

# The Green Woman

A novel

by

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## Prologue

### Off the Cagliari Bay, 1798.

*A blazing flash of lightning cut across the sky, immediately followed by a rumbling thunder and another two flashes of lightning that lit up the night for a few seconds. The thunder bellowed like cannon shot while the rain rattled down on the deck of the little schooner brig like pellets of lead shot.*

*For more than half an hour, the **Lady Anne** was moaning and rolling from one side to the other and back again. Her rigging and masts were creaking and groaning from the hard gusts of the storm that reached out like wet-cold giants' hands for anything they could find up on deck. No storm staysail or reefing had been able to withstand this ghastly tempest. The mainmast's sails were already torn and hanging from the yards like ghostly white rags. The ship would not be able to defy this cruel storm for much longer.*

*John Mackenzie pulled his woollen cloak tighter around his shoulders and strengthened his grip on the staircases' handle. Oh, that god-damned dogwatch! He was dead tired. But sleep was not an option: he was a British sailor and had to do his duty; even though there was nothing much more to be done for the poor ship.*

*Though they had reefed the sails in time, they had not been able to save anything more than the mizzen mast's topsails. Torrents of rain water ran into the lower decks and swashed around the cannons. The reinforced hatches over the hold could just withstand the hailstorm that shot down on John, the two officers of the watch and Talbot, the second officer at the steering wheel, like volleys of rifle bullets.*

*The boatswain Al Dawson was standing under the quarterdeck's overhanging edge and holding on with his right hand to the nine-step*

*ladder that led up to the steering wheel. His other hand was clinging to the figurehead's green painted arm that John had given him the day before. In a few days, this broken-off piece of oak wood would become a new boatswain's stick.*

*The rest of the detailed figurehead of a woman in a long green dress was still defying wind and weather at the merchant ship's bow, just like for the nearly seven years past.*

*It had been painful to John to give away the well-crafted arm, even for an extra-ration of rum. But Dawson had not let up; he was giving credit to the rumours.*

*John cast a worried look across the forecastle that buckled up with every foaming wave and sank down into the next trough of the sea. He prayed that the new right arm with the rose which he had painted blood-red only a few weeks ago in Jaffa harbour, would stay on. Not only the ship's fate and the fortune of her entire eighty-headed crew were at stake, if the beautiful woman went to pieces.*

*John's heart was pounding like mad when he thought that only he knew just how important the mysterious lucky charm was to him and the successful outcome of his plan.*

*A loud cracking-sound, followed by a tearing-sound and the ruptured bursting of wood attracted John's attention. Then something clattered amidships onto the deck. John saw some round object vanish through a hole in the planks: a cannonball.*

*All of a sudden the officers of the watch were in a flurry of activity. They gestured and flailed about, while Al Dawson sprang up from under the protecting edge of the quarterdeck, stormed up the nine steps to Talbot's side, bellowed "all hands on deck!" and started yanking like mad at the ship's bell. The high, rattling chimes cut through the howling of the wind and were only for short moments overpowered by thunder.*

*Immediately, John could hear through the stairway the pitter-patter of many feet below deck. Only seconds later, the first head with a seaman's plait appeared in the passageway that led to the crew's accommodation.*

*"All hands to Quarters!" bellowed Dawson against the howling of the storm.*

*Two men each positioned themselves with the twenty-four eighteen-pounders and pushed open the gun ports. Then they gazed expectantly at the two officers of the watch who both were staring intently to starboard into the storm night.*

*John fixed his gaze out into the darkness, his heart pounding nearly as hard as at the time of their departure from Jaffa, when he was sure to be caught any moment by the henchmen; those grim men with scimitars who had already been chasing James and his companions.*

*One of the officers yelled something that John could not quite catch; but he could well imagine who had spotted them here, southeast off Sardinia, and opened fire: the fleet of the king-slayers had discovered them.*

*John saw how Talbot at the steering wheel braced himself against the gusts of the storm and tried at the same time to hold the rolling ship as stable as possible.*

*The bursting of yet another foremast's yard hurled hand-sized splinters onto the deck. With a sharp buzzing-noise, a nearly head-sized wooden object came down, a tackle with ripped off ropes that John could only evade by having the presence of mind to jump aside.*

*Just a split-second later, the steps of the stairway crashed in – exactly where he had been standing a moment before.*

*"Report, Mister Dawson!" rang Captain Porter's sharp voice in John's ears. The little man had torn open the door to his cabin below the poop deck and was running with three wide steps to the starboard-side stairs leading up to the rear deck.*

*Dawson gestured and rapidly filled the captain in. His cry "Fire at will!" nearly drowned in yet another crashing-sound that made the ship's starboard side explode – exactly where the steps led up to the rear deck. The captain had vanished, buried under the wreckage.*

*Fighting against the storm, Dawson worked his way over to Talbot in order to help him fixing the steering wheel. But he never made it. An enormous wave catapulted the ship's hull high onto the portside.*

*Six bronze cannons tore themselves free of their restraining ropes and broke through the splintering ship's side, taking their heavy oaken mounts with them. John saw how eight seamen were involuntarily carried off into the deep as well.*

*A short flash of light a little way off, hardly to be seen in the stormy night, was followed by yet another ear-deafening crash.*

*With a beastly groaning, the **Lady Anne** buckled up again and lay hard to her starboard-side. Foaming sea spray clashed on the deck like a huge flood wave and swept John off the slippery planks. At the last moment, he clung onto the stairway's handrail and pulled himself up again.*

*He had to keep a sober mind. Giving up was not an option. His luck and fortune lay in this ship, and he would not give her up. To forfeit everything now, he had already taken too many risks.*

*Like running wild coach horses the memories sped through his head: He had never had regrets about his decision to go to sea; even though he would have liked to leave his hometown Huntingdon in different circumstances. At Lloyd & Sons he had learned everything he needed as a carpenter's fellow.*

*But a future in the provinces he would never have established, even if he had not aroused the hate of Melissa's brothers. Maybe they had calmed down by now; after all, it was more than three years since he had turned his back on his county.*

*Well, what worried him much more right now was the promise he had made to Pamela's brother. James Morton had vowed to give him Pamela for a wife, if he were to bring that small pouch of sailcloth to England without detection. But what of it, when they were now sunk here, somewhere between Sicily and Sardinia, by the damned Frogs? John heard Talbot cry out. A moment later the poop deck broke open. The second officer clung to the wood like a rat and, still holding the steering wheel, went overboard.*

*John would never see how the nineteen-year-old disappeared. A huge tremor made him lose his balance and flushed him with the next wave through a gaping hole out of the dying ship's hull.*

*His last thought was with the mysterious woman who was tied to his luck and fortune. He had not been able to save her sufficiently. Soon enough, they both would find their eternal rest in Davy Jones' Locker. One last flash of cannon fire cut through the dark stormy night; then John passed out.*

## Part 1: The Model Ship

### The Bone Ship

**Hamburg, November 2009.**

“Now you’re speechless, right?”

With a chuckle, Wilfred Schnitzler gazes at his colleague and good friend Bettina Maier. The 52-year-old woman absentmindedly ruffles through her greying short hair; her blue eyes are flashing with excitement and anticipation. Her slightly trembling fingers reach into the big, at the bottom strengthened mover’s box and pulls from it a smaller cardboard box, fifty times forty times sixty centimetres.

Smiling silently, she places the box in between the many small cases containing model ships and mountains of archive pictures that Willy has taken of every single miniature warship during the last months.

Now his superior pushes the pictures into an untidy heap of photos, slowly lifts the cardboard boxes lid and feels with excitedly trembling fingers through the wood wool. Then she carefully lifts the object buried in there to the bright light of the halogen lamps.

“I don’t believe it!”

