

Solar Wind 1 : Donegal Trouble

The Solar Wind I-1:

Donegal Trouble

Lyz Russo

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“Donegal Trouble”

is an episode from “The Mystery of the Solar Wind”.

The Solar Wind series consists of a story that spans the whole series;
the episodes within which are the storylines of the sequels.

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This story is for you, Robin, Ray and Meggie.

January 2116

Two ships converge in the twilight, six hundred sea miles off Dakar. A voice calls across from one to the other. A chorus of powerful African voices answers. The national hymn of Southern Free.

Sails are furled. The two ships slow and come to a halt next to each other. Lines shoot across. A gangway extends from the blue yacht to the white trader. Muscular sailors carry goods across: Guns, heavy artillery. Closed boxes.

White teeth flash in laughter. Lines are untied, sails unfurled, the gangway retracted. The two ships veer apart, the crew of the yacht singing loudly. A pirate flag flies from the mast of the white trader. They disappear into the twilight in opposite directions, six hundred sea miles off Dakar...



30 March 2116

“They’re gone!”

The man in grey faced his equally grey officer’s wrath.

“How did you let them get away? They are dangerous!”

“We don’t know, Captain-Major. Technically there should have been no opportunity for them to escape. We were watching them this whole past week.”

“Find them!”

“Yes, Captain-Major!”

*

Tights. Toothbrush. Transmitter. Tarot deck.

The girl smoothed down her sleek black hair and threw a sidelong look at herself in the narrow hallway mirror as she left the apartment. Check. Still myself. No parsley between teeth. No beauty. No big deal. She glanced back at the empty flat she left behind; all traces of her erased, as though the only thing that had dwelt here between the last tenant and now had been time. Home? No. No such a thing. Wherever she was sent, there she went.

This assignment had her excited. She had never worked on a ship before. She almost smiled as she slunk down to the station.

*

1

The Solar Wind

6th of April, 2116. Rust-coloured waves, calm sea fading into the haze towards the darkening east. A minimal breeze, just enough to keep the perfectly balanced white ship moving forward dreamily, southwest towards Bermuda.

Young boy high up in the archaic Crow's Nest, playing a haunting tune on an ocarina, carried down in snatches on the wind. Young man leaning against the foremast, newly bearded and unkempt from the day's work, strumming on a Clarsach, a small Celtic harp. Ancient acoustic instruments, rare calm moment, the great sea hushed. Young sailor with red hair cropped as painfully short as her two brothers', leaning against the rail with an infuriated scowl, humming a fragmented alto line. The fast-sinking sun painting the trio orange. Three musicians, the Donegal Troubles, hired for the Solar Wind in Dublin.

Dark eyes watching from the shadows of the jib stowage bay.

*

Blood everywhere! On her hands, on the deck, the sails...

"Aargh!" Paeon Donegal gripped the rail. More blood, a whole blasted ocean of it, just on the other side of that rail... Her older brother was at her side, Clarsach clutched against him, his other hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off with irritation.

“You alright, Pae?”

They should have left her behind! She hadn't wanted to leave Dublin, run away like a common criminal... here she was, travelling west into the sunset as though nothing had happened. And the blood came following her. She was supposed to ignore it and pretend it was just the setting sun on the plankton bloom they had been crossing all day, and sing inane stupid little tunes and be the entertainment...

She glared at Ronan.

“*Please*, can we be done gloaming?”

“But don't you want to be in Scotland afore me anymore, Pae?”

Aargh! Humour! He really had no idea when was a dumb time for it! “I *never ever*,” she said pointedly, “ever want to be in Scotland! Or Ireland, either. Get that, Ronan?”

Ronan scowled at her. She turned away from him, her eyes moving back to the thick, red sea, her mind compulsively returning (like the guilty party always did, she thought with irony) to the crime scene. To a place she had called home all her life, only a week ago.

Shawn Donegal shimmied down the rigging with a monkey's agility. Old Sherman Dougherty watched him, thoughtfully drawing on his pipe. The ancient sailor with the bush of white hair had been listening to the angry music; now he was listening to the bickering.

“Tomorrow we land at Hamilton,” he commented.

“Yay! Land!” piped the Donegal youngest. “Can't wait!”

“Shawn!” warned Ronan. Paean glanced at both and turned away, disgusted. She *could* wait. She'd be quite happy never to

have land under her feet again! Ronan thought they ought to get off in Hamilton and restart their lives there. She didn't think so. It wasn't far enough from Dublin.

“Play the Britches full of Stitches!” she demanded snappily.

*

There's more than ink going on in that pretty head. I wonder, Katya. Phew! She transmitted her stress so sharply just now, I nearly saw through her eyes!

*

The jolly Britches! Shawn Donegal grinned around his ocarina as that old ditty spilled out of the clay whistle. Pae always demanded that tune when she wanted to punish him. But if it took him playing the Britches a thousand times to get her to smile, he would do that, too. Poor Pae, things had got her the worst of them all.

Oh hey, but her temper didn't help! He wished she could adopt his philosophy that everything would be fine. She was so combusive, he tended to stay out of her way these days. He watched how two of the ship's officers – the First Mate, and that mysterious being Rushka – moved about in the dust, testing signals from the self-tuning sails, the automated winches, and the bridge. Feeding back the results to Captain, on their wrist-coms. He wanted such a com. But he suspected they were only for permanent crew.

Captain Radomir Lascek emerged onto the command deck and shouted something at the sky. Probably Hungarian. He was shrouded in mysterious stories, thought Shawn. People rumoured

that he preferred storms to clear skies; and that there was more to Captain than met the eye; that he was ex-military; that he was an alien... Shawn chuckled. The Captain's military bearing and his alien glares at old Sherman discouraged such rumours.

Shawn yawned and played the Britches one more time, in his own altered version with a beat missing. It had been a long day. The break in the Crow's Nest had been a respite from a lot of scrubbing, chopping, polishing, handing on tools, and tightening of things on deck. His fair, freckled skin was burnt from the work in the sun; his freckles were fusing. He'd be one big freckle soon, he thought pensively, staring at the red plankton bloom and the waves that were slowly losing their glow as the night deepened. When was this watch over?

*

7 April 2116

Hey, Katya. Just dropping you a line, everything's quiet now, crew's in bed, night shift is on duty...

Landed in Dublin last week for restocking. Right under the Unicate's nose again, typical of Captain! But what a dreary port! Rains all the time! Give me Durban Port any day...

Picked up some ace little musicians, loaded them along with the potatoes... Katya, at least two of them are under age. Were running away from the Unicate. What is the blasted Unicate up to, hunting children again? Watching them, something's worrying all three of them. Captain's making them play a lot of what they call "Ceilidhs", which is just an Irish way of saying, make a lot of noise. Cor, Katya, when that violinist plays she

makes me homesick... Federi had a violin once, remember?

Picked up some more stuff, too. One dark horse. Very beautiful girl, but I honestly don't know what made Captain do that. I know the type! Hope there won't be a repeat of two years back. When things come apart, who has to clean up? You know it.

That lot of new crew brings our number to 13, now I think about it. Don't look at me like that, Katya! Is not my fault! He didn't have to hire that last one!

And a bit of treasure too. Looted it out of a shop. Rats, hope Kitty Murphy forgives me! But there was no more time, Captain was raising anchor.

And Captain's plans are unchanged. Still wondering how he'll get them implemented. But I can understand why. The Princess is growing up, I suspect at some point she'll want a safe spot to settle and breed... if we all live that long.

And if we don't, I'll see you sooner.

Missing you and loving you, kathal, my sister.

Your little brother

Federi

*

“Land ho!”

Paeon jolted awake with a headache. The Unicate was banging on the door, sirens and flashing lights...

Turquoise light glittered and danced on the ceiling. She clung to the mattress. How she could have thought she might be in her

bed back home in Molly Street... it showed that she was getting used to the constant rolling of the ship, that she could even forget about it at times when she slept.

Her blinds were pulled all the way up, all the white and blue morning sunlight flooding her cabin. She remembered. She had left them like that, watching the moonlight last night, and the red sea turning black, until she had fallen asleep.

She swung her legs over the side of the bunk, sitting up. Except for her violin case under her bunk and the built-in white compounding chest that held her few clothes, the cubicle she slept in was bare. Frugal. No old toys lying around; no books, no music; none of her own herbal pharmacopoeia she had been steadily collecting in Molly Street. Her old friends the dolls, Shawney's collection of squishy jelly creatures in jars... all left behind. A small storage space for one small Donegal, female.

And someone banging on her door. She groaned.

"Come on, sis! Wake up! All hands on deck!"

Ronan. Taking a moment to see that his younger sister didn't get into trouble for oversleeping.

"Thanks, Ro," she called and slipped into her beaten-up old jeans and hand-me-down, faded red T-shirt. She wouldn't even have had a change of clothing if Ronan hadn't packed for her, that day.

"Land ho!"

It was Shawney's high-pitched yell that had awakened her. It cut through the ship's intercom a second time. *Land jolly ho?* Where the Heyerdahl did he get that expression?

She moved into the day's duties, out of her cabin and up the first companionway, to the upper crew deck, shooting a wary glance all the way down the passage towards the galley, where

that rainbow monstrosity of a gypsy cook was usually based. Lurking there ready to pounce on anything that had hands and give it a lot of work to do. He thought he was funny too. Paean quickly moved up the second companionway, to the outer deck, ready to call her little brother back out of the Crow's Nest – which modern ship had a Crow's Nest? Honestly, a practically forgotten concept; gone long before the ships that had supposedly floated on water with a hull made of metal – another tall tale! Ha, and she knew why Shawn hid up there: Because he knew *she'd* not be climbing up there after him! So he could play ocarina while others worked!

She emerged from the hatch to the outer deck, and stopped for a moment, to stare at the incredibly beautiful blue day out there. The sea, azure; the sky nearly the same. That jolly bloom had passed. And there was a nice breeze, but it was warm. That was welcome! They'd had a miserable winter in Dublin; and before it could properly be Spring, they'd had to flee.

And then she froze. On the horizon right ahead, a thin green line. Land. They were sailing straight towards it.

What had she thought? That they'd be at sea forever? Land ho. Port Hamilton. Now she understood. Why was Shawn so infuriatingly chirpy about it?

2

Stabilizers

Port Hamilton in sight! Shawn watched in fascination from the Crow's Nest. His alert-cry had electrified the whole crew into frenzied activity, fussing with lines – sheets, they called them – and tweaking the sails the way the automated systems couldn't. He plotted stealthily to shout “Land ho” in the middle of the ocean next time and see if it had the same effect.

And then his enthusiasm dipped for a second – Ronan was planning for them all to go ashore here, to start life over. But... maybe he could be persuaded to let them travel a bit further? After all, they were fed and had a roof over their heads – a deck at least; and you got used to all the work. There was really no rush.

Early this morning the great Genoa sail had been unfurled, to add speed to the mainsail and foresail. He had been there to watch and help, too. He had thought then that no ship could possibly go faster than she had been sailing; but now her speed picked up even more, so much that he only wanted to hold on and enjoy the rush. The Solar Wind was a Zephyr, the fastest class of ship available to traders today. She sailed lightly, like a yacht; but with a lot of added power from the enormous area of her self-tuning sails. Shawn squeezed as much information as he could out of the older sailors, whenever they had time. Particularly his countryman, old Sherman Dougherty, took time to answer his questions; and so did Federi, the gypsy cook with the illegal colour sense. That one was especially forthcoming, with

information, entertainment, friendship and a never-ending load of work. The Donegals hadn't only been hired to play Ceilidhs!

The secret of the Solar Wind's speed lay in her huge sails. Hundreds of minute sensors, smaller than freckles, optimised the angle and furl of the semi-translucent white cloth to capitalize on every slight change in wind pressure and light. The sails of the hundred-and-fifty-footer were of a practically indestructible, lightweight silicate-neosilk hybrid weave. There were miniature tensors all over those sails, tightening or slackening a tiny area of sail each, in a process involving the silk protein and artificial muscle fibrilloids. The combined effect of the electronic reefing and tacking from the CPU, and the tensor action, was that the sails were tuned in a hyper-responsive way human hands could not achieve. And still, every so often Captain ordered his sailors to do something manually with the sails that seemed illogical; and every time it turned out that he'd only pre-empted the wind changing.

The iridescent solar cells spread out like fern leaves from the axes of the two larger sails, their hair-thin goldthread connections leading the gathered electricity back to the mainmast and foremast, from which it was channelled down into the machine room to fuel the solar drives, which added just that extra bit of push and direction from under water. Shawn was burning to find out what those solar drives looked like. But the machine room was strictly off-limits for all new crew.

Military ships ran on fuel cells, he had angled out of Federi. Those were combustive drives. They had quite a bit more power than the solar drives. On civilian vessels those and all other combustive devices were prohibited. This did not bode well for the Solar Wind, since the boarding of Paeon and her temper.

Shawn grinned and wondered if that temper could be harnessed for drive power.

*

Ronan peered up at the Crow's Nest between the glittering sails and snorted impatiently. Couldn't his two unruly siblings grow up a bit?

"Shawney!" He planted himself at the bottom of the foremast, cupping his hands to his mouth. "Come down, you lazy lout! All hands on deck!" Shawn could hear him perfectly clearly, he knew it.

They had to be ready! When the instruction came that crew was dismissed, they would have to be packed and ready to go, because this was Hamilton – their destination. He was eager to find them a place to stay, with what wages he'd earned on the ship.

Radomir Lascek was suddenly behind him.

"You Donegals stay aboard."

Ronan stared at him, eyes wide. He didn't dare to ask why. His plans for the three of them had been to restart in Hamilton; but he didn't dare disobey the Captain.

Radomir Lascek moved away to speak to Jonathan Marsden, his First Mate. Ronan's eyes followed him. There went a man who could easily be a fleet commander of some sort in the Uinate Navy. Tall, straight, authoritarian. A man to admire.

Ronan had been considering a career in the Marines himself before everything had started going so badly wrong. And now Captain had discovered something – he was sure of it! The man to admire had become a man to fear.

*

They were nearing Hamilton harbour, the Solar Wind plunging through the early-morning swells towards the white line of the breakwater.

“Shawn!”

Erw! Caught dreaming! Shawn glanced guiltily at the gypsy and back at the knot he was pretending to tie into one of the tensioning lines. He was really just looking busy; and Federi saw straight through that.

“Drop that excuse of a rope,” the Romany commanded. “Crow’s Nest, lookout duty!”

Shawn dropped the knot with a huge grin. He clambered back up into the Crow’s Nest at top speed. He didn’t want to miss this landing, and he had been hoping for some lucky break so he could get back up here, where one could see everything. Lookout duty! Honestly! As though the Solar Wind with all her advanced nautical equipment needed a lookout post!

He peered at the sails that were luffing in the wind. Locked in irons, he thought; wind directly from ahead. Didn’t see that often! They ought to tack that rigging by just about thirty degrees... Funny how the ship could go so fast despite the wind resistance of the whole rigging...

Hey! It was completely wrong! Those sails were supposed to be the force that pulled the ship forward, not a resistance that held it back! What were they doing? If the sails weren’t pulling the ship, what was? Whales on a leash? Why weren’t they tacking? The ship was actually going straight into the wind, at full speed! And the solar drives with their bit of push could never be enough

to achieve such speed against the actual natural forces... Shawn peered at the wake of the ship. What was that rising out of the water? Bubbles? Steam -?

He glanced down at Federi, who was following him into the rigging. He'd ask him. The gypsy was peering intently at the harbour, scowling.

Shawn liked Federi, despite the man's relentless way of creating work. Federi stuck out vividly, dressed like the Pied Piper. He could have been an entertainer; an actor, or a puppeteer, because no sane person would put themselves into such loud colours on purpose. Today the gypsy shone brightly in a light-green flared shirt with a loud orange embroidered waistcoat that looked Eastern European to Shawn. He wore this impossible set over the oldest, most faded jeans Shawn had ever seen, and topped it off by wearing a purple scrap tied around his head gypsy-style, from which the whole contents of a cheap jewellery stall dangled on little hooks. Like a jolly Christmas tree, thought Shawn. He wondered if Federi did it to entertain himself or others, or the younger crew, or to annoy the Captain. And he play-acted too! Once he had climbed about in the rigging with a bread knife between his teeth, grinning. This had impressed the ends out of Shawn. It impressed even more ends out of Shawn when the Captain had ordered Federi to take that darned knife out of his mouth – and the gypsy had complied instantly.

“Say, Federi – why is the ocean behind the Solar Wind boiling? We're running on fuel cells, aren't we?”

Federi threw his head back and laughed.

“Okay,” said Shawn with a grin. “I won't tell. Why don't we just furl those sails? They're breaking our speed!”

“Because,” said the gypsy, “if we close them while we approach the port, they will know, won’t they? Can’t furl the sails! The real question is, why is Captain going so blasted fast?”

“Won’t they figure out that the wind is blowing them the wrong way round?”

“Nah,” grinned Federi. “Technology. They never look that closely – they’ve got their sensors and electronic binocs, with that they only see what they want to see.” His grin faded as he lifted a pair of small electronic binoculars to his eyes and peered through them.

“Federi,” asked Shawn, “that stuff in the harbour there that looks like black caviar. What is that?”

“Reason we’re up here,” replied a voice out of Federi that was altogether foreign. A quiet, dangerous voice. The clown in him disappeared completely and was replaced with something feral. Shawn watched this sudden change with bewilderment. The problem was, this was probably not a guise. The change ran deep, through the entire being of the wiry, slightly-built man.

Shawn glanced back at the strange black specks – boats, he presumed – that littered the harbour’s waters like a hatch of spider’s eggs.

“Twenty-eight!” muttered Federi, hissing through his teeth. “Whole jolly nest! Yoy...” He glared darkly at Shawn. “Stay up here, Donegal! Don’t let your brother call you down again. Watch those craft!”

The binoculars vanished into his pocket and he slid down a rat-line back onto the main deck. Shawn saw him heading for the bridge.

Quietly as a whisper, the Solar Wind turned her sails and moved away from Hamilton harbour.

*

Meeting in the galley! Paean found herself a spot as close to the door as she could, at the heavy, antique Ironwood table – the only item in this galley that wasn't light and modern. A squeaky clean galley; her and Shawn's scrubbing had a lot to do with that!

But despite the despotic drive of the Rainbow Romany for squeakiness, all was not so legal and white-winged here! Shawn had discovered a gas cooker in one of the cupboards. A combustive device! Hah! And a bottle of gas...

Aw hey, she knew what this meeting was about. They had turned away from Hamilton. *Why?* She wanted to avoid land for her own reasons; but the Captain's decision made her uneasy. What was with the Solar Wind? Was she a spy ship? But she knew that she couldn't ask. A low profile. Hang onto that, Paean Donegal.

She studied the crew that was gathering on the benches around the table. Her two brothers: Shawn, chirpy as a chipmunk, as ever, and Ronan, tall and serious. Next to Ronan, blond Rhine Gold from Hamburg, whose real name was Reinhold Schatz; but the others were too lazy or dumb to learn to pronounce that. Ailyss, the quiet mouse from the machine room. Sour-looking girl that. Old Sherman was there, fiddling with his pipe. Captain Lascek moved into the galley and sat down, folding his arms and casting Paean a thoughtful gaze that had her worrying. He knew nothing. She should relax. Behind him Rushka, silent and dangerous, cut off the escape route by standing in the door. Guarding.

Radomir Lascek nodded at Federi, who was suddenly there,

leaning against the cupboard at the porthole watching them. Paean blinked. Where had he come from all of a sudden?

“Captain says I got to put you in the picture.” Federi stretched lazily and moved forward into the light of the porthole. His countless decorations glittered mysteriously. “The picture is, we’ve turned away from Port Hamilton. Any questions?”

“What happened out there?” asked Rhine Gold.

The Romany’s eyes widened theatrically. “We jibbed by sixty degrees to port, catching the wind at twelve knots, and then adjusted the course due west as we rounded the island. Still rounding.”

“Why?”

“To turn away from the harbour, obviously,” was the glib reply.

“Doubt that was the question?” muttered Ronan. “There were small black craft in the port. They looked official. Who are those guys?”

Federi smiled. “Stabilizers. Their job is to annoy – er – anyone here who doesn’t know what Stabs are?” He blinked at the gathered crew. Rhine Gold looked unenlightened. “Next question.”

Yes. Stabilizers. The military arm of the Unicate. The Authorities. Paean bristled. The Solar Wind was on the run! And now the crew was being fed mushrooms! The gypsy had deliberately misunderstood both Ronan’s *and* Rhine Gold’s questions! She’d like to ask why no new crew was allowed in the bilges! And how the heck the Unicate had failed to spot a whole great big sailing ship!

“So *why* is the Solar Wind running from the authorities?” she charged, head-on, then snapped her mouth shut. Rats, rats! Low

profile, Paean Donegal! She cast a worried glance at Captain, who looked amused. And that Federi, whose falcon eyebrows shot sky-high.

There was a breathless heartbeat. She could see, and nearly *hear*, how Federi loaded his reply to shoot right back at her and ask what *she* had been running from, in Dublin. And then he smiled at her.

“Don’t be illogical, little songbird! We’re not running, we’re reaching. The wind is just ahead of the beam. Anyone else?”

Relief mingled with annoyance. And he hadn’t answered her, either! She heard her younger brother’s snort of mirth.

“Federi,” volunteered Shawn, “I thought Hamilton were a free harbour? What are the Stabs doing there?”

“Boom!” exclaimed Federi delightedly. “Full hit, Donegal! That is the right question. What are the Stabs doing circling Port Hamilton like a clan of vultures on liquid compounding?”

And, thought Paean, by saying that, you’ve revealed how legal you are yourself, little brother! “Free harbour” was gangster speak! It was what illegal people called places that were not yet under Unicate control. Oh, lordie, lordie! Had Shawn started thinking like that?

She arched an eyebrow at Federi, unimpressed with his aping around. He was a bad influence on Shawn. No doubt her little brother would want to grow his hair too now and hang fish bones and dead birds into it.

Captain Lascek shifted position and folded his arms the other way round. Federi nodded imperceptibly and smiled.

“Okay. Plan of action, worthy colleagues. We lie low. No electronic signals. Understood? No bell-phones, cell-phones or dell-phones, no cold coffees reheated in the ultra-glare oven.” He

glared at Rhine Gold and Ronan. Paean frowned. Phones? On the ship -? “No hi-tech, no low-tech. No-tech. They can hear a light being switched on.” The Romany paused, puzzled. “Of course they can also *see* a light. Ergo, no lights either. At nightfall some of us go ashore in the smaller lifeboat –“ He paused once more, studying the crew for reactions.

He had them all mesmerized, realized Paean with surprise. They all just hung waiting for the next instruction!

“*Atenție*, sailors: I didn’t say we *all* go ashore, just the ones who have business on land. When we are back aboard, we set sail for Panama. Anyone who doesn’t like this or tries to stow-away on the lifeboat is thrown overboard.” He smiled sweetly at Paean. There went the possibility of them jumping ship, she thought uneasily. And he *knew* it!

“We can swim,” laughed Shawn.

“There are sharks, lots of sharks!” Federi declared dramatically, baring his white teeth, flawless except for that one silver eye-tooth.

“Who goes ashore?” asked Ronan.

“Only those with business on land, Donegal,” warned Federi, his smile vanishing. “Any further questions? Anyone?” He stared pointedly at Ailyss, who hadn’t opened her mouth once. The technician stared back, mute. “Any questions, Ailyss?” repeated Federi with a casual smile.

The corners of Ailyss’ mouth lifted so imperceptibly that Paean nearly missed it. The dark-haired girl’s eyes didn’t smile at all. She looked so disdainful that Paean nearly felt sorry for the gypsy.

“What’s for lunch?” asked Ailyss.

Federi grinned. “Fish. At least, smells like fish.” He glanced

at the fridge. “Yup, says fish there on the menu. Again. And chips. Course this is a ship.” There was no menu on the fridge.

Shawn giggled. Paean’s temper rose. What *was* this?

“In which way precisely were you supposed to put us in the picture?” she shot.

“That *is* the picture, *dulciuri*,” smiled Federi. He held her stare for a second before addressing everyone again. “This session of questions and answers is now officially closed. Are all instructions understood?”

Paean snapped her mouth shut, for the second time. She had caught the intent. He wanted to discuss things with her. Ha! That would be the day! She was not going to be interrogated by the ship’s jolly cook!

Shawn was grinning. Ronan frowned at her. The Captain got up.

“Dismissed,” he said shortly. “Well done, Federi.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

Lasek walked off without another look.

“What precisely is he supposed to have done well? That wasn’t informative at all!” raged Paean. “Some real answers would have been welcome!” She glanced at the gypsy. He was gone.

“What is it you want to know?” asked Ronan sharply. “You want those silly rumours confirmed that are flying around the ship? Captain is an alien? Get real, Paean!”

She snorted. “Well, Ro, you can stop patronizing me right now! It *would* be nice to know why – aargh!”

Rushka had planted herself very suddenly in front of Paean.

“Donegals! Captain demands to see you in the boardroom.”

Paean iced. Ronan watched Rushka turn and walk off. She

had an explosive way of saying “Donegals”! She was uncanny! Did she carry a knife in her knee-high boots?

“Come on, Pae, Shawn.” Ronan and his sibs followed the unfathomable Rushka.

“Think it’s that serious?” Radomir Lascek studied his gypsy with a scowl.

“They’re frozen solid with fear,” replied Federi. “ ‘s got to be serious! Captain, think Hamilton is about them?”

Lascek laughed without humour. “We should be so lucky! *You* know what Hamilton’s about! Keep an eye, Federi. Here they come.”

Shawn scanned the Solar Wind’s blue boardroom as they entered. He had been in here once, investigating, and Federi had found him and given him something to do in the galley, with a warning that the boardroom was off-limits. The door to the boardroom was always closed. It was reserved for officers’ meetings.

A long pine-coloured meeting table and chairs dominated the room, along with a plush dark-blue neofibre carpet, smelling slightly musty from the damp air. A great flat screen was mounted on the stern-facing wall; tiny black gadgets in all the top corners. Shawn knew what they were: Closed-circuit cameras. A wooden-looking cabinet was mounted on the other wall, containing – what? He wondered. The remaining wall space, where it wasn’t housing closed cupboards, was decorated sparsely with woodcarvings, one here, one there. Ship scenes;

battles on the sea, lighthouses submerged in tidal waves; one scene of a Zephyr – the Solar Wind? – flying off into the sunset. Yes, flying. Having lifted off from the waves.

The Captain was waiting for them. Rushka had positioned herself at the door again; Federi, in a corner, cross-legged on an office chair, assembling something small. Being inconspicuous. How had he got to the boardroom without passing them? Was this ship riddled with secret passages?

Blond Rhine Gold was there too. So, all the new crew. But not Ailyss. Shawn wondered about Ailyss.

Ronan tried to move to a position from where he had an overview of everyone, and found he couldn't. Either he lost sight of Federi, or Rushka, or his younger siblings. It was maddening.

Paean watched in trepidation as Radomir Lascek got up and walked past their ranks with slow, measured paces. He stopped right in front of Rhine Gold. The young German swallowed, his blue eyes round. He was half a head taller than the Captain. Paean wondered why he was looking so guilty, if he was perhaps a fugitive too.

“This is too important to discuss in the galley,” said Lascek. “And you should hear it from your Captain, not your cook. Federi did a marvellous job.”

Paean couldn't stand it any longer. “Captain, in which way was he supposed to put us in the picture? We've learnt nothing!” She glared at the gypsy. He smiled at her.

“That's right,” smiled Lascek. “But we have. What's for lunch, Tzigan!” Federi grinned. Lascek's smile dropped away and he glared at the crew. “Sailors, the one who leaks any of this

to Ailyss walks the plank.”

Ailyss! This was about Ailyss! Paean started releasing a pent-up breath.

“As for you, Paean Donegal...” said Radomir Lascek.

The breath stopped in her throat. Paean stared at the Captain, frightened.

“Would you dare to repeat that question you asked Federi?” demanded Lascek, scowling at her.

“No,” she said shakily. “Sorry about asking.”

Lascek and Federi exchanged puzzled glances. Federi laughed brightly.

“Paean Donegal, repeat your question!” commanded Radomir Lascek. “It was an interesting question.”

“Why... are we running from the Stabilizers?” muttered Paean, intimidated.

“Thank you, Miss Donegal! And there’s another question you are burning to ask.”

Now she was in trouble! How did they know? Had Shawn told Federi, and Federi told Captain? She stared at them uncertainly.

“Get on with it!” barked Lascek.

“Why was the Solar Wind masquerading as the San Diego back in Dublin?”

The Captain laughed aloud.

“Welcome aboard, Donegals, and Mr Schatz,” announced Captain Radomir Lascek. “Aboard my pirate ship, the Solar Wind!”

3

Port Hamilton

“The problem lies right here,” said Captain Lascek, pointing to Port Hamilton on the map on the boardroom’s console screen. “What on earth are the Stabs doing here in such force?” He tapped the flat screen thoughtfully with his pen, gazing at his gathered officers. Port Hamilton zoomed in and out behind him with every second tap.

Silence met him. They stared back at him indecisively: Rushka, Federi, old Sherman Dougherty, Jonathan Marsden, Dr Jake, Dr Judith – and Shawn. (“Why me?” the boy had asked Federi, and the gypsy had replied: “Captain moves in mysterious ways.”)

The Captain folded his arms. “Well, we’ll find out tonight what they’re up to. Blasted nuisance!”

*

“I’m concerned!” Rhine Gold was helping Ronan coil up lines. Extra lines. Their function was not clear, as the tensioning of the Solar Wind’s sails happened automatically, via electronically controlled coils on the large scale, and the micro-tensors for fine-tuning. “One is hired on a ship and finds oneself entangled with pirates! *Verbrannt*, Ronan!”

“It’s a tough one,” agreed Ronan. “Didn’t he give you the

option of getting off here? And with a spotless record?"

"A spotless record?" The tall young man from Hamburg shook his head sadly. "Joking, Ronan. The Unicate is going to find out sooner or later that one has spent time on such a ship. He can forge my travel documents all he likes. They will pick it up. The safest is really to stay aboard until we're in the uncivilized regions."

