

*The Boat*

It was in the small hours of the morning when the dinghy I had been dispatched in drew alongside *The Mary-Ellen* and hailed her. The sight of the great ship in the distance had been a welcome one. It had taken longer than it should have to find her.

Down came the ropes, and one of my apprentices caught them while another secured them to our boat.

There were shouts—both between my apprentices and between the crew members above—and in a few moments we were up with a jerk and floating above the water. When we came alongside the deck of *The Mary-Ellen*, I saw the mechanisms of the crane and the bodies of the crew members moving busily about it. In short order we had been unloaded.

“This is where we say goodbye,” I said to my apprentices with a melancholy smile.

In spite of courageous effort, their faces betrayed their devastation.

They asked hopefully, what, if anything, I would yet have of them.

“You may return,” I told them, giving them my blessing with a benign improvised gesture using my raised hand.

“May we stay with you instead, if we’d like to?” asked one of them, by all appearances the youngest.

"I'm afraid not," I told him in an especially kindly fashion. "*The Mary-Ellen* asked for me alone. And I'm sure your ship would miss you besides," I added, trying as best I could to soften the impact of what was undoubtedly a severe blow to both his professional aspirations and his self-image.

In truth, my commission had said nothing whatever regarding apprentices, and since the matter was likely within the bounds of my personal discretion, I little doubted the ease with which I might have retained the young man's service, had it been my wish. But it was not my wish to retain him, or anyone else from my previous life. In all things, *The Mary-Ellen* represented a *new beginning*.

"I don't like this ship," the apprentice said, mildly.

I was taken aback. But what did this young fool know of ships anyway?

He gazed about the deck as though searching for something, troubled that he couldn't find it. The gathered members of *The Mary-Ellen's* crew did not seem to take offense. They merely idled around the equipment and the crane, examining us with the placid looks of men who did not care deeply about what would happen next.

“All the more reason you must go,” I insisted, barely keeping the irritation from my voice.

“You are used to your own ship. *The Mary-Ellen* would come as a shock, with its strange ways and vastly more complex and superior features.”

“Well, if you say so...” the apprentice said, trailing off. “Anyway, I don’t like it, so I’m glad I don’t have to stay, even if it would be nice to continue helping and learning from you. But I do greatly wonder if you’ll like it yourself, and if you’ll have need of me whether you care to admit it or not.”

“Oh, I’ll like it well enough,” I assured him, almost chuckling. I was not so cruel as to then disabuse him of the inflated sense of self-worth he seemed to harbor.

“Could we at least stay until you are seen safely to the next phase of this operation?” another of the apprentices asked.

“That won’t be necessary,” I told him, though as he mentioned it I wondered just what this next *phase* might entail.

I had taken for granted the fact that I would start my work immediately.

As the taciturn crew reclined on their equipment, regarding us with diffidence, while I and my apprentices stood awkwardly—each only a few inches apart—it occurred to me that

someone would have to seize the initiative, and that, owing to my station, said initiative was mine to seize.

“Who among you is in charge here?” I demanded.

Some of the crew looked down sheepishly. Others looked at one another in what appeared to be confusion, as though they did not understand what I’d said, though I could not have been clearer in my address.

“There’s no cause to be shy,” I chided. “I’ll need to speak with your superior.”

...

“The one who supervises you at your work” I explained. “Which you seem to be very good at,” I added hastily, gesturing at the cranes and winches, whose appalling appearance actually suggested gross *dereliction* of duty.

The men seemed skeptical. One of them cleared his throat and spit onto the deck, then looked directly at me in a frankly hostile manner.

“I had expected to be met by someone and instructed further... I had, in short, expected to be expected... But perhaps there’s been some mistake?”

*The Mary-Ellen* was such a large ship that the thought occurred to me that we may have *put in* at the wrong place. There was surely another crane aboard—perhaps many cranes—and if we had hailed the wrong one it would go some way towards explaining the behavior of the men before us.

“What’s your business?” one of the men asked suddenly, sounding almost frightened. In the gloom it was hard to say which had called out—they were all rather burly and hirsute, with long, tangled beards and broad, chapped faces—so I made sure to smile broadly as I replied, revealing as many of my moderately well-maintained teeth as was humanly possible in that moment.

“I am here on a *routine matter*,” I replied, mentally congratulations myself on my subtlety.

I had a good reason for not wanting to reveal my true purpose... Yet.

A murmur rippled through the crew, followed by a long pause.

“If this business of yours is so routine, how come I never seen you before?” asked a crewman whose Company issued cap, shrunken badly from exposure, granted him a somewhat moronic aspect. If they were undisciplined and fractious, it appeared at least that they were united in their suspicion of me.

“It is routine in the sense that it happens aboard ships all the time, though I confess it is new to me,” I added, continuing to smile and hoping that a personal detail would endear them to me and save the situation from abstraction.

“New to you, and new to us,” growled a crewman with a wounded eye.

“And what about these other men with you?” the first man demanded. “You haven’t said anything about them. Are they also here on a routine matter? And if so, is it the same routine matter that you’re here on, or a different one? And if it’s a different one, can they tell us about *that?*”

“They’re crew members, such as yourself, my good man,” I replied, becoming impatient with the interrogation. “And they’ll be leaving any minute now, I promise. They don’t have any other business here besides making sure I arrived safely, and now that’s done they’ll be going back from whence they came.”

Muttering ensued in the assembly, and, I noticed, the smaller gaggle of my own apprentices around me. I tried to catch the eyes of a few of my own to reassure them that I did, in fact, value their service, and had only made it seem like less than it was in order to endear myself to these suspicious deck-crew members of *The Mary-Allen’s*.

None would meet my gaze.

It seemed I had insulted them.

An unfortunate mistake, but it couldn't be helped. A leader cannot please every subordinate. Sometimes he even has to pit them against one another in pursuit of a shared objective to elevate all boats, etc.

In any case, I had no time to waste sparing feelings. If it was—in a way—routine, my business was nevertheless urgent. If my apprentices had been mistaken in choosing the place to hail *The Mary-Ellen* and *put in*, then perhaps they deserved my scorn. There was no telling how many delays or complications might yet ensue as a result of such incompetence.

If there was a silver-lining to my insensitivity, it was that both the crew and my own apprentices now appeared united in their contempt for me, with mutual camaraderie replacing caution and antipathy. I watched the mood shift between them with a wry appreciation, and was encouraged to see a member of *The Mary-Ellen's* crew dispatch himself hastily to locate a superior who could bring the situation to a close and relieve them all of the burden of dealing with me.

"Where do you think he's gone?" I heard one of my apprentices whispering to another.

"That crew member who just departed?"

"I can't fathom the intentions of a person like him," the other apprentice replied.

Ah, I thought to myself—I understand now how there is even an additional layer to my transgression against my apprentices. You see, I said to myself, your apprentices think of themselves as belonging to another class entirely than that of these crew members, even though they are *virtually indistinguishable*. If there is a difference in grade it is minute enough to be practically invisible and, with the exception of having been assigned as my escort, their duties are virtually the same as well. But now they identify with me and hold themselves above these others due to the second-hand prestige they themselves feel suffused with merely as a result of their continued exposure to my person.

Much as I would have enjoyed continuing to dissect the psycho-social nuances of these sailors, the crewman who had departed soon returned with a few more of his fellows in tow, as well as another man whose bearing indicated to me a different status than the others, though in dress he too was much the same: the uniform hanging loosely on his wan frame just as worn, just as greasy, and just as stained. Despite this, he exuded a confidence the others lacked and he twitched with a puckish energy that seemed like it could grow quickly exhausting.

“Hello, and is this our mysterious visitor that has so excited and aroused the crew?” His blackened hand proffered vaguely as if to ask: *who will take this?*

My apprentices moved aside, clearing a sort of grove in which I and the man stood isolated from the others. To his credit he approached and took up my reluctant hand in his, intuitively divining my elevated station.

“I’m called Holder,” the man said. “Probably because I’m the one left *holding the bag* more often than not, and here I am now, *holding your hand!* Not that I’m implying you’re the bag, sir,” he said, vigorously shaking his head.

“No, indeed,” I confirmed. “Not the bag, I’m afraid.”

“And what is it that brings you here to us today? As you might imagine, it’s seldom that we receive visitors, so I hope you’ll pardon my surprise, and the surprise and suspicion of these men. They’re honest individuals all... With one or two exceptions!”

Holder grinned in delight, but the faces on the members of the crew standing behind him remained disquietingly blank.

I thanked Holder for meeting me and confessed that the reason for my arrival aboard his ship was a matter of some delicacy, which would be best discussed in private with the *Senior Officers*.

“I see,” nodded Holder, cocking his head and looking thoughtful, though his expression, in fact, betrayed a lack of understanding.

“And consequently, I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to take me to them at once,” I added, as gently as I could.

“Certainly,” agreed Holder with what seemed now genuine deference and concern, “if you’ll follow me, we’ll get this sorted out right away.”

Upon Holder’s heels, before I entered the ship, I turned to regard my apprentices for what I had every reason to imagine would be the final time. The life of a sailor is full of peril after all, and I didn’t expect to depart from *The Mary-Ellen* for some time. Despite their limited use, I had relied upon my apprentices in my own small way—a way entirely in proportion to their frankly small value—and, despite our brief time together I was, in some sense, fond of them. I had therefore expected a reflection of my own brave and bittersweet expression to meet me when I cast my gaze in their direction, but the sentiment went unnoticed, wasted on the backs of their already turned heads.

Lights flickered to life around us as Holder led me through a series of dingy halls and chambers devoted, from what I could gather, to storage and administrative vagaries. We were passing through an in-between place—a hybrid area of the ship utilized by the laborers of the deck crew: the haulers, crane operators, mechanics, clerks, drivers, dispatchers, and dozen other breeds of minor functionary that called these liminal atmospheres their home.

At present, at least in the areas through which Holder and I passed, they appeared largely unoccupied. Occasionally a door would be slightly ajar, or we would see a light shining from behind a grimed window illuminating some dim shape or another within, and here and there I would follow Holder in taking a large, careful step over a mass of debris—shattered palettes, or a pile of oiled rags—only to notice at the last second some quick or subtle movement occurring in and around these sites of dereliction in my peripheral vision. It seemed that my trusted apprentices had truly made an egregious error when they picked this part of *The Mary-Ellen* to put in upon.

“So,” Holder asked in an elaborately coy tone, “what is it that you do, Mr...?”

“Bilder.”

“A man of his hands,” Holder remarked approvingly.

“Yes,” I smiled, not sure I understood him.

“You’ll get along well with the old man,” my guide observed. “He’s cut from the same cloth.”

“That’s reassuring,” I replied without exactly knowing what the man was talking about.

“We have a great need for men such as yourself right now, as you can see,” said Holder, gesturing around us at the shabby interior of the ship.

“Yes, she’s seen better days hasn’t she? Though I’m not sure how much help I’ll be with regard to matters aesthetic.”

Holder nodded with what I took to be great, feigned understanding. Then he leaned in conspiratorially.

“One of the things I’ve always wanted for myself is a sort of enclosure for my cranes” he said in a near whisper, as though confessing something illicit.

He laughed, a little too lustily.

“Is that so?” I asked pleasantly, not sure what the fellow was getting at.

“Yes. It wouldn’t need to be much more than a shed. In fact, you could call it a shed if it made you feel better. Just a roof and a few walls. Wouldn’t even need to bother with a door. A mere flap would be more than enough.”

“Mm” I intoned.

“It’s just something I’ve always thought about and wanted. As things stand, the cranes are exposed to the elements—not that the cranes mind, although there’s something to be said for the possibility of a shed really helping to extend the working life of a crane. It’s more for the men that I’m thinking. Or maybe I’m just thinking for myself. *Hah!* But you think about it too, eh? Next time you’re on the pot. I’m sure you’ll be more than busy, but it wouldn’t take much to knock up a shed or three for my cranes. Like I said, we don’t even need a door. A tarp or a strip of hide would serve us as well. Just a dry spot to keep out of the rain, and to possibly throw a folding table down where it won’t get soaked...”

It was a bewildering request, but I smiled and nodded just to try and bring the matter to a close.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Holder was clearly pleased.

“Keep it in the back of your mind—behind the moth-eaten coats. Too bad it’s just you now though, eh? Could’ve put those boys of yours to good use at least, but they were off in a flash and I can’t say I blame them.”

“My apprentices, you mean?”

“Those young fellows you climbed on with, yes. Apprentices, eh?” He whistled.

“Oh, apprentices in name only I assure you. I’m not sure what, if anything, they took away from our experience together. But, I suppose that’s for them to say.”

“Sure beats having to do everything yourself, I bet. Boy, I’d like to get an apprentice or two. You must really be something special. But hey, isn’t the point of an apprentice that they hover around, waiting on you hand and foot and doing all the grunt work? That sounds pretty nice to me but seems like it’d be hard to take advantage of that if they’re rowing in the opposite direction. You trying to build up their strength or something?”

“They had served their purpose.”

“Oh hell, I know what it’s like having a whole lot of extra elbows around, you don’t need to sugarcoat it for my sake. So, you didn’t get along. So what?”

“They weren’t all bad,” I admitted, “but they weren’t exactly useful either. They had a hard time paying attention. Anyway, I’m sure *The Mary-Ellen* has her own supply.

Holder said nothing, but I noticed his eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“On the subject of staffing: I noticed it was a little sparse, are we between shifts?”

“I think what it is is that we’re spread so thin. They don’t make ‘em like *The Mary-Ellen* anymore, do they? But you’d know a lot more about that than me!”

He was right enough. Who among my peers had not studied *The Mary-Ellen* with fascination? She was probably the largest Company ship ever constructed when she came off the line and still a marvel, despite being long overdue for retirement. Judging by my surroundings however, maybe the real marvel was that she was still at sea at all.

Nevertheless, I could not help but feel giddy from anticipation.

“Is it a *skeleton crew* that runs her?” I asked.

“A number of us are fully alive,” replied Holder in such a way that made me question the spontaneity of the quip.

I smiled politely.

“So, where will you be turning your attention first, Mr. Builder?”

“Hard to say, really” I admitted with a sigh. “There’s a tremendous amount to consider. First, I’ll need to speak with the Senior Officers and only then will I begin my assessment.”

“I know all of you types have your specialties and I’m not sure what you can do while we’re at sea, but there are parts of the hull that have seen better days and that’s putting it mildly. If you know anything about ventilation that’s a major plus. The latrines are an actual nightmare. Piss poor would be much too lenient a diagnosis. Piss hell would be nearer the mark!”

“As much as I wish I could help, I’m not sure I’ll be much use. I’m not a skilled plumber” I said, somewhat puzzled.

“Is it too late to call back your apprentices? Make an exchange? Maybe one of them knows his way around a pipe wrench?”

Before I could reply Holder continued.

“A jest, my friend and nothing more. There are plenty of unpleasant tasks to take care of onboard any vessel, all I’m saying is: why not leave it to the bright young men and you and I can focus on what’s really important.”

“And that would be?”

“Drinking, playing cards, doing whatever we feel like of course! What’s the use in having authority if it can’t be arbitrarily exercised? Or time if it can’t be ill-spent?”

I couldn’t tell if Holder was being facetious, or if he had somehow mistaken my tepid indulgence of his personality as some broader endorsement of the sort of vicious lifestyle to which he was now alluding; a lifestyle that was, unfortunately—and increasingly—all too common aboard the great ships, whose sheer size afforded unethical crew members ample opportunity to indulge in unsanctioned pastimes unnoticed, or—even more disturbingly—*abetted* by agents of The Company’s disciplinary regime.

“Perhaps you could tell me you what it is you do, Mr. Holder?” I asked, in an effort to get away from the subject.

“Sir?”

“I said: perhaps you wouldn’t mind telling me what it is you do? All we’ve done is talk about me and I’m afraid I’m not much of a talker. But I am interested in you,” I assured him awkwardly. “Really.”

“I’m touched, sir, but that’s not why I stopped you. I’d love to tell you all about myself and set down my life story for posterity before it’s too late, but we’re here.”



Holder held the door and ushered me inside. The room was large and appeared slightly less disheveled than the rest of what I had seen of *The Mary-Ellen*, though much of this effect was likely due to the fact that the random assortment of items that the room contained—of which there were actually very many—had been shoved along its edges, leaving a vast and comparatively tidy central square, a little like a dance floor.

Each of the four walls was lined with large rectangular windows, some three or four feet from the floor and rising almost to the ceiling. Where the panes of the windows were visible—for in many places they were at least partially obscured by pieces of furniture, rusting machinery in various states of disassembly, stacks of paper loosely secured with twine, and various other detritus—they were smogged and largely opaque. It was clear that the office had been built with transparency in mind, with the intention that its occupant should be able to observe the surrounding areas—probably staging, or maintenance facilities—and that he too might be observed in turn by those working in said areas, but the idea was now merely theoretical given its present state. If anyone was out there, he was invisible. So too, it seemed, was the occupant, for I was startled when his voice emerged from a corner I thought devoted only to the remains of a dilapidated dormitory set.

“How’s the fishing industry, Mr. Holder?” an old man asked from behind a narrow, scuffed desk.

“Bloody, ghastly, and unsightly,” my companion replied.

“And what have you caught for me today, my lad?”

“Well, it’s this gentleman you see. He’s come in from the water to us just recently and he said he’s been sent on some fairly urgent business. Actually, he said it was routine, but I saw through him right away.”

“Routine?” the old man repeated. “I wonder what he means by that? Did you ask him?”

“Sir, I pumped this poor man for as much information as I could given the short walk between my cranes and your richly appointed suite, but all he told me was that he was a *man of his hands*, whatever that means. He didn’t even tell me his name, the tight-lipped bastard!” Holder smiled my way, winking.

“He didn’t?” grumbled the old man. “And that’s why you brought him my way, I take it?”

“Yes, sir.”

This wasn’t exactly true of course, but I didn’t interject. The whole exchange seemed oddly rhetorical, as though it had been rehearsed for my benefit. Could the wrinkled old fellow across the grimy office possibly be The Captain of *The Mary-Ellen*? I had asked for an audience with the Senior Officers of the ship, and while I didn’t take Holder for a brilliant soul, he had given me no particular reason to doubt his intelligence or sincerity. The Company rewarded loyalty, it was true, and the further afield the less likely it was to see

the traditional decorum observed, but this was *The Mary-Ellen*. I had expected something more than the grubby and frankly ill-looking old man who sat before me.

“Well, I wonder what it is he wants? Anyway, thank you Holder. You may leave us.”

“Certainly sir,” said Holder, but he hesitated at the door all the same.

“What is it, Holder?” asked the old man patiently, noticing the younger man’s apprehension.

Holder looked concerned but said nothing. Then for a moment he appeared almost catatonic; as though all thought had fled from him, never to return.

When he noticed me looking at him, he blushed and let out a forced laugh.

“It’s probably nothing, sir” he said, waving his hand in an utterly unconvincing pantomime of nonchalance.

“It certainly is not nothing, Holder,” the old man chided. “Not if you’re hesitating.”

Holder regarded his shoes bashfully in a stunning display for a grown man.

“If it were nothing there’d be nothing to hesitate for, nothing to talk about, and we wouldn’t be talking anymore at all right now. You’d be off on your way, down the hall and back to

work. So, you go ahead and spit it out right now, whatever it is that's on your mind" the old man admonished, as though he were Holder's schoolmaster which, for all I knew, he might have been.

"Very well... Only, it's about our guest," Holder said, jerking his thumb toward me. It was as if I was both not present and also being asked to enjoy a private performance exclusively for my benefit.

"This man here?" the old man asked, gesturing toward me, looking at me briefly as he did so, and smiling as though to reassure me that everything was *well in hand*.

Holder nodded.

"Well, what is it? Speak up now and don't be shy!"

"I'm sorry... I... I don't know if I should say it in front of him."

There was a long pause from the old man, who now looked as bewildered as I felt. For the life of me I could not think what Holder could possibly be referring to. Finally, with the utmost seriousness, the old man spoke again.

"Would you like to come forward and say it only to me?"

Holder nodded slowly and even seemed to gulp theatrically as he did so, as though the gravity of the situation had caused a knot to form in his throat which he could only clear by swallowing pointedly.

“Very well, then. Come on up” the old man said gravely, fluttering his wrinkled hand rapidly in a gesture of beckoning made grotesque spectacle by virtue of a pale appendage both fleshy and brittle; part worm and part grasping talon.

“I’m not going to come to you, you’ll have to come to me” the old man added unnecessarily, as Holder had already started forward.

“Of course, sir,” said Holder. He gave me a devious smile and another exaggerated wink as he passed me to cross the room to the old man’s desk. As he made his way, the old man stared forward placidly, his tongue working in his mouth. When our eyes met accidentally, his own crinkled at the corners indulgently, unaware or unconcerned, with my obvious discomfort and disdain.

Holder came around to the side of the desk and bent forward to the old man’s ear, cupping his hand around his mouth so that I could not possibly understand what he was saying. As he spoke, the old man nodded gently and sagely, his expression still one of warmth, even mirth. When Holder had finished, the old man patted him on the shoulder as Holder looked back in my direction, now with what I could only read as a somewhat nervous expression.

“That’s alright—that’s fine, my lad” said the old man as he patted Holder. “Thank you for telling me and thank you for keeping me in your confidence.” He said this quite loudly, and though he had spoken at a high, unmodulated volume throughout the exchange—a fact which I had attributed initially to deafness—I couldn’t help but continue to suspect I was the victim of some obscure ongoing charade.

“You can go back to work now and I’ll take care of this gentleman from here on out, all right?” The old man soothed.

“Yes, sir. And thank you,” said Holder, sycophantically. And, grinning like an ass as he passed me, left.

“So, you asked to see me—is that it?” the old man inquired when Holder had gone. He had placed his large, pale hands on the top of his desk, as though preparing to spring up should the need arise. His tone was blunt. All of the warmth that had previously filled his eyes had drained away. I found this strange, since it had appeared conjured for my benefit in the first place.

I nodded, drawing closer to his desk.

“Well, state your business.”

As I had stepped forward, the old man had suddenly become distracted, sliding back in his chair with a groan and opening the drawer of his desk. He picked up a paper that he found inside and squinted at it as he continued.

“My friend Holder says you are a formidable builder.”

I had been about to speak, but I paused, confused.

“A, um...?”

“A builder” said the old man flatly, putting the paper down and fixing me with his eyes.

They were grey and humorless.

“You could say I am ‘a bilder’ I suppose, yes...” I began tentatively.

“And *I suppose* you’re looking for work, hm?”

I was about to protest, but the old man continued:

“You think you’re pretty smart, don’t you? Coming aboard like this?”

“Sir?”

“Well, if you’re so smart, then why didn’t you consider this: what particular use did you think I would be able to put you here aboard my ship?”

“Use?” I stammered “I thought that was obvious—”

“Obvious? You’re a bold lad, I’ll give you that. But obvious to whom, I wonder? You’re *obviously* personally convinced of your own utility, and you seem to have made quite the impression on my dear man, Holder. But it’s not Holder who runs things around here, is it?”

I was about to agree but was rudely cut off.

“It’s me, in fact, who runs things around here” the old man barked. “So, you’ll have to answer me when I ask: what particular use do you think I have for a builder here aboard a moving ship? I won’t have someone erecting flimsy structures all over the place and crowding up the deck, creating hazards for the crew, just so they can blow away in the night!” The old man sat back, his jaw set.

