

THE ONCE AND FUTURE NERD
Book II - MYTH MADE FLESH

Chapter 7
"What's Close To You"

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PART THREE:

20 EXT. RED REAVER - ABOVE DECK - NIGHT

20

It's quiet now. Just the gentle lapping of waves and the creaking of the ship.

NARRATOR

It was long past dark by the time Jen, Brennen, and Nia had gathered the relevant parties and explained the choice before them. Four of them, but no more, could leave the others for the relative safety of the Sugarcane Isles, if they chose. As you can understand, there were many facets to consider.

BRENNEN

The Queen will not forsake this fight of hers. And I'll not forsake the Queen who knighted me.

YELLOWYIN

And I've long since cast my lot. So that's three you needn't account for.

NELSON

They got libraries on these islands?

NIA

I...small private collections, I believe, but nothing like--

NELSON

--So nothing like what we found in Armstrungard. About like, long forgotten truths or whatever.

NIA

I doubt it.

NELSON

Then I don't see the point. I mean, I don't wanna speak for you guys. But if we go out there, we're no closer to finding a way home and no closer to finishing what we started here. So...eh.

BILLY

Just throwing this out there. Doesn't sound like they have many libraries over the mountains either. We could take a little tropical vacation for a bit, save up a little money to sail back when the heat's died down. And then go back to the library all you want.

JEN

It's not *not* tempting, but...

NIA

Billy. Believe me when I say it breaks my heart to ask the three of you to volunteer for any more danger than you have already seen. But I must say for my parents, because they are too *stubbornly selfless* to say it for themselves...there is no part of this that is their fight. They would never have been caught up in any of this, were it not for my--our actions.

MILDRED

Not that you've even told us what those are...

NIA

Later, I said.

MILDRED

What, after we've left? Sure, just fill us in with your next twice-yearly letter.

BEN

Milly, let's...stay on topic for the moment. Now you're asking us to go off to the Isles in the place of these three, yeah? How old can they be?

JEN

Old enough to make our own decisions.

(beat)

Sorry, that sounded mean. Nia's right, though. You should go.

NIA

Well then. Are there any objections to sending my parents to the Isles?

MILDRED

We have several!

NIA

(snaps)

Well you are badly outvoted. Now I've promised I will explain more to you later, but let us please settle the urgent matter at hand first.

NARRATOR

Now, as this barely concealed tiff was playing out in public between Nia and her mother, a private look passed between Gwen and Arlene. But both declined to say anything. For now.

NIA

(sighs)

And furthermore, I'll be greatly relieved to have you safely away.

MILDRED

But what'll we even do there? We don't know anybody!

NIA

Not knowing anybody is precisely why you must go. As promised, I will explain everything to you as best I can once this matter is settled. But you must believe me that you cannot stay on the mainland.

MILDRED

Nia, come now...

BEN

(defeated)

Very well.

MILDRED

Ben!

BEN

She must be telling the truth, Milly. She knows how deep our roots are in Seahold.

NIA

Thank you, Father.

MILDRED

What about your sisters?

NIA

If Ry'y lo-Th'yyt did not track them down as she did you, then we must assume she doesn't know about them.

YELLOWYYN

I concur.

BEN

Is that really safe to assume?

NIA

The only way she could have known about you was through Ba'a lo-Ky'yr, my doctoral advisor. For once I am grateful the old blowhard never cared to learn much else about me. Let my sisters remain in safety and peace, preaching in their parishes.

MILDRED

Will we be able to write them at least? Or use MNN?

YELLOWYYN

I'm afraid you must treat MNN as though it were compromised. For your safety and theirs.

NIA

In a few years, it may be safe to write to them again.
(*That sinks in*)

I would never dare trivialize what you're leaving behind. But you will get by on the Isles. You are farmers and preachers. Never in my travels have I seen a place where people don't grow food or fear Galadon. It's not what any of us would prefer, but it's the best we can do right now. The only way to keep you safe.

(*She lets it settle.*)

So that's decided then. And it leaves us two more to choose.

