

Chapter 1

Rhamis watched the sun set on Klamorak Island, the last fading rays sinking into the water of the far horizon like the flickers of a dying candle. With his long, acute nose, the rat sniffed the salty breeze, which blew around him like a pure spirit rising from the south, momentarily washing away the stench of the city below, hanging desperately to the cliffside above a turquoise bay. He calmly listened to the booming crash of endless waves stubbornly falling against the jagged bedrock, throwing billows of fine mist into the retreating light.

From a seagull's view, Klamorak Island appeared like a great crescent moon, the rounded end facing north while the points fell to the south, both arms creating an impeccably circular bay. Along the inside of the curve, cliffs rose harsh and gray from the water, almost perpendicular to the sea. Oddly, the Klamorak rats had chosen the rocky face of the island as their home, where they lived in tight hovels clinging to the cliffs in a network lovingly called the Nest. Still, despite harsh conditions, every rat would choose their uncomfortable home over the northern side of the island; the jungle and its denizens controlled that area. Everyone knew a night over stormy, raging seas was preferable to a dismal, dark death.

Gingerly, avoiding splinters, Rhamis leaned against the wall of his shack. He looked to be of average size for a rat, though an unusual hardness shone in his eyes. Long ago, his fur had been silky black, which made him rather handsome by Klamorak standards, but over the years the island's pervasive grit caused his fur to turn gray and matted like every other's. Now, he had only a few peculiarities to define himself: his clean teeth, ability to draw detailed charts of the ocean, and signature war braid, tied behind his head with a small loop of simple fishing line. From his cool demeanor, no other Klamorak member could've known he was mentally rehearsing plans to usurp the current Klamorak king that very night.

As the semicircle of fire in the distance slowly dipped lower, Rhamis's right hand rat, Halftail, appeared at his side. The gargantuan fighter stood a head taller than Rhamis, a tight-lipped rock of burly muscle who had no need to carry a weapon at his side. Although Halftail commanded a fearful presence among the other rats, Rhamis always found the hardened creature to be a trusted ally, perhaps even a friend.

Well, no: there were no friends here on Klamorak island. Friends were the ones who stabbed you in the back, literally, whether it meant a promotion or your shoes were nicer. Rhamis had seen both happen before.

"Sir, we're ready," Halftail remarked in a gruff monotone.

Rhamis nodded. As the last flecks of sunlight disappeared under the waves, he smoothed his hair back. When his hand came away, it held a tuft of black fur. Rhamis gave a defeated sigh as he saw the clump and quickly tried to hide it from sight. However, Halftail saw the fur just before the light completely disappeared. The rat grunted, nothing more.

“Halftail, do you know any reason fur would fall out?” Rhamis asked, trying to dispel his discomfort. The question was almost dangerously personal, but there was no other rat Rhamis could confide in.

If Halftail was disturbed by the honesty of Rhamis’s query, he hid it well. “Stress, sir.”

Rhamis raised an eyebrow; he hadn’t expected a straight answer in return. Once his surprise faded, he closed his eyes in acceptance. “So be it. The time has come, Halftail. Signal the others.” His voice had a note of regret. “Tonight, the king of the Klamorak tribe falls, and a new one rises from his ashes.”

They went their separate ways, walking with purpose as they disappeared into the Klamorak tribe’s shantytown like dark shadows amongst the rotten, decrepit boards.

As he strode through the buildings alone, Rhamis’s sharp eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness and began surveying the buildings for signs of disturbance. Aside from the ubiquitous sound of rats snoring, silence ruled over the Nest, allowing thought to fill the void.

Here, atop the island, the most prestigious members of the Klamorak tribe lived in relative comfort. Far below at the base of their village, hundreds of pirates were piled up in small houses, sleeping fitfully amongst their brethren while hoping an especially large wave didn’t come by. Rhamis sometimes missed the fraternity of group homes compared to the isolation of the upper village, regardless of the unpleasant conditions found below. Being alone always felt oddly...unnerving.

Partly, Rhamis blamed the proximity to the jungle: most rats were fearful of trying to progress through the Klamorak ranks simply because it meant being closer to the dark unknown. Although he brushed away such threats, he never could shake an innate sense of unease.

Rhamis quickened his pace.

At the base of the cliffs, the crashing waves had hollowed an enormous cavern over a millennium of rising and falling tides. Now, it served as the home of *Cullcutter* and *Deadmerry*, the Klamorak tribe's two ships. To protect the vessels at night, an enormous gate of tough, buoyant wood was set in place over the entrance so nothing could enter or leave the dock. Soon, Halftail's team would set it aflame. The hardy, wet material wouldn't be in danger of real damage, but it would create an excellent distraction.

As soon as the thought entered Rhamis's mind, a flash of light illuminated the base of the island, accompanied by an enormous gout of flame.

The sound of yelling began, growing to a steady roar.

Rhamis walked shadow to shadow, hoping to avoid others' attention. Rats began to rush out of their houses, bumbling about in confusion as Rhamis strode with purpose towards the Nest's main boardwalk.

For the moment, it seemed as though his luck was holding out...

"Hey, where do you think you're going, huh?" A rat in the red garb of the King's Watch hailed him, waving his hands overhead. "Go help with the fire, you! All hands on deck, eh?"

Rhamis paused as the guard walked up and roughly laid a paw on his shoulder. In an instant, he twisted the guard's arm backwards and had his arm around the creature's throat. The guard struggled valiantly, unable to speak or break free.

"Need some help there, Rhamis? We've got bigger plans than killing guards!"

Rhamis glanced up at Ripcull and Bladefinger, two members of his team. They were brothers, and each loved nothing more than riches, closely followed by murder. Already, Ripcull

stepped forward with a dagger in hand, clearly intending to finish the guard, who started fighting even more fiercely than before.

“Stop!” Rhamis ordered Ripcull firmly.

In sheer surprise, Ripcull paused as the guard slumped, unconscious. After moving him to a quiet corner, Rhamis looked back at the brothers, who watched him with amusement.

“You old softie,” Bladefinger grinned. “As mum said: knock a guard unconscious, you silence him for awhile. Kill a guard, and you silence him forever.”

Rhamis shrugged dismissively. “I know him: a good rat and faithful to the tribe. Now come, we’re moving to the rendezvous point.” He left without looking back. Shrugging to each other, Bladefinger and Ripcull followed.

They arrived moments later at an intersection. Here, three paths met: the Nest’s uppermost boardwalk, the highest cave entrance into the island, and a path known as the Crevice Walk, which ascended through a cleft in the mountain to a clearing in the jungle. The Klamorak tribe called this intersection the Crux, the only place one could feel the ocean breeze, hear monsters roaring in the jungle, and sense the supernatural evil of the island’s caves all at once. It wasn’t a popular site.

