PIKE

THE

VIKE

by Joseph S daCosta

Runaways

[1]

The waves broke hard across the face, then rolled back, denied. They came once more in vain protest. An endless, futile assault against an enemy with no pride to humble, no doubts to exploit, no soul to corrupt and destroy. It was early winter and the North Sea, having swelled confidently through its Fall training, had arrived at the height of its pomp and was itching for a fight. It rolled south and as its frustrations grew, tenfold came its fury. The hunt had led it here, desperate and starving. It roared as much in anguish as in a proclamation of its terrible strength. The face, as ever, remained indifferent. The predator surged forward, abandoning any pretense of playing with its food, and crashed against the face, stretching ever higher up its smooth surface. It pawed pathetically like some invalid child begging to be picked up by a distracted parent, then slunk back down and receded into its own sorrowful embrace.

The sea frothed and undulated in quiet agitation as it spread its arms out a full nineteen miles wide searching for weaknesses, caressing the face like an apologetic abuser, insincere in its remorse, roughly, secretly trying to find a way back into the heart of its victim. But the Barrier Dam neither thought nor felt. It cared not for the wants and desires of the North Sea. To those of its creators it shared an equal degree of apathy. It just was. Like a sword or a cannon, unconsciously dutiful. There was nothing personal in the dispassionate way it forbade the frigid, incomplete waters from reuniting with their captive former love. The large inlet that was known in those bygone days as the Zuider Zee had been severed purposefully, by man, for the survival and ascension of man. A noble, selfless struggle contested in timeless attrition.

Two sets of oversized hands, broad-knuckled and calloused, coiled around the weatherbeaten railing that wore its rusty scars honorably. The thick fingers strained with anguish, but without malice. The wind, that high above the battering waves, made its presence felt with a stern lashing against the Dutchman's billowing raincoat, challenging his resolve. Yet Pike stood firm atop the Dam, a somber colossus carved from, conjoined with, its monumental base. He peered out across the infinite expanse of the sea and for only the second time, the first since his initial pilgrimage here, he felt bereft of promise. The gateless, unguarded doorway before him had always rekindled a deep-rooted longing within him, a quest spun and threaded to stitch together every individual cell of his body into an expertly woven adventurer. Add a pair of boots, a compass, and a mocking laugh into the face of sobriety and all was right in the world again.

When Leif Pike returned to the Barrier Dam he always brought with him a heavy burden of guilt. He was born a wanderer, as he was born with blue eyes. And he was bred a wanderer, out of reluctant necessity. Those frost-tinged sirens' calls that tempted him to loosen his grip on that rail with their softly sprayed kisses never failed to stir him, even as he held his

customary vigils. But when the loss was fresh that guilt seemed insurmountable. It was a shackle, self-imposed. Then the rover awoke from his groggy slumber and could see no sun glistening crests, hear no circling gulls coasting on the breeze above their briny trough, which he could not smell. And the manacle chafed and bled and he endured his penance. Those men he left behind on the killing fields of Mount Kailash lived inside of him now. The ground on which they drew their last breaths could never be consecrated. They were intruders in a land that was already holy. Their smooth little stones and cute little flags would curry no favor. So their vagrant spirits came to Pike, their disgraced protector, pleading for alms.

As a gust of wind picked up, Pike turned his back on the sea. Though retreating from the elements he was just as likely giving up on the hopes of finding any solace there. As that morose vessel of regrets shambled across the crest of the Dam he brightened slightly as the garrison of windmills sprouted into view. The wide, latticed blades turned over on those marvels of human engineering that had done the yeoman's work of pumping the inlet back out to the sea, reducing it, without surrendering it. Wheels spun in orchestration to the accompaniment of the rich choreography of teeth coupling, then uncoupling. A whirling dance that turned the forces of nature against themselves. Left behind was the Ijsselmeer, a massive inland lake. Its cropped shores were skirted by the fertile band of newly created polders. And on these polders was clasped the bejeweled necklace of Flevoland. To Pike it was a source of enormous pride in his fellow Dutchmen, in what they had created from nothing. In a past where the word still had meaning, Leif had also called it home.

Pike's grandfather, Hrimthurs, had been one of the original settlers. They toiled, unceasing, with hands that became permanently stained by the virgin soil. They did it for their families, of course. But they also felt an obligation to the country they loved with unabashed hearts. The elder Pike, with

the rapturous voice of a newly minted convert, would tell his grandson that being Dutch was their identity. Everything else came second. It was why the younger Pike saw those homesteaders as nothing less than conquering heroes. They had given everything they had to ensure the safety and survival of everyone they held dear. Looking down at the quaint villages that dotted the province, Leif Pike never felt like more of a failure.

The depths of this inner despair went unspoken, but hardly unnoticed. A few yards away the young Spaniard's impatient eyes stalked silently on an unerring path from temple to nose and back in a fixed skull that moved in opposing rhythm along with restlessly pacing legs. The look, though unbroken, was quizzical, not threatening. Yet when the lids grew weary and reset the scene there was a faint seething before calibrating back. Shorn several unnecessary layers Cid appeared even more diminutive, but, with his untamed black hair finally set free and his swarthy complexion regaining its color, he cut a figure at least a full step removed from abject misery. He pulled his hands from his coat pockets and fidgeted with his collar. This climate may have been a comparative relief, but the rim of the North Sea was not the Andelusian paradise he clung to in his memories.

"What's he doing?! Why are we even here?!," Cid erupted, thrusting his fists like pile drivers back into their holes. His gaze never wavered. Derby, seated on the ground, backed casually against the parapet, knew the question was meant for him. "I am quietly contemplating. You are taking the first step in a short journey that ends with you being thrown off a dam," he responded with practical disinterest, his own head bowed down. He raised it slowly, arching his neck back as if he had never done it before and was unsure of the consequences. The ever present tip of his hair surfaced first, the stark widow's peak following behind. His eyes like twin lighthouses, perched atop the rounded hills of his cheeks, still searching, forever vigilant. His scarred mouth, long healing in the weeks that passed. The

shame still raw. He patted the firm concrete beside him. “Why don’t you sit down?”

Cid finally, reluctantly, broke the line he was searing into Pike and looked down at Derby. There was a boiling frustration in Cid and he was determined to hold onto it. “It’s not your fault,” Derby protested suddenly, bringing the kid’s tantrum to a jarring halt. The words were so earnest, so direct, Cero snapped back with a sense that he had to defend himself. “Okay? I…I don’t…,” Cid stammered. “You couldn’t have had any idea…,” Derby continued. “I know. I mean I don’t know. I didn’t,” Cid sheepishly replied. “Once all the shit started happening,” Derby pressed on, “what can anybody do? They could’ve lived and we could’ve died.” He shifted his weight, finding himself uncomfortable. He pointed in Pike’s direction with a rigid finger, the sleeve of his coat snapping in response to the forceful gesture. “He doesn’t blame you. Not really. He knows the dangers.” Old Londongrass lowered his arm, the scars pulling taut across his face. “We all know.”

“You’re wrong, you know,” Cid rebutted, almost embarrassed. His hands still deep in their pockets. He leaned forward, his chest lightly grazing the edge of the low wall. His sights filled with the sea, his eyes squinting and watering with the breeze. “He blames me for everything.” Derby planted a supportive hand on the ground and began to raise himself. Deciding against it, he reseated and pivoted toward Cid instead. “If he really believed that you wouldn’t be here,” Derby stated with analytic proof in place of comfort. Straightening, Cid turned first to Derby before continuing his sweeping study of his vast surroundings. His self-pity was forgotten as swiftly as the aggravation that preceded it. Young Cero’s fickle mind now filled with awe.

“So, is this his headquarters?,” he wondered aloud. “Is there a lair hidden somewhere in here?” Derby’s brow lowered in confusion as his lips parted in something akin to imminent sorrow. “Please tell me you thought of this before I told you to

‘believe it all.’ I can’t handle the idea of being responsible for what’s coming out of your mouth right now.” Cid shook his head and smirked, brushing off the implications of his naivete. He tossed in a good natured laugh. “It’s just, you know, I hear a lot of things.” He stole a quick glance at Pike, brooding, safely out of earshot. “There are a lot of stories, hell, even a few songs, about where he’s been. He’s a legend. Not even just here. All across the continent. And beyond.” The young Spaniard’s voice pitched higher with each hustled word while his mind envisioned a cartoonish map full of bright blue oceans, mountain ranges marked by clusters of crude, inverted V’s, dashed lines swirling into knots, and bright red X’s marked as if by a swashbuckler’s sword.

“A lair?!,” Derby repeated, casting everything else aside. Cid took the pointed remark and used the interruption to catch his breath. He lowered his voice slightly, as if gifting a forbidden secret. His hands finally emerged, palms open, fingers splayed, waiting for their cue to add necessary emphasis. “When I was young,” he began. Derby cocked his head, unamused. Cid started over, “When I was younger my friends and I would go down to the beach. We’d spend all morning gathering up seashells into this cigar box I took from my dad. Then we’d bury it halfway into the sand. We’d pretend we were pirates and fight over it. Well, that’s how it started. It always just broke down into four kids beating the hell out of each other with sticks.