The shed talk, I thought. Of course...

“Sir, I believe there’s been a grievous misunderstanding.”

“I’d say there had been” the old man shouted. “You’ve badly miscalculated if you think you can simply sail up to a hardworking boat and bluff your way into a job installing the architectural equivalent of a gauze fascinator on my cranes. What happens when your sheds blow away, hm? My guess is you’ll be off as soon as you’ve collected your fee, and they’ll be off as soon as we encounter our next helping of *gale force winds*, which won’t be long I guarantee you. I’m not sure which will be worse, the flimsy things blowing about and causing untold disruption or splintering into a hundred pieces and repeatedly smacking my crew in the face!”

“Sir, please, I’m not a builder” I said, when the outburst was over.

The old man, who had sat down heavily after getting partially to his feet during the tirade and who now appeared exhausted, looked at me uncomprehendingly.

“What’s that?”

“I’m not *a* builder,” I said quietly. “Per se.”

“Speak up!”

“It’s *Mr.* Bilder, actually. I’m not *a* builder in the sense that Holder, and now you yourself apparently think.”

The old man stared at me blankly. Was a quiet fury burning beneath this neutral façade?

“... Are you trying to say that you’re not merely *a* builder, but *the* builder, or *Mr. Builder* as you put it? As in, some sort of builder par excellence, whose work is superior to those of others of your trade?”

I shook my head gently.

“My name is Bilder. It is not the name of my occupation, but my actual name. My surname. As much as I’d like to help, it’s not my area of expertise. I don’t know anything about building sheds or crane enclosures. I don’t know anything about hull repair or plumbing. That’s not what I came here for... Now, could I learn those things if I were to put my mind to it? Certainly. Of course, I could. But that’s not why I came here to you *today*. That’s not

why I've spent the last three months tacking back and forth across the open sea in that miserable tub with my so-called apprentices just to find *The Mary-Allen*."

The old man now regarded me with something close to incredulity, and was, I believe, near dismissing from his sight me there and then.

It was time to play my hand.

"I believe this document will attest more eloquently to my purpose here than any speech," I said, drawing myself up and stepping forward.

I reached into my jacket and produced the paper that I had been carrying with me all journey long.

I had taken immense care and despite countless opportunities, I had managed to preserve it from getting wet or even very wrinkled. I made the final few steps toward the old man's desk in a stately fashion and placed the paper gingerly in front of him.

The old man squinted down at the paper, bringing his face closer and closer to where it sat flat in front of him until his neck was craned and his nose merely inches from the words. After a moment, he shook his head and sat back suddenly, as though he had caught a whiff of something bracing. He then removed a pair of shattered spectacles from his breast pocket. The old man didn't fully put them on but rather held up the glasses in front of his

eyes and raised the paper for a second look—perhaps, in fact, for a first look—moving the document back and forth in a manner that seemed both too fast and too tremulous to have allowed for any comprehension.

“I trust the document is clear,” I said when the old man appeared to have finished. “As you can see, I’m no builder at all. Far from it.”

“Yes, it’s clear enough in itself. Quite clear,” the old man admitted. He seemed surprised or confused, and perhaps somewhat deflated.

“And of course, I’m sorry,” I offered.

“Why sorry?”

“Sorry for the loss of Mr. Vak.”

The old man raised a wooly eyebrow.

“A Navigator is indispensable, and Mr. Vak was one of the absolute best. A legend in his own time, if you will. I’ve heard the stories like all of the young guns, and I had been looking forward to the day when I would meet him. These aren’t the circumstances I had envisioned, of course. In any case, when the opportunity presents itself, assuming it hasn’t passed, I’d like to pay my respects.”

The old man looked bewildered.

“What’s happened to Mr. Vak?” he asked.

I wondered, with a sudden chill, if he was mentally enfeebled.

“Sir, as The Captain of this ship”—I began, before a cackle cut me off.

“You?” the old man chortled. “The Captain?”

It was my turn to stare in disbelief.

“Me? No, that’s not what the document says at all.”

“I know what the document says, I’ve just finished reading it. And it’s perfectly clear—you’re no Captain. Not that I needed a piece of paper to tell me that,” he added with more disdain than was wholly necessary, I thought.

“Come now, I never claimed I was The Captain. I was referring to you!”

“Me?”

The suggestion seemed to startle him.

“...You’re not The Captain then?”

“Certainly not!”

Evidently I had not been clear enough with Holder about the nature of my business... A frustrating if not wholly unforeseen complication of the secrecy with which tradition had compelled me to conduct myself once aboard.

“What is your name?” I asked the old man.

“It’s not Captain this or that, I can assure you.”

“I believe you, sir. I mean your given name, not your title.”

“My given name? That would be Jodl.”

“Very well Mr. Jodl, and what *is* your role here aboard *The Mary-Ellen*?”

“I’m The Chief,” he said with what seemed like wounded pride, as though it ought to have been obvious.

*The Chief*, I thought to myself... Wonderful.

“I see. Well, Chief Jodl, you’ve read my letter of dispatch. I would have preferred if all of the Senior Officers had been assembled as I’d expected, but it appears they have not. Nevertheless they’ll be expecting me, especially The Captain. I don’t need to tell you what the loss of a Navigator can mean for a boat as big as this and judging by the difficulty my apprentices had in locating her to begin with, my guess is that some damage may have already been done. Nothing irreversible of course—nothing that can’t be fixed now that *I’m* here—but frankly I’m surprised any attempt was made to soldier on without a Navigator. I’ll need to begin as soon as possible to get us back on track and traveling on schedule. It won’t be easy, mind you, but nothing worthwhile ever is, is it?”

“But we do have a Navigator.”

“I’m glad you’re catching on. I may be young, but don’t let that fool you. I’m as formidable a Navigator as The Company has ever trained and I have the commendations and distinctions to prove it. It is true that this assignment will be my first as a *duly commissioned* Navigator, but I’ve been studying this region especially since my time in the academy and I believe I may already be capable of applying some experimental methods of my own devising to the navigational principles that have so far prevailed that may amount to a *paradigm shift*. It’s quite revolutionary. I hope it goes without saying that these techniques will likely save us a great deal of time and treasure, as well.”

“No, you misunderstand me. We have a Navigator. Here. Aboard *The Mary-Ellen* already.”

“You mean someone has been filling in for Mr. Vak??” I exclaimed, my pulse quickening. “If it’s one of his apprentices, I shouldn’t need to tell you how dangerous that can be. In fact, it’s not only dangerous and reckless, it’s against policy! I will have to insist that we’re halted immediately until I can assume my duties and, first of all, determine exactly where we are.”

“You keep referring to Mr. Vak as though he were gone.”

“Do I need to explain the meaning of death to you, Mr. Jodl? Once someone suffers it, he won’t be returning—it’s a permanent condition!”

My anger had been building steadily since I had come aboard and had reached a new peak with Jodl. I snatched my letter of dispatch off his desk and waved it in his face.

“These aren’t purchase orders for shipping tackle. Did you read the document? If you did and you’re still in the dark then perhaps it’s time you replaced those spectacles because I don’t think the letter itself could be any more clear. Mr. Vak is dead and I am his replacement! I’m the new Navigator of *The Mary-Ellen*!”

Jodl waited silently with a neutral expression on his face as I paced back and forth in front of his desk for a few moments until I felt composed enough to claim one of the two shabby

seats that were drawn up for audiences and which I had hitherto ignored. I felt better when I had and realized belatedly that I was exhausted. The nervous anticipation and tension of traveling to *The Mary-Ellen* to assume my role had distracted me from the wearing stresses of my journey. Now, facing an impasse, these stresses had returned in force.

I apologized to Jodl. It wasn't the old man's fault that he was a dotard, after all.

"I did read your document, son," Jodl reasserted, "and I believe I understand its contents in full. You do indeed appear to bear an official dispensation to assume duty as Navigator here aboard *The Mary-Ellen*. That being said, it occurs to me that some mistake must have been made."

"What mistake is that?" I muttered.

"Mr. Vak is alive and well."

"I find that hard to believe."

"But my dear boy, you have not been here more than an hour, how can you be so certain of what to believe?"

“I don’t believe our employers are in the business of making mistakes, for a start. And when it comes to a matter as serious as replacing a navigator *in medias res*, I find the possibility that an error could have been made inconceivable.”

Jodl’s lips worked slightly as though he were about to smile, but he seemed to suppress the urge.

“One point that you fail to account for is the fact there is no word of Mr. Vak in this dispatch whatsoever. If he had died, wouldn’t they have mentioned it? How is it that you are aware he serves as our Navigator anyway?”

I snorted.

“If you were a Navigator you wouldn’t need to ask such a silly question. I already told you that Mr. Vak is highly respected in our field. Within navigation circles he is regarded as among maybe two or three of the science’s leading practitioners and a notable scholar of the discipline as well. Perhaps even something of an *eminence gris* in terms of the entire industry. Maybe there is no equivalent figure in the realm of Chiefs, or maybe you yourself are that figure, Mr. Jodl—I admit I wouldn’t know—but you must trust me when I tell you that when a young Navigator hears the name *The Mary-Ellen* in one ear, he also hears the name Mr. Vak in the other.”

Jodl smiled at this.

“I’ve known Mr. Vak many years as you might imagine, having served alongside him here aboard *The Mary-Ellen* for more time than I could have fathomed at your age. We never had much cause to interact but he has always struck me as a good and decent man. It pleases me to hear a young person such as yourself speak so well and so highly of him.”

“Anything less would be a disrespect. I am incapable of criticizing the man professionally, except to say that he deserves far wider recognition than he will likely ever receive outside the Navigational community.”

“I see from your face and hear from your words that you are here in earnest, out of an honest sense of duty, and with an eagerness to serve and preserve the legacy of a man you and I both love. It does me no pleasure to disappoint you, but if Mr. Vak had gone and died I can guarantee you I would know about it.”

I didn’t want to argue this point with Jodl, but the idea that a Chief would be specifically notified in the event of a Navigator’s death was absurd. On a ship as large and complex as *The Mary-Ellen*, it was likely that word would not have reached every corner, even days, or weeks after the fact. It was more likely still that the matter would have been kept under wraps if a replacement were not already on hand in order to avoid a panic, to say nothing of the further possibility that Jodl had been kept intentionally in the dark. The more I considered the matter, the more it seemed likely that I had been sent for by The Captain

and other Senior Officers who were privy to information regarding Mr. Vak's health in anticipation of his imminent demise and that Jodl had simply not been kept in the loop.

The way forward was clear.

"Jodl, nothing would please me more than to discover that some error had been committed and that Mr. Vak is still among the living. Were that the case, I would count myself fortunate—both to be able to meet the great man and for the fact that I will have been spared what would no doubt have been the greatest professional challenge of my career, up to this point. I am not one to shrink from such a challenge, but to be spared it would be as great a relief as it would a disappointment. However, I am not in the business of doubting the decisions of our employer, and until I can verify from the lips of The Captain himself that *The Mary-Ellen* has no need of a Navigator—and unless I can shake the hand of Mr. Vak personally and in reciprocal fashion—I must assume that there has been no error and that my presence is urgently needed aboard this vessel. Therefore, I must demand an audience with The Captain immediately and would ask that you, or a man under your employ, conduct me to The Captain's quarters or wherever he prefers to hold his audiences, now."

Jodl shook his head and looked at me in a way that was partially amused, partially pitying.

"I'm afraid that would be impossible."

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, feeling myself growing hot under the collar once again. “How could it be impossible? All that needs to happen is for you to get up and show me where The Captain’s office is. If you can’t do it, call for Holder or one of your other men and have him do it.”

Jodl regarded me indulgently. It appeared that conflicts and arguments animated the man, or else he had only pretended to his earlier confusion. I would have to watch him, I decided.

“I know that it’s possible, physically. I’ll not debate you there. It would be easy enough for me or anyone I cared to assign to show you where The Captain greets visitors and takes meetings. If we were to do so, I have no doubt that The Captain would receive you warmly, even if he were occupied with another matter, which he undoubtedly would be. Many matters...”

He paused.

You seem like an ambitious fellow, but I can tell you right now that as much as you think you want the job of Captain one day, it is a responsibility I would not wish on anybody, even a personal nemesis or foe. But, even if I did have disagreements with our Captain—which I am not saying I do, but merely to illustrate a point—I would not simply allow you to interrupt him while he was attending to vital matters—and all matters are vital at The Captain’s level, I’ll remind you. And do you know why I wouldn’t interrupt him?” Jodl asked.

“No,” I told Jodl bluntly, “I don’t know why you wouldn’t interrupt him, especially since it is such a pressing matter. Mr. Vak is dead and *The Mary-Ellen* drifts aimlessly while rumors and questions begin to circulate throughout the crew. I do not—in contrast to what you’re not so much implying as *explicitly stating*—want the job of Captain, however I do very much want to assume my rightful place as Navigator, especially given the grim circumstances in which we find ourselves!”

“I would not interrupt him,” Jodl answered calmly, ignoring the harshness in my own response, “because of exactly what you’re talking about.”

“What I’m talking about? What are *you* talking about?”

“I would not interrupt The Captain because it is not done.”

“What?”

“There is something that you may have heard of called *the order of people*. There is also another related matter which is called *the way things are done*—these concepts are both the basis of maintaining a third matter, which is the most essential thing about sailing life, whether the times in question are grim, or gay.”

“Oh, and what’s that?” I asked, deciding to play along despite the fact that his idiosyncratic concepts were known by no one.

"*Discipline,*" stated the old man flatly. "Above all else, the one thing that a ship needs is discipline. If I were to bend the rules by interrupting *the order of people* and *the way things are done*, then we would put ourselves at an infinitely greater risk of what you so euphemistically refer to *rumors* and *questions.*"

"Very well, Jodl. You've made your point. For some reason you think I'm bluffing and you think you've called my bluff by invoking the specter of discipline. That's well done. For the moment, anyway. I'll admit that you're holding the cards in this situation because of the fact that I'm new here. True, I could leave and try to find The Captain's quarters on my own. But what's to stop you from detaining me and throwing me in the brig? You're an old man for one, and I believe I could easily overpower you, but not before you called for help. Holder and his crew would arrive, or another of your flunkies, and beat me into a pulp, then throw me into the brig. I would have my revenge, though, once I was interrogated, my purpose uncovered and I assumed my role as Navigator. Then, as a Senior Officer, discipline would be on my side. You could allow me to languish in the brig of course, but the longer I marinated there the greater the weight of discipline would grow until—when I finally did assume my role as Navigator—the impact of it coming down on you would be akin to that of a large maritime anchor being dropped unceremoniously onto a ripe pumpkin. I am not a cruel man, but I do observe *the order of people* and *the way things are done* as you call them and were I to be first denied my rightful place aboard this vessel I would later be entitled to a satisfaction commensurate to the usage I had endured. Still, I would prefer it otherwise—and admittedly I would prefer not to be beaten, or to languish in the brig in the interim.

Therefore, let me ask: instead of going to The Captain myself, what would you have me do? In a way, I am already making a mistake by asking you since my mission here is an urgent one, but let it never be said that I do not observe *the order of people* or *the way things are done*, or respect the need for *discipline*, however misguided its invocation might be.”

“Very good!” Jodl nodded crisply and rapped his hand on his desk, immediately assuming a businesslike tone. “What you’ll need to do now, if you would like an audience with The Captain, is to go through The Steward, Mr. Remnick.”

“Where can I find Mr. Remnick then?” I asked.

“I’ll have someone show you to his office in the morning.”

“It is the morning, Jodl.”

“Once the day has begun properly. It’s still dark out!”

“You and I are up. Your men hauled me in. There is no day nor night at sea.”

“Maybe not for a Chief and his crew,” sighed Jodl with a weary smile, “but Mr. Remnick and his staff keep respectable hours. Oh, I’ve no doubt they’re up, what with their cares—I couldn’t sleep a wink if I were them—nevertheless, we mustn’t disturb them except in an emergency.”

“No, of course, you’re right. There’s no Navigator and who knows how much *The Mary-Ellen* has drifted off course already. Nothing pressing.”

“You sound tired, son.”

I wanted to throw Jodl from his chair but he was right, I was exhausted. More from arguing with him than anything else at that point, but the long journey—and the stress of not being able to immediately assume my post—had worn on me. Having already committed to playing Jodl’s game I had little choice but to stay the course.

“Let me see about arranging for some accommodations for you. I know there has been some kind of misunderstanding here and for that I’m sorry, but you needn’t be left out in the cold. I may not be a Senior Officer but I am a person of some influence around this part of *The Mary-Ellen* and there are a large number of rooms and facilities under my direct control as Chief. In fact, I believe I know just the place.”

“You’re quite generous.”

He got up from his chair with some difficulty after several false starts and cast a shaking hand about in a corner trying to locate his cane while he held on to the edge of his desk for support. He almost fell over before he grasped it and I rose to my feet, readying myself to catch him if he toppled over, but he steadied himself and turned to me with a grin.

“It won’t take long, I promise. It’s a lovely room. I think you’ll find it very comfortable, not to mention convenient.”

“It’s near to The Captain’s quarters you mean?”

“I’m afraid that would simply not be possible since that is one of the most crowded areas aboard *The Mary-Ellen* and given over entirely to the offices of various administrative personnel.”

“But nearer than here, surely?”

Jodl smiled.

“Anybody home?” asked Jodl, swinging his cane against a red door and mugging for me like a fool.

Though the scale of *The Mary-Ellen* was indeed grand, the drab details of the ship’s interior differed little from those of my last assignment, hardly deviating from the textbook.

Because the ship was so large, so anonymous and so unfamiliar to me—and because we had been walking for so long—I had several times found myself wondering if Jodl hadn’t taken a wrong turn and doubled back through halls and stairwells we had already traversed, or forgotten where he was supposed to be taking me at all. He had several times selected a door that appeared completely random, knocked on it jovially with his cane, given me a significant look or an encouraging smile, and mumbled something definitive, only to open it and have us proceed through to another practically identical gallery. So, it was with some skepticism that I met this latest instance.

“Lead the way,” I demurred, and Jodl ushered me through.

The room—for it was a room, at long last and not simply another hall—was large and not at all unpleasant, though a far cry from what I had been expecting. Because of its size and orientation, which were more akin to a recreation room—or even a cafeteria dining annex—it was clear from the start that the space was not intended for use as sleeping quarters but had merely been converted to serve as such, perhaps for the benefit of an unexpected visitor who had long preceded me. Despite its apparently improvised nature, there was something about the room that implied age too, as if its components had sat in

their places for generations; not because of anything particularly obvious—no dust for example—but there was a slight smell, and a vaguely rarefied look difficult to pin down, as though a discreet nearby plaque might describe its effects.

There was a large bed in the corner—more than double the width of a cot—adorned with a homey quilt whose colorful abstract patterns had faded from many washes, far from regulation issue; an upright basin with its own tap, the fixture foreign and moderately expensive; and a sort of deep alcove, almost another room, but not quite—with a small kitchen, pantry, and privy tucked away behind a thin, blue curtain.

“We’ve got plenty of space here on *The Mary-Ellen* as you can see,” Jodl said, gesturing expansively. “It’s just a matter of managing it that’s the problem. You think one place under your control is empty, only to be found it’s being used for another purpose or by another department entirely. Someone’s keeping track of it all...”

I told Jodl that I understood him perfectly well, although it sounded like incompetence to me.

“Just a minute,” I called. “Are you leaving?”

To my surprise the man had already begun hobbling away.

“Hm. Yes, why shouldn’t I be? Do you need something else?”

“The room is lovely...”

“You know how to perform your toilet?” he asked impatiently.

I gave Jodl a look which I believed indicated that I was not to be tested.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I’m grateful for the room, but I had hoped you might take me to see the Steward—Mr. Remnick I think you said his name was? Either that or you could at least describe to me the best way to find his office. I could even draw a map if there are supplies—it’s something of a specialty of mine...” I trailed off, realizing I was beginning to sound desperate. “There were so many twists and turns getting here that I’m not sure I could even find my way back if I wanted to.”

“What do you want to go back for? You got what you came for.”

“I didn’t come here for a room, Jodl, if you’ll remember. I came here because I was dispatched with a job to do. Apparently I need to see Mr. Remnick, and then The Captain as soon as possible. I understand there is *the way things are done* around here to consider, and I intend to abide by the rules, but there is also the matter of discharging my duty to The

Company, which should take precedence and has already been delayed. When can I see Mr. Remnick?"

"You can see Mr. Remnick any time you please, but you're not liable to glimpse more than the flash of his eye from a crack in the door if you don't go early. He's a busy man and his time is slated from the moment he gets up each day. I warrant he's already at work in a manner of speaking as soon as he opens that eye, and probably well into it even as he's chewing his breakfast and sipping something from that tin cup of his."

"Well, in that case I'd better go right away and camp outside his door" I groaned, now imagining The Steward as an illiterate, patch-eyed privateer. "What time is it anyway?"

Jodl pointed to a clock on the wall whose hands had, naturally, frozen at midnight.

"Well, close enough anyway... You'd be better off waiting until tomorrow. Save yourself a trip."

"Wait until tomorrow morning you mean?" I asked, agog.

"You might as well. Like I said, it's likely that he's already too busy to see you."

"I'm afraid I can't countenance a further delay, but I *will* need some directions to find him!"

“Surely a Navigator of your stature should be able to locate something of such importance?”

Jodl chortled.

I felt my temper rising, but before I could make my feelings known, Jodl had clapped that hand of his on my shoulder.

“As a matter of fact, while it has been a pleasure to meet you and get to know a little bit about you and your mission here, and as much as I’d like to show you to Mr. Remnick’s offices myself, I’m afraid I must return to my duties as well. I may not be Mr. Remnick, but my crew is large and our collective cares are many. There are cranes to inspect, dinghies to caulk, locks to oil, and extremely heavy pieces of freight that need to be lifted up and delicately turned on their sides periodically in order to avoid giving them bedsores. Plus a thousand other things, large and small. I’m an old man and I do not move as fast as I once did, as you may have noted, and while I know I can trust men like Holder to keep things running smoothly in my absence, it would not be fair to stretch them beyond the limits of what they’re capable. All that’s to say, I believe it is time for me to leave you, sir. But, if you promise me you’ll wait here patiently, I *will* send a man to show you the way as soon as I can spare one.”

Looking into Jodl’s simple face as he spoke these unhelpful words, his once grand but now rather shabby coat and placid eyes—the eyes of a loyal dog—and the worn, weak hand with its yellowing nails, the rage in me that had been building towards him, threatening eruption, quickly ebbed. There was no guile in him after all, I realized, and could be none—

not from a person such as him. I had met a snag or two, certainly, and Jodl hadn't been a help on balance, but he had *tried*. He was one of the many individually uninspiring, even irritating employees of our collective enterprise without whom nothing would function; a far worse outcome than functioning poorly. The *order of people; the way things are done; discipline*—these were the credos of men like Jodl, who did their level best to interpret and abide by the dictates of these half-historical, half-fantastical, unwritten scriptures—a practical necessity when so many could hardly read. I could not bear ill will towards these men, only thank them, pity them, and learn to marshal the spirits of their unlettered laws to suit The Company's designs.

"You'll be comfortable here, I know," he said with that twinkle in his eye. "I wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors, although I know you won't need it. Not an ambitious young fellow like you. Not from an old man like me."

