

READBEAST

BEASTIALITY STORIES



"Roscoe! Cut it out!" Winston hurled a heavy clam shell at his blissfully writhing borzoi dog, missed, and searched vainly for another. No rocks nearby, dammit. Just sand, and shells, and sun-bleached plastic trash. And dead things. Why does a deserted beach always have dead things lying on it? Why can't they go die somewhere else? Winston Thomas the third owned many fine, high class beach properties—not like this sun scorched strand of Hell-hot nothingness—and even those meticulously maintained sand strips would often cough forth the odd rancid jellyfish or putrified herring. Roscoe found them all, without exception, and rolled on them—spoiled his elegant silky coat every time.

"Roscoe! Heel! Get your worthless ass back here, you revolting son of a bitch!"

Sadly Roscoe brought his ass back, as ordered, and placed it on the sand by his master's feet. Tsarina's Sweet Seducer's Roscoe was indeed a son of a bitch, as anyone could see, but he was far from worthless. Ten thousand dollars he had cost as an untried puppy—pick of the litter, of course—but now he'd bring far more if he were for sale, which he was not. Winston did not readily part with things that were his.

"Damn!" The human threw an idle kick at Roscoe, who dodged him neatly, and hurled another clam shell at the calm, hot, azure-blue waters before him. Fucking endless fucking gorgeous blue ocean with its fucking tidy little white breakers. Land not far off—he could clearly see the low brown rise of it—but the pirates had recommended he not try swimming for it. Cynjinn Island was haunted, yes—and cursed!—but the shallow sea around was more dangerous still. It held sharks, they said, and tricky riptide currents, but mostly sharks. Many sharks, they insisted, all quite vicious, and no water or human habitations anyway, on the other side. How could he have been so trusting? Sail off for a simple Indian Ocean pleasure cruise and his crew up and steals his fucking yacht from him! His favorite! The one with the extra large heliport on top. Took the helicopter too, of course, and his girlfriend, except she turned out to be one of them—how did she manage to snag those damn keycodes from him, anyway? Only Winston and his man James were supposed to know them—and he would definitely have to share a word with James about his choice of men for this voyage! Whatever happened to his old crew, anyway?—took everything but his damn useless dog, and left him here on this desolate sandbar of an island until their Somalian friends could fetch him for ransom. James and the office team would quickly resolve any money problems, of course, so he was in little real danger, but this was the twenty first century, dammit! Mutiny and piracy had no place in the modern world, and most definitely not in Winston's busy schedule!

Winston looked around for Roscoe so he could kick him again, but the brainless mutt was out of reach. He was digging now, scrabbling happily at some bit of trash just beneath the sand's surface. How could that dog remain so fucking cheerful? Couldn't he understand the magnitude of their calamity? Of course he couldn't. He was just a dog.

Winston wandered closer to the site of Roscoe's excavation. The wretched cur had found a bottle of some sort, and was licking it eagerly. Disgusting. Had the creature no shame at all? Winston moved closer. Something about that bottle . . . very old, it seemed—slime fouled, and dotted with barnacles and—Winston snatched the thing from between Roscoe's forepaws and held it up for closer examination. Funny how it almost seemed to be vibrating in his hands. No, no, must be his hands that were trembling, responding to his angry thoughts of a moment ago. He rubbed firmly on the bottle's fat-bellied side, exposing more detail, and . . . were those carvings on it? Yes! Carvings! Symbols, and some kind of clawed, toothy thing and—the bottle wasn't even made of glass. It was stone. Greenish, translucent stone, with a tight stopper of the same material. Jade? Damn thing was priceless, like as not. Best to hide it now and come back later after—what's that?

The daft thing really was vibrating! Getting stronger, too! Was it a bomb, maybe? Winston set the bottle down and backed carefully away while Roscoe rushed back to reclaim his prize. At least his body might stop some of the shrapnel, if—a loud pop made Winston twitch and almost fall over, and then the stopper was out, black smoke boiling forth from the bottle's neck. Smoke bomb? Gas? Or—the smoke was billowing upwards, pulling itself together in an uncanny, breeze-defying sort of way—no, no, no, this was just too cliché! Mutiny, marooning, and now a fucking genie in a bottle? He was hallucinating for sure! Too much hot tropical sun on the old noggin, no doubt. Best to trot back to the shade tent and drink some of the nice wet water the nice pirates left behind.

Winston did not trot back to the tent. He just stood there, slack jawed as the smoke coalesced into a . . . dog?

Yes, a dog, more or less. Three headed and three tailed, true, but otherwise quite doglike in a giant terrifying genie sort of way. The genie shook itself, smiled a three-headed, extravagantly toothy smile, and proclaimed from the leftmost head, "Well hello! A new guest, are you? Yes! A jade-bottle-guest! And a fine, handsome one at that. Many a long year has passed since a visitor of your quality has graced my weary eyes. How may I be of service to you? Bound I am to this desolate shore, but I am not without resources. Three wishes I must grant, if you dare to take them. Please, now—tell me what boons you crave!"

"Uh . . . yes . . . uh . . . for starters I want to see the cold, dead faces of—no! I wish for eternal youth and health, and—" The genie was not listening. All three heads were focussed intently on Winston's dog, Roscoe. This was intolerable! Folks listened when Winston Thomas the third chose to speak! Always! Except today, it seemed. Not doing so well today.

The genie nodded its—his—three shaggy heads. "Ahh, yes!" commented the center one, "an excellent choice! Safe, practical, and to the point."

The sand before Roscoe's nose shimmered, and stirred, and brought forth a steaming golden platter of spiced lamb with couscous. Roscoe leaned forward eagerly for the feast, but Winston rushed forward and struck his head aside. "No! Don't eat that! You have to—"

Winston froze, transfixed. Really transfixed; couldn't move a muscle. The three headed dog was paying attention to him now. It was not a pleasant feeling.

"Master says he's sorry you're so angry with him," remarked the rightmost maw. "He wishes he could make you happy somehow. My, my—such a vague, unconsidered command! I'll have to think a bit to determine what he really meant by that." Six yellow eyes bored deep into Winston's two terrified gray ones. The creature was massive, terrifying . . . well hung. Well, he was, dammit. Winston felt no attraction whatsoever to other males—and certainly not to male dogs!—but a fact is a fact. He tried to turn his head away but the genie's paralysis prevented even that. Helplessly he observed the six eyes narrow in calculation, and the three heads nod in satisfaction at a plan well chosen. Winston quailed in terror, then, and struggled frantically to escape, but to no avail. He grew dizzy, and weak, and as the world around him unraveled his last thoughts were of blazing yellow eyes—how many were there, anyway?—and a low, three-throated rumble of supernatural laughter.

