

ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND DEMONS AND THE CHERUB OF DESIRE

Something caused Donald Macarthur to look up from his work in the kitchen. The storm had died away, but random blasts of wind still hit the lighthouse building. It was perhaps one such gust that had distracted him. He peered out of the window, between the streaks of salt. The view seemed not right. There was a bulge in the world. He rubbed the glass and peered again. And then he launched himself towards the door, knocking over a chair as he did so. There was no time to stop for his oilskins and boots.

Outside, Macarthur ran as if possessed in the direction of the landing on the west side, where Ducat and Marshall had gone. It was a simple enough task that they had set out to do: after the storms of the past week, they had gone to ensure that the box of mooring-ropes and lifting-tackle was securely closed, leaving Macarthur to clean the living quarters. No point in staying out in this weather for any length of time. The day was dark, even though it was close to noon. The sun had vanished, had not been seen for one single day in this heartless December. As had been the case for a week or more, even when the wind had died, there was nothing visible all around - just a brief line of grey sea, and then thick low cloud.

But out at sea - considerably closer now as he saw when he reached the top of the cliff - a monstrous wave was building, from far out in the ocean where such things bred.

The wind blasted him as he reached the head of the narrow steps which led down to the landing-stage. He stopped and glanced downwards. Between the salvos of spray that launched at him like arrows in a battle, he could make out the figures of his colleagues in their dark oilskins down by the box of equipment. Seventy feet below them, the sea crashed against the island, a boiling cauldron that thundered and shook the very rocks under their feet. And coming in from the sea, a gigantic wave, taller and slower than most. He shouted down to Ducat, but might have saved his breath: his words were like the hum of the midge against the roar of the sea. He gripped the guard-rail tightly with his left hand and made his way down the steps.

Marshall was struggling with the lid of the box, and Ducat, one hand fastened to the rail, was doing his best to secure the locks that held the lid in place. Their hands were numbed by the freezing seawater, which came at them from every direction,

thwarting their every move. Macarthur launched himself in between the two men, gripped Ducat by the shoulder and forced him round to see the incoming wave.

But at that very moment the wave crashed over them, its peak high above their heads. As it broke against the cliff, the heavy mass of water fell on them like a huge slab of rock and swept them from their precarious position. Each man struggled against it, kicking, flailing and grasping for a foothold or a handhold. They were swept downwards and outwards; after a brief pause, swept back upon the cliff, battered like three pieces of broken wood.

And then the waters just as suddenly receded, leaving only silence. The three men anxiously picked themselves up from where they had been flung down. They examined their limbs in disbelief, astonished they were not taken by Death. They glanced at each other. Then, like the birds around them, marvelled at the scene.

Where shortly before the boiling waves had lashed the cliffs, now there was exposed rock. The sea had dropped in its bed by some three fathoms or more. The wind had all but died to a gentle breeze. The waters, now calm, gently rose and fell. Where before all that had permitted the men to reach the supply-boats was a flight of treacherous steps and a rusting iron railing, now there was a long and elegant pier, to rival that of Portobello or Blackpool. It spanned the gulf almost to the neighbouring isle in the south-west, a good half-mile, and ornate iron columns supported electric lamps along its entire length. Flags and bunting slapped gaily in the fresh air.

Ducat and his companions stood amazed.

‘God in Heaven,’ muttered Macarthur, shivering, ‘this cannot be!’

‘Hold your tongue, man,’ said Ducat sharply, ‘whatever wonder it is, you have no cause to take the Lord’s name in vain.’

Macarthur paid no attention to this censure, but continued to gaze at the unlikely scene that now lay before them. Young Thomas Marshall, for his part, was on his knees, exhausted and astounded in equal measure. ‘What has happened, Mr. Ducat?’ he wanted to know.