"You're staying on until Hawaii?" asked Ronan.

"That seems like a good plan. I only have to keep my hands clean though. I won't be involved in any looting or shooting or whatever."

"Fair," said Ronan.

He wished he could make a similar resolution. Essentially he also saw himself as law-abiding and good, like Rhine Gold. Only he had the nasty feeling that he'd never be given that choice. Captain knew something. They had become prisoners on the very ship on which they had been hoping to flee. He worried what Captain was going to do to them.

They ought to jump ship at the very next port where the Solar Wind landed, and hang the wages!

*

"Pirates, huh!" Shawn was dicing vegetables with new aplomb. The officer's meeting had been over for an hour now. Lunch was overdue. Suddenly, *not* going ashore because the Solar Wind was hunted, was a lot more exciting than going ashore.

It also meant, and he understood this clearly, that for now the Donegal Troubles were safe from the blasted Unicate. By a

simple function of being in the right place. Clearly Captain had experience getting away, or he wouldn't be a pirate still. This was altogether good news. Maybe if they could just stay on as extra pirates... He wondered what it would be like, boarding and looting vessels. Whether he'd be given a real bolt gun, like the police wielded in Dublin.

But coming to think of it – you couldn't be a pirate with only a bolt gun! They only immobilized people. These pirates probably had guns that shot something more tangible. Bullets or laser or fire or something.

Federi grinned darkly. "Pass me that – never mind." He fetched the egg lifter himself. There was a pile of newly peeled potatoes sitting on the Ironwood table. "Shawn, don't get your hopes up. There won't be any bloodshed."

Shawn blinked, puzzled. "Why not?" How could you be a pirate and not do bloodshed?

"Because Captain doesn't believe in unnecessary killing," said the gypsy. "We're not that kind of pirate." He started filleting two metre-long deep-sea tunas that Wolf Svendsson, the assistant engineer, had pulled out of the sea earlier. Shawn watched, fascinated. He picked up one of the translucent little scales that were coming off under Federi's expert knife.

"Fancy," he said.

"There are classified documentary chips no larger than that," commented Federi, glancing briefly at Shawn's intent face. The kid was on a track about spies, technology and danger. Perhaps those topics would throw the young boy off the track of boarding and looting, slashing throats and keelhauling. Federi frowned. That had been psychologically ingenious of Captain! Telling a young boy of twelve that they were pirates! Inaccurate, too.

Outside, the turquoise waves splashed against the Solar Wind's white hull. The ship turned a little on its anchor chain. The sunlit island came into view through the starboard-side porthole. The knife sliced the fish-belly open.

"Evisceration," said Shawn with a grin.

"Next time, your turn," replied Federi. "So observe!"

*

The paradise of blue sea and green shore lay smiling in the afternoon sun. A breeze blew here on the outer deck, by the bowsprit with the not-quite-figurehead, where Paeon was standing staring into the hazy distance. It was nearing four o'clock. The afternoon seemed endless, working on her overstretched patience.

Oh hell, the Solar Wind was a pirate ship! Hadn't they just boarded the ship so they could get away from being hunted? Now they were stuck in one place, fixed targets, and time was moving ahead without them. And she couldn't even discuss it with her brothers.

She had finished scrubbing all the heads, not that she'd had orders to do so. She had tidied and swept all the cabins on the lower deck, and the infirmary – a glum, cluttered little yellow cabin on the starboard side of the lower crew deck. It sported two bunks on opposing walls, a too-small porthole covered with a pale grey vertical blind, white metal medical cabinets mounted against every available wall – bulkhead, they called the walls; a drip stand that was clipped to the wall, fixed-mounted machinery with touch-buttons and knobs and so many indicator needles and displays, and a wall-mounted flat screen. The infirmary, for all it

was cramped, was clean, well-equipped and functional; but it gave Paeon the creeps.

The crew cabins weren't any larger, on the lower deck. Her own was two doors down from the infirmary. The lone door on the port side, across the passage from her cabin, was always closed; on the rare occasions she had tried the handle, it had been locked.

Her own frugal little cubicle was by no means a skimp. All cabins on the lower crew deck were that small. She kept the pull-down bunks opposite her own, and the one overhead hers, secured to the bulkheads to have a bit more room to move. Not that her room at home in Molly Street had been that much larger.

And now she'd run out of things to do. It wasn't her watch anyway; she was supposed to be off-duty. So she could stress herself into shreds. Ooh, and the sea had to be so darned blue, and the day so sunshiny! Belying what was lurking beneath the surface.

“What’s eating you, girl?”

Paeon turned and stared at Federi. So it was interrogation time? For one who jingled and squeaked when he walked, he'd crept up on her without a sound! Blooming stealthy. And his dress code was a walking disaster. Sometimes she wondered if he were a ghost.

“Och,” she said listlessly and flashed him an insincere smile.

Federi returned it with a genuine one and took a spot leaning against the rail next to her; there above the mermaid figurehead that wasn't really one. Just a blob of compounding. In Dublin she'd thought the Mermaid's eyes were following her around. Another illusion.

“Missing Dublin?” he asked gently.

“Where’s Dublin,” replied Paean acridly. Gentleness was the last thing she needed now, blast! She’d left a lot of friends behind in Molly Street. But not only friends...

“Sorry I gave you trouble, back in the galley,” said Federi. “Wasn’t in a position to answer you. You heard the Captain.”

Ah yes. Because of Ailyss.

“So what’s *she* supposedly done?” snapped Paean.

Federi smiled regretfully. “Classified, young lady. Sorry.”

Paean snorted. “So if this is a pirate ship, does this mean everyone’s a pirate? The whole crew?”

“That’s what it means, little songbird,” smiled Federi. “Unless you’d rather be a hostage...?” He peered at her. “Thought not.”

She clamped her mouth shut. They *were* hostages.

They both stared across the deck and at the sea and the island, where the gulls were circling. And Paean sighed. She wished there were a chance of living, again.

She thought back to countless rainy afternoons in her old schoolteacher’s musty living room. A room lined with genuine old bookshelves, with ancient books made from original paper, and slightly newer ones on permaprint, on every conceivable topic. The old teacher didn’t believe in electronic literature; she used to say that the Unicate could control what you read, that way, and could even erase it. Mrs Flanagan, the rebel teacher, her grey hair in a tidy knot, subversively reading history or philosophy to the children of Molly Street who were gathered on her carpet.

Mrs Flanagan, who had hidden the Donegal sibs in her study and concocted a wild story for the Unicate police, charming them old-lady style while the sibs had pressed their ears to the door

trying to hear what she was saying.

“I miss her,” she muttered, not even aware that she was speaking aloud. “She taught us such a lot!”

“Your old teacher?” asked Federi.

She inhaled sharply. What? She hadn’t told him anything! Either he was sharp as a flaming laser, or he could jolly well read minds!

“She taught you things you didn’t learn in school?” guessed the gypsy. “History? Culture?”

Subversive content. Paeon knew very well that Mrs Flanagan ran a huge risk. The Uinate had outlawed all knowledge and culture that dated back more than thirty years.

“So when last did you attend actual school?” asked Federi with a knowing smile.

Oh, for crying out loud!

“We’re done with school,” she announced defiantly. “It’s only compulsory until age sixteen. And I’m... sixteen.”

“Give or take,” laughed Federi. “Sweetness, how many months short of junior adult status?”

“I *told* you, I’m...”

“Not a very practiced liar,” completed Federi, winking at her. “You were raised to be honest, *dulciuri*, that is your biggest problem here. Relax, little bird. Got my own secrets. Won’t give yours away. Haven’t you heard of honour amongst thieves?”

Paeon rolled her eyes.

“So,” prompted Federi, “fourteen?”

“I was born the thirteenth of August, *on* the century,” she said angrily. “Year Zero. It’s twenty-one-sixteen, so work it out, won’t you?” She ground her teeth and added, annoyed, “I’m not

a child, Federi! Just not very tall.”

Federi nodded, satisfied. He stared into the hazy distance. She was four months short. For Captain’s records. So he did indeed have two under-aged crew aboard.

But you didn’t have to be sixteen to stop being a child. He knew this himself. Childhood left when reality set in.

The ship turned slowly on its anchor chain, rocking gently on the waves.

“You’re lonely and sad,” he diagnosed. “Could try telling Federi about it?”

Paeon eyed him. “Or I could try falling off the face of the Earth,” she said glumly. And noted his injured expression with surprise. “Sorry, Federi. Just – I don’t think you can help us. Don’t think anybody can.”

“Captain might,” said Federi quietly.

She stared at him, baffled. Captain would not even bother to wait for the next port before throwing them off the ship!

“Captain’s a dangerous man, in’t he?” she commented.

The gypsy bared his teeth. “The Pirate Captain? Most dangerous man I’ve ever come across!”

Paeon nodded. She’d thought so.

“Wish there were somewhere on this ship where my brothers and I...” Another sigh; another gloomy shrug. Hells, she couldn’t tell him!

“Ah,” said Federi. “For a sibs’ meeting. Good idea. But not in the cabins, little hummingbird.”

“Didn’t think so,” agreed Paeon. “People listening in?”

“Electronic eyes,” said Federi. “Go check. In the top corners. And hidden microphones. The whole ship is riddled with them. Safety measure. You keep this to yourself, *hai shala?*”

“Course,” said Paeon seriously. “Is there any place...”

Federi laughed softly. Was like picking a porcupine’s pockets, talking to this one!

“Come,” he said, leading her away from the prow, down the steps of the small elevated jib deck onto the main deck. “Let me show you a spot!”

*

Captain Radomir Lascek frowned and watched from the bridge how his gypsy showed the Donegal girl the one place on the ship that was unsupervised. Well, the only one that was accessible to her. In the jib storage area, at the prow, under the small rain deck with a roll-down gate. Between crates and vats and sails. No sensors there.

A solution still had to be devised concerning those three mischief-makers! The Donegal Troubles, the youngest had called their band. Lascek needed to find out their secret.

Rushka arrived back on the bridge. She followed the Captain’s gaze.

“Nearly time to get the Stormrider ready,” said Lascek. He pointed at Federi, shaking his head. “The faithless rogue! He’s making the Donegals aware of the eyes!”

Rushka laughed softly.

“You’re finding this funny?” the Captain snapped at her.

“Very!”

“Well, you would,” growled Lascek. “He’s covered for you often enough!”

“This is *really* funny,” said Rushka, watching how Federi and Paeon rounded up Ronan and Shawn.

“Yes! Right where I can see them plotting and scheming,” retorted the Captain. “I suppose I should see it the other way. At least I’ll know when their conference will be finished!”

“They’re not plotting and scheming, they’re coming to grips,” Jon Marsden, the First Mate pointed out quietly from where he was busy at the console. “Most honest people are a little bit shocked when they find out they have just turned into pirates!”

“Honest, those three?” wondered Lascek.

*

“Are you sure this is a good spot?” asked Paeon doubtfully.

“’s good as any,” said Federi. “Make yourselves comfortable. Captain can see where you’ve gone, but he can’t hear what you’re discussing.”

“But you can,” grinned Shawn.

“Well observed,” said the gypsy. “*La revedere!*” He strolled off.

The glint of something small caught Paean’s attention. She picked it up. It was a minute electronic gadget, no larger than a lentil.

Shawn had a look at it, squinting in the low light, and then Ronan did too.

“A microphone,” he said with a grin.

“Thieves’ honour,” laughed Paean.

*

No Ceilidh tonight. Bermuda’s lights glittered in the post-gloaming gloom. Paeon hung onto the rail, the evening breeze

blowing spray into her hair.

She felt somewhat better than this afternoon. According to Ronan, it was alright to shelter on an illegal trader for a while provided that nobody exposed their secret to Captain. It helped the invisibility along; such things as customs police checks didn't apply, which solved a lot of problems. He was going to try working it through Rhine Gold that the three of them could also get clean papers from Captain when they arrived in Hawaii. The most important thing now was to be excellent deck hands and cause no trouble. And possibly, to build good relations so that nobody wanted to dig up dirt about them. Doubtlessly every single crew member – barring maybe Rhine Gold – had some or other reason to evade the Law on an illegal trader. Paeon noticed that Ronan absolutely refused to speak the word “pirate”.

Good relations. Shawn had no problem with this, Paeon knew. Already her little brother had become very friendly with the gypsy, and Ronan, too, had made firm friends with Rhine Gold. She herself was a little out of the water there; if she could decide to like anyone on the ship, she'd maybe try to connect. But it felt rather pointless. How ironic, she thought, when she, Paeon Donegal, had been the main socialite and organizer on the block back in Dublin!

Her eyes followed the Stormrider, the silent electric motorboat that was headed for the shore, carrying Captain, Marsden, Dr Judith and Federi. She feared them, at least, most of them; but her fervent wishes went with them. Let them be safe, let them return soon, so they could weigh anchor and sail away from this fraught island!

Another presence next to her. She turned and saw Ailyss leaning against the rail too, studying her. And she thought of the

Captain's warning.

The dark-haired girl said nothing, just studied her. In the very near dark each recognized the fear in the other's eyes.

Whatever the other girl was hiding, she was not going to tell. And Paeon herself – she'd have liked a friend, but sharing her own secret? Friends, Paeon Donegal realized, were something of the past. She couldn't do it. She sighed and moved off towards the hatch. Sorry, Ailyss. Sorry, Ronan.

*

Paeon descended to the galley where Sherman had gathered the young crew around Federi's Ironwood Table and was telling fabulous stories in the dark, his voice hushed. Ships drowning in tidal waves. Rocks ripping holes in hulls. Submerged debris floating about, banging into a ship. Huge quakes...

As though they didn't have enough disaster in real life! Paeon recalled how Ronan had tried picking some of Sherman's stories apart for their glaring logical inconsistencies. He had ended up scrubbing decks until midnight, a result of Federi's wrath. It seemed as though on this pirate ship, the entertainers stuck together.

By that logic the Donegals should stick to old Sherman and Federi as well! She shrugged impatiently and took herself off down the unlit passages, back downstairs to her cabin, sitting on her bunk in the dark wishing she had brought her diary with her. Although that was pointless. What she wanted to write, must never ever be committed to paper. It would be her end, and that of her brothers.

*

Down in the machine room, Wolf Svendsson was checking on the various drives with Ailyss by the dim light of torches. Dr Jake's workplace was a calm, organized area; where most ships had some damp in their bilges, the Solar Wind's were kept clean and dry. Most apparatus in here was stowed safely in white metal casings, with all sorts of indicator switches, needles and mini-screens to keep the engineers informed of the status. There was a terminal of the ship's processor where Wolf spend a lot of time programming; metal cabinets housing the diving gear and other necessary gadgetry; and the water desalination system. The Solar Wind, like all modern vessels, derived her drinking water straight from the sea.

Some of the back parts of the machine room were also used for storage. Great plywood crates were stashed against each other, containing mostly torpedoes, ammunition and other everyday necessities. Federi now and then took the liberty of storing food there, if his pantry as well as his little storage area on the main deck got overloaded. This didn't suit Wolf all that well. The harbours had a way of selling one roaches along with those food crates. And today's roaches were descended from the poison-proof survivors of the nuclear wars of the Sixties. A roach in the works could cause all sorts of electronic nonsense, and mostly, of course, more roaches. Wolf kept a slipper at hand for just such emergencies.

It was the first time since Ailyss was hired that the two colleagues were really alone; Dr Jake, the ship's engineer, was always there guiding and teaching and supervising. This way it was nearly impossible to get into conversation with the dark-

haired mystery girl.

“So, are you enjoying it on the ship?” asked Wolf.

“It’ll do,” shrugged Ailyss.

“How old are you anyhow?”

“Twenty,” said Ailyss.

“I’m twenty-two.”

An awkward silence followed. Wolf was discovering that Ailyss was not the talkative type.

“Where did you graduate?” he asked, trying again.

“You wouldn’t recognize the name,” replied Ailyss.

“Oh.”

Another little silence ensued. A disjointed thought of dentists and pliers crept into Wolf’s mind.

“Got any sibs?” he asked.

“Is this an interrogation?” Ailyss shot back.

“Crypts!” said Wolf, put out. “Sorry I asked!”

They continued their work routine in silence.

*

At stroke eleven the shore party met back at the Stormrider with their various purchases. They had only managed to take on enough food supplies to last them a few days, more was not possible with this small manual mode of shopping. Few shops had been open; it limited what they could get. This meant they had to restock somewhere else within the next week.

“Found out anything?” Jonathan Marsden asked Federi.

“They’re all out drinking,” replied the gypsy. “Not that they’d be making sense when they’re sober. Heads full of girlfriends, mum about job. ‘s a pretty good team that,” he

grinned approvingly. “Draatted pity they’re on the wrong side!”

“And that’s not all,” prompted Marsden.

“Darned right,” agreed Federi. “Will tell you the rest on the ship. ‘Fraid you might not believe it!”

Half an hour later, with everyone back aboard, the *Solar Wind* set sail for Plymouth. Paeen heaved an enormous sigh of relief to be turning her back on Bermuda. She spelt the Uinate with four letters. D-e-t-h. Mrs Flanagan would have made her sit and write it out twenty times if she had known.

*

Shawn sat in the cool, misty Crow’s Nest, the night wind tousling his hair, finally being allowed to play his ocarina again. The moisture added a muted, somewhat fuzzy quality to the sound of the clay whistle.

It was dark up here; the small guiding lights that studded the foremast at the handholds, had been dimmed down to a minimal glow, barely more than reflectors, to allow for better outward vision. The only reason they were not simply off was deck safety. There were no lights on the Crow’s Nest itself.

While the *Zephyr* tuned her own sails to the wind, under the electronic control of the CPU and the command of the bridge, there were still tasks to be done on deck. Jon Marsden and Rushka were down there, along with Rhine Gold and Ronan, checking things and degreasing the winches which had a bad habit of becoming tacky if you left them – a function of the compounding greasing mixture, and sea salt. But the activities were all low-key and muted – no Ceilidh tonight!

The presence of those Stabs in Hamilton Harbour worried them all. Captain expected an attack from the Unicate; Shawn's responsibility was in the Crow's Nest, as early warning system.

He had been equipped with all sorts of nice gadgetry. A wrist-com was one; another, an advanced set of electronic binoculars. Federi had given him a glass-lens one too, pointing out that they were traversing an area prone to electric storms. Electronic gadgetry wasn't always completely reliable here. There were several such places on Earth's oceans, the gypsy had explained. Shawn was to ask Sherman about it.

The gadgets were for his job. Shawn was now part of the alert system of the ship, a human high-tech sensor. Sitting inside yet another sensor. Because that was what the Crow's Nest was. No other ship had such a structure.

The Crow's Nest was the one visual feature the Captain kept flaunting in the Unicate's face. Ships these days were identified by satellite, not by sight. A reason why they had not been pursued from Hamilton. Usually by the time someone cottoned that the ship that was just leaving had a Crow's Nest, the Solar Wind was well beyond reach.

Shawn had learnt that Captain enjoyed allowing people sightings. He usually removed the false name and identity just as they left a port. Sometimes this resulted in interesting chases, but according to Federi the Solar Wind was the fastest ship moving on today's oceans, so there was no real worry unless they sailed into a trap. And to prevent just that, Shawn had been stationed in the Crow's Nest.

"Oh, hi, Federi!" Shawn watched as the gypsy climbed into the rigging. "Was the shore fun?"

Federi shot him a wry grin. "Don't like land much," he

commented. “But, yes, eat your heart out, Donegal, I’ve been to a pub.”

“Pooh, I can smell it,” laughed Shawn. “Smoke all over! Any good music?”

“Nothing like the Donegals,” said Federi. “Spotted any whales yet?”

“Nope!” This got Shawn’s heart racing. Whales? He had thought they were extinct! “Are there whales here?”

“Course there are whales, boy! This is the Ocean!” The gypsy laughed.

Shawn peered at the dark waves with his fancy binoculars.

“Found out why the Stabs are in a free port?” he asked, only listening with half an ear. What if a whale surfaced while he was not paying attention?

“A pirate port, in Unicate speak,” added Federi. “Fact is, they haven’t attacked Hamilton yet. She’s still a free city.” He stared over the dark sea, into the distance.

For how long would Hamilton remain a free port, now that the Stabs had given her attention? How many other free places would be brought under the merciless rule of that corrupt organization now?

“Federi,” said Shawn, “why are we pirates, if we don’t do bloodshed?”

“Because the Unicate calls us that. We don’t exactly stick to their laws.”

A disappointing answer. Shawn had hoped for treasure, boarding and looting, daring stunts and glorious sea battles.

“But if they call us that anyway, and if they hunt us anyway...” The boy got an evil little grin. “Shouldn’t we exploit that a little bit?”

“Oh, Donegal!” Federi laughed. “You worry me! You’re more of a pirate than Federi!”

Lascek had business partners and suppliers in Hamilton and other free ports. Federi wondered whether one of those business partners had been a bit too eager to make a buck out of Radomir Lascek. Perhaps some of them were trying to palm in the small fortune the Uinate promised for his capture? But somehow his gypsy radar, his internal sense of truth, told him that the answer lay closer. Much closer. On the Solar Wind herself, in fact. And perhaps this time, worried Federi, the spy they had loaded along with the new crew had been one too many. It had gone badly wrong in the past.

“In the Pacific,” he said dreamily, “where there’s less Uinate and more Freedom... there you might understand. We are basically just traders, like everybody else!”

“What do we trade?”

Federi laughed. “Not going to tell you! Should ask Captain, if you’re so curious!” He was not going to inform Shawn that they laid traps for and captured Uinate military vessels, put the crew ashore and sold the ships to the Rebellion; or that they trapped and caught Rebellion craft, corrupted or unloaded the crew and sold the vessel to other contacts inside the Uinate! But all that was just a day-job. Captain Radomir was a big picture person. He had a much larger plan.

“Federi,” said Shawn, “what are we going to Hawaii for?”

The gypsy considered. The Donegals had been briefed. Briefly. But disclosing Captain’s plans – he wasn’t authorized to do that.

“Trade, of course,” he said lightly.

Shawn grinned. Evasive gypsy!

But at that moment something else drew his attention. Was that a light in the distance? Shawn peered through his electronic binoculars and got only disturbance. He moved the binoculars through their various options – no use. Och, dratted electric storm! As predicted! He grunted impatiently and reached for his glass lens binoculars.

Federi trained his own set of glass lenses on the light as well. Shawn activated his wrist-com.

“Captain, ship sighted about – er – twenty degrees starboard. Can’t see anything through the electronic binoculars, can’t see enough through the glass ones. How do I get an identification?”

“Satellite,” came the answer. “Good work, Donegal. She doesn’t show on the Solar Wind’s radar. Probably shielded. I’ll identify the vessel.”

Shawn kept his binoculars trained on the other ship. It seemed to be getting bigger...

“Captain, they’re coming towards us! At a rate!”

“I know, Shawn. I’ve nearly got the identification.”

Shawn strained his eyes. The other ship was darker in colour than the white Solar Wind; more Shawn couldn’t really be sure of in the treacherous partial moonlight. The other ship’s speed was surprising. The vessel probably ran on fuel cells. Therefore, probably military. He glanced at Federi, concerned. The gypsy had transmuted into that sharp, sinister entity again. A subtle shift. It scared Shawn.

“If Captain identifies them by satellite, can’t they identify us too?” he asked, worried.

“They have, long since,” said Federi darkly. “Can bet on

that!”

Not by satellite, the Romany refrained from adding. It was more complex than that...

If Federi could have had a glimpse from a bird’s eye view, he’d have been a lot more worried still. Hamilton Port was where the main force of Stabilizer T-craft lay. Small, agile motorboats built for all sorts of fast manoeuvres in the comparatively shallow waters of a harbour. But all around the islands, in regular intervals with their radar fields overlapping, military speed-ships were positioned, Pursuers, which were equipped with fuel cell drives running on hydrogen gas. These vessels were built for bursts of extreme speed over short distances, and their spacing was such that once in view of Hamilton, the Pirate could not escape without registering on at least one Pursuer’s radar screen. The Solar Wind had sailed into the Unicate’s net.

“Donegal, come in!” came the Captain’s shouted command over the wrist-com. “Come down from there instantly! All hands below deck! Shout it to them! Leave nobody out! Hurry!”

“All hands below deck!” yelled Shawn as he shimmied down the rigging like a monkey, followed by the gypsy who grabbed a rope and slid down it. “Captain’s orders: All hands below deck!”

“All hands below deck!” bellowed Captain Lascek over the intercom. “Boardroom! Accounting system! Roll call!”

Seconds later everyone was gathering in the boardroom. Jonathan Marsden was already taking roll call, making marks at the voices that weren’t yet responding and reading them again at the end of the roll call. All were accounted for. All were below deck. And the Unicate vessel was still bearing down on them.

“Marsden! Make sure nobody moves a foot outside! It would

be lethal!”

Rushka and Federi were leaving the boardroom at a run.

“What are they doing?” Paeon asked, at no one in particular.

“Checking that all portholes are closed,” said the elderly Doc Judith. “Run, Paeon, help them! See there, over the doors? Those electronic displays? Run to the galley, Paeon, check those two. Make sure they’re good and tight.”

Shawn was running after his sister.

“And now?”

“Checking portholes, bro! Come!”

*

Aboard the Unicate MS Hun, Captain Anya Miller blinked. Was it possible?

“What the hell is that maniac doing?”

Just a second back she had everything fixed to capture the entire Solar Wind, crew, Pirate Captain and all. What a fortune she’d be palming in, along with the deep satisfaction of having outwitted Radomir Lascek! Now before her eyes the white sails of the Zephyr folded up like bat’s wings, disappearing into the booms as the latter lifted up to align with the masts, which telescoped a bit and laid themselves down gently on the deck. Something glinted. She peered, trying to see what it was, and got a better view as her search-beam brushed the Solar Wind with the lift of a wave. It was hooks – springing up out of the deck to secure the folded-up rigging down. The next moment the entire ship simply – sank! She saw a vague glow vanishing under water.

4

Undertow

Anya Miller cursed. The Solar Wind had got away from her before, merely by speed. But at some point she had been promoted into a position where she could choose her own ship; and that was how she was Captain of the Hun, the fastest craft in the entire military force. By normal conceivable means the Solar Wind could not outrun her. But then, Radomir Lascek wasn't normal. He had just provided new proof.

“Get a grip, ladies!” snapped Miller. “Get a fix on that boat and follow! Move!” She gazed at the spot where the Solar Wind had vanished. “And close your damned mouth, Anyhow! This time the old crook is not getting away!”

She had positioned herself perfectly. She had been accurate with the assumption that Lascek would not be able to stock up the way he needed to in Hamilton, and would therefore try to make a dash for the next pirate port. Which one was not quite clear; Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua all had some unconquered harbours, hidden bays that the Unicate was still trying to bring to light. It was, after all, the major trade route to the Pacific, the great domain of the Rebellion. And then there was Barbados. Though unconfirmed, Anya Miller was personally convinced that Barbados still had a pirate port somewhere. If it were true, she'd bet he'd head for Barbados!

She knew the old pirate! He'd try for the one that was slightly

out of the way rather than carry on straight, to throw pursuers off track. But Radomir Lascek was never completely predictable; it was this element that made him so dangerous. So she had taken the precaution of stationing ships all around the island while placing herself squarely between him and Barbados. Her calculation had been on the money.

She had known that he was off the satellite. How the old crook managed that, the devil alone knew; *nobody* circumvented the satellite ID! But his ship being radar-cloaked had come as a surprise. This explained the lethargy of the Stabs. Anya Miller's sharp wit alone had resulted in her seeing him at all: The Solar Wind had practically tripped over the Hun on her way down to Barbados. She had been spotted visually.

*

“Got to go deeper,” muttered Radomir Lascek. “She’s still on our tail. Risky.” He punched another sequence into the console, and the Zephyr descended further. He activated the intercom to the machine room.

“Dr Jake, we need the fuel cells. Solar drives not fast enough.”

“Yes, Captain!”

The fuel cells blasted into action. The Solar Wind surged forward. Quite a few new crewmembers sat down suddenly.

Shawn had followed the Captain to the bridge. This was another playground full of technological wonders. Shawn couldn't get enough of all the beautiful electronics! The ship console and all the controls took up the width, more or less, of a piano. The “mixing desk”, as Shawn thought of the panels of

buttons and indicators, was flat to allow the Captain or the helmsman a clear view to the outside, from the bridge over the main deck, to the prow, and to the ocean beyond. If all electronics failed, Shawn realized that one could run the Solar Wind manually, by visuals and wind. Basic; effective. He was impressed.

The Captain was monitoring the helm that was on autopilot with his left hand while his right moved over the keyboard of the console. Readings showed on the various screens.

“Who is this ship?” asked Shawn, pointing to the blipping dot that showed on the electromagnetic grid. The reading was somewhat clearer from down here. The Unicate ship had a huge electromagnetic presence; it had to carry all sorts of charge.

“The Hun. Ship of Anya Miller.” Lascek grinned, a cold light in his eyes as the console reflected in them. “Old enemy of mine. Very ambitious woman, Unicate navy officer. She tends to bend the rules. I caused her a ruffle from her superiors once. Been following me around ever since. Let Old Sherman tell you that story some time.”

*

Dr Judith was walking amongst the crew in the boardroom with oxygen masks for those who needed it. “Don’t panic, this is normal,” she told the newcomers. “We’re just evading some troubles on the surface. Would you like some oxygen? Oh my, Ailyss has passed out. Ronan Donegal, won’t you please revive her?” She handed him another oxygen mask to hold over Ailyss’ face.

The Captain kept his eyes fixed on the dot on the screen.

“Blast! We’re not losing them! Going under is usually enough for most other ships.”

“Do they ever try to follow, Captain?” asked Shawn.

Radomir Lascek studied the witty Donegal Trouble for a second. Shawn gnawed his lip, hoping Captain’s sense of humour was active tonight.

“That Anya is a tough customer!” The Captain peered at the screens and muttered a Hungarian expression. At least, Shawn hoped it was Hungarian. “We should mask. Be ready, Donegal. Don’t get scared now.” He punched the intercom to the machine room again. “Dr Jake, we’re masking. Be ready. Shawn, sit down!”

“Yes, Captain.” Shawn obeyed, wondering what that ‘masking’ entailed.

