

KARMHOLZ

a short story by J. Nelson Leith
j.nelsonleith.com

Jitz was a local no-good, always jingling more copper (or, on occasion, even silver) than he had any right to. He wasn't particularly charming, or particularly clever, or particularly talented, but he was nevertheless well-connected. Everyone in Royal Fork knew him. Most of them knew to avoid him. But, there were enough left over to keep him jingling.

Now, let's get into that name. Not the man's name. *Jitz* was a common name among men his age. A quarter century ago, there was an obscure knight named Sir Jitzerald who, while defending the king, lost his life to a thester arrow, right through the visor, and suddenly every other baby boy was named Jitzerald. Then, just as quickly, Sir Jitzerald was forgotten and everyone realized what an awful name he had and how inauspicious it might be to name a child after someone whose only claim to glory was taking an arrow to the face, even if it were in defense of the king. So, Jitz's name is unfortunate, but explicable.

But *Royal Fork*? It sounds important. It's not. Even when the grand town of Karmholz was still just a few miles upstream, Royal Fork was not important. Now, with the nearest large town, Vissan, well above the rapids where Karmholz once stood, Royal Fork was a even less important than "not important." A place to sail or row past.

It's a small fishing village on the Sketterun River, with an even smaller stream running through it, from which the village gets its name. That stream just happens to rise in a rural spring called the Kingswell because, allegedly, Old King Johaus was drawing water from it when his iron crown fell into the water, turning immediately to gold. If the idea that a spring can turn base metals to gold doesn't convince you that this story is a silly thesterish fable, the image of a king drawing his own water should.

Even Jitz didn't draw his own water. Or his own ale. He always had enough copper to convince someone else to pour an ale for him. And one for whomever he was trying to wrangle into helping him secure a few more coppers. For example, one resident of Royal Fork (I say "resident" because he was not native) who was usually among those who knew to avoid Jitz.

In fact, as Jitz set a second mug of ale on the tavern table, Jaylis Katrisson leveled his eyes on Jitz in a way that made clear that he was still among those who desired to avoid him.

That name also requires some explanation. Jaylis is not a common name inland but, as stated, he was not native to Royal Fork. He had been a pearl diver on the coast, until he got in trouble and had to flee inland. There wasn't much diving to be done on the Sketterun River, but his boat-

handling was valued among those who toss nets, those sanctified *ut professionis* as the Body of Quelek, patron of fishermen.

The surname Katrisson also told a story. Son of Katri, a woman's name on the coast. You can work out the details in that.

After he arrived in Royal Fork, with intentions to move upriver to Vissan, Jaylis Katrisson met Jitz and Jitz introduced him to the fishermen of Royal Fork and that was that. In a sense, Jaylis had cause against Jitz, because (as stated) Royal Fork was a place to sail or row past. In another sense, he owed Jitz a favor, for securing him his first job inland when he was hungry and without means or prospects.

Jaylis had done well for himself handling boats and drawing nets on the Sketterun. Part of that was probably because fishing did not entail the same temptations as pearl diving. So, Jaylis had settled into the fisherman's life in the Body of Quelek.

Still, he wore a pearl diver's anklet, a circle of blue shells, as a reminder of his former glory.

Jitz sat down with an unconvincing grin and slid the second ale across the table. He leaned back in his chair and lifted the first ale to his mouth. He took a sip and, surprisingly set it on the table without a trace of foam on his mustache.

"I'm paying you for this," Jaylis said.

"Nah," Jitz said. "Just a tiny addition to the job I got you. Captain Scharille's boat."

"Scharille was a terrible boss. I found my current job with Captain Vicert without you."

"True." Jitz set an elbow on the table and pointed at him. "You'd made a name for yourself under Scharille."

Jaylis sighed and grabbed the ale. He took a drink. It was a good batch. Jitz was setting him up for something.

"Alright," he said. "What do you want?"

"I want you to meet someone." He took a drink of his ale and shrugged. "I don't like him."

"So, why do you want me to meet him?"

"He knows things."

Jaylis stared at him. He'd need another sip for what came next, he knew. So, he took another sip.

"He knows things?"

"His name is Beausond. Goes by Bo. A copyist at the monastery up the Fork, where the Body of Raien keeps—" He waved his hand in the air. "*Chronicles* and stuff like that. He found something interesting there."

Jaylis took another drink. "What did he find?"

