



As the sun was sinking into the reddish-orange cumulus canopy of sky, a lone vessel traveled north from Talatheal through the shimmering, lapping waves of the Yoan Ocean. This ship had come from the port kingdom of Elandor and was en route to the colder waters of the Northlands. The large frigate, seasoned in waves far to the west, was called The Phoenix and flew the flag of the nation of Breanna from its main mast alongside a sage flag emblazoned with a golden phoenix in spread eagle display.

The flag of Breanna, home of the gnomes, was pure white with a medium-sized stripe of powder blue sweeping across its snowy surface. Few had seen it this far east and north, for Breanna was one of the lands far to the west. The Mystic West, as some would say; and not many of the denizen who dwelled there traveled too far beyond the familiar waters of their homeland. Only when they had a great compulsion could you ever see a Breannain vessel outside the Western Lands.

And The Phoenix had just such a compulsion. The frigate had left Elandor in fine weather three days ago. It was spring in the Midlands and the fresh winds were just gaining strength as the seasons changed from the harshest winter that many had seen in more than a decade, to a warmer and more inviting climate. The favorable winds from this seasonal change did much to aid the vessel's voyage, cheering the crew. Their labors had been easier

due to the fair breezes assisting them in their journey from Breanna some six months ago.

They had been happy, after half a year of travel, to see the coast of Talatheal and even happier to gain some land beneath their heels for a bit of time. The frigate wormed its way around the continent's northern confines until it docked in Elandor to fill up with supplies and gain some rest for the crew for the next stage of their journey.

The Phoenix had been a solid ship when it was first purchased, but the captain had followed a common gnomish practice – placing large projectile weapons in the lower sections of the vessel for added protection. It was an expensive outfitting. Few did it, save the war vessels of the Breannain navy, but the captain of The Phoenix enjoyed the added protection granted by these modifications, for it had come to sail in many different waters for many different reasons. In such cases, a bit more protection was always welcome. The Phoenix had only two such projectile devices, both bastille, hidden below decks with trap doors on each side of the vessel that would open when needed to levy large bolts against any enemy.

The Phoenix's captain and crew were more or less traders and adventurers, who opened themselves up for sale as transport and guide for various clients – taking a share of their clients' profits, in addition to the initial fee for their services. It was a lucrative venture that never failed to net the crew a fine reward; this current voyage was no exception.

The crew itself was a ragtag bunch, as most men of the sea or aquatic-based commerce were. Mannerisms, old prejudices, and ways were often forgotten or suppressed in favor of civility and survival in the cramped quarters of wood, rope, and sail that they called home for months at a time. Though the crew showed a mix of races, many were tall and tawny Telborians with sharp green and blue eyes and leathery flesh lashed by sun and cured in salty surf. Mixed among them were a varied host of dark-eyed and onyx-skinned Celetors who made their way about the ship alongside a few gray-tinted and silver-haired Patrious and even

a handful of Napowese – their almond-shaped eyes and jet-black hair accented their soft yellowish-brown complexion.

All of the crew were men. Woman didn't bode well with men on ships. Indeed, many of the crew gathered would consider it a grave invitation to bad luck and strife to so embrace a policy of inclusion encompassing what the bards called "the fairer sex". No, these men were traditionalists to the core. Loyal only to their captain, a powerfully built, dark-skinned Celetor named Hirim Koofehi, himself a skilled and accomplished sailor who had embarked on this recent gnomish venture to the distant north.

Just what this venture involved, though, the captain would not reveal to the sailors. Only his first mates had any inkling of what it was about. This didn't concern them that greatly, however, for Hirim, was trusted by his crew; he had earned it over the years. In many things he was open in his discourse with the men in his employ but in some matters he kept his lips tight. The crew figured as long as they got paid, they really didn't care what this current venture might be. However, they assumed it was something highly profitable if the gnomes were involved. Tales and popular thought spoke of anything a gnome touched as turning to gold and returning a profit with a higher yield than could be imagined. Such were some of the delightful stories that danced in the crewmen's heads as they sailed.

