

From the Belly of the Whale

Captain's Log: Day 1095 (219 whole tally marks).

Today is either September 3<sup>rd</sup>, September 4<sup>th</sup>, or, if last year was a leap year like Bosch suspected, September 5<sup>th</sup>. Don't even ask me what day it is— all I know about today is that it's New Years' Day for the Pod, if my math checks out (and it generally does). Three years aboard the *HMS Rhodophyta*, but what does it matter anyways? It's felt like three years since before we were even done with one. I'm starting to wish they'd put me in this office from the start— perhaps I've been afraid to admit it, even with only myself for company, but the crew merger was not nearly the bump in the road I was hoping it would be. Can I really say that today was any different than the last 1094, even with its two broken-legged hearth-tenders in the sick bay and a new painting in the gallery? Status report: everybody loves everybody, nobody fights. The food still tastes like flavored chalk no matter how sloppy the disinfection gets; still shrivels up my tongue like I used conditioner instead of butter. Nobody, not a soul from the winding alleys in the guts, has been able to purge the goddamn smell from whichever gilded corner of my quarters it rots, beneath snaking grooves and studded greebles that might still glisten beneath their skin of smudged fingerprints, so thick now that they might have a topography. You know the smell— the one like someone was so self-conscious about their fragrant feet that they hid in an air duct to slather their soles in cheap hand soap, but now the room just smells like cheap hand soap *and* feet? I always sound like a raving lunatic when I try to describe it— and to think this is log-worthy! Sometimes, I'm not so sure the Sarah Company was telling the truth when they said the Malaise wouldn't get us down here. I feel it every day.

Nobody has figured out that the intercom goes both ways. Maybe someday we will regret having lost most of our engineers before the Pod merger, but until that day comes, all it means is

that no one onboard can bust me. In lieu of constellations to watch, I've taken to giving each of the crew a nighttime visit— like Santa Claus, but if Santa Claus never showed his face and listened to the things you said and did in the moments you thought you were alone. I'm aware of how that sounds— such is the burden of a guardian angel. Hopefully they see it that way. I listen as Téa hums to her plants in the greenhouse as she lovingly lowers the lights in the room, dimming them like a sunset, and at the speed of one, too, likely straining our touch and go battery. I listen as Bosch rustles through a sarcophagus of crumpled paper, dried and re-dried after the occasional return of the impossible drip from the starboard sonar ear. I listen to the children who have gathered past curfew beneath the stacked tables and chairs of the classroom, giggling to themselves in a whispered second dialect that I could never hope to be privy to. Sometimes, I just listen to the baleen churning on its rusty wheels, or the rattle and hum of the reactor shell, with not a soul awake to interrupt its mantra. My prying ears can never linger long on these empty rooms with their empty activities, though, much as I'd like to pretend I meditate— they always come back to the room at the base of the crow's nest, back and right from the empty control room, where Escher and Magritte always used to meet. How long after the merger it started, I do not know, but they talked like they'd been there forever— no, not at all like that, for surely, they'd feel as suicidally bored as I get in this tin can of a vessel. Escher I'd known for longer, though I can't say very well— I only felt close to him now that I'd heard everything in his frizzy head over the intercom on nights like these. He remains the psychologist, even after our pod had been assigned the rest of these freeloaders; freeloaders like Magritte, though she never acted like one. Beneath her suspiciously soft innocuity is a veteran hearth-tender, though whether or not she was a seasoned one, I cannot say. Of course, in our moment of need, she decided to stick to being a speech therapist instead, teaching the children not to jabber

like anencephalic gremlins rather than helping forage for our lifeline. Then again, last time she'd been on the surface, out with her old pod and her old co-tender, they'd come to blows with another pod— may not have even been from the same school, but I can't be sure. I skimmed the paperwork Bosch gave me before I knew how important it was. What was he gonna do, fire me? What I did glean is that there was a miscommunication between Magritte and her co-tender—the hearth malfunctioned, and they got jumped by the other pod. The flimsy museum foundations crumbled around them, and there were a few hearth breaches. The Malaise there must've set in fast, because nobody lifted a finger when the spilled fuel ignited and burned the whole place down. If I'd been nearly as sophisticated as I am now three years ago, I think I would've laughed— seventeen men and women, a pair in each otherworldly exoskeleton, died in the flames fighting to the death over Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*. Sure, art meant something completely different three years ago, but the absurdity won't ever be lost on me.

