

## II

“King ask for bodies not meats- corpse,” came the thick accent of the young wolf up front again. He turned to face the conscripts, holding out a skin of water towards Arrehp. This was the first time he managed to get a good look at the soldier in the hours since his remarks regarding the piss. He had a strange appearance, not quite like that of the rest of his wolveren comrades. And it wasn’t merely his lither build that differentiated him: his face didn’t quite yell “wolf” to Arrehp.

The two stared awkwardly at each other for a second, utter confusion etched into Arrehp’s face, before the human broke the silence, “What?”

The wolf-- if that’s what he was-- reciprocated with his own confused look, perplexed by the exchange, “What?”

Finally, Arrehp broke the increasingly awkward staring contest, “What the fuck did you even just say? Bodies? Meats? Corpses? What?”

Startling everyone, the soldier erupted into a raucous laugh, drawing looks from both the humans and the wolves next to him. He withdrew his outstretched arm, still clutching the skin of water as he brought the back of his furred hand to his face, covering his catlike eyes. The strange display managed to elicit a small smirk from Arrehp who, for a second, forgot his situation before whimpering softly to himself, the brief moment of humor giving way to a renewed pang of despair as the absurd juxtaposition reminded him of his captivity.

The wolf relaxed and outstretched his arm again, offering the skin once more, “Me... not speaking much Daerrikh yet. That is why. Mean to say you need to drink water to not become corpse. King want sailors, not corpse.”

“Your king doesn’t want me. I’m no sailor. I’ll be useless,” Arrehp reached out and took the skin regardless, drinking down a hearty gulp of water.

The soldier pointed towards the others, gesturing for Arrehp to pass the skin along, “The king would conscript dirt, if could. You row and scrub decks and thing like that. Not hard. You learn.”

Arrehp lowered his gaze for a moment, trying a new strategy, he suddenly changed the subject, “You got a name?”

“Sakobo,” the soldier replied curtly.

“What’s with your face?” Arrehp asked bluntly, “You look more like a dog-- or a cat-- than a wolf.”

Sakobo looked at Arrehp with a mild indignation on his face, “And you look like... monkey!”

Arrehp mirrored Sakobo’s offended expression before the exchange was interrupted by the wolf sitting next to Sakobo laughing, giving the latter a firm slap on the back, “Tell him why we call you Mutt!”

Sakobo rolled his eyes, his muzzle wrinkling slightly into a scowl before nearly barking back at his comrade, “*Nose syegza i zehase ek pam!*”

The wolf just chuckled. Sakobo turned back to face Arrehp again, “I from Bokzrem. Lots of people there.”

“My family *Rgimem*... uh... what you call ‘Wolf,’ *Foradem*, ‘Foxes...’ *Pewom*... um... ‘Dogs,’” Sakobo reached up and scratched a floppy ear as he trailed off.

Arrehp could sense there was some sort of shame in the soldier’s explanation, almost as if it were moreso an admission than anything else, particularly towards the end, “You know, that’s... interesting. I didn’t mean to phrase my question so... rudely.”

Lowering his voice, Arrehp almost whispered, “I could work for you. My family’s got a good plot and harvest’s coming. You could take my share-”

“No,” Sakobo cut him off, “I know what you doing. Won’t work. Please stop.”

Arrehp’s fists clenched, “There’s got to be something-”

“There is no,” Sakobo’s tone shifted, something almost pitying creeping in, “You not first to beg. Not last. Nothing can do.”

The familiar desperation washed over Arrehp again-- if somewhat weaker this time-- another built-up hope crumbling beneath his feet, “If I run...”

“Then I... shoot you,” Sakobo finished for him, tapping his crossbow.

“And if get away... we track you,” he continued, sniffing subtly in Arrehp’s direction, “I’m sorry. Don’t try.”

A horrible silence befell the two. Sakobo watched the conscript for a long moment, then abruptly asked, “You ever seen the sea?”

Arrehp shook his head.

“Well... there have!” Sakobo’s expression lightened with a toothy grin, as if trying to effect the same change upon Arrehp, “Think of like... uh... big adventure from small town. Ocean! Fun!”

“Just... be good. Stay out trouble, keep nose down. You make friend. Don’t call people dog... though,” Sakobo chuckled, with a strange, youthful excitement, “Will be back home before knowing.”

The road curved. Somewhere ahead, the faint scent of salt crept through the pines.

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Arrehp’s stomach lurched as the cart rolled beneath the gibbet greeting them all to port, its rusted cage cradling a skeleton picked *nearly* clean by the gulls. The docks sprawled before them, a chaos of shouting men and women, humans, wolves, and even the foxes and dogs Sakobo’d mentioned earlier-- all backed by the eternal assault of the waves against the rocks and pilings. Ships loomed like floating fortresses, their masts spearing the dawn sky.

“Off,” grunted the older wolf.

The conscripts stumbled out, knees stiff from hours of sitting. Sakobo herded them towards the docks with gentle shoves, his earlier cheer dampened by the grim efficiency of the officer barking orders ahead.

