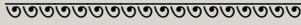




TUNE-UP



g'ig'ng, the people's Keening takes root in the soil.

*Blue shells are crushed and woven into earth; their color seeps into roots of the giant-trees.
When giant-trees are cut into vessels, they sit blue against blue on the horizon.*

gy'ng, the people's Keening is forged in the fire.

*gy'ng is forged to bind the seams of vessels, to make fins which carry the vessels forward.
When gy'ng is welded to vessels, they sit gleaming on the horizon.*

g'ig'ng, the people's Keening is woven in the cloth.

*Blue cloth is woven to cover the gy'ng of vessels, to mute their shine with colors of the sea.
When the sun reaches zenith over blue vessels on blue waters,
peeking gy'ng winks to hunters sitting hungry on the horizon.*

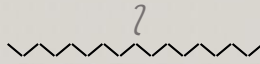
g'ig'ng, the people's Keening is voiced in the song.

*gy'ng fins of the vessels propel the voyage; their articulation is sung in sm'agn.
When the people must move quickly, the strongest sm'agn sits low on Thegam's horizon.*

g'ig'ng, the people's Keening begins on the vessel.

*The strongest sm'agn of Thegam cannot be willed.
The strongest sm'agn of Thegam sits at dusk; the only path forward is darkness.
When zdg'he'ng is offered, the sm'agn of g'ig'ng sends the people's vessel over the horizon.*





Captain Ibalis returns the ocean's salt from his mouth and hikes the top of his chapped lip in satisfaction. For five months, they've been making sweeps along the edge of The Brine—the uncharted expanse of sea surrounding Iodesh's pangea—half-heartedly carrying out their contract.

Some scat-brained Earl had approached Ibalis with a deal last Spring: capture a Faye and keep the crew quiet. Ibalis had laughed in his face. Only quill-snapper-sages and bad-rum-sailors¹ believe in the Faye. Besides, Fayetales say they're shapeshifters who can move objects by looking at them. How's anyone supposed to capture something like that?

But the Earl was set on bedding a Haywood, and the Lady in question was a Faye-nutter herself: "A gesture this grand would guarantee the marriage seal, *and* earn My Lady's deepest appreciation. I flatter myself, it's fool-proof!"

Fool's errand, rather, though Ibalis wouldn't have risked shattering the Earl's delusion by saying so. Better to be free on the high seas than to have your ship and crew commandeered for the Kingswar, after all, and better still with a fool volunteering to fund your truancy. Ibalis had ordered his men to sign the Earl's ridiculous writ of silence and they'd left within a week. Today, their contract came to an unexpected end.

After the midday sun erected too-tall columns under the hold's grate, Ibalis had altered course for a resupply. That's when the crow's nest saw it: a brief sparkle on the horizon. The same sparkle reported in every sea encounter with the Faye. It'd taken the entire day to catch up to the slippery bastards, and now...

Uproarious cheers from his crew pulse outward from the deck, riding dusk-lit waves below. Ibalis eyes the lone scow drifting towards him as the larger, stranger, blue vessel behind it gains an impressive burst of speed.

He'll be rich. The Faye are real, and they'd willingly given up one of their own.

First thing he'll do is threaten to talk. The Earl wants all the glory, but his writ of silence failed to include provisions for disembarking. Ibalis should be able to squeeze the dolt for enough to buy a title. Then maybe he'd call on the Haywood mare himself.

Cheers reach a fever pitch as the scow scrapes along the side of his ship. Shadows of empty lifeboat hooks slither down grimy wooden planks—crooked rust stretching for water. Ibalis' sneer expands to a grin.

No, first he'll find out just how many Fayetales are true.



¹ An Avon idiom of three parts. Respectively: adamant philosophizing from behind one's desk, those who succumb to maritime superstition, and altogether, any lot particularly inclined to figment.



Sky-blue silk rises and falls with Lysbeth Haywood's sigh; her matching eyes re-read the message held taut in her hands:

...how I pined over Spring Equinox. You spoke of your childhood fascination with Faye, and in the course of your speaking, the shapes of your mouth transfixed me. Ever hot did my yearni—

Ignoring the drivel on either end:

...a pigeon arrived from their ship. They have done it, My Lady! They have captured a being wrapped in silver! Not in five-hundred years has this been accomplished, if we are to believe the tales!

They have been instructed to dock at Limington, where I will examine the cargo personally. If it is acceptable, I shall hasten to Lindenholt Manor with every intention of gifting this very rare creature. I will not attempt to hide my desire, sweet Lady, that this offering might induce your passions for me...

The parchment wrinkles in Lysbeth's grip as her gaze returns to the window of her sitting room.

Hers is a leisurely life, if somewhat dull. All the duller now, as most men of gentry and peerage are occupied with the Kingswar to the North. Unfortunately for Lysbeth, one gentleman was given leave from the fighting.

The Earl of Dorsit, referred to simply as Dorsit, had been preening and panting over her for the better part of a year, though he was hardly first. Lysbeth's height—nearing six feet—pleasing features, and polished mannerisms lend her an air of elusive refinement uncommon to those of twenty-three. Before the Kingswar, Avonleigh Lords with questionable views on compliments had taken to calling her a "jewel of the court." She'd been sure to meet their expectations: sitting pretty and silent in her setting, pointedly cold to their advances.

