

Flying Ocean

From the memoir of Captain Pleth

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That day, the dangle-noses were all on edge. I should have known better than to stop, rest my pail on the ground, and look up. But I couldn't help myself. Today was the day I would experience the waters of Orotricia for the first time since I was born. I craned my neck back, so I could take all of the sky within my sight. It sighed, drew breath, and winked at me as tiny fish caught the light overhead. I filled my lungs and imagined that I was pulling water into the gills that striped my throat. Even though the air I breathed here was dry and dirty, I could always forget that, gazing upon my home. My home, the ocean hanging over my head.

"Eyes down, Pleth!" a voice rasped behind me. I couldn't even turn my head before someone shoved me to the ground. I heard the crack of a whip. The pain set in a half-moment later. This time, I lacked the breath to scream; I could only wheeze as the pain seared white-hot across my back. The dusty wind blew into the open welt, and I had to sink my fangs into my lips to hold back a howl. I braced for the next strike—but the dangle-nose behind me hooked his whip back into his belt, and stomped off. "Sons of worms," I heard him mutter. "They're worthless, even as slaves."

Commented [BPI]: I've formatted every dash to be an em dash like this, but it's a little messy to show in track changes, so I just wanted to let you know about the changes here.

In a daze, I held myself against the ground. My two webbed hands clutched the thorny earth; against it, my skin was comically blue. *These hands were never meant to touch dry land*, I thought. I staggered up. Someone else cracked their whip at me and I rushed forward, salt water sloshing from the bucket in my left hand.

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Groculls hurried across my path, many of them carrying their own boxes and barrels to the whale just below the hill. Yes, the Groculls—those are the ones I call dangle-noses. Now,

gentle reader, you may be a Grocull yourself, and might find my term offensive. You must imagine how I, a Reggalian slave with so much bitterness in his heart, saw your kind.

They disgusted me, with their bristly arms, their leathery hides, and the way they grunted like animals when they exerted themselves. And, pardon me, but the Grocullic fashion of braiding one's nose-hair did not impress me, even when those braids were dyed in bright colors. Least of all I liked their noses. Those floppy, fat trunks that hung down over their chins twitched most grotesquely. My own nose was two small slits in my face, so such a protruding proboscis seemed unnecessary at best. Dangle-noses, indeed.

Everywhere I turned these creatures were lugging caskets of dridgeon-weed ale and bundles of baldger's hide, or lashing ropes and harnesses to the sloping sides of Heigo, our winged carrier whale. Making my way through the dust and din, I upended my water pail into Heigo's artificial pool. I stood for a moment, watching the water glisten against his yellow hide. As I turned, my eyes caught a blue figure through the crowd. Stooped, clad in only a loincloth like myself, he made his way to Heigo and threw his bucketful of salt water. Our eyes met briefly, before both of us went separate ways. Lengul—that was the older slave's name. He was the only other Reggalian slave on this voyage, but he kept his distance from me.

I had been taken from my heaven when I was small, too small to remember what breathing water felt like. I have heard the Groculls used to worship us, the Reggulians, the lanky blue people who live in the ocean overhead. But times ~~had~~ changed, and the Groculls grew clever, until they could touch the heavens for themselves—taking things, people.

By now I could feel the second sun prickling my back: late noon. *It is time to feed the child.* I felt a pang of guilt. I had forgotten to steal food earlier in the morning, when there were fewer watchful eyes. No matter. I knew which crates around me held milk and meat. I picked my

Commented [BP2]: I mention later on how I'm not a big fan of all the metadiscourse, but I don't want to discourage you if you're really attached to it. I know you also want to adjust the pacing of the beginning, so trying to cut some of this could be a way to do that.

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way through the maze of crates around me, looking alert, as though some Grocull had told me to fetch something for him. Bending to pick up a box, I strode back to the slave barracks just beyond camp. No dangle-nose stopped me on my way back.

Commented [BP3]: This edit may be more of a rhetorical choice.

I passed under the flap to my quarters and found Gallin waiting in my hammock. Her pouty, almost surly face brightened at my arrival. After prying open the box, I withdrew cured meat, dried spike fruit, and flagons of pepper juice. The child waited until I was seated on the floor with some food for myself before she began eating.

“Eat well,” I told her, to break the silence. “This is your last chance for solid food. In Orotricia, injected liquids are all you’ll have.” As a Reggolian, I could eat food either in, or out of the water. But trying to eat in Orotricia was dangerous for the Groculls, who needed masks to survive there.

Chewing a strip of luggard meat, she gave me a sharp look. My Gallin was a Grocull orphan, if you can believe it. Her face was not so ugly yet: unlike their mothers, young Grocull girls have flat noses, which turn up slightly. I suspected she was a runt, as she was small for her age—small enough for me to carry her with me, if necessary. Her skin was still a sandy color, but would grow dark with time. Gallin sniffed a biscuit experimentally before eating it, still silent. She rarely spoke. *But that’s just fine,* I thought. *I know she’s listening, and that’s all I need.*

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“I’ve found a mask for you. I assume you still insist on going with me.” Gallin, her cheeks balled with food, nodded. I had tried to dissuade her from coming on the voyage, but she did not want me to leave her with a Grocull guardian.

Commented [BP4]: This paragraph seems to work better here than where it did below so we understand Gallin’s backstory sooner.

I met Gallin the night before a voyage, one that I was considered too young to attend. Some Grocull sailor, drunk off sidgweed ale, was wandering the lengths of Heigo’s back. I

Commented [BP5]: Should we make this “dridgeon weed ale” like you have earlier, or did you intend to have multiple types of ale? (I don’t think it really matters either way, especially since having multiple ales shows a little more world depth, but I just want to make sure that it’s consistent if you want that.)

hauled crates nearby, listening to this man sing and curse into the night. Then his slurred voice came to a stop. I heard a box being opened and a child's wail rising out of it. I tensed. One moment the man seemed to coo to the abandoned baby—the next, he was complaining about the noisiness of children. Suddenly I looked up and saw a small shadow sail across the sky. My mouth hung open. That drunkard had thrown the baby overboard. I dropped my burden and ran, my webbed toes slapping against the sand, my hands stretched upward.

As Gallin finished her meal and brushed crumbs off her rags, I stood. I lifted my thin cot off the floor to find the leather mask I had stolen earlier. These masks could filter the oxygen from the water, like my gills, to allow a Grocull to breathe in Orotricia. Blinking, Gallin brushed aside a lock of her hair and stared at me.

“Are we going now?” she asked. I nodded, then slipped the mouthpiece and goggles of the mask over her head. She squirmed at the tight leather over her face, but didn't resist me.