What few belongings I possessed were soon squared away in my new accommodations. I had packed light, assuming I would inherit the necessaries from Mr. Vak and be supplied the rest by The Company's largesse. I was glad that I had during my long journey, but now I wondered how long I would have to rely on what meagre supplies remained, and if meals would even be brought to me in the subterranean backwater to which I had been interred.

Because I could not put the matter from my mind, I located and re-read my letter of dispatch, though naturally I knew it all by heart. It was all there of course, *The Mary-Ellen*, my commission as Navigator, etc.

It was true that Mr. Vak was not mentioned *personally*, but this was insignificant when it clearly stated that *The Mary-Ellen's* Navigator was indisposed and required immediate replacement. The Company, for all its virtues, had an unfortunate tendency of expressing things in occasionally opaque or euphemistic language and the word 'indisposed' was symptomatic.

In this instance it obviously meant Mr. Vak was dead, but for someone like Jodl—who was unused to the modes and parlances of The Company's upper echelons—it might easily have appeared more ambiguous. The fact that they did not name Mr. Vak as such would have only heightened his caution, but this too was something of a house style and, lest I seem too critical, far from arbitrary. In all such correspondence, an individual was almost never named owing to the fact that The Company allowed for its Captains to exercise as-needed discretion in staffing for all positions, with the caveat that permanent *senior* positions—

such as Navigators—were subject to Company oversight, and any appointments made by Captains to fill vacancies at such a level while at-sea—whether as a result of death, dismemberment, insubordination, or *other*—were temporary, pending Company approval. So, while appearing vague to the naïf, the dispatch I held was, in fact, also entirely in line with Company protocol—clearly indicating that *I* was to take over the position of Navigator, *regardless* of whoever might have been appointed *since* Vak's unfortunate though—it must be said—far from untimely demise.

It really was too bad that Vak was dead, for the man was undoubtedly a genius and had much to teach the profession of Navigators still. One slim manual on maneuvers and an unimpeachable but narrow legacy was all that was left of him now, and sadly even that would likely soon fade. Probably no one except the apprentices of his apprentices and a few specialists such as myself would be referencing concepts such as *Vak's Apple*, or *Vak's Ax* over the next decades, or saying words such as *Traipswing*, *Speedwrench*, or *Woolbird*, even if he was employing these very techniques, or unwittingly drawing from the theories Vak had pioneered and expostulated in *Boating*. Still, all things must pass on as they say, and I had not only his immortal words to thank, but his mortal body as well, without whose failure I might have labored indefinitely as a Draughtsman in a succession of Junks with no opportunity to distinguish myself and no hope of escape. *The Mary-Ellen* might have been a relic, but she was a rare and splendid specimen in her own way, and her routes were—owing in no small part to Vak's talents—reliably the most fantastic and outlandish in all The Company's lines.

With *The Mary-Ellen*, I would go to locations where few other men had dared and to many places men ought not to go at all.

In her thirst, The Company would not be deterred by danger or risk, no matter how severe, and would inevitably penetrate into seas beyond the dreams and nightmares of its assurers to riches untold and unfathomed; to isolated kays and atolls in the black west; humid wastes of endless mists in the north; ancient submerged cities in the far east; and the violent, bestial waters of the south, where a dropper of eustachian fluid from certain dread leviathans was said to fetch as much specie as a freight pan of jade. I could think of few other opportunities so grand as the one before me for a young Navigator. It was not every day that one received a letter such as mine in the squalid hole I had called home, nor every lifetime for that matter.

Feeling encouraged, I tucked the letter of dispatch away, strode across the room and opened the door. I don't know what I expected—perhaps a breeze or a pleasant vista—but of course I was squirreled away somewhere in the dark guts of the massive *The Mary-Ellen*, and it was only a long barren hallway and dim red running lights as far as the eye could see.

Jodl had implied I was close to Mr. Remnick's office, or closer anyway than I had been in his own ramshackle quarters, but where Remnick's office was and how I was supposed to find it remained unknown. What was it that Jodl had said? That if I were patient he would send a man as soon as he could spare one?

Such vagaries took the breath away.

And even if he had meant it, what could “as soon as he could spare one” mean to man like Jodl?

I shut the door and paced back and forth a few times across the floor of my room. Then I walked into the kitchen.

The counter was barren, but to my surprise there was a small ceramic tray built into the far side, fitted with a small gas burner, a kettle and coffee pot with a cork-stopper sitting at the ready.

It was probably too much to hope that the pantry cupboard contained any sort of provisions, but I checked all the same and was delighted to find a tin of The Company’s standard issue coarse ground coffee alongside several packages of crumbling hard-tack crackers in yellowing wax-paper packages. The tin was half empty and looked older than the crackers, sporting an unfamiliar style of label that must have predated my time with The Company—a small, rather fierce-looking coal-black demon with curving horns, blazing red eyes, and a black forked tongue leaping from a vicious red mouth to lap the surface of a cup of drab brown coffee set on a white saucer.

I decided that a pot of coffee might liven me up and help me analyze the best way to proceed. At the very least it might brighten my mood and give me something to do while I

waited to see if Jodl's man would show up. I put my supplies on the counter and went to the basin to fill the kettle.

When I brought it back, I realized I was missing a filter and scoured the cabinets again. Apart from a few cans of beans and spinach I had not noticed on my first pass, there was nothing else in there at all except for a large, armed rattrap, its desiccated bait still in place and unrecognizable as whatever item of food it once had been. An encouraging sign, but no help in my present dilemma. Having ransacked what little kitchen there was, I broadened the scope of my search.

A good scrap of paper would do, but there wasn't a shred to be found except for my letter of dispatch and that could in no way be compromised. The only thing that seemed remotely able to suit my purpose was the ridiculous curtain hanging between the kitchen and the privy.

The fabric was blue and of a thin, cheap weave. Like other aspects of the room, the curtain seemed old and perhaps even degraded. That said, it was more or less clean apart from a small amount of fuzz that had collected on the crimped edge—an uncharacteristic flourish which struck me as more out of place than even the curtain itself. I fingered the soft material for a moment and decided it would do. Grabbing a handful, I jerked at the edge and started a tear easily enough. From there I continued until I had a rough circle that made the amenity look as though some beast had bitten off a corner.

When the coffee was ready, I found and poured myself a cup and settled down on the bed.

The coffee wasn't the worst I had encountered in my service and had a different flavor from that which I'd grown accustomed. I didn't know whether this could be attributed to the coffee's age, which of course was suspect, or the blend. Still, I drank a few more sips for something to do and found that instead of enlivening me, the coffee produced a sedative effect. This happened to me sometimes, especially when I was already tired—the coffee acting as an aggravator or propellant for whatever feeling was ascendant, as opposed to simply being a reliable stimulant.

A devil's brew indeed.

I put the cup of coffee down on the little bedside table and sprawled upon the vast bed. I was exhausted without question, though my mind still raced.

Was it merely luck that had caused me to come to the attention of The Company Directorate as a qualified replacement for Mr. Vak, or had the *hand of fate* somehow intervened?

It was impossible that Vak had heard of me, or at least so extremely unlikely as to be virtually impossible. Of course, I had been—indeed, I remained—a great admirer of the man, and had never been shy in saying so, as I had recently reaffirmed in my conversation with Jodl. I had *always* been unreserved in my esteem for Mr. Vak and in my willingness to

say so publicly, even *sticking my own neck out*, as the saying goes, to defend his reputation and methods to other Navigators and Navigators-in-Training more skeptical of his theories and of his constantly *going out on a limb*.

Perhaps one of the exuberant articles I had written while at The Academy had somehow come to Mr. Vak's attention and he had made a note of me, I speculated. But naturally, the idea was absurd. The articles had been idiotic efforts and had only ever been roundly condemned by the Navigational community when they had been noticed at all. Even the articles I had written after I had graduated and had already begun work as a Draughtsman were criticized for their absurdity and for their *lack of erudition*, or so I imagined they had been whenever I looked back and thought of them.

It was painful to look back and think of the articles I had written in those days and the largely soporific effect they had produced amongst my peers in the Navigational community, or must have produced if the total lack of recognition they had received could be read as an indication of the effect they must have produced.

Still, there must have been some reason The Company Directorate had chosen me, of all young Navigators—or even of all the other Navigators they might have chosen, young or old—to replace Vak aboard *The Mary-Ellen*.

Having no allies to speak of—no patrons in the upper echelons of The Company's leadership, or even amongst the Navigational Community—I could only assume that Mr.

Vak himself must somehow have taken notice of me and singled me out in his papers as a *person of interest* and would-be protégé.

Perhaps he had read one—or even several—of my articles and had made a note in his writings which was interpreted as an endorsement of my work after he had died and his papers were collected. Or perhaps he had even explicitly written in his papers that I should be tapped as his successor in the event that he perished at sea...

I supposed that I would never truly know, but I resolved—once I had assumed my role as Navigator of *The Mary-Ellen* formally, and once all the rights and responsibilities of my office were vested—to ask for Mr. Vak's effects, including his papers, so that I could comb through them myself for any clues that might pertain to the unexpected fate that had befallen me.

I made my way back across the room to the coffee pot, but as I was preparing to pour myself more, I paused, then stopped what I was doing entirely.

There are moments that I experience occasionally, which I assume others must experience as well, but which I have never thought to ask anyone else about—the subject being somewhat strange and hard to access in polite exchanges—when I recall something unusual that I have noticed only after the fact. It is perhaps the fact that occasionally something one notices is so unusual that there is no way for the mind to put it into the proper context and therefore keeps working as usual, one going about one's business

normally without pausing to consider—the mind perhaps assuming that the thing is part of some fleeting daydream and thus not a proper citizen of reality, worthy of remark.

When I was on the bed drinking my coffee and thinking about Mr. Vak something like this happened. I put down the pot and returned to re-examine what it was I had only just realized I had seen.

And there it was.

On the wall next to the bed, was a window.

And in the window, a face.

My skin vibrated as though grazed by a wire.

It almost happened again with the face in the window—this phenomenon of non-recognition when confronted by the extraordinary—but there could be no mistake whatsoever, even though the face disappeared almost instantly.

As soon as it must have realized that I could see it, it was gone.

Had my certainty not been absolute, I might easily have mistaken what I saw for a phantom.

It was a small face. Remarkably so.

Round, and extremely pale.

It had a small, pointed nose, a severe little mouth with sharp teeth, and somewhat bulbous, copper-colored eyes.

A few stray hairs were brushed across the dome of the forehead, and these—like the skin—were milk-white and fine as silk.

There didn't appear to be any eyebrows whatsoever, but it is possible that they were there and only too pale and finely textured for me to see against the paleness of its skin.

The expression on this face had not seemed to be one of alarm—despite the fact that it withdrawn with lightning speed—but it was so unlike any expression I have ever seen that I cannot say for certain what sentiment it reflected.

The shock of the vision was paralyzing and I was frozen in place for a moment that felt like an age.

The face was long gone—its disappearance occurring with a quickness that belied the human—by the time I regained some control of my senses.

When I had, I bolted to the window to throw it open.

Finding no catch and finding furthermore that the window itself was comprised of the concrete-hard tempered glass used for portholes, I darted from my room into the passage.

Perhaps there was a side hall that I had overlooked, or some nearby door that might lead to a parallel passage on the other side of this window?

Though the light in the passage was dim, the truth was plain right away that nothing along these lines existed. My room was at the end of a long, narrow way with no other entrances or exits except for the red door, practically identical to my own, that stared at me from the opposite side of the passage and probably led to still another, and then perhaps a gallery,

stairwell, or the sort of flywheel hub with four or five passages and galleries leading away from the central chamber one occasionally encountered in the depths of big boats. Looking across at this other door was a little bit like looking into a mirror with the notable exception that I did not figure in the picture whatsoever.

I briefly contemplated going across and opening that door and trying to work my way through *The Mary Ellen* by whatever routes I could manage to try and locate the place on the other side of my window. The internal architecture of a ship is complex, but there is a logic to it that extends beyond simple utility and commonsense notions of convenience. This was what troubled me about my idea.

The fact was that the interiors of the large classes of ship in The Company's service were often constructed in intentionally counter-intuitive, or even bewildering manners, in the interest of suppressing mutiny. The result was that the shortest distance between two points was not necessarily—or even often—attainable by the most apparent means, and unless one possessed intimate knowledge of a particular ship through long experience, uncommonly good spatial intelligence and memory, and more than a casual glimpse at the schematics (or better yet, a copy of the ponderous documents) a person could probably starve before he found his way.

As much as the desire to chase after that strange face burned, I could not become distracted from my purpose.

I resolved that patience would be the most prudent course of action.

Although I did not expect anyone to be there, the first thing that I did when I was back inside my room was to creep over to the window and stand beside it for a moment, but out of sight, flat against the wall.

I tried to listen and sense whether or not the person who had been peering in at me had returned by keeping absolutely still, trying to will my whole being into the form of a giant ear, with its delicate whiskery follicles which would vibrate at the slightest stirring—the distant shuffling of the wings of a moth buried inside a coat in the closet of a faraway functionary for example, or the subtle tapping of a crab's claw as it picked its way across the thrumming hull. I froze myself in place and thought nothing of navigation or the depredations I had suffered—not only in my journey from the fetid swamps in that rusting, up-jumped trawler, but even since scrambling over the deck of *The Mary-Ellen* in the chilly dark—but I sensed and divined nothing whatsoever on the other side.

To be certain, I leapt out suddenly, hoping to surprise the little fellow and perhaps zap him into a state of the same temporary stasis as he had inflicted upon me.

Alas, there was nothing.

As I looked again through the window at the area on the other side, so close and yet impossible to access, I noticed for the first time how odd it was—the place itself.

The place on the other side of the window did not seem to be a room as such at all, and it didn't look like any of the many passages I had so far traversed aboard *The Mary-Ellen*—nor indeed like any passage aboard any of the ships on which I had served, or even any of those that I had studied or heard described by experts and experienced sailors.

Unlike my own room, which was illuminated from overhead by a battery of lights built into the very ceiling, and which cast everything that occurred under them in a stark, almost surgical relief with few if any shadows, the place on the other side of the window was as dark and occluded as if resin had been smeared meticulously over the interior pane—a factor, I surmised, in why I glossed over the bizarre aperture in the first place, perhaps subconsciously taking it for merely a hole which had yet to be dealt with by maintenance, or simply one of the horrible paintings one sometimes encounters in the administrative warrens of great ships.

Unless one put his face fairly close to the window and waited for his eyes to adjust, it was very difficult to make out anything on the other side at all—the freakish sight of the bizarre face notwithstanding, which of course had been pressed right up against the glass in such a cretin-like manner. Unlike the admittedly dim passages and traversal areas of the ship, my “friend’s” area lacked even the low-powered, red-tinted courtesy lights which were otherwise endemic. In fact, the only source of illumination whatsoever in this area seemed to come residually, from my room.

What could be glimpsed was not at all encouraging. In addition to lacking the hallmarks of any regular interior ship space, the area lacked the proportional formality one might expect. That is to say, it was *irregular*, almost as though it were not a room or a passage at all, but instead an excavation of some sort, undertaken by amateur hands in an extremely haphazard fashion. It looked more like a cave or a tunnel than anything, like it shouldn't have existed at all but for some accident of nature or primitive conspiracy—all ragged angles and clumsy scoops, with a ceiling that dipped and sagged, walls that curved inward, and a floor that seemed comprised solely of scraps and planks, like a catwalk constructed above a marsh, with holes here and there leading to unknown depths. As I scanned what I could of the strange room through the grimy aperture which was my only vista, I was forced to contend finally with a glimpse of a light source that contradicted my earlier assumption. Though a greater part of me simply refused to believe my eyes, there—in a sort of sconce on the far end of the opposite wall—was a tallow candle, burning.

As curious as the whole room was, I found the sight of the candle specifically, viscerally repulsive. I decided I must not torture myself and merely looked away.

I returned to the bed and lay down, looking—instead of at the window—towards the simple, reassuring basin on the other side of the chamber and the modicum of cold-comfort domesticity offered by the small preview I had into the kitchen.

As I lay there, looking over at the edge of the countertop and the peaceable coffee-pot with my improvised filter, I thought of the candle. And then I thought of the face.

There was no denying that I was exhausted, but I felt that if I did not find some way to guarantee that I would not be awoken staring into that demented countenance and grisly beacon I would be unable to fall asleep at all. It was not that the face seemed malevolent exactly—though it easily might have been that as well—it was that the entire episode was *intellectually intolerable*.

Maybe the person—whoever he was—had a perfectly reasonable explanation for his peering into my room and, judging by his own sudden disappearance, he had been as surprised to see me staring back as I had been to see him staring in. Heaven knows there are strange things that happen aboard boats and these were strange waters *The Mary-Ellen* was traversing. If it was an apparition that had appeared to me it would not have been the first to trouble a man of the sea, nor would it likely be the last. The face had not seemed like an apparition—apart from the fact that it seemed like the sort of thing that *would* appear as an apparition—but it did not *strike me* as an apparition, and I suspected that there was a logical explanation for its intrusion that I would eventually find myself in a position to uncover. In the meantime, in the absence of any practical means of pursuing the investigation, I felt it important to block all possibility of being taken by surprise by the face again, or of being in a position of vulnerability vis-à-vis the face's ability to observe me while I slept. Not that it was possible for the face to get into my room—that much was very clear—but the thought of being looked in on while I slept was not only extremely unpleasant but precluded the possibility of sleep entirely.

I decided that I would have to engineer some means of blocking the view from the window.

It was obvious after a cursory glance that there was no shade or drapery that I could draw to cover the window in the normal fashion, not that I had counted on one. Nevertheless, a covering device of some sort was needed since there was no way that my bed, big as it was, could be dragged into the kitchen pantry—it simply would not fit through the threshold. The sole instance in which I would have preferred the typical coffin-sized cot... It would have been easy if I were the sort of person who could sleep on the floor, in which case I would have simply taken the bedclothes and spread them out next to the cabinets with my head sticking through into the privy, but I have never been the sort of person who could sleep on the floor. If there had been a bath in the privy this might have sufficed, since the floor of a bath is infinitely preferably to other sorts of floor, but the privy did not have a bath—only the drain and the small, grim shower. All the same, it seemed the privy possessed the answer once again in the absurd modesty curtain which had already come to my aid once before.

It was easy enough to tear the curtain down from its rod and find a few nails in the back of one of the dresser's drawers, then complete the task with the can of spinach as my hammer.

Though the curtain was thin and gauzy and not quite wide enough, it served.

I lay down and looked at the curtain, happily able to make out nothing behind it.

I began to try to conjure the face I had seen in the window.

It should have been indelible—that non-apparition—but even though I remembered the effect of it, I found—as I lay watching the lank curtain—that I was having difficulty recalling the face’s distinctive qualities in their specificity. I remembered that it was a small face—pale and with pale hair—and the strange and rather bulbous copper eyes and protruding teeth, but it was as though I were only recalling the words for these things—their symbolic significance—as opposed to the things in and of themselves.

A symptom of my exhaustion maybe?

Or had my exhaustion been the reason for the vision at all?

Perhaps I had only imagined it, I speculated.

But why this face?

And why that candle?

I awoke suddenly to realize I had fallen asleep.

I was disturbed. Not because I had fallen asleep, but because there was now another person in my room with me—a man, standing across the floor by the basin, looking at me as I sat up in bed.

“May I help you?” I asked, in an odd mixture of fear and reflexive courtesy.

It was not the owner of the face I had seen in my window at least. And, looking over at where the thing had been, I realized with a jolt of both surprise and relief that there was, of course, no window there at all and no improvised curtain covering it.

The whole episode, undoubtedly a dream...

“You’re awake,” the fellow observed drily.

The man was conventional looking, at least his face was to the extent that it was the correct size and proportion for a grown man, in contrast to that of the person I had seen looking in on me through the window. He was older than I, though not elderly—perhaps in early middle age, though really it was impossible to tell with some. There was a slight jowl stubbled with rough black hairs, which imparted a certain shabby authority. He was dressed in a dark jumpsuit and wore heavy black boots with thick rubber soles. There was a large pack on his back whose canvas was stretched tightly around a double-barreled

aluminum tank fitted with valve heads, and a cap on his own head—the kind that workmen wear.

“Who are you? And what are you doing here in my room?” I demanded, not unreasonably given the circumstances. I was returning to myself.

The man looked at me steadily, taking his time before responding.

“I’m Loog.”

“Well, Loog, that’s all well and good, but you haven’t answered me fully. I asked what you were doing here in my room and you’ve only told me your name.”

Loog shifted his weight from one foot to the other in a slow, deliberate way, as though he had been standing still for a long time and needed to stretch the muscles of his calves. I saw that a sort of hose poked from out of the belly of the bag he carried, which was slung tightly across his shoulders with cords, and this snaked up a thin metallic brace that was fluted through the fabric of one of his sleeves and extended a few inches beyond the tips of his fingers where it ended in a delicately flared nozzle perforated by a series of tiny, evenly spaced slits. It looked vaguely like a gas torch or a piece of gardening equipment.

“Jodl sent you to me, I presume?”

Loog stared at me blankly.

“Mr. Jodl—your Chief?”

Loog blinked slowly. “I know Jodl,” he replied simply, and then suddenly cleared his throat loudly.

“If Jodl didn’t send you to me, Loog, I must ask you again what it is you’re doing here. This is my room now, at least for the time being, and I would like it and myself to be treated with a little more courtesy in the future. For one thing, you must not burst into this room like you have done, especially while I’m sleeping.”

“The door was unlocked,” observed Loog.

“That’s hardly an excuse.”

“It was open as well. That’s unusual down here.”

“If so, it wasn’t my intention, you can be certain of that. Of course, I had thought the door was closed and bolted fast. I really must have been more tired than I thought... Still, that’s no reason to enter someone’s room uninvited.”

“I smelled coffee.”

I looked over at the cup and saucer on the bedside table. No steam rose from the cup. I reached out and stirred the black liquid with my little finger.

Cold.

“I made some for myself, there in the kitchen,” I said, pointing in its direction.

“I know, I’ve seen it.”

“Well, would you like some?” I asked sarcastically. I was more than a little disturbed that Loog had been rummaging in my kitchen and therefore possibly my other effects while I was dead to the world and dreaming of phantom windows and apparitions.

His shifting concluded, Loog now stood impassively, staring across the empty space at me as I lay propped in bed. I did not know what else to say to him just then and though I had meant the offer of coffee in jest it was also the proper and polite thing to do.

“I can reheat it if you like. There is a burner. If it’s anything like my cup here what’s in the pot has already gone cold.”

I wondered how long I had been out.

“Don’t like coffee.”

“You don’t like coffee, and yet when you smelled it you couldn’t help letting yourself in for a closer look?”

“Seemed unusual.”

“Let me ask you this, Loog, what is it that you do here on *The Mary-Ellen*? You seem to know a great deal about what is and isn’t unusual and have a pretty good nose on you to detect the scent of brewing coffee from who knows how far away, not to mention a mandate to enter someone’s room unannounced and uninvited that seems to me to be pretty strong. I’d like to know what kind of a person possesses all of that.”

“I’m The Exterminator.”

I had never had the pleasure of meeting an Exterminator before, but of course it explained his dress and the equipment perfectly.

“An Exterminator you say? Tell me, Loog, are there many rats aboard *The Mary-Ellen*?”

“Very many,” said Loog.

