

## **Fish Stocks Limited**

Michael Summers

A Tale of Fish, Love and Copious Quantities of Rum

Part One of the Infinity Fish Trilogy

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Check out my author profile on:

<http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/MichaelSummers>

Email me on:

[fishstockslimited@hotmail.com](mailto:fishstockslimited@hotmail.com)

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## **Chapter 1 – Piscogenesis**

Go to the Fish, O sluggard; consider her ways and be wise!  
- Ancient Piscador saying

Expiscor. Run that name over your tongue, let it drip like the branches of the great Hook Trees in the morning dew, let it shine like the Smug (that conceited little star), let it go out and catch a meaning like the Piscadors who bait and cast and wait. Expiscor. To fish out, to find out, to discover - and what discoveries! Let us imagine ourselves falling in upon this most implausible globe from a great height, from the orbital path of Xiphias, its scimitar shadow moon. We see the curve of the globe. No blue to be seen on this sphere; like an emerald of deepest green and bearded wisps of cloud-white our little planet traces its ellipse through the black blanket of night. We fall further and discover the great Mist Sea, the pea-soup ocean that covers the globe and hides its maternal soil from view. Like islands the green swathes of the Hook Tree forests stand with their canopies above the mist. Falling further we can see individual trees, their foliage of myriad jade crochets riffing and rippling at the casualness of the lukewarm breeze. We see movement in the canopy of the Hook Trees – monkey men on the hop and skip and, of course, the cast and reel. Look a little further and we might even catch a glimpse of something elusive and sinusoidal in the Mist Sea below, that happy medium.

How frivolous the Creator's hand, or blind, for either such adjective would perhaps provide the explanation for the incongruous nature of this mist-bound world. Then again, perhaps it is wisdom in its purest form which pervades this land, like the Mist, and makes its true design so murky to the mortal eye. With this in mind, let us study the bizarre primary ecosystem that must surely catch the attention of any observer incident to Expiscor. We have mentioned in passing its three main species already, but let us go into some greater detail.

First, then, looms the stately Hook Tree (*Termes camur*). It is difficult to describe the dimensions of the Hook Tree, other than to say it is vast, for what familiar reference point should one use to describe its size? To say that the trunk of a Hook

Tree is ten times as wide as a cloud and as tall as a small hill leaves much latitude for the imagination, but no better sense of scale can be given. Perhaps the most salient feature of these arborescent giants is, apart from their size, their foliage. Each leaf of the Hook Tree is a marvel, forming as it does that most useful of trinkets, the Hook, complete with a loop at the top which just so happens to allow the passage of a thread made from the fibre of the Hook Tree's outer skin. Just why the trees bear such convenient features is as yet unsolved by any thinker on the planet of Expiscor, or any other planet for that matter. Certainly it is difficult to see what evolutionary advantage the tree could gain from its Hooks. It could be speculated that they aid in transpiration, deter herbivory, facilitate gas exchange and various other more or less plausible explanations. Perhaps there is little advantage to them at all and they merely represent a very likely shape, a low-lying peak in the local fitness landscape. Roll the dice enough times and such things will emerge, so it is said. Just who it is who does the rolling is, of course, beyond the scope of science and reasonable speculation.

But what of the movement in the boughs of the Hook Trees? What creature lives in so precarious a fashion, far above the veil of the Mist Sea, lofty in habitat and nimble of feet, hand and tail? Our next species, *Homo piscador*, surely does, and does it well. Medium stature and wily, stupid, noble, base, sophisticated, crude, aloof and worldly (as all dominant species tend to be), the Piscadors are defined by their contradictory nature and their sole passion; Fishing. To pursue this activity they first take a Hook from the Hook Trees. They then take fibres from a nearby young bough, the skin of which must still be greenish, strong and lithe, and strip this to an improbably thin fibre. They do this many times and weave these fibres together until they have a thin cord of such high tensile strength that it could easily bear the full weight of two portly Fishers. To make the cord stronger they trample it with their feet for three days, a process known as "treading a fine line". This fine line they pass through the convenient loop in the top of a Hook, tie it in a complicated figure called a Love Hitch (which takes a dexterous Fisher at least five years to learn how to tie), and wind the other end round and round the end of a severed Hook Tree branch of small or medium girth, depending on their preference, which is in the shape of an L. The next step is to drill holes in two other hand-sized pieces of Hookwood and slot the bail of twine into this fitting. In such a way, if something were to bite and pull on the Hook and move away very fast, the twine would pay out at a rate that the Fisher could control by pushing the two other pieces together to create friction on the bail. The unfortunate quarry could then be reeled in by rotating the end of the L. This is the basic apparatus of the Fishers, and it has remained unchanged for countless generations.

Thirdly and finally, we have already caught a glimpse of movement in the mist below out of the corner of our eye, and are no doubt wondering what it is. It is scaly and silver, whiplash quick and a muse of grace, a little like the light of Xiphias. Its name is *Pisces infinitum*, the Infinity Fish. It is good to know how such a peculiarly beautiful thing came into being, for the Infinity Fish is as old as Expiscor and older. Indeed, the Infinity Fish is as old as the Universe (and it would be meaningless to say older), for in the chaos that preceded the Big Bang, in that maelstrom of improbability, into that bubbling, broiling, bumptious broth there came into being by sheer chance the archetype of fishiness.

This first Fish was heavy with roe, and it waited for its spawning place to form as it swam through the icy blackness of space, to the world of Expiscor. When this ball

of rock had first coalesced, cooled and given birth to life, the Infinity Fish dove gladly into the new shrouds of steaming hot Mist and deposited its roe at the base of the progenitor of the Hook Tree. The Infinity Fish grew in numbers until the sea of mist was full of darting shoals, as numerous as the stars in the sky from where their mother had journeyed. The fish wallowed and bucked, the pisconification of joy.

The aeons passed and from the primordial mist emerged the first animalcules indigenous to Expiscor. Billions of years saw these microscopic movers and shakers grow until they were big enough to scale the rough trunks of the Hook Trees and proudly crawl the branches. And to crawl branches takes skill and a large brain. So the Piscadors became clever, and with cleverness came inextricably the ability to fish.

So the Infinity Fish had a predator, yet a sensitive one. The Piscadors fished only what they needed to cook their favourite dish, a sort of gumbo made with a good strong stock and thickened with the pulped starchy fruit of the Hook Tree. The stock was by far the most important part of the dish, and competitions have been and are still held each year to see who can make the best. It is said that the longer a fish takes to catch, the better the stock, and good fishers would deliberately spend hours teasing a fish to try and make the perfect ingredient. Perhaps they deceive themselves and the whole thing is a myth, but in a treetop world above the clouds without the slightest hint of science, myths are a form of truth. Whatever. The belief that a long battle with a fish leads to a good stock meant that for most of their history the Piscadors caught fish at a relatively gentle rate, for they savoured quality over quantity in their culinary endeavours. A balance emerged.

So the Infinity Fish still enjoyed its asymptotic freedom, the Piscadors were well fed, and Hook Tree seeds were spread far and wide by the discardings of the gumbo makers. It seemed that everyone was happy. It seemed this way, that is, until one young Piscador fell out of a tree.

This is his story.

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## **Chapter 2 – The Fall**

It is said that when you are about to die (or very nearly so), your life flashes in front of your eyes. This was indeed the case for a young Piscador called Ambrosius Codwich as he fell from a branch of one of the tallest Hook Trees after slipping on a carelessly discarded rotten Hook Fruit. And what better place to take up his story, for we can use his fall and its associated recollections as a kind of slide-show of his life. An excellent way of becoming acquainted with him as a character.

As Ambrosius started his fall he was overwhelmed by terror and his mind did a sort of very fast rewind until he was in the womb again. He was given the unique experience of being able to replay his very first thought. Bizarrely, this was “I deny absolutely everything.” It occurred to Ambrosius that perhaps he had committed acts of such scurrilousness in a previous life that his embryonic musings were still centred around escaping their consequences. This would explain a lot, in terms of bad karma, about the misfortunes of his current life, and perhaps about the unfolding of its end. But more on both of these in a short while.

Passing the utmost branches of the Hook Tree, Ambrosius' mind jumped forward several months to the day of his birth. The labour was a long one. On the birthing

bough, the doctors and nurses gathered, using subtle simples of herbs to alleviate the mother's pain and speed the birth. At last the child was born, and in the tradition of the Piscadors, the baby's second name was chosen according to the first thing the mother saw. Well, it had been a long labour and one of the doctors had become peckish. On the sill of a window, pooled in a golden circle of sunlight that made it quite unmissable to a woman seeking inspiration, there it was: a half-eaten codwich (the codwich is the second most favoured culinary creation of the Piscadors and consists of a fillet of Infinity Fish between two slices of bread made from the ground husk of Hook Tree fruit.). After that, the first name was simply chosen as the child's father's second name (whose mother had allegedly seen the much more glamorous light of the divine as she lay back with babe in arms, for Ambrosius means “divine”), and so it was that Ambrosius Codwich came into the world.

Ambrosius fell through the canopy, Hookleaves whipping at his skin. His next earliest memory hit him like a slap in the face. He was two years old, and just starting to learn to fish (at about the same time as he was learning to walk, but that is comparatively inconsequential). All the other boys and girls were catching small fry and reeling them up dancing and glittering in the morning sun, like jewels of happiness. But Ambrosius' line dangled empty from the tree into the mist. No fish would bite. He stayed long after all the other young Piscadors had left, hoping that he would catch something, but the Fish shunned his Bait. Even at such an early age he felt useless.

The fall continued and in his recollection Ambrosius was six years old. He had by now learned that his uselessness at fishing was something permanent and not, as he had hoped, something he would grow out of. He was on the broad playbough at school and the other children were dancing round him, singing and chanting.

“Oi, Codwich, caught a fish yet?” That was Hook Fist, the school bully. Ambrosius could take that. “No, didn't think so. You better give me all your dinner today otherwise I'll punch you on the nose!” Ambrosius gave him all his dinner and got punched anyway.

“Stop being so horrible to him,” came a voice from one side as Ambrosius cowered on the floor. “Are you okay?” The voice was directed at Ambrosius. The owner was Sunbeam Lightning. This was the first time she had spoken to Ambrosius and it would be the start of a long lasting friendship. She was a strange girl, plain looking, with a good heart, although stormy as her name would suggest. At the time Ambrosius had been glad of someone to feel sorry for him, but later he would rue such sympathy. The memory faded.

Ambrosius was clear of the canopy now, and could see the bare trunks of the Hook trees that stretched down starkly into the floating blanket of mist far below. He reached for a passing branch but just succeeded in taking the skin off his fingertips. With the pain came another echo from the past, floating wraith-like in front of his eyes. Ambrosius was twelve years old and standing crying in the gimcrack treetop hut his forefathers had built many moons ago. All his relatives were there for this most sombre day. His father had choked to death on a fish-bone, so the doctor had said, and today was his funeral. Ambrosius knew that the doctor's pronouncement was only partly true – his father, Rainstorm Ambrosius, was a partaker of the Stone (the Stone of the Hook Fruit contains a potent drug which, when ground up and insufflated or smoked induces wild visions and a sweating, all-encompassing feeling of power. It is ironic that this feeling of power is accompanied by a great weakness of body and

mind which leaves the user quite useless), and had died from the habit to which he had dedicated so much of his life. There was a fish-bone found in the back of his mouth, it is true, but the question of whether he would have choked on it were it not for his heavy intoxication remained unanswered.

Whatever Rainstorm's habits, Ambrosius still loved him as a young son does his father. It was with sleepless, tearful eyes that he approached his father's casket. He had been dreading this moment. All eyes were on him for the fulfilment of the sacred tradition of the Laying On Of Fish, which fell to the next in the family line. As the only child and heir, that meant Ambrosius. The Fish had to be caught by him and placed on his father's chest, otherwise his father's spirit would not be able to rest. Ambrosius had been up all night with his Hook and Line, desperately trying to catch something. But it seemed the Fates would have no mercy on him even now. No Fish had bitten, and it was with unspeakable shame that Ambrosius approached his father's casket.

"Father, I'm sorry," he said with a trembling voice. All around him heads shook and tongues clicked in disapproval. "This was all I could get. Please, forgive me..." Ambrosius lifted something small out of his pocket and placed it on his father's chest. It was an intricately carved fish made of Hookwood.

"I carved it myself."

He knew it was not good enough, and so did everyone around him. His mother tried to smile at Ambrosius to say it was all right, but the tear at the edge of her eye told of her disappointment. They rolled his coffin off the funeral bough without a real fish to pacify his father's soul and the Mist enveloped him for eternity. From that day on the Mist held a special terror for Ambrosius, for somewhere in it lurked his father's restless soul. This terror pressed upon him like a knife point as he fell now towards the wispy whiteness below.

The wind whistled in his ears and his memory threw another bite at him. Suddenly he was fifteen. He was sitting in the darkness of his family's hut, a look of intense concentration on his face. He was carving again.

"What are you making now?" came a voice the doorway. It was Sunbeam, and she made Ambrosius look up from his work.

"Nothing," he said curtly and carried on working quick strokes across a piece of Hookwood.

"If it's nothing, why are you wasting a day like this indoors? You should get out more, you know."

Ambrosius sighed. "If you must know," he said pompously, "it's an adding machine. You have rods like this," (he held one up), "and beads like this," (he held some up), "and the beads slot on the rods and you can move them across to represent different numbers and do sums on them. I read about how to make it in an old book that I borrowed off Wiseman Cobweb.

"Wiseman is a crazy old coot. You know, there's a new codwich bar opened on tree seventy. I thought you might feel like inviting me along sometime..."

But Ambrosius hadn't heard. He was too busy carving.

"Then again, maybe not," said Sunbeam after a while. "I may not have many potential suitors, but I'm not going to ask you on a date twice if you can't even acknowledge me the first time. Maybe I'll ask Fathead Treegirth instead. My dearest Fathead. At least he can fish."

Ten seconds later this comment sunk into Ambrosius' consciousness with a sting and he looked up, but Sunbeam was gone already. He felt a sensation of loss, for some part of him realised he had missed something important. But the shame that comes with years of fishlessness had forced him to quickly subdue his emotions, and he went back to his carving without really realising just what had passed him by.

The feeling of loss hit Ambrosius as he fell past the middle branches of the Hook Tree, and he realised he had been a fool. He had spent hours at his abacus and reading his books, and he had acquired an ethereal, useless type of wisdom. He could predict the movements of the stars, calculate the number of fish required to feed the population of Expiscor for the next ten years or even work out how many stories high a shack could be built without it collapsing, yet he had nobody to share these things with. If only he had set aside more time for Sunbeam...

The next memory was on him before he had much time to be sad. He was eighteen and it was the Great Dance that marked the end of his formal schooling. Everyone had a partner to go with. Ambrosius had left it until the last minute to ask Sunbeam to accompany him, for he knew that she was plain and clever and so unpopular with the other boys, so he wouldn't have much competition. So he had taken her for granted and not asked. He was mistaken. Fathead Treegirth was her partner, so no, she couldn't come with him. Ambrosius stayed at home with his abacus.

Ambrosius could see the Mist Sea rolling vast and opaque below him now, and he was terrified. He had never really spent much time thinking about death, but now he was making up for lost time. It seemed to him that if there was some kind of judgement for his soul then he would probably be found wanting. As he watched his life play out before his eyes he certainly felt like a failure.

"You're getting married?" he remembered himself saying, one eyebrow raised and a look of disbelief on his face. He was twenty two years old.

"Yes," said Sunbeam. "I shall be Mrs. Sunbeam Treegirth this time next year, when the Smug is out and the Hookblossom falls."

"But Treegirth..." Ambrosius thought hard about how not to be offensive. "You're sure he's right for you?"

"Yes. Well, sort of sure. As sure as one can be. How can one ever be sure of anything? I mean, nothing's sure. But as sure as anything can be sure, I'm sure. Sure."

Ambrosius' expression must have spoken volumes, because Sunbeam didn't wait for a reply.

"I didn't expect you to understand. I just thought I better let you know, that's all. As a... as a friend."

"Okay," said Ambrosius.

"That's all you've got to say? Okay?"

Ambrosius shrugged.

"I'll never understand you!" spat Sunbeam, and Ambrosius winced in his recollection as she stormed out.

And that was it. Ambrosius hit the mist and felt the moisture condense on his skin. He didn't think to scream. It was over. Dead. He was the late Ambrosius Codwich. He felt the sickening jerk and a pain shot through his body. That must be the ground, he thought.

I'm a goner.

But that wasn't quite the case. There was a terrifying ripping noise, a quick but non-fatal deceleration and then a further fall of about ten feet, during which he was

decidedly chilly. Ambrosius lay still on the damp, mossy ground for a good thirty seconds before he realised what had happened. By good fortune and the mysteries of Providence, a Piscador's Hook had caught on his trousers a short distance above the ground. Had he stopped instantly because of this he would have died, for such a quick stop would have had the same effect as hitting the ground. The Hook, however, had torn a line up his trousers, had caught on his waistband and with one final jerk pulled the trousers clean off him. The speed of the fall had been checked and, whilst knocking the wind out of him, his final contact with the ground was not fatal.

Recovering his breath, Ambrosius stood up shakily. The Mist was cold and damp, and he shook with the terror of it. Shapes coalesced and meandered at the edge of his vision, threatening spectres of things he could not describe. In his mind the tendrils of mist formed bats, rats, wolves, spiders, terrible monsters that were beyond classification. Above all other imaginings, however, he trembled because he knew that in the mist, somewhere, his father was coming for him. Was that really a fork of mist in the distance, or was it the fumes from a Stone pipe? His blood ran icy in his veins.

For the first time in his life he had his feet on the ground, and the bone-trembling, spine-chilling horror of it was indescribable. It was taboo to even talk about the ground up above, but he had heard the occasional furtive comment or whispered allusion. People said that the Mist was the ghosts of the dead, and that if you breathed it in you turned into a flesh-eating zombie. Ambrosius didn't feel like a zombie. He patted himself down. Only a few bruises. His father was there in the mist somewhere, high on Stone and displeased at Ambrosius' puny parting gift. He didn't want to meet him. How could he look him in the eye after his fishless funeral? Suddenly Ambrosius was very eager to get away, to run away from his failure to his father, to escape this world of fish and death. Panic did not come naturally to him, but certainly there was a more than pressing desire in him to get back to the safety of the canopy. The Hook Trees had rough bark, easily climbed by the strong hands, prehensile feet and tail of the well-adapted Piscadors. He could be back up in the land of the living in ten minutes.

Ambrosius turned to the nearest tree trunk and found a hand hold. He was just about to start his ascent when something made him take one last glance over his shoulder. Just what made him do this he would never know. Could such a careless movement of one's head change one's life for ever? What did those swirling mists hold that could channel the full force of fate into such a lowly outcast? He looked through the coiling vapours and blinked, trying to dispel the sleek vision that had materialised before him. But there was no mistaking the streamlined shape that undulated through the mist.

For just one millisecond, Ambrosius made eye contact with the Infinite in its own habitat. It is difficult to describe the effect of this. Suddenly every single atom of the world had meaning; all was connected and living; everything was pain and rapture all at once. The swirling of the mist was the swirling of stars, the scales of the fish reflected a thousand different Ambrosius' back at him. But most of all Ambrosius could see in that fish's eyes an everlasting blackness, a void of such unmentionable depths that it seemed to suck in Ambrosius' very soul. Suddenly the blood rushed from his head and the world swam fishlike before his eyes. Before he knew what was happening, Ambrosius collapsed onto the ground and the Mist rolled deathly pallid around him.



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### Chapter 3 – An Apparition and A Resurrection

Just how long Ambrosius lay there he could not tell, but when he woke he was freezing and disorientated. The diffuse light that filtered down through the mist from the invisible Smug stung his eyes. The fish was gone, but that moment of eye contact...

The thought was severed by a terrifying noise juddering through the mist that froze Ambrosius on the spot. There was a low base rumble that shook his belly and made his knees weak, a teeth-jarring clang and a high-pitched wheeze. It repeated rhythmically and seemed to be getting nearer. There was no time to climb. Instinctively Ambrosius dived into the fronds of some slimy green Mist Kelp at the foot of the nearest Hook Tree and lay trying not to move, but shivering in fear and coldness nonetheless. Through bulging eyes Ambrosius peeped out from under the mercifully thick straps of the kelp that hid him.

At first there was just Mist and noise; a terrible rhythm as if the devil himself were playing drums and a chorus of his demons were humming threateningly in between the beats. The ground pulsed. The mist parted and suddenly all Ambrosius could see was yellow. The vast yellow shape rumbled and guttered through the churning fog and then, without warning, stopped in front of the kelp. It was as though the ground itself was trembling at this monster's presence.

Now Ambrosius could read, and read very well. At this moment though it seemed as though this faculty were somehow inappropriate, even though it engaged automatically and shouted at him from the side of the nicotine-yellow leviathan in big black letters:

“Fish Stocks Limited”

Oh. What did that mean? If ever a sentence had harmonics, this one did. It made something flare up in Ambrosius, something which had been communicated to him by the eye-to-eye with the Infinity Fish before his faint. Fish Stocks Limited. Infinity, it seemed, was under threat.

The yellow monster turned and started off in another direction. Ambrosius watched as the mist enveloped it and the noise grew fainter. His mind still reeling from his encounter with the great chugging jaundiced beast, Ambrosius extracted himself from the fronds of kelp and quickly started his ascent of the Hook Tree. As the ground left him he felt safer somehow, more alive. In a matter of minutes he was out of the ghostly mist and breathing fresh, dry air that tasted like summer and Hookblossom. The feeling of well-being that the clear atmosphere brought stood in sharp contrast to the terror of the ground. Ambrosius put all the energy he had into climbing and scaled the tree as though he were running up it.

“You're dead!” came the shrill accusation of young Moonrise Husk, as Ambrosius covered the last few feet and at last sprawled on a branch again. “I saw you fall! You're dead!”

Ambrosius was too out of breath to talk. Instead he lay panting, feeling the last dampness of the mist drying off his clothing along with the sweat of his exertions in the afternoon sun.

“I'm telling Leatherskin Wrinkly that you fell!”

“Don't make a fuss,” managed Ambrosius. “I'm alive now aren't I? Come and feel my pulse if you want, listen to my breathing.”

“But you've been down in the mist! The mist is for the dead and...” the colour suddenly drained from Moonrise's face. She put a hand up to her mouth in terror. “Zombies! You're a zombie!”

“I'm not a...” started Ambrosius, too late. Moonrise was all ready running, a shrill frightened squeal emitting from her throat that warbled with the rhythm of her pounding feet. Ambrosius sighed. He had never understood the superstitions of his people. If something had a pleasing ring to it they believed it, no matter how absurd. Fish were the souls that hadn't been born yet. The Smug is a great ball of fire where all the evil burn. The last dregs of each pint of Hook Beer has to be tipped off the tree for the souls of the departed. Codswallop! The writings of the great philosopher Bellyfat Chinbeard had thrown all that out centuries ago, if only people would read his books (which were, admittedly, unfathomably boring and written in a largely illegible shorthand). No, Ambrosius knew the truth. He knew that all the matter in the universe was made of tiny Fish. Each Fish swam in a straight line unless it was otherwise disturbed. All the interactions in the universe were mediated by tiny invisible lines with Hooks on the end, that would catch the Fish and yank them out of their trajectories. Indeed, the area of Quantum Fishics was one in which Ambrosius had a special interest in, and, he told himself, gave him deep insights into the nature of reality.

It did not take long for Moonrise to gather a group of worried looking Piscadors together, lead by the elderly statesman Leatherskin Wrinkly and the frankly senile professor Wiseman Cobweb. Some of the younger and more volatile Piscadors who rallied behind them held sharp pointy sticks in the fashion favoured by young and volatile mobs everywhere.

“First things first,” bellowed Leatherskin in a voice that carried authority and a fine aerosol of phlegm. “Are you a zombie?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” asked Wiseman from next to him, consulting a battered volume which he had produced from under his long flowing blue robe. His parchment brow creased in sympathy with the velum as he read the text. “Any thoughts of a cullinary nature regarding brains or other such cerebral tissues?”

“No,” said Ambrosius.

“Any uncontrollable moaning or other involuntary atonic vocalisations?”

“No,” said Ambrosius.

“Increased salivation and non-Pavlovian spittle-based responses?”

“No,” said Ambrosius.

“Do you have any sudden urges to participate in a motion picture with a very high gore-to-budget ratio?”

“No,” said Ambrosius.

“Good,” said Wiseman. “You score zero on the Zombification Index, which means that, assuming you don't try anything funny, we don't need to proceed with the standard Angry Mob Protocol as defined by Smallfry et al.”

There were murmurs of disappointment from the more enthusiastic members of the congregation, after which the crowd started to lose interest and disperse. Leatherskin beckoned for Ambrosius to come closer.

“You're in your underpants, boy.”

“I fell out of tree number eleven. My trousers got caught on a Fish-hook.”

“Ah. And you're sure you're not dead?”

“No.”

“No you're not dead, or no you're not sure?”

“I'm not dead.”

“Glad to hear it. Well, you better be going. Can't have you standing around all day in your scruds now can we?” Leatherskin was a seasoned statesman and had excellent control over his expressions, so the smile that crept over his face showed just how ridiculous Ambrosius looked.

Ambrosius bowed his head deferentially in as dignified a way as possible. He was just about to make his way back to his shack when there came a chesty cough from Wiseman. “Actually I don't think you should go just yet.” Wiseman turned to the nervous looking skivvy who attended him. He was a short Piscador of about fifteen by the misleading name of Stipule Longlegs, with a pimply face and greasy hair.

“Stipule,” said Wiseman, “go and fetch this young man a pair of trousers. Bring them to my residence, quick now.”

The pimped youth nodded politely and dashed off on his errand.

“You are to follow us to my hut,” said Wiseman. “I think you should come along, too, Leatherskin.”

There were mercifully few giggling gawkers along the way. Wiseman, Leatherskin and Ambrosius reached the seclusion of the hut just as Stipule came running panting (pardon the expression) with a pair of trousers. Ambrosius quickly put them on and, at the invitation of Wiseman, both he and Leatherskin sat at the large Hookwood table in the middle of the hut.

“I have grave news,” said Wiseman, leaning heavily on the table, face down and staring at the wood as if he had discerned something interesting in the grain. All of a sudden he looked up, his old rheumy eyes lighting up with something indistinguishable. This unfathomable emotion was curiosity, and it burned bright. “But first,” he said, his mucous-filled lungs giving his voice a purring, bubbling enthusiasm, “in the interests of philosophy, you must tell us of your venture into the mist. We have never had anyone survive an experience such as yours. Is it true that the dead who were fishless at their funeral walk in the mist?” he stopped, surveying Ambrosius' expression for a second, before shaking his head. “No, that is an old fishwives tale, of course. Quite ridiculous for an educated man such as myself to suggest such a thing. No, I must be more sensible. Is Wrigglything's seminal treatise on mist stratification correct? Was the whiteness of the mist an illusion produced by multiple layers of coloured gasses?”

Ambrosius looked blank.

“No, I never liked Wrigglything's work anyway.” said Wiseman. “Tell me, what did the mist taste like? You see there is a theory by Glaucous et al. that posits that the taste of fish is determined by the medium in which they swim. Did the mist taste of fish?”

Ambrosius still looked blank.

“No, of course not, a ridiculous idea.”

“Look,” interjected Leatherskin, “I am a busy man. I have a meeting scheduled in for one o'clock and it's half twelve now. Can we skip this rubbish?”

Wiseman looked hurt. "Well, okay. Unless there was anything important you saw?"

"Actually," said Ambrosius, "there was. Very important, and this concerns you too Leatherskin."

"It better be good," said the statesman. Leatherskin had little respect for a youth such as Ambrosius, even less considering his reputation as a recluse and a hopeless Fisher. Be that as may, from years of experience Leatherskin had learned never to dismiss people with something to say, especially those who were normally quiet.

"I don't know about good. It might be quite the opposite. I saw the future," said Ambrosius.

Leatherskin and Wiseman each raised an eyebrow in unison.

"Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof, son," said Wiseman.

"I looked an Infinity Fish in the eye."

"Ah," said Wiseman. "Now there has been much written about this. Every Fisher knows that by the time Infinity Fish are reeled up and out of the mist they are dead. They need the mist to survive – all but the Progenitor."

Wiseman made the sign of the fish across his chest.

"Nobody has ever looked a living Infinity Fish in the eye before," continued Wiseman. "Most of the texts say that such an encounter would send one irretrievably insane. That is, all apart from Petiole et al. who say that one would absorb the knowledge of the fish and become lost in what is known as a Perspective Vortex."

"I fainted," said Ambrosius.

"Can we call that a Perspective Vortex?" asked Wiseman.

"If you like," said Ambrosius. "I think there might be some truth in what you said about absorbing the knowledge of the Fish. I suddenly had this amazing feeling of... clarity. I can't think of any other words to describe it. When I fell my whole life flashed before my eyes. When I looked into the Fish's eyes all those events were sort of connected and directed. In that moment I knew suddenly that I had a purpose."

"What was that purpose, boy, what was that purpose?" Wiseman asked, leaning forward eagerly on the edge of his seat.

"I... I can't remember. Well, sort of can't remember. It's in my head somewhere but it's too vast to fit into my consciousness all at once."

"Interesting, interesting," said Wiseman. "Such is the nature of the Infinite."

"Well, anyway," said Ambrosius. "When I woke up I saw something else."

"What?" asked Leatherskin. He did not seem at all interested in Ambrosius' experience with the Fish. Fish were an everyday thing. There was nothing special about them.

"When I awoke there was this terrible noise. I saw this great yellow thing come through the mist, and suddenly there in front of me there was this huge ugly monster."

"Ah, this is more like it," said Wiseman. "The literature is full of huge ugly monsters."

"It had writing on its side."

"Most unusual," said Wiseman in his rasping lilt. "Do carry on."

"It was in big black letters. It said 'Fish Stocks Limited'. That was all."

This made Leatherskin pay attention. "Fish Stocks Limited'? What does that mean?"

"It means what it says," put in Wiseman. "It is a message from beyond the mists. Our fish stocks are limited."

“Limited?” asked Leatherface. “Preposterous.”

“I think Wiseman's right,” said Ambrosius. “There was something in that fish's eyes. It looked incomprehensibly sad. Infinitely so.”

Leatherskin's face was set into an unreadable mask. “You do realise the weight of what you are saying? The entire of Expiscor depends on Fish. To suggest the Infinity Fish is actually finite is political dynamite. Blasphemy even.”

“We cannot simply ignore such a portent,” said Wiseman.

“I don't believe it. I think this youth has been running round in the mist for too long and gone bonkers. He's quite literally out of his tree.”

“Ignore the word of God at your peril!” exclaimed Wiseman. “The message is clear: we have sinned, and for this we will be made fishless!”

“Oh stop that at once,” said Leatherman. “This is nonsense. Now at the start of our meeting you said there was some bad news. Bad news is important news, so out with it man, then I really must be off.”

“Yes, quite,” said Wiseman smoothing down his beard and composing himself.

“Got a little carried away there. The bad news is for young Ambrosius here.”

“Yes?” asked Ambrosius.

“Well, as soon as young Moonrise came shouting her head off about Ambrosius being back from the mist, it immediately made me think of Pinnate Rivet's 'Booke of Ancient Law'.”

Leatherskin audibly sighed. “Not more about your books, Wiseman.”

“No, this is important. We have lived according to the law for generations immemorial. We cannot break a law that is in the literature.”

