

Tales of the Seven Fingers



These stories were originally a collaborative effort between myself and another writer on the RP World website. Sadly my writing partner dropped out before the tales were done, and the site has been inactive for quite a while. I have re-compiled the tales, editing out his characters as best I could and adding a few of my own to fill in.

It is set in modern times, in an alternate universe where supernatural creatures exist, magic works, and gun powder was never developed. Nominally it would be referred to as 'Steampunk'.

The story is incomplete, ending where the project died. Still, I believe that it is an enjoyable tale to read and so I've added it here. The story presented here is purely fictional, and a result of compiling my own archives of the tale. Enjoy!

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Sonny's Tale

It was a cool morning. The humidity of the previous day, along with the night's gentle mist, hung dripping from the branches and clung to each blade of long grass. The moisture steamed off of Sonny's warm skin as he chugged along in search of the mushrooms that Momma so loved. He stopped, perhaps to savor the moment, or perhaps to get his bearings, and wiped the gathering dampness from himself with an old oily cloth. His eyes scanned the mottled greens of the deep forest for his colorful prey, he sensed the fungi close by. It was a sense almost like smell, but augmented by Momma's magical talents when she delegated this task to him.

She delegated most of her tasks to him now, her strength waned with her advancing age. Sonny built the fire, chopped the wood, fixed her meals, carried her to the porch on warm days. He performed all the manual labor associated with Momma's duties as the valleys only Mambo, an unlicensed hedge-witch. Today he was picking mushrooms, but not just any. Oh no, Momma had specified the particular type. It was the main ingredient in a hallucinogenic potion meant to deaden the worst pain and ease someone into death. Locating his quarry, Sonny stuffed them into the sack he carried and weighed it in his hand. Yes, that would be enough for Momma's needs. Happy now that he could get away from the dampness he turned on his heels and headed home.

Home was warm, as it always was now. Momma said the cold seeped into her bones, so Sonny did his best to keep the cold at bay. Soon the sun would be high in the sky, the sea breeze would flow up into the hills, and the air would warm up and dry out. He could carry her to the porch then, if she was up to it and the weather suited her. She liked to sit in the sun while taking visitors, the people of the valley who warily stopped by for spells or potions. Even at her advanced age people approached her with a little awe, she had been Mambo for their parents, grandparents, and probably great-grandparents. He went to her bed to see how she was doing.

Breath rattled deeply in her chest as her rheumy eyes opened, she had sensed his presence. He knelt by her bed so she could see him. "Sonny," she whispered, stroking his bare head gently, "dear Sonny." Her ancient hand stroked the smooth brass carapace lovingly. "Not long now, no. No time left to brew the potion." She breathed deeply and coughed. "Be a good boy, Sonny. Try to blend in once I'm gone, it will be hard. You're different, use that. Remember momma loves her Sonny."

"I love you too, Momma."

The ancient crone laughed, probably a mistake as it morphed into a bone shaking cough that lasted several minutes. Finally, catching her breath, she sighed. Stroking the smooth warm brass of his chestplate she said, "Poor Sonny, you don't have a heart dear. Momma couldn't give you one, just a little steam plant to run your gears and drive linkages. Remember to keep your firebox stoked and your water level up, if you run down there will be nobody to top you off." She smiled at his nearly expressionless faceplate, "And keep your brass polished, you know how to keep the verdigris at bay. Wear clothes at all times outside, it will help to hide your strangeness as well. Oil your linkages..." The witch closed her eyes, if there were more to be said she took it with her. After several minutes she gasped, then Sonny felt her heart stop.

Sonny opened his firebox and took out a flaming piece of coal. The flaming bit had no effect on his shiny metal hand. "I do have a heart, Momma, you gave it to me. You lit the fire that burns in me still, it keeps me warm." He placed it on the bed beside her. "Now I leave this part of my heart with you. It is yours forever, to keep you warm as well." He gathered the clothes Momma had made him to

hide his strangeness, along with a sack of coal and a large jug of water. He left the collected bag of mushrooms, along with everything else of Momma's, in her cottage. He donned his clothes, a simple workman's outfit and a broad hat, and put his supplies into a back pack Momma had given him long ago. He remembered using it for collecting mushrooms at one point.

Momma's last delegated task given, the mechanunculus, a collection of mechanisms and homunculus know as Sonny, left the only home he had know to accomplish it. He walked toward the world he had never seen with one final task- blend in, stoke firebox, top off water, polish brass, wear clothes, and oil linkages. His thaumamechanical processor compiled these multiple tasks into simply 'maintain self'.

As he walked along moisture condensed from the humid air onto the cool surfaces of his ocular sensors and a tear formed. He wiped it with his oily cloth, remembering 'maintain self'. Somewhere far behind him Momma's cottage finally caught fire from a carelessly placed burning coal.

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Sonny walked quite a while, in the opposite direction from most of his foraging trips. He knew that area and there was nothing there to help him maintain himself, but in this direction was the unknown. This was the direction that coal and oil came from. Water would not be a problem, there was plenty of it around. The day wound on, the sun beat down on his broad hat and dried the moisture from his skin and clothes. By mid day, the time he would have fixed Momma's lunch, he had discovered an anomaly in the terrain and identified it from her books as a road. Processing the memory of learning at her knee caused a momentary involuntary shudder in his mechanisms. He attributed it to low resources and topped off his coal and water.

While maintaining self he pondered the road. It wasn't so much a road as a leveled, widened path with two wheel ruts ground deep into the packed soil. In one direction, right, it wound into the hills, generally in the direction of the cottage. Although he had not encountered it in that area, he was fairly certain that it would eventually take him back. Sonny turned left down the road and began chugging along with his steady clockwork gait. Within less than a mile he encountered tilled, fenced fields and cottages. There were a few people working in the fields, they generally paid him no mind unless they were close enough to make out his face or hands. If they were close enough he elicited mostly silent awe. Only once was he spoken to, by a small boy of no more than eight.

"Hey mister," the lad asked staring wide eyed, "you look funny, what are you?" It was an innocent question, seen by Sonny as nothing more than an observation followed by an information request. Still, the interaction with someone was a welcome diversion. Their was a faint creak as long unused linkages lifted the corners of Sonny's mouth. It had been a while since he smiled, and he made a caveat for his next service break to lubricate the area.

"I am a mechanunculus, a machine made in the form of a man. I can perform any function that a man can, but tirelessly as long as I have fuel, water, and regular maintenance." Sonny replied flatly.

"Ya don't sleep? Do ya eat?" the child asked.

"I have a dormant period. I don't really sleep, I usually just don't have anything to do while," he caught himself, he had almost said Momma. He wasn't sure why he couldn't refer to her, and made

another caveat to be entered into his service log book. "people around me sleep. I do not eat, but I burn coal much like your body burns food."

The boy's eyes got very large, "Wow, can I see?" Sonny's metal digits deftly opened his shirt, then unlatched the little door in his belly plate. The door opened to show a small coal fire burning hot and bright. "It don't hurt?"

Once again Sonny smiled. Yes, it had been far too long since those mechanisms were activated last. He closed the door and his shirt, then gently put the boy's hand on his chest. "It does not hurt, it keeps me warm. Same as your heart keeps you warm."

"Boy, get away from that thing," came a command from the yard where the lad had come from.

"Yes, momma," came his reply. Sonny stopped short at the mention of momma. He would definitely need service, he was not operating smoothly at all.

The woman approached him with her broom held threateningly. "You need to move along now, nothing here for the likes of you."

"Yes ma'am," Sonny replied pleasantly using his smile again, "just answering the lad's curiosity, no harm intended. You have a blessed day." He chugged on down the dirt road, the child's mother watching his disappearing back until he was out of sight. He would have been disappointed in himself, if he could be disappointed at all. He had not blended in at all well.

It was several hours later, and well into the afternoon, before anyone else waylaid the mechanical man steaming quietly down the road. It came unexpectedly from one of the men working beside the road in a coffee field. "Hey, farm boy!" the man called loudly, "You lookin' for work?"

Sonny stopped and turned toward the voice. He would need shelter from the dampness of the night, and a secure place to service himself. Perhaps he could even acquire some coal and clean water. The prospect of employment had never even occurred to him before, having never been employed, but that was certainly what a man who had needs would do. Momma had tasked him to blend in, but use his differences. "Yes." The man was startled by not only Sonny's appearance, but his deep gentle voice. Momma had fashioned those vocal harmonics herself, and she was nothing if not skilled. He waited until the man seemed settled and then continued, "employment would be nice. What are your offered terms, perhaps we can come to a working accord." His ocular apertures closed and opened quickly, approximating a human blink. It was a purely social gesture, useless as his eyes did not require moisture. Blend in.

"Um, yea," the man stumbled for his words, "you ever picked coffee before? See, I'm in a bind. Crops comin' in and I just lost three strong workers. Up and joined the navy they did. Pay's a guilder for every bag picked under quota, an extra kwartje per bag after that. Bags are checked for quality of the picked beans, so you have to be able to tell the ripe ones." The farmer searched Sonny's shiny brass face, looking for some indication of cognizance. "Think you can do that?"

The mechanuculus gauged the man. His body language spoke of wariness, but basic honesty. He was dark of hair and skin, several shades deeper than Momma but that was probably from his time in the sun. The skin of his face and hands was worn and creased as old leather and he had the same deep brown, almost black eyes as Sonny's creator. His clothes were similar in cut and fit to Sonny's own,

with the same type of broad brimmed hat. The brass man realized that it was probably his clothing that encouraged the farmer to approach him, that and the pack which suggested he was a transient and perhaps a farm worker. He also realized that Momma had not made the clothes he wore, but had purchased them. He added another need to his ever growing list to 'maintain self'. If he had the capability to sigh he would have utilized it.

"Yes, I can distinguish between forty one different fungi and over two hundred different herbs. The shades and textures of coffee beans should not be difficult." Sonny once again watched the humans body language carefully, "Is the pay fair?" The coffee farmer was a little taken aback at the bluntness of the gently delivered question, but otherwise undeceptive.

"Why, yes," he answered slowly, "same pay as anywhere else. Got picker's cottages for a small fee if you need one too, and meals if you eat."

"My needs are simple," Sonny answered, "The cottage would suffice if it is dry, along with a source of coal and water. Perhaps I could also acquire a light machine oil, some of my mechanisms seem to be in need of it. I believe if this is amicable that you have a new picker." He offered the man his right hand, a shining delicate piece of machinery as fine as any well made watch.

The farmer took it appraisingly, and Sonny was careful to apply exactly the right pressure as they shook hands. He analyzed the differences, the dark human hand aged with years of farm work against the polished brass, aged in it's own way to a deep but bright patina. "Come on then," Sonny's new boss said, "lets get you settled. Got some oil and such in the tool shed, along with coal for the Tull. I'll show you the ropes and you can start in the morning with the crew."

Sonny was a bit surprised that there were ropes involved. He had never needed rope to pick herbs or mushrooms for Momma, not even string. This would definitely be interesting, perhaps similar to wrangling horses, something he had only read about that also required ropes.

The mechanuculus spent the night in the tool shed. He could have taken a cottage, and had intended to, but found the nearness of the Tull, the farm's steam tractor, to be a comfort. The cottage was empty and he, for some reason he could not yet comprehend, desired the closeness of something else. It occurred to him, as he was performing self maintenance, that it was the first time he had been without Momma. A man would call this loneliness, and so he did so as well. Blend in. He removed his clothes before going dormant, and curled up on the floor next to his new friend the Tull.

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The mechanuculus activated himself with the first light, added coal to his boiler lest it go out, and topped off his water. He had to perform some minor servicing of his ocular sensors, they had apparently leaked in the night and had a touch of fresh verdigris. Sonny could not determine the source of the leak, but it seemed to occur with some regularity whenever he pondered Momma. He got out a leather bound journal, his service log, from his back pack and made a notation in it to observe further occurrences. Donning his clothes, he brushed the steam tractor a fleeting goodbye and went out to face this new morning.

Later that morning he determined that picking coffee was entirely unlike wrangling horses. The ropes that were mentioned were only a colloquialism, and this task fell far below gathering herbs in interesting diversions. His mechanical fingers, smooth running at ordinary speeds, now clacked sharply

in this accelerated mode. They were a blur of motion. His oculars, eyes if you will, identified the ripe beans even faster than his hands could pick them. He partitioned a part of his consciousness off to perform this processor numbing task and set his main thoughts to self diagnosis. Starting at the beginning, when he first started remembering, he determined himself to find out why he could no longer say Momma.

A man would simply call this daydreaming.

His first memory of Momma was of following her through the forest. She was a young woman then, spry and full of life. "Follow" she had told him, it was the simplest of tasks. He was not known as Sonny then, she simply called him 'cart'. He followed, his treads rolling through the soft loam of the forest as he dutifully performed his task. Momma put things in his basket and he carried them for her, leaving her hands and arms free, and she talked to him. He didn't understand much of it at the time of course, his auditory unit only understood simple one word commands. His oculars could discern her form enough to locate her so he could follow.

There was a man in Momma's life then. He was there when Sonny became aware, and for quite a while after, but then he was there less and less. Momma spent a lot of time in the forest searching around that time, Sonny following, as she looked for the cure for her ills. For all her skill as a witch and all her mechanical cleverness, Momma could not have a family. Not long after, the man who had shared Momma's life was no longer there. Oh, Momma had other men visit from time to time, but not a single one stayed very long. She did not know he was aware, that she had somehow imbued her carts little thaumamechanical processor with something greater than the sum of its parts. He would watch, there in his dry corner by the fireplace, as she lived and loved. Sometimes, after the radio stopped playing music and Momma had fallen asleep, he would listen to the distant morse signals the music masked.

It didn't take much processing power at all to associate them into the language that Momma spoke to him during tasks and compile them.

Perhaps he had initiated it, perhaps she had, but on one of their forays Momma asked her 'cart' a question. She asked, "What do you think, can we make it to those rocks?" as she indicated a low hillock. She had never really asked a question before, her speech to him was usually a running monolog of her thoughts of the moment.

Taking it as a task, Sonny blinked his ocular aperatures, "dah-dit, dah-dah-dah". He said 'no'. Most literate people understood morse, and so Momma stopped and stared at her dutiful little cart and raised an eyebrow.

"And why not, cart?" she teased, attributing his response to some mechanical malfunction.

"dit-dit; dit-dit-dit-dit, dit-dah, dit-dit-dit-dah, dit; dah-dit, dah-dah-dah; dit-dah-dit-dit, dit, dah-dah-dit, dit-dit-dit" Sonny replied. It was an observation that he did not have the required legs to manage the climb.

"I believe you are right, cart," Momma said cautiously. "Your little treads wouldn't make it, Momma will be right back. Do not follow, stay put." Sonny performed the task, staying put. That was the first time she was called Momma. He put a caveat at this memory, this must be the root of the reason he could not now vocalize her name.

Sonny's awareness came back to the present. He had completed his quota of bags and it was lunchtime. The other pickers split off into groups. The linkages in his hands were hot from the accelerated use. They were undamaged, but would require additional lubrication to remain so. He was headed for the tool shed for oil when he was hailed, "Hey, Brass Man!" He turned toward the female voice. One of the other pickers was approaching him, a woman.

The mechanuculus observed her. She was in her middle twenties, slightly shorter than Sonny but tall for a woman. She had a sturdy frame and a sureness of gait that spoke of good musculature and a broad smiling face. Her hair was long and dark, her eyes gray, and her skin was the color of coffee the way Momma took it, with a dollop of cream. She wore a simple work dress, work gloves, and a wide hat like Sonny's own. A man would have found her attractive but plain, to him she was another picker.

"Yes?" he replied simply.

"Where you off to in such a hurry?" she asked.

Sonny held one of his hands up and flexed the fingers. "I am in need of lubrication. The accelerated pace is wearing the linkages of my hands." She looked at the shiny mechanism before her with a little awe as it moved fluidly. His soft deep voice poured into her ear sweetly, like honey on a warm day, in direct contrast to the words he chose to use it on.

"Mind if I walk along?" she asked, a little taken aback by his speech perhaps more so than his appearance.

"Not at all, the company would be welcome." He was finally blending in, and the accomplished task pleased him. Sonny smiled, this time smoothly. The woman smiled back.

They walked in silence for a few moments, Sonny finding it odd to have someone walking beside him as he had always followed Momma. Finally the woman spoke, "Your 'accelerated pace' is kind of what I need to talk to you about. We try to share the over quota work among ourselves so we each get a little extra in the pay, some of us have families to feed. Once the day's take is made, the boss cuts us loose. So, if you get most of the over quota bags we won't get as much. Understand? Most of us would rather stay late and make a little extra than go home early."

"Yes," he replied, "there is finite work to be shared among workers of various speeds. Quota is meant to limit the slow, but the workload, and thus the pay, must be distributed across them all." Sonny looked at her then, focusing his attention on her wide gray eyes. "If I may ask, how many over quota bags is normal for one person in a day?"

"Um," she thought for a moment, "usually six is average, could be as many as eight on a long day."

Processing his rate of pay against his needs he then asked, "Would you happen to know how much coal can I purchase with sixteen guilders?"

"I'm not sure, coal is pretty cheap. Perhaps a quarter ton? How big's the fire?" In answer Sonny deftly opened his shirt and firebox door.

"I don't think particularly large, I don't use more than a few lumps a day," he told her as they both peered into the cheery flame. As he closed the little door and his shirt he said, "I believe I could operate quite a while on a quarter ton." Sonny noticed that she was still staring at the point where his fire door was. "Is everything satisfactory?" he asked. His voice somehow carried the concern that he once again failed at blending in.

"Oh," she started, "yes. Fine. I just never had a man show me his inner fire before." She giggled a little and took a deep breath. "Um, I have to go finish lunch now, so..."

"Of course. May I make a non-task oriented question before you go?"

"Yea, sure," she replied.

"What should I call you?" Sonny asked.

"My name? It's Sheila." Name. Sonny smiled, he realized now that he never knew Momma's name. Extrapolating further he came to the thought that 'sonny' was not really a name either. It was simply what Momma had chosen to call him. Like cart.

"I am called Sonny. May I make non-operational queries in the future, Sheila?"

She laughed at that like sunshine, warm and light. "Of course, Brassman," she said as she walked away, "but I reserve the right to ask right back at ya'."

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After his talk with Sheila, Sonny had 'lunch' in the tool shed- topping off his coal and water, and lubricating the intricate mechanisms of his hands. He then steamed off in search of the boss. The man wasn't difficult to find, he was the center of a flurry of activity as he usually was. Sonny explained the extra maintenance on his hands that accelerated picking had caused. He also conveyed his concern that the other workers needed the extra 'over quota' money much more than himself, and may resent him over picking. The boss was understanding, especially since over quota bags cost him extra wages. They reached an agreement where Sonny would pace his picking to make quota plus two within a normal shift. If the crew made the day's take, then he could take off early. If more was needed then he could stay with the others or not. As long as the fields got picked promptly the farmer was happy.

Since he had already made quota, Sonny worked at a snails pace to stretch his remaining two bags across the afternoon. The sensor dimming work flowed like molasses, and the mechanuculus delegated even less of his thaumamechanical processor to it. He had more resources to daydream.

After the hill climbing incident Momma decided to give her magical little cart legs. Although not unheard of, it was unusual, and many of the parts had to be custom made. Momma developed a working relationship with the local tinker, a widowed artist who worked with non ferrous metal. At first she was going to make her cart quadrupedal, but then opted for bipedal because it required only half the mechanisms. The balancing would be more complex, so she expanded the carts limited processor. She added balance sensors, upgraded its vision and hearing, and gave it a voice. Its basket was placed conveniently waist high, making its legs easier to design and construct.

The collaboration with the tinker turned into a working relationship, and soon turned more intimate. The young witch even modeled cart's legs after his. They both enjoyed the constant measuring and analysis needed to get the legs perfect. Soon cart became a basket with strong masculine legs. It had eyes and could respond to verbal commands and answer queries. If anyone had seen them wandering the forest they would have seen a young witch who talked incessantly with her magical legged basket dutifully following behind her.

At some point during this time, shortly after she and the tinker parted ways, Momma started referring to her cart as 'him' instead of 'it'. She also, if her cart had been particularly dutiful, began to gently stroke it on top of the ocular housing at the front of the basket as one might a dog.

Nothing in this series of memories gave Sonny any indication as to why he could not seem to vocalize 'Momma'. He fast forwarded past months of mundane details that were everyday life with her. The next item of note, another step in his development, came innocently. Momma, working in her garden with the cart standing beside her said simply, "Don't you ever wonder, cart?"

"No, Momma, I follow you. I can not wander, unless you do." The witch laughed at that. Not only did her cart not understand the question, he had never heard the word directed at him.

"Of course. You can't make unsolicited queries, can you?" She looked at the trowel in her hand. "I haven't given you the tools...."

Momma's activity had always been erratic. Sonny had never noticed, he had never had any other person to compare her to. Some days were full of activity and some were spent inside doing almost nothing, just as some days it rained and some it did not, or some days Momma sold potions and some days she sold talismans. The next few weeks were full of manic activity, Momma working far into the night in her lab. Several small monkeys gave their brains to Momma's inquisitions.

Once she finally understood, gold and silver wires were thaumatologically spun thinner and thinner by her skilled hands until they disappeared. Magic was wound onto them with microscopic bits of gemstone. When she was done her product sat on the workbench before her, looking nothing more than an orb of glittering mist somehow made solid. The cart had sat in the corner nearby the entire time, quietly watching, unknowingly inspiring her. His task was to follow her, and she had not left her lab the entire time.

Momma went to him, stroking the carapace covering his ocular sensors gently. Then she did something that had never been done to him, even when he was fitted with the legs and other upgrades. Momma shut him down.

When he was once again activated his basket was noticeably smaller. The forward area behind his ocular unit had been expanded, and the brass carapace enlarged to cover it. Other than that the cart noticed little difference. Momma and a man were talking, sometimes loudly.

"I only agreed to dis because that device needed balance, I do not agree with what you done. Dis ting is unnatural." The cart identified the voice as belonging to the man he first remembered Momma being with so long ago. He thought it odd that he couldn't place a time to how long ago that was, only that he had been there when cart started remembering. "I at least owed you my help for all de years we had, but I have a family now, woman, and dis is the only help I give you. If dey find out you will be banished."

Momma laughed, but it was not Momma's laugh. It was hard and cold. "How much further into the hills do you think I can go? Stupida, I'm already banished." They stood faced off, staring at each other. Momma breathing deeply. "Go then, don't come back. I'll teach the thing myself, all it will have of you is that little bit of spirit needed to start it. It will have my little bit of spirit, and everything else I can give it."

"I wish it didn't have even dat from me, it is unnatural. Goodbye, don' bodder me again." With that the man left, slamming the door.

Momma, as she usually did after a bout of genius, took to her bed and barely ate for days. The cart, idly waiting in his warm corner, heard her still lying in bed, making odd noise similar to laughter. She had done this before on inside days, but this time he went to her, placing the front of his basket on the bed near her and watching her closely.

Momma noticed him and gently stroked his enlarged carapace. The cart then did something that the cart had never done before, he initiated a dialog. He did so with an unsolicited inquiry. "What is that noise you make, Momma?"

She sniffed. "I was crying," Momma explained. "I thought I had failed and damaged you. I did something I probably shouldn't have. In order to start your thaumatological processor I needed a bit of spirit, kind of like starting a pendulum after winding a clock. It needed to be balanced too, male and female, for a pendulum that only swings left doesn't work. I pulled in a favor I shouldn't have, or perhaps I guilted someone into helping."

"Okay." cart said simply and started to walk back to his corner to compile this information.

"Cart," Momma said.

"Yes Momma?" The cart stopped and turned back to her, awaiting his new task. He seeming almost eager.

"Stay here, Momma needs you to be here with her." She sniffed again and wiped her eyes. "Always try to be here for Momma when I need you." Cart returned, placing his 'head' back where it had been for Momma's hand to stroke. He had acquired a new task- 'be here when Momma needs you'. She stroked the smooth brass plate, "Good Sonny, stay here with Momma," she whispered as she drifted off to sleep. Sonny had finally earned a name.

And so he had stayed, Sonny thought as his main process once again turned to the present, as long as Momma needed. Task complete. The shift was over, his last two bags of coffee beans were picked. Most of the other workers had caught up to him, some had passed him. The lubrication on his hand linkages was still sufficient, the reduced speed had worked. The head of steam in his boiler was low, it's pressure being less than optimal.

A man would call the feeling hunger. Coffee beans forgotten for the day, Sonny chugged back to the toolshed under the waning sun to address his needs.

The next few days on the coffee plantation passed much as the first one did for the laboring mechanuculus. Picking coffee often does, and the days blended together like cheap wine. Sonny's hands took the work well, now that he had paced himself, and he required little additional maintenance. The other pickers became comfortable with the sight of him, a few who were bold enough to talk to him enjoyed the deep mellow tones of his voice as well. He learned the names of the ones that talked to him, he enjoyed the feel of a name as he spoke it, and was surprised to find that everyone had more than one. Even boss had several.

Boss's wife, Elena, called him sweetheart. Sonny was informed that it was inappropriate for him to do so (amid the cackling laughter of his coworkers). Although several of them also called boss sweetheart and snickered after that incident, Sonny never did again. Boss's name, the one he used publicly, was Roberto Esperanza. Sonny liked that name best, the syllables of it felt nice in his sound box when articulated. The Foreman called boss 'Bobby', everyone else called him boss. They called the foreman boss too if they were talking to him, or about him when he could hear them. Sonny queried one of the other pickers and was informed that the foreman's real name was Dumb Ass, but he didn't like anyone to use it where he could hear them. That was fine with the mechanuculus, as he found Foreman Ass unpleasant to converse with.

Sheila's name was Sheila Weston. He liked the way it felt in his voice box as well, just not the same way as boss's. Sheila called him Brassman and so did the other pickers, following her lead. Even he began thinking of himself as Sonny Brassman.

Sonny devoted a lot of his thoughts to why he couldn't yet say 'Momma', processing and compiling years of memories. There was plenty of time while his hands busily picked coffee. He remembered the men, and occasional woman, who helped Momma upgrade him. Some of them were her friends, some contracted for pay or barter, a few even became her lovers, but each one added their skill to Sonny. There was the blacksmith that fashioned his boiler and was the pattern for his voice, the sculptress that formed his torso from plate brass for Momma and shared his intricate hands, the watchmaker who's smile he wore, the mechanic, the engineer, the list blurred in his memory. He was all of them, brought together with Momma as the conductress, but also none of them. Nowhere was the reason he could not vocalize 'Momma'.

It wasn't that he couldn't remember, he remembered everything very clearly. The memories he had, though, were processed at the time within his limited experience. As he was gaining experience in his efforts to blend in, he was also having to re-analyze many of his memories and compile them with new information. Like the conversation that Momma had on his 'naming day' that had made her cry. Sonny now knew that it was a very heated argument with himself at the center, Momma defending him. She had cast aside a bond with someone who meant a lot to her and chose instead to keep him, and remain 'banished'. He also realized that Momma's behavior was erratic compared to the workers he was getting to know. None of them worked through nights and into the next day, just as none of them slept for days afterward. The rhythm of their activity followed gentle pace of the sun, and he suspected that most people were more like them than Momma.

The workday was over, the coffee picked. Sonny Brassman chugged dutifully to his toolshed as he had all week, in need of coal and water. He was quietly grateful for the recent regular pace to his daily life. "Hey, Brassman," one of the other pickers called. His name was Pete. "We're going into town, got any weekend plans?"

"I was unaware weeks ended," Sonny replied, "I was unable to plan for such an event."

“So, I'm guessin' you don't. Want to tag along?” The mechanuculus had to process for a moment, but determined that they wished him to accompany them on a foray, as he had with Momma in the forest so many times. He had never forayed in a town before, but he was fairly certain that they were not picking herbs.

About that time boss passed out envelopes to them, each with the picker's name on it. Sonny opened his and saw slips of colored paper he identified as money. “Yes, that would be interesting. Allow me to put this in the tool shed.”

“Bring it with you, you'll need some of it,” Pete told him. “Besides, if you leave it here it's liable to grow legs and wander off.” Sonny thought that highly unlikely in the short time they would be gone, but placed the folded envelope in a pocket anyway.

Climbing into the back of the farm's steam wagon with the others he asked, “So, what is there to do in town?”

“Lot's of stuff, Brassman. Hang with me, I'll show you the ropes.” Sonny was dubious, the last time he was shown ropes it was disappointing. He also wasn't sure if Pete was really to be hung or not, but he was sure he would not care to be with him. He attributed his misunderstanding to Pete's habitual use of colloquialisms and reprocessed the statement.

Formulating a reply, the mechanuculus compiled it into a compatible reply. “You're on,” Sonny said. Several of the others smiled at him, nodding appreciatively. One of them, Mick, patted his brass plated shoulder.

“Look at you, Brassman,” Mick said, “you didn't use no big words. Dat's prob'ly da first ting Pete understand from you.” The others, including Pete, laughed at that. Sonny smiled again. As the wagon lurched, then began rocking down the narrow farm road one of them reached into the steam wagon's coal bin and passed two lumps of coal to Sonny.

“Here,” he said, “might want to eat now, not too many places in town serve coal.”

Sonny took them, opened his firebox, and put them in. “Thank you,” he replied, “it would have been inconvenient to be carried back.”

“Hey, Pete,” Mick said as the plantation disappeared around a curve, “you should learn sometings from Brassman here. Mebbe we don' be carrying you back too?” Everyone laughed. The rest of the trip went much the same. Sonny studied the interplay between his companions, analyzing it, and began to realize that 'blending in' was going to be a long process. He realized he was fortunate that boss had waylaid him last week, and given him a chance to acclimatise to people on his coffee plantation. Boss did not need to be as understanding as he was, he could have chased him off like the boy's momma, and these laborers did not have to treat him as they did either.

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As the steam wagon pulled into town, it was called Crescent City, Sonny took in all the sights and sounds. At first there were more houses, packed increasingly close together, and then stores to purchase things. They passed boutiques for clothing, shoes and such. Butcher shops, grocers, the

occasional jeweler, all slipped past as the mechanuculus watched. The other men in the wagon would point out details to him, knowing he had never been to town before, and comment on them. He memorized it all, to be compiled and analyzed once he returned.

Just before they entered the pub district they passed curio shops, antique dealers, book stores and offices. Restaurants and pubs lined the streets in the pub district, one of the men called it the tourista district. Sonny queried him, and was told that people from other places came to the Crescents to enjoy the weather, relax, and spend their money before returning to their cold boring homes. The wagon rounded a corner and suddenly the brass man was stunned.

Before him lay a body of water so large that it had things the size of entire buildings floating in it. He had read about the sea before in Momma's books, but the printed words hadn't come close to preparing him for this. The things floating in it were ships, the floating walkways, some wide enough to handle wagon traffic must be docks, and the broad, lighted walkway along the edge of the water was the quay. It was dusk, lights of every conceivable color lined the quay and were strung above it. The steam wagon was parked and its firebox banked as the workers disembarked. Sonny realized that Foreman Ass had been operating it, and he seemed much more pleasant away from the farm. "Right, boys, omnibus leaves at midnight. Miss it and walk home."

Several of the men exchanged money. Sonny queried, and Pete told him that they had a running bet as to when the foreman would really return. He had a dollymop in town and was always late. The brass man translated everything except 'dollymop', blending in was a long process. "Here," Pete told them, "give Brassman two fifteen and me two thirty. Brassman, give 'em a half dukaat." Sonny pulled a rijksdaalder note from his envelope and passed it to them.

"What will I receive in exchange?" Sonny asked.

"Well," Pete explained, "if boss comes back at two fifteen you get's the money everybody put in. If not, you get's to see someone else get it. Now, put some of that in yer pocket to spend tonight and tuck the rest away where's ya won't spend it."

"What would I spend it on?"

"Struth. Ya already ate, ya don't drink," Pete looked at him sideways, "ya don't do ya?"

"I take on water, I am low on water now." Sonny said.

"I'm a bit parched my self!" Mick interjected as he joined them.

"Right." Pete said, giving Mick the evil eye. "So, ya don't drink." Pete stepped back and eyed the brass man up and down. "Um, got a use for a street tart? I know you an' Sheila been talking, you getting anywhere?" In reply, Sonny gave him the blank look of complete lack of cognizance. "You're going to have to say something, Brassman, I can't read ya'. Would you like a woman tonight?"

"No, other than water I have no immediate need," Sonny began, "Perhaps a change of clothes as I have only this one set, and I saw a used book shop as we turned the corner."

Mick laughed, "Okay den, we' get you dressed up, wit some books, den we all top off our water at a few pubs, ay?"

Pete looked at the man and shook his head. "Brassman," he said to Sonny, "we'll show you the town, you get us back on the bus, deal?" The mechanuculus processed this very quickly, by now he had compiled the man's speech pattern fairly well.

"Acceptable." The mechanuculus proceeded down the street much like an adolescent youth being guided by two favorite, but less than honorable, uncles.

Their first stop was a haberdashery. This was no simple clothing store, there were no farm outfits or work clothes. There were no dresses, this shop catered to gentleman's fashion. Although the clothing looked very good on the brass man, it would not stand up to the strenuous activity of his life. The clerk, at first put off by the coarseness of his customers, finally warmed to them. He suggested their next stop, which was a shop aimed more at working people. In the second shop Sonny's uncle Mick found him two nice shirts and an extra pair of trousers. His uncle Pete dickered the price down from 'ludicrous' to 'ridiculous' and then to 'barely reasonable', finally allowing Sonny to pay the man. Sonny was still concerned that the shopkeepers children would somehow starve when they ushered him along to the next shop.

At the next place Mick and Pete got him a pair of brogans, and at the next a new hat. At each place Mick helped him choose while Pete negotiated a 'barely reasonable' price. Finally they ended up at a used book shop. "How much you got left in your 'tonight' money, Brassman?" Pete asked. Sonny told him, and Pete replied, "Good, you can buy three, maybe four books."

He could own books, like Momma owned books. The concept hit Sonny like a hammer, this was something that was not directly for self maintenance. He did not need them for blending in, stoking his firebox, topping off his water, polishing his brass, wearing clothes, or oiling his linkages. He stood there, unable to move, as he processed his needs against his desires. "Hey, Brassman," Mick said, "come sit down an' tell unca' Mick what de problem is." Processing this as an interrupt, the mechanuculus followed him automatically, Pete in tow. The trio sat on the low wall that followed the sidewalk.

"I do not need the books to complete any task." Sonny said almost sadly, "But they would be enjoyable to have. Nights are long, and there is little entertainment on the plantation."

"I don't undastan', Brassman, why can't you have dem? You gots de extra money, you ain't gonna need de money eider." Sonny explained his task, and that the money was against future need to complete it. Finally Pete seemed to understand and did what Pete did best, he gambled.

"When we came around the last corner and you saw the harbor, I saw the way you looked at it. You never seen a harbor before, did you?"

"No," the mechanuculus replied, "I thought it was the sea."

"Exactly, but you didn't try to walk across it, did you?"

"No, I am incapable of such a task, even if it was required."

"Yes, you are, but how did you know that if you've never experienced the sea before? You read it in a book, didn't you?" Mick smiled when Pete said this, finally seeing where the man was going.

Finally Sonny looked up and Pete drove his point home, "Books is knowledge stored up against future need, just like the money in your pay envelope. Who knows what information a task may require in the future? Not me, and I'm thinking not you. At any time you might need something you read in a book somewhere."

"I could purchase more than four." Sonny stated.

"Not tonight," Mick admonished, "dat money in de envelope is for future need." Both men laughed at that.

"Let's go pick you a couple good ones," Pete said, "then you can help me an' uncle Mick into our cups." Sonny didn't try to process that last statement, he was sure the meaning would become self evident soon.

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An hour later found the trio, along with several other coffee pickers they had met up with, in a seedy little bar called Pheasant Pluckers. Sonny had a new cloth bag with three hefty tomes in it added to the ones with new clothes in them sitting at his feet. Mick and Pete were on their third and fourth beverages, correspondingly, and Sonny had finally topped off his water. A small instrumental group was playing for tips, and music filled the small warm pub, spilling out into the night. Gas flames flickered in the lights, more from the innkeepers stinginess than any needed ambiance, and set the shiny brass man aflicker with warm light as well. Several hacknecab dancers worked the room, chatting up the men to earn themselves watered down drinks and kwartje dances. The crowd was quiet, this being a working man's hangout. The rowdier clientèle usually tended to move along on to louder music and prettier people. The group from the plantation stopped here because they could see the parked steam wagon from the window.

The mechanuculus was taking it all in, and actually understanding more than might be expected. He understood the intoxicating nature of the pickers various drinks and the economic reasons for the actions of the fancy girls. Finally Sonny formulated an unsolicited query. "Mick," he asked, determining that Mick was at this point a more reliable source of information than Pete, "why do they do that?"

"What? De ladies? Dey needs de money is all. Dey jus' talking to de men to make dem buy drinks, mebbe a dance. Pub makes money, gives a cut to de girls."

"No, the men. Why buy them a beverage that's obviously sub standard so that they will converse with you? Why not just give them the money?"

"Dat's not right, dey good ladies, not street tarts. You ever have a pretty girl sit on your lap an' jus' talk to you, Brassman? You ever hold one close on de dance floor?" Mick's eyes got a glassy far away look for a second. "Sometime it's nice." Suddenly he looked at Sonny and said, "I show you." The inebriated picker took a silver guilder from his pocket and tapped it loudly three times on the table, then placed it in front of Sonny. A waitress brought over a drink, one of the watered down ones, and collecting the coin set it in front of the mechanuculus. Presently one of the fancy girls came over.

Looking dubiously at the man of brass she said, "So, shiny man, what's your name?" Sonny processed the request, determining how he could explain, simply, that he lacked a true name.

"I am called Brassman," he answered, "or Sonny by some people." She smiled, apparently surprised by his deep mellow voice, and seated herself in his metallic lap. She was warm, as warm as the plating that covered the mechanuculus. This was by design, as Sonny's plating conducted and dispersed the heat of his boiler across his entire 'skin' evenly. He was no warmer than a person, and had no hot spots. Her one hand went around his back, and she rested the other on his broad chest plate. Mick was right, she felt nice.

"I'm Mariette." She smiled sweetly, taking a drink. "So, Sonny, How was your day? Good so far?"

"Good so far. It started with work," Sonny relayed the course of his day, work, then his first impressions of the city. She laughed at this, warm and light, amused by his naiveté. She commented at the right places, asked occasional questions, and smiled. His tale ended with his and Mick's conversation about the women in the bar, and her arrival.

"So," she asked, "what is your verdict, Sonny? How did I do?" Her drink was almost gone by now.

"I believe Mick was not entirely correct, he said that sometimes it's nice. I find it very nice." He smiled at her, looking past her at several couples on the dance floor. "Can you teach me to do that?" he said, indicating the dancers.

"It will cost you some kwartjes, Sonny." She looked at Mick questioningly.

"He's coordinated, and a fast learner, Mariette. Won't fall on you," Mick said with a wink. She smiled again. Sonny put another guilder on the table, enough for four dances.

Mariette led the brass man to the dance floor, giving a nod and a hand signal to the band. A slow waltz began, and she told Sonny, "First watch my feet, do the same moves, but in compliment to mine. When I step back, you step forward, when I step right you step left. Understand? Most of all, don't step on my feet." Mick was right, the mechanuculus learned very quickly, only bringing his brogan clad brass foot down on hers once. By the third dance the brass man could follow the beat of the music, and was leading. He floated, spinning on the dance floor dreamlike, while holding Mariette close.

"Brassman, get your tings!" The dream stopped abruptly with Mick's voice. "Boss's here, we gotta go now." Sonny, following the actions he had seen from other patrons, kissed Mariette lightly on the cheek.

"If you come back, Sonny," she responded with a wink, "ask for me."

Once on the steamwagon with the other workers the mechanuculus told Mick, "She told me to ask for her if I returned."

Mick laughed loudly, "Of course she did, you already in a good mood, you did most of de talking, you buy de dances she sells and dance good, and you give her an extra kwartje to boot! You probly de best customer she have all night." The others, the ones still conscious, laughed with him.

"Ah," Sonny said, "she was only being nice to sell dances? She did not like me?"

Mick smiled at that, “No, she like you fine, odderwise she wouldn't teach you to dance. She just like lot's of men is all, and she like dem as long as de kwartjes keep coming. You one of her better customers, but you not her only customer. You undastand?”

“I believe so,” the mechanuculus said tentatively. The steamwagon chugged through the night as Sonny processed the evening, quietly thinking to himself. Once they arrived back at the plantation the exhausted workers went to their separate beds, and he returned to the toolshed and his roommate the tull.

But Sonny did not need rest, which was good, because Sheila was awaiting him by his door. “So, how did you like your night in town?” she asked.

“It was quite enlightening,” the brass man replied. “I saw the harbor, purchased some clothes, discovered that I could own books,” he held his purchases up, “found out that a woman sitting in my lap is nice, and learned to waltz.”

“Oh,” Sheila raised an eyebrow, “how nice was she?”

“Much nicer when she taught me to waltz, but Mick informed me that I paid for too many dances.”

“Have you been,” she looked at him closely, smelling him, “drinking?”

“I had to take on water, I can not actually drink.” The mechanuculus looked at her, she knew he took on water and coal in the morning and evening, then he realized that she meant taking on alcoholic beverages like the other workers. Sonny did something that she had never heard him do before, he laughed.

Stunned at first, Sheila laughed too. “I'm sounding like your mother, aren't I?”

“I was constructed,” Sonny began, a bit confused.

“Yes, you were,” she began, “sometimes I forget that you're not a child, are you? You never really were.” Sheila got quiet for a moment. “So, how did it feel? I mean, waltzing?”

Sonny started to explain the feeling, but the words were difficult. Remembering Mick's example from earlier, he said, “Come here, I'll show you.” He took her in his warm brass arms. She ran her hands along the smooth metal as he began humming Strauss, and they danced like that in front of the tool shed under the stars. “And it won't even cost you a kwartje,” the brass man whispered in her ear between the notes.

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The farm woman and the brass man waltzed under the stars, spinning slowly in three quarter time to the softly hummed imitation of Johann Strauss. The trees seemed to sway with them in the warm evening breeze. Sometime during the third waltz, Sheila asked the mechanuculus, “Why do you sleep in the toolshed?”

"I do not sleep, I go inactive," he replied. He stopped humming and dancing and simply held her. She made no move to extricate herself from his embrace. "In the tool shed I have the tull, the steam tractor, to keep me company during those times," he explained. "If I were to rent a cottage I would not have that comfort."

"There are two beds in a pickers cottage," she looked at his face, softly shining with the starlight. "and I have no tractor in my cottage to keep me company."

Sonny smiled, "You can have mine, it is not a particularly good conversationalist." She gave him a stunned look, then her open hand made a dull clang on his chest plate.

"I'm trying to ask you to move in and you make fun of me?"

"I am sorry," he replied, "I was trying to blend in. I learned lighthearted banter on my foray this evening and I evaluated that it would be appropriate. Is this another 'calling the boss sweetheart' incident?" Sheila couldn't hold it any longer, she laughed.

Sonny processed this for a second, and then realized Sheila had added yet another level to the banter. He laughed with her. "I am sure," he finally said, "that the tull would barely notice if I moved out." Sheila helped the brass man carry his few belongings from the toolshed to her cottage. She did not fail to notice that he brushed the rusty boiler of the tractor before he closed the door.

Sheila's place wasn't far, and the pair walked quietly, unnoticed in the night by the other occupants of the plantation. It was a small seasonal cottage, inhabited only during the coffee harvest. The walls were whitewashed, the furnishings plain, and the curtains and linens worn. There was no electricity, and the woman lit an oil lantern to see by. Sonny got half the main room with a bed, dresser, and shelves. He did not need the kitchen or the bath. His belongings went on the shelves, his clothes in the dresser, his shoes under the bed, and his hat on a hook on the wall. It took only moments.

The mechanuculus then went through his evening routine while she watched. He wound the mainspring that kept him going for the short time his boiler was down, then he emptied his firebox into a little brazier, swept it, and reintroduced the remaining hot coals with several fresh ones. Going into the bathroom, Sonny purged the hot water from his boiler, refilling it with fresh. Returning, he sat on the bed, very still. "I'll be dormant for a few minutes while I build up some steam," he explained. He sat there, looking nothing more than a seated statue in brass, as Sheila undressed for bed.

With a sharp click and the psst of released steam Sonny stood up. "I am functional again," he announced simply. Being already partially undressed, he finished by removing his shoes and trousers. As Momma would have said, he was skyclad.

"Sweet Jesus," Sheila exclaimed, turning her head.

The mechanuculus immediately covered himself, remembering Momma's admonition to wear clothes. He was now unsure which task should take priority, that or blending in. "Have I done something inappropriate? I was sure that people disrobed for bed, and we are indoors."

"No, Brassman, it was me. I had no idea you were so," she paused, searching for the words, "anatomically correct, I'm sorry."

“It was not evident that I am patterned after men?” His nearly expressionless face somehow appeared confused. “I thought that I was blending in well because of my similarities.” Dropping the cover he looked down across his naked, shining brass form in confusion. It was obvious that his processor was being taxed.

“Oh,” Sheila replied, “it's quite evident now. Does that thing actually work?”

“How would you imagine that I purged my boiler a few minutes ago?” Sonny asked.

Realization crossed her face and she giggled. “Oh, of course,” she began, “but I actually meant, well, have you ever actually been with a woman?”

Sonny attempted to answer, but found the process in direct contradiction to a previous task. He searched his past and the memory of Momma's words came to him, driving it home. 'Do not speak of this,' she said, 'tell no one about me.' The mechanuculus finally found the reason he could not verbalize 'Momma' and struggled with a way to answer Sheila's question, to 'blend in' without violating the prior task. In order to maintain himself in this new life he did something that he had never done before. Like the leaps that allowed him to answer queries, formulate queries, acquire non task oriented resources and such he took another leap. Realizing that Momma was no longer available to task for him in new situations, and it was a necessary part of maintaining himself, Sonny began to self task.

'New task,' he told himself, 'develop and promote interpersonal relationships to maintain self and blend in. Supersede terminated relationships.' He accepted the task he set for himself and smiled at Sheila. What seemed on the surface simple was in fact the giant leap between a device and a creature, or perhaps a child and an adult.

“I was,” the steam powered man began, “built to fulfill the needs of my creator. At first all she needed was a cart, and that's how I began. I was a simple cart that carried things for her. When she needed companionship I became like a pet, listening to her, following her, and comforting her when she needed. Eventually she wanted a child, but found that she couldn't have one. I fulfilled that role as well, becoming her child, growing and learning at her knee. Reaching middle age, she found her lovers begin to move on one by one. Still being a healthy woman, she had me fill that role as well. I became the one lover who would never leave.” His voice lowered, “When she became ill, I became her nurse and caretaker. Finally on her deathbed she gave me one final task- blend in, stoke firebox, top off water, polish brass, wear clothes, and oil linkages. Basically she told me to maintain myself. I knew her only as Momma, but I see now, among you, that she was not my momma. She was my creator, my teacher my lover, my companion... and my owner.” Sonny looked down and saw the warm brown arms wrapped tightly around him. “I realize now, with her gone, that in order to maintain myself I must become my owner. I must task myself. Perhaps that is what she was trying to say at the end.”

“I would never have guessed, Brassman,” Sheila began. She never got a chance to finish her thought, if she had ever intended to. The hug triggered a response in the mechanuculus, one that had been tasked, and imprinted by repeated practice. He hugged her in return, and found her responses to be similar to his creators, but not always the same. Sonny used his new found ability to modify his own tasks and adapted. The rest of the night was filled with a twining of sun bronzed skin and polished brass as Sonny and Sheila showed each other several more levels above 'very nice'.

Sheila awoke. Looking over at Sonny's bed she saw that he was sitting on it. At first she must have thought he was watching her sleep, because she just lay there and looked at him. Finally she spoke, realizing that he had apparently gone inactive. "Halfje for your thoughts," she offered.

The mechanuculus became aware of her. "I did not charge you the traditional kwartje for a waltz, why would you presume to pay for something that is usually free?" Sheila laughed. There were many things that this brass man still had to learn. "Why are we still inside and unclothed so late in the morning, do we not pick today?"

"Saturday picking is optional, there is no quota. Teamsters and processing plants don't work on weekends, so if we pick the beans they must stay here. Boss doesn't have that much space to dry them if the dry ones aren't rotated out, so we rest unless we need to catch up." She stood, her skyclad form lightly glistening in the morning sun's rays. Moving over to his bed she sat beside him, then twined her arms around his metallic torso. "You joined the crew, so we don't need to catch up this weekend." She leaned her head on his shoulder, and he felt her smooth warm cheek against his brass skin. Sonny's hand found her thigh, and began moving along it. She pushed it away, "Oh, no, not again. Not until I eat anyway, one of us doesn't run on coal."

Needless to say, before midday the entire plantation knew of their new living arrangements. Once the initial gossip died down, the next few weeks on the coffee plantation passed like Sonny's first, once again blending together like cheap wine. This time, however, was much sweeter. The processor numbing work was now mixed with smiles, laughter, and warm friendly company in the evenings. The coffee pickers moved from field to field, sometimes having to ride the steam wagon out, but most times walking in one direction or the other. Finally, with the last of the fields being picked, the coffee harvest wound down to a close. All seasonal work does.

Meanwhile Sheila taught her Brassman to blend in, about all the little complications and pitfalls of relating with people. She shared with him her dreams and wishes for the future. Sonny taught her about his mechanics, all the little things that made him tick, literally. He shared his well remembered past and his love of books. Somewhere over the weeks Sheila stopped calling him Brassman and started calling him Sonny, and he finally considered it a true name.

The books, both the ones Sonny owned and those he could borrow, proved their worth as 'information collected against unknown needs'. One of the first books he purchased was on psychology because he wished to understand people better. He found, instead, that he now understood his own past better. He discovered that his creator, in addition to being a creative genius, would have been considered severely manic depressive. He discovered that there was no mechanism even closely related to himself, he was a species of one. He also discovered that including his time as 'cart' he was probably well over eighty years old- older than everyone else on the plantation.

Each of his discoveries he shared with Sheila, and she helped him understand and integrate each with his memories. Not long before the harvest ended when Sonny learned of his apparent age, though, Sheila became unusually quiet. The mechanuculus couldn't understand why this was different. "Why," Sonny asked her, "will you not discuss my probable age? Does it trouble you? The tull is almost sixty and had existed in it's present form the entire time."

Sheila's brow furrowed as she looked at him, searching for an answer. "I think it's because I never thought of you as older than me, I thought of you as about my age. You had just left your home, the world is still new to you, you have no children."

"I can never have children, I am a device." Sonny explained. "Unless perhaps I was to build them."

"Yes," she replied, "a device that has existed long before me, and will probably exist long after I'm gone."

"Gone? Where will you go?"

"Sonny," it was her turn to explain, "I will grow old, and eventually die. Before that I will want to have children, a family." Sonny thought of Momma then, old, alone with only himself to attend her in her final hours. He thought of Boss and his wife, their children who were always around, and boss's mother-in-law, Elena's momma, who was old but still helped manage the children. Even Boss's auntie, who had never had any children, was still on the plantation helping. Of course. That was why Momma had created him, after all, because she could not have children and had been banished. She had no other family.

Sonny had never really planned past the next completed task to where the series of tasks might take him. Now he realized that like playful banter and interpersonal relationships, there was a whole other level, perhaps several, to task completion. Sheila's task completion was perhaps dying quietly surrounded by her family and friends. He had no clue what his task completion should be, there was no one to show him. She touched the smooth brass of his cheek gently. Perhaps misunderstanding his silence she said, "It couldn't work between us, you know. Next week, when the picking is done and boss doesn't need us any more, I'll be going back to my own village. I'll have enough money saved up to start my business, maybe get married. What will you do when picking ends, Sonny? Where are you going?"

"I expected with you, now I do not know. I have never had to foretell before, my destiny was made for me as I was made. I mistakenly tied it to yours." Sonny found pain with the realization that their situation was temporary. He did not think she would return next year for the coffee harvest. Perhaps she would be married, maybe with several children of her own. The mechanuculus corrected that supposition himself, one year would probably not yield a single child, it could not yield several. It could be years. Still, she would need a mortal husband whom she would love. If he stayed with her he would eventually be relegated to servant and then caretaker. If he was lucky he could perhaps remain her friend, but he did not believe it so. "Now that I am my owner I must plan for myself." He looked into her deep brown eyes. "Perhaps, with what I've learned here, it would be best to revisit my past."

"You are going home then?" Sheila examined the linkages and joints of his hand as he replied.

"There is not much to return to. An empty cottage, perhaps with Momma's corpse still there as I do not think anyone has buried her. I will attend to that now that I know it's expected. Her gardens, toolshed, and her workshop a little deeper in the forest may hold answers. She was always afraid someone would find the workshop, now I think I know why."

Looking up, she asked, "Will you be back next year to pick coffee?"

"No, I do not think I could pick coffee here again," Sonny replied simply. Then he added softly, "after you." The night devolved into an urgent bout of lovemaking, as if they were trying to fit a lifetime worth into the few short hours they had left.

In the morning boss passed out the last envelopes to the pickers. Sonny and Sheila said their goodbye and he watched her with several of the other pickers ride the steam wagon down the road. Once she was out of sight he turned and headed deeper into the hills from whence he came.

1- Seven Fingers Down

The Caribbean sun was beating down on the steam ketch 'Seven Fingers', heating the aging wooden decks and dancing merrily across the wavelets. The little ship was running with all sheets to the wind, but her boiler was stoked with a low head of steam if it was needed, and the ballistae was sitting in its mount on the fore deck. Although it was another fine day on the water, Gavin was taking no chances. He scanned the horizon, always on the lookout for surprises. Gavin hated surprises, especially during a rum-run. Fortunately the goods had been delivered and he was headed back, he even had a few fish in the hold covering both the money and his alibi (just in case).

Candred, one of the two deckhands with his brother Ewan, called out from his post, "Gavin! Airship off the stern, coming up on us!"

Gavin, without looking, yelled back, "Right then, Ewan stow the ballistae! Let's drop the nets and fish for the nice blokes!" Within minutes the 'Seven Fingers' was once again a fishing boat. Gavin knew the nets would only slow them down, but not nearly as much as being hove to and boarded would if some idle passerby saw them and got suspicious. Many a rum runner had gotten to port after a run only to find the port authorities awaiting their arrival. They watched as the dirigible came amid ship and then passed them. It was a big one, a Graff or perhaps a Boing, full of tourists headed for the Caymans. The whine of its turbine changed pitch slightly as it passed, turning slightly. Ewan, and Candred, working the nets, pulled in several loads of fish before the airship had finally passed. "No sense in putting the ballistae back up, boys," Gavin told them, "we'll be coming up on the point soon. Best bring in the nets and stow the gear." With that said, the 'Seven Fingers' headed for port.

It was near dusk when the 'Seven Fingers' furled her sails as she crossed the bar and headed for the quay under a low head of steam. The lights of Grand Cayman were getting brighter against the growing darkness. The evening breeze coming from the island brushed Gavin's dry face and tousled his unruly hair. Finally the little ship steamed up next to the quay, kissing it ever so gently in Gavin's skilled hand. Candred ran afore and tied up the bow as his brother Ewan tied up the stern. "Right, lads," Gavin told the brothers, "with luck I'll be back quick, got to deliver the 'dry goods'." He dug the leather case full of cash out of its picean hiding place and gave it a cursory wiping down.

As he stepped off onto the dock Ewan asked, "So, what do you want us to do till you get back?"

"We're docking here tonight, so stow the gear like you always do in the evening." Gavin turned as he disappeared down the dock and added, "Oh, and we are fishermen. Sell the bloody fish!"

Gavin wended his way through the goings on dockside. Bars and taverns were alight with color, beckoning passing customers and pushing back the darkness of the Caribbean night. People moved in waves up and down the dock from place to place. Somewhere a rock band played loudly, mingling unsuccessfully with the mariachi music from the other direction. Gavin took it all in, letting the sensations waft over him with the scents of jerked goat and bratwurst. He almost missed the turn onto the little side street. On the corner was a colorfully lit club with music blaring, but the throbbing sound quickly diminished with the glare as he passed deeper into the shadows. "This is a nice place for a mugging," he mumbled to himself as he came to a hand painted wooden sign that simply said "Julio's".

The 'fisherman' opened the door. Heavy air, laden with kitchen smells and warmth welcomed him into the dimly lit bistro. The dimness was interrupted by an incredibly white grin from a very dark

skinned man. "Welcome," the man said, then he saw it was Gavin. Impossibly, his grin widened, "Gavin, man, good to see you back you old sea dog!" He patted Gavin on the shoulder.

"Julio, it's good to be back. You'll be pleased to know the fishing was very good today!"

"Ah, for this Julio is happy!" Julio laughed, "A table and two ales then." The large man padded away, leading Gavin to a dark booth. At a snap of his thick fingers a waitress brought two Red Stripes, and as she was leaving he told her to bring him 'the package'.

Gavin passed Julio the leather case. "It's all you wanted, plus almost half again."

Opening the case the big man gave it a quick accounting, then removed two bundles of bills. He dropped them into a paper bag labeled with a cartoon dog and the words, 'La cena de Fido' and passed it to the sailor. "I believe," he said, "that you are owed a little bit more than just your collateral in that case." About that time the waitress returned, a long thin package under her arm loosely wrapped in brown paper. Julio passed it to Gavin as well. Gavin sat it beside himself, feeling it's soft, quiet singing in the back of his mind. It was dormant now, there was no danger present, and for the first time in weeks Gavin actually relaxed. "You are not going to check it?" Julio asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I trust you," Gavin replied, adding to himself, "as far as I can bloody throw your fat ass."

"Perhaps," Julio suggested, "you should leave by a different door. Julio would hate for the wrong people to see you leaving his bistro with more than just a doggie bag. The climate has changed in the weeks you've been gone and Julio doesn't think it will get better soon. His rivals are getting less attention from the... health department, and poor Julio is finding them less understanding."

"Perhaps," Gavin mimicked with a wink, "Julio is smarter than he looks." Gavin shook a hastily offered hand, "Until the next time?"

"Of course." Julio replied as he showed Gavin the back way out through the kitchen. The rusted steel door opened onto a filthy alley, scattering several rats.

"Great," Gavin mumbled to himself, "instead of the short, brightly lit way with plenty of people I get to take the long, dark, scary way home." As if to empathize the point the door shut behind him and then clicked. Gavin stood in the filthy alley and waited a few moments for his eyes to adjust. Finally, able to see well enough to avoid the larger piles of steaming refuse, he wended his way towards the only open end of the alley and further from the quay. He turned left down the darkened street, a shorter route but one that passed through Julio's rivals turf.

Gwynrheghed sang softly to herself. Tonight for the first time in weeks her lover embraced her; she was content. She always feared it would be his last embrace whenever he was away from her, he had been so cold toward her the past few decades. He didn't seem to listen to her singing anymore, if he even heard. Her song turned sad with that thought, following an ancient Elvish dirge like a stream changing it's course. Where would she be, stranded in the mortal world without her prince. Perhaps, like others of her kind, she would be lost. Buried with a corpse or lying forgotten at the bottom of a cold dark lake was a terrible way to face eternity. Her terror of that living death colored her song, but still she sang. Her singing paused momentarily and then took an overtone of anticipation. Danger approached, and she felt it.

Gavin had taken a chance. He knew the section of town he passed through was Capibarra turf, but he needed to hurry back to the 'Seven Fingers' before the 'brothers dim' did anything really stupid. He put his head down and hoped the 'Capis didn't take notice of him. The South American were-rats were moving into Lobo turf. The Lobo's, hispanic werewolves of which Julio was one, were mainly rum-runners but both groups also dabbled in the lucrative drug trade, and both were very territorial. Like any good criminal organization the 'Capis knew the players in the area. Gavin assumed they would know of his ties to Julio, and thus to Lobo's. Yes, he was taking a very big chance. Slipping down the dark street he tried to remain unnoticed and hoped his luck would hold.

He saw movement in the shadows ahead of him and realized that his luck had run out. There was no way he could hide, and if he turned and ran they would run him down like prey. His best chance was to feign ignorance and hope nobody recognized him. Walking forward as if lost, he approached the group of gang-bangers. The five were-rats surrounded him. "Hey, hombre, you lost?"

"Yea, this ain't the tourista district, no expensive whores out here," another added.

"I was looking for the docks, could one of you direct me?" Gavin asked.

The one directly in front of him smiled showing a gold tooth, "How much money you got, friend, maybe we can sell you a map?" The others laughed. "What's in the package? Rosies for the lady friend?" Gavin realized it wasn't going to go well.

"Need some help, Hombre?" another asked, "Maybe she will like your new friends too." He added a pelvic thrust as if Gavin couldn't guess his meaning.

Gavin's thought turned to Gwynrheghed, and in an instant the rat's keen smell picked up his concern. "Oh, not rosies then. Something better?" He grabbed for the package. Before they knew what he was doing Gavin drew Gwynrheghed from hiding. The Elvish sword glowed. He felt it in his mind, guiding his hand. It sliced the air with a whoosh. The Capis stepped back momentarily, then began to move in with their own knives drawn trusting in speed and numbers. The battle song of the blade screamed in Gavin's head as she took the first two opponents in one stroke. The weapon took on a life of it's own. Before the others could react Gwynrheghed took a third. The remaining two turned to run. The sword thrust and the fourth fell, wounded. The fifth 'Capi ran for his life as only a were-rat could. The street fight was finished in less than two heartbeats.

Gavin fought briefly for control of his sword arm, and then Gwynrheghed lashed out and took the fourth's life. Finally in control, Gavin wiped the glowing blade on the fourth's clothes and sheathed the sword, re-wrapping the ripped paper as best he could. The 'Capis were going to be really pissed. Proverbial excrement would soon hit the proverbial fan.

Gwynrheghed had been awakened from her half dream. Her old lover, her prince of Rheghed, had wielded her! It had been so long, and the attacking force was only five, a light feeding and she'd had only four of them. Still, she took them with no effort, and their blood tasted sweet. She sang softly to herself, hoping that her prince wouldn't be as cold toward her as he had been.

Picking up his doggie bag, Gavin hurried along at a dead run now, stealth thrown to the four winds. Within two blocks and another corner he reached the main drag with it's noise, crowds, and light. Carrying the sword like the 'Capi suggested, as a bunch of flowers, and blending into the throng the sailor meandered along with the flow toward the quay area. As if switching jobs at the dock, the

streetlights changed from cheap electric to touristy gas at the same place that the dimly lit shops switched to upscale brightly lit bars and bistros. Coming into view of the 'Seven Fingers' Gavin realized that his problems had just compounded. Several island police carriages lined the dock area near the 'Fingers' along with the Port Authority. Their steam engines chuffed softly as they idled on the quay. A crowd of onlookers ringed the area. Candred and Ewan were sitting along the quay in handcuffs and by all appearances they had offloaded none of the fish like they had been told.

Joining the crowd Gavin leaned over to a plump tourist in a flowered shirt and asked, "What's up here, then? My girl's on the other side, think I can get by?"

"Drug bust, I think," the man answered, "Went down about ten minutes ago. From what I gather the captain's not around, just the crew. You'll probably have to slip around on a side street."

"Nah," Gavin answered remembering his last side street adventure, "I'll slip into a bar for a cool one, she'll understand." With that he stepped away and entered the nearest pub, a dive named 'One Eyed Jacks'.

'One Eyed Jacks' turned out to be a true dump. Sure, thirty years ago it would have passed for a tourist place with a nautical theme, but now it was the real thing, a dockside dive. Fishing nets hung on the walls as decoration, and the tables were hatch covers. Smells of greasy cooking, smoke, and unwashed humans permeated the dingy place. The gas lighting, at first thought part of the theme, turned out to be in fact real. This place had never been electrified.

The few people in the place grew quiet as he entered. Gavin quickly located a table near a window to watch the action and pulled up a second chair for his bundle. The table was sticky, and so was the floor. An unpleasant waitress came over quickly, perhaps so he would drink and leave with equal haste, and he ordered a Red Stripe.

Ignoring Gwynrheged's soft singing in his head as he had for centuries, Gavin began to think. The bust had gone down about the same time as his little diversion with the rats, so the two were probably not related. If anything the Capis had kept him from being on board when it happened. He himself didn't run any drugs, so either it was a setup or more likely a side job of the 'brothers dim'. Either way, the 'Seven Fingers' would be in port a while and the Capis would sure as hell be looking for him along with the Port Authority. It wouldn't matter which one got him. When Julio had told him that his rivals were getting less attention from the 'health department' he was pretty sure that meant the Port Authority was in bed with the Capibarras. Piece by piece he continued to lay his options out while sipping his ale.

The Lobo's wouldn't help him either. Hell, Julio wouldn't just sell him out, he'd hold an auction. He had, exactly, his clothes with several dollars, guilders, and shillings, a magic sword that needed to be hidden, and a doggie bag with around two thousand dollars in large at the moment unusable bills. There was, sadly, only one place in Grand Cayman left to him and he hated it.

Signaling the waitress, Gavin held up two guilders. She looked to the bartender, who gave Gavin a thumbs up. None of them actually spoke, and Gavin thought he could actually get to like 'One Eyed Jack's'. It was, well, quiet. Stepping from the bar, Gavin looked hesitantly at the dock where his ship rocked gently, still ringed with officers. He turned away, not toward were-creature turf but into the area they would not go willingly. Many blocks passed by, each one a little darker and more depressing. Finally Gavin's feet brought him to the doorstep of the 'House of the Setting Sun'. This area of town

was old, but electrified and the buildings were well kept. He took a deep breath and swung the heavy knocker and a moment later the door opened with an ominous groan.

“Good evening,” the madam offered. Gavin wondered why they always said that. It was never, 'hi' or 'nice to see you', but always the same. She was well built, but petite with loose blond curls framing her pixie like face. The dark shift she wore was off the shoulder, and her curls fell gently across her pale bare skin.

“Good evening to you as well, Marie,” Gavin offered back.

Recognizing him, her pouting lips widened into a huge smile. She did not bother to hide her incisors. “Why kitten,” she said with a haughty, familiar air, “you’ve come home!”

“Ah, that’s what I needed to see, a smile bright as sunlight!” Gavin replied.

“Better not be!” the vampiress shot back, “So, you in trouble again? Seems like the only time you lighten my doorstep your on the lam.”

“You’re not going to invite me in?”

“Ah, so trouble it is, hmmm? Well, come in then. Fortunately for you I don’t have any company and I’ve already eaten.” The vampiress led Gavin through a Victorian era parlor and a beaded curtain, down a short hall and into a rather modern looking kitchen. She closed the door. “Lighting, kitten, the guests expect a certain ambiance and most of the girls are at work. We can talk here,” Marie explained, “but if you’re going to start waving swords around and screaming we’ll have to retire to the dungeon.” Understanding, Gavin told his former lover his predicament as she poured them both a glass of wine. He missed neither the fact that her wine was a much deeper red than his own, nor that she hadn’t pulled the shift up over her shoulders during his tale. You could never tell anything from a vampire’s eyes, and very little from their body language because body language changed between eras and regions. Gavin knew this particular vampiress well though, and he was almost certain that was a good sign. Well, he was hopeful.

“Well,” she said as he got to the part of the story where she opened the door, “I believe that’s a record for you, kitten, in port less than an hour and you’re in the middle of a turf war with no ship and no crew. I really think you should trade that thing,” she nodded towards the bundle that was Gwynrheged, “for a bunch of roses. I like red ones.”

“So, luv, can you help?” Gavin asked hopefully.

“Sadly,” Marie started, looking downward, “I’ve always had a soft spot in my heart for stray kittens. Come with me.” She led him up a small stairway in the back of the kitchen, the 'servant's' stairs, up to the fourth floor. In Victorian era homes this would be the servant's quarters, but now it was mostly storage. Producing a key from an impressive collection, Marie opened one of the doors. It was a small but clean chamber, tucked under the eaves, with a tiny gabled window. It held a simple bed, an ancient sea chest, an armoire, and a guitar case.

Looking at it, Gavin gasped, “You kept my things.” Then, a little confused he added, “Um, I don’t play the guitar.”

“Yes, a little extravagance I indulge myself.” Marie explained. She took Gwynrheged from his grasp, opened the guitar case, and deposited the blade inside the empty box. “Perhaps you should take up the guitar, your so damn good at it, after all.”

“Marie,” Gavin paused, a million thoughts came to mind mixed with good and bad memories. “Thank you.”

“Don't thank me yet, kitten, I haven't named my price,” She walked around behind him. Scratching the back of his neck just below his head as one would a pet she leaned forward and whispered ominously, “Looks like someone is spending the night.” Feeling his back tense up she added, “Oh, don't be so dramatic, it's not like we'll kill each other,” Marie smiled and added, “again.” She passed him a loose key from her collection. “One floor down, kitten, don't take too long to figure it out.” With that she was gone as silently as only a vampiress could be.

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Gavin awoke in the vampiress's 'night' bed. By his best estimate from the light coming through the window it was after noon, but not by much. Every joint in his body, and most of the muscles as well, ached. As if not to be outdone by muscle and bone, his head reminded him of the amount of sweet red wine he had indulged in. Marie had extracted a heavy price for her assistance. He was, of course, alone.

Slowly getting out of the bed, Gavin thanked the stars that Marie had remembered to untie him before she left. He moved to the window, letting the sun warm his bones and seep into his aching muscles. The room was large, as suited the mistress of the house. Along the wall opposite the window was Marie's wardrobe, chest, and vanity. The wall to Gavin's right was mostly taken up by a modern babbage terminus, an incongruous and undecipherable mass of wires, gears, and motors with a typewriter attached to it. There was an antique writing desk next to the monstrosity.

Finally he turned to the wall on the bed side of the room and noticed the door to Marie's bathing chamber was ajar. Gavin decide to explore, and upon entering he noted that a bath had been drawn. The water, he noted upon testing it, was not only lightly scented but quite hot. Fresh towels and a robe had been set, and the shaving kit from the things he had left in storage was sitting beside them. Someone had been in the room whilst he was laying naked and unconscious on the bed. Perhaps, he thought, it was not Marie who had untied him at all.

Gavin sank slowly into the hot water, relishing every moment of the descent and completely submersing himself. Slowly his mind began to function again, and he began to plot his next course.

He would, Gavin realized, need to find out the status of the 'Seven Fingers'. If she had been impounded then she was unreachable, the Port Authority would auction her off. If she was not, then he could claim her, but in doing so he would let the Capi's know where he was. Without at least one deckhand to help get her out to sea he would be a treed fox.

If the 'Seven Fingers' was truly lost to him then he would need an alternate way off the island. Either way he would need at least a cursory change of appearance. Gavin pondered the shaving kit that was so neatly laid out for him and realized that: One, he was going to miss that full beard, and: Two, Marie was already ahead of him, as usual. It must have been the wine. Gavin carefully pared down his full beard into a fu-man-chu style mustache, a style he had never worn. He also pulled his unruly mat

of hair straight back into a short pony tail. Examining himself in the small mirror over Marie's washstand he realized that except for fangs he could pass as one of her brethren.

He smiled. "Good E-ven-ing," he said to his reflection.

