

The Mystery of
The Solar Wind

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January 2116

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

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

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



1

The Solar Wind

“They’re gone!”

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

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

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

“Find them!”

“Yes, sir!”

Tights. Toothbrush. Transmitter. Tarot deck.

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

thing. Wherever she was sent, there she went.

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

*

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

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

Dark eyes watching from the shadows of the jib stowage

bay.

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

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

“You alright, Pae?”

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

She glared at Ronan. “*Please*, can we be dungloamin’?”

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

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

Ronan scowled at her. She turned away from him, her

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

Shawn Donegal shimmied down the rigging with a monkey's agility.

"Tomorrow we land at Hamilton," old Sherman Dougherty threw in, thoughtfully drawing on his pipe. The ancient sailor with the bush of white hair and the yellow teeth had been listening to the angry music; now he was listening to the bickering.

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

"Shawn!" warned Ronan. Paeon glanced at both and turned away, disgusted. She *could* wait. She'd be quite happy never to have land under her feet again!

"Play the Britches full of Stitches!" she demanded snappily.

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

The Britches full of Stitches! Shawn grinned as the ditty rolled out of his ocarina. Paeon always made him play that tune when she was trying to punish him. His eyes darted

about, watching the proceedings on the ship. Things would be fine, that had always been his motto. In the past at least. He refused to think about it too deeply as he watched the Captain's First Mate and that mysterious being Rushka moving about in the deepening dusk, testing and checking the Solar Wind's rigging and sails, and the responses of the many tiny sensors to signals from the bridge, and feeding back the results to the Captain on their wrist-coms. He wanted one of those coms; but he suspected that they were only for permanent crew.

The days aboard were varied, with him covering by being upbeat and silly for the benefit of his siblings. Paeon's temper didn't help. They were being kept busy though, very busy. They hadn't been hired only for playing music! He himself was scrubbing decks non-stop, along with his sister, and chopping vegetables and polishing bits and pieces of the ship that had been the "San Diego" in Dublin when they had boarded, but had become the "Solar Wind" soon after they had left the port. He didn't know anything about nautical procedures, but that one had struck him as rather funny.

Captain Radomir Lascek emerged from the bridge onto the command deck and glowered at the skies. He uttered something in Hungarian and disappeared back onto the bridge. Shawn watched him, never pausing in his play. They said that Captain preferred storms to clear skies.

They said that he loved riding a storm. Then again there were many unlikely stories about Radomir Lascek on the ship. His straight, authoritative attitude discouraged such rumours, as did his glares at old Sherman Dougherty, the storyteller. Shawn shrugged. He didn't believe any of those rumours anyway.

*

7 April 2116

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

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

Picked up some ace little musicians, loaded them along with the potatoes... Katya, at least two of them must be under age. Wonder what they're running away from. Watching them, something's worrying all three of them. Been making them play a lot of what they call "Ceilidhs", which is just an Irish way of saying, make a lot of noise. Cor, Katya, when that violinist plays she makes me homesick... Federi had a violin once, remember?

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

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

And a bit of treasure too. Looted it out of a shop. Not proud of that, Katya, got to put a stop to that. They say you can't take it with you anyway when you go. I did though. Is a funny little item. Hope Kitty Murphy forgives me...

And Captain's plans are unchanged. Still wondering how he'll get them implemented. But I can understand why. The Princess is growing up, I suspect at some point she'll want a safe spot to settle and breed... if we all live that long. And if we don't, I'll see you sooner.

Missing you and loving you, kathal, my sister.

Your little brother

Federi

*

“Land ho!”

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

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

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

And someone banging on her door. She groaned.

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

Ronan. Taking a moment to see that his younger sister

didn't get into trouble for oversleeping.

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

"Land ho!"

It was Shawney's high-pitched yell that had awakened her. It cut through the ship's intercom a second time. *Land jolly ho?* Where the Heyerdahl did he get that expression? Was it one of those archaic things from the near-mythical mineral fuel era, when ships were propelled by combustion engines and their hulls were made from metal? As though metal floated, she thought cynically. She had never quite believed those bits. Sometimes Mrs Flanagan's subversive history club had bordered on fantasy.

