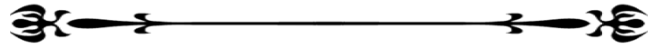


CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:



The Harbor Of The World

The pungent smell of ozone hit the air as they suddenly appeared in the middle of the dirty street. Several passersby saw the group of strangers appear out of thin air, but paid it no more heed than one would a person wearing odd clothing, before going on about their own business again.

"You'd think they see people appearing out of nowhere every rise," Eldar said looking around.

"This is Harbor Of The World," Sabu said, "they probably do."

They were all there except for Blag-ak. The ogre had indeed wanted to stay behind to watch over his precious dragon eggs, like some one-ton nursemaid. Quickfoot, on the other hand, couldn't leave fast enough, so eager was he to get into trouble in such a large marketplace. For a lot of them, it was their first time here.

"This was the street where that gypsy fortune teller was that me and Eldar saw before we met you," Sabu pointed out to Sindar, "that's how I was able to transport us here. I've been here before."

The street was reasonably crowded for a noontime nev, its old stone-paved streets lined with the smell of tristurel-old human sewage, yet mixed with that of hay and horses, pigs being off-loaded from some ship at the docks, a hint of freshly worked leather at an unseen tannery, fresh vegetables and hot meat pastries from innumerable open-air vendors, the scent of men sweating in their daily work and old women smelling of fresh-cut fish, and with the fresh salty smell of the inland sea that is the Harbor, awash throughout all else.

What the nose missed, one's ears could fill in, for the sounds of activity were all about. A continual hubbub of noise, from which one could hear snippets of life; the call of the teamster leading his animal

through the nearby streets, the sound of a street vendor calling out the quality of his finely blown glass figurines, the scream of someone being robbed on the street, sailors shouting to each other on the docks, the sound of horseshoes making repeated contact with the street as a carriage was pulled down a cross-street nearby, the hushed whispers of secret deals in dark corners, and the applause of people watching street performers ply their trade for a few coins.

The eyes, too, had much to offer. Races of all types wandered these streets. Human, Elves, Dwarves, even a few such as Quickfoot. At one end of the street they were on could be seen a medium-sized merchant ship, its Thirdocian crew unloading cargo. In front of a nearby door, standing guard, stood a fur-covered humanoid cat, standing on two legs like everyone else, but descended from more feline races, his tail swishing back and forth, his fangs showing as he firmly stood his post. Stone-carved buildings lined the streets, their millennia-old walls bearing the painted names and symbols of various businesses. Street vendors, in their wood and cloth booths, lined the street corners like rust the edge of a blade. Streets went on for indeterminable lengths before finally fading from view or twisting out of sight. And finally, the bright blue sun overhead, with Gamri crossing its path, let everyone know, and feel, how close to the tropics they were.

"Now *this* is what I call a town!" Eldar exclaimed.

"It certainly is big," Shong commented as he looked around at the crowded streets.

"My friend," Bronto said, "you haven't seen anything yet."

As they were all looking about, a horse rider galloped by, cussing at them for blocking the street.

"I think we should move," Sabu observed. "Let's go down by the docks; there's more room there."

"I still don't like the smell of this place," Lindel said, as they started walking, "not one fresh plant or piece of greenery around here."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Eldar said, walking beside Lindel, "the nearest tree may be hundreds of miles away, but Sjlva' may be found in other forms around here."

"Now *this* is the proper place to live in," Quickfoot said, skipping on ahead, "places to hide, pastries to steal, sights to see."

The street ended at the docks, a wide area lined with ships coming and going, people of all sorts busying about. They walked over to an empty pier to stop, no ship there to crowd their view.

"*That*," Sabu pointed out to the bay, "is the Harbor."

For some their first view, for others not their first but still holding its own impact. In front of them the sea stretched out to the horizon, the shore they were on going on to either side for as far as even the elves could see. A light sea breeze blew in their faces as they looked out upon the large expanse of calm waters. Ship after ship poked its sails

up into view. Uncountable ships, some near, others farther down the coast. Some ships far out into the Harbor, still others as several tiny specks far on the horizon. Like grains of sand floating upon the water, they seemed, and just as numerous.

"This is a *harbor?!!*" Lindel exclaimed.

"It looks more like a whole *ocean*," Shong agreed, eyes wide.

"That's what I thought when I first saw it," Kilgar put in. "It looks endless."

"Trust me when I say," Sabu said to all, "that there *is* another side, that the Harbor *is* enclosed from the sea but for a narrow outlet of a mere hundred miles wide."

"A *mere* hundred miles?" Sindar asked with some incredulity.

"It's said to be the home of a million ships," Bronto said, gazing wistfully out to sea, "from all over the world. Some of the ships just trade back and forth across the Harbor itself, it's so vast."

"And quite easy to get into trouble in," Kor-Lebear observed calmly.

"But, that's the best part of this place," Eldar grinned.

"He's right," Sindar said, "we all have to be careful."

"We should split up," Sabu said. "Bronto, why don't you take Shong and Kilgar and see about getting us a ship. We'll meet you at that same place we stayed at the first time we were here."

"Sounds good," the big man said, "and maybe I can show Shong here some real city life."

"Lindel," Eldar said, "come with me; I know some places you *gotta* see."

"The rest of you," Sabu said, "just make sure that you're with someone that knows the area. We'll be meeting at the Boar's Head Inn around nightfall."

"This is going to be some fun," Eldar said gleefully.

"Now *this* is a place I can sink my teeth into," Kilinir said to Kor-Lebear.

"Or a dagger," Kor-Lebear said quietly back.



They shouldered their way through the crowded double-doorway and on into the building. Eldar and Lindel walked past several crowded oak tables and into the wide central area. Off to the right hand side of the large room was the bar, its fifty-foot length covering that entire wall. Far at the opposite end of the room stood a large semicircular stage, rising up more than several feet above the floor, its rear end flat up against the wall, circular steps ringing around the stage, easing their way down to the floor. Overhead were the balconies of two more floors, each circling around the open central area of the bottom floor, like stone pews ringing around some large cavern. The large stage, while some distance

away, was almost level with the second floor balconies.

People of all types sat around the tables, stood by the bar, and walked around the place. Barmaids, mostly human, walked through the crowds, carrying their trays of varied drinks and taking orders, all the while handling the more rowdy patrons. Voices and conversations bubbled up from all around, the smell of ale and beer coming up from everywhere. Eldar and Lindel were walking through the crowds.

"There's a bar on every floor," Eldar was saying, "the tables on the bottom floor are the most expensive, the top balcony's the cheapest."