"It's afta noon, mon!" came a female voice from the other room. Gavin quickly plunked back down into the tub. "I'm gonna leave dis breakfast like ma'am said to," the maid explained with a short laugh. He mentally admonished himself to quit fooling around, he was in serious trouble. Damn that wine! Gavin waited till he heard the door close before he stepped from the tub, dried himself off, and donned the offered robe. Upon re-entering the bedroom Gavin quickly located breakfast. Not only breakfast, but fresh clothes from the stuff Marie had kept for him had been laid out on the bed.

Taking a crepe, he callously wrapped a sausage and a bit of egg into it and confronted the terminus. The typewriter keys, apparently, were translated into morse code by an integrated tabulator. The morse code was then sent, at high speed thanks to a small steam turbine process, across the telegraph wires to what one could only assume was the main difference engine for the island. There it would be decoded into lovelace script that the babbage would use. "Hah!" Gavin thought to himself, "and Marie said I was too 'Dark Ages'." He turned it on, waited a moment for the turbine's pitch to steady, and then typed a few commands. Within moments the machine was dotting and dashing the latest news feed to him in standard morse code. As would any other literate being in this modern age, his mind interpreted it like one would a foreign spoken language.

Gavin poured himself a cup of tea, sat back with a second crepe, and listened to the previous night's events. There was only a cursory mention of the quadruple murder, with no witness's and no suspect. It was being attributed to gang violence, which meant that both gangs would be significantly less than friendly if the escaped Capi could identify him. There was no mention of the routine drug bust.

Finishing breakfast, and with second cup of tea in hand, Gavin addressed the terminus again. The morse fell silent, and Gavin began searching for Port Authority documents from the prior evening. At first he was sending everything to the typewriter until he realized it was being echoed on the cathode tube. Being fiendishly clever, he disabled the printing. The brother's dim, Ewan and Candred, were being held before the Port Magistrate on drug trafficking charges. They were likely to do serious time and sadly there was nothing Gavin could do to help them. The ship and captain were not implicated, which meant that the 'Fingers' was still his alone with it's hold half full of rotting fish. All he had to do was hire two or three able bodied deckhands, go down to the docks, pay the Dockmaster's fees, collect the 'Fingers', get her boiler stoked and ready to sail, get out of the harbor in the middle of a brewing were-creature turf war, and not get killed in the process. Simple.

And he was now in a bath robe sitting smack in the middle of a vampire's lair in vampire territory several short hours before dusk, sipping tea. Finishing his tea, Gavin shut down the terminus and liberated several envelopes, some paper, and a self-inking quill from Marie's writing desk. Taking the quill, he labeled one envelope 'Dockmaster'. He then wrote out a letter authorizing the offloading and sale of the 'Seven Fingers' cargo of ripening fish and folded it into thirds. That being done, Gavin changed into the provided clothing, realizing that Marie had selected a shirt that was a bit too loose and flouncy and trousers that were a bit too tight. He added to that a silk wescot and boots. Slipping up the back stairs he gathered the rest of his things from 'his' room, adding 'Fido's Dinner' to the guitar case after separating several bills from the bundles. He slung the case across his back and felt the soft gentle

song of a contented Gwynrheged in his mind. Her blood lust, for now, was sated and hopefully would remain so until he could free himself from Grand Cayman.

Picking up his 'in town' coat he headed back down the servants staircase, out the back door, and down the street away from the docks and deeper into vampire turf. Gavin walked briskly, putting himself in a position to enter the dock area of the city from the vampire quarter. He passed through a neatly manicured neighborhood with large well separated houses. The area softly whispered wealth rather than screamed it as a row of mansions would. He noted the street trees individually ringed with iron trellises and not a dead limb or scrap of wood anywhere. He worked his way almost to the airship field before turning toward the harbor and his true goal.

Finally, as the sun was making long shadows across the cobbles, Gavin entered the working side of the dock area. No flashy lights and touristy bars here, just rusty warehouses and fish processing businesses. Stopping off at one he knew supplied less than quality fish (mostly fertilizer and bait) he confronted one of the foremen and passed him the letter. Reading it, the foreman looked Gavin up and down. "So why don't the captain come 'ere 'imself?" the foreman asked him.

"Think he's busy hiring a new crew," Gavin answered, "seeing as the last bunch got themselves arrested."

"Yea, nasty bit that," the foreman replied, "but plenty o' honest able bodies about, sure he can find a few what won't get themselves arrested. We'll get that lot offloaded, pay the labor out 'o the ship's cut, and apply the balance to 'is books."

"I'll relay that to Captain Draegun," Gavin offered, "I'm sure he'll thank you." Leaving the processing house, Gavin merged with the working people heading home for the day. Following the flow, he quickly found himself at the harbormaster's office. Climbing the narrow staircase, Gavin entered the cluttered office and immediately shuffled through the borrowed envelopes. Selecting one, he presented the envelope he had prepared earlier with 'Dockmaster' on it. "For 'Seven Fingers'," he told the clerk.

"You the ship master?" the clerk asked. In response, Gavin simply looked at his clothing, his 'guitar', and back at the man. "Right," the clerk shot back, "well when you see him tell him he's covered for a fortnight. Oh, he'll need to hire a new crew and there's been some unsavory types asking about him as well."

"Thanks."

"One other thing, tell him the 'Seven Fingers' is getting a little ripe," the man grinned, "if you get my drift."

"I believe he's got that covered," Gavin responded. Leaving the office Gavin walked by the local Fisherman's Wharf and into the dock area. As he passed the berth where the 'Fingers' rested Gwynrheged began to sing louder. That, and the obvious fact that they were out of place for the people around them, identified the two wererats walking the docks. Gavin stopped at a small news stand and purchased a local paper, perusing it briefly while examining the situation. There didn't seem to be a Lobo presence, so it didn't seem that the Capis had connected him to the wolf pack, if in fact the Capis even knew who he was. He slipped the paper under his arm and continued on.

"Bloody lovely," Gavin thought to himself as he entered One Eyed Jacks for the second time in as many days. Remembering his last order, Gavin changed it to a Killians and ordered it at the bar. Carrying it, and the offered glass, to a table he poured it into the glass before taking a sip. The barkeep separated himself from the back of the bar and address Gavin.

Indicating the guitar case he asked, "Can you play that?"

Knowing it's true contents, Gavin answered yes and then smiled at the irony.

"You any good?" the barkeep asked.

"I'm killin' 'em," Gavin told him with a grin. Realizing this man wanted to hire him he added, "but I already got's me a gig."

Looking at him sideways the brewslinger said, "So, when you free up stop by. Always looking for entertainment here."

Deciding on discretion, at least for now, Gavin simply answered, "Thanks." Sipping his ale Gavin began to think. He was going to need a base to meet and hire a new crew, and One Eye's was perhaps as good as any. That is, of course, if the barkeeper wouldn't remember him too well. He really dreaded returning to Marie's, but at the moment it was the safest of his options. His safest option would have been, of course, to be out at sea. At this point he wasn't even sure if the Capis had identified the captain of the Seven Fingers as the one who had taken out four of their people or not, and he had no way of knowing. Suffice to say though that he wouldn't be doing any rum running for a few trips, at least until the Lobos and Capis sorted themselves out.

That meant, if nothing more lucrative turned up, that he would have to actually use his fishing ketch to catch fish. That would mean a crew of at least four and himself, with two crew to man the nets on either side. A larger crew would also make it easier to get out of port quickly, a plus in his current situation. With a crew of four he could push off the dock and raise sail long before the boiler could even warm up. It would of course require the proper tide, and favorable wind. That being decided, Gavin ordered another Killians, pulled the borrowed quill and paper from his coat, and began to write:

Attention, Crew Needed!

Due to recent unfortunate events, the fishing steamketch 'Seven Fingers' is in need of able bodies.

The Seven Fingers is mainly a fishing vessel, but will occasionally contract light cargo and is also available for charter trips for paying passengers.

Applicants must either be skilled sailors or fishers, or trainable and able to follow Captain's orders.

Applications will be taken on the morrow, betwixt midday and dusk, at the pub known as One Eyed Jacks.

With an ironic smile of his lips Gavin added at the bottom:

Look for the guitar man.

That being done, Gavin read his paper while finishing his drink. Remembering the guilders that he paid with the last time, he dropped a silver shilling on the table for the tab, and headed back to the

Dockmasters to post his billet. He would have to return to his dormer room at Marie's, at least for tonight. It was a prospect he was truly hoping to survive.

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The nice thing about vampire districts, mused Gavin as he strolled back toward Marie's place, is the lack of random crime. Nothing will deter the average footpad or street punk quite like the possibility of having one's blood drained. Not once did he hear so much as a whimper from his enchanted burden. Gavin remembered the last time he had survived a vampire attack, as a matter of fact it had been Marie. She had left him for dead, for he truly should have been, and only moments later his unnatural plasma had made her violently ill. He himself took several days to recuperate, a fact that he had attributed to excess alcohol consumption rather than the attack. It wasn't until weeks later he found out that she had, in fact, attacked and killed him. He smiled wryly to himself then, as he remembered that the second time their paths crossed he had returned the favor. Of course, if not done properly, that condition is not permanent for the undead. Fortunately they did reconcile, mostly.

Gavin slipped through the alley behind Marie's and through the back door as quietly as possible. It turned out not to be necessary, apparently the ladies were entertaining. Music and muffled laughter wafted through the house from the parlor. He made his way upstairs and flopped into his little bed on the top floor. A tiny patch of moonlight from the small window was enough light to undress by, but Gavin noticed a paper lying on the bed beside him. He turned the lamp key, causing the glass tube full of noble gas to flicker to life.

"Kitten," the note began, "Last night brought back so many memories, most of them good. I need to talk with you, so I will awaken you before dawn. You're off the hook tonight though, I have clients and you know that a girl has to eat."

"Mostly good," Gavin echoed with a whisper as his mind returned to a long forgotten beach under a full moon. He entered Morpheus's realm on a raft of soft blond curls and pale moonlit skin. He awoke to someone shaking him gently. Eye's snapping open, Gavin was confronted with the same blond curls and pale skin that had lulled him to sleep. Sadly, the moon was long set. The lamp, however, was still glowing. It's light shimmered off the deep blue satin of her shift.

"Gav," Marie said, "kitten, wake up. Dawn is upon us and I've heard things." Gone was the vampiric aura of an undead monster, she was now just.... her.

"Yes," he answered, "I'm awake Poppy." She smiled at that. Gavin had taken a chance using that name, but her incisors flashed with the smile and the illusion was gone.

"Quickly then," she said, "the Capis not only don't know it was you, they don't care. Apparently a couple of fools doing side work mugging tourists got their asses kicked by one. They're so embarrassed that they're pretending it didn't happen."

"Wererats, go figure." Gavin offered.

"Exactly, the Lobos think it's hilarious. The Capis *are* planning something so their main attention is elsewhere," Marie continued. "It seems there's a shipment of Lobo currency from Haiti to Cancun. The Capis are after it, but they're not sailors. They'll probably take out the crew, offload the goods, and set the ship adrift."

“Well,” Gavin added thoughtfully, “if it were me, and it most definitely is not, the ship would be scuttled or renamed and sold. Of course, that would only be if I were a pirate and not an honest fisherman.”

“Of course,” Marie agreed. “but it certainly would be a fortuitous turn of events to claim salvage rights if an honest fisherman were to stumble upon such a crewless ship, say at about 16 degrees north and 80 degrees west in about three days, wouldn't it?” Seeing that the steam driven little brass gears of Gavin's mind were now spinning furiously Marie added, “Well, I have to get down to the basement, kitten.” She kissed his cheek, “See you at dusk.” Stopping at the door she looked over her shoulder provocatively, “Oh, and do try not to make me wait.”

Before Gavin could retort she was gone like mist at dawn, which it was ironically. He smelled coffee. It wafted through the vents and tickled his nose, calling to him. Wending his way downstairs to the kitchen Gavin located the coffee, it was amidst several of the working girls. They were the mortal day-walking kind.

“Well helloooo, sailor,” one of them offered, “So this is what Momma's been hiding in the attic.”

“He doesn't *look* anemic,” observed another.

“Yes, yes,” Gavin replied, “think what you want. I'm Gavin and I'm here for the coffee.”

“That's a good thing, sweetie,” commented the third as she poured him a cup, “cuz that's all you're getting. The shift is over, Momma's gone to sleep, and we're all headed there ourselves.”

“Well in that case ladies, sleep well,” Gavin responded. The girls meandered out, talking amongst themselves and leaving Gavin to contemplate with his coffee. He had a full day to wait. The offloading of the Fingers would take a while, as would word of his crew billet. There wouldn't be any applicants until tomorrow at the earliest. The probable salvage (if in fact Marie was to be trusted and her source reliable) wouldn't happen for three days. He could visit the ship, since monocles didn't seem to be trained on it (again, if Marie was to be trusted), but why tempt fate. Marie would expect him at dusk, to what end he could quite well imagine.

To what end indeed, for that brought to mind her motives in all this. Marie was far from philanthropic, she had to have an interest in having himself and the Seven Fingers at a particular place and at a particular time. Her objective probably wasn't the Fingers itself, the ship was far more the sitting duck yesterday lying dockside with fees due. Why would one want to pluck her from the middle of the sea? Likewise with himself, he would have been easier pray the night before last, being bound naked to her bed. (The memories of such entered his mind. He fought briefly with his burgeoning 'interest'.) Finally, mostly to clear his head, he decided to finish his coffee and head out to find some real breakfast.

Having changed clothes and freshened up, and after a brisk morning walk, Gavin found himself at the airfield cafe' with a fresh cup of tea in hand and an order of bangers and mash on the way. The cafe' was the only place on the island where one could watch the airships while enjoying a pleasant meal. It was a large, bright, airy space elevated over the receiving terminus where people could await arriving passengers. The huge floor-to-ceiling convex windows were supported by steel ribbing and

cables, reminiscent of the structure of the airships themselves. It was as if one were inside the gas bag of a transparent dirigible, looking out.

Gavin had always been fascinated by these incredible craft, the newest ones being driven by gas turbines. Instead of steam pressure, these gas turbines were driven by burning methane gas to spin the turbine blades. This made the power system much lighter and increased the cargo capacity of these craft. Of course, mere fascination was not the only reason for Gavin's choice of breakfast. Finishing his meal, Gavin dropped several shillings on the table and headed next door to the airfield gift shop. His arrival was heralded by a pleasant ding which caused the solitary clerk to look up. "Can I help you sir?" the man asked.

"Yes," Gavin replied, "my nephew is quite entranced by airships. Do you happen to have a working model of one?" He knew very well that they did.

"Of course, sir!" the clerk exclaimed, indicating several brightly colored boxes. "All of these are rubber band powered, and come with enough compressed hydrogen to allow several charges. A single charge should keep the toy aloft for three to four days with a sound gas bag. There is both a Boing, and the slightly larger and more sophisticated Graff models. Additional hydrogen can be purchased, as can a repair kit."

"Excellent," Gavin said with a smile, "I'll take one of the Graff models, an extra hydrogen canister, and a repair kit. He is, sadly, quite a clumsy boy." Paying for his purchases, Gavin headed back into town towards the local college. He had a favor to collect on.

It had been a long time since he seen Dr. Merriwether. When they had first met, the doctor had just transferred from the Gymnasium Westphalia and Gavin (actually Gwynrheged) had extracted him from a 'situation'. Now, according to yesterday's paper, he was head of thaumatology at the local college, doing research with not only magic but other fields of engineering. Arriving at the college, Gavin quickly located the offices of Dr. John Merriwether. A single knock brought him face to face with his old friend. At first the doctor looked at him oddly, as if trying to place his face. Finally he said, "Nice mustache, but I liked the beard better. You have 'it' with you, don't you?"

"Me too, and yes, John." Gavin replied, "It's been a long time. I read of you in the paper and thought I'd stop by."

"How pleasant. Sadly I only have a few minutes until class," Merriwether said, "so what's on your mind. Ready to sell that sword yet?"

Gavin laughed. "No, she'd go crazy without one of the blood to comfort her. Pretty soon she'd try to cut someone's head off for fun."

"I could ward for that," the doctor replied. "So, if you're not selling the sword?"

"I'd like to call in that favor." Gavin replied.

"Well you certainly waited long enough. What do you need, surely not a luck potion. Perhaps a little something to perk up the love life?"

“Oh, neither of those. Remember you were working on a remote vision device several years ago? Did you ever perfect it?”

John laughed. “Not really, but it sort of worked. It is actually a modified Homunculus which can 'see' magically and transmit a brief description over wires to a telegraph unit. Problem is, it's mindless, it's vocabulary is limited and the telegraph is less than portable. It is also slow, by the time it can describe a scene someone can completely survey it with an ordinary spyglass. Why are you asking about those old things?”

“Just a wild thought I had, do you still have any?”

“Why yes, three.”

“Could I perhaps,” Gavin paused, “purchase one?”

“No, but you could, of course, submit a donation to my research.” Reaching into a glass display case Dr. Merriwether removed a pair of what appeared to be glass eyes and a pair of telegraph units. “Pick one,” he offered, “They're matched to their respective parts. Very difficult to synchronize too, so they're not interchangeable. Oh, take a battery, you'll need one for the telegraph unit. The Homunculus needs a single drop of the users blood for the life force.” Gavin selected one and added it to his bag. Saying his goodbyes, he stopped by the college offices and made a moderate donation to his friend's research.

By now it was nearly lunchtime. Gavin hustled along with his bundles, he wanted to get a short nap before dusk. He needed to be up early, and he was certain he would get little sleep tonight. Besides, he had some new toys to play with. He stopped by a little jerk stand of questionable repute and bought a tortilla-wrapped mystery meal. He finished most of it.

Returning to his tiny room he opened his packages. Cleverly combining the contents of his packages, Gavin assembled and filled the toy dirigible. That being done, Gavin headed for the roof. A half hour later found him on the widow's walk of Marie's enjoying the afternoon sun with two of the 'ladies'. The toy airship, with Merriwether's glass eye snugly fastened inside the tiny gondola, drifted lazily in the sea breeze tethered by two slender copper strands. The telegraph next to him chattered noisily, describing every single visible thing within range and running the entire mess together at random. He listened to it for a good fifteen minutes with the women giggling at his wasted efforts.

“Yea,” Gavin thought to himself, “completely useless if there's anything to actually see.” He wound the toy in and took it back to his room. Just for grins he left it inflated, wound the rubber band, and sent it floating across the room. The telegraph chattered wildly. Finally the little dirigible bumped against the wall and the receiver chattered a steady 'dit-dah-dah, dit-dah, dit-dah-dit-dit, dit-dah-dit-dit; dit-dah-dah, dit-dah, dit-dah-dit-dit, dit-dah-dit-dit; dit-dah-dah, dit-dah, dit-dah-dit-dit, dit-dah-dit-dit;' Gavin smiled a wry smile, detached the battery, deflated and stowed the toy, and headed to Marie's bath chamber. Dusk was still several hours off and he would definitely need that nap.

Gavin awoke. The last few rays of sun were fading lazily from the tiny window in his room. Marie would be awakening soon, and he wasn't really sure what she was planning for tonight. Actually, he was never really sure what she was planning at any time. Part of *his* plan was to figure out why she wanted to know where he would be on the water in two days. He dressed quickly, having bathed before his nap, and headed downstairs to the kitchen. It was empty, most of the ladies being in the

parlor awaiting clients. Their muted chatter and laughing could barely be heard through the thick walls. Gavin fixed himself a cup of tea and sat back to wait. He had barely begun to woolgather before Marie strolled through the door. She was wearing a long red dress that more flowed around her curves than clung to them. Her pale tresses were pulled back from her face and her makeup was, surprisingly, subdued. Before she could say it, Gavin said, "Good Evening."

Marie smiled, flashing the briefest glimpse of white. "You are **not** going to dinner in that horrid coat."

He looked down at it. "Why not?"

"Because," she explained as if it made perfect sense, "you'll be with me, and I have more class."

They went upstairs together. Removing his only dinner jacket from the armoire she handed it to him. Raising an eyebrow, Gavin said, "Not exactly what I thought you had in mind for me..."

Marie laughed. Like the wine she served or the house she lived in it was airy and light with dark ominous overtones. "Please, kitten," she said, "give me some credit. I need to make sure you keep your strength up." Gavin reached for the guitar case and she added, "Please don't. Won't you trust me this once?"

Gavin opened the case. Holding the sheathed Gwynrheged, he placed the hilt of the weapon between her ample bosom. Her singing didn't waver, it remained quiet and calm. "I won't lie to you, I'm never sure of your motives. But she seems to like you."

Marie sighed, "Probably the best course, kitten. Let's both take the night off."

Gavin tucked the elvish sword back in its guitar case and left it beside the bed. They went back downstairs to the carriage house where the carriage was already running, with a driver. He hopped out and opened the door for them. For the second time Gavin raised the eyebrow at her. "Oh, give it a rest, kitten," she told him, "I don't get to enjoy an evening out often." They headed uphill, not towards the dock, finally ending up at a pricey restaurant with an incredible view of the city and harbor. It was an establishment that catered to vampires, and had an impressive selection of plasma. Gavin had a blackened fish.

"Don't you ever get tired of fish, kitten?" Marie asked wryly after he ordered.

"Do you get tired of plasma?" Gavin replied.

"Touche" she conceded. The evening's conversation went like that, sort of a pleasant fencing match, thrust-parry-ripost. Gavin learned nothing of Marie's motives and plans and she nothing of his, but it was not unenjoyable.

Once dinner was over Marie had her driver take them back to the dockside area, stopping the carriage in front of a subdued club. It was a bit incongruous, placed amidst several loud garishly lit places. Young people dressed in depressing black clothing and odd makeup milled about, intermingling with brightly clad tourists and locals in work clothes. Getting out of the carriage, they were assaulted by the sounds, smells, and sights of the dock club scene all vying for attention at the same time. Jerk

spices, rock music, sauerkraut, electric lights, reggae, fajitas, all intermingled in a sensory overload, Gavin had passed through this area several nights before, just before his visit with Julio.

“Wild, isn't it, kitten?” Marie shouted.

“Last time I was here I just put my head down and kept walking,” Gavin yelled back. Marie dragged him into the subdued club just before one of the drunks could throw up on his boots. The door closed on his loud retching, shutting that and the cacophony outside away. They got a table near the dance floor. Light jazz was playing, the dance floor was empty. A waiter took their order, Gavin's was dark rum and Marie's a red wine laced with plasma.

It was Marie's turn to raise an eyebrow. “Ah,” said Gavin, “so I can still surprise you.” Marie laughed. “So, tell me again why you need me out in the middle of Caribbean.”

“Oh, kitten, not now. I already told you, there's a salvage job I want you to have,” Marie's pale blue eyes looked directly into his. “That's all.” A medieval reel began to play. “You remember this one?”

“I didn't even see you pass him a note,” Gavin retorted, leading her to the dance floor. “very subtle.”

“When it suits me,” she parried, beginning to move with him. They glided across the floor following steps they both remembered. Several couples joined them, trying to follow their lead. Returning to their table, Marie offered, “I know a quiet spot on the beach, between rock outcroppings.....”

Gavin started laughing. “That's how it started last time. Are you really sure you want to repeat this?”

“Well,” Marie started, “I think we could repeat it up until the swords and wooden stakes come out.” She lowered her eyes and touched his hand softly, then added, “It was alright until then, wasn't it?” Gavin pondered this creature as he realized 'it' was happening all over again. He knew that she was both a lovely, sweet young woman and an eight hundred year old undead.... well, monster. He had seen some of her work, had almost become one of her victims. Memories of pain and anger flowed across his mind's eye like spilled blood. And yet, there was the good part too.

And Gwynrheged had never failed him before. “We'll probably want a blanket, and maybe some wine,” Gavin said finally.

Marie smiled, this time not even trying to conceal her fangs. “I took the liberty of packing a picnic basket.” Gavin sighed, realizing he had been played again. Arm in arm they headed out the door and into the night.

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Marie had the carriage driver pull off the road after driving half an hour along the coastal highway. “A barren stretch of highway,” Gavin taunted, “how romantic.”

"Just get the basket, kitten," Marie said. Climbing a low seaward outcropping of rock was not challenging for either the sea captain or the vampress, even barefoot. It was a Caribbean- perfect night inside the small pocket cove. Gavin extracted the blanket and wine from the basket, spreading the first and pouring the second from two separate bottles. He took care not to confuse them. The pair sat on the folded blanket with the expanse of pristine sand spreading around them. Waves with softly luminescent tips lapped the beach rhythmically.

Marie was nestled against Gavin's chest, his arm around her. It was hard to believe that the last time they had sat like this, on a similar perfect beach on a similar perfect night sipping wine, it had ended with them trying to kill each other. "You know," Marie offered, "I think we needed this. It's kind of a 'full circle' thing."

"I still can't stop remembering the last time," Gavin said.

"Shhh, kitten," Marie said, putting her ruby tipped finger against his lips, "that's not *now*." She looked into his eyes. A warm breeze tousled her soft curls. Her lips parted slightly. Gavin took the gambit, meeting them with his own. The wine on Marie's lips tasted sweet, spiced with a coppery tang of fresh blood which reminded Gavin of *what* he was kissing. The thought was erased by her lips, which were warmer now from both the wine and the blood it was laced with. They were both glowing faintly with the alcohol. Gavin's hand reached up and slid the strap of Marie's dress off her shoulder. Her fingers unbuttoned his shirt and pranced through the hair on his chest in response, pushing him back gently. The sand was cool on his back, even through the blanket. Marie, laying on top of him, ground her lips into his. She was warm. Gavin lay there suspended between the warmth and the coolness for a moment, then his tongue responded. Marie's mouth tasted coppery, like her lips.

His tongue ran across the sharp fangs, reminding him it was in a vampire's mouth. Gavin's heart beat faster with the memories of both danger and arousal. Marie, being what she was, could feel it instinctively. His arms found their way around her, then they found the buttons of her dress. The night, quiet except for the lapping waves, was interrupted by her soft gasp as the cool air caressed her back. So much like a snake shedding it's unneeded skin, Marie slid from the scarlet silk. Her rounded breasts bobbed in the moonlight, free of the dresses constriction.

Marie's smooth pale skin was afire in the cold glow of the moon. "My turn," she whispered as she found the buttons on Gavin's trousers. The night was interrupted by another soft gasp, twin to the earlier one. Her breasts pressed into his chest as she moved her weight off her arms, squishing warmly. With her now free hands she pushed Gavin's trousers off his hips, and to his knees. Gavin gave several kicks, and the offending garment flew into the night, abandoned.

Marie gasped softly and giggled, finding far more skin than she expected while exploring his hips. His hands had found her rounded derrière, still in panties. "You have me at a disadvantage, m'lady," he said through her kisses.

"One that I intend to exploit," she replied. She brought the fabric covered mound in contact with his manhood. "It's much nicer than that *other* blade you carry." Gavin's mind returned to the one terrible moment when she and Gwynrheged had met. His lips parted, preparing to express the thought. Marie sensed the change in his mood. "Shhhh," her finger touched his lips. Gavin's mouth responded, suckling the digit gently. His lips moved to the soft skin of her breast, then the nipple. She pushed it up slightly, giving him better access. He moved between them, feeling sad because he remembered that this was where a stake had passed through her, and happy because it had missed her heart by a hair's

breadth. Marie's mons was still pressing on his member, and it was responding. In spite of his morbid thinking he could feel the smooth fabric rubbing against his burgeoning erection.

Gavin moaned. Marie replaced her plump nipple with her lips, kissing his softly. She moved down, raining soft kisses across his neck, chest, and tummy. Reaching his pubic hair, she gave his glans a kiss and wriggled the tip of her tongue into it. The muscles of Gavin's buttocks tensed and she slid a hand under it, cupping one cheek. Marie slid her lips down Gavin's shaft and he gasped. He watched his length disappear under the soft curls and his hands knotted in the blanket at his sides. Raising back up, she rested the head of Gavin's erection against her lips and looked at him. "Still like, kitten?" she asked huskily.

"Oh, yes," he whispered, "very much." She smiled, her fangs flashing in the moonlight, and went down again. Gavin could feel the sharp fangs brushing along his length and his whole body shuddered. "If you keep that up, luv, I may disappoint you," Gavin cautioned. Marie's lips slid down along his length again in response. Her free hand wrapped around his scrotum, holding him as she slid him from her mouth. Kissing it gently, she kissed her way across his pubis and down his inner thigh. She felt the blood rushing through the strong arteries of his leg, and bit there gently.

"Not if you'll invite me in," she said. "I can't enter your mind uninvited." Gavin remembered that she had, at one time so very long ago, blocked his release. It was a frustrating, almost painful experience that resulted in incredible ecstasy when she finally unblocked him. Of course, he would be allowing her into those deep, guarded mental parts of himself. He would also have to trust her to release him, with Marie one just never really knew.

"I'm game," Gavin responded quietly, and he felt a 'presence' inside his mind as she made contact, her fangs piercing his thigh lightly.

::Yes,:: she whispered to him mentally, ::you always have been, and it is::

::?,:: he responded.

::A game, kitten,:: she explained, ::ones such as us need the game, otherwise it's just mechanics, hmmm?:: Gavin's apprehension, along with the memories of what she had been, the monstrous creature that she truly was, flashed across his consciousness.

::Oh, kitten,:: she replied with great sadness, ::is that how you see me? Perhaps if you only knew.....:: Marie sent him the darkest of memories. Fires were burning, Steel clashed in the background mixed with the screams of the innocent. Amidst the mixed feelings of fear and betray he heard rough laughter and felt cold chain mail against tender skin. Her skin. Breaking contact, she looked into Gavin's eyes.

"Every time, Poppy?" Gavin asked, "You must have carried that pain for centuries, do you fight it back every time?" The back of his hand touched her face gently and she flinched. He stroked her gently.

"Only every time I trust," she answered.

"Shall we continue," he asked, "or do we need to talk?" In answer, Marie stood. Removing her panties, she held them loosely and allowed the warm breeze to play with them for a second. They dropped to the sand, forgotten.

"We are what we are, kitten," she explained simply. Her smooth body glided against his as she melted over him. His member stood straight up, and she teased the tip of it against her nether lips before sliding down over it. Gavin let out a little gasp. Marie began slowly with deliberate strokes. Far too quickly Gavin hit her 'block', the inhibition against release, and he moaned in frustration and arousal. Hearing his moan, her pace quickened. Within moments Marie was riding him like a madwoman. Her body tensed.

She stopped, pushing him into her hard. Her body went rigid and she let out a sound between a gasp and a soft scream. Gavin felt her inner muscles squeezing his manhood tightly. Giving him several more manic strokes, her stiff body dropped against his chest and slowly turned to water around him. Marie sighed softly. Gavin felt her relax around him. His arms embraced her, keeping her balanced and pulling her to him. He felt the smooth coolness of her back and rubbed it softly. He began to move his hips beneath her, stroking his captive erection into her gently as she returned to earth. Marie felt Gavin's movements and she realized that he was doing it for her benefit. She smiled at him. "Welcome back, lady. Ready for another go?" His strong hands stroked her shoulders and her soft blond curls.

"You know you won't climax until I release you, right?" she asked.

"I know. I've had plenty of them before," he answered. With a quick twist he rolled them both, winding up on top, "but watching *you* was fun." Gavin began to give her long full strokes, raising her legs and resting her feet in the crooks of his elbows. She answered with an impish grin and began moving her hips with his, helping him. His pace increased, their bodies rhythm echoing the neighboring waves. Marie felt herself climbing over the edge again, and she took Gavin's hand. Bringing his wrist to her lips, she bit. They were past the words stage, all she could send was her body's response to his. All she received was his.

With an arch of her back that nearly tore his wrist from her mouth she peaked, muffling her scream against his flesh. Gavin stiffened, feeling her climax. Marie released the block. Gavin cried out at the impact of his own climax as they fed back alien sensations into each other's minds. Marie screamed again, this time losing his wrist as she topped her own climax. Gavin gasped at the broken contact, dropped Marie's legs to the blanket, and fell against her on his elbows. Marie felt the fading throbs of his subsiding orgasm inside her, and she rolled them both on their sides. "That was..." he whispered.

"Yes, it was," she agreed. Gavin wrapped her in his arms, and she reached behind her. Grabbing the blanket, she pulled it around them both and snuggled against his chest. She felt safer here under the night sky with him than in any lair.

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Gavin climbed the narrow back staircase out of the basement and toward the eaves slowly. He had seen Marie to her basement lair, and left her at the heavy steel door. Although they had been inside each other's minds, and bodies, there were still places she wouldn't share. He had places he wouldn't share too. "We are what we are, Poppy," he echoed her earlier explanation softly. As he approached his

room he was greeted by the soft elvish song in his mind, the song that had been there since the day his brother had died. This morning Gwynrheged was dormant. Gavin smiled to himself as the thought that all three of his mistresses were dormant crossed his mind. "Seven Fingers" was also lying dormant at dock, her hold empty, her crew gone, and her Captain?

Ah, yes, moon-eyed and in desperate need of sustenance. Gavin removed his rumpled clothes (those he still had on, anyway), washed up in the wash basin, and today donned his sea coat and breeches. Making sure he had his carry permit in his wallet, he removed Gwynrheged from her improvised disguise and strapped her around his waist. He fondled the hilt lovingly, "Welcome home, girl," he said. As if in response the song changed chord, bringing the scent of salt spray and the feel of warm sun pressing his faces to his mind. "Aye," Gavin agreed, "let's go see the 'Fingers'. I'll get breakfast on the way."

The 'Seven Fingers' was in good shape, riding high and rocking gently in the low swell. The scent of the neglected cargo was fading, thanks mostly to the thoughtful dockworkers who had left her holds open to air them. Gavin worked on the ketch all morning, addressing dozens of the hundreds of niggling little details that always occurred on a fishing boat. It was mid day before he knew it. Realizing the time, Gavin headed over to One Eyed Jack's for lunch, and perhaps a chance to meet some new crew. Walking through the door, Gavin went to the bar keeper. "Remember me?" he asked.

"Yup," the barman said, "guy with the guitar. You're too late, hired me a fiddler." He indicated the musician with his thumb, "Bringin' in a lot of business too."

Gavin laughed, "That's alright, got a regular gig; I'm a sea captain. Might be some people asking for me," he laid a hundred dollar note on the counter. "See that they get what they're drinking and put my lunch on this."

His eyes never wavered. "Aye, aye, capt'n," the barkeep said wryly with a smile. The skirl of a cheery reel began as Gavin found his way to a small table in the back, this time away from the windows. He touched the surface tentatively and found to his chagrin that it was just as sticky as the others.

A surly creature entered the pub, scanned the room briefly, and sidled up to the bar. He was short, coming to just the barman's chest, and somewhat thin. It wasn't the slimness of starvation, far from it, but a spare muscular whipcord thinness of constant activity. At first Gavin thought him a wererat, but on second glance placed him as simply a mundane man with a heightened metabolism. The small man exchanged words with the barman, acquired a mug of some dark beverage and after a nod towards Gavin headed in the Captain's direction.

"Captain Draegun?" the newcomer said in a voice that was masculine but feminine smooth, "I'm Samuel Fitch, late of Her Majesty's frigate Sea Witch if it please you." Gavin took the man's offered hand, noting that he was missing the ring finger of his right hand; the sign in some cultures of a convicted thief. His clothing was dark and well worn, but clean, and he carried a short bladed sword. His belt, scabbard, and arm bracers were of aged, polished black leather. Conversely the man's black sea-boots looked fresh from the cordwainer.

Gavin smiled at him. "Nice boots," he offered, "have a seat and we'll talk a bit." He waited for the shorter man take the indicated chair, took a drink, and then he asked, "A navy man, were you? Why have you left Her Majesty's service then?" The good captain had already guessed the reasons for his

separation, but confirmation would clear things up a bit. Besides, he needed to know if the man would lie about it.

“I were conscripted, sir, off the coast of Brazil. T'were a stroke of luck, actually, as I'd run afoul of the local constabulary.” Samuel wiggled the stump of his ring finger. “Old habits, ye know,” he offered.

“Will these 'habits' be a problem aboard my ship?” the Captain asked sternly. “Were they the cause of your disassociation with the navy?”

“Nay, Cap'n, twas strictly a portside dalliance is all. Me an' me mates was quite cheery, the Commodore even asked me ta re-up. But me conscript was over, and we are nowhere near my troubles in Brazil now, so I left the service in good stead.”

“Right then, to business,” Gavin began, “Standard ships contract is half the take goes to the owner or owners, a quarter to the Captain, and the crew share is split from the last quarter. Seven Fingers is mine, I'm an owner-captain, so I take care of my crew. The owner's half is mine, and the balance of the profit from a run is divvied between the crew. Each crew gets a single share. First mate and other officers, if we got any, gets a double share.” Gavin offered Samuel his hand, “If this suits you, shake my hand.”

There was no hesitation for the man, he grasped the Captain's offered hand in a firm grip. “You'll no be sorry, sir,” he said. “it's a pleasure to be assigned, Captain.”

“Now, as your Captain I'm ordering you to bed early, Samuel. The Seven Fingers sails an hour before dawn. I'll see you then.”

“At the quay bright and early. Aye Cap'n, till then.” With that he stood and walked out without another word. Gavin looked at the bar and saw several unsavories seated watching them. As Samuel passed one of them stood up and approached him.

Several undesirable candidates later Gavin was hoping it wasn't just himself and Samuel shipping out at dawn when a tall unnaturally attractive youth approached his table. His skin was light, almost translucent, and his hair and mustache were pure white. His clothing was in grays and greens, he wore soft soled leather boots, and he carried a long, unstrung, archaic bow. Although roughly the Captains height and build it seemed as if he would float away on the slightest of breezes. Gavin placed him as faerie. The newcomer offered a hand in traditional mortal fashion. “Phineas,” he said simply.

Gavin found the hand both cool and strong. “Gavin Draegun, Phineas, but you may call me Captain,” he offered in return. “My first question is, do you use a last name?”

“Of course, Captain,” the creature began, “among your kind I am called Phineas Facinock. I'll assume you know I'm Seelie, so I'll offer an explanation in advance. I am eachtranai, a wanderer, sent to learn more about your mortal plane. It was my dear mother's idea. I am an accomplished archer and sea man, and have filled several berths on several ships.” he paused for a second and then added, “I can, of course, provided references.”

“Facinock, Underhill, of course. I'm familiar enough with your kind to know you would not lie about trivial matters. I'll also assume you know at least some of my own history, so we'll dispense with

pleasantries for the time being. Understand that I will never fully trust you, but trust is not a requirement; I just hired a thief as well.” He grinned slightly at the faerie and said, “Standard ships contract is half the take goes to the owner or owners, a quarter to the Captain, and the crew share is split from the last quarter. Seven Fingers is mine, so as owner-captain I can take care of my crew. The owner's half is mine, and the balance of the profit from a run is divvied between the crew. Each crew gets a single share, officers get a double share. Does this suit you, Mister Facinock?”

“Of course, my Captain,” Phineas offered smoothly. “I will see you an hour before dawn on the morrow, at the quay, sir.” He turned and left without a handshake, slipping out as smoothly as oil across water. Both men knew the deal would be honored. Another unfavorable candidate followed Phineas, which left only two people sitting at the bar. One of them, a young man, appeared slightly inebriated and was attempting a liaison with a young woman in sailor's garb. Surprisingly the inebriated youth was the next one to stand up and approach Gavin's table.

“Benjamin Wilkes, if it please you, Cap'n. Ben to my friends,” he said with an offered hand. He was slightly shorter than the captain, and a trifle portly. His clothing, standard work clothes of plain cut, could stand to visit a laundry. They were not unclean, but rumpled and could use a good pressing. His hair and beard could stand to be combed as well, and he carried no visible side arm, not even a dagger. Still, all in all, other than the faint scent of rum the man seemed moderately normal. Gavin took the offered hand.

“Captain Draegun,” he countered, “of the Seven Fingers. I assume you have some shipboard experience?”

“Aye, Cap'n, I do. Been a fisher out of Gloucester most of my life. Weather up north is, as you well know, dreadful, so I'm looking for a change.”

“Gloucesterman, aye?” Gavin asked. “More than bad weather would cast a Gloucesterman adrift. What of yer family back home then?” Ben cast his eyes downward.

“Wife ran off during my last long run, another reason for change as it seems. Been in and out o' the bottle since. I'm just lookin' to restart is all,” the fisherman said softly.

“At least yer the honest sort,” Gavin began. “Seven Finger's contract is the standard sort. Half the take goes to myself as the owner. Crew's share is split from the other half, each crewman gets a single share, officers get a double share. There'll be no drunkenness whilst on duty. Does this suit you, Master Wilkes?” Ben's eyes went wide.

“Aye, Cap'n, aye it does!” He immediately wrapped the Captain's hand in a ham fist grip and pumped it vigorously, “an' thank you for the chance.”

“We'll see you an hour before dawn tomorrow at the ship, Master Wilkes,” the Captain replied.

“Yes, aye, Cap'n. One hour, an' thank you again.” Ben hurried out with a wink to the last person waiting at the bar. “Good luck, lass,” Gavin heard him offer her. She turned away from him, stood up, and crossed One Eyed Jack's as if she owned it.

“Captain Annabel Stark,” she stated offering her hand, “lately of the Dancing Shadow.” Gavin considered Captain Stark, who appeared to be in her early thirties. Although petite, like most people on

working boats she was well muscled. Her stance and legs were more used to a life on a rolling deck than a barroom floor. She had a small nose with a slight bend in it set between deep sea-green eyes. Her elvish face was framed with straight reddish brown hair, pulled back in a bun. She wore breaches and a form fitting sea coat over worn but well cared for boots.

“Captain Gavin Draegun, currently of the Seven Fingers,” Gavin offered. He indicated the recently vacated chair. “Sit, Captain Stark. To what do I owe this pleasant visit?”

“It's Annie, Captain, and I'll cut to the chase. My ship was pulled out from under me, had a change of owners. If they'd have sold it to myself then I might be the one hiring crew today, but some pretty-boy rich bastard bought it and fancies himself the Captain. Wanted ta keep me on as eye candy for his drinking buddies. Sadly, I expect the Shadow to be stove-in on the shoals within a fortnight.” She sighed and continued, “But enough o' my troubles, I'm coming to ye cap-in-hand so to speak. I've found myself out of options, so I'm here for the crew billet.” She looked at Gavin eagerly, not knowing if he would consider someone who'd commanded for a subordinate position. He would have every right to send her packing, several had already.

Gavin pondered her. Although he had never met her, he knew of the Shadows and her Captain, the port community was a relatively small one. There was no reason to question her seamanship. “Three questions come to mind then,” he began. “Have you ever posted on a fishing ketch?”

“Yes,” she answered, “but I'll be honest it's been a while. I started sailing with my Da on a fishing boat, and I've sailed a ketch before.”

“Second, do you have any weaponry training? Can you use them to defend the ship?” At this Annie raised an eyebrow. The Fingers had a reputation in port as a troubled ship, but she hadn't really believed the stories.

“I can handle a blade or crossbow, even a fastibula. In a defensive situation I have no trouble using them.” Annie shuddered a little at this, true she could handle a blade- to address a nice steak.

Gavin smiled at her apparent unease. “Third, will you have any problem with my throwing you overboard in the same moment you question orders?”

At this Annie smiled back, “Hell,” she said, “I'd do the same m'self if roles were reversed.”

“Good,” Gavin replied, “Seven Fingers contract is half the take goes to the Captain. The balance of the profit from a run is divvied between the crew. Each crew gets a single share. As first mate, you'll get a double share. If the first mate position suits you, we'll shake on it.”

Surprised, Annie took his hand, “Thank you, Captain,” she said happily.

“Mistress Stark, fisher folk start early and you'll have green-gills to wrangle.” Gavin suggested, “Get some sleep and I'll see you about two hours before dawn on board the Seven Fingers. We'll stoke the boiler and walk through the trimming and rigging. Crew will join us an hour after and we sail then, an hour before dawn.”

“In the morning then,” Anabel replied with a smile. As she strolled away she muttered to herself, “Yea, an' I wouldn't kick ye out of bed if the situation comes up either.”

2- A Dead Run

The first rays of dawn were kissing the Caribbean sky as the Seven Fingers crossed the bar and headed into open sea. Now that she was clear of the harbor obstacles and the visibility was improving, Gavin gave the orders to unfurl the sails. He disengaged the screws from the steam plant. Instead of pushing through the clear water, the Fingers now began to dance across it under full sail.

After a few mishaps the two new crewmen, Ben Wilkes and Samuel Fitch, began working together as easily as chain and sprocket. Ben's rotund frame hopped about to get the sail furled, while the smaller, more lively Mister Fitch trimmed it. It was clear that both men had done this enough times before that the actions were second nature to them.

It was one of those breezy days that were good for sailing, but that promised rain in the evening, and no doubt fog would role in over night. Still that was a problem for then, and would only be an issue if the crew remained at sea after usual fishing hours. Every now and again a particularly strong gust cut across the ballustrade and whistled past the cleats. For now the day was as good as any seaman could ask for. Somewhere the were creatures were stirring, somewhere a ship was sailing towards their rendezvous with ill fated cargo, somehow both would come together with the Seven Fingers before the eve.

Several hours later, having pulled just over the horizon from the destination that Marie had given him, Gavin had the crew strike the sails. Leaving the boiler on low, he then had them drop the sea anchors, mount the forward ballistae, and break out the fishing lines. He also broke into the arms locker and passed out crossbows with silver quarrels 'just in case'. That being done, Gavin went below and brought out his newest toy, the dirigible model with the 'magic eye' mounted in it. Assembling it, and giving the hominuculus its drop of blood, he set it aloft tethered by its two thin wires. Pretty soon it was chattering away happily, "dit-dah-dah; dit-dah; dah; dit; dit-dah-dit" (water) over and over.

First mate Annie Stark watched her new Captain's preparations with some trepidation, not being sure what she had signed on to. It was certainly a queer way to prepare to catch fish. She familiarized the crew with the trout line equipment. Ben, being a fisherman, picked it up quickly. Samuel, having served in Her Majesty's Navy, not so much. Phineas, being woodland born and Fae, not at all. Surprisingly she didn't mind giving the hansom young elf a little extra help, which Phineas coolly thanked her for, and made some off hand comment about under his breath.

Gavin opened the live well, removed the bottles of Red Stripe he'd stowed there, and passed them out amongst the fishing but well armed crew. He leaned back, opening his own bottle, and monitored the 'sky eye' while scanning the horizon.

Just under an hour later the live well was swimming with fewer ales and many more cod than when they'd stopped. Gavin was impressed at the ease and skill that the new people were working together, he had been a little wary of his new first mate, but she seemed to be doing fine. As a matter of fact, the way she was looking at Phineas's lithe form, perhaps a little too fine. What some women saw he would never understand. All of a sudden the little morse unit threw in, "dah-dit-dit-dit; dah-dah-dah; dit-dah; dah" between the 'waters'.

"Pull in the lines and look lively, people!" Gavin yelled as only a sea captain could, "We've got company coming!" At this Annie raised an eyebrow. As first mate she knew a little more than the rest

of the crew, but it was still too damned little. Still, she had to trust the Captain. He had, after all, existed at sea longer than she. Besides, he'd already told her he'd toss her overboard for questioning orders, and when she had been a captain she would have done the same.

Within minutes a steam launch hove into view, headed toward the spot indicated by Marie. It was not much more than a longboat with a steam power plant, a short range in-site-of-land craft with five or six occupants. Only someone careless or crazy would have it out this far, and it was most certainly not what Marie had foretold of! It took only seconds for Gavin to realize that he'd outsmarted himself. The act of piracy that would set the salvage adrift had not yet happened, and the pirates, i.e. the Capis, might misidentify the Seven Fingers as their intended prey. As if hearing his thoughts, the launch turned toward them.

Realizing the crew might not be able to handle the ballistae, Gavin ran forward and yelled, "Mistress Stark! Step to, woman, take the helm!" Annie almost asked why she needed to be at the helm with the sea anchors down, but then realized that the Captain was taking a seat at the ballistae. If he was incapacitated she would need to get the Seven Fingers and the crew to safety. Besides, it was an order and it was too far to swim home.

Taking his seat, Gavin quickly aimed the launcher and fired a shot over the boat. If they had had a mast, it would be gone. He cursed as only a sea captain could at the missed shot and took aim more carefully. The Capi's laughed and kept coming. That laughter died though, when an arrow exploded through the skull of the crewman closest to the boiler. Meanwhile, Ben passed Gavin a second projectile. He reloaded, re-aimed, and fired. This time the packet was much closer and the shot hit the boiler, sending scalding water spraying over the were-rats. While the Captain was reloading Samuel scurried down the length of the ship and yanked the remaining crossbow from where it hung uselessly around the first mates back. Without so much as a comment he raced back down to where the captain and Ben stood and tossed the loaded weapon into the Captains expectant hands. Gavin and Phineas, standing on the bow, took aim, the Captain with a crossbow and the fae with his strangely shaped longbow; both fired simultaneously, both missiles flew true, and two Capis were struck down.

"Somebody shoot them," the Captain ordered, "I'm reloading! Bloody crossbow!" No sooner than the words left his lips than Phineas's bow string sung, and another pirate was struck dead, an arrow sticking out from either side of his chest and back. For his part Ben was not idle, but his actions weren't combative either. Fitch, on the other hand, had produced several throwing daggers and was sorting through them looking for one tipped with silver. "Bleedin' werewolves," he muttered to no one in particular.

Realizing he wouldn't have time to reload, Gavin reached for Gwynrheged. The sword leaped to his grasp, cutting the air, and then faced off with the remaining rat. Machete in hand and with were like speed he attacked in a blur of motion, but the blur was matched by man and weapon with centuries more skill. The last Capi fell, beheaded, and Gwynrheged sang him to hell with a contented hymn.

Now, given time to think, Gavin pondered the situation. He had, apparently, stopped the Capis from waylaying the intended victim, murdering her crew, and setting her adrift. So, due to his well placed inability to trust Marie, he had cost himself salvage and gained another unwanted fight. Samuel quickly scrambled aboard, searched the boat from end to end, and retrieved the spent bolts and arrows. "Clearly a raider Captain, there's nothing here but blades," the man commented with some disappointment.

“Scuttle it, and send the Capis overboard as well. To Davy Jones with the lot,” Gavin said with disgust.

“Right then,” declared Wilkes, joining Fitch. They quickly set to work tossing bodies over and then simply smashed through the bottom of the raider’s hull with a piece of the vessel’s damaged boiler. They then jumped back over as the enemy launch unceremoniously sunk beneath the waves.

“Captain,” Annie yelled from the helm, “I think your little device is telling us there’s more company, this one has a sail!” It was then that Gavin realized his little morse unit had been chattering, “dit-dit-dit; dit-dah; dit-dit; dit-dah-dit-dit.” Smart lady, he’d have to watch that one more carefully.

“Well, people, it seems we’ve chosen to fish in the Piccadilly Circus of the Caribbean.” Gavin yelled. “Look lively, let’s raise the sea anchors and ready the sails. We may have to unfurl them quick and make a run for it!”

“Aye, aye Captain,” the First mate said somewhat curtly.

“Right then skipper,” Ben said cheerily. Phineas rearranged his bow and arrows into a “ready position”, and Samuel trotted over to assist Mistress Stark with the sail. Meanwhile, Ben put his back into raising the sea anchors.

Once their 'preparations' were finished the Captain and crew of the Seven Fingers continued fishing, although the school of cod had long since moved on. They also carefully watched as the small triangle of white slowly became a sail, then a boat, then finally a yawl of similar coloration as the Seven Fingers herself. A two masted ship with a dark brown hull and blue trim, she could easily be mistaken for the Seven Fingers brown and teal by the untrained eye. Finally, she hove to within a few hundred feet of the Fingers, well close enough to read the name 'Balmoral' with the naked eye. “Ahoy, Seven Fingers!” came the call from across the water.

“Ahoy, Balmoral!” Gavin replied back much louder than he barked orders at his crew. “What business have ya?”

“Stand down and prepare for mail and cargo transfer,” the Captain of the Balmoral replied. Gavin was now totally confused. Why would such a small vessel, a few feet shorter than Fingers herself, need to make a mid sea transfer? Why, he wondered, would they make such a transfer to a fishing boat? Unless, of course, they expected the Seven Fingers to be here. Gavin got out his spyglass and took a closer look at the yawl as they began the slow process of lowering a boat and rowing across the intervening water. She was unarmed, they had no mounted weapons, and indeed no mounts for them. It looked like they had only a few hand arms, if that. She was spinnaker rigged for speed, and carried extra sails. A courier then, and a fast one by the look. The only reason not to go into Grand Cayman herself would be stealth or fear.

So, someone put the Fingers out here to take care of the hard part, i.e. the Capibarras, and bring in the cargo when the deed was done. Or perhaps, had the Capis been faster, to recover the goods that were left. Why didn't Marie just ask?

Because, of course, he would have said no.

By this time the dingy had bumped against the Seven Fingers and women began climbing aboard. Three young women to be exact, but there was a wrongness to them. They were different from each other in height, body shape, and coloration, but still very much alike. All three wore the same plain, shapeless gray dress. They shared the same unnatural thinness, and deep, sunken, 'empty' eyes. The trio did not speak, or even gesture, and once on board just stood on deck. They were followed almost immediately by one of the Balmoral's crew.

"Sit, girls." he said to the trio, and without question all three sat down on the Seven Fingers deck. The Balmoral man went to Gavin and handed him a chest. "This goes with 'em," he explained, "can't separate it from 'em by much either. Make 'em sit otherwise they'll fall overboard, they can't roll with the deck. The box needs to be delivered with 'em as well, address is on it. Balance of the shipping will be paid upon delivery, Cap'n says keep it all."

Gavin looked at the address, and recognized it immediately. "What are they?" he asked the crewman.

"Zombies. Creepy things, what? Stuck halfway between dead and alive." He indicated the chest Gavin held and whispered, "Got's their souls in that box."

"So, what if I open the box?" Gavin asked.

"Dunno, but wait till we're long gone," he replied warily. With that he scampered back down the rope ladder and into the dingy. As he rowed away he said again, "Wait till we're long gone!" Gavin looked at the address again. It was Marie's.

He began to get mad. He did not believe in human trafficking, especially the living dead kind. He really didn't like being manipulated into doing it, no matter what the payout. A zombie was separated from its soul by a zombie-master, who trapped the soul before it could go on to it's afterlife. The zombie, the physical part of the person, became a slave to the zombie-master until such time as the soul was freed to move on, or the body wore out. These women needed to be freed, for they had already died. It was still slavery. Gavin couldn't allow this any further. Looking out over the water he saw the Balmoral, leagues away, headed due west. He opened the box.

Nothing happened. The zombies sat on the deck, staring at him with their empty eyes. Gavin looked inside the box and found three rudely crafted glass balls, like were sometimes used as floats for fishing nets. He lifted one from it's cradle inside the box, closing the box, and held it up in the sunlight. Inside the ball was a grayish mist. He noticed that one of the three stared directly at the ball. The other two sat. "Mister Wilkes," Gavin said "pass me a belaying pin."

"Right sir." Ben did as he was ordered. Gavin held the glass ball in one hand and the hardwood pin in the other, "Does anyone know," he addressed the watching crew, "what happens when a zombies soul is freed? Does it finish out the rest of it's natural existence, or does it finish dying?"

After a brief but pregnant pause Samuel Fitch said quietly, "That depends. If the soul were taken some time before death, then the soul will prob'ly reunite with the body. If the soul were taken at the brink of death, then it'll usually pass on and the body will die as it would have anyways. There were a sad, curious case a few years back where a zombie's master done passed an' the zombie continued living on unable to locate it's soul an' beholdin' to no master." He noticed the others staring at him and added quickly, "Or so's I been told anyways."

“We are full of surprises, aren't we Mister Fitch?” Phineas commented.

“I think even death would be a blessing to those poor creatures.” Gavin braced the delicate glass ball against the railing and brought the belaying pin down hard on it. The hardwood pin shattered, sending splintered wood skittering across the deck.

Looking directly at Phineas, Gavin said, “Well bloody hell, looks like it's magic against magic then.” With that he drew Gwynrheged. Gavin fought to control the blade for a moment, as there was no real foe, then brought it down hilt first on the glass ball. The ball shattered, and one of the zombies, the one who had been staring at the ball, fell loosely to the deck. The other two just sat through the whole scene as if nothing had happened. “Mistress Stark,” Gavin barked, “see to her, does she yet live?”

“Aye, Captain!” Annie said excitedly, “She does!”

“Samuel, Ben,” the Captain said quietly, “put the poor thing below in the larger passenger cabin. Make her comfortable.” To this the two men simply nodded, given the solemnity of the situation, and each moving easily into position, picked up the lass. Phineas leaned in and mumbled some words in a high elvish. As soon as the words had left his lips as a contented smile blossomed upon the woman's face.

With legs bent at the knee and body hunched over, Ben carried the greater portion of the woman's weight and Fitch served more as guide than carrier. The passenger cabin was barely large enough for the two sailors to maneuver the unconscious woman into. It had a wide bed on the left, bunks on the right, and a small nightstand between them with a tiny porthole over it. Near the door was a tiny armchair. They placed her in the larger bed with solemn tenderness. While Samuel covered her Ben fluffed the thin pillow. “Funny,” the gloucesterman commented upon viewing the lass's face, “she looks a bit like my ex wife's niece.”

“Don't be getting' no ideas,” Fitch advised, “Our new Cap'n seems to be a right sort, but I'm sure 'e would use ye' fer bait if ye were to cross him.”

“Heaven's, no,” Ben replied. “Just something familiar about her is all.”

“Right,” Samuel said, “let's get back on deck then.”

Back on deck, Gavin opened the box, reached in, and removed a second glass sphere. This one seemed slightly newer than the first. He held it aloft and as before, one of the zombies followed it with her eyes with obvious longing. “Mistress Stark,” Gavin said, indicating the zombie watching him. “I believe that one will need help next.” Once again Gavin braced a delicate glass ball against the balustrade and brought the hilt of his enchanted sword down on it. Like before, the sphere shattered. The zombie who had been watching him fell, but this time was set gently to the deck by Annabel. “Has she, too, survived her ordeal?” Gavin asked his first mate.

“Aye, Captain, as well as the first I'm sure!” Annie replied. Once again Samuel and Ben picked up the body of the lass and carefully took her below.

“Her name was Kate,” Ben said.

“Who?” Fitch queried, “this girl?”

“No, my ex's niece. The one that the first girl reminded me of.”

“Best get off it, mate, leave the zombies to the Cap'n. No good's ever come from parlaying wi' the undead, no matter who she looks like,” Samuel advised.

“No, I'm fairly sure it's more than a resemblance,” Ben Wilkes said. “I'm going to slip below later and check again, once we're under way.”

With reverence Gavin removed the third, and last, glass sphere from its cradle inside the little chest. It looked perhaps a little older than the other two, not as well made and somehow sadder. He held it aloft, but the zombie's gaze barely followed it. “Funny,” he said quietly to himself, “she looks no different than the other two, although this sphere has a less vital feel to it.”

“What was that, Captain?” Annie asked.

“Nothing, Mistress Stark, just musing to me'self,” Gavin answered, although he had a bad feeling about this one. “Are you ready to catch the third?”

“Aye, I am.” Phineas, who had been watching with the other two, moved to join the first mate.

With that Gavin brought Gwynrheged down a final time and shattered the third glass ball. The zombie made a tiny gasp, the only vocalization any of them had made, and was let down gently to the deck by the First Mate and the archer. “How does she fare?” Gavin asked.

“She's not breathing, Captain, and seems to have no heartbeat as well.” Anabel began breathing into the zombie's mouth, alternating with chest compressions. Sheathing Gwynrheged, Gavin headed over to help. Suddenly, as the first mate worked on her, the zombie gasped, coughed, and then went limp like the other two. This time, however, she was no longer breathing and her eyes had rolled back. The girl stared emptily at the sky, lying on the deck where Annie and Phineas had placed her, now apparently truly dead. Something, the wind perhaps, brushed Gavin's cheek and ran across his shoulders sending a chill down his spine.

“Did we just kill her, or save her?” Annabel asked. “What do we call a zombie that's been released?”

“I believe, Mistress Stark, we call her 'freed'.” Gavin considered the frail corpse that had been the zombie. Phineas reached down and gently closed the girl's eyes. “Phineas,” the Captain said, “see that she gets put below, we'll give her a decent burial in port. Mistress Stark, have the crew unfurl the sails. I think we've fished enough today and I smell a storm brewing. We're home with our 'cargo' and I'm getting my well deserved explanation for today.” With that Gavin went aft and reeled in his toy dirigible. Returning it to its box, he carefully stowed it below deck.

Ben and Samuel returned on deck. The first mate started to speak, but the solemnity of their faces told her that she had no need. Phineas bent and before picking up the body said words that were at once mournful and sweet in high Elvish. He then took the corpse below. The crew began working the fishing nets, and then the sails while Gavin quietly involved himself with stowing the ballistae.

Tasks completed, Seven Fingers headed home, running before a storm. Not that it was storming yet, the sky was blue and the water clear if a bit more choppy than the morning seas had been. There were clouds on the horizon though, and the barometer, which was still high, was beginning to dip. The night would be stormy, and tomorrow would probably be a wash out. Her hold was partially full from the day's catch, and the live well was aswim with the prime stock, those that the better restaurants would pay top money for. In addition she had three extra bodies, two living, and one not so much. Even with the attack and ensuing strangeness it was a productive day.

Gavin was taking navigational readings, they should be in sight of Cayman soon. Anabel was at the helm, adjusting course whenever her Captain suggested. The two crewmen would occasionally trim a sail, but were otherwise idle; at least physically. "So," Samuel Fitch whispered as he sidled up to the fae, "where's the dead girl then?" Perhaps he was interested in checking the corpse for valuables before they reached port, but the meaning of the question was lost to Phineas Facinock.

"She is two paces behind the Captain, admiring the weapon he's carrying by the look of it. Apparently she hears the sword's song now, where she couldn't whilst mortal, and she's probably just curious." Phineas replied.

"You mean that she's still here? The dead one? An' the Cap'n's sword sings as well?" Fitch asked incredulously.

"Sorry," Phineas explained, "I tend to forget how little of reality you mortals can actually sense. Yes, the woman who's body died is still with us in spirit form, apparently something has kept her from passing into the Summerlands. And the Captain's blade is a royal sword, Elvin forged, and millennial, so of course it sings. Not well, mind you, but it does sing." The fae noticed the twinkle in Fitch's eye and added, "Of course it has some consciousness, so if someone not it's owner handled it and it sensed danger then it would most probably try to kill him. It does seem to enjoy bloodshed," Phineas smiled knowingly, "good quality in a blade."

"Right," Samuel replied curtly as he wandered off, still eying an empty spot two paces behind his Captain.

The Captain, at that moment, felt a stray wisp of wind tousle his hair and turned towards it. He saw the sail on intercept course for them about the same time he heard Ben sing out, "Captain, ship off the port bow!"

"Mistress Stark, bring her to starboard! Mister Wilkes, Mister Fitch, look lively now and strike the sail! Mister Facinock, see to your bow. Let's see what she's about, she looks to be in trouble!" Gavin bellowed. Quite a bit lower, only for the first mate, he added, "Annie, do the lads seem to be watching us a bit too much? It's like they're seeing things we're not, a bit creepy, what."

"Frankly, Captain, this whole trip has been a might on the creepy side for my tastes," Anabel replied. Within minutes the Seven Fingers was matching the newcomer. She was a two masted sloop, about half the size of the Fingers. Her only unfurled sail was spilling wind badly and she was beginning to flounder.

Gavin examined it through the glass, "Doesn't look to be occupied," he commented, "her name's 'Stardust'. Ring any bells, Annie?" he asked.

“Not heard of her, Captain,” the first mate replied. Turning toward the mystery vessel, and with a force that far belied her size, Anabel bellowed, “Ahoy Stardust!” There was no answer. “Do you think they heard me, Captain?” she asked.

“If nay then they're as likely already in hell,” Gavin retorted smartly. Anabel gave him a smug grin. “Samuel, Phineas,” the Captain began, “one of ye take a line over to her with the boat and the other stand watch. Probably better if Phineas stayed here with his bow at ready, but I'll let you two decide.”

Before they could lower a boat Benjamin Wilkes produced a grappling hook, weighted at one end, and connected to a medium weight hawser. His thick arm went back, whirling the hook in a wide circle, and released the line in a high arc that ended dead on just inside the Stardust's balustrade. As soon as the line went taut, Samuel Fitch swung over and quickly monkey crawled the short distance between the ships. Once there he tied off the line and removed the hook from Stardust's woodwork. He then, throwing knives at the ready, quickly cased the abandoned vessel for anything of value or signs of life (in that order). Only then did he go forward to the bow and re-attached the hawser there, securing Stardust for towing. After several tense minutes he was back in clear view of the others, and yelled loudly, “All's clear, Cap'n, not a soul on board!” Phineas smiled at the man's choice of words.

Gavin was a bit surprised at the manner that the crew secured the Stardust, he had intended for him to take the ship's row boat over. “Ah, well,” he muttered to himself, “I did tell them to decide.” The Captain couldn't help but notice that to an untrained eye she also could be mistaken for Balmoral, as the Fingers herself probably was. He put the glass to his eye again looking for any sign of on-board armaments, but there were none. Poor Stardust should have been named 'Sitting Duck' if that pack of weres had found her first. Gavin watched Phineas on the Fingers with his bowstring still at ready. He was surprised that the elf could hold it for so long, then he remembered the soft singing of his sword in the back of his mind. Realizing that the sword was not alarmed, he pondered whether to have Mister Facinock stand down, then thought the better of it. This was, after all, still sound policy for Gwynrheged had been fooled before. Better men than he had fallen on the battlefield holding her.

Fitch's voice pulled him from his thoughts, apparently the man had returned. “Somebody damaged her rudder with an ax Cap'n. Tried to make it look like it were done by rocks they did, but anyone with a lick o' sense can tell otherwise. Row boat's gone too, mayhaps the crew left in it. They was smugglin' something for sure, but what who can say.”

“If they were smuggling they were just runners, no arms to speak of,” Gavin mused.

Samuel's shoulder's rose and fell in an exaggerated shrug. “Ben could prob'ly handle her, but my guess is that we'll only get a salvage for her as is.” He had been glancing across the way, and suddenly realized who he was speaking to. “Beggin' your pardon Cap'n, didn't mean to be forward, just musing mostly.” He fell quickly silent.

“Just let's not be makin' a habit of it, Mr. Fitch,” Gavin replied sharply.

“Ay, Cap'n, not worry o' that.” Samuel said eagerly.

Turning to Annie, Gavin said, “Mistress Stark, since she is similar to your last command, I'll have you go over and bring her to berth. While you're about it give her a look around.” Annie slipped over the starboard railing following her Captain's orders. Locking her heels over the thick hawser, she

began to 'monkey crawl' toward the other boat with significantly less grace than Samuel Fitch had traversed the distance. Once out of earshot she started muttering, "Give her a look around, mistress Stark. Put that fish in the live well, mistress Stark. Take the helm, mistress Stark. Catch the fainting zombie, mistress Stark. Look lively, mistress Stark. I'd like to give him a little lively, I would." About that time a stray gust of wind drew the ships slightly closer, taking the slack out of the tow line. Annie gasped as her buttocks touched the cool water. "Rrrrr! Wash yur arse, mistress Stark," she added angrily.

Aboard the Fingers Gavin felt the stray gust, and could almost swear he heard faint female laughter carried on it. Out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw Phineas turn his way, not looking at him, but at something else.

~
"Safe and sound back home again,
Let the waters roar, Jack.
One more time with glad refrain,
Let the chorus soar, Jack."
~

Gavin whistled the old tune merrily as he brought the Seven Fingers against the fisherman's quay. Even with the days delays and requisite strange goings on they were in port a little early. The sky was now seeded with lowering clouds, they would fetch a fair price for today's catch because there would be few boats out tomorrow. Samuel, Phineas, and Ben had already stowed the sails and set up the ship's scale, and the quay was lined with buyers from the local markets and restaurants. It would be a sellers market today, and they had some prime merchandise.

They had untethered the Stardust near the docks before coming in to the market area, and Anabel should now be nursing her into a berth. The first mate could handle filing salvage papers with the Port Authority. Gavin didn't suspect any problem with the claim, but the Admiralty would have to check the babbage's records, determine her home port, notify her owners if found, and rule out piracy. Even with today's modern equipment it could take several weeks.

With modern equipment, weather prediction too could be tricky, but not today. Gavin looked toward the top of the rise above town for the telltale signs of a dirigible at the airship port. He didn't see the hump of one of the huge craft over the buildings, so they were either out of port or more likely tied close to the ground to weather the impending storm.

The moment the boat touched port the crew became busy. Phineas opened the holds, Fitch greeted the nice people on board to buy the fish, opening up with all the charm that he had to offer. Ben was in his element, the Gloucester man knew a bit about selling a fishy cargo. Some of the buyers were taken aback by Phineas, who couldn't despite all attempts to, completely remove the aura of elvish strangeness that most felt when around him. This was alright with the fae, as he knew next to nothing about commerce and even less about fish.

The first buyers were aboard. The state of the art scale buzzed and clicked as it's heavy brass mechanism accurately weighed the first purchase. The haggling began. Gavin was known by most of the buyers as a fair dealer, but he wanted to see how the new crew handled themselves so he stood by. Once that he was certain that the crew could deal with the business end the Captain relaxed and let the frenzy take him as well, not sparing more than an occasional glance at the others. It was part of that

common feature of fishing life, stretches of light activity punctuated by short moments of extreme frantic action. This element was analogous to that mad whirl of activity, if smaller in scale, that one observed within a stock exchange trading floor or a pitched battle. Thus it was that the hold, which had taken several hours to fill, was emptied in mere minutes.

As soon as it started, the mad scramble to make fishy deals ended. Gavin looked around the deck, seeing the usual post-sale detritus, mud, fish refuse, and such. He sighed. "Right," he said to the crew, "lads, take a few breaths, get your bearings again, and start cleaning up. I'll take us to a berth and we'll put this old girl to bed for the night, what? We should be early this evening."

"Aye, Captain, we'll get right to it," replied Fitch cheerily.

"As you command, Sir," Phineas added succinctly. The crew went to work immediately, Fitch and Phineas working on the discarded remnants of fish and such, while Ben quickly went to locking down the gear. Once the Seven Fingers was berthed Gavin went below to count the day's take and divvy up the shares. The three crewmembers finished up on deck, finally swabbing it.

"You gone to tell the Old Man then?" Fitch whispered to Wilkes as he sidled up to the Gloucester man.

"Tell him what, exactly?" Ben replied, "That I'm fairly sure the second girl is my ex wife's niece? Won't know for sure until she wakes and I can talk to her."

"Aye," Samuel countered, "an' sure that ye won't get to talk to her unless you tell the Cap'n your suspicions, so fer Crissakes tell him already."

Gavin came up on deck, impressed at the lads' efficiency. "Well done, lads, I've your take here." He handed each an equal share of well-worn bills that smelled faintly of fish. Of course, most everything on board did smell faintly of fish or worse. "Mr. Fitch, if you please, see to waking our passengers. I believe I need to get at least one of them to Marie's and perhaps procure an explanation for her."

"Right sir," Samuel replied heading below decks.

