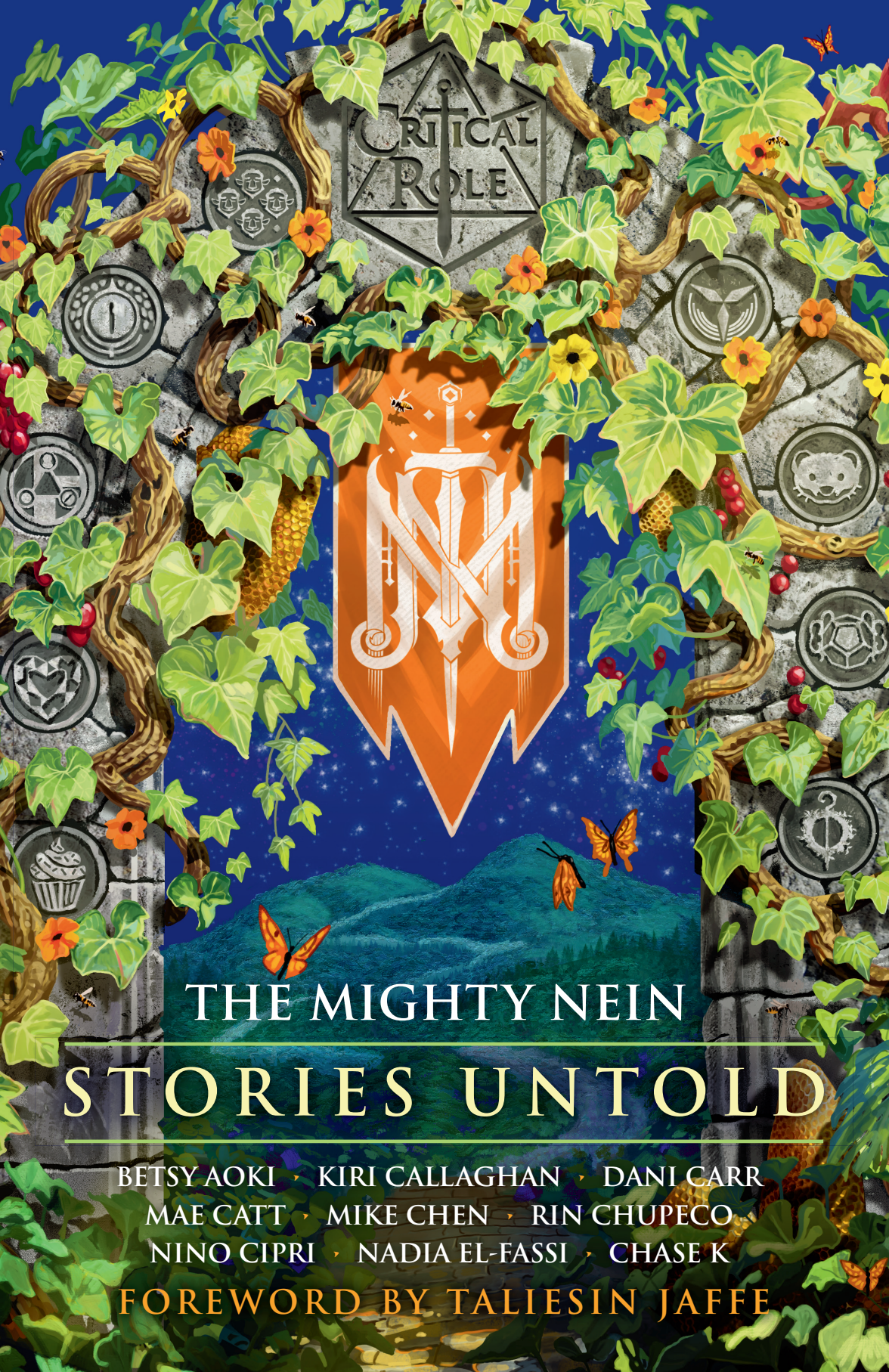




CRITICAL
ROLE



THE MIGHTY NEIN STORIES UNTOLD

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FOREWORD BY TALIESIN JAFFE



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FOREWORD

Taliesin Jaffe

It has been said that describing what happened in your role-playing game is like trying to describe a dream. That is to say: It is a fruitless endeavor in which, to the outside observer, you seem like a bit of a lunatic. Anyone who's ever played such a truly life-altering game knows this frustration. In high school, my friends and I battled the gods on Mount Olympus. In a cyberpunk future, we stole a hoverboard and used it to crash our prom. And we battled a giant werewolf across Disneyland only to find while on a trip to the park the next day, in a moment of absolute wonder, that the ride we had trashed in our game was suddenly "closed for repairs" in the real world. There's nothing like those moments, and the friendships forged in these adventures are unlike any other. More than thirty years later, I'm literally ignoring texts from two of those high school friends while I write this. How do you explain the depth of these experiences to someone who wasn't with you at the table? If you had asked me a decade or so ago, I would have said you really can't

explain it, and that's the price of admission for getting to live these adventures. The first rule of Narnia is that you can't talk about Narnia.

That was, until *Critical Role*. To everyone's complete shock (other than Felicia Day's and my partner's), people wanted to watch us play. Somehow the internet created a window into our private world. Our stories and characters could leave our dining room table and become a truly shared experience. This new audience watched as the heroes of Exandria known as Vox Machina battled vampires and dragons and would-be gods. After many grand battles, good triumphed, evil was defeated, and the legend of Vox Machina was spread far and wide. For a time, there was quiet in both our world and the world of Exandria.

Then one night, a traveling carnival performed in a field just outside the small town of Trostenwald, deep in the Dwendalian Empire. There, a group of mostly strangers were arrested under suspicion of murder.

A sailor on the verge of selling his soul in exchange for power.

A reckless young girl with a trickster god whispering in her ear.

A wizard desperate to absolve his sins and not become the monster he was trained to be.

A drunken goblin racked with despair over the life and family she lost.

A detective with a short fuse and a chip on her shoulder.

A debauched carnival fortune-teller running from the madness that once lived in his skin.

And a dealer of death so vicious she was given the title Orphan-Maker.