For now, the men were just content to scrub the deck, maintain the order of the ship, and dream of the rich reward that awaited them. Some still dreamed of Elandor and the pleasures they'd had there – keeping them smiling for a few more days, until the doldrums of sea travel returned. As they worked away, the captain and his guests rested in his cabin at the stern of the frigate.

Hirim actually had more than one room that was part of his cabin. He wanted a larger area than most captains, so had some space custom-fitted to meet his likings. None saw these spacious personal quarters but him. The smaller room off this private area, however, was a common hosting area for the captain and his guests (those who had secured the services of the phoenix). Though it

was a smaller room, it wasn't too cramped as one might expect, being able to allow comfortable seating for six people around an old circular oak table in the room's center.

It was inside this room where the captain and his guests had taken to, as they had many nights prior. Inside all was awash with bluish-white smoke. It hung above the four occupants' heads, strangling a copper oil lamp that swayed over the center of the table on a stout chain, before it fled out an open, narrow, rectangular window at the back of the room, opposite the door. There were two such glass windows in the room, but only one of them allowed the strongly scented smoke to escape.

"I see you're courting Saredhel now, eh?" Hirim's smile was like a flash of lightning in the starless night sky. His strong jaw clenched a thickly rolled cigar that churned out a wreath of slate-gray, pungent-smelling fog about his shaved head; adding to the hazy halo above the gathered men. Angular eyebrows outlined his dark brown eyes that flirted with mirth. He was dressed like many Celetors of the West: billowing red silken pantaloons, leather boots, and a large khaki shirt opened at the top, just low enough to outline the dark valley between the twin mountains of muscle on his large, hairless chest.

"One does the best one can," an oddly accented voice spoke back in Telborous, the same tongue that Hirim had been speaking as he fanned his playing cards wide before him. It came from Josiah Brookshire, the gnomish representative of the Breannain company that was funding the expedition.

The gnome was dressed in a simple brown coat that covered garb very similar to Hirim's own – save for breeches instead of billowy pantaloons. He also wore a leather vest in whose breast pocket rested a set of spectacles, and when he wasn't smoking it (as he was now), an elegant ivory pipe that had a fruit layered, nutty flavor about its wispy plume.

Josiah was no exception to his race, who were shorter than humans while being similar in height but not in build to dwarves. Josiah was slender and tall for his kin, though not by much;

crossing above a man's belt by a head (giving him just enough clearance at the table to function like his taller companions). His eyes were a deep blue, his smile straight – though a bit stained from pipe smoke and tea – with a face well worn, many a wrinkle forged by a hospitable and kind nature.

“Well, read them and weep, losers,” a scruffy looking halfling thrust his cards upon the wooden table, “a full court.”

The vellum cards revealed a colorful portrayal, done in profile, of a Telborean king, queen, prince, princess, and priest. Their suits were not matching, however, revealing the five suits of the deck: clashing silver swords, a yellow circular shield, a singular green oak leaf, a bright red heart, and a soft blue four-pointed star.

“Looks like I win.” The halfling's bloodshot eyes lusted after the small pile of copper coins in the center of the table.

“Not so fast, Charles,” the Telborean beside him smiled.

Charles de Frassel's diminutive figure turned to the bard while grabbing for the loot at the center of the table. “Got something on me then, do you?” His grin was sour, his skin waxen – as if he'd been to the bottle for some time and was only now showing the signs of it. His combed over thin wisps of auburn side hair did little to hide the pale moon that rose behind it, but it made him feel like he was younger. The rest of his face was clean-shaven, though dark stubble was making its way back up to be harvested once again.

He wore a rather simple outfit. Simple that is for a halfling, that was. Charles' pantaloons were of rich, blue silk that ballooned out to double the size of his small legs. His stockings were white, with gold embroidery, and matched his golden, wooden-soled, silken shoes. On his chest he sported a white cotton shirt that was slightly undone to show off his hairy chest. The shirt stretched over a protruding belly, as if it were covering the waist of some expecting woman, and was tied down with a wide black belt.