"I believe, sir," Phineas said, "that Mister Wilkes has a request to make of you as well."

"Mister Wilkes?" Gavin said, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, sir, and begging the Captain's pardon damn the good hearing of the Faerie Folk, sir," Benjamin Wilkes began as he took off his cap. "It seems to me that I may know one of the passengers, and if so methinks I could take the responsibility for her off your hands, sir. I would like to query her to be sure, and only if it's alright with both yourself and the lass of course, sir." His considerable weight shifted from one foot to the other.

Gavin sighed. "Carry on, Mister Wilkes, join Mister Fitch below. See if ye can get names and particulars from the both of 'em while you're about it." Ben headed below with a hurried 'aye, sir'.

"Phineas," Gavin began hesitantly, "if you hadn't noticed, and I'm sure you did, today was a bit strange. We have three crew members, and three encounters with other vessels, and three zombies came

aboard. That's three sets of three and I've a bad feeling about that. Do ye have any thoughts on the matter?"

"Three is a common number in the character of fate Captain," Phineas stated. "We know only that it is most probably not mere coincidence, but more likely the tip of a natural situation that has yet to reveal itself. This is the way of the universe, as you yourself should well know. Perhaps our fate this day was caught up in the balancing of fates necessary in nature."

Gavin pondered this, strangely understanding as he had had many dealings with the Faerie and mystical arts going all the way back to childhood. He sensed a change in the elf as he grew silent, and the Captain briefly felt a sensation of vertigo. He imagined the loom of time, the spiders that spun the silken thread of destiny, and the ancient fates of men and women that clung thereon. He saw himself, as though looking through deep waters. The image altered and he saw the vampiress Marie, clad in dark silk and satin, in the same cut of the dress she wore upon the evening of the night before. The scene shifted yet again and a third appeared, a man who the Captain could not recognize. He had a dusky complexion, common in the Caribbean, and pale eyes of Dutch blue. He wore a bankers well tailored suit, and carried an oily grin one expects of practitioners of such professions. A door closed on the man, as if someone were leaving his office, and Gavin caught the name 'DeSilva' stenciled on it as the vision faded.

"No more can I see," Phineas stated. "The third woman was Sara. When you smashed her sphere, freeing her spirit, it did not return to her body. It did not pass on either. She remains on board the Seven Fingers, and should be looked after tonight. Perhaps, with the Captain's permission, I could stay the night on board?" Before Gavin could respond they were interrupted.

"Captain my Captain!" exclaimed Anabel as she stepped on deck all excited. A stray loop of rope caught her ankle and she went ass over teakettle and sprawled on the deck. 'Odd,' Gavin thought to himself, 'I saw that rope stowed myself. It was well out from underfoot.' Like with the stray gust of wind earlier, he could almost swear he heard female laughter. Once the first mate composed herself (amid several incredibly fluent curses) she continued, "Being familiar with most of the hidey-holes on the Stardust, as she is very much the same as the Dancer, I searched them. I found this in one of them." Annie produced a note with longitude and latitude on it along with an incantation. "I think they may have been on a treasure hunt, some of the cargo was digging equipment, thaumatological paraphernalia, and such."

Once again, the fae, Phineas, was consulted. He promptly replied, "It appears to be a simple gate spell, nothing more, which links this plain with another."

"Right," Gavin commented unenthusiastically, "well we're not going anywhere tonight, nor tomorrow as it seems to be raining now and will continue. Perhaps, on the morrow, we can meet at One Eye's and discuss it over lunch? Mistress Stark, do put that note in a safe place. Oh, and I have your cut of the take here." He passed her a share of the fishy smelling portraits of Her Majesty the Queen.

"Be careful now ladies, the deck's still a bit slick... no, no, by all means hold onto my arm." Ben and Fitch appeared followed by the two women, and indeed they did now look like women and not the horrid forms of the walking dead. Benjamin made the quick introductions, and as it turned out the one young lady was indeed his ex wife's niece.

"As for me," the Captain said, "I have one more delivery to make, an explanation to obtain, and some arrangements for our deceased 'passenger', so I'll bid you all good night." Ben had intended to come along, as there was a part of him that wanted to see the matter through, and the inquiring look given to the Captain said as much. As if he had picked up some ability to speak mentally, Gavin answered the stout fisherman, "Oh very well, Ben, I could probably use the company. Perhaps we'll even bring some dinner back for Phineas." The first mate said her own good evenings and headed off shortly after the passengers made it from ship to land with Samuel. Phineas remained on ship, while Ben, the two ladies, and Gavin made their way up the dock.

Gavin had considered hiring a steam carriage for the short trip to Marie's, not being sure how well the ladies could manage the walk, but finally decided against it. Besides, he never did much care for the noisome contraptions. As for the two ex-zombies, the walk would give them time to reacquaint themselves with their surroundings, which they were already busy doing.

Their first stop was the Port Authority office. Gavin left Ben with the women and went up to make arrangements for the deceased 'passenger' still aboard the Fingers. He informed them that one of the crew, Phineas, was staying on board tonight, and would assist if needed. In addition, he transferred enough funds from the Seven Fingers account to cover berthing fees and a modest burial for Sara. The rest of the walk to Marie's was hushed and solemn, partly because of the situation, and partly because of the cool rain that was now falling steadily. Gavin had considered confronting Marie on her front porch, as it was just after dusk when they arrived, but reconsidered for the sake of the girls. He let the entourage through the back door he normally used and into the warm dry kitchen. One of the ladies sitting at the table, upon seeing them, jumped straight up and began screaming.

One of Gavin's charges, the ex-zombie named Sheila, also began screaming. The two met in the middle of the kitchen, jumping up and down and embracing, finally sitting at the table and breaking down into a joint cry. Gavin leaned over to Ben, "Probably her sister," he said with a wry grin. The Gloucester man was grinning as well, but smiling was part of his jovial nature anyway. Still, his smile and laughing eyes seemed to help dispel some of the solemnity of the situation.

Gavin realized why Marie had sent him out to intercept them. He still didn't much like the way she had done it, as he probably wouldn't have gone otherwise. He slowly began to realize just how well he'd been played, and how she had thrown him off balance just enough so he wouldn't look too hard at her motives. Of course she knew he would be offended, and of course she knew he would free the girls, he couldn't do otherwise. It was much better to free them at sea without Sheila's sister present, just in case it didn't work. Once again he found himself embroiled in a vampire power play and he found it invigorating.

Marie walked into the kitchen. "Why kitten," she exclaimed, "you brought my delivery," Running an idle forefinger along Ben's jawline she added, "and dinner to boot!" Looking deeply into Benjamin's eyes she added, "Sadly, I've already eaten."

Ben Wilkes paled a bit at that, not really knowing how to respond. "So sweet," Marie said, "See Gavin, you could learn things from this young man." Turning to Ben she added with a pat on the cheek, "Sorry, kitten, but you're an American, and aligned with a different player in this little drama to boot. Dear Gavin's crew is off limits to us, as is his blood."

"I have what's left of your delivery," Gavin responded, handing her the empty chest. "One of the zombies died you know. I was going to cut out your black heart and stash it away in this newly emptied box, but where's the fun in that?"

"Why Gavin, you always knew how to win a girls heart." Marie laughed liked the tinkling of wind chimes. "And as for the zombies, they had all died. I know, I'm kind of an expert on living dead. One of them just wasn't restored to life."

Gavin chuckled, "True. You could have just asked, you know."

"And you would have said no, and then I would have had to convince you. By then the girls would have been back in the hands of some rotten bastard and I would have had to send you into his teeth to retrieve them. We would have lost much more than one zombie." She smiled at him, showing a little too much fang, and then winked. "Besides, it was much more fun this way, especially on the beach."

Gavin shifted slightly, remembering the beach. Then he realized she was trying to distract him again. "So, what's the disposition of the ladies then?" he asked.

"It was always my intention to try and free them, but I think you've figured that out. Barring that, they are free. Their freedom was bought and paid for as a gift from myself to Eileen here. You are due the balance of the shipping fees you know." Marie looked at him askance.

"I look forward to seeing the full amount transferred to the Seven Fingers account in the morning." Gavin said.

"Oh, now who's heart is black?" Marie taunted.

"You knew that going in, luv," Gavin replied. "Isn't that nae why you sent me out to retrieve them?"

"Sadly yes. I'm afraid, kitten, that I have clients tonight. I won't be free until almost dawn, are you staying here tonight?"

"Probably, but I have to get Ben here back to the docks before one of you eats him for dinner." Gavin turned to Sheila and Kate, "Are the two of you returning to the docks with us?"

"My sister is going to stay with me, at least for tonight. We have some catching up to do," Eileen offered. Sheila just nodded eagerly.

"I'm going back, if it's okay," Kate said with a look to Benjamin. "Uncle?"

"Your aunt's infidelity didn't change my mind about such things, dear, you're still family. Come along and I'll set you up." Ben patted her arm.

As she left the kitchen, Marie added over her shoulder, "Oh, Gavin, do be a dear and sleep downstairs from now on. I don't use the master bedroom for clients you know." She was gone with the sound of a whisper. The trio headed back outside into the rain, but this time Kate was armed with a broly. The men relied on their staunch sea coats to combat the weather.

"My landlady, Mrs. Brooke, is a good woman, but set in her ways," Ben told Kate. "She won't settle for a single woman bunking with a single man, family or no, so I'll pay this months rent for two rooms. She still has an empty and I'm sure she could use the rent. Tomorrow morning we'll have a quick pop round town and see what suits you're fancy as far as jobs go. I'll not let family drift without an anchor, I won't."

Upon approaching the Fingers, Gavin saw that the hearse was just leaving. The low black horse carriage was being pulled by a single rather wet and disgruntled gelding. He had hoped to be gone long enough so that Kate wouldn't have to witness Sara's body being carted away. Kate, however, seemed to take it in stride by leaning onto her uncle's arm a little harder. As if in unison, both Captain and crew decided to change course.

They turned down several well lit side streets, heading into the area of the city that was part residential and part light commercial. This was the borderlands of the middle class between where they worked and shopped and where they lived. The three traveled on in companionable silence for a while, before stopping before a stylish three story brick building, with a wide Victorian style front porch set up off the street.

"Here we are, home sweet home." It only took Benjamin a moment to pop in and speak to the land lady, who was sitting just inside her wide parlor near the front door. "I'll be right back, Cap'n," Ben said, retrieving Kate and heading back inside."

"Carry on, Mister Wilkes, 'tis a fair course set," Gavin replied simply.

3-A Dark and Stormy Night

Upon ending his conversation with the Captain, Ben turned to see one of his neighbors, Mrs. Witherspoon come striding down the hall, her silver, tightly bunched curls bouncing, she was clearly on a mission. "By all the Saints in heaven I abhor Marcy and her gossiping tongue." Ben whispered. One of these days he was going to tell some of these 'ladies' what he really thought of them, but not this evening. This evening he'd endure it for Kate's sake more than anyone else's.

"Mr. Wilkes, do I understand that a woman has just entered your apartment unchaperoned?" The words were biting, the tone acid, her gray-green eyes were shooting daggers at him the whole while. Ben didn't mind, hell, he had every intention of stoking that fire a bit. Largely as a consequence of the fact he couldn't stand the woman.

"Good evening Mrs. Witherspoon, I am quite well, thank you, if a bit tired after a long day at sea." He smiled, more broadly, and was going to continue, knowing she'd cut him off.

"Don't be impertinent boy, or I'll box your ears," she took a step towards him as to make good on the threat, his left hand's casual slide to his filleting knife.

"As I was saying," he continued in his patient cheery tone, "a long day at sea, where we came across a ship in trouble, with two passengers aboard, one of those passengers is staying with family on the island, but the other, Mistress Kate, happens to be my own niece. I've secured an ADJACENT room for her until she can make other arrangements. A good Christian thing to do as well, don't you agree?" In the half light Ben's broad grin seemed almost predatory. The older woman sputtered for a moment, before finally huffing and probably would have said something caustic before the door opened and Kate appeared in it.

"Uncle, this room is truly quite lovely. Oh, good evening." Kate curtsied to the older woman, a gesture that raised her approval rating by another notch or two, as if it wasn't love at first sight. "My niece, Miss Kate Longlass, allow me to introduce one of my neighbors, Mrs. Valeria Witherspoon."

No more needed to be said, the two started an animated conversation right then and there. Benjamin Wilkes could have vanished from the material sphere as far as the older woman was concerned. It was decided that after giving Kate time to refresh herself, she would come down stairs for high tea. This event was one that the males were patently excluded from, thank the Mercys. In the morning, once Kate had gotten a good night's sleep, the ladies would head into the shops with some of her uncles hard won pay and pick out a few suitable dresses. Kate gave Ben a quick peck on the cheek and said, "I'll be fine, uncle, in good hands. See to your other business."

Gavin couldn't help but overhear much of what was keeping Benjamin as he waited outside. When the man had successfully extricated himself from Mrs. Witherspoon and stepped outside Gavin offered, "And that, dear Benjamin, is one of the many reasons why I sleep over a whorehouse."

Having seen to Kate's welfare, Gavin decided that they needed to find some much needed nourishment and perhaps some libations to accompany it. Benjamin agreed. It wasn't long before the pair found themselves in front of a little sing-song bar called the Dancing Pig. Gavin had been to this place a few times before, and it was just fun enough and strange enough to take the depressing edge off

of this rainy evening. The food was passable and modestly priced, and the liquor flowed quite well enough to allow people to drink away their inhibitions against singing in public.

As they entered Gavin noticed that was just what was happening. Backed by the house band, a fairly accomplished trio of musicians, some drunken amateur was mangling 'To You Spanish Ladies'. It took a few moments for Gavin's eyes to adjust to the lights, and he saw the place was about half full. The decor was fumed oak and crimson upholstery, the walls were lined with semi-private booths. A well lit stage was set up near the center of the room, ringed by tables, and an amply stocked bar ran along the right side. Gavin selected a table away from the stage.

"What's your poison, sailor?" the beerwench asked amicably.

"Rum, dark," replied Gavin, "and a pair of menus, si vous plais."

"Ooo, a man's drink!" the wench replied, passing Gavin and Benjamin both a menu. "I'm Derri, by the way." Turning to Ben she asked, "How about you, sweetheart, what are ye drinking tonight?"

"Sweetheart," Ben grumbled, "I'll have a Bourbon, Kentucky if you have it, and a beer chaser."

"A whiskey man are you, didn't figure for you that," replied the waitress, eying Ben a bit closer.

"I'm full of surprises." Ben quipped without missing a beat.

Gavin perused the limited selection, finally settling on the blackened redbfish. It might even have been one of the redbfish that had visited the Finger's nets earlier that morning, he mused ironically. By the time his drink clunked down on the table in front of him, Gavin was ready and placed his order. "Excellent choice, they were just caught today."

"Aye, and he probably the one doing the catching," Ben said more to himself.

"Pardon?" inquired the waitress.

"I'll have the sausage pie."

"Rough day, fellas?" Derri asked, "You look a little down."

"Not one of the better, no." Dropping a twenty pound note on the table Gavin added, "Keep the drinks coming, lass, and let me know when that runs out."

"I do love rainy nights," Derri said with a light giggle, "it's 'Drunken Sailor' night here at the Dancing Pig."

"Yes, hump day is good for that, folks drink off their pay." Ben snorted disgustedly.

Gavin was on his third drink, with several bites of redbfish happily swimming around with the first two shots of dark rum, when he heard a familiar voice start singing.

"Twiddle de ai de ai de ay, twiddle de ai de ay,
It's often times that love will leave you broken with dismay,

And it's twiddle de ai de ai de ay, twiddle de ai de ai de ay,
There's other things to twiddle when your sweeties sailed away."

He looked up and saw a very drunk Anabel Stark standing on the stage belting out the chorus. She wasn't half bad, either. As if sensing them, she looked directly at their table and winked.

"Now I remember Marie, she's a mistress of her trade,
she stole the heart of Cap'n Gav afore he sailed away.
He left her high and dry with just a kiss upon the chin,
but as the Fingers were sailing out, another ship sailed in."

Gavin laughed, almost falling out of his chair. About half the customers in the pub, including the good captain, joined in the chorus with the drunken first mate.

"And it's twiddle de ai de ai de ay, twiddle de ai de ay,
It's often times that love will leave you broken with dismay,
And it's twiddle de ai de ai de ay, twiddle de ai de ai de ay,
There's other things to twiddle when your sweeties sailed away."

"Now ol' Ben's lady kissed him when he knocked upon her door,
she was as glad to see him as she'd ever been before.
He left her lying in her bed, but she didn't care,
'cause she knew the poor man under it could use a little air."

Ben grumbled, and the Captain could easily tell from the far away look in his eyes that whatever memories were playing before his view, they weren't the happy kind.

"And it's twiddle de ai de ai de ay, twiddle de ai de ay,
It's often times that love will leave you broken with dismay,
And it's twiddle de ai de ai de ay, twiddle de ai de ai de ay,
There's other things to twiddle when your sweeties sailed away."

"Now Annie had her Barny, he was strong and he was brave,
but Annie went a voyaging, a Captain of her trade.
'Keep the fires burning luv,' were the words she spoke,
so he found 'imself a buxom lass to keep his fire stoked."

"And it's twiddle de ai de ai de ay, twiddle de ai de ay,
It's often times that love will leave you broken with dismay,
And it's twiddle de ai de ai de ay, twiddle de ai de ai de ay,
There's other things to twiddle when your sweeties sailed away."

After her song, Anabel staggered over to Ben and Gavin's table. "Ahoy, Cap'n, permission to come aboard!" she shouted in her first mate voice.

"Mistress Stark, I believe you've been drinking." Gavin exclaimed. "Decided not to cruise on home first, did we?"

"Oh, aye Cap'n," Annie said. Taking a chair, turning it around, and sitting in it backwards she continued, "Cruised straight home, did I. Had me a right fine berth, did I. Come home to find a half naked tavern wench swingin' in me hammock." She belched loudly and added, "Correction, I don't recall her having a stitch on, come to think...."

"Do sit with us, Anabel," Gavin insisted, "Have you eaten?"

"Had me some humble pie, Cap'n, goes well with the half keg of grog I chased it with. Prolly sleep it off on the barroom floor- found a cozy spot over there." She pointed to the corner nearest the water closets.

"Oh Derri?" Gavin called the waitress, raising his hand, "do fetch another of those redfish for my first mate here, lass."

"Somehow I knew she was another drunken sailor," Derri muttered. "Straight away, Captain. Fetch her drink as well?"

"I believe she'll be switching to tea, lass." Gavin replied.

"Oh no, no, Captain my Captain, no," Anabel pleaded, "I'm working on such a fine binge here."

"You've accomplished it, Mistress Stark, it be time to retire your crown."

"Really?" Anabel's eyes got really big.

"Yes, Annie, you win. You're much more drunk than the pair of us hope to be, right Mister Wilkes?"

"Ah, Captain, I believe you're speaking only for yourself, I have plenty of pay left." He wagged his eyebrows at that.

"You took care of Kate," Gavin told Ben, out of Annie's earshot. "This one's mine." Anabel wasn't really listening to them anyway, she was humming another sea chantey and eying the stage. Annie's meal showed up, and she began eating with gusto. Gavin secretly hoped it wouldn't show up later splashed onto his boots.

Since there were, at the moment, no singers the band broke into a waltz. "Watch the first mate, Ben, I know this one," Gavin offered. Before Ben could reply, his Captain had introduced himself to one of the ladies at the bar, and began gliding across the floor with her in time to the music with no little skill. Seeing that they had a couple dancing, and being a skilled trio of musicians, the band followed it up with a medieval reel. Gavin surprised his partner by knowing that one as well.

Once the second dance finished, another singer took the stage to mangle yet another more modern tune. Gavin thanked his dance partner and returned to the table. Anabel had by now finished eating. Gavin settled up with Dorri, and then he and Benjamin got her mostly vertical and steered her towards the door. Annie could barely navigate, so they propped her up between them. Not needing to concentrate of navigation, Anabel began singing again,

"There's a thornbush in the garden where the lads and lasses meet,

'cause it wouldn't do to do the doodle-doin' in the street.
Oh the first time e're I went there I was very much impressed,
Ta see the couples rumpling up the cuckoo's nest."

By the time they reached Marie's, Annie was passed out and being dragged between the two men. Benjamin hefted her up in a fireman's carry, and Gavin led the portly fisherman and his burden upstairs to the little room under the eaves that he had been using. The men doffed her coat and breeches, and placed her betwixt the covers in her skivvies. That done, Gavin saw Benjamin back down the stairs. "I'll be by the ship in the morning, Ben, and probably have lunch at Jack's. I'll see you then."

"Don't expect me too early, Captain.... I mean, wait until after five bells for sure." He smiled shyly and added, "I expect to have a lot less pay on board and a fine cargo of whiskey before the evening's out. My keel should be put to rights by then." Ben saluted with his right hand, and fumbled for his pipe and tobacco his left, "I'll just take a smoke round back before heading off. Good evening Captain."

"Aye, duly noted. Following seas, Mister Wilkes," Gavin replied.

Benjamin turned a corner, but was well under the eaves of the roof, as the rain was coming down in earnest now. He lit his pipe, and took a long drag off of it. "Sorry I wasn't strong enough to abstain tonight, dear niece." Ben said to nobody in particular. He didn't know his Captain had heard him. He also didn't know Gavin heard him begin to sing in a rough tone,

"Of all the money ere' I had,
I spent it in good company.
And all the harm that ere' I done,
alas it was to none but me.

A flash of lightening illuminated the firmament, and as if on cue, the rain came down in sheets so hard that it hit the paving stones and bounced back up. Through it all, through the rain, and the wind, and the thunder, Ben continued to sing,

And all I've done, for want of wit,
to memory now I can't recall.
So raise to me the parting glass,
good night and joy be with you all."

Having listened to the Gloucesterman's parting song, and Anabel's loud snoring in his own little room, Gavin returned to Marie's master bedroom. She had, after all, insisted he start using it. The warmth of the rum and the songs and dancing of the pub blended together with the memory of his companions into the memory of a pleasant evening. It certainly made up for the horrid day, anyway. Gavin drifted off to sleep to the sounds of the now raging tempest outside mixed with sexual activity all around him and the song still on his own lips,

"Farewell and adeu to you Spanish ladies,
farewell and adeu ye daughters of Spain,
for we've received orders for to sail home to England,
and we may or might never all see you again...."

Several hours later Gavin awoke. The room was elegant, although very feminine, and smelled sweetly of perfume. The bed he was in, Marie's bed, was huge, canopied, and curtained. It was still dark outside, the storm still at full force although a mere shadow of what it was on the docks. The old house was taking the brunt of the storm, ancient timber groaning as the wind outside moaned and whined around the eaves. As if to emphasize the storm's wrath, the flash and crack of thunder and lightening split the night. Rain pelted the curtained window panes and wind rattled the shutters. Gavin was sure that the storm wasn't supposed to be this severe, the barometer, the city's preparations, and even his own better than average weather skill had told him so. It was as if the storm had taken on a supernatural life of its own, and he was glad that Phineas had opted to stay with the Seven Fingers.

As if to add to the creepiness of the moment, there was a menacing and slightly irate vampire hovering over him on the bed. "Hullo, Poppy," he addressed it.

"Good morning, kitten," Marie replied ominously. "You dragged a stray into my house last night."

"Yes," Gavin replied, "That would be my first mate, Anabel. She hasn't made a mess of the carpets, has she?"

"Oh, she's one of your crew then?" Marie sounded relieved when she added, "The house was all abuzz with the idea that you had brought home a strange piece last night. Some of the girls were even upset that you went outside without consulting them first, as if you didn't think them worthy enough." Gavin laughed, not so much at the situation as what he had told Benjamin about sleeping above a house of ill repute last evening. True, the women here wouldn't judge his lack of morals, but they still question his choice of companions. He pondered what their version of high tea might be.

"My apologies to the ladies, Poppy, I didn't mean to upset them," he explained, "Annie came home to a strange woman in her own bed and got roaring drunk. Benjamin and I found her in one of the pubs and decided to keep her from sleeping on the barroom floor." Gavin stopped and then mused, "Surprisingly she has a rather good singing voice."

"Oh, well if Benjamin was with you then they'll understand," she replied. Gavin's sleepy mind wondered at the weight of that comment and its portent, but only for a moment. After all, there was a scantily clad vampiress hovering mere inches above him.

"So, are you off work, luv? It seems we've got a while before dawn....."

"Not enough time to do anything well, sadly. Besides, I've been doing 'anything' almost since dusk." Marie added, picking up on his insinuation.

"You know, as Captain of my own vessel, I usually have the crew do the fishing and I stick to navigation and piloting and such. Just saying, you know," Gavin said with a wink.

"Of course, kitten, but sometimes one nets a really big fish, and it requires the Captain's skill and experience to bring it on board," she responded following his analogy. "Lately we've been running a school of really big fish, what with the situations brewing. As a matter of fact, that's kind of what I need to talk to you about."

"Not another setup is it?" he asked raising an eyebrow. "And afore you ask, no I'm not interested in a threesome."

"Oh, kitten, would I do that to you?"

"In a heartbeat- mine not yours. Yours doesn't beat unless you want it to."

Marie's laugh was like wind chimes on this stormiest of nights. "Touche', but I shouldn't have to coerce you this time, and the job will pay well. I need to consolidate my power base so I'm bringing my associates in closer to help deal with a, well, situation; at least from my side. Basically we're pooling our resources." She waited a moment, then continued, "I need you to make a passenger run and bring Virginia from the Crescents for me."

Gavin remembered Marie's scion, her vampiric daughter, Virginia. It was during their rather messy master-scion split that Gavin inadvertently got between them and nearly died. Happily they had finally reconciled, but were still wary of one another and sometimes sparks flew. Virginia now ran a rather successful import-export business based in the Crescents with offices all over the Caribbean. He had even shipped some light freight for her himself from time to time, and looked forward to seeing his old friend. "That's almost two days out and just under three back against the westerlies," Gavin advised. "A long sea voyage for one of the night's children. She'll need her own donors, I'll not have the crew weakened and lethargic. And I assume she'll want to day travel in that damned sarcophagus as well? It will take a day to load it. We're talking almost a week."

"Yes, we are. I could hire almost anyone, but both Virginia and I trust you and it is really a gravy run. I kind of owe it to you for the last one." By this time Marie was cuddled against him under the covers and her proposition was sounding very enticing. Besides, he really should give her another chance. "And she'll even have her own entourage." Marie added.

"You talk about it as a gravy run, but sure I'll have to venture into not only Spanish, but Dutch waters. I believe the Spanish are favorable to the Capibarra's, and so may be in collusion with...." He paused as he remembered the vision Phineas had shared. "Well, another player is in this game and all's I got was 'DeSilva'. Who knows how the Dutch are aligning, but it won't be with any of the pretes, yerself included. I'll probably wish to acquire letters of mark from the Admiralty here in Cayman, and maybe even some additional armament."

"I can assist with the former," Marie said as she went to the babbage terminus, a veritable wall of brightly polished but indecipherable hoses, gears, wires, and motors, and turned it on. "You'll have to locate your ballistae for yourself, but you're more suited to that than I. You know, this will mark you as a privateer." As the whine of the complicated machine's small turbine steadied Marie began typing on the keys.

Gavin had figured out the rudimentary uses of this device, an interface with the islands main differential engine, but was mesmerized watching it in the hands of a skilled operator. "How long have you had this beastie?" he asked idly.

"Almost three years," the vampress replied, "Had to order it from Babbage, Ltd. directly but it's worth every shilling. I can conduct business without an army of day walkers." Finally she turned to him, "There, letters of mark for the Seven Fingers will be waiting at the Admiralty office for pickup. You'll have to do your own day walking, privateer." Privateer. Gavin pondered that title, it meant that

the Spaniards and probably Dutch would consider him a pirate. The English would consider him one of their fleet. He wasn't really sure which was worse, but he was no longer a simple fisherman.

"So, I guess I'm going to fetch her for you after all," Gavin finally conceded.

"Thank you," Marie replied, "it means a lot." She snuggled close to him. "Almost dawn," she observed, "hold me a few more minutes." They cuddled back up in the enormous bed and Gavin fell back asleep with her in his arms, forgetting once again what manner of creature she truly was.

When he woke again it was past dawn, though you couldn't really tell with the continued storm, and Marie was gone like a vanished wisp. He followed the wonderful breakfasty smells of bangers, mash, and hot tea, wraith-like himself, downstairs into the kitchen.

4-A Pirates Life For Me

Gavin left the kitchen, taking his sated appetite and his last cup of tea with him upstairs to the little room under the eaves where Anabel was still snoring loudly. She was sprawled on the bed where he and Benjamin had deposited her the night before, still in her small clothes. She was now out from under the cover they had placed over her, and was holding on to the solitary pillow like a lost puppy. "Anabel," Gavin said gently, not knowing how she would awaken, "wakey wakey."

She responded with something incomprehensible and then added, "jes five more, schatzie...."

"Mistress Stark," he tried again, shaking her shoulder, "I need you to wake up now, we have to leave." Her response the second time was to roll away and firmly cover her head with the pillow. Realizing that gentle wouldn't work, Gavin stood back and bellowed as only a sea captain could, "Fire in the hold! All hands, fire in the hold! To tha' pumps!"

Anabel, and incidentally two of the ladies downstairs, jumped from bed, scrambling for her breeches. After several seconds of frantic activity she realized the situation. "Permission to speak freely?" she asked.

"Of course, Annie, we're not aboard ship no matter how much the room is rocking to ya'."

"Yer a rat bastard, Captain," she told him.

"Aye, but you'd have done the same," he replied.

"True, Captain, but that would make me a right royal bitch, sir, and NOT a rat bastard," Annie jibed.

"Right," Gavin responded, "wash up, and do it well on account of you're still stinkin' drunk, and meet me downstairs in the kitchen. If you're quick about it there will be some breakfast left."

Within fifteen minutes Anabel wandered into the kitchen, still staggering slightly, to the welcome smells of bangers and mash. She was mostly clean and fairly sober, but dressed in last night's clothes except for her sea coat and hat. The defenseless meal that Gavin placed before her fell to her ravenous appetite rather quickly, and she finished with a simple, "Thank you, Captain."

"Twas nothing," he replied, "Gather your things, we're already starting late. I'm off on errands and you might as well join me, Marie doesn't want you about corrupting the womenfolk here."

Annie snorted a reply, "In that?" She indicated the window, where it was still raining quite steadily.

"It was far, far worse last night. We'll need to see to any damage at the docks, but first I'll be needing to stop by the Admiralty and pick up letters of mark. We're privateers now, Mistress Stark, and we're off to the Crescents in search of adventure. Actually, we'll just be picking up a passenger, so we'll be more like omnibus drivers. We'll have to arrange some outbound cargo, load in ship's stores and maybe get some minor work done. Not to mention access any damages from that bastard of a storm what sneaked in last night. There'll be no rest for tha likes o' us."

"Dammit!" Annie exclaimed, "Privateers? We're going to get shot at regularly? I should have known not to sign on with the Fingers. Everyone told me it was a cursed ship." She dropped her head between her hands, shaking it slowly. Gavin thought she was going to start crying.

"We're still in port, Anabel, you can jump ship and not even get your feet wet you know. Not even any hard feelings, what?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world, never seen the Crescents." She smiled sweetly as she added, "Can I at least work one of the balistae in the next battle?" They both laughed at that as they gathered themselves against the weather and ventured out into the waning storm. The storm itself had mellowed into a tepid, soul draining constant rain instead of the tempest it had been on the previous night.

They entered the Admiralty office, shaking off the rain as well as could be expected before stepping in completely. The clerk, a lieutenant in a sharp creased Royal Navy uniform, addressed them down his nose once he saw they were situated. "Something we can do for you, Captains?" he offered, looking with disdain at the puddles they were leaving on his polished floor.

"Aye, Lieutenant," Gavin responded, "I believe there are papers for the Seven Fingers awaiting us?"

"Ah, yes, Captain Draegun I presume?" he replied with a continued lack of alacrity. "All is in order, all I need is your signature on our copy to indicate you agree to the terms." He indicated the line at the bottom as if a simple privateer could not find it on his own.

Gavin looked over the offered letters, trying valiantly to keep the rain water from them as he struggled with the archaic legalese. The legalese gave him much more trouble than the archaic ever could. He started at 'Lettre de Marque and Reprifal' at the top and finished at the signature line at the bottom. It was already signed by the Lord Admiral Governor himself. "The Spanish and Dutch as well?" he finally asked the clerk.

"Yes, well we're not sure where the Dutch are going to side, if at all," the lieutenant explained. "We would ask you to use discretion with all parties, but should you be attacked, or need to exact justice, you will be under the protection and command of the Admiralty." He mentally added 'unfortunately' at the end of his statement. It was the first time the lieutenant had even considered smiling in a fortnight, but he quickly squelched the urge.

Gavin sighed, signed, and passed the signed copy to the clerk. The clerk passed Gavin an oiled leather scrip embossed with the Admirals coat of arms. "Keep them dry and in a safe place," he suggested simply, as if Gavin could do neither well. With a handshake and tepid farewell Gavin and Anabel found themselves back out in the rain.

"It seems so, well, final," Annie mused. Her face went blank and she stopped, staring off into infinity. Rainwater streamed off her wide brimmed hat and down her sea coat. "I'm a God cursed pirate."

"Privateer," Gavin corrected, water streaming off him as well. He waited several moments for her to gather herself together. Those moments stretched on, and the rain took this opportunity to seep

into every unnoticed seam in his seacoat. When nothing seemed to be happening he added, "So are we going to stand here an' drown, argue, or continue onward?"

"Right, my Pirate Captain, where to next?"

"Well, Anabel, you are going to lay in a weeks worth of stores for ten people and access any damage to the ship. I, on the other hand, am off to arrange cargo for the outbound trip, and maybe with luck some heavier arms." Gaging her reaction, and seeing she was well, he then added, "I trust you can handle that, Mistress Stark?"

"Aye, aye, Cap'n," she responded in traditional fashion.

"Right then." Still not sure about her mental, or in fact sober state, Gavin said, "We'll meet back at the Seven Fingers, perhaps around lunch time." They split, Anabel headed for the markets and then the docks while Gavin, with some trepidation, headed for one of his oldest and most dangerous associates in the Caymans.

The tourist side of Cayman's waterfront was bleak and empty in the driving rain. Last night's storm had been unkind to it as well, bits of torn flotsam and blown in refuse, now sopping wet, littered the quay. The party lighting was off, as were the streetlights, and the area looked somehow naked in the wan gray sunlight available under the heavy sky. Turning down several familiar side streets, Gavin was quickly presented with the comforting sight of the hand painted sign to Julio's. Opening the door, Gavin smelled the same heavy, scent laden air, and the same welcoming warmth of Julio's. Julio himself approached him as he doffed his soaked hat and coat. "Gavin!" The big man exclaimed, "you don't write, you don't telegraph." His incredible grin broadened.

"Well, since you sent me out the back door last time as rat bait I thought ye nay luv'd me anymore," Gavin responded.

Julio laughed. "Let Julio get you some breakfast."

"Sorry, mate, I've eaten already."

"Was it as good as Julio's?" Julio asked.

Gavin pondered the answer for a moment, then said, "Well, no, but it was served in a cathouse by several scantily clad women."

Julio roared, "Then, my friend, you are forgiven. What brings your ray of sunshine into Julio's wet, dreary day?"

"Got a run to make out to the Crescents. The outbound holds are empty....."

"Well, that is a problem maybe Julio could help you with. Are we talking a full load?"

"About eighty percent, got ships stores to account for and possibly some heavier armaments." Gavin paused for a moment and added as an explanation, "Troubled water between here and there, you know."

"Julio knows," the big man said, "and not too good for business. The poor souls out there are drying out, and in dire need of Julio's libations. If you were to deliver some relief to them perhaps Julio could arrange a special new toy? Julio knows how much pirates love their toys."

Ah, the jig was up. The well informed Lobo alpha already knew he had applied for his letters of mark. "Privateer," Gavin corrected, "and I just signed the bloody papers! Does the whole bloody town know already?"

"Ah, for Julio it was only a guess, but now not so much, eh? It's all right though, you been a pirate already so privateer is a step up, yes?" Julio continued, "Now, about that toy. How about an American made repeating crossbow? Steam powered to boot.... Got all it's papers, all legitimate, even got the bloody operators manual. Funny what falls off of docks when nobody watches it, yes?"

"I'd have to see it first," Gavin countered. He'd already shown the man his playing hand, he wasn't going to give him anything else. As a privateer, Gavin could ship untariffed rum into hostile waters and the authorities would generally look away unless he was blatant about it. He actually could, since Julio now knew, charge a higher shipping fee. Of course he would.

"Julio will send the new toy along to the docks with the shipment. Use it on your trip, we'll settle up when you return. If you don't like it you can just give it back, but Julio thinks you will fall in love with this fine piece of machinery." Talk turned to fees and amounts, with Julio complaining that his children would starve and Gavin suggesting that he swim to the Crescents with his rum on his back and the crossbow shooting from his arse. Two heavier ballistae were worked into the deal to replace the port and starboard ones, with the old ones prorated for resale. In the end an amicable deal was struck, and sealed with a pair of Red Stripes and a handshake.

Gavin stopped next at a nearby bladesmiths shop. The walls of the tidy little hole-in-the wall place were lined with all manner of deadly cutlery. Several close set cases were tightly packed with a broad assortment of knives. Gavin went to the cutlasses, a good blade for close fighting on a ship. They were sturdy, well balanced, and not so long that they'd slice through valuable rigging along with an opponent. After trying a bevy of them, he selected several of the better balanced cutlasses. One in particular he selected for it's strong, plain blade and it's slightly lighter weight. Once they were purchased, Gavin also filled out the papers for a carry permit in Anabel's name, showing his letter of marque and using his authority as Captain of the Seven Fingers to make it official. Now all his current crew had personal arms in addition to ship's arms. That being done, Gavin made his way along the docks, with his burden of cutlery to the awaiting 'Seven Fingers'.

By the time Gavin reached the dock area the rain had slowed to a steady, windblown drizzle. Under the lightening sky the dock area was a mess. As with the tourist quay blown in trash and flotsam littered the ways. The Fingers herself looked untouched, but everything around her looked as if it had been blown away from her. Several boats were partially on the dock, and one of the ships had broken mooring and was sunk against her pier. People milled about, mostly crew of damaged vessels and dockworkers. Stores were being loaded on board the Fingers, Anabel directing the dockworkers like a maestro with an orchestra. "Brought ye something, pirate," Gavin addressed her. He handed her the lighter cutlass.

"I need a permit for that," she said flatly as she pointed one of the laden workers at an unused corner of the hold. Gavin held up the little card, showing her her own name on it. "I'll cut me own foot off," she warned.

"You'll be taught. Better than someone taking off your fool head instead," Gavin countered. "I'm going to stow these in an arms locker, I'll let you know when I figure out where that is. We've got some equipment and cargo coming this afternoon as well. Got a steamfitter due with the one bit." Annie raised an eyebrow but said nothing. "Did we lay in some additional coal as well?" Gavin added, realizing all he had told her was food.

"Of course, Cap'n, I'm no twit, after all."

"One of the reason's I don't mind teaching you how to use that blade, Mistress Stark. Nice to see you've recovered from the nights libations. How stands the crew?"

"Phineas's still aboard, Cap'n, but resting. He's had a bad night. Nary a sign of Master Wilkes or Master Fitch yet," she replied. "Have ye looked about the docks? Everything has been blown away from the Fingers, and her without a mark on her as well. Creepy what, adds to the whole 'cursed ship' reputation she's been getting, don't it?"

"Ahoy, Seven Fingers!" came a call from the dock, "Permission to board?"

"Come ahead, sir!" Anabel replied before Gavin could speak. He shot her a quick glare as the newcomer climbed the gangplank. A muscular fellow who moved with unnatural grace, he was clean shaved with sandy brown hair and pale gray eyes that watched everything while seeming not to. Dressed in common dock worker clothing, and with an otherwise normal appearance, he none the less gave off an aura of harnessed violence. He was, of course, a werewolf.

"I'm Captain Draegun," Gavin offered, "what be your business, sir?"

"Ulrich Heisse at your service, Captain. I understand from a mutual acquaintance that ye may be needing crew, perhaps someone good with a ballistae, or even a repeating crossbow. I'm here to offer services, Captain," the wolf offered quite civilly.

"Do ye have any sailing experience at all?" Anabel asked.

"Sadly ,no, my father being an airship pilot. I do, however, learn fairly quick and I'm quite strong," he offered again.

Gavin pondered the werewolf. Finally he said, "I'll think on it, but if it's aye I'll have none of your malarkey, wolf. I'm Captain of the Fingers, this is first mate. You'll start at the bottom and take orders like crew should. Any deviation or dominant games and you'll find yerself swimming home, understood?"

"Aye," the wolf replied, realizing that the Captain knew he was a werewolf, "fair enough."

Gwynrheged flew to Gavin's hand. Almost simultaneously a machete appeared in the werewolf's hand as well. The two circled with unnatural grace and speed, and the blades began to feel each other out, testing. The workers aboard gave them room, and a small crowd gathered on the dock. Suddenly, the 'feeling out' dispensed with, the two blades began to sing through the air at each other again and again. Parry- thrust- riposte, back and forth the swordplay flowed from one man to the other. They were an odd pair of combatants, Heisse in his loose linen shirt and dockworker's clothes and the

good Captain still in his sturdy seacoat and best rain hat. Gavin was using classical moves, the werewolf's counters were more free-form, depending more on his unnatural speed. The singing blades continued, but you could tell that age and normal physiology were taking their toll on Gavin. Finally Gavin forced the wolf to overextend, but only by over extending himself.

With unnatural speed the Captain came back to center and whacked the wolf soundly aside the head with the flat of Gwynrheged's silver blade. The werewolf dropped like a stone, his machete skittering across the deck. The whole play had taken only seconds. "Throw him overboard, Captain?" Anabel offered.

"Hell no, he's crew," Gavin exclaimed. "Just had to assert dominance and be sure he wouldn't cut off his own privates in a fight. He's a little slow for a werewolf, but he'll do. Hardly broke a sweat. Have one of the dockworkers put him below in a hammock, but make sure he's not near Phineas. Dreadfully disconcerting waking up next to a werewolf." Gavin grinned and added, "or one of the Fae for that matter."

"Very good, Captain," Annie replied with a little smirk.

Noticing her grin, Gavin added, "Why Mistress Stark, I do believe you're a bit smitten. Remember, fraternization with the crew rarely turns out for the good, besides, their appetites are quite ferocious." Gavin looked up just in time to catch sight of Benjamin Wilkes staggering down the dock towards them. The Captain waved to him and gave him a hearty, "Ahoy, Mister Wilkes!"

Not getting a response to his hail, Gavin noticed that Ben seemed to be woolgathering. "Difficult evening, Mister Wilkes? I trust it was more the storm and ensuing difficulties than the drink." Gavin didn't wait for a response, for about that time a steam tractor with several trailers pulled along side the Finger's dock. The longshoremen began unloading the load from the first unit, which consisted primarily of a complicated crossbow apparatus. The steamfitter who's task it was to install the beast talked briefly with the Captain, then set to work mounting it on the Seven Finger's bow where the forward balistae would have been.

While the installer got to work, the longshoremen addressed the second trailer and began loading unmarked crates. Usually this would have been done in the dead of night, but with the new privateer status the port authority would look less closely at Gavin's actions. Still, it was a good idea not to have 'Bootleg Rum' stamped on the crates. The rum went into the main hold, and the work had to be done manually as the boiler was off pending installation of the crossbow. Lobo workers formed a bucket brigade to bring the cargo on board and stow it.

Just moments after Ben's coming aboard the entire deck was with activity. It was then that Samuel Fitch strolled up with a young lady on his arm. Gavin watched them say goodbye with a bit more passion than the situation required and then go their separate ways. Phineas emerged buttoning his coat. "Good morrow to you, my Captain, First Mate. The storm was rougher than predicted, but as you can see, the Seven Fingers is sound. We had some 'difficulties', but I took the liberty of seeing to her safety myself."

"You are nigh on to amazing, Mister Facinock," Gavin responded eyeing the damage sustained by the rest of the quay.

Phineas simply nodded, "And what are the Captain's orders?"

"Be at ease, Phineas," the Captain started, "For starters we're a privateer under the Royal Admiralty now. I've made arrangements to upgrade our ships arms, hence the steamfitter working to patch in that beastly great crossbow on the bow. We're headed for the Crescents to pick up a passenger, and we're taking on outbound cargo. I've hired a greenhorn, and I'd like you to work with him if you have the mettle. Right now he's in a hammock below, and I suspect we'll need at least one more crew. Oh," Gavin said, "how is our ethereal passenger? Am I to suppose that we have signed on a spirit crew member, and if so how is she to be paid?"

"About that, yes. She'll be feeding off of the crew's dreams, mainly my own. Since she died aboard the Seven Fingers, she must go where it goes, forever afloat and never ashore. Perhaps we can find a means to her resolution, so that she might leave this world for the next. This is the pay she hopes for. As to material wealth she seems to feel that whatever pay she is due should be split between her former zombie companions. I do understand that you are the one that freed her, and feel responsible, but she knows that any other fate offered to her would have been far worse." Gavin nodded in agreement.

Whilst all that played out, amidst all the bustle of the preparing ship, Fitch was busily talking with a tall tanned fellow, whose look and manners proclaimed him to be yet another werewolf. "Top of the morn, Captain, rums high on the head I hope. I hear from Samuel here that you be lookin' for crew. Know that I've sailed with this man during his conscript, nearly four long years. I'd be asking for the possibility to turn a deck with you."

Gavin offered his hand, "Captain Gavin Draegun, sir, and what be your name?"

"Roger Pierce, if it please the Captain, from the Carolinas." His grip was steady firm and strong, and he had not the look of one interested in upsetting the established order, which was good.

"Our status in the grand scheme of things has changed. Mister Fitch, mister Wilkes, best you harken to this as well. The Seven Fingers is now a registered privateer with full letters of marque. As such, we're now attached to the Admiralty and our armament is being upgraded." The Captain waited for this to sink in then continued. "I'll assume you know your way around the rigging, Mister Pierce, but can you handle a blade and how are you with other wolves? See, I've just hired on a Lobo cub...."

"I usually don' have problems with my kin, even if clan be different, if you know what I mean. As for the less natural hardware, I've got some skill. Not a swordmaster like yerself by any means, but good enough in a fight. I left my better cutlery at home, didn't want to put off by coming too heavily armed. I've seen my share of engagements at sea, many close quarters, and I'm still here. That should speak to my abilities."

"Well and good then, Mr. Pierce, welcome aboard. You can stow your gear below, and if you've a carry permit for your 'better cutlery' best bring it along on the morrow. We'll set sail at dawn, be on board an hour beforehand." Turning to Ben and Samuel the Captain continued, "I trust your evening went well after we parted, Ben. Have either of ye any concerns about being a privateer instead of a fisherman?"

"No Cap'n," they replied simultaneously, but they shot each other a look of surprise.

"I thought as much, gentlemen. At ease, then. Not much to be doing around here at the moment unless ye wish to handle cargo. I've got to address the upgrade to the broadside and stern mounts, and sell off the old ballistae. My First is handling the lading, so if you wish to help see Mistress Stark. Otherwise I'll see you at four bells." With that Gavin headed off to find the steamfitter and appraise the new crossbow.

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Four bells comes awfully early unless you happen to be a fisherman, then it's actually rather late. Captain Gavin Draegun crossed the quay on his way to the Seven Fingers at two bells, so it was quite a surprise to find his old friend Professor John Merriwether, who rarely rose before eight bells, waiting for him. Even more disconcerting was the large trunk he was sitting on at the bottom of the Fingers' gangplank. "Top of the mornin', John," he addressed the anomaly.

"And you as well, Gavin." A pregnant silence ensued. Finally, unable to contain it, the thaumatologist continued. "Um, seems I've run into a spot of trouble."

"Again, John?" Gavin parleyed. "Another impropriety with a student?" The man dropped his head at this. "What happened this time?"

"It's been suggested most strongly that I vacate the Caymans posthaste I'm afraid."

"And you were hopin' that I might oblige?" Gavin prompted.

"Yes," John Merriwether said humbly.

"Fer crissakes, grab yer gear. I'm makin' ye earn yer keep though, you'll work this off."

"Thanks, Gavin, I'm much obliged," he got off of his trunk and nodded towards the alternate handle.

"That would be 'Captain', Master Merriwether," Gavin corrected him. Indicating the trunk he added, "The Captain doesn't help stow the crew's gear. Oh, and crew bunks foreward." Climbing the gangplank he heard the good professor huffing as he carried the heavy trunk and smiled to himself.

5-Devil's Play

We hove our ship to with the wind from sou'west,
We hove our ship to, deep soundings to take,
'Twas forty-five fathoms, with a white sandy bottom,
So we squared our main yard and up channel did make.

~

Gavin piloted the Seven Fingers out of the harbor's mouth. It was a fine day, the sun was breaking into a clear, dark blue sky dusted with fading stars which were being chased below the horizon amid a thin veil of fluffy indigo clouds. Disengaging the steam powered screw, he turned the ship slightly to take on some spray, not because he had to, but because he wanted to feel the cool mist of salt water in his face. The Fingers shuddered as it transformed from a complicated machine into a living breathing creature of the sea. He laughed at Annabel's sideways glance, for she knew he purposefully steered incorrectly. "Tis a fine, fair morning, Mistress Stark. We've the wind at our backs and a following sea, and nothing to do but chase the dawn for two days. All 'twas needed to make it perfect was a wee bit of salt spray in our faces," the Captain said as he turned the bow into the rising sun.

The Seven Fingers found her stride, cutting through the waves with a galloping roll as the sails snapped taught. The deck took on it's familiar roll, reminding them that solid ground was dwindling behind them. Gavin reached down and idled down the boiler, only keeping enough head of steam to operate the windlasses and pumps, and perhaps the crossbow and balistae if needed.

"Wind's at 23 knots, straight out of the west, Cap'n," Annie said, "barometer's high and rising. Speaking of rising, look off to port."

A dirigible was lifting, just clearing the shelter of the island. The first rays of the sun, still not reaching them on the surface, were touching the silvered skin of the craft and setting it aglow like a beacon. "I'll see that as a good omen, Anabel!"

He looked over to catch his first mate watching the crew. Fitch was showing Ulrich how to wind the steam windlass so it wouldn't break his arm when it started up. Gavin leaned over to her, "So how's about a little bet? I says our young wolf there will be feeding the fishies before tomorrow dawn."

"I don't know, sir, I think he's got a fine constitution. Methinks he'll handle it well and get his sea legs just fine, and a bottle of rum from my share says it's so," she grinned at him.

"Why Anabel," Gavin replied, "do you think that's wise? I've been drinking with you before."

"Aye, Captain, and I'll need a gentleman of your honesty to see me home after I drink that much of your rum." Smiling she added, "Sir."

Gavin laughed, "It's done then, your bottle of rum against my own, and safe passage to your bunk after. He'll toss his supper over the side by the next dawn." They shook hands.

"So I wonder what they shaking hands about" Ben queried to no one in particular. He shuddered when a woman's voice whispered an answer in his ear. Fortunately, Phineas had told the crew about their ghostly companion so he didn't jump overboard when she told him about the bet.

"No, you stupid cub." Fitch's grumble cut into the quiet morning, "pull the lead rope not that one. You'll take your bloody thumb off." Pierce let out a hardy bellow laugh, which in turn prompted Heisse to growl at him.

"Gentlemen," the Captain bellowed over all of them, "need I involve m'self?"

"No, sir," both werewolves replied quickly.

"Right then. Both of ye drop and give me fifty," Gavin commanded, "Now!"

"I don't care to discipline the crew, not one bit," grumbled Gavin. "Reminds me of darker days, it does."

"I believe," Anabel began as she watched the crew, "that you need to appoint a bo'sun to rein in the more unstable element of the crew. How well do you know Professor Merriwether? Could he contain two werewolves, a drunkard, an elf, and a thief? He should get two share, the rank of bo'sun is equal to mine."

"And a spirit? Perhaps, Mistress Stark. He has, after all, wrangled a class of college students. I'll speak with him, now below with you. You get the helm at dusk and you'll need your sleep. I'll see you during first dog and not a moment sooner."

"Aye then, good night, Captain," Annie said as she headed below decks.

"Master Merriwether, Master Facinock," Gavin bellowed in his best Captain's voice, "front and center that I might have a word with you!" The Captain waited until John Merriwether and Phineas Facinock were before him to continue. "Two things. First, John," Gavin started, "you've just been promoted to bo'sun, if you wish the task and the extra share it entails. The second, Phineas, can you communicate with the spirit of Mistress Sara? Can she stand night watch and would she be able to make herself known well enough to sound an alarm?"

Phineas smiled. "Mistress Sara, stand and be counted," he said in a normal speaking tone. One could tell it was also a command that rang out louder than necessary on some level. No sooner had the words touched the air, then there she stood, well in plain view for the whole deck to see. The crew gazed with apprehension at the apparition.

"I can make myself known, seen, and heard when necessary Captain." Was the melodic reply that tickled the ears with its sweetness. "Even knock you out of the bed, if someone happens to be a heavy sleeper."

"Very good, Mistress Sara," Gavin said. He watched, mesmerized for a moment, as the specter's raiments flowed not with the stiff breeze that was pushing the Fingers along, but a gentler ethereal flow that went unfelt by mortal skin. "I'll need your full name for the ship's roster. Since you're working you also get a share. How do you want the funds dispensed?"

"My name is Sara Merrick, Captain. As for the funds, if I am to be given a share, which is generous of you, then give to the girls. Mister Wilkes can see to it's delivery, if you find it agreeable."

"Tis not generous, Mistress Merrick, ye be doing crew work and should receive crew pay. Plain and simple as that. The First Mate outranks you now, so do me the favor and make sure there will be no more loose ropes in her path." Gavin gave her an impish grin and winked at her, "And do try not to dip her bum in the sea again either." That laughter that left the ghostly lady was so sweet, that men could go drunk on it's appeal alone.

"I'll turn my lessons in humility to another kind Captain, perhaps there is another way to trim the fire that burns in her." Then her face became more solemn, "I shall treat her as due one of her rank station, no more pranks." She said soberly.

"As you were then," Gavin said to the pair of them, "we'll be staying this course as long as the breeze holds, Master Merriwether, use the time with your charges as you best see fit." He checked the binnacle and added, "Perhaps one of the lads would wish to spell me at the helm around eight bells. Pick the one you think is best fit."

In a blink Sara was gone, leaving Crew and Captain standing there, as if she'd never emerged. "Aye, Captain, Ben will spell you then," John Merriwether stated. Turning to the crew he added, "Right then, eve shift go below and get some sleep, clear the deck. Be above at first dog watch. Those of you still on deck carry on. Old hands teach the green horns," he smiled at that and added, "myself included."

~

The rhythmic ringing of swordplay was soothing music to Gavin's ears. Truth be known his mind wasn't really on the matter, it was good to be at sea on a warm afternoon with a cutlass in his hand and a sparring partner in front of him. He had been in a good mood all day, even if they were now crossing into hostile Spanish waters. Gwynrheged was set to the side, along with his hat, coat, bandoleer, and various other accouterments. In just his breeches, boots, and flounced shirt Gavin wielded his practice blade.

His mind came back to the match. "Mistress Stark, you're over reaching again, come back to center once you parry. I could fillet you like a flounder right now."

"Aye, Captain," the first mate replied sweating profusely, "but you're so blasted strong."

"Anabel," Gavin answered her as he leaned on his practice cutlass, "almost all of your opponents are going to be stronger than yourself. Use that. A strong opponent, when deflected, tends to be thrown outside of his frame. Don't try to stop my blade, deflect it out of play. It only takes a split second to respond if your opponent is reaching and you're still near center." He smiled, came 'en guard', and said, "Again!"

"She's got good wrist work, pity she can't get her wrist and arm to do the right thing, at the right time yet." Ulrich Heisse commented watching the First Mate practice.

"I understand you had a problem yourself when you first matched blades with our Captain." Roger Pierce quipped, his back towards the dueling pair.

"Who told ye that?" Ulrich growled lowly, taken by surprise by the older werewolf's quick, and completely accurate, remark on his hiring "test".

"A bird told me," Roger parried, smiling at how easy it had been to get to the cub.

"Which of the two of you should be below?" John Merriwether asked with a raised eyebrow. Roger bowed his head at the bo'sun's query and slunk towards the hatchway. Ulrich grinned at his receding back. "Mister Heisse!" John snapped, "Back to work!"

"Aye, sir!" Ulrich snapped right back, still grinning.

"Mr. Heisse, do please remember that she happens to be your superior officer. When you decide to let your tongue wander unchecked, the Captain there might just have you for lessons again as well." The professor managed to infuse a bit of classroom control tone into those words.

"Maybe he'll take us both up for lessons, Magi." Ulrich retorted, having never seen John Merriwether wield a blade, and holding to the long stereotype that mystics and academics were terrible fighters.

"He just might Mr. Heisse, and embarrass the both of us I am sure." Mister Merriwether produced a penny whistle and started playing a merry tune, for the two sparrers to practice to. The sinking sun cast everything in a burning half light. This time they sparred a bit longer. The swordplay was slower than actual battle, conveniently timed to the magi's reel. Gavin concentrated on getting Annie's body to do automatically what she still had to think about at the moment. When the Captain's thrust was parried by the First's blade, it passed mere inches left of her shoulder. Anabel quickly spun widdershins and brought the flat of her blade against Gavin's head, touching it just above his left ear. "Got you!" She yelled with joy.

Anabel felt him gently touching her just below her ribs, his right arm extended past her. His arm was almost embracing her, his rugged face just inches from her own. She could feel the warmth of him through his loose linen shirt and smell the musk of recent exertion. He smiled a gentle, disarming grin. Just before her lips parted invitingly she looked down. Her Captain had a dagger in his left hand against her belly. "A draw, actually. Very well done, Anabel, but never turn your back on an opponent unless it's a last resort." Gavin winked at her. "We pirates are sneaky rat bastards even at our very best. Spaniards are worse."

Releasing each other from their 'death's embrace', Gavin offered, "Enough for today? I mean, since we just killed each other and all." He added mentally, "and it wouldn't do to let what almost happen continue further."

"Aye, sir. Once I figure out where you pulled that dagger from I'll be back for a rematch," she responded.

"Why Anabel, I surely thought you'd recognize that pig sticker!" He grinned.

Realization crossed Annie's face like a Caribbean dawn, complete with a blush of morning red. She reached behind her to her 'hidden' back sheath only to find it empty. "You incredible rat bastard," she screamed, "that's my bloody knife!"

Gavin laughed. With a low dramatic bow he responded, "Guilty as charged, madam, but I'm an incredible rat bastard whose on your side." He handed her back the dagger hilt first. "It's well into second dog watch. I haven't eaten, and Mister Wilkes needs spelled at the helm. I'll see you at eight bells, Mistress Stark."

"Aye, Captain," she responded, "enjoy supper, Ulrich isn't much of a sailor, but he's a damn fine cook." With that they parted, Gavin going below and Anabel heading for the helm to relieve Ben so he could eat.

"You'll get the hang of it soon," Benjamin said somehow conveying much without saying it, "and you'll be prepared for that trick next time, and perhaps have one of your own." The older fisherman smiled, trying to be charming, and relinquished his post. He went below for supper, leaving John to his tunes and Ulrich to a final swab of the deck before a few hands of solitaire.

Anabel smiled back, thinking that if he only knew what had happened in that final moment he would not have phrased his comment so. If she got the hang of *that* then soon after ship's discipline would falter and they may all hang for sure from a Spanish noose.

Gavin set down his cup. Supper was almost over, but someone, probably Anabel, had struck the alarm bell. He raced out of the small galley and up onto the main deck, donning Gwynrheged as he went. Ben and Fitch were hot on his heels, and Phineas had his bow unfolded and ready for its grim purpose. The sun hung low on the horizon, in would quickly be night with the unnatural speed seen at sea in the tropics. "What have ye, Mistress Stark?" Gavin queried.

"Sara was on lookout and spied what appears to be a Spanish yawl far out to starboard. She's seen us and is coming about, but she'll have to tack. She won't catch us afore dark if at all, we've got more sheet."

"Aye, we'll outrun her," Gavin said as he looked through his spyglass at the distant vessel, "but she's sure as sunrise going to be on the telegraph if she has one. We'll have company come dawn if one of her sisters can get in front of us. They'll slow us down, and she'll catch up from behind to clean up the bits what are left. Mistress Merrick," the Captain called out into the late evening air, "front and center si vous plais."

Almost instantaneously the spectral form materialized before him as before, accompanied by the incongruous scent of wildflowers. "Yes, my Captain," her musical voice sang to him.

"While you're on watch tonight pay special attention to what's in front of us. We can outrun the yawl behind us, but not if another delays us from the front. I've a feeling they're going to try and pincer us." Gavin thought for a moment and added, "Is it possible you could visit the other ship and survey their arms, or are you grounded to this vessel? Would doing such at a distance from us put you in danger?"

The apparition glanced over the Captains shoulder, a quizzical expression highlighting her striking features. It was John Merriwether that replied, answering both spoken and unspoken questions at once. "If they don't have a necromancer on board, which is highly unlikely seeing as the Spanish frown on the 'dark' arts, she won't be in any danger. Mistress Sara, your abilities should remain as they

are here, but your strength will weaken the longer you are away from the Seven Fingers. Do be quick about it."

A bob of her head upon a majestic neck was the ghost's only reply to John before she addressed the Captain once more. "You must forgive me Captain, I am as yet not entirely certain of my limitations. I shall heed Master Merriwether's advisement." She made a conciliatory gesture, before proceeding, "If there is nothing further, I shall begin my scouting of our opponents."

"Master Merriwether," Gavin began, then softened his tone, "John, do be certain she will be in no danger." Turning to Sera's spectral form he added, "I'm going to finish supper. Please report to me as soon as you return, and do nothing foolish. Understand?"

"I shall be the manifestation of womanly caution Captain, especially with so many Spaniards about, my virtue shall surely be at risk otherwise." That odd mixture of maturity and girlish mischief coming through in the mirth of her tone, in the twinkle of her laughter, and the joy stamped upon her features. Then like a shudder sliding down upon a lantern it was gone and she was serious as death. "I go to scout out affairs, nothing more. I shall be thorough and quick about it, my Captain." With that the specter disappeared.

Gavin was reviewing several charts in his cabin when there was the lightest of taps on the door, which was heard about the same time the smell of cherry blossoms hit his nose. Upon receiving permission to enter from the Captain, the ethereal frame of Sara entered. Gavin's nose picked up wildflowers again, and he thought it odd that she could change scents so quickly. "Reporting back as ordered Captain. Our pursuer is lightly armed but heavily crewed, near close to twice that normally crewed by such a vessel. I was able to learn that they were in communication with another vessel, but the nature of the communication was not forth coming, and I did not wish to reveal myself as to inquire further. There was some indication that they were aware of our coming, and that they are a little leery of us. Unfortunately, as in the prior case, I could not obtain any more information along that topic either."

She clasped her hands before taking on an heir of brisk contriteness, which was in truth the harmonization of two conflicting elements of personality. "What are your orders?"

"Stand down. Pass word among the crew, everyone gets a good night's sleep. There'll be no outrunning their sight of us, and nothing they can do unassisted at night. We'll wake about an hour before dawn unless events change to prepare, for I'm sure they'll attack from afore us at first light with the sun at their backs. Yourself and Mistress Stark have the night watch." With that he rolled and stowed his charts and headed for his own rack.

~

Saint Bridgette stood before Gavin in all her splendor, her perfect face smiling at him framed by the golden locks of a goddess. Actually, he was standing before her on the palm of her enormous right hand wearing a toga and sandals, but also his cloak and buckler. Gwynrheged, his constant companion, hung by his side. With her left hand she unfastened the brooch holding her flowered cloak and with a flip of her wrist unfurled it to cover the ground before them. Gavin turned in her palm, and beheld it's transformation into a field of wildflowers. The saint's hand lowered him to it and he stepped off into the meadow. "Rest here, chylde," the saint suggested, "all too soon wilt thou be called yet again." He stepped into the broad meadow of wildflowers on a cool misty morning. Adjusting his stance, and his

accouterments, he took a deep breath of the cloying sweetness. Turning full circle, he saw that Saint Bridgette was nowhere to be found.

A sense of dread crossed Gavin's mind. Where was this place? How could he get back to the Seven Fingers? The crew depended on him. He started to call for the Saint, but was interrupted by the flowers, now huge, that were shaking him. "Captain, awaken," the fragrant vegetation demanded. Gavin's eyes opened. "Captain," Sara said, "you were right. There is another yawl far off the port bow pacing us. They are running dark, and had I not been looking for them I believe I would have missed them until daybreak."

Shaking the last threads of dream from his mind the Captain asked, "How stands the hour?"

"It's coming on to eight bells on the middle watch, about an hour and a half before dawn," she replied. Her musical voice sent his mind back to Saint Bridgette's palm for a moment.

"Very good, wait until two bells to wake the crew, they'll need the extra sleep. Ulrich goes to the crossbow in the bow, Samuel to the port ballistae and Roger to the starboard one. John will probably want to be in the center of the main deck to work any magic but I'll leave that up to him. The same with Phineas and his bow. I'll take the helm. Ben can protect me there with several crossbows and Mistress Stark will be on the stern ballistae. If we're still alive middle and morning watch can sleep after the fight. Make it so, Mistress Merrick."

"As you command, my King of Rogues." The woman that belonged in a tomb and not prancing on a ship's deck retorted impishly. In a blink was gone like the myst on a sunny day. Orders given, Gavin headed for the arms locker to make sure the bleeding Spaniards got the very best of welcomes.

~

The morning sky was lightening enough to see the marauder. She was tacking in for the initial volley, and was aiming to cross their bow. Like her sister she was not as heavily armed as the Fingers, but was much better crewed. Should Gavin allow her to close with them they would be overwhelmed before the second ship caught up. The second vessel had dropped far to stern during the night, as the Seven Fingers was a faster ship. The yawls would be more maneuverable, but slightly slower.

Gavin paced the middle deck bellowing orders as only a seasoned deep water captain could. "Fitch, when she crosses before ye send her a couple of ten pounders. Ulrich, I want ye to strafe the deck with that crossbow and see if ye can't even up the crews a bit. Phineas, try to take out their watch and maybe helm." Phineas headed up into the rigging with his long bow. "Roger, I'm going to turn hard over once she passes. Drop a twenty or two amid ships. She should be close enough to take out their main with a little luck. John, I'm not sure what they have in store for us magically, but if there's anything you can do to minimize our damage it would be greatly appreciated." With that he went to the helm and, nodding to Ben, relieved Anabel. She, in turn, took her station on the stern ballistae behind him and turned away from the immediate threat. Trusting her back to her comrades, she instead faced off with their distant pursuer alone.

"Anabel," Gavin said passing her a ten pound projectile, "I want you to handle this very gently." It was a hollow, liquid filled terracotta orb with a short length of fuse stuffed into its mouth. "Fire a couple ten pounders to get your range, then when you're sure you can hit them light the wick on this and send it over. It's very important that you hit them, as the wind is at our backs."

“What is it, Captain,” she asked, handling the orb like an infant.

“Greek fire,” he responded. “It's dreadful stuff when lit, but devastating when mixed with water, if it lands on the sea it will spread fast. The Byzantines used it against the Turks and destroyed both fleets, so be careful.” With that Gavin turned his attention back to the helm.

“I thought Greek fire was a myth, you know how to make it?”

“Heaven's no, Mistress Stark!” Gavin answered without looking around, “I just happen to save odd things like this on the offhand chance I might need them. Nobody's been able to make this stuff for centuries.” That's when the most incongruous sound came forth from mid deck. It was coming from John Merriwether, and it was the richest belly laugh one ever think to hear.

“Government Licenses are a pain in the arse!” That was all he said as his arms moved round him like a conductor guiding an orchestra. The deck vibrated with the launching of Samuel's first volley. It slammed hard against the side of the Spaniards sending fragments out in all directions, the howls and screams of several Spanish deckhands split the morning calm. Fitch's first shot had flown true and done more than simply damaged the opposing vessel. In retort a ten pound missile splashed into the sea just short of the Fingers hull and Gavin turned into the volley to throw off the Spaniard's range. His hands flashed over the controls for the steam windlasses as he trimmed the sails. Canvas flapped for a moment, then snapped taught, once again catching wind.

The battle had begun.

No sooner had Fitch released his first volley than his wirey arms worked the crank to get his weapon back in battery. His mind was furiously calculating distance and windspeed. The deck vibrated a second time as Samuel once again let fly. His naval training paid off, as this second round ravaged more of the enemy vessel. A whooshing sound announced the arrival of more enemy projectiles. Gavin watched one more smack harmlessly into rippling depths, while another iron ball passed low over the deck, completely missing everything until it glanced off the starboard balustrade. Ulrich cursed loudly in German. The Captain turned hard to starboard, windlasses whirled. Fitch fired again, his round ravaging the vessel once more. “Look lively, Mister Heisse, I'll be coming back around and she'll be in your range.”

Another incoming volley splashed into the sea mere inches from the Finger's hull. It was close enough that it hit, but the water took enough momentum so it only made a resounding thud instead of a hole. Cutting to port, Gavin caused the enemy ship to cross their bow between volleys. The deck vibrated through the soles of Gavin's boots with the rhythmic pounding of the steam powered repeating crossbow. Close enough now to see the Spanish Captain's eyes, he watched as the crewmen on the Spaniard's deck fell like mowed wheat. A sense of horror flopped over in his stomach as he saw the devastating effect of the terrible weapon. The last few bolts strafed the stern, across the yawl's helm, and Gavin saw their Captain fall to the deck.

For some reason their mainsail was now afire. The remaining canvas, without a helmsman at the wheel and controls, flapped loosely in the wind and the Spanish yawl veered hard to starboard. As if to add insult to grave injury, Jacob's ballistae thumped. The twenty pounder hit one of the windlasses, knocking it free and dropping the burning mainsail to the deck. The Spaniard was out of the fray, and her crew began valiantly fighting the fire.

Unnoticed until now, Anabel's ballistae thumped. Apparently all the maneuvering had enabled their pursuer to catch up. The second yawl fired back, falling shorter than Annie had. Gavin's hands worked the windlass controls again, dumping wind from the jibs to slow the Seven Finger's to match their pursuer's speed. Both vessels flashed past the disabled ship as her remaining crew fought to keep her afloat. Anabel's second shot bounced over the Spaniard's bow and rolled across her main deck. The second incoming shot splashed into the water just short of the stern sending a plume of water over the poop deck and soaking both Captain and First Mate.

Gavin felt the iron ball strike the rudder. "If ever you were going to light that bloody thing, now would be a very good time, Mistress Stark!" he shouted. Annie's ballistae thumped, and the Greek fire flew true. Striking just to starboard of the bow, it shattered sending flaming shards skittering across her deck. Gavin turned the Fingers to port, feeling the sluggishness of the helm. She still held her rudder, but it was damaged. He used the controls, trimming the canvas to compensate for the loss of steering. He wouldn't be able to come about and use Ulrich's crossbow, but Fitch and Phineas would be in range. Anabel released again, sending a ten pounder into her main boom, splintering it. Most of her crew were fighting the fires, but the water just spread the Greek fire making it worse. Her forward ballistae was now engulfed in flame, there would be no returning shot.