I had meant the question more or less as a joke, but Loog's tone and expression struck me as anything but.

It was not uncommon, of course, for the larger ships to acquire a population of rats as they traversed the distant corners of the globe, but these situations rarely wreaked the havoc that they had once upon a time. A few nests might be discovered now and again and the proper measures were inevitably taken. When food or goods were compromised the issue became more serious, and a quarantine might be enforced in the affected areas, but this was infrequent. The figure of The Exterminator was, these days, more often a symbolic, even ceremonial one, and was often held by individuals near retirement who had acquired their position by having become a sort of favorite of one kind or another through ties familial or fraternal, often in concert with being or having become generally incompetent at other more demanding forms of work. Consequently, The Exterminator was now most typically seen as a shambolic rambler who paced the bowels of great ships in obscurity, far from the eyes of those who might object on principle to such desultory wanderings.

Whether such conduct was truly warranted was difficult for one such as myself to say, having no great personal knowledge of the strategies and tactics of shipbound rats and vermin, but if the lore I'd learned had even a whit of truth to it, the "vigilance" of The Exterminator led him often to the illicit card games and messes which operated stealthily in the nocturnal below-deck ecologies of big boats like *The Mary-Ellen*.

"Very many you say?" I suspected already that he was likely exaggerating his concern for my benefit in order to lend himself greater importance.

Loog nodded slowly, watching me carefully as I pushed the blankets back and began to rise, as though he thought I might be harboring rats on my person or under the bedclothes.

“How many would you say there are?” I asked him for the sake of conversation, taking hold of the cup of coffee and bringing it to my lips.

“A lot,” said Loog unhelpfully, but with an attempt at a look that seemed to aspire to communicate a significance in this assessment beyond what the words themselves were capable of revealing. Possessing, however, an especially inexpressive face, this was less helpful to me than I judge Loog intended.

“I see,” I said with a brisk irony that was undoubtedly wasted, taking a sip.

The coffee, now that it was cold, was more redolent of the unpleasant qualities which were merely nascent when it was fresh. It tasted less like something a demon might sip and more like something that might have passed through him. I swallowed quickly and put the cup down.

“And you came in here looking for them, I suspect, drawn by the scent of coffee?”

“I was drawn by the scent of coffee, yes.”

“But *you* don’t like it?”

Loog grunted.

“Do rats often make coffee, in your experience, Loog?”

Loog seemed to consider the matter seriously, or at least he lowered his gaze to the nozzle of his spray hose—which must have been for dispensing poison, I now realized—in what I took to be a gesture indicative of consideration.

“Rats do a lot of things,” he finally said. “A lot of funny things you wouldn’t expect.”

“Like what?”

Loog didn’t answer. He was peering into the kitchen area, craning his neck slightly.

“Do you see something in there, Loog?”

Loog grunted and looked in my direction briefly, like a hound seeking approval to pursue fallen game. I shrugged, and he moved from his place by the basin. I followed.

“Do you think there are rats in this room, Loog? Is that why you’re looking around?”

I felt like I was having a conversation with a dog.

Loog continued to ignore me. Instead of answering he scanned the countertop, his eyes roving slowly from one end to the other.

They came to rest on the burner.

After looking at the burner for a few intense seconds, Loog stooped down and brought his face right up to it. Moving carefully, he reached his hand up and poked at the iron tines where a pan would sit, taking them between his thumb and forefinger one by one. When he had finished this, he removed the tines altogether—they were of a piece, and merely sat above the burner, held in place by a lip recessed beneath the counter—and examined the area beneath them. The aforementioned lip cradled a sort of tray that sat beneath the tines, designed to catch drips, crumbs and other stray particles of food from falling into the burner housing, around which it formed a loose collar. It turned out that this tray merely sat on the lip as well and Loog removed it easily, setting it aside.

The burner now sat exposed, poking up from the darkness of the housing like the head and neck of a turtle, tentatively peeking from its shell.

Loog reached his hand into the housing and felt around, a look of immense concentration taking hold of his face. I could not see what it was he was touching down there or imagine why it might be important.

When he had satisfied himself inside the burner housing, Loog returned to the tray on the counter. This he took up in both of his hands and raised above his head toward the light. Loog closed one eye and looked at the bottom of the tray, then lowered it so that it was on a plane with his line of sight and looked across it as if to determine whether it was true.

“You’ve got a few crumbs on this,” remarked Loog.

“Oh... Yes?” I answered. “What does that mean?”

“Do you do much cooking down here?”

“I haven’t been here for very long, you see. I’ve only made that coffee so far.”

“How long *have you* been here, would you say?”

I almost laughed at the intensity of this sudden interrogation, but something in Loog’s expression stilled me.

“Not more than a few hours. I haven’t even been on the boat much longer than that.”

Loog raised his eyebrows at this but said nothing.

“So... Rats?”

Loog replaced the tray and tines and turned to me.

“I haven’t seen any evidence of that so far.”

“So far?”

“The crumbs are a concern. But it could be worse.”

“Are you saying you think there is a chance the rats have been using my kitchen?”

Loog looked at me blankly.

“A joke.”

“Oh,” said Loog flatly, blinking.

“Why are the crumbs a concern?”

“Crumbs attract rats,” Loog replied.

“And you were looking at them to see if they had been nibbled, I take it. Tampered with?”

“No,” said Loog. “I was looking at them to make sure they weren’t scat.”

I was puzzled and must have shown it. In an uncharacteristic display of awareness, Loog elaborated.

“Leavings. Rat droppings.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Rat shit,” Loog continued. “It’s small and black. Sometimes not that small though. It looks like shit, basically, but sometimes it looks like crumbs, too. Some people mistake it for that, or dead, dried-up beetles. Especially charred crumbs that you might find around cooking areas.”

“But these were just crumbs?”

“That’s right, just crumbs this time. But it’s important to check up close. There are striations on rat feces that you don’t find on charred food matter. Their intestines rifle the feces as they pass through the rat, marking them like a lathe. It’s pretty easy to tell by sight alone but if you can’t, you can roll it between your fingers. That wasn’t necessary in this case. I knew right away. If I was going to roll it between my fingers, I would have put gloves on, too.”

“Because of disease?”

“For me, it’s because I can feel it better with the gloves on.”

“So, disease isn’t spread by rat feces?”

Loog laughed tersely.

“What’s so funny?”

“Let’s just say it can be spread by feces, all right?”

“Very well, Loog, I accept that entirely. You are the expert, after all.”

“You’d most likely need to ingest it though.”

“Well, there’s no chance of that from this quarter, Loog, let me assure you. I’ve no interest in that sort of thing *whatsoever*.”

“That’s why it’s important to check cooking areas. Not only because of that, but food preparation zones tend to attract rats more than other areas.”

“Of course. Well, it makes sense, doesn’t it? You’d think after all this time they would’ve discovered the allure of the latrine at least.”

“And what you have here is a particularly bad situation with a view to rats because you have a food preparation zone that’s also got a warm, dark place that’s hard for a human to access,” he said, ignoring me entirely and becoming almost professorial in his tone as he indicated the burner poking up from the dark maw of the housing as though it was an item of scientific curiosity. “You’ve also got an opening somewhere down there where the gas line feeds in, probably goes right along the duct work. An easy exit off the rat super-highway.”

“That sounds very convenient. Almost like a built-in feature. They don’t seem like a particularly discerning group based on what you were just saying, so I would have thought they’d be content with a dirt track. But perhaps traffic became too much, is that it? You think there are that many rats in the ducts?”

Loog looked at me with an expression somewhere between contempt and disbelief. “Where would you be if you were a rat?”

“I don’t know. I never thought about it,” I said defensively. “Wherever the other rats were, I suppose.”

“How do you think they get around? But it’s true that they’re not only in the ducts. That’s just what they like to use to bypass us. They can establish themselves quickly almost anywhere but they’re not stupid, and some places are more suitable for their needs than others. And” and here he paused significantly, “for their desires”

“Hence why you’ve taken such care in examining my kitchen. I’m grateful, Loog, really, I am. And to hear that I’m clear is a relief.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Loog replied. “You may be clear now, but it doesn’t take long for rats to establish themselves. And once they’ve arrived they can send out signals to one another in order to let their companions know. And what’s worse is that they’re clever. If they think they’ve been found out they may decide to vacate an area but this only has to be temporarily. Once the human has gone, rats remember. That’s one option. The other is to simply overrun a place.”

“Overrun?”

“Yes. That’s when the rats arrive quickly, *en masse*. No one knows how it works but once it occurs the best option is to abandon the area.”

“Just give it up to the rats you mean?”

“Some people think that the rats are sign-makers, like humans, and that this is how they know how to overrun an area. I don’t know if that’s true, but they are clever. It may be something as simple as a kind of call or even a gland that releases a certain scent that only other rats can detect, even across great distances, and that this is what tips them off to ‘overrun’ a room, or even a whole set of rooms, or a house. Or a ship. Whatever the mechanism, the results are the same.”

“When you say overrun, Loog...?”

“By that I mean when the rats arrive rapidly, *en masse*. They do so together in what could only be described as a *coordinated* fashion. And yet, when they arrive, they are also anything but orderly. The rats pour out of the opening or openings of their choosing so rapidly that the flow of rats could be likened to a pressurized liquid exploding from a spigot, almost as if someone—or some rat—had turned a valve causing a tremendous amount of rats to pour in seemingly out of nowhere. The rats flow in, and when they do you had better get out, because these rats do not discriminate between objects of any kind, including the bodies of human beings, which to them become no different than any other form of matter they may happen to encounter. Everything is fair game for these rats, who positively climb over one another and scabble about on top of one another and *every surface available to them* relentlessly until an entire room is over-topped by their seething, squirming bodies. Everything is bitten, chewed, and trodden upon, even parts of their own bodies, or the bodies of any person unlucky enough to have become trapped in an overrun room as it is being overrun. Eventually the rats will settle down into a more normal pattern

of behavior after the fire has gone out of them and the process of overrunning an area is complete, but woe-betide anyone and anything that was left behind. You can write them off, because they are a complete loss.”

“But there must be a way to prevent it from happening, even if you imply that there’s no way to fight it once the rats have decided?”

I was alarmed.

“Once the rats have decided to overrun an area it is already too late. The only way to resist the process is prevention, and—after a sufficient period of time has elapsed—remediation and reclamation.”

“I just asked about prevention, Loog—I’m asking you now again what you mean by prevention. What can be done to *prevent* this horrifying phenomenon?”

As I spoke, Loog turned suddenly to the cabinets, as though something I said had jogged a memory, though it appeared as likely that Loog had simply stopped listening to me altogether.

“Is there any food in this area?” he asked.

“Just what’s in the cabinets,” I replied.

Loog approached the cabinets cautiously and opened them slowly, taking stock of their meagre contents. He paused and stared for nearly a full minute when he spied the package of crackers, seeming almost to vibrate with excitement. Then I saw his eyes alight on the trap.

“Ah, I should have mentioned that trap. I saw it earlier when I was taking an inventory of my supplies. Clearly you’ve been here before,” I suggested.

Loog shook his head slowly.

“No. I’ve never been to this room before. This device was left by my predecessor or even someone before that.” His tone was somber, as though it pained him to acknowledge that there was a time when he had not held the position of Exterminator.

“Well, that’s good news. Seems as though rats must not have troubled this space for some time, if ever.”

Loog turned back at me, the disappointment in his face betraying just how hopeless he considered the cause of my education.

“It’s a good thing that most of that food is in cans.”

“You don’t really think there’s any reason to worry?”

“You asked before if rats made coffee.”

“I didn’t seriously mean—”

“They might not be able to make it, but they might eat it. Rats eat all kinds of things. It makes the job of an Exterminator extremely difficult, which is why I’m glad to see you’re using canned food. They can do a lot of things when they really put their minds to it but chewing through a steel can isn’t one of them.”

After Loog’s horrifying account of rats *overrunning* a room, this particular limitation came as something of a surprise.

“What do you do with food that you suspect has been contaminated?”

“The only guarantee that rats are not going to get into a food product is if the food is being stored in a steel can like these,” said Loog, indicating the ones in my cupboard unnecessarily. “That or cans made out of tin or aluminum will do as well. As long as it’s a powerful metal that rats can’t chew through with their teeth or scratch through with their claws you can be certain that a food product is safe. I’ve never seen a rat be able to use a can-opener. They might be able to figure it out intellectually but to put it into practice

would be beyond what they're capable of physically, in my opinion, even if they were working together."

"What about food that can't be stored in cans?" I asked.

"Everything can and should be stored in cans," said Loog flatly.

"Certainly as an Exterminator you must be familiar with some way of protecting our food supply from rats? You say everything can be canned—well, that may be, I wouldn't know myself, but the fact is that it isn't. What do you do to protect our perishable items from these creatures?"

"This is the dreadful truth about an Exterminator," said Loog. "The fact is that the greatest weapon Exterminators have in the fight against rats are our poisons. Deadly poisons that whiff of nothing—that are colorless—and, most critically, that can kill in an instant. There are several different kinds at our disposal and what we have to do, I'm afraid, is utilize some food storage areas as bait for the rats. Dummy food, if you will, that is never bound for human consumption but is put in place in certain strategic areas where it will be most likely to attract the local rat population. The food is just like any other food that you or I might eat, except it's been laced with my deadly poisons so it can kill in an instant as soon as it passes across the rats' lips."

"But these poisons are harmless to humans?"

“Some Exterminators argue that, if anything, my poisons must be even more effective against humans than rats because they can kill humans *just as* quickly and efficiently as they can rats. The fact that humans are so much larger than rats means that, pound for pound, the poison must be even more effective against us.”

“Well, that’s not very reassuring.”

“It could be our metabolism, or maybe not” Loog speculated. “In some ways it suggests that rats are stronger than humans and that humans are weaker than rats, although the fact that they have not mastered the use of poisons, such as human Exterminators have, to me suggests that can’t be true.

Then again,” continued Loog, “perhaps the rats are aware of the similarly double-edged effect of their own horrific diseases: diseases that are—like our poisons—deadly to both species, though arguably more effective against the rats. When you look at it like that, you see that in many ways our two species are in fact equals, locked in a struggle that appears to be eternal.

Though I am of the belief that rats actually possess the *advantage*. We make assumptions about eternity, as though we can comprehend its scope, but it is a depth no man can fathom, nor any rat for that matter. The difference is that as humans, we possess the hubris of *thinking* we understand.”

“Are you implying that the advantage rats hold over humans is that they remain untroubled by concepts such as eternity?”

“There are actually several advantages that rats have” said Loog, apparently uninterested in clarifying his earlier statement. “Advantage one is particular to the notion of rats at sea. In the enclosed space of a ship, even a very large ship such as this, there are particular staffing needs in order to keep the business running as usual. This requires a certain minimum number of humans and these humans all need food. Because some of these humans refuse to eat only canned food”—and here Loog paused, a look of contempt creeping into his tone—“they must keep a certain amount of unsecured food aboard at any given time. In order to protect this unsecured food, an Exterminator such as myself—though preferably there would be more than one—would need to place strategic caches of unsecured “dummy” food around the ship in order to lure enough rats to their doom often enough for the population to stay at a manageable level.”

“And what would be a manageable level in your view?” I asked, hoping to avoid the clearly sensitive subject of food rationing policies, which undoubtedly favored the officer class to the great personal and professional consternation of Loog.

“This would be a level at which the percentage of every successive generation of rats born aboard the ship who dies from eating our poisoned food equals, or exceeds, the rate of replacement for the rats who do not die and therefore continue to breed.”

“Ah. And in your professional opinion, have we exceeded the manageable level here aboard *The Mary-Ellen*?”

Loog looked at me so queerly then that I actually glanced back over my shoulder for a moment, wondering if the window and its face had somehow returned.

“What are the other advantages?” I asked, hoping to distract Loog from his suddenly intense interest in me.

“What?” asked Loog, not breaking eye contact.

“The other advantages the rats have. You made it sound as though there were several advantages that the rats have, but you only mentioned one.”

“Oh,” said Loog, snapping back to some semblance of his former disinterested self. “The other advantages are their numbers and their size. The numbers advantage has to do with the fact that rats are more fecund than humans and are not forbidden from breeding aboard the ship, such as we are. As long as there is food for them, the rats will continue to reproduce at a rate we cannot hope to match, even if we brought in reinforcements.

Because I cannot poison all the food aboard *The Mary-Ellen*—because certain members of the crew wish to eat and refuse to eat simply canned food—fresh un-poisoned food always risks falling into the hands of the rats, who make so much more efficient use of it than we

can, with practically a single mouthful leading to the creation of a thousand babies. Adding to the fact that merely a single cache of un-poisoned food creates the potential for a geometric increase in rat population, is the sad reality that there are places aboard ships where—because of our size—humans will never be able to reach the rats. Impenetrable strongholds and safe harbors within our very walls that merely require a few morsels of ferreted food to keep the little devils going for thousands of years.”

“Or *ratted* food?” I laughed, though I was laughing alone.

“Why does Jodl have you down here anyway?” Loog asked, ignoring my attempt at levity.

“I’m not here at Jodl’s behest” I clarified. “As a matter of fact, it’s pretty bold of him sticking me all the way down here and making me wait the way he has. I happen to have important business to attend to aboard *The Mary-Ellen*.”

“What business?” Loog asked.

This was

I weighed how much, if anything, I ought to reveal to this bizarre man. I could certainly say nothing about my commission as Navigator, but for all his strangeness there was something guileless in Loog that made me inclined to trust him, perhaps more than I had trusted anyone else aboard *The Mary-Ellen* so far. After all, he had been scrupulously honest with me regarding his own work—a font of information really. And though half

might have been pure fantasy—the internally consistent ravings of a high-functioning lunatic—I had no reason to believe Loog wished me ill.

“I need to see Mr. Remnick as soon as can be. I have to set up an appointment with him regarding some important matters concerning personnel.”

“Good luck seeing Mr. Remnick,” said Loog.

“Yes, I’ve been told he’s a busy man.”

“You’ll have to go through his private Secretary, Mr. Lloyd,” continued Loog. “And he’s even busier than Mr. Remnick, if that’s possible.”

“Mr. Lloyd,” I repeated, a little dumbstruck. “Are you telling me that there’s another person that I have to speak to, just so I can then speak to Mr. Remnick?”

“Mr. Remnick is impossible to reach, except through his very own personal Secretary, Mr. Lloyd. As the Steward’s Secretary, he’s practically the Steward himself,” continued Loog.

“And I take it Mr. Lloyd’s office is located on another ship entirely...” It struck me that I was further from assuming my duties than when I first came aboard *The Mary-Ellen* and it would hardly have come as a surprise had Loog affirmed the suggestion.

The Exterminator looked puzzled.

“Why would Mr. Lloyd’s office be on another ship? That would defeat the purpose of him performing his role as Mr. Remnick’s personal Secretary, which is frankly to conduct the bulk of Mr. Remnick’s business. Needless to say, as the Steward of *The Mary-Ellen*, that business is conducted aboard this ship, and not on another one.”

“Yes of course, Loog, you’re right—how silly of me to assume otherwise. Only, I suppose this Lloyd’s office is located one thousand decks down and is encircled by a moat of lava.”

“There are not even one thousand decks on this whole ship,” Loog corrected me. “Mr. Lloyd’s office is naturally also located in the Steward’s office. In fact, his personal office might be said to constitute the antechamber to Mr. Remnick’s office for how closely and intimately they are linked.”

“I have to say that’s a relief, Loog—it really is. I’m sure that once I see Mr. Lloyd, he’ll admit me to see Mr. Remnick right away, given the nature of my business here.”

“That’s for Mr. Lloyd to decide,” said Loog. “And Mr. Lloyd is not the easiest person to impress, let me tell you. The number of times I have tried to get in and talk to Mr. Remnick about a pressing matter having to do with the rat situation here aboard *The Mary-Ellen*, only to have been turned away by Mr. Lloyd...”

“Yes, well, whatever the procedure is, I’m less concerned that I’ll be turned away and more concerned about finding the place, period. I was expecting Jodl to have sent someone down to me by now to show me to Mr. Remnick’s office, but though I know little enough of your Jodl it would not surprise me if he had forgotten.”

“I know Jodl,” Loog said again, and something in the way that he did struck me as more ominous than when he had the first time.

We stood side by side in silence for a few moments then, neither apparently knowing exactly what to say next or whether our conversation had, in fact, ended, when an idea came to me from out of the blue.

“Loog, as The Exterminator, you must know *The Mary-Ellen* better than almost anyone. Would you say that that’s an accurate statement?”

Loog raised an eyebrow, though the rest of his face stayed precisely the same.

“I know it well enough... It is a big ship.”

“So it is. And here I am stuck in a dank corner while it appears my very urgent business will go neglected because our dear Jodl has forgotten me. Well, that’s not a very good state of affairs. And while the blame must fall squarely on Jodl’s shoulder’s, none of us aboard will prosper while I’m delayed in my mission. So, what I’m wondering, Loog, is if—since you

know *The Mary-Ellen* so very well and I not at all—you would do me the immense favor of guiding me to Mr. Remnick's office from here?"

There was a deafening silence as Loog stood almost motionless, as though he had caught wind of some far distant sound and dared not move for fear of muffling it with his own movement.

The silence lasted for a protracted period during which I myself was afraid to move or make any noise lest Loog should have reacted to the interruption with some sudden violence.

Had my request been so unreasonable, I wondered?

Finally, he spoke.

"What if Jodl sends someone down and you're not here?"

"It doesn't matter in the slightest, Loog" I answered, relieved that this was all he had been troubling about. "The thing is, the duty that I need to discharge is frankly more important than whether or not one of Jodl's men makes an unnecessary trip to my room."

Loog looked somewhat insulted by this, but the truth is indifferent to sentiment.

“I do know where Mr. Remnick’s office is,” admitted Loog, rather reluctantly. “Or at least the door to Mr. Lloyd’s antechamber.”

“That’s good. That’s the first thing. Is it very far, Loog?”

Loog considered for a moment, perhaps weighing several different routes in his head or whether he wanted to help me at all, and then nodded.

“It is far. It’s almost in the heart of the ship, much closer to the main deck. Which makes sense given how much business has to pass through it. If I am going to extend my thinking about the ship as a body to describe where we are now, I would say we are in the shin, getting down by the ankle.”

No wonder it took so long to get here, I thought darkly. Why did that fool have to stick me down all this way? And him saying it wasn’t far at all. Perhaps it was not as innocent as it had seemed...

“Did he just wish for me to rot down here?” I wondered aloud.

Loog eyed me steadily.

“You said you know Jodl—is that the kind of thing the old goat would be capable of?”

“Jodl is...” Loog paused. “A very old man. He is maybe not as reliable as he used to be. But he is not stupid either. It may be that he had a reason.”

I tried looking at Loog surreptitiously to try and gain some kind of understanding of how he might have meant the response—whether it was a veiled warning; whether he was trying to protect Jodl; whether he did not know or had simply grown uncomfortable speaking at length on any subject apart from rats at all—but the face of The Exterminator parted only grudgingly with its secrets.

“Well, never mind, Loog,” I said. “The important question is: can you do it? Can you guide me to Mr. Remnick’s office?”

Loog was now deep in thought. I wondered if he was considering still whether to take me at all.

“I *can* guide you... To Mr. Lloyd’s antechamber,” he said finally. “And I will. But...”

“Yes?”