Almost adoringly, Betty turns the ebony-coloured mount around. Gingerly, she picks wood wool from the tackling. Bleak as a skeleton, the deck of a small model ship shimmers in front of her eyes. The attention to detail of the superstructures and especially the poop deck let her caress every inch with fascinated gleaming eyes. Then she sighs, happy and content.

“Just you wait, what the old gentleman says when he finds out what we got with this donation apart from the pictures”, she grins mildly.

“Yet in his vast collection, this pretty piece would just drown, right?”

Here with us, it'll get a very prominent place. That is, once we've identified, catalogued and cleaned it."

Willy nods and allows himself a mild grin as well. He really looks forward to spending the next days with this little ship. Carefully, Betty places the model in his hands so that he can look at it more closely in the bright halogen light. The dark mount is a little bit sticky, just like somebody had a sweet bun and forgot to clean his fingers.

The ship's hull with the tiny black nails is a bit greasy as well so that some pieces of wood wool and something like old dirt cover the bone-white.

Carefully, Willy rubs with his thumb on the ornamental blind at the rear and uncovers some elegantly curved letters in faded dark ink:

*Persephone*

Awestruck and cautiously, he turns the little ship in the lamplight to look at it from all angles: a uniquely nice specimen, even nicer once it will be cleaned and catalogued.

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After the third ringtone, the phone is picked up. A male voice, very much out of breath, answers in English: "Sawyer here. Excuse me, just a second."

Willy chuckles and pictures his son-in-law, Peter, carefully balancing some curtain-rod or sideboard around the new apartment that he is furnishing for Miri.

Willy has already received some pictures via e-mail that show a handsome four-room-apartment in one of London's most sought-after neighbourhoods – including tiled floors, high ceilings and full height windows looking over Blackfriars Bridge, Victoria Embankment and the Temple district.

On the tube, London's famous underground transport system, it is only about twenty minutes from *Blackfriars Bridge* via *Leicester Square* and *Tottenham Court Road* to the British Museum.

Twice a week, Miri works there in the museum's archive and, on behalf of the National Maritime Museum, supervises the digitalisation of old English sea charts and crew lists of the Royal Navy.

On the other three days, she travels on for two more stops to the University of Westminster where she has been working on a part-time position in the history department for little less than one and a half years now. With her PhD in English History, it is not easy to get a well-paid job, not even in England. She relies on her additional expert lectures about naval history she gives for paying audiences from time to time

It is a relief to Willy that his daughter has resolutely taken the chance of opening doors with volunteer work in the British Museum and the National Gallery after graduating from King's College in Cambridge. Of course, her pay-check has been rather slim at first, but it has been sufficient enough – mainly thanks to Peter who is hardworking himself and taking care of Miri very well. And thanks to some recent, but small inheritance has been able to pay down on the new apartment. Ever since they moved to it six weeks ago, Peter only has to take the tube for two instead of eight stops on the Circle or District Line; his agency *AdvEx maritime* for sportive adventure trips is located at the Embankment.

Willy still cannot grasp that one can make money out of it to plan exclusive sailing and diving trips for other people; but the business flourishes thanks to Peter's best friend and former fellow student Raymond Philips ever since they started.

The two young entrepreneurs have even been able to close their first business year with black numbers; and this year has started out very promising as well.

“Pardon me and thanks for your patience”, Willy hears his son-in-law’s voice, still quite out of breath, on the line.

“Here is Willy”, answers Willy in English. “How is the moving going?”

“Ah, Willy”, cries Peter laughingly and switches to his accent-heavy small-talk German: “Moving is good. Very good. Very far completed. You want speak with Miri, yes?”

Willy nods to the phone and confirms.

Peter explains a bit laboriously and in two languages that his wife is at an antique’s shop in Hampstead, accompanied by her colleague Rachel from the British Museum, to inspect a commode. Allegedly, this elegant empire-styled piece of furniture is from 1812 – and thereby perfect for the new living room; but when Peter found it the day before he noticed some details that may prove it to be fake.

“Before we buy, we check. Rachel check”, Peter explains in German.

Willy agrees to this wise move, for Rachel Monaghan has a PhD in Art History and works in the British Museum’s laboratory where she checks art objects for their age, materials and so on. Furthermore, she is an Europe-wide acknowledged expert on English silverware and a hobby-specialist on furniture from the Napoleonic era.

“Shall Miri call to you? When she is back?”

Willy confirms and then calms his son-in-law who gingerly enquires after Gaby.

“The result”, Willy slowly explains in German, “we will get within the next days. But the doctor said it would not be too serious. She is feeling better already. Her back-pain is gone. Her stomach is still a bit touchy, but that’ll work out fine. You may tell Miri that, so she doesn’t worry anymore.”

Peter promises that, says goodbye and hangs up.

Only when he hears the tone on the line, Willy realises he did not tell his son-in-law why he wanted to speak with Miri. Well, he will just

surprise her and test her knowledge; after all, she wrote her doctoral thesis on the Royal Navy from the Lord Nelson era.

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“*Persephone*? Are you sure?”

Miri sounds a bit irritated.

Willy is nearly able to see how she is now twitching her pointy nose and combs one of her red-blond strands behind her ear. Her green eyes are probably fixated not on her netbook’s screen, but on the ceiling-high shelves in her study, the small room next to the bedroom that has only one narrow window to the street below.

In there she has many large pictured books on naval uniforms, ship types and maritime paintings next to vast numbers of heavy books on military history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as several biographies on Nelson, Napoleon and the French admiral Villeneuve.

For the latter, Willy had to search for many months before he and Gaby could send that eight-hundred pages strong book to London – back then still Notting Hill – as an Easter present for Miri.

“Yes, I’m quite sure. It says *Persephone*. You can’t see that well on the picture, I’m afraid.”

“What, there at the stern? Oh, that’s supposed to be the name. I thought it was just ornamental...”

Willy can hear how Miri turns some pages of a book.

“Greek mythology..., yes, that would fit, but... *Agamemnon, Theseus, Minotaur, Polyphemus, Ajax, Achille, Medusa*... Huh... maybe here...”

Anxiously, Willy holds his breath and waits. For a few minutes he can only hear the turning of pages, then the clicking of a keyboard with strong key-strokes on Space and Enter. Finally, Miri clears her throat.

“Well, sorry to disappoint you, Dad.”

All of a sudden, Miri's voice sounds weary and not as excited as at the beginning of their phone call. "All through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there has been no ship in the British or French navy under that name; neither military nor merchant or private vessels. Not even with the Americans. Sorry."

"We'll have an expert take a look at it next week", Willy returns. He is very disappointed, too.

It could have been so wonderful. And now, it is only a fictional replica or, even worse, a very well-crafted fake.

"Okay, please tell me what you find out", Miri asks.

She is probably absentmindedly chewing on one of her hair locks. Willy has to chuckle. She has already done that as a kid whenever she was thinking very hard. He promises to call her immediately.

"Persephone...", Miri mumbles and is keying again. "Huh, huh, huh... Oh, here. I'll send it over to you."

A few moments later, a little letter symbol blinks on Willy's monitor. A woman's voice tells him that he's got mail. Miri has sent a short, uncommented list of information:

***Persephone*** (Greek Περσεφόνη) refers to:

- a fertility goddess and goddess of the underworld in the Greek mythology, see [Persephone \(mythology\)](#)
- the wife of Iasios and daughter of Minyas, see [Persephone \(daughter of Minyas\)](#)
- the Roman tradition, see [Proserpina](#)
- a main-belt asteroid, see [\(399\) Persephone](#)
- a character in the drama by [Paul Gurk](#), see [Persephone \(Gurk\)](#)
- [Perséphone](#), melodrama by [Igor Strawinsky](#) in 3 scenes by André Gide, for Speaker, Tenor, 4-part choir and orchestra (1934)

While Willy is still reading, he receives a second e-mail. This time, Miri has sent two links: [Persephone \(mythology\)](#) and a website that lists all British naval vessels between 1587 and 1945.

