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WRITING SAMPLE

Torn Between Sea Mists and Solid Land

"It might erupt if you stare at it long enough."

Éirim started out of his reverie of Mount Rashkana and lowered his gaze from where it had been focused on the heaven summit of the volcano for the past few minutes, as he thought it. When he chanced to turn and look for the source of the voice, he saw the sun had moved two spans from its zenith and he winced, thankful nobody from Wadi had seen him waste two hours staring like a mad fool at an immovable mound of rock when everyone in Silverton walked in its shadow without a second glance. He could already hear the mocking cries of "Wadi-weak" that sometimes followed him through the streets in Wadi Medani, all on account of his passing out from sunstroke one day in the middle of the market, and he groaned.

"Yes, I'd think you'd rather have a painful crick in your neck after having it back at such an odd angle for so long. I confess I thought to hear a noise much worse than that, though, maybe even a word or two along the lines of indecency when in a child's presence."

Éirim looked over his shoulder, thinking the voice emanated from somewhere behind him now, where he had sworn it was just in front of him and off to his right just before. His eyes were too sun-dazzled to make out anything more than the slim shadows cast by the nearest trade shop.

"Blinded you, has it? Not too surprising. You started staring when the sun was at its highest. If I didn't recognize that fancy trinket around your neck, I'd think you the worst sort of madman."

The words now drifted from his left and Éirim turned again, his hand reflexively tucking his symbol of safe passage back into the light cloth of his shirt. He'd been chosen for this mission because he was an unknown face, but he was also trusted, though from his performance thus far, he wondered if the woman who had assigned this job to him had been as mad as the rumors said.

"Too late now. I've seen it, which means you're quite an important man." He felt somebody touch his arm and he whirled, spluttering a curse because the person had come up behind him. The stranger leaned back as he reflexively swung his arm out to shake off the hand and perhaps hurt whoever meant to harm him.

"Sule's Teeth! But you're a jumpy one." A rather bedraggled looking woman grinned up at him, both her hands now propped jauntily on her hips which were barely covered in tatters of what he assumed was once a skirt, and one of a very thin material as he couldn't help but notice.

"Soolay?" Éirim stared at her as she licked a few fingertips and rubbed at some of the dirt on her cheek, only smearing it into a light brown mask instead of wiping it off, as he assumed she had meant to do. At his question,



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she stopped her odd preening and laughed.

"You sure you didn't steal that pretty piece you wear?" She leaned closer to him and thumped him smartly on the chest, made all the more painful because she struck the pendant directly. "Sule!" The woman exclaimed the word again as if it was supposed to have some meaning to him, but Éirim only rubbed where she had hit him, trying to relieve the aching pain she'd put there. "By the Woman herself, I think the sun has fair fried your wits! Sule! Surely you know your own Goddess if you wear her symbol." Her voice was rakish and loud and a few heads had turned at this last. Éirim cursed the woman and shook her hand off where she was rubbing the material of his shirt contemplatively.

"Would you keep your god-be-cursed voice down? I don't need the whole city to know whose symbol I wear or what it implies, which, by the way, implies nothing because I haven't the devil of a clue who or what Soolay is!" Éirim knew he was blushing; he could feel the heat underneath his sunwarmed skin as he glowered at the woman. "You are daft. You wear it sure as I've seen it." Her grin grew larger as he grew more annoyed. "You Oasis?"

"What?"

"Are you Oasis?" She thumped her hand against his shirt again, leaving a smudge of dust in her wake. "I'd guess yes by your fine garb, there."

"If you mean am I from the oasis, yes."

"Ah, easy to tell." Before he could even worry about how much he stood out as she implied he did, she tapped again at his shirt where the pendant lay beneath. "You Oasis call her Şulevia. Here, she's Sule. We don't like all the syllables you Oasis folk add to things." Éirim tried to regain some composure and watched a little while as she licked her hand and smoothed her hair, disturbingly catlike but with a less successful effect.

"Ah, well, thank you." Éirim cleared his throat and nodded to her, then stepped around her and began to head further into the center of Silverton. He jumped as he felt a tap on his shoulder after ten paces and turned, seeing no one behind him. Sighing with frustration and thinking the sun may have indeed addled his wits, he turned around once more to walk forward, only to yelp in surprise.

"Rude for an Oasis, you are, but I suppose that's normal. You didn't even ask my name." Éirim stumbled back from her, unnerved that he hadn't heard her and that she stood so uncomfortably close without his skin prickling with awareness.

"How by Hells do you do that?"

"My name's Deannachúil, but everyone calls me Dusty, or Dee, or sometimes Deanna, but only when they're trying to be rude."

"Ah, yes, well...Pleasure to meet you, Dusty." Again Éirim stepped around her and continued on his way, only to be stopped by a tug on his short pants, hard enough to make him think they might very well come off. "Stop that!" He tried to slap at the hand as he turned, but there was only a bodiless giggle that made him grumble as he hiked his pants back up on his hips.

