

I

The knife in Arrehp's hand had been dull for three harvests. He ran his thumb along the edge again, feeling nothing but smooth, worn metal where there should have been bite. Outside the window, the sun bled orange across the fields-- fields he'd spent every daylight hour working since he was tall enough to swing a scythe. He bore a countenance upon his face which seemed to age it beyond its eighteen years, dirt ground into the creases around his eyes.

"Pass the bread," his younger sister muttered through a mouthful of porridge. Their mother slapped her wrist lightly-- the same scolding she'd given since they were children. The familiar rhythm of spoons scraping wooden bowls filled the cramped cottage.

Arrehp exhaled through the wooden slats that made up the window. The village beyond hadn't changed in his lifetime, not really: same thatched roofs, same mud paths that turned to rivers when it rained, same drafty church where Father Gorarr droned sermons everyone heard without listening. The only difference was the banners now-- those damned Ikbemite standards flying so arrogantly, as if defying the wind. Oh, to be a hundred miles away.

"Sharpening that knife with the air again?" his mother said suddenly, nodding at the knife in his hands, "just like yer ol' da. Ain't no whetstone gonna appear magically, ye know?"

Behind him, his sister snorted into her gruel. Arrehp turned away from the window, flicking a berry at her. It landed in her hair, producing a satisfyingly familial squawk. His mother scrunched up her face in fleeting annoyance, "I'll turn in the both o' ye to the wolves if you don't stop that. Eighteen summers, Arrehp, behave yer age!"

Outside, the first evening bell tolled from the watchtower-- new since the occupation. The sound was wrong, just a little... too sharp. Arrehp set the useless knife down carefully. His father's knife. The one thing they hadn't taken. The berry still lodged in his sister's hair, Arrehp leaned back against the hearthstone, its warmth seeping through his threadbare tunic. His mother's fingers moved absently over her own bowl, tracing the chipped rim where his father's spoon had knocked loose a splinter a year ago. The silence stretched-- not comfortable, but worn in, like the grooves in the floorboards from generations of pacing-- disturbed only by the dinning of the distant bell and a decreasingly faint rumble without.

Then a knock came: three heavy thuds-- not the tentative rap of a neighbor borrowing salt, not the frantic pounding of someone fleeing the patrols, nor the incessant beating of the tax collector. This was the sound of a gauntleted fist striking oak. Arrehp's mother froze mid-bite. His sister's spoon clattered into her bowl. The air thickened, curdling like milk left in the sun. Outside, the second curfew bell hadn't rung yet. They shouldn't be here-- not now.

"Open," the command was guttural, the accent clipping the word like shears through wool. No titles, no courtesies-- just the tone men used when they knew resistance was futile.

Arrehp's fingers found the knife handle again. His sister made a small, animal noise in her throat. Their mother stood slowly, hands pressing flat against the table as if to steady the earth itself. The door rattled under another blow. A hinge groaned.

"Coming," his mother called, voice brittle as autumn leaves. She smoothed her apron with trembling hands, then shot Arrehp a look that pinned him to his seat, her eyes but briefly flicking towards the useless knife now clutched in his white fist: *don't*.

The door swung outward before she reached it. Framed in the doorway, the soldier's silhouette blotted out the twilight. A wolf. His armor wasn't the polished plate of a gallant knight, but boiled leather and poor steel, smelling of sweat and damp fur. Yellowed fangs dully glowed in the firelight as he sniffed the air. Behind him, two more shapes shifted in the mud lane, their eyes catching the hearth's glow like banked coals.

"*Virr riet*," his mother said, bobbing into a curtsy so deep it nearly toppled her. The honorific was wrong-- Ikbemites didn't use Ienrrargian titles-- but the soldier's ear twitched in acknowledgment.

“Young one,” the wolf rasped, muzzle jerking toward Arrehp, “Age?”

Arrehp’s throat closed. He’d seen the conscription parties before, hauling children barely old enough to shave onto oxcarts-- seen the empty huts afterward, doors left ajar like slack jaws. His mother’s fingers dug into her apron seams.

“Sixteen winters, good sir,” she lied.

