

Against the Tide By Keper Shipwright

The sea-elf, Captain Rodin Rae Duana Cordelia, circled her opponent, looking for an opening. Able Seaman Davey Stewart, one of her newer recruits, stood easily a foot and a half taller than she but he was breathing hard. His left arm hung awkwardly at his side and the rocking of the carrack, the *Emerald Lady*, gave him an unsure footing. Around her, Rodin Rae could sense the anticipation that was building from her crew; never one to prolong a mate's agony, they knew that in the next few moments their Captain would take Stewart down and end the bout. Oh, there'd be no shame in it, they had all lost to the Captain at one time or another. Sparring was a Saturday ritual on the Captain's ship, and the crew looked forward to it the same as double rum rations. But it was a rare occasion for the Captain to partake in the fighting. She only did so when teaching some of the younger crew, or when a new mate, like Stewart, made the mistake of snidely asking why the Captain didn't join in.

The ship began to rise on a swelling wave and Rodin Rae knew this was the moment. As the *Emerald Lady* began to roll she lunged forward, thrusting the palm of her hand squarely into Davey's right side. She was fast and he missed his chance to block her. She followed up easily with an elbow to his chin and he fell to the deck like a sack of stone before the *Emerald Lady* had crested. A wild cheer went up from her crew. They loved their Captain dearly and they loved when she beat a loud-mouthed landlubber who had the audacity to challenge her. She blushed, and tried to wave them to quiet down, reaching her hand out toward Davey Stewart's good arm. He shook his head to clear it and spat blood on the deck, refusing her good gesture. The rest of the crew booed him.

"Hope yer planning to clean that up, Wart!"

"Serves yer right, you stinkin' fool! You asked for it!"

If Stewart is looking to make friends on this ship, Rodin Rae thought, he's swimming against the tide.

Davey scowled as Doc, the medic onboard, pulled him to his feet, popped his shoulder back into place, and shoved a poultice of herbs to his swelling jaw.

"Do you know why you lost, Stewart?" Rodin Rae asked, neatly retying her chestnut hair behind her elfin ears. He scowled at her. She barely looked winded.

"You lost because you had no idea who your opponent was. Let that be a lesson."

She watched the muscle near his eye twitch, and for a moment he looked as if he was going to make a snide retort. Thankfully, he held his tongue. He gruffly shoved Doc off him, mumbling something about not needing his medicine, and rushed off in a huff. He did not salute his Captain as he passed her. She made a note of it. Sore loser or no, there were certain symbols of respect that were due her Office.

She turned toward the rest of the crew, running her hands down the front of her leather trousers, and eyeing the weather. It was a lovely day for late November but it would be turning. They would have to return to the business of sailing soon. But they might have time for one more quick bout.

"Anyone else want to give it a go?" she asked. The crew cheered wildly, looking at each other to see who would be foolish enough to volunteer. To all of their surprise, and incredible delight, the Captain's First-Mate, Dranoel, stepped forward.

"I'm game," he said, stripping off his coat. Rodin Rae grinned from ear to ear. Dranoel was an excellent opponent, skilled in wrestling, hand-to-hand combat, and all sorts of varied weaponry. This was going to be fun.

"Shall we use knives?" she asked.

"Ladies choice," he replied, stretching.

"Knives it is then," she said, and the crew erupted into a frenzy.

Down in her cabin, Doc huffed as he stitched up the Captain's right brow. Dranoel lounged on her divan, his chest bound tight where she had broken two of his ribs. He was still basking in the glory of his victory; the pain hadn't quite hit him yet. "That was fantastic!" he exclaimed, "That left thrust of yours is pure evil; I can't believe I blocked it!"

"Yer lucky ye did, or I'd be sewin' up that baby face of yers," Doc grumbled, tying off the thread with his teeth.

"I knew you had me," Rodin Rae said, "when I fainted right and kicked left. You almost caught my foot." She mimicked the move from her chair. The exhilaration of the fight was still in her blood, too, and she was flushed a radiant hue.

"Hold yerself still, lass, or you'll end up lookin' like the sheet of a two-bit whore," Doc chastised. "There," he said, finishing his work on her. She touched the stitches, grunting in satisfaction. Rodin Rae marveled that a man with such large hands could sew so fine.

Doc poured them each a healthy mug of rum "to calm yous both down," as he put it.

"I can't wait to get back to Morgandy and tell Thorny how I beat you," Dranoel said, rubbing his hands together in delight.

"That old yarner's back?" Doc queried, helping himself to a drink and sitting down. Thorny Smallberries was an old friend of the Captain's from Toolibrie; No one had seen him in a while but his tales about the Captain were all over the Eastern Shore. Thorny adored the Blackpearl, as Rodin Rae was also known, and loved to spread stories of her prowess. Most were outlandish tales, with only a grain of truth to them, but Rodin Rae didn't mind. His exaggeration had caused many a pirate to think twice before attacking her shipping endeavors, making runs like the one she was on now much less dangerous.

"I've heard he's been around, but he hadn't come calling at the Inn before we set sail," she said, digging in her mahogany cabinet for her shoreline map. "I'm sure we'll see him by the end of next month. That's when I expect we'll make it back to Morgandy."

"That soon?" asked Dranoel, trying to raise himself onto one arm to see the chart she was unrolling. He was beginning to feel the ache of his ribs.

"If the weather 'olds," said Doc, gesturing to the weather-glass on the wall. Rodin Rae scowled at him. Doc was a pessimist.

"The glass hasn't moved in two weeks," she said, reviewing their course for the hundredth time. They had been blessed with one of the warmest November months in E'Atara that Rodin Rae could remember. Usually by mid-month the Boreas began to howl in these cold northern waters, making sailing this far north impossible. But the North Wind had held, so she had decided to make one last run up to the alum mine she had discovered for a final haul. They were on the return trip, the *Emerald Lady's* hold fat with the Captain's prize. Once they raised Morgandy she would have the alum refined and sold. The profits would allow her and her crew to live comfortably until spring. Between Thorny Smallberries's rumored return and Logophil's reappearance after two years of wandering, Rodin Rae was looking forward to a peaceful winter among friends. She considered for a moment these two strange men who had resurfaced in her life: Smallberries, whom she loved like her father, despite his inflated tales about her, and Logophil, the Keeper of Obscure Knowledge, who had wandered into her life quite by accident and turned everything upside-down, particularly her heart. *Old friends and new*, she thought, *how wonderful they both can be.*

"Mayhaps that glass ain't moved," said Doc, "but I can feel bad weather when it's comin'." He rubbed an old scar on his right arm. "And somthin' is a comin', mark my words," he cautioned.