"You're more rude than most Oasis, I say. I introduce myself and you don't even tell me your name. I shall make a proclamation in all of Silverton that Éirim is too rude to trade with and he works for Shaf—" Dusty squeaked as Éirim slapped his hand over her mouth, finally finding her as she tried to slip away from his left side and peripheral vision. Their strange embrace was almost lewd as he held her tightly with one arm across her lower back, hard enough that her toes barely dangled in the dust below both of them and her head leaned hard away from him as he pressed none-too-gently against her face with the hand that silenced her.

"I'll ask you not to say that name nor mention my connection with it, if you don't mind." Éirim glared down into Dusty's eyes, belatedly noting that they were a disturbingly bright blue, a color strange for native Thermadorians. He could feel her smile against his palm and yanked his hand away from her mouth when she licked it. "What is wrong with you?" Éirim didn't let her go as he swiped his hand against the side of his pants.



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"I promise, Éirim," she quipped.

"And how the hell do you know my name?"

"Finally!" Dusty grinned and squirmed in his hold, pushing at his arm with her dirty hands and finally giving him a stinging slap with both of them when he didn't let her immediately go. When her feet again touched the ground, she didn't alleviate the intimate closeness between them, so Éirim took a large step back away from her. "Finally you ask a sensible question."

"Does this mean I'll finally get a sensible answer?"

"Oh now, don't go being rude again or I won't help you at all."

"Well you certainly haven't helped yet. And would you stop that grooming, or whatever it is you're doing?" Dusty paused with her saliva-dampened hand over her nose and lifted both brows at him, which, he suddenly noticed, were white, as was the rest of her hair, though it looked murky covered with sand and some other odd-looking dust.

"If you're going to be that way about it, Éirim, I won't take you to Slivos at all. In fact, I'll tell him news came in that you were eaten by a drake, all except the head since your mouth is too foul to taste good, I'm certain." Her petulance seemed almost childlike, but when she crossed her arms over her stomach, he noticed the pleasing shape of her torso and the disturbing thinness of the rags there, almost more transparent than those over her hips, and knew she was far from her childhood days.

"Why don't you put more clothes on?"

"It's hot." Éirim was surprised at the answer, the first truly direct one he'd had from her.

"And you've gone back to asking stupid questions."

"And you've remained the same, annoying, prattling madwoman as when you first started speaking."

"Fine, then. See if you ever find Slivos at all. Then you'll have to go home a failure and who knows what she'll do to you there. I've heard she's started eating children again." This time the name she spoke registered and he was afraid when she turned and started to walk off, already familiar with her knack of disappearing and staying hidden.

"Wait!" When Dusty kept walking, Éirim jogged after her, trying not to think about the sweat he already had running into his eyes and what this would do to add to it. "Will you wait? Dusty!" He cursed as she turned the corner around one of the shops and repeated the same oath when he followed and didn't see her. With a groan, Éirim sagged against the shop's wall and started to swipe the sweat out of his eyes when he felt something lick his cheek. He squealed and jerked away, nearly toppling a local who was passing by with a basket full of thread. "Sorry, I'm sorry." He hastily disentangled himself from the poor woman and handed her the basket, mumbling apologies all the while. After she had cursed him thoroughly for being a clumsy, wet-foot, Oasis, she went on her way with her nose in the air and Éirim turned to see Dusty grinning at him.

"I liked the way you said my name. It was a pleasant mix of desperation, fear and want. Do it again?" Éirim muttered under his breath as he walked back to her, rubbing at his cheek where she had licked it and trying to keep his temper in check, but this woman was trying it beyond all means.

"You said you knew Slivos."

"Well of course I do. He's the one that sent me out to fetch you whenever you made it into town."

"Well?"

"Well what?" Her reply was directed more to the sand than to him as she doubled over to rub at her calves.



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"Aren't you going to fetch me to Slivos?"

Dusty straightened, rubbing at her chin as she did so and peering at him with her foreign eyes. "Are you going to be nice?"

"Yes, yes I'll be nice."

"You don't sound as if you mean it."

Afraid she would walk off and disappear again, he hastily reassured her. "I'll be nice, Dusty! Just, please, take me to him." Éirim watched as she seemed to consider, now rubbing at one of her shoulders and making little circle patterns in the dust there.

"Alright, Éirim. But if you're mean at all..." She left the threat hanging between them before she leapt forward and grabbed his shirt near the waist, pulling him afterward as she hurried into the crowd at a pace too near to running to make him comfortable or anywhere near graceful as he stumbled along behind her, too afraid to swipe at her hand for fear she would let him go and turn a corner without ever taking him to Slivos.

WRITING SAMPLE 2

For Fear of My Ruin

"Soft, soft. Go softly now." Sive placed her hands over his and cradled his calloused fingers. Her own were dry, nails chipped from farm work, but they were still softer than his. Daniel croaked a response as his fingers shook against her palms.