“I’ll have a talk with Gary next week, just to be sure”, Miri continues. “I have to go to Greenwich anyway because of the lecture. Maybe he has yet another idea. Perhaps there was a ship by the name of Persephone that was built, but never launched; somewhat like that German aircraft carrier in World War Two.”

“You’re talking about the *Graf Zeppelin*”, Willy nods and clicks on the corresponding digital picture in his archive folder “DigiCam”. In the collection he catalogued before this new donation, there has also been a model of that carrier – produced by *Hansa* as *Wiking* did not carry it.

“Say, Dad...”, interrupts Miri’s voice his recollection of those tiny zinc-die cast ships. The tone of her voice immediately tells him that she is pondering and serious. Probably, she unwittingly scratches herself with her right ring finger under her left ear just like she always does when she is pondering hard; or wants to address a difficult topic.

He assumes to know what she will ask next. He is not sure whether he wants to answer her, before he knows what the outcome is. It just may not be as bad as he fears.

“...did Mom already get her results from the doctors?”

Willy swallows twice and takes a deep breath before answering. The uncertainty depresses Gaby and scares her. He himself feels some unsteadiness, too, that can only be calmed by the result. As long as Gaby’s condition does not get worse again, he has to wait, calm and composed.

The colonoscopy last week did raise much more startling suspicions than an uncomfortable inflammation of the pancreas or appendix; a scaring suspicion that only a CAT and an MRI next week will be able to remove. So far, they have not yet dared to imagine what may be in store for Gaby.

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## The News

### Hamburg, December 2009.

Cautiously, Willy lifts the little model ship out of the box. Betty steps back to give him unhindered way. Carefully placing the ship's hull into the fitting mount made of shining ebony, Willy heaves a sigh.

Then he grabs the bulky magnifying glass, pulls the halogen lamp closer over the model and has a long close look at the *Persephone* from bow to stern.

The little figurehead is a beautiful slim girl wearing a long dress. Her right arm is bent, her hand holding a blossom. Next to her left foot, there is a small roundish object that Willy cannot quite make out.

Below the bow, the ship's hull slopes down to the sturdy keel in harmoniously crafted, about forefinger-wide planks. Tiny nails hold everything together, neatly arranged row after row. The fixed parts of the ship – masts, yards and the rest of the standing rigging – are evenly polished and very accurately and smoothly crafted.

Petite movable parts of the rigging – chain plates, euphroes and blocks – are carved true to scale and with high accuracy and positioned at the appointed places. Even the lids of the gun ports for the twenty-four guns are detailed and have movable hinges.

“Here, better take this for an even closer look”, interrupts Betty his indulging in the awesome craftsmanship.

“Thank you”, Willy answer, takes the silver torchlight and directs its LED-beam to the forecastle.

There is handful of miniature barrels, lashed up next to a square cargo hatch with delicate lines the size of hair pins. Amidships, there is a

broad staircase leading down to the lower deck where – Willy nearly twists his neck when he peers in – there are truly twenty-four tiny brass cannons, neatly lashed up on their mounts of painted bone in two rows behind the ports.

Between the stairs and the superstructures at the stern, there is another cargo hatch with four little metal rings; on real-sized ships, has ropes attached to it so that the hatch's latticed lid can be used to lift heavy cargo.

"Absolutely fantastic", mumbles Willy. Fascinated, he looks at the four windows and the two doors that mark the stern cabin's entrance below the overhanging quarterdeck. "There is even an indication of curtains", he reports.

"Means that someone who knew the ship that served as a model very well crafted this little beauty", Betty answers from experience.

"And that he had a really long for crafting it."

"You told me once that these models were made by prisoners-of-war", Willy remembers a conversation that Betty and he have conducted at the beginning of his voluntary work.

Back then, she has shown him another, not even half as well-crafted model that has belonged to the museum for decades and is actually not very presentable.

For didactic reasons, however, and in spite of it being crafted very roughly and without any details, it is shown next to the well-detailed models of *HMS Mars* and *HMS Agincourt* in a vitrine of the figure-head collection.

"Most of them were, yes", Betty confirms and nods. "Some have even been commissioned by rich merchants and other better-to-do people. Have a look at the stern; usually they have carved in their initials there or at least a hint as to who commissioned it."

"There is only the ship's name", Willy answers and inspects the stern with the torchlight.

There is nothing to be seen on the ship's side, neither at the rear nor at the sides. Even on the poop deck, there is nothing to be seen aside the filigree steering wheel, the mizzen mast, the casing of the ship's compass and two stern lanterns.

"No such luck", he states with a shaking of his head.

Betty sighs and nods. Shrugging, she voices what Willy is dreading as well: "This is going to be hard work."

"That's why you have me here", he returns. "I will somehow manage to find out what kind of ship this is, name and everything. Then we can catalogue it properly."

With that, he stoops over the ship again and, through the magnifying glass, admires the detailed work. The neatly ordered tiny nails and the details of the filigree objects on deck strengthen the impression that there has been a real ship taken as a model.

"Hey...", Willy suddenly mumbles and casts the bright light again over a certain part. "There is something, wait a second."

Betty, who has been walking over to her desk, returns and mumbles a question that Willy answers with: "there is something that's not just abrasion, wait, I nearly have it..."

There are two narrow staircases leading up to the poop deck, one on every side of the ship, both with nine steps. Starboards on the upper step, Willy can see something in the LED-light that looks like an inconsistency of four slim marks. Yet they are too constant for being there just by chance. They form a hardly distinguishable, slim letter <sup>E</sup>. Frowning, Willy takes another look at the upper step on the portside. There it is three slim marks, forming an <sup>N</sup>.

"Here, come and have a look", he whispers excitedly and hands Betty the magnifying glass. While Willy adjusts the LED-light so that the marks cast slim shadows, Betty's eyes widen with surprise, then with excitement.

“I have never seen anything like this before”, she mumbles with ill-concealed glee. Then she laughingly shakes her head. “What an odd and most peculiar ship this is.”

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“Dad!” Miri’s voice sounds strained and full of tears. “Should I come home? I can take vacation from the fifteenth onwards.”

Willy silently shakes his head and stares at the bookshelf next to the couch. There is a framed picture, a holiday snapshot under the bright Tuscany sun, taken three years ago; a memory of the trip that Willy gave his Gaby for their silver wedding anniversary.

The memory almost hurts. Ten beautiful days with fine weather, many sights and extraordinary food. And Gaby is all smiles. Her most beautiful beaming face, tanned and with fine laughter lines around her blue-grey eyes under her greying chin-length hair.

It has been a long time since she gleamed in that way, or has even laughed or smiled. Not even now, when the whole city is gleaming in pre-Christmas splendour and decorative lights. In Gaby, the darkness is back, and Willy cannot do anything about it.

For more than a year now, he has had to helplessly watch how she became more and more apathetic. Headaches are her constant companions, most certainly strengthened by the long, strenuous hours in the chambers of a Hamburg barrister where she is working as a secretary.

“No, you don’t need to arrive early”, Willy calms his daughter. “It’ll be just fine, if you two arrive on the twenty-third as planned. I’ll pick you up at the airport. Really, don’t worry yourself, my precious. She is doing better.”

Not much better, but nevertheless: the depressive episode is over, the nauseating headaches have decreased. She even finds pleasure again in baking.

There are no cakes and Christmas biscuits like those pieces of heaven that Gaby bakes. But she is yet not quite back on her feet. Quite the opposite: the depression will return, most certainly now.