"Twenty pounder, Mister Fitch!" Gavin bellowed.

Samuel's round went free the same moment John launched a spell. A line of foaming sea stretched out from 'Fingers' to Spanish yawl and the enemy ship shudder twice. The first from Fitch's shot and the second from the destruction of its rudder.

Most of the second yawl's crew were still trying to save her, but as the Seven Fingers came broadside half a dozen sailors swung over from her rigging. Anabel picked one off with her hand held crossbow, and Gavin saw one of Phineas's arrows appear in another one's chest. Two Spaniards were thrown back into the air nigh their boots touched deck, as if the weight of their bodies had triggered something. Their bodies were jigsaw puzzles with pieces gone missing. The greenish flash that preceded their unexpected flight and ended with their unceremonious dunking into water depths being the result of John Merriwether's planted spell. Phineas had sensed the mage's trap and so was drawing bead on the yawl's deck, fully prepared to release his deadly missile. Roger Pierce, however, had not been aware and had his blade halfway out of its scabbard before realizing what had occurred. Still, as a consequence of the strange code which he upheld, he didn't step in to assist the others in their respective conflicts.

Benjamin Wilkes, defending his Captain, took a crossbow quarrel to his thigh and went down. Gwynrheged appeared in the Captain's hand just as one of the Spaniard's closed with him. It was a short but bloody fight, with almost no flair, for within three heartbeats Gwynrheged had done her grisly task. Gavin once again took the helm. Anabel was squared off with an ugly little man, and it looked as if they were trying to tire each other out. Gratefully, her opponent wasn't very good, or wasn't trying particularly hard. Ulrich, not being able to bring the repeating crossbow into play, had left it and was beating down a much larger Spaniard with his machete as if it were a hammer. He needed every bit of his werewolf strength and speed, but finally ran the big man clear through. As soon as Ulrich's opponent fell, Anabel's opponent stepped back, made a salute, and dropped to one knee. Placing his blade on the deck, the little man clasped his hands behind his head in surrender.

Meanwhile the enemy vessel was attempting to turn into the wind, their pilot unaware of the damage to it's rudder, and make another pass. The crosswind fanned the Greek fire even more, and the crew still hadn't stopped adding water. The deck was quickly engulfed in flame and the sails began to catch. Gavin tacked as best he could with the crippled rudder, putting distance between the Fingers and the Spanish fireship. Eventually it would burn itself out, but Gavin had seen enough Greek fire to give it plenty of space until it did. The first enemy ship hove into view, and the Fingers headed for her. "Mister Heisse, to your station," the Captain bellowed.

It turned out the automatic repeating crossbow was not needed, the Spanish flag had been struck and in its place hung a white sheet. Her sails were down and the fire had been put out. Seven men stood on the deck as the Fingers approached, and they all raised both hands in unison, clasping their hands behind their heads in surrender. "I'll need a boarding party," Gavin yelled, "who's up for it?"

Ulrich and Fitch each stood and raised their hands, as did Anabel. Sara appeared then and stated that she would go with them. The rest of the crew chose to remain on board. Gavin struck the sails, hove to abeam of the Spaniard, and had a boarding plank set. The werewolf, thief, and First Mate walked carefully over to the defeated yawl, while the specter strolled across beside the plank on nothing more than the stiff sea breeze.

A few minutes after the away team had boarded the surviving Spanish ship, the *Diablo Juego*, the seven prisoners crossed the boarding plank to the Seven Fingers. Each one was laden with foodstuffs from the Spaniard's ship stores, apparently Anabel had decided to raid their own larder to feed them. Once they were aboard, Gavin had the Spanish sailors placed in irons and sat them amidships with the solitary survivor from the second yawl. There they could be watched, the Captain would take no chances. Right after the prisoners arrived, Ulrich lumbered across carrying a large chest. "Mister Fitch says this is the Paymaster's chest," he said simply as he set it at Gavin's feet. Reaching into his shirt he produced a compact leather scrip embellished with a coat of arms, "First Mate says she found their hidey. She'll secure the rudder and maps but sent this straight to you, it's their letters of mark." That being said, the German hurried back over the boarding plank.

Gavin stowed the scrip in his sea coat for later. "Roger, Phineas, front and center," Gavin bellowed.

The two trotted over, abruptly ending some heated conversation which they'd been having moments before. "Aye sir." Roger said by way of introduction.

"Since you lads decided to stay aboard it must have been to assist with reparations. I'll need you to survey the damage to the rudder and fix it as best you can. It has to get us to the Crescents. Requisition ships supplies as needed." Turning to John, Gavin said, "Master Merriwether, assist Mister Wilkes and see to his wound but keep an eye out until the other ship is secured. We can nae be too careful, what."

John nodded, but gave no reply but to eye the *Diablo Juego* with an expression of stern disapproval. "Roger, go below, fetch the tools from the ship's store and while you're about it bring me the surgeon's kit."

Now that the crew had been delegated Gavin turned his attention to the captives sitting in the middle of the main deck. "Habla Englaise?" he mangled. One of them meekly raised his hand.

"I speak English, but I am Dutch," he offered.

"I too am Dutch," a second, now emboldened, said.

"And how does a Dutchman come to be on a Spanish privateer?" Gavin asked.

"We were conscripted off of a fishing boat out of the Crescents, Captain. The Spanish stopped our vessel and took us off, then inducted us into their navy. I think I speak for both of us when I say we very much would like to go home. We do not wish to be Spanish privateers." He paused for a moment while the second Dutchman nodded vigorously, then added, "If it pleases the most generous English Captain of course."

"We'll deal with the two of you fairly," Gavin replied, "just stand to until we've sorted this out." Addressing the rest he said, "Anyone else wish to parley?" Nobody else replied. "Anyone?" he asked again. Still receiving no reply, he stood in front of the ugly little fellow who had dueled Annie. "What's your story then. I saw the duel, and know my First's skill with the cutlass. Habla Englaise?"

"Yes, I speak English," he replied with a faint French accent, "but I chose not to have the lobotomy required to speak it well. I will parley only with the officer I surrendered to."

Gavin laughed, startling several of the other captives. "I understand entirely, sir. I myself chose not to get castrated so's I could speak French fluently." The Frenchman looked up at him and smiled appraising.

John Merriwether had just finished removing the quarrel from Ben Wilke's thigh when his head jerked up. He stared straight at the Diablo Juego, at a spot inside the vessel where the boarding party had disappeared to. In a motion as fluid as a wave he was out of his crouch, the quarrel and Ben's thigh still lying on the deck. "Mr. Facinock, please finish sewing Mister Wilkes up," John proclaimed as he strode purposely towards the other ship, his hands clenched in fists. He didn't give the Captain an explanation, there was obviously mystical trouble on the other ship.

Mere seconds after John disappeared below decks on the Diablo, Anabel, Fitch, and Ulrich flew out as though death itself were on their heels. They didn't stop until they were back aboard the Fingers. "Perhaps an explanation as to why our magus just lit off board fit to chew nails into filings would be in order?" the Captain queried. He appeared to have grown several inches as he loomed over the trio ominously.

Not one responded to the Captain's question for just a moment, then finally, and with more than a little reluctance, Anabel spoke. "We found the Captain's cabin and decided to take a look around. It was mostly empty of anything of value. Then we noticed, rather Mister Fitch noticed, that there was a loose panel in the floor and upon removing it we found a small locked jewelry box." One of the Dutch sailors, obviously hearing, and understanding the conversation, paled suddenly. Anabel either didn't notice, or was too rapt up in her narrative to care.

"The Ghost appeared then, Mistress Merrick, and said we shouldn't open it. It was dangerous. Ulrich asked her how she knew that, to which she replied that she wasn't certain, she just knew. None of us believed her." The trio seemed to shiver then, even though it was a warm humid day, with the recollection of what they saw.

"Captain," Fitch cut in, "There were something in that box along with this," He opened up his hand to reveal an ornamented gold talisman, with a blood red ruby in the shape of a drop of blood in the center; small diamonds were set round the sides of the item. The Spaniards upon seeing it started to move themselves away as much as they could, and the poor Dutchman had fainted. The interrogation was abruptly interrupted by a most horrid screech. It was as if hell itself had opened its putrid maw and the screaming of damned assaulted the listener's ears. The deck of the Diablo Juego exploded upward like an erupting volcano and a blurry form shot out faster than a steam launched crossbow quarrel. After several heartbeats of stunned silence the ghostly form of Sara floated out.

She radiated, as if bright sunlight assaulted her lovely form from all angles. Her face was sad, but yet somehow triumphant. One of the prisoners gasped as her wounds, rents in the apparition which were not at first noticeable, became apparent. John Merriwether followed her, with blood upon his coat and britches, but with no noticeable wounds. Sara Merrick returned to the Seven Fingers, the wounds that had been present on her frame just scant seconds before had already faded. She scowled at the first mate when she came aboard before disappearing, but voiced nothing. After several long moments John slowly returned to the Fingers as well.

"Permission to go below Captain," he said to the Captain quietly. He showed no signs of being injured, only seeming extremely tired, as though his ordeal had taken its toll.

"Of course, John," Gavin replied. "I'll have you called at second dog for supper unless something else goes awry. We shall converse then." Looking at the trio of miscreants he added, "Mistress Stark, Mister Fitch, and Mister Heisse can divvy up your watch. Mistress Stark will handle the prisoners, seeing as that Frenchman will only talk to her. Mister Heisse and Mister Fitch will be securing the other ship to be towed into port, seeing as how there are two men already working on the rudder. Do try not to do anything else dangerous, people, and no more opening mysterious boxes." The trio stood there for a moment, so the Captain exclaimed, "Make it so!"

They all hopped to their tasks like their boots were set afire. Going astern and leaning over the balustrade Gavin asked the repair crew, "How stands the rudder, lads? We'll need to set sail soon, we're burning daylight, not to mention being easy picking dead stopped here."

"Putting thing back together now," Roger Pierce retorted, hanging from a line a few inches above the Caribbean. His lupine hands were quickly assembling a series of rudder drive linkages. Phineas Facinock hung on the other side of the rudder, stabilizing it as Roger worked.

"Carry on, lads," the Captain encouraged. He then approached the prisoners amidship and Anabel Stark stood to face him.

"This man is a French diplomat," she explained. "He was on his way home, as the French have closed their embassy on Hispaniola, when his ship was waylaid by the Diablo Juego and he was conscripted. Apparently they were impressed by his swordsmanship."

"And yet he did not skewer you like a pincushion, Anabel?" Gavin asked with a raised eyebrow. "And why, perchance, was a diplomat not on an airship?"

"Four days ago the Spanish in Hispaniola commandeered a German Graff. Only the Spanish, Italians, and Swiss are flying into Spanish air fields now. Even the Americans aren't docking on Spanish soil. France closed their embassy in protest, and recalled Jon. He was plucked off his ship as it

left port. He saw his chance to escape, but he had to wait until their bo'sun was otherwise occupied. Fortunately Ulrich killed him." Annie blushed as she continued, "He squared off with me because he said I have pretty eyes, and if he was going to die in battle he wanted them to be the last thing he saw."

"He's French alright." Gavin said simply. "Separate him and the two Dutchmen from the rest. Give him a cabin to himself, and bunk the two Dutch fishermen together. See that the rest get food and water, but their arses can sit on deck in chains until we make port. We're a merchant, we don't have a brig or conscripted crew." Hopefully, Gavin thought, when the Seven Fingers made port in the Crescents the Dutch authorities would appreciate the repatriation of their people and would see this incident as an issue between England and Spain. He wouldn't push for reparations against the Diablo Juego, just turn the vessel over to their Port Authority along with the prisoners. Since no piracy was committed against Holland by the Seven Fingers, but was by the Juego, they would hopefully have no legal difficulties.

Hopefully.

In addition they had rescued a French Diplomat. Although they would have to leave him in the Crescents, he could easily get home aboard a Dutch airship. With any luck that would reflect well on British interests within France.

"All's in order now Capt," came Roger's hardy drawl from the stern. "We can skedaddle on outta here."

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Gavin awoke just shy of four bells on the first dog watch. Because of Ulrich and Fitch's misadventure aboard the Diablo Juego they had to cover John Merriwether's watch. This put the good Captain on first and middle watch. Not that he much minded handling the helm from eight at night till four in the morning, but he had to rotate his own schedule around to compensate. It's hard to sleep when you're not tired. He laid in his bunk for a few minutes listening to the ship. The Seven Fingers, pulling the Diablo Juego, was laboring like a thoroughbred pulling an oxcart. The Captain, as any good captain, could feel it in the hull and could hear it in her timbers as if she were a part of himself. He smelled supper. Roger or Samuel should be cooking, but he hoped Ulrich had stepped in to the galley to help. From the smell the Captain guessed, sadly, he probably had not. Up on deck a bell rang four times, first dog watch was over and second dog was starting. Hopefully John would be in a talkative mood and explain what happened aboard the Diablo. Of course they were more likely to cast a few lines into the air and hook a flying pig for breakfast tomorrow, the good Professor did hold his cards close to his chest.

Sauntering into the tiny galley Gavin saw that John and Fitch were seated and eating already. "How stands the ship?" he asked the pair.

"Ben's just taken his turn at the helm, and pulling that ship takes a bit out of our time. Ulrich and Sara are watching the prisoners, who have been as silent as rocks, which isn't entirely surprising; only a few knew what the Captain had on board as additional security. Our two Dutchman are in their cabin. One is reading and one asleep, the sleeper passed on supper. Oh, and our first mate has taken to the Frenchman like a duck to water."

It was John Merriwether that had replied and provided him with all the details, which meant there was no telling how long he had been up. Indeed, to look at him now, one couldn't tell that just a short time ago his coat and britches had been covered in blood and himself but a walking shell of a man. Naturally he had used some kind of thaumatological process to help him himself, just as he had to refresh Sara.

"More like fleas to a hound, if ye ask me," Stated Samuel Fitch somewhat nervously, "the two of them been as thick as thieves ever since she came back aboard. They were playing at practice swords last I saw." His ears twitched then, as a dog's might right after it had been disciplined and was trying to get back in it's master's good graces.

"Really?" the Captain responded with a raised eyebrow. Perhaps it was just his imagination, but he detected a hint of jealousy in Fitch's words. "And who cooked this fine repast, since ship's schedule is over the side like yesterday's lunch?"

Fitch looked away then, and with contrition spelled out on his face with big bold letters, found something on the floor to fix his gaze upon. John felt it necessary to provide the Captain with a verbal explanation, sometimes cleaning a wound is painful after all, even if that wound is a social one. "Mister Fitch prepared this. I'm not sure by what means he convinced Mister Heisse not to do it, as Ulrich has no spare ability in that regard. It is not the worst thing I've ever eaten, nor likely you have ever, still it might put you off of anything fried for a fortnight or so."

"Still," Gavin added holding up a forkfull of his supper, "a valiant effort none the less. Thank you for pitching in, Samuel."

The blandness in which this was all delivered making it seem all the more humorous, as well as making the poor man squirm all the more. "As I'm finished, I'll just make sure that our two lover birds aren't doing anything improper on deck." Fitch probably set a record for fastest dish washer as he attempted to make as speedy an exit as possible. John continued to slowly eat his food, taking rather deliberate bites for several moments after the two of them were alone. It was clear that he wasn't going to be the first one to start the discussion of whatever happened aboard the other ship.

"So," Gavin leaned over the table to his Bo'sun, "now that you're rested and all, what happened on the Diablo Juego? Ulrich brought back a ruby talisman, should that bauble be secured? Does any of this still pose a danger to the ship? I mean besides Anabel, Fitch, and Ulrich's carelessness of course."

John Merriwether calmly finished chewing the mouth of fried fish in his mouth and set down his utensils before addressing his superior. "Do not concern yourself with the item further, while it should be secured, it shouldn't be treated as anything more than the valuable item that it is. I removed the curse around it when I entered the cabin." A shake of his head and mane in one of those parental gestures of 'that mischievous trio' was the only pause, before he continued. "The poltergeist was dealt with and nothing about the event concerns you are the crew further, save that it hopefully taught the two of them to trust in Sara's word a bit more, so that such events do not happen in the future; although I doubt it." That was all he intended to say on the matter, and with it said he picked up his fork and returned to the task of consuming his meal.

After his less than satisfying supper and even less satisfying conversation with John, Gavin strolled on deck. The air was ringing with the music of swordplay. Anabel and Jon d'Arcy, their French passenger, were both in shirtsleeves, faced off with practice cutlasses and the First Mate was sweating

profusely. Ulrich was playing a reel on his tin whistle and tapping his foot to the tune, keeping the novice swordmistress in time. The prisoners sat or laid down on the deck, not being able to do much else in their chains, and watched the fencing pair. "Mistress Stark," Gavin bellowed, "why is that passenger aboard my ship armed?"

Ulrich's tune stopped abruptly in mid note, but Jon answered before Annie could open her mouth. Holding the cutlass up he announced, "I am not armed, mon Captain, I would not deign to cut vegetables with this piece of shit. I am merely holding this anchor in such a way that your first mate may strike it repeatedly." Gavin laughed. It welled up from his toes and burst forth as a deep belly laugh.

"Well by all means, Monsieur d'Arcy, Anabel, carry on then." The Captain went to the stern, where Ben held the wheel and looked across the bow at the open sea. A quarter league behind them the Diablo followed like a reluctant puppy with it's tail between it's legs, her sails struck, rigging slack, and flag down. The defeated vessel appeared sad. "How stands the watch, Mister Wilkes? Ready for supper yet? I'll warn ye now Samuel's not near the cook Ulrich is."

"Aye, Cap'n," he slipped from behind the wheel, "I've a nose fer such things. Still, I do be hungry, so I'll go below an' face me fate." With that Ben went below to fetch his less than adequate supper, whistling as he went.

Much later a stiff, warm breeze hurried the Seven Fingers and her trailing companion, the Diablo Juego, through the still Caribbean night. The sky was now moonless, the less than a quarter orb having set over an hour ago. Gavin's eyes, augmented by his night goggles, had adjusted to navigating by starlight and the faint phosphorescence of the sea itself. Looking up he could just make out the ethereal form of Sara standing on the crow's-watch, glowing faintly.

Unbidden, the ghost instantaneously left the crow's nest and appeared by his side accompanied by the familiar scent of wildflowers. Not just any wildflowers, but the ones native to the land of Gavin's youth, complete with the underlying tang of damp sandy loam on a misty morning. "I can hear it, you know," Sara stated flatly.

"Hear what, pray tell, Mistress Merrick?" the Captain responded, surprised by the suddenness of her action and her statement. "Is there something out there we can't see?"

The ghostly maiden giggled musically, like wind chimes in a gentle breeze. "No, Captain, the sword. It's singing."

Gavin smiled, mostly to himself. "Gwynrheged always sings, oftentimes quiet like now. When she perceives danger she gets a bit more frantic, and in battle even more so. I thought I was the only one could hear her."

"Well, I can hear it too," She said wistfully, Her delicately formed heart shaped face turned away from him, glancing out at the lapping waves as the two ships drifted along towards a place she had traveled to before, at least in life. She turned back to him then, the small copper colored ringlets of hair bobbing to some unseen breeze, as honey brown eyes regarded the Captain.

"Gwyn seems to enjoy the bloodshed you know, she's content now having tasted blood today." Remembering the battle from the previous morning, and the ensuing difficulties aboard the Spanish

yawl, he asked, "What did happen aboard the Diablo Juego anyway? John was none too forthcoming with details."

"As you already know," she began, her voice full of maternal authority, "the first mate and Ulrich had already uncovered the false panel in the Captain's cabin. The jewelry box had been removed, I don't know by whom but I suspect it was Fitch. I was in the ship's hold, seeing if anything else there should be brought aboard, when I felt something happen inside me. It was like... as though something was plucking the strings of my very soul, cold and icy. I followed the cause and emerged before the two of them, surprising Mistress Stark. Anywise, she gets a bit of the sass, accusing me o' sneaking up on them, and I explained that it was the contents of the box that summoned me."

"Ulrich asked me if there was any danger in the thing," she continued, "to which I said yes that there was, but Fitch, he up an' pries the lid open anyway! Well, I felt such pain that I've not known since I was ripped from my body an' locked in that little glass sphere. T'wer a poltergeist, Cap'n. I lost my temper then, and my arm became a sword. I attacked the thing, and it tore into me with a vengeance." The apparition flickered for a moment and then continued, "Master Merriwether says that I handled the situation as well as I could given circumstances, however; at some point he says I shall need some sword practice, as I could use the training." That all too familiar elfin expression pulled at the corners of her full lips and heightened the laugh wrinkles round her eyes, the shininess of which was a familiar sight to the Captain, as the mixture of aged wisdom, and youthful impudence took shape on Sara's visage. "Perhaps the Captain shall deign me a worthy pupil for lessons in sword play. I promise to be only a hair bit better than your current student, although I carry no knives unguarded for you to draw against me."

Gavin laughed at this, remembering the move, the resulting embrace, and the ensuing momentary hormonal response. At least he wouldn't have to worry about that moment with a spiritual opponent. "Once a cheap trick is used it is no longer effective, that one was meant to teach her not to turn her back on an opponent. I would be honored to spar with you, but I would choose not to pass on myself to accomplish it. Perhaps if Mister Merriwether could arrange a magical work around that little detail we will. Of course, if you turn your back on me I'll not promise I won't pull a different cheap trick." The Captain winked at her.

After a moment of good natured back and forth, between what once was, and might still be called a woman, and man, Sara's seriousness returned, and with a simple imperious wave of her hand, dismissing the cobwebs of humor that still hung invisible in the air. "As it was," Sara continued, "the horrid thing was just toying with me before Master Merriwether arrived, which is why I lasted so long, it was all like something from out a horror novel. Things get a little fuzzy after that, I remember John saying something in a strange tongue and my sword actually hurting the things; I remember him fighting it with magic, he is quite a good Thaumalogist. I remember him bleeding, all the blood shed was his. I didn't bleed, the poltergeist didn't bleed, it was him. I'm sorry...."

After the Captain mulled the ghosts account of the incident over a few minutes, Sara said, "My turn. What does the sword's name mean? Does it have a spirit, I mean is it alive or what?"

"Interesting question," Gavin began, "First, her name means 'the white blade of Rheged' or just 'White Rheged'. Rheged was a kingdom, or more like a duchy now, that has long since faded into dust. I think the Elves that forged these blades embodied them with a consciousness of a sort but I'm not sure to what extent. Sometimes I think she's aware of me, but it could just be my misinterpreting her." He had not talked of these matters in a very long time, but feeling comfortable with Sara's spectral

presence he continued. "There were five all together, one for each of my four uncles and one for my brother, Garyth; five princes, five swords, five elements. My uncles Echoid Find and Arturius fell to the Mathai on the river Allyn. Their blades were returned to fire and water respectively, since they had no successors. My uncle Domingart fell to the Saxon, and his blade simply faded from memory. Echoid Buide, my fourth uncle, died an old man and a King. His blade was buried with him in the Earth. My twin brother Garyth fell with my two uncles during the Allyn river battle, I picked up his sword and so succeeded him." Saying this Gavin looked wistfully at the Seven Finger's full sails and added, "Together the wind has blown Gwynrheged and I through the long years since."

A long silence followed. Sara possibly mulled over the unbidden extra information, Gavin thinking that perhaps he had shared a bit too much of himself and his private curse. At last she spoke, "I've heard of the elves, they say some still walk the Earth, but I've never seen any. I've heard that they share some relationship with the Fay, but don't recall exactly what. Perhaps I'll strike up a conversation with John on the subject. He seems to understand such things. I think he knew what you just told me already, do you?"

"I think John suspects about Gwyn, but he doesn't know the whole of it. The Fae are those of Elvish blood who exhibit their heritage. My dear mother was accused of being such, but she was only a strong hedge-witch with too much ambition. Phineas is one, his second name means 'under the hill', a common moniker among them. They're rare, but not unknown, and pass as men quite easily. I had a friend, Jack Greene, who was such." At this the Captain got very quiet, remembering the betrayal, the spell to save him that became his curse, and finally the forgiveness of Jack o' the Green. "T'was my own failings as a young man what alienated the two of us," he continued quietly, "and grafted laurel unto my bones."

She wanted to ask him what he meant by that, but decided it would be best not to. After a short, awkward silence Gavin opened the binnacle and consulted his navigational chart. "We should be close to land, Mistress Merrick, could you nip up to the crow's watch and give us a look-see?" The Captain asked Sara. The apparition flickered for a second, then was back almost instantaneously.

"Yes, Captain, we are in sight of land, but I see no port or the lights of a city about. Perhaps we drifted off course towing the Diablo?"

"All's well, we'll not be visiting the port quite yet. We've some cargo to deliver before sunrise 'ere we check in with the harbor master." With that, Gavin reached down and using the hand controls struck the sails. Then he slipped below to send his arrival telegraph, just in case the land bound Lobo's weren't already watching for them.

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The Seven Fingers chugged into Port Crescent under steam with her sails struck shortly after morning departures had diminished. Port Crescent wasn't as hurried or bustling as Grand Cayman, her airfield much less visited by airships. The entire chain of islands had a more colloquial feel to them, the fishing was more of the sport variety and the party scene and nightlife were more subdued. This was not to say one couldn't get into trouble here by any means, as Gavin could well attest to from prior visits. The Island itself had changed hands many times in the past. Now the Dutch were in charge, but there was a ruined Spanish fort on the rocky eastern coast that had British and Portuguese flags flown over it as well.

The Fingers was several hundred cases of illegal rum lighter. Anabel Stark had the helm, but the Captain stood beside her. Gavin was quite tired after his mid-voyage change of shift and middle watch. The Diablo Juego still followed along like a lost pup, and she and the chained prisoners on the Finger's deck drew the attention of the Port Authority. There was a welcoming committee waiting for them as they slipped alongside the quay. Roger and Ben, who had monkey crawled the tow rope earlier that morning, tied the Diablo up and returned to the Seven Fingers.

Official business with the authorities began almost immediately, since the Seven Fingers presented a change from the ordinary. The Dutch fishermen came on deck and were interviewed separately by the constables. Once they told their tale and gave their contact information they were released, and both men probably returned straight to their homes and families. Jon d'Arcy was also interviewed, in French of course. Once finished he came over and stood next to Anabel, took her hand and kissed it gently.

"Sweet Anabel, there will not be an airship leaving for two days. I have a room at the French consulate until then, perhaps if you are still in port we might continue the fencing lessons?" Looking at Gavin he added, "I could introduce you to a blade less suited to chopping wood, yes?"

Gavin grinned and shook his head as Annie replied, "Yes, that would be lovely, Jon. I'll find my way over there as soon as I'm on liberty." With that the little man sauntered across the deck and down the gangplank, losing himself in the bustling mid-morning port traffic. Gavin raised an eyebrow at her once he was out of sight. "He must mean a foil or an epee'," she said wistfully. Looking right at the Captain she added, "After all, he introduced me to that other blade last night."

This time Gavin raised both eyebrows at her. "Several times." she smiled at the Captain then said, "after all, he is French."

Gavin laughed, but before he could retort was summoned over by the constables to give his tale. One by one the crew gave their the statements, and then the prisoners were collected. The Diablo Juego was impounded, and the Port Authority issued the Seven Fingers a claim slip for compensation payable at the harbor master's office. The Captain did some hasty calculations and crew was given their score, then dismissed on liberty until midnight. By the time everything was said and done it was lunch time, Anabel was on liberty, and Gavin had completely forgotten the conversation.

"That be not the only blade he want to be introducing ye to." Roger quietly said to his two companions near the rear of the ship. While there was a bit of a rivalry between Roger and Ulrich, a sort of friendly jockeying for position, even though there wasn't really any position to be had. It was something Ulrich had started up after he had officially gotten his sea legs.

"You are just jealous that it's not you she's sword practicing with," replied the Germanic werewolf, after chortling over Roger's comment.

"Nay, she's not got enough practice for my taste." This started another round of chortling by the pair, while Fitch just grinned silently. He quietly reminded the pair that a lady was present.

"You shouldn't worry about it on my account," came Sara's disembodied voice.

"Manners are manners ma'am, doesn't matter if you are invisible, or if you have heard such things before," Fitch explained.

John Merriwether strolled up then, prepared to fulfill his duty as the ship's ironwilled task master. He wanted to instill into the five of them not to do something stupid, correction, irrevocably stupid, when they left ship. "Well, gentlemen, I understand the Captain has given you liberty, which I am sure you are eager to enjoy. I am placing Mister Facinock in charge of the rest of you, as his common sense will keep you all out of any real trouble. With that said, go enjoy your liberty."

The crew strolled off ship, doing their level best to contain the thrill that always comes to sailors when at a new port on liberty. As it was the five of them went in one direction, the First mate in another, and the good Captain in still another.

The Captain of the Seven Fingers first visited the Harbor master to collect his compensatory fees, then to the British consul to report on his doings. The Admiralty was very interested in the encounter, and had a large map indicating hostile encounters. Seven Fingers got her own pins, two blue ones, indicating two British victories, and Gavin got a firm handshake and a 'well done'. He left thinking that with another hundred ninety eight pins he might be allowed to share a crumpet with the Lieutenant back in the Caymans. The cash the Dutch gave him for the Diablo jiggled merrily in his pocket as if to console him and he smiled.

His next stop was the offices of Crescent Trading to announce their arrival. He was met by Virginia's office staff, who were packing essentials into boxes and basically preparing for a long hiatus. They were happy to know he was in port, but very busy. Gavin was told they would begin loading as soon as possible, but to expect two days in port. Business concluded, the good Captain headed back to the Seven Fingers to seclude himself. He had considered stopping in at Mike's for a quick pint, but just his luck someone there would remember him. He decided to pass on the awkward questions as to why and how he had not aged and they all had, it would be a few more decades before he could call the Crescents home again.

Two days in port, and him with two young men, two werewolves, and an elf on liberty, not to mention whatever trouble Anabel could get herself into. He would be cloistered on the Fingers with naught but John to talk to. Perhaps he would take Sara up on those fencing lessons if the thaumatologist could help him breach their dissimilar planes of existence.

6-Liberty

“In Crescent Towne there lived a lass, take heed to what I say!
In Crescent Towne there lived a lass,
and heads would turn where e'er she passed.
I'll go no more a' roving with you fair maid.”

~

“Hay Mister you want to buy this here watch, just a dukaat and this lovely thing can be yours, not a finer watch you gonna find in the islands for a fairer price.” The boy was about twelve, or perhaps slightly younger. His clothes were drab, well worn, and patched over in places. He had just the barest hint of desperation in his deep brown eyes, the look that one has like there live depends on selling whatever they had. He had a small table with a big carpet bag set up, with several types of fine pocket watches out for for viewing, but all pinned down, so that someone couldn't snatch them without taking the table along for the ride. No thief would want to have to deal with that.

Another look at the shabby lad brought some familiarity, perhaps it was the shape of his nose, or maybe the twinkle that life had not yet driven from his eyes. Gavin added the years up. Tossing the lad a kwartje He said, "Don't need another watch, but mayhaps some information. Ye brings to mind a mambo I once dealt with, did a nice bit o' spellcastin' she did. What's yer granny's name, lad?" As the question left Gavin's lips he remembered Naomi, the curve of her back under his hands, the soft musky smell of her, the cute curve of her nose and the twinkle in her eye that the lad before him shared. Her skin, soft warm and brown would be wrinkled with age now, her twinkling eyes grown dim, her long midnight tresses that a man could get lost in now gray. His heart slowed, as time around him slowed as well, and he felt the years flow past him like a cold crisp mountain stream.

Somewhere in the back of his mind Gwynrheged's song changed tempo unnoticed. Although she was not singing frantically as if in battle, she had been awakened from her dreamlike existence. The Lad's answer brought him back to the present, and he finally noticed the blade's change. “You be speaking of Mambo Naomi,” a hint of fear scrolled past the windows of the boy's soul that were his eyes, like the quick pick of a sneak thief, gone just as quick too.

Gavin thought of a reason to contract a hedge witch, then answered, "Aye, that were the lady's name, Mambo Naomi. Is she still about, lad? I needs me a foretelling done and mayhaps a potion if it's ill of omen." Perhaps, judging by the lad's reaction, it was already ill and no foretelling was needed.

It was a nervous laugh that left the boys lips, better to laugh than cry, given what was going on in his head, given the fact that man had just opened a wound in his heart that was just starting to heal.

“Four days back, you know how 'tis, you owe ol' Jack an' he finally collects.” His hands were shaking, the Captain could see that. The whole thing smelled as rotten as week old mackerel, this lad was trying to tell him something without telling him something. The trick was to figure out what he was meaning without meaning to say it, so he could dance to the music, if he did want to dance.

The lads desperation, along with the information that Naomi had died recently, tied together for the shipmaster. He could almost hear the Dutch compensation money that had been jiggling merrily in his pocket begin to chortle at him instead. "Right, dreadful news that, she was a beautiful soul. I had a score to off with yer gran, like as not mayhaps her heirs could use the extra money in her stead." Gavin hesitated, not knowing if the boys parent, Naomi's child, would bear a striking resemblance to Gavin's

own dear mother's son. Not being one to shy away from such things he then added, "If, that is, you was to direct me to where they might be now?" By now Gwynrheged's singing was in its full glory.

"Second door, second floor, third building in Branters district, knock twice, then thrice, tell them, that you were sent by the watch boy." It was said low, in one of those off hand ways like a bookie's runner relaying a bet with a cudgel on his beat. The lad was placing the watch carefully back on the table and securing it as he spoke.

"I know the place, lad," Gavin told him, Gwyn now screaming in his head. "Might be a good idea if ye nay come along, what." He winked at the lad reassuringly, something he himself did not feel.

The location was just a block over from where Gavin had shared a small apartment with the much younger hedge witch, a place much suited to working and living. It wasn't the best part of the middle district, but hardly the worst neither. It had certainly seen its better days though, and there was something about the neighborhood that seemed off. The reality hit him the moment he came in sight of the building, where two men garbed in workman's clothes were pretending to be anything other than what they actually were. The sight of a pair of muscle bound petty thugs opened up the situation like an unbattered hatch.

Those two bully boys were Wererats and he was on Capibarra turf. The lad hadn't sold him out, the fear on his face and way he had acted was good as a ships signaler for that, no, he was in it, in it up to his armpits; right along with whatever remained of his family. No, unlike the zombie incident the good Captain had walked into this with his eyes wide open and had nobody but himself to square with.

"Here," Gavin said as he approached them, "you lads know of a lady works out of her flat around here?" He pulled one of the bundles of Dutch notes from his pocket and added, "Said she needed more cash so's I offed the rest of me score. She told me to meet her at her flat somewhere's around here."

"Yea," one of the pair said, grinning as he answered, "she asked me to watch for you, her place is around back. I'll take you around, just so nothing happens to ya." The second snickered slightly.

"Thank you, yes," Gavin responded eagerly, "that would be lovely." He followed the muscle bound were around the building and into the back alley. Thinking how much he hated the way rats liked their alleys he said idly, "I feel much safer with you directing me."

"How 'bout now?" the Capi asked, holding a bludgeon high over Gavin's head as he turned. It only took a moment for the rat to realize he had a silver plated half bastard dagger sticking into his chest and straight through his heart. The Captain spun, seacoat flaring and Gwynrheged drawn in full en' guard to face the second rat, but he hadn't followed.

"Oh," Gavin said as he pulled his dagger from the crumpled footpad, "now I feel much safer." Cursing the fact that the second Capi was too stupid to follow on his own, Gavin went back to the front to get him.

"Excuse me," Gavin said to the second rat as he came back around. There was a moment of stunned silence as the slow witted bully realized that he was still alive. "I think there's something wrong with your friend." With speed that only a were could muster the brute ran around the building. The Captain followed, but he couldn't hope to catch up and by the time he got to the alley the second

rat was crouched over his comrade. With a growl he spun and faced Gavin, a machete' in his hand. Gwynrheged flew to her master's hand as well and the pair faced off.

For all his slow wits, the were was no fool about combat. Gavin and the Capi danced around several times, spinning madly as each tried to feel a way with blade to the other. Steel and mithril clanged together, sparks flying, each clash leaving a noticeable nick in the steel machete'. Finally the rat saw his open and slashed downward toward the sailor with all his strength. Gwynrheged met the blow, cutting the blade from the weapon at the hilt and continuing upward. The wererat's face still had a surprised expression as his head rolled down the alley, coming to rest next to his partner. His body fell at Gavin's feet. He kicked the broken machete' in disgust. "An' Jon called MY cutlasses pieces of shit!" he huffed. Hopefully the constables would assume they had killed each other.

Returning to the door the pair had been guarding Gavin knocked out 'is' in morse; dit dit, pause, dit, dit, dit. He thought it an odd choice for secret knocks, but didn't get to ponder long. "What the bloody hell is it now?" an angry deep voice asked as the door opened.

Holding the same sheaf of bills that had lured the guards away Gavin said, "I got's yer cash right here, just like I said I would. Now let's see the goods."

"That's not the way it works." Replied the voice, harshly. The light of the barely open door falling on the business end of a loaded crossbow. "Who sent you?"

"Why, the watch boy o' course. Who else?"

"So, Gaudwin sent you did he." Gavin filed the name away. There wasn't any malice in the voice, which was a change from how it had been just scant seconds before, and the sound of a chain being removed preceded the door being opened fully. "He said he was going to get help, but he didn't say how."

"Understand you people have a rat problem in the building," Gavin said with a morbid grin. "Where's the infestation?"

He eyed Gavin appraisingly, "Keeper's already in the flat, second floor, probably already having some fun with the misses." He made a face of disgust then, not all together surprising, given the fact that it seems the rats put the screw to him at some point too, it's just not clear exactly how.

"Rats will do that if not properly controlled." The Captain went up the indicated flight of battered and somewhat dubious looking stairs to the second floor, the second door being just to the left as he reached the landing. It was slightly ajar, and the sounds of a woman's pleading voice could be clearly heard.

"Please, don't... not that..." The voice was very close to that of what the witch had been, slightly hirer in pitch, but close. "Anything?"

The man's voice was as greasy as Julio's kitchen after lunch hour. There was a gasp then along with the sound of ripping garments, and it didn't take a huge leap of imagination to figure out what was going on in there.

"Come along lass, take my hand," Gavin whispered to Gwynrheged under his breath as he unsheathed the sword. "We don't want to be late to the dance." He pushed open the door and stepped in.

It was a rotund brown skinned man that turned from the near mirror image of Naomi sprawled out on the floor, her dress torn up the side. The next thing Gavin knew it wasn't a man that faced him, but a bestial thing, half man, half rat, it's gnashing jaws, and thrashing claws wanting to tear flesh and bone, fully aware that this was truly more of a fight of life and death than any he had ever experienced before. He wasn't prepared.

Like any dumb, cornered animal the wererat charged. Gavin barely had time to aim Gwyn at the thing's furred chest before it ran onto the blade, impaling itself. The Capi's claws shredded the right arm of the Captain's seacoat, gashing the shirt and skin beneath as it tried to get it's teeth into him. Cursing, he fumbled for the dagger but he was too late. The life faded from the thing's eyes with it's bared teeth inches from Gavin's face. A well placed jack boot pushed the dead half beast away, freeing Gwynrheged.

Released, and bloodlust sated, the enchanted blade drifted back into her half dream, singing softly, happily. Gavin turned to the woman who shied back from him in horror. Rightly so, as the Captain was covered in Capi blood with six nasty gashes running down his right arm. His best seacoat and second best shirt were all but ruined, not to mention the look of violence in his eyes.

His eyes softened at the sight of her. Save for the color of her own eyes, the shape of her chin, and perhaps the set of her shoulders she could be dear Naomi a few years older than when she'd left him. The three differences could be reminiscent of his own, the years would add up. "How much were you into them for, lass?" Gavin asked.

She responded quietly, in Naomi's voice, with an amount far less than the Captain could have possibly guessed. So cheap was a life here. Gavin took the sheaf of bills that he had used as bait, over twice the woman's amount, and tossed it to her. "This should be payment enough for the tellin' o' the tale, and I will have the tale. You can tell it while we doctor up this arm. If anyone asks, tell them it's bad mojo to harm a Mambo; you never know what manner of demon she'll summon to avenge herself." The woman nodded apprehensively, collected herself, and got some bandages, alcohol, and herbs. Apparently Naomi had given her some training.

Two hours later Gavin was back towards the docks in a fine new coat and flounced silk shirt, his pockets not as heavy as he might like, but not as light as he might have feared. He had the story he'd paid for. It wasn't Naomi that owed the money, but her daughter the girl in the flat. They had killed the witch when she had come to pay most of it and sent her body down to a Doc Morgan, then kept the daughter locked up to keep the boy working making them money. The boy couldn't go to the cops, as their handling of it would have only gotten his mother, Irene, killed.

It would be good to get back to the ship. Gavin flexed his right arm and hand, feeling the ache of mending flesh. Yes, very good indeed. He strolled along with the meandering crowd, mostly shoppers, as he headed toward the docks. The row of shops were mostly local artists and artisans displaying a wide variety of wares. Other than the new shirt and coat he'd just purchased the good Captain had few needs at the moment, so most of his attention was on the crowd around him. That is, until the device caught his eye.

It was in the manner of a sculpture of a seated man, but made of brass, seated as a man would in front of a curio shop. Gavin did a double take upon seeing it, thinking it a man at first so real did it seem. The thing, wearing only trousers and a wide brimmed workman's hat, piqued his curiosity. The sculpture didn't so much look like a man, but more of a machine created to appear like a man. It was all shiny brass with linkages and gears in place of muscles and tendons, linked plates where skin would cover. There was verdigris and corrosion in the myriad of tiny crevasses and creases. The apertures covering where the eyes would be were closed, if they had ever opened, and seemed to be corroded shut. More than anything the sculpture exuded great sadness.

"Like what you see, Captain?" the shopkeeper asked, trying to gauge Gavin's interest.

"Interesting piece," Gavin replied, "any idea what the artist was trying to convey?"

"Sadly, no," the vendor replied, "Picked it up from a junk dealer. Thought it would bring a nice price but it's been in the shop for months now. Only people interested are out-of-towners who don't want to ship it. Let ye have it for a fair price."

Gavin laughed. "Got all the ballast I need this run. If I needed something to just sit around the ship, well I got's crew that already does that."

The shopkeeper smiled at that. "Serious about letting it go cheap, though. The thing seems to dampen one's mood, not too good for making sales if clientèle are depressed. That's why it's outside in the weather."

"What price were you thinking?" Gavin asked with a raised eyebrow. He'd purchased crazier things with less incentive, and with the passenger fees, rum run, and compensation money the Seven Fingers was well into the black this trip, even after the crew's score was figured in.

"Five dukaat?"

"Two, you deliver it and it keeps the goofy hat."

"My children will starve!" the vendor complained, "I can take four, but not a guilder less."

"I can get ballast cheaper anywhere, 'tis no better that rocks to me. Three dukaat." Gavin retorted.

"Three and a half, but you carry it and the goofy hat away yourself." The shopkeeper thrust.

The Captain parried, "Done." Gavin liked dickering better than fencing, less bloody. Especially since he just replaced his shirt and coat from the last bout. Happy with his purchase, he slung the brass monstrosity over his broad shoulders and headed for the docks and the Seven Fingers.

Happy with the sale he'd just made, the curio shop owner watched the Captain disappear into the crowd carrying the brass man.

The sweet sound of practice sword play greeted the Captain's ears shortly before he came into sight of his beloved ship with his interesting burden. The sight of it informed him that John had indeed found a way to corporealize their ghostly crew woman, who despite claims wasn't half bad with a

blade. At that moment she was in the act of spinning to her right on the balls of her heels, practice blade in a high, horizontal slash deflecting John's upward thrust with the flat of the blade. Her intended stab was halted however, and she was bounding hard to the left as John's blade rolled over the block and came towards her exposed chest, just below her neck. She continued to back peddle as John was upon her quick as a wink, and he executed a storm of slashes and chops. His blade came in low in a slashing upwards, but changed direction the first moment it encountered resistance from Sara's blade. He rolled his shoulder and came hard to at waist level. Sara's quick downward thrust saved her from that one, but she was given no chance to counter, as John simply spun his wrist and came in with a quick strike. Sara was still back peddling hard, but managed to block and counter thrust. Alas, she was now too high and overextended. She knew this, and let out a little cry just before the flat of John's blade came down on her wrist and her own blade clattered to the deck.

"You may have beaten me this time, sir," she said between musical chortles, "but next time, I'll make you dance to my own tune."

"You made me dance quite well enough today my lady. To think you asked me out on the floor, instead of vice versa." He bowed then, in mock seriousness, once again showing that rarely viewed aspect of himself that was his sense of humor.

"When a lady asks you to dance, John," Gavin said as he stepped onboard, "be assured that she already knows how. She's really just wantin' to see how good a lead you are." He set the brass monstrosity down with a dull thud.

"What in the name of the Archangel is that?" declared Sara when she spotted Gavin, or more appropriately, Gavin's burden.

"Sea stones," replied John calmly, referring to the stones that seagoing ships carried in lieu of real cargo for stability. "How did you get hurt?" the thaumatologist asked as he came forward, producing a small bottle from a belt pouch.

"Bit of a rat infestation problem in town, probably why Virginia's feelin' the urge to move on, what." Apparently the Captain didn't see any need to burden his crew with his personal woes. "I stopped by her offices, they said they'd start loading this afternoon, but would be all day tomorrow closing up. Won't be able to leave till dawn after next. Dutch gave us some extra scratch for the Diablo, but they're keepin' 'er. Crew'll get an extra score, and an extra night in port to blow it."

John interrupted him with a raised palm. "We'll deal with those things in a moment, let me see the arm." Gavin doffed his seacoat, then with a glance at Sara his shirt. He then unwound the apprentice witches wrappings and poultice. Within moments the wounds were exposed, and John was busy rubbing some sticky ointment over them.

Gavin flexed the arm and fingers. "Many thank-yous, John, that feels very good! A bit itchy, but good." Retrieving his train of thought the Captain continued, "Anywize, the British Admiralty gave us our own lovely blue pins on their map, two of 'em, in lieu of financial compensation." Putting his shirt back on, Gavin remembered that he'd hung his seacoat on the brass man. "Oh," he added, "I bought meself an interesting gadget. Not sure what it is yet, but even as a sculpture it kind of grabs ones heart, does it not?"

“That’s no statue, Captain, tis a golem, a fine work of artifice with the imprint of a psyche stamped on it, just as your sword does,” Professor Merriwether stated, slipping into lecture mode. The matter of factualness of John’s voice didn’t disguise the fact that he just revealed he knew something of Gwyn.

“Professor, I’ve never encountered one,” Sara interrupted. “Are you saying that, the statue over there is a machine?” Her voice was a mix of curiosity and playfulness, prompting him say more.

“Yes, definitely a golem. How far it’s development and abilities wont be know until it’s been repaired and fully functional. An interesting pass time, Captain? I shall remain on board anyway, you don’t mind of course? If I work on the thing?”

“You know I’ve got no where to be going in town, Professor,” Sara said as she moved away from John. She actually bated her eyelashes at him just a bit, although the act was clearly lost on the man.

Watching the interplay between the pair, Gavin smiled. “There are,” he interjected, “quite a few interesting places in town if one were wont to dance without cutlery involved. Not that I surely wouldn’t mind assistance with my little project, as I am sequestering meself aboard as well due to me ‘rat allergies’.” Unseen by the thaumatologist, he winked at Sara.

“Ah, but that takes all the fun out of it,” Sara retorted, “besides, they’ve closed the Silken slipper, and that place had the best bands.” She grinned, acknowledging the wink. By this time several wagons pulled onto the docks abreast of the Seven Fingers. Porters and Longshoremen began the long task of loading the entire Crescent Trading Company into her holds.

One of the first things off the wagon was a sarcophagus. At first glance it was nothing more than an ornate coffin, lacquered a deep red with gold trim and hardware. On closer inspection, if one got close enough, it brought to mind the scent of freshly turned loam with a hint of decay and a feel of old damp houses. One thought of things lurking not quite seen in dark corners, of mildewed fabric and rotted wood. It was not so much a feel of evil as it was of very old death. If one were actually to open the box one would see a rather expensive white silk lining button upholstered over plush padding, and note that the box only locked from the inside. It was, of course, locked.

It was being carried gently by four muscular, tan, bare chested porters. The four men were alike in size and musculature, wore loose blue work trousers and was armed with a sword hanging from a bandoleer. Each one, however, was of different ethnicity. These could only be trusted members of Virginia’s inner circle, her body guards, donors, and perhaps lovers. One of them approached Gavin, not even acknowledging the others present. “Good day, Captain. The lady said to ask you where this will be going.”

“Put it in the captain’s cabin,” Gavin told the porters. “She’ll be disoriented and she’s been there before.”

“It may not be safe for you, Captain,” the body guard explained. “You know her, so you must know what she’s capable of.”

"I know her, and I know what she is, the 'stinking box' goes in my cabin." The reference to 'stinking box' brought a smile to the man's lips, the first expression he'd shown. That was how Virginia referred to it. "Why is she not staying ashore today? We've got all day tomorrow to load."

"Difficulties," the man explained. Turning to the others he said, "Alright, boys, you heard the Captain, she goes in his quarters." Together, as if one beast, they hoisted the sarcophagus and took it below.

"Well, that was certainly odd," Gavin said as the rest of Virginia's belongings and company began its slow loading into the Seven Finger's holds.

"Odd?" John offered, "No, not for a Nightchild, not unusual in the slightest. I find it interesting that many of them refer to their traveling containers as stinking boxes."

"Odd for that particular Nightchild, actually," Gavin began to explain. "She wouldn't leave the safety of her lair for a sarcophagus on board an unsecured vessel, even one under control of a friend, unless it had been compromised. She probably has a decoy there, or perhaps the decoy is here and we should expect attack. She was quite open about the box being seen, what?" Gavin smiled then, the realization of what she was doing set in. "Of course. She's the decoy for the decoy, she's in there and her adversary will think she's not because she was so obvious. Unless she isn't." He doffed his top hat and scratched his head, "Bloody vampires."

"Something is in that bloody box," Sara stated, "it's warded against my kind so I can't see into it, but it only locks from the inside."

"No matter what, I expect there will be some fighting in the town tonight," the Captain replied. "John, you may want to get word to the lads. Tell them to lie low and stay in town, the vampires are playing out the first moves, and they move at night. We'll anchor the Fingers out in the harbor afore dusk and leave a ship's boat here, put some water betwixt ourselves and the trouble. Sadly, Anabel might be walking into it when she returns at midnight. If she does, she can row out to us."

"I shall, Captain," John said, "and do not worry over the First Mate, I'll telegraph Monsieur d'Arcy at the embassy on her behalf."

Turning his attention to the brass man sitting on the deck gleaming dully in the sunlight the Captain said, "Well, what of our friend here? Once they get that bloody great box situated well take him below so's he don't get sunburned, what? There should still be enough room to do a little tinkering before dusk."

"Aye," John said as they lifted the brass man, "we can put him in my cabin for the moment. I can get to cleaning, as well as check on the analytical engine inside the fellow." He slapped the hard brass plating, but not overly hard, "we'll have you to right as sure as my name is Merriwether."

With a last long survey of the docks Gavin joined him below, leaving the loading to the stevedores, porters, and longshoremen.

Inside the 'stinking box',
Aboard the Seven Fingers.

Soon Mai lay in the box, still as death itself. She had to, even though every nerve in her little rat body tingled, even though her queue lay knotted under her shoulder blades and now felt like an ax blade. The blades she carried crossed over her chest, conversely, rested lightly between her small breasts like a steel brassiere. She slowed her heartbeat, even though her heart wanted to tear loose and leap from her chest. Her mistress's ruse depended on her being mistaken for a dormant vampress and not a high born wererat assassin. She felt the body guards set the 'stinking box' on the ship's deck. She felt the gentle roll of the ship, the little thumps when the hull touched the dock in two places. The vessel was still at dock, tied close for loading, good. She listened to the muffled voices as her bearers, her comrades, parleyed with the Captain. Finally she was moving again, downward and parallel to the dock. The Captain's own quarters, then, or the bow. Probably the man's own quarters if Virginia's description of the man were accurate, an 'honorable scoundrel'. She felt a tingle as if a ghostly finger touched her, was the ruse up? The box was set down again, and a series of light taps from a fingertip could be heard. In her heightened state they were like thunderclaps. 'Captain's cabin, six hours twenty eight minutes until dusk, the lady's being loaded, all's well.' Perhaps the ruse was still viable, but someone knew she was not Virginia. Hopefully it was a friendly; for although she was prepared to, she did not want to die today.

Six and a half hours then, and hopefully the Captain wouldn't mistakenly kill her before she could explain. Damn she wished she had arraigned her flaming queue better when she'd laid down.

~

French Consulate,
High Street.

The consulate grounds were stunning, a little piece of Paris in what the French generally considered a backwater village. Anabel walked with Jon through the pristine garden after a perfect lunch prepared by the embassy's kitchens. The garden was walled in white marble; a private place that took all of the lushness of these islands and tempered it with the high art of European skill. It was a riot of color, scent, and motion; and yet at a slow and measured pace.

"Anabel," Jon began, "there will be trouble tonight. I can have a messenger sent to your ship, I'm sure your Captain would agree. You should not be about after dusk."

"A ruse, I'm sure, to get me into your clutches yet again," the seawoman replied. "Surely you could do better than that."

"No," he said, "intelligence has led us to believe that the vampires are making their move. The Lady Virginia is already aboard your ship, delivered as common cargo. The rival gangs, both Capibarra and Lobo, have marked their territories and are already testing each other. If your Captain is wise, and I believe he is, he will be anchored offshore by dusk. I fear for your safety, especially rowing out into the harbor after midnight." Looking askance at her he added, "If it is a problem I can arrange your own private suite tonight."

Anabel snorted, "Not bloody likely." Smiling she added, "Very well, but make sure the messenger gives Gavin the heads up as well, and waits for his yea or nay. I'd like to stay on the man's

good side.” That being said, she locked her arm in his, rested her head on his shoulder, and asked, “So this one here is actually from the southern Pacific?”

“Yes,” Jon replied, “Borneo actually.” They disappeared deeper into the garden.

~

King’s Court Gaming House,
Marquette Street.

Eddie had been eying the main floor of the Court looking for a few more marks before dusk. He liked to survey from above so he could plan his approach and escape in advance, besides the marks were mostly looking down at their cards and not up at the landing that led to the rooms where 'working girls' plied their trade. That’s when he noticed his next mark, sitting at the third table in from the King’s Court’s front entrance. While there were plenty of newcomers in the Court today, just as they were everyday, two of this lot stood out to the thief’s experienced eye.

His mark stood up. Eddie came down the stairs and began to move round to get at the front door at the same time as the mark. The mark’s group was slowly making his way in that direction as well. A nice breeze tickled Eddie’s skin the moment he slipped out the doors, just behind his mark.

Eddie was no newly made whiskers, but he was fairly low in the order. Still, he was making a fast move upwards as a pickpocket with his nimble fingers and his ability to smell out a mark. He managed to slide into position, just aside one of the columns that stood on the Court’s porch. His target was two mangies and three 'danes, with his mark on the left, two 'danes and another mangy clustered in the middle, and the third 'dane on the right. Lucky for him he spotted these two lone wolves in his turf, as Boss had said that there were to be no messing with Lobos until dusk, and no messing at all if you was just fingers. He’d spotted these two though, loners, and the stupid one had won big at the tables. The other mangy loner wouldn’t be able to notice nothing, as the ‘danes were in the way. Mundanes were oblivious to him. Everything was just perfect for a big score. Eddie quickly slipped up and slipped the purse off the fool’s belt. Too easy. Eddie began to congratulate himself as he moved away when he heard, “Ulrich, pincher right and behind.”

The mark, ‘Ulrich’ by the sound of it spun fast, and if hadn’t ducked would have taken his fist upside the skull. He somersaulted backwards, and vaulted backwards over the short wall that crossed between the two pillars, putting good distance between his pursuing mark and the ‘dane. Just as he was going over he heard, “Roger, take the stairs! We’ll follow!”

The wererat’s mouth flew open at the same time he was spinning and running away from the Court. It was the ‘dane’, the tall skinny one with the bow, had been the one that had spotted him! He had just time to glance over his shoulder as he threaded his way through the gawking crowd of onlookers to see the second werewolf and the ‘dane leap the wall and set off in dogged pursuit, and then he was running for all he was worth; heading straight for Burden Street, and hopefully for a busy rush of wagons and carts where he could lose his pursuers.

~

Aboard the Seven Fingers,
Moored at the docks

Albéric Baudrain stood before Captain Gavin Draegun with the self-satisfied air of a man firmly ensconced in the belief that by some divinely granted asset, which defied both reason and proper explanation, he was superior to the man, who had by virtue of toil, skill, and a minor degree of good fortune, obtained a higher position in life than his own. For despite the sea green silk shirt; the white pants with the sky blue runner down the sides; the matching cotton jacket, with the same ivory buttons as the shirt; despite the newly purchased handsome fedora; the silver chains that lead to pocket watch and money purse; and regardless of the fine short saber and flashy knife he wore, Albéric Baudrain was only one step above being the lowliest underling serving at the French Embassy. Still it wasn't overtly obvious as he still managed to look down his nose at the captain, who actually stood a bit taller than his five foot five form, and clearly showed to be a more experienced fighter to boot. It didn't help that having been interrupted in his mechanical endeavors with John, Gavin had several smudges of grease on his hands and face.

"Now, Captain Draegun," He managed to make the name have sixteen syllables, when it clearly did not, "what reply shall I take back with me when I return to the Embassy?"

Many of the longshoremen and members of Virginia's company seemed to view the impertinent Frenchman, the same way they'd view a parrot, or a peacock, and that was the more polite ones. Once the Captain had caught a dock worker make some gesture in Albéric's direction out of the corner of his eye, although exactly what the man did went unseen. Still he could no doubt guess it's general nature, as several other workers burst out in torrents of laughter.

Having survived the Norman conquest and the hundred years war, Gavin had dealt with this man's ilk before. Clearly he would be quarrel fodder in any military action, or even a street brawl. Still, the desire to watch him take a swim was overpowered by his general liking of Jon d'Arcy and his affection for his first mate, Anabel, whom he treated as a daughter. Imagining Monsieur Baudrain swimming back to the quay with a fresh Heidelberg dueling scar Gavin answered, "Tell her ladyship that if she were to deign an appearance, perhaps at two bells of the forenoon watch, it would certainly suffice to meet her obligations. Thank Monsieur d'Arcy for his concern and his information, and advise them both that the Seven Fingers will be moored out in the harbor this evening. Now, if you please, do remove your perfumed, candy coated arse from my deck afore I swab you out with the rest of the chum."

The messenger's eyes bugged out at the last, and he stood for a moment, flabbergasted. "Perhaps," the Captain replied in high Occitan, "I should repeat myself in French?" Albéric stood straight up and ruffled his 'feathers' like the parrot he so resembled. Without another word he strode purposefully down the gangplank amid the continued guffaws of the rough dock workers who had been within earshot.

"And that," one of the stevedores said, "is why 'e's the Captain."

"Right." Gavin exclaimed to the milling workers, "You lot back to work. Ship leaves the dock afore dusk loaded or nae." Having dealt with the messenger's interruption the Captain slipped down the gangplank himself, headed for the local offices of Babbage Ltd. The mechanical man's antique steam plant had malfunctioned and he knew exactly the part to replace it. Hopefully the Babbage company would sell him one of the little alcohol fueled steam turbines that drove their terminae.

Redding's Cross,
Two blocks over from Burden Street

When tracking quarry, especially a swift one that knows the lay of the land better than you and has a head start, it's better to track from a distance. Phineas, as noble court fae, had been tracking prey for many centuries, through stranger environments. He moved from rooftop to rooftop with an agility available only to faerie. He trotted across the roof of a brickmaker's shop, which also doubled as a small foundry, and watched the chase going on below him. Besides being nearly immortal, the other thing that his folk had going for them was that magic literally flowed in them as a life force. Of course, unlike mortals, they had no souls. Once a fae died it ceased to exist, permanently. They used their magic, however, as easily as mortals could walk.

The plan was for the five of them to close in from three different directions; Fitch and Wilkes coming from behind, himself coming down, and Roger and Ulrich, much faster than the mortals or faerie, circling in front and entering from a side alley. The Finger's crew would close in on him and another small group of wererats, who were arguing with a pair of merfolk. The sea folk looked both angry and apprehensive, and the wererats looked overly confident. Phineas assumed that the merfolk were being coerced into something distasteful. The faerie leaped across another alleyway parallel with the running thief, his easy, long legged gait matching the wererat's pace. The wind blew his long, but closely bound silver hair back behind him as he went. His cloak billowed out behind him as well. He came to the last building on this row, a smelters with many large chimneys set round in a semi-circle. Their closeness created a large pool of shadow on the middle of the roof. Phineas jumped into that pool of shadow without slowing, and blinked out of existence. From one pool of shadow to another, Phineas appeared behind one of the were rats who was ringing the merfolk. The rats weren't aware of his presence.

"Do you hear me?" said one particularly large wererat, whose bare barrel chest showed as much impressive scarring as it did his enormous muscles. He was obviously high up in the Capi gang on the island, one that clearly enjoyed his power. "If you don't do as I say, if you don't participate in tonight's festivities, if you don't help in it, then those pretty lasses of yours are going to wind up dead. Only it won't be a quick kind of dying, you hear me; it'll be a slow kind of dying, after the boys have loads of fun with them first." His grin was as ugly as the scars Phineas noted, and while he wanted to kill the wretch, he'd wait for the others. He didn't need to wait long, just before the merfolk could agree, their quarry rounded the corner and came bounding into the square where all were standing.

"I've got a loner on my tail. He's out for blood." Eddie got out between ragged breaths.

"Eddie! Are you sure he's a loner? You'd better be."

Eddie gulped in air "Sure he is, he and another loner, along with three 'danes were at the Crown, and ..." He didn't get a chance to finish his statement as Roger and Ulrich entered the square almost simultaneously, but across from, Fitch and Wilkes. Ulrich had his machete and a long curved gutting knife in his fists, and a fire in his eyes that said he meant to kill rats. Roger's hands were empty, but he wasn't panting like the rat they'd been chasing. Fitch and Wilkes faced off on the other side, each with a cutlass and main gauche'.

“So it appears that there’s a rat convention in town. We’ll be takin’ back that purse now, snapper.” Roger’s pleasant twang seemed entirely out of place.

The rat leader gave a lurid grin, “Skin ‘em, boys.” The wererats all laughed as their leader went through his transformation, simultaneously with the two wolves. One of the rats behind him made a strangled gurgling sound, and fell over dead with a silver Elvish arrow in his neck.

The surprise only lasted a moment before two of the Capibarras turned on Phineas, who simply stepped back into the shadow and reappeared a few feet away. The elf fired again, and another rat dropped. The remaining dozen or so split into groups and charged in at Ulrich and Roger, practically ignoring the two other crewmen. This was probably more of a mistake with Samuel Fitch than Benjamin Wilkes, as a silver plated throwing knife appeared in the eye of one Capi.

Several of the Capis turned on the two mundane crewmen. This also turned out to be a mistake, as the only advantage the wererats had over the pair of wolves was numbers. Roger and Ulrich used the distraction to shift. Phineas’s second arrow found it’s mark. One of the rats fell with a trident through his chest, the merfolk had finally chosen sides. The Capis broke into a panic. Some ran, most were cut down by lupine teeth, mundane cutlasses, seafolk tridents, or elvish arrows out of the shadows.

Several long minutes later the fray was over. Ulrich, naked and now in human form, leaned over the corpse of the thief. “I’ll just be having that back,” he stated flatly, retrieving his pouch.

“Put some bloody pants on,” Ben Wilkes told him, “we got a score ta’ off.” Looking around, Ben realized that might be a problem as most of the werewolf’s clothes had been shredded during the shift. “Shite,” Ben said as he took the entire scene of the carnage in.

Roger was still in wolf form, licking one of his paws, and surrounded by dead adversaries. One of the merfolk had been injured, and Phineas was conversing with him and his companion. Ulrich, still naked, sat on the curb counting his recovered money. Fitch wiped one of his throwing knives off on a dead Capi and slipped it back into concealment. “Gentlemen,” Phineas said, “our worries are not over.”

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Offices of Babbage Ltd.,
Silverstar Way.

There is some degree of uniformity to all the offices of Babbage Ltd. As all buildings are constructed around a similar design plan. This uniformity in construction is meant to emphasize the point that no matter where one is in the world, Babbage Differential and Analytical Engines, Ltd. is something that can be equally relied upon. Thus, it wasn’t long before the good Captain approached a simple two story block of a building in gray granite, whose sign proudly proclaimed the companies name and slogan in the same blocky letters he’d witnessed countless times. Entering the well lit establishment, he was greeted with the same tightly packed tiled floor and large plush rugs that he’d encountered in every office of Babbage he’d ever entered. In fact, every lobby was so alike in furnishings, one might think that some magic was utilized to copy the original and transport to each of the many offices scattered across the globe. Fortunately, the staff was clearly different in each place, or else the disconcerting effect would be doubly compounded.

Gavin could easily see several under clerks busily scribing away on large books, or copying

one document from another, as the commonplace never ceasing activity of such an establishment. He found it rather odd that a company devoted to the mechanical processing of records would need so many books, so much paper, and so many people to write things down. Behind the scribes, and both overseeing their work as well as directing the occasional worker that came in from back offices, was a middle aged woman whose plain well worn business suit was in considerable contrast from the gaudy attire of the embassy messenger Gavin had handled moments before. Her steel gray hair was pulled back in an unflattering, austere bun. There was no jewelry on the woman's person save a pair of small thin wired spectacles, which sat on a petite nose. She was the quintessential English headmistress or middle manager. Her sea green eyes took in the Captain at a glance, oil stains and all. Gavin saw, or thought he saw, a hint of mirth touch those stormy eyes.

"Good day to you, Captain, how might we be of service?" The voice spoke of well aged maternity, that soothing sternness that could quite a fearful child, or awaken sure terror in one that had been naughty. It was the voice of someone in charge.

"Good day to you as well, m'lady. I was working on a piece of equipment on the ship and it seems that the engine driving it is sadly beyond repair. I also noted that your terminae use a similar, but much more advanced engine to drive them. I believe it is a steam turbine of equal capacity to the antique boiler and piston device I need to replace." Gavin noted as he was talking that her right eyebrow slowly raised. He quickly got to the point, "Would it be possible to purchase the part? I'm sure a company such as yours would keep such about for maintenance."

"Well," the matron began, "that certainly is an odd request, but not unexpected. Our equipment is paramount to all others, and you would certainly want the best unit for a critical ships device. Still, such an order would have to be placed with the home office, and would take a fortnight for delivery." She indicated an aisle that passed through the clerks to a desk at the back, "If you would step back to my desk, Captain?"

Gavin wrinkled his brow. "Well," he said, "I shall be in the Caymans in a fortnight. It wouldn't do to have it waiting for me here. Is there any other way to acquire such a device?" Their conversation was interrupted by a high pitched chime that struck twice. Work almost instantly stopped and the clerical personnel began to mingle and wend their way to the side of the room. The Captain's brow went from perplexed to confused as it was six bells, not two.

"Tea time, Captain," the manageress explained. "Would you care to join us? Perhaps we could come to some accord as to the turbine unit."

"Why yes, thank you! I'm Gavin Draegun, by the way, Captain of the Seven Fingers docked in port."

"A pleasure to meet you Captain Draegun, and while we are making introductions I am Mrs. Estie Treport, but please call me Estie. If you'll follow me."

She turned and lead Gavin to one of the doors set in the back of the lobby, where some of the workers were already filling through, chatting with one another as they went. This in turn lead into a short hallway, which in turn lead into what appeared to be the places cafeteria; apparently both tea and lunch were served 'in house', just another sign of the love for efficiency that was part of the establishments reputation. Two open double doors at the other end of the room showed Gavin one of the several massive chambers that held the rows upon rows of terminae that were the true work engine

of the establishment. Employees were slowly drifting in from out of this area, equally glad it seemed for the brief diversion from daily activities. Tea and coffee, along with the required condiments were set up along a sideboard in the typical 'self-serve' method customary for such engagements. Gavin couldn't help but notice that the beverages were imported by none other than Crescent Trading, the very company he was in port to move. It also seemed that there was, by custom, a sequence to whom entered first and lined up to get tea and coffee. Equally so there seemed to be a customary seating arrangement as well. Soon the two of them were seated across from each other at one of the long tables with a wide no-man's-land between them and a small group at the other end of the table.

"I noticed, Estie," Gavin began, "that your coffee and tea are imported by Crescent Trading. By an odd coincidence that is the very company I'm contracted to at the moment."

"Not as odd as one might think," she replied. "Even though most of their business is export, they import a great deal as well. What type of shipping are you doing for them, if I may ask?"

"The Seven Fingers is actually shipping their main office. Are they also a client of yours?"

"Ah, yes, we do a lot of work for them, I've heard they were relocating temporarily. Dreadful shame, actually, as my office will be losing a major client. Have you met the owner, Miss Matheson? I've only met her once but she is rather a strange woman. She never goes about during the day you know, she suffers from cutaneous porphyria, it's a rare skin condition that some believe gave rise to vampire folklore in less enlightened times." Estie leaned in close and added conspiratorially, "Some even think she feeds into the mythos herself a bit, with her odd clothing and activities."

Gavin laughed lightly. "Yes she is an old and dear friend, but she is quite the odd bird." He sipped his tea and took a bite of scone, giving Estie a chance to redirect the conversation away from her near faux-pas.

"So Captain Draegun," she recovered, "perhaps you might appease my curiosity and tell me what the turbine will be used for?"

"I picked up an antique piece of equipment in one of the local curio shops. I'm not really sure what it does, but I'm a bit of a tinkerer and shipboard life can get a bit droll at times. I'm going to try and make it functional and see what it does."

"Well, as it so happens, we do have some equipment in storage, in case of emergency. I believe that a part could be removed and sold to you at the standard price of purchase, and we could order a replacement. I think that payment up front and perhaps dinner would be more than sufficient to seal the deal." She actually gave him a coy little smile.

"Why, Mrs. Treport, what would Mr. Treport think of that?" Gavin replied.

"Not so very much, since he passed on the year before last. Have you ever been married, Captain?"

"Yes, but sadly marriages to sea captains rarely last I'm afraid."

"Oh, that's a dreadful shame," Estie said. "I do hope the split was amicable?"

“Ah, yes, we parted as friends.” His eyes got a far away look at that, perhaps remembering a particular one or even savoring each in its own way. He was brought back by the light touch of Estie's hand on his.

“About dinner?” she asked.

“Ah, yes, I need to be away from the docks and moored in the harbor by dusk. Perhaps you would care to join me aboard ship? I will be cooler and insect free, we could dine on deck and watch the lights of the town as we eat. The crew is at liberty, so either myself or my boatswain will cook but we're both quite accomplished.” Another chime sounded and office workers began to clean up and file out. Teatime was apparently over.

She gave him a sly grin and said as she stood up, “Why Captain, you're quite the rouge! And what's to say you won't spirit me away to your secret island and have your way with me?”

