

The Mystery of
The Solar Wind

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Dublin

31 March 2116, 5:30 am

Running. No: Scurrying, like rats, cutting corners, slipping and scrambling through the half-dark of the dank storm drainage system of the old harbour town. Her older brother was chasing her on from behind, her younger one scouting ahead, furtively checking each corner before they reached it, to make sure it was clear.

In a twisted way she was glad that she had cropped her hair short into an extreme brush cut, because the glorious mane of ginger curls she still had yesterday would have been in a hopeless mess by now. Her face, hands and clothes were streaked with mud, reeking of rat droppings and cat urine. She clung to her violin case and Ronan's guitar bag, as he had more than enough to carry with his Clarsach and the heavy backpack.

Shawn who was lugging the pipes under his arm as he peered around bends, beckoned for them to proceed. The next corner was

clear. They ought to be right under the old promenade by now, and they had to be careful, because their tunnel was half visible to the streets from here, through fairly large storm drains. Dawn hadn't finished breaking yet. Breaking what, she thought dismally. Breaking her whole life, everything she'd ever cherished. Breaking her childhood off with a deadly finality.

It had taken both Ronan and Shawney to get her pulled away from Mother's body, her hands still covered in blood. What insanity was this? Why not leave her there, to die too when the Uincate came knocking on the door?

Lying low at Mrs Flanagan's had been gruelling; but not as bad as spending the night down here in the drains. And as for the reaction of relatives, yesterday morning – she didn't even want to go there. And through it all she couldn't get the blood off her hands. What was driving her by now, was nothing but primal fear.

“Here!” Shawney's signal was barely more than a whisper. She allowed Ronan to push past her, and found a way to hold the Clarsach for him too as he helped Shawn work on that manhole lid. They battled with it a bit. Rain and mud had sucked it into place and it was a struggle loosening it, but suddenly it lifted, and they pushed it aside.

All three waited and listened with bated breath, ready to bolt back into the depths of the storm drain system if they had to. Things seemed really silent up there. Ronan made a step ladder with his hands for Shawn, who put his foot into it and pushed himself up, peering out of the manhole.

“Coast's clear,” he whispered down to his two sibs. Ronan boosted him up, then handed the instruments up to him. It was a tight fit for the Clarsach; but this square manhole was one they had tested before. Life for a young Dublin musician could be perilous at night.

“C’mon, Pae!” came Shawn’s optimistic invitation.

She shook her head, unable to face the scant daylight.

“Sis, we’ve been there,” said Ronan, almost threateningly.

Paean Donegal backed down and accepted the burglar-lift up to ground level from her older brother. Once she was out, she turned around and took the backpack from him. It took her and Shawn’s joint efforts to get that heavy pack lifted out.

She lay down on the pavement and extended a hand down for Ronan; Shawn did the same on the other side of the manhole. Ronan grabbed both hands at the wrist in a mountaineer’s grip and hauled himself out of the sewers, kicking against the crumbling stepladder none of them had dared to use.

All three pushed the lid back into place and stared at each other. So far so good; they were at the docks. They scanned the surrounds. Those uniforms could come breaking out of any alley, at any moment. They were not safe anywhere in plain sight.

An unkempt-looking character was idly leaning against a lamp post, watching them. It looked like a wild man, long black frizzy hair tied down around the head with a bandanna. One thing this person was decidedly not: Any kind of Unicate. There was something... he somehow looked like a sea person to Paean. On a hunch she stormed at the man.

“Sir, sir, please – are you a sailor?”

Gypsy eyes stretched wide in surprise as he took in her filthy appearance. He studied her intensely, making her wonder whether it had been a mistake talking to him at all. If he alerted the harbour guard?

“Looking for a ship to stow away?” he asked eventually with an unreadable grin.

“No, sir! We want to work! We’re hard workers, have been all our lives.” She hoped desperately he’d accept that. She was fifteen

– work was only legal once you were sixteen. But he didn't look like the type that would care.

Critical dark eyes noted the instruments.

“Musicians, huh? *Shukar!* This way, *shey.*”

“Paeon, what are you doing?” hissed Shawn.