Willy sighs when recalling the six months previously. Sometimes it has been so bad that he was really scared for her. The absent stare, the somnambulistic movements and the detached performance of daily tasks have increased, nearly to self-abandonment.

In this time of inner emptiness, Gaby was only saved by being backed up by her family; and, when she was doing a little better, by a psychological short intervention that taught her how to handle stress and problems better.

Not only her job has been working better after that; even during phone calls with Miri there has been a noticeably new and more hopeful mood.

But then again there were those odd pains in the stomach and the back, accompanied by weight-loss. It started over a month ago. At first, they thought it was just a stomach upset or the beginning of a gastrointestinal virus – after all, Willy has had some days of bad sleep as well and nearly no appetite. But that might have been caused by some accidental tomatoes he is allergic to.

When it could be eliminated that it was just a passing thing, she again began worrying. They have tried to keep Miri out of it; it is enough already that he – Willy – is worrying, too, Gaby has said.

But the mere suspicion that it is only an inflammation of the stomach mucosa or the pancreas has unfortunately not been confirmed by the examinations.

And so they have heavy-heartedly decided to fill their daughter in, to forewarn her. Miri has reacted in an exemplary manner, ever since

the first shock and bursting into tears have found solace in Peter's strong arms.

Now Gaby's sadness is back, the glumness, the apathy: a new episode. Gaby hardly has the strength for what lies in store for her after the operation, has hardly any hope left. And even Willy is very close to letting desperation enter his mood. It would be so easy: just letting the dark curtain fall, all silence, retreat.

"Well, now it's us who have some news for you", Willy hears his daughter's like from a far off distance, "Dad? You're still there?"

"Yes", Willy nods into the phone, slightly irritated and pulled from his glum thoughts.

"Dad, I'm going to have a baby."

For a moment, Willy closes his eyes. When he opens them again, his gaze falls upon another picture standing on the bookshelf. It is the framed image of a little girl, sitting gleefully cheering on the back of a grey pony and, surrounded by the forest *Forst Klövensteen*, waving into the camera. Only four years, that's how old Miri has been when her infant brother Fynn suddenly died in his sleep just eight months after he was born. That has been the first time for Gaby to fall into a bottomless hole.

"Dad, you're going to become grandparents", Miri adds, as Willy is not answering. "Are you still there?"

"Uh, yes, of course", Willy hurries to reply as soon as he has re-found his voice. "How wonderful, I'm very happy, more than I can say now. Congratulations! I will tell your mother immediately. Or do you want to do so yourself?"

"If she is awake, please hand me over to her."

"She is sleeping for about thirty minutes now."

"Then let her rest."

Willy nods into the phone again and decides to change the subject. Even if there is nothing much to tell, one information he has not yet passed on to his daughter.

“By the way, I have some more pictures of the ship”, he says, “I’ll send them over to you later. They show the superstructures and the stairs up to the poop deck in particular, very filigree and delicately crafted, very impressive.”

“Sounds interesting”, Miri agrees. She seems to be a bit surprised by this sudden change of topic, but does not let it show. There is more than enough time for talking about the grandchild-to-be.

“Maybe, some way or other, we will find out somehow which ship it actually is portraying”, Miri ponders. “The name *Persephone* could well be added at a later time. Did you inspect that piece where the name has been carved in?”

Willy stops short for a moment; then he tells Miri once more and in full detail how they have inspected the little ship. Just this once, Betty has taken him to the laboratory, where they have examined the model very thoroughly with all the necessary tests and analyses.

The model ship assuredly dates back to the times around the year 1800, probably rather 1805 than 1795. That is what the radiocarbon dating of most of the parts made from beef bones suggests.

The ship type is adapting an English schooner brig that not even has the usual mismatching proportions between hull length and mast height, although the masts are just a little bit too tall and the superstructures are a bit too big. Compared with nearly every other known bone ship model, this fact is truly unique.

According to the X-ray analysis, the rigging consists of real human hair, the shrouds are made of horse hair. The superstructures, the ornamental borders and the poop deck’s side plates, the stairs and the figurehead have been carved from ivory.

“There are two specific features”, Willy continues, “apart from the details and the distinct proportional measures, I mean.”

“Specific features?”

“Firstly, the craftsman has not signed his workpiece.”

“Did they usually do that?”

“If it is such a first rate model, there is almost no exception to that rule, yes. Usually they put something to the bottom of the hull, Betty said, or at the rear. Or they would sign with typical speciality of the main mast or the ornaments at the transom. But here: nothing.”

“And the second special feature?”

“On the upper steps of the staircases to the poop deck, we’ve found the tiny carved in letters <sup>E</sup> and <sup>N</sup>”, Willy reports. “It looks like they’ve once formed the end or respectively the beginning of a word.”

“Maybe the original name was taken down and the piece has been converted to steps”, Miri thinks aloud, mumbling slightly. Probably one of her red-blond strands is being chewed again.

“Might be”, Willy confirms, “the pieces might have been connected. The texture of the bone would fit.”

“E-N or N-E...”, she is obviously already leafing through her books, “huh, well, how about the *Entreprenante* or the *Neptune* – they both were in the Trafalgar action in 1805. Then there is the *Culloden* or the brig *Mutine* that were part of the battle in Aboukir Bay in 1798. Other than that there are some Danish ships from the battle of Copenhagen in 1801 that were taken by the English, for example the *Sværdfisken* or the *Holsten*. But, no, they won’t fit at all due to the ship’s type and the number of cannons. The *HMS Mutine* would be closest, but she had more cannons than just twenty-four. Huh..., among the French and Spanish fleet there is the *La Neptune* and then the *Neptuno*, both at Trafalgar, but, no, doesn’t fit either because of the cannons. Apart from that they had a different poop deck...”

Willy heaves a silent sigh and smiles to himself. His daughter is in her element: ship types and maritime success of the Royal Navy are her hobby; a hobby she has made her profession. As fascinating as this topic might be, he has never fully understood why – out of all things – she had to pick historical studies.

Today, he is glad, though, that his Miriam has – already as a ten-year-old – buried her pointy nose in her adventure novels by Stevenson, Forester and O’Brian.

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*The Tiger roars.*

*Angrily.*

*He has made a big haul.*

*But not the one he has been hoping for.*

*And he nearly has been detected by the guards.*

*That was a near miss.*

*Now, he has to hurry and return.*

*Return to his new territory.*

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## The Prisoners

### Norman Cross near Peterborough, November 1805.

“You may have the bones.”

John Mackenzie looked up. The other man had addressed him in French, but he had understood nevertheless. Everyone was talking very distinctly and slowly with him. And they were kind, even the guards treated him slightly more considerate than the others.

And that was not only because he belonged to those lucky inmates who were given special treatment due to their special skills. It was some kind of advantage, John thought, if people figured him for a deaf-mute.

While he took the four halved, already boiled up and scraped beef bones from the greasy hands of the other man and thankfully nodded his head, he brooded on. Just in time, he had come up with a solution how they could save the ship. Talbot had agreed.

But what else had the young man been able to do? His use he had forfeited at Le Havre where he had put them both on that list, under their new identities.

Just away, that had been the plan ever since the news had reached the French papers. That was one day before their arrival at the harbour town. Returning to England had not been an option under those circumstances; not even if his shipmate was the second son of one of the oldest noble families in the kingdom.

Far away they had wanted to travel, off to the West Indies and the Caribbean; just away from the bloody war. And far away from anybody who might have been on their secret's trail.

The journey on the impressive three-mast bark owned by a privateer had been just what they could have wished for. They had decided to take their first opportunity and flee; just as they had done back then when the Frogs had imprisoned them at Toulon. A peculiar memory, it made sad and hopeful at the same time.