“Anyway, there were these caves at the far end of the beach. If you started out early enough you could make it out there and hang out and get back home fast enough so you don’t have to eat your dinner cold and standing up, on account of your sore ass.” The kid smiled ruefully as his hand stopped halfway to instinctively soothe a pain that was still there. “So you climb down these rocks to get to the mouth. And you have to wade in, and sometimes it’s up to your waist already. And the opening, it’s small, even for a little kid. And it’s dark in there. I’m not afraid of the dark. I’m not. Those other guys, they were too scared to even go down there. So they don’t say nothing.”

Cid swiped his hand dismissively and waited to see if Derby would challenge him. Derby said nothing, as well. “It’s the water,” Cid hurriedly resumed. “If you get in there and the ceiling’s low, you know, and it doesn’t open up and the tide comes in then that’s it. So I don’t go in.

“I try to forget about it, but it stays in my head, when I look out into the ocean, when I close my eyes every night. Not even nightmares. I don’t drown. I don’t get eaten by some giant squid. I’m just in front of the cave. And there’s…nothing. Like my brain can’t fill in the picture. My imagination doesn’t know what to do. So I go back, and I go down there, and I can’t go in. I go back again, same thing. Eventually, my friends stop coming along. They know I’m not gonna do it. I go by myself. I think, ‘I can tell them I went in. They wouldn’t know.’ But that’s not the point. I could’ve lied to you from the beginning and you would’ve believed me.” Derby, again, said nothing.

“Then one day I’m coming out of the cafe and there’s this guy sitting at one of the little tables and, man, he’s the ugliest guy I’ve ever seen. He looked like he spent all day getting hit in the face with an oar before he was tied down in the sun. Oh!,” Cid shot bolt upright in revelation. “Like that guy who was tied to a cliff and a bird kept pecking at him!” “Prometheus?,” Derby offered forth with caution. “Maybe. Are we talking about the same guy?” “Probably?,” Derby shrugged. “So you just went to the beach instead of going to school?” Cid regained the tenuous grasp on his train of thought. “This guy, he catches me staring at him and I froze…like Medusa!,” he blasted, with astonishment at himself. “Did random pages of books just wash ashore?,” the bewildered Londongrass interjected as Cid began again, oblivious. “I think he’s gonna kill me, and then he smiles. And right in the middle of this mangled face is a mouth that looked like it swallowed the sun.

“Every tooth was like a sparkling gem. I’d never seen anything like it. This magic ogre with a mouth like a treasure chest. And he asked if I wanted to hear a story. My eyes were

falling out of my head so I just nodded. I sat down next to him and he points to the center of the table and says that's where we are. And he tells me to point to any place on the table, like a dare, and he could tell me where it was, the name, if there were deserts or jungles, what the people looked like. And, with his finger in the center, that little table seemed so big…and empty. And so I ran my finger all over the place, at random, like I would confuse him. But he knew everywhere. And everywhere there was a story.

"There were moss covered temples hiding in dense swamps full of snakes and spears. And if some giant reptile didn't capsize your boat, boobytraps were waiting to strike you on the land. There were sandstorms that lasted for days and when they passed you'd find yourself in front of some walled city, like it just popped up out of the desert. And you were very much unwelcomed. There were islands where your feet were the first to ever touch it. And people who never knew what a stranger was until you arrived. And this time you were welcomed. 'And that makes the big world small again.' That's what he said. But what I really remember was that every adventure, every death-defying escape, every dirty fingerprint on that table bore one name: Pike. It was Pike who dove off a cliff to save his friends and Pike who buried a hatchet in the skulls of his enemies. He faced down everything in front of him and went right on to the next. I swear, Derby, this guy, he looked up to the sky every time he said Pike's name.

"I went to sleep that night and, for the first time, when I walked into that cave it was bright. Everywhere I looked there were piles of jewels, one for every color of that ogre's teeth. And gold doubloons from a temple in the swamp, and a horde of the sultan's treasures. I woke up panting in the middle of the night. All I wanted was to fall back asleep so I could revisit that room, but I was too excited. I thought of that ogre's thick, hairy, disjointed finger pointing at the middle of the table and I looked up into the midnight sky, which was all I could see from the high

window in my room. And I just sat there until I heard my father moving about and I knew it was morning.

"I flew down the beach, half worried that it wouldn't even be there anymore. All of a sudden I'm there and I tumble down the rocks and the water's freezing because it's barely daybreak. I"m staring at the cave and my teeth are chattering…because it's cold. I reached out my hand and realized it was shaking too. So I grab the side wall of the entrance, to steady myself, you know. And the rock, it was so smooth, worn by the waves, I guess. I ran my hand across it like I was searching for a seam. Then I duck my head, I follow my hand around this edge, but it's not an edge. It's more like a perfect curve. And then I'm in the cave and I don't even know how I got there. The ceiling is getting higher and the water's getting lower until I can hear my feet slapping on the ground. The whole time I'm following this wall that goes on forever. As I'm losing the light I wonder if I'll brush my hand over some metal plate where a skeleton is chained to the wall, like Pike found in those ancient Gallic catacombs.

"I turned back to the entrance and realized how far away I was. The opening was like this little eye that was watching me, but I didn't think it minded me walking around in its head. I started pacing off distances. I went back every day. I had to map out my discovery. I groped around half-blind until I knew every square inch of that place. When I finished I ran back to the cafe and I spread my map out on the table and made my final marks. And I sit back so proud of myself, and look at the map resting on the table. And I remember the ogre and his imaginary map and I realize how wrong he was. If this map, my map, takes up half the table, then how big is the world?"

Derby watched the Andelusian explorer standing above him, knowing Cero had drifted miles away. "Did you find anything?," he asked the kid, as if to gently prod him back. Once more Cid stared through the socket of that stone skull at the beckoning ocean and heard a familiar voice. "In the cave?,"

he muttered as he rejoined Derby in the waking present. “No. No treasure or anything. No skeletons. No monsters.” The fresh memories dissipated with each fading word. But they receded like an electric charge being withdrawn from the skin, standing every hair on its end as it let go. “It’s worth it sometimes,” Cid smiled, “just for the adventure.” Derby’s face sank at the remark, a refrain he had suffered to hear after countless narrow escapes. “Not if people die,” he answered tersely, a premature gruffness in his voice.

The young Spaniard absorbed the jab, shrinking slightly. “Hey, I’m sorry,” he offered as he extended a hand to the still seated Londongrass. Derby reached out to meet the assistance, groaning as if in acceptance, but more likely to disguise a cramp. “I didn’t really know those guys,” Cid continued. “They seemed like good guys, though, you know.” He groped along in another unfamiliar cave. “If I knew…” Derby held onto the railing, facing the sea. With firm grip he twisted to meet Cid’s apologetic gaze, and to secretly stretch out his back. “I told you to knock it off, Cid,” he commanded. Without any other words Derby’s authoritative pose began to look absurd and so he relinquished his grip. The pain flooded back immediately.

“Hey, did you know that other guy? The ogre with the teeth?,” Cid perked up, revived by another splash of forgiveness. “No,” Derby fired back, aggrieved. “I’m not that much older than you. He was before my time.” Cid nodded vigorously, rocking his body as well to overemphasize his agreement. Back and forth he swayed, biding time while he wracked his brain for a segue. He watched Derby’s eyes move past him, beyond. “He’s probably looking for Pike,” Cid thought, then blurted without pause, “Do you remember when you met Pike?” Derby focused back on the face before him. “Do I remember? Seriously, how old do you think I am?” Cid smirked, an attempt at levity that went unreciprocated. He imagined Derby standing over him, fists clenched in fury. Cid on the ground, picking up emeralds and rubies and trying to refit

them into his gums. The smirk grew wider. Derby saw the buffoonish grin and shook his head in surrender at the harmless kid. He pointed out beyond the Dam towards the endless sea. “Way out there, past the horizon, somewhere on the outer rim of your cafe table, where spilled coffee pools and dries, lay the Frisian Islands.”

[2]

Though situated in the North Sea, there is a window of time every year when the Frisian Islands glimmer like a soothing oasis that beckons weary Northlanders to their shores. All manner of seafaring vagabonds crowd the lively ports. Their business, for the slim minority who have any with regularity, is left behind, forgotten, on the mainland. The predominant rabble stake their boisterous claim from the docks to the farthest reaches inland. If there is any resentfulness in the sparse native population they hide it extremely well, typically in the form of unadulterated celebration. It is a raucous symbiosis that breathes annual life into the floating organism. The westernmost island, however, preserves itself as the golden link in that chain. Its lifeblood is as pure and blue as the surrounding waters that lap its sterile shores.

