

III

Counting. There was little else to do between the incessant rowing and scrubbing that'd become Arrehp's life than to count. He counted the burst blisters on his hands. Thirty. He counted the oarstrokes that defined each minute of daylight. Twenty. He counted the salt-cured lashes of the whip upon his back. Only ten. He'd learned quicker than most that it was better to endure the unending simmer of the arms than the sear of the leather. And he counted the number of friends he'd made for being good on the fourteen days of his big adventure. Zero.

Not a soul on board spoke Daerrikh. Or, at least, not a soul on board cared to speak to him in it. The wolves, the foxes, the dogs: not one spoke Arrehp's tongue, of course. But even the other humans whom he was certain did, had seemingly been reduced to animals baser than the canids for whom Arrehp's contempt grew. They rowed when whipped, like beasts of burden. They ate when fed, like livestock. And they did just as all animals do. Or, at least, many tried, daring the whip and often their chosen partner, should they be less than willing. Indeed, there was another count to keep there, with Arrehp noting the attempts thinning with each night as discipline prevailed even above nature.

Strange smells and sounds filled the night and, combined with the ceaseless spray, wind, dew, and cold against which the rough blankets and hard benchtops did little, it was perhaps no wonder why none were in a particularly conversational mood. Arrehp himself laid on the bench, staring skyward as he counted the morning stars in an effort to return to the stony embrace of restless slumber after his ninth awakening that night: *pihp-kurgneg peverttee too, pihp-kurgneg peverttee pnee, pihp-kurgneg peverttee bon wap gaeg, Mor Fanrreehon wap gaeg...*

Arrehp's eyelids slid fully open, his brow then furling as the voice in his head trailed off, some distant song having bled into his counting from beneath the creak of tired planks. His ear twitched as he tuned into the nearly whispered melody:

*And they let him a-lie for a very long time
'til the rain from heaven did fall...*

It was a harvest song, a *Human* song-- in Daerrikh-- in *Human* tongue. There was no doubt left. His head snapped up so fast his neck cracked. He continued listening to the familiar lyrics as he rose gently but swiftly from his bench, shedding the worthless canvas that covered him:

*... 'til he looked both pale and wan
Then little Sir John he grew a long beard
And he so became a man, he so became a man...*

Arrehp stole away in the midst of that moonlit darkness, following his ears towards the source of that music, the stars dancing above.

*... so they have hired the men with the scythes so sharp
To cut him off at the knee
And they rolled him and tied him around the waist
They've served him barbarously, they have served him barbarously*

Fa, la, la, la, it's a lovely day...

Finally, after tiptoeing between the shit and piss and down the aisle that parted the galley lengthwise, Arrehp crept up on a figure cloaked by the same sickly blanket he'd been issued, facing moonward.

*... and they have hired the men with the crab-tree sticks
To cut him skin from bone
And the miller he has served him worse than that
He's ground him between two stones, he's ground him between two stones-*