Back then, everything had turned out surprisingly well. Who would have thought that the mere presence of that little Corsican general would throw a whole city into a state of hysteria and tempt prison guards to light-headed neglect of duty. At least, Talbot's trick with the stolen uniforms had worked out; up until they had reached the city gates. From there on, their luck had departed.

They had been very fortunate to be taken for Frenchmen, indeed. Talbot's idea with the deaf-muteness had been the best of all; and, of course, that they had not been appointed for war-duty but for the merchant navy.

As a carpenter, John was sought after ever so much, despite his deaf-muteness; the same was true for Talbot with his sharp eye and talent for navigation which they could well use for keeping their secret. And they had pondered, in secret, and hoped how they would return after the war's end, returning: there.

Countless nights they had been sitting together, on watch, and made plans under the sparkling North Star or the Southern Cross. Talbot's memory had been a great help to them, his observations aboard the *Le Guerrier* and, later on, his presence of mind on the *La Heloise*. Throw in the astonishing story of the man from Wroclaw and his sawing a log under water, and their plan was complete.

At first, John did not trust his ears, but finally he believed the sophisticated and far-travelled young man. Talbot knew what he was talking about; he himself had seen the marvel that would be the key to their plan's success.

The return from Martinique was what they had agreed upon to wait for, so that they would have enough pay put aside to buy their passage to Sardinia aboard a fast Levant sailer. If only they would have gotten that far...

Deep in thoughts, John began to work on the halved bones with the acid-soaked cloth. All the fat, all remainders of meat, sinew and cartilages and the marrow were already off; completely unrigged, so to speak. The next thing to do was the bleaching, until only the smooth, whitish bone was left.

During this stinking, most uncomfortable step of processing, it was advisable to let one's mind wander. And so, John's thoughts returned once more to that August day – the fourteenth *Thermidor*, as they said back then in France; the same day as the one on which the Royal Navy gave the Frogs a hard time and, thanks to that congenial rear-admiral aboard *HMS Vanguard*, won the great sea battle in a bay off Egypt.

Any such success was not to be had by *capitaine Jérôme Savigny* in even in home waters, when they returned to Brest and were intercepted and captured by a squadron of the Royal Navy's channel fleet, led by Captain Collingwood.

John could still see the menacing silhouettes of the frigates, coming ever closer; he could still hear the first shot of cannon, more than ten yards off the bow: a warning shot, followed by signals.

In spite of himself, John narrowed his eyes as if he really could see the Royal Navy's signal flags in the distance. But there, nearly five feet off, was only the cold, damp wall with its tiny cross-bared opening that let in snow during the winter and hardly any whiff of air in the summer.

Right next to it, Talbot lay on his rickety plank bed. He was occupied in twisting some of his hair to ropes for their little model ship. His long legs in the dirty saffron-yellow trousers were dangling from the

edge, relaxed and lazy like the big shimmering flies that crouched around the cold, damp wall.

The young man had a good grip on himself; you had to ungrudgingly give to him. With his nearly twenty-seven years of age, he was more hard-nosed than many of their fellow inmates of which the most had been in a sea engagement. Some had even lost some limbs in battle.

But Talbot was way ahead of them with his acuteness of mind and his ready wit. Nobody had detected yet that he was no Frenchman.

Luckily, he had actually spent some time in the colonies before joining the East India Trading Company. And he was so good in speaking the Frogs' language that even their own fellow countrymen aboard Collingwood's ship had thought him to be an officer in the French merchant navy.

"The knife", one of the other prisoners pulled John out of his memories and pointed at it, "may I borrow that for a moment?" He emphasised this with accompanying gesture so that John nodded to agree.

The man – one of the Jeans among the six men that shared the cell with him and Talbot – helped with cutting the planks for the deck and the sides of both models. The slender little man from the Quiberon region had proven his clever hands by delivering smooth pieces of the same size. He was superior to all the other carvers in this cell, and John therefore to himself called the Breton *Jean Plank*.

Without this man with his clever hands and eager enthusiasm for his work, he would not have built a single model ship. He would have simply gone on to carve figureheads for Jean de la Porte who, in his cell further along the corridor, currently crafted a second rate ship of the line with ninety-eight cannons, supported by his seven helpers.

John sighed heavily and tried not to take in the sulphuric odour that rose from the cloth with every movement and burned in his weakened lungs.

Appreciatively, he looked over to Jean Plank who had used the knife to split another boiled-up beef bone cleanly in the middle and was now busy emptying it of marrow. When working highly concentrated, it was his custom to run the tip of his tongue along his chapped lips. Very content, John noticed that his most skilful co-worker was putting his mind into it and was, even with this tedious and time-consuming task, paying attention to deliver the best quality possible. He was quite the opposite to the other three men who had worked with him on the superstructures – melancholic Jean-Baptiste from Dieppe, longshanks Pierre from Morlaix and burly Jean-Maurice from the vicinity of Vannes. They all did their best. Contrasted by Jean Plank, they only delivered mediocre results, for example those two pieces at the rear that should have worn the ship's name. Just in time, Talbot had noticed that they had made a mistake with the order of letters. But John had turned the calamity of wasted material to gold when carving from the two pieces the steps for the staircases up to the poop deck. The two remaining letters were fitting his plan very well. Talbot had seen that as well, when he told John in secret what to carve into the ivory at another place. Accompanied by his message from Malta, John's beloved would come into her own luck somehow. And then one day, when he would stand in front of her, a rich man in exalted position, he would be eligible for her hand as well. At least, that was what he had planned. Now it was only important to pass on to her his secret. He felt that he would bite the dust some time soon. John heaved a silent sigh. Six years of imprisonment, an eternity. On the hulks, he would not have survived even that long, he was sure of it. What Jean Plank had told about those destitute, unrigged prison ships was hardly believable. This was England, after all. Here there was a firm belief in decency and dignity; at least, it had been before the war broke out.

However, the orange-yellow jacket had been evidence enough with the big black letters **T.O.** on the back – showing the convict to be under the authority of the Transport Office. The skilled carver knew what he was talking about.

John had heard similar tales of other relocated prisoners which Talbot had secretly conveyed to him: overcrowded, deadly damp and full of horrible illnesses of which typhoid fever was the least. The hulks were nothing but swimming graves.

With a chill, John pulled his thin jacket of formerly saffron-yellow cloth closer around his skinny shoulders, covering his flashy red waistcoat. The ragged shirt he wore under it was dirty yellow-grey and stank of sulphur and the grime of tallow candles which they had used for a work-light until a few weeks past when the commissioner had followed Talbot's advice and asked for a real source of light. Now there was an old ship's lantern dangling from a hook under the low ceiling.

A hoarse cough shook John and produced solid yellowish-green slime that he wiped off with his ragged sleeve. Every breath was harder than the one before. Even the headaches were more frequent than before, regardless whether he sat down working in the dim lantern light or directly underneath the small window.

At least he was permitted some convenience now and then, for example working outside in the yard, guarded by two wardens with their modern flintlock muskets and fixed-on bayonet. As if he would dare to think of flight. He was way too weak for that.

In his prominent convict clothes he would be tracked down after a short while anyway; just like those two French sailors from the northern block who had dared to flee one week previously. Now they both were six feet under and slept eternally, with many lead bullets in their back.

John sighed and shook off another tickle in the throat. Very soon now he would be with them. That was as sure as England's supremacy at sea. A stinging pain in his lungs wrested a rattling sigh from John. Not even a proper burial it would be for him, in Davy Jones' Locker as befitted sailors. But at least he would look at his home country's grass roots from below; from his old county even.

"Here, they are ready", a warm voice pulled him out of his gloomy thoughts.

John looked up and straight into a pair of blue eyes that sparkled like stars in the bleak, dirty face of his fellow depot inmate. Jean Plank returned the knife. Then he laid down the new, clean pieces of bone and carefully piled up some even, finger-length planks on the floor next to John's knee.

