

HIGH FASHION AND THE NECROMANTIC ARTS

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Denarra Syrene

Denarra Syrene was bored.

Imprisonment wasn't really the problem — Denarra was familiar with many jails in the Reach: there was the aptly named Trollmaw, a feid pit of madness in the limestone caves beneath Chalmor that mocked the city's hypocritical grandeur; the Hanging Cells of Barrico, hundreds of bamboo cages suspended on slender golden chains over a raging southern coast; the Penance Wall of Harudin Holt, in which the spirits of wrongdoers were held in enchanted sleep until their term ended. The gentle matrons of a Dhean hermitage — the Slumbering Tower — practised rehabilitation through spiced wine and aromatic baths, whereas less-enlightened settlements like the grim-walled Bashonak preferred the older tradition of inciting mass riots, hurling rotten vegetables and other produce, and well-aimed spittle.

At least in those situations Denarra had company or interesting scenery to ponder. Even during her exile on the blue glacier in the Waste of Sleet she was provided with a sublime vision of the northern night skies. The shimmering colours of the Celestial Veil brought her to inspired tears and provided the basis for her spring wardrobe. But until Mibber's Point, Denarra had never known the pain of incarceration, and it was driving her to the edge of insanity.

"By Bidbag's hairless goat, these brutes know their business," she whispered hoarsely, scanning the distance for something — anything — to break the tedium. But there was nothing to see besides grey rock, grey buildings, and the occasional grey and dusty Human trudging toward an equally grey destination. Even the sky, so often her solace, had joined the conspiracy, its friendly blue turned to tiresome slate.

With a deep sigh loud enough to direct the guard's attention to her plight, Denarra slumped down on a rough bench. Her shackles clattered loudly on the table. The jail had recently been a tavern, though clearly not much of one — nothing more than a room with a few benches and splintery tables crammed inside. A single barred window was the sole source of natural light, more for smoke ventilation than illumination, if the soot-blackened timbers of the ceiling were any indication. A squat stone fireplace against the south wall was the only furnishing that had any aesthetic potential, but the sooty stones merely increased the room's dreary mood.

Time crept on. The iron shackles blistered her wrists. Dull daylight plodded toward late afternoon and each moment dragged with

insufferable slowness. Denarra's bright pink nails tapped a jaunty rhythm on the table, but even she couldn't overcome the heavy malaise that settled over her makeshift prison. She tried all her standard ways of passing unpleasant times: she styled her dark hair into an elaborate tower bedecked with ribbons, feathers and strings of semi-precious stones; she reouched the beautifiers on her face, trying out a new cache of light floral shades; she even risked her guard's ire with a couple of quick colour-castings on her dress, transforming the dusky red fabric to a bright lilac that perfectly matched her new eyeshade. The shackles prevented any deeper connection to the *wyr*, the ancient spirit-source of the Folk, but such small castings tended to skitter past iron barriers. So she pushed through and, after a few false starts, found the new colour satisfactory. Any one of these activities would normally keep her occupied for hours, but the overpowering dullness stifled even their therapeutic powers.

Finally, unable to bear the tedium, Denarra rushed to the window. "Yes, yes, I admit it! You've broken me. You win — I can't take it any more!"

A fat man with mismatched shirt and jerkin stepped into view in the jail's outer room. "Quiet! You've only been in there for an hour."

Denarra snorted. "But it's been a perfectly hellish hour. Have you any idea what I've been going through in this chamber of torments? There are laws against this sort of treatment."

"Yes," the man grumbled, "and there are laws against burning down prayer shrines, too."

Her eyes flashed. "I'm an innocent victim of circumstance! How was I supposed to know the casting would do that? You'd think the shrine's manufacturers would've known better than to build the roof with such combustible thatch. I can hardly be held responsible for their lack of foresight." She was warming up to the defence. "Besides, how was I supposed to know that they were only for decoration? Nobody I know just poses big copper braziers filled with kindling standing around like that, and I did extinguish your very ungrateful priest before all his hair burned away." She didn't mention the priest's muttered refusal to let the "half-breed" near the shrine's altar just before the fire broke out. The only response was the whining creak of a chair as the man lowered his heavy bulk.

"You know, empathy is a quality you could familiarize yourself with," she muttered.