Moments later, Halftail and another group of rats joined Rhamis, Ripcull, and Bladefinger. Giving them a quick once-over, Rhamis examined the new arrivals: Nock, Pedlam, and Maus. Three decent rats by Klamorak standards, especially since none of them were ambitious enough to take power themselves.

Halftail gestured toward the small group. “I invited the ones you told me. No more.”

Rhamis surveyed his followers: they were fearful. The rats were risking their lives for him, hoping for a sufficient reward. If something went wrong, they would likely betray or

murder him in the hope of mercy. Naturally, it wouldn't do them any good: if the plan didn't work, they were dead or worse. Still, Klamorak usurpers couldn't expect any better.

"They are with us," Halftail asserted. "You can believe in these rats."

Rhamis nodded and addressed them. "We do this, and we become the leaders of the Klamorak tribe." His words had the desired effect: greed immediately rippled through their countenances, momentarily revealing inner dreams of power and wealth. He added, "Fail this task, and pray your death is quick." Allowing the sobering thought to sink in, Rhamis indicated the gaping entrance. "Let's go kill a king."

Their group moved silently, spreading through large areas and rushing single file into narrow passages, all the while avoiding cave formations, lest they give away their coup to dawdling guards. The highest leaders of the tribe lived here, along with reserved soldiers and storerooms aplenty. Everything important to the Klamorak tribe – their food, their armory, and other necessities – waited safely by pools of still water in boxes, bins, and heaps.

"I don't like this..." Nock whispered feverishly in the dark, her high-pitched voice echoing from multiple unseen crevasses.

Rhamis would've told her to be silent, but he agreed with her opinion. Although rows of torches marked clear paths, the caves wound so deceptively and contained such a sense of evil that even the best rat could get lost. When the tribe first began exploring the island, they lost more rats to the darkness than the jungle. Nowadays, even the most down-to-earth pirates knew to stay on the torch-lit road whenever possible.

"Did you inform Sormach we're moving in?" Rhamis suddenly asked Halftail.

"Of course, sir."

Rhamis nodded gratefully.

The group rounded a corner and found themselves at the heart of the island: the Lake of Night. A beach of black sand curled to either side like an onyx replica of Klamorak Island itself. Piles of treasure rotted on the beach all around, holding a king's ransom of gold, satin, and other fabled items of untold value...now decaying in their splendor far under the earth. Beyond the riches, at the very edge of the water where the sand became tough and wet, a single throne stood by itself, facing into the cavern's infinite reaches. The lake itself, steps away, spread throughout the endless blackness like a sea of perfectly formed glass, continuing into eternity without the slightest disturbance.

"Rhamis? Or is it you, Grifton?" a breathy voice called from the throne. "I was sure it would be one of you."

"It is I, Rhamis," he said. "I've come to claim the ring of the Klamorak tribe, and therefore its command."

Single-mindedly, the band of rats spread across the black beach, preparing. However, Rhamis came to a confusing conclusion: the king wouldn't fight! Rhamis couldn't understand why, but the instinctive knowledge made him want to leave, abandon his escapade. Instead, with great effort, he forced himself to sweep around the backrest. *Come what may*, he thought.

The throne was indeed occupied: an aged rat sat in the chair's iron folds. Greying fur told of long years and sunken, hollow eyes revealed a syndrome of disease racking the king's body and soul. Rhamis remembered when this creature stood robed in fine clothing, lording over the tribe with fierce pride and royal authority. Now, he huddled, slowly dying, in rags.

"I believe you came for this," the old rat said, and offered a ring decorated with a large, scintillating ruby. Awed, Rhamis accepted the offering and slipped it over his finger as a hush

fell throughout the cavern. With one simple move, all power of leadership transferred. Rhamis was now the leader of the pirates.

“All hail the new king,” his followers whispered in unison, heads bowed.

A hand grabbed Rhamis’s wrist, causing him to jump with fright – shameful. He looked down where the King pulled him closer, his old, haggard face insistent. Realizing the dying rat bore no ill intent, Rhamis cautiously allowed himself to be drawn nearer.

“You’ve been a dutiful servant all these years, Rhamis. There has never been a rat like you in our tribe, who made such accurate ocean charts. I’m glad you will succeed me. But, I want you to know a few things before I pass on, things which may be the difference between life and death for all the Klamorak tribe, whether bodily,” he paused for a breath, “or spiritually. The first: I forgive you for killing me.”

Rhamis gave a start. “Why would I care –”

“Cease your prattle boy!” The king began a fit of coughing, shaken by the effort of yelling. “You may have the others here fooled, Rhamis, but I see you differently. Unlike me, you may be able to accept forgiveness when the chance comes and avoid my mistake. You won’t understand now, but when another comes to take your place, you will understand.”

Replace me? Forgiveness? What is this nonsense? Rhamis fought to control himself: there were too many eyes and ears, and his current actions would shape the fabric of his rule.

The King, however, had no such qualms. A tear began to roll down his cheek, falling into the hungry, dark sand.

A disgusting display of weakness, Rhamis thought. *For his own good, I should...*

The king spoke. “Second: the ring is cursed. An evil surrounds it. I’ve felt it all the years it adorned my finger, and I’ve desperately tried to remove it to no avail.”

Nock, Pedlam, and Maus whispered nervously together, and even Bladefinger and Ripcull were struggling to remain calm. Only Halftail remained stoic as ever.

Rhamis nearly gagged. *One ambiguous statement about supernatural power and their imaginations began to run amuck like little children.*

“I see you disbelieve me,” the king noted. “Very good. Hopefully your critical gaze will detect the lurking danger before it strikes. Listen: the ring’s beauty will take your interest first. You will notice every facet of its magnificence: the blood red tone, the shimmer of gold unparalleled in its splendor. It will never tarnish. But then it will draw you here.” His greedy tone turned to one of fear. “Once it has your focus, the ring will only truly shine down in the darkness, by the lake. Then, it will finally consume you.”

“Why would it do that?” Rhamis asked, as if it were an everyday question.

“It wishes to bring you back to the spirit.”

Whispers once again, from the usurpers.

Pedlam shivered. “The spirit, I’ve heard about it!”

Ripcull puffed himself up. “Psh, if a spirit came for me, I’d punch it so hard...”

The king looked to the lake. “There’s something out there, believe me. I’ve never seen it, but I can feel it through the ring... Every once in a while, a ripple rises from the darkness. At the start of my rule, they came months apart. Now weeks.” He coughed again, trying to regain his breath: the very conversation was killing him. “Something is going to awake, and your rule may be the last before it does.”

“A drip somewhere off in the distance, perhaps?” Pedlam asked.

“No, not dripping water. Something stirring. Something...” With those words, the king breathed his last. His head fell as his final word rolled across the lake into the darkness.