With a silent grin he nodded to John and returned to his corner where he busied himself with helping one of the other Jeans to produce many small tackles and euphroes – a task that was strenuous even to an experienced ship's carpenter and if the wooden blocks and stakes had their normal size.

In model making they are one of the greatest challenges; for these little pieces of bone are always in danger of shattering when the Jeans worked on them with the slim little tool – an Archimedian drill that their commissioner, shoved by Talbot, had bought from a local goldsmith, so that the Jeans could cautiously drill the tiny holes.

They had tried the same, using a rusty nail they had pulled from one of their plank beds, but fabricated much more bone splinters than holes, once they hit it carefully with a small wooden mallet.

With the aid of the special tool, however, the Jeans were now able to produce as many tiny, holed pieces that they could even barter them for additional meat rations and other conveniences from their neighbouring cells.

John had regarded Jean Plank with favour, for he took great care with this time-consuming detail work, checked every piece and supervised his co-workers very closely; like he was doing now.

From time to time, one of the Jeans came over and laid down some more completed pieces next to John who had ordered them with the aid of sign language and Talbot's translation.

By now, the men knew quite well what John meant by describing with his hands and feet, some figures drawn into the dust and silent gestures what he needed.

His cell mates made an effort and tried to beat each other in creative ways to secure new material; just like the old belt buckles of tinged brass that Jean-Baptiste had wheedled out of one of the guards.

Carefully, John placed the last of the metal cannon tubes into the closely fitting mount of bone and tied it down with the tiny ropes. The between-deck was ready, in every detail. They had even crafted trunnions that closely fitted the mounts of the twenty-four cannons.

One more time he let his gaze wander around the lined-up miniature cannons that they had strenuously drawn with much pains and sweat from the old brass buckles; then he inserted the broad staircase, followed by the already connected planks of the upper deck.

Using the tip of the knife, he pushed each piece to its place and then, with a stone poulder, cautiously tapped the rear cabin's walls into position in between the outer ship's sides.

The stern blind with its fine ornaments fitted exactly and completed the poop deck with its cleanly tiled planks around the mizzen mast. The cleanly carved steering wheel and the ship's compass between the small barrels on the rear deck were positioned correctly, just like the rest of the superstructures; and just like he remembered them.

"Perfect", mouthed Talbot quietly and in English, while he put down a little ball of laid rope onto the old wooden casket in front of John that he used as a workbench. Scrutinising, he took up one of the tiny

chain plates und carefully turned it between thumb and forefinger. It was flawlessly carved.

John silently gestured the young man where to put the little peg, thereby fixing a falling rope. A smile split Talbot's face when he took a look at the result.

"All correct."

John slightly nodded his head, while Talbot returned the two steps back to the cell's outer wall and sank back onto his plank bed. There he began drilling more ropes, using some fibres from an old shirt sleeve. It was the last piece of cloth that they used for the thicker ropes. Claude-Michel, the little midshipman from the next cell, did not need it anymore, since he died of typhoid fever the week before. John felt how the fever reached out for him with greedy hands as well. Up until now, he had cheated death, but not the next time. He sensed that it would be his last call and quite soon, too. He would never see Pamela again.

To divert himself from these gloomy thoughts, John began to cut the shrouds for the foremast from the rope ball. In strenuous detail work he put the ropes properly through the holes of the tiny euphroes and finally fixed them at the ship's inner side, using filigree chain plates.

His back pained from the bent sitting posture, but John hardly felt it. Weary sleepiness gripped him so that he drifted off for a few moments. Then he was startled by another aching cough and continued working with a faint rattle in his throat. He had to complete the ship model; who could tell how much time he had left.

Anxious not to apply too much pressure on the upper deck, he inserted a new piece of bone near the main mast. With attaching the top castles, the small platforms on the ship's masts beneath the top-sails, the little model would be nearly complete. Tomorrow, he would be setting the rest of the rigging, helped by Talbot or Jean Plank.

Then it would only be the figurehead that was yet to be carved by him, from ivory.

For the moment, it was time again to continue with the other model. It still lacked the superstructures, the jib boom, the spars and, of course, the rigging. Their commissioner would be delighted with that well-wrought ship and its seventy-four cannons made from painted bone on delivery day.

John wiped his hands at his seat of trousers and reached for the two halves of the second beef bone in order to prepare them for processing. While his hands mechanically did one well-trained movement after the other, John's thoughts once more returned aboard Collingwood's ship: the crew, the constant need to be wary of his role as a deaf-mute French prisoner, hardly bearable whenever the red-coats came near them and hissed their insults.

Far worse, however, had been something else. John sighed silently and gazed at the halved bone in his hand without consciously seeing it. All was back before his inner eye: the passage, and then the first sight of the English coastline. For him, that had been heaven and hell all at once.

There had been a strong ache in his chest, just like now, when he was thinking back to that moment. How strange these memories were. Fortunately, he had kept up his silent role. And with controlled and Talbot at his side, he had controlled himself as well, while the English crew burst into shouts of joy at passing Cape Lizard who had looked forward to their share of the prize money.

Landing at Plymouth harbour and being back on English soil again, John recalled shedding some hidden tears. Apart from Talbot, who had walked very straight and steady off board next to him, nobody had noticed his emotional reaction; yet another strange memory.

Almost mechanically, John's hands were busy washing one of the two cleaned halves of bone in a bowl containing rainwater.

Using another cloth, he then dried the white, smooth material and polished its surface. This would become the rear superstructures of the big ship and the remaining structure pieces of the small one, shimmering white and perfect down to the last detail; even if it took them three additional weeks.

But the brewery owner, their commissioner, was not in a hurry, not anymore; not since the one whom he had intended to present with the larger of the two models had drawn his last breath. John swallowed hard while his hands washed the remains of the sulphuric acid from the second bone's halves, dried and polished them. Not only ten days ago...

The message had hit them like the largest of all cannon balls in the world. The overseer had been walking through the corridors with their heads held high, but their faces betraying their emotional uproar. John had witnessed some of them crying when they had been told the dreadful news; even Talbot and he himself had been crying, in secret, obviously.

"They have for him at last", Talbot had murmured in English and thrown himself upon his plank bed, feigning a bad cough and crouching in pain to hide his tears.

In retrospect, this precaution had not been necessary. Amazed and, for the first, filled by an emotion of sympathy and thankfulness, John had noticed that even the Frogs around them were distraught over the death of England's greatest admiral. Talbot had overheard many a conversation, in the yard and at food distribution, and murmured the contents to John later on while working close to him.

Many prisoners had reported of their experiences with the famous Lord; some had even seen him in person. Although John had not understood much of those tales, it had been plain to see the admiration of the widely acknowledged strategist, his bravery and boldness.

“Here, they’re ready”, Talbot said in French and wound up the last inch of rope around the little piece of wood he had used for twisting. The thick rope would become the jib boom stay for the *Theseus* and keep the jib boom at the ship’s bow in the correct position; and in case there would be some left, this thicker rope would be a suitable anchor cable for the smaller model – and thereby nearly completing the precious little thing.

Two days ago, they had added the shrouds, made from white-grey horse hair, to the ship’s sides, leading up to the mast tops. The steps of the stairs they had fixed carefully yesterday, like they had agreed; the same held true for the delicately crafted quarterdeck’s sides that he and Talbot had carved themselves, including the filigree ornaments on the outside – and the path that led to their secret.

John grinned while attaching the cant timbers underneath the bow to the little pedestal that would be the place for the figurehead. The little figurine was already very clearly outlined in his mind.

After the evening’s change of the guards, one of the overseers had promised to bring the ivory and had it over to John as an occupation for the night. And then, yes, then he would be able to hide his very own secret – the secret not even Talbot knew of – and securely shut it away.

