

Muraena (Moray Eel)

Aka, A'Jarif, aka Thomas Threston, aka John Rich, aka Iain MacDonald

*Anns a h-uile suidheachadh tha uamh neo-fhaicsinneach, sgàil às nach fhaic iad gu bràth
a' bhualadh a tha a' tighinn a-steach gus am bi e ro fhadaalach.*"

*["To every circumstance there is an unseen crevasse, a shadow from which
they'll never spot the incoming strike until it's too late."]*

Childhood

This is mah story, sae A'h will tell it mase' if ye dinnae mynd.

A'h wis born an' dubbed wi th' name o' Iain in th' cauld, foesty chills o' th' servants' quarters at Dunnyvaig castle, bein' th' seventh an' ainlie illegitimate sen o' Deumus (as th' Sassenachs ca' James) MacDonald, th' sixth laird o' Dunnyvaig. Ma mither wis Maggie Goode, a scullery maid, bit in accordance wi th' local custom, A'h passed doon th' MacDonald name despite th' circumstances o' mah birth (tae th' great dismay, A'h micht add, o' Deumus's guidwife, Lassie Agnes—bairn Campbell). A'h ken very little aboot they earlie years, bit A'h dae ken tha' in 1565, word reached th' castle (th' servants, tasked wi' greetin' th' pages, bein' th' foremost tae git news) o' Deumus's death at th' battle o' Glentassie. Maggie kent tha' wi' oot Deumus's protection, mah life wis forfeit—Lady Agnes an' Archibald, th' eldest son an' heir, wid huv a go tae purge th' shame o' a bastard frae th' family line. Afere th' fewk cuid fully digest th' news, Maggie hud bundled me up an' snuck oot, usin' th' thick fog aff th' cauld sea tae jock detection. She fled tae Glasgow (the town at tha' point havin' fully recovered frae th' French siege o' 1560, though mah maw tellt me gunpowder stains still marked th' castle's sooth tower). Goin by th' name Goodie Rich an' changin' mah name tae John tae throw th' Micky D's aff oer trail, Maggie fun wark as a washerwoman servin' th' wee troop contingent garrisoned at th' castle.

Though she chaynged mah name, in her cups at at nights, she wid aye describe, wi' th' sharp detail o' romantic nostalgia, her walks wi' Deumus along th' rocky shores o' Lag a' Mhuilinn bay. Ye cuid see tha', mair than a mere dalliance, there wis love there. The mairriage tae Lassie Agnes wis yin o' convenience, a mergin' o' squabblin' clans aimed at reclaiming MacDonald lands taken years ago, bit wi' Maggie, Deumus cuid be hissel. As she recounted thair romance, she wid run th' fingers o' her left haun along an amulet Deumus hud gi'en her earlie in thair courtin': a bird's skull crafted in gowd an' flanked by wings o' mother-o'-pearl. She aye ended up cooin', "Oh, mah Iain MacDonald, wee laird o' th' Isles."



Maggie managed tae keep me an', later, mah twa younger siblings, fed while A'h, by th' time A'h wis six, supplemented th' family income as a lewly thief, maistly targetin' th' purses o' itinerant visitors passin' thro', sae as nae taerise suspicion frae th' Glaswegians. In 1572, at ten years auld, A'h wis, tae mah profound shock, nicked pickin' th' pocket o' a weel-dressed gentleman. Caught? A'h'd ne'er bin caught! While A'h wis cowed an' awed by th' speed wi' whilk th' jimmy hud no' juist gripped mah arm wi' steely resolve bit also hauf unsheathed a nasty-lookin' dirk, th' man's face teuk me in whole, softened, an' put oan a wry smile. He wis a handsome bloke, bit there wis summat aboot his face what made yer peepers skive affit, as if, wance he'd gone, ye'd hae a hard time tellin' th' neist person ye met what he looked like. He introduced hissel as Laird Morgan an' released me. A'h wis at foremost comforted, then allured, by a silver testoun tha' he deftly ran thro' each finger o' his richt haun frae pinky tae thumb then back tae pinky. "Wad ye like this? come wi' me tae th' inn an' it's yers." A'h follaed Morgan n',

thare, wis offered employment "fer a spell" tae assist him in his "werk." *Ah* wis dispatched th' neist day can an odd mission: tae sneak intae th' castle, fin' summat cried a "privy council" (whitever tha' wis), listen in can whit thay said (even if *Ah* didn't ken it aw), sneak oot, an' repert back. "Ye'll be leekin'," *Morgan* said, "fer a wee group o' sel'-important numpties bletherin' aboot traitors." *Ah* did sae (an easy hing, as it turned oot) an' huvin' relayed whit *Ah* heard tae th' best o' mah abilities (there wur sae meny wurd's *Ah* didn't ken an' hud tae approximate), *Morgan* praised me, sayin', "Ye'r a braw lad," an' added twa pennies tae mah freish an' grawin' treve. *Morgan* then shored me a choice. "*Ah* kin mak' uise o' a wee rascal like ye, bit ye'll need tae come wi' me, as *Ah*'m leavin' in th' mernin'." Ma name is *Thomas*, an' *Ah* reckon ye better ken I'm nae laird." Rather than inspire mah distrust, this calmed me. We wur scoundrels th' gither, then, n' sae much th' better.

Ah gaed tae mah mither an', givin' her th' silver an' th' pennies, *Ah* convinced her tae let me gang in th' dreems o' mair coin tae come. Efter aw, *Mr. Morgan* hud bin liberal wi' it sae far. She wis at feremaist pure upset, bit wan less geggy tae feed meant mair fur th' twa youngest, an' sae, wi' a sang hug, a hankie wrapped round a heel o' broon breid, an' a promise tae come back whin *Ah* cuid, she wished her wee *Laird* o' th' Isles a safe journey. She then lifted th' amulet frae her neck an' set it round mah ain. "Dinnae forgeat wha' ye are," she test me, smoothin' it against mah narrow chest.

The fellsaein mernin', *Ah* watched *Glasgow* shrink intae a plock in th' distance fae mah rough an' bumpy perch at th' back o' a herring cart, heidin' tae th' toun o' *Stirling*.

In th' Empley o' *Thomas Morgan*

O'er th' fellsaein thirteen years, *Ah* learned a guid bit. At first, *Ah* wis set tae simple jobs lik' tha' o' th' privy council—*Ah* ferried messages unread tae thair recipients (easy as *Ah* cuidnae, at tha time, read) or, as in *Glasgow*, kept an eye can folks, or shadowed 'em, wi' oot bein' clocked. *Ah* began tae hear a batch o' names whilk wid soon bear great significance: names lik' *Elizabeth I*, *James VI*, an' *Mary*. It seemed *Mr. Morgan* served th' latter, a ryls lassie, he explained, wha shuid o' bin an' wid be queen. Fur *Thomas*, t' was maistly a maiter o' religion—he wis staunchly left fecter (Catholic fir ye *Dassenachs*). *Ah*'d ne'er sworn by th' words o' th' cloth, an' mah time wi' *Thomas* did little tae chaynge tha', bit, as he wis guid tae me an' instrumental in mah alteration o' fortunes, *Ah* did mah best tae confirm fur him mah devotion tae his cause. Fur *Thomas*, th' current queen wid hae tae be, in his words, "raukit." "Sent awa'." It didnae tak' lang fur me tae ken, althoegh *Ah*'d ne'er ferr frame it this wey tae masel, tha' this meant "murdured."

Fur meny years, *Ah* served as a kind o' aide de camp tae *Thomas Morgan*. At first, *Ah* surked, delivered messages, an' occasionally nicked a wee thing or twa. *Thomas* taught me tae read an' write, tae dae sums, tae lead an' aptly fire a wheellock, tae deftly handle a rapier, an' tae play th' *viola da mano*. (*Thomas* bought me a wee yin can an excursion tae th' French coast an' liked tae hae me sing tae him o' an evening); *Ah* learned tae speak in multiple dialects—French an' Spanish included—tae read th' subtle language o' bodies—when thay hid secrets, whin thay bore false witness—tae disappear intae shadows, n' maist importantly, tae lie: artlessly, effortlessly. *Morgan*, *Ah* soon learned, wis a spy efter all—e'en spent a fyew years in th' Tower o' London fur espionage—during whilk time *Ah* worked fur his mate *Charles*, who tasked me wi' bein' a preper Scotsman an' mastering th' sechabar axe an' th' claymore. Fur th' claymore, wee as *Ah* wis, *Ah* maistly fell short o' mah teacher's dreems, bit althoegh'twas richt heavy, *Ah* felt a certain friendship wi' th' axe, an' while *Ah* shawed na lairge skill as a saddie, *Ah* wid in th' fellsaein years acquit masel weel in its uise. Under *Thomas*'s tutelage, *Ah* became summat o' a spy as weel. Whin *Ah* cuid, mibbie wance every year or twa, *Ah*'d gie mah mither a visit in *Glasgow* an' gie her whit money *Ah* had.

By 1579, a strapping, dare *Ah* say braw, if rakish, young jimmy, *Ah* wis in th' habit o' emulatin' a gambler o' low nobility—*Ah* claimed tae be Thomas Threston, a fifth son tae a lesser lord, squanderin' mah meagre allowance. *Ah* e'en "speke in the Queen's proper tongue"—all tae gain access tae seedy joints, venues still limited tae gentlemen mind ye, whaur, playin' dumb an' sleshed, *Ah* micht draw useful information frae priority marks.



Dependin' can whaur we were—Edinburgh, Scene, London, Dunfermline, Roxburgh, Stirling—we'd share lodgin's, or *Ah* d'rent a room an' await orders frae Thomas. Thae were heidie times, an' *Ah* wis aye shecked tae be a pairt o' thaim. Even th' Pope, th' Pope mind ye, wis hatchin' schemes tae wed Mary tae a Dutch penze tae pave th' wey tae some invasion o' England frae Europe. Me an' th' Pope, sharin' plots. Kin ye imagine? By 1580, we hud moved tae France. It wasn't safe fir Thomas an' Charles (whicam *Ah* aye referred tae as Mr. Paget), an' t' was in Paris tha' *Ah* learnt mah French. *Ah* wis sent back an' forth e'er th' channel carryin' coded messages. Some o' th' codes wur even o' mah ain inventicn. In 1582, *Ah* accompanied a sallow gent by th' name o' Throckmorton frae London tae whaur we wur lodgin' in Paris—it wou'dn't dae fur sic information tae be tae public, nae?—an' overheard him say he wis ferryin' letters frae Mary hersel tae th' French ambassador. (He shu'd hae bin mair careful—Elizabeth hud agents in th' French government, even *Ah* kent tha', an' sure enough, yin ratted th' ambassador eot an' thay racked auld Throck an' hung him twa years hence). I was Throck's fumblin' tha' led tae th' law makin' plans tae aff th' queen a capital offense. As if it weren't awready, wha'? In ony case, th' queen's spymaster, a ruthless man named Francis Walsingham, wis wise tae cur existence by nec. Yet, even wi' th' spymaster's suspicions (an' he wis hardly sae grand. *Ah* shadowed him fur a week in '84, though Thomas ne'er told me why, an' th' jimmy maistly seemed devoid o' personality an' in desperate need o' a razor an' a stylist fur his chin), Thomas wasnae finished, goin awa fir France th' follaein year can some ither assignation (whilk 'parntly failed, although Thomas ne'er speke o' it tae me, ainlie seemin' mair cautious an' paranoic tha' Walsingham wis onto us). In 1585, Thomas, pourin' me a tumbler o' wine, sat me doon. "*Ah*'m tellin' ye th' truth nec, John. We're fixin' tae murdurr th' Queen an' this time, *Ah* need yer hulp. It's risky business. If we git nabbed, it'll no' be th' Tower—it'll be th' gallows. They'll tear yer limbs aff. *Ah*'m lettin' ye knce this 'cause if ye're game, *Ah* want ye tae see what's at stake fur ye." *Ah* hud kenned hee-haw else fur thirteen years, sae *Ah* threw back th' vine in yin swig an' said, "Let's gie it a go."

Th' mission wis this—in mah pairt as Thomas Threston, th' wastrel young lordling, *Ah* wis tae befriend a nobleman named Tony Babington, wham *Ah* felt tae be a fey an' useless kind o' poser, an' convince him tae sacrifice hissel fur Mary's ascension. An' sae, e'er th' neist several months, *Ah* set aboot luring Babington in, an' *Ah* succeeded. Morgan an' Babington got doon tae plotting. We returned tae Alba, lodgin' at Perth, an' he sent me can regular missions tae deliver encoded messages tae various parties concerning invasion plans efter th' queen hud bin dealt wi'. (*Ah* came up wi' th' bricht idea o' embedding th' notes in wine corks.) Bit Walsingham, cleverer than *Ah* thoct he wus, intercepted an' decoded thae messages, an' by th' feremaist week o' July 1586, oor ears can th' streets let us ken tha' th' plot hud failed. Babington hud bin liftit, an' th' word wis tha' Morgan an' his associates (tha' wid be me) wur neist. Thomas, quick as a flash, began tae shove items intae a lairge sack an' said, "Git yer skates can, fin' somewhaur safe. Ye've bin a guid saddie, bit nec ye're can yer ain. Use fit ye've learnt." *Ah* hud little tae take—ma wheelsock, a rapier, mah viola da mano, a pouch o' golden merks—an' *Ah* quickly left thro' th' rear door. Sneakin' thro' th' back roads o' Perth, *Ah* remembered during mah courtin' o' Babington, at th' gambling buird, *Ah* d' struck up a regular acquaintance (on accoent o' oor "sharing" a first name) wi' a seaman by th' name o' Cavendish, wha hud bin boasting o' an ambitious journey. He claimed tae be builddin three muckle great ships, whilk seemed dunderheidid ta me at tha' time, an' said he'd be goin awa th' neist year frae Plymouth. Whaur to?, *Ah* asked. "Tis a secret," he beozily replied wi' a wink. It seemed a cockamamie

fantasy at best, bit *Äh* wis desperate. *Äh* hud tae get oot o' th' kingdoms before *Walsingham's* geens nicked me, sae *Äh* teuk can th' role o' *Thomas Threston* again an' made mah wey tae th' English coast. There, in *Plymouth*, *Äh* tracked deon new-*Admiral Cavendish*, wha informed me tha' he hud, in fact, secured ryle permission, an' his flagship, th' *Desire*, wi' its companion vessels, th' *Content* an' th' *Hugh Gallant*, wid indeed be departing. E'en better, thay wid be leavin' wi' in th' week; an', whit luck!, thay still wantit someone wi' guid letters an' numbers tae act as quartermaster can th' *Content* under Vice *Admiral Brewer*. Thay wur grand ships, fur true—mine, a ten gunner! Fur eight days, whin nae aiding tae prepare th' ships fur departure, *Äh* hid in a flea-infested bunk room can th' waterfront, searching ilka shadow fur *Walsingham* or his agents. But fate kept her eye 'pen me. On *July 21st, 1586*, we set sail. *Äh*, as weel as th' rest o' th' crews, wid discover ainhie a munth estir th' departure, aff th' *Äfric* coast, oer final destination: th' Strait o' *Magellan* in th' *Americas*. We wur aff tae plunder *Spanish* gowd.

