

THEY EAT THEIR OWN

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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SYLANDAIR



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The sun, low in the east, glinted off the rippled surface of Lover's Sound, its sleepy light cutting through the *Ipesia's* panoramic glass walls and sending glowfly flares dancing over the gaming deck's polished appointments. A glint flitted across the dry eye of Duke Sylandair Imythedralin, bringing him around to morning after yet another night spent trading barb and wager at the lyntyyl table. He rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger for a moment then slid on wire-rimmed sunshades—a meager guard against the crouching dawn.

Through two sunrises and more than thirty rounds, Syl he had attempted to defeat Flark, owner of myriad buildings across Dockhaven's Upper and Lower Rabbles, including the Heap, the cockeyed structure Syl and Aliara called home. After a winter of annoying and double-crossing Syl, Flark had attacked again days before the Sowers Festival began. The nasty old bung had petitioned the City Council to raze the Heap, attempting to force Syl, the building's last holdout, to accept his latest bid. Rather than capitulate, Syl had determined to put Flark so deeply in his debt that forfeiting the Heap's deed would be preferable. Thus far, neither had made much progress toward their respective goals.

As he was in business, Flark was an inscrutable and adept lyntyyl strategist—though he seemed to possess almost no discernable

skill in reading the subtleties of his fellow players. Despite this shortcoming, the pile of silver bars and assorted coins in front of the surly land baron totaled marginally less than Syl's own. With three days of the Festival already behind him, Syl needed to change his strategy or face the eventuality of losing his and Aliara's home.

He scanned the barge's gaming deck in search of her, wondering what his mate might be doing to amuse herself at this carnival of hedonistic delights while he sat here treading water. Aliara was not fond of social events, and after her near death at a fete last autumn, he had been pleasantly surprised when she'd assented to join him aboard the *Ipesia* for Mintryl Marthoth's annual new-year's celebration. While Syl had attended more often than not since becoming Duke of Isay, this was only the second time Aliara had joined him.

"Shall we take a break after this round?" Syl asked the other players at the table, their faces homely with too much drink and too little sleep. "I believe we all could do with a meal and a wash."

No one spoke, though one or two heads nodded.

Syl flicked lacquered fingertips at the aged and bespectacled dealer, Darwin, indicating the game should continue. Darwin dropped the master die in its cup and, with a sigh, shook it as though it held the weight of a thousand dice.

Darwin gave the players a slow blink and muttered, "Lyntyyl table one. Round thirty-four. Hand six."

He flipped the cup on end. The die clattered briefly before quieting, its result hidden beneath the cup pinned in place by the dealer's frail, nut-brown hand. With a long, hooked stick, Darwin shifted the small, silver statuette of a foppish badger into position in front of Syl, quickly followed by the player's dice.

Syl rattled the trio of tens in his leather cup and tossed them onto the red felt. He selected the two and nine and collected eleven cards from Darwin. It was a good hand. With the remainder from the last, he held enough cards to work with but not so many as to

be unwieldy.

Syl slid the dice to Daisy, a portly female puka and Flark's one-time wife, who wore a dress so green it almost made her skin seem blue in comparison. She rattled the dice a single time in her cup, dashed them onto the table and stood on her chair for a better view of the result.

"Imt's eyes," she cursed under her breath before calling for her cards.

Flark chuckled with bitter amusement—as he did each time Daisy botched her efforts. She repaid in kind when he failed. Their marriage had been divested long enough past that the pair could endure being in the same room, but not so long that they had given up nattering at one another.

"I'll take seven," she told Darwin.

"You never were good at lyntyyl," Flark muttered.

Daisy made a face as though she might attempt to spit across the table at him.

"It's not a game for women," the old puka said, raising his voice. "Am I right, Duke?"

Syl's brows shot up. He had not expected to be enlisted as arbiter in their acerbic banter. "I hold no such belief, Mister Flark. Lyntyyl relies so heavily on luck that I fear personal attributes have little to do with the outcome."