Dorsit is no exception. Lysbeth finds his personality as disagreeable as his attentions, but her opinion matters little, as he's never cared to acknowledge it, and her refined sense of propriety prevents her from dismissing him outright. Over Spring Equinox, the Earl had called on Lysbeth and her brother, Isaac, Marquess of Edenshire. Though she'd taken great pains to be civil, Dorsit's company was difficult to tolerate, and she'd soon fallen back on a subject which offered her repose from several disquieting events throughout her life: the debated existence of beings known to her countrymen as Faye.

As topics go, it was an unfashionable choice. Any Avon of good breeding would tell you the Faye belong to children and half-mad carousers. Thus, Lysbeth was sure to make an overzealous presentation, and Dorsit's premature departure suggested her plan had worked to put him off. Now she realizes her liveliness had spurred his affections instead.

She folds his ink and turns to a young woman reading in the middle of the room. "Anything?"

Elane closes the book in her lap. Its spine reads, *Evidence for the Faye: A Collection of Accounts from the Dawn of Man*. "No, the most recent records are the Spencish galleon and the burning of Corburg. Nothing we would've forgotten."

Resigned, Lysbeth joins her cousin on the couch. The veracity of Dorsit's far-fetched claims can't be determined until his arrival in two weeks. She'd, rather pointlessly, hoped something in the book might provide her with the truth now, sparing her the need for patience.

Though appearances of Faye are scattered across ages² of historical record, their existence is disputed for two reasons: the outlandish descriptions of their physical appearance and abilities, and the frustrating peripheral events which always seem to accompany the main accounts—leaving just enough room to question their authenticity.

The encounters Elane has just mentioned are prime examples of the latter.

Five-hundred years ago, the seafaring nation of Corburg proudly claimed the capture of a Faye—or Syren, as the Corburgish called them. Within a month, a devastating fire swept across the capital where the Syren was said to reside. Corburg's much larger neighbor took advantage of the chaos and invaded before the ashes settled, ensuring the loss of any singled primary records through the ravages of their brief and brutal occupation.

Two centuries later, a Spencish patrol galleon set after a sparkle at the edge of Spencish waters. After hours of slow gains, the sparkle took the form of an unfamiliar vessel and deposited a small craft into the water. Despite the mothership's unanticipated surge of speed, the Spencish galleon pursued it for a time, returning later to find no sign of the scow. Though specifics of the account matched others before it, the report was largely discredited due to additional claims of a dragon's silhouette in the clouds.

Lysbeth bites her cheek.

"Please don't fret, Lys. Dorsit must be teasing you," Elane says, placing *Evidence* on an end table.

"I would agree, but then what could give him cause to so openly state his intentions?" She scans the message again and runs her thumb over the referenced line. "Here, 'that this offering might induce your passions for me,' he writes. You see? He seeks to extort my sense of obligation."

"Well, Dorsit is hardly a beacon of wit. Perhaps he's been fooled by his hired sailors? Or perhaps his men believe they've caught a Faye but in truth they..." Elane's brow knits.

"Precisely. How is one meant to mistake a Faye for anything else?" Lysbeth asks, waving the parchment. "Alder's descriptions were quite clear."

Were it not for Alder, the Haywood family's peculiar progenitor, it's unlikely any Haywood would've given the Faye much thought. After all, such rare and undependable

² Two-thousand years. Calendar years reset at the end of each age.

accounts left little else to be said about Faye which hadn't already been said over millennia. Alder's own account, however, begged pardon from this rule.

Three centuries ago, Alder rose from Earl to Marquess, bringing the Haywoods into Avonleigh's elite peerage. Given the southern county of Edenshire and a new residence at Castle Lindenholt, his dutiful approach to Sovereign and soil was regrettably short-lived when, after his supposed loss at sea, Lindenholt passed to his wife until his young son came of age. Even today, such tragedies are common enough, though less common is the return of the lost decades later.

Thirty-four years after Alder's disappearance, he'd reappeared on Lindenholt's stone court offering vague explanations for his fated voyage and blaming his protracted return on a bout of amnesia. Rejoicing Lindenholt residents chose to muzzle the gift horse rather than pry its mouth, and the remaining nine years of Alder's life were merrily spent. It was a happy piece of Haywood family trivia, and would have remained so, had the letter Alder composed in secret not been found by his son after his death.

In truth, according to Alder, a Faye ship had spirited his own away to their homeland—where he'd lived in bliss until the desire to see his child once more compelled his return to Avonleigh. Alarmed by nearly every passage of the letter, Alder's son assumed his father's madness and kept the document a family secret. So it happened this account of the Faye—by far the most detailed—remains unknown to the world at large, passed down through generations of Haywoods as a source of great debate and whimsy among them.

"Yes, but Dorsit's sailors aren't privy to Alder's letter. His descriptions of Faye were humanlike, but *they'd* be searching for something from a Fayettele." Elane tilts her head to *Evidence*. "Something intelligent but *inhuman*, like a chimera or a shapeshifting demon."

"Aye, but the captured wears some manner of silver attire, just as Alder said," Lysbeth counters. Satisfied Elane's confoundment has reached suitable levels at last, she skims the message again. "'...examine the cargo personally.' Whatever they've found, Dorsit considers it more debris than intelligent being." She returns the letter to her lap indignantly. "Why should I be made to accept such a man? Even supposing his claim is true, would Father really secure a *person* as my price?"

"Considering tradition, he may not have a choice. And Isaac is liable to take Dorsit's view on personhood regardless." Elane cups her cousin's flexing fingers. "We'll find a way out if it comes to it, Lys, but we won't know anything for certain until Dorsit arrives."