Rodin Rae was used to Doc's pessimism. She ignored it. "We should make the Straits of the Kuin Sea in two days," she said,

bringing the map over to Dranoel so that he didn't have to struggle to see it. "Then it's round Iona and back to Morgandy." She tapped the parchment, "Easy as pie."

"You ain't never baked a pie," Doc noted, knocking the wooden table for luck and making the sign that sailors make when they're asking the Goddess for protection. Dranoel began to laugh and immediately regretted it. His side was truly beginning to hurt.

"Serves ya' right," Doc said, getting up to check Dranoel's bindings and shooin' Rodin Rae away.

"Well, maybe I haven't baked a pie," Rodin Rae retorted, "But I've sailed this route a hundred times or more, what could possibly go wrong?"

Doc rolled his eyes in her general direction and ordered Dranoel to get to bed, slapping the First-Mate's hand as he reached for more rum and wagging a finger. "Enough of that," Doc said, "and enough from you, lass," he said to his Captain. Rodin Rae wondered when Doc had assumed this familiarity with her.

"You know the old saying," he said, gathering up his medical supplies and shuffling a pained Dranoel out the door, "Sail in September with goods in your hold/Sail in October make sure they're all sold/Sail in November with home to your lee. . ." He shut the door to her cabin before he finished the rhyme.

Rodin Rae stood for a moment at her table, reviewing her charts, and whispered to herself the end of the rhyme, "But sail in December and ship wrecked you'll be."

Rodin Rae woke in the morning watch. She could feel the familiar movements of the *Emerald Lady* as the crew maneuvered the square-rigged ship toward the Straits of the Kuin Sea. Not a particularly fast ship, the *Emerald Lady* was built to carry cargo, ballista, and a large enough crew to repel any untoward advances from pirates. She ran her fingers along the familiar beams. A fine specimen of woodcraft, each peg, each plank, had been skillfully and lovingly carved from the trees of the dryads who perished in E'Atara's great cataclysm, a gift from the faerie queen, Lady Laurel Angelica of Ravenhilt. When handled well, the *Emerald Lady* positively sung. Rodin Rae loved that sound. She could tell from the way the *Emerald Lady* sounded now that they must be entering the mouth of the Straits, where the wind changed direction. She was just beginning to think about breakfast, and that the *Lady* must be making at least ten knots, when she felt a strange hesitation. The *Emerald Lady* had turned into the wind and then had fallen off. She cocked her head, pausing. They

were losing momentum. Had they missed stays? She dressed quickly, grabbed her cloak, and ran up on deck.

As she came above into the gray light of the very early morning, she heard Dranoel yelling commands to wear. The *Emerald Lady* was being forced to come to a complete stop before the wind, so that they could wear in the opposite direction. They had indeed missed stays, a capital offense on the elf's ship. Rodin Rae let Dranoel finish his command and then marched up to him. From his disheveled look and the pain in his face, she guessed that he had rushed above deck half a second before she.

"Who is the Officer on this Watch?" She demanded, raising her brow.

Dranoel's tense face met hers, "I believe it is Caraway, Captain."

Rodin Rae looked around her. Lieutenant James Caraway was nowhere to be found. She watched the crew carefully and they, knowing she watched, sheepishly avoided her gaze and went about their task to perfection. *Too little, too late*, she thought. There would be hell to pay for this folly.

Rodin Rae called for a sounding. "By the deep four!" Came the response and she cursed the Goddess, "Leta's balls!" They were getting blown off course and the water was getting too shallow to turn. With the wind from the coast, they would not have a second chance to make the Straits. They would have to sail around the far side of Kuin Island, adding a considerable amount of time to their journey. Rodin Rae was infuriated.

"Meet me in my cabin as soon as these maneuvers are finished," she barked in Dranoel's general direction, not waiting for his reply.

Below again, Rodin Rae quickly re-charted their course, cursing the Goddess and her missing Lieutenant as she did. There was no way they would make it back to Morgandy by the end of December now. Even if she sailed the *Emerald Lady* as fast as she could, the additional time at sea would be considerable. She poured herself a glass of mulled wine. There was nothing she could do. *What's done is done and cannot be undone*, she thought, but oh, was she angry.

Dranoel entered her cabin, his face pale from both pain and frustration.

"What in the nine-hells of Sheldon was that all about!" she yelled at him.

Dranoel shrugged and helped himself to her glass of wine. "Do you have any food to go with this?" he asked.

She waved her hand in the general direction of her cupboard. Dranoel pulled out some bread and a chunk of cheese, handing it to her. She took it absently, still looking at her charts.

"How are your ribs?" she asked, tearing off a hunk of bread and dipping it into her cup.

"I'll live," he said, "Do you always drink wine for breakfast?" he asked.

She flared at his impertinent tone, "Only when my bloody Officer on Watch goes missing," she said, slamming her cup on the table.

"I have Doc looking for Caraway," Dranoel said, unfazed by Rodin Rae's anger. He had known the sea-elf for a long time; he knew she liked to bang things around when she was annoyed. When she was truly angry she was quiet, and that was when one really had to watch out.

"Did you check that landlubber's hammock?" she said, getting up to stomp around the room.

"Right before I came here," he said. "He's not there."

"I'm going to kill him," she commented, half to herself.

"You and half the crew," Dranoel said, knowing how unhappy the mates would be to be kept at sea past Yule. Most of the men had signed on with the promise that they would be home for the holiday.

"What the hell could he possibly be doing to abandon his post?" Dranoel mused.

The bell struck five, the sun would be rising any minute. Rodin Rae finished off her cup and poured a second glass.

"I can only imagine," she said, angrily.

Rodin Rae could not imagine what she was hearing. Before her stood Doc with Lieutenant Caraway in his grizzled right hand, and Able Seaman Davey Stewart in his left. Both boys, for they could be no more than fifteen or so, had black eyes. Caraway's nose was bloody. *Leta help him if he drips so much as one drop on my Endhomian carpet,* she thought.