Escher and Magritte talked of lighter things the night before last. When I jabbed the orange button that tuned my microphones to the room at the base of the crow's nest, the button that used to stick before I used it so much, Escher had already begun their conversation.

“—ccrrrkbut I heard somewhere you're supposed to turn the water cold to close your pores before you get out.”

“That implies you're using the cancer water from the reactor before you turn it cold.”

“When I said I'd die for a hot shower, I meant that.”

“You ever wonder if you need to close your... like... your mind pores?”

They laughed a bit, but an excited Escher promptly replied.

“Right, that's where I was going, too. Because, like... I need to get to work on time, but—”

“Can’t let the lyrics to some buried Backyardigans song keep you from your patients.”

“Oh please, you know you hum those too.”

“Do I?”

“You do.”

“I just... yea, you’re right, I feel like I daydream too much—”

“Too much? You can’t daydream too much, don’t say—”

“No, I mean, I like it, I just— my bucket list just keeps getting longer and longer, you know? It doesn’t even fit on a page anymore. And like... do you even know anyone who has a bucket list anymore?”

Escher thought for a moment. You can hear him sigh through his nostrils. I wondered if Magritte could feel it on her skin— I always imagine them sitting side by side, shoulder to shoulder, but for all I know, they could be on opposite sides of the room.

“Well... well, I can’t think of any, but that’s no reason not to keep your own list. What’s the last thing on it?”

“I told you about the bird thing, right?”

“The what? Maybe I’m a bad listener, but I don’t think—”

“No, no, it’s fine! Okay, so I’ve always had this dream,” she began, stopping abruptly to giggle. “You’re gonna laugh at me...”

“No, no, go on.”

“I’ve always had this dream that I’d check the mailbox one day and there’d be a nest of baby birds in there. And... y’know... I could raise all the baby birds. Keep them away from the dogs. You know, be a bird mom.”

“Oh, so you’d just orphan baby birds for your amusement?”

“Escher!”

“Don’t hide it...”

The speakers crackled continuously with their laughter. Magritte finally finished,

“I gotta do what’s gotta be done if I want some bird babies...”

“Are you gonna let them in on hetay ecretsay?”

I almost quit listening every time they did this— speaking in some kind of archaic code, probably an extinct language that deserved to be six feet under. It’s there for a reason, keep it that way. But I can’t stop what’s already been done, and I know it. Even if their exhumed secrets ricocheted in tinny echoes through the rattling pipes and cramped metal hallways closing in from all sides, nobody onboard would know what they’d shared.

“I on’tday owknay. They’d have to be the kind of bird that speaks. I don’t know enough about birds to tell.”

“But you do know more than enough about speaking.”

“Thank you,” Magritte conceded. You didn’t have to listen closely to hear the punctuation in her voice.

The morning after, or perhaps simply the morning of if the twilight conversation had meandered for longer than it had felt, I was jolted awake as the hull shook thunderously. I allowed myself a shallow chuckle, thinking of Bosch in the sonar ear, no doubt buried under a collapsed fortress of loose papers. Had we still been thousands of feet beneath the surface, a quake such as this would have been cause for alarm, but today we had planned to beach Ol’ Rhosey to retrieve an artifact of grave importance. If nothing else, its retrieval would give us the illusion of something, *anything* to celebrate tonight besides a third year in a metal death basket.

Still, a muted alarm mewled mournfully from some faraway chamber in the ship's belly, and its insistence was enough to drag me exasperatedly from my quarters.

It appeared that we were right on schedule—in all the wrong ways. As I swung into the hallway, I was met with a flurry of traffic squeezing past in either direction with an urgency I hadn't seen in years. I seemed to be moving upstream against the huddles of crew shoving their way sternwards. I was almost trampled by a gaggle of medical officers, carrying two stretchers like train cars hauling two crumpled bodies as their cargo, though who exactly these belonged to I did not yet know. Swept aside, I was caught just in time by Bosch, who had ducked into the corridor behind me escorted by yet another swarm of navigators.

“Captain! Captain!” they babbled like the children they were.