Jitz shook both hands in the air. One of them found his mug as he turned and waved a man over.

The man was hardly more than a boy. But, he had the hints of a beard. He was wearing the dark green robes of the Body of Raien, patron of records, and he filled them out a little too well. He gathered some papers from his table and started in Jaylis's direction. Then, he lifted a finger, turned to retrieve his ale (also courtesy of Jitz, no doubt), and shuffled over the Jaylis's table spilling foam from a mug he'd clearly not even tasted.

"Beausond?" Jaylis said.

The man-boy nodded as he sat and set the mug aside. "Please, Bo."

"Brother Bo, or something?"

He shook his head, looking at the pair of papers. "Not yet. I'm still in training. Just a copyist."

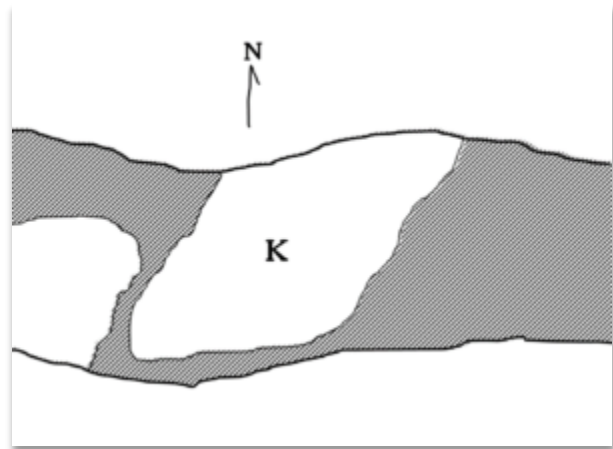
"A copyist," Jitz confirmed, grinning.

"You've copied something there?" Jaylis pointed at the papers Bo was looking at.

"Yes, yes." He set one on the table and slid it to the middle. It was a crude drawing, a map. An arrow with a "N" drawn near the point indicated north. There was a broad swath through the middle of the map from west to east, a smaller zig-zag of hashmarks inside with a blank space to either side.

"Jitz told me you weren't from here."

Jaylis squinted. "Yes. I lived on the coast until about five years ago."



"I thought this would help. This is a map of part of the Sketterun valley," Bo said. "About a hundred years ago, from a book called the *Survey of Ways and Waters*. I apologize. It was drawn in haste."

Jaylis leaned in. Jitz took another drink.

"This middle part—" Bo set his finger on the western edge of the map, in the hashmarked area. He traced the zig-zag between the two blank spaces. "That middle part with the cross-hatching is the where the Sketterun used to flow."

"Where is that?" Jaylis said. "It doesn't look familiar."

"Just upstream," Jitz said. "Let him talk."

Jaylis shrugged and took another drink.

Bo tapped the two blank spaces in the valley. "These were banks of stones and mud deposited by the river. The dark lines are the edges of the valley, mostly cliffs, but this—" He tapped the "K" in the easternmost blank space, clinging to the north shore. "*This* was where Karmholz once sat."

"Karmholz," Jaylis said. He nodded at Jitz. "The old ruins, just upstream."

"Karmholz," Bo said, grinning.

"It doesn't look like that now," Jaylis said.

"No," Bo said. He swept his finger around the "K" signifying Karmholz. "The town once took up this entire bank. Boats would come from upstream, from Vissan and towns to the west, and unload their goods. These were then carted through town to docks on the east side to be carried downstream."

Jaylis nodded.

"Also," Bo said, "same thing in the other direction. Upriver."

Jaylis cocked his head. "Why not just sail through here?" He traced his finger through the narrow gap between the two banks.

"Because," Bo said, "that was then a narrow rapids from the calm water above Karmholz and the calm water below."

"So," Jaylis said, "what happened?"

"What happened?" Bo said. "Oh, yes. You're not from here. The great flood happened."

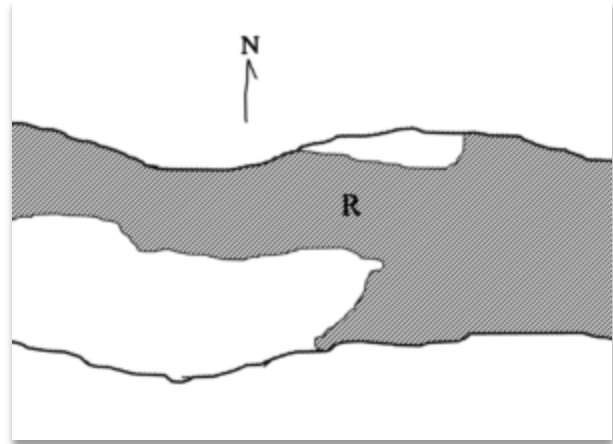
He set the second sheet on top of the first. Then, he shook his head, pulled the second sheet back, and tapped on the first where Karmholz once sat.