“I'm sorry, but you'll have to wear this for a while. You'll get used to it.”

“I'm scared of high places,” she replied at length, her voice muffled. But after being hurled off of Heigo by one of her own, I couldn't blame her.

“I'll carry you in my pouch. None of the others will see you, and you won't have to look down.” To this, Gallin said nothing. I took down my haversack from the wall. There was just enough room for Gallin's small body. Then, as she ducked her head out of sight, I made my way out into the afternoon.

The preparations for our voyage were complete. A crowd of big-boned Grocull women had gathered at the base of the whale to see their husbands off. At the whale's head, a team of luggards was roped together, the harnesses around their shoulders lashed ~~back~~ to the whale's long, shallow tank. Even from where I stood, I could hear these beasts grunt as they tasted the air

with forked tongues. I grabbed a rope ladder and made my way up Heigo's side. Once I reached the top of the whale's back, the height made my head swim. I squinted and tried to focus my sights down the length of the whale.

Old Heigo was enormous. All around me, cabins and cargo holds had been strapped to his back with bands of hide and coils of rope. The maze of barrels and small buildings crisscrossed my vision. On either side of me, I could see the whale's great, formless wings fan into the distance. Heigo had been a lucky find for these Groculls. I had heard that he was pursued by a predator, and in his desperation to escape, dove down through the Pearl's Skin that separates Orotricia from our atmosphere of dry air. Without water, he grew weak, and rested on the earth, where Groculls made quick work of subduing him. Since then, they'd kept him in a tank of salt water until he was well enough to make voyages back into Orotricia.

Later, I was surprised to discover that even the Reggulians do not fully understand the Pearl's Skin. Although it is hardly thicker than the webbing between my fingers, it holds all of Orotricia over our heads. With enough force, however, it can be penetrated, as if where water cannot pass through, solid bodies can. No wonder Reggulian society regards it as a sacred mystery.

Once more, I noticed Lengul watching me from afar. The older slave's mouth twisted into a grimace for just a moment. Then, his normally impassive expression returned, and he disappeared behind a throng of Groculls. I scowled. Did Lengul look down on me, as a younger slave?

It wasn't long before a dangle-nose accosted me. Did he predict a dark end for me on this voyage?

"Slave! The Commander requests yer presence!"

Commented [BP6]: This thought kind of sounds like Pleth would be the only one to have a dark end, which seems like a somewhat paranoid thought (unless its more clearly linked with Gallin). Is there a better way to foreshadow this?

His barbed whip nipped my toes. I straightened up as a hulking figure turned to face me. He had never spoken to me before, but I knew his name to be Commander Runc. Runc was an old but mighty Grocull, with gray whiskers like the tails of a burrowing fox. He squinted down at me, and flashed a yellow grin behind his dangle-nose.

“Look closely, men.” Speaking to two other sailors that flanked him, he lazily gestured to me. “Our little friend here will be our guide.” I kept my head down, hiding my face. An arm shot out and I was yanked into the air.

“I can see yar blasted smirk beneath that seaweed ye call hair!” the sailor cried, spittle flecking his lips. Beside him, the ~~C~~commander chuckled.

“Now, there's no need for that.” The Grocull released me, and I stumbled backward. I knelt before Runc, trembling with both fear and rage.

“Excuse my impudence, master,” I told him in careful, measured tones. Although I had been taken from my home as a child, I ~~adopted~~had a habit of adopting the polite speech of the older slaves around me, who remembered life in Orotricia. “I would only be happy to assist your kind in this great undertaking. Let the knowledge and instincts of my race be at your disposal as I guide you through our undeserved heaven.”

I looked up. Commander Runc was not impressed. He cocked one eye down at me, suspicious.

“Reggulians,” he muttered. “Where is their courage, their grit, their honor? So quick to bow at the knee. Now, men!” He turned and made his way ~~towards~~ the prow of our “ship.” “Let us begin.”

I kept my face down to conceal my bared fangs. Who were they to question my bravery? I would be an upstart to defy them—was I also a coward to kneel to them? I hissed at the thought

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of Runc's claim to honor, courage, and pride. I know the meaning of honor now—but to my younger self, the concept seemed unnecessary, even dangerous. In our heaven, we Reggulians had no need of killing one another to gain respect; or so the other slaves had led me to believe.

The boom of a cannon scattered my thoughts. I turned around to see Commander Runc wave his hand in the air as he stood at the whale's crown.

"Forward!" The whole whale shuddered beneath me as the luggards stampeded, dragging the whale's pool with them. We rattled over the wasteland, the water in Heigo's tank splashing alongside us, while the Grocull crowd hooted and howled. A sudden jolt nearly knocked me off my feet. Wrapping my arms around a crate, I spat out grit and closed my eyes against the dust.

"Are you alright?" I said over my shoulder, just loud enough for Gallin to hear. I felt her nod shakily, her face pressed through the fabric and into my back. Ahead of us, wave after wave of luggards surged up the stony cliff. As we crested it, I caught sight of the yellow-green land rolling into the sooty horizon.

Then, my stomach leaped to my mouth as we plunged.

The luggards spilled over the cliff, half-sliding and half-scrabbling against its downward face. Their harnesses came loose from the tank all at once, and the tank rushed off into open air. Through the roar of wind in my ears, I heard the Groculls crying out commands. A team near me unclasped the harnesses that latched Heigo's wings to the tank. Astonished, I watched as the tank plummeted beneath us. There was a downward lurch, and I clung to Gallin's haversack in terror. Suddenly, we jerked into stillness, as Heigo's wings unfurled and caught the hot updrafts.

The tank hit the ground far, far below, its water leaping up in an arc of spray. Heigo hummed as he steadily glided forward, his wings rippling. Beneath us, the scattered forests looked like mere clumps of moss.

When I looked up again, I noticed Commander Runc standing on the whale’s wooden prow, watching me.

“Ha! The flipper-foot is impressed, no?” he shouted to me. I stiffened—I didn’t expect him to address me. Runc laughed again at my silence, his nose_hair-_mustaches tossing in the wind. “While your kind has been lazily treading water up above,” he continued, “we Groculls have been forced to survive whatever nature throws at us!” Lowering my gaze, I said nothing. I was not impressed with these dangle-noses. Astonished with their insanity, maybe. But not impressed, I assured myself.

Suddenly exhausted, I rested on a barrel a little ways away and calmed myself by looking up at Orotricia. Her waters shimmered in a dome above me, closer than ever before. From here, I could also see the Pearl’s Skin better: faint rainbows shone in its surface, like the glimmer of oil on water. As I gazed up, I became oblivious to the shouts of excitement from the crew around me. All I saw was the home I had never knownknew.