The soldier’s nostrils flared. He stepped inside without invitation, boots tracking mud across the floor. Arrehp’s grip on the knife tightened. The wolf’s gaze flicked to it, then away, dismissively-- a pup’s toy.

“Records say eighteen,” The soldier pulled a scroll from his belt, the parchment crackling as he unrolled it, “Arrehp, son of Vihton, field hand... fit for service.”

Behind him, Arrehp’s sister whimpered. The sound seemed to snap something in their mother. She lunged for the soldier’s arm, her voice shredding into a scream, “He’s my only son! You took his father, you can’t-”

The soldier marched deeper into the abode, his burly frame unhindered by the human woman’s desperate grasp. His sister screamed. Arrehp was on his feet before he knew he’d moved, the knife raised-- not to kill, not even to wound, just to stop this... madness.

A flicker of light flashed in Arrehp’s peripheral vision: the dull glint produced by the hearth’s fire in the second soldier’s crossbow bolt, now pointed directly at his chest. Arrehp froze.

“Drop it,” the wolf towering before him said, more annoyed than intimidated.

The knife clattered onto the floor. Arrehp’s mother let out a strangled sob, her fingers still twisted in the soldier’s gray fur as if her frail human hands could anchor a mountain. The wolf merely shook her off like a bothersome gnat, “The king must have sailors. To the seas he must go.”

“Move,” he said, the word less a command than a fact of nature-- like telling water to run downhill. And Arrehp’s legs obliged. The crossbow didn’t waver as he stepped over the threshold into the violet dusk, where the air smelled of turned earth and the tang of old iron. Behind him, his sister shrieked something incoherent-- his name, maybe, or a curse-- before the door slammed shut with a finality that plunged his heart into the cold abyss he felt within.

Then, the familiar sound of that same old door creaking wide open came, jerking the boy’s head in its direction. His mother bolted out, tears cascading in streams towards the earth below. Arrehp felt all self-control vanish in that instant. He lunged towards his mother like a lost child. But no warm embrace greeted him, instead rebuked by the coldness of steel against the back of his neck and the cruel clutch of the same harbinging gauntlet that had knocked, as it closed around the collar of his tunic. His mother’s face contorted in purest anguish as she dropped to her knees, crying. Arrehp could not bear the sight. He clenched his eyes shut and turned away, barely containing his own tears. The wolf, seizing the opportunity, yanked Arrehp away and once more towards the cart.

“ARREHP!” came the agonized, heart-wrenching shriek from behind him, shaking his core like glass. He didn’t dare to look, lest all control truly be lost-- who was to say that the wolves weren’t willing to worsen the tragedy? There were at least a dozen between the three carts.