"...and there they were," Doc was saying, "scrapping about for the love of naught, one screaming curses and the other a hollerin' away like two cats in a sack and no brain 'twix the two. Ain't seen nothing like it. Nothin'." He pushed the boys forward and he would have spit, had he not known how much the Captain loved her foreign carpet. Instead, he twisted his face up in disgust. Outside of fighting practice on Saturdays, brawling was unheard of on the *Emerald Lady*. At least Caraway had the good sense to hang his head in shame. Stewart just stared straight ahead, half a smirk on his quarrelsome

face. There was something about that human she didn't like. It was the way he smelled to her. Oh, like a regular seaman, for certain, but there was an undercurrent of something else. Something rotten. Like fish. *Or sulfur*, she thought.

"Thank-you, Doc," Rodin Rae said and he saluted her, stepping back but not leaving. A scuttlebutt to the end, Doc loved gossip and he wasn't about to prematurely depart unless he was ordered to do so. Rodin Rae let him stay. What was the difference? With quarters being what they were, and her anger at a fevered pitch, the entire crew would know directly every word she spoke.

She took a deep breath and then laced into her two young crewmen with a string of foul-mouthed words that would have made Doc's hair turn gray, had he not heard them from her before.

"I'm sure you both know that because of this *incident*" she spit the word out, flailing her hands in the air, "my ship has missed stays, missed the Straits, and missed her chance to make it home by Yule. Do you know what that *means*?" Her voice had risen to a deafening crescendo. Since it seemed like a rhetorical question, both boys kept their mouths sealed tight while the Captain fumed and continued pacing, considering what to do to them.

"It means, that for every additional hour we're kept at sea, you will be kept awake. You will both do double-duty. If I see so much as a nod pass between the two of you, I swear by the nine-hells of Sheldon that I will flog you raw in front of the entire crew." She watched the boys closely and saw Caraway lose all color in his face and Stewart clench his jaw. *Caraway has never been whipped before, but Steward has*, she thought, *I wonder by whom?*

"Stewart, to your post," she commanded, waving him out of her sight. Saluting her meekly, he departed. She could swear he was smirking as he left. She nodded to Doc and he slipped out after Stewart. Rodin Rae knew that Doc would keep an eye on that trouble-maker for her. She turned on Caraway, who was as pale as death. He did not meet her gaze and she could tell that the mistake wore heavy on him. They had sailed together before and Rodin Rae was certain of Caraway's character. He was not one to fight, nor to take his duties lightly. He was also a very good sailor. *Something is amiss*, she thought.

"Well?" she asked, pointing to a chair and indicating he should sit.

"It was my fault, Captain," he began, not raising his eyes. "I failed to note that we were entering the Straits..."

"Oh Bollocks!" She interjected, banging her hand on the table as Caraway blushed a deep red. He was unaccustomed to her unique vocabulary or to being at the receiving end of her anger.

"Don't insult me with your fabricated excuses, which are bordering on outright lying. You've sailed this route with me before," she yelled. "Why weren't you at your post? You know we have to tack to enter the Straits, you know it's your job to give the order. No officer of mine has ever gone missing on this ship, nor has any officer or crew member ever been caught brawling on the *Emerald Lady!*" Her voice was now at a fevered pitch.

She pounded her fists on the table in front of him, "I suggest you tell me exactly where you were and why you were fighting!"

Caraway cleared his throat, opened his mouth, thought better about what he was going to say, and closed it again. He seemed to turn from red to white to red again in a heartbeat.

"Oh, hellfire!" Rodin Rae exclaimed, throwing up her hands in exasperation.

A furious knock at her cabin door interrupted her tirade. Dranoel came flying through before she had finished calling, "Enter!"

"Sail on the horizon!" Dranoel roared. From his expression, Rodin Rae could tell this was no friendly pleasure vessel he was reporting.

"What kind?" she asked calmly, her immediate anger at Caraway melting away as her defense instincts took over. Out of practiced habit, she began clearing her cabin for action, throwing her bottles of wine into a sea chest and grabbing several knives from her closet. She hid the weapons in various places under her clothes. Caraway's jaw dropped; he had not known that the Captain could hide so many daggers on her small frame. He tried to keep his eyes in check as she tucked one into her corset. Dranoel, helping her into her Captain's coat, answered, "Looks like a pirate vessel, possibly a corvette."

"This late in the season?" She mused aloud as she motioned for Caraway to help her roll up her sea-charts. He did so obediently. Quickly, Rodin Rae locked them into her mahogany cabinet. She handed Dranoel the key as he handed her her cutlass.

"I can't be certain yet, but it looks like the *Mithaglar*," Dranoel stated.

Rodin Rae cursed, turning Caraway's ears red. The *Mithaglar*, or Grey Glory, was the ship of Delorian Grey de van Huesen and his *Gall-Gael*, the Sons of Death. A ruthless band of pirates, Delorian and his men had recently tried to plunder Rodin Rae's other ship, the *Darkmyst*. It had been by the Goddess alone that Rodin Rae had escaped.

"Let's go and find out," she said.

Up in ropes, Rodin Rae cursed again. Her elfin eyesight could clearly see the *Mithaglar* bearing down to larboard. She quickly made some calculations in her head; the wind was strong but at their current coordinates the *Mithaglar* would cross their path by the end of the afternoon watch. Once Delorian Grey de van Huesen had the weather gage, he would surely attack. There was no way her carrack could outrun his corvette. She groaned inwardly and raced down the ropes to the quarterdeck, landing lithely in front of Dranoel, who, with the glass to his eye, had just come to the same conclusion.

"We're in for it," she said to him, knowing that there would be no escape this time. "Even if I dump our cargo, we can't possibly press enough sail to outrun him. We'll have to engage. The question is where? And can we hold him off long enough to gain some small advantage?" Rodin Rae wondered aloud.

"We could try for the Horn of Kuin," Dranoel suggested, "The currents change there. That would be our best chance of gaining the weather-gage."

Rodin Rae agreed, that could be a possibility, but only if the wind held. And she was certain that Delorian was a weather-witch. Dranoel groaned when she reminded him of this. He hated sailing against sorcery.

"Tight up in a clinch ..." he muttered.

"With no knife to cut the seizing," she finished.

Staring out over the rail, Rodin Rae worried her lower lip. She was angry with herself for being so foolish as to make this last run north. She should know better than to be out this late in the season with no weather-witch aboard, but the fine fall weather had lured her into a false sense of security. The Horn of Kuin would be in their sights within the hour but an unnatural green color had begun to form over the *Mithaglar*. Rodin Rae was sure it was some kind of magic. She inhaled deeply; there was a strange odor on the wind; something familiar, but not quite right. She checked the set of her sails, nodding in satisfaction to the crew. They seemed to be in high spirits, eager to fight, but although their Captain smiled, she did not share in their enthusiasm. They might outnumber the *Gall-Gael*, but they were sailing to a lee shore with uncertain winds. And she had seen the ruthlessness of Delorian's pirate crew. If they were to engage, they would pay a heavy price. She was not convinced they could win against the Sons of Death. She felt incredibly disadvantaged.