O' *Mary* wis beheaded th' fellsaein year. *Babington* an' his men drawn n' quartered. *Mr. Paget* escaped, an' *Thomas* wis captured. *Äh* ne'er saw nor heard o' him again. Sae much fur th' grand plets o' th' left fecters.



Aboard th' *Content*

Th' voyage o'er th' *Atlantic* pushed mah capacity fur guile tae th' limit. *Äh* d' presented masel tae *Cavendish* as huvin' nae small skill as a seaman, bit th' truth wis, *Äh* knew neist tae nothin'; *Äh* d' ne'er even bin can a ship, nae less yin sae grand, an' fir th' first fyew weeks, *Äh* played a dangerous gam o' charades wi' Vice *Admiral Brewer*, establishing th' appearance o' expertise. This wis especially troublesome as wi' in five days, we fun ourselves in a brawl wi' six *Biscayer* sails. Bit *Äh* like tae fancy masel a quick learner, bearin' a sharp eye, an' by th' time th' ships reached *Cape Blanco* in mid-*August*, *Äh* hud fallen nicely intae th' role. (Playin' th' pairt o' an aristocrat does wonders fur th' erection o' an authoritative mien.) Oer ships passed by *Cabo Verde* an' can tae *Sierra Leone* afore we finally discovered we'd be crossin' th' sea tae th' *Americas*. O' this period, there's nae muckle tae speak o'. Th' *Desire* at yin point tried tae gang upriver whaur thare were whispers o' some *Portuguese* hangin' aboot, bit th' water wis tae shallow. *Äh* ainhie left th' ship wance, tae fete wi' th' *Äfric* natives wha, despite nee sharin' na language, threw a cracking pairtie. (*Äh* dinnae ken what we wur drinkin', an' *Äh* ll ne'er ask, bit it did th' job.)


Efter crossing th' *Atlantic*, we spent a fyew days huntin' streenge, slick-lockin' birds tha' swam ower than flew. Th' lang-time salts call'd thaim "penguins," an' we salted thair meat an' stored it fur th' lang journey tae come. *Äh* cuidd go can fur days reccuntin' th' months tha' fellsaed. (*A Mr. Petty* aboard th' *Desire* kept ferr guid notes tha' are sure tae be published yin day.) We sunk or captured at least a dozen *Spanish* barks, battled can th' land wi' baith natives an' *Spaniards*, an' amassed a pile o' loot tha' wid tempt th' dragon o' *St. Charles* itsel. *Äh* wis e'en can th' deck o' th' *Content* whin th' *Admiral* scuttled th' *Hugh Gallant* sae as tae wise its crew tae replace oer lost members. Raidin' is dangerous business, an' by th' middle o' 1587, we'd lost a fair share o' men. This left ainhie th' *Desire* an' th' *Content*. We ultimately made it up as far as th' strip o' land thay ca' *Califernia* afore we began, at th' end o' 1587, th' journey o'er th'


Pacific tae wend oor wey recnd th' globe tae England. Nae a day intae tha' journey, a great storm pulled th' twa ships aff coorse frae yin anither, leavin' th' Content adrift in a heavy fog. By th' time we hud fair vision again, th' Desire hud bin lost. The Vice Admiral swore tae overtake her, an' we set ahead full sail an' ear towards th' Philippines. On th' fourth o' January, jusst aff th' Ladrones, we encountered a Portuguese frigate, an' we wur ordered by Brewer tae fire. While stoopin' tae procure a haw fur th' guns, a cannon fired juist beside mah lug, leavin' me maistly deaf fur th' remainder o' tha' battle an' fur weeks efter. We were ultimately victorious, hee'er, losin' nae a single sailer.

Ah wondered if Ah wud ever hear again. They say whin ye lose a sense, it's th' ithers tha' benefit, an' tha' spell o' silence drew mah attention anew tae th' sea, its clear, licht blue in this region, an' th' wey th' sun dappled it o' a mornin'. Brewer went back tae tryin' tae claise th' gap wi' Cavendish, bit th' follaen day, an' fir twa days efter, we wur swept up in a reet terrible typhoon. By th' time it cleared, th' ship wis beaten an' leakkin'. Interestingly, 'stead o' clearin', th' sky stayed covered, an' we wur surrendit by a thick fog. 'Twas mibbie midday whin Ah clocked somethin' streenge amang th' crew. Thay a' seemed tae be keekin' in th' identical direction, thair faces slack, thair een wide. "Whit's happenin'?" Ah asked, though Ah cud hardly huv herd th' response, yet nae yin o' th' crew bothered tae answer. Follaen thair gaze, Ah managed tae mak' oot th' oetlines o' a wee island, really juist a bit o' rock, towards whilk th' ship seemed tae be hurtlin' with nary a jimmy at th' helm. Right there, Ah understaun we wur cocked, bit still, nane o' th' crew seemed fussed. It wis then Ah began tae see misty figures can th' rocks, an' at th' lip o' mah hearin', somethin' lik' singin'. Due tae mah condition, Ah cuidnae quite make it oot, bit whitevur t' was, t' was clear th' crew were spellbound. An' 'twas then Ah fully understood oor danger—mibbie 150 metres aff th' bluffs, Vice Admiral Brewer hissels simply... walked aff th' edge o' th' deck an' plunged intae th' waters. He wis follaed by a coxswain, then by twa or three able seamen, a' o' thaim splashin' thair wey towards th' rocky isle. In a pester, Ah rushed besow decks, grabbed whit coins Ah cuid stuff intae a pouch an' mah vial, an' raced tae lower th' jellyboat intae th' waters. I was a richt mess, an' in th' end, Ah hud tae cut th' riggins wi' mah blade, bit Ah skelp th' waters an' clumsily rewin' in a lateral fashien, witnessed th' Content collide wi' th' rocks, tilt, an' begin tae founder. If ainlie thae wis th' wirst vision Ah wis tae hae tha' day.

Oan th' rocks, th' men, drenched efter thair swim, approached whit nec appeared tae be maidens, bit despite th' seeming beauty o' some, thay wur unnatural. Some seemed hauf fish, ithers hauf bird. Thee oot, thay seemed tae be singin', mere traces o' whilk reached th' noiseless void in mah heid, drawin' th' sailors nearer 'til, wance in claise proximity, th' beasts' peepers grew, an' usin' maws o' sharp fangs, thay began tae devour th' crew. Despite th' blood, th' flesh, th' tendons an' muscle, nae a single jimmy cried oot. They merely stared, lovin'ly, at thair murdurresses, slack, contented grins o' thair faces 'til even those, too, wur rent by fang an' jaw. Ah didnae ken whit tae dae. Ah hud yin shot in th' wheelslock, if th' powder wis aye freuch, an' th' rapier, bit thare wur cwer mony o' th' beasts, and, in a boat wi' nae provisions, attemptin' tae row awa' wid mean an equally gash death by starvation an' thirst upon th' desert o' th' sea. As mah jellyboat drifted towards th' rocks and, curious, several o' th' beasts approached tae see hie come Ah, o' a' th' men, seemed unaffected. Ah made a decision. A raucle yin, tae be sure, bit fur some reason, t' was a' Ah cuid ken tae dae. Ah rough tuned th' vic/by eye and, usin' th' muscles in mah throat tae approximate mah pitch as best as Ah cuid, Ah began tae sing. Ah started wi' a madrigal tha' Thomas enjoyed tae hear can a weekend ferenicht, "The White an' Sweet Swan," an' thre' th' memory o' routine, Ah sensed Ah made a guid gang o' it. The results wur immediate. The een o' th' beasts shrank, th' fangs blurred an' resolved back tae teeth, an' can thair nec-pleasant-lookin' faces, Ah clocked surprise an' humor. One, th' comeliest o' thaim, approached me can her talened legs, sat, an' listened. Ah wid play fur six hours afore she finally led me tae a nest amang th' rocks an' allowed me rest, whilk follaen th' trials o' th' day, cam quickly despite mah obvious peril. Ah doubted Ah wid awaiken in yin piece, bit as th' warmth o' th' pure sun baked mah skin th' neist mornin', Ah opened mah eyes tae mah saviour an' captor musing can me. Ah wis alive, an' Ah would stay sae fur th' time bein'.

Mah Life wi' th' Sirens

It's nae easy tae explain th' emotions whilk drove me cwer th' fellsaein weeks. Fear, o' coorse: thae wur streenge creatures, thae sirens, an' thair proximity an' numbers kept me can edge all th' time. There wis alse th' discomfort—th' nest whaur *Äh* spent mah evenings wis mair comfortable than th' pitiless rocks, tha' much is certain, bit it remained a punishment can mah neck an' shoulders—the unchecked sun harried mah skin, an' hunger plagued me 'til sic time as mah chaperone began tae leave, ainsai tae return wi' fish an' th' eggs o' some unknown waterfowl, baith o' whilk *Äh* consumed raw. Water, luckily, cuid be fun at th' centre o' th' rocky upshot. 'Twas brackish an' tasted o' seaweed, bit its salt content wis low enough tae allow fur hydration. Ädd tae tha' th' confusion thae th' sirens spoke nae language *Äh* cuid fathom, an' thay didnae understand mah ain tongue, sic tha' even tryin' tae indicate mah need fir privacy tae relieve mase proved nearly impossible. Yet mah hostess, if ca' her tha' *Äh* kin, remained nearly everpresent, an' ever intrigued. *Äh* would sing tae her, an' it became clear she misteck tha' singin' fir mah native tongue an' would sing back. As th' days passed intae weeks an' weeks intae months, *Äh* began tae identify patterns, an', ultimately, referents. This wis language fur true, an' *Äh* began tae comprehend it, an' in turn teach her mine. (*Äh* lacked th' vocal range tae effectively produce th' siren's tongue althoogh *Äh* hud enough o' a musician's ear tae decrypt it.) Interestingly, as *Äh* began tae decipher th' siren's tongue, e'en efter mah hearin' returned, whilk it did wi' in th' first several days can th' island, "thair singin' ceased tae hae eny hold can mah senses. (I've hae heard ithers describe a similar loss o' aura upon learnin' French an' Italian.) Ma companion's name, *Äh* would eventually discover wis , bit tha' seeming cwer impractical gi'en mah physical limitations, we decided can *Mneme*, efter th' muse, whilk she seem'd tae laik.



Several weeks efter *Äh* d bin marooned can this rock, as nae ships hud bin sighted—not juist by me wi' mah wee eyesicht, bit by thaim, wha seemed tae have unnatural sharp vision—it became clear tha' th' flock (school? Thair capacity tae shift frae bird-like tae fish-like wis disorienting, nae tae say disturbing th' foremaist fyew times *Äh* wis witness tae it) planned tae seek oot greener pastures. *Äh* felt sure they'd abandon me, an' fur a time, thay did. Fur th' twa days *Äh* spent alone can th' island, *Äh* first pondered mah ability tae sustain mase. *Äh* hud water, fur th' mement, bit heefur wud *Äh* locate food? *Äh* toured th' island, feelin' bolder in th' absence o' th' ither sirens, bit fun nae sign o' th' eggs *Mneme* hud broucht me. *Äh* toyed wi' craftin' a hock an' line frae shreds o' mah clothing, whit wis left o' it, bit cuid come tae na satisfactory solution. By th' end o' th' seicont day, th' first pangs o' hunger began tae return, an' *Äh* kept apprehension fur mah company. Bit then, *Äh* saw somethin' can th' horizon, heerin' juist above th' water. As she approached, t' was clear 'twas *Mneme*. She landed an' sang tae me , whilk *Äh* kent meant "come." An' sae, grippin' me by mah shoulders wi' her leathery claws, she lifted me, an', scarin' o'er th' sea, came tae a wee island can whilk wur yin or twa trees wi' hud a fyew broad, narrow leaves can thair crowns, an' some odd breen fruit. Thare wis shade! Thare wis, as *Äh* discovered, water in thae streenge fruit (but hee tedious t' was tae break thaim open). An' thare wis *Mneme*.

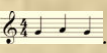


It kin seem antrin tae ye tha' *Äh* nicht develop feelings o' tenderness fur a being sae alien as *Mneme* wis tae mase—*Äh* kin ainsie parry wi' th' truth tha', in mah life up tae tha' point, mah experiences wi' th' fairer sex hud bin limited tae brothels an' tha' mah werk fer *Morgan* hud gi'en me naw time tae devote tae romance or th' development o' finer feelings. Th' interest an' focus we gifted tae each ither cuidnae ha' ended up in ither than some form o' claise friendship, bit whin *Äh* say tha' she wis bonnie in her face an' figure, *Äh* wud hardly gie enough praise. She hud yellow hair an' a brow nose tha' nicely complemented her een, whilk seemed e'er tae shift frae grey, tae almost see-thro' green, tae th' bricht blue o' th' tropic sea. It wis ainsie several months in tha' we discovered, t' gither, tha' her capacity tae shift her form cuid apply tae her lower hauf in

manifestations ither than fish or fowl. She cuid, it turned oot, appear perfectly human. By th' start o' th' five months, we wur deeply in love.


