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## N: A Sea Monster of a Research Project

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**N: A SEA MONSTER OF A RESEARCH PROJECT**

by

**Adrian Jay Thomson**

**Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for graduation with**

**UNIVERSITY HONORS**

**with a major in**

**English – Creative Writing**

**in the Department of English**

**Approved:**

**UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, UT**

**SPRING 2019**

## Abstract

Ever since time and the world began, dwarves have always fought cranes. Ever since ships set out on the northern sea, great sea monsters have risen to prey upon them. Such are the basics of life in medieval and Renaissance Scandinavia, Iceland, Scotland and Greenland, as detailed by Olaus Magnus' *Description of the Northern Peoples* (1555), its sea monster-heavy map, the *Carta Marina* (1539), and Abraham Ortelius' later map of Iceland, *Islandia* (1590).

I first learned of Olaus and Ortelius in the summer of 2013, and while drawing my own version of their sea monster maps a thought hit me: write a book series, with teenage characters similar to those in *How to Train Your Dragon*, but set it amongst the lands described by Olaus, in a frozen world badgered by the sea monsters of Ortelius. I flipped the paper over and wrote the title: *N*, a symbol for all that a northern world of legend embodies.

The aim of this project was to plan an epic fantasy adventure novel based upon the teachings and maps of Olaus and Ortelius, as well as the real history, culture, mythology and cryptozoology of Scandinavia, Iceland, Scotland and Greenland, and discover how to adapt these sources into my fictional text. The research I have done concerning these 95 separate "concepts" as I call them, five of which I have written within scenes, has beautifully bolstered by idea of how such items are adapted, and mapping out the chapter plots and arcs of my four characters has provided endless growth in both my idea of them and of myself. Drawing five of the sea monsters and including the sample chapter allowed me to truly judge the overall scope. This project not only taught me about novel writing, but how I can make *N* the best novel it can be.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express multiple, unending thanks to my mentor Phebe Jensen, who showed patience and enthusiasm every step of the way and informed me of the pitfalls as well as the high points. Thanks as well to second reader Charles Waugh, who waited until the very last minute to look things over, and English Honors Advisor Keri Holt, who saw it fit to mention all necessary steps of the process. And extra special thanks to Honors Director Kristine Miller, the USU English Department, the USU and English Symposiums, and the USU Honors Program in general, for letting me do my capstone on something as fun as fiction and sea monsters. Thank you all for your confidence, interest and never-ending support.

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## Final Project Reflection

Final Written Product Word Count: 34240

My Honors Capstone allowed me to map out *N*, a forty-chapter fantasy adventure novel based on the sea monster myths and iconography of medieval and Renaissance Scandinavia. The final result represents an overview of the research, plotting, character arcs, and sea monsters needed to complete such a novel. During the process, I realized the great scope of the project and recognized that a smaller focus on the main aspects of my research would better represent my undertaking as a whole. My project includes a list of all outside concepts I had initially planned to write scenes for, with five—marked on the list in bold—that I performed research for and wrote scenes around. My completed structure map, with an overview of character arcs and the plot through each chapter, and illustrations for five major sea monsters—the Sea Orm, Trolual, Nahval, Ziphuis, and Enwhale—round out the rest of my project, along with an accompanying chapter of my novel after the completed bibliography at the end. This project has not only resulted in a solid blueprint for the novel itself, but has also given me invaluable insights into novel-writing. While forming the concepts and scenes, I found new areas of research and discovered my novel's major purpose of adapting or preserving the various iconography and cultures I hope to include. I also came to realize what sea monsters were truly needed while plotting each chapter, and discovered facets of myself as I mapped out the arcs of my characters.

Writing the concepts and their scenes led me to new research opportunities and allowed me to better realize the actual purpose of my novel—to adapt sea monster iconography for the current generation, and represent or even preserve Northern European and Greenlandic culture. Undertaking this project forced me to use the Merrill-Cazier Library's inter-library loan system, an amazing service that I had not taken full advantage of before. I also happened upon the fertile fruits of Google Play Books, where I discovered a free public domain edition of Pliny, and

utilized the Merrill-Cazier library's copies of Olaus Magnus' *Description of the Northern Peoples*, the main source I shall base my adaptation of Olaus' world around. For that is truly what I hope to eventually achieve in this novel, as well as the inclusion of mythology and culture of Scandinavia, Iceland, Scotland and Greenland. I only intend, however, to use the mythological and folkloric elements of the setting as a world in which to set my characters. The main plot, concerning teenagers Noak, Aleen, Brogan and Wilburt (NABW) as they traverse their world and replace nine magic stone tablets to prevent the Norse dragon Nidhoggr from bringing about the apocalypse, also includes a wide range of heritage in the main cast. Noak has Norwegian and Swedish roots, Aleen has both Icelandic and Swedish parentage, Brogan is Scottish, and Wilburt is a descendant of the Sami people. Later they meet Orpik, daughter of the late-medieval Thule People of Greenland. Due to the cultural and historical weight I have assigned myself to encompass, I also see my novel as positively representative and preservative of the cultures I wish to speak on. While researching the concept "kulning," for its scene, I saw the YouTuber Jonna Jinton mention that kulning itself is slipping further and further under the radar of the rest of the world, and that even the videos she makes help preserve it and countless other aspects of Scandinavian culture. I hope that my work also comes to be seen as a preservative love letter to these cultures, and feel thankful to this project for helping me discover the purpose of my novel.

Relaying the plot of each chapter also allowed me to see how elements I planned to cut from the narrative structure—several sea monsters—actually further the story through their importance of impacting the characters. My original idea for the novel had a total of fourteen sea monsters—partly for reasons of symbolism, as N is the fourteenth letter of the alphabet—including the Sea Orm, Trolual, Sea Hog, Seenaut, Hroshualur, Nahval, Steipereidur, Staukul, Skautuhvalur, Burchvalur, Roider, Rostunger, Ziphilus, and Enwhale. After realizing that this

might be a bit much, I decided that I had to scale back. I told myself that I had to find which sea monsters proved most essential, and found as my answer the five I chose to illustrate—the Sea Orm, Trolual, Nahval, Ziphius, and Enwhale. which, with the added exceptions of the Sea Hog, Rostunger, Staukul, and Hroshualur, are the most interesting both visually and in folklore. This leaves the three more “boring” monsters, just fanciful depictions of whales, and their additions to the story—the ship’s rescue by Steipereidur in “Safe Passage North,” the encounter with the Burchvalur in “A Skerry Situation,” and the flensing and eating of a Roider in “Fare Flensing off Munkurin”—on the chopping block. As much as I could do without them, however, I cannot bear to cut them now, for over the course of this project I have re-discovered their worth. None of the three chapters just mentioned existed in my plan before creating the structure map, because until then only one aspect of the sea monsters had truly surfaced—their ferocity. The three “boring” monsters, in contrast, have come to represent the kindness and fragility of sea monsters in general. Even in folklore the Steipereidur is named the kindest of whales, that regularly assist sailors, and it helps guide NABW’s sinking ship to land. The Burchvalur pursues them over the skerries, but in curious play instead of wanting to eat them, showing intelligence. The Roider represents how humans have actually managed to kill and harvest a sea monster, a thing largely unheard of in their world, and gives NABW insight as to how sea monsters are really just a part of nature, not some demonic force within it. This supports Noak’s growing image of the world as not as it always appears, offering growth in the next chapter when he spares the life of the polypus. As it stands, then, I still feel hesitant to cut them, and may instead make space elsewhere. I have come to realize that the sea monsters really do epitomize this novel, and are representative of actual endangered whale species, and so worry that without moments of kindness my description of them may lead to a negative, *Jaws*-esque result. This



does not mean that all sea monsters are safe from cutting, though; the Skautuhvalur in particular is not that interesting, in visual design or in folkloric roots, and would not service the plot other than to again destroy NABW's ship. Creating the structure map also allowed me to realize this, but more importantly what elements will further the story in the impact of my characters.

Finally, I discovered personal developments in my very own character while attempting to finalize the four arcs in my story, effectively allowing me to realize parts of my own path while focusing on theirs. Initially, I had orchestrated the character arc section of the structure map as a simple overview of what Noak, Aleen, Brogan and Wilburt go through in chapter-based increments, from the beginning to the end, with specific connection to the plot. In so doing I created an effective look at the characters in general, but this did not allow for deeper insight. After much deliberation, I chose to provide extended, extremely detailed, and structured descriptions of their unfortunate beginnings and eventual triumphs to better describe the characters themselves, instead of just the paths they go on. Allowing for time between the first and final drafts of the structure map gave me the opportunity to rethink the actual specific details of my characters as those of actual people, but it also allowed me the real opportunity to consider them as such. The identity of Aleen especially changed in dramatic ways, moving to a quest for inner rather than outer strength and fulfillment, and ended up perfectly representing how I already saw her, making it an entirely natural progression and realization. Similarly, I discovered my current notion of both Brogan and Wilburt's interests while creating their arcs, and found these to also be enigmatic of how I already saw them. Though I had a better idea of Noak's arc than the others, formalizing it helped to further cement his eventual realization.

Of all the insights made concerning my characters, however, the most amazing occurred when I realized that each of the different arcs of my characters represented different struggled

facets of my own personality. Specifically, Aleen's journey of self-worth mirrors a realization I experienced myself in the past months, when I discovered that I truly am worthy enough to be loved by a significant other, and I share her love and compassion for small animals. I also find my desire to build a purpose in life around the things I love most in Brogan, and struggle as he does to convince myself it is possible. Wilburt has my silent and overly sincere demeanor, only speaking when he has something to say, and represents a part of my past when I was shyer and more reserved. Noak, of course, epitomizes my interest in discovering the world—namely the world of sea monster cartography—understanding it, and finding my own place in it. Organizing the victories of their arcs also proved very therapeutic, and helped to convince myself to work toward escaping the personal conflicts that I share with them. Thus, I discovered that each of the four represent a different part of my own personality and character. As such a description of character-crafting is mentioned extensively by professional writers and creators as a major part of what makes characters work, discovering that I had suddenly found this applying to my own understanding of character granted me an extreme sense of completeness, as if I had finally come to another element of novel-writing I did not even know I had not reached. If performing my Honors Capstone project has allowed me to work toward such eventual heights, it is indeed worthy of the final project of my undergraduate career.

My Honors Capstone project as a whole has allowed me to make amazing discoveries in the research and purpose of my novel as an adaptation of iconography and representative preservation of culture. It also let me determine necessary elements of the story, including sea monsters, and realize my own self-worth and other insights to my own journey while charting out the paths of my characters. For these reasons, I feel personally indebted to all involved, and wish to say thanks again for all to take part in the long and tumultuous process. Thank you.

## List of Concepts

(Those in **Bold** Used  
in Scenes Below)

1. Olaus Magnus
2. Ells/Cubits
3. The Aurochs
4. Juoksa, the Sámi  
Bow
5. Erich Pontoppidan
6. **The Gulon**
7. Bryggen
8. The Voyage of St.  
Brendan the  
Navigator
9. Yggdrasil
10. Norns
11. Apron Dress
12. Baldric
13. Tvi, Tvi
14. In Norwegia,  
Reindeer Have  
Three Antlers

15. Carrack
16. The Methods of  
Sailing
17. Ship Terminology
18. Sailing  
Superstitions
  - a. Never Set  
Sail on a  
Friday (Day  
of the  
Crucifixion)
  - b. Never Sail  
on  
Thursday  
(Thor Being  
the God of  
Storms)
  - c. The Best  
Day to Set  
Sail is  
Sunday  
(Day of the

- Resurrectio  
n)
- d. Cooking  
Split Pea  
Soup  
Causes Fog
  - e. Throwing  
Eggshells in  
the Water  
Allows  
Witches to  
Follow the  
Ship
  - f. Killing an  
Albatross is  
the Worst  
Possible  
Harbinger  
of Bad Luck
  - g. Whistling  
Causes  
Storms

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| h. Hearing a<br>Bell Causes<br>Bad Luck  | 26. The Trolual   | 42. The Steipereidur   |
| i. Losing a<br>Bucket<br>Causes Bad<br>Luck                                      | 27. Seabirds Swarm a<br>Sea Monster Attack                        | 43. Stone Spheres  |
| j. Sailing with<br>Women or<br>Meeting<br>with<br>Redheads<br>Causes Bad<br>Luck | 28. The Halliflundra  | <b>44. Dwarves/Pygmies</b>   |
| 19. The Sea Orm  | 29. The Sea Hog<br>a. Sea Hog of<br>Thule                         | <b>Fighting Cranes</b>   |
| 20. Ulfberht Sword   | 30. The Shell Monster   | <b>a. In<br/>Greenland</b>   |
| 21. How to Defend<br>Against Sea<br>Monster Attacks                              | 31. Reynisdrangar   | <b>b. As a Story<br/>Motif</b>   |
| 22. Cloudberries   | 32. In Islandia There<br>are Stacks of Fish<br>the Size of Houses | <b>c. Destroying<br/>the Eggs of<br/>Invading<br/>Cranes and<br/>Building<br/>Huts</b> |
| 23. Scurvygrass  | 33. In Islandia Geese<br>are Lured by<br>Playing Violins          | <b>d. Cranes Set<br/>a<br/>Watchman<br/>While They<br/>Sleep</b>                       |
| 24. Kenning  | <b>34. Kulning</b>  | 45. The Staukul  |
| 25. Self Defense Glima   | 35. Skyr  | 46. Migrating Quails<br>Alight in the  |
|  | 36. The Seenaut   |  |
|  | 37. The Hroshualur  |  |
|  | 38. The Vermis  |  |
|  | 39. The Nahval  |  |
|  | 40. Guksi   |  |
|  | 41. Snitte  |  |

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| Rigging of Sailing<br>Ships  | 54. Sharks Following a<br>Ship Means<br>Imminent Death        | b. Fold and<br>Place in a<br>Wood Box  |
| 47. Swallows<br>Hibernate Under<br>Frozen Lakes<br>During Winter     | 55. The Skautuhvalur<br>56. Fuathan<br>57. The Nuckelavee     | c. Burn the<br>Box<br>d. Throw the<br>Ashes into<br>the Sea  |
| 48. Pheasants<br>Hibernate Under<br>Snow Banks<br>During Winter      | 58. Red Sky at<br>Morning<br>59. Skerry<br>60. The Burchvalur | 66. Isle of<br>Rum/Shearwaters   |
| 49. Birds are Thought<br>to Go to the Moon<br>During Winter          | 61. Cormorants Hold<br>the Souls of<br>Deceased Sailors       | 67. Fairy Loaf<br>68. Anchor (Symbol)<br>69. The Boneless  |
| 50. Dovre Mountains  | 62. The Fachen  | 70. Milky Sea/Mareel   |
| 51. Trolls (Mountain<br>Trolls)                                      | 63. The Brollachan<br>64. Carrageen Moss                      | 71. Beach Trolls<br><b>72. The Tree Duck</b>   |
| 52. The Diplocaulus  | 65. Procedure of Re-<br>Naming a Ship                         | 73. The Polypus<br>74. Munkurin  |
| 53. Dragonflies Are<br>Used to Weigh<br>Souls (Devil's<br>Steelyard) | a. Write the<br>Old Name<br>on a Piece<br>of Paper            | 75. The Roider<br>76. In Grutlandie, the<br>Coast is Covered in<br>Massive Amounts<br>of Driftwood |

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| 77. In Grutlandie,<br>Houses are<br>Fashioned from<br>Whale Bones | 82. Bird Stomachs<br>Provide Vitamin C | 90. The Enwhale                          |
| 78. Skraeling   | 83. The Rostunger                      | 91. Wind Trolls<br>a. Ysätters-<br>Kajsa |
| 79. Umiak   | <b>84. Halcyon Days</b>                | 92. The Egede Serpent                    |
| 80. Ulu   | 85. Yule Goat                          | 93. Hvitsark                             |
| 81. Tupilaq   | 86. The Ziphius                        | 94. Thule                                |
|   | 87. Ginnungagap                        | 95. Nidhoggr                             |
|   | 88. The Sea Swallow                    |  |
|   | 89. The Morse                          |  |

## Selection of Concepts and Accompanying Scenes

### Concept 1: The Gulon

**Explanation:** This monstrous beast, thought to be first described by Olaus Magnus, is considered a fanciful depiction of the wolverine, but its appeal as a fantastic animal lies within its eating habits. Also known as ‘glutton,’ it is thought to devour an animal carcass until full gorged, then locate two closely-growing trees with which to pull itself through, thus purging its bowels and resetting its digestive system so it may hunt and kill again. Mythologically native to Sweden, where its name is *Jerff*, in *N* it appears as a monster of the Norwegia forest that all Berga youths must hunt once they come of age at 17. Noak holds animosity towards them, as his father was eaten by a gulon when he was very young. He faces one in **Chapter Two** in an attempt to prove to himself that he is not only book-smart, gets saved by Aleen, and runs away from her in shame. Magnus describes the method of hunting them as sneaking up and killing them while they are between trees (though with arrows, not the swords Noak and other Berga youths utilize), how the blood is drunk by hunters (or during marriages) with warm water and honey, as Noak must do before the hunt, how their entrails are used for musician’s strings, as Wilburt has on his violin, and how their skins are made into blankets specifically for visiting dignitaries, who experience gluttonous dreams while sleeping with them or wearing them as coats. Topsell labels it the progeny of a hyena and lioness—as is the Crocotta—calls the skin a ‘rusty’ color, and links its gluttony to allegories of sinful members of the Christian faith.

**Quote:** “The Latin name is *Gulo*, for he is so called from his gluttony. He is as great as a great Dog, and his ears and face are like a Cat’s: his feet and nails are very sharp; his body is hairy, with long brown hair, his tail is like the Foxes, but somewhat shorter, but his hair is thicker, and

of this they make brave Winter Caps. Wherefore this Creature is the most voracious; for, when he finds a carcasse, he devours so much, that his body, by over-much meat, is stretched like a Drum, and finding a streight (*narrow*) passage between Trees, he presseth between them, that he may discharge his body by violence; and being thus emptied, he returns to the carcasse, and fills himself top full" (Ashton 102-105, *after* Magnus 888-890).

**Scene, in Chapter Two, "The Wrong Gulon":** The gulon crept back up on him silently, so that he smelled it before he could see it emerge from the shadows to his right. Reek of refuse hit him first, then it's accompanied sweat, and finally blood, its own, which he could now instantly recognize. Noak turned and saw its mass of shaggy, stench-matted fur, rug-brown, its bottom fringed in faded-white tassels laden with hanging baubles of filth. Its broad-whiskered snout passed into the light of the gibbous-thick moon, which illumined the monster's gunge-yellow eyes. Its cat-boned head rested halfway down the body, as if it were a heavy-headed kitten poking its neck out of a dirty, soft-bristled broom, but ten times larger—with a mouth big enough to fit Noak's head inside. Its body, half the size of a horse, led to four bear-like paws too massive for the rest of it that seemed to grip the ground rather than stand on it. Its tail, long and bushy, twitched noiselessly behind it like a ship's pennant floundering in wind. As flopping paws broke the moonlight the beast lowered its knobbly brow, grimaced its enormous red-shining teeth and let out a vibrating, gut bending growl.

At that moment if Noak had reached down and touched the shining blade of his sword he knew that his skin would feel colder. For long seconds he stared, like a dead man at nothing, with only the last seconds of his father's life on his mind. The hairy horror before him finally gaped open its maw, revealing a long evil tongue and a many-lobed throat of pink, belching mist in a spray of raw meat.



At long last Noak's feet got in touch with his head, and he snapped into action, moving straight backwards through the stream and the woods beyond even before completely spinning around. With a thunderous roar the gulon cleared the stream effortlessly, and in another leap was close at his heels. He could only hear, and inevitably picture, the monstrous thing smash through the forest behind him, its thick ropes of hair fanning wide. He reasoned in half a second that it would be best to go through rough terrain or enclosed spaces so that it could not follow, and immediately veered off the path into the entangled undergrowth.

Noak leapt over logs and ducked under low branches. He slipped through trees that grew one ell apart and barged through seemingly impassable walls of pine needles. He long-jumped over puddles and sprinted straight through a soft stump.

The animal behind crashed through the forest like a storm, moving as if in a ball instead of on feet. Once, it ran into a tall, thin tree and snapped it at the base, bashing over its bushel of branches nearly onto Noak's neck. Though he had quickly tired a minute into the chase, and felt his lungs fill with sand and his feet with lead, he forced himself to picture again the gulon's sausage-linked waste exiting its body in ballistic succession, then pictured his own remains disposed of such fashion, and thus ran much faster.

**Sources:**

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## **Concept 2: Kulning**

**Explanation:** Kulning is an ancient Scandinavian herdingcall, sung to bring herds of cattle or goats down from the mountains of Sweden and Norway at nighttime by mainly female medieval herders. A hauntingly serene sound, it is done with an almost nasal high pitch, in an effect similar but unequal to falsetto, in order to carry it many miles through dense forests and steep canyons. Brought to prominence in the last few years by YouTuber Jonna Jinton, activist Åsa Larsson, and its inclusion by vocalist Christine Hals in soundtracks of major films such as *Frozen* or *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, kulning represents the wealth to be found in preserving the pristine beauty of Swedish and Norwegian tradition. In **Chapter Twelve** when NABW attempt to herd in the Islandia dairyman's seaneats. Noak and Aleen have a discussion on how she can use her talents to solve problems without subsequently taking things too far. Aleen then remembers how her mother used to lull her to sleep with the kulning she learned as a child in the mountains of Svecia. Aleen has since practiced it herself during long treks into the woods outside Berga, but has never sung it in front of people. In a show of courage, she does it in front of everyone (though not perfectly) and after some minutes the cows do come home.

**Quote:** "Kulning, the traditional Swedish ancient herdingcall . . . is a domestic Scandinavian music form, often used to call livestock (cows, goats, etc.) down from high mountain pastures where they have been grazing during the day back home to the farm in the evenings. It is

possible that the sound also serves to scare away predators (wolves, bears, etc.), but this is not the main purpose of the call. The song form is often used by women, as they were the ones tending the herds and flocks in the high mountain pastures . . . The song has a high-pitched vocal technique, i.e. a loud call using head tones, so that it can be heard or be used to communicate over long distances. It has a fascinating and haunting tone, often conveying a feeling of sadness, in large part because the lokks often include typical half-tones and quarter-tones (also known as "blue tones") found in the music of the region" (Scuderia Ferrari Club).

**Scene, in Chapter Twelve, "Kulning in the Waves":** Aleen wandered for a moment by herself in the lapping surf, trying to digest all that Noak had told her. She did not feel insulted, just perplexed. How she used her strength had always been a big deal to her, but to her it came naturally, and she had never looked at it close enough to see it as a major problem. Aleen thought of Noak casting judgmental eyes during her bouts of strength and cool shivers passed all through her frame, originating from her mind rather than the freezing water.