"You have to *pay* just to sit at a table?" Lindel said as he looked around. "Then why don't we just get a table on the top floor?"

"Oh, trust me," Eldar said, "you want the ground floor, close to the stage."

Eldar waved to a passing barmaid not presently involved with a tray of drinks. She came over as they were talking.

"Get us a table right up by the stage," Eldar said as he tossed her two pieces of gold.

The barmaid was scantily dressed, being in just a short-cut dress and a top that fit rather tightly over her breasts. She pocketed the gold then led them over towards the stage. As they passed through the crowds, Lindel glanced around them. He saw that the lighting came from a series of small round glass globes, each just inches across, floating several feet above the ground, spaced irregularly all around the tavern and its balconies, always shining forth their mellow light, none of them ever going out. No doubt from magic, thought Lindel. The stone walls were adorned with the occasional painted wall-carving; pictures showing females of all manner of races in various borderline-obscene positions, as if trying to entice the onlooker to join in. The occasional trailer of smoke trickled upwards, as one or two people enjoyed their own particular brand of smoke. The whole building was made of stone, and seemed to emanate an age older than some civilizations; a tradition that was passed down through several hundred long reles.

The barmaid finally seated them over at a table right by the bottom of the circular steps, near the front of the stage. She brushed some stray dirt off the table with a rag as they pulled up their chairs.

"Get us two ales," Eldar told her as they sat down.

As the barmaid walked away, Lindel's eyes followed her retreating form.

"Okay, I'll admit," Lindel smiled, "I make no claim to chastity, and there *are* a few sights here worth the time."

"That's nothing," Eldar sat back, "wait until the show starts."

"Show?"

"Yeah," Eldar grinned, "why do you think these seats are so expensive?"

"I *was* wondering," Lindel responded.

They sat back, looking at all the varieties of people and creatures around them. Never before had Lindel seen such a wide diversity all in one place, but Eldar assured him that this was average for anyplace around the Harbor. The "center of culture", Eldar had called the Harbor Of The World.

Of course, Lindel knew what Eldar's idea of culture meant.

The barmaid came by with their drinks, Eldar paying for them as she slid them onto the table, bending down just enough for both of the elves to have a quick peek of her tightly-held assets.

Okay, Lindel thought, so he had to agree with him on this one; Nature *can* come in other forms around here.

As they watched her leave, the tavern began to darken, the lights from all the light-globes to gradually mute and dim simultaneously. A magic unknown to him, but one that he had no doubt Sabu would have a ready explanation for.

"This is it," Eldar slapped his companion on the shoulder, "the show's about to start."

Indeed, the noise in the large tavern seemed to quiet down a bit as everyone else realized this same fact. People stopped grabbing at the passing barmaids as the lights lowered to a dim twilight. Soon, only the occasional clink of drinking mugs disturbed the dimness.

Suddenly, a small circle of blue light appeared on the floor of the stage. More magic, Lindel thought. The light expanded until it was wide enough around to encompass a large man. Then the light moved back along the stage, and then finally up into the air a bit above it. It stopped as a globe of light hovering four feet above the center of the stage. The light then got brighter, a blue beacon sending its wishes across the large room. The light began to pulse, slowly at first, but then more rapidly. As it did so, music seemed to emanate from the globe of light itself. Faint at first, but then stronger and stronger, until its rapid beat reverberated along the walls as the light pulsed brighter and brighter. Feet stomped and hands clapped to the rhythmic beat of the light as the audience joined in as part of the display. Finally, both light and sound reached a crescendo simultaneously.

Light and sound exploded in a spray of pyrotechnics and rapid melody, leaving nothing in its place but silence and a single figure standing in the middle of the stage. The feet stomping and hand clapping stopped as rapidly as the light, as eager eyes strained forward.

A dim blue glow seemed to surround or emanate from the figure, encasing it in an aura of light. It looked to be female, close to six feet tall, standing there head bowed down, arms crossed in front of her. Silence dropped over the room like a rock. Then, she brought up her head, tossing it slowly back as if it were being pulled puppet-like by a string from behind. As she did so, she slowly drew her arms back, as if trying to raise her chest up to the sky.

It was then that Lindel noticed two things. The first was the apparent reason for the eager eyes, for she wore nothing from the waist on up, the blue glow reflecting on odd sheen off of her tender white skin and firm chest. Her skin looked to be as smooth as milk, running like liquid up and down her body in the blue light. She began to swivel her body back and forth in a slow, smooth rhythm.

Then, Lindel noticed the other thing about her. From the waist on down, she wasn't human. Where legs should be, was instead a long, thick, snake-like body, starting as green scales just below her belly-button, thickening around snake-like hips, and down into a snake-body as thick around as her torso, gradually narrowing down towards where feet would have been as it finally coiled around into a small circle beneath her, its final end being like a scaled tail no thicker than one's finger.

She swiveled back and forth on the end of her tail, her entire body moving as a single organ, arms now reaching up over her head, clawed fingers moving with the rhythm. New strains of music now seemed to emanate from around her, expanding throughout the entire building. Stronger and stronger her movements became, her eyes now facing upwards as if in some sort of trance. As she moved, the music seemed to move with her. The stronger her movements became, the stronger and more pronounced the music became. As her rhythm increased, so did that of the music. She and the music were both one, two manifestations of the same entity.

Suddenly she whipped around like a large spinning top, twice around, whirling on the end of her body-tail, the blue light following her as it danced off her skin. She stopped abruptly towards the front of the stage. Rearing up higher on her tail, she faced out towards the audience, stern but seductive look on her face, a pair of fangs now protruding from the corners of her mouth. Pointed ears showed through her deep black hair, as blue eyes looked down like a seductress that wasn't afraid of taking what she wanted, no matter the consequences. She then began to weave back and forth on her tail, blue glow flowing with her, reflecting off the contrast of her deep green scales and smooth white skin, arms reaching invitingly out in front of her.

She danced now like a nymph in heat, spinning around on her tail, rolling and slithering across the stage, performing feats of acrobatics on her tail that most dancers would be hard pressed to do with two feet, yet all the while seeming to keep her eyes focused on each person in the audience, as if only that person were there to watch her dance. Everyone was entranced.

She uncoiled the lower part of her tail now, wrapping it up around her body as it were some other beast come to take her. Around her waist she coiled herself, up towards her bare chest. The thin end of her tail finally found a home between her breasts, wiggling slowly back and forth like some long finger massaging the hills of her chest. She

weaved lightly back and forth, eyes rolling back in her head as if in some orgasmic convulsion. The music beat faster, seeming to gain with it the rhythm of all watching, as the beat of their hearts, the pounding of their blood, all seemed to keep pace with the cadence of the music, the movements of her body, the flow of the dance.