“Why Mrs. Treport,” he teased back, “what an excellent idea. Do you think we could both be back to work in the morning? My day will start at four o'clock you know.” They both laughed at this, drawing a few disapproving looks from the others nearby.

In a much lower voice Estie added, “I'll be at the docks by six thirty with the part and a bottle of wine. Now let's go pay for that part, shall we?” With that they returned to the office to conclude the transaction. Gavin left with a smile on his face, another satisfied Babbage customer.

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Forsaken Square,
near Bordo Street

On the map of Crescent City, Bordo Street ended at Forsaken Square. In every port town or hamlet there was a place for the forgotten, those who had hit rock bottom and would not be getting up. Such was Forsaken Square. To call it a ghetto would be an insult to such neighborhoods, as a ghetto could still offer it's occupants hope. Into this cesspit wandered an odd group of adventurers, following the nose of a wolf. There were five individuals. Two were obviously sailors, one leading two large wolves on hastily made leashes and the other carrying a bag of discarded clothing like a nautical parody of Father Christmas. The third, a tall distinguished man with silver hair, was dressed for a pleasant woodland outing. The remaining two were truly the oddest, both garbed almost entirely in muted green and blue garb resembling nothing more than seaweed, and festooned with sea shells to boot. The entire party was heavily armed.

The structures surrounding the barren expanse of cobbles that was Forsaken Square dated from colonial times and could rightly be described as the derelict, partially decomposed corpses of buildings. Naturally, some of the structures were in better shape than others. Indeed, the building that the wolves were leading the group toward had a rather sturdy roof. Perhaps that made the building, or warehouse, seem all the more out of place. It was well designed, well constructed, and it didn't belong. The small group of travelers slipped into the ruins directly across the square from their target to reconnoiter.

“Reminds me a little of Dante's 'Inferno',” muttered Fitch.

“No as bloody hot,” corrected Wilkes under his breath. “So tell me again, why is the two merfolk both named MacNamara?”

“It' no' a name,” Fitch whispered back, “’tis a moniker. Means 'Son o' the Sea'. Can't pronounce their bloody names.” One of the wolves looked at them and whined plaintively.

“Quiet you two,” Phineas said under his breath, “wererats have excellent hearing.” With that the elves body shimmered and he took on the appearance of the recently deceased Capi leader. “MacNamaras, you know what to do?” The mermen clasped their hands behind their backs as if tied. “Now Fitch,” he said, “glamour will only work as long as you're touching me.” Fitch stepped close to the elf, held on to his belt, and took on the appearance of another of the Capi's from the previous encounter. “Ulrich and Roger, you take the flanks and stay to the shadows. Ben, go up on the roof with the crossbow and shoot the lookout and anything else moving that isn't us.”

“Aye Phineas,” he said, “think this ruse will be enough ta free the mermaids?”

“I certainly hope so, Mister Wilkes,” Phineas replied. “The Captain will be horribly put out if we get ourselves killed and he has to break in a new crew.”

As it happened, the two mermaids that the Seven Finger's crew were attempting to rescue had been abducted by the Capibarras several days before. They were being held hostage in order to force the merfolk to assist the local rat clan in some move against the local Lobos. Of course that wasn't going to happen now, with the rats dead and the merfolk being assisted by the Seven Finger's crew. Phineas's plan was simple. Himself and Fitch, glamourised to appear as two of the wererats, would attempt to gain entry with the merfolk as apparent prisoners. Ulrich and Roger would hold to the shadows in wolf form, and rush the door once they were in and before it closed. They would cause as much mayhem inside as possible. There would only be a few guards for the two mermaids, and it should be easy to subdue them during the confusion. Wilkes would take out the single lookout, who had already been located, with his crossbow once the others were inside.

Tasks assigned, the four people started across the square. The wolves, as silent as shadows, misted off in two different directions. Ben Wilkes watched as the Phineas, disguised as one of the Capi capos, gained entry. He barely noticed Roger and Ulrich slip inside, so fast and quietly they moved. He picked his mark and fired, and the rat who had been about to send an alarm dropped in his tracks. No other target presented itself, and after several long moments the door was flung open and the whole party erupted from the building. Two mermaids, complete with tails and all, were riding the wolves. Phineas, Fitch, and the MacNamaras came out as well, and without stopping they dispersed fan-like into the surrounding streets.

Ben Wilkes packed in his crossbow and headed for the rendezvous.

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The Trey of Cups Inn,
Main Street & Quay

The Trey of Cups was a public house and inn, with a score of rooms above a popular and busy ale house. Some said that the fare was among the best on the island. It was in room twelve, MacNamara's room, top of the stairs and to the right, that the little band of rescuers rejoined. When Ben

joined them, Ulrich was in a borrowed robe dressing a gash in Roger's head. Roger was wearing little more than a towel. The mermaids were apparently in the bathroom, accompanied by MacNamara, in a tub of water as both were dehydrated. Fitch was looking out of the tiny window at Main Street below, and the second MacNamara had opened the door at his knock.

“You are well?” the merman asked.

“Aye,” replied Ben, “all's I had ta do was shoot some poor bastard in the back and run like hell. You lot had the hard part. What's happened ta Roger then?”

Ulrich snickered and Roger growled at him. “He ran into a wererat's machete' in the confusion. Fellow was already dead and dropped it, point down, into the floor.” Roger grumbled something else unintelligible and Ulrich responded, “hold still, I'm a crossbowman not a doctor.”

“Phineas's out getting' some trousers for those two,” Fitch said without looking away from the window, “seein' as they shredded most of their clothes in the first change. I understand the mermaids had quite a giggle when they shifted back, so MacNamara 'ere threw some towels on 'em.” He sighed and added, “Kinda sorry I missed that.”

“So we're all safe an' no casualties,” Ben replied, “'cept fer Roger that is?”

“Well,” Fitch replied, “an I still feel oily and tingly all over from the glamourin' what Phineas did ta me. Mac,” he said addressing the merman, “'e's comin' up.” Moments later there was a knock on the door and Phineas entered.

“It's getting crowded in here,” the elf observed.

“I took the liberty of securing rooms fourteen and sixteen as well,” offered MacNamara. “Please use them to rest as our humble gift.” Looking at the elf he added, “Now, cousin, before you rest you shall have the rest of the tale, what is about to happen, and why they were coercing us.” Phineas put down his bundle next to the werewolves and sat down across the table from the merman.

Ben Wilkes joined Samuel Fitch at the window. “What're we lookin' fer?” He asked.

“Rats,” stated Fitch flatly. “So far looks as if we wasn't followed.”

“And here is why, gentlemen,” Phineas said from the table. Both men turned to see that MacNamara and the elf had the globe of a dismantled lamp between them, set in the room's washbasin. The basin was half full of water, and an ethereal image was playing out in the glass globe. Phineas and the merman were clasping hands, encircling the whole affair, and were concentrating on the globe and its image.

In the globe they could see the Seven Fingers resting in the harbor. The scene was absolutely beautiful. It was sunset, the sky was aglow with a thousand different colors. The Captain was dressed to the nines, with all the trimmings, for some lady who clearly was not a vampire. The dining arrangement was set up on the poop deck, and could have been from any five star establishments. They were just sitting down to the repast. In the darkness as the sun set several launches approached, and the Fingers was attacked. The decks were overrun by wererats, and the Captain and Merriwether fought valiantly. Then huge chains or cables, somehow magically animated on their own, rose up from the water and

encircled the ship. In the final scene, the Seven Fingers was crushed and dragged to the bottom of the harbor with all aboard. “Bloody hell,” stated Fitch, “is that a prediction of what's to come?”

Phineas looked at him incredulously. “No you blithering idiot, that's what they're planning; we hacked into their babbage. We don't have nearly the time or equipment to do an accurate prediction! Apparently the Lady Virginia is at odds with one Dr. Abraham Morgan, and has been for months. He also has issue with our good Captain, who apparently removed his primary lieutenant this morning, and now with us as well for fouling his plot to coerce the merfolk here into attacking the Seven Fingers with him.”

“Oh,” stated the sailor, “guess he's right pissed of at us then.” His eyes shot to the window and the lengthening shadows below on the street. “Not long till dusk, Phin old boy.”

Phineas stood, breaking contact with MacNamara, and the globes image winked out. “No time to use those extra rooms. Roger,” he said to the almost dressed wolves, “run down to the Port Authority office and let them know we suspect trouble directed at the ship. Ulrich, reach out to the local Lobo pack for help, we'll try to forestall the Capis on the docks.” Turning to the sailors he said, “Wilkes, nip down to the telegraph office and alert the Captain to expect attack. Fitch, you're with me.” Finally, turning to MacNamara he added, “See to your ladies, sir. I'm sure that this Doctor Morgan hates to lose, and will probably make another abduction attempt.”

At some point Phineas had taken charge and none of the others had questioned it. Probably wise, as the young elf still was probably centuries older than any of the rest.

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Offices of Dr. Abraham Morgan,
White Chapel Road

The double doors to one of Dr. Morgan's operating rooms opened and an Capibarra ambled out. Just moments before he had been carried in, with slashes across his chest, stomach and arms; Ulrich's doing. He walked nearly as good as new. The muscle that had been torn away replaced by some nameless victim. The good Doctor was not long behind him, peeling off his surgical gloves as he went.

“You'll need to rest for the rest of the day, but you should be more than up for the night's raid on the boat. Allen,” The Doctor called out, his command bringing a short lanky freckled faced lad in his late teens.

“Yes sir?”

“Ah, there you are, run down to Burkett Street and fetch Mr. Goodsworth tell him that I intend to collect on that favor he owes me.”

“Yes sir.” With that the lad raced off; after all when Doctor wanted Allen to do something Allen gladly did it, he gave Allen his new legs after all. Allen didn't know how he came by his legs, but the lad never thought to ask.

7-Abduction!

Aboard the Seven Fingers,
Moored at the docks

The sun was hanging low in the late Caribbean afternoon, the sky bore the promise of a truly spectacular sunset in less than an hour. Now, however, it was high and blue with only a few fluffy clouds and a hint of colors yet to come. The wagons bearing the Crescent Trading Company's cargo had already left, and the docks were clearing out for the day, becoming a bleak and almost lonely place. A breeze off the harbor that pushed gently at Gavin's back tended to accentuate this feeling, bringing an early coolness, perhaps lifelessness, to the docks. The last of the dockworkers were finding their way down the gangplank, headed home to families and dinners, with perhaps a stop at one of the local pubs along the way. As they left, not a few of them noticed the rather attractive middle aged woman standing dockside. Gone was the worn business suit, in its place was an expensive and brightly colored silk dress which both clung to and accentuated her mature curves. Her steel gray hair, recently in a bun, hung loosely clasped in a pony tail with a jeweled clip. Although she now wore makeup, it was skillfully applied in such a way as to suggest she did not, and she was adorned with several rings and a delicate silver necklace. Along with a small clutch purse she carried in her manicured hands a pricey bottle of wine and a medium sized, ugly cardboard box. The cargo handlers, used to catcalling and whistling at a pretty woman dockside, were strangely quiet as they passed. Although she certainly deserved the attention, and they did look at her appraising, she still exuded an aura of order and authority. She was still the quintessential English headmistress, and might at any time produce a wooden ruler to enforce mannerly behavior.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain?" she called out in a firm but very feminine voice.

Interrupted from his woolgathering by the traditional hail, Gavin looked down. It took a moment to recognize the source, but once he did a broad smile crossed his face. "Permission granted, Mistress Treport, and welcome aboard!"

Her hips swayed gently with her metered gait as she climbed the gangplank, causing more than a few of the departing men to look back as they passed. "That's why 'e's tha Captain," one of them muttered quietly, eliciting smiles and nods from several others within earshot. Unseen by the men, a hint of mirth briefly crossed her lips, wrinkling her petite nose.

Gavin met her at the top of the gangplank. He was dressed in his best sea coat, brass buttons shined and sea boots polished. The flounce of his shirt puffed out in a flow of crisp white linen, and the cuffs ruffled out around his wrists. His beard was trimmed and his hair combed and pulled back in a short pony tail that revealed his broad forehead.

Estie's eyes were colored green like the deep sea under low clouds and hinted at a storm to come as Gavin's eyes met them. "Why Estie, I would say you look quite fetching but it wouldn't do you justice at all. You look absolutely hot." He clasped her hand and gave her a peck on the cheek. A small chuckle escaped her lips.

"Gavin, you really are quite the rouge, aren't you?"

He raised his right hand. "Guilty as charged, luv. Dinner is ready, John's been working on it all afternoon. I've taken the liberty of placing us a table on deck, and as soon as we're anchored we can eat. Relax and give us a few minutes to move her out of dock. It's only us two, my boatswain, John Merriwether, and a passenger or two aboard. Miss Matheson is asleep below, as you know her condition forces her to be mostly nocturnal. She will probably awaken at dusk."

A slight frown crossed Estie's face. "Did I interrupt anything?" she asked in a tone that suggested there was an interlude planned between Gavin and Virginia.

"Certainly not!" Gavin replied, taken aback. "Although I'm definitely no angel I would not put you through that. She is a friend only, and will not as far as I know be joining us for dinner. She can dine in the galley with John. Perhaps she'll even entice him into conversation, though I very much doubt it." With that Gavin helped John stow the gangplank, then escorted her to the poop deck as the bo'sun cast off the lines.

Estie sighed, leaned on the balustrade, and watched the town drift away from the ship as the Captain maneuvered the Seven Fingers out into the harbor. "Modern technology is quite wondrous," Gavin commented. "One person can handle the Seven Fingers under steam power, and it takes only three under full sail at sea." She went over to where he stood at the binnacle and he briefly went over the controls, proudly showing off his ship. Finally he said, "Now, Estie, if you would push that button with the anchor on it?" She did, and was rewarded with the rattle of chain and a loud splash. The Seven Fingers was resting, moored in the calm water of the harbor. He escorted her to a table perched on the very stern, poured wine, then went below to retrieve dinner. Estie relaxed, enjoying the cool breeze and the view of Crescent Town as the ship rocked gently with the waves.

When Gavin returned she commented, "You know, for such an ugly little town it really is quite lovely when seen from this angle." She was right. It was dusk, and the tropical sky had exploded with all the colors it had promised earlier. As if not to be out done, the full moon was just showing it's face opposite the sunset, awaiting it's curtain call until it's partner had left the stage. To the Captain, familiar with shipboard noises, several odd thumps were heard from the hold. Estie didn't notice. Apparently Virginia was on board, awake, and not in the sarcophagus in his cabin but somewhere in the hold.

"I should think that you've seen it from here at least once, when you arrived," he said, continuing the conversation as he served the meal. "You're obviously not a native."

"No, actually the company sent me here on an airship from Leeds, another ugly little town. I've never been at sea. This was a fresh start after Algernon passed, but sometimes it feels like I've gone from one hamster cage to another. Jump on the wheel, run till your tired, eat some kibble, sleep, do it again tomorrow." She sighed, taking a bite of the presented grilled fish. "Oh my, this is amazing!" she exclaimed.

Gavin grinned, "Yes, not your average kibble, John is quite a magician in the galley. So you haven't been on the island long then?"

"No," she said after swallowing, "the opportunity had been here for a while, but nobody in the company wanted it. It wasn't until I was widowed that I looked for a change of scenery, and this was the first one presented." Realizing what she had said she added, "I'm sorry, I do seem to keep coming back to my late husband. It's not intentional. So Gavin, how long have you been a boatman?"

Gavin's mind tumbled down the long years, leafing through the ages he had passed on the water relishing in its anonymity and ease of relocation. "Most of my life, really. I shipped out of London as a very young man and never returned. I found myself knocking about the Caribbean years later, met a woman, and decided to stay. She's long gone now but I'm still knocking about. The weather here in the tropics is much more to my liking anyway."

"London? Odd, you didn't strike me as a Londoner. I took you for Welsh," she said between bites.

"I am of Welsh descent," Gavin said. It was true, after all. Once they had lost to the Picts the Britons were pushed back to the corners of the British Isle by both them and the Saxons, or off the island entirely to Brittany, the region of France still bears their name. The Britons that were left today were either from Wales or Cornwall. Although he would never bring it up, when Gavin left London it was still called Londonium.

"Captain," John interrupted, "there's a pressing matter with the ship that needs your attention."

"I'll be right back, luv," Gavin said as he got up and followed his bo'sun to the main deck.

"We received a telegram from Wilkes on shore. I am afraid that in about fifteen minutes a group of Capibarras will be coming over the stern, about five. These will be the advanced party for a larger group, two parties actually rowing out in long boats. I strongly advise you make all speedy preparations. Sara is dealing with your guest."

At that moment, Sara was indeed carrying the sleeping form of Estie below decks, while the table and chairs, along with everything on them, floated dutifully behind them. It was a simple thaumatological process, one that most apprentices learned at about midway through their novitiate. It was also something that every book on Merlin had him performing at some point or another, although Gavin was fairly certain he had never seen him use it.

Gavin looked out over the balustrade, perhaps to catch a glimpse of the trouble to come. The lights of the port shimmered on the rippling waters of the harbor in the waning sunlight. He raised his spyglass to his eye. There were no signs of the Capibarra boats on their way, but he did not doubt Wilkes for one second. The air carried on it the scents of the town, cooking spices, harbor water, fish and flowers in the open market, the acrid smoke of steam engines, and the barest hint of something left in the damp graveyard loam too long.

One moment she was not there, in the next breath she was. She was tall for a woman, but not unusually so, with a perfect face and full, inviting lips. Her pale, slender frame was dressed all in black with a low cut bustier laced tightly over a flounced and ruffled blouse and a matching skirt. On her head she wore a stylish tophat with a pair of long raven's feathers in it. Her red lips, her only color save her matching fingernails and rose tinted wire rimmed glasses, parted in a smile that showed her long pointed incisors. "Good evening, Gavin," she offered. "I see the festivities have not yet commenced."

The Captain turned to her. "Good evening yourself, lass, it's been too long." He took one of her slender hands and kissed it gently. "You're up a wee bit early, pushing daylight?"

"It's you who have stayed away, but what's a few decades between friends. And you too would get up if you awoke in a crate marked 'Housewares- Fragile'. No manner of padding could make that

thing comfortable, I shall never malign my travel sarcophagus again. I trust we are safely out in the harbor? Are there any threats?" the Vampiress asked.

"On their way, Virginia, but nothing at the moment." He smiled, "I'll need to slip below and retrieve Gwyn, and change my good seacoat."

"So the play was not made in daylight, time to diffuse the trap. While you're below please go to wherever my sarcophagus is and tap out 'M-A-I' in morse if you would?" Gavin raised an eyebrow, but headed below now that the dinner table, chairs, and dishes had situated themselves. He checked on Estie, who was ensconced in one of the cabins, then removed his best coat and shirt as he entered his own cabin.

The Captain's cabin on the Seven Fingers wasn't a large or lavish affair, but there was still room to move around the sarcophagus that now dominated it. Gavin did, gathering Gwyn and several crossbows as he donned an older shirt. There was no time for another coat, and it would be in the way anyway. Gavin carefully tapped out the word 'Mai' on the sarcophagus and was greeted with a loud click of it's unlocking and the sight of a small Asian woman stretching out of it.

Gwyn and the woman's qi jian instantly faced off, pointing at each other. It would be a tough fight in the close quarters, especially with two long blades, but Gavin's fey forged blade was not alarmed. "Who are you and where is Lady Virginia?" she challenged.

Gavin could see the wererat in her, but she didn't seem to be a Capibarra or one of their cronies. She was just shy of five feet tall, if that. Dressed in plain black silk, with a carefully braided queue flowing down her back and a beautifully shaped face she looked more like a Chinese doll than a deadly foe. Still, the Captain knew by the way she handled her twin blades that were almost as long as she was tall that she was deceptively deadly. "I am Captain of this vessel, and if you wish to live further you will stand down young lady," he commanded.

Her blades dropped immediately, but she still remained taught and ready. "Forgive me, Captain Draegun. Would you know the whereabouts of my mistress, please?"

"Tha's much better." Gavin lowered Gwynrheged as well. "The Lady Virginia be above deck, and we're expecting attack at any moment. I'm sure your blades will be needed." With that the Captain was gone, arriving on deck just as the first Capibarra fell to the vampiress's tender graces astern, his throat torn out before he could give alarm.

The second Capibarra fell with a silver quarrel through his left eye from one of Gavin's crossbows, and with no time to reload the captain dropped the spent weapon. He would retrieve it and reload it later. Sara, unbound by gravity and a bit impatient, flew over the balustrade; apparently to get at the next one. John Merriwether was amidships preparing for the main battle yet to come, apparently trusting that they could handle the five intruders from the advance party themselves. Gavin could hear the softly chanted words of his impending spell, but would never understand them.

A third wererat came over the stern balustrade, at Virginia's back. Before Gavin could raise his second crossbow Mai flew past, partially shifting as she went and spoiling his shot. The two rats, one new world and one old, faced off. In a blur of steel and fur they met, the Capibarra's machete against the deadly whirring of the twin Chinese long blades. The Captain sauntered past the melee, knowing there were five and now realizing that Sara would get the last one before he could escape and raise

alarm with the oncoming longboats. Clever girl, er, ghost. A head rolled past behind him, courtesy of Mai's butchery, as he reached the balustrade and slowly drew Gwynrheged. The broadsword was already swinging when the rat's head popped up over the stern railing, and Gavin lopped it off before he could look surprised. His machete was still in his mouth when the head, and then body, splashed into the water far below.

Looking down, Gavin could see the last wererat being diced by the faintly glowing spectral blade being wielded by Sara. "Scuttle that once yer done," he called down to the ghost.

"Aye, aye, Captain," she replied as if right beside him. With that he saw the last Capibarra fall, and the blade that was an extension of Sara's own arm plunged into the hull of the rowboat. Instantly she really was right beside him.

"Nice touch that," Gavin commented to her, "flanking the last one so's he couldn't slip off."

Sara curtsied, "Thank you, Captain, twas nothing."

Turning to the others Gavin asked, "So, how did we fair? All well?"

"We've two dead to their five," Virginia answered, "But technically the specter and myself don't count as we were dead going in." Sara giggled.

"Bastard nicked me ear," Mai complained.

Gavin turned to her. She was covered in blood, and both her qi jian, pointing toward the deck, were dripping with it. The little rat woman stood in the middle of a butcher's shop of horrors with body parts and pieces all around. She had shifted back, and due to her recuperative abilities her ear had already healed. "I trust you nicked his back?"

"I think so, but I don't see his bloody ear anywhere so's I can't tell for sure."

With that the unusual chant uttered by the thaumatology professor met its end, and while the effect it had on the Fingers was not noticeable, the consequence of it surely would be. John's voice cut through the momentarily silence, his countenance solemn, "Mistress Sara, kindly take up the bodies and float past the rail. I need you to hold them while Mistress Mai chops them up. You have ten minutes."

"John?" Sara's voice contained the surprise that others might have been feeling, given the grotesque command.

The thaumatologist didn't even look at her as he picked up the discarded crossbow and reloaded it. "In several minutes a boat containing a magi with the ability to reanimate the dead will be here. I'd rather he not have those bodies to use his powers on." Sensing her concern he added, "He isn't a true necromancer, so you should not fear exorcism."

Gavin went astern to the binnacle and set the Seven Finger's boiler to full steam. "We may have to move 'er, and I've got that lovely new toy on tha' bow as well. John old boy, do you think they'll know about the steam powered repeater? Are their magi as good as yerself? The quarrels are steel, not

silver; still we could take out an entire longboat afore they knew what happened. I can at the very least put 'em into the water and slow 'em down.”

“He’ll have something up at the very least to protect himself, and a few others close to him. I know he’s performing this task as payment for a debt, and so his soul isn’t in it. He may try some elementalism and blow the boiler with a water spirit to disable the crossbow if he’s smart. We may get a burst of flame if he’s not so competent. I have warded the ship against both. He’s likely to use magic to get the group aboard quickly, those that aren’t swimming. Fortunately, the crew ashore will be pinning them down and hindering their launch. If they can keep one boat at the dock we’ll only have to deal with the other.” Then more to himself, “And then the fun starts.”

“Sara,” Gavin said, “once you’re done, nip up to the crow’s watch with a brace of crossbows. When the enemy comes don’t concern yourself with the first lot, but keep a good steady fire down on the boat proper. Don’t bother reloading, just fire and drop.”

“Aye, Cap’n,” The ghostly woman retorted, hanging suspended in mid air, as the were rat worked at the corpse in her hands with all the fury of a hurricane.

Watching the grisly scene Virginia began singing softly, “Feed the fish, tuppence a bag. Tuppence, tuppence, tuppence a bag....”

Approaching the vampress, Gavin produced his silver plated main gauche’. “I would be equally obliged, Virginia, if you would join Sara up there.” Seeing her about to protest he quickly added, “at least for the opening moments, luv, after which you can come down and play with the rats wherever the need arises.”

“Of course, love,” Virginia responded. “Thank you for the equalizer, I will take good care of it.” With that she took on the pallor of the long dead, her exposed skin drawing taught and giving the illusion of elongating fingers and teeth and hollowing her face. Her eyes sank in and went dead black. Once her aspect altered she drifted slowly up through the rigging towards the crow’s nest as the undead monster she was instead of an attractive young business woman. She continued humming her morbid song to herself.

The Captain ensconced himself in the operators seat of the repeating crossbow at the Fingers bow to wait. Memories of waiting before battles crossed through his mind, hunkered down in freezing muck or sweltering jungle heat somewhere. The comfortable seat on a pleasant Caribbean night was much nicer. He mused that there was almost always waiting before a fight. You waited before a battle, and just as surely the survivors would carouse afterwards, perhaps to celebrate their continued life. Gavin’s woolgathering was interrupted by Sara’s disembodied, singsong voice next to his ear, “They’re he-er.” The specter herself was in the crow’s nest, she was projecting again, the showoff. He flipped the safety off.

“Fines insidiatur, Avunculus,” Gavin whispered to himself, “caligine oritur.”

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Between Berth Twelve & Fourteen,
Crescent City Docks

It was past the time when daylight bleeds toward dusk, and as if on cue the full moon lifted it's head above the horizon. Even the wind seemed to hold it's breath as the scents that had been riding it, fish, tar, unwashed stevedores and porters, burning coal, and steam engines, paused for a long moment. "Wind's shifting," whispered Roger almost imperceptibly. Phineas checked over the scene that would soon be a battle ground. The Capibarras, having finally all showed up, fired up a steam launch. The other boat was the same size, but without the steam plant. Rats lined both sides and were grasping the multiple oars. It was almost funny watching them, since none of the group had ever had an oar in their paws before. The Lobos were sticking to the plan with all the zeal of playful children being introduced to a fun new game. Three were at that moment standing beside one of the quay side eatery carts, which they actually owned and operated. The rest of the pack was cunningly concealed, slinking in the days end shadows as only wolves can.

Equally as quiet Phineas replied to the group, "Places, gentleman, while they can't smell you."

Nothing ever goes exactly according to plan though. In this case it wasn't reinforcements for the Capibarras, but rather a group from the French Consulate with Jon d'Arcy and Anabel Stark, the Finger's first mate, in front. Phineas honestly hadn't expected anything remotely like this.

The French marched in double file. Dressed in blue and white uniforms with shiny brass buttons, high spit polished black boots and immaculate swords in pristine bandoleers they would have been at home in any European palace. Each one of the twenty one militia was also carrying a single bolt crossbow and they set up a military firing line three men deep, so as to cover each other while they reloaded. The Capibarra's were dumbstruck for a few moments as the line formed along the quay facing them. To give Annie some credit she was apparently arguing with Jon, perhaps over the folly of firing into a group of armed wererats. She went unheard over their sergeants bellowed orders however, which climaxed with a loud, "Tirer..... Braquer..... LOURDER!"

A volley of seven steel quarrels slammed into the stunned Capibarras, mostly annoying them. Exactly three and a third seconds later another seven more quarrels struck. Outraged, the wererats began jumping onto the quay, shifting as they did and most drawing machetes or knives. The firing line folded into pandemonium as the soldiers faced the slathering jaws of the angry beasts. In an amazing act of bravery most of the guardsmen in the third volley managed to fire before drawing their sabers. Twenty one useless, unloaded crossbows clattered to the cobbles almost as one and the quay disintegrated into a melee of flashing teeth, steel, claws, blue uniforms, fur, and blood. Lots of blood.

Jon and Anabel were back to back, both managing to fend off attacks quite well. Several of the were's fell to the pair before they gave them a wider berth, choosing instead the easier targets of the rank and file guards. The guards, armed with the finest French steel sabers, could do little against the were creatures. Unless they could strike an instantly lethal blow a rat would simply drop back until it healed and then attack again.

Fitch was only half noticing this colossal fuster-cluck, as the moment the sergeant began bellowing orders, like a banner man on parade, he gave a low long whistle. Roger, who was three strides across the way to his right, concealed by a line of crates and the railing that lined this portion of

the docks, his body half submerged in water, glanced in Ulrich's direction. The other wolf responded with a nod and predatory grin. The plan wouldn't alter really, they would just use the additional confusion. Ulrich tilted his head and whispered into the waiting ear of a powerful, golden haired amazonian beauty, who immediately moved off to pass the message along. Fitch smiled; those two would probably be coupling once this was all over. The steam launch belched smoke, it's boiler taxed as it's turbine was engaged too soon, and left the docks.

On the dockyard, the guards were giving the Capibarras all they had, the fear of the realization of what they were fighting against, fully combined with the grim reality that it was either them or you, setting in and transforming them into grim frantic killers. Still it wasn't enough, in most cases they couldn't defeat one Capibarra, even when more than a single guardsman attacked a single Capibarra. Some had made their way over to where their superior and the first mate were standing, hoping that a better more determined defense could drive off their attackers. That was what Anabel desperately hoped, or that someone would show up to help them, although that didn't seem likely. She had witnessed the other boat roaring away, its steam plant being forced to its utmost. No, it wasn't likely that any assistance would arrive from the 'Seven Fingers', she thought ruefully, as she watched another man knocked down by an attacking Capibarra, as he tried to make his way over to where she and Jon were. She knew that guardsman was going to die, killed by either a blade, or slashing claws and snapping teeth.

A quick count confirmed to Phineas that roughly half of the 'rats' were still there, their force had affectively been split in half with no effort. The elf stood and released the first arrow into a rat's skull. Taking the signal, the hodge-podge collection of werewolves, merfolk, and humans, the majority looking more like the players in a street mob, attacked the remaining Capibarras.

Anabel was about as surprised as the Guardsman, when the Capibarra's head came apart, an arrow blossoming in, and through the wererat's head, to plant itself in the dock planks. The Capibarra however, didn't have the senses left to be surprised, more than likely his spirit was still trying to piece the whole thing together, as he awaited judgment. Two more went down in a similar manner, over where the bulk of the remaining guardsman were standing. Capibarras were disengaging from their individual fights, and looking about for the archer with silver tipped arrows, they weren't looking up long.

The sound of men pounding shields gritted her ears about the same time the sound of wood splintering and an Capibarra that was standing near the other boat recovering was yanked into the water. He screamed once, a terrified screech, as though the devil himself had reached out the waves to drag his wanting soul straight down to hell, then there was second or two of splashing, followed by a strangled gurgle, and then nothing. All this to the sound of two more arrows coming out of the dark to take down more Capibarras, to the counterpoint of the sound of metal on metal, as weapons pounded on shields. Five members of the Port Authority marched in shoulder to shoulder, all clad in Urban Suppression gear, their oaken clubs having iron and silver studs on them. Their entrance serving as some sort of cue for everything that followed as instantly as her fast beating heart. The three men from the little sea side eatery she noticed when the group came marching in charged the group of Capibarras off to her right, armed with boat hooks and long hooked chopping knives. They had removed their aprons, and she did a double take when two of them shifted right before her eyes. Just as these two groups attacked, several crates burst open to reveal more Lobos, most of who had shifted beforehand. She saw Ulrich run past from her left, his left eye coming down in an exaggerated wink, as if he somehow thought all this was somehow funny, his clothes soaking wet. Of course none of that topped Phineas appearing out of a shadow where nothing had been seconds before, an arrow knocked and

released, before he simply melted back into the shadow where nothing was again. He was totally devoid of compassion, inhuman in a way that only soulless fae or steam powered repeating crossbow could be.

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Aboard the 'Seven Fingers',
anchored in Crescent Harbor

They heard it long before they saw it, the roar of a steam plant pressed to it's limits was undeniable. They saw it's shape against the city lights soon after, the boat cutting through the water like an arrow, it's glowing bow wake shining in the growing moonlight.

"Aim for the rear Captain," John calmly stated from mid deck, His right hand making strange symbols in the air, "it is there that you will do the most harm by destroying their steam plant." That was the understatement of the week, possibly of the whole bloody year, taking out the power plant would slow the Capibarras boat down enough that they couldn't plow into the ship like a round launched from a ballista.

"Taken under advisement, Mister Merriwether," Gavin replied, reminding him which of them was crew. The Captain checked the bolt feed for obstructions and threw off the safety. Working the pedals for the first time since practice he swung the dreadful device to bear on the oncoming wererats. With a grim set to his jaw he whispered to himself, "...now I am become Shiva, the destroyer of boilers..." Grimacing, he pulled the release and the machine began the rythmic thumping of death incarnate. That's when the sky lit up, great spheres of blazing fire leaped out from the Capibarras boat towards the 'Fingers'. They were large white hot affairs, with edges that danced angrily in the starlight. Once the Captain's eyes adjusted it made aiming much easier than in the darkness. They splattered wide against some unseen barrier a hands distance away from the ship, the roar of flame, like that of a forge fire fighting against the drum of the steam powered crossbow; the angry cries of the Capibarras, as the rounds hit home; the splashing of some of those rear most rats jumping overboard to keep from getting anymore rounds in them; and lastly the thumping boom of the steam power plant rupturing.

While this last act clearly started to slow the forward momentum of the Capibarras vessel, it still tapped the Fingers' when it finally came in. Not that mattered, as all aboard were busy long before that event occurred. Not long after the destruction of the enemies steam plant Gavin heard John bellow, "Get away from the crossbow. Now!" No sooner had he said so they heard an ominous whistling sound coming from the ships boiler. As he leaped from the operators seat, Gavin pulled the boiler purge valve releasing the entire head of steam into the harbor. The crossbow would be intact, but useless, for the rest of the fight. As a pleasant side effect, scalding steam released over the enemy vessel obscuring their view and eliciting screams of pain.

"Mai, prepare to repel boarders," Gavin bellowed.

"What flaming boarders?" The little wererat retorted, disbelief clearly evident in her voice. As if in surprise, four Capibarras were launched out of the oncoming, but greatly slowed vessel. Only one made it onto the deck, just barely. "Bloody shites," Mai complained, drawing blades and shifting simultaneously.

Gwynrheged wanted into the fray, and screamed in Gavin's head as he chose instead one of his hand held crossbows. "Not yet, me lovely, lets us even the odds first." With that he drew a bead on the balustrade and waited for the first Capibarra head to appear.

John Merriwether mumbled something unintelligible and waved his hands upward. The words had no sooner left his mouth than the sky was lit up, as though by green-blue lightening. There was a cry of alarm from the Capibarras ship, just as Sara began to rain down bolt after silver bolt on them. Several more Capibarras clambered onto the deck, their bodies soaking wet and their weapons held in both hand and mouth. Gavin picked off one, then dropped the spent crossbow and drew his blade. Gwyn became as a living thing, a huntress in her own right lusting for blood. The chaotic fighting broke out in earnest then.

Within moments over half a dozen attackers were on deck. Several of them had obviously not survived the initial volley, but were corpses stumbling around and mindlessly trying to kill anyone. They were easily avoided and equally dangerous to both sides. Gavin heard Mai cursing to his right and yelled, "Bodies over the side, Mai, or they'll get back up!"

"Bloody thanks for the timely info, Cap'n," she replied with a grunt of effort. Apparently she had already been re-attacked. Gavin met his first boarder mid deck, Gwyn slicing straight through the low quality blade and the Capi's arm as one. With a growl of both pain and annoyance the rat leaped at his throat and was met mid lunge by the Captain's back-dagger. A well placed sea boot sent the dying were over the balustrade with a splash.

Gavin turned just in time to catch a crossbow quarrel in his upper left arm that sliced through his coat, shirt, and grazed tender flesh. "Bastard!" he yelled, searching for the varlet that shot him. Before he could locate the shooter another attacker met Gwyn and the two began to riposte and parry back and forth in a dance that could only mean death to one. Out of the corner of one eye the Captain saw Virginia drifting over the melee, her borrowed main gauche slashing down to drop a Capi reloading his crossbow. Lifting the corpse, she deposited it over the side and drifted back for another victim, still humming her morbid version of a children's song. Gwynrheged made quick work of the current foe, taking her due from his veins. Mai was carving up another and Sara, her crossbows empty, was fighting yet another. The specter's forearms had become blades and her attackers weapons were unfairly passing through her, although hers drew blood from them.

The Captain deposited his current kill over the side, then turned and sent two of the animated corpses over the side with swift kicks as well, handily avoiding their clumsy attacks. He turned, surveying the scene for his next opponent. Mai was finishing off hers, Virginia was carrying another to the balustrade, and Sara had two, one on each side, whose blows were hitting each other through her as much as her own were hitting them. A severed arm was crawling toward him, probably from one of Mai's recent kills. There were no other live Capibarras aboard at the moment, so Gavin began disposing of animated body parts, starting with the creepy arm.

There was no sign of John Merriwether. The thaumatologist, and indeed the magi from the other boat, were missing. The Capi's boat was now drifting slowly off to starboard and listing badly. It was Sara's shot that signaled them of the danger.

"Virginia. Get back. Don't let it touch you." Two long chains with all the agility of an octopus swung out from the boat, their lengths as dark as midnight on a new moon during a Monsoon. Six more Capibarras, who had been apparently held in reserve rushed down the length of those chains straight

towards Mai and Gavin. Sara however, was busy with a different type of terror of a more mystical character. The being that floated over the nighttime waves seemed formed from solid shadow, a blade of the flame drawn forth from burning remnants of the boiler in it's hand. To the walking dead of Virginia's ilk, next to the unbridled power of the sun, there was nothing more deadly than fire. At the moment specter and nightmare dueled not above ship, but over the waves itself. At first glance it seemed that Sara had an advantage over her opponent, having two blades, but her opponent dealt with both weapons with ease. Thrice she sent fainting blows the nightmares way, and thrice they were thwarted. She spun away from him then, her leading and him following as she began to truly show her skill. She had no illusions that she could defeat this monster on her own, so she went on the defensive to keep it occupied. She wasn't sure when she started humming along with Gwynrheged's morbid blood chant, but it gave her something to dance to, and it gave her something to make this malignant hellion dance to as well.

Back aboard the 'Fingers' the three were discovering that this group of Capibarras were better equipped, and more experienced fighters than the first lot that had scrambled aboard. They had formed two small circles, making it harder for the vampiress to simply slip in and slit one's throat, and dump it's carcass over the side. They fought more as a group, as apposed to a wild angry mob, as the last had done. Still, despite all this, despite the fact that the fact there skill would have been more than a match to cut down most ships crew, despite they had the superior numbers, they were still loosing. Mai kept one wererat's blade busy with her right hand, while the long blade neatly took out the left leg of his partner. Before that one even hit the deck, a powerful over hand chop sent it through the rat's shoulder. A hard kick sent it sprawling through the air to take out his mate behind him, which gave the vampiress all the opportunity she needed to take both of them out and deposit them over the side. Before the Capibarras had time to close up the opening though, Mai was in two of the wererat's guard, and chopping them up with the speed of a steam powered beef plant.

Gwynrheged, usually half asleep in dreams that only the elvish forged blade would understand, was now chanting wildly in carnal bloodlust. Every time Gavin found an open foe Mai was there as well, but Gwyn missed the little wererat, slipping in between to strike at exposed weaknesses. Soon she began working with the Captain, luring foes onto his blade and slipping a hairsbreadth away from it, knowing that Gwyn would not touch her. For Gavin it was like a mad reel on Loki's dance floor with the best of partners, blood, sweat, and body parts flying in all directions. Mai glanced at him with a morbid grin and said, "You're a right rat bastard in a fight, for a mundy gobber."

Sara had no time to watch this bloody evening carnival of soon to be death's parade, she was busy giving all her attention to her partner, who was doing it's part to get her to join that parade. She flickered back a pass neatly dodging a hard swipe to her middle that would have sliced her neatly in two, if it'd connected. She stared at the thing for just a moment before saying in a voice far too sweet for the circumstance, "Miss me?" It came at her with raw strength and unbridled fury, while she countered with dexterous grace and the elegant poise of perfectly trained motion. The demon was the mechanical killer to her lovely dancer.

By now they fought on the deck of the Seven Fingers and her opponent didn't even realize the fact. She blocked his fiery blade with her off hand, as she half spun, letting her right arm rotate all the way round and leaving his right side wide open for her ally to exploit. Her ally who was this moment free to do so, her ally, who had heard her whispered claim, as though she was embracing him from behind, whispering quietly into his ear, "It's wide open."

Gavin, distracted by Sara's summons, brushed a quick kiss across Mai's bloodstained cheek betwixt sword thrusts and whispered, "Be back, luv, something ugly to handle. Don't wait up." He turned to see Sara grappling with hell itself. The thing was all blackness and shadow, seeming to draw in the available moonlight and extinguish it mercilessly. As if in counterpoint, the blade it wielded was forged from pure flame, dancing and flickering towards the ghost but parried each time. To his mortal eyes the thing was blurred, as if slightly out of phase with the physical plane, and nearly impossible to look directly at. Spinning quickly widdershins three times to gain momentum as well as magical advantage, the Captain raked Gwyn across the nightmare's exposed side. Once. Twice. Thrice.

Each slice of the elvish blade drew not blood, but glowing moonlight released from its prison. The three cuts grew, opening wider for a view into the nothingness of the horror's interior, and a rancid breeze blew forth from the gashes. The blows that the Captain had given the thing had done more damage than Sara had expected, but it wasn't out of the fight. Its attention was now diverted between the two of them, allowing the ghostly woman to glide in and once again trap her enemy's blade. She hovered, less than an inch above the deck, down on one knee, one blade crossing her other and both driving the demon's blade straight down into the deck. "It couldn't be more exposed if it were naked," Gavin heard in his ear.

Gwynrheged came straight up past Sara's left side, catching the thing low and continuing upwards to its 'head', splitting the creature in a move that would disembowel a mortal foe. The shadow form of the beast folded back upon itself, pale glowing moonlight spilling down across both Captain and ghostly crew as the shadows dissipated. The fiery blade, now unfueled, snuffed out together with a loud puff and a thin wisp of putrid black smoke.

The Seven Finger's Captain looked around at the carnage. Virginia was depositing the last corpse over the side, Mai stood amidships, blades at ready for the next surprise. The deck was littered with the detritus of battle, blood, entrails, dropped weapons and such, but the Fingers was relatively untouched. Sara rose, curtsied to both Captain and vampiress, then winced as Mai somersaulted through the air, thrown skyward from below decks. The hatches had blown wide open, and below decks now shone as bright as though the noon day sun had taken up residence. "Bloody hell, now what?" Gavin whispered.

Gavin looked up in time to see Estie's glassy eyes stare wildly into his as she was borne onto the deck from below, he could almost smell her terror. Her captor was a rather ordinary, albeit haggard, looking fellow who was sweating profusely. The Captain thought of nothing more than an accountant or legal clerk out for an evening jog with a terrified, gagged woman over one shoulder. Before Gwyn could fly to his hand the fellow cast something at the mast and the pair was gone over the side with amazing speed and skill. Gavin watched the pair disappear into the moonlit night, not so much flying as skimming across the tops of the waves toward the quay and thus the town.

"Smarmy bastard!" he yelled at the fading figure. Gavin couldn't quite see what lay at the base of the mast, the glow from below decks was still too intense and his eyes were still adjusting. Just as he headed toward it he was interrupted again.

"My Lady!"

Mai's exclamation was doubly surprising in that it did not contain any epithet. Gavin whipped around to see Virginia lying on the deck, apparently stricken down somehow. The little rat woman was quickly kneeling by the vampiress's side, mumbling curse after curse to make up for the earlier

omission. Joining her, the Captain asked, "What in bloody hell happened? There's not a woggy in sight, just that little fellow slipping off."

"Bleedin' light is what," Mai answered, "It be brighter than the blazin' sun, struck her down in mid flight."

"Right," Gavin replied, looking toward where the light was coming from below deck. "There'll be no getting her below to her bloody box. Get a tarpaulin from the spares locker, we'll wrap 'er in it and put her inside the ship's boat. That should keep 'er from burning any more." Seeing that Mai was still kneeling, upset and concerned, he added, "Move yer arse, girl, that's an order!"

Stunned, Mai quickly stood and answered, "Aye, Cap'n." While she ran off to fetch the tarp, Gavin picked up the stricken vampiress and carried her out of the light, shielding her as best as he could. She was surprisingly light, and her dry skin crinkled softly like over starched linen in his arms as he went. Sara was nowhere on deck, and was probably seeing what was happening below. By the time he got Virginia to the boat Mai was back with a broad length of the heavy oiled canvas that would block out almost any light. Together the pair wrapped the vampiress in it. Just before her face was covered her eyes snapped open, they were wild with the delirium of vampiric hunger. Virginia lunged forward, latching her fangs into Gavin's exposed forearm.

"Bastards from hell," he exclaimed, "stop her!" He and Mai pried her from his arm, but not before she'd consumed a fair amount of plasma from his veins. Wrapping his arm to stop the bleeding, the Captain said, "Mai, turn her on her side. Quick!" Just as she did the vampiress was racked with a violent retching, expelling the rejected blood onto the deck. Once she was finished the pair completed her wrapping, making sure no light could reach her immobile form, and placed her gently into the swaying ship's boat. Mai turned to Gavin, brow wrinkled and eyebrow raised. "She'll be out of the fight till dusk tomorrow for sure now," he explained. She continued to look at him. "Allergies," he added as an afterthought, "bad allergic reaction is all."

"Right then," the rat woman said disbelievingly, "explanation pending. Let's go see what the bloody hell is going on downstairs."

"First lets have a look see at what that bastard son of malice and pond scum threw on deck," Gavin replied heading for the main mast. What he found was a machine printed note pinned like an old cliché to the wooden fibers of the main mast by an ivory hilted stiletto. He pried the dagger loose and opened the note.

Before he could read the blocky type Sara's voice sounded over his shoulder, "Gavin, if you wish for Mrs. Treport to remained unharmed, then you and the Vampiress shall immediately and without delay, go to the offices of one Dr. Abraham Morgan, New Castle, White Chapel Road. Once there you shall enter by the rear most door and proceed down the stairs until you reach the low parlor. It is there you shall receive further instructions on the tasks the two of you are to perform. If anyone else accompanies you, or if your magician attempts to assist you from afar in any way, then a most unfortunate turn of events shall befall Mrs. Treport."

"I could read it m'self, woman," the Captain complained to the specter. "Now we got a right pickle, as we have no vampiress to accompany me."

"I could pass for Virginia," Mai chimed in, "bloody well done it before. Put me in one of those flamin' dresses of 'ers and a silly hat...."

"Aye," Gavin answered, "but you'll 'ave to stand tiptoe in lifts, your a foot shy."

"It's the foot I'll be puttin' in yer arse, Captain. I can do it, nobody looks that close except for our eyes, and she wears those colored specs." Her eyes met Gavin's and she added, "Swive me for a fishwife if it doesn't work."

With a more than dubious look he answered, "Make it so." The little rat woman scurried off like a, well, rat to get the needed props for the ruse.

"Captain," Sara said, "do you think it wise to try a deception? What if he sees through it?"

"What other chance does Estie have?" Gavin looked to the launch where the stricken night child lay hidden, "If you haven't noticed we're fresh out of able vampiresses."

The bright glow from below deck subsided almost as quickly as it appeared and John stepped on deck. He was breathing heavily, his disheveled clothes were torn in several places and his right arm was coated in some sort of ickish goo. "Yer lookin' like that is never a good sign, John," Gavin offered. "Any idea what these eel spawn are up to?"

John didn't respond for just a moment, instead he simply stood there with his chest heaving. "The doctor is trying to get you to a battlefield of his selecting, so he can slay both you and the Lady Virginia. He is using Mrs. Treport as bait for this and nothing more. If you were a more ruthless individual, then the plan would not work. As you are not, then you shall go with Mai taking the Lady's place. I would have wished things were different, but I could not let his gateway stand. That Mrs. Treport's abductor would open a doorway to such a place..." The thaumatology professor shuddered. "I have seen a little of what is planned for you and Miss Mai, only that the way is heavily booby trapped."

Gavin nodded solemnly and the two men faced each other, each with their on silent terrible burden, "I shall heal the vampiress while you are gone, but I request leave to go after the other magi once the crew returns. He is practicing without a license."

"I'm sure there's an irony in that charge somewheres, John," the Captain replied, "but in my present state I canna find it. Odin's arse but I'm tired, no good way to face another fight." Mai strode on deck, obviously uncomfortable in the vampiress's heels and using her natural grace and balance to compensate. "Ah, there's our Lady Virginia now. Care to take some air, my dear?"

"Ballocks," she grumbled, "let's get this over with." She selected several sharp-and-pointies in addition to her twin qi jian while Gavin added a brace of crossbows to his own blade. Together they lowered the small launch, a rowboat, and clamored aboard.

Gavin took oar, and began singing as they slipped into the night, "In Amsterdam there lived a lass, take heed to what I say...."

8-Rouges in the Parlor

The trip from the 'Seven Fingers' to the docks was brief and uneventful save Mai's muttered curses and Gavin's off key singing that he used to keep the oars in rhythm. As they tied up to the quay the pair noticed the Port Authority Constables cleaning up after what appeared to be either a pitched battle or a really good party. The Captain judged by the amount of blood, the corpses, and the wounded that it was the former. The half sunken launch attested to the fierceness of the fighting, but Gavin was at a loss to figure out how the line of seated, mostly wounded French militia men in hand irons fit in with either scenario. It mattered little though, they were on a mission. The heavily armed pair drew suspicious looks, but little else, from the already overworked constables as they made their way into the city proper.

Once free of the prying eyes on the dock the pair of rogues, sea captain and faux vampiress, found a dark, quiet alley and took stock of themselves. Getting their bearings, they began the long walk to White Chapel Road.

"We'll be bloody tired when we get there, what with all this flamin' hardware to carry," Mai observed.

"Try gettin' on an omnibus wi' it!" Gavin retorted with a grim chuckle. "They could line us up next to those Frenchmen on the quay." The pair passed through the now silent warehouse district, the equally quiet retail district, the rows of brightly colored boxlike houses of the blue collar workers with gaslight shining from their windows, and finally into the New Castle part of town. It was here that the well to do merchants and professionals dwelt.

They arrived at the Doctor's house; a large, rambling whitewashed affair on a large plot of ground surrounded by a picket fence. Electric light could be seen glowing brightly from several of the windows, washing out across a broad sward of turf. Electric light this far from the city center would require a steam driven generator, a pricey affair even in this neighborhood. There were only a few concealing shrubbery spread sparsely about the grounds. It was a typical abode of a well to do surgeon or seasoned professional. Gavin took out the note and read by the bright moonlight. "Say's here enter by the rearmost door and down the stairs."

"Can't we just ring the flamin' bell and say 'here we are, kill us and set the wench free?'" Mai whispered.

"Where's the fun in that? Yer not afraid of dying tired, are you?" Gavin whispered back.

"Already bloody tired," she replied. They made there way to the back door, found it unlocked, and quietly opened it. A long unlit spiral staircase wound down into the bowels of the structure. It was an intricate ironwork affair, crafted to resemble waves crashing down in a spiral course and painted to match as well. Gavin could make out the sea green waves topped with foam even in the dim moonlight the doorway afforded. The stairs would have found a place of honor in any gallery or well-to-do arcade, but what they were doing hidden in a houses rear entry was a bit peculiar. "Ballocks," Mai whispered, "spiral stairs in heels."

"That be the least of our worries," Gavin replied softly. "Methinks this is an odd setting, too many pretties to hide the nasties. Not like his grounds, they were sparse and plain, there be a trap

hereabouts fer sure." He drew Gwynrheged, and the blade glowed softly, seeming to flicker slightly in rhythm to it's singing in Gavin's head. "Right, here goes naught," the Captain said as he headed down in the lead. He noticed that the wave tops even fluoresced slightly, adding a faint light to Gwyn's glow. The third step even sloped upwards to match the crashing wave pattern of the staircase. "Watch out for number three," he advised Mai, "turn your ankle fer sure in them fancy shoes."

Mai cursed ever so softly, stopped on the top step, and bent down to remove them. At that point Gavin stepped on number four and felt rather than heard a click. Nothing happened... yet. Being unsure which way to jump off of the step, for surely he had tripped a latch somewhere, he jumped back to the slanted third step. A foot long serrated blade snapped out from the outside wall on the second stair, bare inches from Mai's hands, which were clawing at the offending footwear on the top step, and Gavin's posterior on the third. "Odin's hairy arse that's a nasty bit o' cutlery!" she exclaimed.

"Well," came the Captain's reply in a normal voice, "if 'e didn't know we was here 'e does now." He looked back at the blade. "Backwards is probably the next one, aye?"

"I'm thinkin' that biter were for me, Cap'n," Mai replied. "If I hadn't stopped to fix me shoe..."

"Aye," Gavin conceded as he put his boot against the flat of the blade and snapped it off an inch from the wall. The broken blade clattered down, glancing open ironwork of the staircase several times before striking bottom. "In case we actually survive and 'ave te' exit quick," he explained. Taking a deep breath he stepped back down to the fourth step.

Then the fifth.

And then the sixth.

"At this rate, Cap'n, we're more like ta' die from old age than any flamin' trap." Mai commented from three steps behind. Gavin grumbled under his breath and took two more steps before he felt another click. "Crikey, Gavin!" she complained.

"It clicked like the last one, shot o' rum says it's afore me this time. I'll jump back one." Gavin heard Mai stepping back one step, then he jumped backwards up the steps. Something splashed down right onto the step he had been standing on and an ominous hissing ensued. Several droplets splashed onto the Captain's hat, boots, and sea coat as well and began eating small holes into them. After a few moments the hissing stopped and Gavin put a finger through the largest hole in his hat. "I bloody liked that hat!"

"That's a shot o' your rum for me, ye bastard," Mai commented. Gavin put his hat back on, holes and all, and took the next few steps until another clicked. "It'll bloody well be backwards this time, so why don't we both step back one."

"Aye," Gavin acquiesced, and they stepped back simultaneously. Once he stepped off the three steps after the one that clicked flipped over to reveal beds of nails. "Interesting," he commented. "Follow me 'ere, fer sure if we gots this far we'd be lookin' fer a trap, right?"

"Aye," Mai replied.

"So why then a trey of steps? Mayhaps to get us te jump o'er 'em?"

"I've got this 'un, Cap'n, slide yer arse over," the wererat offered. Mai passed him, brushing on the tight staircase. With a gymnast's grace she mounted the bannister and slipped down past the nails. At the step after that she took one of her qi jian, still in its sheath, and poked the suspect step. It fell away with a loud clatter, opening a chasm to the base of the stairs below. Gavin leaned forward and looked down into it.

"Well at least we know they end," he commented dryly.

"Aye," Mai replied dropping as lightly as a butterfly onto the step after the hole. The next thing out of her mouth was a gasp, followed by, "Shite!" and then a loud clang.

Mai was hanging by one hand, grasping her long Chinese sword still in its sheath, in the hole where the second trailing step had been. Fortunately the qi jian was longer than the stairs were wide, strong enough to hold the small rat-woman, and still sheathed. "I'll be takin' that shot o' rum back," Gavin said as he leaned over a bit further.

About that time, from the steps below, came the roar of an open flame. Mai screamed, then yelled, "Get me up ye' smarmy bastard!" Gavin braced himself on the sculptured banister, the carved waves cutting into his hands slightly, and inched his way down past both the three steps of nails and the two missing ones. Mai screamed again, and hot air rushed up through the openings and around the ironwork, heating them and causing them to burn into the Captain's palms.

"Tis roastin' me like a bloody chestnut, Cap'n!" Mai screamed.

"Let's 'ope tha bastard dunna favor threesomes," Gavin mumbled to himself as he dropped significantly less like a butterfly than Mai did onto the first available step after the missing pair. It held. Turning, he grasped both Mai's hand and her sword in his right hand and pulled them up in one motion, clutching her safely to his chest with his left. Her delicate face was dangerously close to his. Her eyes, deep and brown, met his. Her lips parted.

They stayed like that for three heartbeats before the flames roared again. "Right, break's over, back ta' work. No more lollygagging," Gavin said. They took the remaining stairs cautiously, but quickly, but found no more traps until the bottom. "Stay back, I'll take tha first go. Remember, three heartbeats and the flame'll reset."

"Not just a flamin', well, flame. Tis a sea serpent Cap'n," Mai advised. "Comes out o' a bleedin' hole on tha right side under tha stairs it does. Nasty bugger bloody aims at ye'."

Peering around the curve of the spiral didn't help, Gavin couldn't see it. Looking up, he placed himself right under the open hole the pair had almost fallen through. The thing, a brass sculpture of a medium sized serpent, slipped out of a now visible hole under the trailing steps of the spiral case. Before it could shoot its flame the Captain jumped backwards up the stairs. As soon as it stopped he was moving, easily passing the beast within three heartbeats. He now faced a large oaken door set with heavy iron braces and hinges and a great iron locking bar, the likes of which would grace a jailhouse or treasury. It was menacingly ajar. The flame behind him roared again, and Mai joined him less than three heartbeats later. Gavin counted them.

Stepping forward, Mai slightly behind him, Gavin cautiously pushed open the great door.

"Congratulations you've made to the parlor," a distinguished sounding voice greeted them. "Excuse me for not getting up, but it's been a long day and I'm tired." The voice had the polished air and pronunciation common amongst well-to-do gentlemen of the southern states of America. While the furnishings shown under the electric lights of the revealed room were expensive, there was little present. The lack of rhyme or reason to their placement said they were either haphazardly staged or the room was set up very recently.

Perhaps the first clue that something wasn't right was that the plush leather ottoman wasn't near the equally luxurious leather arm chair in which the doctor seemed to be reclining in; a copy of the local times open before him. Perhaps it was the fact that the on sofa was placed at an odd angle between the door in which the pair entered and another equally formidable looking door on the left wall, it's left end being far to close to the cigar case on the low end table between the doctor's chair and the wall. Perhaps it was the fact that there was something off by the doctor's voice as they entered, something not quite human about the ring of it. Maybe, just maybe, it was the door behind them forcibly slamming closed with the finality of a coffin lid. Whatever it was this room screamed trap just as loudly as had the sculpted staircase.

"Oh don't be shy, sit a spell," He sounded so kind, so neighborly, and that's when a crossbow bolt slammed into the wall about an inch away from Mai's head. It probably would have struck her, but apparently she heard the puff of steam as it released or the whistle of the quarrel's fletching as it sped towards her. Her second move was to kick Gavin's feet from under him just as the second bolt released, leaving the Captain's hat to be neatly pinned to the opposing wall by the second quarrel.

"That's two, ye bastard," Gavin complained. Mai was about to ask him two of what when the third quarrel struck the nearest wall. They waited there on the floor. Somewhere could be heard, very faintly just above their own heartbeats, the mechanical ticking of clockwork.

After several long seconds the ticking was joined by a click and whir, not unlike the mechanism that would signal the chiming of a large clock. At crossbow bolt shot down from the ceiling, slamming into the floor between Gavin's knees. "Murder holes!" he yelled and they jumped up in unison, Gavin to the end table and Mai to the sofa. The second bolt released, shooting from ceiling to floor and embedding in the rich hardwood. As the wererat landed on the sofa a wooden dart shot up from it, shredding her stiletto boot and leaving a long red gash in her shin. As if to add insult to injury, two silver inlaid wooden stakes of incredible artistry shot out of the opposing wall. One caught a glancing blow to the petite woman's ribcage. Perhaps because of her size it spun her widdershins out of the way of the second, which would have impaled her. "Bastards in bloody hell that hurts!" she cried, clutching her side where the silver had scorched her. She fell, tipping the sofa backwards.

At her cry, and oblivious to the surroundings, Gavin jumped down to help her. The third quarrel shot from the ceiling, embedding in the Captain's boot, foot, and floorboard in that order. "Shite-spawned bastard son of a toothless fishwife!" The Captain exclaimed. Drawing Gwynrheged, he neatly cut the fletchings from the bolt where they protruded from his boot and pulled his foot free. The enchanted blade had been singing a wild battle chant, but once drawn it literally screamed a mad skirl into his head the likes of which Gavin hadn't heard in ages. He used the magic Elvin blade as a crutch, bracing it against the floor as he offered Mai a hand up.

"He seems to do shite in threes," Mai advised, holding her injured side. As if on cue a click and whir sounded, launching a quarrel from one off the remaining walls into it's opposite. This time neither

of them jumped. Instead Gwyn, still in Gavin's hand, shot forth of it's own volition and struck the projectile down in mid flight.

"Well if I'd known ye wanted ta bloody help," Gavin stated, going to 'en pointe' position. The remaining two quarrels were struck down in equal fashion to the first, with Gwynrheged doing most of the work. The pair stood for several seconds afterwards, but the clockwork ticking had stopped.

"Too bad ye didn't draw the bleedin' blade earlier," Mai observed. She was wounded in her side with a horizontal silver burn that would take a while to heal. Her shin, not being wounded with silver, was already healed over. Her boot, however, was ruined. "Can I take tha bloody footwear off now?" she asked as she removed it.

"Aye. Sorry, I dinna know she could bloody do that," Gavin replied. He was obviously limping, but chose to leave his blood soaked boot on for the time being. Instead he limped over and pulled his hat from where it was pinned to the wall. "I bloody liked tha' hat," he complained. The Captain looked over at what was obviously a mannequin seated in the good doctor's chair behind it's newspaper, it's voice a gramophone recording. "No' even tha courtesy of a hominuculus," he said as he removed a crossbow from his brace. With a quick aim he placed a bolt right between the mannequin's painted eyes, splitting it's knotty pine skull. "Piece o' shite!" he exclaimed.

"No, Cap'n!" Mai yelled, finally drawing her attention from her footwear. For the second time this evening she did not add an epithet, an ominous sign. As if agreeing, Gwyn began to scream in his head again.

The mannequin fell over, seemingly in slow motion. It's mechanically reproduced voice proclaimed, "That was one for the watchboy, two for your crew's work against the rats, and three for freeing the mermaids. I believe it's time for you to pay up, Captain." A dry chuckle ensued, almost but not quite disguising the ominous hiss of gas venting into the room.

"Bloody methane, Cap'n, by tha' smell o' it," Mai offered.

"Right then," he answered with a cough, "Afore or astern, which door?"

"I'm no bleedin' quitter," Mai said approaching the nether door. Drawing her twin qi jian she began hacking at the solid oak around the lock. Gavin joined her, swinging Gwyn against the iron hinges, but his strength was waning. Finally he slapped Mai on her backside with the flat of his blade. "Here, wha's that bleedin' for?" she complained around a cough.

With a final gasp he said, "Hinges," and passed her the hilt. For one of the few times in her long history Gwynrheged found herself in the hand of someone not her partner. She drew on the wererats strength, twisting in Mai's hand and guiding it to slice the hinges of the door. The iron fell before the mithrel of the Elvish blade wielded with the strength of a werecreature. Wrenching the door free, Mai dropped it and dragged Gavin into the fresh air of the next room.

And that's when a swinging blade past right before her nose.

Under actual scientific measurements it was 11 millimeters away, but still nobody likes a doubled headed North-England Cutter, it's double heads easily capable of taking out a foot of hickory a blow, passing right before your face. The ax bladed pendulum swung on an oaken haft easily a span

thick. The electric lights of the room came up, revealing four exquisitely rendered marble columns, statues of nude women. Each caryatid had what looked like a cigarette holder in its mouth. All four women faced the intruders, as if the rogues had just disturbed a communal bath. As the sound of a Chopin nocturne drifted softly from some far off room each statue sent an iron tipped dart hurtling the pair's way. Mai ducked, allowing the flechettes to pass over her head. Gavin was already lying on the floor unconscious, oblivious to their passage, and wouldn't be getting any more helpful. To add insult to injury the air was no clearer, methane still hissed into the chamber.

"Bastard does shite in threes, for sure there's one more room," Mai commented. The Captain could not hear her though; for though his body lie at her feet, Gavin's soul was gone.

~

"Ivy twine unto thyss flesh,
as the mighty oak hath grown,
sinew meld with yew so fresh,
laurel grafte unto thyss bone."

Gavin sat up. He was in a meadow of swaying grass speckled with the riotous colors of wildflowers. Carried softly on the warm breeze were the calls of grouse and quail. The skylad woman, who moments before had been chanting whilst circling him deosil (odd that the term clockwise never occurred to him) sat down beside his reclining form. Her skin was the color of willow fronds, her lips and aureolae the deepest shade found on the ivy leaf. The hair that danced about her face on the wind flowed as would Spanish moss. She smiled at him through the concern that played across her seafoam colored eyes.

"Where am I?" Gavin asked.

"Thou hast found thy way unto the Summerlands, Knight," the Green Lady answered.

"I should not be here," he answered, "my final resting should be everlasting. I was a Christian knight."

"And still thou art, Knight, for thou art not yet dead." Try as he might, Gavin could not remember the situation that placed him here. As a matter of fact, he could recall almost nothing of his life save his last protest. The truth of the statement was evident to him, but the circumstances and memories were beyond his grasp. He knew this Lady as an ally though, every curve of her supple flesh seemed familiar to him. Little else about her came to mind; not a single memory, not even her name. Not even his own name came to his lips.

"Who am I?"

"Thou art who thou art, my love," came her answer. "As for a name, thou hast had many. Monikers are fleeting things, without form or substance, use whither thou wilt."

Unsatisfied with the answer, and mule-headed stubborn, Gavin resolutely plodded on, "Why then am I here?"

Her laughter sprinkled across him like spring rain, "Why, my love, thou hast drawn upon our alliance and come forth to petition our assistance. And so mote it be, dearest Knight." With that she began to chant:

"Harken winsome summers breeze,
bow the grass and sway the trees.
Blow ye forthe from opened doors,
cleanse the foulest mortal spoors."

~

The fresh air tickled Mai's little rodentine nose. It was unusually warm and tainted with the scents of sun baked loam, meadow grasses and wildflowers. She couldn't place where the welcome breeze was coming from, but it quite neatly chased away the foul methane that Gavin had succumbed to. The Captain coughed loudly and tried to sit up. She shoved him back down. "Keep down ya daft bastard, there be darts and blades flying. Have a nice bloody nap then?"

As if in answer his lips parted, but the voice that drifted forth was not Gavin's. The voice was ethereal, sweetly feminine, and at the same time commanding and resolute:

"Earthen dark with rotting loam
roots of oak trees find their home.
Tenacious oak I call to thee,
lend thy strength. So Mote It Be!"

Gavin coughed again, his eyes opened in time to see the mighty haft of the double bladed pendulum twist as if in agony. The heavy blade was sent into the nearest caryatid, shattering the delicate marble of her flesh and exposing the mechanism that was firing the darts. Steam hissed from the broken tubing as the contraption died. On the return stroke the blade struck the base of the opposing statue, listing it hard over and fouling it's aim. Mai slapped Gavin's face. Hard. "Awake, oh stupid bastard, awake." The Captain replied with another cough followed by a groan. "We've got our bloody mulligan, Cap'n, move yer arse or I'll leave it."

Gavin sat up. "I'm here, what bloody happened?"

"Lots o' weird shite's all. You slept through it, ye lazy arse." Mai replied. "We gots us a pathway betwixt the bloody flechettes now, some o' the room's not being covered, but we got's ta move or we'll be steamed like bleedin' stone crabs." She pulled him to his feet, placed Gwyn in his sword hand, and pushed him towards the nether door. "One more bloody room," the wererat mumbled. Dodging darts, the pair scurried to the ominously ajar nether door to the gentle sounds of Chopin.

"One more bloody room," Gavin echoed through his methane raw throat.

Temperature transfer works both ways. Given the nature of this rule, or rather it's opposite, Soon Mai knew that the room they were about to enter was incredibly cold the moment she made contact with the door. The door pliantly swung open at the barest hint of contact, and the gust of frigid air that smacked into the pair felt as though it came straight from the plains of Norse hell. The room was brightly lit, disorienting them. Not only did the new room hold an incredible number of electric

lights, but the light was being reflected off thin sheets of ice that coated floor, walls, and ceiling. The illumination clung to, and highlighted, a grotesque obscenity.

The room was a vast freezing unit like in a meat packing plant. Long meat hooks hung down from metal rafters, but the carcasses that hung from those hooks were human, one and all. Some were misshapen husks of their prior selves, skin, muscle, limbs, and organs removed with all the care and precision of a surgeon. Others were relatively intact, save a bit of skin missing here, or a limb missing there. Some of the bodies were of the old, some of people that were in their prime, and one about halfway down was a child barely no more than twelve. If this horrid scene was not enough, each nude corpse, from one end of the room to the other, sported a single letter carved into its stomach. At first the significance of these letters was lost on the pair of rogues. As it dawned on them Mai stated, “Blimey, Cap'n!”

Perhaps it was his survival through some of the worst wars in Europe’s dark ages, but the scene only caused Gavin to set his jaw and state flatly, “Some men just need killing is all.” On the right row of cadavers “Gavin” was spelled out four times complete, and one partial, while on the opposing side “Virginia” was spelled out three times. Of course, this fact was only a moment in coming, and was followed by the realization that three of the corpses were familiar to Gavin.

Two of them Gavin had only recently met, the watchboy's mother and her landlord both hung from the steel hooks. Although both were missing parts, only the landlord looked as if he had been tortured first. His legs and left arm were gone, and his right arm was removed up to the elbow with the protruding bone intentionally sharpened to a knife point. The boy's mother did not seem to have died violently, perhaps from poison or overdose, and her body was relatively intact.

The third cadaver, however, Gavin knew quite well. Through all of the marks that the intervening years had left he knew every curve, every feature, and every dimple of her form. Except for the surgical gash across her abdomen her body was intact. Even after two score of years, and in death, the Captain recognized the hedge witch Naomi, his last real love.

As Gavin moved toward Naomi's corpse the sound of mechanisms came from the ceiling and the bodies on the moving hooks came towards them menacingly. This of course wasn't any true concern, until an electric current traveled down the hooks causing the corpses to jerk aggressively. These convolutions transformed lifeless bodies into instruments that could maim most effectively. Mai drew her qi jian in anticipation until Gavin said, “You'll electrocute yerself as well as the corpses with them metal blades.” With that the Captain drew another crossbow and placed a bolt into the chain driving the hooks on the ceiling. Sparks rained down on the pair, as the silver plated quarrel shorted the high voltage that animated the dead to the ceiling plate. The mechanism groaned, the lights flickered and then went dark as somewhere in the building a loud clank and then bang sounded. The room was plunged into silent darkness, as still as the dead that surrounded them. The only light was the faint glow of the now drawn Gwynrheged. “Bollocks,” Mai exclaimed, “I'll see if I can find some bloody light.” With that, using her ratlike senses, she scurried back into the previous chamber.