But it isn't like that, she tried to remind herself. He meant well. "Focus on the positives he mentioned," she said through pursed lips to the sea at her waist. *Focus on your other strengths.* In the moment she had actually felt a few terse seconds of anger when he'd said that, as if he were implying her physical strengths were a bad thing to begin with, but she saw now what he meant. "So what else is there?" she asked out loud, and the water did not answer. "It would have to be something Noak doesn't know about," she surmised. "What would that be?"

There was a lot he didn't know. The cold salt stung her nostrils as she took a deep breath of exasperation. She decided to take a different course, and instead think of all she knew about cows. It seemed only natural, she determined, as it was indeed the issue at hand.

“Well, I sort of used to kill them,” she said to herself, recalling her days spent in the mountains, hunting rogue aurochs, “so that doesn’t help.” For some moments, however, she happily thought back to her day-long hikes, and the tranquility that a mere few hours away from town had provided. When she reached the thin openings of canyons—which she used often to capture aurochs and take them—and peered through the light of the high sun, or the thick mists, to the green glens of grass five miles up, it had always reminded her of—

At that second, across the bay, Brogan attempted another cattle mating-bellow, shocking her for a moment out of her thought. Then, it came back, and the answer hit her.

*Kulning.* The word tasted almost foreign to her mind, and reminded, with its first soothing syllable *cool*—, of the breezy summer nights when her mother had held her close to the open window, as Aleen had poked a pudgy hand from the swaddling cloth to grasp her mother’s star-blue eyes, and the lantern on the windowpane fought the moon outside to illumine her hair. From this image the recollection of similar evenings unraveled, and as Aleen stared offhandedly at the sea horizon where the grey water merged blue, a smile formed on her face unintentionally.

For once her mother had rocked her halfway to sleep, her hair glowing like a thin-veiling halo, she would coo, in a voice like sunlight rippling through water, a herdingcall she had learned in her youth. When Aleen was older, and rocking to sleep was replaced with long nightly conversations sat on the edge of the bed, her mother told her how she had learned to sing in her youth, high in the mountains of Svecia. Her father had entrusted her to an entire herd of cattle—when she let them out of the pastures in the morning, they would run many miles up into the canyons to reach the fresh grazing. At night, when they were due to return, she had to sing—very high-pitched and very loudly—to call them back. And in no time, they would always return, their

lead cow bringing them home. Her lullaby to Aleen had of course been a softer, quieter version, but the technique was there—of the ancient cattle-calls, known as *kulning*.

And Aleen, quite enchanted by her mother's stories, had attempted this herself one day in the mountains while hunting aurochs. She hadn't done it to attract them of course—which it hadn't—but instead to hear its full effect out loud, which she never had. The results, at first, and she would admit this, sounded downright monstrous. But they were high-pitched enough to carry a long way, to which her blushing glances to gossiping sailors along the wharf for the following week could attest.

So she kept at it. Kept calling for invisible cattle-herds high up in the mountains, in a shrill voice that eventually softened to a siren-like harmony—as she thought it—as time went on. She had never told her mother about this, but always thought she would find pride in her daughter's calling. But to do it here, now, thought Aleen, snapping out of her calm memories, would not be the same thing at all. According to her mother, cattle of Svecia remembered their calls for years afterwards, and even passed this “memory” to their offspring, but such a tactic would definitely not have the same affect—or any—on *sea* cattle, on an island a quarter way across the world.

There's no way to know unless you try, said a quiet voice in the back of her head, before she could forcefully snuff it out. She sighed. Try as she might, she could not think of another answer. It fit both her criteria: something Noak didn't know about, and one of her strong suits; Aleen actually prided her singing as one of her better talents. But *privately*, she thought. Was she ready for Noak, no, *all* of them, to know about it?

What other choice did she have?

She turned her head back toward the guys, still a ways off to the east, moving through the grey-capping waves near the cape. Brogan's bellowing had veered somewhat off-course, and transferred to the throaty gulps of a frog. Noak stood in the back of them near the beach, peering out at the sea, arms folded and silent.

He really does trust me, she thought, and he's getting better at showing it. She did not feel like reciprocating that trust in the moment, but she did feel motivated enough to try it for herself. She took another sea-frosted breath and cleared the passages of her throat, eager to hurry and do it before she talked herself out of it. She waded over quickly to a nearby rock, clambered up even in slippery boots, and stood on top, the wind battering her from the west.

And then she held her head up, faced away from the others, and sang, in a piercing, fractured, spine-separating note that dashed on sharp feet through the sea like rushing cracks through thick ice, then finished it off in a more controlled, melodic tune with a plump, curling tail.

At the sound Noak nearly stumbled off his feet, but kept himself steady at the last second. Brogan fell straight over backwards. In his workshop just off the beach, the dairyman jumped while smelting iron as if a specter had appeared in the doorway.

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### **Concept 3:** Dwarves/Pygmies Fighting Cranes

- Dwarves/Pygmies Fighting Cranes in Greenland

**Explanation:** Quite inexplicably, in *Description of the Northern Peoples* Olaus Magnus places both dwarves and cranes in the freezing expanses of Greenland (located on his *Carta Marina* to the north of Scandinavia and reaching to its western corner past the far side of Iceland) where he describes their eternal skirmishes, as Pliny first attested (against Pygmies and cranes) in the wilds of Scythia. Though seemingly a random addition to his *Description*, according to John

McKay, an avid researcher of maps, it was usual for map-makers to place the supposed homes of 'monstrous races,' which included Pygmies, on the far-distant edges of the world, which at Magnus' point in cartographical progression included Greenland. McKay also conflates the Norse discovery of native peoples of Greenland as adding to the 'northern Pygmy' mythology, as the Norse term *skraeling* used for native peoples at this period is considered by some to be a translation of 'Pygmy.' And, since Greenland was thought to lie in the far north (as Olaus Magnus seemingly believes) it was considered to be connected to Asia, and thus the home of the pygmies of Pliny's description, thereby making them dwarves, the Scandinavian equivalent. In *N*, the dwarves and cranes are an ever-important presence, locked in constant battle to the north, and represent an extremely important facet of the world of *N* in general, second only to sea monsters, even so far as to being referenced in the very first sentence of the novel (sea monsters first appear in the second sentence) which is spoken again by Noak at the start of his speech in the scene below. The dwarves, cranes and their conflict are also very important to Noak, who has amassed an expansive knowledge on studying them and sees them as a direct tie to his missing grandfather Olaus. He will learn more than he knew of them before, however, when he and the others come upon the dwarf lands while on their voyage.

**Quote:** "Pygmies, in Ancient and Medieval lore, were not merely small people; they were one of the monstrous races said to inhabit the far parts of the world. In the case of the Pygmies, "monstrous" was not a moral judgment. Pygmies were said to be brave and organized in their age old war with the cranes . . . The Norse believed that Greenland and the lands to the west were either part of Asia or islands near Asia. The geography of the time had pushed the Pygmies far into Asia. When they Norse met small people in, what they believed to be Asia, it made sense for them to believe they had discovered the homeland of the legendary Pygmies" (McKay).



**Scene, in Chapter One, “Seventeen”:** Noak very quickly ran up to the front of the class and dumped the contents of his bag, a metal, scarred dwarf battle helmet and a long, ivory-white crane skull, on the table. He pulled down the curled-up map of the world above the wall behind him, cleared his throat, and began.

“Ever since time and the world began, dwarves have always fought cranes. It is . . . a truly ancient war, beginning back before the start of recorded human history, when the cranes, tall field-dwelling birds with a massive wingspan, first ventured forth from their island, the . . . closest isle from the northeastern edge of the world,” he said in one long breath, and slapped a pointed hand onto the map behind him. “The dwarves, short and ugly and bearded, are a warlike and brutal species by nature who keep mostly to themselves, up in the barren tundra of the northern strip of Grutlandie.” He slapped the map again. “When the first crane troop arrived in their land, massing to rest in fields that the dwarves use to feed reindeer, a passing company of dwarves attacked them, driving back the few that survived to their island, from which many more would soon arrive. And so it began, the cranes with their long, pointed beaks,” he finished triumphantly, pointing to the skull on the table, “and the dwarves with their huge, powerful axes, always fighting, never ceasing, each side never getting neither the upper or lower hand, as it has been for countless centuries and probably always will be, until time and the world ends.”

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- Dwarves/Pygmies Fighting Cranes as a Story Motif

**Explanation:** In *Ariadne's Thread: A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature*, William F. Hansen describes pygmies (or dwarves) making war with cranes in far-off countries as an ancient motif the world over, mentioned in Homer's *Iliad*, described extensively by Pliny, and eventually making its way to Olaus Magnus in *Northern Peoples*, as well as appearing in both Arabic and Cherokee legend, therefore breaching both the Old World and the New. In **Chapters Fourteen and Fifteen**, the trope discussed below shall be subverted, for while NABW do stop in the Dwarf Lands to seek help for their damaged ship they end up siding with the cranes after they find the dwarves' war-techniques morally questionable.

**Quote:** "A traveler come to a land of dwarves, who suffer periodically from attacks by cranes (storks, geese, or other animals). The traveler fights on their behalf or shows them how to combat the large birds (animals) by striking them with clubs (by twisting off the necks, etc.). The grateful dwarves reward their helper or arrange for his return home" (Hansen 45).

**Scene, in Chapter Fourteen, “Safe Passage North”:** The dwarf captain shot a sizzling blue stare at them past his gnarled nose once more, and the two axe heads hanging from both forking ends of his beard clacked together. “I’ll ask you this, Captain of Wayfarers. What can you offer us so that we are not wasting the precious time we must put toward our crane assault this coming afternoon?”

Noak swallowed, careful of the mud-covered dwarf spear still pressed into his neck. His mind ran through possible answers like an unwinding scroll, though it mostly focused upon how easily the cut would get infected if the spear in his neck broke the skin with the mud still on it. But within the span of seconds he decided upon the best choice, inspired by the second half of the dwarf’s last sentence. “We . . . we, could . . . my crew and I . . . assist you in the crane assault—this coming afternoon.”

The others shot silent glances of judgment at him from behind their own spear points, of which Noak regretfully took immediate heed. Their dwarf captor, thankfully, did not. He brushed a reddened hand down one perforated end of his beard-fork, gripping just below the axe head in a fist like a ball of raw meat. Noak caught a flurried shift of his eye.

“Th-think about it!” Noak said suddenly, out of turn and much too desperate. “The cranes would never expect humans this far north, or fighting on your side, not even by our smell downwind. We’re your best chance at really catching them by surprise—a few meager ells of lumber and borrowed tools are certainly worth a victory.” He was unable to think of anything more to say.

The dwarf captain squinted at him, furrowing the vein-blued streak on his forehead and enveloping his eyes behind mountains of fleshy bumps. Then his eyes opened wide, dark

eyebrows flaring, and the dwarf opened his mouth wide in a laugh to reveal eight teeth spaced near-evenly around his mouth, with none in succession. “HA! You have good bargaining skills, Wayfarer. I’ll accept your offer. But I disagree about your knowledge on smells. Take them to the outfitting huts!” He waved his meaty hand, and they were lead to the closest foul-smelling mud hut of dwarf furs and leather.

**Sources:**

Hansen, William F. *Ariadne's Thread: A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature*. Cornell University Press, 2002.

- Dwarves/Pygmies Destroying the Eggs of Invading Cranes and Building Huts

**Explanation:** Here Pliny discusses the more questionable practices of pygmies facing the cranes, namely going after their defenseless, unborn chicks. As discussed directly above, when NABW stop at the end of **Chapter Fourteen** to have their ship mended, the dwarves agree to do so if they (unbeknownst to NABW at the time) help destroy crane nests. After NABW discovers this, they see it as an unjust war crime and refuse.

**Quote:** “It is said, that [Pygmies] are in the habit of going down every spring to the sea-shore, in a large body, seated on the backs of rams and goats, and armed with arrows, and there destroy the eggs and the young of those birds ; that this expedition occupies them for the space of three months, and that otherwise it would be impossible for them to withstand the increasing multitudes of the cranes. Their cabins, it is said, are built of mud, mixed with feathers and egg-shells” (Pliny 132).

**Scene, in Chapter Fifteen, “The Ballad of the Dwarves and the Cranes”:** Noak’s knees felt like lead as they impacted the hard gravel in front of the nests. He could only stare at the

two clustered eggs, dappled brown, clutched in a halo of grey down. The nest surrounding them was comprised of long wooden splinters, ell-long lengths of rope, bits of iron, and other detritus washed ashore, no doubt from the countless shipwrecks to the south. He remembered suddenly the voice of the dwarf captain: *When you find the objective, crush it.* When he first heard it, Noak had questioned the phrasing. Now he understood.

He looked up, hard circles forming round his eyes, and out across the dozens of nests that lay before him under the great cleft of the boulder in checkerboard rows. The majority of them sported broken eggs, crushed entirely by metal boots or with halves of shells laying open to the sky. In some he could make out protruding small pink legs, wings. The egg's albumen had long drained dry, and the bodies were frozen in the wind. In such nests, no down remained.

With the taste of bile in his throat and rising up like green film in front of his eyes, Noak at once remembered the odd look of the dwarves' beach-huts, with their furry, fluffy appearance, as he realized they had taken handfuls and handfuls of down from countless nests and stuck it into the slats and corners of the mud and wood for padding, to keep warm.

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- Cranes Set a Watchman While They Sleep

**Explanation:** This fable, told by Pliny (and later referenced from him by Magnus) describes the methods of how cranes were thought to sleep (while on military guard against dwarves, Magnus adds) and was repeated in many following bestiaries under the crane sections of each. The story goes that one crane was to watch over the others as they slept, with a stone in its claw that would fall to the ground and wake it should it nod off as well. As were the majority of animal fables in bestiaries, this was an allegorical representation of faith: the sleeping cranes represent the masses, blind to the powers of divinity; the sentinel crane represents a caretaker of divinity, who practices grace for his fellow men. The stone is Christ, which the caretaker must keep close to himself—if not, the grace of Christ leaves him and dooms those he cares for. In **Chapter Fifteen** as NABW invade the crane camp, they must pass by several sleeping and standing guard in this way.

**Quote:** “[Cranes] agree by common consent at what moment they shall set out, fly aloft to look out afar, select a leader for them to follow, and have sentinels duly posted in the rear, which relieve each other by turns, utter loud cries, and with their voice keep the whole flight in proper array. During the night, also, they place sentinels on guard, each of which holds a little stone in its claw: if the bird should happen to fall asleep, the claw becomes relaxed, and the stone falls to the ground, and so convicts it of neglect. The rest sleep in the meanwhile, with the head beneath the wing, standing first on one leg and then on the other : the leader looks out, with neck erect, and gives warning when required” (Pliny 501).

**Scene, in Chapter Fifteen, “The Ballad of the Dwarves and the Cranes”:** They stopped before they came around the rock face. Noak held out his hand and Aleen halted behind him. “Okay,” he said, turning to her, “I’m going to look first, see if they’re there. If they aren’t, it’ll be safe to move.” Aleen nodded, her lips in a terse line, her hands tightly gripping the sharpened pole. Noak took a deep breath before he peered around the rock.

Roughly one hundred feet down the long boulder, on a smaller escarpment of stone, perched six cranes—asleep, Noak noted from their sharp beaks tucked deep under one wing and their long necks cradled up against their chest—with a seventh, larger crane standing awake at the end of the line, but facing it, with head held high and—if Noak could tell correctly at that distance—head drooping, long beak rested softly against his chest. All seven stood outlined in black against the orange glare of morning sun. The sleeping birds all had one foot tucked up under their bodies, and somehow managed to keep upright in the wind, looking quite like a clump of odd thin-trunked bushes that had sprung directly out of the rock. But the seventh crane held one foot forwards, so that the wrist bent straight directly in line with its chest, an indiscernible round object clutched in its claws.

At the sight Noak’s breathing quickened faster than it had at the start of his mission with Aleen, and he turned back to her. “There’s some over there, standing guard,” he told her big-eyed stare, but many of them are asleep.”

“Can we go ahead then,” she asked, jabbing eagerly with her pole, “if we keep quiet?”

Noak quickly shook his head. “Definitely not—here, look.” He had her look around the corner with him, and used one finger to point. “See the leader, there on the left? He’s the Sentinel. He keeps watch while the others sleep—but if he should fall asleep himself, the

stone he keeps in his talons—there, see it?” Aleen looked, and with eyes sharper than Noak’s in the dim of late morning could see the round, white stone, no doubt taken from the sea where it had rolled smooth, held in the Sentinel’s foot. “If he drops that stone, should he fall asleep, it will wake him up—and they’ll all wake up, and seize us.”

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**Concept 4: The Tree Duck**

**Explanation:** A mythological off-shoot of the Barnacle Goose, a real bird endemic to Greenland, which—due to the similarities in appearance with the beak-like shells, feathery filaments and long “goose-necks” of dead barnacles attached to pieces of sea-wood that wash up on shore—were once thought to grow from barnacles, and thus labeled acceptable to consume during lent. Similarly, the Tree Duck is a duck thought to be born from the fruit of trees. Olaus Magnus places them, as Aeneas Sylvius (Pope Pius II) does, in the Orkney Islands, where they are pictured on the *Carta Marina*. Joseph Nigg in his *Sea Monsters* marks the ‘hatching from fruit’ quality as yet another explanation of the sudden appearance of birds during migrations, such as the real barnacle goose appearing in England in great numbers during the winter. He also



highlights a bestiary illumination, a woodcut by Sebastian Münster, and print from the *Herball* of John Gerard that either portray the birds hanging from trees *as* fruit, hatching from fruit as if from eggs, or in the case of the *Herball* illustration, from ‘shells’ (that greatly resemble barnacles) attached to a much more alien, pod-like tree structure. In his *Dragons*, Nigg mentions that tree-hanging geese (or the fruit they hatch from) that fall to the land die, and those that land in the water (most usually the sea) survive. In **Chapter Twenty Eight**, NABW land on an island halfway between the Orcades and Fare (the Orkneys and Faroes) and encounter a tribe of Faroese beach trolls who agree to repair their ship if they assist in the capture of a polypus that is devouring all their tree ducks (both the ducklings and their fruit), which they regard as produce.

**Quote:** “In Orkney ducks are produced when the fruit from a certain tree falls into the sea. After a short while, when they can take wing, they fly off to join other ducks” (Magnus 957).

**Scene, in Chapter Twenty Eight, “The Beach Trolls and the Polypus”:** The beach troll led them down to the edge of the water. There laid no beach or strip of sand there, but only an edge which drooped off quite suddenly in a moss-laden, emerald, broad-hanging bank of grass and heather, with the shallow, calm sea of deep turquoise lapping in its cove. In this spot, of all places, grew a tree, gripping the broad bank with a splayed base of knobby roots sunk into the green. Its base supported a curving, smooth, green-yellow moss-covered trunk, which reached eight ells tall up to a series of thick branches that grew outwards near the top. Due to these qualities it did not appear all that strange, except that its leaves only grew from the very top in a bowl-cut clump, and along the otherwise bare lower branches hung equally-spaced bushels of pale green gourds. These gourds, while the usual shape and color of pears, were larger and appeared firmer, with plump bases that could fit in the spread fingers of a man’s hand. They hung from stems three to a bushel, but a great number of them lay in the grass beneath, yellowed

and brown. The majority of the branches were bare, and a number of these in the back, noticed Noak as they approached, grew longer and in greater numbers over the sea.

They stopped in front of their tree when their guide did, and at his raised arm were instinctively signaled to wait. For what, though, Aleen wondered, eyeing the large fruits lying still on their sides nearest to them. And what type of fruit ripens in the dead of winter?

For a full minute they stood and watched the tree, with Wilburt patiently gazing at the far-hanging clouds and Brogan more noticeably rolling his eyes, though he kept silent.

Noak was the first to notice, since they were now standing much closer, that the bases of the fruit, growing underneath them as they hung, terminated in short, curly-Q ends.

At the next second, the beach troll's perfectly still head twitched bird-like to the left, jangling the shells in its hair. Then, as they all intently watched the tree as if it were about to jump and run, a soft cracking, tearing noise was heard, and an especially fat gourd on its far side dropped off its lone branch with a loud *plop* into the ocean. Despite its size, the fruit actually floated, coming back up to bob softly on the surface. The beach troll shuffled over to the bank's edge, reached one long arm into the water and gripped the gourd in its claw, bringing it back to the base of the tree and setting it softly in the grass.

At this point the troll grew oddly excited in nature, and gestured at them to look closer at the fruit with wet eyes and a pebble-toothed smile. They all gave sideways glances to one another before each kneeling down in front of it, somewhat cautiously, except for Aleen, whose eye had caught movement coming from the gourd, and went directly down with a happy sound of endearment.

For at that moment, as the others also bent down to watch, the gourd had begun to rock softly from side to side, and in the next second a bulge appeared in its middle. After poking itself out

several times, the bulge suddenly burst, and a dark shape pushed forth from the fruit, so that everyone finally understood what they were watching—a small animal of some sort, struggling to emerge.

Noak, Wilburt and even Brogan's jaws instantly fell, and their only perceived emotion was perplexity. Aleen, seeing the little thing struggle, was overcome with emotion and turned to the beach troll for permission to assist it. The troll, as if already assuming her intention, gave a wizened nod of its ancient green head.

Aleen picked up the gourd, holding it in one hand while tenderly gripping the loosened chunk the creature inside had dislodged from with the other. Despite its pear-like, heavy and hard appearance, the gourd felt quite light, and its white flesh beneath as she tore it away felt as soft and spongy as cork. She easily removed a large amount of it from its surface, so that they could all see what struggled inside.

To them all, it looked like a duckling. In fact, it *was* a duckling. Its wet, black body flailed in the mushy yellow insides of the gourd, which appeared similar to watery egg or thick custard. The poor thing looked soaked in the stuff, from its flappy webbed feet to the tiny round beak, which opened along with its shiny black eyes with a weakened, adorable *peep*.

Aleen immediately reached her fingers into the gourd, gently cradling the duckling as she raised it out, and her heart turned the consistency of the mush in her hands. She gave a long and wheezing *aww* as it righted itself in her cupped palms, sitting with legs tucked underneath it as ducks do when they're calm, and looked up at them with one eye and offered soft, happy chirrups while they all kneeled there, looking at it, and the gourd it had come from, underneath the tree, with the warm sunlight streaming down through the branches above them.

The shock in Noak at such a marvel of nature did not instantly register to his mind. Instead it filled with questions. How had Olaus never mentioned these? Did he know about them? How had it gotten in the fruit? Was it a burrowing parasite that crawled inside? How could it?