The poster had clearly been a case of false advertising: "Calling all Intrepid Travellers with Adventure in their Blood. See the Reach and Exotic Ports of Call. Journey in the Safety of a Guided Tour with Like-Minded Companions. Only the Dauntless Need Apply." She had packed her travelling gear that very afternoon. The timing was fortuitous, as she'd had a small misunderstanding with a rather influential merchant earlier in the day — a tiny quibble about whether she'd paid for what she assumed was a free sample of an exceedingly rare perfume — so she decided to take a little vacation to give him a chance to calm down and reflect on his bad manners.

Denarra had been disappointed to find that her fellow "adventurers" were nothing more than dull, wealthy Humans looking for a story to tell their equally dull, wealthy friends back in Chalmor. They fell into three categories: spoiled and ruting striplings with more nose hair than brains; pastry-faced guildsmen and their mousy wives, who yammered endlessly about the terrors of campfire living; and babbling pilgrims, who collapsed with pious wreness at the thought of the enshrined knucklebone of some obscure and half-forgotten saint in every dreary little town along the way.

Denarra was the most exotic aspect of the entire affair, a Strangeling with a flair for the dramatic and a fashion sense unfettered by convention. She shared with her father the bronze skin and curly voluptuousness of the forest-dwelling Kyn, along with his oak-leaf ears and bright eyes. Her mother's Human blood tempered the four sensory stalks nestled in her thick hair. She inherited other qualities from her mother, too: a visceral need for excitement, a bewitching beauty and captivating smile, and an unpredictability that bordered on chaos. Even when she was a youngling she'd been more of a wildflower than a cultivated rose, preferring the free breeze and sunshine to the placid domesticity of the high-walled garden. When just a stripling, she changed her name to something more suitable to her personality, exchanged her breechcloth for a dress, and rushed into the wide, waiting world to experience all its dangers and delights. But the gift that most defined her life came from her father's calming Kyn ways: she was a wielder, connected to the *wyr*-bound currents that shaped and joined the Kyn and the other fey-Folk to the old ways of the hidden world.

Generally, Humans tended to be suspicious of the sorcerous wielders, and after hundreds of years of being persecuted and driven from their homelands, most Fey-Folk had little use for Humanity. There were few places where Humans and Folk lived in peace. Chalmor, the political centre of the Reach, however, was one such rarity, although not so much in recent years. This travelling group was largely predisposed to tolerance. If not for a brief dalliance with the son of a particularly myopic guildsman — which came to an abrupt and quite revealing end when Denarra carelessly kicked over a lantern and set their wagon aflame — she might still be with the caravan on some remote road in the Allied Wilderlands.

Instead she'd been abruptly transferred to a merchant train on its way to some of the more isolated settlements in the Firebrand Mountains. And now she was in the twice-cursed town of Mibbet's Point, a once-bustling mining community that now held little interest for even its own residents.

Denarra stood up and stretched with a yawn. No use in regrets — as her mother had often told her: "Feeling regretful is like shovelling smoke: you do a lot of work and end up with nothing to show for it." Still, it was hard not to mourn the loss of her wide-brimmed scarlet hat with the golden greathawk feather in the band. It was gone, lost in the fire. The memory annoyed her, so she sat back down on the bench, leaned over the table and gnawed at the edge of a fingernail.

Denarra returned to her daydreams. What if she never left this place? What if Mibbet's Point, this tedious tomb of a town, was the end? She was fading in this dingy room, wasting away like an epic poem of suffering as the last breath left her full lips. Visions of her funeral, crowded with hundreds — no, thousands — of sobbing friends and admirers drifted in front of her eyes. She smiled at her own image, resplendent in her finest emerald evening gown and ropes of rare pearls. The Strangeling wielder nodded approvingly at the sight of her lovely and well-coiffed body lying inside a gold-lined crystal casket, arms draped gently over a dozen pink orchids nestled in her ample bosom. She could almost hear the aching strains of a funeral dirge and the poetic retelling of her noteworthy life, her noble end and her unparalleled sense of style. She even felt a pang of regret that she wouldn't be able to attend the fabulous memorial party that was certain to follow.

She was wiping away a tear when a scrape at the door shattered her

wandering thoughts. She turned to greet the visitor with a broad smile, but it vanished at the sight of a short Human with a bald, bandaged head and singed beard, followed by a trio of nervous, mud-covered miners.