"Every few years, a flood would wash through Karmholz here," he stroked straight from the upstream calm water to the downstream calm water. "So the town elders had sluices built to carry the water safely through during floods. But then, about a hundred years ago, a great flood came, overwhelmed the sluices, and washed half the town away. And the bank with it."

He put the second sheet atop the first again. There was one long bank on this one, clinging to the southern shore. The Sketterun flowed along the northern edge where Karmholz once sat.

"Now it looks like this." He tapped an "R" in the river where the "K" had been. "These are the rapids of Karmholz."

"Alright, I know *those*," Jaylis said with a wave of his hand. "I'm a fisherman, after all. I briefly worked just downstream of them, with a Vissan crew."



He glared at Jitz. "*After* Captain Scharille and *before* Captain Vicert."

Jitz shrugged and took a drink. Bo looked at Jitz, confused.

"A fisherman? You said he was a diver."

Jaylis lifted his leg and put his bare foot on the table. He slipped a finger under the blue shells of his pearl-diver's anklet.

"I was," he said, "on the coast. I came here after I ran into some trouble."

Bo's eyes bounced back and forth between the two men. "What sort of trouble?"

Jaylis put his foot back under the table and shrugged.

"I tried to keep a few pearls for myself."

Bo sat back in his chair. "Don't they search you? I've heard you dive naked..."

"Yes," Jaylis said. "They look in your mouth, your ears. Up your nose. Between your fingers and toes."

"So," Bo said, "where?"

Jaylis shrugged and took a drink. Jitz chuckled.

"Oh," Bo said with a grimace.

"So," Jaylis said, "what's the real story here? Karmholz got washed out and now there's just ruins and Vissan is the big town on the river."

"Well," Jitz said, "part of what got washed out was the treasury. And Karmholz was a rich town. Richest on the Sketterun at the time."

Jaylis sat back in his chair. His hand let go of his mug, but then found it again.

Jitz was smiling. He wagged a finger in the air.

"In the days after the flood, all sorts of no-goods swept in from all over the kingdom to dive downstream for coins and gems from the Karmholz treasury. His local lordship, the duke of Albeder, sent troops and dispersed the looters."

Bo was nodding and grinning like a boy.

"What I found in the monastery's archives was the confession of a captured looter, who claimed to have seen a large chest on the riverbed, with the treasury's seal. A chest the size of a coffin."

Jitz tapped the table with one finger. "That's a lot of gold," he said.

Jaylis thought about it. Thought about it like a diver.

"That's a lot of *weight*," he said. "And, how do we even know it's still there?"

Bo lifted a thick finger. "The confession was in a chronicle of legal processes called the—"

"We don't care what it's called," Jitz said.

"Right," Bo said, straightening his dark green robes. "Anyway, I copied it years ago. Before I met Jitz, when I was still doing magistrates' logs. But, last month, I was copying the log of the duke's recorder from the same year. Very fascinating, the debris and drowned bodies from Karmholz jamming the river at the rocks above Kierik, and at the bridge of Jemacher. They sent men out in boats with hooks, but they didn't draw the dead out to bury them, just sent their putrefying bodies downriver to clear the way for boat traffic."

Jaylis sighed. "All very *fascinating*, but how does this matter to us?"

"Well," Bo said, "the duke's record mentioned the confession from the *Magistrate's Chronicle of Vissan*."

He'd snuck in the name. Jitz groaned.

"The duke's men," Bo went on, "were sent to retrieve the chest. But then, the war with Thesternesse broke out. The duke's men were called up by the king to fight thester heathens."

Jaylis let this sit for a moment. "There's no record of the chest being recovered."

Bo shook his head. "There is no record of the chest being recovered. And, there would have been."

All three men exchanged looks.

"Should have been," Bo said.

"Where is it?" Jaylis said.