Flark snorted and chewed absently on something, possibly his own tongue.

With a firm nod at Flark and a pat on the arm for Syl, Daisy settled back into her seat and studied her new cards, fiddling with the namesake sateen flower paradoxically affixed to her hairless scalp. Though the adornment made her no more appealing, Syl had found its presence useful; she fidgeted with the piece when displeased with her draw.

Tired of waiting for Daisy to cede the dice, Idra Carsuure, Dockhaven's mayor and a chivori like Syl, snatched the tens and

dribbled them into her monogrammed cup.

“Terrible, this rash of raids on inbound freighters of late, would you all agree?” Syl asked.

Idra gave him a brief, dark glance as she shook the cup roundly. Syl held his tongue until she was about to loose the dice.

“Perhaps one day we will see that picket fleet of yours, Idra,” he said, hint of venom in his voice.

She flinched, the cup tumbling from her hand, the dice rolling limply away. The cup banged into the polished oak box at table’s center, the game’s hold and home to all the silver and platinum players supplied as wagers.

“Surely, with such a fleet you could prevent ships being lost just over the horizon,” Syl added, smiling pleasantly.

“The picket ships have been delayed due to a shortfall on the funding,” Idra’s angry gaze pinned Syl. “I’m fairly certain you know that, Imythedralin.”

“That is unfortunate. I suppose you will need to employ a mathematician to assist in learning where the city’s loss was incurred,” Syl said, relishing the jab.

The nostrils of her round-tipped nose flared in a way only she could make lovely. “Why don’t *you* assist, Imythedralin? I’m sure you can afford to make a donation for the good of our city. After all, you do have the resources lying about.” Idra’s voice was as cold as the water in the Sound. Her eyes flicked to the dice, jaw muscles clenching and releasing beneath her fog-grey skin.

She had been at the table almost as long as Flark. Syl had fed her a steady stream of caba and themot—down then up again—the combination keeping her on edge as intended.

“I should be glad to demonstrate my civic pride in such a way,” Syl said. “However, most of my resources—as you put it—are currently committed to improving the desalinization plant.”

“*Pfft.* The city’s water costs are twice what they were before you took control.”

Syl lay his cards face-down on the table and stared at her soberly. “Really, Idra, you cannot expect me to uphold the rates in a contract signed more than two decades ago by people who now are dead.” He paused to sip his caba and resume his cards. “Besides, the additional monies go toward removal of the ruined portions of the plant...and restoration of the Promenade.”

The effect was satisfactory. Idra’s eyes went wide. Her jaw clenched. This was the first Syl had mentioned the project, which would restore the long-neglected boardwalk and public green. As Mayor, Idra believed herself privy to everything going on in the city.

“Mayor,” the dealer said, “It’s your draw.”

“I’ll take four,” she snapped.

Too few cards to play a decent hand. A corner of Syl’s mouth quirked. Her stake had dwindled to the point where he could either force her to pass or drive her out of the game this hand.

Idra leaned back in her chair, pawed her cards with samite-gloved hands, and heaved a sigh. Flark’s reaction was nearly instantaneous. His glistening eyes shifted to her augmented bosom and he unconsciously reached for his belly. After a moment’s massage, the puka came abruptly out of his trance.

“Vesven!” Flark prodded his karju bodyguard with the polished walking stick he kept hanging from the table’s edge. “Dice!”

Vesven Dobencourt pushed himself away from the pillar he’d reclined on for hours and placed the dice in front of Flark. It was a humiliating role for someone from such a highly placed family.

The dour puka patted the bedraggled suede charm bag lying on the table beside his mound of silver and ran the three dice between his palms like a baker forming stick-bread.

“What Idra suggests may be a good opportunity for you, Mister Flark, given your interest in joining the shipping trade,” Syl said, watching for reaction from behind his dark lenses. Flark offered none. “Being the one to bring a picket fleet to Dockhaven would most definitely win you the admiration of the Council and your new

peers in the shippers association.”