Lascek waited until the Hun was nearly upon them. Shawn held his breath. Nerve-racking stuff! Was the enemy ship going to send a torpedo? The Captain hit a sequence of buttons. Everything went completely dark. The Solar Wind blended into her surrounds. Her radar-diffusing coating, paired with the absence of any electricity or light made her invisible on the enemy ship’s varied detection systems.

*

“Worried, Doc?”

“Very! Captain hasn’t disengaged the electrics underwater in a long time!”

Paean’s ears peaked at the whispered conversation between Doc Judith and Sherman Dougherty.

“Enemy must be right overhead,” said the old storyteller.

Paeon felt someone take hold of her sleeve in the dark and nearly lost her balance with fright. A firm hand closed its long wiry fingers around her wrist and guided her own hand to the back of a chair. The Solar Wind was still listing and rolling a bit.

“Sit down,” ordered the gypsy’s voice by her ear, almost inaudibly. “Could hurt yourself!”

She found the seat by touch and complied, a bit put out. She had been doing fine before he pulled her off-balance!

“Why are the lights off?”

“Don’t worry, sunshine,” whispered Federi. “ ‘s a standard procedure. But we all have to be dead quiet!”

He ponged of pub! Smoke and alcohol! Not ale though, that smelt subtly different. Something stronger, sweeter. Rum perhaps?

“Federi, you’re drunk!” she hissed, annoyed. Sheesh!

“Am not! You’ll also smell like this after a seedy gig!”

“What was the mission – fratting with the enemy?”

What a little spitfire! Federi’s falcon eyebrows lifted as he tried to work out how he had deserved that attack.

“Why is it so important?” he asked.

Paean laughed softly. “It’s not! Go stink to yourself in the dark, why don’t you, Mr Thieves’ Honour!”

“Ah!” So that was it. A broken promise! Federi grinned to himself. “Think you’d want to give me back my microphone?”

“Nope,” said Paean. “ ‘s a handy little item.”

“Can’t do anything without its other half,” Federi pointed out.

“Neither can you.”

“I can hear everything you say.”

“Can’t, either!”

“You were singing some opera music this afternoon,” said Federi.

“s your imagination,” said Paean. “Ro has disabled it! With a hammer.”

Federi paused. She could tell that he was – well, a bit put out. She grinned with glee.

“Well...” the gypsy said tentatively, “will it help if I say I’m sorry?”

“I’m not upset,” smiled Paean. “Anyway you’re fickle. I’ll accept your apology, knowing that you’ll do it again soon. There’s no curing you.”

“Will you two be quiet back there,” hissed a voice. “We’re masking!”

“Sorry, Jon,” the gypsy hissed back. His sinewy hand briefly closed over Paean’s wrist once more. “*Kathal*, Twinkletoes!” Then he was gone. Gone off to stink in the darkness. Paean shook her head, puzzled. Twinkletoes -?

They waited. Ronan had managed to revive Ailyss with the oxygen mask, for which he had received a venomous look just before the lights went out. Now he stood in the dark feeling slighted.

Rhine Gold was counting down time in his head. One a potato, two a potato, three a potato... how long was this still going to go on? He wondered if any of the female crew was in any way approachable for a little tête-à-tête in the dark. Let’s see. There was Ailyss – no, she was certainly not approachable. Rushka plain smacked of danger! Who else was female? Doc Judith was surely a bit old. Sixtyish, he’d guess. He was wary of her too. The last time he had encountered her by accident in a dark, lonely passageway, he had been overpowered with a

Vitamin B injection! He always looked both ways now before venturing to and from his cabin on the lower deck.

Sheesh, not much of a choice on this boat! All the females were dangerous!

And then he remembered there was also little Paeon. Young, childish, and a tomboy too, but if one thought about it, actually really the only one who was in any way a possibility. Perhaps if one chiselled at her she might get more ladylike. He'd have to work on it quite a bit though; this ship with all its hard work turned every sailor into a man, even the girls. See Rushka. So he'd have to get at it while Paeon wasn't yet a proper sailor. Then again, Rhine Gold liked such mathematical challenges. He began to work on a plan. It never occurred to him that perhaps she was more dangerous than all the others put together.

Wolf and Dr Jake were down in the machine room by the smallest ray of a micro-torch. They had to see what they were doing; they were getting the other drives ready for when Captain needed them.

Sherman Dougherty cooked up a brand new story in his head. And then he designed the holes into it, especially for Ronan Donegal. He was rather disappointed that the young man hadn't picked his last one apart. And he had built in such beautiful inconsistencies! He'd have to tell Federi not to punish a questioning young mind for being a critical thinker!

*

Shawn was on the bridge with Captain Lascek, learning the ropes of a pirate escaping the law.

“Quiet, Shawn,” whispered Captain Lascek. “They have

sound detection on. But they won't pick up a whisper, not over the noise of their own ship. We're drifting away from them now. Anya must have forgotten that there are counter currents down here, flowing opposite to the surface current! Or perhaps the Unicate Marines don't have that information."

"Pardon, Captain?"

"We're in an undertow," explained Lascek. "That's why we had to go deeper: To get ourselves positioned in it. I suspect it's in fact part of the oceanic conveyor belt. That flows south, right here, and it comes surprisingly near the surface. Would be interesting to find out why. Could be a thermal current too though. The Solar Wind picked up the turbulences. Anya's on the surface, where the Gulf Stream is moving her north. The currents are moving our ships apart without me doing a single thing."

"But won't they just follow?" worried Shawn.

Lascek laughed silently. "They've passed us, and they were going at an ape velocity when they did, and it took them a good few seconds to stop their own movement, and now they're not sure where to look for us. Even if they cease their engines to listen for us, we'll simply drift away from them."

"What are they listening for?" breathed Shawn.

"Well, any sound at all; any light; any slightest signal. The electric disturbance outside is working against them. Fudging their signal a bit. Dr Jake and Wolf are working on an electronic shield for the Solar Wind, but it's not yet ready for use. Son, you'll love this ship once you know everything about her. You won't want to leave."

"I already don't want to leave," whispered Shawn. "I'm crazy about this boat and everyone on her. Well, everyone except –

that is –“

Captain Lascek chuckled soundlessly. “Out with it, boy! You dislike Verushka Lascek?”

Shawn paused. “Verushka – *Lascek*? Is that Rushka?”

“She’s my daughter,” said the Captain, and Shawn clearly heard the pride in his voice. Lucky Rushka, thought Shawn. She has a dad and he’s proud of her!

“No, Rushka’s cool,” he said. “*Really* cool! But Ailyss. I don’t think I like her very much. She’s *strange*.”

“Good instincts, Donegal. I wonder about the older Donegal, though.”

“Ronan? He warned me of her. But he didn’t have to, I’ve got my own sense of danger. Captain, if we’re pirates, what are girls doing aboard?”

Radomir Lascek laughed softly.

“Aren’t you glad that they are? Or your own sister would have had to stay behind!”

“Och, but – she’s not a *girl*,” said Shawn. “That’s different!”

“She’s not a girl?” The Captain was amused. “What is she then?”

“Och, just – one of the guys,” said Shawn.

Lascek smiled. “So, Shawn, what’s your sense of danger telling you right now?”

Shawn listened for a moment. The Solar Wind rolled a bit, shifted a bit, listed a bit on the undersea current. She was also very slowly turning, he thought. Drifting without drives. He reached out with his “sense of danger” to detect the foreign vessel. It was far away, out there somewhere behind them, circling and steadily moving away in the wrong direction.

“They’ve lost us,” he concluded. “I may be wrong, Captain.

It just feels like that.”

“I second that, Captain,” came Rushka’s quiet comment behind them. Shawn jolted with surprise.

“Good, both of you! Now let’s test your theory.”

Lascek sent a single, minute satellite blip in the surmised direction of the Hun. The signal came back, somewhat distorted, but still confirming what both the Captain and Shawn had sensed: They had practically shaken off their pursuers. The Hun was bobbing about in the far distance trawling for submerged objects with loud satellite and radar signals.

Captain Lascek activated the com. “Dr Jake, come in!”

“Captain,” came the quiet response from the machine room.

“Empty the ballasts. Get the nu – the *special* drives ready but don’t activate until I give the signal. We rise to the surface quietly, no sound, no light, minimal power. They’re searching for a submarine now.”

“Alright, Captain,” Dr Jake’s hushed voice acknowledged.

The Captain turned. “Shawn! Go find Mr Marsden and relay these orders: When we surface, still no lights or sound. We’re sailing due east. Will turn later. Don’t trip in the dark!”

“Okay, Captain!” whispered Shawn. He felt his way to the companionway that led from the bridge directly below deck.

Slowly the Solar Wind rose to the surface in the pitch dark. If Anya Miller the Hun had known where to look, if she had been close enough, if there had perhaps not been any haze, she would have witnessed a reversal of what she had seen before: The beautiful white ship surfacing, raising its two masts, stretching out its rigging like arms after a good sleep, keeping the sails furled though, and then – there was a flash of light and the Solar Wind shot away across the ocean.

As it happened, Miller did see the flash of light.

“What?!” What were they doing that far south?

“If that was the Solar Wind, we’ll never catch her now,” said her First Mate.

Captain Miller was furious.

“Follow!” she snapped. “We’ll catch her! We’re on a Pursuer, for crying out loud!”

*

A cheer went up on the Solar Wind when the lights went back on. Shawn went looking for Federi, and found him in the galley, alone, clearing up and making coffee for everyone. He told him about the currents.

“If Captain Lascek knew about the currents, didn’t that other ship know too? Why didn’t they compensate and calculate it in?”

“That is the beauty of the Solar Wind,” said Federi with a grin. “You were so lucky to be on the bridge with Captain!”

“What do you mean?”

“The Solar Wind is not your usual ship,” said Federi. “Other ships have functions built into their processors that find the path of least resistance on the ocean, consistently and reliably. The processor plots the smoothest course. Is a case of humans too reliant on their technology for their own good. You’re still going to see how our Captain exploits that! Ditto with our getaway from Hamilton harbour!” He laughed softly. “Fact is that Captain uses this kind of information consciously where others let their ship’s computer do the work. *That is what!*” He handed a mug of hot coffee to Shawn. “Captain knows most minor currents on Earth’s oceans personally. He actively seeks them

out. Part of what makes this ship so fast!”

“But how does he know about the undersea current? Is it on the map?”

“Doubt it. Old maps perhaps.” Federi rolled his eyes. “Donegal, if you must know. The Solar Wind is a very special ship. Her outside is – shall we say – like skin. There are sensors everywhere. She knows every current, every change in temperature, every shark that comes nibbling. The ship computer is constantly processing the information from the sensors. We know a lot more about Earth’s oceans than any other ship out there. But you keep that mum!”

“Captain is a genius,” said Shawn, marvelling.

“That’s why he’s a pirate. Nobody must tell Captain ‘You can’t have more sensors on your ship, you must have a license’. Nobody must say, ‘You can’t hire Shawn Donegal, he’s too young.’ Captain doesn’t like walls.”

The Captain appeared in the galley’s doorway.

“Just so, Federi,” he agreed, accepting the mug of coffee the Romany handed him. “She’ll tail us for days now. She’s a tough one to shake. But she won’t catch up. Not now.”

“How many days, Captain?” asked Federi apprehensively. They were only stocked for four or five! And when they landed in Plymouth, what was to prevent Miller from bringing down the local forces on them? Sometimes he wished they could just sink the woman! Couple of torpedoes ought to sort it!

“Not scared, are you, Tzigan?” Radomir Lascek narrowed his eyes at his gypsy, amused.

“Concerned,” admitted Federi. Shawn watched the Captain and the cook. Two contrasting attitudes to danger!

“We’ll double up on fishing,” decided Lascek. “Don’t worry.”

*

When Shawn got out onto the deck the next morning, he noticed the Captain was in a great mood.

“That Hun is still following our trail,” Federi explained to Shawn when the boy reported to the galley and asked about it. “We’re leaving a trail for her to follow.”

“What kind of trail?” asked Shawn, fascinated.

“Potato peels.”

Potato peels! “Why?”

“Because after she follows them, the squid can eat them. Captain doesn’t believe in pollution.”

“And then we eat the squid,” laughed Rhine Gold, who was peeling potatoes again. Mostly for the peels, Shawn realized.

“But why is he leaving a trail?” he insisted.

“Let’s just say, he likes playing games,” grinned Federi as he chopped an onion with a virtuoso staccato movement. Shawn watched, impressed. He had a sinister notion that Federi would have preferred it to be Anya Miller there on the chopping board.

He seated himself across from Rhine Gold at the huge, heavy Ironwood table. Federi had secured that table for the galley at an auction many years ago. The table dated back to the early pioneers’ days of Ovimba, in Southern Free Country. The Ironwood table had been fastened to the floor with serious bolts, because anybody who got squashed by this solid piece of furniture during a storm or sudden manoeuvre would be gravely injured if not killed.

“What is the Hun’s problem?” asked Shawn.

“Well, she’s Unicate,” said Federi. “And of course, injured

pride. Captain Radomir and Anya Miller have a feud on as old as the sea. 's been going so long it's almost a love affair."

"Och no," commented Shawn, disgusted. "That's so – urgh!"

"Yes, I agree, it's poor taste," said the gypsy, frowning. "Federi thinks it's a huge risk, and unnecessary. She wants us dead. She's a bounty hunter, thinks that's how she's going to make her fortune. 's a lot of cash. Probably wants it to retire from the military. Course by now it's personal!" He glanced up from the onions. "Shawn, we know how to deal with bounty hunters. The problem is that she's a bounty hunter with the whole Uinate military at her fingertips."

Shawn said nothing for a few moments. Then he looked up.

"So the Captain of the Hun wants to have Captain Lascek put to *death* for *money*, and because he hurt her *pride*? And Captain doesn't want us to defend ourselves because he's in –"

"Quiet!" Federi held up his hand. "Haven't you been listening to Sherman, boy?"

"What do you mean?"

The Captain peered into the galley.

"Coffee, Captain?" asked Federi, getting up.

"No, that's fine, Federi," replied Lascek with a grin. "Just checking..." He went off, whistling. Shawn stared after him, rattled. "Sheesh! Who's the pirate in this equation?"

"Us, always us," said Federi lightly. "Never get that mixed up. Aargh! I detest onions, yodiho!" He wiped at his burning eyes with his colourful flared sleeve.

Shawn reached out and took over dicing the onion, starting to cry right away.

"There aren't that many potatoes left," said Federi. "Got to get to Plymouth soon!"

“And if she follows us all the way to Plymouth?”

“I think the potatoes will run out before that,” said Federi. He glanced up at Shawn’s confused face and laughed. “Don’t worry! Captain would never let her sink the Solar Wind!”

Don’t worry? Shawn iced. Suddenly it felt to him as though it weren’t a joke at all.

Federi watched him. The chill had reached him too. He feared that Captain was underestimating the Unicate viper. There was something terrible aboard her ship. He had sensed it last night.

“But why should it be personal?” asked Shawn, dumping the chopped onion in the electric wok.

“Complex question. She was demoted because of him,” said Federi. “She bends the rules, abuses Unicate resources. Deserted her post, I suspect. What do you suppose that bunch of Stabs at Hamilton was about?”

“Not about us, surely?” asked Shawn.

“Can’t be ruled out, can it? But I fear they are in fact taking over Hamilton Port. Manila went that way, last time we passed there. Worrying that, in the Pacific! That’s not even Unicate territory! Wonder if the Rebellion has conquered that place back yet!”

“But why is the Unicate doing that?”

“Clamping down on deviants,” said Federi. “They’re just following their program. World domination.”

The Crow’s Nest beeped on Shawn’s wrist.

“Sorry, Federi, can’t do the onions,” he exclaimed, dropping his knife and running down the passage towards the companionway to the hatch.

Federi stared after him, wondering. Those three Donegals!

He couldn't piece it together. The oldest, Ronan, was reserved and very responsible, if completely unforthcoming about his past. Shawn was downright chatty and light-hearted, although there were topics he shied away from like a cat from something rotten. And the girl – whatever haunted her was eating her alive. Every time he spotted her she looked a bit more harassed and less sane. And – she wasn't allowing him to help. Skittish. No trust.

Whatever she had done, he knew Captain would get to the bottom of it. He heaved a sigh. Then what in hell had been the point in rescuing the three of them from Dublin?

It would probably not matter, in the big scheme of things. Captain was playing a far too dangerous game with that Mad Miller woman. Federi knew he had to get behind the truth of what was hiding on her ship, before it killed them all.

*

Even as Shawn scaled the ropes, he spotted the small dot in the distance. He activated his wrist-com.

“Captain, ship approaching fifteen degrees port.”

Captain Lascek was already on the bridge next to his daughter Rushka, having received the Crow's Nest signal too. He keyed a few variables into the ship computer.

“Well done, Donegal,” came his answer on Shawn's com. “Friends on their way. The vessel is the Sea Eagle. Ali Hlabane's boat.”

“It was the Solar Wind who spotted her, sir, not me,” said Shawn.

Captain Lascek punched in a few more figures. A blip from the satellite answered his question. The Hun was far behind, but

still tailing them. She'd catch up with them in two hours if they stopped.

"Blast that woman!" he muttered. "This is going to be tricky! No time for visiting." Anya Miller would not be following the Solar Wind if she didn't have the facilities to disable the ship.

"She didn't shoot last night," Jon Marsden pointed out. "She didn't use shock either although she was practically on top of us! She could have, even without knowing where we were. It would have fried our processor. That would have killed us, because we would have had no way of surfacing. We have to look into that, Captain. We must find a way of emptying the ballasts manually. It's a weak point of the Solar Wind."

"Clearly," said Lascek, "she didn't want that to happen. I wonder why not!"

"Didn't want to lose the prize money," said Marsden. "She needs to bring us in, dead or alive, as proof that she captured us. She'd never have found us if she had sent shock. We're radar cloaked."

Radomir Lascek nodded gravely.

"That's not the same as not wanting us dead," Marsden pointed out.

"Dead or alive, Jon?"

"That's the contract, Captain. You know it."

"Right! Of course, if we're already badly damaged and immobilized, and all she has to do is walk aboard and collect us..."

"Piratical," grinned Jonathan Marsden.

"Ancient trick," replied Radomir Lascek.

5

Abandoned

Federi listened up. There were voices, singing! A powerful chorus of voices he knew could only be from one place...

He dropped the knife and the onions and headed for the deck at a fast stroll. Hell, they had started without him! The crew was already throwing mooring lines across to the beautiful blue hundred-foot Penbrook yacht with its triangular aero-solar sails that had drawn up alongside the Solar Wind. Its automatic gangway extended across the gap. Wolf was on the deck along with the other sailors, waving madly and singing loudly with Captain Ali's crew – the anthem of Southern Free. Ronan was listening intently, and Shawn was picking up on the harmonies.

Federi glanced up into the rigging. The Crow's Nest was empty. Usually it was him, up there, shouting those first words of the anthem. And them answering! Arw hell, and he had missed it!

Captain Ali Hlabane, a short, powerful African man in a white playboy suit with keen, highly amused eyes, walked across the gangway first, leading the way for his crew. The five Africans streamed onto the Solar Wind, laughing, shaking hands, clapping arms, collecting hi-fives from the Solar Wind's crew while the new sailors looked on with wide eyes.

"Federi," asked Shawn by his side, "what's so special about these people?"

The gypsy glanced at him with a five-mile grin. “What’s so special? What’s so special about the Donegals! Shawn, just look at these guys! They’ve got Freedom all over their personalities and they bring it wherever they go! Besides they’re great friends of the Solar Wind. Hey there, Vusi!” He moved into the melee, joining in the greetings.

Shawn watched. Captain Ali was very well dressed; his yacht also smacked of luxury. On his hands he wore several heavy gold rings. His left wrist sported not a wrist-com but a classic Swiss luxury watch. And his face, a grin second to none.

Captain Lascek clapped a hand on Hlabane’s shoulder.

“How are you, old pirate?”

“Glad to see you too, Radomir, old sea-devil,” replied Ali. “What are you up to?”

“I’ve got the Hun on my tail,” said Lascek with a grin.

“Bummer,” Ali grinned back.

“She’ll be here in another two hours. You in the mood for some sports?”

The visiting Captain nodded enthusiastically.

“Let’s get the supplies out of the way first, my friend,” said Ali. “You’re short, you say. I can help you out.”

At the orders of Captain Ali, the crews of both ships began to carry crates aboard the Solar Wind and stow them in the storage deck.

“Got my goodies?” Ali asked as he and Lascek watched from the Solar Wind’s bridge. Lascek opened a cabinet.

“As promised. Now what can I offer you, Ali?”

“Nothing alcoholic, Radomir,” said Ali. “Give me a Coke. Got to keep my wits sharp too if the Hun decides to question me.”

Coca-cola, the favourite drink of the 20th and 21st centuries, had made it into the 22nd. Despite nuclear wars and the Unicate. A resilient beverage. Lascek poured a glass and handed it to Ali. He paged Doc Judith to the bridge.

“Hamilton Port, taken by the Unicate,” said Hlabane, turning serious. “They’re forcing us back into the Pacific!” He mulled. “That complicates things. I can’t restock there any more than you can. We must make another plan for more provisions. But at least, if we both keep on fishing, you should make it through to Panama and I should manage until Rabat.”

“Ali,” said Lascek seriously, “not trading girls, are you?”

Captain Hlabane grinned. “Are you making an offer?”

“I seriously hope that’s a joke!”

“Radomir,” laughed Ali, “the only girl I’ve got aboard is my own personal property! I’m not trading her! Not even for Rushka!”

“You’ve laid off the slaving?”

“You injure me, Radomir,” said Ali. “I’ve never been a slaver! You took all those jokes seriously?”

“You never know,” growled the Captain sheepishly. He had believed Hlabane about the slave trade. Even now he wasn’t entirely sure if he ought to believe the denial.

“I only trade guns,” replied Ali. “Just breaking into a brand new market. Highly specific electronic weapons. Potent enough to sink a city. Just learning the ropes. Got a marvellous mentor.”

“Should introduce me,” said Lascek.

“I will, one day! She’s sure pretty enough for you!” The Southern Free man grinned. “Still trading ships, Radomir?”

“Of course!”

“That was no joke?”

“No.”

“And they still haven’t caught you?”

“Not that they didn’t try!”

“You’re not the Uinate’s favourite civilian then, are you!”

“You’d be surprised,” smiled Lascek. “They keep throwing money in my direction! What concerns supplies? I think I have an idea! Ah, here’s Dr Judith.”

The doctor handed a small metal case to Captain Ali. He disengaged the safety lock and peered inside. Two neat rows of little vials sat embedded in a wooden frame. He whistled softly through his teeth.

“Nice! This stuff works?”

“All of us have already had ours,” said Dr Judith. “This stuff is gold. Don’t lose it.”

Ali nodded. “Thank you, doctor,” he said, extending a hand which she gave a brief shake.

“Welcome, Captain Hlabane.” She left the bridge to return to her work.

“Now,” said Ali. “As for your plan?”

“Have a seat!”

*

Shawn watched all the highly excited activity on the deck and between the ships from the hatch. It seemed as though things were being printed and pasted and painted and programmed. Data cubes wandered back and forth. The gypsy cook was suddenly next to him.

“Supervising them, Shawn?”

“What are we doing now?” Shawn asked back.

“What pirates do best,” grinned Federi. “Watch and learn!”

*

Aboard the Hun, the officers watched a worrying scenario on the electronic screen.

“Looks as though another ship has spotted Lascek and has opened fire,” commented young Johnny Anyhow, the First Mate, locking onto the second ship’s electronic identity. “Aha. Satellite identifies her as the Santa Anna. She’s famous,” he added. “Name rings a loud bell. Captain is – it’s on the tip of my tongue –“

“Phineas Skebengo,” read Captain Miller, annoyed. Was someone else going to palm in her reward? “Depraved bounty hunters!”

“Ah yes, Skebengo.” Johnny Anyhow nodded sagely. “Heard a lot about him.”

“Such as what?” snapped Anya Miller, paging impatiently through the spotless history of the Santa Anna’s captain.

“Good guy. Has stopped a drug-syndicate in Oceania. Or was that Captain Hawkins from the Espagnola?”

“Stop gabbling, Anyhow!” Miller glared at him. “How did you come by such a name, anyhow? One can’t really use it!”

The First Mate shut his mouth, rattled. Head Office had assigned him to her, not by her own choice. First Mate at age nineteen! But she had accepted it without a complaint, even welcomed it. He suspected that Miller was so ambitious she didn’t want anyone with too much experience as a second-in-command. It wasn’t a comforting position either – her prior First Mate had disappeared mysteriously.

Captain Anya Miller watched the battle of the two ships ahead of them with a sinking heart. Skebengo was a damned civilian! How did he come by such sophisticated firepower -? Enormous electric discharges were flying to and fro, invisible to the eye but recorded by her systems. She wasn't going to ask where Lascek had got hold of his stun charges! Her console showed that even under water, torpedoes with electric hypercharge were hitting the Solar Wind. Clearly Skebengo was after the bounty money: He didn't want to damage the hull of the ship, just disable the processor and stun the crew. She laughed cynically. Without his precious processor, Lascek had only one way of submerging the Solar Wind – permanently.

Then a distress signal came from the Solar Wind, probably sent automatically by the ship's system itself as the processor failed.

“Ha! The old crook! He's met his nemesis!” growled Captain Miller. “His ship's in trouble. He can't move!” She got angry. “Nobody else must get to him first! I'm the one who must turn him in! I've worked years for this moment!”

Her ship com activated. She listened with amazement to the patchy signal from the Solar Wind's dying com system.

“Anya,” came Radomir Lascek's voice, deep and resonant, but sounding somehow broken. The signal certainly was. “Help! I know you're there! Save us!”

What! He was begging her for help? The old pirate thought she would actually step in on his behalf?

“My crew is out cold,” pleaded Lascek. “These guys are taking us apart! If they board we are finished! You're our last hope, Anya! You're Unicate! Have a heart! In the name of fair play!”

He was delivering himself into her hands? Captain Anya Miller smiled as she hit the button.

“I don’t believe it! Are you surrendering? I’ll take you to Headquarters, you know it!”

“Anything! Anything you say! It must be better than watching my crew be slaughtered by these bounty hunters! They’re a good crew, Anya. They don’t deserve to die!” Another shockwave travelled between the two ships. “Aargh,” said Radomir Lascek.

“Hang in there, Radomir,” called Anya Miller. She switched the direction of her intercom, pushed a sequence, and the Hun charged forward.

“Attention, Santa Anna,” Miller sent to the other ship’s intercom. “Thank you for intercepting the Solar Wind. We’ll take it from here.”

“Acknowledged,” called Captain Skebengo with a strong African accent. “Captain Miller, this is Captain Phineas Skebengo of the SFS Santa Anna speaking. We have apprehended the pirate Radomir Lascek of the Solar Wind. You will ensure that we get our remuneration?”

“It’s already on record. I’ll see to it personally,” lied Miller. There was no way she was going to share her prize money! She’d deal with Skebengo when she’d finished with Lascek. Easy enough to concoct a story of Skebengo being another lawbreaker, which he probably was, in fact, who wasn’t? Her crew were behind her, they’d back her story, especially if it could be fortified with some grains of truth. It didn’t take Miller a second to plot this manoeuvre.

The Hun circled the Solar Wind, wedging the pirate between her and the Santa Anna. Ropes shot across, hooking onto the

Solar Wind's rail and pulling the Pursuer up alongside, closing the gap. Captain Miller and her officers boarded the Solar Wind, leaving only the technician aboard the Hun, holding the bridge.

There was no one on the Solar Wind's deck. Nobody on the bridge either; the console was dark. This was most disappointing!

"Lascek, come out! You're surrounded! Give it up, old villain!" Anya Miller got no response. Absolutely nothing stirred aboard the Solar Wind.

"You're finished, Radomir," said Anya, more to herself. "Time to negotiate for the lives of your crew, I think."

It had occurred to her a moment back that she could win both ways in this one. Radomir Lascek himself was rumoured to have considerable financial resources. She wondered how much he would pay over to her for the freedom of each of his crewmembers. She could arrange that freedom easily, just place them all on his motorized lifeboat and send them off; the Ulicate only had a reward on his head and the actual bringing in of the ship, not on the rest of the crew. But she might as well force the money out of him and then have them all executed for the criminals they were, anyway; bribery or its attempt was illegal in itself!

Radomir Lascek had to care about his crew a lot if he were prepared to deliver himself into the hands of the Ulicate in a futile effort to spare their lives. This worried her. It was, in fact, an illogical move she couldn't quite understand. She understood her own response to it even less. She didn't want to dwell on the idea that perhaps he had some gentleness in his character, or perhaps she ought to admire his courage. It complicated things, and interfered with her plans.

“Radomir, come out! Don’t you want to negotiate? Aargh, the old coward!”

It was disappointing. She had expected at least a heroic show of resistance from her old enemy – or perhaps she would have enjoyed seeing the look on his face when he admitted that she had won. This – all of them cowering below deck in fear – this was almost demeaning. It certainly took the sparkle out of the capture! Anya Miller entered the hatch and descended the companionway into the upper deck, aware of her crew to be right behind her.

It was dark down there. Doors were closed; blinds covered any open portholes. She had left the hatch open; light filtered into the passage from above. The Santa Anna had indeed scrambled the entire electrics of the ship with her shockwaves.

Right by the companionway a young girl lay groaning. Her eyes were shut. Miller kneeled down, looking closer. The shockwaves had not only damaged the ship. Could this be the explanation for Lascek not responding to her summons – that he was stunned too, senseless? Or even dead? Unfamiliar panic crept over Miller.

“What’s your name, girl?” she asked.

The little redhead moaned. “Watch,” she mumbled vaguely. “Watch out...”

“What do you mean, girl?” Anya Miller leaned over her to hear her better.

“Pirates!” said the girl, sitting up suddenly and banging her head against that of Captain Miller. “Ooh! Ouch! Rats!”

The pirates descended on the officers of the Hun from all sides. Anya Miller felt strong hands restraining her. Not that she could have moved, currently; she was seeing stars from the

collision. The girl's head had caught her right across the eyes.

"You can't do this, Lascek!" she protested. "You're surrounded and you're outnumbered."