BEN

Two more? You wouldn't come with us?

NIA

(*a little numb*)

I'm...not sure. I have to consider all of my obligations. Arlene and Gwen have a very strong claim on it.

GWEN

Aye, that may be, but...

JEN

The kid.

ARLENE

Yes.

NIA

(*kicking herself a little for missing this*)

Of course. If my parents go the Isles, then one way or another you must split with the child.

BEN

No, we couldn't possibly tear a babe from its mum's arms.

ARLENE

The others were right. This is not your battle and you deserve safety. And, we must admit he's not...ours, in the traditional sense.

MILDRED

Sorry. I know this is rude, but I'm just so in the dark here. Whose is he?

GWEN

(a little hesitant)
I found him...orphaned after a battle.

MILDRED

And you didn't think to leave him somewhere safer before you got caught up in all this mess?

NIA

Mother, you must not speak to her that way! Gwen made the best decision she could under the circumstances.

MILDRED

What circumstances?!

NIA

Very well, since you insist on doing this now.
(Fast as she can without being unintelligible)
It is an Orc child. Gwen here could not bring herself to let him die, seeing as he is completely helpless and has hurt no one, so she and Arlene took him in. Ry'y lo-Th'yyt sought to murder them for this crime of being compassionate, so they fled and found their way to us.

These two conversations should be panned apart, aside from the Narrator, who should always remain centered. Mix should strongly favor the Narrator/Arlene/Gwen lines but Nia should just about be audible.

NIA

(Takes a quick breath)
The fencer upstairs - who happens to be the granddaughter of the late King Gunther Guernatal and thus the rightful heir to the High Throne of Iorden - had just witnessed Ry'y lo-Th'yyt and her retinue indiscriminately slaughter dozens of Orcish women and children who were unarmed and posed no immediate threat to her.

NARRATOR

Now. As Nia condescendingly recounted information to her parents which was new to them but which you, my dear listeners, already know - thanks to me! - Gwen stole her paramour away for a brief aside.

NIA
So, we were inclined to believe Arlene's story.

ARLENE
I can't send these poor preachers into harm's way. But, it's just what I was afraid of.

NIA
We took them in, and the Queen resolved to take up arms against Ry'y lo-Th'yyt.

GWEN
I know, love. We said whatever's best for him, right?

NIA
Ry'y lo-Th'yyt tracked down and kidnapped you to get to me, hoping to turn me against everyone else.

ARLENE
I think Nia's proven more than trustworthy. Do you?

We can transition away from Arlene/Gwen now and return more fully to Nia.

NIA
Instead, we rescued you, in the process killing several Elves, and...
(her voice falters just a little)
...leading to the deaths of many innocent bystanders. That is why none of us is safe anywhere the White Forest casts a shadow. Does that help?

There's a moment of stunned silence.

MILDRED
...An Orc? You mean them what have red eyes and gnarled fangs and ashen skin?

NIA
If you look, you'll see the child has eyes that are nearly a shade of orange. We've come to infer that many of the other tales about Orcs may be greatly exaggerated or else lacking crucial exculpatory context.

Another beat for this to start to sink in.

MILDRED
...I need to sit down.

NIA
Then please do. We will talk more later. As I promised.

NARRATOR
This was when Gwen and Arlene rejoined the broader conversation.

GWEN

Nia.
(summons her courage)
If you take him with you, you can go with your parents.

NIA

If I take him?

ARLENE

Yes. The child will be in hands that we trust. And you can be with your family.

JEN

Hang on, you've been through hell for that kid. Are you really gonna be okay leaving him?

ARLENE

No, not really. But if we keep him any longer, I don't think I'd ever be able to let him go. Even if it was best for him.

NELSON

Can I make an argument that it's actually best for him to come with us?

GWEN

How's that?

NELSON

Where we're going is where he's from, right? He might have an auntie or a grandma or something who'd be glad to have him back. Wouldn't that be best for him? And for the people who lost him?

