

Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Seaⁱ

The Siren has taken Starshadow's Muse – but can his Clan get it back without losing something of their own? Arëanna, Brother Bart, Falana, Hoot, Kiriannin, Shani and Atraties climb aboard The Emerald Lady with Rodin Rae to try and reclaim the King's Muse.

By Keper Shipwright (a.k.a. Suzanne Augugliaro)

Rodin Rae perched in the nest, smelling the sea air on this cold February afternoon, watching the clouds with increasing intensity. Mackerels and mares' tailsⁱⁱ; the wind had picked up. They were going to be in for some heavy weather by the morning. An unconscious shiver ran through her—what was she doing sailing at this time of year, anyway? She should have had *The Emerald Lady* in dry dock months ago and be relaxing in Ravenhilt with the Lady Laurel Angelica's fine elfin wine and the luxuries of the local inhabitants. Instead, she had spent the last week aboard her ship, begging the crew to gamble once again on their Captain's good fortune, pleading with them not to desert her in her time of need, and praying that they wouldn't mutiny when they found that they were sailing into known Siren waters. And that had been nothing compared to the antics she has pulled before that with Arëanna in *Crystalmist*. Rodin Rae mentally saluted the Queen's élan. Oh, to be sure, Rodin Rae would regret agreeing to take Starshadow along on this journey but she had to hand it to Arëanna – that desert elf would stop at nothing to have her way. Rodin Rae just hoped that the herbs Arëanna had used to drug the King would hold up through the oncoming storm. The last thing Rodin Rae needed was Starshadow falling overboard again.

Curséd elf! She thought. Never had he had a sea journey without some misfortune and this last misadventure topped them all. With his Muse taken by the Siren, Starshadow had at first been sorrowful, then apathetic. Now, he was positively dark, reverting to petty thievery among his friends and hunting brigands in his own land for sport. As convincing as Arëanna and Rodin Rae had tried to make their night of debauchery in *Crystalmist*, Starshadow had remained cantankerous and unenthusiastic the entire time. It was Arëanna's will alone that persuaded Star to try the herb-laced rum and none too soon. Five minutes more of his foul mood and Rodin Rae would have clocked him on the head with the bottle of rum and hells be damned. She dreaded what he would be like when he awoke from his herb-induced stupor and found he was locked in the brig. That was probably the least of her concerns compared to what they might encounter when they found the Siren. That is if they would make it to the grotto that was the

entrance to the Siren's lair – with the weather picking up, they could easily be blown off course.

The Emerald Lady groaned in the increasing swells, the lines clattering in protestation. Rodin Rae sniffed the air–wind from the North. They were definitely going to be in for some difficult sailing. She cursed again under her breath and vowed when she got back to the mainland she'd hire a weather witch for a crewmate.

She called down to the main deck, "Ring the bell! Furl the mainsail! Double-time - we're in for a blow!" Seeing Brother Bart lift his hand in acknowledgement, Rodin Rae began her decent from the crow's nest. It was time to check their coordinates. She prayed they would reach their destination before the storm came.

"Hail, Captain!" Brother Bart said as she jumped the last few feet onto the deck, landing lightly on her feet. Rodin Rae loved to travel with the Druid, being he was also an old sea dog. He seemed to sense her very train of thought and never second-guessed her commands at sea. The perfect sailing companion, Rodin Rae felt blessed to have him aboard *The Emerald Lady*.

"Hail, Brother. How goes everything aboveboard?"^{miii} She inquired.

"The sea's restless, my dear, and so is your crew. Rumor's afoot 'bout our plans, the weather is making them edgy, and Shani has stolen not only their hearts, but their minds, as well." He gestured over his shoulder, to where Shani, the healer-elf and quarter-siren, was precariously standing on the rail's edge. Her flame red hair was flying out behind her, her face turned into the wind, obviously enjoying the increasing gale and equally oblivious to the four sailors who stood near her, eyes transfixed.

Rodin Rae opened her mouth to command them to get back to the work at hand, but Bart had already left her side, cracking the leather strap he carried to get their attention, "Avast, you miserable excuses for sailors! Put yer eyes back in yer head and yer prong back in yer pants and step lively! Now belay that line before we lose the fors'!"