The world was still hot and bright and sandy when Winston once more grew aware of it. Brighter and hotter than ever! Winston stretched, and yawned, and . . . where was the genie? There was a genie . . . wasn't there? Massive black three headed monster, yes? Gone now, it appeared, if it was ever here at all. Nothing around him now but sand and sun . . . and Roscoe, of course . . . and a half-eaten platter of spiced lamb with couscous. Golden platter, exquisite classical workmanship, most likely quite valuable if not a fake. Winston noticed such things. So—a part of his hallucination was

real, anyway! Why was Roscoe looking at him like that? He couldn't still be hungry after all the lamb he ate! Nervously Winston shrugged, and shifted, and stood up—or tried to. What was the matter with his legs? They were all crooked and thin and . . . and furry? And what was that huge tan thing where his nose should be? Was it a . . . a dog muzzle? Winston gasped, and cried out in terror, and the sound came back to him as an agonized howl. He flailed four thin, elegant, cream colored dog legs in the air, failed entirely to gain control of them, and collapsed into a quivering huddle on the hot sand. Roscoe stepped quickly forward, trying to comfort, and that did help. Quite a lot, actually. He smelled so virile and strong! Masterful. How was it Winston had never noticed that before?

Roscoe snuffled forward eagerly, concentrating his attention on Winston's rear end as dogs are wont to do. His nose felt wonderful, poking around there, and his tongue—what was Roscoe doing with his tongue? A tingle of unlooked for pleasure ran up Winston's spine, and his tail—yes, he had a tail now too, it appeared—and his tail snaked eagerly to one side, offering easier access to parts below.

"Roscoe! Stop that!" Winston scolded, but only yelps and squeaky whines escaped his throat. He scrabbled sideways in embarrassment, tried once more to gain his feet, and succeeded. This was more like it! Such a helpless feeling to lie all huddled on the ground like that. When trouble threatens one must be on one's toes, ready to run like the wind, and—where had that thought come from? Winston didn't run from trouble! He commanded his people to deal with it.

Never mind about that. Winston was standing now, and his four legged balance was growing rapidly more secure. How had he ever managed on just two? Roscoe was investigating his hindquarters again and Winston whipped around, jerking them out of reach. He growled low and bared his teeth, just a bit, and Roscoe backed off with a hurt look on his face. Oh! Winston hadn't intended to be quite so rough on the guy. Roscoe meant well, and he was just a dog, after all. Didn't know any better. Winston stepped forward and lick-kissed the big lunk's cheek—hold on, what was that I just did?—and Roscoe instantly bounded back to resume his interrupted work.

Winston gasped again, told himself to skitter away, didn't quite get around to it. Once again his tail had thrown itself gleefully to one side, and the new standing position was giving Roscoe's tongue better access than ever. Winston's testicles were no strangers to the caress of a lover's tongue, but the pleasure had never been close to this! Bemusedly Winston sighed, squared his legs, and let Roscoe continue his eager work. This was all some strange dream, perhaps. That would explain a lot! He must be certain to remember every detail of it when he woke up.

Roscoe's licking was growing faster, and more urgent, and the pleasure in Winston's hindquarters ever stronger. Really, it was hard to think of anything else! Abruptly the licking stopped, and Winston breathed a soft whine of disappointment. Oh, well. It had been nice, but—

Roscoe's weight settled gently down upon Winston's back, his forelegs snaking confidently around his flanks. Roscoe was an experienced sire, gentle and smooth and skillful, and even in this crazy dream he knew just what to do. Ah, but the poor dear had made an embarrassing mistake, this time. Even a dream-dog Winston could not satisfy that urge! Roscoe did seem rather set on the idea, though, and his probing thrusts were all directed quite low—comfortably clear of Winston's anus. Clear of where his anus ought to be, anyway. Hadn't quite had the opportunity to check things out back there yet . . . but no matter. The silly dog's embrace was remarkably . . . ah . . . pleasant. Soon he would discover his mistake, but until then it was simpler to just let him—
Oh!

Winston sat down, hastily, then flopped over and twisted 'round to investigate his genitals for the first time. Her genitals. Winston was a dog in this dream—kind of hard to deny that observation!—but she was not the sort of dog she had supposed. Not the hint of a testicle nor rumor of penis sheathe could be found between those lanky hind legs—only the v-shaped, darkly swollen

vulva of an estrus bitch. There were nipples down there too; on the belly and chest, that is. Lots of nipples. Winston did not trouble to count them.

No! Definitely time to wake up, now. Winston grimaced, and concentrated on moving—something. Anything! Anything real, that is—not those damn twitching legs and tail! And . . . the rest.

Not working. Winston had always been able to break away from bad dreams in the past! Once they proved themselves to be merely dreams, that is. Roscoe sensed Winston's distress and tried to comfort her again, leaving the hind parts unmolested and limiting himself to her fetchingly fanged borzoi-bitch muzzle and weebegone but seductively attractive ears.

Winston thrashed to her feet and ran, then. Ran like the wind. What else was there to do? Roscoe ran with her, of course. No way was he going to leave his entrancing new companion behind!

It was the heat that forced Winston to stop, not any hint of tiredness. Strange, how suddenly it came on! Already she was panting heavily, but it didn't seem to be working anymore. She grew light headed, frantic—the need for coolness overwhelming all other considerations. A breaking wave caught her eye and she veered off, plunging herself gratefully into the foaming white water.

Ah! This was more like it! The water was very warm, but still cool enough to draw the killing heat out from her. Winston bit gleefully at the churning foam, dipped her head briefly beneath it, bit again. Roscoe was beside her now and she bit him too, but not hard. He mock-bit back, ecstatically, then threw his greater weight on top of her, forcing her under. Damn! Water rushed stinging up Winston's nose and she snapped out in annoyance, but failed to connect. Roscoe was gone when she rose sputtering to surface. No, there he was! High up on the beach already—prancing out a gleeful challenge to renew their race.

Winston launched herself passionately in pursuit, and she won the race this time . . . race? Just when did this turn into a race? I never meant to . . . caught him far too easily. Found herself mounted again in short order. "Sneaky son of a bitch!" Winston muttered to herself, and prepared to wiggle free. In a minute. Roscoe's salty-wet body was way off to one side, and no threat for now. Didn't he know any better? She twisted sideways, slightly, trying to help him with his alignment. That quick touch from his previous mating attempt had been kind of . . . exciting . . . and it was all just a dream, after all. Maybe she could get him to do it again. Just a touch, of course. She stood patiently for a time, leaning helpfully in the right direction, and the dimwit still wasn't getting it. She twisted further, backed up a bit, and Roscoe's clumsiness left him as quickly as it had appeared. "Yikes! What am I doing? He's almost—oh!" Winston squirmed nervously in Roscoe's grip, not very hard, and it did no good whatsoever. The big dog was in her already, moving deeper with each thrust. She could feel him there—right inside!—shamelessly pleasuring . . . ah . . . pleasuring . . . himself. Really ought to . . . ah . . . ought to stop him . . . ah . . . soon . . .