Once the hallway had emptied out, they all shuffled into a line along the wall before throwing the Escher salute in unison. That bastard! When had he taught them *that*? I refused to return the favor, only shooting a scowl their way and making a mental note to give the children a designated rise-and-shine time long after I usually wake up. Much as I wanted to reprimand Bosch to keep his men in line, when I saw his sunken, wrinkled face, I knew there were more important issues to address.

“What's the situation, Officer?”

Bosch turned, ushering me back towards the bow while he explained.

“Beaching malfunction, Captain. The Malaise carpet in the photic zone made our sonar go all sideways. We're still within range of the target, but we surfaced too quickly near a collapsed cliff, and readings show the hull sustained a pretty sizable hit.”

“The jolt, I assume?”

“Indeed. Our hearth-tenders were already locked and loaded, but the turbulence sent them tumbling across the hangar. Both walked off with— pardon, both sustained at least a crushed leg, they won’t be in service for at least another month.”

My scowl trickled back, and I whirled to the nearest navigator next to me.

“Have you ironed out the sonar malfunction?”

“We’re working on it, sir.” he mumbled apologetically in his prepubescent voice. The halo on his ill-fitting headset faded from black to yellow, as if he were blushing.

“You’d better be. And this is strike two— if I see one more salute from *any* of you, I’ll have you picking dead mice out of the baleen for the rest of your formative years!”

And like mice, the legion of children flanking Bosch scurried away as he shooed them once we reached the desolate hangar. Deep within me, something had stirred, and for a moment I felt a touch of panic. After three years, a mission of this sort was no longer essential, but allowing the critical injuries of both hearth-tenders was absolutely a fire-able offense in the company’s book— and a tragedy, to be sure. Still, Bosch had yet to ask permission to declare the operation aborted, and the reason why soon made itself apparent when, as fate would have it, a new hearth-tender I’d been waiting for finally stepped up to the plate. Magritte shrugged it off like this wasn’t what she’d been pressured to do on all sides for countless months; maybe she wanted to make sure we all knew this wasn’t charity. She had made this decision of her own accord, and it was no mystery why when she strode into the hangar with Escher in tow. He, too, threw me the Escher salute, but given the fact that he wasn’t a child like the navigators, decorum dictated that I give him a disgruntled salute in kind. As my right sleeve empty from the forearm down slapped loosely against my temple, I hotly reassured myself that this only reflected badly

on my tailor. Escher grinned nonetheless, waving it off reassuringly. I quickly rolled the sleeve up to my buried wrist in case I needed to gesture any further in the future.

Apparently, I'd missed a part of Escher and Magritte's last conversation—I thought I could never stop listening to their back-and-forth, but the tedium of their winding, elaborate, and usually unsuccessful goodbyes and goodnights must have lulled me to sleep. Their nighttime talks were always more circular than linear anyways. Nevertheless, I learned as they fastened themselves into the grimy hearth exoskeleton that it had been a mutual agreement— if either was to ever hearth-tend in the future, they'd only trust each other as their partner. I claimed I'd thought so all along, even though I hadn't considered what should have been incredibly obvious. Applying the necessary nodes and needles and suctions to each of their heads seemed redundant when their minds were practically already one. Still, though I knew it to be an extraneous formality, I stood atop a crate and began their briefing.

“Co-tenders, in a moment, these airlock doors will open, these steel jaws will yawn, and you will find yourself in a cold, ruinous world, but make no mistake: it is by no means empty. This is an in-and-out mission: go to your assigned coordinates, retrieve your assigned painting, and return to this location— and don't keep us waiting. Wherever your mind may wander, it is of paramount importance that you remember your priorities. The painting comes second, you come first. Once the hearth is ignited, I becomes we, me becomes us. Protect your partner if for no other reason than protecting yourself, because the line between you no longer exists. Keep the hearth alive, or the Malaise sets in.”

Buckles and clamps began to latch themselves in. In the bulbous cockpit, Escher and Magritte sat back to back, controls wrapping around their arms. I could see Magritte impatiently



mouthed my every word, though her low eyes were already facing her fingertips. Escher pressed his thumbs into the grips on his seat.

“Remember what your Gram-Gram says,” I barked, snapping a pointed finger up to the faded cartoon mural of Grandma Sarah that adorns the convex ceiling. From her apron, she has drawn a comically large recipe scroll, which, in dissonantly bold military lettering, lists the steps that all who exit must heed.