"I can do," came his voice right by her ear, "whatever I like, Anya. Don't forget, I'm a pirate."

The pirate Captain grinned at her out of the darkness. "Now, allow me." She found her wrists tied behind her back and her feet tied together. Captain Lascek picked her up and put her down in the big comfortable swivel chair in the ship meeting room. He tied a few more ropes around her.

He had said it himself! She mustn't forget that he was a criminal! She wouldn't forget it ever again, this she promised herself.

"I shan't speak for you in the Uinate court," she said acidly.

"Comfortable, my dear?"

"You'll regret this," hissed Miller. "Captain Skebengo is right behind me."

"My friend Phineas Skebengo?" asked Radomir Lascek. He flicked a switch and the lights came on. All five Miller's marines were tied to chairs around her.

"Anya," said Radomir Lascek, "thank you for heeding my call for help. It tells me that there's a soft spot somewhere in your embittered little heart. You said something about negotiating earlier?"

"For the lives of your crew," Anya ground out through clenched teeth. "It occurred to me that you called for my help so that your crew can survive. You know that you're a dead man walking, don't you. But there's no particular reward on their heads, so I thought you might want to buy their lives!"

"Anya!" Lascek smiled. "How thoughtful of you! They're

good pirates, you know. Loyal to the last soul! Even our little spy. I'd never hand them over to the Uinate, never. But I'm willing to make a trade anyway, for your sake. My crew goes free, and in exchange we help ourselves to your food supplies. It seems as though we can't restock at Hamilton anymore."

"You wouldn't dare -!"

"Thanks, Anya! Kind of you," smiled Lascek.

*

Ronan held a cold pack against his sister's head.

"You're a hero, Pae. Well knocked!"

She laughed. "I don't think I've ever had such pleasure hurting myself! Thanks, Ro, that's better!" She picked herself up from the deck. She did indeed feel fantastic. It was hugely empowering to knock out the enemy.

"Hey," said Ronan, pointing down the passage. "What's with him?"

Paean followed her brother. Wolf Svendsson was sitting on the floor, holding his head in both hands. Paean crouched down, a hand on the scruffy young engineer's shoulder.

"Are you okay, Wolf?"

"Will be in a second," muttered Wolf, keeping his eyes closed. "Blasted Uinate and their blasted stun guns!"

"Someone stunned you?"

"Hells, yes. Feels like my brain's been rewired!"

"Come, Wolf," said Ronan, helping the muscular young sailor up. He and Paean supported Wolf down to the small yellow infirmary, and onto one of the bunks.

"Sorry, guys," said Wolf with a grin. He shut his eyes again.

“Nothing!” retorted Paeon. “You couldn’t help that! They shot at you! Is there something I can get you? Glass of water? Painkiller?”

“Nah,” replied Wolf. “Thanks.”

“Want me to stay here a bit?”

“Nah, don’t worry,” said Wolf. “I’ll get over this in a second.”

The two Donegals left him and made their way back up the dark passageway. Paeon thought that she’d have to come back in a while and open all the blinds and curtains. She hoped Wolf would be all right.

*

Shawn stood in the Crow’s Nest, watching the goings-on between the three ships with delighted fascination. The Sea Eagle had circled to the other side of the Hun, and both crews had boarded the military ship. The helmsman who had stayed aboard the Hun was tied up. The crews of the Solar Wind and the Sea Eagle looted the food stores of the Hun, which had just been replenished at Hamilton. Anya Miller had known that the Solar Wind was headed for the Pacific, so she had stocked up well. Practically all of the Unicate guns went to Captain Ali, boosting his trade. Then Captain Ali and his men helped Lascek’s crew put Anya and her officers back onto their own ship, on the outer deck.

*

Federer was on a mission of his own, trailing through the enemy ship. She was a beautiful vessel; speed and economy of design

was written all over her. The crew cabins were larger than the cubicles of the Solar Wind; the Captain's Quarters downright spacious. But there were only eight crew cabins. Each could house four crew, with two sets of pull-down stack bunks on opposing walls, like those of the Solar Wind. A force of thirty-two? They could accomplish things, actually! But Miller only had five. Clearly this bounty hunt wasn't too well supported by the military headquarters.

The Unicate's favourite colour was unfortunately grey; the compounding that lined the decks and the colour of the hull and walls was grey. It saved the compounding the effort of fading to grey over time.

The bridge was slightly more spacious than that of the Solar Wind. Federi cracked the code on the safe following a hunch; as it opened, he grinned smugly. Anya Miller was so egocentric that the password she had used was an anagram of her own name! He rummaged a bit; inside the safe there were various interesting looking items, data chips, cubes, quite a bit of money, some rings and a sealed capsule that radiated evil. He slipped everything into his pocket.

*

On the deck, Anya Miller fumed while the pirates had amiable conversations with her marines.

"Tell me one thing," said Johnny Anyhow good-naturedly. "How on Earth did you guys survive such blasts?"

"It's an illusion," replied Jon Marsden with a smile. "We've cooked your detectors with long-distance program overrides. Want to join us? I'll show you how it's done!"

Johnny Anyhow shook his head, shocked. He had just been invited to become a pirate! If these pirates only knew how numbered their days were, with or without today's fancy manoeuvre...

In their position today, he would have killed Anya Miller and her crew to the last man. Plain survival. Why were they taking such care not to harm anyone?

*

Captain Ali's ship departed first, with the two ships' crews waving madly at each other and wishing each other fair winds and happy trading. The Sea Eagle would sail off in another direction, then change course as she changed her identity back to the original. Ali Hlabane was especially gleeful about the false name he had picked. It wasn't really an African name. But Anya Miller wouldn't know; she had never been to Southern Free. Skebengo meant vagabond. But the digital history of the fictitious Phineas Skebengo was that of an angel.

*

Radomir Lascek was keeping Anya Miller company on the Hun. He had sent his sailors back to the Solar Wind; once everything was organized and Captain Ali had a decent head start, he was going to release Anya Miller and return to his own ship himself, and set sail. He waited for the signal from his First Mate. Finally he got impatient. He punched a button on his wrist-com.

“Jon, what is the situation? Can we sail?”

“Still waiting for Federi, Captain. He’s still aboard the Hun.”

“Aargh! What’s he doing so long?”

“Probably picking all the cabins clean,” commented Jon Marsden unkindly.

Federi was by now in the bowels of the enemy ship. In his many years as a fugitive he had learnt one thing more loudly than anything else. You ignored a hunch at your peril.

The machine room of the Pursuer was like the rest of the ship: Sleek, frugal, minimalist. And grey. Federi’s eyes darted to the water desalination system – smaller than the version they had on the Solar Wind, but newer. The huge hydrogen drives, powered by fuel cells, were mainly situated near the stern, with smaller drives for steering bursts lining the sides of the machine room. A highly manoeuvrable craft! Federi sighed. Almost a man could dream.

Between the side drives, torpedo guns were mounted into the hull. That made sense, for a military craft. Federi investigated the nature of the torpedoes. There were conventional ones that merely ripped holes into the enemy vessel by exploding on impact; there were electric discharge torpedoes that could fry a ship’s electrics when fully charged, without destroying the hull. He also found a more sinister type of torpedo, the kind that hooked into the hull of a ship, drilled a hole and released poison gas. All of those missiles were heat-seeking, and capable of homing in on vibrations. He shuddered. She could have killed them any number of ways last night, by disabling their machinery or poisoning them while they were under water if Captain hadn’t switched off the power.

But none of this accounted for the horrible feeling of

foreboding, the evil presence he sensed. The hair in the back of his neck stood on end. He had to find that threat, disable it... kill it if he had to. He closed his eyes, listening for his gypsy radar's message.

His eyes flew open. The presence was right next to him! Bristling, he turned and stared at it –

A grey metal box, standing as tall as himself, mounted into the prow of the machine room. And it whined softly. Federi reached out carefully and withdrew his hand before it got too close. That thing was charged with evil! It radiated cold. He moved to its other side and understood. It was the shock gun. He shook his head. This was odd. He never got a whiff of danger that turned out to be nothing! But they were aware that Unicate ships disabled the processors of other ships using electric shock...

He read the voltage.

He read it again to make sure. The fear that streaked through him was grey and icy. Disable the computer? This lightning bolt could wipe out the whole crew, fry them all to a cinder with one single directional discharge! No compounding hull could protect them from this! And it was charged up and ready to fire. Only awaiting Anya Miller's command.

Potato peels and trails -! Captain had no clue of the magnitude of this woman's hatred!

There was only one right thing to do. He had to find out how this thing worked. He investigated the panel of the gun. It wasn't exactly user-friendly, but Federi had experience with weapons. Even a Unicate stun gun needed to be serviced at times. Even a Unicate technician could get himself fried fussing with something like this. There had to be a safety catch somewhere for the technician. He searched and found it, and

released it. The lightning gun wasn't going to go off unsolicited now. Carefully he opened the panel, unscrewed the plate and laid bare the gun's innards. And there was the heart of the weapon: The hyperconductive generator coil, hermetically sealed and deeply chilled by liquid nitrogen, shimmering slightly in the half-dark.

Federi took a small piece of something soft and malleable out of his pocket with fingers twitching in stress, pushed it snugly around the coil's casing with his pocket knife, inserted a small gadget the size of a thumbtack into it, stood back – and detonated the explosive.

It was a small, accurate explosion. Liquid nitrogen leaked out of the casing; the hyperconductive super-pure coil was blackened and bent, its hair-thread coils fused together. Excess voltage fizzled along the wires that connected it to the ship console, and into the processor, which responded with a resolute pop. Queasy apprehension streaked through Federi's gut a second time; what if it had triggered anyway? He should have waited until the Solar Wind was well out of range, and then discharged the shock gun and taken the life boat back to the Mother Ship.

Anya Miller had that thing charged up all the way, last night. He, Federi, had sensed it. She meant to kill them all! She had to be prevented from coming after them again. He disabled all the drives, collecting wires and parts as he went. His bag got heavier by the moment. To fail now was to send the entire Solar Wind sailing to hell. He'd have to tell Captain.

*

Jon Marsden's signal came. Radomir Lascek grinned to

himself. He hadn't seen his Tzigan leave the Hun, even though he was on the outer deck with the hostages! How did that gypsy do it?

“Right, Anya,” he said. “You are free to sail. I'm untying your hands. Help yourself with your ankles, there's a big girl. You may do the honours for your crew. Thank you for providing us and our friends with fresh food – and such nice food, too!”

The moment Anya's hands were free, her elegant fist connected with his nose. He caught her wrists and laughed.

“I'll be going now. It was nice to see you again, Anya.”

“You'll burn in hell, Radomir,” snarled Anya Miller.

Radomir Lascek crossed the gangplank to the Solar Wind and withdrew it. Anya fumbled with the ties on her ankles, and one by one the knots came unstuck. Finally she was free. She charged to the bridge, to lock onto the Solar Wind and pursue – and found the system down. She ran back to the deck to catch a sight of the Solar Wind sailing away. The crew waved to her; amongst them on the deck stood Radomir Lascek, blowing her a kiss. The absolute gall -!

Anya Miller returned to the bridge and examined the console. It was dead. Someone had disconnected the power supply and stolen the adaptor; beyond which there were traces of soot and the acrid smell of fried circuitry. There was no resurrecting this processor in a hurry.

Captain Miller took in the situation. A Pursuer had no sails; they would interfere with speed. The fuel cells only responded to the electronic command. The back-up solar panels, for the event of failure of the fuel cell, were implanted in the roof. They too responded to electronics only. Except for the fuel cells and their slow solar backup, there was no other way of propelling the craft

forward. In summary, they were stuck, drifting on the currents at random. Too late she realized that no matter how fast her ship was, its complete reliance on electronics was a weak point. They were marooned on their own ship.

6

Federer's Amends

“You *WHAT-?!?*”

The Captain's voice thundered across the deck. Jonathan Marsden ducked behind the console. Rushka vanished. Ronan and Rhine Gold looked supremely busy suddenly. Shawn fled into the Crow's Nest. Paeon, emerging from below the deck, got stuck in the hatchway and stayed rooted to the spot, gaping in horror at the confrontation between the Pirate Captain and the gypsy cook.

Federer glanced down at the bag he held in his hands, and back at the Captain.

“Captain, I've only disabled her ship,” he said. “She won't be able to follow us. I've taken the sting out of her shock generator too. When that ship is running again, she won't be able to fry us.”

He failed to add that disarming a time bomb was probably a safer task than what he had achieved there in the Hun's bilges. And how he had nearly collapsed with relief on returning to the Solar Wind and finding his friends alive and uncooked.

“You left Anya sitting helpless and immobilized in the middle of nowhere,” raged Lascek, “and you fail to see the problem? Here, what's this?” He dug in the bag. “By Stravinsky, Federer! What all did you loot? Information! And cash, too! You corrupt

Tzigan! She'll be in such trouble!"

Anya! Ratted Anya! Fry Anya in hell! Federi frowned and refrained from informing the Captain that the cash in the bag was petty change as compared to what had gone into his pockets without detours. He also omitted to mention the personal effects he had stolen. They weren't in the bag. One day his larcenous habits might get him into trouble, he thought. Only he hadn't thought it would be today, after saving the scalps of everyone on the ship! He stood speechless, surprise frozen on his face as his Captain let rip at him.

Lascek was Hungarian. This accounted for it, thought Federi. Hot temper. Just like his daughter Rushka; except that the poor girl was so regimented by her authoritarian father that her outbursts of temper had turned in on herself. Every now and then, Federi quietly cleared away the shards of a broken mug out of Rushka's cabin and spoke gently to her until she simmered down. He had experience. And mugs were a regular item on his shopping list.

He ought to have looted some mugs from the Hun, he thought absently. There had been one with a bunny on it in the machine room, and "Anyhow" scribbled in indelible ink on the bottom. He hadn't had the heart.

He caught the terrified blue stare of little Paeon, in the hatchway, and pulled himself up straight.

"Captain, if you don't mind," he interrupted the Captain's loud tirade. "I'll fix it."

Captain Lascek's mouth got stuck open. His face registered a complete blank. Five seconds passed in silence.

"How?" asked Lascek, stumped.

"Simple," said Federi with an easy smile, "I'll put the money

back!”

Another three seconds. Then the Captain exploded into laughter. Federi winked at Paean.

“You useless rogue,” laughed the Captain. “But you’re dead right, Federi. You *are* going to fix things! She could have a collision, sitting there on a major trade route without lights at night! She could get looted by pirates!”

Federi bit his tongue. The woman had just been looted by pirates!

“You know yourself how inefficient the Unicate is,” said the Captain. “They’ll take their sweet time rescuing her! Especially if she can’t call for help! You’ve disabled her radio com too?”

“Particularly her radio,” said Federi. “Didn’t want her reporting Captain Ali!”

“Well, we won’t need to go shopping for replacement cables and electronics now,” sighed Lascek. “I don’t want to say well done, Tzigan! I was curious to see how far she’d trail us into the Pacific. Now we have to rescue her!”

“She’d have cornered us at Panama, Captain,” said Federi rationally. “She’d have alerted the military there. With all those sluice gates we’d have been sitting ducks.”

“We might still be,” said Radomir Lascek, troubled. “The Unicate taking over Hamilton! Panama is already Unicate territory. I wonder how we’ll slip through this time!”

“We could round the Cape,” suggested Federi.

“Get real, Tzigan! We’re on a time schedule!” The Captain smiled grimly. “Here’s what, my good Federi. We attach the Hun to the Solar Wind. We sail into Hamilton Port and drop Anya off, under the guise of a harmless trader who happened across this disabled ship. This way we, the Solar Wind, don’t

endanger our reputation, and she doesn't lose face. And it's *your* project."

Now it was Federi's turn at staggered silence. Had he heard right?

"Tow her into Hamilton, Captain?"

"Exactly."

"With all those Stabs we've just escaped?"

"Precisely!"

"And Federi co-ordinates this?" asked the Romany disbelievingly.

This was bad. This was crazy! The other thing that Federi had learnt in all his outlaw years was this: Never underestimate your enemy! A real enemy was never stupid.

"Afraid, Tzigan?"

"Petrified," laughed Federi. Ye Stars, he wanted to run away! He glanced at the little redhead who still stood transfixed in the same spot with her shocked blue eyes. "So what are we waiting for?"

You don't think Miller wants you dead, he thought as he took the bridge. You didn't see that gun! Good and well for Captain to be infatuated with the Solar Wind's arch-enemy. But Federi thought he detected a deep instability in her. And an uncanny coldness...

The Solar Wind turned.

*

Night fell over the Hun. Captain Miller's furious command to "fix it" had resulted in several hours of trying to find enough wiring to get the drives reconnected, and trying to hot-wire things

between the solar cells and the console. It was hopeless. The ship's engineer Tony had ended up opening the fridge and using its inside wiring, twisting it into longer leads, only to find that there wasn't enough. She'd need about ten times as much. And she had no idea what she was supposed to use to replace the subionifiers and the ZITs that had been stolen.

Next she had tried to resurrect the radio com with the wire ripped from the fridge. This tested her capacities to the extreme; eventually she had something that might have worked – except that a crucial bit of machinery was missing. The encryptor. Tony raked her hands through her short black hair. She dug in her intellectual resources. Could the anchor chain be fashioned into wire? The image of it being fashioned into nooses for all of them intruded on her. Could she use anything – anything aboard to “invent” something that could replace that encryptor... like, for argument's sake, her belt buckle... She knew now that she was not cut out for the military. She'd get out the moment they got back into port. Anya Miller was in any case a madwoman.

“Here, Tony!” Johnny Anyhow descended down the steps with a burning piece of plank as torch. “Don't sit down here in the dark feeling sorry for yourself! All is not lost! Come out on the deck! Tomorrow is another day.”

Johnny Anyhow, the trusty ex-sea-scout, was prepared! An empty wooden crate had been taken apart and the planks made into flaming torches, fastened to the deck of the Hun to make her more visible to passing ships. He was boiling water for coffee on one of those planks. At least the pirates had left the supplies of coffee, and the mugs. And accurately enough provisions for two days, and the fishing rods. The water desalination with its separate small solar power supply had been left intact too, where

everything else had been destroyed. It gave him food for thought. They really didn't want Captain Miller and crew dead! Why not?

A tiny light approached in the distance.

"Ship astern," called Johnny Anyhow.

"Which one?" snapped Captain Miller.

"Lock on and get identification," said Anyhow innocently.

"We can't, you idiot! Just look at her outline. What type of ship is it?"

"Light patterns look like a Zephyr or a Frigattina," said Johnny, peering through his electronic binoculars. One of the few items that hadn't ended in Federi's bag. "There she comes – come on – move a bit closer.... Got something stuck in the rigging, it seems. Something boxy."

Anya Miller took the binoculars off him and peered through herself.

"It's the damned Solar Wind," she exclaimed. "She's coming back! Oh hell!"

"Why is she coming back?" asked Johnny, feeling left out of a crucial part of the conversation.

"To kill us all, of course!" Anya Miller was panicking. "Anyway, you don't understand!"

Some of the key data cubes had been stolen. Lascek now knew about a lot of the movements Headquarters were planning. And here they were, unable to flee or defend themselves, unable even to send a warning or call for backup.

"So far Captain Lascek hasn't hurt any of us," said Johnny rationally.

"Radomir Lascek," said Captain Miller, "is a first-rate criminal. He is extremely dangerous! If he steps aboard, each one of you personally has my orders to terminate him. Am I

understood?”

“Yes, Captain,” replied a shocked crew.

Anya Miller glared at them. Had they perhaps not quite understood what they were dealing with? Had they misread her willingness to save Lascek from Skebengo as a concession, rather than a practical measure, keeping the end in mind? Had it led to them underestimating the pirate? Thinking him harmless, perhaps even kind? She recalled the gallantry, the kiss he had blown her, and went cold. Did the crew have the impression that she had some sort of emotional attachment to the murdering villain? In which case, could she still rely on them to comply? Were they still taking their mission and their Captain seriously?

This could lead to grave complications, she realized. If her crew took a humanitarian stance and began to disobey her concerning Lascek, it might cost them their lives – especially hers, with that data capsule in his hands. She had to recover that! She would have ordered them to start shooting at the pirate vessel the moment it came into range, if all their weapons hadn’t been looted!

*

A little while later the two ships were in shouting distance.

“We’re towing you to Hamilton,” Lascek called across. “It seems as though one of my crew has disabled your ship. This is regrettable. It leaves you in my responsibility.”

The crew listened up. So he didn’t mean to execute them?

“Careful,” Anya told her crew. “It’s a trap.”

“Come, Anya,” laughed Radomir Lascek, reading her body posture against the flickering firelight, “don’t be afraid. If I had

wanted to kill you I would have done so earlier. We're towing you back to Hamilton! Can't just leave you here!"

"I'm not afraid of you, pirate," shot Anya Miller, annoyed.

"Good! Then you'll catch the lines and fasten them onto your ship."

A line came flying towards them, shot out by the Solar Wind's mooring mechanism.

"Let it drop," commanded Captain Miller. "If they get close enough to board, we throw them off the ship with our bare hands if we have to."

The crew were military men and women, trained to obey orders instantly. The line was dropped into the sea.

"You're being stubborn, Anya," shouted Captain Lascek. "Now be a good girl and catch those lines! You're invisible to commercial craft and this is a main shipping route. You might have a collision."

Anya Miller dug in her heels. Hamilton? Back to her superiors? She wasn't ready for that encounter! And with a damaged ship! Besides, there was no way she'd give an inch to the old pirate after believing she was rescuing him this afternoon and walking into his trap. The line came flying again. Once again Captain Miller ordered her people to ignore it. The metal mooring clip caught on the Hun's rail.

Tony reluctantly freed it and threw it back into the sea. She scowled. Pirate vessels like Lascek's, who snared other ships, were equipped with looting chains that had grappling hooks at the end. He hadn't sent them one of those, only an ordinary mooring line leading a hawser. The whole scenario failed to make sense to her. Lascek didn't seem aggressive at all; he genuinely

appeared to be extending a helping hand. If she had to rely on her judgment of character, she'd say he rather liked Captain Miller.

“The military will pick us up,” Captain Miller told her marines. “We don't need to go along with the machinations of this outlaw. Do you believe him? I don't! Head Office keeps permanent tabs on where every ship is, and they'll see on the map where we were last. When they don't reach us by radio or satellite signal, they'll come looking for us.”

She knew that what she told them was only partially accurate. Head Office could be very inefficient, especially if their record showed that she had loaded provisions recently and no distress signal had gone out, therefore there was no sense of urgency. The last routine communication had been that morning, but she hadn't informed anyone that she had located the pirate, wanting to bring him in personally. She didn't want to share her reward if she didn't have to. This failure to be a team player proved to be a mistake. She could lose her career now, or her life. Depending on how they managed to fend off Lascek. She wasn't overly hasty to confront Headquarters.

As for them being on a major trade route, that could be good or bad. A collision, though highly unlikely, couldn't be ruled out entirely as they were radar-shielded. They might instead receive help from a passing trader. Then again they might encounter a Rebellion ship. In their military uniforms, the chances of them being slaughtered were only exceeded by the risk of being taken hostage and traded off, like so much merchandise, back to Head Office. That would certainly spell the end for her. Ulicate dealt efficiently with inefficient military leaders.

*

Lascek turned to Jonathan Marsden.

“What do we do?”

“We could harpoon her,” suggested Marsden.

“Causing further damage to her ship,” Lascek pointed out.
“But the principle is sound. Ha! Marsden, Donegal! Come below deck!”

A short while later, out of sight in the dark of the sea, looting cables and mooring lines were secured to the screw of the Hun. Then Jon Marsden and Ronan Donegal re-emerged on the Solar Wind, dripping wet and with satisfied smirks.

“Captain, this thing’s going to fly. Haha!” Ronan was enjoying himself immensely.

“Good work! Set sail for Hamilton!”

“Set sail for Hamilton,” called Marsden.

“And hand over to Federi, blast you all!” added the Captain.
“It’s *his* project! Got to organize everything myself for the man! What’s this?”

*

Anya Miller watched how the Solar Wind’s huge white sails unfurled in the moonlight. A small burst of power from her solar drives, and she started moving. Away. Anya Miller allowed herself a sigh of relief. They were going to be left in peace. How she had managed to talk the Pirate off her back, she didn’t quite understand. But she and her crew were safe for now, and a bit of time had been bought. She had to find a way to explain the loss

of those files to Head Office. And the devastation of her ship. She knew what to expect if the truth came out. Perhaps the military was the wrong place for her to be, now. Perhaps she ought to reconsider the proposal her brother had made, not too long ago.

The Solar Wind's sails opened fully, and the night breeze punched into them. The wind was at their back; she plunged ahead, her large mainsail and huge foresail "goose-winged" to each side to catch the most air. They needed minimal stored power for this.

There was a bump as the lines pulled taut. The Hun was not half the size of the Solar Wind; she turned back-to-front and got dragged along, the wrong way round, in the wake of the pirate ship. Anya Miller turned as white as a sheet.

"Captain? What's happening?" asked Johnny Anyhow, just in time to see her collapse on the deck.

*

Wolf opened his eyes through a zingy red haze. Across on the other infirmary bunk crouched Paeon Donegal, her eyes stuck on his face.

"You okay?"

He probed tentatively for the headache that was still lingering just under the surface. It was survivable. His sight cleared as he finished waking up.

"I'll live," he grinned.

"Coffee for you," said Paeon and pressed a mug into his hand.

“Aw! Thanks! That’s thoughtful!” She was cute!

“And painkiller,” she added, handing him a strange powdered substrate. Wolf sipped his coffee and eyed the powder with deep suspicion. Not so cute!

“Don’t need that, thanks,” he said.

“Alright.” Paeon got up from the second bunk. “I’ve got to get back to work.”

“Sherbet, so do I,” exclaimed Wolf. “How long did I sleep?” It was dark outside!

“Few hours,” replied the redhead. “But you were booked off injured. So it’s okay.”

“What? I was just knocked out by some oaf’s stun gun, that’s all! Who booked me off?”

Paeon grinned and pointed to herself.

“Don’t do that again!” growled Wolf. “Thanks all the same.”

“Any day, Wolf,” called Paeon, already halfway out of the door. “Later.”

Wolf shook his head as he collected himself and got up.

*

Federi looked up from the console. In the door to the bridge hung a worried little redhead.

“You okay, Federi?”

The gypsy laughed.

“Fine, Paeon. Except that Captain’s making us sail into a – oh, hell’s gadgets, it’s fine! We’ll be fine. Federi’s an old coward, that’s all! Anna bottle...”

“Coffee for you?”

Federi smiled broadly. “Now that’s going to make all the

difference,” he stated. “Thanks, little carer!”

“Any day,” said Paeon and handed him his steaming mug. “Got any decks for me to scrub?”

What? With death hanging over all their heads? He didn’t think so!

“Funny thing that,” he said, then trailed off. He could see how she’d had a lot of friends in Milly-Molly-Mandy street. Anyone who cared for their friends like this, had friends. He frowned. It made no sense. This was her true nature, he sensed it. Whatever she had done that was weighing on her like that – it had been a fluke, a mistake. When Captain decided to drill down to the truth – he’d be there protecting her, he decided. He stared moodily into the dark beyond the bridge.

“What?” asked Paeon.

Did she sense about the horror he had found in the machine room of the Hun? How could she sense, he thought. And about the irony of Captain being prepared to rescue his arch-enemy... sail right into the death trap that was Hamilton! With all his crew.

“Störtebecker,” he said.

“Pardon?”

“Pirate called Störtebecker. You should ask Sherman about him. Federi can’t tell a story quite the same.”

“Tell me anyway,” pushed Paeon.

“Aw, alright. Störtebecker must have been a bit like Captain. This is long ago. In the days before mineral fuels. He and his whole crew got captured by the law, and of course piracy carried the death penalty even then. So Störtebecker negotiated with the government that all of his sailors could go free past whom he could walk after he was dead.”

“That’s dumb,” commented Paean.

“Wait for it,” said the Tzigan. “I said I can’t tell it like Sherman! So they line up his crew and chop off his head. Paean, *atenție!* He walked past his entire crew with his head chopped off. All of them! Before his dead corpse fell to the ground.”

“Whoa!” commented Paean disbelievingly.

“Is true,” said Federi. “Was a historical figure. Go look it up in the Sher...” He sighed impatiently and stared out to sea. “Go to sleep!”

Paean gaped at him in shock, then she shrugged and left the bridge. Federi glared at the sea some more. In his mind’s eye he saw Captain walking past the Solar Wind’s crew with his head chopped off. Aw hell... and now he’d snubbed the little mockingbird! For what?

*

The next morning dawned bright and blue. Another borrowed day, thought Paean as she got out of her bunk, today amazingly without a headache. Maybe they’d make it through to Hawaii, if they could just keep it quiet, like now. Definitely if she was allowed to knock the Unicate one on the noggin, like yesterday! She peered through the porthole.

Suddenly she felt observed. She turned and glared at the electronic eye in the top corner of her cabin. Federi was right: The darned ship was studded with them! There was no cabin without closed-circuit camera. Couldn’t even change a T-shirt!

Paean padded the few paces to the Solar Wind’s infirmary in her pyjamas and raided the First Aid Box. She returned to her cabin and pasted a plaster over the electronic eye.

“Nobody watches Paeen Donegal change!” she muttered through clenched teeth.

*

Shawn’s optimistic tunes carried down from the Crow’s Nest. Captain’s orders were that he stay up there a lot, and definitely with every landing or sighting of a ship; because of his acute gift for being observant. Federi stared glumly up at the boy. No amount of observance was going to change their fate today. He climbed into the rigging with another of Captain’s nonsensical orders. The warm breeze was blowing, it was promising to be a marvellous day. It was hard to be morose in such gorgeous weather; impossible to be upbeat in the face of what waited for them in Hamilton. They had been towing the Hun for ten hours now, and another four lay ahead. Four more hours of being alive. Federi had no illusions as to what the Unicate would do to them. And no matter how he turned it, there was no getting away out of that spider’s nest. What he needed most now, was a paranormal phenomenon rescuing them. His eyes had acquired an insane glitter.