“Getting us a job,” she replied. “On a ship.”

“She's right, Shawn, move!” urged Ronan.

The wild man led the way, along the docks to a beautiful white tall ship lying at anchor. Paeon noticed that he moved like a predator; a feral cat or a burglar. But damn, the three of them didn't exactly arrive smelling of roses, either.

The name on the side of the two-master sailing ship, she noted as they approached, was the ‘San Diego’. And the figurehead was a mermaid... its eyes seemed to follow them.

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30 March 2116, 6:05 am

Loud banging on the white-painted door that was splintering with age. Louder banging. And an impatient grip on the door handle, forcing it.

The old lock gave way. The door swung inwards. The uniformed crew entered, with guns lifted high. Not stun guns; real fire. The little house was quiet. Too quiet.

They made their cautious way through the rooms, first the tight living-cum-dining room, the ridiculously short passage where three bedrooms and a bathroom connected; pushed the only closed door open, lifted their firearms -

“Check the other rooms! Check the bathroom! All the windows!” The young charge-sergeant personally looked under the

bed. There was nothing; as opposed to what was on the bed.

So she was dead. He checked the pulse of the woman lying there drenched in her own blood. Accurate. Then where were the three?

“They’re not here, sir.”

Damn.

6:50 am

“They’re gone!”

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

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

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

“Find them!”

“Yes, Captain-Major!”

30 March 2116, 9:59 am

Tights. Toothbrush. Transmitter. Tarot deck.

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

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

*

31 March 2116, 5:55 am

Paean was standing indecisively in the hatch of a *petite*, minute, tiny cabin. It had everything she needed; a pull-down bunk that came out of the wall; a round porthole with blinds – those were important; and a small, squat chest for her belongings. Neo-compounding, of course. Ronan and Shawn had been assigned a similarly small cubicle, with the two bunks pulling out of the wall one above the other.

Ronan came in and unceremoniously dumped the clothes he'd packed for her, on her bunk.

“Freshen up, sis. Don't want to present like street kids, now do we?”

She shook her head, still unfamiliar with the missing mane, and the way there were no curls to move around her shoulders but only a stark crew cut.

“Where are the bathrooms?”

He took her out of her cabin and pointed down the passage. “They call them the heads, like, on a ship, alright? We'd better wise up on the jargon, sis.”

She nodded, gathered up a fresh set of jeans and t-shirt and padded to the 'heads' to get cleaned up. The heavens knew, the blood she had tried to wash off her hands for a day now was bothering her a hundred times more than the foul-smelling gutter-mud.

*

January 2116:

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

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

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

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31 March 2116, 6:59 am

“Don’t know what you dragged aboard there, Federi!”

The gypsy flashed a steely grin, gazing out over the harbour. “Jon, watch these sports.” He pointed at the docks. A pointless sun was rising behind a drizzly cloud cover. A Unicate patrol emerged from the ancient, narrow roads, stepping in perfect synchrony with hair-raising precision. You only heard one single marching gait. And they were headed straight for the ship.

Jon Marsden glanced over his shoulder, at the bridge. Yes, Captain also saw that patrol. He gave Federi a nod and they undid the mooring hawsers, which spun back into their holds. Captain raised the anchor. The ship started moving innocently away from the

docks, gliding on solar drives.

The patrol increased its pace. Marsden glanced at the bridge and received a go-ahead signal from his Captain. Together, he and Federi peeled the neo-membrane with the false name off the side of the ship. He glanced back to the bridge. His Captain was grinning broadly. They all three watched how shock and disbelief spread over the faces of the Uinate civic military. The ship's sails clapped like thunder as they expanded. The Solar Wind cleared the port and moved out into the Irish Sea, picking up speed, sailing close to the wind.

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1

The Solar Wind

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

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

“Aargh!” Paeon Donegal gripped the rail. The blood was everywhere. On her hands, on the deck, the sails... She stared at the setting sun. The whole jolly ocean had turned the colour of blood. Did nobody notice?

Her older brother Ronan was at her side, Clarsach clutched against him, his other hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off with irritation.