Thus began the story of the Mighty Nein.

Where previously we had followed a party of adventurers trying to become heroes, here was what appeared to be a group of misfits trying to not become villains. They were difficult and often reckless. Their checkered pasts and emotional damage would constantly undermine their attempts to survive. The world around them hung on the edge of war, but when asked to join the battle, they ran from the call to arms. Like most people living in uncertain times, they were too busy trying to

stay alive to think about the larger conflicts around them. Instead they found work with crime lords, saved lost children, fought pirates, and befriended underground revolutionaries.

And then, of course, there was a party member's death. A small, ugly, reckless death and all the pain and unfinished business that came along with it. It shook us, leading to a fundamental shift in our table of players unlike anything I had ever seen before. Our characters started questioning what they wanted and who they wanted to be. For me, the sudden shift led me to create a character so unlike anything I had ever played that I barely felt in control. I would prepare to speak, and a voice in my head would softly say, "Nah, I've got a better idea." And then something far wiser than anything I could come up with in my normal life would come flowing out. Don't get me wrong, I was always driving, but the guy riding shotgun had the map, and it was best not to ask questions. Somehow it felt like my character outgrew me when I wasn't looking. Maybe this feeling was the inevitable result of a group of characters who spent less time saving the world and more time saving one another. They were not the sort of people who would ever become heroes of the realm. They did something far more impressive: They became good people.

I eventually came to realize that the fundamental shift we experienced in the game had also had an effect on our audience. People were absolutely grief-stricken. Some had to walk away from the show for weeks to recover. To this day, when I'm out in the world, I'll randomly meet a fan who will cry when they talk to me about what happened. I feel like most shows don't have that intense of an effect on their audience. Except, I eventually realized, we're not a show. We're friends around a gaming table with a window open to any and all who want to be with us within the story. This death was witnessed by only a handful of people within the fictional world of Exandria. But the truth is that there were countless invisible eyes watching that day. They were there, floating just beyond reach, incapable of stopping this tragedy as it unfolded in front of them. The window into our game had opened wider than I thought it could.