Rodin Rae smiled, old sea dog indeed. Funny, how quickly she could forget he was a Druid once his sea accent returned. She decided to help alleviate the problem, "Shani!" she called, getting the elf's attention, "see if you can find Hoot, Kirrianin, and Atraties for me, then meet me below. Council in ten minutes!" Shani nodded, then hopped from the rail and skipped off to her appointed task. Rodin Rae went below to find her first-mate, Dranoel, noticing on her way down that Bart was helping to belay the line.

Rodin Rae found Dranoel in his cabin, hovering over his charts,

Arëanna, and Falana beside him, looking alternately concerned and amused.

"Thank the Lady you're here!" Dranoel exclaimed. Rodin Rae noticed that his hair was standing completely on end. She wondered if his hand had become a permanent feature on top of his head. From the looks on the other elves' faces, he had been ranting for some time now. She had tried to keep most of the party's plans from Dranoel, he being too logical to approve of any of it. Apparently, the cat had been let out of the bag.^{iv}

"What kind of half crazed scheme is this anyway-your going to try and *find* the Siren's cave? I don't have the shoal maps for that strait so we're sailing blind! *And* you bring a quarter-siren on board the ship – I'm lucky I can get an order obeyed at all!" Rodin Rae opened her mouth to speak but Dranoel wasn't nearly finished. She clamped it back shut and let his ranting continue. "... you've got Starshadow drugged in the brig, he's going to kill you when he finds out he's aboard this ship again – didn't his last trip cause this Muse problem in the first place? And was that the weather bell I heard not five minutes past? How the hell are we supposed to find the grotto's entrance if we're fighting a storm? There's no haven out here – we're in the middle of open waters! What if you do find the Siren's lair, bless your insanity, do you even have a plan to deal with her? I certainly don't think a little candle wax is going to help you avoid her enchantments! And even if you do manage to get out of there alive, how in the seven hells of Sheldon-to use your favorite expression-am I going to find you after it all?" Exhausted, Dranoel sat down.

Rodin Rae looked from Arëanna to Falana, who only shrugged.

"So ... ," Rodin Rae scratched behind her ear, turning to Dranoel impishly, "You noticed the weather bell?"

Dranoel slammed his hands down on the table in exacerbation, "Noticed it?" He yelled, "I'd say it's signaled that we're in the midst of a maelstrom!"

Rodin Rae smiled, "Of course we are, my dear Dranoel. Where else would we be?"

Rodin Rae rubbed her eyes, weary from the hours she had just spent in council and worried about making it to the coordinates she had set before the storm hit them full force. Already the ship was rocking in the swells; She had called it a night when a green-faced Arëanna had exclaimed, "Portals I can handle! But this damned rocking is going to kill me!" Dranoel had by then given up on trying to get his Captain to change her plans, but he had given her updates faithfully on the hour. Neither one spoke of the obvious fear that lay between them and now it weighed heavily on Rodin Rae: Dranoel and

her crew were sailing directly into a storm, which by all reports looked to be a bad one. Even if they managed to get in and out of the Siren's lair, most likely through Arëanna's portal abilities, that still left Dranoel and the crew fighting a storm that they should even now be trying to sail *around* instead of *into*.

Rodin Rae had told the others to get some food and sleep; she should heed her own advice. But she was restless, and *The Emerald Lady* was moaning. She found she could never sleep when her ship was in danger. She paced the lower deck, thinking of all that had transpired. Despite the incredible skills the party possessed, she felt only slightly better than she had about their prospects for survival. She mentally listed their abilities. *Arë's a mage and a Healer; her portal abilities can get us in and out of the grotto. Shani can heal others, though not herself, and she's a quarter-Siren. She says the Siren's song cannot affect her. Brother Bart is a Druid, Atraties a fighter. Hoot is the Dreamsinger; he is armed with Loristarthamae's knowledge. He learned how to sing counter-harmony, disrupt notes, and other defensive song tactics, which may work to negate the Siren's song. Kiriannin can deflect spells with his sword, (insert name) and it doesn't appear that he can be drowned, though he can't breathe underwater like me. Falana can track the Muse through the threads of Star's Song and she's an excellent fighter. And Star. Well ... her thoughts trailed off there. Normally she would say that he was a seasoned swordsman but tonight she was worried that taking him along would be more of a liability than an asset to the party. If he only cared about getting his Muse back!*

"I thought you said you needed some sleep?" Arëanna had come up behind her, silently. Rodin Rae raised a brow; she had not heard her approach. *Losing your edge?* She thought, and added "thief" to Arë's list of abilities, having forgotten about Dreamingdark.