“*Nokiptom arak fiba ani! Nokiptom! Nokiptom!*” droned the officer, which-- along with his incessant bell-- added to the cacophony of port sounds. Arrehp could feel a headache coming on and the racket certainly wasn’t helping.

Still, even through the discomfort of his throbbing head, of his growling stomach, and leaden eyelids-- of the despair which yet hid away in the foggy forest of his mind, waiting to reemerge-- Arrehp could not help but gaze up at the towering masts of the ships at dock. And the sheer number of ships, for that matter... he’dn’t seen a single one before in his life and here they stretched on for what seemed like forever along the port’s edge. Even just the number of bodies milling about, hauling supplies, hauling... other bodies... was enough to awe the country boy.

What transpired next was a blur to Arrehp. He felt Sakobo’s hand close around his shoulder a few times as he guided him towards the line of conscripts forming before the officer, Arrehp’s head pitched up at the sails and mouth partially agape half the while. Turning towards the soldier, “Sakobo, you’ll help me if--”

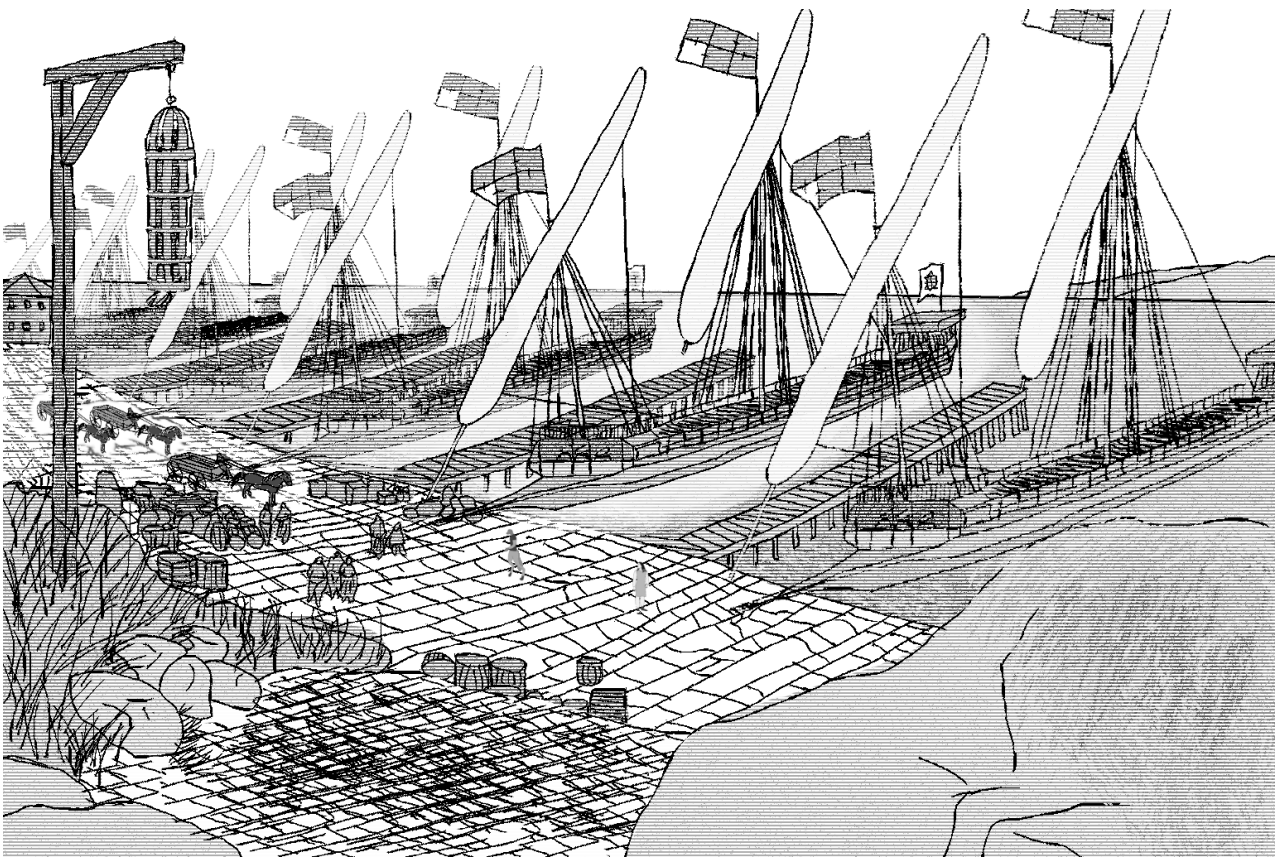
“*Shusho! Gae tu gamego ze gergemo, me kom ame tagze!*” hollered one of the soldiers still aboard the cart, interrupting Arrehp.

Beside him, Sakobo seemed to hesitate for a moment, ears flattening. He turned to meet Arrehp’s gaze. With a weak smile, “Be good. Stay out trouble, kid.”

And with that, the lithe soldier severed the contact between their eyes, patting the human on the shoulder before parting from his side.