“What is it? What!” Rhamis yelled, grabbing the decrepit rat by the rags on his chest. The King, however, was no more.

Suddenly, Grifton, the tribe shaman, rushed through the cave entrance; he moved silent as a ghost and looked thin as a willow branch. Rhamis knew Grifton had laid plans to take the throne himself, and watched carefully as the shaman quickly hid his dagger and shrouded his disappointment with false congratulations.

“Ah, I see there’s a new king on the throne. Hail, Rhamis the conqueror!” he cheered. “I’ll go tell the good news to the rest of the tribe! May your reign be prosperous and...long.” He turned about quickly to leave, but stopped still.

“Something wrong?” Rhamis asked.

A shadow spoke from beyond the shaman in a gruff tone. “Perhaps he’s wondering how he missed his chance to be King. Huh, Grifton?”

Grifton moved aside, revealing a fat, hunched rat with gray around his eyes. The old codger walked with a knotted cane and his breath became haggard as though he moved his aged body by sheer anger alone. Many of Rhamis’s group muttered in disgust at the sight of him, but Rhamis stepped towards the rat happily, stopping just short with an expectant eye.

“Sormach, it’s been finished,” Rhamis said with finality, hoping to please.

“Did you put a dagger in the old fool’s heart?”

“Well, no, not exactly. He died before...”

Sormach cut Rhamis off, purposely raising his voice above the new king’s. “Fair enough, boy!” He gave Grifton a glance. “You get out of here, Shaman. And the rest of you,” Sormach added with narrowed eyes, “are dismissed. Tell the tribe their leadership has changed. In fact, tell ‘em the way things run around here are going to change as well.”

Rhamis's new band of leaders departed, glad to be free of Sormach's presence. Only Halftail remained, his eyes on Rhamis. "Sir, I leave at your command."

"Thank you, Halftail, you are dismissed. And congratulations...lieutenant."

The large rat accepted his promotion with a nod, and left.

When they were gone, Sormach turned to Rhamis, talking in a hushed, angry voice on the verge of fuming. "What are you thinking, telling them you didn't kill the king, huh? Have I been raising an idiot all these years?" He paused as if waiting for an answer.

"No, father -"

"Father, huh? It's funny you call me that now. After I adopted you all those years ago, you repay me by letting the King die from disease? How is the clan going to respect you once they learned you didn't take the ring by combat? Huh?"

"The old man wouldn't have been much of a fight anyhow."

"Be that as it may, you can be sure Grifon is going to tell his followers about this, stirring up trouble for you."

Rhamis bit his lip, conflicted. "The point is, I'm the head of the Klamorak tribe now, just like you always wanted. You thought I could do this, and now I'm here."

Sormach gave him a flabbergasted look. "You think this is my lowly dream for you? Just to be king? No, you have a long way to go, boy."

"A long way? What more would you have me do?"

"Have you do? I think it's rather simple, really."

"Yes?"

The old rat stepped about grandly. "You need to bring glory back to the tribe. Once, the Klamorak clan held vermin of every kind, sailed with an armada of ships, crushed enemies with

its reputation alone! Now look at us: we've stooped to picking up every little whelp of a rat like yourself. We're afraid to stick our noses out of our island fortress, lest a few fishes take our home while we're away. We need pirates! We need recruits!"

"So, re-form the Klamorak tribe?" Rhamis asked hesitantly.

Sormach began to examine gold lying on the ground, enjoying the red torchlight shining across yellow gold as he pushed items about with his cane. "You know, you always were a dull one, Rhamis. Think about it for just a second: how are we going to take over if we don't have enough power on this island? Our base, our stronghold?" He waited for an answer, but Rhamis had none. "Slaves, boy: we need to get slaves! Do you understand me?"

"No," Rhamis cringed. "Slaves?"

Sormach snorted. "When this island was in its heyday, did we steal food? No! Slaves grew it. Did we mend our own clothes? No! Slaves fashioned whatever garments we wanted! Did we have to build houses, clear trees, chop wood, cook, clean, or work at all? No! We didn't have to worry about anything because we had slaves!"

Sormach pointed to himself. "You may not understand this, but the Klamorak tribe isn't made up of shoe-shiners. We're conquerors, and it's about time we became conquerors again. On top of this island, somewhere in the jungle, there's a mighty fortress we used to control. Now it's ruined, claimed by the jungle. When we take it back, we'll be ready to repair the shattered pieces of the Klamorak tribe under your rule!" He nodded with finality.

Rhamis shook his head, still in doubt. "I still don't see why slaves are necessary."

"Really?" Sormach asked sarcastically. "How do you build a house? How do you clear a forest? How do you sew?" He held up a yard of silk cloth to illustrate his point, and then threw it away carelessly. "There isn't a rat here with those skills any more, let alone one who wants to

regain them. Be my guest; tell the tribe to cook, clean, and build again. Don't be surprised when they tear you to pieces and make Grifton their new king."

"Fine," Rhamis said, nodding. "I'll do it. We'll find slaves and bring them to the island."

"So it's a 'we' thing, huh..." Sormach sighed. "I'll admit you've done a half-decent job, boy, being a cartographer and such. But don't get stupid now. You're the king, which means you have to do the work. Don't let yourself go soft, and don't forget who took you in when you arrived here, a whiny brat with nothing. It was me, son."

Rhamis thrilled at the term. Son!

Ignoring him, Sormach began sorting through the treasures, walking around the beach happily. "Time to take the lead, boy. Those rats out there are waiting for a strong king. You'd best give them one...or else."

"Yes," Rhamis said in an echo, mentally gathering his strength.

Before leaving, the throne caught his eye. Unable to help himself, Rhamis strolled over to its side, grabbed the edge firmly, and attempted to turn it from the lake. The large chair wouldn't budge. He pushed harder, with all his might, but it held firm.

Huffing silently, he paused, glancing towards the lake. As he did, a single ripple appeared from the darkness and disappeared like smoke against the dark beach.

Hiding his horror with disbelief, Rhamis turned about and left Sormach to rummage through the piles of decaying treasure. He had a job to do, an empire to build. There was no time to consider if he believed what he'd seen, or if the ring was truly haunted. He needed to find slaves to rebuild the Klamorak tribe's greatness.

Because...well, because his father said so.

Chapter 2

Wynden swung his sword in a magnificent arc, the weapon becoming an extension of his arm as he angled the blade to create a delicate whistle in the air. A good-looking young squirrel, he had sandy brown fur and a well-combed bushy tail that was complimented his favorite outfit: a long-sleeved green shirt, brown pants, and an elegantly simple belt tied around a plain sheath. In fact, aside from the annoyingly off-center stripes down his back, Wynden consider himself to be the epitome of a wandering warrior. With no packs or armor to weigh him down, the independent fighter wandered unburdened through the forest, practicing his art during long periods of seclusion. Although the native villagers would never say it, they considered Wynden kind and friendly, albeit dark and mysterious – the product of many harsh years training under a difficult and skilled master who recently passed away.

