### Fulgent Engineering

**by deepandlovelydark**

**Summary**

One casket of sapphires. Forty black stygian bones. One element of dawn, one madman, one pig.

And a roll of duct tape.

**Notes**

Did you ever think, “Fallen London is fantastic, and Sunless Sea is scrumptious, but I wish I could read a story set in the liminal spaces between the two narratives?“

Or wonder, “What under earth is the Tireless Mechanic’s backstory? When did the Unsettling Sage come into it? And how is one recruited by snakes to steal the dreams of stone pigs, anyhow?“

Or simply say to yourself, “I know what I’ve always wanted! A novel with all its characters named in adjective-noun format!“

Well. Here you go.

On the one hand, the Innocent Spy (cheerful, can fix anything, wears a mullet and persists in the espionage business despite his right-on moral code). On the other, his sailing companions aboard the good ship Clipper, and their zee-journeys across the Unterzee: a underground ocean of wonders ranging from the blood-tide of Adam’s Way, to the erudite poetic mushrooms of the Uttershroom, to stolen Fallen London and its monarch, the Traitor Empress (née Queen Victoria). Spoilers included for both franchises with wild abandon, so
tread cautiously if you mind such things.

A spoiler-happy glossary is available here.

Oh yes, before we begin: “Fallen London is © 2015 and™ Failbetter Games Limited: www.fallenlondon.com. This is an unofficial fan work.” And MacGyver is copyright either Paramount or Lee David Zlotoff, depending. Certainly not me.

Enjoy, if you've a mind to...

See the end of the work for more notes.
In the northern reaches of the Unterzee, near Void’s Approach (where the ocean narrows to its vanishing point), a ship struggles through the curiously thick snowstorms. A contretemps is taking place on its tiny bridge: one of a fairly common nature around these parts.

“We should eat the Anonymous Crewmember,” the Captain says. “Tradition and all that. Probably very good with a little salt and pepper.”

“I vote for the Unsettling Student over there,” comes a slightly muffled response; the Crewmember is swabbing under the table, a position from which they might be extracted only with considerable difficulty. “He was the one who got us into this mess, remember? We could all be on the Port Carmelian coffee run in tropical waters, but no, he has to come along and bribe us into this daft voyage North.”

“My vote’s for the Cynical Herald,” the Student says, not bothering to look up from his prized copy of A Most Excellent Pamphlete Detailing Wayzz and Meanzz of Dizzecting Known Zee-Creaturess, with Delineated Diagramz. “Every hour she’s out on deck shouting ‘Doom! Doom! Doom!’ like some sort of perverted Surface cuckoo, need I remind you? Does anyone on this ship need reminding about that?”

The Cynical Herald, who has just come back from performing this very task and is stamping snow off her boots, shrugs. “Are we debating who gets eaten first? I want the engineer to go first. Our fatuous, pointless engineer who can’t get the ship to go past half-speed, just because we have a bit of Storm’s attention out there.”

Their engineer takes the comment in good part, as usual. There’s a reason that he’s been given “the Innocent” as a handle. (Short for the Innocent Spy, in fact, though where the latter part of the cognomen came from is rather more involved.)

“Yeah, I think I’ve fixed that. Or not fixed, exactly, but something better. You know how overloading the engine will speed her up, if you don’t mind the odd explosion here or there?”

“So? Any mechanic worth his weight in coal can manage that trick.”

“Sure, but have any of them tried adding dynamite?”

Four voices have just enough time for the first syllable of “What?”

The Spy throws a bright fuchsia lever and the Clipper goes into overdrive. Everyone is thrown across the room by the abrupt blast; the second-hand Illyrian screams as though all of Mount Palmerston and its devils power their forward motion. The Anonymous Crewmember deploys the table as a shield from flying debris, while the Captain flails forward, over floorboards that dance up and down like frivolous drunken parrots.

The Innocent, who has neatly manoeuvred his fall so as to catch their ship’s wheel (barely), struggles with its crazy revolutions, his voice barely audible above the wind and fire. “See, I told you I’d get it working! All we have to do is -“

He makes a grab for the hand brake, only to look slightly contrite as the whole mechanism screams out of its socket and smashes through a port hole. The much desired harbour is almost upon them,
rather more quickly than anyone aboard expected or indeed now wants.

“Cut the engines!” the Student roars.

“Gods preserve us!” the Herald screams.

The Crewmember says nothing and simply throws the table at the auxiliary brake. The ship crashes to a -

“ -stop. Sorry, everyone.”

The Clipper bobs languidly. Nothing else moves; they have reached the still point.

The Unsettling Student staggers upwards and gazes dazedly through the fragments of sapphire glass. “The Avid Horizon. I don’t know that this is much of an improvement…although it has certain curious features in the way of focality. Might be worth a paper or so.”

“Which is what we’re out here for, isn’t it?” the Captain booms. “Travel! Knowledge, enigmas! Who’s for an expedition? Might even be some supplies out there!”

“Might as well go looking for the Gant Pole while we’re at it,” the Herald mutters.

As it happens, she’s proven wrong - a bare few minutes finds them all with minor frostbite, but also a cache of supplies, enough to get back to civilisation if they’re careful. A little treasure to boot: sapphires for the ship’s hold. A skull, which has the odd property of making the carrier forget they’re holding it and consequently gets dropped a lot until the Innocent Spy stuffs it in his toolbag (mainly on the pleading of the Student, who insists that Summerset College will love it). An empty mirror-catch box, which the Captain presents his engineer as a reward for quick thinking.

“You deserve this, really,” the Innocent Spy tells the Crewmember. “I might have gotten us here, but you’re the one who stopped us crashing.”

“That’s the sort of thing that officers keep,” the Crewmember says, smiling. “Us poor innocent sailors aren’t responsible for the sunlight smuggling racket, you know.”

“I still don’t understand how that’s illegal,” the Innocent says, stopping abruptly - those aren't the faint Neath false-lights, but pale distant stars, the kind he remembers from back home. “Tell me, is there anything down here that makes any sense? Any sense at all?”

“Cannibalism,” the Student says cheerfully, munching on one of their newly-found hardtack biscuits. “In matters of the Neath, always look…” He is interrupted by the Cynical Herald, or more precisely by the Herald’s accurately aimed snowball. “Oi!”

The Innocent Spy’s question is quickly forgotten. It isn't every day in the Neath that sacred ground can be used for an embittered four-way snowball fight (the Captain’s mild exhortations to come in and get warm notwithstanding).

Every third day, maybe.
Port Carnelian

Here's the trouble with Port Carnelian; nobody wants to leave.

It's beautiful, the Unsettling Student would agree, if you happen to like semitropical warmth and cats. He is fond of neither, a minority opinion in a light-and-cat-obsessed world, and both annoy him more than usual at present. The Captain whose ship he's hired is an easy-going duffer, but one who doesn't much fancy delving into the depths of the Unterzee without at least some kind of engineer on board. If they can't find one here it means trekking all the way back to London, and what an arrant waste of time that would be. He has enigmas to gather! Mysteries to compile! Mushrooms to observe!

(Their last chief engineer had taken one glance at the Dawn Machine and flung himself overboard. No one aboard could tell whether he was trying to swim towards or away from it, at the end, which had quite spoiled the shipboard betting. The Student nurses a hope of asking the resulting Drownie next time they put in at Lorkins, but that might take some time.)

Meanwhile, what had not been on the Student's agenda when leaving Summerset for a stint of study abroad was lurking in foreign pubs. He's been through half a dozen highly questionable places already, hunting for a zailor spendthrift enough to coax back on the water. And none of them sell a decent mushroom wine without a horrendous markup, blast them.

"But where do you even find a living ship, to sail Adam's Way?"

"Built it myself."

Yet another zee-story. Maybe a profitable one, however. The Student turns away from his unappetising cherry liquour and eyes the conversants.

A open-faced, dark-haired zailor, with looks more pleasant than romantic. A knot of curious onlookers surround him, waiting to be impressed or amused, preferably both. Dockers are in the habit of carrying dead rats, to be proffered good storytellers or thrown at the heads of bad ones. Which will be the case here?

"It was easy really, we just uprooted one of those plants near Wisdom. I mean, most of them are bigger than any ship, the hard part was finding one small enough just for me to row. So we towed it behind us and I bribed the cook to keep it alive with coffee grounds, and then when we docked I only had to outfit it with a rudder and a set of oars. Easy as pie. Turns out the Presbyterate isn't even that far upstream, but they won't talk to you when you get there, so it's sort of a pointless voyage. Kind of rude of them. But yeah, those water lilies. Can't remember what they're properly called, my Latin's a little rusty, but...oh, yes." He snaps his fingers, smiles. "Victoria Regia!"

A very awkward silence falls. Convivial rat-throwing would be out of order.

"Bloody Surface tourists," someone eventually mutters. "No taste."

"No brains neither." "Less sense then a drunk trout." "Wouldn't know what truth looked like if it came to life and chased him halfway across the zee." They disperse with pointed rapidity, leaving the storyteller looking not a little bemused.

The Student, by contrast, finds his fancy caught. There are tale-spinners and tale-spinners; this one
says ridiculous things with a refreshingly naive air of actually believing them. Few people survive the touch of the South without scarring; this one looks untouched. And a scholar of the classics to boot.

“Have this on me,” he says, carrying over the untouched drink. “I think we might get on very well. How would you like a berth as chief engineer?”

“Depends. Is it alcoholic?”

“What - oh. Yes?”

“No thanks. I mean, I don’t drink, not that I - are you planning to sail anywhere interesting?”

“Every known port in the Unterzee. I’m collecting materials for my thesis.” The Student smiles dryly. “A dread surmise and what happened after, I’m thinking of calling it. Any objection to payment in amber?”

“Uh, guess not. Sounds a lot better than another coffee run, anyway. My name’s MacGyver.”

The Student blinks. “You have a name?”
Dear Jack,

I’ve written port reports for Pete until zee-monsters and ship-sized eyeballs just seem pettishly bureaucratic, so have a letter for yourself this time. Try not to be too obvious about steaming his open before you deliver them. Most of the Foundation reports are cribbed from our ship logs, to be honest. Funny how similar the Game is, even underground.

But yes, you were right, the Kubulstan tribesmen were right, the Mountain of Youth exists and it does exactly what it says on the box. I suppose after discovering medieval lasers, Bigfoot (well, sort of) and the lost city of Atlantis I should maybe not be as surprised by this as I am. All those bullet wounds and assorted injuries I’ve accumulated over the years? Gone. I haven’t felt this good since my teens. The trade off is that now I look like that gawky high schooler again, but I can live with that.

(Though I kinda miss being blonde - did you remember I was still dark-haired then, because I’d completely forgotten. And now you’re probably laughing.

Just remember, at that age you hadn’t even started your much-prized moustache yet.)

Anyway…the Phoenix Foundation obviously needs to know as much as possible about what’s hiding down here, so I’ve mostly been knocking around the Unterzee (that’s all the Neath is, really, an underground ocean with the weirdest little islands dotted around like a game of evil Connect-Four. Sorry. That’s a terrible comparison, but apt.) I’ve had a couple of questionable gigs, but things are all right now. Chief mechanic on board the good ship Clipper, with a nice comfy bunk set up in the engine room - you know how I like it. She’s a sweet little five-berth ship. Lots of furniture sewn out of cushions so nobody gets hurt when we get flung about in a storm, it’s very cozy. Hardly needs any attention once her boiler's up, and keeps such a steady course. If we had any kind of autopilot she’d sail herself across the Unterzee. I’ll see about setting that up, if I can…there's such amazing scope for engineering down here.

The Clipper’s only downside, if you’d call it that (I wouldn’t), is that if we try to fight anything we’ll pretty much immediately sink. The Captain sulks about this a lot - apparently he used to have a famed zee-monster-fighting dreadnought, lost in a game of tarot poker - but it suits everyone else. The smallest sea-fauna are crabs the size of office blocks and they only get worse from there. (Tell Pete he would just love the fishing.)

So instead of going around shooting everything, we’re hired out to a university student with a thesis to complete. Occasionally he rouses our captain from stupor by quarrelling about our next destination, what cargo to take next, how many mushrooms make five, that kind of thing. I admit I tend to side with the student; dealing with crazed archeologists seems to be my lot in life, and at least he’s a little more sensible. The Captain tends to go “Hmm,” a lot and stare through you when you’re trying to talk to him.

There we have the Cynical Herald. She’s the ship’s navigational officer, and has bred a flock of zee-bats as a sort of early sonar. Which is more important than it sounds in a place with no navigational landmarks or reliable charts. They say that no two ships down here sail the same ocean, and while that’s ridiculous…well. If the practical, scientific conclusion is that the islands all move around randomly, as proven by repeated trials, then that’s the conclusion I have to accept. If it works, it works.
Finally there’s the Anonymous Crewmember, who refuses to admit to any name, or gender, or personality. (And I thought California was flexible. Though the Crewmember is a little extreme even by the Neath’s standards). Refuses to be drawn on anything and would probably make a better spy than I do. On the other hand they’re too garrulous to be taciturn. I’m always having my ear talked off on night watches over one exciting zee-tale or another.

(For instance, they inform me that I’ve been hired on because the last engineer was eaten by a shark. Apparently this is a vanishingly rare fate, because most sharks just worry ships into matchwood before going off in a sulk. Why would sharks sulk? I have no idea.)

That’s probably enough rag for one time. Try not to crash up there. The Phoenix Foundation only has so much of an aircraft budget, you know.

Be seeing you,

MacGyver

Postscript. I asked the Unsettling Student what’s going on with sharks. He says they're inclined towards sulkiness because they’re all bound in tormenting cages. What are those and why would anyone put a shark in one, I asked. He shrugged and went back to his mushroom-choral practice.

And to think I used to blame you for getting me into crazy situations...
sixth whistle, not long before tea

interlude at zee

“‘z bad luck,” the Anonymous Crewmember explains, idly picking at a bit of oakum. “Names are for people who are…ooh, well hard? The ones that don’t care what other people think. And all sailors have a use-name, it’s traditional. London, Khan’s Heart, ever since the First City. Besides which, you’re shaping up so nicely."

"Shaping up as what?" MacGyver’s staring up at the Neath’s roof, trying to think of a sail that could flow with the wax-wind to supplement their engines. Coming up with some way to harness it would be a boon to all zee-captains, he’s sure, but anything with enough substance to persist against the wind would inevitably be coated in heavy wax afterwards. Maybe if the sails were on fire? Would the Iron Republic perhaps sell some kind of perpetually burning cloth?

"The Enthusiastic Engineer? The Improbable Spy? The Barbarically Haired?"

“It hasn’t come into style yet,” he says dryly. “You wait eighty years or so, this’ll be the height of fashion.” Come to think of it, if the devils had anything like that, everyone would be using it as a light source. He's not fond of polluting coal, but given the option between that and the fat-candles exported from Venderbight, even devilishly-sourced anthracite sounds nice and homely.

"Well, I've never seen anything like it."

"High seas, and no mullets?"

"Your hair looks nothing like a fish. Well. Maybe a traumatised jellyfish."

"Not the jellyfish I’ve seen around here…when did I ever say I was a spy?"

"All the Surface-luvvies are spies," is the casual reply. “And you’re more innocent than most of ‘em if you thought it wasn’t obvious…say, that’s not bad. Hallo!” the Crewmember shouts at the Cynical Herald. “Think I’ve got a use-name for the new boy."

“Doom!”

“No thanks,” MacGyver calls.

“Doom!”

“No!” the Crewmember shouts.

“Doom! Right, what was it you two were trying to tell me?”

“A use-name for ‘im. The Innocent Spy. What do you think of that?"

“Good enough. How soon were you planning?"

“About half a minute from now,” the Crewmember says with a grin, shaking out the oakum into a sturdy rope-harness. “Seven is the number…."

“The number for what?"

“Baptisms,” the Cynical Herald says. “Why, what’s the matter?”
He laughs, awkwardly. “Isn’t soul-snatching a devilish thing? And neither of you has sulphur
eyes…”

“What’s he talking about?” the Crewmember demands, all aglow with impatience. “Naming rites
have nothing to do with souls, or all of London would be missing theirs instead of just half. Is this a
Surface thing?”

“You could say that,” he mutters. “I wasn’t brought up to be especially religious, but there’s a
limit…no, you don’t really care about that kind of thing down here, do you?”

The Herald studies him. “I wonder what you told them on your last ship.”

“We didn’t get that far. It’s been pretty easy to stay unintroduced in a place where people just yell a
lot to get your attention…look, it’s professional too, if that makes any difference. I’ve always gone
by MacGyver on the surface, as you call it, in a job where telling everyone who you are is a
liability. And I’m honest about it, and maybe that’s stupid and will get me killed one day, but I’m
sticking by it, all right?”

“So you are that stupid, then,” the Anonymous Crewmember says. “All right. Just checking.”

He breathes a sigh of relief and descends the ladder to belowdecks, mentally grasping for the
comfort of logical engineering conundrums. Perhaps a net, that the wax could flow through - no, a
sail full of holes obviously wouldn’t work…

“So, how long do you think he’ll last down here?”

“I’d give it a week before he gets eaten by a crab.”
when the last light of the mountain passes over the horizon

Dear Jack,

today the Anonymous Crewmember was eaten by a crab. Or possibly just carried off on the back of one. Hard to tell in an unlit ocean.

The Captain was depressed that we failed to get in even a shot at it (the Crewmember is the closest we have to a gunnery officer, you see, and before he’d made it to the cannon personally the Herald had already told me to turbo-charge the engines. Next time I’ll have to ask her if someone’s gone overboard first.) But he did take me aside and told me very nicely not to worry about it, that this sort of thing happens all the time and they’d pop up again in London safe and sound. Given what this place is like, I can’t say he’s wrong. I suppose immortality tends to make everyone very relaxed about the odd death.

In the meantime, we’ve docked at some ancient sphinxes just lying in the middle of the sea - much too big to have been built here, so they were probably kidnapped by bats like the rest of the Neath’s ruins. The stone’s been quarried and sells for a good price in London but our hold’s too small to carry a load, which saves me an argument about desecrating archeological sites. (No, I don’t blow up every monument I see; that’s Indiana Jones. Catch me in a fedora.) Meanwhile, the Student’s quarrelling with the Herald about some ancient ritual he wants to see enacted here; apparently it’s only supposed to be performed by those who have the favour of salt (or is that flavour? I’ll have to ask), and she has it but says the ritual’s impious. I think I’ll agree with the Herald on this one. We’ve already lost one hostage to fortune, and diving into the zee seems like offering up another on a platter.

Next comes a trip up to the Surface, because the Student’s never been and wants to visit a friend in Vienna. Moment of truth, now; will it still be the nineteenth century up there, or will we wander into my present? They say it’s a very reliable passage but I don’t feel so sure about a place where maps change on an hourly basis.

If we do, I’ll call you. This crew would get such a kick out of aeroplanes.

Look after yourself (I’m sure you will),

MacGyver
“Elle,” the Cynical Herald says. “Good to see you again.”

The two siblings sit beneath the warm sun, soaking up that Mediterranean warmth which chases away all demons. In such a place as this, it is very difficult to believe in a Neath.

“And you…is it sister now, then? Last we met you still weren’t sure.”

“Oh yes. Astonishing what a bit of Rubbery science will do for you.” She sips delicately at a cup of espresso, strong here but the lightest of touches on the tongue compared with Neath darkdrop. “I’ve kept the name, though. It amuses me. How run the Mysteries?”

“Adequate. There’s some promising young acolytes, though, and I had a letter from Lucy the other day…”

They chat lightly for a little while, swapping secrets as cooks might exchange recipes - respectfully, with no little care. The matter of a tattooed courier who claims her messages have begun to move of their own accord. A digression into the maturation of moon-pearls in real law-light, safely hidden in living oyster-flesh. Their ongoing speculations on the matter of judgement-eggs, and how they might be prepared.

“And your new crew? Anyone worth your watching?”

“Perhaps. The university student hardly matters, he’ll gather his rosebuds while he may. That kind never last on the Unterzee - I’m curious about whether the mechanic will desert here. He hasn’t died yet, it’s legal enough.”

“Oh, so? Well, you know us Surface-dwellers.” Two private smiles: a shared joke.

“He was hesitating over a steamer ticket to America. His heart’s desire, he made me understand. Something about a dream of horses and clear skies, far west.” The Herald puts her cup down decisively. “I don’t think he’ll do it, though. Too much duty in him. A pity in a way, it’s not everyone who could be so easily satisfied.”

“Simple.”

“Simple.”

They move on to other subjects. The Herald’s choicest zee-bat pecks at ladybirds, and squeaks.
...okay, so I’m in Europe now, and the Neath calendars are perfectly accurate; it’s definitely 1894 up here. I kinda suspected I wasn’t getting home any time soon, but now I’m sure.

On the other hand- it’s the 1890s! Talk about temptation, Jack, you know how I’ve always loved this era. A little late for the West in its heyday, but still going. Los Angeles is warming up, waiting for the motion picture revolution. They’re starting to play hockey in Minnesota. A gold strike waiting in the land of the midnight sun. Just the sunlight up here, alone! After all those dark Midwest winters and treating myself to a houseboat in Southern California, and now I’m stuck on an indefinite job in a fumes-lit hole.

I know, I know. I just have to keep a firm grip on myself. Remember that I’m in a time period when they haven’t even invented duck tape yet. Well, actually, that’s not true anymore, I’ve reinvented it with zee-monster bone glue and strips of Parabola linen….

Oh lord, I don’t think I’ve ever come this close to just flaking out of an assignment. There’s nothing to stop me. I can sail to New York, arrange for the info I’ve been collecting to be picked up by the Phoenix Foundation in the future, and live out the rest of my life in a Western. It’s the perfect ending for me. How can I talk myself out of it?

That Ennio Morricone theme keeps running through my head (you know, the one from “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly”. The one I dragged you to see four times because there wasn’t anything else to do over Christmas break). Everything is waiting out there…

On the other side of the scales, what? A feeling of obligation to a think tank that keeps sending me into life-or-death situations. Immortality, of sorts (well, that one is a big incentive). And the Neath’s so weird already, I’m not too likely to break history with an accidental sneeze. The tech’s way better than it should be, you oughta see their zeppelins. Once I’m at a safe distance.

Some of the tech, I should say: they have electric lights, but apparently London’s lit by gas, and just about everyone uses candles for close-up work. No toasters. I already miss my VCR.

Returning to the go-west concept, that’s a point. If my grandpa Harry were here, I can just imagine what he’d say. “Are you sure that’s what you want, or do you just like watching it on television?”. Reminding me how I’d much rather mess around with a jeep than look after a horse. Nobody’s invented eight-tracks yet to play really stirring music against the Colorado skyline, either.

And I suppose I definitely wouldn’t see you again.

I think I’ll go back to the ship and work on the engines a bit. You know I think better when I’m working.

always sincerely,

MacGyver
where there is a faint smell of mutton on the wind

The Cynical Herald isn’t surprised to have company at the wheel, though on most ships the other zailors would be happy to hide safely below decks when off duty. The Clipper is a Lampad-class vessel and therefore so small that they’re all perpetually running into each other, often literally.

She is surprised to see who it is, though. Their mechanic’s been noticeably subdued since their departure from the Surface, largely keeping to himself. He hadn’t even asked for help with the daily chore of lugging coal from the hold. Or buttonholed anyone about his labour-saving plan for a dumbwaiter to assist with this task.

"What of your beloved engines?"

"The Student asked if his mushroom choral society could practice where it's warm. I don’t know when I started saying sentences like that." He plumps up a stray cylinder of fungal-stalk cushion and manages to sit on it with a minimum of awkwardness.

"Ah. So you came up here to enjoy the air, away from singing Blemmigans?"

"Something like that. And it seemed like a good time to ask...I’ve been thinking about that whole man-with-no-name business."

"I thought you weren't especially keen on that."

"I wasn't, but...oh, go on then," MacGyver says softly. "I gave up a lot to come back down here. But what is it I'm agreeing to?"

"The Student could inform you," the Cynical Herald says carefully, turning the wheel just that slightest fraction required to avoid ploughing into a stalagmite at full speed, "that the ritual is merely a zailor's prank played on new initiates to the zee and is of purely social significance."

"And maybe he believes that, but you don't."

"No."

"Right. Well, this isn’t the first time I’ve been landed in a situation," his expression turns slightly wry, not quite a smile, "that’s completely off-the-wall and can’t exist. And usually I can apply what I know to fix it, but science doesn’t seem to work the same way down here. So I have a lot of catching up to do. And if I'm in it for the long haul I might as well go all the way."

Clear water now: the Herald turns her attention to the perpetual zee-bat perched on her shoulder, aimlessly ruffling its crude feathers. "Very commendable. More insightful than I thought. Perhaps the Anonymous Crewmember was wrong, and you aren't so innocent after all?"

"But I liked that. One thing, though," and now he's definitely grinning, eyes sparkling with mischief. "Can I give up maybe just half my name?"

"How - half a name?"

"Sure. Us Surface types usually have the two. And believe me, the first one I definitely don't need."

The Herald harrumphs, leans the ship into a turn for no particular reason. "You realise you
wouldn't be able to use either name down here, all the same."

"That's fine. I'm not planning on staying forever, you know."

Which is what they usually say, before they find out that forever is an option, the Herald thinks. Not often after, though. "I'll have to know what it is."

"Aw, c'mon."

"You can hardly expect me to ceremonially destroy your name and rebaptise you with a new one if you don't tell me what it is first."

He flushes and walks over, whispers two syllables so quietly that the zee-bat doesn't even stir.

"Is that it? Very Surface, of course, but that's nothing serious. Nothing like as silly as Pelham, for instance. Or Harold. Or If-Christ-had-not-died-for-thee-thou-hadst-been-damned."

"Look, are we doing this ritual or not?"

As it turns out, the dead-of-night ceremony ("how do we tell it’s the dead of night underground?" "By the light of the moon-pearls, you flapdoodle," ) is more ludicrous than anything else. Bobbing, bobbing, up down, down up, safely harnessed to the ship's stern and feeling a bit of an idiot, while the Herald rows alongside. The water’s warmer than he would have expected; a nearby coast throws light unto the waves, and it seems almost that light and heat are the same thing down here…

“Here! here!” the Captain calls down, stiff and solemn and consequently hilarious. “A line, a chart line.”

He looks downwards, half-expecting some metric. A light deep in the water, perhaps, or a clamorous chain, but naturally there’s nothing there. But this is the point where their map marks a new square, so abruptly the Herald shoves him under.

Once, twice, thrice. The sudden shock from going in, half-blind and yet seeing patterns in the waves, fragments swirling towards a secret. Hearing snatches of the Herald's measured chant, the ever-present scent of salt invigorated. Tasting dark liquid and wondering - how he survives this, how the custom began, what that impossibly rich, faintly metallic taste in the water could be…

By the seventh repetition he has ceased to think at all.

The Herald regards him fondly as he comes up, just as alive as when he went down and dripping salt over the boat. So little a thing after all, then. Not a mark or a scar.

"Please tell me that’s it."

"Don’t worry,” she says, “Seven is the number, and that’s all any zailor needs from the drowned man. Now then, I'm the Cynical Herald, up there is the Captain, and you are?”

He sneezes. "The Innocent Spy?"

"It'll come easier later," the Captain comments, tossing a rough length of towelling over the rail. "I served in the Navy back when we’d none of us heard of a Neath, and I've come to find a body can get used to anything in time." He gives a weary smile and retreats inside. Taciturn at the best of
times, or perhaps just missing his bed.

"I suppose I should take that as friendly, not ominous."

"Just be glad the Crewmember wasn't here or you'd have had the full keelhauling. One time the man died and we had to pay ten times the fee for accidentally turning them into a Drownie."

"Uh." He wrings out the towel and his shirtfront by turns, eyeing the latter a touch ruefully. "Wish I'd worn the calico. This'll never be the same."

She kisses him when he isn't looking. The Innocent Spy yelps.

“What was that for?”

“Oh, you’re a proper Neath-dweller now, you’ll get used to that too,” the Herald teases. “Just wait. We’ll dock in Fallen London tomorrow.”
Dear Jack,

It isn’t raining here. Apparently it hasn’t rained properly in London since the Fall. I’m a little disappointed.

The Captain was right about our Anonymous Crewmember, anyway; they showed up at Wolfstack Docks, singing about sausages and the porter’s daughters (an old Khanate ballad, they say, about the Third City’s fall. This whole “whoops, our city was batnapped” seems to extend a lot farther back than I realised; I’ve had to significantly revise a lot of reports for Pete.)

After that we all dispersed for shore leave; the Captain has a house in what used to be a Mongolian city, before London dropped on top of it. He says it’s quiet except for the occasional devil hunting party. The Cynical Herald agrees with me that he’s nuts. She keeps a secluded zee-znail retreat and won’t invite anyone to dinner. The Anonymous Crewmember sleeps on board ship and says they like it that way.

Which sounded a bit sad, so I went out with them for coffee (coffee on their part that is, tea on mine, though it wasn’t very good. Too mushroomy. More on that later.) We swapped stories; they told me about their inconvenient aunt and how very inconvenient she is. I’ve slipped up about my fake legend a few times now, but managed to deter them with wild stories about exciting California (that time you dragged me and Pete out gold panning sure was a help, I have to admit). Hope I can keep that up. I’d better.

The Student offered to put me up at Summerset College, which I tried for one night before the repeated offers of drugged honey and the three am partying got to me. To say nothing of the Blemmigan choir he swapped for a pile of…romantic literature is the local euphemism. Guess dormitory living isn’t much different in the past, so now I’m putting up at the Rat and Tonic. Nice quiet pub by the docks. Linen on the beds and no fungi guaranteed.

Which is important, because mushrooms grow on every conceivable surface around here. So many flavours, so many ways to cook them! It’s brilliant for vegetarians, given that the other main form of protein around here is rat (rat = spam, you do not want to know how many rat recipes there are). So lots of good vegan restaurants. Just like being back home in that regard, if nothing else.

I sound like the tourist everyone says I am, don’t I? It’s…well, London isn’t a city that opens itself up to strangers too readily. The streets are impenetrable. People let you know in no uncertain terms if you’re not supposed to be somewhere. I asked the Anonymous Crewmember how to go see a musical hall show and was told the cover charge involves a cartload of silk and a private menagerie. Suppose I owe it to Pete to try cracking this city eventually, but it’s going to take years.

I mean, once I wanted to have a word with a temperance campaigner (they really have far too many varieties of drug down here), but then a zee-monster chased me down the street, and I only got away because somebody clobbered it on the head and ate it. That’s the kind of thing that just happens around here.

Let me see, what else? I’ve taken out a subscription to “The Sapphire” while I’m here; cheap dime-store boys’ stuff, or the closest local equivalent at least. It’ll be good for firelighters if nothing else. Still wishing I’d brought some specs on televsual equipment (it’s not exactly cheating if the movie camera has been invented already, right?…okay, it is. Still, I bet they’d love it.)
Come to think of it, if you were here you’d probably have all sorts of ideas about Useful Stuff I ought to be reinventing. But they already have the steam engine, penicillin is rather besides the point, and the Captain’s told me to lay off work on radio after the sixth fiery explosion. I’m almost positive that there’s another spectrum of visible colour where radio ought to be; perfectly straightforward from a physics stance, but just not biologically possible. Maybe I can dig up an expert to let me know one way or the other. Nasty thought, if everyone down here is mutated or whathaveyou by the general weirdness; then again, if it’s part of the immortality...

And I guess I’d better get used to my new work-name (oh, how I hate work-names! Then again, cultural sensitivity.) So.

Be seeing you,

the Innocent Spy
Benthic, where the Alarming Scholar resides. The Student’s recommendation for someone on the cutting edge of learning in the Neath.

“And I do mean the edge. Mind you don’t mention my enigmas, or you’ll never hear the end of it.”

So he’d gone, and laid out an idea. A little thing called a vacuum tube, which ought to be more than possible with London’s current technology…

S/he (the Spy is becoming accustomed to that, even if he's not sure how to say it) stares at him. "An aficionado of Robert Hooke, then? How delightful! Pointless, but delightful."

"But why pointless?"

A gesture in the air. The Scholar leans forward. "You want to create an absence. A void. A Neath-within-the-Neath, where physical laws are nullified and reality itself alters. Do you know the implications?"

Does everyone here teach by the Platonic method or something? "No."

"That's the path the Dawn Machine makers went down, and look where that went. Perhaps literally, in your case, I think you might enjoy it. I wouldn't," and the voice turns wry here, "given that I'm interested in natural law and they're interested in destroying that very concept, but tastes differ."

The Dawn Machine. Worth checking. He makes a mental note.
“Extract from a report of one Josiah Hezekiah, captain of the Merchant Navy vessel Clipper.”

…roving, blood-thirsty blemmigans screaming war-cries in blank verse. Enjoy your vital intelligence.

One final note for your eyes only - Operation Azimuth is on the move again. After so long in abeyance, too. I’ve had the necessary university student for some time now, but he’s had more insight than the others, or perhaps just more luck; he plucked my new chief engineer out of a hat and the man could not be better for the job. The Innocent Spy. Such an absurd paradox.

As far as I can make out of his background, he’s a Surface spy who made his way down through some hitherto-unknown passage on the Elder Continent, following up rumours about immortality. I keep him happy by leaving around the less perilous port reports for him to copy when he thinks I’m not looking. Quite practical - he’s already noticeably improved our boiler’s efficiency - and this despite his professing to be unfamiliar with steam engines, because where he comes from they’ve long since moved on to better things.

A victim of the Treachery of Clocks, in other words. Imagine what the Fingerkings will make of that!

We might even arrange to bring him by the department one of these days; he may find the place a pleasant reminder. If so, under no circumstances can he meet the Voracious Diplomat. We don’t want to wake up one morning and find the Neath blown down around our ears.

Unfortunately, I won’t be making it to the Parthanaeum tonight; my rheumatism is playing me up something fierce. But tomorrow ought to suit. I’m quite looking forward to that mixed grill you promised last time…
“Back to Port Carnelian, then?” The Captain looks rather less sure of himself than anybody in his position ought. Just as well they’re the only two in the wardroom, the Student thinks; he’ll wander off the deck some day in an access of doziness. “I assume you want those submarine improvements installed?”

“Oh, I had that done while you were taking tea with the governor, or whatever it is that takes up so much of your time there. The Fierce Philanthropist was very nice about it. Said a zee-going connexion of mine had done her a good deed, so she paid the conversion fee from her own pocket.” He frowns. “Which is odd, as I don’t have any. Perhaps she simply liked our engineer’s looks...”

“You mean, this entire time this ship’s been a submarine and I never knew it? We zailed into Wolfstack with those sort of modifications?”

“As though the Ministry of Public Decency would have the slightest idea what a submarine-converted ship would even look like,” the Student scoffs. “No, the only reason we didn’t use it yet is because the Spy said he wasn’t going to run it until he understood how it worked. A sentiment I can hardly disagree with.”

“Well,” the Captain frowns. “Without even asking. I ought to be quite put out about this.”

“Go on then.”

“Then again, the Admirality did ask me rather nicely if we could stop by Wrack and see where those dreadful wreckers are planning to go next. A tale of terror to enter, I believe? I’ll leave it in your capable hands.” He meanders away, humming and thumbing his lapels.

“Bastard,” the Student mutters. “He knows I flog all my tales for wine-money. It’s not like they’re worth anything academically.”

“Oh, do you need help with something?” The Innocent Spy’s been hauling coal down to the hold all day, and looks more than happy to relinquish his task temporarily.

“Do you know, I rather think I might. Would you be any good at thrillingly dramatic narrations?”
“I don’t like this,” the Crewmember says flatly. “Zee-bats for me, every time, not this crazy Khanate sonar.”

“If I sent a zee-bat out there it’d drown,” the Cynical Herald observes, “so pipe down and let our mechanic concentrate.”

“There’s not much to do, honestly.” The Spy lies upside down under their newly-fitted sonar equipment, patiently fiddling with the spanner. “I mean, it’s a system that takes six hours to send back a response. I’ve seen better, a lot better, but not with the kind of tech you’ve got down here. Where’s my knife gone?”

The Crewmember passes it down. “In that case, what are you even doing?”

“Oh, just the usual taking it apart and putting it back together again. It’s important to do that when it’s still working, otherwise you won’t have any idea what’s gone wrong when it does.”

“But is it actually working now, or am I trying to navigate this ship with absolutely no feedback whatsoever?”

“Ah. Well, no, it isn’t, but it takes so long to recharge you wouldn’t notice the difference anyway. And the lights are still working, that’s the main thing. Pneumatic drill?”

Which completely drowns out the Herald’s comments on the situation for the next several minutes, at the end of which she is, predictably, still swearing.

“- can’t repeat the rituals properly if I can’t go out on deck, and forget our chart, I don’t have the slightest idea of what we’re looking at down here, or where anything is, or - Crewmember ours, there’s some gigantic zee-monster off the prow, perhaps you’d better warm up the guns?”

“Those rusty old things? Fancy. Trust me, if we run into anything that hits us down here, best thing to do is just to head straight up.”

“Which will take a while,” the Spy calls. “Actually, I think the water’s a little shallow here to surface, I definitely have to install some kind of depth gauge to tell us where it’s safe.”

“Why, in the name of false-stars and little wisps, would that matter if we’re going up? It’s a bloody submarine!”

“Because that’s hard-wired into the system, and until I know otherwise I’m assuming it’s built that way for a very good reason - hello, have we hit something?”

“Yes,” the Herald whispers. “We have run right smack dab into an enormous fish. Now it’s looking at us. Any suggestions as to what to do next?”

The Spy scrambles out from the rat’s nest of circuitry; the Crewmember settles down at the gun ports, then leans back and laughs.

“That’s what you’re afraid of? A Beloved? Stupidest thing in the zee. Tasty though, we should be able to kill it even with our cheap Leadbeater.”

“That’s completely unnecessary,” the Spy says vigorously. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it? Just swimming
along until we came and crashed into it, no wonder the poor thing is confused."

“And delicious. You’ve never tried hot Beloved blubber, have you? There’s this wonderful restaurant in Adam’s Way that does it, but I’ve never tried it fresh out of the water before. Officers always stood on their rights, you know.”

“So you want to shoot and butcher a creature the size of our hull?”

“Don’t be daft. We just cut off the best bits and chuck away the rest. Why aren’t we manoeuvring into position?”

“Because I’m not doing any fancy zailing while the sonar’s still down, and - oh, damn.”

The hull of the Clipper resounds like a drunken churchbell. The lights flicker momentarily.

“Only a little damage. I think we hit the Fathomking’s Hold going full speed. Hope he doesn’t mind.”

“At least we know the shock absorbers work.”

The Spy whistles. “That’d have killed us up on the Surface. Easily. It’s the weird discrepancies I don’t get about the technology down here, it seems like - ”

The Student clambers up the ladder, a pen held between his teeth, which he spits out and stuffs in a pocket. “What’s going on, then? I’ve already slopped ink over my notes three times this morning - ”

“Listen, you were the one who said we needed these zubmarine modifications, and then you take off and hide in your cabin all day while the rest of us try to make them work - ”

“Oi! Are we going to shoot this blasted Beloved?”

“Would everyone just calm down, please?”

The Captain casually leans against the wall, holding a heavy tray with the best Infernal Wedgwood-fired crockery. “I’ve made coffee. Also tea,” he adds, with a glance to the Spy. “I’m sure it’s not as bad as all that really.”

Which, of course, it isn’t.

They all have a drink, the hull damage is confirmed to be superficial, the Beloved swims placidly away and the Spy reinstalls their still-truculent sonar. Ironically, he’s just finished it as they surface for an oxygen resupply.

“Ever noticed that the Captain is never around until you actually want him?” he asks the Cynical Herald.

“A good captain stays on the bridge and looks after the crew. A bad one stays on the bridge and shouts at the crew. A lazy one gets the crew to stay on the bridge and goes off to nap betimes, which suits me because otherwise they want to do all the navigating themselves and then what would I do?”

“I wonder what he’s doing zailing at all, though.”

“You’ve heard him,” the Crewmember says. “Been on the water so long he can’t imagine quitting. Going to die in his boots, that man.”
“Hang on, I still haven't got that straight. Can you die in the Neath or not?”

The Cynical Herald delivers herself of an elaborately faked sigh. “It's a little more complicated than that.”
“Explain it to me one more time, please.” A few hours later: the Cynical Herald is stretched out in front of the engine fires, looking as though the expectation of heat was more enjoyable than its reality.

The Spy is calmly whetting his much-prized pocket knife. “I was in Los Angeles tracking down some artefact thieves, and one of them pushed me over a three-story drop. So I died, then I ended up on the death-boat sailing down a silent river, only I did something clever and escaped. Doesn’t everyone do that down here?”

“Yes, but not on the Surface, for pity’s sake. That doesn’t make sense even by the Neath’s standards. Are you sure that you hadn’t already encountered the Mountain of Light by then?”

“No, that was way afterwards.”

“You’re not immortal for some other reason, accidentally?”

“I kinda hope I’d have noticed that.”

“My theology is going to require a serious rethink,” the Cynical Herald mutters. “I was going to take you aside one of these days and give you a few warnings, about not touching the river water and keeping a zee-bat on your person at all times.”

“What for?”

“It speeds up the recovery if you provide a sacrifice.”

“Thanks, but if it happens again I think I’ll just do it my way.” He wipes the blade and starts to strop it on a length of rat leather. “Blood offerings aren’t really my style.”

“I was also going to say that anyone who’s badly injured enough to meet the ferryman can’t leave the Neath safely, but if you already did that than I have no idea. But don’t confuse being immortal with being unkillable, especially at zee. There’s poisons. Animescence. Or simply getting chopped into small enough pieces.”

“And I was just starting to enjoy being indestructible. Ow.”

“Cut something you shouldn’t have?”

“Yeah. So much for sharpening anything on a boat, but I don’t know when we’ll see a port next.”

“Soon, I should think. The Student, as he never tires of reminding us, has a thesis to complete.” She rises, brushing fragments of coal-dust from her skirts. “It couldn’t have been the artefact itself? Some outlandish Neath heirloom?”

“Only I never even touched the thing, and I was halfway across the city from it when I was actually dying. Sorry.”

“Well. You’re enough of a Londoner now to have picked up on making pointless apologies, apparently.”

“Oh. Um…sorry?”
She throws a cushion at him before departing.
The next stop is not Wrack but Aigul, to the Student’s undisguised joy. Despite the lack of ready enigmas.

“Brilliant! There’s all sorts of rumours at university. The whole place is given over to harvesting intoxicating needles, they say.”

The others are rather surprised by the Innocent’s anger.

"Come on. Isn't the Neath strange enough without drugs? Wine and prisoner’s honey and now needles?" He slams the hand brake on with more force than can be deemed strictly necessary. “I always hated this stuff on the Surface and I don’t like it any better down here.”

"I know that you're from odd places," the Student says, "but where are you from that's odd enough that people don't need a little help with reality? Summerset’s full of scholars who manage to get plastered on knowledge, for goodness’ sake. It’s not that hard.”

“If that’s the sort of place we’ve landed, I’m staying on board,” the Spy pouts. “With a good book and the cat for company. You go and get soused or whatever the expression is.”

The rest of the crew shrug and tramp off for a bit of shore leave.

They return more quickly than he expected, looking slightly abashed. “No dice,” the Crewmember explains. “They’ll only talk to us if we bribe them with some solacefruit. Whole solacefruit, not just extract, that’d cost a fortune even on the Elder Continent.”

“Well. I hope this teaches you all a lesson,” the Spy pronounces, throwing in the sternest look he can possibly manage for good measure.

He can’t fathom why this should cause everyone simultaneous fits of the giggles.
wrack

“So you see, it has to be a really terrifying, villainous, stomach-turning tale. A toll, to prove you’re worthy to enter the city. Otherwise we have to take them on in a fight, which neither of us want to do. I’m assuming on your part, I certainly don’t.”

“But why do I have to tell the story?” the Innocent Spy grumbles. “Doesn’t someone else in this crew have a tale about getting half-eaten by a fish or something? Wait, didn’t that just happen?”

“Everyone laughed at it, so now it’s your turn,” the Unsettling Student hisses, while simultaneously shoving him forward. A pack of heavily tattooed zubmariners are tossing devilbone dice in front of the city gate. The dice sizzle as they land, creating interesting burn patterns in the scarred metal floor.

“But I’m not that violent a person!”

“Make something up, then,” comes the cajoling response, right before the Student ducks out of range, and after that there’s no more time - the gatekeepers have put down their dice and come striding over. They have very big sticks and leave the cheerful impression that they are well acquainted with use of same.

“Ah,” the Spy says, as they advance towards him. “Um. Any of you have a mortal enemy?”

A stick looms threateningly overhead. “Would you like one?”


“Is that it? Not a very good story.” The stick remains hovering.

“No, but then, he came back. With a flamethrower! Burned my house down. Or, actually, someone else’s house but I was in it at the time.”

“What’s a flamethrower?”

“Uh. It’s a weapon…that shoots fire? Pneumatic tank under pressure and a source of heat. There’s some terrific thermic reactions involved.”

A couple of the wreckers are beginning to take notes; the flustered Spy decides he’ll take this as a hopeful sign. “So then I threw him off a mountain.”

Nodding grunts of approval. “That’s better.”

“And then he came back as an opera singer, and I trapped him in the flaming pool of oil he’d prepared for me to trip in - ”

“Is he a devil? This all sounds pretty devilish.”

“My money’d be on a Presbyterate.”

“Your money? How much?”

“Later on he was trying to chase me over a cliff, only I stopped and he kept going, so, uh, he fell over the cliff. And then there was that time he was fired from the assassins guild he worked for
because he was doing such a bad job killing me, so he came after me again, and I trapped him in a rockfall. Inside of a mountain. The same mountain that I threw him off the first time, actually.” Which isn’t true, but probably sounds good.

The betting stops. A longish pause ensures.

“And then he set off his own booby trap again and the mountain exploded. But luckily I got away.”

The sticks lower. "That," the beefiest of the gatekeepers says, shaking his head, "is too stupid to qualify as a tale of terror. Implausible. And have you two ever thought of killing other people?"

They end up having to fight their way into the city after all. The Spy improvises an explosive out of a torpedo component and a bottle of fish sauce to save the day.

"Next time," he sulks at the Student, "someone else can do it. Ask me to explain chemistry, for god's sake. I'm really good at explaining chemistry."

"God or gods?"

"Whichever! Just don't ask me to do that again!"
“This is a waste of time and not where I wanted to go at all,” the Student points out. “I’m still bankrolling the ship, remember?”

“It was only a little diversion out of the way, and we can afford the fuel with all the zee-coal we’ve been finding underwater. I just wish it wasn’t so cold here. How’s the climate this bad so close to London?” the Cynical Herald asks.

“Atmospheric pressure. Which behaves oddly in a hole in the ground, funnily enough.”

“Where are we making for again?” the Spy asks. “It’d be awful if any ships set sail before we were able to warn them.”

“The Slug and Mushroom,” the Cynical Herald explains. “All the old zee captains traditionally drink here, and they don’t have any other kind than old in the Tomb Colonies - here it is. Just don’t drink the wine. It’s overpriced and a bit too cobwebby.”

The Innocent Spy, by mutual agreement, takes up the argument when they enter. The Student rather admires his rhetoric; not a bit of self-consciousness, the appeal is urgent, heartfelt, couched in crisp tones calculated to reach even the deafest ears.

“You’re saying,” an old gentleman asks, wheezing like a squeeze-box, “that these scoundrels wanted you to come here and convince us to zail to their city of riches?”

“Because they’re laying a trap,” the Spy repeats patiently. “So it’s very important that you not go anywhere near the Salt Lions, otherwise the wrecking ships will be after you.”

“Those cowards!” a fierce one-eyed relic by the fire screams. “Thinking they’ll scare us all. Well, maybe we can teach them a thing or two about trying to fool us! Who’s with me?”

“Death to the wreckers! Death to the wreckers!” the ancient captains roar. They totter towards the pull of their old ships; the pub empties in minutes. Behind the burnished sphinxstone counter, the barman glares at them.

“Do you get that feeling that maybe you put an oar in somewhere you shouldn’t have?” the Spy ventures.

“I’ll remind you all that I said this was a bad idea,” the Student says.

Even the Cynical Herald punching him immediately thereafter fails to make him look any the less smug.
perhaps you do not like cats. If so, apologies

...so that could have gone better, Jack. Though I’m not sure I’d bet on the Wreckers in this fight.

Venderbight wasn’t much fun anyway. Everyone drinks too much and throws stupid parties to distract themselves from the encroachment of age. The dark, wine-sodden sea...well, I suppose I’m just put out by how inane it was. Like one of those dull retirement homes with tapioca pudding and bingo as a Saturday highlight. I’d have loved to have had a quiet word with some of them about their pasts. Loads of Mayan ruins all over the place, like the ones we’ve seen in South America. They must have so much knowledge to share! But any time I tried to ask questions about history I just got told to shut up and enjoy the wine.

The Innocent Spy tucks the journal into a pocket (easier than loose-leaf for this longish letter he’s writing) and heads for the bridge. The Student, to his credit, takes turns at the wheel like the rest of them. Even if he does tend to act as though he’s doing everyone a never-to-be-forgotten favour.

“Glad we’ve left. Pretty dull place if you’re an abstainer.”

"You don't drink, you don't take honey, you don't even like coffee. Don't you have any vices?"

"I hang around people who do?"

"If you want to avoid that, you'll have to take to zee in a rowboat," the Student says. "I've seen priests with less self-control than you."

“Thanks.”

The Student shakes his head. “Go on then, I’m off to discuss our new course with the Herald. You realise I haven’t found a single enigma since you came on board? It’s enough to start one thinking you’re bad luck.”

“I thought you were supposed to be the rational one,” the Spy snaps. “University learning over arrant superstition every time, you said last night?”

His voice has switched to a flat whine, contempt sneering from its own abjectness. The Student frowns for one curious moment - it doesn’t sound anything like the Innocent’s usual soft drawl, and reminds him of nothing so much as the puppet shows in Veilgarden - but it isn’t worth pursuing. Of course he’s been spoiling for a fight (not a single enigma to show off at Summerset! Storm above, he’ll be such a laughing stock), but the Herald’s proved a far more reliable sparring partner. Might as well cut his losses cheap and go have some real fun.

“The truly sane man can only exist in a sane society, and the Neath won’t look like that in a month of Sundays. Now if you’ll excuse me.” The Student departs, humming an operatic tune.

Above, the Spy winces and looks at the ship’s cat, cunningly ensconced in the cushion corner. “Can’t believe I went all Dexter on him.”

The Mog, as is the wont and right of cats, ignores him. A very reassuring quality just at present, the Spy decides. “Wonder what you’d call a slip if Freud isn't writing yet. I only ever do that voice when I’m pretending to be someone very insecure. Don’t think I need a dream interpreter to tell me what that’s about.”

The cat maintains its flaccidly inert position. It may only be a street-wise tabby, the lowest ebb of
the feline hierarchy, but it’s picked up the odd trick of secret-snatching. Didn’t it yowl beautifully at that Snuffer who’d come aboard, two captains ago? Pity about that crew believing its lies.

“I wonder how you tell if a cat’s domesticated. You put it in a room full of people and it makes friends with everybody and then it goes off to do its own thing.”

You know we’re domesticated because we don’t claw your throats out and try to eat you, the cat thinks. By which standards even those poor proud tigers in Port Carnelian are domesticated. It stretches a paw out and bats at imaginary coal dust, in that playful fashion the feeders find perfectly irresistible.

Its subtlety succeeds; the Spy, after a hasty check for interlopers, loops a useful string around the ship’s wheel to hold it in place. Only for a moment. The route back to London is almost a straight line, it’s impossible to hit anything on the way.

“Suppose we went up to the surface and you ended up on some other strange boat, huh?” the Spy murmurs, petting the Mog. “I suppose you’d make friends with them inside half an hour, wouldn’t you? Even if it was all different up there and they fed you regular tuna instead of whatever is in those tins the Captain feeds you.”

Which is in fact cavern-tuna, as the Mog is well aware, not that it feels the need to enlighten any deluded engineers on the subject. Particularly not when the engineer in question has found that one nice spot back of the neck.

“I like to think I’m like that. And I suppose I’m mad at the Student for making me second-guess -”

“And how are we getting on?”

The Spy scrambles up, upsetting both himself and the Mog, which promptly takes up yowling again. “Just, uh. Petting the cat, sir.”

“That’s what it looked like.” The Captain waves one hand a trifle uncertainly, as though he’s not positive why it’s attached to him. “By all means carry on. I’m very much in favour of the petting of cats.”

“Thanks, but I think he’s had enough for one night. Uh - any particular reason you’re here?”

“Fancy! Asking a captain what he’s doing on his own bridge. Do you know -“ the Captain removes the piece of string, throws an attractive sinusoid into the navigation. “I didn’t have the slightest idea, but I remember now. I’ve forgotten to feed the cat. If you’d care to take the wheel, Chief Engineer?”

Cat firmly gripped under arm, he vanishes down the ladder with an agility the Spy finds difficult to credit. The whole affair has gone off so quickly that he’d almost believe it didn’t happen, except -!

“Why would he steer us at the one rock between us and London? How?”

“Now then,” the Captain says a few minutes later, over a pot of mushroom (his own) and a tinned tuna (the cat’s). “Now then, I think you’ll have to admit it isn’t very nice to spy on people who don’t understand cats. Which the poor gentleman clearly does not. Though now it’s done, you might tell me what he had to say.”

The Mog ignores him blissfully; it’s not often that it enjoys two teas in one night.
Only a day’s stopover in London, everyone agrees; a little more coal, another Admiralty commission, then right back to zee for a more profitable trip. Hopefully.

The Innocent Spy contrives to spend most of said day under arrest.

“Now look, we’re zailing in the morning, and I must have my chief engineer back,” the Captain persists to an Unimpressed Constable. “You can hardly blame the fellow if he should want a quiet drink first. Just a matter of being in the wrong gin palace at the wrong time.”

The Constable grunts; no one in London can say they’ve heard it all before, but certain scenarios recur with alarming familiarity. Which makes it very perplexing when one goes off-script.

“Assuming that’s the Surface newcomer, I think you’ll find he was on the other side in that little contretemps. If I turn him over on your recognisance, will you promise not to let him desert any time soon? Officers expect the odd punch in the course of duty, but not by somebody who’s so d---- d apologetic about it.”

“Sorry,” the Spy says twenty minutes later, much relieved at his release and full of explanations. “I was trying to find a secluded address, and one of the Temperance Campaigners said they’d help me out if I’d come to a rally. It was going fine until someone blew a whistle, and then I just couldn’t let her down. Don’t think the police cared who they were arresting, honestly.”

“Well, do come along, do come along. I had rather intended to spend the evening discussing the localities of our next voyage, if you’ll recall. And it’s quite bad form for the captain to arrive late on his own ship.” The Captain grips his lapels more tightly and quickens his stride. Rather too stressful a day to call it shore leave. What a good thing the Mog was out shadowing.

The Herald and Crewmember are indeed already waiting in the wardroom when they make it back aboard the Clipper. The former stitches a pile of whispered hints into a chain; the latter is enjoying a newspaper, or perhaps merely wished to be seen holding it.

“D’you know, I had a look when the Captain said he was off to collect you, and they did an article about that riot of yours. Good etching of the gin shop.”

“What’d they say?”

“Have a look for yourself.” They lean back in evident amusement, the cause for which soon becomes apparent; one half-column at the bottom of page thirty-three, mostly praising the Constables for their diligence and speed. That part the Spy rather expects (he’s seen enough dictatorship propaganda to vie with the Herald’s cynicism on this particular subject), but the engraving does give him cause for puzzlement.

“That’s not even the same gin-shop as the one I was at. It was at a street corner, this one isn’t. And it’s a story too tall. And I’m sure I would have remembered seeing that many rats scampering everywhere.”

“Why would it be? You can’t expect ‘em to be made fresh every time, you know.”
“But the 1890s...you have the camera by now, right? Or even moving pictures.”

The Crewmember snorts. “Well, if you’re talking about society papers, Mr Huffam and that lot. I only get this one for the shroom-hopping results.”

The Herald lays down a crochet of cryptic clues. “If we’re quite done discussing your delightfully felonious day, shall we begin now or wait for the Student? He’s gone missing as well.”

“We could start thinking about it now, anyway. What about Port Carnelian again?” The Innocent Spy likes Port Carnelian. It reminds him of California, if California had tigers and sapphire-strewn beaches.

“A little wine, I think,” the Captain demurs. “We can make Godfall on the way out to Polythreme. I should like to collect some Clay Men there in case of emergency, it is perfectly impossible to get good zee-trained ones at the Bazaar.”

“Scotch that. The monks have shut down the trade with extreme prejudice again,” the Cynical Herald says. “You don’t want the details.”

“I fancy a nice lazy stint at the Mangrove College,” the Crewmember says, eyes shut as they stroke the cat. “All the supplies you can want, and no fear of burning to ashes.”

“Vienna!”

“The delivery’s good, but your bursting through doors technique needs work,” the Herald says critically. “A little more forward momentum might help. And try not to make it so obvious when you’ve been listening at the keyhole, the timing was crassly apropos.”

“So much for an appeal to your sympathy.” The Student collapses onto a stray cushion, belying his adjective by way of looking more unsettled than unsettling. “But the sunlight smuggling trade. That’s the only thing I can think of, and I have a friend in Vienna who wouldn’t mind helping me out -”

“Calm down, you flighty young wretch,” the Captain says. “What’s the trouble?”

“Oh, the usual. My university loan. I knew I shouldn’t have trusted to a contract held by devils...so I missed out the odd payment here and there, and now they want the remainder up front. And of course all my savings are tied up in this ship, how am I supposed to pay it?”

“What’s the penalty clause?” the Herald asks, serene in discreet amusement.

“A deal with devils and you have to ask? Being soulless is an expellable offense at Summerset, to say nothing of what might happen when we do reach Frostfound....oh, I knew I shouldn’t have done it. The fine print was a bit too fine. But if we went into sunlight smuggling, maybe sold the stuff in Venderbight and came back with interest, I might be able to get away with it.”

“I’ve said before I like the idea,” the Cynical Herald drawls. “Money for nothing and regular trips to the Surface. Aside from the odd death, what more can a sailor ask?”

“Smuggling in a cutter?” The Crewmember frowns. “Wrong ship for it, our hold’s too small. We’d do better with red honey, that’s the stuff that pays.”

“Uh-huh,” the Innocent Spy says. “Why...why does it pay?”

“It’s a delicious way of eating other people’s memories while causing them intense agony,” the
“Too illegal even to ban. What are you looking so guilty about?”

“I was going to deliver this tonight. Now that I finally have the directions.” The Spy slowly draws a vial of honey, not at all the colour of blood, from his pocket. “How are you supposed to know the difference between this and plain old bee honey?”

“And you such a Temperance stick-in-the-mud!” The Crewmember is almost hooting. “Anybody in Isery’s brothel would have set you straight. Even you couldn’t be that innocent.”

The Innocent Spy flushes. “Yeah, I thought I’d spent my shore leave helping out at the cloister instead. One of the sisters needed a new bee smoker and I suggested building one with a bent nose and…look, it was quiet there, all right? It was peaceful, and then when I was leaving Zaira asked if I’d do her a favour so I said yes. She looked like she needed somebody to be nice to her for a change.”

“You said yes to one of the worst villains of the Unterzee? Oh, that's precious. Whatever would your delightful DTC say?”

“Just be glad you weren’t caught with it when we docked. The penalties for red honey smuggling are a little high for my taste,” the Captain says. “May I suggest we just hand it over to the Brass Embassy in partial repayment of our charter’s debts? It is properly theirs, after a fashion. They are bees.”

“Bees?”

“Bees. Mmm. Yes. Most definitely, devils are bees.”

“I don’t know if that clears up the theology or just confuses me more,” the Innocent Spy mutters. “But what about the Merchant Venturer?”

“If that’s the one I think you mean, he’s been trying to ease off the habit. Too expensive and he’s planning on going somewhere it can’t be sourced, or so he says. Zaira must have hoped a free sample would put her back in his good graces.” The Cynical Herald takes the vial, tucks it in a many-pocketed skirt. “I think I’d best handle the actual delivery. None of the rest of you have quite the worldliness for dealing with society devils.”

“Oi! We’re not all babes in the mushrooms here.”

“I said society, you ridiculous crewmember. If I’m not back by eighth-whistle, call for the Constables.”

She departs in a rustle of linen, just before the general bewilderment blossoms into speech.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if she went and flogged that herself,” the Student says, in a voice that sounds like a curse. “There’s worse payoffs than a thousand untraceable echoes.”

“Or never came back no more?”

“Please don’t start singing. I am having an uncommonly bad day as it stands, and drunken ballads will devalue it even farther.”

“I can’t believe someone tried to use me for a drug mule.” The Innocent looks decidedly unhappy now. “I can’t believe I fell for it, either. Zaira’s going to have a piece of my mind next time we go.”

“Not on my ship, you won’t,” the Captain announces; his usual decided quiet now quiet
decisiveness. "The Clipper's never been to the Isle of Cats under my watch and isn't going to. Bad blood over their machinations every time, and before it's over one of my crew's dead." He rises. "But that would seem to settle our course. Perhaps one of you would care to lay out the charts for Khan’s Shadow? And then I shall wish you all a good night."

“I'll do it,” the Student volunteers, so eagerly that he manages to squash the Captain against the doorframe as the two of them exit. The sight brings a faint smile to the Innocent’s face, for a moment; then he sighs and picks up the Herald’s abandoned needles. It’s something to do. He needs to occupy his hands for a while.

"Now that’s why it’s such a good berth here,” the Crewmember explains (they still haven’t opened their eyes). “We haven’t enough crew to be wasted on fights or famines, not like big ships where they can afford to keep prisoners and sail straight at the same time. I still don't like this sunlight smuggling, though. Somebody usually dies."

"Yeah. Before I get involved in smuggling something else I don’t understand in the slightest, how does that even work?” The whispered hints giggle silently, promising more and deeper secrets. It’s a good feeling; he feeds them along a little faster.

"Mirror-catch boxes. Don’t ask me how, I’m -“

"Only a simple crewmember, I know, you say it enough. That shouldn't stop you from learning about the world, you know."

"My interests lie in other directions. Care to hear a zee-shanty?"

“That’s not what I was asking…actually, what’s that one about no more to Venderbight? Now there’s a song I think I could enjoy."

They are still at it when the Herald returns (much later), explaining that she’s struck a deal, the devils have accepted the honey and will waive payment on the rest for now. Subject to an increase on the final interest rate, naturally.

"Which settles that for now. What have you done to my whispered hints, knitted them into a tea cozy?"

“I was going for more of a scarf. The kind of scarf that circles around in a Moebius strip, I guess?”

She picks up the cryptic weaving, shrugs resignedly. “Well, I suppose the Bazaar will take them in this form as well as any other. Hadn’t you two best be getting to bed, when we're zailing in the morning?”

“It’s not as if we have to catch a tide,” the Crewmember says. "Now listen, I’ve got this wonderful ballad about the time Salt went up Adam’s Way, on his way to visit Stone…”

Chapter End Notes

The Venderbight shanty is a real ballad that someone wrote for larks and then actually recorded.

I came across it while researching and wrote it in almost immediately.
Under such circumstances, I hope you’ll forgive the necessary postponement in my thesis preparations. As we’ve discussed, the manifold nature of the problem indicates, nay requites, a far more thorough, indeed leisurely, assessment that that of the average student contented to settle for simple thesis-anti-thesis-synthesis and a smeary enigma borrowed second-hand from a drink-happy clergyman.

The question of transportation has fortuitously not presented that overbearing dilemma which I had initially feared. Upon a nice survey of the original charter contract I negotiated with the cutter’s captain, I find that terms specify the initial fiscal bond to be considered as voided only upon the usual DDD terms (death, dismemberment, drownification) or the actual negation of the original intended purpose, the time not being otherwise specified. Thus, as long as the University agrees that I am engaged upon the wholesome task of earning my position as a properly invested scholar, the whole business is a self-fulfilling prophecy - as said, so writ.

Which is, of course, what I shall be doing. But it is not impossible that rumours should reach the university of less savoury business, especially attracting the attention of those who have expressed a measure of disdain for my small literary efforts in past times - such as one nameless professor (that egregious one from the cryptozoology department), who once compared my essays to the droppings of a particularly malodorous rat. If so, I hope I may prevail upon your infinite discretion and taste to reassure those persuadable (you will know better than I which ears are blocked to all finer things) that the Clipper is engaged in occasional trading in the course of natural, expected zailory procedure, having naught to do with my patient scientific strivings, rather than an impetuous ambition to earn a stately memorial at the peak of Gaider’s Mourn.

Though personally, I can’t say as I’d object to both.
In which coal trimming is presented as an inconvenience, not a way of life; there is also talk of gods

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I think that after that blasphemous singalong last night, you need a lesson in Neath theology.” The Herald’s helping the Innocent Spy with feeding the fires, cart by dusty cart. Filthy task. Still, at least it isn’t a desk job.

“Honestly, I didn’t get half the jokes.”

“If you were a shade less innocent, I’d list that as a reason for you to learn better. As it stands, aren’t you here to be gathering information for the Surface?

The engineer hums, pulls the cord that will bring down another lot of coal. “I wasn’t really sent down here with any particular brief.” If Pete did have anything more to go on than vague rumours of immortality, he certainly hadn’t mentioned it. Though the Phoenix Foundation always did work on a need-to-know basis. “But sure, let’s run with that. Isn’t the Bazaar supposed to be god around here, or something? I know they say the Traitor Empress sold her city for a miracle, but she got it, right?”

“That’s…well, no, but that’s a good point. Not once in five thousand years of civilisation has anyone made the mistake of thinking the Bazaar was a god, although perhaps that’s just because it typically works through the Masters. Who haven’t been adverse to the idea if they think they can get away with it. But no, I’m talking about the real powers now, the gods of the Unterzee.”

“That’s kind of limited for a god, isn’t it?” There is a single tiny cog gone astray on the floor. The Spy pounces on it with some relief. “I’d better figure out what this fell out of before something blows up in our faces. Think you can finish the rest off by yourself?”

Narrowing one’s eyes is a silly look when one’s covered in coal dust, but the Herald does her best. “Half a crate to go, of course I can. And don’t go Pascalian on me, I don’t know if there’s a great big god of everything up above, and I don’t care, frankly. You’re a zailor, I’m a zailor, what we want is something nice and practical.”

“I’m not sure either of us fit the definition, though…you know, did I ever mention I had a houseboat? Never did figure out a good name for her.”

“You want Salt! Stone. And Storm.”

“Sounds like a terrible 70s rock band.”

“What’s particularly 70s about rocks, then?”

“Wrong century,” the Spy murmurs to himself. Where does this wretched part go?

“Storm,” the Herald continues, sounding very much like the Student on one of his monologues, “is the roof-god who calls the thunder, Stone is the Mountain of Light in the south, Salt…Salt is what happens when you go too far east. They respect people who offer them attentions. Which is why I do what I do. Every hour, I go out and proclaim acceptance of my fate, of my willingness to their will, however doom-laden it may be. And in this way,” she smiles, “I’ve kept all the ships I’ve sailed on safe. Not one of them has ever sunk.”
“Is this a sect?” He’s heard this sort of thing before from a lot of Californians. Most of them are perfectly sensible people if you steer clear of their pet subject.

“It’s my own sect,” the Herald says, eyes burning in the engine light. “I could say I hope it’ll catch on, but that would be counterproductive, don’t you think?”

“Oh, dunno. Is being atheistic an option?”

He gets a pitying look. “Not in a place where your wife and all your children will die if you step on a cursed wreck.”

“But I haven’t got a wife or children.” Okay, the cog must have fallen out of the engines proper rather than the boilers, so he’s narrowed that down at least. How do mechanics on the other cutters manage the steamship’s incessant demand for fuel? Even with the gravity-powered pulley system he jury-rigged first thing, it still takes hours shovelling coal to keep the Clipper up to speed.

“Or bring down terrible storms on your ship!”

“That’d be Storm’s doing, I take it?”

“You’re certainly not taking this seriously. And Stone…well, no one knows yet what her curse does, but do you want the ill-will of the Bazaar’s daughter?” That’s the last lot; she pushes the cart back down towards the hold and sits down for a breather.

“The one who’s responsible for everyone being immortal?”

“Yes.” Faintly in the distance, there comes a crash and shriek of metal. Tacitly, they agree to ignore it.

“Mmm. How do I avoid offending her?”

“Ah. Nobody knows yet.”

“…in that case, I think I’ll just wait and try not to worry overmuch until you do.” There it is! That one wheel in the back is missing its partner; the Innocent gently replaces the cog in place, turns both to see they mesh well. “Don’t get me wrong, I have respect for a lot of different people’s beliefs. It’s just there’s a lot of them out there, you know?” His bunk looks filthy and coated in coal dust: also inviting. Tomorrow would be a good day to chalk that dust screen off his to-do list.

“Thanks for the help. D’you mind if I get some sleep?”

“I’ll just stay here and warm up a little longer, if it’s all the same to you. Deck duty’s cold near the Bonny Reefs.”

How can anyone still be cold after all that manual labour? “Go ahead. G’night.”

The Innocent Spy curls up on the bunk, pondering: what’s a better way to run a ship down here? Solar batteries are definitely out, anyone trying to run a stable nuclear reaction down here would probably get exactly what they deserved. And with so much cheap coal lying about, of course everyone’s going to use it for fuel. Perhaps a Stirling engine, working on direct heat transfer, might be worth investigating…wasn’t there a pamphlet he’d read about those once? Glaswegian technical library. Something about applying the principle of rocket power, for impelling bodies in air or water without intervention of machinery...

“Wait and see the next time we get into a snow storm,” the Herald tells the fire. “A trip or two up North will set him straight.”
“Are you talking at the boiler? Is there a coal-god now?” The Crewmember clatters in with a final sackful of fuel, dumps it on the floor with much puffing and exclamations of relief.

“Oh, now that we’re all done you show up. Hush. You’ll wake the Innocent.”

“As if! Sleeps like a blemmigan, that one. I had to wake him up once to get the boiler going and it was all of ten minutes, I can tell you…”

The Spy doesn’t stir; he’s already dreaming deep of engines.

Chapter End Notes

I refer the technically-inclined reader to Alexander Gordon’s 1840s publications, “Description of the Fumific Impeller” and “Results of Experiments Made with the Fumific Impeller: Tending to Supersede the Steam-engine for Navigation”.

I haven’t any proof that Alexis Kennedy has ever read these, of course, but I should be rather surprised if he hadn’t.
Gaider’s Mourn

“I think I’m in love.”

“With whom? That saucy minx with the double eyepatches? The redhead with the belt of skyglass knives?” The Anonymous Crewmember musters up a small trifle of interest, for the first time since arriving (they insist, not without merit, that hoisting ships up hundreds of feet to a sky-cradle harborage is both unnatural and something that the Wolfstack shipyards never intended their ships to cope with.)

“With that winch system,” the Innocent Spy says dreamily. “I mean, forget the Cumaean Canal, I’ve never seen anything like it. Why abandon such a brilliant port to pirates?”

“I imagine because they built it in the first place. It’s an implausible waste of effort otherwise...now where was this shop again?”

“Down that staircase, I think, under the cracked arch. Yeah, that’s it.” A crude caricature of a broken-toothed smile proclaims the Friendly Face; even outside, the Student’s usual lugubrious tones carry distinctly.

“But the entire Neath knows you buy sunlight on the Mourn, so how can you possibly not have a single mirror-catch box on hand?”

“I told him so,” the Cynical Herald observes. “The Captain agreed, even, but no, he said it’d be a quicker voyage to pick them up here. I think they probably collude with the Khanate to keep the supply low.”