“Get down on the deck, Donegal,” the gypsy ordered with a mirthless grin. “Captain wants a Ceilidh. I’ll put Rhine Gold on the lookout.”

“Sure,” smiled Shawn.

Federi climbed down, black eyes darting across the deck. He still had to organize the pasting of the false name on the Solar Wind’s hull. Marsden had taken care of the programming of the false identity. The gypsy took in the blue sky, the turquoise sea. A beautiful day to die! Hells and jingles! He’d remember it all

his – er... What had got into him to take the Captain up on this challenge? He had to be crazy. His business was to survive!

*

Anya Miller had arrived at some sort of strategy. All was not lost. After all, she was bringing the pirate into port! It didn't matter who towed whom, in the big picture. The Solar Wind had spotted the Stab craft in the harbour, the first time. She knew this from the reports of the ship turning away. Clearly though, Lascek wasn't aware of the wider net of Pursuers stationed around the islands. Bit of a challenge that she could not contact her lieutenants yet and prepare them. She'd have to act fast, once in the harbour. Doubtlessly Lascek would put her ashore and turn tail right away.

Contagious Irish reels and airs carried over to the Hun, where some of her marines uttered wistfully that they would like to have a party too.

“Any of you who wishes to be on the pirate ship can go,” said Captain Miller.

“Really, Captain?”

“And when I turn them all in, in Hamilton, you can be judged as renegades and buccaneers too!”

*

In the afternoon the civilian trader Santa Marguerita sailed innocently into Hamilton Port, a crippled military craft in tow.

“Just thought we'd give this lady in distress a lift,” signalled the small, dark-haired captain to the harbour authorities. The

Stabilizers converged on the strange twosome, helping with the untying of ropes from the screw of the Hun. Quite a few of the military men and women peered curiously up into the Santa Marguerita's rigging at that strange boxy structure.

Captain Miller got onto the leading T-craft. She was wearing a grin a mile wide.

"Gomez, we've done it! Look! That ship is the Solar Wind!"

"The Solar Wind? That ship is the Santa Marguerita," argued Gomez. "Well known private trader. Their record is spotless. You're lucky they're the ones who picked you up, Captain!"

"It's the Solar Wind," insisted Anya Miller. "We tracked her down and got into a battle. Very nearly sank her. Came a bit short, but here she is."

Captain Stefano Gomez regarded her with narrowed eyes. That sounded like a wild yarn! He had seen who was towing whom! Besides he knew what Lascek looked like – and the Captain of the trader didn't look like Lascek in any way! What was Anya Miller playing?

Gomez had been placed under Miller's authority for the duration of this project. He was the commander of the Stab craft in the harbour. Technically he ranked higher than she; how she had achieved this reversal of the power structure, he wasn't quite sure. It certainly reeked of some unethical goings-on. He wasn't too happy about it; Anya seemed unstable to him.

He punched a few more buttons. "No, Captain, sorry, that ship is definitely not the Solar Wind but the Santa Marguerita. The identity checks out."

"Just arrest them, Gomez," ordered Anya Miller. "You'll see."

Captain Gomez had enough.

“Captain Miller, you have an obsession. You’ll never get this past Head Office. You can’t arrest the nearest civilian and try to palm them off to Head Office as the Pirate. I’ve been observing you and reading up, Miller. This is not the first time you’ve abused Unicate resources. But you aren’t getting me entangled in that, lady! I’m booking you off, as of now, and putting it down to a nervous breakdown. Three weeks reprieve in a top nerve retreat sound good to you?”

“No,” shouted Anya Miller, finally boiling over. “That does not sound good! It sounds like subversion, mutiny! I’ll report you to Headquarters! The notorious pirate Radomir Lascek is aboard that vessel over there!” Her voice was striking a hysterical coloratura as Gomez’s fingers moved calmly over the keyboard. “I found him, I, me, me! I want to turn him in to the authorities! I want to collect my reward! You’re not sabotaging me, you nobody!”

“I’ve just booked you for a stay on the Canaries, Miller. Subtropical island paradise, all expenses paid courtesy the Unicate Navy. Three weeks.”

Anya Miller tackled Gomez and tried to choke him. Two of his marines had to take her away forcibly and organize her into the harbour’s private nerve clinic for observation. Gomez cancelled her island holiday again.

He peered at the outline of the white Zephyr that had rescued her. What a mindboggling hag that Miller was! He couldn’t believe she had tried to turn in a civilian who had just saved her and her crew! His First Mate Gina Nevada re-emerged out of hiding from the minute galley compartment. She levelled a gaze at the trader that was sailing out of Hamilton Port.

“What are they doing now?”

“They’re removing something –“ Gomez trained his lenses on the ship. He started laughing.

“What?” asked Gina.

“It *is* the Solar Wind!”

“They’ve saved that Miller harpy’s life,” said Gina.

Gomez smiled. “Shall we give her a decent head start?”

“We’re going after her?”

“Sure! That’s a lot of money!”

*

The men on the Solar Wind were laughing too. Loudest laughed the Pirate Captain, back on his bridge.

Federi had withdrawn to his cabin. He sat cross-legged on his bunk, just staring, his fingers clenching and unclenching subconsciously. He felt sick. Captain could laugh now, but in his mind the gypsy could still see the horrible little black craft closing in all around the Solar Wind like spiders, Unicate marines crawling aboard, his friends being brutalized, gutted, murdered...

The trick had relied completely on psychology. But that wasn’t all. He had a hunch that though this prank had gone well, it had been the first sea mile on the long, dark voyage into oblivion.

*

9 April 2116

Katya

Very nearly, your brother joined you today.

Captain must be off his mind. He outwits that Anya Miller, and then, when Federi has made doubly sure that all danger is past and she can't come after us and fry us with her lightning bolts, Captain catches a virus and orders me to rescue her! Right back into that nest of Stabs! After we fielded the getaway so beautifully, yesterday! It's enough to drive a man twitchy! Katya, sometimes I think Captain is a madman, despite all the good he does!

He's protecting our three little musicians, and that's great – haha, the little songbird's pretty upset with Federi bout that thieves' honour thing, can't accept that I'm not an honest, ethical, upstanding – Katya, are you laughing as loud as Federi? Maybe Federi's not laughing all that loudly anyway, rats in pyjamas... was pointless upsetting her yesterday.

Pretty impressed with Shawn, the kid's got a very bright wit. Was the first to figure out we're pirates, even before Captain told them.

Captain speaks about Donegal magic. They have an amazing effect on us all. We haven't been laughing such a lot in a long time. And that music... Cor, my heart-sister, I'm tired of being a morose pirate! Want to be a happy Tzigan again! Haven't had much chance at playing the clown since the Princess is all grown up. Hells, Katya, but I can't laugh after I've seen the voltage of that woman's hatred... Can't stop thinking of headless old

Störtebecker!

Going to pass out a bit and then make everyone coffee. As though they need it, blasted crew of hyperactive monkeys!

Kathal, my sister.

Your wrecked little brother.

7

Old Sherman

Shawn came shimmying down the rigging in the early dusk to join his sister and old Sherman at the rail. Paean had her violin out and was playing a few tunes to Ronan's accompaniment; but her heart wasn't in it.

"That was an ace trick today," Shawn laughed. "Wonder what that Anya Miller is doing now!"

"I don't like wondering about psychopaths," replied the old storyteller.

"Och, won't you tell us a ghost story, Sherman?" begged Shawn.

"You like your ghosties, Shawn," laughed Sherman Dougherty. "Are you three planning to tour around the world playing music?" He pulled out his pipe and started cleaning it.

"Och no," said Paean, giving up on the tune she'd been attempting. It didn't want to.

"But why not? You three are good, Paean!"

She studied the old man, with his wild white mane and his huge, somewhat tobacco-stained beard. An old leprechaun. Not even the Uinate had managed to edit leprechauns and shenanigans out of Irish folklore.

Almost she'd like to trust the grandfatherly old sailor and give

him a real answer. But... yeah. That was suicide. A low profile!

“Och, Sherman, we didn’t make it in Dublin, and that’s the world capital for music.”

“Made a good deal of money though,” piped Shawn happily. “Up until...”

“Shawn!” Paeon frowned at him. It was bad luck if Shawn wanted to talk about the past right now! Couldn’t he just keep on shutting up until Hawaii? Anyway, what did he call a good deal of money?! “It was *Ronan* who was earning money, remember? We just went along!”

“Sure,” came a cryptic comment. The gypsy had appeared out of nowhere and was leaning against the foremast, watching them. Paeon peered back at him critically. He was in a lime-green flared shirt with a sky-blue waistcoat and a mauve paisley headscarf – a combination that hurt the eye, even in the dusk. He must be feeling better.

She had changed her mind. She wasn’t going to give Ronan’s plan of making friends another go. Making friends on this ship was not only darned tricky; it was pointless, too. She couldn’t really see why she bothered. Ro could carry his plan out alone. And Shawn. Friends were dangerous. You ended up telling them things.

Quite a few of the sailors were out on the deck by now, drawn by the beginnings of the Ceilidh. There was an air of elation. They wanted to party, having pulled one over on the Uinate.

“Yup, that’s right,” grinned Shawn. “They kept on just giving Ro all the money! And we did just as much of the work! Played weddings, funerals, seedy pubs...”

“Ceilidhs,” corrected Ronan sternly, putting his Clarsach away in its weatherproof bag. Mist was beginning to rise. The wind

was picking up. The Ceilidh would have to move below the deck. “All you two ever played was Ceilidhs. Paeán, pack up your violin, it’s going to get wet! We’re a law-abiding family, Shawn. Don’t know where you got all those other ideas! Sir, he dramatizes!”

“Stands to reason, he’s Irish,” said Wolf Svendsson. Paeán glanced up from putting her violin away. So Wolf was back on deck!

“Now, Svendsson, what precisely do you mean by that?” asked Sherman Dougherty sharply.

“Och, Sherman,” begged Shawn, “a ghost story, please?”

“Wouldn’t you rather tell us about your own ghosts, Shawn?” replied Sherman. “Why are you at sea, when you ought to be at school?”

Paeán hissed under her breath. The Donegals had last been to school in September. It was not a topic she wanted to discuss. “Sherman, what is the Solar Wind’s mission in Hawaii?”

A small sound caught her attention. Federi was laughing quietly to himself.

“Might as well ask how a Dougherty gets by the name of Sherman,” said Ronan, trying to get the conversation back onto safer ground. Drat Paeán and her sharp wit! He didn’t want to be put ashore in the next port! The plan was to get to Hawaii, not stay in Plymouth!

He had his hands full with his sibs. Shawn had to be pulled in line all the time, telling people too much, while Paeán had developed a style of communicating that was – well, loudly suspicious.

“How a Donegal gets by the name of Paeán,” countered Sherman. He had the pipe lit by now and puffed on it, studying

them all.

“Mother picked it,” said Paeon defiantly. She turned away, walking along the rail towards the prow. The Ceilidh was over.

*

The Solar Wind was cutting her way south-southeast towards Plymouth, another free port. Captain Lascek, Marsden and Rushka were on the bridge, holding a conference.

Radomir Lascek summarized the situation. The Uinate had been swarming all over Hamilton harbour. Discovering that Hamilton was a pirate port, they would carry on searching now until they found more pirate ports. What Federi had found out that night on his pub mission was disturbing. The Uinate was systematically checking every last port now. Hamilton was gone; Manila was gone. Several ports in the Gulf and along the Florida coastline, including Key West, had already been discovered and taken over. Nicaragua, a resilient free country, had folded to the Uinate days ago. It would be in the World News now. All in all the Uinate had suddenly become a lot more vicious – but why? What lay behind it all?

Some answers would await them in Hawaii, this they knew. Jonathan Marsden had been working on the decryption of those data sticks and especially the high-security capsule Federi had picked off the Hun – with little success. It seemed as though whole parts of code were missing. What single glimpses emerged, made no sense as yet. This was no small project.

The Solar Wind’s concerns for safety lay closer still. Had the Uinate discovered Plymouth yet? Uinate was like a bulldog – once they had a grip on something, they never let go until they

had finished it. The Unicate was a fearsomely thorough conqueror.

But Plymouth was only the first stop on Lascek's map of concerns. They would have to cross the Panama Canal to get to the Pacific. Anya Miller knew of their course, that was clear. She had been too accurate positioning herself. So the Unicate would be waiting for them in Panama.

"It's madness," said Marsden.

"Good," replied Captain Lascek. "So, any ideas yet?"

Rushka shrugged. "Go around the Cape?"

"For all that's going to cost us in delay," replied her father, "it's not that much safer. Unicate's all over the Atlantic. You know this."

"At least we won't be delivering ourselves right into their hands," said Rushka.

Radomir Lascek's eyes narrowed. "Right into their hands, you say?"

Jonathan Marsden shuddered. There was a plan brewing in that formidable mind! All he could do was modulate the Captain's risks down, try to make it a bit safer.

"A year ago I would have said, go north," he suggested. "Even now – wouldn't that be better?"

Lascek shook his head. "The passage is frozen again."

"Blast our way with the nuclear drives?"

"Not doable, Jon. The ice is finally recovering. Sea level has dropped."

"Submerge and pass under the ice cap?"

Radomir Lascek leaned back and folded his arms, mulling.

"For all it's possible," he said, "it would cost nearly as much time as going around the Cape. Now that the Unicate is hatching

something, I feel there is more need to hurry. We'll just have to find our way through Panama.”

“If the sea level has dropped, Lake Gatun will be a challenge,” warned Marsden.

“It will be a challenge anyway,” said Lascek.

Rushka nodded. “Stabilizers,” she said.

Lascek’s glance fell on the little Irish waif out there at the rail, under the occasional spray of the prow wave. She stood as tall as her tiny frame allowed and met his eyes across the whole length of the deck with Donegal pride in every inch of her stance.

“Rushka,” he said, “remind me!”

“*Igen*, Captain.”

For now, he needed to focus on the Panama Debacle.

*

Sherman Dougherty had his audience gathered around himself now. The ship’s deck lights lit up automatically just as he took a breath to start.

“Shawn,” he said, “you know where we’re going, now don’t you?”

“Sure,” said Shawn, “Hawaii!”

“And do you know how we’re going to get there?”

Shawn’s face was a blank. It was on the tip of his tongue to say, “by sailing ship”, but clearly this was a loaded question. He waited.

“D’you know your geography, Donegal?” asked old Sherman.

“No, but I will,” said Shawn happily. “Give me five years or so at sea!”

“Plymouth in about four days,” said old Sherman, smiling.

“We restock, and then we pass through Panama – that should be sports! From there –“

“What kind of sports?” asked Shawn, riveted.

“Unicate,” said Sherman. “Now listen! Don’t get so excited! You think you’re a pirate? You don’t know anything! Probably read too much subversive literature! You want some real pirates, go to the east coast of Africa. The Indian Ocean coast. Mayotte. Dzaoudzi. Reunion. Slave trade, Donegal! Right into this century! Why do you think there’s a place on the northern tip of Mauritius that is called, to this day, Cannonier’s Point?”

Shawn nodded, impressed.

“In any case that’s the most dangerous stretch of ocean ever designed,” said Sherman Dougherty.

“I thought that was south of the Cape of Storms,” interjected Ronan.

“Storms, ha,” said Sherman. “The Agulhas comes down from India along the East Coast. Warm water pushing south. The Oceanic Conveyor Belt goes up that coastline, but of course deep down. Storms? You get lots there. Great cyclones. High waves. Ships tend to disappear without leaving a forwarding address...”

“The place must be littered with wrecks,” commented Shawn.

“Sherman, won’t you tell us the one about the Bronberg?” asked Wolf Svendsson.

“Which one -? Oh. All right!” Sherman puffed on his pipe and settled comfortably on the deck. The ship rolled as she ploughed on through the dark. Fine salty spray settled on them. The crests glowed a bit with bioluminescent plankton.

“The Bronberg was a Namakura, Class fifty-seven,” said Sherman, leaning back against the starboard rail. It was the holes that worried him. He hadn’t yet had a chance to build holes into

the Bronberg's tale for Ronan. Well, he'd just have to do it as he went along. "Blue ship. Now wasn't she beautiful as the evening breeze? A steamship from the mineral fuels era; ran on what they called dirty oil. Unrefined oil. And was it dirty, now!" He frowned and went silent for a moment. He had been there. "You kids have no idea what rubbish was thrown into the atmosphere by those old steamers! And all other transport! Why do you think the ice caps started melting? If the Unicate ever did one thing right..."

"What?" asked Shawn, surprised. "The Unicate stopped the use of mineral oils?"

"We don't really know, do we?" replied Sherman. "I believe it did run out. The Unicate wasn't responsible for Nemesis II either."

"You sure?" asked Wolf Svendsson with a grin. Nemesis II had been one of a pair of meteorites. It had hit Earth in the mid-Atlantic. Nemesis I had been caught further up the solar system by Neptune.

Sherman had been alive at that time, too.

"Oy! That was a tense time for Earth, wasn't it!" he recalled. "Tidal waves, earthquakes, volcanic outbursts. Luckily it was a comparatively small hit; Nemesis I would have sliced our planet in halves. Geography shifted."

"How?" asked Ronan, eyes narrowed. Here it came!

"The Mid-Atlantic Ridge? Boys, you should see it now! Used to be a nice fault line. Now it's a real cliff. And hasn't the east side sunk a great bit lower?" He grinned and drew on his pipe.

"Ah." Had it, now? Ronan smiled and considered whether scrubbing the galley floor was a worthwhile option tonight. It had to be a tall story! If the east side of the ridge had sunk any

lower, Ireland would be where Tir Nan Og was! And probably, half of Europe too!

“What about that dirty fuel, and the ice caps melting?” asked Shawn, ears hot.

“You’re talking about another story now,” said Sherman. “And they didn’t exactly melt, did they? Just thinned a bit. The ice receded a wee bit. Unicate blasted a passage into the thinned Northern Ice Cap in the late Eighties to promote traffic between Tokyo, New York and London. But it has iced over more every year now, as the atmosphere recovers from the Greenhouse effect. Soon it won’t even be open in summer any longer, and what a pity that will be for the sea trade!”

“And the sea levels?”

“They’ve been dropping, but not too dramatically,” said Sherman. “Don’t you Dubliners know? All harbour towns were built up quite a bit in the fifties, with the sea levels at their highest. Harbours were raised and dykes were built higher every year. A lot of technology went into that! You think you had a problem? Should have seen Holland, and Florida!”

“Lowlands,” muttered Ronan.

“Now that the sea level is dropping again, there are places where one can see the old submerged buildings resurfacing,” said Sherman. “Old highways. And so on. Isn’t that the plain truth!”

“Och,” said Ronan and bit his tongue. Decks!

*

“I wonder if Dr Jake is ready with his electronics shield.” The Captain pressed a few buttons on his wrist-com. “Dr Jake, come in – how far is that shield?”

“Incomplete yet, sir, but we can use it for partial disturbance.”

“Thanks, Dr Jake. We’ll use it. Can’t disturb them enough, where I’m concerned!”

“Obviously we’ll have to sail under a false identity,” said Marsden. “The San Diego?”

“Paeon Donegal busted that one,” smiled Lascek. “And the Santa Marguerita will be all over their records now. Got to create a new one.”

“Captain, can I go listen to Sherman?” asked Rushka.

Lascek studied his daughter for a moment. Well, she was only nineteen, and these heavy survival issues shouldn’t strictly be her concern. Other girls her age were having fun at University!

“Only I find that I get better ideas from his stories,” said Rushka.

“Go, little rogue,” laughed Lascek. “Go play with the other kids! Jon and I will take care of the Panama business.”

“Thanks, Papa.”

*

The ship’s ghost peered at the single little figure up there on the jib deck by the bowsprit, in the wind, catching the spray of the prow wave. Sherman’s probing had cut close to the truth. Federi could sense the stress radiating from the little redhead.

Should he go and tell her that she shouldn’t worry, everything would be alright? But what if it wasn’t? What if her deed was so awful it broke all rules of humanity? There was really no way of telling. In reality he didn’t actually want to know, either. It was up to Captain to deal with that kind of thing. Or to choose not to.

“The Bronberg,” Wolf prompted.

“Now, the Bronberg,” Sherman agreed. “Beautiful ship. Beautiful crew, too. Black as ink, tall, straight marines.”

“I thought a Namakura was a coastal guard?” asked Shawn. He had been reading!

“In the same way that the Solar Wind is a Trader,” agreed Sherman grinning. “At any rate, pirates. Mwali. Mutsamudu.”

“Incantations,” grinned Wolf Svendsson.

“Places,” corrected Sherman. “The Unicate suspected goings-on in those regions. So they sent the Bronberg, from Southern.”

“But I thought Southern Free is a free country?” There. Decks after all. Luckily Ronan was practiced with scrubbing by now.

“Is, and was even then,” smiled Sherman. “They were currying favour with the Unicate though, those were the early days. And didn’t the Unicate send the Bronberg of all ships to Mayotte to investigate what is going on there? O’ course, this is right after the strike of Nemesis II, so the Earth’s crust is unstable. Volcanoes all over. New uncharted islands springing out of the sea.”

“*Uncharted* islands?” asked Ronan sceptically.

Wolf had told Shawn at some point that Sherman was over a hundred years old! Well, that would account for the holes in the stories! Paean with her sharp tongue had of course told Shawn not to believe everything Wolf Svendsson said...

“Of course,” said Sherman. “You’d think, a place like the Mozambique Channel... Nobody goes there! Only slavers and drug dealers!”

“It’s a major trade route,” said Ronan.

“Today, yes, today,” said Sherman. “In those days... anyway,

the Bronberg goes in. She travels up the coast – now, the Captain of the Bronberg’s no fool. The Agulhas runs south there. But there’s a counter current, known to the ships of old, closer to the shore. The Captain’s a dare-devil, he –“

He glanced up at Rushka, who had suddenly popped up out of the floor.

“What about the Captain, Sherman?”

“This is another captain,” laughed Sherman. “Sit down, Rushka! Mustn’t be so sudden! You’ll give an old sailor a heart-attack!”

“Sorry, Sherman.” Rushka settled in the general vicinity of the Donegal brothers.

“So every now and then a new island pops up out of the sea,” said Sherman. “Covered with seaweed and dying anemones and rock-pools full of starfish. And sometimes a whole sunken ship is raised to the surface that way, full of ancient treasure.”

“But why uncharted?” pressed Ronan. “Wouldn’t that information be available instantly on the Net?”

“Och, the Net,” said Sherman Dougherty. “They didn’t have the Net in those days, now did they?”

“Ouch,” said Wolf. Sherman’s bushy white eyebrows lifted. He’d have to be subtler with his lies. Wolf was in on the ploy, but this had been an instinctive reaction.

“But shouldn’t they be visible from the satellites?” insisted Ronan.

Sherman Dougherty rolled his eyes. “Complicated. Volcanic islands are very small.”

“Come on! Ships in Tokyo Harbour are visible from satellite! Saw a photo back in...” Ronan trailed off.

“I’d love to be that high up,” said Shawn enthusiastically.

“What a feeling!”

“Back in...?” asked Sherman, studying Ronan critically.

“The Bronberg,” prompted Wolf again.

“Och all right, the Bronberg,” said Sherman, who realized that no matter what he did, he wasn’t going to get out of telling that story. “Now o’ course, isn’t that area prime habitat for whales?”

“Whales?” asked Shawn excitedly. “They still exist?” Despite Federi’s assurance that this was the Ocean, he hadn’t yet spotted one.

“Hear me out, Donegal! Sheesh, Donegal Minor and Donegal Major! Whales are known to do battle with giant squid. Humboldt squid.”

“Why?”

“Why? They eat them, now don’t they? Either way round, depending who wins! Now, the suckers of giant squid are ten centimetres across. The squid themselves are fifteen to eighteen metres in length. Work out the size.”

Ronan got up and paced out fifteen metres.

“I don’t think so,” he commented. Shawn watched, with eyes wide.

“Fifteen *feet*,” corrected Wolf.

“There’s that,” said Sherman. “And what about the whale shark? Size of a whale, rises out of the twilight zone at night to feed. I’ll tell you, things grow bigger down there! Leftover species from the Pleistocene. Who knows what all lurks in the deep?”

Blond Rhine Gold sounded as though he had a coughing fit. Within seconds they all knew he was trying not to laugh too loudly. He had settled close by with a pile of potatoes and was calmly peeling them while listening. Duties were duties, tall

story or not.

*

Paeon had gone to her cabin to put on a jersey. Despite the tropics she suddenly felt chilly. Cold and alone. She hung about the frugal cubicle for a while, sitting on her bunk, trying to think of something to do. She could have done with her old weather-beaten teddy bear now, but he had stayed behind in Molly Street like everything else. Like Mother. Her mind shied away from that.

She switched off the light and tried to sleep. It was hopeless. Images haunted her. Ten restless minutes later she got up impatiently and left her cabin.

There was still light and movement in the cabin across the passage. Paeon peered in through the for once open door. Usually the Doc kept the door closed religiously; all Paeon had glimpsed so far was a fridge at the far end.

White equipment and clean surfaces met her eye everywhere. She marvelled. Red displays on great square metal appliances gave what seemed to be temperature readings. There was a translucent machine with a jelly-like substance in it, with many little orange lines travelling across it. There were columns of reinforced silica-plex, sporting bands of colour along them. Everything either bolted into place, or placed into wells, holders and clamps to keep it steady. An extractor fan operated ceaselessly over the workspace.

“Paeon,” said Doc Judith. “Come in!” She handed Paeon a paper mask. “Put this on. Don’t contaminate the air!” She grabbed a spray-bottle and sprayed at Paeon. A very cold, sweet

mist. Paean sniffed and her eyes started tearing.

“Don’t breathe that, unless you want to get drunk,” said Doc Judith. “It’s seventy percent ethanol.”

“Can I lend a hand?” asked Paean, finding her bearings. “I’m feeling useless.”

“There’s not much to lend,” replied the Doc. “But you can keep me company. Sit over there!” She motioned to a compounding barstool that had been bolted into place next to a work surface. “Did you have chemistry in school?”

“A bit.” Paean took a seat and studied the elderly lady doctor. Doc Judith had to be sixtyish. Her hair was tied back into a loose bun; this was clearly for practical purposes, but Paean had never seen her wear it any other way. It made sense. “But what I really want to learn is medicine. Want to be able to heal people.”

“Really? It’s a tough field,” said the Doc.

“Och, I’m tough as well,” said Paean. “And I already know some herb lore.”

“Herb lore!” Doc Judith paused. “You know *herbal* medicine?”

“A bit,” said Paean.

“How did you get by that knowledge?”

Paean went silent. This was dangerous ground.

The Doc read her worried expression.

“All right, I won’t push,” she said. “I only hope you’re over your addiction?”

“Addiction?!” Now Paean Donegal was incensed. “Hell, no! There’s no addiction in *our* family! Doc, do I look like a girl who would voluntarily drink or smoke her brains away?”

“No,” laughed Doc Judith. She was relieved. So that was not where the herb lore had come in! “Which herbs do you know?”

she asked.

“Well, the most important is probably willow bark,” said Paean. “Aspirin by another name! I know they don’t have aspirin as a drug in the pharmacies, but it does everything. Breaks a fever, kills pain, protects the heart... so I extract my own out of willow bark.”

“Beauty,” commented the Doc. “And -?”

Paean thought a bit. “Nettle, for detoxing the kidneys. Cranberries against migraines.”

“Didn’t know that one,” said Doc Judith, surprised. “Does it work?”

“Like a bomb,” said Paean. “What else do I know? Basic stuff, Doc... Chamomile and fennel for upset stomach, Valerian for sleeplessness and anxiety...”

“Elder,” said the Doc, enthused. “For...?”

“Antiseptic and antiviral,” replied Paean without hesitating. “But it doesn’t always work.”

“It does,” argued Doc Judith. “It used to be the sacred tree of the gypsies, did you know?”

“And the druids,” agreed Paean. “St John’s Wort for depression...” She grinned nastily. “Foxglove for poisoning people’s espresso...”

“Paean!” The Doc shook her head. “That’s not particularly funny. And have you brought any of your herbs aboard with you?”

“Only a bit of hemlock,” said Paean casually.

“I hope that’s another tasteless joke,” said the Doc. “And why this interest in herbology?”

“Doc, we’re from Molly Street,” said Paean. “That’s not a rich place. We cut corners. We grow our own potatoes in our

gardens. Medications are expensive. I was the neighbourhood herb witch. Used to make remedies for everyone. Mother and me. Our remedies always worked.” She went quiet, frowning. Battling.

“And where’s Mother now?” probed the Doc.

Paean turned away. “Excuse me, Doc, I need the bathroom,” she said and made her escape.

“It’s called the heads,” Doc corrected in her absence. She activated her wrist-com. “Captain, a free moment?”

“Certainly, Doc.”

“About the Donegals.”

“Ah, yes,” said Lascek tiredly. “That’s one I’ve been putting off. They’re nice kids, actually. Did one of them say something?”

“I’m afraid it may be rather sinister,” said Doc Judith.

*

“So, the Bronberg, Sherman,” Wolf pushed.

“You know, the sad thing? I can’t really remember what happened to the blue Bronberg,” said Sherman. “She went in to investigate the slaver situation and uncovered an illegal nuclear testing site. Was already on her way back to Cape Town when she disappeared.”

“What!” Now he had their attention.

“We think it was a rogue wave,” said Sherman. “Happens a lot, in that Channel.”

“Rogue wave,” said Shawn. “What’s that?”

“Where the surf from a storm collides with a major current,” said Sherman. “They can get thirty metres high. They swallow

ships.”

“Thirty feet?” guessed Ronan.

“Hundred feet,” said Sherman. “Thirty metres. Fourteen stories on a mid-city flats block. You Donegals haven’t yet weathered a proper storm at sea. We’ve had surprisingly fair weather so far this passage. Wait and see! And the Bronberg was sighted about two years back, off the Cape of Storms. Work that one out!” He got up. “Please, kids, excuse me. I can’t focus on my tall tale. That Panama debacle’s worrying me too much.” He moved towards the bridge.

Ronan got up and followed him at a run.

“Sherman, I’m sorry! Didn’t mean to break your speed.”