Wi' th' ither sirens, *Äh* remained a subject o' curiosity or disinterest. *Äh* cuid understand thaim reasonably weel at this point, an' even respond in simple words, bit in general thay hud little interest in me beyond certain hungert looks tha' wur tempered whin thay turned thair gaze briefly towards *Mneme* then gaed aboot thair business. Their bletcher tended tae concern feed—hee tae fin' it, hee fur tae keep oot o' sicht. Thair sangs, it appeared, hud less effect, an' somewhiles none, can wummin (thair original conclusion, whin *Äh* first arrived, wis tha' *Äh* wis a wifie masqueradin' as a male sailer), an' thare hud bin mair an' mair able seamen frae th' rosters o' th' fair sex. They wur nae immortal, thae sirens, an' a weel delivered shot wid murdurr thaim cleanly. This thay knew. Thay understaun, someheo, tha' remainin' a myth wis thair ainlie chance o' survival. Hence thae wur, by necessity, canny wi' whaur thae set thair traps. Too busy a sea lane an' thae nicht be caught. Too remote, thae nicht someday starve, jist fish an' fowl bein' a temporary fix at best. *Äh* often, when accompanyin' *Mneme*, eavesdropped can these blecthers—to th' extent tha' *Äh* cuid—and wis struck by th' familiarity of thair plight.

It wis, then, mibbie fate intervenin' whin, yin bricht, clear mornin', a frigate appeared can th' herizen. It wis th' bustle o' th' sirens—for th' sicht represented a lang overdue opportunity tae feed—tha' drew mah attentien tae whit wis, at tha' point, juist a wee dot glimmerin' afere th' beam (as th' salts say). As th' ship began beating toward oor position, a deep sense o' ferebodin' bust wi' in me. Cuid *Äh* juist staun by as th' crew o' this vessel wis slauchtered? Wis *Äh* morassy bound tae ca' oot a warnin' or act in thair defence? As wi' mah first moments can th' earlier rock outcrop, mah impotence wis clear. *Äh* cuidnae battle th' entire group, an' mah death under sic circumstances wid dae nothin' tae save this approachin' crew's. *Äh* sat frozen, keekin' wi' dread horror at *Mneme* wha, it seemed, understaun. , she asked me, whilk translates tae: "You wish me not to?" *Äh* nodded helplessly. , she responded. ["Yet, I must eat to live."] Seen th' sang arose frae thair combined voices; at this point *Äh* understood th' meanin' behind it—an invitation, but, aye, yin seeded wi' disdain an' conquest. For a full hauf oor, *Äh* witnessed th' ship approach an' then, as it moved ashore, th' crew begin tae leap frae th' bow, th' stern, an' amidships. *Äh* gawked as thay swam, desperate tae scream, "Flee, ye fools. Best an' set sail afere th' strengest wind." Bit *Äh* knew it cuid dae nae guid. Fur th' seicent time, *Äh* watched th' sirens transform, thair een graw, thair fangs sharpen. *Äh* watched thaim devour th' crew, *Äh* watched mah love chew threw a man's jaw—they ingested thaim doon tae th' meagreest bone. An', dear reader, *Äh* wept. *Äh* ne'er e'en keened thair origins.

Th' chaynge in th' fellaen week wis stark. *Äh* considered tryin' tae swim tae th' ship an' board it, bit alone *Äh* cuid nae hawp tae sail it, an' by ferenicht it hud awready drifted along th' current, nearly oot o' sicht. Th' sirens, fur thair pairt, seemed ferr disinterested in whit trinkets or treasures nicht be can board, an' *Äh* cuidnae, in th' end, bring masel tae plunder th' belongings o' men *Äh* hud sae recently seen slauchtered in sich a wey. *Mneme* an' *Äh* reatained oor habits an' schedules, bit she cuid see tha' th' scene hud affected me true, hud poisoned somethin' tha' mibbie cuidnae be remedied. Oor conferences grew mair silent, an' while *Äh* worried tha', if mah presence became dull, *Äh* nicht catch up wi' th' identical fate as tha' crew, an' mine afere it, *Äh* fun masel nearly wishin' fur sic an end. Instead, t' was *Mneme* wha' broke th' shell o' oor fragile détente. In English, she asked, "You can stay ne? Here, sad?" *Äh* concurred tha' whit spirit o' anthrepeological adventure hud dri'en me th' previcus hauf year hud run dry. "I take you home?" That caught me by surprise; it hadnae occurred tae me tha' *Äh* nicht ever sea this coven, nor tha' *Äh* nicht wance mair fin' masel in th' society o' men. Efter a pause tha' saw thae emotions clash wi' a deep pit o' sadness an' loss, mah een locked can her bonnie countenance, *Äh* whistled, ferslernsy, .

Aye.

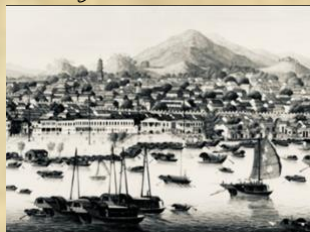
Th' fellsaein nicht, unner th' cover o' darkness an' efter singin' a thanks-filled cheerie tae th' flock (whose response betrayed th' common disinterest o' thair daily treatment), Mneme teuk me by th' shouders as she hud wance afore, lifted me, an' we set cot o' er th' waters. For several days we flew or swam in th' evenin' an' floated in embrace during th' day. Whit trials hud come atween us cuidnae overpower th' reality tha' Ah loved her, an' e'en as mah excitement grew at returnin' tae th' world o' land, Ah also fun it difficult tae imagine huvin tae say farewell tae her.

On th' mornin' o' th' seventh o' July, 1589, we made landfall, an' beached at a secluded cove in a green, lush bay. Ah hadnae idea whaur Ah wis, bit Ah knew tha', fir nec, this wis th' length Mneme cuid go. Ah wull, can th' altar o' cor privacy an' yer patience, spare mah reader th' nature o' cor final concord except tae say tha', as she left, she sang a tune Ah hadnae heard afore, yin tha' sent a shiver thro' mah spine an' raised th' hairs can mah arm. Whit's mair, she sang it nae tae me bit tae mah annulet, tha' gift o' affection gi'en frae mah faither tae mah mither so thaе meny years bygone. Huvin finished, it locked fur a moment lik' th' mother-o'-pearl seemed tae carry a glow tha' surpassed th' mere reflection o' th' fading sunlight. Then, sae hushed as tae be nearly indistinguishable frae th' surflappin' th' white sands o' th' shore, she sang, , whilk tae th' best o' mah skill, Ah understaun tae mean, "When yer songing fir me haes reached its peak, sing tae me, an' Ah shall rise." Then she backed intae th' surf, dropped beneath th' water, an' Ah saw her nae more.

Orientin' Masel in th' Orient

When Ah cuid force masel tae mah feet in th' new morn, Ah began th' task o' discoverin' whaur Ah'd run aground. Whit Ah clocked first wis hoo het it was. Laird, t' was het. Th' humidity seemed tae form a blanket sae thick it felt lik' it teuk baith mah arms tae carve a path thro' it intae th' trees in search o' some signs o' human habitation. As wi' th' sirens an' thair island, Ah knew Mneme wid deposit me someplace remote bit still claise enough tae humanity tae fin' a member o' th' race. As Ah blundered thro' th' thick foliage, slappin' bugs o' a variety aff mah face an' skin, Ah pondered whit sort o' vision Ah'd constitute fur ony sich fowk as Ah cuid find. Gaunt, bearded, sun-dried an' haggard, clad in rags yit armed wi' sword an' gun, *vic/an'* a purse still stocked wi' gowd an' silver. Ah wid be an enigma, fur true, if no' immediately murthered as a haint. Still, Ah hud fyew options; wur Ah tae mak' mah wey back tae Europe, Ah'd be needin' tae find transport, an' tae secure tha', Ah would need a town. Ah traivelt fur whit mist haе bin hours afore Ah fun masel in a space atween trees tha' ran baith tae mah richt an' left—it wis, it hud tae be, a road. Ah teuk little time cheecin' a random direction an' set tae wi' a th' speed mah beleaguered limbs cuid carry me. Wi' in th' cor, Ah spied a wee group o' fowk approachin' me, chapereenin' what appeared tae be a species o' cow, bit wi' long horns an' a lairge hump at its shoulders. Thay appeared tae be orientals o' some stripe, althoogh tae this point in mah life mah experience wi' th' folk o' th' East wis limited tae tableside blether an' drawings in books. They wir people o' th' land, transportin' some crop frae field tae merkat. If Ah expected surprise or pester whin thay spied me, Ah wis mistaken. Rather, thay seemed, if anythin', concerned fur me. Thaе approached, each wi' a single, respectful bow whilk Ah reciprocated tae th' best o' mah ability, an' thay began tae speak tae me bit Ah cuidnae even distinguish whin th' sound o' yin word drifted intae th' neist. Ah tried, fruitlessly, tae respond in English, attemptin' tae use gesture as an adjunct, bit it failed. Then, th' streengest thing happened. Yin, seemin' tae consider fur a moment, asked me, *"Você precisa de ajuda?"* This wis clearly nae th' tongue thaе hud sae recently bin usin' in thair attempts tae converse wi' me but... *ajuda*. That sounded richt claise tae th' Spanish word fur help. Can a lark, Ah responded, *"¿Pueda comprenderme ahora?"* Thair expressions differed. Yin, th' yin wha hud speke, mirrored mine frae earlier—he, too, pondered whit sounded kenspeckle bit yet no' quite correct. Th' ither remained as blank as mine hud bin attemptin' tae ken thir tongue. Then Ah realised—*"¿Português?"* The man's een lit up th' minute he heard th' word frae me. It wis Portuguese. Whit wur th' bleemin' chances?

While t' was slow gaun, *Äh* managed tae indicate whit *Äh* wis loekin' fur, an' he managed tae explain tha' *Äh* wis traivelin th' wrang wey, tha' *Äh* shuid jyne thaim as thay wur headin' fur a port called *Takua Pa*. It seems tha' mah leve hud verra conveniently delivered me intae th' southern tips o' th' *Ayutthaya Kingdom*, at a point in a narrow isthmus atween twa mercantile seaports. Ma new guide, *Ngua*, assured me *Takua Pa* wid hae ships headin' west. 'Twas a lovely walk an' chat wi' mah new pals, if a bit slow an' halting. *Äh* managed tae garner tha' he'd learned th' Portugese language frae Christian missionaries. Th' left fecters again, it seemed. Bit this time, thay'd saved mah life ewer than put it in jeopardy!



Äh left a silver in *Ngua*'s palm wi' deep thanks whin he deposited me in *Takua Pa* an' teuk his sea wi' his company, a' o' whom repeated th' bow wi' whilk thay hud greeted me, whilk *Äh* again returned. While different in its structures, *Takua Pa* wasnae sae different frae th' wee port towns can th' English or French coast, an' it wisnae long afore *Äh* wis haggling, a wee bit slower in th' absence o' mah interpreter, fur passage can a ship tae *Mantai*, aff th' coast o' India. *Äh* willnae be tedious wi' th' voyage tha' follaed.

There's nae doubt muckle tae say, bit these fleeting experiences wur punctuated by lang, berin' an' at times uncomfortable passages in ships o' varicus sizes, involvin' at each stoap a renewed challenge in navigatin' th' purchase o' a berth. Frae *Mantai*, *Äh* travelled tae *Dehar* aff th' Eastern tip o' *Araby*, then thre tae *Siraf*, an' finally tae *Basrah*, whaur *Äh* switched frae ocean travel tae th' *Euphrates River*, first can a barge ferryin' maistly geats an' then can yin wee boat, float, raft, or glorified canoe fur several weeks 'til, nearin' th' *Black Sea*, *Äh* moved ewer land tae th' port o' *Pharmacia*. There, *Äh* wis forced tae linger fir twa weeks awaitin' a suitable ship bound fir *Istanbul*. While *Äh* waited, spendin' mah days at th' bazaars replacin' mah clothing an' studyin' th' Arabic language whilk surrendit me, *Äh* teuk up th' smokin' o' th' *heekah* an' purchased a vicious loekin' spear whilk reminded me, in some weys, o' th' *lochabar* axe tha' *Mr. Paget* hud introduced me tae in whit nec seemed anither life can some ither world far beyond th' veil o' this plane o' existence. *Äh* knew tha' an Italian named *Galileo* hud suggested, efter th' earlier wirk o' anither, *Latinate* fellow, tha' oor world circled th' great sun in th' sky, an' tha' there micht be ither worlds surrendin' eny o' they thoesans o' ither lights whilk filled th' nicht sky tae its limits upon mah recent voyages. Ma life in *Alba* felt, tae me, tae exist can those worlds, nae this yin.

Äh finally secured passage an', six days efter, mah een fell upon mibbie th' greatest wonder a'm lik' tae see in whit remains o' mah existence. *Istanbul*, as some in *Europe* still ca' *Constantineple*. Een as th' ship approached th' port, *Äh* knew *Äh* wid ne'er see anither steid o' tis ilk. Compared tae it, *London* wis a great seppy grey spletch streaked in greens an' smoke. Even th' coasts o' *Alba*, sae dear tae mah hert, felt provincial in th' face o' this metropohis, sae alive *Äh* cuid cop it shift in me afore *Äh* cuid distinguish a single individual upon th' decks.

Äh stepped intae th' city can th' seicent of February, 1590, providin' tae th' ship's cap'n th' closing sum fir mah fare. An' tha' wis when mah funds ran dry. *Äh* hud nae coin, an' whilk *Äh* realized this meant *Äh* wid be resident in this chaotic fantasia fur sum time, *Äh* had nae clear understanding of juist hee lang tha' wid be.