Peering out of her haversack, Gallin whimpered when she saw the dry land far beneath us. I brought her closer to me and turned her face away. I couldn’t allow her to be seen with me: what would the dangle-noses say, when they saw one of their girls in my care?

Now, reader, you must be asking yourself: what madness had driven me to take in a Grocull child?

I met Gallin the night before a voyage, one that I was considered too young to attend. Some Grocull sailor, drunk off sidgweed ale, was wandering the lengths of Heigo’s back. I hauled crates nearby, listening to this man sing and curse into the night. Then his slurred voice came to a stop. I heard a box being opened and a child’s wail rising out of it. I tensed. One moment the man seemed to coo to the abandoned baby—the next, he was complaining about the

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Commented [BP9]: For some reason, Pleth’s metadiscourse always throws me off a little bit. It might just be a personal preference, but I think here readers might also want a smoother transition. Is there a more natural way for Pleth to start thinking about the night he saved Gallin?

~~noisiness of children. Suddenly I looked up and saw a small shadow sail across the sky. My mouth hung open. That drunkard had thrown the baby overboard. I dropped my burden and ran, my webbed toes slapping against the sand, my hands stretched upward.~~

My reverie was broken as Heigo thrummed. Now, his old home was nearly close enough to touch. Turning around, I watched as his reflection danced and wavered in the surface of the Pearl's Skin.

"We're enterin' the Pearl's Skin!" Runc cried. "All hands, buckle down, secure y'selves! Git those masks fitted on tight, check the weights in yer boots. Once we're in Orotricia, I won't be goin' back fer drifters!" Around me, the Groculls hastily pulled out their masks. While these drylanders had to place weights in their boots to keep them rooted to the whale's surface, I could glide with ease through the water. But Gallin... I peeked in her haversack to make sure she still had her mask on. The blue of our oceanic sky glowed bright in the darkness of her upturned eyes.

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Heigo began to ease his snout into the Pearl's Skin. Around me, the Groculls clung to any handlebars and ropes within their reach. I stood frozen, as frightened by the advancing wall as I was impatient to be on its other side. Hesitantly, I raised a hand to touch it. But when my hand made contact, it was as if death itself grabbed hold of my wrist. Panicking, I wrenched back, feeling like an insect caught in a web. The Pearl's Skin continued to envelop my whole body, until it lay like a clammy film over my mouth. I tried to scream—but then, with a soft *slop*, I sprang out of its rubbery hold, and stumbled into Orotricia.

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At first, I lay suspended in the water, feeling nothing. In the next moment a wave of sensations crashed over me. Soft as down, the warm waters rolled across my skin. With incredible ease, I swam back towards Heigo over the small distance I had drifted, my flippers

undulating gracefully in the water. The current was fragrant and tasted sweet in my mouth, sweeter than any food or drink in Herrok. I reached out and grasped a rope ladder dangling off Heigo's side.

"You alright?" bubbled Gallin's voice from beside me.

"I'm fine," I returned, then paused. Here in Orotricia, my words fluttered like the notes of a palm-heart lyre. Below, my voice had croaked and creaked. I smiled.

My view of Orotricia from Herrok was nothing compared to what I saw now. From above, pillars of green-gold light pierced the depths. Spires of coral anchored to the Pearl's Skin loomed over reefs so large they spread like cities into the distance. The corals were a rainbow of colors: delicate pinks, stormy purples, vibrant greens, blazing oranges, and imperial golds. A carnival of fish danced through the reefs, each clad in the most vivid stripes, ~~and~~ spots, bands, and speckles. There were tiny fish like grains of paprika, and colossal flat fish whose fins waved like banners. Whole forests of seaweed wafted in the currents. Through the waving fronds, a turtle, itself a third of Heigo's size, emerged and drifted past.

"Isn't it magnificent?" I whispered to Gallin. She didn't answer me, but her eyes swept across it all, hungry for beauty. Keeping Heigo in my sights, I headed out, swimming through the castles of coral, through clouds of fish, and alongside a pod of red-skinned dolphins.

The temptation to abandon my Grocull masters was enormous. It would have been simple to slip through the towering ropes of seaweed around me, and never be seen again. But Gallin tied me to them. Even a Grocull's thick skin will wrinkle in the water, and liquid injections are not nutritious enough for an extended diet. We would have to return to Herrok eventually for her sake.

Even then, there was a part of me that couldn't help but feel sorry for the Groculls, who hadn't always needed to make their skyward voyages. Later, when I had access to their records, I discovered the truth: that in days past, one sun rose as another set. Now that the suns shine together, the forests wither, and the lakes dry up, leaving vast stretches of desert in their place. I recognize that the Groculls do not live in the same world as their ancestors;—that few jungles remain, and they needed to trade their goods to survive. But the only way to cross the sprawling wastelands now is to enter the ocean above.

Looking around me, I reflected on what it must have taken them to reach this point—;to successfully survive a voyage in Orotricia. The wisdom of their race was bought with the bodies of their drowned ancestors. For a moment, I couldn't help but respect the old sea captain and his kind.

I turned back and swam for the whale. As I neared the side of Heigo's lifting wings, a figure caught my eye. Commander Runc, his weighted boots keeping him on the whale's back, was walking the length of the deck. As he strode by, he waved his hand in the air, directing the crew; while his clothes and hair billowed in the current.

Runc surprised me by turning around and catching my gaze. I looked to my left and right, trying to see what he was looking at.

"Fool, I'm looking at ye," he rumbled, bubbles popping out of the slits in his mask. I straightened up to attention and ~~read-trod~~ water in place. "Thinkin'g of sneakin' off? I wouldn't advise it."

"I wasn't~~---~~. But why shouldn't I, sir?" I asked, to humor him.

"Tell me, do ye know of the Elecudas?" he asked. I had a good idea of what Elecudas were, but I bowed my head in silence. Runc swept his arm towards the blue void behind me.

“They’re terrors, to put it plainly,” he continued, his chest swelling as he worked himself up into his “sea tale” mode. “Giant serpents, with jaws that could swallow ye whole. Their mouths are lined by teeth as big as the saber at me belt. And every ripple of their body sends a spark down from nose t’ tail! That is what awaits ye if ye leave the safety of our ship, Pleth.”

Lengul was sitting just beyond Runc. I hadn’t noticed the older slave before, and his sudden appearance startled me. Runc seemed satisfied with my wide-eyed expression and carried on. “The Reggulians ride ~~em~~ into battle. They’ve made themselves immune to the Elecuda’s electric currents, but we don’t know how.” Lengul, ignoring us, watched the blue horizons with squinting eyes. “Yer kind, Pleth, is sensitive t’ vibrations here. I want ye and my slave Lengul to patrol the waters surrounding Heigo and warn us of incoming threats. Lengul is going to show ye the ropes.”