Then she smiled, wryly. "I'm too busy castigating myself."

Arë shook her head, "It's not your fault this happened to him."

"It was because of me that Star went a sea in the first place, knowing full well that he's never been on a boat without *something* happening to him."

"It was important to him to go with you on your first journey home! He loves you like a sister!"

"Yes, and he's going to hate me like family when he finally gets out of the brig. We'll be at loggerheads^v for sure. I never should have agreed to this! And I should have known better the first time, too."

"He knew how important it was to be there with you. It's why we all went. But it didn't *cause* his accident."

"If only I had insisted he stay behind in E'Atara!"

"He never would have listened to you!" Arë countered, shaking

her head. She knew Star better than anyone, "He knew the risk and he went *despite* it! Because it was important to him!"

"If I had posted a watch on him!" Rodin Rae continued, stuck in her own doubt, "If only I had insisted he stay tied to a line! If only ..."

"If, if, if!" Arëanna said. "If wishes were fishes!" She grabbed Rodin Rae's arm, looking at her intently. Rodin Rae shook her head, knowing the Queen was right.

"We'd all cast nets," Rodin Rae finished quietly. It seemed to be a day for old sailor sayings.

Morning had come, but it looked like midnight. The sea was all fury and rage. Rodin Rae sat in her cabin at breakfast, carefully honing her knives. Seven in all, they lived always hidden upon her person. *One for each of the hells of Sheldon*, she thought. Each blade had its own personality, its own secret. The one at her waist had been the blade that bound her to Lenardo, her beloved, now lost to her. She thought of it as an extension of herself, the way he had been to her. *May it bring an end as bitter as his*, she thought as she tested its edge.

A knock at her cabin door interrupted her ritual, and she quickly sheathed her blades before answering it. It was Dranoel. "We've hit our spot, thanks to Brother Bart's clever sailing," he said. "You should go now, before the storm blows us off course. We won't be able to last for very long out here."

"I'm ready," she said.

"And Captain," Dranoel added, "I also thought you should know that Starshadow, um, escaped."

Rodin Rae sighed, "I figured he would, eventually. I don't know a lock that can keep him bound. He can pick them with a splinter from the floorboards. It was just a matter of time."

"He's with the Lady Arëanna. She's treating the sailor."

Rodin Rae raised a brow at Dranoel's vagueness, "The sailor?"

"Yes, the one who was guarding him. It's not serious, just a black eye, but he was knocked out for a bit. The Lady says he should be fine and fit for work by tomorrow."

Rodin Rae shook her head, knowing it could have been worse. *I'm probably next on his list*, she thought. "Well then," she said, standing up and breathing deep, "I suppose there is no time like the present."

The storm howled around them, the lines at the crew's waists the only thing securing them to the rocking ship. They were working hard to fight the gales that threatened to thrash them against the rocks that lined this Strait. It was a precarious situation, especially

with the ship being tossed the way it was. The last thing she wanted was for someone to fall over board. *Or a man to lose a line and my ship to hit those shoals*, Rodin Rae thought. She felt certain the elves could handle the ship's movements; it was the humans for whom she feared. Only Shani seemed completely unaffected by the perilous weather. Falana, her own footing sure and solid, stood steadying Hoot, who had his mandolin wrapped in oiled leather, cradled carefully beneath his arm. Brother Bart was still running commands with Dranoel, keeping the ship steady and true to their position. Ever the seasoned sailor at heart, the Druid didn't appear to notice that the ship's movements at all, although he did occasionally mutter a prayer when the bolts of lightening illuminated the sky. Atraties and Kiriannin both looked nervous but determined, each gripping the hilt of his respective sword as they prepared. Starshadow simply stood with his arms crossed, hair plastered against his face, unmoving and unmoved by the happenings around him. He hadn't said a word to Rodin Rae about how he had spent the week but if looks could kill, she'd be dead by now. He positively radiated unpleasantness. His mood had darkened even further. Only Arëanna seemed able to communicate with him. How she had explained her plan to him was a mystery.