Like most of his race, Charles stood a little less than four feet tall, and had the look of a man in a child's body. Though similar to the dwarf and gnome in stature, halflings were completely

different from them, and each was proud of that fact. Where the dwarf was stocky and muscular, the halfling was thin and frail and possessed an ear that rose to a small point. Collectively, the race was famed for being rude, obnoxious, and selfish in both their wants and dealings with all they encountered.

Most detested manual labor as well, considering such work only worthy of the common beast, and indeed seeing those that did so no better off than such base animals. Instead, they tried to pass themselves off as freethinking men and women of culture and expression – beings of living art and ideas – and therefore above just about all folk they came across.

To a halfling life was a series of pleasures to be enjoyed, but only by themselves, for their *own* glorification. It was no wonder that the race was so disliked and hated throughout the world and was the butt of many a joke both clean and raunchy from east to west, north to south.

“This ought to be good,” Hirim stroked his handlebar mustache over his broad, toothy smile. “What you got, Corwyn?”

“The Court of Leaves,” the Telborian bard grinned as he displayed his hand to the players.

“Let me see that!” Charles hopped up on his chair and leaned over to have a closer look at the bard’s hand. Sure enough, it was as Corwyn said. All five cards bore the green leaf suit: a king, queen, prince, priest, and a jester.

Corwyn was a young, clean-faced, slender man of Telborian descent. He was a traveling chronicler, entertainer, and mild adventurer among other pursuits. He had worked up quite a reputation for himself in the Midlands over his short career for his exploits and tales. In fact, one of the reasons The Phoenix had docked at Elandor was because the bard had requested to join the expedition, having received a rather strong recommendation by a good gnomish friend who often helped promote him and his shows. It seemed that this same gnomish friend happened to have a rather large share invested in this venture as well.

The bard's reddish-blond hair was kept short about his fair face, blue-green eyes scanning the tipsy halfling who smelled of sour wine that was sweated out from his pores. Corwyn's dress was a pair of simple leather shoes; breeches and a cream-colored linen shirt completed his garb, a coin purse dangling from his side.

"Hmph," the halfling slumped back down into his maple plank chair with a sigh, "jester's wild...why does it have to be jester's wild?"

Those around Charles laughed in response to the halfling's lament. He hadn't yet won a hand, not uncommon, since during their infrequent games since leaving Breanna, Charles rarely broke even and usually lost. Even more amusing was the fact that before they had started playing their first game over six months ago, the halfling had boasted that he never lost in cards – that he was the best player there ever could be found. His empty pool of coppers, which had shimmered with the tiny man's arrogance before the games started, would seem to have quickly revealed otherwise.

"So now I'm out of coin." Charles flung his cards into the center of the table near the small mound of copper, as did the others while Corwyn moved the pile of glittery gain toward himself. It was added to the bard's own modest pile before him which, even with the newest addition, was about average with all those gathered around him, save Charles.

"I'm surprised you've kept what you had so long, considering the poor playing you've been doing since I let you on board," Hirim smirked.

"Just a run of sour luck is all," Charles waved the captain's comment away, "I'll be back on top and you'll be my debtor soon enough. I just need one hand to win it all a back...and something valuable to get me one more hand..."

The halfling's eyes darted back and forth to each of the three players at the table. He knew his luck was just ready to turn around – that Saredhel was going to shine on him at last – and he wanted to be ready to rub it in their faces when it did.

“You still got that map, de Frassel.” Hirim poked fun at the halfling’s loss.

“And it’s staying in *my* possession. Thank you very much.” Charles removed a slender rolled cigarette from a rectangular, silver carrying case in his shirt’s side pocket, tapped it on the table, and placed it in his mouth. Gaining a spark from the dying embers of his previous cigarette that smoldered in an ash and butt-filled tin beside him, he lit the newest one. A sudden burst of a mixed blend of varied plants bloomed over the table.

“Ah,” said Charles as he blew out a thin jet of creamy smoke. “halfling-cut tobacco, the best there is.”

“One would disagree,” Josiah submitted between pipe-clenched teeth.