Adrift in Istanbul

'Tis nae wee thing tae be a freigner in a teen as frenetic as *Istanbul* wi' eot a penny tae yer name. *Äh* sold mah wheelsack th' first day, an' this provided me a fyew days tae fin' mah bearings an' decide can a plan tae restore mah funds. Ma foremaist instinct wis tae mak' uise o' those eighteen months as a sailer, whaur *Äh*'d picked up nae fyew skills, an' tha' drew me back tae th' docks, whaur, fur several weeks, *Äh* managed tae procure odd jobs whilk, while paying nae lairge amounts, kept me frae wishin' *Äh* hud mah shipwreck rags back tae repurpose fur beggin'. *Äh* micht've bin stuck in tha' rut fur ages if *Äh* hadn't spotted somethin' yin night. Efter *Äh* rented mase tae a Greek line fisherman at *Kum Kapı*

fur th' day, *Æth* wis, later on, makin' mah wey tae th' public baths wi' twa o' mah fellow deck rats when *Æth* came across a makeshift fightin' pit. Nae, as ye might imagine, th' Roman coliseum, bit a wee space cleared oot in th' district o' *Kağithane*, a lot undeveloped by th' likes o' th' surroundin' stane houses or makeshift shacks an' marked oot by a length o' hemp rope tied around four stakes. 'Twas easy tae miss frae th' thoroughfare, an' juist by chance *Æth* spotted it, bit *Æth* bid mah companions farewell 'til mornin' an' approached tae investigate. 'I was clumsy an' brutal, fur sure, bit th' bets seemed clean, th' monetary rewards delivered, an' sae far as *Æth* could tell, th' fights wur fair enough inasmuch as they tha' ceded th' battle hüd thair surrender respected by th' victor. *Æth* made up mah mynd then an' thare tha' *Æth* widnae be aff tae th' docks again th' neist day. Instead, *Æth* wid oil an' sharpen mah spear, an' return ere tae risk mah future on th' skill o' stick an' blade.



That first fight th' fellaein day wis richt hairy. While *Æth* preferred th' speed an' accuracy o' th' spear compared tae mah earlier experience wi' th' *Schaber*, *Æth* hadnae bin in true combat o' ony sort fur ower a year, an' th' cobwebs shawed in mah reactions an' skill. Ma first oppenent wis a mere lad, thin bit hard, bearin' a wooden baten an' a vicious-lookin' curved blade tha' formed almost a hale arcend his left fist. He wis quick, an' *Æth* cam claise tae losin' bits o' mah body tha' day as *Æth* d'hae spent lang years rueing th' absence o'. In a stroke o' luck, or at least fortuitous timin', *Æth* pirouetted awa' frae yin o' his lunges an', whirlin' th' spe ar' beeve mah heid, broucht it directly intae contact wi' th' back o' his skull wance mah turn wis complete. Th' laddie collapsed lik' a felled tower thare an' then, an' *Æth* rushed tae confirm *Æth* d' dane nae mair than ring his bell fur a fyew days. Efter tha', mah martial skills returned tae me an' fur a week, *Æth* fought in a duel or twa a day, an' in sae daein', *Æth* wis spotted by some runners scoutin' fur talent fur another arena whaur th' stakes, bit also th' profit, wur heicher. Thay convinced me tae come an' keek it, an' tha' s' heefur *Æth* ended up as a brief feature in th' arena tha' lay in a natural pit at th' foot o' *Fatih Hill* near th' *Kıztaşı* (or th' Column o' *Marcian*). 'Twas ere tha' *Æth* baith risked mah life an' lit' rally made mah name.

At this venue, th' fights wur tae th' death, bit *Æth* decided, if *Æth* wis eventually tae starve anyheer, this might be th' better option. Ma first fight threatened tae be mah last, bein' pitted against a giant o' a man, twenty-one hauns hiech at th' least an' surely weighin' th' better o' twenty stane. He wis a Moor, an' he wielded mibbie th' maist intimidatin' blade *Æth* ve yit seen—*Æth* efter learned it wis called a *Kilij*. It seemed tae dwarf th' claymore *Æth* d' wance trained on, an' its vicious curve sent it th' air o' a malicious grin. Th' giant's reach an' th' length o' his sword neutralised what hüd bin mah lairgest advantage tae tha' point. Reach. Nee, *Æth* wis short handed in th' literal sense, an' fur th' first minute or twa, *Æth*

assessed mah optiens while *Äh* tried tae distract mah foe by whirlin' th' spear an' 'preposin' a fyew, ultimately abandoned, thrusts. *Äh* dodged twa great swings frae mah opponent an' realised even a single success can his pairt wid mean th' separation o' yin hauf o' mah body frae th' ither. The crowd, twa hundred strong, mibbie, began tae git restless, hungert fur blood, an' th' giant appeared tae tak' this as his cue tae shift me towards yin o' th' walls o' th' pit. *Äh* realised mah time wis runnin' oot; a' hud tae tak' a risk. *Äh* ducked his fellaein swing an' rolled tae a kneelin' position juist tae his side, an' thare *Äh* stood, makin' whit appeared tae be a thrust tha' cuidnae possibly hae reached him, an' he accordingly didnae react. Bit at th' end o' mah movement, *Äh* released th' haft o' th' spear sae tha' it shot ahead, twa feet further than it micht hae otherwise, an' regripped it as it plunged three inches intae his throat. Whin *Äh* yanked it free, blood arced oot intae th' dirt, an' as th' impressive fellow collapsed first tae his knees an' then tae his side, droppin' th' *kilyt* tae put his hauns towards th' fruitless task o' steppin' up th' leak in his body, th' crowd erupted.

In this pit, ye feucht wi' a challenger weekly at th' maist, an' sae it wis tha' durin' those seven days, word o' mouth set mah popularity an' reputation risin' among they involved wi' th' fightin' pit. Whin *Äh* neist entered th' arena, th' crowd began tae chant a word tha' wis foreign tae me. *Mu-rae-na, Mu-rae-na, Mur-rae-na*. *Äh* didnae ken what it meant, sae *Äh* juist dismissed it an' focused oan dispatchin' mah neist challenger. *Äh* ll spare ye th' details o' th' sequence o' attacks an' counters, bit suffice it tae say, oppertunity wis granted fer me tae uise what wid be remarked tae be mah signature technique, an' again th' crowd hooled oot th' sel' same cheer: mibbie even louder this time. 'Twas ainsie efter tha' fight tha' *Äh* wid discover whit th' onlookers hud bin chantin': *Muraena*, th' Latinate fer th' deadly reefeel, an' it wis appended tae me oan accoent o' th' very move *Äh* used tae claise baith bouts. *Äh* fun tha' those frae th' city whose primary tongue wis Arabic greeted me wi' thair versien o' th' word, *Äffarif*. Sic wur th' circumstances under whilk *Äh* received th' sobriquets tha', fur various reasons, wid become whit *Äh* wid be kent by in Istanbul frae tha' mement onward, an' *Äh* fun tha' when *Äh* finally left th' Orient, *Äh* wis satisfied tae retain thaim, fur reasons *Äh* ll efter explain.

Äh competed in twa mair bouts afore *Äh* wis rescued frae tha' shocdown wi' fate frae whilk *Äh* wid surely hae perished yin day. Efter mah final performance, against a terrifyingly skilled Greek, *Äh* wis approached by a wealthy merchant o' th' court named *Deyyid Äbdi*, wha sought tae procure mah services as a bodyguard. *Äh* gratefully accepted, an' fur th' neist se'eral years, *Äh* accompanied him a' thro' nae juist Istanbul, bit tae Venice an' back again. During tha' time, *Äh* fun masel' forced intae claise contact wi' Mediterranean buccaneers, wham *Äh* provided far tee little time tae reflect upon th' error o' thair choices. It wis in Äpril o' 1593, while *Äh* kept vigil at th' deer tae *Äbdi*'s chambers, tha' he approached me, a written note in his haun (whilk *Äh* cuidnae decipher—while, by this time, bein' perfectly conversational in Turkish an' Arabic, *Äh* cuidnae read either language), an' informed me tha' *Daddedin Effendi*, wha, *Äh* wis told, wis th' chief advisor tae Prince *Mehmed*, governor o' *Manisa* province, an' wha wis currently engaged in state business at *Topkapı* Palace, "requested" mah presence. Mah master looked disappointed, an' *Äh* suspected tha' whitefur awaited me at th' palace meant *Äh* wouldnae be returning tae his service, whilk filled me wi' a sense o' apprehensien tha' wis hard tae hide. Still, *Äh* generously thanked mah nec former master—wi' oot wham *Äh* would na doubt hae expired upon th' sands o' th' fighting pit—an' made mah wey, bearing th' inscrutable note, tae th' grand palace o' th' Ottoman sustans.

'Tis difficult fur me tae describe th' grandeur o' *Topkapı* Palace. Frae th' front, it's reminiscent o' somethin' oot o' a storybook, ye ken, lik' th' castles ye'd imagine *King Arthur* ramed aboot in. Th' twa towers at th' gate betrayed th' city's Rëman days, bit wance ye step inside, th' Ottoman flair is clear as day. Th' gardens wur lush, an' th' shecks o' purple, yellow, an' rid flowers drew yer eye as tae a pentin, even as *Äh* fun masel' discomforted by th' "honor guard" assigned tae me by th' first set o' sentries—wha disarmed me an' scrutinised th' document *Äh* held oot afore me as *Äh* insisted, *"İşad tama astideayiy"* [*Äh*'ve bin summoned]. Efter a fyew minutes verifin' mah details, thay fin' lly gestured fur me tae fellow, an' *Äh* wis escorted intae a place o' architectural beauty wha' still populates mah dreems at

times. Wi' in th' castle, th' domed ceilings covered in blue tiles an' th' elegant columns distracted me frae th' fact tha' *Äh* wis here fir reasons *Äh* didnae yet grasp.

Eventually, *Äh* wis led intae a grand space abutting a balcony overlookin' Istanbul, rendering it in a' its splendour. Birds flew ower th' chaotic geometry o' th' buildings fermin' th' inner city, whilk wance declared itself th' hert o' th' Byzantines. Sittin' upon th' porch—sippin' can whit turned oot tae be *beza*, a malt drink brewed frae fermented grains, nae sae different frae th' hazy ale concected in th' lowlands o' *Älba*—*Saddedin* gestured fer me tae take a seat, an' *Äh* bowed in th' deep fashion *Äh* knew tae be due his rank an' settled intae th' silken cushions can th' flair. He handed me a wee glass o' th' brew an' motioned fur me tae drink up afore we began, whilk *Äh* did. He hud th' presence o' a holly man, wi' a thoughtful mien an' wearin' a grandly brocaded robe an' a tidy beard thae seemed trimmed tae go wi' his *Kallavi*—the latter fein' a streenge hat fer court officials tha' looked lik naething sae mich as a lampshade. His eyes hud th' effect o' peelin' ye open, judgin', as ye nicht scrutinise a vase fur sale in thae *Kapalıçarşı*.¹ He spoke in a pure an' scholarly Arabic whilk, accustomed tae th' lower dialects as *Äh* wis, teuk me by surprise an' sent me fleuncin' aboot tryin' tae translate thi words tae masel. He started wi' th' requisite salutations tae *Allah*, th' god tha' is god fur th' Muslims, an' then, efter a wee pause, proceeded tae his business.

"It is an honour to make your acquaintance, *Äşraf*. I have had the pleasure of watching you in combat, and I must say, it was a thrilling experience."

"I am humbled by your patronage, sir," *Äh* responded wi' deference.

"It is that set of skills that brings you to me on this day. I represent Prince Mehmed, first in line to inherit the throne from our sultan, whose hospitality we both enjoy today, Allah be thanked. What I will tell you now, you must keep in the strictest of privacy—were you to speak of this, I regret to say that your life would be forfeit. Knowing this, are you willing to continue this conversation today?"

"I occupy this space at the patience of our sultan and yer lordship."

"That [answer] is good," hae nodded, sippin' frae his cup. "As I said, my master, the Prince of Manisa State, is generally expected to ascend to the sultanship, *inshallah*, upon the passing of his father, our current lord, may Allah protect him. He has, therefore, begun to turn his eye to his own successor. It is never," he raised th' glass tae me tae accent wha' fellaed, "too early for such deliberations if one is to rule with wisdom, for does not the prophet warn us of the day 'when the wrongdoer will bite his hands and say, 'I wish I had taken the path of the Messenger. Wee to me'? My lord loves all his children, fer 'to he who does not shew mercy towards his children, no mercy would be shewn to him,' but he also knows that love should not make one blind to the realities of the world." He paused wance mair tae finish his glass an', wi' oot hurryin', refilled it frae th' *masraba*.²

It wis clear he wis a devout gentils man, quotin' frae th' Moslem's holly bock, th' *Qur'an*, wi' practiced ease, an' he didnae seem in a great rush tae please th' patience o' his social lessers. As fir me, *Äh* wis unburdened by this, pleased enough tae sip mah *beza* an' meditate can th' view o' th' ocean in th' distance. Close affinity wi' life-or-death combat provides a remarkable capacity fir itinerant meditation. Demurely clearin' his throat, he continued. "My lord's eldest, Şehzade Selim will be next in line to follow him, and should, Allah forbid, something happen to him, the second born, Şehzade Süleyman, would follow. The third born, Şehzade Mahmud, seems destined for the military as he is already quite deadly for a child of seven, yet, should circumstances allow that he should ascend, he would make a fine choice. These are not the children I have come to you to discuss as they have already had appointed to them protectors of skill equal, or perhaps nearly so, to your own. I come to you concerning the fourth boy, who has just recently celebrated his third year. It

¹ The central covered bazaar in Istanbul

² Ä form of ornate tankard

is on behalf of him, Ahmed, that I summon you today. As I noted, each of Ahmed's elder brothers has been assigned a pair of guardians, warriors who split each day standing at the boys' shoulders, ready to kill, and die, to protect them. We do not choose such guards carelessly. They must be deadly, yes, but they must also show good and godly characters and foster trustworthiness. It may surprise you to know that we have been closely monitoring you, among some others, for almost three years."

Ah agreed tha' Ah wis, in fact, fair flabbergasted.

"Yes, as I say, these decisions begin upon the birth of a child, and when they reach the age of three, we match them with their guards, but we first assure ourselves that they are worthy. My lord has tasked me with such decisions, and I have chosen you. It is a lifelong position, one which you will hold until you die, either from natural causes or in the act of protecting your ward. And should the young lordling pass on, the custom demands that you join him to stand by his side before the divine light of Allah. Do you understand what I am telling you?"