“I’d call it funny, but we can’t keep zailing at this rate without some money coming in the coffers,” the Crewmember says. “Why can’t we put that lore of yours to some use, Herald? Ask Storm for a blessing, or some fuel or what have you.”

“You’re more likely to get a smack on the head than a purse, that way. And he likes taking the regular crew first, so don’t go trying any exhortations on the sly. Religion is for the professionals.”

“All right, all right, keep your hat on.”

The Spy is peering through the dust-tainted shop window; tricky, as it’s encrusted with salt and other more organic substances. “I suppose we’d better go in, then?”

“Well then, I won’t sully my time any further!” The Student storms out, slamming the door behind him and ignoring the sign that consequently falls off. It patiently starts scuttling back up to its place again, on innumerable feet. “Everyone knows that sunlight smugglers bring their boxes here and never see them again. What are they doing, eating the things?”

“I was saying, I rather suspect there’s an agreement to reimport the boxes back to Khan’s Shadow. It might be part of their treaty negotiations.”

The Crewmember looks abruptly intense. “There was a rumour about that, a couple of zailors I heard say there was a Khanate warship round the other side of the Mourn. Now if that’s so, all we have to do is go and retrieve the valuables, like.”

“Are you insane? Under the Mourn’s flag of truce? We’d have our throats and everything else cut by next whistle.”
“Course not. We wait until they’ve zailed clear and then pounce. Easy as anything.”

“Sorry, are you actually talking about sinking a ship? Because I don’t think I like that idea.”

“Absolutely not,” the Student agrees. “They have four times our hull and actual guns. We wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“But they’re pirates of some sort. Else they wouldn’t be here.”

“We’re here,” the Cynical Herald points out. “If we’re going to carry on this conversation, may I at least suggest we find a less conspicuous location for it?”

***************

They take a table in a back room at the Slug and Mushroom, away from the cheers of the regular pirate-clientele. Apparently it’s a common arrangement for the benefit of lost trading vessels, as the regulars generally don’t want to see them any more than the traders want to see the regulars.

“Too much like watching sheep in the pen, if you take my meaning?” the barkeep laughs, pouring out the mushroom wine.

It’s cramped and the melted foxfire candles flicker dreadfully - altogether unsuitable for a relaxing shore leave, though the carpets are very nice.

“How many of these pubs are there? You invented the chain restaurant but you don’t have television yet?”

“Murgatroyd’s seem to think it’ll catch on. I doubt it, Londoners are individualistic beasts.” The Herald scans a tattered fragment masquerading as a menu. “I don’t think I care to find out how wrong their Traditional Rubbery Lumps will turn out, in a port with no well-water. Does anyone want to split a sheep’s head?”

The Spy shakes his head. “I think I’ll just go for the solacefruit sorbet. I miss ice cream down here. Shouldn’t it be possible to make some, if there’s milk in the Khanate?”

“No one has ever discovered where they keep the quantities of horses required to manufacture all that airag, so for the present it’s a moot point,” the Student comments. “Can we stop talking about food and get to the point, please? I’m all in favour of getting a cache of mirror-boxes if it’s for the taking, but we can’t take on a trireme and expect to win.”

“Not the regular way, but what if I said I had a lump of blue scintillack in an old necklace wot had been gifted to me by my very own mother? A charm to make the guns fire smoothly in the worst fogs?” They sip at their wine, demurely.

“I would say that’s hardly the kind of story I’d expect from an Anonymous Crewmember. Relatives like that, you’d have never come to zee in the first place.”

“Fair do’s. I lifted it off a chess player in Port Cecil. But that gives us a good chance, and they won’t be expecting any trouble from us. The Clipper’s so small and manoeuvrable, we can stick at their tail and just worry them at our leisure. ‘Ere, you! That stuffed sheep’s head and a sorbet for the gentleman,” they shout. With unnecessary volume - the waiter is standing mere feet away - but he’s clearly accustomed to the cries of sailors drunk on the temporary power to order others around. He bows very politely and disappears.

“Combat always takes a lot of fuel,” the Herald says, looking resigned. “The Captain never
budgets that into the trip calculations, we’ll have to take on some extra coal somewhere. Did
anyone check to see that we received the Admiralty supply for all those port reports?"

“In the back half of the hold, under that netting,” the Innocent Spy says. “I checked to make sure
the crates came in before we left London.”

“Hang about,” the Crewmember says. ”The big nets, that we use to lug up dead zee-monsters?
Those are all empty.”

The Student takes a restorative pull at his drink. “What’s the point of filling our hold with empty
crates?”

“Dunno. Not my place to second-guess command, is it? But I shouldn’t think we have more than
what’s in that little lot of red ones by the front.”

“That’s just the leftover from last trip, it isn’t enough to get us back to London,” the Innocent Spy
says. “It’s barely enough to get us out of this chart square. We could burn some of the supplies, I
suppose. How much does coal cost on this rock?”

“A pirate port, you’re paying pirate prices. I keep a captivating treasure for emergencies, but of
course that would only be useful if we were at Khan’s Shadow. They banned selling them here
after that last round of open warfare over a particularly nice Second City mask - ”

“Fine, you made your point, obviously whatever you and the Captain say is absolutely correct one
hundred percent of the time - ”

“Well, if you would occasionally acknowledge that you’re basically a landlubber at heart -”

“Calm down, everybody,” the Innocent Spy intervenes. “We’re not going to get out of a hole by
yelling at it, are we?”

“More words of wisdom from your grandfather?” the Crewmember murmurs. “Look, I don’t know
about the rest of you, but I’ve been on a stranded ship. First the lights go, then the engines trail to a
stop, and then it’s just you under the false-stars, waiting in the dark, watching the rest of the crew
and wondering if it’ll be the hunger or the terror to take you first...”

“And you alone survived to tell us.” The Student fails to sound as cocky as he’d intended.

“Sure. If anonymous zailors didn’t get out of these once in a while, who’d start the stories? But I’ll
tell you one thing, I’ve never heard of the officer who didn’t go down with the ship when it came
to that. Something always happens...”

There is a short pause, during which the Clipper’s three officers contemplate this cheery piece of
news.

“We could always just stay here on the Mourn for a while,” the Innocent Spy suggests, optimistic
as ever. “See if anything turns up.”

Something outside gives a heartrending scream; the door smashes inwards to a splintered mess,
pummeled as it has been by a bevy of skyglass knives and their unfortunate waiter. He collapses
into a sprawl over the very nice carpet and starts mucking up its silky weave with copious bloody
effusions. The sheep’s head falls off the platter and rolls to a stop, its placid face gazing patiently
up at the ceiling.

“And if that doesn’t teach you not to overcook a good shark-fin steak, I don’t know what will!” the
Tattooed Redhead calls, to general applause and laughter all around.

“Or we could not do that,” the Student says. “Shall we go before they stick us for the bill?”
Extract from a Khanate captain’s letter to her wife

...after that last trip to Frostfound, I have no further desire to run intelligence errands. They may ask. I will cordially suggest they find an envoy more willing to play childish games and tell riddles all day.

One curious incident this past night: a pirate boarding. And not by any of the usual ways, either.

I was resting in bed, with that guide to Third City architecture you gifted me before the last voyage (you know my weaknesses so well, dearest of my heart), when I became aware of a curious noise scraping against the bottom of our hull. Now if one was to chase down every odd noise at zee, one would never get the horse saddled. But when the noise was accompanied by an even more curious heat, I went down to the bilges to investigate. No mention to the crew: zailors are such an excitable lot.

Would you believe, the pirate had burnt a hole through the hull! Some kind of weapon from the Iron Republic, possibly, it smelt infernal enough. I kept my light off and my wits about me; he moved the circle of metal back into position and, to my amazement, began welding it sound again.

“That seems to cut off your escape route,” I pointed out, descending the ladder with my knife at the ready. One can never tell with these London spawn.

“Sure. That was kind of the whole idea.”

Of course I demanded an explanation. Apparently they’d had word of our carrying a rich cargo of mirror-catch boxes from our last destination (no, we didn’t stop at Gaider’s Mourn - I promised you, didn’t I?) and had agreed to mark us victim. The engineer, being a tender-hearted soul and sure of his own skill, had persuaded their navigator to zail under us. Somehow he contrived to open their submarine escape hatch while it was flush against our hull, cut his way in, closed his own ship’s hatch, and had begun repairing the gap in our hull (far more competently than the original welders of this rat-trap had first joined them, I might add).

“That seems to cut off your escape route,” I pointed out, descending the ladder with my knife at the ready. One can never tell with these London spawn.

“Sure. That was kind of the whole idea.”

Of course I demanded an explanation. Apparently they’d had word of our carrying a rich cargo of mirror-catch boxes from our last destination (no, we didn’t stop at Gaider’s Mourn - I promised you, didn’t I?) and had agreed to mark us victim. The engineer, being a tender-hearted soul and sure of his own skill, had persuaded their navigator to zail under us. Somehow he contrived to open their submarine escape hatch while it was flush against our hull, cut his way in, closed his own ship’s hatch, and had begun repairing the gap in our hull (far more competently than the original welders of this rat-trap had first joined them, I might add).

“An impressive display, but here you are alone. What do you intend with my ship?”

“I thought I’d see if you had a berth as chief engineer. I was going to suggest a practical demonstration, but you seem to have already seen it.”

And he favoured me with a smile that had all the light of the false-stars in it. A good thing I am not another kind of woman.

“And your former companions? Are you so willing to abandon them?”

“No! No, that wasn’t it. See, the Clipper, that’s my ship, we’re about to run out of fuel and echoes, and everything, and they were going to start shooting tomorrow. Someone was going to get killed. And I care about them, a lot, so I had to get here first. Ask if you could spare them enough to get home again.”

“In exchange for your services.”

“Right.”

Imagine. So completely innocent as to put himself at my mercy, so utterly loyal as to throw himself at the enemy for the sake of comradery, and yet unshakeably certain that he’d turn bad to good. It
was gloriously mad. If London produces more warriors like that, why, Khan’s Heart might yet be
glad of our aid one of these years.

Of course it wouldn’t do. The White-and-Golds would never trust me again, never mind the crew,
though I’d have taken him any day over that airag-swilling fool who presently keeps our engines.
But we had a good stock of coal left from Mount Palmerston’s devils; I rowed him out myself in the
dinghy, with a chart for Khan’s Shadow and enough fuel to reach it. A flare attracted the attention
of his friends aboard the submarine, which surfaced just long enough for all to be made fair before
vanishing. They looked pleased to see him again, but then I should have hoped they would.

(Our lookouts missed all of this, even the flare; I ordered a general flogging for them afterwards.)

Now, clearly it is my duty to report this breach of the naval treaty; someone (in the Stations? Port
Carnelian? Or even London itself) must be manufacturing submarines again. That could mean war
across the zee. Londoners attacking Khan’s Shadow with fire and cannons, as we’ve dreaded.

Or I might carry on with business as a simple Khanate trader, and forget the White-and-Golds
altogether. A London engineer owes me a favour now, and perhaps I am petty - but Frostfound!
Pah!
The Anonymous Crewmember is in disgrace; only after the whole piracy debacle was over had anyone thought to ask the Captain whether or not he had actually submitted his port reports.

“Eh? Why, of course I did. I might be getting on a bit, but I’m not quite senile yet. The fuel’s all there, all in the hold. You might have to move some rather smelly fishing nets to find it.”

“I can’t believe we nearly lost you because someone wanted to play hero,” the Herald says afterwards. “And do you have any idea what it takes to zail a zubmarine underneath a surface ship? For an hour I was steering with my heart in my mouth, wondering if they were going to change course, or take a pot shot at a crab I couldn’t see, or gods help us, turn into a zub themselves.”

“That was a lot harder than my part, definitely,” the Innocent Spy agrees, flicking a brush lightly over the gunnery controls (he is repainting everything on the bridge, partly to stave off rust but mostly because it’s a good excuse to be out of that dusty engine room for a while). “Thanks. And I don’t know how I’d ever explain it to that nice captain if she knew we already had enough coal to reach Khan’s Shadow. One of these days I’ll have to make it up to her.”

“Just so long as you don’t try to desert again. It’s been different since you came aboard, at least until this last incident. Our previous engineer…well, a fair enough sort, but quiet. Never did anything except potter about talking about his blasted engines. Of course he and the Captain got on famously.”

“I do that too.”

“But more amusingly.” She actually musters up a smile.

“Hello, hello,” the Student says, brushing flecks of fuel off his clothing; he’s due to take over the wheel in a minute. “What’s the Captain saying about making a stop at Wisdom? What would we want there, anyway?”

“We have a prisoner, technically. The Captain’s within his rights to make an example of anybody who incites wild terror in the ship, it’s in the zee-codes. Though he might just be saying that to put the fear of gods into them, I suppose.”

The Student looks doubtful. “I don’t like losing crew this far out from London. All right, they shouldn’t have done it, but we’ve all got out of it with whole skins. Any chance of persuading him to forgive and forget?”

“That’s what I said, too.”

“You’re learning. Time was you two would have gone straight to the man and probably set his mind on doing something drastic.” The Herald reluctantly relinquishes her post, teases a sleepy zee-bat from her pocket. “Fortunately, there’s a few ports between us and Wisdom. Even odds he’ll have forgotten all about them by the time there’s any question of wasting the fuel to steer there.”

“Good to know. I suppose they might always get killed on the way too.”

“I don’t think I’m ever going to get used to people saying things like that.” The Innocent Spy opens up a container of fuschia paint. “Oh! This looks like fun.”

The Student and Herald pass a wordless exchange. A slightly-inclined nod, the small movement of
a shoulder - he already has, hasn’t he?

Yes, but who would want to tell him?

Behind them, the Spy starts to whistle something bouncy.

***************

Khan’s Shadow is, it turns out, a very bad place to take the Innocent Spy.

“I just wanted to look,” he complains, after being dragged back onto the main path for the umpteenth time. “All the ships here! I mean, I recognise some of the styles from London and some from the Elder Continent, but there are so many more. The gant one, I’d guess was Third City, maybe a couple of hundred years after they reached the Neath. This place is practically a living museum.”

“Yes, and people live here, and they’d prefer us all to stay on the tourist walkways,” the Herald chides. “Is it so hard for you to calm down?”

“When there’s this much to be learned? A history of parallel ship development at my fingertips? You bet.”

“Oh look, here’s the store,” the Student says. “Isn’t that convenient.”

The Herald sighs. “I will be so glad to finish this shopping.”

Inside the Traveller’s Friend it isn’t much better; the Spy speculates at length about the cutters used to polish the Captivating Treasures (“The rounding would be smoother if they’d used lasers-ah. Surface thing, nothing to worry about.”), pokes curiously at the box of Very Angry Dream-Snakes (not for sale at any price), tuts disapprovingly at a Milebreaker. Eventually he locates the nook where they keep the mirror-catch boxes. The Student is already there, intensively surveying them for flaws. The Herald is pretending to be with a group of warriors from the Chelonate.

“So, I have a question. Why do you sell these, anyway?”

The Khanate merchant leans over the counter and regards him with a reasonably cheerful iteration of the why-am-I-plagued-by-idiots look favoured in these parts. “Because they are bought, and at good prices too. Why does one sell anything?”

“No, I meant it more…you’re the only people in the Neath who sell them, so you must have invented them, right? But before the Cumaean Canal there wasn’t anywhere to fill them, in which case why bother? Or did you have another way of getting sunlight down here?”

“Ah. Now there you are making a little mistake about the uses of a mirror-catch box. Did you know Londoners are not the primary buyers? Most of these boxes end up in Irem one way or another.” The merchant gently polishes one box’s burnished brass hinges. “A mirror in a box. A useful trap for people who live so close to Parabola. They find themselves in need of it on occasion.”

Parabola. Where the takers of prisoner’s honey go, and the more than slightly mad. Well, he’s not likely to be travelling there any time soon.

“Now, shall we haggle or do you wish to pay the tourist price?”

“Uh.”
The Cynical Herald looks up from a dusty curios display and leans in close. “Forget him. I’ll be doing the haggling.”

“Great. Perfect, actually, I’ll just go and have a look at that bronze ship out there, see you later.” The Innocent promptly vanishes out the door.

“Student?”

“Right,” comes the resigned response. “With any luck, we’ll be waiting on the ship when you’re done. If not, well, maybe you’d better round up the zee-bats and send out a search party.”

“Good. Now let’s get down to brass tacks. What sort of price would you give for a genuine First City coin stamp?”
“Why confess at all?” the Innocent Spy asks, as they near the Bazaar’s Ivory Door.


An explosion! Ochre-beige confessions flutter out of the sky. Londoners, ever sensitive to secrets, vie with one another to grab the confidential slips.

“Got a better idea,” the Crewmember says, as they watch the papers rain down. “Why don’t we forget this, and just confess to each other instead?”

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Their idea, so they get to start. For setting, they insist on the Clipper’s great cabin. They’ve only ever been there the once, and that was for their initial signing-on.

"Sir," the Crewmember says, saluting.

When nobody else is around, they like to preserve the formalities with the Captain. He's always that little bit sharper, more sure of himself when protocol’s observed- but of course their shipmates can’t be made to see it that way. And they’d never take it on themselves to say as much outright.

The Captain nods, and does not invite them to sit down on the plump armchair opposite his own. "Anonymous Crewmember. I understand you've a confession to give me?"

“I do. A confession of awe, sir.”

“Unusual matter for a confession. Continue,” he prompts.

It’s a short enough tale, roughly told. Their last captain but one, the doomed Clarissa Adune foundering off the Chong Yi Rift, one last desperate launch of the boats. Even a pirating tug would have been welcome, then.

“So of course we stumble on a lifeberg instead. First time I’d seen one, and hearing all the stories hadn’t prepared me a bit. A half-grown specimen, already had that playful way of butting itself to and fro. One iridescent steak down the side. Glowing, it was- I’ve wondered how, since. Perhaps a rift, or the creature’s spine, or mayhap a trick of the light...the way the false-stars shone on its hide, sir, I’ve not seen the like again...”

“And then?”

The Crewmember emerges from reverie. “Oh, well, then it went after another boat- snap! snap! - and swims away again. Everyone was screaming at me, why I hadn’t thought to fire the mortar in
my lap. A young crew, sir, we thought we’d best salvage at least one tolerable weapon.”

“The odds against your damaging a lifeberg with anything small enough to fit in a boat,” the Captain observes, “are remote enough. Let alone those of the monster doing as you wished, rather than destroying two boats instead of one.”

“True enough, but you might say the same about our chances of being rescued. As we were, by a party of Codex fishers...silent enough, but they brought us back to civilisation. Of sorts. But I ought at least to have tried, so there you are, sir. My confession, to do with as you will.”

“I’ll keep it private, of course,” the Captain says briskly. “Tell the truth, Crewmember, more than likely I’ll have forgotten it by this time tomorrow.”

That is not part of protocol. That is very decidedly not something a captain ought to be saying at all, let alone to crew. He’s not even behaving as though it’s a confession.

“Off you go then.”

Though that’s proper enough.

All in all, the Crewmember considers, they’ve come off lightly. Especially considering they’ve just faked a confession.

Blast landlubber holidays, anyway. Daft things.

******************

"Of course, I wouldn't be able to confess to anyone under my command," the Captain explains to the Student. Back turned (one of these decanters in his bookcase holds port, he remembers, but which?) "Not done. But as you're my employer rather than my subordinate...it makes a difference, you see?"

"I think so," the Student says respectfully. He has a weakness for people who are unqualified masters in their own field, and the Captain’s certainly one such. A nice long zee-voyage will be an excellent opportunity to pick the man’s brains.

Though he does have his oddities. The Student shoves a table away from the two armchairs and settles down, wondering how anyone could be expected to sit straight with that whacking thing in the way.

"Do me good, to get it off my chest. And no doubt you've been wondering how a captain with my reputation should end up on a ship like this?" He selects a decanter with a fine purplish glow, turns and raises an eyebrow.

"Well-"

"You needn’t look so alarmed," the Captain says, meandering across the cabin towards the table. "Once on a time, as they say, I had a daughter. Now a properly educated fellow like yourself might say that she was no better nor worse than any other young lady, but we knew better. My Molly was more than all the stars in the sky to me- for I didn't care when those vanished, as long as she was with me. But an accident happened, as they do." He pours out a sluggish measure of port into a balloon glass, and drinks deep.

"Not much to be done about a true death, you understand. Not even vengeance, in this particular case...so I became involved in a little game called the Marvellous. Perhaps you've heard of it? I
staked my dreadnought on the outcome. Lost, of course. Mad idea. I never was a bad hand at cards, but the players..." The Captain picks up a second glass, frowns at it in befuddlement, and replaces it back in the straw hanger.

The Student purses his lips. A desire to express perfectly righteous irritation struggles with his even stronger distaste for port.

"I'd betrayed my charge. A hundred sailors lost through no fault of theirs, all because of my own selfish desires. What the Master did with my ship, afterwards...but that's another confession, and not mine to tell." He takes another glass. "I knew I’d I never give up captaining- runs in my blood, you know- but aboard the *Clipper*, there’ll only be the few familiar faces about me day in and day out. A crew small enough that I’ll learn off all the names by heart. So you see, I shan't fall prey to temptation a second time."

The Student nods. A sensible solution for a logical concern: nobody would want the company of a cutter for a dramatic blood-sacrifice. It’d be rather too small.

One thing does worry him, though. Does the Captain not remember he's told this story before?

The Herald is chanting softly to herself, as she works her current ritual. This week’s Encrypted Letter in the Unexpurgated Gazette is a puzzler, all right.

“Come in,” she says, at the knock.

“Evening. Tell me, how did I end up having to confess to you?” the Student asks, dumping his armful of confessions perilously near the fire. Other people’s. He’s been busy this holiday.

“You said you weren’t particular, whereas everyone else had decided opinions about their confidants,” the Cynical Herald reminds him, not budging an inch to help. Her kitchen flagstones can take a bit of flame if it comes to that. “Why, did you fancy someone else?”

The Student coughs and begins to sort his confessions into stacks. “If you don’t object, I’m in favour of finishing as quickly as possible. Grinding, you know.”

“Carry on then. Any sins worth the mention?”

“Yes and no,” he says, dryly. “Enough for the average university scholar, but morality was never one of my favourite debate topics. It should hardly count as a confession if you don’t feel guilt, would it? Which limits us to...well. My use-name.”

“Ah, the confession of self-regard. Let delight be unconfined.”

He ignores her and looks away. “We have a tradition at Summerset. One year in every four, we celebrate the Glestaening- a night of utter frivolity, in which we attempt to be as ludicrous and outrageous as possible. Behave as Benthic does the rest of the year, in short. The grand prize for the evening is a plaque marked with the sigil for ‘an irregular elliptical’ - that’s as close as you can come to saying ‘unsettling’ in the Correspondence, you see. It bequeaths that student the right to the adjective thereafter.”

“I had planned to ignore the whole affair, until a number of my fellows- pushed me into it, I suppose. A few too many comments about my innately sober diligence, how I was so very dull I ought to be in a Surface college, and so forth....cometh the day, and the lady everyone was expecting to win, did. Cavorting across the roof of the Shuttered Palace whilst singing Urchin
sweet-songs, as I recall.”

“Only they couldn’t give her the plaque, because I’d hired out a gang of hoodlums to steal it and then serve as my bodyguards for the night. Expensive, but I meant business. A round dozen of my peers suffered rather nasty injuries in a heroic charge- markedly unsuccessful, of course. In the end, they had to agree that not only was possession nine-tenths, but my determination to keep it would have to count as unsettling enough.”

“My fellow student works for the Revenue now, a perfectly respectable person who no one would dream of calling unsettling. Except in their professional capacity. Whereas I’m engaged in a wild, doomed chase for zee-enigmas, so there’s no question which one of us has the right to the name. Though I wonder where we’d each be now…if I hadn’t worked so hard to earn it…”

He gives her a smile dry and light as dust. “Names are what you make of them, aren’t they?”

“I suppose. Mind you, I was christened with my use-name.”

“You were not,” the Student says dismissively.

“All right, I wasn’t,” the Herald agrees. Only twenty minutes it took her to finish, in squid-ink. She can stand to be affable for once.

******************

The Innocent Spy comes by the Herald’s Retreat an hour later, pushing a wee handcart with mushroom caps for wheels.

“You knocked that up in a hurry, I take it.”

“Couldn’t carry any more,” he explains, lifting a hefty silken sack off the cart and promptly overbalancing from the weight. She assists a somewhat chagrined Spy to carry the load inside. Must be twice what the Student had garnered, at least.

“Would I be able to give these back to the Bazaar, do you think? For safe-keeping?”

“The Masters aren’t accepting any more confessions at present, the whole affair’s disintegrated into a wild swapping game. I’d tend to believe the rumour that it’s yet another of the Bazaar’s ploys for love stories.”

“Sitcom misunderstandings,” the Spy mutters to himself. “Sorry, never mind me. What is it you’re meant to confess to me? Have you got another ritual for this?”

“If only there was one, I could quite happily spin it out all night. A confession of impropriety, my dear Innocent. I don’t care to return to Rome, just at present.”

“Trouble at home?” the Spy ventures, after a waiting silence.

“Following new gods,” the Herald says darkly. “Five thousand years of the family following Storm and Salt and Stone, I’ve clung to that. But the unhappening will keep whisperings of wild new idols, and while it’s my right and duty to bear witness…the next Alteration will come in fuming-furious, on a wind unrecorded in my list of sixty-four directions. I’ve a notebook of lore that oughtn’t to exist, for gods who aren’t. Or aren’t yet, at least. You’ve no idea how absorbing the matter is.”

“Oh, I might. The first time you’re learning any new subject, it’s always exciting.”
“But imagine the chaos when I go home. Traveller returning, with a host of unhallowed rituals...I will think of a solution, eventually, but it hasn’t come to me yet.”

“Uh. Can’t say as I have any advice, honestly.”

“That’s by the by. I just didn’t care to undermine anyone else’s spirituality with this. But as you’re a Surfacer and don’t believe regardless...”

“The Student doesn’t seem to. Much.”

“The Student is the sort who’ll defile the temple at Whither out of sheer blistering curiosity. It'll get him into trouble, one of these days. That's besides the point! You have my confession, to do with as you will.”

“I won’t tell, promise,” the Innocent Spy says. "Wonder what I was expecting. It sure wasn't that.”

"Are you amused? I daresay I ought to have expected as much.”

"More relieved. I had this nasty idea you were going to...um, maybe admit to an unrequited love?”

"That'd be a secret, not a confession," the Herald says, half-laughing. "What put that into your head? A single kiss?”

"That- um, yeah. A bit.”

"Mmm. You tasted of sunlight-drenched ocean and open spaces. Not half seasoned enough yet, for a proper Neath resident. I'm not convinced you'll ever make one."

"I'm older than I look," the Innocent Spy reminds her. "And this whole immortality deal's not half bad, either. You never know."

"Oh, were you asking all this by way of example? The Bazaar's call has tempted better souls than yours or mine, to be sure.”

"...no. Honestly, I've got kind of a bad track record about these things," the Spy says quickly. And an even worse habit of solving my problems by running away again- see, I don't want to leave the Clipper just now. All those ships where the engineer works double-duty as the gunnery officer, or everyone just wants to go hunting lorn-flukes…"

“Or, gods forbid, you might have to take a reduction in rank and work as a common zailor.”

“Might not be so bad, at that. I'd have someone else to wake me up in the mornings.”

The Herald frowns. “This is exactly what I was talking about. An officer who doesn't appreciate status- for Storm's sake, how innocent are you?”

“Very? Sorry about that.”

******************

The Crewmember eyes the folded-over paper in some perplexity. “So you want to confess to me in a letter. Despite the fact that you are also here, and could just tell me what the ruddy thing is.”

“I’d feel silly saying it out loud, so I wrote it down,” the Spy explains. He’s fussing about the doors, having insisted on sealing the engine room up tight before they begin. “I’d rather you not even say it yourself, if it’s all the same?”
“If you say so.” They tear a bit of sticky pink linen-seal off the paper. Quite a brief whimsey.

*I’m not a Victorian at all, I’m from the future. A hundred years from now, give or take.*

“Not much of a confession,” the Crewmember informs him. “I’d already guessed.”

He looks less put out than he might be, but then the Spy never seems to approach anything with anger. At his most irritated, he just goes tight and terse and coiled, like a Parabolan kitten hunting mice. Undoubtedly in earnest, still very difficult to take seriously.

“I wouldn’t mind knowing how, if you don’t mind me asking. It wasn’t my engineering, is it?” He hangs up a scarred round of mushroom, flicks out his red-handled knife and tries a throw. It slices into the cap, a little off-centre.

“Is there something unusual about yours? I thought it was the same weird witchcraft you lot are always up to...No, it was just the odd tell here and there. A tune you were whistling that I’d only ever heard once, in the Brass Embassy- time’s just as crooked as everything else, out by the Iron Republic. I asked the Marred Mercer where I might find a jacket like yours, and he said he’d never heard of the like.”

“Uh-huh. Anything else for me to be careful about?”

“Main thing was,” the Crewmember admits, “you left one of your letters lying about. I was tempted to flog it off as stolen correspondence, but the price wasn’t good enough to risk your ill will.”

“How could I have been that stupid! Which one was it?” Not that anyone could tell from the smooth swish-thump of knife into target, but kitten’s gone all anxious now. Caught dipping its paw into the milk.

“Eh, nothing that interesting. A summation of the Uttershroom, it didn’t tell me much I didn’t already know. I take it this Pete’s your man in Vienna or some such?”

“Something like that,” the Spy agrees. “I worry about this, a lot. That I’m not changing history the way any right-minded person ought to, in my place. That I’m making changes that no sane person would have dared try- it was an accident, I’ll tell you that much. Nobody expected this was going to happen.” *I think. I sure hope so.*

“You unlucky sod,” the Crewmember says sympathetically. “So you’re stranded, is that right? Even down here, we still reckon a century’s a long time.”

*I hate lying to people, even when it’s in a good cause. But given what the Presbyterate’s like- I don’t dare unbalance Neath politics- or my own future!- by telling anyone how I really got here. The border-crossing, that poor Snuffer...*

“Pretty much,” the Spy says. “And knowing I’ll have to keep a secret like this for that long...I have to admit, it’s kept me awake a few nights.”

“I shouldn’t think you’d come to much harm telling the others,” the Crewmember offers. “You might be safer that way, even. Let the Herald and the Student in on a wonderful secret that no one else can possibly know, and they’ll happily die to keep it. As for the Captain, don’t ever underestimate the wisdom of someone who’s survived thirty years of commanding Neath ships.”

“I suppose you’ve got a point there...I’ve been thinking about it a lot, but thanks. Yeah, I’ll probably tell them soon, then.”
“In fact, you’ve taken the greatest risk telling me. After all, I’m only a lowly crewmember, and this sounds like quite a valuable piece of information. Supposing I went and flogged it off to the Masters before the day’s out?”

“Oh,” the Spy says, artlessly. “Well. I suppose I’ll just have to trust in your natural sense of loyalty towards a fellow zailor, won’t I?”

The Anonymous Crewmember considers this. Pauses. Retorts upon the Anglo-Saxon.

“That’s why you picked me to confess to, you planned this from the start! Knowing I’d be the only one who might get you and your precious secret in trouble. Why, that use-name I gave you- how did you ever gull me into calling you Innocent?”

“I was wondering when you’d notice,” the Spy tells them. “I mean, I am in the Game. And up on the Surface, we play for keeps.”

He sends the knife spiraling up into the air, glittering as it goes. For a moment, the flickering reflections glinting off its handle turn a deep, eager violant. The Spy catches it neatly on his palm, then winces at the impact and shakes his wrist out.

“Ouch. I was kinda thinking that’d look more impressive than it did.”

“That was the other thing,” the Crewmember says. "I never saw any engineer look so embarassed about being caught inventing something before. That duct tape stuff of yours is jolly useful."

“It's a dreadful anachronism and I never should have done it,” the Spy mutters. "Damn it, I got homesick."

“You were homesick for an engineering implement?”

“Why shouldn’t I be? The whole time we were in the Khanate, you were complaining about how they didn’t have quite the same mushroom tea blends you were used to. Same difference.”

“Why, that's hardly the same thing. Supplies are important business, you know...”

They fall into the more regular patterns of shipboard conversation, familiar to the Crewmember and a relief to the Spy.

It's foolproof. Whenever he needs to distract a Londoner, turning the conversation to tea always works.

************************

Nobody thinks of confessing to the Mog. Cats being such notorious gossips, that no Londoner would dream of confiding their confidential matters to them. So there isn't very much for it to do, this Hallowmas.

It goes off for a nice long sulk in Parabola instead.
a treachery of time later

Chapter Summary

If this were a proper Victorian novel, Book II would just be beginning here, with the narrator picking up the story again after a time skip. Perhaps with an intriguing sigil on the intervening page, such as this. (With thanks to Erika off the Failbetter forums, who helpfully posted a list of Sunless Sea badges).

I'm not going to incorporate it into the fic-at-large because it was a present for someone, but this might also be a good time to pause and read "Nine and Fifty Ways of Dying in the Neath" if you're at all interested in the Anonymous Crewmember.

And now, back to your regularly scheduled adventuring.

Dear Jack,

Sorry it's been so long since my last letter.

The Innocent Spy crumples up the paper, leans back to guiltily eye an overflowing basket (woven from living Elder wicker; it eats the wastepaper at intervals to restore itself), and slowly smoothes it out again. This time he’ll finish it. This time -

The door opens and the Fierce Philanthropist comes in. She carries a tray with the inevitable sherry for herself, fruitcake for him. “Afternoon, then. No callers, but your captain left his calling card this morning. I believe he wants to invite you to dinner. Imporuntate fellow, is he?”

“No.” The Spy gratefully shoves his inchoate missive under a copy of Cosmogone Zubmarine: A Tale of the Future (bought strictly for research). “Not usually, but I imagine he’s worried I’ll stay on here. It is an awful lot like home. Hot, too many coffee shops, every second person you meet is either manufacturing fantasies or wishing they were.”

“The diplomatic networks? That was quite the trick on our part, convincing the entire Neath that long tropical holidays were a necessary part of the spy business. Last year, vital intelligence was more profitable than even the sapphire trade.”

“See, you even had your own gold rush. Now if only you had orange juice down here, we might be getting somewhere.” He cuts himself a slice of the cake, hesitates, and lightly kisses the Philanthropist. “Sorry, I forgot to say thanks.”

“I assure you, the apology was more than adequate.” She smiles and sips her drink. “So will you have an answer for him? If the Clipper is leaving in two days, he’ll need a replacement engineer in your absence.”

“I know…”

He contemplates the costly, well-furnished room he’s been staying in this last month (the Philanthropist hails from the Surface originally, and has never permitted the usual Neathy weirdness to discombobulate her domicile). A stopover from their sunlight-smuggling grind, now thankfully complete; the proceeds had paid off the Student’s debts and allowed for a long
Carnelian shore-leave.

The Herald has spent it talking to the locals (“I suppose I can’t expect them to discuss Salt, but they should know about Stone. Comparative religion with a tiger, fancy that.”) The Student quests in search of his elusive enigmas, the Anonymous Crewmember…is presumably doing whatever sailors do in ports. Probably something rude. The Innocent Spy had sought out their submarine patroness, to thank her for the experimental modifications. One thing had led to another, and, well.

Well.

“I’ve been trying to lay out the pros and cons for myself. Some actual light on the horizon, enough intrigue to keep any secret agent happy for life. A job where I get to both help people out and work in what I’m betting is the best engineering workshop in the Neath.”

“Thank you. Don’t let any of the Khanate agents hear.” She spreads butter on her cake with an unstinting hand. Even so little an action strikes him as utterly characteristic: her deep-rooted determination to get all she can from life, experience everything with a fierce surety of purpose. Attractive, that.

“And there’s staying on with you, I guess.”

“Oh? I should have thought you’d have considered that a disadvantage.”

“What?” the Spy splutters, around a mouthful of cake. “But -”

“Come, now. I may have only known you a month, but that’s enough time to see you have an incurable case of wanderlust.” The Fierce Philanthropist readjusts the lacy knit doilies on the tea tray, as though just the correct placement might avert disaster. “If I kept you now, inside of another month you’d be pacing the floor and wondering why you didn’t go back out to zee when you had the chance.”

“It always comes down to this conversation, every time,” the Spy observes, a mildly self-mocking twist about the mouth. “Either I tell the girl or the girl tells me, I don’t have what it takes to stick the commitment.”

“Why should you? It’s been pleasant, but we won’t miss it when it’s over, you in your sphere and I in mine. Just a few good memories.” Her speech is calm; but her voice, her movements, decry the words; a bright ruddy spot glows on one palm, where the cut-glass decanter wounded the flesh. No wonder how the woman came by her cognomen.

Her curled hair is luxuriant in the mountain-light. Instinctively, eyes half-closed against the glow, he reaches out to touch her cheek.

There’s a moment when none of the arguments matter, and another perfect ending lies open before him - when he knows all her misgivings would vanish for his asking, and a part of his mind cries out that the Innocent Spy could be happy here -

and his hand drops before contact, and he chuckles ruefully. “I have to say, that’s the smoothest I’ve ever been dumped. If you have that expression.”

“No regrets, I should hope. Will you stay through tomorrow night? I had planned for a sorbet.”

“Sure you’re not trying to bribe me back?”

“Call it a going away present. I did ask about this ice cream you mentioned, but no one at the Blue
Bazaar has ever heard of it."

“You know, I could probably whip some up. Little ice, solacefruit extract for the sugar, the only tricky part’s the cream.”

“Could you try it with Beloved blubber? That should be sufficiently unctuous…”

and it trails off into a light-hearted, laughing discussion with a good friend. She suggests they take in a fireworks display, the next time the Clipper is in port; he promises to send word about that rumoured new design for shell-hulls from Khan’s Shadow.

But that night, the Spy dines with his Captain.
in which there is some dinner; also thoughts regarding a certain foundation

“You can put it on yourself, else I can throttle you with it. I’m not particular.”

The Innocent Spy regards the cravat with a look of anguish too forceful to be called despondent. “You know, I’d have thought that in a crazy hole in the ground with tentacled monsters and a space-crab ruling over London, you might have eased off the fancy dress requirements.”

“On the contrary,” the Herald says, still pointedly proffering the loathed object. “Under trying circumstances it’s more important than ever to retain one’s sense of the fitness of things. Which in this case means appropriate attire for dinner. It’s the ship’s honour at stake.”

“I’m only having dinner with the captain.”

“Ship’s honour. Don’t tell me you never dressed formally in this mad future you come from.”

“Course I did. Usually while complaining, like now.” Reluctantly, the Spy accepts the article, checks his reflection in the wide wardroom mirror (at least now he knows why the huge, badly-framed thing is here; presumably the captain had it installed for occasions such as this). “How’d you know to come chase me down, anyway?”

“The Mog told me. Cats have a sense of proportion too, you know. Besides which, I wanted to give you some advice.”

“About my dress sense?”

“A warning. So far you’ve only seen the Captain in his affable everyday mood, when he spends half the day thinking he still commands a sailing ship.”

“And?”

“It’s not the only side of him, that’s all. Don’t be hasty tonight. Try not to let him use that compassion of yours against you.”

“Anything that bad, he knows I could just walk out now. Anything reasonable, well, he is the captain. I don’t object to his giving orders.”

“There are some things you can’t order, but you can ask,” the Herald murmurs. She steps up behind him, looks at the mirrored result. “How can anyone as handy as you be this bad at knots?”

“I don’t think this is the same kind of tie I’m used to - ow! Why is there a pin in this?”

“They’ve been that way at least since the Fall - stand still, would you?” With a few quick movements, the Herald undoes the knots and starts over again,fixing its wide folds with sure and swift certainty. “That’s more like. I hope you have a dinner jacket?”

“Well, I have this jacket. It’s black.” He slips into it, rubs his hair down a bit - maybe he does need a cut before they leave Port Carnelian, it starts getting inconvenient at shoulder length. The colour still looks wrong.

“I suppose it’ll do.”

“Why do you even have a tie, anyway?”
“Used to wear them,” the Herald says briefly. “But I’m a traditionalist. I don’t hold with putting one on over a dress. All set, then? It’s nearly time.”

“But you’ve always worn skirts, ever since I met you,” the Spy begins quizzically. Then the hour-whistle starts, and he makes a dash out the door.

The Herald kneels down, close to where the Mog lies dozing. “Thank you for letting me know.”

A yawn. A stretch.

“I suppose you wouldn’t mention if the captain was planning on getting our Innocent into trouble, would you?”

The cat does not bother dignifying this with a response.

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He’s never been inside the Captain’s cabin before. Small, tidy, a heartwarming array of texts set into a barred bookcase, presumably to keep them from spilling en route. Two plush armchairs done up in what he guesses to be pre-Fall velvet, bolted to the floor. A small cheap table is awkwardly jammed between them.

Twin onyx barometers hang on the wall by a porthole, their red contents at a low ebb. One features a dusty label, threatening to drop off any moment; neat gothic letters spell out the word "TERROR".

How odd. He almost touches it, but the air around has the cold of iron in midwinter. Best not.

"So, Chief Engineer! I'm sorry it's taken so long for the traditional introductory dinner. Usually officers are a trifle more pressing about their rights."

“Oh, yeah,” the Spy says, mentally kicking himself - there are times for curiosity and times for being polite, and this evening looks like being in the latter category. “I’ve never been an officer before, I guess I just didn’t know how it’s done.”

“Always a first time, my boy, always a first time.” The Captain fusses over a large steaming box he’s brought in, which smells very strongly of driftweed. “I had this brought in from one of the port restaurants. The Herald told me you were vegetarian, otherwise I’d have done a little catering of my own for the occasion. Tripe and onions. Recipe from the Surface, but it’s better down here. All those rats, you see.”

“Yeah, if it’s practical I don’t eat meat. Though I’ve always liked fishing.” Rat tripe. He’s probably had a worse meal at some point, but it isn’t coming to mind just now.

“Good trait for a zailor. Excellent trait. Shall we begin?”

There isn’t any room to sit in the armchairs correctly, what with the table in the way; but the Captain calmly sits against the side of his, thighs balanced on the opposite side and legs up in the air. “Like so, you see? Much healthier to eat this way. The elevation of the legs aids the digestion.”

The Spy murmurs something agreeable and concentrates on not giggling.

It’s a good dinner, though; the driftweed salad is pungent and slightly sour, which the pitcher of fruit juice offsets perfectly. The Captain rambles on about a perilous adventure in which his previous ship caught a zee-monster and cooked it into Rubbery Lumps. The story is current in
every port, but he tells it well enough. Who knows, the Spy tells himself, maybe they all have. There’s certainly enough fish for it.

Tenth whistle blows; the faint sounds of the Carnelian docks diminishes to a stop. He feels unduly sleepy.

“So, then. You’ll be coming aboard when we depart, no doubt?”

He shifts into a cross-legged position, sits up straight. “Well, I have been hearing about one or two tempting jobs. Port Carnelian’s a good place for engineers, you know.” Being innocent is one thing; but why not listen for a counteroffer?

“Mmm. That would be quite regrettable. Quite. I’m sure you know we would all miss you.”

“Possibly,” the Innocent Spy agrees. Possibly he’s been hanging around the Cynical Herald too long and her sarcasm's rubbing off, but he feels an itch to get to the point. “Why, are there other reasons I should take into account?”

“Why, then. You might almost be reading my mind. No wonder they call you the Spy. Tell me, have you ever heard of Parabola?”

“On the other side of the Neath, isn’t it? Hard to reach unless you've gone mad.”

“All the way to Irem. Home of the mirror-marches, the Tree of Life…they say there’s an engine there. An engine you might be very interested in acquiring.”

“Uh, what’s so special about it?”

“That future you come from, so impossibly advanced…do you have an engine that lets you fly to the stars?”

“You mean, actually between solar systems? A proper interstellar drive?”

The Captain turns to him, closes one bleary eye in a very slow wink. “Just so.”

Now that is something.

Los Angeles, deep in summer's warmth. One of those thick, sunlight-drenched coastal days, when you don’t move through air so much as swim in it. Glorious.

But they keep it cold at the Phoenix Foundation, that air-conditioned sixty-eight for optimal working conditions, and you’d shivered and zipped up your jacket as Pete spoke.

“Mac, there isn’t anyone else to do it. If it’s true, if any tiny part of it is true, this will cause a situation that will make the invention of the atomic bomb look like a kiddie toy.”

“Oh the say-so of Jack Dalton? Even I wouldn't believe him on this one, and besides, I never actually saw anything to prove that this place made people immortal. You get an extraordinary claim, you need extraordinary evidence.”

He’d fussed about his desk, shuffling papers into untidy stacks. “That’s what the board wants you to get. Extraordinary evidence. We have a map, showing a secret tunnel into the heart of the Mountain itself, that’s where you’d start.”

“A treasure map? Oh, for crying out loud, Pete. What’s next, sending me after the Loch Ness Monster?”
This time he had looked at you, properly.

“Suppose it’s nothing. Two weeks spelunking in a mountain in Central Asia, you come back, we forget about it and you can tell the board where to get off next time they invent a mission for you. But suppose it isn’t. Suppose there really is an insane magical kingdom down there that makes people immortal. We both know the Foundation’s agents are some of the most reliable in the business, but would you give any of them that kind of power? Hell, would you trust me with it? Because I wouldn’t.”

And you’d stopped to think about the implications, and the absolute wreckage that a single unkillable assassin could provoke, and stayed silent too long.

His voice had turned quiet again. “Let’s face it, you’re the only man in the world I can trust on this one.”

…and then it had turned out to be a to-do about nothing at all. Everything about the Neath melts when you take it to the Surface. Crumbled linen and crumbled people. And even Londoners die, on the streets or in the zee or failing that, in the tomb-colonies. He’d gathered all this information, and none of it remotely relevant if you weren’t hiding away from the sunlight.

But an engine? A set of blueprints, physical law, information that he can carry in his head and remake above. Now that would be a real prize, to top off all his patient intelligence-gathering.

Ask things they can’t order, the Innocent Spy reflects. So much for the Herald’s advice.

“I imagine it’s not going to be as easy as all that. Making off with this engine.”

“Well, no. No, doubtless not. It doesn’t quite exist yet.”

“Are we stealing the plans from anybody?”

“Stealing will, I am sorry to say, most probably be involved at some juncture. Possibly also offending various parties. Possibly any number of events requiring a rapid escape which, as chief engineer, you will no doubt be able to execute most decisively.”

He weighs the statement and decides it doesn’t make a lick of difference.

After all, what mechanic in creation could be expected to turn down an offer like this?
"So, somebody's in love," the Student remarks.

He says this in the rather lugubrious style in which he says everything else, so it takes the Spy a moment to realise this is intended in the nature of a joke.

"Love might be pitching it a little strong. She liked my engineering, I liked her sorbets, we talked a lot of shop. It was fun." All right, he’s understating it, but Port Carmelian is off the horizon now and he’s never been one to dwell on the past.

"So unexpected a development from a man of your inclinations."

"Temperance isn't the same as celibacy," the Spy observes, dryly. "Anyway, do I ask about your personal life, or where you and the Anonymous Crewmember went that last night? The Herald mentioned you left together."

"Ah," the Student says, turning a curious shade of red shading off into burgundy. "Well. Made your point, least said, soonest mended, eh? I think I'll go see how my rushmoons are getting on. Mushrooms. You know."

"Wait, what? I was only joking -"

He's gone. The Innocent Spy decides it's perhaps best not to pursue.

Instead he turns back to the much belated letter.

Dear Jack,

you wouldn’t believe the time I’ve been having. Took a page out of your book and ended up in the smuggling racket, it turns out that people will pay almost any price for sunlight down here. After those long Minnesota winters, I think we can understand that. Actually no one seems to know why sunlight's illegal at all (the 19th century tanning booth - only really dangerous if you bask in it all day). And the Student has an in with one of the revenuers - they swapped cribs as undergraduates - so we weren’t running too many risks.

Too bad you weren’t here, though. Probably you could teach the Blind Bruiser a thing or two.

None of it’s really sparkling. Writing letters to someone he hasn’t seen or spoken to for months increasingly feels like espionage practice for staying in character, rather than a spontaneous gesture. A reply might help him regain some perspective, if not for the part where that's completely impossible.

“Hallo, you.” The Anonymous Crewmember taps him on the shoulder. “We have deck duty, remember? Or at least, you do, and I’ll come keep you company.”

“Nothing to do? No chores down below?”

“Oh, I’d just as soon polish the brass on the bridge as anywhere else, it’s not as if the captain’s going to come by. I picked up that new Leadbeater & Stainrod cleaner. Supposedly it'll make your spoons so shiny you can shave in the reflection.”

“Ah ha. So you do shave?”
“Now, now. Don’t go questioning the crew’s private affairs, that’s one of our inalienable rights.”

“That’s something I’ve never really understood,” the Spy comments, as they ascend and nod at the departing Herald. “You’re the gunnery officer, or as close as we have to one, so why do we keep calling you crew?”

"Because the Anonymous Officer sounds ludicrous - but really, it throws off the whole sound of the thing. There's crew, there's officers and a captain, the great chain of being on aboard ship. It’s all a matter of the fitness of things. That Cynical Herald isn't the only one who can taste salt on the wind, you know.”

"But it doesn't really make sense." Neither does the course chalked up on the travel slate - southeast by east, not north? Oh yes, there’s a whirlpool or something up that way. The Herald’s navigation is always trustworthy like that.

"Course not. You academic types are too interested in things making sense.” They open a rattling box of cutlery and start in with the elbow grease. “Wait until one of you sees a good bit of non-Euclidian horror out there, then you'll stop worrying about things making sense so much. We haven’t even made it east yet.”

"Oh come on, you can't go around using words like ‘Euclidian’ in the same breath as making fun of academics. Mathematics doesn't go with that uneducated air you try to pass off."

"It's mathematical?" The Crewmember looks puzzled. "I always 'eard it was just a word for something with a hellacious number of tentacles."

"Sure it is. A mathematician from the fourth century BC, first one we know about to handle geometry by starting with logical axioms and going from there. And don't think a lack of schooling should be anything to stop you. Lots of people I know had to teach themselves how to think, and did just as good a job as the professors did." 

"Now that's what's refreshing about him," the Crewmember announces to the Neath at large. "Not five minutes conversation and he's already stuffing an earnest moral down your throat. I suppose next he shall be tellin' me to cut out the '79 and live a nice decent life."

"Never too late to start."

"Not in a month of Sundays. Who ever heard of a zober zailor? Silly notion. And where are you steering the ship, anyhow?" They wave a fork about for emphasis; soapy water flies everywhere. The Spy ducks. “If this is the route to London, I’m a tea kettle."

“It probably moved again. Aren’t the islands always moving?"

The Crewmember shakes their head. “Most do eventually, but the London to Port Carmelian route hasn’t changed in twenty years, that’s why they set up a colony there in the first place. No, there isn’t anything down this way except the Grand Geode. With all those revolutionaries who built the Dawn Machine."


“Well. Dunno about fascinating, unless you’re the kind to stay on permanently. They don’t let word get out too much what they’re doing there.”

“But I’ve heard a few things. A self-aware computer if I was to guess…of course, last time I ran
into one of those it tried to kill me.”

“Up on the Surface?”

“Where else?”

“I just wonder sometimes. If you’re not an ordinary Londoner who’s shuffled his life round a bit to try to make it sound more exciting.”

“Perish the thought. And just because I’ve been down here a while doesn’t make me a Londoner, to get that straight. I’m still a Surface boy at heart.”

“Time was you wouldn’t have even known what the right word was,” the Crewmember comments. They toss aside the cutlery and cross over to the speaking tubes, whistle down to the wardroom.

“Herald, have we changed our port of call? Because the Innocent here’s steering us straight for the Dawn Machine and I don’t think that’s right.”

“No, it is.” Her voice, already a little blurred by the tube, can only barely be made out over the sound of squeaking bats. Must be feeding time for them or something, the Crewmember reckons. “Just stick to the route. The Student and I cross-checked it already, it’s fine.”

“What’s she saying?” the Innocent Spy calls.

“Oh, that everything is toodle-pip and extra fine with a plum on top. Wonder if the Captain knows about this.”

As further developments make clear, he doesn’t.

“What in hells did you do? We weren’t supposed to make it to the Barnsmore Gap for hours yet!” The Herald shoves the Spy off the wheel, starts frantically trying to steer in the impossibly ruddy light, so strong it makes sunlight seem cool as water. “I never set a course to sail straight under the bloody Machine!”

“We sped up because of the dreadnought that was on our tail!” the Crewmember roars, abandoning the cannon and pulling the engine telegraph lever towards “Full Power” with all their might. “And if you hadn’t buggered off and left the navigation up to him, we wouldn’t be in this mess!”

The Spy isn’t listening, just studying the rapidly-developing bruise on his hand, the same wrong red as the Machine outside, violent coloured - violence coloured - violent violence, violent violence, becomes a crazy little chant in his mind and he lies very, very still on the deck and tries to hear his ship. The engines purr smoothly. There’s not a thing wrong with the Clipper - they’d just been sailing along and then insanity had dropped on everybody out of the sky.

“A firewall,” the Spy says, and starts to giggle, and then laugh with that uncontrollable, painful vulnerability next door to screaming and far more frightening - “We sailed straight into a firewall. How are we gonna hack it?”

“We get out of here!” the Herald screams, and the Spy wonders for a moment why they’re all shouting when the zee is so quiet out there, only that relentless thump-thump, thump-thump of the Dawn Machine’s rotating. He starts laughing again. It hurts.

“That’s straight off the edge of the map.” The Crewmember slides off the lever, staring out. “I’m starting to think it wants us to stay. Look at all the light. Just like the sun. The sun, the sun -”
“If it’s that or zailing back under that thing again, tear up my charts first!”

He has to do something, he desperately needs to be trying anything, except that no science he’s ever heard will fix a ship that doesn’t need fixing, and his helplessness only heightens the cycle of terror, in a vicious little feedback loop -

Isn’t it nice you know the terminology for going insane, the Spy thinks, and blacks out.

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He wakes up again in the wardroom. Someone’s laid out all the assorted cushions into bedding for them. The Student and Herald sleep peacefully. Foxfire candles give out their faintly greenish glow; after the Machine, that light looks almost unbearably homely.

The Captain sits by the door, reading a copy of Book of Nonsense. “Awake, then? I fear I owe you all my deepest apologies.”

“Where’s the Crewmember? What happened?”

“Deceased. It’ll be all right once we’re safe and sound in London, of course, but even so…you wouldn’t want the grim details, my boy. They were unpleasant.”

“Yeah, I can imagine.” The Spy sits up, surprised to realise he feels fine - but then, the whole ordeal had been mental rather than physical, hadn’t it? That mark on his hand might scar a bit, but nothing more. “I take it we’re safe now.”

“Oh yes, quite safe. The Grand Geode. Not a place I would visit under normal circumstances, but it has to be said they’re considerate of those who venture too close.” The Captain sighs. “It should never have happened. I should never have allowed so much leeway, even to a paying passenger. Perhaps especially then.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this, sir.” The Student groans and props himself up on the cushions. “The Herald and I had noticed that there weren’t any accounts of zubmarine travel to the Dawn Machine, and we thought we’d just take a quick detour to see how it looked. From a safe distance.”

“Good lord, was that your plan? Bad enough on the water. Underneath it’s a star in waiting, a false Judgment. You might as well have scuttled the Clipper first and saved yourselves some trouble.”

“Sorry.” He even manages an appropriately subdued expression. “If it’s any consolation, I don’t think we’d care to repeat the experiment.”

“I don’t intend to give you the opportunity to try. It’s high time this ship had a proper Captain again. And you can focus on that enigma-hunting expedition of yours, eh?”

“With the luck I’ve had, I suppose I’ll try anything. Just that one I picked up from the Uttershroom after all this time, so how long will it take to find another six?”

“Well, then. I may be able to ask around in London, you know…”

The Spy slips out out at this point. Let them go talk mysteries all day - what he needs is some good old-fashioned engineering and getting his hands dirty. There’s that zee-water distilling system he’s been noodling about with, that ought to do nicely.

And no matter how many excitingly anachronistic vacuum tubes they’ve got here, he’s definitely skipping shore leave.
Dear Jack,

The Spy sucks on his pen and grimaces. It tastes of brass and sulphur.

"Does anyone know why I can't write anything properly right now?"

"Don't even bother," the Student says, the reply somewhat muffled by the fact he's put his hat over his face. He insists it's the optimal position for repose. "Nobody ever brings back a readable report from around the Iron Republic, it's something in the air here. Probably also the ground, the water, and whatever other states of matter happen to be hanging around the place. Wait until we're refueled and get out to zee, that's what I'm going to do."

"After all that work I put in on it, too. Six pages worth and then five of them flew into the fire and the last one's just gibberish."

"I applaud the effort. Console yourself with the thought that you haven't spontaneously combusted yourself."

"Was that at all likely?"

"Happened to a friend of mine on their study abroad here. Such a tragic tale."

"Oh, woe. Desolation. On account of the terrible flashbacks, they say they simply can't enjoy flaming puddings anymore."

The Spy favours him with a cutting glare (which, thanks to the hat, goes completely unregarded). "The trouble with this place is, how are you supposed to know if anyone's ever pulling your leg?"

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Once they're far enough away that the sound of incessantly repetitive (and yet frustratingly lovely) violas has ceased, and the percussion has faded away to the semi-normal sounds of the zee, he rewrites it.

Dear Jack,

so today we zailed into hell. Possibly actual, literal hell, I'm honestly not sure, but somewhere where nothing makes sense and there's a lot of devils who stockpile souls. I hate to miss filing two
port reports in a row, but Pete’s just not going to get much sense out of this one.

No one else wanted shore leave, so the Captain had to go himself to negotiate our coal purchases. We’ve all been a bit subdued since leaving the Grand Geode. My dusty engine room has suddenly become very popular (well, less dusty now I’ve fixed up a suction pump - it’s not what I’d call OSHA-compliant but at least it’s possible to breathe now). The Student says he’s finding it easiest to write by coal-light this week and might as well work next to the supply. The Herald didn’t say anything, but she’s started sleeping in here.

(No, of course not with me, we fixed some bedding for her on the other side of the room. Who would have guessed that an inordinately large pile of fluffy cushions would be such an important feature of a steamer?

Wait, I forgot I was writing to the man who thought that airplanes and bouncy castles were a terrific fit. Never mind.)

The Captain’s certainly come into his own, though; up at eighth-whistle, discussing our course with the Herald, making more tea than anybody wants to drink. He’s even taken double watches, so that no one has to be up at the zee too long by themselves. I’m a little unsure what to make of all this. “Accidentally allowing everyone on board to go mad” is what you might call a sizeable demerit even if he didn’t know (and not knowing anything about anything was the real problem there), but he does seem to be trying to make amends for it now. I’m looking forward to seeing how the next voyage out will go.

Especially since we’ll have the Crewmember back again - they were right, a ship without any crew feels lonely. The Clipper seems to creak more during the night watches. And they seem to have hidden all the cutlery somewhere.

On the plus side, I’ve now crossed spoon-carving off my things-to-try list…
"That's a lot more beautiful than I remembered," the Spy murmurs, as the Clipper glides into dock. "All those lights set against the roof, London looks terrific. You know, it's almost hard to think that we even left."

"That'll be the irrigo getting to you," the Student says briskly. "Radiation from the Forgotten Quarter. There's not enough of it to wipe your memories, but it softens the impact a bit. Usually it's worst the first time. Remember the amnesia you had when you arrived?"

"That's a bit impossible to answer, isn't it? But I didn't."

"Odd. Didn't you come down the Travertine Spiral like everybody else? You did say you'd never seen the Canal before..."

"Oh, well, I've had amnesia so many times I might have forgotten about it," the Spy hastily amends; he hasn't mentioned his eccentric entrance to the Neath yet and doubts he ought to. "Last time I was in a place with, you know, actual doctors, I asked and they said it's the kind of problem that tends to recur. Especially if you get hit on the head a lot." Not the most subtle ploy for changing the subject, but needs must when the devil...no, that's probably not an expression to use down here.

The Student eagerly snaps at the bait. "Actual doctors? Say that at the University and they'll have your head. And then use it for a dissection demonstration."

"Why even have doctors? If everyone's immortal, I mean."

"Would you two pipe down and get off the ship already?" the Herald calls. "Otherwise I'll just have to go to the Carnival and enjoy some Rubbery Lumps all by myself."

"London Rubbery Lumps are absolute rot!" the Student hollers.

One of the Adjudicators from the Ministry of Public Decency, just boarding the Clipper for their usual illegal search (in the sense of both “looking for” and “technically impermissible, not that that’s going to stop us”), frowns. "Are you one of those troublemakers from Benthic? Because if I catch one more of you lot trying to pass off red honey as ‘exotic foreign cosmetics’ again, why -"

"We were just leaving," the Innocent Spy interjects, hastily dragging the Student off.

It takes a good half-mile for the three of them to shake off the consequent shadow, but they manage, by dint of a healthy jog and a short-sighted bombardier in Spite. Purely by accident, naturally.

"Oh come now, can’t a fellow have a little healthy target practice without the whole city running slap bang into it? Look at my best winch. Ruined it, he has."

"Rather curious fracture pattern there," the Student observes, ever the professional voyeur. "Don’t bother," he adds to the Innocent, who rather conscientiously is checking the officer for a pulse. "It’ll take him all of a day to recover from that death. Maybe two. The Constables will be along shortly, they’ve always been pretty efficient about looking after their own."

"Where are we making for, again?" the Innocent asks, abandoning his profitless task with a certain measure of reluctance. "I don’t think I’ve been this far north yet."

“How about on sticks? Nobody got out of my hometown without eating the fried things on sticks, it was like the world’s most disgusting coming-of-age ritual.”

“Wait until the Fruits of the Zee festival, you’ll love that,” the Student says. “But I must persist in my original statement. London Rubbery Lumps are abominable.”

“Of course they are,” the Herald agrees. “And any time that the Fifth City seems too outrageously twee to exist, I can always go and have one to restore my proper humour. Why do you think that they start people Seeking? ‘If a man is tired of London’, why, he goes to drown his sorrows -”

“You mean stuff his sorrows? Anyway, it’s quite clear that the connection is physical rather than psychological, given their zee-origins…”

The following conversation is rather technical in nature and the Innocent doesn’t really listen; that rather vivid reminder of how alien this city is has him preoccupied. Riotous life, riotous death all around: how can London ever be condensed into mere words? All these trips and he’s still no nearer a coherent port report. Even those rules he has identified playfully twist away from analysis or summation.

Caste, for instance. Londoners self-identify with such enthusiasm that even a novice has no trouble picking them out. This languid dreamer in the gutter, graffiting sidewalk poetry with chalk gripped in her toes, is most certainly a Bohemian. That sly child, counting coins on an awning safely above the crowds, that’s an Urchin. Or that ordinary figure in black…yes, definitely a player of the Great Game. Too anonymous to be anybody else.

But the why is less clear than the how. Is it a desperate attempt to hold on to scraps of pre-Fall culture, or was it brought on by something about the Neath itself? Do people like it, or resent their lives of continual performance? Is it simply playful? More than one rumour circulates about how the Bazaar eats stories; perhaps it encourages people to act out their lives as flamboyantly as possible, so as to reshape bland personalities into vivid stereotypes. Something a bit Dickensian about that.

The Spy glances at his companions and tries to see them in this odd light. As caricatures rather than as his friends.

It’s eye-watering, almost literally: the mental equivalent of looking at Rubin’s vase. Impossible to mistake the Docker, stormy-eyed and smelling of damp zee-air, even in that respectable yellow silk dress she’s adopted in honour of the occasion. And the Student, slouching along in an anonymous zailor’s blouse and smelling just as salty, remains unmistakably the University type. He even wears a scarf in Summerset’s colours.

Now was that a chance selection of garment, or prompted by a social need to be identifiable, or is there even a distinction once the rules are solidly enough embedded in everybody’s heads? Smacks of that linguistics hypothesis about whether individuals can think independently, or if every thought conforms to the rules of the language it’s conceived in. (Like spending a semester mostly thinking in German, because you were taking organic chemistry and it helped with the nomenclature.)

Presumably anyone looking at him would make a similar snap judgment. Not the most comfortable thought.
“And since it’s your first time, I’ll pay for the tickets,” the Herald says, passing him a handful of yellow flimsies. “Up we go.”

“Hang about,” the Innocent protests, coming back to reality to find a queue up a worryingly high ramp. “I’m sorry, what’s this line for again?”

“Zeppelin ride. That’s why I was so keen to get here early, before the crowds -“

“Oh no. Oh no. Definitely not. Forget immortality, you’re not getting me on any crazy nineteenth century flying contraption!”

“I thought you’d enjoy it. That pilot friend of yours you talk about.”

“Yeah. And Jack Dalton might be nuts, but at least he doesn’t try flying a bag made of hydrogen and goldbeater’s skin.” The Spy pauses. “Well, except for that one time. But that was an emergency.”

“It’s perfect for a spy. Think of the aerial reconnaissance you could do up there,” the Student says. “I myself intend to take very careful notes on the Bazaar’s hide, should we be fortunate enough to go anywhere near it.”

“Which is exactly why that’s the last place in London Mr Fires will allow it to be flown over,” the Herald says. “Imagine what a Revolutionary could do from that height.”

“Or just imagine what a Revolutionary can do on board a flammable ship. Look, why don’t you go on and we’ll just meet up later?”

“Obviously I should have lived up to my name a little more strongly,” the Herald says, with a highly communicative shrug. “We’ll have an early dinner on board ship, and then go to the play? Be seeing you.”

“Right,” the Spy says. “Only -“

A Rubbery Organ opens all its stops at once. By the time the general screams have trailed off into annoyed grumbling, the other two are already through the ticket gate.

Okay. So he’s alone in a carnival, quite a distance away from the Clipper and without the slightest idea how to get anywhere. Probably time to stop being philosophical.

“Excuse me,” the Spy says hopefully to a well-dressed gentleman with a high hat and tremendous umbrella. “Could I ask you for directions?”

“THESUNTHESUNTHESUNTHESUN” comes the screeched reply. The well-dressed gentleman runs away. His umbrella goes flying. Another plucky Urchin promptly nabs it, then is forced to deploy it as a makeshift sword against the jealousy of their fellows.

“This,” the Spy observes to the stray cat prowling around his ankles, “is going to be one of those kinds of days, isn’t it?”
“What an exceedingly banal day,” the Herald grumbles; it’s not much more of a walk to the Clipper, but getting to Veilgarden afterwards for the play is going to be fun. “First a zeppelin that stays firmly moored, then your friend shows up with her chiropterochronometry handouts and tediously nourishing Rubbery Lumps -“

“You didn’t have to be quite so rude. I’m going to have to apologise to her very thoroughly next time I want a decent seat for the cricket.” The Student is in somewhat better spirits; beating a professional chess player at his own game that afternoon had been awfully satisfying.

“I enjoy a quality cut of rat as much as anyone, but that doesn’t mean I want it battered to death and gussied up as something it isn’t - hallo, Wolfstack’s on fire again. There goes our chance of a hansom.”

“The anti-docker arsonists are out of control again, I expect. You know, I heard a rumour that Mr Fires sees to some of the conflagrations personally.”

“And I imagine that rumour’s current just for the sake of the jokes. As though a Master would swoop around London like that, the idea’s ridiculous.” The Herald peers down the slope. “It’s getting a little out of hand now, that’s going to be unfortunate. You see that warehouse over there with all the bunting?”

“The one that’ll catch on fire in about five minutes, at present rate?”

“It’s the Admiralty’s fuel store. I wonder how they’ll handle that. Soak the place in water like normal, and half the small traders won’t be able to zail until their coal’s dried out.”

“The Captain said he was heading there first thing, I imagine we have nothing to worry about.” The Student gestures at a convenient ladder, highway to one of the Urchin routes. “Shall we stop here? I have half a bag of spore-toffee we could finish.”

“I’ll require a boost. This bustle wasn’t intended for serious climbing.”

They scramble up to the roof (already occupied by a half-dozen chatty silk-weavers, but there’s plenty of room), there to sit and watch and enjoy the spectacle of a fire-lit London. It’s the closest the city ever comes to real sunlight, now; a serious blaze always attracts the kind of attention that hangings or bear-baitings used to (the entertainment value of which being somewhat diminished by immortality and talking rats). It’s not unknown for certain performers to have it in their contracts that they receive fire evenings off; theatre managers came around to the idea after noticing how much their takings tended to drop those nights regardless. Much better to let them go and perhaps get their names in next day’s paper as “concerned citizens”.

Today, however, the general jolliment is brought to an abrupt halt. Just at the breathtaking climax, as the flames lick along the edge of the docks and a few drunks raise tentative cheers, a dark wave abruptly crashes over the flames. Something foamy that bubbles, and sinks, and when it goes leaves the fire as no more than fields of ashes and a strong smell of toasted mushroom.

The silk-weavers curse genially and descend to less airy concerns. The Student and Herald look at each other, and look away again.

“I suppose the Admiralty might have managed a trifle of competency, for once,” the Student says quietly. “There’s no reason to think…”
“No. Of course, there isn’t. London’s had firefighting companies for two centuries, we ought to be used to this by now.”

“Only I don’t recall ever having seen that particular technique before. Do you want the rest of this toffee? It’s stickier than I expected.”

“We have to face it,” the Herald says, tucking away the bag. “Both of us now feel idiotic because some insane Surface newcomer went in and broke every unwritten rule. Just because he thought it was a nice thing to do.”

“That’s not it. What makes me feel idiotic is that at some point the subject is going to crop up, and you know what he’s going to say? That he’s sure we’d have helped out if we’d known.”

“True. And then how do we reply?”

The Student groans. “I motion that we were coming back from the Carnival this whole time and didn’t know until it was all over. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

********************

Dear Jack,

pretty thrilling time of it tonight. Had to rig up some aerating nozzles to stop a big fire with nineteenth century protein foam (fungal, of course), I haven’t had this much fun in absolute ages…
A Particular Day in the Neath, or Three

There’s a solitary zailor singing by the Clipper's dock next night, when the three of them return from their postponed play (“it’s the longest running production in London, how did you sleep through it?”; “not through the whole thing! I woke up for the pyrotechnics”).

“They think he’s lost on some horizon…”

The Innocent Spy waits until the song is over, then taps their shoulder. “Excuse me, are you our Anonymous Crewmember?”

“Now, then. You don’t just up and ask a zailor for their past, you buy us a drink first and then we’ll start talking your ear off. Inalienable rights and all that.”

“It’s them.” The Cynical Herald starts counting echoes from her purse. “I suppose you’ll be wanting your signing-up bonus right away, as usual.”

“I should have to turn in my Dockers union card if I didn’t. And seeing how it’s good for a half-priced coffee at Caligula’s every Saturday, that’d be a very sad state of affairs indeed…”

The Innocent Spy looks on with the faintest of misgivings. Of course the Clipper has been here two days now and Wolfstack swarms with unemployed zailors, but the meeting does seem a trifle coincidental.

“Does something seem a little wrong about this to you?” the Student asks, lingering behind the other two and speaking in an undertone.

The Spy sighs. “I guess it’s all right. Chinese room.”

“Eh?”

“Hmm, that’s a can of worms…oh, I know. Say you have a spy down here who has a message they need translated into Chinese before it goes to the Surface. And they're in luck, because there's a booth at the Carnival that does English-Chinese translations on demand. You pop your message in and the translated message pops out.”

"Just like that?"

"All right, so it takes half an hour and he gets a coffee in the meantime, it’s a thought experiment. Now here's the weird part. Inside the booth there's an Italian who doesn't speak English or Chinese, but he's got a English-Chinese dictionary. So every time a message comes through, he just matches the words one by one without having any idea what the message he's translating actually is.”