Bo grinned inside his sparse beard. "The location was recorded as one-third the distance across the river from a standing stone on the north shore to a sapling blue oak on the south shore."

"A blue oak?" Jaylis said. "I don't know much about inland, but I know those don't grow here. That's a Worthasian tree. Deep north into Thesternesse."

Bo nodded. "That's why they thought it noteworthy here in Albeder. It was seen as an omen of the war. A thester standing stone across the river from a thester tree. The record says that many believed the flood itself was an attack by thesterish sorcery."

"Nonsense," Jitz said with a scowl. "Anyway, I've been there. I stood next to the standing stone. It has thester markings on it, the triangular Ashtel type. From the old days. I looked south across the river. There's a blue oak there, but no longer a sapling."

Jaylis thought it over.

"It's a chest the size of a coffin. Filled with something heavy. I can't swim that up. If we try to draw it up with a rope, any boat on this river will capsize. They're all too small."

"We don't draw it up on the water," Jitz said. "I've worked it out."

Jaylis sat back. Jitz was trouble, but he did have a way of working things out. He seemed at his best when there was trouble.

Jitz pointed at the map Bo had drawn of the post-flood river.

"You dive down from a boat, while we're throwing nets as if fishing. You find the chest and secure the rope."

"No, no." Jaylis shook his head. "First, we can't be in that part of the river. Even just pretending to fish. That's Vissan fishright, controlled by the sheriff upriver. I know that much from my stint with a Vissan crew."

"That's right," Bo said.

"We'd get arrested," Jaylis said.

Jitz grinned.

"You're *both* right. We'd need to get a lease to fishright from the sheriff."

"I know from the fishermen that he doesn't grant leases to boats not docking at Vissan."

"But," Jitz said, "he likes profit. If we offer a larger take than your Royal Fork fishermen are willing to offer, he might see his way clear."

Jaylis took a drink and thought it over.

"Good enough," he said. "Let us say you can get us this lease, we find the chest, and I secure a rope. Then what? We scuttle our boat?"

"No. We secure the rope to the boat and retire to the north shore for the night. Make camp instead of returning to Royal Fork. After sunset, once the river traffic dies down, we wrap the rope around the standing stone and drag the chest to shore."

Jaylis glanced at Bo, who looked bemused. Clearly, the copyist hadn't thought of this either.

Jaylis nodded, slowly. "That would work."



The sky was a thin blue, a few prominent stars already peeking through. Quellab, the green fishing star. Rayyab, the red remembering star. Quanicis, the blue ruling star in the north, which was particularly important to the sea captains Jaylis had known on the coast.

Upriver west, the sun was hidden behind the woods of the southern shore. The sky in that direction was a deep orange and the air shivered with the noise of the rapids, which were also hidden around the bend in the river.

Jaylis, Jitz, and Bo were gathered near the standing stone, peering down the steep slope into the dark waters of the Sketterun. Their boat was moored on the near shore. Across the river, in the shadows of the woods, the pale leaves of the blue oak seemed almost to glow. The limbs of the tree bowed outward and upward in smooth arcs.

"Was it hard getting the lease?" Bo said.

Jitz shrugged. "A lot harder getting the boat. I had to buy *that* outright."

Jaylis chuckled. "Nobody in Royal Fork would lend you one, eh?"

"Fuck off," Jitz said.

Bo took an uncomfortable breath. "How do the waters look, Jaylis?" He clearly wanted to calm the situation.

Jaylis cocked his head to the side.

"Not too bad. Rivers are tricky, though. When I fished up here—" As if called into being by Jaylis's words, a boat appeared around the bend to the east. Its sails were furled, its crew rowing upstream with a low chant. A triangular banner on the mast was the yellow of Vissan.

"Huh," Jaylis said. "They're late. The gatekeepers won't be at station at this hour."

"Gatekeepers?" Bo said.

"Um, on your old map, where the river used to run on the south side? There's a little canal there now, carrying Vissan boats up and down past the ruins."

"Oh," Bo said. "*Locksmen*."

"Yes, but the fishers call them *gatekeepers*." He looked up into the sky, which was deep purple by then. So many stars, most of which were unnamed. "The canal is a bit spooky. I wouldn't want to do it at night, so it's probably best the locksmen retire at sunset. The ruins are coated in vines. They look haunted."

"This whole area is haunted," Jitz said. Jaylis huffed and looked at him. That was not a very Jitz-like thing to say.