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The audience found their way to us, our characters have grown beyond us, and now Exandria lives and breathes even when we aren't sitting at the table. And that brings us to the book you are holding (or listening to, times being what they are). *The Mighty Nein: Stories Untold* is, from my perspective, an expedition. The window we all opened into Exandria more than ten years ago has finally expanded into a portal, and this wonderful band of writers has crawled through to see what stories they can unearth for us. They have a rich collection of sketchy friends, justifiable enemies, loved ones, and complicated messes to choose from. Thanks to these stories, the imaginary world my friends and I inhabit now grows in our absence. For once, I get to peer through from the other side of the window, right beside all of you. But before I join you, dear audience, let me leave you with a little something to get things started.

After weeks of travel, you and your friends come to the town of Shadycreek Run. You make your way to the Trench tavern, walk straight up to the bar, order a round, and chat up the young dwarf with shoulder-length brown hair tending bar. “You’re looking for the Mighty Nein? Sorry, friend, you just missed them. But they were talking to those people at the table in the back there. I bet they know something that would interest you . . .”



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THE MIGHTY NEIN
STORIES
UNTOLD

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FIGHT FOR THE SOUL

Betsy Aoki

INTRO TO THE DEPTHS

Dread Uk'otoa, in his prison sealed, three locks

HERE, IN THE STORM-SHATTERED SPLINTERS and melted slag from the *Tide's Breath*, sinking swiftly into the depths. Here, in ruddy pools of blood diffusing across hungry waters. The rack and ruin of souls stilled as the Lucidian Ocean swallowed it all, and flotsam whirled down to Uk'otoa's domain as tribute.

Green fronds waved amidst spiraling bubbles and the chuckling of a hungry leviathan.

So compelling, the movements of the drowning. Under the dark waters, their struggles became seductive, sensual, slowed like a lover's caress.

Uk'otoa thought no one would ever understand this beauty: his need to see them die with all his burning yellow eyes, hold them tightly within the serpentine coils of his mind, taste their last thoughts and breaths.

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Where once he spent his followers' blood across the islands, now the fallen leviathan savored each tiny blood-tinged bubble, each terrified last shudder, as the fire of salt water filled their lungs. Seawater was the only substance that could erase the souls of fools in quite this delicious way, and Uk'otoa drank deep.

Their minds? Their minds screamed for the Dawnfather, the Wildmother, other godly relatives even further from the frequency upon which Uk'otoa thought his thoughts.

At least they weren't crying out to *his father*. Uk'otoa felt the old anger rise and reflexively quelled it. Revenge against the Cloaked Serpent would be in stealth until such a time when it was too late to be anything but loud.

Something new descended, cutting through the deep kelp . . .

Ah, Vandran's old falchion, seawater converting its barnacles into encrusted blue-green eyes. Once wielded with utter devotion, now cast off in treachery. Uk'otoa didn't care how the storm killed Vandran. His lack of weapon suggested the human captain had drowned already.

Near the falling blade, Uk'otoa found Vandran's pet, the half-orc sailor, still struggling in the bloody waters. Fjord. So angry, having just witnessed his shipmate Sabian's explosive betrayal of the *Tide's Breath* crew.

Burning to save his own life, yes, but also to be powerful, to not be at the mercy of anything or anyone. Like Uk'otoa, Fjord did not want to die alone down here, defeated by his beloved wind and open water, betrayed by someone he thought he understood.

As his dying soul screamed for recourse into the sea's cold depths, Fjord didn't realize there was a bargain to be made. But Uk'otoa did.

And Uk'otoa made it for him.

WHAT THE BISON REMEMBER

The Wildmother, in her realm far from Exandria

THE FIRST TIME THE WILDMOTHER grew concerned about the sailor was when she heard of him from the bison.