Flark had shared this aspiration during one of their impromptu kisselball games at Syl’s penthouse. It was a pursuit Syl had supported earnestly and had assisted in planning. It was a pity the puka had not honored their agreement—one more insult stacked between them.

“I’ve reconsidered, Duke. An opportunity to negotiate better fees for my material imports will come along soon enough.” Flark rolled the dice and pointed a stubby finger at the dealer. “Gimme twelve.”

Marthoth’s fleet administrator, Javit, huffed like a kartah bull about to charge. “You’re overestimating Karna’s value.”

Javit was half-again Syl’s height and easily three times his weight. With four legs and thick skin like living stone, Javit took up a great deal of space and required an entirely different set of furniture when visiting Syl’s penthouse. A species of prodigious size and strength, the rhochrot had only one gender and a rather humdrum reproductive process, something Syl found both intriguing and pitiable. When they’d appeared on Ismae during the War of Whispers two millennia ago, the rhochrot had been hailed as saviors, turning the war in the Duin’s favor. After the campaigns had ended, the other species were not entirely sure how to assimilate or even properly address them. When the morphology of adapting the rhochrot’s complex collection of pronouns to Plainspeak proved too much for most, the species was deemed unilaterally female, owing to their ability to bear children.

“You both should consider sponsoring the picket fleet. Were you to do so, I’d be sure you received special consideration from my employer.” As she rolled the dice, Javit’s dark eyes flicked to Syl before locking on Flark. “You may find yourselves needing it.”

“A fine suggestion, Javit,” Syl said. “I will discuss it with Mintryl when we dine later.”

From orbits settled so far apart they were almost on the sides of his head, Flark’s enormous brown eyes rolled toward Syl. His

compost-colored lips turned down in a frown.

“Perhaps,” Syl continued, “we can form a combine of interested parties to make up Idra’s shortfall.”

Idra’s face pinched, an unflattering aspect on such a lovely façade. Syl offered her a smile.

Darvin dragged the forgotten dice to the sharp-faced chivori man seated between Flark and Javit. Syl could only recall that one’s surname: Menelow. The appellation was as common as cats among phao, those chivori not hailing from Chiva’vastezz or Eita. Other than dark purple eyes—bloodshot and ringed sickly blue from the extended play—and an ability to slouch stiffly as though relaxing in the slightest would cause him to unravel, Menelow was unremarkable. He had joined the game after sundown the night before and was now down to a pittance. Every hand as badger, he bet two silver bars and ended with a few cards. Only fourteen cards now remained in his draw deck. Soon his chair would be empty, and Syl would have one less distraction.

Menelow snatched the trio of player dice from the felt and rattled them slowly in his own cup, vinegar gaze passing over his opponents. He cast them, the dealer read the roll, and Menelow called for his draw. He snatched his cards from the table and held them strangely close to his face as if smelling them, a behavior he indulged in when displeased.

Play passed to Javit, Syl’s attention with it.

“I read the *Nimomyne* was the most recent victim of these raiders,” Syl said. “A fine ship, I’m told. Or at least it was.”

“It still may be if we can get it off the reef.” Javit accepted her draw from the dealer with a nod. “It’s Tokimer’s grace that the wreckers have no interest. It’s too big and the raiders didn’t leave anything on board that doesn’t require a crane to offload. I scheduled Ruutana Salvage to start on the work after the Festival. Meanwhile, we’re paying a half-dozen Abog to live aboard...for all those mercs are worth.”

“Do it quick,” Flark said. “I need those materials by the beginning of Celebar at latest. I’m losing a pile of silver waiting on you.”

Syl snorted at the bung’s audacity.

“He should have had more than one escort.” Flark smirked at Javit. “If he wanted the raider clans to take him seriously, Marthoth should join the Billidoc Coalition of Traders.”

