

Undercurrents

by
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Fifteen years of being tossed like flotsam on unfriendly seas, and still Elsh wasn't totally immune to sea-sickness. Dark grey spumes of spray washed over the cramped flat bottomed boat as he negotiated the narrow creeks and shifting channels. The sky was full of rain as dark and dirty as the sea.

Inside the cabin Elsh pulled his old greatcoat around him. Nights like this should be good for business, he thought, even if the business wasn't a particularly good one. Hell, everyone had to make a living. He scratched his scalp through the bush of curls on his head. He envied his bastard of a brother-in-law, sitting in a warm, modern tow-barge waiting while a no-hoper of a bum-boat pilot plied the seas, doing the dangerous work, finding ships aground on the shifting flats.

A light flickered on the instrument panel. He couldn't even afford to buy a decent signal tracker let alone a tow-barge. Resignedly, he turned the wheel and homed in on the signal, wondering what sort of boat he'd find. All sorts got stranded here, and the potential pickings were good, especially if it was a factory-ship - all those captive customers. He could do with a big sale.

The storm grew worse. Lightning turned the dull grey vista a brilliant grey instead. Elsh screwed up his eyes, but the mud banks were nearly invisible blurring into the sea-sky interface.

The boat tossed wildly and Elsh tasted bile in his throat. Fighting down the nausea, he called on all his instincts to keep the boat afloat and on course. It was as if he was homing in on the source of the storm rather than a simple distress signal.

And then he was in the eye of the storm, relative calm hit him, the violent dull thud and smack of waves stopped almost immediately. Through the grey-out loomed a silhouette. Strange and enchanting, black against grey.

Shit, he thought, that's no factory ship. It's not even a research boat from the deep-water labs.

The craft was small, elegant, archaic. Twenty feet long it gave the impression of being three times the size. A miniature clipper, shredded sails hanging from its mast, stuck fast on a sandbank. It looked like a boat from the pages of a child's story book.

Elsh manoeuvred carefully, afraid that the boat might evaporate like a dream if he bumped into it. Killing his engines he clambered onto the soaking, slippery deck. The cold bit through his grubby woollen mitts and sank its teeth into his bones. Slowly he prepared a grappling hook and rope. Wrapping his arm around a rail for support he swung the rope in a circle, released it and watched the miserable arc it described as it fell short of the clipper and into the sea.

Laboriously, he pulled the rope in. Again he watched the hook and rope snake through the night. It was a better shot, the grappling hook snared its target. Hastily he threaded the other end of the rope into a small on-deck winch. He kicked the start lever and the winch began to shudder and grate, the rope went taut and the two boats closed.

There was no sign of life on the clipper. No one to help him aboard. Even the portholes were firmly shuttered against the elements.

The boat was made of wood and metal - no sign of fibre glass or plastics. The metal was brass, old, obviously well cared for, hardly tarnished. The sound of hinges made him turn. A hatch set into the deck opened upwards into the greyness. A warm, rosy glow spilled out - a comforting oasis in a brumal wasteland.

'You'd better come below,' said a voice. It was a woman's voice, evoking summer. A voice that made Elsh think of gardens and beautiful places he'd never visited.

Stepping through the hatch and shutting it against the cold outside he gazed at the interior of the boat. Delicate tapestries hung on the walls. The floor was carpeted with a luxurious mat woven from pastel lilac and lemon wool. Matching silk cushions were scattered about the floor. The whole interior was taken up by this one chamber, yet there was no sign of the portholes which could be seen from the outside. There were no navigational instruments. Even the hatch had melted from view after Elsh had closed it behind him.

A lamp stood in the centre of the room. Its light was tinged red and pink. A smell of apple blossom and roses hung in the air.

'Welcome to my home,' said the woman.

Elsh stared around, not quite taking everything in. 'How long have you been stranded?' he asked.

'Years...' the woman looked sadly into a middle distance that Elsh could not see. Her hair was as white as the flowing dress which swirled waterfall-like round her slim body. A silver locket hung from her neck.

He hadn't really listened to what she had said, he was too taken with her appearance. With an effort, he spoke. 'I've got the usual stuff. Alcohol, hallucinogens, some stimulants. Help pass the time while I arrange for a tow-barge to come and pull you off the bank.' He still hadn't taken his eyes off her. 'Although, your boat's pretty small. I might even be able to pull her off with my old tub. Cheaper that way too, I wouldn't need to radio my brother-in-law and his tow-barge. Cut out the

middle man, eh?' He faltered, his sales pitch drying up and dying like a stream in the desert at noon.

'Passing the time is no problem,' she said, smiling. 'Or, perhaps it is, perhaps that's exactly the point.'