This wasn't a dance, it was a seduction.

Her tail slowly uncoiled from around her body, as if caressing snake scales against her own smooth skin, until, with a sharp crack, she whipped the last length of it out in back of her. Forward along the stage she now slithered, up to the steps that led down to the floor below. The music now had a slow seductive sway to it, as she went up to the first step, half-slithering, half-dancing along its length. Down the steps she then came, her every movement a slow dance, while still keeping a seductive gaze on each individual watching her. Slowly she slid down the steps, her blue glow making her seem like a strange eerie ghost, floating down the circular steps in some otherworldly dance.

Wide eyes and drooling jaws watched as she finally caressed the ground floor with her tail, watched as she started to dance up to the nearest table, arms lightly massaging an onlooker's chest as her tail coiled lightly around his thigh, but all the while the rest of her body remaining in constant, weaving, motion. Then, onto the next table, leaving the man at the first table in a pleasurable stupor. From table to table she went, her sprite-like dance suggesting much, but stopping short of actually offering it, whirling around in a frantic dance of seduction. Around the tables nearest the stage she went, the music seeming to come with her, or *from* her, like unto the blue glow that always kept her in sight.

Finally she danced up to the table at which Eldar and Lindel sat. Both of their eyes were locked into following her every movement, as she slid up between them, first enticing Eldar by drawing an arm slowly across his face, the music coming from her body seeming to match his heart's own rapid rhythm. Then, a tail came coiling around Lindel, massaging him around his waist and chest as if searching for something, tantalizing him with what the answer to her search might be. Lindel watched unmoving, as the closeness of her breasts seemed to reach out towards his face and then, too soon, draw away as she uncoiled from him and danced out away from their table.

She danced back up against the steps of the stage, standing between the bottom-most step and their own table. Her coiling dance then became more intense, as she swayed back and forth, first slow, then more aggressively, as if being tugged back and forth by two monstrous creatures. Into a frenzied whirl she went, spinning around on her tail, the blue glow flickering as she whirled round and round. Faster too went the music, and brighter became the light, as she now started to twirl like a maddened top. The music went round and round with her, faster and faster, the glow now brightening into a bright blue light, her whirling

almost a blur.

Finally, all that could be seen was a bright blue swirling light, shaping around the contours of her body, the music now a maddening rush. No portion of her body could now be seen, as bright flecks of light swirled through the maelstrom of rushing blue light that was her form, swirling faster and brighter, expanding now to twice her size. Expanding, brighter, 'til all that could be seen was a storm of blue light near the stage; all that could be heard was the maddening rush of the music as it carried with it the bodily rhythm of all watching. The light and sound both rose to a thunderous crescendo.

And then, nothing. With a flash the blue light was gone, the music with it, and no trace at all of the dancer. A brief moment of silence filled the tavern, with nary a sound made, as everyone's hearts suddenly lurched to a stop.

There was an explosion of applause as the lights came up, cheering, shouting, stomping, and clapping, of an intensity that threatened to almost bring down the stone walls of the building itself. Long lasting applause, finally fading down into the general hubbub of talk and people ordering fresh drinks.

"See," Eldar finally said cheerily, "was I right about these seats being worth the price or not!"

Lindel didn't move; he *couldn't* move. He sat straight in his chair, eyes fixed forward, drool coming out of his open mouth. Eldar waved a hand in front of his friend's face.

"Lindel?" he asked. "Are you all right?"

Lindel's right hand slowly began to move across the table, the rest of him not moving a muscle, his face frozen in an expression Eldar couldn't decipher. Finally, Lindel's hand found his mug of ale, still mostly full. Straining as if from weakness, his hand slowly wrapped itself around his mug, and then carefully brought it up to his face.

Eldar watched curiously as, still the only part of his body that moved, Lindel raised his mug, holding it with all the care one would of something precious, his arm then tensing as if ready to strike.

He splashed himself full in the face with the contents of his mug. Cold ale dripped down his face, as he slowly put the mug back down on the table and shook his golden-haired head back and forth, spraying ale all around him.

"*Definitely* worth the price of admission," he finally said.

"Now you know why they charge a gold apiece for these seats," Eldar laughed.

As Eldar laughed at his friend's reaction, Lindel reached into a pocket and drew out a small pouch, jingling with the sound of several coins.

"What's that for?" Eldar asked. "I already paid for the drinks."

Lindel tossed his pouch onto the table with a loud *thunk*,

spilling its dozen gold coins onto the table before answering.

"The tip."



A voice cried out as small feet scampered down the street. Someone's shouting about being robbed faded into the crowds as Quickfoot dived between legs and around people, nibbling on the stolen pastry as he went. He finally ducked into a shop full of marble statues, hiding behind one of a scantily-clad nymph with a bow and arrow, just as he swallowed the last of his snack.

"Why, yes," he heard the proprietor say, "we have statues of all types. We even custom make them if needed. What kind would you like?"

"Well," he heard another voice say, "do you have a statue of Indra?"

"Who?"

"You've never heard of Indra?" the second voice gasped. "Why, my son, you are truly missing out on one of the finer deities around! Let me tell you of the might and majesty of the mighty Indra."

Quickfoot groaned inwardly as he recognized the voice. Candol probably wouldn't like it if he found out that he was stealing again. But, those pastries looked so tempting! Covered in fruit, they were, there was just no way one could resist them. Just one, he'd thought. How was *he* supposed to know that the baker had made it special for some regular customer.

It was good, though.

"I'm quite sure, sir, that this Indra is a good deity," the proprietor was trying to say, "but I just need a *physical* description of what he looks like, not a telling of his deeds."

"Ah," Candol said with fervor, "only by hearing of his glory can you truly capture the essence of his magnificence in non-living stone. Only through enlightenment can you be divinely inspired to make the stone come to life."

Fortunately for the store's proprietor, a large man dressed in a baker's apron chose that moment to come running in.

"Where is that little runt," he shouted, "he's got to pay! I'll take it out of his *hide* if I have to!"

Quickfoot cowered behind the statue, trying to remain unseen, as the baker looked angrily around.

"Excuse me a moment," Candol said to the proprietor, as he turned and walked over to the baker, "What seems to be the problem?"

"I saw him," the baker said, tightening the muscles on his broad arms. "He came in here. He owes me for one of my best pastries!"

"A thief then," Candol observed. "You have but to calm down, and divine power will reveal the culprit for you."

"I'm sorry," the baker said, calming down. "I don't usually show

disrespect to a priest. Forgive me, but he stole a pastry from me."