“I know very well the importance of law,” said Leatherskin, “but I am not aware of any having been broken.”

“With respect, that is where you are sadly mistaken,” said Wiseman. “Young Ambrosius here has unwittingly broken a most weighty of statutes.”

“Cut to the chase, please,” said Leatherskin.

“It says here that any Piscador who so happens to fall from the heights of a Hook Tree and comes into contact with the Mist must be expelled for ever from the company of the tree-dwellers and must walk the face of the bare earth forever. For the Mist is death, and the breather of Mist is dead to the world.”

Ambrosius' face dropped. “But that's unfair! I didn't fall from the tree on purpose.”

“Yes,” said Leatherskin. Despite his professional detachment he couldn't help feel sorry for this lanky, hopeless looking youth that stood before him in ill-fitting trousers. “It does seem a little harsh, don't you think, Wiseman? Perhaps we could just pretend that you never knew about that particular law.”

Wiseman shook his head furiously. “If this rule is broken, then the Fates will stop the fish from biting and the whole of Expiscor will starve. I'm sorry, Ambrosius. I know you are a man of learning such as myself, and I have a lot of respect for you because of that. But laws are laws.”

“So just like that, you'd throw me out into the mist again?”

Wiseman hung his head in silence.

“You're not going to let this happen are you sir?” Ambrosius asked Leatherskin.

“Surely you can see this is madness?”

Leatherskin grunted. “I can and I do.” He turned to the old professor. “Wiseman old bean, is there any time limit on this thing?”

“Time limit?”

“Well, it says Ambrosius here must be expelled for having breathed the mist, but does it say when?”

“Er, not as such,” said Leatherskin.

“There we have it; an equable solution. I say we let Ambrosius stay here for a test period. If the Fish supplies dry up then we can throw him out into the Mist then and get our Fish back. There will be no great harm in a few weeks of fishlessness, we have plenty of supplies. Let us test the Mists, so to speak, before we do anything unnecessary.”

Wiseman shifted uncomfortably. “I don't like it. I don't like it one bit. But then, who am I to argue with you, Leatherskin? You are the leader, after all. I must stress though, that as soon as the catch shows the least sign of decreasing we must throw Ambrosius out, as unpalatable as that might seem.”

“Then we are agreed,” said Leatherskin. “We shall give this young man a probationary period. I hope for his sake this law is baseless.”

“Hang on a second,” said Ambrosius. “I've just told you what I saw. It was a message from beyond the mist telling me the fish stock *will* run out. Now you're saying that I'll get the blame for it!”

“Your message from beyond the mist was no more than a dream brought on by unwholesome vapours. The fish stocks are limitless, they always have been and always will be.” Leatherskin tapped his finger on the table, his eyes burning into Ambrosius'. “The one thing you can rely on is Fish.”

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#### **Chapter 4 – A Challenge Is Set**

The one thing you can rely on is Fish. Ambrosius scowled as he walked dejectedly back to his shack. He had never been able to rely on Fish, so why should he start now? He looked up at the Smug. It was about one o'clock by his reckoning, and a lurid, diffuse heat filtered down from above. He thought about the madness of this fateful morning. His life had flashed past his eyes when he fell; his sad, fishless life. But he had learned something new as he plunged through the canopy towards the rolling mist: there are worse things than fishlessness. Fish can be bought or begged off other people whose catch is good. Missed opportunities are gone forever. And there it stood, a shining, gloating list of missed opportunities. Sunbeam Lightning or, more accurately, Sunbeam Treegirth, stood glowing in his minds eye. He had never realised it before but she had been the only girl who had shown the slightest bit of interest in him. Perhaps she was the only friend he had ever had. Perhaps... well, even Ambrosius had a spark in him, a spark that longed to make flame. Yes, there were more things than a lack of fish that Ambrosius now regretted.

He got back to his shack thoroughly dejected, limbs heavy from his climb up the tree and with an immense feeling of tiredness weighing down on him. He had lived there for going on five years now, since he was eighteen, but he still hadn't bothered to decorate the place. The walls, made of rough planks of Hookwood, smouldered red and resinous in the lunchtime light of the Smug. There was a complex smell of wood smoke emanating from a small fireplace full of last night's ash and a few dying red-flecked embers, a smell as of burnt wisdom and old incense that begged for more fuel and a bass to roast. Ambrosius had neither, but he blew on the embers nonetheless.

Somehow, the fire still had life in it and mustered a few small yellow flames for a couple of seconds before sulking again into an angry red. Ambrosius breathed in the masculine musk of the hut, and felt a little better for being home. He moved away from the moribund fire and sat on a chair that he had carved himself.

And now he had to think. He couldn't help it, for he was a dweller. He dwelt on the memories that had swam so clear in front of him. He dwelt on his mother's tears at his father's funeral. More than anything, he dwelt on the sound of bells and shower of confetti as Sunbeam, *his* Sunbeam, had found her false true love. He had attended the wedding – how could he not? He had watched without any real emotion as she walked down the aisle, he had felt that millisecond of eye contact as she passed him, that millisecond that, had he been open to it, would have communicated a volume of emotion. But he had just not bitten the bait of reality – he had shied away, dissociated, for he felt that this was the logical thing to do. What point was there feeling love, pain, regret, loneliness? What point? Only a barbed one, like a Fish-hook. A barbed one that, once you had been caught by it, dug deeper and deeper. And now he had been snagged - by an unexpected fall, by the unknown, by the infinite. Yes, a fall had made him and broken him all at once.

He thought about his close encounter with the Fish. Such unfathomable sadness he had seen in those sparkling, whirlpool-black eyes; such infinite sorrow. Something was happening to the Infinity Fish, and he had to find out what. But first he had to get the girl.

“What do you want?” Sunbeam had come to the window after Ambrosius' third throw. He had read somewhere that suitors threw stones against their beloved's window, which he had diligently done. Sunbeam now had a round lump on her head where the Hookfruit stone had sailed through the glassless aperture.

“Can I come inside?” Ambrosius decided to ignore the angry tone in Sunbeam's voice.

“What's going on?” came a voice from inside the room. “If some fishing idiot is throwing things through the window he's going to feel the back of my hand!”

Sunbeam looked over her shoulder, then quickly back to Ambrosius. “Look, you can't come in. Whatever you've got to say, say it now and quickly.”

“But I can't say it,” said Ambrosius. “It would take a million words.”

Sunbeam's face dropped. “Oh Ambrosius, no. Not now.”

“Sunbeam, I lo...”

“No! Don't you dare! I have a life and I'm happy with it. Don't you dare try and ruin it.”

“You know how I feel about you. We're meant for each other!”

“I don't believe in destiny, Ambrosius. Forget me, Ambrosius. Go back to your books.”

“What can I do to change your mind?”

Sunbeam seethed, before anger made her reply burst forth without thought.

“Ambrosius Codwich, the day I love you is the day... is the day... is the day you catch a fish!”

It is not possible to slam a glassless window, but Sunbeam drew her curtains with such ferocity that a bang was almost audible. Perhaps it was the sound of Ambrosius' heart breaking, but that is a cliché. Anyhow, Ambrosius' suit had failed and he was

left to plod mournfully along the boughs. He didn't know where to go, what to do. Suddenly all those years of carving and learning seemed useless, wasted. What had he gained from them? Grey matter. That was the best description. And grey matter was just that – grey. When he thought of Sunbeam he thought of colour.

Colour is a terrible thing, be under no illusions about that. Colour is a broken promise. When we see a field of flowers we demand beauty of it, but ask a botanist and he will tell you it is nothing but cut-throat competition. We see a Hooktree Frog display its vivid colours and are enticed by beauty to touch it, whereupon we collapse in a convulsing heap at its venomous feet. Colour looks nice, so we accept it as good without thinking.

Be that as may, Ambrosius longed for glorious, deceitful colour, the colour of no less than true love. And suddenly it came to him in Sunbeam's own angry words. “The day I love you is the day you catch a Fish.” How cruel she had been, but in that cruelty lay hope. Somewhere out there a Fish was waiting for him, he knew it. Fate could only have dealt him such an ultimatum for a reason. Jaw set in determination, Ambrosius went over to his book case and selected a volume that was his father's, a volume that had been collecting dust for a long time now. He blew and a whirlwind of grey fled into the air, revealing the hand-painted cover underneath. There was, picked out in silver against a white marbled background, a bass of prodigious proportions. Underneath this fine Fish was the following inscription:

*“A Piscador's Companion  
by Gigantic Turbo”*

Ambrosius carried the book over to the chair and sat down. The book creaked open and Ambrosius flipped past the title page and the index. Just before the book started there was a page blank but for a single quote:

*“A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.”*

Ambrosius didn't quite know what that meant, but then there are many such puzzles in life. He flipped through the book a little until a heading caught his eye:

“The Philosophy of Fish

*What is the meaning of the Fish? Piscadors have debated this point for millennia. What cannot be denied is that there is something intrinsically meaningful in Fish and Fishing. This meaning translates to the Fisher as what is known as The Game. The Game is the battle of wits between the Fisher and the Fished; it engages the utmost faculties of both to the extent that a sort of blissful dance is played out and the minds and bodies of both parties work in an antagonistic kind of harmony. Let us investigate this relationship further.*

*Firstly, consider the Fish. Swimming along happily through the mist one day, our friend sees a Hookworm apparently helpless in the water. An immediate moral dilemma is posed for the Fish. She is hungry and must eat to live, yet in doing so she must cause this helpless creature to suffer a most terrible fate. Some fish may swim away and go hungry at this point. Others, however, will make the judgement that they somehow have an intrinsic value higher than that of the worm, and will eat. Immediately they are hooked. It must then go through their minds that they are deserving of this cruel predicament they now find themselves in. They judged another creature to be expendable, now they too have so been judged. What cruel irony now*



*stings the Fish along with the pain of the Hook, but is there education there too? Surely the fish, if at all sentient, has learnt a huge moral lesson.*

*Now consider the Piscador. It may well be impossible to know what goes on in the mind of the Fish, but the Piscador must try. Information on the mind of the fish has been reduced to simple modulations of the tension in a string. Somehow two creatures, with completely different brains, connected only by a thread, are transferring complex notions such as fear, tenacity, free-spiritedness, the will to survive. The data are processed, reduced to changes in the tension in the line, expanded and processed again in an interactive process. This is just part of what we call "Fishing".*

Ambrosius lost interest and flicked through the pages once more. He spotted several sections on Good Fishing Practice and Hooks, Baits and Lines which he mentally noted and earmarked for future reading. The leaves flipped past until he was only a few pages away from the end of the book. Something caught his eye.

"The One That Got Away

*Every Fisher has experienced it. The tentative nibble. The bite. The Game. Then, without explanation, the line goes slack: the Fish has got away. Much lore exists about this phenomenon, but perhaps the most common story which young Fishers hear is the tale of the Progenitor. According to legend, the Progenitor is a giant Infinity Fish the colour of alabaster which taunts Piscadors by taking their bait, playing with them for hours on end, then either breaking the line or somehow unhooking herself. Some say the Progenitor strikes when the planets are in a special alignment, some that only sinful Piscadors are so teased, and some even say that all cases of a fish escaping are due to the same fish. It is unlikely that the true nature of the Progenitor will ever be discovered. Some say that this fish is the archetype of Fishiness created by God before the universe came into existence; the very same fish who first brought the seed of Fish to Expiscor."*

More codswallop, thought Ambrosius. As far as Ambrosius was concerned fish were fish. All else was dangerous misdirection. He flicked back to the start of the book and started reading.

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## **Chapter 5 – Preparation**

*Idiot.* It was the word that struck Ambrosius like a hammer as he suddenly awoke with a jerk from his sleep. He could see through the open doorway to his shack that the evening was stealing in and the daylight slowly fading. He had read a good way through the *A Piscador's Companion* before his unintentional slumber, certainly far enough to refresh his memory concerning the theoretical underpinnings of fishing. Why, then, had this accusatory little word popped into his consciousness. He was offended by it, and rubbed his hand through his hair in consternation. Surely he was well educated - all the more so for today's studies - yet still it had come to him through the ether. *Idiot.* How could anyone call him such? More to the point, how could he call himself such? He could read the most high-brow books, work out the

most complicated equations, craft the most aesthetic carvings, build the most ingenious of contraptions. This insult stung, however, partly because it was the one thing he feared being seen as, but also, deep in some inner sanctum of the unconscious, because he suspected it was true. Idiocy takes many forms, and can affect anyone. One in five people suffer from dandruff, one in four suffer from idiocy. Ambrosius suffered from both. He was not yet consciously aware of this, but perhaps he will learn about this later on in our story.

Such thoughts aside, Ambrosius had work to do and, whilst it was now dark outside save for the pale, ghostly light of a waning Xiphias, he saw no reason not to make an immediate start. He went in to the corner of the room and pulled a cloth off something dusty and neglected on the floor. Anyone who has ever gone fishing will be familiar with what lay underneath. The Box of Things. The Box of Things is a miraculous contrivance. It is a box, medium sized and unassuming, whose lid opens out to reveal many compartments. According to the usual laws of space and time such a large number of compartments should not normally be allowed to fit into such a box. Such laws are made to be broken. In each compartment there is a different trinket, more or less related to the art of fishing.

Ambrosius opened the lid and peered through the gloom at the objects that were lit by the pale lunacy of Xiphias. In the first box was a small bobbin, hopelessly and irretrievably tangled with line. In the second box was a spinner, cast of iridescent silver which caught the light and sent it sparkling back. In the third box was a selection of hooks, covered in the red flaky Rust Fungus that is the primary decomposer of dead Hooktrees. In the fourth box was something entirely unidentifiable. In the fifth box were some dessicated maggots. These, as well as many more miscellanea in many, many more boxes, are all the usual contents of the Box of Things.

Ambrosius shut the lid, clicked down the fastenings, and carried the box outside. Now it is true that Ambrosius had always been a hopeless Fisher, but this is not to say that he was bad at *preparing* to fish. He had, in fact, become quite good at it in his youth. People had commented that, even with the best set-up in Expiscor, Ambrosius still couldn't catch a fish. He could still remember the preparation process perfectly, and he commenced them now with a look of determined concentration on his face. He set the Box down on the bough, taking a knife out and sticking it in his belt as he did so. He went back into the shack, returning in a couple of seconds with a short length of rope attached to a harness. Lying down flat on the bough with both arms round it, he passed the rope underneath the bough and tied a sturdy knot in the bottom. He got into the harness, testing the strength of the rope by pulling on it a couple of times. Then, taking a deep breath, our brave hero stepped off the side of the bough. His stomach jumped as he fell and was left dangling a couple of feet below the branch, looking up at the underside. Regaining his composure and taking the knife from his belt, Ambrosius started to carve a straight line across the girth of the bough so that it formed a U-shape which terminated at the end of his reach. He repeated this process many times, sliding his rope and harness along the branch to get to fresh areas of the branch, until a good ten metres of the branch were banded with U-shaped cuts. This took him until midnight.

He then heaved himself up the rope and clambered back onto the branch. Untying the rope, Ambrosius took the harness back into his shack and left it in the corner where it had rested for so long. He walked back out onto the branch and found the

start of the bands he had cut. With the skilled hand of an expert carver he took the knife and continued the bands round the top of the branch. This was the difficult bit. He had to continue the lines so that, rather than forming a circle, they instead formed a spiral. In other words he had to connect each line up with the one one cut further along. Many Piscadors could not do this, and relied on buying line from other more gifted members of the community, but Ambrosius was lucky. With a craftsman's talent he continued the carving process until the Smug cast a dull yawning light from just below the horizon. The moment of truth had arrived. With the tip of the knife Ambrosius teased the end of one of the strips of bark between the cuts until it came free from the underlying woody tissue. As he slowly pulled, the incredibly thin yet strong strip got longer and longer. He took a bale from the box and wrapped the line around it as he went to avoid the dreaded tangles. Round and round he went, patiently pulling out the line from the tree. It took him until the Smug was full and smiling in the sky to finish, and then he set the fat bale on top of the Box of Things and sat down to rest.

As he did this he realised he was being watched. It was young Moonrise Husk and her friends, sat on the bough opposite, legs dangling over the precarious drop without a care. When Ambrosius made eye contact with Moonrise, she put her hand up to her mouth to stifle a laugh.

“Ambrosius is preparing to fish,” she said to her friends. They laughed.

Ambrosius' teeth set in annoyance, but he was determined to rise above it. He rested for a minute more, pointedly ignoring his audience, before getting once more to his feet. Taking the bale of line from the top of the Box, he walked back to his shack. It was a moment's work to tie the line round the doorknob, then he walked back along the branch, paying out the line as he did so. At the end of the branch he returned, doubling the line back on itself. It was a matter of judgement, but he estimated that the line needed to be about twenty lengths of the bough to be suitable for fishing. When this length of line was laid out he cut it with his knife and went back and did this twice more, until three lines lay next to each other.

Now was the start of the weaving process. He took the threads and passed them one over the other, keeping them tight and close as he did so. Hours passed. Night came again. Xiphias rose and fell. The Smug chased the night away again. Bleary eyed, Ambrosius made the final pass and the cord was complete. Three strands were now interlinked to form the nascent line. Now all that was left was to Tread The Fine Line, but first he must sleep. He reeled up the line and retired to his shack, where he slept and dreamed of fish.

The next day he got up and walked out to a long bough. He took off his shoes and set them on top of the Box. Making the sign of the Fish as was traditional, he trampled forcefully along the length of the line, rubbing the fibres together as he did and agitating the sap so that it bonded them glue-like together. The Smug grew high in the sky three times as the days rolled by, until at last it shouted midday down at him for a third time, and finally, sweating and exhausted, he finished. The line was now a Line, and Ambrosius could sleep.

It was a dreamless black-hole that Ambrosius fell into, which lasted from midday through until dawn the next day. He woke up with that peculiar, sucking tiredness that affects one after such a long sleep, but he quickly set his brain to sharpness in preparation for his next task: the preparation of the Hook. No trivial matter this; the

Hook must be of the right size and shape, be sharp and strong yet flexible, have a loop at the top the right size for the line to pass through and finally not be tarnished by Rust Fungus that would dissolve in the Mist and put off the Fish. To find the Hook required expert knowledge of local geography and dendrology. In his mind's eye Ambrosius navigated the trees in his local area until he found one with the appropriate characteristics. He got out of bed, still dressed from the previous day, and exited his shack. With a hop and a jump he navigated the boughs until he was there at Bough Eight. This was a dangerous place to be. Bough Eight was notorious as a bad neighbourhood, and was riddled with gangs of antisocial ne'er-do-wells who would beat up and rob an innocent Piscador without thinking. Such are the hurdles a determined Fisher must take in his stride. Fortunately it was still early in the morning, and most of the trouble-makers were still sleeping off last night's Stone. There were one or two people about, just setting their morning lines up, but these were the older, more measured inhabitants. They would still rob a Piscador of his catch without thinking; however, they knew Ambrosius as fishless and not worth bothering with, so they left him alone. Some of them raised an eyebrow in amusement as they saw him casting what he hoped looked like an expert gaze on the myriad hooks that glittered in the morning dew.

"Fish me," said one of the morning Fishers. "If it isn't Ambrosius. You looking for something to hang your coat on?"

Ambrosius glanced over to him nervously.

"I'm not going to bite yer head off," said the man. "I used to smoke Stone with your dad. He was a right laugh, old Rainstorm. Yeah I know all about you, no-fish. The names Branch Hearthstone. You really looking for Hooks, son?"

"Yes," said Ambrosius in a voice that sounded like a mouse trying to sound like a lion. "I'm going to catch a Fish."

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhahaha. Haha. Haahaaha."

"Stop it."

"Ahhahahahaha. Haha. Hahahahaaaaa."

"I said stop it."

"Hahahaha. Hahahaha. Hahahaha."

Ambrosius seethed, but what could he say? This bloke had arms like tree trunks and looked like he could rip Ambrosius in two. This was not someone you could make demands to.

"Ha ha. Ha. Sorry. Hahaha. No, really, I'm sorry. Ha. It's just... I thought you said... ha... that you were going to catch a Fish."

"I am."

"Haaaahahahaha. Hahahahaha. Haaaahaaaahaaaaa."

"Stop laughing at me!"

"Ha. Really, I am dead sorry. Haha. You really think you can catch something?"

"Yes."

"Hmm, I like your style, son. Never give up."

"Well, if you'd excuse me." Ambrosius started to move away, but Branch let out a gargantuan cough before calling after him.

"Wait there, lad."

"What now?" asked Ambrosius. "If you're going to make fun of me..."

"Not at all, not at all. Like I say, I knew your father. He was a man with problems, that's true, not least when it came to the Stone, but when you got past that he wasn't

that bad. We had some good times together, caught some bass, had a good few little smokes. Those were happy days. You're really after a Fish?"

"Yes," said Ambrosius.

"Then you don't have to go clawing about in all that foliage for the next two hours trying to find the perfect Hook." Branch motioned for Ambrosius to come closer, before bending down and rummaging in his Box of Things. He stood up again and held out his hand. "I want you to have this."

Ambrosius looked at the object in Branch's palm. It sparkled dull silver in the Smugshine; a large, perfectly formed Hook.

"Me and your dad, we caught some big fish with this Hook. We came to reckon it was the best damn hook in the whole of Expiscor, so we had it platinum plated. It's sharp as anything, and won't rot with the Rust Fungus like a normal hook. You could catch Fish for the next thousand year's with this and it'd still have a mean point on it."

"I...I can't take it."

"Sure you can. Your dad would have wanted you to have it. I got plenty of Hooks myself, loosing one won't do me no harm. Take it."

Ambrosius nodded. He reached out a trembling hand and took the Hook from Branch's great ham-fist.

"Thank you," said Ambrosius."

"Don't mention it. Now go catch a Fish!"

Bait. Such a simple word, but so complex a concept. There are as many types of bait as there are grains of sand on a beach. Hookworm and Hookfruit are by far the most popular, but there are also Stonemeal, Blossomfly, Fat Hairy Caterpillar, Shrieker Guano, Trunkspider, Little Beetle Type-Thing, Dessicated Hookfruit Maggots, Daddy Shortlegs, Honey Mushroom, Tree Mouse Cheese, Detoxified Hooktree Frog's Leg, Pickled Branch Lizard Egg, Ummagumma. Ambrosius had his own views on bait. As the initial point of contact with the Fish, one must take bait very seriously. Ambrosius first went to a Hooktree that was in fruit and scoured the boughs below for windfalls. He found a nice rotting Hookfruit with a tell-tale hole in the outside and cut it in two with his knife. From it he extracted a somewhat confused looking and rather plump Hookworm who squeaked wordless profanities in protest. He took this worm back to his shack and set it on a particularly ripe piece of Tree Mouse Cheese. Then, as the Smug was setting, he went to bed.

Now a Hookworm loves rot, and a particularly good piece of Tree Mouse Cheese is reticulated with veins of the stuff. Overnight the Hookworm munched his way through so many of these foetid arteries of mould that when Ambrosius plucked it from its wallowings in the morning it was stinking and blue just like them. Just how the Fish like it. Ambrosius gave it a light sprinkling of Honey Mushroom Juice to finish with and then set it squirming in an empty compartment in his Box of Things. He was now ready. Fish on!

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## **Chapter 6 – Fish on!**

Fish off. That's what Ambrosius thought as he exited his shack. He had sort of half expected it, but that didn't stop him going bright red with anger and embarrassment.

Moonrise and her friends had evidently wasted no time in telling the whole of the Hundred Boughs that “No-Fish” Ambrosius Codwich was out after a Bass. The crowds lined the boughs as he tramped doggedly across the branches to his fishing spot on Bough Twenty Four. The faces in the crowds showed a range of emotions from mirth to disdain. He ignored most of them, but there was one face at the back that was not so easy to pass over. Sunbeam stood on one of the side branches, a sad look on her face, trying to keep out of Ambrosius' line of sight. As Ambrosius made eye-contact with her she shook her head and looked away. Ambrosius felt ice stab at his heart, but he carried on. She would see; when he had caught a Fish she would know she had married the wrong man, promptly divorce Fathead and come rushing into Ambrosius' arms. Life worked like that, didn't it? As he thought this to himself Fathead towered behind Sunbeam, kissed her lightly on the head and put his arms around her in a proprietorial fashion. He looked menacingly at Ambrosius, who quickly looked away and continued his journey.

After a short but humiliating walk the spot that he arrived at was, piscogeographically speaking, a perfect one. It was away from the competing lines of the more populous boughs, sheltered from the Smug by a thick canopy and free of lower branches to snag ones line on when casting. Ambrosius sat on the bough, his legs dangling over the edge. He opened his Box of Things and extracted the Bait, the Line and the Hook.

“Sorry, little fellow. My need is greater than yours.” Ambrosius hated this bit. He skewered the cheesy Hookworm with the cruel Hook, passing it twice through its body to make sure it would stay on. He took hold of the bail of line, holding the fork of the mounting loosely so that the line was free to pay out. Then he swung the Hook with the Bait on the end round his head the traditional eight times and let go. The Hookworm squealed as it shot through the air and fell towards the Mist far below. It was a good cast, perfect in fact. Everything was perfect. Nothing more could be done.

The waiting had begun.

The crowds were persistent, new people popping along to stare and stifle a laugh in a constant procession throughout the day and into the evening. Ambrosius tried hard to ignore them, but their interest pressed home the fact that he had made a one-way decision now – there was no going back.

He contemplated the subtle pastel colours of the Smug as it set, then the stars in the velvet sky and the unimaginable vast blackness between them. He had to make a concerted effort to tell himself that the Universe didn't go on forever as many people had previously thought. If the Universe was finite, how could anything within it be considered infinite? Where did such a concept come from? Was it just something Piscadors had made up? Such questions were heresy, for the infiniteness of the Infinity Fish was something deeply drummed into every young Piscador. But when he had looked into that Fish's eyes, he had seen it. An end, looming terribly at the back of those sacred retinas. What was happening? The Piscadors had hunted the Fish for the whole of history without even denting their numbers – this was testified to by the constancy of their catch. Fish and Fisher had mutual respect, and the relationship between the two was inviolate. Something was changing though, something big. The huge hulking yellow monster swam vividly across his mind's eye again. Perhaps the monster was eating all the Fish. That made sense. But where had the monster come from? Big yellow things didn't just appear out of nowhere. Something told Ambrosius

that he would not be able to forget his fall so easily. Ambrosius' mind wandered. Fish Stocks Limited. What did it mean... what did it mean...

*Focus.* Communicate to the Fish through the line.

Hours passed. Night fled into morning. The Smug rose and set, shedding blood over the horizon as it killed time.

What is it about the line that makes it invisible to the fish? If it saw, surely it would surely never bite. It must seem as if it is suddenly drawn along, that a great force is pulling it, something it can never hope to understand.

Night was day.

What went on in the mind of the fish? An instinctual understanding of nature that no Piscador can hope for, surely that is what resides in that unknown resort. The fish has no need to ask questions as we do, for it knows all the answers. The fish is free, it has no worries, no cares. The fisher has knowledge of what is to come, which forces a certain degree of sombreness.

Day was night. Weeks marched passed.

The people watching now had different attitudes towards Ambrosius. Even those who lambasted him tagged their sly comments with a caveat of respect for his tenacity. They knew he was on a hopeless mission, that he had staked his whole life on what was, for him, impossible. Yet still he tried, and hats were cocked to him because of this.

Does the Hook have a memory? If it had what stories it could tell. A bass that fought for hours, a small fry that fought like a leviathan, and, of course, The One That Got Away. So glint there in platinum, hang there in smoking mist, wait patiently, you deadly, beautiful, merciless Hook.

The months passed, the seasons changed, and the warmth of summer faded. Ice and snow crept in and made Ambrosius shiver and jitter on his treetop perch, but still he kept his vigil. A sympathetic old bag brought him hot soup and a knitted jumper. She patted him kindly on the back. "Sometimes, dear, the manly thing to do is just give up." Ambrosius shook his head and through his chitters spoke firmly "No."

Winter reached its zenith, hurling snow and sleet at the solitary Fisher. Surrender beckoned, but, frozen and miserable, Ambrosius fought it. He fought it until the weather had nothing more to throw at him, and winter acquiesced into spring.

And then, exactly one year after he had sat on that lonely bough and cast his line, something snapped in the heart and head of Ambrosius Codwich.

"You stinking rotters, Fish! I curse you with all the curses man has ever made! You putrid, insufferable pustules, you are a disease on the face of this planet! How fickle? How evil more like! I hate fish, I hate you!"

Irony often strikes when it is most needed. As Ambrosius raged and ranted and banged his head against the nearest trunk, there was a twitch and a jiggle.

"I hate Fish, yes I do, Fish I hate you! The devil made Fish to taunt me, surely this is true. If there were just me in this world and a single Fish for company I would still hate it. What are you looking at? Come to gawk at a man driven to distraction? Away! Let me be alone in my suffering." This to the slowly accumulating crowd, whose interest had been once more piqued, not only by Ambrosius' outburst, but also at a subtle movement of the spindle to which his Line was attached.

"To hell with you all, Fish and Fishers alike! Sweet hatred fills me to the brim and you are nothing but stains on this good inanimate land. Away!"

There was a ripple of surprise as the line started to hiss off the spindle. If it wasn't for Ambrosius having taken the good thought to wedge it in the top of the weighty Box of Things and leave the bale arms loose so that the Line could pay out, it would surely have been dragged off the bough.

“You horrible, detestable, insufferable, unendurable...”

The tirade stopped. Ambrosius' mouth fell open. He had seen the Line.

“...beautiful, ecstatic, wonderful... A Fish!”

Like a flash, Ambrosius took up the tackle and pressed the bale arms against the quickly spinning bale. The Game had begun. It was clear by the persistence with which the line paid out that this was a Bass of prodigious proportions. It was all Ambrosius could do to check the progress of the Fish and hope that it tired before the line ran out. He was in luck. The quarry changed direction sharply with just metres of line left on the bale, and swam back towards Amrbosius. Without sparing a second he took the opportunity to reel it in, gaining valuable ground on his mist-faring opponent. There were cheers from the spectators as the Fish was on the back foot, but this was no time to become complacent. The Bass changed direction again and now the line was paying out faster than ever. The bale smoked and Ambrosius worried that it would catch fire. Thinking fast, he reached into his Box of Things and took out his flask of water, pouring it quickly over the smouldering spindle. This solved the immediate problem, but the Fish was still gaining ground and the Line was running out fast. Ambrosius must take a risk. He grabbed the handle of the tackle and controlled the rate at which the Line paid out by checking its rotation. The line creaked in complaint, but this was better than leaving it to hit the knot at the end of the bail and stop dead, snapping for sure. Ambrosius pulled the line to one side, trying to turn the Fish's great head. Again, he was lucky – the Fish turned. He reeled like there was no tomorrow, and the Fish came tantalisingly close. Then it turned once more and took the line out with it again.

Minutes went on in this way, the Fish giving ground then taking it back just as fast. Hours went. The crowd stood on tenterhooks, shouting encouragement. Their tune had changed; suddenly everybody wanted Ambrosius to make the catch. He had no time to enjoy such good feeling. His whole being was focused into the ping of the line, the whiz of the reel, the pull of the Bass.

What is a day after a years waiting? Nothing, but it felt like an eternity. Ambrosius was exhausted, but still he played the Game as the sun set. New people replaced the old in the crowd, people taking shifts to watch the ballet of wits that was playing out before them. The Fish struggled mightily, seeming to lose no strength at all. What a Fish! Nobody had seen the like of the battle that was being fought between the dwellers of Mist and Tree. The night wore into day once more, but Ambrosius was still there fighting. He knew something of this Fish now, he had a feel for its personality. It was freedom, yet it was unpredictability. He fought it in his heart and in his head. Here it was. That Fish was educating Ambrosius with every buck and tug.