Arrehp wasn’t exactly sure how long after that brief exchange he kept staring at the figure now shrinking in the direction of the cart, but it must’ve been a moment too long because it wasn’t a

call that interrupted him, but a more than firm slap on the back of the head that contrasted starkly with the pat he'd received on the shoulder. It nearly knocked him to the hard, wet ground below.



*“The lithe soldier severed the contact between their eyes, patting the human on the shoulder before parting from his side.”*

*“Pezako ze syegza, pok atekmyok nuakzo me te alba!”* spat the white wolf now towering above him-- the officer-- absolutely unintelligible to Arrehp's ears.

“What?”

The wolf decided Arrehp should indeed meet with the ground at that moment. A swat came from below, connecting with the human's jaw and sending him spiraling downwards. Arrehp saw black for a second or two. Then the wolf barked at him again from above, the accent much thicker still than Sakobo's, “Put attention when talk!”

The same white, furred hand that had struck him down now yanked Arrehp up, violently, before tossing him towards yet another wolf. Arrehp was sick of them already. *Filthy fleabags*, he thought as he struggled to stabilize himself on his feet. He spat a gob of blood at the ground. Then, with a panic that seemingly brought Arrehp out of his stupor, he looked up at the wolf he'd been tossed towards, quickly confirming he'dn't caused further offense by spitting. It was another white wolf, not grayish-red like Sakobo. *Maybe it's the white ones that are fucking assholes*, Arrehp mused.

“Follow,” came the noticeably softer yet no less unkind voice. Arrehp's vision finally focused on the wolf properly, intrigued by the new timbre. It was a female. Her piercing yellow eyes seemed to cut straight through Arrehp's dazed mind like an arrow through tender hide. He stumbled in her direction, catching himself with each step.

The white wolf began her march towards one of the ships, snout slightly upturned and tail hanging straight down. She wore a brown leather jerkin over a linen shirt not unlike Arrehp's, but not nearly as sullied or tattered. Her other leather pieces completed the outfit: gloves, boots, hat, and

belt, a formidable saber of some sort attached thereto. Arrehp's eyes studied the boots in particular. Their shape was an interesting one. They rose from foot to knee but had an intriguing bend in the middle resulting from their contouring to her doglegs.

*Do not call people dogs*, Arrehp recalled Sakobo's advice. *Come to think of it*, Arrehp continued thinking to himself, *one of the other wolves in Sakobo's party was wearing boots like these*.

Before too long, the wolf made a sharp turn rightward. They descended slightly from the cobblestone they'd been treading thus far onto the wood of the docks proper. The woman stopped before a gangplank then turned towards Arrehp and the others who'd been following behind him, whom he only now noticed, "*Mulak*."

Her yellow eyes fixed onto Arrehp's, as if daring him to ask for a translation. Luckily, she'd complemented the foreign word with a gesture towards the plank. Confident enough that he'd inferred the correct meaning, Arrehp tentatively set foot on the plank connecting the dock to the ship. He shot a quick, nervous glance towards the wolf before continuing onward and upward towards the deck, lest he incur her ire.

The ship was an aged galley. She bore two masts and some ten or fifteen oarports either way Arrehp looked as he ascended. He'd never been at sea in his life-- let alone aboard a galley-- but he could tell they'd be transporting some sort of cargo just by looking about as he set foot upon the low-lying deck-- "over the hills and o'er the main," as he overheard one of the mariners say. The crew paid him no attention as they tended to their own business pushing barrels about, save for some incomprehensible utterance as they gestured that he move out of the way.

He wasn't quite given the choice to do so of his own volition, shoved aside by the rest of the conscripts who filed in behind him, rather ugly men and women whose faces were strange to Arrehp. The compatriotic townsfolk carted in with him must've been distributed elsewhere. The thought would've vexed Arrehp further were it given enough time to sink in like his shoe now did into yet another yellow puddle. He flinched away from the pool of piss, though it was of little use. *We'll have to wash you scaredy shits when we get to port*, Arrehp recalled Sakobo's words what must've been half a day ago as he grimaced, foot suspended awkwardly in the air. It was only as he finally paid attention to his nose that it dawned upon him that the words had been no more than a joke, such concerns clearly of no matter to those in charge aboard.

The air was tainted with sweat, vomit, and-- of course-- urine, among other foul miasmas. He looked around, noticing the men and women huddled on the benches beside the oarports, many of their ankles chained in place. At the bow, a wooden fortification enclosed three massive metal cylinders which tapered inland. Cannons. Standing beside the armaments were more canids dressed much like Sakobo'd been dressed. In fact, they looked just like Sakobo-- until Arrehp managed to focus his still somewhat dizzied vision. They seemed to be foxes, their ears standing erect. A few other soldiers stood alongside them and opposite them aftward, watching over like hawks.

Partially realizing it'd be best that he not stand idly amidst the crowded deck, and partially stumbling thoughtlessly towards the nearest corner, Arrehp joined the rowers, finding a spot amongst the benches and hanging his head. He breathed once, then again-- then the tears followed, and the vomit... and all the rest that'd been held back and finally found release.