Roscoe's weight and powerful thrusts were pushing her off balance, but nothing beyond her strength to handle. Winston braced herself, holding steady . . . no, no . . . not steady! Need to move away! Soon he'll be . . . oh. Too late. Already Roscoe's knot was swelling inside her, locking itself in place . . . and she was helping him! She felt herself clenching him tight with muscles she had never before possessed—muscles that clamped down without volition, and refused to let go. She could tighten them . . . ah! . . . like that . . . but she couldn't quite . . . couldn't quite . . . release. Is this truly a dream, I'm dreaming? I'm being fucked by my own dog! How could I imagine something like this? Winston squeezed again and Roscoe gripped her harder, panting great shuddering pants, then ceased his thrusting and froze rigid; trembling against her haunches. He was twitching now, so very deep inside—and each twitch brought forth an answering pleasure-shiver from her. It was like an orgasm—it was an orgasm!—but it just kept on; not ending. Roscoe began to tread, blissfully—gently

shifting his weight from one hind paw to the other—and the tugging movement coaxed a whimper of lust from her throat . . . Roscoe, Roscoe—what have you done?

This is me, Winston! Your . . . ah . . . your master . . . Roscoe's treading slowed, and stopped, and his grip on her haunches relaxed. Carefully he lowered his front legs to one side, lifted a hind leg up and around in some strange sort of way, and was standing wetly tail to tail with her, still securely locked in place. How did he do that, anyway? The process was painless, and took no effort at all on Winston's part. Through it all she simply stood there, pleasure-drunk, oblivious to everything but the cool-wet tickle of her dripping fur, the delightful pull and twitch of Roscoe within her . . . and her own helpless, rhythmic response.

"My master says he is very happy with his new bitch. Are you happy too?" The genie dog was back, standing close beside them. He was much smaller this time. Borzoi-sized.

"I'm not Roscoe's bitch!" Winston barked, startled.

The genie chuckled a soft, three throated chuckle and dipped his center head to nuzzle the place where Winston and her partner were joined. Winston gasped in pleasure at the touch, and Roscoe's pulsing grew faster, and more forceful.

The center head began to lick, gently—caressing Roscoe's throbbing shaft base and Winston's quivering folds in one slow, sensuous movement. "Really, now!" it murmured, "Please pardon my error." Winston's barks had borne little resemblance to human words, but the genie dog had understood them anyway, it appeared. He continued to lick-tickle the tie area with his center head, but his right head rose up and settled itself comfortably across the top of Winston's back. The left head was taking similar liberties with Roscoe's person. "If you're not Roscoe's bitch, then who's bitch are you? Soon he'll be finished here. I can wait."

"No! Not . . . ah! . . . not . . . a bitch! I'm . . . ah . . . I'm—"

"—a man, you say? Sorry, mortal. That part of your life is over. Now—tell me please—what sort of bitch are you? Are you a happy bitch?"

"No!"

Supernatural heat welled forth from the genie's heads and sank deep beneath Winston's salty skin. She gasped, and clenched down hard as the mating pleasure grew stronger even than it had been. Roscoe whimpered softly and shuddered, powerfully, in response. "There, I've enhanced you both for greater pleasure together. Do you like it? Are you happy now?"

"I . . . ah . . ."

"I've left your human wits undiminished—and your meager human years!—and I've improved your mate's to match, but perhaps that was a mistake. Humans are not prone to happiness, after all. It's not too late to correct that error, of course. Let me see what I can—"

"No! Don't do that! I'm . . . ah! . . . I'm . . . ah . . . happy!"

"Are you sure?" The mating pleasure was overwhelming Winston, making it difficult to think—and the genie dog's center nose was still making itself free with territory that should have belonged to her alone. Or to Roscoe, anyway. "Yes! I'm . . . ah! . . . I'm happy! Now just . . . ah! . . . just go . . . ah . . . go . . . away!"

"Very well. Soon. But since I'm here, and my master's second wish has been fulfilled, and—you are happy, aren't you? Not just humoring me?" Winston whimpered and nodded, submissively. "Good, good—it's nice to have a complex wish like this turn out so well! So often they go horribly wrong even when I don't really mean to—er—never mind. Wishes can be tricky things; we'll just leave it at that. So, Master Roscoe—are you listening? Yes? Do you have a third command in mind yet?"

"Roscoe! No!" Winston yelled. "Don't trust him! Let me . . ah . . . let me choose . . . choose wish."

"My Master is wondering what you're fussing about, bitch."

"Tell him! Please tell him!"

"Oh . . . very well . . . but you're wasting your time, don't you know." The genie dog paused, thoughtfully—even forgetting for the moment to continue his tickling.

"Well bugger me bum!" he continued, after a short pause, "Your mate is made of fine clay indeed! He has given you the wish."

"What?"

"The wish is yours, Mistress. Roscoe has freely surrendered his right to it. Astonishing. Truly astonishing. No one ever gives up a wish!" The genie dog disengaged himself from the coupling borzois and favored Winston with a low, courtly bow.

"So, my Mistress—what boon do you crave? What is this wish you have, that will benefit Roscoe so much more than any he can wish for himself?"

Winston's mating lust raged on, only partly diminished by the sad departure of the genie dog's tongue. So hard to think clearly! "I . . ah . . I want . . ah . . want to be human! Like I was!"

"And just how is this wish to benefit your beloved Roscoe?"

"Never mind . . never mind Roscoe. He'll never . . never lack for anything! Anything . . I can give. Now honor . . honor my wish!"

The genie dog shook his head, sadly. "I am not a god, Mistress. I cannot do as you bid."

"Why not? You transformed . . transformed me . . into this. Why can't . . can't you undo . . ah! . . what you've done?"

"You were not pregnant before."

"What?"

"Silly rule, isn't it? I can kill you, if you let me, and your puppies will die too, but I am not permitted any transformation magic that might harm them."

"Puppies? No! Not . . huh! . . not possible! How can—"

"Look behind you, Mistress. You'll no doubt notice a large, handsome male dog making free with your body. That delightful feeling within you is the pulse of his seed flooding into your womb. Puppies are the usual result of such congress. Roscoe has taken you, and in the proper time you will deliver his young. Did you think his wooing but a game? Or a dream, perhaps?"