250 fathoms, Rodin Rae signaled. There was no use in trying to scream over the weather. A nod of acknowledgment from Arëanna came immediately; and from Dranoel, a return signal, *Eight minutes or Toolibrie*. He would count his heartbeats until the portal opened. Rodin Rae nodded back. It was agreed then; if they could not find the Siren's grotto in eight minutes, if the portal could not be opened, Dranoel was to sail the crew and the party out of the storm and abort the mission. They would regroup in Toolibrie in two weeks time.

Rodin Rae looked at Arëanna, who was visibly terrified of the swelling sea. The charm of water breathing lay around her neck and she clutched at it, wrestling with what she was about to do. Rodin Rae marveled at what love could make one do; at how much Arë must love Starshadow, to be willing to face her fear of the water and let the sea engulf her.

"You'll be fine!" Rodin Rae yelled to her, screaming over the storm, "Stay with me – it will be calmer once we get under!"

Arëanna nodded, and the duo moved to the rail. Rodin Rae's heart pounded in her chest, *What the in the seven hells of Sheldon am I doing?* The others watched them for a moment perched above the angry sea; then they were gone. Arëanna and Rodin Rae had jumped into the raging sea.

They swam down for what seemed like an eternity, Rodin Rae counting every beat of her heart. Two minutes, then four, then five.

The sea was calmer once they were beneath the initial energy trapped in the waves. But it was dark down below; an eerie twilight darkness that only the sea could produce filtered around them. She swam on instinct, calculating as her eyes adjusted, deducing from what she could see that the grotto must be close. At least we didn't over shoot it in the storm.

Arëanna kept pace, once she adjusted to the idea of what she was doing. She seemed to take to swimming-deep, as Rodin Rae named it, naturally. *The Clan is never going to believe this*, she thought.

As they reached the six and half minute mark, Rodin Rae spotted what could only be the Siren's grotto. She headed them toward the entrance, motioning with her hand, *Caution*. As they reached the mouth of the cave, they swam in until suddenly there was rock beneath their feet and they were walking out of the sea, into the air-filled cave. Arëanna was the first to speak; "My word!" was all she said, stunned and shocked. She took a moment to wipe the limus and grot from her feet, and then sat down to concentrate on opening the portal to the ship. A tiny tingling went up the back of Rodin Rae's neck.

Moments later, a small tear materialized in front of her. Rodin Rae stood on edge, alert to any possible movement behind her. What if they should be attacked before Arëanna was finished? Unconsciously, she gripped and re-gripped the knife at her waist. A pregnant silence hung around the two elves, save for the occasional dripping of saltwater onto the cave's floor, and the gentle lapping of the ocean's underground waves on the grotto's deep shore. Slowly, and with little apparent effort on the desert elf's part, Arëanna opened a portal to *The Emerald Lady*.

Through it, Rodin Rae could see her friends, swaying on the deck of the ship, clutching the rail. The wind whipped furiously about them, the rain and sleet pelting them mercilessly, stealing their footing. It was oddly unsettling to watch them from afar, seeing the anxiety in their faces as the ship rocked in the endless sea. *They're right above me and yet right in front of me*, she thought. She could see them yelling at one another through the driving rain, but she could not hear them. It was oddly silent here under the sea; the depths penetrated only by the sounds of her and Arë's breathing.

Rodin Rae saw them from afar; then, one by one, they began to materialize before her. Atraties was the first one through. The mercenary drew his sword before he was even through the portal. Instinctively, he took up position guarding Arëanna and Rodin Rae. Shani came through next, a bit nonplused by the experience, but none the worse for wear. Hoot and Falana came together, then Brother Bart,

exclaiming, "Well, it beat getting soaking wet!" No one bothered to point out that they were *all* already drenched from the storm.

Rodin Rae could see Kiriannin gently guiding Starshadow to the portal. *Good idea*, she thought, *Send him through first to make sure he comes*. Then she glimpsed Dranoel, clutching the rail with one hand. The ship shifted violently to the portside and Rodin Rae's heart missed a beat. Lightened had hit the main mast. She saw Dranoel's face, illuminated in the white glow, yell a command, and half read his lips even as her own mind screamed the same command. *Secure the yards!* Kiriannin yanked Starshadow away from the portal, as it quite suddenly began to diminish in size.

"What's happening?" asked Atraties.