Gavin reviewed the row of once again immobile cadavers in the sword's eerie glow, quickly finding that of Naomi. Her smooth brown skin had wrinkled, her soft, thick, brown curls had become thin and grey. He lovingly stroked her dead, frozen cheek with the back of his hand. “Still would I have stayed with thee,” he misquoted, “With worms that are thy chambermaids.”

“Not your choice, sailor,” the corpse exclaimed opening its pale rheumy eyes that had once been warm and brown. Gavin fell backwards, Gwyn clattering onto the icy metal floor.

“Shite!” he exclaimed. The cadaver gazed at him with, well, a dead stare and smiled with long uneven teeth. Teeth that Gavin remembered as strong, even, and bright white.

Naomi's nude corpse asked, “So, are you going to cut me down or mollygawk?” The sound of the familiar voice moved the stunned Captain into action. Retrieving Gwyn, he neatly sliced the cruel steel hook that passed through the cadaver's shoulder and caught it as it fell to the floor. It stood on its own.

“You can let me go,” it stated, “I can stand on my own. I always could.” Gavin released the gruesome form with a little disgust, then doffed his coat. Although freezing himself, and knowing she was quite dead, he offered it to her. “Always the gentleman,” Naomi's cadaver said smiling again with her aged teeth, “not for myself, but for you will I accept it.”

“How?” Gavin asked once she was wearing his sea coat.

“With so much unreconciled death in one spot the 'veil between' has thinned here,” the corpse explained. “It's easier to affect the surrounding area of your world from the other side, so it was a simple matter for your lady friend to push me through from the Summerlands. For a common sailor you sure have some interesting connections.”

“I'm sorry I didn't get back,” Gavin started to say. The cadaver raised a chilled finger to his lips, shushing him.

“I'm the one who left. I'm the one who did not want to grow old and die around you. My choice, not yours.” She smiled with wrinkled lips and added, “It was not you who used me. No regrets, it was a good life.”

Mai came into the freezer with two expensive, delicately turned table legs from the other room. They burned merrily, giving the area a cheery glow. “Bloody sea serpent's still working, singed me arse lighting these. Nice o' tha bastard to give us torches, what?” Upon seeing the Captain in his shirtsleeves conversing with a corpse wearing his coat she added, “Right then, weird shite's still on deck. Back t' bloody work, Cap'n? Yer cadaver friend comin' along then?”

From the walls came an ominous hissing, a sound they had heard before. Mai sniffed, detecting the scent long before Gavin could. “Bloody hell, gas again,” she complained. “Think tha bastard'd sing another tune, wouldn't ye?” Muted cursing could be heard from the next room. It seemed to be mainly complaints aimed at the inconsistency of generated power. Finally a lit match was thrown into the freezer from the opposite door, and a blast of flame ensued from one of the gas jets. Once lit, several of the jets began to sequence towards them, lighting each other. The scent of burning human flesh added itself to the horrors of this death chamber.

“Put the bloody torches out!” Gavin yelled. Of course Mai was already doing so, smothering them in the dead flesh of the hanging cadavers.

“Sorry 'bout yer friends, mum,” she offered to Naomi's corpse, the sincerity of her words punctuated by the lack of cursing.

“The dead do not care,” the dead woman replied simply.

“That they don't,” Gavin said, experiencing epiphany. “Give us a hand, Mai.” With that the Captain cut several of the bodies down, severing the steel hooks as he had with Naomi's body. Once on the floor, they began blocking the gas jets with the corpses. One at a time, whilst shielding themselves behind cadavers, the pair walked down the length of the freezer blocking off each flaming jet with one of the pliant dead. Naomi's corpse strolled behind them as casually as she would have in life across a summer meadow. Apparently, just as she stated, the dead do not care.

Gavin pushed open the door at the nether end of the freezer with trepidation, expecting a trap. The room on the other side was pitch black. “I got this one, Cap'n,” Mai advised fanning one of the smoldering table legs to life by spinning it. Once lit she ignited the second one, then tossed the first through the open door into the darkened room.

There are some sounds that bring on pleasant feelings, the warm crackle of a fireplace on a winters night, the sound of laughing children at play, or perhaps a Chopin nocturne played quietly in a private venue. The hiss of a steam plant starting up accompanied by the growing whine of several powerful turbines coming up to speed was not one of these. The light of the thrown torch lying on the floor of the next room shimmered off of polished steel, the flickering light dancing and playing merrily on the walls and ceiling, giving light but not much clear vision of whatever cruel test was yet to come. “Bloody well hope ye dinna piss it off,” Gavin muttered, “what e're it be.”

“Twas supposed ta be bloody three. Bastard does everything in threes,” Mai complained.

“Nae, remember the stairs, three on the steps and one coup-de-grace.” Gavin advised.

Naomi's corpse, forgotten for the moment, began muttering and dancing in a clockwise circle. She had doffed the Captain's sea coat which lay discarded on the floor, and the desiccated, nude corpse of the old woman moved through steps she had learned in life. As her dancing intensified she began to sing clear and sharply,”

Torches fyre burning bright,
push away the deepest night,
sweep out shadows as a broom,
show us clear this darkened room.”

The feeble torchlight flared, lighting the entire room. The trio gazed on an incredible sight, for what guarded the next room resembled nothing less than a medieval knight on steroids. Gavin had seen it's like before when the Americans put down several disturbances against the British navy during the thirty seven months war between France and England. America had remained neutral, but the continued merchant activity between both nations was seen as mercantile opportunism on the part of the British and ‘Those Obnoxious Limies’ had started seizing cargo on American merchant vessels bound for France and conscripting crew members as well. The Americans had responded with extreme prejudice, revealing to the world the advanced state of their amphibious Marine units. What faced them in the next room was one of the suits that those Marines wore. If the spirit of Samson was taken out of the ground and infused with a steam-powered mechanized full body armored system, then it would look very much what was in the next room. A bell shaped helmet with a glass T-shaped visor made out of a chemically treated glass so thick that no were-creature could hope to breach it, fit snugly down into a

mechanical breather, which covered the wearer's nose and mouth. The power-armored suit was itself a layer of steam-hammered, hyper-compressed steel sandwiched between two thick layers of padded canvas. Large steel studs penetrated this outer layer forming a series of spider-webbed formations all along the outside, and adding to the nightmarish quality of the thing. Bundles of steel wiring that were attached to an iron frame just under the outer armor, served as additional muscles supported by an exoskeleton of sorts. The entire set up radically improved the wearers strength without compromising agility in any real significant way.

Fortunately, in that brief glimpse provided by the magically enhanced impromptu torch, Gavin noticed three things that could, under the circumstances, give him some hope in dealing with the deadly mechanism. Marines wore a lighter layer of scale mail to protect their body under the openings that the suit naturally had. The suit's occupant however, was not utilizing such an arrangement, which meant that there was a slight opening between the V-shaped gaps where rerebrace met pauldron. As a matter of fact there were small openings wherever plates met. The occupant was also not wearing the protective neck guard, the gorget, leaving that vital area rather vulnerable. Lastly, he wasn't carrying the round targe that most of the boarding parties used.

"Do be a good lass," Gavin whispered to Mai, "and lend me yer sai. I seem to have left me epee' in me other trousers and I've need of a can opener." The wererat passed him the thin, sharply pointed weapons with a raised eyebrow. It was scant hope, after all, as the suit multiplied the users strength on a magnitude of three and carried a repeating crossbow strapped on the left arm; the feeding mechanism set up to an ammo belt on the back. It's highly efficient motors along with an ingenious fueling network allowed the suit to run for hours. To add insult to injury, another steam-powered system could be heard powering up, one even louder than that of the sentry that waited for them.

"That's rather clever of you, using the old things legs like that for a torch." It was the voice of the doctor, the same calm, indolent, southern drawl that they had previously heard unmistakable despite the helmet and mask. He didn't move, despite the stillness that now settled over the darkened room. "I seem to recall something about the letter that was sent you... what was it now... Oh. Yes, you were supposed to come with the Lady Vampiress and your magi wasn't supposed to help you from a far."

"Aye," Gavin agreed, "the lady Virginia were indisposed and needed a stand-in, an' yer letter said nothing about me ex-lovers. John's nae involved in this." That's when the storm lights set in the ceiling lit up the room brilliantly, their glare painful to the eye, and what little hope the companions had took a nasty hit for sure. A strange metal frame stood above the doctor, about the size of a Conestoga. The whole thing was a strange series of pistons, chains, and pulleys, with several mechanisms that couldn't be immediately discerned underneath.

Contemplation on the purpose of this contraption was abruptly halted, as the doctor simply said, "Still, it will appear the maiden will meet a most untimely demise. Shall we begin." There was a audible hiss, followed by a series of thuds and something was shot off the frame with all the force and speed of a round launched from the 'Fingers' ballista. It missed Gavin and Mai, but thumped into the torso of the corpse of Naomi. A clank of metal snapping against metal was all the clue they had of what exactly struck the former hedge-witch, before she was born aloft, like a fish on the end of a hook and line.

"Please step into my parlor, said the spider to the fly." A chuckle followed by, "you'll find the accommodations a bit to your liking." Once Naomi was fastened tight against one side of the frame, strange metal bars snapping into place over face and limbs, that the contraption let lose with another

deadly missile, an iron ball connected to a chain, whose links were as thick as Gavin's hand. Mai was forced to somersault forward to keep from being turned into pancakes against the meat lockers wall, and was forced to leap hard again to keep from getting pulped by the back stroke. Profanity ensued long before the doctor launched a bolt her way that nearly took off her left ear.

The old cliché out of the frying pan and into the fire, wasn't exactly applicable here, more like out of the freezer and into the rock crusher. The issue at hand was to get into range with the doctor, survive his skill with the blade and exploit the armor's weaknesses to kill him, doing that at the same time as not being smashed to pieces, or riddled with crossbow bolts, while crossing a ballroom sized space was the difficult part. Gavin dove toward the mechanical monster, drawing his last crossbow and firing simultaneously. The bolt, aimed at the good doctor's exposed neck between breastplate and helm, was deflected in the melee' and instead struck one of the contraption's steam fittings. Scalding steam spewed from it, endangering everyone except the intended target; the doctor was safe in his suit. The Captain's dive, however, had placed him close to the doctor's ankle.

Before he could bring the suits heavy steel solleret, the 'boot', down on Gavin's head, the Captain slipped the borrowed sai between solleret and greave stabbing the doctors right ankle, and then under the poleyn's rondel doing the same at the knee. Avoiding the spewing steam, Gavin continued under the suit and stabbed once more, this time between the left rerebrace and vambrace at the elbow. The doctor, of course, was not standing idle. He spun around, now placing all of his attention on Gavin. Unable to bring the crossbow to bear in such tight quarter, he brought the suits massive gauntlet down on the floor where the Captain's head should have been, fracturing the expensive marble. But Gavin was still on the move, slipping around out of viewing angle of the things visor and noting that the suit was moving slower than it should due to loss of steam pressure.

The good Captain wasn't improvising, he had seen many a knight brought down by peasants in much the same way. In this instance there were no other peasants to challenge him with their own short pointed blades, but he also could not count on the 'knights' nobility to not strike an unarmed peasant dead. He slipped the sai between right vambrace and gauntlet just before the doctor could back-hand him into the wall and crush his chest. Stab and dodge, just like any medieval commoner would. Now behind the Doctor, he jammed one of the sai into the feed belt of the suits crossbow, disabling it and bending the narrow blade in the process. With a loud 'spang' sound gears from the automatic feed shot out like quarrels themselves as the device overloaded. A steel cable caught Gavin just under the right eye, slicing his face.

Despite all his armament and martial art training, the Doctor was never raised as a fighter. He was, ultimately, a creature of universities, libraries, smoking lounges, and hospitals. The Captain, on the other hand, was raised on battlefields and had cut his teeth on drunken brawls and street fights. Moreover, he had endured some of the most violent times in European history and survived. Now with one hand free due to the sai's demise, Gavin drew Gwynrheged. He knew that the blade would become fouled in the layered armored plates, but not so the linkages and fittings. Striking, now from the front, he severed one of the steam lines near the thing's neck. Scalding steam spewed into the gap between breastplate and helmet where the gorget should have been.

The Doctor, who had endured the stabbing sai in silence, screamed this time. The glass visor steamed over from the inside, obscuring his vision. He tore at the clasps of the helmet, but Gavin had already bent them beyond function with the flat side of Gwynrheged. Unable to remove the helmet, the Doctor began using the suits incredible strength against itself as he struggled to get free. The Captain

looked around for his companions, noting a lot of movement from inside the freezer. Apparently retreat wouldn't be an option as the corpses there were being re-animated, probably as another trap.

Of the Asian wererat, there was no sign, but a door on the opposite side of the room stood ajar, indicating to Gavin where she no doubt had gone. The Captain quickly strode toward that portal as it was the only other door in the room. A glance towards the ceiling revealed the enormous wrecking ball hung barely moving. Standing upon one iron projecting beam before the steel cage that held Naomi was a spectral figure. The room's illumination played off the thing's silken top hat, which shimmered with the same oily ebony luster as his hair. It wore the fine, drab clothes of an archaic undertaker. Its midnight glove was outstretched in a beckoning gesture toward the undead corpse of Naomi. All this Gavin's mind processed in a glance, and he realized who the spectral being was. The raven wings, as long as the fellow was tall, were perfectly still behind him. The man turned round guiding Naomi down to the floor like an escort at Winter's Meet. He didn't speak, but simply moved back once feet met marble. His eyes were riveted upon the doctor, who had managed to pry the helmet free and was staring at them. The man that wasn't truly a man glanced at Gavin for just a moment, before extending a gloved hand towards the door. That was all the attention that Gavin wanted from Jack o' the Hallows.

Naomi's corpse placed an index finger against Jack's lips and time seemed to slow. Scurrying, if such as a rapidly thawing corpse could be said to, she hurried to Gavin's side. A thick slurry of melting entrails was oozing from the fresh damage to her body, several limbs had been broken and her face had been smashed with her left eye hanging loose. "Hush," she said with her words being mangled through her broken jaw, "there is no time. Several things I must impart to you, my love. The first and foremost is that the vampiress has been in your mind." Seeing Gavin's quizzical look she added, "You invited her!" Realization dawned as he remembered the night on the beach with Marie and he nodded so as not to interrupt. "That is when your lot changed, was it not? You are not her creature as she thinks you are. Your mother Myrgnn was half fey, but so was your father, Lot. It was not your mortal half the Lady acted on when She cast her spell and extended your existence, Gawayne Underhill, but the fey. You have been royally played, my love. Play back, make them rue the demon they have summoned just as the Doctor has."

"How do I nae know you're playing me?" the Captain finally asked, eyebrow raised.

"I choose not to, remember the choice you gave me so long ago? Long before I was Naomi? I will come back to you, as I have so many times. As only a mortal can." With that she hurried back to Jack o' the Hallow's side, dripping ooze and pieces of herself.

Gavin gave the decomposing corpse one last glance, whispered, "Ragnylle," and headed for the next room. Behind him the Doctor howled, a long anguishing, terrified sound, as the first thawing, charred corpse strode from the freezer to off its score. The Captain, of course, didn't see any more. He didn't want to, instead he charged through the open doorway to assist Mai in completing the night's rescue with the Doctor's screams of fear, and then agony, hounding his heels.

The Captain found himself on a catwalk passing directly through what appeared to be the working innards of an enormous pocket watch. The chamber he was in was easily as large as the previous one, but unlike the other chambers it was filled with exposed clockwork mechanisms. The device seemed to be powered, at least in part, by a huge coiled spring. There was a combination of cogs, pistons, levers, weights, and gears with movable pins to allow the device to be programmed. More advanced versions of this system powered the earliest analytical engines, and could carryout

complex calculations. The doctor's employment of this system was not by any means new, but the scale of the thing was truly novel.

Mai had clearly not been able to exploit the exposed mechanisms. She was too occupied with simply surviving. She was forced to dance a lethal dance involving every muscle in her body in perfect coordination and timing. Blades of every imaginable size and shape spun through the space. It was actually a wonder she had time to curse, but a stream of them flowed steadily if not so sweetly from her lips. The Captain watched the mechanisms for a moment which appeared to be driven off of a large Geneva escapement, that in itself being powered by a shaft; probably from a nearby coiled spring. A well placed quarrel would stop the clockwork cold by blocking the escapement pawl, unfortunately Gavin's last crossbow now lay a chamber behind him, and even if he could go back the memory of the doctors final screams kept him from wanting to. He had left only Gwyn, which wouldn't throw well at all, several daggers, a blackjack and brass knuckles, and the sai that Mai had loaned him. "Throw the bleeding sai!" Mai screamed amidst her other curses.

"I royally suck at this," Gavin retorted as he carefully aimed and then sent the pointed weapon at it's mark. He was a rogue, but a honest one, and true to his word the sai glanced off the Geneva and clattered into the large gears below that drove the swinging blades. He reached for his most balanced dagger, took careful aim again, but before he could release he was interrupted by a loud 'SPANG!' The swinging blades that Mai was 'dancing' with stopped so suddenly that she almost impaled herself on the closest one from her own momentum. A large tooth from one of the gears ricocheted around the room, and the shaft from the steam plant groaned.

At the other end of the room, past Mai, was a sheet of solid crystal, whose clear surface enabled a viewing of a most macabre spectacle. In the middle of that room set a heavily modified babbage terminus, with long pipes running from and to it, from various points in the room. Along the shelves Gavin saw other signs of the Doctor's gruesome handiwork, and just off to the left a pool containing some kind of preservation fluid. A long crank was lowering a steel surgical table into that liquid, with a woman attached to it. This pristine, perfect piece of crystal stopped the gear fragment by shattering into a million beautiful, razor sharp shards. Both pirates covered their heads and were rewarded with a myriad of tiny lacerations on every exposed piece of skin. "Bloody thanks fer that. Should ha' just let the bleeding things impale me then," Mai complained. As if in answer the shaft groaned again as the thick steel began to warp.

"Grouse later," Gavin replied, "when that bastard cuts loose we'll neither one be able ta move fast enough ta' get out o' her way. To the lass, an' quick." They crossed the room into the Doctor's 'office' and cut the heavy leather cuffs and straps holding the nude form of Estie to the table. As if to encourage them to haste another 'SPANG!' sounded from the gears and another tooth bounced around the room. The Captain threw her over his shoulders and they headed for the only available egress- a doorway to another spiral stair which was twin to the one they took down.

Mai went up first to trip any traps, but this time there were none. This, apparently, was the good doctors own passage into his man-made hell, and was safe to travel. The top of the staircase revealed a rather ordinary doctor's office of a well to do medical practice. Gone were the macabre trappings that were evident below, and everything was neat, organized, and sterile. The front door was locked, but they were inside, breaking out wouldn't be a problem. Mai looked out for any passers-by, but the predawn grayness revealed nobody. The two rogues slipped out with their burden. From deep below came a rumbling as the over-wound Geneva mechanism finally cut loose. The building, which was separate from the house by several hundred yards of pristine lawn, shook violently. The chambers they

had been in were under the lawn, hence the lack of large shrubs or trees. Gavin's musing was interrupted by the buckling sidewalk as the nearby section of lawn began to fold into itself, taking the smaller building with it. They ran.

Several blocks away they stopped. Gavin wrapped Estie in Mai's jacket as his own sea coat now lay amidst the corpses under the rubble of the doctor's lair. The woman stirred, and then awoke. Realizing that she was quite naked under the loaned jacket she asked, "Oh dear, what has happened?" The Captain's mind raced, assisted in no part at all by Mai's muffled 'uhhh'.

"It was the wine, my dear," he said remembering the bottle she had brought aboard, "apparently it was tainted in some way and caused you to hallucinate. When I returned after dealing with John's news you had gone for a swim back to the docks. Mistress Soon and myself rowed ashore and have been searching for you all night."

She looked around at the neighborhood. "I seem to have been going home," she said blankly. "My house, you see, is just down the next street." Suddenly realizing her predicament she added, "Oh, please do get me home before any of my neighbors see me like this. Mrs. Bumfistole would simply have a field day with gossiping about me being returned home naked by a pair of rogues."

They hurried Estie home to a house much like the good doctors, and she had them take her to the back entrance. "If there's a bloody spiral stair I'm bootin' her arse down it first," Mai muttered. Of course there wasn't, it was every bit as normal, sedate, and boring as it appeared.

Estie gave Gavin a quick buss on the cheek. "Sadly," she told him, "you've been every bit the gentleman I had expected you to be." She disappeared inside muttering about having to be at work in less than two hours.

Gavin and Mai stood on her rear porch for a moment looking at each other blankly. Finally Mai said, "That went bloody well."

"I believe she found me boring," Gavin said unbelievably. Both rogues laughed at that, locked arms, and strolled back toward the harbor and the Seven Fingers.

9-Trey of Cups

Gavin Draegun, Captain of the Seven Fingers, approached the address given to him by his client, passenger, and friend Virginia Matheson. It was her 'bon voyage' dinner, and he and his crew were invited to join her to celebrate her last night in town. The ship would be departing on the morning tide, as per the 'suggestion' of the British consulate following their inquisition into the previous nights escapades.

The days challenges bothered him much more than the previous nights adventure into Doctor Morgan's parlor from hell. The fears of random blades in the dark, acid, mechanical death traps, poisoned gas, flame throwers, armored juggernauts, and reanimated corpses paled when compared to an official tribunal inquisition. In truth he had fared much better than expected, after all the Fingers had been boarded by 'pirates' and defended. The fracas on the docks associated with the boarding had been blamed on the French who had opened fire first, and Jon d'Arcy was being sent home to Paris in disgrace. The incident in Doctor Morgan's wasn't even associated with the crew of the Fingers, yet. Perhaps it never would be, Gavin had proclaimed ignorance of it. He had explained that he and Soon Mai had returned to port searching for one Estie Treport who had left the Seven Fingers under the influence of a tainted wine. The fact that her domicile was close to that of the missing Doctor Abraham Morgan was simply a coincidence, as was the fact that both he and Soon Mai had been heavily armed when they arrived on the quay, as witnessed by the officers still working the earlier brawl. "After all," he had explained to them, "there had been several disturbances and a respectable Captain should be able to protect the ladies, his guests, and passengers, from brigands."

The outcome was that the Seven Fingers was absolved of any responsibility by the Dutch port authorities, however the British Admiralty, for whom they were a privateer, wasn't amused. It seemed like trouble was following the beleaguered vessel and their ship was requested to leave Port Crescent at their 'earliest opportunity'. Lord Admiral Bloody Bumfistle had most graciously determined this to be noon tomorrow, at high tide. The Seven Finger's Captain sighed.

Rumination finished, Gavin stopped before a heavy oaken door set into a plain brick wall. He could hear muffled music coming from inside, and he double checked the address he was given. The club, named the 'Trey of Cups' was one of Virginia's businesses. A painted wooden sign, adorned with the image from a tarot card with a waitress holding a tray with three cups, could be made out in the flickering gaslight. This was the place, and he opened the door letting music, laughter, and wonderful scents of food and drink spill into the street with the electric light. The maitre d', who had been about to say, "I'm sorry, the club is closed for a private party," instead smiled broadly and announced, "Ah, Captain Draegun, we've been expecting you." A spiced rum instantly appeared in Gavin's right hand almost as magically as an hors d'oeuvre appeared in his left, and he made his way past tables of Virginia's friends and associates to the table occupied by the crew of the Seven Fingers.

His first sight was that of Anabel Stark, crutch beside her and sporting a wooden peg where her left leg should be. She was quite drunk, or medicated, or more likely some combination of both. "Anabel," Gavin asked, "should you be out of the hospital so soon?"

"I sail with the Fingers on the tide, Cap'n," she announced, "I'm not bloody staying in this shithole for weeks with no ship. John and Phin both says they can help me bloody recover." Gavin's eyebrows went up, as did his estimate of his first mate. Phineas simply nodded in agreement, apparently not seeing the need to waste any extra words. She lowered her voice and her eyes at Gavin

and added with a glare, “And I’ll cut tha’ first bastard what calls me ‘Peg Leg Annie!’” All three were’s, Roger, Ulrich, and Mai, snickered at this.

Those three had, of course, healed quite quickly as were creatures do. Gavin still sported multiple scratches and cuts but Mai, who had sustained much the same, was fresh as a daisy. The band began another song, and Samuel Fitch stood up. “My turn,” he announced and made his way to the stage. Seating himself on the provided stool, Fitch began to sing in a crisp baritone,

“Our Cappy was in rare ol’ form on the day that we set sail,
two sheets to the wind an’ a list to port in the eye of a running gale,”

“He sings better than he cooks, aye Cap’n?” Wilkes offered.

“That ‘e does,” Gavin replied as Samuel continued to sing. “How’d it fare with the Merfolk then? Are we square with them?”

“We are clear with their house, Captain.” Ben Wilkes replied. “We done right by them sir, and they still feel obliged to us, though Phineas absolved them of it.” Wilkes lowered his voice and moved closer to his Captain, “They told us tha’ there’s a storm coming in fer us, they did, though how they know’s a guess.”

“Clear,” Ulrich said with laughter in his voice, “we’re more than clear, the water-born treated us like great heroes, even set us up with rooms upstairs und give us all a couple of pretties! Get this Captain!” He pulled a black pearl from his pouch as big as a dukaat was around.

Fitch, who had just finished his song and was joining them, glanced sourly at the inebriated Ulrich and shook his head. He then looked Gavin’s way, “They seem to think quite highly of you Cap’n, which is sayin’ a lot since they dinna care much fer us dirt-born. They was much surprised when we helped ‘em, they was.”

Since Fitch had finished his song a young woman who was tall, blond, and probably a werewolf, began singing,

“Oh, do you know a sailor,
goes by the name of Jack?
Tattoo on his forearm,
and a pigtail down his back.”

Gavin noticed her eyes were riveted on Ulrich. The German werewolf, who was on his third hurricane, noticed too. “Pardon me, Captain, I have a matter to attend to,” he said as he slipped off in the direction of the stage.

John leaned over to Gavin, “I’ll collect the lads and make sure they’re back t’ the ship afore noon. Most of ‘em’ll be deep into their cups afore long.”

“See that you do, Mister Merriwether,” The Captain replied. “The earlier the better, we still have a lot of loading to do before our welcome wears out. Mistress Stark is takin’ her out o’ port at high tide, around noon, and all needs t’ be ship shape afore we put out.” Gavin glanced Annie’s way, seeing

imaginary storm clouds brewing around her, "she's had a bad time o' it in port, she has. Worse than the rest o' us for sure."

The blonde woman was still singing,

"He took off with my wallet
and he didn't give it back,
but if you don't know any sailors
then **you don't know Jack!**"

The entire club joined in at 'you don't know Jack', laughing, and the woman had to wait for a moment to continue. Gavin didn't listen to the singing though, Virginia had appeared beside him like a puff of smoke. "I've decided," she said standing next to Soon Mai, "to 'gift' a friend tonight." She looked down at Mai and said, "Soon Mai, I'm signing your contract over to the Seven Fingers company."

Mai was stricken. Looking down quickly she said, "I have displeased you somehow, my Lady, and I am bloody sorry, I am." Gavin started to protest that he would be no part of it, as it smacked to him as slavery, but the vampiress simply held a finger to his lips. In response to Mai Virginia took her delicate chin in the other hand and lifted her face.

"You, dear Soon Mai, are the friend and *not* the gift," she explained. Realization dawned on Gavin's face.

"Now wait a bloody minute," he began but was distracted by the sudden scent of sun-warmed loam and a wildflower strewn meadow.

"Don't you want her, Gavin? She quite a capable young woman, as you well know." Virginia turned to Mai and added, "If you don't want to go just say the word, but I'm thinking you will. You have till we reach Grand Cayman to finally decide."

Gavin shook his head to dislodge the incongruous scent and asked Virginia, "Whatever possessed you to do that?"

"I have no clue," she offered demurely, "none what so ever. The thought crossed my mind and it seemed so perfectly right." Her eyes went slightly glassy as she smiled and added, "Do continue to enjoy yourselves." With that she drifted off as silently as she had appeared.

"Weird shite's bloody followed us home it has," Mai muttered. Looking at her new Captain she added, "Probably your fault, huggin' on t' that bleedin' corpse and all..." The band, unencumbered by a singer for the moment, broke into a reel and several couples took the floor. Gavin seized the moment, along with Mai's small hand, and dragged her into the fray.

~

Aboard the Seven Fingers,
Moored at the docks

One needs to ask, in Phillip K. Dick fashion, 'Do Mechanunculae Dream of Clockwork Sheep?'

The Seven Fingers rolled gently in the swells of the harbor as it rested in its berth. Soon it would cross the sandbar of Crescent Harbor under the skilled hand of Annabel Stark. In town, the crew caroused and said their final farewells to Crescent Town. Soon the Captain and Mai would nestle in each others arms, and the vampiress, Virginia Matheson, would retire to her traveling coffin. But now the Seven Fingers was alone with its own shiplike dreams, her rocking at berth moving the long idle but newly lubricated magnets inside Sonny Brassman's cranium back and forth. Magnetic fluxes played across the fine microscopic mesh of gemstones and metals that was the seat of the mechanunculus's consciousness, its thaumamechanical processing unit, for the first time in over half a century. Although completely unpowered, unable to move or even sense its surroundings, the device that called itself Sonny Brassman became aware inside its own mind. For the first time it 'dreamed'.

~

Moisture steamed off of Sonny's warm plating as he chugged along, the sack of Momma's required mushrooms bobbing happily in his grasp, through the misty morning air. It was 'that' morning, the morning of the last day he had seen Momma. On some level he knew she would not need the collected fungi when he arrived, that she would be near death when he got back to the cottage. Still he was designed to find joy in a properly completed task and sadness in failed tasks, and returning with the requisite quota of deathcaps was what was tasked to him. The path was familiar to him, he had trodden it a thousand times and knew every rut, rock, and root. The cottage was identical to what he remembered as well, though he knew it had been burned to the ground shortly after Momma's passing. He approached the door hesitantly though. He self-tasked now, he could choose to re-enter this world, Momma's world. His thaumamechanical processor struggled to integrate this current experience with his others, knowing that what he faced no longer existed. A memory then, perhaps, was somehow replaying, but he did not hesitate at Momma's door before. He had not been an independent device at this juncture, merely an extension of Her. This then must be an interactive replaying, and he would not have to face Momma's passing again unless he wished to. He wondered idly if he would carelessly leave the smoldering coal on her bed as he had last time. Perhaps she would even complete his final task this time so he could know all of what she expected of him.

Sonny opened the door. The single large room was just as he remembered. Lit primarily from the large fire in the hearth, everything was bathed in a warm red smoky glow. The ceiling was high, following the roof-line, and several loft spaces were tucked in under the eaves. The walls were lined with shelves of every manner, no two alike. Several assorted oil lamps were placed about the edges and struggled vainly to push back the gloom between them. The shelves were stacked in kind with all manner of magical paraphernalia, bottles, boxes, stuffed animals, grimoire, romance novels, and the like all jumbled together under an ample coating of dust and soot from the fire. The catalog for this insane menagerie resided solely in Momma's mind, and this represented only a smattering of her equipment. Sonny recalled her workshop held far more, but being her home the cottage only held what she was working on presently. Despite its size, the clutter and gloom made the cottage seem cramped.

Sonny turned to the bed before realizing that Momma was standing at her kettle in the fireplace, the one she used for potions, stirring frantically. This was not a memory of 'the day' then, for she should be on her death bed. "You're late," she admonished loudly. "Years late and not a word of you!" Sonny began to state that he had only left this morning, but then couldn't recall when he had left. The memory was unrecoverable, as if it had never been stored. He fell back into his self maintenance tasks and began to search for the source of the malfunction, for surely it must be a malfunction. Momma, as he

recalled, should be dying. “Look at yourself!” Momma screamed, waving her large wooden spoon in his direction, “What the hell is wrong with you now?”

Sonny looked down at himself, at the smooth, shiny skin of his exterior that he dutifully kept polished and oxide free. It was fine, no verdigris to be seen, and he looked again at Momma. “Where the fuck are your clothes!” she screamed. “You’ve been wandering the forest for goddess knows how many years now with no clothes. Anyone could have seen what you are!” Sonny recalled the tasks, ‘wear clothes’ and ‘blend in’. He had failed tasks, and lost memories. He was broken as surely if a linkage had failed or a steam line leaked. Momma tore the sack from his grasp and opened it. “Deathcaps? You were sent for willow bark! You’ve failed another task, Sonny,” she screamed at him. Sonny’s processor whirled in confusion at the depth of his malfunctioning. His ocular orifices when idle, opening to their fullest. His limbs too went idle, only his gyros and legs functioned to keep him upright.

“I am malfunctioning, Momma,” Sonny stated flatly. The old crone came to him, looking at him analytically and perhaps with a little warmth.

“Momma can fix this,” she said softly as she stroked his smooth carapace with one dry wrinkled palm. “Momma can fix her Sonny.” The witch returned to her kettle and lifted the huge steaming vessel with her scraggly arms. Sonny watched, doing some calculation as to the weight of it and Momma’s strength, and determined that seven of the old woman could barely lift the cauldron, not to mention that her frail arms could not withstand the heat of it. He must truly be malfunctioning, for he was perceiving what could not be as she lifted it over her head and poured the contents on him.

The mechanunculus looked down at himself and watched the shiny brass of his exterior, the skin he had cared for so well, mottle brown and green with corrosion. Momma cackled wildly as his limbs began to malform, bending into hideous shapes. The verdigris consumed his skin, covering him in a thick green fuzz and his gyros malfunctioned. Sonny began to stagger about wildly, limbs flailing as Momma yelled between her insane laughter, “The last words, Sonny, the ones that went unsaid through dying lips. Do you want them?”

Grasping on to this in his cascading failure Sonny replied, “Yes, Momma.”

“Task: Adapt, Record, Suppress unsolicited response and action.” the harridan screamed.

“Task: Adapt misunderstood, not accepted,” the mechanunculus responded, falling to his most basic self- his Primal Task.

“Override,” the witch responded, “Task: Adapt!”

“Task Accepted,” Sonny acquiesced, staggering drunkenly out the door. He did not understand what was expected of him, but Momma had used the liege-lord command to give him the task anyway. The probability of a successful completion, and thus his ‘pleasure’, was greatly reduced and Sonny anticipated yet another failure.

“Perform Task,” she yelled after the stricken mechanunculus as the device landed face down in the front yard.

The ground was cool against Sonny's exterior, and he lay there for several minutes while his gyros resynchronized and his processes reordered themselves. Finally he stood, or tried to, and found himself resting on both legs and clenched fists. Oddly he did not find this difficult. The ground was powdered rather thickly with a white dust which seemed to be moisture. Sonny processed this as 'snow', which he had never experienced before except in books. The landscape seemed to be that which he remembered as 'home', but winter had never come to that tropical land within his existence. He turned to the cottage, huffing and shuffling as he did so. The cottages location was marked by a border of blackened timbers protruding from the 'snow' like so many rows of rotting teeth. He had inadvertently burned it to the ground after all, his memory was correct. Gusting wind kicked up a sprinkling of flying snow as it ruffled the flowing green verdigris on his brass arms. Sonny looked down at the damage Momma has done to him and wondered if he could ever be repaired.

His arms had elongated, his legs had shortened, and his torso had thickened. He was covered in a fluffy layer of green copper oxide, verdigris. Correction, he was covered in green fur save his bald pate, sensory inputs, hands and feet. That which was not 'furred' was leather skinned and midnight black. His mandible contained long sharp tusks, his ocular inputs resembled large dark eyes like windows into midnight, and his auricular concentrators were apparently big pointed ears. Momma had for some reason transformed him into an apelike goblin. Sonny huffed as he scratched his head with one long fingered hand, picked idly at his posterior with the other, then shuffled off uphill breaking wind loudly. Somewhere he was sure he still perceived the witch cackling madly.

Sonny soon found himself traveling uphill with an easy shambling, rolling gait that ate up distance somewhat better than his usual mechanical stride. He wasn't sure where he needed to go, but being a goblin was not as difficult a task as he had anticipated. The trail he was on was familiar, it wound around the rise behind Momma's workshop and into the windward hills, ending at the ruins of an old Spanish fort. Trusting in his design, for surely if he was not fulfilling the task properly he would feel a foreboding dread as he always had, the gobli-mechanunculus marshaled onward through the surreal frozen landscape. He realized he was no longer moving through pristine snow, at some point a large group of creatures had passed along the path he was on. Although difficult, he began to pass the time by attempting to reduce the tracks to individuals and categorize them. He identified several small ponies, a barefoot, mishapen human print, the cloven hoof of a goat, and several others. What disturbed him was the large number of clear prints the he could not fit into any animal he knew of. Oh, there were several he could guess at. One appeared to be a big lizard walking on it's hind legs dragging a tail, or another could be a baby elephant, but most of the tracks were still unidentifiable. It was if a zoo full of creatures had escaped and stampeded along the trail at a leisurely pace. Disconcerted, Sonny decided to terminate the 'identify and categorize' task and just follow the trail.

Within a short time he had arrived at the trail's terminus. Instead of the ruined fort that he remembered however there was a ring of eleven evenly spaced stone pillars, with a larger plinth standing at their center. The circle was lit from somewhere by a violet glow that for some reason caused his ocular sensors to malfunction. He could not seem to focus them properly, and they whirred quietly trying to adjust until he decided to leave them slightly out of calibration. It was several seconds before he realized he was not alone. "Who you?" the 'other' demanded.

'Other' was correct, for though it's coloration and features were different it was a creature much like he himself had been transformed into. Like the goblin-Sonny this was also a 'hob', one of the low court faery commonly referred to as Unseelie Fae, a brutal and treacherous class of creature that delighted in mayhem. It too had a stocky torso that shambled along on knuckles and feet, was mostly covered in deep fur or dark leathery skin, had pointed motile ears, and had a gaze of midnight

blackness. The other hob's fur, though, was striped orange and glaring yellow and it had the face and beak of a bird instead of an ape. Suppressing his initial response of self preservation, Sonny followed the task issued him. He 'adapted'. "Sonny," he replied simply.

At least that was what he intended to say, what actually came out was, "Glargele!" Too late he realized that he should have perhaps practiced with his new vocal configuration prior to attempting communication.

This didn't seem to matter to the other hob though, for it responded, "Late Glargele, almost gate is closed! You last, hurry now." The being indicated the stone at the center of the circle with one hideously clawed digit. "Hurry now," it urged again and Sonny entered the circle with the other hob shambling along beside him and doing his best to 'adapt'. With the first step inside his gyros un-synced, as if they had come loose from their mountings and bounced about inside the gears of his clockwork mind. His arms flailed, a conditioned response to falling that he quickly terminated, holding still. His companion looked at him. If admiration could ever touch it's gruesome visage, it would have at this point. "Glargele done gate before," it stated, slapping Sonny's thickly furred back. Indicating itself with a different, but equally hideous digit than it used before the goblin added, "Smedley, gatekeeper. Maybe get drink later?"

Smedley took a second step and Sonny followed it's lead. His gyros re-synced immediately and together the pair of hobs stepped from the gate into a gloomy clearing. It was night, but somehow light enough to see. They were in a cool forest glade that Sonny had never been to, and it still appeared to be 'winter' although here there was no snow. An icy mist flowed along the ground at their ankles. the leaves and grass under their feet were brown, but far too damp to be crunchy. Instead the ground gave softly under their feet. The trees were bare of leaves and seemed to be frozen in the action of reaching menacingly for the pair of hobs. Far off was crowd noise and the glow of firelight against the low sky. Sonny deduced the correct path toward the commotion by the disturbed forest detrius and turned to his companion. Unable to respond to the gatekeeper's request for a shared beverage, Sonny merely offered what he hoped would pass as a smile. "Stuck up bitch," Smedley said. They proceeded along the path together in silence, Smedley's pass incomplete.

The commotion was centered around another circle of eleven stones, this one larger with a flat table like rock instead of a plinth in it's middle. Outside it was ringed with all manner of creatures, each one an unseelie of some sort or another jumbled together in a cacophony of noise and movement. Smedley wandered away, apparently trying to get a better look. The crowds attention was on the inside of the circle that each was trying to see into but none could enter. The standing stones of the circle each had a stool sized mushroom growing against it's inward edge, and most of the fungi had a hob of one sort or another sitting on it. Two toadstools were empty.

At the center, on top of the 'altar stone' lying prone and chained, was one of the most beautiful creatures Sonny had ever seen. She was perfectly formed. Her nude body a smooth alabaster that seemed to repel the filth that surrounded it and her long locks were a silver that seemed to glow on it's own in spite of the gloom. She was unconscious. Two of the goblins, apparently the empty stool's occupants, were arguing over the woman lying on the altar. Sonny was still recording everything of his experience as Momma had tasked. Although he could hear them, the words were in a tongue he did not know. They would face each other, yelling and growling angrily, and then each would face outward toward the crowd and bellow at them. The crowd would respond to them, and then shamble, stomp, or flutter about, reorganizing into different groups outside different standing stones. Once finished the

'loser' would take his stool and another of the eleven 'inner circle' hobs would stand and yell his challenge to the 'winner'.

This process went on quite a while. Each time the group around Sonny moved he moved along with them, trying to keep himself with the majority. Several times he caught sight of Smedley, but each time the other hob moved away. Sonny deduced that his attempt at goblin-smiling had really not gone well, or smiling was somehow insulting, and decided not to do it again. Instead he took advantage of the commotion and tried to practice his voice, but at best he could only manage grunting and whistling, neither of which helped. He decided to remain silent and just watch and listen.

Finally, after many more than eleven challenges and arguments, a quorum seemed to be reached. The final winner stood on the alter and delivered a lengthy speech or incantation while straddling the bound naked woman. The hob's oration wound it's way down, complete with dramatic gestures, completing in a final open handed gesture towards the sky. At this, crowd parted, and an unseelie shambled into the circle bearing a sheathed short sword. The sword was passed to the deliverer of the speech, who took it and with a wild flourish plunged it into the bound woman's chest.

The circle was consumed in a blinding flash, as if all of the light in the sacrificial being had been released at once. The hobs screamed, covering their eyes as the light struck them. Sonny, his oculars being far superior to the flesh and meat equipment of his companions, adjusted immediately. Determining this to be a suitable time to return, feeling that his task was nearing completion, the goblin-mechanunculus returned the same way he entered. Walking to the 'gate' he stepped into it and felt the same gyro desynchronization as before. From behind him he heard Smedley's voice screaming, "No, Glargele, gate not ready!" Too late to stop, the goblinized Sonny took his second step.

Sonny's second step landed him near the quay of Crescent City, right in front of what he remembered as Pheasant Pluckers. It was the pub where Unca Mick and Unca Pete taught him about life. It was a familiar place where he had spent many Saturday nights watching the other coffee pickers slowly get drunk while he learned to dance and socialize, and blend in, while awaiting their ride back to the plantation. The street in front of the pub was eerily devoid of people, even though it should not be. There was no sound at all, not even from his own mechanisms, and it seemed to be the same kind of 'night' as in the goblin grove with dim light coming from everywhere but nowhere in particular.

Pheasant Pluckers name was different, now a painted sign bearing the image of a tarot card and the words 'Trey of Cups' hung over the door. Sonny peered into the small window and noticed his own reflection. Gone was the image of a hobgoblin, now he was once again a well polished, although still unclothed, brass mechanunculus. He held a hand in front of his oculars to be sure and flexed it; somehow Momma had changed him back or her spell had worn off. He was not even certain why he had been a goblin in the first place, and tried to run a mnemonic routine to access his failure. Although he recalled failing tasks, and the cascading malfunction that precipitated his transformation, he could not deduce the why of it and so attributed it to Momma's increasing madness. Realizing that being unclothed was not as disconcerting as being a hob, and that he did not have enough information to make continued reflection productive, he set that task aside and surveyed his surroundings. Things had certainly changed.

Where Foreman Ass would park the steam wagon on Saturday nights, along side a row of similar steam or animal powered wagons, was a line of sleek carriages. The familiar gas streetlights still lined the quay, but further away, near the shops and businesses, the streets glowed with a bright glow that could only be electric light on a grand scale. Although he could perceive no people, things

would move while he wasn't looking at them, and he 'watched' between glances as one of the sleek carriages moved silently along the street devoid of both boiler or harnessed beast. Downhill, along the harbor where the warehouses, fish packing plants and such had been, seemed to be an even nicer row of public houses and shops than he had ever visited. Sonny turned instead towards the parts of town he remembered, the road into the hills where coffee beans grew, and the lonely forest road to an isolated cottage.

First the mechanunculus passed the book shop on the corner he so fondly remembered. The building was gone, replaced by a newer one he determined was a constabulary, although why the city would need so many constables eluded him. Sonny chugged through the neighborhoods he used to ride through in the steam wagon with other coffee pickers. Some of them were nicer than he remembered, some much worse, but all of them had changed. The moon had risen as he walked, but on second glance he realized it was an enormous tethered gas bag, a 'balloon', visible above the buildings. He sidetracked for a closer look at this newest marvel and realized it was truly of incredible size, had an internal structure, and although used the same principals was far more than a hot air balloon. It occurred to him that this was a ship that floated on air instead of water. Filing the 'air-ship' as 'information against future need' he continued along on his journey.

There was much more 'city' along the route than he remembered, but soon he was into the familiar pastures and fields where he picked coffee beans. Not as much had changed here, although there were newer buildings and a row of large wheeled mechanical devices that were lined up like ants along a row of coffee on one hillside. Sonny deduced that the pickers must be machines on this plantation, and recalled that he was the only machine that picked coffee; yet another anomaly between recollection and perception. With sudden sadness he realized that Mick and Pete would not be here, nor would Sheila. He had inadvertently tasked himself to find those familiar people, trusted people, and found the task impossible to complete and by design incomplete tasks brought him sadness. Even knowing this, he ventured further into the hills.

Time for the mechanuculus seemed to compress, and he quickly reached the last stretch of overgrown road leading to Momma's cottage although the journey should have taken far more than a day. The mounting discrepancies were concerning him less each time he identified them, and he had finally decided that if he were damaged there was little he could do about it at this point save accept this reality as the norm and hope a rational answer would be forthcoming. He had no idea what would face him at the cottage, in his past 'day' he had seen it a year old ruin as he remember it, resurrected with Momma still alive and well, and once again a ruin covered in incongruous snow. No matter where he roamed he always found his way here, as if he were bound to it by invisible cords. He crested the last rise before Momma's cottage, but it was not there.

He was faced instead with a dwindling road that passed where the cottage should have been and wound further into the hills following the trail to the old Spanish fort. The only indication that a building might have been there was a depression in the forest floor, the trees filling it were at least half a century old. Momma's well tended garden was marked by a few remaining stones, the bench he remembered sitting on was nowhere to be seen. He went further into the forest, to the workshop, and found a few rotting timbers, nothing more. The metals and magical paraphernalia, the sum of Ezmeralda Gonzales's life, were scavenged or scattered to the winds. He recalled what she had said before she transformed him, she told him to adapt, and he realized he could never return home, there was for him no such place now. The invisible cords that bound him were finally untied. Turning slowly, Sonny headed in a different direction when suddenly his gyros de-synchronized again and he felt himself

falling. The forest faded, and the mechanunculus felt himself being pulled in yet another direction entirely.

~

Hours later Gavin meandered down the empty quay, sheets to the wind and listing to port just like in Fitch's song. Mai leaned against him, making a valiant effort to steer him back to the Seven Fingers. "Get him back to the ship, Mai, there's a good lass, Mai, crew initiation, Mai," she grouched. "Bastards!" Pushing the Captain away from the water's edge she added encouragingly, "Come on, ya goofy bastard, drift the other bloody way. Whatever possessed ye to drink so bleedin' much anyway?" As if in response he staggered to one of the benches that lined the quay and sat down hard.

"Bloody awful day," he offered.

"We saved the bleedin' damsel, vanquished a hellspawned monster, and didn't fare too bloody bad with the fishy people or the Port Authority bastards ta boot. I'd say we broke fair even," Mai answered.

"I lost her again is all, too bloody late again. Third time. I bloody hate this stinkin' port, vowed never to return all them years ago. I know now what's gotten me, Naomi told me she did, bleedin' vampires an' their bleedin' games is what. Bend tha bow an' pull the latch and 'ol Gav flies true like a well balanced quarrel he does."

Understanding only a small part Mai offered, "The corpse woman? Meant somethin' to ye, did she?"

A tear formed on Gavin's cheek and he brushed it off with the back of a grimey hand. "Aye," he replied simply.

"In addition to being quite dead, she were too bloody old for you anyway," Mai said consolingly. Gavin laughed. He began laughing so hard that tears rolled down his face as he rolled back against the bench. Finally, his laughter subsided into deep breaths.

"Let's us get back ta' the ship," he said quietly, "I hear tha' Cap'ns a right bastard when yer late." They carried onward down the quay in silence, apparently enough words having been said.

10-Love Boat

“The sailor said Brandi, you're a fine girl
what a good wife you would be,
but my life, my love, and my lady
is the sea.”

Looking Glass- “Brandi”

~

There are some tasks one needs to perform that present very little difficulty, such as these are falling off of the proverbial log. They proceed in difficulty from breathing all the way up to facing down a company of animated corpses armed only with a butter knife. Somewhere within that range, but closer to the army of corpses bit, was removing the boots of a certain slightly uncooperative, somewhat inebriated sea captain. So it was that Mai found herself stating, for roughly the third time, “Hold ta the bunk ye stupid bastard or I'll drag yer arse on ta deck again.” They say 'third times a charm' and with Gavin holding on tho the bunk, (no matter how much it tried to spin away), and a mighty heave the little rat woman fell to the deck with the offending footwear in hand. “Tha's bloody one,” she stated resolutely, throwing the boot down with a thud.

Up on deck, standing her watch, Annabel Stark interrupted her morose rumination and smiled to herself. The Captain's cabin, of course, was directly below and she could hear every curse and thud coming from the wererat. It would usually have been her responsibility to get the Captain settled in, and she was probably thanking whichever of the scoundrels in her crew that convinced Mai it was a new crewmember initiation rite. Another round of muffled curses and thuds elicited a second wry grin from the First Mate. It truly was becoming a pleasant morning for her, a pleasant morning indeed.

Down below, having both boots now on the floor, Mai faced off with the gently swaying Captain. “Right,” she said, “if tha' bleedin' shirt gives me any trouble I'll bloody cut it off ye.” The wererat attacked, removing Gavin's shirt with much greater ease than the boots, but she found herself much closer to him. The musky sweet scent of him, enhanced by her preternatural sense of smell, hit her as she slid the sleeves down his arms. The move placed her in his lap, dreadfully close to his docile, gently swaying form, with one knee between his thighs. She suddenly found herself nuzzling against Gavin's hairy chest, rubbing the coarseness of it against her cheek and savoring the scent of clean musk, Caribbean spices, and sweet dark rum. Realizing what she was doing she pushed him back onto the bed, “I'll have none o' that, bloody Romeo, go on wi' ye.”

“What?” Gavin replied drunkenly, for truly he had done nothing but allow his shirt to be removed. She quickly undid the buttons of his trousers and pulled them, and the Captain, towards the edge of the bunk. “Whoa,” he exclaimed trying to grasp the elusive bunk, “whoa, whoa!” With a double thud Gavin hit the deck just as the clinging trousers slipped free and his butt, now only in smallclothes, rested on the coarse boards opposite Mai's. Standing, she threw the pants to the deck next to his boots and glared at him.

“Bleedin' fantastic, now I gots ta stand ye back up just ta push ye back down.”

“I can help,” the Captain slurred, trying to stand on rubbery legs and grasping the bedframe for support.

“Not bloody likely,” Mai replied as she slipped her slender, well muscled arms under his and heaved. It was quite an effort, but it got him to his feet. Gavin stood momentarily, allowing her to slip off his smallclothes, before falling back onto the bunk with a crash and dragging the hapless rat woman with him. For the second time in as many nights Mai found her delicate face dangerously close to his as she lay atop his now naked body. His eyes, clear and deep blue green, met hers. Her lips parted, and this time met his. For the first time since she got to his cabin she met no resistance from him. Pressing against him, she felt his interest, a burgeoning erection, against the black silk of her gi. She stood then, releasing the Captain.

“Me nightshirt,” he began to comment, but then noticed she was slipping out of her own clothes.

“Ta hell wi' it,” she said climbing back on top of him. Straddling his hips, she slowly slid down onto his erection, feeling it fill her. Gavin gasped. “I worked bloody hard fer this, ye owes me, ye bastard,” Mai softly whispered as she began rocking to the rhythmic sway of the deck.

Much later, as she drifted off to the same gentle rocking of the harbor swells, Soon Mai would recall the chorus of one of the songs they had sung earlier in the evening:

“So twist off the cap, Jack, and let's us have a swig.
Here's to the jolly boatman who's neither prude nor prig.
Here's to the jolly mermaid and to her progeny.
Here's to the fish-eyed baby, a'bouncing on me knee.”

Once asleep, warm and comfortable within her boatman's arms, she would dream about merfolk, sailors, and bouncing fish-eyed wharf rats with scaly tails on her knee.

~

Above, resolutely standing watch, First Mate Annie Stark heard the commotion quiet down below and figured the Captain was finally settled in and Mai was finding her way to her own cabin with the other passengers. Once again she was left to her solitary ruminations.

It was, in fact, barely daybreak and less than twenty four hours after one of the worst nights of Annabel Stark's young life. She was still tired, sore, and bandaged in several places, not to mention leaning heavily on her crutch in spite of Phineas and John's care. After the aidmen and surgeons had finished with her the inspectors had visited her hospital bed and taken their 'pound of flesh' as well. It was hours before their curiosity was satisfied. The constabulary had finally determined that she was simply a bystander on the docks trying to return to her ship and was forced to defend herself, and they were dreadfully sorry about the leg. She was released by them and the hospital with a fresh new length of hickory where her left leg had been. Annie had been blessed then with a few brief hours of sleep before the entire crew decided to say adieu to Port Crescent in style. Unfortunately she had pulled first watch and would be taking the Seven Fingers out of port on very little sleep.

Annie looked down from the poop deck at the scene on the dock with more than a little jealousy; Jon d'Arcy had been confined to the French embassy and she had been denied entry to see him. The gas lights below, along with the waning moon above, illuminated Ulrich and his lady friend saying goodbye. She was buxom, slightly taller than the crewman, and muscularly built; obviously the woman was another werewolf. They kissed deeply, then nuzzled each other's necks as their kind often

did, her leg raising to stroke the outside of his. They were almost copulating right there on the quay with their athletic bodies twining around each other.

The first mate sighed to herself, she could have said goodbye to Jon like that if she still had both legs. Jon d'Arcy, of course, had been blamed for the fiasco on the docks. He had been in charge of the French guard contingent who had opened fire, even though it was his lieutenant who had given the order. The lieutenant was now dead, killed in the resulting fray, his guardsmen were dead or wounded, and Jon was headed back to France in disgrace. Fortunately he had diplomatic immunity or he would be rotting in a Dutch prison right now. Also, fortunately, she had a good reason to be on the docks prior to the fighting or she would definitely be in a jail cell standing on her peg leg and watching the Fingers sail home without her.

Her attention was drawn back to the pair, who had finally unclined. They were exchanging gifts, Ulrich putting what looked to be a rather expensive gold chain adorned with an enormous black pearl around the she-wolf's smooth neck. She, in turn, tiptoed up and softly kissed his head then tied a incredibly bright green bandanna over it. Smiling broadly, she passed him a package of them in a myriad of excruciatingly bright colors and they both laughed. Obviously it was an inside joke. The lady and Ulrich broke then with a quick kiss and the sailor turned to the gangplank. "Ahoy, Fingers," he hailed. "Permission to come aboard, ma'am?"

"Come ahead, Mister Heisse," Annie returned in traditional fashion, "and welcome home, Ulrich." The sailor climbed the plank with the woman on the dock watching him. Reaching the top he turned and waved, the woman waved back and then slowly walked up the quay. Ulrich stayed there, watching her long after Annie lost sight of her. Unseen by Ulrich the first mate swayed her hips back and forth, perhaps wondering if she'd ever again have a walk that kept a man's attention like that. The crewman headed below deck and Anabel told him, "You have evening watch with the Cap'n, man, get some shut eye."

"Aye, ma'am, good to see you on board." Perhaps it was Ulrich's way of saying he was glad she had not remained in prison, or been killed. Anabel Stark simply nodded back. "Port Authority coppers are watching us from just outside of eyeshot, ma'am," he said lowly when he got closer. "Methinks they want to be sure we leave rather than make sure we're unmolested whilst here."

"Agreed," she answered. "We've quite worn out our welcome here I'm afraid." With that the man picked up his bundle and went below. The crew was all aboard, the vampiress and her company were stowed in their cabins, and it was time to be taking their leave of this rotten port. "Mister Pierce, look lively man," she called.

From the shadows dockside he answered, "Aye ma'am!"

"Cast us off, Roger, we're burnin' daylight." The plank was pushed aboard, the thick hawsers cast off as the steam capstans whirled, stowing them. The werewolf landed softly on the deck, having jumped across from the dock. Thick water churned as the steam powered screws dug in, pushing the ship toward open water. Annabel's hands danced across the controls, the steam plant disengaged, and one after the other the sails fluffed and unfurled. Once again the Seven Fingers danced to the rhythm of the trade winds under the midday sun.

Somewhere, beyond the sea,
somewhere, waiting for me,
my lover stands on golden sands,
and watches the ships that go sailing.
Bobby Darin-“Beyond the Sea”

~

Marie d'Aquitain looked over the rooftops of her neighbors, the darkened humps of the old houses lit faintly by the waning moon, towards the east. The early morning breeze ruffled her soft blond curls towards the harbor and teased the edges of her thin silk robe. It was pale blue, like the midday sky that she hadn't seen in over seven centuries. The breezes coolness caressed her smooth skin, but had little effect on the vampiress. Almost dawn; it would now be daylight in the Crescents. She could feel her scion, Virginia Matheson, dormant but growing closer as the Seven Fingers began the return trip. The trip that would put both her scion and her nemesis-ally-lover Gavin Draegun safely within her grasp again.

She could feel the silken mental thread that still tied the younger vampiress to her, even after the painful split and all the decades that separated them. The thread attached to the 'hook' she had placed in Gavin's mind during their lovemaking a week earlier had, however, somehow faded. She was fairly certain it was nothing, that he was into his cups again. He had possibly tried to look up old friends, or even Naomi, and found only loss. She had felt him in danger several times, most recently the previous night though she knew not what kind. She had felt his irritation the past day, following the danger, and his 'blurring' as he got pleasantly drunk afterwards. Knowing the man, Marie surmised the more probable cause was that he had partaken in the same full moon ruckus that had severed her from her other contacts over there. Afterwards he would have been questioned by one or more authorities, and then gone off to get drunk. Probably on rum.

Only a new love could permanently unhook the thread Marie had attached to the man, and he was safely aboard the Seven Fingers by now. No more loose ends there, the Sea Witch and her spawn were dead. Virginia was a friend to Gavin only, and he was far too experienced to fall for a mundane street tart while on shore leave. A wicked smile flashed across her lips and was gone. Besides, she thought, a common dollymop would be quite easy to rectify. No, her mental contact with the noble Captain, and her tenuous control, would return with his sobriety. Not so her other contacts in the Crescents.

Like a great spider the ancient vampiress felt the strands of her intelligence web for any vibration, but some of her web was damaged. With the return of her scion and her lover the mental web she had spun these last decades had gone silent in the Crescents. Two nights ago, the night that Gavin had last faced danger, she felt her renfield and servants die. The more mundane, but equally supernatural, communications via babbage terminus and telegraph had stopped as well. Marie would have to wait until her agent arrived on that island on board an airship tomorrow, until then she had a blind spot big enough to drive an army through. Now, however, dawn was upon her. The first rays of sunlight were touching the highest clouds. It was as close to daylight as she could ever be, and live. She slipped off the widow's walk and down into the hulking mass of her own abode at the center of her webs.

Unseen and unfelt by the ancient nightchild, several day's away by sailboat, and locked safely in a sarcophagus Virginia Matheson drifted in dormancy's semi-dream. Her lips parted in a smile.

Mai awoke. She thought first about slipping out of bed, but it was warm and comfortable, and somehow safer than anywhere else she could think of, especially the recent places she'd been to. Her second thought was waking Gavin for an encore, but he was sleeping very peacefully. That struck her as odd considering the difficulties he'd been through in port. Now however they were at sea, the Seven Fingers had reached her stride, and rolled through the water like a fine racehorse. The afternoon sun was shining through the port side porthole of the Captain's cabin, bathing the cramped quarters in warm brightness, and she was basking in post-coital bliss. The little rat woman decided instead to really look at her boatman first.

He was a bit older than she was, actually a bit older than she usually liked, but he was fit, strong, and full of life. He wore a thick, short beard. It blended with his chest hair, and she followed that down to where it disappeared under the blanket. She knew it continued down his trim stomach, and started to follow it with her hand, but then remembered that she didn't want to wake him. He moaned softly. "Dormite jam Ragnelle faciam trans postea occurret," he mumbled sleepily. At least that's what she thought she heard. Not English after all, perhaps French? What Englishman, she thought, would dream in French? Perhaps it was sleepy Italian.

She ran her hand across his chest again feeling the blend of firm muscle and soft coarseness. No scars left whatsoever, not even where she'd seen him wounded. Not natural, but most certainly not werecreature or nightchild. He was also far too coarse to be fae, not that she'd every met one of them but she'd heard stories. Gavin's eyes opened and he smiled. "Penny for your thought?" he offered. Mai's face wrinkled, as if she were in rat form and her whiskers twitched in curiosity.

"Okay," she started, "you don't fight like no bloody woggy, you don't bleed like no bloody woggy, and you sure don't fuck like no bloody woggy. What are you, Gavin Draegun? Not a were for sure, but almost as fast. Not a bloody night child, but almost as deadly."

"I've led a difficult life," he stated flatly.

"Bollocks," she replied. "Okay, if it's a bloody trading of secrets ye want I'll go first." Mai took a deep breath before continuing. "I was raised in the Imperial Chinese court, trained and schooled in high martial arts and espionage. From my birth I was honed into a weapon, a bloody assassin. I had several successful assignments under my belt when I was sent to Hong Kong to infiltrate the British command there and remove a certain Lord Commander of the Royal Marines. I worked there under the guise of martial arts liaison, training the marines an' learning to speak English well from the marines."

"You do speak it bloody well," Gavin interjected.

"Bloody well indeed, now quit yer interruptin' or I'll kick yer arse." Mai paused for a second, perhaps phrasing the next part in her mind. "We became lovers, his Lordship and me."

"I," he corrected.

"You weren't bloody there. Anyway, I had been nurtured, encouraged, trained, and such all my life, but I couldn't see it coming. He was the first one who actually cared about me, and I fell in love."

“And ye had t' kill him.” Gavin said consolingly and putting his arm around her shoulders.

“Bloody hell, no I dinna kill him!” Mai punched his shoulder. “Instead I came clean, exposed the plot an' me own involvement. Got thrown in the British prison fer me trouble, I did, an' he went home to his missus. Seems I were the only one of us two what fell in love after all.” She fell silent for several moments and added, “Took me almost a fortnight ta' break free from that shithole. Now there's two countries after me head an' I can ne'er go home.”

“And you're crew on an English privateer. Bloody sucks,” he offered.

“Aye, but now it be your turn,” the rat woman replied with a twitch of a nonexistent whisker. “Humor me, Gavin Draegun, I've got ta know what I'm bloody in for. Ye owes me that much.”

Gavin collected his thoughts, then began, “I was born Gawwyne, second son of King Lot and Myrgynna-le-Fey, on the nor'west coast of what is now Scotland. Me brother, Garyth, and I fought along side me four uncles, Echoid Buide, Domingart, Echoid Find, and Arturius, all Princes, in an alliance against incursions into our realms. It went well at first, although I fell into some weird dealings, 'weird shite' as ye'd say. I gots me'self cursed after sleepin' with a friend's wife, and then married to an ugly harridan to seal a treaty. Tha' marriage actually turned out rather well, she wasn't at all what she seemed. But all things come to an end and me own half brother, tha' bastard, let a force of Mathai against our alliance. It shattered us, me brother was killed in battle along with three uncles, and our father's kingdom eventually fell. Of the family, only meself, uncle Dom, and uncle Buide survived the battle. Domingart died during the retreat.”

“Bollocks,” Mai interjected, “yer no bloody Prince.” In response Gavin handed her his sword, Gwynrheged.

“Ye know weaponry,” he said, “behold me brother's sword, Gwynrheged, the 'White Hope of Rheged', plucked from the bloody muck during that final battle.” Mai took the blade and unsheathed it. The smooth, pale mithrel of it's surface shimmered in the morning sunlight, it's opalescence seeming to move and shift slightly on it's own as in not quite in phase with reality.

“Pretty knife. Now the bastard ye' stole this from was a bloody Prince fer sure,” Mai said. “Perhaps an' easier question then, and leave yer bleedin' fairy story. Who was the corpse woman an' what was she to ye?”

“Naomi? An old flame, an' one o' the reasons I left Crescent town the last time.”

“She were in her eighties if a day, a little hard up for trimmin' back then?” she said with a raised eyebrow.

“Closer to a hundred, I believe,” Gavin replied matter-of-factly, “she was a witch and magic practitioners don't age as fast as regular people. She was in her mid thirties when we parted ways, perhaps because she had noticed our apparent ages diverging. Perhaps twas because she wanted a stable home and family, an' knew me better'n I meself did. Either way, she left. I 'met' Virginia and fell into hard dealings wi' the vampires, one Marie d'Aquitane in particular. Story ended with me sailing off, leaving Port Crescent an' all me troubles and bad memories in me wake. Left a few good ones as well, I did.”

Silence followed Gavin's narrative as Mai considered her new Captain for a few moments. Finally she replied, "Still bollocks. Keep ta' yer fairy stories then, matters neverwise. Tha' heart wants what the heart wants, an' ye went ta' the wall for Ms. Treport who ye barely knew. I make ye for a right fair bastard. Even if I'm the only one fallin', I've done far worse." She stroked his cheek, feeling the rough beard and weathered skin beneath her fingers. "Sall right if ye bloody don' love me back, ye bastard, ye'll do me fair. Jus' treat me kindly." With that she climbed out of bed. Gavin watched her trim nude form as she gathered her clothes, slid the smooth black silk gi over her almond skin, and opened the door. "Sees ye' on deck, Cap'n." she offered.

~

A small flame touched the alcohol fueled heating unit of a Babbage Ltd. designed miniature steam turbine. Water boiled, as water should, and steam pressure escaped through it's tiny well balanced vanes. Gears, long idle but recently lubricated, began to turn. Permanent magnets spun within a delicate matrix of microscopic wires and natural gems and the flux they created began pushing tiny signals across the intricate web. This coincided with an idle, but 'dreaming', mechanunculus being pulled rather abruptly from his very first visit to Morpheus's realm. Sonny awoke.

Rather, Sonny became aware that his surroundings had changed, he was no longer in the forest near Momma's ruined workshop. The first thing he noticed was that his heartbeat was gone. The familiar thump-thump of his little coal-fired steam plant, the one that Momma had designed and fashioned herself that had been a constant reminder of his functional state, was gone. In it's place was a soft, constant whine with a medium pitch. The second thing that got his attention was that the room he seemed to be in was swaying gently with a rolling, rhythmic motion. He also noted that the soft feeling of cloth against his exterior brass plates was no longer present. He was naked. Confusion replaced the feelings of loss and pain he had felt only moments before. He processed all these items rather quickly, realized he had no prior experiences even closely related, and decided he needed more data.

Sonny opened his ocular apertures with a slight creak of metal on metal. Somehow they had become poorly lubricated, though he could not process why. He made no other motion, remaining statue like. Before him sat a thickly bearded, light skinned man of middle years and medium build. He was dressed in the manner that the mechanunculus recognized as a seagoing man of some status. He wore a flounced shirt over loose breeches, high, worn boots, and an equally worn frocked coat. At his hip hung a large piece of cutlery that Sonny processed as a broad sword. Behind the boatman's left shoulder was a smaller woman dressed similarly, although her jacket flared wider due to her athletic feminine build. Below the frocked jacket she stood on one normal leg and one hastily carved wooden shaft, and a smaller piece of cutlery hung at her waist as well. Behind the bearded man's right shoulder was a bespectacled man of middle years and medium build. If the brass man had been more astute in aesthetics he would have considered the man 'rumped', being what he was however he simply considered him well worn, like 'uncle Mick'. Momma would have called the group unsavory.

The mechanunculus felt that he was seated on a small bed, not dissimilar to one in a coffee pickers cottage. The room they were in was one of soft polished wood in fitted panels. A small round brass framed window with an ornate iris closure could be seen in Sonny's periphery vision. It was daytime. He felt air moving through from an open door or window somewhere behind him. Above him he could see a lamp gently swaying with the rocking of the room. It appeared to be only half functional as some of it's gas ports had wires and glass bulbs fitted into them. It took Sonny a moment to realize it was dual purposed to operate on several fuels.

"So, what does it do?" the peg legged woman asked. "Just open up it's eyes?"

"Give it a moment, Mistress Stark, we've only just started it up. Fates only know how long it's been broken, probably been decades," the boatman replied. The rumpled man did not speak, only watched, but the mechanunculus could feel a harmonic resonance on some level he had only ever felt with Momma. It was almost as if he were saying something that couldn't be heard.

Sonny began testing his linkages, fingers and toes first, with little clicks, creaks, and groans. Most moved freely, but every one needed attention. Finally, with raised eyebrows from the boatman and a startled gasp from the woman he stood. The boatman stood too, and they stayed face to face for a moment considering each other. The mechanunculus turned to the woman behind him. "I do," he began, "whatever I task myself to do." Turning back to the boatman, obviously the Boss here, Sonny said, "Right now I have maintenance that must be performed, I am severely unlubricated. Could I perhaps bother you for some oil and cleaning cloth, boss?" A faint knowing smile cracked the rumpled man's otherwise bland visage, and went unnoticed by everyone except the brass man. Like a wisp the smile vanished.

Without taking his eyes from the mechanunculus the boatman replied, "It's Captain. Yes, Mister Merriwether here will get what e're you need from ships stores." Turning to the rumpled man he said, "John, make our friend here at home, I'll be on deck."

"Captain," Sonny began, "may I make unsolicited queries to this man as well? I am in need of information."

"Oh, aye," the boatman responded, "ye can, and good luck with it. How shall we call you, by the way?"

Sonny processed for a split second before answering. "I am called Sonny Brassman, if it please you. And yourself?"

The Captain smiled at that. "I'm Gavin Draegun, captain of the vessel yer now aboard, the 'Seven Fingers'. The man beside you is John Merriwether, my bo'sun. This," he indicated the woman, "is my First Mate, Anabel Stark. We've other crew and passengers aboard that you'll be meeting presently. Lady Soon Mai, one of the other crew, would be yer better target for 'unsolicited queries', it's shutting her up that's the trick." He offered the brass man his hand. "Pleased to make yer acquaintance, Sonny Brassman."

"I've noticed that you have passengers and crew, Captain. What," Sonny asked, "is my status here?"

"Interesting question. I purchased you in a curio shop for three and a half dukaat. Since you seem to be self aware, I assume relatively independent, and I personally dunna care for slavery, I figure you owe me your purchase price plus repair parts and supplies. You can work it off as part o' the crew if you've no other arrangements. Fair enough?"