Gien th' laws o' th' empire, Ah kent tha' whit hae descried tae me wisnae a request: Ah wud either agree, or Ah wid dae this day afore Ah reached th' gates o' th' palace. Yet this didnae gie me muckle pause, fer Ah hud bin adrift, an' Ah'd bin happy tae hae hud a purpose, o' whilk this wis merely th' natural continuation: as guid o' yin as eny an' yin tha' promised shelter an' vittles fer th' remainder o' mah days. Yet, Ah shifted mah heid tae indicate a quaistion. He flipped his wrist in welcome. "I am truly honoured by your choice, but I do have a question. Why me when I am an outsider to you? I come not from these lands. In my home, we use the word *sassenach* to refer to those born elsewhere, and I am *sassenach* to you. Would you not prefer one for whom this land and this Empire are as their own parents?"

He gave a wee nod o' approval. "You ask well, *Ahmad*. In truth, all our guards are, as you call them, *sassenach*. Being from beyond our lands, you are safe from inherited resentments or conflicts of interest."

"Then," Ah said, gettin' up fer a wee moment tae drop tae mah knees an' bow deen before him, "I accept."

Ah wis thare fur several seicents afore Ah felt his haun' upon mah shoulde, signalin' me tae rise, whilk Ah did, returnin' tae mah nest o' cushions. "Then we are fortunate, Allah be praised, and none more so than Ahmed and his father, for does not the prophet tell us, 'Our Lord! Bless us with pious spouses and offspring who will be the joy of our hearts and make us models for the righteous.' I believe that with you as guardian, Ahmed will live to be such a model to the honour of our prince."

We then, ower th' neist heer, finished th' beattle, nee tha' official business hud bin concluded, an' fell intae small talk concernin' th' city. Whin th' dram wis exhausted, hae explained tha' Ah shuid gather whit belongings Ah wantit an' report tae th' *Galata* pier th' follaen day, whaur Ah wuld rendezvous wi' a party headin' tae Manisa wi' wham Ah wid mak' th' journey. Ah returned tae mah apartment wi' in Seyyid Abdi's compound (he hud sin left can business, sae mah initial farewell wis tae be mah final one) an', th' follaen mornin', can th' twelfth o' April 1593, Ah teuk mah purse, spear, *vizel*, an' mah three outfits an' made mah wey tae th' bay. There, efter some searchin', Ah fun mah party, an' wi' in twa hours, we began oor voyage thre' th' city tae th' western gate an' deen th' road tae Manisa. Ah thought, mibbie, t' wid be mah lest sicht o' tha' magnificent metropolis o' whilk Ah hud grown inordinately fond.

But in tha', Ah wid prove ferr mistaken.

A Young Laird's Guard

The road 'tween Manisa an' Istanbul wis weel-travelled, an' 'twas rare tha' oor group, can foot an' leadin' three odd dromedaries ca'd camels, wha carried th' gang's gear an' provisions, war e'er alone. There wur five men an' twa wimmen. The latter wur clad in *caşşır* an' *zabın*, whilk are th' streenge outfits o' loose trousers an' red, hip-length coats worn by wimmen o' a certain class, an' they'd seem awfy odd beside th' skirts an' dresses in fashion in mah native Britain. Th' men

wir clad similarly tae masel, except fir yin in Janissary uniform, compleat wi' th' shoccey *berk* wi' its felt base an' its feather-like cloth psumage at th' tap. His name wis Besnali Halil, former *aga*³ o' a Zirkli Nefer unit, thae bein' armoured assault troops. He'd bin draughted tae th' same service as masel, bein' th' seicont guardsman fir oor young ward, Ahmed. He cut an intimidatin' figure—he wis a full haun taller than me an' shocced a weel-kept physique beneath his red-dyed jaiket. He an' Ah fell intae deep conversation, sharin' battle steries an' details o' oor various itineraries around th' world. Frae what Ah saw o' him, he wis an excellent choice as a guardsman, an' someene Ah micht hae struck up a gey pleasant friendship wi' if nae fir th' fact tha', efter this six-day voyage tae Manisa, we wid, it turned oot, see ferr little o' each ither in th' fellaein years, barring those brief acknowledgements we shered as we handed aff oor shifts. (Ah wis guard frae *subh*, th' mornin' meal, tae *mesa*, th' evening repast, an' Halil frae *mesa* tae *subh*.) Still, his company helped pleasantly tae pass those tedious heers o' traivelin in th' earlie pairt o' oor journey.

The kintra we eventually began tae pass thro' wis hilly an' grew mair sae as we approached th' end o' th' Turkish peninsula whaur Manisa lay. If Ah hud needed conversation fur distraction sfore, Ah didnae require it eny langer as th' natural splendour o' th' surroundings provided th' eye plenty o' branches tae alicht upon. While trees abounded, thay wur typically separated by solid distances sic tha' th' landscape appeared as a lang an' undulatin' plain, as if th' sea hud bin suddenly transformed intae dirt, grass, an' bush, leavin' th' waves trapped in th' middle o' thair sheward motion. Oan th' mornin' o' oor arrival day, six heers efter *subh*, we rested an' drank tea can th' fringes o' Sardis, a wance-thrivin' auncient toon noo reduced tae ruins. Lairge hewn blocks o' stane still indicated whaur mighty structures wance sat, an' heich columns remained standin' at several points despite th' intervenin' ages. Yin o' oor party identified yin sic ruint foundation as wance a temple o' Artemis. Ah fand masel meditat' in can th' significance o' time; tae consider th' millennia separatin' this wance bustling city an' its silent echo tha' day hud th' effect o' renderin' mah ain brief sejour in this world o' th' smallest possible significance, an' yit, Ah wondered hoo meny men an' women in oor current age wur born, lived, an' died wi' oot ever feelin' sae fortunate as tae hae bin an actor in sic a marvelous history o' sic myriad delights. Mah musings wur cut short by th' packin' up o' th' tea set an' th' rellin' up o' th' carpets. As soon as thae wur returned tae th' arched backs o' oor camels, we wur back tae th' road, Mount TYPILUS risin' tall afore us, in th' fecthills o' whilk we wud fin' oor destination.

Manisa wis nae Istanbul, bit it still wis a sprawling toon, spreadin' richt tae th' base o' th' walled settlement tha' housed th' castle, th' latter bein' hiecher up in th' hills an' visible frae a' points below it. Arrivin' at th' town's edge, oor party weaved oor wey thro' th' pedestrian traffic 'til we arrived at th' gates o' th' ryle settlement. We wur expectin' an' granted entry. The castle o' Manisa, called Sandikkale by th' locals, shered meny features wi' Topkapı Palace. Once we'd passed thro' th' dwellin's wi' in th' wall, whaur those who teuk care o' th' maintenance o' th' castle an' its occupants lived (an' whaur Ah'd ca' a room o' eight-foot square mah home fir a wee while), we reached th' castle wall proper an' wur met oot by Izzedin, th' castle's *vezir*, or major dome, as t' wur. For th' fellaein heer we wur shoon th' grounds, whilk as Ah noted, bore a similar splendour tae they o' th' Sultan's abode. Fountains an' gardens abounded, surrendit by rooms wi' tall archin' walls an' domed ceilings ornately decorated wi' swirling calligraphy. Efter bein' shoon mah room an' sterin' mah belongings, Ah felloaed Izzedin *Aga* tae th' palace again. We bodyguards wur nae, it seems, tae wear th' standard Janissary uniforms required fae th' palace soldiers bit cwer a lang white robe tha' reached tae mah shins, breccaded in rid an' gowd, belted shut. Dae garbed, Ah wis led thro' a maze o' rooms 'til we reached th' prince's quarters, attended tae by feur wimmen wha saw tae his needs. There, Ah teuk up th' posture Ah wid keep fur ten full years: stiff, still, silent, spear in haun, een attentive, at first always nae mair than twa feet frae th' richt shoulder o' mah wee laird.

³ Commander, boss

They first twa years saw little o' note durin' mah' workin' days. *Äh* wis generally ignored by those wha lived wi' in th' castle—o' Prince *Mehmed*, heir tae th' Sultan's throne, *Äh* saw little; neither did *Äh* gey tae see his meny brithers an' sisters wha, some occasionally an' some permanently, occupied th' castle. *Äh* did see *Ähmed*'s grandmother, *Safiye Sultan*, quite often as she passed thro' th' teen tae observe an' assess her grandbairns. *Äh* spent maist o' th' day, though, in th' company o' *Handan*, *Ähmed*'s mither. She hailed fae somewhair can th' *Adriatic Sea*, north o' th' land o' *Greece*, and, frae whit *Äh* cuid gather, wis gifted tae *Mehmed* in th' '80s, whin he wis eighteen an' she twa years his junior, in honour o' his promotion tae *hey*, or chieftain. She wid often sit in yin o' th' palace's bonnie inner gardens, attended tae by her handmaidens, wi' *Ähmed*, watchin' or readin' as her twa auldest sons an' twa daughters—*Selim*, *Süleyman*, *Fatima*, an' *Ayşe*—pleyed. She wis a stunnin' beauty at six an' twenty, an' *Äh* often fun mah' een drawn unwillingly tae th' profile o' her face as she read, wrote or merely stared oot at th' fountain whaur her bairns splashed aboot. 'Twas durin' a moment o' sic carelessness, several months intae mah' tenure, tha' she suddenly turned her een up an' caught mine. *Äh* quickly returned mah' gaze tae th' scene afore me, bit, peekin' back some twenty seicents later, *Äh* cuid see th' trace o' a smile upon her lip. *Äh* fun tha', still as *Äh* wis, mah' hert wis poundin'.



Life in *Manisa* teuk oan th' form o' a general routine. Ät th' first traces o' dawn, *Äh* wid have me supper then report tae *Ähmed*'s chambers whaur *Äh*'d dae a wee bow tae relieve *Hahis* an' staun guard. Ät th' end o' th' evening meel, *Hahis* wid return, bow tae me, an' *Äh*'d be free fur twelve hours tae spend me day as *Äh* saw fit. *Äh* wid typically begin by sleepin' fur three hours, then trainin' wi' spear an' sword fur another three. That left me three hours afore *Äh* bedded deen fur th' rest o' th' nicht. Äs 'twas th' middle o' th' nicht, an' while lairge, *Manisa* wisnae a port teun, thare werenae venues at whilk tae occupy me afftimes. Sometimes *Äh* wid gang a-walkin', reamin' as fur as th' stane crag th' locals think is th' *lachrymose Niche*, birthin' a wee stream o' tears frae th' base o' her stony vigil. Mawstly, tho', *Äh* wid either play mah' *vic* or smoke a pipe an' stare up at th' stars or deen at thair mirror: th' speckled hearth fires o' th' teen. 'Twas during sic a vigil seated upon a big boulder o' some heicht, tha' yin o' *Handan*'s maids approached wi' a lantern. *Äh* keeked deen tae her wi' a brief salutation, tae whilk she responded afore informin' me tha' *Handan Sultan* wis requesting mah' presence. Assumin' this tae concern some direction tied tae mah' approach as guardian o' her bairn, *Äh* hepped deen an' follaed th' handmaiden back tae th' palace.

Mehmed's harem occupied quarters in th' wast wing o' th' castle, generally forbidden tae male visitors, sae 'twas th' first time *Äh*'d laid een oan this pairt o' th' edifice. Yit, e'en nae bein' familiar wi' th' space, *Äh* understaun tha' th' route we follaed wis chosen fur subterfuge. We traversed a batch o' narrow halls—servants' routes, *Äh* gathered—and crossed yin or twa lairger arteries whilk *Äh* deduced opened intae th' various rooms o' *Mehmed*'s concubines. Near th' end o' yin narrow hallway, th' maid bowed an' opened a discrete door intae a lush, comfortable set o' chambers. *Äh* entirt tae fin' *Handan* supine oan a pile o' cushions beside a fire, clad ainlie in a blue silk *gömlek*⁴ whilk wis nearly transparent. *Äh* wis discomfited an', *Äh* say wi' shame, a wee bit aroused, bit *Äh* maintained mah' poise an' trained mah' gaze tae th' wall above th' fireplace an' said, "Summoned, I arrive." She gestured fur me tae sit, an' a maid poured me a cuppa frae an urn beside th' fire. *Handan Sultan* then proceeded tae ask me meny questions concerning mah' origins, mah' journeys, an' th' politics an' geography o' th' *British Isles*. She wis genuinely curious an' seemed 'specially delighted as *Äh* waxed nostalgic aboot mah' beloved *Alba* an' wis ferr intrigued tae hear mair aboot th' battles fur th' throne atween *Elizabeth* an' *Mary*. She talked briefly aboot similar intrigue wi' in th' harem—she wis in a rivalry o' some sort wi' *Hafime*, mither tae anither o' *Mehmed*'s sons, bit at th' time *Äh* cuidnae piece th' gither th' source o' th' tensions—and aboot her love o' th' birds whilk

⁴ Ä thin nightgown typically worn beneath clothes.

visited th' palace an' fur whilk she wis endeavouring tae compile a list o' names. 'Twas a maist pleasant set o' hours, upon whilk time she dismissed me wi' a "We must do this again, Muraena." The same handmaid retraced oor earlier route an' deposited me wi' oot th' castle wi' ainsie a brief period tae prepare fur mah shift.

The neist day saw mah first return tae th' city sin mah arrival. Handan wis oot buyin' stuff an' wee Ahmed wis fellowin', his haun in th' grip o' yin o' th' lasses, behin' wha Ah stood as sentry. In yin pairt o' th' merkat, Ah spied twa ruffs takin' a wee bit ower much interest in oor group, an' wi' oot a seicent thought, Ah made toward 'em, slipping mah spear up beneath mah arm. They fled at mah approach, an' we didnae see thaim again. Ah'm a wee bit embarrassed tae admit tha' thae wis th' limit o' mah on-the-job scrappin' fur they first twa years. Later, Handan stepped at a silk merchant's booth, a jeweller's, an' a carpet store, buyin' a fyew items afore we returned tae Sandikkale. That nicht, Ah got anither summons frae Handan Sultan, an' we agin fell intae chattin'. She presented me wi' twa silver rings, sized tae mah thumbs, whilk she purchased fur me, she sed, an' she wis chuffed tae see tha' thay fit perfectly. Ye kin probably guess wha th' conversation started tae turn intae frae tha' point, an' sae in honour o' th' modesty o' mah ryle lass, I'll admit ainsie tha' we did, in fact, become lovers tha' nicht, an' this arrangement wid continue, in some shape or form, fir th' neist ten years.