Wilburt saw the joy in his friends' faces and felt similarly struck back, more so at their happiness than the wonder before him. But he also felt appreciative that the beach troll had judged them privileged enough to see something of such obvious importance to him, and grew honored.

The questions in Noak's head never ceased their barrage. Is it actually born in that thing? How does it reproduce? How does the tree reproduce? The joy he felt in just wondering was equaled in the emotion he saw in Aleen's face, and culminated in an outstretched arm he offered forth to touch the duckling, which Aleen accepted with her face in sunbeams, so that they each formed two halves of a fully-cupped hand, to hold it still-peeping between them.

"So," said Brogan, getting to his feet and shooting a cock-headed glance at their host. "How do they taste with a side of hollandaise?"

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**Concept 5: Halcyon Days**

**Explanation:** In Greek mythology, lovers Ceyx and Alcyone did blasphemy against Zeus, who destroyed Ceyx' ship when he went to sea. Alcyone in grief threw herself into the waves, and the other gods turned them both to kingfishers, in an event that also led to the name of the Alkonost.

**Quote:** "Ever since, for seven days before and seven days after the winter solstice (December 21 in the Northern Hemisphere), when the seabirds lay their eggs and hatch their chicks, the ocean is calm and navigable and the winds are quiet, as if Aeolus himself is protecting the daughter and grandchildren. Even today, this mid-winter calm is called the "Halcyon Days"" (Rosen 166).

**Scene, in Chapter Thirty Two, "The Lament of Knowledge":** As the snowy land faded into the turquoise behind them, their ship passed into darker green waters while the sun set. Eyes squinting in the vertical sunlight, Noak peered to the ocean in front of them, south, their course for another week before they swung up and to the northeast, along the Great Western Edge of the world. On the horizon and to the southwest loomed two long white oozes of cloud above the rolling ochre, framing a strip of black sky.

In a burst of cool wind-summoned adrenaline Noak hopped onto the starboard railing, gripped a rope and hung out to meet the writhing froth. "We're passing into the Halcyon Days," he announced, gaze still steely on the sky. "After this next gale hits us, it'll be a period of calm for seven days and seven nights." He flicked back his head. "Centered around the solstice, of course."

Brogan huffed. "How would anyone really know that happens, if no one is actually crazy enough to sail in winter?" No one heeded him—the wind was too strong, and bit too hard at the ears.

Wilburt said nothing; this news for once made him assured. Aleen did not remove her stare from the distance, her eyes glossed and unblinking in the cold. She only took a deep breath, the chaff of the water brushing upwards, her face between malice and discontent, stopped somewhere near

disinterest. The distant west looked to her like the blunt lip of a great dark box, patiently waiting to receive them before it closed.

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## Structure Map

### Character Arcs

#### Beginning of the Novel:

Noak wishes to learn all he can about the world, due to the influence of his grandfather Olaus, and believes that all of the world can be fully understood. He regards knowledge of the world as more important than the number of friends he has. He feels tired of only learning from books and jumps at the chance to go on a quest in order to gain actual experience as his grandfather once did, bolstered by his insistence that Olaus has survived his years lost as sea. He thinks good captaining means putting the mission first, and not taking into consideration the others' welfare, labeling them as a "crew" and choosing to at first adopt a hardened "captain" persona in order to make up for his lack of leadership, which he thinks Olaus possessed naturally. He does not realize that leadership grows to greatness and effectiveness over time, or that simply planning everything in advance does not properly prepare for problems, and that adapting as one goes along due to practice and built experience proves a better tactic. He takes the level of devotion Wilburt has for him for granted and views Brogan as a mindless brute who cannot be negotiated with. He loves Aleen but thinks her too strong and beautiful to ever like someone like him.

Aleen wishes to come to grips with her overwhelming strength, which gives her uncontrollable energy and ousts her from society, and believes the only way to do so is to fight the dangers of the world Noak's grandfather Olaus once told her about. She regards physical healing and conditioning as more important than working toward mental and emotional stability. She feels tired of sitting inactive at home and jumps at the chance to go on a quest in order to

finally exert herself and gain stability. She thinks that her strength itself will solve any problem she encounters, and does not take into consideration tactics or planning as part of the process, nor the fact that she can prove “strong” in other aspects, such as singing, a talent she denies. She does not realize the partial affection Wilburt at first comes to see in her and reacts to Brogan aggressively due to her own anger in her own faults as he is very much afraid of her. She loves Noak but does not see herself as strong or beautiful enough to deserve his affection.

Brogan wishes to discover what he wants to do in life in order to impress his dad, who he has been dependent upon from a young age, and believes that he can do so without any outside help. He regards personal stability and prowess as more important than relationships with anyone, and so bullies those around him. He feels tired of disappointing his father by messing up and jumps at the chance to go on a quest in order to escape his currently broken and depressive home life to find his path. He believes that purpose in life has to extend beyond his smaller hobbies and interests, such as carpentry and dancing, and does not regard finding true love as essential to his own happiness. He disregards Wilburt due to his physical superiority over him and greatly fears Aleen due to her physical strength above his own. He dislikes Noak because of Noak’s exact idea of purpose in life, which causes Brogan ire due to his lack of it.

Wilburt wishes to open up more, overcome shyness, strengthen his friendship with Noak and make other friends besides, and believes that loyalty through friendship is the only possible way to achieve happiness himself. He regards his interest and great skill in archery as an intimidating, overwhelming or envious practice in the eyes of others and thus a barrier blocking further opportunities of friendship, and so does not feel pride in his own achievements, nor speak about them, indeed opting to keep mostly silent in fear of others’ judgment. Yet he finds such joy in archery, though it brings him guilt, that he spends more time perfecting it than actually



interacting with other people. He feels tired of performing his pastime in relative loneliness and jumps at the chance to go on a quest in order to grow closer to Noak in friendship and use his talent to better serve the purpose of Noak's mission. He thinks that his ancestral ties also make him an outsider, and so attempts to further integrate himself with others by disregarding his heritage, and only uses his other skills of medicine and playing the violin when the others need it, never as a hobby to please himself. He fears Brogan due to his years of bullying him. He discovers Aleen as an unexpected potential relationship once she takes interest in him and his skills that he had never regarded before due to feeling intimidated by her strength. He regards Noak as a lifelong friend but feels great pain that Noak not always sees him the same.

End of the Novel:

Noak comes to learn that the world can never be fully understood, and that he is just one piece in the larger whole he inhabits. He comes to view the three true friends he has now, and the ones he had all the time undeservedly in Wilburt and unknowingly in Aleen, as much more important than all secrets of the world. He feels pride in learning the true path of experience, and this helps him cope with Olaus' death. He becomes a true captain and leader, regarding the welfare of his subjects over the fulfillment of the goal, and now refers to them as a "team." He now realizes that addressing issues as they come by utilizing past experience proves better to facing trials, and that planning sometimes helps but to never entirely invest in it. He now appreciates his friendship with Wilburt and shows his friend as much, and has come to see Brogan as a real person not too different than himself. He confesses his love to Aleen after realizing all the accomplishments he has completed and convincing his own worth to himself.

Aleen comes to grips with her abilities after realizing their importance and uniqueness to herself, and learns that mental strength more than physical allows her to "use" them instead of

“control” them, and so learns how to make her strength work specifically for her. She learns the importance of thinking things through before rushing into danger, as well as what dangers she is capable of facing and those she is not, and discovers her added strength in other aspects and talents, which she comes to love and accept. She realizes how her interactions with Wilburt let him think she saw interest in him and how her interactions with Brogan intimidate him and only push him away, and learns how to positively change her morale with each. She tells her love to Noak once she comes to see herself as beautiful, talented, and strong in ways beside strength.

Brogan learns that he needs friends and allies in order to craft a positive future for himself, and that his dad will always be proud of him no matter what he does, due to his dad’s great distress and even worse home life while he was away. He leaves bullying behind him because he realizes that he can impact others with his talents and prowess as much as they can impact him, indeed coming to view all walks of humanity as amazing and loving in their own right. He builds up his small talents and interests to craft more of a personality for himself, and realizes the importance of love for another person in the fulfillment of himself. He comes to view Wilburt as a good friend after actually taking time to learn more about him, and sees Aleen as the compassionate and caring person she is. After learning that Noak has no better idea what to do in the future than he does, Brogan decides to do what he loves and live in the moment.

Wilburt discovers that he himself is the only one responsible for his own happiness, and that pleasing others does not mean as much to his own happiness than does loving and feeling indebted to himself. He comes to have great personal pride in his archery skill and recognizes its positive benefit of bringing others closer to him in friendship through their interest in it, yet still retains his silent and thoughtful demeanor, now happy with it as an essential facet of himself. He also comes to accept and love his ancestry, and learns the personal benefits of performing his

other interests. He comes to see Brogan as a good friend after learning more of his interests and opinions, recognizes that Aleen does not actually feel that way about him, and also recognizes that a relationship with her could never serve the purpose of distracting from other issues. He comes to recognize Noak and himself as separate people, working well together to support each other but never indebted to one another for one another's happiness.

Over the course of the story, the four of them go from all being social outcasts in their own right to a loving friend group that works synergistically together to conquer anything.

### Plot by Chapter (Areas Discussed Elsewhere in **Bold**)

#### **1. Seventeen**

- a. Noak awakens on his seventeenth birthday, and goes to school to give a presentation on his grandfather that he is mocked and chided for by Brogan.

#### **2. The Wrong Gulon**

- a. That night Noak is tasked to kill a gulon as part of the tradition surrounding his seventeenth birthday, which he fails to do. Aleen rescues him and he runs home in embarrassment.

#### **3. The Tablets**

- a. Noak walks down to the beach in the morning and finds a box of stone tablets and a message from his grandfather signaling the end of days should the tablets not be placed back at certain points around the world. Noak proposes this quest to Wilburt, and because Wilburt is a devout friend he promises to go.

#### **4. Adventure**

- a. Out of desperation for another member for their quest, Noak and Wilburt ask Brogan to join in the hopes he will provide the muscle. After goading him into it, the three hold a meeting that night and Aleen arrives, interested to go with them as well. After Noak agrees, he explains the real danger as the prophesized coming of Nidhoggr and divulges the plan, adopting a “captain” persona that the others do not feel entirely keen with.

#### 5. The Crew Assembled

- a. NABW go through town the next day, shopping for supplies and picking out a ship, but the other three grow concerned that Noak has changed some, due to his efforts in “leading” them. After experiencing sudden doubt, Noak consults the town bishop, Erich Pontoppidan, and is surprised to hear that he supports it.

#### 6. Not an Ell Past an Orm

- a. At dawn NABW leave money at the harbor, take their carrack of choice and set sail, doing so slowly while growing accustomed to sailing mechanisms, superstitions, and each other’s idiosyncrasies. Almost immediately they are attacked by a Sea Orm, and with a combined effort eventually fight it off, with each doing their part. Noak discovers his sword is actually of fabled Ulfberht-make.

#### 7. Self Defense Against Fruit

- a. The next day Noak attempts to teach everyone a bit more on sea monster prevention and scurvy, but a pact between Brogan and Wilburt to sabotage things

due to Noak's new over-commanding "captain" persona sets things awry. Aleen teaches them all self-defense tactics, which ends messily when the argument comes to a head.

#### 8. Like a Tub Out to a Whale

- a. Days pass, and tensions do not improve. Eventually one argument proves too much to Noak, who retreats only to notice two Troluals approaching, though the others do not. On an enraged whim he decides to let them find out on their own, which culminates in near-death as the other three never do realize until it's too late. Noak caves at the last second, however, and they manage to fight them. After hearing of his "test" the others are even madder than before, and Noak realizes something profound about leadership.

#### 9. Holes

- a. NABW arrive on the first tablet island, and must coerce heather-covered ground filled with hidden Halliflundra burrows to reach the center. When Aleen becomes wedged underground due to rushing in too quickly, Noak tries to save her by enacting more of his newfound captaining methods.

#### 10. Of Shanties and Sea Hogs

- a. A long period of no wind hits, setting the ship adrift, and after a day everyone feels the lull of inaction. To liven spirits, Noak suggests a number of things, eventually resting on singing sea shanties, which boosts morale. Upon sighting the Islandia coast that night, a Sea Hog emerges, and in response to Aleen's

incessant asking if she can attack it with the anchor, Noak gives in to trust and says yes. This initially goes well, but then backfires, sinking their ship.

#### 11. Pitch Black Sand

- a. NABW, separated from their ship, wash ashore on a southern Islandia town and after a bit of arguing come upon an angry Shell Monster. Noak faces it himself but it wounds him, nearly breaking his arm. They make it to the safety of a local widow's house and ultimately reconcile. The next day they find a new ship owned by an aging eccentric and each part with a dear item to pay for it.

#### 12. Kulning in the Waves

- a. NABW sail along the coast to reach the second tablet island, where a farmer lives who will only let them on his land if they agree to herd in his captured Seenauts, or sea cattle, and help him capture a few more. They comply, and in the process Noak and Aleen talk about how to control her energy and make better calculations in tense moments, leading to strength in her that is not just muscular. This lets Aleen remember ancient herding calls her mother used to lull her to sleep with, and so uses them, which calls in the cattle. They set the tablet and leave, only for a Hroshualur to attack them. Aleen takes care of deterring it, showing that she is more collected, but then interacts with a Vermis sea snake and becomes poisoned, falling into a fevered sleep.

#### 13. A Cure in the Storm

- a. While the others desperately tend to Aleen a winter sea storm brews, and a ferocious Nahval attacks them in the middle of it. Noak is wary to trust Brogan and Wilburt, but they come through by helping him weather the storm, harvesting a chunk of the Nahval's hardened snout once it pierces the hull and fashioning it into a cup for Aleen to drink from, which then cures her of illness.

#### **14. Safe Passage North**

- a. Aleen awakens and has a heart-to-heart with Noak. At dawn a Steipereidur, the only whale friendly to sailors, arrives and carries their slowly sinking ship to the dwarf lands. Once there, they attempt a plan to steal materials and mend their new ship.

#### **15. The Ballad of the Dwarves and the Cranes**

- a. NABW approach the hostile dwarves to help patch the hole in their ship, but the dwarves only agree if the four help them in their dispute against the cranes. In so doing, Noak and Aleen grow closer to one another, falling more in love. When they realize their task is to crush helpless eggs of a crane nesting ground, however, they rescue a debilitated crane and refuse the dwarves any further assistance. Just before they are executed, the crane army arrives, killing a majority of the dwarves, and the crane king thanks them for their allegiance while a troop of captive dwarves mend their ship. They leave with a better knowledge of the conflict as the cranes whose partners fell hold vigil and the current partners dance upon the floes.

#### **16. An Old Friend**

- a. NABW come across a small craft sinking in the sea, and from it rescue an elderly fisherman named Fisk, who reminds Noak of his grandfather. The band are then assailed by pirates, and a deadly Staukul arrives, which they had seen resting on its tail in the waves earlier. Noak warns the pirates but they do not pay heed, and the Staukul destroys the pirate ship and consumes its crew. In the end, Fisk sacrifices himself to save NABW, and Noak is left mortified to finally come to grips with the fact that his grandfather has truly experienced the same fate. As they leave, they acquire the pirates' smaller boat.

#### 17. The Council of King Dovregubben

- a. After Noak's reaction to a quail-based mistake caused by Brogan makes Brogan see less of himself, he refuses to speak to Noak even as they anchor on the east side of Norwegia and climb the Dovre Mountains to set the third tablet. This continues as they are captured by Trolls, which they fear at first as enemies but learn only wish to coexist peacefully in the natural environment. Noak learns to listen to Brogan as a good leader should, and they set the tablet as they receive better appreciation for all life in their world.

#### 18. The Shadows of the Ground

- a. After stopping at a rocky island south of Norwegia to find the fourth tablet shrine and getting lost in labyrinthine rock formations, NABW discover a population of diplocauluses and Aleen decides to adopt one, to the chagrin of Brogan. Later that night the ship is assailed by ruthless Fuathan, who steal their ship and strand them.



### 19. A Skerry Situation

- a. Now stranded upon a skerry with a curious sea monster known as a Burchvalur hunting their every move, NABW frantically hop from rock to rock to reach the drifting rowboat with tensions rising continuously between them. Wilburt finally confronts Noak about his apparent neglect of him, and causes the both of them to seriously re-think things. Wilburt eventually makes things better by sighting some cormorants and realizing that the Burchvalur isn't that cruel of a monster after all.

### 20. Flowing Currents, Flowing Veins

- a. After arriving in the Orcades, NABW traverse the mainland to find the fifth tablet shrine, and after night falls become attacked by a horrifying Nuckelavee, eventually run to safety over the nearest stream, and come face to face with a second one in its own territory.

### 21. Blue Mountains Wild

- a. After making it in their tiny lifeboat Scotia, they traverse the impressive terrain to find their lost ship in Fuath Territory on the far side.

### 22. An Exercise in Exorcism

- a. After finally arriving at the Fuath village, Aleen, hoping to protect Noak, rushes in alone, manages to rescue him but becomes possessed by a "baby" Fuath, a spirit known as a Brollachan. After escaping on their ship the others exorcise the Brollachan, freeing her. She and Noak talk about how they see each other, without divulging full feelings for one another, and come to the conclusion amongst

themselves that they have to save each other, instead of one saving the other all the time. They drift past the Isle of Rum, and Noak tells her of the Shearwaters there.

### 23. The Battle of Bald Island

- a. After arriving at the sixth tablet location, NABW learn of the Fachen, a horrendous bird-ogre living in a cave on a floating island in a lake where the tablet shrine is, and promise to the townsfolk to venture in and vanquish it. They all try initially, but Aleen goes in and defeats it alone, proving herself.

### 24. The Auld Country

- a. NABW are surprised to find themselves treated as heroes at a coastal Scotian town, but Aleen must fight to control her emotion when one resident decides to terrorize them.

### 25. No Such Luck

- a. Noak feels assured since the Scotian people gave them a Fairy Loaf, which brings good luck, but after Brogan kills an albatross the four of them do indeed run into bad luck after mistaking an ancient Trolual for an island, leading to Noak's qualms with Brogan over superstition coming to a head, and the destruction of their ship.

### 26. Pillow Pursuit

- a. NABW wash up on the seventh tablet location, an island in Hetladia where the Boneless, a white, shapeless mass, lies in wait. After being pursued and even

consumed by it, they one by one attempt to best it only to see a side of it they did not expect. They then find another ship among those wrecked on the island.

### **27. Fare Flensing off Munkurin**

- a. After stopping in the capital of Fare, NABW assist in its flensing of a Roider washed up on the shore and come to learn a bit more about sea monsters.

### **28. The Beach Trolls and the Polypus**

- a. NABW land at an island of beach trolls, kind beings who claim to have met Olaus, who agree to replace their missing mainsail if they take care of the polypus that is eating all of their tree ducks. After many attempts they capture and plan to kill the polypus, but Noak decides to spare its life and instead instructs the Beach Trolls to preserve their crop better, to which they agree and fix their sail.

### **29. A Welcome Far From Warm**

- a. Upon arriving at Grutlandie NABW is attacked by a brigade sent by the local chief, but the chief's daughter, Orpik, arrives to save them and briefly joins their crew while protesting her dad, and Brogan falls impossibly in love with her.

### **30. Cold as Ice**

- a. Brogan attempts to warm up to Orpik as the tribe hunts them, but unintentional underlying prejudice interferes.

### **31. The Calving**

- a. Orpik leads NABW on an expedition to hunt Rostungers, which ends poorly when the glacier they standing on breaks. Just before they say goodbye, Orpik develops feelings for Brogan.

### **32. The Lament of Knowledge**

- a. After meeting with the chief at the capital of Grutlandie, NABW once again come to see the world differently.

### **33. The Head of an Owl**

- a. As they sail further toward the Great Western Edge, Christmas arrives and Noak gets extremely close to committing himself to tell Aleen his real feelings for her, but then a Ziphius attacks, which Aleen must face with a harpoon gifted to them by the Grutlandians.

### **34. Unladen Sea Swallows**

- a. NABW sails alongside the Edge, and best a flock of sea swallows to show they are now truly in sync as a working team, not just a crew.

### **35. And Then It Stops**

- a. At the eighth tablet island right on the very edge of the world, Noak finally realizes that he is just one small piece of a larger sphere, and that he will never understand all there is to know of the world. A Morse appears, but Aleen finally uses her anchor in a controlled manner to deter it.

### **36. The Claws of the Enwhale**

- a. In the north of Grutlandie, an Enwhale appears, which they at first try to fight by due to its size and brutal majesty ultimately come to grips with their own deaths. It crushes the ship with one snap of its jaws but they each manage to escape.

### 37. The Egede Serpent

- a. Upon awakening on the surf and finding each other, Noak and Aleen finally confess their love and kiss. Out of nowhere a Wind Troll arrives, and they come to trust him after he rescues Brogan and Wilburt. He builds them a small raft to set out on, but as they cast off he begins to laugh, telling them the raft will break. Before it does, the fabled Egede Serpent rises up, eats the Wind Troll, and allows them to ride it the rest of the way to Thule. Noak and Aleen discuss their relationship under the Northern Lights.

### 38. Ultima Thule

- a. After finally arriving at Thule, where the end of the world will begin, Noak searches all over the empty lands and castle to find his grandfather but does not. This moment of dread lasts long enough that the ninth tablet is not placed in time, and as they run to do so Noak trips and it breaks. With a flash of fire, the demon dragon Nidhoggr rises in might from the sea, and darkness falls upon the earth.