“But what—”

“A bitch’s term is short—two moons and a quarter, no more. Ask me when you’ve whelped and I’ll transform you then—if you’re still present on this island, that is, and if you’ve let slip no other wish before! In the meanwhile please enjoy your lovely new body, and your admirable new mate—my heartfelt gifts to you.” The genie’s dark form grew ragged then, about the edges, and streamers of black mist curled away on the stiff sea breeze. In seconds the creature was gone altogether, leaving Winston and Roscoe alone on the beach but very much still together. Winston’s new lover was not quite done yet, after all.

Roscoe selected another Perrier from its case, pierced the thin plastic bottle with his canine teeth, then lifted his head high to allow the fizzing water to trickle down his throat. This was not a normal sort of way for a dog to drink, but Roscoe had mastered the trick instantly when Winston showed him how. Winston sighed, shrugged, and took one for herself. No sense pretending to conserve the stuff; the pirates had left behind a week’s worth at most. Presumably a boatload of colleagues would be calling before then to claim their valuable human hostage and his dog. So sad. Human gone. No one left here but a pair of penniless pooches—and one magical genie monster.

Yuck. Too warm. Needs ice. Winston gulped down the tepid water anyway, every drop, then chucked the empty bottle and slashed open a packet of deep-fried pork rinds—scattering them carelessly over the loose sand floor of their shade tent. She was not hungry, really, but she had to bite something, and Roscoe didn’t deserve such treatment. He had always been her favorite, but now—well—Winston’s tail twitched and the fur on her back tingled as she imagined him mounting her again. He didn’t worry about right, or wrong—or the money witless Winston might bestow if manipulated properly. Such a forthright, carefree lover he was—and so hot! If only he were . . . if only James were here! These doggy thoughts were getting the best of her, but James would sort them out quick enough. He would bribe the pirates away, call for more food and water, keep her safe here until her . . . until her children arrived. A couple of months, that’s all, and then the genie would turn her human again, and male, with only James and Roscoe to share her secret.

Winston shook herself, sat firmly down on her haunches, and tightened her lips in concentration.

“Jj—ames. Hel—lo Jjames. Is mme, Hwinn—sthon.” Not bad! Not bad at all for two days’ work! Who says a dog can’t talk? You just have to try hard, and keep at it. James might never show up in time—or at all—but if he did she’d be ready for him!

“Rawsko! Your thurn! Now thry haa . . . thry ha—gain: Raw—sko. Goth it?”

No, Roscoe didn’t get it. He was ignoring her lesson in favor of a packet of spilled pork rinds. Maybe she should bite him after all.

Roscoe’s shoulder was closest so she bumped it hard with her nose, and Roscoe continued to ignore her. She bumped again, paused, sniffed curiously. Dry sea foam, dry sand, rotten . . . mackerel? Definitely the same dead thing he had rolled on two days before. Not so strong now, perhaps—multiple ocean dips had taken their toll—but still tenaciously present and even richer, in its way. Really very interesting, actually . . . so many complex under-scents! Roscoe finished his pork rinds and stepped forward so her nose was on his flank, and that was interesting too. No mackerel here. Just Roscoe’s own musky male-scent and . . . herself. Not long ago that same part of Roscoe had been hammering hard against her own backside, and she had welcomed it. Again.

How many times was that now? She had lost count. Winston dipped her head lower, to the opening

of Winston's sheath, sniffed delicately. So strong! And so . . . enticing. Winston snuffled forward and tease-touched him with her tongue. Roscoe was sated, of course—how could he possibly be horny so soon?—but when he's ready again, perhaps . . .

Roscoe stretched, indolently, and showed himself not so sated after all. Well! Winston smiled a doggy smile, and flicked her tongue teasingly forward. Roscoe was here, now, and so was she. The future would just have to take care of itself.

Winston nose-bumped, gently this time, and Roscoe's sheath grew firmer as a half-knot began to form near the base. He turned to face her and she left him, then—leaping forth from their shade tent to sprint swiftly away, along the firm damp sand of the middle beach. Ah! Speed—glorious speed—running—flying—galloping with the wind in your nose and the seagulls flapping up in panic and the earth streaming blurry-fast beneath your pads! So nice—almost as much fun as sex. Almost.

Winston was not holding back at all, streaking forward as fast as her long strong legs could carry her, but Roscoe was faster still. Soon he was beside her, pant-laughing, and then ahead. Winston skidded to a stop and when Roscoe circled back she jumped up on him, male-dog-style, and bumped madly against his rump until he threw her off and whipped around to cover her instead. No messing around, this time, just a couple of test pokes and one long borzoi-lean cock sliding deep inside with a single unstoppable movement.

Winston froze, panting, as her mate held her tight and began to thrust exultantly within her. Roscoe was panting too, close by her ear, and a thread of happy drool caressed her cheek as his knot swelled tight and sealed them together, cock tip to cervix. Winston squeezed, powerfully, and felt Roscoe's knot grow even larger in response. He was so tightly locked he couldn't move at all now; except for the rhythmic pulse of his semen, of course, forcing its way deeper still. Winston lowered her head and stood for him, entranced, while he trembled, and turned, and tied himself together with her, tail to tail.

The muted rumble of a boat engine brought her back to awareness of the outside world. Hmm—what's that?—mid-sized motor launch, diesel for sure, Volvo Penta D3 series most likely . . . single prop stern drive . . . kind of rough at speed, but excellent cruise range at the lower RPMs . . . what was it doing way out here—

Oh! Rescue. Or recapture. Would the pirates be using a nice boat like that? Maybe, if they stole it. Have to greet them, soon, whoever they are. Soon. No . . . not soon . . . now! Winston tugged, fretfully. This really was very pleasant, but—ouch! Not done yet. Definitely not done yet. She fidgeted, and Roscoe whined in protest—finally losing his ardor and deflating early. Winston was off then, like a shot—her abandoned lover lagging dolefully behind.

Winston followed the engine noise and the boat soon came into view, snaking its careful way through a deep-water tidal channel toward the lee of the island. No waves to speak of here, but shoal water everywhere outside the channel. Better watch it, guy . . . channel takes a hard jog to port, there . . . best you turn soon . . . like, now . . . damn! Boat's aground! What sort of moron is driving that thing, anyway? It's not like a joystick helm control is so difficult to handle! I could pilot that barge just the way I am now—thumbs optional! And . . . only one man? Where are the others?

The human slammed into reverse, trying to dig his way out by brute force. He was cursing now, and pounding the dashboard with his fist. Idiot. He's just digging holes in the sand. He'll shear a shaft coupling for sure if he keeps that up! Tide's still rising; why doesn't he just sit back and wait for it to lift him out?