The second night came, but Ambrosius did not give in to sleep. He occasionally took a hand off the spindle to rub his red-ringed eyes, letting the line pay out as he did so, but always he caught the run and turned the Fish once more. The day was a relief, for the warmth of the Smug was welcome, but with it Ambrosius began to feel the fatigue. The shimmering heat haze on the horizon conjured up nightmare visions of monsters and goblins and other things too outlandish to describe. But still he fished.



The third night came and now Ambrosius' thinking had become increasingly eccentric and weird. The rhythm of the Fish seemed to make his thoughts ebb and flow, themes repeating in monotonous freakishness as the line paid out and in, out and in. He was hypnotised. The Smug, when it came, was not so welcome any more, for it blinded Ambrosius' sleepless eyes and made him blink. Each blink was a quantum of sleep, from which he jolted upright disconcertingly, once more to the Fish.

The fourth night came causing waves of fear and anger to almost consume him. Almost. With some previously unknown reserve of strength he mastered the peculiar chemical imbalances that his sleeplessness had induced and fished on. Day crawled up the horizon and laughed at Ambrosius, so serious and brow-knitted where he sat. A Hookbeetle crawled across his legs and continued its own mission unthinkingly as it trundled mechanically onwards. The same animal mechanics kept Ambrosius functioning; this was excellent for Ambrosius as a machine is just what he needed to be.

The fifth night was terrifying. Dark shapes flitted about at the edge of our determined Fisher's vision, taunting him. Things from other dimensions started to impinge on his consciousness. Dawn rose somehow from the sepulchre of night, but it was a cold and windy day without cheer. The Fish seemed perhaps to have tired a little, for it pulled out with slightly less vigour, but it was by no means beaten.

The sixth night. Shapes and patterns. The image of a Fish, smiling and laughing, taunting the Fisher, telling him of his weakness. Blackouts. Daylight. Some last inner reserve of strength. Yes, Ambrosius had strength. He would see this through. All through the hours of darkness he fished, all through the night he meshed with the thoughts and struggles of his quarry; he was one with the starlight, one with the endless black of space. He was free, he was free...

He was told about it afterwards, after sleeping for a full three days. He had tapped an inner reservoir of strength and skill, and with an impossible burst of energy had renewed his efforts. The Fish was struggling away from him, the Line taut, but no more taut than it had been so many times before. There was no reasonable cause for worry. Ambrosius' conduct was impeccable, textbook, expert... yet it still happened. Ambrosius was pulling to one side, trying to turn the Fish. Had he succeeded? The tension in the Line had certainly dropped, and now he reeled in faster than ever. He reeled in. Was the Fish finally beat? He reeled in some more. Sleep could wait just a few more minutes. He reeled in. He reeled in. He reeled in. The line came up the tree. But it felt light. How light and how absolutely, undeniably, irrevocably devoid of a fish. The precious Hook was gone too, snapped off in the great fish's mouth, no doubt. Ambrosius looked up to the rising Smug, that Smug that had risen non-judgementally seven times on his one and only chance to become fishful. He shook his fist and he screamed like a dying creature, and the crowd cried and mumbled to themselves and left him. He reeled. Sank down in a flood of tears and sleep, he fell; sleep came washing over him like a Stone addicts long-anticipated fix. He was like a corpse, but still he breathed the summer air, still his heart beat and his blood rushed and his brain fired. All through this black repose he could see nothing else but a great white Fish, so breathtakingly beautiful and sleek, standing out impossibly bright against the blood-ebony backdrop of his eyelids.

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## Chapter 7 - Exodus

The Smug wasn't bothered in the least about Ambrosius' plight, for it shone with cheerful disregard through his shack window and made the dust motes dance and sparkle like a thousand tiny stars. Ambrosius sat up and rubbed his red-ringed eyes. He looked around the familiar interior of his room. Books and dust. Some kind person had wound up his line and neatly placed it on top of his Box of Things, which they had left in the middle of the shack floor.

He wasn't hungry, but he ate a breakfast of Hookfruit biscuits. He wasn't thirsty but he drank a quart of water. He splashed the rest of the water over his face in a sorry excuse for a wash, which just left the sweat of a year and a week more evenly distributed over his clammy skin. This sorry, fishless man crawled back into bed and pulled the covers over him. There was dark silence, and he could almost pretend that he didn't exist, were it not for those troublesome idiotic thoughts that insisted on their histrionics on the stage of his mind.

Enter the players: Self-Loathing, a small, dark, well-educated character who has a melancholy disposition and is thoroughly unlikable; Embarrassment, a corpulent old fool with gout who won't stop his infernal gabbing; Shame, a surprisingly persistent and base rumour-monger; Uncertainty, perhaps the most evil villain to ever grace Life's stage. There were more in this diabolic cast, more demons to mock and torment, but to describe them would make this book a depressing affair. At the bottom of the scrambling heap of emotions that clawed for prominence in Ambrosius' mind, there was a poor, crushed, wingless butterfly of a creature called Hope. When Ambrosius tried to help it out from under the pile he noticed that it had a sting to its tail, which it viciously applied to his helping hand and cast what was possibly the worst pain through his soul. He knew what he must do. Life held no promise for him, he had become like the dead. He must go down to join his kind; he must walk the Mist forever.

With this in his mind Ambrosius got out of bed, picked up his satchel and left his shack.

The spectators were there, perched on the higher branches and lining the main bough. They looked, for the most part, sad and sympathetic, but an errant peal of malevolent laughter from a young and unruly Piscador stung Ambrosius' ears. There was, although Ambrosius did not pick up on this at the time, something else written in the expressions of the crowd as they stood there. Indeed, their faces themselves had changed from what they were a year and week ago; where once they were plump and jolly they were now gaunt around the cheeks and serious. Yes, seriousness was there, along with concern, worry, and our evil actor Uncertainty. Something above and beyond disappointment at Ambrosius' failure to land a Bass filled the populace. Something that Ambrosius had once dismissed as superstition.

Ambrosius knew where he was going. He must collect food for his solitary exodus into the land of mists and ghosts, for within him there still smouldered stubbornly the will to live, if all else had fallen away. He made his way to Bough 36, which he knew to be in fruit. He gathered the windfalls, not bothering to climb the tree and select the choicest Fruit. He walked morosely over to a Fish vendor and bought some smoked Fish, wondering vaguely why the price was so high. His satchel bulging, Ambrosius couldn't see any reason to wait. He looked over the edge of the bough. How easy, he

thought, to take a single step and save all that careful climbing. But that wasn't for him. He would live, for he wanted this sorrow that consumed him to last a lifetime; only then could his misery express itself fully. Swinging his satchel over his shoulder, Ambrosius cracked his knuckles, stretched out his arms and gripped the rough bark of the nearest Hooktree's main trunk.

"Not quite yet," came a voice. Ambrosius looked up and was confronted by the weather-beaten crinkles of Leatherskin Wrinkly. Wiseman Cobweb was next to him, playing with his beard agitatedly and looking at Ambrosius with a look that could only be construed as vindictive.

"What do you want?" asked Ambrosius of Leatherskin. "All I want is to disappear into the mist forever."

"I wish I had my violin, for I would play you a tune," said Leatherskin sarcastically. "You really haven't had any news for the past year, have you?"

Ambrosius shook his head. "I don't care for idle gossip."

"Nor do I," said Leatherskin. "But the news I bring is gravely important."

Wiseman could contain himself no longer. "You've gone and made the Fish disappear, you Mist-breathing idiot!" he interrupted. "I knew this would happen, I knew..."

"Yes, thank you Wiseman," said Leatherskin. "You really haven't heard of this, Ambrosius?"

"No."

"Well, as Wiseman was so delicately putting, we are in the midst of a piseconomic downturn."

Ambrosius' memory flagged up a conversation that had occurred just over a year ago. He remembered his reprieve from being expelled on the condition of the fishing staying good.

"You've cursed us all!" announced Wiseman.

"Really?" asked Ambrosius, numb to any more negative emotions. "I can't say I care. How long has this been going on for?"

"The past month. We were going to... tell you earlier, only it is considered bad luck to interrupt a Fisher looking for a catch. Then you hooked that fish. That was quite some game, by the way. You've won a lot of respect, you know."

"Respect?" spat Ambrosius. "I'm a fishless loser who can't even land a bass! How could I look people in the eye after that? No, people don't respect me, they don't even feel sorry for me. The mist is the only place for me now."

"Well, think that if you like. I am not going to stop you venturing down into the mist. Quite the opposite, in fact. I was going to ask you to – make you, that is – go down into the mist anyway, for the good of the Hundred Boughs. I suspected you might be doing so anyway. I have something more to ask of you."

"Go on," said Ambrosius moodily.

"Wiseman here," said Leatherskin, "reckons that our catch has decreased because we let you back up here after breathing the Mist. He thinks you are cursed."

"Cursed, I say! Cursed!" reinforced Wiseman.

"As such, your expulsion into the Mist will solve our problem. I, however, take a more rational view," said Leatherskin, with a superior look on his face. "I believe that there is some logical explanation for the current lack of Fish. I have a hunch that it lies in the Mist. That yellow monster you saw, the inscription on the side - Fish

Stocks Limited. I think that the yellow monster is eating all the fish. I fear that expelling you on its own will not solve our fish shortage.”

Ambrosius shrugged. “What do you want me to do about it?”

“The monster must be stopped, and as such I have placed a reward of one thousand rupees on its head. You are the only one who will go down into the Mist. Everyone else is too scared. You must kill the monster.”

Ambrosius sneered. “You think I could kill that thing even if I wanted to? No, as far as I’m concerned you can all starve. I don’t care, not about the monster or the reward or the whole of the Hundred Boughs.”

“Well, if that is your opinion then you may go. But I should perhaps mention that a certain young lady might be impressed if you were to return a hero. And if you didn’t return... well, nobody can survive on Hookfruit alone.”

“You’re trying to make me feel guilty about what might happen to Sunbeam?”

“No, son, I’m just telling you what you already know. If the fish stop biting then everybody slowly dies, including Sunbeam. You just might be able to save us from that fate.”

“I’m no hero.”

“But Fate has conspired to send you into the mist at our time of greatest need. You may become one.”

Ambrosius was silent for a while. “I don’t want Sunbeam to starve.”

“Good.”

“But I am a natural coward. How am I to defeat the monster?”

“I think that maybe if there is a God then you will find that out when you need to.”

“I don’t believe in God, or Fate or any of that old cod. If I defeat this beast it will be by my own wits. The only trouble with that is that those wits are not that sharp.”

“I have confidence in you. So does Wiseman.” At this, Leatherskin nudged the old coot.

“Ah, er, yes,” said Wiseman. He sighed, as if he were dealing with an unruly child. “You know, Codwich, I always felt sorry for you. Being fishless and all, must be difficult. You were always a good learner and I’ve always thought of you as something of my protege. That said I blame you for infecting us all with your fishlessness.” The old man struggled to remember what he was talking about. “What I’m trying to say is that I have confidence in you, but if you don’t succeed it’s all your own fault.”

“Thank you,” said Ambrosius. “If that is all...”

“You may go. Good luck,” said Leatherskin.

“Yes, good luck,” said Wiseman. “I will sing incantations to appease the ghosts and stop them haunting you as you make your way through the Mist.”

“I am a ghost,” said Ambrosius simply. A peculiar smile crossed his face and he nodded curtly at Leatherskin and Wiseman in turn. With that, Ambrosius Codwich grabbed hold of the Hooktree bark and, for the second time in his life, descended into the Mist.

It is an unusual sensation for a Piscador to have his feet on the ground. Within minutes it is like all non-terrestrial life is mere fantasy, that existence on anything less than this solid ground is so precarious as to be impossible. But, for Ambrosius, this feeling was coupled with a deep dread, for, reassuringly firm as it was, the ground

was alien to him. The Mist rolled in great sheets around him, pressing home the point that he was very small, making him feel almost as if he would be carried along with its ethereal currents at any moment. Indeed, some things were. The Mist is a medium for many primordial things, little creatures that squiggle and squirm through its moist vapours. They feed off smaller squiggly squirmy things, and those on yet smaller animalcules, until the members of this fractal food-chain are reduced to their simplest forms and there is nothing but molecules to feed off. Very acute scientists would be amazed to find that actually these molecules eat each other, but then we are straying into the précis of a different world. On Expiscor nobody really cares that much, so molecules are left to be molecules.

A slimy eel about a hand's-length long hit Ambrosius on the forehead, peristalsising in indignation before scuttering off quickly about its business, leaving a patch of green slime on Ambrosius' brow. He didn't bother to wipe it off. He was the lowest of the low, and he would wear this foetid insignia to declare it to the world. A placard would have been good, but he had not thought of that. Expiscor's Greatest Loser. Yes, that would have been perfect. Now that he was on his own he could get down to some serious wallowing in his self-pity. He walked on, away from the trunks of the boughs, out onto a large flat plain that seemed to be devoid of Hooktrees. There were the occasional clumps of Mist Kelp and Fog Wrack, but apart from these sparse signs of vegetation the place seemed lifeless. Still he trudged on, into this desert wasteland. He could not see the Smug through the Mist, but he could get a vague idea of the time by the diffuse luminance that filtered through. It must have been midday by his reckoning before he stopped with sore feet and aching legs for lunch. Smoked Fish. It tasted like ashes in his mouth, this hated foodstuff, but it gave him strength.

Lunch finished, he travelled on. The light of the Smug slowly decreased until the Mist became dark and it was impossible to see. When this happened Ambrosius lay down without attempting to make a shelter and shivered into a fretful sleep that was haunted by his dead past life in the treetops. When he woke up he felt more tired than ever, but he forced himself to walk on once more. Late in the afternoon he came to another patch of Hooktrees. They came as quite a surprise, looming out of the mist as they did, all but their great buttresses invisible in the fug.

It occurred to Ambrosius that he should be feeling proud; no Piscador from the Hundred Boughs had ever seen another island of vegetation. Still he felt wretched. He considered climbing one of the great Trees, but the thought of meeting people at the top and having to explain how his journey had come about made him feel even more lousy. People, after all, were the source of all his problems. So he roamed on through the trees. As he ventured further in, the bark of the Hooktrees became older-looking and the secondary vegetation more dense; strange, rope-like creepers dangling across the path and nameless, lush shrubs leering hungrily for light between the moss-bearded tree trunks. The Mist-dwelling creatures here seemed bigger and more bizarre too, their bright colours belying their true venom. Things bit Ambrosius' bare arms and made his skin itch. Still he traipsed on, the discomfort coming as a strange kind of relief.

How many days and nights did he spend in that jungle? Certainly the obscured Smug rose and fell many times. The food in his satchel lasted so long, then he had to rummage about on the floor for windfalls. He would not be able to survive on Hookfruit alone for very long, and, with this in mind, Ambrosius hunted for other sources of food. Now Ambrosius was pretty useless when it came to physical pursuits,

so hunting the Mist-dwelling animals as they floated past was out of the question. This said he had a certain kind of ingenuity. It had caught his attention that certain animals did not bob along in the mist as others did, but crawled along the floor. Taking a fallen branch that had not yet rotted from the forest floor, Ambrosius used it as a digging stick and made a hole about ten hand-spans deep and ten wide. He broke a huge leaf off a nearby plant and placed it over the hole. Then, as it was nightfall, he retreated a small distance and slept.

He awoke disorientated and it took him some time to determine where the pit was, but when he found it he was pleased. The leaf had fallen, along with a large round evil-looking scuttler with a thick shell on top. It looked like a Mist Crab (which sometimes had taken the Fisher's bait and been hauled up into the treetops), but it had dome-shaped armour on top and no pincers. Ambrosius poked it with a stick and it twittered.

"Wee, sleekit, cowrin, tim'rous beastie," began Ambrosius, relating an old poem. He paused, trying to remember the rest. Then, "Oh who cares," and, with a swift motion he brought the stick down on the creature.

"Tweedle?"

"Die!" Once more, the stick.

"Tweet?"

"Die!" Again.

"Squirm?"

"Die I say!"

"Weeble?"

"Oh, who am I kidding," Ambrosius said in defeat. He picked up the creature out of the hole by cupping its shell and set it down on the forest floor.

"Groo!"

"Go on."

"Plouink?"

Ambrosius sighed. How did something with such a tangible lack of any drive for self-preservation exist? He shook his head and walked on. It was difficult not to notice the noise of twigs crackling behind him. Ambrosius turned. The creature was following him. He ran through the undergrowth for a short distance and stopped, turning round. Leaves shook and twigs crackled and the peculiar crab-like thing emerged with what could only be described as a hurt look about it. Typical, thought Ambrosius. Just when I thought I could have my glorious solitude.

In a storybook, Ambrosius would have reluctantly developed a heart-warming affection for this little creature, they would have gone on exciting adventures together and then, just in his moment of direst peril, the little crab-type-thing would have saved our hero's life. Unfortunately for the crab-type-thing, real life differed somewhat. Ambrosius approached the thing with a friendly look on its face, at which it tweedled affectionately, then with a deft movement he flipped it on its back and left it helplessly flailing its many legs in the air. Ambrosius walked on and forgot about his would-be companion. It is a sad fact that shortly afterwards a giant pig-like creature came along and pitilessly ate up the crab-type-thing in several cruel crunches. Such is life.

The tweedle-tweets of the crab-type thing faded into the distance, and Ambrosius was alone once more. He trudged on until the Smugshine faded and darkness ruled,

then hunkered down to another uncomfortable night in the Mist with the cold and the insects.

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## Chapter 8 – Caught

The ground shook. Small twigs and leaves fell from where they had been resting amongst the creepers and vines that interlaced the air above Ambrosius. His bowels churned with the presence of danger before his eyes had chance to open. A familiar clank and terrifying hum echoed around him. He sat upright, breathing heavily. It was coming for him. He scrambled to his feet and his legs moved automatically, propelling him through the night, branches and vines whipping and clinging to his clothing. Blind panic enveloped him, and suddenly all his lesser woes were forgotten. How he wished he had stayed in the safety of the land above the clouds, free from the threat of mist and monsters. But here he was, now stumbling, now running, now gasping for breath, and all the time the terrible noise getting closer. He snatched a look behind him and there it was: Fish Stocks Limited. He plunged headfirst through a thorny bush, his skin puckering as the cruel needles pierced it. He didn't even notice the pain. He skidded over the slippery leaf mulch that blanketed the floor, weaving between the trunks that loomed like tombstones in the foggy air. On and on he sped. Now he knew what it felt like to be hunted. Suddenly he was nothing but an animal, his higher mental faculties dissolving in panic. Wee, sleekit, cowrin, tim'rous beastie...

When it happened it happened fast. Hurtling along at top speed, Ambrosius' foot got caught on a tree root and he was sent sprawling to the ground. He got to his feet, but before he could move something struck him from behind, taking his legs from under him. Everything went very slowly. He struggled with his arms, but something entangled them. He kicked with his feet but they were similarly ensnared. He felt himself being pulled towards the yellow beast. Blackness swallowed Ambrosius and, cowardly as he was, he fainted.

Odd noises filtered through Ambrosius' faint to reach that thin sliver of mind that his perception occupied. There was the all-encompassing chugging of the monster, but, sounding small and tinny compared to it, there were voices:

“Aha, matey, we seem to have caught a right strange bass today! Come on, get him untangled from the net.”

“Let's make fishmeal of 'im, nobody'll notice.”

“You're only half joking aren't you Mungo?”

“Har, har, only 'alf!”

“You ever heard of a catch like this?”

“Aye, I heard a skipper down the Cannery Arms once tell of a monkey man caught in his nets. He was a cruel 'un that skipper, gave 'im a knock for messing up his nets and threw 'im kicking and screaming back overboard. Some say that there's a whole load of 'em living in the trees a few clicks east of here, past the desert, like. It's true I reckon – I was over there once with some crazy skipper who thought the fishing was better there. There were all these hooks, like, that dangling from the trees. I even saw a fish bite and get hauled aloft.”

“This one must have fell out of his tree or such like, then. Hairy little urchin, I'll warrant. What say you we put him on the end of a pole and swab the deck with him?”

“Har har, we could do an' all.”

“But I'm not such a bad man as that, a real softy I am. We could cast him back overboard but he's not going to last long in that jungle. There's things in there that'd have you for breakfast. No, I say we take him back to the City and leave him there.”

“He'd probably be as well in the jungle, Jerry; the City's as dangerous as it for the most part. Har, har, a funny lookin' thing like 'im - he's got a tail and all.”

“You felt your back end recently, Mungo? No, on second thoughts don't answer that. What I'm trying to say is that stump is there for a reason. I reckon we were like this bloke once.”

“Monkey men? Har, har, you reckon? It'd explain my fleas I suppose.”

“Again, you're only half joking, aye, Mungo.”

“Har har.”

“Look, he's opening his eyes.”

“Where am I?” Ambrosius croaked. “I don't feel too good.”

“Mist sickness, that'll be. The names Jerry,” said Jerry.

Through Ambrosius' swimming vision he discerned a man of about forty years, skin grizzled by long contact with the mist and an air of simple wisdom about him. “This here's Mungo.”

Mungo gave a slovenly salute, raising one grimy hand to his red-spotted bandanna and then back down to his waist. He was a short, paunchy man of about thirty who looked like... well, lets just say the name “Mungo” oddly suited this jolly, hairy, swarthy fellow.

“Ambrosius,” said Ambrosius. “How did I get here?” he asked, sitting up. Ambrosius surveyed his surroundings anxiously and saw little to reassure him. Below him were roughly hewn planks, full of knots and splinters. These rude floorboards were awash with condensed mist and something else more disturbing: blood. The deck was pooled liberally with this watery red mixture, and it scared Ambrosius.

“You were caught in the nets,” said Jerry. He saw Ambrosius eyeing the gore beneath him. “Nothing but fishblood, don't worry yourself. You get used to it in our line of work. We gut some of the bigger, better quality fish on the way back to the City, that way we can put them onto the market whilst they're still extra fresh.”

“You're Fishers?”

“What? You stress the word like its something holy. We're fishermen, yes.”

“So this is what the yellow monster is for? You catch Fish with it?”

“There you go again, stressing your words odd. We catch fish. Nothing special about them. This yellow monster is a mist boat. Yes, if you can call that there mist a pea-soup then this is a yellow sub-tureen. Uses fish swim-bladders to keep it floating.” Jerry stamped his foot on the deck. “That and a petrel engine to drive it forwards.” (Yes, petrel as in the bird. These poor creatures are driven beak first into the stern of the ship, so that when they flap their wings they drive the ship forward. They are controlled by a throttle – a piece of rope like a lead that can be pulled tight round their necks to cause them to fly forward.)

“So that's what the noise is?”

“The noise? That's the rendering plant we got down below. Smug-panel powered, very efficient. We use it to process some of the smaller, lower grade fish as we go.



That way we can get rid of all the waste fishguts and keep the stock, the profitable stuff. Means we can fit more on board and don't have to return to port for longer."

"Port?"

"The City," put in Mungo. "You really 'ave lived up a tree all your life aven't you?"

Ambrosius nodded. He didn't know what to make of these two fishermen. There was something rough about them, murderous even, yet a peculiar goodness was there too. "What's a city?" asked Ambrosius.

"Har, har. Your as green as young kelp, you are, lad. A city? Lots of houses, plenty of people, more than enough vice. Anything you want you can finds there, pretty much. A lot more besides."

"I want to be alone," said Ambrosius. His misery and self-loathing, forgotten temporarily when he was in perceived danger, were back again.

"Well, that's the one thing you can't 'ave in the City. You seem a bit down, lad. What you doing on your own out in the middle of the jungle? You could 'ave been killed."

"I'm an outcast, a misfit, a loser."

"Har, har, join the club matey. You'll fit right in 'ere."

"Have you ever considered a job as a fisherman, son?" asked Jerry.

Ambrosius snorted. "I hate Fish." He stopped for a second. Now he thought about it, he really was saying the word as though it were sacred. "I hate fish, even," he corrected. "I'm a useless fisherman."

"Useless? There's nothing to it," Jerry grinned. "You just cast your net and trawl along. You catch everything in your path and then haul the nets in and process what's there. Sure you catch loads of squiggly things, but you just throw them back overboard. Anyone can fish."

"Anyone?"

"Anyone," said Jerry. "Say, I can ask the skipper if he needs another pair of hands if you want."

"No, thank you. Is the skipper the boss?"

Jerry nodded. "Aye, and don't you forget it. He's not one to cross, our skipper. He's as crazy as they come, crazy and dirty. He'd sell his own mother for half a ton of hake, mark my words. Best damn captain around, with it. Fishmael is his name."

"Where is he?"

"Below, matey. He always stays below. Hates the Smug, he does. Only comes above decks when we moor up in dock, and then he slinks out at night to indulge his habits in the City. I've never known a man hit the stone so hard as he, but he seems none the merrier for it. Always a grim look on his face, that Fishmael, like a storm's brewing behind his forehead."

"I better not disturb him, then," said Ambrosius. "You say the City is big?"

"You could walk all day through it and not come clear."

"Big enough to get lost in?"

"Aye, if you like."

"Good," said Ambrosius. "Then take me to this City."

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## Chapter 9 – The City With No Name

The City didn't have a name; there was no need, for nothing else like it existed on the face of Expiscor. The mist made it invisible from anything more than a ship's length away, meaning that only a skilled navigator could find it. Here houses are built on layers of history, memories of vice and disease, slovenliness and enterprise, fire and flood, all stratified carelessly under the living, bustling crust. The streets are awash with flower-girls and sewage, the inns with merriment and vice, all fuelled by cheap beer and negotiable affections. It is a true cliché to say that the City never sleeps, for it is alive and awake and aware all day and all night. First you can smell it, then you can hear it, then you can see it. The mist is kept at bay by huge dykes which surround the inner sanctum of unsanctity, keeping the unsavoury air relatively clear of fog. Visibility is still not great, but you can see down a whole street on a good day. How pure the rot, how unadulterated the scum, how soft the fabric of sin laid hard and bare for all to see. Yes, the dykes brought clarity, the very latest, most modern, urban clarity. And this civilisation made animal its civilians until they died and their bones became lost in another stratum of decay.

"Home," said Jerry as the gates to the City loomed into view. "Real air at last, air with experience."

"Har, har," said Mungo.

Ambrosius stood in a brooding silence. He saw his mood mapped into physicality as the gates opened slowly, the mist rolling through them in great swathes; through that threshold lay depravity and baseness, the two things which a man will seek as anodyne for a broken heart. The ship crawled through the opening and the gates closed astern with a resonant thud. The docks were little more than a stone wharf with warehouses behind and a few cranes busy unloading barrels of stock and crates of fish off the incumbent ships.

"It stinks," said Ambrosius.

"Odour is in the nose of the beholder," said Jerry. "Come on Mungo, lets get moored up, then we can hit the Cannery Arms for a cheeky ten pints and a good kip in a bed that doesn't rock."

"Unless you slip the Madame a silver sixpence, that is, har, har!" chuckled Mungo.

Jerry laughed heartily, then, deftly handling the creaking wheel that steered the ship, skilfully piloted them until their starboard side was lined up perfectly with the wharf. The two shipmates made quick work of tying the ship off, then laid down a gangplank.

"Land, sweet land," said Jerry, grinning from ear to ear. "I'll trample you until my feet get restless and my belly calls for the rocking of the mist, then I'll leave you like a two-penny girl, promising I'll be back again. I'm sorry our love-affair is so fickle."

"They're the best kind o' love affairs," said Mungo. "Come on, y'big barnacle's bottom."

"You can come along if you want," said Jerry to Ambrosius. "No pressure, like."

"I've got nowhere else to go," said Ambrosius.

"Very well then, the Cannery it is."

They walked through street that led out of the docks, past the run-down warehouses, past the chandlers and sail-makers and various traders who gathered round the newly docked boats and tried to sell fresh fruit and savoury snacks to fill the long-deprived bellies of the sailors. They walked down a street full of houses with

sumptuous frilly curtains and discreetly dim red lanterns in the upper windows, until they came to a building that looked like it had been constructed solely of driftwood. The smell of alcohol hit all three of them from a good twenty paces away, and by the time they were at the door Ambrosius felt half tipsy just off the fumes of the place. A man stood at the entrance with a large piece of wood with various assorted nails and bits of broken glass embedded menacingly in it.

“Afternoon, Gentle” said Jerry, nodding. “This here's Gentle Mike. Soft as a brush aren't you, aye Mike?”

“Snaarm,” said Mike.

“Mike's not that eloquent, I'm afraid, but he does his job well. Come on, let's go in.”

The three entered. At first it was as if they were back in the mist; the air was thick with stone smoke and the interior was lit only by a few cheap fish-tallow candles. They made their way over the grimy floor, inch thick with ash and dirt, to a free table in the corner. The table top was covered with the most obscene, misspelt words and the rudest pictures imaginable, all products of a filthy mind and a sharp knife. A serving wench, without asking, brought all three of them a pint of yellowy-brown liquid in a pock-marked tin cup and Jerry paid her with three dull bronze coins.

Ambrosius tentatively tasted his drink. It was unspeakably foul, and made the roof of his mouth go numb.

“Grog,” said Mungo. “Can't be more specific than that. Miscellaneous grog, the first thing any sailor asks for when he hits land. She must have sensed we were fresh off the boat. Well, maybe not that fresh, but you get the picture, har, har.”

“The first mouthful's bad, I'll say, but get halfway through it and it's more than worth it,” said Jerry. “You'll be merry as a marching band for a penny, and that can't be sniffed at. Speaking of which,” said Jerry. He took a tin out of his pocket and opened its lid, offering it to Ambrosius.

“No, I don't,” said Ambrosius. The contents were familiar – crushed stone, a potent narcotic that was snorted by the user. This produced a high within minutes and a surprisingly pleasant trickles of stone-laced mucous down the back of the throat. To Ambrosius the habit meant nothing but death, for on it he placed the blame for the passing of his father.

“Suit yourself,” said Jerry, offering the tin to Mungo, who eagerly took a large pinch, placed it in the dimple formed by the tendon of the extended thumb on the back of his hand, and raised it to his nose. There then preceded a truly disgusting noise like slime draining down a half-blocked plug-hole and the powder disappeared. Such a social habit. Jerry followed suit, washing his snortings down with a brave mouthful of grog.

“Har, har,” said Mungo, smiling broadly, displaying a row of rotted teeth (a side effect of years of grog and stone). “That be better. Now, lets play,” he said, getting a pair of dice out of his pocket. He suicidally downed the rest of his grog and dropped the dice into the bottom of his cup. “Highest wins. I'll lay down fourpence, what say you, Jerry?”

“I'm feeling lucky. I'll see your fourpence. Are you betting, Ambrosius?”

“I don't bet.”

“You're in the City now, lad. Best find your vice pretty quickly otherwise you'll never last. Everybody's got their sin here.”

Ambrosius thought for a second. “I don't have any money.”

“I'll lend you fourpence if you pay me back nine on the morrow,” said Jerry. “I'm kind like that.”

Peer pressure is a terrible thing. “Go on then,” said Ambrosius, smiling besides himself. “I don't want to seem rude.”

“Good lad. Now you can roll, Mungo.”

Mungo put his hand over the top of the cup and shook it vigorously, whispering incantations to whatever passing gods might be listening as he did so. He rolled the dice, sticky with dregs, onto the mottled tabletop.