James Ducat made no reply. Although he would not care to admit it, this was beyond his experience, a man of more than twenty years’ service on the lights. He studied this pier carefully, in spite of his disbelief, admiring its construction. The thing was doubtless a marvel, a shameless monument to sophistication - he had seen the like at such places on the Firth of Clyde where the unwashed masses liked to waste their days of leisure. All that was lacking was a military band, fresh and tanned from Transvaal, marching up and down in smug formation before swooning ladies and patriotic dupes.

He was interrupted in his reflections on the Frailty of Man by another nervous shout from Marshall, who had meanwhile been looking northwards

‘What’s that, Mr. Ducat?’

All three men looked in the same direction and saw a majestic yacht sailing round the headland in the north, its bows glistening as it slid through the waves. It came on swiftly, effortlessly, driven by a vast silver sail stretched taut against the breeze. After a few minutes, or in no time at all, the boat glided gracefully in beside the pier, slowed effortlessly, halted.

‘Well, damn me,’ observed the unrepentant Macarthur, ‘that’s not the *Hesperus*, then!’

Surely, thought Ducat bitterly, Mr. Macarthur will go to Hell in short time. But the man was correct - that was no Lighthouse Tender come with the relief-keeper. This was altogether a different kind of vessel, smooth and gleaming and massive as a leviathan. It was now stationary at the end of the pier, although there was no sign of any activity on the deck.

Adjusting both his coat and his decorum, James Ducat led the way along the pier to exercise his authority. It was at this moment that Ducat realised that neither he, nor either of his companions, had anything on their feet - his sea-boots had vanished, sucked off, no doubt, by the force of the wave. However, boots or no boots, this island was in his keeping, and he was equal to the task.

Underfoot, the broad slats of the pier were fashioned from some rich solid wood, not cheap pine as would rot within a week. The treads were not slippery, each being scattered still with sand and studded moreover with square-headed brass nails to provide a grip for their feet. Just above their heads, the wonderful electric lights burned brightly, one after another after another. Ducat made to count them, if only to keep his mind from straying and his mouth from gaping artlessly at the wonder of it all. He had passed one score and eight in number, and had lost the ability to count more, when the three keepers came alongside the shimmering vessel, now miraculously tied up with silver chains to the pier. Carved in elegant golden letters along the side were the words *The Beguiling Splendour of the Cherubim*, this being, they might suppose, its name.

The yacht was not extravagantly large - perhaps some fifty feet from stem to stern; but was fashioned, it seemed, from glass and silver. Surprisingly, for a vessel that had sailed upon the face of the ocean, it bore no traces of rust or of the unsightly stains of salt-water. All that was metal, gleamed; all that was glass, sparkled. There was no sign of anyone on deck, no movement detected within. The three men stood, uncertain, watching the portholes and the doors.

Ducat decided he must take charge of the situation. ‘Ahoy there!’ he hailed the boat. ‘Please show yourselves!’

A minute passed. Macarthur and Marshall stood slightly behind Ducat, with the respect that rank demanded. Water gurgled under the pier, a fathom below where gentle waves lapped.

‘Why do we not just go aboard?’ demanded Macarthur, always a man eager for action without forethought. Ducat put out an arm to restrain him, but said nothing. Macarthur muttered some blasphemous comment to himself, but stayed back.

At last, when even Ducat himself began to consider there was some justification for boarding, a door was pushed open. From below decks a figure clambered out with some difficulty. It was perhaps ten feet tall. This was no immaculate naval captain. This was something other. Its head was that of an eagle; its body was that of a loose woman naked above the waist, and draped in finery below; and as it stepped on to the deck, the three men could see that it had two pairs of wings. One beady yellow eye was terrible in wrath, the other covered with a patch.

The figure stood on the deck, stretched its arms out, roared the terrible roar of a lion, and flapped its gilded wings. The three men stepped back involuntarily. At that, the figure let loose a laugh that echoed around the surrounding rocks. It laughed and it laughed. Then, for good measure, it roared and beat its wings one more time.