If only we hadn't missed stays, she thought, we'd be sailing home at ten knots with the wind in our favor and the Mithaglar would

never have been able to reach us. That mistake seemed to linger in the recesses of her mind. Something about it, and the boys fighting, did not seem quite right to her. She sniffed the wind again: There was that strange odor. It made her think of Davey Stewart. She double-checked the set of her sails and then went below to find Doc and ask him about what the boys had been fighting.

Doc was in the wardroom, his make-shift infirmary during a battle, combing through his instruments and carefully sharpening each one.

"Need help?" she offered.

"Help yerself," he said, pointing to the blades that had not yet been honed. Rodin Rae grabbed a strap and set to work. They worked in silence for a while until Doc, familiar with his Captain's ways, finally asked, "So what's on yer mind?"

"Stewart and Caraway," she said. Doc grunted, nodding his head.

"Ne'er seen nothing like it, not on the *Lady*," Doc said. Doc, like Dranoel, had been a mate on the *Emerald Lady* since her maiden voyage. He knew the secret of its wood, and that the enchantment of Ravenhilt still resided there. That magic kept the infractions of the crew to a minimum; usually they were cited for staying too long in their hammocks, dreaming of willowy dryads.

"And what were they fighting about?" Rodin Rae asked, stopping her work to sit down backwards on one of the wardroom chairs. Doc joined her. A small flask appeared from his vest pocket and he handed it to her. She tried to wave it away; she never liked to drink before a battle, but Doc insisted. She took a swig and her eyes opened up wide. It was the strongest drink she had ever tasted.

"Theys were fightin' 'bout you, lass."

Rodin Rae raised a brow, "Me?"

"From what I heard, when I pulled those two lubbers apart, and from what I gleaned from the crew. Seems that Wart, you knows that's what we call 'im ..." She nodded, she was aware of the crew's nickname for Able Seaman Stewart "... must 'ave said somethin' unkind 'bout yourself." He touched his brow in respect and continued, "and James, well ..." he snickered, and took a swig of his drink.

"Well, what?"

Doc rubbed his hand across his mouth, trying to hide his mirth. Rodin Rae was perplexed. What was he laughing about?

"Blinder than a mate with the pox and a bottle of brandy," Doc muttered under his breath. His face was now bright red. "Well, now, ya' might as well know," he said.

"Know what?" Her voice was begging to rise, what was he keeping from her?

"'Bout Caraway. That boy has a fire in his pants and you're the wind that's flamin' it," Doc blurted out.

Rodin Rae tried in vain to choke down a cough. Doc was up in a flash, beating her hard on the back with his big hand. She put up her own to stay him before he crushed her.

"Thought ya mighta known," Doc said as he sat back down. She shook her head from side to side, unable to speak. Strong drink in the nose was disastrous.

"That boy adores ye'," Doc continued, handing her a handkerchief so she could wipe her nose and eyes. "Has since he saw ya' fightin' the *Gall-Gael* and that over-dressed, silver haired sea-witch." She nodded; he was referring to her last encounter with Delorian Grey de van Huesen and the Sons of Death.

"He wouldn't stand for someone goading him into a fight. 'Specially if that someone was a sore-loser landlubber with a black heart."

Rodin Rae considered this. "Do you think that Stewart intentionally drew Caraway away from his post, Doc?" She hated to say it, to even think there was a traitor onboard, but that was where her instinct was leading her.

"'Course I do," Doc said mater-of-factly. "Don't ya find it a wee bit curious that while your best Lieutenant is brawling with that dog Wart we miss stays and 'ave to sail round the far side of Kuin, 'stead of sticking to the Coast?" Doc took a swig from his flask. "And ain't it curious that once we was on the far side of the big island, that's just when we run into your old friend the sea-witch?"

"Doc, any crew can miss stays!" Rodin Rae protested, her mind wanting to reject the thought of having been led into a trap.

"Oh aye, that's true. But when was the last time any of this crew missed 'em?" he asked, knowing she couldn't answer. Her crew was well seasoned; it had been a long, long time.

"And don't ya pretend with me that ya like that Davey, lass," Doc said, pointing a finger at her accusingly. She opened her mouth to protest but quickly closed it.

"Something isn't right about him," she said.

"Aye, he smells wrong to you, don't he?" Doc asked.

Rodin Rae nodded, thinking of that strange odor that permeated Stewart's being.

"I can tell 'cause you curl up yer nose like that whenever he's near," Doc said, wagging his finger at her.

She rubbed her nose, unaware she had been curling up anything at that moment.

"Smells like magic," Doc said, "Bad magic."

Bad magic indeed, Rodin Rae thought, watching the *Mithaglar* from the quarterdeck. It seemed to be flying towards her at an unnatural pace. They had just reached the Horn of Kuin and the currents had shifted, but what little wind they had gained from that was of little consequence. The dark, foreboding cloud that hung over the *Mithalgar* seemed to give Delorian's ship twice its previous speed. There was no question in Rodin Rae's mind that the *Mithaglar* would be engaging the *Emerald Lady* within moments.

Rodin Rae had done everything she could to prepare for this, her men were ready, her Officers on deck with her. She had checked and double-checked the set of her sails and the edge of her cutlass.

The first ranging missiles from the *Gall-Gael* came as no surprise but they struck with remarkable accuracy, making Rodin Rae groan. She suspected that they would need a small miracle to get out of this engagement unscathed.

A large projectile came hurling from the *Mithaglar*, tearing through the *Lady's* rigging and loosing a spar before it impaled itself into the wood of the quarterdeck, just inches from Rodin Rae. Her breath caught in shock and surprise.

"Are you alright, Captain?" Caraway asked, suddenly beside her. Rodin Rae quickly regained her composure, saying she was fine. Caraway saluted her and began to furiously work on getting the spar out of the rigging, as it was causing the sail to drag and slowing the *Emerald Lady* down. Flaming arrows began to rain down on them and Rodin Rae caught sight of Doc, helping some of the younger to put out the fires that had started in the ropes. After the engagement began in earnest, he would be needed below deck, tending to the wounded. The acrid smell of smoke was in the air, but it did not make her blood rise as it might normally. *Probably because normally I think we can win*, she thought.