But now? Wynden prepared for battle, surrounded by multiple enemies.

Standing his ground, Wynden flipped the sword back and forth as he examined the foes. In his mind's eye, they were already incapacitated; the physical action was all that remained! With great agility, he moved to attack.

SLICE! CHOP!

“What in the Forest’s name are you *doing*, Wynden?”

Wynden stopped mid-swing. Oh no!

He had been daydreaming again! The “enemies” were just coconuts, held up by Wynden’s young students. And Wynden? He remained an undeniably great swordsman, but one meant to be teaching the children. With difficulty, he tried to remember the current lesson’s topic. Something about responsibility or sword safety...

A heavy-set mole waddled through the forest with a basket of corn; Ingrid, Wynden’s adopted mother. Repeating herself, she asked, “What are you doing, Wynden?”

He stabbed his sword in the ground, annoyed. “I’m teaching, okay?”

Wrong answer! Ingrid dropped her basket, gesturing wildly as she spoke. “Well, that’s obviously what you’re *supposed* to be doing! But why are you waving your sword around in front of all those children? You’re going to cut somebody’s head right off!”

The circle of children whispered in surprise, considering the possibility. They shuffled to a safer distance.

Ingrid looked to them. “Now, you little ‘uns, get movin’ and go be helpful somewhere else. Heaven knows there’s a lot of work to be done around here today. The Peace Banquet is this evening, for heaven’s sake!”

Wynden started to protest, but the kids – whose attention spans were short as ever – quickly dispersed to the winds.

Ingrid watched them leave, hands akimbo.

“Mom, did you really have to do that?” Wynden pleaded. “Everything was -”

“Wynden, don’t you give me that! I know exactly what you were doing there, trying to impress them with your crazy derring-do. Don’t you see how dangerous that is for them? No

matter how many times you do something like that safely, it only takes one time...*one time*," she emphasized, realizing Wynden wasn't paying attention, "to hurt somebody real bad." She put a hand on his shoulder, trying to make eye contact. "Look, I know you aren't a bad boy. You don't want anyone hurt, right? So just try to be safe, okay?"

Wynden nodded, focusing on everything but her gaze. "Okay, okay, you're right. I was just trying to teach them a little something about swordsmanship, and then they wanted me to show them something cool, so I was just, you know, showing them a few things."

"Just a few things, huh?"

"Yeah. Just to get them interested in sword fighting."

Ingrid gave a soul-searching look. "Is that what Barth taught you? Swordplay is just 'interesting'?"

The words struck a nerve.

Barth had been Wynden's old teacher, a stone-cold serious otter, and a stickler for rules. Those were bittersweet times: Wynden balanced the joy of swordplay and the utter despair of learning from a creature who constantly badgered him about patience, respect, dignity, and so on.

Heh! Badgered.

Wynden tried to counter. "Well, not exactly, Barth said -"

"Yes?" Ingrid asked pointedly, stopping him short.

"He said it was an art I needed to take more seriously," Wynden finished, seeing he was getting nowhere. "Mom, I'm pretty sure I need to, ah, do something else now..." he trailed off, looking for an escape.

Wynden and Ingrid stood in the training area, which abutted the forest. Here, pines disappeared into a scattering of palm trees amidst a sea of grass. Farther east, the grass became

dunes of sand, which finally descended into the ocean, a thin line of blue almost indistinguishable from the sky above. Wynden could just smell an ocean breeze over the wooded, vanilla scent of oak. More importantly, since the northern beach remained smooth as far as the eye could see, Wynden directed his attention to a southern rise; his favorite place to hide from villagers and work.

“I have a great idea,” Ingrid said.

I'm too late! Wynden lamented.

“You can go fold the napkins,” she said, pointing. A group of banquet materials waited under a low, leafy palm tree. In the center, two large baskets sat together, piled to the brim with cotton napkins. “Someone’s got to do it, and you have time since ‘class’ ended. Afterward, you can get back to being a swordsman. Just...make sure you’re away from any children. Okay?”

“Sure,” Wynden groaned, knowing it wasn’t really a question. As she trundled off, he sat down by the baskets in the shade.

I really have to do all of these? Then, a thought came to his mind suddenly. *No...I don't! I only have to do half of them.*

He got to work folding.

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A little while later, a vole named Narcus, the grump of the village, came walking down the path. Glancing around, he saw Wynden flopping a loose napkin about, attempting to wrestle the diminutive square into submission.

“Problem?” Narcus called.

“Nope, I got it!” Wynden said, and placed his work atop of a growing pile of misshapen napkins.

Narcus plodded over, grumbling. “No, no, no. That’s not how you do it, let me show you.” Grabbing the napkin away from Wynden, he folded it properly and set it with the others. “Now that’s how you do it right. Try it again; I’ll watch and make sure it’s okay.”

Again, Wynden gave a valiant effort, but failed miserably. He held up the grotesque creation. “Is this alright?”

Narcus sat down. “Give me a basket, I’ll teach you to fold properly.”

“Which one?” Wynden asked, indicating the two baskets. One had undone napkins at the top and the other had badly done napkins.

The old vole scowled. “There: the ones you messed up. I’ll redo them while you figure out how to do it correctly.” He pulled a few of the cloths out, unwrapped them gruffly, and folded meticulously. “There...there...and...there! Now, you give it a try.”

Wynden gave his new square a better attempt, making a rather nice triangle.

The vole clicked his tongue. “Could be better. Keep working, and follow my lead.” Focused, he started in on the basket.

While the vole labored away, Wynden sat back and began toying around with one napkin, letting Narcus do his magic. The old vole didn’t even notice the badly wrapped napkins give way to completely unmade napkins below. He simply completed the entire basket while Wynden finished his solitary one.

Narcus looked up in amazement. “What? Did you do anything?”

Wynden feigned surprise. “Oh, I guess not!” From the top of his basket, he removed the undone napkins to reveal the pristinely folded triangles he’d finished earlier.

“Huh?” Narcus asked, squinting.

“My!” Wynden exclaimed. “Looks like I finished them and then forgot, eh? How strange?” He hopped to his feet. “Well, since there are only three left, you can take care of them, right?” Looking about, he luckily spot his sister, Errin, walking by. “Ah, I think I have to go talk to her. Right now.”

Wynden departed quickly, leaving Narcus to stare in confusion at the basket. He quickly caught up to Errin and matched her pace.