Rising out of the finely combed beach that fronts a wide swath of privately owned coastline are forty-four steps. Every year, prior to their arrival, majestic pines are culled from the Londongrass family estate for the expressed purpose and honor of being laid fresh to bear their ascent from their pristine waters to their temporary, but Heaven forbid reduced, seat of grandiloquence. The final step presents itself in silent fealty before a vacation home that looks more like a miniature replica, a delicate and ornate nesting doll that emerged from the shell of the Baron’s own castle back in Luxembourg. There would scarcely be a need for fortifications like iron gates in such a secluded place as this, but there they were, lording their

dominion over a few little birds that hopped through the bars, indifferent. Behind these gates the massive wooden doors lurched open as Derby made his way inside.

Stepping absentmindedly into the broad hallway, Derby took three full steps before halting abruptly. He cursed himself under his breath, his face contorted in quiet rage, as the echoes ricocheted off the stone walls in a race to the front foyer. The boyish face, glowing with a newly christened tan, bore no blemishes of the stresses that awaited him. He eased the sandals from his feet, sand still caked on his toes, sprinkling to the cobbled floor. The fine grains spread midway up his bare calves, as if he was grabbed by the sharp point of his hair and dipped in sugar. With fingers hooked through the footwear that tried to betray him, the young boy slinked down the hall past rows of gilded frames filled with austere relatives who clearly disapproved. Even as a child Derby thought it was an odd decorative choice for a beach house. Odder still when he tried to picture his great uncle Hugo buried up to his epaulets in the sand.

Derby snuck up behind the grand staircase, formulating a plan. As the sun crept its way toward midday it shone brilliantly through a thick prism of deep red and amber into this myopic cathedral. While the heir to the Londongrass legacy schemed in the shadows an ancient man wearing the neat attire of a house servant emerged from a passageway to his right. The man moved noiselessly, befitting a skeletal creature that was outweighed by its own wool casing. The suit was tight enough to keep the bones from jangling, as well. In the likely eons of this man's life his hearing actually improved, to the point where he could tune into the precise frequency of individual grains of sand shedding. He rapped the stone floor with his broom handle to get Derby's attention. The old man waved the stick, tracing the trail of sand from the door to the stairs. The accusing arm was stern, but the man's face showed no disgust. His lips made no sound. The light behind his eyes made no indication of life.

“Séiss Jong?” The disembodied voice resonated through the hall. Derby ignored the call and turned his scornful eyes on the old man, whose bones rattled upright to attention at the sound of his lord. Derby peeked out cautiously from the staircase to search the second floor landing. He squinted through the dense forest of bronzed leaves adorning the thousand arms of a looming chandelier. Nothing. “Séiss Jong?,” came the deep voice a second time with omniscient pretension. The stoic suit of bones rapped again. “Yes, father,” young Londongrass at last replied as he flung a sandal at the old man in petulant revenge. The old man took the hit in his chest, as if he’d forgotten how to move. He did remember, however, how to smile.

“Remember, Derby,” the Baron’s voice continued, “we are attending lunch at the residence of Vicecount Röhmer this afternoon.” Derby sucked his teeth in pointless protest. He lifted his legs, one after the other, and made a show of brushing the sand off his legs to the family servant who had begun the tidying up. “Derby?,” his father’s voice called again. “Yes?,” the son curtly replied. “Did you hear? Lunch with the Vicecount,” his father proclaimed from above. “Yes,” came the sharp confirmation. “One forty-five, precisely. This is a very important meeting,” the Baron declared. “Nice vacation,” Derby muttered to himself. “One forty-five,” the voice announced with finality to his congregation of one.

A resigned Derby swung round the marble post of the staircase and wrapped his hand around the balustrade. He paused to check the time on the stately grandfather clock that stood sentinel by the front door. It was always imposing to the small child he once was. He had imagined a woodcarver expertly crafting it out of one solid tree, a tree so tremendous it grew where the clock still stands and the castle had to be constructed around it. The intricate labyrinth of endlessly layered gears enraptured his mechanical mind. Observing the hands in that oppressive red and amber sunlight, daring not to

keep the Vicecount waiting, an older Derby wondered if there ever existed a Londongrass who didn't call that wooden casket of ticking entrails "master."

The hardware and embossments on the slab of solid oak were cast from the purest iron, sea air be damned. As Deby dragged himself into his private quarters the door moaned pathetically as it turned on its weakening hinges. He walked as if through cobwebs, though they could obviously never exist thanks to the silent, broom wielding wraith on the first floor. The boy stared blankly at the appropriate banquet attire that had been laid out for him on his bed. He felt a stifling heat and moved to part the shutters on the pair of large windows that overlooked the water. They were already open. He looked out, and down, and contemplated the richly ornamented chiffarobe, with its plethora of drawers and shelves. It was a well stocked warehouse of crisply folded linens. More than enough to knot together into a makeshift ladder. They were so finely threaded and delicate. "They could never support my weight," he reasoned in defeat.

A small rowboat lay beached alongside the pier, loosely fastened to a pile, abandoned beneath an ocean of stars. Crumpled at the bottom of the rescue vessel remained a brocaded satin jacket. A set of shod and neatly stamped footprints formed an arrow straight line to a cluster of rough hewn seaside establishments, each spewing forth their unique intoxicant of smells and sounds. The determined march from the orphaned boat ended abruptly at the splintered first step of a saloon, swallowed by the belching fog that emanated from within. It took but one loyal and overserved voice belting out the opening bars of "William of Orange" for the well whetted crowd to fall in. The euphoria built to an offkey crescendo as they arrived, circuitously, but aligned once more, at the final verse. "...and drive the plagues that try us, and tyranny away."

A hulking, flailing blur ejected from the saloon, through the open door frame, as if fired from the world's most ornery cannon. The body cracked every stair on the way down, putting

the invalid bottom step, finally, out of its misery. The door itself, not without forethought, leaned against the face of the building to the left of the jamb. There it reposed until it would be rehung at closing time. His fleshy palms patted the gritty earth, gingerly, confirming his body had ceased moving, while hoping his head would soon follow. Pike wobbled to one knee, a lazy stream of drool seeping from the corner of his split lip. He squeezed his eyes closed then reopened them, first one, then the other. They both worked, equally poorly. With that low bar crossed he raised himself onto two shaky feet. He nodded confidently at another milestone. He rolled his shoulders and nothing popped. His giant hands folded stiffly into fists that might never have had the power to reopen. He dismissed the useless concern.

Pike looked up at the doorway and there before him, enshrouded in smoke, stood a cherub faced dandy with shark fin hair. He looked back at the ground, half expecting to see his own lifeless body. In an epiphany he realized the being was dressed only in shirtsleeves and therefore could not be hiding his wings. “I’m alive and you’re not an angel,” Pike declared with a puffed out chest. Derby calmly folded both arms behind his back, clasping his hands. “You probably have a concussion.” Pike stepped up, unaware of the missing tread. His foot finding no purchase, he tilted forward precariously. “Where do you think you’re going?,” Derby asked with a sad shake of his head. Pike studied the gap intently before his second attempt. “I forgot something inside.”

“Your teeth?”

“I have all my teeth.”

“I guess that’s a point of pride for a sailor.”

Pike bristled at the casual insult, and, finding a new target, forgot his battle with the staircase. “I’m not a sailor. I’m an explorer. Now why don’t you prance on back to pantaloon island…” Derby had begun to make his way down the stairs, hugging the rail, where the boards were still solid enough to offer support. Pike eyed the descent intensely, sizing up the boy

for the ass-kicking of his finely festooned life. “You’re seriously gonna go back in there? Which one of the four are you gonna hit first?,” Derby asked as he brushed past the off guard adventurer. “You obviously think you’re tough,” Pike rebutted, his agitation quickly returning. “Why don’t you help me even the odds?” Derby rolled his eyes, though, now standing beside the Dutch giant, he made a subtle gesture of it. He paused before a crude bench that was little more than a block of stone, inexorably retreating from the visible world into the sand, one end working with considerably more determination.

Derby stared down at the thick layer of greenish slime that coated the uneven surface. “What’s the matter?,” Pike goaded, “Forget your handkerchief in your coronation mantle?” Derby dropped instantly to his seat and set his chin spitefully. He pointed to the saloon, bustling once more with the sparking fuse of sodden revelry. “I’m just trying to figure out if you have a death wish or if you're just an idiot.” As Derby lowered his hand Pike watched the boy settle it back properly in his lap. “If you cross your legs I’m going to kick you square in the chest,” Pike threatened as he swung his left leg back. Immediately losing his balance, Pike turned sharply and replanted. He improvised some sweeping arm movements, adding an unconvincing flourish in an attempt to disguise the embarrassment as some exotic fighting style.