**GRAM-GRAM’S RECIPE FOR DISASTER** it reads, *Know the nine symptoms of a Malaise infection!*

As Escher and Magritte begin to read, they alternate perfectly as if they’ve practiced, with Magritte taking the lead.

“One: the absent mind does not wander.”

“Two: loss of ticklish tendencies.”

“Three: reluctant acceptance that tic-tac-toe is not a game of strategy.”

“Four: delayed response time.”

“Five: the smile lacks bare teeth.”

“Six: loss of daydreams, loss of nightmares.”

“Seven: severe apathy.”

“Eight: shortness of breath.”

“Nine: refusal of sustenance.”

I nod. “And should there be so much as a whiff of any nine in your hearth, abort the mission immediately. When linked, your minds should possess the fortitude to hold off an infection, but... well, after all these years in the field, all I can say is: shit happens.”

And so, the cross-hatched bars and fortified portholes of the cockpit swung shut with a hydraulic hiss, and the hearth scuttled off into the airlock. I wondered if it looked as ungainly out there as it did in here, like a rusty Victorian dive suit made for a fifteen foot tall sea urchin, but I would never know—from now on, I watched through their eyes on the grainy, whining monitor in my office on the ship, Bosch huffing apprehensively over my shoulder. Now the many spidery limbs of the exoskeleton they piloted skittered up the sheer, limestone cliff ahead, the camera I glared intently through jostling precariously through the ascent. On a smaller monitor in the corner, a constantly updating graphic displayed their brain function, and I watched as the minds of Escher and Magritte made two diverging paths, then crossed over to one point, then diverged again, like a double helix weaving itself. They were perfectly balanced—the hearth was alive.

I tuned into their thoughts, which were stamped out by the wheezing typewriter to my right. This time, they knew I was eavesdropping, and I wasn't sure I liked that.

*We're reminded of childhood—the smell is familiar.*

*I'm thinking of the leather cleaner my dad used to slather his car's interior with.*

*I'm thinking of the Huggies shampoo my mom used to lather my hair with.*

*We do not want to shampoo with leather cleaner.*

And so on, and so forth. The hearth had reached the top of the cliff face now, and just for kicks and giggles, I pointed my camera back to the rolling grey sea, a roiling, impasto puddle of soot and crystals interrupted by the hulking silhouette of the beached *HMS Rhodophyta*. I waved to the camera from my office—joke's on me, the office doesn't have any windows. For a moment, I considered putting the gas on her fluke, causing the sub's bifurcated tail to come swinging up and crashing down into the warm sea, just like the real whales used to. I shook my

head— sometimes I forget I'm a captain now. A captain who doesn't play with the big, metal whale he commands; a captain who needs to get his head in the game, like Escher and Magritte.

The hearth had ambled up a rugged forest road, recognizable as nothing more than a deer trail after years left unattended. The painting wasn't far from here— only about a mile and a half's walk inland to a humble hoarder's home, a cottage no doubt ransacked for food in the early days, when there were still marauders wanting to maraud. We were counting on the painting still being there, even if it had sustained minor weathering. Hell, even major weathering wouldn't be a problem, it just had to have some splotches of color here and there, enough that the children can at least do something with it, with their gremlin-speak and their magical minds. For once, the journey itself would be the least difficult part— the path seemed cut out for us, with evenly spaced trees, too far apart to hide an ambush, but too close together to grant passage to the bellowing, bending, grumbling, grinding body of a metropolipede, flattening the hearth into a pop of coppery color on the sole of one of its many concrete feet.

Blurring the barred windows of the cockpit and the lens of my camera was the ever-present fog of the Malaise. It rolled gently above us on the calm waves when we sank beneath the sea, and it condensed on the surface of the hearth now that it had come ashore. Beyond that it floated through the sky, hailing down with the monsoons and roving over the landlocked prairies far from here, blanketing the sky so the sun cannot peak through. Sometimes it turns a watercolor orange in the sunset, accenting the dry, papyrus grass and the maroon needles of beetle-killed trees with an autumnal glow. Tonight, we wouldn't be treated to that— the hearth must be home in time for supper. Today, all we had to gaze upon was a shifting sky and a flock of microwaves spiraling overhead in loose formation.

The typewriter clattered away, transcribing the worries of Escher and Magritte.