"Oh, you again. Well, I can't say the visit is entirely unexpected. I assume you've come to apologize?"

The bald man coughed. "Me? Apologize? You're the one who ... my shine ..."

She waved her hand, dismissing his concern. "Now, now, there's no need to take all the blame — the building was clearly a firetrap, an accident waiting to happen. I completely understand your position. And don't worry, I have no intention of taking the matter to your superiors. All I ask are reasonable accommodations and perhaps a meal to tide me over till I find someone to take me back to the trade wagons."

"Now, hold on there — we've come to read the charges you're facing. Arson, assault, blasphemy, resisting arrest and lengthy profanity in the vicinity of women and children." The man's voice grew louder with each new charge, his ragged beard quivering. Denarra pointedly ignored him and turned her attention to the others.

"Ah, I see you brought some of your associates with you! To be perfectly honest, I was getting *absolutely* desperate for company, and though I've never really had much interest in the 'sons of the soil,' as it were, I'm ever so glad to meet you!" The miners bunched together, eyes wide, as Denarra rushed forward with her lacquered fingers extended in greeting.

Her welcome was interrupted by a sudden bright flash and explosion that rattled the earth and threw them to the floor. To Denarra's amazement, the structure continued to stand, although sooty thatch dropped from the ceiling.

"Wasn't me this time, boys," she said, coughing as she fanned the dust away from her face, the clank of her chains muted in the thick air. "Oh, damn." There was a lengthy gash in her dress. Denarra turned to the bearded man, who lay sprawled in the firepit. "Do you happen to know where my travel satchel is? I need a needle and some thread — if I don't take care of this problem right now, I'll have a dire emergency on my hands." The man stared at her.

Outside the tavern, all was chaos. Denarra hadn't had much of a chance to see the settlement before the little misunderstanding that

landed her in this predicament, and she was surprised to see so much activity. She stood and walked to the doorway, sidestepping the miners who lay tangled in a heap near the door. Mibbet's Point lay at the juncture of three tall peaks. Its thirty or so stone and timber houses squatted on each side of the main road, which was now flooded with a bewildering array of creatures. Humans were rushing past the raven in a desperate frenzy, occasionally colliding with one another and all manner of livestock and poultry in their haste. A couple of hardy mountain burros galloped by, their mouths open wide in a synchronized bray of terror, followed closely by a weathered old man with a floppy hat, who let loose a stream of profanity that brought an appreciative nod from the much-travelled welder.

"Sithén save us," the priest whispered. "Mordok is upon us."

Denarra turned to him. "Who?"

"Mordok, the Shadow Serpent! The Asp of the Loathsome Tower!" Seeing no response of recognition, the man went on: "He's a great and powerful reaver, a cruel necromancer who rules these mountains with a will of iron and cruel magic. He demands tribute of gold and goat's milk from us each spring, but with the good ore and she-goats drying up, we haven't been able to meet his demands. And now he's come to get his revenge!" He buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, *that's* original." Denarra looked back to the north. "What kind of name is 'Mordok,' anyway? Sounds more like an anti-social skin condition than the reputable title of a brother of the arcane arts. Ah, well — I suppose I'd better go and see what this is all about." The chains clattered to the ground. The men looked at her in horror. She smiled and held up a small wire pick, which she returned with a flourish to one of the many folds of her dress. She'd waited to use the little tool until she had an appreciative audience. Admittedly, their gaping mouths and bulging eyes weren't quite the enthusiastic response she'd hoped for, but it was hardly surprising given the dearth of cultured entertainment these remote parts. Maybe she'd stay for a while and offer them some guidance; she *was* a charitable soul, after all.

Another crackling blast from the north brought her attention back to the smoking centre of activity, and she walked on, absently rubbing her chafed wrists. The men behind her stood together in confusion, none followed.

Denarra picked her way through the rubble in the street, avoiding piles of burro dung as well as the surprisingly large amount of iron scattered across the road: remnants of wagon wheels, picks and other mining tools, the strewn inventory of a pot-and-kettle merchant's stand. Iron was mortal poison to many of the Folk, and though Denarra was Human as well as Kyn and had some resistance to the metal, she still suffered from its touch. This narrowed her choices when it came to a wide range of jewellery and other accessories.