Disinterested in the spectacle, the Baron’s son from a tiny, landlocked country turned to the open sea that he had crossed for a nominal vacation. Two weeks of formal engagements before a return trip home. It was enough to make him go inside and hit someone. “So, you’re really an adventurer?,” the boy inquired of the teetering Dutchman, whose preoccupation with the ebb tide of a chunky burp made him forget he had company. “What’s your deal, kid?,” Pike asked from deep inside his putrid reverie. “You climb out of your diamond encrusted crib, crawl into your swan boat made of solid gold…” “There’s no way that could float,” Derby interjected. Pike thrust a finger in the general vicinity of the kid and figured

he would know it was for him. “And that! You run your mouth at me. You don’t even know who I am! Maybe you’re the one with the death wish.”

The chastised runaway had no witty rejoinder loaded and ready in his slingshot. He recalculated. The trip out there with the rowboat wasn’t on a whim. He could recite the dictionary definition of the word, with the etymology, but he wouldn’t dare put it into practice. Stick to the plan. Find a way out. Any way. “Who are you then?,” he cast out reluctantly. Pike chuckled, self satisfied. “I’m Leif Pike,” he answered. His modesty, unlike Derby, was comfortably on vacation. Adulation not forthcoming, the high-flying adventurer continued, “You’ve probably heard about my excursions to the Sixteen Haunted Spires of…” “You have a ship?,” the boy cut in impatiently. “Yeah,” a bewildered Pike responded.

“Here?”

“Yeah.”

“And a crew?”

“Mostly,” the Dutchman murmured with a contrite shrug. Derby perked up at the news, a fresh wind in his sails. “Perfect. I’ll join.” Pike’s head drooped lower. He scratched his scruffy beard ponderously. “That still leaves me three short…” The color flushed out of the sun kissed cheeks of the boy as the somber reality of this unknown world he longed for burst before him. “You lost four men?,” he asked gravely. The question stirred an anxiousness in the captain, one in which he searched for a way to quickly forget. He looked first to the waters, calmly cradling the moonlight’s perfect reflection. With a thinly concealed sigh he turned to the saloon door. He began, almost in a whisper.

“We were out at the far edge of the North Atlantic, bouncing from one barren island to the next. We had the scepter, but we couldn’t find Ragnarsson. Seventeen days we fought through that frozen hell, the boat barely making a mile a day. Breaking sheets by hand. Supplies run low. Try to

conserve fuel, but then you shiver so hard you think your spine's gonna break. Save the blackened bread for tomorrow, where do you get the energy to swing an axe at the ice today? Grim. Then we saw the shore. Greenland. Ragnarsson was good for the money. Split it up. Head home. I'm going back to Flevoland, check on my horses. These assholes…" Pike's eyes grew fierce, his voice developing a low growl as he considered the saloon once more. "They say, 'Pike, come to the Frisians. Have some fun. Get a line on our next big quest.'

"I've been here for eleven days. The people that come through here, you know what they do? Shipping! Load shit onto a boat, sail it somewhere, take the shit off! That's it! That's not what a fucking boat is for!" The brute stomped about fitfully, his anger regaining focus, as if the alcohol had burned away. Derby sat momentarily perplexed as the rambling story pieced together in his head. Then, clarity. "Those guys you were fighting? That's your crew?!" "Not anymore!," Pike thundered as he made for the broken stairs. "You're insane," Derby said, almost to himself. Almost in resignation. Pike paused at the initial missing step and recalled his old nemesis. He heard the charge of insanity and shot the accuser a crazed, self incriminating glare. "Where's the rest of your crew?," the kid calmly coaxed. "Are there more?" "Back East," the derailed Dutchman huffed.

The truant Londongrass could see the plan, a multifaceted whirl of parts, coming together. He strained to rein in his eagerness, turning a lunge forward into a slow lean. "I can help with supplies, manage inventory." He felt the scrutiny in the subtle movement of Pike's eyes and he began to creep with shame. Suddenly, being ensconced in luxurious silks didn't feel especially comforting. A panic seized his throat as he considered his miscalculation. "I'm good with numbers. I'm organized." He thought he caught a slight falter in his voice at the end. Was it detectable? Could he risk exposure by saying any more? A bored Pike dismissed the kid with a lazy wave of his backhand. "Go home, little lord. I don't need your daddy's money."

Derby's eyes glowed red. His cowed voice resaddled and charged forward, sword pointed, thirsty for blood. "I don't remember it being offered." Pike welcomed the action, accepting with a broad grin. "I'm sorry. Did I offend your delicate sensibilities?" "Enough of that shit," Derby demanded as he sprung from his stone perch. "I can handle this." Pike once again looked the boy up and down, making an unmistakable show of his disbelief. The young aristocrat tugged his shirt front with both hands in a hostile call of attention to his wardrobe. "I was attending lunch with the Vicecount. Well, it was more like a gala…" Pike recoiled as if assaulted by some noxious odor. "Please…stop," he begged, "If I puke this time I won't be able to hold it back." He saw the unwavering earnestness on the kid's face and composed himself. He leaned in and gave Derby a firm pat of reassurance on his shoulder. "Look, this is a fun little diversion for you. But you're out of your depth here."

Pike turned from Derby, then quickly looked back, deliberately. "Seriously, you'll die." His thoughts jumped instantly to unfinished business, and he moved with a reinvigorated strut. "Now, I've gotta get back inside to kick the shit out of some people. You've stopped me twice already." He wanted to rush up the battered steps, but made the correct decision not to. He was due. As he plodded along the rail he listened to the cacophony of profanity-laden insults and breaking glass just out of reach, an irresistible siren's song. Feeling the firm boards of the front porch under the well worn soles of his boots the Dutchman braced for impact. Then he felt the obstinate pull of an anchor he couldn't cut free from. The stalking Londongrass had grabbed his elbow. He wrenched his arm to rip the moorings.

Derby started back at the violent break, but scrambled to project confidence in the crosshairs of the seething brawler. "You can hit me if it makes you feel better," the kid offered in an ironic olive branch of peace. Pike raised one menacing fist and

in calm appreciation answered, “Thanks. It really would.” He saw fear in the kid’s face, but maybe just a healthy fear. He wondered if he pulled his punch if it would still kill him. “Like a two,” Pike thought as he visualized a numbered dial. The waiting Derby set back his shoulders and stiffened his lip. “Maybe a four,” the Dutchman refigured. He held a second longer, then threw his head back in despair, uncoiled his fist and shook his open palm to the heavens. “What is your deal, kid?!” He lowered his arm, thrusting both quaking palms out to the boy, confounded. “Is this some kind of trap? Like you’re rich so you’re really good at some bullshit like fencing or falconry? And a bird’s gonna swoop down and peck out my fucking eyes?”

Derby felt a reprieve from the erratic hothead, but he had compulsions of his own. “Thank you for finally getting around to my ‘Are you an idiot’ question,” he stated bluntly. Pike laced his fingers behind his pulsing skull, his flexed biceps locked in a stalemate with his bullish neck. He was determined to rip off somebody’s head that night and he had reached the point where it didn’t matter whose. “Biting sarcasm isn’t a good defense in a fight,” he warned.

“Neither is a thick skull.”

“My brain might disagree.”

“Why don’t you pull down the back of your pants so I can ask it?”

Pike peeled his left hand from his head and extended it out firmly with just the pop of his elbow. It hit the post at the top of the stairs and the porch wept a cascade of dust from the exposed rafters. Pike stared at the boy, unblinking, as the vibrations rippled through them and passed. “You don’t think I’ll hit you because you’re a kid?,” he asked, expecting an answer. Derby stood with arms tightly folded, biting a forked tongue still loaded with venom. It was getting him nowhere and he knew it so he held his teeth and bled it dry. “Fine,” he exhaled, as if from a collapsing lung. “Pike, right? I’m Derby. Listen, please. I know I can help you. You can mock my clothes all you want, but I’ve also been tutored by the finest minds my father could

assemble. Cartography. Geology. Oceanography. I speak over a dozen languages." Pike raised a hand to halt the desperate scholar. "What happens when you have to fight a tiger?," he smugly interrupted.

"That happens a lot?"

"It might."

"Then you fight the tiger. I'll make sure there's plenty of bandages."

Pike's resolve was truly being tested, by the boy surely, but more so by his desire to move on to anything else. "We're not pirates, kid," he began. "We don't go around kidnapping heirs to the throne. I look for trouble. The trouble doesn't look for me." "I'm not running away. I'm leaving," Derby quickly replied. "You understand the difference, don't you?" Pike swiveled his head, the remark still grazing his conscience as it shot past. He cast a thousand mile stare across the southern horizon, his thoughts skimming just above the surface, clipping the gentle waves, on and on, at terminal speed, before striking the unbreachable wall. "You're gonna tell your father," Pike said to the sea. Derby looked down at his riding boots, scuffed from his nocturnal travels, and he thought of his disappointed father, and he wanted shoe polish. "Go say goodbye," the somber Dutchman commanded. And with those first orders young Derby Londongrass was sworn into service aboard the seafaring vessel of the legendary Leif Pike.