*The fog reminds me of looking out the huge windshield in the control room back on the ship.*

*Look without me all you want.*

*We wonder if the Malaise looks to the sky because it wants to go home.*

As if blinking, my camera readjusted to the waning light of the thickening forest. Deciduous trees had begun to fill in the gaps, and the leaves they littered were whisked up in swirling brush strokes around the Hearth as it pushed against the wind. These sharp yellow blots that drifted across the screen almost felt like pinpricks in my eyes— it had been years since the leaves had been anything but brown at this time of year. Apparently, I wasn't the only one to notice:

*I can't shake the feeling that it's spring, even so.*

*I think fall can be just as beautiful.*

*We do not feel lost, like the leaves in the wind.*

Not far off the beaten path stood the foundations of the lonesome cabin, not much more than a box made of standing logs at this point, differing little from the jagged, toothpick trunks at attention all around them. The camera shuddered here, lingering on this impressionist portrait of the dead pioneering spirit as the hearth came to a dead halt. I looked to the display of their brain function— I. We. I. We. It was working just fine, so why had they stopped? I whirled to the transcript, scanning their suddenly sharp thoughts.

*I don't think the wolves will hurt us.*

*I need us to stay away from the wolves.*

I snapped back to the monitor and swiveled the camera, jostling the controls perhaps a little too violently. My point of view jerked to the left to see no more than nine grey shapes

draped limply over the adjacent hillside. The head of one bent upwards in vague recognition as it rolled onto its back, throwing its four emaciated legs into the air like a cheerleader succumbing to heat exhaustion.

*We will go around to the other side.*

I snorted. It was a roundabout route, but I couldn't stop them—the painting was on the collapsed back wall either way. The hearth's many spindly arms sprang into action, deploying jointed scoops and splitting apart into dexterous fingers to clear away the splinters and clumps of crumbling cabin. It didn't take long before a comically long frame was hoisted from the remains, dusty and torn but otherwise intact: *Surly Cat Being Ejected* by Theodore Geisel. An amorphous hourglass of a nude woman in an alley swallowed by ink irately sends away an absurdly serpentine cat, who gloomily marches through misshapen archways to whatever punishment lay ahead. Charming. As a fine-tipped scalpel slunk from the finger of one arm to cut the piece from its frame, the arms at the back of the hearth were behaving as if they had a mind of their own. They were shuffling through a crumpled and bent receptacle strewn across the leaf litter not far behind—a mailbox, adorned with a chipped painting of a duck plastered to the side. It flaked away as the arms shook the box gently, eventually loosening the dented hatch to a point where it fell open of its own accord. Delicately now, the split fingers reached in, hooking around something bunched up inside—a delicate bundle of needles and twigs. Though it had been long since vacated, this was still unmistakably a bird's nest.

*We found something. It's not what we wanted, but it's a start.*

The dingy mess hall felt warm and lively that night, before the christening of the new year and the plastering of our newest trophy painting to the ceiling, front and center of the

gallery. I felt a twinge of disappointment as the blanket of blacks and browns that was *Surly Cat* was smoothed across the rounded ceiling, which made the place feel like a runt cathedral. When I first heard whispers of a lost Dr. Seuss painting, I thought it would add some whimsy to the collection, but I had no such luck. That's the thing about art— though it's here to remind us what we're capable of feeling, some feelings don't feel like they're worth being reminded of.

Discomfort, apprehension, uneasiness, and dread dominate our collection right now. When the merger happened, we had lost another submarine to a metropolipede whose skyscraper feet staggered and stomped too close to the shore while their pod was fighting ours over Gustav Klimt's burning masterpiece. Every downed whale-sub is like the ransacking of a library— an incalculable loss. They say the Malaise is no smarter than the barnacles on our hull, yet the fact that we only recovered the most skin-crawling paintings always felt like a pointed message.

Nonetheless, spirits were high tonight, higher than I ever would've suspected meat substitutes and chalky fruits and vegetables to be able to muster. The carbonated grape juice made its way 'round the table like it was something with ten times the punch, but nobody complained about the lack of intoxication. Three years now, and not a single objection to my no-alcohol policy; deep down, I suspected everyone knew that we had to learn and re-learn how to feel intensely without poisoning ourselves. If I ever had to police someone about it, I knew Téa would do the dirty work for me, anyways.