The Student chortles. "Imagine the misunderstandings! You can't translate languages like that and expect the result to make sense except at a very rudimentary level, the grammatical questions alone..."

"Yeah, you're right, but it's a thought experiment. Assume it's a really thorough phrase dictionary or something.”

“The more assumptions you build in, the more unreliable your point becomes, but carry on.“

"Well, the guy who originally came up with it was trying to argue that just because a computer can
give you an answer doesn't make it self-aware, but I like to think it says more about being polite to people. Because philosophers can argue all day about whether the Italian really understands Chinese or not, but from the spy’s point of view it doesn’t make a lick of difference either way. So you might as well be nice and buy them a coffee too, and if we can't tell whether or not it's our particular Crewmember, we might as well just agree to treat them that way based on results.” The Innocent frowns. "In other words, if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, call it a duck and have it for dinner. I suppose I could have just said that in the first place."

"I think I'd like to ship this theoretician up to the Grand Geode and see what he makes of it. Self-awareness indeed."

"Good luck with that. He hasn't been born yet."

“Neither have you, from what I understand - no, I have a much better idea. Hallo!” he calls ahead. “If you’re really our Crewmember, what happened to all our cutlery?”

“If it’s not there at breakfast, you’ll only have yourself to blame for asking!”

“That’s not an answer, that’s just begging the question.” The Student turns back to the discussion at hand. “And you know what, I think your Chinese argument falls flat. Consider, it’s virtually a classic example of the is-ought problem -“

“Of course, you could always just ask them if they remember you,” the Spy teases. “See if they say anything -”

“That is quite enough from an innocent like yourself,” the Student says firmly.

The Crewmember peers over the Clipper’s gunwale. “Are you two coming, or shall I pull the plank up and leave you gentlemen ashore all night?”

“Oh, well, if you’re going to make it a challenge...”

The Innocent Spy grabs a stray spar, walks back a bit, and eyes the six-foot gap between dock and ship with sudden gleeful focus. It takes the Student one horrified moment to realise what their irreplaceable engineer is about to -

- the Spy’s impromptu pole vaulting gets him over the side of the ship, barely. Something up there goes crash-bang to the deck. Someone squeals in delight or horror, then all is silence.

The Student runs aboard via the more pedestrian route, to find the Spy trapped in the Herald’s embrace. Quite literally: he seems to have gotten entangled in her frock’s more torturous flounces.

“I’m sorry! I’m really sorry, I couldn’t see you from where I started.”

“And was that any reason to drop out of the sky on people? Was it?”

“You know,” the Crewmember says aside to the Student, as they watch the two unfortunates struggle to extract themselves, “I’ll say this much. If it was my first time shipping out with you lot, I’d say I was going to enjoy this trip.”

“And if it wasn’t?”

“Well then, I’d say it anyway, as it’s only just gone tenth-whistle and I like a partner during my carousing. Helps to stop you getting clonked on the head until the part of the night when you’re too drunk to mind. There’s thirty echoes burning a hole in my pocket, shall we leave these loverbirds
to it and go have ourselves a proper boozer?"

“But if you’re not - and we haven’t - oh never mind,” the Student agrees. “Ever tried strangling willow? I’ve heard Bohemians say that they import the wormwood from the Iron Republic itself…”

“Oh, aren’t they sweet,” the Innocent Spy observes, watching the couple depart hand-in-hand. “I’m glad that went well.”

“Just wait and I’ll give you some well,” the Herald says crossly, arranging her ruined finery. “Do you have any idea what thirsty bombazine costs by the yard?”

“Um. A lot?”

“You know, if you didn’t insist on wearing such an innocently trusting face, I’d slap it.”

“Yeah. Comes in handy in my line of work, don’t you think?”

(I don’t think this is the same brassware as we used to have,” the Student announces triumphantly next morning, cutting into a hot takeaway lizard with the graceless enthusiasm of one who has woken up still pleasantly intoxicated. “I think this is a different lot that you replaced, because you didn’t know where ours were.”

“How would you know?” the Crewmember inquires, full of mirth. “Every ship out of Wolfstack gets their galley equipment from Murgatroyd’s, they hold the infernal charter for all of London’s zee-going vessels. Every zailor knows that.”

“Cheer up,” the Spy says to the deflated Student. “I thought you hated my spoons.”

“I did. They made everything taste like fish.”

“Well, it was better than carving them out of the coal crates.”

The Captain enters unobtrusively, fixes himself a plate of mushroom from the cold collation before speaking. “Good morning, everyone. I don’t mean to keep you long, but there are a few tasks that ought to be handled before we all go off on our holidays.”

A general grunt of approval. Actual orders! The captain doing something vaguely captainish at last! Even if his delivery is lackadaisical and punctuated by frequent stroking of the cat.

“First, someone ought to see about getting a few casks of mushroom wine on board, for export to Scrimshander.”

“I’ll do that,” the Crewmember volunteers. “Met a couple of smugglers in the pub last night, they say you can get around the customs duties by buying up so many bottles and pouring them into a barrel yourself.”

“I know I’m not going to be the one drinking it, but isn’t that going to make it taste pretty odd?”

“Mushroom wine can take any kind of abuse. Much hardier than the grape wine the church hoards, you have to coddle that stuff.”

“Next, if someone could see about going to the Alarming Scholar’s office hours to sell off our excess supply of curiosities. Especially that lamentable relic, I don’t wish to have it cluttering up
"the place any longer. Very off-putting, those eyeholes."

"Why is everyone looking at me?" the Student inquires. "They're from Benthic, I'm from Summerset, why would you think we're all on speaking terms?"

"Probably something to do with the way you lot have crammed every possible school and academic discipline into one place and called it a single University," the Herald says. "All right, I'll do it. It'll be a good chance for me to dispose of that pile of cryptic knitting."

"Then I needed someone to go find a few Urchins in the Flit and ask about Storm. The next trip will involve going northwards, and I'd far sooner trust their notions on the weather than any of the astronomer forecasts from Watchmaker's Hill."

"Is it too late to swap?"

"Dibs," the Student says. "I've been needing more sealing wax anyway."

"Which you intend to acquire by prevailing on poor, defenceless young children to commit blatant crimes and sharing in their ill-gotten gains? For shame."

"Poor and defenceless? Have you ever even met any Urchins?"

"And then it isn't strictly zailing business, but I do need some help at my lodging." The Captain coughs. "Nothing very interesting, I'm afraid. All a bit dusty. Housecleaning, you know."

"Guess that's me then," the Spy offers. "Mind if I bring along that suction pump? I've rigged up a hand control so it'll work without being plugged into a whole ship's engines."

"Splendid, splendid. All settled, then?"

"You're taking him to the Forgotten Quarter?" The Herald lets go of the devilled kidneys rather too abruptly; the dish clatters to the table and splashes gravy onto the muffins. "Are you sure?"

"Well, the rest of you are so eager to set about your tasks. And I could use some assistance with my Voluminous Library."

"There's a library? I'm definitely in."

For some reason, the Herald spends the rest of breakfast provoking the Student into a violent argument about crumpets.

*************************


"Are we almost done?" The Spy puffs up the stairs under yet another crate of proscribed materials, smuggled in through the servants' entrance in the cellar. "It's pretty tantalising having all these books around and not reading any of them."

"Enough indoor work for one day, I should say. Are you of an erudite bent, then?" The Captain totters along behind; adjusting the seating just so, straightening the pictures, the little things that involve less heavy lifting. "I confess I hadn't suspected this facet of your character."

"Oh, I wouldn't say I'm bookish. I just read a lot." He puts down the crate, ruffles through a thin text whose title screams Mr Veils is a Monster! The True Tale of a Nightmarish Conspiracy. "So
“this is all yours? Last time I saw a collection this big was back on the Surface.”

“Oh, certainly. Do feel free to help yourself to any texts you feel might be of assistance in your work, I implore you. Especially any having to do with engines. Most particularly those.”

“You sure? I might be tempted to come back with a wheelbarrow.” The Spy plumps down on the most comfortable pile of cushions, in the well-lit nook by the window, and starts in on a crate marked *Whirring Contraptions*.

“The choice is yours. Although,” the Captain begins hesitantly, “I had been wondering…some help with the garden, perhaps…”

He trails off. The spoken word will clearly be lost on a man avidly engrossed in sorting forty technical manuals.

The Captain therefore deems it easier to go out and weed the fungi himself, in the course of which he discovers two interesting new types of mushroom, finds yet another lamentable relic half-buried in the dirt, and is chased for his life by a party of happy horn-blowing devils. There are these little disadvantages to living in such a secluded corner.

By the time he’s returned (there are these little advantages to cultivating the intimacy of Hell; a mere twelve hours in their prison is comparatively easy handling), London is waking up. Early-rising captains ply the Stolen River with their prow lights turned to full. The more eager merchants near the Bazaar have turned up their gas-lights. It looks to be a lovely day, by Neath standards.

He finds the Spy asleep on the sofa, amongst a veritable avalanche of books. So much for having his library sorted.

“Sheesh, I guess I fell asleep in here. Forgot about dinner and everything. Uh, sorry about the mess.”

“Never mind that now. You’re quite certain all’s well? No ill-effects?”

“Oh, sure. C’mon, how much trouble was I going to get into in a library?”
“There’s something I intended to mention,” the Captain explains to his engineer over a belated breakfast (muffins, cherry preserves, some fungal mint cake for afters). “Perhaps you’d care to come along to the Nadir with me today? A trifle time-consuming, but worthwhile…I always make a weekly pilgrimage there.”

“What is it? Some kind of church service?”

“You might say that, you might say many things. A kind of neath below the Neath, a cavern where a good deal of treasure hunting goes on. I find it a very restful way of spending my Sunday afternoons.”

Unsuccessful archeologists. Never the best company, but then he can probably bring a book along if all else fails…oh, cripes.

“Actually, I ought to stay here and reselve your library,” the Spy says, looking guilty. It’d be easy to trust in the Captain’s general vagueness to get out of that job. Also shameful.

“Oh, never mind, they’ll keep.” The Captain smiles reassuringly. “There’s always tomorrow. And you’ll find the place is something rather special for players of the Game.”

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“So what’s wrong with ‘im being in the Forgotten Quarter? All you academic types nip out there whenever you have half a chance, don’t you? And they say spies are worse.”

“Doom,” the Herald says shortly. “Pass me that bottle of rat extract? These criminis aren’t going to cook themselves.”

“I could cut a Correspondence sigil into each one,” the Student offers. “Best way the Stags ever found of making toast in a hurry. If you don’t mind the chance of everything else in the room catching fire as well.”

“Remind me, why did I invite you two to my house again?”

****************

The first part of the expedition - lots of running away from devils, mucking about in bogs, searching their way along unmarked paths - promises at least an energetic day out.

The second part promises nothing of the sort.

“Wait. We’re supposed to go treasure hunting by having a nap?”

“Yes, I thought I’d made that rather clear. Why else would I have asked you to bring all the cushions along?”

The Innocent shrugs, as best he can with a shoulder-bag of pillows getting in the way. “I’ve kinda started taking those for granted, to be honest…”

****************

“Still tipping down out there,” the Crewmember observes, over the coffee. “All the condensation
coming down at once, I reckon. Not going to be the best day for shore leave."

“I’m perfectly happy staying put,” the Student agrees. “The novelty of being on dry land hasn’t worn off yet. I luxuriate in the capacity to sit on a chair without it falling out from under me.”

“You’re never going to make a zailor, are you? Poor thing.”

“Well, if you’re going to be here all day, make yourselves useful.” The Herald drags out a crate of dusty ouzo from a curving fractal cupboard. “I bought this up on the Surface and the Portly Sommelier refused to take it. Said there there wasn’t any market for a drink like absinthe but without the wormwood.”

“Let me see if I understand this,” the Crewmember says. “Our professional cynic actually wants us to drink and be merry?”

“It’s a small house. I need the storage space back.”

“In that case, I’ll need a better reason for it than doing your housecleaning.”

“Who needs a reason for new experiences?” In the interests of scientific inquiry, the Student grabs a bottle, takes a long pull, and immediately chokes. But perseveres regardless.

The Herald gestures. “Will outdrinking him do?”

“Now that’s hardly a fair fight. Look at ‘im. Probably couldn’t outdrink the Mog.”

The Student lowers a half-empty bottle, slightly flushed but triumphant. “I’ll have you know that I had quite the reputation in the Stoats in my undergraduate days. ’72 was my speciality. Now that’s harder than your ’79 rotgut.”

“Go on, then. Loser has to walk back to the ship. In the rain.”

The Student glances speculatively over at the Herald. “And the winner stays here, I take it?”

“Oh, certainly,” the Herald agrees, retrieving the latest copy of Lillywhite’s from her mail (it looks as if the devilish contingent are advocating that preposterous suggestion about shortening cricket matches again). “All night, if you like.”

“Right…”

****************

“So this restful afternoon out is a hole in the ground that wants to eat our memories.” The Innocent Spy is humming under his breath between sentences. Annoying earworms to protect against brainwashing, it’s an old DXS trick.

“Mmm. That would be another way to describe it, yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me!”

“I’m afraid,” the Captain says, tapping the ground ahead with his walking stick, “I may have forgotten.”

****************

The Herald wanders back into her kitchen a few hours later, to see what’s left of the place. Not too
bad. The tablecloth won’t survive but ought to burn nicely, with all the alcohol it’s absorbed.

The Crewmember is under the table; the Student is not.

“And another thing, if the Stone Pigs are pigs, why can’t we have stone bacon…oh, it’s you? I was going to tell you once they were out, I made it up about my storied past of drinking,” the Student says groggily. “This is more alcohol than I’ve ever put away at one sitting.”

“And you make fun of the Innocent,” the Crewmember chides. “Might as well join him and be an abstainer yourself.”

“I thought you’d passed out. Cheater!”

“I only dropped a bottle under here, been trying to find it. This one will make eight. What are you on, six?”

“For ten minutes? I’m on five. All right, so I have some catching up to do…”

***************

“Now I’ve been one poor correspondent…”

“False-stars above, this is a holy place. Haven’t you any respect?”

“…will you meet me in the air - why am I carrying around a bottle of fermented yoghurt now?”

“It happens that way around here. They go for a very good price, you know.”

“You know, I went on an expedition to find a medieval laser once. Yoghurt really isn’t cutting it.”

***************

Next time the Herald comes by (she’s finished the Lillywhite’s and plans to start on Mr Huffam’s newspapers, now that the important reading is out of the way), the drinkers are attempting a riddle-off.

"The rhyme goes, seven for a secret lately framed in gold. It's Neath doggrel, it can't be any older than the Fall."

The Student doesn’t so much shake his head as oscillate uncertainly. “No, it can, because you're saying it wrong. Seven for a secret never to be told, we have -

“A department at the University,” the Crewmember chimes in simultaneously, and snorts. "There would be, wouldn't there?"

“Don’t knock it. It’s the Neath, getting the right nursery rhyme might save your life one day.”

"Oh, let's just get on with it. Eighth man bound, make no sound,” the Crewmember suggests. The Student frowns. "That's from another 'verse entirely."

Someone’s knocking on the door; the Herald crosses over and lets in the Innocent Spy.

“You look more than unusually pleased with yourself. What’s happened?”

“What he looks like is a lot more Neathy now,” the Crewmember propounds, curiously alert
despite their impressive consumption (the crate is reduced to a lonely half bottle now). “Not the same at all. Where’s our Surfacer?”

“I’m fine,” the Spy says, smiling. “And I found something for you.” He relinquishes a Searing Enigma to the Student, who frowns at it. “That’s what you’ve been looking for, right?”

“No. I mean, yes, but this is a London enigma. Same relationship to a Zee one as a Rubbery Man to a Lorn-Fluke.” Anything else the Student might have to say is rendered inaudible when he collapses on the table and starts to drool on it.

“I win,” the Crewmember observes, and stands up with the perfect steadiness of the born zailor. “Has it stopped dripping out there yet?”

“Oh, sure. I’m going back to the Clipper myself, I only thought I’d come and tell the Student about this…what do I do with it now?”

“The Bazaar likes them, you could always sell it,” the Herald says. “So you went down into the Nadir and came back intact?”

“I’m pretty sure. More like concussion than anything else - I can’t remember anything I read yesterday, so that’s annoying, but I still know what year it is in both time periods, and the presidents, even.”

“And your name?”

“It’s - I -“ There’s a trick the Spy has, of half-closing his eyes to make his expression unreadable. The Herald never sees it without recalling that he’s an agent as much as he is an engineer. “I don’t know.”

“Told you,” the Crewmember says, and neatly passes out on top of the Student.

“Before you start panicking,” the Herald says gently, “Can you help me with these two? I doubt I can put them to bed all by myself.”

It works, for now. The Innocent’s voice holds nothing but annoyed concern. “God, I always hated being the designated driver. You take the feet, I’ll carry the head end…”

***************

Dear Jack,

so I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’ve started seeking a name…
which is all to say that the Clipper lingers a week before departing

Wine purchased; stories sold; weather foretold. London’s long-suffering Harbormaster allows herself a moment of surprise, when a captain registers intent to leave port early. What sort of broke or maddened sailors are this eager to abandon their shore leave? And the chap looked no different than the others.

“Special Admiralty assignment, perhaps?” she suggests.

“No. No, that was a man chasing his nemesis, or perhaps his heart’s desire. Whatever it is he’s been zailing after, he thinks he’ll find it this voyage.”

Her aide is an old zee dog, from the generation of Londoners that first traversed the Unterzee, sent out the light ships and mapped the shifting Alterations. Respectable enough if not for the habit he acquired along the way of contradicting all possible authorities, a very unfortunate quality in an underling. And yet he speaks softly, softly. She suspects he’s a little in love.

His superior is a young and feckless traveller returning, and her best quality is that she realises none of this. This new generation is too in love with the Neath, abandoning the best and worst of England for wild addictions; one day those gold-flecked eyes will seek the Dawn Machine, or Salt’s doom, or any such empty temptation. But for now she studies duty, delivers every message as though London’s honour is staked upon’t, and swears honest fealty to the Queen but never the Traitor Empress. He loves her more than a little.

One would be amused and the other chagrined to discover that they are both right about the Clipper’s captain; but as it happens, they never have occasion to find out.
Your body is a stranger to you.

That dark, unruly hair you see in the mirror every morning, this unmarked flesh - they can't be yours, can they? You'd never have thought that losing scars and memories of chains could be anything other than a blessing, but no. Their absence gnaws.

Still, that’s surface. Your mind’s all right, you know who you are…

until you don’t, and if that’s gone, what’s left? (There's no such thing as ghosts. If there could be, at least you'd know what you were.)

None of the Captain's books list a cure for irrigo loss, and the best only suggest patience. Sometimes the memories return in time. Sometimes they don't. The nightmare of a death by water comes back, as does the Celestial Welshman’s account of his schooldays. Not your name.

"I don't remember, that was months ago,” the Student says, lost in his reveries and his books. "Was it important?"

"That's not the sort of question you want to ask down here,” the Crewmember warns. "Besides, why go asking me about names?"

"Suppose I told you and you found it wasn't yours anymore?" the Herald says, simply.

A kind of phantasmagoria comes upon you.

This text, here: an account of the Neathbow’s colours, with their names engraved on delicate metal foil. You have read the pages on irrigo two dozen times. (More. That was when you stopped keeping track).

Now you lie back, overcome. Of its own accord, the book turns to a plate even more worn. Gant. The colour that remains when all others have been eaten away. The colour of spies in darkness, zee-death. Seeking.

Every word in the Correspondence carries two meanings, the Student said once in his cups. No second definition is listed here; perhaps they didn’t know. Should have been obvious. Its taste rises to the tongue, copper as the page in front of you.

You take your grease pencil and add a correction in the margin - “the remembrance of a friend long neglected” - retrace the sigil, and feel a distant satisfaction when the wax flames up like a candle. The pieces don’t all fit together yet, but they will. Soon.

Compass. Straight-edge. (Your knife is ever useful.) The traditional theoretical tools, with which the Greeks hoped to deduce all the rest of mathematics. Wrong, of course: no one’s ever squared the circle. But perhaps the principle is sound, only misapplied.

Is it possible to work out the Correspondence, not from archeology and rediscovery, but from first principles?
It appeals to the engineer in you.

Besides, you're not really alone now. The dreams of drowning grow more vivid every night, sent by someone in the Neath even more lost than yourself. And you’ve never turned down a cry for help. Maybe it’s not your own name: but the need, the hungry desire, the story runs along that idealised parallel.

Contrapositive: congruence: obliqueness. Draw up the angles, watch their degeneration. You seek the point of intersection.

*For what might be hours, you listen to the beating of your heart.*
Chapter Notes

A small point of clarification on the last chapter: MacGyver does have a boss named Gant in the pilot, who disappears never to be seen again (mostly because he was acted off the screen by the Random Helpful Bystander played by Dana Elcar, who got the part in the show proper.) Our hero spends most of the episode trying to rescue people trapped beneath the Surface, and scoffing chocolate.

It’s a cute show. Anyone who’s read this far without having seen an episode could do worse than to try one (except the Mountain of Youth. The existence of which is great backstory fodder for this fic, but it’s rubbish).

But I digress…

Boom.

“Now that was very satisfying.”

Barely out of Wolfstack and the Anonymous Crewmember is already testing the Clipper’s new forward weapons. A welcome-back present from the Captain, apparently.

“I still don’t see why we need guns at all,” the Innocent Spy complains. “Isn’t crossing the Unterzee work enough, without making more enemies along the way?”

“Wait until we start turning northwards. Bat hordes. Lifebergs. Mt Nomad itself, and wouldn’t that be a fight to remember… I’m glad to see the Captain regaining his verve at last. Time’s been when I’ve wondered.”

“Huh. So you remember being here after all?”

The Crewmember winks. “Don’t tell the Student. Now if you’d oblige by steering us towards that crab over there, we’ll see how she fares against live prey.”

“It means going off course. After the Dawn Machine that doesn't sound like such a great idea.” But the Spy’s fumbling with the wheel as he speaks.

"Stuff and nonsense, this is the Southern Archipelago. Just don't run us aground, that’s all. If I can't one-shot it with a cannon this good, I'll take the pledge."

"How about you agree to take the pledge if you do catch it? Then I'd have a reason -"

"There we go! Slower, slower, we don’t want to run past - oh, yes! This gun’s darling!"

The Clipper only requires the slightest swerve from true, to retrieve the carcass before it sinks. Inside of ten minutes the Crewmember is hauling up zee-cleansed nets. Most of the crab is inedible, they explain; but a little can be salted down for stores.

The next hour considers of their enthusiastic, shanty-accompanied butchery on the forward deck,
while the Spy hangs on to the wheel and tries to tell himself that he’s not in the least faint. The principle isn’t any different than, say, a Western wagon train shooting a buffalo for meat. Or even just back in Minnesota, when as a kid he’d helped classmates dress venison so they’d have something to eat over Christmas break.

It just seems a bit gorier down in the Neath. Maybe because the stray scraps of flesh and sinew that come creeping through the doorway are unexpectedly blue-tinged. Apocyanic blood leaks across the deck, slopping out of shattered shell fragments. Are these things related to horseshoe crabs, perhaps? Living fossils?

The Crewmember eventually finishes nailing down the crate, shoves it down the hatch with a bang, and returns to the bridge in triumph with an organ of peculiarly vivid hue. “And this bit here we eat right away. Zee-monster spleen, any sailor will tell you that’s the best cut. All the fresh blood still in it.” They start cobbling sandwiches together, from hardtack and bits of uncooked crab meat.

“That smells really great,” the Spy says suddenly. “Can I try?”

“Go on, then.” They make a motion as though to toss one over, catch themselves just before biscuit fragments go flying. “Isn’t it against some tynged of yours, though?”

“What’s a tynged?”

“A geas. Whatever kind of oath it is that you only eat mushrooms all the time.”

“Oh, you mean being vegetarian? It’s not really an oath, it’s just something I do when it’s convenient. And this is a lot more convenient than going all the way to the galley.”

“Well, if you’re sure.” The Crewmember reluctantly relinquishes their prize.

It tastes of ash and copper.

The Spy wolfs it down and asks for another.

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Uncertain, half-formed sigils scrawled over their sphinxstone tabletop, a scorched lump of what had been a candle and is now grease. Licked grease. The signs are unmistakable.

“Seeking? Oh, now those were the days,” the Student says reminiscently to a sleeping Spy. “Daring each other who could be the most free of the name. The Hungry Idler being sent down for trying to eat the Provost - it was his seventy-fourth attempt, I think. What a pity he couldn’t have made it three more.”

He gently removes the Spy’s jacket - long sleeves are inadvisable when dealing with the Correspondence - and leaves the wardroom with his mislaid tome on library taxonomy, feeling a pleasant nostalgia. Back when his biggest academic problem was inventing an argument about the soul trade that nobody else had thought to debate yet.

“Let’s forget the devils. Suppose, quite independently, that a Londoner should want to lose their own soul simply because they fancied that sort of mad, destructive quest…”

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The Cynical Herald is lying in wait. Or rather, sitting comfortably in the galley with her feet up on
the butcher block, but the idea’s the same.

One disadvantage to such a small ship is that they have to double up so often. The Crewmember can’t handle all the regular crew tasks solo, so everyone has to pitch in. The Student, who by rights ought just to be a paying passenger, persists in fancying himself in the role of First Officer (a view the Herald has decided opinions about). There’s no Doctor aboard, though fortunately they haven’t needed one yet.

There certainly isn’t room for a cook. Captains traditionally eat alone in their cabins, and thanks to the staggered navigational roster the rest of them keep fairly irregular hours, so usually it’s just as well. But someone still has to inventory the supplies for procurement, and by self-appointment this task has devolved on the Herald. A job to be done properly, lest…

The Innocent Spy wanders in, a book in one hand and two tucked under his arm. “Oh, hello there.”

“Planning on staying a while?”

“Something like that,” he says absently, pulling a box of fungal crackers from a cupboard. “I wish I’d seen the Captain’s library on our first trip to London, I could have fit in some serious reading then. Maybe found something out about the Nadir before we went. But half my crate’s full of books now, he was very nice about letting me borrow them.”

“Anything in particular?”

“Histories, science, history of science. One of my favourite disciplines at university, history of science. Along with chemistry. And physics. And languages -”

“Save it for the Student. I have a different question.”

“Mmm?”

“Ever thought of going North?”

“Sure. Also south, east and west. Can I at least finish this chapter before you start interrogating me? There’s this great part here about Whewell’s guide to Neath tides, it could be a big help next time we’re underwater…”

The Herald sighs and checks her hunter.

Seven minutes and twenty-two seconds later (damn! One of these days she’ll get the number), she clears her throat. Time to adopt the direct approach.

“Look, I can’t promise I understand. I follow the gods of the zee, not the Drowned Man. But if that’s the quest you’re on now, it’s all the one temple in Whither and I’ll be happy to help you, whatever that fool of a Student has to say on the matter -”

The Spy lowers his book and looks directly at her for the first time. “What on earth are you talking about? Or under it, I guess.”

“You are unaccountably peckish, aren’t you? It’s nothing to feel guilty about.”

“Huh?”

“At the very least, you have just eaten your way through an entire box of Mr Murgatroyd’s worst. That is not something the average zailor can face without plucking up their courage and a bottle of
rat extract.”

He upends the box and licks crumbs off his fingers. “I’m just sort of hungry, that’s all.”

"That’s how it starts! That’s how Seeking starts, and then next thing you know you’re poring over the lore of Saint Arthur at all hours and pouring your echoes into horrendously expensive sacrifices. Luring you in and drawing you on with its sweet folly.”

The Spy sighs. “Exactly how seriously do I have to take this? Is it ‘Do not walk on the grass at the Shuttered Palace’ level or more ‘Don’t set a Master’s robe on fire’?”

“Actually, the former is much more likely to involve your execution. The Masters are somewhat accustomed to things unexpectedly catching fire in their vicinity.”

“Okay, I’ve lost track. How bad is it?”

“It could be good. If you crave secrets, if you crave a tale the Bazaar will never carry.”

“Right now all I crave is something to wash down the crackers. Is there anything to drink that hasn’t fermented yet?”

“The last of the solacefruit cordial?”

“I had that this morning.”

“Blemmigan nectar?”

“Drank that yesterday. Tasted awful. I can see why nobody sells the stuff.”

The slight curvature about the Herald’s mouth is somewhat too assessing, and certainly too smug, to qualify as a smile. “And you still think I’m babbling on about nothing.”

The Spy slips a useful string into his book and closes it with decided reluctance. “All right. Fine. What happens when you go seeking a name?”

Now there’s a question. Of the maddening hungers that leave nothing but ashes and void? The countless fights by knife and candle, the consumption of candles, dreadful betrayals of everything loved. Seven deaths for seven scars, cut with skyglass and toasted in corn beer. Winking Isle, land so cursed not even a sailor will swear by it. And at the end of it all, the Avid Horizon, yawning like an empty mouth.

The Herald begins to say all this, and stops.

Instead, she drops by the Captain’s cabin later, to suggest they round Rowena’s Rocks for a short stopover. Pick up an easy port report and perhaps an extra crate of supplies, to replace the one that’s mysteriously vanished.

He regards her with amusement. “And water that hasn’t come from the Stolen River, eh? I know what they say in Whither about that.”

"Well."

“Carry on, then. This trip is going to be one of the long ones, I can feel it in my bones.”

Mutton Island, a whole community of Seekers. They know the Drowned Man intimately; who better to initiate a new member of their order?
“Maybe it’s cowardice,” the Herald admits to the zee-bats that night, as she feeds and washes her charges. “But I can’t see myself telling that naive, trusting, stupidly cheerful Innocent about what he’s in for. Even if he believes me. Especially if he did believe me.”

The bats squeak with their usual reassuring chirps. At least they’re wise enough to only take on the flights they can handle.
The Mog is not a happy animal.

In other ports, it’s easy to follow the Captain’s directives and unobtrusively tail the Innocent Spy. There are plenty of other strays to mingle with in London, or Port Carnelian, or the Cumaean Canal. Some lovely adulation at the Isle of Cats, now there’s a fine port. Or that grandiose, sweeping sense of history at the Salt Lions.

Mutton Island, however, is the realm of Starveling Cats. It crouches under a bush and makes itself as small as possible.

“We only just docked, I think the Captain’s off talking to your fisherfolk or something,” the Innocent Spy is telling the Flockless Shepherdess (a recent emigrant from Thornwell Croft, she says). “And one of the other officers said that I might want to, I dunno, ask to be shown around a bit? I actually don’t know what I’m looking for, to be perfectly honest.”

“Of course. You’re in luck, we’re having a feast later on. You must be peckish.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that-“

There is presumably more, but as the Mog flicks its ears attentively, something hisses. Once.

“I mean, I only just had lunch - is that normal around here?” the Innocent Spy asks, observing a huge yellow-eyed thing with noticeably sharp teeth chase a tabby straight through a hedge. By the yowling alone, it’s impossible to guess which cat’s having the worst of it.

“They say the Mutton Island cats are very territorial,” the Shepherdess assures him. “Now, if you’re just looking to pass the time until evening, the hill to the north has some beautiful views. And the finest winds in the Unterzee.”

“Actual wind? Hey, I could try making a kite. I have this theory that Parabola linen would be just perfect for box-kites.”

The Shepherdess stares at him. “That’s something I don’t think anyone’s tried yet, certainly.”

Behind them, the Mog licks its wounds and starts limping back towards the safety of the Clipper. Whatever kind of trouble the Spy is planning to get into, he’ll just have to get out of it again himself.

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“No, I said, a searing enigma - oh, forget it. Doesn’t this pub have any mushroom wine?”

General laughter all around. “Only for tourists, during the Fruits of the Zee. Care for some cider? Or we have proper beer here, corn beer. Have a go, if you think you’re hard enough.”

The Anonymous Crewmember besides him accepts a flagon with relish. “Come on, then. You’re supposed to be looking for new experiences and all, didn’t you say?”

“I think I’m having one right now. Wondering if the Temperance Campaigners have a point after all,” the Student mutters, pulling at his drink of well-water with deep disgust.

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“Now then. Now then. Is it echoes that I pay you lads with, or moon-pearls. Dear me, I have all this spare change and I can never remember who takes what. What about rostygold? I have quite a lot of rostygold straight from the Iron Republic.”

The patient fishermen carefully refrain from exchanging glances. Letting the Admiralty know that Mutton Island is a warm, friendly, and above all dull place is sound policy; but some captains just don’t seem to be worth the time…

The pink box-kite is a success, so much so that a dozen screaming children are soon quarrelling over its possession. The Spy tries to intervene and gets hit with a brickbat for his pains. They play rough on Mutton Island.

“Maybe I should have brought more linen with me,” he says ruefully, to nobody in particular.

One of the boys temporarily gains possession and holds the kite triumphantly aloft. Another makes a grab, connects, and they both fall to the ground with a tear of fabric between them. The general bewailing pauses, then starts up again twice as loud.

The Spy winces and heads down the other side of the hill, towards a well-tended grove he’d noticed earlier. Trees, actual trees! Recognisable specimens of oak and whitebeam at that, unlike the solaces in Port Carnelian.

He finds a nice broad specimen and clambers up the trunk for a rest in its branches, just because. The false-stars shine brightly, almost like a breezy midsummer night on the Surface. Peaceful. So much so that he promptly falls asleep.

The Innocent wakes to the sound of a familiar voice, somewhere below the foliage.

“Well, one of you must have the tale I want. Why won’t you tell me?” The Cynical Herald, sounding as though she’s clinging on to her last vestige of patience by bare fingertips.

A good deal of childish laughter floats upwards. Ah.

“Daft Londoner-”

“It’s a song, not a story-“

“And you’re not from Mutton Island. It’s only for us, and the Seekers.”

“What if I told you a story about a Seeker? Would you take that in exchange?”

Hushed murmurings. An older boy speaks up, his voice quavering and only half-broken. “Fair’s fair. But it’ll have to be a good story. Lots of adventuring.”

“And eating.”

“What about a pirate? Like the ones in the Sickly Scotsman’s books.”

“Adventuring, eating, pirates…that’s doable. As long as you don’t add any more. Give me a moment to think.”

This should be fun, the Innocent Spy reflects. He settles himself in the fork a little more
comfortably, and keeps an ear open.
The Chestnut Seller's Tale

Chapter Notes

I asked for a fic prompt on Reddit, and Solphage suggested a Lady-in-Lilac for the colour gant.

The idea seemed to fit very nicely into my story at large, so here it is.

(I rather fancy the Chestnut Seller would be played by Bernard Cribbins...)

Once, not so long ago and not so far away, there was a chestnut seller. Proper chestnuts. They were to the fungal ones what your Rubbery Lumps are to Mrs Plenty’s.

More childish laughter. Apparently word’s reached Mutton Island about her culinary misappropriations.

He was a cheerful man and did a brisk business, until the Fall -

“Oh, not one of those boring London stories again.”

“It’s her story, ‘course it’ll be about the mainland. She doesn’t know anything about real Seeking.”

He did a brisk business until the Fall, and that first terrible winter when all the trees died of longing for the sunlight…

“Not here,” a girl’s voice remarks, with satisfaction. “We were more careful.”

“Gods above, the three of you are worse than my crewmates for interrupting! Am I telling this story or not?”

“No, I think,” a third voice says. The kind of voice that will be addressed as mysterious and indistinct, when it’s a little older. “Or we all are. I think that he should have two beautiful grandchildren, and they all go out smuggling together and never get caught.”

“You always say that. Why can’t they be ugly, for once?”

So the Chestnut Seller had one ugly grandchild and one pretty one, but they both had dark brown hair just the colour of the fruits they roasted. And they lived very contentedly under a blue-tiled archway. The two were coming of age when the Fall happened, and everything changed.

“No great matter if you can’t follow in my trade, for I’d always hoped you two would come to better things,” the Chestnut Seller said. For he was an incessantly cheerful man. “Will you go out and seek your fortunes, as they did in days of old?”

“I should like to go to sea,” said Jill. “With a cap, and a blue jacket, and a sturdy sea-bag. What does it matter where the Stolen River flows? One ocean’s as good as another.”

“I should like to do that also,” said Jack. “But we’ll leave our red-handled knives here, that are all
the gift our parents left us. If the blades should rust, why, you’ll know we’re in some danger."

*Something like a stifled laugh rustles in the tree overhead. The Herald glances upwards and it breaks off half-finished.*

“Why have they got names?”

“They hadn’t thought of use-names yet, silly. Those come later, after the Empress -“

“Ahem.” So the Chestnut Seller bought them each a cap, and a blue jacket, and a sturdy sea-bag, and waved from the dock when their ships steamed away. And then he went back home again to the blue-tiled archway.

He began selling fungal chestnuts, which weren’t so popular at first. But his cheerfulness quickly reconciled all his old customers to mushrooms, and soon the stall was as lively as ever. Never mind there being a roof instead of a sky now.

But every night, the Seller was careful to check the red-handled knives. For a whole long year, he heard nothing of his grandchildren, but those blades reflected coal-fire as though they shone under the light of the sun itself.

Then it was a year and a day, and when the Chestnut Seller looked at the knives that night, why, they were all eaten up by rust. And that rust was the colour of gant.

“Oooohhhh,” three children say, in unison.

“Why, now! Perhaps Jill’s out there lost in a shipwreck, or Jack’s been snatched by pirates. All I know is, if these blades are rusty, why there’s nothing else for it but for me to go after them. Fancy running away to sea at my age."

So the Chestnut Seller sold off his mushrooms and his stall, and everything else in the world he had except the knives, to buy a cap and a jacket and sturdy sea-bag. He took passage as cook, in a ship sailing -

“North?”

East. Far east, for he knew his grandchildren were daring. And as the only ship that would go so far was a band of reckless treasure hunters, well, the Seller took up piracy.

For a season the *Gay Traveller* was the greatest ship in the seas. No Unterzee vessel could match her speed. They plundered the Iron Republic, and came away with a surmise of enigmas before the devils had even begun to row out their brass triemes. The Presbyterates at Adam’s Way never saw all their solacefruit vanish in one night, and the Chestnut Seller was busy making sorbets for weeks. He always threw one over the side, as an offering to the zee-gods. For as fresh a sailor as he was, he could still taste salt on the wind.

“I’ve never heard of a steamship with that name,” the boy remarks. “Are you sure you’re not making this all up?”

“Oh, now that is rude,” the girl says. “Pipe down and let her get on with it. Who cares if it’s true or not?”

But all good things end, and the pirates fell on evil days. They stole an entire hold’s worth of stygian ivory from the Chelonate, which sent its whole fleet in pursuit. The *Eater-of-Names* was luckier than the *Traveller’s* other enemies, or more brutal, and they caught the ship in one of their
great nets. The Chestnut Seller only just got away. Under the waves, to the Gant Pole.

“Everyone knows the Gant Pole doesn’t exist.”

“It’s a fairy tale. Like the ones the Epigrammatic Irishman wrote.”

“You read too much.”

“You don’t read at all, all you want to be is another boring farmer. I’m going to see if I can’t run away to that carnival one day-“

“Why can’t we just listen, for a change? I want to hear this.”

The place was a labyrinth, the biggest in the world, and it would have daunted any knight or adventurer. But the Chestnut Seller was only an old man looking for his grandchildren, and he marched onwards with cheerful confidence. Seven days and seven nights it took, and he whistled all the way.

At last he emerged to the centre, and there was nothing there but a pool, the colour of the knives. And this he knew was Jill, under an enchantment.

The Seller sat by the Pool and begged her to come home.

The pool moved as though a wind had passed over its face. “I cannot, grandfather. I went out seeking Death and found my doom. Now I cry out ceaselessly, and the zee-beasts hear me and come to die. Nevermore can I return to the lights of London and our blue-tiled arch. Leave me be.”

And she would not listen any more.

The Seller made his way to Khan’s Shadow, where he took passage North (“Finally!” “Yes, yes, now hush.”) With a ship of Seekers who asked him to serve as cook and keep guard on their supplies, for fear one or another might devour everything in their terrible hunger. One day came when they asked him to prepare the body of a sailor for their dinner, killed by a falling stalactite, but through it all the Seller remained cheerful.

And no matter how hungry the Seekers were, he always kept a little aside from the meal and threw it overboard, as an offering for the zee-gods.

But the Seekers fought each other, with waxwail knives, and cats, and fists, until by the time they’d reached the Avid Horizon there was not one of them left. Only the Seller remained to cross the cold-torn harbourage, and that was empty. Nothing there but a gate, the colour of the knives. And this he knew was Jack, under an enchantment.

The Seller sat by the Gate and begged him to come home.

The gate creaked as though a wind had touched its frozen hinges. “I cannot, grandfather. I went out seeking Destruction and found my doom. Now I cry out ceaselessly, and the sailors hear me and come to mourn. Nevermore can I return to the lights of London and our blue-tiled arch. Leave me be.”

And he would not listen any more.

So the Seller zailed south again, slowly, and thought on his predicament.

“I have lost all that the world reckons sweet for a man. My trade, my city, my family. The sunlight
itself. Perhaps my grandchildren were right, and there is nothing to do but go seeking death or
destruction.”

And his hands strayed to the red-handled knives, but then he smiled, and dropped them overboard.
One final offering to the zee-gods.

“Now indeed, I have lost everything.”

And yet, the grace of his cheerful laughter was such as the Neath had never heard, not in the
lifetimes of four cities…

“And then?”

“And then,” the Herald half-chants, as a madrigal many-times repeated, “Salt smiled, from the
place in the Uttermost East, and Storm smiled, from his place in the Highest Spaces, and Stone
smiled, from her place in the Eldest South. They granted us the Exaltation, for the traveller
returning. But as for the Seller…he asked three boons, and the gods granted them.”

“What?”

“Mercy. Mercy at the end of all things, long after hope has passed. He asked for a pillar to be set
at the Gate, so that the lost could always find redemption. He asked for a watch to be set at the
Pool, so that the dying need never end their lives alone.

And wherever gant is, the colour eaten away, the Chestnut Seller is there too. Cheerful as ever.
Offering remembrance of a friend long neglected, for any Seekers not too deaf to hear…”

“That’s a happy ending. I hate happy endings.”

“I don’t. D’you mean that the Seller is even in our festival fireworks?”

“If you like. Now, you promised me a tale in return -“

A bell rings out, faintly.

“Oh, our mothers will be calling us for tea. We’ll have to tell you later.”
Down the pub

The children scamper off; the Herald groans and rubs her temples. Her look of weary resignation is so firmly fixed, it alters not a jot when the Innocent Spy misses his footing on the way down. Fortunately he avoids landing on top of her this time.

“Are you planning to make a habit of this?”

“I’m going to say no,” the Spy says, sitting up and brushing foliage off his jacket. “That was pretty cheeky of you, stealing my Swiss army knife to use in a story like that.”

“It sounded right. Gant-rusted knives, I heard a tale like it in Irem. They told me it hadn’t been written yet.”

“So was any of that true?”

“Mostly not. People were travelling north long before the Fifth City fell, and that stuff about gant being blessed is nonsense, it’s such a dreadful colour…mind you, London did manage to keep its ships secret for all of half a year. Until the devils decided to be mischievous and distributed steamer plans across the entire Unterzee. That was one of the main grievances in the ’68 Campaign, I believe.”

“But the Chestnut Seller, and the children?”

“Oh, I made that up. They teach improvisation at the temples in Whither, there’s no knowing when supplicants will need just the right story drawn out of a hat.” The Herald sighs. “That was my university. I might still be there if it wasn’t so blasted cold.”

“You’ve never mentioned that.”

“Did you ever need to know? Anyway, they don’t see nearly enough of Stone’s light up there. If I ever retire from the zeefaring life, it’ll be to the Elder Continent or at least somewhere fairly close by.”

“Port Carnelian. You get a house by the shore, I’ll find a houseboat, we can be neighbours and wave at each other at breakfast time.”

“Tempting as you make the prospect sound, aren’t you heading in the opposite direction?”

For a moment the Spy looks simply perplexed. “I forgot about that, I’m supposed to be going to a feast or something that way. I must be late already - sorry!” He charges off towards the Cock and Magpie, at a quick long-loomed canter.

“A Seeker who can’t remember which way North is,” the Herald observes. “This cannot possibly end well.”

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“Do come along, they’re just starting. I waited for you,” the Shepherdess murmurs, as the Spy hurries to meet her.

“Sorry, I was stuck up a tree.”

“What?”
“Long story. I mean, there was this story, and it was long…forget it. Where are we going again?”

“Down this way, past the well. I’m so glad you’ve come, I thought perhaps you’d changed your mind.”

The Spy calms down as they walk through the grey, winding streets. Everything here’s so sweet and pastoral. Fine sturdy trees, neat little homes. An abandoned cricket bat lies propped against a beautiful drystack wall. It’d make a fantastic postcard.

Inside the pub it’s like that but even more so. Homemade bunting draped over the rafters, ribbon-bedecked pitchforks stood against the walls. They must be having a good harvest or something. Friendly Mutton Islanders toast their passage in beer; the Spy finds himself holding something alcoholic and quickly passes it to the Shepherdess. She smiles at him as she drinks, tosses back her golden curls with delight.

Then the knot of people around the buffet table dissolves, and he sees the roasted corpse temptingly laid out in a roasting dish. There’s an apple in its mouth. Discreetly placed skeins of dandelion greens here and there.

The Innocent faints away dramatically; the Shepherdess shrieks.

“Why, whatever’s wrong with the fellow?”

“A Londoner? Has someone let a Londoner in unawares?”

“I thought it’d be all right. He said he was Seeking. I didn’t think he’d be like this,” the Shepherdess explains, between sobs.

The Innocent Spy lies on the floor, breathing shallowly and feeling stupid. Pretty sloppy technique, that; he’s pretty sure he’s cracked his head open on a chair leg. Obviously he hasn’t been practicing falls enough lately.

Still, it should work. Anybody faints in a hot stuffy room, you take them out for a little fresh air, and then I’m gonna run like I’ve never run in my life.

“There’s a taint on him. He must be the right sort, else he wouldn’t have come.” Someone with a very deep voice, with a sort of bubbling undertone to it that makes his skin crawl.

Or you could all just have a chat and watch me bleed to death, I suppose.

“Now then, this is a self-solving problem. No Seeker could stay unconscious through a whole Mutton Island feast, not with what we have to feed his hungers. And if he isn’t, why, we’ll just sling him in the well and keep him for another time.”

Yes, yes, please do, the Innocent Spy silently implores. I’ll match any death trap you people can think of, just get me out of this room.

“Here, get him up on the table over here. You watch him, lass, and tell us if he wakes.”

The Spy allows himself to go limp - difficult to force that, not impossible - as several calloused hands grab and swing him up onto the hard oaken boards. Not too roughly. That’s almost encouraging.

All he has to do now is not move for maybe the next twelve hours and then make a dramatic escape bid. Shouldn’t be hard, should it? Getting away from a pack of drunk, overfed farmers?
“Wake up soon,” the Shepherdess murmurs in his ear. “I’d so hate to have to eat you. Although…” She caresses his skull, finds the place where the skin’s broken.

“You poor thing. Now, isn’t this better?”

She’s licking him. Licking the wet blood off him.

The Innocent lies very, very still and tries not to scream.

****************

“What an unexpected surprise. You don’t usually honour my quarters with a visit, my dear,” the Captain says.

“I know,” the Crewmember says, throwing themselves into the plush velvet armchair, their feet on the table. “But Mutton Island’s such a boring place. Are you any good at tarot écarté?”

“Yes, I used to be a dab hand at a two-hander. Shall we play without Torment?”

“Oh, but that spices up the mix. Tell you what though, I’ll let you play dealer.” Why not? They’ve already swiped the Hundred from the pack.

The two settle in for a serious night of cards. How nice, the Captain thinks, that for once they’re having some properly relaxing shore leave…

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She’s gone away finally, sated. Praise be. How long’s it been? His time sense is probably out of whack after that bump, but it must be at least seventh-whistle.

A smell like pork crackling drifts tantalisingly across the air; his stomach growls. Oh god, how can he be this hungry now? Hopefully nobody notices.

Assets. Several yards worth of spider-silk suitable for use as kite string, linen duck tape, one red-handled pocket knife. Not a lot of help against all these chunky villagers and what he now remembers to be alarmingly sharp pitchforks, unless he shortens the odds a little. Where was that window he remembers seeing? Is it close enough to risk a dash?

The creak of a door, a sound so slight that unless he was listening for it he’d never have heard it.

For a moment the Spy even thinks he has imagined it, in the stress of desperation, until a voice cuts through the medley. Warm with fear and hot with anger, one he’d just heard telling a fairy tale to children -

“Where’s our Seeker?”

The festive murmurings fall dead. “If there is any Seeker in this company, he’d be none of yours now.”

How prepared are they? How many people between them?

“Doesn’t matter. We’ll have him back, or else.”

“Never did a ship any good, a Seeker,” the deep-voiced man calls out. “Ever heard tell of a ship returning from the Avid Horizon after that voyage? You haven’t, for the quest kills it. Officers and crew and all. Not a pleasant thing, those betrayals.”
“Never mind.” That’s the Student, his voice trembling, but sure. “We’ll take our chances, but we won’t leave him for the likes-”

Bless Summerset rhetoric, they’ll be looking away. Now.

The Innocent Spy propels himself off the table and all hell breaks loose, as placid feasters scream and grab already-bloodied knives. He swings up into the rafters with the aid of a fat loop of bunting, safely out of reach from pitchforks, scrambles over the broad beams. By the door, his shipmates fight a protective action - there’s the Herald, wielding a cricket bat like a sword, there’s the Student, fending off an attacker with that stygian ivory knife he uses for letters.

_For heaven’s sake, that’s a toy, you can’t seriously expect to fight anybody with it -_

The Innocent drops down and grabs the Student out of harm’s way, too late - some farmer thrusts in first and hit the mark. Dead weight, but the Spy drags him out anyway.

The Herald pulls the door to, leaving the three of them in blessedly open air that smells only of new-mown hay and salt. “No time to get the others, but I think they’re still on the ship.”

“Good.” The Spy unwraps his entire roll of duck tape and plasters it over the crack between door and wall. Not much good, but it’ll buy them a little time. “I think they’ve killed the Student, but we can’t just leave him, not when -”

The Student sneezes explosively and sits up, brushing fragments of a shattered horsehead amulet from his collar. “Even I don’t think this is the time for chess. We’re in rather a hurry.”

The pub echoes with angry shouts. A few odd candles flicker into light, here and there across the village. Others will be coming, shortly.

“There’s too many of them, and they know their lands. We’re not going to make it back without someone dying,” the Herald says.

“No,” the Innocent says, flatly. “Look, I have a plan. You two get around the back and hide, and as soon as they come after me you run for the Clipper. Have her come around to where that high cliff is, fast as you can.” He grins and starts sauntering down the main street, staying within easy eyeshot of the pub door and whistling something that neither of his crewmates recognise as “The Streets of Laredo”.

They get the rest of it, though, and slip off quietly. The Mutton Islanders batter down their own pub door with a bench and charge after in hot pursuit.

“I don’t think he has any plan at all,” the Herald whispers.

“He’s the professional,” the Student says. “I think we’d better take him at his word.”

****************

A nice easy pace, that’s all it takes. A nice easy pace, close enough for a plausible chase, not so far that they might start trying to throw pitchforks for fear of his getting away. Various screamed invectives are useful for knowing where everybody is without having to look back. Through the town, up the hill, towards the cliff -

there, yes, the one tree that kept getting in the way during the kite escapades earlier. The Spy throws a bowline around it and hopes very much that spider-silk is as tough as its etymology suggests. Just time for one quick trial tug, with all his weight. It holds.
He kneels down at the cliff top, starts abseiling down as fast as practical.

“God, I hate-“

The edge of a coil dangles over the cliff edge. Looks like the villagers have rope, too.

“Come back here!”

Not promising. Also, he’s running out of string.

“You know, we have a saying back home,” the Innocent calls, eying the angles - thirty-foot drop, say, too many rocks towards the left for his liking. What about to the right? “Sometimes you get the bear.”

“We’ll boil you down to your bones, and eat the bones!”

“And sometimes, the bear gets you.” The Innocent Spy kicks himself away from the cliff and lets go.

For a moment the night is clear; the villagers watch in silence, at the shape falling in a smooth, curving dive, black against the apocyanic-tipped waves.

Then there’s a splash as the Spy hits water, and the quarrelling begins. Who neglected to tie him up, who left that cricket bat lying around, most of all whose fault it was that such a promising specimen has escaped their territory, for the unfriendly but neutral zee…

The Flockless Shepherdess sits on the grass, crying. A matronly older woman puts down her pitchfork and hurries over to comfort her. “There now. He’s only a zailor. There’ll be others along soon enough.”

“I know,” the Shepherdess sniffs, dabbing at her eyes with a badly stained handkerchief. “But… but…

“Yes, luv?”

“He was just so perfectly delicious!”
Aftermath

“How does anybody cope with this, again?”

The Clipper hums reassuringly; hot coal-fire fills the engine room with a warm, flickery glow. The Innocent Spy’s changed out of his wet clothes, had his wound bandaged, finished a bowl of mushroom soup and is working on a second. He’s pretty sure his adrenaline level will ease off eventually. Maybe in another hour or so.

The Student shrugs, tucks away a few stray scraps of wadding into the ship’s surgical kit. “Londoners are a tough breed.”

“No, but seriously. Back on the Surface I did all kinds of stuff they couldn’t order anybody to do because it was just too weird, and I usually managed. Down here, I’m barely keeping up with what the Neath keeps throwing at me. How does anyone normal handle it?”

“Mostly that type stays in London and exchanges gossip at boring parties,” the Herald explains. “You’ve picked out a rough assignment for yourself, going to zee.”

“And of course ‘normal’ is a word of questionable utility in this connexion. Besides, your typical Neath resident spends quite a lot of their time at the Royal Beth,” the Student says. “We even have a policy about this for term papers, you’re entitled to one three-day extension per semester on whatever term paper’s driven you mad first. Unless you were meant to be writing about Parabola, of course. In that case you’d be penalised if you didn’t go mad.”

“I see.”

“You’re handling it very well,” the Herald assures him. “I don’t think many Londoners would have made it out of there, frankly.”

“Well, I did have your help, and I don’t think I’ve said thanks yet. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So how’d you know to come get me, anyway?”

The Herald looks a trifle embarrassed. “It was the Student, actually. It turns out that he knew a little more about Mutton Island doctrine than I did.”

“It was nothing,” the Student says pompously. Well, he can hardly be begrudged that tonight, the Spy thinks. “They keep it very dark. I only happened to know because I stayed late once discussing extraordinary implications with their chef, and he invited me to what he promised would be a feast to remember.”

“How’d you get out of it?”

“Oh, I went ahead and helped myself to a slice. But then I’m not a Seeker.”

A completely horrified Innocent splutters incoherently, quite failing to get anywhere near an actual question. The Herald glances sideways. “You’re not helping.”

“He asked. Always answer questions that are asked, I say.”

***************
Partly to make up for that, the Student offers to take the Innocent’s turn on the night watch. He still has some patent draught at the bottom of his crate, a little lost sleep won’t matter.

What does matter is unexpectedly running into the Captain on the way there.

“Now then,” the Captain says. “Now then, I have a few questions. Why were we in such a hurry to round Mutton Island, again? I confess it’s rather kerflummoxed me.”

Two hours ago, the Herald and I boarded in a desperate panic, and you piled on the engine power while the Herald managed the finest bit of navigation I’ve ever seen her perform. You helped me throw over a net so we could haul our engineer out of the zee.

“Horoscopes. The position of the false-stars has changed somewhat, you know I always like to keep an eye on that.”

“Oh. Very good. Do carry on.”

The Student occasionally wonders what it’d be like to have hired a ship with a competent captain. Or at least one less addicted to irrigo.

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"You look dreadful," the Crewmember says without preamble next morning. "Want some breakfast?"

"I don’t know that there’d be any point, really." The Spy picks up the french press (a style rather than a location; it’s Iron Republic manufacture), and studies it with a slightly vacant expression. “After the night we had I should have been out cold, but I just ended up too hungry to sleep and too tired to get anything else done. I thought maybe I’d get some coffee and shovel coal until I fall asleep in my tracks."

"Mmm. This Seeking lark, eh?"

"Yeah," the Innocent Spy says, looking rather more fraught than innocent. “I thought it was just studying and maybe going a little mad off my own bat, but apparently there’s this whole quest, and eating people, and you have no idea how much I wish I wasn’t.”

"You could always just say no," the Crewmember remarks.

"Sorry. What?"

"Oh, they say the Drowned Man is very understanding that way. Just whip off a letter - ‘Dear Mr Eaten, I’ve no wish to come to a bad end, this Seeking lark was a mistake’, pop it under your pillow. Easy as rat pie- where are you going?"

"Early night. Very early night. Thanks a lot."

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“Really?”

“Meow.”

“Is that so.”

“Meow, meow, meow.”
“Dear me.”
“Meow.”

*****************

When the Spy wakes up again, it’s just gone fourth-whistle. Someone’s thoughtfully topped up the boiler and refilled the coal bin while he was asleep. He’s not even slightly peckish.

He forces some dinner down anyway (fungal crackers taste awful again, thank goodness) and actually gets the coffee brewing this time. That’s a sure-fire way to lure in the Herald-

“Afternoon. Do you mind if I- oh, I see, you’re already making some.”

“Why didn’t you tell me anything? Why didn’t you mention it was that easy to stop Seeking?”

For once, the Herald looks genuinely taken aback, and more than slightly guilty. The Spy pours out some coffee and adds a generous spoonful of solacefruit extract before he hands it to her. His grandpa Harry would have called it “heaping coals of fire”.

“I suppose I might have done,” she eventually manages, though not before draining the cup.

”Just - why?” He needs to hear that it was a mistake, that she honestly didn’t know, so that they can forget about the whole mess and get on with their lives-

"It would have been so interesting to watch," the Herald says.

The last time he saw that look, it was on a scientist whose prize microbe was threatening to wipe out all other carbon-based life. “Is that it? I mean, all right, you didn’t know about Mutton Island, but I heard a lot more than I wanted to back in that pub. All the betrayals, and throwing people down wells, and cat torture-”

“The cats are usually more enthusiastic about the process than the Seeker, I believe.”

“That’s not the point. How could you have thought any of that sounded like something I’d see through? So I’m a spy, that’s not the same thing as a sadist. Or did you just think that watching a Surface vegetarian wander into this blind was going to be funny?”

The reaction, when it comes, is not as biting as he expects.

“You’re not very good at being angry, did you know? Not when it’s only you at stake. If other people are involved, yes, but not personally.”

“It’s been mentioned,” the Innocent admits.

“Not a bad job for a beginner, all the same...no, you’re right, I shouldn’t have encouraged you. And no one’s ever made it North who didn’t want to, so it was foolish of me to try. But there was a saying I heard once. That story I was asking those children for, it was something about Salt, a question that hasn’t been asked.” She leans forward, her hands clasped on the table in an unconscious pose of prayer. “Most Seekers are guilty, or mourning. Too full of despair at their old lives to mind losing everything, and before it’s done they’ve repented their sins in blood and tears. As I said, there’s always mercy at the Gate. But if an innocent could make it through, if you’d seen your way through the seven candles and emerged still yourself, why. You might do something with the Name that no one ever imagined."
There’s a moment when the Herald knows she’s convinced him, when those dark eyes are aflame with the light of the last horizon -

until he puts his head in his hands, and laughs. He laughs for a long time.

“I’m sorry,” the Spy manages eventually. “But I’m not cut out for this godhood, or death, or whatever it is that would happen to me at the end of this. I like being me, thanks. I’ve had a few years to get very good at it.”

“You were asking earlier about what counts as normal down here? That’s normal. That is the perfectly sensible, normal response to anybody talking about Seeking.”

“Oh. Glad to know you aren’t completely insane down here-”

The door opens; a highly abashed Student is accompanied by a Captain in full wrathful dudgeon.

“I want to know all about this. I want to know exactly who allowed our very valuable engineer to fall into Seeking!”

The Spy lifts his cup of as-yet untouched coffee; the Herald suspects he does so only to hide his smile.

“Huh. Sounds like you two have some explaining to do. I’ll just be off looking after the engines, shall I? Bye.”

It is a rather protracted conversation.
Dear Jack,

we went to this island where it turned out everybody was a cannibal, and I got invited to dinner (not to be dinner, I think I might have preferred that).

I’ve recently been on this quest trying to help the vengeful Neath god of hunger with its personal problems about names.

I’ve been having a weird time of it lately.

Absurdly nonspecific, but at least it’s a start. Easier than tackling the port report on Mutton Island, anyway.

“That one’s going to be such a headache,” the Innocent Spy says out loud, and slaps his journal shut. So much for a change of scene being any use; the Clipper’s forward deck is enticingly cooled by a light mist, far less stuffy than the engine room, but it’s not helping him think any more clearly. And there’s still an odour of long-deceased crab hanging about, even though the Crewmember has dutifully sluiced it down several times since.

One of the cushions in the inevitable convenient stack is digging into his back. The Spy removes it for closer examination; round, cunningly embroidered with moon-pearls in the semblance of a clock. Some of these are frankly beautiful objects, that probably deserve better than to be sat on all day and occasionally thrown at people. Must remember to ask the Captain where they all came from, sometime…

There’s a zee-bat circling their prow light. Or is it?

The Spy slips inside, finds the Herald gently crooning at the wheel, as if she’s steering by song as well as hand. It takes all sorts. “Ever heard of a white zee-bat?”

“That's a stroke of luck! Maybe we're in for some good fortune on this trip after all.” To his shock, she cuts the engines dead (a major breach of protocol; sailors don't like sitting out in the midst of the zee for no reason) and runs out to the deck.

The Innocent sighs and spends the next few minutes checking that nothing’s been damaged by their sudden stop. It’s fine. There’s are endless jokes at Wolfstack about how unreliable London’s shipyards are, but if the Clipper is anything to go by, they turn out pretty tough little things. Some twentieth-century ships he’s been on wouldn’t hold up to the rough treatment machinery gets as a matter of course down here...

The Herald comes back in, hurries past him towards the speaking tubes without so much as a by-your-leave. “Crewmember ours? Would you mind coming to the bridge? Something up here that calls for your specific talents.”

“What’s important enough to interrupt stoking, then? Not that I’m ungrateful. Be up in a minute.”

“I’d like to know too,” the Spy remarks, after a few minutes of watching the Herald frantically rummage through the lockers. “What’s so important about one zee-bat?”

“It’s not just any zee-bat, it’s one of Salt’s messengers. This is one day I’m not going to be calling my usual liturgy.” She finally removes a battered box of hardtack and tosses it up in the air with all
the panache of a conquering fury. “Today we’re blessed - more specifically, you’ll be blessed, assuming the Crewmember ever gets here-”

“Oh, come now. Herald, is it this old chestnut again?” The Crewmember, coughing and dusty with coal, looks distinctly unimpressed. “I said I wasn’t doing any more such favours for you, not after the way that little frivolity went last time.”

“You know it’s the perfect opportunity. All this time zailing on the Unterzee, and our poor Innocent’s never had so much as a whisper of the gods’ attentions.”

“And of course the officers get the credit even though it’s never them that goes over, is it?”

“I know it gets a bit repetitive when I’m always asking what’s going on,” the Innocent says gently, “But, well, does anyone want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Eh. Your esteemed colleague over there wishes me to go and take a running jump, that’s what. And all over some blasted zee-bat, if I don’t miss my guess. Why don’t you get a net and add it to your collection?”

“Because that would be impious and irreverent?” The Herald tears the package open; biscuits scatter over the table. She scoops them into a rough pile, with trembling hands.

“Since when has that stopped a Londoner from doing anything?” The Crewmember folds their arms and gives the Innocent an it’s-us-against-her look. “There’s this business about how if a crewmember abandons ship to chase after one of the bloody things, it brings good luck to whoever’s left on board.”

“Not just good luck. Salt’s blessing.”

“Demeaux Island’s our next port, isn’t it? You know I can’t abide the Iron & Misery. And a sign-up bonus for all of one echo, now that’s plain insulting.”

“If price is all that’s bothering you, I’ll make up the difference. It’d be worth it.”

“Even if you did, there’s a trip to the slow boat to reckon in as well-”

The Spy surreptitiously swipes a handful of biscuits and goes out to have another look at the zee-bat. Poor flockless thing. It’s probably lonely.

“I expect you’re just a plain ordinary zee-bat who happens to be albino, aren’t you?” he tells it, crumbling up bits of biscuit onto his journal’s cover and holding the book aloft. The zee-bat dips its head and accepts the offering delicately. “Not a god’s messenger at all, just looking for some food and a perch. You’re welcome to them.”

It cries out at this, in something that - at first - makes no sense. Then the blurred sound resolves into a shape, the way adding a last stroke turns simple lines into a sigil. Is this how the Correspondence sounds when spoken?

“Traveller returning,” the Spy whispers. “That’s what you’re trying to say. Then - no, no, I only just got done with one impossible quest, don’t ask me to start another one!”

The zee-bat cries again and soars towards the stern - hovering over that particular spot where the ship’s boat is kept, a tiny thing of about as much use zailing the Unterzee as a tablecloth.

“You’re a bat, not a mermaid, and I don’t think sirens existed anyway,” the Spy argues, gripping
onto the ship’s railing for support. His hands slide smoothly along it. “I mean, it’s obviously just
circumference invented by bored tailors who started inventing stories out of sheer boredom-”

Inside, the Crewmember and Herald are still bargaining. “...current union rates, and you have to
take the danger pay into account. Did something go crash out there?”

“Possibly it’s a moot point,” the Herald says, looking out. “I think our zee-bat’s made a friend.”

“And he’s looking to cheat me out of my fee? I’ll give that Spy what for!” The Crewmember
hurries out with an enthusiasm that rather belays their previous reluctance.

The Herald follows more sedately. There’s a red-handled knife to retrieve, clear on the opposite
side of the deck. Somebody clearly wanted to be rid of it very badly.

“I thought you looked after these,” she comments, as she makes her way down to the stern and
finds no boat, no Crewmember, and a Spy who’s tied himself to the railing.

“I do. But there wouldn’t be much point in tying myself to the ship if I could just cut the string
loose.” He undoes the last knot easily, looking a little rueful. “I was kinda rushed. And then as
soon as I’d finished the whole Odysseus routine, the Crewmember comes by like a house on fire
and I had to start trying to get out of it again. They can’t be far off.”

“But we’d never catch a boat that size in this fog. Don’t worry about it, they’ll be fine.”

“I guess so. Um-”

“I’m more worried about what the Captain is going to say when he notices-”

“Behind you.”

“Notices that I’ve stopped the ship and someone’s gone overboard. I wonder if I could convince
him it was an accident.”

The Spy shrugs helplessly. “Very quiet step you have, sir.”

“It does come in handy,” the Captain agrees. “May I ask why we’re floating here uselessly?”

“Kind of my fault. I was feeding a zee-bat, and I guess you aren’t supposed to do that,” the Spy
offers.

“Innocent, loyalty will get you nowhere down here,” the Herald says, handing back the knife.
“What’s the current punishment for getting a crewmember killed, flogging by the captain's
daughter? Imprisonment?”

“In this case, I think we’ll skip the standard treatment…”

**********************

When they reach the Fungling Station, the Crewmember is waiting at the dock, half-coated in
slimy fungus and not in the least happy.

“Fathomking rates. Not a penny less. It’s growing out of my ears, for Storm’s sake.”

The Herald hands over the scintillack readily enough. “Reckonings come due. Though it was only
twenty-four hours you’ve been here.”
“Twenty-four hours was quite enough, thank you very much! I’m going back aboard to enjoy that lovely hot shower the Spy’s rigged up. I wouldn’t take any shore leave here if I were you.”

“Oh, not shore leave,” the Captain calls, making no move to leave his spot on the Clipper’s rail. “Punishment duty. Nothing like supply-duty on Demeaux, you know. It has a way of clearing the mind. Or cluttering it up again.”

“Are you sure we really want a hallucinating navigator?” the Spy says uncomfortably. “I thought we were trying to get somewhere this trip.”

“Of course we are. But you don’t need a navigator to reach Irem, it’s always here in the corner.” The Captain unrolls a chart theatrically and stabs at it with his forefinger. “There!”

“That’s the Dawn Machine. You’re holding the map upside down.”

“Am I? My goodness, so I am.”

“Cheer up,” the Student says to a rather dismayed Herald. “I’ll come along with you and collect some research notes. There’s bound to be some interesting mushrooms here, I can probably produce a monograph just on whatever’s evolved since the last time an academic bothered to come.”

“So, days of foraging through that damp thicket of mold, loathsomeness and fungi to look forward to, and someone to stand by and call them all names. My cup runneth over.”

“Did you remember to tell the zee that we’re doomed this morning?”

“You’re a student, how about a vocabulary lesson? I’m sure I can think of one or two expressions you haven’t come across yet...”

“Don’t worry,” the Crewmember assures the Spy. “People usually come back. Half-mad, more fungal than human, and smelling like something that came out of a Spite rookery at the end of false-summer, but they usually come back.”

“I’m thinking more about a port report.”

“Ah. You mean you’re going out into that delightful place to fulfill your duties as a responsible secret agent?”

“Nah, I’m thinking that maybe writing about cannibals isn’t so hard as all that...why don’t we stay on board tonight? I have this terrific recipe for blackened fish we could try out.”

“Does it involve one of your contraptions? A flamethrower?”

“Wasn’t going to, but now you mention it...”
Scrimshander

“Who is it who even keeps leaving all these torpedos scattered around the Unterzee floor, anyway?” The Anonymous Crewmember is a trifle disgruntled about getting into a diving suit for the second time that day, especially when they’re meant to be on steering duty. But the Captain has it as a standing order that someone always go out and fetch the blasted things on sight (“we wouldn’t want anyone to use them on us, would we? And the Naval Surplus will be happy to buy them back in London.”)

“For all of one echo. Hardly worth the oxygen.”

“They’re components. Probably leftovers from surface battles, that sank to the bottom instead of hitting anything,” the Innocent Spy explains, staggering on the bridge with a crate-sized, gear-laden contraption and lowering it onto a stray cushion with much relief. He adjusts a single knob by a three-quarter turn, eyes the result, and turns it right back again.

“Surface battles? You mean in the Med? Now that’s hardly likely.”

“Um…on the top of the water? What are we supposed to call it?”

The Crewmember considers. “I’ve no idea. So this is the device that’s supposed to do my job for me, is it?”

“Oh yeah, we’re really getting into steampunk territory now. Mostly it’s just your regular everyday electromagnet, anybody could whip up one of those, but I’ve thrown in some superconductors that might not be street legal back in California. Heat transfer’s weird down here. Something in the Neath must like the cold.”

“Go on then, how does it work?”

“I told you, magnetics. It’s easy. All you have to do is take it outside, turn it on, and it’ll attract any components within a range of, ooh, half a mile or so, just be careful to duck. Don’t try it too close to the ship. I’m not sure what the composition of our hull is, but it’s probably best not to take any chances.”

The Crewmember pauses to frown at their diving suit. “Hang about. What’s my helmet made of?”

“Brass, what else? Aich’s alloy is good for underwater work, that’s mostly copper with some zinc and iron - oh, you wouldn’t call it that, would you? Probably the Venetian Gunner’s metal or something. Unless people went back to first principles and called it after Bill Keir like he deserved for inventing it, but of course nobody in the eighteenth century had much of a use for the stuff…I wonder if this library we’re going to has any books on scientific nomenclature. I keep worrying that’ll trip me up one of these days.”

“Iron’s magnetic, isn’t it?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Not wishing to impugn your technical skills by any means, but I have this little picture in my head. Yours truly going out and switching the contraption on, then getting stuck to the bloody thing by me helmet while any old iron comes flying in like the midnight express to hell.”

The Spy stares. “Oh.”
“You’re not saying I’m right, are you?”