[3]

"What did your dad say?," an enthralled Cid Cero asked of Derby as the two boys sat cross-legged, facing each other on the concrete floor. The parapet wall guarded their flank like a tiny fort. The Spaniard kept his voice down as if in fear of tempting the call for "lights out, go to bed." Derby considered his answer, the corners of his eyes creasing into branching tributaries through which no salty waters streamed. "He wasn't

happy about it," he concluded emphatically, putting the final punctuation on his tale. Cid rocked back, shaking his head in amazement. Derby produced two apples from his knapsack and tossed one to his companion. Cid took a ravenous bite, the juice running down his chin. He wiped clumsily with his sleeve, hurrying to finish and free his mouth full of racing thoughts. "I can't believe he didn't hit you!," his words exploded out beside a torrent of half chewed shrapnel. "I guess I don't have anything to worry about." Derby, polishing his snack with great care, paused abruptly. He cocked his head with exaggerated concern to correct the misguided Cero.

The core of the apple disappeared into the Spaniard's greedy mouth. The black seeds spit out indiscriminately. A slathering tongue traced the edge of his gaping lips. "You must have seen some crazy shit," he laughed, rubbing his scruffy chin. "All those stories…I can't even imagine…" Sufficiently wound up he couldn't wait for a reply. He slapped the ground, giddy, and was off. "Were you there for the corpse rains of Kolkata?!" "Well, the name that got attached to it is a little misleading," Derby prefaced. "Bodies weren't actually falling from the sky. You see, Kolkata is close to a major commercial port so when the cyclone came through it tore through that whole district, brought all of that debris inland. So it was really more of a corpse flood. That was the first time Pike lost his ship," Derby finished before adding, wearily, "The first time."

Undeterred by the dull history lesson the excitable Cero snatched another book of mythology from a shelf in his overcrowded mental library. "Was there really a leviathan in the Strait of Gibraltar?" "That would be the second time," Derby pointedly affirmed. "And an army of mummies in Khartoum?," Cid uttered in a near spasm of overloaded glee. A fresh bite of his apple rolled around slowly in Derby's mouth waiting to be chewed the requisite number of times. "I wouldn't call it an army," he corrected again. "They weren't organized into a battalion or anything. Honestly, I only remember seeing four. And they're really slow. Just have an exit."

“Did Pike say that?”

“I don’t know. Probably. But so did anybody who ever had to get out of anywhere.”

“How can you be so calm about all this?,” asked the mystified Cid. He slapped the heavy parapet. “We’re sitting on top of a giant dam talking about mummies and sea monsters and I’m losing my mind and you’re more interested in your lunch.” Derby leaked out an easy smile. But he wasn’t thinking about apples. Or secret tombs. Or capsizing boats. He heard the soft whisper of a Nepalese folk tale. He tasted the rich warmth of yak butter tea. He lost count of the number of bites he had administered and swallowed. He wasn’t worried about choking. He was worried about the part of him that wanted to. “Most of these stories, you know, they have a life of their own,” the reflective Londongrass finally responded, forcing his thoughts in another direction. “One day Pike’s getting punched in the face by a Minotaur, a week later they’re saying it was Ares and Mars, together. Even though they’re the same person.”

“Pike got punched by a Minotaur?!”

“Yeah, but, like, a small one.”

“There’s still truth in it, though.”

“I’ll tell you a quick story,” Derby teased as he neatly shrouded his uneaten apple core in a cloth and tucked it back into his pack for responsible disposal later. “Out East, in the lands bisected by the Danube, there’s a popular folktale. It’s called ‘The Legend of the Wondrous Hind.’ It’s kind of an origin story for the people who live there. Two brothers are hunting in the Meotis marshes and they come upon this hind, which is a white stag. They chase the stag, but it always keeps just out of their reach. Eventually, they come out of the marsh into this beautiful land that’s the Carpathian Basin. Now, they never catch the stag, but they decide to settle the land, make it their home. Over time this became the gathering ground for seven disparate tribes.

“Thus begins the legend of ‘The Seven Captains of the Magyars.’ In a time of great peril the seven tribes banded together in a common defense. To solidify their union and mark a symbol of that solidarity the seven tribal leaders each left a few drops of their blood in a ceremonial vessel. That is where the history lesson leaves off. However, in certain circles it is rumored that by drinking this vile concoction one would thus command all the armies of this region to their own ends. But nobody knows exactly where this vessel is. Along comes Leif Pike and he figures the answer to the riddle is in the origin. So he goes to the Meotis marshes and walks around this swamp for days. Then, just as he’s about to abandon all hope, he sees it. The white stag. He tracks it all the way through the marshlands into this valley.”

“What did he find?,” the slack jawed Cero asked, poised to jump out of his own skin. “According to some, Pike located the vessel and took control of a vast legion of warriors, comprised of both the living and the dead, who returned to serve their old masters,” Derby hauntingly recollected. “Which we both know didn’t happen,” he added as an offhanded postscript. “What did he find then?,” a frustrated Cid mewed as he ransacked his tangled hair with both hands. “Jack fucking shit,” Derby bluntly summarized. “These were nomadic tribes. If they even stayed put they lived in tents mostly. There’s no temple or castle with a neat little pedestal and a vessel on top. Also, I’ve seen a lot the past couple of years, but the idea of consuming centuries old blood is beyond the pale. Furthermore, and back to my original point, this supposedly happened thirty years before Pike was even born! Stories get wrapped up in other stories. People embellish because they like the attention.”

The hangdog Cero got up in a fit of subtle petulance. He fought with his jacket hood that insisted on rising up his shoulders. “Why does this stupid jacket even have a hood?!,” he thought. Why did nothing make sense? Why was the cave empty? He couldn’t figure out why it didn’t seem to bother

Derby. “He almost takes a perverse pleasure in it,” the kid told himself with a sneer. “Those snowmen were real, Derby,” he reasoned out loud. “And maybe that vessel of blood is real,” Derby assented. “It just wasn’t Pike.” All he was doing was stating the facts. That was all the rationale he needed. The world is a cold place and a healthy dose of cynicism was required. It wasn’t a constant shadow that followed him. It wasn’t a suit of armor he wore to protect himself. It was just him. It oxygenated his blood and sparked electricity in his brain. It also turned a cigar box of treasure back into seashells, and he recognized that in the Andalusian boy’s wilting face.

“You know what, Cid, maybe I’m not giving Pike his due,” Derby conceded as he gestured for the kid to sit back down before him. “To be clear, he’s not a time traveling vampire,” he continued. “But there are things that I can vouch for because I was there. Except that one time. But he told me what I missed.” Cid pulled his knees into his chest as he settled in. “And you believed him?” “I did,” Derby said. “He may not go out of his way to correct someone else’s tall tales about him, but a lie like that would never come out of his own mouth.”

“So what did you miss?”

“Quite a bit.”

“Was there treasure?”

“Actually, yes. There was.”

“How much? No, wait! What kind? Jewels? Coins? Were they silver? Gold? Both?!”

“We weren’t there to get treasure. We were there to get rid of it.”

A dozen deformed fingers reached menacingly into the sickly sky. Blackened by the soot that rained up from the brimstone clouds below, the thin spires picked at the scab in the center of the bruised heavens with their jagged nails. If the rocky appendages grew from anything at all they were likely potted in a witch’s cauldron. Toward their tops the pockmarked surfaces peeled and glistened as if suffering from shingles. The

air hung dense and stagnant, a malignant clot. Then, just below the tip of the tallest peak a massive fireball was expelled from the mouth of a cavern, piercing the atmosphere. The unfurling flames licked the opened wound as the searing heat cauterized it, keeping the disease trapped in an everlasting portrait of despair. The fire consumed the air around it before mindlessly pursuing it into death. The glowing reflections on the entrance walls faded as the last burning embers sizzled to ash. But, further inside, the combustion chamber furiously churned.

The viscous air crept in waves through the antechamber toward the entrance, with a speed that indicated it would likely perish before ever tasting freedom. With each burst of scorching breath the salivating roof of stalactites illuminated in the distorting haze. This swaying phantasm of fangs looked below at the forest of stalagmites in futility, unable to reach, unable to lock its jaws as each calcified set slid perfectly into place, unable to grind and dissolve a pair of unfortunates who had wandered into its trap. In fact, the slow sculpting of these squat monuments over centuries had unwittingly provided cover for Pike and Derby, two pilot fish swimming through a shark's mouth in symbiosis. Except nobody told the shark. And the shark was a cave. And the cave had a dragon.

Pike crouched behind the hardened mineral deposit, a steady stream of sweat running from his long, matted blonde hair into hiding within his coarse beard. Visible heat radiated overhead. He took a swipe of his big paw to clear the strands from his sight and felt as if he were prying a jellyfish from his forehead. His disgust, as with everything else around him, melted quickly. "Well, you've been a good sidekick, Derby," he mused. The youngster, back pressed firmly against the rock, ushered intense perspiration down the channels of his frown lines with both hands. He turned his pink, irritated eyes to his sweltering friend. "So, I've been demoted from 'guy who constantly saves your ass?'"