With all of the passing of food and the throwing of arms in the air, it took me longer than I was comfortable with to notice that Escher had left his seat, and that Magritte's seat had been empty for quite a while longer. I saw his lanky figure stride cautiously past a wall into a side exhibit, just past a slightly askew Remedios Varo piece, *Disturbing Presence*. As I slunk after Escher, I glanced up at it, making contact with the suspicious eyes of a woman alone at the

dinner table, through which a sapling bursts. She isn't unaware of the man's lascivious head that pokes from the chair behind her, leaning tongue-first toward her exposed neck, but she isn't quite aware of it either. It was a perfectly preserved image, flash-frozen in a surreal world: the last moment before things went horribly wrong.

Behind the wall, in the secluded, druidic temple exhibit of Jay Defeo's *The Annunciation*, Escher and Magritte whispered. It was difficult to sift their words from the background noise, but I'd be lying if I said I hadn't strained my ears any more than this to eavesdrop. She spoke first.

"I can't thank you enough for turning away from the wolves... it— I know it's silly—"

"But it's not. You saw in my head, and I saw in yours. The time when you were seven, with the dog—"

"Well, you didn't have to—"

"It's just common decency!"

"Rivera didn't."

A bell rang out like a foghorn in my head. Rivera was the last person she co-tended with—the day the malfunction happened. Behind them, the tsunami that was *The Annunciation*, an abstract seraph of textured paint, seemed in the dingy, dusk lighting to boil over like an octopus erupting from its constricting enclosure. With a shudder veiled behind her voice, Magritte continued.

"That's why the fight broke out. We saw a pack of wolves round the corner— they hadn't been hit nearly as hard with the Malaise as the ones today, and they were clearly hungry. I don't know what happened, but... in an instant, Rivera's mind filled *both* of our heads. We sprang into action before the dogs could take us apart, but we kept missing, because I wasn't fully in it, but my resistance was no more than a repressed thought at that point. We didn't know there was

another pod around the corner, too. They thought our attack was an act of aggression against them— one of our arms breached one of their hearths in the scuffle. It... it was all over after that.”

“That’s not how hearths should work.”

“Well, now I know that, so... thank you.”

And that’s why I was so surprised when I made the intercom rounds that night, through Téa’s humming and Bosch’s shuffling and the grumbling and growling of the inanimate machines, that I didn’t hear a peep from the room at the base of the crow’s nest, back and right from the empty control room, where Escher and Magritte always used to meet. It could almost certainly have been explained away, but in the gossip-starved moment, the only course of action that made sense to me was to sneak down to the room, which was unsettlingly unlit with an ajar door tonight. I glanced to my right, to the yawning void outside the control room’s window. Marine snow floated past in the solid black water like burnt-out stars, only reflecting back the light from within this room, manned by an audience of cracked leather chairs, with only one lucky occupant to speak of: Escher. The control room, like my office, had clearly been designed with a compromise in mind, decorated like a royal Victorian explorer half-assed sprucing up the claustrophobic, industrial catacombs of a naval submarine. With the right crew manning its stations and gazing steadfastly out into the great black and blue beyond the planetarium of a windshield, it might have looked every bit as regal as it was hastily designed to be. Escher was not that crew. Back twisted and neck bent as he leaned haphazardly against the armrest, he looked like a muddy raincoat cast over a bannister. His crooked glasses slid down his thin nose as he turned to greet me, with a raised eyebrow and a split smile.



“Good *morning*, Captain, if it’s as late as I think it is,” his voice crackled. His right hand lifted momentarily, but dropped back down, dead before it could salute.

“As you were,” I said with a roll of my eyes. “Where’s Magritte?”

His entire face sank—I had to blink to make sure it hadn’t melted. He handed me the mailbox from the cabin, already pried open, and tilted it to expose the crumpled paper inside.

“Is this contamina—” I hissed, but he cut me off before it could escape my throat.

“It went through the baleen to sterilize, just like us. It’s fine. Read the note.”

*If I know I’ll be back to speak with you again, I’ll live long enough to give you my sign. It will be there if you want it.*

“She’s gone.” he elaborated, voice faltering before quickly falling flat again. “She took a hearth with her before she left.”

“That’s suicide!”

“No, it’s not.” Escher said, although the only thing in his tone to back this up was distinct resignation. “She’s the strongest person I’ve ever met. I think she just needs to prove this to herself. That... that she can make it out there with nobody but herself inside her head.”