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The elders had scented a not-from-here stench that stood out from the clean grass and the wind through the cottonwood trees. The smell centered on one of the travelers who trod the land with a heavy boot. And in the abandoned campsite, the bison nosed through a wet area littered with bloody dust clumps and orc tusk shavings, rife with the burnt smell of tooth.

The Wildmother recognized the stench through their noses: the acid burn of salt water vomited in a rough series of circles, burning through the grasses and killing the soil underneath.

Her seas were nowhere near this place. Who would carry seawater while traveling, drink it to the point of sickness, and then vomit it out upon her lands?

Reaching with her soul-sense, she found that the area smelled of coercion, a deal forced upon someone. Salt water from her seas had been used as a tether. She could think of only one power on Exandria who placed such bindings on the drowning: Uk'otoa, creation of her twisted brother the Cloaked Serpent.

The bison elder, sensing her growing dismay, sought to ease her worries.

The interlopers moved on, of course. And this smell certainly didn't disrupt the evening feed or the morning lowing rituals to the Mother of All Bison, he said hurriedly. All herd proprieties have been observed, and our gracious lady still holds these lands.

But the grass never did grow back.

THE WORDS, AND THE WEAPON

In his prison sealed, three locks

ANOTHER MIDNIGHT ARRIVED, ALONG WITH the roiling of mazarine-blue oceans inside Uk'otoa's soul. His dreaming eyes saw overturned silt sending rot-scum in eddies across cold currents. Within these tiny vortices Uk'otoa detected Fjord's young soul, yearning and bright, coming to rest before one of the leviathan's burning eyes.

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Delicious. Words seek havens, like larval barnacles seek rock, and Uk'otoa would send such larvae to swim deep inside Fjord's soul.

Come to your true father, who has sought you out, Uk'otoa thought, preparing his own mind for the exhausting contact with Fjord beyond the barrier. *Cast off these fools and weaklings. Come into your power as my Fathombound.*

The giant leviathan coiled gently around Fjord's tiny soul—a soul so anxious to please his new traveling mates, so worried about his tusks and his ability to appear strong, so concerned with his ability to fit in. So full of shame about who he was, where he came from, how little he knew about the world and his magic.

Easy doorways, to a son of the Cloaked Serpent. The half-orc was wide open.

Let him face the scrutiny of just one eye—all he could probably handle at this stage. And send him simple words, to carry compulsions past the three seals.

Watching.

Uk'otoa felt Fjord flinch. Whenever someone had noticed Fjord in the past, pain would follow. And something this powerful, watching him like this . . . ? Fjord's soul was sputtering at Uk'otoa, bleating nonsense in fear.

Regardless, it didn't matter what Fjord said to the leviathan. It was enough if Fjord knew that a great being like Uk'otoa was watching him. Owned him.

But Fjord also had to *want* this bond, to seal up the cracks made from Uk'otoa choosing for him. Fjord's desires were what made him worthy of knowing Uk'otoa's mind and his plans. Avantika had honed herself like a blade for Uk'otoa within her ambitions. Fjord could be just as strong a Chosen.

Uk'otoa tried for kindness and what he imagined was fatherly pride. The leviathan sent the terrible ripping of whale calves being born, a shark child's first taste of prey. The power and joy of a sea predator and

his son, dancing through the waves. What Uk'otoa had once felt, in the earlier days when he was young and he and the Cloaked Serpent were in better accord.

Potential.

There. Uk'otoa felt a stirring of ego in Fjord at that word, a sand-speck's more pride. Perhaps this strange scrutiny wouldn't be so bad, after all. Perhaps the half-orc dared to think he might have some touch of greatness.

However, there wasn't enough of a bond formed yet for a fledgling to keep up a longer communion. More of the leviathan's cypris larvae needed to grow within young Fjord's mind. Uk'otoa tried to send the most important words before his senses tired and the magical connection started to fade.

Learn . . . Grow . . . Provoked . . . Consume.

More bleating, more flailing at the visions Uk'otoa was sending. Uk'otoa consciously kept his own hunger in check as he sent the next word.

Reward.