He looked at her, puzzled. 'Listen lady,' he began.

'Aileey,' she said.

'Aileey.' Speaking the name aloud, felt like he was taking part in a sacred ritual, calling on elemental forces, summoning mysteries.

'It isn't just me who needs rescuing,' she said. 'We can help each other Elsh.'

'How do you know my name?'

'Sit down, you must be tired.'

No, he wanted to say. I've got a living to earn. Stranded mariners to supply and rescue. No time to waste. Instead, he sank into a cushion.

'There is something I need,' she said. 'Rescue of sorts. But not the sort you're usually involved in.'

'I don't understand.'

'I need someone to rescue me from myself, someone to take my life away. You,' she smiled.

The words stunned him, was it a game? 'What do you mean?'

'What I say.'

'Kill you? That's absurd.'

'You don't understand,' she said. 'Your reward will be immense.'

'Look, I don't do murder. I do some dealing, some contract work for tow-barges. I'm no hit-man. I'm trying to live my own life not end other people's.'

'Your life is the reward I have in mind for you,' she said. 'Our life-lines are linked, look.'

She raised her hand and pointed a finger at one of the tapestries. Woven into the fabric he could see a small figure, her, embracing a naked man. He looked closer, he was the man.

‘What’s this mean?’

‘It means you’re bound to me. You will help me. You love me.’

‘I could go, now,’ he said, confused. He moved to get up and found that he lacked the will. Instead, he asked her: ‘Why do you want to die?’

She sighed. The noise was deep, anguished, exaggerated - more like a tormented choir than one woman. ‘I’ve lived long enough.’

He did love her, he wanted to take her in his arms, comfort her.

‘Kill me now,’ she said. ‘Take my life and enrich your own. It’s very easy.’ She fingered her locket and started to ease it open. ‘One small thing, such a small thing, and this is yours!’

It was a fine locket. Ornate, incredibly valuable. Part of him weighed its worth. An old dream welled up, a dream of a tow-barge and a warm office, a good life, an easy life. Another part of him watched enchanted as Ailey slowly unclasped the pendant. As the locket opened a brilliant phosphor glare burned his brain, a bedlamite roar reverberated inside his head. Pain, anguish, misery and horror raged. The boundaries of his body, incapable of containing such intensity, disintegrated. He dispersed in many dimensions and the relief was exquisite.



When he grew accustomed to the euphoria he opened his eyes and let his sight adjust to the subdued green freshness of the forest. Judging by the delicious smell of rich earth and herbs it must be high summer. He inhaled. There’s been a shower, he thought. A gentle canopy of steam percolated through the vegetation. Bird song and the buzz of insects played softly in the air. Butterflies danced on subtle thermals.

He walked, unsure of where he was going.

The forest path forked before him. Instinctively he followed the left-hand path to a clearing. Ailey was chained to a tree, she hung

limply in her shackles. He stopped. Momentarily, he thought she was dead. But then she moved her head and stared at him.

‘You’re bleeding!’ he said.

‘I’m a woman,’ she smiled, skin like alabaster with scarlet rivulets running from tiny wounds.

‘Who did this?’

‘The world... can you smell fire?’

He could smell it - faintly sulphurous, sooty. He could feel it coming. His forehead was wet with anxiety and heat. The forest, once temperate, was like a tropical jungle. Trees swayed. Earthquake? The humidity was overbearing, a physical presence filling his nostrils and ears, muffling, distorting, playing tricks with his hearing. Was it his own breath he could hear or giant footsteps? He closed his eyes.

‘Esh.’ And again louder, ‘Esh.’ And then stridently, ‘Esh!’

He opened his eyes with a start and found that he was on his knees by Aileey’s side.

‘It’s almost here,’ she said. ‘The dragon.’

The heat was intense, choking. ‘Take my locket, keep it safe. Slay me before the dragon defiles me,’ she sobbed.

And then his hand was on the hilt of a sword he hadn’t realized he was wearing. Before he knew what he was doing he had drawn the blade.

‘Yes,’ she cried.

He didn’t move, he just stared at the weapon in his hands and the wild-eyed woman chained to the tree. He didn’t belong here. He was a victim in another world, not this one. Why is it, he thought, that I always end up being coerced into things I want no part of?

A terrible stillness announced the arrival of the dragon. It was huge and awful. Black and deadly with wings the size of houses and teeth that defied the cruellest of imaginations. Its eyes, fired with white heat came to rest on Aileey. It reared its head and prepared to unleash its breath.

I don’t want to be here, he thought. I don’t want to kill her. I don’t

want to be involved. This isn't real. Elsh tightened his grip on the sword handle and as if in a bad dream stepped in front of Aileey.