"Just a pastry?" Candol asked.

"It was a special one," the baker said proudly, "my pastries are known all over the Harbor, and this was from a special batch that I made for a mayor down the coast. The best of the best."

Oops, thought Quickfoot.

"Have no fear my son," Candol intoned, "the offender shall be revealed."

Candol raised his arms as he said this, as if beseeching higher powers.

It was then that Quickfoot felt a sudden, and rather painful, shock poking him in his rear in response to Candol's request.

"Ouch!" he said, leaping up, rubbing his bottom.

"There he is!" the baker said, advancing towards him.

Quickfoot quickly backed up against the statue, his sudden movement causing the stone nymph to rock back and forth on its base.

Candol shook his head.

"I should have known," he said to himself.

The baker went diving towards Quickfoot. Quickfoot slid aside at the last moment, bumping the statue hard as he went. The baker landed on the ground, hitting his head hard up against the rocking statue. Cursing, he shook his head and looked up. Quickfoot ran over to Candol, cowering behind his robes. The baker got to his feet and was about to advance on the small one, when something happened.

The statue of the nymph with the bow and arrow had finally been rocked too much and came crashing down on the man's foot, point of its stone arrow first.

The man screamed with pain as his foot was pierced clean through. The proprietor, in shock, now realized that a man was about to bleed all over his store.

"Please," he asked Candol, "you've got to help him. He's screaming in pain. I don't want potential customers to think that this sort of thing goes on all the time in my shop. You're a priest, do something."

Candol sighed, and then took a coin out of his pocket. Casually, he flipped it up into the air, watched it go round and round before he caught it in his hand and flipped it over onto the back of his other hand. He then looked down at which side was facing up.

"Sorry," he said looking up, "not my cult."

Candol calmly walked out of the shop of statues, Quickfoot close behind him, leaving the baker's screams and the worried look of the proprietor behind him.

"You got to watch that stealing of yours," Candol said when they were both outside and further down the street, "it might get you into trouble some rise."

"I wouldn't have gotten caught," Quickfoot pouted, "except

that they were so good I went back for a third."

Candol chuckled and patted the small one on the head. Together they walked down the street. Past the leather shops, and round a corner where a number of street performers entertained the crowds. They stopped a bit to watch.

There was a tall, skinny, almost hairless, man, dressed only in a strip of cloth tied round his waist, swallowing down a flaming length of thin metal. Half sword swallower, half fire swallower, he downed the red-hot sword length to the amazed applause of the crowds. That is, until a watching dwarf pointed a finger at him, muttered two words, and caused the burning length to flame up unexpectedly. The crowd laughed along with the dwarf as they watched the tall skinny man try desperately to put the flames out while not choking on the sword that was now stuck halfway down his throat. The dwarf laughed heartily while the performer finally got the sword up out of his throat, glaring about the crowd.

The fire-and-sword swallower stared at the dwarf, who was still laughing, but said not a word himself. Instead, angry look on his face, he inhaled deeply of the seaside air, holding his breath while the dwarf still laughed at his expense. The performer then let out his breath in the direction of the laughing dwarf.

And produced a tongue of flame that leapt straight towards the dwarf, instantly igniting his wide dark beard. The dwarf yowled, reaching a pitch that one would say only women could reach, patting at his beard as he ran away into the streets looking for something with which to put out his beard.

The crowd laughed and applauded the performer, who then smiled and bowed, as Candol and Quickfoot went on to the next street performer.

There was a man juggling half a dozen sticks, and doing quite well by those watching, until Quickfoot proved that he could juggle even more knives. This got him the approval of the audience, but the blunt end of the other man's juggling sticks.

There was a man, trying to prove his prodigious strength by lifting several other men and weights.

"Bronto should have a look at this one," Candol commented, as they passed by. "He'd probably embarrass the poor man and then buy him a drink afterwards."

Finally, they came to a minstrel, a bard if you would, playing a form of lyre. The lyre seemed to be shaped like a coiled seashell, having a straight wooden back that wound down into a circle at its base and then spiraled inward from there, smaller and smaller, until it came to a small round knot of wood. Lengths of strings went from regular points all along the wooden backbone down to that central knot, starting out long at its end and getting shorter as the backbone spiraled inwards.

The bard playing it was sitting on a small wooden stool,

watching the crowds walk by, tossing him the occasional coin for his music, as he smiled back at them in return. Human, he looked, with maybe a trace of elvish in the lean features of his almost-clean-shaven face, his brown hair blowing in the slight ocean breeze. The song he sang spoke of a time to come, a time of peace and no fear. The melody he played seemed to weave its own spell around those that listened and watched, forming its own half-seen image around the bard, tantalizing people with dreams.

For Quickfoot, the song wove a mountain of pastries, meat-cakes, and muffins, all piled around the bard, always just out of reach, as if teasing him to try and follow. His was a world of never ending plenty, a world with a myriad of new knives and shining things that begged of one to steal them. A world where he might eat forever and still have more. Never grow fat, never grow old. Food piled high around him. Quickfoot tried to grab at what he thought was real, but failed and grasped only air.

Candol saw open fields all about him, statues dedicated to Indra lying about, the sun shining brightly overhead, all weaving phantom-like in the distance. Peace poured in from all around him. He didn't seem to so much as hear the bard's song as to experience it, feel it flow through him, working its magic with his soul. He knew, more than felt, himself to be in a world of peace and plenty; a world with no fighting, no horrendous creatures trying to feast on the flesh of men, no evil lurking beneath every rock. He sensed it as a whole world about him, with himself as its center. He wasn't just seeing this phantom world, he *was* this world. It sprang from within his soul, given substance and form by the power of the bard's song.

He shook himself, dispersing the image and seeing only the bard, the passing crowds, and Quickfoot trying to grab at unseen phantom images in the air. He gave the small one a quick shake, startling him into sudden awareness.

"Hey," he said, looking around, "where'd all the food go to?"

"Illusion," Candol explained. "The bard's own magic, praying for times that might never come."

While Quickfoot tried to solve his own puzzlement, Candol reached into a pocket and took out a coin. This he tossed at the feet of the bard, where several more coins lay. The bard nodded his head and smiled in gratitude, all the while never interrupting his playing, still weaving his spell for others to become entranced with.

"Come," Candol said to Quickfoot, "his dreams are not yet for us. There is more to see."

Together, they walked past others entranced with the bard's music and out into the crowded streets.

"There is much Life has to offer," he said to himself, "and much that would stand in the way of Her generosity."