~~I had been wondering who Lengul belonged to. As a lower slave, I was owned collectively by my village, told to run the errands of anyone who crossed my path — but Lengul answered to Commander Runc alone.~~

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“So let it be clear, boy.” I glanced back at Commander Runc. “Yer duty lies with us. Feel free to take a chance at escapin’, but warrior Reggulians don’t take kindly to ye earth-walking ones.” Part of me was skeptical of Runc’s warning—the other part of me was worried he may be right. How much did I really know about Reggulian society? Lengul suddenly turned his eyes on me. The ~~C~~ommander grinned at my silence.

“As you wish, sir,” I told him quietly. “I will follow Lengul’s lead, and remain vigilant of the waters around me at all times.”

Lengul had turned away at my words, as if bored with the proceedings. I couldn’t help but feel annoyed with his judging eyes. At the same time, I was intensely curious to talk to him,

about his past, about Orotricia—and now that we would be working together for the first time, I had the perfect opportunity.

Just as I turned away, Gallin poked her head out of her pouch. I quickly yanked the haversack around to my front to conceal her. Runc was still grinning.

“You watch yerself, Pleth,” Runc said, chuckling as he turned his back on me. I stared at him. *They can't find out,* I thought, panicking. *They'd try to kill her again.* But if Runc had seen anything, he gave no indication.

I kicked off of the whale and fell into a cloud of silvery bubbles. Lengul dove after me without a word. I sank a little ways ahead of him, and took the moment to whisper, very quietly, to Gallin: “Why didn't you stay hidden?”

“That man wasn't a bad person,” she whispered back, after a pause. “He wouldn't hurt me.”

“You're wrong. You can't trust him. He's a . . .” I trailed off. At once I realized the absurdity of keeping a Grocull child from Groculls. Could I keep her forever from her own kind? Like the Groculls kept me from my own race?

I cut the conversation short, as Lengul, with his smooth, long-limbed strokes, caught up. I waited for him to say the first word, but he passed me without a single look, leaving me to trail after him.

We dropped all the way down to the Pearl's Skin. A thin layer of velvety soil was scattered here and there, while some areas of the membrane were clear, showing Herrok below. I sensed movement and heard the burble of water above me. Glancing up at Heigo's shadow, I watched as the crew's swordfish emerged from tanks strapped to the whale's hide. Now that our journey had begun, these creatures would patrol the whale's flanks. They glistened in the light,

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their sharp fins and snouts cutting through the water. Alongside them I could see the hanging feet and legs of their Grocull riders. Lengul and I swam on, lazily churning the water with our back flippers.

Still silent, Lengul led me into a stony clearing. Immediately the water took on a chill, the currents biting and icy. Twisted rock formations, like crooked spines, surrounded us; while small fish peeped at me from their hideaways. The sighing *bllll-oosh* of Heigo's tail echoed far away. For a moment, I felt very strangely alone; and vulnerable—even though Lengul was at my side.

Lengul rested his feet on the sandy Pearl's Skin and stopped to face me, smiling, his green hair writhing in the water, a spear clutched in his hand. He was taller than me, with a slight stoop. Up close; he seemed younger, too. If I was a juvenile, Lengul must have been just barely an adult. Yet creases lined his smile and dark eyes; as if his experiences had aged him beyond his years.

"This is your first time in Orotricia, no?" he finally asked, still smiling. "If you like, I can teach you to read the currents." Lengul extended his hand. His other hand continued to hold the spear fixedly in place.

"That would probably be best," I told him, trying to conceal my unease. At least he seemed ~~more friendly~~friendlier; now that we were speaking together. I placed the tips of my fingers over his, and he withdrew his hand, satisfied. "You've been here before, right?" I asked him, giving voice to the question that had consumed me for so long. "You must know so much more than I do."

He laughed. A Reggolian's laugh, heard underwater, was a surprisingly beautiful sound to my ears.

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“Yes, this is not my first voyage,” he told me. “I was happy to come here again after such a long wait in Herrok.” At this, I brightened up considerably. I too, had had long to wait—a whole lifetime to wait, until I experienced Orotricia for myself. Lengul turned back toward Heigo, beckoning me toward him with his spear. I swam alongside him as we rose into the light, slowly nearing the old whale.

“And I’m glad we’ve been partnered together, Lengul,” I said at length. “The dangle-noses, they make for poor company—” Lengul cut me off with another laugh, surprising me. He seemed over-amused at my words, and I couldn’t help but smile, his mirth infectious to me. As suddenly as he started he stopped, staring at me.

Throughout our conversation, Gallin hid in her haversack and kept silent. Still, Lengul’s eyes trailed away from mine to rest on her pouch. I realized that Lengul must have seen her somehow, and was quickly embarrassed. “The child—” I said, averting my eyes from his. “Could you promise to keep this a secret?”

“Of course,” Lengul said, his clipped tone catching me off guard. “I am a slave. We slaves must be bearers of secrets, whether they are our master’s secrets or those of our friends.” Before I could respond, he changed the subject. “And your name is?”

“Pleth is my name.”

“Pleth.” He looked away from me and wrinkled his forehead in thought. “Do you know your clan name?”

“Clan name?” I was at a loss. “I was taken from here when I was a babe.” For the first time, Lengul smiled sardonically. I had difficulty reading Lengul’s moods, perhaps because he was not straightforward in his expressions like the Groculls were. Yet his mysterious, fleeting looks only made me want to understand him more. To know the secrets he claimed to bear—

secrets about the Groculls, and the Reggulians. The dark look passed from Lengul's eyes, and his sardonic smile was replaced by an easygoing one.

"Perhaps we will discover which clan you came from on this voyage," he told me, watching my hopeful expression. Looking back, this was the moment where he hooked me—the moment when I began to trust him completely.

#

Our journey was set to last only five days. Heigo drifted on through day and night, feeding himself on the krill he filtered through his baleen, while the dangle-noses took shifts keeping watch. I found myself a nook tucked between a cabin and a storage crate, and I hid there with Gallin whenever she needed food.

She squirmed in my arms as I positioned the fat needle that would deliver her nutrients.

"I can see this won't get any easier for you," I said. She screwed her eyes shut in discomfort, but was wise enough not to let out a single sound.

"How much longer?" she asked very quietly after we were done.

"It's the fourth day. We'll drop down through the Pearl's Skin tomorrow, as long as there are no setbacks." I thought my answer would cheer her; instead she looked miserable.