“I would like your permission to do one thing before we leave.”

“What’s that, Loog? Ask and you shall receive!”

“May I have your permission?”

“To do what, Loog? You must tell me what you want my permission to do before I grant it. That’s the way it works.”

Loog looked a little put out but it was also clear that he would not press the matter and was maybe more disappointed in himself for not having been more subtle in attempting to obtain my approval for whatever it was he now hoped to do.

“Very well, I’ll say it,” said Loog. “I would like your permission to go ahead and poison the crackers in your cupboard.”

There was only intermittent talk between the pair of us as Loog led me down the long passageways and endless stairwells that seemed to comprise not only the skin of *The Mary-ellen*, but every part of her besides. Certainly nothing in the way of conversation initiated by Loog himself, who—when passing a certain door, grate, or ventilation duct—would slow his pace so that he was barely walking at all and crane his neck like a dog on a scent, quivering as though it were only our tenuous agreement that prevented him from attending immediately to the omnipresent threat of rats. All the same, I did my best to cultivate the fledgling relationship by peppering my guide periodically with inquiries concerning his trade.

“One question that I have is: how do you keep track of all the poison you put down, Loog? There must be an awful lot of it around. You certainly had a free hand when it came to my cupboards.”

Loog grunted.

“I’m well supplied. No reason to skimp. The last thing you want is a rat with some poison immunity surviving a meal and passing the trait on through the gene pool. That’s why it’s best to use as much—and as much variety—as you can. But even though I use a lot, I take very careful notes about where, what, and how much I’ve put down.”

This was hard to believe since I hadn’t seen Loog writing down anything, and we had departed almost immediately after he had finished poisoning my crackers, indeed in

something like haste. I nearly pressed the issue, but before I could he continued to speak. With his head turned away from me as he led me on our course, I had no warning of when he would open his mouth.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Loog said drily.

“What do you think I’m thinking, Loog?”

“You’re thinking it’s dangerous.”

This was exactly what I had been thinking.

“You’re thinking that it’s dangerous that I use so much poison. I know you’re also thinking that I really don’t know where all the poison is that I put down, that I don’t remember what I’ve poisoned and where I’ve done it.”

“Well, Loog,” I admitted. “We’ve only just met. It takes time to trust a person and to have faith in his methods.”

“You don’t have to worry about me,” assured Loog. “I don’t expect you to believe someone right away. I wouldn’t. But, in my case, you can and you should. I don’t take my job lightly, and while it may surprise you to learn it, I can remember everywhere I’ve ever put poison down. Not only the specific place either, but including the specific items.”

“That’s certainly impressive,” I said.

“The issue that we run into aboard the ship is that of when the crew doesn’t know where I’ve put poison down, and what has been poisoned and what hasn’t.”

“That sounds like it could be a big issue.”

“It can and has been a *huge* issue at times. But it’s not an issue that I have any responsibility for, even though I take pains to follow all safety protocols.”

“I imagine it would be a good idea to put up some kind of sign.”

Loog scoffed. “And tip the rats off? What kind of Exterminator would I be then?”

“You think rats can read signs?”

“I told you they were sign-makers, didn’t I? They may not be able to read words and sentences in the same way that we can—and saying ‘we’ is giving a lot of credit to some of the crew, I can tell you—but they can easily recognize the presence of a human sign. Most importantly that it *is* a sign. If I were to go around putting signs up, you can be sure that rats would take *that* as a sign to avoid that area like the plague.”

“Why not put signs up then, instead of using poison?”

...

There was silence for a long while.

Was he considering my suggestion?

Finally, Loog spoke.

“I submit records of where and what I’ve poisoned to Mr. Lloyd on a regular basis. The matter is really in his hands. Or rather, Mr. Remnick’s”

We had been walking for long enough since the subject had dropped that I almost forgot what Loog was referring to—having become distracted with my own cares as a Navigator soon to assume his duties—though evidently my companion had not.

“So, there is an official record then? Something that’s written down?” I asked, taking up the thread again.

“That’s up to them. I know where the poison is, and I submit a verbal report to one of Lloyd’s ledger-keepers. It’s up to The Steward’s office to keep the relevant crew advised of my activities, but I suspect communication breaks down now and again.”

I could imagine what the result of such a breakdown might be and wondered privately whether this might account for the surprising *sparseness of habitation* I have already noted. The great ships are heavily compartmentalized, of course, and it was impossible to tell how much life might, in fact, be thriving behind the innumerable anonymous doors we passed as we made our way into what Loog referred to as the “heart and throat” of the boat, but the fact that we had encountered exactly no one else since departing my room was hard for me to fathom and only reinforced the sense of ominous possibility alluded to in Loog’s cryptic utterances.

“Loog,” I ventured, remembering something about what the Exterminator had said before that had continued to bother me, “I believe you said that once an area is overrun by rats that the situation is quite hopeless, at least for a time. What I want to know is: what can be done to prevent further spread? If anything.”

“What do you mean?” Loog asked. His tone suggested that the answer to the question was obvious.

“Are there steps that one can take to address the issue in some way. To contain it at the very least? If, as you said, the typical course is to abandon the area and hope the rats

eventually vacate, couldn't such a strategy lead also to rats *claiming and controlling* increasingly large swaths of territory?"

Loog chuckled darkly.

"It's true that the first and most vital step is to abandon the immediate area *immediately*—though by the time a person has noticed that the rats have firmly and definitely decided to overrun the area it is almost certainly too late. At least for that person. The next and as equally vital step, is to call in a welding team to seal the overrun area off with three-inch sheets of *reinforced steel plate*; every door, vent, duct, and crack. If you're lucky it'll just be a single room, or a suite of rooms. Labs and messes are the stuff of nightmares—anything with a drain or plumbing. You can imagine what a large bathroom is like with so many drains and showers—you might as well abandon the entire sector, find the most convenient choke points, lay down a moat of neurotoxin and ask the torch teams for *double-duty*, also-known-as six-inches of *reinforced steel plate*. The welding team will likely balk at the idea of *double-duty* and respond with skepticism and hesitation. They may say such phrases as: *three inch sheets of reinforced steel plate are quite enough already*, and: *I would like to see the rat, or rats, that are able to chew through three inch sheets of reinforced steel plate when they have such trouble with mere tins of canned fish as it is*, or: *we do not have enough reinforced steel plate to go around for this level of coverage*. When they say these words or phrases, you can then produce your *ace-in-the-hole*" said Loog, more smugly than I would have thought possible for a man of his affective range.

“What are you referring to, Loog?”

“Why, my letter from The Master-at-Arms, of course, which gives The Exterminator *carte-blanche* when it comes to protecting the ship against the threat of rats.”

This was all quite a lot to absorb. It was amazing, not to mention somewhat pathetic, that such a thing could seem to excite a grown man in this fashion.

“It sounds like you have a pretty good relationship with The Master-at-Arms to possess such a letter, Loog.”

“He’s a man who understands how badly things can go when it comes to rats,” said Loog matter-of-factly.

“What happens when the area is sealed off successfully?”

“If it’s done properly, eventually the rats die off. If not from the poison, then from internecine wars and cannibalism. After you’re certain the problem is contained it’s best to let nature take its course. Depending on the scale of the problem, the area can start to be reclaimed after anywhere from several months to a year.”

“Wouldn’t that be extremely disruptive to the operations of a boat?”

“Would you rather have disruption, or chaos?” Loog asked.

The question, posed by any other person would likely have been understood as rhetorical. But the way Loog asked it seemed as though he was honestly curious to hear my answer.

I was beginning to be concerned about the judgment of a Steward who would countenance such techniques, assuming Loog and his welding teams had the administrator’s consent in the first place. According to the usual chain of command, it would be highly irregular for The Exterminator to report to The Master-At-Arms rather than The Steward, since the former’s provenance were the military and disciplinary spheres, while the latter oversaw operations, including custodial services, of which The Exterminator was unequivocally a part. The alternative—that it proceeded unsanctioned and unnoticed—was, if anything, even more chilling. Perhaps because the event of an infestation invoked security concerns The Master-At-Arms could claim a legitimate interest, or perhaps he was merely indulgent?

After we had walked on quietly for another few minutes I posed Loog another question.

“Loog” I asked, “What do you think of Mr. Vak, The Navigator?”

My companion was silent for long enough that I began to imagine that he had not heard my question, then, suddenly—as was his wont—he spoke, though it was far from characteristic Loog.

“What do *you* think of Mr. Vak?”

He posed the question in such a manner as to seem extremely sly, which of course had the effect of only drawing my attention. I wondered if Loog was really so unsubtle, or if the extravagance of his response was intended to indicate itself somehow. I pressed him.

“Now that’s not fair, Loog. I asked you the question. My opinion of Mr. Vak is not the subject here. I assure you though, if you’re afraid to express something negative regarding him you’ve nothing to fear from me. I’m merely curious.”

“I know so little about Mr. Vak that I can’t even form an opinion of him,” Loog said. “All I know of him is what you’ve just told me, that he is The Navigator of *The Mary-Ellen*. Beyond that I have nothing, except to say that I know he is very insulated and has little to do with the day-to-day running of the ship.”

This struck me as somewhat unfair.

“He may have more to do with it than you think, Loog,” I replied. “A Navigator is an extremely important functionary aboard any vessel, and the responsibility is magnified with the size and complexity of the ship in question. Given *The Mary-Ellen’s* stature, you can imagine what the job is like.”

Loog shrugged, which was for the best. Of course it would not be wise to tip my hand any more than was necessary. Nevertheless, I found the remark had stung; a vicarious insult.

“You are correct that a Navigator like Mr. Vak is seldom seen going and coming,” I conceded. “Unless his chambers had a rat problem, it would be unusual for a Navigator to interact with an Exterminator.” I smiled secretly to myself.

“It sounds as though you know a lot about Mr. Vak,” declared Loog. “Is he a friend of yours?”

“Not a friend exactly,” I admitted, with a certain amount of satisfaction “but it does sometimes feel as though I know him. Let’s call him a fellow traveler and leave it at that.”

Loog’s head seemed to bob in front of me in affirmation. He then cleared his throat and spoke again.

“It’s true that we may not have much cause to interact, as you say,” said Loog deliberately, “and at first glance we do not seem to have much in common... But I wonder if there aren’t certain similarities between a Navigator and an Exterminator after all?”

I almost laughed aloud.

“What sort of similarities are those, Loog? If you don’t mind elaborating on your theory.”

“Both are solitary figures, for one. You even suggested as much yourself.”

“A fair point,” I admitted. “But that hardly means the role is somehow less integral to the essential functions of a well-managed boat. One could make the case that, without a Navigator in place—without someone at the helm, guiding the progress of the vessel through every step of its journey, having indeed painstakingly planned said journey in order to protect The Company’s capital and maximize its profits—the entire endeavor would be for naught.”

“I wasn’t implying that the solitary nature of the Navigator makes him less essential,” rejoined Loog, “but it does make him similar to the Exterminator. You could also say that the service the Exterminator performs—that of poisoning and exterminating rats and other vermin that threaten the food stores, lives, and livelihoods of the crew—is, in its own way, as essential and fundamental to the success of The Company as is the role of a qualified Navigator. And, just like a Navigator, the job of an Exterminator is that much more essential the larger and more complex the vessel.

“Take *The Mary-Ellen* as an example; here is a vessel so large and so complex that you could say that an effective Exterminator is just as essential as an accomplished Navigator. There is also the peculiar similarity of their respective need to understand certain spatial zones. In a way, you could say that it is the Exterminator who knows how to navigate the ship the best of anyone, since he needs to understand it in its entirety, as a landscape and as a *system* full of secrets which must be mapped. And it is the Exterminator who must map it if

he is to be successful in his crusade against rats and vermin. Whereas the Navigator might be said to concern himself less with the landscape of the ship itself and more with outside affairs. To be honest, I must admit that I have never known a Navigator who was capable of navigating more than his own chamber. With that in mind, you could say that—with respect to the ship—the Exterminator is, in fact, the true Navigator.”

“You could say that” I replied, “but if you did, you would be grossly mischaracterizing the nature of the work the Navigator performs. The work of the Navigator is—in every sense of the word—*prior* to the work of an Exterminator. The Navigator is a laborer true enough—for who with a job of work isn’t a laborer in the most elementary sense—but the nature of the labor that a Navigator performs is of an intellectual cast. The Navigator must study for years—in some cases decades—in order to perfect his craft. The best Navigator may even be said to elevate his work into a kind of art form; something subtle and enduring. Without a Navigator in place—*shaping the entire conversation*, as it were—an Exterminator cannot even enter into the picture. How can an Exterminator exterminate rats and vermin aboard a boat if there is no occasion requiring the navigation of a boat to begin with?”

“It could be the dead and abandoned remains of a ship,” Loog pointed out. “Many wrecks become infested, and if anything is to be salvaged from such a place it had better ought to be free of rats before it’s sold off, otherwise The Company may not be able to remand anything of value. In that situation an Exterminator would have to be called in and yet there would be no Navigator involved whatsoever.”

“That’s an entirely different situation, Loog, and one that we needn’t entertain provided there’s a good Navigator. A good Navigator means no shipwreck. Besides,” I added, “a Navigator would have to be involved anyway. Whose responsibility do you think it would be to *navigate* to the site of the shipwreck in this scenario?”

...

“Suppose it was the Navigator’s fault that a ship came to be infested in the first place?” Loog resumed after a brief pause. “Perhaps in an effort to cut corners, the Navigator took a rash route that steered the ship through unsafe waters that harbored rats and vermin—some are able to swim you know, and others can survive long periods simply clinging to flotsam. They call them ‘water-rats,’ though they go by other names as well. There are many species of rats that thrive in the tropical climes The Company’s lines frequent. We may put in at some isolated cay or lagoon thinking we are there to take on fresh water and allow the engineers to perform routine maintenance on cool engines while the crew stretches their legs, but what we are really doing is exposing ourselves to creatures we take less than seriously and know little about. You say the Navigator is prior to all ship-bound endeavor—to that I say that the Exterminator is a complementary figure in that he is a *figure of last resort*. He is the one who is called when there can be no other recourse. It is his job to protect and guarantee our enterprise through the systematic and—if necessary—*ingenious* application of deadly chemicals, whose properties and uses he must study and memorize. Without an Exterminator, the Navigator and everyone else on board would

perish at the hands of our enemies, the rats. In that way, the Exterminator might be said to be a *post navigational* authority.”

The ludicrous idea rendered me momentarily speechless. I simply couldn't fathom how a person could be simultaneously so methodically reasoned, and so fantastically wrong.

Having drifted from my original aim, I decided to drop the matter. After all, I didn't require Loog to understand, merely to show me the way.

We settled into an awkward silence after our exchange on the comparative prestige of Navigators and Exterminators, and large swathes of *The Mary-Ellen* drifted by as though the ship itself was merely a haze and we two frustrated interlocutors the only bits of solid matter for miles, bobbing at the whim of swirling currents and drifting eddies in the distant reaches of a remote and murky sea. At first disturbed by how easily the wreck of our conversation had sunk beneath us, in the fullness of time I found I was unconcerned; the almost giddy sensation that precedes an assignation with destiny mounting in me instead with every step I took.

Eventually, we came to a precipice overlooking a vast empty space which seemed to extend hundreds of feet below us. The lights were dim as always, but through the gloom I thought I could make out the distinctive rectilinear contours of shipping containers and concluded that we must have arrived at some kind of mezzanine area overlooking one of the hull's manifold freight storage bays. Ahead of us a short way was a kind of catwalk that extended over the chasm, past my vision and into the distance.

Loog, who had stopped, gestured at the precarious bridge like a herald.

"Across there is Mr. Lloyd's office."

I nodded and waited for Loog to proceed, but he didn't budge from his spot.

"Are you not coming with me then, Loog?" I asked him.

“You should be able to find your way from here.”

It appeared this was goodbye.

“Of course, Loog, I understand completely, and I owe you a debt of gratitude for your time and expert guidance. Needless to say I wouldn’t have made it here without you.”

Loog gave a short nod by way of acknowledgement.

“And of course,” I went on, feeling a sudden pang of something less like contrition and more a species of regret, “I appreciate the significance of the role you play here aboard *The Mary-Ellen* and the urgency you feel to return to it. I myself had little knowledge of the nuances and potential severity of rat issues aboard boats and am admittedly chastened by the grim realities you describe. I feel better knowing you are out there combating them, Loog. You are a braver man than I, and yet...” and here I trailed off deliberately, wondering if Loog would take the bait.

“Yes?” Loog asked.

“And yet you won’t accompany me this last little stretch, even after we’ve gone all this way together and shared so much of ourselves?”

“It’s precisely because we’ve come all this way, and taken so much time, that I would prefer to be on mine. Like I said, Lloyd’s office is only over there.”

He pointed again across the catwalk as if perhaps I hadn’t seen him the first time. It seemed our contempt for one another was indeed a shared malady.

“I just wondered if there was a particular reason you didn’t want to accompany me to The Steward’s office, since we’ve come all this way and it’s only over there?”

“I have no business with the Steward.”

There was that proud streak of Loog’s I found so grating. The man was certainly full of himself. It would be a relief to be rid of him.

“As you say,” I demurred, shrugging. “Would you like me to relay a report regarding your poisoning of my cupboards? Perhaps it will save you time later, since you are so busy.”

Loog stepped forward and looked at me oddly, saying nothing. It seemed I had gotten under his skin.

“It’s a very remote area of the ship as you know. There won’t be any immediate danger to anyone down there. Except for rats that is.”

“It won’t be any trouble if that’s what you’re trying to save me, Loog. It’s my way of saying *thank you* for taking the time and trouble to guide me here when others failed to do so. I hate to think how long I might have moldered in that dank basement had it not been for you happening by and ignoring polite conventions to invite yourself into my chamber while I slept.”

“It’s better that you say nothing,” Loog said firmly. “You don’t know what poisons I used or in what quantities, which are extremely important details. You also don’t know enough about the ship to accurately describe where your chamber is located.”

“The shin of the boat?” I smiled.

“That is only my own pet name” clarified Loog, unnecessarily. “It’s not recognized in official Company nomenclature. No one at The Steward’s office will understand what you’re talking about if you tell them that the shin of the ship was poisoned. These are officials and they speak only in a certain way about things. If you tell them that the shin of the boat has been poisoned they’re likely to call The Master-at-Arms and have you committed to the brig.”

“I think The Master-at-Arms has more important matters to attend to than the words that a person uses to describe something.”

“You might be right about that,” Loog admitted, “but you would be wrong to underestimate the influence that The Steward’s office has, or the authority that The Master-at-Arms wields

here aboard *The Mary-Ellen*. At the suggestion that something might be amiss it is easy enough for them to respond, especially if that something is a someone. The brig does not lack for cells and discipline is more than a word to the Master—it is a sacred rite... I cannot prevent you from thinking in a certain way or speaking in a certain manner, but I hope you will trust me enough to listen to me now as I am advising you to be deliberate when you speak with Mr. Lloyd or any of the men of The Steward's office. Avoid vagueness and suggestion and do not traffic in speculation or rumor. Adhere solely to the facts—you may use descriptive language if you must but keep it hard and simple and avoid the ornate and decorative. Do not allow them to imagine any picture outside of the one that exists. You may fail to capture in words what you mean to convey, and what they draw in their minds may be different from what you intend, but at least you will have made an honest try, even when you inevitably fail. They will recognize the attempt, I think, just as they will recognize an attempt to turn things to your advantage by twisting in the direction that the wind is blowing.”

Loog's solemnity, and the extent to which he had apparently considered the matter of how to speak to representatives of The Steward's office caught me off guard. There was something definitely odd about the man, but while I knew I had nothing to fear from the office of The Steward, his warning was disquieting. I do not know what I hoped to gain by confronted Loog about his reticence to enter into the orbit of Mr. Remnick by drawing closer to Mr. Lloyd's office other than to cow him in exchange for belittling my profession by comparing it to Extermination. Despite of the fact that he had helped me, I found I resented him and more than ever after he had gone.



As I crossed over the catwalk, I paused for a moment to look down into the depths of the freight bays beneath me.

There was not much that I could make out, but the marvel of the sheer distance between my perch and the containers beneath me struck me afresh. As I gazed down upon their obscured splendor, I noticed, here and there, tiny pricks of golden light making their way slowly up and down between the aisles that separated the neat rows of containers and realized that they must have been the lights of watchmen making their rounds.

Seeing this, my heart swelled anew with pride.

There was something merry and cheering about looking at the lights and imagining the simple, devoted men who carried them. A tedious task, no doubt, and probably thankless, but there they went all the same, pacing dutifully for the collective good rather than—one must assume—their own enrichment. They were men undoubtedly like my own erstwhile apprentices, to whom my thoughts admittedly had turned—dependable and stolid lads who might have been useful to me now, though they were not without their superstitions, an affliction which all laborers share to varying degrees. My own apprentices' case had been mild, a patently transparent cloak for the reticence they felt in separating themselves from me and assuming a new assignment. I knew they would be fine and had probably forgotten all about me already, though perhaps not totally given the enthusiasm they had displayed when we had been together.

In sharp contrast stood a man like Loog, I thought, whose confused blatherings and pseudo-scientific “studies” of the minds and motives of rats betrayed, above all, a lonely soul whose endless and largely pointless ramblings in the dankest and most isolated corners of this enormous vessel had clearly resulted in a mind gone to rot. And this was without touching on his warped sense of superiority and the prestige of his station, which was out of all proportion to reality as it stood in either a *de facto* or *de jure* sense.

Perversely, the single thing that could have helped him out of this unfortunate state—namely, additional human contact—was precisely what he seemed to fear and shun the most, an indelible sign that his diseased condition had become a terminal state.

As I thought back on my time with Loog, I made resolution then and there to inform The Steward’s Secretary’s office of my assessment of the man after all. I did not like the thought of him roaming the depths with his poisons, intervening indiscriminately in otherwise perfectly healthy food supplies. It would be for his own benefit to have his activities curtailed, not to mention the rest of the crew’s. Having not seen a single rat through my entire time aboard *The Mary-Ellen* so far, I was more or less convinced that the threat he described was largely imagined.

Then, unbidden, I remembered the odd face I had seen in my dream—and the whole wild dream itself; the imagined window; the strange passage; the nailing of the curtain—and marveled at the fantastic distortions that could be harbored by the human mind. All a

symptom, unfortunately in my case, of frustration and fatigue; far greater threats to sailors than any rat, in truth.

As I cleared the final paces of the catwalk and emerged on the opposite shore as it were, I found myself unable to banish the cryptic words of Loog's last warning from my thoughts.

*Do not allow them to imagine any picture outside of the one that exists...They will recognize an attempt to turn things to your advantage by twisting in the direction that the wind is blowing*

There was nothing to them, naturally, but in spite of understanding this from an intellectual standpoint, I found I remained shaken by them for some reason. Was he somehow implying that my purpose on *The Mary-Ellen* was illegitimate? What could he know or understand of the situation anyway? And, of course, there was nothing to do except continue and present myself to The Steward, or rather, The Steward's Secretary, Mr. Lloyd, so what was the use in worrying?

At least it appeared as though Loog had led me to the proper part of the ship.

The area before me was better illuminated and seemed to be more assiduously maintained than the places Loog had guided me through to get there.