Winston loped closer, making no attempt to hide. The human was stooped over now, poking about near the stern. He cursed again, stood up on his feet—and tossed an anchor over the side. Ha! About time! The human secured his anchor line . . . good, good—got to leave plenty of slack there . . . killed the engine, and began to load a backpack for the inevitable shore excursion. His form was growing more distinct as Winston approached. Short, pudgy, rather pale—could it be . . . no, no, she was just hoping, is all; just imagining what she wanted to see. The man was wearing a hat, and he took it off to wipe his brow. Round glasses and a shiny bald head flashed into clear view. Yes! It is! It is James! That explained the bad piloting. James was never worth a damn on a boat. No good with dogs, ether. Roscoe detested him—especially lately, since that nasty little business with the Greengrow pension fund account. No matter, really; a touch of genteel dishonesty was no great fault in a personal assistant, and James was coming to terms with the new accounting firm and his new reporting requirements. He'd get over his snit in time. He always did.

Winston bounded out into the muddy shallows, barking joyfully. Before James had time to get his feet wet she was waiting, chest-deep by his boat side, her long skinny tail churning the water in greeting pleasure.

"Er . . . Roscoe? Is that you? Who's that other dog on the beach? I'm quite certain Mr. Thomas took only one." He lowered his gaze to the murky, prop-roiled waters surrounding him.

"Stingrays down there for sure," he muttered. "Too shallow for sharks, anyway." The human shuddered, shouldered his pack, and lowered himself carefully over the side. Chest deep for Winston was only hip deep for him, so it was really not that big a deal. Winston pushed up against him and her tail wagged faster then stilled, suddenly, as she felt the fin-wash of something very large swimming past her. She looked down but the water was dark, so dark in the brilliant sunlight . . . she felt the fin-wash again, and then the sliding touch of a sinuous, rough-skinned form brushing her thigh. One quick touch, no more, and it was gone.

"Greetings, Mistress!" The words were in her head, somehow—voiceless but still feeling like natural words—as if the genie were chatting calmly beside her rather than lurking silently below . . . or behind . . . or wherever he had got to now.

"Mistress—were you aware that sharks are attracted to the scent of a bitch in heat? The shallower shallows will be safer for you, I fear, until that condition has passed."

"Roscoe! What was that? Did you feel something in the water?"

Winston nodded, numbly, and trained a pair of tragic eyes on the human. She parted her jaws to speak but already he had turned away from her, slogging anxiously onward toward the safety of dry land. Winston shrugged, silently, and followed him there. No stingrays were encountered during their journey.

On the beach James peered nervously this way and that, scrutinizing the horizon but failing to notice Winston's wetly obvious lack of boy dog parts. The true Roscoe sulked nearby and failed to greet him, and James took no notice of that, either. It was as if the two dogs barely existed for him. Winston nuzzled his hand and he turned away, ignoring her, and crept up to the dune line where he stood tall for a moment, inspecting the horizon one more time, then knelt down to dig a shallow pit in the sand. He opened his pack and removed a gun—one of the newer Glock models by the look of it, complete with laser sight—checked the gun's action in a chillingly competent sort of way, and slipped it into his pocket. From a different pocket he extracted a boat key with lanyard and flotation cork, then set key and pack carefully down in his little pit, and covered them over with sand. He backed away, brushing away his tracks, and set off down the beach in the direction of Winston's

shade tent.

Well! That was strange. Winston stood there for a time, watching the human stroll away, and when he was out of view she dug up the cache and nosed it over curiously. Hmm . . . smells like guns . . . and money. A bit of careful tugging with her incisors had the strap buckles loosened, and she poked her head inside to investigate. Another gun, sure enough, and a box of extra cartridges.

Quite a lot of cash in there—American fifties and hundreds, mostly, wrapped in tidy little bundles—but with a smattering of other currencies as well. Just pocket change for a man in Winston's circles, but Winston was not a man anymore. Could prove useful. Winston tossed the gun and ammunition into deep water, and buried the rest in a hiding place of her own choosing. A rat came to join her as she brushed the sand smooth with an outstretched foreleg. It was a large rat, jet black, three headed and three tailed.

"Good afternoon, Mistress! Who is this new visitor we have? Is he a friend of yours?"

"I thought so. Now I'm not so sure." Winston yip-whined the words carelessly, assuming the genie would understand, and he did.

"Ah, yes—such is the bane of power. 'Tis one burden we spirit creatures share with mortals such as yourself. You were powerful, were you not?"

"Yes, I was—and I will be again! I have no intention of wasting that last wish."

"Yes, yes," the rat-genie soothed, "of course you won't." He scampered up a foreleg, and took station between Winston's shoulder blades. "Now—will you be taking me to meet your colleague, or shall I visit him myself?"

Winston shook herself, grumpily, and the rat rode firm in his perch. "Ha! Don't think to throw me off so easily," he laughed. "Go on, try again! Or you could simply wish for me to go away . . ."

Winston bucked, experimentally, and the rat didn't budge. She bucked harder with no greater success, then threw herself down and rolled, vigorously. The genie rat leaped free as Winston's shoulder hit the sand, then hopped right back as she scrabbled to her feet. "Oh . . . nasty nasty!" he chortled. "There's no plaything like a genuine live mortal! You're so fresh, and unpredictable. Go on, run now," he urged. "Race, rush, gallop—spurn the earth with lightsome feet—your human is getting away!"

Winston grumble-growled, bucked one more time, then forced herself to saunter slowly down the beach slope and onto the firm sand. She sauntered there, too, for a time, but soon gave it up and allowed her lanky legs the lope they longed for. Who was she trying to fool, anyway?

James was halfway to the shade tent when she caught up with him. He was sweating profusely in the fierce sunshine, and his face was strained. Winston's fur was still half-damp from her ocean dip, so she was still comfortable, but Roscoe was panting heavily by her side, tongue lolling low in the stifling heat. Silly oaf! Winston veered off and splashed herself through the flat lee side shallows—the shallowest of shallows, muddy but still quite adequately wet—and this time Roscoe joined her. They were both ambling cool and sodden by James' side when he reached the tent.

"Mr. Thomas, are you there?" James' voice sounded unctuous, and falsely humble, and perfectly normal to Winston's ears. James' voice always sounded that way. His hand brushed the gun pocket but didn't linger there as he stepped forward, past the side panel, to where Winston's sleeping blankets lay.

No one there. Only wind, and sand, and untidy piles of half-consumed ship stores. "Mr. Thomas?" The human peered about, doubtfully, and kicked at a dog-tooth-mangled can of Spam. He edged away from the two filthy-wet dogs crowding up behind him, squinted suspiciously at the place on Winston's back where the genie-rat perched, then he shrugged, shook his head, and turned away as if nothing at all unusual lurked there. "Mr. Thomas!" he called out to the empty wilderness around them, and Winston Thomas the third, borzoi bitch, did not answer him. The talking could come later, if at all. What the hell was this man up to?

