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Journeyman

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Journeyman

Sunbeam shafts....

Rich humus....

Cathedral of living jade....

—Focus on conversation:

Mirci shook her head sharply, short black hair flying. “That was damned peculiar.”

“No,” Sir Nyss corrected easily, “merely damned.”

She stopped at that, looked up from her sunwarmed mossy boulder, over to where her liege was swimming in the long wide streampool. “Are you s’ sure of that? So sure it was a demon?”

“Yes, Mirci. I have no doubt.” The knight traced a shifting series of sinuous curves with his ophidian body, sending ripples against the flow of the clear water. Sunlight dappled the leaves above them, coaxing shades of green and yellow from the high canopy: organic stained glass. A slender tree spread its wands partway over the churrilling water, splotching its surface with shadows in turn. Sir Nyss swam beneath, and sunlight flashed from his wet scales in tiny stellar glintings, sharp and precise.

Mirci stayed up on one elbow, half-consciously stroking the moist green moss for its comforting softness. Her mind was aroil with crisp memories of their recent encounter. Sir Nyss was convinced the thing had been a demon; Mirci was uncertain, although it had frightened her in some way that pierced beneath perception. The fluidity! It had moved with a purely inhuman grace and speed, obscenely boneless as no biped should be; its body had been a slick black hue, like water from some oceanic abyss. That color! It had been anticolor, anti-light almost, as if all the light of the morning forest understory had vanished into it —or had been negated—

Like liquid obsidian of sheerest jet, Mirci thought. The first line of a poem? Perhaps; “obsidian” threw the meter.

Water splashed up, pattered down in glistening droplets as Sir Nyss dove and cavorted beneath the surface, comfortable with the shallowness of the streampool. When Mirci had waded out to this flattopped rock she’d estimated the rill at about two areds deep, hardly enough to reach halfway to her knees. Plenty for the knight. She lay watching her liege’s underwater play, her trademark half—smile now tinged with honest affection. She’s always respected the man, but now had learned to enjoy his humor, and...was coming to appreciate his company in general. The squire was also slightly flattered (probably more than she should have been) that Sir Nyss trusted her to maintain the guard while he indulged himself. He rarely let himself react on the spur of the moment, preferring (for whatever complex of reasons) to cloak himself in the intangible chasuble of Knighthood, with all its attendant responsibilities and directives. Mirci was glad for her knight’s increasingly frequent bouts of relaxed play. Demon or not (and she suspected not), suddenly facing that icy jet thing on the steep hilltrail

had been a tense way to begin a day—and what if it hadn't paused and stalked away? This streampool was an excellent antidote, bathed in light to wash over the recollections of that insane unlight....

Mirci traced the knight's progress to a wide boulder, centrally placed in the stream. Through the glare from the water's surface she could see him pause before the submerged overhang, his tail beating sinewaves to maintain his position against the divided current.

A blur—
—strike—
—score!

Mirci mentally cheered as Sir Nyss shifted the rivercrab to a more manageable position, avoiding its flailing claws and crunching it down. Here it was a half-meal, a supplement, almost a delicacy...but Mirci remembered when she had survived in the alleys on such fare, and much worse as well....

Sir Nyss thrust his blocky triangular head above water for air, coiling his body around a fallen branch below. Mirci envied him his ability to hold his breath for so long. The Nylmlani knight heaved a deep breath, his entire body expanding fractionally. Then he said, "I should tell thee, then. Remember the demon's body?"

"Of course." *How could anyone forget!*

"What color thought thee 'twas?"

A simple answer, surely! But Sir Nyss could rotate any gem to find its asteria. So Mirci's answer was more than ordinarily cautious: "To my eyes, at least, it was black...pure black.—Liquid obsidian of sheerest jet," she added.

"Aye. Was that all thine eyes showed thee?"

She considered, watching a pearly gold damselfly as it perched a number of ells upstream, behind the patient knight. "Yes.... There were two points of light that were in it? Or on it? In the chest, I think. One a little higher than the other."