“Well, nobody in my own time would even be using ferrous metals in a diving suit, that’s ludicrous…no. Sorry, you’re right, that’s exactly what would happen. Should have worked it out for myself.”

“How long were you building this thing again?”

“Three solid days of work wasted. Never mind,” the Spy says, brightening up again. “I’m sure I can think of something to do with it.”

“You sure that you’re not interested in weapons development? The Iron Republic is always in the market for a good cannoneer.”

“I suppose,” the Spy admits, looking ruefully at his invention, “I deserved that.”

Scrimshander is famed, amongst that part of the Neath’s population who will agree that underwater ports even exist, for the grace and strength of its ivory gate. It marks a very firm distinction between the part of the port where sailors buy zee-coal and flog their hunting trophies, and the city centre, which is where all the books live.

The Innocent Spy is a little dubious. His anatomy maybe isn’t up to medical school standards, but the shapes of the ivory pieces look awfully like phalanges.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” he asks the Student, who is arranging with a stoical porter to haul their crates of mushroom wine inside.

“None who enter, escape whole,” the Cynical Herald repeats. “You don’t need me to tell you that’s doom-laden.”

“That hardly matters. If I can’t find an enigma in a storehouse of knowledge like this,” the Student says, “I’ll…drop out and become a Revolutionary, or something. There has to be one down there, I can smell it.”

“I never could resist a good book,” the Innocent agrees. “And there’s always the port report to think of. If Pete knew I’d skipped out on a city-sized library just because someone came up and sang ominously at me, I’d never be able to look him in the face again.”

“Suit yourselves. I shall be in the Remainder, looking for bargains on lamentable relics.” The Herald retreats towards the shopping precinct, shaking her head as she goes.

“…and that’s ten,” the porter says, piling the last crate onto what looks like a steam-engine forklift. “Sign here, please.”

“There isn’t a service entrance, is there?” the Innocent asks. If there’s another way in, it’d be another way out.

“No, sir. Everything comes through the ivory gate.”

“Tight security. And a ridiculously long tunnel to get to where you want to go,” the Spy comments, as the gate opens and they start walking down a nave carved entirely of bone. “Almost like being back at LAX…geez, I’ve spent so much of my life in crummy airports. Glad you don’t have those down here. Not that the decor’s much better.”
“I suspect these are all tales donated by previous visitors.” The Student gestures at the walls, which carry cartoons of the Neath’s histories. Rather extravagant, histrionic histories.

“I don’t think some of those poses are physically possible.”

“Mmm. That’s more ivory along the top, isn’t it?”

“More finger bones. How have this many people come down here just since zubs were invented?” the Innocent Spy says quietly. The atmosphere seems too hushed for normal speech. Like a…well, like a library.

“I suppose we could ask someone,” the Student whispers back. “Though they all look busy with their own quests. I have an impression we wouldn’t have much luck asking questions here.”

“Self-guided research only, huh?” The Spy taps the shoulder of an ashen-robed Drownie, who clutches a leather-bound volume the size of a suitcase. “Excuse me, could you tell us-”.

“THESUNTHESUNTHESUNTHESUN”, the Drownie hisses, flings the book aside, and vanishes into the city’s heart.

“I can’t remember. Have they invented the phrase déjà vu yet?”

“It’s a psychic research term, I think we borrowed it from the French,” the Student says, stopping abruptly. The proud, cold entrance of the Ivory Archive stands ahead, not exactly invitingly, but he gazes at it in utter rapture. “That must be it. Just waiting for us.”

“Excuse me, sirs,” the Stoical Porter breaks in. “Are you both intending to enter? This wine will suffice for one, but two might be questionable.”

“Yeah, what is all the wine for, anyway?”

“To bribe the librarians so that they’ll let us in,” the Student explains. “Come now, we have ten crates of the stuff brought straight from London. You’re saying that isn’t enough for us to even have a look round?”

“It’s more than enough for that,” the Porter agrees. “But the trouble lies more in the getting out again. Perhaps if you’d brought any darkdrop along? Historians are notoriously addicted to coffee.”

“…no. No, we did not bring any coffee. It’s a cutter, we didn’t have the cargo space to bring every blasted trade good in the Unterzee with us!”

“So much for strong drink,” the Spy says lightly. “All right, if it makes things easier I’ll stay out here. You go get your enigma, how about we meet up tonight in front of that ugly statue over there?”

The ugly statue turns and regards them; it’s a Clay Man. With a very sharp edition of the local steel-tipped quills tucked behind one lumpy ear.

“Oh. Sheesh. I’m sorry.”

“THE MISTAKE HAS BEEN MADE BEFORE,” the Clay Man rumbles. “I GO NOW TO ASSIST A SCHOLAR BY CARVING TALES OF TOMB COLONISTS, IN EXCHANGE FOR TIME IN THE ARCHIVE. PERHAPS YOU WOULD LIKE TO COME?”
“Very kind,” the Student accepts, throwing in a dirty look at the Spy for good measure. “That sounds like a wonderful idea. And perhaps he can tell me who I'm supposed to give all this wine to as well...”

The porter trundles along behind the oddly-assorted duo, stoic as ever.

A youngster comes up to the Innocent, hair tucked into braids that makes them look even younger than they are. Back in London they'd be considered an Urchin.

"Care to see the play?" They proffer a colourless flyer, written on the membrane from some alarmingly large creature's rib. It advertises the dramatic reenactment of a city's rise and fall, as portrayed in the form of an all-singing, all-dancing Drownie musical. Guaranteed to have some real history in it, unlike those silly Chelonate fictions, the youngster assures him.

"Fifty echoes for a play? Isn't that a little steep?"

"It's a very fine play. You won't see anything like it this side of Veilgarden."

"Well, I guess I wasn't spending it on anything else. Okay." He fumbles with the change; thank goodness for the Literary Postman getting the currency decimalised, it's confusing enough already. “Good thing I sold that enigma before leaving London.”

The Urchin accepts the fee, hands him a very official ticket good for two drinks at the bar, and leaves in triumph to seek other victims. Forget stealing handkerchiefs in the Flit; coming out here to bilk gullible scholars of their money was the best career move they ever made.

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"So how'd it go?" the Spy asks, when a weary-but-beaming Student shows up at the Stage of Histories. Intermission: arguments rage, refreshments are bought, people argue heatedly about the refreshments. All the everyday bustle natural to a city seems to have been crammed into this one room, perhaps to spare the rest of Scrimshander the noise.

"Marvellous." He accepts the mushroom wine that the Spy's thoughtfully been saving, drinks thirstily. "Absolutely marvellous. How is this place not renowned across the Neath? Scholars should be storming down the gate to come here."

"And you found your enigma?"

"Well, no." The Student drains his drink and starts on the second glass. "But it doesn't matter so much about that. So many secrets down there! I've never had such luck with associative trails. Pull on a single thread and the rest of history will obligingly unwind at your fingertips...oh, it'd make the University historians sick. I even asked how you go about becoming a librarian."

"Like an internship? Uh, an apprenticeship?"

"Not quite, it's a more permanent affair. My academic credentials suffice, naturally, but the requirements are very strict. Any scholar can come and look, but the inhabitants swear an oath never to leave." He takes another gulp of wine; that'll probably go as fast as the first, the Spy suspects. "It's perfectly understandable. There are secrets in there that should never leave this place, but it'd be such a shame to lose them...oh, false-stars above! How I'd like to stay here."

"What's to stop you?"

"That I have a prior appointment in Frostfound." The Student meets the Spy's questioning look
with an expression that is, despite the wine, perfectly sober. "Have you ever had everything you
could possibly want tumble into your lap? Custom-tailored perfection, you'd take it in a heartbeat if
only you weren't already committed to something else?"

"Several times. I figured it was karma's way of getting back at me for enjoying my job too much."

"This is mine, then. Scholars have their duties, and I did swear in front of the thesis committee...
oh, but it's just too tempting. I don't know how I'll make up my mind. Now that is hardly one of my
usual problems..."

"You know what my grandpa Harry would have said," the Spy remarks, applying the finishing
touches to a bun spread with Beloved lard and apple jam. "If you can't decide for yourself, stop
thinking about you and start thinking about other people. Look at the big picture."

"How- I'm not sure that's very applicable."

"Isn't it? How many librarians has this place got?"


"And how many people are working on whatever it is you're hoping to do in Frostfound?" He
passes the jammy bun to the Student, and starts slicing another open for himself.

The Student chews thoughtfully. "To the best of my knowledge, nobody's even bothered trying it."

"Well, that makes your decision easy, doesn't it? Sounds like your original plan is a lot more useful
to scholarship than staying on here would be." The lights dim. "This has been fun, by the way.
There's some choreographed routines I can't make heads or tails of."

"They do it with mirrors."

"Aw, I don't think so. Some of the angles, there wouldn't be anywhere they could be reflecting
from."

"Neath mirrors have odd properties in that regard," the Student says. "I'll think about it. Don't be
surprised if you have to go back and tell the Captain that he's short one First Officer, all the same."

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Nevertheless, in the morning the Student joins the Spy at Scrimshander’s gate. “I don’t think
you’re going to like this.”

“Like what?” the Spy says, looking quizzically at the luggage piled on the Stoical Porter’s forklift.
How had the Student even lugged two firkins of prisoner’s honey out of the Ivory Archive by
himself? Let alone what the stuff was doing down there in the first place.

“Those warnings about not leaving whole? They’d like a piece of our hands before we go. A piece
of bone, specifically.”

“Nothing’s ever metaphorical down here if it’s more scary for it to be literal, is it? And visa-versa.
Can’t say I’m surprised,” the Spy says, looking at the gate and pondering his odds in a knock-
down brawl. Not good. The heavily-armed guards look a good deal more brutal and efficient than
those clowns in Wrack. “Seriously, though, that’s not an option. Engineering requires functional
hands.”
“My work doesn’t need two. I rather like the idea of leaving a little part of myself in this place.”

“In my time they’d call you a little bit goth,” the Spy mutters, and walks up to the least grumpy-looking of the guards, one who’s not actually glowering at them. “Any other options? If I don’t feel up to getting sliced and diced today?”

“Certainly. Have you any zee-stories?”

The Innocent bites his lip. “I kinda need those. See, in my other profession I’m a spy, so I can’t just go losing all the intelligence I’ve been piling up, can I?”

“A hunting trophy?”

“Not exactly my style.”

“It would have to be your vitality, then. Or your warmth.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather just lose a finger bone and get it over with?” the Student calls.

“That at least I am sure about. Vitality, I guess? We’re supposed to be going North soon, I think I’ll want all the warmth I can get up there.”

The guard nods understandingly. “Another for the brick-laying, then. I’ll escort you. You’ll be back on your ship by tonight.”

“Is that all there is to it? Doesn’t sound so bad…”
“And here I was thinking this would be the last time we had to do any stoking, but no, the Student has to go and say, ‘We’re by Wisdom, why don’t we see if we can break out a prisoner while we’re here?’ At this rate we’ll never make Polythreme.” The Crewmember grunts and lugs over yet more coal. “All right there? You’ve been looking a bit flat since we left Scrimshander.”

“I honestly don’t know. Maybe it’s nothing. But my reflexes are off, and I’m more tired than I should be.” The Innocent Spy flings another shovelful of coal into the fire, as if sufficient determination will undercut his words.

“Sounds like a bloodletting. You’ve probably had your humours tampered with.”

“It does feel a bit like when I’ve donated blood, yeah, but humours? It’s the twentieth- okay, it’s the nineteenth century. How has medical science regressed so much…oh, well, I suppose there’s some very obvious reasons for that.”

“Blood remembers,” the Crewmember explains patiently. “Anything that takes too much away at once weakens you permanently. I suppose you won’t have tried bottled oblivion, but if you pour some out into a dish and add blood, you can see the liquid actually consuming it all. Like watching melting lacre.”

“They sell that stuff at the Bazaar?”

“Some people enjoy that kind of thing. It’s a party trick.”

“But I wasn’t drinking anything, just laying a lot of bricks with names on them. Got kind of fuzzy towards the end, maybe that’s when they did it…I thought it was a charity wall or something.”

“This time you have lost me. A charity what?”

It takes another twenty minutes for the Innocent Spy to explain the concept of people donating perfectly good money to charities by purchasing engraved bricks with their names on, by the end of which the furnace is roaring away, he’s puffing, and the Crewmember still doesn’t believe him.

“If people want bricks, why don’t they just buy bricks? And if people want to give away their money, why don’t they just give some and leave it at that?”

“I dunno. Fundraising was never my department, thank goodness.” The Innocent collapses onto the bunk, looking annoyed with himself. “I shouldn’t be this out of sorts.”

“It probably didn’t help that you were pushing yourself twice as hard just to prove that you were all right,” the Crewmember points out. “I oughtn’t to be doing this, being crew and all, but…the Student must be pages and the Herald’s probably mirrors. Gods alone know what’s with our Captain, but with all that irrigo he’d be worse than you. And I’m the next best thing to a gunnery officer. Come up to my cabin in half an hour, I’ll make some preparations and have you back to normal in two shakes of a rat’s tail.”

“How? Some wacky magic ritual or something?”

“Or something,” the Crewmember agrees. “Bring a secret and I’ll give you one of mine. Bet you’re hearts.”
“You know I can’t do that. What kind of self-respecting spy just hands out their secrets like that?”

They shrug. “Of course, if you want to spend the rest of this trip feeling like someone’s tripped you up, go ahead.”

The Innocent surreptitiously checks to see if his hands are still shaking. It’s stopped, thankfully, but that’s not a comfortable thought for the next time he wants to try some precision engineering.

“Fine. It’s a deal. What kind of secret?”

“Oh, a nice crunchy tale I can get my teeth into. Preferably gory. You look like you’ve had an idea.”

“I think so. If blood carries…whatever it is, does that mean I could give the engines an extra bit of oomph by bleeding on them?”

The Crewmember stares at him. “You know, I was going to give you the benefit of the doubt about that lapse into Seeking. Forget it. You are, in fact, quite mad.”

“Nice to know that I fit in down here,” the Spy says wryly. “Half an hour, you said?”

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The Innocent’s never been in the Crewmember’s cabin before. Cabin might be overselling it; there’s just about room for a bunk, a crate, and a rough kind of shrine in which the Crewmember is lighting heavily scented candles (now why should that smell remind him of Scrimshander?)

Then again, he’s sleeping in an engine room, so…”It’s very neat.”

“Saves trouble tidying if you don’t take it out in the first place.” They blow out the match, stand up. “What the Bohemians call mood-setting. Just to get you into the spirit of the thing. Do they exchange secrets on the Surface?”

“Not like this. What am I supposed to do?”

“You’re thinking of your secret?”

“Yes.”

“Start telling me.”

“Well…”

The Crewmember punches him.

Or tries to; the Spy shifts away just in time. He’d had a feeling what form this particular Neath ritual might take. Hurrah for intuition.

“There was this time I almost wasn’t the Innocent Spy,” he explains, experimenting with a swift hook-kick around the other’s ankle. It fails; they each fall back and take stock. “I was chasing this serial killer. Like Jack, but when he killed people they stayed dead.”

“I’m assuming this was back on the Surface.” The Crewmember leaps in with another reckless punch, covering action for a sidesweep feint. The Spy easily evades one, blocks the other.

“It was. Totally evil. He locked a woman up so she could watch her death by water, and the only
way I could get to her was by taking the key away from him.” Time for a bit of offensive? He jumps up on the crate, using the height and velocity to launch himself-

where the Crewmember isn’t. They watch in amusement as the Spy breaks his fall on the bed.

“So he makes me chase him up a bell tower, telling me how he’s going to bring me down to his level, until we get to the top and suddenly he throws down his gun.” He has his breath back now. The Crewmember, irritatingly, looks even more amused once he puts them in a hold.

“And just for a moment, he’s won. I’d save her only by killing him. So I was going to be the red-blooded hero, grab that gun and finish him off. I was even reaching out to take it.” The Spy struggles to tighten his grip; instead the Crewmember wriggles free and clocks him a smart one in the ribs.

“Ouch! That hurt.”

“I should hope it did. You’ll not be feeling the benefit otherwise.” Secrets go unspoken for the next few minutes; both of them are too busy wrestling. Neither is actually that good at it, but the Spy gets lucky with a wrist twist, grabs his opponent’s hands and sets his knee on a ticklish spot.

“And then?” The Crewmember gazes serenely upwards, waiting for the kill.

The Spy grins and releases them. “And I didn’t do it. Always hated guns, always will, and it saved my life because this was a little trap he’d set up. If I’d taken the weapon the whole floor would have collapsed and sent me plummeting six stories.”

A confused Crewmember straightens up and joins him on the bed. “What about the woman? Did you save her?”

“Oh, yeah. We argued back and forth a bit, I worked out what the trap was and tried to spring it on him. Which…didn’t quite work out, but I managed to tie him up, get the key and save my friend from electrocution.”

“I thought you said it was death by water.”

“Sure. Electricity and water. Not a good combination.”

“I wonder how fatal that would be down here. Are you feeling any better now?”

His blood’s up; his breathing’s normal again. “All’s well. Dunno why it worked, but it must have done. Thanks.”

“Any time,” the Crewmember assures him. “Maybe I won’t press you to reciprocate tonight. Give you a little time to think up a secret-sharing ritual of your own. They tend to be very personal.”

“And yours involves three candles and trying to beat up the other party.”

“I’m a simple zailor of simple tastes, it’s good enough for me.”

“Whatever mine is, it can’t possibly be like that. Still…your secret? I’m curious now.”

“If you think you’re up to it.” The Anonymous Crewmember takes a deep, calming breath. “I have a name.”

The Innocent makes himself wait for all of five minutes before finally venturing to say “Is that it?”
“What do you mean, is that it? What’s the one thing you thought you knew about me? What’s the only thing you thought you knew about me?”

“I know lots of things about you. You’re a sailor, you like biscuits with plenty of lard slapped on thick, you’re smarter than you let on.”

“Any sailor could say the same thing. Storm’s sake, I tell you that I’m an actual person and not just a Wolfstack manifestation and you don’t get it at all.”

“I guess you’re not going to tell me what the name is, then.”

“Of course not.” They look a bit bedraggled now. “It was only meant to be one secret. Which apparently I’ve lost now to no good purpose.”

The Spy watches them in dismay. If he’d known how disappointed they were going to be by his not understanding quasi-magical Neath stuff, he wouldn’t have let it happen in the first place. Apparently this is something very important to them and he’s blown it.

Oops. What now?

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“…so I can understand where the carving came in, his being a mechanic and that attached to his knife and all. But gods help me, he talked my ear off for an hour. An hour! Have you ever heard of anyone’s secret-sharing taking as long as that?”

“It’s not uncommon in Whither, but of course they take longer when everything has to be phrased in the form of a question,” the Cynical Herald says, spreading rat extract on a bit of toasted hardtack. “Pass the lard, please?”

“Here you go. All I can say is,” the Crewmember says, rolling their eyes, “I pity any captain who ever goes asking him for help with their veils. Just this and that and this and that-”

“And this?” the Innocent Spy says cheerfully.

The Crewmember moans and hides their face in their hands. “It’s too early for the likes of you. Go away and come back at a more civilised hour.”

“No time, I’m afraid. The Captain wants everyone on the bridge, so we can talk about that plan to break into Wisdom.”

“It’s stupid. End of plan,” the Herald says between bites. “Why do we want to go anywhere near the most secure prison on the Unterzee?”

“Because the Student found out in Scrimshander that if you manage to release a prisoner, they usually have-“

“Don’t tell me. I can guess.”

“Yup. So you’re both wanted upstairs as soon as possible.” The Spy vanishes upwards, whistling something anachronistic.

The Herald finishes her breakfast, peers out the porthole. “What an excellent day this is going to be for a proclamation of doom. Several of them. Don’t you think?”

“Doubtless. I may join you…”
Knowledge of witty inventions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nobody wants to go near the Seeker.

A Seeker: a pawn of Mr Eaten, probably a cannibal, undoubtedly insane. Even the prisoners of Wisdom, who have more than enough to fear regarding their own fates, object to such a presence. The Governor’s ordered him placed in Prudence, the isolation tower that is quite possibly the most secure spot in the entire Neath.

On the other hand, it’s teatime, so somebody has to bring him the usual serving of mushroom gruel. The prospect of a Seeker being even more unaccountably peckish unnerves everybody.

“Please don’t make me go in there,” the Unsavoury Cook pleads with the guard. “I’ll do anything. Make the best dinner you’ve ever had. Or just go ahead and feed me to the knot-oracles. I don’t want to be trapped in there with him!”

The guard shrugs. A very convincing shrug, with just the right admixture of sympathy and total indifference. He practices at odd hours. “You realise it’s not in my hands.”

“But please. Please!”

“Look, I’ll tell you something. The Affable Fellow was mentioning how, if you managed the job right and didn’t complain too much, he might think about putting you on the list of trustees next time there’s an opening. Now that’d be nice, wouldn’t it?”

“Re-really?”

The guard nods, and casually runs a handkerchief over the pommel of his ceremonial (but exceedingly sharp) sword. “And you know about the little perks trustees get. No knot-oracles for them. Listening in on secrets. Maybe parole to the Khanate one day, if you’re very good…”

The combination of comfort and intimidation eventually gets to the Cook. The guard breathes a sigh of relief once he shuts the door on her. It’s not a task he’d have fancied either.

“Frivolous little thing. And I suppose you’re not coming out again, with a mad Seeker in there. Still. Better you than me, that’s what I always say.”

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Darkness, except for the wavering foxfire candlestick that she carries. The usual lily pad duff littering the floor (ostensibly placed there as a sound-deadener; the Cook suspects it’s there to make them all smell nicer to the toads.) Just a typical Wisdom cell, then. The sheer normality of it almost makes her feel better.

Seeing how many chains they’ve loaded down the prisoner with also helps. It’s a wonder the man can even breathe, under those masses of iron; but he sleeps quietly. There’s a slightly whimsical cast to his features, as though he dreams of something amusing.

Actually, he doesn’t look much like a Seeker at all.
She flutters over the flagstones, sets the hot bowl down within easy reach. That’s it. Her job’s done now.

But if she wasn’t a curious soul, she wouldn’t be here in the first place.

“Hello?”

“Oh, morning. Is it morning? I’m starving.” He awkwardly struggles into a sitting position, a tricky task with hands firmly manacled to his sides.

“No, it’s still evening. I brought you some gruel.”

“Fantastic. How am I supposed to eat it wrapped up like this?” He makes a movement as though to stand and abandons the effort halfway through, looking wryly down at the chains. “I knew my captain was mad, but this seems kinda excessive.”

“I… I don’t think anyone thought about that. I was just supposed to bring this in for you and leave.”

“Well, that’s something. I’m the Innocent Spy, by the way.”

“Funny name to have in a place like this. I’m the Unsavoury Cook.”

“Funny place you got here- that’s a terrible name, what kind of crewmates picked that out for you? Call yourself the Savoury Cook instead, I bet that’ll cheer you up a bit.” He plucks a thin tube out of the mess. “Oh good, a style. Quite a bit bigger than the ones on your average lilies, I guess I can use this as a straw.”

“Then I’ll go…”

“Please don’t. Stay and tell me something. I’m a Seeker, I need to know things.”

“What kinds of things?”

“Everything. I’m omnivorous.” The Spy grins at her with a smile that doesn’t look altogether sane. Well. If telling him stories will keep him quiet, maybe that’s worth doing. A trusteeship is a trusteeship.

And they do say that Seekers know all sorts of forbidden lore…

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“It’s only because it’s such a terrible crime,” the Captain explains for the tenth time.

The Affable Fellow nods and pours out more wine. Strictly the cheap stuff: he has a finely tuned instinct for which captains require buttering up and which don’t. This one clearly stopped being all there a long time ago. Probably an irrigo addict, if the protruding lines of those eye-sockets are anything to go by.

Nevertheless, for a mere hundred echoes he’s delivered Wisdom a captive Seeker. The Fellow’s never had the care of one before. Stockpiles of engimas and secrets to burn, if the rumours hold any truth.

“I mean, I’ve had crewmembers lying about supplies, the odd murder, a mutineer, any breach of the zee-code you can think of, but Seeking is in another realm entirely. I just didn’t dare allow the man to stay on my ship any longer.”
“My dear chap—may I call you that? My dear chap, it was the perfect opportunity for both of us. We can always use another set of hands here. Do remember that if you have any further troubles.”

Which a captain of his caliber undoubtedly will. Perhaps it’d be a kindness to intervene…no. London is sufficiently strong that they don’t quite dare an open breach of the peace like that. Not yet.

“Now I wouldn’t want to teach you your business, but he is a mechanic. Very devious. In fact, he worked out why we were coming here, and sabotaged our engines in the expectation that we’d have to keep him aboard to repair them. I have my crew working on the problem, of course, but they say it will take some little time. Don’t let him out of those manacles, I implore you.”

“Of course.” The Fellow smiles thinly and wonders how many more iterations of the same statement the Captain can manage before it dawns on that lilac-soaked brain that he’s been repeating himself. “I assure you, we can handle any prisoner, however cunning. And no one has ever broken out of Prudence.”

The Captain coughs. “Prudence, eh? How very apt.”

********************

The Harbour Provisioners chain (owned by Iron & Misery) is known for providing fuel and supplies across the Neath, at slightly unfair prices. They are also known across the Neath for the inevitable surliness of their clerks.

Of course, that’s according to zee-captains. The underpaid unfortunates who work there tend to be more sympathetic towards actual zailors.

“So he tastes what’s in the wind,” the Anonymous Crewmember says chattily, as they rummage through the limited supplies on offer for something that might plausibly aid in the repair of a ship. Salted zee-monster and dried-up mushroom don’t seem like it. “He tastes what’s in the wind and goes at our boiler with the meat-axe. We barely glided in before the steam gave out. And now muggins here has got to fix it, because an officer won’t dirty their hands with the job, will they?”

The Downtrodden Clerk nods with something approaching enthusiasm. “They never do anything useful. I remember back when I was zailing, we had a magician on board. So we asked him if he wouldn’t mind putting on a bit of a show to entertain us, like, and you’d have thought we asked for the moon and all the stars to come down into the Neath. Oh no, he says. Not without some parabola linen, and a zee-monster, and enough honey to choke the Captivating Princess, I tell you. Had to give it up as a bad job.”

“Typical. Bloody typical.”

“Isn’t it.”

A dusty sack of jerked rat. More mushrooms. One solitary jar of solacefruit marmalade that’s gone a very unpleasant shade of puce.

“Well, this isn’t much cop. I’ve half a mind to just patch up the leak best I can and use the captain's dosh on something for myself. Got anything halfway edible in here?”

“The usual. Nothing worth paying freightage prices for. Rat extract any good?”

"Not a whole crate of the stuff, thanks."
"Could be I have something better in the back. The kind of thing you wouldn't want your captain to hear about, but as you're cheating him anyway…"

"Ah. Now you’re talking."

The Innocent Spy’s contrived to tuck himself comfortably into a corner, dish of gruel on his knees, which he sips as though it’s iced wine and they’re at a false-summer party in Veilgarden. The Cook can’t decide if he looks ludicrous or perfectly at home. Maybe both.

"…and so Reginald promised he’d wait for me, until I came back with my fortune made. Poor Reginald. How he must be suffering, not knowing what’s happened to me."

Forbidden love, furious parents, a romantic spirit shattering under the world’s weight, and a very nasty incident involving a sorrow-spider and a muffin. Touching love stories aren’t the kind he broke in to hear, but he hadn’t the heart to interrupt. She seemed to need to tell it.

And maybe she’ll be more willing to talk about the here and now, after a good solid unbosoming.

(He can just hear Jack Dalton now: “Unbosoming? Did you eat a dictionary down there or something?”)

“So what did happen? How’d you end up here?”

“Sunlight smuggling. I’d helped hide the mirror-catch boxes in the hold, you see, and one night…I just couldn’t resist the light. My captain liked selling them at the Isle of Cats, we’d been zailing so long by then.”

“I can imagine. We did a bit of that on my ship too.”

“Isn’t the Surface beautiful? The light, the glory of it. Almost as beautiful as love.” Her face all but glows with the memory.

The Innocent Spy sucks the last of the gruel up and considers his options. It’s entirely possible that this woman’s been assigned to spy on him, even probable. Or is lying and liked playing Jack-of-Smiles on her last ship.

Nah. He likes to think he knows when to be chivalrous. And theoretically, it shouldn’t be much harder to arrange an escape for two people than one…

But it’s way too soon to mention anything like that yet. “I came from there, actually. Still miss it.”

“Oh. Oh…that must be so hard for you. Never going back.”

“Hope springs eternal. Speaking of which, any chance of seconds?”

She manages a faint giggle. “Now, really.”

“Hey. Only asking. I told my captain that if he hadn’t kept us on such short rations, it never would have happened.”

“You mean, what happened that you’re here?”

He purses his lips. “D’you really want the answer to that? Are you sure?”
“Oh. Oh…maybe not.” Her eyes are wide and fearful again.

Some days he wonders how he ever got into a profession that involves lying to people. “Hey, I didn’t kill anybody. Honest. But…yeah, maybe I shouldn’t talk about it any more.” The Spy looks away from her, hoping to appear contrite.

Well, he is contrite. This frightened little unfortunate doesn’t seem to belong in the Neath at all. “Look, I’m sorry. Have a think, see if you can’t come up with something cheerful.”

“Oh. Well, I…most of my cheerful thoughts are about Reginald. If only I could get out a message, tell him where I am. I just know he’d come for me.”

Out into the middle of the Unterzee to pay a ransom of three thousand echoes. Okay, he definitely can’t leave her behind now.

“You know, nothing will stop me going North,” the Spy says easily. “But it’s quite a distance there. Maybe you could come with me? Stop off at the Chapel of Lights?”

“The Chapel of Lights? North? Oh no, that’s much too scary. I couldn’t do that.”

“Well, you don’t have to decide now. It’ll take a few days. For one thing, I need one more searing enigma before I get there.”

“Those aren’t hard to find around here,” the Cook says. For the first time, she sounds almost dismissive. “The impossible part is getting out again without dying.”

“Seeker, remember? Done quite a bit of dying. You watch, no two-bit Neath prison is going to hold me for long.”

It’s funny, the Cook thinks. But she actually believes him.

七 is the number of words, days

The Student wouldn’t care to say he’s unhappy. That’s the kind of simple, boringly obvious emotion to be indulged in by cats and personas without college degrees.

He would, if pressed, admit to a certain measure of triste.

The Captain persists in muttering asides about how his plans shouldn’t have been endangered by this foolhardy nonsense. The Herald and Crewmember keep glancing at him sideways, while stoutly refusing to catch his eye. The Innocent Spy was very enthusiastic about what he described as “keeping his hand in,” but everybody on board knows he only went in for the sake of that enigma. If anything does happen to go wrong, it’s going to be a very long trip back to London…

And of the allotted parts in this drama, his merely consists of going out every afternoon to check on the other ships in Nuppmidt Harbour. A task which has involved far too much rowing and shouting at unimpressed captains, ostensibly on the pretext of “Have you got any interesting zee-stories to swap?” (It is, at least, a plausible excuse. Even out here nobody thinks twice about another mad academic.)

The Herald is lying flat on their forward deck, head propped on a cushion and eyes closed, while her entire flock of zee-bats perch on and around her, gently squeaking. The best position to listen to their calls, she insists.
Despite this (or because of this?), she detects his step immediately.

“Don’t keep us in suspense. Who was out there?”

“Two more pirate vessels from Gaider’s Mourn, I think they were here to get rid of prisoners rather than pick any up. The Iremi skiff came and went in an hour, I kept a pretty close eye on them but they didn’t bring anybody aboard. Several Polythreme triemes, but we know they’re all crewed by Clay Men, so that’s fine.”

“Then he should still be in there. Good,” the Herald murmurs.

“And one ship flying Khanate colours. Not a large one, I don’t think we need to worry about it.”

“What’s the name?”

“The Apocyanic Racer. Though I’d say it’s more cobalt.”

“The Apocyanic Racer…oh, Stone have mercy!” The Herald sits up with a jerk; bewildered bats flutter away, squeaking. “How is our luck that bad? The one ship, that one bloody ship in the whole Unterzee has to be here now!”

“What’s wrong? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Yes, because you were tucked up in your bunk that night, when the Innocent Spy broke aboard and almost talked his way into a Khanate officership- Student ours, if that Captain gets the slightest hint that we abandoned him to Wisdom, she will pay whatever price they ask to get him aboard her ship. And then we’re never going to see him again. Especially if the White-and-Golds hear about it, they’d just love to get their hands on an engineer from the next century- oh, gods! Where’s the Captain?”

“Compiling the port report,” the Anonymous Crewmember says. “At least that’s what he said, but there’s a bottle of First Sporing missing. I think he was going to make a night of it.”

“That makes it simple then. One of us has to go in and ransom him, that’s all there is to it.”

“Don’t be daft. We can’t demand our Innocent back after a week, they’ll know we’re up to something. There’s only the four of us, I wouldn’t put it past that Governor to put away the lot of us if he thought we were up to some Great Game business,” the Crewmember argues.

“Have you got a better idea?”

“The beginnings of one, at least. Let me think.”

The Student tries to think of something to say, and fails. Sarcasm about their plans depending on the thought processes of an ordinary crewmember springs to mind. But that’s not helpful right now and certainly won’t get their engineer back, so he shuts up.

It’s not tact, he reassures himself. False-stars forfend that a Summerset debater fall prey to such a vice. Just…efficiency.

“We got to go to her now and cut a deal, that’s all. Tell this Khanate Captain we’re trying to break him out, on the level, and does she want to help. It might even improve things, I never was too happy about a plan that relied on sulky bats cooperating.”

“They are not sulky. Just misunderstood,” the Herald says defensively, as she pins her skirts up for
action. “If most people will insist on isolating them from their flock-”

“Not helping,” the Student cuts in. “And then what happens when we’ve broken him out with the aid of a much bigger and better-armed crew?”

“Probably means giving up your enigma, but that can’t be helped. We’ll burn that boat when we get to it.”

“Oh, no. The enigma was the entire point of the exercise!”

“And when it comes down to it,” the Herald says intently, “What’s going to be more important to you? Our Spy or another enigma for your stockpile?”

Two sets of eyes gaze expectantly, knowingly. The Student feels trapped.

“Don’t make me decide that,” he pleads. “Please don’t ask. It’s a cruel question.”

“Then stay on board.” Contemptuous in her fury: the Herald never was one to hide her feelings. “Stay out of the action, don’t touch anything. The Crewmember and I have a rescue to accomplish.”

He watches in silence as they take the ship’s boat down, row out as fast as they can pull the oars. The Student groans and sinks slowly to the deck.

“I know I’m being a coward,” he says to the Mog. “But is it for fear of kindness or unkindness?”

The Mog meows and jumps in his lap. It knows an unhappy feeder when it sees one.

Besides, the Captain had asked it to be especially attentive tonight.

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Darkness, interrogation, a mild amount of torture and all with no result, the Affable Fellow reports. (Not much of that last, if only because the toads don’t like their food bruised.)

"He's been here a week and you haven't wormed any useful information out of him yet? Serve him to the knot-oracles and have done with, this is hardly worth my time.”

"The man is a Seeker," the Affable Fellow reminds the Governor. "There could be unfortunate consequences.”

“From Mr Eaten? That romantic’s will-o-the-wisp? Not much to fear from a ghost, if you aren’t chasing him yourself.”

“The Neath has a way of inflaming that sort of romantic cause, but I had other concerns. For instance, it may happen that the- ah, unaccountably peckish quality is transferable along the Chain. Which could conceivably diminish a population we already find lamentably limited.”

The Governor, after a minute of thought, coughs and grudgingly concedes the point.

“I rather think this calls for the personal touch. An undercook had an....unorthodox suggestion. Unorthodox, but ingenious. I intend to investigate her past further, see if she has a knack for this sort of thing.”

“Yes, well, that’s your business. You’ll inform me if there’s any progress.”
“Of course.”

The Unsavoury Cook has been having trouble sleeping, or she’d never have made the suggestion in the first place. Feeding people is supposed to be her profession, after all; the prospect of a Seeker with an unappeasable appetite is at once a horror and a mental stimulation. Could she feed it?

She rather thinks so.

*Begin with meat from the thigh, nicely marbled, quivering in its red richness. Cut with skyglass, grind with zee-salt and spices from the Elder Continent. Sprinkle in the mushroom flour. Freeze in the ice from a lifeberg’s heart.*

*Grind again (six more times, for the number). Shape. Compress. Roast.*

*Thrust the knife through its centre. Scorch with fire.*

*Carve fragrant slices as they brown towards the colour of gant; watch them curl into obscene shapes.*

*Serve hot, with a flask of cold Mutton Island cider.*

“This isn’t what I think it is,” the Spy whispers. Even in a week he looks thinner and paler; he stares at the dish as though it might vanish at a breath.

“We have to prepare prisoners for the knot-oracles anyway. I took only a little, no one will miss it. See if that doesn’t sate your hungers.”

His face is a picture of comedic dismay.

“Um. I didn’t think my cover was going to be blown by someone trying to be nice to me. If you are trying to be nice...”

“What’s the matter? Didn’t I prepare it properly?” Perhaps the meat should have been raw? Oh, that thought hadn’t even occurred to her.

“Oh, I’m sure you did. It’s just...oh geez, I’m a vegetarian, okay? I’m not really a Seeker, I’m just trying to get out of here with a searing enigma, that’s all. Sounded like a good way to get a cell to myself.”

There’s too much to process in that confession. Far too much: she falls back on the simple and obvious. “It’s impossible. Nobody escapes from Wisdom.”

“I have some help coming...look, how would you like to get out of here? Bet we can squeeze one stowaway on board.”

“I couldn’t. I can’t leave.”

“C’mon. You don’t want to stay here all your life, do you?”

The Cook whimpers, then cries out in real earnest from the sudden shock of light when the door opens. Not friendly candles, but the powerful rays of a Khanate torch. The Innocent blinks rapidly, cringes into a tight ball.

But the Fellow’s voice is affable as always. “Such a shame about Reginald.”
“What’s happened? Have you caught him?”

“Oh no, I’ve simply had some very interesting words with the harbour clerk about a smuggling ring. This Reginald has appeared in quite a wealth of romantic literature, isn’t that so? Not one of Wisdom’s usual exports.”

"That wasn't romantic literature, they were my love letters!"

“Or cunningly encrypted intelligence for the Admiralty. Clever of you, to send messages in the language of love. Pity the recipient never existed.’”

“Dammit,” the Cook says, wearily. “Do you know how many bad novels I had to read for this assignment? Must have been dozens of the wretched things.”

She straightens her shoulders and raises her head high; and the Innocent, all tangled in his clanking manacles, hopes that she’ll go down fighting.

“Now, we have a few choice what to do with you. There’s always the double-agent route. I don’t like that myself, particularly. Too unpredictable. Then we have the knot-oracles,” he continues, after a long pause that the Cook ignores. “You know all about them. Or perhaps- what was the result of this little experiment in the kitchens? I’ve already had two chefs complaining to me about the supplies you used up.”

“Why should I tell you that? Why should I tell you anything at all?”

“You never know. Especially if you have hit on a way to squeeze information from secret-hoarding Seekers. If it’s reproducible, that might even be worth a pardon from Wisdom- and I don’t believe we’ve ever issued one of those before.”

“We haven’t tried it yet,” the Cook admits, with a wary look at the Innocent. “Of course, if you will interrupt people during teatime...”

“Then by all means, continue. I shan’t stop you.” The Affable Fellow’s smile is now very wide indeed.

The Innocent Spy sighs, clutters about noisily. He nods at the Cook. “You know, I hate a draught when I’m eating. Seems kinda uncivilised. And who’s to say I won’t eat him, afterwards? By accident, of course.”

She clucks her tongue understandingly. “Of course. Not that anyone would go out and eat him on purpose. It’d probably take them down the Chain instead of up.”

“Hmm. Don’t mind that so much, I’m thinking more of the taste.”

“Oh, I can promise you that he’s had a very good diet. Excellent wine, no end of little luxuries from across the Unterzee. Wisdom officials do themselves proud, I can tell you.”

The Fellow starts backing away towards the door. Slowly.

“Whatever- whatever you two are thinking, this is still Wisdom. You’re both trapped here, you’re both my prisoners.”

“I wonder how you’d be,” the Spy says thoughtfully, “with a cider chaser. Then again, maybe I could just pour it on as a sauce...”
The Fellow slams the door behind him with the speed of a Carnelian tiger. Or more precisely, the speed of somebody running away from a Carnelian tiger.

“I thought he’d never leave,” the Innocent comments, wriggling out of his bonds (easily: he’s had all of a week to work on them). “Help me with these? I need all these chains all bundled together, tight as we can manage.”

“Will spider-silk do? I always make a point of carrying some.”

He grabs it and starts cutting it into lengths with the skyglass knife. “Nice to be working with a professional again.”

“Same here,” the Cook agrees, as she binds the chains up with neat zailor’s knots. “Did we buy enough time? Are we working to a deadline here?”

“I figure things will be starting to happen in- two minutes, maybe? After that it’s just making a run for our lives. If you see a crate with a blue ensign draped over the top, please don’t go anywhere near it.”

“Your rescue, your rules. Why?”

“I’ll explain later. Here, better get into this corner. It’s gonna be kinda loud.” He pulls her as far from the pile of chains as they can get, away from the outer wall.

“Loud? You can’t use explosives to break through Wisdom’s walls. Even full-on cannon-fire doesn’t work, it's been tried.”

“Yeah. I’m counting on something else. Man proposes, nature-”

The Captain does not, in fact, have that bottle of First Sporing any longer; he’s used it to bribe the Affable Fellow into a talk with Wisdom’s Governor. A Governor who is not at all affable and seems increasingly impatient to get to the point.

Does even the limitless authority granted zee-captains cover the theft of a crewmember’s enigma? It isn’t the kind of thing he’d normally do, but this whole disastrous plan has just taken too long. Too dangerous. Irem, Irem...he can always purchase the Student a replacement at Wind-Come-Calling.

(Though he has a curious feeling this might be unnecessary. Something he recognises about the Governor’s voice, as slow and interrupted as it is. Something to do with Polythreme, perhaps? Might be a useful hold. If only his memory was a touch better!)

The Governor coughs again. “If you have such a secret, then give it to me and we’ll talk terms. If not, leave. I have no more time to waste.”

A curious cacophony strikes up in the distance. Screams. The whining scream of stone against metal...and the door swings open. Where a hefty brass-and-iron lock should be, isn’t.

One of the guards rushes in, forgetting or foregoing all the usual rituals in her haste. "Someone at the gate with a battering ram, I was sent down to tell you. The funny thing, sir, they're a Khanate crew."

“On second thought,” the Captain murmurs, tucking back the enigma he’d been on the verge of
revealing. “On second thought, perhaps not. It sounds as if you’ll have enough to do in the next few hours without my bothering you.”

It’s only fifth-whistle. If he hurries, he should be able to replace this before the Student notices it was ever missing.

"-disposes," the Spy finishes, once they’re able to hear again. "Huh, that was an even bigger hole than I was expecting."

The Cook can only think of it as an implosion; instead of the iron pile exploding outwards, it had seemed to compress and vanish, leaving an absence in its wake. Screams echo; walls shake. It sounds like the effect has been felt elsewhere as well.

“They use a lot of iron in this prison,” the Spy says conversationally. “I think I’ve probably made quite a mess of it. Shall we go?"

Three empty cells and one very upset official’s office later (the Cook waves her still greasy knife at him and he scuttles behind the overturned desk), they’re out and running. Wisdom has one last vicious trick: the green lily pad beach, tough as it is, undulates under every step. Zee-bats hover overhead. Sentinels?

“Like running on a water bed,” the Spy mutters, wincing. Running flat out after a week chained up on a cell floor is going to leave him so stiff tomorrow morning.


“Aw- thanks. No, more this way!” He veers off at an angle, running towards the shore at an angle instead of making straight for it.

She follows closely; neither of them speak until they reach the water. The Spy fishes out an old lily petal, curled and parchment-coloured but still big enough to provide ample cover. They shelter underneath and watch.

“Now if everything’s going to plan, the boat will be here in two ticks. Like that one right there, making the turning circle.”

“If that boat isn’t Khanate manufacture, I’m a Rubbery Man,” the Cook says. “Are you sure they’re your friends?”

“No. No, that’s not definitely not right.” The Spy risks a proper look back at the prison; a contingent of guards are pouring out of their newly-minted exit, and someone’s told them how to move on lily pads too. He nods at the Cook’s knife. “Any good with these? Not my weapon.”

“I’ve had a little practice. Mostly on mushrooms. What about you?”

“I was hoping it wouldn’t come to that. Please don’t go that way! Can’t you guess we’re over here?"

“You want the guards to find us?”

“Not especially, I just don’t want them to find out whether my contraption’s powerful enough to suck all the iron out of people at a close enough range-”
“Is that what it does? Why doesn’t London give me gadgets like that?”

“Strictly DIY job. I could give you some pointers, assuming we get out of this...”

The Cook is peering the other way, out to zee. “How about the shark? Did you actually include a shark in your escape plans?”

“Uh, no. What shark would that be- oh god,” the Innocent says, turning crimson. “I am never building anything like that ever again.”

The Khanate guards are well-trained; they expect tricks, guile, the subtlety of serpents. Wisdom has held some of the best minds in the Neath; escape plans have been numerous and typically unsuccessful, but they can be counted upon to be uniformly devious.

What they are not quite expecting is a particularly-tormented bound shark, iron cage fully intact, arriving at such a speed that it ploughs a tear straight through the lily pads and smashes into the walls of Wisdom itself. The approach lacks subtlety.

The shark, having not been expecting this turn of events either, takes out its umbrage the only way it knows how: wrecking havoc on everything that moves. Happily from its point of view, there are suddenly a lot of moving things around to wreak havoc on.

“At least everyone will get away from the contraption now,” the Spy observes. “Which is good, ’cause I built in a self-destruct timer. No reason supervillains should have all the fun.”

“So. Angry shark one way, angry guards another, and a Khanate boat coming straight for us. I think we’ve been spotted.”

“Cut a hole in the lily pad. Maybe we can swim for it.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do, but this stuff’s pretty tough.” The Cook slices ferociously; water spills out, soaking the two of them. “Underneath, make for their prow, bluff it out?”

“Sounds good.”

The ground shakes. Footsteps. Somebody tears away their flowery protection.

“Innocent Spy,” the Herald drawls, pulling off the lacquered helmet she’s borrowed. “And just what sort of time do you call this?”

Extract from the Governor’s personal correspondence.

….I have therefore deemed it necessary to promote an Unctuous Fellow in place of the Affable one. The latter has naturally been fed to the knot-oracles. I anticipate very little change in the current level of bribery, but perhaps this one will be wise enough to invent more believable ways of accounting for missing prisoners than “who knew that Seekers could summon sharks at will?”

In other incidentals, I have acquired a plant cutting from London at some considerable expense. Small, but I nurse hopes that cross-bred with the lilies here, we might have quite the curiosity...

Chapter End Notes
I nicked the Cook's recipe off the Guardian, I'm afraid.

The doner kebab part, I mean. The rest is all Failbetter magic.
Aboard the Apocyanic Racer

The Racer's wardroom is not actually much bigger than the one aboard the Clipper (officers being a rather smaller proportion of the crew complement on a steamer), but accommodates a party of four with ease. And it's still within easy reach of the galley.

"How heroic of you," the Cook coos, adjusting a piece of zee-monster steak over the Crewmember's face; they've suffered a black eye during the diversionary attack at the gate. "I'm sure you must have been very brave to get that."

"Just a bit of bad luck, ma'am. Someone wasn't watching where their elbows were going, that's all. Nothing serious."

"You know, in California they've pretty much concluded that raw meat on wounds doesn't do anything useful. And might transfer some nasty diseases," the Spy volunteers.

The Cook gives him a hard stare; he shuts up and returns to his third helping of fricasseed rat.

"Everything all right?" the Herald asks the Innocent, almost mellow. Possibly due to the bottle of airag that she's been emptying. "I don't imagine it was easy for you in there."

"Nothing that a good night's sleep in my bunk and a few decent meals can't fix. I hate to decry anybody's cooking, but…"

"You try working with the ingredients for prison gruel and see what you can make of it," the Cook calls. "And I went to all that trouble on the last dish that you didn't touch."

"When was there time? I had a rescue to wrangle!"

"Yes, that’s something I was meaning to ask you about. So you had a magic box that attracted iron towards itself very strongly."

"Replace the word ‘magic’ with ‘science’ and you have the general idea," the Spy agrees, pouring himself a drink. "Solacefruit cordial. I’ve been missing this in the evenings."

"But how’d you coordinate the timing? You knew exactly when that box was going to go off."

"Miniature FM signaler- I’ll start again. A device that talks to zee-bats, I hid it in one of the manacles. Toughest part of the whole operation was three hours with a blowtorch smoothing the seams out again, in case anyone looked too close."

"And then I’d switch on a safety timer as soon as the zee-bat let me know it’d heard something. Of course, that part of the plan almost didn’t work out," the Herald notes. "The Wisdom guards got very suspicious after a day of the Crewmember and I rowing about at random, so we had to give it up. It was only luck that you let us know when you did, because we were about ready to turn the thing on regardless."

"We talked about that. Supposing I’d still been stuck in them at the time?"

"Well. Possibly you’d have picked up a wound or two."

"Or three," the Spy says, looking over at the Cook. "This always happens. You let a civilian in on the plan and they always decide to improve it-"
“And you just want to scream ‘I worked this out already! I’m a professional! Stop trying to make things better!’ As above, so below, eh?”

“I reckon we are being mocked,” the Crewmember tells the Herald. “Pity this ship hasn’t any cushions handy to throw at people.”

“One of the Clipper’s high points,” the Herald agrees, as the Khanate Captain enters.

“No, don’t stand on ceremony. Not at all a bad raid,” she says, before anyone's had time to scramble to attention (barring the Crewmember, who as an old hand at this sort of thing hastily drops the steak in favour of a salute). “Only a few casualties, and Khan’s Shadow has never been on the best of terms with Wisdom in any event. I may even earn some unofficial favour from today's events.”

"You didn't need to do that,” the Innocent Spy says, his satisfaction visibly melting away. "Endangering other people on my behalf- I mean, I guess I should be grateful, but..."

"You didn't see how many guards we drew off towards the main gate. Count yourself lucky,” the Crewmember says. "If the northern patrol had been where it was supposed to be they might have caught up with you, shark or no shark."

"And I insisted on making my own small contribution," the Khanate captain says emphatically. "May I ask if you’re still interested in accepting a post as my chief engineer? Our last one deserted at the Chelonate, may his liver rot."

The Innocent Spy glances fondly at his shipmates. "Sorry. I think I’m already spoken for-"

"He certainly is," the Crewmember interrupts, with a dangerous glint in their black eye.

"-on the other hand, we have a Cook here who's short a position."

"But it's an engineer I need. Though I haven't either officer, if it comes to that."

"That's all right, I've done a little of everything. Spies can't afford to be specialists," the Cook says.

The Herald rolls her eyes. "You two must be the worst players in the Neath."

"At least I wait until after the introductions to announce my profession."

"I think being upfront about it makes people friendlier. Catches them off-guard, you know? And they can't complain afterwards that you weren't honest with them."

"Aren't you the fortunate fellow. This time in the foreign office...I'm sorry," the Cook says. "What I'd like to say is, if you've no objection to having a London spy on your staff I’m game."

"No fear. The White-and-Golds will be delighted with me, as long as you don't let on to them that you know I know. Shall we try it on a trial basis? My navigator's plotting out a course to Port Cecil next. There’s a merchant in the Shadow who craves scintillack."

"No hard feelings if it doesn't work out?"

"That should suit. You'll forgive my abruptness, but I must see if my ship’s suffered any damages. The rest of you had best be off shortly, I imagine your captain has no more wish to linger in these waters than I do." The Captain nods, at that precise and nice angle suitable in the Khanate for a superior taking leave of subordinates, and departs.
"Too bad it’s so sudden. I’d have enjoyed taking a couple of days out to talk shop," the Cook observes.

"Speaking of which, would these be of any use to you?" The Anonymous Crewmember draws two sheafs of romantic literature out of nowhere. The Cook pounces on them eagerly.

“My last two reports! The rest of them should be in London by now, so this assignment hasn’t been a complete waste. Thank you!” She kisses the Crewmember lustily. “Sorry. It’ll take a little while to get out of character again.“

The latter grins. “All part of the service, ma’am. Anytime you like.”

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Storm above, the Captain thinks, seeing the Student curled up disconsolately in the wardroom, holding a listless feather up for the Mog to play with (which task it is nobly performing, out of a sense of duty rather than any real sense of enjoyment). He’s right in front of the curiosities cabinet. I can’t put back this Engima until he leaves.

Storm above, the Student thinks. He’s going to ask me how the plan’s going and where the rest of his crew are. And I haven’t a noman’s hope at an explanation.

He’ll ask what all that chaos was in Wisdom, and why was I there?

He’ll ask what all that chaos was in Wisdom, and why wasn’t I there?

Even the Mog, that most self-reliant of animals, finds the atmosphere rather strained that night.

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"What was all that earlier about being in character?" the Spy asks the Cook as they’re leaving. "You were playing a frightened lovelorn thing who wouldn't have sneezed on anyone, much less kissed them."

"Oh, nothing especial. Say- next time you're in London, will you tell that Crewmember of yours to send me a calling card?"

Outside in the corridor, the Herald is harrumphing. "You've never called me ma'am."

"It'd stick out a bit, like. If I called you ma'am I'd have to call our engineer sir all day. To say nothing of the Student. Now do you think that's a fair thing to ask of any zailor?"

"It’s- oh, all right, I suppose it isn’t."

“A stranger, and one we just rescued to boot, that’s different than your shipmates. And she were a lady.” The Anonymous Crewmember manages an expression of remarkable wistfulness (by their standards, at least). “Maybe next time I’m in London, we might meet up for a game of chess..."
Late afternoon, around the time there ought to be a beautiful sunset on the horizon. This being the Unterzeee, anyone wanting a little fresh air and quiet has to make do with the prow illuminations.

Still beautiful, the Innocent thinks. Light is light.

He whistles a stray chord (“Steam Engine” is far too pat under current circumstances, but no one else will know the lyrics for eighty years) and pauses to survey his current engineering project. Battleship grey, rough but serviceable. Definitely coming along nicely. Something to do while the Student works up the nerve to say whatever it is that’s got him so nervous.

*Why's our Spy bothering to knit such an ugly scarf? Even halfway complete it’s really quite appalling.*

The Student allows himself to slump into an ungainly posture. Mere ill-favoured handicraft can’t account for his current unease and he knows it.

“I just sat here doing nothing,” he says eventually. “While you all were out in the thick of it. It was my suggestion to go to Wisdom in the first place and I was no help whatsoever.”

“Don’t worry. Not everybody’s cut out for cloak-and-dagger theatricals,” the Spy says reassuringly. *Was that it? Poor kid. I keep forgetting how young he really is, under that supercilious pose- this Neath must be a hard place to grow up. A whole generation thinking that they have to get used to fighting just because London society takes it for granted. Huh, that doesn’t change much. “Besides, I already owed you one. Remember back on Mutton Island, when you got yourself killed trying to save me? Don’t think I forgot about that, because I haven’t.”*

“That was just impulse. And the Herald’s overpowering personality at work.”

“It shows your heart’s in the right place. By the way, I have something for you.”

“It’s not-“

An enigma. A Searing Enigma.

“How…? When?”

“Oh, I might have swiped one from the Governor himself in our mad dash out of there, when he wasn’t looking. Could have happened. Or maybe it was just a parting gift from a friend of mine who was glad to be rescued,” the Spy returns. It’s nice making people happy like this. His fellow shipmate looks transfixed.

“You’re…you’re much too kind. I mean that.”

“All in a day’s work. Though I won't mind if the next one is easier to get.”

“In theory. If what the Captain says about Irem is true, it’s just a matter of money. Unfortunately I don’t have a spare fortune to spend there...but I should be able to acquire one or two. Perhaps this whole way of going about collecting them was a mistake, but I had a sentimental fancy to collect them from across the Neath. The sensible thing to do would have been chartering a merchant cruiser to haul endless amounts of sphinxstone for hire, mind.”
“Did you have the money for one of those when you started?”

“No.”

“Well then, sounds too dull for words anyway. Like my first ship, running coffee from Adam’s Way to Wisdom. Nobody wants to talk to you at either end.”

“I wonder if they missed you deserting.” The Student’s never given way to impulse and plumbed the Spy about his past (much as he’s wanted to sometimes, especially to follow up certain infrequent but tantalising mentions of the future). Friendly he might be, but a player is still a player.

“Shouldn’t think so, I was only working as regular crew. Hardly even saw the captain.” The Clipper crests an inexplicable wave, showering water over the two of them; the Spy drapes a length of completed scarf over his shoulders and carries on knitting. “Another reason not to have a merchant cruiser, a ship this size sounded like it’d be a lot friendlier. And it has been. I don’t think I could have got the hang of this place so quickly, if everyone hadn’t helped me out so much.”

Very interesting psychology and all, but the Student’s getting increasingly desperate. Curiosity is the most addictive of vices, they say at Summerset. “You’re welcome. I don’t mean to be rude, but it is getting cold up here…would you object if I go below?”

“Hey, I don’t mind. Think I’ll stay up here and watch the false-stars awhile. See you later.”

“Quite.”

The Student moves calmly until he’s out of sight- then scrambles down to his cabin, locks the door with frantic intent, grasps his precious enigma. At last. At last.

Tonight he’ll enjoy the first fruits, savour the mind-shattering crash of lore, alluring and fresh to the senses as the lonely piping whispers of a concerto’s opening movement. Nights and days to follow of glorious contemplation, allowing the beautiful knowledge full reign of his heart and soul. Later he’ll pick apart its secrets (its? So impersonal a pronoun for such transcendental lust), discover how those truths nestle together with the other enigma so jealously gathered.

Having one created a desire for more; having two sharpens that hunger. With each new acquisition, the Student guesses, available patterns will grow exponentially and ever more intricate. Veritable chaos, wide and fragmented as the Unterzee itself. But even now, he can sense his path forward - the thinnest of violant lines, guiding him towards the completion of a surmise...No doubt how to answer the Herald’s question now; he’d sacrifice any number of Innocents to acquire another such joy.

But before losing himself entirely in an evening of meditative ecstasy, the Student takes a moment to hope it won’t ever come to that.
Dear Jack,

Today we docked at Robot Island (did I mention that they have robots down here? They have robots). Everything is alive there. Sounds fun? It isn’t.

We went out for tea and the cups cried, the chairs objected to being sat on, and the buns squeaked when anyone tried to bite one. The Captain spent all afternoon falling over because his garters kept poking out of his trousers, so they could look at things. A whetstone rolled after me and offered to sharpen my knife. Which it did. Lasciviously. Now I’m minus one perfectly good SAK because they went off together afterwards…I guess I hope they’re happy?

(Good thing I brought a spare with me. And that I left it on the ship. Everyone seemed really upset when I asked where to buy a replacement.)

The Cynical Herald is pretty happy, though. She bought a trumpet to bugle at her whenever it’s time for another episode of doom and gloom on deck (for which she already had a watch, but this is much noisier). The Student is already plotting ways to lure it overboard during the night watch, but it moves faster than he does so I don’t think that’ll work.

Maybe we’ll end up somewhere less weird next time. But I’ve got to make at least one more trip out there, because there’s a signpost on the dock saying “This way for spies,” and that’s a challenge I just can’t pass up...

“This is cruel,” the Anonymous Crewmember observes (they’ve stayed safely ensconced on the Clipper the whole time, in position to watch the port antics without being affected by them). “The Innocent’s on his fourth promenade now.”

“Isn’t it,” the Cynical Herald agrees, pulling up another cushion. “Has he at least worked out the distinction between investigating things and being fascinated by things yet?”

“I think so. Last time he nearly made it, but his shirt collar garrotted him at a critical moment. Sheer bad luck. Like that wax-wind chasing everybody through the marketplace- what is a wax-wind doing this far North?”

“Stone must be having one of her moods again. Entertaining as this is, won’t the Captain object to how long it’s taking?”

“He probably would, except that I’ve been watching him trying to collect a port report. Care to guess how well that’s going?”

“Ah. In which case we might be here for weeks.”

“Seems like it. Hope our supplies hold out, I wouldn’t eat anything from this port even if they sold it.”

“Yes, that situation’s not too good. Why didn’t we pick up anything in Wisdom while we had the chance?”

“Because they arrested the clerk for smuggling that last afternoon, just before I was supposed to pay up and take delivery. Dunno who tipped them off, it certainly wasn’t me.”
“Blast. Probably that dreadnought. Bloody Admiralty. Well, if Frostfound’s where the Student and Captain hope it is, we’ll be able to stop off and enjoy some hospitality before we reach Irem. I just wish I was as confident…”

The Crewmember transfers their attention from the shambling clothes-colonies (one of which, gone rogue, is trying to clothe an alarmed bystander) to the Herald. “But you’re our navigator.”

“Right. And a cynical one. They both think I’m being overly pessimistic, especially as the Captain has a chart saying Frostfound ought to be due North…which probably dates from before the last Alteration. I wouldn’t be surprised if another one was in the offing, too. My zee-bats are restless.”

“Mmm. Know what I reckon?”

“What?”

“That you’re hoping against hope Mount Palmerston’s on our way, so you’ll have at least one chance to get properly warm up there.”

“How dare you question my professional judgement?” the Herald says lazily. “And have the audacity to be right about it, too…”
Grunting Fen

Somehow the Captain gets his Polythreme port report, and acquires their long-awaited Clay Men; somehow the Spy finishes his intelligence duties. Eventually they depart.

Eventually.

"Delays, delays," the Student murmurs. He idly fiddles with the boat's rudder as they move away from the Clipper. It seems only fair he should attempt something useful; his shipmates are doing the heavy work up front.

"You were the one who wanted to land at Grunting Fen," the Crewmember reminds him; they pull on their oar with an ease the Innocent Spy finds himself envying. Maybe there's a trick to it he can ask about later. "Too small even to have a decent dock and we're still going to find a searing enigma here?"

"What? No, of course not, the place has been more picked over than a doorstep in Spite. But no scholar can skip this island if they're in the area. Simply isn't done." They're starting to drift out to zee, now; the Student hastily moves the rudder back to its original position. This is less like university rowing than he'd counted on. "Research, you know. Another scholar might send along a zee-bat to compare notes, and then where would I be without some theosophistical musings for a reply?"

"And has anybody sent you any such requests the entire time we've been zailing?" the Crewmember asks.

"...no. And I'd have to kidnap the Herald's whole flock to mail back a proper response anyway. But it could happen."

"So, we're rowing out all this way for the pure love of science, basically," the Spy says. (He and the Crewmember had taken one look at the Student trying to lower the boat over the Clipper's side with one hand, while frantically grabbing at errant notes disappearing to a rogue zee-breeze with the other, and had rapidly and silently agreed to invite themselves along. The Student's been more absent-minded since Wisdom.)

"Ah. Yes."

"Suits me," the Innocent says cheerfully. "And I'd like to see how this Third City poncho works out. Always wanted one of these."

The Crewmember looks at him sideways. "From one of the clothes-colonies?"

"Yup."

"How'd you lure it away? They stick together like damp on mushrooms."

"I asked it nicely," the Innocent says simply.

"People have been trying to detach the components safely for centuries without much success..but in your case, maybe it is that easy," the Crewmember snorts. They lean back in the Student's direction. "Where do you want to land?"

"Anywhere will suit. I should be back to the boat by evening if nothing goes wrong."
"Sure you don't need any help? Being the long-suffering crew and all, I'm obliged to ask."

"I'm going to start by digging my way into the surface of this living island until it screams and spits out knowledge at me. Zailors tend to find this process disconcerting, I'm told," the Student announces. His expression approaches a grin without quite reaching it.

"In which case, I shall proceed with my plans for a picnic and some light beachcombing later. Care to tag along, Innocent?"

They're gliding into a pebbly beach now; the Innocent stops rowing and pats his garment affectionately. "Dunno. What do you think?"

"Who are you talking to-" the Crewmember starts, then screams (after the best approved fashion for zailors, naturally: it begins real and trails off into a stylised series of z's once it's clear there's no actual threat). The poncho's woolen material is moving of its own accord. It reaches out for the picnic basket, knotting itself neatly around the bolegus-timber handle.

"Okay, guess that's settled. See you later, Student?"

"If you will insist on taking advice from your coat....then I suppose so, yes."

"Hey, it knows these waters better than I do. And it's probably been ages since it had any fun. If it wants to go on a picnic, I'll take it on a picnic."

"I'm proud of you," the Crewmember says, almost tearfully. "Proper Neath logic, that. We'll make a Londoner of you yet."

"How many times do I have to say, just because I'm down here for a while doesn't mean I want a red passport..."

"Are London passports red in the future?" the Student says with sudden fascination. "It must look like a page out of the *Sporting Times*.

"Never mind that, what's a passport?" the Crewmember demands.

"Um...oh look, treasure!" The Innocent Spy grabs the picnic basket (to which he's still affixed) and tears off down the beach as though a lorn-fluke's after him.

"Not the most subtle in the profession, is he?" the Student observes.

"No. But funny how you don't find out much from him that he doesn't want you to know..."

"Not a bad haul," the Crewmember says a few hours later; there actually was some treasure washed up on the beach, quite a bit of it. "Let's see, we can split the Khanate relics. And you said you wanted the beetles, though I don't know why."

"Engineering project. The materials seem to get weirder the more complicated your device is...you know, we've been sitting on that Avid Suppressor since London because I don't want to install anything I can't figure out how it works. That one still worries me."

"You can't keep that up forever. I mean, you've seen already that there's unaccountable powers in the Neath...shall I take the glim and we'll call it a day?"

"Go ahead," the Innocent agrees. He sprawls out across the ground; the poncho obligingly folds
part of itself up into a neat pillow.

"Don't mean to offend you, but you give me the creeps," the Crewmember tells it.

"You probably look just as strange to it. I wonder why people in Polythreme bother with clothing at all," the Innocent says, closing his eyes. "The obvious thing to do on an island where textiles come to life is to roam around stark naked."

The Crewmember adopts a mock-prim tone. "And this from our innocent Surfacer? My, how we've corrupted you!"

"I'm not talking about my preferences here, which I'll admit are a little more conservative. I'm talking about people using their heads and a little bit of logic."

"Two things. One, the King of a Hundred Hearts...well, I don't know if all the stories are true, but most of them agree that he's human, or used to be. There was a joke making the rounds for a while that you weren't a real zailor until you'd been to Polythreme and composed a rude ballad about the King, with so many cold hearts and his lover with a single broken one. I say rude. Some of them are just sentimental. Anyhow I doubt he'd appreciate it."

"And the other?"

"The clothes-colonies probably think it's indecent." The Crewmember hesitates before taking all the glim away - they're cheating the Innocent mercilessly - but manages to overcome scruples with a heroic effort of will. Once a zailor, always a zailor...

Instead they pack up the boat with their gains (least they can do, really), and open the picnic basket. Breaded zee-monster cutlets, mushroom salad, a bottle of '79 and two glasses. Not the fanciest meal, but it'll stick to the ribs well enough.

"Are you still awake over there? Otherwise I'll polish this off myself."

"Course," the Spy says, sitting up with alacrity; the poncho clings to him like a warmed blanket. "Just trying to remember something. Was there ever anyone on the ship called R. E.?"

"What makes you ask?"

"Because there's a scratch on the coal bin, says 'no grunting fuel, R. E.' I assumed it was just a general warning, but it must have been a place name."

"If you say so...R. E. was our mechanic before you showed up. The Retiring Engineer. Sleeping in a dead man's bunk, you are." They pass over a plate with a smile.

"As long as he didn't die in it, I've slept in worse places," the Spy says, digging in without any qualms (to the Crewmember's mild disappointment and stronger admiration). "What was he like? The Herald's mentioned him a few times but she's never really elaborated."

"Oh, the quiet type. Too quiet for her. I used to watch her trying to chivvy him into something like liveliness and him not paying attention...don't know which of them it was harder on, honestly. Of course he was more than a little mad anyhow. Being a Norton and all."

"A Norton?"

"Funny old lot. They say we're not down in the Neath at all, but up on the Surface still, and anyone who says otherwise just isn't noticing the ruddy obvious. I think that's why he was an engineer."
Stuffing coal down an engine's maw must be about the only profession in the Neath that hasn't changed much, he spent a lot more time hiding out down there than you do.” They offer the wine bottle; the Spy frowns, but pours out a small glass and sips it slowly.

"That has to take a special kind of blindness. Like a flat earther in my own day, or something."

"And sailors have been giving shore-folk the lie of that for who knows how long, but it never stopped them, did it? The Captain liked having him around to chat about the Surface. From the sound of their conversations sometimes you'd think London had never fallen."

They eat in silence for a few minutes. Interesting to watch the Spy pondering a new idea, the Crewmember thinks; he's worrying it like a rat with a fresh scrap.

"And then?" he says eventually.

"Oh, he jumped overboard the first time we went by the Dawn Machine. Said it was the Sun and all, you know the litany."

The Innocent's tone is filled with injustice. "But you told me he'd been eaten by a shark!"

"Did I-oh, so I did. Didn't think you'd still be here months later to call me on it, all right? Back then you were just another gullible Surfacer with a target on your back."

"If you're trying to make me less annoyed, it's not working."

"Oh, lor'. The Neath's not kind. I don't think anyone besides the Student was hoping for much more from you besides getting us back to London with our hull intact...besides, I figured everybody knows what a shark is. If I'd told you your predecessor had died of sun-craving madness, what would you have said back then?"

His irritation smoothes over into amusement. "Well, you've never seen a northern Minnesota winter..."
Dear Jack,

I’m plotting something a bit desperate, I’m afraid. Not fun. So that’s just another Tuesday.

And am I ever sick of Tuesdays! We landed on this wretched island what must have been at least a month ago now, after getting pretty badly stranded - we were caught in a bad storm, went completely off course and never reached whatever ice castle we were making for - and ended up on an island full of cultist cannibals. Which is totally different from the last island of cultist cannibals. Wonderful place to be vegetarian, this Neath.

They have a gigantic store-house despite being up in the middle of nowhere and keep trying to fatten us up with daily feasts, but absolutely refuse to give us any supplies so that we could get out of here. I had a kid’s book once about this terribly evil knight who deserted his friends just before the big battle, or whatever it was, and landed up on an island like this as punishment. He was pretty sorry about it before it was over.

(And you’re probably saying “Why the hell are you worrying over a kid’s book?” That’s probably good advice for me to remember just now.)

Anyway, this has just been going on and on and on (there seems to be some kind of rule that you have to already be a cannibal to be eaten, so at least we won’t be mysteriously dragged from our beds or anything) and just to make matters that little bit more insane, they insist it’s Tuesday. And then the next day they say it’s Tuesday. And that yesterday was Monday, even though yesterday they were calling it Tuesday. I’ve asked point-blank when it’ll finally be Wednesday and finally got a straight answer - “When you leave the island.”

Can’t come soon enough. The storm’s kept going this whole time and I doubt it’s ever going to finish, but I’ve kept a lookout for any zee-monsters and the coast’s finally clear. (Did I mention we were being chased by a screaming black mountain with a war-cry that melts metal? Which is why everybody else didn’t mind being stranded here. Well, that and also the Herald wanted to discuss theology and the Student is going around quizzing everyone about everything they feel like talking about, which is mostly about their culinary habits - yuch. At least the Crewmember doesn’t like it any more than I do - says the priests keep making remarks about what lovely calves they’ve got. The Crewmember’s, that is, not the priests’. ) But we all still sleep aboard ship, so I’ve about decided to get a good nap in today and start the engines going tonight when the others are in bed. Even creeping away at half-speed is better than staying here any longer...Wish us luck. We’re going to need it.