Sabu, meanwhile, had been walking around the city with Sindar, seeing what sights were offered by this small section of the endless coastal city that was the Harbor Of The World. He was showing his friend his most favorite place in the entire Harbor at which to stay, entertain himself, and have fun.

"So," Sindar was asking, "*how* old is this library?"

"Well," Sabu answered as they walked down the dusty aisle, "it was founded about six or seven hundred rels ago by a rich merchant who wanted to support the pursuit of knowledge. Since then, it's attained quite a large number of books and old scrolls."

The building they were in was, like most of the major structures in the Harbor, made of stone and, while somewhat old, not nearly as ancient as a lot of other nearby buildings. The walls that weren't covered by shelves of books going from floor to ceiling, were covered in dusty old moth-eaten tapestries. The size of any given room was always hard to tell, the innumerable shelves making a direct line of sight impossible. They'd found their way to some stairs and were now in a large underground room of the building. They would see the occasional scholar or seeker of knowledge walk across a neighboring aisle of book shelves as they strolled down their own, books piled on either side of them, high up into the dusty recesses of the ceiling.

"Just walking among this much written knowledge is somewhat relaxing," Sabu was saying.

"It *is* kind of comforting to know that such a repository exists," Sindar agreed. "It would seem the kind of place that the King wouldn't mind looking through. I remember hearing at Thir Glomdäitaÿor that he collects any such knowledge into his own library."

"It is true," Sabu said as they turned a corner. "I was able to have a brief peek at his own library while we were there, and he has amassed much more than is even in *this* place."

"And still he would seek after more?" Sindar asked. "Rather commendable for a king."

Their aisle opened up into a small room-like clearing in the jungle of books, a dusty old rug covering the floor with a small stone table at its center. On the table several books were piled haphazardly, with several open parchments of maps, mathematical figures, and plotted drawings. Standing by the table, two thinly-haired human scholars quietly debated, occasionally gesturing to some of the drawings.

"The plots indicate that prediction *is* possible," one gray-robed scholar said.

"But the equations would seem to preclude any practical sort of prediction," the other white-robed scholar responded. "It may be possible, but the equations would just be too complex."

"This sounds interesting," Sindar said.

"I told you there would be some fun in here," Sabu agreed.

"Just look at the charts," the gray-robed scholar gestured to one of the open parchments.

"Excuse me," Sabu interrupted their debate. "May I ask of what the debate concerns? I have some small mathematical ability myself."

The two scholars looked up in controlled surprise, as if amazed that anyone could find their subject of interest.

"We seek to answer a question that most people think nothing of," the gray-robed one said.

"That is what scholars are supposed to do," Sindar said, "it is their own privilege in life. I only wish I could spend more time in such a place as this, and explore it in detail as you yourselves do."

"Well, then," the white-robed one said, both men perking up a bit as they realized someone was actually taking a scholar seriously, "you may find this of interest."

"We are trying," said the gray robe, "to see if we can plot the motions of the moons enough so as to be able to predict their course."

"People have been trying that for thousands of rels," Sindar said. "Some older references say that there's a certain amount of randomness inherent in their orbits, making prediction impossible."

"Ah," said the gray-robed one, grabbing for one of the charts, "but if you plot their motions, over a long enough period of time, it suggests a pattern. And where there's a pattern, there's an equation."

"But we had to go back over tristurels of data to even get a suggestion of a pattern," the white-robed said. "That suggests an equation too complex to be solved, even if there is one."

"Hmm," said Sabu, as he looked down at the charts, his eyes going from one set of figures to the next, "these figures would seem to suggest a rather high degree of precessiveness in their orbits."

"Yes," agreed the white robe, "but to such a subtle degree that we can't even figure out the order of the precession, and we've been working on it for several rels now. And I fear that if we, as scholarly heads of this library, can't figure it out, it may not be done in our lifetimes."

"Twenty-seven," Sabu said casually as he shuffled through some of the other open books and parchments.

"Huh?" the gray-robed one said, caught off-guard.

"The order of the precession," Sabu said, "it's twenty seven."

"But, how did you find that out?" the white-robed asked, puzzled.

"I just figured it out," Sabu said simply.

"Surely not as we were talking?" the gray robe said, amazed. "How did you do it?"

"You were right in saying that these equations, as written, can't

be solved," Sabu explained. "So, I took a few shortcuts and rewrote them in an easier form."

"Ah, you've been studying the problem yourself, then," the white robe commented. "How many rels have you been working on this answer?"

"Actually, I haven't given any previous thought to it," Sabu said, leafing through one of the books. "I solved it just now, as you were speaking to us about it."

The two scholars stared at each other, disbelievingly.

"But-" the gray robe began. "The best minds in all the world couldn't-"

"So fast?" the white robe said. "You couldn't possibly-"

"Check the figures yourselves," Sabu offered.

"That could take a few motabs," the gray one said, "and then to use that information to work out an equation that *might* be possible . . ."

"A rather simple observation would suggest that there *has* to be an equation," Sindar put in.

"And what might that be," the white robe said doubtfully.

Sindar pointed to one of the charts, several circles, arcs, and loops on it representing Maldene, its three moons, and their orbits.

"Our moons are spaced equally over a volume around our world," Sindar began, "such that anywhere in the world you always see but a single moon. As one leaves our view, another takes its place. A complex arrangement that *can't* be natural. And, if it isn't natural, then that suggests that there has to be a pattern, and hence an equation with which to predict the pattern."

"Hmm," the white robe said, thoughtfully, "but it is said that long-dead gods put the moons in their orbits."

"Even gods have to follow the laws of mathematics," Sindar finished, putting down the chart.

"Most astute observation," the gray robe said, "but it could take us several rels to figure this out."

"And then, to what purpose would these orbits be?" the white robe asked.

"Maybe you both could stay and work on the problem with us?" the gray robe asked.

"No," Sabu said, "but I promise that I'll work on the problem whenever I have extra time. I'll let you know when I've solved it."

"Oh, you'll need copies of our figures and equations then," said the white robe, as he reached for blank parchment and a quill.

"Unnecessary," Sabu said, as he and Sindar started to walk away from the table, "I already have it all memorized."

They heard the white robe drop his quill and parchment in shock behind them as they started down another aisle, leaving the two scholars to their business.

"That was invigorating," Sindar said, taking in a deep breath of musty air, "but I didn't think that even *your* memory was that good, to memorize so much so quickly."

"I took one of Eldar's potions," Sabu shrugged as they walked quietly down the aisle.



A lone olive-skinned woman walked down a narrow stone-paved street, a mere ten miles inland from the nearest dock. She was dressed in dark silk, a few shiny jewels draped around her neck. The street was as choked with people as it was with their smell. The woman walked slowly down the street, pulling her cloak tightly about her head.