He was nodding in a satisfied way, viridescent scales glinting in the warm bright light. "Well marked, Mirci." He paused for a second, dipping his head lower to let the current wash over his neck. "Those were our souls, squire. Reflected in the substance of the creature, for it had no soul of its own." He hesitated a beat, then uncoiled from the branch and swam to another rock across from hers, at the lip of the small streamfalls. As she absorbed and weighed his statement, Sir Nyss slithered onto the bare wet rock and sprawled contentedly on its warm wide surface.

He was unarmed at the moment, and unarmored; the caracil and chain mail were steps away from Mirci. Another heartening indication of his confidence in Mirci's alertness. Naturally the Drin girl was armed; she had, after all, survived a childhood in the lowstreets and back-alleys of Velen. Several slender, dense throwing knives (not a matched set!) were nestled in tunic and belt. Mirci felt as vulnerable without her weapons as a Lady of the Velen Towers would have without her pearl bracelets. *Or whatever they wear*, Mirci thought with a trace of the

old, familiar bitterness. *I wouldn't know, would I?*

Another thought. "Miliege, you appear amazingly unconcerned."

"I should hope so," was his laconic reply.

"You're still not worried that we're hopelessly lost?"

An eye opened and fixed her reprovingly. "There is no hope lost, squire, while we yet have our faith."

She let that bait pass. "Another adjective, then. Dangerously lost."

Sir Nyss managed to shrug, despite the fact that he had no shoulders. "We have three weeks yet, and the nightly clouds should lift soon. With the Lord's help we will be able to locate ourselves."

"Don't need that," she grinned. "We're right here."

"In relation to Jaryl Cyt. — You can navigate with the stars."

A brief expelled breath. "We'll find out."

"A loss of confidence, milady?"

Mirci hesitated. Then: "It's been a long time since I really practiced. I knew the skies perfectly when I first learned...but that was eight years ago, almost half my life, and I was just a *renah*."

"A what, lady?"

"Sorry. Velen word. Means 'girl-child,' or close enough. 'Boy-child' is *miinyah*."

"*Reinah* ?" Sir Nyss was always ready to learn something new. It was a quality Mirci found refreshing, after most of the Alantyth knights, and (for some reason) endearing.

"*Renah*," she corrected. "Not so much *i*, more *ai*."

Sir Nyss practiced until he got it right to her satisfaction.

"Methinks thou'rt very fortunate," he said a short while later.

"Hmmm?" She had laid back and was staring up above, down the hollow-ness to where the canopy leaves whispered below, arching from fifty ells up to cover the gap made by this series of rills and falls. The New Star was shining faintly through, viridescent and constant.

Sir Nyss elaborated: "You have traveled across the whole of the continent."

The statement stood for itself, Mirci thought, and felt no need for a response. (She hoped he understood that.) This was a comfortable, almost lulling place, especially with the water spilling a dozen areds down beneath her boulder. Far above (or below, as could be imagined), several red and yellow ovals fluttered in unpredictable patterns. Butterflies. She could follow them with her eyes as they danced around each other, looped and rose and vanished into the mysterious, aloof canopy.

"Well," she said, not moving her attention from the heliconiids that remained visible, "can't s'much say it was planned. Miliege."

"You were intent on leaving Velen, though?"

"Surely. But going away from a place isn't 'tall the same's going *to* another." She watched a brilliant yellow butterfly dance much closer above them, watched it float through sunlight over the water, watched it die as a jacamar

Reversal! He compensated: "I seem to remember a lady who this morning insisted on any number of alternatives."

Mirci dismissed that, frowning. "They're not making much sense now."

"They were well-defended."

"Logicking doesn't always fit," she murmured, low enough that Sir Nyss couldn't hear her above the water. She repeated her comment at his politely angled head, and added, "All of this is too far beyond our logic."

"All of what?" (Sir Nyss knew, but wanted her to say it.)