"I want to go down now," she said, sullen. Turning her chin up, I searched her face through the mask; her eyes were deeply sunken, and the skin on her palms was beginning to wrinkle. Every day I regretted taking her with me more. I cursed myself inwardly for not finding her a caretaker, difficult as that would have been.

"Listen. When we touch down, we'll be in a new kingdom. Think of this as an adventure."

Brightening up ever so slightly, Gallin asked me how these other Groculls lived. I told her about the jungle they dwelled in, their houses nestled in the huge flowers that lined each tree. As I spoke, I listened for disturbances in the water around me. My fingers tingled, absorbing the slightest vibrations: the rumble of Heigo taking breath, the friction of the cargo holds as they creaked against one another, the currents brushing against the whale's sides, and the swordfish darting through the water. In the few days I had trained with Lengul, I had already learned so much. But it wasn't enough. I had to learn more if I wanted to detect Elecudas—predators that emitted a faint electric signal masking their own approach—or the stealthy Reggulians.

~~In the end, I was a Reggolian raised to walk on dry land. I sometimes. At times, I missed the solidness of walking on bare earth, a fact which distressed me. I never spoke a word of my worries to Lengul. Lengul, however, believed that everything about Orotricia was superior. and that the Groculls were a hopeless race. He had once suggested that I give Gallin back to the race to which she belonged. Not for her own well-being, but because raising a Grocull child was beneath me.~~

Commented [BP11]: Could cut this if you feel it gets in the way of pacing.

Runc had been brusque with me at the start of the voyage, but the more I learned, the better he treated me. He trusted Lengul and ~~me~~, a trust that was just shy of respect. Runc's subordinates did not like us; and only held back their harsh words in the presence of their ~~C~~ommander. I shuddered to think of how this voyage would have been if Runc ~~wasn't weren't~~ captaining it. Then again, perhaps I would never have been placed on a voyage if Runc ~~were was~~ not here.

And I was grateful that I could be here. The beauty of this ocean was unceasing. We had passed forests of stone, with tall spires that curved over us, and forests of kelp that stretched into the distance. Pods of dark and yellow-speckled whales drifted pasts—in time, they would turn all

gold with age, as Heigo did. We never encountered any threats throughout our journey. Yet darkness lay at the back of my mind, as if I felt hidden eyes watching our carrier whale from afar.

I noticed that the crew had gone quiet. Slipping Gallin into her haversack, I crept out of my hiding spot. Around me, the Grocull sailors watched the waters around us. It was nighttime now, and Orotricia was dark and chilled.

I noticed Lengul and Commander Runc standing together nearby. Though neither turned to face me, Runc called out my name.

“Say, Pleth. Notice anythin’ strange?”

I stopped a few steps away. Lengul watched me expectantly.

“I detect no unusual vibrations in the area, and the fish are still gathered here. However,” and here I paused, looking at the stony faces of the Grocull sailors who milled about. “There’s a strange taste to the water. It’s bitter, like burnt flesh.”

“Very good, Pleth,” said Runc, turning to face me with a smile. “Lengul here described somethin’ ~~g~~ similar to me. I wanted to see if ye could taste it too. ~~z~~ jus’ to make sure Lengul wasn’t tasting his breakfast. Problem is, Lengul doesn’t know what it means either. So everybody’s on edge, because even us Groculls can feel somethin’ isn’t ~~t~~ right about the waters.”

I looked questioningly at Lengul. But the older slave would not meet my eyes, instead watching the darkness with an impassive expression.

Hours passed. As we left the coral reefs behind, there were fewer and fewer fish. ~~so that~~ I had little to eat except for the black minnows that nibbled at Heigo’s skin. We had been ~~traveling~~ ~~travelling~~ over the same pale dunes all day, and the lack of scenery left me bored and restless.

Sensing my anxiety, Runc once approached me and asked:

“You’re worried about the Reggulians, aren’t ye? An’ what you’ll do when they come?”

His question jarred my thoughts. “And how you’ll protect her?”

I muted a hiss, turning away so he wouldn’t see my startled expression. Briefly, I wondered if Lengul had ratted me out. That didn’t seem likely—what would Lengul have to gain from such gossip? Then I realized that Runc must have seen Gallin back when she revealed her face in his presence. Too flustered to answer his question, I remained silent for a few agonizing moments. Commander Runc did not press the issue, and to my relief, turned away from me. I was mortified that he knew. At the same time, I was troubled that he did nothing about it: was I in his debt now, for his silence?

Wanting to be alone, I made my way to the end of Heigo and sat at the base of his tail. The tail rose and fell before me as I faced the stretch behind us.

“Why’s it so quiet?” said Gallin, so softly, her voice did not even ruffle the water. I tugged her pouch closer, and she rested her head on my shoulder. Together we looked out over the plain. The white dunes that rolled beneath us were ghostly and still; above them, the nighttime waters stretched on into blackness. Then, as I peered into the obscurity, I saw something. A huge area in the distance appeared to ripple, as if the darkness itself was alive. I sat up straighter, feeling my hair prickle and stiffen in the water. Had I been staring too long? I closed my eyes and listened. The movements of my gills, Gallin sucking oxygen into her mask, and the rise and fall of Heigo’s tail all sounded loud at that moment. But very faint, very far off, I could hear the *splishssh, whish* of a finned tail sliding through the water. My eyes snapped open just in time to see another flicker in the distance. This time, I caught a glimpse of murky green scales.

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My heart racing, I swam toward~~s~~ the whale's front end. I found Commander Runc speaking with a few of the other sailors. I kept back, —but when Runc noticed my presence, he stopped mid-sentence and turned to face me. I told him of what I had seen. He went immediately into action, quietly delivering orders. Throughout it all he deliberately kept his gaze away from where I had seen the monster.

“If it's as large as ye say, it may be an Elecuda,” Runc told me when he returned to my side. Around us, the Groculls gripped cudgels, sabers, and spears at their side. “Elecudas, fer all their size, prefer to stalk their prey until the right moment. If we panic an' try to flee now, he'll strike. Quickly, Pleth, git yerself a spear, and *don't look back.*”

Runc's offer surprised me. A dangle-nose approached me from the side with a spear in his hand. I caught his glance and accepted the weapon with my head bowed. Once in my hand, the lropal bark shaft felt surprisingly heavy, and I spun it through the water a few times to get a sense of its balance. The barbed spearhead caught what little light was radiating off the dunes and gleamed coldly. I became aware then of Gallin's weight on my back, her body tense and unmoving. *Forgive me, my child, I thought. I promised to protect you, but I've brought you into death's jaws once more.*

“We're changing course.” Behind me, Runc had raised his voice just loud enough for the crew in his vicinity to hear. “My slave Lengul tells me there's a safe zone nearby that Elecudas won't enter. It's filled with hydrothermal vents that heat up the water, so prepare yerselves. These vents could make even the hardest o' Groculls dizzy.” I turned around to see Lengul standing at Runc's side.