NARRATOR

Arlene and Gwen glanced quickly at one another.

NIA

That assumes, for one thing, that we can track down his relations. Which is vanishingly unlikely. And for another, it assumes much about the lives of his kind. If he were my kin, I'd rather he be safe in the East than in danger in the West.

NELSON

Well, no offense, but...that's easy to say when no one's trying to destroy your culture. Maybe they're willing to risk more than you are. You know, to raise him as theirs.

YELLOWYYN

He's won me over. It is right and proper that the child be raised by his own.

NELSON

(winces audibly)

Man, it's less good when you say it.

BRENNEN

I agree. We all know what became of Traft, when the Elves raised him.

JEN

I mean...not the way Yllowyyn said, but I get what Nelson's saying.

ARLENE

We've had similar thoughts, I assure you. But we can't know whether the poor creature who brought him east to begin with wasn't fleeing some manner of persecution herself.

GWEN

And we said the trip over the Mountains is dangerous, yeah?

NELSON

Sure. But think about what his life would be like on the Isles. I mean...the other kids are gonna bully him for his eyes, that's a given. But how long before the wrong, you know, colonial magistrate or whatever overhears? And starts looking into his background? And what if he does develop other quote-unquote orc features or something when he gets older. At least if we take him over the mountains, we don't have to wait for that shoe to drop. Yeah, it's riskier up front, but it might be safer long term. Plus Arlene and Gwen get to be safe in the Isles.

NARRATOR

This, at last, snapped Nia's parents out of their daze.

MILDRED

But not Nia. She gets separated from *her* parents.

NELSON

(gets what he's asking)

Yeah. Yeah. Nia, I can't make that call for you. But I wanna say one more thing in favor of keeping the baby near me.

NIA

Near you?

NELSON

Yyyyyeah. Nia, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I had one of those dreams. And I think the baby might be important to us.
(just a little defensive)
I wouldn't put him in any danger if it was just that! But also the other stuff. And protect Arlene and Gwen.

JEN

It's your decision though, Nia.

NELSON

Totally. I mean...yeah.

ARLENE

If we truly think it's best for the baby to travel over the Mountains, then we could come with you, and Nia could go with her parents. We needn't use all four spots.

NIA

And what would the two of you do, then? Over the mountains.

GWEN

What we've always done.

ARLENE

Make the best of things.

NIA

The Isles are *by far* the safer option for you two.

GWEN

We understand. We've lived with risk before.

NIA

(flabbergasted)
I...

NARRATOR

Nia surveyed the cabin, looking back and forth between family given, and family found.

BRENNEN

When we met, Nia, you were a college student bored with her studies. You were interested in a new bit of lore that found its way to you. You were never out for war. Not that you haven't met its challenges admirably, but...you deserve safety too. My first choice would be her Ladyship and Gwen as well. But if they're volunteering...

NARRATOR

But Nia's mind was not on her friend's words.

NIA

I can't.

MILDRED

You can't?

NIA

I've made up my mind. My place is here.

MILDRED

Nia, what's this nonsense you're talking? If you think we'd ever be so cross with you that--

NIA

(voice breaking a little)
--I've cast my lot, mother. I've made many, many choices that brought me here. Each more risky, and frankly more belligerent than the last. Her Ladyship and Gwen have only made one, and it was a choice to care for the innocent. If I let them be put in harm's way for that, it would betray the vows of both our clerical orders.

BEN

If everything you've told us is true, then haven't you made choices to protect the innocent as well?

NIA

Not always. And I'll hear no more of it here. The three of us can discuss more in private.

MILDRED

(Not letting it go)
Aye, and we will!
(sighing)
And she calls us stubbornly selfless.

NIA

My Lady? Gwen? Is the proposed plan acceptable to you? You sail east with my parents, and the baby comes west with us?

NARRATOR

Arlene and Gwen looked to each other one more time. Each saw courage and resolve in the other's eyes.

GWEN

You take very good care of him, hear? Like he was your own.

NELSON

(a little rushed)
We will!