The large door was constructed of a heavy, handsome dark hardwood and tastefully embellished with repeating geometric patterns. They were complex but not *ornate* and engendered the sense in the viewer that the people behind the door possessed the supple sort of power that did not need to stretch itself into ostentatious displays in order to prove effective, though they undoubtedly could be stretched into such displays and assume such forms if the situation called for it.

The repeating pattern was somehow both soothing and threatening, calling to mind images of estate gardens and labyrinthine prisons.

I looked the great slab of a door up and down, but could find neither handle, knocker, nor bell.

The uncertainty as to whether or not I was simply supposed to wait until the door opened of its own accord or mount some kind of attempt to enter on my own prompted me to withdraw for a moment back into the shadows where, illusory or not, I felt less exposed to potential scrutiny.

I had nothing to fear, naturally, but if this was to be the leadership of *The Mary-Allen's* first true impression of their new Navigator I wanted to present a more auspicious picture than that of a man fumbling for the entrance as though he were blind.

Unlike certain other members of the crew, the office of The Navigator bore no special insignia or mark which might distinguish him at a glance, not that I could have depended upon such a mark or insignia at this stage in my tenure anyway, not having technically assumed my duties.

As my discretion when dealing with the crewmembers I had so far encountered demonstrated, there were practical reasons for this, a Navigator being a person of such special significance aboard any vessel that the preservation of his anonymity was as much a matter of security as it was a natural condition of the demands of the role.

Having initially mistaken him for The Captain, I had been free with Jodl—though because he belonged to the administrative echelon (however devolved) I could still theoretically have confided in him safely—but I had, of course, deliberately concealed my identity from Loog, whom I had deputized for a narrow and temporary purpose. The rationale for this somewhat irregular tradition is based on the assumption that, knowing the identity of a boat's Navigator could conceivably create an opening for a mutinous faction to secretly gain *de facto* control over the operation of said boat by the clandestine blackmail, bribery, or torture of said Navigator, causing the individual to route the boat to a location known to be friendly to the cause of the mutineers—or, in some cases (typically cases in which a mutiny is complex or advanced enough to overwhelm the disciplinary regime itself) to a location so remote as to render the vessel incapable of signaling for or obtaining the necessary aid in time to quash the mutiny and restore order.

What I did have, of course, was my letter of dispatch from The Company. Though whether or not I could in good conscience show this letter to a Steward's office guards—thereby revealing my identity to them and exposing myself to the risk, however miniscule it might be, of being compromised by that interaction and pressed into the service of a secret, mutinous cult operating aboard *The Mary-Ellen*—remained a question. The disciplinary regime both Jodl and Loog had alluded to was no idle matter, and though it posed considerably greater risk to crewman than a person such as myself, I would be vulnerable if I found myself running afoul of the enforcers of said regime, even if I had been pressed into service against my will.

It would be best if I could hail the guards and somehow make it clear to them that I needed to be admitted on a certain amount of faith to see Mr. Remnick, (or at the very least Mr. Lloyd) without delay...

It was possible that Jodl had notified The Steward's office to expect me, which would render all worry and precaution moot, but merely possible was not the same as likely, and I had my doubts about Jodl's faculties, not to mention his motivations.

As I stood there thinking, my hand, almost independently of my mind—that prodigious organ being otherwise occupied with these swirling concerns—sought the interior pocket of my jacket where I had been keeping my letter of dispatch. In some subconscious way, I believe I found the presence of the letter calming—a proof of and validation for my very existence, at least aboard *The Mary-Ellen*. I couldn't consult it for clues as to how to

approach the conundrum with The Steward's office because I knew it contained no such information, but it was reassuring nonetheless to hold it in my hands.

When I had first received it I had read it so many times that its entire contents were indelibly stamped into the very fibers of my consciousness, never to be forgotten. It is, after all, every Navigator-in-Training's dream to receive a letter such as this, and among other things I remember being impressed by its poetical qualities—a function probably of the discretion with which The Company was oftentimes compelled to communicate with its personnel—even loyal senior members—to avoid the risks for sabotage, and indeed outright mutiny, that interception of such communique might inspire.

A comforting document.

And essential, since The Steward and eventually The Captain would need to read it as Jodl had in order to verify its authenticity—which was unimpeachable—and confirm my identity.

It was more than a letter really, my letter of dispatch. It was, in effect, the *keys to a kingdom*. For what was a Navigator after all if not a sort of royal personage—holding dominion over the seas through the lordly and noble calling of Navigation?

I might also go so far as to call the letter of dispatch the *dream of the Draughtsman*, for what Draughtsman did not dream of being one day *called up to serve a higher purpose*? Looked at

this way, the letter was something far more than a mere slip of paper; the supernatural document actually endowed its recipient with a new life.

So, it was with a growing sense of alarm and a newly conscious purpose that I groped within my jacket when my hand came back empty after wandering off to explore the pocket on its own. Maybe, since it had been an almost somnambulant attempt, my hand had missed something, I thought. So, I drove it in again only to confirm the unthinkable.

The letter was gone.

I checked the other pockets in the jacket and everywhere else that it could possibly have been, beyond even where it might conceivably have slipped or been stuffed in haste, but the effort was futile.

The letter was not something that I would have put anywhere else, or really could have.

It meant enough to me that it could only be in one place if it were on my person because I had made certain that this was the only place where I would ever put it if I were carrying it with me—and I had carried it with me for as long as it had come into my possession—reasoning that if any vessel I were to find myself on before I arrived aboard *The Mary-Ellen* were to *go down*, I would rather have the letter on hand than tucked away in one of my external effects, which would likely end up at the bottom of the sea.

Numb, I concluded that I must have gone against my own nature at some point, taken the letter out and left it somewhere.

Having given the letter to Jodl for inspection, I could at least rely on the fact that the letter *had* travelled aboard *The Mary-Ellen* with me and had not—in defiance of all logic—slipped out somewhere on my journey to the boat. It must, therefore, have slipped out somewhere *on* the boat, either on the way to my room, in my room itself, or in my travels with Loog. Either that, or—and I shuddered at the possibility—it had been stolen.

Whatever the cause, I realized that without the letter I was faced with a choice:

I could attempt to press on and insist on being admitted to The Steward's office to plead my case—trusting to my authoritative bearing to carry me through.

Or I could regroup... Return to my chamber and look for the letter.

Then—if I failed to find it—I might at least have time to formulate some alternative plan.

Impatient as I was to begin my work—and exhausted as I was of dragging myself through the endless labyrinthine depths of the boat—approaching the office of The Steward and either attempting to elbow my way through with bravura or throwing myself on their faith and mercy did carry considerable risk. Loog's fear of The Steward's office—infected as it was with his own paranoias, petty grudges, probable sense of inferiority, and unvarnished ignorance regarding the operations of The Company—was undoubtedly out of proportion, but, like the ravings of most madmen, it contained a morsel of truth. If I had no way of proving the authenticity of my claim on the office of The Navigator, then I might be consigned to quarters far less preferable than those offered by Jodl while the matter was investigated. Assuming it would be, given the size of *The Mary-Ellen* and the complexity of the tasks undertaken even in a normal Steward's office, I might find myself waiting for a very long time. If this occurred, I would of course be released eventually, and no doubt at that time the recompense for having been wrongfully interred would be sweet indeed, but there remained above all my responsibility to the office of Navigator to consider...

Even though I had not yet assumed the office, as a Navigator-in-Waiting, I knew I must refrain from acting in any fashion that would impede, thwart, or delay my assumption of the office, it being essential to the functioning of *The Mary-Allen's* mission and the success of The Company.

The delays I had been forced to contend with so far were bad enough, but I had weathered them to the best of my ability, and at least none of them could be construed as having been of my own making. If I were fortunate enough to, at some future date, undergo an audit of my performance as a fully sanctified Navigator of a Company flagship like *The Mary-Allen*, I wouldn't want a blemish such as having been interred for failing to present The Steward's office with my official letter of dispatch upon the commencement of my duties to mar the otherwise happy occasion.

Lost in this pleasant reverie I nearly forgot my predicament, but of course reality returned. When it did, I found I had made up my mind.

I would return to my chamber.

It was not an easy decision, but it was undoubtedly the correct one.

I would not put myself on the wrong side of discipline before I had even properly begun my tenure as Navigator.

Even if I avoided the brig, presenting myself to The Steward without my letter of dispatch would be a stain I would have to endure for the rest of my otherwise spotless career.

Perhaps in time I *would* make a mistake—there was even the possibility that I had made one already (having misplaced my letter of dispatch would certainly qualify, though I felt certain I would find it and thus be vindicated, the putative black mark of its disappearance forever unborn and even its memory worn away by time)—but I would not willingly place myself in a situation where I could be so judged.

I would return to my chamber and I would look for my letter of dispatch in every nook and cranny, and I would find it and return to The Steward's office to present myself as though nothing had happened, which would be the truth, since nothing of consequence would transpire except for the inconvenience of a long and avoidable—but nevertheless fully understandable and probably quite common—delay.

The problem with this plan—though it was undoubtedly the correct one—was that I had little idea of how to return to my chamber, since the ship was new to me and so very complex and Loog had been guiding me all the while, allowing my mind to drift as I listened to him prattle about his rats and his pet theories regarding his own cosmic importance.

In a perfect world, I would not have needed Loog at all to return to my chamber, but because I did not possess a map or native knowledge of *The Mary-Allen's* anatomy, it

seemed I would be forced to work with him again unless I could find another person to help me, (preferably a discreet person who would correctly assume that I outranked him without asking too many questions).

As much as I was loath to admit it, Loog had a point when he had offered the ironical observation that an Exterminator often knew the physical layout of a ship better than the Navigator who plotted its course...

I moved to the catwalk and looked down at the little lights making their stolid way up and down the aisles.

A person like one of those workmen would be the perfect candidate for my mission, as long as he could be enticed into leaving his post.

I could be very persuasive when I wanted to be, and I don't think I flatter myself when I say also, imposing.

It is the ease of command that comes to one trained to lead and handle complex, multifarious tasks such as Navigating.

The only problem with deputizing one of these men, however, was that I was much too far away and did not know how to get down to their level, as it were.

So, I tried shouting—cupping my hands around my mouth to amplify the effect and kneeling down to better bay out my message to the men below:

“Hello down there!” I called. “Can you hear me?”

I watched intently as one of the dots of light slowed and eventually stopped.

“Hello, I’m up here!” I shouted. “Can you see me?”

The dot had definitely stopped—it was no illusion—but as I hailed it again, I wondered if I were really the cause after all.

I had no way of knowing—of confirming or denying my hope—because the man, if he could hear me, was either refusing to reply, or did not possess enough strength to project his own voice back the considerable distance to where I stood.

It might have been that he was bewildered, unable to determine the source of the voice, or suspicious of its motive—maybe both.

It was likely that he had received some training and had been warned against the dangers of distraction. He might have even suspected that the voice was something like that, even if he could not make out the words—a loud noise, meant to distract him from his job of patrolling and safeguarding the containers so that someone else—a *co-conspirator*—could

meddle in the contents of one or another of the things and have less of a chance of being detected. The containers were often full of valuable things—ore and jewels, other raw materials, and even weaponry—and the threat of sabotage or theft, or the contents being otherwise compromised—perhaps the serial numbers switched so that when the container arrived at the port it would be loaded onto the wrong cart and hauled away to the wrong warehouse—was real enough. I bellowed at him for a few moments more and watched with dimming hope as he moved on, either unmoved or totally unaware of my presence high above.

Unfortunately, the most likely solution to my predicament would be to try and find Loog himself, since he at least knew where I was bound and couldn't be far away, having only left me a short while before. It was not my first choice, but unless I happened to encounter another candidate by chance it was beginning to seem like my only option.

Feeling glum about the prospect of having to endure the man's company once again, I made my way across the remainder of the catwalk and began searching for the passage we had come through to get there.

It proved more difficult than I thought, there being, I could see, several passages spaced at equidistant intervals across the broad sweep of the overlook leading out of the mezzanine area, any one of which—by their appearance—could have been the one Loog had conducted me through mere minutes before.

The only thing I could recall with any certainty was the fact that we had seemed to emerge in more or less the center of the overlook, the catwalk positioned directly in front of us, which eliminated any of the passages on the far extremes but still left several more in the middle which might have qualified.

Then there was the matter of which passage Loog had used when he had left, which, I reasoned, might not by any means have been the one he had taken me through.

I poked my head down a few of them and shouted Loog's name, but the only reply was my own voice echoing back at me.

It was a hastily conceived plan and I had not really expected it to work, but it was disappointing nonetheless.

It seemed that my only option was to try and retrace my steps as best I could and hope to run into someone, Loog or otherwise, who might be able to guide me back to my chamber. I picked one of the passages—one of the middle ones—and started off.

At first it appeared that I had chosen well. The passages, stairwells, and ladders I found myself traversing had a familiar feel to them, bearing something, it seemed, of those ghostly traces that individuals leave behind them even after they have moved on and vacated an area—a certain vibration in the air—or perhaps just a smell—and a vividness that is rarely attained on a first pass.

I noted certain rungs of certain ladders where paint had peeled; small scuffs on the rubber shod stairs; the way a light flickered and buzzed overhead in a hall.

But after an indeterminate period of time, I found a sense of strangeness and novelty returning and began to suspect that even if I had been following the correct route initially, I had by this point likely taken a wrong turn.

I cursed Loog—even as I sought him—for talking as much as he had while escorting me to The Steward's office, and cursed myself for allowing him to do so, even encouraging him by asking follow-up questions about his damned rats, of which I still had glimpsed nary a trace despite Loog's heavy implication that *The Mary-Ellen* was practically overrun.

I had not considered the possibility that I would ever need to come back through the boat this way and so had felt licensed to indulge my curiosity about Loog's odd beliefs while tuning my surroundings out. Once a Navigator assumed his duties, he would be so fully occupied with the day-to-day minutiae of guiding the enormous vessel under his watch through the treacherous seas to its destination that he would have no time whatsoever to

concern himself with anything else at all. Furthermore, because of his exalted position aboard the vessel—some claiming the office need only answer to The Captain himself, and others asserting that The Navigator should be considered co-equal with The Captain—he would of course have his own retinue of designated apprentices who could do things like descend into the bowels of the boat to fetch his effects.

There were even said to be cults among the Society of Navigators who believed the office to be more exalted than that of The Captain, and certain vessels which secretly observed the rites of this ancient tradition without the knowledge of The Company... Still others believed The Company leadership itself endorsed this apparent heresy while *appearing* to vest executive authority solely in its Captains as a kind of counter-intelligence operation designed to obfuscate its true intentions and its true investitures of power from its many enemies, and even—crucially—its employees (except of course, The Navigators). Having been merely a Draughtsman up until I had received my letter of dispatch, I could not say whether or not these rumors and legends were credible in any degree—though I had my suspicions...

I was now more or less certain that I was in a part of the ship I had never been to before. At first, I could not pinpoint the reason for my conviction, but as I stalked empty passage after empty passage it finally came to me. The little running lights, which had, as far as I could remember, been red throughout my entire time aboard *The Mary-Ellen*, had at some become green.

It was the kind of shift that seemed both subtle and significant all at once. Had I crossed over into another sector of the boat without even having realized it? And how long had the lights been green anyway?

Just to see, I traced my route back through three or four passages and the lights remained as they were.

So, they had been green for some time then.

Unless of course they turned red only one more passage back, I thought...

I almost checked, but I realized that thinking like that was liable to get me back where I had started.

Either that or *hopelessly* lost, if I wasn't *hopelessly lost* already—in contrast, I suppose, to merely not knowing where I was.

Perhaps all the lights had turned from red to green as the result of someone, perhaps the Steward, (or more likely Mr. Lloyd), flipping a master switch in a control room someplace to indicate... Something?

It was all conjecture.

It was not the first time that I paused to marvel at how few people seemed to populate *The Mary-Ellen*.

Was I so extremely blessed that the only one I had encountered after having been interred in my cellar by Jodl was the captivating and charismatic Loog?

I found it hard to believe.

Surely, I had been aboard the boat long enough at this point to have seen the passage of several standard shifts. Why had I not seen men coming and going as usual from their beds and bunks to their various duties or back again? On my previous vessel they had been inescapable—crowding the halls, messes, and latrines.

Was *The Mary-Ellen* really so much bigger that a person could wander for hours and never encounter another living soul besides The Exterminator?

As difficult as it was to conceive, I had to acknowledge also that there was much I did not know about the world and The Company, even if I would not have admitted it to Loog or anyone else like him.

There were the men I had seen in the freight hull bays... But were they men, really?

And then I thought, what else could they have been, rats?

I laughed to myself at the notion of it. But my mirth was short lived as I soldiered on and continued to encounter nothing.

I was beginning to reach the point where I was becoming more than a little concerned about how long *The Mary-Allen* must have been without a Navigator. More than a professional setback, my inability so far to assume the role I was trained and duly commissioned to perform was no doubt now jeopardizing the great ship's missions—whatever they might be—not to mention sending the Senior Officers, and especially the poor Captain, into a state that must have been approaching panic.

This panic would be sensed by subordinates and would ripple outwards until felt by even the most common crew members: deck hands and freight guards, the crane operators and haulers of Holder's crew for example. And the restiveness of the crew—whatever form it took, whether mild or severe (maybe a latrine would be vandalized or a shift leader bloodied in a brawl with his underlings)—would only heighten and exacerbate tensions at the senior levels.

There was always some natural tension between crew members and officers, but on a healthy vessel these were kept in equilibrium by the crew's inherent fear of the disciplinary regime and the officers' inherent fear of the considerable risks posed by mutinous crew. In the case of a panic however, these forces could easily be thrown out of balance by even minor infractions or inferences. A paranoid Captain, or even an overzealous Steward—no

doubt under considerable strain in the absence of a Navigator and becoming concerned that his ship's missions might be compromised by endless delay—could easily become convinced, in this environment of heightened pressure, that a conspiracy was afoot. The inevitable subsequent crackdown—that ritualized display of the strength of the disciplinary regime so essential to keeping order— might be harsher and less surgical than usual. Designed to suppress future action, and perhaps smoke out radical elements of the crew (who as the bugbears of the officer class' imaginary ship ecology are invariably to blame for whatever sort of misfortune is being suffered) such crackdowns, when mismanaged, paradoxically tended to instill belligerence in the crew instead of cowing them, tempering radicals not to moderation, but in the manner of steel; to a harder, colder deadliness. It is thought, by theoreticians of mutiny, that this overzealous display of force not only angers the crew but also tacitly signals—even to those who may not have the slightest inkling of the reasoning at play—that the administrative class believes that they are weak and losing control. In other words, by cracking down pre-emptively on a nascent mutiny, an administrative class can actually sow the seeds of its own destruction by revealing its own precariousness to those it has intended to cow.

Whether or not things had reached this stage yet aboard *The Mary-Ellen* I could not say, though I was certainly beginning to become concerned. If they had, those I had encountered had done a pretty good job of concealing the fact from me, despite behaving oddly. They might have believed they had good reasons for doing so—and therefore made a convincing effort—but I considered myself an apt judge of men and none had struck me as

bald-faced liars. Eccentric perhaps—definitely so in Loog’s case—but honest, fundamentally.

It was odd that Jodl had put me where he had, but the man was clearly somewhat touched by senility, and his explanation for doing so was plausible. The fact that he had apparently spoken with Mr. Vak after I had already received my letter of dispatch was very queer but could also be attributed to his mental state. “A few days” could mean anything coming from an old man like Jodl and was probably not worth analyzing. Still, I could not help but wonder if there was a more sinister explanation, one in which Jodl knew exactly what he was doing by pretending not to know about Vak’s demise and sticking me down in that strange little room. In any case, it was now imperative that I return there and make my way safely back to The Steward’s offices as quickly as possible. Whatever plots may or may not have been afoot aboard *The Mary-Ellen*, as a Navigator, my task was a sacred one and I couldn’t tolerate further delay. If I failed in even assuming my position, the implications for The Company and my career were too great to consider.

...

I decided I was going to put a new strategy into play, one I had been turning over in my mind since I had encountered the green lights several passages back.

I decided that, instead of going up or down stairs or ladders when I encountered them—as I had been doing according to my whims and a natural sense of what *felt right* according to

my finely-honed sense of direction—I would ignore these distractions and continue to explore the level that I was currently on.

I reasoned that by traversing the ship in this *lateral fashion* I was more likely to encounter another person—any person—who might have some better knowledge of the ship's geography.

*The Mary-Ellen* might be spread thin, as Holder had suggested, but no matter what issues it was currently facing I felt confident that entire levels could not simply be vacant.

Eventually, if I just kept going and resisted the temptation to ascend or descend, I knew I was sure to meet someone.

My strategy proved fruitless.

The blank, repetitive nature of the interstitial spaces I had been traversing was beginning to produce a headache.

Though it probably was not a very good idea, I began to try doors—just for a break.

If I was being honest with myself, I had to admit that I *was* hopelessly lost and had been from the beginning. This begged the question as to whether one could truly be considered lost if he had not known where he was in the first place, or where he was bound, or whether the word *bewildered* was, in fact, correct.

The return might cross centuries and dimensions for all I knew.

In the trade of The Navigator, there were occasionally paradoxes—seemingly fixed places that sometimes shifted and evaded even the most skilled practitioner's attempts to locate them. Though these instances of mystery rarely attained dramatic heights, or heights as thoroughly stubborn and frustrating as *this instance*, they were no less formidable for the obdurate blank—unreachable by science—that they represented in the logic-governed minds of their pursuers. *Any* blank on a map, whether tacked to a wall, or imprinted in the mind, was a blemish impossible to hide and equally difficult for a Navigator such as myself to endure. However, I was enough a master of my craft to understand also that sometimes

experimental strategies are warranted where the limits of knowledge are reached, and sometimes science and stupidity resemble one another closely.

In my situation there was more blank than map, an almost intolerable state for a Navigator of my eminence, or putative eminence. Apart from the deck, Jodl's office, my room, the door to the office of The Steward, the rest was a black kraken—a blank with tentacles extending every which way. Stupidity, or you could call it instinct, is the science of confronting such terror.

Most of the doors would not open.

I continued on through the galleries and forgot the idea for a while, earnestly trying instead to get my bearings, though a part of me understood that it was futile without a point of reference or some piece of equipment that might have oriented me. Then again, would a pocket compass have helped? Such a bauble was hardly useful below deck on a moving ship.

I considered that perhaps instead of my lateral strategy, a policy of *going up* whenever possible in an attempt to reach the main deck might yield results, but I feared the chance of apprehension without my letter of dispatch.

Would Jodl, Holder, or Loog vouch for me if they could be summoned?

They would if they knew what was good for them, but as to that matter I had my doubts...

Distractedly I tried a door, and to my surprise I found it open.

I stepped into the room not knowing what to expect, and while what confronted me was not exactly impressive, it was temporarily striking if only for its comparative novelty. Like all of the spaces I had so far encountered aboard *The Mary-Ellen*, the room in which I stood was dingy and seemed to belong to that strange species of human pseudo-habitation that bears the marks of overuse and disuse both.

It was difficult to tell if the room had been recently vacated or had stood derelict for months.

It was a fairly sterile space and somewhat small.

It appeared to be some sort of supply closet.

In contrast to the proportions of a traditional room, the one in which I stood was long and narrow, receding into the distance to terminate in what looked, from my vantage point, like another door—though it was far enough away and dim enough in the space to make this assumption perhaps not entirely secure.