"This." She gestured at the steep hillsides sloping up on either side of them, so lush that no true estimate of their height could be made. "All...the mountains, this whole Daijhedda Range." She cut off suddenly, frustrated by her inability to convey.

"You recognized it, then?"

That startled her. "Recognized the demon!?"

"Not as an individual, milady. As a component. Even the damned had a part to play, and mayhap this one has another."

"You're being obscure, my dear knight."

"Then let me be pellucid as the water below. I have told you that our Lord—"

"—Yours—"

"—is not always to be understood. It is our faith that allows us to recognize and accept these things that are Arranged."

Mirci listened attentively, because she was his squire but also because she was curious.

"We are not lost, Mirci, because the demon was not sent after us."

"That's a relief."

"Listen!" A hint of frustration in the man's voice. "It was sent before us. Unknowing, probably. Uncaring, of a surety. But we can use it." He was sliding from the rock now, swimming to shore. Mirci gave the moss a last regretful stroke, stood, and followed.

"How?" she wondered, wading against the insistent current.

"To move in its tracks," Sir Nyss called back to her. "To pace its motions, if not its actions. To follow it to Jaryl Cyt. We should not stay here longer; you need to learn from doing, now."

And the knight refused to explain until they reached the joust at Jaryl Cyt, saying only, almost half to himself, "Yet still an apprentice...."

John M. Aguiar
RC '92

swooped with practiced accuracy. “Velen taught me the basics—survival’s masks. Once I’d learned those, Velen didn’t have much else. Not—well, time to leave, see the real world.”

“Velen is famed, milady. A host to marvels sung across the lands.” (Privately Sir Nyss was pleased. Of late Mirci had rarely been this talkative.)

“The Towers.” Syllables bitten and flung out “The nobles and merchants and all those who served them. I wasn’t one.”

“Mayhap you could have been?”

But Mirci just gave a half—laugh and rolled back on her side, hand on chin, not staring at her knight but rather at the water flowing between them. They were hard to see, darting back and forth, making headway and falling back...but after a moment Mirci’s mind caught the range and she was able to find the group of tlis. “See those?”

Sir Nyss peered over the darkstreaked edge of his rock, following her gaze. “Aye. Insects?” For the knight, an insect was anything small and fast and hard.

“Nope. Furry. Look,” and a quick dip of her hand sent cold water spilling from her palm, stranding a black fuzzy creature with a skein of spindly appendages. An instant served to resolve the tiny mammal’s features: an elongated, flattened body half the length of her thumb, and much thinner; two forelegs with long splayed fingers, slender as threads, to play the harmonies of surface tension; short thin hindlegs and a smooth short tail as rear rudders. The eyes were pink and small, the snout long and sharp; two pale red dots showed in the fur just ahead of the tail. Then the nervous tli had scrambled out of Mirci’s hand and tumbled the heights back into the pool, to rejoin its dozens of fellows jostling and darting across the water. Sir Nyss kept a patient silence. He had little interest in the waterstriding tlis, but was genuinely curious as to Mirci’s commentary.

“See that?” she said briefly after.

“Aye?”

“Never go anywhere. They’re still in their same part of the rill. Plenty of competition for spaces right here—” she flicked a finger in the water, sending tlis skittering away— “an’ they all come back, see, but there’s nothing else for them.”

“Mayhap I see thy thrust. You are saying Velen is like this?”

Suddenly Mirci was closed up. “Oh, I don’t know what I’m saying. Never mind me.” Sir Nyss let it go at that. It was enough to feel the cool, moist air; satisfactory, for now, to enjoy the rapid, unhurried pourings of the streamfall just below them. They rested in mutual silence, watching and listening, for at least half an hour.

A dark blur burst from above into a sunshaft, flaring brilliant azure; then the hummingbird was skimming back into the shadows. Concentrating on where it had vanished, Mirci said quietly, “Someone sent that demon after us.”

She had half thought her liege to be asleep on his warm rock, but one slitte sapphire eye was open. “Oho! You call it a demon now?”

“What else could it be?”