GWEN

And whatever he turns out to mean to you or your cause or what have you...you look him in his eyes before you make any decisions about him. D'you understand? He laughs when he's happy, cries when he hurts, he shits, smiles, sneezes...don't you ever forget that.

NELSON

(more earnest)
We'll remember.

ARLENE

In that case, I would only propose that perhaps...we be permitted to name him.

NIA

I don't think anyone would oppose--

BILLY

--Nah, FUCK that!

Everyone is stunned.

BILLY

Heh. Just kidding.

NIA

(Not gonna dignify it)
Did you have a name in mind, My Lady?

ARLENE

We'll talk, and decide on one before we must part.

NIA

Then, I believe everyone present is agreed.

A beat of relief.

NIA

That leaves the matter of Ren's collateral. And, also...

JEN

...Right.
(beat)
God da--

--HARD CUT TO:

21 MEDICAL DECK - SIMULTANEOUS

21

We're in a musty, lower deck of the ship.

REGAN **GROANS**, GROGGY.

ALF
Ope. Rejoining the party are we?

REGAN
Where the fuck am I?

ALF
Wish you'd stayed out a little longer.

REGAN
Alf?

ALF
Your arm's busted up something fierce. I'm gonna splint it, but I need to reset the bone first. It's gonna smart. More than a little.

REGAN
Do what you gotta do.

BUT REGAN **WINCES** IN PAIN JUST FROM ALF GRABBING HER ARM.

ALF
On the count of three, ya?

REGAN
Just fucking do it.

ALF
And a-one, and a-two, and a-
THREE!

REGAN
(psyching herself up)
Do it. Just fucking do it,
you gods damned coward.
Fucking do it already you
yellow motherf--

A bone snaps.

REGAN
--FUUUUUUCK YOU IN THE MOUTH WITH YOUR BROTHER'S COCK!

A door opens.

NIA
(dry)
Oh, good. She's up.

REGAN CONTINUES TO **YELL AND SHUDDER WORDLESSLY** AS SHE RECOVERS FROM THE JOLT OF PAIN.

ALF

She's all yours. Need to go fetch a splint.
(to Regan, patronizing)
Now try not to move it too much, ya? We'd rather not have to do that again.

REGAN

(has just about caught her breath)
Bite my cunt and spit in my asshole. You gods damned butcher.

Alf walks away.

ALF

(receding, perfectly pleasant)
Ah huh, see ya soon.

REGAN

Bring rum! Giant fucking bastard.

NIA

(stiff, almost cold)
Your Grace. Apologies for the ill-timed disturbance. But we had to make some decisions while you were... insensate. We wanted to inform you of them.

REGAN

You couldn't just fucking wait?

NIA

(bordering on snippy)
With respect, we did not know how long you would be. And time was of the essence.

REGAN

Fine. What did you decide?

NIA

Well, only four of us can go to the Sugarcane Isles, so after much--

REGAN

--Whoa whoa whoa, that wasn't the deal. Did Ren try to fuck us? Where is she? Get her ass in here.

NIA

That was not the original deal, no. Turns out - there are consequences to bringing pirates a fraction of what you promised them.

REGAN

Okay, I'm getting a whiff of hostility here, which - seeing as my arm is blown to shit and not yours - I don't fucking appreciate.

NIA

(loses it)

We had a plan! It wasn't perfect but dammit it worked! Against all odds, we got my parents to safety. We got all of us to safety. And then you decided you knew better. You had a better plan, after the plan had already worked. And now look where we are. After everything I had to do - practically grovel to convince you my parents were worth saving. Because YOU SAID it would endanger the group. Then you go and throw it all away for...for what reason I couldn't begin to speculate. Do you even know?

REGAN

Yeah, I do! I was gonna kill Ry'y lo-Th'yyt, and get us some more money, so that maybe we'd--

NIA

--And that doesn't endanger the group?

REGAN

It shouldn't have, cause if--

NIA

--Well it did!--

REGAN

--Cause if any of you had any brains you wouldn't have--oh, shit. Jen. Where is she? Is she--

JEN

--Right here.