“You alright, Pae?”

They should have left her behind! She hadn't wanted to leave

Dublin, run away like a common criminal. Here she was, travelling off into the sunset like a hero.

But the blood came following her wherever she went. She had not managed to get it washed off her hands for a week now. She was supposed to play the happy fool and sing inane stupid little tunes and be the entertainment...

“Are you seeing things again, Pae?”

“You kidding me? Open yer eyes!” She made a wild gesture at the rusty sea.

“Tha’s only the plankton bloom, sis,” he tried to pacify. “The light catches the little plants that way at sunset. Now if you’d kindly pipe down.” His eyes flitted uneasily to the bridge and the shadows at the bow.

She glared at him.

“*Please*, can we be done gloaming?”

Ronan smiled. “But don’t you want to be in Scotland afore me anymore, Pae?”

She groaned. “I *never ever*,” she said pointedly, “ever want to be in Scotland! Or Ireland, either. Get that, Ronan?”

Her brother scowled at her. She turned away from him, her eyes moving back to the thick, red sea, her mind compulsively returning to a place she had called home all her life, only a week ago.

Shawn Donegal came shimmying down the rigging with a monkey’s agility. Old Sherman Dougherty watched him, thoughtfully drawing on his old-fashioned tobacco pipe. The ancient sailor with the thick headful of shoulder-long white hair had been listening to the angry music; now he was listening to the bickering.

“Tomorrow we land at Hamilton,” he commented.

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

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

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

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

The jolly Britches! Shawn grinned around his ocarina as that old ditty spilled out of the clay whistle. Paean always demanded that tune when she wanted to punish him. Poor Pae.

Oh hey, but her temper didn't help! He wished she could just relax. Everything would be fine. They were on a ship, they had escaped. Things might be a bit dubious here, but at least the Unicate would never find them as long as they stayed aboard and kept a low profile.

He watched the First Mate, Mr Marsden, and that mysterious being called Rushka, move about in the dusk. Rushka wore a black leather cap, knee-high black boots and black clothes all over. A hint of dark-red hair peered out under her cap. They were currently testing signals from the self-tuning sails, the automated winches, and the hand-holds system. Feeding back the results to Captain, on their wrist-coms. Shawn wanted such a com. None had been offered to him or either of his sibs.

Captain Radomir Lascek emerged onto the command deck and shouted something at the sky. Probably Hungarian.

Shawn briefly thought back to their first, intimidating encounter with the ship's Captain. Tall, powerful and formidable, with hands that looked like they could break a neck at the drop of a hat. His coarse black hair and short-cropped beard showed first signs of greying, and his eyes like blue steel seemed to cut through any cover-up and straight to the truth.

Except that he hadn't. They had been called to the bridge, where Captain Radomir Lascek had demanded to see their credentials.

Ronan, forever the organized, cool-headed planner, had produced their identity documents and his own school leaver's cert. He was the only one who had finished his junior cert. Lascek had read the three identities with a deep scowl.

"Why are you aboard?" he had challenged.

"Sir, we'd rather be employed, and a ship is the only place that will employ people of Shawn's age." Ronan's answers were studied, self-possessed.

As opposed to Paean. She had stood there with her eyes downcast, unable to look at any of them, with guilt scribbled all over her – or perhaps depression. Until the Captain had ordered her to look at him. She'd raised her eyes, in defiance, tears lurking just under the surface, and glared at him.

"Yes, sir?" she'd barely whispered.

"What did you do in Dublin?" he had asked. She had gone pale and only stared.

"Captain, she's our essential violinist," Shawn had come up for his sister. "Gigs don't work without her. We're the best harbour-side band in town," and he'd grinned, hoping desperately that the Captain would stop putting pressure on Paean. If she cracked...

He got his wish. Captain Lascek released Paean from his interrogating glare. His expression had turned cold and official, and he'd beckoned to Rushka – that same Rushka, to come forward with some documents.

"Sign here, and here, and there," he had instructed them. "You're employed. We need you to play a gig whenever one is called for, and for the rest you're deck hands and cabin boys. You shall be trained on the job."