Beside her, as always during battle, stood Dranoel. His ribs were bound tight, covered by his dress uniform. He moved without flinching, though Rodin Rae suspected that he must be in great pain. She marveled at what an amazing team the two of them made in battle; many a time she had stood with Dranoel and he had never failed her. They moved as if in a dance, one seeing to the set of the sails, the

other calling orders to the men. Each seemed to be able to predict the other's move, and they stepped through the initial battle movements with grace and a calm that easily spread to their crew. The men trusted their elf Captain and her First-Mate impeccably.

Rodin Rae felt the *Emerald Lady* pick-up speed; Caraway had succeeded in freeing the spar from the rigging. She judged the distance of the *Mithaglar* from her ship and then ordered her men to return ballista fire. Their first shots skipped harmlessly across the deck of the *Mithaglar*. Rodin Rae paused, recalculating the distance in her head. Missed shots like the last one could quickly demoralize her crew. She ordered them to rearm, as Dranoel commanded the crew to luff the mainsail.

As the *Emerald Lady* slowed, they fired on the *Mithaglar* again. This time the projectiles hit the enemy ship, and her crew cheered. She immediately ordered arrows to fly. For a moment she thought she caught sight of Delorian Grey de van Huesen, trimmed in silver brocade, on the quarterdeck of the *Mithaglar*. She blinked, trying to clear her vision. A darkness had descended, one through which she could barely see. She knew that if her vision were hampered, then the rest of the crew, most of whom were human, would be in pitch blackness. It was as if the cloud that had hung over the *Mithaglar* had finally reached the *Emerald Lady*. As it did, all the light around them went out. The hair on Rodin Rae's neck began to stand on end.

"Take care!" She cried to her crew, "There is foul magic about!" A strange crackling sound was in the air. Around her, Dranoel was calling to the men to tie on and she could see him running to and fro, making sure that everyone was tied to a line, should an unexpected sea swell hit them and they lose a man overboard. Something was building, she could feel it in the air. The tension was almost palpable. After what felt like an eternity, it finally gave way.

The magic cloud above them suddenly burst into a hundred of small, charged balls of light. They were like shards of lightening, raining down from above and shattering everything as they fell to the deck.

"Get down!" Rodin Rae heard Dranoel scream, as the main mast was struck by one of the balls and cracked with a thunderous roar. Rodin Rae stood, horror-stricken, as the thick center pole, nearly six feet in diameter, split in twain. Dranoel tackled her, forcing her to the deck, as the rigging collapsed, hitting men and killing them. Dranoel had his body half over hers, protecting her. Men were screaming, some in terror, some in pain. Where the balls of light hit the deck, they bounced, and where they found something to ignite, they did so in a flash of brilliance. Sometimes it was rigging that ignited, but

sometimes it was a member of her crew. Men, their bodies burning, were throwing themselves overboard.

Rodin Rae tasted blood in her mouth, and realized she had bitten through her own lip. In less than two minutes, nearly a quarter of her crew lay slain on the deck of the *Emerald Lady*. She could hear the ship cry out beneath her, or maybe it was her own rage coursing through her body and pounding in her ears. This was an abomination. They had no defenses against sorcery. They would have to surrender.

"Dranoel!" She yelled, she seemed to need to scream for him to hear her, the exploding lights had nearly deafened him. "We must strike the ensign!" He nodded, trying to stand. The left side of his face was covered in blood and she realized, to her own shock, that it was hers. A splinter from the main mast had embedded itself into her left arm. She tried to pull it out but the blood made it too slippery to grip. Lightheaded, she decided to break the shard off where it was. As she did, the world around her began to disappear. She forced herself to remain conscious. She'd be damned if she would let Delorian and his pirate crew swarm her ship while she lay on the deck.

Rodin Rae felt sick inside as she watched Dranoel lower her ship's flag. Human remains lay everywhere onboard. She caught sight of Caraway, his face stricken, helping to heave the bodies of his dead shipmates overboard. She saw Doc for a moment, helping to bring the wounded below to be treated. All this as the flag of the *Emerald Lady*, a green dryad on a sea of blue, came slowly, slowly down.

The surviving members of her crew, their faces blackened by the smoke, their hands bloody with the carnage of their crewmates, hung their heads as a cheer went up from the *Mithaglar*. Never before had the colors been struck on any ship of Captain D'Cordelia, the Blackpearl of the Sea. Rodin Rae looked around at the devastation around her. Wood was everywhere. Dark, black smoke hovered in the air. All she could see from the surviving crewmates were their eyes, white and wide in their dark, filthy faces. She doubted any of them had experienced magic like this before.

Dranoel's jaw clenched as he handed his Captain her flag. Her heart sank as she took it and the first hooks from the *Mithaglar* landed onboard, pulling the two ships together. *Enemy consort*, she thought. Then, realizing that the *Gall-Gael* would be upon them in moments, she turned to Dranoel, "Give James the key," she said to him, and to Caraway, "Hurry. Get to my cabin and destroy my maps." Her throat tightened at the thought but she would rather lose her entire collection than have de van Huesen lay one finger on those valuable objects. Caraway nodded, and bolted below.

Rodin Rae turned back to Dranoel. "Whatever happens," she said, "Ensure the crew's safety. I'll come for you as soon as I can." De

van Huesen had just swung himself onboard and the *Gall-Gael* were flowing over the sides of the *Emerald Lady* like rats. She unbuckled her cutlass.

"So we're going to the lock-up, then?" He said, straightening his jacket and unbuckling his sword.

"No doubt," she replied, raising her head high. Then a smile lit the corner of her mouth, "But if you see a chance, make a run for Morgandy."

The sides of Dranoel's lips curled into a grin. "Aye-aye, Captain," he said, and took his place beside her as Delorian Grey de van Huesen approached, smiling from ear to ear.

He made an impressive sight, dressed in dark black velvet with his long silver hair flowing out behind him. For a split second Rodin Rae's heart stopped; once long ago she had adored this man. De van Huesen stalked up in front of her, his arms folded across his chest, every inch of his being oozing self-satisfaction. Suddenly, Rodin Rae remembered why she despised him.