Jitz was staring across the river at the blue oak, chewing on his mustache. He glanced at Jaylis, then turned to look at the standing stone. The others turned with him. The stone was like a spearhead lodged in the ground, twice as tall as a man, covered in triangular carvings. Beyond was the darkness of the woods.

"What did you call these signs?" Jaylis said.

"Ashtel," Jitz said. "An old thester clan who lived around here."

Bo stepped toward the standing stone. "The downward-pointing triangles represent water, falling from the sky and flowing down to the sea. The upward-pointing triangles represent plants growing up toward the sky."

"It's all nonsense," Jitz said, returning to form. "The Lushem drew hashmarks all over everything up in the hills."

"On the coast," Jaylis said, "it's spirals and circles."

"The Ashtel," Bo said, "believed that the waters and the plants were partners. Husband and wife. The Ashtel lived along the rivers, but they never fished. They thought that was stealing from the waters, when the waters had already provided by feeding plants."

"Nonsense," Jitz said, glancing at Jaylis. "Thesters were silly, superstitious savages. There's a reason they're not here anymore."

"Driven out by armies," Bo said.

Jitz grunted. "You're a monk."

"Not yet," Bo said.

"Still, you work for the Body of Raien, a proper god with a proper order. Not these silly thester spirits."

"Yes," Bo said, "but it was armies who set up the kingdoms, duchies, and counties. Not gods."

Jaylis peered into the triangles. There were indeed upward-pointing triangles and downward-facing triangles. There were interlocked triangles, one facing up and the other down. There was a ring of triangles, alternately pointing up and down, all around the middle of the stone.

"My anklet," he said. He looked down at it. The blue shells alternated in their arrangement, pointing up then down. "It's an old tradition. Maybe a thester tradition."

"Perhaps," Bo said, "the pearl divers were trying to appease the spirit of water so the pearls could be taken without consequence."

Jitz slapped Jaylis on the shoulder and laughed. "Maybe the heathens did have orders, *and you're in one.*"

"Fuck off," Jaylis said, yanking his shoulder from Jitz's hand.

Bo reached a hand out and touched a pair of interlocked triangles with a thick finger.

The night woods beyond the stone lit up with fireflies, dancing stars in the dark. Bo pulled his hand back and stepped away from the stone.

"That's," Jitz said, "strange."

"What?" Jaylis said.

Jitz huffed. "They're blue."

Jaylis nodded. They were blue. He'd only seen gold-lit fireflies along the Sketterun. The blinking lights floated toward them. They took steps backward until the river's slope was at their heels.

The fireflies swarmed the standing stone, flashing blue against the carvings. They began to land on the stone, crawling across the surface, gathering on the carved triangles. The shapes shimmered in blue.

"Fuck this," Jitz said. "Let's go down to the boat and get some sleep."

They turned and saw the oak across the water alight in blue fireflies.

"We have a lot of work tomorrow," Jitz said. "We'll need our rest."



Jitz tossed a net toward the near shore, on the opposite side from the boats passing along the river. The sun was high in the eastern sky, shining in a cloudless blue sky.

"Why *this* side," Bo said. "Wouldn't we catch more in the middle?"

Jitz groaned. "Yes, we would. But, we're not trying to catch more."

Bo nodded. "Ah, yes."

Jitz glanced at Jaylis as he played the net out. "If we pull any fish into the boat, we'll just have to toss them over before we make camp. Unless we want the boat to stink tomorrow morning."

Jaylis put a hand on Bo's shoulder. "We want it to look like we don't know what we're doing. So, when we draw nothing and end up moored on the shore again, it makes sense. Just three idiots from Royal Fork who don't know how to fish."

Jitz tied the net off and stepped over to a crate on the deck. He lifted the lid, looked inside, and let the lid drop shut. He had a grin Jaylis didn't like.

"What's in there?"

Jitz grinned again. He waved both of them over and lifted the lid. Inside were three short swords.

"In case we run into trouble."

Bo gasped. "That's illegal."

"Gods," Jaylis said. "If the sheriff's men see those, they'll run us through."

"If we don't run them through first," Jitz said. He was always trying to work out trouble. Usually, he was good at it.

"Have you ever handled a sword?" Jaylis said.

"No," Jitz said, "but neither have most of the sheriff's men."

"How did you even get those?" Bo said.

Jitz shrugged and closed the lid. "I have debts all over."