"Works for me," Ronan had muttered and signed, his siblings following his lead.

That had been a week back, as the 'San Diego' was already

putting distance between herself and Dublin, leaving a small host of Uinate harbour guards behind in her wake. Shawn had known it would be alright, as long as none of them said anything much. What was Captain going to do, throw them overboard?

Actually, what would stop Captain? Who would come looking for them? Shawn had realized since that he wouldn't want to mess with that man. Radomir Lascek had both the ship and her crew in absolute control. Watching him operate, Shawn could sometimes imagine that the crew were merely automatons responding to his signals. He trained them like that: Responses had to be instant and dead accurate.

The Captain had a military bearing, and he seemed to have an unflinching instinct where sea and sky were concerned. The Solar Wind's sails were self-tuning; but often he would override that and take an active hand, ordering 'all hands' onto the deck to tweak and influence the sails, and every time, this resulted in greater speed.

There were many rumours flying around the ship concerning the Captain. Some of the sailors said that he preferred storms to clear skies, and that there was more to Captain than met the eye; that he was ex-military, that he was an alien... Shawn chuckled. The Captain's military attitude and his alien glares at old Sherman discouraged the old storyteller from spreading such rumours. For a few hours at a time.

Shawn yawned and played the Britches one more time, in his own altered version with a beat missing, making them sound as though they were limping. It had been a long day. The break in the Crow's Nest had been a respite from a lot of scrubbing, chopping, polishing, handing on tools, and tightening of things on deck. His fair, freckled skin was burnt from the work in the sun. His freckles were fusing. He'd be one big freckle soon, he thought pensively, staring at the by now purple plankton bloom and the waves that were

slowly losing their gloaming as the night deepened. Surely Pae had no problem with the purple? Tonight the waves would have fluorescent peaks again. He sighed. When was this watch over?

*

7 April 2116

Hey, Katya.

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

Landed in Dublin last week. What a dreary port, rains all the time! Right under the Unicate's nose again, just like Captain likes it... was a prima getaway, too, you should have been there!

So we loaded some young sewer rats with the potatoes. Call themselves the 'Donegal Troubles', yes, I can see the 'trouble' bit. Wonder what the Unicate's up to, hunting children again? Ace musicians though. Captain's making them play a lot of what they call "Ceilidhs", which is just an Irish way of saying, make lots of noise. When that girl plays, Federi gets homesick. Remember I had a violin once, sis?

And Captain had to hire one more. A very beautiful girl, but – Katya, you know how it goes. When things go wrong, who has to clean them up? That brings our head count to thirteen, don't look at me like that, is not my fault! Is bad luck that!

Captain's grandiose plans are getting bigger by the minute. But seriously, Katya, he's taking too many risks now. I can't see us surviving that long.

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

Kathal, my sister. Missing you.

Federi

*

“Land ho!”

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

Turquoise light glittered and danced on the ceiling. She clung to the mattress. How she could have thought she might be in her bed back home in Molly Street... it showed that she was getting used to the constant rolling of the ship, that she could even forget about it at times when she slept.

Her blinds were pulled all the way up, all the white and blue morning sunlight flooding her cabin. She remembered. She had left them like that, watching the moonlight last night, and the red sea turning black, until she had fallen asleep. She'd been awake again for the midnight shift, the 'graveyard watch' as the crew called it, and back in her bunk at four when the early morning irrepresibles had come on duty. It was waiting for her too; she'd already had to take one early morning watch.

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

And someone banging on her door. She groaned.

“Come on, sis! Wake up! All hands on deck!”

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

“Thanks, Ro,” she called and slipped into her beaten-up old jeans and hand-me-down, faded red T-shirt. She wouldn't even have had a

change of clothing if Ronan hadn't packed for her, that day.

“Land ho!”

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

She moved into the day's duties, out of her cabin and up the first set of steps – companionway, the sailors called it – to the upper crew deck, shooting a wary glance all the way down the passage towards the galley, where that rainbow monstrosity of a gypsy cook was usually based. Lurking there ready to pounce on anything that had hands and give it a lot of work to do.