James removed his hat, drew an arm across his head to smooth away the sweat, and eased himself down into a deck chair the pirates had thoughtfully left behind. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply several times, then snapped his eyes open and rose again to his feet. Why didn't he rest longer? It was quite comfortable here in the tent shade, with the late afternoon sea breeze in one's face. What was driving the man to be up again so quickly?

James pressed onward, past the shade tent, to the island's northernmost tip. Deep channel here, crazy-strong current when the tide was running strong, and—Winston peered suspiciously into the swirling, rippled surface—and, yes, a shark or two. They liked to hang out in the fast water and wait for edible things drift by.

They rounded the point, and by twilight came upon the site of Winston's terrible transformation. The ghost crabs had risen from their burrows with the evening's coolness but they remained close by, and scuttled nervously down again at first approach. Edible, perhaps, and fun to chase . . . but damn near impossible to catch! Oh, yes—there's the spot—elegantly chased golden bowl lying askew and neglected on the sand, jade bottle lying . . . where? Hmm—missing now, it seemed. Definitely not where Winston had last seen it. But over there—by the water's edge—were they . . . her human clothes? Winston was quite certain they had not been present when she last came by this way, but there they were now, shorts and tee shirt folded neatly together in a little pile, and—Winston sniffed, curiously—newly laundered. She smelled soap, and sandalwood, and frankincense . . . and genie dog.

Winston moved on to the bowl and nosed it upright—wistfully, savoring the lamb sauce scent that still lingered there. A bite to eat might be rather nice right now; water even better. Winston had chosen not to partake from the shade tent stores while James was watching. Winston sniffed again. What was that? New scent now, coming right from the bowl below her nose! Fruity and cool, kind of like . . . muskmelons? The scent grew stronger, and moisture began to bead on the bowl's sides—trickling, then cascading down to form a cloudy puddle in the center. Melon juice? Winston sniffed closely, and tested with a tentative tongue. Yes, melon juice, more or less—watered down in the Middle Eastern manner to make a drinking beverage. Sherbet, they called it.

Winston lapped tentatively, then with more confidence. Delicious! No sense worrying about poisons and such. The genie could destroy them any number of ways if it felt the urge. Roscoe came to join her and the two borzois emptied the bowl, licking their chops in delighted satisfaction. Who'd have thought the damn thing still had magic left in it?

"Genie!" Winston barked, "You never told me the bowl was good for more than one meal!"

The genie-rat did a little dance on Winston's back then jumped off, and made himself one with the sand, and the sea wrack, and the the sparse dry dune grasses surrounding them. "I was saving it for you as a surprise," his mind-voice drifted back to her. "I like surprises."

Winston stared out the way the genie-rat had gone—intently watching, and listening—but then her attention was caught by a strange sound coming from the man behind her. He was laughing! Sort of laughing. The sound had a creepy, demented feel to it that made the fur stand up on her neck. She

whipped around, alarmed, but James was not laughing at her at all; he was simply laughing, holding her old clothes against his chest and staring out at the shark-infested tidal channel.

He thinks I died there! Winston wiggle-wagged solicitously forward and the human slapped her away, snarling. He hurled down the clothes and stalked back toward the shade tent while Winston stood there, hurt and angry. "Jjames—" she called out softly, but he was too far away to hear. Roscoe nuzzled close, trying his best to comfort her and maybe get another piece of her long lean lanky ass, and he accomplished both those goals. The evening darkness was complete when they were done.

Afterward Winston shook herself, licked Roscoe's ear a tender lick, and jogged out into starlight night, in search of her human. Ok, so James is a jerk. Not like that's any sort of news, after all. It was one of the things that made him such an excellent personal assistant. She found the man stumbling blindly by the water's edge, picking his way along by the feel of wetness on his feet and by the faint phosphorescence brought forth by wavelets slapping at the shore. So easy to forget how very quick a tropical sunset can be . . . and how very very dark the night that follows! Dark for humans, that is. To Winston's new eyes the beach was shadowed and dim, but otherwise quite easy to navigate.

Winston barked softly and pressed herself close, and this time the human accepted her help. She guided him briskly onward to the tent, and there he found a flashlight, and matches, and the driftwood pile Winston had gathered when she still possessed hands.

He lit a fire and put together a meal for himself from crackers and canned ham, and set some out for the dogs, too, with a bit of nagging on Winston's part. It was not enough, and later the two dogs crept off to the golden bowl for a hot meal and some steamy after-dinner entertainment.

James spoke few words that evening, and none at all that revealed his true thoughts. Winston had hoped to charm a monolog from him but he was just not the monolog sort, and Winston's charming skills worked much better on Roscoe than on a grumpy, dog-hating, wanna-be murderer like her man James.

The human slept badly, if at all, and Winston never found the opportunity to steal his gun from him. At first light he marched off southward, toward his boat, with the two big dogs sauntering casually by his side.

The boat was fine, floating quietly at anchor, but no amount of sand-grubbing or swearing brought forth a key.

"Mmiss-ssing somm-thing?" Winston wanted the words to slip out smoothly, confidently, but her mouth just wouldn't work that way. Maybe with more practice it would get better.

"Huh?" James whipped his head around, and ceased his digging. He rose to his feet, and looked closely at the grimy borzoi dog beside him. Really looked, this time.

"You're not Roscoe!" he accused. "Roscoe is a male!"

Winston sighed, and rolled her eyes heavenward. "Nno. Nnot Raw-sko." she agreed. James was looking straight at her, and the hard morning sunlight must clearly show her mouth and tongue forming the words. Would he deny the evidence of his own eyes?

"Ah . . . right." James edged away, nervously, and slipped his hand into the pocket with the gun. Not good.

"Nneed helpff, haave keey," she elaborated.

"Who are you? Where are you hiding the speaker and electronic stuff? How do you manage to control this animal from such a distance?"

"Nno eeless—eeleks . . . thraw-nnics. Jjust mme. Nneed helpff, haave keey."

"Right. Have it your way. Do you really have the boat key?"

Winston nodded, and gestured with her head toward the motor launch. "Nneed helpff. Nneed booot."

"You're not getting this filthy animal in a boat with me!"

"Nno booot, nno keey."

"Show it to me."