She walked slowly, drawing on a shale tablet with charcoal. Like Wynden, Errin had sandy fur, a bushy tail, and, in Wynden’s opinion, the makings of a natural swordswoman. However, she preferred charcoal to a blade, and Wynden long ago chose to respect her decision. “Hey Errin, how are you doing?”

“Hi! Doing just fine, thanks.” She kept her eyes down, looking at the tablet. “Tell me honestly: did you trick Narcus into doing your work simply for fun? Or do you really dislike folding napkins that much?”

He smiled. “Who can fathom my craftiness? Nobody, so there’s no point in trying. Let’s talk about you, sister! Watcha making this time?”

“Oh, just a tree,” she shrugged dismissively.

Wynden tried to examine the artwork as she huddled over it, blocking his view.

“Er...nice? I can’t actually see it, could you show me real fast?”

“Oh, sorry.” She gave him the tablet, suddenly shy.

To her credit, the work instantly impressed Wynden. Within her drawing, a tree stood alone on a hill overlooking the ocean, the firm trunk rising from strong, winding roots. Every leaf contained intricate detail and each fruit revealed expert care. Supporting the greenery,

natural-looking boughs twisted skyward, though many appeared bare and cut. Finally, in the far background, bubbly clouds hung in the sky, casting shadows on the waves below.

“Wow, it’s fabulous! How did you learn to do that?” he asked.

She blushed. “Grandmother teaches me on occasion. When she’s not busy being Urlam-the-leader and all.”

Wynden nodded: Urlam, a confusing mix of grandmother and village hero. The well-aged mole rose to the task of leadership years ago, organizing general construction, setting yearly crop cycles, and planning celebrations for everyone’s well being. At the same time, she fulfilled her role as Ingrid’s mother and their adopted grandmother, to Wynden’s undying amazement.

Suddenly, before Wynden could protest, Errin brought the slate close and rubbed her arm across its surface, irrevocably destroying her tree.

“What?” Wynden cried. “Why did you erase everything?”

Errin jumped, and gave him an annoyed look. “I’m just starting over.”

Wynden shook his head. “Why would you do everything again? You should at least, I don’t know, show some people first.”

“I enjoy drawing for myself, that’s all.”

“Really? All that work is fun when nobody sees it?” he asked incredulously.

She shrugged. “Yeah. And if I didn’t erase it, I couldn’t draw again.”

Wynden cocked his head, thinking. “As long as you’re having fun, I guess that’s okay.” However, he eyed the tablet critically. *Definitely not okay.* “Anyhow, where are you going? All the excitement and preparation is thataway. I should know.”

She held up her arms, needlessly displaying charcoal-darkened forearms. “Ingrid told me to clean up. She said if I don’t wash up now, I’m going to be eating my drawings at dinner.”

“Ingrid, huh?” Wynden asked. “Should have guessed she’d have you running around doing chores as well.”

Errin rolled her eyes, smiling, as they reached the stream. She softly set her drawing tablet on the bank, kneeled beside the water, and began washing her arms. As the flow swirled past, the charcoal residue became sweeping tendrils of darkness amongst invisible eddies along the bank, until the current finally swept the cloud downstream. Meanwhile, Wynden found a sunny rock and sat down, enjoying the calm.

Splash! A noise echoed, somewhere in the forest.

Wynden looked upstream. “My, here comes trouble,” he noted drily.

As Errin continued scrubbing her arms, three creatures thundered through the creek from upstream: Hadrian, Shepherd, and Benjamin, the oldest boys apart from Wynden. Together, they became a veritable storm of water and laughter as they hopped across rocks and logs, pushing each other to gain dominance over locations deemed “the mountain”. As they neared, Wynden’s ears picked up their taunts, accusations of cheating, and near-constant joking.

Eventually, Hadrian looked over. The large hedgehog lived with his uncle, Bardson, from whom he received much of his personality. They were both cautious but kind: quick to avoid conflict and the first to extend a helping hand. When he saw Errin and Wynden, he called out, “Hey, do you guys want to join us?”

“Er, no,” Errin replied quickly.

“Are you sure? We’re playing lord of the mountain,” Shepherd called grandly. The hare lived with Scurbins, the village storyteller, who adopted Shepherd two winters ago after his mother succumbed to the cold. The hare’s showmanship likely came from Scurbins, but Wynden just assumed Shepherd was destined to fall into her care.

“A queen can be a lord, y’know,” Benjamin shouted to Errin as he wheeled his arms about to regain balance. “She’ll have to beat me first, though - agh!” He fell into the water. The burly, short, mouse also stayed with Ingrid and Urlam, making him the two squirrels’ adopted brother. He always talked loud and teased everyone, but they knew he meant no harm.

Wynden looked at Errin. “Why don’t you go? You could knock Benjamin off easily.”

The mouse called from the water, “Not even!”

Wynden shot Benjamin a look and turned back to Errin. “Well?”

She shrugged. “They always play too rough.”

He shrugged back. “Well, then you have to become stronger!”

She gave him an annoyed look and held up her arms: *see how small I am?*

Wynden pushed them down to her side as the boys resumed playing. “Errin, there are other types of strong, you know.”

“Such as?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Look at it this way: everyone wants to be strong, but most people don’t realize what that feeling means. It means they want to find their own *personal* strength.

Sometimes it’s physical, but a lot of times it isn’t. Some creatures are smart, some are artistic, and others are kind. And everyone at some point has to find strength working with others:

friends, family, or even strangers – because that’s the greatest strength of all. For example...”

He climbed on top of a large rock, and looked to Benjamin, Hadrian, and Shepherd. “Aha!

Look at me, the mighty creature of the mountain. I bow to no king! None, I say!”

The boys caught on immediately.

“The mighty beast must be slain at all costs,” Shepherd remarked stoically.

“Go for his legs,” Benjamin instructed.

“Look out for the moss,” Hadrian advised, wading along. “It’s really slippery.”

Wynden danced about, purposely avoiding them with all his skill. “Ha! Three can’t best me! I’m too powerful!”

Benjamin turned. “C’mon, Errin!” The others looked to her as well.

“Alright,” she said, smiling. Timidly at first, she hopped across the rocks.

The first time, Wynden let the four push him over. The second time, he held nothing back. However, they made an impressive team and Wynden fell despite his best efforts to avoid their onslaught. Then, they continued fighting until the sun neared the horizon. Finally, Wynden took his leave, saying goodbye to everyone and reminding Errin to grab her drawing tablet. Waving, she took off with the others, ready for another adventure with her usual boundless energy. After watching them go, Wynden merrily began searching for a place to nap until the Peace Banquet, preferably somewhere safe from prying elders.

Because, he thought to himself, I certainly need some rest after such a hard day!