Jaylis sighed and looked past Jitz. The river was empty of boats.

"It's clear." He leaned down to scoop up an end of rope. "I should take this opportunity to go down."

"May Raien bless you," Bo said.

Jaylis shrugged, set a foot on the boat's gunnel, and launched himself into the Sketterun.

The water was cold and murkily green, very unlike the warm, clear waters of the coast. Blue-and-gold light rippled in the surface above. He pushed downward with his hands and feet. The bottom was only a few yards away, an expanse of mud and rocks. He glanced around, then thought of Bo's account. The chest was a third of the way across the river. The boat was too near the shore.

He swam under the shadow of the boat, rope in hand. More rocks and mud. There were some squared-off stones, remnants of the flooded town. Ancient homes, or maybe bits of the old sluices.

His lungs were burning. It had been too long since he last dived. Years. He scanned the riverbed, but saw nothing but the bare trunk of an old tree, half-sunk in the mud.

He turned, swam back under the boat, and kicked to the surface.

"What?" Jitz said.

Jaylis took several breaths, huffing water from his lips.

"Nothing," he said, "yet. Just a lot of mud and stones. And an old tree."

Bo touched his sparse beard. "An old tree? The confession mentioned a drowned tree."

Jaylis and Jitz glanced at each other.

"Yes, yes," Bo said. "The chest was beside a drowned tree!"

Jitz glanced over his shoulder.

"While you were down, a boat went upstream."

Jaylis shook his head then shrugged. "So?"

Jitz frowned in a way Jaylis did not like.

"They were laughing," Bo said.

"I yelled at them," Jitz said.

Jaylis groaned. "We're on a lease. And, we're supposed to look like idiots."

"I know," Jitz said.

"What did you yell?"

Jitz shook his head. Jaylis looked at Bo.

"He," Bo said. He looked at Jitz apologetically. "He yelled, *Fuck you Vissan bastards.*"

Jaylis shook his head and looked up at the black-and-white striped Royal Fork banner on the mast.

"They'll be sheriff's men at the locks."

"We have a lease," Jitz said.

"We have contraband on board," Jaylis said.

"We should throw them over," Bo said.

"No," Jitz said. "No. If we do get boarded, we might need to defend ourselves."

"No good if I'm diving," Jaylis said.

"No. I called in a lot of debts for those swords. And, I bought this fucking boat."

Bo put a hand on his shaking forehead.

"You just read some books. Where would we be with just a bunch of old stories?"

"Jitz," Jaylis said.

"And you," Jitz said. "What would you do with those old stories without this boat?"

Jaylis glared at him.

"Dive from the shore."

"Fuck off," Jitz said. "We're not throwing the swords over. If the sheriff's men come, I show them the lease and they go away. Let's just get this over with as fast as we can."

Jaylis was tired of treading water. He had his breath back. He looked up at Bo. The copyist was staring up the riverbank, at the standing stone. He glanced over his shoulder at the oak.

"Yes," Jaylis said. "The drowned tree looks to be about one-third the way across."

Bo looked him, nodding. Neither of them looked at Jitz.

"I'll be right back," he said and dived again.



Jaylis swam under the boat, peering down the slope of the riverbed, past the mud and stones he had seen before. He moved with purpose now, no longer scanning but heading straight for the drowned tree.

Then he saw it. A mud-caked trunk with stumps of limbs arcing this way and that. He kicked toward it and there it was on the other side, a wooden chest the size of a coffin, one end buried in the mud. It had iron bindings and a seal burned into its lid: a floral design with a large "K" in the middle.

He set his feet on the riverbed, at the end of the chest that was most exposed from the mud. Reaching down with his free hand, he swept the mud away from the corners, and slipped the rope around the bottom edge of the crate. Then, he swam to the far side of the crate, set his feet against the wood, and pulled a few feet of rope under it with both hands.

Jaylis could feel his lungs burning. He wasn't used to diving. He needed to finish up. Another boat was moving by on the river above, casting a shadow over the chest. He hoped it was just fishermen.

With a sweep of his free hand, he leaned forward to grab the slack of the rope leading back to the boat and, with both hands, yanked the loop down the crate to as close to the middle as he could against the resistance of the riverbed's mud.

He tied a quick, but secure, knot and traced the rope back, under the boat, to the surface.