### 39. Striker of Malice

- a. Filled with dread and guilt, Noak goes against the wishes of his team and goes to consult Nidhoggr alone. The dragon, who can speak quite eloquently, offers to make Noak king of all the world, with Aleen as his queen, should he choose not to

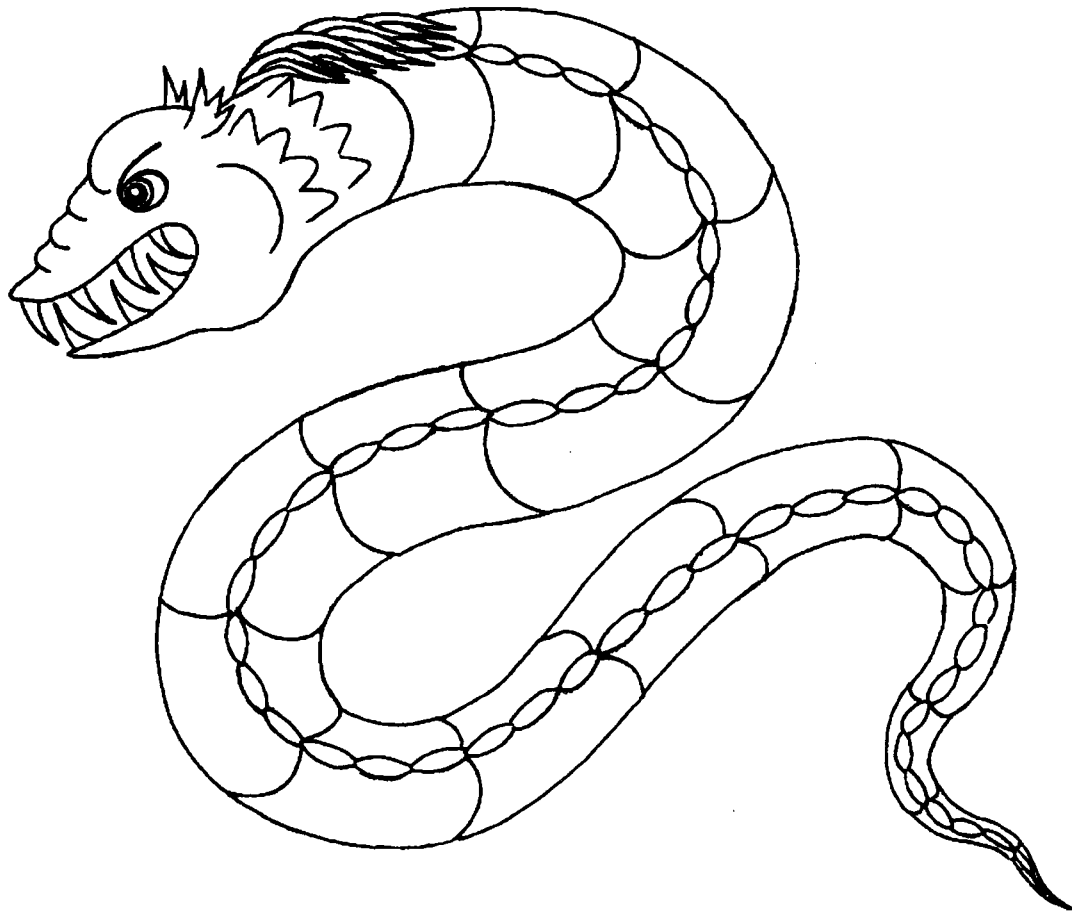
fight him. Noak at first agrees, and the others are appalled, but it was all only to get at a closer vantage point to stab him with the holy shard of tablet, which is performed with the combined fluidity of their teamwork, killing Nidhoggr and lighting the skies again.

#### 40. The Final Truth

- a. NABW are rescued from Thule by Orpik and her father, and all return to Norwegia to consult the king. In the end, NABW decide not to take credit in their outlandish tale, and so leave the world a bit more mysterious.

# Sea Monster Illustrations and their Original Images

## Sea Orm





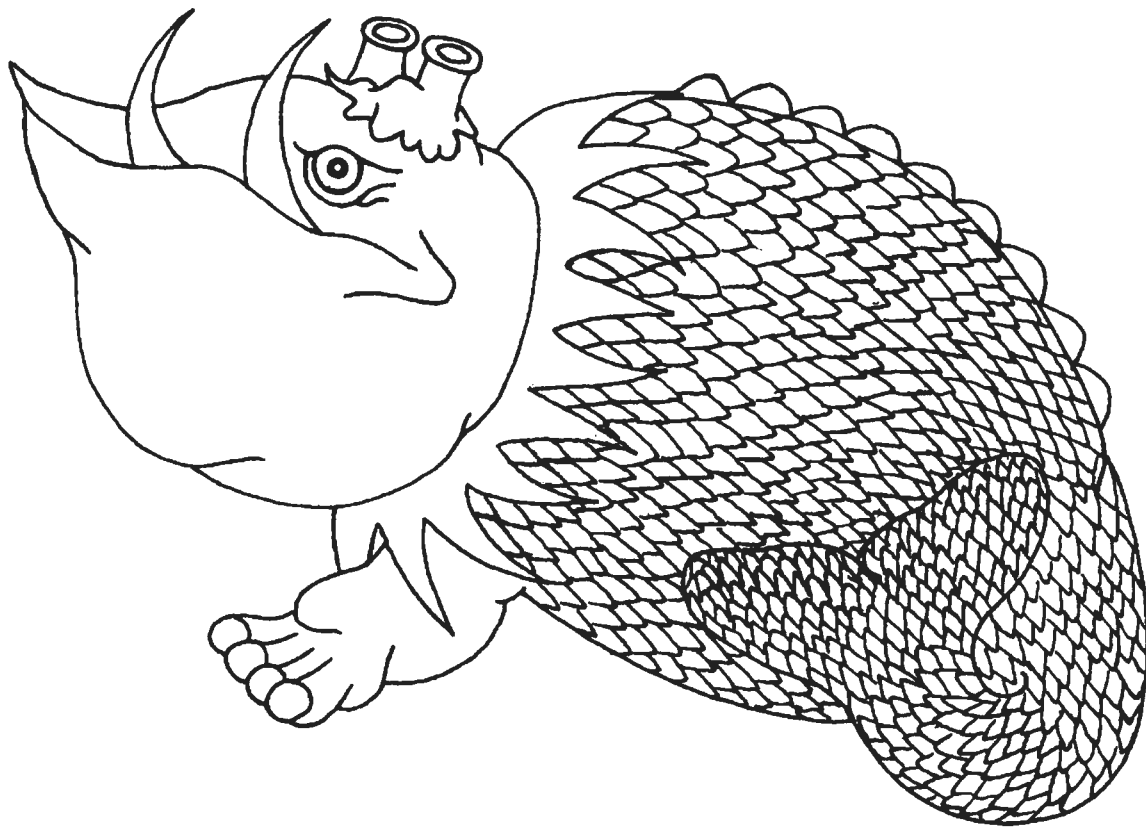
Sea Orm on Olaus Magnus' Map of Scandinavia, the *Carta Marina* of 1539

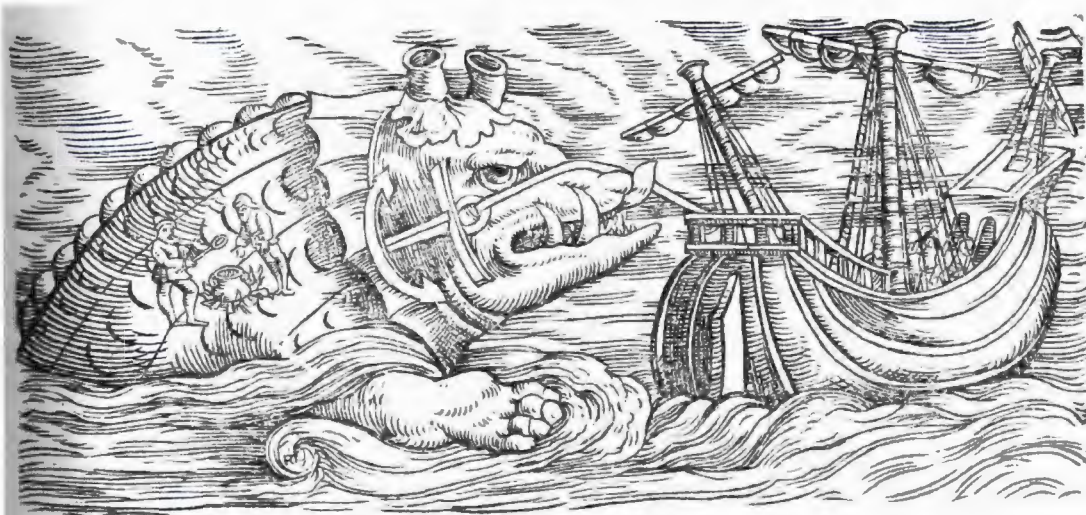
— Image from *Sea Monsters: A Voyage around the World's Most Beguiling Map* by

Joseph Nigg



Trolual





Above: Sea creature sighted between Antibes and Nice in 1562 (P, *Paralipomena*, 31).  
 Below: Sailors on the back of a whale (Norse, *Trolual*; German *Teuffelwal*)  
 which they imagine to be an island (P, 119).

Trolual, Later Depiction by Konrad Gesner and Edward Topsell

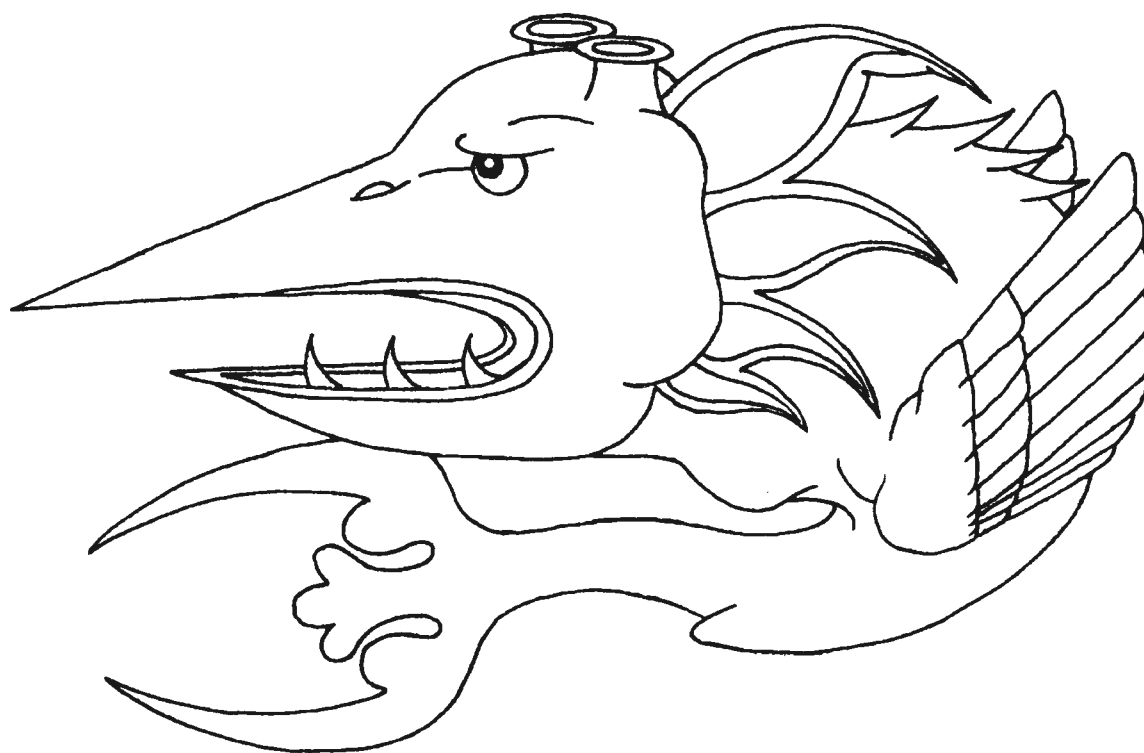
— Image from *Curious Woodcuts of Fanciful and Real Beasts*, Dover Publications, Inc.



Trolual or “Island Whale” on Olaus Magnus’ Map of Scandinavia, the *Carta Marina* of 1539

— Image from *Sea Monsters: A Voyage around the World’s Most Beguiling Map* by Joseph Nigg

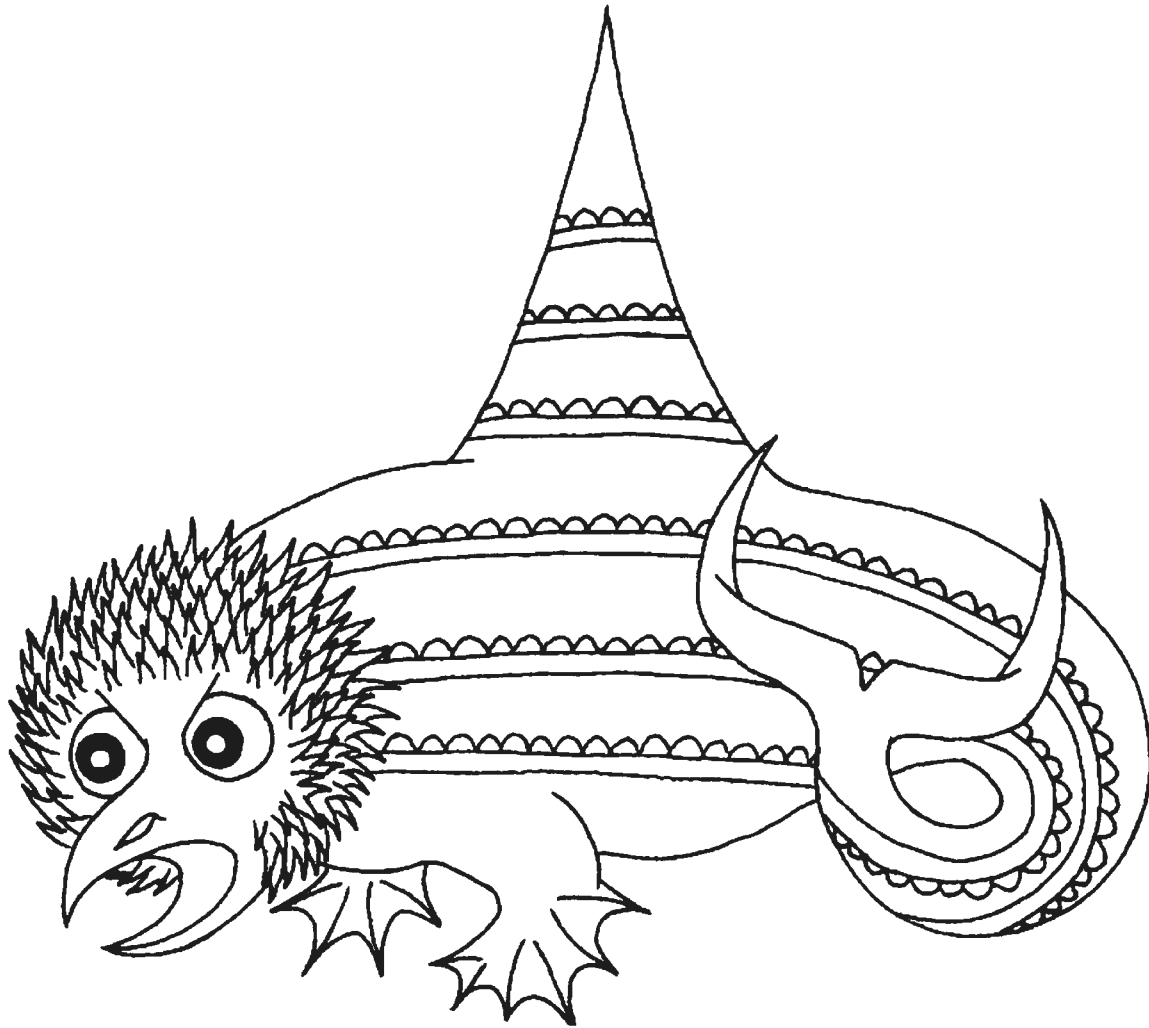
Nahval

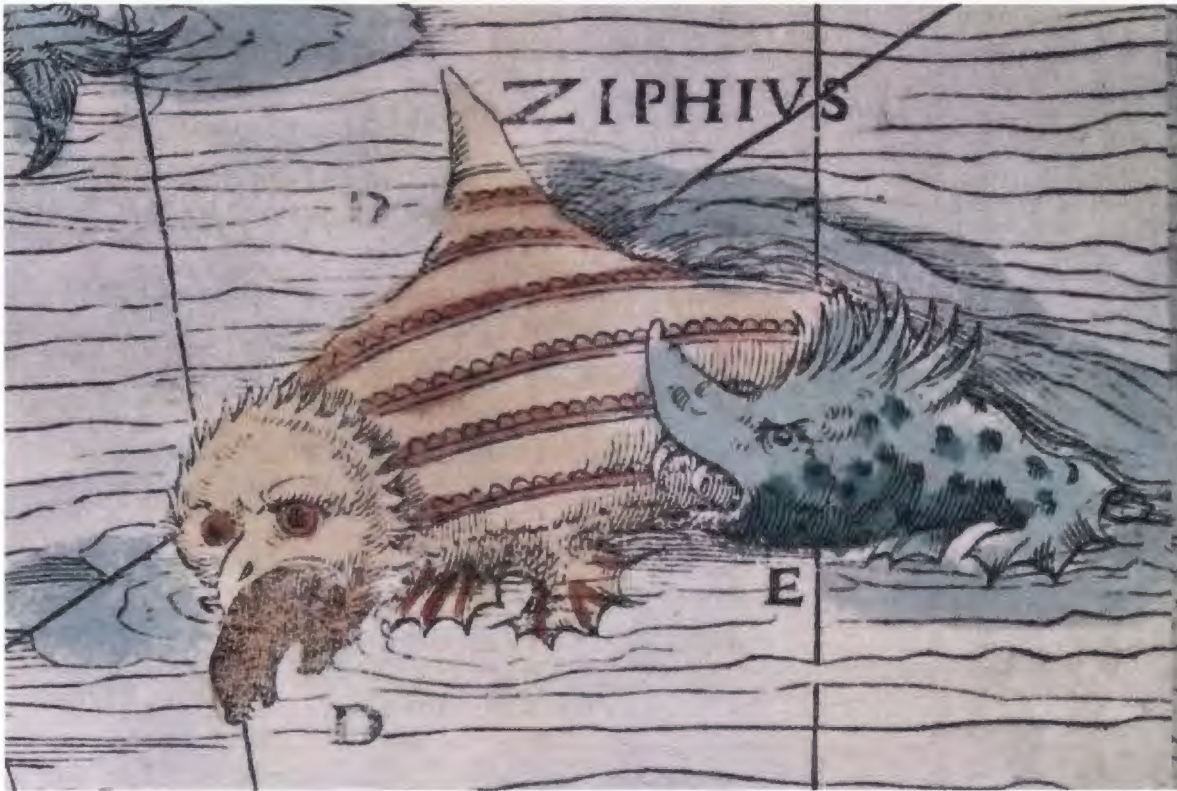


Nahval from *Islandia*, Abraham Ortelius' Map of Iceland, 1590

— Image from *Sea Monsters: A Voyage around the World's Most Beguiling Map* by  
Joseph Nigg

Ziphius

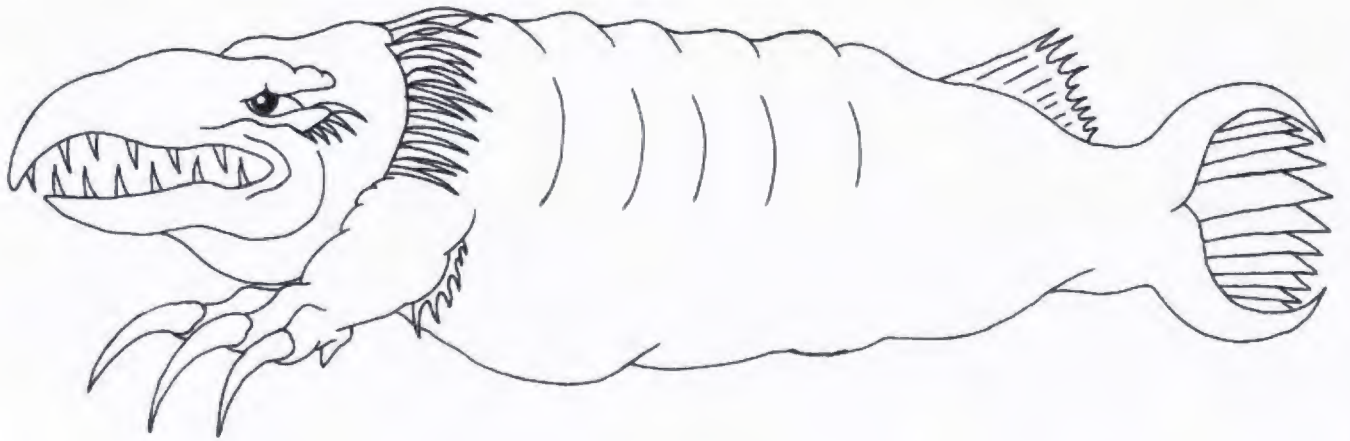




Ziphius on Olaus Magnus' Map of Scandinavia, the *Carta Marina* of 1539

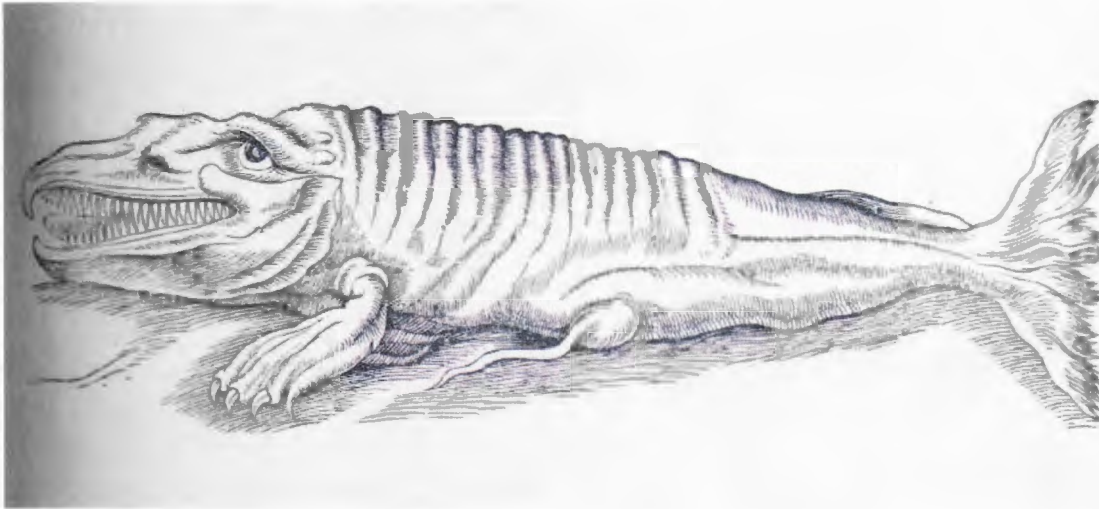
— Image from *Sea Monsters: A Voyage around the World's Most Beguiling Map* by Joseph Nigg

Enwhale (My Own Name) Based on Image of Famous Stranded Whale Carcass



“Enwhale,” 1532 Tynemouth Whale, on *Islandia*, Abraham Ortelius’ Map of Iceland, 1590

— Image from front cover of *Sea Monsters on Renaissance Maps* by Chet Van Duzer



“Enwhale,” Tynemouth Whale Carcass, Later Depiction by Konrad Gesner and Edward Topsell

— Image from *Curious Woodcuts of Fanciful and Real Beasts*, Dover Publications, Inc.