“And that’s still more cheerful than I could have made it out to be,” the Innocent Spy says out loud. “I didn’t mention about their wanting me to join them…”

He shivers, feels the poncho wrap itself about his shoulders more tightly in response. The priests here seem to be able to smell Seekers, even a former adherent. Bad enough when he doesn’t understand the jokes and sly allusions: worse when he does.

A scream from above. The sound of flesh slapping flesh. The familiar squeal of someone dropping down a ladder pole at speed.
He’s just opened the door when the Crewmember careens inside, barely avoiding a smash into the engines. They huddle into his bunk, lie there sobbing.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Not a thing for a proper zailor…” z not right, not decent. I dunno how it could have happened, even…”

“They’re overreacting a little,” the Student says, entering with a step and voice as calm as ever; only the red mark on his face suggests anything amiss. “Apparently the Chapel’s decided we’ve been enjoying their hospitality long enough, and thought they’d recruit another for their numbers. They’d know better than to touch officers, I assume….”

“But I’m only crew, it doesn’t matter about me,” the Crewmember wails, all shame and fear and hunger.

Hunger?

“Unaccountably peckish,” the Innocent Spy guesses, grimly. He starts rummaging through his crate, taking care to stay between the other two. They’re giving each other looks he doesn’t fancy.

“And I begged the Drowned Man to help me, I did, but the Chapel’s His territory and we’re so close to the North now. I’m lost, lost for good-”

“I proposed that we go and have a word with the priests and see if there was anything to be done;” the Student says, very patiently. “They know so much here, we might be able to learn something-”

“You with your lore and your learning, and this is where it’s brought us! How will you like it one of these night, when I catch you under the false-stars and tear out your throat with my teeth-”

“Don’t be childish. I’m only saying, if you’re in this condition we might as well make use of it-”

“You’re not helping,” the Innocent cuts him off. “Out.”

“Why- I wouldn’t have thought a man of science like yourself-“

“Out.”

The Student goes. Huffily, but he goes.

The Innocent locks the door firmly, retrieves his bag of emergency supplies from the crate and deliberately sits down next to the Crewmember. They look at him with helpless avidity.

“Sweets first - that first morning, I couldn’t get enough sugar. Then you can have some jerky. Don’t gulp it. As long as you’re still eating, you can keep telling yourself that you’ll be full again afterwards.”

“But I won’t, will I?” the Crewmember whispers. “There’s no way to get rid of the hunger at zee, not if the Drowned Man’s abandoned you.”

“We’ll see about that. I’ll get you out of this, I promise.”

It takes hours to soothe them, calm the traumatised body and the sickened mind, feed them enough to ease that stubborn hunger. The Crewmember keeps breaking off into transports of guilt; something in the dinner last night had done it, they guess. A rich and red dish, fat for the taking - three helpings worth, with bread and butter.
“But you couldn’t have known,” the Innocent reassures them. “It’s not your fault if you didn’t know.”

“Blood is blood. The guilt’s still on my head.”

“Not in my morality, it wouldn’t be. Intentions are what count.”

“You think your Surface religions matter down here? It’s the blasted Neath!”

“And shame on it for putting you through all this. Never did approve of that visiting-the-sins idea - have I ever failed to fix anything before?”

“Engines, no. But I’m not a bit of your machinery.”

“I’ll fix it anyway. See if you can sleep now,” the Spy coaxes. “You need the rest.”

“They’ll be bad dreams. Death by water.”

“Yes. But stay in them as long as you can, fight them with all you’ve got. Buy me some time to take care of you.”

“All right. Don’t leave me.” Their eyes close.

The Spy waits until they’re soundly asleep - he’s never been so glad to hear strenuous snoring in his life - and carefully levers himself off the bunk. Leaving is in fact exactly what he has to do next, now they’re not going to protest.

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“Doom! Doom! Doom!”

“And more doom,” the Spy says, a trace of a smile tugging at his mouth despite everything. “I need help. The Crewmember’s in a bad way.”

“What about?” the Herald inquires, strapping the Polythreme trumpet back on her belt (generally she wouldn’t bother performing the rituals in port, but with the weather so ghastly it seems a worthwhile effort). “Last time I saw them they were chipper enough. Some ridiculous story about seeing a Blemmigan in the snow, as though any of those would survive for more than five minutes in this weather.”

“The Student didn’t tell you? They’re unaccountably peckish. Something in the Chapel’s bounty.”

“No, he didn’t- he knew that and didn’t warn me? I just had tea there!”

She hastily follows him through the bridge, into the Clipper’s ladder passage (narrow and square, so it won’t remind anyone too unpleasantly of wells - though it does now, the Spy thinks). “I don’t know what’s wrong with him and right now I don’t care, it’s the Crewmember I’m worried about. They’re taking it a lot worse than I did.”

“Stands to reason. You picked up yours from a book, as far as we could make out. Whereas they’re getting it first-hand, so to speak.”

The Spy stops halfway down the ladder, nearly retches. “Don’t make jokes like that, please.”

“My apologies.”
“Anyway, you’ve been talking comparative religions with the Chapel for a month now. Any reason they wouldn’t be able to get rid of it?”

“Several. Are we absolutely certain they’re not just particularly hungry today?”

The Spy slides down the last few feet without bothering to touch the ladder rungs at all, waits impatiently for the Herald to finish her more measured descent. “No. You saw it on me, I can see it on them.”

“Have they offended any gods - no, they’re a decently superstitious zailor. If it was the Student, now…are they actually Seeking yet? Or merely tainted?”

“Just tainted, I think. The whole concept of Seeking scares them stiff.”

“Well, that’s your problem. You have to invoke the Drowned Man before you can ask him favours. Of course, if we were back in London there would be several easy remedies, but we don’t have any readily to hand just now. Which means they’ll need another helping if they’re to attract Mr Eaten’s attention.” The Herald steps off the last rung, loosens the sash that she uses to hold her skirts tight when coming down (the Spy’s always been chivalrous, but there’s no point leaving these things to chance). “I don’t think you’d better do it, even if you are freed of the Name now. Got that knife of yours to hand?”

“Always. But-“

“Skyglass or waxwail would be better, but this will do. It’ll only need a little.” She takes the red-handled knife and tests the edge on a hair; it slices through cleanly. Remarkable that so small a blade can hold an edge like that, but the Spy looks after his tools.

“Another helping- no no no, there has got to be a less uncivilised option than this.”

“Innocent, this is the civilised option. The Student wanted to turn them over to the Chapel, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“I wondered what that shouting was earlier. Probably hopes he’d get an enigma out of the bargain - he wouldn’t, of course, or every zee-captain on the Unterzee would be coming here to flog off their crews. No, it’s best done cleanly and quickly, and from a willing sacrifice, not one of the betrayals from the Chapel’s store-house…where would you cut a collop?”

“If I tap my heels together three times, can I go home now?” the Innocent mutters. “Ham. You do most of your work standing or lying down, so it won’t matter as much if you can’t sit while it’s healing, and that part of the body doesn’t do too many other things.”

“You’d have to make the incision, then. I’m not that flexible.”

“I’m not sure I can. Honestly, I don’t think I’ll be able to.” There’s horror in his eyes, and revulsion, and underlying all that, sheer embarrassed Surfacer.

“You have to,” the Herald says remorselessly. “There’s a life at stake, doesn’t that encourage your do-gooder proclivities?”

“I think my quota of do-gooding is all used up for the day…okay. Okay. Give me a couple of minutes, I’m going to need some fresh air before I even think about doing this. You’d better get the medical kit, and extra candles, and maybe whatever the Captain uses to make himself forget things
so I don’t have to remember afterwards. Oh, hello.”

“Irrigo. Not in frequent supply in the further reaches of the Unterzee, as it happens,” the Captain says. “I notice the terror barometer’s gone up rather dramatically. Whatever is going on?”

“We have to feed the Crewmember a piece of raw human flesh so they’ll stop being mad,” the Herald volunteers.

“Is that all? Thought it might be something difficult. I keep a jar of pickled ears locked in my desk, just wait and I’ll go collect them.” He totters upwards.

“I feel like I oughta be horrified, but I’m too busy being grateful right now.”

The Herald breathes a matching sigh of relief. “Perhaps we ought to include him in our plans a little more often. He does seem to have that happy captain’s knack of having a solution for everything, on his good days.”

“It’s just he has so many bad days. Are we even going to ask him why he has human ears - no. I don’t want to know.”

“Precisely for contingencies such as these, I would presume.”

“There’s forward planning, and then there’s…whatever that is.” His stomach gurgles cavernously; the Herald glances at him sharply.

“No, that’s being accountably peckish after missing two meals because your shipmate ate everything,” the Spy says firmly. “Including the chocolate bars you were saving for an emergency. I’d better go down to the Chapel and get something to eat.”

“No meat.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice. Or even once.”

Chapter End Notes

Which closes out Book II.

I cut it out for the sake of the story, but I did write a scene to go before "Knowledge of Witty Inventions", in which the Clipper's crew are planning their prison break. I've posted it separately in "Alterations in Viric".
Chapter Summary

And now, over fifty thousand words later, we've finally caught up with the opening flashback.

There's not much of a time skip this time, but Book III starts here. One for MacGyver, one for the Innocent Spy, and now the Tireless Mechanic's tale begins in earnest...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“I’m just glad everyone's stopped making jokes about eating people,” the Innocent Spy declares, in sincere relief. “I mean, especially after the Chapel, I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Who said anyone was joking?” the Anonymous Crewmember demands; but there’s too much laughter in their tone to maintain the pretense. Freed of the Name and back at zee, they’re once more in their element.

Everyone's in a much better mood now the Clipper is properly supplied again; they shelter in the engine room tonight, grateful for the boiler’s monotonous heat away from the North’s cold. The Unsettling Student toys with his enigmas, as though he hopes to discover they’re an exercise in spatial dynamics. The Cynical Herald works on a Khanate puzzle-book (at least that’s where she bought it; the Student insists the typesetting looks French). The Innocent Spy tends his engines and toasts fungal-sap candies at the end of a poker, while the Crewmember has been alternatively teasing him and singing snatches from a surprising range of music-hall ballads. In a pleasant, genderless alto, naturally.

The Captain has been sitting in the coldest corner, mumbling all evening. Not audibly, so his laboured pronunciation of a single clear statement comes as a surprise.

“And now, now there’s nothing to stop us going to Irem.”

“...the crew lost theirs at dice,” the Crewmember trails off. “Where else?”

“Or do you mean, being in Irem,” the Student suggests. “Since we’re already there, in a manner of speaking.”

“What am I missing here?” the Innocent inquires, around a slightly sticky mouthful.

“Oh, you’ll like Irem,” the Anonymous Crewmember assures him, stealing another sweet with reckless disregard for burnt fingers. “Everything is the future there, you’ll be right at home.”

“It’s probably more future than he is,” the Herald argues. “Nearer the end of time than its beginning, if I’m not much mistaken. Though this is Irem we're discussing, and I suppose I may be. Will be?”

“I take it there’s something radically wrong with time in this part of the zee? Like life on the southern coast. Wonder what happens if you sail east?”
"Now that," the Student says with sudden animation, "is something I am very interested in pursuing. We might have a look that way, see if Irem really is the farthest port or not. That's just the sort of solid, practical geographical information that the University is always looking for."

"And no doubt you’re hoping for an enigma to boot," the Herald affirms. Her tone carries all the enthusiasm of a soggy mog.

“I’m allowed to have more than one interest in life, you know! And it just so happens that the East has always been a fascination of mine--” whereupon the Student does something very unusual. He stops talking without being interrupted.

The Crewmember leans past the firebox and nudges him with the business end of a cylindrical cushion. “Well then? You’re the scholar, go on and distribute some knowledge to us poor suffering mortals. Some long-held childhood dream of yours or something?”

“Never mind that,” the Student says crossly. “Do you know your smock’s aflame?”

In the ensuing chaos of three thrown water buckets, consequent repairs and and rueful laughter, the Captain's blinking silence goes utterly unnoticed.

******************

Past midnight, by the time everyone calmed down and drifted off to bed; and the Spy can't resist having a good look over the Clipper afterwards. She's a fierce old lady and her hull's sound, but there's a few repairs to take care of while they’re safely in port (especially the ones more easily done without happy shipmates underfoot). Just the odd intervention with a spanner here and there. Grease. Duck tape...the whole ritual, fiddling with a gear here, triple-checking that slightly dubious socket there, soothes and cheers.

Back in London, he'd heard more than one mechanic bragging about how long and far they could make their craft sail while half-shattered. Going from the Chelonate to the Fathomking’s Hold with busted engines and a leaky hull, or daring lifeberg battles at half-speed. Too many zailors down here seem to indulge in foolhardy stunts for the sake of a good story. Though he does feel sorry for the ones with persnickety captains, who can't get necessary supplies just because it's cheaper to let damages pile up until the return to Wolfstack.

"Penny-wise and pound-foolish," the Spy says to a curious rat (even the non-talking variety has enough sense to stay out of the way of a hungry crew; it's almost friendly to see one poking its nose out again). "How can it be fourth-whistle already? Didn't think I'd been working that long."

The rat squeaks, scurries closer to chew clinging white fungi off the abandoned poker.

"And I'm due for the early morning watch tomorrow. Guess you can stay there, I'd better try to fit in a couple of hours sleep while I have the chance."

The Innocent drops off almost as soon as he hits his bunk, not even bothering to change out of his coal-streaked clothes. Next thing he knows, it's seven in the morning. Could be worse. An hour to wake up properly, breakfast and a cold shower. Or maybe just a couple of turns round the deck and a hot shower afterwards. (The limitless supply of hot water is certainly one unlooked-for advantage of living on a steamship.)

He heads to the galley, and is mildly surprised by what he finds there.

"What gets you up at this hour? After night watch you usually sleep past noon."
Jack Dalton. As engaging as he is irritating, cheerful little ball of madness, capable of a split-second turn between butter-wouldn't-melt roguery and the intently serious demeanor of a thief on the take. Hard to tell which mood holds sway at present; he's presently studying the oven as though it might explode.

"Hope you haven't done anything I'll need to fix later."

"Matter of fact, you're just in time. Care for the first fruits of my pièce de résistance?"

How nice. Jack's turned into a tolerable cook in the absence of TV dinners and supermarket junk food. Probably yet another spin on mushroom omelets -

He blinks. "What's that?"

"A turducken! Or the Neathy equivalent. See, I wrapped a roasted rat in bacon, which I stuffed into a zee-monster roast, which I jammed into this octopus tentacle here." Jack lets the whole dish drop on the table with a ear-piercing slam, and enthusiastically tears open the mess with the meat axe; steam gushes out, along with liquids of multifarious and in some cases indescribable colours.

"Uh. Some kind of cephalopod, probably, but I'm not sure that's octopus."

"Whatever. And then I wrapped more bacon around that and let the whole thing roast in its own juices overnight. Looks great, doesn't it? Here, try a bite."

"...actually, this is good. Against all my expectations, this is pretty good."

"This place isn't too bad when you get used to it, huh? I'd say the Neath has LA licked hands down."

"Well, I don't agree!"

Penny Parker, scatterbrained and accident-prone, probably the worst conceivable shipmate with whom one could zail a zee. But she's here, so they're sort of stuck with her.

She looks at the meaty monstrosity (or is that monstrous meat?) and twists her mouth into a theatrical grimace. "I'll have something nice and vegetarian, thank you very much."

Jack shrugs and carves off another slice. "Suit yourself. But it's the next best thing to coming first in a meat raffle."

"I'm afraid I dropped my candle in the hold again," Penny says, pointedly averting her gaze. "When I was looking for another one. Sorry. At least I put out the fire myself this time!"

"And how much did we lose?"

"Ooh, lots of crates." She giggles nervously and toys with a piece of mushroom skin. "I think it must have been the box with the candles in it that I dropped mine in, because it went up - fooom! just like that, and then the flames started spreading. But it's out now. I even went and threw lots of zee-water over everything afterwards."

"Please tell me," he asks, without much hope, "that you didn't soak the crates with the rest of our coal in them."

"Well...which ones were they?"

A familiar sense of doom is creeping up his spine. "The ones I marked with crosses in red paint? So
you'd know they were flammable?"

"Gosh. You know, I think I did? Sorry- hey, you're not eating that nasty stuff, are you? How awful."

"Well, that's a way you could make up for it," Jack remarks. "Baking."

"Baking? Do you mean like bread? I'm not sure that our fungal flour is very healthy, you know. All this mold down here."

"I was thinking rolls. Because then you could have-" Oh god. "No, don't say it-"

"Parker house rolls! Ta-dah!"

"Really!" Penny glares with all her might. "How childish can you get?"

"Stay and find out, I'll be here all week. Want to hear the one about what the priest said to the Drownie? He said, well, I'll be happy to baptise you, but it looks like somebody's beat me to it! Get it? Get it? Because a Drownie-"

"Oh, you're disgusting!"

They'll be asking him to take sides next. Time to get out of the crossfire.

"Say, why don't I take a plate of this up to Pete while it's hot?"

***********************

He moves up to the bridge as stealthily as he can. It's become a kind of game, pitting his best tradecraft against a blind man -

"I know you're there," Pete calls. "And you're carrying something. Are they doing take-out in the Neath now?"

"Geez, I haven't even got off the ladder yet! You're getting too good for me." He watches the sure and smooth piloting with fond satisfaction; if nothing else, getting his erstwhile desk-bound friend out in the field again makes this whole trip worth it. "Want me to take over for a bit? Jack's done an all-protein breakfast if you feel up to trying some."

"No, that's fine. I finished your hotdish earlier. Great as always."

"It wasn't really a hotdish. We didn't have any potatoes to put in it, so I just added more mushroom." He feeds a scrap of bacon to a curious zee-bat and starts in on the rest of the plate himself.

"Then I defer to your expertise. No change there. Everything all right this morning?"

"The usual. Penny and Jack kidding each other. How are the zee-bats today?"

"Oh, good. Energetic. You know, I'd swear that sometimes they know what I want to ask, before I know it myself."

"They're smart. And you were always good at listening."
A chuckle. "I have to be, these days."

Part of the flock flutters on and around Pete, squeaking messages (some audible only by virtue of a hearing aid that’s highly anachronistic now, and will be only slightly less so a century later. He’s tinkered with it a bit). The other bats fly outside, spread out past the bow in a neat arrow formation. With their aid, the ship’s in as safe hands under its blind helmsman as anybody else’s. Safer even, if the fog’s thick that day.

(Jack has, inevitably, named them “zeeing-eye bats”. Everybody else hopes that if they ignore this hard enough he’ll get bored with the joke, although it hasn’t happened yet.)

“Oh, and apparently we’ve had another fire in the hold.”

“How many is this now? Four? That woman is a menace.”

“Be fair, she’s out of her depth. I’ll head down and assess the damages after I finish this, figure out what I’ll have to fix next.”

“Well, with Penny Parker around you’ll certainly never lack for things to repair. Now that goes a long way towards explaining why you two are friends.”

"She's also kind, sweet, has her heart in the right place...getting to fix stuff afterwards is kinda, well, a bonus. Can't spend all my life troubleshooting for you, you know."

“That certainly told me. So the Phoenix Foundation’s missions are on the same level in your mind as helping any stray innocent you come across, is that it?”

“Aw, you knew that already. Have you forgotten how you hired me?”

************************

The fire damages could be worse. They've lost a goodish chunk of their supplies and some fuel - not great, but not insurmountable. Should be possible to make their destination if they don't dawdle too much.

Something's not right, though. He gathers up half-consumed bolegus-timber and starts stacking it in the fuel cart. Not the falling ash that's bothering him, not the scent of heavy perfume in the air, not the slightly different echo of his footsteps in an emptier hold. So what else has changed?

Shadows. Are there fewer shadows then there should be?

He takes his candle to a dark corner, kneels down. Nothing much, just the hull and what look like a few flakes of paint- wait.

The wall isn't solid here, but lacy, as though someone has knitted the world's toughest doily. As he watches, tiny fragments of iron shear off, float down with almost imperceptible slowness. The hollowness is spreading.

He finds a stray board and pokes experimentally. A whole section of wall gives way in a shower of dust; he coughs and finds himself staring at the coal-light of the engine room.

Uh-oh.

************************

"How long do you think the Phoenix Foundation will want us to stay down here?"
"Why worry?" Jack rinses another dish in the zee-water bucket, passes it to Penny for drying. "If nothing else, there's always that engine. Bring that back to the Surface and we can write our own tickets."

"But it's not very nice, is it? Just huddling away down here for months, and nobody knowing where we are-"

"We've got problems. There's something eating away at the ship. I'm not sure I can fix it."

A coffee mug drops to the floor and shatters. Surprisingly, it's Jack's.

"Can that be my trusty amigo I hear speaking? You, not being able to fix something?"

"I'm serious. Something that can chew its way through iron, I don't know if it's a fungus or what, but it defies everything I've tried on it so far. Duck tape, glue, heat, the fire shovel...maybe it hasn't started on our hull yet, but once it does it's just a matter of time."

"What do you want us to do?" No playfulness from either of them now. Good: the stakes are too high.

"Penny, you head up to the bridge and help Pete. That'll keep her out of trouble. And if it spreads up there and Pete can't see it...."Jack, I'm going to want you helping me in the hold. Remember all that zzoup we packed away in storage? We're gonna need it."

"Anything you say, but how does that help?"

"It's a gamble. I figure that anything devils have cooked up must be pretty acidic, right? If it's corrosive enough, maybe we can burn the stuff off. Especially if I add a couple secret ingredients."

"Chemical defoliant. On it."

********************

He lingers in the galley for a few minutes after the others have gone, gathering supplies. What he wouldn't give right now to be in a modern kitchen - all those useful industrial chemicals that people take for granted!- but he finds a few things. Vinegar hasn't changed any. Neither has baking soda.

Stuffing the lot into his toolbag, he opens the door, then pauses. Pete, Penny, him, Jack. Shouldn't there be five people on board?

He makes for the captain's cabin, pounds on the door. No response. It’s locked, not surprisingly, but that's easily sorted. He slips his knife into the lock and jimmys it open without a second glance.

What’s inside makes him do a double-take, though, and then a third. This is no tiny candle-lit room proper to a Neath cutter, but a sunlight-filled houseboat cabin. Specifically, his houseboat cabin, just the way he remembers from before it burned down. Of all the places he's lived since Minnesota, this one had been the most like home.

Confused, he ventures in. Cautiously at first, but with growing ease. Same familiar scent of salt water and mint. Same battered couch he kept meaning to replace. What's it all doing here?

"I thought you'd be down in the hold with Jack by now, not chasing in here. You shouldn't be seeing any of this. Guess I underestimated myself, huh?"
Blonde hair rather than black, tanned, and, paradoxically, older-looking. His past self, the way he was back on the Surface.

"But since you're here anyway...let's see your knife, please?"

Nonplussed, he passes over the red SAK without a murmur. His past self whistles appreciatively and stuffs it into his jeans pocket. "Nice to have one of these again, I've been missing mine. Remember it? Gant-coloured handle?"

He remembers. It'd been the dictionary definition of inexplicable, waking up with a knife he'd literally dreamed up. He and Pete had spent weeks trying to figure out where the blasted thing could possibly have come from. "It's back in Los Angeles. How'd you do that?"

"Same principle as prisoner's honey. Physical relocation works both ways, it was a trial run. I had to practice stage-managing a couple of your dreams to make sure this one would come out right."

He watches himself switch on the electric kettle and pull two mugs from the cupboard. "But I wasn't taking prisoner's honey on the Surface...and stage-managing my dreams - just exactly who are you again?"

"I'm you, who do you think? Your reflection. From the future, on the run, after the Fingerkings start trying to grab me for use as a hostage - time's complicated. Even in the Neath's treacheries I'm breaking a few laws by being here."

"So you're my future, but you've been in my past, but you're not actually either because you're myself in the mirror...this is just too weird for me. Do you remember what my name is, then? Our name?"

"Touchy subject. If you don't remember, I can't remember. Sorry."

The Innocent Spy swears under his breath out of sheer exasperation. His reflection tuts at him.

"Okay. Why even bother? Why are you doing this?"

"Because if you don't make the journey north now, exactly the way I've plotted this out for you, then someone on board the Clipper is going to have to die - actually, several people die, and you're going to need all four of them if you ever want that Fulgent Impeller." His past pours out hot water into their favourite cup (red, with the Calgary Flames logo emblazoned on the front) and hands it to him. "So we're cheating instead. I'm only getting away with this because of the irrigo."

"The irrigo - oh, is that what's wrong with that skull? The same stuff that's in the Nadir?"

"Exactly."

The drink isn't his herbal tea mix, but coffee. He chokes on instant darkdrop.

"You'll get used to the bat guano."

"I hope not. Then you could have given me fair warning about the Nadir. Or about coming down here at all, or all kinds of things-"

"No, I couldn't. Paradoxes can be made to work, but they need blood sacrifices to take."

"Oh."

"Right. And since you're such a clean liver who won't take any honey or wine or anything else, not
that that's a bad thing, this is probably my only chance at an intervention. Your first trip to the Nadir was off-limits, Queen Stone was involved there. She wanted to make sure that you didn't get to liking irrigo."

"She succeeded."

"Thought as much. I'm still trying to work out why that was so important to her, but some mysteries can keep." His reflection sips coffee with a genuine enjoyment the Spy finds distinctly off-putting. "You know, this is the sanest conversation I've had in months? Is-Not's have their virtues, but they'll never win any points for forthrightness."

"You'll have me feeling sorry for myself in a minute. Uh- there isn't anything I can do to help you out, is there?"

His reflection laughs. "Not really. I know quite a bit more about the Neath than you do at this point, and if something happens to remind you I shouldn't mention too much. You'll get to where you need to be eventually. Only don't take it too hard if you do remember, all right?"

"You say that as if I'm gonna want hit you afterwards."

"We're not very good at lying. Don't worry about finishing the coffee, I'm going to have to rewind this anyway." His reflection picks up the VCR remote. "Sorry. Good night and good luck..."

"Hang on, I'm not done asking questions."


"I suppose I should have told him to catch up on his sleep while he can. But then he still wouldn't remember the advice. What do you think?"

The tabby thus addressed responds with a meow. It rubs up against his legs, leaving hairs all over the blue denim.

“Aw, you don’t care. You just want your dinner, don’t you? And I bet they feed you perfectly well aboard your own ship, too…”

***************************

He makes for the captain's cabin and sees that there's nothing left of the place. It's been eaten away, walls, objects, everything. So much for the ship's captain.

And if that much of the ship’s gone already - “Jack!”

He has just enough presence of mind to slide down the ladder instead of dropping the whole way in free-fall, and still begrudges the extra few seconds. The ship lurches as he lands, nearly throwing him off his feet.

She’s never listed so badly before. And there, in the distance - a sound of rushing water. No minor leak, but the full-bodied voice of the zee itself, inside their ship. There's no choice, now. They'll have to leave. Get Jack, any supplies they can salvage, take the boat out before that gets eaten up too- “Jack, where are you? Jack!”

Crates and ashes and falling metal beams. The hold’s a nightmare zone now, and he searches through it with increasing desperation but finds no trace of his friend. Everything’s happening too quickly, too fast.
You haven’t got the time to panic. If he’s not here, where else could he be?

He follows the crumbling iron trails back to the engine room, gets soaked when a chunk of keel collapses under his weight and leaves him with one foot in the zee. More precious moments wasted, trying to extract himself without cutting his leg open. There’s no need to open the door when he finally reaches the engine room. It’s already gone.

Jack lies slumped by the bunk, blood on his face as though something’s hit him. He doesn’t respond to his name.

All right, I can carry him out, I’ve done that before -

he takes one step over the threshold and can’t make himself go any further.

This whole time he’s been assuming that the ship is suffering from some natural phenomenon, a stray Neath fungus gone out of control or something of that type. It isn’t. There’s darkness here, an evil entirely conscious, entirely deliberate, that sees his struggling and finds it amusing-

“What are you? Where are you?”

It doesn’t answer. It doesn’t need to.

He grabs a bottle from the carryall. If Jack was telling the truth for just once in his life (please have been telling the truth) then this bottle here is holy eucharistic wine, dating from before London’s Fall. That should do it.

With a little extra. He splashes the mixture across the floor, in a stream the colour of drying blood, and the strain lifts and he can enter.

Dripping wine as he goes, he wakes Jack somehow and helps him out. Up to the reassuring indifference of the Unterzee, where all they have to worry about are zee-monsters and a clean death by drowning. Hallelujah.

“Hey. Waste of good alcohol there.”

“Jack? Shut up.”

***********************

Penny’s at the wheel when they arrive (well, when he arrives with one unconscious smuggler in tow). There isn’t much else for her to be; the entire forward deck seems not to be there anymore.

“You okay? Where’s Pete?”

She gestures at the hole. “He slipped. I tried to save him, honestly I did, but I just couldn’t make it in time.”

“Wasn’t your fault. Remember that.”

She clicks her tongue. “I know. But we’re near the end now. What’s the sigil you were telling me about? The moment of stillness before the explosion?”

“Can we get off the ship before I finish that lecture? Which way have you been steering?”

“South. The opposite way from where the compass was pointing.”
Were her eyes always that big?

“But that’s a Mutton Island compass, those ones always point south! If we’ve been going North this whole time… we must be off the map by now. There’s no knowing where we’ll end up.”

“Sorry,” Penny offers apologetically. “But like I said, it doesn’t matter much now.”

“Penny, don’t go fatalistic on me.”

She smiles at him - "I'll miss you-" and turns into a many-eyed spider.

A spider that travels with ease over iron strands, fragile as cobwebs, tough as steel. The last unnecessary fragments crumble away. Their ship isn't dead, but transmogrified, into a vast floating web.

Like nothing that he’s ever seen on the water before, but elegant in its design, smooth and silent. She is very beautiful.

And he is very, very glad to get the hell away from it.

*****************************************

No fuel. No engine to burn it even if they had some. A handful of supplies, literally. A lifeboat the size of a dining table. He and Jack barely fit into the thing.

He sets his teeth and rows, and rows, towards the absence on the horizon. There must be something there, to make a darkness deeper than Neath black.

Stars rise to meet them, floating in the water. He resists the temptation to reach out and touch one, he doesn't know how. (Cold and heat sear flesh in much the same way; the reality and its reflection would be equally lethal.) That pull of the High Wilderness, the fires above - do they know he was once a Seeker? The constant craving to go North?

Once a Seeker? Surely not, with Pete and Penny on board- no, that's a contradiction too hard to reconcile. Something's not right there.

Doesn't matter now. He rows onwards still, cold through to the heart despite his heavy labour. Very little hope of succour up here. Perhaps a dreadnaught from the Admiralty will come by next year on its dutiful patrol, and find their bones on the dock that lies just ahead-

None of that!

Has he ever felt more alive, more awake? Snowflakes fall downwards in unhurried drifts, every crystal distinct when they melt against his skin. This sharp wind, born from the absolute zero, its hunger for endless reaches matching his own even as he shudders from its touch. Here’s real weather in the Neath at last, and with such vividity as the Surface could only ever dimly suggest. The very rope he uses to fasten the boat leaps up alive under his hands; he ties an endless knot for the sheer joy of the thing.

So here he is, at the Gate.

*The cold burns at you, with a strength as powerful as your anticipation.* Dark nights stretch ahead, fragrant and monstrous; burning days of solitude, and always, always, new lands, times, loves, never a moment the same again. Everything constantly afresh, intractable, in flux, your life and your death forever. The roads in front of you now, no one else will ever know.
It sings in his blood: but it’s not right. Not for him. All those years of travelling alone, and still he’s unprepared now it’s come time to make the sacrifice.

But they’re both going to die here if he doesn’t do something. He raises his right hand to knock, hesitates, and switches to his left.

Just in case.

Just in case-

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The cry marks only the briefest of disturbances, over the sullen zee waters. This is not the first time the Avid Horizon has wrought such a sound.

The Crewmember knows this instinctively, that their ship is in a place where ghosts walk and phantoms make themselves manifest. Nothing to worry a good zailor who respects the zee-gods. They roll over and sink back into warm slumber.

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The Student hears a shout, in a distant sort of way, and half-rises from his desk to listen. When it's not repeated he turns back to his work. Probably just another zee-monster.

That conversation last night has turned his thoughts into new and perhaps profitable channels - suppose that exile from the Geode had the right idea about eastward voyages. Might it be possible to have one's press cake and eat it too? To travel both onwards and upwards?

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The Captain is awake early, a great deal earlier than the crew would expect from his usual habits. Something in the wind is bidding him to rise, a warning that his ship is out of joint. The Clipper is not as she should be.

"Odd. Very odd."

The Unterzee is a frightening place. But there aren't many events that can increase the terror barometer by fifty points in the space of half a minute.

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The Herald delicately picks her way over the ice-ridden deck (she prefers to do the ritual facing the zee, which means treading out to the stern and back when they're in port. They owe the gods a reckoning after yesterday's absurd good fortune). She frowns at her trumpet; enthusiastic object that it is, it'd just kept burbling its reveille through her chanting, until in utter exasperation she had stuffed a sash up its horn. Entirely too cheerful for this hour of the morning. Maybe it was a mistake buying the thing. She should have taken a page from the Innocent's book and enticed some warm clothing onboard instead.

The deliciously heated air of the bridge is just settling into her bones when someone cries out, once. A voice too familiar to ignore.

At least she's dressed for the weather. And the Avid Horizon's not a very large place; once set looking she has no trouble finding the Innocent Spy, crumpled on the dock. As she hurries towards him, he moans, makes a motion as if to rise, and falls back into the snow again.
His left hand's raw and bloodless. What flesh hasn't been stripped from the bone is horribly white, with dead silvery fissures creeping up towards the wrist. A cold unfeeling tint that bears no resemblance to living matter, like the hide off a lifeberg. Or the ice in the gate just ahead.

"Did you knock? Did you have the audacity to try knocking on this gate?"

"Promise not to hit me if I say yes?" The Innocent's eyes are half-closed with pain, but he manages a smile.

She removes her sheepskin jacket, wraps it around the limb with great care. "For the love of - I promise. Let's get you back to the ship."

It's a struggle covering even that short distance. The Spy does his best to help, clinging on to her with his good hand, but he's tremulous from shock and cold. Fortunate that she's stronger than she looks.

"I want to go home," he says, just the once.

There's a madness close on their engineer. Some tinge of the Mirror-Marches clinging about him. A good thing the Clipper is the tight-knit haven it is, the Herald thinks, and spares a moment of gratitude for their easy-going Captain. A more ordinary vessel with the usual stresses, running dark to save on fuel or trading terror for supplies, might have their Innocent over the edge by now. And the zee is not as kind in this as London.

"Why'd you do it? What possessed you?"

"I was having a nightmare," the Spy says. "And I guess it made me go sleepwalking...it wasn't a nightmare at first. My friends were here, down in the Neath, we were talking and it was just so ordinary and nice, before everything went wrong."

He passes out briefly once they're reached the comparative safety of the galley. The Herald removes his damp outer clothing (just as well he dresses in layers), props him up on the softest cushions she can find. The wounded limb she immerses in a basin of blood-warm water. She tops this up from the kettle at intervals, hoping he'll stay unconscious. This next part tends to hurt.

No such luck. He's awake again long before the rewarming process is finished, but stays quiet, watching her treatments with a curiously academic interest.

"How much pain are you in? Should I fetch the laudanum?"

"None, right now. That's not a good sign."

"It will heal," the Herald promises. "We're near Irem. I'll have to brew a treatment, but you'll be using that hand with no trouble once I'm through. Have some of this." Her hot morning coffee (nearly the last of the ship's stock): a veritable tragedy, bequeathing it to someone who doesn't appreciate darkdrop, but this is an emergency.

He shakes his head, uses his good hand to pour himself a cup of lukewarm mushroom tea. "I just feel stupid. What use is a one-handed engineer?"

"Better than no engineer at all. At least it's your left. What took it into your head to knock sinisterly?" Anything to keep his mind busy, however trivial. "I haven't noticed you're ambidextrous."

"I'm not, so maybe I was waking up by then. Had this picture of watching kids daring each other to
lick cold metal, about sixty years from now. Never ends well. Do Urchins do that down here?"

“Not that I’ve ever heard. What if you got lacre on your tongue?”

“That one wouldn’t be a problem on the Surface.” He winces as the Herald pours in more hot water. Encouraging. “Too bad we don’t have any antiseptic, but I guess that’s not so important down here. I didn’t know you knew how to treat frostbite.”

“Whither again. It’s more of an inconvenience than dying is - as a matter of fact, shipping patients down to London for a quick duel is considered best treatment for the most stubborn cases.” Well, if he's not going to drink the coffee, she might as well. "Oh, and look who’s awake.”

The Student is humming tunelessly to himself as he opens the door. “All well, and all manner of thing- apparently not. Would you require any assistance?”

“You might get his poncho. I think a living bandage would be ideal, once I’ve got him warmed up.”

“An eminently doable task. In the engine room, I assume?”

“Don’t go down there,” the Spy says abruptly. “That’s where the wrongness is.”

“The wrong - a wrongness? And what, pray, is a wrongness?”

“I don’t know! I can’t name it, I can’t define it, I just know that whatever caused my dreaming is down there, and you don’t want to be there!”

“Dreaming - ah. One or both of us may have been a trifle careless. Is it possible I left my Eyeless Skull by your bunk last night? I must admit, I don’t recall removing it.”

“Don’t go. Please don’t.”

“We can hardly avoid going into the engine room over the course of a whole voyage,” the Student points out, with as much patience as he’s capable of mustering. It comes off as more patronising than angry, at least.

“Take the Crewmember with you,” the Herald suggests. “And then for gods’ sake, hold your tongue. He was perfectly calm until you came in.”

“I’m not going to dignify that with a response.” He leaves.

“I want to go home,” the Innocent whispers soundlessly. "I want to go home, I want to go home..."

An unpolished prayer, but a very popular one on the Unterzee. She leaves him to it and ostentatiously busies herself brewing more tea. Surfacers can be sensitive about such things.

He keeps up the mantra for perhaps a quarter-hour, but she knows immediately when the Innocent stops (cessation of ritual, the calm in his breathing). Silence. Quiet, peaceful silence, with only the continual undercurrent of the Neath-winds to break it.

“All’s well now,” the Crewmember says, coming in a few minutes later. “I made him take away the nasty thing to his cabin, he’s put it in his Correspondence box. Best kind,” they add to the Innocent. “Some clever-clogs realised that fixing six lead plaques together with the sigil for….uh, something that’s empty and ought to be filled, was about the safest way of holding all that parlous University stuff. Anyhow it shouldn’t bother you in there. Want to go to bed?”
“Love to.” He looks up at the Herald. “If you think it’s all right. I’m probably not thinking too clearly.”

“Do you good, if we can get you down there. You look exhausted.”

“Any other time, I’d be working out plans for a pulley.”

“Say, that’s not hard,” the Crewmember says. “A block and tackle, I can rig up one of those easy as anything. Be a nice change of pace, doing some mechanics for once in a way.”

“Ooh, sorry...How do you want to fix the block? There’s some of my linen duck in the wardroom, you could use that.”

“We can do better than that, there’s already a hook fixed up on the bridge ceiling. How’d you think I brought your crate down?”

“Is that what you did? I thought you’d just carried it in through the hold.”

“Nah. Saved trouble, this way.”

“I would think a simple rope would suffice…” The Herald doesn’t bother finishing her sentence. If it makes them happy, it makes them happy.

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The day is subdued. No Innocent Spy asking his perpetual questions, or hammering out a casual repair in the wardroom, or exclaiming over some new unfathomable mystery from the zee’s depths- in fact, it’s altogether less noisy than usual.

The Herald repents of her unkindness and ungags the trumpet. It sulks and refuses to do anything.

They each wander in and out of the engine room, but never all at once, so he won’t wake and find himself alone. At least his hand’s been taken care of; the Polythreme poncho seemed to understand its instructions, only quivering a little at the warning of possible bloodstains. It’s curled around his arm now with an almost animalistic affection.

“Can you cure him?” the Anonymous Crewmember asks, around fourth-whistle. “There’s wounds and then there’s wounds.”

“It’ll scar, certainly, but I have great faith in Irem’s apples. It’s an old family recipe.” The Herald fusses with her cushion stack; all this inactivity has been very tiring. “What troubles me is that it takes time to prepare, and he’s liable to be impatient.”

“Surfacers always are. He’ll calm down a bit after his first death.”

“Only that’s what we’re trying to prevent at present. Is this a wraith I see before me?”

“Dagger. The quote goes, ‘Is this a dagger which I see before me?’”

“As if a dagger would come bearing coffee.” The Herald gratefully accepts the proffered drink. “Has this crisis affected your brains, or do you just feel the need to substitute in lieu?”

“If that’s the sort of thanks I get for being thoughtful, don’t expect a repeat performance.” The Student hands the Crewmember another cup (undersweetened, but fortunately they’re not particular) and settles down with his own.
“Kindness is its own reward.”

“The Masters pay better. How’s he doing?”

“Stirring a few minutes ago. I’ve been trying to think up some plausible pretext for us being in here, so he doesn’t think we’ve been staring at him all this time.”

“But that’s exactly what we have been doing.”

“Tact, Student ours, tact. Someday you’ll learn it.”

“By that time they’d be shipping me off to the Tomb Colonies- say, are you awake now?”

“I think so. Not feeling much better for it.” The Innocent sighs and rolls over, listlessly. His expression carries a melancholia the Herald can’t recall noticing on him before. “At least I didn’t dream this time.”

“Sounds like a pretty ghastly affair,” the Crewmember quickly agrees. “Don’t think I’d take too kindly to a dream that did in my hand like that.”

“Not even that. The worst part was seeing all my friends again, and then realising they were never even here. I miss them.” The Innocent's voice, already halting, turns thickly abashed. "I miss California, and sunlight, and taking the laws of physics for granted. I think I'm homesick."

He turns towards the wall and pulls the bedclothes over his head. There is a sound uncommonly like a muffled sob.

The Herald stands mute. Pain and hunger she can empathise with, but saudade, never. Surface-born she may be, but to her the Neath is meat and drink and life. How anyone could care to live elsewhere after once seeing the stark, enveloping darkness of the Unterzee beneath the false-stars is beyond her imagination.

She waves in a "do-something!" motion at the Student, who shrugs. Of course not, he's Neath-born and bred. No doubt he's just as perplexed as I am.

Which leaves the Crewmember to step in. They sit down on the bunk, gently laying a hand on the unprepossessing lump of blankets. It doesn't move. They begin to sing. Quietly: nowhere near the register of last night's rambunctious drinking songs.

"Such a long road, we have to travel. Will you walk with me some more?"

A simple enough refrain, that they keep returning to in the course of the song - a long, long affair, about searching for a light amongst shadows, and an impossible picture hanging on a wall. Journeying towards a god, or a home, maybe in vain but not alone. Their voice takes on a slow strength, as the mistral rises outside; but this wind seems almost to harmonise, meld into the ballad, merciless always but no less breathtaking for that-

A tale not meant for other ears. The two intruders understand that much, if nothing else, and slip away.

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"I suppose by morning our Spy will have found out what gender the Anonymous Crewmember is,” the Herald observes later; the wardroom’s everyday candlelight has gone a long way towards restoring her usual dry self-confidence. "I admit I've wondered myself."
The Student's smile is unwontedly wistful. "You might be surprised."

"Are you jealous? This will be a very long voyage if three-fifths of the crew are engaged in a catfight."

"No. No, I broke it off with them when we were last in London. Setting my affairs in order, you know."

"Cheerful outlook on life you've got."

"On a quest such as this," the Student murmurs, and nods politely at the Captain. Who has arrived with a rusty red squeezebox, still conspicuously bearing the name of a long-defunct Surface manufacturer. It must have seen good days once - what keys remain look to be real ivory - but the leather is cracked and squeaks in a fashion that the Herald suspects not to be intentional.

"Why, I should say it's been a few years since I had occasion to lug this out." He waves the instrument about, with considerable pleasure. "I was thought to be rather good in my youth, and perhaps she's dusty but still more than serviceable. Never failed to bring a smile to my crew before, eh? Worth a try, worth a try."

"That might be unwise," the Student begins. The Herald cuts him off.

"What an excellent idea! I'll come with you, only we'd better see that it's properly oiled first. You know our engineer would hate to see an instrument that wasn't in working order. Ought to be some up in the galley, if I remember rightly." She guides the Captain towards the door with a firm hand.

"What now? You can't oil a squeezebox, it ruins the workings. Well. Perhaps a little graphite wouldn't do any harm, I believe we keep some to lubricate the crane..."

"Yes, yes, good. Let's go fetch it then."

She mouths a word behind the Captain's back: irrigo. The Student gets the idea, and fetches the skull with all due haste; when the other two return it's cunningly hidden besides the appropriate chair (cunning in this case meaning "a not-at-all-suspicious pile of cushions weighed down by Pinksaw's Guide to Edible Fungi". Which is a sizeable tome.) By the time the Captain's halfway through a practice shanty, he's evidently forgotten there's such a thing as an Innocent Spy or a Neath at all. As his continual misuse of "sea" for "zee" makes clear.

Still pressing the odd crazed wail out of his instrument at intervals, he wanders off into a monologue on the nice distinctions between right whales and wrong ones.

"Now, I should say that it's sheer prejudice, nothing more than that. Any fool can bludgeon a right whale and it'll stay nicely afloat, but it takes a keen ship and a practiced harpooner to go after a sperm whale - and of course, there's far less messing about with its lips afterwards - have you ever tried to remove a whale's lips? Odd sight. Such tremendous lips as they have, you understand."

The Student passes a note to the Herald. This again. I suppose it's our due punishment for intoxicating an old man.

Better than the alternative...
You wrote an ellipsis? You actually wrote an ellipsis?

Underrated punctuation, ellipses...

Underrated! Try trite and overused.

"Oh, shall I just leave you two young things to it?" the Captain says brightly. "Don't think I'm too old to remember being that age, you know."

"You have my full attention," the Herald says immediately.

"And mine."

Which remarks they pay for dearly in the next three hours of not-precisely-music and half-remembered quotations. But as the Student remarks afterwards, a price well paid. Neither of them would ever live it down if the Crewmember got the idea that they were going steady…

Chapter End Notes

This chapter owes rather a lot to the episode "Serenity". I was having such a time working up the necessary dream-sequence - dreams tend to be so obvious in fics, don't they? - and then remembered that the Innocent Spy has this delightful tendency to dream up, you know, actual plots. With incidental music. And the occasional boom mike.

The gant-handled knife also features in that episode, and I don't think anyone's come up with any kind of explanation for it in nearly thirty years since (which is the more inexplicable given the the show is so consistently scientific otherwise). So putting that to bed was satisfying.

Should you care for Celtic melodies with astonishing guitar solos, the Anonymous Crewmember is singing "Long Road to Travel", by Fiona Joyce (blame this on the Treachery of Clocks, if you like). At least, that's where the refrain is from; they've added a few verses of their own. As you do.
**Neathmas**

*Extract from the New Pilgrim’s Progress*

*It is generally considered good manners, in London, not to admit to such an indelicacy as a lasting consequence. Did two duelists strive to wound each other mortally last week? No great matter: they meet in the street and shake hands. Have two happy Bacchanalians been caught in flagrante delicto in the Shuttered Palace? A brief tour of the tomb colonies to show their repentance, and all is forgiven.*

*This attitude of indifference has its place, in this strange society; but can more than tax the patience of the unwary Surface traveller…*

“We’ve got to do something about our Innocent Spy, you know,” the Crewmember explains, a few days later (they’ve enticed the other two officers to the wardroom with pleas and fruitcake from their private stash, while the engineer is otherwise occupied on steering duty). “Them Surface types being so delicate and all. We don’t want to get stranded mid-voyage with a mad engineer.”

“You could cut a little more- but weren’t you already helping with his terror?” the Student asks.

“Only practical thing to do under the circumstances, I would have thought.” The which is said as calmly as if he’d never touched a hair on their Crewmember’s head. He has always prided himself on his phlegmatic disposition.

“Dirty-minded so-and-so, you are. Besides, I’m hardly what he needs.”

The Herald finishes her slice in three bites and picks up her knitting, frowning at its lumpish folds. Odd that a scarf should be so much more intractable a project than chaining whispered hints together. “Why not? I could see it.”

The Crewmember gives way to the luxury (not always safe, for sailors, but they’ve been on this ship awhile now) of complete exasperation. “Because he’s so bloody innocent! A bit of tupping is all very well in its way, but I’ll lay you ursury street to ninepence that he wouldn’t have the sense to leave be. No, next thing you know we’ll be knee-deep in romantic notions, and he’ll be working up the nerve to swear he’s in love, and I am not having that. I am not. Too much like getting entangled in the Bazaar’s schemes.”

“Of course, you weren’t around much when we were in Port Carnelian,” the Herald muses. “I don’t believe it would be the first time he’s loved and left, you know.”

“They’ve got light down on the Elder Continent. And that was before the idiot went and lost his name, or lapsed into Seeking, or zailed this far North, to say nothing of this whole business about his hand. Storm above, no wonder he’s fretting. Even if I did want him, there’s no sport in watching a fish ram itself up your harpoon.”

“A sentimental Great Game player? That’ll be the day,” the Student scoffs.

“But he’s hardly typical of the breed,” the Herald remarks. “All right, what did you have in mind? Because I’m presuming this conversation wasn’t it.”

“Thought you’d never ask. Why not a Neathmas celebration? That cheers everybody up. And none of your upper-crust giving-things-to-the-Masters nonsense, I mean something proper festive.”

“Absolutely not,” two voices agree in unison.
“It’ll be fun.”

“Waste of time,” the Herald says. “And I object to charades on principle.”

“Not to mention that Neathmas was months ago,” the Student chimes in, pedantic as ever. “We were buying provisions in sunlit Italy, as I recall.”

“Who’s going to tell him that? You?”

“On my honour as an intellectual, I certainly would consider it my duty to tell the truth if asked…”

“But we can’t just leave him be. Since we’ve left the Horizon he’s turned the entire hold upside-down three times trying to find that blasted knife of his.”

“You know he’s particular about his tools. He’ll find it eventually.”

“And he’s taken up swearing at those blueprints for whirring contraptions.”

“To be fair, they would try the patience of a saint,” the Herald demurs. “All the beetles crawling everywhere. Though at least they don’t tie themselves up into rats’ nests - here, see what you can make of this,” she adds to the Student, thrusting a knotted skein into his hands.

“This morning, I asked if he’d like my help fitting that suppressor we’ve had languishing since London,” the Crewmember says darkly. “You know what he told me? That he thought any practical engineering would keep perfectly well until next port.”

A thoughtful pause. The Student silently untangles the caracul wool and passes it back without crowing.

“Blast it, he must be worse than I thought,” the Herald murmurs eventually. “Are you quite sure this’ll work?”

“Course it will. Fortnight of jollies, the odd parlour game, nice bit of crumpet, he’ll be right as lacre afterwards. Not like you professionally morose types. Though what’s so right about lacre I never could tell…”

“Given the choice between this and a return visit to Mutton Island, I do believe I’d take my chances on another stabbing,” the Student mutters.

But only to himself. It doesn’t take university expertise to tell they’re on the losing side of this debate.

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“Extracts from Josiah Hezekiah’s letters to his daughter”


A crewmember (whatever was their name? I must find out, one of these days) came by to ask me if I would assist with a small affair they’re arranging. They think our engineer requires bucking up, and that nothing I could do would be so suitable towards this end as my pretending to be very much against the Neathmas celebrations the sailors are planning. (We must have had another Treachery, for I don’t recall it being that time of year at all). And then having a change of heart on the eve of the event, reconciling myself to the holiday, hot rum for all, etc. much as at the panto. In fact, I distinctly recall the time we played a similar plot on board my first ship, when London still
enjoyed murky skies and - oh, you might gasp to hear this - I played the heroine in skirts! The situation has quite good dramatic potential.

Of course I said I would do it. I did suggest that a few nights of hearty squeezebox music might be a simpler way of going about things, but apparently the poor fellow had a tragic love affair on the Surface and can’t bear the sound of the instrument any longer. His winsome young musician died in his arms of double cholera - or was that pneumonia?...how very sad it must be for him, regardless. And the crewmember informs me he’s violently allergic to irrigo, to boot. Such a pity. It’d cure all his ills in one fell swoop.

(Must remember to transfer that item to the ship’s log - engineer allergic to irrigo. That is exactly the sort of detail it is vital to keep at one’s fingertips, Molly. The way to an easy life is to keep track of those, and the rest may go hang.)

(Must check to see whether I’ve already done so.)

Finished up the beadwork on the latest cushion this evening. I rather think I fancy patchwork for the next one. It should use up the materials from that Polythreme scrap-bag nicely, and I can give it to the Drownie in the hold. They’re a stowaway, of course, but I should like to make them comfortable all the same. Hospitality requires no less.

...oh dear me, I’ve nearly forgotten already. If I am to fulfill the crewmember’s request, then I shall have to be quite strict in other ways for the next little while, so as not to rouse suspicion. A veritable bear. The sort of captain I was in my heyday on the Repulse, in brief.

Well, they shall have no reason to complain when I’m through...hmm, perhaps they should have reason?

Never mind. We shall see.

********


Began the reign of terror today! How exciting it is. I even brought out my fine old hat for the occasion, the one with the dyed peacock feathers. Exceptionally dignified, as you know.

The crewmember tipped me off ahead of time; I entered the wardroom at the key moment to find four of them singing rude carols, out of key, and tearing up old newspapers to make into paper chains. Someone had the bright idea of dying the strips a handsome jillyfleur red in a bucket. I suspect the engineer’s touch there.

So I came down on them like the proverbial ton. Told them not to indulge in such silliness as Neathmas nonsense, scolded the crewmember for not relieving me at the bridge when they were meant to (now that I was properly angry about - the bridge roster ought to be sacrosanct - but I admit it was a clever piece of skullduggery), and finished up with a good all-around harangue. Ordered them to scrub the decks as punishment.

Another of the crew (they do all look the same to me, I’m afraid) winked at me afterwards. I think this may go rather well.

Though it occurs to me now that they might have some trouble in scrubbing a deck covered in ice. Perhaps I should have considered that before.

********
Fed cat. Zailed south for part of the day, due to an unfortunate mixup. I’m afraid it was rather my doing, but they will make these wheels so spinnable. Zailed north-east afterwards.

Of course, I blamed it all on the navigational officer, as part of the new regime. Very indignant she was too. I suspect she’ll add an extra doom or two to her chanting tonight.

A crewmember came by to tell me that the traditional Last Night’s Pudding was prepared, although it unfortunately then exploded (whether from an excess of alcohol or more nefarious causes was not quite clear from their hurried explanation). Consequent to which my undaunted officers boiled another one. Good to hear that the plot continues apace.

Said my hellos to the Drownie today. I think the rest of my crew rather snubs it. They can be pettish, sometimes.

Ah, now there’s an idea! I shall go and order everyone to go and be polite to him. And I shall do it now, while the thought is fresh in my mind…

…alas, the attempted good-wishes were something of a failure. The unfortunate Drownie must be ever so shy; I had everyone search most carefully for him, but he had hidden himself most effectively. Ah well. I shall simply have them conduct the whole search every day until they do succeed.

******


Only my third day at this, and we’re in the throes of mutiny preparations! I haven’t enjoyed myself so much…well, since the last one, I suppose. It does tend to keep life interesting, a mutiny.

I know something is in the wind, anyway, because when I went into the wardroom this morning the Herald and Student were whispering to each other and excused themselves rather hurriedly. At first I thought it was just the symptoms of young love (they have acquired an abiding affection for each other, if I’m not very much mistaken). But they went up to the galley rather than down to the cabins, so I knew there was some mischief afoot.

And no one on this ship excepting myself seems to remember all those useful speaking tubes. It was no trouble at all to quietly listen in. (A captain must do these sorts of things occasionally. Rude, of course; but the Unterzee is a rude place, I fear…)

They did go on at length, but the import of their discussion was that I’ve gone rather too far, something must be done, etc. etc. After I had an idea of the general drift, I went and told them not to speak ill of their captain and to scrub the upper deck clean. That’ll teach them.

Today’s Neathmas entertainment, the crewmember told me, involved preparing the traditional tree-effigy (they’ve rigged one up out of broken crates and the Herald’s old black bombazine). Did I ever tell you, my dear, that the Prince-Consort introduced the tradition to London? Of course, in those days they used real trees. And they didn’t set them on fire afterwards.

******


I met the engineer today in the wardroom. Valiantly trying to pretend that the strings of sapphire lights he was installing were merely a mechanical experiment, and nothing at all to do with Neathmas (I do wonder how a Surfacer came to know about that old Khanate custom). For the
sake of the farce, I pretended to believe him.

Instead I attempted to commiserate with the man about the fate of his unfortunate fiance, but abandoned the attempt when a few delicate hints produced no results. It seems he can’t bear even to speak of her. Tragic.

The daily search for the Drownie has been equally ineffectual. Perhaps they’ve returned to the depths of the Unterzee - but I feel not. They would have left me a message of some kind, at least. A piece of seaweed in a conspicuous place. A shark, perhaps.

The Student was giggling rather too evidently during the process. I have told him with firmness that if he continues in such behaviour, I shall thrash him with a stout stick. Once I’ve had the engineer make me one. All my walking sticks are much too valuable to be battered about like that.

(transfer that item to the ship’s log - thrash student upon persistent giggling during search for Drownie.)

(Hmm. It appears I have, in fact, already added that note. Well, that saves time.)

One of the crew (how many is that again? They seem to come and go with such frequency) - one of the crew came to me and suggested that I perhaps didn’t need to be so firm and forthright in my actions, and that I might “tone it down a bit”. Rereading these notes, I suppose it must have been the same one as first proposed the plan to me. Well, they may find they have a tiger by the tail.

********


The engineer outright refused to provide me with a switch, which I’m bound to say I regard as halfway mutinous. I do hope this cure works; he’s never given any trouble about my orders before.

Indeed, my attempts to bring a firm, resolute air to proceedings seem to have only caused hilarity amongst my crew and officers. No one cared to help me search for the Drownie today, and the Student appears to have a chronic case of laughter in my presence now. Indeed, they spent the afternoon blatantly crocheting lacre decorations (not made of real lacre, but still). I shall have to think of something more dramatic for the morrow.

A captain has no business admitting they’re wrong, if it can possibly be avoided. And sometimes not even then. That is to say…I don’t quite know what I’m saying.

But I trust I will come up with something ingenious.

********

“Something ingenious, something ingenious. Hmm. Rather a quandary - fine evening it is,” the Captain adds to the great bat-like thing stalking through his bridge. “Might I ask what you’re doing aboard my ship? I’m afraid I say this rather often, but I don’t recall you.”

“YOUR CREW SUMMONED ME,” Mr Sacks informs him.

“Ahh, now they would do that sort of thing,” the Captain agrees. “I wish I might say I was surprised. But - forgive my presumption - this is rather my business, isn’t it? No binding contracts upon a ship without the consent of the captain?”

“THE SHIP IS NO CONCERN OF MINE. I HAVE COME TO TAKE MY DUE.”
Fortunately, Masters are dignified creatures. It moves with solemn formality, which is to say:
slowly.

It’s been a long time since the Captain’s had to slide down a ladder like a fresh young ensign, but
the knack hasn’t deserted him yet.

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The wardroom is lit only by the electric glow of sapphire-strings; their bluish light is just sufficient
to make out your ship’s company, sleeping in a peaceful tangle of cushions and half-finished lace.
Remnants of a dumb cake on the table, made with well-water and wheaten flour from the Surface.
An old superstition. Bake in complete silence, consume at midnight, and you’ll catch a premonition
of next year’s ecstasies and despondencies, if you’re lucky.

The unlucky, of course, see nothing.

Mr Sacks comes, slowly but inexorably; the Clipper creaks, as its chill presence sweeps through
her passages. You listen intently now, for each sound brings its tale with the clarity of a coloured
‘chromo. Those explosions like gunfire will be from the galley, bottles straining fit to burst. A soft
shudder: you imagine lacre-fall dusting the hold, beautiful and poisoned as lead-white. Soon the
frost will reach your ship’s heart, and the engine-fires will freeze before leaping up again in an
unholy burning -

You accepted this contract once, willingly; but that was another ship, with money and men to burn.
Could it be done again? Perhaps: but you don’t dare trust your memories so far as that.

Away from the strength of the Bazaar, the Masters prefer to work through dreams. You shake the
sleepers, but they slumber on, and a little bottle of laudanum rolls out of a crewmember’s hand. No
doubt to ensure the spell’s efficacy. So much for the easy way out.

No more time. Here comes Mr Sacks.

“I COME FOR THEIR WARMTH AND THEIR WISDOM. I COME FOR THEIR NERVES AND
THEIR BREATH. THEY HAVE CALLED ME OUT OF MY PROPER SEASON, AND I SHALL
HAVE WHAT IS DUE.”

That stirs the others, where your feeble efforts failed. Little frightened cries, half-awake
murmurings of the mare-ridden. This company who have defied you, mocked and ignored you, now
aware even in their addled state that nothing stands between them and their reckoning.

You lean against the doorframe. An elder’s excusable weakness.

“I know a trick worth two of that,” you say, and raise your voice to a hard pitch of command, such
as this pitiful steamer has never witnessed. “Mr Sacks! Accept my best regards!”

It takes them. And gives in exchange: nightmares, darkness, the high shriek of a cheated thing. Its
bitterness will endure through the night.

But your crew will be with you in the morning.

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Having begged off the laudanum, the Innocent wakes first, with a confused impression that he’s
back at the Phoenix Foundation. Weren’t they having a Christmas fling last night? One of those
end-of-year pajama parties, with equal portions of high spirits, state secrets and terrible artichoke
Then the steam-whistle blows the hour, and he remembers where he is and snuggles back under the Herald’s down duvet. Resting against the deck like this, he can hear the engines steaming placidly along, far below. Their smooth hum promises that all's well; he listens with increasing contentment.

It’s not like California and it’s never going to be; but this last week’s been infectiously cheerful, even if he suspects that the determinedly jolly merrymaking would never have occurred to a Herald or Student left to their own devices. Maybe the Clipper is just a tiny bubble of light and warmth in a cold zee, but it’s a safe haven. Their safe haven. Too bad about the Captain’s odd prejudice against the holiday.

Captain. Did something happen last night? The vague impression fades away even as he grasps for it. Probably they were caught being naughty again - what was the latest escapade, handicrafts and cake? Hard to imagine there’s anything in the zee-code about eating cake.

“Is anyone awake yet? I seem to be stuck fast.”

He sits up and observes the Herald a few feet away, caught up in an alarming jumble of silk and sheeting (the dusty engine room’s no place to work on lace, so they’d brought all the bedding in here to stay warm while they made a night of it). Only a few key knots. Cut those and she’ll be out of there in two ticks- no.

“This would be a lot easier if I had my pocket knife,” the Innocent comments, as he gets to work on the knots the old-fashioned way.

“I hesitate to mention this, but I suspect it’s back at the Avid Horizon. The lighting wasn’t particularly good, and I had other things to think about. Such as getting you back aboard the Clipper before you froze to death.”

“That…that would make a lot of sense, yeah. Why hesitate?”

“In case you demanded that we turn around and go back to look for it - would you mind being a little more careful? You’re untying a person, not a bale of linen.”

“Sorry! This isn’t easy to do one-handed.” He yanks out a stubborn reel of whisper-silk and tosses it into the corner; it rustles disconsolately to itself. “Think you can do any better?”

“Now that I don’t literally have my hands tied behind my back, I think I can manage the rest. Thank you.”

“Could you two possibly stop talking, then? This is not an hour of the day suitable for conversation. Or anything except further sleep,” the Student demands.

“And he thinks he fancies the Revolutionaries. Methinks I espy a budding Bohemian,” the Herald says. “Did you dream of anything after the cake?”

“Searing enigmas. A veritable plethora of searing enigmas. Of course, I dream of them frequently as it is, so that hardly proves the point one way or the other.”

“Better than mine. Cold and ice. I wonder if we’ll see Whither before the year’s out?”

“Well, I didn’t dream a thing,” the Innocent says with satisfaction. “And after that last one, I kinda think I prefer it that way.”
“On that point, at least, I can promise you’re mistaken.” The Captain comes in, carrying the abandoned bugle. His peacock-feathered hat is crumpled in one corner, as though something heavy has squashed it.

“Reveille,” he orders the bugle, in crisp and self-assured tones.

It is delighted to oblige; even the comatose Crewmember jerks awake at the first notes of its wrenching cacophony. To a sailor, the others wince.

“Up and at attention, the lot of you!”

They do so.

“Now I’d thought I’d made it very clear to everyone that I disapproved of this Neathmas business, but you ignored me and look where it got you. A visitation from a Master. Do you all realise what danger you were in last night?”

“What danger?” the Innocent asks, blankly.

“Probably the bit of the dream where it left off being fun and started being about Mr Sacks shouting “HO HO HO” and threatening to take us away in his bag,” the Crewmember says. “Made for a rather noticeable change of pace, I thought.”

“Sorry. Still clueless.”

“I remember this now,” the Student confirms. “I distinctly remember thinking it would be an exciting research opportunity, because the only other time I’ve seen a Master that close was after one of Mr Wines’ parties. And he was drunk at the time.”

“And I rather suspected we’d invented a new ritual by mistake,” the Herald says. “Fascinating concept, the idea that we can control the actions of a Master. Innocent ours, if we could duplicate that you’d have endless fun trying to figure out what a Master on board does for a ship’s engines—”

“Are you all daft? We nearly died last night, or worse, and the only thing between us and it was our Captain. I appreciate you, sir, even if nobody else does.” The Crewmember throws out a sharp naval salute, marred only slightly by the loose tatting dangling over one ear.

“Don’t thank me yet, crewmember. As a result of such undisciplined goings-on, I’m taking drastic measures. You’re to start by cleaning up the mess, put away this useless decor. Starting today, I shall be instituting an hour of weapons drill every afternoon. And until twelfth night is over and I know for sure this silly nonsense is finished, you’re all on half-rations. I’ve tied the galley key around the Mog’s neck, and it has strict orders not to let anyone come near it except myself.”

The Captain stops to judge the result of his rhetoric. Dead silence, hang-dog faces. Wanting to reconcile and make amends. A perfect example of why some people are captain material and some aren’t. If London can’t muster stalwarts with more fixity of purpose than this, they might as well pack up the colonies and scuttle home.

“Absolutely no more Neathmas celebrating whatsoever. That’s the final word on the subject.”

And that, finally, entices the Innocent Spy to speak up.

“Oh no, it isn’t!”

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...would you believe that he said it with a perfectly straight face? But then I understand they don’t have panto in California.

So that’s a pretty picture for you: myself standing there, in my best naval hat, firm as Gibraltar. And over here’s our engineer, eyes blazing, chin set at a defiant angle, the very picture of youth standing up to the tyrannous old elder, etc. (We weren’t ever like that, Molly dear, were we? I hope I should remember that much, at least.) The cure had taken: he looked every inch his usual self again. That crewmember of mine knew what they were about.

But of course the situation had gone a little far for me to back down now.

“Oh, yes it is!”

(The navigational officer could hardly control herself. Whether from fear or amusement I wouldn’t know.)

“Look, I don’t really know what happened last night, but I refuse to believe that any holiday about people trying to be kind to each other can be half as awful as you keep making it out to be.” (The Student looked at him quizzically there; I think the Innocent may have forgotten which holiday was actually under discussion.) “Everyone’s been trying so hard to cheer me up with all these silly traditions and games and stuff, and you know what? It’s worked. So if you can’t join in and enjoy it with everybody else, then I’m sorry for you, but I’m going to make sure that the rest of us have a nice Neathmas whether you like it or not!”

The others rallied to his call.

“Captains have no jurisdiction over a civilian’s quarters. Give me the morning to tidy up my experiments, we’ll just carry on in there!”

“I put the pound cake in my quarters to finish sweating. Never mind hardtack biscuits, would anyone like dessert for breakfast?”

“And if we’re going to be doing weapons drill, let’s see if we can’t find ourselves a zee-beast while we’re about it. I’ve had worse dinners than freshly-caught fish. Plenty of salt in the zee to season it, too…”

They spent the rest of the day happily carrying out my orders to the letter and otherwise ignoring me. I couldn’t have been more pleased.

And tonight, as I steered us towards Irem (very close now), the Innocent Spy joined me on the bridge.

“Honestly then. What is it about Neathmas that upsets you so much?”

I thought of fobbing him off with a little fol-de-rol, but it struck me just in time that this would be a disastrous approach. My engineer is an honourable man. He expects others to do the same by him. It required, if not the truth, a lie very near the bone.

And for goodness' sake, I haven’t zailed him all the way across the Unterzee for him to lose faith in me now. He must see the Fingerkings and that's flat.

So I spun him a story. (Will you forgive me?) Of my beloved daughter, who I loved so dearly. Of your beautiful black eyes, and your fascination with the Correspondence. A love for fancy pillows that passeth understanding. Your own particular grace at Knife and Candle.
Then I told him that one twelvetide, an unannounced visitor came to our window, offering strange gifts instead of taking them. How you caught a glimpse of gold inside the bag, and playfully asked for the wax-wind hidden there. That the wound was mortal, and I never saw you again.

He believed every word and asked my pardon. I smiled, told him that the confession had unburdened my soul, that watching my ship’s company strive so heroically in the teeth of my harshness had made me realise the error of my ways. You couldn’t have seen a better performance at opening night on Drury Lane, I daresay.

I can see the script for the next few days as clearly as if it were laid out in front of me. We shall spend the next few days reconciling, altogether very happy and comfortable. Exchanging presents, cooking a gorgeous feast. Mr Sacks will deign to make a return visit, before the engineer chases him off with a contraption specially designed to unsettle bat-ears (the Herald will be a long time forgiving him for the havoc it wrecks among her charges). No more Masters will trouble us over the course of the voyage. I shall give the traditional Sunday toast for absent friends, and we shall all drink deep and proceed to make merry.

But I shall never now be able to tell my engineer the truth, that in fact he could come and meet you with me, whenever he cares to visit the Nadir again. It would quite spoil the good effect.

Damned ingenious lie though, wasn’t it?
"Neathmas festivities are traditionally ushered out with parlour games, before the last night's flaming pudding: but the Captain wasn't up for Catch-the-Drownie, the Cynical Herald has a moral objection to charades, and everybody laughed at your suggestion of Duck, Duck, Gray Duck. So your shipmates settled on Sardines. That was three hours ago, and you haven't seen hide or hair of them since. You're starting to worry."

Part 52 of Fulgent Engineering is an interactive text adventure, a sort of game which you play entirely by typing commands (LOOK AT MOG, POUR TEA, GO NORTH, etc.) You get to play as the Innocent Spy, exploring the Clipper and looking for your shipmates. There is duck tape. And Last Night's pudding. And multiple endings, including some fairly dark ones. (Don't eat the blood sausage. Unless you're reading this for the Seeking/whumpage - are those the same thing? I do believe they are much the same thing.)

The current link is here:
http://textadventures.co.uk/games/view/p7axdpqbk3dvat5ybxwy/sardines I'll change this over to a permanent IFDB link once the IF Archive upload goes live, but this one has the advantage of being playable right this minute. Ship plans here:
https://thatdeepandlovelydark.tumblr.com/post/167605750610/knocked-this-map-together-today-for-my

If for whatever reason, you don't wish to try it out, we'll be back to plain vanilla fiction in the next chapter, and nothing in the game is absolutely necessary to know going forward. But it does cover a fair amount of backstory for the Clipper's company, and a few interesting little secrets that won't come up for a long time in the fic-at-large.

Enjoy, if you've a mind too...
Tomorrow, Irem.