“Double two, bad luck matey,” said Jerry, smiling.

“I could win yet,” said Mungo.

Jerry took the cup off him and placed the dice in it. He shook and rolled.

“Four and five makes nine,” said Mungo. “You lucky trout botherer, Jerry. Ambrosius, you next lad.”

“I don't think I'll beat that,” said Ambrosius pessimistically, but he shook and rolled anyway.

“Five and six! Someone's smiling down on you, son. That's your stake back and eight pennies to boot.”

They played on through the night, Mungo and Jerry drinking first grog to get them to a certain level of drunkenness and then beer to keep them at that level until the wee hours. Copious amounts of crushed stone disappeared up their noses, until their eyes were red and pupils small and glassy. The two seafarers' faces took on a pallor as of dead men, a fine sheen of sweat beading their foreheads. Ambrosius drank only the first pint of grog, which he made last through the long night. This was partly due to his natural restraint when it came to such habits, but was also due to the fact that the grog tasted so hideous and turned his stomach sour. In truth he did not enjoy such revelry, but the dice rolled in his favour and time after time he raked in money off his new acquaintances. By the end of the night he had won just over ten pound. Ambrosius left the two shipmates dozing intoxicated face down on the table, each with one hand still clutching a half-full cup. He went to the bar and asked for a room.

“Do you have company?” asked the buxom barmaid.

Ambrosius looked back over to Mungo and Jerry. They would sleep like kings where they were. “No,” he said.

“Would you like some?” asked the barmaid provocatively.

“Er, no thank you,” said Ambrosius with a quaver.

“Suit yourself,” said the barmaid. “There's a free room up the stairs, first on the left. I'd make sure you get the right room if I were you.”

“Thanks,” said Ambrosius.

The Smug looked different through a window with glass in it, sort of as though it were trapped like a fish in a tank. It had been peeping over the horizon as Ambrosius crawled into bed, now, after a good sleep, the orb was high and fat in the sky. Ambrosius' teeth felt chalky and his mouth tasted foul after last night's grog, as though he had been sick. There was nothing in the room other than the bed, so he had to quest downstairs for a glass of water, which was served to him by a new barmaid with black flowing hair and an ugly face. The water looked a little like the grog.

“Would you rather have some small beer?” asked the barwoman with evident amusement, having seen the look on Ambrosius' face. “I'm afraid this city isn't made for teetotallers.”

Ambrosius nodded and took the mildly alcoholic beer. Jerry and Mungo were still sleeping at their table, so Ambrosius decided to leave them be. He took his beer and drank it in the doorway, tasting the foul air of the City as he supped.

Feeling a little merrier and marginally more hydrated, Ambrosius returned the cup to the bar and left the pub. He did not really want to have to hang out with two sailors with sore heads for the rest of the day, so he decided to see the rest of the City alone.

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## Chapter 10 - Sightseeing

“Cheers,” he said to the fish vendor, and, as he walked, tucked into his turbot and some new things he had never heard of before called “chips”. They were good. He was feeling good. Money gave a comforting weight to his pockets and the world was his oyster (although, as he had never encountered an oyster, he did not know this). Perhaps amongst the depravity of the city he really could lose his sorrows.

The City was split up into four quarters: in the first, where he had landed, were the warehouses and red lights and drinking dens of the docks. The second quarter, which he now entered, was the market quarter, full of noise and bustle. Half the goods had been stolen several times before they made an appearance on the stalls, which kept prices competitive and ensured a good redistribution of wealth amongst the working classes. The third and fourth quarters were the industrial and residential quarters, but the day was half gone already and he doubted he would get to see them just yet. Instead he headed towards the centre of the City, through the markets. Ambrosius finished his fish and chips and stopped to buy a bottle of small beer from a grotty looking tyke of a street vendor who eyed his full pockets covetously. He walked on down the street enjoying his beverage, taking in the sights.

“S'cuse me sir, you want to buy post-insurance?” It was a chirpy, sharp-witted voice that seemed to exude a kind of lively, likeable yet highly untrustworthy quality. “Three pence.”

“No,” said Ambrosius, wondering vaguely what the man meant by “post”.

“Post-insurance, cheap at half the price. Threepence per minute.”

“I said I'm not interested.”

“To me, sir, that would suggest that you are ignorant as to just what services I am providing, if you beg my pardon, sir.”

“Look, would you go away?”

“Post-insurance, sir, is an extremely valuable service that lets the policy holder – that would be you, sir – insure himself against past events such as, sir, some grotty little tyke picking your pocket just after you bought a beer from him.”

Ambrosius stopped. “He did?”

“Afraid so, sir. Post-insurance? Six pence.”

“Are you trying to extort money from me?”

“Not at all. Nine pence now, sir.”

“I should call the police.”

“The police? That'll cost you more than twelve pence, sir.”

Ambrosius sighed. "Look, if I give you twelve pence will you get me the rest of my money back?"

"Sure thing, sir."

Ambrosius reached into his pockets.

"Best pay me after you get your money back, sir," said the post-insurance salesman, giving a sympathetic smile. "One second." The insurance salesman ran off down the street. A minute passed. Ambrosius wondered whether he should give in and except his new-found impecuniousness, but, against all expectations, the salesman came running back up the street rubbing his knuckles.

"I should charge you extra for that, he had a bigger brother. There you go sir, your money back, minus sixteen pence for me."

"Thank you," said Ambrosius, taking the money. Many eyes lingered on it as he deposited it back in his pockets.

"If you don't mind me saying, sir, the chances of you now making it up the street without requiring my services again are slim to none. In short, sir, I think you need a chaperone."

"How much?" asked Ambrosius. He had been considering looking for a guide as it was.

"Another ninepence? Then threepence per hour."

"Done," said Ambrosius. "What's your name?"

"Got a lot of names, sir. You can call me Stan."

"Ambrosius. Now, Stan, I want to get a feel for this town. What makes its heart beat, so to speak. Can you show me?"

Stan grinned. "The City's got a lot of hearts, sir, a lot of beatings too. If you're looking for the former you often find the latter."

"That's what I'm paying you to avoid."

"Quite so, sir. What is it you're interested in exactly?"

"I've been told I need to find my vice."

"Ah, very good sir. I'm an expert on that. There are a handful of things that might push your button. Women?"

"I came to the City to escape a broken heart, not to find one."

"I see. Drink?"

"Not my thing?"

"Stone?"

"I hate the stuff."

"A good brawl?"

"I couldn't punch my way out of a paper bag."

"Well then, that leaves money and power. You interested in them?"

Ambrosius thought for a second. "Yes, I suppose they would suit me."

"Then you need one. A suit, that is. Trust me, if you look the part, your one step away from being a millionaire."

The suit fitting took the best part of an hour. It wasn't the very best suit money could buy, but it looked sharp enough to say "I'm not poor", which marked Ambrosius above ninety-nine percent of the City's population. Ambrosius left the tailors five pounds poorer but with a feeling of importance.

"Now sir, a good con-man..." started Stan.

"Hold on," said Ambrosius. "Con-man?"

Stan smiled. "Come on, sir, you're obviously intelligent. You don't need to make your money by pickpocketing."

"I want to make my money honestly."

Stan was taken aback. "That's impossible."

"Then I think our arrangement has come to an end."

"Hold your horses, sir. I was just in shock, that's all. What I meant to say is that, whilst it is impossible to make your money in this City whilst being one-hundred percent honest, it might be possible to do so one-hundred percent legally. If one's clever about it, of course."

"I want to be honest."

"Sir, please do not take offence, but are you living in the real world?"

Now there's a question. Was the real world the treetops? Was the real world the smell of a bass roasting on a winter night safe in a rickety shack whilst the wind howled outside? Was the real world the hot Smug on a summers day and the tickle of hookblossom as it brushed your skin? Did the real world have Extraneous Capital Letters to indicate holiness? It was a sad summation which gave Ambrosius the answer: nevermore.

"Sir?"

"Maybe I don't care about honesty as much as I used to. As long as I stay within the law, that is – I don't want to end up in irons."

"A brave admission, that, sir. It's hard to soul search and find you're a n'er-do-well like the rest of us. Life's more fun when you do though, you just have to get over that initial flutter. A strange thing that flutter, like a dying butterfly. No explaining it." Stan looked sad for a second, before that ear-encompassing crocodile grin crept back over his features. "But enough of that. You sir - I can tell just by looking at you – are good with numbers?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"Excellent. Have you ever heard of something called a Personal Secured Loan?"

"No."

"Well, sir, there's two ways of seeing a Personal Secured Loan. You see, the first is the textbook definition." Here Stan spat into the gutter. "The idea is that someone wants some money for something they always wanted. Trouble is they'd have to scrimp and save for years to get it and then they probably wouldn't want it any more, or their roof would cave in and they'd have to spend the money on that. Something like that. So along comes a nice, trustworthy gentlemen – like yourself – who says he'll make their dreams come true. They can have the money, and all they have to do is sign a piece of paper saying they'll pay the nice trustworthy man twenty percent extra per year that it takes them to pay it back. Everyone is happy – the nice trustworthy man makes his twenty percent and the poor borrower gets his thing what he's always wanted."

"Sounds like a valuable service," said Ambrosius.

"Well, that was the textbook definition. The clever person's definition," at this Stan smiled even more broadly, "goes like this. The lender goes round knocking on doors. He is looking for a certain breed of animal. Animal A opens the door. She is wearing cheap but good quality clothes that are well-ironed, and there are well-dusted pictures hanging on the wall behind her. The lender has noticed her front garden is well maintained and there are nice hanging baskets next to the door. Our housewife

asks with a polite but suspicious voice 'Hello?' It is all the lender can do not to slam the door in her face, but instead he politely says 'Sorry, wrong number.'

“Animal B comes to the door. He is wearing cheap clothes with a few coffee stains on one of the sleeves, but overall seems quite presentable. There are cheap prints on the wall that look dusty and faded. The lender has noticed the animal's front lawn is a little overgrown, but the hedges are trimmed and there is no rubbish about. The animal says in a level tone “Hello?”. This animal is not the type the hunter is after. 'Sorry, wrong number,' he says.

“Animal C comes to the door. He is wearing tracksuit bottoms with curry stains down and a string vest. There are no pictures on the walls behind him and the wallpaper is peeling off. The lender has noted the front garden is a tip, with a burnt-out cart in the middle of it. The animal burps in an inquisitive tone as he opens the door. Again, this is not what the hunter is looking for; he makes his excuses and leaves.

“Finally, the lender – the hunter, that is - comes to the door of Animal D. Animal D opens the door. She looks stressed, and shouts something over her shoulder to her kids as she opens the door. She is wearing cheap clothes with holes that have been darned. The lender has noticed the front garden is well-maintained, but certain jobs that indicate a man are left undone; the gate needs painting, there is grass in the gutters; there is a dead tree that needs cutting down. “I'm sorry, you've caught me at a really bad time, I'm just about to send the kids to school and then I've got to get to the fish canning plant for work.” This is perfect: the hunter has found his game. 'You look like you need a holiday' he says, an air of sympathy about him. She laughs. 'Of course,' she says. 'But I work all day as it is and still can hardly put food on the table. I can't afford a holiday.' The lender smiles. 'Of course you can,' he says. 'Let me explain.’”

“So to cut a long story short you sell Animal D a loan, she signs a contract with lots of small print that she just doesn't have time to read. There's no way she can pay off the interest, and in that small print it says that if she can't pay up you get her house. You've just got yourself a twenty grand house for a thousand pound stake.”

“That's disgraceful!” exclaimed Ambrosius.

“You want to make money? Just do it, that's what I say; don't think about the poor animals. They're always poor, they're used to it. You, on the other hand, are a superior breed, sir. You require better feedstock and that requires cash.”

Something inside Ambrosius squirmed and tried to flap its way up towards his consciousness, but something big and black trampled it down. “How much can I make?”

“You make one score a day for one calender month – that's twenty eight days. You make nineteen grand on each loan. You gotta wait for the animals to go bust, which usually takes about six months. In about seven months you've got yourself a little over half a mill. Move to another area, do it again and in fourteen months you've made your first million.”

A million. He could see a way forward now; he would buy himself happiness. “You really think I could make a million?”

“I know it. Of course, I would do it myself only I'm... well, I have a certain reputation round here. You, on the other hand, have an innocent face and an educated voice. The animals like that. All I ask in return is thirty percent.”



“Why should I give you any money? I think threepence an hour is pretty generous.”

“Well, lets just say, you have to actually get the houses off people to sell them. That requires people with large pointy objects, people who I know and you don't. We call them debt collectors. Of course, you'll have to pay their wages out of your cut, but muscle comes cheap in this city so you'll be left with at least fifty percent.”

“Where will I get the money to lend people in the first place?”

“Just leave that to me. I've got some contacts. Just make sure you pay them back, otherwise... well, just pay them back okay?”

“Okay,” said Ambrosius after a moments thought. “I'll do it. I can donate some of the money to good causes when I've got enough.”

“If that would make you feel better, sir.”

That night Stan invited Ambrosius back to his dive. It was getting towards midnight as they finally reached the slums of the residential quarter, and Ambrosius was glad he had a guide. All the local muggers seemed to know Stan and hailed him with jovial greetings from the shadows. They finally got to Stan's home – a lean-to shed of sorts round the back of a take-away fish bar – at about one o'clock in the morning. It stank even for the City, but there was a kettle and some gumbo that looked like it had been simmering in a battered tin pot for the last decade. The two new business partners sat down and enjoyed a cup of crushed, roasted hookbeetle coffee (a delicacy of the city) and a bowl of gumbo each. They talked for an hour or so. Stan was interested in the world of the treetops, seeing it as one big opportunity for a scam, whilst Ambrosius was enthralled by Stan's tales of his money-making antics and other dodgy dealings. At last they decided to turn in, and, with alien tales of innocence and depravity swimming in their respective minds, Stan and Ambrosius slept.

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## **Chapter 11 – One Fine Day**

The urge to yawn is contagious, it is said, and this contagion spread across the City with great speed as the Smug peered over the horizon. Washerwomen yawned, dunny men yawned, policemen yawned, thieves yawned, dukes in their towers and tramps their gutters yawned, wastrels and workaholics yawned, even dogs and cats yawned. Ambrosius yawned.

“Good morning, sir,” said Stan, yawning too. “Looks like it's to be a fine day.”

“Yes, said Ambrosius. A fine day.”

“One fine day,” she said, “I'll sell that old pony-trap and get something sparkling and new.”

“What are we going to do?” asked Ambrosius.

“One fine day,” he said, “I'll take them away from this sink-hole and we'll have a proper family holiday for once.”

“That's up to you, sir. I see no reason not to start on our little venture straight away.”

“One fine day,” she said, “I'll get her that toy horse she's always wanted. Then she won't think her mummy doesn't love her.”

It was a short walk to their target, a poor area a few blocks away. Ambrosius was nervous, but as the door opened his confidence surged back and expressed itself in his smile.

“One fine day,” he said, “I'll put a proper spread on the table, not the same old fishmeal day after day.”

“So if you'll just sign there...”

“One fine day,” she said, “I'll get them clothes that haven't been passed down for three generations and darned so many times there's not an original stitch on them.”

“What do you think it is that makes people suspend belief to such an extent?”

“One fine day,” he said, “I'll send them to a proper school, then they'll have a chance in life.”

“Oh, well there's lots of things,” said Stan.

“One fine day,” she said.

## **Chapter 12 – Next Week**

The lives of a select number of people seemed much brighter, burning like diamonds in sewage, much brighter than tungsten, impossibly bright. They were living dreams, breathing hopes, tasting heaven. For once they were free from the constant humiliation of the daily grind, and could afford to smile. Ambrosius had even met some of his clients by chance in the street and had been personally thanked. He was considered a pillar of the community.

“I'm so happy, we're the envy of the whole street. The new cart goes beautifully, like a dream. Next week I'll put something by to pay it back.”

“You know, Stan, I really think we are providing a valuable service.”

“I've actually got out of this dive for once, the family too! We'll remember that holiday for the rest of our lives. Of course, next week I'll have to scrimp a bit to put something aside for the repayment, but that goes without saying.”

“You really think so, sir?”

“Oh, look at her little face! She loves that toy horse. It's important she has a treat now and again. I'll just have to miss out my night out next week, then I'll have enough.”

“Yes. These people deserve a bit of brightness in our lives. We're selling a dream.”

“We've been eating like kings! They're looking so much healthier for it too. Next week we'll go back to fishmeal.”

“Perhaps dreams should stay as dreams, if you don't mind me saying, sir.”

“Look at their new clothes, they'll be the talk of all their friends. Next week I'll stop shopping like this.”

“Why should they? Twenty percent isn't much, after all. Why can't they pay it back? They'd just have to give up a few luxuries.”

“Now they can get a proper education. It's an investment in their future, that's what it is. Next week I'll give up smoking, then I'll have a bit extra to pay it back.”

“Well, sir, they have a saying in the slums...”

“Next week...”

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### **Chapter 13 – Next Month**

If you drink from the royal chalice there is always the chance that you will get poisoned; this was starting to occur to some of the debtors, who still nodded to Ambrosius in the street but did so with less enthusiasm. They had just made the first payment, and it was clear that they were in trouble already.

“I can't sell the cart yet, everyone will laugh at me. Next month, maybe.”

“What are they whining at? They read the contract, didn't they?”

“The holiday was good, but it's just a memory now. Living with just a memory and no food is going to be mighty hard. I can't tell them I can't afford it yet though, I'll have to borrow off my friends to pay next month.”

“Perhaps they didn't want to think about the downside, sir. People are like that.”

“I feel stupid for buying her that rocking horse now. What's the point of having toys if you can't afford any heating?”

“They are all adults, they should have thought about the future.”

“The money's nearly gone, but they don't want to eat that stinking fishmeal any more. I dare not tell them I can barely afford that. Next month's going to be difficult.”

“Some would say the stupid shouldn't be punished for being stupid, sir. Not me, sir, but some.”

“She's got a tear in her new dress already - I really need to get her a new one. Just one more shopping trip won't hurt, will it? I deserve a bit of a de-stress. Next month I'll stop.”

“Well I can't feel bad about it. I can't take the blame for other people's laxness.”

“I've set it aside for his schooling but I'm having to dip into it to make the payments already. By the time he's at school it'll all be gone. Next month I'm going to pay it all back – but what about the interest?”

“No sir, well said. I can hardly wait for payday...”

“Next month.”

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## **Chapter 14 – Next Year**

A ball of rock and mist and trees and people had described an ellipse around the Smug once since Ambrosius had made his first sale. Things were starting to pay off.

“I never thought it would come to this - they're taking the house!”  
+ £30,000

“I never thought it would come to this - we'll be out on the street!”  
+£19,000

“I never thought it would come to this - where will we find our next meal?”  
+£21,000

“I never thought it would come to this - we're bust! We've brought shame on our family!”  
+£17,000

“I never thought it would come to this – what about the kids?”  
+£22,000

“I never thought...”

“Who would have thought it, eh?” grinned Stan. “Just over a million gross. After paying back our creditors, paying the bailiffs and all, that's about five hundred grand.

My cut's £150,000, yours is £350,000. Not a bad year. Well, not bad for us, anyway. Now, about those good causes, sir. I believe there's a good hotel a few streets west of here that does an excellent dugong steak. They are always open for donations."

"Don't be so cynical, Stan."

"Don't be so self-righteous, sir. What's the point in helping the poor and homeless when you're the one who made them so? Hypocritical, that is. No, I say don't let one hand know what the other's doing, that way if both are on the take then you needn't worry about it. Come on, I'm hungry."

There were marble veins of fat in Stan's dugong steak, a sign that it was the very best quality. With a previously hidden refinement he cut into it, and with equal refinement the steak oozed blood onto his plate. Ambrosius hadn't touched his yet, and instead was playing distractedly with his fork.

"Eat up, sir," said Stan. "It's some good stuff. Melts in your mouth."

"Stan, I can't stop thinking of what we did to those people. Do you think..."

"No I don't," said Stan, chewing his words and swallowing his steak. "Life's better that way."

"But I never wanted to..."

"No, nor did I. I did point out all this to you at the time. I made a special mental note of it. I never lead anyone astray who's truly innocent. The time for guilt has passed, the deed's done now."

"But it was so easy..."

Stan smiled. "There are two ways of making money in this world. One is to work hard. This rarely works, but some people like to try it. The second way is to be ruthless. Some people find this hard, and that includes me. I have a conscience, though many would argue against that. I have to get over that every day. You, on the other hand, are different. You have no conscience."

"I don't?" Ambrosius didn't know whether Stan was trying to pay him a compliment or offend him.

"No. Do you feel bad about cheating all those people out of their homes?"

Ambrosius thought. "Yes."

"Now look deeper. Do you feel bad?"

"Yes."

"Deeper."

"Yes. Stan, I feel bad about what I did."

"You're a liar as well, then. I have a way of telling these things - when your life is sin, you pick up on these things pretty quickly. Ambrosius, your morality is all cerebral; it doesn't go any further than the first few millimetres of your brain's surface. All the strong, animal parts of your brain don't hold to your morals. Some people are just like that."

"And you're different?"

"I've got very strong morals, but I go against them. I used to be good, angelic even. You know what changed? I had a fall."

Ambrosius thought back to his fall from a tree, the fall that started all this. "What happened?" he asked.

"I used to be honest," said Stan, "a window cleaner by profession. I liked to think I gave people clarity. One day I fell off the ladder and hit my head on the floor. It was one of the busiest streets in town. You know how long I lay there?"

Ambrosius was silent.

“All day and all night. If it had been winter I would have frozen to death. In the end I came to. My wallet was missing and someone had taken my watch. Since then I've never carried a wallet or a watch, and I've learnt to leave my morals bruised and bleeding in the gutter, where those of other people left me.”

Ambrosius didn't know what to say. Stan cut another piece of steak and passed it to his mouth. Ambrosius rubbed his hands over his face, before speaking. “You know, it just goes to show. There's no such thing as evil. People are just pushed into doing bad things by circumstance.”

“Oh no,” said Stan. “There is evil, don't you forget it. You've done evil by cheating those people out of their houses. Just because evil is understandable, that doesn't make it right.”

“How can I change my nature? You say you can see that, deep down, I have no real morals. Surely if I am innately amoral then I can't help doing bad things.”

“Humans are perhaps unique in that they can choose to go against their nature. It is important to pick your battles, though. You must not fight a war against nature, Ambrosius – I can see that within you at the moment, a childish desire to attack parts of yourself. No you must learn to live with your nature, evil as it may be. Only then can you overcome it. Unless, of course, you don't want to overcome it. It is your choice.” Stan smiled that hypnotic smile. “I suggest you follow me into a life of sinful luxury, but then I would say that.”

“Enough,” said Ambrosius, smiling. “Something tells me that your advice is good, but I don't want to follow anyone. I want to take responsibility for myself. If I do good then it's to my credit, if I do evil it's on my own back.”

“Watch as I wipe a tear away,” said Stan, theatrically. “My little hatchling is about to fly the nest. Yes, I think our little arrangement has come to an end. You want to earn a living where at least you don't have to see the people you're shafting?”

“I suppose you could put it like that,” said Ambrosius.

“There is a company you might be interested in working for,” Stan said, dabbing his mouth with a serviette. “It trades under the name of Fish Stocks Limited. Let me tell you about it.”

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## **Chapter 15 – The History of Fish Stocks Limited**

Unthinkably, the City did not exist back then. The ground dwellers were spread in small tribes amongst the jungle, and had to put up with wild snarlgrüber attacks and the persistent, biting insects that buzzed through the mist, spreading mist fever and the dreaded jitters. Fish were hunted with spears, which was extremely difficult owing to their lightning quick reflexes and keen eyes. People had just too little to eat for most of the time, and they were thin and hollow-eyed with hunger. But they were pious. In a world where God's whim could mean the difference between eating a big fat bass or starving for another week, people valued their God. A priesthood arose, the fish hunters supporting them with a fifth of their catch. Hundreds of years passed, and the priesthood gradually accumulated books full of arcane knowledge. The world was understood in terms of the great pitched battle between good and evil, a battle that could explain all the glories and hardships that befell the ground dwellers. Demons

and angels abounded, men were vessels for greater powers and the great interplay between fish and fisher was held holy, as it still is in the treetops to this day.

Then a man was born who would change everything. His name was Tempura Lanomaly. Tempura joined the priesthood when he was sixteen and studied hard. He had always had a great ability to build things with his hands – like Ambrosius he was a carver, but also a metal worker and mechanic. First he started on small decorative pieces, carvings of men and fish and everything in between. Once he had filled his room with such contrivances he sought new ground. His fascination turned to cogs and wheels, and his fertile mind and dexterous hands gave birth to the first machines. They did many things; pumped water, played music, washed clothes, printed books. But one day Tempura discovered something that would make his previous discoveries pale to insignificance. He presented this new contraption proudly before the king of the land, who he had previously impressed with his ingenious inventions. With a flourish he whipped off the covering from the machine, which he had assembled on the king's lawn. Metal sparkled.

“What does it do?” asked the king.

Tempura bowed low. “If it pleases my lord, I will demonstrate.”

“Very well,” said the king.

First Tempura turned a crank on the side of the machine to start the motor, which ran off fish oil. Then he went over to a control panel and carefully adjusted a few dials. When he was satisfied that the machine was perfectly calibrated he nodded to his assistant, a small, nervous looking youth of about fifteen with a pimply, pale face and squinting, rat-like eyes.

“Bring me the fish,” said Tempura. The skivvy hurried over to the cart which had transported the machine and from under the awning plucked a cage, inside which thrashed an infinity fish. There was terror in those fathomless, animal eyes, and desperation in those thrashings.

“Attach the cage,” said Tempura.

The servant attached the cage to a fitting at one end of the great, gleaming machine.

“Release the fish,” ordered tempura.

The servant took a nervous, sidelong glance at Tempura.

“Release the fish, boy!” bellowed Tempura.

Gulping down his revulsion, the servant pulled up a flap that separated the caged fish from the input bay of the machine. The fish, with freedom on its mind, rushed for this new opening.

It is a small mercy that nobody could see what went on inside that machine, but the clanking, booming, chuntering noises were highly suggestive. Within one minute, a flap opened at the other end of the machine and out of it a bottle appeared. On the label it said “Poppa Lanomaly's Traditional, Organic Fish Stock.”

“Is that it?” asked the king. “I'm not impressed.”

“If my lord is willing, would it please him to taste the product?”

The king harrumphed. “I have already had my breakfast.”

“But, my lord, one sip will be enough.”

“Very well,” grunted the king. “But this better be good.”

The servant boy rushed over and brought the bottle of stock to his master. He popped the top off with a knife and passed the open bottle to the king.

The king put the bottle to his mouth and, tentatively, sipped.

“Good heavens,” he said, looking with astonishment at the bottle as though he had seen it for the first time. “This stuff is the best stock I have ever tasted!”

“Yes, my lord, and my patent machine can produce stock of this quality consistently twenty four hours a day, seven days a week.”

“You shall be a knight,” said the king, “and you shall have a thousand servants at your disposal. You will provide stock to the whole of the kingdom. It shall be a law that all the fish must be processed in your machine, and I shall levy a tax on its use.”

So the people brought their meagre catches and fed them into the machine, and they were supplied with the most incredible stock they had ever tasted. The people could not resent the king for the tax imposed on them because the stock was so good, and it would be ungrateful to complain. Now there was only one machine to start with, so people had to come from miles around to process their stock. People abandoned their ancestral lands and moved nearer the machine. Gradually the City arose.

But the story does not stop there. Now that so many people were concentrated in one place, knowledge spread fast, like a nuclear reaction. New and inventive ways of fishing quickly evolved, ways that no one person could have thought of but that many people acting in concert could all contribute their little spark of inspiration to. Great mechanical monsters were born, things without soul but made animate by man's ingenuity. No more did people venture out with crude spears, instead they built vessels of steel that could float through the mist by virtue of the super-buoyant swim-bladders they stole off their fishy friends. From these boats they trailed vast nets and dredged all the life out of the mist as they went whilst the fishers watched from the deck. When they got back to the City the machine guzzled their catch, the stock flowed, and soon they became rich. Eventually people could afford their own machines, and gradually the king's power was superseded by the power of companies.

It was peculiar; the companies started to act like they were individuals with personalities. Some were slipshod and lazy; these quickly withered and died. Some were diligent and thorough; these prospered. Then a new breed of company came along, one that, though hard-working, was ruthless and took risks. Most of these companies came a cropper pretty sharpish, but some hit the jackpot and became unstoppable giants. One of these companies was called Fish Stocks Limited.

Fish Stocks Limited was started by one Wrasse T. Fishbone. He grew up in the slums of the residential quarter and from his childhood longed to escape the grinding poverty that broke people's backs along with their minds. Wrasse was a good man, honest and hard working. He started off with a single fishing boat bought with money that he and his close friends had scrimped and saved from working horrendous hours in the local factory, rendering fish bones into glue. Wrasse made a science of fishing, reading copiously about the behavioural ecology of the fish, shoal dispersal models, mist currents, feeding patterns and just about everything fish-related. He passed this know-how on to his crew, and they all worked together to bring in a goodly catch. Things went well, but nothing lasts forever - good men included. Wrasse had breathed noxious fumes in the glue factory for nigh on twenty years, and as he hit fifty his health began to fail. He taught everything he knew to his daughter, Sylkie, then died with great dignity in the local hospital.

If Wrasse was a wizard with fish, Sylkie was a witch. She captained the fishing boat just as well as her father, keeping the crew focused and the catch bumper. But she had something hard and sharp in her character that her father never had. She came



up with the name of Fish Stocks Limited and had it blazoned on the side of her fishing boat, which she painted a distinctive yellow. She made sure her crew got up an hour earlier so that they could be the first to the catch. She bought a fish processing machine and was the first to have it fitted inside her boat, so that she could carry more stock. These could all be passed off as harmless innovations. Then she invented the practice of stock-piling. This is were a more successful fishing company save their stock until just before a smaller company, who are struggling to keep in business, get in with their catch. The more successful company – Fish Stocks Limited – then floods the market with cheap stock just before the smaller company hits land, meaning that they can only sell their stock at a pittance. The smaller company quickly goes out of business, and the bigger company buys up their boat and equipment at a rock-bottom price. With such brutal tactics Sylkie acquired a whole fleet of boats, which she painted her characteristic yellow and franchised out to prospective captains. She chose those skippers with knowledge of fishing, it is true, but she also selected those with a mind only for the money and the present. They would dredge an area dry of fish, not even leaving the tiddlers behind to grow into the next generation of fish. Why bother when someone else might catch them? In such a way Fish Stocks Limited grew bloated with money and eventually took pride of place as the name everyone thought of when they thought of fish. The king is dead, long live the Company.

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## **Chapter 16 – Wining and Pining**

“They don't sound very nice,” said Ambrosius.

“I'm afraid that's tough, sir. If you want a job in this city, you've got to work for the Company one way or another. Fish Stocks Limited has its finger in just about every pie there is. You go to your corner shop to buy some bread and get chatting to the owner; it turns out he's getting money off Fish Stocks Limited to sell their product only. You go to play handball on the local playing fields, it turns out Fish Stocks Limited owns them. You go to church, turns out Fish Stocks Limited is paying off the vicar to slip their name into his sermon. You can't get round it – you have to work for them, not against them.”

Ambrosius paused. “Do they pay well?”