The Crow's Nest in the rigging of the Solar Wind was an even older concept. That dated back to before the metal era. What was a modern Zephyr doing with that? It was the only ship she had ever seen that had one – and she had after all grown up in Dublin Port! She wouldn't even have known what to call that structure if it hadn't been for history club. It made her wonder about her Captain, Radomir Lascek. What kind of person would put a reconstruction of something archaic into the rigging, doubtlessly breaking the Solar Wind's speed, just for a quirk?

Hey! What was Shawn doing up there this early in any case? Taking a break, first thing in the morning? She'd have to get him down from there before he got trouble. Her feet moved her into the day's duties, pacing down the white non-slip passageway of the lower crew deck and to the stairwell; and up the stairs, past the upper crew deck. She glanced down the long, straight passage, all the way to the prow of the ship and the spacious galley, where that rainbow monstrosity of a gypsy cook was in all likelihood hiding, waiting to pounce on anything that looked as though it had able hands, to give it a lot of hard work. And he thought he was funny, too. She hurried up the second flight of stairs and out through the hatch, onto the outer deck. She inhaled the reviving sea breeze deeply and gave a thought of thanks to the general universe for the sea being blue and the sun being out again. It had been a miserable winter in Dublin; and before it could properly be Spring, they'd had to flee.

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

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

2

Stabilizers

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

Early this morning the great Genoa sail had been unfurled, to add speed to the mainsail and foresail. He had been there to watch and help, too. He had thought then that no ship could possibly go faster than she had been sailing; but now her speed picked up even more, so much that he only wanted to hold on and enjoy the rush. The Solar Wind was a Zephyr, the fastest class of ship available to traders today. She sailed lightly, like a yacht; but with a lot of added power by virtue of the enormous area of her self-tuning sails. Shawn had squeezed as much information as he could out of the older sailors. Two were basically approachable: His ancient countryman Sherman Dougherty, and Federi, the gypsy cook with the illegal

colour sense. That one was very forthcoming, with information, entertainment, friendship and a never-ending load of work.

The secret of the Solar Wind's speed lay in her huge sails. Hundreds of minute sensors, smaller than freckles, optimised the angle and furl of the semi-translucent white cloth to capitalize on every slight change in wind pressure and light. The sails of the hundred-and-fifty-footer were of a practically indestructible, lightweight silicate-neosilk hybrid weave. There were miniature tensors all over those sails too, tightening or slackening a tiny area of sail each, in a process involving the silk protein and artificial muscle fibrilloids. The combined effect of the electronic reefing and tacking from the CPU, and the tensor action, was that the sails were tuned in a hyper-responsive way human hands could not achieve.

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

Military ships ran on fuel cells, he had angled out of

Federi. Those were combustive drives. They had quite a bit more power than the solar drives. On civilian vessels those and all other combustive devices were prohibited. This did not bode well for the Solar Wind, since the boarding of Paeon and her hot temper. Shawn grinned.

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

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

Radomir Lascek was suddenly behind him.

"You Donegals stay aboard!"

Ronan stared at him, eyes wide. He didn't dare to ask why.

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

Ronan had been considering a career in the Marines himself before everything had started going so badly wrong. Now the man to admire had become a man to fear.

They were nearing Hamilton harbour. Details of ships in the harbour and buildings on the docks were already visible.

“Shawn!”

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

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

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

He peered at the sails that were luffing in the wind. Locked in irons, he thought; wind directly from ahead. Funny how the ship could go so fast despite the wind resistance of the whole rigging...

Hey! It was wrong! Those sails were supposed to be the force that pulled the ship forward, not a resistance that held it back! What were they doing? If the sails weren’t pulling the ship, what was? Whales on a leash? The ship was actually going straight into the wind, at full speed! And the

solar drives with their bit of push could never be enough to achieve such speed against the actual natural forces... Shawn peered at the wake of the ship. What was that rising out of the water? Bubbles? Steam -?