‘Did I startle you?’ it asked in a pleasant voice, jutting its terrible face forwards towards the three men. ‘You like the lion’s roar from the eagle’s beak?’

Ducat thought to shake his head and deny it. The creature looked briefly disappointed, and then it - she - roared once more, so loudly and unexpectedly that Ducat could not this time conceal his fear. The creature laughed heartily and clapped her strong hands together once, twice, thrice.

‘Well, that’s better,’ she said in satisfied tones. ‘Now, do not stand there keeping me out in the cold. This fresh air is no place for one of my breeding. Come aboard, come aboard my vessel!’

Powerless to resist, in awe and in terror, the three men made their way to an arching gangway that they had not noticed until now, and boarded the boat. Around them, they could hear the wind building to a gale again, and felt the spray from the rising waves. They descended below decks by a crystal stairway.

Down in the saloon, it was hot, the air close and laden with scent, heavy and dark from luxury. A thick carpet lay on the floor, into which their bare feet sank, a sensation none had ever felt before. On the walls, curtains, tapestries and richly-coloured paintings hung. Gleaming tables, lacquered sideboards, deep-padded seating - all these stood around in profusion. Although there were several large windows, little light penetrated. Oil-lamps stood burning on every flat surface, the smoke smelling of sweet incense. Mr. Ducat suspected he had strayed on board the plaything of some Yorkshire Sybarite - or worse - into the floating chapel of an unrepentant Papist; and was greatly offended. He affected to notice none of the

treasures that were displayed, and certainly undertook not to admire them. Marshall simply gaped at his surroundings. Macarthur coolly appraised the naked breasts of the creature and seemed on the brink of making some inappropriate remark.

Ducat turned to their awful host and asked with a courage he did not feel: 'What is this vessel? Who are you?'

The captain of the ship threw up her arms. 'What is this?' she demanded. 'Is there no respect in the world any more? Truly it is said that mortals fear nothing but their own mortality. These are sad, sad times.' She turned her one good eye balefully on Ducat. 'You look upon me and you do not know who I am?' The creature shook her wings fiercely, dislodging from her feathers considerable scents of musk and incense, which set her to coughing and choking. Tears sprang to her eye, and she wrestled with the patch over the other one, finally tearing it away in disgust. She threw it to one side, where it landed inside a huge amphora of bronze with a slight tinkle. Then she rubbed the tears from both eyes.

'No, indeed, I know you not,' Ducat advanced more boldly, when the disturbance had settled. 'And I require an answer without delay, so that we can be done with our business and return before the night comes in. We have a lamp to tend, it is our duty.'

'Don't come the bag with me, miserable sinner!' growled the creature. 'Keep your airs and graces to yourself! Duty? You know nothing of duty!' Violently, she thrust the three men into seats. They sat down heavily. The seafarer squatted down upon the thick carpet, recovering from her coughing-fit, and glared once more upon them. 'What do you imagine - am I feathered fiend or am I fevered friend?' She opened her mighty beak and roared, delighting in their terror. 'Heaven preserve me from fools! Just look at me. Ah - the brightness of my presence is too much? Bear it for an instant and consider - would I not be the Cherub of Desire?'

James Ducat knew about the Cherubim, and he knew about desire. Desire was not something a man of his years and a man of his education and spirituality could listen to. On lonely, warm spring days during his twenty years with the Northern Lighthouse Board, he had felt desires: loneliness and a yearning for his family, growing up without him in those long months that took him away. And he had seen what desire did to the men who had never left dry land, for he saw them broken down and turned insides-to-out by the rendering of burning desire into ashes and the rending of infatuation into tatters. 'If you be the Cherub of Desire,' argued Ducat, convinced now that he had dealings either with the Great Adversary or a profligate from London, or both, 'then I am not your man. And you shall stay away from my men, for they are easily led astray!'