There was a smile from Stan at this. “It depends what you do. The fishermen work for all the fish they can eat and a few pounds to fritter away on their vices every month when they hit land. You don't look much like a fisherman to me, though, if you don't mind me saying, sir.”

“You're right there,” said Ambrosius. “Are there any jobs where I don't have to see any fish?”

“Haha,” exclaimed Stan. “Of course, and they pay the best. It's a peculiarity of the way the Company works that the jobs where you don't have to get your hands dirty are the best paid. Well, you don't get your hands dirty with dirt you can physically see, that is, but mark my words the invisible dirt is there. People with certain eyes can see it, and maybe even hate you for it.” Stan lowered his voice. “That said, there are certain women who love that kind of dirt. I'm telling you now, you want to impress a chick, sir, all you've got to do is show them the dirt – money, that is – and they'll love you. Real love, as well.”

“Really?” asked Ambrosius. The image of Sunbeam broke to the surface of his perception.

“Really really. They go wild for a man with means.”

“And what exactly do these jobs involve?”

“You buy and sell fish. Only those fish are numbers.”

“I don't understand.”

“Well, say one company brings in a load of fish. They could go round selling them to loads of little shops, but they're fishermen, not businessmen. They find it easier just to sell the lot to a single person – the trader. The trader could then go round selling the fish to lots of little shops – this would take time and expertise, but some traders do this. However, imagine a trader comes along and buys up a load of fish, then there's a lull in the amount of fish caught, as happens sometimes. Maybe there's a storm and the boats can't go out, something like that. Anyway, people are desperate for fish that way, and they'll pay higher prices. Our trader can then sell his fish that he bought on the cheap to another company for more money. He doesn't even have to get his hands dirty with distribution. Indeed, he doesn't even need to see a fish. He does all his work on paper and takes a tidy sum. There are other things he can do, as well. For instance, he could say to a seller, “Look, I'll buy your fish off you and pay you for them next week at whatever the price is then.” If the seller thinks the price of fish is about to go up, he might do this deal because he thinks that he's going to get more money. The buyer is hoping that they'll go down in price, so he'll have to pay less.”

“It sounds like gambling,” said Ambrosius.

“Well, yes and no, sir. With gambling, you normally lose overall. However, if the economy is growing healthily, the stock market pays out more than you put in. It's sort of like priming an engine with fuel – you give these companies money and they use it to make more money, so long as they keep getting that constant input.”

“What happens if it stops?”

“You get a crash. It happens. When one person loses confidence in the system another person is more likely to lose confidence too. If you get enough people losing confidence, the effect amplifies itself and you get a massive decrease in investment. For the investor that means you can lose everything overnight.”

“I don't like the sound of that.”

“It only happens once in a while. Most people just don't think about it.”

“So if I take the money I've made off the loans and play the stock market, I could make even more money?”

“You've got it, sir,” said Stan.

Ambrosius thought for a little while longer. “In fact, you could say I would be catching fish, all be it indirectly.”

“You could think about it like that, yes sir.”

Ambrosius smiled. “More fish than anyone could hope to catch with a single line?”

“Yes, sir.”

Ambrosius cut into his steak and thought of Sunbeam's flustered promise. “Then I might make a fisher after all,” he beamed.

The two acquaintances finished their meals and ordered some hookfruit wine of an excellent vintage. They drank moderately, enjoying the sophisticated tones of the wine, which was much too good for most people to appreciate (which is ironic as

alcohol is a simple molecule with few pretensions). A healthy rouge filled our nascent businessmen's cheeks and brains, and the hours slipped by pleasantly.

"Look at the couple on that table," said Stan covertly during a lull in the conversation. "That man is M. Hakefish-de-Montaigne. He is a regular at this establishment, but his wife is not. The waiters are very discreet."

Ambrosius laughed.

"And look over there," said Stan. "That is Colonel Flounder. He comes in here every night and orders plate after plate of spicy gumbo. Since his wife died he makes company only with his food. It's a wonder his belly doesn't burst."

Ambrosius laughed again.

"And on the next table is Duchess Whitebait and her ladies-in-waiting. She owns a considerable share of Fish Stocks Limited. We shall not be approaching her for a job though, as she is a complete and utter cod wrangler. I have a contact in the Company who is much more approachable."

Ambrosius nodded.

"And that," said Stan, nodding towards a table in the corner, "is Miss Striga Hermonthica. She is a parasite and a temptress, and my one true love. She always dines in here alone, and when I have the money I order her a bottle of wine and she blushes as if she had any demureness and lets me sit with her – nothing more, you understand. It has been that way for seven years."

"Have you never thought to ask her out... I don't know, to see a show or something?"

"And ruin something perfect? No, she takes my wine, the drunkard, and talks to me as if I were a king. I hate her loveliness."

"You seem to entertain some contradictory emotions regarding her," said Ambrosius.

"As is the way of the heart. I entertain all emotions in their superlatives for her, but they will always be flowering and never fruiting, for fruit rots. It is just as well that my longing for her is nothing more, otherwise my emotions would tear me apart and leave me broken and alone, shovelling gumbo down my throat like the colonel over there."

Ambrosius smiled. "One day you'll..."

"One day? Are you trying to sell me a loan? I don't think like that. I see things as they are, and accept them as that." He paused. "Do you have a love?" The question came suddenly, tagged on to the end of the sentence like a full-stop.

Ambrosius was caught of guard by Stan's staccato enquiry. "Sort of," he said.

"Ah, let me guess: you love her but she doesn't love you."

Ambrosius nodded, then downed the rest of his wine uncouthly. "I think she may have done, though, a long time ago," he said after he had swallowed. "I took her for granted and she ended up marrying someone else. The wrong man."

"A commonplace tragedy," said Stan. "And you hope to win her back?"

"She said that the day I catch a fish will be the day she loves me. I've never caught a fish in my life."

"Ah, so you have been cursed, sir. But does that curse fulfil a purpose?"

"How so?" asked Ambrosius.

"You are to become a most fishful gentleman, sir. The quest for your woman's love will drive you to great heights here in the City."

"Hmm," grunted Ambrosius. "Whether that is a good thing remains to be seen."

“That would depend on your definition of goodness; whether it resides in your heart or your head.”

“And what do you think?”

“Like I say, I don't think,” replied Stan.

“A good answer,” said Ambrosius. “I do think, but I still don't know. I reckon most people in the treetops would say your heart, whereas most people here in the City would say your head – if they didn't identify certain other areas of their anatomy, that is.”

Stan laughed. “Their bellies, of course. What do you say?”

“Maybe goodness is in your hands. If your job relies only on your hands it's pretty hard to do anything too bad. Sure you can hit someone, but you'll get hit back and sooner or later you'll come up against someone who's tougher than you. If you use your head, you can do some really nasty things. You don't get hit back, so you kid yourself that they are actually good.”

“Maybe you're right. You should know that you will be using your head a lot in the line of work you are going to pursue.”

“It's a sacrifice I'm willing to make.”

“Excellent,” laughed Stan. “You've got the right attitude, sir.”

“Why don't you go into that line of work, Stan?”

“It is not for me,” said Stan. “Ever since my fall I've... well, I've not been right in the head. You wouldn't know it to talk to me, but there are things which struggle inside me. If I become too involved in the world then bad things happen.”

Ambrosius decided not to pry too deeply. “That must be hard,” he said.

“You know, it is, sir. I feel like I'm never quite a part of the world, even when I'm in control of it. It is most disconcerting.”

“Sometimes it's better to be aloof.”

“Aloof? Detached is a better word. Stone cold, statuesque, like a painting on a wall. Is that really a way to exist? I try and have my input on peoples lives but it is always vicarious; I may work through a person but never as a person. I long to be one of those stupid, drinking, laughing slobs that grace the planet with their dirt, but I just can't seem to settle.”

“You seem to have plenty of friends round here,” said Ambrosius, thinking of the nefarious characters who had hailed them from the shadows on their way back to Stan's place.

“That's because I help them. I have a brain on me, which I use to facilitate their various sins. When I have my influence on people a car thief becomes a used car dealer, a mugger becomes a loan shark, a drunkard becomes a publican and a scumbag becomes a politician. It's the effect I have on people; I make them successful.”

“Isn't that a good thing? You're pulling people out of the gutter, sort of like a guardian angel.”

Stan sipped his wine before continuing. “Yes, I do a very similar job to an angel. Angels help people in their darkest hour, as I do. There seems to be a difference with me though, which makes me sad. I can't help but help the wrong people. Everyone I make successful is corrupted by that success. I sometimes try and prevent it, but it just seems to be the way of things. Nowadays I just go along with it.”

“You shouldn't feel bad about it,” said Ambrosius. “You try your best.”

“You're indebted to me already though, you would say that. The truth of the matter is that I have corrupted you.”

“I shan't hear any of that. I corrupted myself, you were just a catalyst.”

“A catalyst? We all have our destiny in death, sir, but we would never call a murderer 'just a catalyst.' No, I cause terrible things to happen and that makes me feel terrible without ever even erring myself. My only sin was to fall off a ladder, yet here I am, lost in a world of sin and depravity, drinking a fine wine with an innocent man whose soul I have tarnished. My melancholy is justified. And my smile...” Stan gave that impossible beam that stretched from ear to ear. “My smile is just a way of showing how sharp my teeth are.”

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## **Chapter 17 – The Beast Within**

Summer lightning assaulted the sky with luciferous, arcing tendrils of blue-white light as Stan and Ambrosius made their way home through the night. All of a sudden rain came down in sheets, and within seconds the two were soaked through to the bone. The streets became reticulated with rivulets of rain, transmogrified into liquid gold by the meagre, other-worldly light of the few fish oil lamps that lined the streets. The sewers rose and boasted a stench that was suffocatingly foul, their contents floating out in feculant streams that lapped at the front steps of nearby houses and threatened to rise above and flood over the thresholds. But summer rain is as fickle as it is ferocious, and all of a sudden it stopped and gave way to a balmy, close night which just made the smell all the worse. The two wayfarers made it home soaked and tired, and went to bed with the last dregs of wine still in their somnolent stomachs and the stench of hearth-smoke and sewage in their nostrils.

Stan swore at the Smug, which woke Ambrosius up.

“It's still early,” said Ambrosius.

“Yes but I forgot to draw the damn curtains, and that cod-forsaken bauble is doing its best to shine right in my eyes.”

“We might as well get up now.”

Stan sighed. “I resent it, but yes. You need a new suit, one which speaks for your new found wealth. Then we shall see about getting you a job with the Company.”

The tailor had the suit fitted by the afternoon and Ambrosius and Stan collected it as soon as it was finished. It looked sharp as a nine-inch nail, with that certain deadly quality that accompanies something very expensive.

“You look murderous, sir,” said Stan as they walked towards the centre of the City. “Now Fish Stocks Limited has its headquarters about fifteen minutes walk from here, right in the middle of everything. They took over the king's old palace. It is said all roads lead there, from when people came from miles around to use his fish processing machine. Some say the old machine is still down there somewhere in the basement.”

They made quick progress across town, Ambrosius receiving a few resentful looks off people who had taken out loans with him. But they were looks that spoke equally of deference – the suit told them that they would do well not to get in its wearer's way,

and they obeyed. Soon the towering headquarters of the Company loomed above the surrounding buildings. The headquarters were a peculiar bricolage of different styles with bits tacked on willy-nilly as the company had grown over the years. The effect was unspeakably ugly, an architectural obscenity that was thrust at the sky with questing pseudopodia of brick and mortar, wood and steel. Glass was used in a way that maximised the light inside to save on candles, which resulted in the whole structure having a quality which was not only naked but almost eviscerated, showing the human entrails trapped behind desks within.

“We're here. I have a contact on the fifth floor, by the name of Jacob. He'll get you a foot on the ladder, so to speak.”

They went in to reception and Stan spoke to a woman on the front desk. She scribbled a note and put it into a capsule in a pneumatic tube, which then was sucked upwards with a hiss and a rattle. After half an hour of waiting a man of about thirty with flushed cheeks and yellow sweat patches under the armpits of his white shirt came down the stairs into the reception area. He was fat and he smelt.

“Jacob, you big bass steward, how's it going?”

Jacob didn't smile. He eyed Amrboisius' tail with a kind of surprised disgust. “I'm busy, Stan. What do you want?”

“This man here is a very capable man. I want you to get him a job.”

Jacob groaned. “We're not taking on any new staff. Haven't you heard there's a pisonomic downturn on at the moment?”

“What's that mean?” asked Ambrosius.

“It means we're running out of fish,” said Stan. “You boys up in the trees might not have realised it quite yet.”

“Yes, we have,” said Ambrosius. “I was meant to try and stop it.”

Stan raised an eyebrow. “So it really is that bad.”

“Look, you guppies might be able to stand round and chat but I'm pretty rushed at the minute,” said Jacob. “Give me one good reason why I should give monkey-boy here a job.”

Ambrosius couldn't help look a little angry. “You say that you turn fish into numbers here?”

“You could say that,” said Jacob.

“Well, I have a way with numbers,” said Ambrosius.

“It's true, he does,” said Stan.

“Lots of people do,” said Jacob. “I'm afraid there's no way we can afford to take on rookies at the moment, no matter what their skills are.”

Stan ran his hand over the two day's stubble that foliated his chin. “We can prove to you that Ambrosius will make you money.”

“How?” asked Jacob.

“You let us loose on your trading floor for one hour with our own money, then we'll show you what we can do.”

“Your own money?”

“Yes.”

“You do realise you could lose everything?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I'll arrange it for tomorrow. Be here early, six o'clock in the morning, that way things will be quieter. If you mess up it's your loss.”

Stan and Ambrosius worked their way back through ant-like throngs, towards the residential quarter and Stan's own alcove of filth.

"You didn't say anything about having to put up our money," said Ambrosius as they walked.

"Everything worth while in life requires some element of risk," said Stan. "I have every confidence in you."

"Say what you like, it'll be my first day on the job and I could lose everything."

"But you won't. You have a plan."

"No I don't."

"You do, but you've just not realised it yet." Stan opened the door of the shack and the two stepped into the gloomy closeness of the interior. "You've got a hidden skill that is going to make you win the day."

"I have?"

"Yes. Think about it."

Stan stoked up the fire and brought the never-ending infinity fish gumbo to the boil. They both took a steaming bowl and sat eating and cogitating.

"I really haven't got a plan," said Ambrosius as he finished his gumbo.

"Yes you have. Something that you've always had a talent for, but that everyone's belittled."

Ambrosius thought. "Well, there's my carving... hang on. Of course! The whole City works on numbers, all I need is a suitable abacus!"

"I told you," said Stan, smiling that pedigree grin.

"Just a minute, how did you know that..."

"I read a lot of books," said Stan. "Trashy novels, mainly. The hero always has a talent that is overlooked, then one day it saves his life or helps him get the girl or whatever."

"Well, anyhow, you're right. All I need is the right abacus, then I can predict the movements of the stock market."

"You've got until six o'clock," said Stan. "Can you do it?"

"I need a knife and some hookwood," said Ambrosius. "Yes, I can do it."

To say Ambrosius whittled away the hours would be very accurate. He cut his thumb early on in the evening and his blood dripped and mingled with the wood as he carved, lacquering the grain with smears of brownish-red. This thing that he was giving his soul to by the hour was beautiful; it needed that blood and drank it like wine. The frame took shape and the bars with their beads slotted perfectly into place. The Smug was just below the horizon, giving the sky its weird half-light as Ambrosius finished.

"What's that thing, kid?" asked Jacob, as, bleary eyed and half drunk with fatigue, Ambrosius and Stan entered the trading floor. It was a big room with a high vaulted ceiling. A large cube with a clock on each of its four lateral faces hung from the ceiling in the middle of the room, rudely shouting "five to six" at anyone who would care to listen. All around were desks, clerks sitting with pens at the ready, waiting for trading to start. In front of each desk was an array of pneumatic tubes.

"It's just a little tool I think might come in handy," said Ambrosius.

"Whatever," said Jacob. "Now I'm not going to be able to give you any training in the five minutes before we start, so I'm just going to have to sum up what's going to

happen in as few words as possible. Those clerks get the latest gen on the markets from those tubes in front of them. They decide what to buy and what to sell, then write down their orders and put them back in the tube. Those tubes criss-cross the whole city, covering all the major fish dealers. Fish are bought and sold by those pieces of paper, and the fish dealer's signature is put on them to make sure he agrees on the price. That way we can buy and sell fish without ever have to get a sniff of them.”

“Okay,” said Ambrosius. “Where do I sit?”

Jacob motioned towards an empty desk. “Rupert's off sick, so I managed to get you his desk. You've got one hour. If you go into the red by more than a hundred grand I'm pulling you before your hour's up – I don't want you annoying the traders by not being able to pay up. You ready?”

“As ready as I'll ever be.”

“Good fishing, kid,” said Jacob. “You'll need a miracle to last ten minutes, though, the way the markets are moving.”

Ambrosius nodded. The hands on the clock ticked round to six o'clock and the floor was suddenly a bustle of noise, everyone shouting at each other and pneumatic tubes whooshing and zipping. Ambrosius was left out of the loop totally. Everyone else was shouting advice and forming alliances to push stock prices up or down. Nobody trusted Ambrosius so he had to operate on his own. He read the prices of the various stocks as they hissed onto his desk from the tubes. He flicked beads on his abacus and jotted sums down on scraps of spare paper. Theory, he realised, was very different than practice. He was slow and clumsy at unscrewing the capsules containing the stock information and his hand quickly started to ache from writing. By the time he had done his calculations the markets had changed completely.

Ten minutes passed and, out of the £500,000 he and Stan had put in Ambrosius was down to just £250,000 already. He struggled on, forced into bad decisions by his cumbersome calculations. The nib of his pen scratched his signature again and again, putting his name to failure after failure. “Bad luck,” came back a note from one of the dealers. “J. J. Turbot and Son's just lost half its value. You lost £200,000.” Ambrosius felt the blood rush to his head. He had just £50,000 left. Quickly he consulted his abacus, trying to calculate the rate of change of a new stock, trying to predict when it was going to peak. He scratched sums down, his ink-smearred hands smudging them so that they were illegible as he did so. He lost another £50,000. Only half an hour had gone by and he had winnowed his money down to nothing. The clock seemed to laugh at him as he struggled to plan his next move. Whilst he was waiting another stock plummeted. £50,000 in the red. He reached for the abacus, sweat dripping from his forehead and his hands shaking. In his ears he could hear laughter, but when he looked around he could only see people sat hunched over their desk patently ignoring him. He tried to calm down. He only had quarter of an hour left. He moved the beads slowly, purposefully, meticulously. He chose his stock well, then... it crashed. He was £90,000 in debt - just £10,000 left to borrow.

“Cod-damned son of a fish!” shouted Ambrosius. Heads turned. Now people really were laughing. Every glance, every sly comment, every snigger, all just fed into Ambrosius' anger. He pushed the abacus off the front of his desk and it smashed to pieces on the floor, scattering beads everywhere. Recklessly he put the whole ten grand on an outside bet, signed it and posted it down the tube.



“You jammy codger,” came the reply. “Monkfish Associates just doubled. Maybe your luck's on the turn, kid.”

Ambrosius' expression didn't change, but in his brain lots of lovely chemicals seeped into all the right places. This was a rush better than any stupid fisherman could ever hope for. He made another punt on Hake & Hake PLC and came off on top again. From then on he couldn't lose. His abacus lay broken on the floor as he used his instinct to drive his deals. Hit after hit, he got his fix. He hardly noticed when the minute hand hit the vertical again.

“Wow, you sure pulled it back there,” said Jacob, stepping in and taking Ambrosius' pen off him. “You pulled it back from minus ninety grand to plus fifty. You still lost big time, though.”

“Give me another hour,” said Ambrosius, his face set like a mask. “I'll make it all back.”

“No dice, kid. You had your chance.”

“I'll personally give you ten grand if you give me one more hour.” It wasn't the loss of money that bothered Ambrosius. He just wanted another fix.

Jacob grunted. “Twenty and you got yourself a deal.”

Ambrosius nodded.

“One more hour,” said Jacob.

What can happen in an hour? Let us look at some examples.

A mistfly lives and dies.

A hooktree grows six point eight millimetres.

A fish is hooked and caught.

A hooktree is cut down.

A liver-spotted old man gets drunk.

A young woman called Sunbeam lies with her husband.

A hookflower loses a petal.

A young woman thinks of a man who is not her husband.

A cloud boils to nothing under the Smug.

A young woman thinks about how things could have been.

A shrieker bird puts the finishing touches to her nest.

A young woman's forehead wrinkles; her husband finds it charming.

A countless billion hydrogen atoms fuse in the Smug.

A young woman's husband asks “Why so full of care?”

A hookbeetle fights for its mate and loses.

“A passing thought, no more.”

A clock completes a revolution.

“A thought you want to share?”

A painwasp burrows into a hookfruit.

“A confusing memory, private to me.”

A hill falls in a landslide.

A man in a City is held for a second by a woman's face in his mind.

A piece of paper travels through a tube.

A man makes £50,000.

Another piece of paper shoots along.

A man makes £20,000.

Another piece of paper...

“A miracle!” announced Jacob. “Nothing short of a miracle!”

“I just got my eye in, that's all,” said Ambrosius. A fine sweat was evaporating off his forehead and he felt drained but happy. He wanted more.

“You made your £500,000 back and another £100,000 on top! Kid, I underestimated you. You can have your job. You're going to go far, I'm telling you. Just make sure you sign over that twenty grand in stock over to me.”

Stan and Ambrosius left the Fish Stocks Limited building with a spring in their step. That devilish grin that was at first only Stan's was now Ambrosius' as well.

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## Chapter 18 – The Boy Who Rode The Fish

“So you're saying the minute you smashed the abacus you just started to *feel* for what was going to happen?”

“Yes,” said Ambrosius. They were sitting around the fire in Stan's hovel, a celebratory bass roasting on a spit over the fire. The velvet evening was drawing dreamily in outside, lapping in rolls of nightfall over the land. Pleasant smells of cooking fish and wood-smoke oozed mesmerically through the close atmosphere of the interior, drowning out the usual sluggish, garbage stench of the urban air. They sat in silence for a while, drinking in the gentle cool of the gloaming.

“I used to sit round the fire like this with my dad,” said Stan after a short pause. There was something reluctant about his voice that hinted of a mellifluous sadness; such a quality often accompanies fond memories now faded but not forgotten. “He used to talk in rhyme and tell me these incredible stories; parables even. Have you ever heard of *The Boy Who Rode The Fish*?” As he said the words his eyes flashed wide in the firelight.

“No, I don't think so,” said Ambrosius, yawning. He was starting to slide down from the plateau of frenetic energy that his short buzz on the stock market had created. The warmth of the fire and the closeness of the tumbledown walls made him feel sleepy, but he tried to focus on Stan's voice.

“I can remember it like it was yesterday, he told me it that many times. I always wondered what it meant.” Stan smiled enigmatically. “You want to hear it?”

“Go on then,” said Ambrosius, leaning back into the darkness.

“Well,” said Stan, waving his hands in front of the fire like a conjurer. The flames hornpiped and tangoed, twisting into shapes of fish and men. “The story goes something like this...”

*There once was a boy not ten years grown,  
Who lived in a cottage all on his own.  
His nephews and aunties and uncles were late,  
His mother and father had met the same fate.  
Every new Smugrise he would lay a flower,  
Over each earthy, tombstone-marked bower.*

*Through thick and thin, rain's pelt and thunder's din,*

*Through ice and snow and north wind's harsh blow,  
Our hero would speak out some words for those below:  
"One day I'll get out of here.  
Ride out into that wasteland sere;  
I'll go and then I'll be a man."  
Out beyond that barren land.*

*There once was a fish who would swim free,  
Out under the foggage-green mist of the sea,  
'Bove the wilderness rocky and knife-sharp with slate,  
Our codling would sliver and would undulate.  
Moonlit and mystic, with animate power,  
The winsome, young fishlet grew hour after hour.*

*Through scaly skin, the soul deep therein,  
Through bad and good would outpour a flood,  
And announce to the world to make understood:  
"The wind is my bridle here,  
My saddle the wasteland dear,  
I'll never be held by man,  
Who could my freedom dam?*

*Many would try to saddle the fry,  
Till monstrous it grew and threw them aside,  
With chomp-bit and blinkers and jodhpurs they came,  
And left broken-spirited, glumly and lame.  
Every new Smugrise they all would come,  
But riders of fish amongst them were none.*

*Through bumps on chins, tail's flick and whinny-spins,  
Through bash-bish made felt the fish,  
That all attempts to tame her surely would miss:  
"You tie me with flaxen rope,  
Frayed fibrous with vain hope,  
Yet I always break loose;  
That cord 'comes hope's noose.*

*One day the boy was watching the fish,  
Buck as it threw men out into the mist.  
With courage and daring and brave-heart he strode,  
Up to the fish who had never been rode.  
"Not saddle nor bridle nor blinkers I need,  
Sure as the Smugrise this fish is my steed!"*

*Those lacking faith, wide-eyed all said "Nayth,"  
Those arrogant men that stood to him ken.  
Then this bold young upstart walked right through them,  
And taking hold the codfish,*

*Firmly and sharpish,  
Whilst it dove to tack,  
He jumped on its back.*

*Away across wasteland and desert he rode,  
On and on until his face grew old.  
The wind cracked his features and cold creased his brow,  
Until youth passed him by and "one day" was "now".  
His mind 'came accustomed to the fishes stride,  
And his movements attuned the the swell of the tide.*

*But in time memory cheated him cleverly,  
His pride at his ride petered aside;  
Inside his heart the gratefulness died.  
He looked at the ground,  
That stretched all around,  
And longing for its stillness  
Bred in him an illness.*

*"I am mist-sick, ill  
Of this fish so fickle.  
I've rode him all my years,  
But bond there is none.  
Perhaps I'll step off him,  
Climb down his great tail fin,  
Then maybe he'll pine for me,  
When I am gone."*

*He stepped down.  
He looked round.  
The fish flew  
To pastures new.  
Not a thought did pass,  
Through the mind of the bass,  
For the old-man-child,  
Who once had rode wild.*

*He lay down to rest,  
And found heavy his chest,  
His eyes were glassy and pale.  
And with nobody there,  
To mourn him or care,  
His heartbeat started to fail.  
"Oh woe, oh woe,  
With my big toe,  
I spurred the gurnard on,  
But now it's my end,  
I'm nobody's friend,*

*And all my glory is gone.*”

Ambrosius rubbed his sleepy, fire-tinted eyes. “Is that it?”

“What do you mean is that it? I really like that rhyme,” said Stan.

“It's just a load of nonsense.”

“There's wisdom in nonsense, though,” said Stan. “I'm telling you, you're starting to ride a big bass with your new job at Fish Stocks Limited. I just want to make sure you know that the Company won't have any more of a thought for you when you're of no use to them than the fish in the poem.”

Ambrosius shrugged. “But what about the ride?”

Stan smiled. “That's the attitude, sir. The ride will be great, there is no doubt about that. Don't think about what will happen afterwards, that's my advice. But I thought I'd tell you the tale anyway, just so you can't say you didn't know. Just so you can't use the excuse of innocence or ignorance, whichever word you might like to use.”

Ambrosius was half asleep. “You are a contradictory character, Stan. You encourage me to get a job one minute, then tell me some rhyme about an ungrateful fish the next.”

“Just warning you, sir. Like the rider of the fish, you won't be liked for your success. You'll die in the metaphorical wasteland, sir, and God knows what will happen to your soul afterwards.”

“I don't have a soul, Stan, just a brain.”

“Everyone has a soul, sir. I should know.”

“Oh?” Ambrosius emitted interrogatively.

“I told you about my fall from the ladder.”

Ambrosius nodded.

“Well, I had a near-death experience. I say 'near', but I think I might have actually died, just for the blink of an eye. I went to heaven, you know, what with having been a good and honest man up until that point.”

Ambrosius raised an eyebrow. “You hallucinated, you mean?”

“Call it what you will. Anyway, I felt this great cosmic awareness, like everything made sense all of a sudden. In short, I saw God's plan for His creation.”

“Sounds pretty intense,” said Ambrosius doubtfully.

“It was. The trouble is, I disagreed with Him. I thought He was being unfair to people, punishing them for being weak.”

Ambrosius made a disinterested noise. “So how does this relate to your soul?”

“Well, He picked up on my thoughts. He knew I was against Him. So I was called into His presence and he explained to me that I could not stay in heaven. He said that there was something wrong with my soul, that somehow it wasn't up to scratch. I was thrown out of heaven and had nowhere else to go but back to the land of the living.”

“I'm finding this pretty hard to believe,” said Ambrosius.

“It's true,” said Stan. “It's one of the reasons why I shunned my respectable life. Why work hard to be good when the fate of your soul is written in the Book of Life from day one?”

Ambrosius sighed. “If you believe in all that codswallop, then I can see your point. If God is omnipotent, then he determines your actions, and if that's the case then you can't help being bad. What's the point in being punished for something you can't help?”

“My point exactly. It's unfair.”

Ambrosius thought for a second. "You know, I believe in a purely mechanistic universe. There are rules for everything. If you knew the position and properties of everything in the universe then you could predict the future exactly. So it's not just your belief in God that raises the question of free-will. I suppose the thing you've got a problem with is punishment. I reckon people are punished for leading bad lives in this world; if you steal you go to prison; if you lie, nobody trusts you; if you're violent then you end up getting hurt. So there's still that problem of punishment for purely mechanistic, predetermined wrong-doing."

"Yes," said Stan. He poked the bass that was roasting over the fire with a stick. It was ready. "What is free will anyway? I have never heard an acceptable definition. Perhaps it is God's will that we are his slaves. Perhaps we would like this world even less if we were free."

"You think we couldn't handle it?" asked Ambrosius.

"I strongly suspect that we couldn't. We are at our happiest when we do things automatically; we hate things that break our routines. I think that if we were given a totally free will over anything, we would freak out."

"What a depressing thought," said Ambrosius.

"The fish is ready," said Stan, taking the spit off the fire. "We're like him," said Stan, looking the bass in the eye. "We just can't see that infernal line, then we're pulled by it into heaven or hell."

"I hope I go to heaven," said Ambrosius. "I don't like the sound of hell."

Stan put the bass on a large plate and started carving. "Nobody does. I get the impression not many people avoid it, though."

"So you think you're damned?"

"I lead people into sin now, it's virtually my job. You think there's a place for me in heaven?"

"If God's all-powerful then everything is his work. You might be leading people into sin so that they can realise what sin is, then repent and be saved."

"You mean I could be doing evil for the greater good?"

"Yes," said Ambrosius.

"I'd like to believe that", said Stan with a sad glint in his eye. "I really would. But I don't."

Ambrosius awoke the next morning early and pulled aside the tarpaulin that served as the door to Stan's hovel. The Smug cast warm light over the tower-studded horizon, shimmering between the buildings and giving the City an odd ruby-hued quality. People were just starting to emerge from the womb of the night's sins, groggy eyed and throbbing-headed, still half full of beer and stone. A million livers desperately churned out detoxifying enzymes and a million minds tried desperately to remember (or forget) the previous night. Such concerted attempts to escape reality do indeed twist its very fabric; there were rents in the space-time continuum that were still healing this morning, and the sanguine light of dawn was the best (albeit unwanted) balm. Ambrosius could feel the closeness of unreality. He sensed it in the way the tower-blocks defied gravity; he sensed it in the way people who had felt invincible the night before were reduced to gutter crawling mortals in the rubicund dawn; he sensed it in the way bits of paper could change lives and build fortunes. This was a city of oxymorons, where the impossible was not only possible but drudgingly routine. And it was a city built on infinity fish; for in the minds of the occupants that

grew like bacteria in its agar crevices, tomorrow was today was yesterday. They accepted this dawn as infinitesimal, something that did not require any special appreciation for it could be repeated indefinitely. But Ambrosius was worried. He was worried that everyone was wrong. He was worried that the fish were running out.