Finally, the true flames rose: Fjord's soul was attuned now, wondering what Uk'otoa wanted done for his reward. But Uk'otoa was tiring, and it would be best to leave Fjord wanting more.

Patience.

Uk'otoa sent the last rush of his larvae to implant in Fjord's soul, along with a splash of Lucidian seawater. It was important that Fjord get another taste of the perilous waters, a reminder of the drowning he was spared. A boon from a leviathan god.

And in turn, Fjord would be the key to Uk'otoa's release upon Exandria. Surely inheriting Vandran's weapon would help, a weapon as hungry as Fjord.

LATER, IN A WHIRLIGIG DREAM-WREATH of gnarled barnacles and salt water . . .

The Sword of Fathoms was now bloodied. Uk'otoa had wedded a single eye of his own to the hilt to watch Fjord's soul.

This blade ate other blades, just as Uk'otoa would consume all others. Uk'otoa savored every bloody sacrifice made as Fjord swung the blade against his foes.

Yes, this Chosen would serve.

WHAT THE SWAMP SWALLOWS

The Wildmother's realm

THE WILDMOTHER LIFTED A GOBLET of moss agate and silver, a harvest cup re-created from what she remembered of human festivals. Birds and their wings decorated the arc of the handle; the basin had been overlaid with silver ivy and tiny cosmos blooms. Steam rose from the cup, bearing the spicy scents of tea: rooibos, cinnamon, licorice, clove, black pepper.

She closed her eyes and inhaled as she reached for Exandria and its humid rot, algae and lily blooms, green shoots bursting through wetland mud.

Her consciousness opened to the Labenda Swamp and scurried along the segmented legs of insects. She felt ravenous satisfaction as a great blue heron speared a fish with its beak, waiting for the struggling to still before swallowing. The Wildmother was hungry, and so were her creatures.

Water seeped into the footprints left from heavy boots.

Her tangled creepers and vines gave the Wildmother a sense of the half-orc sailor's bearing: ducking from the whip of branches and foliage, cringing from the black flies buzzing in his face.

From the flies she learned Fjord seemed to be flinching more than was needed to avoid them. His companions would gesture, and he would ever so slightly shrink back before assuming a stoic pose to accept the touch.

She saw through curious frog eyes that the half-orc peered into the

pools of water when alone, trying to make faces of nobility, of happiness, of bravery. As though he didn't cower from even the dragonflies when they got all friendly!

The pileated woodpeckers had paused long enough in their nest maintenance to comment on the strange songs he sang when no one was near: the same sounds over and over, shifting their lilt and pitch. The woodpeckers thought he might be trying to master a mating call, but then he would use those newly lilted sounds with *all* his companions, so who was he trying to mate with? *All of them?*

The Wildmother had her doubts.

A bargain with Uk'otoa would give Fjord boons of illusion-crafting. So why was this sailor working so hard to make changes to his speech?

Deep scions or even those transforming into deep scions never practice their swaggers, the Wildmother thought. *This half-orc puffs out his chest to prove he knows his own strength, but does he? He's more conflicted than he wants anyone to know.*

A very odd choice for Uk'otoa.

JELLYFISH TANGO

The Wildmother's realm

THE WILDMOTHER WALKED ALONG JAGGED violet shores, summoning dream tides to better reach the seas of Exandria. She could hear the sleepy cries of gulls settling in flocks for the night. Still, she needed to reach farther out to sea.

CRYSTAL, MOON, CROWN, COMB, EVEN the haughty mauve stingers—they all knew tonight was special: Even a *ship* had sailed in to watch this mating. *Tonight is important, children.*

And now the Wildmother's consciousness joined the excitement.

Umbrellas of spiral light opened and closed in the dark waters. Beaded fountains undulated. Ruffled fans edged the scene in glowing

gems and sparkled against the waves. A whoosh of sudden spurts amid watery laughter. Fondle, catch, release, dance.

Each jellyfish knew she was a queen with a tiara of movement spiking the soft waters, a pleasure fan wrinkling and folding, her coil of stars spinning endlessly along miniature jets. Each jellyfish knew himself to be a coronet of the seas, the ruffled stinger to the joyously stung, his jeweled scepter ruling the waves for tonight, for future progeny, and for pleasure.