The welder wrinkled her nose in disgust at the sudden acrid stench of sulphur and rancid milk. Her hand disappeared into her dress and emerged with a green scarf, scented with rose oil, which she held up to her face. As she did so, she noticed with some irritation that the nails on her hand were still pink, not the soft purple of her new ensemble. So she stopped briefly to match the shade with the rest of her outfit.

Mordok. She'd never heard the name before, but that wasn't surprising — there were many rogue reavers throughout the Reach and most operated on such a small scale that they rarely met any resistance. Denarra frowned. When Humans went wild, it never reflected badly on the entire people, but if one of the Folk got a little experimental with the *wyr*, men brought out the hounds and pitchforks against all "Fey witches." Wielders were fundamentally different from Human sorcerers, yet the subtleties of such distinctions never seemed to matter to Humans. Wielders drew from the *wyr* that was the essence of their own spirits; thus, they drew only on those powers that were given freely, not those taken by force. As Humans practised it, it was just another name for slavery.

She looked around at the men and women crouching in the shadows around her and shook her head. She couldn't help but feel sorry for them. Not all Humans were fools and bigots; many were just as much victims of cruelty as were the Kyn and other Folk. And not all interactions between the Folk and Humanity were doomed to failure. Her parents were the perfect example, in spite of all their differences. She had no doubt that her mother would always be chasing after another wild dream with her father beside her, breathless with anticipation. Sometimes these things worked out.

The smoke was thicker now. She peered through it, eyes watering in spite of the scarf, as she tried to catch a glimpse of what stood beyond. A slight breeze caught the edge of the smoke and lifted it away to reveal

the prayer shrine that had gone up in flames only a short time earlier. Denarra stomped over to it indignantly, "After all that fuss and bother ... 'burned to the ground,' indeed! Over half the shrine is still standing." She swung around to glare reproachfully at the bearded priest, but he was lost in the smoke. "He'll hear more about this when I'm through with this 'Mordok' fellow."

Looking up at the crest of the hill, she saw the blackened remains of a goat, and beside them stood a tall, broad-shouldered figure in sleek black robes that flowed like magma around his feet. In his right hand he held a black staff topped by the onyx head of a striking serpent; in his left hand gleamed a wicked scimitar. His hair was long and pitch black, save for the white streak streaming from temple to split ends down his back. Denarra wasn't a bit surprised to see that one eye was hidden by a crimson patch.

She shook her head. "So this is Mordok. What is he thinking with that outfit?"

The reaver held the scimitar high and cried, "The Shadow Serpent demands that thy elders present themselves, at once and in haste, lest my wrath be visited upon thee again! Let this smouldering ram be a warning to all of the powers of Loathsome Tower!"

Denarra stifled a giggle.

A group of six old men emerged from the ruins, led by a portly elder whose broad hands wrung his leather apron incessantly. Denarra turned to a young woman who crouched behind an overturned ore cart. "Your council of elders is all male, I see. Typical. No wonder this place has so little imaginative possibility." She shook her head and moved closer.

"Thou hast forgotten Mordok's tribute, curs!" the reaver bellowed at the elder in the apron. "Mordok is not given to patience or generosity this day. Prepare thyself for unbearable torment!"

"Please," the sooty lead elder grovelled. "We're doing all we can, but you ask the impossible! The snows this winter were fierce, and we couldn't get through the pass to the richer veins. And because of the drought, we've been pumping our goats every day and night, but all we get for our trouble is blisters and bites." A merry laugh echoed in the distance. Mordok glanced around for the source of the sound, then turned back to glower at the grovelling man.

The elder continued desperately. "Just a little longer, we beg you! We're a peaceful community, small but honest, dedicated to responsible

industry and a strong standard of living. We might not have the art scene of Argot Falls, but our schools are consistently rated among the best of the Seven Settlement region, and our crime rate decreased last year from a high of —"

"Enough!" Mordok cried, his brows bristling in fury.

Denarra was impressed. I wonder how he does that, she thought.