"Not your day, is it Blackpearl?" he said, reaching for her cutlass. She locked her jaw tight, refusing to be provoked by his taunting tone, and, as the rules of the sea dictated, handed over her weapon and the ensign from her ship. Her heart clenched in a knot as his hand curled around her ship's flag. He smiled, two rows of perfect white teeth, and handed off the ensign to one of the *Gall-Gael* beside him. Rodin Rae blinked in astonishment. At her right, she heard Dranoel suck in his breath, as surprised as she. It was Stewart, Davey Stewart, but his entire being was altered. Gone was the pinched, unhappy face, of the querulous Wart. It had been replaced with a broad shouldered, strapping, dark-haired *Gall-Gael*, who although still looked extremely young, also looked like he could break Rodin Rae in two with his right hand tied squarely behind his back. Rodin Rae noticed that the odd odor that had permeated his being was missing, too.

"I see you recognize my Mage, Stewart?" Delorian unctuously said, tucking the *Emerald Lady's* ensign into his breast pocket. "He has some interesting tricks, doesn't he?"

Unable to resist, Rodin Rae answered, "If you call killing a hundred of my crew in two minutes a trick, then yes. Interesting. And unethical." Her voice trembled; she was barely able to control her anger.

Delorian smiled arrogantly, "Well, darling, you know what they say ... 'All is fair ...'"

She clenched her jaw tighter.

"Now," Delorian continued, his manner cavalier, "If you don't mind, you're dripping blood on my newly acquired ship." He turned to Stewart, "I'll leave you to disarm the Blackpearl. Once the prisoners

are secured, bring her aboard." Delorian dismissed both Stewart and Rodin Rae with a wave of his hand, moving past them to survey the damage on the *Emerald Lady*.

Rodin Rae cringed at the look on Stewart's face. He smiled an evil smile at her, so cruel, it was almost a grimace.

"It will be my pleasure to relieve you of your weapons, Blackpearl. Shall I take you below, or would you care to disrobe here?"

Dranoel coughed. A small warning; mage or no, his honor would not stand for that kind of innuendo. Stewart chuckled at this.

"You seem to surround yourself with men you are just dying to protect your honor," Stewart spat, casually thrusting out his hands. Terrible dark magic jumped from his palms and slammed into Dranoel's chest. He collapsed on deck with a sickening thump. Rodin Rae rushed to him, feeling for a pulse in his limp body. It was there, thin, but there.

"How dare you," she hissed, her eyes flashing a murderous green. Stewart smiled, almost willing her to rush him. She crouched over Dranoel, her head spinning from the wound in her arm and the rage that threatened to overwhelm her. She forced herself to reign in her anger. She must keep her head and not be goaded into a fight on his terms. She composed herself and stood up, facing the Wart. Calmly, she removed the weapons from her boot, belt, and bodice and tossed them at Stewart's feet.

Unconvinced that she had disposed of all her weapons, the Wart took it upon himself to lay his hands on her. Shocked but not surprised by his boorish nature, Rodin Rae bit the inside of her lip, ignoring the pain he inflicted as he casually brushed over the wound in her left arm. He didn't excuse himself as he gripped the front of her shirt and plunged his cold hands down her bodice.

Satisfied that she was not harboring an illicit blade, he made as if to let her go. Then he pulled her close by the front of her shirt, a mad look in his eyes.

"Do you know why you lost?" he murmured into her ear, holding her tight in a forced embrace. Rodin Rae stared straight ahead, her heart racing. The Wart's magic, which seemed to ooze from every pore, made the hair stand up on her neck.

"You lost because you had no idea who your opponent was," Stewart whispered. Rodin Rae's blood turned to ice. The Wart was mad with his own power. He pushed her roughly away and with a sweep of his hands cleared the dark clouds from over the two ships.

"You," the Wart pointed to one of the *Gall-Gael*, "gather the prisoners below. Leave him," he said, pointing to Dranoel's collapsed body. "Pile their weapons on the quarterdeck." Rodin Rae watched as Stewart's order was obeyed. When the weapons had all been collected,

the Wart waved his hand and in one quick blast of unnatural green light, turned them all to ash.

"Enough!" Came Delorian Grey's harsh command. The air crackled in obedience; he seemed to possess powerful magic of his own. Delorian Grey's eyes swept over Rodin Rae's disheveled state, Dranoel's limp form, and the now pungent, smoking remains of the weapons, in one quick motion. His eyes narrowed on the Wart and the Wart seemed to retreat back into some shadow of his former self; the self Rodin Rae had known: begrudgingly submissive. Was he afraid of Delorian Grey? *Interesting*, she thought.

"Wart, see to the rest of the prisoners. No more displays, if you please." He grabbed Rodin Rae's arm and shoved her toward the *Mithaglar*. She caught a final glance from the Wart that let her know she now had two enemies with which to contend.

Locked in a cabin aboard the *Mithaglar*, Rodin Rae paced back and forth. She felt weak and overly warm. She had already tried to pry open the door, which had some kind of magic upon it, to no avail. There was nothing in the room, save for a bucket of water and a raised plank on the far wall, on which she supposed she would eventually sleep. However, she was afraid to close her eyes for the moment. When she did she would start to hallucinate, and she was loath to slip into some sort of unconscious state in the hands of her enemies. She walked the short breadth of her prison, listening. The room was deep below the waterline and she could tell by the sounds, filtered through the wood, that the *Mithaglar* had finally set sail again, with the *Emerald Lady* in tow. After what seemed like an eternity, the door to her confinement opened. Two *Gall-Gael* entered, dragging the battered body of James Caraway after them. They laughed as they unceremoniously dumped him on the floor and left, locking the door again behind them.

"James!" Rodin Rae cried, in shock. Stripped to the waist, he had been mercilessly beaten. His face was a bloody mess.

"Captain," he croaked, spitting up blood and trying to stand. Tears began to stream out of his swollen eyes.

"Be still!" She commanded, trying to assess his condition. Rodin Rae ran her hands as gently as she could over his battered body. She was no medic, but she saw that his oppressors had meticulously abused him. He would live, though he might wish he were dead. She rocked him as tenderly as she could, his head in her lap, on the floor of their prison.

"They didn't ask me anything," he said. "They didn't ask ..."

"I'm so sorry," Rodin Rae whispered, tenderly wiping his hair back from his face. "Just lay still, James," she said, trying to calm him, "Just be still."

"Not anything ..."

Rodin Rae's stomach churned. Anger coursed through her veins. What animals behaved like this? She could barely see straight, she was so enraged. Gently, she took James's broken hand and held it, hushing him as he cried.

After some time he quieted and she thought he slept. Rodin Rae had no idea how long she sat with him like that; it might have been hours or days. When he awoke, he asked her to help him to the plank.