As he pulled himself back onto the boat, Jitz and Bo were standing with their backs to him. Talking to soldiers who had boarded from the other boat.

"We have a lease from the sheriff of Vissan," Jitz said, pulling a strip of paper from his shirt.

"You," one of the soldiers pointed a short sword at Jaylis. He glanced at the tied-off net, then at the rope. "What were you doing? What's that line?"

"We, uh," Jaylis looked back into the water, trying to think fast. "Laid traps on the bottom, because the nets weren't working."

The soldier looking at the paper handed it back to Jitz. "Step back while we take a look around."

Jitz looked over his shoulder at Jaylis, his eyes darting once to the crate with the swords. Jaylis glanced back at the shore. "Swim for it," he was trying to say. Jitz got it, but shook his head. Bo just stood by the gunnel, shaking all over.

"Sirs," Jaylis said. The soldiers turned to him. "I'll go down and get the trap. You'll see."

"Stay right where you are," one of the soldiers said.

"I'll be just a moment," Jaylis said. He set his foot on the gunnel, blue shells spinning around his anklet, and launched himself over the edge.

"Stop!" the soldier shouted.

As the green water of the Sketterun surrounded him, he gritted his teeth. He was not going to lose that treasure because Jitz was an idiot. He swam for the chest. He passed under the shadows of the two boats, then kicked through the gold-and-blue shimmer from the river's surface.

Reaching the chest, where it was lodged in the mud against the dead tree, Jaylis undid the knot. He set his feet against the chest and tugged on the rope to free it from the mud underneath. It was caught on something, not moving.

There was a thumping noise from above. He looked up. The boats were rocking on the surface. The soldiers were moving Jitz and Bo to their boat.

Jaylis spread his legs and set his feet on the muddy riverbed on either side of the chest. He heard something hit the water, and looked up. Jitz was slowing sinking into the river, spilling red.

Jaylis yanked desperately at the rope. His feet sank into the mud. His right foot scraped the dead tree. He was suddenly enrapt by its shape, the proportion and shape of the stunted limbs reaching out from its trunk.

He tugged the rope, still staring at the fallen tree. Jitz came to rest in the mud beside him, blood trailing from his mouth into his mustache.

His lungs were starting to burn. He'd spent too much time on the decks of fishing boats. He'd abandoned his diving. He'd betrayed his anklet, his order, his tie to ancient Thesternesse. He could no longer see the anklet in the mud of the riverbed.

He pulled hard. The rope moved sideways, slacking in his right hand and tugging his left. He tugged with his right hand and the rope moved again. He set his left hand alongside his right and pulled the rope free of the chest. He tossed the rope to the waters. The sheriff's men would never have the chest now.

There was another sound from above and he looked up. Beausond's limp body floated on the surface, buoyed by his bulk and spilling red into the river through his green robes. Jaylis felt air bubble out of his mouth. He needed to swim for shore, escape, and come back later for the chest.

He kicked away from the riverbed. His left foot came free from the mud. His right foot was caught.

He glanced at the lifeless face of Jitz, lying in the drowned mud. He looked down at his right foot, buried in mud next to the tree. The tree with stunted limbs bowing from its trunk in smooth arcs. Another blue oak. A thester tree, drowned in the riverbed of the Sketterun.

He set one hand on the tree, the other on the chest. He yanked desperately at his foot, but the anklet was caught on something under the mud. The back-and-forth arrangement of blue shells from his pearl-diving days, a life he had betrayed with his thieving, a life he had betrayed by fishing the river from on deck.

Jaylis shoved his hand into the mud next to his leg. His fingertips scraped against a stunted limb. His anklet was wrapped around it. He glanced at Jitz's blank, open eyes. He looked up at Beausond, floating in a halo of his own blood. His chest was pulsing with pain. He pushed his fingers through the mud, down the stunt limb, but he could not find the end of it.

Jaylis yanked at his foot, eyes fixed on the river's surface. Air was there in the gold-and-blue. Air and life.

The red halo of blood around the dead copyist faded into the blue of the sky above the river. The shadows of the boats faded, too. Jaylis put both hands on the drowned blue oak and pushed, scraping his ankle on the ring of shells. It wouldn't give. The anklet would not break. He wrapped his arms around the tree.

"I'm sorry," he thought. "I'm sorry I stole. I'm sorry I betrayed my calling."

The entire world turned blue and Jaylis faded into it.

THE END