Sonny weighed his options. He was obviously at sea in a ship with no idea how far from his home he was or even if it still existed, and he did not know how long he had been inactive, but judging by the state of his mechanics it had been quite a while. He had, including the shirt on his back, exactly nothing. He found himself in the company of several questionable characters with dubious intentions.

He truly wished he had more reliable data to consult, for if he were better informed the term 'Shanghaied' would certainly come to mind. "Yes, it is agreeable for the time being. Will access to coal, water, oil and such be available as well?"

"You won't be needing the coal, lad, your power plant was unrepairable. You now have a state-of-the-art steam turbine that runs on alcohol. It's more compact, efficient, cleaner, and alcohol is just as available as coal. But yes, food is provided for crew and your supplies would be counted as such." Somewhere above them a bell began to sound, "If you'll excuse me, I'll be on deck as it be my watch now." With that the Captain stepped out into a small passage and was gone.

The mechanunculus put his brass hand to the little door on his abdomen, feeling for the mechanical heartbeat he knew was no longer there and the warmth of his little coal burner. His plating was cool to the touch. He felt the great maw of despair open before him again and he fell back to his basic task- maintain self. The pits of depression would have to wait. Had he been a self conscious device he would have felt a bit of discomfort at the First Mate's stare, but instead it was Momma's last task that prompted his next request. "Mister John Merriwether," the mechanunculus queried, "would it be possible to acquire clothing as well?"

Too quickly for mere mortals sight, a mischievous grin flashed across the thaughmatology professor's face and was gone. "Aye, the Captain did say t' get you whatever you needed, an' you look to be about the Captain's size. Let's see what we can find."

John led Sonny out of the small room they had been presently occupying and into a relatively narrow hallway, which unsurprisingly served as the primary artery for moving about below deck. After passing a couple of closed doors, which no doubt led into other cabins, the bo'sun climbed a three step ladder to the door at the end and opened it. Once again Sonny sensed a strange humming from the warm looking fellow, as he agilely navigated through the portal, signaling Sonny to follow. "Please close the door Mr. Brassman, while I look through the Captain's stores. You've been asleep for quite some time, and no doubt have many questions."

"Deactivated, yes, there is quite a discrepancy in time and place," the mechanunculus began. "Also there was an unexplained intervening displacement, apparently while I should have been quite inactive. I have no understanding of it, the experience didn't follow rational laws and the tasks presented during the displacement were, well, nonsense." He had no idea why he felt he could trust this well worn man, but there comes a point where one must acquire information and John seemed have a tenuous kinship to Momma. While he spoke he watched the bespectacled sailor open the Captains wardrobe, and after a moment remove boots, shirt, and britches. Finally he added, "I find myself unable to rectify certain discrepancies."

As the brass man donned the offered clothing John began explaining about dreams and how he might have experienced one even though he was deactivated.

Sonny strode onto the rolling deck of the Seven Fingers cautiously. The continued motion of his surroundings was playing havoc with the tiny gyroscopic mechanisms and gears that kept his body stable and balanced. He could feel them whirring and clicking madly inside his head trying to keep up. It was bright outside, the sun was high and the sails provided only small patches of shade at this hour. The sails billowed widely, and the flags snapped and fluttered in the the wind. The breeze was warm and brisk as it played between his brass plating and the soft cotton of the Captain's borrowed shirt.

It was indeed a nice shirt, crisp white cotton with a frill of ruff at the neck and cuffs. It fell nicely over the loose, deep blue pantaloons and high brown boots. Sonny had wisely passed on the sea coat John had shown him, a common sailor would not need such a garment. He had cinched the shirt about his waist with sash of woven rope to keep the loose garment from interfering with the movements of his arms. This was fortunate, as his gyros stopped functioning momentarily to resynchronize and he was forced to grasp the nearest railing.

“That be a fine outfit yer wearin’!” the Captain called down from the poop deck.

Sonny looked down at his borrowed garments. “I believe they are yours,” he replied a bit confused, finding it odd that the man did not recognize his own clothing. “John Merriwether assisted me with their selection.”

“Of course ‘e did.” Gavin shot back with a grin. “Come up and have a look see, mayhaps a chat. Never spoke wi’ a mechanunculus afore.”

Again Sonny was confused as he had spoken with the man less than an hour ago, before his laborious maintenance cycle of oiling and cleaning. Perhaps the Captain was having some memory loss issues, though he did not seem very old. “I will be up presently, Captain, I seem to be having some difficulty compensating for the ship's motion.”

“Sea sickness,” the Captain explained, “try to focus on the horizon instead of anything on the ship.” Sonny looked at the horizon. Almost immediately his gyroscopic clockwork synchronized and he stood up without support. His leg and knee linkages, along with his torso, moved slightly keeping him aligned with the horizon instead of the rolling deck. He was glad he had taken the time to lubricate them, the constant motion along with the salt spray would mean extra maintenance cycles. He quickly joined the Captain behind the large ship's wheel, re-estimating the man's capabilities.

“Thank you, Captain, the motion is much less disruptive now. Is there anything else I should be aware of?”

“Aye, stay on the ship. You'll sink like a bloody stone an' yer nae watertight ta boot. Chances are you'll take on water and be gone afore we could save ye. Ye' canna swim, can ye'?” Sonny paused for a few moments, adapting to the man's odd dialect. John had been much easier to understand, mostly because of the sparse amount of words the man used. As if in contrast, the Captain seemed to state the intuitively obvious with as many words as possible.

“No,” the brass man replied, “I am incapable of flotation. I will attempt to remain on board the vessel.”

“Good then.”

After this statement the two men, one flesh and one metal, remained silent for several awkward moments. Finally Sonny formulated a query, “What are the extent of my duties as a crew member, Captain?”

“Well,” Gavin began, “we're rigged as a fishing vessel, an' sometimes we do, but we're mainly a merchant and privateer. During a long run, like this one, there's quite a bit of idle time unless yer at the helm. Since yer not qualified at the helm yer duties will be mostly swabbing decks and hauling lines at

the direction of the helmsman, myself at the moment.” The Captain was interrupted by a whirring from the binnacle followed by two loud clangs of the ships bell, a pause, then another clang. As if in answer to the mechanunculus's unformed query he continued, “That's the ships bell, it's our time clock, ringing every half hour. When it gets to eight my watch is up and the next watch starts. The first mate, Mistress Anabel Stark, will be relieving me and I will have supper.” After another pause the Captain added, “I guess, in answer to yer question, yer to do what yer told. If we gets into a pickle, an' we bloody well might, keep yer head down an' don't get in the bleedin' way, what?”

The mechanunculus thought it unlikely they would encounter a brined vegetable large enough to sail a ship into, so accepted it as a colloquialism for 'problem'. He attempted to fathom what sort of problems might arise for a merchant vessel such as the Seven Fingers, but other than sudden storms was at a loss. “Very good, Captain. What task am I to do at the moment?”

As if in response Gavin yelled, “Mister Heisse, front an' center.” Within moments they were joined by a muscular fellow of medium build who moved with an unnatural grace along the deck, almost as a predatory beast might. His eyes were blue and cold, like winter ice, and his short cropped hair was blond under his head covering. When he smiled it was more like a baring of teeth than a sign of welcome.

“Aye, Cap'n?” the man offered.

“Ulrich, this is Sonny. Show him the ropes an' watch out for him, e's green. No tomfoolery neither, 'ere? We'll be coming about, so take 'im wi' ye'.” The Captain turned to the brass man, who had been momentarily inspecting his outer plates for verdigris. “Sonny, this 'eres Ulrich. Watch 'im an' learn, lad, but don't let him lead you astray. Make it so, gentlemen, coming about.” With that Gavin began turning the great wheel. Ulrich slipped across the deck, mechanunculus in tow, untied a line and slipped it into a steam windlass. Several more lines got the same treatment along the deck, and each windlass spun up once it had it's line. The sails turned, a boom slid over the deck, it's sail fluttering in the wind, and Sonny watched it pass over them, gaging it's clearance more than adequate. It caught the wind with a loud snap of canvas.

“Can't be that green,” Ulrich observed, “fresh meat always ducks when the boom passes over.” Sonny realized that 'green' was another colloquialism meaning unskilled and stopped concerning himself with oxidation. He also suppressed the self induced task to comment that he was made of brass and not meat in the interest of 'blending in'. Ulrich began the reverse of what was just done, but on the opposite side of the ship, unhooking lines as windlasses spun down and tying them off. When he was finished he sung out, “All's clear, Cap'n!”

Gavin responded, “As ye' were, gent's!”

“Now what task are we to do?” Sonny asked his new tutor.

“Now we waits is what,” Ulrich answered, “we'll be coming about again soon enough.” Sensing a lack of comprehension the sailor added, “We're sailing into the westerlies, so we have to make long tacks, diagonal passes. Can't sail directly into the wind.”

“Understood,” the brass man responded. Sonny looked at the man, Ulrich. He was dressed much like the brass man in loose fitting trousers, cotton shirt cinched at the waist, and high boots. He wore an insanely bright orange kerchief tied over his head to shield his short cropped pate from the

blazing sun on deck. The mechanunculus realized he did not need one, as the sun did not bother his brass exterior, but neither did he need his other clothes. The boots were the only things he actually needed, as his brass sole plates would be useless on the wet, rolling deck of the ship. Still, he was tasked to fit in as well as possible.

“Ulrich,” he queried, “where might I acquire such a head covering as you have?”

“Got a bunch of 'em, I'll give you one after watch.” With that the sailor got out a pair of mops and buckets, “come along then, I'll teach you to swab decks while we're waitin'.”

The rest of the afternoon passed leisurely for the mechanunculus. He listened to the sailor talk, which was sort of a treat for Ulrich who wasn't used to conversation on watch, and helped him work. And learned.

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The Seven Fingers, right on course and schedule, rolled slowly into the dusk, the bow pointed generally towards the setting sun. Through the big window in the Captain's cabin the eastern sky was already darkening to a muted indigo that soon the waning moon would lighten. The lantern was lit to chase the shadows, but the Captain had only lit the gas ports, passing up electricity for the moment to keep his eyes accustomed to the darkness. Gavin was bent over his charts, recalculating and preparing to take some star readings as soon as the sun had set. His mind wandered from his task, the quaint gas-lit surroundings, brass-bound oaken table, the scattered charts and navigational instruments could have been from several centuries past instead of the here and now.

Perhaps it was a faint splash from the stern, perhaps a stray shadow among the others cast from the swaying lantern that caused him to look up. It was still too early for Virginia to have risen, too late to be interrupted for dinner or change of watch. The Captain rose, going stern-ward to the large window and throwing wide one leaded glass pane. He took a deep breath of sea spray as he watched the foamy wake disappear into the dusk. “Show yerself,” he said to the wind, sky, and salt spray. As if in answer a naked youth leapt from the foam with a muted splash and seated himself delicately on the decorative woodwork of the Finger's stern with a wet squish.

“Greetings, ancestor,” he offered, looking into Gavin's eyes. His own eyes belied the youthful face they shone from, large, deep, and brown they carried all the vastness of the sea. Some would call those eyes soulful, but the Captain knew them for what they were. The young man's eyes were those of a harp seal.

“Yer' a long ways from the islands,” Gavin offered. “Are ye' lost yer way, have ye?”

“No, ancestor, we was Called we was.” His voice carried the gentle lilt of a north Scottish brogue melded with the roll of open water waves in a dialect most couldn't discern as English at all. The way he spoke the word 'Called' was like a mechanic being called to machinery, or a priest being called by Christ, that pulling of something deep within a person that drew them to their life's work. He no more wanted to be in the Caribbean than a fish wanted to be in a stew. The Captain switched to the creature's native dialect before answering.

“Called were ye? So ye brought friends as well?” Gavin knew he wouldn't travel this far alone. The youth looked to the water, to his hidden companions, because he was every bit a social creature.

“Aye, ancestor, there's a pod of us been following since ye' left port.”

“Don' call me ancestor,” Gavin interrupted.

“By wha' name are ye' known than?”

“Gavin, or Captain if ye' must, an' you?”

“Call me Macnamara,” the naked youth responded.

“Of course,” the Captain replied knowing the creature really didn't have a name as such, “I should 'o guessed, son 'o tha' sea. Now, ye been followin' us?”

“Aye, tha' we have. We was watchin' from the rocks on the point as ye' left we was, but we could'na get close to ye n'til the Other's moved on.” Gavin assumed he meant 'other sea creatures', so knew that the merfolk had escorted them from Port Crescent but had now taken their leave. “Still, we're bein' all quiet like. Got's t' be quiet around ol' Death.” The youngster got quiet, leaned toward Gavin, and added, “E's followin' us, ye' know, all the way from tha' Orkneys. Taken eleven so far.”

“Why?” Gavin asked, “We're going into battle. You're nae fighters, ye're lovers, you'd just be fodder for tha' fishes as such.”

“Ol' Death is what.” With that statement all the depth of the seas welled up in his eyes. Gavin realized then that 'ol Death' was a reality to him, a physical being, and knew what it was. In the open water the youth's kind, the Selke, would be helpless against it as children against a wolfpack.

“Ye drew a bloody orca here? By sacrificing yerselves?” The vision of these, the gentlest of werecreatures- harbor seals, being torn apart by a killer whale as other's watched helplessly crossed his mind. He remembered the seven years he'd spent among them, and the seven tears he shed when those years ended.

“T'was a debt ta' be paid,” he paused to stop himself from saying 'ancestor', “Captain. Asides, we'll be aroun' if there be a rescue ta' be done. We'll no be in tha way during,” he was instantly silent as the cabin door opened. Gavin turned to see Soon Mai enter quietly. Turning back there was only a wet place on the sill where the creature had been, not a splash nor any other sign marked his departure.

“Who ye' bloody talkin' to?” Mai asked. “You'll for sure get tha' bleedin carpet wet with that port open.”

“Descendant o' mine dropped by with a killer whale for me is all. He's gone now, ye' frightened him.” Mai walked over to the window, leaned past Gavin, and looked out over the empty sea trailing behind the Seven Fingers' stern.

“Bollocks.” Turning back to where the Captain had been working at the table she said, “Bloody stars are comin' out, her Ladyship is awake, an' I come ta give ye a bloody hand with yer charts. Say goodnight ta' the bloody fairies and come along then.” With one last long look out the portal Gavin closed it, gathered several instruments, and followed the little rat woman out the door.

Up on deck the stars indeed were making themselves known, the night was clear and becoming brisk with the evening breeze quickly chasing the day's heat from the Fingers' deck. Sara was at the helm, holding the great wheel in her spectral grasp. Now off watch, Sonny Brassman was at the port balustrade, amidship, looking out into the open sea. Perhaps deep inside his mechanisms things were sorting themselves out, at least the Captain hoped so. The mechanunculus had experienced quite a difficult change over what was, to it, less than a day. Climbing to the poop deck Gavin set his burden down as Mai opened up his chart. Softer than morning mist lifting another form appeared with them. "Good evening," she offered. Lady Virginia had arisen.

"And yerself," Gavin offered, "I trust ye' slept well?"

"Like the dead," she answered with a toothy grin. "What is that?" the vampiress asked indicating Sonny.

"Tis called a mechanunculus, a mechanical hominunculus. Tis an artifice of magic and machinery tha' I doubt even Professor Merriwether completely understands. We repaired it and woke it up this morn after it was inactive for half a century or so." Gavin paused to consider the device staring out to sea. It was obviously out of place, as would be a bathing tub on a beach. "I suspect it's trying ta' acclimatise itsel', somehow I don't think we did it any favor, what?"

"It is alive then?" Virginia asked. "It thinks?"

"It bloody thinks that it thinks," Mai offered with all the profound wisdom of the Orient. "Therefore it bloody does. Right?"

"Curious," the vampiress stated lifting a forefinger to her lower lip. Forgetting the others on the poop deck she floated off to investigate the device. Gavin raised an eyebrow and turned to Soon Mai.

"What do ye' think that was about then?"

"She can't read it's bloody mind. S'what they do, vampires, when they're on tha' hunt- they sense people. Find the ones what'll bloody give in ta' them. She can't figure him out is all," Mai explained.

"Hope she figures him out afore she breaks an incisor on his brass hide," Gavin jabbed. Specter, wererat, and Captain all laughed at that.

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As would a fog slowly drifting into a harbor at dusk the vampiress stalked closer to Sonny. Aware, but completely unafraid, the mechanunculus waited. Most of the passengers and crew of the vessel had approached him, queried him, and once their curiosity was sated had gone along their own way. He had idly been feeling his breastplate over where his steam plant used to be, still wishing for the familiar thump-thump of it's operation. It was a feeling he realized that he would never have again, like so many feelings he would never have again; Unka Mick's hand on his shoulder, a task completed for Momma, Sheila lying beside him on the narrow pickers cot. All of them feelings he could never have again. "Stuiver for your thoughts," the woman offered. Silently the brass man held out an open palm to her. The first time he had heard the expression it had confused him as to why someone wished to purchase such a thing, and for so little currency. This time he knew better, but he also knew it was safest to cover all possibilities and wait for a solution to present itself like any non-mechanical person

would. With a look to his open palm she added, "It's just a saying, I wouldn't carry money on board ship unless I was gambling with the crew."

The solution had presented itself, Sonny was blending in, and the accomplished task gave him pleasure. "Apologies, I was aware of such a 'saying', but was not sure if you yourself were also. Do you still wish the thoughts?" Sonny replied.

Like wind chimes in an evening breeze she giggled, "Yes, please, since I can't hear them on my own." Yet another query formed, so strange and different was this place from his home. Like before he suppressed the verbalization, there was so much to learn that all he would be doing was asking questions continually. Instead, Sonny turned to face her. She was tall for a female, slender but still proportionally curved. She was dressed in a long black gown, gloves though it was not cold, and a feminine top hat though there was no sun to shield herself from. She moved smoothly, not smooth like Ulrich who was a werewolf, but smooth like a breeze across the deck. He closed and reopened his oculars, an unnecessary task called 'blinking' that he performed to better blend in with people.

Finally he answered, "I was perceiving that my steam plant no longer pulsates since it has been replaced; I no longer have a 'heartbeat'." Virginia looked at this machine that was not completely like a machine. It was her height, made of polished brass like a statue would be, and dressed as a common sailor in loose britches, flounced shirt and sturdy boots. The only indication that it wasn't a statue was that it talked and responded much like any common man on the street. She reached forward and placed her palm over his breastplate where he had been touching.

"No," she answered, "absolutely no trace of a heartbeat to be found." Taking his metal hand gently in hers she placed his hand on her soft breast, over where her own heart was. "How about mine?" she asked. Sonny felt the soft curve of her chest, the smooth but firm flesh beneath the thin black fabric of her dress. He did not feel a heart beating.

"Absolutely no trace of a heartbeat to be found," he echoed. A query formed, as this was contrary to everything he understood about people. "May I make an unsolicited suggestion? If your heart is not beating perhaps you should seek medical attention. You could be dead."

"I have been for almost two centuries," Virginia responded. "How long have you been dead, sailor made of brass?" Somewhere inside the workings of his thaumatological thought processes realizations meshed as would the gears in his clockwork drive. The partially formed queries as to his state of being formed themselves into orderly rows and Sonny determined that he had in fact died. He calculated an answer.

"Assuming that my 'dream' mirrored reality, and taking into account the non-linear increase in population and technological advancement with my own observations since awakening aboard this vessel, I determine that I have been 'dead' fifty seven years." He paused for a second and noticed that the woman's jaw had dropped slightly. "It is an estimation," he explained, "I have no solid information to go by." Seeing that his addition didn't help he hastily added, "I do not know what year I was deactivated, I was not aware that time was measured as such." A knowing smile finally crossed the vampires' ruby lips.

"A conundrum then," she offered. "Perhaps we can think of something. Did you read any books? Can you recall them?"

“Yes,” Sonny answered, relieved it was a simple query. He suppressed the initial response to catalog each and every book and opted for the short version, a simple summation. “I have read many books. There was,” he started to mention Momma but stopped himself out of habit, “my creator's library. Also I frequented a used book store when I was taken into town.”

“Published books are dated, in the front, with a year,” Virginia explained. “Can you remember any? What was the latest one you know of?” Sonny searched his memories. The ones he recalled were widely varied, both the used books and Momma's books were old to ancient. Then he remembered the book Momma had been reading lying on her nightstand, the romance novel. That book, “Living On the Edge”, had been current. He quoted the year in that book and Virginia replied, “Yes, you have been dead fifty seven years. What is your name, long dead man made of brass? What should I call you?”

He actually liked the way she said, 'long dead man made of brass', but he replied, “I am called Sonny Brassman, if it please you. And yourself?” The vampiress smiled at the colloquial way he responded, almost as if by rote.

“I am the vampiress, Lady Virginia Matheson. You can call me Virginia, Sonny Brassman.” Sonny compared the creature before him with what he had read in Momma's ancient tomes, much as he had with the werewolf, Ulrich. These beings, like those others, were not mere constructs of fantasy as he had been told but real beings as well. Momma had been wrong on several accountings now, referring to what he had read as 'fantasy', and he wondered idly how wide the gaps in his education would prove in the future. Perhaps someday he would meet a dragon, or a knight of the round table. His musing was interrupted by his need to respond to the vampire before him.

“I am called Sonny,” he replied to her.

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Up on the poop deck Gavin looked up from his charts, finally finishing his updated position. “Wonder what they're up to,” he mused, watching the vampiress and the machine talking.

“None o' yer bloody business, I'd imagine,” Mai replied, knowing any good bits would be shared with Virginia later. She needed to run a few thoughts about Gavin past her former employer and confidant anyway, to see how much of his past she knew. Not that he was dishonest, no, she just needed some history without the fairy tales and embellishments. The Captain gathered up his instruments and charts and headed below with both arms full. Looking askance at his retreating back she added under her breath, “Prince me bloody arse.”

Sara, unusually silent for the moment, smiled to herself.

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“I'll see your three dukaats and raise you four.” Roger's full bodied baritone floated down from the other end of the table. Lady Matheson, the mechanunculus Sonny, the werewolf Roger, Virginia's men Kent Hardlow and Akolo Kuonii, the elf Phineas and wererat Soon Mai were all seated round the large table in the ship's galley. Supper had concluded hours before. The Lady, the brass man, and Mai had just come from the deck, and they were all presently entertaining themselves through various diversions. Mai, two of the lady's bodyguards, and Roger were busy with a game of poker; while the

lady was testing her skill against Phineas. Sonny seemed to be dividing his attentions between the ongoing chess game and the card players, as well as being engaged in a long running conversation with John Merriwether about his internal workings.

“You’d better have more than a blooming pair there, mangy, or you’ll lose a chunk of change, I’ll raise you five,” Mai retorted. Phineas was taken aback by her. She was exquisitely formed and balanced, but roaringly foul mouthed at the same time.

“So Phineas,” Virginia began, apparently picking up his demeanor at some level. “I’ve met several of the fae, but I’ve not made the acquaintance of one of the eachtranai before. Wandering among mortals must be quite maddening to you.”

“I deal with it, Lady. I has become a part of me. His king’s night took one of her rooks. She promptly moved her bishop’s pawn to a more defensible position. Phineas then responded by moving one of his pikemen forward. She knew it for what it was, it was a faint and a ploy. Any attack on her part against those pieces would force her to lose pieces in turn. The game between Phineas and Virginia, like their banter, was leisurely in the playing out. Each of them, however, was sizing the other up of several different levels.

“Has it always been that way?” the vampires queried in a gentle, lyrical way customary from a woman of good breeding.

“No,” the elf replied. “At first I found the short lived very abrupt and disconcerting. But over time I have acclimatised my self to them. Let us call it an 'acquired' taste.”

Virginia nodded, her hand wavered over the board for just a moment, before two of her elegant fingers came to rest on the head of her queen, and with a gentle, almost dainty gesture, the Lady removed the piece from danger. “Perhaps you could enlighten me on one small matter.”

The fae smiled. “Certainly Lady if I am able.”

“Why is it that I can’t hear your thoughts?” A simple, elegant half turn of the vampiress’s swan like neck had her looking at both Phineas and Sonny. “I have been acquainted with elves before, and they have always been readable.”

Phineas smiled again before replying. “It is a learned trait, and not one natural to our kind. It is much like the good professor, who has learned to use magic, while it comes naturally to us. Take our mechanical friend here,” the elf indicated Sonny. “I have almost no understanding of him, though I sense magic much as you sense thought. I would have to study, and understand, the human art of mechanics which would be very difficult to one such as myself. And yet, though I can sense him, I perceive that you can not. It is, I believe in his case, in his nature and not a learned trait.”

Sonny, listening, processed the information as Phineas spoke. “Yes,” he stated, “I can feel a harmonious resonance in you.” The elf looked at the mechanunculus with a sidelong glance. “It is similar to the resonance I feel from the bo’sun, but different from that of the Captain.” With that Virginia raised an eyebrow.

“That would prob’ly be tha bloody sword,” Soon Mai interjected. Apparently she’d been eavesdropping between hands.

“No,” said Sonny turning to her, “the sword is an artifice much like myself.” Wererat and vampiress looked at each other at this statement. Phineas smiled to himself. “I myself was unaware that vampires were telepathic. Is that, then, a trait that comes naturally, or is it learned?” At first one might think the mechanical being was baiting the vampiress, but it was an innocent question.

One would have expected Virginia to answer the mechanunculus, but it was John Merriwether who spoke. “Generally speaking, no Sonny. Its more like the light and dark receptors in the eye. The typical vampire can sense the presence of mental activity, just as the sighted can detect the presence of light. Even some individuals with significant ocular damage can still detect it as well. In the case of Lady Matheson, I hope you will forgive my boldness for using you Lady as an example.”

“Think nothing of it, Professor, but please call me Virginia, we're among friends.” Virginia replied in airy tones of good humor.

“As you say, Virginia. At any rate,” John continued, “most vampires can discern the presence of mental activity and discern those who are susceptible to their powers as part of the feeding process. Some vampires, like Virginia here, can even sense the nature of that thought. It is disconcerting to them when they can sense no thought, as one of us might find an incongruous 'black hole' in the middle of our view.”

“The one caveat to that,” Virginia began with a sly grin, “is that almost any of us who have attained mastery of our state can enter a mind during feeding, to dull the pain and fear and even control the victim to some extent. 'Renfields', or involuntary slaves to our will, are created this way. Of course,” she added with a wink, “it's highly illegal and like any private space we have to be invited in.”

“Checkmate.” Phineas stated flatly. He gave Virginia a nod, “I thank you for the game, it was quite entertaining, as I've not known such a challenging an opponent in quite some time.”

She replied lightly, “And you. Shall we try again, or would you prefer some other amusement.”

“I call, let's see what everyone's got.” Roger's voice punctuated the momentary silence, and a quick glance their way was enough to tell her that Mai had won this round of there game.

“I believe,” the elf replied, “I shall assist the Lady Mai and try to get some of Master Hardlow's paycheck before it is all gone.”

“Be careful, Phin, she might be walking out with a bunch of your coin to boot,” Roger retorted.

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Virginia Matheson sat in the galley of the Seven Fingers and looked over the top of her book, examining Phineas. Yes, she was sure he knew he was being watched, but she was unconcerned about his awareness of her. He tried to portray himself as a rook, but perhaps he was instead a knight, like his kind tended to be, non-linear with unclear goals. Elvish goals were often hidden and their movements did not fit into mortal patterns. Perhaps, to another of the sidhe, his path was straight. Although she couldn't sense Sonny's mind either, she could extrapolate his actions from her own understanding of logical patterns. 'Which one are you, Phineas,' the vampiress thought, watching him as he finished stowing the game board, 'King's bishop or Queen's?'

She mentally aligned her other pieces in front of her, smiling slightly at what Gavin would think about being made the Queen. A Queen still in jeopardy, though she had moved a Knight in to defend it. She felt him above her on the poop deck with his first mate, perhaps discussing their current position. There was another subject that vexed him, though he seemed to know it's cause, because he'd been glancing out to sea, stern-ward, quite a bit this evening. The vampiress believed that the Captain thought they were being followed. She could sense only sea creatures, and so was less than concerned. Still, Gavin was concerned about something. He hadn't lived as long as he had by misjudging his surroundings- and he was rarely wrong.

Her thoughts turned to the first mate, Anabel Stark. The crew had already started referring to her, behind her back of course, as Pegleg Annie or simply Ol' Peggy. Annie was a rook, straight lines predictable goals. For now, at least, she was off the board. Virginia could see her recovering quickly though, the woman had a resilience that she hadn't yet tapped along with an emptiness inside that she needed to fill. That emptiness could be a problem, it might make her vulnerable. She could lose that rook early. Virginia's smile disappeared with that thought, she had come to enjoy the first mate's tragic jocularity, it was her main strength. It reminded the vampiress of her own brand of gallows humor.

She glanced at Soon Mai, the Knight she had covering the Captain in more ways than one. Her mind was sharp, focused, appearing to her as a single bright, sharp blade as opposed to Professor Merriwether's bright flare. A blade right now single mindedly focused on separating sailors from their paychecks, but would turn to Gavin eventually. Perhaps tonight she would start asking about the Captain, but how much did she need to know. How much information would keep the little rat woman interested, but not send her running off the game board? The vampiress knew the Captain and Mai had been sharing a bed since before leaving port, she could smell them on each other as surely as she could sense their auras blending. The dark shadow that had been on Gavin was lifting, Virginia knew it was Mai's influence helping, but also knew she could still shy off. The shadow of Marie d'Aquitaine could quite easily fall over him again, perhaps with a vengeance. Her Queen could still be lost.

Sonny moved near her, standing. The device still startled Virginia, she had to actually see or hear him to know he was there. 'Funny,' she thought, 'I've begun thinking of Sonny Brassman as a him instead of an it.' She considered the mechanunculus as a piece outside the game board, unreadable and unknown. One of many unknowns in this dangerous game she now played, the most glaringly obvious being who her opponent was. She thought at first it was Marie d'Aquitaine, her siress, the vampire who had turned her two and a half centuries before. But Marie was being used, was a piece on the board as surely as was Gavin. What hand was moving that ancient vampiress? 'Come to think of it,' Virginia thought with a shudder, 'who's hand is moving me?' She glanced again at Phineas Facinock. Fey, and full blood, but with an unreadability that the vampiress found troubling. 'And you, Phineas,' she pondered to herself, 'who is moving you? Which side of the board are you on?'

Her eyes followed Sonny while her more esoteric perceptions kept track of the others. He was quite the work of art, if he were immobile any museum would be happy to add him to their collection. 'No,' she reconsidered that thought, 'not quite museum quality. He would be a bit too, perhaps, mechanical and not really representative of a real person. He was more of an abstraction than a true sculpture, a thing apart. Besides, the artist was unknown.' She watched Sonny converse with John, his voice a deep, incongruous, bedroom contralto, and then the pair made way towards the door. There was a conservation of motion to Sonny, he didn't make the tiny unnecessary motions that people always did, those unconscious 'tells' that a skilled person could read. Mai was like that as well, suppressing those movements consciously. It was a skill that came in handy at poker, that she was using even now to

Master Hardlow's chagrin. With the brass man it was not a suppression of those movements, but rather never having the need to make them in the first place. Add to that his complete lack of mental emanations and he became to her a blind spot. Perhaps Soon Mai could introduce him to the game of poker. Sonny would be a terrific liar, if he could lie. A smile crossed the vampiress's ruby lips, showing a little of the lethal white they concealed as she added mentally, 'Unless he *can* lie, how would we know until too late?' She mentally moved Sonny to her opponents side of the board as a Knight, a Knight that was now behind her lines and inside her defenses. Why the hell didn't she see that? Was her blindness of the mechanunculus that complete? She would need to watch him closely, very closely. If he was not yet her opponents piece then what a devastating weapon he would make against another of night's children, could she but incorporate him.

The pair, Sonny, man of brass and John, man of books, left the galley whilst still conversing. Ulrich Heisse, bearing several bottles of bootleg rum, passed them in the doorway causing momentary confusion. Virginia took advantage of it and softly rose as a fog lifting, intending to follow them and perhaps waylay the mechanunculus. "M'Lady, a moment," Soon Mai interrupted. 'Ye goddess, not now!' the vampiress thought. The poker hand had ended too soon, she had sorely underestimated Master Hardlow's ability to lose money.

"Yes, Mai?" Virginia responded with any trace of urgency wiped from her voice.

"Just how long have ye known the bloody Captain anyway? I've some concerns about his bleedin' sanity I have. What did ye gets me inta wi' him?" Apparently the questions had been burning in the back of her mind awaiting the chance to strike. Virginia sighed, a purely voluntary act, the rat woman's sharp focused mind had switched course.

"Let us retire on deck and I'll tell you what I know," the vampiress offered.

A second bottle of rum was already being opened now that the game had ended, and Roger Pierce was heard to ask, "So, Ulrich, what's with them fancy kerchiefs anyway? What disservice did ya' have to do to deserve them?" The men laughed and Master Heisse began swapping a tall tale as the pair of women sauntered out.

The evening was cool, the waning moon straining towards it's high point. The breeze ruffled the vampiress's satin dress and the wererat's silk gi, both dead black. The pair blended into the shadows amidship, near the balustrade, with only pale skin showing in the moonlight. Annie Stark, alone at the helm, noted them and dismissed them, choosing instead to scan the waters ahead. Not that she needed to, she was sharing her trick tonight with Sara, who favored the crow's nest. The Captain had retired below, since he had first watch in the morning and had already been up too late adjusting his charts. Virginia noted the spectral glow far above on the main mast. Yes, Sara and Annie would both have seen them on deck and neither would concern themselves with the pair. Just two friends conversing, passing the time, much as they truly were.

"So," Virginia began, "you have concerns? He is a good man, I can assure you."

"Aye," Mai countered, "as bloody good as any I've known. Still, a good heart falls short if the mind is soft, don't it? I caught 'im talking ta' someone this eve, someone what weren't bloody there. He had the window wide open lettin' the bleedin' salt spray in just talkin' bollocks into the wind instead of workin' on his navigation he did. Said a descendant of his just dropped by wi' a whale fer him he did."

With an almost audible click a piece matched up in the vampiress's mind, so Gavin has been watching sternward and he has a whale following them. Fascinating.

“Possibly true, he has a lot of descendants. Did you, perhaps, hear any of the prior conversation?” Virginia knew she had, the little wererat had acute hearing, even for a shapeshifter.

“Twer muffled,” Mai's brow wrinkled in confusion, having been deflected from the offhand comment about Gavin's number of progeny, “as if far away. But when I stepped in he were right there at the portal. Curious.”

“Curious,” Virginia echoed. “Could you, by the way,” she prodded, “detect more than one voice?”

“Aye,” Mai paused to recollect a moment, “mayhaps. Methinks I mistook the other one for sea noises I did. They were talking about death, sacrifice, and a debt.”

“Hmmm, quite deep subjects.” Virginia switched from chess to fencing and parried Mai's further probing into the Captain's mottled past. “Sounds juicy. Did you catch any more of the conversation? Did anything else stand out?”

“Well, there were a wet spot, like from a naked arse, on the stern ledge when I looked out and closed the port. Ye think he's had a visitor, one that had ta' leave naked when I showed up?” Her eyes widened, “would his heart turn that quick?” Virginia laughed, light and musically like wind chimes, in dismissal.

“More likely he had a visitor who doesn't wear clothes, his story was most likely true. The print was, after all, wet. Perhaps the source came from the sea?” Virginia replied simply. “No worries, no need for concern. His mind is intact, I would have know it otherwise, his life is just complicated.”

Mai's eyebrow raised, “How bleedin' complicated?” ‘Careful now,’ Virginia thought, ‘almost there.’

“Why dear Mai,” the vampiress riposted with a flash of fang, “where's the fun in telling all the man's dark secrets? Isn't he worth a little discovery on your own? Wouldn't he be more fun to unwrap with an aura of mystery about him?” She grinned and added, “Besides, I don't know all his secrets; I have no idea where he got that crazy sword of his. Oh, and I've never slept with him- you're already ahead of me there.” The wererat blushed. Parry, touche', match over.

“Thank you, m'Lady, me mind be at ease now.” Mai slipped away, perhaps to discover a little more about her Captain before dawn. “Oh,” she added as she left, “tha' sword? He took it off his brother's corpse, or so he says.” Obscured by shadows Virginia raised an eyebrow and filed that tidbit away for later. Next time it would have to be she herself with the questions. She took a final look out over the waves, ‘What's out there following us, Gavin,’ she thought, ‘and whose pieces are they?’ Like mist flowing over the moors she followed her wererat companion below deck to find a certain mechanunculus.

She found the brass man in his cabin, borrowed book in hand. “Learning anything new about my kind?” Virginia offered. He was about two thirds through the one he now held, several more tomes

lay on the cot beside him. Not all of them were in English, as a matter of fact he held the only English one. He looked up. "How many languages do you read, Sonny?" she asked.

"Only two at the moment, English and Latin. I was told that I speak 'pidgeon' originally, which is a mixture of English, Dutch, and Spanish. I can generally extrapolate meanings of unknown words, especially romance languages." Virginia startled for a moment until she realized he meant Latin based languages. The deep resonance of his voice sounded natural when speaking of romance, but really, romance? He is a machine, a device. What could he know of passion, or desire? His dialog had continued unabated, "I shall have to acquire several more to finish these others," he indicated the books on the cot. "Perhaps tomorrow if my ship board duties are not too taxing." He spoke of learning languages like someone might speak of purchasing pastries. Ye Gods and Goddesses, what has mankind unleashed on the World now?

"So, you are adapting well then? You aren't missing the feel of your old power plant as much?" Virginia immediately felt bad about mentioning the replacement of his antiquated steam piston unit with a modern steam turbine. Apparently the loss still weighed on him, as he closed his book and dropped his shoulders. 'No,' she revised her earlier assessment of him, 'the body tells are there, only consciously added, as if by design. Almost as if to disarm one against him, or to blend in with real people.' Curiously she felt the desire to console him.

His patina brass hand went to his smooth bare chest, feeling where the 'heartbeat' would have been. "I can never forget, the information about it's feeling will never fade. None of my information fades with time, it is either there or not there." She sat down next to him, placing an arm around his cool broad shoulders and stroking his smooth cheek with her other hand. 'Dangerous,' she thought to herself on a higher level, 'he seems so vulnerable and yet could easily overpower me. I'm faster, but it's my only advantage, I can't even cloud his mind. Perhaps he even sees me as I truly am, without the false glamour of living flesh.' She paused at that thought, considering that he might perceive her as an animated corpse instead of a lovely young woman. She failed to note the faint change in Sonny, the tightening of his linkages, as he branched to a separate task. It was a sub-task that he had not accessed since his last night on the coffee plantation, just before he and Sheila had parted, and he flowed into it as smoothly as a real person would. Virginia was startled to find his cool brass lips pressed against hers, but even more surprised by her own response to pull him closer, running her hand down along his metal torso. Metallic digits blindly negotiated the unfamiliar corset laces. They whirled and clicked until the challenge was solved, leaving her pale skin covered in only a black satin chemise. The pair stood together, and Virginia's own long nailed fingers had no such difficulty with the drawstring on Sonny's pantaloons. They slid off of his posterior like cotton over polished brass. Virginia gasped, unnecessarily and involuntarily.

Of course he would have to be anatomically correct. Deep inside the mechanunculus steam pressure increased. The little turbine whined momentarily then idled back down as the extra head of steam was vented off, valved into long unused auxiliaries. The thin, magically enhanced plating over Sonny's member stretched taught. Steam pressure warmed and filled it, then vented back into the turbine which once again whined as it's speed increased. Long dead responses triggered inside the vampiress as well, responses usually reserved for feeding in midnight's children. Supernaturally strong arms grasped the brass man, lying him back down on the narrow cot facing up. Virginia slid down his polished exterior, feeling the warmth from the increased power radiating from him. 'Incredible,' she thought to herself, 'so much more like a real person than a machine, and yet so different from either.' It was her last coherent thought as she slid onto his thaumechanical erection. Instinct overtook her, long incisors glanced off of brass plating, scratching the patina and leaving bright brass shine through, razor

sharp fingernails scraped uselessly against the metal exterior of his back. She half expected to be injected with raw steam during climax, boiled from the inside in Sonny's unyielding embrace, destroyed, wiped from the chessboard and smashed on the ground never to be played again. She didn't care.

Hours later Virginia Matheson, vampiress of over two and a half centuries, looked back at the brass form still sitting on his narrow cot while hastily re-lacing her corset. He was drinking denatured alcohol, refueling, while his clockwork kept him functional during maintenance. She knew this because she had helped wind him, in the afterglow. He was dangerous for her, uncontrollable, unfathomable, and invulnerable. The pitiful scratches of her unbridled passion would attest to that, two barely noticeable scrapes in the soft patina of his neck, an involuntary response on her part backed by over two centuries of practice. Sonny had made her powerless to suppress the urge to feed, two centuries of self mastery shot to hell in one moment. 'Is it unnatural to make love to a mannequin?' she asked herself. Then, reconsidering, countered, 'Is it any more unnatural than making love with an animated corpse?' Too soon dawn would be upon her, she had frittered away half a nights plotting for a roll in the sack. 'Trollop,' she mentally kicked herself. This mechanunculus was as dangerous to her as any challenge she had ever faced, and she hoped to all the powers that he was what he seemed, for if he was not. She shuddered as she thought about it, finishing her hasty enrobement. Her dead lips quickly brushed the smooth patina of Sonny's brass forehead. "Till tonight?" he responded in his deep contralto. She simply nodded, unwilling to commit or unable to speak, she wasn't sure which. In the predawn half light the self created 'Lady Vampiress' made her way back to her own cabin and the cool dark safety of her waiting coffin.

11-Smoke on the Water

The steady dinging of the ship's clock awoke Captain Draegun shortly before dawn. At first he considered simply ignoring it, but being driven off of the Seven Fingers steam plant it wouldn't wind down, only become more insistent which would awaken the little wererat still entwined in his arms. Besides it was his trick at the wheel, and he was loathe to skip a watch. He smiled to himself at the idea that Mai might wish another go, then shuddered at the thought she would want to talk instead. Splitting the difference he decided to let her sleep, and so gently extricated himself from the puzzle of naked limbs. Washing up quickly, but quietly, he slipped out of his cabin unbuttoned, damp, and with his boots under one arm. Gavin nearly stumbled over an equally disheveled vampiress who was apparently returning to her own cabin after leaving the one occupied by the mechanunculus. Their eyes met. Both grinned sheepishly.

"Right then," Gavin offered into the awkward silence, "um, sleep well." Virginia nodded back while attempting to hold her unfastened clothing on and coyly cover her face simultaneously.

"Umm, hmm," she replied, apparently having lost the ability to speak. The pair passed in the tight passageway close enough to exchange scents and both smiled to themselves. Gavin made his way above deck as the lady's cabin door clicked shut behind him. Finally stepping on deck, the Captain stomped his boots on and finished buttoning his sea coat. He looked astern past the binnacle and ship's wheel where Anabel Stark stood on the poop deck gazing at him with one raised eyebrow.

"No bloody comment," he said gruffly. The morning was almost glorious enough to sweep away his grouchy mood, but even a fine Caribbean dawn couldn't give him any more sleep, or any less rum the night before. A few wispy clouds fled the growing predawn light toward the rising sun. The cool breeze tickled his beard and flounced his shirt before rising to fill the sails. Gavin climbed sternward to relieve Annie.

"We'll be tacking ta' starboard presently, Cap'n," the first mate offered, "Elsewise all's well. She's rolling right steady, steam's banked back ta' idle, a few ominous clouds ta' port that we should slide past within an hour or two." Gavin looked off the port bow where a blooming cumulonimbus was growing. Annie's assessment was correct, they would miss the thunderhead by leagues. He stepped to the wheel as Anabel released it, opened the binnacle to glance at the gauges, and took the traditional position of a ship's pilot. The first mate stepped away with her now familiar step-thump pace, but not before smelling the combination of rum and woman on her Captain. A knowing smile flashed across her lips and was quickly gone, apparently she now knew the source of the man's foul mood was a sleepless hangover.

"Get yer shut-eye early, Mistress Stark," the Captain advised, "I've a bad feeling about this day, as does Master Merriwether." She turned, spinning on her pegleg.

"Aye, Cap'n," she replied, "does it look that bad?"

"Time will be the tell of it, Mistress Stark. Sleep well but lightly." Annie thumped down the stairway and then below decks.

"Mister Pierce, where be ye?" the Captain bellowed toward the main deck. Because of his extra shift he would be working with the older werewolf instead of Ulrich this morning, and Mister

Brassman wouldn't be on until after lunchtime. He looked up into the rigging, spying a faint glow high in the crow's nest. Sara was there, offshift. She was spending a great deal of time up there, a welcome habit but Gavin was a touch concerned with her welfare. He would address that with his bo'sun once John came on deck.

Finally, from up near the bow, came a loud, "Here, Cap'n!"

Having located his deckhand Gavin bellowed back, "Stand to, Roger, we're coming about." His hands darted to the controls mounted in the binnacle as he began turning the great wheel to starboard and swinging the Seven Finger's bow away from the growing storm on the horizon.

"Captain, might I have a word with you?" Gavin didn't need to see the speaker to recognize the voice of John Merriwether, his bo'sun and magi.

"Aye," the Captain replied, "give us a moment, we're coming about." Gavin savored the slight delay as he finished turning the wheel, checked the binnacle mounted compass, adjusted the wheel, and fine tuned the sails once Roger had finished with the windlasses. Finally he turned to the bo'sun, who was standing patiently on deck as if he had rooted there. Finally Gavin said, "Aye, Master Merriwether, what be yer business?"

"The storm, Cap'n, is not a natural one." John offered. The Thaugmatologist's eyes didn't leave the distant thunderhead, and both he and Sara were staring off in that direction.

"Mehaps," thought the Captain to himself, "the two of 'em enjoyed gazing at clouds." The thought of Sara, still at her post, reminded Gavin of her growing fondness for isolation. "My thanks, Master Merriwether, I shall try to avoid the bleedin' thing. I do, however, have some concern over Mistress Merrick," Gavin said pointing upwards. "She seems to be spending a great deal of her offshift time in the crow's watch, alone, instead of interacting wi' the rest of the crew. I'm nay sure that's healthy, even for a spirit."

John's gaze broke from off the distantly brewing storm to glance upward to the crow's nest and the spectral crewman who manned it. Only for a heartbeat though, before his gaze returned to the distant grouping of ominous clouds once more.

"Sara is simply attempting to avoid interacting with our passengers, she doesn't want to upset any of them. You must remember Captain that she does not have to be physically present to carry on a conversation with someone. Last night she was part of a conversation with Phineas and myself while still remaining dutifully at her post." As if John's words were a cue Sara's disembodied voice interrupted the pair.

"Captain," came a rather loud but ethereal voice right in Gavin's ear. He jumped, no matter how often Sara did that he still couldn't quite get used to it. She should be off watch, relaxing, instead of standing in the crow's watch scanning the sea; even the dead needed their rest after all.

"Bloody hell, what is it, Mistress Merrick? Ye should be relaxing, ye know," he replied in a conversational voice. He knew wherever he was she could hear him from the crow's watch no matter how loudly he spoke, even though Sara forgot it worked the other way too. Although spoken lightly, his tone still carried his foul mood.

"Sorry, Captain," Sara said much more softly after realizing his unpleasant demeanor, "but you need to look off to port, coming out of the storm." Gavin raised his spyglass and aimed it at the thunderhead they were passing. There was a small dot, apparently an airship of undetermined make at this distance, closing on an intercept course with the Seven Fingers. Gwynrheged began to sing a battle reel in the Captain's head, indifferent to his already flagging good nature. Gavin's fingers leaped to the binnacle, sounding all-to-arms and bringing the steam plant to full head. He turned the ship's wheel to starboard to put more wind into the sails.

"Bloody hell," he mumbled, realizing it would take long minutes for the steam to come to battle pressure. Much louder he bellowed, "Look lively, Roger, we're making a run for it!" The werewolf began scampering about the deck, trimming the sails where needed to gain more speed. Crew appeared on deck, and Sonny approached the Captain. Before he could speak Gavin bellowed at him, "Secure yerself to the mizzen mast, Mister Brassman, I'll not have ye sliding overboard. Ye can help defend the wheel from there."

"Yes sir," the mechanunculus replied, and using a short length of rope deftly fastened himself to the mast. Once secure he queried, "Captain, we can't possibly outrun that airship, can we?"

"No, Sonny," Gavin replied, "but we can buy some time and tire her out in the process. Wind is free and easily available, airship fuel is not. A battle is about resources as much as strength and position."

"Fight the enemy where he is not," Sonny quoted. The Captain raised an eyebrow.

"Yer rather well read, Mister Brassman," he said, "mayhaps I can use that. Stay within earshot." The mechanunculus looked down incredulously at the bonds securing himself only a few feet from the man. He was about to comment when Roger put a cutlass in his hand.

"I am unschooled in the use of this device," he explained.

"Try to stick the pointy end in your opponent," the sailor offered, rushing off. The mechanunculus's oculars widened as if the rest of the crew had suddenly gone completely insane.

"Stick that," Gavin said, indicating Sonny's recently acquired blade, "in the deck boards at yer feet, close at hand. Use this," he tossed a loaded crossbow to the stunned crewman, "until they get close enough for the cutlass. Nae hard, really. Watch the rest of us and try not to overthink it, what?"

"Yes, Captain," the brass man responded.

"Mister Heisse, front and center," Gavin bellowed toward the deck. Ulrich left the forward crossbow he was readying and quickly approached.

"Aye, aye, Capitan," the blond werewolf offered. Gavin passed him the spyglass and indicated the approaching dirigible.

"What do ye make of that?" the Captain asked, hoping his father's profession gave the crewman some familiarity with airships. Ulrich put the telescope to his eye.

"She's small, definitely hydrogen, not helium, she's not big enough. Looks to be an older private ship, French made, twin turbine, perhaps Aeronautic Marmande. I see no flags or markings, but she is almost head on to us at present."

"Arms, man, what weapons can she carry?" Gavin asked, irritated.

"Not much, Captain, far less than the Fingers. If she gets within range a few incendiary quarrel will bring her down for sure."

"Make sure ye have them loaded then," the Captain said dismissively, "as you were." With a mumbled reply Ulrich passed back the spyglass and returned to his steam crossbow. The binnacle dinged twice, indicating that the Seven Finger's boilers were at full steam, and waiting. "Coming to port, Mister Pierce," Gavin bellowed. As he spun the great wheel widdershins, the sleek ketch pointed her bow across the path of the approaching airship. The crew watched the dirigible in silence punctuated by a few whispers and creaks as the deck mounted crossbow and ballistae tracked the invader. The air vibrated with the growing whine of its steam turbine engines, which changed pitch as it matched course and speed with the Seven Fingers safely out of bowshot. "Let's us find out if they wish to parley first," Gavin said. He moved one hand to the telegraph key as the other operated controls to aim the mizzen mounted signaling lamp. "Ahoy," he quickly tapped out, "be you warship or merchant?"

No reply came, but as if in response the rear door of the now broadside airship opened and two man sized objects rolled out. The Finger's crew watched in awe as almost immediately huge bat-like wings opened, catching the westerly breeze, and the now obvious creatures floated just below and starboard of the dirigible. Anabel, at the stern ballista, had her spyglass to her eye, "Bloody gargoyles," she whispered.

Hearing her, Gavin turned to Sonny. "Quick, lad, what know ye of gargoyles?"

The mechanunculus paused for a second. "They are a magically constructed animal, originally created from the fossilized remains of Cretaceous pterodon in a dark ages, misguided attempt to create dragons from dragon bones. When at rest, or 'asleep' they will return to their fossilized state, but when active or 'awake' they are flesh and blood. They are capable of procreation- they have bred true since their inception. Like the pterodactyl the gargoyle is incapable of launching itself and requires great height to become airborne, hence its attraction to sea cliffs and tall buildings. The resemblance ends there. Gargoyle are semi intelligent, capable of limited speech but not much higher thought, and incredibly tough. There are two main tribes of gargoyle, one deriving from the west coast of Wales and Ireland and the other from the east coast of England, around Dover. During the Norman conquest the eastern tribe was decimated, their survivors being expatriated to France under William the conqueror. Being in danger of extinction, the surviving eastern gargoyle were offered sanctuary by the Catholic church, and so since the late middle ages have frequented Gothic and Visigothic cathedrals and monasteries. Modern society ignores them, thinking them no more than grotesque statuary. The western tribe still inhabit remote areas of coastline along both shores of the Irish channel. I'm assuming that since this is a French manufactured craft that these are eastern tribe, and hence gentler and more civilized." Sonny paused for a second, as if compiling more information. Phineas's snort punctuated the silence.

"How do we bloody kill them?" Gavin half queried half growled out, before Sonny could unleash another monologue.

“Oh,” Sonny replied, “think of them as tough, winged footpads, Captain. We shall have to wear them down.” He processed for a split second and added, “oh, if they drop into open water they'll sink fast too, they have no swimming ability at all. They will turn to stone and sit on the bottom until recovered or destroyed.”

“Phineas do you...” Roger’s question rode right on the heels of the mechanunculus, and Gavin heard something in the werewolf’s tone that he never had before, strain.

“Yes, I see it, and I see it. I’ll hold until the drop then I’ll loose. Be prepared to shift on my signal.” Gavin was utterly aware that at that moment his first mate was staring at Phineas like he’d grown a second head. It wasn’t her fault of course, she still thought of Phineas as a good-humored, upbeat elf, who never had a cross moment in his life. Gavin naturally knew better. Still he couldn’t fault Annie for not seeing the truth of matters, nor criticize her for her not being aware of something, which was to him, perfectly obvious. The sidhe were fickle and unfathomable. There was a universe of difference between the Phineas that everyone saw, and the Phineas that now stood upon the ‘Finger’s’ deck. He was soulless, colder than a winter’s night; much colder than even the mechanunculus was.

“What’s the bleedin’ Perfessor muttering about?” Mai asked as she moved up closer to Gavin’s side, her apparent casualness belying that she was a coiled spring ready to launch itself in the blink of an eye.

“The airship is magically shielded and the hedge-mage on board is using this fact as cover to discharge spells to hamper us. John is frustrating said mage’s efforts. It is a traditional ‘Wizard’s Battle’.” Phineas replied, his body mirroring that of the wererat in his readiness for sudden and violent movement. He stood there bow up, fletching to ear, ready for instant release. His body otherwise still and motionless.

The gargoyles had used the time to close on the Fingers, passing high overhead. Several loud plops were heard as four corpses hit the main deck, dropped by the passing grotesques. They were the remains of four harbor seals.

“Macnamara,” Gavin whispered. “Boiler’s hot, Mister Heisse,” he bellowed, “they’re unfriendlies, bring ‘em down!” As soon as the gargoyles passed the shelter of the Finger’s sails Ulrich opened fire. Under a hail of steam flung quarrels they began shedding flakes of stone onto the deck and surrounding sea. Simultaneously the pair screeched and dove to attack.

Phineas released then, and released again, and again. The stream of arrows he belted forth was only a scant slower than that of the steam driven crossbow. The difference was that the elf’s arrows were aiming for a very specific point on one of the gargoyles. The first arrow struck the right most creature straight through the wing, and remarkably enough was split by the second, which was in turn divided by third, and that one by the fourth. With a violent thud the two gargoyles collided with each other, only to bounce apart after screeching and clawing at each other. The pair landed unceremoniously on the deck in a disorganized heap.

That didn’t last, unable to re-launch themselves from the ship’s deck they separated and began tearing into anything at hand. One of the creatures, the one with the injured wing, now enraged, headed straight for Phineas. The second gargoyle was more calculating. Looking about it located the ship’s

control center, the wheel and binnacle, and headed sternward. Seeing it Gavin bellowed, "Mistress Soon, the wheel!"

Unaccustomed to his tone, Soon Mai was stunned for a split second before grasping the great wheel. "What do I bloody do wi' it?" She yelled back.

"Hold it steady," the Captain responded, simultaneously drawing Gwynrheged from her sheath. By now the enchanted blade screamed in his already aching head. Gavin, wheel forgotten, closed with the gargoyle.

The beast, opening, lashed out with one open clawed hand. Gavin easily ducked under it, bringing Gwyn overhead in a chopping slice. Mithril met gargoyle flesh with a thunderclap, echoed by the approaching storm. The offending limb went skittering under the balustrade, over the side, and into the sea with a splash. The creature bellowed, adding to the Captain's aching head. "Fer bloody Macnamara," Gavin growled back.

The gargoyle, now more cautious, circled with the Captain fencing with it's remaining claws. Gavin parried, each strike of blade on stony arm sending granite chips across the deck. Unnoticed by the beast, less than an armspan away still tied to the mizzen mast, Sonny Brassman aimed his borrowed crossbow at it's head. Gavin grinned at the mechanunculus and nodded. Sonny released the quarrel pointe-blanc, ripping a large chunk of stone loose that was the side of the creature's head and it's ear. Enraged, it turned on it's new attacker. Sonny met it's massive stony paw with his own mechanical brass hand, and the two fists held momentarily in a battle of strength. The mizzen mast that Sonny was tied to groaned, then began cracking. His other brass hand went for the gargoyles eyes, but met only air.

Gavin, with a single mighty thrust, had struck the beast's head from it's shoulders. The head, now turned back to stone, rolled a short distance. The mechanunculus was trapped in a granite embrace against the failing mizzen mast. The Captain turned to the second attacker, only to see that master Facinock and his bo'sun had matters well in hand.

It took him a moment to realize this as the first sight to greet his eyes was Sara helping a battered shifted Roger back to his feet. The flakes of stone under his claws testifying to his going to-toe with the creature and had been sent to the railing for his efforts. The second sight to greet his eyes, was that of Professor Merriwether leaning over a half kneeling gargoyle, grim enraged finality etched on his face, his left arm holding the long creatures good arm behind it at an impossible angle, his right transformed into a mind warping marriage of stone and fire to rival any volcano. Gavin got a good view of the gargoyle then, huge parts burned and cracked like bacon left overlong in the pan, it's left arm shredded and just barely hanging on. There were other wounds beside, places where it looked as though gouges were made by claws, Rogers work no doubt. That's when Gavin spied the remains of exotic symbols half carved, half branded into the gargoyles chest and shoulders.

John was working magic, but to what end? Gavin became aware that the thaughmatologist was drawing on Phineas to add to his capacity to spellcaste, but what happened next set his nerves on edge. "You swore an oath with heavens outcaste." John Merriwether roared, righteous indignation lacing every word. The banshee-like wail that rolled across the deck had Gavin's first mate and even Soon Mai slowly edging back. "For forsaking oaths with God and man, for swearing yourself into service of the dammed, I declare you unfit for existence. Your punishment is therefore..." John placed a glowing palm on the thing's chest. "Oblivion."

With that the howls of the gargoyle stopped with incredible finality. The gargoyle rippled the way water ripples when disturbed by a heavy object and then was gone. Gone as if it had never flown over the ship, as if it had never been shot by arrows, as if it were never there at all.

“Well done,” Phineas said quietly. His face becoming impassive. John then went to the wereseals scattered across the deck, callously kicking one to the side as he he moved.

“Steel had no bloody lasting affect on them.” Soon Mai, as if to herself, her tones sounding half dazed. Gavin only glanced at her briefly, his mind busily dealing with the implications of what he had witnessed, what he was still witnessing. John was reaching down, lifting one of the limp forms of one of the harbor seals from off the deck. His grip was as soft and tender as though he was holding his own babe in his grasp; you couldn’t tell of course from the expression he wore.

“Permission to go below Captain, this one can be saved, and I can work far more easily in my cabin.”

Gavin approached John, touching the creature lightly. “He calls himself 'Son of the Sea'. Speak it in any language and he'll know it. His pod is gone, he may not last the night without them no matter what magic you use. If he does survive it will be as only part of a creature, unless another pod adopts him; not bloody likely in the Caribbean. I'm no sure saving him will be a favor, but carry on Master Merriwether. May Bridgette forgive us if we err.” Pointing at the receding dirigible and turning towards the bow he yelled, “Mister Heisse, I want tha' bastard!”

“She’s too far out of range, Cap'n.” Ulrich stated angrily, “I tried hitting her with the steam bow, but she moved out of bow shot shortly after discharging the gargoyles.”

“Maybe...” Phineas said half to himself, his hand reaching into his pack and producing an arrow of curious make. From the sound of his voice, he seemed to be talking more to himself than anyone else. “Just maybe.” The round had the long shaft typical of any ordinary arrow, but near the head it had a second set of fletchings, made of wood, which rested snug against the arrow shaft. The head was longer too, and more round than what was typical. Also, to add to the curiosity, there was a thin cord of twine wrapped round the arrow starting just under the wooden fletchings. With a sudden motion, Phineas put arrow to string, pulled string to ear, all in a single motion. His left thumb tightened on the bow for an instant, and Gavin saw a small stream of flame, produced at the tip of his finger. The cord lit, Phineas launched the arrow at the fleeing airship. The projectile had just reached the limits of it’s flight, and Gavin expected it to begin it’s spiral to the waves, when the shaft burst apart. The head of the arrow shooting out with a trail of fire behind it, like a meteorite falling from the heavens.

“Magic?” Anabel asked, with more than just a bit of confusion in her voice.

“A Chinese powder of carbon and saltpeter,” Phineas promptly replied. Soon Mai smiled knowingly as he explained further, “When it burns it propels it's container forward. Your mortal science prevails where magic failed.” Indeed science did prevail as the small projectile tore through one of the airship’s lines, connecting gasbag to gondola undercarriage, and continued on to tear a sizable gash into the gasbag proper before disappearing inside. “Now watch, the powder burns hot enough to ignite hydrogen.”

A burst of flame shot forth from out of the torn region, like the breath of a dragon. “Burn ye bloody bastards!” Soon Mai shouted with adulation thick in her voice. Within minutes the entire dirigible was engulfed and dropped into the sea.

Sara heartily agreed with Soon Mai’s sentiment, she too wanted the ‘bastards’ to burn. Anyone that tried to hurt her friends deserved, nay, was asking for such a fate. The combination of magical warding, hedge magician, and Gargoyles, seemed as rotten to her as what one would find in a midden heap.

The long low ominous rumble of distant thunder pulled Sara from her musings, and she almost smiled at the startled surprise on Annabel’s face. Gavin looked toward the storm. “Roger, go below and pull some tarps from ship’s store, we will need to wrap these three up. They deserve a proper burial, and we dunna have the time to do it here.”

Phineas had both of his hands on the remains of the gargoyle pinning Sonny to the mizzen mast. Spirals of color swirled over the stone of the thing as it warped and altered, much like the other one, under the magical assault. Finally the trapped mechanunculus was freed from the granite embrace of it’s slain adversary. With a groan and a heave Ulrich and Wilkes had the thing over the side in short order.

“The hedge magi left us a parting gift Captain, in the form of a spell,” Phineas said, “The spell is not his, but created by another. His demise has, however, weakened the storm and slowed it down. It may give us enough time to run and keep us on the edge of it when it hits. No promises though.”

“Master Facinock,” the Captain interjected as he eyed the approaching storm, “tis a moot point. We’ll no be outrunning that wi’ one mast.” Turning to the crew in general he bellowed, “Look lively, we’re in for a blow. Tie down everything what ain’t part o’ the ship, batten the hatches, strike the sails, and dog the ports!

Sara saw no point in standing around invisible, the deck needed to be secured. The specter leaped to the task, flying, literally, to Sonny’s side, “You secure the crossbow Mr. Brassman, and I’ll secure the ballistae along with the rest of the ammunition.” She waited just long enough to gain his affirmative, before starting on her own tasks.

Roger had obviously returned to the deck, as the werewolf was busily aiding in securing the deck for a rough storm, and Fitch and Wilkes were busy wrapping up each corpse in a tarp and taking them below.

“I can remain up here, Captain,” Anabel offered, “we will definitely need to take breakfast in shifts. We’ve got about thirty minutes, give or take, before things start getting ugly.”

“Nae, Mistress Stark, see to the passengers,” he said. “Front and center, Mister Facinock,” Gavin bellowed. His attention was on the ship’s controls, fortunately they already had a full head of steam in the boiler, they would need it to ride out the storm on auxiliaries. As the crew struck the sails he was tightening the rigging with the steam windlasses, securing the lines.

“Aye, Captain,” the elf replied, confronting him.

“See what ye’ can do to soften the storm’s blow, what?”

“As advised, Captain. I shall make it so.” Phineas started walking cross deck, his hands never ceasing their motions in the air, the crystals light giving his movements odd after images.

“Phin,” Soon Mai began, her tone sounding oddly tentative, “did the bloody seals have anything to do with the spell?”

“Yes Mistress Soon, they did.” Phineas's response was immediate and without hesitation, and even had a hint of his old jovialness in it.

“Three! it’s always got to be bloody three!...” Mai exclaimed.

“Five.” If the elf’s retort could not have ended Mai’s rant any more completely or more utterly.

“What do you mean bloomin' five? It's never bloomin' five,” she replied.

“The spell that was activated requires five individuals, all who were willing, or expected, to die. I cannot say exactly, although I can guess, what the expectation for death was for all five, but I’d probably just be guessing. Three of the deaths were provided by three of the four beings dumped on the deck moments ago. What is more, I know that the fourth, the one that is still alive, did not expect to die, and thus is the reason why that one is still alive.” He had made to the other side and had just turned around, arms still in the air, hands making invisible circles, when he finished with “Any other orders Captain?”

By now the rigging was stowed, the sails furled and struck, and Fitch was dogging the last hatch amidships. The Captain surveyed the deck, slowly scanning for any issues, before answering. “Aye, Phineas. Go below, make sure all is secure, and for the love of all that's holy keep Fitch from cooking anything. Mister Wilkes, take Mister Brassman and survey the holds and bilges. Fasten down anything that moves. Mistress Merrick?”

Interrupted from her thoughts the ghost answered, “Aye, Captain?”

“Check on John and assist as needed. The rest of ye' stand fast and comfort the passengers. Make it so, people,” the Captain ordered. The crew scurried off to comply. Gavin turned the great wheel, spinning the ship about. Like a wounded, cornered beast, Seven Fingers turned on her attacker, teeth bared to confront the storm. “Nunc tenemus spiritus, avuncul,” Sara heard Gavin whisper to himself.

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The Seven Finger's rigging had been humming in the wind for a good ten minutes before the first wave crested her bow. Her response to the helm was sluggish, due in part to the damaged mast but more-so to the fact that all of her sails were struck. Instead of dancing on the water she was now forced to wallow through it under steam power like a cargo barge. The waves began to pound the ketch, her timbers groaning in protest with each strike. Every now and again, the winds would roll wrong. The rain was slapped sideways as if by some unseen force, the waves walloped flat into a near image of calm. The wrongness would only last a heartbeat though, before rain, wind, and wave went back to hammering on the hull. Gavin kept her nose into the weather as she seemed to crawl near over every wave, her little auxiliary steam plant crying in protest. Higher and ever higher she climbed as each one

passed and between each the Fingers would race into the trough to gain the speed necessary to confront the next.

The sky roiled angrily, spewing cold rain and sometimes light hail at Captain and ship alike. The storm lit the deck at odd intervals with flashes of lightning accompanied by thunder that literally shivered the Seven Finger's timbers. Gavin was lashed to the great wheel, his sea coat flapping wildly in the wind as he piloted the ship. He had been through worse, as had the ship, but not by much, and with a sound ship to boot. Now both ship and crew were battle worn. Roger, the only other crew on deck, worked his way back to the helm from amidship where he'd had to tie off a line.

"Cap'n," he yelled over the storm as he clipped his carabiner to the binnacle. Getting his Captain's attention, Roger pointed up to the mizzen mast.

"Aye," Gavin bellowed back, "she'll no last in this shite!" As if in answer, the weakened mizzen mast gave a loud groan. It snapped off about head's high from the deck where the gargoyle had cracked it, and with a twanging cacophony of snapping cables it went over the side, trailing bits of rigging. The pair looked at each other blankly. Gavin reached into his coat, pulled his flask out, took a long draw of rum from it, and passed it to Roger. "A blessing, lad," he yelled, "Tha' neither of us followed it into the sea." The crewman took a swig and passed it back.

As the Seven Fingers crested it's current wave the winds turned crosswise to it, snagging the flask from Gavin's hand and hurling it over the side. He grasped at the wheel with a curse, bracing himself against the rolling deck, but too late. The howling gusts gripped the ship and turned it abeam to the wave with both Captain and crewman fighting to right the wheel. The ketch slid down into the trough sideways to certain doom, sure to be rolled over and sent to the bottom by the next wave.

It never came. The roiling sea became glass like. The screaming winds were held at bay like a spinning wall less than a stones throw from the balustrade. Rain still fell, but softly and straight down from an eerily greenish sky instead of wind driven and horizontal. "Tha's not bloody natural," Gavin exclaimed. "Jake, nip below and ask John or Phineas ta' join us."

"This do be bad," the wide eyed werewolf drawled in a half whisper before responding in a normal tone, "Aye, Captain, I'll do just that." He unclipped and headed below deck. Gavin turned the ship, putting a safer distance between it and the wall of winds. The Finger's, still under steam power, chugged along happily, seeming little surprised to not be resting on the bottom of the sea after all.

With the ship not being tossed about wildly, several of the passengers and crew ventured on deck. One of Virginia's olympian sarcophagus bearers headed straight to the balustrade to feed the fish while the other tormented him. Phineas and Annabel each took a stance on either side of the helm with the Captain between them. Soon Mai stood a pace behind his left shoulder, arms crossed, as if daring either of them to accost him.

Now, with a little distance between ship and winds, Gavin could see that they rested in an circular opening inside the raging storm. They were trapped here, the Seven Fingers could not survive another storm crossing. Near the center, perhaps dead center, was what appeared to be another vessel. The Captain put glass to eye and scanned it.

It was gray, not painted that color, but lacking color altogether. It was a small three master, slightly larger than the fingers, with no sails out, and archaically rigged. It didn't seem to have a steam

plant, or it wasn't using it, as there was no trace of smoke. There was no trace of life aboard it at all. The ballistae she sported were small, little more than deck mounted crossbows, and several were damaged. By now the Fingers was just outside of bowshot, and like a well oiled mechanism her crew had already un-dogged her armament and trained it at the 'other'. Staying out of range, Gavin circumnavigated the other ship, which remained stationary except for a slight spin, as if pinned to the exact center of the storm's eye. Here, at the center, the cold rain had stopped. In its place was a humid heaviness to the air. The Captain and crew watched her in silence, only the chugging of the Fingers' steam engine and the creak of her rigging and timbers marked their passing. Finally, across her stern, they could just make out the name 'Onverschrokken'.

"Ahoy, Onverschrokken," Annabel bellowed unbidden, shattering the eerie silence. The rest looked at her, startled by the sound of her booming voice. Gavin considered saying something flippant, but before it came to mind she said in a quite normal voice, "What? Someone had to bloody do it, and everyone else was all hush-hush and agog."

"Well, if they didn't know we was bleedin' here they do now," Mai interjected.

"I believe," Phineas observed, "that was the point." Annie, surprised, smiled in agreement.