This could get ugly. Nothing for it but to try, though. Winston trotted over to the key's true hiding place, uncovered it, and took the cork float into her mouth. Immediately a shot rang out, and beside her a jet of thrown sand showed where the bullet had struck. No! Not like this! Was he just going to gun her down and pry the key from her dead jaws? Not such a bad plan, when you come to think of it. Damn! Not cut out for this kind of work. Winston dropped the key and leapt sideways, trying to throw off the man's aim, and a bullet struck the sand where she had been. She leapt again, heard a cry and another shot, but nothing that came close to her. James was screaming now, and Roscoe savagely snarling. She heard a fourth shot, and the agonized yelp-scream as her mate was struck down.

Winston doubled back, careless of danger, and flew raging toward the human. He was standing hunched, clutching a bleeding hand, and Roscoe lay crumpled on the sand by his feet. He reached down left-handed for his fallen gun but Winston reached it first. She snatched the thing in her jaws and cast it away, far away into the sea. She wheeled back, to her lover Roscoe, nosing him frantically to get up, but he couldn't do that. He would never get up again. The wound was in his chest, square in his chest, and in seconds more he would be dead.

"Genie!" Winston howled, "Come to me, genie! I need my wish!"

"Yes, Mistress?" The genie was there, by her side, borzoi-sized. "I take it you'd like me to—"

"Save him!" Winston keened. "Save him now, before it's too late!"

"Very well, Mistress. Would you like me to heal the human too, while I'm at it? I can handle them both with the same wish, and—"

"I don't care! Do what you like with him—just give me my Roscoe back!"

"As you wish, Mistress, so shall it be."

Roscoe's labored breathing ceased, for an instant—then started again smooth, and powerful. He parted his jaws to scream then closed them, in confusion. The pain was gone! He shuddered and stretched himself, testing, then surged to his feet and stood steady and strong beside her, smiling that big goofy smile of his—

"Roscoe," she whimpered, throwing herself against his side—his still bloody side—damn genie couldn't be troubled to clean up after himself—"oh, Roscoe."

A strange small whimpering sound drew her attention away, if only for a moment. James was standing not far off, staring at his injured wrist. Injured no longer, it seemed, but James did not seem pleased by this. Perhaps it was the silky, cream colored fur that bothered him; perhaps the shrinking fingers above, gathering themselves into a paw as he watched. Perhaps it was the way his other hand was beginning to change in the same way.

Not pleased, anyway. Definitely not pleased.

“Genie!” Winston yelped, “What are you doing?”

“I’m doing what I like. You did specify that in your wish, you know. You said I could do what I like with the human. I’ve decided I like borzoi bitches.” The genie-dog breathed out with his leftmost head, a whisper of almost-song that made the fur on Winston’s neck rise up, tingling, and the fur on James’ hands sweep over his body in an overwhelming tide. At the same time his clothes unfastened themselves, and fell undamaged to the sand. The rightmost head sang out, and Winston’s personal secretary fell to the ground as his legs shortened and his nose lengthened and a thin new tail burst forth from his rump. The changes swept to completion and he flailed clumsily, like Winston had when her time came, but no solicitous muzzle stretched forth to comfort him. The others simply stood there, watching, as he worked things out for himself and rose clumsily to his feet—a handsome, healthy male borzoi looking much like Winston except for the boy dog bits. The genie-dog’s center head sang out, softly, and that changed too.

Winston stepped forward to sniff over her trembling, exceedingly confused ex-personal assistant. She snorted in amusement. The poor creature was in heat already. “Didn’t waste any time now, did you?” she yip-laughed.

“I saw no need,” the genie-dog blandly replied.

Winston returned her attentions to Roscoe, and his blood-soaked chest fur. “Come on, big guy.” she yip-yapped, “we need to get you cleaned up! I don’t care about the damn sharks. The water is clear now, and we can see ‘em coming!”

Winston washed her lanky lover, and herself too—stroking her body this way and that against him until the water around them ran clean—then repeating the process a few more times just to be sure. No sharks appeared to spoil their play. Afterward she noticed the genie-dog alone on the beach, watching them.

“Where’s James?” Winston asked, confused. “I thought you’d be, ah . . . having your way with her by now!”

“Oh, she ran off,” the center head responded, not at all concerned. “I assumed she would.

Mortals always need a little time to grow accustomed to a transformation. I thought I’d stay here for a little while, and say goodbye to the two of you. You’ll be leaving now, I assume, since you have a boat and there’s no compelling reason to stay . . .” The genie-dog’s voice had a neutral tone but still it sounded sad, and a bit wistful to Winston’s ears.

“Yes,” she replied, “I think we will.” She retrieved the boat key from where she had dropped it, and dug James’ backpack from out of the sand. Tide was on the ebb, and she’d have to hustle if she wanted to get that boat in deep water before the next flood. James would have left himself another day or two of privacy for his own escape, but no sense in throwing that time away. Winston really really didn’t want to encounter those pirates again! Or their friends. Meeting them in the form of a valueless, unclean canine was unlikely to help matters. She grabbed a pack strap in her jaws and

lifted her head high to avoid dragging. Kind of awkward, and heavy, but not the sort of thing to be left behind—

“Would like some more?” The genie-dog inquired, politely. “It’s quite useful, you know. Can’t have too much. Just find a biddable human who can pretend to own you, pay him a modest stipend from time to time, and do what you like with the rest.”

Winston set down the pack. “More money? Ah . . . sure, I guess. I mean . . . uh . . . yes, thank you very much! I would never think of spurning the gift of a noble, powerful spirit such as yourself!”

“It’s only a little gold, you know—left over from old wishes and shipwrecks and such. Never bother much with the stuff . . . except to tease mortals with, of course.”

“Yes, of course! Thank you very much for your kind offer . . . but just a little, now, mind you. I don’t want to seem greedy.”

A rough laugh rumbled forth from the genie-dog’s throats. “Really, now—a mortal who’s not greedy? That’s a new one indeed! For that I’ll toss in a few diamonds and rubies as well. Please feel free to visit again some time, if you feel the urge, and—” The genie lowered his leftmost head and whispered, conspiratorially, “—be sure to sniff over the tide line with extra diligence, if you do. That jade bottle was not the only one, you know.”

Winston’s tail dropped in astonishment. Another wishing bottle? Right here, on the island, waiting to be found? Perhaps she was being hasty in her flight. What harm could a few—

The faint buzzing thrum of a boat engine caught her ears. It was far off, north north by west—out beyond the island’s windward side. A boat? Already? It’s too soon for that! Way too soon! Even James could not have been expecting—no, never mind. Still not hopeless. If she got the motor launch running right now, this very moment, and idled quietly south, then southwest, she could keep the island between them and slip away while they were investigating the shade tent. If there was only one pirate boat, that is . . .