“And lose half his coin to dues?” Javit snorted.

“My clerk at the packet office said the *Nimomyne* was also carrying artifacts out of Tehtaemah,” Syl said, “ones from the dig site most recently purported to be Vosharilim. I cannot help but imagine the value of the antiquities aboard. A pity they should be lost to the undermarket...assuming that is where they landed, of course.” Behind his dark lenses, Syl’s long eyes slid toward Idra, who looked anywhere but at him. “Regardless, I am certain it will be a boon to *someone’s* collection.”

The dealer lifted the cup, revealing the master die’s roll. “Value is seven,” Darwin said. “Badger sets blind post.”

Syl pushed a stack of silver toward the hold.

“The badger bets twenty bars,” the dealer said without enthusiasm.

Idra and Menelow shared a groan. He passed while she met Syl’s wager—barely. Daisy, Flark, and Javit matched the amount without hesitation.

“Your stacks,” Darwin said.

In turn, the players laid out their stacks, groups of cards whose combined value equaled the master die’s, whether by addition or subtraction. Syl played his stacks, leaving two uncooperative cards for the next hand, and eyed the other players. Idra sorted and re-sorted her cards in a way that signaled dissatisfaction. Daisy, fiddling with her flower, appeared equally annoyed. Menelow waved a steward over. Javit crouched on her hassock in calm readiness, all four legs tucked beneath her. Flark was a mask of blandness. He didn’t twitch. He didn’t snuffle. He barely seemed to breathe.

When their stacks were laid, each held a remainder; play would advance to another hand. Without a winner, the round continued, the burgeoning hold's prize unclaimed.

Everyone stretched and yawned while Darvin prepared for the next hand. Syl drew an amethyst glass vial from his waistcoat pocket, tapped themot onto the side of his hand and snorted the pale-yellow dust. His head buzzed for a moment like the hives behind Bretad's Sweet Shop before the stimulant settled in. Puka farspeakers used the drug to extend the range of their telepathic skills; karju and chivori used it recreationally.

The group rolled for badger. Menelow won. It would be a dull hand with that one at the helm.

"Lyntyyl table one. Round thirty-four. Hand seven," the dealer called. With his customary sluggishness, Darvin tumbled the master die in the cup and turned it over, value hidden.

Syl waited until the draw dice reached Idra before continuing his campaign of annoyance. "Idra, I was told you were recently gifted with a new piece of art for your collection."

This time she held onto the cup, though the dice scattered. "What are you babbling about, Imythedralin?"

"Perhaps I was misinformed," Syl said, frowning elegantly. "Councilor Pitta Dobencourt sent one of her husbands over last quartern—I can't remember his name, the brutish one."

"Ugh, you mean Grehv."

"Yes, I believe that was his name. He said you were the recipient of a genuine Jetsam."

Her eyes snapped from the dice to Syl. "You call that art? Ha! That hack vandalized city property!"

Flark snorted. Menelow cleared his throat. Daisy watched with silent amusement while Javit made a conspicuous effort to ignore the conversation.

"Ah, yes, Grehv said it was found at the bank. What did it do?" Syl asked, tapping his lower lip in a pantomime of concentration.

“Jetsam’s works always do...something. Remember that sinister, palsied herd of windup kartah outside Splar’s Meat Market a few years back?”

“Hers was hanging off the bank’s gate,” Flark said. He paused, spiteful chuckle threatening to become a coughing fit. “When the wind blew, our darling mayor moved up and down on the gate. Looked like she was sneaking out, bag’a Calla’s over her shoulder.”

Menelow threw his pointy head back and laughed. It was the most animated he’d been. The others joined in, unable to maintain the illusion of ignorance any longer.

“It was atrocious.” Idra flipped her hair and pretended to study her cards. “Looked nothing like me.”

“Mayor Carsuure,” Darvin said softly, “it’s your draw.”