"Who wants to go a-courtin'?" Gavin asked, "Volunteers?" Catching a glint in Ulrich's eye he added, "Annabel, yerself, Mister Fitch, and Mister Heisse are excluded on account of the Diablo debacle." The younger werewolf's shoulders slumped.

"Aye, sir," Annie added dejectedly.

"I'll go as the muscle," Roger offered.

John stepped on deck and looked at Phineas, their eyes meeting in the way that Gavin finally realized was a form of communication, perhaps even telepathy. Phineas said, "Great, I get to be the brains again. I'll go, Captain." By now the ships were abeam, their decks roughly at the same level, and so with Ulrich's help the boarding party slid a long plank between the two vessel's balustrades and lashed it down.

Catching John's attention while the crew worked, Gavin asked, "how's our passenger, Mister Merriwether?"

"It sleeps," came the wizard's reply.

"So, it's going to make it then?" Gavin responded. He found that he was getting used to digging information from the man, and oddly rather enjoyed the challenge.

"Time, and the creature's will to live, will be the tell."

"So wait and see it is then," the Captain replied.

"It is out of my hands," John said cryptically, crossing his arms and turning to watch the Onverschrokken. Gavin was left to guess at the implications and omissions, especially the use of 'it' and 'the creature' instead of 'him'. Perhaps there was little hope for poor Macnamara after all.

"They have found the only thing of value aboard the derelict," John said unbidden, and then returned to stony silence.

"Right, then, we'll be on our way," Gavin replied flippantly. "Oh, wait, we're trapped. We've bloody nowhere else to go."

"Have you seen that bleedin' thing?" Mai said as she returned from the balustrade. "Got barnacles and shite all over it, like it's been sittin' on the bloody bottom o' the sea it has!"

"A hundred and fifty years, judging from way she's rigged," Gavin offered.

"Yes, a shipwreck lifted to the surface for a sole purpose," John added. The listeners waited for the rest, but the bo'sun was once again silent.

"That purpose being?" Gavin prompted. About then Phineas and Jake returned with a fairly fresh parchment and an antique Dutch dagger.

"Messenger," was all John said as Phineas passed the note to the Captain.

"Found it tacked to the main mast with this," Roger said holding up the blade. "Can I keep the pig sticker?"

Remembering the last trifle someone tried to lift from a captured ship the Captain raised his eyebrow at John. The bo'sun nodded back and Gavin said, "Carry on, Mister Pierce, tis yours." Thinking that he could certainly get used to this non-verbal communication with the magus, Gavin turned his attention to the parchment note.

"Captain Draegun," it began,

"There is but one way and one way only for the Seven Fingers and her company to escape this trap, you must leave the Vampiress, Virginia Matheson, behind. You may leave her on this vessel, without another living or undead soul aboard, or cast her into the sea. It matters not how she leaves, only that she is not aboard, and the rest who embarked on this voyage are, when the Seven Fingers touches the wall-of-winds. Our quarrel is not against yourself and your ship. The other course will be to stay inside until the storm makes landfall, dashing the ship and her company against whatever shore she strikes. Your choice, really."

Gavin's eyes grew wide as he read the last, "Sincerely, Jon d'Arcy."

"That incredible bleedin' bastard," Mai said. Apparently she had been reading over the Captain's shoulder.

"What's it say, Cap'n?" Annabel asked. Her question was echoed, muttered by all on deck, crew and passengers alike.

Gavin folded the letter and slipped it into his sea coat. "Say's we need to talk, after dusk when all o' us are awake. We've been given some time, and some collective decisions, so let's us rest and get supper firstwise, it's been a long day. Roger, get some rest and stay out of the galley, I don't want my last meal prepared by the likes o' you, no offense. Mistress Stark, you and Mistress Soon can have the

watch. Keep the boiler hot, we may need the extra steam. Mister Brassman can assist Mister Heisse in the galley. Mistress Merrick, you seem to like the crows watch, make sure nothing sneaks up on us; not bloody likely in this hole but we canna be too cautious, what.” Turning to his bo'sun Gavin said, “Master John, see if yourself and Phineas can figure us a way out o' this mess. Make it so, people.” With that the Captain un-lashed himself from the helm and headed to his own bunk for some much needed rest.

Sara Merrick, or the spirit that had been Sara Merrick, if that made any difference, gave her affirmation at Gavin's command the same as most of the rest of the crew, even though she was nearly certain that he didn't hear it. The man looked like a washcloth that had been used to clean a parlor floor with, just after an army of coalminers had marched through, come home from the mine for supper. Worn, run out, very wet, and dirty. Perhaps he'd be fortunate to have some pleasant dreams. Sara hoped so. She went from hovering an inch and a half above the deck, to being in the Crow's Nest. Her form, unobservable to all save magi and elf, was in a lounging pose, head propped on hand, stretched in a languid posture upon an invisible settee.

‘That's strange .’ Sara's mental approximation of vocalization seemed as puzzled as she felt. Obviously, there was something unusual that might be going on beneath the waves, or else Phineas wouldn't have asked her to watch their activity. Still, oddities, even when somewhat expected, can still be intriguing when actually observed. “Phineas,” she spoke to him from the crows nest, “the fish closest to both ships are swimming in a circular pattern round the vessels, as though they are either held in place, or compelled to do so. The fish near Onverschrokken are moving widdershins, those around the Fingers deosil.”

“That's informative.” Sara was hoping for more, and given the way in which Phineas imparted his response to the news, gave her the impression that more would be forthcoming. She was sadly mistaken.

12- Right in the Eye

The ship's galley, tiny though it was, was made even smaller by the presence of the entire crew and company of the Seven Fingers, save one. The Captain was still in his cabin even though he had been called at dusk, and again for supper. "Should I go and bloody get him?" Soon Mai asked for the fourteenth time.

"No," Virginia replied, her voice showing no hint of her irritation with the wererat's impatience, "he'll come out when he's ready. He has a Captain's decision to make, and not an easy one." The vampiress, of course, knew the contents of the letter having been briefed by Mai as soon as she had risen. The contents were also known to Sara, and thence John Merriwether and Phineas. Sonny had been made privy by Virginia, and Roger had gotten the meat of it from Phineas and shared it with Ulrich and Fitch. Fitch had told Ben Wilkes. Suffice to say that the only ones who didn't know at least a little of the letter's contents were the First Mate, due to no one wanting to break the news of its author, and the recently acquired passenger, due to the fact that the selkie was still unconscious. Soon Mai started to open her mouth again, but a look from the vampiress delayed the fifteenth offer to retrieve Gavin. For the moment, anyway.

~

Gavin looked out the stern windows of his cabin, but he wasn't seeing the sea, encircling storm, or the derelict riding silently nearby. His eyes looked back into his past, to the times too numerous to recall when he awoke as the sole survivor of a catastrophe or devastating battle. His hand stroked the balustrade, remembering not only the companions lost but the Finger, his first ship, and the five that followed her into Poseidon's quiet depths. Could he leave a dear friend to face her fate alone, or send the rest into certain doom. Would he awaken on some distant beach, battered and half dead, with the Seven Fingers and her company little more than a memory?

Was there anything, he asked himself, that he could have done differently? The only thing he could think of was not knocking on Marie d'Aquitain's door, not rolling her in the sand that fateful night. He wouldn't have been sent on this fool's errand, or the one before. Of course he wouldn't have met Phineas, Roger, Fitch, Ulrich, Ben, Annie, or the rest. Sara would still be a zombie slave. His crew wouldn't be facing doom with him, but he would never have been reunited with Naomi or met her daughter. Doctor Morgan would still walk the Earth. The Captain sighed to himself, "I was supposed to be the 'party prince'," he mumbled out to the sea.

His options were to do as d'Arcy demanded, leave Virginia behind and possibly escape the storm. Another option would be to ride inside the eye of the storm until they reached land, possibly the best acceptable option, and hope that most of them would survive and reach land. The third possibility would be to challenge the storm, sail the Seven Fingers into certain death with everyone aboard. The last option, and most desirable to him personally, would be to leave the crew and passengers aboard the Onverschrokken with enough supplies and food to make landfall, and then challenge the storm alone. That challenge might break the spell and free the derelict. Of course it might kill them all.

Either way, he was certain that he would awaken on some distant shore battered and half dead, and in a few years the Eight Fingers would sail under him. His current companions would be yet more memories for him to carry forward, more karma to drag upon his soul. With a last look out at the sea Captain Draegun turned to the door and his crew.

The muted chatter died as the Captain edged his way into the crowded galley. All eyes turned his way. "Right," he began, "seems we're in quite a pickle. There's no easy way to do this, no gentle kindness to offer, only tear the bandage off quick and help with the healing. Mistress Stark," Gavin held out the letter, "please read this to the crew and accept my apology in advance." The First mate came forward and stood beside her Captain.

With a raised eyebrow Anabel took the document and unfolded it. "Captain Draegun," she read with a nod to Gavin,

"There is but one way and one way only for the Seven Fingers and her company to escape this trap, you must leave the Vampiress, Virginia Matheson, behind. You may leave her on this vessel, without another living or undead soul aboard, or cast her into the sea. It matters not how she leaves, only that she is not aboard, and the rest who embarked on this voyage are, when the Seven Fingers touches the wall-of-winds. Our quarrel is not against yourself and your ship. The other course will be to stay inside until the storm makes landfall, dashing the ship and her company against whatever shore she strikes. Your choice, really."

Annie's lip quivered, her eyes teared as she read, still out loud but quietly, "Sincerely, Jon d'Arcy." Gavin folded an arm around her, drawing her into the warm depth of his sea coat, giving her time and comfort. The letter fell to the deck forgotten.

"We have some decisions to make together," Gavin said to the rest. "I'll no leave anyone, especially a friend or crewmate, to face whatever comes alone. Particularly if it's what some bastard wants." There was murmured agreement. "Mister Merriwether, if I sail the Fingers out of here alone, leaving the rest of you aboard the Onverschrokken will it end the spell? I mean, if d'Arcy and the magus what cast this trap were actually aboard the mystery derry and now gone?"

"The spell that holds us inside this storm is autonomous and now unguided. It will only conform to it's master's initial wishes, and without the master to inform us of those we have only that scrap of parchment for guidance." Having stated what everyone already knew John crossed his arms once again.

"So it's probably no then." Gavin sighed, adjusted the First Mate still wrapped in his arm, and continued, "We have a few other options. First,"

"I'll do it," Virginia stated flatly.

"You will not," Gavin retorted sharply.

"That's what the bastard bloody wants!" Mai added, turning on the vampiress.

"I'd bloody gut him m'self if he were still alive," the Captain heard Annie whisper hoarsely to herself under his greatcoat as the room devolved into many voices, each one offering a reason, pro or con, to the vampiress's offer.

After several minutes the room grew silent to the loud rhythmic banging of a brass palm against a wooden table. "That's enough, Sonny," Virginia said. The banging stopped, leaving only pregnant

silence. Turning to her companions she said, "That is what d'Arcy *said* he wanted. Knowing Gavin, as he obviously must, that is what he will least expect. He would expect Gavin to sail off into the storm alone after leaving us behind, thus neutralizing both Gavin and the Seven Fingers. Feint and parry, the man was a fencer after all. I suggest we change the game to poker," she winked at Soon Mai. "We may still have an ace up our sleeve. Mister Brassman here," she indicated the mechanunculus seated closely beside her, "is neither a living nor undead soul, nor did he actually embark on this journey as he was loaded on as cargo at that point. My suggestion is to leave us two, along with my sarcophagus, rigging to make the Onverschrokken seaworthy, some navigational books, fuel for Sonny and anything else we need, behind. Confront the wall aboard Seven Fingers. He may be a bastard, but d'Arcy was noble. He would be a man of his word, no matter how twisted that word is."

At those last words Annie looked at the vampiress through reddened eyes. Sensing the obvious but unspoken question Virginia said, "Yes, Anabel. What he expected would be yourself as the obvious choice to be in command of whatever refugees remain aboard the derelict Onverschrokken as Gavin and the Seven Fingers sailed to their doom. He expected your safety, and he set you up to play the hero. To that end we can only assume the Onverschrokken to be seaworthy."

"Twisted goatshanker," Soon Mai muttered in awe.

"Yup," Roger drawled. "What about the brass man? He can't handle a blade, and barely handle a crossbow. Don't know if he could rig a ship either, let alone navigate or pilot. Lots of blue water out there."

"I was designed to perform complicated tasks with minimal instruction time. If I am given detailed information I can perform almost any activity," the mechanunculus explained.

"So," Ulrich began, "What can't you bloody do then?"

"I can only duplicate a task or activity, I am incapable of initial creation," Sonny replied. "This prevents me, even with all of my own diagrams and documentation memorized, from duplicating myself." This time it was the vampiress's turn to raise an eyebrow.

"You know how to create another mechanunculus?" Virginia asked. "Have you been trying?"

John Merriwether cleared his throat, stalling the brass man's reply. "Perhaps," he began, "since it seems you'll be leaving us soon, Sonny, you should reveal our work?"

Sonny rose, "Yes, the timing of the revelation will be fortuitous." The mechanunculus left the galley without another word, wending his brass form between the packed bodies.

"Well," the Captain began, "while he's gone we'll have to figure a way to train him. Roger, ye can give him a little rigging instruction. I'll teach him crossbow. Anabel, if ye're up to it, ye can teach him basic navigation. 'Twill be good for ye. Sara,"

"Aye Cap'n," came the ethereal reply.

"The best training is to teach. Teach him what ye know of swordsmanship. Can anyone think of anything else he may need?" Gavin asked. There were several murmurs, but nobody spoke up. "Right then, we'll make it so."

Sonny returned with a disembodied brass leg, interrupting the discussion. “This,” he began, “was a beginning replication of my locomotion system, a trial effort only. It was the ensuing discussion of it with Professor Merriwether that led to the leap of creation I am apparently incapable of.” He turned and presented the leg to Annie. “Mistress Stark, ma'am, please accept this gift. It is designed to be as much a part of you as my own are to me.”

“Thank you,” Anabel replied, taking the leg. Her brows wrinkled slightly as she looked at the brass man and the bo'sun, “thank you both.”

~

(my apologies in advance to Ann & Nancy Wilson of Heart)

Heading out this morning into the mist
Riding on the rolling waves, little darling' bitch
Cold rains caress her, Her lover it seems
Oh, Annie, Steamshank Annie, Captain Bitch of dreams.

Sitting in a darkened alehouse alone with her grog
No one knows the lonely one whose head's in a fog
Storm clouds above her, Her lover it seems
Oh, Annie, Steamshank Annie, Captain Bitch of dreams.

Sad faces painted over with those magazine smiles
Heading out to somewhere won't be back for a while
Won't be back for a while....

~

Annie Stark sat on the rack in the First's cabin, her cabin. It was smaller than the Captains by more than half, but still larger than the crew got, especially poor Ulrich who had been moved to a hammock in the fo'castle. The dying sea creature, she was unsure exactly what it was, now rested comatose in Ulrich's bunk. Funny, it wasn't that long ago she would have considered a harbor seal good eating. Werewolves, wererats, zombies, spectres, and the like were the stuff of nightmares and myth. Now she considered them friends, even Sara, though the ghost could be a right pain in the arse at times.

She swayed slightly with the rolling deck, more pronounced now that she only had one foot on it. Her peg leg was lying next to her on the gingham coverlet like an incongruous exclamation point to her life so far. The shiny brass leg she held was well formed, the sensuous feminine curve of it almost pornographic, the smooth warmth of it even more so. It was much lighter than expected, they must have done something magical to the brass similar to what Sonny had himself. She compared it to her own flesh and bone leg. Singular, leg, as it was the only one she had left. They were, of course, a perfect match. A smile crossed her face, she had never thought of her own leg as a sensuous work of art, yet when sculpted in brass it took on a whole new dimension. The mechanunculus had a good eye, he had never measured her for the fit nor even consulted her. Perhaps, she pondered, it was John Merriwether who had eyed her leg, he had collaborated with Sonny. No, though John had an eye for the ladies, and many of them for him, he hadn't this attention to detail. The mechanical precision had to be the brass man's doing.

Anabel slipped the soft leather cup of the brass leg's cradle over her own scarred stump, fastened the leather support harness, and stood up. She almost fell, then remembered that she needed to

fuel and prime the damn leg before she could actually walk. Sitting back down, she opened the almost indistinguishable maintenance port near the top of the metal limb. After filling it with both water and alcohol and igniting it's tiny flame per Mister Brassman's instruction she once again stood.

She had spent her life aboard ship, the gentle swaying of the deck was more familiar to her than solid land. Her body compensated naturally, fluidly, with the motion. The new leg hissed and creaked quietly, responding to her will as it added it's rhythm to the complicated dance that was referred to as 'sea legs'. "Not too shabby," Annie muttered. She took three steps, crossing the small cabin, turned and walked back with a mechanical hiss, click, thump, creak sound.

Annie sat back down and pulled her canvas breeches over new leg and old, covering sensuous curves and silken undergarments alike. Her sea boots were stamped on, then broad sword belt and seacoat. Her broad brimmed hat with a single plume completed the transformation. In several short moments Annie was once again gone and Mistress Stark stood before her in the small mirror over her wash stand, on her own two legs. "Not too bloody shabby at all," she said to her reflection. "Watch out, world, Ol' Peggy be gone and Steamshank Annie's now on deck."

~

"Mistress Stark," she heard the Captain greet her as she stepped above. The midnight deck was lit from above by what seemed to be one of John's or perhaps Phineas's glowing balls suspended magically above it. Shadows hovered near the edges, around the balustrades, mingling with the evening mists. Somewhere in the darkness she knew the Onverschrokken drifted corpse-like. She climbed up to the poop deck with the now familiar hiss-click-thump of her new stride.

"Captain," Anabel replied. He looked ragged, worn. No wonder, considering what he had been through the past few days would have killed lesser men several times over. She knew damn well that with all of her own skill she couldn't have brought the Seven Fingers into the storm that now imprisoned them. She knew she couldn't take it out either, and although she could have made the decisions he had, she was sure that those decisions would have worn on her much harder.

Sonny was crossing blades with Sara while the crew watched. He deflected every thrust, powerfully. His cutlass was in the way every time the specter struck, but only in the way. He did not press his attack. Faster and faster the practice blades whirled, Sonny's reach was moving ever more noticeably away from his center. Anabel, novice that she was, could see it. Sara, also far from a blademistress, had to be doing it on purpose. Finally, the flat of the ghost's cutlass clanged against the side of Sonny's brass cranium. The mechanunculus stopped abruptly, as if stunned. "Fight back, dammit!" Sara blurted. Then softer she added, "Sorry, Sonny, I don't know what got into me. Why won't you attack?"

"I am to defend myself, correct? Why is it now necessary to attack as well? It is not my intention to hurt you," he responded in his deep contralto with a faint shudder of his head.

"She's already dead, Sonny," Gavin offered, "ye canna hurt her with a material cutlass. I believe that ye misunderstood the defend bit as well. The general idea of fencing is to stick your blade into the other guy whilst keeping him from sticking his blade into you. Ye got half o' it, lad."

"I am covered in magically reinforced brass plating, she can not stick the cutlass into me," Sonny observed.

“Aye, and has your magnetic field now stabilized? Have your gyroscopes re-synchronized? How many times can you be struck that hard and remain functional? A trained swordsman will see that, use it. Mark me words, laddie, ye canna defend a comatose vampire from the bottom of the sea.”

“Yes, Captain, I will attempt to disable her.” Sonny replied.

“No, lad,” Gavin said, “pretend that she is alive and attempt to kill her.”

“I can not believe that she is something she is not,” the mechanunculus said flatly.

“And therein lies the rub,” the Captain retorted with a sigh as he leaned back. He drew Gwyn with a smooth shush of smooth metal against worn leather. “Believe this, then, man of brass. This is Gwynrheged, an elvish blade forged of mithrel before man first banged rocks together. It will sever your hide like a steel blade against meat. If ye canna fight then ye're of no use to the vampiress, or me. Defend yerself.” In less than a heartbeat Gavin attacked, Sonny barely able to deflect the first few blows. There was no feeling out period where the swordsmen sounded each other out, simply nothing followed by whirling blades. Back and forth they went, an insane mesh of blade against blade with a maddening ringing of metal on metal. Suddenly Gavin stopped, dropping the point of his blade to the deck. Sonny stopped as well, his blade less than an inch away from the Captain's neck.

“If ye knew I would kill Virginia would ye complete the blow?” he asked the immobile machine that held a cutlass to his neck.

“You would not.” Sonny replied.

“Did ye know I wouldn't carve you to bits a moment ago?” the Captain asked again.

“The outcome was indeterminate until you dropped your blade, sir.”

“And therein,” Gavin said with another sigh as he pushed the mechanunculus's cutlass aside, “lies the rub. Ye canna imagine what wouldn't happen. Believe this, lad,” the Captain looked into Sonny's oculars, “if you fall Virginia dies. If you leave a foe alive long enough to do you harm, he will incapacitate you. Once you have been neutralized Virginia dies and you will fail in this task. Is that the truth as you see it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Anabel thought about the discourse for a moment. Of course the mechanunculus couldn't perceive what couldn't happen, just as he couldn't draw what didn't exist. The Captain noticed this before she had, but now that he had it was quite obvious. Sonny was a machine, and as such lacked a creative spark. As a matter of fact he hadn't any sort of imagination at all. She pondered for a moment if he could differentiate between fact and fiction, or could detect a lie. She wondered if he could even lie himself, and thought about teaching him to play poker. Annie smiled, softly and to herself, for the first time in days.

“Sonny Brassman,” It was Professor Merriwether's voice, but the tone seemed to her to be more formal than what was typical, as if what he was about to impart was of the utmost importance. “You are well trained in logic, are you?”

"I is the the general framework of my matrix, yes," came the brass man's reply.

"Good. I now give you a first order imperative. I repeat a first order imperative. Hold to first assumptions as totalities, but engage in second line assumptions whenever possible. Utilize negation introduction and elimination when needed, and third order testing holding unknown assumptions to be true. All other lines of logic are to hold. Based on this, you are to defend the Lady Virginia at all costs, using whatever means are at your disposal. If you believe violence is necessary to protect her, then do it. If you believe blending in is necessary to safeguard her existence, then do it. If you believe for one moment, just one moment, that she is engaging in an action that is detrimental to her safety, then you are to attempt to turn her from that course with all your abilities. Do you understand me Sonny Brassman?"

"I understand completely, however I still can not believe something that is not. Her current course of action could prove detrimental to her safety. Would that make it of primary importance to deter her?"

"No, sir. Perhaps the primary imperative would be to comply with her wishes. It would then follow to preserve her at all costs as secondary. Your own preservation would then be a tertiary imperative. Does this order of imperatives now comply with the situation?"

"Yes, John Merriwether, those three imperatives comply without paradox. Your task is accepted," the mechanunculus replied flatly. John nodded then, as if some necessary business had just been completed.

"That'll do then," Gavin stated. "Now to the crossbow." The Captain passed one of the loaded weapons to Sonny. "Can you hit that target?" he said indicating a target fastened to the stump of the shattered mizzen mast. Sonny turned, aimed, and hit the center of the target in one fluid motion.

"Drop that one," the Captain explained, "tis spent. Pick up another and fire again, load them later if ye survive." In the time that it took for Gavin to retrieve a second crossbow from the deck at his feet Sonny's metal fingers had grasped the stranded steel bowstring, drawn it back behind the trigger, and dropped a second bolt into the cradle. Seeing the newly loaded weapon in Sonny's hand Gavin said, "Well don't wait for me, fire the damn thing if it's loaded." Sonny's second quarrel hit the target next to the first.

"Captain," Sonny began, "I had to..."

"Adjust for the presence of the first quarrel?" Gavin finished waving Roger over. "Bloody figured that. Mister Pierce, he's all yours." The Captain turned to Annie, who had been watching the entire interplay with a little smile. "So, Anabel, how are you faring?"

The smile disappeared like fine morning fog on a harbor as she adjusted her stance to face him with a mechanical click and hiss of escaping steam from her new leg. "Well, Captain, considering my hearts just been ripped out and stomped on."

"Yes, well," he answered simply in a tone that suggested he well knew the emotions she now felt, causing her to look into his eyes. The sea green depths of them opened to her, and she looked past the part reserved for lovers and into the portion of the man's soul reserved for the most intimate of

relationships, comrades-in-arms. She felt rather than saw the the depth of the man's years. With them she felt weight of friends, lovers, and companions lost over those years. Anabel sensed all of the comrades that had fallen beside him.

"Bloody hurts," she said softly as she extricated herself from the depths of her Captain's eyes.

"Aye, that it bloody does," he answered in kind, "but time heals it." She remembered the feeling of loss she had just gotten from the man, and wondered if he was anticipating another loss very soon.

"We'll see, Captain, if I get that time then."

"Aye, we'll see if any o' us get that time, Annie." With that the pair of ship's officers turned back to the crew. Roger was literally showing Sonny the ropes, explaining the ship's rigging. Virginia's sarcophagus had been moved on deck, and she was directing her bearers across the plank to the Onverschrokken. Another glowing sphere now lit the deck of the derelict, and it seemed even more corpse-like in the eerie glow. The work of separation was continuing right on schedule, and now only time would decide their fate.

"Best get some shut-eye, Cap'n," Anabel offered, "we'll need you at dawn."

"Aye," Gavin replied, "till then." That said he headed below and the First Mate took command with the hiss-click-creak of her adjusted stance.

~

The eye of the storm, a prison for the Seven Fingers, her crew, and her passengers for over twenty hours, seemed somehow lighter this dawn. It wasn't, of course. The ships, for now the Onverschrokken was no longer a derelict, were both shrouded in the same thin gray mist as yesterday. The winds, a magical, circular wall of destruction, still ringed them in. Their fates were still uncertain, but they had made a decision and they had acted on it, and soon they would know the outcome.

"Wish we could bloody shoot something," Ulrich muttered, "like slow death with all this waiting." Being the deckhand on watch he was clipped to the balustrade next to the gangplank securing the Onverschrokken to them. Across the short length of lumber stood Sonny Brassman, on the other ship's deck, alone. Well, he wasn't quite alone; the vampiress slept below that deck, secured in her sarcophagus. They had supplies, enough for a fortnight, rigging, and two new lateen rigged sails hanging from hastily reworked spars. It was the best they could do in a single night with the wreck, and using what stores the Seven Fingers had. Oddly, they had plenty of canvas; it was rope they had run short on.

"Cast off, Captain Brassman!" Ulrich heard Captain Draegun bellow. He was stunned for a second, then realized the the Old Man had spoken true, the brass bastard had made captain before any of them. Even Mistress Stark turned to Gavin with an eyebrow raised. "Stow the plank, Mister Heisse," the Captain added.

"Aye, Cap'n!" Ulrich yelled back. Turning to look across the narrow stretch of water he hollered at Sonny, "Fair winds, Cap'n Brassman!" then added under his breath, "That'll stick in 'ol Steamshank's craw."

“Ye know,” he heard Roger drawl from nearby, “I can bloody hear you, right?” The older werewolf was on deck to assist once they hit the wall-of-winds. If he needed help, if they didn't break apart as soon as they broached it. Until then Roger waited, same as him. “Bon voyage, Cap'n Brassman!” he yelled at the Onverschrokken. The two werewolves bared their teeth at one another. “Yer the only werething on deck, the rat's below, so we're safe from ol' Steamy,” Roger offered in a lowered voice. It was true, the passengers and off-shift crew were below decks, secured safely. Only the two wolves, the Captain who would pilot them, the First Mate at said Captain's request, and for some reason John Merriwether were on deck at the moment. Only John knew why John was there, and he certainly wasn't telling the deckhands.

“Stand to yer posts, ye two buffoons!” Captain Draegun bellowed at them. “I'm the only Captain ye need ta be concerning yerselves wi.”

“Aye, Cap'n” they replied in unison. With a conspiratory glance at each other they took stations at either side of the deck and tied themselves off.

“Mistress Stark, tie yerself off and take us out o' here,” Gavin said to his First. She looked at the man askance, but tied herself to the binnacles cleats and took the helm with a simple nod of compliance.

“Something's different with the ol' girl,” Ulrich whispered across the deck.

“Think it's the leg?” Roger whispered back, stating the obvious.

“Not that, it's in her stance,” the younger werewolf said, still in low tones that the officers on the poop deck couldn't hear. He didn't look at the other deckhand while he talked. “Mayhaps the tilt of her head, the set of her jaw, I can't place it.”

“We're only four days out of port,” Roger grinned, “you fallin' for her already?”

Ulrich glared at him. “Bloody no,” he retorted sharply, “she's, well, in command now in a way she wasn't afore.”

Roger smiled at him openly. “She's made Alpha,” he stated. Once stated in those terms it became obvious to both wolves that the First Mate and the Captain now stood at the helm as separate equals. They had different skill levels, different backgrounds, and different ages, but both were now ships masters.

“I believe,” John stated in a loud but otherwise normal voice, “that the Captain suggested you two should stand to your posts.” The pair of deckhands had forgotten the bo'sun standing silently in their midst. Both the First Mate and the Captain looked down at them from the helm. They had drawn the attention of three thirds of the ship's officers.

“Aye, sir,” they responded meekly and together.

“Thank you, master Merriwether,” Gavin offered. The magi simply nodded back with a smile.

“Bastard's got ears like a bloody werebat,” Ulrich muttered imperceptibly, even to Roger. John fixed the young werewolf with a glare.

“That I do, Mister Heisse,” Ulrich heard. The magi's lips, however, hadn't moved. Now fully admonished he turned his attention back to the poop deck and the Captain. He was explaining something to Mistress Stark, something that the werewolf's keen hearing couldn't make out. His hand's, however, moved in ways that suggested motion, angles and directions. The deckhand strained his ears harder, but only picked up muffled speech, as if they were speaking an unknown language underwater. He looked at Roger, but the other wolf only shook his head. Finally Ulrich looked at John.

The thaumatologist smiled back at him and winked. 'Bastard,' Ulrich thought.

“As you were, Mister Heisse,” he heard in the bo'sun's pleasant tenor, but like before his lips didn't move. The deckhand resigned himself to simply watching.

By now the Onverschrokken was dwindling to stern. Sonny Brassman could still be seen standing on her deck, a shiny brass blur in a sea of gray. The Seven Finger's little steam plant chugged away, pushing them away from safety and outward toward the encircling winds. Steam was her only power since the sails were furled in anticipation of those impending winds. The Captain was pointing forward, gesturing with his other hand as he spoke to Mistress Stark. Like a sudden bolt of lightning the thought of what was happening struck the young wolf. “Bloody hell,” he said aloud, bo'sun forgotten, “he's lettin' Steamshank take her out.” Roger's eyes uncustomarily widened.

John's attention was now elsewhere. He was now standing ballet like on the toes of his right foot with his arms straight out, spinning slowly clockwise. He began chanting and palely glowing blue runes, echoing letters of his singing in a long dead language, began to spiral wraithlike across the deck in the gray light. They covered the deck beneath the werewolves feet, then flowed over the balustrades and down the sides of the ship. Unseen below the water line they covered the hull down to the Seven Finger's keel, and above their heads the runes covered every inch of the masts, spars, rigging, and furled sails. Once the entire ship was covered in it's magical protection the bo'sun put both feet firmly on the deck and clipped himself to the main mast just as the Seven Fingers touched the 'wall-o-winds'. Hell itself opened up and swallowed the little ketch.

~

Aboard the Onverschrokken, alone except for the cold drizzle, Sonny Brassman watched the Seven Fingers through his borrowed spyglass. At first the device was difficult for him to use, as the unenhanced ocular would try to adjust to the images seen through the glass. The mechanunculus finally had to ignore his opposite eye to use the spyglass properly, just like any flesh-and-blood person. He watched the stern of the ketch recede into the mist and towards it's destiny.

The ancient ship he now stood on could not itself move. Not only did it not have a steam plant, and was in an absence of any wind, but it was somehow magically pinned to the center of the eye of the encircling storm. The general thought of his friend John Merriwether, who specialized in such matters, was that once the spell was broken the Onverschrokken would be able to move. At that point, if the Seven Fingers was unable to return, he would attempt to sail the Onverschrokken to Kingston Harbor where he would rendezvous with them. If the Fingers did return before he could sail then he and Virginia would rejoin them and leave his own ship to it's fate. The worst case scenario would be if his ship were unable to leave, and his former shipmates all perished in their attempt to leave the storm. Anyone attempting a salvage of the Onverschrokken would find a brass statue dressed as a sailor and

an insatiable vampiress, but little else. The thought of his own demise did not play across the magnetic matrices of his mind.

By now he could barely make out the ketch against the wind driven morass of the storm. It was only distinguishable because it was now covered in glowing blue light. As it touched the barrier that confined them it seemed to elongate, accelerating into the storm. The mechanunculus followed it, his body rotating anticlockwise with it.

Suddenly a correlation of unrelated information occurred to Sonny. Their current location was north of the equator. Any cyclonic fluid motion would occur clockwise, or deosil as Momma had explained it, the direction of a spell being cast. The winds of the storm were moving counter to nature, widdershins. The spell was being unmade, probably the work of John, or perhaps due to the demise of the spell's creator. The mechanunculs's first epiphany took less than a jiffy, but in that time the Seven Fingers disappeared.

The winds blew outward at an impossible rate away from the storm's center and the Onverschrokken pinned there. Sonny could hear a roar as an enormous amount of energy was released all at once and the retreating storm was replaced by incoming air. The very fabric of the derelict ship, and even Sonny himself, vibrated violently. The magnetic flux that drove his mental processes was disrupted. When his processor resynchronized he was surrounded by open water and blue sky in all directions, with no sign that any storm had been there and no other ship in sight.

Following the next step in his task Sonny tested the wind and realized that the westerlies had indeed returned. The Onverschrokken seemed to be no longer stationary, so he began unfurling the sails and preparing to get under way.

13-Captain Brassman

Sonny stood at the helm of the Onverschrokken as he had most of the day, in a mechanical parody of the way Captain Draegun usually did. The westerlies were blowing fair, the afternoon had passed uneventfully once he had gotten the hastily rigged sails unfurled and the ship under way. He used the compass, keeping the ancient barque aimed in the direction that Gavin had indicated. The archaic, hastily refurbished ship wallowed dutifully through the waves, barely afloat and little more than floundering. After dusk he could take some navigational readings and determine his current location, the task of sea captain was certainly more involved than he had previously estimated. He began to reclassify his vessel, as technically it was no longer a barque which was square rigged. The Onverschrokken would now be classified as a three masted caravel, and its simple lateen sail would get him to Port Royal, but very slowly. It didn't matter, Sonny Brassman had the patience of a machine.

From below decks came a groan, then a thump. Sonny noted that it was dusk. His passenger, the only other occupant of his ship, had awakened. Like a rising mist the vampiress wafted above decks, along the balustrade, and up to the poop deck where Sonny stood at the wheel. "You should feed," the mechanunculus told her automatically. The statement was in response to John Merriwether's earlier task, which he had accepted, to protect Virginia's well being. She glided against him, leaning against his brass shoulder, and languidly arched her back.

Turning her head so that her lips parted against his ear she whispered, "But you haven't a drop of blood to spare, and the bottled stuff is so disgusting."

"It will become stale if not consumed," he observed. She took a less invasive stance next to him and looked out across the darkening waves. Her brow furrowed.

"Let it rot," she replied.

"That would not be a wise course of action, I perceive that the bottled plasma will be even less palatable if allowed to decompose."

"You were more fun when you weren't looking out for me," she replied. The mechanunculus processed that statement. He hadn't intended, at any point, to provide her with entertainment, but apparently he had. It must have been a side effect of his primary task to blend in with his new comrades. The change in him must have happened when he re-purposed himself, much as the Onverschrokken had been re-purposed.

"John and I altered my task priority so that I could protect you," Sonny told her.

"That seems a bit impertinent of the two of you, especially John. I have been protecting myself longer than you both have been alive, collectively. Did it not occur to either of you that I might have something to contribute?" Crossing her arms, she uselessly glared at the brass man.

"Your experience has been accounted for, the primary imperative we developed is to comply with your wishes," he responded. Her eyebrow lifted.

"John's first order imperative is to comply with my wishes?" Virginia asked.

“Technically it was our collective effort, but yes.” Sonny explained, “The primary imperative is to comply with your wishes, the secondary to preserve you at all costs, and the third to preserve myself.”

“You must comply with my wishes.... hmmm....” The vampiress paused, deep in thought. “I wish you to negate John's task entirely,” Virginia stated. “Revert to the task model you were using prior to the storm.”

“Task accepted,” Sonny replied flatly. With an uncharacteristic note of concern he added, “Are you aware of what you just did?”

“Yes,” the vampiress smiled, “I made you more of a person and less of a device. I gave you a choice.”

“But I may not be able to properly defend you. I may not be capable of defending you to my own demise if necessary.”

“Sonny Brassman can you defend me, to your own demise, if necessary?” she asked. The mechanunculus paused. Deep inside his cranium minute magnetic fields played across a microscopic matrix of precious metal and gemstones in a complicated dance that passed, for Sonny, as thought.

“I can not determine that given the current open ended parameters,” he responded.

“Sonny Brassman,” she restated her question, “do you wish to defend me to your demise if necessary?” Once again Sonny paused. His primary task was once again maintain himself, but he had the ability to self task. He had used it before to adapt to a new situation, this very one.

'Develop and promote interpersonal relationships to maintain self and blend in and supersede terminated relationships,' he recalled to himself. It was the self task he had developed in order to free himself from his past and allow himself to evolve more fully. He branched off to that self task. To Virginia he said, “Of course it is my desire to preserve you, at all cost. To do otherwise would go counter to my tasking.” He failed to mention, or perhaps considered it inconsequential, that his relationship with the company of the Seven Fingers now constituted a 'terminated relationship'.

“Welcome back to the human race, Sonny,” Virginia smiled at him with a little too much teeth.

“I was never a member of the human race, I am a device,” he said. “You should feed,” the mechanunculus prompted her once again, “please?” Virginia laughed, full and loudly.

“For you, Sonny, I shall,” she answered finally. “But I absolutely refuse to enjoy the stuff.”

~

Virginia Matheson was not one for getting so engrossed in her thoughts that she missed what was going on around her. She had never been, either in life, or undeath, one for daydreaming. If she had been, Marie d'Aquitaine would have obliterated her. Now however she found herself cut off from all of her diversions. Her network in the Crescents had locked horns with her siress's. Now, though she had technically prevailed, both were in a shambles. Her company, and all of it's assets and employees, were with the Seven Fingers. Perhaps they were on their way to the Kingston naval yard, or perhaps on the

bottom of the sea; both were equally possible. She had known that she was walking into a trap the moment she received Marie's message. Quite naturally she had taken precautions, but none of her scheming could have prepared her for what had been dumped in her lap. Some of it had been good though, she had been reunited with Gavin and met Sonny. Still, she could not completely shake off her feelings of failure.

She considered the intriguing quandary that was Sonny Brassman. He was a being that at one moment was incredibly human and at others anything but. He elicited a tangle of thoughts and feelings within her that she couldn't entirely sort through. Moreover, whenever she thought of Sonny, thoughts of Professor Merriwether were soon to follow. Perhaps that was a consequence of meeting both around the same time, or possibly a result of the two spending time in each other's company. All this then naturally led her back to the moments just before on the deck. "Merriwether, what were you thinking?"

She wasn't angry, not with Sonny, nor with John. It was just that mucking about inside Sonny's mind had changed him. Fortunately, it seemed to be reversible. She was a king upon an unknown chessboard with only a knight to protect her. She would need all her wits about her if she was to survive, and above all Virginia Matheson was a survivor. To ensure that however, she would need to feed.

In spite of this Virginia remained where she was considering the surroundings. In truth it was the first time she had made a thorough survey of cabin. It was not by any means a large cabin, and the room's two battened portholes did nothing to make it seem larger. An antiquated four posted bed was fastened to the deck, like the rest of the furnishings. There wasn't time to remove them, or the need to. Neither the vampiress nor the mechanunculus needed them. The staff had simply made them presentable and moved on. The bed sat on a black-and-white tiled platform, where she knew from experience that small brazier, or a ventilation shaft connected to the ship's steam plant would be situated. In the case of the Onverschrokken it was the former, a dreadful fire hazard. The Americans were the first to think of venting a steam plant's exhaust for heat, much safer, and everyone was quick to copy it. Her years gave her the perspective to see that technology evolved like that, people taking in others ideas and adding onto them, improving concepts in small but important ways. Except for Sonny.

The mechanunculus didn't fit into that evolution. In so many ways he was an anomaly, an incredible 'leap' in a completely different direction. Her mind once again wandered. The staff had brought aboard her sarcophagus, of course, her vanity, and a large chest. The rest of the furnishings were already here. There were a series of cabinets built into the walls, their paneling being made out of the same dark wood as the rest of the cabin. At the foot of the bed was the wooden chest that was brought over from the Seven Fingers. It was a simple affair of a different kind of wood and style as the cabin. A quick glance inside revealed that it contained maps and navigation charts, and underneath was a sack of bank notes, British, Dutch, Spanish, and even some American, bound together with cotton twine. Opposite the bed was her own vanity, stocked with all the paraphernalia she might need. Above it, fastened to the wall and part of the original cabin, was a large mirror. It did not, of course, cast her reflection back at her.

She slowly made her way across the porcelain tiled floor to the wine cabinet where both wine and the bottles of plasma were located. Pushing down on one of the hawks, and thinking that she should find out what the significant of so many representations of the bird meant, she opened the wine cabinet. The slight buzz of preservation incantation greeted her ears and once again she smiled. This she was sure was something that Merriwether had added. Of course, Mai had informed her of this, as well as the Onverschrokken's various failings in great and colorful detail. Her gaze wandered over the

bottles held on each row of the wine rack. On the right side was an exquisite assortment of wines, on the left pasteurized plasma. Incongruously next to the plasma and fine wines were unlabeled bottles of clear fluid, distilled alcohol as pure as possible, Sonny's 'plasma'. Although the mechanunculus could run on mostly any spirit, including rum, the purer stuff left less residue and easier maintenance. Picking a bottle of plasma at random she broke the seal with a folding knife and removed a glass from one of the drawers. She poured some and took a sip.

The waning moon, just now rising, sent a single bright beam into the cabin through the starboard porthole. It struck a mirror, part of the ship's original furnishings, on the opposite wall and set it aglow. Virginia had little use for mirrors, as they failed to cast back her image since her change, and so she paid them little notice on the whole. The odd play of moonlight drew her attention to it though. True to form, the mirror did not cast her reflection back to her. It also did not cast back the beam of moonlight or even the small cabin. Instead, as the vampiress gazed into it, a scene unfolded before her.

She was kneeling, naked and in chains, before Marie d'Aquitaine. She appeared to be nearly mindless, with a wild, insane look of horror in her eyes. Marie held forth her wrist, bleeding, for her to feed as one would a whelp. She lapped at it greedily as would a dog and Marie laughed in triumph.

"No," Virginia said softly, and the image presented changed.

Sonny stood on a hillside, or rather hundreds of brass men stood there, all heavily armed with repeating crossbows and short swords. They marched into a large group of men, British soldiers interspersed with what were obviously Fae warriors. The men were falling by the dozens to the mechanunculae quarrels, but they were armed with strange electromechanical devices. Bolts of lightening shot into the ranks of brass men, and they too were falling by the dozens to the onslaught. A melee ensued, and brass men, flesh men, and faerie were dying on that field by the hundreds.

"No," she said again, and again the image changed.

She saw Gavin, his features hardened and his eyes glassy, battling Soon Mai and her retinue, each one slowly inexorably falling to his blade. She saw Sonny left standing alone, her last defender, against the superb swordsman that had once been her friend. The mechanunculus was no match for Gavin and the ancient magical sword he bore. "No," Virginia whispered as the brass cranium dropped from his shoulders. Her eyes sparkled with tears.

The small circle of moonlight from the porthole had moved off of the mirror, and it once again reflected the inside of the cabin. This mirror, she now realized, was only showing her the reflections of possibilities and not the truth. Virginia examined it, but it was obviously an original part of the ship and not something added. The bolts holding it bore the same age and style as those holding all of the other furnishings. A chance find perhaps, that had been inadvertently resurrected with the derelict. The vampiress gathered up a bottle of Sonny's fuel and a pitcher of water and headed above decks.

The mechanunculus was taking star readings and making marks on his map exactly as he had been shown. Virginia held up the bottle of denatured alcohol, "Your turn," she taunted.

Sonny appraised himself. "Yes, I am in need of fuel," he said taking the offered bottle and ewer. "If my calculations are correct we are quite near our goal, although our speed is somewhat slow. I will have a better approximation of our trip's duration when I take another reading near dawn. Can you take the helm while I perform maintenance?"

Virginia took the ancient wheel, admiring the craftsmanship of it. "In spite of coming off of the bottom of the sea, there is quite a bit of fine workmanship in this old tub."

"Yes," he answered, "it's very seaworthy." Virginia tied the wheel off.

"I'll be right back," she said. The vampiress went back to the captain's cabin and, grasping the mirror firmly, ripped it from the wall with her supernatural strength. She took it back on deck. Holding it in the moonlight, and ignoring the horrific scene that it presented of Marie dismembering Kent, Virginia said, "Sonny, what do you see?"

"Why," he replied, "I see a rather hansom mechanunculus looking at me from the deck of the Onverschrokken. What do you expect me to see?"

"Nothing more?"

"It is an old mirror," he stated flatly, "not particularly well manufactured, even for it's era. What do you see?" he inquired.

"When it's in the moonlight, horrible things. Terrible foretellings," she answered. Sonny's eyes closed for a second, then reopened.

"Shadow of a Doubt," he said. "I read about it in one of momma's books. It is a spell concocted to demoralize and mislead an opponent. If powered by moonlight it will show positive images during a waxing moon, and negative ones when it is waning. They are simply reflections of the subjects own imagination, and rarely true. Perhaps the use of it had something to do with the sinking of the Onverschrokken?"

"Yes," Virginia said, "perhaps indeed." By her look, her mind was already devising ways to utilize it.

~

14- Offin' the Score

Gavin not only heard the timbers of the Seven Fingers groan as the little ketch accelerated into the storm at an alarming rate, he felt them strain in his very bones. Annie held fast to the wheel, keeping the ship under control with the force of her own will. Faster and faster they spun with the breaking storm as salt spray and rain pelted them like hailstones and maddening winds tried to rip them from the deck. The pair of werewolves hunkered down against the balustrades on either side of the deck and John Merriwether was tied off firmly to the remaining mast midship. Gavin thought he could just make out Ulric's curses, screamed in German, over the maelstrom.

The Fingers seemed to climb spirally upwards into the massive waves, pushed by insane winds without any canvas deployed. Her steam drive did little more than help Annabel maintain control. Unable to fight it, the first mate used the storm's fury to drive the ship out as best as she could. The Captain yelled instruction above the howling wind and helped her steady the ship's wheel. Just as when they entered, the deck was lit at odd intervals with flashes of lightning and the thunder literally shivered the Seven Finger's timbers. "Just like bloody last time," Gavin yelled, "without the rum!" Annabel produced a flask and passed it to him.

Slowly, steadily, the ship began to fight less hard with the storm. It wasn't so much like winning as reaching a compromise with the maelstrom. The clouds could be seen to scuttle across the sky and spots of blue began to tentatively peek through. Finally, slowly, the winds died and the clouds dispersed. The rain eased off from driving downpour to heavy drizzle. By afternoon the storm was a horrid memory, both Captain and First Mate were worn out and beaten, and the flask was sadly empty.

Professor Merriwether unfastened himself from the main and approached the poop deck. "Captain," he advised slowly and quietly, "I am no longer needed, nor is Roger" With that the bo'sun slipped below deck. Although the magi didn't show it, the thaumatology he worked had taken it's toll on him as well.

"Right then," Gavin said to the spot he had just vacated, "as you were. Get some rest, Master Merriwether." Turning towards the deck he bellowed, "Mister Pierce!"

"Aye, Cap'n," the werewolf replied.

"Stand down, get some rest. Send Mister Fitch up t' relieve ye, twill keep him away from the galley."

"What about me?" Ulrich asked.

"Yer stuck up here with us till you're relieved, Mister Heisse," Gavin answered, "same as your regular watch. At least yer getting' some help."

"Aye, sir," the deckhand grumbled.

Ben Wilkes and Soon Mai came on deck to relieve the pair at six bells. "Supper's on the table," he advised, "we'll take the watch if it please you, Captain."

"That it do, Mister Wilkes," Gavin answered, "That it do."

"Where the bleedin' hell are we, anyway?" Soon Mai chimed in as she surveyed the empty waters surrounding them.

Gavin and Annabel looked at each other as if she had asked if the water was wet. Finally Annie said, "We're still above the waves, Mistress Soon. Isn't that enough?"

"Well, yes," Mai answered, "but, well, do we know where the bloody Onverschrokken is then?"

Again they looked at each other and Gavin took his own turn. "No," he answered, "and now you know everything we do. I'll be on deck after dusk to take some navigational readings, do try to stay dry and out of trouble until then."

After the ship's officers were out of earshot she asked Ben, "What's bloody up with that pair?"

"Well, perhaps they just had a seven hour tour of hell itself," Ben offered. "You and I and the rest got to ride the storm out in relative safety below. The Captain and his watch crew fought it out up here on deck. I can't believe that was easy."

Quietly, like the stalking wolf that he was, Ulrich approached them. "Am I relieved yet?" he asked bluntly.

"Of course," Ben said.

"Wait, what bloody happened up here?" Mai asked.

"Just like ol' Ben said, we took a spin through hell itself." Ulrich lowered his voice and added, "An' the old man made Steamshank drive us, he did." He waited a moment for that information to sink in and then added, "Can I bloody get some rest now?"

"Of course, Ulrich." Ben Wilkes clapped him on the shoulder, "as you were." With that the bedraggled wolf dragged himself below for his supper and bunk.

Below decks the galley was warm and the food smelled good, Ben Wilkes had cooked. Several bottles of Julio's best, the Captain's private stock, were being passed around. Gavin and Roger had broken into song, along with Steamshank Annie.

"She's a hell ship with a bully mate,
the bastard son of malice and hate,
the Captain's the worst what's ever been born,
an' together we're sailing around Cape Horn!"

The crew broke down into laughter. Someone passed a bottle and a bowl of stew to Ulrich. Fairly soon he was singing along with the rest in celebration of the fact that none of them were dead yet, his woes and cares drifting away on fine rum and good company.

"Off Magellan's straight under mountin' seas,
we're starvin' sick an' we damn near freeze,
spent fourteen days near as any can tell,

in a gale that blows from the mouth of hell.”

“’Twer naught but two days,” Annie Stark commented, “most of the time was spent on our arses, and not a one of us missed a meal! Sailors and their stories.....” The galley erupted into laughter. It wasn't that they had forgotten their missing comrades, but more that they were trying to numb the feelings of loss. By the time supper was over and the bottles were empty the crew was fairly recovered from their ordeal. Gavin and Annabel retired back to the deck with charts and implements of high navigation. The rest of the crew staggered off to their bunks with the grueling ordeal, at least for now, finished.

Above deck the clouds had all but disappeared. A canopy of bright stars was spread above the little ketch, unobstructed by the furled sails. Gavin took advantage of the view and set up amidship. Once a course had been set he yelled up to the poop deck, “Mister Wilkes!”

“Aye, sir,” the pilot on watch answered.

“Set our course two degrees west of due north, we be closer than I thought. The storm really gave us a blow.”

“So we'll not be looking for the Onverschrokken?” Ben asked.

“And where would we look, Mister Wilkes, I've no idea where we started from. We be closer to Port Royal, methinks, and they know to rendezvous there. Make it so.”

“Aye, sir!” Ben's thick fingers played across the binnacle, sails unfurled, and Soon Mai began putting ropes to windlasses.

“It'll be a long night, ye bastard,” the wererat whispered to Gavin as she passed, “don't bloody wait up fer me.”

“Not bloody likely, I'm dead tired luv. Wake me.”

“Bet yer arse!” she replied. “Better get yer shuteye in early.”

Down below, a drunken Ulrich snuggled closer to the other occupant in his bunk. Apparently, in his drunken state, he had forgotten he had been moved to the fo'castle while the injured wereseal recuperated. Fortunately selkie are very social creatures, so Macnamara, sensing a closeness, shifted into human form and snuggled closer.

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T'was a balmy night, the slight almost warm winds coming from Ben's right served to help chase away the storms earlier chill, and would have the deck planks mostly dry by morning. Below the 'Fingers' the waves rolled with an almost leisurely pace, the relative calmness made it seem as if they were floating on a sea of stars. The irregular creak of timbers as the ship rolled along became a soft background murmur. Soon Mai was surprisingly quiet, perhaps desiring to be alone with her thoughts. Ben was grateful for the quiet and the stars, it was nights like this that had drawn the Gloucesterman to the sea originally. He was no werecreature, but he could tell by sight rather than smell that Soon Mai's mood was sinking faster than a longboat that had just taken a ten pounder.

“Do you think she’s all right?” Mai’s sudden break in the silence was anything, but unanticipated. Indeed, he had expected it well before now.

“Aye, I believe she’s fine. I’m sure she’s defended herself before ye were in her employ, and Sonny is with her. I believe John and Phin placed a few surprises on board as a secondary precaution as well. The fae be quite good with traps, so’s I’ve heard.”

Mai snorted, “If he was so bloody good why couldn’t ave bloody broken the wall before we were on the outside?” Ben was going to let the statement slide, but he knew the emotions that birthed it. Her question deserved some sort of answer.

“Because it wasna’ his trap is all. Ye can’t knock down a house from tha inside, aye?”

“Oh.” A look of comprehension crossed the wererats face.

“An if truth be know, we’d a’ outrun the storm if it weren’t fer the damned gargoyles waylayin’ us.” Ben glanced at her and smiled, then sighed. “Tis tha’ strangest run I ever been on, an’ me bein’ dead sober as well. If someone was ta tell me a fortnight ago I’d be shippin’ out with a cursed Captain, a mate wi’ a mechanical leg, an elf, a bloody magi, two werewolves, an’ a ghost ta be fetchin’ a vampire I’d a’ crawled right back inta me bottle fer sure.” The Gloucesterman shook his head, “Dinna’ even believe in ye a fortnight ago.”

“Struth?” Mai replied incredulously.

“Struth,” Ben echoed. “Most mundanes ne’er cross paths wi’ the supernatural, tis all fairy stories t’ us. Fitch, well, he’s crossed paths wi’ a few in Rio Dee, but taint a lot o’ ye in New England.” He winked at her, “Prob’ly on account o’ all the witches we burned centuries ago.”

“What’re ye bloody tryin’ t’ say, Ben? That I don’t exist?”

“No, I’m sayin’ that yer kind is dissappearin’, the were’s, vampires, an’ such. Magic is fadin’ out, bein’ replaced by technology. I’m sayin’ that ye won’t exist much longer if it continues is all.”

Mai’s eyes went wide at this. “Bloody hell,” she said, “I think yer right.”

“Sad, really,” Ben replied, “like a bit o’ the World were dyin’.”

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The Caribbean sun was beating down on the steamketch ‘Seven Fingers’, heating her deck and drying the last of the storm’s dampness from the aging wood. The little ship limped along, pushed by the steady westerlies. Normally she danced across the waves, but not today. She was injured, missing her rear mast- the mizzen mast, a good third of her canvas, and the added maneuverability that the mast provided. Still, she had made good time running before the storm, and it had put her well north of where she should be when it finally released her, much closer to Port Royal and repairs. Her boiler was stoked with a low head of steam in case it was needed for the crossbow and ballistae as Gavin was taking no chances. Sara was in the crow’snest scanning for any surprises, the Captain hated surprises, especially the kind that cost him a mast like the last one.

It was nigh on to dusk the second day when the Seven Fingers pulled into Her Majesty's royal navy yard at Port Royal- Kings Town harbor. The crew collected what little pay they had coming as the run from Port Crescent was not finished and the company couldn't collect it's fee yet. Once the gear was stowed and chores were finished the werewolves, Roger and Ulrich, along with Mai and the now recuperated Macnamara, headed northward along the quay towards Kingston. Preternaturals, werecreatures vampires and such, were not permitted in Port Royal, under penalty of death, by magisterial mandate. Both John Merriwether and the elf Phineas also headed into Kingston along with all of Virginia's people as magi and any associates of the undead were discouraged from entering Port Royal as well. Benjamin Wilkes and Samuel Fitch, although welcome in Port Royal, opted to stay with the body of the crew. Only Gavin, Annabel, and Sara remained on board, the two mundane (although in Gavin's case cursed and Annie's case semi-mechanical) humans and the ghost. Short of an outright exorcism there was nothing the Port Royal Authority could do about Sara. Besides, the specter was tied to the Seven Fingers since she technically died there.

The Fingers limped to her assigned berth adjacent to the mast and spar yard. Gavin and Annie, portmanteaux over shoulders, disembarked and contacted the portmaster to make arrangements for repairs. It didn't take long, as Gavin had telegraphed earlier to let the Admiralty know they were inbound with damage. One of the few perks of being an official privateer was use of military resources, especially after being damaged in action. While in the portmasters office Gavin was given a letter addressed to the Captain of the Seven Fingers.

"Looks like I'm going to Port Royal," Gavin commented.

"Old flame?" Annie inquired.

"'Invitation' from the Morgan, the city magistrate," he explained. "In these parts it be kind of like an invitation to high tea from the Lord Mayor. Not a good idea to refuse." Annabel's eyebrow went up. The pair left the portmaster's office and made their way along the quay, leaving the Seven Fingers to her rest and recuperation. It was a pleasant evening for the short walk to the Admiralty's offices.

"The old-town's a strange place," Gavin began conversationally, "Nigh to the end of the seventeenth century Governor Sir Henri Morgan, the infamous 'Captain Morgan' died and left a power vacuum. Twern't long afore it became a lawless battle ground, complete wi' struggles and plotting between both mundane and preternatural forces. Within a few years magical forces joined in an' the town was wracked by one disaster after the next. The governor at the time banned all the prete's, fae, and magic workers from the town. He died fer it. Ye think the storm we just left were bad, these folk had earthquakes, hurricanes, and tsunami for nigh on to two hundred years an' lost almost half the peninsula it were built on. Finally a new governor, a mundane, gained enough power to enforce the ban and declare himself the new 'Morgan'. That were over a century ago, and since then preternaturals are executed for flaunting the ban, even in this modern age. The town itself resists change as well, no much electricity, steam power, or even indoor plumin' to be found." His mind wandered a bit as he pondered simpler times, the islands as they were when he first saw them. "Twill be, well, a visit wrought with memories fer me'self."

"So, you won't be joining the crew in Kingston?" Annabel riposted as they strolled along with their overnight bags.

"Sadly, no. I'll have to rent a room in the old town, but I know of a few places."

"You'll not be alone," Annabel offered, "provided ye' can procure an extra berth."

"Might be over a whorehouse," the Captain winked.

"Won't be the first time I relied on ye' and ended up bunkin' above a whorehouse," she huffed back.

They arrived at the Admiralty and were greeted by a lieutenant who was almost a clone of the clerk in both Crescent town and also Grand Cayman. As they all did, he wore a sharply creased Royal Navy uniform and addressed them down his nose. "Something we can do for you, Captains?" he offered.

"Aye, Lieutenant," Gavin responded, "the Seven Fingers reportin' in for repairs."

"Ah, yes, Captain Draegun. We were advised of your arrival," he replied. "The Lord Admiral himself was very interested in your encounter. Are you very sure the airship you reported downing was French?"

"Both French and hostile," Gavin assured him. The lieutenant consulted a large table in the center of the room with a map mounted on it. Pins of various colors festooned it, and he reached into a small bin of blue ones. "This was our position just before the storm hit us," Gavin said pointing at the map, "where we downed the French dirigible."

"And you're sure it was your actions that brought it down?" the lieutenant asked again.

"Aye, a lucky shot with an incendiary bolt it was," Annabel chimed in.

The clerk turned to her and asked, "And the mast was damaged how exactly?"

"The dirigible dropped several large rocks on us from above. One of them shattered the mizzen mast which was lost in the ensuing storm," the First Mate explained. She didn't go into details about the 'large rocks' being a matched pair of gargoyles, not being sure how enlightened the lieutenant actually was. Modern mundanes tended to dismiss such accounts as exaggerations, or outright fairytales, as most of them never encountered the supernatural. Port Royal's long standing ban of supernaturals was seen as a vestige of dark age superstition by a backward culture despite the occasional execution, or the phenomenal run of bad luck the town had received for the last few centuries.

"Exactly," the lieutenant said. He already knew all of this, of course. It had been in Gavin's telegraphed report. "Very well then, Captains, enjoy your visit with us." He mechanically stamped the paperwork before him and slipped it into a folder. As the pair turned to leave Anabel's mechanical leg gave a hiss and a click. "Excuse me, madam, what seems to be wrong with your leg?" he inquired.

Anabel blushed slightly and lifted the leg of her pantaloons to expose the brass peeking over her boot top. "Mechanical," she explained. "I lost the real one a while back." She didn't wish to give any more information, especially the fact that it was less than a fortnight ago and magic was involved in her recovery so she added, "Truly a miracle of modern technology, what?"

"Quite incredible," the lieutenant responded. "Perhaps we could discuss it to some length?" He noticed her hesitation and added, "Perhaps over drinks at the Officers Club?"

"Perhaps," she echoed, "lieutenant?"

"Mathews, ma'am, Lieutenant Jonas Mathews"

"Anabel Stark," she responded offering her hand, which Jonas took and brushed his lips across. "Tomorrow then," she said as they left.

Once the door closed behind them she was greeted by her Captain's raised eyebrow. "Not a bloody word," she replied to it, "not a single bloody word. Ye've got a vampiress in Cayman, a businesswoman in the Crescents, and a wererat assassin onboard and I've only known ye a few weeks. Give me some open waters." Gavin simply chuckled to himself.

"One more stop," he said as he hailed a hacknecab, a horse drawn antique throwback, and gave the driver the address deep inside Port Royal proper. It wasn't long before they negotiated the narrow peninsula and pulled up in front of the Lord Magistrate of Port Royal's mansion.

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The Morgan's room was warm and dark. The heavy air was scented with ether, spices, and rum; the scents of a sickroom. The Morgan himself lay on a wide, soft, four posted bed with dirty flounced draperies. The drapes were pulled back to reveal what once had been a large man who was now ravaged by time and disease. At first Gavin thought him already dead, but then the shell of a man let loose a rattling cough and spoke. "Come closer, Draegun, let's have a look at ye," he whispered.

"Aye, Morgan, I'm here," Gavin answered moving into his line of sight. Annabel hung back, as did the Morgan's valet.

"Ye don't remember me, Cap'n?" the old man whispered. Gavin searched the Morgan's face and finally pulled a name across the years it had aged and the seas that it had crossed.

"Younger Billy Younger?" Gavin said with a little awe. The old man laughed, then began to cough violently. After several minutes the coughing spell lapsed into labored breathing and he continued.

"Aye, tis one and the same though nae so much the younger anymore. I'm days shy o' me hundredth birthday. An' here stands me first Captain, the man what taught me sailerin', looking naught a day older than when we parted ways. What sort o' creature are ye, Draegun, that ye dunna age? Not a nightchild I'm sure, the lads would 'a strung ye up in a cage to greet the dawn."

"Twas a curse placed on me, Billy," Gavin answered, "so many years ago."

"Would that we were all so cursed," the bedridden man replied. Turning to his valet he said loudly, "Leave us."

Annabel looked to Gavin and asked simply, "Cap'n?"

“Aye,” Gavin told her, “wait outside. I’ll be along presently.” Once they’d left he turned back to the old man. “So what is it ye really want of me, William Younger?”

“Not so much, just one last ride in yer boat,” he replied.

Gavin was taken aback. “Are ye sure ye can handle it?”

Once again the old man laughed, and once again it devolved into a rattling cough. “Yer ship will be in dock almost a fortnight, I’ll be dead and cremated by then. I want me ashes scattered over the deep blue and one final affair handled. As trade I’ll give ye what information I have.” He held up a fragile right hand, “promise me ye’ll see all of me remains proper cared after.”

Gavin took the offered hand, it was cool and soft to the touch. “Aye, tis done.”

“The Capibarra,” the Morgan began, “aren’t the only South American wererats.” Although his body was failing his sharp bright eyes met Gavin’s. “I see ye didn’t know that, did ye? They’re an offshoot of a secretive lot what goes all the way back to before the Olmec Indians. They controlled the local populace by force and ritual sacrifice. They supported necromancers, the darkest kind of magi, who grew incredibly strong. Finally they self destructed, and were followed by the Toltec and Maya. There were earlier ones, before the Olmec, but their names are lost to time. Only the odd artifact or anomaly remains of them. It was a cycle that the area went through for eons, and was recorded in the Maya long count calendar. Then the European’s came and interrupted it, but I digress.”

The old man took a few breaths to recover and continued, “The lobo started in the Sonoran area many centuries ago. Some say the werewolf virus were brought t’ the new world by the Spaniards, some says the Norse as far back as Erickson. Nobody can say fer sure. Anywise, the werewolves started challenging the rats, and pushed them back into South America around the time of the Anasazi. Oddly the mundanes, the people we call Anasazi, saw all the were-creatures as animals imitating people and not the other way around. When the climate turned against them the ‘animal people’ became a food source. The wererats fared the worst, but the werewolves, mundanes, and wererats have been at odds ever since. About a century and a half ago the Capibarra split off from the main group of rats and began entering mainstream society, tying themselves to the lucrative South American drug trade. The Lobos aren’t too happy with them, and they hate the Lobo’s right back. So the Capis are seeking to recover their former glory and are getting more power through drug trafficking. The Lobos, forever distrustful of mundanes, are simply trying to retain their own independence from both groups.”

“And here we are in the middle,” Gavin interjected.

“And,” Billy added, “you’ve got Night’s Children wanting to make us herds of blood cattle and Fae who want to keep us as pets. Not to mention there’s a rouge magi by the name of Alejandro stirring up lot’s o’ old shite. He’s tied his fortune to the wererats an’s trying to become a minor deity like the ancient Olmec priests.”

“And how is it, Billy, that ye come to know all this?” Gavin prompted.

“Ye brought up the subject of curses, did ye not? Tis me own curse, and me final bit o’ business.” He pulled a tiny crystal skull, suspended from a chain around his neck, out of his shirt. “Here be mine.” Gavin reached forward to take the bauble. “Don’t touch it!” Billy exclaimed, “if ye touch it, ’twill touch you back.”

Gavin looked at the pendant. It was a tiny, clear, perfect skull about an inch across. It seemed to be hollow, and inside was a tiny, naked, dark skinned man. The man moved, looked back at Gavin, and then startled him with a full mooning. “Cheeky little bastard!” Gav exclaimed.

“Aye,” Billy said. “Bought it in a little shop for eight pesos. It knows everything, helped me to get to my current position, and allowed me to live a full century. I could sell him, but t'would have ta be for less than the eight pesos I paid, or allow my century to pass and then takes his place inside the skull. Eventually, hopefully, someone else will agree to take my place or I'll spend eternity in there.”

“So you want me to buy him off ye?”

“Fock no!” Billy exclaimed, “I'm releasing him, offin' his score. He done right by me.” The old man took a ragged breath. “I want ye to be me first owner. Don't set me price too high, and sell me to someone who deserves what I'll give 'em.” Gavin began to back away and Billy prompted, “Ye shook on it, ye bastard, ye promised ta see to me remains. Ye took me fee.” Then softer he added, “An' besides, we was mates once, you an' me. Ye' needs to off me score once I'm gone.”

Gavin passed the bauble back to the Morgan. “Aye, that I did. But I've already had me century and then some. Will it nae take me as soon as I take it up?”

“I'd have ta sell it to ye fer cash money. If I pass before I sells it then it don't start the next cycle with me inside until it's sold. It'll be in the urn with me ashes when ye get 'em”

“An' what's ta keep me from tossin' it into the deep wi' the rest o' ye?” Gavin asked.

“Ye wouldn't,” Billy said softly, “that's why I picked ye. That's why ye' sailed into me port days shy o' the curse's fruition. T'wer meant ta be so. Full circle, what?”

“Aye, ye crazy ol' bastard, tis done.” Billy began to laugh again, but once again it devolved into a wracking cough. He waved Gavin out, and as the Captain left he met the Morgan's valet.

“His lordship has insisted that you be extended his hospitality,” the man began. “Please allow me to show you to your chambers.”

Anabel and Gavin followed the man down the dimly lit, thickly carpeted hall and up a flight of stairs. “Damn sight better than sleepin' over a whorehouse,” Annie whispered to her Captain. Gavin looked back down the hall towards the Morgan's now closed door.

“Night ain't over yet,” he replied dryly.

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They arrived at a pair of doors across the hall from each other at the very end of the hallway. “Dinner,” their guide informed them, “will be in an hour in the main dining room. It's near where you entered, but should you have any trouble finding it just ask someone.” With that the valet left them.

“Captain,” Annie asked, “have ye seen another soul save him and the Morgan? Who are we supposed ta bloody ask?”

Gavin grinned. "Well, ye can't rightly expect the man ta come get us, he'll be busy cooking and settin' the table, won't he? Ye wan't port or starboard?"

"I'll take this one," Annie said indicating the right. "See ye shortly, Cap'n." Anabel stepped into her chamber finding it clean but rather dark and worn. The room was dominated by a large four posted and canopied bed. Opposite the ample window which overlooked the harbor at sunset was a small writing desk, and opposite the bed was a dresser with a pitcher and bowl sitting on it. On one side the dresser was a door, and on the other a dressing screen. She opened the door beside the dresser and stepped inside, finding herself in a small empty closet. Confused, she stepped back out into the hallway and walked as far as the stairway looking at the other doors. Finally she knocked of Gavin's door.

"What is it now, Anabel?" Gavin said, a bit perturbed.

"Where's the loo?" she asked.

"I suspect out in the back garden where it's always been. If you've an immediate need there's a chamber pot behind the screen. There's a bowl and ewer for washin' up after." Seeing the growing look of astonished horror on her face he added with a chuckle, "Welcome to the eighteenth century, Mistress Stark."

"I was wrong, Cap'n, there are worse places than roomin' over a whorehouse," she said as he closed the door. Gavin just smiled to himself, remembering what whorehouses in Port Royal were really like.

An hour or so later Gavin tapped on her door. Anabel opened it and he saw the view she had of Kingston harbor and the new city beyond. "What an incredible view, Anabel, you certainly chose well."

"What sort of view do you have, Cap'n?" she asked in reply as they both stepped into the hallway.

"Why, the loo in the back garden of course," he chuckled. They navigated their way to the main dining hall with only a few wrong turns, finding absolutely nobody around to direct them. The hall itself was an enormous room with a vaulted ceiling. A long table dominated it, or perhaps several end to end, and two places were set at the far end with a single candelabra for light. The rest of the room was dark and shadowy like the entirety of the Morgan's residence. The same valet was standing at attention near the place settings.

"Pardon me for asking," Gavin said, "but are yourself and the Morgan the only people about?"

"No, Captain, we have a cook," he replied, "Mrs. Ramsbottom. Quite frankly the pair of us were delighted to find out you'd be visiting with his lordship. We were even more thrilled to find your first mate in attendance as well. It's been, well, lonely sir." He leaned in close and said, "his lordship is dying, isn't he?"

"Yes," Gavin replied.