This worry he held inside him was in direct contradiction to the buzz he had felt as he had moved fish with paper yesterday. He wanted to be the hero and save all the fish, but there was also an urge to be an anti-hero and exploit them even more. He knew that he could not walk away from his job at Fish Stocks Limited – he had been addicted since the moment he had entered the trading floor. Yet it pained him to think of Sunbeam starving. Perhaps he could work for the Company and become powerful enough to change the way they operated. Yes. He would hold that in his mind. Of course he would. That's exactly what he would do. He had the power to do that, didn't he? Just crank the ratchet-hold of the company one bit tighter, then maybe he could...

"You're up early," said Stan, stretching. He saw Ambrosius' abstracted look and walked over to where he stood in the doorway. "What's on your mind?"

"Oh, nothing much," said Ambrosius. "I was just thinking about this pisonomic downturn. You think it's going to be that bad?"

Stan patted him on the back. "Yes. I think we're going to run out of fish."

"What will happen?"

"I think we'll die," said Stan. "It won't be quick and it won't be dignified."

"And there's nothing we can do to stop it?"

"No. It's fate."

"I don't believe in fate."

"Don't then," said Stan. "But it is."

"Well I'm going to change things. If we manage the fish carefully we can all have enough to eat. It's about stewardship, not dominion."

"Ha ha ahem," Stan let slip. "Stewardship not dominion? Just because you call it something different, doesn't change what it is. There are ten million people living in the City. They eat on average a fish a day. How long do you think that can go on for, even if we were the best bass stewards imaginable?"

Ambrosius was silent for a while. "There's got to be a way," he said at last.

"Why? You don't believe in God. Why should there be a way forward for us?"

"It just seems, well, stupid if after all this time we die because we haven't got any fish."

"You know, I agree. I believe in God and, even though I disagree with him on some points, I still hope against hope that he's going to come through for us on this one. He made the planet fishful once, he can do it again."

"Fish from heaven? I don't think so," said Ambrosius.

"No, not as unsubtle as that. But there must be a way."

"You're not being very specific."

"That's because I don't know what's going to happen," said Stan. "It is the lot of everything that crawls on the face of this planet to be unsure about things. I just hope for the best, but don't listen to me. Like I say, there's something wrong with my soul." A complex smile lay on Stan's lips.

Ambrosius returned Stan's odd smile. "Anyway," he said. "Tomorrow starts today. I think it's time to go to work."

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## Chapter 19 – In Tuition

It is strange the way connections are made when a lot of people live together. Ambrosius caught a rickshaw into the city centre, incidentally giving the driver enough money to buy a fish for tea. This fish was caught by a fisherman who used the money from its sale to feed the petrel that drove his boat. He proceeded to catch a bumper haul of infinity fish. He then sold these fish to a dealer in town, which brought down the price of fish a small amount. This slight drop in fish prices caused other traders to lose confidence in the price of fish, leading them to sell more of their stock. An avalanche ensued, both making and breaking fortunes as it went.

In a strange way then, the fare for today's commute can affect the movements of the markets next week. This is why Ambrosius had to smash his abacus to start making money: the interaction of such an astronomically large number of factors goes into determining the price of fish that any attempt to predict the fluctuations minute by minute fails - all but that peculiar ability we call intuition. The strange thing about intuition is that it is extremely difficult to justify, yet often accurate. How is it that we “know” something, without being aware of the logic for such knowledge? Clearly we are drawing upon something hidden and mysterious – powerful too. Why does that spark which we call perception not venture into that hidden part of our soul? The evolutionary advantage of doing so must surely be vast. Perhaps then, there is something fundamental that stops us perceiving those dark, powerful areas of our souls. Do heaven and hell lie in these waters? Does God? It is easy to get distracted with such matters, so enough for now. Let us just concentrate on our protagonists day at work.

There was tangible electricity in the air as Ambrosius entered the trading floor, eyes flickering microprocessor glances at him, evaluating and assessing this peculiar new component. Ambrosius integrated himself into his work with measured diligence; today was less frantic than yesterday, and he had more time to think. Under less pressure Ambrosius performed less well, but with less risk. The deals he made were solid and he made a reasonable profit. By the end of the day he was tired and happy, like he had just eaten a well-rounded meal. He went back to Stan's hovel and talked to him for a while about his day, then they enjoyed the perks open to the wealthy amongst the City's restaurants and nightspots.

Such a routine continued for days, then weeks, then months. Work became second nature to Ambrosius. But as he became wealthier and wealthier, Stan became increasingly pale and wan, and ever more distant. One night, about five months after Ambrosius had started his job, Ambrosius felt compelled to ask his acquaintance about his increasing melancholia.

They were in their favourite restaurant, the one where they had first enjoyed dugong steak. This time they had ordered and enjoyed a fine infinity fish fillet and were sitting digesting and supping an equally fine cognac. The conversation, as had been increasingly the case over the past few weeks, was sparse.

“It's just that I feel...” started Stan when Ambrosius tactfully mentioned his glumness. “Well, I feel as though I have granted you a wish – be that for good or bad – but I feel like I am unable to grant my own. This is not because I lack the resourcefulness, it is simply because I don't have one. A wish, that is. What do I want more than anything else in the world? I can't say.”



“There must be something,” said Ambrosius.

“No, it's true, I don't have one. I used to have dreams, lots of them. Now there's nothing. I feel like I am living vicariously, helping other people achieve their goals without ever really achieving my own. How can I help remove the speck in my fellow man's eye when I have a plank in my own?”

“Interesting way of putting it,” said Ambrosius. “Think about it. What would make you happy?”

“I honestly don't know.”

“Do you remember when we first met?” asked Ambrosius. “You told me to find my vice, as everyone in the City does. Well, I have to reflect that idea back at you. What's your button?”

Stan shrugged.

“How about Miss Striga?” asked Ambrosius, gesturing subtly to the young lady who, as ever, sat alone and in the corner of the restaurant. “Go and talk to her. Ask her out.”

“No,” said Stan. “That is too obvious.”

“Obvious? Maybe that's for a reason.”

“No, Miss Striga is not the answer,” said Stan firmly.

“Then go and get drunk,” said Ambrosius.

“No, that is not my style.”

“Stone?”

“No.”

“Power?”

“I have my own kind of power, I want no more.”

“Money?”

“As long as I have enough to live I am happy. I have no hunger for wealth.”

Ambrosius thought for a while. What the devil does he want?

“You won't get it,” put in Stan. “All I can say is it is likely to be very abstract.”

Ambrosius ran his finger round the edge of his crystal wine-glass, which resonated dully. “Let's look at this logically,” he said. “When was the last time you were happy?”

“Truly happy? When I was an honest window cleaner.”

“What did you have then that you don't have now?”

“Easy,” said Stan. “Reputability, integrity, honesty...”

“No,” said Ambrosius. “They weren't things you had. They were things other people thought about you. Nobody is reputable on their own, it's impossible.”

“You think the same applies for integrity and honesty?”

“I don't know. Those two seem like opposites. If you're really honest with yourself, you always want what's best for you, so it's often impossible to have integrity. A man catches an under-size fish. The man who has integrity lets it go. The man who is honest says “I'm hungry” and has it as a snack.”

“An interesting point,” said Stan.

“So what was it that you *really* enjoyed about window cleaning?” asked Ambrosius.

Stan thought hard. He finished his cognac, swilling the last mouthful pensively round his mouth before swallowing. “You want to know the truth?”

“Go on,” said Ambrosius.

“I liked seeing into other people.”

“You mean other people's rooms and stuff?”

“Yes, but more than that. Have you never found it fascinating that when you are faced with a window you can either focus on the glass or focus on what's through it?”

“I've noticed it, but it's not that interesting really.”

“Well, when you do that as a job you sort of get very good at it. You start being able to do it with people as well.”

Ambrosius smiled. “How can window cleaning make you able to do that?”

Stan returned the smile. “You've never been a tradesman, have you, Ambrosius?”

“No. But all you do is rub a sponge over the window, then get a squeegee...”

“Yes, there is that to it. But people are more complicated than that – they read things into their work. No matter how simple or demeaning the task, if you are of the right mind you can always learn things from it. In fact, the more simple the task, the more you learn. Why do you think ascetics go out and live in the wilderness, where there is nothing more than the shifting of the sand for stimulation? Minimalism focuses the mind. Suddenly the window, the ladder, the bucket, all become metaphors for something more. The universe is put together in such a way that everything is a microcosm of something bigger.”

“Is that it then?” asked Ambrosius. “You thought cleaning windows gave you some kind of insight?”

“I suppose so,” said Stan. “I miss being in tuition.”

“Have you ever thought of going back to your old job?”

“I've tried,” said Stan. “It just doesn't make sense to me any more. The work just doesn't speak to me like it used to.”

Ambrosius shrugged. “Perhaps you need to find another job which does.”

“Easier said than done,” said Stan. “You know, perhaps the time just isn't right yet. Perhaps I just need to wait. Fate generally throws things in your direction, you've just got to be patient.”

“And you're happy with that? Waiting for something to come along?”

“Like I say, I can't actively chase a dream that I haven't got.”

“What if nothing happens?”

“I get old and die. There are worse things.”

“I'm going to use your own words against you. What then of your soul?”

Stan shifted uncomfortably. “Ah, yes. Like I told you, there is something wrong with it anyway.”

“But you're never going to rectify that if you sit around waiting and moping for the rest of your life on the off chance that Fate might take an interest in you.”

“I am different from most people,” said Stan. “I can sense that Fate has plans for me, for good or bad. Something will happen.” Stan's eyes had that dilated, mesmeric look that they had when he was sat round the fire.

“Sounds very mysterious,” said Ambrosius, unconvinced by Stan's theatrics. “I wouldn't base my entire life around some dreams if I were you, though.”

“What else is there? Life is a dream, of sorts.”

“Very philosophical.”

“It's just a truism. Reality is just that part of the dream which sometimes we share.”

“Yes, well,” said Ambrosius. “We've had this big long conversation now and we've come no closer to determining the cause of your unhappiness.”

“If it were obvious I would know what it was. Anyway, it is good that we are talking about achieving our goals. You mentioned that there is a girl back in the treetops...”

Ambrosius had talked at length about his flight from the Hundred Boughs and his pining for Sunbeam during the evenings spent round the fire in Stan's hovel. He was a little thrown by Stan's sudden change of subject. “Yes,” said Ambrosius. “Sunbeam.”

“You love her?”

“I think so.”

“Then you must go back.”

“I can't.”

“Of course you can. You said she told you that the day she would love you would be the day you caught a fish. You've caught thousands of fish, albeit indirectly, on the stock market.”

Ambrosius thought for a while. “Yes, that's true,” he said.

“I say go to your boss, ask for your wages in stock. Get him to have a certificate drafted to show how many fish you own. That way you can take the certificate to Sunbeam and prove that you've caught more fish than any monkey-boy treetop dweller could ever wish for.” Stan beamed.

“You reckon it'll work?”

“How could she turn you down? Women love money.”

“Sunbeam's different...” started Ambrosius.

“Then she'll be the first that is,” said Stan. He sighed, then leaned forward. “Go. Go in your sharp suit, your patent leather shoes, your best hat. Tuck that tail of yours into the back of your trousers along with your shirt and show her the certificate. She'll swoon straight into your arms when she sees all those zeros.”

“But what about my job?”

“Take a holiday, you've earned it. Bring the girl back to the City, then you can both live in urban bliss.”

“It sounds pretty straightforward,” said Ambrosius. “Just think, if I hadn't fallen out that tree I would still be some geeky loser sitting playing with my abacus in some backwards treetop shack. Yes, I'll go. I'll go and it'll be perfect. Stan, I want to thank you.”

“Don't.”

That evening passed slowly. They left the restaurant half drunk and went back to Stan's hovel, breathing in the thick evening air as they went. They got in and Stan kindled a fire, which obligingly took until the flames were roaring hot and evil up the chimney.

“You should move out of this place, get somewhere new. I'll give you the money,” said Ambrosius as they sat in front of the fire in two old armchairs whose springs creaked raspily as they shifted their weight.

“No, I don't take other peoples money.”

“What about when we first met - your post-insurance business?”

“You got your money back, didn't you?” said Stan.

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Ambrosius, unconvinced.

“The real reason I sold you post-insurance was because I knew you were a man of means. I needed a way to engage you. My expectations have been more than fulfilled.” Stan scratched his chin. “I have a good sense for people. Intuition.”

“So you weren't just scamming me?”

“Not that much, no. Maybe just a little bit.” Stan smiled. “I told you, I only *used* to be honest.”

“Like I said before, perhaps you are more honest now. You admit to being a self-serving ruffian.”

“Gentleman-ruffian, I'll have you know. But don't get any ideas in your head about me being honest and noble and whatnot. You can't go round saying scam-artists are honest because it's in their nature to be scam-artists. You can't have honest dishonesty.”

“True, I suppose.” There was a pause, and Ambrosius' thoughts progressed onto another topic which had been worrying him for some time. “Stan, I've been thinking,” he said. “I promised before I left the treetops that I would try and solve the whole problem of the fish running out. Without even thinking about it that much it seems like I've become caught up in something that's responsible for that very problem.”

“Don't tell anyone,” said Stan. “Do they know about Fish Stocks Limited back in the treetops?”

“They thought one of their boats was a monster. They wanted me to kill it.”

“I see. Well, they're not going to put two and two together. Have your stock certificate made out without the company name on. They won't realise.”

“What about the fish, though?”

“What about them? You can't stop something as big as this, trust me. The fish will run out, like it or not.”

“It's really that bad?”

“Worse.”

“What will it be like without fish?”

Stan looked deep into the fire. “You see that ash?”

Ambrosius nodded.

“We came from it. We will go back to it. We have burnt too bright.”

“But there has to be hope. I know it. After I've won back Sunbeam I'm going to change the way the Company operates.”

Stan smiled, but he shook his head. “No. The Company does not change. Not any more.”

“But that's...”

“That's that. Trust me on this. You can change anything in this world, but the Company is the Company.”

“Then there's another way. There has to be. I'm going to find it.”

“You know, I'd like to help you, really I would. But you need a miracle, nothing short.”

Barnacled with age, bearded with kelp, mottled iridescent with cracked, tarnished scales, shimmering, bright, soulful-eyed, glorious, monstrous and free, a fish – oh such a fish! - awoke. Many names it has been called – the Fish of God, The Infinity Fish of Fate, The One That Got Away – though all names fall short. Sound travels in peculiar ways through the mist, much further than through the air alone. Still, it would be impossible for Stan's words to reach this fish where it lurked in the deepest, unfathomable depths of the darkest chasm on Expiscor. All the same it rose and shook its great bulk into movement. It should be lumbering, but instead it was lithe and unimaginably graceful, like a house doing ballet. This fish was bigger than a boat,

strong as a thousand men, unearthly and pale, alabaster-white, like a ghost but as substantial as a hillside.

In that outsize mind that held the music of the spheres, the spirals of the galaxies, the mysteries of love, the humour of death, the futility of power; in that great mind that was goodness misconified, the fish knew that something terrible was brewing. It knew its progeny were dying. It knew the greed and heartlessness of corporeal men made corporate. It knew that evil was an anachronism when profit was about. And above all it knew a miracle must come. That's a lot to lay on a poor fish. It flogged a bit in a joyful fashion, but soon it grew tired of flogging. It hummocked a little, then whinny-spinned, then undulated profusely until it simply had no undulations left. These are not practical solutions, granted, but what other weapons are in a fish's arsenal? It could hardly storm into the Fish Stocks Limited headquarters and demand satisfaction, now, could it? That would be most unfishlike. It shimmered a little in the misty currents. Then it did something it perhaps should have done a long time ago. It closed its sapphire eyes and, with all its animal and transcendental faculties, it prayed.

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## **Chapter 20 – The Skeleton**

Ambrosius got up early the next morning as the City was waking and packed some essential belongings into a small backpack. He went directly to the Fish Stocks Limited building and took two weeks off on holiday. His boss was surprised and a little bit annoyed that he was taking time off at such short notice, but Ambrosius had brought in a lot of money for the business and so he acquiesced. Whilst he was there, Ambrosius had his wages for the past five months made out to him in stock and, ignoring his boss's raised eyebrow, placed the certificate carefully in his bag. As he walked through the city streets, Ambrosius felt free; this perturbed him a little – he had grown accustomed to the mantle of a steady job and missed the rail that had guided his life for so many months - but still his mood was ebullient. He was going to get the girl, she would divorce Fathead, he would take her back to the City and then he would save the world. It all seemed so simple. It was as if his whole life had been building up to this. Little memories from childhood flitted back to him. Insults, jokes, unusual comments, all seemed to make sense. Yes, these two weeks would be the time of his epiphany.

He reached the edge of town and the great mist dykes loomed into view, filling the horizon with their oppressive barrier. You can't hold me, Ambrosius thought. It must be said that his optimism had now well and truly erred into the realms of the foolish; you don't think stupid little thoughts like that to yourself unless you are a fool. Wise men are marked by a silence in their heads.

"I'd like to charter a boat," said Ambrosius at the harbour master's kiosk. The harbour master, a round, red buoy of a man with lank, shoulder-length hair that looked like it had tar in it, looked askance at the slight, nerdy looking figure before him.

"I'm not a rental service, boy," said the harbour master. Then the suit Ambrosius was wearing permeated the rotund man's consciousness. He breathed out a sigh that smelt of ship's biscuit and rum. "What type of boat are y'after?"

"Just a small one. With a petrel engine."

“Go down to the dockside, see. There's a big fishing schooner just come in. She'll be back in dock for a couple of weeks now, having the barnacles scraped off her hull. Speak to her skipper and he'll probably rent you out her jolly boat for a reasonable price. Speaking o' which...” The harbour master smiled, revealing a row of rot and gold.

Ambrosius put one hand into his pocket and extracted a silver sixpence. “Thank you,” he said, placing it on the counter top.

The jolly boat was light and quick; the mist parted in front of it and trailed in whipping vortices at its stern as Ambrosius sped along. The poor outboard petrel embedded just above the rudder was flapping ninety to the dozen, letting out the occasional squawk of protest, but Ambrosius was in the mood for speed and he kept the throttle threateningly tight round the unfortunate bird's neck. When he came to the jungle he had to slow a little to avoid hitting the trees, which towered above him and trailed creepers down to brush his hair and face. The myriad insects that propelled themselves through the mist splattered stickily upon the prow and Ambrosius' forehead, which, combined with the incessant bobbing and weaving between trunks, made this part of the journey unpleasant and mentally demanding. An hour or so later, Ambrosius was glad to be clear of the balmy jungle and out into the open expanse of the desert that separated him from the Hundred Boughs. He floored the boat, which planed over the surface of the mist, eating up the distance between him and the far-off trees that stood spire-like on the horizon. A flock of shrieker birds took off from the distant canopy, spots of black against the low morning sun. Minute by minute the trees of the Hundred Boughs grew larger and more life-like.

After another hour and a half, Ambrosius had reached his destination and he let the petrel rest, which it did whilst gasping avian curses in his general direction. The boat now hovered above the mist next to one of the hooktrees, an old moss-bearded giant with immense buttress roots that were frozen in a static kick. Ambrosius could not help but stop for a moment's contemplation. He was on the barrier between two worlds, two separate realities that filled different sections of his head and his heart. On this watershed he stood shaking, feeling things click and crackle between lives. He shook his head and clenched his fists to stop his hands shaking, but these suppressed tremors seemed to travel up his arms and shake his very brain. Now he was a City dweller, now he was a tree-dweller; back and forth between these polarities our dichotomous protagonist reverberated. The two seemed immiscible, the constituent memories that related to each seemed to separate out like oil and vinegar, forming a vinaigrette of vignettes, all bubbling to the surface of Ambrosius' perception and then settling down again back into the suspension of his subconscious.

Enough! Ambrosius grabbed hold of the rough bark and hauled himself out of the jolly boat. Now his tremors were gone, now his simian climbing instincts kicked in and made fast and unshakable his grip. He started his ascent and as he did so for the first time in a long while he felt the atmosphere of the treetops start to ooze back into his soul. There were exquisitely subtle undertones to this homely miasma; the smell of hookblossom, the smell of bark, the smell of his own sweat even, all seemed to trigger deep memories that bred a sense of familiarity to make his stomach fuzz as though he had just downed a glass of warm brandy. As his efforts brought him nearer the canopy even the quality of light was different, having filtered through an atmosphere less permeated by the damp of the mist.

It was not, however, until he lay panting on one of the boughs not far from his home, his birthplace, that something very marked happened: things started to have Superfluous Capital Letters. A hooktree was now a Hooktree, a hookfruit was now a Hookfruit, and, most importantly, a fish was now a Fish. This peculiar sacredness hit Ambrosius like a slap in the face with a wet flounder, and he was dazed by it temporarily. He got to his feet and looked about him. Nobody was to be seen. The place was eerily silent. This lack of movement, this silence, this death of bough-slapping feet - something was wrong. Uncannily the static surroundings absorbed his breathing, until his chest felt tight and it was as if the very fabric of the trees pulsed to his inspirations, as though he was trying to move hard bark and solid wood with each gasp. He shook himself. This was all the product of his sudden change of environment, a peculiar nervous effect generated as part of his mind's attempt at so sudden a readjustment. He would snap out of it soon enough. So what if nobody was about? It was the middle of the afternoon and many people took their siesta round about now; people always shunned the sweltering heat of the midday Smug and dozed in the cool of their shacks. He focused his mind. Only one priority stood silhouetted in his mental headlights – Sunbeam.

Throwing his concerns over his shoulder, Ambrosius strode and swung purposefully over bough and branch. In less than five minutes he was outside Sunbeam's door and knocking urgently. Rapraprap. Rapraprap. Raprap...

The door creaked open an inch under the force of the knocking. Ambrosius pushed further and it swung open, revealing an interior that was black as a moonless night. The midday Smug beamed in through the open door in geometrical perfection, creating a small triangle of illumination in the murk.

“Is anyone there?” tested Ambrosius to the darkness. “I say, is there anybody there?”

A voice that seemed swamped by the blackness called out – call it a call, one may, but it was more of a squeak or a croak or a gasp. “Who's there?” It was female and quiet. It seemed to Ambrosius not unlike Sunbeam's voice, only broken in two, now high, now low. “We don't have any, so you might as well try robbing someone else.”

“Sunbeam?”

A pause.

“Sunbeam?”

“Is that you, Ambrosius? I thought you were...” Sunbeam trailed off. “You're alive?”

“Yes.”

There was a shuffling from the interior, but no shape emerged. Ambrosius did not know this, but that shuffling had been Sunbeam trying to stand up.

“I've come back to...” Ambrosius paused. He hadn't really thought how he would phrase this. “I have become fishful,” he said after ten seconds had dragged. The words seemed lost in the ink shadows of the shack.

There was no response.

“Come into the light where I can see you,” said Ambrosius.

“You've become fishful?” The question was asked with a mixture of disbelief and something else, something which Ambrosius could only identify as disgust.

“Yes, I thought you would...”

“Would what, Ambrosius?” The words were spat rather than spoken. There were more shuffling noises from the depths of the shadows and stifled gasps.

“Well, you set me a challenge, you see,” started Ambrosius uncertainly. “You said that the day you loved me would be the day I catch a fish.”

“A Fish?” emitted Sunbeam. And she laughed long and hard and hollow, a laugh that Ambrosius didn't understand. She stopped suddenly. “You say it like it's a rock.”

“Sorry, I meant a Fish,” said Ambrosius.

“You have it here?” asked Sunbeam. All of a sudden there was a frantic edge to her voice, a desperate edge. Ambrosius could hear her take some faltering steps across the room and stop just on the edge of the darkness.

“Well,” said Ambrosius, rummaging in his bag, “I think you'll be pleasantly surprised...”

“You've got a Fish! Ambrosius, you've got a Fish!”

Ambrosius continued rummaging awkwardly in his backpack. “Now, I'm sure it's in here somewhere.” He stopped. “Do you remember your promise, Sunbeam?”

“What promise? Out with the Fish, oh please, out with the Fish!”

“You said the day you loved me would be the day I caught a Fish.”

There was a silence. Then Sunbeam croaked, “If you have a Fish then I love you, Ambrosius.” The words were as bitter as wormwood.

Ambrosius seemed oblivious to that bitterness. In his monomania he could hear only their literal meaning. He rummaged with renewed vigour in his bag, and at last his hand grasped at what he had been looking for.

“You have the Fish?” asked Sunbeam intently.

“Better than that,” said Ambrosius, taking his hand out of the bag.

Before Ambrosius could say any more a hand shot out of the darkness and grabbed him by the wrist. Ambrosius looked down at that hand that gripped vice-like at his skin. It could have been a skeleton's, it was so thin.

“Where is the Fish? I see only a piece of paper!” The voice was cracked and broken, as though the speaker had been cheated of some great hope.

“Sunbeam,” said Ambrosius, trying to take in the skeletal appendage that grasped his own. He tried to project his voice and make it sound firm and manly, but instead it wavered. “This piece of paper is worth eight hundred thousand Fish.”

There was silence again. The grip around Ambrosius' wrist was so tight that it hurt. Indeed, where Sunbeam's nails dug into his flesh deep purple-red marks were being inscribed. At last the unbearable silence was filled again with that hysterical, hollow laughter. It pealed time and time again, inhuman, cold laughter that chilled Ambrosius to his bones. Then, out of the darkness loomed a face. The cheeks were sunk, the eyes desperate and wild, the lips cracked. In all respects it was gaunt and wasted, and it was a terrible face, because it was the face of Ambrosius' love.

“Look at me, Ambrosius,” said Sunbeam. “For the past year I have had no Fish. Do you know how terrible it is to starve? Yes, there were Hookfruit, but nobody can survive on Hookfruit alone. I should know; there was a point when I would gorge on them to fill my screaming stomach, but still the gnawing, relentless hunger remained. There is nothing on this planet like true hunger, Ambrosius, nothing.”

Sunbeam's eyes burned into Ambrosius' and he couldn't speak.

“But you know what is the worst thing?” continued Sunbeam. “Through all those days and weeks and months of suffering, I held out one hope. That hope was you, Ambrosius. I knew you had gone out into the Mist to try and kill the monster. I thought,” again, Sunbeam laughed, “I thought that you would bring the Fish back. And



now you stand in front of me with this... this piece of paper? Do you know how soul-destroying that is?"

"But all you have to do is come back with me to the City and..."

"What is a 'city'?"

"It's where lots of people live, down in the Mist..."

"In the Mist? I am not dead yet. This is my home, Ambrosius. How could I leave all my fellow Piscadors to die, even if there were all the Fish I could eat back at this 'City'?"

"Forget them, Sunbeam. We can be rich, rich and well-fed."

"No, Ambrosius. You may have found the riches of hell down there in the Mist, but you will not drag me down there too. I have made my peace with myself, having thought my life to be ebbing away. I will not break that peace."

"So you're just going to stay here and die?" Ambrosius exclaimed. An anger had crept over him unbidden. What a stupid, pointless, preventable way to go!

"You have a fire in you that I did not see before. You've changed," said Sunbeam. The words were dry.

"Yes, I've changed," said Ambrosius. "I'm not a stupid, feeble, push-over any more. I am a man of means."

"Then bring the Fish back."

Ambrosius clenched his teeth. "You can't ask me to do the impossible."

"Yes I can. I can and I am."

"Then you're even more stupid than I thought!"

"You can call me what you will. Go back to your city, find a replacement for me. I know you love me, Ambrosius." This was said with a cruel mirth to it. "But you'll just have to find someone who looks like me. Yes, do you know any skeletons in the City?" She laughed but her face, lit by the triangle of Smuglight, showed tears at the edge of her eyes.

Ambrosius wrestled with himself. "I do love you... no, not any more... I'll never find another like you... but you're just a stupid.... don't make me do this, Sunbeam! Come away with me!"

"Never," said Sunbeam, and there is none more terrible a word for a lover to hear. "You'll know where to find my bones. You can fawn over them all you like."

"Does it really have to be like this? I've worked hard for my Fish and now they mean nothing to you."

"I can't eat pieces of paper, Ambrosius. When you catch a Fish with your own brawn and cunning, catch a Fish that you can see, smell, feel through the line. Then you are my man. You know where Fathead is?"

Ambrosius stood in silence.

"Fathead is out with his line cast. He has been gone for a fortnight. You know, he would die at that line for me. He might well have done already."

"But he doesn't love you like I do," said Ambrosius. "Deep down you know this."

"I'll know nothing when I'm dead."

"But you know that I will never make a Fisher. How can I ever bring you back a Fish?"

"If you loved me you would be able to move mountains."

"Romantic codswallop!" cried Ambrosius. Then he controlled himself. "Sunbeam, I love you. But you have set me a task I can never do. To look on your face is agony now for me; I will spend the rest of my life running from this last image I have of

you, this gaunt, pale wraith of everything beautiful and innocent and good. Your eyes will hunt me to the ends of the world and I will have no rest.”

“Then so be it, Ambrosius Codwich. I would have it no other way.” Only love could have nurtured such a statement.

“You like to know that I suffer?”

Sunbeam gave a cracked smile. “It will sustain me.”

The petrel screamed and revulsion danced in Ambrosius' brain as he jerked forward and away, away for ever from his home, from love. His face was a mask; suffering lay deep in the crypt of his soul, booby trapped with vicious spikes of self-loathing. Every time he tried to access a fond memory of Sunbeam those cruel barbs shot forth and, as his mind lay bleeding, the living skeleton of Sunbeam loomed over him, and the whole of his mind's eye was eclipsed by that terrible, cadaverous face – his mask twitched and ticked but still did not give way. With every yard that trailed behind him he was further from himself, from truth, from light. He was not conscious of it but with every flap of the petrel's wings he was becoming a thing of darkness, like the shadows of Sunbeams hut.

Now Ambrosius was infected with this thing that was spreading over the world – call it a pisconomic downturn, the apocalypse, the evil tide; call it what you like. He bore the seed of shadow in his soul, and it was growing fast, sending out a tentative hypocotyl to quest for light and to turn it to shade – indeed, to make Ambrosius himself a shade, a spectre, a ghost. He steered the boat down into the mist, until he could see only a few yards ahead. At such a high speed the danger of collision with an unseen obstacle was great, and adrenaline surged like a balm through his tortured brain. Gnashing and weeping tearlessly, Ambrosius hit the jungle and trees whipped past on either side of the boat. He slowed despite himself and steered in between the trunks, trying to occupy himself entirely with the steering of the boat. But it was still there, Sunbeam's maniac laugh. In her love she hated him, and he could do nothing but love her wholly in return.

It was late afternoon as Ambrosius neared the mist dykes of the City, the petrel now lamed and chuntering along pitifully at the stern, causing the boat to slow to a funereal crawl. To say Ambrosius felt better now he neared the City would be incorrect – he felt worse. But that feeling was of such a negative quality that it had its own kind of lure, an addictive property that caused Ambrosius to lap it up like it was slaking some kind of thirst. And another thirst whelmed him, a thirst that was more literal – he wanted absolution, and, as everyone who has ever been in this state knows, the promise held by a beer glass was calling strong. The mist gates opened just wide enough for the jolly boat to pass through, and Ambrosius piloted it to the docks and moored it. He told the harbour master that the crew of the schooner to which it belonged could find it at the quayside, and that a bill for a new petrel could be sent to his office in the Fish Stocks Limited building. He knew that such an address would probably put the skipper off claiming any damages.