"Pays the same."

"Like crap?"

“Eh, so’s the job.”

Between the two laid an overstuffed burlap sack, its fibers stretched and frayed by the many prominent bulges. A crude rope lashed around the top was the only thing keeping the innards from spilling out of this bag that slumped like a boil-infested corpse. Derby bent a knee and set his boot against it. He met stern resistance as he leaned into its heft, unable to straighten his leg. His brow furrowed as he stubbornly refused to surrender to it. “Hhhhnn! This better be worth it, Pike.” The Dutchman’s attention was elsewhere as his eyes danced nervously above the crest of his sturdy cover. He couldn’t make out the shape he was searching for in the insufficient light. He needed more, but dreaded being accommodated.

“I have to break the curse,” he finally responded without diverting his concentration. “Right,” Derby snapped back before registering one last kick that the sack absorbed with a dull crunch. “Because the curse is going to kill you.” The sarcasm evaporated before it could intrude on Pike’s hearing, which had tuned in to a faint hissing somewhere beyond the infinite blackness of the unexplored cave. There was a room beyond, he knew, where these balls of fire were conjured from paranoia and hate. Where a blood red eye pierced through the darkness back at him, its scaled lid twitching with rage around the orb as a fierce swirl of smoke built up inside like a sorcerer’s ball. As the image materialized in his mind the hissing seemed to grow louder, more sinister. Pike envisioned a single puff of steaming hot breath, a mere wisp, seeping out of a flared nostril like an uncoiling serpent from a volcano vent. And he wondered what kinds of noises would have come out of himself if he had been alone.

“There is an unfathomable level of irony to all of this,” Derby said in a rising tone that ratcheted up quickly as he finally gained the courage to peek out himself from behind his dripstone safety blanket. “Big word,” Pike retorted. “I don’t

remember teaching you that." Slouched back down behind the rock, he laid almost flat on the ground as he rummaged through his pants pocket. He turned it inside out, revealing it as hopelessly empty. Derby retreated as well, his attitude adequately readjusted after his brief flirtation with danger. He thrust his right arm straight out, pointing aggressively over the stalagmite at the unseen, but surely lurking, danger. "So what is today's lesson? How to become human beef jerky?!" Pike stuffed his pocket back into his pants, his sense of shame just one more emotion on the ever expanding funeral pyre. "And what's your plan?," he prodded.

A colossal clawed foot thundered to the ground, buckling the cave floor beneath it. In a plume of pulverized rock the disjoined slabs heaved in a tectonic shift. "Plan?," Derby stuttered uncontrollably as his organs caromed around inside his rib cage. "There's another word you never taught me." Pike sat in the shower of ceiling fragments, scheming. The last glittering particles hovered in front of him, unsettled, mocking gravity. Then, suddenly, they rushed away, as if sucked out of the room. A massive vacuum created by the flutter of an enormous wing. The next room was much closer than Pike had surmised. It was desperation time, but he was always keen to not worry his friend. A glance at the youngster, however, and he could see the point was moot. A wide-eyed Derby held an index finger to his temple stiffly, if not rigor mortised. Bloated beads of sweat traced their way around the obstruction at full pace. He made a show of the pleading gesture. "How about we reason with it? If he knows we're returning his treasure, maybe he'll stop trying to kill us."

The clear thinking pragmatism of the boy's words fought against the tide of dwindling options that fled rapidly from Pike's mind. The preoccupied Dutchman patted himself down thoroughly a second time, a third, in the useless hope of discovering some last minute miracle. All he could produce was a wooden handled clinch cutter which hung like a totem from his belt. Though resembling a small hatchet it was functionally a

tool used for horseshoe fitting. In his meaty hand the meager weapon seemed even smaller to Pike. He paused, expectant, then shook it gently as if to wake it. No inspiration came. He shrugged in resignation and turned abruptly to Derby, whose hard-traveling pleas had at last reached their destination. “I’m going to have to get a lot closer,” Pike accepted belatedly. His next words came reluctantly, even as he remembered a kid who begged for adventure. “You need to distract him.”

Derby stood, his back already to his mentor, as he charted a path through the twilight. His keen eyes scanned the nearby terrain. He calculated approximate distances. A mound fifteen yards ahead and to the left. An opening, perhaps a tunnel, just beyond that. The ceiling dripped perpetually, coating everything in a wet sheen, lending form and distinguishing shapes even in the practical dark. It was all he needed. He figured once he was spotted the ensuing attack would alight his surroundings. By processing a quick mental image he could then plot his remaining course. The routine work of a machine. “Machines generate solutions,” he thought. Machines don’t know fear. As the kid clenched his jaw hard and steeled his nerves Pike reached out, firmly grabbing Derby by the elbow. One final order. “Run…and don’t look back.”

The young aristocrat peered back over his right shoulder, disarmed by the odd show of emotion. Then, his boyish features, for the first time, found a natural fit in the playful smirk that spread across his face. “You’re gonna give me the finger, aren’t you?” And he was off. Pistons pumped his legs in a short, choppy sprint that lacked the elegant stride of an athlete, but far exceeded it in determination. His boots sloshed through shallow pools of primordial stew that managed to survive a boiling fate. He focused solely on the amorphous mound that he steadily approached, though he had to convince himself the gap was getting smaller. He knew he couldn’t dodge the flames so he didn’t bother to look for them. He recalled something

about a distraction and wondered if he should yell to draw attention. He decided to wait until he reached cover.

Pike strangled the knotted neck of the burlap sack with a single white-knuckled fist. One thought in his head was typically a mild annoyance, but two competing thoughts were torture. He waited for an indication that the dragon's ire was directed elsewhere, but he knew the intended target. There was a low groan. That could have been the great shifting mass of the belly as it pivoted away. A rough scraping overhead. Perhaps a long neck craning under the tight confines of the cave ceiling. Just about anything passed comfortably under the bar of what Pike considered reckless, but this reeked of suicide. "Maybe I should have told the kid to yell," he pondered, as a flash of brilliant orange engulfed the far side of the chamber. A full second after came the subsonic rumble. Pike's response was swift enough to catch the dissipating comet's tail. There was only one thought left in its wake.

He scooped the hulking sack of treasure off of the ground in one effortless motion. He slung it over his left shoulder as he made a mad dash forward, into a darkness his predatory eyes were instinctively adapting to. He glided across the floor with ease, as if skipping along stones in a stream. He weaved a path through a grove of stalagmites, the far end transitioning abruptly into the inner sanctum. Running to outrace death itself the Dutch panther was upon the bluff that ringed the pit, and its precipitous decline, in an instant. He spun to his left, planting his right arm onto a rock to propel himself onto the ridge above. He tossed the treasure onto the ledge to free his left arm and, at the height of his daring vault, seized the lip with both hands.

Pike followed the broad ridge that ran along the outer rim of the dragon's lair. He hugged the wall for fear of knocking debris over the edge and giving away his location. He heard stirrings below and caught glimpses of the wide fins that traced down a sickled spine. Ahead, even in shadow, Pike discerned the unmistakable pattern of a colonnade. Somewhere in that triumphant consecration of a stalactite's endless toil he saw a

refuge. Despite his strengthening vision he groped the wall, out of habit, or to be reminded that this was all real. Another booming torrent froze Pike in his tracks, but momentarily. Curiosity was his temptress, and booze his handmaiden, so the unquenchable explorer leaned over the edge to sneak a look at the backlit beast. Stray light flitted across the scales that wrapped the swelling torso. The symmetrical pattern made Pike think not of fish, but of a honeycomb, dripping gold, buzzing with hostility. The wings rose suddenly and fanned open, sending a startled Pike to the ground. He scurried crab-like to the wall as the wings compressed and the bellows blasted once more.

"He must have found a way down," Pike thought of his friend. Then, the revelation that Derby must still be alive. Joy in a flaming apocalypse. Reinvigorated, Pike surged forward, as if the columns ahead held the answers to all of his problems. He arrived panting and leaned for support against one of the bars of the stone cage. Through the slatted openings he saw a mezzanine with the floor protruding out further into the open air, hovering above the fathomless pit. It was just around the bend and, undoubtedly, the end of the line. He had two allies, the boy and time. He had wagered one for the other. Now it was time to repay the favor.

The advantages of height diminished as the slope of the roof made a hunched PIke first stoop, then bow as he stepped out from the balcony onto the precipice with his burden of riches in tow. Approaching the edge, his fingers dug into the cinched opening. The gathered ends that sprouted from his fist like a weed were swallowed up by his other hand. Several stories below the dragon's hind legs scratched and jostled, its back end wriggling to accommodate the motions of its unseen head. The barrage had ceased. Fuming roars petered into anxious growls. Then, a detonation. Like a cathedral bell broken loose, shattering stained glass on impact. As the sack of treasure crashed at the feet of the dragon the top burst open, glittering baubles erupting into the air. The tin clatter swirled around the

shaft. Pike waited for the updraft of sound that would confirm the delivery. With each passing second the pit got deeper. The dragon got bigger.