And those not mating at this time also danced to share in the joy, their shapes like pulsing gas lamps, their stinging nematocysts edged in light. Their glow reflected off the faces of the earnest half-orc and blue-haired infernal leaning toward each other, sitting on the deck of a quiet ship.

The land beings must be doing their own kind of mating dance, the jellyfish agreed communally. They swam around the ship, creating fanciful minarets in the waters around the keel. Their chatter has a sensual feel about it. Wildmother, even the land dwellers celebrate with us!

The Wildmother remained amused. Then she realized what she was seeing aboard the ship. This was the half-orc who had smelled of Uk'otoa's seawater in the grasslands, who bore the mark of his not-entirely-consensual bond.

A bond made somewhere in her seas, and whose rules he followed even now.

Unusual, that such a one could perceive joy in nature. And share it with someone, the Wildmother thought. Uk'otoa's helpers, if they aren't single-note fanatical, are always miserable.

Perhaps his very flexibility would open him up to leaving. Perhaps she could carve out space for him to choose his path, in all the ways Uk'otoa had tried to avoid.

Tiny waves slapped gently around the ship as the jellyfish churned the waters, violent sunflowers transmuting to bougainvillea, shimmering. Pearls of light whirled like mermaid hair.

Keep an eye on this Fjord, the Wildmother told the jellyfish. But they were busy.

Good thing the Wildmother was not the blushing kind. Not anymore, at least.

There's no grander ball than this, no jewels finer, the jellyfish thought happily at her.

This night would nestle into Fjord's soul as a reminder that not all dark waters stay cold. Some waters pass through lighted beings and become the warm currents of sex, new generations, and new lives to be lived.

His soul would remember how the jellyfish's light illuminated Jester's eyes and hair, how beautiful the canopy of the brightest stars in the sky and the faint glowing sparkles around the edges of dream.

WHEN PIRATES MEET

In his prison sealed, three locks

LOVELY AVANTIKA, BLOODTHIRSTY AND AMBITIOUS, always tasting of jasmine and smoke when Uk'otoa reached for her soul. She was so openly fierce, it made Fjord's little barnacle garden and aura of cinnamon and stone feel paltry by comparison.

Indeed, it was harder than it should have been to push through the connection to Fjord's soul. The half-orc captain had rebuffed Avantika's seduction, but his control was slipping.

Fjord seemed distracted by something—or someone—else.

Perhaps more fear was in order, then. Avantika had done what she did best with the sailor, intriguing and seducing him with her aura of power and danger. She would draw him in physically.

Now Uk'otoa would do what he did best in dreams: Show Fjord the terror of ships destroyed, remind him of what he owed the leviathan god. The salt and blood stinging in his lungs. The mere fact the half-orc still drew breath—Fjord should be grateful to his sea father, Uk'otoa.

Learn. Can't this landsman feel how easy it is to breathe underwater in this dreamscape? He could learn this magic from me and more!

As the sea vines rose to show Fjord a staircase, Uk'otoa sent: *Grow. Could this fool gain wisdom any more slowly? Step down to the depths and enter my dominion!*

Prøveke. Fjord understood what to do now and destroyed the dream visages of his old fixations: his treacherous shipmate Sabian and then that false father figure, Vandran.

Fjord had once thought to learn from these two what his betters expected: how to behave in the world, how best to survive. Still, both had betrayed him—openly or by silently abandoning him to his lonely fate. Indeed, they deserved destruction so Fjord could become something greater.

Watching...

Uk'otoa coiled and uncoiled his lengths of eyes in frustration.

... Watch.

How stupid could this whelp be? Uk'otoa was showing him exactly what to do with the orb embedded in the sword. Slow, so slow! The leviathan hoped when it came to handling the actual placement, Fjord would be much faster with the Cloven Crystal.

Reward.

How small Fjord's soul seemed, facing the oncoming ships, and then the half-orc's exultation at slamming the dream seas together to shatter those ships to splinters.