She had located him, that day. The wild man from the docks who had introduced them to the First Mate who had subsequently assigned them cabins. It had taken her the entire day to find him; she'd wanted to say thank you. When she'd eventually discovered the galley and realized he was based there as the person who mixed the gumbo – in itself an idea to get used to – and she'd started to say thanks for bringing them aboard, instead of an acknowledgement he'd abruptly cut her short and given her pots to scrub. Her favourite chore! - not.

She didn't appreciate his brusque order; a request would have done the same thing in a heartbeat. And his chronic sense of humour that went with his psychedelic dress code, felt forced to her. And a bit too morbid.

Paean quickly moved up the second companionway, to the outer deck, ready to call her little brother back out of the Crow's Nest – which modern ship had a Crow's Nest? Honestly, a practically forgotten concept; gone long before the ships that had supposedly floated on water with a hull made of metal – another tall tale! Ha, and she knew why Shawn hid up there: Because he knew *she'd* not be climbing up there after him! So he could play ocarina while

others worked!

She emerged from the hatch to the outer deck, and stopped for a moment, to stare at the incredibly beautiful blue day out there. The sea, azure; the sky nearly the same. She breathed, and started to relax, feeling the morning sun warm on her skin, drawing out and evaporating the stress from her. She closed her eyes for a second, revelling in the sunshine. That jolly bloom had passed, thank the Infinite. And there was a nice breeze, but it was warm. That was welcome! They'd had a miserable winter in Dublin; and before it could properly be Spring, they'd had to flee.

Perhaps Shawney was right. Perhaps things really would be alright; all she needed to do was trust. Nobody. Trust nobody. But have faith that the world itself would take care of her; that somehow, they were safe. Nobody had asked them any pointed questions at all. Maybe on this ship it didn't matter and they could start anew.

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

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

2

Stabilizers

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

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

Early this morning the great Genoa sail had been unfurled, to add speed to the mainsail and foresail. He had been there to watch and help, too. He had thought then that no ship could possibly go faster than she had been sailing; but now her speed picked up even more, so much that he only wanted to hold on and enjoy the rush. The Solar Wind was a Zephyr, the fastest class of ship available to traders today. She sailed lightly, like a yacht; but with a lot of added power from the enormous area of her self-tuning sails. Shawn squeezed as much information as he could out of the older sailors, whenever they had time. Particularly his countryman, old Sherman Dougherty, took time to answer his questions; and so did Federi, the gypsy cook with the illegal colour sense. That one was especially forthcoming, with information, entertainment, friendship and a never-ending load of work. The Donegals hadn't only been hired to play Ceilidhs!

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

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

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

Ronan peered up at the Crow's Nest between the glittering sails

and snorted impatiently. Couldn't his two unruly siblings grow up a bit?

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

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

They'd probably have to drag Paeon off the ship by her ears, because she had gone into burrow mode, hiding away when she was off duty, and talking to no-one when she was on. He didn't know his sister like that, but he guessed she had reason. But didn't she see? The longer they stayed in one place – the ship in this case, the larger the danger that they were found out. They had to keep moving. Go to ground in Hamilton for a month or so, then find another ship and travel on, perhaps to Cuba.

Radomir Lascek was suddenly behind him.

“You Donegals stay aboard.”

Ronan stared at him, eyes wide. He didn't dare to ask why. That put an end to his plans! But he didn't dare disobey the Captain.

How on Earth had Captain discovered that they wanted to leave?

Radomir Lascek moved away to speak to Jonathan Marsden. Ronan's eyes followed him. There went a man who could easily be a fleet commander of some sort in the Unicate Navy. Tall, straight, authoritarian. A man to admire. Ronan had been considering a career in the Navy, perhaps even the Marines himself before everything had started going so badly wrong. And now Captain had discovered something. He was sure of it! The man to admire had become a man to fear.

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

“Shawn!”