"I think the lightening has affected the portal," answered Bart. Rodin Rae noticed Arëanna's face had turned bright red, beads of sweat breaking out on her brow. Shani was already at her side, laying her hands on the Queen's shoulders in support. Rodin Rae could see Kiriannin shaking his head. They weren't going to make it through. Then Dranoel raised a hand in a familiar gesture, *Luck*. Instinctively, Rodin Rae raised her own in salute, indicating from her side of the portal for him to take care. Then the portal winked closed, and *The Emerald Lady* was gone.

"The lightening," gasped Arëanna, "I think it may have pushed the ship of course. The connection was suddenly ... gone." Rodin Rae swallowed hard and Brother Bart put an arm around her. "It will be okay," he said and she nodded, feeling like her heart had just been ripped out.

"Well, let's not stand around here," said Hoot, unwrapping his mandolin and tuning it lightly. "There's nothing we can do about that now. Our best hope now is to find the Muse and head back to Toolibrie. They'll meet us there ... eventually."

"But without Starshadow," began Atraties. Brother Bart cleared his throat, silencing him.

"Hoot's right," said Shani, "There is nothing else to do but go on. We should all be on our guard. I'll go first; There is no telling if She is here or not but her Song cannot effect me."

"Falana," Arëanna said, standing up, "Can you still track the Muse, even if Star isn't here?"

"Yes, I can but it may be more difficult. Since the song is a co-creation between Star and Muse, the thread will run through both of them. I had hoped that having him here would help to channel the threads of the Song but the connection should still be there, only fainter. I'll have to make the best of it."

"It's all any of us can do now," said Brother Bart.

Falana stepped up behind Shani and for a moment stood very still. Then she began singing, lowly. Rodin Rae could barely make out the song, but she could tell it was once of Star's and the song itself had a sad overtone to it.

Moving in a trance-like state, Falana began to track the Muse through the threads of Star's song. She walked behind Shani, aware of her surroundings, but obviously seeing something else. As they moved through the grotto, Rodin Rae could hear Falana's signing grow fainter as she paused, then stronger, as she became certain of a particular thread and direction.

"Does she whisper softly?" sang Falana, *"Does she make no sound?/Does your heart beat faster/When there's no one around?"*

A wistful regret filled Rodin Rae's heart as she recognized Star's song, *Does She Come in the Darkness?* She thought of her ship, and the Sea; and the connection she could never explain to them both.

Rodin Rae heard Brother Bart sigh. And they trudged on, all the time listening to Falana's voice, ringing beautifully off of the cavern walls, mournfully signing Star's song.

Phosphorescent lichen lined the walls, partially lighting their way, but the light was strange, cold, and bluish.

"She's the one you dream of/She's the one you fear/Would you hold her close?/Would you hold her dear?"

Falana could be singing about the Siren or the Muse, thought Rodin Rae.

There was seawater up to their knees in places and an unpleasant smell that no one wanted to place. Rodin Rae and Brother Bart knew its scent instantly, as any sailor would. They glanced at each other, uneasily. It was the smell of stale saltwater and seaweed, but also the smell of bloated bodies that the sea had claimed. It was the smell of Death at the hands of the Sea. We're walking into Davey Jones's Locker, she thought, and shivered to herself.

"Would you die to be with her?/That's the only way/When she comes in the darkness/Will she stay?"

The underwater currents were moving, making the water levels wax and wane. "I don't even want to think what this water is doing to my sword," said Atratis. "Or my Mandolin," countered Hoot, as he lifted his instrument above his head in a particularly high-water point.

Deeper they traveled into the heart of the grotto, half walking, half swimming when the need arose, all the time following Falana as she sang. Although they were alert, Rodin Rae felt as if she were in a dream. Suddenly, she realized Falana was singing in her full voice.

They had arrived in a small chamber. It was damp but the smell of death was not as strong here. Rodin Rae could make out stones on

the floor that had been fitted carefully together and she was certain that some of the shells had been placed around the space. *Decoration?* She wondered.

Falana's singing had stopped, "This is where the thread of Star's song ends," she said, rubbing her forehead as if she were just awakening, "The trail is cold, but the Song is powerful. The Muse is here."

They looked around in the eerie blue light. For a moment no one spoke, transfixed by the simplicity of the objects before them. Then Hoot stepped forward, lightly strumming his mandolin. A humming seemed to fill the room. Directly in front of Falana was a pearl-white shell, its radiance singing to them from another realm.

"That's it," said Shani.