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John’s thoughts were with Pamela. In the dim light of the ship’s lantern that stood next to him on the hard floor, it was like she was there before him, hallowed by a golden shine that was only part of his memory.

His cellmates’ low snoring was drifting away as the sweet twittering of birds and the soft murmuring of a little stream under a small

arched stone bridge filled his ears. Here it had been, here he had kissed Pamela for the first time; back then, when all had been well.

It was like she was again dancing across the meadow along the bank, nearly floating, while the red-golden evening sun was conjuring a soft shimmer onto her fine dress of pale rosé taffeta.

The sight made his heart beat faster and sent a warm shiver across his back. It was just like that May day when he had accompanied her to the dance; that day when he had seen her for the last time.

His Pamela, nearly within his reach, with her beautiful auburn hair that she always wore delicately coiffured under her maiden bonnet; the slim body with the petite feet and tender hands he had once held in his arms; her pretty face with the cute snub nose and the fine pointed chin; her soft cheeks, all reddened by the dancing – and by his whispered compliments; her gleaming eyes that had smiled at him at more than one occasion...

Was she still thinking about him? How would she react, if she were to know that he was here, only a few miles from her, imprisoned and still dreaming of her?

And what would she say, if he were to vanquish this fever once again and be standing in front of her one sweet day, garmented in the finest dress uniform with a high top hat and polished leather boots, a gleaming marine sword at his hip; and with as much material security to make her life a golden one indeed.

He was feeling much better than yesterday. The headaches had decreased and the shivering fits as well. The fever had sunken. Maybe there was some hope for him after all; hope for a future, a future with Pamela just like he had always wished for. The vision seemed to fall into place in front of his inner eye.

“Pamela Aurelia Morton...”, he heard his own voice echoing inside his head, “with this ring I thee wed...”

It sounded like they were standing inside Ely cathedral when she breathlessly whispered her agreeing “yes”. He saw her beautiful eyes under the delicate veil made of white lace.

Most reluctantly, John thrust these happy thoughts aside. Blood was pounding in his temples. He would never experience this happiness, even if he were to outlive this month. Another would make Pamela to be his bride, very soon. There was nothing he could do.

He knew he had lost her; and that he would hardly make it to the next springtime. Yet she would be well looked after, his Pamela. He had made his decision.

Talbot had agreed. How was he to know that their little model ship held another secret, one that only John knew of; a secret he would take to his grave, soon now.

Pamela would be happy, without him. But through him, she would be much more fortunate than through her new groom who would be able to care for her, if only for that. She would always be thinking of him, John, for she had received his letter. She would detect his secret and be very grateful to him in everlasting love and thankfulness. His Pamela.

John sighed quietly and forced his concentration again on the hard piece of white walrus tooth that he was working on. It would become the figurehead, the figurine for their special model, the most special one; the little ship they had, only among them, named for a Greek goddess, just in case...

They had told the others that the fleshy brewery owner had commissioned two models with them; in reality, the jovial man had only ordered the *Theseus* – that ship of the line with seventy-four cannons that had been commandeered by the famous rear-admiral from Norfolk during the blockade of Cádiz.

With his unique cleverness, it had been Talbot’s effort to convince the overseers that they both had been commissioned with one ship

each; and in a quick whispered conversation, Talbot had persuaded the brewery owner that his written commission had been that ambiguous.

The broad man had obviously liked the idea, for he had agreed upon his next visit. One of his business associates, a cloth merchant from around Leeds, needed a present, he had told the overseers; a present for the new county's magistrate who had promising connections to the House of Commons.

Following one of the brewery owner's passing remarks, John and Talbot had deduced that this particular cloth merchant hoped for an annulment of his marriage with a mentally defective woman; and, of course, to marry again – the beautiful daughter of a certain tea merchant from Huntingdon.

John's heart had skipped a beat when he had overheard this. But he knew that he was drawing to the close. He had missed his chance, a long time ago. Now, it was his last duty to save his secret, the whole secret.

John sighed silently. There was no chance of him seeing Pamela again, he knew that for sure. She would go to Leeds, leaving Huntingdon, married to that cloth merchant. And this, John stated once again in surprise, was just what he needed.

With an appreciative nod, the brewery owner had calmed the overseer's astonished gaze and delegated the task to Talbot – the young man who would be in charge of details, for a special little model ship. Talbot had been awesome: with his well-done French accent and much convincing acting, he had explained to the guards what he was commissioned to do, and that they needed more beef bones than they would usually get.

For beef and mutton bone were the material that suited their work the best, aside from the expensive ivory. Their commissioner had even accomplished to get them some of that most exquisite material,

for the special ornaments, certain structures and, of course, the figurehead; a figurine like the one that John was carving right now.

John stopped short. This figurine was the one for the second, the additional model ship, their special one. This figurehead was something special, too, something mysterious.

Pensively, he stared at the figurine. The little face stared back at him. A fine smile spread across her features. This was not quite correct, but now it was too late. The filigree girl had Pamela's face, her right hand holding a tiny rose.

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SAMPLE

## The Crisis

**New York City, October 2008.**

The little man silently closes the heavy, sound-proof door. Then he takes a few hesitant steps across the thick, bouncy carpet that swallows every noise. After ten feet, he reaches the lounge seats grouped around a little table made from dark mahogany that supports a low bowl containing floating candles. The sweet flavoured potpourri that his secretary Gina used to fill in the bowl is gone; or rather banned ever since the headaches and the nausea came three months ago. The intercom hums, an unnerving tone from a little speaker on his writing desk, right next to the chromed plate with his name:

Jeremiah F. Cullingham  
*Director*

The deep sound calls mercilessly for an answer. Jeremiah F. Cullingham heaves a sigh and quietly moans. Slowly and struggles to reach the large dark desk with its top made from polished ebony reflects the shimmering lights from the surrounding office buildings.

Breathing heavily, he sinks into the big comfortable swivel armchair; then he reaches out his hand with a surrender sigh.

“Yes?”

“Excuse my interruption, Sir. But there is Tokyo on the line. It’s Mister Matsumoto”, Gina answers.

Her Italian accent has not vanished altogether, even though she has been in the United States for more than ten years and completed several professional trainings. But that is quite alright. The accent

makes her voice warm and soft, very sympathetic, when she speaks English: a perfect secretary, the best to be found in all of New York.

“Matsumoto...”, Jeremiah mumbles.

Instantly, the headaches and the stinging pain in his chest increase again. The lucrative contract of a global company, the new market China, his company’s logistics sector, his reputation both as a business man and a gentleman – it all is at stake.

“Yes, Sir. Should I patch him through?”

“No, thank you. Tell him, I’m in a meeting. He may call again in two hours. And please alert Fisher to be ready in time.”

Fisher would not disappoint him; quite the contrary, he would finally provide the necessary evidence, and then he would sue and win the poker game for the big contract. It has to work out this time. They have to know what Matsumoto is up to; only then they will be able to get the better of him, once and for all.

“Very well, Sir.”

“Thank you, Gina.”

“Anything else I could do for you, Sir?”

“No. Thank you.”

The intercom cracks, the conversation has ended.

Heavily breathing, Jeremiah sinks back and closes his eyes for a moment. If only those terrible headaches would finally be gone! And if only those merciless dizzy spells would end that conjure black and white spots to the edge of his field of vision.

And, of course and worst of all, this pain in his arms and legs; pain that never seizes, but comes and goes in big waves, ever increasing, just like an enormous flood of fire, in every movement and every breath he takes.

Now, as if to torture him even more in his agony, there comes the difficulty in breathing, accompanied by the oppressing feeling in his chest that has been afflicting him for five weeks now.