NARRATOR

Jen entered the cramped cabin, behind Nia, her eyepatch prominent.

REGAN

(that actually hit home)
Fuck. Your eye.

They both let Regan stew in her discomfort for a moment.

REGAN

I...I don't...

NIA

(furious but merciful)

We think she'll keep the eye. By pure dumb luck.

They continue to let this hang.

REGAN

(almost...meek?)

...You should leave.

JEN

Seriously?

REGAN

I got nothing for you.

JEN

You could start with an apology maybe.

REGAN

You shouldn'ta come back for me!

JEN

Let's go, Nia. I don't know why we fucking bother.

NIA

I bother because my fate is tied to this woman, whether either of us likes it or not. I'm likely to be in her company until my premature death. And all I can hope for is that that time remains bearable.

REGAN

I never told any of you to follow me. That's on you. Fucking...look at me. I was never supposed to be a gods damned queen. No matter who fucked my grandma. I wasn't even supposed to live this long.

JEN

Oh, don't do that! Don't be all melodramatic so you can turn this on us.

The door opens again.

ALF

Okie doke. Here's a splint and some very strong rum.

REGAN

Thank the gods.

JEN

Yeah, good, get drunk. That'll fix everything.

REGAN

Excuse me?

NIA

Perhaps your instinct was right, Jen. We should cool our tempers and return in a little while.

JEN

Fine!

Jen and Nia open the door and walk out.

They get a few steps away...

...And then one set of footsteps storms back.

NIA

(through the door)

No, wait, Jen--

--Jen slams the door open.

JEN

Of course we're gonna come back for you, you selfish asshole! Normal people can't just leave their friends to die!

REGAN

Well sorry, fuck me then. Guess I thought you were smarter than normal people.

JEN

Being an asshole doesn't make you smart, it just makes you lonely. And an asshole!

REGAN

Maybe I'm supposed to be lonely.

JEN

Fine, fuck off, then.

She huffs out of the door one last time.

JEN

(through door, walking away)

Why is she like this?!

NIA

(through door, walking away)

I'm sure I don't know.

Regan pops the cork of the bottle.

ALF

You know, it's none of my business, but--

REGAN

--You're right, it's not.

She takes a swig.

22 EXT. ABOVE DECK - A LITTLE LATER

22

NARRATOR

And so after this unpleasant conversation, Jen sought out Billy's company. But Nia sought out the company of the wide open sky. Of course, she was not the only one to have had this impulse. I believe there's a saying in your tongue about apples falling from trees?

Nia walks up to the railing of the deck.

NIA

Hello, mother.

MILDRED

Hi.

NIA

I'm sorry I was short with you in there.

MILDRED

Oh, you gave me worse when you was younger.

NIA

I'm sure.

Beat.

MILDRED

I just wish you would talk to me more is all. I mean, all this with the Elves and the Orcs...It's not that I doubt you, see? It's just so much to believe all at once.

NIA

Trust me, I understand.

MILDRED

But it's not even so much *what* you told us. When you was young, it was like all you did was talk to us. I used to pray for a minute of silence. Since you left

(MORE)

MILDRED (cont'd)

for college, it's like we hardly speak the same tongue anymore.

NIA

I know. It's not because I don't want to. It just... became so difficult at some point.

MILDRED

I hear you talk the way you do now, and I can't help but think you're ashamed of us.

NIA

(moved, sympathetic)
Oh, mother...Mum...

MILDRED

Is that why you won't come with us?

NIA

I am ashamed. But not of you. Never of you.

(Works up her nerve)

I made choices in order to rescue you. They got people killed, many of them with no part in our fight. Going in, I convinced myself that was unlikely. But I think, deep down, I knew it would happen.

(beat)

I couldn't bear the thought of losing you--of having gotten you killed. And so out of guilt, and self-centered fear, I let innocents die. Is there a greater failure you can imagine, for one who would be a priest?