Behind her several disreputable figures lurked, passing through the crowd like unseen predators through thick brush. The woman looked slightly over her shoulder, noticing her pursuers and then picking up her pace. The pursers hastened their pace, weaving their way through the thick crowds. The woman walked more quickly, finally turning to a narrow alley between two buildings.

The pursuers caught up to her, all six of them running up to her and surrounding her, two of them pinning her up against the stone wall.

"Okay lady," the scraggly ruffian on her left said, as he yanked the necklace off her neck, "what else you got on you besides those jewels around your neck."

"Yeah," said another in front of her, as he pressed a hand to her thigh, "you have anything *else* we might value?"

"You would rob and rape me in broad daylight," came the timid female voice, "in front of such a large crowd to witness?"

"Witnesses?" another unshaven one said. "You think anyone cares *what* we do to you? You must be new to the Harbor."

"Yeah, let's see if anyone cares," another laughed, and then began to shout out at the top of his lungs. "Hey, we're about to rob, rape, and kill this young girl here! Anyone care?"

The crowd continued to go on about its silent way.

"See?" the one who shouted said. "We could murder you and no one would even care."

"Glad to hear it," the woman said quietly to herself.

"It's my turn to search first," said the one that had grabbed her necklace as, still holding the jewels in one hand, he reached forward with the other.

And promptly stopped breathing. His reaching hand went to his throat as he gasped for air, while his other hand dropped the necklace. He gasped but a few moments, while his friends watched in puzzlement, and then he fell over, dead.

"What happened to him?" one asked.

"It's her," another pointed, "she's a witch!"

"I guess it *could* have been the poison I put on the fake jewelry," she shrugged.

"A trick," said one in front of her, as he leaped back, reaching for a weapon.

Unfortunately, he leaped straight back into a waiting knife. A black knife to tear straight and quick across his throat. Dead before he hit the ground, the others whirled around to face the unseen foe.

The woman lashed out at one of them with her foot. Gone now was the weak and frail voice, the helpless figure. Her foot came straight up into one of the men's crotch, landing with a sickening crack and rip, as she whirled off her cloak, landing it over someone else's face.

Kilnir yanked out her foot from the guy's crotch, letting the man fall to the ground as blood dripped from the jagged blade that was attached to the front of her shoe, then gave a quick chop of her hand to the back of the guy's neck with her cloak over him. As he fell quickly to the ground, one of the others got pulled into the shadows, to end his life with a dull scream.

Two remained, their knives now ready, as they kept an eye on Kilnir and tried to stay away from whatever was in those shadows.

A black knife came whizzing through the air, suddenly appearing in the side of one's head, going straight through to his brain. Dropping to the ground without even time to scream, then the last one trying to turn and run. Kilnir gave a quick jump into the air, leaping up, her feet even with the man's head as her bladed foot then lashed out in a quick and gruesome kick to the back of his neck as she came down.

Bloody gash on the back of his neck, spine cut at that spot, the body rolled out into the crowded street. No one took notice of it as they walked casually around it.

"He was right," Kilnir said as she wiped her foot-blade off on one of the bodies, "you *can* kill someone here and no one will care."

"They got anything on them?" Kor-Lebear asked, stepping out of the shadows.

"No," Kilnir replied as she went to his side, "that's why they were trying to rob *me*."

"It was good practice, though," he said, pulling his dagger out of his victim's head and then wiping it clean.

"I like the way you two play," Mauklo said, stepping out of the crowd.

"And what have *you* been up to?" Kor-Lebear asked.

"Researching things Man was not meant to know," Mauklo grinned.

"What about Woman?" Kilnir smiled.

"They're all dead, I take it?" Mauklo asked.

"Of course," Kilnir said, sounding mildly offended, "what kind of assassins do you take us for?"

"And they aren't anyone that'll be missed," Kor-Lebear added, "just some random thugs."

"Good," said Mauklo, prodding one with his foot, "drag them into the alley then. What I have to do, even some people in this crowd might object to."

Kilinir and Kor-Lebear bent to their task, dragging the six would-be muggers deeper into the shadowy recesses of the alley. Mauklo pulled out a small pouch, and a small chest about the size of a matchbox, before walking into the shadows himself.

Moments passed. Some passersby may have heard strange noises, others may have smelled a faint odor reminiscent of sulfur and decay. Others may have noticed the quick sparkle of dark light that shone out. But, whatever anyone may have noticed, no one stopped or gave it anything more than passing consideration, the way one would a fly waving about one's face.

Mauklo, Kilinir, and Kor-Lebear all finally walked out into the street, Mauklo holding the small chest in one hand, the pouch now gone.

"Well, that was," Kilinir paused, searching for the right word, "interesting."

"I can see how the majority of the population might object to seeing that sort of thing," Kor-Lebear said, "although I found it to be mildly stimulating."

"A man after my own heart," Mauklo said.

"What was the purpose in that anyhow?" Kilinir asked.

"Just consider them as now being servants for a future need," Mauklo answered. "In case something comes up."

"I guess they would make for good flunkies at that," Kor-Lebear said. "After all, they've *already* died once."

"Come," Mauklo said, "we have more work to do."

They walked on down the street, blending in with the crowd. As they did so, Kilinir finally asked a question that had been on her mind for a long time.

"Tell me," she asked, "just how much *can* you fit into that tiny chest anyway?"



"Catho, you say?" the Thirdocian Captain said. "I'd have to sail clear around half of Cenivar to get there. That's a trip of over twenty-five thousand miles. It would take over a motab to get there."

Bronto, Shong, and Kilgar were standing at the docks, talking to the man, in front of his large merchant ship. The fresh sea air blew in their faces as they haggled.

"At least you wouldn't be going through the tropics," Bronto chuckled. "We've been through that; it's kind of rough."

"I don't know," the Captain replied. "That's far north, over to

Catho's western end. There'd be no ports for the bulk of the trip."

"Are you afraid of making the trip?" Kilgar asked matter-of-factly.

The Captain first smiled, then chuckled, before he gave answer.

"No, my son," he replied, "I was just thinking of charging you by the mile, is all."

"Well then," said Bronto, pulling out a pouch that jingled a lot, "how about this for the trip then."

He tossed the pouch to the Captain, who caught it in the air, then opened it up and looked inside.

"There's gems in there worth about twenty-five thousand pieces of gold," Bronto said as the Captain's eyes widened. "Is that enough?"

"That's enough to *buy* my ship," the Captain answered, "of **course** it's enough!"

"You can keep your ship," Bronto said, "all you have to do is get us there; we'll find our own way back."