The reaver swept his staff in a wide circle. "On thy belly, worm! Mordok has not travelled this vast distance to parley — he has come to conquer, come to rule! The mountains cradle in their stony embrace vast riches, precious ores that shall be used to finance a titanic campaign of political destabilization, economic inflation and social anarchy that will lead to world domination. Then Mordok will be master of all! Yes, fool, thou art looking upon thy lord and master. All will bow in supplication to the throne of Loathsome Tower, my slaves forever, generation after generation of manual labourers subject to his every whim, his every desire, his every —"

"Okay — just stop, stop, *stop!*" Denarra snarled and stomped up the hill, green eyes flashing. The few Humans who remained in the street rushed for cover. "Please have some respect for the dignity of your position," she said, pointing a lilac fingertip at the reaver. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

Mordok spun around to face her. Blood-red fire exploded from the head of the staff and enveloped the sorcerer in an eerie glow. In a deep, sepulchral voice, he roared, "Who dares to speak to Mordok the Shadow Serpent in such a fashion?"

Denarra waved some of the smoke away with her scarf. "Oh, you sad, silly thing. First, you've got to get rid of that overblown language — it just doesn't work. Honestly, whoever heard of a reaver these days who still follows that old cliché of thees and thous? Remember, darling, you're not on stage. And referring to yourself in the third person? Pretence only works with irony and you're sadly lacking in the latter. You're simply a pathetic joke — not, I assume, the intended result of this whole performance." She flicked his staff scornfully with a well-manicured fingernail.

"By all the powers of darkness, thou shalt pay for this impudence!" he sputtered, grasping the staff tightly in preparation for another devastating casting. The town's elders took this opportunity to rush to safety with surprising agility. Only Denarra and Mordok remained on the hill,

although many frightened and curious eyes watched the happenings from the rubble that littered Mibber's Point.

"See, you're just not listening." Denarra shook the sleeve of his ornate robes with disdain. Mordok stepped back in alarm. "Look at you — dressed in black? What look are you going for? Most redundant villain of the year? It's hardly imposing. Every angst-ridden poet has an outfit just like it, and I'll tell you, you don't know irritation until you've been to a late-night reading with a half-drunk horde of passive-aggressive virgins more skilful at posing than poetry." She walked around him, her eyes narrowed in thought. "You should try something unexpected, like fuchsia — now that can be a terrifying colour. Or maybe try alternating stripes of yellow and green. Solids just aren't good with your complexion."

Mordok stared at the Strangeling. He'd never faced such an enemy, and he was uncertain how to safely proceed. Besides, she *was* making sense. He'd agonized over solids versus some sort of pattern — he did love reds and yellows — but frustration and insecurity led him to more conservative choices. "Well, I ..."

"And another thing: the eye patch? The snake staff? The little skull and crossbone pattern on your robes? You give evil sorcerers a bad name." She leaned in closer, speaking in soft, conspiratorial tones. "You see, the best villains are the ones you don't expect to be villains. They're cultivated, charming and at the forefront of fashion. But darling, to be honest, the only thing frightening about you is your alarming lack of creativity."

He held his hand up to his eye. "But I need the patch!" Denarra shrugged. "Well, if it's a genuine medical condition, at least go for something other than red. In this case, you might even try a helmet that drops down over half your face. Or maybe have the patch partly designed to look like the jawbone of some toothy creature — something interesting like that. Now, turn around."

Mordok moved around carefully.

"I'd also look into breeches and knee-high boots. Robes are all well and good for ceremonial occasions, but they're hardly practical for the wear and tear that occurs when you're trying to obliterate a town. You need something you can move around in, something that won't trip you up. And, if I'm not mistaken," she said, pointing to dusty streaks on the front of the robes, "you've already taken a tumble in those a few

times today."

Mordok nodded sheepishly.

Denarra continued: "I'd stay away from anything like robes." She laughed and spun around, her long lilac dress and rainbow of scarves and ribbons whipping wildly around her curly form. "Unless, of course, you know how to do it right! If you decide that you just can't give up the robes, you should look for a genuine Joolip de Tour like this one. Fashionable and practical, at a price anyone can afford!"

She stopped and scrutinized him again. Mordok shuffled uneasily under her critical gaze.

"You know," she smiled, "the hair works. I like the streak — it's not over the top, just enough to be dignified and striking. If you trimmed the goatee a little, it would be a nice combination. You might try a couple of earrings, or even a nose ring for flair. And you'd be quite handsome if you didn't scowl so much all the time."

He looked away shyly.

"But the name has got to go. Mordok? You're not a subterranean mud road, darling. That can't *possibly* be your real name."