"Then let's take it and get out of here!" said Hoot, as he bent down in front of the shell. He lifted it up carefully, and its inner light beamed outward.

Falana gasped and Brother Bart inhaled sharply. Hoot began to sing and tears began to run down Arëanna's face. All around them, the sound of Starshadow's music filled the dark grotto, transporting each of them to the moment they had first heard him play. Rodin Rae saw the Fairy Ring Tavern almost eight years ago, the candles burning low, her Clan, some now gone or lost, others whom she knew well and loved, gathered in joy. She laughed, even as she had laughed then, and raised her hand as if in toast, though no mug was now in her hand. *What powerful magic is this?* Her mind asked her, but her heart was lost in the song, her body reliving the moment she had first heard Starshadow make music. The first song she had heard him sing now filled her ears and she sang along, even as she had back then. *What do you do with a drunken sailor? Earlie in the morning!*

Suddenly, the music stopped. Rodin Rae looked around, confused. They were back in the grotto. No, they had never left. But the magic was gone. Arëanna, Falana, Brother Bart, Hoot, and Shani looked at each other, confused, some of them in mid-motion. Rodin Rae put her hand down, aware that there was nothing here to toast.

Atraties looked at them all, an expression of disbelief on his face. He had the shell in his hands, wrapped in the oilskin leather that Hoot had had around his mandolin. "I've never heard him sing," he said, "so the enchantment did not affect me."

"Thank you, Atraties," said Brother Bart; "I fear that if you weren't with us, we might have stayed lost in Starshadow's song until our doom." Atraties bowed his head, acknowledging the thank you, and handed Starshadow's Muse to Arëanna.

"We should leave here," said Shani, "I feel strange."

"Arë, can you portal us out?" asked Rodin Rae.

"Yes, but I need a moment to recover," she said, wiping her eyes and placing the Muse inside her tunic. "That was like no magic I have ever experienced."

"It's because it was Starshadow's magic," said Falana, "Not a spell, but the essence of his Song. Its power has no equal for us, since it touches the innermost part of our own Song, and where the threads of his Song and our own overlap. It would be the most severe for you Arëanna, no doubt, because your thread is bound to Starshadow's."

"I think we should hurry," said Shani, who had begun to shuffle from foot to foot restlessly.

"I'm not leaving without these other shells," said Hoot, "Are they all Muse's? We can't just leave them here." He began to collect them, stuffing them as carefully as possible into his shirt.

"Let me do that," said Atraties, "You should keep your mandolin free, just in case."

"Let me help you," said Brother Bart, and began picking up the shells with Atraties. There were nine others in all, some large, some small. All were pearl-white and beautifully shaped but none of them sang as Star's had to them. They did their best to be respectful of them, all the while trying to hurry.

A sound like no other Rodin Rae had ever heard pierced the grotto's stale air, reverberating off the walls and pinning her to the ground where she stood. Falana let out a blood-curdling scream and clamped her hands over her ears, falling to one knee, her sword making a terrible sound as metal hit stone.

What are you doing, uninvited, in my home? The Siren sang, the notes of her voice both exquisite and perverse. The Siren had entered into the chamber from the sea passage, her scales shimmering, her face beautiful and at the same time, hideous to gaze upon. She was like a specter, a creature not living yet not dead.

Trapped! Thought Rodin Rae, as she saw Atraties and Brother Bart go rigid; the shell Atraties had been ready to place in his pocket fell to the floor, shattering as it hit the ground. He moved toward the Siren, ensorcelled, drawn by an urge he did not understand to both please and possess this creature. Brother Bart moved slower, as if he were fighting the enchantment.

"NO!" cried Shani and Hoot in unison, as another wailing note rocked the party. Rodin Rae tried to think around the sound in her head but it was impossible. Her hands would not obey the fleeting thought she had to grab her knife. They could only find her ears and cover them in vain. She felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her; singing from the Siren filled her head, but it was a song filled with grief and hate. At her side, Falana was struggling to stand. Rodin Rae could barely see through her pain and she wondered what resources

Falana was drawing upon in order to stand against this unearthly pain and sound.

We've come for something that was not yours to take, sang Shani, in a voice that was like sweetness and doom. Behind her, Hoot, recovering from the initial blow of the Siren's song, strummed a tentative chord. It was the counter-harmony to the Siren's song/voice.