Sherman chuckled. “You didn’t, Donegal! I was waiting for much more from you, actually. But I’m serious. Panama’s a death trap. We’ll have to try talking Captain into rounding the Cape. We’ll not make it through Panama this time.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Worse.” Sherman walked off to the bridge, leaving Ronan standing worrying. This was a lot worse than any ghost story. This was their life!

He turned, and nearly tripped as he came face to face with the very sudden Rushka.

“Captain demands to see the Donegals in the boardroom!”

8

The Donegals' trial

Cold spotlights irradiated the blue boardroom from all around the tops of the walls. The huge flat screen against the stern-side wall was off; not in use. At Captain's fake pine boardroom table, Jon Marsden and Doc Judith had taken seats; Federi was in an inconspicuous corner, apparently absorbed in assembling some or other small gadget. The door was closed; but Paeon knew that Rushka was guarding, outside.

The Donegal sibs were standing, lined up for execution. The large, carved analogue clock over the screen was ticking softly, tick, tick. Carved out of compounding. Strange how such details stood out when it was your last hour that was ticking away. Oh hell, oh hell, she should have had the sense and stayed out of that lab! And kept her loud trap shut! Paeon Loudmouth, she berated herself. Rats all over!

She thought back to the blue early this morning; to the way things had almost normalized in her mind, with their predicament almost forgotten, and such issues as recalcitrant friends taking her attention. She should have realized. Her guard had slipped. Their borrowed days were up; all three of them were going to pay with their lives for her carelessness.

Radomir Lascek paced before them, measured, grave.

“When I hire new crew,” he said eventually, “it’s always a surprise packet. Donegals, let me first apologize. I as your Captain should have taken care of this the day you boarded. I might say in my defence that I had my mind on somewhat larger things.”

Paean’s eyes darted to the gathered older crew. Witnesses, that was all they were. And of course Doc Judith, the prosecutor. She saw Federi’s mouth twitch at the “larger things”. But when she looked at him, he avoided her eyes.

“Take this to heart, Donegals,” announced Radomir Lascek. “The Solar Wind is a pirate ship. Does this mean we have no law? No! On the Solar Wind, I am the Law! I make the law, I enforce it; I deal with who oversteps it.”

Paean heard Ronan swallow.

What form would their execution take? Would Captain hand them over to the Unicate? Would he kill them himself? She hoped that her brothers would forgive her.

“Paean Donegal,” said Radomir Lascek, bending down to eye level with her, placing a firm, authoritative hand on her shoulder. “One of my most important laws is that of secrecy. No secrets from the Captain, on the Solar Wind!”

She nodded, her throat dry.

“What are you hiding? What have you done?”

“She’s done nothing, Captain, she’s innocent,” said Ronan.

Radomir Lascek shot the young man a single glance, then returned his attention to Paean.

“If you are innocent, why do you fear execution?”

Paean stared straight ahead and said nothing. If she said nothing, nothing could be held against her. It was a silly notion.

The Captain straightened out and glared at Ronan.

“And you? Speak up!”

“Captain, we’re innocent,” said Ronan.

Lascek shook his head. Paean watched him, then glanced again at Federi, who was studying her. For once there was no humour in his black eyes, only – sadness? Almost a friend, she thought glumly. If she had trusted him and told him? Could he have turned things? Or would he have turned them in? Would he have kept mum and she’d simply have had a friend for a few days?

Radomir Lascek’s cold glare brushed Paean once more, then he turned to Shawn. The boy would have grown into a man taller than Captain, thought Paean. And a better man! How low, to cut him down now while he was still small and defenceless! She took in how her little brother stood proud, fearless, facing his Captain with confidence.

Aw hell! How could she allow Captain to ruin that? As Radomir Lascek drew a breath to speak, Paean interrupted.

“Captain...”

He turned back to her.

“Will you let my brothers go? I’ll tell you all.”

“Paean, no!” exclaimed Ronan. “Captain, she’s done nothing! She’s innocent!”

“Donegal, quiet!” thundered Lascek. “Let your sister speak!”

Paean took a deep breath. Here we go, she thought. “Captain, do you promise you’ll let my brothers go? After all the Uinate only needs one guilty party.”

“Paean –” started Ronan and flinched from the Captain’s glare.

“Paean Donegal, this is like the proverbial dentistry. State your case and then we shall decide! Dr Judith mentioned that it might have something to do with you giving your mother

unwholesome herbal preparations. Paeon Donegal, tell me everything.”

Paeon nearly felt the electric shock that went through the gypsy. She glanced. He turned his head away. She blinked, confused. *What* was that Captain had said? “Captain, pardon?”

“You poisoning your mother,” repeated Radomir Lascek patiently.

“*Poisoning Mother!*” This was one too many. It started as an exclamation and ended as a great, heartbroken sob. “No! That’s not true! I didn’t!”

Mother, lying grey and emaciated in her bed, bleeding, bleeding ceaselessly, from her nose, her eyes, her mouth... Blood all over her, over the sheets, the pillow, Paeon’s hands... Mother had died in her arms. Tears came down in a torrential deluge. She couldn’t stop them. The box had been opened. The nightmares spilled out of it, there was no way to put them back and ram the lid back into place. Paeon covered her face in her hands.

A gentle hand touched her shoulder. The elderly Doc was there beside her.

“I misunderstood, didn’t I?”

Doc Judith had no idea. Guilty as charged. Herbal home-remedies were illegal; and with reason. Sometimes they went wrong.

Radomir Lascek studied the scene of the nervous breakdown, and then the other two sibs. He wouldn’t push Shawn with a feather right now; the boy looked as though he were going to go the way of his sister in a second. There was no information to be got out of him now. Ronan remained standing, straight, proud – and mightily angry.

Radomir Lascek focused on the older brother, frowning. They could cover all they liked, with anger and tears and emotional breakdowns – but he would get their dark secret out of them! He had to! He didn't ship a crew of pirates around the world out of sight of the Uinate only to endanger them with the presence of real criminals!

“So Ronan, if that's not what happened, would you care to enlighten me? Why are you three on the run? If your mother wasn't poisoned, what did Paeon actually do to her? Was it an accident? Was it drug-related?”

Ronan took a deep breath.

“Captain, with respect. That was unnecessarily cruel! My sister has suffered the most of all of us. How can you accuse her of something so vile?”

“Without knowing the facts, Donegal?”

He could literally see the cogs working in the oldest Donegal's mind. The young man was clearly weighing up the risks of telling him the truth against the risk of remaining silent. If they refused to talk, he'd turn them over in Plymouth, he thought. Send in Jon Marsden, or Federi... But they would talk! He had experience in making people tell him things.

Clearly the truth won out. Ronan's shoulders lifted in a hell-with-it expression.

“Captain, in brief, here's what happened,” he said. “I don't know what the regulations are in the rest of the world, but in Dublin you need a medical care license if you want to be treated by a doctor when you get ill. Our license was up for its yearly renewal and we didn't have the quid. So it lapsed. My sibs are under age and we hadn't yet figured out that if we play a gig I'm the earner and they're just there for the fun. That's legal.”

“And your father?” asked Radomir Lascek.

He could see how the boy had to restrain himself from spitting on the deck. “What’s a father, Captain?”

“Do carry on!” prompted Lascek. He had thought so.

“So our mother came home ill from the factory the one day,” continued Ronan. “Once you’re ill, you can forget it, they’re not renewing the license without a fine the value of your head. We think it was a virus. But on second thought, it may have been poison. Paean and she tried fighting it out with herbal medication, but it was no use. She bled to death, eventually. Was not pretty!”

He sniffed loudly but kept staring defiantly at the Captain. Radomir Lascek nodded.

“So it wasn’t your sister’s herbal concoctions that killed your mother?”

“Captain, we’re from Molly Street,” said Ronan proudly. “Mother was our neighbourhood healer. Who needs doctors?” He glanced at Doc Judith. “With respect, Doctor. But Paean and our mother cured a lot of common colds and flu’s and tonsillitis and stomach upsets – a lot of things with their herbs. I would say, Paean and our mother knew their herbs too well to make mistakes. In any case they never used the really poisonous ones. Too risky.”

“So then if you are innocent, why did you run?”

“We’re legally liable for her death because in those six months we couldn’t raise the licence penalty money,” replied Ronan. “Maybe the hospital could have saved her. Unicate came looking for us the day she died.”

“That same day?” asked Lascek.

“Yes.” Ronan shrugged. “We’ve broken many laws, Captain.

We stopped school. We all three worked under age. We used herbal medication on a dying person. We evaded justice. We had to leave her there...” He stared straight up at the ceiling, fighting for his voice back. “So, Captain, if you want to put us to death for that, pick me and spare my sibs. I’m the adult in the equation.”

“How long between her getting sick and her dying?” asked Jon Marsden, worried.

“Six months,” said Ronan.

Radomir Lascek started pacing. This was grave! He exchanged troubled glances with Jon Marsden, who scowled back; then with Federi.

“’s the truth,” mouthed the gypsy.

“I know,” replied Lascek dismally. “Easier if it weren’t! Ye Powers, and what do we do now?” He turned to Doc Judith, who was talking softly at Paeon, trying to pacify her. “Doc, what do you make of that?”

“Pardon, Captain?” asked the doctor. “I wasn’t listening.”

Radomir Lascek repeated the essence of Ronan’s story.

“Haemorrhagic fever,” said Doc Judith. “Bio-engineered to stretch over six months. The original wipes you out in forty-eight hours. Those bio-engineered viruses defeat the strongest immune system. Paeon, there’s nothing wrong with your herbal remedies. You had no chance from the beginning. A shot of highly specific antiviral along with interferon would have fixed it.”

“That’s what the Uinate withheld, via the expired license,” commented Lascek. “Doc, so the Uinate hunts them for the death of their mother, and they step aboard and damn the whole crew of the Solar Wind?”

Doc Judith fell silent. The clock ticked.

“None of us caught it in six months,” said Ronan. “Paean was working the closest with Mom, she was helping her, practically the whole time.”

“The incubation time might be even longer,” the Doc pointed out. She stared darkly at the three siblings.

Ronan cleared his throat.

“So, Captain, what happens now? Will you turn us over to the Unicate in Plymouth?”

Radomir Lascek turned to his officers. “Conference on the bridge,” he ordered. “Who stays behind with the Donegals?”

“I shall,” volunteered Doc Judith.

“No, Doc, I need you in the conference. Federi?”

“*Shukar*, Captain,” said the gypsy.

The Captain, Doc Judith and Jonathan Marsden left the boardroom, taking Rushka with them who had been on guard outside the door.

Silence descended in the boardroom. The three sibs stared at each other, frightened. They dashed suspicious glances at Federi.

“It’s going to be okay,” said Shawney eventually. “I’m sure Captain thinks like a fair man.”

“He’s going to make us walk the plank,” argued Paean moodily. “Sorry, you two. My loud mouth!”

The gypsy’s eyebrows went up, and he smiled at Paean.

“Least you’re innocent,” he said. “See it that way.”

A bio-engineered virus! She sighed and shrugged, close to tears again. Innocent. Months of shaky guilt released her slowly, one by one like a swarm of disinterested piranhas. It had looked like a common flu at first, and Paean had made Mother their own home-mixed flu remedy as she always did; but it didn’t go away,

and so Paeon had upped the strength and frequency of the tea, uneasily because she knew that it also thinned the blood. Then the nose bleeds started; Paeon immediately stopped giving Mother any further willow bark based tea and started her investigation into other herbs. Cat's claw, kava kava... they all had side effects, and not all were equally available. She peddled small favours with a Roma family in lower Dublin to entice them to get hold of some herbs for her via their relatives and contacts in the Free Gypsies – a highly risky endeavour for both her and the Roma. And with each of the herbs, new symptoms emerged. It was a nightmare!

The more frantically she tried to help Mother and doctor her back to health, the worse things got. Eventually she didn't give Mother any herbs at all, in a hope that it would all go away – but once more the disease was ahead of her and turned for the worse, so that Paeon resumed the herbal fight. In the same time she and her brothers pulled out all the stops to earn enough money to get that licence restored – in vain. Several times they were close – but the Uinate wanted the whole amount in a single go, and every time they went in, there was some inflation and the goal-post was once again just out of reach.

In those months she had started fearing that Mother was sick because of her herbal teas, and especially too much willow bark tea. Or that perhaps a poisonous plant had slipped into the harvest – how, she could not imagine, but who knew. Mother died literally drowning in her own blood. Paeon remembered having blood on her hands permanently those final two weeks. It haunted her at night in her dreams. Sometimes in the daytime too.

“Federi,” Ronan cut in, “what's your position? What landed

you on the Solar Wind? I'm not aware that Roma mingle easily with the *gadje!*”

“Not a Rrom,” replied Federi, “Tzigan. Difference.”

“What’s the difference?” asked Ronan.

“Tzigany are Free Gypsies.”

Ronan stared at Federi in surprise. The man was a Free Gypsy? Those were so elusive and secretive, few people ever met any in their lives! And they *never* mixed with non-gypsies! What on Earth was the man doing working on the ship, solitary, amongst *gadje?*

“But –“

Federi smiled. “I’m an outlaw,” he said with a shrug. “Aren’t we all? Good enough, Donegal?”

“What do you think Captain will do to us?” asked Paean despondently. “For bringing the virus aboard the ship?”

Federi sighed and glanced down at the gadget in his hands.

“Don’t know, little songbird. Was a mistake. Should have told him, got yourselves quarantined. Can’t see how it should make much difference anyway...”

“What do you mean, Federi?” asked Shawn.

“Panama,” said the Tzigan grimly. “ ‘s a death trap. No way round it. No way through it. End of line. Captain won’t listen!”

“Federi, I’m sure those are officer’s confidences,” said Ronan. “Why tell us?”

“What’s the point?” replied Federi with a shrug. “Going to die anyway, all of us, in another five or eight days. Six eggs if I tell you.”

The Captain, Doc Judith and Jon Marsden returned to the boardroom with grim expressions, Rushka with them this time.

The mysterious girl took up her post standing by the closed door, gazing a hole into the air. Guarding again, thought Paean.

“Donegal,” said Radomir Lascek to Ronan, “you come with me. Federi, you supervise Shawn. Doc, as discussed.”

Doc Judith approached Paean.

“Come with me, Paean. To the lab.”

Paean grabbed onto the closest chair, eyes wide with alarm. They were to be separated? Killed one by one?

“Captain,” she begged, “please...”

“What now, Miss Donegal?”

“At least – can we have a bit of time to ourselves first? To say goodbye?” Tears were threatening again. She fought them down, thinking frantically. If she could only get her brothers alone, they could maybe come up with a plan, a getaway...

“To say goodbye?” repeated Radomir Lascek, frowning. “What’s this?”

“Why are you executing us separately?” sobbed Paean. “What’s Shawney done to deserve it? He’s just a kid! And Ro is innocent too!”

“*Execute you!* What kind of a man do you think I am?” exploded the Captain. “Execute you! For the Uncate murdering your mother and then hunting you for it! There shall be no executions! I’m protecting you! The only thing I have to consider is how to protect the rest of my crew too!”

Paean wailed loudly and hid her face. Doc Judith put her arm around her shoulders and led her out of the boardroom.

“Sedative for you, girl,” she declared. “Did you honestly think for a second that Captain intended to put you all to death?”

Paean nodded.

“He’s a fair man,” said Doc Judith. “He runs a tight ship; but

that's necessary. We wouldn't survive any other way. But he never hurts innocents. You and I, Paeon, we are going to do like you said you wanted to. We'll look after people's health. We're going to try and isolate your virus, and clone an antiviral."

"Genetics," said Paeon. "Is that not illegal?"

"Then again we're pirates," Doc Judith pointed out with a smile.

*

"Why did Paeon have to go with Doc?" asked Shawn anxiously.

"Taking care of the medical crisis," said Radomir Lascek. "I hope we're in time. We've been everywhere spreading it! Hamilton Port. Anya Miller and her crew! Ali! How on Earth are we going to contain this one? It's all over the place now!"

"Captain, if the mother of the Donegals had it, it's all over Dublin in any case," said Federi.

The Captain nodded thoughtfully.

"You're right, Federi. And if it is over Dublin, it ought to be over the whole world by sunset. Ha! That may in fact sort our problem in Panama! Maybe it spreads more slowly than that. Well, back to work, men! Federi, check up on Doc Judith's progress every half-hour and report back to me."

"Yes, Captain."

*

Paean watched in apprehension as Doc Judith drew blood from her. The sample got fed into a small, sleek machine, and Doc pressed a series of buttons, programming the machine.

“The Genitron,” she explained. They waited. Doc Judith paged in the lab’s console, pages and pages of what looked like scientific text.

“There we go,” she said eventually, “haemorrhagic fever. Now we feed that into the Genitron...”

The small, sleek machine emitted a beep.

“We’ve got a match,” said Doc Judith with a completely uncharacteristic grin. “Lookie here!”

Paean bent over the screen of the Genitron. All she could see was long rows of letters.

“There,” said the Doc and pointed to a highlighted red area where the letters were doubled. “Now we analyse! *In situ!*”

She focused on her work, typing in variables and reading, and typing some more, and reading again. Eventually she sat back.

“Paean, listen. This is very strange. I don’t know if these data are reliable; we’ll repeat it in a second. But what it means is this. You carry the virus all over you; probably by now, all of us do. But according to this none of us is going to get sick from it. Not you either, nor your brothers.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a disabled virus.”

“But – my mother died from it!”

“Yes,” agreed Doc Judith. “You have to understand the mechanism of this piece of artillery. It’s broken now. It broke when it got out of your mother – what was her name?”

“Annie Donegal,” said Paean softly.

“This virus is a Unicate design, specifically created for Annie

Donegal,” said Doc Judith. “They didn’t want it spreading and wiping Dublin clean, that’s why they built in the safety catch. Exposure to air breaks it.”

Paean stared at Doc Judith, only taking in half of what she was saying. “I don’t understand.”

“We’ll clone an antiviral anyway,” said Doc Judith. “To be safe and put Captain at ease. But there’s no risk. Nobody got this virus. Your mother was assassinated, Paean.”

*

Ronan found that he had been included in the discussion on the bridge about the crossing of Panama. This surprised him immensely. For now he tried to say nothing and only listen.

“The Crow’s Nest will have to come down,” said Radomir Lascek with a sigh. “Now they know we’re radar cloaked, they’ll be looking at our outline, visually. Makes a false identity so much more difficult!”

“Can’t we submerge all the way?” asked Ronan.

“Those sluice gates,” replied Sherman Dougherty, who had been holding the bridge during the Donegals’ trial and was still at the console. “They only let ships through that obtain authorization. That’s the whole problem!”

“Captain, I’d much rather round the Cape,” said Rushka. Ronan nodded. That sounded a lot more sensible.

“I know that, Rushka,” replied Lascek. “That’s why you’re not the Captain!”

Rushka shut her mouth.

“We’re landing at Plymouth,” said Lascek.

“If she’s still a free port,” commented Marsden.

“Working on the assumption that she is,” said Lascek. “That should give us some space to think. Time to do the Solar Wind’s face change.”

“Here I am, Captain.” Federi had gainfully employed Shawn in the galley, along with Rhine Gold, and was now reporting in for the officer’s meeting.

“Good that you’re here,” said Lascek. “Should we call the Doc too? I suppose, not the Doc. Find out for me how things are going in the lab.”

“Yes, Captain!”

*

Federi appeared in the door of the lab, watching silently as Doc Judith operated the machinery. Paeon raised her gaze to him, feeling drowsy and warm from the potent non-herbal sedative the doctor had given her. She was thankful for the medication; it blunted all edges to all feelings and made her too sleepy to remember.

The gypsy was studying her out of his dark eyes.

“Hi, Federi,” said Doc Judith, glancing up from the console.

“Captain wants to know how things are going,” said the gypsy.

“Smoothly,” said Doc Judith. “Tell him, we’re creating the immunization as we’re speaking. We’ll come round and inject everyone tomorrow through the day.”

“Will tell him. Can I borrow Paeon for a second?” asked Federi.

“Certainly.”

Nothing happened for a few seconds.

“Paean?” prompted the Doc.

“Uh?”

“Go,” said the Doc, motioning.

“*Shukar*, Doc,” muttered Paean. She followed the gypsy uncertainly. He only led her as far as the passageway.

“Where did you learn that expression?” pounced Federi.

“Heard you use it.”

“I see.” He frowned. “Are you alright?”

“Fine, thanks,” said the little redhead. “Just Doc gave me a *sheda*... a sedative.”

Federi grinned briefly at her slip of tongue. “Feeling better about things?”

“Shomewhat.”

“*Shee?* – er, *see?*” He laughed and shook his mane. “Captain’s a fair man!”

Paean smiled. Since the Captain’s verdict, her entire outlook had taken a leap. They were not living on borrowed time anymore. Their time had been given back to them, all the way: A present from Captain Radomir Lascek. They didn’t have to fear the Unicate, any more than the rest of the crew did. They didn’t have to fear execution by the Captain anymore, either. Instead he was keeping them safe. The man was her hero.

“Thanks for looking after Shawney,” she said.

“Sure. Stole this for you in Hamilton.” Federi handed her something turquoise.

“Oh wow, a moonbag!” Paean beamed and fastened it around her waist. “Thanks!”

“Pleasure,” replied Federi. “You’ll find it handy. Get back to work now! Shoo!”

Paean smiled and returned to the lab.

“He’s a shweet guy,” she said to the Doc.

“That he is,” agreed Doc Judith with a smile.

Only then did Paeon find the fly in the ointment. Had he said he’d *stolen* it for her -?

★

9

Stalling in Plymouth

Paeon opened her eyes. How she had got to her bunk, she had no recollection. She did remember vaguely about the Doc coming in the middle of the night and giving her another injection, after which she had slept some more. Now she was awake, if still lethargic.

She recalled about all the blood. She'd had a horrible nightmare about blood. Her mother's blood, all over her, not only her hands but her face, her mouth, her eyes; the live virus crawling into her via the blood; the sea, moving and churning blood; and then a still, cold lake of grey-green water devoid of life. The end of the world. A name. Lake Gatun.

Somehow that eerie, empty place had spooked her worse than all the violent blood in the dream before. She had woken up screaming hysterically. Which was when Doc had given her the second shot of sedative.

The antiviral! Paeon swung her legs out of her bunk, noticing the soft leather moonbag she was clutching like a fluffy toy. Turquoise teddy bear, she thought. Yes, it would indeed come in extremely handy. She loaded her pennywhistle into it and strapped it around her waist before she even changed shirts. Time to report to Doc.

Half an hour later Doc Judith and Paeon went around injecting the crew with the antiviral. The doctor had briefed Paeon to not tell the sailors what it was for. It was vitamins, and period. She didn't want to precipitate panic. Of course Paeon braved the first injection; then she found Ronan on the bridge, being taught the console by Rushka, and gave him his, while Doc Judith took care of the older sailors and the Captain. After Ronan, Paeon injected Rushka, who simply bared her arm without a comment and accepted the sting.

"Hurt?" asked Paeon.

"No," said Rushka and returned to the instructing of Ronan.

Not talkative, thought Paeon. She went down the steps and trotted along to the galley and found Shawn, Rhine Gold and Federi busy preparing meals again.

"Who goes first?" she asked, brandishing her syringe with a maniacal grin.

"Go for it, sis," grinned Shawn and presented his biceps.

Paeon punched him. "Relax that muscle, kiddo! Otherwise it hurts!" She injected him nicely, the way Doc had shown her. He was already her third victim, so she was picking up experience.

"Who's next? Reinhold?"

The huge blond sailor blinked his sky-blue eyes in surprise. "You said it right," he commented.

"Course," she replied. "Ready?"

Rhine Gold looked a bit squeamish. Paeon found it funny that such a powerful young guy should cringe from an injection.

"Come on, Rhine, it doesn't hurt," encouraged Shawney. Federi glanced back from his frying pans, where tomatoes were being singed.

Under protest and bellyaching, Rhine Gold received his

injection. Paean moved on, loading the next disposable syringe from her turquoise moonbag. She looked up and caught Federi's grin.

"That coming in handy?"

"Very," she smiled. "You next?" She reached for his left sleeve.

"Hang in there," said Federi and ruffled up his right sleeve instead.

"Ah," said Paean sagely. "You're left-handed." She scowled at the scars that marked the olive skin of that sinewy arm. He looked as though he'd made personal contact with a meat shredder at some point in the distant past.

The gypsy grinned and said nothing.

Ailyss was alone in the machine room when Paean entered. The redhead had hoped that Wolf would be there too. Oh well. She loaded a syringe.

"What is this?" asked Ailyss suspiciously.

"Vitamins," replied Paean. "Got to have them. We're all getting them. Doctor's orders."

"I don't need vitamins," said Ailyss. "No, thanks."

Paean sat down on a square metal box. It was a bit warm.

"Don't sit there!" yelled Ailyss. "That's radioactive!"

"Yow!" Paean got up again. "What I meant to say, Ailyss, you'd better take this injection. It covers you against the nastiest disease I've ever seen."

"What is this?" asked Ailyss again, putting down the copper wires she had been twisting. She was alone in the machine room, and there was nothing much happening, so she amused herself with metalwork. A spy novel was lying next to her, with a

bookmark about halfway. Paean found this strange. She knew that her brothers thought Ailyss was an agent. She thought they must be wrong. Which agent would read spy novels?

Sure, Ailyss was cagey and hedgy, but so had she herself been up until yesterday! Ailyss was only a bit better at it, that was all! Who knew what tragedy lurked in the older girl's past?

Well, there might be one in her future if she kept refusing the injection! Doc had said it was unlikely, but it couldn't be ruled out that the disabled virus recombined with a common cold or flu or other everyday jinx to mutate into something disastrous. Virus did that, sometimes.

"If you want to die from a haemorrhagic fever virus about seven months in the future, then refuse this injection," said Paean. Never be vague when applying pressure; this she had learnt from having two brothers!

The older girl studied her intently.

"You're serious!"

"Dead serious. Ailyss, our mother died from that. We Donegals brought it aboard. The Doc is taking preventive measures, doesn't want the whole crew to die!"

"So that's why you've been so cagey!" Ailyss rolled up her sleeve and presented her shoulder. "Inject away," she said. "Sorry I gave you resistance. You never know."

"You're right, you got to be careful," agreed Paean. "Can't just go trusting any old one. There, I hope that didn't hurt too much?"

"Not a bit," lied Ailyss, smiling. "Paean, seems like you're a sensible girl. Are you aware that this is a pirate ship?"

Paean paused. Ailyss had not been in on that briefing.

"You're kidding," she said.

“You’re lying,” replied Ailyss, smiling. “I can tell. You already knew.”

“Got to go,” said Paeon. “Still have twenty other people to inject!”

“Twenty?” Ailyss counted in her head. There weren’t that many sailors on the Solar Wind. “Well, have fun!” Strange kid, she thought.

Weird girl, thought Paeon as she made her way up out of the bilges.

The Solar Wind sailed into Plymouth’s harbour later that week, under shade of night and a false identity. The Bronberg. Ronan grinned indecently about this.

“I promise that’s the first time the Solar Wind has used that name,” old Sherman insisted. They stood on the prow, watching Plymouth’s lights. Ronan had asked Sherman whether he could have a puff on his pipe and had instead got a vicious lecture about never taking that first drag.

To the crew’s relief the port was still a free-trading town. A beautifully Stab-free harbour greeted them.

They docked the Solar Wind, Ronan and Rhine Gold receiving instruction from Federi and Wolf on how to fasten the mooring cables on the ship by the mellow glow of the deck lights.

“This harbour is deeper than it was when it was originally built, too,” mentioned Sherman. “The water level is higher by a number of feet.”

“A few feet,” said Shawn, helping Ronan securing a hawser to a cleat with a huge metal clip. “Do a few feet matter? A metre or two?”

“Do they matter! Those two or three metres caused Holland

and Florida and Japan and various other flatlands to build enormous dykes! The coping mechanisms on the Pacific tropical islands were unbelievable. And Samoa now, that was submerged. But we're talking a good few decades ago, aren't we? The sea has dropped back to within half a metre of its original level. And many of the islands have recovered."

"How can they recover from that?" asked Ronan, puzzled. He suspected another tall story.

"They were actively repopulated and replanted by the Rebellion," Federi threw in, glancing up from coiling up deck lines. The sheets, lines used for the sails, were self-coiling – those that needed to be coiled in the first place. "The original population was rescued and taken to Australia."

"So the Rebellion are the good guys?" asked Ronan.

Federi got a thoughtful look. "*Nu*," he said softly. "Don't really think so."

The Captain allowed the Donegals to go ashore, along with Wolf and Rhine Gold. They sat in a plush coffee bar and sipped espressos with their first wages from the Solar Wind. Paeon could see clearly again; the long night's sleep and the work in the early morning had restored her brain back from the sedative. And her mood had improved by a hundred miles.

"Nice to have wages to spend," she grinned.

"Even nicer that one doesn't have to spend them," growled Ronan, who was drinking only water. Having had the responsibility of running the Donegal household on their meagre takings from gigs, his sense of financial freedom had received a severe knock. He was too thankful that someone else had to worry about provisioning the ship!

“Och, relax, Ro, I’ll sponsor you for this one,” Shawn offered generously. “Get yourself something!”

“Sweet that they allowed us ashore, innit?” said Paeon.

“Why?” asked Wolf. “Why should you not be allowed to go ashore?”

Paeon glanced nervously at Ronan. Her loud mouth again!

“I think it’s safe to tell him now,” said her brother. Paeon explained.

“Oh,” said Rhine Gold. “That’s why we got those injections!”

“Exactly.”

“That was an interesting one there in Hamilton,” said Wolf, changing the topic.

“Could have gone wrong,” replied Ronan. “What if they had cottoned on? Are there any other ships that have Crow’s Nests?”

“Only on the virtual records,” grinned Wolf.

“What do you mean? – Oh!” Shawn laughed. “All the false identities of the Solar Wind!”

“Exactly. Someone who hasn’t been operating the system too long can easily assume that a Crow’s Nest is an optional add-on for Zephyrs!”

“So how are we going to get through Panama?” asked Rhine Gold.

Ronan smiled.

“You!” Rhine Gold rounded on him. “You sit in on the officer’s meetings! Won’t you leak a bit to us?”

“Nope,” grinned Ronan. Wolf grinned too.