So, with leaden heart and a storm in his head, Ambrosius hit the Cannery Arms.

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## **Chapter 21 – From Bad To Worse**

The Cannery was full of that particular kind of drunk who starts supping as soon as they wake and continue a steady battle against sobriety through all their waking hours. Ambrosius broke the sedate pace of imbibement by ordering a quadruple measure of Pusser's Rum and knocking it back in one tonsil-singeing gulp. For anyone familiar with Pusser's Rum, that was enough to get him some distance from sobriety in a matter of seconds, the effects of the fumes being somewhat more rapid than absorption through the alimentary route. He ordered another, and pretty soon was at that unpleasant stage of drunkenness where the room starts to lose its tracking and rolls disconcertingly in front of the eyes. In his half-stupor Ambrosius took out the stock certificate from his bag, set it on the bar top and sat staring at it. This piece of paper was all he had. He contemplated the frailty of material wealth, how the difference between 'mine' and 'yours' is often only paper-thin. He reached out and touched the certificate, trying to get a tangible grasp on it, but all that happened was that the writing smudged beneath his rum-sticky fingers, his wealth becoming just that little more blurred.

The barman, a hulking great sack of potatoes, noticed his customer's peculiar behaviour and read upside-down the stock certificate. He laughed.

"You're rich are you?" he asked.

Ambrosius nodded glumly.

"Bad luck."

Ambrosius was puzzled by this comment, so he dismissed it as a philosophical statement about the ignominy of wealth.

"You must be as gutted as a halibut fillet," continued the barman. "Have another double on me."

The barman poured him a liberal measure of rum and Ambrosius knocked it back. "What d'you [hic] mean, gutted?"

"Upset. You must be pretty upset about the whole thing."

"What [hic] thing?"

"The crash. Surely you've heard about it?"

"No."

"Oh dear, you're not going to be happy." The barman leaned over the bar. "This morning the ships started coming in empty. There's no more fish, see. At first the stocks all went through the roof as people thought the shortage would make the prices rocket. But when people realised that all the fish were notional, that they were just bits of paper, everyone lost confidence. People wanted to trade their stock in for money. By the end of the day they were selling fish stocks at literally two a penny. I don't know who'd buy them – they're worthless in themselves and they're not going to put food on the table. I don't know what is. Pretty soon there are going to be a lot of starving people in this city."

A wave of sobriety hit Ambrosius. "You mean..."

"I mean those pieces of paper you stock traders like to wave about are only good for one thing. Let's just say there's going to be a lot of well-stocked posh privies after this morning."

It took a good thirty seconds for this news to settle in, after which Ambrosius groaned a long, drawn-out groan. "If I give you this piece of paper will you give me all I can drink?"

"Let's see, eight hundred thousand fish, at two for a penny that's four thousand pounds. I would say that's an overpayment, but by the time I've found someone stupid

enough to buy it off me the price will be drastically less than that. I'll be generous and give you your fill of drink and a room to sleep it off in. Best stick to pints though, any more rum and you'll be vomiting up your equity on my counter top."

"Thank you," said Ambrosius morosely. The barman poured him a pint of brown, thick hookbeer and he sipped at it dejectedly. He retired to one of the tables and took up the traditional over-pint hunch that so many broken men adopt.

People say that alcohol makes you feel better. This is not true. Ambrosius' head was now a scrapyard, in which old happy memories were unceremoniously being crushed into cubes of hatred. Through all this danced the skeleton of Sunbeam, touching things with her sepulchral finger and turning them into ashes. One minute she would be gaunt and wasted, giving vent to that terrible hyena laugh that pierced Ambrosius to the core, the next minute she would suddenly become full-bodied and rosy-cheeked, unbearably attractive and full of health. The contrast between these visions made her emotional impact all the more acute, preventing any acclimation that Ambrosius' assaulted psyche might attempt.

Strong emotions and strong drink brought about in Ambrosius a forgetful daze, until he was half hypnotised by the steady shuttling of his pint glass between the mottled table top and his unsmiling mouth. By night time he had got to that lonely stage of drunkenness where the boozier is filled with an insatiable need to talk to complete strangers. Ambrosius was just about to get up to disgorge his woes onto the barman, when out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a dark figure entering the drinking den. He looked up from his pint and unintentionally caught the eye of this peculiar character, who held it intensely without even a suggestion of a blink. Ambrosius may have been filled with bitterness, but this dark figure had it etched onto his soul. The moment of eye contact seemed to communicate the fact that here was a man who would mix all Ambrosius' woes together in a pint glass and down them for breakfast. He wore a cuirass of tanned snarlgrüber hide, much scratched and worn, as well as off-white trousers that looked to be made of old spinnakers, very baggy and loose and covered in stains that had long ago mouldered to black. In his belt was a mean-looking cutlass with a blade that was as chinked as it was sharp. The man that filled these garments looked to be strangely consumptive yet solid, as though he were a shadow made of lead. Despite his gaunt and thin face and limbs he had an unnatural paunch to him that spoke of a prolonged affair with drink, and under the skin of his face wove a network of purple and red blood vessels. There was something about this character that reminded Ambrosius of his father.

A drink was proffered seemingly without payment, and this black fisherman (for what other occupation could such a man have?) gulped it down with the unquenchable thirst of a seasoned sot. He had the barman pour him another and then, sloshing it carelessly with one hand, he turned round on his stool. Ambrosius could feel him staring with those razor-sharp eyes straight at him, daring him to look up from his drink. Ambrosius fixed his gaze on the bottom of his pint glass. Despite this, the unseemly gentleman stood up off his barstool and walked over, glass in hand. He sat on the chair across the table from Ambrosius.

"Call me Fishmael," he said with a deep rumble evocative of a bass drum full of pitch. He did not smile, and his eyes burned with all the fires of hell, yet by some unidentifiable signal it was clear that he was being friendly towards Ambrosius, insomuch as such a man can be friendly to anyone.

Ambrosius did not reply, although the small sober part of his brain recognised the man's name.

"I was born," embarked Fishmael, much to Ambrosius' surprise, "in the year of the great storm of '83. My mother never knew which man was my father, Old Nick knows the short-list was long enough." At this Fishmael laughed like a drain being unblocked.

"Erm..." said Ambrosius.

"When I was two I snook onto a fishing boat. I took my berth in the stores, living off ships biscuits and rats that I caught between m'teeth." Fishmael made a suggestive gnashing motion with his teeth, which appeared to be filed to sharp points. "The boat sank with the loss of all hands save m'self, who took refuge in a floating barrel of apples." (The curious phenomenon of bits of ships floating in the mist is due to the fish-oil with which they are treated. This oil, with which the swim-bladder of *Pisces infinitum* is filled, has the remarkable property of having a negative specific gravity.)

"Erm..." said Ambrosius.

"When I was four I had my first taste o' rum, which I procured off o' this very barman, myself having threatened him wi' m' cutlass. He blubbered like a baby seal after a club athwart the head."

"Erm..." said Ambrosius.

"When I was ten I got this scar across the midships." At this he hoisted up the cuirass and revealed a roll of flab with an old scar across it, just visible through the layer of grime that covered his belly. "Twas a terrible accident – one of me shipmates went to cast over the stern and hooked me good and proper. Nearly yanked me clear overboard, the rascally old salt. He's dead now, what with the boat sinking on the way back to port. Lost all hands unfortunately, save for me, who clung to a floating stave o' wood."

"Erm..." said Ambrosius.

"When I was a young lad o' fifteen I married a wench by the name o' Bess. Good o' Bess, she was a nice girl but fat as a barrel of lard. I remember the moment I knew she was for me - 'twas when she won six month's wages off me in an arm-wrestle. Irresistible she was."

"Erm..." said Ambrosius.

"Well, when I was twenty I shipped off with a mad old man, big beard and learned brow. Had an obsession with finches. Came up with some big theory he said would change the world, couldn't make head nor tail of it m'self. He insisted on sailing half way round the world just so we could collect a few critters and pickle 'em. Me and m'shipmates mutinied and left him stranded on some island with nought but a fishing line and a barrel o' rum to keep 'im company. 'Twas bad luck to leave him so, though, for the ship sunk afore it made port, to the loss of all hands save me, who clung to one o' the thwarts that had broken free and was floating nearby."

"Erm..." said Ambrosius.

"When I was thirty two I ate me first dog. 'Twas a yorkshire terrier by the name of Bonnie. Good, loyal dog 'twas, a ratter that we kept aboard to keep the varmin at bay. The ship was caught becalmed – this was in the days before petrel engines, see – right out in the far mists o' the north, where the fog settles and freezes on the rigging. All the ship's supplies were gone, even the rats. Poor old Bonnie saved me and m'shipmates' lives. T'would have been what she wanted." Fishmael shifted position.

“’Twas all in vain o’course, the ship having sunk the next day. I escaped Davy Jones’ locker by clinging to a half-stove lifeboat.”

“Erm...” said Ambrosius.

“When I was a little older, fifty I must have been, I captained m’first ship. ’Twas a fishing schooner with one o’ the new petrel engines, a real beauty she was. Bess had died t’other year of some ague - brought on by way of her drinking and other activities, what with me being away for most of the time and her having nought else to do – so I had nought tying me to the shore, save for our twenty nippers, but then they were all old enough to catch their own supper by that stage, the oldest being three. Any way, about the ship; I crashed her into a reef just out of port, sinking her as swift as a fart in the night. Lost all hands save me and the cook. No, come to think of it, he died too. Aye, fond memories.”

“Erm...” said Ambrosius.

“And now, here I stand. I be sixty one years of age but don’t feel a day over twenty. I put it down to all the rum. Say, I knew as soon as looked at ye that y’be drowning your sorrows. Well, I be a good drinking partner for anyone in such a mood. Let me by you a drink...”

Just how it happened Ambrosius didn’t quite know. Many, many more beverages were consumed, or ‘sent below’ as Fishmael would have it. Conversation flowed in peculiar directions, the old salt being full of tales from his pockmarked career as a fisherman. It were as if Ambrosius were being brainwashed. First he had been stripped of absolutely everything he had - his love, his money, his sobriety – then he had, in Fishmael’s tall tales of man and mist and fish, been presented with some new world that seemed to hold a promise of escape. It took only an hour for Ambrosius to start saying ‘aye’ a lot and sounding his pockets with his grapnels to haul up some change to buy Fishmael his grog. At midnight Fishmael brought out a long, thin-stemmed pipe, filled it with a pinch from a box fashioned from a rat’s skull and applied a fish-tallow candle to it. He sucked demoniacally, sending out thick billows of smoke. He then let the smoke rise from his mouth and funnel up his nose in an inverse-waterfall, a trick that looks impossible and leaves the sinuses black and tarry. After an unhealthy amount of time he exhaled and coughed raucously. He spat before he spoke.

“You smoke?”

“No,” said Ambrosius.

“’Tis a good, healthy habit. How not?”

“My father died whilst he was on it.”

“Then he died happy. You must try it, to put his soul at rest. Be a man, laddy.”

Ambrosius hesitated. Then, through his drink-addled mind, the gaunt face of Sunbeam loomed. “Yes, I think I will,” said Ambrosius abruptly. He took the pipe off Fishmael, nearly spilling the contents of the bowl as he did so. He put the stem in his mouth and cautiously sucked a small, acrid mouthful into his lungs.

“Ngggrhggghcoughcoughcough,” ventured Ambrosius.

“’Tis good, no?” grinned Fishmael.

Ambrosius at last managed to empty his lungs of the last dregs of the burning vapour and gasped in air greedily.

“You feel it?” asked Fishmael.

Ambrosius was just about to splutter “no” when it hit him. It wasn't how you'd imagine ecstasy to be – it was subtle, gentle, soft; not overwhelming or excessive. Suddenly all the burning in Ambrosius' lungs was forgotten and replaced with a floating happiness.

“I feel very schmerrr...”

“Har har, 'tis the fisherman's friend. Say, you been a landlubber all y'life?”

“Yes,” was all Ambrosius could muster.

“Then let me guess. You're filled with an overwhelming, head-staving urge to flee from this damnable solidity we call the ground?”

“Yes,” said Ambrosius.

“You want to leave all your troubles behind, to take a cutlass to your memories, to have no past?”

“Yes,” said Ambrosius.

“You want comradeship, adventure, danger?”

“Yes,” said Ambrosius.

“You want to taste the misty air and see the world from the top-gallant?”

“Yes,” said Ambrosius, smiling an inane smile.

“You want, m'hearty, to be like me?”

“Yes.” Ambrosius' eyes lacked focus.

“Then hold out y'left hand.”

Ambrosius held out his hand. He was lost in his dreamy haze as Fishmael pulled out his cutlass. It didn't hurt as the old mistdog drew the keen blade over his hand. From his pocket Fishmael produced a shrieker bird quill and piece of paper, the latter of which he unfolded and flattened out on the table. He wetted the nib of the quill on Ambrosius' bloody palm and passed him the pen, which Ambrosius held dumbly in his right hand.

“Make y'mark, m'lad.”

Unthinkingly, Ambrosius scrawled his signature drunkenly on the bottom of the list.

“Thar,” bellowed Fishmael. “'Tis done!”

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## **Chapter 22 – All At Mist**

The room seemed to sway disconcertingly as Ambrosius awoke. An intense dull pain pealed in his head and a sharp, stinging pain in his left hand. He held his palm in front of his bleary eyes and saw the gash, and as he did so last night's memories flooded back to him. The room took another pitch and he unceremoniously sat up and vomited to one side. It was at this point that he realised that it was not actually in a normal bed, but a hammock. Groaning softly, Ambrosius wiped his mouth and looked about him. He was in a ill-lit room with small, round port-holes for windows and hammocks strung up on either side. Nobody else was about. Ambrosius made a concerted effort to swallow his sickness and stood up. The room was definitely swaying. With faltering steps he tottered unsteadily to the door and opened it. There was a ladder in front of him, which led to an open hatch through which the sky was visible. Seeing no other means of egress, he climbed up the ladder and was greeted by a cool breeze on his face.

“Yo ho, there, monkey boy!” hailed a voice from above. Ambrosius was now standing on worn, woodworm-nibbled boards, into which sank three masts, the middle one being the largest. The voice had come from the largest of the masts. It originated from a familiar face.

“Mungo,” muttered Ambrosius.

“Aye matey, Mungo it is. Don't think you can mutter my name and me not hear - when you're in a force ten with thunder deafening you and your life depending on the hails of your shipmates then you soon learn to lip-read.” Mungo climbed down the mast and jumped the last five foot onto the deck. The white of his red-spotted bandanna was brilliantly clean, in stark comparison to his grimy face.

“Where's Fishmael?” asked Ambrosius groggily. He looked around and was relieved to see that they had not left the docks yet. The squalor of the quayside stretched out reassuringly on the port side.

“He's below, in the cap'n's quarters. You won't see him out in daylight.”

“I think I signed something I shouldn't have...”

“Har har, bad luck. You signed in blood, son; a fisherman's signature. Death is the only way out, and if you break your contract you'll soon be familiar with that particular escape route – every fisherman in the City will be baying for your blood, and not to wet their quills in.”

“So I can't just tell him I've changed my mind?”

“Har, har, no chance in hell. You're up for one hell of a voyage.”

Something suddenly occurred to Ambrosius. “Just a minute, if there's no fish left, what are we doing going fishing?”

“You mean you signed the contract before y'knew?”

Ambrosius nodded dismally.

“Oh ho, you're in for a big surprise. I'll let the cap'n tell you when he's ready.”

“How long have I got before we set sail?”

“We cast off at midnight tonight. Cap'n Fishmael says he navigates best by the light of Xiphias.” Mungo looked about him and then lowered his voice. “Devil knows what his pilotage would be like in the day, that's all I'm saying.”

“I... I need to go ashore for... supplies.”

“Very good. Oh, and don't even think about it. Running away, that is. If you break a deal with Fishmael he'll hunt you to the depths of hell and make a collage of your entrails. Mark my words.”

Ambrosius felt numb as he walked through the docklands. He had signed his life away in one stupid night of debauchery. He didn't know where he was going, so it must have been by some innate autopilot that he ended up at Stan's hovel an hour later. He entered into the gloom, to see Stan sitting in his armchair next to the fire.

“You know, for some reason I was expecting you to turn up.”

“I'm in trouble,” said Ambrosius.

“I was expecting you to say that as well.”

“I got drunk last night.”

“Tut tut,” said Stan.

“I signed something. In blood.”

“Ah,” said Stan. “The fisherman's signature. Who have you shipped with, sir?”

“His name is Fishmael.”



Stan closed his eyes. "I know the name. Everyone does. So you signed up with a captain who has never set foot on a ship that hasn't sunk, to go on a fishing trip just as all the fish have run out?"

Ambrosius swallowed hard. "You could put it like that, yes."

"And your quest for your sweetheart?"

"She hates me."

"Well, things could be worse. I'm not sure exactly how, but they could be."

Ambrosius sat in the chair next to Stan. "What am I going to do, Stan?"

"You're going to go out into the mist sea, and, in all probability, not come back. I sense this had some appeal to you when you were seeking absolution last night, but in the cold light of day it seems a little less attractive."

"I'm going to run away."

"Impossible. Fishmael will find you. Legend has it that every chink on his cutlass is where it has struck a vertebra."

"I could go back to the treetops but..."

Stan raised an eyebrow.

Ambrosius ran his hand through his hair. "They're starving in the treetops, Stan. There really are no more fish."

"They only have one fishing ground, they cannot go further afield to find their dinner," said Stan. "The City fishermen have a greater range, which explains why they took longer to run out of fish. Still, we're in the same position as the tree-dwellers now. People are going to die if someone doesn't pull several million fish out their hat. Perhaps the best place for you will be out to sea, away from all the misery and death."

"But I don't know a thing about sailing or fishing!"

Stan let out a long sigh. He looked tired. "You know, this City is going to turn into a living hell. When people get hungry all higher human faculties go out the window. The biggest and the toughest will kill for their dinner, and the weak – that's me and you, Ambrosius – won't last a minute. Flee from it all Ambrosius, find somewhere beyond the mist where all this is just a memory."

"Maybe you're right Stan," Ambrosius said reluctantly. "What are you going to do?"

"Me? Nothing."

"You're just going to sit here?"

"Yes."

"I can't let you, Stan. You said that Fate had something more for you. Well, I want Fate on my side. Come with me on this doomed voyage, Stan. I know it's madness but it's better than sitting here like an old man to die."

Stan was silent. He shook his head. "No. I am not a fisherman. It is not in my nature."

"Then go against your nature. Stan, you helped me when I was lost in this City with barely a penny to my name. You made me great. I can't just leave you here to wither away."

"Ship with you, you say? Do you know what they say about Fishmael?" said Stan suddenly, changing tack. "Some say he is a fool, an incompetent captain who sinks every ship he has set foot on. More insightful people say he is the Devil's Devil, a punishment sent from above on evil; evil squared. Do you think I am afraid of Davy Jones' locker? I am not. Hell also, whilst I fear it, I have learnt to accept. But that man

will take you to worse places than that – he will take you to a demon's hell and further, a perdition beyond fire, beyond brimstone, beyond weeping and gnashing of teeth. Once you ship with him you may as well abandon all hope, yes, and abandon all hope of hope as well.”

“I thought you said I would be better off sailing away from this place?”

“You've caught me,” said Stan. “It is a trait I have, giving advice to others that I would not follow myself. You see, I have all these irrational beliefs. When I make my own judgements, I apply them to myself. When I make judgements about what others should do, I use only concrete logic, not superstition.”

“I say you should always try and get perspective on your life by viewing it as another person would,” said Ambrosius. “If you could leave your body and talk to yourself, what would you say to do?”

“Hmm,” emitted Stan. “You have a point. I would probably tell me to jump onto that ship as quickly as possible.”

“Then come, Stan. God and the Devil are just modules in our brain. Sociability and survival, that's their function. An animal will fight for its life much more vigorously if it thinks hell awaits the loser.”

“I don't agree,” Stan sighed, then reached forward and poked the fire with a stick he kept by the hearth for that purpose. “But you are a friend – that is a rarity – and how could I abandon a friend? I will ship with you, be it to hell or beyond.”

“You make me feel bad for persuading you.”

“Perhaps you should feel bad.”

“Nonsense, Stan,” said Ambrosius. “Fishmael may be mad or a fool but he is no devil. He can sink us and that's our worst fear.”

“I hope you're right.”

Darkness. Friend of the dispossessed, shroud of evil, accessory to theft, violence, drunkenness, lust. Darkness. By which we know light, draw together, rest, recover, replenish. And it came over the City in all its evil and good, seeking out the nooks and crannies first in long, arcing shadows and then boldly striding across street and square. Through this gathering dusk walked Ambrosius and Stan, two men by Fate decreed to leave civilisation, to strike forth into the unknown, to fish in a fishless world. They had spent the day visiting their old haunts, restaurants and bars, not to get drunk, but for old times' sake, to say goodbye to their old life. Now the gloaming was electric with tension and worry, for news of the empty fishing boats had spread by word of mouth to every last living soul in the great metropolis. As night fell there was all the usual drunkenness and debauchery, but now with a strangely earnest glimmer in its eye, as if it was being pursued not out of will but out of desperation. It was nine o'clock when Stan and Ambrosius got to the docks.

“Which ship is it?” asked Stan.

“I don't know its name. It's big and yellow.”

“All the Company ships are big and yellow,” said Stan. “Perhaps its anonymity, though, will be the feature by which we may recognise it. If I remember the rumours, Fishmael has a tendency not to name his ships. You see, the first one he owned he named after his late wife Bess. The second one he named Bess II, following, of course, the sinking of the first. He went on in this fashion, but eventually thought it both ridiculous and off-putting to any potential crewmen to have so many numerals on her side. We should look for the ship with no name.”

It did not take them long to find it. They crossed the gangplank, looking down into the mist that rolled choppily underneath, before jumping down onto the deck.

“Avast! A barnacle's attached to ye hull, shipmate!” cried Mungo from the quarterdeck.

Jerry was there too, and he looked up from where he was coiling some rope by the mainmast. His hackles went up as soon as he saw Stan.

“This is my friend Stan,” said Ambrosius. “He would like to ship with us.”

“Like to ship with use, aye, matey?” asked Jerry.

“Yes,” said Stan.

“Ever dredged up a boulder in your nets and had the ship pitch over ninety degrees afore y'could cut it loose?”

“No,” said Stan.

“Ever lost both masts in a storm and had to jury-rig one out of a felled young hooktree?”

“No,” said Stan.

“Ever had your petrel engine break down and been forced to catch another bird with nought but a net and some breadcrumbs?”

“No,” said Stan.

“Ever hit a rock full pace and been thrown overboard, only to be saved by your own nets?”

“No,” said Stan.

“Well, son, have you ever lived at all?”

Stan was silent.

Mungo burst into peals of laughter from the quarterdeck. “Har, har, har, Jerry's only messing with you, matey, only messing. Eh Jerry? Har, har, welcome aboard matey. Jerry here is in charge of the ship's roster whilst the cap'n is below, he'll let you sign.”

Jerry held Stan's gaze levelly. “Of course, only joking, mate.” He said without a smile. “Only joking. Don't listen to me. Here, sign up, sign up. Make your mark – why not? Any man can be a fisherman after all, 'tis his right.”

Stan looked to Ambrosius, who shrugged. “I'll sign,” said Stan. Stan, Ambrosius, Jerry and Mungo went below and Jerry pulled the roster and a quill out of a draw in the sleeping quarters.

“What shall we use for ink?” asked Jerry. “You know the fisherman's way.”

“Come now, none of that, Jerry,” said Mungo. “Fishmael may be happy to pull out that cutlass o' his and carve up every poor young hopeful, but we're better than that. Here, there's some sepia at the back of the draw somewhere... here.” Mungo pulled out a bottle of thick, black-red ink.

“'Tis bad luck for him to sign in ink rather than blood,” said Jerry, eyeing Stan. “We don't want a jinx on us.”

“What a load of old cod, Jerry. Let 'im sign and be done with it.”

“Very well, but mind I warned you. I've a good sense for things like this.” Jerry took the bottle of ink off Mungo and wetted the nib of the quill in it, then passed the pen to Stan. “Make your mark then. Be one of us.”

Stan took the pen but hesitated for a second. “No going back once I sign?”

“No going back.”

Stan nodded slowly, taking a sidelong glance at Ambrosius. Then he scrawled his signature.

“Har, har,” trumpeted Mungo. “Yer an old tar like the rest of us now,” he said, grinning devilishly. “I say we have tonight's tot o' rum now to celebrate, what say you Jerry?”

They had their tot of rum and went back out on deck. Xiphias waxed gibbous above them, sending silvery shadows through the cables, sheets and shrouds, antimony sprites that seemed to man the rigging with quicksilver limbs.

“They're ghosts,” said Jerry, seeing Ambrosius staring up at the rivulets of moonlight adance above. “Ghosts of those gone down to the mist. Back in the days of sail, when I was a boy, there were many a time I would make safe a sail, only to find a minute later the knots I tied were unpicked. Cheeky, they are, and dangerous with it. Fishmael shouts at 'em, commands 'em to do his bidding. That's why his crew never numbers more than a handful – he has all the hands he needs.”

“Har, har, that and nobody wants to ship with him because he's as mad as bats and's sunk every ship he's ever commanded. Why, we only shipped with 'im because no other ships are going out, what with there being no more fish and all.”

Jerry shot Mungo a glare. “Aye, in this world you can look for causes shallow or deep. If you only sound the shallows, then you'll see a mad captain. If you look deeper then you'll see a man followed by ghosts, mark my words.”

“Oh, and what deep reason did you ship for, Jerry? Was it not double pay that lured you onto this ghost-ship?”

Jerry was silent.

“Come on, 'tis nearly midnight,” said Mungo, grinning. “The cap'n will be on deck soon enough, then we'll 'ave to make way.”

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## **Chapter 23 – The Fish's Tale**

Twelve bells tolled out from the clock tower next to the wharf, and on the twelfth Fishmael's head appeared atop the companionway, floating in pipe-smoke and darkness. He inhaled and the ember flared red and angry in the curious long pipe of his, squeaking and popping as it consumed its wicked fuel.

“Make way, blast ye all! I said make way! Man the capstan! Weigh anchor! Think ye not of that cursed land you see to larboard – it stinks! Think ye instead of the mist, glorious mist – like the smoke of purest stone, all-consuming, all-concealing, mist! Hard on the throttle, make that petrel earn its fish! Don't put too much weight on caution, you scoundrels; a ship is at its best with a few scrapes in her hull! Make way there, make way! Don't hoist the Company flag, this is no Company mission! I say, make way!”

Fishmael stormed across the deck, shouting and gesticulating wildly, whipping Jerry and Mungo into action with his words. Jerry was at the wheel whilst Mungo busied himself loosing all the moorings. Stan and Ambrosius stood awkwardly in the middle of the deck, unsure what to do.

“You two there, what are ye, daft? Hoist the mainsail!”

“Err...” said Ambrosius.

“Err..” said Stan.

“Har, har, har,” laughed Mungo as he scurried past. “He's pulling yer legs. We ain't no sail-boat; we don't have no mainsail!”

“You should be thanking me that I didn't tell thee to jump overboard, landlubbers!” shouted Fishmael heartily.

“Very funny,” muttered Stan.

“Funny, y'say?” roared Fishmael. “Then laugh, damn ye, don't mutter under your breath like a jib luffing in the wind. I'll have no muttering aboard this ship, y'hear? Roaring and yelling, but no muttering. Muttering breeds discontent, and I'll have none o' that. What say you?”

“Okay,” said Stan.

“What say you?” Fishmael shouted, throwing foam specks in Stan's direction like a wave crest in a storm.

“I said okay, what more do you want me to say?” asked Stan, annoyed.

“You say 'aye aye, cap'n' if you know what's good for you!”

Stan was silent and his teeth were clenched.

“What say you?”

“Aye aye, cap'n”

“I can't hear you!”

“Aye aye, cap'n!”

“That's better. Now head for the mist gates, Jerry, and lets get out of this stinking landlubber's doss.”

Jerry skilfully piloted the ship out to the harbour gates, which, on Mungo waving a flag at the harbour master, were opened by a mechanism powered by a fish-oil generator controlled by a lever in the harbour master's kiosk. Mist rolled in through the opening as the nameless ship rolled out into the spectral sea. Jerry deftly pulled a rope to tell the petrels to pitch down, forcing the prow of the ship upwards. He then levelled the petrels out which pushed them on a new trajectory up to the top of the mist. The pitch of the boat was then adjusted again in the same way to bring the prow down and carry the ship on a level course over the top of the ocean of fog.

“Cap'n,” called Ambrosius, when their course was set and the frantic air had calmed a little.

“What, lad?” asked Fishmael.

“What are we doing going fishing when there's no more fish?”

Fishmael breathed in sharply. “You mean you've forgotten your oath? You were more enthusiastic than I, last night in the Cannery Arms.”

Ambrosius thought back. He remembered a garbled conversation, then him and Fishmael clasping hands and shaking firmly, after the bloody signing of the contract. “I was drunk,” said Ambrosius.

“Ha, no excuse, laddy. You honestly don't know?”

“No. Nor does Stan.”

“That landlubber?” asked Fishmael. Stan, whose face was an unnatural shade of green, was stood by the taffrail contemplating being sick.

Ambrosius nodded.

“Then cock an ear in my direction, all hands!”

Stan looked round, but couldn't bring himself to move away from the rail. He met Fishmael's glare and held it for a second to let him know he was listening, then vomit chuntered out of him in an arc that he just managed to get overboard.

“Mungo, Jerry – ye may have heard this before, but I'll announce it to ye again, just so there's no excuse for not knowing why your here.”

The crewmen nodded. “Aye aye, cap'n,” they chorused.

“Then I'll begin,” said Fishmael. “There was a storm afoot like no other, the night I saw the fish...”

There was a storm afoot like no other, and the mist came in mountainous waves that ran churning over the gunwales, filling the deck with a thick, turbulent fog that reduced visibility to a matter of inches. The ship was a large and beautiful schooner, the best in the Company fleet, painted bright yellow and gleaming in the moonlight. The sails were reefed tight in a desperate attempt to stop her nosediving down to her doom in the blow, a south-easterly which had come from nowhere in the night and drove her helplessly before it. The wind moaned tortuously in the shrouds and the hull complained with groans and cracks every time they rode out another wave. It was clear to all on board that before long the storm would tear the ship apart – something had to be done quickly. There was no question of lowering the life boats – such small craft would be whirled away to their doom within minutes in the tempest. No, all rational solutions were eliminated. The crew had done all that was possible to secure the ship's safety, yet still they were in dire peril. Such a lack of control over perilous circumstances has only one great placebo – superstition. It was to this vain standard that the crew now rallied, the ensign of the Company having been torn from the mast by the hurricane winds and sent flapping into the mist.

How different things had been when the ship had been at anchor, taking on its usual crew of miscreants and desperadoes in the sheltered anchorage of the docklands. The curriculum vitae of the average boarding fisherman read more like a list of allegations levelled in a court of law than anything to be proud of. Yet none of these men thought of themselves as having made any particular offence to Fate – yes, they had stole, romped, smashed, threatened, conned and generally bootlegged their way through life, but in a way they thought of as fair and, criminally speaking, within the rules. None of them were grasses. None of them were wife-beaters. None of them were politicians. Why should Fate balk at such common sin as these grizzly misfits blundered into?