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## Sample Chapter: Chapter 6 – Not an Ell past an Orm

They returned to shipyard the next day a half-hour before dawn. From afar it appeared that four swift shadows had passed under the tall fence, over the hills, and down along the dock carrying many heavy parcels. The two slower shadows ended up making four trips each with wide wooden carts. The smallest shadow paced around, appearing worried, and the last, satchel-laden shadow carried a parcel to the empty shack near the water, opening the door—it was not locked, for Nicholas kept no valuables inside overnight—and setting a note and 1500 in coins on the desk, securing it from the wind with a smooth rock.

Noak walked down to the water as if in slow motion, and peered at the distant skyline through the fog, down the fjord, past the islands, at the defining black flat line of sea beyond. At home on his pillow lay a shortened sentiment he had left for his mom:

*Hey, may not see you for some time. The notes below will help you understand—I found them floating in the tides. I believed in Olaus for so long, and now he needs to believe in me. I know. Worst Goodbye Ever. I love you.*

Below his note rested the box, now barnacle-less, with its note inside. Over Noak's shoulder hung the satchel, with all nine tablets and Olaus' guide to the islands within. He had dressed warm, with wool trousers, fine boots, a light overshirt, colored brown, and beneath it a dark-blue tunic that his mother said popped out his eyes. He wore his sword at the side.

Out of all of them, Aleen had brought the most clothes. For now, she wore another yellow-colored smock, but cut off at the waist with grey linen as a top, and an azure blue skirt with brown leggings and boots. She had fastened a thin black leather baldric to her belt, which

passed over the right shoulder, with Fist tucked securely in a scabbard across the middle, its blade angled upwards at the left.

Brogan and Wilburt looked as they normally did—Wilburt removed his reindeer vest for no one and Brogan's attire never changed. Brogan lugged his metal spar in its holding sleeve on his back, while Wilburt carried his bow and a cloth quiver of arrows. Out of them all only Wilburt had red rings around his eyes and a shallow breath—though it did not appear as if he had been crying, nor was he about to. They all held their own fears about the mission, how their families would cope, and even about the authenticity of Olaus' note—save Noak—but a thrill like she had never felt kept Aleen's eyes and smile up and her feet moving, while Brogan became bolstered by the brisk morning breeze and Wilburt kept going as if driven by a compelling force apart from himself, eager but unassured.

Every single doubt Noak had harbored in the sides of his mind cleared out upon boarding the ship for the first time. He began with the right foot for luck, as was tradition, and encouraged the others to do the same, not paying heed to their curious glances to one another in his glee. He hopped from the boarding-bridge down onto the deck and became enveloped by the thick smell of newly-varnished wood, so invitingly rich he felt as if he could burrow into it and live as a woodworm. The rusty orange color all around him absolutely glowed even in the cool dawn, offset every so often with round black whorling tree knots. The constant bobbing and shifting of the waves below came to him as an unexpected comfort, like a deep connection with a loved one long estranged.

He could at first walk slowly around, admiring the silken rigging and breathing in the tang of the sea mist as he imagined it spurting off the hull, but then he noticed Aleen and Brogan scrambling around him, carrying things and looking for places to put them. With excitement

Noak directed them to the wide square opening set into the wall of the sterncastle below the helm, where thick wood stairs led to the between—or ‘tween’—deck, which they had to crouch in, and further down into the hold, where the cold water lapped outside. After he and Wilburt helped the others load everything, including food, equipment and personal belongings, all into different parts of the hold and the tween deck, which took some minutes and left them already weary, Noak gave them a further tour of the tween deck and all its amenities. These included the crew’s quarters set toward the bow—some haphazardly hung hammocks—the galley between, used for eating meals—a table—and at the back the latrine, set directly above the rudder—an unceremonious hole in a seat, beneath which freezing sea sloshed—and finally the captain’s cabin through a door halfway back up the stairs—a bookcase, a desk, and a cozy little bunk—which Noak described in very acute detail before leading them back out into the sun.

At once Noak realized that all items were now packed, all ties to the land extinguished, and they were now on the water, ready to set sail. He found himself on the deck over waves and under sky, in a position that his entire life had led up to, standing proud before his motley crew. With as much gusto as he could manage, he drew in a breath large enough to fill the lateen sail and with joy on his lips barked his first order as captain.

“All right, motley crew!” he shouted, throwing one pointed finger into the air and turning away from them, angling himself back toward the stern and out to sea. “Weigh anchor!”

He brought his hand triumphantly down into a fist at his chest, and waited—for some thirty seconds. Oddly he could hear no movement behind him. No scrabbling feet, no hollers of ‘Yes, Captain!’ He turned around to see them glancing at one another worriedly, and making short head turns over their shoulders. “Didn’t you hear me,” asked Noak, stretching out the *hear* as if foppishly insulted. “Weigh anchor!”

Brogan was the first to offer a response. "With what?"

Noak, caught off guard, dropped the demeanor. "Huh?"

"Do we have any scales, or . . ." Brogan moved his open hands up and down as if weighing possible options.

Noak did not react to this at once. An odd milky look began to grow in his eyes, and the only words he found were further instructions. "Brace fore and aft?"

Wilburt scrunched his face in. "What?"

"Release the clewlines?" Noak offered further.

"Release the *what?*" asked Wilburt.

Noak's voice was no more than a whimper now, and reaching. "Trim the sails?"

"Trim them!" said Brogan, quickly glancing upwards. "With scissors?" He glanced up again. "Are they too square?"

"Noak," Aleen said then, for it needed to be. "None of us know how to sail."

To Noak at that moment, the waking town over the hills seemed at once a lot closer, and the chuckling faces of its residents in plain view. He felt a quavering in his stomach and moved to the stairs to sit down. For a minute he held his cheeks and stared at his feet with frightened, desperate, bugging eyes. *Of course* they didn't know how, of *COURSE!* They had not spent an eternity holed up at home, every day after school, reading and reading and reading about it. They had lives. They knew not the first thought about any of it. Why didn't he realize it sooner? Why *NOW*, of all times? They were sunk, already, and they had not even left the harbor.

Aleen walked over to him. She asked herself most of the same questions, but the difference was she had a solution. True, her sailing skills did not add up to much, but she felt they were enough to help them get going. She hated to see him distressed, and bent over him, reaching out an unsure hand but then pulling it back. "Noak?"

"What?" he asked, the words muffled by the hands on his face. The countless dark spirals in the deck looked to him in that moment like countless judging eyes.

"We don't know it, but we'd love to learn," she offered, and turned to the other two with a frown, mouthing 'right?'

Wilburt and Brogan, left in the center of the deck, mumbled and grumbled an "Mm-hm."

"Come on," said Aleen, "what was the one of things you said? Brace . . . something?" Her eyes watched the ever-rising sun, now halfway over the mountain. "What's the first step?"

Noak looked up into her face, but it did not comfort him, which he found alarming. He turned his gaze aside, and looked up at the topmost sails, or topsails, furled and tied on the top yard of the mainmast. At that moment he realized that he made another blunder—the sails needed to come out before the anchor was weighed. Noak turned back to the deck and rubbed his forehead. "Well, the sails need loosened."

Aleen peered upwards. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, by hand, at the top." Noak spoke through a sigh. "There are three support ropes securing each."

"Like, along those three horizontal beams up each mast?"

"The yards, yes."



A breeze blew in from the mainland, shuffling wheat-gold strands over Aleen's face. A strong wind, to take them out. At her feet Noak droned on with more directions. She smiled, eyes filled with vigor, and with arms at her sides assumed a half-crouch, facing the mainmast.

"The ropes should be tied into a knot afterwards," Noak went on, "to keep them up out of the rigging." He looked up at her. "I suspect it will take us too long to get out of here by—"

With eyes still set in their bulging, Noak joined the equally stunned Brogan and Wilburt in staring at the wonder occurring above them.

In a moment Aleen had broken into a short run and leapt upwards into the rigging along the mast, now tangled all about her, and began the climb upwards, maneuvering and agile in her smock, boots and skirt, like a squirrel but faster.

In seemingly no time she reached the topsail of the mainmast, gripping the covered yard with her hands and supported by only the single rope that stretched along the yard under her feet. After gaining balance she stood triumphant for a time, gazing out over the rippling blue-green mirror that stretched open before them. While the rising sun spelt danger for their cause, its warm promise of a clear day ahead filled her with confidence. The wind smelled sweet with rain that far up; she looked back to the land and found herself at the height of the tallest trees on the closest hill. Though not tired she did feel proud of herself, and with a chuckle looked back down to see how the others were doing.

It had been a long time since the three of them had seen her near-limitless energy in action, save with Noak and the gulon, but she still thought they might be staring a bit too hard up at her, with jaws dropped and their eyes boring. As she peered down at them through the ropes she really began to feel uncomfortable, though she was not sure at first why. It wasn't the fact

that they stared, but that they held that stare, all three of them, with no signs of stopping. And though Brogan showed it more than the others, she could tell that they all felt just a bit scared.

At once Aleen's breath staved in her throat and her knees buckled. In a second she had been transported back to grade school, when she could not control her strength as much—she remembered the staring, constant and humiliating. She remembered the innumerable hours she'd spent hidden behind her bangs, hands full of debris from something she had unintentionally crushed.

"I *did* have very long bangs," she said to herself, desperately trying to make light of the situation and oppose her own creeping emotion, but it didn't work. and at once her breath came in short bursts and her feet slipped off the rope and she grabbed along the yard, hanging in space.

Below on the deck the others snapped out of their hypnotic state, gasped, and jumped back. Noak experienced a rush of cold as his heart stopped—at this point the sudden stop from a fall would kill her. "Alee—stop! What—what, help!"

"Hey!" Brogan yelled up at her. "You okay?"

Aleen had no problem keeping a grip, nor straining to hold herself up. Anxiety ate at her brain like a rat at cheese, and it made the furled cloth of the sail feel slippery as soap. "Don't—don't stare at me!" she yelled, her face pressed against the ropes. It hurt her pride to say it, and her shaking body hindered the words.

"What?" yelled back Noak.

"I said don't stare!" Aleen screamed, and tightened her grip on the ropes until her knuckles shone like ivory. "Just—just don't watch me, look away!"

“Yeah right!” Brogan said. “And watch you fall?”

“Please!” shouted Aleen, and found her heartrate only increase.

Noak felt helpless and furious on the deck, standing still and worthless. But he found that this request made sense, and found relatability in her pleas. Though it stilled his blood into straining pipes he tore his eyes down from her struggling form and turned them to his companions. “Guys, look down. Come on. *Now.*”

When Aleen glanced back down she saw the three of them looking at the boards, or off into the waves—Brogan appeared to be whistling. This helped to calm her trembling arms and with willpower still in her arsenal she overpowered the rest of it, swinging her foot back up onto the rope and gaining balance once more. At length she managed to shimmy along to the farthest knot, undoing it and tugging its line over and around the sail and then tying it back into a jumbled knot again, as Noak had said. After she had moved on to the other two along the same yard, she felt the pressure recede from her head, and when she pulled herself out of the way and let the sail fall still halfway-secured with a *flump*, she felt spirited enough to chuckle at the anticlimactic reveal and unappealing sound.

Wilburt heard it down on the deck, and turned his round face up long enough to shout, “You can do it!” and then angled his nose back to the floor.

Normally this would have caused more issue by placing her in the spot, but at that moment she found that it actually helped return her control, and bit her lip and pressed on. She had five more square sails to swing to and fifteen more knots to untie, but after her confidence returned her strength took over and the going went smoother than expected. At some points she moved fast enough that she pulled herself upwards with only one tug of her hand and leapt from

yard to yard with the compressed power of her knees. In only five minutes and nine flumps later she had completed the task in full, inched back down the mainmast and leapt back onto the deck on both feet. She found herself actually breathing heavy for once, and shocked to feel a line of sweat across her forehead. She glanced around the ship. "Now what?"

She looked at the others and saw extreme relief in their faces, along with the still undesirable look of shock and astonishment. Noak's eyes were glistening as if filled with liquid, and to both his astonishment and hers he moved toward her with open arms.

He acted almost involuntarily, yet planned to stop if she did not look accepting, but to his own surprise she did, and met him in the hug halfway. It lasted for but a moment, before Noak had pulled away, leaving Aleen grasping air for a split second, and Noak rubbed his nose where a strand of long hair had lingered before brushing off his shirt, clearing his throat and saying "Ahem, hmm. Thank you, Aleen, for—for that."

She could only nod, her mouth softly puckered and her eyes staring blankly ahead.

Noak pulled away from her gaze and said, more commandingly again, "Now. It's time I show you the basic details of sailing, before we start on anything else."

Brogan looked at him with a face only half-smug, but Wilburt nodded in agreement.

Aleen felt mostly disoriented still, until Noak turned back to her once more.

"Do you—feel like pulling in the anchor?" he asked, and she responded with a salute.

"Yes, Captain!"

Noak clapped his hands together. "Then let's set to it." With an embarrassing jolt he realized another item he'd once again forgot. "Wait, wait," he said, rubbing his forehead. "First

we need to set the sails.” He strode over to the bases of the masts, and beckoned all to follow him. He showed them the area of the deck in front of the foremast where extensive ropes called clewlines—which led to the edges of each sail—and buntlines—securing the top of the sails—were tied off on metal hooks set in the wood. To set the sails meant untying them, and releasing the sails above to all their square and open glory. Wilburt and Brogan jumped at this—it seemed easy, and they had felt rather unhelpful up to this point. They seemed so adequate at it—as Noak found himself thinking—that he set them off to set the mizzen all on their own. While this was being done Noak showed Aleen where the anchor hung off the front right of the bow, almost under the bowsprit, on a chain secured to the deck which passed through a hole in the rail and down to the water below.

The second Aleen had gripped the chain Noak turned up his head and looked away, arms folded and foot tapping, but not impatiently. Seeing this, Aleen felt something in her stomach open like wings and blushing returned to her task. She almost effortlessly tugged in the chain, until it rested in a snaking pile at her feet, and after the dripping anchor came up she secured the chain on a hook in the deck. The iron object was as tall as her, and cold to the touch. For a time, she admired its perfectly straightened T-shaped shank and crossbar, its heavy yet lovingly-worn ring, and the pronounced flukes, pointed like demon tails, at the ends of the great sloping arms. She pulled herself away only when she recalled that Noak was still waiting.

By now the other two had finished loosing their lines, and the six sails flapped supplely in the ever-strengthening wind. All four of them could feel the ship already listing back and to the left, which it began to do the second the anchor had pulled free. “We need to brace the sails now,” Noak continued, and led them to the side rails where many thick cords were tied in brackets and ran up to the ends of each yard. “You have to untie these, and pull the foremast to

the starboard side, and both the main and mizzenmast to port. That will turn us around . . . I think.”

The others stared at him blankly. Aleen finally watched as her little sailing knowledge ran dry.

Noak cleared his throat. “So, starboard is right and port is left—when you’re facing the front, or fore, of the ship. The back is the aft. I’ll show you.”

In some minutes he had directed them on which to pull and toward what side, which was quickly taken over by Aleen, who to her own chagrin strained against the heavy foremast yet insisted on pulling all the necessary lines at once. With the noise of knocking, groaning wood the great mast rotated on its base—to the surprise of them all, save Noak—and in a moment, all its yards pointed to starboard. Once the braces were tied again with knots Noak instructed them to tie. Noak noticed with soft joy and incredulity that the ship had actually begun to move back, out of the harbor, and in the actual direction they wanted.

“Oh, the helm!” he said in surprise. “I need to steer!” The very thought of it enthralled him, and he felt enamored that this exact moment he had pictured in his mind had finally come. “Aleen! You okay with the main and mizzen?”

Aleen looked up, happily breathing heavily, and nodded.

“Good. Brogan, Wilburt, help her with untying and retying. I have to *steer!*”

They raced off. Noak ran over the deck in five long strides and up the stairs in two. His hands gripped the helm before he knew it, and there he stood, in his ever-coveted and imagined position as helmsman, and his ship laid out before him. The bulbous handles of the wheel were

smooth and supple. He took off the precious satchel and stowed it in the box nailed to the sterncastle by his feet. He smelled the wind, examined the early morning clouds, watched the main and mizzenmasts below him hauled into place one after the other by Aleen, and once Brogan and Wilburt had secured the braces once more, turned the wheel to starboard.

Nearly immediately the ship turned as a great wind came up, filling the sails and pressing it backwards. The mizzen's lateen sail caught the burst and sent them back, and Noak yelled with excitement and one hand in the air while they did. As they went out, the heavy wooden boarding bridge on the port side was pulled sideways, tumbled off both the rail and pier behind it, and fell into the water between them, sinking from sight.

Noak watched it fall away with a nauseous gaze. His mouth formed to a near figure eight. He could only respond to the others' blank stares with "Whoops."

Despite the blunder he kept a steep upper chin, and called out "Brace round forward!" — the final step. "That means bringing the foremast straight again!"

Aleen hopped to it, delighting in applying her energy. Brogan and Wilburt sauntered behind, rather tired at this point of doing up knots. By the time the ship had tilted horizontal to the shore, helped also through Noak's steering, the foremast stood straight once more and the wind hit it just right to send them forward, into the fjord, and straight out to sea. Noak nearly fell to weeping at the sight of sea ahead of him, framed at the sides with green isles, sitting blue and clear. "We did it!" he shouted triumphant, and the tired hands below him cheered.

At last the churning dread within Noak subsided. He thought of what Olaus would say to see him, putting his book smarts to good use, and failed in imagining a worthy answer. He

looked skyward as his mind calmed to a lull. Frantic shadows flew down from the shifting sails above him, and the pennants flew. The ship pressed on smooth and stemmed the tide.

As they coasted like a dream out of the forested skerries, Noak was surprised that they had gone so far so quickly. He looked behind him one last time to the red dots of houses, oval of fence and mass of green trees beyond. Along the harbor he saw a striding shape, small and black like a pinpointed star. After reaching the final ship in the line it stopped. He watched it jump with limbs splayed, pace about for a bit, then pass into its hut as they rounded the bend.

\* \* \*

In time the horizon behind them turned into a green line, with a lumpy rise in the center where the high mountains sloped beyond Berga. Noak paid no more attention to it as it faded—the rushing mist in front of him proved too exhilarating. On the sterncastle deck to the right of the wheel lay the wood box next to his feet, secured by nails. In the box sat many tools they had purchased the day before, including a compass, spyglass, astrolabe, and map of the major shipping lanes written on the same waterproof parchment as Olaus' book. A studied glance at this told him that they were steadily traveling along the direct shipping lane to Islandia, along the popular mid-ocean route. The compass and the morning sun told him enough at this point to steer the ship due northwest to Islandia's great Horn, and he marveled in the fact that he navigated it so smoothly thus far, even for all of ten minutes. The light, happy feeling in his chest told him that, despite all possible obstacles, they would fare well in the voyage ahead. With elation he brought the spyglass up to his eye for the first time as captain, and saw nothing but sunlit blue water through the luffing mainsails.



Aleen, Brogan and Wilburt had busied themselves with laying out their belongings in the tween deck after securing the rest of the braces, and after that found nothing better to do than join Noak on the sterncastle. All sailing tasks were done for the moment—the courses had been set with a strong wind behind and if there were other things to prepare they didn't know them.

Noak at first jumped when he brought his sights out of the compass and saw the others standing around him, with Aleen at his left leaning on the rail, but quickly covered it up by exclaiming "I'm amazed at the *perfect* direction of this wind!" He compressed the spyglass between his hands with a metallic click and smiled at the sea in front of them. "Thank goodness we set sail on a Sunday."

Brogan glanced over from cleaning out his ear. "Why's that?"

Noak looked at him with a look of incredulity. "Sundays are the only good days to sail on," he said, as if trying to remind him. "Didn't you know?"

"I did!" Aleen said, but then worried if it had been said too quickly and with too much over-enthusiasm. Noak only looked at her with muted surprise.

Brogan did not pay attention to her, and shook his head. "Isn't any day as good as any other?"

"Oh, ho ho," Noak chuckled, shaking his head. "Absolutely not. For one thing, Thursdays are a BIG red flag. Sailing on them at *all* is risky behavior."

"Really?" asked Wilburt quietly. "How come?"

Noak was about to answer, but to Aleen's surprise he turned to her.

"Aleen?" He had no idea where her knowledge came from, but decided to let her show it.

Though taken off guard Aleen, quickly remembering, said “Because of Thor, god of storms—cause it’s Thor’s day, see?” Her face turned the color of rosewater.

“Also Fridays,” Noak added. “At least, don’t *set* sail on Fridays.”

“And why?” asked Brogan, with his nose upturned.

“It was the day of the crucifixion,” said Aleen.

For a second the only sounds heard were the ship bobbing along in the water about them. Brogan turned to her and blinked. “Oh.”

“It sounds like you guys aren’t caught up on your maritime bad luck,” said Noak, once again mad at himself for not realizing that, even though Olaus had told him all these things from a young age, they were not exactly common information.

Brogan bloated up his stubbled face like a spiny blowfish before letting the air out in a pfft. “You’re really going to stand there and talk to me about superstitions? None of it matters.” he said, throwing up his hands. In his way of thinking, nothing happened by chance, though he did not say this aloud. He thought of his dad, at home. “And there’s no such thing as *luck*,” he said.

“Of course there is!” shouted Noak, with offense in his voice. “*Especially* in sailing.”

“Like what?” Brogan snapped, and crossed his arms.

“Well,” Noak said, thinking up an obscure one. “One that I like is to never throw eggshells overboard without crushing them into pieces.” He smirked at them. “Can anyone tell me why?”

For ten seconds he was met with blank stares, even from Aleen, who looked very lost. At last Wilburt began with “Well—”

“Because,” Noak said, “if you throw them over when they’re whole, witches might use them as boats and follow the ship, bringing about curses.”

“Oh, oh yeah,” said Brogan, drawing out the words. “I was *just* about to guess that, you beat me to it.”

Noak didn’t regard his sarcasm—he felt too excited at sharing the wisdom of Olaus, as if it had built up inside him for years and years and was now finally bursting out to an acceptable audience, if slightly annoyingly so. He peered at them again with a dancing eyebrow. “Do you want to know the top five ways of getting bad luck on a ship?” he pressed, pushing out his elbow at them.

Wilburt knew how Noak could get at times like this, and it only brought his despair and doubt of him deeper. “Well—”

“From least-worst to worst,” said Noak, listing them on his fingers. “is losing a bucket, hearing an unanswered bell, whistling,” —he put a hand to the side of his mouth and bent his head down— “this causes storms, of course.”

Though Noak didn’t notice, Brogan rolled his eyes at this. Even Aleen was growing a tad annoyed by his sickly enthusiasm, and had a concerned look.

Noak closed his eyes and held up his head with an open smile to continue. “And the second worst is—” he said, and at that moment his mouth snapped closed like a book. His eyes grew. “Um.”