Along one side of the room, there ran a long counter which was piled with supplies of various kinds: rolls of disposable serviettes, trays of cutlery, stacked tin mugs, and a vast

array of differently sized dishes, plates, bowls and serving platters. Some of the items were stacked extremely neatly, almost as if they had never been touched by human hands, while other sets appeared to have been placed more haphazardly, as though they had been left in haste.

While there were no obvious delineations across the counter to indicate as much, I imagined that the differences in style owed to the fact that different sorts of people utilized this pantry—probably servers employed in some attendant mess area—and that each maintained his own sort of informal “station” where, behind closed doors, his personal habits and standards of neatness would be on visible display. As long as supplies of durable and semi-durable goods did not run out ahead of their expected lifecycles, it is hard to imagine that a Mess Officer would care to scrutinize the station habits of his employees. Such actions were rarely appreciated, and Mess Officers were rarely personages of enough real importance to raise genuine alarms if supplies happened to go missing. Like Mess Officers themselves, such supplies were necessary but replaceable, and the good men that held these jobs were almost never connected in the way that even Exterminators could occasionally prove. A good Mess Officer therefore picked his battles, was very much “one of the boys” and meted out punishments, to the extent that they might be necessary, for infractions of a different sort than those typically deemed worthy of correction by the disciplinary regime. It was not uncommon to see servers flogged for the crime of not having plied their table forcefully enough to have caused its total inebriation, for example. It was altogether a different standard which was maintained in these sorts of messes, one

governed by the complementary logic of its place in the chain of associations which constituted the disciplinary regime.

A drunk sailor was a happy sailor.

Along the other side of the wall—the side across from the long counter—I noticed several irregular features which seemed, at a glance, almost sculptural additions. I drew closer to examine the first and saw that—far from an artistic statement—it was a haphazard quilt of dented steel plating welded roughly together over a space of wall a little taller and wider than the proportions of a man. The same situation with only minor variations in dimension was to be found repeated at regular intervals down the length of the wall.

Remembering what Loog had told me about his favored approach to containing rat infestation, I surmised that the plated areas must once have been doors. Of course, the doors still existed underneath the plate even though they couldn't be accessed by me or anyone else, rats included.

Or so I hoped.

In truth, the plate looked somewhat flimsy which—in addition to its amateurish application— was hardly an encouraging state of affairs. Then again—in contrast to Loog—I placed little faith in the ingenuity or resolve of rats, whether or not they were capable of making signs or working together to achieve collective aims.

Having reached the end of the long space in my examination of the plated-over doors, I could now confirm that the area terminated in another door. Unlike those lining the long wall, this door was not sealed shut and was, in fact, slightly ajar. I pushed it open the rest of the way and went through to find myself at the top of a set of long stairs that wound downwards for a considerable distance. Not having much else to do, and with no compelling reason to think better of it, I decided to see where they led.

At the bottom of the staircase was a small landing with still another door. The door was closed but was at least not plated over. I tried the handle and found that, like the one that had led into the pantry above, it too was unlocked.

The room within appeared to be some sort of recreation area, likely for the crew members who staffed the likely adjacent galley. A round table took up the bulk of the room and had clearly been used for cards and carousing if the burn marks and stains across its top were any indication.

I had seen many like it before.

There were one or two tins scattered around as well, which I presumed had been used as ashtrays or cuspidors, but a quick glance inside revealed them to be surprisingly clean. A cupboard next to a basin on one side of the room called to me and within I was delighted to find a cellar compartment with an extensive array of tinned foods, ready to eat.

The matter of my hunger was something that I had tried not to dwell upon. I simply did not feel as though I had the time to indulge myself in an activity as perfunctory as eating, essential as it is, when I had so many more important matters to attend to—namely, assuming my duties as Navigator of *The Mary-Ellen*. With a matter as pressing as that one, I felt I could be forgiven for neglecting the responsibility of feeding myself at regular intervals. The irony of the fact that my time aboard *The Mary-Ellen* had so far been devoted exclusively to waiting to assume my responsibilities as Navigator and traversing endless liminal zones—including, now, the periphery of a mess-hall—when I was quietly ravenous, apparently possessed of all the time in the world, and probably no closer to my goal, was not lost on me. Nor was my sudden desire to tear into the tins and consume their contents any less potent.

I had never thought much of the rations which were afforded to crew members, having become used to the fresher preparations that were afforded to mid-level officers and officials such as Draughtsman, but in my state I was of no mind to discriminate. I seized the nearest tin without bothering to glance at the label, punctured the foil with the tab and peeled back the lid.

Although there were several different varieties, they could all more or less be described as *stews*, and I knew anecdotally that the distinctions between the actual proteins used in each had less a practical bearing upon the tasting experience than a theoretical one. The sauce

was the thing, and this thick, rust-brown paste eliminated any textural or gustatory particulars possessed by beef, pork, poultry or even fish.

I ate several before I was sated and sat down to rest at one of the little chairs drawn up at the table.

Loog, I thought.

Loog and his poisons.

Even if I could not trust Loog to fully and consistently apply his philosophy of food safety to his actual actions, I could at least be certain that any tampering he might possibly engage in with canned goods would be easy to spot. I doubted The Master-at-Arms' patronage of my dear Loog would extend to employing the services of a welding team to re-seal deviled ham...

Besides, his marked preference for canned goods originated from the belief that rats could never penetrate them anyway, though this did seem to fly in the face of Loog's assessment of rats' intelligence and tendency to persevere.

*If a rat had been interested in feasting upon the contents of any of these tins, assuming he could find a way to do so, he would also have had to find a way into the cellar compartment in the first place, which was dubious.*

And, *if* the tins had been poisoned, the creature would have dropped dead then and there after a few bites, leaving its carcass to desiccate or rot away, assuming it remained undisturbed by human hands. I saw no evidence of this.

So, the tins I had eaten in haste must have been safe.

Though there was the slim possibility that the poison Loog had probably not used was slow-acting by design, and the rat, or rats had died elsewhere after eating it.

Another possibility was that the poison was as fast-acting as I imagined any poison might be, but that rats had carried away the tins to store in their own larders and had died after consuming the contents there.

I supposed, too as I digested, that the poison could have been fast-acting, and that rats—using whatever clever means they had devised to both enter the cellar compartment *and* prize open a tin—*had*, in fact, died on the spot, only to have their lifeless bodies consumed post-hast by their ravening fellows, who perhaps also died shortly thereafter, only to be consumed by a subsequent wave of their hungry fellows and so on, until whatever poison remained in the rotted or desiccated carcasses of some subsequent wave of their hungry fellows was sufficiently diluted so as to pose no risk to the wave thereafter and had therefore been consumed without consequence.

And, of course, it was still possible that the tins had not been poisoned at all and therefore posed no risk to rats or man.

Finally, I considered the frightening possibility that the tins had been poisoned and the rats had simply become immune to the poisons.

Before my imagination could run away with itself however, reality called my roving mind back from its dark reveries with the appearance of another door.

Across the table on the far side of the admittedly small room; a door I had somehow missed when I walked in.

The handle turned only grudgingly.

It was so reluctant that I found myself leaning against it with both hands, pressing my entire weight downward towards, and even lifting myself off, the floor—jumping up and thrusting down against the handle. Eventually, after a few minutes of this the thing began to budge and when it did, it did so suddenly, as though my exertions had somehow melted the lock. After that, it was easy enough to push the door open and squeeze inside, though I found myself halting by reflex almost as soon as I crossed the threshold.

This was because the room I had entered was almost completely dark—the kind of dark that is almost a presence unto itself, perhaps because of the fact that such pitch blackness could completely mask the presence of another living thing nearby.

There was an odd odor.

I might have tried to listen carefully for the sound of breathing, for that was surely one way to determine fairly accurately whether or not something nearby possessed life (which is to say nothing of the vast array of life that does not aspire, or does so more or less silently), but unfortunately there was also a great deal of noise coming from somewhere in the room as well—a vast rushing sound, as though I had crept upon a cataract.

The door—as doors on ships tend to be—was quite heavy, and before I had known what I was stepping into I must have let it go. Due to the loud rushing sound and the shock of the black room, I didn't hear the door slam as might have been expected, and when I turned around I found that the blackness was so complete that I couldn't even see where the door was any longer.

I turned in what I thought was the direction of the door and groped around for the handle, but to no avail—realizing as I did so that in such darkness it would be difficult to say how far one had even turned without the orienting cues provided by vision. I might feel as though I had turned completely, but such absolute blindness made a person very quickly and acutely aware of how much he depended on his sight in order to accomplish even

simple physical tasks. For all I knew I may have only thought of turning—and imagined the sensation that the thought had led to the action—when in reality perhaps I was standing just as I had been, gaping blankly into the unknown.

I felt a floor beneath me at least but had not yet come back into contact with the wall that presumably surrounded the door through which I had entered this odd space.

Considering the volume of the rushing sound and my sudden lack of confidence regarding my spatial orientation, I decided that I had better freeze on the spot to guard against the possibility of falling off into some vacuum or abyss.

There were rooms inside the bowels of great ships such as *The Mary-Ellen* that were more or less intended only to be accessible by *qualified technicians* for maintenance purposes and, while these were typically well marked, I couldn't help but wonder if I hadn't accidentally wandered into one such room and was in fact standing very near to a *large piece of machinery*—a turbine, power substation, enormous air-filtration array, or even some kind of *massive sump* for draining the water that big boats inevitably take on, for one reason or another.

As I stood contemplating my next move, wondering if I should maybe crouch down and crawl in the direction that I thought the rear wall was in and thenceforth grope for the handle of the door to return to the recreation room so that I would have less of a chance of

inadvertently stepping over and slipping past some precipice or brink and into the waiting jaws of some great, churning machine or endless pit, the lights suddenly flickered on.

The transition between absolute darkness and harsh illumination was jarring—as though I had been thrust without warning from the void of non-being into life.

I found myself on a small platform in what was merely a corner of a vast space, largely barren except for several large, wooden boxes stacked on pallets along the facing wall. A small set of stairs to my left led to the floor which, as my eyes adjusted to the cruel lighting provided by a battery of floods rigged high above, I quickly noticed was covered in about two inches of standing water.

This was strange enough, but the oddest aspect of the room was the fact that standing starkly alone in the center of the space, surrounded by a shallow interior sea which lapped around its tarpaulin door, was a modest, somewhat rustic-looking shed.

If I hadn't been absolutely certain I was awake this time, I might have thought I was dreaming again.

"Holder?" I called out, realizing as I did that the rushing sound that first met me when I had stumbled in in the darkness had stopped abruptly—apparently when the lights had gone on.

There was no reply.

It was probably foolish of me to have called out at all, I realized, but the sight of the ridiculous albeit also *quite frightening* shed, had immediately recalled me to the man's bizarre obsession.

There was something very unsettling about the situation, but I decided I must at least go and have a look inside the shed for no other reason than to see if I could unearth some clue as to why it had been erected *in this of all spaces*.

What was the fascination that such flimsy structures held for men like Holder and other laborers, I wondered, as I made my way carefully down from the platform to the flooded floor below. Was it their very transience and impermanence perhaps, which somehow mirrored the tenuous and precarious nature of their own lives and positions vis-à-vis The Company's rigid and unforgiving hierarchy? The impulse, perhaps, to build—even within the superstructure of a great ship—more fitting environs in which to carry out one's whims unnoticed? A place of one's own?

I supposed I understood that.

"Holder?" I called again, when I stood outside.

If someone was in there he might be napping or otherwise occupied with some private matter... Although curious, I was not callous like Loog.

“Hello?” I tried again.

There being no reply I pulled back the tarpaulin and peered inside.

The shed was utterly empty except for a bucket in the center of the floor.

Because the shed roof shielded the interior of the structure from the now blazing overhead floods, it was difficult to see what, if anything the bucket contained merely by standing in the entrance.

I stepped inside the shed and drew up for a closer look.

It was amazing how dark the interior of the shed was once I was inside, and I noticed for the second time that somewhat familiar, somewhat odd, and not entirely pleasant odor permeating the place.

It appeared to be coming from the bucket.

Although I couldn't see exactly what was inside, I could tell there *was* something.

Not feeling particularly excited about the prospect of investigating further, but reasoning that I had come too far now to turn back without concluding the matter, I picked up the bucket gingerly and brought it outside.

Having been immersed in the same absurd water which covered the entire floor, the bottom of the bucket had been wet and had dripped down my coat and pant leg as I had carried it.

Setting the bucket aside momentarily, I tried as best I could to pat myself dry using my sleeve, which worked only marginally.

Then I looked inside the bucket.

As soon as I did so the lights snapped off again and the rushing sound came back so deafeningly I could not even hear the scream I had no power to suppress when I saw the hand, a bit like a crab in its pinkish pallor, sitting, severed in the bottom of the pail.

It was some time, I believe, before I found the stairs again and left the room through the same door I had come in by, and some time further hence when, after I had vacated the area as quickly as possible and climbed many flights of stairs that I realized I had seen the hand before.

Aha, I thought to myself—I do not know why, triumphantly—as I wandered down another hall, that’s where I know the hand!

From Jodl.

With its yellowed nails like aged, eggshelling paper.

Could the presence of Jodl’s hand in the bucket inside the shed in the flooded interior room have been meant to convey some sort of message, I mused, half panicked, half numb.

Was it, in short, *a sign*?

At the thought of the word, a shiver passed involuntarily over my body.

I recalled what Loog had said about his beloved rats and how they were “sign-makers,” beings possessed of the intellectual sophistication required to represent their thoughts and feelings through the use of signs and symbols.

Of course it couldn’t possibly be the case that the severed hand of Jodl, Chief of *The Mary-ellen* was a deliberate sign left by rats—I wasn’t prepared to believe that—but the very idea that it might be a coded message of some kind was bad enough in itself. If it was not an accident, might it instead be a threat?

If it was a threat, I wondered, who was attempting to threaten whom, and for what purpose?

Bubbling beneath the surface of so much of what takes place aboard vessels such as *The Mary-Ellen*—indeed, aboard every ship of The Company's line, large and small—is the omnipresent threat of *mutiny*.

Out of all proportion to how thoroughly it pervades the minds of sailors everywhere—and especially those sailors' officers—it is a threat seldom voiced, as though uttering the word itself might cause the spirit of violent dissent to manifest in recognition of its name.

Despite feeling as though I had been wandering its depths eternally, I knew little enough of *The Mary-Ellen* still to speculate with any degree of authority as to whether or not a *mutiny* or *mutinies* were currently afoot. It was highly likely that the mutinous sentiment was there in one or more quarters, but in a ship as large as *The Mary-Ellen* this was both unsurprising and not necessarily a cause for concern.

But a severed hand was not a sentiment.

If it *was* a threat, it must be considered a serious one, even if it had not been directed at The Company itself or its representatives, but merely between two factions with more narrowly defined interests and aims.

I could not see any other alternative except that it pointed towards the presence of a mutiny, and Jodl's involvement, one way or another.

Either Jodl was the victim of this mutiny and had had his hand removed and left as a symbol to intimidate and threaten The Company, or Jodl was himself sympathetic to the mutiny and had had his hand removed by Company loyalists in order to intimidate and threaten mutineers.

Or, again, there was the possibility of an internecine mutiny which had nothing to do with The Company per se, except for the fact that it was taking place illegally on one of The Company's ships, and Jodl, being involved in one side or another, had had his hand made an example of in order to threaten and intimidate the other side, whomever they may be.

Considering it all baffled the mind until all that remained was the visceral revulsion of the amputated hand.

I was no closer to an answer.

And even more disturbingly, no closer to assuming my role as Navigator.

The next thing I knew I had entered a hub with a four-way intersection at the center of which stood my old friend, Loog.

I do not know exactly how long I had been blundering on after encountering the hand, but it might have been some time. I had gone into something of a trance.

When I did see Loog there at the intersection I nearly jumped out of my skin. When I realized who it was, I could scarcely contain my relief.

“How did your visit with The Steward go?” he inquired blandly as I grasped hold of his arm, as if no time had passed since we had parted.

“The Steward?”

“Mr. Remnick. Did you see him? They didn’t tell you he was too busy, did they?”

“Too busy? No, Loog, that wasn’t it exactly.”

My mind raced. Should I tell Loog what had happened? Should I tell him instead about the discarded hand?

“Did you make your report to Mr. Lloyd then?” Loog asked.

“My report?” Now I really was puzzled.

“Yes, your report on my poisoning activities. You had indicated that you were going to tell Mr. Lloyd about my overzealous use of poisons, I believe,” said Loog, with no indication that this necessarily upset him.

“Ah, that!”

I laughed lustily for quite a while.

“Well, Loog, I admit I was concerned, but no I can’t say that it came up. There were more pressing matters to be discussed after all, and I decided that I had better just leave the matter of poisoning to the expert, in this case your good self, Loog, as you know.”

“More pressing matters than defending *The Mary-Ellen* and its personnel against the scourge of rats?” inquired Loog, and as usual I could not quite place his intent.

“Loog, I am thoroughly convinced that rats *do indeed* represent a serious threat; not only to the personnel of this fine boat—of whom there appear to be lamentably few—but to the boat itself, its mission and The Company’s welfare besides. I am not, however, convinced that the rats you are referring to and those that most concern me are indeed the same rats at all.”

“An intriguing proposition,” Loog said, with something approaching interest. “Go ahead and tell me more.”

“I must first ask you very seriously, Loog, whether or not I can trust you. I mean *really* trust you. Please do not be offended that I ask, because while I know you have shown me great courtesy in escorting me throughout *The Mary-Ellen* at the personal cost of delaying your own very important work here aboard the boat for us—and that says a lot about your character already—I must know that you will keep what I am about to tell you—and what what I am about to tell you may suggest—in the strictest confidence, to be revealed to no one else without my leave.”

Loog stared at me, earnest and unblinking, but said nothing. I waited, knowing by now that the gears of Loog’s mind turned in their own time, but no response came.

“Loog, did you hear me? What I said to you just now? You were paying attention, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was paying attention,” Loog replied at last. “I was paying very close attention, and then I was thinking for a while about what you said.”

“So, am I to understand that I can trust you, Loog?”

“I was under the impression that you trusted me already.”

“I did—I do trust you, Loog,” I assured him, “but this is different—what I would like to talk to you about requires an additional assurance of trust—a reaffirmation if you like, of the deep trust that’s already held between us.”

“You trusted me to guide you to the next station of your journey,” Loog continued in that way he had of ploughing ahead without giving away whether he had been listening to what a person had just been saying. “You trusted me to lead you through *The Mary-Ellen* and to convey you safely to the Steward’s Office. If I had wanted to lead you astray, it would have been easy to do so, you know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, Loog—I know that. I’m extremely grateful. I think I’ve told you, but it bears repeating. I don’t know what I would have done if you had not decided to come into my room, even if you were uninvited. I thank you for your frankness, for your curiosity, and for your unerring devotion to your job and *The Mary-Ellen*. God knows, The Company could use more men like you,” I babbled, believing I actually meant it.

“It would have been the easiest thing in the world for me to have taken you to some remote location deep within the ship and then abandoned you there in the dark. If you were lucky maybe you would have found your way out on your own, but you do not strike me as the lucky type, sir.”

“Please, Loog, we’ve passed that point in our relationship where such formalities are required!”

“But you never told me your name did you, sir? Even though I revealed my own.”

“Is that right? That can’t be right, Loog, can it? We know each other, better than anyone!”

“Except for your name, it would seem,” Loog replied.

“I’m sorry Loog, I’m a cad. Let me repair this now—it’s Bilder, that’s my name. It’s my pleasure to share it with you.”

“I might have guessed Weaver for such a sly spider as yourself, but Builder is a nice name, too.”

“It’s actually *Bilder* with an *I*—nothing to do with construction I’m afraid, though you’re not the first man to make that assumption.”

“But builder does have an I, doesn’t it?”

“What? Oh, yes. Just the “I” in this case.”

“I see... Well, that’s too bad. And what does *Bilder* mean?”

“Nothing, I’m afraid. Nothing I’m aware of anyway.”

I laughed nervously.

Loog smiled sadly and shook his head.

“No, it doesn’t sound like it means anything, does it? Most names don’t after all, though it’s nice when they do. Anyway, I’m used to it. Still, having the anonymity of a meaningless name can come in handy in its own way, can’t it?”

“Yes, Loog, I suppose it can now that you say it. Maybe I’m not so unlucky. Besides, I encountered you again, didn’t I? What are the chances of that?!”

“Slim.”

“Then it must be fate that I found you! And none too soon... Call it destiny if you like, but of course now I see I can trust you, Loog, and I must ask you something rather urgent.”

“I can see that you trust me now, yes,” agreed Loog, “but...” And here his melancholy demeanor seemed to deepen, as though it pained him to have to inform me of what he was about to tell me.

“What is it, Loog?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

“I’m not certain that I can trust *you*,” finished Loog.

“Trust me? Why of course you can trust me, Loog—why wouldn’t you be able to trust me?”

“It’s not that I wouldn’t—you must remember what it is that I said. It’s that I’m not sure I *can*.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“While I have been very forthcoming about my business here aboard *The Mary-Ellen*, you on the other hand have been extremely cagey. When I told you my name, you did not respond in kind. When I told you my occupation, you pompously feigned interest, all while leaving me in the dark with regard to your intentions. When I told you of my methods, all you did was exhibit revulsion and threaten to report me. When I told you I could spare no more time for your misadventures, you implied I was a coward. I have given you ample opportunity to show me your true colors and to reveal to me, through explicit and implicit actions, who you really are.”

“Loog, when you put it like that it’s clear as crystal to me that I’ve behaved abominably toward you...”

I was concerned that Loog had come away with these impressions of me from our time together.

Perhaps I was not so subtle as I thought...

I was struggling to think of what to say next.

Then it occurred to me:

“You have my profoundest apology, Loog.”

Loog looked at me blankly.

It had not had the desired effect.

I paused, considering my next words carefully.

“And more than that, I want you to know, Loog, that you have my deepest respect... Of all the people I’ve met since coming aboard *The Mary-Ellen*, you have been by far the most generous, the most helpful... The most like a friend, that I could have hoped to encounter. And if my time aboard this boat has taught me anything, it’s the value of a *friend*. I have not treated you as a friend, Loog—I’ll be the first to admit it—but rather more as a subordinate, and for that I may never forgive myself. I allowed my mission and my station here to cloud

my judgment and render me crass and classless in my dealings with you. And now, it seems my mission is in jeopardy all the same.”

I surprised myself at the depth of sentiment I had been able to summon.

“Loog, I do not deserve it” I went on, “but I *need* your friendship, now more than ever. If you can but deign to put your confidence and trust in me just one more time, I swear to you that your recompense will be more than my eternal gratitude, my eternal esteem, my eternal respect, but my true friendship—with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto, yours for as long as you will have them.”

As a final detail, I extended my hand.

“You make it sound very enticing,” said Loog.

“Oh and it is, Loog, it really is! I swear to you.”

“Very well,” said Loog, with the kind of quiet dignity he could sometimes attain.

“Then you’ll help me?”

In my eagerness I nearly forgot that Loog had not yet grasped my hand.

“On one condition,” Loog beamed.

“Name it and it shall be yours, Loog—goodness knows you’ve earned the right to ask me a favor.”

“Now that I know your name, tell me your business here aboard *The Mary-Ellen*.”

xx

I lied.

It pained me to do so.