"I don't want them to see me on the floor like a dog," he said. Carefully, she helped him up. As he lay there, she shredded some of her blouse and tried to wipe away the blood from his eyes.

"You're glowing," he whispered.

"Shh..." she told him, trying to get him to drink a little water. He must be hallucinating. "Try to go back to sleep," she said.

"Green. A lovely green," he tried to babble something more, but the effort was too great and he closed his eyes.

Rodin Rae sat for a time with her head in her hands. Her mind was racing. She had to find a way out of this cell and off of the *Mithaglar*. She and Delorian Grey de van Huesen had been advisories for a long time but something fundamental had changed. Delorian had always been competitive but he had never been senselessly cruel. He was cocky, but reasonably fair and somewhat honorable. The *Gall-Gael* were another story. They were known to be vicious in battle. However, their main lust was wealth. Since Rodin Rae had plenty of gold, she had never feared the *Gall-Gael*; she always had something they wanted and she knew how to bargain. The wildcard here was the Mage, Stewart. The Wart. Rodin Rae had never liked magic, but she saw it as a tool and had learned to tolerate it. It, like any other weapon, could be quite useful. But something about Stewart and his magic didn't seem right. She had suspected for a while that Delorian was dabbling in the Arts and she was almost certain he was a weather witch. He obviously had some kind of power, which the Wart feared. *But who is the Master and who the Servant?* She wondered. Just the thought of the Wart made Rodin Rae's skin crawl; he seemed unpredictable.

"Captain," James croaked, trying to find his voice. Shaken from her thoughts, she turned. "You look like hell," he said. Rodin Rae snorted at the absurdity of that comment.

"They didn't get them," he said.

"Get what, James?"

"Your charts," he rasped, "Your charts."

She smiled at him, "Thank you, Caraway." It was a terrible loss but she was comforted by the fact that the charts and maps aboard the *Emerald Lady* were copies; the originals lay hidden under the floorboards of her room at Wynn's Favor in Morgandy.

Rodin Rae helped James to some water and asked, "How did you come to be here?" Usually only the Senior Officers of an enemy ship were brought aboard; technically, Caraway didn't qualify.

"I traded ... my parole," he said.

She shook her head, not understanding.

"For Dranoel," James said. "The Wart ... he wanted to bring him aboard ... but Doc said he shouldn't be ... moved ..." He was interrupted by a coughing fit. "Doc and I ... we interceded ... with Delorian."

Suddenly, Rodin Rae understood.

"Did the Wart do this to you?" She asked, her voice hard.

James turned his head to the wall, nodding. "He watched," James whispered.

Rodin Rae bit her lip; Caraway had delivered himself willingly into the hands of a madman to save his fellow mate.

"Listen to me," she said, pushing his hair back, "I'm going to get you out of here, with Leta as my witness, I swear to you. You must trust me."

"I have always ... put my trust ... in you, Captain," he said. "But I gave my word."

"Yes, well, it would seem the Rules of War stand for little here aboard the *Mithaglar*," she said.

"Still ..." he murmured, and she knew he was right.

Days passed, during which Rodin Rae saw only cruel-faced *Gall-Gael* who brought water and bread. Repeatedly, she demanded to see Delorian Grey and repeatedly the *Gall-Gael* ignored her requests. She gave most of her food to James and thought he seemed to be improving. She had bandaged as much of him as she could but she had little with which to work. Mostly, she was sorry for James's hands, which were both broken and which she could not set. She was afraid he would never be able to use them again.

It was dark in their cell and hard to tell day from night. Often, James slept, though he was plagued by nightmares and moaned in pain. Occasionally, he screamed out horrors that, in consciousness, he would vaguely remember. When he would question her about them, Rodin Rae would feign ignorance.

Rodin Rae's own wound also seemed to be improving, though she was concerned about the dark green tendrils that had begun to spread out from the splinter's puncture. Since it didn't hurt very much any more, and her fever had gone down, she tried not to be overly concerned with it. At times her mind would grow dim and she would imagine ancient wooded lands. She would awake with the scent of the forest around her, and know then that she had been dreaming.

Time had ceased to have any relevance in their small world and she wondered if Delorian Grey had completely forgotten about his captives. To pass their waking hours, Rodin Rae would tell stories of her past to James, who was shocked to learn that she and Delorian Grey de van Huesen had been at odds with each other for more years than he, James, had lived.

"How old *are* you?" He asked.

"I can honestly say I have no idea," she answered. For a moment Rodin Rae was tempted to tell James how she had met Delorian Grey, how her father had entrusted her into Delorian's care, and how Delorian had first taught her to sail. But the memory made her throat close, and if it hurt her to think about it, it would be too painful to recount. Instead, she asked him about his life, and how he had come to the sea.

"My father was a blacksmith on Iona Island," he said. "When I was a child, I would shirk my duties at the forge to watch the sun set over the ocean. Father knew it was hopeless to make me into a smith, so he allowed me to enlist in the Harbor Guard when I weighed enough to haul a line. Did you feel that?"

"Hmm?" Rodin Rae had been deep in her imagination, picturing the clouds over Iona Island turning pink in the dying light. Shaken from her reverie, she felt the *Mithaglar* lurch. The sounds of men running above filtered through the floorboards.

A sliver of light appeared along the wall; the door to their cell had opened. In a flash, Rodin Rae was on her feet. A stern faced *Gall-Gael* appeared. He seemed to gasp when he saw her but quickly covered it up by clearing his throat. "The Captain requests your presence on deck immediately," he said. Rodin Rae blinked, her eyes tearing from the light.

"Can you stand, James?" She asked.

"Not the human," the *Gall-Gael* said, "Just you, Captain." Rodin Rae did not fail to note the tone of respect in his voice. Or perhaps it was fear.

Behind the pirate, Rodin Rae could hear men shouting. Something was happening above. Taking a chance she folded her arms across her chest, "Either he comes with me or you lock that door back up."

The *Gall-Gael* hesitated just a moment, then nodded. Rodin Rae wrapped her arm around James's waist and helped him to stand. Together, they managed to make it onto the deck of the *Mithaglar*.

Above board, chaos was afoot. The *Emerald Lady* had slipped her chains and was running before a wild storm. She was sailing fast, and Rodin Rae's heart leapt with joy to see her ship expertly navigating the reefs round Iona Island. It appeared that the *Mithaglar* was trying to pursue her. A feral, foul smelling wind was howling about the deck but the sails were set wrong and would not fill. The *Gall-Gael* seemed to be purposefully sabotaging the ship. On the quarterdeck, Rodin Rae caught sight of the Captain, and instantly understood. They were in the midst of a mutiny.