“So now what are we supposed to do for entertainment?” Charles took another slow drag on his cigarette, the lit end crackling with a reddish-orange glow. “If I can’t play cards, how am I supposed to pass this godsforsaken boredom?”

“We have quite a long trip ahead of ourselves here, if your map is to be believed.” Josiah removed his pipe from his lips with his right hand, which held it as he spoke.

“You certainly believed it enough to take on this venture,” the halfling chased down his words with a swig of wine from an open bottle beside his chair. Finding the bottle empty after his indulgence, he returned it to the floor beside him, crestfallen.

“Hey now, try to ration yourself a bit more.” Hirim started to shuffle the cards for another game. “I don’t have enough booze to keep you going, if that’s what you’re seeking.”

“Indeed, Mr. de Frassel, it would seem that your indulgence of the juice of the vine has been quite excessive since we left port in Breanna.”

The gnome adjusted some fallen locks of his white hair; the longer strands, though thinning, had cascaded down his crown. They were touching his neatly trimmed, but still thick and bushy sideburns that descended toward the back of his lower jaw.

Corwyn (from past dealings with his gnomish promoter and those whom he worked through) and now the entire crew of The Phoenix, since they had traveled with him, knew that gnomes had a strange habit of referring to everyone by Mr., Mrs., or Ms., as a prefix to their last name. Only those with whom they were intimate, such as close friends and family, did they address by their first name. Otherwise they even referred to people as “sir” or “madam” and spoke in a rather elegant, if not verbally robust term of conversation, when compared to their Telborian counterparts, whose language they shared with slight modifications.

Legends claimed that the gnomes became such successful traders and businessmen they forgot their own native language by excessive use of Telborous, the lingua franca of Tralodren, or at least a good portion of the world. None knew for sure, but it did make a good story and seemed to fit their nature.

“Well, I have to do something around here to keep myself entertained if I can’t gamble anymore,” the halfling snorted in despair.

“Why not help the crew?” Hirim asked sardonically, knowing full well the response.

“Pah,” the halfling snorted again. “Work like a dog with common men? You have got to be *joking*, Hirim.

“Now, had your superstitious sailors allowed me to take aboard *all* of my cargo, I might not be so apt to cause complaint.”

“Mr. de Frassel,” Josiah addressed the halfling in a tone of speech resembling a parental lecture, “you know full well that we at Coggsbury, Elliott, Chesterfield and Company are a moral company and your entourage of fallen persons of the weaker gender is not something with which Coggsbury, Elliott, Chesterfield and Company wish to be associated.”

“Blah, blah, blah,” Charles used his free hand to form a simple mocking puppet opening and closing its own “mouth” in time with Josiah’s words while the halfling simply rolled his eyes in mocking annoyance.

This only seemed to raise Josiah's dander, who grew more parental in his mannerisms. "Mr. de Frassel, I trust you are aware that I am the representative of the wonderful company whose bountiful investment in your offer has made this whole venture possible in the first place. I will not be mocked.

"You were aware of the terms and conditions as laid out in your contract, which I might add, you signed quite readily. So I would ask that you at least conduct yourself with a modest amount of tact and decorum whilst we are on this journey."

"Fine." Charles extinguished his cigarette on the small tin dish where it expired with the rest of his spent butts and ash. "Can anyone then lend me some coin for another game?"

Hirim's eyebrow rose. "I thought you said you were a professional gambler." The Celetor now smiled wide. "Seems to me you've done nothing but lose – and quite badly at that – since you got on board. Why should anyone lend you anything?"

"Well, I would have won more if we had that bookworm in here," Charles' lips puffed out in a childish pout, "he'd be a push over to take coin from."

"I'll loan you some coin if it will shut you up for a while." Hirim proceeded to deal out the cards to the players, his smile fading as his card playing expression once again became firmly entrenched over his face.

"Thank you," the halfling bowed his head slightly though there was little to no actual gratitude in the words themselves.

"I'll win it back soon enough anyway," the Celetor chuckled.

The others joined him.

"Oh," Hirim looked the halfling in his bloodshot eyes, "and jester's wild."

"Your humor is quite profound," Charles shook his head as caustic lines etched into his face.