Brogan turned his head at him. "Yes?"

After making a sound like a hiccup he continued "Well the worst of course is killing an albatross—"

"Yeah, yeah yeah whatever," said Brogan, "but what is the second thing? I want to know, I'm *really* interested."

"Hmm?" asked Noak, as if he hadn't heard him correctly.

"What is it, Noak?" Aleen asked. The concern in her eyes had grown too strong for him to ignore.

"Ah—ah," he said, trying to speak. "The second worst, is, uh . . . sailing with," he looked away from Aleen at Wilburt, "women, or meeting with." he turned away from Wilburt to Brogan, "redheads." Brogan could only offer him a wide-eyed stare, a horrid remainder of how he had screwed up.

"Oh," said Aleen at first, and even managed a chuckle. "Well, that is . . . that's—no, no wait, it's not, *excuse me?*" Her hair flipped across her face. "And who decided that, may I ask?" She was not entirely mad, *per se*, at least not at the prospect itself—only that she had never been informed of such a belief.

A sour lead weight plunked down Noak's stomach, as it did each of the very few times he had ever seen Aleen angry. "Haven't you ever heard of . . . that?"

"*No!*" she said, and took a step back. She almost didn't recognize her own tone, but at the same time felt it was warranted. She thought about taking a deep breath, which usually soothed

in times of stress, but did not find the strength to pull away, and opted for an honest question instead. “And what, may I ask, *inspired* this myth?”

Noak stood rooted with his shoulders touching his ears, and did not want to speak. Still, he could not take his eyes off her. The anger in her stance at once terrified and fascinated him. “They were feared to prove as . . . *distractions*,” he choked, with the last word through a softly clenching throat. The teardrop-shaped weight slipped deeper into his gut as he remembered that this very reasoning had nearly prevented him from letting her come.

Aleen stared at him with hollow green holes through her eyes. A fist raised itself up to eye-level almost without her meaning it to. For a split second her eyes relaxed and she looked slightly upwards, as if thinking over the logic behind it, but then reverted straight back to a death-glare. She didn’t want to feel mad, but it had shocked her more than anything—and she did not like feeling shocked. She certainly didn’t want to be mad at Noak, but in some strange way it was almost as if he had been keeping a secret from her, and because of this felt especially betrayed, bewildered and attacked, even if she of course knew this not to be the case. And so what if he does, she thought. It’s not like he cares enough about me anyway—he’s his own person and I am mine. All inner hopes regarding the hug from earlier were now entirely detracted.

Finally breathing slowly, Aleen felt overly saddened by this as she brought her fist down, crossed her arms and leaned against the top rail with one foot up against the second. She looked at the others and noticed Wilburt standing as round-eyed as a long-necked baby bird, and Brogan against the far railing, with slight tremors going through his legs, almost in a half-crouch and hiding his face. She held her head down. She did not speak again.

Noak coughed up the tension corking his throat shut. "I—I'm sorry, Aleen." He blinked, and thought to say 'I had supposed you knew,' but at the last moment decided not to and left off on a strangled "I—"

Unbeknownst to the shreds of his stomach, this was near-exactly what Aleen needed to hear from him—though the fear of false motives still kept her angry, and was seen in her eyes as she glanced down at the deck.

In despair Noak next looked toward Wilburt, who he had forgotten about in the foray. "I'm sorry, Wilburt," he said, and did not offer anything more.

Wilburt looked up at him with eyes like soft dough, as if not realizing he had spoken to him. He didn't feel personally attacked, far from it—he knew enough about sailors to know how wary they were. He only felt more stabs of pain at how Noak had disregarded him from the night of the meeting until now, and now regarded him with—disappointingly—not as much emotion as he had apologized with to Aleen. He desperately tried to lighten the mood, with a bit of his own family humor that Noak knew. "Oh, it's fine," he said with a laugh, piercing straight into Noak's eyes. "They're right to be afraid of us, I'd say."

To his dismay Noak only brushed this off and turned away.

"You know," Noak admitted, "I don't think that all this sailing," —he hated the word but forced himself to say it— "*superstition* matters much anyway. It's all built on false information, most of it," he said, gesturing with open hands to Wilburt and Aleen. "Like the part I just said. Total mistaken information."

Brogan perked his head up near the railing, finding it unbearable not to chime in. “So, what? You’re telling me that witches hitching up eggshells and spurting curses out their noses is totally legit, but sailing with women and redheads—that’s all blither and nonsense?”

Noak had a face of stone when he said “Yep,” with full sincerity.

With a distressed ‘grr’ noise Aleen threw up her hands, briefly, then brought them down to fists. She found some contentment, however, in Brogan ducking back down again. “Come on, Wilburt,” she said to him, and saw that he looked rather astonished at her speaking to him. “Let’s go where we won’t cause these two any trouble.” She marched down the stairs.

Wilburt, after glancing half a second at Noak’s surprised face, turned and followed, leaving his captain standing stock still behind him.

When he saw Aleen walk away, Brogan came out of hiding. “Well,” he laughed, traipsing over and clapping Noak on the shoulder. “How does it feel to be one of the lucky ones, eh bud?” He tilted his helmet up to expose more of his bark-brown hair as a reminder, and deftly raised his eyebrows.

Noak blinked at him meekly. There was failure in his eyes and pain in his voice. “Not great.” He turned back to the wheel.

On the deck below Aleen broke her irate stride as she suddenly let out a chortle, and gave Wilburt a nudge with her elbow. “Brogan *does* realize that he would be the one that gets bad luck from *us*, right?”

Wilburt found himself smiling at her. “Well, he *is* a few arrows short of a quiver.” The sudden sparkly laugh that burst from her face was his first moment of clear-headed enjoyment of the morning.

It lasted around four seconds.

“Hey!” shouted Brogan from above them, farther away than they had guessed he could hear, blowing out Noak’s ear, and Wilburt froze in place.

Brogan’s big boots bumped down the stairs. He walked up to Wilburt and poked a segmented finger at his chest. “I represent that, you know!”

For a second Wilburt was caught off guard. He stood for a moment blinking at the blue sky past Brogan’s face. Aleen’s sighing beside him revealed what he had actually meant.

“No, no Brogan,” she said, with fingers clutching her forehead. “It’s *resent*.”

He turned from Wilburt and shot her a quizzical look. “Of course it is.” His head whipped back and forth between them. “It just happened, didn’t it?”

From the sterncastle, Noak watched them argue, and he could see the threads of his authority as captain unravel in the breeze. In a few short minutes, it had all become chaos, and even—indirectly—the authority of Olaus had been questioned. I must achieve order, at once, he thought, or the mission will suffer. At that moment he did acknowledge how selfish this sounded in his head, but ultimately shook the thought away in favor of time. He secured a small hook-like apparatus at the base of the wheel to keep the ship on its same course, as Olaus had told him of many times before, and after judging that the wind was strong enough to keep things steady,



leapt down the steps into the fray. He found Wilburt shaking silently as if cold, and Brogan in the throes of some sort of vocabulary lesson.

“Attention crew!” he barked, and it startled Aleen and Brogan into silence. He searched his mind for leaderly things to say, then decided to go with the ever-popular shared conception of fear. “At this time, I wish to test your knowledge of the ship, its parts and descriptions,” he said as he paced around them, head back and hands clenched behind him, resembling a strutting goose more than anything. “I do this because, in the likely event of a sea monster confrontation, I shall not hesitate to direct you with the specific terms that I already know.” He spun around on one heel and turned back, strutting towards the way he came. “As this is to be the case, lax knowledge of the ship’s components may result in confusion in the moment of battle and thus death.” He stood still for a time, judging their faces, all of which looked something between amused and bewildered, even Aleen, which brightened Noak’s spirits to see.

However, he ignored them all and pursed his upper lip in a professional manner. “And so,” he finished, straight as a post, “what I ask you now is—” He then relaxed his stance and his voice, in a matter which he regarded as approachable. “Do you have any questions? About anything you’re now sure about, anything at all?”

Wilburt averted his eyes. Aleen, amusement draining from hers, folded her arms again.

“Yeah, I have one now that you mention it,” said Brogan matter-of-factly.

Hearing this, Noak vowed in that moment to give Brogan his enthusiastic and helpful attention, for the time being and beyond, until he had gotten grips with everything. “Yes?”

Brogan snapped up his hanging jaw. “Which is Starboard again?”

Noak opened his mouth, and held it there for half a second in astonishment. Then he let his better judgment take control. "This is how I remember it," he offered Brogan with a smile, speaking as helpfully and slowly as he could. "*Right* starts with an 'r,' and Starboard has an 'r' in it. So, right is Starboard." Noak thought that was about easy enough; it worked for him.

"But doesn't Port have an 'r' in it too?" asked Brogan.

Caught off guard, and stumbling further, Noak countered "Uh, well, Starboard *sounds* like 'r.'"

Brogan scratched his head curiously. At least he would have if the helmet was not in his way—instead, he raked his fingernails on the metal, adding exponentially to the annoyance of it all. "Which part?"

"The second part." interjected Aleen from her half-cocked stance before Noak could interject anything more.

"Board?" asked Brogan.

Aleen tightened the fold in her arms. "No, star."

"You said second part," Brogan added.

"The second part of star."

Noak brought a hand to his face, and his fingers slid the tops of his eyelids down.

At this point Brogan just looked confused. "Are we talking about the 'r' in 'star' or the 'r' in 'part'? Cause part sounds like Port."

“ENOUGH!” screamed Noak, throwing his fists in the air, and everyone went rigid.

“How about this,” he said maniacally, all thoughts of good intentions gone. “Instead of Port and Starboard I’ll just say left and right, okay? Does that *agree* with everybody?”

The others only stood in silence. Aleen looked at the ground, her feelings now muddied.

“Any more questions?” their captain spouted.

Like a fraying leaf caught up in a frail updraft, Wilburt raised his hand.

“Wilburt.”

He took a moment before responding. “So . . . which direction do we face, again? When determining left and right? Your right or my right?”

“Uhhhhh . . .” Noak groaned, letting it out in a long, slow wheeze. “Your right.”

“He is?” Brogan asked, surprised. “About what?”

“HOW BOUT I JUST POINT?!?” Noak screamed, losing his grips at last. “When some roider or staukul or ziphius springs up I’ll just point at it, and scream ‘attack!’” His eyes shot open and he froze with one pointed arm outstretched when he realized that the three of them still knew nothing about sea monster defense.

Aleen had seen just about enough. Her anger had drained away without her realizing it, and while not entirely in high spirits again she now wanted nothing more than for the conflicts to be over. “No,” she said.

Noak snapped from his frozen stance to her face. “What?”

“You can tell us that, if you want, but we are willing to learn the real terms,” she said, as if speaking for everybody—though it felt weird to her to explain it outright— “whatever and however you want us to.”

To both her surprise and Noak’s, the guys both nodded swiftly in approval.

Noak half-smiled at them, well-behaved and attentive as they looked—if only for the moment. It gave him sudden solace that the mission would work, and that their attitudes of the whole ‘captain’ stance would improve, as it had to. It even granted him enough confidence to use his captain voice again.

“Why, thank you. Aleen. Yes,” he agreed, pacing around. “it would serve much better to all use professional terms—” His mind drifted, but jumped back on track. “For you see, it makes a good crew to all be on the same page . . . with things.”

He looked back at them and saw their attention falter. His words were too vague, too awkward, too easily lulling them to sleep. He needed something stronger.

What would Olaus do? he thought. What *did* Olaus do, when *he* was captain, for the first time on his very first ship? Noak remembered the tales about her, but in them the crews always obliged, and Olaus had never explained why, or he couldn’t remember.

Noak *could* remember Olaus’ language, like a steady brook overturning the stones in his mind. That’s it, he would use a brilliant metaphor, he realized—something basic yet catchy, obvious yet necessary. He had only to turn to his left to find it right in front of him.

“It’s like this mast here,” he said, and traipsed over to it, splaying his hand on the smooth oak, dark and soil-colored in the shade. He turned back to them with a commanding air.

“A mast must be made from *one* piece of wood, otherwise it would surely break,” he said, and threw up a stiffly pointed finger in front of his face for emphasis. “It is the mast that thanklessly supports the sails, and carries the weight of the wind forward,” Roots of thought grew deep in his words. “Stability in the mast allows for strength in the yards, and treasured shade on the deck. It secures the ship together at its center, and directs its path when the sun is warm.”

As he spoke Aleen found herself quickly lost in his words—they stemmed confusion that brought her excitement. Wilburt followed his logic rationally, and finding no fault in it, accepted it. Brogan was captivated by the upturned movement of his hands.

“But most importantly,” Noak went on, “as the ship comes to peril, the mast stands fast, and stabilizes. In the dreaded blowing night, through rough and churning storms, past the barrage of sundry spined sea monster backs, the mast remains. Its single beam holds tight as one, unbreakable by all beings of malice.”

When Noak next looked upon his crew, their faces glowed with awe and understanding—he did not at first recognize it. Then he realized such radiation meant he had finally broken through, and the lobes of his heart beat like thin butterfly wings, and the sun above them grew brighter with promise.

But as he locked on to each of their eyes he saw hope, blinding and irrational—in the mission, and in him, and in the outcome of the journey ahead. Great pressure roosted on his shoulders like a large, bony vulture, the stares all but broke him, and he found his mind blank, his lips falter, and his conclusion pool out with a less-than desirable finality.

“And *that*—is what . . . *teamwork* . . . should. Example,” he finished, and stood back, hands on his hips, as a long and wheezing sigh emptied his lungs.

The others’ faces informed him of his misfire. Brogan especially appeared bewildered. “Uh . . . wanna run that last part by us *one* more ti—”

“Nope, nope I think I made myself clear,” Noak said, shifting his feet and glancing away. He killed whatever chance of further awkward silence before it began. “Aleen!”

She jumped at the bark, as it tore her away from the fact he had slipped, and said *team*. “Yes?”

Noak saw her face, invitingly round again, and calmed his demeanor despite himself. “Since you showed such initiative before with the sails, you may now operate the helm, for a time.” He half-rolled his eyes at this, as it was rather un-captain like, but the kindness he expressed toward her in the suggestion helped him cope. He gestured a hand up the stairs. “Does that sound . . . okay?”

At the front-end of the last few minutes Aleen had convinced herself, if not in words, that she would not resume the cheery air she’d had throughout the morning, but her breath leapt at this suggestion. After spending ample time near ships at the docks, helmsman had long stayed in her mind as a coveted and honorable position, and she delighted at the thought of taking it up herself. But most important to her was that the offer came from Noak, and begrudgingly so, for she saw that it meant a great deal to him as well. Still, he could have offered her the pock-marks on the moon.

“Yes!” she said, excitable in spite of herself.

Noak's heart bounded along with hers but he didn't show it. "Wilburt and Brogan, you tidy up those brackets over there—I don't think all of them were tied off properly."

"Well actually," said Brogan, and pointed his head behind him. "I think I'd better hop off to the *brig*, as it were, to—"

"Say no more, just go," said Noak, and held up his hand.

With that Brogan shuffled down to the hold, Wilburt discouragingly shuffled to the ropes and Aleen flew up the stairs, her shining hair fanned in the sun. For a moment Noak hesitated behind, then decided to follow her. He found her gripping the wheel, the bright sea already pooled and reflected in her eyes. From a glance at the compass Noak saw they had blown off their course by one dial, and now headed due west. With care in his words, he directed Aleen how to steer back northward.

Aleen glanced at him shyly with the small of her mouth open, and found herself afraid of messing up. "Like . . . like this?" She turned the wheel fast to the left, for some reason thinking at that moment that the rudder had a reverse effect on the direction, and the bow turned strongly to port.

Noak almost wanted to chuckle, but instead smiled warmly, and said "No, no—may I?" he asked, surprised at himself for suddenly being so bold, and reached out to grasp she wheel where her own hand rested.

Aleen nodded. Her heart beat against the deep breaths of her lungs.

Noak fought himself in the span of a second whether to reach around her body to the other hand or not, and ultimately decided against it. He held the handle above where she did,

standing awkwardly to the side, and slowly turned the wheel starboard. "You just turn the way you want to go, see?" He showed her how they aligned back with the compass to bear northwest. "And this is?"

"Starboard," Aleen said, smiling. "I don't know why I thought it would go the opposite direction."

"Oh, that's fine," Noak said, still a bit lost in the feeling of her proximity, and felt his voice falter. "You know, I used to think a sterncastle was a place where an . . . angry king lived, you know." She laughed almost enough to bring her head back, and the quaver in Noak's chest subsided. Still, he could not bear the good feeling for very long—his composure had about faltered already. "Have it figured out?" he asked.

Aleen's laughter fell. "Oh, yeah. Thank you," she said, and he turned from her smile down the stairs again.

Noak made his way back across the deck along the portside railing, in the same place they had just convened. At that moment he should have felt complete solace in the fact that all had so far gone according to plan, and all tidings appeared favorable going forth. The sun shone brighter than it seemed it ever had on land. Noak looked out behind them at that moment and saw, with terror he did not expect, that the green land had finally passed from sight. Bare ocean ringed them now, flat, blue and limitless.

He stopped with his hands on the rail and looked back. He saw her smile and move her head around as if in slow motion, with sparkling ocean spray that he may have imagined spouting behind her. More joy brimmed on her face than Noak could ever remember. Then their eyes locked. For five aching seconds they locked, and both of their stares were passionate. But



Noak turned away. He sighed and leaned against the railing. Above him Aleen could only droop her face with sorrow and concern, and face forward once again to her task.

Try as he might, Noak could not feel good about the good tidings. Doubt and foreboding sat in his stomach like a big block of soft cheese. Most of all he recognized that he would never be the great captain Olaus was, or even anything close. At that moment, for a sickening flash of time, he indeed had no faith even in Olaus' words.

No! he thought. I could never distrust him—he has led us well so far. With an overturn in his gut he realized that he did not feel sick from distrusting Olaus—he felt sick for distrusting his own trust in Olaus, and this realization made him so confused that he did not want to think about it anymore.

He stood up straight. This ends now, he thought with a stamp of his foot. I just need to trust more in myself. Starting . . . he turned, and planted a captainly foot forward. Now!

The second his foot landed a feeling overcame him—a horrid shaking, rippling movement, beginning in his core and radiating out along his whole body. He had enough coherence then to realize it was a motion of his own, yet it seemed connected to the sea beneath him. Not a sea-quake—it was more personal. At first he did not react, and kept his eyes glued downward in shock, but when the shaking grew tremendous and nearly pushed him backward he threw his hands to the railing to steady himself. For a moment he watched his hands, clasping the rail as best they could, vibrate uncontrollably in their grip. Then the shaking took his feet, and with a hushed cry he fell down.

Aleen was looking to the sea off Starboard and did not hear him, but across the deck Wilburt had just stood up from correcting Brogan's tie-job—he felt certain they weren't his—

and saw Noak, half-obscured by the mainmast, collapsed on the deck and floundering against the siding.

All ill thoughts of his friend were left behind as he rushed over.

“Noak!” he shouted, and knelt at his side, clutching his limp head in his hands. He had no notion of what could be happening—a seizure, he thought, or worse. He pushed his fear of the thought away and made sure Noak wasn’t swallowing his tongue.

Besides the racking of his body Noak felt fine, and could breathe and see clearly. He tried to tell Wilburt this, but having his mouth pried open did not help. “Wi-blut—Wi-blut, splop!”

Then he heard Aleen yell “What’s happening down there?” and at that second the tremors subsided. He pushed Wilburt away, sat up and pressed himself against the siding in a fright.

Wilburt stood up, wiping his brow. “What *was* that? Noak?”

Flustered still, Noak first looked to Aleen, who hung her arms over the helm in concern, and then back up to Wilburt, who seemed more concerned than her.

“I—” Noak began, his eyes meek and afraid. He was about to speak again when the shuddering came back, one last time, and all at once, in a great boom that felt to come from below, deep below, under the ship and in the cold clear water, as an immense force, shifting and turning, coiling and uncoiling, with titanic movement that Noak could feel as a sickening twist throughout his whole body.

The next second a horrid force seemed to grip the ship and it stopped. The shaking ended, and the pressure released upwards.

With an underwater explosion a massive, cylindrical shape burst from the blue sea behind Noak and Wilburt, showering an assault of freezing drops upon their necks. They spun round in sudden fear, Noak flat on the deck and Wilburt standing still, and saw the shape move upwards as a wide, sea-swept log would shoot with immense buoyancy from the surface. Then it loomed down, like a slowly moving finger bending forward. The mist cleared, the droplets absorbed into their eyes, and as every detestable tale and description of the thing that faced them pooled back into Noak's head in Olaus' voice, the two friends beheld the face of a sea serpent.

Its skin was red. Red as blood in a sunlit puddle, red as a ruby shined in the sea, red as the center of a bonfire at night, with the same amount of radiating power and heat. The face itself hung in the air before them at ten feet wide, and led to a thick bent neck that snaked back into the waves behind it at a length which Noak knew could reach two hundred feet long. Instead of scales its shining worm-skin stretched in slight segments along its length, and a corkscrewed line of ridges marked the spine.

Its head appeared more mammalian than serpentine; the long nose grew bumpy and as pointed as an arrow, and nostrils could be seen. Behind its knobbed forehead and the tiny upturned ear-like fins that flanked it grew a short coarse mane of black hair, which carried within it the stench of all dead and floating refuse on the seafloor and floating in the tides. About its neck fanned stubby flower petal-shaped frills.

Its skull-sized eyes rolled like black marbles set with bright orange swirls, and seawater drained from its mouth. Beneath the withdrawing lips sprouted ell-long rapier-like teeth gleaming white as pearl despite the rotten breath that rushed past them as the great monster opened its maw.

From the sterncastle, mouth open in a small circle, Aleen stared at it—at its size, at its teeth, and at its small victims huddled beneath.

Before anything else happened Wilburt had his bow in his hand and an arrow pulled from his quiver and nocked faster than Noak could follow it with his eye. With a face like ice he shot the arrow directly up the open and protruding nose. The sea shook as the serpent reared back and drew its neck straight, and it gave a great bellowing growl.

At this, Aleen's eyes set and hardened, her cheeks eclipsed them in smile, and she watched the chance she'd waited a lifetime for rear itself higher then planted one foot on the railing at the top of the banister while her arms fanned out as soft-pointed wings.

"SEA ORM!" screamed Noak, and pointed his arm upwards through the accompanied reeking deluge.

"*All* RIGHT!" came a shout from above them, and it was Aleen, poised in attack, with one hand on Fist in its baldric. Noak watched helpless as the red beast reared back down and Aleen backed up, took a running leap off the sterncastle, brandished Fist as her limbs flailed out in midair and clung to the side of the monster's neck with Fist buried deep in the mane.