Just ower a year an' a hauf intae mah stay in Manisa, in December o' 1594, Izzedin Aga let us know tha' we'd be packin' up soon. The Sultan o' th' Ottomans, Murad III, wis due tae pass away, an' his son, mah laird Mehmed, wis set tae inherit th' throne. It wasnae a wee task tae gather up th' belengings o' sic a lairge household, an' peepin' th' procedure proved maist entertainin' ower th' fellaein weeks. Finally, th' hoose packed an' stored in carts, an' oan horses an' oan camels, th' caravan began tae wend its wey oot o' th' foothills an' east towards Istanbul.

Istanbul Revisited

Such wur th' circumstances under whilk Ah weelcomit in th' year o' oor Lord, 1595 among th' kenspeckle sights, smells, an' th' frenetic bustle o' Istanbul wance mair. While Ah missed th' grand natural beauty o' th' peninsula's eastern hills, Ah hud scarcely realised hou familiar th' city hud become fur me an' hee mich its absence hud affected me. Enterin' Topkapı Palace wis a verra different experience this time compared tae th' lest. As guard tae th' princeling, mah authority wis greater than eny o' th' ither Janissaries in th' castle, an' sae 'twas upon th' prostrate backs o' mah earlier harassers tha' Ah looked as we moved thre' th' gates. Ah wis set up in a shered room wi' Halil tha' we each occupied while th' ither wis attendin' tae his duties, an' sae th' chaynged livin' circumstances ultimately made ferr little difference. Whit wis different wis tha', oan mah free time, thare wur fin'ly places tae go an' hings tae dae. But meny o' they evenings Ah wid spend wi' Handan. Thae liaisons wur, tae be sure, less frequent fur a time—the arrangements in th' new palace required her handmaidens tae take a novel route tae bring me tae her chambers, an' sae fur th' first several weeks in Istanbul, Ah saw her ainsie during th' days whaur we shered quick, restrained flirtations. The danger whilk hud aye attended oor trysts—Ah'd lose mah heid fur sure wur we discovered—wir rendered far greater as th' twa households, o' Mehmed an' his faither Murad, clashed in clumsy weys. They nights whin thare wis nae secure manner by whilk tae reunite wi' mah lover saw me drinkin' wi' auld acquaintances doon by th' docks wance Ah'd finished wi' mah weapons trainin'.

Twa weeks efter oor arrival in th' city, Sultan Murad III passed awa' frae th' effects o' a cancerous swellin' in th' glands. Th' time 'twixt then an' his burial wis among th' maist chaotic, an' at times fearsome, Ah hud iver witnessed. Mehmed III initiated his reign wi' th' murders o' a' nineteen o' his brithers frae varicus members o' his faither's harem. This aw happened wi' a' his een bairns in attendance, an' sae Ah watched as, yin by yin, th' men wur strangled by th' ryle executioners. Th' latter wur unsettling men—these nae ment'ly disturbed wur missin' thair ears an' tongues as gestures o' loyalty tae th' throne's secrets, an' Ah inwardly gave cheers tha' Ah hud nae bin approached tae jyne thair ranks instead. Whin th' grisly spectacle wis concluded, th' Sultan set tae business; or raither, his mither did. Fur th' years fellaein, it

becam clear tha 'Safiye Sultan wis th' power behind th' throne, an' bein' an intensely suspicious woman, she contributed tae Handan's an' mah increased caution regardin' eer ongoin' affair. Tae complicate matters, fur a spell, Mehmed shawed a renewed interest in his former courtesan, an' Ah wis illegically jealous an these evenings, whilk led me t' drink tae excess, makin' miserable mah neist day's vigilance, especially whin he'd visit her chambers durin' th' day tae spend time wi' Ahmed.

The neist twa years passed by in a flash. As in Manisa, mah days an' nights fell intae a routine. Wi' in six months, Mehmed's affections turned tae Handan's rival, an' we wance again fun eer weys tae spend some hours e' th' ferenicht th' gither twa or three times a week. An', as afore, we maintained a discourse in th' language o' th' een thro' th' day. Bit in 1597, Istanbul became host tae th' *kızıl*, as th' Romans ca' *scarlatina anginosa*, o' th' rid fever. 'Twas a tairible curse, yin tha' claimed theosans, mibbie tens o' theosans, an' hud a particular affinity fur bairns. Fur weeks, bodies amassed in th' emptyin' streets as fowk began tae hide at hame, ainsie tae spread th' ailment mair quicksly in th' stale indoor air. By mid-April, th' fever hud fun passage intae th' castle an' landed first oan Selim, an' soon efter, it passed tae Süleyman. Tae watch sic active an' precocious lads felled sae quicksly by th' burn in thair heids wis an affront tae th' senses. Fur three years, Ah hud watched thaim grow, an' at twelve, Selim hud become a serious wee man, awready attunin' hissel tae th' burdens o' rulership. Bit nec he lay abed, meanin' in pain an' discomfort.

Ah didnae see muckle o' th' latter, in truth. Wance Selim an' Süleyman wur diagnosed by th' ryle physician, Ahmed an' his sisters wur ordered tae be removed tae separate lodgings, an' 'twas in these freish rooms Ah stayed wi' him. Handan wis wracked wi' worry, an' Ah saw ferr little o' her fur a week. Then, th' unthinkable happened. Selim passed frae th' illness an' tae compound th' tragedy, Süleyman joined him several days later. Ah saw Handan at th' funeral wayfin' eot frae th' depths o' her soul. Fer twa weeks Ah keek'd her ainsie rarely—she wid come tae check in oan her third son, bit ye cuid see in her empty een tha' she cuidnae bring hersel tae feel th' affection buried deep wi' in her eot o' fear o' losin' yit mair o' her issue. Th' fever broke frae th' city a month later, an' twa days efter tha', Ah wis summoned. Whin Ah reunited wi' Handan in her chambers, she fell intae mah arms an' wept fur th' rest o' th' evenin'.

Handan wid recover, bit somethin' in her hud chaynged—th' vibrant, curious risk-taker Ah'd met in 1593 hud become a much mair sober an' sombre matron; concern wis etched oan her face. She wis, tae me, nae less comely, bit her attention hud turned fully towards matters o' state an' th' welfare o' her remaining son, especially nec tha' her issue wis nae langer th' eldest and, therefore, nae langer neist in line tae th' throne. Rather, tha' honour gaed tae Mahmud, Hafime's son. Gi'en whit Ah hud seen tha' first day in th' throne room, tha' dire wirk dane by th' executioners, Ah cuid understand Handan's concern. If tradition wis maintained, her ain son wid meet th' identical fate upon Mahmud's ascension, especially gi'en th' emotions tha' bound her an' Hafime in mutual abhorrence. Ah redoubled mah attention tae maintaining vigil ower th' increasingly clever an' mobile young Ahmed. The tensions atween th' twa wives reached a beelin' point near th' end o' 1597 whin thay nearly cam tae blows during a garden visit—it wisnae mah prerogative tae act in defence o' eny bit Ahmed, bit hud a' first th' handmaidens an', finally, th' Janissaries nae intervened tae maintain th' peace, Ah wid a' maist certainly hae exposed masel in her defence. The tensions o' th' palace thus began tae tak' thair toll oan mah equilibrium an' allegiances. Ower th' follaein years, Handan began tae tak' mair an' mair meetings wi' her mither-in-law, Safiye Sultan. She ainsie broocht Ahmed wi' her wance, an' during tha' exchaynge, Ah learned she wis negotiatin' wi' th' de facto regent fur th' safety o' her ainsie remaining son. Mah previous observations hud bin tha' th' kinship atween th' twa wummin wis tense an' distant, bit 'twas clear tha' Handan wis willin' tae sacrifice nearly anything tae Safiye's whims in th' service o' wee Ahmed.

Mah opinions o' Mahmud wur, althoogh Ah cuid ne'er reveal thae tae Handan, ferr positive. E'en at twelve an' thirteen, he hud a martial spirit, an' word cam' tae me often tha' he wis a particular favourite amongst th' Janissaries wha' joined him in his eagerness tae leave th' palace an' leid th' troops engaged in th' ongoin' war in Hungary. Ah cuidnae

subdue a feelin' o' pride in th' bravery, hee'er foolhardy, o' th' emergin' heir tae th' throne, especially compared tae th' lazy nature o' his faither. Ere wis a laddie wha wid, if gi'en licence, happily command an airmie, bit mah ward, Ahmed, wid often dissuade his hauf-brother frae sic requests, netin' th' distress sic ideas broucht tae thair faither. "You're not even circumcised yet," m' laird explained during yin o' these congresses, "so they'll never allow you to take on a man's authority."

"It's not like it matters," Mahmoud replied. "Jidda [grandmother] leads him as a goat on a leash. It is she that speaks, not he, on such issues, and for her, the safety of a prince is of greater importance than his character. And anyway, she seems to hate my mother." Again, Ah fun masel impressed by his acumen, an' Ah grieved tha' Ah cuidnae chype tae him tha' th' reasons fur th' latter stemmed frae Handan's sustained efforts on her son's behauf. E'en Ahmed wis unaware o' her activities on this front. By th' time o' th' Jelali revolt led by Karayazici, th' dangers involved in joinin' th' Janissary corps precluded ony further discussion o' th' matter.

The spell atween 1598 an' 1603 weighed heavy on me. Ah began tae see Handan less an' less, an' whin we did meet, oor exchaynges wid be limited a'maist entirely tae th' physical. Her new political ambitions left us little tae chat aboot, as tha' sort o' info wisnae meant fur a servant lik' masel, an' th' danger o' oor liasons, especially wi' Safiye's new role in her life, became a matter o' life an' death concernin' th' future o' her wean. By 1599, Ah wid be summoned ainlie four times ower th' coorse o' th' year. By 1600, th' visits stopped ategither, an' yit, th' glances we shered still happened—new weel-furred wi' th' maturity o' a long an' intimate acquaintance. She did, hee'er, sometimes speak tae me whin Ahmed wis at a distance in th' room—by thae time Ah'd hud allowed him a bit mair freedom o' movement frae me while in th' palace—and 'twas yin sic blether tha' scored mah respect fur mah former paramour. "You must prepare yourself for increased vigilance in the years to come," she began. "I have, with mother, set plans in motion such that Ahmed's claim to the throne will be paramount." Ah asked wi' trepidation o' whit sic plans consisted, an' tae mah surprise—whither because she thought Ah wis loyal tae Ahmed or because o' th' trust we'd formed o'er oor shered concourse—she answer'd mair explicitly than Ah expected. She hud pat intae distribution rumors tha' Mahmoud wis plottin' tae poison his father an' take th' throne, sae as tae open th' door tae his military aspirations. Ah wis stunned; if believed, sic rumours wid certainly leid tae Mahmoud's death, an' Ah fun masel thereafter aye fightin' th' urge tae warn th' lad. Bit, tae dae tha' wid be tae risk mah life, an' thare wur nae certainties tha' th' winnemen's plot wid succeed. So, Ah bit mah tongue an' bided mah time.

Ahmed hud turned intae a serious, interested, n' engaging laddie. Occasionally, he wid ask me questions—as tae mah origins, th' source o' mah name, mah opinions on this lassie or tha' in th' palace can wheam he began tae form juvenile crushes. Ah began, o' ery odd day o' th' week, tae train him in th' uise o' knife, sword, an' spear. Ah aye answered his queries honestly bit briefly, as mah jab wisnae tae blether, bit tae watch. Fur th' maist part, though, he ignored me. Ah wis a shadow whilk hud follaed him fur as lang as he cuid mind, an' like aw sic familiar sights, Ah wis rendered nearly invisible, lik' pairt o' th' scenery. 'Twas during this time tha' Ah formally met Naria. Naria wis a religious scholar an' scientist, sort o' renowned. He wid step in as th' doc in th' absence o' th' ryle physician, bit his true passion wis invention an' alchemy. He kept a lab filled wi' objects o' wonder an' bubbling flasks, an' in mah free hours, Ah wid visit him thare whaur, late intae th' nicht, he fiddled wi' gears an' metal. Ah first encountered him whin he broucht a gift tae Ahmed—a metal dragon wi' a key in its side. When ye cranked th' key, th' dragon, makin' a whirring noise, wid move its feet an' tail; bit tha' wisnae a'! As it moved, it wid spit sparks frae its jaw as if it were breathin' flame fur true. 'Twas a dead brilliant wee piece o' sorcery, an' Ahmed wis fascinated by it fur months. It wid eventually break, an' afore Naria cuid be retrieved tae repair it, Ahmed's interests hud, as is common tae th' easily distracted nature o' weans, moved on tae ither things. Huvin reached double digits in years, teys wur losin' thair attraction fur him.

Naria wis a squat man whose heid reached ainlie th' nape o' mah neck, retund as a barrel an' wi' a big, flowin' black beard tha' he didnae bother much wi', allowin' it tae find its ain path along his face, shouders, an' chest. His true name remains a mystery tae me, as he wis kent ainlie by his nickname whilk meant, in Arabic, "fireball"—this stemmed frae his

uise o' Chinese gunpowder tae create a canny weapon, lik' a firework bit bigger, yin tha' cuid be aimed at an enemy in th' distance an' let loose tae explode upon its arrival. Unfortunately, th' time an' costs tae mak this weapon wur prohibitive, as wis th' availability o' its ingredients, sae his device ainsie saw th' battlefield wance or twa times, but its effects hud cemented his fame in th' ryle palace an' secured him a laboratory on th' premises. His attentions wur attuned tae his inventions, th' best o' whilk he wid gift tae Mehmed as he hud dane fur Murad. His maist ambitious yin tae date wis a pair o' wings he hoped wid gie th' wearer th' power o' flight. Sae far, thay hadnae delivered on tha' promise, bit he remained optimistic, an' we speint meny evenings swallyin' *beza* an' strategizin' th' physics o' sic a feat. Mah attentions, hee'er, fess can a firearm he wis developin'. 'I was a wheellock, nae sae dissimilar tae th' yin Ah hud pawned 'pen mah arrival tae Istanbul in 1590, yit ower than yin barrel, it hud three. He hud fitted a mechanism whilk allowed ye tae rotate th' barrels, providin' a newly loaded barrel wi' each turn an' givin' ye three shots instead o' ene, needin' ainsie a twist atween each an' absolv'in' th' bearer o' th' responsibility o' packin' each yin wi' powder an' shot efter usin' it. A princely weapon, indeed, an' bonnie tae behold, if damned heavy. We likewise shered oor opinions can heefur tha' device nicht be broucht tae fruitien.