“Nine,” Idra snapped. “Give me nine.”

Draws complete, Menelow set the wager at two silver bars, as expected. His eyebrows, as pointy as his nose and chin, jittered with anxiety while Flark moved so little he might have been dead. Daisy rocked in her seat, humming a nonsensical melody. Javit counted and re-counted the loops dangling from her septum. Idra toyed with a large firestar pendant at her neck, eyes flitting from Syl’s amethyst vial to her pile of coins, which had diminished to near nothing.

“A lovely necklace, Idra.” Syl slid the themot across the felt toward her.

The skin tightened around Idra’s eyes. She gave him her most politic smile before tapping the drug onto the bare skin of her wrist and inhaling. She passed the vial to Flark, as had become the table’s custom, a little jab at Syl’s expense shared between them. Unless taken by a farspeaker, themot had almost no effect on pukas. By nature, their species could go sleepless for days before succumbing to exhaustion. Flark was simply enjoying wasting what was Syl’s.

Syl flicked a pair of bars into the hold and elbowed Daisy. “The jewel is stunning around her delicate neck, do you agree?”

Daisy tossed her bars in the hold and glanced at the firestar

pendant. “If you’re desperate for everyone to stare at your bubs, then sure, it’s pretty.”

Idra released an offended huff.

Syl chuckled. “You are a delight. Daisy, I cannot fathom why Mister Flark released you from his grasp.”

Daisy giggled. Flark muttered an oath and spat on the floor.

As the wager moved to Idra, she flagged the closest floor manager, who hurried over. The pair whispered heatedly for a moment then Idra removed her necklace and laid it in his palm.

Syl caught the floor manager’s wrist as he passed. “Allow me to purchase the lady’s marker.”

“Of course, Duke Imythedralin.” He bent toward Syl’s ear and lowered his voice discreetly. “The piece is not particularly valuable. We offered twenty Callas.”

“A single silver bar? Pitiful,” Syl said. He slipped the necklace into his pocket and passed five bars of his boodle to Idra, far more than the jewel was worth. The silver would be his again soon enough.

She took the bars without comment.

Somewhere in her flighty mind, Idra believed Syl’s inheritance should have remained in her keeping. He’d surprised her last year when he had finally claimed the funds held in trust by the city since the purported death of his one-time master and tormentor, Orono. Idra had spent a substantial portion—some on the city’s picket ship project, but much on her personal whims—and repaying him had left her deeply and dangerously in debt. Taunting her with that knowledge was a pleasure Syl could not forgo.

Play moved on and Syl lost himself in strategy and calculation, startled when Aliara materialized from the milling crowd and slipped onto his knee.

“I’m bored,” she announced.

Syl held his focus for another beat before he closed the fan of cards and shifted his attention to his mate. “A lovely surprise to see you, Pet.”

She sighed theatrically. “It’s dull this year.”

Syl could not stop the bark of amusement. Marthoth offered his guests every entertainment they might desire: the finest collection of gaming tables in the Middle Seas, live performances both musical and theatrical, restaurants manned by Dockhaven’s finest chefs, and a space in which all manner of sexual dalliances could be enjoyed. Guests were even treated to a nightly fireworks display, viewed from the barge’s panoramic glass windows or atop the open-air upper deck, where a band played, revelers danced, and liquor poured like the coming spring rains.

That Aliara found it difficult to stay entertained here had once mystified Syl. He now understood her restlessness would not be cured by a frolic such as this; her vocation provided far more gratification.

“There is much to do here.” He slid fingers beneath his sunshades to rub his sore, gritty eyes. Even with the protective lenses, the growing morning agitated them. “I believe I heard something about an impending performance in the lounge.”

“Ended. Pretentious. That puppet show at your salon was better.”

Flark snorted, and Aliara’s gaze flitted over to him. She didn’t care for the bung, often vanishing during his visits instead of enduring the old puka’s leers.