The hollow jingle rustled through the hairs in his ear like a welcome wind to a ship stalled at sea. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted down into the pregnant chasm, “It’s yours.” He immediately backed away with two deliberate steps that tested the limits of his hamstrings. He opened both hands and held them high in surrender, making his peaceful intentions excessively clear. There was a rush of air, but no breeze. In an instant Pike’s efforts to meet on an even plane vanished, as the dragon’s head loomed high above his own. The thick serpentine neck arched deliberately and twisted to confront the voice that dared to speak to it. It looked down on the Dutchman with contempt, the misty cataract smothered by a ruby glare. “And how did it come into your possession?,” it asked with more of a purr than a hiss. Its elongated snout pointed squarely at Pike, the twin nostrils trained and ready.

Pike stared into those tightly set torch nozzles, recessed in what appeared to be a glimmering shield. Two sharp points accented the vents at the top and culminated in a pronounced tip at the bottom, for the exclusive purpose of cleaving. Pike was sufficiently intimidated, and he didn’t care for it. “Who cares how we got it. We brought it back.” The nostrils flared in defiance. The subtlety of the gesture was lost in the scale of the cavities that could have enveloped the Dutchman whole. The snout inched closer. Pike braced himself at full attention. With two intrusive sniffs the dragon pulled back in quiet council with itself. Pike felt slightly aggrieved, and largely confused. But he had grown accustomed to having feelings at all, so he decided to let it go.

The armored snout returned with a begrudged huff. The steamy breeze scattered the hair of the blonde intruder in all directions. In the center of this exploding sun were squinting eyes that leaked a steady stream of tears. The awkward grimace threatened to split lips dried out by the heat. “Who are

you?," the dragon earnestly entreated. "My name's Pike," came the uneasy reply. With that the menacing pointed beak that caved a thousand ramparts and snapped the arms of countless catapults drooped to the ground. It circled and scritched as if working out some complicated formula in the loose gravel near Pike's feet. The Dutchman remained rooted to the spot. "Hhhmmph…Pike," hummed the dragon softly to itself. Its wide flapped ears curled inward to punctuate the thought and the neck recoiled instantly down the shaft. The giant head snapped back violently and was sucked down with it.

Pike breathed deep, as if the entire conversation had happened underwater and he just surfaced. He cut short a poorly considered effort to run his fingers through his hair for fear of scalping himself. He strained to detect any sound, anything to believe he wasn't abandoned. He cupped hands around his mouth once more. The updraft swelled. A mangled voice called out from the depths, "Thah nay." Pike's hands dropped, dumbfounded as the dragon appeared, as though summoned by dark magic. "Thah nay," it declared again, incoherent. Its lower jaw dropped open, a mouthful of ill-gotten gold spilling out before an ashamed Leif. "That name," the dragon began a third time, "echoed through these caverns…long ago…the day my treasure was taken."

Pike's sagging head showed no relief at the confirmation. He had reached the end. With nothing left to run to, the accumulated weight of the journey caught up to him. There, in the malignant shadow of a monster, beside a pit to hell, Leif Pike made his confession. "It was my father. He stole your treasure. And he died. And then my grandfather, years later. That's kind of why I'm here. I brought it back, so…" His eyes rolled up slowly to meet the dragon, while his body remained a statue of contrition. "...can you remove the curse?" The dragon pulled back reflexively, startled by the insinuation. "Curse?," it muttered hoarsely. A fog drifted through the polished red lenses, diluting a primal lust for vengeance. "I assure you," it

cooly continued, “if the Pike’s are indeed a fated lot, it is not of my doing.”

The first sensation to pass through Pike was the relief of elementary survival. He even mustered a smile of gratitude. His tired shoulders slumped as a second wave of emotion came. Emptiness. Or worse, something that still lingered behind, wound around every strand of his being, grafted inexorably to his genetic code. Not being wiped from existence by a dragon was merely a consolation prize. The dragon contemplated the forlorn adventurer. Its eyelids fell to half mast as it lowered its chin to the ground with a degree of humility. “As for the treasure, I appreciate its return and I forgive your father.” Pike accepted the charity without a look, only with a dip that lacked the enthusiasm to even be a half hearted nod. The dragon blinked slowly. “And it would seem,” it added, embarrassed, “I owe you an apology.”

Somewhere in the bowels of that pit, past the scavenged burlap corpse of worthless wealth, stolen, then returned, to its owner, the original thief, lies the entrance to a cavern. It sits directly beneath the antechamber, propping up a reception area for a homeowner who values solitude. It is here the dragon reposes, wallows in his greed, plots future destruction from idleness. It is a pitiable place, perpetually dank, full of detritus and plunder and, yet, a wasteland. And on this day it smoldered. Nothing, regardless of luster or ornamentation, had value that superseded rage. It all lay tarnished, freakishly conjoined in a searing forge. Somewhere, in some faraway kingdom, these cherished heirlooms would be grieved. A bejeweled crown, cross bent, tufted fur scorched. Some exotic animal condemned to death twice. A ceremonial sword, retired from battle and revered after striking the first blow against tyranny. Its larceny mourned by a lesser tyrant. And the battered, blackened heap that lay crumpled in the corner. The widow’s peak pointed at a massive gash in the forehead of a face that more closely resembled a bloody Hallow’s Eve mask worn to a party in the guise of a young aristocrat. Had he been

conscious Derby Londongrass would have objected to both the costume and the occasion.

The wedges of Pike's elbows burrowed deep into his knees. They bore the weight of a weary skull, buried in two palms, buttressed by two forearms. They dug for nerve endings in ignorant flagellation. His considerable frame sunk into the plush velvet of an opulent sofa. The thick cushioning behind him pulled taut to buttons the size of a small fist. The high back of deep purple, capped by an arch of pure ivory, gave the impression of a monstrous whale seizing on its next meal. He was convinced that there was a preordained number of times one would have to express remorse that, once reached, would force another to accept. It may have been in the thousands, but he was hoping that number was three. "Again, I'm sorry about your son, Baron." It was an agonizing sincerity, one he felt like a fissure in every rib. He couldn't repeat it any more without risking permanent damage.

The aloof Baron Londongrass swirled a snifter of brandy with as little regard as he had reserved for his guest. He wore an unfastened silk robe, a royal blue he was certain brought out the steeliness in his eyes. An important attribute, even in leisure. They held a vivid slate grey and a condescension for insolence. Both features unchanging. He had the familiar hairline that had distinguished his rich ancestry back to the first Londongrass to issue a stern rebuke to a neanderthal for "forgetting their manners." His dignified jowls were the slow work of gravity on his own once boyish cheeks. He stood before a raging fireplace, its mantle adorned with offerings of brass and wax to the portrait of ungodly size that hung above. The screen in front of the fire, an intricate web of leaves and branches, formed a necessary barricade.

Along the far wall three more paintings were displayed in obeisance. They were so large that had they been pastoral landscapes one would be tempted to climb inside and build a cottage. Instead, these portraits chose the finest examples of

the Londongrass lineage: the first, Christ-like yet humble; the second, a gallant Crusader; the third, resplendent in full regal pomp. A memorial wreath was placed respectfully in front of each, and in front of these an even more respectful velvet rope, to keep those paying homage at a safe distance. The Baron's attention was rapt firmly on the esteemed figure bound in gold leaf above the mantle. He wore a fine coat of arms and had the posture of a man of no small importance, but he lacked all the royal visual cues that cried for adoration. Still, he joined the other suspicious ghosts who peered down for time eternal over the treasures they had bequeathed.

Pike gazed far across a luxuriant ocean of oriental fabric and sensed his mea culpa had been lost at sea. He lifted his head and leaned back, as if to adjust the volley of his voice in order to carry the distance. "I never meant for any of this to happen. Derby and I…" The snifter's rotation ceased. The brandy took another lap before braking, itself. The Baron made a slight turn, like a creaking robot whose top half only remained functional. "This seems to happen a lot around you, doesn't it?," he said in a tone used to conveying authority without raising his voice. "Do you know who this is?," he admonished rhetorically as he gestured to the portrait above him that commanded the room. "This great man, who stood with a coterie of noble patriots to win the freedom of this proud land from those who cast off the yoke of Spanish oppression only to become oppressors themselves. Your beloved Dutch, cowed by this man," he exulted, raising his glass to the venerable legend of yore, "my grandfather."