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

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

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

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

Hey! It was completely wrong! Those sails were supposed to be the force that pulled the ship forward, not a resistance that held it back! What were they doing? If the sails weren’t pulling the ship, what was? Whales on a leash? Why weren’t they tacking? The ship was actually going straight into the wind, at full speed! And the solar drives with their bit of push could never be enough to achieve such speed against the actual natural forces... Shawn peered at the wake of the ship. What was that rising out of the water? Bubbles? Steam -?

He glanced down at Federi, who was following him into the

rigging. He'd ask him. The gypsy was peering intently at the harbour, scowling.

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

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

Federi threw his head back and laughed.

“And fuel cells are illegal,” added Shawn pensively.

“If you say so,” agreed Federi.

I don't say so, thought Shawn. They are! I happen to know my stuff! A little of the strangeness of the Solar Wind had suddenly become clear to him. He grinned.

“Okay, Federi, I won't tell anyone. But why don't we just furl those sails? They're breaking our speed!”

“Because,” said the gypsy, “if we close them while we approach the port, they will know, won't they? Can't furl the sails! The real

question is, why is Captain going so blasted fast?" He turned thoughtful, peering at the harbour.

"Won't they figure out that the wind is blowing them the wrong way round?" asked Shawn.

"Nah," said Federi. "That's not the problem. They never look that closely – they've got their sensors and electronic binocs, with that they only see what they want to see. But we should have..." He lifted a pair of small electronic binoculars and gazed through them.

"Federi," asked Shawn, "that stuff in the harbour there that looks like black caviare. What is that?"

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

Shawn glanced back at the strange black specks – boats, he realized – that littered the harbour's waters like a hatch of spider's eggs. And suddenly he knew what they were.

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

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

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

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

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

Aw hey, she knew what this meeting was about. They had turned away from Hamilton. *Why?* She hadn't exactly been keen on Ronan's plan to go ashore; but the Captain's decision made her even more uneasy. What was with the Solar Wind? Was she a spy ship? But she knew that she couldn't ask. A low profile. Hang onto that, Paean Donegal.

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

Radomir Lascek nodded at Federi, who was suddenly there, leaning against the cupboard at the porthole watching them. Paean blinked. Where had he come from all of a sudden?

"Captain says I got to put you in the picture." Federi stretched lazily and moved forward into the light of the porthole. His

countless decorations glittered mysteriously. “The picture is, we’ve turned. Any questions?”

“What happened out there, precisely?” asked Rhine Gold.

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

“Why?”

“To get to the other side of course,” was the glib reply.

Ronan scowled and raised a hand. “There were small black craft in the harbour. It’s to do with them, innit? Who are those guys?”

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

Paean snorted in irritation. Yes, the Stabs. The Unicate military; small, extremely versatile vessels that were used to pilot ships into a harbour or escort them if they carried precious cargo; or to surround a lawbreaker’s ship and trap it, and... her mind refused to go there. She had seen such manoeuvres in Dublin Harbour, and they had chilled her. When the Unicate got their hands on a criminal... This was hair-raising!

“So why is the Solar Wind running from the authorities?” she charged.

And what were you running away from, in Dublin?

She blinked. Federi was smiling nonchalantly at her. It took her a moment to realize that he hadn’t actually voiced that critical question.

“Don’t be illogical, little songbird,” came his acerbic/amused response. “We’re not running, we’re reaching. Really, you land rats should learn your terms! The wind is just ahead of the beam. Fair breeze like this, should carry us all the way to the shores of sweet Argentina, where we can all get off and collect cockles and mussels.

Alive...” He peered intently at each of the crew, a challenge in his dark eyes. His fingers were twiddling with something. A paring knife, determined Paean. She bit her lip as she stared at him. He’d smoothly averted the attention away from her. What...?

“More questions, anyone?” he snapped, clearly not amused any longer. “Maybe want to ask why Rushka wears boots?”

And he’d neatly side-stepped her question, too! Ha!

“Federi,” Shawn piped up, “I thought Hamilton were a free port! Why are the Stabs circling it like that, like a swarm of vultures?”

“Kaboom!” exclaimed Federi with grim delight, pointing at Shawn. “Exactly. Finally the right question!”