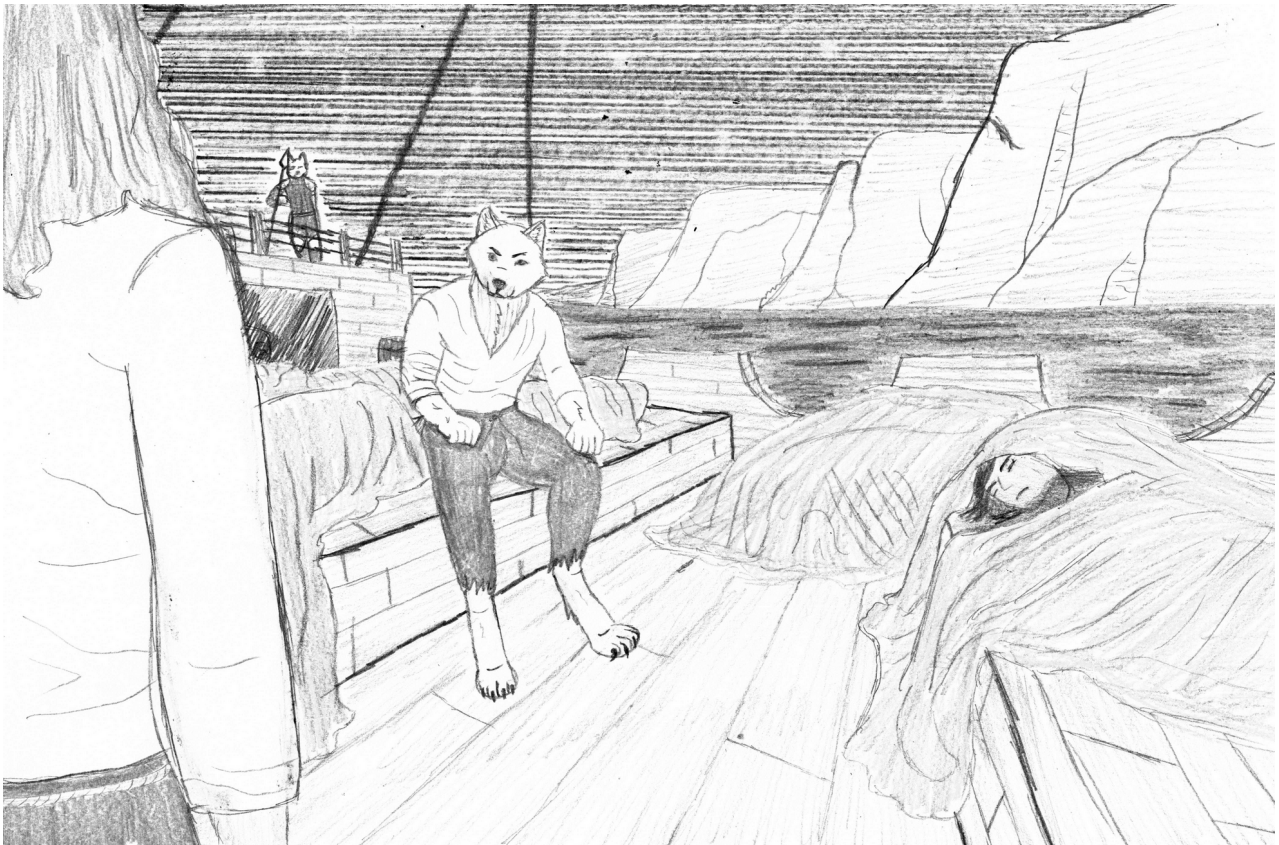
Thoughtlessly, Arrehp laid his hand upon the figure's covered shoulder, "Morning, mate. That--"

The figure swiveled furiously in place, a callused pad violently claspng Arrehp's wrist, the other shooting straight ahead to clench his throat-- all in half a heartbeat. Yellow eyes gleamed up at him: a white wolf. *Another fucking white wolf.* Arrehp's stomach twisted with fear and vitriol, as if he'd been betrayed. With his free hand, the human fought to pry the claws which felt on the verge of breaking skin. He reciprocated by digging his own nails into the wolf's hand and growling through the choke, "You're... one of them. You..."

The wolf's face softened just slightly, the snarling snout relaxing quizzically. He eased his grip on the human's throat, just enough to let him speak properly, but not before asking, "What do you mean 'one of them?' Who the hell are you? What do you want?"

"Go rot, flea-bitten piece of--"

Now realizing what the human'd meant, the wolf released Arrehp's wrist as suddenly as he'd seized it, pushing him away with the other, enough force in the shove to send him stumbling back nearly three steps into the benches across the aisle, "Fuck off, *licehead*... or I'll call my 'pack' to whip you into a pulp."



"The wolf released Arrehp's wrist as suddenly as he'd seized it, pushing him away with the other, enough force in the shove to send him stumbling back nearly three steps into the benches across the aisle."

Arrehp looked around nervously, idly massaging the red points on his throat with one hand. He finally noticed the few soldiers standing watch from the rambade and a few others just aftward, their attention now clearly roused. This was not to mention the rowers awoken by the commotion, whose glowers fixed intently on the human, center-stage. He felt himself shrink, feet tentatively shuffling back towards the wolf that'd just repelled him seconds ago. Lowering his voice, "I- I'm sorry. I didn't... mean that... fully. I- I just..."

The sensation was foreign. This was Daerrikh he was speaking, something he felt he'dn't done in years-- and to a wolf, no less-- *a white wolf*. None of it made sense. Wolves murdered fathers and tore sons from mothers. They spoke Ikbem, not Daerrikh-- *Wolf*, not *Human*.