Praises dutifully sung, the Baron lowered the snifter and rested it delicately against his lips before partaking. He savored the memory, and the warmth that coated his tongue, which had offered such a splendid veneration. His eyes reopened to the firelight, soul refreshed, self righteousness bountiful. "Your grandfather, Hrimthurs," he said into the center of a gentle whirlpool of brandy. "Terrible way to go." The antagonizing remark arrived across the miles at Pike with pure bile, having

jettisoned its mock sympathy for the sake of speed. The chastised Dutchman, humbled on behalf of an entire nation, rose to a simmer. Through a clenched jaw he reminded his host, “The curse…” The Baron lifted his drink in the direction of Pike, extending his accusing index finger from the glass. His own frustration boiled over. “Perhaps you are the curse, Mr. Pike,” he lambasted. “Or is it more comforting to just blame ‘fate?’”

The four posts of the bed stood watch, each eight foot tall mahogany column sculpted by the enchanted tools of an Italian artisan brought to Castle Londongrass to craft miracles under the patronage of its lord and master. It was rumored the Florentine craftsman was also a powerful mage, whose instruments had been imbued with forces so magnificent that the Baron believed any attempt to authenticate them would be a mortal insult to them both. Each post was a tower, inhabited by the honor bound spirit of a guardsman who each, in turn, stared unflinchingly into the far corners of their world. This bedroom suite was their sworn protectorate and the Baron would put no price on its safety. The Tuscan magician, however, was more than happy to assume responsibility for that calculation.

Pike leaned heavily in the open door frame, his overwhelming guilt enough to give the disembodied sentries an overdue day off. “I can’t do this,” he announced in disgust. It was all he had prepared. A white flag. An ignominious retreat. He would figure the rest out when he awoke dry-mouthed and head splitting in an alley tomorrow morning. But to the heavily bandaged Derby a grenade had just been tossed into the mountain of pillows he rested upon. “So that’s it, then?,” he barked, staring coldly through bruised and blackened eyes. “Just a bunch of empty promises?” The lacerations that crisscrossed the boy’s face were cartoonish accent lines of his anger. He wriggled himself upright, the pin straight fold of the imported Persian blanket doubling over into his lap. He grabbed two fists full of the spread as his gauze turban slipped down his

crinkled brow. He felt the sumptuous fabric caress his raw knuckles as it oozed through his fingers. An infection disguised as a balm.

"I don't want my father's legacy," he cried. The yawning walls of the grand room were constricting. The promise of rescue reneged. He threw his arms out without knowing what to do with them. The hands twitched, tethered to a damaged body, doomed along with it. They latched desperately to the headboard behind him, finger tips finding the hollows within a repeating maze of patterns elicited from a sacrificial tree by an Italian necromancer. "Token royalty. Meaningless ceremony," he rattled on. "You've doomed me to a life of…" "Living!," Pike anxiously exploded. "You're alive, Derby. Despite me…you're alive." His voice trailed toward the end, slightly somber. Still, his fiery conviction, once prodigal, had returned to reclaim its rightful throne. The sulking Leif that had crawled on its belly across the legitimized border of the grand duchy and lay prostrate before one of its most celebrated houses was given a reprieve.

Derby planted his arms into the bed, struggling to keep them steady as he prepared to readjust his position. "That's it…uhhhn…you can't handle the guilt?" He swung his palsied legs over the side of the bed, clumsily knocking into the nightstand. He gave no utterance of pain as his bare feet flailed about with the fresh dent of a brass knob. A replica Argo, trapped in miniature within a glass bottle, trembled atop the clattered bedside table as if navigating once more between Scylla and Charybdis. "That's…that's pretty selfish, Pike." Pike stormed across the room, each determined stride a return receipt for the Baron's supernatural defenses. "Selfish?!," Pike shouted as he beared down on the frail boy perched precariously on a ledge. "I brought that treasure back to its rightful owner," he continued, indignant. "To lift a curse off your head," Derby roared, finishing the sentence of his arriving adversary. "You are incapable of acting in a manner that doesn't benefit you directly," he added as his spine stiffened.

Pike huffed over Derby, waiting for the young man to raise his eyes to meet him. The well worked routine of verbal combat had settled into an unfamiliar silence. A thin whistle leaked from Pike's nostrils as he deflated. He placed a respectful mitt upon the bottled ship to steady it and set it back on course. Then he squatted directly in front of Derby to get level with his sightline. Londongrass looked right through him. The Dutchman put his hand on the shoulder of the Baron's son. "Look, Derby, you deserve a better teacher." His outstretched arm was defiantly swatted away by a hand that shot out as if from the closing lid of a tomb to proclaim it was not dead. "Better friends too," the crippled castaway bluntly replied from deep within the fortified confines of his father's castle.

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"Fuuuck," Cid whined, "I don't want to end up an invalid." He looked down pitifully at Derby, sitting straight legged against the parapet wall like a discarded ventriloquist dummy. "Shit. I didn't mean…," the Spaniard scrambled. He bent over nervously to extend an arm of assistance. When his sleeve brushed Derby's pant leg the startled Cero flinched back in momentary terror. "Oh, God! Are they fake?!," he stuttered. Derby calmly raised a hand. "It's okay, Cid. They're my real legs." Bent at the knees he backed hard against the wall to gather himself to his feet. The ashamed Cero once more offered his help, which the creeping Derby refused. "It took about a year and a half to fully recover," he explained. "They just stiffen up if I sit too long." Cid stepped back to give him room, looking about, distressed, as if suddenly, at the top of the Barrier Dam, there would appear something he could use to comfort Derby. "A rocking chair with a quilt? A lapcat? A bowl of soup? I don't know anything about the enfeebled," he thought in a panic.

A limbering Derby observed the teetering Cero and tapped him playfully on the arm. “Hey. I’m fine. Seriously. You think I’d climb Kailash on two janky knees?” He smiled at Cid, who replied in kind. When the kid turned his back, though, Derby’s grin fell apart as he regretted reminding himself of the mountain. He watched Cid wander aimlessly toward the rail that held the polders in its lofted embrace. He heard him call back, “How’d you find him, Derby?” The blood flowed freely now through the young aristocrat’s rehabilitated knees. He made a spirited effort to arrive at the rail just as the Spaniard did. “What was that?,” Derby asked as he raised a finger to his ear. “The wind,” he felt compelled to offer in excuse of his deficient hearing.

“I was just wondering how you tracked Pike down after you got better,” Cid repeated. Derby casually shook a thumb over the edge of the Dam, indicating the fertile valley far below. “Generally speaking, Leif Pike travels pretty loud and his exploits tend to attract a lot of attention. But if the trail goes cold, chances are he’s hanging his head at home.” Cid wrapped both hands excitedly around the peeling railing and leaned forward. He scanned the distant villages, accepting an imaginary challenge to find which house belonged to the swashbuckling hero. His brow fell over his squinting eyes, darting frantically. His lips puckered between each silent sigh of “no.” “And he just took you back?,” he asked absently, a stray thought left behind from a forgotten conversation. “Pike needs people,” Derby nakedly stated as he caught a glimpse of his friend beyond the arched back of the searching Cid.

Derby studied the shambling husk he had accompanied here so many times before and this didn’t just feel different. It looked different. Defeat has a posture. The Lief Pike that knelt before his bed was racked with remorse over his injuries, felt the sting of having to betray him at the behest of his father. And yet, that Pike had set shoulders. A rigid jaw. Two fucking eyes! What Derby saw atop that Dam wasn’t even a pale shadow. It was a phantom who truly believed his life was cursed, and that

curse still followed him into the afterlife. “You see,” Derby said, returning to Cid, “Pike thinks having friends along for the adventure is half the fun. Hell, maybe he’s right. But the other half is survival. He might be able to face down things most men can’t, but he’s still a man. And he gets caught up in the thrills, and he makes mistakes, and he misreads situations. And you have to be prepared for that. Sometimes he’ll swing in to save the day, and sometimes he forgets to tie off the other end of the rope. We’re the other end of that rope…we’re also the ones that have to remember to pack it.”

“So, which house is his?,” the Spaniard asked as he ruffled his shaggy hair. Derby’s head dropped in dismay. “I heard you,” Cid reassured him. “We keep him alive, he keeps us alive. He looks like hell, though. Aren’t you concerned?” Derby watched Pike shuffle toward them and felt no need to state the obvious. “I thought for sure we would’ve gone to Scheveningen. I heard he likes to drown his sorrows along the wharves there whenever shit goes sideways,” Cid prattled on. “That’s how I knew where to find you guys. Once I had a line on Kailash I thought, ‘This is how I get in with the great Leif Pike.’ Then I heard about that complete fucking debacle you guys had with those aborigines in the South Pacific so I figured you’d make your way back to his favorite little fishing village. Hey, were you really attacked by a roc, because I thought they were native to islands off Africa…” He stopped as he caught the icy gaze of Pike. The Dutchman held for the longest second Cid had ever lived through, then turned to Derby, who nodded in agreement before the four syllables even came from Pike’s mouth. Scheveningen.