He glanced down at Federi, who was following him into the rigging, the soles of his worn-out neomer deck sneakers gripping the lines. He'd ask him.

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

mouth – and the gypsy had complied instantly.

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

Federi threw his head back and laughed.

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

“Because,” said the gypsy, “if we close them while we approach the port, they will know, won’t they? *Solar* drives alone never get this kind of speed. Can’t furl the sails!”

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

“Nah,” grinned Federi. “They never look that closely. By the time we get close we slow down. Don’t worry. ‘s the beauty of this ship. One moment she’s on the horizon and the next – wham! – she’s there.” He turned serious. “Shawn Donegal, you stay quiet about that, understood? Don’t even tell your best sister, okay?”

“Sure,” said Shawn. “Federi, what is the Solar Wind really? Military under cover? Secret Service? What’s our real mission in Hamilton?”

“Wouldn’t be very secret if I told you,” smiled Federi.

Shawn gazed out to where a crowd of identical, small black craft were circling the outskirts of the harbour like over-sized river-boatmen.

“What kind of vessels are those?” He pointed.

“What kind indeed?” echoed Federi softly, taking a pair of old-fashioned glass-lens binoculars out of his pocket and peering through them. The clown in him disappeared completely and was replaced with something feral. Shawn watched this sudden change with bewilderment. The problem was, this was probably not a guise. The change ran deep, through the entire being of the wiry little man.

Federi counted. “Twenty-eight,” he muttered. “Whole jolly nest! *Yoy...*” He glared darkly at Shawn. “Trouble, Donegal!”

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

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

★

The Donegals have secrets. So, it seems, does their Captain, Radomir Lascek! And while the Solar Wind is a very versatile ship, sometimes that is not enough...

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

“You okay, Federi?”

The gypsy laughed.

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

“Coffee for you?”

Federi smiled broadly. “Now that’s going to make all the difference,” he stated. “Thanks, little carer!”

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

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

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

“What?” asked Paean.

Did she sense about the horror he had found in the machine room of the Hun? How could she sense, he

thought. And about the irony of Captain being prepared to rescue his arch-enemy... sail right into the death trap that was Hamilton! With all his crew.

“Stortebecker,” he said.

“Pardon?”

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

“Tell me anyway,” pushed Paean.

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

“That’s dumb,” commented Paean.

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

“Whoa!” commented Paean disbelievingly.

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

Paean gaped at him in shock, then she shrugged and left

the bridge. Federi glared at the sea some more. In his mind's eye he saw Captain walking past the Solar Wind's crew with his head chopped off. Aw hell... and now he'd snubbed the little mockingbird! For what?

*

Federi is not the only one who fears for his life as the Captain takes hair-raising risks...

*

Paeon stared uncertainly at the colourful entertainer.

“Federi, what was the plan with Panama?”

“Little bird, I can't tell you. Captain would have my hide.”

“It's my life too,” said Paeon. “Federi, Lake Gatun is Panama, isn't it?”

“Yes, why?”

“I had a dream. Lake Gatun is the end of the world. It's death.”

The gypsy with the mauve headscarf full of data cubes and earrings put his drying of plates down. He planted himself in front of her, arms folded, his black eyes boring into hers.

“You’ve got the sight,” he stated. “Why does it surprise me, actually? Listen, Paean. The plan is that we fight our way out of Panama. Our electronic shield fudges our signals and protects us a bit from the Unicate death bolts. We have torpedoes too. We should have gone around the south, the Cape, but there’s no time...”

“How do you rate our chances?”

Federi frowned. “Bad,” he said. “We’re going to die.”

*

**Radomir Lascek is a wily sea-devil, but
will it be enough?**

*

“There!”

A vast expanse of blue water became visible through the opening gates. And with it, a host of gleaming black T-craft, Stabilizers, like volcanic sand grains on a mirror. All lying in wait for the Solar Wind.

*

End of preview