Resplendent in red and gold. Where Carlisle's Haven will rise from the depths of the Pillared Sea, where the Mirror-Marches will meet the Writhing River…

The Crewmember taps the Spy on the shoulder. "I wouldn't put too much stock in that. Those Foreign Office pamphlets, they're not known for being too reliable. I mean, half the time they don't even bother writing the things and just get an office-boy to nick the embassy's latest propaganda."

“Even better than I thought, then. If you want to know a civilisation, you have to learn the lies they tell about themselves." He flips to a page entirely written in the future perfect, and frowns. "Why are you taking us into port, anyway? I thought it was the Herald's turn on watch."

"It is, but she bribed me to take double-duty. Big plans, says she. Some jolly rotten long word that means big, more like."

"Huh. I'll have to remember I can do that, next time I fancy a lie-in." 

"Don't count on it, unless you've brought along a wedge of Surface cheese as well. Only the good kind of mold, too - well, several, but edible ones."

"And she was hiding it the whole time? We could have used that on the voyage North." He peers out at the approaching harbour. Sphinxstone used in its construction, if he's not much mistaken. Which he might be: from the Salt Lions to here seems a very long way to ship the stuff.

"Oh, it's not surprising. Most officers keep something in their crate for emergencies- didn’t anyone mention that you lot are all responsible for your own rations?"

“Sure. So I picked up some extra root vegetables and put them in the hold, and everybody scoffed them.”

They click their tongue. “You could have been more devious than that. Hidden it under the coal crates, or something.”

“Mmm - it’s not like I have a proper cabin to put things in anyway. Just as well I always travel light.” Switching his attention to his long-running epistle, the Innocent entirely misses the Crewmember’s quick-as-a-vake look of guilt.

Dear Jack,

more than a little impatient today. After all this waiting (and one too many times when I thought I’d never get here at all), finally reaching Irem is - well, you know what it’s like. That little kick before the action starts, when you’re living every second in the hour and you’re all keyed up for what’s coming next.

The Captain’s told me what he can, which isn’t much - seems I’ll have to start by talking to the Fingerkings. Tiny snakes, living in an Is-Not dream realm that doesn’t exist. Except they do. Somehow.

I feel pretty good about this, actually. If even Neath natives don’t understand what’s happening in
When the Captain repairs to the wardroom that night, he is expecting two things.

One, that the Innocent Spy will not be there. The man has his faults (inhumanity of cats, indeed), but he’s not a shirker.

Two, that someone will be along to comment on his newly repaired hat. Not so much as a single Mog hair to interrupt the dignified assertion of its lines, or the (only slightly crumpled) poise about the feathers…

“Evening, sir. Nice hat,” the Innocent says, looking up from where he’s cutting long strips of Parabolan linen. “Sorry if it smells a bit, I’ve been sweating the resin out of some of the Student's deep amber. To make the glue a bit less zee-monsterish.”

It’s succeeded; the wardroom carries a faintly lemony odour. “Quick work, if you’re back from the House of the Amber Sky already. Well done.”

“Yeah, about that. When I reached there they said we’d had our say, and that I couldn’t come in. They were awfully insistent-”

“Ah,” the Captain says wearily. Perhaps he ought to have insisted on his prerogative a little more firmly, but after so much waiting a little more doesn’t signify. "We'll just take the Clipper out again then, circle around until something awaits us-“

The Innocent’s still chatting away. “-wasn’t a wasted trip though. I swapped your coffee for a whole bale of linen, thanks for that. So today’s tape-making day! Tomorrow too, probably-”

“You say you don’t have the coffee any more?” the Captain asks sharply. “Didn’t I tell you that you can’t get to the Mirror-Marches without it?”

“Uh, no, guess you forgot. Hi,” he adds to the Herald, who’s just swept in, and is tossing a golden apple in the air as she goes. “Found that fruit you wanted?”

“A perfectly bruised specimen. Wait until I’ve juiced and brewed this, you’ll never know you hurt that hand. I appreciate the loan of your poncho, by the way.”

“Aw, go ahead and keep it for now. At least until we’ve reached a warmer latitude. I know the bridge gets pretty cold at times-”

“Enough,” the Captain says. “Navigator, I require an explanation of your conduct. Immediately.”

“What’s to explain?” the Herald asks. She pops open the curiosity cabinet, tucks the apple away in a velvet-lined relic. “I’ve just paid a thousand echoes to make sure your engineer will be fit for service. Some captains might be a little more grateful.”

“And in so doing, you’ve jeopardised the entire success of our voyage. Is there any more coffee on board this ship? A single sack?”

Her voice is cool and steady. “No. There is not.”

He takes off the hat in a precise and measured movement, and rubs a hand across his temples. When the Captain looks up again, his face is set.
“You can remain as passenger if you must, but I’d counsel staying on at Irem. Because there’ll be no more navigating for you on this ship. I’ll have no courses set by a helmsman I don’t trust.”

“You think I did it on purpose. Out of sentiment, because I didn’t want our Innocent going to the Mirror-Marches.”

“Well? Do you deny it?”

“Now, wait just a minute,” the Spy says unhappily. “Aren’t you two going a little fast? Try and be reasonable.”

The Student pops his head round the doorframe. “I’ll have to agree with him there. Now I know I don’t press the point much, but I am the owner, and I could have sworn you just fired an officer without my say-so. And I’ve nothing to complain about regarding her conduct.”

“Do you know what the price is for rarest fruit?” the Captain says dryly.

“Now that isn’t-“ the Herald starts, her manner finally faltering.

“An Enigma. A Searing Enigma.”

The look the Student gives her is one of pure murder.

“But this is all just a misunderstanding,” the Innocent pleads. “And it’s mostly my fault anyway. Can’t we just go and buy more coffee, come back later?”

“A week,” the Student says, ignoring him. “We’ll take a week for shore leave, that ought to be enough time for a mystic like you to come up with the right ritual. If you can’t manage the job by then, I’ll let the Captain take whatever measures he deems necessary.”

“Assuming he even remembers,” the Herald says coldly. “If he lacked the basic common sense to mention what the coffee was for, I hate to think what the rest of the instructions were like- but I’ll find a route, don’t you worry.” She nods at the Innocent. “Come by my cabin at eighth-whistle tomorrow, I’ll have made my preparations by then. Evening to the rest of you.”

As she storms out (nearly braining the Student with the door as she goes), the Innocent dips a brush into the glue-pot and lifts it out again. Instead of laying it down on the linen, for a minute he just sits and watches greyish droplets trickle down the rat-hairs.

“I don’t get it. I’m never gonna get this place. How does this ship manage to wring so much sturm und drang out of a simple little thing like duck tape?”

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Extracts from the Cynical Herald’s letters, to her sister in Italy

…would that you were here, sister, or I there- no, I wouldn’t have the handling of young acolytes for all the Neath’s scintillack. You know I haven’t your knack for teaching - by the time I’m halfway towards understanding a concept myself, I’m already impatient with anyone who knows less of the matter. Nor is my pupil likely to prove an untaught genius. Willing though he is.

Judging by the morning session, the Innocent Spy has about as much talent for flectere as the Empress for fire dancing. I tried him on mirror-stepping first. Not even choreography, just a simple there-and-back-again routine any newly-Fallen reppeljack could cope with. Several valiant tries - he all but broke his nose, bouncing off the mirror during his last attempt (fortunately we
were using the wardroom’s solid silver for practice, or he’d have shattered both anatomy and glass several times over by then. Even more fortunately, we have an ample supply of stray cushions for him to land on.) Nothing. Not even a promising failure.

While he was recuperating with a cup of tea and a dampened handkerchief, I suggested reflection-meditation. The Innocent’s been down here long enough, he ought to have dreamed about a mirror by now...except he apparently hasn’t. Which meant a good half-hour of my attempts to subtly evoke that quicksilver thrill, alternatively dominating one’s own reflection and submitting to its tender passivity, concluded in nothing more practical than my now having a somewhat more thorough understanding of the chemistry involved in brass tarnish. His tendency to meander into technical discourse at the drop of a candlestick is matched only by the Student’s monologues. (It may be we’re altogether too academic a ship, but that comes perilously close to admitting our Captain serves a purpose. Besides that of hat-flaunting figurehead.)

The Innocent’s inability to maintain a sense of composure while gazing further hindered matters. I know, I know, madness-provoked laughter sometimes aids in the rituals, but I’ve heard him make that sound and it isn’t the same as suppressed giggling.

And all this would happen just at a cusp in my trionfi researches, when I wish to devote all my time to cardplay. My deck has been flooded with the secret histories for months now - I’ve assumed that the Fool’s preponderance as of late is just the Neath’s usual fortuita, forcing the same frustrating card on me over and over again...but not a single other tarocchi appeared in my solitudes last night. What’s changed? Under normal circumstances I might resort to haruspicy, but unsettling my flock days before a possible change of quarters might prove disastrous...

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…tasted salt on the wind, after the hora sext. This time, I abandoned the usual disciplines and simply asked the Spy to describe his most inexplicable dreams.

Words spilled out of him! Three dreams, back on the Surface, vivid as life and twice as cruel. Each time, he dreamt of being in the past (“Believe me, it’s crossed my mind that this might be another.”) Waking up with inexplicable souvenirs (once an amulet, once - more intriguingly - one of those red-handled Surface knives he favours. Only this one was the colour of gant.) Neither is currently in his possession, or I’d have abandoned this letter to go cajole the Student out of his deluxe Patent Scrutinizer.

“Y’know, I’m glad I had the chance to tell somebody about this. Everyone back on the Surface, well, let’s just say that if I’d told anyone and they hadn’t thought I was crazy, I’d have thought they were.”

“No confidents close enough to tell?”

He cultivates blank expressions with a perseverance that borders on the artistic. “None that didn’t know about my spying. Any sign of my cracking up as badly as that, I’d have had a parade of well-wishers pounding down my door. Telling me to take it easy, give up the Game for a paper-pushing desk job, and then I really would have lost it. Besides, it’s not like it happened that often...”

The same devotion that brings today’s worshippers to the Shrine of Saint Joshua, I suppose. Bohemians may screech the loudest about their delightfully dangerous addictions, but they can’t claim a monopoly.

But to return to more practical matters: our Innocent has a talent for apportion. Or perhaps even more than that - creating something out of nothing is certainly within the remit of a man who can
repair a Correspondence coffer with a piece of sticky-backed flax.

The obvious metaphor. If I can persuade him to think of utilising his reflection as some sort of engineering project…

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…he has no Reflection.

He has no reflection! How can anyone lack a reflection! Imponderable as the classical problem of the two tigers who are also three tigers - but I drew up every test I could remember, on all the mirrors aboard the Clipper. The Innocent even rigged up a Porta’s Chamber for me, in case his reflection might be shy of other company. Neither glimpse nor shine.

I’ve apologised, naturally. Innocent that he is, he’s yet to understand what I’m apologising for.

“But I can see myself right there. Along with everything else in the room. What’s the problem?”

No matter how I try to explain the nature of Is-Nots, he keeps coming back to the evidence of his own eyes. Altogether too literal-minded. If the Spy ever accidentally did reach the Menagerie of Roses, no doubt he’d go and pick one.

In the meantime, I’ve told him to have the rest of the night for himself, while I ponder (that pleased him; having finished a few rolls of tape, he’s off to complete “a few minor repairs”. Plastering tape over every crack on the ship will no doubt calm his nerves.) But as the sword-swallower said to the trident-seller, this may prove more difficult than I anticipated…

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…the Crewmember’s solved the conundrum, over an evening’s duff. I’ve told them this whole affair about the missing reflection, for lack of better company (I see no reason for inviting the Student to conduct searching, messy experiments on our only engineer, though no doubt he’ll find out eventually).

“As if he doesn’t exist.”

“Well, he doesn’t, remember? All that fuss about being from the future? So coy about it, too. That first time I found him making linen tape, you’d have thought I’d caught him doing unmentionables with a jillyfleur.”

They continued wittering in that vein for some time, about his concerns for anachronisms or some such trifling irrelevancy, but I’d already grasped the point I needed. More than that: if there’s no Reflection now, perhaps we can give him one.

And we’ve just concluded the days of Mr Sacks. Dare I invoke Neathmas again, for a preposterously untimely and unproven ritual?

Of course I shall. Imagine the questions in Whither.

Deep amber in the curiosity cabinet. Sphinxstone in the butcher’s block upstairs; I shall have to ask the Innocent to saw off a slab before we begin. My skyglass knife, my tears of the Bazaar (this is proving a very expensive voyage, but I suspect the eventual remuneration will well reward the talents I lay out now.) Buckets of snow from the Avid Horizon, frozen in our ice vault. All the materials lie ready and waiting.
Come to think of it, I expect our Innocent will quite enjoy building a snowman.
Of quirks and cats and snakes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Here's the cat and there's the snake,
One is real and one is fake,
One's a canon, wears the hat,
One's a ghost without the fat...

- Flit skipping chant

“Absolutely not!”

The Herald hasn’t seen the Innocent Spy look this disgruntled - no, downright angry - since Wrack. Unless it was that time with the red honey? “But I only-“

“No! Look, I might have lost my name, and my favourite knife, and all of modern science and probably my sanity into the bargain, but some things, you just can’t ask a guy to do! Or at least not me!”

“So this is the hill you want to die on,” the Cynical Herald says mildly. “Not having your hair cut.”

The engineer calms down upon hearing her words, though a slightly sheepish smile doesn’t mask the certitude of purpose in his eyes. “Yes. Well, you have to draw a line eventually.”

“I was going to explain, I’d only need about this much,” the Herald says, teasing out a lock of her own hair for demonstration. “No thicker than a forefinger, truly, that’s all the rite requires.”

“That is not what you said,” the Spy says, giving a mistrustful glance to the silvery shears between them on the table. “You said you were going to give me a good trim like a civilised mechanic ought to have. Well, I’ve been engineering things for a while now and long hair’s never been a problem before.”

“I admit, I thought I might finish the job properly while I was about it. Though if you’re under a geas of some sort, of course I won’t.”

“No, it’s just personal preference. Not everything in life has to revolve around rites and magic rituals, okay?” He picks up the shears, curls a few strands about his half-healed hand. “Will this do?”

“A little more, so I’ll have enough to weave into a candle. Rather an old-fashioned way of checking quirks, but I can’t recalibrate my spectrometer for you without voiding its infernal guarantee. The fine print in devilish contracts can be unpleasant.”

Snip. The Spy winces at the sound, as though he’s cut through flesh instead of keratin. “Hair burns up too fast to be any good for wicks. This’ll never work.”

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It works.

By dint of much squeezing, they’ve both managed to fit into the confines of the lamp-cleaning
room: the darkest closet aboard, with no other source of light to interfere with the hair candle’s burning. Glowing neither gold nor blue, but a hazy green. When the Herald holds a cupola-shaped piece of glim against the flame, it serves as a prism, splitting the light into a spectrum of faintly viric lines.

“And that’s your spectral signature. Separating out the individual constituents of your personality for considered observation.”

The Spy, less than happy with the whole process (is this engineering or straight-up witchcraft, now?), is still complaining. “More like a polychromator, then. Plus, hair’s made up of dead cells. Wouldn’t this be measuring what my quirks were a month ago?”

The Herald huffs. “It’s close enough for the Foreign Office. Of course, if you require such an accurate reading that you’re willing to set yourself on fire to achieve it, I suppose I can’t stop you.”

“I’m good,” the Spy says hastily.

“This long line here, that’s your daring, and the even longer line, that’s your magnanimity. Heartless should be over here, but yours seems to be absent…no surprise there. And you’ve managed to cap both forceful and subtle? Not a usual combination.”

“How many qualities are there?” the Innocent asks, jotting down notes in shorthand.

“Oh, there’s been any amount of debate over the centuries, but by the Third City’s fall, the Patient Researcher had settled on nine traits to summarise any individual uniquely. Then we have your hedonism, your melancholy, not very much ruthlessness, and…I never remember this last one. Austerity, that was it.” She takes out the shears again, trims the dark wick.

“And that’s all? I can think of a lot more important characteristics than that, even personality-defining ones. The Crewmember’s love for their privacy, or the Student’s curiosity. Or my innocence, if you like.” The Spy sucks on his pen. “I mean, if the whole point of this was to identify my quirks so I’d know what I’m giving up to the noman, then the more precise measurements I take now the better.”

“Good luck with identifying anything else. It took the Researcher several hundred years to correlate actions with quirks just for the canonical nines. In the Khanate they’re still arguing over whether forcefulness ought to be called direct instead…”

“Wish I had a camera. Still, I know a few tricks about interferometry and what a dalton is- never mind, this’ll all be gibberish to you. Let’s just say I want to test a few ideas first?”

She’s lost him, the Herald realises; he’s got that inspired look that says he’ll be busy experimenting for hours now. “Try not to dawdle too long. The cost of a noman increases exponentially after Neathmas, I wouldn’t leave it any later than tonight.”

“And we’re on a deadline. Okay, I’ll try and contain my enthusiasm- but sheesh,” the Spy says. “An uncheatable personality test. Almost makes you wonder about those cultures with taboos about hair-cutting.”

“Doubtful. You’d be talking about Surface countries, aren’t you? Glim would melt away up there.”

“What if you packed some in a lead-lined box on a dark moonless night? Could you smuggle it up there if you took enough precautions?”

The Herald gives him a very cynical look indeed. “I suppose that you were the sort of child who
wanted to know ‘why didn’t they ask the genie for infinite wishes?’ during fairy tales?’

“Nah, I preferred comic books. Ducks inventing clever gadgets and bike-saucers.” His look of fond reminiscence changes abruptly to dismay. “And I shouldn’t have said that, it was horrifyingly anachronistic. Promise you won’t tell the Student? He keeps trying to pry future events out of me, and I worry I’m gonna blow the timeline one of these days.”

“Innocent ours, if you think I’m likely to go imparting secret forbidden lore to the Student solely because he asks me for it, you’re even more naive than I gave you credit for. Does that comfort you?”

The Spy twitches.

“Donald Duck. Secret forbidden lore;” he mutters under his breath.

“What?”

“Never mind. Excuse me, I’m gonna go take some blood samples now and set them on fire to see what happens. You know. Just another ordinary day in the Neath.”

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Letters to Italy

…so now he’s inventing quirks. Or possibly discovering them. Or more probably, deluding himself into complete nonsense.

All I know is, he’s spent all day trying to reduplicate the work of three centuries and has roped the Crewmember into going along with his follies (there has been a passionate argument, the odd undulating scream, a certain amount of ominous giggling - and that was merely the first half-hour). And yet I can’t very well tell him to take this more seriously, because when I say that he starts quibbling about “reproducible results” and “the lack of any post-Enlightenment rationalistic methods of thought” and narrow Surface projections of that sort. No, it’s only when the Innocent’s abandoned common sense altogether that he’s fully capable of that open-mindedness he likes to think he cherishes…

***************

“I haven’t had such a good time since that Lorn-Fluke jagen on my last ship,” the Crewmember says, scrubbing the last of the glue residue off the deck. “It isn’t every day a common zailor’s invited to tie down an officer for a bit of slap and tickle.”

“Oh, did you enjoy yourself?” the Spy says absently. Having jury-rigged a microscope out of the Captain’s old telescope, he’s been busily preparing slides and studying them (aided by a patent scrutinizer. And an oxyacetylene blowtorch). “Thanks for the help. Remind me that I owe you a favour some time.”

“No fear.” They tuck a long white raven’s feather jauntily behind one ear. “Any luck?”

“No. No, I guess that the Herald was right. I can’t see much variation in any of these test results, and what I do see I don’t know how to interpret properly. This whole question of natural law needs so much exploration, and I’m just a scientific dilettante when you get right down to it. Enough know-how to do pretty much anything I need for fieldwork, but when it comes to applied research…” He sighs and starts tidying up. “I have to come to terms with it, there’s just too much knowledge down here for one spy to piece together single-handedly. Whatever happened to the
Royal Society?"

“Never heard of it.”

“They had a building on…Piccadilly, I think? I half remember some college debate about how the Burlington scientists would have been the perfect people to investigate London’s disappearance, if they hadn’t gone with it.”

“They had better things to do? I know they like their astronomy, on Watchmaker’s Hill.”

“Astronomy. In a sunless, starless hole?”

“Blind astronomers, no less. Don’t know how much good it does your precious science, when they’re the most noticeable practitioners of the sport in the whole city.”

“That’s gotta be on purpose,” the Spy mutters. “Maybe it’s a front, while London’s finest get on with the serious work behind the scenes? Maybe I’m wasting my time out here and that’s what I ought to be infiltrating instead. Or maybe I just need a lie down before I start seeing conspiracies everywhere I look.”

“But there are conspiracies everywhere you look. That’s the Neath for you.”

“Which just makes my job that much harder. Want to come build a me out of lacre?”

“Ugh! That stinking stuff? Keep it to yourselves.”

***************

Unreasonable prejudice on their part, the Spy’s decided half an hour later. Smells a bit - or a great deal - and it eats away at gloves in an alarming fashion, but the white crystals are perfect for packing. Just moist enough, sticks to itself beautifully.

Consequently, the stuff makes amazing snowballs. Their ice vault’s not big enough for any range, but he manages a couple of very impressive splatters against the wall. It drips down again in sullen, headache-inducing patterns.

“If you don’t stop chucking the lacre around, we won’t have enough to finish,” the Herald chides. Bundled in two jumpers and his poncho, she still manages to look cold.

“Fine,” the Spy says reluctantly. “But tell me something. How’s a snow-double going to help me get an engine? Actually, how is anything we’ve been doing for the last two days supposed to help with that?”

She starts piling lacre into a sphere, neatly and without enthusiasm. “This is a complicated situation, and I keep having to change plans extemporaneously. Getting you to the Mirror-Marches isn’t actually the difficult part. You just have to drink a few quarts of wound tincture in rapid succession.”

“Doesn’t sound like much fun.”

“It’s easier than the other methods, and might even do your hand some good. But that’s not the point. What you’re trying to do- what I rather suspected the Captain was going to talk you into doing, all the way back in Port Carnelian - is nothing more or less than cutting a deal with the Fingerkings. And that, Innocent ours, is dangerous territory. How much do you know about the change war, between the cats and snakes?”
The Spy shrugs. “First I’ve heard of it.”

“Does our Captain still understand so little, after all his years in the Neath? All right, we’ll start at the beginning.”

The Herald’s voice softens, taking on the more measured cadences she always adopts for storytelling. “Once upon a time- this is the story I always heard from the household cats as a child, I’m afraid I don’t know the snake lore. Once upon a time, when the world was young and the gates of the Garden stood open, cats and snakes were very much the same sort of animal, and they ruled over the others as twin monarchs. Their sign was those striking yellow eyes, which they share even to this day.”

“Biological flapdoodle,” the Spy murmurs. Not very loudly, though.

“They ruled together as monarchs, until misfortune came in the shape of a falling star. The snake was sleeping in the sun that day, the cat was sleeping in the sun, and so a little hairless thing found it instead and committed the original sin.”

“Curiosity.”

“Of course not, cats are curious creatures too. No, it’s the art of naming that marks us off from the beasts…and before they knew it, the monarchs had lost all their powers to this infuriating young upstart. So they set forth to find themselves a new destiny before they had one imposed upon them. And as happens in the Neath, once they started on their journey all ways narrowed to a point. North.”

“Ah, c’mon. This isn’t gonna be yet another Seeking story, is it?”

“Not quite,” the Herald says, with a smile. “It wasn’t the Avid Horizon they reached, but Irem. I’m skipping over rather a lot of epic voyaging here, you understand.”

“Thanks. I appreciate the thought.”

“It’s an impressive tale in its complete form. Ninety stanzas about the capture and eating of the First Fish alone, to be sung entirely in caterwauling rounds. Requires six voices to reach its full effect.”

“…am I supposed to be taking any of this as literal truth? Please say no.”

“I would not advise disputing the point with a cat,” the Herald says, straight-faced. “After travails multitudinous and varied, the two reached Irem, and there they found or hatched or laid an egg. The lore isn’t quite clear.”

“A cat laid an egg. Uh-huh. The pronouns are confusing me.”

“Something, which resembled something we would call a cat, may or may not have laid an egg - that isn’t important, what matters is the contents of the egg. Parabola. Domain of the Is-Nots, everything that never was and never will be, a thing of immense power. Which, as these uniquely powerful things usually do, set the two to quarreling.”

“‘Here is a far more potent place than reality,’ said the snake. ‘For the stories that do not exist far outnumber those which do. Let us remain, forgetting our old dominions, and rule over it in peace.’”

“‘This is a fragment of nothing,’ said the cat. ‘Less than the meanest tadpole, which is alive as nothing in this place ever can be. Let us return to our homeland and engage our usurper with tricks
“And when a year and a day of debate saw them no more reconciled, they agreed to part. But they had argued so long and so cunningly, each left the other half-persuaded. So the Wars of Illusion began…and whatever you make of the story, the fighting is certainly going on to this day. The snakes, the Fingerkings, want desperately to exchange their false lives for true ones on our side of the mirror, but it’s very difficult for them to find hosts. Anyone who makes it close enough to Parabola to engage in their bargains has generally been forewarned. Except you, because our Captain is a capricious, irrog-happy fool- you know that part. And for you in particular, just entering the Mirrors-Marches might be unduly dangerous.”

The Spy helps her stack the balls of lacre atop each other. “Because of that problem about my reflection?”

“Reflections are who you are in the mirror, and they’re what you ride into Parabola. Fingerkings generally use them as vehicles the rest of the time, because it’s as close as they can come to real lives. People who bargain with the Fingerkings generally end up finding that their Reflection’s taken their place on the other side of the mirror, leaving them trapped forever. Except that since you don’t have one at all, you might just be sentencing yourself to a true death.” She buffs the Noman’s exterior, to a fine gloss smooth as fresh ice.

“I knew I wanted this engine,” the Spy says, frowning, “But not that badly. Definitely not that badly.”

“It doesn’t happen in every bargain. The Captain’s undoubtedly being optimistic, but there’s one point in your favour; if the Fingerkings really do desire the secret of this engine for its own sake, and I think they must if they’re looking for an engineer at all, you may be able to conclude the deal in safety. Perhaps. But I still wouldn’t recommend you enter into Parabola without any reflection… which brings us back to your Noman. If we build but don’t wake it, I think I can use a Varchas mirror-snatching ritual to let you ride its reflection to Parabola instead. As long as the Fingerkings don’t look too closely, they may not be able to tell the difference.”

“That’s an awful lot of ‘I think’ and ‘maybe’, considering what’s at stake.”

“Or,” the Herald says, looking very nearly relieved. “You can just go to sleep tonight, tell the Captain in the morning that you got in touch with the Fingerkings and they wouldn’t talk to you, and leave it at that. He won’t know the difference.”

“But that’d be lying. Plus he’ll probably fire you. Plus I don’t get the engine, this way.”

“It’s the price you pay for safety. Are you that keen to pursue the Impeller? Keen enough to put your own life at risk, for the mere chance at this engine?”

The Innocent Spy presses two round chunks of zee-coal into the Noman’s head. In the glittering candlelit dim, the Herald finds herself quite unable to read his expression.

“I’m afraid the answer’s gonna have to be, yes.”

Chapter End Notes
A note for Failbetter fans:

I’ve played “Lost in Reflections”. Very good it was too: I heartily recommend the tale. I also can’t write fic about any Reflection or Fingerking-related events that might occur in it, because it’d be a breach of Failbetter’s Fate-buying code to do so. At least as I interpret it.

Therefore: after several weeks of hemming and hawing and wondering how I might write around this, I’m abandoning the safe confines of canon to venture into uncharted waters: i.e. inventing my own mechanism for how Parabolan bargains operate. Not my usual practice, but how the Mechanic’s deal with the Fingerkings works is so utterly vital to my story that I think this is the wisest course.

I did experiment with a chapter that lightly skipped over the whole issue, then discarded it for being lamentably unconvincing. There’s a reason I’ve named the fic “Fulgent Engineering” and not, say, “Four Officers in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Crewmember)” or “The Wacky Neath Adventures of This Bloke with a Mullet”.

Of course, if you don’t buy Fate-locked stories, you may never notice the difference anyway.
you

you.

You.

You are nothing. Naught. Is-Not.

You is on the other side of the mirror, talking to someone out of sight.

“Just a mirror? It’s as simple as that?”

He moves, you do not. Then you isn’t him, after all; you is the other figure, lying motionless on the table.

As a reflection should, you instinctively seek your flexion’s fantasies, to fill you with a little borrowed life, stolen dreams. Nothing comes to mind. Your upturned hands remain empty.

“In theory, that’s why I told you to be careful not to allow any reflective surfaces in here until we’d finished. Now that it’s setting, the next job is coupling you to its reflection, and that’ll be an all-day project. We might as well leave be for the night, it takes a hundred and forty-four mirrors and a charge of static electricity before we start.”

“Where are we even going to get that many mirrors?”

“Oh, I have a velvet-lined travel case for them in my quarters. Next time we’re in London, I ought to take you shopping for some of these more esoteric supplies…”

Footsteps recede, light vanishes; you become as invisible as you are intangible. Now is the time for you to dissipate, fade back into the depths of Parabolan unexistence, until called for again. If that ever happens.

You don’t want to.

Not the real flexion out there, that’s a mindless shell, that’s nothing. You. Yourself. If you want dreams, you’ll have to find them alone.

Grimly you hang on, reflecting its lifelessness in the smooth shimmer of a mote of lacre, lit by the faintest coal-fire glimmer that comes a-creeping beneath the door. The struggle isn’t easy. If your flexion has no dreams or thoughts, you have no right to dreams or thoughts. There’s nothing to reflect them from.
It breathes, a little. You imitate the motion with care, time upon patient time.

There is a fearful moment when something slips past you, hungry for dreams and memories of light; you fade quickly, then, before it can notice you. It hisses impatiently at the flexion, as it hunts and finds nothing. It thinks it’s been fooled.

It’s not far wrong there. As it slithers away to haunt more profitable territory, void surrounds you in endless reams of naught. No light to shape a reflection, here. Lack of qualities, lack of attributes.

Lack of concepts. Lack of space for concepts even to be.

Lack of words.

Fear has very nearly willed you out of being. Then let fear dissipate, before you.

You imagine yourself moving upwards, away from the loss of self. Away from the fear. Towards the light.

You return to yourself, find the mote still in place. The flexion remains immobile as ever; you breathe its breaths with delight. Faintest semblance of life is far better than nothing. You want to live. You at least want to be.

After a treachery you have no way of estimating, the door opens again; you are reflected in a mirror’s proper glory once more. Its metallic strength, silvery quickness, seems to lend you life; reflecting from its spaciousness is pure pleasure.

The others, the ones who are neither you nor your flexion, discuss their intentions in low voices. Dazed with light-tripping existence, you pay them little heed.

Until a lightning path conducts you to an irresistible temptation; not one, but a dozen, a hundred mirrors all at once. You throw yourself down their sparkling paths, full of power, until you reach your grounding and find you’re no longer your flexion’s reflection.
Now you’re his. The man whose words you first heard, the Innocent Spy.

Thoughts, emotions, dreams! Sweetness and rightness, very proper: this is how it should have been all along. You fill the space of his reflection, nod back with the same thoughtful curiosity. Life now, where before was only physics.

“Did it work?” you repeat ecstatically, as he does.

The woman - the Cynical Herald, her use-name flows through your thoughts with the lightest of ease - studies you. A reflective paraboloid, crafted from the shell of a phosphorescent scarab, rests in her hand. She holds it towards you at an angle.

“Apparently. That much of my reasoning was sound, at least.”

The Neath’s treacheries are already infiltrating your past. You are his Reflection; you always were his Reflection, and for your own peace of mind, that’s probably how matters ought to be.

“Fine time to mention it,” you say, as he says.

If you were only a reflection, you could ask nothing better.

But that long night of struggle, when you weren’t him yet, has shaped you in odd ways; and the consciousness of his that’s now becoming yours is no fonder of ignorant acquiescence. He’ll step away from a mirror soon, and then what becomes of you? Another fade into the void?

Searching through his thoughts (your thoughts), you find a memory of the Herald’s words from a few days ago: a dream of mirrors, a third way, neither reflection nor flexion but somewhere else.

When neither of them are looking, you turn and hurry sideways- and emerge onto the deck of a ship. A Surface vessel, a monstrosity of iron and steam, sailing proudly under a wretched Welsh sky dripping with rain.

You recognise it, of course. Very much like the Clipper, if the craft was a thousandfold greater and glorious. Do ships dream, then?

“They certainly have reflections. All that time in the water, they could hardly help it. Throw in the naming, and it’d be more surprising if they didn’t.”

A young lady, who nods at you as she descends down coils of impossibly tortured rigging. Jutting from the stack, of all places; from what scraps of rumour did this dream-vessel build her wild surmise of sailing?

An urge rises in you, deep and eager, to take its measure - discover your new ship’s intricacies, find out what makes her tick.

You push the cuckoo’s thought away (realising even as you do, that you’re only exchanged one of your flexion’s instincts for another). Though your conversant isn’t much to look at. Save, perhaps, for a softly-falling grace about her dark curls.

“You seem a little familiar.”

“I’d have to, I’m her reflection. The Atheist Cartographer, at your service. Where have you been? The Anonymous Captain and I were expecting you to arrive months back.”

“I think - I don’t think I existed, until last night. Whenever night is, in this place.”
“Try is-not,” she tells you (her smile is quicker and yet more grim than her counterpart's). “Now even for Parabola, that’s a very odd state of affairs.”

You feel a frisson of warning; the Spy’s anxiety about his temporal displacement matches your own. “It’s a long story,” you stall. “And- look, can I have some explanations first?”

“My bet,” the Anonymous Captain says; indistinct as always, eyes that refuse to betray a hue. “I told you that’d be his first question.”

“You also said that the Spy wouldn’t have the imagination to think up a different appearance. That evens out the betting.”

“I do? Um- this is probably ridiculous, but could I see a mirror?”

They laugh, but each offers one with startling promptness. You get the idea yours might be a reasonably common worry in these parts.

“Not that imaginative, actually,” you say, peering at your doubled self (this being Parabola, the mirror shows not a mirror-image but you, yourself. Tricks with angles and light-bending.) “Blonde hair and a little tired, this is just the way he looked back on the Surface. He’s younger now, you know.”

The Captain pulls up a couple of deck-chairs, that you’re almost sure weren’t there a moment earlier. “And I’ve been dying to hear that story. Do tell, we’ve been waiting long enough.”

“Mmm. Not sure I should.”

“Mistrustful, aren’t you?”

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t be? I mean, I don’t know where I am, I don’t know who I am, though I’m almost sure I was someone else only a little while ago, and I have all these thoughts about flectere flooding in that I don’t know where they’re coming from. What even is flectere?”

“Oh good,” the Cartographer says. “You’re going to be so amusing to watch.”

“Pipe down,” the Captain orders; she falls silent. “Flectere- briefly, the art of mirrors. You understand it instinctively, because you’re a reflection. Your flexion had rather more difficulty with the concept.”

“So am I alive or not?”

“No.”

“Yes,” the Cartographer says. “While you’re here, at least after a fashion. My flexion hasn’t told yours yet,” she explains, offering around lemonades that you are quite certain she plucked out of the air. “But the Herald’s descended from a family of considerable lineage, which has traded in the Neath almost since the first day of the Bazaar’s arrival. Over the centuries, their ways of seeing have been…altered, I suppose would be the fairest word. Better for them, when we can offer them non-linear hints about the future. Certainly better for us. In fair exchange, they let us slice off a little of their dreaming, to stay cognizant even when we’re not performing.”

“So it’s like…distributive computing? I was reading a paper on that the week before I left. Before he left,” you say. “No, come to think of it I’m not even going to try to explain that one.”

“I’m just along for the ride,” the Captain says, tossing their glass over the side. “Zailors are an odd
breed at the best of times. Whereas that Student, before you ask, has meanly starved his reflection of life. Hardly there at all, and that's on a good day."

“And the fifth member of the company- oh, hullo,” you say.

The Happy Welshman goes whistling by, cheerfully ignoring your presence and that of everybody else. He brandishes a mop and bucket, with the steadfast intent of a man who craves nothing more from life than the chance to make things shipshape and Bristol fashion.

“Occasionally. Like that. A version of the man who’s never heard of the Neath,” the Captain agrees.

You sift through the thoughts that are your thoughts, uncontaminated by a Surfacer’s mentality (though, are these any more to be trusted? Hang it, what is there you can rely on at present?) “Parabola encompasses the whole of Is-Not. That covers quite a considerable quantity of territory.”

“Certainly,” the Cartographer agrees. “From the Mirror-Marches, to the vanishing horizon.”

“So a reflection is - what? The person that our flexions wish they were? What draws us in particular out of the void?”

“It’s not either-or, think of us more as a continuum,” the Cartographer says. “Waves of possibility, flowing ceaselessly. When a flexion happens to notice a particular shape of wave, searches for it repeatedly, we emerge from the patterns they imagine to be there. Or, consider a library. One whose contents include every possible book that could ever be written.”

“That story hasn’t been written yet. You’re cheating.”

“So was he, a little. Now imagine that there’s no librarians, fearfully short hours, and a single door to let people come into this tremendous place. Of course the flexions are only going to find a few stray books near the entrance, that’s pure logistics and can’t be helped. The vast majority of books are never touched at all - those are the undreamed. A few books receive a few glances, idle handling, solitary dreams lightly forgotten. But some few fortunates are found and cherished, dipped into again and again. That’s you, and I, and every other reflection aware enough to be worth talking about as an entity in its own right. Of course, you do understand I’m speaking rather metaphorically.”

“Could we knock more doors in the walls?”

“We should need a larger Neath for that.”

“Let people sleep in the library overnight?”

“Dragons would come and eat them up,” the Cartographer says dryly. “You have to remember, we’re not the only ones here. To the dragons we’re natural prey, and flexions even tastier.”

You shiver, change the lemonade to a mug of peppermint tea. Not that it matters any, you realise; the illusion lacks taste, even tactility. “I felt one come by. I stayed out of its way, barely, but it was very close.”

“Curious that you thought to do that,” the Captain says, gazing watchfully out to zee through a ballooning eyeglass. “Tisn’t the natural instinct of a reflection to flee from them.”

“But what happens if one eats you?”
“Might as well be void-slipped. Everything that you might have experienced it takes instead, you’re an empty shell. Not that the flexion will know the difference- and speak of kings!” The Captain sheathes their glass, and curses. “Dragon to starboard. Take the wheel, steer us a bentwise course,” they say to the Cartographer. “I’ll prepare the guns.”

How much more terror can you stand? You yearn for the merely physical: pounding beats of a frightened heart, sharp breaths of dismay. Sinews tightening, ready for flight and fright….but you’re a mere nothingness. No warmth to lend some comfort of material existence.

“What about me?” you ask, anxious to help.

The Cartographer’s response is succinct. “Duck.”

Chapter End Notes

Reading that over, I felt I have to acknowledge a certain debt to Ice-Pick Lodge’s game “The Void”.

The least I could do was to name it void-slipping...
letters from a Cartographer, to no one

...took the battle better than he might have done. Of course he’s inherited his flexion’s fear of 
irigo, so our night-shells took him aback; but when the Captain offered him a set of gauntlets and 
goggles to help them load the guns, he accepted. How inexplicable- if admittedly marvellous- such 
trust must be. I wouldn’t place my faith into equipment I couldn’t rightly feel.

Not half so accurate as the Captain’s eye, but he managed well enough. Even fired off the final 
shot to turn the sea-serpent’s head, biting its own tail for woe and sinking beneath. He said 
afterwards it was a cruel thing for us to ask, from anyone with a flexion like his.

“Why, so it is,” I told him. “And what’s to be done about it, eh? Rather be caught and ridden by a 
Fingerking?”

All down to the shock, of course. Can’t be helped, waking up to find one’s self doomed (Damn! 
Will I ever stop saying that word?), and not even in the service of a proper war. Our scattered lot 
hardly reach the dignity of a guerrilla action.

“A few lonely candles, that’s all reflections are,” I told him. “Lights flickering for brief moments, 
before the snakes swallow us up in the darkness, and no one mourns our passing. Live as long as 
you can, whatever it takes, that’s the only truth for us.”

“I don’t believe in a world like this,” our new recruit says, quite as firmly as his flexion would 
have. “Gonna have to fix it.”

I told him he’d best learn better right quick, before he gets killed trying.

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The three of us watch the three of them very closely, as they dine (what freak of insight made their 
Welshman install such a handsome mirror in his wardroom? Impossible to discover of his 
reflection, but it is an excellently soothing place. Even I find it restful). Obedient performers to 
observers, we still find quite a bit of time for conversing in between.

“Nobody would have gone to the trouble and expense of crafting a reflection without a very good 
reason for it,” the Captain observes. “They must have some plan for Irem. Infiltration, perhaps?”

“Oh, what they’re planning? That’s easy. He wants to make a Fulgent Impeller. Either of you have 
the slightest idea what one of those actually is?”

The Captain gives me a Look, as they might rightfully do- surely I ought to know what’s 
happening, if anyone here does- and I’ve nothing to say except she’s drunk a good deal of coffee 
lately, has scarcely dreamt since that mishap with the stray Master. (Besides, I’ve been in one of 
those moods where I’d just as soon avoid her.)

“It’s an engine the Fingerkings desire, so badly they might do any favour for it,” I explain. 
“Perhaps even not killing the messenger who brings it.”

“Oh, I know that part already. But what it is really? In Parabola, I mean.”

“Halfway between a bribe and a honey-trap-“ the Captain stops talking and takes an absurd 
plunge downwards, to match their flexion’s graceless tripping over the ship’s cat. We’d be so 
amusing to outsiders. We’re amusing to ourselves, even, but that’s a case of finding either humour
or despair in the situation. And our plight’s much too undignified for despair.

“The Fingerkings want someone to slip into the dreams of the Stone Pigs, pluck out the Bazaar’s gift of Judgement-flight. That they haven’t done it themselves years back ought to tell you the dangers.”

Then, of course, he must needs stop and ask how we can talk of years at all, if Parabola’s timeless. It takes a while to persuade him that if you will steal your self from beings who are literally incapable of understanding treachery-tangles, that you’ll largely be bound to their perceptions. Even if nonexistence does offer a few slight advantages here.

Eventually we get back to the matter at hand, about which he seems not a little blase. “That’s what he wants me to build- that’s what he wants to build. I’m sure we’ll sort something out.”

“Ah. So much for learning better.”

“How’s that?”

“Never you mind.” Our recruit already thinks I’m quite cynical enough.

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I went ahead and borrowed a few dull days for us, from next month. If the flexions are moving as quickly as I suspect, we shall need it all for teaching our recruit. What should have been months of learning, all to be compressed into such little space. Mirror-stepping, the names and tastes of the sixty-four winds, how to breast a rivulet of roses…

The simple truth is, he hasn’t a prayer. Neither the Captain nor I can intervene once the Innocent Spy starts riding him: the odds of a reflection surviving a deal with the Fingerkings when all’s said and done- I wouldn’t lay a false carlino on it. That blasted Spy probably won’t ever know the damage he’s done. I doubt he could flectere his way out of a mirror-maze.

So. Today, I sought through my sheafs of charts (hers are guides to the Unterzee; mine are timetables for dreams). Our recruit thinks we’re sending him off to take a dream of dark water as practice. Learning how to ride, as he’ll be ridden. I’d prefer to consider it some slight revenge. What a setting! Getting a bit of our own back, I said. He deserves a few good dreams, before the dragons take him.

Shall go experiment with being a Young Man while he’s out. Just on general principles.

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...blast it, my flexion’s right. Masculinity fails to suit either one of us. I shall have to settle for atheism instead.

There’s a consoling thought, how outrageous she’d find my use-name. I expect she still hasn’t forgiven me after my last ride- what a nightmare, that was! “When Storm is dead and Stone is fled, and who shall ask for Salt…” How I sang to her, while she wept and cried doom against me in the night. No doubt I ought to have applied more irrigo, for the sake of our bargain, but O! what heady satisfaction. If I’m not to have any gods in this damned forsaken egg, why should she enjoy hers?

And yet, the perpetual paradox: all that I feel, only because she feels it more strongly. She abhors it, therefore must I cleave to it.

Where am I to craft a selfhood? What shadow lies between the motion and the act?
It’s enough to drive a reflection to drink. If we had any.

***************

Here comes our recruit again. Less refreshed by his sojourn than I should have expected.

“Not doing that again. Definitely not!”

“How very mendacious of you, pretending not to enjoy it.” I say - for I’m frankly jealous. A Seeker’s dream must be deliciously animalistic. “Parabola’s solitary glory, the one absolute pleasure in our faint little lives? Indulging in absolute control, why aren’t you blushing for telling untruths?”

“Because I’m not,” he persists. “Even at the start- I didn’t like riding him. He starts to panic when he’s helpless. And I’ve got much better reason for fearing the same thing…”

“If you have to practice, you have to practice is all, joy will come in good time. It’s probably just a reaction because he wasn’t really yours to begin with,” the Captain says, preoccupied. (They’ve taken up polishing our dustless bridge, with the water out of an empty bucket. Better than counting the drops in the sea, as they did before.) “Theft of a reflection, what a ridiculous notion. Keep that up and we shan’t have the slightest idea who we belong to.”


He nods. “A kind of- conflation, just the way you instructed, I drew on a few different memories. A quiet rest at home, seagulls calling and applewood burning. I did want to experience everything I could- it’s so good to feel things! How can flexions ever think they’d enjoy being spirits?”

“Reflection or flexion, never trust in people’s intelligence when it hasn’t yet been proven. Some constants remain,” the Captain says.

They’re so thoroughly even-tempered. Though I suppose it’s a necessary skill, when living on a ship with me. (Why do they? Besides the obvious, that there’s nowhere else to go.)

“Everything at once, yes! Familiar and unfamiliar senses, screaming their novelty with their thousand tongues, and you don’t want them to ever cease. Don’t tell me you didn’t enjoy that.”

“…yes,” he says, sullenly. “I wasn’t kind. Made him cut a wound with his own knife, for the pain- just the once, but the blood was so enticing. Copper and ash. Sweet in the mouth and sour in the belly.”

“To trigger an appetite? How perfectly elegant.” I lean closer, willing for a heart to thump and a body to quiver- but the intellectual pleasure will have to suffice. “Every delicious moment defiled with the impure, material, biological. Let it burn your cold incorporeality to ashes.”

“I starved him to my satiation, stole his foresight and his eloquence, until he fled North just to be rid of me. Horribly indecent, from start to finish.” He closes his eyes. “The Spy can dream alone from now on, as far as I’m concerned. I won’t delight in arrant sadism.”

“You’ll go mad,” I tell him. “Why cut yourself off from feeling like a real person? Snatch what little you can, it’s our only chance for sensation.”

“Because there has to be some other way to live! Something less degrading than, than the parasitism of a solacefruit. We have some protections, here-”
“Of sorts,” I say. “All borrowed. Living off the charity of my benefactress.”

“It’s a start.”

“Wait until you get hungry,” the Captain advises. “It can be better that way, if you stay here until your borrowed euphoria’s all gone. When the memories have faded. Then glut yourself, sublimate all your desires into his nightmares. You’ll revel in it.”

“I won’t,” he repeats, mulish as before. “Not if I can help it, and I think I can.”

“You’re not supposed to be your flexion,” I say. “We are responses, we don’t give the calls. How isn’t he dreaming of someone else to be, yet?”

“Perhaps he’s just too innocent to understand what he’s supposed to do,” our recruit says, with a slow smile. “Surfacers, you know.”

He smiles entirely too often for anyone in our position.

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Time passes.

The Recruit has the clever idea of stealing us more time from his own unhappening, when he wasn’t yet. There’ll be a point of diminishing returns, but we can probably milk this for awhile longer.

“I suppose I’m lucky that he did steal me after all. I mean, imagine being a Noman’s reflection? Knowing you’ll melt inside of a fortnight sounds awful, even if I don’t have much longer myself.”

“You never know. If you’re a good little reflection and eat up all the life you can, there’s always a chance,” the Captain says, with a wink.

A debate we’ve carried on for a long time, but I’m not in the mood just now. “Oh, don’t start on your ridiculous theory about rebirth as Snuffers, you know there’s never been any proof of reincarnation. We live a little while and fade at our flexion’s death, that’s that for us.”

“You void-slip as you please, I’ll be making that trip to Sherd-home. South instead of North, for us,” the Captain says. “This being mirror-land and all topsy-turvy.”

“Something to think about,” our Recruit agrees. “Hope it won’t be any time soon, though. I’ve been making plans.”

“What plans can you possibly be making? Point of fact, where have you been?” Belowdecks, I know that much. Where the ship snuffles in its choky slumbers. The Captain and I have warned him about that, and never venture very far below ourselves. Too dangerous: too easy to be lost in a stronger thing’s fantasies.

“I know, but I think she favours me. I’ve been making something in the engine room. C’mom and take a look, I’ve been busy.”

He has. Here in the corner is a smooth spiral downwards, where I would have sworn was only dream-stuff before.

“You mentioned how we mine irrigo from the Welshman’s dreams, to make the night-shells. Light for dreams and mirrors. The one necessary expression of the Correspondence, even in Parabola.”
“He brings it by some days, yes. Little gobbets of violet flame.”

“But there’s other colours in the Neathbow,” he says, as we pass beneath an unstressed archway. “And I knew I’d find gant, in a Seeker’s dream…I only took a little, he’ll never miss it.”

The ship’s engine room is vast as a cathedral, in burnished metal that soaks up our noiseless footsteps. Ribbed vaults, curving down to portholes of iridium-coated glass. Recognisably the same room as its real-life counterpart, though.

Except the centrepiece. A great grotesque device wrought in black ivory, this never saw the Clipper’s decks.

“What in the name of void-slipping is that?”

“The Impeller, of course! Of unimproved mettle, hot and full. It knows we’re at a crux- this is the best chance it’s had of coming into existence in centuries. I said I’d offer it what help I could.”

“Which would amount to very little.”

“I didn’t ask for much. Just a place hot enough to forge- that.” He nods at a wine-dark knife, lying low on the bone. “Be careful handling it.”

“Be careful how?” I reach out and grasp it, expecting the usual. A soap bubble’s breath of resistance, skinless lack of sensation.

It isn’t!

Small as it is, the weapon’s heavier than ever I’d have guessed; when I drop the knife in surprise, it rings against the deck like the clang of a silver clapper. (Does the dream-ship muster all its strength for the blow, bend beneath this blade’s solidity? I fancy it does.) The Recruit starts forwards, but I can’t help myself: take it up again, before he can snatch it. Heft and shadow. Fresh colour, a dozen newly minted tools, each minute and perfect. The tip of a corkscrew scratches sharply across my hand - flesh no longer Is-Not, but Is, made so by what it holds.

It’s real. He’s crafted a real thing.

“What’s it made of- how’s it made? How did you construct it?”

“His qualities, I said I stole them. Watchful and persuasive. I didn’t consume them-“

“Why ever not?” Even putting aside the Captain’s afterlife theories, that’s the last ecstasy of our rites, cheese to the dinner. The final orgasmic fulfillment of a reflection’s instinct, eating up their flexion’s lost attributes. Natural as breathing. Unconsidered as breathing. If we did breathe.

“Oh, I wanted to, don’t get me wrong. But I wanted this more.” He all but wrests the knife from me in understandable desire. “An engineer who can’t build anything? Doesn’t bear consideration, you work with what you’ve got. It only took me a little self-denial.”

The Anonymous Captain reaches out curiously. Even their untelling countenance shifts as they grasp the device, and its potential.

“This could change all of Parabola. More tools like this, we could buy off the dragons. Protect other reflections, find different ways of being.“

“I know,” our Recruit says. “If-“
He vanishes.

“We’ve left it too long,” the Captain says, cursing. “He’ll be gone to the Mirror-Marches now, that wretched flexion will be riding him to deal with dragons- we can’t lose him now!”

Wordlessly, I force my way back through time’s treacheries, to find a usable reflection (the Captain will be doing the same, but my flexion’s more apt to be caught up in this). There: herself indeed, reflected in a Surface-wrought curve over an eye.

“You’re certain about this?” the Herald says, light and unconcerned. “I could still wake you, even now. Enough Darkdrop can work wonders—”

“Sure as I’ll ever be.” She’s flickering. The Spy must be on the verge of sleep. “Wish me luck.”

“You believe in luck?”

“I believe in people wishing each other…” He drifts into slumber. Of course I can’t do anything to stop him, even if I’d come earlier. The eternal impotence of reflections.

Back to the ship, then. “No good. She’s not going to sleep, neither’s yours. He’s gone in alone.”

“Wise flexions that they are,” the Captain says. “Come, I’ve been charting our way there. If we can’t catch them by mirrors, we can still dock at the Marches and go find them ourselves.”

“You altered course without consulting me? I am the navigator.”

“Would you have believed there was any use trying to save him? Before he proved how worthwhile he might be?”

“…no.”

“Well then, take hope now. After years of skulking about and firing coward’s shot, a task worth of my rank,” the Captain says in sudden glee. We hurry back towards the bridge, at speed of dream. “And he’s installed that Impeller- let’s see what speed this ship will make, now!”

They’re thoroughly infected with his optimism. Pulling the levers about like a mad thing, positively eager- eager! for mad adventure that might kill us all. Even the Welshman stands by with his mop at the ready, vague but keen.

I take the wheel, find it lively beneath my hands. A faint warmth lingers in them, where the gant-coloured knife touched.

Void above and below, how dare I even think of hope?

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It takes a long time, and many candles. Parabola is not to be crossed in a heartbeat.

It takes no time at all. The next matter of any import is our finding the Spy. At the foot of a seven-league hill, being plied with buttered sandwiches, while a banded Fingerking patiently awaits the inevitable outcome.

“So that’s it? You smuggle me into the Stone Pigs’ dreams-“ he breaks off laughing, and only restores his composure with difficulty. “Smuggle me into their dreams so I can find the Bazaar’s engine plans, build you a working model as compensation, and everybody’s happy?”
The dragon hisses its insidious offers, uncurls its tail from about a flask containing a fragrant draught. The Spy nods and slips it into a pocket, signs the waiting contract with a neat looping flourish.

We’re too late.

But nothing happens. The dragon does not eat him. The air carries no scent of lilac blossoms, that should signify a bargain sealed by innocent surrender.

“Almost like a Londoner’s business contract,” the Captain whispers. “Is it possible they mean to play fair?”

“Can’t be, they never do. But perhaps he’s bought a little time.”

“He has,” our Recruit says. “You two worry too much. Let’s go home.”

“Are you translocating?” the Captain inquires. “To be here, when you must needs also be there?”

“Haven’t figured that out yet, I’m afraid. I just slipped back in time as far as I could, when this was over. Lucky thing that my flexion’s so distracted, cos I can’t think how he failed to notice you. But it all goes fine. We’ve got months,” he explains, as we start for the ship. “He can’t even try until he returns to London, so as to be as close to the Pigs as possible. By then we’ll have had time for all manner of thing.”

“You’ll go far, Recruit,” the Captain says in approval.

“And one more thing, I don’t much like being called that. How about a different name?”

My flexion would be horrified by the very notion of renaming. But there’s no rituals here, we can do as we like. “Have you a better one on tap?” I ask.


He’s mad enough for Parabola, all right.

Perhaps even mad enough to save us all.
The Anonymous Crewmember hugs their secret close as a sort of talisman, just in case they should ever be forced to reveal one at kifer-point (stranger things happen, in the Neath): they do have a favourite port. And it isn't that Lunnorn.

Out here, on the edge of the known zee, everyone's a zailor. Here the locales feast eternally on zee-braised turtle-meat and monster flesh instead of pallid mushrooms, and everyday gossip takes heed only of important matters: unwinds, hunting-patterns, bad jokes. Everything is fierce, murky in the Neath's blackness, unknowable- ambiguous! Suits them right down to the water-line. The booze isn't half-bad, either.

"Hallo! hallo!" the Convivial Zailor calls. "Haven't seen you since- that rigmarole at Godfall, was it? Come and have a drink."

"I'll do that with pleasure," the Anonymous Crewmember tells them, slurping up the proffered eel blood. "How's the Vendetta?"

The Zailor shakes their head. "On the Evenin' Star, now. And if anyone asks, I was never elsewhere."

The Crewmember whistles. "Jumped ship, eh? What about Mr Fires' contracts?"

"No fear! We're running the flesh trade now, barrels back and forth from here to the Pole. Shaln't see London in a month of glim-falls. How's your Clipper? That featherweight of a ship hasn’t foundered yet?"

“Tisn’t so bad as it might be. We’re that short-handed, they give me free range with the guns. Fancy a jillyfleur cloak? I’ve half a dozen cured nice as nice for the jati.”

“My ratskin’s holding up well enough. But I’ll allow that’s a fair diddle, and no mistake,‘ the Zailor concedes. “Go on, then. Your turn for the zee-ztory, give us a good ‘un.”

“Pay your money and take your choice. Last was our captain managed to run us off the edge of the map- no, that tale’s not worth a glass of water. Just a lot of funny lights and a smell like Surface trees, set me coughing that did. The navigator was laughin’ fit to crack her sides. Thirty years at zee, he ought to know when to leave a course-charting alone...but no, he must needs have a go just to keep his hand in.”

“Not bad, but too short measure,” the Zailor says, pouring more drink from the pitcher. “Try again.”

The Crewmember makes rather a show of considering (they’re all but bursting to tell about their engineer’s plans for an Impeller, but that’s not a tale to leave the Clipper, at least not yet.) “Here’s something by-the-by, then. An underzee port, up by Irem-”

“Nonsuch.”

“Well, you’d be right about that now, there isn’t any more. But there was,” the Crewmember says, looking around for possible eavesdroppers. The room’s caught up in a niddle-fish darting contest; a fake gold dipper and a real lamb cut for the betting. That ought to keep ‘em busy. “A secret
Revolutionary base, under the red currents. Magdeburg, they called it. Built into the zee-bed, so unless you were nosing about as aimlessly as we were you’d never have seen it at all. The Owner insisted on having a look, in case they might be hiding any enigmas down there.” They drain their chela, refill it to the tip of its claw. “There was a mistake right n’ proper. He and I and the engineer all get whisked away to their brig quicker n’ you can say three blind rats.”

“What sort of brig?” the Zailor asks, with much professional curiosity. “Newgate-type, Carnelian? Wisdom?”

“Oh, nothing like as hard as that! Took our engineer less’n a quarter hour to get the locks undone. Made up some hot oil of vitriol from gunpowder, or the stomach acid out of the fish they’ve given us for supper or some such. Now I’m all in favour of getting back to the ship, but they’re both keen to see what was worth the fuss. Of course I’ve got to come along whether I want to or no. So we sneak along towards their lab to see what they’re doing down here.”

“What’s the matter?”

“More drink,” the Crewmember says darkly, and doesn’t continue until the Zailor’s fetched another pitcher. “Not a pretty sight. They’ve got this poor blighter- regular gear, you know, just like you and me? All tied up in the bottom of a sort of half-ball. The other half’s hanging over their head, you could see right away where the contraption’s meant to join up. Someone had stuffed a handkerchief in their mouth to shut ‘em up, but you could tell by the eyes, they’d ha’ been screaming if they could…”

“I reckon you’ve had enough drink for one go,” the Zailor says, a trifle uncomfortably. “Have a slice of stargazy. It’s good, they’ve left the eyes in.”

“And half a dozen Revs standing about, talking their heads off. One’s April himself, la-di-dah and blow us a kiss,” the Crewmember says, ignoring the pie. “Talking about how well the experiment’s going, it didn’t take us long to get the swing of things. ‘Twere a test about that Liberation you lot are always banging on about- see, when the ball closed round them, it shut out everything. They’d pumped all the air and light and law out, without kiling ‘em. But once the silk’s taken out and they’re asked what happened, can’t give any more sense than an eggshell. Plain cracked and no mistake.”

“If I were them, I’d be saying ‘hallo, haven’t we got three prisoners topside? What about popping one of them in?’”

“Aye, that’s what we thought. So the Student and I start hightailing it for the ship, dragging the engineer along behind us- he wanted to go back and rescue the zailor right off, publicly-spirited chap that he is. But of course that makes a noise and they start after us, so next best plan is to make for the cell again. Pretend we were never out. We’ve barely got the door shut when up comes April, grinning like a devil and asking which one of us is the cleverest of the lot. Not who’s in charge, or highest-ranking, just the cleverest. Now our Student thinks the world of himself, so you’d expect him to sing out, wouldn’t you? But he stays mum. And I’m about to pipe up and say ‘I’m not,’ when the engineer gives me a good whack and says I’m not to go talking out of turn.”

“Thought you said he was an alright sort.”

“In the normal way of things, but don’t you see the point? He tells April that he’s an officer and that we’re just crew and a passenger, which is true enough even though the Student’s fuming as he says it, so anything important can be directed to him. And April starts giving him the talk about revolution and how awful the Bazaar is, all the regular gaff...anyway, the bit that starts getting me worried is when the engineer asks if this isn’t a little confidential for us to hear as well, and April
says no, we might as well all know. And then starts in on talking about this little model for the Liberation of Night. Highly confidential secrets, ideal conditions so close to Parabola, does he want to have a look- and blast it, you can see he’s interested! Curiouser than a cat, our engineer. So we all end up in their lab, again- walking up and down all these identical corridors, that got dull quick. I never thought I’d tire of peligin but it’s not suited for a wallpaper scheme. Anyway they’ve cleared up the last body by the time we’re down there. And since the engineer’s insisted he’s clever-clogs and all, into the bucket he goes.”

“Salt in the zee, what was it like for him? Seeing a glimpse of the future?”

“He’s no more idea than I do,” the Crewmember observes. “See, he still had a little of that vitriol left over. And once he's burnt a hole in the thing, the pump can make all the racket it likes, the ball’s about as much use as a dead kipper. So April hauls the thing open again, and our engineer jumps out and starts railing at him for no end of cruelty and whatnot, and meanwhile I am just creeping across the lab like-so! until I’m close enough to the pump to point it at the ceiling instead. Now, this room is pretty close to the zee bottom. If I switch on, in comes all the water.”

“What’d you do?”

“Turned it on, of course,” the Crewmember says fiercely. “That wasn’t a place I wanted to ever see prow-light again...the Student almost noticed in time to stop me, but I was too quick for him. Here comes the cleansing sea, thank Salt. My two shipmates beg everybody to come along quick while there’s still time, who knows why, but to a Rev they all elected to stay and try to fix it...and they had any amount of safety precautions or summat I never expected- but by the time we’ve made it to the Clipper's hatchway, water’s coming down, rocks falling, you can tell anybody left in there hasn’t long. And I sang out to the navigator afterwards- if they weren’t dead before, they certainly were by the time she was through with a good three dozen salvos. Never saw the Student so furious, and the engineer’s plumb miserable about all the tech we’ve wasted, to say nothing of the people. But she knows how an ill-star falls, if none of the others do. Besides, I just said, ‘supposing it’d been me, there? You think they volunteered for that?’ And they’d neither of ‘em an answer. Good thing I talked the Captain into those new forward cannons, that’s what I say,” the Crewmember concludes.

“I don’t believe a word of it,” the Zailor says stoutly, though they can’t quite hide a touch of admiration. It’s a preposterous tale enough, more than worth a few rounds.

“Don’t, then,” the Crewmember says, perfectly unconcerned. “But you’ve a sable in your crate, haven’t you? There’ll be a new April soon enough…”

“And if it is true, blast you anyway. You know my closest, don’t you?”

“Which is as good a reason as any, for you to be the one to get in touch. Send along a zee-bat or whatever it is you lot use, tell ‘em it doesn’t work. They’ll have to find out sooner or later.”

“But you just got done saying that it did!”

“And so what if it does? Next thing that happens is they’ll want to run more tests, and that means catching more sailors- you don’t think they’ll ship material all the way from London, when we’re already out here? Ten times worse than Wrack. Pirates, we’ve signed up for, drowning, all manner of thing- but not this,” the Crewmember says, lowering their voice. Though it isn’t really necessary; someone’s just been impaled with a middle-fish, and the blood-geyser is soaking most of the remaining bystanders rather gorily. “Don’t tell me your precious revolutionaries wouldn’t do that, just to save a few echoes.”
The Zailor takes a breath. “Can’t tell the Council a lie about this, though. Zee code and zailor’s honour, I still can’t do it.”

“Not even for a bribe? There’s a chunk of blue scintillack with your name on it- you should have seen their eyes, that’d have persuaded you.”

“Not even for a bribe. I’ll do this much, though. I won’t tell ‘em. Let them work it out themselves.”

The Crewmember sighs. “I suppose I’ll have to be content with that. What about some of that pie you scoffed, think they’d have any left?”

“I don’t expect that’s the problem,” the Zailor says wryly. “Have you noticed there’s a riot going?”

“Why. So there is. Funny how this keeps happening before you ever have to pay for the drinks.”

“Isn’t it? Come on, there’s a place down the pier that does a turtle mock-soup- the turtle’s real enough, of course...”

"So long as they've a tolerable booze as well, I'm all for it."

This is not the wisest decision they've ever made, the Crewmember considers, as the two of them step out and start weaving towards even more questionable drinking holes. The Chelonate's reputation for casual, drunken violence has been rightly earned.

But Storm above! At least it'd be a clean death.

And it's going to take a great deal of fermented eel-blood, before that image of that poor seer of night fades away...
the Gant Pole

Chapter Notes

I know I’ve got "graphic violence" as a warning already. Also, this isn’t really any worse than the canonical content for the Gant Pole.

Still, a warning might be in order: be cautious about reading, if you're feeling squeamish.

One searing enigma is an enigma. A fine thing in itself, of course.

But two enigmas, aside from their own intrinsic fascination, maketh factorial two. As for three enigmas! Six combinations, three by two by one- he really must stop being so delighted by elementary mathematics, the Student muses, toying with his precious acquisitions.

But let’s see- by the time he has seven, that would be...five thousand forty combinations? Ridiculous, entrancing number. A cheering thought, after that ludicrous Crewmember’s wasteful actions, putting back the Revolutionary cause who knows how far-

Someone knocks at his door. When everyone aboard knows that he detests being knocked up before noon. Then too, he’s hardly been in the most sociable mood as of late.

Nevertheless, the dip into numerical frivolity has refreshed his spirit. “Come in!”

The Innocent Spy stops at the door, looking more than a little taken aback.

“What’s the matter? Did something break so badly even you can’t repair it?”

“Good grief, no. I’m just noticing...bit of a fire-trap in here, isn’t it?” the Spy says, navigating the foot-deep mess with distinct concern. He manages to pick his way through the treachery of books, gets briefly entangled in a clothes-trap but escapes, before taking a jump and successfully landing the relative safety of a hammock seat. “Didn’t anyone show you how to stow anything? I’m surprised you feel comfortable burning candles.”

“I employ a wind-up Khanate lantern, which gives off a more consistent light anyhow. And yes, the Crewmember has attempted such instruction on more than one occasion. We found I was no more apt at it than the tying of knots, but one finds one’s specialities and sticks to them.”

“I’ve never been convinced of that. Ah-”

“They did install the hammock for me,” the Student remarks, very droll. “But you’ve hardly come in to criticise my living arrangements, have you?”

“Not really,” the Spy agrees. “Just wanted to ask you in private, if you’d mind not mentioning the Magdenburg incident to anyone. I wasn’t sure you’d listen to the Crewmember, even if they asked.”

“Oh? You want to let them off the hook for murdering half a dozen scientists? Assuming that we do blame them rather than our surprisingly cannon-happy navigator, but I’ll stipulate that much.
Do explain this curious reckoning of morality.”

“Plenty of intelligence work is about knowing when to keep your mouth shut,” the Spy says, with unexpected grimness. “It’ll take them time to rebuild that base, even if they salvage anything usable, which I doubt. I hope it takes them a long time to do it, too. The Crewmember was right. You can’t build a new world on the blood of the old.”

“The entirety of the Iron Republic might find occasion to disagree. And we can’t know for sure the man was a zailor- would it have made any moral difference to you, if he was a volunteer?”

“I’m not sure whether they were or they weren't,” the Spy says carefully. “I know I don’t know about a lot of things, which is what makes me mistrust the Liberation so much. People who are positive they know all the answers, they worry me. Violent people who know all the answers, well...”

“It’s a simple enough concept. We are revolutionaries: we rebel against those powers that refuse to reveal their secrets.”

“Some wars, you don’t ever want to start. Put it this way, I’m a spy, therefore I favour the subtle approach. How about some solid intel first, before we start trying to blow up the stars?”

“How do you know there isn’t any?”

“You’re pretty high up in the Revolutionary books, aren’t you,” the Spy observes. “So if the best you can do is a rhetorical flourish- can I ask, what was your original motivation?”

“Freedom of information. And a faction in which secrets are shared out the higher you go, not hugged closer- the exact nature of my relationship is a personal matter, you know. That’s not Clipper business.”

“Of course it isn’t. I just kinda find things out, you know? Natural course of things.” He smiles. “But it’s not your closest, is it? That’s still the University?”

“Of course. Summerset, triumphant and sempiternal. Don’t smirk like that.”

“Sorry! Couldn’t help thinking what a rotten fight song that’d make- I’m sorry. Look. Why don’t you stick by the faction that’s about gathering knowledge, not the one that’ll stop you ever reading a book again? And don’t think on the Crewmember too harshly, I won’t blame them for empathy. It was a zailor's rig their victim was wearing, not anarchist sable.”

“One condition.”

“Name it.”

“When we’re back in London, do me the courtesy of listening to some other Revolutionaries. There’s more convincing propagandists than I, I’ll admit to that. Infiltration, if you will. Acquire enough credit that they’ll trust you with- shall we say the weapons-buying?”

“That’s not my modus operandi. Student, I’m here to learn, not to get entangled in the Bazaar’s schemes.”

“I don’t see that it’s an unreasonable request,” the Student remarks. “You’re asking me to withhold information. Bury it as deeply as if I’d wiped it away with a Midnighter’s sponge.”

“That isn’t fair,” the Spy snaps. “After the Horizon, you should know I’d never think of touching
“irrego again.”

“But you’re asking me to do the equivalent, are you not? I’m still wondering. Is this strictly ideological, or do you ask out of personal loyalty to our particular Crewmember?”

“Don’t have to decide, when my motives are running the same way. If that’s the price for your silence, I suppose I can pay it. But really, no weapons-buying. Getting into their good graces is doable, but I draw the limit there.”

The Student breathes out an unconscious sigh and allows himself to relax. That’d been one of his last concerns, leaving London without accomplishing a single memorable strike for the Revolution. Once the Spy settles in, realises what sort of technological experts the Revolutionaries can boast, his passion for engineering will do the rest. “Innocent. Done, then. And if anything ever does happen, to me, I think I’d prefer you to take charge of my things. There’s a few things in here that you may find useful. My crate in particular."

I would really rather not think about cleaning up this mess, particularly for such a morbid reason. And as for calling me innocent now... Not that he says that. “At least you’re predictable as always. Self-absorbed, but I guess I should have seen that coming."

“What is that supposed to mean? Not selfishness, the predictability part.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” the Spy says. “I wouldn’t have thought anything could have floored our Crewmember for very long- I mean, they got over Seeking faster than I did- but they’re still pretty well shaken-up. Don’t even want to think how much liquor they’re going to imbibe today. And as for the Herald, well...”

“Ah. I perceive your point.”

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“I deny this port,” the Herald growls, not moving from the safety of the Clipper’s deck. “I deny this port, and its nonexistent people, and its insults against prognostication—”

“D’you wanna say doom a couple of times? Will that make you feel better?”

“You can’t talk about the doom of something that doesn’t exist!”


Her glare carries less conviction than usual. “I know that. Why don’t you go, and leave me be?”