Indeed, it pained me more than I would care to admit, but I lied all the same—bitter as it was to lower myself in Loog's eyes.

I told him I was a Draughtsman.

In a way, it was not so much a lie as I would have liked.

It was true, after all, that having not yet assumed my role as Navigator of *The Mary-Ellen*, one might argue that I was, in fact, still a Draughtsman. I do not hold to this particular reading of my situation, but it is one way to look at things, and in *that* way I suppose I was actually honest with Loog. Another way was to look at my situation as existing in a kind of purgatory. Having received my letter of dispatch commissioning me as Navigator of *The Mary-Ellen*, but having not yet assumed my role as Navigator of *The Mary-Ellen*, it might be said that I was neither truly a Navigator nor a Draughtsman any longer, but something *in between*. What that in between was, was of course difficult to define; was it actually anything at all, in and of itself, or merely a lack of formal designation that nevertheless amounted to a sort of pseudo-designation, formal or not? In this regard I might be considered something also between a liar and an honest man.

I preferred to think of myself simply as a Navigator—a much cleaner case—for above all I was a Navigator *in my heart*. Which is what made telling Loog I was a Draughtsman feel like such a debased lie.

Nevertheless, it also felt necessary. As much as I had made a fuss about trusting Loog, the truth, of course, was that I could not—nor should I—trust him, or anyone else.

I could not simply tell Loog that I was the new Navigator and risk compromising myself and *The Mary-Ellen* if, by some chance, Loog belonged to a mutinous faction.

Mutineers, after all, come in all shapes, sizes and intellectual castes, but there were many more of them amongst the ranks of working men and laborers and far fewer amongst those of the administrative echelon and officers. The officers and administrators that did involve themselves with mutineers were, of course, the most dangerous sorts of mutineers of all because of the power they wielded, and their ability—in many cases—to wield that power in a clandestine fashion to their nefarious, mutinous ends, all without having The Company realize what was happening. In fact, some of the very cults operating within the Society of Navigators who believed in the concept of the so-called *Executive Navigator* were sometimes said to be carrying on an ancient mutiny—perhaps *the original* mutiny—rather than, as they would have it, carrying on an ancient tradition that protected The Company from its enemies through layers of command-chain obfuscation. All that is to say that, while I did not fear Loog per se, I knew I must be cautious in what I revealed to him because of who—or *what*—he might have been allied with.

Lie or not, telling Loog that I was a Draughtsman was the *correct* thing to do.

And yet, as soon as I told Loog that I was a Draughtsman, I knew I had made a grievous mistake.

I knew this because of the way Loog's eyes lit up when I told him this, because I realized then that Loog's eyes could light up.

It was a terrible thing to behold.

It turned out that Loog had need of a Draughtsman.

Or rather, it turned out that Loog's patron had need of a Draughtsman.

"It would be a tremendous favor, you see," explained Loog, as we traveled through a passage, this time with me in the lead and Loog bringing up the rear, obligingly shouting directions whenever there was a turn, flight of stairs or ladder. It was determined that this was a more practical way of proceeding, since Loog would be better able to keep an eye on me if I was up in front and be well positioned to administer a burst of poison gas should I attempt escape.

"A favor is a funny way of putting it," I replied. "A favor is given willingly. As much as I would like to help you, Loog, I would consider your actions as having placed me under duress, which negates my ability to provide favors so much as compliance. Anyway, I asked you for a favor first and I granted you your condition for giving one. Shouldn't the granting of my favor have preceded yours?"

"Ah but you see, this is marvelous," said Loog with unusual expansiveness. "You being a Draughtsman changes the calculus entirely. I had thought you were some sort of Health & Safety Inspector, what with your incessant questions regarding our little rat problem and my methods of combatting it—all of which is quite legitimate I might add, for the really very scary problem that it is, I assure you—and while Health & Safety Inspectors are invariably a great bore and bother to me, they ultimately have very little power to censure

me, especially once the Master-at-Arms has assumed control of *The Mary-Ellen*. He, at least, understands the scope of the problem and will not, I think, attempt to prevent me in combatting it in the most effective fashion possible. And if I deliver you to him—a trained Draughtsman of some repute I imagine, if they took the bother to summon you here—why, I may even find myself ingratiated. There’s a lot of power a Master-at-Arms wields, you know.”

“Of course I know that, but you do realize that by preventing me from assuming my duties you’re exposing yourself to risk from the very disciplinary regime whose rule it is your Master-at-Arms’ sworn duty to uphold?” I explained. “What do you think he’ll do to you when he realizes that you’ve taken it upon yourself to detain a duly commissioned... Draughtsman, who’s very urgently needed aboard this ship by The Captain and The Navigator, etc.?”

“The current leadership of *The Mary-Ellen* has, unfortunately, lost its mandate. That is my belief anyway, and I’m convinced that the Master-at-Arms will agree. Every exchange I’ve had with him over the last several months—every word, every glance, every gesture—has only encouraged me in my conviction. It is only a short matter of time before he puts his plans into effect and assumes control of *The Mary-Ellen*.”

“You realize that you’re discussing mutiny, Loog,” I said, hardly able to believe what I was hearing.

“There is nothing mutinous about serving The Company,” Loog retorted. “The officers of this ship, with the exception of my good Master-at-Arms, have been criminally negligent in addressing the risk posed by rats and vermin to both the health of the crew and consequently the success of our entire endeavor. The truth is that the problem may now be intractable. I do not wish to believe it—and with urgent action there may yet be time enough to mitigate and eventually recover from the worst effects of the infestation—but it should never have been allowed to get to this point in the first place. The Master-at-Arms has always given me a free hand, but I am only one man. By myself I have not been able to gain so much as a toehold against the rats—not while I am bogged down, held up, and foiled time and again by the *so-called* Steward and all the dreary minions of the *so-called* Captain.”

“Whatever you want to call them, Loog, they—along with the Navigator—are the lords of this boat, and their rule is absolute while at sea according to Company law. If they are at fault for the way they’ve conducted business aboard *The Mary-Ellen* they will be held liable and dealt with appropriately by Company authorities once in port, or by Company marines while at sea if it comes to that. Has the Master-at-Arms even attempted to make contact with The Attaché for this region?”

Loog snorted. “You think The Master-at-Arms hasn’t exhausted every recourse? You must not know the man very well. Every attempt has naturally been foiled, just as I myself find I am foiled at every turn by the *so-called* *Lords of the Boat*. This is a *ship*, you indifferent fool. I hope you’re a better Draughtsman than you are an orator, otherwise The Master-at-Arms

may have less use for you than I thought, which would be bad for both of us. Consider yourself lucky, in any case, that you didn't end up in The Steward's offices. I wouldn't want to be trapped in there when the Master-at-Arms makes his move."

The image of the hand flickered in my mind. Perhaps the Master-at-Arms had already *made his move*. Or perhaps I was simply going mad.

I began to wonder about my letter of dispatch.

"What is it that the Master-at-Arms wants with a Draughtsman anyway, Loog? Why are you so intent on bringing me, of all people, to this aspiring mutineer? I'd rather face the brig than take up arms against the rightful custodians of this...ship. If it's bodies he wants, he'll not press mine into service, come what may."

Loog laughed aloud at this, which I did not appreciate.

"You really are a fool if you think the Master-at-Arms needs men. The barracks are full of loyal soldiers such as myself, willing to go to hell and the wall for the just cause of their commander. They've been mustering for some time now and practically boiling over—they're so eager to fight for what's right. As for you, you're right in one matter, and that's where you're bound—which is to the brig. It's up to the Master-at-Arms whether and how much he wants to press you, I suspect, but it may also depend on how good a Draughtsman you really are."

“Meaning what?”

“You’re a skilled hand with a pen, I take it?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Loog jabbed me hard in the back with the snout of his nose.

“Of course I’m good with a pen—a Draughtsman draughts *for a living*.”

“What about a brush?”

“I don’t understand what you’re asking...”

“Slow indeed. But there’ll be time a-plenty, I expect. It’s your eye that’s more important than your hand, don’t they say?”

“I’m lost, Loog.”

“My dear Draughtsman, The Master-at-Arms is a proud man. A vain one. I know he would very much like to have his portrait done.”



My room in the brig was not so much different from the one Jodl had conducted me to before.

It was not quite as large perhaps, but it was not a cell exactly. The primary difference this time was that I could no longer expect even the theoretical freedom of movement I had enjoyed before, whether it would have helped me or not, because Loog took pains to demonstrate how thoroughly I was to be locked in, and how futile might be any attempt to escape.

“A formality” he had quipped before he clapped the iron on my ankle. “But you cannot be too careful. Not with a mighty Draughtsman.”

“They say the pen is mightier than the sword.”

“They do,” admitted Loog, “but it’s a painting the Master wants.” And with one last skewed smile, he had gone.

Perfunctory or not, the iron appeared to be securely bolted to the wall. And while I had enough slack to make it around my quarters, there was no chance of getting out.

Extremely hungry again, in spite of the situation, I was cheered slightly to find several tins of blightfish in the cabinet, and even a further supply of coffee, this time with filters.

I tore into the tins like an animal and wolfed their contents over my basin, tossing the empty containers down by the drain as I crunched the oiled, salted fillets bones and all, one after the next. My appetite satisfied for the time being, I put on a pot of coffee, mostly for something to do, and sat down on the cot while it brewed to consider my predicament.

Whether or not it was true, what Loog had told me—and with Loog, I reasoned, there was ever the possibility of derangement—it was a pretty grim situation I was faced with.

If the Master-at-Arms was really poised to attempt taking control of *The Mary-Ellen* by force, then the likeliest outcome was annihilation.

The administrative fastnesses of such a vessel were designed to withstand sieges and, if protocol had been followed, were supplied and booby-trapped to the point where the Master-at-Arms could play every card his deck might conceivably hold and still come up short. Even if the Master's forces were capable of intercepting or blocking distress communications from The Captain, or Steward, and thus prevent The Company from sending a marine force to retake *The Mary-Ellen*, his own men would be liable to starve or slaughter one another in internecine conflict before the blast doors gave way or the officers' own food ran out. I did not like to imagine my chances amongst the mutinous hordes in that scenario, and thinking again of the hand, it struck me again how matters might be further along and further out of control than even Loog understood.

Which brought me again to the consideration of my letter of dispatch.

If what I had seen so far aboard the boat was any indication—and despite being vast, I imagine I must have seen at least a representative sample in all my endless wanderings—*The Mary-Ellen* had been in a bad state for some time. Great vessels, difficult as they are to maintain, do not fall suddenly into complete anarchy. It takes time, failure and dereliction of duty on multiple fronts, and it might take malice, too, above all else.

Suppose it had not been The Company who had dispatched me to *The Mary-Ellen* after all, I mused, but someone aboard the boat itself?

The coffee had finished brewing, and I took a cup and returned to my cot.

It was better coffee than what had been stocked in my chamber. Another tin, this one featuring the face of a yellow-eyed black cat, rather incongruously sporting a red cap and licking its nose with a curling tongue, the label in a foreign alphabet I could not even identify.

It was a blow to my pride, but it had to be considered that I had perhaps been summoned *informally* by a person or persons aboard *The Mary-Ellen* for a narrower purpose than the Company's thriving.

There were several possibilities to consider.

One, of course was The Captain, or someone from the Officer class.

If *The Mary-Ellen* was on the verge, or in the midst of a mutiny, it was possible that Mr. Vak had been injured or killed and needed replacing, though given the protections typically enjoyed by Navigators—ensconced deep within the heart of the administrative center of the boat—this seemed unlikely.

It was possible that Mr. Vak was himself a mutineer, or had been coerced and captured by the mutineers in much the same fashion as had I, but this seemed equally unlikely for the same reasons, and Mr. Vak had—by all accounts—an immaculate record of service. If this were the case however, and The Captain—or whatever other loyalist in charge had managed to get a message out—why would he take the trouble of having a Navigator dispatched when he might have sent a distress call to the Attaché? Perhaps he had done so under duress, I considered, which led me to the next possibility.

That I had been dispatched to *The Mary-Ellen* under false pretenses by a document forged—or forced—by the Master-at-Arms.

This disturbing possibility seemed the more likely. If the mutineers were successful, they would naturally need a highly trained Navigator working for them if they were to have any hope of finding a safe, remote harbor to evade The Company long enough to escape and melt back into the world to live out their days spending their ill-gotten gains, assuming

selling stolen Company freight at a profit was their ultimate motive. Like most mutineers, even those who might have initially imagined themselves freedom fighters, there was always an eventual reckoning with the value of what they found they controlled.

It was a solid theory if not for the fact that I had arrived aboard *The Mary-Ellen* to find a ship that, while clearly disorganized, was by no means under the full control of a Master-at-Arms. If Holder and his men had been a part of such a mutiny, I would have been ushered away to fulfill my purpose to the best of my ability—probably to some version of a makeshift bridge unless they had managed to take Vak's by coercion. Such a theory could also not account for Jodl, whose baffled reaction to my letter could hardly be explained away by mere senility. He was old, but the more I considered the figure of Jodl, the less I could dismiss him as a fool.

The Fool, perhaps.

Jodl...

And there was the matter of the horrible hand—it must have been his.

...

The more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that Jodl must have known, must have been the orchestrator of my summoning. He had played dumb and stashed me away

where no would be looking and no one should have found me. But, he hadn't counted on Loog...

Then again, perhaps he had. Perhaps he had counted on my discretion, my discipline, my sacred duty *not* to tell Loog what it was I had come for. Perhaps he had known that Loog would be prowling the depths as he always did and that Loog— single-minded as was— would not ask too many questions; that I—single-minded as I was—would not hesitate to tell him lies. Loog was in thrall to the Master-at-Arms, but all he really cared about were the rats. Perhaps the Master-at-Arms had known this, too. Perhaps he had tolerated Loog— even taken Loog under his wing and ingratiated himself to Loog by encouraging him to poison everything in sight for a false safety that was really the cause of mutiny, killing through guile what arms alone could never have achieved...

Perhaps this is what had happened to Mr. Vak, and The Captain, and Remnick and Lloyd, men I had never met and yet I felt I knew.

Perhaps, if I had been bolder and had ventured through the door to the Steward's Offices, I might have discovered a *ship of the dead*.

Perhaps if I had not lost my letter of dispatch and had even tried the door, finding it open, I might have proceeded past the cackling visages of a true *skeleton crew* to a catafalque known as the Navigator's bridge. Seeing the dead husk of the erstwhile Vak, I might then have realized that something was amiss and activated the blast doors, sealing myself safely

within the *heart* of the boat with a limitless supply of tinned fish, clean water, coffee, closed-circuit plumbing, and a sophisticated map-room with adjoining access to the all-important helm.

Perhaps he had had faith in me.

Perhaps it had cost him...

As I sipped the coffee, the contours of my time aboard *The Mary-Ellen* seemed to snap into a sharper focus.

I no longer felt hazy and vague.

I no longer felt fear.

Instead, I felt only determination as the pieces of the puzzle seemed to fall into place around me.

Jodl had been loyal.

Jodl had got the message out.

Jodl had brought *me* to *The Mary-Ellen* and *I* would bring *The Mary-Ellen* back into the fold.

If there were survivors on the bridge, I needed some way to contact them—to alert them to my presence and my loyalty. And if not through them, I needed some other way in.

If I revealed myself a Navigator to the Master when he came to have his portrait painted, there was perhaps a chance... If it was open, I needed only to take the helm and I might bring the boat around to a favorable location, unbeknownst to the mutineers. I would need to *feign ignorance*.

To *pretend collaboration*.

As I was considering my plan, I began to take note of a strange sound.

Like all large ships, *The Mary-Ellen* was prone to a certain amount of structural noise, to say nothing of the ever-present hum of the engines, ventilation ducts and water pumps—creaking, groaning, occasionally even crackling and banging, sometimes as loud as a crowbar on a lead pipe. It was all entirely normal, especially for older ships, and such a fact of the life of a mariner that I had long since become so accustomed to these sounds that I was able to ignore them completely, and indeed barely took note of them at all, sleeping peacefully through even the loudest and harshest.

This sound was different.

For one thing, it was rather quiet.

Quiet and regular.

A far cry from the loud, staccato cadences of structural noise, reassuring in their randomness, but pitched above the fluid, ambient aura of the pumps and engines—which were less sound than texture—nearly a part of the structure of the ship itself.

This was a sound I couldn't place, both in terms of where it was coming from and what was causing it.

*Bump-bump bump-bump* it went, followed by a pause, then *bump-bump bump-bump* again.

It went on like that.

It sounded like a sort of thud, but there was a soft edge to it as well, though the lack of an edge is perhaps a better way to describe it.

Almost like scrabbling, or scuttling—the sort of sound a sea-creature might make.

It was not inconceivable that one might have found its way aboard *The Mary-Ellen*, though hard to fathom how one might have made it this far below deck.

Maybe if it had been hauled aboard by Holder's crew and managed to slip away and find itself in the plumbing system it could have happened.

Or it might have simply been sucked into one of the many intake ducts that performed who knows what myriad purposes. It might have found itself swirling around all throughout the ship surviving on whatever unsavory morsels it happened to encounter.

I thought of the fish grease and bone fragments dripping down from the tins into my sink.

Such a diet might suit certain bottom feeders, so maybe it was not so different from home.

Perhaps the creature didn't even realize it wasn't where it ought to be.

There might be pleasant estuaries—isolated little backwater pockets, far from the reach of man within *The Mary-Allen's* plumbing system where things like that could make a life. It was a pleasant thought in a way—a diverting one—but I did not put much faith in it.

Then I wondered if it might be rats.

I was not squeamish around rats or rodents in the least, despite their evil reputation.

I even admired them, to a certain degree, as consummate innovators and survivors in the face of what must have been enormous odds—the whole weight of human disdain and fear mustered against them across centuries; a mad arsenal of vicious weaponry and savage science applied more or less constantly since the advent of urban life, with increasing sophistication and mania. As a man, there was something inherent in my desire to gird myself against the presence of these creatures, but at the same time I bore them no personal ill-will, and the need to fight their wiles and appetites while at sea did not preclude a certain fondness, if not also a kind of melancholy—a wish that it were otherwise between our species.

I had been sitting down, and now I stood up and moved around to the front of the cot.

The noise seemed to be growing louder in fact, and was now consistent, though still quite muted.

The soft, almost brush-like bumping sounds seemed to be coming from all over.

Ships are strange things, acoustically speaking, and it would not have been the first time I had felt sure I had pinpointed the origin of one sound or another only to have realized later that I had been deceived by the queer tricks the mechanics of vessels like these can play with sound and the way individuals perceive it.

I stood still and listened, only for the sound recede.

I began to drag myself across the floor for a refill of my coffee when the sound resumed.

It was certainly louder.

It almost sounded, I thought, like very subtle knocking at my door.

I sidled up and listened closely, but there was nothing. It seemed that whenever I moved or changed my position, the sound would stop for a time and only after I had been comparatively silent and motionless for an extended period would it resume.

After standing stock still with my cup in hand for what felt like a minute, sure enough, the noise started up.

It was a kind of knocking.

“Hello?” I called out.

There was no reply, but the knocking ceased.

“Is that you, Loog?” I asked.

No reply.

I waited, and of course eventually I heard the sound again. Louder this time, definitely.

“Now then, I hear that you’re out there and since you’re continuing to knock or scrape or whatever it is you’re doing even after I already inquired as to your business and identity, I can only assume that you wish to be heard and addressed by me in turn. All that’s to say that here I am, at your service, should you wish to declare yourself.”

The knocking had stopped, and I listened intently.

“I’m a busy man,” I warned. “I may be a prisoner, but I have rights. If you don’t answer, then I’ll stop listening. I have better things to do than stand at my door all day and I would hope that you do as well.”

A few more tense moments passed, and I was prepared to hail the mysterious person again and exhort him to answer me, when at last a reply came.

“Hello?” I called out, because though there had definitely been a reply I had been unable to make out the words.

Like the knocking, there was something odd about the voice, as though it were coming from a great distance away, or traveling through water, or extremely thick steel—some medium other than air and the foil plate that constituted my door.

The reply came again, but it was similarly impossible to make out.

“Speak up!” I encouraged.

There was another lengthy pause—I pressed my ear to the door in order to hear the fellow better, but it seemed he had given up trying to communicate this way because the next thing I heard was the odd knocking sound again, much amplified now that it reverberated against my head.

“If this is some sort of torture technique then I’m prepared to hand it to you for creativity, but I must say it’s not particularly effective. It’ll take more than strange sounds to break a Draughtsman, and besides,” I said, lowering my voice to what I hoped was a charming cajole, “I may be able to help your Master with more than just a portrait.”

I was not, in all actuality, a particularly accomplished portrait painter, but I didn't doubt that I could whip up something to satisfy the person I imagined the Master-at-Arms to be.

An utterly unexpected reply came in the sudden reappearance of my letter of dispatch, which floated in through the narrow gap between the floor and the bottom of my door on a dark and foul-smelling tide of effluence.

It was as though a very large animal had appeared outside my door and flooded the passage with vomited bile.

The letter of dispatch was chewed to ribbons and covered in muck, but I recognized it immediately all the same, such had been its significance for me.

Then things began to happen very quickly.

Loog had described the effective outcome of rats "overrunning" a room, but he had been short on detail when it came to the actual process and experience. This might have been a mercy on his part, or he may not have possessed direct knowledge—I do not know.

However, it is my personal opinion that Loog had probably only ever seen the results—or imagined them, or smelled them—from behind the searing heat of a welder's torch as it gnawed and knit the edge of a steel plate to a wounded passage or a ragged door.

They came from all directions and yet queerly seemed to act as one—a maddened, ill, and damaged thing of terrifying strength and malice.

The room grew rapidly smaller in a crush of twined bodies that pressed in from every opening, and opened more as seams appeared in the ceilings, floors, and walls—splitting and widening and admitting an ever more perplexing confusion of flailing, sheet-like limbs.

Rats; dead, and alive, woven together in bloody, bilious mats of disturbing length and uncanny thickness.

The sound of this leviathan was like nothing I am prepared to describe.

I felt soon—as my room gave way to a forest of rats—like a louse who had found himself on the back of a drowning, rabid dog. As the rats filled every available space, so too did liquid—blood; the sea; fluids I daren't attempt to categorize; or some mixture of all of these, and more besides.

In seconds it was over my head.

If I had been possessed of a mind in those moments, I would have prayed for death, and perhaps I did, I do not know. Perhaps my prayers were granted.

But suddenly I saw as well, a weird, white face an arm's length from me through the vile slur like some vision of a distant moon and recognized it as the one I had seen in the dream in my room so long before.

I reached for it, I think, or else it grabbed my hand, but somehow it had me and before I knew what had happened it was swimming ahead and dragging me behind its strange, slim, pale form.

Up and away, a long time through grasping claws and whipping tails and biting teeth with the broken chain still affixed to the iron around my ankle trailing behind me like a tail of my own until somehow we were out—out of *The Mary-Ellen* entirely.

I was clinging to a steel plate, somewhere in the eastern sea. My companion—if indeed it had not been a figment of my imagination—was gone.

I squinted through the murk to see if I could still make out the shape of *The Mary-Ellen*.

Assuming she would survive the rupture that had allowed my escape, and if there was a break in the clouds, I imagined I could paddle close enough to use the light of the moon reflecting on the plated door to signal Holder to haul me in again so I could assume my role as Navigator once and for all.