It has been worst whenever he has been lying in bed at night, wide awake and staring at the ceiling in the darkness; staring holes into space, black holes that threaten to swallow him up; that horrible feeling of being sucked in, that rapid heartbeat.

Just an ordinary panic attack, the doctor has said, before he connected Jeremiah to the ECG, CAT scanned him and conducted a number of other tests. Jeremiah has nearly hoped for the man in white to find something, anything. But everything is quite alright.

“You’re just over-worked”, the specialist and best doctor in the city has said while clapping him on the shoulder. “Get some holiday. And find yourself a therapist, in case you do not yet have any.”

Holy ignorance; in this city, even the therapists have therapists themselves. Everyone who fancies himself, or is of any renown, visits a professional shrink at least once a week, even though they usually are not able to make a real difference.

“Matsumoto...”, Jeremiah murmurs to himself and ruffles through his thinning and grey-flecked hair. Soon there will hardly anything left from his good looks that used to impress women so much.

One smile and a flash from his bright blue eyes – that has always done the trick. He could have had any woman; a second Paul Newman, they have used to say about him, very gentleman-like. Just like a dress man for the expensive suits that he likes to wear, if only he were taller.

But now, he feels like just a shadow of himself. His blue eyes have grown dull, and his formerly very athletic body is progressively letting him down.

Who would believe that he – of all people – is forced down onto his knees? He who has been on top of anybody else for so long is now coming to a close. Now it is his turn, but not quite in the way he has anticipated.

For more than a year he has been dreading that there would be another forced entering into his property in the Hamptons, another robbery of irreplaceable pieces from his priceless collection.

“Tsukasa Matsumoto”, a low growling sounds squeezes through his teeth.

The massive and broad Asian with his piercing eyes haunts his nightmares for many days now. Not even Fisher has been able to find anything useful by now. It is the first time he has failed, completely. There is no trace, since they have lost the trail. Luckily, there has not been any new attempt to enter the strong room where he keeps his real treasures, including that little model ship that he has acquired just recently at *Sotheby's* by outbidding an English collector, along with the folder containing old newspaper clippings, drawings and letters from the years 1799 to 1805; exactly what he has been looking for to enhance his collection regarding the greatest naval hero in maritime history.

However, nothing of that is now important anymore; not since the phone call from the specialist he received ten minutes ago, leaving an important meeting. Three years at the most.

In the long corridor outside his office, he has learned what he has – truth to be spoken – already dreaded in all his nightmares. It is the same reason why he has invested so much in research and even established a dedicated foundation for the cause. It is the reason why he is sending untiring Fisher into battle over and over again, bidding on many a strange object, searching for historical clues and trying to uncover legends. And it is the non-public explanation why he has – for many years now – used the bulk of his fortune to achieve one specific goal: completing his other collection, the special one.

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A throbbing pain behind his right eyes wakes Jeremiah. He heaves a deep sigh and fights against the pain. His thoughts are on a roller-coaster ride, trying to find a fixed mark. Jeremiah tries to breathe calmly. The deep black hole has nearly swallowed him up.

With a quiet sigh, he rolls onto his other side and places his sleeping arm onto his stomach. The hard racing of his heart is nearly bursting his chest open, when the endless white emptiness appears in front of his closed eyes.

Conjuring all of his strength, he wills the thoughts of helplessness, irretrievableness and disgrace away and, in his thoughts, takes a decisive step around the black hole that opens up at the end of the endless white plain.

He must not give up.

The shadow hanging above his head has to be conquered, once and for all; otherwise there will be no peace for him. Not to think of the shame, if anyone would discover his secret.

Not even Fisher is privy to the delicate knowledge, although the wiry man in his mid-forties is part of all his endeavours to enlarge the collection, knowing very well Jeremiah's many interests; and he is an important ally in fighting the impuissance named Matsumoto.

Matsumoto.

There it is again, that hateful name that forces Jeremiah's heart into a painful race; caused by fear or helplessness, who knows. The only important thing is that the energetic Asian, who so grimly interferes with Jeremiah's causes, does not detect his secret – and makes Jeremiah's shameful disgrace public.

Taking a deep breath, Jeremiah tries to calm himself. The man from Japan has overrun him at the latest auction, surprising him and Fisher alike. But he does not know why Jeremiah was in the bid for those papers.

Nobody knows, not even Fisher. Jeremiah has told him that he would feign a bit, to test Matsumoto and decoying him in order to not show too much of an interest in the two paintings: *The Battle of Cape St. Vincent*, a beautiful etching by an unknown artist around the year 1810, and the half-finished portrait of Admiral Lord Hood, said to be painted by a student of L.F. Abbott around 1805.

The decoying has worked out fine, in regards to Matsumoto at least. But Jeremiah is quite sure that Fisher has not swallowed everything that easily. He guesses that there is more to it.

At least, that is what Jeremiah is afraid of.

Or is it only his re-occurring paranoia that sees piercing eyes everywhere, closely watching him? Shuddering, Jeremiah realises that he can see those eyes very clearly in front of him; and that he knows those eyes.

Hot and cold flashes torture him while the memory rushes over him, reliving that day two years ago when he – quite by incident – has strolled through the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, accompanied by a business associate, and met with that strange woman: the woman with the inscrutable black eyes.

“Madame Fatime” was what she has called herself; a fortune teller that can be usually found at third-rate fairs. Jeremiah has consulted many of them, just for fun, asking about his future – only to be told the obvious:

“You are an energetic person who is very successful in his business life. Your strength and the meaning of your life you get from your work which pays very well. Very soon you will celebrate a special success – if you continue to believe in yourself and your inner strength.”

Yet none of them has foreseen those re-occurring headaches, the black hole and the panic attacks.

Only Madame Fatime has seen that at first glance, there, right in the middle of the Grand Bazaar. Quite suddenly she has taken hold of his arm and – unwished for – has grabbed his left hand.

“A dark secret overshadows your life”, she has murmured in English.

“Very soon now, your successes will be only dust in the wind. You will have no peace of mind until you have found *Fatih's Doom* and re-established your ancestors' honour.”

Before he has even had time to ask her what she meant with those gloomy words, she has disappeared from his side like a ghost and melted into the crowds.

Only a few hours later and in another part of the town, there has been a horrible event: an assassin has firebombed a public bus, killing three women; one of them has been Madame Fatime. A claim of responsibility has later on assigned the bombing to the notorious Kurdish underground organisation.

Jeremiah senses icy cold hands grabbing again at his heart when he recollects the aftermath. His successes have indeed decreased; and the same has been true for his health. First there came the nightmares, then the headaches and finally the panic attacks.

Not even his vast collection of nautical artefacts, maritime paintings and countless other historical remains of the era between 1780 and 1821 have been able to distract him and make his mind lighter.

In retrospect, he is absolutely sure that his illness has started back then. At least, the experience may serve as a reason why, all of a sudden, there has been so many unforeseen incidents happening to him; why he who had been accustomed to blazing success had to re-accustom himself so radically.

And, following the logic, it is now his only salvation to detect the secret. Otherwise there will be no peace nor health, just like Madame Fatime has prophesied.

He has taken her warning very seriously, ever since he has studied his family's history one month after the events in Istanbul.

"God is my judge", he has named the secret, password secured file folder on his personal computer.

In recent years he has laboriously and secretly – and with the unwitting Fisher's help – uncovered what has been meant by *Fatih's Doom*; and how Madame Fatime and her family are involved.

His personal salvation, his lucky charm, lies hidden: somewhere down in the sea – exactly where a certain ship's carpenter has concealed it, before he was lost in history; and after he had abandoned a certain Melissa Hartley back in England to her fate, whereby placing a heavy burden onto all of her descendants: a curse. *Fatih's Doom*.

\*\*\* End of Sample \*\*\*

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