Reminding himself thus of his two colleagues, Ducat glanced over his shoulder: the pair sat enraptured, each facing in a different direction, their eyes fixed on something unseen, their lips moving in unheard speech, their brows furrowed. Their

present purposes were mysterious to him, hidden as had ever been the locks and keys to their day-to-day moods. It never did a man any good, to enquire too closely into the thoughts and passions that inhabited his fellow-keepers, when together they were stationed on a remote rock for weeks on end. Far better to remain isolated, alone. To probe into the minds of others was to invite violence.

‘Listen, you numbskull,’ hissed the Cherub impatiently. ‘I do not ask for your immortal soul, or question your pernicky rectitude. I am not propositioning you, do not flatter yourself! I am far, far older than you can imagine, and normally I have little interest in what goes on in your heart. But today I sailed past your little island, and I thought to myself - what is it that drives a man to keep watch over the stormy seas, and what is it that he dreams about as he watches? So now amuse me! I crave amusement. Life is so tedious on the high seas, so dull! You would not believe how tedious, especially at my age. So - I will be pleased to know: what is your deepest desire?’

Ducat considered the question for a moment. ‘I’ll have none of it,’ he insisted, standing up, ‘none of it at all!’ Words came unbidden to his lips. ‘I am sick of love. It is but temptation.’

The Cherub threw herself back on a rich-embroidered couch and howled with laughter. ‘Ah, the Song of Songs! The Songs of Solomon the Great Lover? What childishness! Lips like a thread of scarlet, teeth like a flock of sheep? Threescore queens, fourscore concubines, and virgins without number? A belly like a heap of wheat set about with lilies, remember that one?’ Wiping another tear, this time of mirth, from her good eye, the creature reached into the drawer of a nearby cabinet and pulled out another patch, which she placed fastidiously over her other eye. Then she suddenly snarled: ‘Listen, you simpleton: I ask you not of your relations with women, merely what leads you on, from day to day?’

It seemed an idle, aimless question: at his age, Ducat desired no more than to be warm in his house at Leith, watching his children grow, tending the coal-fire and growing old in peace with his wife. All other desires had been leached from him by the passage of the years.

‘I have no time for this sophistry, madam,’ said Ducat in a determined voice. ‘You will excuse us if we return to our posts: there will doubtless be another storm soon, and our duty calls us back to prepare the lamp as a warning to all shipping.’

Ducat felt the entire boat being pushed up and sideways by the rising storm.

In reply, the Cherub smirked and waved him away. ‘Oh, go,’ she said, ‘return to your island. I wish you good fortune.’

Ducat spoke to his fellow-keepers of the light, but received no answer. He mounted - alone - the glassy flight of steps which led to the deck. The boat heaved

in the waves and he gripped the brass handrail tightly. Having fought back the door, he stepped out into the gale.

And observed that the islands were now a mile or more behind them, disappearing under the endless onslaught of mountainous seas. The lighthouse was hidden in low sweeping cloud, dark. The magnificent pier and its electric lights had vanished. The strange boat dived and spiralled before the swell which swept across its stern from the south-west.

Gathering his wits and holding fast to the door to avoid being hurled into the grey ocean, Ducat peered around him through the spray: not a sign of anyone else on deck. There was a smooth protuberance towards the stern which might have been a wheelhouse for the yacht, but it was certainly deserted. No other equipment or object disturbed the glistening clean lines of the vessel, beyond one huge main-mast that towered and swayed and sang keenly in the air above him. Waves washed over deck almost without resistance. Ahead, nothing, except an endless heaving mountain of sea thrashed by the gale. A single translucent sail filled with the wind and drove them northwards.

'May the Good Lord preserve us all!' prayed Ducat, realising that a return to land was impossible. He fell back into the stairwell, tumbled down the steps as the door slammed closed above him, and sat heavily on the thick-cushioned seats of the saloon.

Both Marshall and Macarthur had disappeared. The Cherub lounged alone on the seats, noisily amused by Ducat's precipitate return. She picked her teeth with a splinter of cedar-wood and sipped at a cheap bottle of Jamaica rum, humming to herself.