Chapter 3

Wynden woke from his nap under the glow of a radiant moon, which hid behind a bank of clouds now outlined by the silvery, blue light. Across a fallow field, paths of torches gently glowed amongst the trees, adding an orange tinge to the illumination across Wynden's concealed hammock. With a groan of annoyance, he regarded a figure overhead, gently shaking him from unconsciousness.

"C'mon, let me sleep," Wynden muttered.

Hadrian came into view. A blessing! Every time one of the elders caught Wynden napping, he got an earful of lecture. The hedgehog seemed completely happy, smiling broadly as the torchlight turned him into a spiky silhouette. "I've been looking all over for you, Wynden! We're waiting to start the banquet."

Right, the banquet! Wynden rubbed sleep out of his eyes, mussing up his fur. Groggily, he smoothed it back into place as Hadrian watched patiently.

"How long have they been waiting?" Wynden asked.

The hedgehog laughed. "Not too long, thankfully. See, we started looking for you earlier than last year. Best to plan ahead, y'know."

“Ah, good,” Wynden said with a nod. “Not too big a problem, right?”

Hadrian gave him a hand, “Look at it this way: Shepherd started calling this our ‘Wynden Hunt’, sort of the first event of the Peace Banquet. It’s a challenge!” Hadrian smiled, but realized Wynden didn’t share his enthusiasm. “Well, as long as you remember next time, there won’t be an issue, I’m sure. Although there wouldn’t be a Wynden Hunt either...”

“Yeah, that’d be sad,” Wynden agreed. “Look, let’s go. But please don’t say anything when we get to the banquet area. We’ll just sneak in, okay?”

Hadrian nodded firmly.

Heading east, they crossed over the dirt field, wound through the empty village, and pushed through a sea of grass to emerge on the sand dunes. There, Wynden and Hadrian beheld the banquet area, a great sea of torches complete with milling creatures who were anxious for the night to begin. On the pleasantly warm sand, cooking fires burned merrily, tables lay in wait, and a large palm weave formed a festive, makeshift dance floor. The air thrilled with scents, most notably the ocean, torch oil, and cooking food. With emphasis on the food.

Excited, Hadrian began to call out, completely forgetting his earlier promise. “Hey everyone, I found Wynden! We can start now!”

As heads began to turn, Wynden grew self-conscious. “Hadrian, could you please not yell so loud? Please?”

To make matters worse, Benjamin, Shepherd, and Errin appeared.

Immediately, the hare started to express his disappointment at losing the Wynden Hunt. “You won already? I’m so much faster, though!”

Hadrian shrugged. “Guess I find people better, huh, Shepherd?”

Errin looked at Benjamin, slapping his shoulder jokingly. “How did this happen? We should’ve won, he’s our brother!”

The mouse laughed. “Whatever, we’ll win next time, no matter how fast or skilled the competition.”

Together, they walked toward the tables, looking for a spot. Meanwhile, Wynden tried to avoid attention by slipping through the crowd and listening in on nearby conversations.

“C’mon, can I please have just a bite?”

“I love her dress, did you make it just for the banquet?”

“Hey, did you steal a roll?”

“Nawp, oi did not. Howeber, I c’n tell you thith food ib gunna be reel gudd fur sure!”

“Is that Wynden? Yay, Wynden’s here!”

“Took you long enough. Thought you were gonna sleep through next season!”

Ah, and so it begins, Wynden thought bitterly.

“Don’t worry, Wynden, it’s hard to be young in a group of old codgers such as ourselves, am I right?”

Wynden searched for the voice and found himself looking down at Urlam: mole, matriarch, and grandmother all rolled into one.

“Hey there,” he said awkwardly.

She smiled. “Ingrid tells me you’re quite a hit amongst the youngsters, yes?”

He winced. “Yeah, about that, and sleeping late...you have to understand...”

“There’s no problem, child,” she said good-naturedly. “They forget, you know.”

“Who? Forget what?”

Urlam gestured at the rest of the elders. “The old creatures here forget what it was like to be your age. Take me for example: do you think I was always the ‘wized leader’ of this tribe?” She waved the thought away. “Ha! When I was a young lady your age, I acted more like you than you can imagine, Wynden.” Urlam smiled in recollection. “My mother used to complain, saying I wouldn’t go anywhere in life if I didn’t get a good husband and grow into a proud molewife. Hah! She was a well-meaning old mole, but narrow-minded when it came to making goals for her children.”

She put a hand on Wynden’s cheek, reaching up to do so. “My point is, you’ve got so much potential, Wynden. What matters isn’t who you are now, but who you become and what you leave behind for loved ones. I know that sounds like an old molewife’s advice, but it’s as true as ever. Might’ve made my mom proud, eh? So listen; just have a good time tonight, because things always get better.” She hugged him and trundled away.

Wynden beamed, watching her greet others one by one.

Minutes later, Errin, Benjamin, Hadrian, and Shepherd cheerfully greeted Urlam as she came by. The old mole gazed at them knowingly and said, “I heard you four made quite a ruckus by the stream today. Tell me: who was the king of the hill?”

“You mean lord of the mountain,” Shepherd corrected her. “And it was me, of course, the mighty and gracious Harechief, Shepherd the Awesome.”

Benjamin elbowed him. “Want to run that by me again?”

Taken off guard, Shepherd stumbled towards Hadrian, who caught the hare, warning, “Watch the spikes!”

“Oh, thanks, Hadrian” Shepherd replied as he punched Benjamin in the arm.

Urlam smiled at their antics and looked to Errin. “My, my, Errin! Did we have a queen of the mountain today?”

Errin smiled. “Yep!”

“Excellent! Oh, and I see your drawing slate now doubles as a place-keeper.” She was right: the tablet guarded Errin’s chair. “Well, it’s good you chose a nice spot, because I have a secret,” Urlam said, leaning in. “You have to try my cinnamon-pecans, they’re right there. I made them with help from uncle Bardson, but he’ll snag them all if you’re not quick!”

The four nodded together in perfect clandestine agreement.

With a quick wink, Urlam walked to an old oak podium, the traditional place for her banquet speech and prayer. Following along, the four kids offered assistance on the stairs, which gave Urlam trouble in her old age. The kindly matron accepted their help graciously.

Wynden took his cue and grabbed a spot near good food: some crisp red apples and a basket of salted almonds. Mason, the old carpenter, plopped down beside him. The beaver gave Wynden a knowing look and said in a rough, scratchy voice, “You know where to sit, eh, Wynden! When you get up there, make sure to grab a few of old Cheryl’s nut-sprinkled rolls for me, okay? They always run out before I get any.”

Wynden laughed. “Well, Mason, that’s because I grab them all!”

“Why you cheeky sprout!” Mason said in mock astonishment. “Should’ve known it was you all along!”

“Well, I guess I might leave a couple this once. But no promises after that, okay?”

“That’ll do,” the beaver replied sagely.

