Грэг Кииз

Пролог

Когда Иффе почувствовал содрогание моря, он знал. Ветер замертво упал с неба, задыхаясь, словно не уже не выдерживая под этой растущей опухолью, в последний раз шепнув что-то в уши моряку. Небо всегда узнавало первым; море было медлительным – смертельно медлительным – чтобы осознать.

Море содрогнулось снова – или, точнее, казалось, под килем что-то медленно двигалось. Наверху, в «вороньем гнезде», Ким завизжал, словно что-то швырнуло его, как котенка. Иффе проследил за его вращением и почти невозможным движением поймал снасть своими пальцами Ситайского Рахта.

- Стендарр! – выругалась Грэйн с гортанным выговором Южного Нибена, - Что это было? Цунами?

Своим слабым человеческим зрением она не могла ничего разглядеть в сумраке.

- Нет, - прошептал Иффе, - Это вне Вселетних Островов. Это море старется поглотить их. И я чувствую одно из таких движения прямо под нами. А другое, еще когда я был молод, стерло с лица земли побережье Грядущего Ветра. В глубокой воде многого не почувствуешь. А здесь воде глубока.

- И что теперь? – она откинула серебристо-серую челку с бесполезных глаз.

Иффе потрепал ее по плечу, имитируя человеческий жест, и запустил когти в пеструю шерсть собственного предплечья. Стальной воздух пах сладко, как гниющий фрукт.

- Что-нибудь видишь, Ким? – позвал он.

- Собственную близкую смерть, - крикнул в ответ неоновый квин-алеанский кот.

Его голос отражался от пустоты, словно корабль был помещен в ящик. Гибкое лоснящееся тело легко скользнуло обратно в гнездо, и через мгновение он добавил:

- На море – ничего.

- Значит, по ним, - нервно сказала Грэйн.

Иффе потряс головой.

- Ветер, - сказал он.

А потом он увидел это. На юге, внезапный мрак и потрескивающие вспышки зеленых молний приняли форму широко грозового фронта, вздымаясь над самим существом мира.

- Постойте! – закричал он.

And now came a clap like thunder but forty times louder, and a new fist of wind

that snapped the mainmast, taking poor Keem to the death he had nearly seen.

Then all was still again, except for the roaring in his damaged ears.

“By the gods, what can it be?” he barely heard Grayne ask.

“The sea doesn‟t care,” Iffech said, watching the dark mass move toward them.

He looked around his ship. All of the masts were broken, and it appeared that half

the crew was already gone.

“What?”

“Not many Khajiit take to the sea,” he said. “They‟ll bear it for trade, to move

skooma around, but few there are who love her. But I‟ve adored her since I could

mewl. And I love her because she doesn‟t care what the gods or daedra think.

She‟s another world, with her own rules.”

“What are you going on about?”

“I‟m not sure,” he admitted. “I feel it, I don‟t think it. But don‟t you think—

doesn‟t it feel like …” He didn‟t finish. He didn‟t need to.

Grayne stared out toward the thing.

“I see it, now,” she said.

“Yes.”

“I saw an Oblivion gate open once,” she said. “When my father worked in

Leyawiin. I saw things—it feels a little like that. But Martin‟s sacrifice—they say

it can‟t happen again. And it doesn‟t look like a gate.”

It wasn‟t shaped like a thunderhead, Iffech realized. More like a fat cone, point

down.

Another wind was starting up, and on it something unbelievably foul.

“It doesn‟t matter what it is,” he said. “Not to us.”

And a few instants later it didn‟t.

Sul‟s throat hurt, so he knew he had been screaming. He was soaked with sweat,

his chest ached, and his limbs were trembling. He opened his eyes and forced his

head up so he could see where he was.

A man stood in the doorway with a drawn sword. His eyes were very wide and

blue beneath a shock of curly, barley-colored hair. Swearing, Sul reached for his

own weapon where it hung on the bedpost.

“Just hold on there,” the fellow said, backing up. “It‟s just you‟ve been hollering

so, I was worried something was happening to you.”

The dreamlight was still fading, but his mind was starting to turn. If the fellow

had wanted him dead, he probably would be.

“Where am I?” he asked, taking a grip on his longsword, despite his reasoning.

“In the Lank Fellow Inn,” the man replied. And then, after a pause, “In Chorrol.”

*Chorrol. Right*.

*“Are* you okay?”

“I‟m fine,” Sul said. “Nothing to concern you.”

“Ah, yes.” The man looked uncomfortable, “Do you, umm, scream like that

every—”

“I won‟t be here tonight,” Sul cut him off. “I‟m moving on.”

“I didn‟t mean to offend.”

“You didn‟t,” Sul replied.

“The breakfast is out, down there.”

“Thank you. Please leave me.”

The man closed the door. Sul sat there for a moment rubbing the lines in his

forehead. “Azura,” he murmured. He always knew the prince‟s touch, even when it

was light. This had not been light.

He closed his eyes and tried to feel the sea jump beneath him, to hear the old

Khajiit captain‟s words, see again through his eyes. That thing, appearing in the

sky—everything about it stank of Oblivion. After spending twenty years there, he

ought to know the smell.

“Vuhon,” he sighed. “It must be you, Vuhon, I think. Why else would the prince

send me such a vision? What else would matter to me?”

No one answered, of course.

He remembered a little more, after the Khajiit had died. He had seen Ilzheven as

he last saw her, pale and lifeless, and the smoking shatterlands that had once been

Morrowind. Those were always there in his dreams, whether Azura meddled with

them or not. But there had been another face, a young man, Colovian probably,

with a slight bend in his nose. He seemed familiar, as if they had met somewhere.

“That‟s all I get?” Sul asked. “I don‟t even know which ocean to look in.” The

question was directed at Azura, but he knew it was rhetorical. He also knew he was

lucky to get even that. He dragged his wiry gray body out of bed and went over to

the washbasin to splash water in his face and blink red eyes at himself in the

mirror. He started to turn away when he noticed, behind him in the reflection, a

couple of books propped in an otherwise empty shelf. He turned, walked over, and

lifted the first.

TALES OF SOUTHERN WATERS, it announced.

He nodded his head and opened the second.

THE MOST CURRENT AND HIGH ADVENTURES OF PRINCE ATTREBUS, this one read.

And there, on the frontispiece, was an engraving of a young man‟s face with a

slightly crooked nose.

For the first time in years Sul uttered a hoarse laugh. “Well, there you go,” he

said. “I‟m sorry I doubted you, my Prince.”

An hour later, armed and armored, he rode south and east, toward madness,

retribution, and death. And though he had long ago forgotten what happiness was,

he imagined it must have been a bit like what he felt now.

**ONE**

A pale young woman with long ebon curls, and a male with muddy green scales and

chocolate spines, crouched on the high rafters of a rotting villa in Lilmoth, known by some as

the Festering Jewel of Black Marsh.

“You‟re finally going to kill me,” the reptile told the woman. His tone was thoughtful, his

saurian features composed in the faint light bleeding down through the cracked slate roof.

“Not so much kill you as get you killed,” she answered, pushing the tight rings of her hair

off her face and pressing her slightly aquiline nose and gray-green gaze toward the vast open

space beneath them.

“It works out the same,” the other hissed.

“Come on, Glim,” Annaïg said, tossing herself into her father‟s huge leather chair and

clasping her