'Where are Macarthur and Marshall?' Ducat asked at length.

'Oh, they have gone to lie down,' said the Cherub airily. 'They were tired and cold. They have gone off to enquire more deeply into the question of Desire. My servants are tending to their every need. They are well looked after, do not fear.'

'That is just what I do fear,' retorted Ducat angrily. But he made no further move. He was tired, very tired. The hull strained and drummed around him. He closed his eyes for a moment. Then, recovering his composure, he pulled out his pipe, lit it and silently sucked. The Cherub made a great show of coughing and waving the pipe-smoke away from her face, and of catching her breath to one side. Ducat ignored her. He considered this strange captain - a woman withal. He brought to mind the vision of the Cherubim as Ezekiel described them in his tenth Chapter: the prophet saw that the Cherubim had four faces; a Cherub, a man, a lion, an eagle; and all were full of eyes. His present adversary had but one face and a single opened eye.

‘You are no Cherub,’ he said finally, pointing the stem of his pipe at the creature. ‘You have one eye only. And no wheels.’

The Cherub sprang to her feet and drew herself to her full height, towering above Ducat. ‘I? I am no Cherub?’ she exclaimed. ‘And what if I have but one eye - once I had many, my wings and my back and my hands were full of eyes! Full of them, do you hear? No room for even one more eye. Lovely eyes, they were. Oh, and wheels? Wheels I had in plenty, man. Does a Cherub need to stick with eyes and wheels, just because it is written down by some prophet? No, a Cherub has to move with the times. A Cherub must not become *démodé*. My dear man, I cast off eyes and wheels long ago. Wheels on a lady like me? Oh, I think not! But I tell you, I could bring them back this instant, if it so pleased me. Aye, wheels and eyes enough to fill a whole book of nonsense! And my one eye is still worth more than your miserable estimation! I am the Cherub and you - you are nothing!’

She flapped her wings fiercely, sweeping heedlessly from a shelf a number of valuable navigational instruments and a roll of important charts. ‘Nothing!’ She roared again in anger, showering the man with slaver.

‘Why,’ she continued at some volume, ‘is it not enough to you that I can clear the storm from the ocean? How think you that I came so easily to land? I pushed in just one last wave which would calm all the waves, and then I set me up a rather fashionable landing-stage, lined with those new-fangled lights that men so love, and got up very nicely indeed with flags, just so that I could make a quiet landfall, no trouble at all. I can do that, mortal, I can do all that, eyes or no eyes, wheels or no wheels!’

Ducat shrugged at this angelic demonstration of wrath, puffed some more on his pipe. He knew how to deal with anger. The Cherub eyed him, through her one good eye, for a moment. Then she shook her one eagle’s head sadly.

‘And you have not yet answered me: what do you desire, Ducat?’

Ducat considered calmly. ‘And will you, like the Tempter, grant me my desire if I tell it to you?’ he asked scathingly. ‘Is that what you will do?’

The Cherub sneered pleasantly. ‘Oh yes, Mr Ducat, the Cherub of Desire does all that. But for now I simply ask the question.’

‘And I simply desire no more,’ said Ducat stubbornly, ‘than to be released from this forsaken vessel and to find my feet on dry land once again.’

‘That,’ conceded the Cherub, ‘is a desire worthy of an old man. And have you no more desires?’

‘I have, madam, more regrets than I have desires,’ answered the lighthouse-keeper. ‘But neither the one nor the other are any concern of yours. I share both with my Lord alone.’ Ducat stood up, brushed past the wings of his tormentor and peered out from a small porthole. He could discern nothing, for the glass was thick with streaming waters and behind the waters only a dim grey and black mass shifted.