Most pukas Syl had known were fabulously modest and blushed deep pine when confronted with anything remotely sexual. In a species that tended to seek out strong leadership, those rare pukas who fit that role rose quickly and often discarded such working-class trappings. Like Flark and Daisy, they wore bejeweled rings, had mouths worse than any karju bilge rat, and enjoyed activities more perverse than an inbred chivori. Wealth and influence, Syl had decided, negated a puka’s natural prudery.

Aliara’s lip twitched in a way Syl recognized as a calculating smile. She leaned into him and crossed her long legs, giving Flark a better

view—and significant distraction from the game. Eyes pegged on her, the old puka relaxed back into his chair and rubbed his dome-like belly.

“Good to know. I shall invite the troupe to return another time.” Syl played along with Aliara’s diversion, palming one of her petite breasts, reconstructed by Master Enan Ranaran only months ago, following the tussle with the thing Orono had become. The surgeon had done magnificent work here and on the organs beneath. The filmy periwinkle piece Aliara wore barely veiled the regrown bub and its mate. “Perhaps engage someone interesting in conversation?”

Flark shifted. The rubbing turned briefly to patting.

“Nobody here is interesting,” Aliara said.

Idra made a sound somewhere between cough and growl.

Syl ran fingers across Aliara’s cropped, black hair. Though it had grown while she was bed-ridden, the back and sides were again rigidly short. Only the extra length on top evinced the long winter in bed.

“Why don’t you play a game?” Syl gestured toward the cordoned-off area near the band. “You would do well at darts.”

Aliara shrugged, lower lip jutting out in a mockery of a pout. Syl bit back a laugh. Her attempts at coquettishness were rare and delightful, though they reminded him more of Aliara as a child than as a lover. When being coy had no effect on Syl, she twirled the dark tail of his hair with one hand and slid the other between them, into his lap.

“Let’s leave,” she whispered, fingers making her intention clear, “and visit the southern Nors.”

Flark’s cards sagged so low that the table at large could read their values. His free hand continued its slow, unsavory massage of his belly while his rheumy eyes crawled over Aliara. Syl usually enjoyed others’ appreciation of his mate, but this left even him queasy.

“I am in the middle of a round, Pet. I doubt these lovely people would appreciate my leaving with so many of their Callas.” Syl

gestured around the table. “After the Festival I will book us passage to Elnor. Sea or air, your choice.”

Aliara made a sound of disappointed indignation.

“Badger’s stack,” the dealer announced.

Menelow stopped sniffing his cards and busied himself with stacking.

“Very well,” Syl said. “Perhaps you should do something you’ve been talking about since you rose from your sick bed?”

Aliara rolled her sloe eyes and groaned. “I visited *that* room.”

Flark jerked forward as though struck.

Syl chuckled. “No, not that, Pet.”

The dealer cleared his throat. “Duke Imythedralin, it’s your stack.”

“Yes, of course. Apologies.”

Syl stretched past Aliara and stacked his cards, one remaining in his hand. Daisy barely allowed him to finish before building her own stacks.

“Perhaps you could go back to work,” Syl told Aliara.

She cocked her head and stared into the space over his shoulder for a long moment. Her hand withdrew from his lap and she slid away, fading into the crowd. With regret, Syl watched the sway of her slim hips as she disappeared amongst the merrymakers.

Flark’s braying, nasal laugh disturbed Syl’s musings. “See, you old goat, just like I told you, you can’t play lyntyyl worth a plop.”

Daisy grabbed Idra’s half-full cocktail and hurled it at her former spouse. The glass sailed past Flark’s ear and bounced off Vesven’s stomach, splashing his white shirt with dark red caba.

Flark’s laugh built. “Can’t even aim.”

“For our children’s sake,” Daisy flopped back into her seat, her enormous eyes narrowed to slits, “I hope you die before you squirt an heir into your new trull’s belly.”

Thank you for reading

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