The Captain looked up, amazed appreciation on his face.

"My friend," he said offering his hand, "it's a deal. You got yourself a ship and crew. When do you want to leave?"

"Tomorrow should be all right," Bronto replied. "Until then, anyone for a drink?"

"I knew *that* was coming," Shong grinned.

"But *I* pay for them," the Captain said, "just as soon as I get the crew to ready the ship."

The Captain turned and shouted out several orders in Osan, while the other three made their way back to where the pier met the shore. They walked together, weapons not ready, casual as can be, as if the world offered no threat to them.

"I think he would have gone for less," Shong commented, "instead of the whole pouch-full."

"But then we'd only have his service, not his loyalty," Bronto said. "And besides, what's money for but to spend with some good friends."

"And now, *he's* a friend," Kilgar finished.

"Correct, my boy," Bronto said jovially, putting an arm on the boy's shoulder.

"I think we've got company," Shong said, pointing up ahead of them.

Blocking their exit to the pier stood four large and burly men, human all of them, carrying short clubs. Sailors, their clothing bespoke of them, but with little care or scruples according to their manner. The three approached them, stopping as the four sailors refused to move from in front of them.

"Stop right there," one of them said, swinging his club in front of him.

"My friends," Bronto put forth both of his empty hands, "we have no wish to fight you."

"Good," said another, "then that'll make it easier. The three of you are about to become sailors."

"And that kid will make a great cabin boy," another one leered, "the Captain likes 'em young."

"Sorry, but we already have our own ship," Shong said, "and we leave tomorrow."

"Well, your plans are canceled," another of the four said, as they all started to walk closer, clubs ready.

"You *really* don't want to do this," Bronto said, trying to maintain his friendliness.

"I don't like them," Kilgar said casually, looking up to Bronto, "can we kill them?"

"Cute kid you got there," one of them said. "Now say good-night."

So saying, the sailor swung his short club at Bronto while another went for Shong. The club came right down towards the big man's head.

Then the club was shattered into several splintered pieces, Bronto's large hand crushing the remains, along with the man's hand. The big sailor cried out in pain as he tried to land his other fist into Bronto's face.

Shong's assailant, meanwhile, was bringing his club up to Shong's midsection, Shong's empty hands both at his sides. Then suddenly, as if by magic was it so fast, there was a sword in Shong's hand, the end of which was now sticking through the sailor's chest as he stood frozen in mid-stride, club now dropping from his dying hands.

"That's the fastest quick-draw I've seen," Bronto said, as he picked his attacker up by the hand he now held him by and casually threw him up and over into the sea behind him. "Have you been taking one of Eldar's potions too?"

"No," Shong said as the body slid off his sword, the next attacker already coming at him, "I've just been practicing."

A long curved knife came lashing out at the belly of another, as a small boy-sized form then slipped between the sailor's legs and behind him. Kilgar then kicked the screaming man off the pier and into the water.

The last one, about to lunge at Shong, suddenly stopped, doubt and fear now on his face. He looked hesitantly about.

"You have one chance to run," Bronto said to the single sailor, "and no one will fault you for it."

The man chose to run, his feet carrying him and his short club as far and as fast as they could. Bronto chuckled as Shong calmly wiped his sword off and put it away. The Captain they'd just hired came walking

quickly up to them from his ship, just as Shong finished sheathing his sword.

"What happened here?" the Captain asked, looking at the body in front of Shong.

"Nothing really," Bronto said. "Some poor sailors just thought we'd make a nice addition to their crew. It's not their fault they were wrong."

"Well, I can tell you they weren't from a Thirdocian boat," the Captain said, turning the body face-up with his foot, "we don't resort to conscription. You have to *earn* your way onto one of our boats."

"All the more reason why we only hire Thirdocian ships," Bronto said, slapping a hand to the Captain's shoulder. "Come, I'll show you a drink as well as the rest of our little band."

Together, the four walked off the pier and down the streets to the Boar's Head Inn.



"Hey, pass me some more of that stew," Eldar was saying, "that show gave me an appetite."

"It made *me* horny," Lindel said quietly.

"*Sotüva*, that's an understatement," Eldar commented as his sharp elven ears caught the comment.

"How long do you think it'll take you to finish those calculations for the librarians?" Sindar asked.

"I'm not sure," Sabu answered, "maybe as long as our entire voyage to Catho."

"Speaking of which," Candol put in, as he grabbed for a roll of bread, "I wonder what kind of boat Bronto's found for us."

"You can ask him yourself," Sindar said between mouthfuls of stew, "he's coming in now."

A moment after Sindar said this, Bronto walked in through the inn's entrance, followed by Shong, Kilgar, and their new Captain. They looked around a moment before spotting the large table the others were at, then went to join them.

"I'll never get use to how he does that," Quickfoot commented about Sindar, as he grabbed two more pieces of bread.

They were inside an inn, several dull brown tables strewn around, the stone walls rising high enough overhead for even an ogre to stand up under. At one end was the counter at which the innkeeper sat, the door to the kitchen beside him, overhead hanging on the wall a large mounted boar's head giving evidence to the inn's name. Opposite that was the end of the large room at which they all sat eating steaming hot stew at their table. Off to one side, a third wall supported stone stairs leading up to a second floor and rooms beyond. The wall opposite the stairs held the large door through which Bronto had entered.

"Ho there," Bronto called as he walked over. "Meet our new Captain everyone. He sails the finest merchant ship you ever saw."

The four of them sat down with the others, a young woman in a long skirt bringing them each fresh bowls of the hot stew and a new bowl of bread.

"No sleem this time?" Mauklo said mildly. "Or have we gone through too many of them?"

"Ignore Mauklo," Bronto told the Captain, as he spooned out a large bite of stew, "we all do."

"Glad to hear it," Mauklo smiled cagily.

"So, Captain," Eldar asked, "how long do you think our voyage will last?"

"Well," the Captain began, eating his own portion of the dinner, "storms and rough weather aside, about a motab. We'll be docking at Port Threegan in the middle of the west side of Catho. From there, you should be able to find any of several major roads that'll take you inland to where you want to go. It's the closest I can get you to where Bronto said you're going."

"Are there enough quarters for all of us," Kilinir said with an almost dainty smile, "or will some of us have to double up?"

"No need to worry about your privacy, my lady. My ship can easily hold you all," the Captain said, "and no more steady a voyage will you have short of being on a sleem."

"A whole motab caged up on another ship," Quickfoot complained. "You know, I'm beginning to hate ocean voyages."

"Feel more sorry for Kilgar here," Bronto said heartily, "the boy will have grown another half inch by then."