As he stood there, holding to the gilded surrounds of the port-hole for stability, he told through the number of his desires. There were few enough now: in another lifetime, there had been those of a young man - for women and then for a woman; for justice and the casting down of injustices; for peace and the ending of war; for war and the ending of evil; for evil and the beginning of wisdom; for children and the growing of his son. One by one, the desires of his life had blazed like a bush, then flickered and died, extinguished by the repeated withering of hope; his resolutions had been inherited by young men whom he despised and envied for their naivety and blind strength of purpose, men like Macarthur. He was not an old man. But now his desire was only for warm fires, a bottle of India Pale Ale, some woodland in which to walk out of the wind - aye, trees and the birds of the woods would be a comfort; the months spent tending lamps on the buffeted rocks of western Scotland in the company only of taciturn men and shrieking gulls had blunted all other ambition.

‘Dry land and wee birdies, Mr Ducat?’ mocked the Cherub. ‘In the name of the Beast, these are seductive desires indeed!’

Ducat paid no attention. If the creature could hear his innermost thoughts, then there was no point in discussion. Perhaps if he ignored her, the Cherub of Desire would leave him alone.

But in a swift change of mood, the creature delicately enfolded Ducat with her sublime wings and pressed him close to her soft and exposed breasts. ‘I cannot leave you,’ she whispered, her breath heavy with alcohol and dangerous with desire. ‘You are mine: mine until the end of all desires. I am the Cherub, too, of Regret, for the one thing goes hand in hand with the other, skipping down the short road of life.’

Ducat at last yielded; he felt heavy, light, numbed, tingling, thirsty, sickened, tired. He slipped into dreams, of a small birch-wood with a hidden burn cutting deep through it. The burn trickled low and dark, almost hidden by the ferns and the branches and the grass, cutting deep into the earth beneath, year after year, lower and darker still. In its cool depths, only rest. Only rest.

When he awoke, it was to the insistent shaking of the Cherub. Her cruel eagle’s beak was poised over Ducat, so unexpected, so close that he was terrified into a scream.

‘Oh, control yourself, weakling!’ she scolded impatiently, shaking him more strongly still. ‘You are beyond fear! You are beyond desires! Now, awake, for we are close upon your destination. You may see for yourself, if you choose to go above.’

James Ducat found himself lying full-length upon a bench, his pipe sliding and tumbling on the floor with the motion of the boat beneath. He raised himself

heavily and peered about him. Some daylight filtered into the cabin. 'Where are Marshall and Macarthur?' he demanded. 'What have you done with them?'

'Oh, safe enough, while you slumbered. Marshall has been landed in the night; and the young man Macarthur -'

'Landed?' exclaimed Ducat. 'Where has Marshall landed?'

'Mr Marshall is on Sula Sgeir. As for Macarthur -'

'But Sula Sgeir is a barren rock! No one goes there, woman, not in winter. He'll be drowned for sure! We must go back for him.'

'A rock, indeed - I near lost my ship on that rock last night!' shrieked the Cherub. '*My ship, my ship* - do you not care? Do you know how valuable this vessel is? No, it is beyond your imagination. If I were to lose this ship, you fool, I would lose immortality itself. And this is all the thanks I get?' In her anger, the creature threw an empty rum-bottle at the wall where it shattered into a hundred shards. 'Small thanks I got from Marshall, the miserable whining wretch!' The Cherub stamped up and down for several minutes, growling and shaking her horrible head. 'Did he not say to me that of all things he admired, the best was the seal in this great grey ocean? Aye, he said that, and then he complained and whimpered when we arrived at the place that is home to those creatures of his greatest desire. Truly, you mortals are beyond my reckoning. I do not understand the world any more. Why do I bother? Why at all?'

The Cherub kicked petulantly at the furniture, then looked around for another bottle of rum. One of the several priceless cabinets of exotic wood seemed to contain several hundred bottles. Ducat recognised the label - a cheap spirit, commonly found empty in the gutters of Greenock and Glasgow on a Sunday morning, the contents inside unconscious sinners also lying in the gutters, or up a close.