“So you’re in on it as well?” asked Rhine Gold.

“Let’s say – trust our Captain,” said Wolf. “For that matter – how long have we been sitting here wasting time?”

“Have another cappuccino,” prompted Rhine Gold.

“Not as good as Federi’s,” grumbled Wolf.

“But a lot more expensive!” replied Shawn with a bright smile.

The shore party returned around eleven, with Rushka moodily waiting for them aboard the ship. The Captain’s daughter had once again been forbidden to go ashore.

Federi watched from the shadows. He thought he’d really have to take that up with the Captain again soon. Ever since the girl had started developing some frontage six years ago, her father had kept her locked on the ship, not allowing her ashore anywhere, ever. He didn’t want the strong-willed teen to get into trouble. This had of course resulted in secretive, insubordinate escape episodes. Federi had repeatedly helped her get out; he had also talked her back onto the ship once or twice. He’d fielded several confrontations with the Captain about this Rapunzel situation, meeting a brick wall every time. He shook his head and grinned wryly. Well, the next one was due. He’d give it some real steam this time. It might be Rushka’s last opportunity to go ashore, ever.

The night passed; the morning dawned; they were no closer to raising anchor. The officers and the Captain met at erratic intervals, sharing their new ideas. Doc Judith returned to the lab. She was pleased that she had a little apprentice she could train; Panama was a hair-raising debacle, with or without a distracting manoeuvre. She felt, along with Rushka and the rest of the officers, that they should round the Cape. Even with painting the hull of the ship royal blue, as the crew was doing right now, and giving her the identity of Bronberg, the Doc couldn’t see how

they could con the Unicate. The Crow's Nest was going to be dismantled too, closer to Panama, on the open ocean. The Captain was wary of watchers. But even so! That stunt in Hamilton had no doubt served to turn the full attention of the Unicate on the Solar Wind.

Doc Judith locked the lab at five in the morning, and was suddenly aware of a dark gaze.

"Hi, Federi."

"Hi, Doc."

"You're up early again," she mentioned. "Checking on everything?"

The gypsy nodded. "Not early, Doc. Late."

So he'd been up the whole night again!

"Sleepless?" guessed the doctor.

Federi grinned. "Can sleep when I'm dead!"

"Worried," concluded Doc Judith.

Federi nodded gravely. "Doc, I wish Captain would listen! The officers are unanimous that we should round the Cape."

Doc Judith sighed. Panama had them spooked. Even Captain. If it didn't worry him, they'd be on their way by now.

"And you have no plan either?" she probed.

"I do," said Federi. "Cut and run. Best plan ever! Then again this is not a democracy," he added with a grin.

That was right. And they were all feeling it acutely. The whole crew was scared of Panama; the more informed they were, the more it scared them. A death-trap. But Captain wasn't budging from his plan. And Captain's word was law. Basta.

Another bright blue morning. But the light-heartedness of yesterday was gone. It felt to Paean as though the blue was only

a prop, and if you peeled it off the sky, behind it there was darkness. If she stared into the sky long enough, she could actually spot the black behind the blue.

“s the universe,” laughed her little brother when she pointed it out to him.

“Yeah, sure...” That wasn’t what she meant. Since she could relax about her own past, she had been observing the others. And the older crew slunk about with terrible frowns and stressed eyes. Doc Judith was downright morose about Panama. This stopover in Plymouth wasn’t a holiday. It was Captain, out of plans.

Urgh! Something had to happen; something had to give. Paeon knew that they were dressing the Solar Wind up as someone else, meaning to sneak through the Channel and all the gates. From what she had learnt about satellite identities, the harbour authorities considered them infallible. This did give her hope, because Jon Marsden clearly knew how to reprogram the Solar Wind’s satellite ID. But it wasn’t going to be enough, she knew. Captain knew too, or they’d be on their way by now. He needed more.

It worried her relentlessly as she went through the drill of dissecting a raw chicken some time later that morning, and sutured it up, a skill a young paramedic had to have, as Doc Judith insisted. Paeon wondered vaguely how many chickens got into scrapes on pirate vessels and had to be stitched. And if she’d be alive to stitch the surviving crew, after Panama. If any survived.

“This is terribly shoddy work,” scolded the Doc. “I can see your mind’s not on it.”

“I know,” replied Paeon with a sigh. “Worried about Panama.”

“I’d leave the worrying to the strategists,” said the Doc soothingly. She would be in that strategic meeting right now, but she had nothing to bring, today.

She studied Paeon thoughtfully and wondered about three young people who had somehow acquired a lot of learning without attending school. She was intent on finding out how Paeon had learnt about Sophokles and Descartes, and in which way her more detailed than average view of history coloured her political perception.

“Shall I show you how I cloned bioluminescence?” she offered to take Paean’s mind off Panama.

“Oh yes, please!” Paean was highly excited.

“It’s really simple,” said the Doc, leaving the remains of the chicken carcass in the galley for Federi to cook for lunch, “it works like a puzzle. Say you have an organism here,” she said, grabbing a writing pad. “Let’s take an Ecoli. And you want it to do something for you. Say, glow in the dark. Bioluminescence. What you do is go look for something that does that naturally. You read up until you find the gene that causes it. That process has been simplified for us by the researchers of the twenty-first century, before the Unicate. They set up huge gene libraries. And Sherman Dougherty rescued those data for the Solar Wind!”

Paean’s eyes widened. “Sherman was a geneticist?”

“Sherman was an information technologist,” said the Doc. “He survived the Unicate Takeover. Now he’s a source of knowledge and joy.”

“How did he come by a gene library?” asked Paean.

“He predicted which way the wind was blowing and copied down a lot of data from the international files. On all sorts of what they call subversive topics today. All openly available in

those days of freedom, Paean! He kept all those old memory sticks, and drives from those days that can decipher the ancient data. Sherman was right! The Uinate closed access to all that information, first thing after their takeover.”

Paean listened in shock.

“Jon Marsden adapted the Solar Wind’s processor so she could access all those ancient files. It’s been invaluable! They knew a lot in those days. Today a few top secret places know it all, and the rest is kept in darkness.”

“So there’s a lot of stuff I could learn simply off the ship computer,” said Paean, ears hot with excitement.

“Now focus, Paean,” said the Doc and showed the young girl how to program the Genitron. Genetics, which had once been complicated, had been simplified to extremes by the pre-Uinate scientists and simplified further by Doc Judith and Jon Marsden. The Solar Wind’s processor did a lot of the actual work.

“I’d like to clone a bug that keeps Panama running to the loo for as long as we’re in the Canal,” said Paean viciously.

“Paean!” The Doc was shocked.

“They can’t catch us that way,” said Paean.

“You never, never ever release a GM organism into the wild,” said the Doc angrily. “The results are completely unpredictable! That’s why genetic research was outlawed.”

“Well, the Uinate does,” muttered Paean. “Case in point, Annie Donegal!”

“Well, you won’t!” ordered the Doc.

“Not even if it only makes them drowsy a few hours?” asked Paean. “Just long enough for us to pass unnoticed?”

“Laughing gas!” exclaimed the Doc, staring at her. “Paean, you are a genius!” She left the baffled teenager in the lab and

hurried off into the strategic meeting she had been bunking.

Paeon stared at the Genitron. And the gene library on the console. She knew she could do it! But she knew too little! Doc had only shown her the rudimentary basics. She paged back to the method on the console screen and read through it. Let's see if she could get it right alone with the example Doc had just shown her.

Actually, she suddenly understood, it was really simple! The element of chance, trial and error, had been completely removed from genetic manipulation, as long as one knew exactly what one was looking for. If she could get it programmed correctly on the *computer*, like Doc Judith would, and then just press the "de novo" button on the little machine... the last step in the chain was to make the information into a ring-shaped plasmid, something the *de novo* function could be set to do automatically, and shake up the plasmid with an Ecoli of choice...

"Just for interest's sake," she muttered, "Solar Wind, what is an Ecoli?" She typed the word into the console and pressed the look-up function key. "Ecoli – not found! Ecology... all that goes with that... Egoli – Place of Gold," she read, "central in Southern Free Country! Mined out of gold and uranium in 2064, insignificant mining town survives as largest town in Southern, blah, blah... Oh, well."

The "Gold" had drawn her eye. She paged through the gene library.

"Hey," said Shawn. "Still down here, sis? You'll get square eyes! You haven't been out all day! Going to get all pale and cheesy! Did you sleep in here last night?"

“This is so intriguing,” muttered Paeon, stalling him with a hand. “You should read the console, Shawn. Gee, there’s a lot going on here!”

“Captain says we can go ashore again,” said Shawn. “The seniors and Federi have decided that it’s okay.”

“Go ahead without me,” said Paeon absentmindedly. “Gosh, Shawn, this stuff is incredible! And look!” She pulled a small stopped-up tube out of the incubator. She blended it gently by turning it upside down a few times. “Switch the light off!”

Shawn complied. The tube glowed orange in the dark.

“Bioluminescence,” said Paeon. She grinned. “Now check!” She dug back into the incubator and fetched another tube. This one glowed green.

“The first one’s Doc’s recipe,” said Paeon. “This one,” she held up the brighter, green tube, “is *mine!* What do you say to that, Shawney?”

“Wow,” said her brother, his face greenish in the light of the tube. “Can you also program one to sing?”

“Need a lullaby?” laughed Paeon. “Go, Brother! You’re disturbing my circles!”

“Sure you don’t want to come? Wolf’s going to be there!”

Paeon laughed mellowly. “Scoot, brother! Give the old ruffian my regards!”

“Not in love with him, are you?” teased Shawn.

Paeon laughed again. “If I were, would I be telling you? Be off, wastrel!”

Shawn went off, worried about the way his sister was suddenly immersing herself in learning. It struck him as unnatural.

“Woof,” said Paeon with another laugh and shook her head. She had to admit, if she thought about it, that the young nuclear

engineer did have nice eyes! Green ones. But it took more than eyes...

“They’ve been docked here for five days now,” said Gina Nevada. “Captain, how long before you contact the forces?”

“I’m not contacting the forces!” Gomez laughed. “Want to share the prize money with everyone?”

“You’re beginning to sound like Miller, Captain,” said Gina. “It worries me.”

“Don’t worry! I only have to cook up a suitable ambush. I’m thinking, for now, let’s collect information. Let’s follow them as far as they can go.”

“And when they’re cornered at Panama, we take the prize,” said Gina as though she had a logical plan for this.

“Something like that,” said Gomez. He had parked the T-craft, the “Stab” vessel as civilians called it, in a boathouse out of sight. He and Gina had booked into a hotel and were watching the Solar Wind under plain clothes cover.

Paeon drifted into the Solar Wind’s bilges.

“Oh, hi,” she said uncertainly.

Wolf looked up.

“Hello,” he said shortly and returned his focus to his work. Ailyss was ashore; the young crowd had insisted on taking her along, strongly supported by Federi. Wolf wondered irritably what Federi wanted from Ailyss. And Rushka had actually been allowed to tag along for once. How Federi had got that right, was a mystery. Marsden and Federi both had gone along as supervisors. And Doc Judith was taking a well-deserved rest, after which she wanted to go ashore too. She had been surprised

when Paean had declined; but she had put it down to the girl still being afraid of being spotted by the authorities. Here in the free port of Plymouth!

“Aren’t you going ashore?” asked Paean.

“Someone’s got to baby-sit these drives,” said Wolf. “Paean, you shouldn’t be down here, there’s classified stuff!”

“I’m a pirate, Wolf,” said Paean. “There’s honour amongst thieves, so I’m told. Got my own secrets too.”

A smile lingered in the corner of Wolf’s bearded mouth. He’d heard that line before!

“Tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine,” he offered.

“Really?”

“Paean, despite what you seem to believe – Wolf Svendsson doesn’t lie. That was perhaps my biggest problem, that’s how I ended here. Unicate requires a certain amount of lying. I couldn’t do it.”

Paean digested this. An honest pirate!

“We Donegals of Molly Street have always been honest,” she volunteered, making herself comfortable on a metal box. “That’s why it’s difficult...”

“Don’t sit there!” cautioned Wolf. “If you want your guts slowly grilled from below...”

“Eww!” Paean slipped off the nuclear drive casing. “That dangerous? Where can I sit?”

Wolf pointed at a wooden cabinet. Paean cleared herself a space on top of it.

“Please just don’t scramble those cables,” said Wolf, too late again. He sighed. “Oh well, I’ll just have to do it all again.”

“Sorry.”

“So why haven’t *you* gone ashore?”

“That’s what I wanted to ask about,” said Paean. “What’s the plan with Panama?”

“There isn’t one,” said Wolf. He bent over the console and wrinkled his face.

Ooh! Wolf Svendsson didn’t lie? Paean knew from the smug way her older brother had been carrying himself that there was *some* sort of plan. She couldn’t get it squeezed out of Ronan. Well, perhaps it was only part of a plan, she thought; that might explain it.

“So how are we going to get through?”

Wolf looked up.

“Lookie here, Paean. I know you’re the ship’s little candy girl or something, but I haven’t stayed aboard tonight to baby-sit you! Got work to do! Isn’t there someone else whose ears you could talk off their heads?”

“Thanks,” said Paean and removed herself from the machine room.

What a horrible character! Nice eyes? Well, you could be a mass murderer and happen to be born with pretty irises! Pretty is who pretty does, thought Paean acidly.

She padded to the galley, helped herself to a cup of coffee and went back to the lab. No point in practicing violin while she was in this mood! With what had she deserved that?

She’d show them! She was properly peeved now! If there were medals for peeving, Wolf Svendsson had just earned himself one. Little candy girl! Just because she was small and light, and had stopped growing a year or two ago. She was mere months away from legal junior adult status, for the love of luminous tubes! Well, she’d show them that the most dangerous poison came in the smallest containers! Very small in fact... She

gazed at the Genitron with a calculating smile. Hemlock by another name.

On the morning before they set sail for Panama, Federi was on the deck with Wolf and Marsden, lighting fireworks. Shawn and Ronan gathered close excitedly.

“What are you doing?” asked Shawn.

Federi smiled brightly.

“Look!” He handed one of the missiles to the boy. Shawn studied it in detail.

“Wow, Federi!”

It was a rum bottle with wings, mounted on a rocket, with a matchstick model of a ship inside it. The ship looked suspiciously like the Solar Wind. Shawn looked closer and saw that “Solar Wind” had been penned in minute letters on one of the matchsticks on the hull.

The Crow’s Nest looked vaguely electronic.

“That’s an electronic transmitter,” said Federi. “Now observe!”

The design of the rocket was conceivably simple. It operated like a firework.

“Isn’t the heat of the rocket going to ignite the insides of the bottle?” asked Shawn.

“No. It never gets there. See, the rocket is *behind* the glass bottle. These wings stabilize the whole thing, let it go nice and far, and when the fuel is up, the last bit lights a fuse, and the fuse lights the material of the wings, and they burn off. The bottle can withstand that! By the time the wings are gone the bottle is at sea level. Wolf has worked it all out, done the strength tests and so on.”

Shawn stared at Wolf with wide eyes.

“Wolf is a genius,” he said, awed.

“And so say all of us,” agreed Federi. “Credit to Marsden too, Shawn, he thought of it all!”

“And Federi built the little Solar Winds inside the bottles,” completed Marsden.

“Wow,” said Shawn. “Can I have one?”

“No,” said Federi. “These are all for a purpose. But I’ll make you another one.”

“Wow,” said Shawn again. He pointed at the bottle. “Isn’t the glass going to break when it hits the sea surface?”

“Only if it strikes a young volcanic island springing out of the sea,” quipped Ronan.

“Nah, don’t worry, the bottles are sturdy,” said Federi. Wolf had done strength tests on various bottles, and they had selected the one brand that would survive such an impact.

“What are we doing this for?” asked Ronan.

“Fun and games, *amigo*,” said Federi with a grin.

“What if one lands on an island?” asked Shawn.

Federi laughed. “That should puzzle them!”

“This is very interesting,” said Gomez, peering through his binoculars. “What are they doing now?”

“Lighting a whole bunch of fireworks, it seems,” said Gina. “Wow! Look at it go! Wonder why they do it by day! Gosh, doesn’t the thing come down at all?”

“This is very interesting,” said Shawn, training his binoculars on Gomez. “There’s a man watching us with binoculars!”

Federi looked up. “That one? Stabilizer! Followed us from

Hamilton! Wonder what he and his little girlfriend intend to do against a whole ship full of pirates!"

"Does Captain know?" asked Shawn.

"Is the Pope catholic?" Federi asked back.

"They've spotted us," said Gina.

"I know," said Gomez, grinning. "Our presence doesn't seem to worry them!"

Gina was worried, though.

"There you are," came a voice behind them. Gomez's heart sank into his shoes. Gina had the urge to flee.

"Miller," said Gomez. "I hope you are well recovered?"

"I see you're on the job?" said Anya. "I'd better come with you. Knew I'd find the pirates in Plymouth. We'll corner them in Panama. There's no conceivable way they'll get through that Canal!"

"Where's Johnny Anyhow?" asked Gomez.

"Having details seen to," replied Anya Miller. "How close is the pirate to setting sail?"

"For now they're just amusing themselves," said Gomez. "See there!"

Anya Miller squinted. "Wonder what the old villain's up to!"

10

Panama

The Solar Wind had left Plymouth and was sailing on a fair wind, due west to Panama. For three days, at regular intervals, Federi and Marsden lit more missiles and sent them off over the sea. Naggig at the very edge of vision, carefully tracked by Shawn from the Crow's Nest, followed a weird black tadpole-shaped craft carrying Stefano Gomez, Gina Nevada, and to the distress of both, Anya Miller.

“Blast this,” said the Captain at some point and asked Dr Jake to activate the fuel cells. The Solar Wind shot forward, out of sight and out of range of the Stab vessel.

On the fourth day, before the stars had faded in the dawn, a distress signal came from the Solar Wind, just off the coast of Haiti. Instantly the coastal guard was alert. What luck! The pirate ship practically delivering itself into their hands! They started zooming in on the signal.

Quietly as a whisper, a beautiful royal blue Zephyr by name of Bronberg slipped into the Canal. The control tower checked out the identity via tamper-proof satellite signatures; it was all authentic. Bronberg had clearance for the Canal; she was a legal trading vessel on her way to Adelaide.

The Unicate had installed this modern system in backwater Panama two decades ago, when a lot of political movement had taken place between the Pacific and New York. Today, in fact, if

they hadn't been expecting the Solar Wind, they wouldn't even have bothered to man the control towers, which operated automatically.

The junior operator okayed the system to go ahead, confirming the Tower's electronic identification with a sigh. This drill had been carrying on for nine days now. It was jolly tiring to sit up here hour after hour confirming identifications that were fireproof anyway!

He sent a signal through to the other towers of the approach of the blue Bronberg. The first sluice gate opened, letting her in. She began her long wait for the water to rise up to the next level.

It seemed to Captain Lascek as though they were going to go through the Canal without a hitch. His skills in programming hadn't let him down yet.

Quieter even, a porthole opened and a small hand extended out, pouring something into the Canal. *De-fluorobacter valeriensis* would survive the seawater; but it would actively gravitate towards sweet water, and that in a matter of minutes. All the hours of reading up had paid off. The little green bug was a masterpiece. Streamlined to perfection, it had a very small genome and only needed about thirty seconds to replicate. All non-essential genes had been deleted. It was covered in flagella that enabled it to swim extremely fast. It had nothing in it that would make people seriously sick. The nth division was abortive, self-limiting the bacterium.

Off the coast of Cuba, another distress signal started beeping. It seemed to the Cuban Coastal Guard that the Solar Wind, the notorious pirate ship was just offshore and experiencing trouble.

“Ha!” said Salvatore Rodriguez, Captain of the Day Watch.

“Now we’ve got you, old fool!”

Haiti was experiencing trouble finding the ship. Then the report came that she was lying outside Cuba.

This was annoying. Haiti sent their coast guard out straight away, along with the Stabs that were already looking. Cuba wouldn’t palm in that reward!

Tortuga got the next call. By now the coastal watches of three different countries were all getting into each other’s hair trying to locate that blasted ship that seemed to be moving around madly despite its damaged condition.

And then came a call just east of Cayenne. The Solar Wind seemed to have been moving south, headed for the Cape. And having some difficulties. And another, from the Northern Atlantic, at the height of Jacksonville, heading back towards Hamilton. A signal that caused great excitement amongst the Stab forces in Hamilton.

More satellite signals came. The authorities were confused and hunting in circles. A whole fleet of Solar Winds seemed to be adrift in the radius of about fifteen hundred sea miles from Montserrat. More than twenty signals riddled the satellite tracking system. Then they all died down. An hour later, Cuba picked up on their original signal again. Then the merry chase began again.

The Unicate derived that the actual location of the Solar Wind must therefore be at Montserrat, and fine-combed those islands.

In the first control tower of the Canal, the junior operator fell asleep over his freshly made coffee. It had been a long, boring shift. The first sluice had closed behind the Bronberg, which was now properly locked into a chamber, waiting for the water level

to reach the correct height for the second sluice gate to allow her passage.

Aboard the “Bronberg”, Paeon was pacing up and down passageways wearing a terrible frown. With all the brilliance of her plan there was one obvious thing she had overlooked. The Solar Wind derived her drinking water from the sea. As long as none of the crew actually drank any water...

She drifted into the galley, casting troubled glances out of the starboard porthole.

Federi was drying dishes, for once not helped by Shawn, who was on lookout duty on the deck. The Romany looked up as she walked in.

“What’s eating you, my girl?”

Paeon stared uncertainly at the colourful entertainer. A sweet guy; a dicey ally. Would he keep her secret if she told him?

“Federi, what was the plan with Panama?”

“Little bird, I can’t tell you. Captain would have my hide.”

“It’s my life too,” said Paeon. “Federi, Lake Gatun is Panama, isn’t it?”

“Yes, why?”

“I had a dream. Lake Gatun is the end of the world. It’s death.”

The gypsy with the mauve headscarf full of data cubes and earrings put his drying of plates down. He planted himself in front of her, arms folded, his black eyes boring into hers.

“You’ve got the sight,” he stated. “Why does it surprise me, actually? Listen, Paeon. The plan is that we fight our way out of Panama. Our electronic shield fudges our signals and protects us a bit from the Unicate death bolts. We have torpedoes too. We

should have gone around the south, the Cape, but there's no time..."

"How do you rate our chances?"

Federi frowned. "Bad," he said. "We're going to die."

"And what if..."

She couldn't tell him. What if he told Captain? Och, it was hopeless.

A light appeared in the gypsy's eyes.

"What have you done?" he probed with a slight grin in the corner of his mouth.

"Nothing," said Paeon, rolling her eyes in desperation. She had turned him down once for sharing her secrets. She still didn't know how good an ally he would have been... but he looked after Shawney, that counted for a lot, and he'd been sweet and concerned with her before... if they were all going to die anyway... "Federi, can I take you up on that Thieves' Honour thing? For real, now? I need someone who's on my side..."

"You've really done something," stated the gypsy in amazement. "Spit it out, girl, let's see if Federi can help you fix it!"

"Only..." She petered off.

"I've helped Rushka many times," said Federi.

That tipped the balance! "Och, okay! Is there any way you could rig it so nobody drinks any water? Specially not the Captain!"

Federi's eyebrows lifted. "You want me feeding them all rum?"

"No! Just not water, and not anything that gets made with water – coffee for instance..." Her face fell. It had been hopeless from the start. "Oh, blast!" The entire crew of the Solar Wind

was addicted to coffee.

“Cor!” Federi shook his head. “No coffee! Could you explain?”

She sighed. “Federi, I never finished thinking it through, I thought I had, but now there’s this hole in it...” She told him what she had done.

His reaction floored her. Federi laughed until tears started down his cheeks.

“Federi...!”

He stared at her and packed up laughing again.

“Oh, you little genius!”

“What’s so darned funny?” asked Paeon, upset.

Federi sat down on a chair at the head of the Ironwood table, wiping the tears of laughter and relief out of his face with his green flared sleeve. Brilliant, brilliant! Maybe there was not going to be any shoot-out.

When Plan A had consisted of a showdown of firepower, Federi had known that his Captain was out of plans. An unbelievable risk; the Solar Wind against a fleet of Uuncate. And this not even in the open ocean where one could dive away from them.

Captain had tried to avoid it. But the active way in which the Uuncate hunted them now made going around the Cape no safer. They would have had to field battle after battle all the way down South America’s eastern coastline. It was like Lascek to risk everything in one single, high-risk manoeuvre, hoping to break through fast, rather than field ten potential battles in locations they couldn’t predict.

But Federi knew. Based on stealth alone they would not make it. He had seen it. Lake Gatun was swarming with Stabilizers,

just like Hamilton Harbour had been. They would not be conned by the Zephyr being blue and having taken down the Crow's Nest. They would send shockwaves first and sort everything else second. And when the Solar Wind submerged, which she was definitely going to do to get away, they would have their suspicions confirmed beyond any doubt.

Unless they were all asleep. The little genius had just given them their lives back!

He glanced up at the girl's shocked face, grabbed her wrist and pulled her down onto a chair too.

"You are a brilliant star, little luv," he told her. "Got to tell Captain right away."

"Aargh!"

That beaten, betrayed look on her face! And right after she had saved all their hides and given them a fighting chance! He couldn't leave it like that, even if it cost him precious time.

Federi pulled something lime-green out of his pocket and unravelled it with quick fingers. Paeon watched his prestidigitation, mesmerized.

"Paeon, welcome aboard! You're a real pirate now!"

"What?!"

"Because there's not a pirate aboard this ship who hasn't breached the law in the name of survival – or treasure."

"Och Federi – you're just saying that to make me feel better!"

Federi solemnly shook his head. "Take me, for instance!"

"Take you?"

"Bin in deep water so often I've lost count," said Federi. "Mostly for treasure. Last time for survival, you saw that one... Come here!"

The fluorescent green thing in his hand turned into a scrap of

material; he tied it around her head, gypsy-style. To her dismay it was also covered in stolen spangles.

“Aargh!” said Paeon. “Now I can be an eyesore too!”

“You see?” smiled Federi, looking mightily proud. “Now you’re a real pirate too.” He nodded, satisfied. “And now we tell Captain.”

“No!”

This was serious. She hadn’t understood. Federi took her hand in his and caught her eyes.

“Little luv, see here. I got two questions concerning the bug itself. Firstly, is it dangerous?”

“No,” said Paeon. “I’ve taken all the dangerous genes out. It only carries the sedative from the Valerian plant.”

“You know your herbs,” commented Federi. “Second question. Does it work?”

“I haven’t tested it as such, not on anybody,” said Paeon. “I don’t really know.”

“Okay. So you release a GMO into the sea. Did you consider that it could mutate?”

“Yes,” said Paeon, “but I’ve made it self-limiting. The nth division is abortive and kills both daughter cells.”

“Beautiful,” smiled Federi. “Sleek, small, dangerous. Does it also have red hair?”

Now Paeon had to laugh.

“It has flagella, it can swim,” she said.

“What does it eat?”

“Are you joking? We’re in Panama!”

Federi grinned. “Oh, yes. Paeon, listen. How old are you?”

“Going on sixteen,” said Paeon.

“Nearly an adult,” agreed Federi. “*Atenție*. Nuclear physics

and Unicate shoot-outs and genetic engineering – those are all adult games. Why? Because they are dangerous. Not just for yourself but everyone around you. You want to be an adult, you'll also have to learn to carry the consequences. What you did was very daring, and I think you've saved our lives. But you got to tell Captain! If you don't, it could go badly wrong!"

She stared at him, frightened. She had understood.

"Federi – can't you rather..."

"No," said Federi. "That would be playing outside the rules. Got to do it yourself, young woman! Do you believe for a moment Federi would spill your secrets to anyone – even the Captain?"

"You wouldn't?"

"Of course not! Paeon, that's sacred ground. People who do that don't deserve friends."

Paeon sighed.

"Och, alright. What the hell. In for a penny..."

"That's my girl!" said Federi proudly. "I'll go with you. Federi shall protect you!"

He studied his masterpiece. The green certainly complemented her skin tone. And she did look becoming covered in stolen treasure.

The first control tower operator was asleep. The others only had to see that nothing unusual occurred.

For nine days and nights, nothing unusual had been occurring all the time. It was a boring process. The radio operators who had been temporarily employed for this felt abused. After all, the electronics did all the identifying anyway. No one could hope to sidestep that system. The past sixty ships had confirmed their

opinions.

“Blue Zephyr with no Crow’s Nest passing through, and two American yachts,” yawned a colleague a bit further down the Canal, looking at the image of the Solar Wind on the side screen and comparing. The irony was that the Solar Wind on the image carried the name “Santa Marguerita”. He had checked by zooming all the way in.

He yawned. These early mornings were the worst... His head sank onto his arm. His mouth dropped open as he began to snore. Perhaps a more exciting job would have kept him awake at this moment.

“A moment, Captain?”

Captain Radomir Lascek turned from the console where he was analysing the sluice gates with Rushka, to look at the colourful rogue. The Romany had Paeon Donegal in tow, with a hair-raisingly green head covering that contrasted fiercely with her flaming red hair. Punch and Judy? What was going on here?

“Federi, you know this is no time for comedy.”

“Not comedy, Captain. An interesting development.” Federi pushed Paeon forward. “Speak, little hummingbird!”

Paeon stared at the Captain, terrified. He studied her. How much did she guess? Did she understand that he was sailing his crew straight into hell?

“Make it short,” snapped Lascek.

Paeon swallowed.

“Captain, I’ve released a bio-engineered bacterium into the harbour. It puts everyone to sleep who drinks water.”

“*What?!?*”

“Or coffee,” she added.

Radomir Lascek gaped at her, rattled. It took him several moments to assess the whole situation. Did that bacterium actually work? Federi looked as though he thought it would! And the Romany had a pretty fine sensor for such things.

This might turn out disastrous! But it might also be exactly what they needed. What a brazen little wildcat! And then that forsaken green lighthouse she was wearing...

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done, girl?”

Paeon stood silent, petrified.

“Go tell everyone,” thundered the Captain. “They must not drink any water or coffee or anything else! Call a meeting! In the boardroom! Federi, empty the reservoirs! Get Wolf on the job to help you! Snap to it! If we fall asleep, that’s it!”