As the two sealed their pact with a solemn handshake, Urlam began her talk. “Hello everyone! It’s nice to see you all here!” As the villagers responded, her ancient eyes peered

about, sparkling. “I know you wish to eat and I’m sure the kids are impatient as ever, so I ask you listen only a short time: I’m a creature of tradition, and we have much to look back on and be thankful for.”

Ugh, get on with the banquet, Wynden thought to himself. *Why do we have to do this every single time?* He waited with discomfort as Urlam continued her tirade.

“As important as planning for the future is, I believe looking to the past is just as necessary. You all know our story began long ago in a great city.”

Whyyyyyyyyyy...

“Our people came from a great place known as Justeros, a center of trade and ideas protected by a great wall, keeping it safe from predators and roving bands of vermin for many, many years. Inside, we were happy. We were safe from cold winters, had plenty of medicine to fight disease, and lived in harmony with each other as best we could. Our people were rich in knowledge, wealth, and kinship.”

Wynden rolled his eyes. *Why do old people always talk about how good things were? Not everything could have been that great.*

Urlam’s head bowed. “However, our prosperity blinded us to the greed and darkness in other nations. The walls protected us from much, but they weren’t enough when a few of our strongest allies attacked, uniting with our most feared enemies.”

The village children sat open-mouthed, raptly listening to Urlam’s tale. Except, oddly, for a young hedgehog who picked at her spines in annoyance. Wynden quietly laughed, approving. Unlike the hedgehog, Urlam’s tales had captivated him every year.

He remembered building delusions of grandeur, planning to find the ruins of Justeros and solve his mysterious past. Back then, Wynden clung tightly to failing memories of childhood in

Justeros, hoping to remember details about his mother, father, and life in the city. Once, he even told Ingrid in a fit of anger he wanted to leave and find his *real* parents. After feeling awful for a week, the kind mole told Wynden a simple truth: she loved him and encouraged him to cherish his old identity and remaining memories.

Regardless, the shame of his outburst made Wynden's dreams of adventure seem bleak and empty. Eventually, he came to a final conclusion: tales of older times, past events, and great cities might as well be myths, for all they were worth to a villager.

"...Under siege for years." Urlam stopped for a moment, mentally gathering herself. "Heroes defended us to the end, brave warriors all. When they saw the attackers pushing toward certain victory, those brave creatures made one final effort to ensure our freedom. While the city burned, they freed anyone unable to fight for themselves, battling until the least of us escaped. Those heroes were mothers, fathers, children, siblings, and friends."

There it was again! Wynden noted bitterly he couldn't be sure his parents were even heroes. How could he respect their memory or mourn their loss without knowing who they truly were? For all Wynden knew, his parents abandoned everyone to save their own lives. Plain and simple: he never knew them in any meaningful fashion.

Urlam's tone suddenly brightened, calling Wynden's attention: "Look around you! Their sacrifice continues to bear fruit. We have a plentiful harvest despite winter. We have fields to plant for spring. Most importantly, there are friends to your left and right. After so many obstacles and trials to get here, it would be a shame to forget those we've lost while celebrating our good fortune. Instead, let's honor their memory with hard work in the coming year! Let's continue to strive and grow, making a life through all times. So promise me one thing: that you'll try. Try the best you can for each other! Can you do that for me?"

Around the tables, everyone called their agreement.

“Aye, aye, marm!”

“Of course I will!”

“I’m not going anywhere, promise!”

Urlam chuckled. “Well, we have another year to celebrate, and more good food! I, for one, plan on eating enough to prepare for next winter!” Laughs rang throughout the banquet area, especially from like-minded elders.

“Now, for the prayer,” the old mole said. Obediently, they bowed their heads as one. “Lord, thank you for this banquet. Thank you for blessing our hard work. More importantly, though, thank you for the people who accomplished it together, and those who weren’t able to be here but made it possible. May you continue to care for us and help us through the challenges we face every day. It’s in your name we -”

Urlam’s words stopped.

Wynden opened his eyes, wondering if the prayer was over.

Although the old mole’s eyes remained closed peacefully, she hung in midair with a sword protruding from her chest. Blood seeped through her shirt in a growing circle.

The iron blade disappeared and her body fell to the ground, light as a feather. In her place, a dark figure rose garishly into the light, gripping a blade that glared with reflected fire.

Finally, someone screamed, and time proceeded in slow motion.

An elder yelled “vermin”, as shadows scurried from the night, flashing amongst flickering torches like vengeful wraiths.

Elders grabbed children, turning to the village.

Ingrid rushed to the body of her mother. Startled by her movement, the first killer struck out in self-defense, sending the distraught mole to the ground, wounded. Crying Urlam's name one last time, Ingrid became still and peaceful while the banquet became utter chaos.

The torrent of rats wielded crude swords, grubby daggers, and wicked-looking nets, clad in a strange assortment of ancient, dirty, and mismatched rags. Their beady, black eyes gleamed with a palpable malevolence, which spread across the dunes like a miasma and assaulted the villager's from within, causing most to freeze and surrender.

Wynden tried to move but found himself amongst the frozen; his mind moved like a flying thrush but his body couldn't budge an inch, aside from an unstoppable shaking.

Meanwhile, rats bore down on those trying to flee, brutally attacking anyone who dared attempt escape. The luckiest victims were simply grabbed and thrown to the ground with a command to stay put. The less fortunate received blows, some mortally wounded by overzealous pirates who shrugged at the mistake and began pursuing a new target.

Terrified by everything happening around them, the village children wailed in unison, their high-pitched voices evident above the din. A few pirates herded the kids and caretakers together, ordering them silent without any effect. The children cried, unabated.

Hadrian, Benjamin, and Shepherd sprung into action, a single island of clarity amongst a sea of chaos. Circling around Errin, they skillfully fought with anything nearby, including ladling spoons and bowls. Their resistance took the pirates completely by surprise and within moments, the boys developed a circle of pain for all vermin who dared come close.

Benjamin parried a stab with his chair and broke the seat on his attacker's head, quickly stepping back to safety. Simultaneously, Shepherd sent a hefty ladle swipe into the stomach of another foe trying to take advantage of Benjamin's blind spot. On the other end, Hadrian

protected his corner by pummeling creatures with powerful fists and using his spiny body to discourage anyone from his periphery.

Eventually, even their resistance turned out to be futile.

Hadrian went down first, knocked unconscious by a three-pirate rush. As he fell, Shepherd took a crude, wooden club to the back and dropped, crying. Alone, Benjamin couldn't stand long; a multitude of foes tackled him as rats swarmed in.

Wynden abruptly became the last warrior left standing. Immobile.

A hand grabbed his shirt and pulled him around. Wynden whipped his sword out, but found Mason's scared eyes looking into his.