“What makes ye think we c'n trust im?” growled one Grocull with a red face and green nose-locks.

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“Lengul has saved my voyages from disaster before,” Runc said firmly. “I trust my own life and the lives of my crewmates in his hands.” The Groculls said nothing, looking askance at one another.

After the crew dispersed, I made my way to Lengul’s side.

“Lengul. This safe zone— Is it really going to work?” He flashed a lopsided smile at me, but only for an instant.

“The Elecudas are powerful, but they overheat easily,” he explained, his voice even and soothing. “Young and inexperienced Elecudas sometimes enter a vent field and slowly fall asleep, until they begin to die without realizing it.” Though Lengul’s words calmed me somewhat, I remained on edge. In my mind’s eye, I again saw the Elecuda moving in the blackness behind us, watching us, waiting for our whale to make a sudden movement. Why had the Elecuda stalked us for so long? And why hadn’t Lengul mentioned these hydrothermal vent fields to me before?

My worried thoughts were interrupted when Lengul suddenly asked me, “Pleth, what would you do if Reggulians attacked us?”

I paused for a moment. Then, gazing at him levelly, I answered,

“I suppose I would fight. No, I must fight. Runc gave me a spear like yours—and so I shall use it, even against my own kind.”

“And why is that? Who do you want to protect?” Lengul’s question left me speechless. The Reggulian was always difficult for me to keep up with in conversation, but this time I felt like he was cornering me.

“You already know the answer to that question,” I finally said, putting some strength into my voice despite Lengul’s intimidating stare. “I have someone I need to protect. I saved her from

death, so I'm responsible for guarding her life—from Groculls, from Elecudas, and from Reggulians. I hate these dangle-noses, but I've come to respect the Commander for who he is. I'll do what it takes to protect our voyage."

Lengul's expression didn't change, leaving me to wonder what he thought of my answer. Was he testing my resolve—making sure I had the courage to fight by his side? Or was he disappointed in my obedience to the Groculls? Lengul would leave me to wonder for a little longer, for he simply turned away and said, "Very well. Let us fight to the very end."

It wasn't until later that I realized exactly what he meant by that.

We changed course, and the monster followed. All of us heard it now: the *splishssh*, *whish*, *splishssh*, *whish* of the Elecuda's tail. Lengul told me that Elecudas stalked whales cautiously because a whales matched #them in size and strength, but that fact didn't put any of us at ease. The swordfish were spooked, whirring about as their riders struggled to control them. Once, I glanced back, and saw a whorl of dark green amidst the inky black. Fear flitted through my veins as I turned away. Everyone could sense it. The beast was coming closer.

Later that day, after the suns had risen, we entered the vent field. Though it was daytime, this area was dark, filled with columns of black sulfide that billowed through the water like smoke. As Heigo, crooning lowly, drifted into the field, huge shadows took shape alongside us. These were massive structures of rock, large enough to have their own magma centers. One of these monstrous floats of shale and stone was close enough for me to see its vents spewing chemicals, and even thin veins of magma beneath its crust. The water quickly became hot and stifling, and for Lengul and me, the stench of the sulfide was overwhelming. I wondered if Heigo would be able to take the heat. I could feel our whale moving more slowly, unwilling to go farther farther.

Commented [BP12]: I appreciate the foreshadowing here, but it could be more effective for Pleth to repeat this line near the end of the story when he actually does realize what this means.

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“Pleth.” Commander Runc startled me as he approached me from behind. “You were the first to see the Elecuda. I want ye to look back an’ tell us if he’s still there. It’s harder to see through the water here—but I trust that yeou’ll know when ye look.” I nodded. I was terrified to go. Still, I made my way to Heigo’s tail once again, and looked out behind us. Though clouds obscured my vision, there was no doubt—the telltale sound of the Elecuda’s approach was gone, and nothing moved through the darkness beyond. Lengul was right. The Elecuda had refused to follow us into the heat.

“An Elecuda!” somebody screamed. “The Elecuda’s found us!” I whipped around just as shouts filled the water. Then I froze in place. An enormous Elecuda blocked our path ahead. But this Elecuda was not the same one that had stalked us for hours. This one was black from its snout to its tail, with small eyes that burned red in the light of the thermal vents. A row of glowing spots arced down from its head and pulsed with electricity. After their initial shouts of terror, all the Groculls had gone silent. Nobody moved. The Elecuda, its gullet opened, its hooked fangs bared, was poised to strike.

“Raise yer weapons!” I heard Commander Runc howl into the silence. “This be the work of Reggilians!” At once, the Groculls lifted their weapons and gave a shout. The Elecuda twisted forward. For a moment, its dark throat and forest of teeth loomed over me—then the beast slammed into Heigo, and all of us were thrown into the water.

The ocean was a mayhem of smashed cargo and bloody foam. Above me, the Elecuda rippled and flexed while Heigo struggled to release himself from its jaws. A shuddering moan escaped the whale, and the Elecuda’s jaws unlatched, releasing a cloud of cream-colored blood. Around me, the Groculls struggled to pull the weights from their boots and swim back to Heigo’s side. The swordfish flitted between the two battling behemoths, seeking a soft place among the

Elecuda's scales to dig in their snouts. Heigo cried out again as the Elecuda plowed into him with the force of a meteor, tearing his wings with relish.

Runc was still aboard the whale. As I remained frozen in fear, our ~~C~~ommander fired a huge grappling hook into the Elecuda's eye. The monster thrashed and screamed, and the vibrations of its cry made my bones quiver. From afar I saw Runc pull on the hook's chain with his huge hands, trying to reel the serpent in. The swordfish swarmed over its flapping sides and plunged their snouts in deep. A group of Groculls mounted the Elecuda's head and beat it with spears, clubs, and cutlasses.

I was astonished at their bravery, and my weakness. Perhaps I was wrong about their notion of honor. Perhaps I didn't deserve to protect Gallin. As I watched Commander Runc stand his ground and pull back on the hook chain, I knew I had to do something. Summoning my courage, I swam forward. There was no time to think of whose side I was on.

At that moment, I was blinded by a strobe of light. The Groculls leapt back with a cry, as the swordfish were fried in an instant. I had nearly forgotten: Elecudas possessed electricity! The charred bodies of a few Groculls drifted into the depths. In the next instant, the grappling chain snapped. Uncoiling itself, the Elecuda prepared for another strike. Only then did I catch sight of the figures who were riding this great eel. Figures with long blue legs, manes of green hair, and dark eyes.