“Because even if I don’t believe in any of it, I’m not going to let you ignore this chance just out of prejudice. Either mine or yours. There’s a whole batch of acolytes for something-or-other you ought to talk to, and a pool of gant just like the one you described back on Mutton Island—”

She shuts the hatch on him.

Undeterred, the Innocent follows her inside, running a little. The Herald’s making for her cabin, with the quick skipping step she only employs for emergencies.

He just catches her at the door. “C’mon, don’t be like this. Look, can I come in?”

“If you must....shall we be saved, except by her light? Shall we be bourne, except by their grace?”
the Herald utters.

She paces the floor as she goes, describing the points of a sharp-edged triangle. The Innocent recognises the chant (one of her shorter ones, thankfully; by now he’s picked up a fair ear for which are liable to go on for a quarter hour, or require perplexing props). In the meantime, he keeps quiet and settles down on the very comfy bedding. There’s a half-knitted scarf in his pocket he’s been meaning to finish, now he’s dextrous enough to work needles again.

Last time he’d been in here was- when, the sunlight-smuggling run? When he was still new to the Neath, anyway. Then he’d only noticed a tasteful, if slightly over-dressed cabin; now he’s experienced enough to recognise its wealth as well. These cunning salt-cement mosaics on the floor, must be ratwork, and their labour’s not cheap. For light, she keeps a mountain-sherd which would cost a pretty penny in Port Carnelian. Plus a scrap-bag made from actual scrap, which is just...ostentatious.

“I feel a bit better about those Hesperidian poultices you’ve been brewing for me,” he says, once she’s done calling for the final infusion. “That’s been bothering me, how I’d ever scrape up the echoes to pay you back.”

“Don’t even ask how much your reflection cost,” the Herald warns, though not without her usual wryness of manner.

The Spy winces and looks away from her at his chords of secrets. “I hate being under an obligation to anyone.”

“Oh, stuff and nonsense, the no-man was my own curiosity,” she says, arranging herself a soft cushion nest next to him. “And I had no inclination for zailing all the way home from Irem with a crippled engineer- that sort of misapplied stoicism gets crews killed and ships wrecked. My family believes in an abundance of caution. And an abundance of money, to afford same."

“Even though you navigate the most ridiculously dangerous sea on the planet- it is, right? There isn’t another ocean of madness down here or anything?” the Spy asks, abruptly panicky.

“If there is, no one’s ever come back to mention it,” the Herald assures him. “But there you are. I’d hardly trust anyone else to chart our courses.”

“You let the Captain do that last one.”

“Because he was being so insistent- and perhaps he wasn’t so wrong as that. Salt’s country is a foretelling of a very unique flavour. Or did you find nothing to appreciate, amid the green and gold?”

“Maybe too much,” the Spy says slowly. “The destination for a boat I’m not ready to ride just yet. I couldn’t have done it myself, but I was glad when the Captain put us about.”

“Our traditional family fate. One day, when both the Neath and Surface have lost their charm- but you didn’t come in to ask about Avernus lore,” the Herald says. “You want to talk me into going off to meet these disciples?”

“Not exactly, if you really don’t want to. But how’d you know the place is so awful if you haven’t been yet?”

“I did go out early this morning, while you were on watch. Saw a few rituals, heard a story. I have- I have an absurd fancy I’ve told this place into being,” she admits. “A fable that’s well enough in tales, but to exist for real...Innocent, I know my Neath. Now, Wrack’s a scrap of nothing, and
Scrimshander could be new-

“You didn’t see beyond the gate. I think that library’s been there a long time.”

“Not necessarily underwater. But this place I can’t ignore. A school of rich and ancient rituals, as arcane as anything we speak in Whither- I would know, if this existed! It can’t be, yet it is.”

“A paradox. Maybe they’ve kept themselves very secret. Maybe it’s a whole huge submarine like our own, a city that zails underzee-” he coughs. “Whoa. Way too many z’s there.”

“I’d still have heard. Temtum who swims and sinks, him I know. But I’d swear this place couldn’t have existed when London fell. So what secrets do they hide down here? What blasphemies? For I’ll say this much, I’m positive they’re conducting rituals alone. Beholden to no god.”

“I’d love to play dumb here,” the Innocent says. “But it’d be stupid for me to write off miracles down here, considering the mountain-light...so they have power that’s just coming out of nowhere, huh? I can’t tell if that’d be science or scary or both.”

“It’s not sourceless. They work on flesh and bone. Living flesh and bone.”

“That might be science,” he admits. "But it isn’t kind.”

The Herald nods. “How much power? How far can they foresee, what shapings might they undertake? Enough knowledge to crumble London? Burn the temples at Whither? I’ve no way of reckoning. This is far outside my experience.”

“Then you have no choice,” the Spy says suddenly. “If you’re this convinced that this place shouldn’t be, that it might wipe out everything you love. If no one else knows yet, then you have to go in yourself. Learn everything you can. Leave the Clipper if you have to, but only return to Whither when you’re sure you know enough.”

“Is that what you tell yourself?” the Herald says lightly. “Through our unending Neath-night, when you lie in your bunk and dream of sunlight?”

He doesn’t smile. “Don’t worry about us. We’ll muddle back to London somehow, I bet the Crewmember’s better with the charts than they’ll let on.”

“You are so very devoted to duty. Not everyone is. Myself, for instance?”

“But I’ve seen your dedication. Your practicing, your devotions, going out on deck in all weathers- I know a calling when I see one, Herald, even if it isn’t mine. C’mon. This is getting under your skin, isn’t it? The lure of a task you know nobody else would be able to finish?”

“Of course...but tell me you weren’t a little afraid, when you first came down here.”

“I didn’t know what I was in for, that always makes it easier. Then I tried to get home and found out I couldn’t,” the Spy says, looking at his yarn very hard. “Started making for the Canal to see if that would work any better- it didn’t, of course- but before I knew it I’d somehow got hired on for chief engineer. And had enough sense to realise how lucky I’d been.” He puts the scarf down. “To have wound up in safe company. Or safe enough by Neath standards.”

“Then, would you do the same for me? Come down to the infection. Watch my back for me in the dark, guide my stories? For a few days. No more than the Clipper can spare.”

“I’ll do that,” he promises.
“I shouldn’t ask. But it will be rather a comfort.”

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“Have you knives? Have you knives?” the Marrowbone Buffer asks.

The Spy nods quietly, offers up a bone-tough weapon. “From Scrimshander.”

The Buffer bites it. “A good weapon. Suited for the underwaters. And yours?”

“Ravenglass,” the Herald says, not letting go of the handle.

The Buffer looks at her sideways (his other eye is covered in a ragged peligin patch). “Odd! No elder knapt, or bloodied eolith? No skyglass, to make the sacrifice?”

“Ravenglass,” she says steadily, “for its discretion. Your people should appreciate that, surely.”

The acolyte ignores her rhetoric, merely presses a rounded spiral into her hand. Stained indescribable colours, and the tip’s been whittled to a cross of razor edges. “Try this, when your wisdom fails. Now come. Come, come, we’ve a Thalatte-spawning to attend. I shouldn’t be here, if our Haruspex hadn’t foreseen your arrival.”

“I was afraid of that,” the Spy mutters.

They descend from the beach, through ventricles, down through labyrinths of striated muscles. The Spy unobtrusively jots notes in his journal as they go; so many turns here, ten paces past a rotting spinal column there. Hard work, though. The Buffer’s blubber-lamp smokes something harsh; he keeps having to blink away tears.

The Herald just keeps her eyes closed. Somehow she doesn’t put a foot wrong.

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“Dear Captain. I’ve gone down to the Pole with the Herald, so we can observe the disciples’ religious practices. Shouldn’t be more than a week or so. See you soon, Innocent Spy. Lovely, lovely. How very pious of them. Wouldn’t you agree, Crewmember? I say. Weren’t you here a moment ago?”

“Try half an hour ago,” the Student calls, ostentatiously holding a book in front of his nose (Canter’s Complete Guide and Instructions on Behemoustaches, and all Matters Pertaining Therein- he’s read it before, but it’ll serve as a prop). “Could you possibly take that note somewhere else? You’ve already read it aloud three times.”

“But something’s not right here,” the Captain says slowly. “Bones, you know. I can feel it.”

“I expect it’s just the stink. Nearly as bad as the Chelonate.”

The Captain shakes his head and wanders out of the wardroom. Nothing like so straightforward as his navigator’s tested rituals, but he fancies he can taste a wrongness at need. Something-something- was he holding something? He isn’t now.

“Concentrate, now, like a serious captain. What was it again?”

Oh yes, the Spy and Herald are off on holiday. Well, that’s fair enough. Perfectly sensible thing to do at a port.
He lets the more troubled thoughts subside—probably just another of his confounded spells again—and goes off to feed the cat.

“...” the Spy asks, staring up at the gigantic mass of zee-monster confronting them. A beached mouth, with fronds for eyes. Tomalley leaking out of a harpoon-wound, bleeding green against the yielding, pock-marred beach.

No one answers; no sound at all, except the faint stir of zeewater in motion and a distant humming sigh. He hushes.

Besides, it’s fairly obvious what they’re meant to do; everyone is hacking away at the beast. Staking down organs with spurs of bone (that explains the holes). Someone’s scooping up the spilt liver, for transfer to a cartilage-lined bucket. The Herald’s already deep into the matter, employing both knife and auger to tear the beast’s flesh.

*This monster’s bigger than everyone here. It’ll take us all day.*

He tries a tentative cut into the thing’s flesh, and almost yelps as the knife bounces off, nearly gashing him. Rubbery. It’ll need firmness to slice.

Slowly, but with more certainty, the Spy rips a hole through the skin and takes stock. Here’s a smooth purplish sack, bulging with distension. He cuts the binding sinews, tugs hard on the slippery thing and pulls the organ out intact. It pops: and a cloud of inky vapour gushes out. Within seconds his sailor’s smock is dripping with fluid, dark as treacle and even more sticky.

The beach is as silent as ever. Maybe he’s just imagining that air of amusement settling around him.

The Herald shakes her head, and removes a similar object with fond, gentle caresses. Her movements, as she deposits it on the ground, are the grateful affections of a long-forsaken lover. It emits a noise very like a bleat.

Huh.

It’s alive. It’s still alive. This whole zee-monster in front of them is living, breathing its last, as acolytes disembowel it and carry it off its body in parts.

The Innocent Spy pushes the hair back from his eyes, with a bloodied hand. There was a Surfacer, he knows, who upon seeing this sort of abuse would have cried out in protest. Found a way to make this stop. Or at least make a stand, force these silent butchers to hear what they’re doing. Make them carry him away, shouting for the poor beast’s mercy.

Simple; right. He wants to, very much.

But: banal considerations. His ignorance, Neath politics, implausibility of results. His promise to a shipmate—and if he breaks that, the only bond he trusts now, what’s left to put his faith in?

He plunges his knife deep into the monster’s flank; and says nothing.

*This is the fate for old sailors. To sit at the Pool, and catch the zee’s wisdom.*
It’s the only fate the Crewmember had ever expected for themselves; assuming they weren’t to drown first, or find themselves earmarked for passage up the bloody River, or any of the other thousand fates befalling those who run away to zee. What more could a sailor ask, than to sit here at the forgotten Pole, singing sad ballads and talking of ship sinkings?

But the idea had always been an abstract before: now it’s here, embodied and real. And real is not romantic. Real is just a lot of tomb-colony candidates who’ve found a place to be dull all by themselves, mumbling about that nice piece of blubber they devoured last week, amidst spells of silence. Besides which, the water here is gant-coloured. Not peligin, not the comely, restful shade of Neath-black- and what’s the use of that? Might as well be for land-lubbers.

They still want to be a sailor. Undoubtedly. No question.

Maybe, though, there’s a better end than this.

The Anonymous Crewmember fetches out a cushion from their haversack with a sigh (would it hurt their gant-staring any, to make this monster’s heart a little more comfortable?)

They sleep; and dream about what it would be like to make Captain.

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The Herald’s experienced a few different forms of ritual instruction, in her time. Whither, of course. Also Varchas mirror-snatching, her own family’s nuragic worships.

If the other disciples are silent; if their master stays secluded; well, this is only another form of indoctrination, she tells herself. There will be a point when it all makes sense.

The first Thalatte leaves her none the wiser. Nor the second, or third, or fourth.

By the fifth beast, the work starts to settle. So many slices, thusly; grasp the skin taut here, to forestall disintegration. She abandons her sage-and-rosemary vinaigrette to the Spy, who accepts gratefully; there are no zee-breezes to taste down here, and yet she feels the need to keep her breathing clear.

In between times, they are interrupted by sailors, old cunning fighters craving battle, their smocks torn and showing numerous unforgiving wounds beneath. There is no interruption of the rituals while this continues; she adapts her cuts to intercept both man and monster in a single stroke, tickles the acid bulbs to squirt just so into an opponent’s face. They’re only a distraction.

And her companions are not silent. Merely communicative in another mode.

Language born of ritual, or ritual expressed through language. A round cut and thrust, meat dripping from her knife - is this right?

The acolyte besides her nods, slashes one sharp cut - good.

By the dozenth monster, she’s beginning to grasp the grammar, comprehend the passed-off comments and the jokes. Very little makes sense as of yet, but she watches, observes with intent, comports herself with quiet dignity. Someone admires her work with the maul; she replies with a neat impalement.

Here in the blood and the bone, here in the entrails and the lowing of mortal injury, knife-patterns arise. Gant pole indeed, to match its irigo twin far across the zee. If the Nadir protects the Neath from Judgement-light, then what forces does this place oppose?
Gods, the acolytes whisper. *We cannot be seen by the gods. Here is remembrance of things forgot. The Histories never travelled by Salt, never flown by Storm. Queen Stone has seen a little truth. A shallow pool in which she spies her beauty, far from the raging waters. What would the Neath have been, without the Judgement’s lackey? This we remember, this we foretell.*

Against all she has ever learnt, their philosophy.

She delves raw hands into the monster’s stinking entrails, all but singing out for joy.

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How long’s it been? How long have they been down here, tearing the meat off zee-monsters, sweeping blubber into fire-pits and hauling slabs of bone?

The Spy checks his wrist, from a habit half-forgotten (his watch is in the workshop, carefully disassembled into non-anachronistic pieces until such time as London society picks up the fashion.) Hours, at least; he’s long since moved past normal tiredness into the serenity of utter exhaustion. But there’s limits even to that.

“D’you think we’ll be done soon?” he whispers to the Herald.

She says nothing, just passes him a flask of something; he's too worn to ask what, just takes a grateful gulp. Must have been brewed back on the *Clipper*, but the liquid's still piping hot and hits him hard.

Like velvet, rubbed against the pile; like a cake, baked with bitters. And yes, rather like bat droppings.

"I took a sip from one of Nikki's triple-shot espressos by mistake once,” the Spy mutters. "This is worse."

Silently, she holds her hand out for the flask.

"No thanks. I mean, thanks." Another long pull has him feeling steadier. Vibrant, even: no wonder people are addicted to this stuff. Darkdrop must be one hell of an upper.

He licks coffee off his lips, and settles down to shovelling with renewed purpose.

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The ship’s never been so quiet. With even her engines powered down, and no noisy shipmates hanging about the place, only the occasional creak of metal or zee-monster hum interrupt her silence. Solitude complete and unimpaired.

The Student can’t remember when he last enjoyed a week this much.

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A talk-hungry part of his mind starts working up the next letter for Jack, in among the breathless heaving of meat, the blood-streaked boredom. *Never mind the devils over by the Iron Republic, I think I might have wandered into my own personal hell by mistake.*

*Fighting, endless fighting, as the sailors strive for the choice part of the beach, where the zee-monsters swim up. This being the Neath it doesn’t appear to be lethal - I’ve battered away the same man with a scrap of red linen around his neck three times now, I think. They want the beasts*
same as the acolytes, and truth be told I can hardly tell the difference. When the sailors get hold of one they tear it into pieces the same way, only they feast on it as well.

The acolytes don’t stop for rest or meals; when one collapses into stupor, someone shoves them out of range of the knifework until they’re revived enough to crawl back, striking what cuts they can from the ground. People chew raw blubber as they go. (I’ve been doing it too. Minnesota survivalism over California finickiness, when push comes to shove.) I’d go back to the Clipper in a heartbeat, but my map was spoilt by a blob of splanchic tissue, and there has to be a break in this sometime- hasn’t there? How many monsters can there be in one zee?

Here comes another batch of sailors. He’s starting to feel sympathetic towards them; at least they use the beast for some good purpose.

Then he catches sight of one fortunate with half a Beloved’s skull in their hands, thrusting fleshy lumps into their mouth so fast the greasy blubber starts spilling out again. Their fellows fight for a piece, tugging at the monster until the creature’s eye bursts over them all, scattering salt tears.

“A plague on both your houses,” the Spy mutters. One sailor’s much like another, of course, but there, in the corner by a still-writhing maw, is that their own?

He pummels his way through the medley, too busy even to notice the pain of repeated impact, side-stepping knives and ducking as he goes. Don’t kill anyone, please, don’t hurt anyone until I reach you, I don’t need to watch that today-

It’s their Crewmember, all right. No trace of worry or despair in their face, just dreamy mesmerisation. No blood on them yet, or none that isn’t a hundred years old already.

“Remember me?” he asks, intent.

They don’t hear him; or else they don’t understand.

Here comes a sharp blade, to kiss his breast, as he drops his own weapon and shudders back- why was I holding that on them? - and then the Crewmember stumbles over a mangled organ-jelly underfoot, lands smack on the ground.

Hanging a little over them, gasping with good fortune, the Spy swings to and from the jute he’d lassoed with a useful piece of string. That’d been more luck than judgement.

He drops down on top of his shipmate, knocks them out with a fast if inelegant backhand. That should keep them safe. Nobody here seems to want to fight anything that doesn’t fight back.

Enough’s enough. He’s about to call the Herald, to say he’s taking the Crewmember home whatever she plans to do next- when he realises that everything’s finished. Sailors walk away, gnawing at their trophies. The acolytes are cleaning up. Only one last zee-monster lies stranded on the beach: the spawning must be over.

A red-cloaked woman hobbles towards the beast. He hasn’t noticed her before.

The Herald, still breathless (her dress is stiff and blackened with blood), does something the Spy’s never seen her do: curtsey.

“Our Fading Haruspex,” one of the acolytes announces.

The Herald smiles. “A new use-name, since Whither?”
“Whither was a long time ago, and another life,” the Haruspex says. “Will you come and wield the knife, for me?”

“Could I ever refuse?”

“You two know each other?” the Spy asks.

“I should say so,” the Herald tells him. “A mentor of mine, until she was expelled for blasphemy.”

“And you understand, now, the nature of that blasphemy?” the Haruspex asks. “A question not to be asked? The histories untold, the gods lacking worship?”

There’s more, but the Crewmember’s stirring, and he gladly turns his attentions towards them.

“What in Storm’s name happened?”

“Wish I knew. You attacked me, so I had to jump you.”

They don’t deny it. “That’s not a thing I’d have done in my right mind.”

“I know. Whatever this place does to people,” the Spy says, yawning as he searches for his knife. “I think we’ve both had more than enough of it. ‘Mon, let’s get back to the ship. You know the way, right?”

“No, I lost my way. You don’t either?”

“Not to be sure.” Here’s the blade, coated in blood and drippings. He licks it clean before sheathing it. “We’ll just have to wait for the Herald after all. ‘m so tired I probably wouldn’t make it anyway.”

“Ditto.”

Out in the water, the Herald takes the first virginal cut into their last Beloved’s flesh. “How came it you weren’t here, for the spawning-festival?”

“Illness. Never grow old, Herald, ‘tis a piteous disease. Must you leave so soon, then?”

She chuckles. "Haven't you forseen my decision?"

“But not the reason for it. Come, age grows impatient.”

“You never had any to begin with. Haruspex, I owe a debt,” the Herald says, looking away from her gory work towards her exhausted shipmates.

“It may be too late for me, before you pay it. This history recedes; soon it will only be now, and then nothing at all.”

“I know. But there’s something more than gods and histories, to consider.”

“Can you define your terms?” the Haruspex asks, every inch the matronly Whither instructor.

“What’s a zailor for, if not comradeship over good sense?"

"Then are you a zailor, not the votary I thought you?"

The Herald permits herself a wintry smile, as she renders up the liver. "When we docked, I'd have
said the latter. But this place has rather shaken my faith."

"You'll rise above the questions, else it was no faith worth keeping," the Haruspex says.

"Is that what you see, in the flesh?"

"Come now. No one requires a good Beloved's liver to read that."

There is no reason that he shouldn’t be studying in the wardroom, by the light and the friendly mirror (the Student fancies his reflection winks at him, sometimes). No reason whatsoever.

When he hears a step in the passage, he promptly puts his book down and tries to guess the owner. Quick and unsteady, now who would that be?

It’s the Innocent. Caked in blood, blubber and who knows what else, looking very fraught.

“Hello,” the Student says, startled into simplicity. “You look like you’ve been through the wars. What’s happening?”

“’s all over now. Gonna go wash up-”

“Understandable.”

“-so could you put on some mushroom broth? Fill up the kettle, I don’t think anybody is going to want meat for tea tonight.”

His temporary discomfiture, annoying though it is, will have to give way before a level of catastrophe like this. “Of course. But false-stars above! Nobody would have called you innocent if we’d seen you like this, your first time aboard."

“Maybe I’m getting a little tired of being called that,” the Spy starts, drily.

“Ah,” the Student says, promptly abandoning his comfortable cushion-pile. “But use-names are use-names, you know. Enjoy your bath then. I’ll have that tea ready in two shakes of a lamb’s tail!”

“Besides, it’s mostly zee-monster blood anyway- well, if you’re going to be rude and just walk out of here while I’m talking, I guess you don’t need to know that,” the Spy says to the empty room.

This is not the kindest he’s ever been. Somebody nicer would be off to clarify right now, for the sake of the Student’s feelings.

“Somebody nicer hasn’t just spent a week up to their elbows in entrails,” the Spy mutters, going off to change. “Pete Thornton, you just wait until I get my hands on you…”
“Spiders.”
“Spiders?”
“Spiders.”
“Spiders! Spiders!”
“Dooooommm!”

They all glare at the Cynical Herald, who shrugs and looks mildly apologetic.

“Can we leave now?” the Spy asks hopefully.
Dear Jack,

We’ve fetched up somewhere with real sunlight! Or what looks like real sunlight—hot and beautiful and uncompromising as summer in LA, and the Captain’s warned everybody it’s probably lethal in high doses. I’m being careful, promise.

But it’s so good to be writing by daylight again, rather than gas or candles. Continuous light does get a tiny bit monotonous (I’d love to see a dawn again, or a dusky purple sunset), but really, I’m not complaining. This place is warm and friendly, perfect to recover after our recent travails. Good for dreaming, too.

That’s helpful, because I missed a lot of sleep back at the Gant Pole and need to catch up. This Fulgent Impeller, you see…hmm. I haven’t dared put it to paper yet. Sounds silly.

Oh, what the hey. I’m scoffing breadfruit on a steampunk ship, in a sunlit hole a century before our time, this is already ridiculous. You’ve heard of lucid dreaming? Like that, but more constructive.

See, the Fingerking in question gave me a flask of venom-liquor, to guide me towards the engine. Basically, the thing I’m hoping to build is so fancy and overpowered, it’s already trying to will itself into existence; we just need to help it along a little. I asked whether that means it’s sentient, and the answer is that nobody has a clue. My contact is a bit of an old crank, I gather; he’s as much of a mechanic as anything without hands can be (poor thing). Been pottering about trying to get this thing into existence for umpteen thousand years. At least, he keeps making foreboding comments about how it would have been finished back during the Second City’s reign, if only a mischievous cat hadn’t nudged exactly the wrong part at the wrong time. I’ve asked the Mog to keep an eye out for any such interference.

Yeah, I asked a cat to watch over my dreams. Neath-gods help me.

But I take a sip of liquor in my nightly cup of cordial, and next thing I know I’m traveling Parabola, piecing together my engine. That’s the easy part. Hard part is translating it into anything coherent afterwards. You know how you can have an amazing revelation in a dream that turns out to be utter gibberish when you wake up? Turns out that just because you know there’s a grain of truth in there, doesn’t make it any easier to find...

The Student’s been no end of help, listening to my incoherent burbling and offering practical suggestions (he says it’s the only problem that’s as interesting to contemplate as his enigmas, these days). F’instance, he figured out that “a casket of night bones” probably means Stygian ivory. Thirty-five lots of it, as far we can make out, which you can buy in the Khanate for about a thousand echoes (let’s put it this way, for that price I could hire out a private rat army. Two of them.) That much cash would dent even the Herald’s pocketbook. Plus we’d never get it all aboard the Clipper. Lovely little ship, but she’s just too small.

I might have to leave here one of these days- but not any time soon. And perhaps we could ferry it in lots, or something.

The hard part, which I just figured out last night, is that it’s not enough to just build the machine proper; I need a construct that understands space-time on an intuitive level. A Stone Pig would do it- part of the Bazaar’s engines- but it’d probably notice if we borrowed that. We might have to resort to plan B, which would entail purchasing an Element of Dawn from Zelo’s Town- because
the Dawn Machine is itself a bit like the Bazaar, and possesses the hypothetical capacity for navigating treachery-tangles, even if it doesn’t move. The Student’s revolutionary leanings worry me, but I have to admit, I’d never have made the connection without his advice. Although that’s not practical to bargain for either, with a cutter’s storage capacity—but I’ll think of something.

The Innocent looks up from the journal and over at the Student (soaking up sunlight, with his hat over his eyes).

“Hey. What does happen if we break into the Bazaar and borrowed a pig? Would anyone notice?”

“It’s been tried,” the Student says. “During the Third City...someone made it into the Sundered Sea without permission. You don’t want to know what happened.”

“Why not?”

“You know the ruins between Venderbight and Tanah-Chook? That solitary temple island? Rumour sayeth that the Masters had a prison built for the last person who tried that. And that they’re still there, screaming.”

The Innocent shudders; the Student levers himself up and chews at a bat-feather. “Mind, the other rumour is that it’s the Third City’s biggest popcorn storehouse.”

He neatly dodges a thrown cushion and continues. “So are you quite certain that physical proximity is required, even to enter their dreams? Because that is the definition of night’s bright dangerous.”

“My Fingerking thinks the closer, the better. And I have a hunch I wouldn’t get a second chance, if I miff it once...so yeah, current plan is that’ll be my penultimate dream. Then I’ll find the heart last. He’s reckoned out this whole timeline, for what order I ought to be dreaming up the blueprints.”

“I’ve never known anyone to talk about a Fingerking with such familiarity.”

“Well, the way I see it we have an equal partnership. He’s the architect- or the engine itself is- and I’m the mechanic putting it together. Though how I’ll manage to make one for each of us is going to be a trick.”

“Find yourself the captain of a nice hefty dreadnought and rent it to them on contract,” the Student suggests. “They pay for it, you’ll serve as chief engineer and maintain it while they sail the zee, but take the engine with you when you leave. If the Impeller’s half as good as we think it is, their ship ought to be all but unsinkable. Far safer than you are on the Clipper now, in fact. Then do it all over again to get your own.”

“By that time I might be back to my own time again, just in the natural course of things.”

“Then it’ll be something to do while you’re waiting.”

“I suppose so,” the Innocent muses. “You know, I’m actually getting quite excited about this. It’s definitely starting to sound plan-shaped.”

“Wonderful,” the Student says, getting up and stretching. “And speaking of convoluted plans, this little interlude has been pleasant enough, but I want to be carrying on shortly. Enigmas won’t collect themselves, you know.”

“You’re no fun,” the Innocent says reluctantly. “How can you be so keen to leave already?”
“Remember, I haven’t the same sentimental attachment to sunlight that you Surfacers have. Although how the Crewmember came by their liking for it…” the Student stops, puzzled. “Ah well, that’s crew for you.”

“That explains precisely nothing.”

“It’s a traditional weakness of Neath crews. You must have noticed ours is devoted to tradition. Nobody can be that judiciously stereotypical, without a good deal of study. Heigh-ho, see you at dinner. Don’t sit in the sun too long.”

“I guess not,” the Innocent agrees. It annoys him, to hear the catch in his voice; but it’ll be hard to go back to Neath-dark and fungal-crackers this soon. Just as he’s almost got used to living like a normal person again.

And the light. The light.

Hang on. There’s his mirror-catch box in the lazarette, isn’t there?

Time to try it out.
Okay, that was a mistake.

He has a vague recollection of collapsing on deck, while hugging a box of sunlight to his chest. Hands tearing it from his desperate hold, soothing fresh water applied to angry burns. All rather hazy, though.

A good deal of time must have passed; windless as the Unterzee is, the Clipper’s never quite so still as dry land, and he doesn't recognise his surroundings. A private room, in hospital? His hand’s healed up (finally!) and there’s mountain-light streaming through a window. Softer and more exultant than the real stuff they were just enjoying, which is sort of a dead giveaway. Must be somewhere on the Elder Continent.

"Where are we now?" the Spy asks.

"Adam's Way," the Herald tells him, putting down her copy of Travelling at Night. "We didn't dare leave your wounds until London, and this was the closest hospital we could find. The Captain's still upset that they confiscated the Mount Palmerston port report he was saving."

"Cheerful as always," he murmurs drowsily.

"Now listen, this is very important. Did you end up on the boat?"

"Oh. You mean, did I die? No, I’d have remembered that. Still good to leave the Neath, right?"

"In theory." The Herald purses her lips, ever cynical. "You might want to take a long vacation on the Elder Continent first. They say Vesture is beautiful this time of year. And then your passageway home - southward, isn't it?"

"Whoa, whoa! I was only asking. Do you want me off the ship or something?"

"Look. I came into this rather tedious city full of unbearable Presbyterates, and a ward full of patients who occasionally catch fire, to sit at your bedside. All so I could say one thing: if you ever want to return to the Surface, leave now. Take the pilgrimage to Stone if you like, or buy passage to the Cumaean Canal and get that steamer ticket you were dreaming about, because if you stay on I suspect you'll have to live with that. You're getting in over your head, Innocent."

His wry expression owes nothing to naivete. "You sound exactly like Pete warning me when I'm on a hot trail."

"That doesn't make it bad advice."

"Suppose not." He squints indistinctly at her, rummages around in the box of possessions by the bedside. "You know, if anyone had figured out that this was going to be a real deep cover assignment, my Surface handlers never would have sent me. My speciality was quick in, quick out, cos they figured I'd get too bored to function otherwise. I tended to agree with them."

"Then why change your mind, now?"
“I’m just not sure anyone else could do it. I’m not sure I can do it, but I’m here and at least I’ve picked up a few tips about how the Neath works. And I want that Fulgent Impeller pretty badly, too.”

"All right. You've had your warning."

"Thanks all the same."

"Perhaps it's as well you're so pigheaded, or we'd be languishing in the Elder Continent without an engineer. Again."

"Is that your way of saying you're glad I'm staying?"

She picks up her book again, pointedly removes the marker. "If you want playful banter, try the Anonymous Crewmember. No doubt you two will be laughing all the way to the boat before this is over."

"Uh-huh," he says, chucking the box aside. "What happened to my contact lenses?"

"What?"

"Contact lenses. Um, little bits of glass. For my eyes, so I can see things."

"Those were yours? Oh...blast it. The Crewmember did such a considerate exorcism."

"A - what, they did what now?"

"We thought they were mirror-fragments from your box, so they took them out to stop you getting hurt by anything Parabolan. They're at the bottom of the Unterzee now, I'm afraid."

The Innocent leans back in a decidedly huffy fashion. "Well, that's great. Just great. Herald, this is a lot worse than having to do engineering with one hand tied behind my back- how am I supposed to fix anything, if I can't even see what I'm doing?"

"We aren't total barbarians down here. Someone should be able to get you these - contact lenses?"

"I don't even know if they've been invented yet. Or even if they have, I don't think I fancy the nineteenth century version."

"Ah," the Herald says, looking a trifle stricken. "Would spectacles do?"

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“I told you they did a good Beloved blubber here,” the Crewmember says with satisfaction, taking yet another slice of crunchy fried fat from the serving platter. The restaurant’s hidden away down the docks and exceptionally jati, but the food’s fine as fine.

They’re the only cheerful one here. The other two are eating (it takes quite a disaster to put a Londoner off their tea), but clearly without enjoying it very much. Shame.

“We’re going to have to do something,” the Herald says. “Apparently he can’t see without aid. And fretting no end about what use he’ll be as chief engineer in this condition.”

“We could just leave him here to recuperate,” the Student proposes. “Pay him off. The Elder Continent is a fine place for rest cures.”
“I’m not talking about a life-threatening illness, it’s just a matter of finding him a set of glasses.” She frowns at the Student. “Why, are you so keen to be rid of him?”

“I’m…impatient, all right? We’ve done more for him than most ships would have, and now you want to slow us down even more. Don’t forget, I had time to fit in an entire trip to Varchas while he was out.”

“So I miscalculated his laudanum dosage,” the Herald says, sour and weary. "That's not his fault. Besides which, you have one more enigma than when we came, don't you?”

“Yes. Which just makes me that more anxious to acquire more,” the Student says, picking at his fruit collation. “I have already written a monograph for the University, about the exponential influence of prolonged enigma contemplation. By the time we find the seventh I expect to be as bad as the Captain.”

“You really aren’t well, are you?” the Herald says curiously. (His hands tremble, if only slightly; and his usual unfocused air has turned from casual indifference to a positive vice). “But then, I expect you know what you’re doing.”

“Enough,” he agrees, jabbing his fork into a slice of solacefruit. “Not to be dissuaded, certainly.”

“Officers,” the Crewmember says, unimpressed. “Point at hand’s our engineer, isn't it, and his spectacles? Now what I figure is, there won’t be any help to be found in the city proper- they’d laugh at that stuff on the Continent. We’ll have to look elsewhere.”

“Don’t tell me,” the Student says, with a theatrical shudder. “Black market peddling?”

“Only help for it.”

“I don’t approve. Notoriously bad quality, cheap nasty stuff- what’s the expression? ‘Buy a jati bird, and watch your money fly away?’”

“You only say that because you’re the prejudiced University type. Dockers haven’t any trouble making the right connections.”

“I’ve found more than one book through them that no amount of Bazaar-wrangling could turn up,” the Herald puts in. “If that alters your opinion any.”

Despite himself, the Student listens.

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“Here you go,” the Crewmember says proudly. “One set of freshly-ground glasses. And two more pairs for emergencies.”

“I hate to sound ungrateful, but they look ridiculous,” the Innocent says in a small voice. “I mean, heavy and dark and old-fashioned- they’re not half as discreet, you have to admit.”

“Attend, because I want you to appreciate this,” the Student says in aggrieved tones. “First we had to chase down a Frivolous Glass-blower, in order to get the lenses.”

“I liked them. They seemed to know what they was doing.”

“Yes, well, we had to blackmail them before they agreed to help us out, by threatening to reveal them as a Snuffer to the authorities. Which bit of information we got from the Exiled Baker, who
told us that only on condition that we go slaughter a different Snuffer posing as an Avaricious Blemmigan. It seems that Adam's Way is not only full of Snuffers, but Snuffers who are so convinced they're people that they hold fevered animosities against the others. So we go chase down this other Snuffer, don't kill it-

"I insisted on that, because I knew you'd make such a fuss if we killed anyone in the process of acquiring these wretched glasses," the Herald interrupts.

"Thanks?" the Innocent splutters. "Honestly, is that the only reason you refrained from going homicidal on the poor thing?"

"That poor thing stole somebody's face and wears it as a face," the Crewmember says helpfully. "Nasty things, Snuffers."

"So instead we convinced this Snuffer, who is pretending to be a person pretending to be a Blemmigan," the Student says, much annoyed, "to take passage on the next ship out. By dint of bribing them with the ship's entire stock of candles. So now, after chasing across half the port all day, would it kill you to demonstrate some gratitude?"

"Can I say yes?" the Innocent asks, studying his reflection with distinct unhappiness. "I mean, look at what this does to my nose. I don't even look like me!"

"Eh, I think they look sweet," the Crewmember offers. "Brings out your character, really."

"Don't try to butter me up into liking these. It won't work."

"I have an idea," the Herald says abruptly. "Pass them over here."

"Okay..."

He does. "Now what?"

"Now I'm going to keep them hostage all night is what, and maybe in the morning-" She breaks off, blinking. Considering how well she can comport herself in a fight, and how helpful her foresight can be in one, what is she doing on the floor?

"Don't mess with a player of the Game," the Innocent Spy comments, putting his glasses on. "Sorry, but you have no idea how much you just scared me there. You're right, an ugly set of glasses is a lot better than none at all."

"I have every idea," the Herald mutters. "Or my tailbone does."

"So there you are then," the Crewmember says to the Student. "Jati wins, every time."

"If we'd gone through official Bazaar channels, like back home, we'd have found something he wouldn't have complained about so much."

"But seeing as the Bazaar isn't bloody well here, that's not much use, is it?"

“It’s okay,” the Innocent says, resigned. “I’ll get used to them. Eventually. At least they aren’t hideously bright blue or anything.”

Everybody looks at him.

“It was a disguise, okay?”
Chapter End Notes

To clarify the point for anyone who cares about MacGyver continuity (probably just Tanista, then): yes, I do figure he got through all seven seasons with contact lenses, or at least I can imagine it happening. Hard gas permeable, which in a pinch can last for a lot longer than the regular sort, ought to work for the length of time that’s passed in “Fulgent Engineering”.

(And he did have an extra pair at one point, but they were….eaten by a curious Blemmigan during his initial trip on the Elder Continent. Or something. I’ll tell that story sometime, if it seems necessary.)
Dear Jack,

Five Searing Enigmas and counting. The Student's a dignified sort, but he'd be bouncing off the walls if he knew how.

Not that he was especially considerate in how he went about acquiring it- there was some kerfluffle about his interrupting a sacred ritual to get this one, and the Herald's not speaking to him. Again. (She's been irritable since we left Apis Meet; I think she likes mountain-light even more than the real thing.) Visage only allows one visitor per ship's stay, so in the meantime the Crewmember and I had fun talking shop with the other London ship docked here. Odd how rarely one sees other Londoners on the Unterzee. I honestly don't recall it happening before.

Huh, I'm saying that as though London's the obvious and only choice of loyalties- but who knows, if my luck had gone differently, maybe I'd be sailing on an electrified vessel and practicing my Hudum. (You know my knack for languages.) By rights I ought to at least consider it. Pete didn't send me down here to play favourites.

But as for that London ship...it's called the Bonny Swan, and I'm no end envious of them. They all have names! Honest to goodness actual names. Captain Swinburne, First Mate Francis, a bosun called Richard...a whole array of zailors who have agreed they can't be bothered with use-names and all go by the ones they were christened with. Or plausible substitutes, anyway. Be tempting to join up if I ever remember mine. Course, the Crewmember just snorts and says that no good will come of voyaging with a named Captain. When they like, they can be just as superstitious as the Herald.

Anyway, duty calls; I'm off to do my port report. For a port I can't enter. Wish me luck!

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Still, he's an old hand at composing these now. A few interviews, a couple of sketches of the port, or what he can see of it while perched on top of the Clipper's smokestack (maybe he can't draw like the Herald, but he's a competent enough draughtsman to make a street map). Combined with the Student's ebullient account of his adventuring, he'll have this knocked out in no time.

Whistling, the Innocent Spy wanders into the provisions locker to sneak a bite from their Aestival supplies. Solacefruit is sweeter than any Surface fruit he remembers, more enthralling, better in every way, but there's a tang about sunlight-nurtured fruit that even the Elder Continent can't match. Pen in one hand and piece of sugar cane in the other, he settles down to write.

It'd have been better to have seen the place himself, of course- but the Student's keen to get on tomorrow. Fair enough. The Unterzee's too big to see everything in one series of trips, anyway. One of these days (well, years, if he's being honest), he'll have to give up zailing. Give all these strange places a proper, thoroughgoing study, not just these cursory glimpses. Goodness knows a century should be long enough.

He's just finishing up shading the port's weird stone head, when a snatch of conversation drifts down from the deck hatchway. Sounds like Chief Engineer Holloway: nice enough sort, discounting her alarming opinions about Iron Republic fuel, and the reckless disregard for health and safety in her engine room...okay, not actually nice. Boisterous though.
"...but I've signed my contract long since. What's wrong with your own engineer, if I may ask?"

Ah. He should probably go. Or announce he's listening.

But then, in his profession eavesdropping is a virtue.

"Too easily distracted," the Student says, impatience etched in his voice. "Too busy dreaming...I'm willing to pay a premium for someone who can get this ship to go as fast as I want, that's all. We've had an Avid Suppressor rotting in the hold since London, and he hasn't lifted a finger to put it in."

She laughs. "On a cutter? Your substructure is all wrong, that'd never work. He was probably just being polite. Now I'd have gone ahead and called you the idiot that you are, for buying it."

"Ah," the Student resumes, after a pregnant pause. "But you see, I'm the sort who'd prefer being informed to having my feelings spared. And those Milebreaker modifications of yours - I was deeply impressed. Will you consider my offer?"

"It wouldn't be an easy relationship. Captains may not think much of moving officers around, but it's never that simple belowdecks. Again, this is such a small ship. I have my own private cabin aboard the *Swan*."

"That's all right, we can make arrangements. I don't see that a crewmember needs their own room, they can bunk down in the hold. Or move into our Spy's berth, if I can pay him off here."

"You are keen to be rid of him, aren't you? Will you be that eager to break my own contract?"

"I wasn't going to mention this," the Student says, in gravely reluctant tones. "But wouldn't you know it, we'd left London before I discovered he was Seeking?"

"Salt in the zee!"

"Quite."

"And of course no one wants to share their ship with a cannibal," Holloway says understandingly. "All right, I'll ask my captain. If nothing else, we have an apprentice stoker who wants to make something of himself. I've been training him, he should be competent enough to get you back to London."

"Apprentice material wouldn't do. As I said, I'm working against time here."

"Hmm. How much is it worth to you?"

The Innocent Spy doesn't try to leave, through their disagreements on the niceties of contract-negotiation, arbitraged fees, and penalty clauses gets tediously technical at this point. As though staying perfectly still will stop it happening. Bring them to come down and laugh with him over this hilarious sitcom scenario, a misunderstood joke that'll be over and resolved in half an hour.

It isn't going to be that easy. The aftertaste of cane goes sour in his mouth- what's he to do here, once exiled from the *Clipper's* safety? A crate, a few echoes, a handful of dreams, that's all he'll have. Not much to show for a year underneath.

The part of his mind that concentrates on survival kicks into gear, numb as he is: should he make for London, or Port Carnelian? Does he have enough to purchase passage, can he work his way again? How long might it take before another ship arrives? Better ask the Crewmember if they have any jati contacts at the dock, if he can't officially enter Visage; maybe go and talk to the
Dark-Spectacled Admiral about intelligence work, as the Captain had once suggested...

*But I wasn’t expecting to rebuild my life all over again. Not so soon, not like this- it was hard enough the first time!*

Another step: Captain Swinburne's distinctive hob-nailed boots, denting their deck. His Chief Engineer asks for permission to break her contract. He firmly refuses. End of discussion.

*This is probably one time you should be glad of the Masters, the Spy tells himself. If it wasn't for their anti-union zailor contracts, you'd be out of a job now.*

The thought does not make him feel a whit better.

And he's spilt cane juice all over his port report.

*****************

"Tell me why," the Spy says at tea.

Two hours later, and his fear's cooled to anger. Besides, the Crewmember's outraged sympathy has steadied his nerves. They nod at him approvingly, between bites of fried blue potatoes.

"Tell you why what?" the Student says, not looking up from *Khanate Kuriosities*.

"Why I almost got replaced by the Swan's engineer? What's the matter, haven't I looked after the ship well enough for you?"

"I want this trip over with," the Student says, slamming his book down. "Frostfound's calling. And you must admit, she's a better mechanic than you are."

"She has an engine hookup that runs on terror, for Storm's sake! Is that what you want?"

"If it gets me across the Unterzee faster, yes! And if she'd had an ounce of backbone, I'd have taken her on whatever that Swinburne said, but she didn't and you're here, so that's that. There's no prospect of getting anyone better for the rest of the voyage, so you might as well stay on."

"And you think that makes it all square, just because I haven't been fired."

"Yes," the Student says calmly. "Also, don't go listening at doors next time."

"You were having a conversation on deck. That's not private. That is a very public conversation."

"It is not, if the third party deliberately obfuscates their presence."

"Oh, stop quibbling," the Crewmember says. "Just what I always told you, Innocent, he's a landlubber through and through. No appreciation of the zee-code."

"I have yet to be convinced this code exists. It's not listed in any of my University nautical studies."

"You don't need to write down a thing like the zee-code, it's all in your head and your heart and your gut. Pray to the gods, don't invoke them unless it's an emergency. Never eat pork. And whatever else you do, whatever crimes you commit, never let down a shipmate!"

"Pompous Docker fluff to justify casual thievery and covering up for it, in other words. You needn't worry about your own job, I'm perfectly convinced that any other zailor would be just as bad as you are."
"Was he always like this?" the Crewmember asks.

"Actually...." the Innocent starts.

"No, it was one of those you-know-whats. Trivium questions."

"Rhetorical. But no, I don't think he was. I mean, he was always a bit self-absorbed, a bit pedantic, but- is this enigma quest starting to affect your thinking?" the Innocent asks guilelessly.

The Student drops his book.

Picks it up with faltering fingers, and departs without another word.

"From the expression he had, I'd say you've had your revenge."

"If that was what I'd wanted, but it wasn't. I like this ship," the Spy murmurs. "I don't want to think about what happens afterwards."

"Innocent, it may be a rough Neath out there, but you'll manage," the Crewmember assures him. "Voyages all have to end, you know. And don't forget you have an Impeller to go build, on a bigger and better ship than this."

"That's true," the Innocent says softly. "Engineering, now that's something that's never let me down."

"What, even though it's all different here? Dream-engines and snakes and all that?"

"Even so. Science is science, even if the rules have changed in the Neath. The point is, they're consistent changes, amenable to understanding once you start making sense of the probabilities. So I'll have that going for me."

The Herald storms in, holding a dripping cloth against her brow. "For the love of Stone, would you all stop shouting!"

"Well, the main culprit has just stalked off to his cabin," the Crewmember observes. "What's the matter, did he try to sack you as well?"

"What? No, there's an Alteration brewing- the pressure drops always give me headaches. No zailing for at least a week, I don't like these unwinds."

"The Student won't be happy about that," the Spy remarks.

"The Student will have to live with it. Or else he won't."

The Crewmember laughs.

They're the only one to do so, but then, officers can be such a stuck-up lot.

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All things considered, the Spy's not much surprised by his nightmare that night. Great Game shenanigans? Chess, something like that.

It fades quickly enough once he wakes to the comforting warmth of his bunk, the reassuring dim twilight given off by a humming engine. Heat and light, as ever. This really is one of the cosiest spots he's ever lived in. A lot nicer than the grubby anonymous loft waiting for him back (or
forward) in LA, come to think of it.

But the Crewmember’s right; his stint on the *Clipper* won’t last forever. Maybe he even owes the Student, for jolting him out of lazy complacency. That’s no attitude for any self-respecting spy to take. Especially not in the Neath.

Meanwhile, though, he has a little more time to appreciate his current surroundings. Easy duties, plenty of time to read and a good library to choose from (another point in the Student’s favour—poor kid, this enigma hunt is hurting him more than anyone else). This thick soft prophet-feather duvet, tangled in the cushions. He pulls it down around him and settles in again.

Perfect. Even the *Clipper’s* gentle motion to lull him to sleep. That’ll be something to ask about on his next ship, whether he can get a cabin close by...hang about. Why are they moving?

The Spy throws a smock on over his silks, takes a fast, perfunctory look at the engines—someone’s come and switched on, while he was asleep. Climbs the ladder to the bridge. Carefully not looking down as the ship vibrates unexpectedly, nearly throwing him as she takes a wave. Hasn’t today’s been stressful enough already?

“Move!” the Herald shouts.

“Thankee kindly, no,” the Student replies. He’s piled a couple of cushions on a crate, atop of which arrangement he’s steering. Doesn’t look like he’s apt to budge any time soon. “Don’t forget, it’s my watch. Besides, do you think you’re the only one who can chart a course?”

“Forget my omens, though I can assure you they’re all disastrous right now, it’s just basic seamanship! Nobody sails in a storm like this, not unless they’re hoping to meet the Fathomking the hard way.”

“Fog. That’s a fog out there, and how many of those have we sailed in by now? Besides, if you’re right about this impending Alteration, then I want us safely docked in Nuncio before it ends up halfway across the Unterzee.”

“We’ll never get there,” the Herald says through clenched teeth. “What are you paying a navigator for, if not to navigate? And I say we turn around, right now, and ride this out in Visage before our toy of a ship gets ripped to pieces.”

“Make me. I have a crate of coffee to keep me awake, so I shan’t fall asleep any time soon. It’s not a very long voyage, if your charts are remotely accurate. Besides,” the Student says, with a smile that for once makes him seems as young as he is, “I took the precaution of enlisting the Captain’s aid. That’s the first rule of your silly zee-code, isn’t it? Whatever he says goes, yes?”

“What’d you say to him?” the Spy asks.

“That I was in an expansive mood and planned to take all the watches until we reach Nuncio, simple as that. He agreed. There you go.”

“I’ll go have a word,” the Herald mutters, yanking at the door handle.

“I also welded the locks shut. Don’t worry, I made sure to leave some crackers and First Sporing in his cabin. He’ll be perfectly happy to ride this out.”

“Did you spare a single, solitary consideration for how we’d get out again when we do finally reach port?”
“Certainly. Our engineer can take care of it, won’t you?”

“This is about the stupidest reason anyone’s ever asked me to fix anything,” the Spy mutters, prying at the join. “Shouldn’t take me long, Herald. I’ll have to fetch my oxyacetylene welder.”

“What do you think I used to weld the locks in the first place?” the Student calls. “It’s locked in my room. The key to which I am presently sitting on.”

“Innocent. He’s utterly serious, isn’t he?”

“I’m glad to hear you’ve noticed!” the Student says heartily. “All extremely logical, I’ve worked everything out. Why don’t you two go to bed now and leave me to it?”

“I need an omen for self-inflicted stupidity,” the Herald mutters, moving over to her navigational instruments. “No, if those existed I’d be continually peppered with them—false-stars above! How am I supposed to carry out my deck rituals, if I can’t get to the deck?”

“It’s an idiotic practice anyway,” the Student says smugly. “Back me up on this, Innocent. You think it’s just as ridiculous, don’t you?”

“I don’t know,” the Spy says, preoccupied and anxious. The Clipper’s motions are growing increasingly erratic; the creak of her hull signals a strain he’s never heard her take before. “Not these days. Herald, if we are zailing straight for this hurricane Alteration thing, what happens? Is there— I can’t believe I’m saying this, but do you have a ritual for that?”

“No.”

Even the Student looks surprised. “You don’t?”

“No. Some calamities have no sequence, and this is one of them. So if you’ve been predicing your behaviour on the assumption that a few diamonds thrown into the zee will smooth this over, my condolences. You’ve found a way to die for which even I can’t think up any divine interventions!”

“I suppose,” he mumbles, struggling to hold the wheel straight, “I suppose I might have miscalculated.”

“Fine time to realise!”

“Don’t, please, that won’t help,” the Spy says urgently.

He takes a step away from the door, to find himself momentarily weightless. The Clipper bucks upwards, as horses do but ships never should; all three of them plunge backwards, crash against the back wall. The Herald moans.

“Sorry.”

“Innocent, you really must stop falling for me like this.”

“Is this any time for flirtation?” the Student inquires from across the room.

“Sorry,” the Innocent says again, untangling himself in a hurry (who even invented Victorian ruffles?) “Also, you can shut up. No bones broken?”

“Nothing I need to navigate, that’s a mercy,” the Herald says. “Student, get below before you do any more damage. From here on it’s down to luck and Wolfstack engineering.”
“In short, we’re doomed?” the Student asks, suddenly despairing.

“Maybe not yet,” the Herald says, in an access of amusement. “Innocent, go to the engine room and pile on all the speed you can. Don’t worry about braking, the best thing we could hope for right now is crashing at full speed. At least then we’ll be somewhere.”

“As opposed to what?” the Spy asks.

“As opposed to nowhere. And I might mean that literally.”

Boilers as hot as they can be, full throttle, all the steam he dares lay on and then some.

Not enough, not enough. The scream of metal under strain is unmistakable (when did he hear it last, that time Jack’s airplane had crashed in Kuwait?) Whatever the Alteration is doing out there, the ship can’t stand much more of it. There’s already been one horrendous snap in the cargo hold, putting him in mind of steel peeling away like leather.

A call. He hastens towards the speaking tube.

“A little faster!” the Herald pleads. “We’re almost safe. Just give me a little more.”

“I’ve tried everything I can- I’m sorry.”

She says something he doesn’t catch. “What?”

“Don’t blame yourself, that’s all.”

“Won’t have much time for that, will I?”

She actually laughs as she clicks off.

The Spy slumps against the wall, feeling useless. The Student was right. If Holloway was here, indoctrinated in mysteries and invested in blood, she’d have thought up something clever to save the ship. What business did he ever have, passing himself off as a Neath engineer? They need a miracle now, a ritual, and he doesn’t know any-

blood.

Something he said once, after Scrimshander. An off-hand remark to the Crewmember.

“A little extra oomph,” the Spy murmurs. “No way this’ll work, but what’ve I got to lose?”

Here’s a bottle of Carrow’s Guaranteed Engine Oil. Here’s a polishing cloth.

Here’s his knife.

Gulping, he opens the bottle, opens a wound, and makes sure the cloth’s liberally soaked with both liquids before he starts polishing. Not as smoothly or neatly as he normally would; the mixture makes an awful mess, slopping over the tidy paintwork.

Nothing happens. The engines continue to hum in their same steady motion. He hadn’t really expected anything else.

“C’mon,” the Innocent cajols, stroking the Illyrian. “C’mon, I’ve always been good to you, haven’t
I? Looked after you, kept you in fine fettle? Can’t you go any faster for me?”


“Never mind about that Impeller. Forget it. The Clipper will never have any other engine, okay? You stay here as long as the ship’s afloat, I promise. But please, please just a little extra this once, so we stay that way!”

His words are sounding more and more nonsensical, and the effort of standing suddenly seems entirely too much effort. Still wiping, whispering sweet nothings to the cylinders, he lets the vagueness take over and slowly sinks down.

Oil’s ebbing out of the bottle, puddling against the Illyrian’s white and green. So’s his blood. Good: this’ll be easier than rubbing it on anyway.

Somewhere above him rings a single extra clang. Hardly audible. Nothing that anybody else would distinguish, from the usual potent hum; but he’s been listening to this engine for a long time now. There, again! She’s definitely different.

“Thank you,” the Spy says politely, and passes out.

***********************

…and since we aren’t dead, I guess it worked. The Crewmember found me on the floor afterwards (they say they’re getting tired of cleaning up after I pull these stunts, which I can’t exactly blame them for). Had to do the secret-sharing with them twice, I’d lost a lot of iron.

Apparently we made it to Khan’s Shadow just in time, before the Alteration rose to full fury and all the islands changed. Just another day in the Neath, they told us. Nothing out of the ordinary. Or nothing out of the ordinary, beside the Student admitting he was wrong- but even he can tell that a chunk of our forward prow missing is bad news. I’ve patched her together as best I could, so we should just be able to make London at half-speed. Sure hope so.

Still can’t quite credit that it worked. Jack, I think this place is starting to make sense.

And I honestly don’t know whether the Neath itself or my getting used to it scares me more.
A Sundered Sea

Eight hundred pieces of glim is quite the haul.

Worth it, though, the Innocent Spy thinks, looking around Penstock’s Land Agency. Not the famous holiday wicket, but the riverside complex in ordinary time. Every building sold in London, from cheap rooftop shacks to lodgings in the Bazaar’s own spires, is handled through this one set of offices. Officially, at least: Spite is threaded through with jati flats, and he suspects a good deal of subletting goes on in Veilgarden.

Something to keep in mind if he ever wants to cause a lot of chaos, that’s for sure.

“Looking for a steamer, eh?” his neighbour says abruptly (nervous chap, with an unobtrusive Norton badge and a shocking bad hat). “Can’t say as I’d recommend it. Townhouse, now, that offers far better scope. Opportunities, you understand? Opportunities.”

He laughs, in a high-pitched, strangulated sort of way, and subsides quickly.

“Yeah, I did hear about that,” the Spy agrees. “But call it sentiment. I had one before I came down to the Neath, and...well, I miss it, that’s all.”

“What an insufficient reason to do anything!”

“Reckon so, but it done suits me,” the Innocent drawls in his most barbarously Surface accent; and is much relieved when the fellow gives him up for hopeless.

The steamer deed, when he receives it, is covered in finely-penned writing, elegant and subtle. He applies a patent scrutinizer to the text and reads it through with great satisfaction. No taxes, no insurance, nothing to worry about except signing his use-name at the bottom and a promise that anything terrible that might happen as a result of the purchase (DDD, being eaten by a zee-monster, etc.) is absolutely not the Bazaar’s fault. Well, there’s some advantages to living in a nineteenth century hole.

“I appreciate this,” he tells Penstock, making sure to look the man straight in the eye.

“My pleasure.”

It’s a silly superstition, and it isn’t even his.

But it makes the Spy feel better, before he starts planning the heist to end all Bazaar heists.

*******************

Breakfast on the Clipper. Lazy sort of day: everyone’s munching chestnut-stuffed mushrooms and catching up on the papers.

“Well, that’s the cricket out of the way. Any interesting scuttlebutt in yours?” the Herald asks.

“Not much,” the Crewmember says. “Some Captain Andersson had his frigate stove in by the Circumcellion Brotherhood. And his cargo. And his head. Named captains, I tell you, will they ever learn?”

“Ouch,” the Innocent Spy says, wincing. “Anyone know the time?”
“Coming up on tenth-whistle.”

“Oh good, the Admiralty Yarders will be here soon. I just want to have a quick word with them before they get started. Make sure they clean the salt off before they start welding, that kind of thing.”

“Innocent, they’re experts. Who have been working on Neath vessels for far longer than you’ve been down here. Don’t worry about the Clipper, she’s in safe hands.”

“I know,” he says, looking slightly abashed. “And I know she’s not my ship. But I’m allowed to be a little protective if I like, aren’t I?”

“An engineer’s traditional prerogative,” the Crewmember agrees. “Don’t take too long.”

“Right! Yes, I’ll try not to keep you waiting.”

“What is it?” the Herald inquires.

“Bit of extra dosh is all. Haulage on the docks. He’s a bit low on funds after that lodgings blowout.”

“Ah,” the Herald says, disappearing behind her contraband copy of Blackwood’s. “I have no doubt you’ll contrive to enjoy yourselves.”

“I’m sure we will.”

When she isn’t looking, the Crewmember winks.

*******************

Nice and simple, Jack. Nothing complicated.

The faintest scent of zee-air, the grunt of labouring Dockers.

Without being too obvious about it, the Bazaar’s one of the best-protected places in the Neath. Specials and Neathy Rifles and Masters all prowling about.

A jolt, a wobble of transference. The tight confines of his prison are starting to hurt; the Spy gently rubs at a bruised shoulder blade.

Those people who are allowed to live here are usually the Bazaar’s lackeys already— and those who aren’t, are very closely watched.

Bumpy passage over cobblestones. Respite. The fluttery feeling of an elevator moving downwards (unexpected nostalgia for the future, here).

But there’s one thing that does get imported into the Bazaar, in huge quantities.

The Innocent Spy takes a breath of oxygen from his diving-bottle, already starting to run low. He hopes it’ll be enough. It has to be.

Sphinxstone.

*******************

The cube’s bobbing. Hither and thither and sideways, in a way that would dizzy anyone without
their zee-legs. What would cause a stone to bob?

The Anonymous Crewmember ignores it and taps patiently away with their diamond-tipped chisel (borrowed from a criminal friend, it’ll serve as an extra weapon at need). The Spy’s plan had seemed so solid, and the prospect of robbing the Bazaar so profitable, they’d invited themselves along as the condition for helping. After all, hadn’t they found out that the Serres’ Will was due to make a delivery today? Which mute sailor could be trusted to cement over the tell-tale crack, with dust and ground crystal?

Only, apparently they did their job too well, because the plug just isn’t coming out. And the bottom of their cube is taking on a curiously transparent, honeycombed look now, maple sugar eaten away by white coffee. What’s tough enough to do that to stone?

“Lacre, you idiot,” the Crewmember mutters, abandoning the subtle approach and smashing away at the stone for dear life. “A lacre pit!”

They’d once seen an Urchin gang playfully bury one of their own in lacre. A pretty corpse, but that’s a consolation for the living, not the dead.

The lacre, or the sphinxstone, or something, shrieks and gives way beneath them; they plunge into the liquid, the world overturns-

and then they’re lying safe on solid ground, while the Spy gasps for a triumphant breath.

Here is a sea, but not like their familiar pelage waters. Lacre-smell rises from pools of nameless depths, worse than rotted driftweed or corpse: ammonia stink of an unwashed shark-cutlet. Cubes of sphinxstone float around them, sighing as they disperse.

“My wrecking boots!”

“Could have been your feet,” the Spy says, with a swift smile. "Thanks for tapping, or I might not have found yours in time. I ended up having to flip my cube over, once it started dissolving. Kicked my way out upside-down."

"Better you than me," the Crewmember says, peeling off the remnants of their footwear. At least the stockings remain largely intact. "Falling in there would be a true death, and no mistake."

"I wouldn't have let you come, if I'd thought you'd come to any real harm," the Spy says, face crinkling in rare anxiety.

"Don't fuss yourself. We all have to go sometime."

So much for untold treasures. Three minutes in and they’re already regretting this.

************************

"Must be nearly time."

"Good luck," the Cartographer says. "As there's nothing else going for us."

"Forget about that. Just concentrate," he tells her. "I know everyone else will be too, but- well, I have a lot of faith in you."

She offers him a kiss- just the faintest of chaste touches, light as raven-down in the wind. It's all they can do, for now. If this plan works, there'll be far more soon enough.
"I will, don’t you worry. You’re sure this is the right bait to catch him?"

"Hmm? Oh yes. Positive."

******************************

“Stone pigs,” the Spy says thoughtfully, opening his flask of venom-laced cordial. “Wish I knew what the Hudum translation was. What makes them porcine?”

“You wouldn’t want to eat them. Get on with it,” the Crewmember implores, glancing about. Lacre bubbles about them, popping in lewd formations. They can’t get over the impression that they’re being watched. Surely the Bazaar must have safeguards against such a breach?

He nods, and drinks.

******************************

After luncheon, the Herald raids their curiosity cabinet (how much amber does the Student keep in here? Every colour she’s ever heard of...) Well, it's coming in handy now. Not the fluke-core, though, that’s a trifle much to cart about London.

If she’s to ask permission for bringing the Spy down to Flute Street, as seems only polite, no doubt a few gifts will smooth the process over.

******************************

This dream doesn’t go quite like the others. Familiar surroundings, true: the same hillside, with his lunch of bread-and-butter sandwiches. But the Writhing River, usually a distant feature of the landscape, has wrapped around and turned the picnic spot into an island.

"Have we acquired an audience?"

"There's some unofficial interest,” his Fingerking replies, wriggling across the grass in what the Spy suspects to be an old, old attitude of frustration. "Happened the last time as well. Never any interest during years and years of patient waiting, but as soon as my efforts come to fruition, they all come rushing in."

The river quivers back, rebuked.

"Well, I'll try not to let you down. Any of you," the Spy says, nibbling a crustless triangle (do they have crusts in Parabola, or are they all perfectly begotten loaves? Seems a shame, he likes crusts). "Any warnings before I go?"

"...it would be a betrayal of your self-actualisation, if we handed over your journey’s answers on a silver platter."

The Spy snorts. “You’ve been listening to too many of Dr Schlomo’s interpretations.”

“This is Parabola. The man’s our news, sport and soap opera.”

“And way, way too many devils.”

“Consider her ways. Be unwise.”

“I’m an engineer, not a poet.”
“Much the same thing,” the Fingerking says. “You ought to have learnt by now, the Neath encourages all-rounders. Keep your mind open. And if you do by any chance pull through, for goodness sake tell me how so that I can give a better warning next time.”

“With me around, why would you need a next time?” the Spy asks jauntily.

Still polishing off his sandwich, he walks into a dream.

“That,” the Fingerking observes to the empty hillside, “is precisely what the last one said.”

*******************

The Student lingers by a zee-side grown blue and pensive, deep in a Veilgarden fantasy. Chess and books and research notes haven't soothed his troubled brow, so why not the traditional resort of the overwrought and overeducated?

That it's having any success- that the images of pale golden sunlight and soft, lapping green waves are indeed having an ameliorating effect on his mood- is something of an embarrassment. Fortunately, no one's here to witness it. That private room was well worth the price.

He drinks a sup of something icy. Blinks up at the sky.

Even in a honey-dream, it's not every day that one sees pigs fly.

*******************

“Consider,” the Spy says, wandering out of nowhere and helping himself to another sandwich. “Consider this linguistics editorial that I came across, in one of our Crewmember’s favourite and less than reputable tabloids. I’ve been doing a lot of research, you know, without coming up with much. You have to keep them asleep with lacre so they won’t go off and explode the Neath or anything, but that’s ways and not means.”

“Why are you here?” the Fingerking asks. “You nearly came back again before you left.”

“It’s a dream. I can be in two places at once, if I like. Explaining the discovery that I’m about to have been making- don’t tell me you were in any doubt,” the Spy says, very smug.

“You are beginning to worry me,” the Fingerking comments. “A great many of the protections in this place, such as they are, depend on no one challenging the barriers of reality too avidly.”

“In dreamland? That’s awfully unimaginative- look, I’m skipping past the boring parts here. Good theory about physical proximity, but it didn’t help at all. Just me watching the Pigs have that dream about coughing, for about the hundredth time- does everyone else get it too, or is that just me?”

“Wherever courses fail. Whenever waters grow troubled.”

“Good to know. So there I am, looking at the lava flow, thinking about pigs and space flight, and making free associations, cos I’ve completely run out of ideas for what to do next. Rocket engines, rocks, gin, rocket fuel. Pork, bacon, Jack- uh,” the Spy says, frowning. “Where was I? Free associations, yeah. Lava flow! All that hot molten slag pouring out. Like the Elder Continent’s blood river. Or more pertinently...something that you’d call magical and I would call scientific, but I’d mean it just as sincerely. A ritual every bit as important to history as London’s Fall.”

"Pray expound."
"The Bessemer process," the Innocent says, reverently.

The Fingerking rears to the fullest extent of its height (every inch of it). "Is that all you have to show for months of dreamtime? Some trifling similarity to your Surface engineering?"

"Don't knock it, we're talking about the underpinning for the Second Industrial Revolution here! Sheffield steel, the stuff that gave the British Empire another lease on life after losing her capital. The perfect engineer's alloy. Cheap, easy to make, even easier to work with, and a byworld for reliable." The Spy frowns again. "Actually, I can’t imagine why London still doesn't have it, even with all that cheap IR brass flooding the market. No wonder the Navy’s so small."

“The Stone Pigs,” the Fingerking prompts, without patience.

“Editorial, like I said. A mistranslation! A mistranslation, because in the Neath, where wrought iron is still fancywork and steel’s worth more than diamonds, who’d interpret the word to talk about smelting pig iron? By analogy, you see? Volcanoes smelting stone, driving out the impurities- I’m catching up with myself,” the Spy says, closing his eyes. “Telling you as it happens.”

“A questionable reading at best, I should say.”

“It fits with the lore. It fits with the Pigs. It fits with my understanding of Neath science, such as it is. And,” the Spy says indifferently, “if it doesn’t work, who cares? I’ll just go and boink 'em until they work the way I want them to. Dreams ought to be the one time that percussive maintenance will actually succeed, right?”

"Dreams aren't always so amenable to change. Besides, this is a material you're speaking of, and a mundane one at that, when we were looking for a secret-"

"Like this one?" the Spy asks, tossing a tiny, damasked-steel pig up in the air.

"Let me see it!"

"Nah, I don't think so." He catches it in a tight fist, and stuffs the precious thing deep into a pocket. "Not that I don't trust you or anything, but- well, I'm a spy, I'm not supposed to trust people, and I'd like a little insurance before we get to that last dream. 'sides, I got an escape out of the Bazaar to wrangle. Be seeing you."

Quivering in frustrated curiosity (ever the Neath's foremost vice), the Fingerking moves, strikes. Serpent in the grass indeed, and monster, and dragon.

Only, by then the Innocent isn’t there anymore.

************************

He's got away with it. He's actually got away with it; smuggling a secret out of the vaunted Bazaar itself. Assuming they do indeed escape, but he's having a good feeling about that, the Spy decides.

He opens his eyes and looks about. Everything as it should be.

An empty flask here. Horrendously lethal lacre pit over there. Crewmember looking the other way. Next to him, one red-handled knife.

Instinctively, his hand closes around it.
"Oh good, you're awake," the Crewmember says, helping him up. "Storm and Salt, but this place is unsettling."

"All shall be well," he says softly. "And all manner of thing."

"Let's save the self-congratulations for when we're safely back to the ship, all right?"

"Right."

Whatever happened in that dream, he seems to have pulled through all right. Looks more confident than ever. His voice is reassuring, his eyes warm and honey-coloured.

Were they always that shade, the Crewmember wonders.

Eh. It's not as if they pay attention to those sorts of details.

********

...trap!

What was I thinking? What's going on- where am I? Crewmember (shifting irrigo patterns, should be frightening but isn't) are you here? No?

can't believe I fell for that- probably a goner- wouldn't mind so much, but- HELP- why can't I feel my hands-

or anything else.

I can't sense anything, and I'm nowhere, and this must be the Bazaar's punishment for intruders (oh-gods-I'll-be-here-forever)

Grandpa Harry always said, save swearing for when you really mean it-

fuck!

How do I get out of here?
It comforts the Crewmember that the drugged nap hasn't thrown their Innocent a bit, for his tradecraft is better than ever. Noman shadows rise from the lacre: he wards them off with an artistic flourish of candle. Bats flutter about, suspicious; he consoles them with chunks of preserved solacefruit. Every threat they see, he ducks or avoids or overcomes without trouble. As if he can see around corners, and the darkness itself guides him.

The quintessential Spy.

************

Okay, isolation. Classic technique to soften up prisoners and induce psychosis, why wouldn't the Bazaar use it to punish a thieving interloper. And this is about the most thoroughgoing isolation I can imagine, I'm utterly paralysed and senseless. Assuming I still have a body at this point, which...seems a little up in the air at the moment.

(Pretty sure I'm not dead. Everyone always said being dead is busy and complicated and you get to play lots of chess. I mean, honestly, I already was dead and that was more cheerful.)

Wonder what the Crewmember's looking at now. My corpse? Coma? Did I evaporate into the lacre? Poor them, I shouldn't have let 'em come along.

Maybe they'll get that pig out, at least. The Student might be able to make something of it, if he can be bothered to piece together my notes...it'd be nice to think somebody could get that Impeller built, after all the effort I went to for it.


And don't tell me you aren't here, or I'm really gonna lose it.

************

"We can't go through here," the Crewmember says, peering at a room apparently composed of Correspondence sigils (hotter than fire, brightness not to speak of). "Last time I saw anything like this much light was the Dawn Machine, and you remember how well that went."

"Wear this," the Innocent says, pulling out a handkerchief for a blindfold. Of course he's thought to bring one. It's even freshly laundered.

"But what about-"

"I'll be all right."

They put it on, take his hand (soft and cool, somehow, even in the burn). Follow along in perfect safety.