I slumped into the chair next to him, which swayed side to side on its axel, and lifted the bag at my side, which I had known, with a sinking feeling, I would need.

“Can I top you off with something real for once?” I asked, sliding a cup towards him with one hand and uncorking the cool bottle from my bag with the other.

His eyebrows perked up with some reluctance, and I could read from his lifted eyes that this was just another thing he was warring to contain.

“Something... real?”

I nodded with a smirk, swishing the bottle of scotch in hand.

“Nothing realer.”

There were, of course, plenty of things realer than the completely dry beverage I was offering, but Escher was in no place to know that. He exhaled forcefully and impossibly slumped even further back into his seat, but a weak smile tugged at the edge of his lips as he held up his glass to be filled.

For a moment, we both drank deeply and gazed out into the abyss. Tales of leviathans only the drowned truly know still circulated amongst the navigators, just as they always had. Sucker marks from the occasional squid dotted the smudged glass of cockpit, but never once had I seen the perpetrators. Tonight, like every night, it was just us stragglers watching the falling marine snow, remains of what once was there.

“You know, I used to have this dream, when I was a kid, about a place not unlike this,” Escher mumbled. Nothing loosens the tongue like a placebo. “I remember I was in this impossibly high-ceilinged aquarium, you know? I was in the lobby, wandering away from my parents, and I rounded the corner into this massive conference room, dotted with a small audience of suits on a set of bleachers. They faced this super tall window— bigger than this one, even, bigger than any window that could exist outside of a dream. Everyone stared into the empty blue beyond, blue like when the sun used to cut through the water above and cast these whispers, these glints of lights that gave the water texture. And suddenly, out from the blue comes a disturbing presence— this massive, mottled whale, bigger than Ol’ Rhosey, even, bigger than any whale that could exist outside of the dream. It didn’t roar like some monster, it didn’t flex its jaws, but its slimy, bulbous eye roved across the room until it reached little me, only three feet tall and peering through the doorway. Without blinking, the whale bumped against the

glass, which boomed dully. It was far from breaking; it didn't even bend... but I knew the whale was holding back.

"I told her the dream too, you know. That's why Magritte and I sit in the room by the crow's nest— or, used to sit. It's so we don't have to look out that window. It was her idea, but... what I'm saying is, I think I understand where she was coming from."

"I'm sure neither of you expected to be living in the belly of a whale now."

"I don't think you understand, Captain... Magritte wasn't. But it's where she lives now. Only now has she entered the belly of the whale."

Another pause.

"I don't know what I'm going to do now that I'm out of the hearth." Escher lamented.

I shrugged. "Well, what did you do before you shared a brain? You had one that worked perfectly well on its own yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that. All you need to do now is go back to that brain."

Escher turned his head to me with his split smile again, straightening up to see me better.

"How old are you again?" he asked slyly.

"Twelve." I mumbled shyly.

"Wise beyond your years, I tell ya... certainly enough to fill out that baggy coat. Doesn't happen every day," he said with a shake of his head and a swig of his drink. "Magritte and I once talked about that— neither of us wants to be stuck smack in the middle of our twenties. One of us said we'd go back to twelve if we had the chance, and one of us said we'd skip ahead to thirty in a heartbeat. Funny thing is, I can't remember which one said which, now."

He turned back to the window, to the open, empty sea. "Captain, respectfully, I think you're wrong. I don't think I can go back."

“Oh?”

“Her mind felt like coming home. In my line of work, everyone’s mind is a labyrinth in the dark, but hers is an autumn corn maze at dusk, one I’ve walked through countless times and countless years before. With every turn, I know the way home. And when I look up...” he trailed off here, eyes glazing over a bit. “...when I look up, I can still see the stars.”

After a long moment, a suffocating moment that desperately needed a punctuating sigh, he turned back to me, nudging his glasses back up to his eyes.

“I don’t think I can go back because I think part of me is left there—in her. Or maybe, part of her is planted here, in me. A stalk has germinated inside my head.”

There was nothing ahead of us, and nothing behind us. Even with the floodlights on, nothing could penetrate the wall of water draped over the road ahead.

“What are you going to do, Escher?” I asked tentatively. “What can you do if you can’t go back?”

Escher pressed his thumbs into the armrests of the seat. His lip twitched a bit before he answered an answer he did not truly know.

“I’m going to wait for her sign.”