Each Reggalian wore a suit of shining armor that protected them from the Elecuda's shocks. Their mocking laughter was shrill and reedy over the roar of their Elecuda.

"You tell them to stop!" I heard Gallin's cry out from over my shoulder. At first, I thought she was speaking to me—until the one she addressed spoke back.

“Who? The Reggulians?” said Lengul with a cruel laugh. “I don’t command them. I am their humble servant.” I couldn’t turn around. The point of Lengul’s spear pricked the back of my neck. All mirth disappeared from his voice as he reached a hand around to stroke my throat, and said, “Pleth. I should have killed you. But because you are young and foolish, I will give you one more chance. This time, choose the better race.”

Before I could say a word, he plunged his fingers into my gills and pulled down—a move that suffocated me and filled my eyes with immediate darkness. The battle cries of the Groculls, Gallin’s scream, the throes of the two massive beasts before me, ~~—~~all of it melted away into silence.

#

My eyes filled with soft blue light as I opened them. The first things I registered ~~was~~were the white bars that curved down before me. At first, I thought they must be bones—and as I sat up, I saw that I was right. I was captive in a teardrop-shaped cage made of rib bones. They met just over my head, each slender and polished to a perfect milky white.

“So you’ve awakened.”

I snapped my head to the right at the sound of Lengul’s voice. I could see him crouched near the bars of my cage, clad in an outfit that clung tightly to his skin, fanning out into loose cloth at his wrist and ankles. The green and gold garments he wore struck me of royalty, and seemed hauntingly familiar. Lengul smiled at my bewildered expression and stood up, reaching one long-fingered hand to the top of my cage.

At his touch, three of the rib bones fell outward. I now had enough space to crawl through, but the sight of what lay beyond stopped me from even taking a breath.

Before my cage was an open space, and beyond that, were Reggulians. They stood in a half circle, and at their center was one Reggulian dressed more elaborately than the others. Like Lengul, this one wore golds, greens, and cream colors; her sleeves and robes had scalloped edges that swayed delicately in the water. Over her brow sloped two blue horns, and between them was set a gold diadem, shaped like a sun with waving spokes. The men who surrounded this Reggulian were more simply clad, some wearing little more than the loincloth I had been given. Each of them bore a curved blade with serrated edges.

The richly clad Reggulian lifted her hand and uttered syllables in a language I did not know.

“Come forward, Pleth,” said Lengul gently. Hesitating, I bowed my head to fit through the gap and made my way toward him. My eyes kept away from the Reggulians and darted around the room; we seemed to be in a palace turret with windows made from a similar material to the Pearl’s Skin. I could see beyond to other Reggulian towers, decorated with intricate designs made of shell and coral, and columns of seaweed that swayed in the blue light.

Suddenly Lengul was behind me. He shoved me to the floor, the tip of his blade pressed into my neck.

“Bow,” he commanded quietly. I bent my head as far to the floor as I could, my arms shaking. Lengul had me bow for a few moments; then, as abruptly as he had forced me down, he stepped back and instructed me to rise. I did so, trembling, looking everywhere in the room except at the elongated eyes of the royal figure before me. Lengul stood beside me and gestured toward the assembly.

Commented [BP13]: It might be good to establish how many Reggulians are actually in the room—otherwise it becomes a little doubtful later when Pleth makes his escape to think that a whole crowd couldn’t stop him.

“Pleth, the one you see before you is my older sister, the Duchess of Melpren. I have asked her to spare your life and to make you a citizen of her duchy. But first, you must demonstrate your loyalty to the Reggolian race.”

“What happened?” I whispered back. “Where are Commander Runc and the others?” For a moment, I worried that I might have angered the Duchess by speaking, but Lengul only smiled in amusement.

“You worry for the ones you call the ‘dangle-noses,’ when your own life is on the line? Very well. Our former master Runc is held captive, along with all his crew. They shall be executed tomorrow evening, to show all our kind what fate lies in store for Groculls so brazen as to enter Orotricia.”

“Then you have been planning to betray them all along?” I asked. “How did you manage to collaborate with the Reggulians; if you’ve been a slave all this time?” Lengul’s smile faded.

“By waiting years,” he said, showing his fangs as he grimaced at me. “We Reggulians tolerated the Groculls until they began raiding our villages and taking children like you prisoner. Most of these brutes we were able to catch and kill—all but Runc, who bested us time after time. I was asked to sacrifice myself. I allowed myself to be captured, so that I could earn Runc’s trust as his favorite slave. Each time I went on a voyage with him, I met secretly with my sister, and we plotted the best way to trap Runc without sacrificing precious Reggolian lives.”

Lengul then explained how he had trained me to be an unwitting accomplice. He taught me well enough to sight an Elecuda in the darkest water. But he did not teach me the true meaning of that scent I detected—the smell of burnt Elecuda flesh; as Reggolian riders prod it with scalding spears. When I saw the Elecuda, I reported it to Runc. Then, Lengul told our

Commander a falsehood, that Elecudas cannot stand heat—a falsehood I was too inexperienced to correct. Trusting Lengul’s judgment, Runc had steered us into the Reggulians’ trap.

Lengul paused, as if he expected me to congratulate him on his success. When I didn’t, he continued in a hurried and hushed voice, “But those years of living with Groculls are all behind us, Pleth. My sister wanted to execute you with the others, but I told her of your reverence for the Reggulians—and your distaste for your captors. Now is the time for you to commit your first act of disobedience to them, Pleth. Do away with your attachments to the dangle-noses, and never set foot on dry land again!”

“Where is Gallin?” I interrupted him, edging my voice with a hiss even as I panicked. Lengul traded looks with the Duchess, who narrowed her eyes at us. He asked me to repeat my question. “Gallin is the Grocull child in my care,” I explained. “Where is she?”

I felt a disturbance in the water behind me as another Reggulian entered the room. I turned to see him holding a bundle in his arms—Gallin. She still wore her filter mask, but was bound tightly in swaddling clothes. Her eyes immediately sought me, pleading.

With one swift movement, the Reggulian guard unwrapped her swaddling cloth and dumped her in the center of the floor. Her wrists were tied together behind her back. Lengul stepped up to my side and pressed the handle of a Reggulian blade into my hand. Like the bars of my cage, this blade was made of bone, while sharp points of coral were fixed to its cutting edge.

“This is my sister’s only stipulation,” Lengul said. “To cleanse yourself of Herrok’s evil influence, you must renounce your ties with their world. Once that is done, I shall take you under my care, and ready you for Orotrician society.”