Yes, rewards for you, too, my son, Uk'otoa thought smugly. *But first, you must do exactly what I ask.*

The Wildmother's realm

THERE WERE ONLY A FEW mice aboard Avantika's ship, but they were expecting more children any day now, they told the Wildmother. Ever since the ship's cat had left for a fishmonger's vessel in the last port of call, the ship's mice had grown less observant, fatter, more content.

The people running the ship seemed to be very excitable and yammered a lot of sea talk the mice didn't care about, since it wasn't about replacing the ship's cat.

Soon they would be near land again. An island with a temple would be a better place to raise babies, the mice decided. They would get off as soon as they could.

A lot to be said for solid walls and floors that don't tilt, said one pregnant mouse with a sniff.

The Wildmother agreed the mice should get off that cursed ship.

She would need to shift her awareness to island creatures living near this temple anyway, as she suspected it was one of Uk'otoa's targets.

Deep within the Lucidian Ocean

CRACK.

Aha! Not Fjord—Avantika broke the first seal! Uk'otoa felt the waters rippling with the rupture of the seafloor, and the whales' songs startled to silence.

The lowest barrier, twisted with lethal magic and woven with bright skeins of fate, had snapped!

Uk'otoa surged higher, still feeling the branded scars on his seared tentacles from when he had tested the barrier before. After the tentacles failed, he had tried to uncoil his tail against the Cloaked Serpent's wards, and the backlash had humbled him for days.

Now he ignored the ache of his bones and teeth as he swam upward toward the second barrier, closer to the surface of Exandria. He didn't have time for pain.

In his glee he stretched a soul tendril to Avantika—easier than it had ever been before—granting her the boon she had long asked for. He laughed as he felt Fjord's envy of her newfound mastery of the tides.

You, too, could win my favor, little orc. Uk'otoa chuckled to himself. *It doesn't have to be Avantika next time. Only two more seals to break and the world is ours.*

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The Wildmother's realm

THE WILDMOTHER PACED IN HER bower as she communed with her creatures. Pirate queens were unleashing dread leviathans, and all her children wanted to talk about was sex. Sex, sex, sex.

But it was good to know Fjord would share his last good air with the playful blue girl. None of Uk'otoa's other minions gave up their lives for anyone but Uk'otoa.

How many of her creatures would die if Uk'otoa sprang forth from the waves again? Why was this sailor helping *him*?! Yes, Fjord had gone to Avantika's bed, but surely that was of the moment, and not where his heart truly lay.

The Wildmother tried for calm.

Fjord still kept space in his heart for something other than the leviathan. That was a good sign, that the corrosion of his soul wasn't total.

And he had someone he loved dearly enough that he would risk the nightmare of drowning again. The Wildmother could feel small bits of her own coral and kelp trying to take hold in Fjord's soul. No more of those insidious barnacles!

Fjord had shared his last air with his whole chest. That couldn't have been easy.

The sailor needed to know that he had choices other than dying to escape Uk'otoa's grasp.

Her minnows were still giggling about sex bubbles when the Wildmother paused her connections to them and to Fjord. She didn't want to think about this next part either, and yet she had to—what would happen in her seas once Uk'otoa was freed?

What could she do about Fjord?

SECOND SEAL

In his prison sealed, two locks

UK'OTOA LAZILY REACHED OUTWARD ONCE more to touch Fjord's soul. Some new kelp and coral cluttered the water currents, but that hardly mattered. Uk'otoa's lovely blue-green barnacles still held on in key areas of Fjord's mind. Fjord's strongest emotions and perceptions were still covered in fearful verdigris.

Who, indeed, would want to face the Great Leviathan? Uk'otoa mused with satisfaction. He stretched his jaw open in a yawn. It felt so good closer to the warm surface, closer to the minions he controlled. To the world he would someday hold in his coils.

The part of Fjord that yearned for a strong father, for a guardian to protect him from abuse, that temptation of never being hurt again—well, Uk'otoa knew his sailor wasn't telling the whole truth to his friends. Not about that.