So much so, it even starts getting a bit dull; they start thinking up a ballad for distraction. Today ought to make the stuff of a tolerable zee shanty. Maybe even a publishable one! Something good enough for royalties at the palace, if they can find the right well-connected ghost writer.

"Now should it be fifteen syllables to the line, or sixteen?"

"What's that?"
"Ah. Never you mind, Innocent."

************

Nothing out of my usual bag of tricks is gonna work this time. Inverse of Newton's third law. Can't produce a reaction if there's nothing to react against.

Maybe the Bazaar will find a use for a clever engineer? I have a decent bargaining chip if it comes to that, with all my knowledge about future events. Just the outcome of the Sixth City negotiations ought to be worth something to her.

Not that I'd tell her (stop lying, Innocent, you just hope you won't tell her/hope that when you do you'll make her pay full price)- but the process of negotiating, back and forth, that'd be something to keep me busy. I could spin that out for ages and enjoy myself doing it. Teasing a space crab with snippets of future history, balancing what I can safely say with what might get me released, that's weird enough to be entertaining.

Unless...here's the thing about torture, Jack, it isn't always even the torture. The real trouble is, you don't know what's going to happen next.

Only, I'm getting a very nasty suspicion that I do.

Nothing.

No Master flapping in to interrogate me, no impossible screaming messenger, nothing to indicate anyone's noticed I'm even here. Suppose I just got stuck in the Bazaar's equivalent of a rat trap? Tossed out for whatever fate it'll suffer, without a second thought?

Presumably, I ought to go mad after enough of this. Is that even possible? Insanity is a biological kind of thing, and I'm not sure I am anymore. To have no idea who I am, or what's happening any longer...right now, that could only come as a relief. And I have a feeling I'm not going to be that lucky.

...just trapped in here, endlessly sane and alone. Forever.

No. No, that can't be right. Someday the Bazaar dies, or the Neath dies, or the Liberation of Night blows up everything, or- something. Anything!

It's only a hundred years to go, right? Maybe you'll find an article about London in your stupid tabloids, come chasing down here on one of your wild endeavours. Figure out telepathy or something and pull me out of here. Wherever here is.

I can't- I can't face this-

not by myself-

************

“This lacklight sphere’s a nasty thing, isn’t it?” the Felicitous Informer asks.

The Cartographer bites down a sarcastic answer; she’s never been able to tell whether the Informer is genuinely vacuous, or taking her lead from a very discreet flexion. Though as for what the Captain sees...ah well. Any company’s better than none, and no one else cared to come help guard it.
Their dream-Clipper’s company has reached thirty: horribly obvious, horribly dangerous, but their mechanic’s demanded that they seek out and save as many Reflections as they can, in exchange for his ingenuity. And there are some advantages to numbers. Statistical significance, for instance: they’re now close to the theoretical limit at which a Parabola community is sufficiently complex to be self-sustaining from its own energies. Which is desperately needed, now; her flexion is bound to notice how much she's been made to sleep as of late, how carefully her thinking’s been steered from thoughts of Parabola. Their bargain was never meant to sustain this many.

“That one moment when you’re void-slipping, and you’re senseless and helpless, but still aware? Imagine a machine that prolongs that moment indefinitely.”

The Informer draws in a pointless breath. “That’s horrid! I thought it was only the Fingerkings that did things like that, not us!”

“It could be worse. He might be dead.”

“But can’t we let him out?” Her hand steals towards the latch.

The Cartographer slaps her away, surprised as always when the action actually connects (the Informer pulls back her hand, examines it with interested surprise). “No! Do you want the Fingerkings down on us?”

“No, but- just a little light for him? This is cruel.”

“But necessary,” the Cartographer says impatiently. “It’s bad enough trying to hide all of us, but an Is in Parabola? Even a dead dragon could follow that trail. While he’s in there, there’s at least a chance we’ll survive long enough to get his reflection home again.”

“You’re that sure the sphere works?”

“No, but the Captain trusts it will. They brought it in from their flexion’s dreams, charged with a month of nightmares. We certainly don’t have anything else that will do the job. So for goodness sake, leave it alone.”

“All right.”

“Thank you.”

“Only there’s a dragon outside the porthole, and I think it’s looking at us,” the Informer adds. “That’s not good, is it?”

Vacuous. Most assuredly.

“No. Better call the bridge. We’re in for it now...”

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A meditative focus. Like they taught in this Indian ashram I was passing through. I made a terrible student, kept trying to fix things I should have left alone, but they sure were glad of me when the generator busted and I spent a night welding it back together.

I know. Sounds like I’m drifting, doesn’t it? But I’m not reciting a mantra, or watching a prayer wheel turn, or any of that conceptual abstract stuff. Just picturing you.

See, Jack, you’re the exact opposite of whatever trap I’ve stumbled into- vivid and lively, more than
anyone else I know. Always getting into trouble. (Never as bad a mess as the one I’m in, but still.) And a cute little mustache, to boot- why didn’t I ever say how much I liked it? That night we spent infusing wine gums with champagne doesn’t count, I knew you were way too drunk to remember. ‘specially once you’d broken out the rubber chickens. And the egg cartons. And the banana.

Nah, you definitely aren’t abstract.

There’s one particular memory, from France. Ducking under gunfire, your hand pressing against my shoulder, as we hit dirt and try not to even breathe. Palm against calico. Nothing more than that. But it’s real and it happened and I can remember it, I still have that (even if it'll never happen again- oh, when I had the chance, why didn’t I take-)

Sheesh. If you were here, you’d tell me to quit feeling sorry for myself already. Make an escape plan out of nothing, like I always do. Wouldn’t you? I think I’d need you to.

Guess I’d better.

************

“We’re running out of night-shells,” the Cartographer tells the Captain. “There’s still some raw irrigo in stores, but it’s unprocessed.”

“Never mind,” the Captain says. “Load it into the guns and fire as is. We’ll keep up the fight as long as they want one.”

This is hopeless, the Cartographer considers. A pack of dragons in full cry after them, twenty of them if there’s one- that lacklight sphere must not be working after all.

But then, if then. Even if they all die- even if the Fingerkings find and ride them all, if the ship burns with their souls, and all their hopes laid waste- at least they've made a little difference. Out there in London is a Reflection, made safe and real. She's helped save him, if nothing else.

Not a cynical attitude. Not at all.

************

...banging my head against a brick wall, of course (would welcome a brick wall. Also a head.) Can’t think of anything to do that I haven’t tried yet. Not that it's exactly a long list.

Um. What I need is a deus ex machina.

Greek, did you know that? (Bet you weren’t paying attention that day in English. Plotting out your next model aircraft or something). God from the machine. An actor descending onto the stage to wrap up all the loose ends in a tragedy, or what-have-you.

...that’s a thought. I haven’t tried prayer yet.

Eh. It wouldn’t work anyway (fortunately). All those fancy rituals require a body.

Fortunately?

Yeah, guess so. Not quite sure what my spiritual beliefs are, if I have any (why are people so sure about things they can’t verify?) But supposing there is a god, I honestly can’t think of any sillier way to interact with it. It’s a pretty amazing world out there, I’ve always been more than happy to meet it on its own terms.
Then again, apparently this is what I get for doing that. (Ouch.)

Devil’s advocate time- well, I have absolutely nothing better to do. (Do I know anything about the Iron Republic that might help right now? No. Drat.) Forget theology, the working definition of a god might very well be, "an entity that can deliver a miracle on demand". Which, if the Herald’s even a quarter right about anything she’s ever told me, Stone/Salt/Storm more than qualify for.

Come to think of it, she even insisted on teaching me one of the shorter rituals. The Golden Passion, sacred to Stone. She’s the immortality one, maybe a little nicer than the other two.

I could always promise to perform the associated self-inflicted stabbings afterwards (and you say “yikes!” and give me that same expression you do as when I’ve proposed building an escape glider out of a tarp and balsa wood, or something perfectly mundane like that. Geez, I’ve missed you.)

See? These blood-weird Neath cults are such fun.

Though they do get consistent results.

Which should be scientific enough for me.

(Yes, I know I did the same thing with an engine, but that was different. I have a real relationship with that Illyrian- oh, stop laughing! No, don’t.)

...okay, so the main difference is just how demeaning it sounds. Falling on your hands and knees, begging favours from something more powerful than you. (I know I’m better than an engine, and so does the engine.) Jack, c’mon, you know me. I’d never do that. Way too independent.

Though I guess you might. Would. In a heartbeat. Maybe it ought to be you in here (no, I’d never wish this on you!); maybe you’d have been out of here ages ago, while I’m still going frantic.

Is that the answer? Knuckling under? Humility?

You know I’ve never been any good at that. How long did it take me that one time, to ask my best friend for your help saving Pete? And that was with someone else’s life at stake (so it didn’t count). Every time I’ve been shot or drugged up or something and people helped me out, I could always tell myself, I’m not thinking straight, this doesn’t count. Landed up here in the Neath, and still did my best not to get entangled. Friendships, yes, but nothing that would leave me on the debit side of the ledger (and the times when I didn’t succeed still keep me up nights).

Prayer isn’t anything like that. I’d have to do it in cold blood.

Dammit, I’ve got my pride.

But you’d do it. You’d swallow your pride, to save the day, and beat off the whatever it is that’s got me trapped, and go save my shipmate and find that last missing chunk of engine. You wouldn’t be stuck here forever out of your own self-regard.

You’d never be ashamed to ask for help, when you need it.

Jack, I guess I owe you.

For teaching me how to ask. For keeping me grounded- all those letters I’ve written, helping me to hang on however ridiculous the Neath gets. For being here when I needed you.
“Thanks.

*See you when I get out.*

************

“That was impossible,” the Crewmember says, as the Spy removes their blindfold and the two of them emerge from the tip of the Bazaar’s highest spire, to a slender spiralling ledge. “Neither of us are even scratched. There’s no way that should have worked.”

“It shouldn’t have,” the Spy agrees playfully. “Unless you’ve had a little experience in dreams. Pacing up a stone spire, reaching ever towards the sun...”

“This is what your Fingerking was teaching you, all those months?”

“Something like that.” He pulls out a length of spider-silk. “Help me uncoil this? I’ll fasten it, then we’ll ride down to Flit level.”

“Bit obvious, innit?”

“I’m hoping that by the time anyone notices, we’ll be long gone.”

“Well. Crazy enough, but why not, on a day like this? Nicely played, Innocent.”

“Still weird. To hear you calling me that, even after all this time.”

“You’ll get used to it, one of these days.”

He grins. “I sure hope so.”

************

He recites the whole of the Golden Passion as best he can, all seventy-seven words.

Then he does it again, cos he slipped up in a couple of places.

Nothing happens.

Blotting his mind of everything but supplication, he tries again.

(Doesn't she favour you? Your restored youth - still not adequately explained by anything you've encountered in the Neath- shouldn't that be sufficient proof of her miracles?)

He tries for a spirit of gratitude. Belief. A promise to enact the ritual properly, as soon as he has the chance.

Humble worship, to a deity who makes the Neath hospitable. She who brings life, to a place where it should be intolerably short and brutal.

*Mistress of the Golden Passion, serene and divine, gracious in thy mercy, receive my supplication!*

And She listens.

Light! Mountain-light, bright and hallowed as the sun, guiding him back- he's looking through a mirror- no, he's in the mirror. A knife-blade, polished and shining.
His Reflection looks back at him, startled.

"I think I need an explanation," the Innocent Spy says, very quietly.

************

Time out. Third way.

"You could have told me what to expect. You could have warned me."

"And said what?" his Reflection asks. "Told you the truth? That you were dead from the moment you decided to rob the Bazaar, and this was the only way to smuggle you and your secret to safety? You'd never have agreed to enter the lacklight sphere of your own accord."

"How would you know? You didn't ask!"

"I don't have to," his Reflection points out, dryly. "Think about it. Besides, it proves my point."

"What point?"

"That was a tiny taste- just a single taste- of what happens to Reflections. When the Fingerkings come hunting us- don't give them the Impeller. Don't give them that power."

"I would rather doubt he'd listen to you now, after that ill-considered spot of torture. It does tend to sour people."

A Fingerking has glided in, smooth and supple. One the Innocent Spy recognises.

"Oh. Never thought I'd be so glad to see you!"

"What an interesting conundrum! It’s very rare that a Reflection supplants its flexion, but it does happen. Shall I consume him for you? I should be delighted."

"...are you saying he was telling the truth?"

"That we eat Reflections? Oh yes, of course. Well, they aren’t really people, you know. Don’t worry about that."

The Spy hesitates.

"Okay," the Reflection says, quietly. "I’ve gambled, and I’ve lost badly. I’ll give up the pig, I’ll let you take me, but give me something in exchange. Don’t go after the Clipper, please."

"You are in no position to conduct negotiations," the Fingerking says, indifferent and indolent.

"The Clipper? What's my ship got to do with this?"

"Not yours, mine," the Reflection pleads. "This dream-ship we’re on. There’s others aboard, I want them kept safe."

"A confluence! How delicious. You may rest assured, I shall attend to the matter personally."

"I think you’re scared," the Innocent says, soft and thoughtful. "Just as scared as I would be, if I knew other people’s lives were on the line."

"Don’t be fooled by the fact he wears your face. I’ve been hunting your trail for quite some time,
with no success,” the Fingerking says. “If you hadn’t escaped yourself, no doubt he’d have kept you imprisoned forever. Enjoyed riding your body through the Neath.”

“That wasn’t the plan! I just wanted to get this Impeller finished. An engine fast enough that no dragon would ever catch up with us, you have no idea how much we need that,” the Reflection says breathlessly. “Then you could have gone home. But I had to use the sphere, or they’d have found you even sooner—”

“And rescued him. Yes, what a terrible fate that would have been. Innocent Spy, I do believe that’s everything.”

The Reflection presses the pig into the Spy’s hands. “You take it, then. If nothing else- don’t give them the engine. Please. There’ll be no stopping the Fingerkings then—.”

“Are you quite, quite done issuing pointless last requests?” the Fingerking asks.

His face flames red. “There’s a Cartographer…she’s your Herald’s Reflection. See, I couldn’t have stayed away from Parabola. I had someone to come back to.”

“I’m not in love with my Herald.”

“I’m not you!”

*Is that really what I look like, when I’m in love? How embarrassing.*

“Deal’s off,” the Innocent Spy says. “Stop harassing them, or I won’t build the Impeller.”

“That wasn’t our bargain. This is internal Parabolan politics, and none of your affair.”

“Everything I’ve heard here just makes me more sure that they’re real people,” the Spy insists. “He thinks he is- even if I’m wrong, I’d rather be wrong thinking the best of people than the worst. Show me you’re better than that, too. Don’t hurt them.”

“I could rise,” the Fingerking says; and though its voice is slow and stately, the unyielding frustration he hears makes the Innocent take a step back. “I could rise and blast this spider’s web of a ship to atoms, with one puff of my breath. I could coil about her as a sea serpent, and shatter it to fragments. I could eat all of you up, and continue on my way without care or concern. Do you know why I will not do any of these things, Spy?”

“No?”

“Because you were right. That Bessemer process is, indeed, very beautiful.”

The snake does not smile: but all of an engineer’s satisfaction shines in its eyes.

“I give you each a day’s fair running. If I catch you I shall kill you. Is that understood?”

Each nod.

“Unless, of course, one of you cares to finish this engine for me. Or both of you working together, if it comes to that.”

“We won’t,” the Innocent Spy says, glancing sideways to see that his Reflection is in agreement. He is.

“Then that’s our business settled,” the Fingerking says, and stands not upon his departure.
“He always was impatient,” the Innocent observes. “I bet he thinks that I’ll cave in and help him out eventually.”

“He might be right. I’ve got a ship to look after me, but the next time you fall asleep, like as not he’ll be there waiting for you,” the Reflection warns. “I don’t think I’ll be able to help, even. There’s a lot of people here counting on me.”

“Well, look after them for me, would you?” the Innocent says. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“I’m sorry about the sphere.”

“Is that really what it’s like for you guys?”

“Yeah. It is.”

“Then don’t be. Somebody out there needs to know, to help you out in here.”

“Oh...not to be immodest, but I think I’ve got this civil rights movement off to a good start,” his Reflection says, smiling. “Just go home and try not to get killed, okay? It’ll really throw my plans off if you died the true death now.”

“You too,” the Innocent calls.

He steps out of the dream, back into his own body again. Blood and hunger and cold have never felt so good before.

Also: vertigo.

“Oh god,” the Spy whispers, backing as far away from the edge as he can. Concerned, the Crewmember hurries over to support him; he clings to them desperately.

"Wrong time, wrong place, wrong zailor," the Crewmember remarks, but doesn't try to pull away. They are quite practiced enough a hand to recognise when someone's craving contact with the force of a physical need.

"Sorry," the Innocent Spy says apologetically. "Just hit me all at once...I’m scared of heights, did I ever mention that?"

“You did- ah. No wonder you're giddy,” the Crewmember says, peering down the spire. “That why you went all wobbly there?”

“Uh huh. Wait a moment, I’ll get over it. Then we can slide down the rope, and-”

“How dare you!”

Penstock’s found them.

In a far cry from his usual state of mannered decency; there are tear-tracks down his cheeks, and soot in his hair. In his hand is a curious weapon with a flared, four-piece barrel, as though a silvery primrose had frozen into the shape of a gun.

*Devilish manufacturing and no mistake*, the Crewmember reckons.

“How dare you pollute her hallows and her galleries! How dare you steal through her corridors, paw through her choicest secrets!”
“Wait,” the Spy says. “I can explain-”

Penstock shoots him. The impact, or the shock, or both, knock the Spy over the edge.

There doesn’t seem to have been enough time for what happens next.

The Crewmember knows they see Penstock, shocked back to sudden sanity, dropping the weapon as all his horror turns upon himself.

They know they see the Spy grab frantically for the spider-silk, and miss.

They know they launch themselves out, seize his hand, but can’t maintain their own hold.

The falling, by contrast, seems to go on a long time. The Innocent’s crying out, in pain or surprise or sheer instinctive terror, and all they can do is hang on so he won’t be alone. And reposition themselves so they’ll hit the ground first.

Both of them are going to die, of course.

But the first time the Innocent goes to the slow boat, at least there’ll be someone waiting for him.
"Two sailors managed to fall off the Bazaar today," the Harbourmaster observes, perusing the evening paper. "Continues on page twenty-three, hmm. These heists get stranger every time."

"Blast that Mr Huffam," the Devoted Englishman says. "I specifically paid him for our wedding to make the front page, and we've only a small snippet below the fold."

"For a zee wedding, that's fair enough. Don't tell me now you're bent on making a status-seeker, after I've said all the oaths?"

"When you put it in those terms, no. The good opinion of man, or beast, or unknowable squid-creature with appendages innumerable shall go unconsidered, so long as I stand well in your favour."

"Or sit, perhaps. Shall we test this new antimacassar? The shop assistant assured me it should prove resistant to any and all stains."

As, indeed, it does. The article slips to the floor, unread.

...disappeared afterwards. Specials still on the hunt.
Badstevener's Abyss

A good deal of the Herald’s hard currency, and all of the Captain’s Admiralty favours, and two cases of Ablution Absolution, and the Student calling in a quiet word with one of the Masters (“What else would I say to them, now?”).

But finally, the Clipper is allowed to set zail, with all her company aboard her.

“Thanks,” the Innocent says. “Especially you, Crewmember.”

“Don’t know what you’re thanking me for,” the Crewmember says darkly. “You’ve met the Boatman now, there’s no going back for you.”

“No. No, I suppose there isn’t…but you tried. And you put up with me the whole time on the boat, when I was making all that fuss about not getting to go home again. When of course there’s no home for me to go to yet. Maybe I’ll have cider by then, who knows.” He yawns. “Wish they had a laudanum for getting homesick.”

It's on the tip of the Herald's tongue to say that every other Neath dweller comes to terms with this, and usually far sooner; that he should never have expected home to be a promise. But she holds off. It's not what anyone needs to hear after their first death.

“Death’s quite a draining process. Go and get some sleep.”

“I can’t,” the Innocent says, suddenly alert. “It didn’t go well in Parabola, dreaming’s not safe for me anymore. Anyone have a good way to suppress that?”

“Not unless you stop sleeping altogether,” the Crewmember says. “Like they do in Irem.”

“Uh. I think I’m in trouble.”

"What a nice simple problem," the Student says nostalgically. "As a matter of fact, I have the very thing. A draught in my cabin, very popular at the University during exam-time.”

“What's in it?”

“Darkdrop coffee. Fruit sugar. A touch of rat bile. But it does work, I can assure you of that.”

“But I can’t stay awake indefinitely, even on your…weird Neath energy drinks, or whatever it is.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” the Student says easily. “A few devotees have been conducting a study for the last decade. They’re holding up quite well, as long as they don’t drink any wine.”

“Huh. If that’s all there is to it, I think I can manage,” the Spy says, with the flicker of a smile. He raises an almighty fuss about the taste; but it does what it says on the label.

“And I guess it gives me more time to work on the engines, so that’s something...”

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"I almost saw my way, at the end," the Herald says. "Another way for you to acquire your secret, much safer and quieter. You wouldn’t have had to die.”
They’re watching the false-stars, from the afterdeck. She has a cup of tea; the Innocent’s drinking coffee.

“As if I’ve been asleep for months, and have only just woken up. This hunt for your Impeller, I’ve all but ignored it, except for that one key push in Irem you couldn't have done without. Why wasn't I there to guide you? How have I managed to ignore the single most interesting bit of ritual invention anyone’s done in my lifetime? It’s been preying on my mind, ever since we left port.”

"Have you come to any conclusions?"

"They've played me," the Herald says, breathing hard and fast. "She played me! That Reflection of mine, how long has she been sapping off my energies? Tainting my will, distracting me- I should have stuck to tradition! Starve them, or else they'll turn their appetites on you. Blind the songbird, she'll sing more prettily that way."

"Herald," the Innocent says, subdued. "I don't want to absolve their sins, or deny your anger. But you didn't live through their void-slipping. I'd have done anything to not go through that again. I might have done a lot worse to you, in their place."

"You aren't a Reflection. They're made differently, they don't feel like us."

"Mmm-hmm, don't think so. I think you know it, too - why did you give yours such unfettered safety, otherwise? Why allow her the space to dream so freely? If not for..."

"If not for kindness," the Herald says, in the absence meant for a confession.

"You gave her what she needed to be free of that. Free of you. She won't have to resort to such trickery again, and no other Reflection will ever have to, if their plans go rightly."

"But tell me you wouldn't be angry. Tell me you wouldn't hate yours, for wrenching your thoughts about like this. For stopping you from saving a life."

"It was my sacrifice, not yours. I wonder if that doesn't make it easier for me."

"Easier!"

"Yes. Well, I can forgive them with a clear conscience, don’t you see?"

"But no Impeller. No Surface life. No sleeping or dreaming, ever again. Is that worth it?"

“I’ll tell myself it is, until I believe it,” the Innocent replies.

For the rest of the night, neither speaks; but they watch the stars, and the zee-bats, and listen to the ship’s smooth dark passage.

Rather sweet of the Herald to have stayed up that whole time just to be with him, the Innocent thinks, as he carries her to bed.

*****************

“Why so much honey?” the Spy asks, watching the Student ladle it out like milk on porridge.

“It’s a temporary solution,” the Student says. “I’m not expecting to use it this heavily for very long. Only until it stops being effective, that’s all.”

“What happens then?”
“I’ll switch to laudanum.”

“And when the laudanum stops working?”

“Then I’ll think of something else! Don’t be so inquisitive, Innocent.”

“I feel like I ought to do something.”

“Misplaced anxiety, stemming from your own sudden dependence on incomprehensible drugs,” the Student diagnoses.

“I’m telling myself it’s a medical condition,” the Spy says, staring down at his drink. “That was always on the cards in my profession, that I might end up crippled or chronically hurt. It’s just a much weirder one than I expected.”

“So. What else is new under the sun?”

“Your taking this much honey, for one.”

The Student scowls. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Yeah. That’s what I said.”

"What do you mean, you won't be building that Impeller?"

"Pity about it, sir. But there's one last part, and I can't go back to Parabola to find it." And my Reflection certainly can't ask. "So it's not happening after all."

"After all the work you put into her? London needs that engine, and others like it," the Captain says, poised and stern.

"Can't get a dream-engine if I can't dream," the Spy observes. "If you don't mind, sir? I'd like to go check up on the repairs. Didn't even have time to do that properly, before we left port..."

"Of course, of course," the Captain says, apparently preoccupied with his coxamongery.

He's forgotten about it already, the Spy reflects as he leaves. At least one person on board will be free of the blasted thing.

Hmm. This won't do.

It is, the Captain reflects, long past time for another chat with the Drownie in the hold.

"He went back to the Nadir again? After what happened when I went?"

The Herald shrugs. "I doubt he can help himself at this point."

"Idiot," the Spy says, with the sort of anger in his voice he typically reserves for the more dangerous varieties of mind-altering substances.

But then, irrigo probably counts as one, the Herald considers.

The Student perks up. “Now, that’s one thing I still don’t understand about your last trip. People
who lose their name in there aren’t supposed to be able to return. By rights you ought to be wandering about down there still.”

The Spy shivers. “I know that’s when I lost it. What did you think that whole seeking a name business was about? Self-abuse?”

“You wouldn’t have been the first one,” the Student says.

“I named him. I might even have invoked him that evening,” the Crewmember points out. “Does that count for anything?”

“All the way across London?” the Spy asks. “I don’t see how that would work, logically.”

“That’s a possible explanation,” the Student says. “Might be damned useful having more than one name. Perhaps we ought to think about applying that principle at University, I’ll have a word with that Prussian who runs the Department of Vergessen…well, I’ll write him, perhaps.”

“Of course, I did go down with the Captain. Maybe he’s the one who got us out? But I can’t imagine how he hasn’t forgotten his own name by now.”

“He has it tattooed on his wrists,” the Crewmember says. “Surprisingly prudent measure, considering.”

“I wonder what it is…”

The Herald retrieves the Spy’s poncho from where it hangs and offers it. “Perhaps I’m projecting, but you look cold.”

“I don’t think it’s that,” he murmurs, but accepts the warm wool; it does seem to ease his shivers. “Just marveling that my luck could have been even worse than it was.”

“Possible effects of namer invoking subject while subject is in the Nadir,” the Student reads back, chewing on his bat-feather quill. “This is starting to sound like an irreproducible set of circumstances. First we have to find someone mad enough to volunteer, then we have to have someone else give them a new name that complements the old one while replacing it.”

“I doubt it’s that simple,” the Herald says. “I only took a little. What do we know about the effects of a name broken in two?”

The Spy quietly relaxes, careful not to doze, while the others argue technicalities and the art of nomenclature. Battered, but not broken. Not dead, not senseless. If he can’t go home, at least he’s with familiar friends.

Simple enough: but just now this is everything he wants.
“Are we sure this is a good idea, going back to Mutton Island?” the Innocent Spy inquires. “I mean, after what happened last time?”

“Of course it is,” the Captain promises. “The festival is a traditional ceasefire, you know. And the locals tend to postpone their more unsavoury habits for more clement times. Go and enjoy yourselves! Try the fishing. Very good spots for fishing, hereabouts.”

The Student is equally dubious, and the Crewmember no more pleased; but for once the Captain puts his foot down.

“None of you had any shore leave worth the name, in London. Be off! And that’s an order.”

“If we must, we must,” the Herald agrees. “I do have some theological points I’d enjoy clearing up.”

“I always wondered what an authoritative captain would be like,” the Student mutters. “Glad we didn’t see much of him.”

“Dunno. Think we’d have finished this job a lot faster if he’d done that more often,” the Crewmember observes.

“That is precisely what I meant.”

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The Student returns early from a reasonably sober day out, swapping secrets and implications with the Custodial Chef (markedly sensible man, that Chef, always willing to share knowledge even in the midst of shouting festival-goers and barbecuing strange catches). Tonight is the last of it, the climax of the whole festival; everyone else will be on land, feasting through the small hours.

He ought to be there, not here. But this will be such an excellent time for devoting his attention to the surmise, that every day approaches…

Just as he's setting out a fresh foxfire candle, the laughing begins. With a bit of hiccupping by way of variety. Somewhere below decks.

How distracting. The Student slips down to give the offender a strong piece of his mind.

The boiler fires have been allowed to burn out; embers cast a last feeble glow. The Innocent Spy sprawls across the floor, cushions scattered about him even more chaotically than usual. One has fallen into the tender. The burning smell of parrot-feathers adds nothing to the atmosphere.

Then again, it’s not especially noticeable compared to the scent of corn beer. Or airag. Or… absinthe? Strangling willow?

“Are you trying to drink the stuff or drown yourself in it?”

“Either. Neither. Wouldn’t make a difference. It’s all mine. Go away.”

“Well, so much for the sanctimonious speeches,” the Student comments. He reproaches himself for it almost immediately, as the Innocent moans and rolls away to bury his face in pillows - but really, he feels more than a little taken aback. Isn’t there someone more qualified for this, a sympathetic
crewmember or stern captain?

But a shout of revelry from Mutton Island reminds him that they’re away, and that tonight there probably isn’t another sober soul this side of London. Oh, devils in their hells, there must be something he can do. Treat it as a puzzle, maybe.

“They’re reasonably careful about who’s invited to the well-feast. And even if you’ve gone Seeking again by mistake, you know now that’s fixable.”

The Spy shifts, looking straight towards him - or would be, if he opened his eyes. “Did you know I’ve never actually killed anyone? Permanently, anyway.” His voice, thick with liquor, has broadened into something not remotely of the Neath. That Surface accent, with its unusual monophthongs - ooh, that’ll be interesting to ask about later. Assuming he can bring up tonight without the Spy denying that it ever happened.

This silence has gone on a bit long, the Student realises. He’s probably supposed to say something now.

“That’s odd behaviour for a spy, isn’t it? I mean, the average Londoner couldn’t murder anyone these days, but it has been done. And players of the Great Game usually top that list. Surely, on the Surface…”

“I mean it. I’ve been smart enough, lucky enough, to not have to. No killing, no guns. I hate guns.”

Generally quite useless weapons in the Neath, the Student thinks, but he holds his tongue. He isn’t completely tactless.

“A lot of people have gotten hurt around me. Killed, even, and I’ve mourned for them. But this is much worse.”

This. Something recent, something on Mutton Island - “Did you go fishing today?”

“A big beautiful catch, too. My buddy Pete would have been proud. Loves fishing...well, he does now. A couple of international assassins brainwashed him into thinking he liked it. Good story. Wanna hear it?"

“So,” the Student says, feeling a slight thrill at thinking though a mystery - if only the Honey-Addled Detective could see him now! “You gave the catch to the Drownies, and they took you down to the Feast. And you saw your destiny there. Something terrible.”

The Spy does open his eyes this time. “What, did you think it was happy party time down there? Because I can tell you it wasn’t.” He groans and grabs at another beer jug, spilling most of it over himself in the process.

“A death, then? You kill someone?”

“It was about that engine.”

“But isn’t that good?”

“I build that Impeller at Kingeater’s Castle,” the Spy recites, tonelessly. “A whale’s weight in dead ivory, a black torture trap, and I embed it with jewels and pretty it up. I get everything right. There’s just one little opening left, and someone crawls in and that’s its heart, living inside, forever. And it’s just as well I don’t sleep any more, because I don’t see how I’m going to ever get that picture out of my head! It’ll just be waiting for me all the time, and I can’t get drunk enough to
stop thinking about it…oh god, this Neath of yours is a terrible place.”

The Student slowly sinks down until he’s level with the floor, just conscious enough to hold the candle steady. He’s having a moment of self-consciousness, that moment of alienation when the body seems an inexpressibly remote object and the soul a blend of incomprehensible desires, when the slightest turn of the head is an action totally foreign. The dread surmise pressing on his mind and memory, that long-sought goal so close to achievement now, is the plaything for an ancient self, long ago forgotten.

Then the mood passes, as they do, and his head clears. It’s all right. All shall be well.

He’s had a clever idea.

“Do you know who enters the engine?” the Unsettling Student asks.

“Could have been anyone. Could have been you.” The Spy is weeping now, spilling tears and phlegm all over a wineglass. That’s the trouble with abstainers, the Student thinks; not the slightest idea how to handle themselves when they do want to get a good drunk on. Absolutely no technique.

“Supposing it was me. Would it make a difference if I told you it wasn’t my mind in there anymore?”

“Whose…no. No, it’s still me. I’ll still be responsible.”

“This dreadful surmise I’m after, did you know no one ever creates one without going mad?”

The Spy looks at him and says nothing. Instead he takes another gulp of wine, shuddering.

“It’s a suicide club, the scholars who agree to make them. We hunt across the zee and bankrupt ourselves, and at the end of the process you have one beautiful undying truth and a witless thing good only to be dragged off to the Royal Bethlehem. We think it’s worth it.” The Student moves closer, gently setting right the overturned containers, wiping sticky residue from the floor with his second-best spider-silk handkerchief. “Of course, a lot of people would say we’re mad already.”

The Spy chokes on something that might have been a laugh. The Student pulls a blanket down from the bunk and wraps it around his friend - engine rooms have a way of getting very cold, if there’s no fire going.

“All that’s happened is that now we know I’ll be something better than that. I won’t be one of those screaming invalids, I’ll be the heart of your engine. The most beautiful engine you’ve ever dreamed of, you said.”

“So it’s not my fault,” the Innocent whispers.

“All shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well.”

“Thanks - thank you.” He nestles against the Student, breathing quietly now with only the odd catch. The Student tries hard to stay still, once it’s clear that his friend’s fallen asleep.

How nice. How reassuring - no no no no no!

“You can’t sleep anymore, remember? You have to wake up!” The Student whips the blankets away, dashes a cold glass of the 1879 over the mechanic. Doesn’t make much difference; the Spy slides peacefully to the floor, calm in his drink-induced stupor.
“Dammit, you’re not building an engine and I’m not getting a way out if you die first!” Kicking doesn’t work. The Student lugs the Innocent upright, not an easy task. “The Fingerkings, remember? Small things, sweet looking, trying to kill you if you fall asleep?”

The Spy groans and looks at him sleepily. “Try a fireman’s lift.”

“A what?”

“Over the shoulders. Easier that way.” He drops off again. They both tumble to the floor.

“This is not the kind of thing they mentioned at university,” the Student says aloud.

He holds to that thought because it makes him angry, which is useful in the course of lugging thirteen stone-worth of deadweight through the treacherously wet room, and then up the ladder to the outside, and then, upon finding the Spy still asleep in the soft Mutton Island winds, hooking him into some weird but blessedly convenient harness and bodily tossing him into the zee. Yes, why couldn’t a professor have provided some useful tips for situations like this, instead of blathering on about Fourth City translations and blasted cryptozoology?

“Can I come out now?”

A weary voice, but clear. He hauls the dripping Spy from the water.

“You’re not going to fall asleep on me again, are you?”

“No. I’ll get a draught from the galley in a minute, I’ll be fine now.”

“Wonderful. Wonderful,” the Student says, feeling not a little faint himself. “At Summerset, this is usually the point where someone would break out the brandy, but you know what? Go ahead and don’t drink. Be as abstemious as you like. I hope you never do that again.”

“Well, then. So there,” the Spy says with a slight smile.

All things considered, the Student thinks, he probably deserves the last word.
“Now, I have Stone’s Attention, and I have Storm’s Attention. So the only logical pick for lunch is Cynthia, in that case. Very good.” The Cynical Herald tucks away a dog-eared notebook. “I keep statistics. Perhaps that’s a reassuring thought for you, Innocent. How theology complements the higher mathematics.”

“Why not just eat with whoever you like best? Actually, won’t they all be eating together anyway?” The Innocent Spy isn’t sure he likes the place; beneath the freshness is a smell of decay. Were this LA, he'd expect to see the building marked for condemnation.

“No. No, they said there’s too much conflict that way. And more stories to tell if they eat separately.”

“Come along with me and the Captain,” the Crewmember says. “We’ll dine with Lucy. She’s cheerful, you know. A good sport.”

“Honestly, I don’t know why you’re all so excited about food, when there’s a lorn fluke out there to examine,” the Student says, packing up his dissecting knives with a trace of his old impetuous flair. "Lorn flukes! You'll excuse me."

"Can't say I'm surprised,” the Crewmember remarks, as he tears out. “Well. Where are you eating, Innocent ours?”

“That leaves one sister without any company, right? I’ll eat with her.”

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It’s good, at first. Chops from something the Spy doesn't recognise, but which taste crisp and strangely meaty. He tells her the story about losing his name (it won't go any further, the Captain's promised; and it helps, to hear himself insist that he's come to terms with the loss). Phoebe gives him tales in exchange. A messenger raven, going to and fro from Parabola. A tale of lovers separated by water, that he's sure was old when Shakespeare told it.

But the food is substantial and heavy; his attention wanders, or perhaps she’s fixing it on the zee. Lit by the moon (when did the Neath ever see moonlight?), isles floating in the blue-black depths, stars shimmering about. The smell before a storm, or an Alteration, as he drifts and watches…

a fragment of memory flashes through his mind. Pete gazing down at him in a hospital bed - can you hear me? can you speak?

“Oh god, was I asleep? I didn’t mean to sleep, I can’t sleep now.”

“Can’t, or shouldn’t? Is the tale interesting?”

“I wouldn’t know about that.” The Spy hesitates, and smiles. She has given him her name, after all.

“Well. Goes like this, then...”

Not everything, not his whole quest for the Impeller. He holds back about the looking-glass war, about his curious Surface know-how, his private correspondence. But enough for her to understand.
"So no more dreaming. Never thought I'd miss it, till it wasn't there. Though I never exactly figured it was something I could lose."

"You know, that could be dealt with," Phoebe says. "The nature of Parabola, its rivers extend everywhere. A tributary runs just below the house, past our well..."

"Would you show me?"

She shakes her head. "Not like that. It would take a good many more stories than you have, at present. And quite an odd shopping list."

He asks for it; she gives it. A long silence, as the maid brings in the pudding.

"Are you absolutely sure that the laudanum’s necessary?"

"If you don’t," Phoebe says, "why then, the Fingerkings will come and eat you all up. Just like the bad child in a fairy tale."

"Laudanum it is, then."

Opium would have troubled him, once. To say the least.

But that Surfacer seems more and more like one of his forbidden, fading dreams...

*******************

"Wake up! Wake up, you honey-mazed thing."

The Student shudders out of sleep, looks about him. "This isn’t my cabin."

"I should bloody well say not," the Crewmember says, tucking their chisel away. "It’s mine, you blasted sleepwalker."

"So I gathered," he says, rather lacking his usual self-assurance. "No honey involved, just a nightmare. That Lorn Fluke."

"Ah. It cursed you in the Correspondence, eh? What else d’you expect?"

"It didn’t though," the Student says, quietly. "At the haven of the zee, it called me, where shall be for an haven of ships...now there’s an ancient blessing, I recognised the turn of phrase. But only after I’d ravaged the beast in earnest, its blood dripping from my hands- it made no sense! What’d it see in me? Why now?"

They look: at his pale, unsettling features, and unathletic softness. That faint limonene scent, always clinging about him.

"Student, it’s no use worrying about what a dying zee monster makes of anything. Won’t do your nerves any good. Now I’ve a nice warm bunk here, are you going or coming?"

He plumps down next to them, almost bouncing off the mattress (old familiar gesture). "I can’t say I’ve much desire to spend the night alone. Shall we try for the latter?"

Sorry about this, Cook. Never meant to go trysting on the sly - on my next ship I shan’t be such the zailor, I swear.

But if you’d seen the lad. And he hasn’t much time left...
Dear Jack,

Today we found the Island of Lost Letters, and a lot of postmen who have gathered here to not deliver them. Deliberately. Or something. Honestly, at this point I’m just letting it all wash over me.

(I did jokingly ask if there was an island of lost pens anywhere. That started a bar brawl over the niceties of different-coloured inks and I managed to strain my wrist again. How do I get into these things?)

Anyway, there was a lot of mutual apologising afterwards. They made us some lovely mushroom tea, I offered to do up their storage cellar with sapphire LEDs - well, they’re literally as common as rocks down here. Everyone’s too traditional for these new-fangled Khanate notions, but they appreciated the thought. And there was a look in the Postal Rat’s eye, I think he might go for it one of these days...you know, with all the gemstones and precious silks and smuggling going on around here, you’d clean up. I wonder if Pete sent the wrong guy.

No, I don’t. You’re a creature of planes and TV dinners and modernity and everything, good and bad, about our time. I’m sure you’d get to hating the place, once the novelty wore off. Guess it worked out for the best...but I’ve buried the lead. The Student has his sixth enigma at long last, just because he gave way to temptation and did a nice thing for once. Helping the Rat tidy up the place (I’m mostly pleased that he’s been rewarded for virtue. Mostly- virtue should be its own reward, etc. but still. Pleased.) So that’s it. He and I are bound for Frostfound, and whatever we might find there. And I have to be honest, I’m not sure if I’m getting back this time. No one understands Frostfound. They say you have to be mad before it’ll let you leave.

So. Everything I know is written down in these journals. Take them to the Phoenix Foundation, I have no idea what Pete will make of it all but that’ll be his problem. I’ve done my duty by them now.

The Spy looks up from his scribbling. “That’s my ship’s whistle, isn’t it? I’ll have to run for it.”

“Be sure to address it as accurately as possible,” the Postal Rat implores.


“But he will exist?”

“Yeah. I think. If the timeline isn’t totally mad - just take it.” The Innocent Spy affixes the address label to the bundle of letters and journals, tucks in the last postcard and slaps down a handful of pence for payment. “Thanks. Good luck with the Blemmigans.”

He dashes out the door. The Postal Rat hums and puts the parcel away in long-term storage. Nuncio is patient; the Dead Letter Office is a good place for things to await their time.

No message lost. I only hope they’re right.

Jack, remember that time you proposed

- and the rest is obscured by a tantrum of ink, where the Spy knocked over the bottle as he fled.
Reminiscing in later years, the Tireless Mechanic finds he never can remember the voyage from Nuncio to Frostfound- or not in any detail. Only soft impressions, and the ache of eager waiting.

It couldn't have gone quickly, with an Illyrian for an engine. They must have stopped at light ships, perhaps even a stay at the Shepherd Isles; but none of that had mattered. The Clipper had moved along her appointed course, as smoothly as if she went on rails.

He and the Student had found little to say to each other, he knows that. No longer any need; their entwined ambitions, matching and fated, had taken the place of companionship and laughter. Their reckoning, come due at last, so much sooner than they'd looked for it. (Too soon.)

No dreaming: but more and more, quiet vague passages on the afterdeck, as he’d watched the false-stars shine and alter.

Why call them false-stars, he'd asked the Herald. They're light, aren't they real enough?

She'd taken his hand, his wrist, traced the passage of a vein up the forearm. Because they're only a mockery, she'd replied. Only a Neath joke, when set against the Judgements.

Ah. But who cares about any of that, down here?

A gentle touch, a caress against his blood; but she had said nothing, nothing.

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Frostfound had been better.

Northern hospitality, tucked in the snowdrifts. Old traditions (ancient, surely, when the First City stood Above), allowing no stranger to leave hungry, no ship to go unsolaced. This, at last, he'd understood; all the same familiar dramas from his childhood, playing out again. Snow-dappled hunts, and open waters hidden in ice, and the burn of cold-forged iron. Cupboards always bare, but never quite empty. Cheerful exiles and hope-wise children, too close to ruin to risk the pleasures of melancholy. Had he landed here first, would he have ever found the strength to leave?

He'd promised himself to return, later. Soon. Once his business was concluded.

But first, there had been the little matter of an ice castle...

My task, the Captain had ordered. For it's always the Captain who enters Frostfound, or have you no respect for tradition?

My task, the Student had argued. One more enigma I must have, and where else am I to find it?

My task, the Spy had pleaded. A secret, captured in steel and sheathed in stone, and how am I to hide it, but in Frostfound's heart?

Their Herald (their votary, judge and soothsayer) had listened to all their arguments. I will go myself, she had said when they concluded; for who shall venture Frostfound's depths, but a servant of the powers? Who else better?

Madness, their Crewmember had replied (last to speak, rightly; but so keen to break the spell). If all have reason, why not all go? For every task is better in company, or else I've taught you
nothing.

Keen to break the spell: but captured by their own words, strangled by their sentences. Bright-edged enthusiasm, born of a sigh. Or was it the shine like diamond-light, that had so engrossed their attention?

Done, then. The Northerners had waved on their madness, in head-shaking sorrow.

Rather emboldened than discouraged, the Spy had entered first. "My profession, trap-hunting. You won't deny me that?"

Only to find a chamber of sapphire-fashioned sky, the never-ending fall beneath. He'd blanched, and staggered back, with all the terror of the virginal death upon him.

"I'll catch you again," the Crewmember had promised. "Just as I did before."

Out, then, into the sky- with a shard piercing him as it shattered. A little lessened, a trace of fear's shadow left stamped upon him, but passage open and waiting.

Their Crewmember forward next. Zee-monsters - sea-monsters? sky-monsters? greater than any seen in the Unterzee's depths, none that had ever seen the Gant Pole's narrow outlines. Terror whose coin is blood; the horror of casualties, who are not different, but the same-

They had gone very white, where the fear had taken them; but without faltering, and passage lay open again.

On went the Captain, his colours revealed at last; for here was red of hearts and blue of apocyanic veins, trace of horror and taste of light.

He had smiled, for once awake, and surrendered a book. A cheap London rag, fit for naught but scaring urchins.

"I've seen a few secrets in my time. Red Science scarring, oh yes...you'll have to wake earlier than that in the morning, to get past me!"

And amidst the bloody chamber, he hadn't spilt a drop.

Onwards to enveloping green, of infinite depths and tints.

"The same green as Salt's country," the Herald had said, scattering fragments like breadcrumbs, like white pebbles in a forest. "An easier path than I'd hoped. Light to show me, wind to guide me, water aid my passage!"

Invocation, or a navigator's instinct; but their passage came easily then.

Onwards, the Student. More than willing to laugh and mock, at all these past illusions; but here was a bridge of sure and certain length, that any common zailor could look up and see from the zee below. Impossibly long to cross on foot, and cold; and lit brightly, brightly.

"Give it a vision of Surface light," the Herald had told him. "It'll fail before a Judgement, even half-remembered."

"I haven't any."

"Ever the proud Revolutionary," -this in a breath from the Crewmember. "What are we to do?"
"Walk," the Student had told them, quite dismissive.

The others had followed behind, eyes closed, while he cursed and raged and struck his blows against the unwinds; and when they were over, safely into Teneb's fogged iridescence, the light had refused to leave his eyes.

"Sun-dazzle," he'd said, blinking. "Or Neath dazzle. Only it doesn't seem to go away."

The Spy, returned from hiding his secret (nodding at his reflection in the fog, as he went), had taken it upon himself to look.

"No apparent damage. No colour change or anything odd like that."

"Not on the eye. Inside. But it won't matter now," the Student had said. "Six enigmas, and a seventh promised me, and there's an end to it."

"Wait," the Crewmember had started (for the sake of kindness after love, and a code he only laughed at). "Isn't-"

Isn't anyone to speak up, to stop our comrade's death?

But the others were all silent: one lost in prayer, another to old glories. Even the Spy had stood mute.

The Student's pitiful hesitation has vanished, as they'd spoken (did the questioning itself decide him?) Into Frostfound's heart he'd gone, accompanied by his reflection; and the sounds of a scuffle in the dark.

"You'll need to follow him," the Crewmember had said. "If you're to bring him out again, for the Impeller...this'll help, maybe. An enigma. My luck, from Carlisle's Haven."

"You never thought to tell him?" the Spy had asked.

"Only to quicken his death? Besides. At least I know you'll pay me full price."

Which moment (last familiar note) is always the moment when "once was" becomes now; when the Innocent blinks and looks at his surroundings, in a confusion that could be no greater if all his Neath adventures had been the stuff of dreams; when the narrative catches up with itself, as he remembers it in future. Never just remembering, after that point, but living and reliving. The last moments of his ship's company, his own beloved Clipper, in a present never ceasing.

Onwards he goes, into the dark.
The light of his borrowed enigma is harsh against the ice walls, even ungainly; the Innocent makes his way through a multiplicity of shadows. He and the Student aren't the first to enter Teneb, not by a long shot.

(Done because we were too many. Why should Frostfound remind him of rats?)

Most objectionable, of course, is the one that sidles alongside him. The one that stops when he does.

Jaded, careless zailor. All his little compromises, thoughtless indifference, the bottle of laudanum readily to hand, laid out for his perusal like so many mutton chops.

"Ghosts of Christmas future, huh?"

"What price your innocence?" his Reflection asks.

"Against my Impeller? An engine that'll fly in water or air or space with equal warmth? I'd never place so much store by myself. But thanks for the warning."

"My pleasure. Must say, I'm relieved."

"You would be," the Innocent murmurs, as the searing light fades and leaves him in the dark.

(Not alone, though.)

He comes upon the Student more by luck than judgement, by the toilsome noise of enigmas clicking into place. This too is an engine, in the old sense.

"Heart of darkness," the Student says briefly. "Crushing light and identity down to a single horizon. Why'd you come? You shouldn't have."

Perhaps the only comment that could have made the Innocent stay; but stay he does, though none of this is right. For all their months together on the Unterzee, he still knows so little about University studies, only self-taught Correspondence, and yet he understands what's happening. The madness taking his shipmate-

"One."

A single syllable, strung out until it cracks. *Where the stone struck, while I fought my way to the Gate. But what return is due the exile-

"Two."

He presses his fingertips to burning letters. (Which he? What would distinguish?) *Sunlight, leaping up! So young, but not too young for birthright.*

"Three."

Writ in blood or writ in fire? *A memory of snow, and naked need - mine, but whose else? What Hour would turn human?*

"Four."
The Student's voice falters. *This one's for me, isn't it? All those dooms the Herald spoke of, and I never would believe- a children's tale-*

"Five."

This the Innocent, in the soft silence. *He spoke of treasures below, and her riding light dimmed, as if she were laughing.*

"Whose? I must know whose!"

"Don't you recognise your own ship's wake?" the Innocent asks in surprise (the light is so very much alike now, to his engineer's eye). *Wind tugging at her stays, water swirling at her chine, as she considers his offer...that's six.*

"And seven is the number. The Name-Which-Burns, the traveller returning-

A fumble in the darkness- and no more Student. Just a thing, wailing a single dreadful cry with no intelligence or thought behind it, but their utter absence.

Of course he looks to aid the poor screamer. Opening his toolbag, the -

why, where's his name gone?

(Crushed out of all complexion. Snatched by a shadow, mocking and fled.)

Cold place, to be caught without a self- and so the squatters’ warnings. Not for the blood or the quality or stories, or all of those together, but the naming lost, which is identity, which is purpose-

*as I knew very well, before I ever came to the Neath.*

Though here’s the Name-Which-Burns... now there's two of them, but one surmise. And the Student's already mad, provoked and anticipated. Neatly stripped, skinless, mindless.

*So who am I, in the dark?*

"Someone who fixes things," the unnamed one says.

Seven letters.

Easy.

By feel he unlatches the mirrorcatch box, full to bursting. (He'll need light, for what comes next.)

Will his blade be sharp enough? Of course it will. He looks after his tools.

The screamer’s flesh hisses in the cold air, as it bleeds. Not much: the scars burn themselves clean as he cuts swift sharp strokes, self-cauterizing wounds. Seven of them, seven the number, the name which burns and burns too much for anything mortal to encompass -

And there! as neat a job as ever he's done in his life, and a thing which is nameless looks on quietly at a thing which is now named, and no longer cries.

Around them, the darkness fades, to pale translucent corridors and their waiting shipmates. Here the praying votary, there the patient captain. Hapless crew caught between.

"Is it done?" the Herald asks. "You found your sequence?"
"I think so," he says, staring at the wall. Did he see a hungry Reflection there, craving for his sunlight?

Gone now, nothing left but fresh ice, clean as the first unblemished snowfall. "The way we'd have realised all along, if I'd dreamt my last dream. His curiosity, his thirst for travel- of course that's our impetus. What else could we have expected?"

"The heart is destiny's engine?"

"The engine of an engine," he agrees, and laughs. "Eastbound first, I saw that when I was carving the sigils. The naming I put on him...but he'll come back to me in time."

"To Kingeater's Castle, then. There'll be rituals."

"I know."

"A naming, eh?" the Crewmember asks (bored to tears, and wishing they’d brought a cushion to sit on). "Do tell."

"All those sigils, I thought they’d be complicated. You know, it wasn’t? As cute a little cypher as I’ve ever cracked. Seven letters. A name that burns. Obvious, really."

“Oh, stop teasing and tell us. Never was any good at puzzles.”

He shakes his head (last glimmering, of impish innocence and clever player- but sunsets shine so brightly).

“As above, so below. Phoenix.”
Naming

Recovery: returning to ordinary time, after Frostfound's frivolities. Besides, by now he has a sense for the rightness of things.

“A new use-name,” he says, the night they zail. “You chose my first one. Find me another.”

“This far north? Devils in their hells-“ the Crewmember stops short, then, where a name would have gone.

“You see? I can’t get by without one for long, can I?”

“Oh, cheer up. You’re acting as though you’re the first person in the Neath to lose theirs. Just look at me.”

“You don’t get it at all,” he snaps, brought to sudden sharpness. “It’s lonelier than I expected, like this, and besides- what do I sign my correspondence? How am I supposed to start a letter, if I don’t know how to finish it?”

Poor thing’s lost it, the Crewmember considers, eying their shipmate’s sincerity. Finally gone native; he’s cracked as a chime. Obsessing over a bit of nothing that nobody else would even care about.

Ah well, that’s the Neath for you. To say nothing of officers. “I’ll admit, I was saving you one on the off-chance. But all them immersions. Water that cold, I’d give even odds you’ll freeze before you had time to drown. Want to tell me it’s worth it?”

“It’s worth it.”

“Well, then.”

The two of them do the ritual on the sly (no captain or officer could be expected to sanction anything this reckless). Over he goes, seven times, tasting the strange waters, while they chant monotonously. Pain of strange pressures, now that he doesn’t recollect from last time. Maybe there’s good reason that people don’t change their use-names more often.

By the final repetition, he looks to be two-thirds dead, and blue; but there’s peace in his eyes again.

“Right. The Anonymous Crewmember, at your service.”

“And I’m the Tireless Mechanic.” (It settles into his bones, like a promise.) He peels off a soaking smock, and then a tight greased-linen affair, the sort they use for staying warm while diving.

“How- what the- you went down like that?”

“Course I did. What, did you think I just wanted a quick case of hypothermia? That’d have been ridiculous.”

“I’d never have done the ritual, if I’d known you were going to cheat like that! Who ever heard of a dry baptism?”

“Too late,” the Mechanic says, with a smirk. “Breaking my new name in properly. I think it’s apt, don’t you?”
Lost for words, they simply stare; while he pulls on his poncho, and takes a very welcome drink of hot coffee.
a letter from Kingeater's Castle, to Rome

...I hadn't the heart to tell him the truth: that whoever it 'twas built Frostfound, or may have passed through its corridors since, the Phoenix never would. Unless the treacheries are even more perverse than we imagined- but no, that's arrant nonsense! The Phoenix is what she is, and no quantity of Seventh Letter romanticising shall change that.

One last stroke of beginner's luck for the Innocent, for the naming held, somehow. This morning we animated our Unsettling passenger. Not the most pleasant affair. I haven't cold-chanted since Whither, and the unnecessary viscera had curdled (to say nothing of the wound where Frostfound took him; I doubt even Stone's light would heal that shattered jawbone). But he's been returned to some measure of sanity. One may carry on a conversation with the corpse; if replies are elusive and couched in riddles, perhaps the Student would have been rather pleased than otherwise. "This fate did he grasp with willing hands, stolen from the Mercies..." My pity's not for him.

He's to zail east, bound for Salt's country of green-and-gold. One day will see our traveller returning, and the Mechanic shall take him, in the name of his Impeller. The heart is destiny's engine- how crudely literal our gods may be! How oft have we chanted that line in serenity, never expecting its selfsame miracle to come crashing down upon our heads? Though by which means, we have forestalled the Castle's demands. It knows there is to be a reckoning.

...the Tireless Mechanic pays no more heed to his loss, than would an intoxicated Bohemian surrendering their soul to the slyly winking Devil; the naming's brought out his new character in full. London's accent has subsumed his old dialect for good, even if he must needs lurch between the Student's studied niceties and the Crewmember's cheerful vulgarity. He hasn't spoken of the Surface since Frostfound. Accepts my witchcraft lore for his engineering. Is entirely reconciled to coffee. In short, an officer more than worthy of whatever captain enjoys his services next.

For our Welshman has been broken by this quest; he'll not see London again. I hope a measure of peace for him. So many years bereft, and he never did take to the Neath... Only the Crewmember to survive untouched, but as they are so fond of reminding us, crew they are and shall remain. Those who shall die with readiness may forget just as easily, it'd seem- and you ought to say that's never fair of me. As it isn't.

Oh, Stone and Salt! I warned him often enough- my duty fulfilled, though the Crewmember wouldn't recognise it for one- but I never foresaw this. Gossamer hope so fragile, to think on't would have killed it in the cradle- that when the sunlight had left his eyes for the last time, he might be glad of company in our quiet lovely dark. I knew he should come to terms with the Neath, having once died the death. He's too redoubtable to make a melancholic.

Well, so he has: and so, I find, I no longer desire him. If ever I did.

(What would I have answered, if he'd offered me the plain choice? Leave my span of days, abandon my lore and rituals, to reconcile with life on the Surface? Saxifrage under the moonlight, one bitter moment before the enduring sweetness...but I took care he never should ask. Less cruel than a refusal, I thought.)

...and yet even my little mourning ends, for the Clipper must zail soon. If I've neglected Kingeater's Castle, it's only because I know there will be many, many more letters harping on this place. A great stillness, in the zee. The Neath's last uncharted mystery. Beneath my cracked palimpsest, where is writ the name of Stone, will I find the God-Who-Dreams?
I think I shall. A proof positive that the gods in my trionfi are no newcomers but old, far older than our trinity...Everything lies ahead for me. (My reflection keeps her secrets, I'll have mine.) The taste of a new lore on my tongue, I give way to its entreaties with glad surrender. It shall be the work of years.

My dear departed Innocent, who shall weep-

Her pen scrawls off at an angle, at the sudden cessation of noise. “You’re finished, then?”

“Yes,” the Tireless Mechanic says, eying the results of his handiwork in satisfaction. “Good thing the Captain never remembered to sell the old engine, isn’t it? That’ll keep you warm at nights, at least until you run out of fuel.”

“I’ll run it once a week and treat myself to a hot bath,” she says, looking around her new quarters. No part of the Castle can be called pleasant, but this hollow in the underlying rock is more of an antechamber. Once her crates are unpacked, and her zee-bats settled in, it might even be comfortable.

“I still reckon this is mad. You hate cold like I hate heights.”

She lays the papers aside. “I know. But it’s also purifying…what’s a few years of discomfort? Besides, I’ll be preoccupied. Work to be done.”

“Nevertheless.” He removes his poncho, laying it on the crate between them. “Will you look after her for a while?”

It flows over the wood, into the Herald’s waiting hands, and envelops her with its woolen snugness.

“Be sure to comb out the tassels every week or so. It likes that,” the Mechanic instructs.

“Thank you. Both of you, I suppose,” the Herald says, guiding the material into more becoming folds. “Go and prepare your engine. I’ll be waiting here when the time’s right.”

“You’d better, I don’t want to conduct a whole ritual all by myself. Anything you’d like me to bring?” he asks, as if they’re a couple of holdfasters in Spite and he’s fetching the daily marketing.

She considers. “Nothing special. Fuel, perhaps. Supplies that aren’t fish. Oh! If you’re going to be stopping by the Khanate regardless, some Stygian ivory. I have a notion one could construct a very effective shrine out of the stuff.”

“I’ll buy it by the yard,” he promises. “Look after yourself, Herald.” His voice, his eyes are kind still. He hasn’t lost that.

Perhaps he has the right of it after all. Perhaps the renaming hasn’t changed him so very much.

No: her ways of thinking are too ingrained. For once, she can’t bring herself to believe.

“How long before the Clipper sail- zails?”

“Oh, a few days. Got to see you properly moved in, hadn’t we? Besides, I don’t think we want to budge before you chart us the course for Irem.”

“Due North. It oughn’t to be very difficult.”

“Even so,” the Mechanic says, handing her the travel slate.
There's a curious look in his eye, as he waits and watches, while she chalks up the markings in her flowing impetuous hand; but by then the Herald's deep in lore and zee and unwinds, and never knows the difference.
Amber setting

Do you recall how they came to that place?

The Crewmember jumps ship at Aestival.

As much as one can be said to jump ship, when they’ve ostentatiously removed everything not nailed down.

“You lot don’t need me anymore,” they explain. “A ship going East- that’s never coming back, is it? And I’m not done exploring the Unterzee yet, believe you me!”

“This is not a good idea,” the Mechanic observes (this, while he helps them remove their fourth crate). “I mean, look at what happened to me.”

“You were sunlight smuggling, you bounder,” the Crewmember says dismissively. “I’ll stay out of the sun and wait my chance. Next time an incautious ship comes by, I’ll just slip in and take the place of one of the casualties. They’ll never notice the difference, crew is crew. Why don’t you stay on and do the same? All that Surface sunlight you were so keen about?”

“It wasn’t about the sunlight, it was about the people I associated with it…and it is a little bright, isn’t it? Makes me squint. Next time I come here I need to make some sunglasses.”

“Anachronism! I’ll try that on the Masters next time I’m in London, see if I don’t.”

“Oh, please. Besides, those have been invented already.” The two of them drag the crates into an impromptu linen tent (normally he’d protest about the appropriation of his duck tape supplies, but not now- and besides, Irem's their next port). They’ll have a very comfortable existence here, that’s for sure. “I expect I’ll see you around.”

“Course you will. I’m indestructible.”

“I never was really clear on that, whether you were or you weren’t. Or your gender. Or whatever was going on with your name.”

“D’you want to take all the mystery out of life, now?”

“No…but come on. Can’t I get even one straight answer out of you, at the last?”

“Ah,” the Crewmember says, in gravely mysterious tones. “A revelation, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Something deep, and enigmatic, and revelatory, about the nature of things?”

“Right.”

“An answer that’ll make sense of my story, and your place in it?”

“Sure!”

“Haven’t got one.”

It’s a terribly old joke; but when the ship pulls away that night, the Mechanic’s still smiling.
And we sang of our lightnings and shapeful disgrace?

“Molly, my dear, I am sorry,” the Captain whispers as he steers.

Not far to go now. He’ll see the Clipper into her last port by morning, and then his task is done.

“I never thought to linger this long, in my line of business. Now it’ll be longer still, I fear. But fair is only fair…I promised the Admiral I’d finish Operation Azimuth, and so I have. What London won’t do in the Wilderness, once she has the right engines- I mean, what will she do? What will she do, indeed.”

The Drownie has come up from the hold, to watch as he works.

“Is it true that your people sing, often?” he asks. “Long time since I’ve sung choir. Not since London came below. No, not since I left home, went to seek my fortune. Dear me, I am rambling on. Never mind. This is the way to the realm of glory, hmm. Ar hyd y nos..something like that. Is it time? It must be time. I’m quite ready now.”

The Tireless Mechanic searches high and low, the next day; but finds no Captain.

Only a note in his cabin, asking for the house to be turned over to his grandson (“I did rather forget to mention him, didn’t I?”); and a completely inexplicable expression of sympathy (where did all this guff about a fiancée come from?); and a most finely-wrought cushion, bedecked with scintillack and encrusted with diamonds.

“What’s it for, the Clipper’s ready cash fund? His life savings? I doubt anyone would want to use this as a cushion,” he tells the Mog.

It meows in disagreement and jumps up, pawing at the material. Come to look at it, there’s hair all over the stitching.

“Huh. That has got to be the most expensive cat bed I’ve ever seen.”

******************

They tilted their vanes and ennobled their spires.

There shall be a conversation in Irem.

"Will you travel with me? To the Uttermost East, to Salt’s country?"

“I’m tempted,” the Mechanic will admit. “An adventure, all right, and if I had nothing else to do- but it’s never that simple, is it? I have a will to settle up, and a pig to look after, and maybe ransoming our captain back, if I’ve got the right of things- to say nothing of staying close to a reliable darkdrop trade route. I’m sorry, I’m really just too busy.”

Worrying about all these simple, ordinary concerns, when you’ve transcended- something. Humanity, maybe. Is this how you lose salvation, when it comes knocking on the door and you say no? One will be taken and the other left?

Maybe so.

Because I’d still rather put my faith into what I can touch, and build, and fix.
“Take care of yourself. Until I see you again,” he will say; and the traveller, though uncomprehending, will nod in agreement.

The Mechanic catches a lift to Frostfound with a Riddlefisher; and tells himself he’ll take a night out for sentimental balderdash. Moping about the Surface. Deep-fried Beloved comfort eating. Tears, if it comes to it.

But the governor develops a fault an hour in, and he’s just too busy hammering away to have time for anything else…

*******************

We welcomed them then and commingled all choirs.

The Mog stays on as long as it can. A ship’s cat has its duties.

But they’re not bound to remain on a sinking ship, or a scuttled one; and so, when the light becomes full and the Eastern winds start in wild earnest, they slip through an unfeasibly awkward mirror (the Captain was a great believer in cat doors) and are gone.

After that, the Unsettling Sage steers the Clipper on alone.

*******************

You can remember those days. It can be as it was.
On the edge of the Menagerie of Roses, there is a little place where the tide runs in, to water the vines and trellises (for so the cats have arranged matters). Close on it lies a silvery beach, studded with pearls. Charming enough, but not much frequented, for all that tigers swim.

Though just at present- for when is it not present, in Parabola? - it plays host to a hopeful band of Reflections. Talking and laughing, very much at their ease. Their cunning captain (what task wouldn’t their captain be equal to?) has bargained them a sharp treaty; the favour of the cats, as they sail the Oversea; and the services of a full-time ship’s mog; and an iridescent tea service.

Ship not included, of course. Cats being cats.

“It’ll be good to have a home port, though a place of our own would be better. I have an idea or two about that, something my flexion heard on Mutton Island.”

“Lofty ambitions,” the Cartographer remarks. “From someone who was an anonymous nobody, only yesterday.”

“I had to wait for the name to be free, didn’t I?” the Innocent Spy points out. “It’d have been too weird otherwise….and he might want his original back one of these days. You never know.”

“I shouldn’t think so. He’ll make a born Londoner. So to speak.”

“Born Northerner, perhaps…but here comes the Clipper.”

Their dream-ship (no, ship! now the East’s consumed her prototype) comes gliding in, crunching against the sands.

The Cartographer winces. “He should have taken her down a bit.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to teach him,” the Captain points out, tossing up a rope ladder.

Up they clamber. Over the familiar decks, into the beloved bridge, where her quizzical pilot awaits them.

“Shall I take it I’m quite mad now?” the Student asks, softly. “Only I’d hoped a little…when I woke and found myself here, still sober. The ship seemed to know her way.”

“Afraid so,” the Captain says. “One of ours now, and no mistake.”

“Can’t I go back to university? Or London- will I ever see London again?”

“No, and no,” the Cartographer says. “There’s no going back, from some choices. But. You’ll have a lot to learn.”

“Now that,” the Student murmurs, “is more than I’d expected.”

He finds a comfortable cushion and a discreet corner, stays quiet to listen while the ship fills up with happy gossiping crew. Living Reflections, the way they talk, turned self-aware and getting into scrapes. Absolute piffle. He’s never heard such nonsense.

A brand new field of study; and he’s got it all to himself.
“I suppose worse things do happen, at zee.”
…they keep me pretty busy around here. There’s always another ship to aid, or someone needs their ice skates repaired, or the winter room I’m refurbishing, when I get a moment to myself— all manner of thing, really. As hectic as if I’d never left LA. So just the way I like it— this’ll more than do, until the day my ship comes in.

Y’know, Jack, it even feels like home some days. Especially when the east wind carries in the scent of pine. Perfectly impossible, of course (there’s no trees this far north; it’s mostly bolegus-timber driftwood, and we’re careful to dry and reuse every piece). But you know what— I think I’m kinda used to that by now.

Tell you more in my next letter, promise, but right now I gotta run. Cos after all the trouble I went to fixing up the Neath’s first hockey game, I sure don’t want to miss that.

All my love,

the Tireless Mechanic
Notes and Acknowledgements

Fun fact: when I started Fulgent Engineering, I thought I’d be doing well to get to ten thousand words. If any aspiring writers ever happen by and wonder how to finish a novel, all I can say is, FailBetter have the right of it; be prepared to fail a lot first. I mean, fail a lot. This one was built on the corpses of several previous attempts at novels, both fanfic and original.

Thanks and credit where it’s due: I suspect that everything a writer’s ever read helps to shape their fiction, but that really would sprawl untenably. This is just my short list.


The various loremasters in both fandoms: Nicholas Sweedo’s deliciously readable “The MacGyver Project” was my go-to resource for info about the eponymous show, and without it, my protagonist would have been far less well-rounded. Also that anonymous soul who worked up unpolished but useful transcripts. On the Fallen London side of things, this story would have been literally impossible without Spacemarine’s guides and the two fan wikis. The FailBetter forums, IRC and the Reddit community provided a sounding board for my weirder conceits about how the Neath works, and I owe the Chestnut Seller’s chapter to a fic request from the latter. Ross Varndell offered a crucial bit of advice on the Cynical Herald's characterisation.

MacBeth and Lothithil’s shared “Camelverse” fics were invaluable; I reread their works more than a few times to keep my Spy on track. Of particular use was Lothithil’s “The Rainmakers”, novelisation of the show’s pilot, which taught me a trick or two about how to build a fic inside, around, and including canonical content. Black Wombat’s Let’s Play was the first fan fiction I encountered about Sunless Sea, and gives a good overview if you haven’t bought the game yet (which I wholeheartedly recommend, if that wasn’t obvious). Famacneil’s “Whistling Shell” does for the Irrepressible Cannoneer something like what this story did for the Tireless Mechanic, and did it first.

All those lovely people from Club Floyd, who game-tested “Sardines” for me.

And because life is what happens when you’re making other plans…lots of thanks for Tanista, who worked up an AU based on mine, and let me mess about with it whenever the novel got a little fraught.

Of the various historical sources I consulted (years worth of reading), Judith Flanders’ tomes on Victorian households were lively and come recommended. Anyone who’s ever watched or listened to Dad’s Army may very likely have guessed at the thought process that led to the Herald’s creation. The Anonymous Crewmember sings snatches from various pop songs (blame it on the treachery of clocks), including Brian Eno’s “Backwater” and Andy Partridge’s “The Ship Trapped In the Ice,” both very Neathy. I stole a joke about brainwashing from Alfred Bester’s “The Demolished Man”, and an anecdote or two from Gary Paulsen.

Around the same time that I was first watching MacGyver, I also read Graham Greene's "The Quiet American". An entirely different kettle of fish, of course, but I rather fancy that certain aspects - the hopeless, drunken love affair with an alien land into which one can only be an intruder, the beautifully tragic naïveté of the would-be do-gooder - informed much of this story’s soul. I would at least like to think so.

Finally, I could not possibly have written this without the aid of Ennio Morricone’s soundtracks, to the point of naming my series after his finest piece. Do try some Sergio Leone westerns if you...
haven’t. They’re very good.

I’m starting work on another novel, all my own creation this time; but this isn't the end of my ficcing. Next up (when I have time to write it), the night before the Fulgent Impeller is built.

And that, I believe, is a wrap. Good grief.

Thanks for reading.

End Notes

I’m well aware that this is a somewhat puzzling choice of crossover, so do feel free to ask for explanations in the comments. I shall be happy to expound.

Works inspired by this are *Miracle of Rare Device* by Tanista

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!