Abruptly the Cherub of Desire sniggered, and put the stopper back in the bottle: 'But as for Macarthur, he is a young man of uncommon expectation and will be taken shortly to a place which is suitable - we Cherubim always see to that. These northern rocks in the ocean can be the very flesh-pots, Mr Ducat, the very flesh-pots, the Resorts of Everlasting Manhood. I am always surprised at what you can find out here, beyond the horizons of common landlubbers. One Cherub, fourscore concubines, eh, and virgins without number - what do you think, Mr. Ducat?' The creature leered at Ducat and winked, tapping him sharply on the chest, once, twice, thrice. 'But consider your own situation, for I believe we are arrived at North Rona.'

For certain, the movement of the sea beneath them had changed and from above came the sound of waves upon rocks. Heartened by that familiar sound, Ducat climbed out on deck, where a stiff wind blew, nothing more, and looked ahead.

Towering to the left was a grim cliff; then a grey hill swept by the rain; and another cliff away to the right.

North Rona? But he'd heard that Rona was some fifty miles north of Lewis. Thus: a hundred miles north of their own lighthouse. But in such a short time, how was that possible? He laughed aloud for the foolish question: how could any of it be? One moment, safe in their lighthouse; the next, in the bowels of an unnatural boat captained by a brazen woman who thought herself the very Cherub; and the next again, coming under a desolate rock having no light.

To be out of the company of that creature, he moved up on deck, drenched in moments by the sea, chilled beyond endurance, but glad to be in the fresh air. There was light in the sky, but no sun. He estimated that it was nine, ten o'clock in the morning. The yacht barrelled silently in under the cliffs, and came behind the eastern headland to a long declivity, over which thousands of birds circled and dived in the cold streaming wind. Steered by no pilot, the yacht sailed into a sheltered inlet.

There was a disturbance behind him. He turned to see the Cherub squeeze herself out of the narrow door behind him. She did so with great difficulty. She pecked and tore angrily with her ferocious eagle's beak, then hauled herself through the opening: minor damage was caused to her wings. 'Putting on weight,' she muttered. 'Must cut back on the scones.' At last, she pulled herself free of the strait gate and clapped the man on the shoulder with hands of steel.

'Well, here we are, Mr Ducat.'

The lighthouse-keeper looked out upon the rocks. 'This is no place for me, madam. This was not my desire. There is not even a light here. What do you mean by this?'

'I have considered your remaining desires,' answered the angel airily, 'and you asked only for dry land and birdies. And now we must consider your inconstancies.'

'My inconstancies?' Ducat faltered. 'What do you mean?'

'Inconstancies, regrets, whatever!' snapped the Cherub, once more losing patience. 'Listen to me, instead of repeating my every word! Or would you admit to being a dribbling dullard? Just listen! Do you tell me you are a constant man? You deny that you have been false to your friends? Deceived your loved ones? Taken what was not yours? Abandoned one thing that was fine in favour of another that was rotten? Edged away when you should have stood forward? Have you not each day fallen short? And have you not finally denied me - me, the true Cherub of Desire? You have given me no respect, and I your loving mistress! After six thousand years, to think it has come to this! Am I not busy? Do I have time for these pointless arguments? I have a Domain to rule over, and the cares of men and women more pliable than yourself. Do not waste the time of a Cherub!'

Ducat hung his head, finding here neither wisdom, nor the least desire to respond. He had reached the end.

‘Ah, James Ducat! I can take no more of this nonsense: fly now and ponder long over your inconstancies!’ Firmly, the Cherub pushed him away and over the side.

Ducat was in an instant without footing, as if hit from above by a falling wave. He stretched his long wings and on the up-draught slid unencumbered into flight. All around him, birds like himself screamed and wailed, flying on desire, inconstant as the airs, regretful as the dead. He was one only of one hundred thousand demons soaring in the air. Below him, *The Beguiling Splendour of the Cherubim* had slipped back into the long waves of the ocean, leaving never a trace of its passage north from the suddenly-abandoned lighthouse of the Flannan Isles.

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