"I can't see anything," James told her.

"The *Lady* has slipped, and we're in pursuit round the Isle of Long," she told him. "Stewart has seized control of the *Mithaglar*. I think some of the *Gall-Gael* are rebelling."

"Do they have weapons?" He whispered to her.

"Not out yet," she said. "But those men have a murderous look in their eye." They did indeed; whatever folly had transpired during her captivity had certainly enraged the *Gall-Gael*. Stewart, the cat in his hand, was screaming commands and flogging those who would not obey. Even still, most of the *Gall-Gael* ignored him. She wondered if he could tell that they were purposefully hampering his efforts; he might be a powerful Mage, but he was a terrible sailor. Two ugly brutes, obviously still following Stewart's orders, tore her away from James and pushed her roughly towards the Wart.

Stewart's face looked haggard; his magic swirled around him and the ship in an untidy mess. There was a madness in his eye that stopped Rodin Rae's heart. Around him, the air was charged with what she could only think of as the opposite of light. The nape of her neck began to crawl.

He pointed a finger at her, and for a moment she thought he would shoot his foul magic at her.

"This is your fault!" He screamed, as he did the wind around the *Mithaglar* screamed back. The sea began to swell.

She ignored his accusation. "Where is the Captain?"

"I am the Captain!" He answered, and let the cat fly. She put up her hand just in time so that the blow missed her face and wrapped around her arm instead. The pain was excruciating but she did not flinch. For a moment, she could see that the Wart was surprised; then he smiled his evil grin and yanked the cat back.

"You will sail this ship," he commanded.

"I will do no such thing," she replied.

"You will, or I will kill you," he said. This time, he gathered the energy around him and let it swirl from his fingers to her head. She instinctively put up her hands, to no avail. The magic sunk her to her knees. Green dots flooded her vision and she gasped at the pain; it was beyond anything she had ever experienced. Two fat drops of rain landed in front of her eyes on the deck. *Not rain, she realized, tears.*

"Get up," he yelled at her, "Get up!"

She tried to obey but the *Mithaglar* was spinning and her feet would not work. A horrible noise pierced the air and the *Mithaglar* lurched, then listed at a dangerous angle. She had reefed off the *Isle of Long*. Now the *Gall-Gael* were earnest in their actions: they were lowering the boats, preparing to abandon the ship. Amid the chaos, Rodin Rae heard James Caraway call out to her, then scream as he lost his footing and slid overboard.

Stewart cackled; he had seen James fall. He raised his hands and shot magic into the ocean; a giant wave began to swell. For a moment, Rodin Rae saw James in the crest, and then the wave broke over him and he was gone. Stewart, not realizing the catastrophe he had created, kept screaming for the *Gall-Gael* to sail the damned ship. He barely noticed as Rodin Rae scrambled to her feet and leap from the quarterdeck into the raging sea.

Down, down she went, to where the water was quiet. Above her, she could see the powerful ocean slamming mercilessly into the *Mithaglar*. In her head, she said a prayer to Leta, Goddess of the Sea, for the *Gall-Gael* aboard, and for Delorian Grey, wherever he may be. Then she searched for James.

What a sight, it was, that December day in Morgandy, when the good Captain D'Cordelia came strolling out of the sea. Like some heroine from a tale of old, she carried the body of her Lieutenant against the tide. How he survived, us poor sailors will ne'er know, but to be sure, the hand of the Goddess was upon 'em both.

Epilogue

Rodin Rae caressed the edges of her sea charts and stored them back beneath the floorboards of her room at Wynn's Favor. It had been a long night for her, Dranoel, Doc, and James, as they each recounted their side of their escape from the *Mithaglar*. From her window, she could gaze out to the bay and see the *Emerald Lady*, safe in port. She stood for a moment there, watching the high clouds turn pink as the sun rose behind the *Lady's* tall, tri-masted silhouette.

Snow had begun to fall; at last winter had arrived. Rodin Rae sighed and stretched, happy to be safe and comfortable in her second home at the inn. Her shoulder was healing and with some exercise would be back to normal soon.

Her stomach grumbled, reminding her it was time for breakfast. She tossed a wrap around her shoulders and headed down stairs to see what food she could find in the kitchen. As she came to the bottom of the stairs, she saw a familiar bundle of clothes, wrapping an even more familiar face, sleeping near the ashes of the fire. Rodin Rae grinned from ear to ear; Thorny Smallberries had found his way to Wynn's Favor and fallen asleep, a mug clutched in his hands. *It is going to be a long, fun winter*, she thought. Gently, as not to wake him, she laid her shawl over his petite frame. He opened an eye, cracked a sleepy, toothless smile, and said, "Ah lassie, glad to see you, glad to see you."

"Same here, Thorny," she said, patting his old shoulder, "Same here." He grunted and curled up tighter, falling back to sleep. She thought how lovely it would be to spend the rest of the season catching up with her old friend.

In the kitchen Leela, the Inn's mistress, was preparing breakfast. She greeted Rodin Rae with a huge smile.

"Now you're up early, m'lady!" It was half a scold. Leela immediately placed hot cereal in front of Rodin Rae and guided her to the table, pressing her down into a chair to eat.

"I've not been to bed," Rodin Rae said, shoveling her breakfast into her mouth in the most unladylike way.

"Well, so much excitement, I doubt any of you will be able to sit still for days, never mind rest." Leela finished patting the bread she was making and placed it in the oven, dusting her hands on her apron.

"We're all very glad to have you home," Leela said, gently patting Rodin Rae's shoulder. Tears began to well in Rodin Rae's eyes; it felt wonderful to be here, and she felt thankful that her friends had survived.

Leela started out the door to feed the chickens then stopped, remembering a letter she carried in her pocket.

"I almost forgot this," she said, "It came for you yesterday. It slipped my mind amidst the excitement of your returning with young James."

Rodin Rae looked at the folded piece of paper in her hands. The most perfect, orderly writing was printed in red ink on the outside. She waited until Leela had stepped into the courtyard before she carefully unfolded it. Inside was an invitation from Logophil. It read:

Hoping you'll join me for a belated Yule dinner.

The address where he was staying was printed below. Rodin Rae smiled and clutched the note to her chest for a moment. How lovely it was to be home among friends.