Something in the white-furred canid appeared to shift. The same alien feeling must've coursed through him in that instant. How strange was conversation aboard this floating hell-- hostile though the occasion may be. He gestured towards the human, beckoning, "Get your dumbass over here, lest my 'packmates' actually do as I threatened."

In that moment, a cold wave broke over the starboard, spraying them both along with the soldiers and all the other rowers about. Arrehp seized the opportunity, slipping in among the benches and finding a seat beside the tenuously amicable wolf who'dn't so much as broken eye contact to wipe the saltwater from his eyes all the while. A few of the oarsmen groaned. A handful stirred. Most remained as still as corpses beneath their coarse coverings. The soldiers, on the other hand, had turned their attention to wicking whatever moisture they could from their own fur, those on port side laughing at their now-soaked comrades.

The human and the wolf stared at each other, brows knit in mutual distrust, each for their own reasons. Arrehp broke the silence, "You know Daerrikh?"

"Obviously."

"Obviously?" Arrehp's face further contorted into something between offense and genuine confusion, still not quite forgiving the white wolf for being a white wolf instead of a fellow human, "What's so obvious about it? You're a... wolf. How does that make any sense?"

"I mean that- I was singing in Daerrikh. I spoke to you in Daerrikh. Does that not make it obvious that I know Daerrikh?"

"Well, sure, but," Arrehp shook his head, realizing the silliness of his question in the midst of his dazed state. It felt as though he was still half-asleep. Then again, that seemed always the case in this never-ending nightmare, "the song... how'd you know that song? That's a *human* song. I get that some of you learn Daerrikh but why would- how-"

"Learn?" The canid cut him off there, "Oh, I learned it alright-- a full score of years ago or so."

The yellow eyes softened, something akin to a smile emerging below. He understood the human's confusion now. Without thinking-- or perhaps *because* of the excess of confused thoughts-- Arrehp uttered the same question that'd yet to fail in agitating the wolves he'd said it to thus far, "What?"

Luckily, said agitation was behind them, "It's my first language, mate-- my *native* tongue."

The wolf sat there, the tentative smile having now fully blossomed as he stared at poor, bewildered Arrehp, clearly enjoying the human's befuddlement. A minute seemed to pass, the latter merely contorting his mouth in a futile attempt to form words. The wolf broke the silence this time, "You ever been to the Northern Countries?"

Arrehp was only able to shake his head.

"I feared as much. You remember the last port we turned rudder to?"

A nod.

"That was Ferrbas. Bestest city in Urpeten. Bestest city in Ienrrarg, dare I say," the wolf sighed.

"Where are you going with this?"

The wolf broke the wistful gaze which'd drifted towards the edge of the sea westward, "It grieved my heart full sore... when we docked there. It took- I thought about jumping overboard a few times or just... running straight up the dock. Wouldn't've ended well. It's best we do our time. This war'll be over soon enough."

"You're telling me... Ferrbas... that's--"

"My hometown. Well... I'm actually from a smaller town a little upland of there, going towards the Highlands-- from Narroo. But, yes, that's... that's home."

Still in disbelief, "Ienrrarg? That city was Ienrrarg? That's what you're telling me? I just- I don't get it..."

Arrehp clenched his fist, "You're telling me you *dogs* have been invading us for more than twenty years at least? You're--"

"No, mate. Listen. That's not what--" a shadow of doubt seemed to cross the wolf's face for a moment, "I was born there. I'm from Urpeten-- from Ienrrarg. I'm Ienrrargian. From the same damned island as you. There've always been... my kind-- wolves-- in Urpeten... in Ferrbas, at least. I'm not... sure how we got there but me ma and pa-- hell, even gran'ma and gran'pa-- God rest their souls-- they're all from Urpeten. Long before the Ikbemites started fucking us over. You get it now, *hojnug*?"

"I guess... if it means you won't try to kill me randomly again... like every other white *dog* I've met," Arrehp rubbed the word in, Sakobo's advice from what felt like a lifetime ago echoing in his head.

"You're trying to get your ribs kicked in or what, kid? I can finish what we started earlier, but I don't think either of us wants that, right?" the wolf flicked his muzzle towards the soldiers watching from atop the rambade.