"Wynden! Do something! Protect us, please! *Do anything!*" the carpenter yelled.

"Stop it!" Wynden yelled back.

"What?" Mason stepped back, surprised by Wynden's vehemence.

"Stop it, I'm..." Wynden saw Hadrian struggling, and turned away. "I'm the warrior of the village, I have a plan to..." nearby, Benjamin rolled into a ball as a rat, rubbing a bruise from the mouse's chair, began to exact his vengeance with a series of kicks. "No, I can't do this, you have to do something, I can't, I..." Urlam and Ingrid's bodies lay in the sand.

"*I can't!*" Wynden yelled.

"Can't what?" A voice asked. It was gruff, with an oddly understanding tone.

Wynden looked up, staring into the eyes of Urlam and Ingrid's killer, an average rat standing one head above the young squirrel. The creature's gaze switched from Wynden to his weapon, which remained stuck in the ground uselessly.

The sword never felt so heavy.

Wynden's fingers loosened, leaving the blade upright in the sand.

“P-please d-don’t hurt me. I m-mean us, please don’t hurt us,” Wynden barely managed.

The rat looked at Wynden’s sword with considerable consternation. Then, the pirate held up his hand high and yelled for all to hear.

“Enough!”

The rats stopped instantly. In just moments, their eyes turned on Wynden and their leader, whose gaze never wandered from the squirrel before him.

“Tell me, what is your name?” The rat questioned flatly.

“Wynden, sir.”

The rat nodded, proffered his hand to Wynden, and spoke in a voice suddenly commanding and harsh. “My name is Rhamis, the Conqueror. I have come to take your village as volunteers for a work program. They will serve me, the *Klamorak King*.” Oddly, the words felt scripted, as if Rhamis didn’t truly believe them.

Wynden looked at the king’s hand and glanced away, desperate to avoid Rhamis’s piercing gaze. Instead, he silently appealed to the villagers for help, assurance, or strength.

He regretted the choice instantly. Their faces pleaded with Wynden, asking him to pick up his sword and save them, despite any reason.

Why do they want me to be a hero now, of all times? It was too much to ask! Or at the very least, more than he could ever provide.

Reluctantly, Wynden shook hands with Rhamis and dropped his head in shame.

Rhamis stepped forward and slapped him across the face, sending the squirrel sprawling. Fury contorted the rat’s face. “You’re supposed to be the warrior, eh? The protector of this village? Their defender?” Wynden didn’t answer, so Rhamis asked again. “Well are you?”

“Yes. I am,” Wynden mumbled, his voice choked.

Rhamis shook his head in disgust and pulled Wynden's sword from the ground. "This is a nice sword, not fitting for a coward like yourself. Do you mind if I take it?" The rats laughed, ready for a show, but Rhamis expressed no joy as he turned back to Wynden with the weapon in his hands. He waited, patient.

"No. I don't mind."

Rhamis lifted Wynden's chin, using the stolen blade. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course."

Rhamis dropped the sword. "Well, then, pick it up."

"Why?" Wynden asked, startled. The rats laughed at his reply, making him feel small and yet not small enough.

The king eyed Wynden angrily. "I'm not sure how simpletons deal with such matters, but in the Klamorak Tribe, a personal weapon must be taken by combat. Will you force me to accept the dishonor of taking this sword without a match?" Rhamis paused, but Wynden refused to speak. "I see, coward. What if I made you a wager, then? Pick up your sword and fight: should you defeat me, your people can go free."

At those words, the villagers' eyes brightened with hope. There was a chance!

Wynden shook his head. "No, I-I won't fight you."

Rhamis slapped Wynden once again, eyes blazing with fire. "Well, then I won't fight you either, scum!" He turned about, his fists clenched in anger. "You're the warrior of the village and you can't stand up to defend your own pitiful life, let alone those you're sworn to protect? I ought to kill you now!" Around the circle, pirates jostled for a better view.

Rhamis picked up Wynden's sword again and held the weapon high over its owner's head. It gleamed furiously in the torchlight, ready to strike down its previous master.

“Please don’t!” Wynden called. “I gave up! I gave up, aren’t you listening? Take them, not me! Please let me live, I’ll do anything you want, I’ll pay you anything I have! I just - I don’t want to die, please!” Wynden fell, sobbing to the ground.

The sword dropped into the dirt by his head, taking a few whiskers from his cheek on the way down. They drifted away slowly.

“Get out of my sight,” Rhamis said flatly.

“What -”

“I said get out of my sight!” The pirate king yelled, brandishing the sword once more. “Get out of here before I change my mind!”

Wynden began sprinting down a torch-lit path, through the village, and into the forest, dark as death. He looked back only once to ensure the rats weren’t following. The memory would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Benjamin, Hadrian, and Shepherd lay on the ground, wounded almost beyond recognition, their faces just clear enough to show anger, hate, and fear. The elders, the very same creatures who raised Wynden most of his life, showed absolute, unutterable betrayal.

Still, none of them affected Wynden as much as Errin. The little squirrel knelt beside Ingrid, holding their dead mother’s hand while clutching the broken halves of her drawing tablet to her chest. Errin’s eyes burned with anger as well, but they were kindled with an unmistakable trace of forgiveness, an emotion beyond Wynden’s ability to comprehend or tolerate. Couldn’t she be like the others and simply detest him? It was exactly what he deserved!

Regardless, her eyes sent a message clearer than words: he was forgiven, already.

It was too much.

Wynden tore his eyes from the sight and continued running as fast as his feet would take him into the darkness.

#

Sometime around midnight, Wynden came stumbling back onto the dunes.

Just north, the trees burned bright, set aflame by the departing rats. As he watched, branches fell to the ground and caused a gauntlet of sparks to rise up, freakishly dancing over the remains of his past life.

“Hello? Everyone?” He called pitifully. “Are you there?”

He received no answer from the shallow graves dug for those who perished, the only others left behind. In silence, they passed unnoticed by the frantic squirrel.

Wynden turned his eyes to sea. The vague outline of a ship slipped bit by bit into the night until a few glowing lanterns remained, hovering like ghosts far away, over the sea. Moments later, those lights winked out as well, leaving Wynden with nothing but night over the water and a burning village at his back.

Slowly, he crawled to the outcropping of rocks where he used to sleep, now hoping someone would tell him to wake up and start working. But there was no such luck. Everyone alive had already disappeared beyond his sight.

Wynden looked to sea.

His fists clenched.

Tears fell down his cheeks.

“I accept your challenge!” He screamed madly. “Come back and fight me, Rhamis!”

He yelled again and again until his throat became hoarse, and then fell to the sand exhausted, oblivious to the uncomfortable grit in his fur.

“Please, come back,” he sobbed until sleep claimed him.