There was a part of Fjord's soul that doubted himself in secret, that just wanted someone else to have all the answers—*that* was the part that couldn't wait for Uk'otoa to take his will away. That part of Fjord just wanted his shame and punishment to stop, forever. To be on the winning side for a change, the side of might. Within a place of safety, not having to think—

The familiar taste of lightning! Fjord had placed the Cloven Crystal!
CRACK.

Echoes rang once more across the oceans as the second barrier snapped.

Uk'otoa wasted no time savoring this triumph. He lashed his tail out to get more momentum as he corkscrewed past the old tangle of the second barrier's magical strands, careful not to touch the remnants of its once-glowing lethal skeins.

Upward.

The skies and surface of the Lucidian Ocean still remained distant,

but Uk'otoa could see reflected light now above the third and final magical barrier, dazzling his many golden eyes.

He closed his eyes and thought.

Perhaps he didn't need to wait for his Chosen to break the final seal. Surely it was weaker now that the other two were broken?

He threw his body upward against the third barrier

and

and

and

AGONY.

Uk'otoa's nerves vibrated like a lightning strike through tree branches. His soul reeled from the workings his father's acolytes had placed into the uppermost seal.

Instead of giving way, the final barrier emanated searing pain, as well as all the loneliness and rejected shame the Cloaked Serpent had ever evoked, his father's anger apparently still woven into its fiery threads.

Certainly, his other attempts to break a magical seal had caused physical wounds, hurts that eventually faded as Uk'otoa slowly recovered. However, his father had shaped *this* barrier with all his contempt, all his fury, all his hatred at not having a perfect son.

Uk'otoa screamed as he curled in on himself, sinking away from the third barrier to heal.

Uk'otoa knew how most Exandrians looked at his form: serpentine, tentacled, many-eyed, terrifying. They saw the leviathan as ugly and repellent. But when his father created him, it was like how a metalsmith crafts a blade: every part of Uk'otoa's body intended as a weapon and a feint, a lure and a perfect edge.

Not that his father had found Uk'otoa beautiful—beauty meant nothing to that despoiler—but the Cloaked Serpent found Uk'otoa beautifully crafted to terrorize the deeps, because he had willed him so.

I had trusted you to be my proxy on this plane. The memory flashed across Uk'otoa's many eyes. The Cloaked Serpent's face, the god's cold, smooth voice, his hands by his sides. His father had never had to touch

the leviathan to make him bleed, and this final goodbye was no different.

Now Uk'otoa could taste his own blood in the waters, razor cuts from the Cloaked Serpent's final barrier, as the memory continued playing its dirge in his father's voice.

You thought you could rise higher than me? A true power in Exandria? Uk'otoa, you are worthless! Less than the worthless land scum, because even those fools keep their promises!

Deep breath. Well, the Cloaked Serpent would certainly see what his son could do. Soon.

Uk'otoa reached out to Fjord's soul again, sighing in satisfaction as his soul tendrils whipped jubilantly from barnacle to barnacle. Terror consumed from others was always so refreshing. Cleansing and soothing his mind from memories of past defeats.

Draining Fjord reminded Uk'otoa that there were still many delectables to savor, still a victory to be won.

He must also remind Fjord of the same victory. He could not bear to stay down here much longer, with his father's taunts ringing in his heart and his final escape so, so close.

Uk'otoa's tail wound around Fjord's soul in the dreamscape, the leviathan's spine bruised and crackling with the injuries he sustained from the third barrier. All of Fjord's heat now flowed toward Uk'otoa, and the half-orc grew colder as the demigod fed and fed from his soul to regain what he lost from the barrier.

Watching. Adapt. Reward.

And there it was, the final vision of the three cities. Where Fjord must go next.

Release.

One eye closes, the other opens, Uk'otoa thought.

Uk'otoa's watchful eye embedded in Fjord's stomach opened wider. He could feel more wisps of Fjord's will bowing to his, a few more tiny barnacles growing anew in the folds of Fjord's mind. *Perhaps the half-orc is learning what I need him to learn.*