The sea orm flung her off with one shake of its wolfish head. She flew upwards and landed in the rigging, near the top of the masts, hanging upside down like a hapless spider. From even his distance Noak could see fire rim beneath her eyes.

But his attention came back to the orm as it reared again, then dipped downward to snatch them. Noak leapt to his feet in one motion toward the aft as Wilburt dodged backwards to the fore, bow still clutched firm in front of him. The great snake brought its head to the deck and wormed after Wilburt, resting its body against the ship and causing it to list.

Noak threw himself against the sterncastle by the stairs. He watched Wilburt weave nimbly through the fore and main masts from afar while his heart tossed about amongst thundering lungs. He could not get up to help him. He felt nailed to the boards. Fear gripped him, worse than ever in his entire life, throwing all his worthless fretting and worrying to shame. His mind was plagued by all Olaus had known about orms, and each bloody and hopeless account.

He knew of its hiding places, in deep holes and sea-caves along the continent, and shuddered to imagine it slinking its soft form between rocks, disturbing the countless snails and mussels of the shallows. He knew of its hunting habits; how it could slurp down an entire flock of floating sea ducks, or slither as a massive twisting menace up onto land, to steal calves and feast on sheep. It had a reputation as the first sea monster encountered by fishermen and traders alike after leaving the Norwegia ports, and so earned its name: The Great Decider, a horrid test for all worthy seamen before leaving the waters they knew. Its territory was the shipping lanes, and its prey the fathers and brothers and sons of the western coast.

Wilburt danced around the masts like a deer, with the great fangs just missing him at each jump.

At the next second Brogan jogged up from the hold. At the top he stopped and looked around. "Huh," he said. "Did I miss something?"

Noak turned to him and his voice cracked. "Brogan!" he shouted; his captain side had not left him yet. He tore one hand from his chattering teeth and pointed at the great red intestine-shape hung over the ship like a sock. "Attack!"

But Brogan was already running, with iron spar pulled from his back and held over his head, and a deep yell of "MacDONNALL!" on his lips. Upon reaching the mass of red flesh its

smell hit him, effectively stalling his feet. He could nearly see the yellowish waves radiating from the fat—a stench of many fathoms of mud and muck and dead things, or wool liquefying in a stagnant pond. Despite this he kept going, and stuck the spar into the topmost muscle with a swing of burly arms.

Its spaded point did not reach deep, but the serpent reeled its head backwards just the same to peer at Brogan through the foresails. With its attention turned from him Wilburt looked quickly up and saw that beneath the fanning petal fins along the neck were dark crevices of gills, like stinking holes of crimson lettuce. He had three arrows up into the nearest of these in as many seconds. From afar his right hand, as it pulled them from the quiver over his head, appeared to move in the three turns of an invisible crank wheel.

A bellow greater than before sounded like gongs, and the great worm slid its bulk back into the waves. Brogan pulled his rod free just in time, and lunged away as the great wolf-head slipped down with a splashing geyser of spray. Not a second later he was up again, and moved to the side with spear pointed in front. Beneath the surface he could see the head, and worm body behind. At ten feet down, its red form now appeared black. He watched it straighten and pass beneath the ship.

From his position Noak felt it pass under, and it wracked his nerves as much as his bones.

As before the sea orm reared up from the water now on the starboard side, its bulged neck a pillar of death. The entire ship rocked and Noak shuddered horribly as it brought its lengthy body up beneath the ship, nestling the keel in its mammoth coils. Its middle came up in an arc, rising and flopping over the opposite—port—side. It bent to attack again.

Brogan caught the creature by surprise, running full speed with his war cry and swinging the spar above his head. He hit it in a front tooth, and the beast recoiled from the pang. But on the second swing the teeth closed around the spear's end, and Brogan was lifted up like a beetle on the end of a stick.

Wilburt rushed at once to his aid, his bow sideways at chest-height, but the tip of the orm's tail, wide as a man and wiggling as if with will of its own, flipped up from the side and caught him along his middle, sprawling him back toward the anchor chain. But just before it hit he let an arrow fly, and it shot inexplicably through the masts and ropes to stick in the left—and as yet unaffected—gill. The serpent reared, and Brogan yelled as he flew toward the fore near portside, landing and sliding with his iron staff bouncing after him, and after coming to a stop lay still.

Noak watched it all as if through the sick haze of a nightmare. All about him his plans were falling to pieces, but much worse all their lives hung now on horrid threads. Nameless dread, cold and stinging, bubbled up into his mouth. It erupted into his brain and out his ears like frost sparking in his nose as the sea orm now turned its dripping head toward him. The black lips rippled open in a sickening grin.

Up above Aleen had finally righted herself, unwrapped her legs, and slid down, watching helpless all the time with as-yet-unexpected horror of her own until an opportune window came. But now, as the jaws inched toward Noak as he trembled on the floor, each and every muscle in her body and protective emotion in her heart yearned to save him, and she leapt like a mad thing onto the nape of the monster's neck.

Noak watched dumbstruck as the monster pulled back swinging across the deck, and Aleen rolled off onto its sloped body on the other side with Fist plunged into the red coil beneath her hand. The teeth of the orm unclenched to roar and the body segment where Aleen perched threatened to toss her in the sea.

Seeing this, something deep within Noak stirred slightly and then burst forth. Olaus would not watch helpless as the one he most desired was pulled into the depths. Olaus would not sit idly by as his crew perished and struggled without him. Olaus would rise and take the occasion, but Olaus was not here to do it.

Noak cried out. The sight of Aleen in peril let him find his feet again, and lengthened his legs out straight in a sprint toward the sloped length of serpent skin. His sword flew from its sheath to his fist in a flash of light. "OLAUUUS!" he yelled, but stifled at the end, and plunged the silver blade of his sword in. It burrowed up to the hilt, to Noak's utter astonishment after witnessing Brogan make not even a dent. For a second he laid against the side, perplexed, and the great soft body expanded larger and smaller like slow-blowing bellows, as long lungs inside pumped coursing air. At the end of the body section Aleen simply slid off, with a face of what Noak perceived as both shock and joy from his rushing over. But then he saw the skin around the wound contract, and the flab switch to muscle and grow taut. Behind them, the creature roared.

In a mass of movement the coils reared, and Noak and sword flipped through the air and to the boards. The monster's head stopped as a shadow over him. Wilburt sprung from the side, unleashing arrows into the smooth eyes. The monster twisted, however, and each bounded off the hard forehead and fell like chaff upon the deck. In this precious window of time Aleen slid to Noak's side at the base of the stairs and helped him up. "Are you okay?!"



Noak's eyes grew huge as arrows fell around them. "Am *I* oka—yes! Are you?"

"Yeah," she said, and as she did the great sea orm's head swung down at Wilburt, for it seemed to perceive him at this point more as a hated nuisance than as food, and the nimble archer ducked into the doorway to the hold. The serpent pursued, but another arrow barrage met its face outside the open doorway. A few made their mark, beneath the nonexistent eyelids. Aleen's eyes shifted all about. "What now?"

Before the head turned their way again, Noak wondered the same, but his thoughts turned at once to surprise. The need in Aleen's gaze and the rush of fear and boldness within him bolstered his mind, and in seconds he had an idea of what to do.

"Stall it down here," he said, in an impressive tone that surpassed his captainly commands sevenfold. "I'll head up to the sterncastle and see if I can spot a weak point. Okay?"

The confidence in his voice excited Aleen beyond measure. "Okay! But wait . . ." she said softly. ". . . stall it how?"

He was already up the stairs. "Oh," she said. Behind her the beast had grown tired of attempting passage in the doorway, and gave the hissing howl of a titanic hound. She turned around to find its head high above her pointed her way. The neck above it loomed high, a living rope. While out of ideas, she was not out of gusto. "Come on!" she called up to it, and put her fists before her face. She saw deep hatred and in the eyes, ringed as they were with the feathers of arrows, and an intelligence that purposefully pooled its faculties toward vengeance.

From the sterncastle Noak saw the great neck lie flat again, angling backwards as the body tumbled down off the side. The folded-over section on the foreside, its purple wound gushing blood, slid off into the water and Aleen backed up against the railing. As he watched the

wolf-head crinkle back as if set to spring, he saw with sudden clarity the fins along its forehead, and the small black holes within them, fist-sized ears.

Down on deck Aleen held her stance, and failed at not letting herself panic. For a hot second she thought twice about Noak's plan. She had no weapon—Fist would not do her much good. No weapon, she thought with sickening realization—besides herself. She clasped her fists tighter, rooted her feet firmer.

Without warning the creature lunged, a great log sliding toward her along its sluice, with bulging segments scraping across the deck. Her eyes boiled with sudden rage-plasma as it neared. The muscles of her arms and legs clenched near to bursting. The beast came upon her, its snout open in a seven-foot triangle of teeth. She had no other action to go with, other than instinctive.

Her own teeth gritted closed, and her eyes shadowed angry beneath her brows. In the final moment she brought her right arm upwards, swiveling her shoulder with the sound of grinding bone, and held it there as firm as the branch of a tree. The orm approached. She smelled its breath.

With power in her thoughts and mind and voice she swung. Great force that surprised even her rippled forth, with every volume of strength in her core rushing as one unit behind her fist as it struck. Behind closed eyes she heard the sound of a giant snapping carrot as her punch connected with the thick mid-point of its snout. Her entire body lurched forward, swiveling around her left boot fixed deep in the deck; she felt a faint rush of wind while the power ebbed outward. As her eyes snapped open and her sudden yell ended, she saw the monster's head swing

out and crash down ten feet away, with eyes rolling and body still arced. For some moments in silence the tongue lolled, and neck floundered, sliding it around on its rotund, hairless cheeks.

At first Aleen stood astounded. Her arms fell at her sides in an ache she did not know. Then "YES!" came her scream, and they flew back up, elbows out. But a whiteness filled her face, and her left hand clutched her throbbing fist. "OOOW!"

Then she quickly composed herself, and went on cheering, knees shooting upwards, fists circling over her head.

Noak had watched the punch with utmost amazement and love. He felt like throwing his arms up himself in a cheer. But there was no time for it. Already the monster was creeping up behind her for another lunge, facing the sterncastle straight on, and Aleen was celebrating too much to notice. "Aleen!" he shouted. "LOOK OUT!"

She turned to see the monster slide closer, but the happy look of enthusiasm and strength faded none. "Come on!" she screamed at it, raising her all-but-fractured hand for another blow. At this point her eyes were twitching like insect wings, and her hair tossed wild. In an instant, an unbridled, frenzied look had come over her that Noak did not care to recognize. Immediately ignoring her own threat she bared her teeth at it, laughing, and charged herself, arm already straightened.

With a fluid motion the red head flicked its flower-petaled neck back and straight again, sending its arrow-clustered bony snout into her ribs. Her body flew back against the sterncastle, impacting with the sound of a puppy being crushed by the heel of a boot. She slumped to the deck, her hair loose from the blow, and it fell in upturned static waves over her face.

At this Noak felt the entirety of his soul drain out his feet. Silence and horrid cold filled the void of his mind. He had done this, through his suggestion. Through his order. The great snake leveled its head out, its face in a twisted grimace that Noak legitimately perceived as joy with neck straight across the deck and high back-ridges level with the sterncastle. It slid its fangs toward Aleen as its head-fins flipped up.

Noak held his sword tight within his grip and screamed out every ounce of his body, then hurled himself with legs flailing onto the rail left of the helm and out. It looked much less graceful than Aleen's leap. In midair he was shocked to see that he had not turned his sword round, and managed to face it downwards as—quite painfully and amazingly—his body draped across the head like a flung washcloth in just the right space to make his mark. The hard forehead slammed against his sternum. One knee met the soft melon of an eye. His sword sank beneath clenching hands into the upturned opening of a fin.

The following scream from the beast's throat surpassed all the others it had given. It was both deep and shrill, wounding and enraged. The sound came like the cavernous echo of a great grumbled moan within the chasms of the earth. Like a massive fleet of ships with hulls grinding together; like great logs cracking in the lava-fires of Hell. It shook Noak from beneath, then lifted, holding him ten feet in the air before he felt his hands loose from the sword as he slid straight off down the nose.

For two seconds he imagined his body crushing Aleen's or his head hammering back into the wall, but in the next second became cushioned by an embrace beneath him. In astonishment he found himself draped in Aleen's arms, who had regained the majority of her composure and stood up at the very last second to catch him, her concerned face close to his own.

Her hair still hung in groves across it, and she hoped it would hide the obvious pain in her eyes. It was a wonder that her head had not impacted the wall.

But their attention went back to the orm.

It reeled and riled above them, twisting itself in unprecedented fury and pain. Purple blood rained. The red body pillared up straight, so great was its stress. As they watched it reared so high it met the first yard, and the exposed cross-guards of Noak's sword snagged in the cleft of the yardarm. The beast pulled it free, then appeared to show a semblance of intelligent judgment through. For it next attempted to knock the sword out by ramming the hilt against the yard-cleft, again and again.

Noak, still enraptured that Aleen was alive, saw this and knew the sword would surely break from such force, and he had no other. His breath held in his mouth as he watched the sea monster pull back, eyes bloodied but focused, and shoot its neck up at the mast with a final show of strength.

A shocking thing happened then—the sword didn't break. The force of the blow rattled the serpent's head as it whined in hot pain. But the cross guard hooked the yard-arm again, and this time the monster pulled sideways, tugging the sword free with several falling spirals of blood. The blade fell glinting and clattering to the deck.

With force the beast lunged back toward them—but its features had drooped. Its energy appeared spent. It turned its head downward at them, as if scolded or beaten, with a saddened question in its eyes neither of them could interpret.

The next second Wilburt slipped out from the doorway where he had been waiting. With concentration never-ending, he nocked a lone arrow, took five whole seconds to aim, and let it loose—straight into the creature's wounded ear. Its fletches disappeared.

As if voicing its displeasure and announcing its defeat, the sea orm reeled in sharp pain, offered a final open mouthed groan to the sky, and sluffed itself off the ship, its eyes tired and forward-facing as they disappeared into the water. The red coils were almost silent as they unwound from the ship below them and sank, passing down out of sight in the deep. Their grip loosened from their vessel like rope unwinding off a buoy, and the sea monster was gone much quicker than it came. Noak felt it slip off. The tumors in his gut quieted. The ship bobbed once again on the surface unhindered, and wind caught the sails as before.

The water ebbed. A distant gull croaked and called. All three of them took a deep breath, and then the happy yells began.

It took Noak a second to realize that Aleen was still holding him effortlessly like a little baby, and after she set him on his feet the two of them clutched hands, dancing around, screaming their joy. "We DID IT!" Noak kept shouting. "WE DID!" Aleen broke away before he could hardly notice the moment. "OH GOD," he shouted, and found himself gripping her shoulders. "Are you okay?!" Then he let go, as if worried he'd hurt her further.

She forced herself to chuckle. "Oh, no. Uh-uh. Just . . . knocked the wind out of me." Her legs felt racked by hammers, her spine pummeled by boards, and a small soft spot that sunk in like soft butter when she swiftly touched it had formed at the base of her ribs, but she didn't let him see this. She hid her swollen, throbbing hand behind her back and assumed a bearable, standing limp. She changed the subject.

“Oh my GOD!” she said, whirling around. “WilBURT, that was . . . just . . . absolutely amazing! I didn’t know you were that good—I’ve never seen you *do* that before!”

Wilburt had stopped to gather his fallen arrows instead of dancing. His whole body shook, and had since the sea orm had plunged back down, but for the time he had suppressed it. “Oh, yeah. No big thing.” He smiled, but felt crushed by Noak’s silence at the topic.

“And *Noak!*” Aleen continued. “When you ran up, just like—like *boom*, like wow!”

“Me? How about you?! Jumping on its head like a creature of the night! That was crazy!” He stopped. “BROGAN!” he shouted, his eyes open wide as they could go.

They all froze, momentarily. Then they raced over, each of them cursing beneath their breath or out loud. Noak remembered that Wilburt had taken some training from his uncle, one of the town doctors. He let him pass and they all knelt beside his still body under the foremast, as Wilburt instinctively looked him over.

“Stupid, stupid!” Aleen said, bringing her right hand up from the deck to slap her forehead and then slamming it back down from the horrible pain. “Stupid!” The self-hatred in her face and words came nowhere close to the slimy disgust Noak felt.

Wilburt rested up on his kneel. “He’s breathing fine, pulse is good. No signs of internal injuries—but of course I’m no expert on *that*.” He felt very tired, and knew that his face and breath showed it. “Throw some water on his face—here, use his helmet.”

With some difficulty they tugged it off—“Has he *ever* taken it off?” Aleen wondered aloud—and found his dark brown hair below to be permanently flattened and hardened into an almost shiny helmet all in itself. “Apparently not,” Aleen surmised.

She leaned over the portside of the ship to scoop water, then brought it back and threw it in his face. Brogan say up instantly in a strangled gasp, startling the lot of them, and with eyes slightly bloodshot he stared at the others. Then he snatched his helmet back, which Aleen still held within reach, and forced it back on his head in a screwing motion. Water that was still in the helmet ran down his face, and he lay back down with a clang.

“Brogan?” asked Noak slowly. “How are you?”

“Wet.”

“Any broken bones?” asked Wilburt.

“No, not broken, just shattered,” said Brogan, but his tone was sarcastic as usual.

“Feel *anything* broken?”

“Just my pride, but it wasn’t that great to begin with,” he said, and when no further questions came added “Nope, no I think it’s good . . . I’m just gonna lie here, now. Maybe for a few days.” For a while they all sat or crouched on the deck, thinking, or watching the shadows move along the dark wood. Then Brogan rubbed his head, wincing, and turned to Aleen. “So how did we make out?”

Aleen grimaced, and shifted away. “We did nothing of the sort!” Then her face softened in realization. “Oh.”

“We scared it off,” said Wilburt, half-shrugging. “It was easy.” He started chuckling, but it died away. Behind his eyes, his mind filled with screams. “No . . . no it, it wasn’t easy.”

“That’s it?!” said Brogan, and propped up on his elbows. “You didn’t kill it?”



“Oh no,” said Noak, with a tremor in his face. “No, no—no we couldn’t have killed it . . . not if we had had a week, I think.”

“Well how long was the fight?” Brogan asked.

“Maybe . . . what, five, seven minutes?” Noak guessed. From the stories, he knew that’s how long they usually lasted—but with a very different outcome. At once fear crept into his thoughts, and the occasion for him turned from victorious to bleak.

“How long has it been since?”

Noak shrugged. “Maybe two?”

Brogan fell back. “Geez. Feels like twenty.” He reached out for his iron rod, which had slid up close toward him, and lay there for a time, mumbling “If only I could have got ‘im in the throat—wham, with the cold steel.” He lunged the spar forward in front of him. “He wouldn’t have liked that.”

Noak recalled his own cold steel, and it ripped him away from his dour misgivings. He got up and went over to the blade while the others relaxed, and found it lying shined in the sun under the mainmast. He said, to himself, “how it didn’t crack the thing is anyone’s guess—” then stopped short in his tracks.

In the puddle of still-wet purpled blood, where his sword lay, the blade was coated with a lot of it, and near the base above the handle it had seeped into and revealed an etched word, in wide letters now white against the grey in the sunlight:

+ULFBERHT+

The letters were of Viking-make, in ancient rune-style not found in the common world. Noak bent down and picked the sword up as if cradling a priceless heirloom, a fragile gem. He had never even noticed the word before, or thought beyond his wildest dreams to look for it. It was no basic piece of work, like the kind usually given at gulon-hunts; even as he examined it now he noticed minute details unnoticed earlier—the hilt looked old, very old. Close up the blade did not shine, but instead appear dotted with tiny flecks in the grey metal, stony as a stone wall. At its very sight and existence Noak's heart soared from his chest and landed many miles away.

"Guys!" he shouted, running back over. "Guys, guys, guys!"

"What, what, what?" asked Brogan from the ground. The others only looked perplexed.

"I just realized something," he said, breathing heavy, "that will knock your noses off!"

Before they could ask 'What?' he shouted "This is an *Ulfberht* sword!" He held it aloft.

The words were met with blank stares. He had expected it, and his eyes shined bright above his bulged cheekbones anyway.

"You've got to be kidding," said Brogan, his head lying sideways on the deck—though while his head had turned, the helmet hadn't. "Let's see."

Noak had to force himself to give it up—after finding it, he now felt horribly protective. But he offered it so his case could be backed up.

Brogan examined it, staring deep at the grain. After less than a minute he handed it back up. "Dang. There it is."

"Excuse me. There *what* is? What's an Ulfberht sword?" Aleen finally asked.

Noak was already holding it out straight in front of him, its razor-tip pointed to the clouds, admiring its weight, its size, its maneuverability. “The strongest—yet most compact—and durable sword ever made,” he said, and swung it around, his face in a daze. “That’s why it didn’t break.” He looked out across the wide sea, sparkling and foamed. “They were made before the world cracked, and their secrets were lost when the plague cities burned. It’s thought they were all made by one person, or a group—Ulfberht could be a name, or a brand. We don’t know. Their metal is made of stronger stuff than any other ever crafted—its recipe has never been discovered. Only fifty or so have ever been found.” His gaze rested back on the name. “This thing wouldn’t break if you bent it between two shifting mountains.” His eyes grew worried. “It couldn’t be random or a mistake that Pontoppidan gave me this sword, it just *couldn’t*. But how—”

The scabbard. Without thinking Noak undid it from his belt, and upturned it over his hand. A paper fell out, folded many times and yellowed at the edges with age. Noak just about squealed with delight upon reading it—he had to have Aleen hold it steady, and she read it aloud as he leapt raucously about:

*Noak—*

*Found this in an open market in Nidaros—couldn’t believe my luck, the marketman had no idea what he carried. I shall leave it with Pontoppidan to give to you when the ceremony arrives—in what will it be, ten years’ time? My tired arms have no more use for it. He should tell you about the note, if he doesn’t forget. Apply and cherish it: I think you know the measure of its make. Have comfort in the fact that this is a weapon you will not have to look after, for it will look after you.*

*Olaus*

Aleen's face beamed peach-colored at each passing word. Noak clutched the paper like a tree securing the last frail leaf of fall before a never-ending winter, holding it to his chest as if worried it might tear away in the wind across the waves.

"That's amazing," said Brogan sincerely, gazing up at the clouds. "My dad used to talk about them . . . treat them as myths." He smiled, a sight that shocked Wilburt, but more shocking were the tiny pools he saw in Brogan's eyes, which reflected the sky as two blue-patchy-white circles. "He used to get so excited, just from talking about examining one someday. He'd go on and on for hours."

Wilburt cleared his voice. "That sounds—really nice, Brogan." There came no reply; perhaps he had not heard him.