"Eh," Quickfoot said, as he tried to find something else that he could eat, "height is overrated."

"At least I *can* grow," Kilgar said casually, while eating from his own bowl.

Quickfoot grabbed a small piece of bread, and made ready to throw it at the boy, but Candol stopped him in mid-swing.

"I wouldn't start to throwing things at him," the priest said, "he just might throw back something with a point to it."

Quickfoot stopped, considering this as he looked over at Kilgar. Kilgar just smiled and went on eating.

"So," Lindel asked, "when do we leave?"

"Tomorrow," Shong said. "The Captain here says the ship will be ready by morning."

"Dawn's break," the Captain corrected, "to better catch the early tides with."

"I hope no one minds getting up a bit early, then," Sabu said.

During all this conversation, Kor-Lebear had said nary a word. All he did was eat and stay quiet. Lindel finally noticed this, saying as

much.

"Why so quiet?" the elf asked. "Even you usually say at least *one* word every now and then."

Kor-Lebear remained silent and expressionless as he finished off his stew.

"Maybe he just has nothing to say," Shong offered.

"Don't mind him, Lindel," Eldar said, "the man's a study in inscrutability."

Kor-Lebear finished, sat back in his chair, and just calmly looked at Lindel.

Lindel got the unnerving feeling of being some bug under close examination by a sage. He shuddered slightly at the feeling.

"No," Lindel said, "he's got something on his mind. I'm just not sure if I want to know."

Kor-Lebear smiled; a smile that one would usually reserve for a cat regarding its intended victim. Nothing that one could call threatening, but a look that seemed to bore through Lindel's eyes as he locked gaze with him.

Lindel broke his gaze with Kor-Lebear. With a sudden loss of appetite, he pushed his bowl away from him.

"Now *there's* a man with a plan," Eldar said, noting the silent human's expression.

Kor-Lebear just smiled and put an arm around Kilinir's waist. She responded by nuzzling him in his ear.

"I think that I'll go to my room now," Lindel said, still a bit shaken as he stood up. "We have an early start tomorrow."

"I thought you elves really didn't need any sleep," Sabu quietly asked Eldar, as Lindel left and went up the stairs.

"We don't," Eldar whispered back, "but our dark friend over there can unnerve almost anyone."

"I think he does it for sport," Sabu commented back.

Meanwhile, Kilinir's nuzzling put her mouth right next to Kor-Lebear's ear. Showing no outward appearance of doing anything else other than lightly biting his ear, she asked him a question.

"So," she whispered quietly into his ear, "*do* you have a plan of some sort?"

Kor-Lebear turned his head to face her, pressed his lips to hers, then let his tongue lead him casually to her ear, for some mock ear-biting of his own.

"No," he whispered just as quietly back, "but it's always good to let someone *think* you do. It keeps them respectful of you."

Kilinir smiled pleurably. Others may have taken this as response to Kor-Lebear's nuzzling, but only the two of them truly knew what they found amusing.

Dawn was just breaking, the large blue sun of Maldene peeking up over the horizon, while the blue-green tinge of Gamra started rising up from the North. The Thirdocian sailors were calling back and forth in Osan, unfurling sails, pulling up anchor, and untying ropes as they cut loose from the docks and started to sail out into the open Harbor. The group was all on deck, for no one wanted to miss seeing the immense view of the Harbor as they sailed out of the biggest port of call in the world.

"A rare view," Lindel said, as they sailed out into open Harbor waters.

"The only one like it," Eldar corrected.

"It'll take us a full rise to sail out of the Harbor," the Captain said, coming over to them, "so you have plenty of time to enjoy it."

They sailed out until the shore was only a dim coastline, its ancient buildings lit up by the morning sun. All about them the Harbor stretched, the largest inland body of water around, yet also one of the calmest. Bigger than any bay, yet the worst any storm did in here was rock the boats a bit, as if Nature kept this place as a special reserve for travelers.

But, as far from the shore as they were, they weren't alone. Sailing with them, dotting their way from horizon to horizon, were ships. Ships of any kind and number. From the smallest boat to the grandest sleem, from the floating shanty to vessels made to carry kings. They were all there, sharing the wide waters with them, speckling the surface of the Harbor like innumerable bread crumbs. Some were leaving as they were, others finally ending their long trip to the Harbor, some just sailing across the Harbor to other sections of the endless shore-to-shore coastal city. A ship was never alone while it sailed the Harbor.

Wars and battles never came to the Harbor. So many ships were there to render assistance to any given side, so much valuable commerce was there about its shores, so many different factions rendering their own Harbor patrols to aid ships in danger, that war just never seemed feasible nor desired. The Harbor might hold every other frailty and sin of Man and several other races, but war just wasn't among them. Pirates even considered these neutral waters, safe from their blood-thirsty attacks. The Harbor Of The World was as safe as any waters ever got.

Down along the snaking shoreline they sailed, past buildings and sections of city with obvious influence from more cultures than they knew existed in the world. Evidence indeed, that the Harbor contained trade and ships from all over this immense planet. Through the quiet waters they sailed, on through the day and into the night. As they watched dusk settle over the horizon, they saw from a distance just what the Harbor's night-life looked like. The entire shore, stretching on as far

North and South as they could see, was aglitter with lights. Be they torch-made or sourced from magic, lights lit up the entire coast, like some immensely long glowworm, a yellow-white glow with the occasional speckling of color here and there.

Eldar's blood ran with excitement as his sensitive elven ears picked up the faint traces of a thousand parties at a thousand taverns, Sabu's nostrils pulsed with the imagined smell of a hundred libraries waiting to be discovered in the deep recesses of the Harbor's cities, while Kilgar's face expressed his sheer childlike enjoyment of such a visual spectacle, lit up like a parade of fireworks, all laid out before him.

No one slept that night.

Finally, dawn brought with it the sight of another shore coming down from the other, western, side of the Harbor, narrowing in as if to meet with their own shoreline. Closer to this meeting they sailed, as the Harbor narrowed into a slow curve a mere hundred miles wide. Like a bend in some immense road, they sailed around the curve until the sun was high overhead. They watched the two shores sail on by on either side, still a-sprinkle with the long sheet of stone that was the Harbor's continuous coastal city. Other ships sailed past them, coming and going through the Harbor's wide entrance, as they sought open sea.

The land on either side finally widened out, cities becoming noticeably fewer, ships thinning out as if they'd just been poured out from some immense drain. The afternoon had brought them their leave of the Harbor Of The World.

Before them lay open sea, the faint view of an island on the distant horizon, the Harbor behind them, a long Fall voyage ahead of them.