“Yes, Captain,” whispered Paeon and turned tail and ran. She jingled as she bolted. The Captain and Rushka stared after her.

“We’re not asleep,” said Federi. “She’s given us the edge. If enough Unicate forces fall asleep... even if they just get drowsy...”

“Get on with it!” bellowed Lascek. “Empty the reservoirs! And Federi –“

The gypsy was already halfway out the door, but he stopped short.

“Yes, Captain?”

“Keep an eye on her! Donegal Black Magic! Hemlock! That girl is dangerous!”

“Yes, Captain.” Federi vanished from the doorway.

Rushka and Radomir Lascek exchanged a glance.

“Especially with that glow-in-the-dark headscarf,” added Rushka, and they both exploded in peals of laughter.

“She deserves a medal,” exclaimed Lascek, catching his

breath. “What a head start! No wonder the towers have been so placid!”

“Still insubordinate,” Rushka pointed out. “She should have cleared it.”

“Right. She’s a fully qualified pirate. We’ll have to watch her carefully.”

As it turned out, only about half the crew was up and chirpy. The rest had already had their coffee. To Paean’s intense relief, Dr Judith had had coffee too. There was another confrontation she dreaded.

Paean called the meeting, and Captain informed them that nobody was to drink anything that was made with drinking water.

“This might turn out to our favour,” said Lascek seriously. “If we need to mask suddenly, we need not worry about the sleeping crew!”

Rushka disappeared suddenly from the boardroom.

“It poses a real problem though,” continued the Captain. “How are we going to get through the sluice gates if the operators are asleep? Have you thought of that, Miss Donegal?”

Miss Donegal had hardly any shade left to go paler to. Her complexion almost exactly matched her scarf. She shook her head mutely, her treasure beads jingling softly.

“A suggestion, Captain,” Federi spoke up. He was leaning against the wall of the boardroom, arms folded, mainly observing and feeling ill at ease. He suspected that Captain held him responsible for the wild idea of the Irish girl. Only because he had backed Paean a bit. He had to deflect the entire situation, and fast. “If one of the gates gets stuck, Shawn and I will go ashore, get into the control towers and open it.”

Shawn nodded enthusiastically. He was highly delighted with his sister's coup. He couldn't wait to get a turn at input, too.

Radomir Lascek frowned. "And if you get caught?"

"We won't, Captain."

The Captain's eyes narrowed. Federi had a point. Federi never got caught. And if he did, he got away. It was the definition of who he was: The one that got away. It was good luck having him on the Solar Wind.

He wouldn't let them catch the boy, either. This idea was quite safe. In any case, thought Lascek wryly, the point was not gates getting stuck. He and Marsden had hacked into their control mechanisms and could override them from the Solar Wind if they needed to; Federi wasn't even aware of this. The point was teaching Paean Donegal consequential thinking!

"Very well, Federi," he said, rolling his eyes. "Do what you have to!"

Paean's timing was perfect: It was still so early in the morning that people reached for something to drink either as they surfaced, or in order to stay awake the last hour of a long shift. The bacterium spread down the Canal; helped along by four further dosages by Paean's hand, on Captain's direct orders. As they passed through the Canal, the morning wore on. The automatic system worked beautifully, even better without the manual interference of control-tower operators. To Shawn's disappointment, not a single gate got stuck.

"How long is this thing now going to spread around the world, sis?" asked Shawn.

"It's got a self-destruct built in after 24 hours," she replied. "The nth division is abortive, so each strain self-terminates as it

reaches that division. That is, unless there is a mutation.”

“What happens then?”

“Who knows!” She shuddered. “Anything’s possible. But luckily nearly all mutations result in cell death. So they’re self-limiting. So the chances are actually quite low that one survives. – Then again, there are a great many cells out there, oh boy... actually the chances are quite good!” She thought about it some more. “On the other hand – they do have that self-destruct built in, so there would have to be at least two viable mutations for it to be dangerous – one mutation would have to be specifically the disabling of the terminate-switch. And they’d have to happen this side of the 24 hours. So I’d say –” she did some fast multiplications in her head. “The chances are – just about – one.”

”One out of a hundred?” asked Shawn.

“No. One. Out of one.”

Shawn took a second to digest this. “Hoo boy! I can see why it’s illegal! And how long are they going to snooze?”

“Well, at least three hours after taking in the *valeriensis*. But when they wake up they may just self-dose again, because they’ll be thirsty...”

Shawn laughed. “Brilliant, sis! And if there’s a mutation disabling only the self-destruct – and the same bacterium just carries on and doesn’t stop? Does Panama sleep for 100 years?”

“I hope not,” muttered Paeon, not finding her brother’s questions particularly funny.

On the deck, Federi unpacked his stock of Coca-cola, straight out of the boxes in his storage area.

“Hope everyone likes this. I’ve also got Raspberry – ohmigod, and greengage – oh boy! Who packed these? – Hlabane!” He

shook his head. “The pirates aboard Captain Ali’s ship have a kindergarten palate!”

“How about ale, you stingy fiend?” suggested Wolf.

“We’re not out of danger yet, Svendsson. Let’s first get to the Pacific, and then we celebrate! Meanwhile you can have ginger ale.”

Wolf growled.

Aboard the T576, Captain Gomez was wishing he’d left what was well enough in Plymouth. That Anya Miller was a right pain in the neck.

“They’re going to go through the Canal, I’m telling you!” She was nagging. “These distress signals are decoys! I know the pirate!”

“Personally?” Captain Gomez couldn’t stop himself from asking. He really didn’t want to know; but anything to rile this obnoxious female was a good thing to say. He wished she hadn’t found him in Plymouth! What pleasure it would have been to follow the pirate to Panama just with little Gina.

Of course the distress calls were decoys! Out of sheer curiosity, for having his suspicion confirmed, he zoomed in on one of them that was coming from close to the entrance of Panama. It wasn’t easy; there were intervals when the dratted thing would stop sending any signal and he had to continue the course on hunches. But eventually he was right on top of the signal, and he found – nothing!

“*Something* is making those signals,” insisted Gina.

“All I see is a bit of rubbish floating about,” said the Miller.

Gomez looked again.

“That’s not rubbish!”

Gina opened the hatch and fished the bottle out of the sea. They looked at it in detail. They marvelled at the minute matchstick Solar Wind inside it, complete with Crow's Nest and almost-mermaid figurehead.

"Awesome," said Gina.

"Awful," corrected Anya's loud voice. "Awfully dumb to fall for this! Just listen to me! Lascek is going through the Canal! So are we going to waste more time drifting around aimlessly?"

"No, no, Miller," said Gomez tiredly. "Of course Lascek is in the Canal! Do you believe for a moment that he'll actually get through it? How do you envision that?"

"He does! He will!" How could she explain that nothing was impossible to Radomir Lascek? It was this trait that made him so dangerous!

They headed towards Panama.

Some time later, Gomez muttered, "This is strange!"

"What is?"

"Our people manning the control towers aren't responding!"

"I told you! He's killed them all!"

"Come now! How can he have killed an entire city?" asked Gomez, eyeing the shore which was suspiciously devoid of movement.

"I told you! He always finds a way!"

The First Mate had taken flight to the galleyette. She re-emerged now with a tray of coffees.

"Great idea, thank you, Gina!" said Gomez and accepted a cup, putting it down distractedly. Whether or not the control towers responded, the automatics should kick into action any moment now. After all, this was a Unicate craft; that meant automatic clearance everywhere. And then they'd see how far

Lascek had made it into the Canal.

Anya took a cup of coffee as well, sipping it in frustration.

My, it had been a long chase! The weariness of all the past days suddenly descended on her. This coffee had a melancholy taste, reminding her of home and her teen years...

With a sigh she put her coffee down and took a chair.

“Sometimes it feels so pointless...” she sighed before she fell asleep.

Gomez and Gina looked at each other, then at Miller’s cup.

“Clever girl,” said Gomez. “What did you put in there?”

“Nnnnn...” denied Gina, sank down to the floor and nodded off.

“You’re beautiful when you’re asleep,” Gomez complimented his First Mate. He glared at his coffee cup. He wasn’t going to sip that dangerous stuff. Clearly it had some sort of drug in it, although it had nothing to do with Gina, or she wouldn’t have drunk any herself. Gomez wondered. It was a long shot, but...

Suddenly he understood what was happening in Panama. He started laughing. He laughed so loudly he nearly hurt himself.

“Old fox,” he laughed. He took a subconscious sip from his cup. Realized it. Looked at the cup.

“Oh, bug...”

11

Lake Gatun

“I only have half of my crew, Paeon Donegal!”

They were gathered in another emergency meeting, on the bridge. The Gatun Locks had gone smoothly; they were in the last chamber, and the gates would open soon. The water level was still rising, regulated by the sluices. The bad part was that they couldn't see through the sluice gate what was awaiting them in Lake Gatun.

The Solar Wind had crossed through the Panama strait many times; Radomir Lascek could navigate the sea bridge backwards with his eyes closed. The nuclear wars of the sixties, at the time of the Unicate takeover, had destroyed most of the Canal. It had been painstakingly rebuilt, all but the parts through Lake Gatun, which were considered less necessary. The Lake was a natural body of water. The nuclear bombs had blasted sinkholes into the lake in places, lowering the bottom at erratic intervals. With the increased ocean levels and the warmer climate of those days, great torrential rains had swept the beleaguered Panama, and the Lake's levels had risen significantly, nearly submerging the island in the lake. Though this was decades in the past, the lake's levels hadn't at any point sunk low enough again for Panama to take action. Ships could still pass comfortably.

Traders such as Captain Ali trod a fine line though. Many illegal vessels had contacts inside the Panamanian Unicate, bribing their way, usually by offering favours or bits of their

merchandise. The Unicate kept a half-awake eye on such dealings. When it suited them, they suddenly sprung a trap on such an illegal trader. Usually not on his associates though, as they tended to provide leads to further pirates.

Possibly, nothing waited in ambush for the Solar Wind. Alternatively, if Federi's hunches were anything to go by, a hefty Unicate fleet. How far had the green bug got? Lascek had ordered Federi to find that pesky Donegal girl and bring her to the bridge.

"How fast can you multiply that green nonsense-bug?" asked Lascek.

Paeon relaxed a bit. She had expected another ruffle.

"The problem is more of slowing the multiplication down, Captain," she said.

"How fast can you make a volume that would fill – say – a Spiffy bag?"

A small sandwich-bag that sealed. "Ten minutes, Captain."

"Get started!" ordered the Captain. "Federi, call Wolf. Bit of engineering there."

The water was still gushing from the sluices into the chamber when five missiles were launched from the deck of the Solar Wind. Five Spiffy bags filled with teeming green bacteria, spinning their flagella in eagerness to get their furry little bodies into the lake. The bags broke as they hit the water surface, and their gooey contents spread out. It was good enough. They had quite a bit of time from here. It would take another half-hour for this gate to open.

Paeon returned to the boardroom, where the remaining crew sat discussing their options. She glanced at them. Shawn was

awake and chirpy; so was Wolf – the lout! Luckily, Dr Jake and Marsden as well. And that was all. Captain was on the bridge with Rushka; Federi was out on the deck, checking the functioning of something.

Wolf, Marsden and Federi had had an interesting time carrying all the sleeping crew members to their bunks. The Doc had fallen asleep in the lab over an article she was reading onscreen. A complicated, scientific article – who could blame her! Ailyss in the machine room, watching the drives. Ronan and Rhine Gold in the blond giant’s cabin where they had been playing a game of cards. Must have been a bit of a slow game. Old Sherman had sipped his coffee on his graveyard shift on the bridge. He had been the first the Captain had come across, not being in a position to explain it at the time. Lascek had first thought that he should stop relying on the centenarian for a full shift. He’d had a bad conscience. Old Sherman was so resilient and brave, one forgot his advanced age.

Of course, the moment he had the full picture, his guilt had transformed into anger at Paean. How dare she cause him to feel guilty about a standard procedure on the ship!

He appeared in the boardroom’s doorway now, scanning his scant remaining crew. Rushka was holding the bridge; he couldn’t leave her alone for long now, as the sports were about to start.

Federi entered the boardroom just behind him.

“It’s all set, Captain.”

“Good. Tune in the cameras. We’re sealing now; it can be hoped that the lake is still deep enough to submerge.”

“Will do, Captain.” Federi moved off to the bridge.

“You,” the Captain snapped at Paean. “Why didn’t you tell

me about this before you released it? We could have kept everyone awake!”

“Captain, I –” Paeon swallowed, hot panic in her stomach. “I was doing this against Doc Judith’s wishes!”

“What!” Lascek was genuinely angry now. Breaching orders from a senior crewmember!

“I’m sorry,” peeped Paeon.

“You had better stay under supervision for now,” commanded Lascek. “Stay close!”

“Yes, Captain!” She wished she could rather stay far, far away.

“Captain,” came Federi’s voice on the Captain’s wrist-com, “the gate is opening.”

“On my way, Federi.” The Captain beckoned to Marsden, and the two headed for the bridge. Paeon obediently tagged after.

Wolf and Dr Jake left for the machine room. Shawn moved to follow them; Wolf turned and forbade him. Shawn stayed behind indecisively; all alone in the boardroom. He toggled after all the people who headed for the bridge.

“There!”

A vast expanse of blue water became visible through the opening gates. And with it, a host of gleaming black T-craft, Stabilizers, like volcanic sand grains on a mirror. All lying in wait for the Solar Wind.

“The Canal is too shallow to submerge,” growled Lascek. “Have to move out into the Lake, right into their range!”

An electric shockwave frizzed through the ship. The screens jumped for a split second and stabilized again. The electronic shield held up. The Captain activated the sequence for the

rigging folding up, even before they were out of the last shattered remnant of the old Canal.

It was as Federi had predicted. The Unicate was sending in shockwaves first and sorting the details later. Couldn't the Tzigan have predicted plain sailing instead?

"They're not asleep," said Lascek scathingly. He glanced at Paean and Shawn. "Rushka, could you take the nursery school down to the galley please and give them something to do? The bridge is overcrowded!"

"Yes, Captain!"

"Some of them are asleep," said Federi quietly as only five of the thirty-something Stab vessels converged on the Solar Wind. "Most of them!"

"Lake not deep enough here," muttered Lascek. "Dr Jake! Nuclear drives! We need the speed!"

The ship lurched forward into the lake.

"Captain, they're closing in faster than we can submerge," stressed Federi.

"I can see that! We'll ram them out of the way."

"Wonder if the Solar Wind can handle that," commented Jon Marsden. "Compounding hull like hers!"

He leaned over the Captain's shoulder and hammered a sequence. One of the nuclear drives ignited the torpedo that had been on its way to the Solar Wind before it could reach her.

"Sheesh," said Federi, pale as chalk under his horrible headscarf.

"I'm scared," said Paean, in the galley. "I thought they'd have fallen asleep too!"

"Only the ones who had something to drink," Shawn pointed

out. He headed straight for the starboard porthole. Paean followed suit. Rushka stared through the opposite one.

“Can’t we force them to drink something?” asked Paean.

“Look, sis,” said Shawn. “It did lame most of the force! Oh no!” This last comment at the water level rising past the portholes. The Solar Wind was submerging.

“This is worse!” Paean watched in horror how a flame leapt out from the Solar Wind and fried a torpedo, and the whole ship rocked with the shockwaves of the explosion. Another high-voltage attack zinged through the equipment and their heads.

Rushka keyed some variables into the microwave’s console with flying fingers. The microwave screen became a radar screen.

“There,” she pointed out, “another torpedo!”

The Solar Wind lurched forward, shooting and blasting at the five Stab vessels. One stopped moving. A rare species of water bug surfaced carefully out of the murky water of Lake Gatun and had a good look around.

“That’s better,” growled Lascek as a complete picture of the positions of the Stab vessels appeared on the console screen, sent back by his bug. “Can finally see them clearly!”

“Target practice,” grinned Marsden. “Our turn!”

He launched a torpedo at the nearest T-craft, aiming for the rudder. The round Stab vessels looked different from down here. From above, they had resembled floating black eggs with squat, square-ish tails. From below, the deep, blade-like triangular keel was clearly visible, half of which was rudder.

Marsden’s aim was good. The rudder broke off the T-craft with the torpedo’s impact. The solid little craft leapt out of the water; but it was heavily plated. Even a frontal impact might not

have damaged it enough to sink it.

“Blasted Unicate!” Lascek was raging. “Those are good young men and women aboard those boats! Throwing them into the fire like that!”

“Always hits the innocents,” commented Federi, keeping the visual sensors trained on the enemy craft. The Solar Wind was submerged now; some of the screens showed the surrounding T-craft from below, and one – the periscope – located the enemy from just above the water, giving just that little bit extra visibility.

“You’re right, Federi,” said Lascek thoughtfully, studying those screens. “There are only four moving now. That green bug has done a lot!”

“Three now,” said Federi as Marsden’s next torpedo hit its target. More electric shockwaves fizzed across the screens.

“Hells, if that damages our processor!”

Dr Jake and Wolf in the machine room were fully occupied too; they could have done with Ailyss helping. Dr Jake directed the drives, and Wolf shot nuclear blasts at any torpedoes that approached the Solar Wind.

There was a jolt. They were hit. The Solar Wind’s alarms went off. Rhine Gold and Ronan woke up groggily.

Another shockwave zinged through the systems. This time the lights dipped.

“Surface!” The Captain hit the sequence just as Rushka came storming onto the bridge with eyes wide. “Back to your post, Rushka. Round up whatever Donegal Troubles you can and find that leak!”

“Two more Stabs, Captain,” said Marsden. “If we can keep her down about six more seconds...” He released one torpedo while he was speaking and searched for the last T-craft. Federi

helped by paging through the different camera views at high speed. Another electric shock ran through the ship.

“Can’t, Jon,” said Lascek darkly and surfaced the Solar Wind. “We’ll drown!”

The safety catches released and the masts stretched out. A last huge shockwave rolled across the ship, and all the lights went out just as the rigging fanned out.

Paeon, Shawn and Rushka had found the leak. It was in Wolf’s cabin. As the Solar Wind surfaced, much of the water that had been gushing in began to recede. A lot of it also ran down the passage into the bilges, where Wolf and Dr Jake cursed and swore at the way everything had gone dark. Now their shoes were getting wet too! They knew what that meant for everything in the machine room. Dr Jake hoped fervently that the Captain was surfacing the ship.

Dark was not entirely dark anymore though. It took the eye a few moments to adjust; but soft orange bioluminescence in jelly glowed in jam jars that had been mounted to the walls. Federi had done this while they had been stalling in Plymouth. He had decided that a teen crew like theirs was tough to keep under control in the pitch dark when they submerged; besides, it was high time that Doc’s sweet little creation got put to daily use! It was one of Paeon’s tasks to feed the glow-bacteria. By the dim light of these, Wolf and Dr Jake began to assess the damage.

The fuel drives were still active; they had to be operated manually now. The nuclear drives did what they were designed to do in such an event: They were shutting themselves down, with safety mechanisms quenching the reaction. It would take time to get them restarted. But first, the processor would have to

be checked, and repaired if necessary. Dr Jake hoped that the Captain had been in time to release the safety catches – or they'd be as marooned as that Anya Miller outside of Hamilton.

Marsden and Federi were out on the deck. The last T-craft was pursuing them relentlessly. Marsden handed Federi his long-range rifle.

“Time, my friend?”

“These are innocents, Jon,” replied Federi. “Not their fault they're employed by crooks!” He disappeared below the deck and re-emerged, carrying two airguns, giving one to Marsden.

“And what now?” Marsden had a close-up look at the guns and the ammunition. His eyebrows shot sky-high, and he laughed. “My word, Tzigan, have you been busy these three hours!”

Federi grinned. “Five minutes, my friend. Didn't take long.”

A grappling hook shot out from the T-craft. It caught on the Solar Wind's rail.

“They're darned well going to damage the ship!” growled Federi. He leopard-crawled at top speed towards the hook, freed the heavy polyramic structure from the rail and hooked it onto the nearest cleat.

“What the hell are you doing, Federi?”

“Play along!” hissed Federi. “We don't want to get hurt!”

Marsden reflected briefly what luck it was to be the best friend of the one who got away. He followed Federi's example. Both lunged to the deck in the storage area, hiding behind crates of food. They waited, guns ready. The Captain watched this manoeuvre from the bridge. Federi gave him a thumbs-up. Everything under control.

“How many are we expecting?” he asked his friend.

Marsden trained his handgun on the rope that connected the grappling hook to the Stabilizer.

“Don’t shoot that!” interfered Federi. “We want them to step aboard! Ah, there they come!”

A young officer, smart in his Marine uniform, came up the ladder and looked around. Federi waited until he was well on the deck and shot.

The man crumpled, a surprised look on his face. The woman behind him emerged, brandishing a stun gun. She followed suit. Marsden and Federi waited for more. None were forthcoming.

“Only two?” asked Federi, surprised.

“These T-craft aren’t particularly big,” replied Marsden. “There are bunks for four, but the Navy prefers to man them sparsely and rather use more craft. More fire power. Makes sense.”

Federi nodded and retrieved the tiny syringes he had looted from Doc Judith’s supplies, and cut to shape to fit into the air guns. They had delivered their little green payload. Now that he knew of Paean’s brilliant bit of piracy, he’d invest in dart guns. Being a pirate had just become a lot more fun!

Marsden helped Federi tie the two marines up. They scanned the lake. None of the Stab vessels moved. Those who had been immobilized by Marsden’s torpedoes had been left behind out of range; those who had had coffee, were in any case out for the count.

“I know this one,” said Marsden. “He turned down an offer to become a pirate.”

“Yup,” said Federi. “Johnny Anyhow. Anya Miller’s Second.” He narrowed his eyes. “I’d say he has potential, but

he'll need some work."

"For one," said Marsden, "we'll have to teach him to drink coffee!"

"Don't say that c-word!" protested Federi. "I've got withdrawal symptoms!"

The Captain emerged from the bridge.

"Good work, all of you! We can cross the lake now, I think! Are any of those lazy louts awake yet?"

"I'll see whom I can round up, Captain," said Federi. "I'll make them some coffee."

"Tzigan! Watch your step!"

"Yes, Captain," grinned Federi. Clearly the Captain was suffering too!

"And if you see that little green bandit, do tell her to report to the bridge," added Lascek.

"Yes, Captain." Federi went on his way. Poor little Paean!

The last leg of the crossing was Panama City itself. There was another series of automatic sluice gates, and more Unicate waiting for them, no doubt. Lascek called Federi and Marsden into a meeting on the bridge. Paean was present too, awaiting orders. The leak in Wolf's cabin was not yet completely repaired, but there were others taking care of that. The passage through Panama was becoming a harrowing experience for her.

Radomir Lascek looked back over his shoulder at the little green light-bringer, from overriding the first of the Pedro Miguel Locks.

"Miss Donegal, get back on a pack with Wolf Svendsson and make us more Spiffy bombs."

"Yes, Captain."

Waiting for the water level to sink in the first chamber, the Solar Wind launched several more small missiles into the Canal at Panama City, the Pacific end. They released their payload into the water system of the Capital.

“Now we wait,” said Lascek over the ship com, stretching and leaning back, hands behind head. “Take a break, sailors! But remember – no coffee!”

“This is getting tedious,” growled Federi in the galley. He’d start chewing coffee beans if he couldn’t have his dosage soon!

Eventually the sluice gates opened one by one, over an hour, as the hydraulic Canal system did its work. From thirty-three feet above the current sea level, the Solar Wind descended the steps down into the Miraflores Locks.

It was the strangest event the city had experienced in recorded history. Like in a fairy-tale, Panama fell asleep. It was lucky that the tropical city was not really awake at that hot, drowsy hour anyway. It was a rather extended siesta.

Doc Judith surfaced and was informed by the Captain. She was so taken aback, she failed to deal with it at all. She had to admit that she felt wonderfully rested.

Wolf and Dr Jake began the repair to the processor. Not everything had been levelled. Dr Jake’s shield, though not yet powerful enough, had done a lot to protect the electronics from that last lethal wave.

“We’ll have to get components in Panama City,” said Dr Jake. “Five of her infra-lateral pointsel orbitors are gone. And two PUPs.”

“Go ashore? You can’t be serious, doctor?”

“Well,” smiled the nuclear scientist, “we can always send

Federi to steal them for us!”

Though the remaining Uinate forces in Panama were alert to the Solar Wind being in Lake Gatun, on last report she had been hit by a torpedo while submerged. The last shockwave had been reported to blow out her electronics, having got past that mysterious shield she seemed to have against such electric assault. If it had erased the ship’s electronics, the calculations were that the crew had to be stunned too, if not dead. Johnny Anyhow had reported that they were boarding her and bringing her in. All was in hand.

Teatime for the Navy.

“Now,” said Lascek. He engaged the intercom, which was up and running again. “Dr Jake, all ready?”

“Mostly, Captain. We’ll get through to the Pacific on what we’ve got.”

“And the fire power?”

“We’ve lost the nuclear drives for now, Captain, but the torpedoes are ready.”

“It will just have to be good enough. Set sail,” decided Lascek. “Let’s get this over with.”

The smaller and noisier of the two motorboats, the Lawnmower, cast off from the Solar Wind, carrying Federi and Marsden, and two unconscious Uinate marines. They unloaded the two sleeping officers onto the quay.

Federi stayed behind on the dock.

“Sure you guys can spare me?”

“Federi, I’m not happy about it,” replied Marsden. “Having

you aboard is a necessity. We'll pick you up in an hour."

"If the Unicate captures you guys, I'll rescue you," promised Federi.

"Course you will," smiled Marsden. "Go well now, Tzigan. Good luck!"

"You too," said Federi. "*Kathal.*"

Marsden's gaze followed him. Within seconds, the gypsy had disappeared, merging into Panama's shops and streets like a rogue colour into a rainbow.

Still life of a sleeping city. Shawn watched in fascination from the rigging, where he was on lookout duty. Tourists sleeping at wharf-side café tables. Single motor vehicles moving along the empty streets, those deviants that refused to hold siesta or take lunch. Shops standing open, unattended, the assistants out for lunch. So were the shoplifters, clearly. There were Unicate ships in the Canal, amongst traders; but they showed no response.

"There's Federi," shouted Shawn. The gypsy was on the wharf, waving wildly. The Solar Wind slowed; Jon Marsden mobilized the Lawnmower a second time and picked him up from the dockside.

"If Shawn hadn't seen you?" he asked, tongue in cheek.

"Jon, I've got my wrist-com," laughed Federi.

"Has the electric shockwave not wiped yours?"

Federi checked. "Fry me, it has! Got to ask Wolf to fix it."

"So what would you have done?"

The gypsy bared his white teeth. His eyes narrowed. He peered over the Canal.

"With all these speedboats on sale?" he asked. "Are you joking?"

Once back aboard, Federi headed for the bilges.

“As specified, Doc!” He emptied his bag of loot out onto the cabinet. “Are these the right ones? I could go again.”

“No, they’re perfect,” said Dr Jake, smiling appreciatively. Federi had secured the very newest kind of pointsel orbitors. They were a lot more powerful than the old ones.

“Great,” said Federi and left for the main deck.

“Is that the Pacific out there?” came Shawn’s call from the rigging. “Ocean ahoy!!”

The Solar Wind was suddenly out on the open sea.

“We did it!” A cheer went up from the ship. The entire crew, with the exception of Ailyss who was still asleep, and Dr Jake in the machine room and the Captain on the bridge, was out on the deck. Federi brought out bottles of champagne and uncorked them with a lot of splashy mess.

“Here’s to the Bronberg,” he announced loudly. “Here’s to our undemocratic, dare-devil Captain, and to our cannoniers, Marsden and Wolf, and here’s to our hero – Paean!”

The little green pirate glowed over her whole face.

“Why are you a hero?” asked Rhine Gold, puzzled. “And why are you wearing that green thing on your head?”

“Aw,” said Paean with an embarrassed grin. “’s a long story!”

*

*The Solar Wind sails on...
(preview into next part)*

12

Storm

The open sea awaited. Panama slept behind them.

The Solar Wind was restored to herself. Ronan and Rhine Gold, under Federi's direction, washed the blue neo-transpox paint off her hull by pouring biodegradable soapy water over – the sea would do the rest. Marsden reinstalled the original identity chip. Radomir Lascek added the latest transgression to the ship log with pride, describing Panama as “an amazingly sleepy town with incalculable opportunity for those who know how to look”. Shawn, Federi, Ronan and Rhine Gold rebuilt the Crow's Nest back into the rigging. Jonathan Marsden clambered about with a voltmeter checking the reconnected wires and sensors. Every last Crow's Nest signal was tested to make sure it was all fully functional again.

The moment he got the thumbs-up for it, Shawn climbed into the Crow's Nest and played a tune on his clay whistle. Ronan joined in on his tin whistle, hooking his elbows around the ropes of the rigging.

It was their first taste of real freedom in seven months.

Radomir Lascek watched from the bridge. He felt so good about the won battle, he wished he could arrange it more often!

Next to him, Sherman Dougherty swore softly. Radomir Lascek glanced down.

“Making progress?”

“Wish I’d started on that earlier,” growled Sherman. “Some very sinister stuff coming out of here! But it’s clearly missing a whole part. I can decrypt every tenth word or so, and that’s on guesswork.” He bared his tobacco-stained teeth. “Maybe we should have hung onto Johnny Anyhow as a hostage!”

“That bad?”

“Look there, Radomir.”

The Captain bent down over the console, studying what his veteran had been able to pull out of Anya Miller’s data capsule. His face clouded over.

“We’ve got to take every turn we can to get to Hawaii faster,” he mullied.

“Skip Atuona?” suggested Sherman.

“Hell, no! That would be disastrous! We’ll just have to hurry, that’s all.”

“And you?” Federi prodded Paeon, who had watched the whole Crow’s Nest procedure from the rail. “Don’t you want to join in the Ceilidh?”

“Och, no,” she said, turning away. She leaned on the portside rail and stared at the receding land, behind and to the left.

“Hey!” Federi inserted himself between her and her view. “Are you alright?”

Why is it so crucial that Captain doesn't skip Atuona? And what does a three-toed reptile track and a murder have to do with the Rebellion's plans?

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