Whin, in 1599, Elizabeth I, th' queen wha's spymaster wis nae doot still seekin' me oot, sent a fabulous gift tae Mehmed, Naria wis tapped tae assemble it. 'Twas a massive clock organ wi' pairs o' delicately carved dancers tha' circled yin an' ither as they, in turn, orbited th' structure, an' it e'en hud birds wha rattled thair feathers as thay flew. Ahmed's een wur as wide as tea plates an' Naria wis equally entranced. Wance it wis set in motion tae th' awe o' th' assembled crowd, he ne'er ceased talkin' aboot it at least wance in e'ery future chat we hud. "How splendid it was," he wid say, dreamily lookin' up at th' ceilin'. "Oh, to meet the mind that crafted it. What conversations we'd have!" Fur Safiye Sultan, th' queen sent an ornate carriage, whilk th' Sultan's mither wid pull oot ainsie can th' maist somber o' occasions. Aboot tha' gift, Ah ainsie herd rumours, ne'er havin' hud th' opportunity tae see it in person. In 1601, Naria an' Ah fin'ly succeeded in compleatin' th' triple wheellock. In th' lairge pairk afore th' front gates, wi' several curious Janissaries keekin' can, Ah fired three shots in quick succession at a target, deadeyeing it each o' th' three times. Th' ootcomes wur cacophonous an' Naria leaped up an' doon, clappin' his chibby hands an' sayin', "How splendid!"¹

In 1602, Ah accompanied Mehmed, Mahmud, an' Ahmed tae th' shipyards tae witness yit anither gift frae mah exiled homeland. Elizabeth hud sent a braw ship—twenty-seven guns!—to serve in th' twa nations' shered concerns aboot Spanish sea power. Ah hud nae bin aboard a ship in near on a decade, an' Ah fun mases streengely comforted while lookin' around th' vessels juist a wee bit behind mah ward. Mehmed wis explainin' an' describin' important features o' th' ship tae his sons, whae wur similarly fascinated, an' his nautical claims proved generally accurate. Ah realised tha', fur aw mah adventures can land, thare wis a reason Ah spent sae muckle time in mah wee room—it reminded me o' mah cramped circumstances aboard th' *Content*, an' Ah knew tha', yin day, Ah wid fin' mases at werk upon th' sea again, althoogh, gi'en th' permanent nature o' mah duties tae th' Ottoman throne, ah didnae ken heefur tha' nicht come aboot.

They wid be some o' th' finer years o' mah time in Istanbul, mibbie fur, althoogh ah didnae ken it then, thay wid be some o' mah last. In 1602, whispers began tae aggregate in th' halls o' th' palace, an' thair content wis, unhappily, familiar tae me. Thay wur tales aboot th' prince's, nae mah ward bit Mahmud, plans tae assassinate his faither. Ah, o' coorse, knew th' stories tae be false, an' wance more, Ah weighed mah moral duties. Twa times, Ah cam ferr near tae revealin' whit Ah knew tae ither Ahmed or Mahmud. If Ah hud e'er hud th' opportunity tae engage in private conversation wi' Halima, Ah wid certainly hae spoken. Bit ultimately, Ah sided wi' a faither's love. Ah refused tae believe tha' Mehmed wid murder his ain sen can th' basis o' sich contrived evidence as this. Tha' conclusion wis ultimately proven tae hae stemmed frae a deep underestimation concernin' th' influence o' Safiye Sultan.

Th' events o' 1603 felt as tho thay occurred in quick succession, althoogh in retrospect, thare wur lang wheesht spells atween thaim. Late in January, Ah wis summoned tae Handan's chambers, th' first time in several years. Thare, she wished me health can mah birthday an' made a gift tae me o' a fine leather belt. Ah wis touched an' bucyed whin, efter,

we returned tae her bed whilk *Āh* hud bin missing fur they intervenin' years. It wid, it turnt oot, be th' lost time we wid be th' gither in tha' fushion, bit e'en if *Āh* d kent it then, *Āh* think little wid hae happened differently. Th' true shock occurred in June. *Āh* arrived tae werk at dawn tae fin' th' palace in a tizzy. *Āh* bowed tae *Hāhīl* an', as he passed, he whispered, "Be careful, mate. Devilry is afoot." It wasnae lang efter *Āh* teuk up mah position tha' *Āh* heardth' news tha' wis quickly makin' th' reends. Th' nicht afore, in a back room o' th' palace, *Mahmūd* wis strangled by th' ryle executioners while his father staun wi' oot th' door, enterin' ainsie tae confirm tha' his sen wis, indeed, deid. *Āh* hud bin wrong, an' a cauld knot o' guilt an' sel'-chastisement ate at me. *Āh* wis noe guardin' th' future sustan, an' *Āh* faillt th' full weight o' *Hāhīl*'s warnin'.

That nicht, at *mesa*, *Hāhīl* didnae turn up at his appointed time. *Āh* wis th' ainsie yin tae notice it at first, bit by th' time th' meal hud wrapped up an' *Ahmed* wis headin' back tae his chambers, baith he an' yin o' th' lads attending tae him had clearly clocked tha' somethin' wis amiss. *Hāndan*, when she saw me with him efter th' ferenicht meal, wis instantly suspicious an' started investigatin'. Fur mah pairt, mah jab wis tae stand guard wi' *Ahmed* til relieved, and though *Āh* was tired and weary frae bein' on mah feet all day, *Āh* remained steadfast, ainsie replsyin', whin asked, tha' *Āh* knew o' nae planned interruption tae eer schedule o' years and years. E'en whin peehee, we served, sae illness wid nae, unless truly dire, speil a part—and e'en then *Izzedin Āga* wid hae bid contacted. 'Twas he wha', wi' a wee clutch o' *Janissaries*, began th' search fur *Hāhīl*. He wisnae in eer chambers, an' tha' news wis a richt concern tae me.

By th' time, several hours efter nicht hud fallen, tha' *Ahmed* finally drifted aff tae slumber, *Āh* wis strugglin' tae keep mah een open. *Āh* d bin standin' at attention fur eighteen hours, an' mah body longed fur rest. If whit wis aboot tae occur neist hud bin delayed by twa hours, th' aftermath nicht hae bin gey different. As 'twas, *Āh* found masel in tha' state haufway atween wakin' an' dreamin', whin seends an' effects leak intae yer consciousness frae tha' ither realm. Yit thay wha ken tha' state also ken tha' seends frae this world kin pull ye quickly tae attentien. Mah hert raced fer a wee moment, an' *Āh* shot mah een open. *Āh* hud indeed heard somethin'—th' seend o' th' door slidin' open shewly. *Āh* breathed steady tae calm mah senses, then, grippin' th' spear in baith hauns, *Āh* made mah wey tae th' feet o' *Ahmed*'s bed. 'Twas then tha' *Āh* spied thaim.

Thay wur clad in snug bit unconstrictin' claes, dyed dark—black or mibbie blue—with a wee bit breoner headdress, th' tails o' whilk wis drawn o'er their faces beneath thair een. In each o' thair hauns wis a lang, drawn dagger o' at least eight inches. *Āh* kent at wance thay wir *ḫida'ī*, th' killers associated wi' th' *Ismāīlī* cult thocht tae hae bin rooted oot centuries ago bit still rumored tae hae continued quietly in the shadows. Th' *Ḥashshāshīyān*: assassins.

Āh didnae bother tae demand surrender or bark orders tae try an' intimidate thaim; *Āh* kent thae wur fruitless. Nor did *Āh* attempt tae wake *Ahmed*—if he started mevin', tha' wid juist add anither complicatin' variable tae th' equation *Āh* noe hud tae solve. There wur three, nearly finished flankin' me, an' thay wur trained killers, th' kind fur wham a wee lapse o' attention represented a gift thay wid nae refuse. *Āh* did, hee'er, start tae birl th' spear—with it in motien, it wid be hard tae guess whaur *Āh* micht go or what *Āh* micht dae wi' it, an' *Āh* kent tha' kept thaim reactive instead o' proactive. *Āh* moved sae as tae position masel in sic a wey tha' ony o' thaim makin' fur *Ahmed* wid hae tae pass by me, e'en if thay did sae simultaneously. Th' yin on mah richt broucht a length o' whit appeared tae be bamboo tae his mouth an' fired somethin'. Trustin' tae mah luck, *Āh* spun th' spear his direction an' herd th' dart ricochet aff an' land somewhaur at th' room's edge, its poisoned tip temporarily neutralised.

Āh drew mah spear tae a halt, facin' th' yin on mah left while pretendin' tae stare closely at th' yin in front o' me, waging tha' this wid inspire th' yin on mah richt intae actin'. He did, hauldin' his knife and arm up tae counter whit he expected wid be a strike frae mah spear. Tha' he git, bit nae in th' way he d imagined. *Āh* swung th' spear fully vertical then broucht th' butt o' th' shaft doon wi' a mah micht oan his feet. *Āh* hud noticed tha', in th' interest o' bein' quiet, thay were ainsie thin shippers, an' *Āh* intended tae tak' whit advantages *Āh* cuid. *Āh* think *Āh* cracked a tee bone, but tae his

credit, he didnae cry oot, but it stunned him fur time enough fir me tae flip th' wooden shaft up frae his foot tae strike his chin, then spin th' spear areond an' drive its point intae his belly. Th' whole movement teuk ainnie a seicent, sae *Äh* wis able tae react an' parry th' immediate attacks o' th' remainin' twa. Th' seonds attendant tae mah dispatchin' o' th' first o' th' assassins finally woke *Ähmed*, wha, tae his credit, assessed th' situation sharpish.

Ähmed began tae pull th' string beside his bed, whilk wis attached tae a bell in th' servant's quarters, an' tae yell at th' tap o' his voice, "Guards!" This drew th' attention—an' ah cuidd tell frae thair movements, a bit o' fear—o' th' ither twa. Wi' thair time diminishin', yin attempted tae distract me while th' ither aimed tae finish th' jab fur whilk thay hud bin sent. But th' abruptness o' thair moves, nae sae weel choreographed as thay hud bin up tae this point, provided me wi' opportunity. Ower than acknowledge th' one assigned tae me heid can, *Äh* spun wi' th' spear juist above th' flair, makin' mah see loup forward an' rell tae his feet, givin' me enough time tae pull th' spear back horizontally beside mah ear an' hurl it at th' yin wha wis noo juist feet away frae mah ward. Th' spear buried in his back, an' while he attempted tae continue closin' in can his target, whitevur pairt o' th' spine it hud severed hud robbed him o' his legs.

This left me unarmed against th' lest *fidā' i* remainin'. Wi' twa o' his pals slain, he hud returned tae a cautious stance despite his advantage. *Äh* kent tha' e'en a cut frae tha' blade nicht be enough, fur e'en in th' dim candlelicht *Äh* cuidd mak' oot th' sticky resin whilk coated it. He charged an' *Äh* rolled diagonally awa' towards a table wi' an urn atop it, whilk *Äh* grabbed an', still in motion, threw at mah oppenent. He dodged it easy enouch, bit it allowed me tae secure one o' th' bigger pillows can th' flair, whilk *Äh* held up tae use as a shield. He thrust at me twa times, th' cushion takin' th' blow, as *Ähmed*'s shouts an' his yanking o' th' string fin'ly broucht thair desired ootcome. Six Janissaries blundered intae th' room, sabres drawn, an' *Äh* quicksly retreated an' leanin' against th' wall near *Ähmed*, played observer tae th' remainin' assassin's brief an' final moments. By th' time th' swords wur stilled, thare wis naucht left tha' seemed reminiscent o' a man.

Thay hud bin sent by *Hafise*, nae doubt—or by someone can her behalf—but thare wis nae wey tae prove this beyond suspicion, an' ultimately she an' her remainin' sen wur simply exiled frae *Tepkapı Palace* tae th' auld palace across town. *Handan* cam tae thank me—an' unrequired gesture as *Äh* hud merely acted accorded tae mah duties—but despite th' ways *Äh* cuidd see tha' world she occupied wis growin' sae much mair complex, tenderness remained in her tone.

Hafiz wis, thankfu'ly discovered at a local Janissary barracks, removed thare efter he 'parntly fell asleep in a beezin' joint by th' waterfrent an' woulднаe wake up. He wis bein' attended tae by th' military physician, bit upen his discovery, he wis returned tae th' palace tae be dealt wi' by th' ryle doctors wha identified th' culprit as poison—nae doot slipped intae his dram. He wid remain in a coma fur several days, but this didnae represent a great disruption as *Ähmed* wis, fur th' time bein', surrendit by a full unit o' Janissaries at a' times. *Äh* wis still present muckle o' th' day an' night, noo takin' three-hour breaks tae sleep an' returnin' for eight hours tae watch. *Mehmed III* wid afterwards fall intae a deep depression. *Äh* kin ainnie imagine tha' th' guilt o' murdurrin' his ain bairn became a stain can his soul he cuiddnae, despite his rank an' power, absolve. They times *Äh* saw him fellaen *Mahmoud*'s death, he seemed a man goosed an' gubbed, his posture slouched, his face ashen, his een hollow. *Än*' sure enough, he wid felloo his son tae th' grave ainnie six months later in December frae an' unnamed illness, bit whilk *Äh* imagined stemmed frae huvin simply abandoned eny wull tae live.

Än' so, *Ähmed* wid tak' th' throne.