"Sive, no. I must." Sun filtered through the loft and coiled its fingers through her hair, setting it aflame. He squinted against the red-gold glare, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes growing more pronounced with the familiar pinch of features. But he did not look away. His fingers spasmed in her hands and he pulled one free, lifting it to caress the heat of her hair. "Please," he whispered. How Sive loved that word when spoken in her native tongue.

"My parents do think more of my honor than to let me lose it in the hay, Daniel. And I do, as well." The words were easy on her lips as she answered in the Gaelic in which he spoke. Whenever they were alone, they spoke the old language. Sentiments sounded sweeter when they weren't butchered by either of them trying to remember English. Daniel sighed.

"Then will you finally marry me, Sive? I have worked your lands for many years now. Your father must trust me by now, and I do wish to retire to a gentle plain." His hand drifted down to caress her neck as he spoke, a finger trailing over her collarbone. Sive pretended to ignore the implication.

"There are plains enough to the south of here much more fair," she answered.

"I do not agree. Here they are softer, and the hills more plentiful."

"If it is hills in plenty you are wanting, Daniel, go to the West."

"They are too filled with stones, Sive. I long for gentle grass on which I may rest my head."

"For soft grass, try the North. I hear the rains are much more frequent there." By now his hands had drifted to her waist and his words were a rasp.

"I do not wish the South or west or north. I do not even wish for the East. What I do desire I already see."

Sive looked away and stretched her arms wide to indicate the hay behind her. "I do not think my father would begrudge you a share of what you help to crop."

"I have not harvested, yet, what I wish to share. Your father may not so kindly give me the price I seek."



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"My father has always been known to be a generous man, Daniel."

"Yes, more so than his daughter, as I do know quite well."

Sive laughed. "My mother did raise me a good woman. I give my fair share and do believe in marital debt."

"But you will not marry me."

"Wisha, Daniel. You have not asked me rightly."

Daniel's hands trembled against the curves of her waist and he gazed down at this woman who would not relinquish her games—not even for him. He sank to his knees and pulled her close with a sudden, tight grip until his forehead pushed into the soft hollow of her stomach and his lips grazed her abdomen.

"Sive, all my life I have drowned in your laughter and followed you as my sun. Where you rise, I turn, and where you set, I follow. In your smile I have found more comfort than any feather bed could ever offer. You have bound me, whether or not you know this, and I am destined to be forever servant to you. Why would you sever the chains you so completely set, my Sive? Do not release me. Marry me."

Sweat trickled down the back of his neck as he waited, every muscle straining to catch her answer. The rough, earthy scent of her *léine* filled his nostrils and the muffled shout of a worker still in the fields faintly fell across his ears. When the echo of labor died off and she still remained silent, Daniel squeezed his eyes shut and held his breath. He would die this way if she refused him. The hissing roar of his own breathing began to slow in its rhythm and grow quiet inside his head. He felt a slight touch against his hair, spider-light before it grew heavy with affection.

"You do well with such words, Daniel. Do tell me, have you learned to read?" Sive's words were soft and he had difficulty hearing around the rumble of blood in his ears. But he knew she hadn't answered. He pressed his forehead harder against her stomach, afraid he would lose her in this moment, forever, if she did not tell him yes. Daniel felt her muscles recoil as she gasped at his rough handling, but he dug his fingers into her waist, keeping her so close her breaths were shallow—a gentle pulse of abdomen against his eyes.

"Sive," he breathed. The heat of his breath fanned back against his mouth as her name was muffled in her *léine*. Spots began to dance behind his eyelids and he knew he would have to draw back soon and breathe again—and leave behind this one moment where she could, she *might*, say yes. Her hand grew heavier against his head and felt as if she tried to push him away, to allow herself a chance to escape his desperation for an answer.

And then the pressure against his crown abated. He felt her sigh.

"I will marry you, Daniel." Her words were faint around the light ringing that had begun in his ears, but he'd heard. A few hot tears escaped his eyes and melted into her dress, but he did not move back or relent his desperate grip. "Daniel? Have you heard me? I did say I will marry you."

Finally he stirred and leaned away; cool air rushed into his lungs and made the sweat on his flushed cheeks chill as he tilted his head back to squint up at her. The sun made her hair a fiery halo and he believed from that moment he had finally found salvation.

"I did hear you, my Sive. *My Sive*." He lingered over those two words together until his somber look melted into a grin and he stood, knees wobbly and numb from kneeling for so long. "My Sive!" She squealed as he wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her, but the startled sound melted into laughter as he spun her and set her down gently again, without releasing his close hold. Sive smiled up at him as he bent to kiss her forehead.

"Aye, I am your Sive as you are now my Daniel. But I am sure you are able to do better than that. Let us see if the hay is as comfortable as the look of it promises."