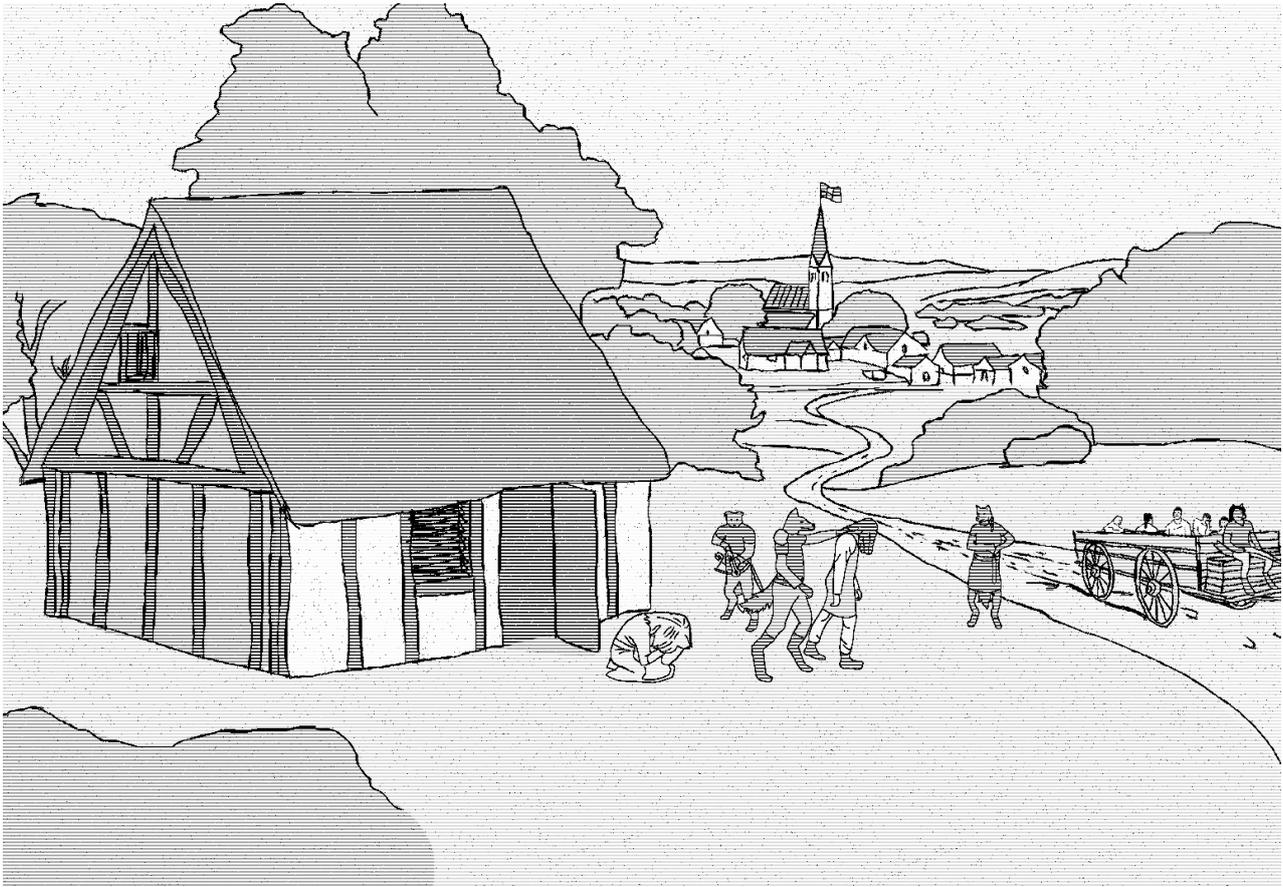
Arrehp barely had time to register the others already huddled in the cart-- faces he knew from the fields, from the harvest dances, now sallow with the same mute terror-- before rough hands hoisted him up. The wood was slick with something that wasn’t rain. One of the younger wolves snickered. Then, in his heavy accent, “Be grateful you not noses like us. We have wash you scaredy shits when get to port... No worry, this last stop. We go fast now.”

As abruptly as he’d been taken, the lash cracked and the cart lurched forward with the rest of the train. He caught a glimpse of his mother silhouetted in the doorway, her apron clutched in both her whitened fists, as she mouthed something-- a prayer, perhaps. Then the village folded away behind them, swallowed by the rising mist.

They didn’t bind his hands-- no ropes, no chains-- just the foolish certainty that none of them would leap into the darkening woods. That was the first thing Arrehp noticed once he managed to pry his mind from the calamity at hand. The wolves lounged on the driver’s bench, tails

flicking at flies, as casually as if they were hauling crops to market. *Idiots*, Arrehp thought. He'd simply leap when they weren't looking and bolt for the treeline. He'd go back home and this nightmare'd be over... if only there weren't the certainty of breaking a bone on impact-- at the least. And if only there weren't the certainty that the soldiers'd immediately hear and stop to make sure that *all* his bones were broken-- at the least. And if only there weren't the certainty that the wolves'd track him down immediately even if he could make the jump uninjured. And if he made it home... then what? They wouldn't just let such a transgression slide. He'd have to... to- it was no use. Arrehp began to look around with a desperation he'd never in his life known before, trying to think of something-- *anything*-- that could possibly be done to liberate himself from this situation. Then it finally hit him: nothing. Nothing could be done.

Arrehp stared at his own knees. The knife was gone. His father was gone. His mother, his sister, his... everything. The only thing left were the salty droplets he collected in his hands.



"The king must have sailors. To the seas he must go."