MILDRED

(sympathetic)

Nia, Nia, Nia...Do you remember the parable of the headsman and the horse thief?

NIA

The law requires that he kill his father, and he refuses.

MILDRED

(quoting)

Truly I say to you, this man who has done an injustice to you taught me the meaning of justice. And so I cannot take his head, lest any claim I have to act justly be forfeit. Tell my successor to hone his blade well, for he must claim two heads this day.

NIA

But Mother, that kind of..small-scale, just what's in front of us attitude...it's exactly why I abandoned the Order of the Plow. If the lives of our loved ones matter more than the lives of strangers, doesn't that

(MORE)

NIA (cont'd)
diminish the value of all life? Doesn't it reduce justice to merely who has the most powerful friends?

MILDRED
I admire your ambitions, Nia. I always have. You want to save the whole world, and I'm proud of you for it. But if all you can manage is saving what's close to you, you don't have to damn yourself.

Another set of footsteps approach.

NELSON
Nia? Sorry. I really need to talk to you.

NIA
I think this once, Mum, I may take your advice.

MILDRED
Mm. I'll try not to keel over in shock.

23 INT. MEDICAL DECK - SIMULTANEOUS

23

REGAN
Nia's staying with us?

BRENNEN
Aye, Your Grace.

REGAN
...Still?

BRENNEN
As far as I know, Your Grace.

NARRATOR
In the hopes of better understanding her circumstances, Regan had summoned her lone knight to her sickbed.

BRENNEN
She elected to give her spot to Her Ladyship and Gwen.

REGAN
...Should we have told her? Is that what this is about?

BRENNEN
Told her?

REGAN
As soon as she told us her plan, I knew innocent people were gonna die. You and Yllowyyn did too, but you followed my lead.

BRENNEN

We also knew she'd do anything to save her parents. I think we spared her some anguish.

REGAN

Yeah. Still. Maybe that wasn't my call to make.

BRENNEN

You're the Queen. Every decision is yours to make.

REGAN

Where's the baby going?

BRENNEN

He will stay with us as well. There was some argument on that point, but none seemed to disagree about Gwen or Arlene. And the two are inseparable. Gwen's loyalty to her liege is an example to all.

REGAN

(chuckling)

Yeah, well, I get it. I've known some pretty marvelous "lieges" in my day too. Especially the high-born ones.

BRENNEN

(truly and genuinely confused)
...Your Grace?

REGAN

(is he joking?)

Well I mean, you know that them two...

(Holy shit, he's not joking.)

Wait you actually don't know what their deal is?

BRENNEN

Their...deal?

REGAN

Yikes. This is a much longer talk than we've got time for right now. And not really my business to tell you anyway. I just kind of assumed you would, uh...anyway. Anything else I need to know about?

BRENNEN

It seems Jen and Nelson stole from the college one of the most valuable relics in the world.

REGAN

No shit? I'm gonna make something out of those kids yet.

BRENNEN

Having it on the ship makes Ren very skittish, and it has no value to her because no one she knows can...what was the word?

REGAN

Fence it. Yeah, makes sense.

BRENNEN

And so Ren requires collateral for the remainder of your debt to her.

REGAN

Right. 'Course. Well, good thing we're shit broke except for an unsellable relic. I gotta think. Thanks, Brennen.

BRENNEN

Of course, Your Grace. Will that be all?

REGAN

(pregnant pause)
...Can I ask you something personal?

BRENNEN

Anything, Your Grace.

REGAN

When your pops died...did you ever...have the feeling sometimes like maybe it was supposed to be you instead?

BRENNEN

(genuinely surprised the answer isn't obvious)
Did I...why, of course it was supposed to be me instead.

This hits Regan like a ton of bricks, but doesn't faze Brennen at all.

BRENNEN

If there's nothing else, I ought to try for an hour of sleep.

NARRATOR

And then Sir Brennen took his leave, having given - to his mind - a factual report on the state of things. But Regan did not return to sleep that night.

END OF PART THREE.