I felt as if all the weight of Orotricia’s waters were was pressing down on me. My ears rang, and my blood ran cold. Slowly, as if in a dream, I swept my eyes across the Reggulians

gathered before me, lingering on their beautiful clothes, their noble air, their refined features. These were celestials to me, and I was a child of their heaven. Outside our turret, I watched Reggulians drive ~~fuchsia~~~~fusehia~~ fish with long fins that curled elegantly in the water. And those golden shafts of light fading into the blue depths—how much more beautiful was the sunlight, seen in Orotricia.

And then I looked down at Gallin. My eyes passed over her bristly hair, and her coarse clothes. The Grocull seemed so fragile here, sucking in oxygen through a mask to survive, her skin pale and waxy in the water. Yet her eyes had a power over me, keeping me locked in their gaze.

I would expect her to be terrified. Gallin knew I longed to return to my birthplace. But she also knew that I loved her and ~~had sworn~~~~swore~~ to protect her the day I caught her falling from the sky. So as she looked up at me, her face became impassive, while her eyes hardened. It was that same stubborn look she ~~had given~~~~gave~~ me when she ~~had~~ demanded to accompany me here. As much as she needed me, she knew I needed her.

“If I don’t kill her, I shall die.” I said to Lengul softly, keeping my sword pointed down at Gallin’s face.

“Yes.”

“And what shall become of her, then?” I asked him. Lengul stared at me, as if the answer to my question should be obvious.

“She will die, along with the others,” he said flatly, looking troubled by my question.

“We Reggulians do not keep the children of Groculls as slaves, and we have no means to care for her.”

At that moment, the room felt unsteady to me, even dreamlike. My mind began to shrink away from the reality I faced, and memories replayed themselves, unprompted. Once more, I heard the voice of the Grocull who threw Gallin overboard. Once more, I looked up to see her shadow against the darkness of Orotricia.

Commented [BP14]: I like the sentiment of this line, but honestly, it's a little confusing. Is there a better way to put this metaphor?

Lengul furrowed his brow as if concerned, then said, “Pleth, you must kill her with your own hands. But if using a blade is too *messy* for you, there are other ways—... You could remove her mask and hold her until she drow—”

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I rounded on him and swung my blade. He leaped back with a howl, clutching his bloodied hand. Immediately the Duchess cried out, and her guards rushed toward me. For an instant, Lengul’s fingers released their hold on his sword, and I dove in. I grabbed the handle of his sword as it drifted to the floor and turned to the Reggolian guard who had carried in Gallin. Both swords in my hand, I lifted one to parry an oncoming slash—with his sword caught in the saw’s teeth of mine, I stabbed him in the stomach. As he doubled over I let go of the handle, and with my free hand I scooped up Gallin. I turned to escape out of the room.

Just as I swam out, churning the water with my back feet, one sword caught me on the shoulder; another guard sliced deep into my big toe. Gritting my teeth, I dove down the corridor with a blade in one hand and Gallin held to my chest in the other. Behind me the Reggolian guards called out in their alien tongue, alerting the rest of the palace of my escape.

Over them all, I heard Gallin’s small, gruff voice:

“Thank you.”

Simple words, so simple they made me smile despite myself. She had never doubted my loyalty to her; yet she knew what I had sacrificed to save her. Now that I look back, I see myself

~~swinging my blade at Lengul as the moment when the course of my life was decided.~~ Never again would I be a mere slave, but never again would I be a true Reggalian, either.

#

My refuge was cold, and sharp to the touch. After binding my injuries with seaweed, I had wedged myself tightly between two shelves of coral, stomach down. The coral bit into me as I squeezed in, and fresh wisps of blood curled into the water. I worried: ~~e~~Could the Reggilians taste my blood in the currents, like the sharks I had heard my crewmates speak of? I knew it wasn't safe for me here. But for just a moment, I had to rest, or else my heart would burst.

Gallin was here too. I heard her stir, in the hollow deep within the coral behind me. One more time, I stared out into the darkening water from my lookout. Then, I tore my gaze away, and carefully crawled backward.

The hollow where I had placed Gallin was just tall enough for me to sit up and wrap myself around her. I cradled her while the coral curved over us like a cocoon. It was so quiet here, yet my thoughts churned and foamed, much like the waters in poor Heigo's tank at the moment of our takeoff. But gradually, they stilled, so I could get the clarity I needed to plan my next move. Without question, I wanted to save my crew. That was certain. But I knew not what came after. The Reggilians would never take me back; what would the Groculls think of me? Was I to spend the rest of my life as a Grocull slave?

#

My narrow escape from the ~~D~~duchess's palace had happened all in an instant. But the harrowing day I broke my crewmates out of their prison felt as though it aged me a decade. Their release would be the first act of valor that earned me this elusive "honor" the Groculls so craved. The stage had been set for me to seize my destiny.

Commented [BP15]: Some metadiscourse that I think we could do without—I like the lines that follow better. But you can decide how you feel about that!

Commented [BP16]: The author added this section (as well as a small bit in the next) after this suggestion: The way this ending ties up some loose ends is great, but it also falls a little flat for me after the climax of Pleth's escape. Is there a better way to convey some of this information without having Pleth go into a long monologue? (Also, I love that Pleth tries to become an ambassador, but I'm not sure how realistic it is that he can actually stop that much conflict in his lifetime.) An idea to adjust this section: Have Pleth find a hiding place outside the palace, cradling Gallin and thinking about how he needs to save the crew and what that means for his life—realizing he wants to be an ambassador and serve "the humble, the innocent, and the voiceless." Just make it a little more interactive, and I think that action will help the reader feel a little more fulfilled with the falling action here.

Later, after I had captained my first voyage, I questioned myself. Was I wrong to work for the Groculls—the very creatures that had enslaved me? Was I a traitor to all Reggulians for that? But then I realized that I never cast in my allegiance with a race. I bowed my knee in service not to Groculls, not to Reggulians, but to the humble, the innocent, and the voiceless. It was for them that I led these voyages into Orotricia, carrying the goods that helped keep the Grocull kingdoms alive even as their world withered away; it was for them that I acted as an arbitrator between Herrok and Orotricia, stopping the Groculls from taking Reggulians as slaves, while I stayed the upraised swords of my own kind. Throughout it all, Lengul was always my enemy. He worked to thwart me even when peace among all was my only goal.

In Grocull history, I will be considered an oddity. A Reggulian slave who became a captain is unthinkable. All kinds of bizarre theories have been written about me, and so, I have penned this memoir with the intent to set the record straight. This has been my life's work, and it remains unfinished. A single lifetime cannot heal the genuine hurts of these people. My hope is that the next generation—perhaps, some of my readers—may see the preciousness of my progress, so that it may not go to waste.

I leave history to decide whether I have acted rightly.