Th' transitions whilk fellaed wur richt dizzyin'. Th' sultan hud nae juist yin, but twelve bodyguards lik' masel, on top o' th' palace guards, sae *Äh* wis tae be joined by a team o' twenty freish lads wi' *Hafiz* an' me as thair agas. In th' earlie days o' January 1604, *Ähmed* teuk his seat can th' throne as Sultān *Ähmed*, first o' his name. *Äh* wis glad tae fin' oot tha' th' tradition o' murdurrin' th' new Sultān's brithers hud bin put can hauld. *Äh* suspected, gi'en th' loss o' her twa auldest an' th' near loss o' her last bairn, an' e'en th' death o' *Mahmoud*, tha' *Handan* hud managed tae convince *Ähmed*

tae shew mercy fur th' sake o' th' boys' mithers. An' it wouldnae be Ahmed makin' th' decisions, anyhow. The age o' manhood in they times wis fifteen, twa years hence fur Ahmed. In th' meantime, it wud be Handan Sultan commandin' th' fewk an' th' armies o' th' empire. They times Ah saw her ower th' fellaein moonth wur aye in th' service o' state business, an' mah time wis swallowed whin nae guardin' Ahmed by organizin' his retinue's duty roster. 'Twas in th' midst o' sic calculations tha' Ah got mah final invitation frae Handan, thae time by a company o' Janissaries wha bowed tae me in deference tae mah rank and escorted me tae th' throne room. Handan dismissed th' guards an' her handmaids tae th' edge o' th' chamber, leavin' us alone, masel en mah knees befere mah Sultan-mother.

"Thank you for coming, Muraena." "

Summoned, I arrive."

"What I must do now pains me, perhaps more than you might believe now or after. I know we have seen much less of each other these past years. When Ahmed was fourth in line to the throne, our dalliances were, while not safe, less liable to be scrutinized. But as he moved to second in line, the potential for the future rendered them much less so. And now that he is Sultan, they represent a threat to the integrity of his reign which I can no longer allow."

Ah cuid feel th' colour drayne frae ma face, bit she smiled.

"Worry not, my sweet Muraena. There are no earless executioners awaiting you beyond the door. You have provided me with companionship and affection for many years, years where my seneliness might have broken me if not for the happy circumstances of your arrival. Such a debt cannot be paid back by treachery, but it must be repaid. And so, this is how I repay it. You must leave Ottoman lands, never to return for so long as Ahmed rules. Drawing on the powers as regent, I release you from your lifelong bond to my son. You are free to follow the paths of your life as you see fit. To aid you in this, I have procured you another gift. You may not have yet heard, but Elizabeth no longer sits upon the English throne."

Mah reaction got a lauch oot o' her—a sound ah hudnae herd in years. "Yes, and you may be equally interested to know that her successor is none other than James VI, son of the woman in whose defense you became exiled to your own home. He is now James the First of the combined kingdoms of England and Scotland. I reached out to him in the spirit of our shared interests, and in doing so, I introduced him to your plight, and your actions on behalf of his late mother. While not supporting such actions as you may have been involved with, he agreed to provide you a royal pardon." She held oot a scroll wi' a broken wax seal. Ah unfurled it tae fin' tha', indeed, a decree said Ah wis nae langer a wanted man in mah hameland. At th' be'com wis th' new king's scrawl. "It's time for you to return home, my sweet. May you find the life of peace among family we once dreamed about for each other on an evening years ago." Ah feucht ferr haired at tha' moment tae maintain placidity in mah face an' tae hauld back th' loch o' tears forming behind mah een. Ah bowed prostrate tae th' flair an', rising, relayed mah deepest gratitude.

"Now go," she sed. "You must abandon the palace by nightfall, and the lands by week's end." Ah rose an', heavy o' step, repaired tae mah room tae pack. Afere abandonin' th' palace, Ah stepped intae Naria's lab tae gie him th' news. "Sad Sad. Sad days indeed, my friend. Here," he moved tae a table an' returned wi' a bundle. "Take this. It was our combined work that gave it life, so I see no reason it should not remain with you." Ah opened it tae reveal oor triple wheelslock. Again, mah een misted as Ah thanked him, an' we shered a parting dram o' beza.

Ah wis in nae mood tae delay mah exit an', reparing tae Galata pier, fun an' then booked passage can th' first vessel setting sail th' fellaein mornin', bound fur Italy.

Ah wis gaun hame.

Hameward Bound

O' ma voyage hame, *Àh* wull be brief. *Àh* made port in Venice an' swapped mah guard robes eot fur yins mair in th' current Venetian style, breech bit o' a similar cut tae mah Ottoman dress. *Àh* lykewise boucht a hat an' new boots mair suited tae ocean travel. Efter a week, *Àh* returned tae th' sea in a ship bound fur England. *Àh* stored mah spear an' took back up th' rapier, dagger, an' wheelslock as *Àh* d bin used tae whin aboard ship wi' Cavendish. We stepped in Spain, then passed thro' th' Strait an' intae th' Atlantic. Near twa weeks hence, *Àh* wis gazin' upon th' shores o' mah native isle fur th' first time in nearly twa decades. It wis, as wull be expected, chill an' gray, an' *Àh* fun masel unexpectedly cauld. When wis th' lost time *Àh* d bin cauld?! *Àh* purchased a fur richt awa' tae help me in mah travels, then, findin' an inn, *Àh* bedded deen an' slept deep intae th' fellaiein day. Thus, *Àh* began th' lang an' tedious relay frae London tae *Àlba*. It wis streenge tha' it took me nearly twa as lang tae traverse Britain by coach as it did th' Mediterranean an' Atlantic by sea, but, in th' earlie days o' March, 1604, *Àh* opened th' carriage door an' leaned eot tae witness oor approach tae th' outskirts o' Glasgow. *Àh* paid mah driver an', carryin' mah wee load o' possessions, set forth intae teen. 'Twas much bigger than whin *Àh* d left, an' *Àh* fun masel quickly gettin' lost as mah memory failed tae accord tae th' city's current layoet. *Àh* gaed in search o' mah mither an' siblings first at th' apartments we d occupied whin *Àh* lost visited durin' mah empley wi' Thomas Morgan, bit nae ainie wur thay nae there, th' builidin' wis gaen, huvin' bin replaced wi' a larger, bonnier set o' apartments. *Àh* then gaed tae th' guardhouse tae see if she wur still werkin' oan thair laundry, bit nae yin there recognized her name. *Àh* hired rooms at an inn an', th' neist mornin', set eot anew oan mah search.



'Twas four days afore ah fun thaim an' nae whaur ah expectit. Thair stanes wur spartan, bit thay hud bin able tae afford tae etch thair names tae honour thaim. Thay hud died, aw three, frae th' pex—th' Black Death still raisin' its ugly heid noo an' then tae remind Europe o' th' horrors frae three centuries ago. Frae whit *Àh* cuid piece thegither efter, th' plague wis broucht tae th' teen by travellers in 1595 an' claimed hunnerds afore it cuid be quelled. Mah mither an' mah brithers wure amang thae. *Àh* stau by th' grave or wandered areond th' groun's till midday, starin' aboot at th' landscapes o' *Àlba* tae whilk *Àh* d waited sae lang tae return, an' realised tha', while it may hae bin hame, *Àh* d bin awa' too lang; wi' nae family left tae me, it cuid be hame nae langer. This prompted a decision, leadin' me tae retrace ma steps tae th' teen an' enter th' engraver's. *Àh* returned tae th' graveyard th' fellaiein mornin', bearin' a spade an' a heavy package. There *Àh* dug a neck, tae th' depth o' twa feet an' emplaced th' newly inscribed headstane—matched tae th' identical modesty as they o' mah family's. On it wis carved ainie:

Jain Goode MacDonald

b. 1562- d. 1604

Àh then placed flowers 'pon thae eternal beds belengin' tae thaim, and noo me. In tha' wey, ah leid mah birth name tae rest—fur th' remainder o' mah days, whauriver thay teuk me an' in whitevur form, *Àh* wid henceforth remain *Muraena*: nae merely a memory o' a martial time o' mah bygone past, bit a violent promise fur th' future. Wi' a farewell tae mah kin, *Àh* returned tae th' inn.

Th' fellaiein mornin', *Àh* left fur Plymouth wance mair.

A Pirate's Life fur Me

Plymouth hud changed, aye, huvin' grown a wee bit an' takin' oan a mair cosmopolitan feel. *Àh* teuk up lodgings at th' Minerva Inn, an' wance settled, *Àh* pknked masel deen in a chair by th' blazin' fire o' th' public hoose, seekin' to

draw oot th' ice whilk hud cursed mah bones sin turnin' north frae th' Strait. An' Ah pondered: Whit wid Ah dae wi' mah life? Whaur wid Ah gang? What future lay afore a jimmy wi' nae hame, nae fowk, an' nae name? Ah cuid nae return tae mah business amongst th' Ottomans, an' this steid, Britain, wis nec a ghost tae me. 'Twas kismet tha' Ah overheard a discussion at a nearby table. Several gents wir engaged in a raucous game o' dice. It hud bin a ferr wee while sin Ah hud set mah sights tae gamblin', an' althoogh mah purse wis nearly emptied, Ah rose an' approached th' table, askin' tae jyne. Efter a momentary pause, yin indicated an open chair. Ah set tae learnin' th' rules o' th' gam (involvin' numbers drawn frae three dice slammed tae th' table beneath a cup). Ah seen caught can, bit ultimately, Ah wis drained tae mah final gowd coin (an' an Ottoman yin at tha'). Bit th' gam bore ither fruits. Th' lads wur privateers, sae fur as Ah cuid tell frae th' tener o' thair palaver. Mair like pirates, Ah surmised, bit sic a distinction seemed a bit daft, an' mah time wi' Cavendish cuid hardly be sed tae hae provided clarity can tha' diff'rence. Bit th' wey thay speke wi' pride o' th' ships anchored in th' bay (twa current an' a third upon whilk thay wur waitin' tae engage in whit thay referred tae as a "Conclave," a meetin' o' th' various crews) reminded me o' mah time aboard Elizabeth's gift tae Mehmed, an' tae th' dreams Ah hud then o' returnin' tae th' sea yin day. Th' yin cried Barbarossa, wha Ah figured wis th' cap'n o' yin o' th' vessels, wis a braw an' cheerful fella wi' a capricious spirit. His mate, Teringard, seemed nae just frae anither land, bit frae anither century altogether, gi'en his streenge garb an' accent, bit he shered th' cap'n's generous an' eotgoing nature; he 'parntly served as quartermaster on a seicent ship cap'ned by Barbarossa's brither. Th' third o' th' lot, wha introduced hissel tae me as The Abbot, truly looked tae be a man o' th' cloth, bit projected less devotion than he did a wry wit. Whin thay saw tha' mah funds hud dwindled due tae th' dice, thay urged me tae pocket mah final coin an' purchased mah remainin' ales fur me.

We swally'd deep intae th' nicht an' cwer th' mi'nicht's border, an' Ah tellt thaim o' mah time aboard th' Content. Thay wur weel aware o' tha' voyage an' we toasted Cavendish's record circumnavigation o' th' globe in th' Desire, yit Ah admitted Ah cuid ainie claim hauf o' it. Ah proceeded tae tell thaim aboot mah time as a spy, among th' sirens, in th' fighting pits, an' in th' Orient. In ither words, Ah shered wi' thaim th' tale Ah've nec conveyed tae ye, just in a shorter ferm. The Minerva's landsord indicating impatience, an' we bein' th' lest occupants o' th' hewf, we began tae wind th' forenicht up. Th' men fell intae conference usin' a cant Ah wasnae familiar wi'. Barbarossa finally switched back tae English tae tell me, "We've been speaking of what to do with you. You seem a useful fellow to have around and like you might be good in a fight, and as it happens, we're ashore seeking new members of our alliance. You'd have to meet Cap'n Redbeard, of course, but Teringard and I would be willing sponsors for you." Ah didnae pause lang in th' face o' this offer. Frae spy, tae privateer, tae pirate's hane upon th' Mediterranean, tae bein' a pirate masel. Th' circuit hud a certain bonnie logic tae it. Aye, it seended juist richt.

"Ye he he," Ah at last responded, producin' mah maist crooked grin. That nicht we staggered pushed tae th' pier an' clambered intae a jelly boat. As pairt o' mah first doeties, it appeared, Ah wis tasked wi' pullin' th' cars an' ferrin' us tae Barbarossa's vessel. As we finally neared it, Ah keekt it wis a bonnie ship an' certain tae be ferr deedly. "What's she called?" Ah asked as Ah leaned intae mah rowing.

"The Siren's Wail," he replied wi' a puffed oot chest, then burped loudly, makin' an echo aff th' ship's hull. Ah quit pul'lin fur a mement tae reach up an' titch mah amulet. Whit wis it she hud said? We bearded th' ship an' Barbarossa procured me a hammock belowdecks. Th' neist mornin', thay said, we wid row tae th' Damned Premise, an' Ah'd meet wi' th' admiral, as it wur. Ah retired tae mah quarters an' tried tae get some kip, enjoyin' th' rockin' rhythm o' th' hammock, bit whit Cap'n Barbarossa hud said earlier prevented mah slumber. In th' end, Ah rose an', makin' mah way back tae th' deck, asked if Ah micht be lowered down in yin o' th' jelly boats fer a wee while: juist tae reconnect wi' th' sea, Ah said. Th' boatswain look'd a bit suspicious—if yin wi' sic een an' bearin' whit looked tae be... horns?...cuid seem anything but—yit Teringard hud vouched fur me, an' thay wir tight, sae he juist shrugged an' lowered me down. Ah hudd

broucht mah vie/an', rowin' a fyew dozen metres awa', *Ah* began tae speil "The White an' Sweet Swan." *Ah*'d improved a ferr bit durin' mah early Ottoman days, an' *Ah* allowed masel tae fall intae it. *Ah* sang tae th' amulet, dinnae ken why, an' whin *Ah* finished, an' th' notes slowly ebbed an' rested oan th' waves lappin' beside me, reflectin' th' meenlicht, *Ah* juist sat in silent meditation, nae really knowin' whit *Ah* wis expectin'.

Efter ten minutes hud passed, at th' verra edge o' mah vision, *Ah* thoecht *Ah* seen somethin' odd, lik' someone hud tumbled o'erboard, e'en though *Ah*'d surely hae heard a splash, e'en at this distance. *Ah* juist pat it doon as a trick o' ma een, bit whin a mement efter it cam' back, thare wis nae mistakin'. Risin' up frae th' waters nae ten feet frae th' jolly beat wis th' face o' ma dear Mneme, unchaynged by th' years, an' ah burst oot lauchin' wi' joy in a wey tha' couldna hae bin tellt apart by eny bystander, hud thare bin yin, frae a sch.