And once again, no answer! Free port? Vultures? Oh lordie, lordie, thought Paean despondently. Had Shawn started to think like that? ‘Free Port’ was gangster speak for a harbour that was not yet under Unicate control. It was Federi’s bad influence, no doubt! She glared at the man, unimpressed with his aping around. No doubt Shawn would now want to grow his hair long too and hang dead birds and fish bones in it.

Federi’s eyes darted to each of the crew members, sparkling with some morbid amusement; he nodded to himself.

“Alright, worthy colleagues,” he announced, “procedures. We lie low. No electronic signals. Understood? No bell-phones, cell-phones or dell-phones, no cold coffees reheated in the ultra-glare oven.” He glared at Rhine Gold and Ronan. Paean frowned. Phones? Archaic old phones? On the ship? “No hi-tech, no low-tech. No-tech. They can hear a light being switched on.” The Romany paused, puzzled. “Of course they can also *see* a light. Ergo, no lights either. At nightfall some of us go ashore in the smaller lifeboat...” He paused once more, studying the crew for reactions.

He had them all mesmerized, realized Paean with surprise. They

all just hung waiting for the next instruction!

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

“We can swim,” laughed Shawn.

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

“Who goes ashore?” asked Ronan.

“Only those with business ashore, Donegal,” warned Federi. There was metal behind that voice; and it didn’t leave either when he asked lightly, “any further questions? Anyone?” His steely smile settled on Ailyss. The technician didn’t look up from studying her hands.

“Any questions, *Ailyss*?” asked Federi pointedly.

She glanced up, bored. “What’s for lunch?”

“Lunch?” The question unbalanced the gypsy, for a split second. “You’re asking me, the cook? Cor, Ailyss! Let me check the menu! Yup, says fish ‘n chips here, on the fridge. Again. Course this is a ship!” He grinned.

Paeon scowled. There was no menu on the fridge! What *was* this?

“So in which way were you supposed to put us in the picture?” she shot. And snapped her mouth shut for the second time.

A smile; an imperceptible shake of the head.

“That *is* the picture, *dulciuri*,” Federi informed her. “Ladies and gents, this session of tease-the-dogbody is now closed. Are all instructions understood?”

The Captain got up and nodded briskly. “Well done, Federi!”

He left the galley.

Paean couldn't stand it any longer.

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

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

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

Rushka had planted herself very suddenly in front of Paean, putting down a firm boot.

"Donegals! Captain demands to see you in the boardroom."

Paean iced. Ronan watched Rushka turn and walk off. She had an explosive way of saying "Donegals"! She was uncanny! Did she carry a knife in her knee-high boots?

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

"Think it's that serious?" Radomir Lascek studied his gypsy with a scowl.

"They're frozen solid with fear," replied Federi. "'s got to be serious! Captain, think Hamilton is about them?"

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

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

closed. It was reserved for officers' meetings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

did a marvellous job.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Would you dare to repeat that question you asked Federi?” demanded Lascek with an intimidating frown.

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

Lascek and Federi exchanged puzzled glances. Federi laughed brightly.

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

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

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

She stared at them uncertainly. Was she in trouble?

“Get on with it!” barked Lascek.

“The ship I boarded in Dublin was the ‘San Diego’,” she said. “But here aboard everyone calls her the Solar Wind. Why?”

Lascek gestured at Federi. “Do put the girl in the picture, my good Tzigan!”

“Was a false identity,” replied the gypsy cook.

Paeon gasped.

“Why were we using a false identity, Captain?” asked Ronan quizzically.

The Captain laughed aloud.

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

3

Port Hamilton

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

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

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

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

“It’s a tough one,” agreed Ronan. “Didn’t he give you the option of getting off here? And with a spotless record?”

“A spotless record?” The tall young man from Hamburg shook his head sadly. “Joking, Ronan. The Unicate is going to find out sooner or later that one has spent time on such a ship. He can forge

my travel documents all he likes. They will pick it up. The safest is really to stay aboard until we're in the uncivilized regions."

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

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

"Fair," said Ronan.