'No...' she screamed as a plume of flame engulfed him.

The last thing that he heard was the despair in that scream, a despair that sounded to hell and back, it was worse than being burned alive.



When he woke it was in the chamber of the clipper. Cushions embraced him, pastel colours reassured him and on a tapestry over his head a dragon devoured everything in its path. He shuddered.

Aileey was by his side. 'That was foolish,' she said. 'The locket and misery are still mine. The locket, and joy could have been yours... next time.'

Still groggy, he squinted at the locket and in spite of what had happened saw it with a trader's eye. 'How much for the locket?'

'You can't buy it.'

He said nothing.

'If I tried to sell it,' she continued, 'It would char and turn to dust. So would I and so would you. It can only be exchanged as a gift, given in return for a favour. That's how I came by it,' she looked away elusively.

'Tell me,' he said.

'The locket lets you live apart from the worlds of others, gives you whatever you desire. Except... after a time, when you want to let go and drift into oblivion... then the locket demands something of someone on your behalf...' she tailed off.

'Someone to kill you?'

'The ultimate surrender - life and the locket.'

'And you chose me?'

'I think that the locket knows who its next owner should be.'

'You killed someone to get it?' he looked at her and couldn't see her as a killer, she was too frail, too beautiful.

'Just as you must do.'

The woman's deranged and I'm hallucinating, he thought. He closed his eyes and wished he was back in his bum-boat thinking dark thoughts about the world. Perhaps if he kept his eyes closed everything would be all right, everything would be calm and no one would force him to do anything he didn't feel like doing.

And then Aileey unclasped the locket again. Without opening his eyes he knew what she'd done, and when he realized what she'd done he didn't much feel like opening his eyes. He started to stand, but rope bit into his wrists and ankles. He opened his eyes.

Wraith like, Aileey moved around him. The room they were in was like a dungeon. Stone walls. A clinging damp coldness. The air dank as though laden with fungal spores. He breathed in and imagined his lungs seeded with spreading filaments of mycelium, fruiting bodies rupturing the fleshy passages which fed his blood with oxygen. The image was strong and only shrugged off with difficulty. He focused on the tiny barred windows at the top of the walls, something tangible, something to take his mind off... his mind.

Aileey stood at his right side. In one hand she held a slim dagger, in the other a rapier. With the dagger she cut the thongs securing his right wrist. Tenderly, she placed the rapier in his hand. Elsh looked at her, puzzled, wondering what game she was playing now. As if he didn't know.

'Kill me,' she urged, bearing down on him, running her finger along the dagger's edge. 'If you don't, I'll kill you - and neither of us wants that.'

The rapier was limp in his hands. She leaned over him. He smelled intoxicating undercurrents of rose petals and apple blossoms.

'I mean it,' she said. The dagger point pressed against his throat,

nicking his skin. The rapier fell clanging against the stone floor. She screamed and levered her blade into his neck. He bled to death in fine, strong spurts.



When he came round he ran his fingers around his neck checking for damage, he seemed to have escaped unscathed. Aileey was sitting with her back to him, the muscles in her back knotted with tension and anger.

‘Aileey, I’m sorry.’

She turned to face him. Her glare silenced him. He couldn’t meet those eyes, instead his gaze fell upon her locket again. He wanted it. He knew enough to fear it, knew that he would never sell it. Twice he’d refused it, and yet...

‘The locket,’ he said, wearily.

Aileey’s eyes softened. She nodded and opened the clasp once more. The clipper’s interior shifted, but only slightly. Elsh braced himself for pain, but none came. A bowl of fruit appeared on the rug beside them. It was full of apples, bright red skins buffed as bright as moonlit frost.

‘This time, it’s easy,’ whispered Aileey. ‘Just pretend I’m the evil queen and give me an apple to bite.’

He picked up an apple and turned it in his hands. Holding it close to his nose, he inhaled. Death smelt sweet. He held it out to her.

She took it and bit into it. ‘It’s done,’ she said. ‘Thank you. The locket’s yours now.’ Her eyes closed and the muscles in her face grew limp. It was an unspectacular death.

Elsh unhooked the locket from her neck and put it around his own. The tapestries faded, cushions fell to dust and he was standing in the bare wooden cabin of an old clipper. He opened the hatch and went up on deck. A warm sun beat down on turquoise waters. It might be fun, he thought, to sail a little clipper boat to God knows where.

The tide rose and the boat floated free. Elsh looked at the little bum-boat tied to his clipper. He remembered it from a long time ago - the memories weren't pleasant. He unhooked the line connecting him to the past and cast it into the sea. He sat in the sunshine with the beautiful locket.

Smiling he set sail for the future. ❀

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