“Roscoe!” she yelped, “Grab the key and get your ass out here! We’re leaving right away.” Would he understand her? No matter. Winston snatched up her burden and waded out into the shallow water, not even trying to keep it dry. She would load the money, then splash back to get the key for herself. Wouldn’t take much extra time, and they really did need that money.

Roscoe beat her to the boat, key float triumphantly clenched in his teeth. He swarmed competently up the stern ladder and dropped his key on the driver’s seat, then shook himself and circled back to haul aboard Winston’s sodden pack. Winston climbed aboard, shook herself as well—kind of hard to resist the urge, after all, might as well get it over with—and snatched up the key. Tricky there, inserting the wretched thing by mouth, but not undoable. Fuel check, battery check, twist just . . . so . . . and the engine thudded to life! More throttle now, just a little, don’t force it—yes, yes—that’s right! Winston left the engine at fast idle and leapt back to seize the anchor line in her jaws. She hauled powerfully, upward and back, and before she could move again Roscoe was close beside her, hauling too. The steel chain section near the actual anchor was cruelly painful on the teeth, but they took in anyway, and then the anchor itself—even worse!—and at last the heavy thing was lying safe, and wetly muddy in the stern bilge. Winston rushed back to the helm, took the lever in her mouth, and engaged the transmission. Reverse for starters, hard burst, then cut to neutral and drift slowly backward, into the channel. Deep water ought to be right about—no! Impossible! The boat was aground again. She could feel the shock through her feet. She seized the stick again and—a shadow blotted out the sun, startling her, and torrents of muddy sea water rained down upon the bow. What the fuck . . .

Winston looked up, looked up higher still—sat herself down, with a thump. The genie was back. Had to be the genie. She hoped it was the genie—the enormous, jet black, spiked and scaled sea monster head looming over her would be quite the setback if it were anyone else.

“Genie?” Winston whimpered, doubtfully.

The massive head grinned cheerfully, exposing a multitude of sharp, blatantly carnivorous teeth. “Why, yes, I am. Were you expecting someone else? I’ve brought you the treasure I promised.”

Beside the boat another head surfaced, gaping wide to hold an ancient, rotten, heavy-looking chest. It set the chest down, carefully amidships, in a small open area behind the helm seats.

Winston’s new boat sank down alarmingly with the added weight but it was well balanced, and safe enough for easy weather—Winston scanned the sunny horizon nervously—which seemed likely enough. “Ah, thank you again, genie. You are most—”

Another head was rising up from the water’s surface, gripping an even larger chest. It hovered above the boat’s center, high above. If the chest dropped now it would sink them instantly, but even a gentle set-down would surely swamp the boat. Winston curled her lips back in terror but made no move, and spoke no word. The genie would sink them, or not. Nothing she could do would change that now. At least they were close to shore, and could swim there easily enough if—

“Well, my lady—tell me now, please!—would you like this second chest, or does the first one alone meet your needs?”

“Ah, just the one, thank you very much,” Winston squeaked. Two unencumbered heads watched from on high, grinning broadly as the third sank beneath the surface, still gripping the chest.

“That’s one of my favorite tricks—” remarked the first head “—but it doesn’t appear to work on modest, sensible bitches such as yourself,” concluded the second. “You may go now, with my good will, and you should be fine except for the second pirate boat, which will surely spot you as you round the southern point.”

Another pirate boat? That spoiled her plan completely! Would this creature ever tire of tormenting her?

“Yes,” the second head continued, “you’ll never sneak past it—”

“—without help,” concluded the first. “Perhaps I’ll pay them a visit and see if they want to play.”

“Careful!” Winston yelped. “They’ll have a machine gun for sure, and maybe other stuff. You know—grenades and things—and more guns.” Why was she warning him? This was the monster who destroyed her life! And saved Roscoe’s.

The genie’s lambent eyes glowed brighter, with anticipation. “Oh, yes, that will be fun,” he remarked, and sank slowly back into the water, all of him this time.

Winston snorted and shook her head, fastening her attention firmly on the business at hand. Angry second guesses later, escape now. She closed her jaws gently down upon the helm stick . . . reverse now . . . check. Now hard aport, goose the engine and wait . . . wait . . . her vessel slewed backward and around, sweetly sliding into the center of the now-empty tide channel. She engaged the forward gear, tickled the throttle and surged sedately onward, into safer water. She pushed firmly forward, on the throttle stick. Now that the engine was in gear she could do that with a simple push of her paw; didn’t need her mouth to squeeze the release. The sea was smooth here, in the island’s lee, and

stealth no longer seemed so important to her. She examined the helm controls more carefully, now that she had the time, and grinned in admiration. Auxiliary fuel tanks, generously large and mostly full—three hundred miles range, easy—and a state of the art satellite navigation system! Idiot proof. Impossible to get lost. Even has a button to record your current location, in case you're too dumb to memorize the coordinates. Winston did that—memorized the coordinates, that is—and pressed the idiot button with her paw, just to be sure. Something cold and wet snuffled her ear. Roscoe! How could she have forgotten him?

She snuffled back, and returned her attention to the tiller. Engines warming up, now, plenty of fuel, no real need to hide—she pushed forward on the throttle, and the big diesel beneath her feet responded with genteel enthusiasm. The boat began to bang on the wave tops, leaping porpoise-like across the sea. Soon she'd have to throttle back as she negotiated the south channel but for now—Winston stood grinning at her helm station, forelegs braced on the dashboard and tongue lolling happily from the side of her mouth. She sneaked a sidelong glance to Roscoe and he was doing the same. She looked ahead, critically—not quite there yet, water smoother than ever in this last lee side sweet spot. She grinned wider and pushed the throttle hard forward, as far as it would go.

Late morning, on Cynjinn island, sun rising high and already burning hot. To the north a pirate craft—converted fishing boat, actually, elderly and worn but still seaworthy—slipped its skillful way shoreward through the treacherous shallows, toward an eerily empty beach camp. The helmsman swore, fretfully, and wondered for the thousandth time what madness had possessed his brothers to select this island for their use, of all the islands in the wide, wide world. On the beach nearby a large dog barked at them, frantically. It was a white dog—thanks be to the Prophet!—and possessed of only a single head. Yes, they had been told a dog would be there, along with their valuable hostage. They would take him away with them if he proved friendly, leave him to die among the cursed dunes if not. No matter . . . but where was the hostage?

Further west a larger boat—also a converted fisherman—rocked sideways, suddenly, to the tug of a giant creature toying with its anchor chain. A crewman looked downward, into the crystal water, and screamed.

And to the south . . . to the south a pair of gleeful borzoi dogs fled outward, toward the open ocean—a fast boat bounding eagerly beneath their feet and the salt spray stinging their smiling eyes—running swiftly, running free. Running like the wind.