Aleen gazed at Noak as he pranced, and the compassion he showed at the sword and the paper for a moment alleviated her body-wide thrumming of pain. She found solace in his excitement as he pocketed it and faced them.

"Do you guys know what this *means*?" he asked, sword in his hand. "It means, with this, that we're that much closer to being unstoppable." The confidence in his mind burnt away the dread of the voyage, and the still-fuzzy feeling in his heart bolstered courage.

"Each of us is special, every one," he said, and to Wilburt's sudden joy turned toward him. "Wilburt, the style and skill you showed out there today was unlike anything I have ever seen from you. That was simply amazing, and it goes without saying that the rest of us can thank you with our lives."

At these statements Wilburt felt his chest melt like wax. The absolute pride glinting in Noak's gaze shined for him, and the thought warmed his whole being and almost—*almost*—made up for and replaced the anxiety he felt concerning Noak's new persona. In that second his worries were wiped clean. A 'thank you' bubbled in his throat, but could not find the strength to rise. "No problem," he said instead. "Just another day."

Without provocation or announcement Noak raised his Ulfberht sword and rested its tip slowly against each of Wilburt's shoulders, then placed a bent arm across his chest in a captainly motion. "I dub thee, Wilburt, the second mate of this ship, in charge of aiding navigation and the medic. May your extreme skill bleed to these areas and allow you further success."

*Second mate?! Wilburt's brain screamed in silence. Second? Seriously?* A deep breath managed to quench his unanswered rage, and eventually he managed an "It's an honor," then looked away.

Noak smiled, nodding. He turned to Aleen, and performed the ceremony as before. His breath quickened as the sword brushed the shoulders of her dress. The proud posture in her chin guided his words. "Aleen, without your strength and sheer will we would not have got going at all, nor would that arm had ever retreated from that massive punch." He forced himself to express gratitude only, and not stray into something greater. "Thank you."

The look in Aleen's eyes told Noak that it meant a lot, but at the same time her stance did not reveal the feelings she held deep. She nodded, trying to ignore the animosity she felt at him naming her strength above all things first.

"I name you Chief Mate, my second-in-command," Noak went on, with his voice and stomach butterflying at the slight implication of the title. This puts you in charge if I should—well, become unavailable, dead, captured or otherwise stricken by sea-madness."

At this Aleen just sort of stared forward, caught off guard, her hand on her chin and her gaze toward the clouds, as if weighing his words among other options.

"You shall also be chief operator of the anchor."

At once Aleen snapped to attention and stood straight with a salute. "I accept!"

"Wait, wait a minute . . . she *punched* it? I missed *that* too?" lamented Brogan from the deck.

Noak bounded toward him. "Brogan, I thank you for your amazing bravery, of rushing toward that thing with only the safety of the ship and us in mind. You will get more than bruises for your troubles." He took a deep breath, for it nearly pained him to continue, but in that moment he did feel honest in what he said. "I can safely say now, Brogan, that you have gained my respect."

Behind him Wilburt blinked in shock. Aleen brought her hands to her face.

"Yeah," said Brogan, "but the bruises will probably last longer." Secretly he felt a shot of gratefulness, and it warmed his thoughts for a nice moment of time.

Noak made the same movements against Brogan's shoulders but with the sword swinging down softly against them, and once clanging his helmet. "You shall be the Boatswain, in charge of maintaining and repair, such as carpentry. I know that you are skilled at that, so that will be . .

. good." He stood up and breathed in a big breath of cool air. "Now that we have our official titles," he smiled, and held his sword toward the ocean before them. "We are forever a crew."

At 'crew' Wilburt finally lost it. His words fired off without him really prompting them, with intent to bring Noak down from his hubris-pedestal. "Hey, what was that—*shaking* that you were doing earlier? You know, right before the thing came up? What was *that*?"

The words were not *hurtful* per say—at least not for most people. For Wilburt it was pretty bad, though it came out with very little malignance in its tone.

Noak spun his head around with actual yellow fear in his eyes, and at the sight Wilburt instantly regretted saying it.

"OH," Noak said loudly, for he had indeed forgotten about it. "I . . ." He found himself reluctant to speak of it, as if its occurrence caused him shame.

"Yeah that *was* weird," said Aleen, her animosity pushed for one second to the side. She walked closer. "You feel okay now, right?"

Noak swallowed and nodded, and found light sweat bead his forehead. "Yeah, I think so." The caring green in her gaze gave him strength to explain. "It . . . I felt it every time that orm swam under us . . . it was worst when it first came up." His feet wrapped around each other as he steadied himself with the sword in the deck, hands worriedly grasped together at the hilt. "It was as if I could *sense* it moving, sense it turning and bending and swirling below us." Breath caught in his teeth as he remembered the sensation of a massive body moving in deep water. "It was the worst feeling—that I've ever experienced. It was like tasting dread." He felt himself shiver.

Wilburt pained to see his only friend terrified, but perhaps it was needed. He *needed* to shape up, he thought. He *needed* to—

“But that’s *great!*” said Aleen.

The others stared at her incredulously, and she blushed. “Well, I mean in a certain way. Just think about it,” she said to Noak, frantic to explain—“you can sense them coming.”

Like water from a bag Wilburt saw the sickness drain from Noak’s face. All opportunities for him to realize something about his leadership were dashed.

“Of COURSE!” the excited captain shouted, a smile brimming wide. “The majority of sea monsters base their ship-attacks on surprise and ambush, so if we can detect them and prepare . . .” The others could see compact wheels grind in his head. “. . . We could live. There’s hope!” He leapt in the air. “Aleen, there’s so much hope!” He ran to her and took her hands, ignoring the happy surprise on her face as she ignored the pain erupting up her arm, and danced in a circle with her again as he laughed, Ulfberht sword still angled dangerously in his hand.

“Crap,” whispered Wilburt to himself.

“Yes!” Noak screamed, breaking away. His arms waved crazily up and down “Do you *know* what this mea—”

“*What?*” shouted Brogan from the boards.

“It means we each have a *superpow-er!*” Noak giggled, tramping on his tip-toes. He pointed to Aleen. “Superhuman strength!” He turned to Wilburt. “Superhuman . . . archery skills! And with my . . . ‘Feeling,’ we have a shot!” He looked across the ocean and its invisible trials.



"We have a real shot against it all." He went over to the railing and hitched up a foot, leaning across it in a powerful stance.

The following silence was broken by Wilburt. "So what's your power, Brogan?"

From the floor, Brogan scoffed up at him. "Didn't you know? When I, uh . . . whistle, birds come to me. And I can talk to turtles."

Noak's stomach sank as his body stiffened. He whirled around and stepped off the rail. "Oh, Brogan, right. I'm sorry I forgot you . . . again."

Brogan shot his head up. "Again?!"

"Oh, Brogan, you have lots of talents," said Aleen helpfully, but the moment had already been marred. "Like . . . um. Like—"

"Durability," said Wilburt. "Especially in the head."

"All right," said Noak, stepping in. "Brogan I'm sorry to put you on the spot like that. I mean . . ." he desperately tried to think. "You're brave, like I said, and . . . well—"

"The way I see it," said Brogan, and as he did he brought himself to his feet, groaning and wobbling dangerously once he had, "none of us have anything special." He shot an upturned eyebrow at Noak as he adjusted his helmet. "You've only experienced that Feeling *once*, and it may have been from something completely different."

Noak opened his mouth, but the words were stuck.

Brogan smirked at him and turned to Wilburt. "You just have talent. *Lots* of people do. You just use push it further, work at it harder. Nothing special at all, really." He turned to Aleen, leaving Wilburt with a humbled, angered look on his face.

“As for you—” Brogan said to her, but stopped, unable to think.

“Maybe hers really is,” said Noak, protectively, still burned from his comment. “Her strength just really is ama—”

“NO!” Aleen shouted at them, in a voice so sudden it sounded deep. Her fists had slowly closed as Brogan had called their attention to her, and her head had turned down. The others now looked at her in shock. While sorry and mad at herself for interrupting Noak with a scream, she now spoke with emotion controlling her words. “It’s not amazing,” she said, her voice nearly transgressing into a sob. “All my life it’s been nothing but a crux. I couldn’t make friends. I wasn’t normal at home. Half of the guys in my class are still *scared* of me!” she said, throwing her arm out. She did not look directly at Brogan.

Wilburt blinked, turning to Noak for his response. None came; Noak held on his face a look of horrified sadness.

Aleen stared at the ground or at the sails, shifting her feet. “I just . . . I know it’s *cool*, it is, but it’s not fun to live with.” She looked back at Noak. “I’m sorry, I—I just needed to say that. Clarify it.” At long last drops appeared in the corners of green, and to hide them she turned away, arms folded.

The others all stood still as if shocked, save Brogan. “Yeah,” he said, gesturing to her with his hands. “That.” Then he folded his arms in suit and also looked away.

Wilburt saw Noak’s gaze turn to him, shakenly like an injured animal, for solace, for answers, for support. In what he regarded as one last major stance Wilburt turned too, with less show of it, and folded his arms, though it pained him to turn his back on his friend.

And so it was that they all stood apart, divided on the deck, and the hope in Noak's mind fizzled and faltered. He felt hollowed out like a piece of wood and beaten over a rock, not to mention spent emotionally, not only from Aleen's words but from a mix of everything. But though his dread once again churned with full force he swallowed it back down, and breathed in fresher air. I need to make a stand, he thought. Show them I'm their captain. At that moment, he realized that that meant having them believe in him.

"Okay," he began, a huge step, and the rest followed as he spoke. "So we're not special. And not all of our abilities are . . ." he stopped, emotionally unable to think of something appropriate, or afraid to say anything. He heard Aleen give a sharp sigh and saw her arms tremble. "But we can still *do this*," shouted Noak, at last finding vigor. "We can wake up each morning. Face the storm. We have to." He looked down at the Ulfberht sword in his hand, then took it up again, and sheathed it back into its scabbard with a sharp snap. "At least, I believe we can." Without even around turning the others knew he then held out a downturned hand.

Aleen's eyes were still slightly red, and her pride still slightly broken, but she still felt faith in the mission, and for its leader, however much in her eyes that he did not regard her feelings. She took a deep breath and stepped forth, holding out her right hand—and switching it with a wince for the left at the last second. "I do too," she said. The warmth in his eyes awarded her. For a long few seconds their hands were clasped alone.

Brogan stepped forward, for he too wished to continue. He rested his own hairy mitt in the circle.

Noak looked over to Wilburt, who now stood by himself in a scowl. "Come on, Wilburt. I *need* you."

While surprised and gladdened at the words, Wilburt still felt bitterness. However, his commitment eventually overcame him. He couldn't desert his best friend, nor deny him, even if he wanted to. He put his hand in, and gave a convincing smile.

"All right!" said Noak. "Let's go one, two, three . . . uh, *Orm Defeaters*. Ready?"

They brought their hands up and down. "ONE, TWO, THREE, UH, ORM DEFEATERS . . . ?" shouted all, and threw their hands up to the sails.

"Oh my GOD, how awesome was that fifty-foot shot into its gills!" Aleen said, clapping Wilburt on the shoulder before once again swallowing agony.

"Oh it was *so* awesome." Noak yelled, "but how about that punch?!"

"That was great," said Wilburt.

"I assume so!" said Brogan.

"Oh, yeah." said Aleen, breath shortened.

"And *Brogan*," added Noak. "Hitting it right in the *teeth*!"

"Aw yeah," said Brogan, brandishing his spar. "With the cold steel!"

For many moments they went on in this way, yelling and leaping about, once again filled with the adrenaline of sudden death, and Noak yelled the loudest and leapt the highest, happily confident once again with energy unending.

\* \* \*

That night, just after sunset, Noak fell backwards into his hammock like a stone board, and his body crumbled and crunched like a cloth sack of broken pieces of pottery. His precious

satchel lay on top of him with surprising weight, stifling his breath. "Ow," he managed to wheeze at the ceiling of the tween deck, and felt his eyes water.

Everyone was sore and exhausted, especially Aleen, with almost her whole body already forming a greenish bruise, and Brogan with multiple minuscule deck slivers embedded permanently into his back. They were all in dire—very much unequal—straits around noon, once they had got the ship back on course and running smooth again, just before their stifled lunch of some dried fish. Other than that the day had gone well, with more maintenance on deck and organization in the hold, and the round blue world around them never-ending.

But now the organization factor was in peril, in the tween deck across from Noak's hammock as Aleen and Brogan fought over bed space.

"Hang your hammock over there," Brogan was saying. "I *need* my space."

"*You* need space?" Aleen said, clutching her rolled-up blanket. Crouching was absolutely killing her knees and ankles, especially the sides of the bone where they'd hit the wall. She looked at all the boys in the cramped, dim area, at Noak over under the foredeck and Wilburt over by the wall. "Yeah, *sure* you do."

Brogan laid in his hammock he'd just put up and tugged off his shoes. "Well I'm glad you agree," he said, and propped his feet up. Noak could see in the dim light how Aleen's anger coursed like ripples through her spine.

He grumbled, and sat up, then tumbled out of his hammock in a crouch. "All right," he said commandingly, but the effect was lost in his crab-walk over to them under the short ceiling. "Brogan, you need to move over with us under the foredeck—its tradition for the crew to sleep

there. Plus, we need to be close together to share heat," he finished. Not to mention stench, he thought as he remembered how only that morning the space had smelled only of wood.

Brogan grumbled. "What? I just got done securing my hammock right here, see?" he kicked at the support hook near his feet. It held. As he leaned up, though, the opposite side broke behind his head, bringing him backwards to the floor with a clang of his helmet. "Okay, half-done," he admitted with the helmet brim over his eyes.

Aleen still looked uncomfortable. "And where should I sleep?"

Noak felt sick at her discomfort, and saw the beauty of her pale face looking around in the green-grey light of the moon as it shone down the stairs. "The captain's cabin," he said.

She sucked in a breath. "What? But—but that's for you!"

"No, it's fine." His eyes were caring. "We can't keep you down here with . . . us—it's the obvious thing to do." His words faltered. "It's—the right thing to do. For you."

The thought in his statements warmed her heart from the cool sea air outside. "Okay," she said. "Thank you." She rested a hand on his shoulder, but only for a second, before bringing it to a salute, figuring that would please him the most.

Noak smiled, then addressed them all. "Okay everybody, we have to take watches each night, in case of nocturnal sea monster activity; three hours for each of us. You guys have been amazing today, so I'll relieve you all by taking the first watch. Brogan will take my place." He turned to him. "I'll just, uh, shake you. Then you can knock and wake up Aleen, and you, Aleen, rouse Wilburt. Sound good?"

He had to accept the silence from everyone, except Aleen.

“Absolutely!” she said. “Good night!” She crawled over to the stairs, moving with more than a bit of excitement in her crouches. She stopped at the steps with a final “Goodnight Wilburt, goodnight Brogan! See ya later!” and then scampered up. They heard the door of the captain’s quarters shut.

“Lucky,” Brogan growled as he shuffled with his hammock over under the fore.

“Right,” Noak nodded. “Goodnight, then.” He went himself up to the deck.

Outside the sea-night smoldered with shadow. The moon hung still in its half-circle, sliced with high-distant slits of cloud. The ship appeared washed in grey light, and around grew a distortion of black. Bare air blew on shivering wind filled with water droplets, blasting Noak as he strolled over to port. It went down his sleeves to rack his frame with chill, but at the same time it comforted him; he saw it as a sign or reward of getting through their first day. As the wet air awakened him he stared out at the white-topping waves. Though he had never seen the ocean surround him at night before, he still remembered many things that it concerned. He knew that the water could turn many different shades and tones, depending on the time of day.

In sunlight under the gold noon sun it turned the brightest glow of aquamarine, and translucent a hundred feet down.

Now, as the night boiled up above them with blue clouds and sparse stars between, the sea shined dark; an expanse of shined coal.

During a storm water foamed black and voluminous like smoke along the hull, boiling and crowning with malice.

And around dusk or just before dawn, when grey clouds tumbled high above with a smooth mist billowing on the surface below and far off on the horizon through the mist came soft rain, the sea grew green as a cloudy emerald—the color of Aleen’s eyes.

Even as he thought of them, Aleen herself came up next to him out of the dark. He jumped, nearly tumbling over the side.

“Oh God!” Aleen said, holding her hands out. “I’m sorry!” She had not changed clothes, and the moon shone round on her face. “I didn’t mean—”

“Oh its fine!” he said, balancing on two feet again. You can startle me any time you want, he thought. “What’s, uh—what’s up? You feeling okay? Bruises all right?”

She nodded at him with conviction, which let her feel the effects of the whiplash. The captain’s bunk had proven much lumpier than it looked, and since noon it had hurt to stand. It did not hurt to breathe, and for that she felt grateful. “I’m just fine!” She gave him a thumbs up.

Through the dark, he saw her grotesquely purpling hand, its bones outlined bright yellow.

At his stare of concern, her own face grew dour and remorseful. “But . . .,” she continued, gripping her left hand with its opposite arm, “well . . . I just felt like I needed to talk about—this morning. What I mentioned,” she said, with legs shifting her body away from him and hands clenched around herself, but Noak could see it was not from the cold.

“Of—of course,” he said, with not an ounce of authoritative captain-ness.

She leaned against the railing. “I mean . . . I’m sorry that I just spurted that out—about my . . . yeah.”



“Oh you don’t need to be sorry!” Noak said, and said it honestly, without veils. “I . . . we, as a crew, must be open with one another. For the good of the mission,” he added, but at the end it felt cheap. “Besides,” he made himself say, “. . . I’d like to know.”

These words bolstered strength in her heart. Aleen found herself smile at his honesty. “Well—just what I’ve already said, I guess,” she began, standing up straight. “When—when I first showed signs of strength,” she chuckled, turned to the milky moonlight, “you know . . . tearing down clocks, pushing over barrels, throwing chairs—typical seven-year-old behavior.” Her face darkened in the glimmer.

Noak grew a tad restless on his feet. “I didn’t mean if you didn’t want to—”

“Oh, no, it feels good to talk,” she explained, and it did. She almost felt as if she had wanted to tell Noak about this for a long time—especially the next part. “My parents had no idea what to do at first—doctors had no clue, not even the ones in Nidaros—only one person had any idea, and he came to us,” she said, and turned to him with a meek and comforting gaze as soft as the yolk of an egg. “Olaus.”

Noak brought his face down and stared forward to the polished water as if stunned. “*Really?*” His heart bulged with delight as it did whenever he learned another tidbit of his grandfather’s former years. “I never knew *that!*”

“I didn’t think you did—” Aleen apologized, “and I didn’t think about telling you until . . . until the time was right. Like now.” Or didn’t have the courage, more like, she thought. She looked up to the shadowed sails, which she had stowed and tied just before darkness fell. “He . . . he was always interested in the unique and unexplainable, wasn’t he?”

Noak’s eyes squinted down as he said “Yeah . . . yeah, he was.”

Aleen chuckled warmly once more. "So anyway, Olaus took me in—he came by the house every so often and helped me control . . . it. Showed me fighting techniques to practice. And he told me all about the world; the dwarves and cranes, the sea monsters—I didn't use to think any of it actually existed. Probably around the same time he was telling you, I suppose."

The fuzziness in Noak's chest overwhelmed his breath. His heart burst.

"And he gave me Fist," Aleen continued, tugging it from her halberd. Its silver blade and golden crossbars and handle-tip sparkled bright beside the wood. "Came from a northern market, he said—maybe it was the same one he found yours."

"Oh my God!" Noak screamed gutturally, unable to contain it longer, his eyes reeling. "That is *awesome!*" he said, with a little jump in the air. "Well. I guess he should have given you the sword, and me the dagger. Would have fit better."

Aleen laughed, a true laugh, a sound more precious to Noak than Christmas bells. Then it ended, after mere seconds. "I was devastated when he left. His stories . . . they were just so good."

At that moment Noak wanted to reach out and hug her more than he wanted the mission to succeed. He very nearly did.

She brushed a shadow from her eyes before it could take hold. "But I never forgot what he taught me—I think it was him who inspired me to offer my help around town. I went into the hills every day to exercise, and it made everything easier. And sometimes it helped to take out some frustration—after school." She loved opening up to him like this, but realized at this point that it was time to stop. "He—he meant a lot to me." She looked outwards over the foam, at nothing. "I hope that we do see him again."

“We *will*.” Noak said, and planted a hand on hers on the railing, and her face passed toward him and the moon for a joyous second before slipping back into shade. “I promise.” His words carried enough vigor in his voice to keep him up the rest of the night.

For a time they stood quiet, staring at their future in the blackness. Then Noak took his hand away, and Aleen felt pressed again to speak. “Noak?”

It meant the world to him that Olaus had impacted her life. It meant the world to him that she could speak to him so freely. The last five minutes had been a treasured and unreal experience, like a nameless dream beyond death. “Yeah what?”

“I know. I know we’ll see him again—but to get there I think we need to know a few things—crucial things. I think it would be good if I taught the guys self-defense—and you of course, if you need it,” she added, her green eyes circles. “Just some simple thing Olaus taught me, and the basics for now . . . maybe tomorrow, if that works out with your plans . . . ?”

Noak agreed before even computing what she’d said. It would fit in perfectly with his predetermined schedule of absolutely nothing. “Yes!” he said, “Yes, that sounds perfect!”

“Oh, I’m so glad you think so!” Aleen said with a sway of her shoulders. “I just . . . think it’s good.” She took a deep breath, and a lot of the pain nulled beneath a blanket of confidence. “Well, I think I’ll leave you to it out here, wait till my watch. Can’t get greedy about it,” she chuckled. She offered him her classic salute.

He smiled, suppressing all he wanted to say. “Good night!”

“Good night to you!” she said, and left.

“Wait, Aleen!” he said, with an outstretched arm.

She turned. "Yes?"

"Thank you so much."

Her smile lit the darkness. "Of course," she said, and went down.

The warmth of her presence stayed with Noak for many minutes after she'd gone. Then he thought about what she had said, and considered for a long time what he would need to tell or teach everyone tomorrow. But I shouldn't let myself agree with her so quickly, he reminded himself, and make those decisions so hastily. He tried to chastise himself, but the wonder still rooted too strong in his mind. Why had Olaus never talked about tutoring her? Was he planning their involvement in this journey all along, for years? Or was it fate?

Noak knew none of it, but in that moment felt content in asking. The sea was deep and the wind grew cold, but the comfort within brought him warmth half as hot as the stars.

## Professional Author Bio

Adrian Thomson is a USU English Creative Writing student graduating with Honors who shall return to Utah State for English graduate school in Fall of 2019. He is the recipient of the 2018-2019 Creative Writing Student of the Year and received a Tuition Award for his first year of graduate classes, during which he will teach Graduate Instructor courses and delve further into the world of sea monsters.