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

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

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

It also meant, and he understood this clearly, that for now the Donegal Troubles were safe from the blasted Uinate. By a simple function of being in the right place. Clearly Captain had experience getting away, or he wouldn't be a pirate still. This was altogether good news. Maybe if they could just stay on as extra pirates... He wondered what it would be like, boarding and looting vessels. Whether he'd be given a real bolt gun, like the police wielded in Dublin.

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

or something.

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

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

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

“Fancy,” he said.

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

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

“Evisceration,” said Shawn with a grin.

“Next time, your turn,” replied Federi. “So observe!”

The paradise of blue sea and green shore lay smiling in the afternoon sun. A breeze blew here on the outer deck, by the bowsprit with the not-quite-figurehead, where Paeon was standing staring into

the hazy distance. It was nearing four o'clock. The afternoon seemed endless, working on her overstretched patience.

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

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

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

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

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

“What’s eating you, girl?”

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

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

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

“Missing Dublin?” he asked gently.

“Where’s Dublin,” replied Paeon acridly. He was fishing, blast him. Using underhanded methods. Gentleness was the last thing she needed now. She’d left a lot of friends behind in Molly Street. But not only friends...

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

Ah yes. Because of Ailyss.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She thought back to countless rainy afternoons in her old schoolteacher’s musty living room. A room lined with genuine old bookshelves, with ancient books made from original paper, and

slightly newer ones on permaprint, on every conceivable topic. The old teacher didn't believe in electronic literature; she used to say that the Uinate could control what you read, that way, and could even erase it. Mrs Flanagan, the rebel teacher, her grey hair in a tidy knot, subversively reading history or philosophy to the children of Molly Street who were gathered on her carpet.

Mrs Flanagan, who had hidden the Donegal sibs in her study and concocted a wild story for the Uinate police, charming them old-lady style while the sibs had pressed their ears to the door trying to hear what she was saying.

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

"Your old teacher?" asked Federi.

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

"She taught you things you didn't learn in school?" guessed the gypsy. "History? Culture?"

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

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

Oh, for crying out loud!

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

"Give or take," laughed Federi. "So, *shey*, how many months short of junior adult status?"

"I *told* you, I'm..."

"Not a very practised liar," completed Federi, winking at her. "You were raised to be honest, *dulciuri*, that is your biggest problem

here. Relax, little bird. Got my own secrets. Won't give yours away. Never heard of honour amongst thieves?"

Paeon rolled her eyes.

"So," prompted Federi, "fourteen?"

"I was born the thirteenth of August, *on* the century," she said angrily. "Year Zero. It's twenty-one-sixteen, so work it out, won't you?" She ground her teeth and added, annoyed, "I'm not a child, Federi! Just not very tall."

Federi's gaze wandered into the hazy distance. For a moment he seemed miles away. He nodded pensively.

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

"You're lonely and sad," he diagnosed. "Could try telling Federi about it?"

Paeon eyed him. "Or I could try falling off the face of the Earth," she said glumly. And noted his injured expression with surprise. Did it actually matter to him? "Sorry, Federi. Just – I don't think you can help us." She glanced down at her hands. The blood was still sticking to them; ghost blood that would never go away. And she looked up and noted with fright that he'd followed her glance. "Don't think anybody can help," she said under her breath.

"Captain might," replied Federi quietly.

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

"Captain's a dangerous man, in't he?"

The gypsy bared his teeth. "The Pirate Captain? Most dangerous man I've ever come across!"

Paeon nodded. She'd thought so.

"Wish there were somewhere on this ship where my brothers and I..." Another sigh; another gloomy shrug. Hells, she couldn't tell

him!

“Ah,” said Federi, brightening up. “For a sibs’ meeting. *Minunat!* But not in the cabins, little hummingbird.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rushka laughed softly.

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

“Very!”

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

enough!”

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

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

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

“Honest, those three?” wondered Lascek.



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

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

“But you can,” grinned Shawn.

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

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

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

“A microphone,” he said with a grin.

“Thieves’ honour,” laughed Paean.

~ *End of Preview* ~

[*Yes, I want the ebook*](#)