What you seek was given freely, in return for safe passage. I will not grant the same boon to you, quarter-ling, or to your friends. The Siren's voice strained higher, gaining an octave on Shani's and forcing the elf to sing beyond her range. Untrained in the arts, Shani struggled to keep pace with the Siren's melody, to keep up her end of the twisted harmonic conversation. The notes swirled in Rodin Rae's head, a mix of harmony and discord. She could barely make out what they were saying. *Dreamsinger,* she thought, *we need Hoot to Sing.* As if Shani had heard her own thoughts, her end of the harmony ended, and she turned toward the party.

A new song emerged from her, this one tender. The pain in Rodin Rae's head eased just a bit and she gasped, finally able to breathe again. Shani was singing a song of protection for them. It was the opportunity Hoot needed. His fingers found the chords he sought and he played, the sound echoing around them. It was an alteration of the Siren's harmony, it grew in strength with each note he played. Rodin Rae felt the hilt of her dagger in her hand, being now able to move, though the Siren was still painfully in her head. If she could just get her arm to come *up!* She had a clear line of sight to the Siren.

Brother Bart, hands plastered to his ears, caught her eye. *No,* he signaled, though it took every effort to do so. Rodin Rae wondered what he had in mind, and then she saw Arëanna, who was calming sitting on the floor. Shani's spell wasn't protecting them all, it was aimed at Arëanna. From the looks of it, it had given her the chance she needed to throw up wards.

But what in the seven hells is she doing? thought Rodin Rae.

The Siren had changed her tune, visibly upset that her song was not having its desired affect upon the party. A new sensation began throbbing in Rodin Rae's head, fingers probing, pulling. An uneasiness spread through her body, dark memories, hidden, slowly surfacing. *Darkness, alone, the sound of footsteps creeping. the face of fear.* A new base tune had begun, this one punctuated by Falana's screams. Hoot altered his counter-melody, but it seemed to have little effect. The Siren's song was now aimed at taking something from them. Inside of her head, Rodin Rae could feel the Siren searching for her Song, pulling at it, trying to unravel the threads. Excruciating pain coarsed through her body. Shani sang to Hoot, even as she changed her own song to protect Falana. *Tempo change, Dreamsinger!* Hoot,

realizing his counter-melody was not working, changed his song, but he too seemed to be struggling, and his song was becoming disjointed.

Then suddenly, Arëanna's efforts were realized. Below the scaled feet of the Siren a portal opened. A screech of inhuman sound passed over them, forcing Atraties, Brother Bart, and Rodin Rae to the floor. The Song the Siren had been singing/stealing snapped back into their beings and sent a shock wave of reverberation through their minds. Then it was gone. The Siren's singing had stopped. Only Hoot's gentle strumming still reverberated in their heads. Then he stopped, too, and a deathly silence filled the grotto.

"What was that?" asked Hoot.

"That," said Arëanna, "Was a portal to the plains of Cinnabar."

I never saw the Captain quite so happy as when we pulled into port in Toolibire, three days behind schedule and with a splintered mast, but whole and with a certain dower elf in tow. But surely, no one was as happy to see that seafaring troublemaker then the Queen, bless her heart. I had the chance to have a mug of rum with my good Captain and I asked her about her adventure. She told me that now, in her head, was a dark tune, and she hummed a short verse for me. It sent shivers down my spine to hear it, for it seemed that once I had heard it before, from a sailor who had nearly been lost to a Siren's songs. I asked if it bothered her, but she just smiled. "Nothing lost, nothing gained," she said, and downed her drink.

ⁱ The "devil" represents the heavy wooden beams used as supports for the big guns. A sailor had to take up position on these beams, called the gunwale, and it was obviously not the most popular job on board because one slip and he was in the water. He was literally "between the devil and the deep blue sea."

ⁱⁱ There is an old sailor saying, "Mackerel sky and mares' tails/Makes a sailor furl his sails."

ⁱⁱⁱ Pirates often kept many of their crew below decks to hide their numbers. An honest Captain keeps their crew "aboveboard."

^{iv} The 'cat-o'-nine-tails' was a whip used to administer punishment aboard ship. No one would want it to be taken out of the bag it was kept in.

^v Literally a tool used to spread hot tar. Sailors spreading pitch would often break into fights while at this job, using the loggerhead as a weapon. Thus, the meaning became a strained relationship between two people.