The reaver shook his head and scratched his scruffy chin in thought. She was making sense. It was like hearing all his own concerns from the mouth of another. "Mordok had not ... I mean, I hadn't really thought much about it. What do you suggest?"

The wielder grinned. "Oh, something more lyrical, with more fire and fierceness. Something that sends shivers through the body." Her eyes glazed over for a moment, and then she cleared her throat, flushing slightly. "Something that rolls off the tongue, like Astavar or Kalugamu the Blasphemous, or even Cyrharri of the Withered Wood. It doesn't matter if it's accurate, it just needs some personality, some quality that says, 'Hey, I'm someone special — pay attention to me.'"

The reaver thought for a moment. "Why not Astavar? It's quite dignified." He continued, increasingly excited. "But what about the staff? Don't you think snakes are frightening?"

Denarra smiled again. "Well, sure, they're scary, but *everyone* uses snakes. Either snakes, bats or spiders. You need to go with a motif that's all yours. Why don't you try something that scares people but isn't overused, like a ravenous fluke worm, or a swarm of killer wasps, or a flying eyeball surrounded by a circle of bloody daggers? I was once chased through a spruce forest by a bull elk looking for love, and let me tell you,

I've never been so scared in my life—you don't know fear until a frustrated elk is after your ass. It becomes the standard against which all mortal terror is measured."

"I'll consider it," he mused. "But I'm still quite fond of the snake."
 "Well, it's a thought, anyway." Denarra turned and looked around at the devastation on the hill. "You know, I could help you. I'm not doing anything right now. Why don't we talk it over, say, dinner... your treat?"

"What a delightful suggestion!" Astavar (the reaver formerly known as Mordok) smiled to reveal a beautiful set of white teeth.

Her knees quivered.

"I know a lovely little café, just a few leagues from here in a charming seaside hamlet. The view and lemon-grilled salmon are unparalleled," he said as he held out a tightly muscled arm, which Denarra eagerly accepted.

"You have yourself a date, my friend. But tell me, have you ever given any serious thought to this whole villain thing? I mean, honestly—anyone can be a villain, but it takes a special kind of man to be a hero."

Astavar smiled again. "I'll take that into consideration, too." Amidst the wreckage of Mibber's Point, the inhabitants began to emerge from the shadows, curiosity winning over caution. They watched the reaver pull a glimmering hoop from the folds of his robe and drop it on the ground. It expanded quickly until it grew large enough to accommodate both the reaver and the wielder. Denarra peered in and clasped her hands together in delight.

"Pantamari's? You didn't mention that's where we're going! Oh, I've heard so many wonderful things about the place. Still, darling, it's only fair to warn you—I'm not a cheap dinner companion!"

Astavar grinned and whispered in her ear as she joined him in a circle. She broke into a long laugh that carried through the valley.

"I'm not that kind of girl," she giggled. "But I do know a lovely young woman in Chalimor who used to be a vengeance crusader in the Claw Brigade—she now designs leather accessories for the romantically adventurous. I'm sure you'd get along fabulously! And from what I understand, she just *adores* rehabilitation work!" Astavar laughed. A flash of lavender light and pearly mist erupted from the hoop. When the mist cleared away, they were gone. Only the lingering scent of roses remained.

The people of Mibber's Point began the cleanup shortly after the wielder and the reaver vanished. The only fatalities were a few unfortunate goats and a cross-eyed cat who was trampled by a low-bellied sow during the riot. Within a day, the rubble caused by the reaver's attack had been transferred into ore wagons and tossed down the slope outside of town. The next day they added the burned timbers from the temple, two melted copper braziers and the still-identifiable remains of a large red hat with a charred golden feather pinned to the band.

The priest himself carried the hat to the edge of the slope. The Strangeling had healed his admittedly minor burns before the arrest, but he half suspected that the bald patches in his beard would never grow back. He looked off into the canyon, gauging the distance thoughtfully. Knotting the hat into a ball, he drew his arm back and flung it into the canyon with a shout of triumph.

The red ball spun out on a wide and impressive arc; indeed, it went farther than he expected. But his elation faded to indignant disbelief as the red shape spun into the wind and unfurled on the wild breeze. The hat disappeared among the clouds, floating merrily east, toward Chalimor.