Arrehp shot them a wary glance before lowering his gaze in submissive agreement.

"And I wasn't trying to kill you. Come on now, kid. 'Randomly?' What else in the world were you expecting just grabbing me from behind like that out of nowhere?"

Arrehp's eyes remained fixed on the bench somewhat ashamedly, reflecting on his naive approach earlier, "Yeah. Heh. I guess you're kind of right but... I mean... you didn't have to do all that either. Could've just... told me to back off or... I don't know..."

"Could've *politely* asked you not to grab me from behind unaware? Look around, kid. How would you react if one of these *fuckers* did that to *you* and said some shit like 'hey, *mate*?'"

Arrehp glimpsed about in that moment and reflected on the many unpleasant things he'd witnessed aboard thus far. His gaze lingered in particular upon a human woman whose head rested-- as best as anything could rest here-- against the wet starboard railing, the weary face so pained even in sleep.

"Yeah, yeah. You're right. Gee, why are there even women aboard? What were those damned do- w-wolves thinking?"

"Ikbemites, matey, Ikbemites. I already told you I'm not one of their lot. You insult me," the wolf leaned over and punched Arrehp on the shoulder, playfully. The human couldn't help but flinch, drawing a snicker from the canid, "I'm gonna take a wild guess and say you've never so much as set eyes upon Ikbatewa, have you?"

Arrehp shook his head again, "No. What's that?"

"Where these guys come from," he jerked his muzzle towards the soldiers again, "The Ikbemites."

"Ah."

"Very different, the way they treat their women. They were probably expecting ours to be the same when they started rounding up people off the farms and whatnot. At least two of these lasses are from my town, actually. They speak Daerrikh just like you and me. But notice how most of these wolven gals have no trouble rowing-- well, no more trouble than we do. And they'd bite your fucking hand off if you dared lay a finger on them. Like Quartermaster Geikabza-- mean lady--"

“The bitch that brought me on board. Looks a little like you.”

“Aye... her... you cunt,” the wolf replied, flashing an indignant grin, “Be glad I’m not actually her and was satisfied with just *nearly* crushing your throat earlier.”

“Hey... that’s not true... I could’ve easily-”

“Uh-huh. Whatever, kid. Anyways... notice how it’s our women these blokes need to step in to defend most the time. Theirs are... not as fragile.”

Arrehp looked around again, “I did notice that, yeah. But what if one of them ends up... uh...”

“Knocked up?” the white wolf completed bluntly.

“Uh... yeah.”

“What do *you* think happens?”

Arrehp thought back to one of the females who’d been claimed by sheer exhaustion, her corpse simply thrown overboard. He couldn’t imagine the wicked dogs showing any greater sympathy for a mere pregnancy, “Nothing nice, I imagine.”

“Eh. Sometimes. Depends how you look at it,” responded the wolf, “they usually hit ‘em with a course of silphium if they think she’s useful. But if it happens anyways... tough luck, bitch.”

“What do you mean? They just-”

“Business as usual. They treat it like... uh... like when you get sick. You been sick before, right-- here, that is-- on board?”

“Yes. Misery.”

“Yep. Well, they get about as much sympathy.”

“I see. I see.”

Silence for a moment, then, abruptly, from Arrehp, “So you don’t speak Ikbem?”

“*Mobo uk pono.*”

“Huh?”

“Just a little bit,” the wolf translated, “You’ll pick up on some of it after long enough.”

“How long’ve you been here?”

“Two years or so.”

Arrehp grimaced at the thought, “Wow. That’s... I can’t-”

“Me neither. Can’t believe it, can’t fathom it. Almost don’t want to-”

A second wave slammed against the hull, on port side this time. The soldiers who’d once laughed now growled at their drier, snickering comrades on starboard. The white wolf looked beyond Arrehp again, nose twitching, “Hmm...”

“What is it?”

“I’d love to keep chatting, *skinbag*, but you should probably get back to sleep now or try to, at least.”

“Why?”

“Rough weather’s coming. Get all the rest you can, mate.”

Arrehp sniffed at the air himself, trying to detect whatever it was the wolf had. The wolf noticed and only smirked, “Go.”