But there was one among them; one who looked just like them, spoke just like them, swaggered just like them; who was different. This fisherman had engaged in all the usual sins, but had made one fatal mistake in addition. He had, in the bitterness that his misspent life had instilled in him, and, half delirious with a hangover of three days making, demanded of the universe that some meaning be revealed in this wretched life of his. Such a demand was only made by the silent movements of his snarling lips as he lay half-comatose on his palliase, but it was a demand made nonetheless. It had been early morning, whilst the stars were still out yet the night sky had paled to dawn, and it had seemed a logical thing to do at the time, according to the fuzzy, erratic logic of the toxified brain at such a time in the morning. He had thought it an inconsequential thing afterwards, and he had forgotten it totally as he boarded the ship at midday.

The ship had travelled beautifully for nigh on a week – too beautifully. Such bonny progress could only be a premonition of the perfect storm that was brewing, and the contrast between the amicableness of the first weeks cruising and the sudden

psychopathy of the cyclone that struck the ship unawares only served to add to the superstitious misgivings of the sailors on board as the storm heightened.

So it was that the crew gathered around the captain on the 'tween deck, murderous fear in every man's eyes. The captain was a green one, this being his first command, and he stood wan and trembling as each of the rough, seasoned seadogs who comprised his crew shouted in his face.

“We're jinxed, I tell you!” cried the ringleader, making the sign of the fish, to nods of approval from his shipmates.

“R...r...really?” asked the shivering captain.

“Aye, I can smell it in the mist. Fate has brewed this tempest – someone has angered the seas and they are against us!”

Fishmael knew what he had done now. He made his way to the back of the crowd, where he would not be noticed.

“Wh...wh...what can we do?” asked the captain, who in his fear, both of the storm and the mutinous looks in his crews eyes, was willing to do anything the grizzled old salt suggested.

“We must draw lots and find the jinx!”

The captain, though weak, was a rational man. “B...b...but that will fix nothing!” he stammered.

“It will let Fate work her wile,” said another crewman, small and podgy but with muscles like boulders – he alone could tear the captain limb from limb.

“Aye!” chorused the other hands.

“A lot should be cast and then the jinx thrown overboard with a prayer to the old man of the sea,” quoth the ringleader again, eyes wide with fear and fervour.

“But that is b...base paganism,” said the Captain. “I will not stand for it!”

“’Tis not paganism to appease any god who cares,” growled the grizzled mariner, “’tis a direct appeal to the divine. Now run, fetch some lengths o' thin rope from below and let it be done with.”

The captain should have been incensed at a lowly seaman giving him orders, but the cracks of dissent showed his command to be a delicate one, and he had to let it bend or risk shattering it completely. He went below and fetched the lengths of cord, the thin sort used for the tell-tales that showed when a sail was backing onto the wind.

“Now cut one short... that's it. Behind your back now, and mix them up. All hands gather now...”

They formed a line and, one by one, took a length of rope from the captains hand.

“Who has the short straw? Who is the jinx?” There was silence. In the shadows, Fishmael tried to slink away.

“You there, shipmate, where goest thou?” called the ringleader after him. “We find our jinx in the shadows, as could be expected! All hands muster and throw him overboard!”

“You would throw me overboard on the strength of a lot chosen at random? Is that justification enough for you murderous scurvy-dogs?” Fishmael had to bellow above the storm.

“Aye, 'tis more than enough,” said the ringleader. “Now make your peace with your maker, for y'are to see him again shortly!”

The crew mustered and a squid-like mass of brawny hands took hold of Fishmael and, without further ado, threw him over the port side. He did not scream, nor make any sound, but fell with clenched teeth into the night. As soon as the groundward

Fishmael hit the mist there was a sudden drop in the wind and the mist took on an oily calmness. Never had the crew of any ship witnessed such a sudden abatement of a storm, and many of them made oaths to repent of their multifarious sins.

Fishmael fell a fathom through the mist, before something soft and wet broke his fall. In a second, the light of the moon was extinguished and a hellish blackness descended upon him. His senses reeled and he toyed with the idea that he was dead. "Well, if I be dead, I'll need a smoke to help me get my head together for the judgement," he thought to himself, so he took his pipe and a flint from his inside jacket pocket, stuffed the bowl from his pouch and applied a spark to the contents. A dull red glow emanated from his pipe, providing a dim outline of his surroundings. He saw what looked like a pink punchbag in front of him, behind which was a row of pearly white spikes.

"Cod have mercy on my soul," breathed Fishmael. "I be in the belly of a giant fish!"

He sat down cross-legged on the floor of the fish's cavity and rested his chin on his hands glumly.

"Surely I am doomed," he said to himself. "I am being punished for a life of sin by having been eaten by the very fish I would have fain hunted for m'dinner."

Hours passed, and Fishmael sat and smoked. The cavity filled with an intoxicating smoke, and after a while he lay back on the mucosa beneath him and fell asleep. Thus started a cycle of waking, smoking, then sleeping, which persisted until Fishmael doubted he would ever see the Smug again. A lesser man would have wept, but not Fishmael; he amused himself by levelling ever more inventive curses at the fish. Twenty-eight days had past, and, as usual, Fishmael stood up and roared his abuse.

"I curse ye, fish, above all else on this planet! If ever I escape this stinking, dank pit o' your belly I will surely have my revenge! I will search for ye every waking hour until I find ye and make fish fingers o' ye; I swear on old Bess, on my honour, yea, on my eternal soul, that I will hunt ye down and kill ye. May God damn me if I break my oath!"

There was a great rumble from within the fish, and a peal of thunder that seemed to come from without. Suddenly, a great surge of stinking half-digested krill spurted up from the recesses of the fish's innards and those great white teeth opened, to reveal Xiphias shining down on a shingle beach. Fishmael was carried out in the wave of vomit and left gagging on the shore. As he looked over his shoulder he caught sight of a giant white tail fin disappearing into the fog.

"'Twas only a days walk back to the City, and once there I met up with the crew of that schooner. They looked like they had seen a ghost, and were much afeared once they heard the story of my time in the fish's belly. From that day on men have made the sign of the fish every time they have seen me and I have been shunned as much a phantom might be. The great white Fish of God, the Progenitor! It must have been that legendary fish who I had cursed, and what better a way of getting my revenge on God than seeking the fulfilment of such an oath?"

"So this is the purpose of our voyage, shipmates, the purpose that in my darkest hour I asked to be revealed to me. We are united in our quest to find the Fish of God, the Archetype of Fishiness, and heave him back to the City to show everyone that Fishmael is no madman, and that God himself cannot make him kneel!"

"Erm..." said Stan.



“Erm...” said Ambrosius.

“Har, har!” cried Mungo. “Told you that you would be surprised. A merry caper we're in for and no mistake.”

“Do we have any idea where this fish might be?” asked Stan from his position by the taffrail, eyes closed and a look of utter despair making his features incredibly calm.

“Not a clue, matey, not a clue,” cackled Fishmael. “We shall have to sniff him out!”

Stan swallowed back another mouthful of vomit. “Well, I see that you have it all figured out,” he said serenely.

“And I swore an oath on this?” asked Ambrosius.

“Aye, you swore to chase the fish to the ends of the earth with me, your bosom friend.”

“Oh,” said Ambrosius.

“Our voyage will take us well beyond the normal fishing grounds. T'will be a perilous journey, no doubt, but think of the glory!”

“Yes, the glory,” said Ambrosius numbly.

Fishmael turned to where Jerry stood at the helm. “Set a course north by north east and don't spare the petrels!”

The nameless ship planed along the mist, tufts of green-white spraying up to her bowsprit as she plunged through the foggy waves. The light of Xiphias galvanised her, anodised her, bathed her in quicksilver. Even her wake shimmered as the millions of tiny phosphorescent animalcules that inhabited the mist were stirred up by her passing. How like the passing of time was the passing of this demon ship – the ground already covered shimmering out to aft, the course ahead a mystery and dark. Fishmael would change tack erratically, “following my nose,” so he said. And so began the final mission, to find the Infinity Fish of Fate.

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## **Chapter 24 – The Taffrail**

“I suppose it doesn't really matter, being as we won't catch the fish in the next several millennia.” Ambrosius was stood by Stan at the taffrail, watching the horizon as it paled in anticipation of Smugrise. There were no colours banding the sky this dawn, only a gaunt light, as if the rays themselves were thin and moribund for lack of fish.

“So that's the best scenario,” replied Stan, his voice broken with tiredness and nausea. “We're on a completely useless mission on a ship that, if the captain's record is anything to go by, is bound to sink. The worst scenario,” he croaked, “is that, against all probability, we actually find this fish and then we destroy the last great embodiment of goodness on this whole rotten planet.”

“Nonsense. Face it, Stan, all but one of the fish are already dead. What's one fish going to do? As a species we've really messed up badly. We've pretended the present is the past is the future for too long, now we're being given our just desserts. There's nothing supernatural about it, it's just the way things go.”

“It doesn't matter who's right,” said Stan. “Either Fate’s punishing us or nature is, whichever way you look at it we're doomed. We've got a hold full of ship's biscuit and dried herring, that should last us six months or so. After that we're dead like everyone else.”

“Well, look on the bright side; if we catch the fish then we'll have some fresh food for a while,” said Ambrosius.

Stan shook his head. “Could you really enjoy your last meal knowing what it signified?”

“Fish is fish,” said Ambrosius.

“Deep,” said Stan, glumly. “But then maybe you're right. Maybe nothing is sacred. Maybe this fish is nothing special.”

“Special?” came a cry from behind them. A hand like a grappling hook clenched on Stan's shoulder. Fishmael was stood behind him, all straggle-bearded and goggle-eyed. “Why that fish is special, all right, to me. 'Tis everything I hate, right there in that fish. It flolops joyfully when there is so much suffering in this world that you can't walk down a street without treading on a poor starving wretch. It has that saintly, senile smile on its fishy face when the riches in this world go to the most heartless and the humble are treated like dirt. That fish, that drastic sturgeon, flounders and flips about all day in an ocean of silliness and frippery whilst the rest of the world toils hard for dinner and a roof over their head. Consider, I say, this fish o' the sea; it has no loom or yarn to spin, yet no king in all his glory could be decked out in all its finery. How unfair! Why should God afford his dumb creatures such natural pomp, whilst us Piscadors, so blessed with the gift of reason, are ashamed of our nakedness and have to don our beggardly rags each morning? This fish uses the whole world as its doss house, running like a madman undressed and unashamed, frolicking where it will – and we call this beauty? Special – this fish is special all right, but then perhaps that word is misleading. Aberrant is my word of choice.”

“You really hate the fish don't you?” asked Ambrosius. “I thought it saved your life?”

“Aye, 'tis true. I was cast o'er board like a bucket o' chum, and that fish plucked me out the mist and swallowed me in a gulp. Ye think it was out of kindness or mercy that it saved me? Nay, it was only for my future torment. For that fish is God's will made animate, and God knows every man to his innermost cranny. That fish, and that God, knew that I was destined for a life of madness and hardship after I was granted freedom in a torrent of fish vomit. It would have been better if I were dashed on the mistbed. He knew that I would be shunned, never to be accepted into that arrogant clique we call man again. He knew that I would suffer all my waking hours, and all my snatches of sleep be haunted by terrible dreams o' been trapping in that fish's belly once more, though this time for eternity. Perhaps those dreams are premonitions of the hell that is prepared for me. So be it. I will stand and wage my war against the fish so long as I may, and no man yet has had the fortitude to stop me.”

Stan looked at this grizzled salt that stood profanely before him. “You know, perhaps me and you are more alike than I thought,” said Stan quietly. “We both have a chip on our shoulders. Maybe my role in the city was just as blasphemous as yours, just as ungodly.”

“Aye, we all have our fish to chase,” said Fishmael, eyes narrow. He looked as if he were mulling Stan over, assessing his character. Despite Stan's appeal to their similarities, there was an indistinct tension between them. “But set them aside for

now. There is only one fish that ye will chase whilst you be with me, that great white atrocity I have mentioned afore. You were a blackguard in the City? Well, you are a saint at sea, we all are. What could be more holy than a quest against the fish? Aye, ye look like that now, but think about her. People who go on a quest *for* God do so for a reward – be it in the praise they receive from their fellow men, or in the promise of bliss in some afterlife or another. Yet the man who fights *against* God, who still fights for what he believes in even though the Godhead may disagree – he receives no praise at all from his fellow men whilst he is alive and almost certainly will burn in hell for his convictions after his death. What, then, is more honourable?”

There was a silence.

“Ye think ye have shipped with a mad captain?”

“Er...” said Ambrosius.

“Er...” said Stan.

“No, I won't make you answer that. Har, look at you both, quivering like a pair o' haddock on the deck. You should know that the captains in this life are always mad; it is what sets them apart from their fellow men. If you're stark raving sane you are liable to realise that you are no better than the bloke next to you, that happiness is in unblazoned, unpraised insignificance. That and a fat bird, a few pipes and a pint o' grog! Nay, you two look sane to me, so be happy with the simple pleasures in life. Leave all the stress to those unfortunate skippers who compete to shoulder all the responsibility the world has to offer. Aye, 'tis a strange concept that, *responsibility*. Haul in a net full o' bass and every man's head o' the ship, claiming responsibility and wanting their fair share. Dredge a net full o' rocks and suddenly there's only one skipper. Yea, there's never a more powerful cap'n than when times is bad, if that man really wants such power. I wonder, before we talked about the highest power of all. Is God really only placed in such a lordly position by merit of him being willing to shoulder the blame for all that is bad? It would make a lot of sense.”

Stan and Ambrosius were silent, for Fishmael's face told them that he was not after an answer, but merely a mute audience for his monomania. For a while all three men were lost in the horizon and the rolling of the mist. Fishmael shook his head at some half-seen thought and, laughed to himself.

Fishmael, are you wise? Are your heretical arguments just? It is troubling that such convincing words can be uttered by such a blackened soul. So, reader, examine this lordly, unlordly man as he stands at the taffrail. This rail divides him from the uncertain mists of the world, and places him stark and clear on the decks of his own surety. So when you sail forth on an ocean of earth in a coffin ship with stone sail, think how the last configuration of your brain will then be forever set and preserved in the embalmer's formaldehyde. Before then, before your graveyard shift, do not let that organ be shiftless; instead let it roam about all those heights and valleys of mortal comprehension and seek out novelty where there once was dark incomprehension.

For your health, then, never be sure about anything. Fence-sitters get a lot of stick, it may be said – indeed, the fence they sit on is pretty much built of such sharp, verbal sticks - yet they should not let any accusations of woolliness get to them. The fool is certain of things, as is the convoluted sophist, yet one possessed of a happy level of intelligence that allows them to be most in touch with reality, ironically, is least sure of things. Perhaps this hints that there is a degree of uncertainty in reality, that to know anything one must confusingly be unsure. This thought, at this moment, occurred to Ambrosius, and, unfortunately, got snared in the tangle of his ideas about

Quantum Fishics; strange, extremely logical ideas which, like a drug, promised mystical insights but left their user with a memory of excitement and a headache. The thought also occurred to Stan, who knew it already. Fishmael, when this idea of the nobility of uncertainty oozed into his consciousness, recognised it as what it was – an attack on his ideals – and spat noisily over the side of the boat before taking his pipe out of his pocket and chemically cleaning the inside of his head with it.

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## Chapter 25 – A Sea of Mist

Just before the Smug came up, Fishmael retreated below to his cabin, like a snail illuminated with that star's salt, retreating back into its shell, and locked the door, having left orders for the navigation of the ship with Jerry, who manned the helm, and orders for Mungo to stay aloft in the crow's nest on the look out for anything pale and fish-like, be it tail-fin or dorsal. The course, which had meandered under Fishmael's erratic influence at night, was now set straight for the day, away from the City, away from the happy entrapment of culture and uncouthness, wealth and poverty. When one considers the vastness of the foggy deep that covers Expiscor, and the relatively small hemisphere of visibility from the topmast, it might seem that the mission our protagonists now found themselves upon was stamped with futility from its conception. Think, however, of how often we embark on such missions. How many romances start not only by a chance meeting, but then by further happy coincidences, such as the sharing of an interest, the reciprocal appreciation of each other's unique beauty, the mundane practicalities of geography and working hours that allow for regular meetings and so on. How many battles have been won by a lone pigeon carrying a scrap of paper thousands of miles to a pigeon loft a few square metres across to call for reinforcements? In our immune systems, how many times have antibodies been raised to multifarious pathogens, saving our lives time after time? Indeed, what fortuitous circumstances allowed for a ball of rock to be situated the right distance from a star, with the right chemical composition and the right environmental conditions for life to arise and be sustained until creatures of any level of intelligence arose in the first place?

Miracles are so commonplace as to be ignored by most people. If we stopped and stared at everything miraculous we would simply get nothing done. If we were at all capable of appreciating miracles, we would spend at least a decade contemplating the incredible chemical processes which convert those most basic elements, light and air, into two pieces of carbon-based, conveniently combustible wood, without ever having time to rub the two things together and start a fire to stop ourselves freezing to death. Nonchalance is an evolutionarily acquired characteristic, if you nonchalantly believe in such things.

All this considered, then, we must accept the impossible probability of this unlikely band of mariners actually finding their fish. It is the way of things that sometimes being so hell-bent on some end or other is in fact sufficient to guarantee success. The shelf upon which the trees of the Hundred Boughs and the buildings of the City rest is a large mesa of roughly one-hundred kilometres square, the flat tabletop of which is just twenty metres or so below the mist. The sides of the mesa drop precipitously once one passes over the edge, until the mistbed is one-thousand, ten-

thousand, one-hundred thousand metres below the mist. In order to become better acquainted with this foggy medium which is so important to our mariners, it is a good idea to turn to the learned writings of one Earnest Grumble. This singular individual came into his prime many hundreds of years ago in the great age of machines started by Tempura Lanomaly, and was the closest Expiscor has ever come to producing a scientist. Grumble was fascinated by the huge unexplored realm of the mist, and in particular the creatures it may harbour. So, at great expense, he constructed a bronze hollow globe studded with thick glass observation portals to protect him from the unsavoury vapours of the deep mist (and any of the monstrosities which called it home and Grumble dinner) and a sampling hatch. He had a great cord of the type used in fishing lines only much longer and thicker attached to a hoop in the top of the globe. The other end of this cord was attached to a giant winching mechanism, the base of which was set into the bedrock of the mesa, fifty metres or so from the edge. It was Grumble's self-assigned mission to venture down into the great unknown of the deep, deep, deep mist.

“Hurrah!” and again “Hurrah! Hurrah!” came the cries of the spectators as, under a hail of hookblossom confetti, Grumble was sealed in his globe and rolled on a trolley towards the edge. They pushed him over the edge and the cord took the weight of the capsule and the portly naturalist. As he was lowered slowly, his journal began.

*Depth: 10 metres. I was immediately impressed by the variety of forms that are found just a small distance beneath the surface of the mist. Most of these are greenish, squigglyform and possess flagella for movement. I strongly suspect these to be the happiest of all creatures (bar, of course, the fish), as evinced by their joyous exclamations of “bree, bree!” when the sample hatch was opened and they were bottled.*

*Depth: 100 metres. First sighting of an infinity fish in its natural environment – such a wonder! It was fleeting, of course, for it fled as soon as it saw the capsule, its tail fin being the only thing visible, but the experience will remain with me for the rest of my life. It should be noted that at this depth much of the Smug's light is blocked by the mist, making things somewhat dim. I switched on the fish-oil lamps on the front of the capsule and was afforded a view of some of the smaller biota at this depth. These generally appear to lack any colour, which I put down to their unjoyful demeanour and carnivorous nature; I have observed one of their larger members eating a lesser creature. Such constant worry at being consumed has evidently bleached these poor creatures of their jolly pigments, as my understanding of photochemistry has it.*

*Depth: 1000 metres. Things are decidedly dark, and I am glad I brought ample fish-oil for the lamps. The creatures have increased in size, and I must admit to being a little afraid of them. Generally they are two to three metres across, possessed of large and jaunty teeth, exceedingly aggressive to each other and, by their constant exclamations of “Waargh!” most antisocial and unneighbourly. I am glad such monstrosities are confined to these depths.*

*Depth: 10,000 metres. I must admit to being extremely afraid. Every last glimmer of natural smuglight has long since gone, leaving just a small sphere of illumination around the capsule near the lamps. Such monsters! A large one, multiheaded and*

*quite unsavoury to behold, came very close to the capsule and put an eye as big as a dinner plate to one of the windows, either by way of curiosity or as a means of putting the wind up me, I cannot say which. Another had something like a bell-shaped body with many wispy tentacles trailing underneath it. I am convinced that this is the source of the so-called 'fisherman's fire', the peculiar burns that sometimes affect fishermen when they haul in ropes that have been at extreme depth and are covered with these wispy appendages. I was extremely careful when I used the sampling hatch to snip off some tentacles, which I bottled. I was amazed to discover that attached in strands along the tentacles were other miniature bell-shaped creatures, as if the larger bell was a freighter for its offspring. I can only expect further terrible wonders as I continue my descent.*

*Depth: 50,000 metres. I have taken to humming happy tunes so as to drive off the terror that thrills me, to little avail. Huge shapes often pass within feet of the vessel, which rocks alarmingly as they swim away. I cannot describe them in their whole, as I can only catch glimpses of appendages or spikes or teeth – however, I must assess their joyousness as being extremely low and their frivolousness to be negligible. There are also smaller creatures which appear to emit their own kind of light, ranging from an eerie glow to crisp, electric-blue pulses. These are slightly more joyous, as any light in this pitch ocean is welcome, but on closer inspection most of them are troubled with a constant frown that is most unbecoming. Perhaps the most terrifying of all the creatures I encountered was a large mass of tentacles attached to a beak-shaped body. It was not the tentacles that scared me, however; in the lamp light I could see its eyes, and they were like those of a Piscador. The only thing more horrific than brute murderousness is the hint of intelligence ruling such a disgusting anatomy.*

*Depth 100,000 metres. The capsule now rests on the mistbed. In front of me is a peculiar funnel-like formation which seems to be geological in origin; however, it is heavily encrusted with a layer of life that appears to lack the usual diversity seen elsewhere; mainly tube-worms but crabs also. I sampled one of these crabs through the hatch and had to throw it back out again, the smell of sulphur was so bad. As I did so I noticed that the hatch was decidedly warm – it seems that the funnel is a source of heat. I can only speculate on the metabolism of the creatures that depend on this funnel for life – it is my learned opinion, owing to the sulphurous smell, that these creatures conserve the gasses that we would otherwise emit when we break wind, and, these being flammable, slowly combust them for their energy. I could also make out that, upon the bed of the mist, there are many large bones and some rotting carcasses, presumably from all the creatures that, meeting their end above, fall down into the abyss. I have to say, I am a little glad that I shall be reeled up out of this dismal place in a short time. Imagine being one of these poor brutes! As never before, I count myself glad to be a Piscador.*

So there you have it. The mist holds many wonders and far more horrors – be glad that you cannot see down into it! You may, incidentally, wonder why Piscadors are so worried at the fish dying out when there are other potential food sources living in the mist. Well, first of all, these are mostly poisonous and very dangerous to even touch, never mind eat. Most of the rest are large and fierce; many nets of deep-mist

fishermen have been torn to ribbons by a mistakenly entrapped beastie, and catching them would be nigh on impossible. There are, however, a very small number of species, like the dugong, which are exceedingly tasty, easy to catch and plentiful in number. However, it is a peculiarity of Piscador biochemistry that Piscadors require the essential oil of the fish, piscoline, to produce and maintain the fatty tissues of the brain. Without these oils, the brain quickly withers and the unfortunate Piscador suffers a mental decline leading ultimately to dementia and death. This perhaps accounts for that terrible, manic laugh which, once emitted from his sweetheart, still troubles Ambrosius to this day, and is a grim portent for the decline of the City into a slowly lethal madness should a new supply of fish not be found.

Some chapters back we heard a ridiculous thing: the great, white Infinity Fish praying. Well, its invocations done, the fish was now on the move. It said a silent hello to the flatulent crabs which populated the deep-sea vents. It bantered with the shimmering chemiluminescent things and the giant spiky things a little further above. It greeted with jollity the jellies and the medusae. It grinned at the shouts of “Waargh!” from the colourless fauna above them. It laughed with the jocund, green things near the surface, and, finally, burst out into the light of Xiphias, spraying mist high in a silvery jet into the night sky (the Infinity Fish has a habit of spitting a mouthful of mist high into the sky as she reaches the surface of the mist, spraying vapour upwards in a concentrated jet). And what does any self-respecting fisherman shout when he sees such a thing?

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## **Chapter 26 – The Shout – A Brief Discourse On The Will O' The Fish**

“There, there, *thar* she blows!” came the shout from the topmast. Mungo used the full capacity of his barrel-chest in exhorting the presence of the fish.

Fishmael was up the companionway in a flash, eyes ablaze and breathing heavily. “Tell me now, be it the white fish?”

“Aye!” cried Mungo. “*Thar* she blows!”

“How far?”

“Half a kilometre by my reckoning, five points to larboard!”

“So. We have a good chance. Five points to larboard, choke that petrel!”

“Aye, aye!” shouted Jerry.

The boat shot over the mist, heading for the place where the spout had last been seen.

“You see her still, Mungo?”

“No, cap'n. She's sounded.”

“Blast and damnation! What was her heading as she dived?”

“She was far off - difficult to say, cap'n. I reckon if we carry on in this direction we're about on her course.”

“Good, then hold the course. Lay off the throttle a little, Jerry; we may need a turn of speed if she breaches again.”

“Aye, cap'n.”

Prow hunting the waves, questing for the next trough, climbing each peak like a mountaineer, the ship bore on after the fish. The captain's moods bobbed with the

palpitations of the sea, until his heart beat in time with his ship, fast and hard, filling his face with purple blood like a leech's abdomen.

“Curses on ye all!” he shouted after an hour. “Twas the fish's way of mocking us! She would never give herself away so easily by mistake – there was intent there, aye, intent. She would make a joke of us all, mates, make no mistake. Keep your eyes peeled, Mungo, and sing out if you see her again!”

Did the Infinity Fish see her pursuer? Did she know that this vessel was a blood vessel, mining a rich vein of hatred to fuel the fires of her captain? Just how much of that peculiar concept of intent can we assign to this creature? A brute creature follows only instinct, is canalised in its instincts. Is there any room in a fish for free will?

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## **Chapter 27 – The Relativity of The Stylites**

Mungo was alone in the topmast as the day broke once more on the oath-bound fishermen still on the fish's tail, so to speak. Mungo was not happy. He had been aloft now for twenty-four hours now, his meals having been passed up to him by means of a rope which he lowered to the base of the mast and had a basket tied to it, in the manner of a man drawing water from a well.

“What manner of a life is this?” muttered Mungo to himself as the midday sun beat down. “Aloft in a crow's nest for the rest of my natural; burned by the Smug by day and frozen by night, whipped by gales and rained on when it pours. Aye, all because of some old man's craziness. What is it that keeps me aloft? Is it faith in our cause, or is it fear? Maybe a little of the two – a potent combination, they are. And nothing but endless white all around, enough to send you blind if you don't squint in deference and keep blinking. But oh, no blinking now. What's that on the horizon? Well bless my behind, if that isn't the strangest sight I've ever seen...”

The story of Simian Stylites is a story of hardship, made all the harder by his own adamance. Some men express themselves through art, others pluck the harp strings and play the lute. Simian was different. Simian expressed himself through suffering. At the age of thirteen he became interested in mysticism, meditation and the interconnectedness of all things, which instilled him the irresistible urge to shun all the niceties of life and take up the mantle of an ascetic. He started by shunning food, by standing in awkward positions for many days, by kneeling in prayer for endless hours; in general he felt happiest when he was discomfited in some way. He was, masochistically speaking, very creative, a true genuflective genius in fact, and, humble as he was, he acquired quite a following. They would observe him on his fasts, tempting him with food in the manner of a tourist trying to make a royal guard flinch, and they asked him for all kinds of advice and judgement. The crowds got so large and distracting that at the age of fifteen Simian, for the first time, decided to escape them. He joined a monastery and took to strict periods of fasting and silence. But his happy unhappy life in the monastery could not go on for long. On one occasion he bound his abdomen tightly with hooktree cords and abstained from eating or drinking for an entire month. He was found collapsed in his cell, much to the abbot's consternation, and had to be nursed back to life. The cords were bound round



his middle so tightly that it took many days of soaking to work them loose from the wound they had circumscribed. Simian was perfunctorily dismissed from the monastery and took up residence in the wastelands around the City, beyond the mist gates. He was just getting down to some decent hardship when he was spotted from an outgoing fishing boat, the crew of which reported his new location to the people of the City. Within hours he was surrounded by a crowd, and the press of bodies, constant gifts and rents in his clothing where people wanted a piece of that sacred fabric became a constant annoyance and quite uncondusive to prayer.

In the end Simian could stand it no longer. He took the gifts of gold and silver which the crowds brought, which amounted to a small fortune, and bought a cargo ship. This vessel he had filled with blocks of granite, and, in the dead of a moonless night, slipped discreetly out of port. Simian headed far out into the mist, beyond the mesa, where few fishers ventured. He plumbed the depths carefully with a line he had brought for the purpose and in this way found a mountain on the sea floor some way beyond the mesa, the pinnacle of said mountain being only one-hundred metres or so below the mist. Simian now, a driven man, used one of the cranes on the ship to lower granite blocks down, one on top of the other. He did this until a higgledy-piggledy tower was formed, which rose some twenty metres or so above the mist. Satisfied with a job well done, Simian attached a long rope to the throttle of the ship and, carrying this between his teeth, set a ladder against the side of the column, which he climbed. He also took with him a simple fishing kit in a small satchel. When he was atop his pedestal, Simian gave the throttle rope a good yank and sent the ship flying crewless back in the direction of the City. The stories that are told to this day of a ghost-ship returning to port are greatly exaggerated, but they have their foundations in truth.

So about this towering figure: Simian had never been more miserable, which was great (indeed, it could be said that, having given up on escaping men in the horizontal direction, Simian had succeeded in the vertical). Complain as you do, Mungo, atop the mast; here was a man who has bested you one-hundred fold and more. Simian, a youthful eighteen year-old when he first went aloft, survived off a diet of line-caught fish, eaten raw. These morsels being quite succulent in themselves, Simian acquired enough moisture from fish alone to mean that he did not require any form of drink to survive. And survive he did. Gales blew, rain, sleet, snow, hail and thunder tried to bring him down, but still Simian remained vertiginously defiant. His mind worked in this way: if I have stood here for a week, I have committed myself, therefore I cannot step down. If I have stood here for a month, then this is no great achievement, so I cannot step down. If I have remained a year – well, a year is neither here nor there in the big scheme of things, I cannot step down to mediocrity. I have stood here a decade; well, I've been here so long I might as well stay a little bit longer. Such devout procrastinating continued, so that fifty years passed and Simian was still aloft.

Now, Simian had relied on fish for a long time. How had the recent shortage affected him? He had, of course, seen it as yet another test, which he accepted humbly. Fasting had always been part of his life, and he was well used to stomach-shrinking hunger – it was sort of an old friend of his. So here he is, standing on his self-built tower, thin as a skeleton, arms cruciform in a particularly painful position, loving every minute of it. It is this figure and his bizarre, rapturous rictus that the mottled Mungo sees looming out of the Mist at him, at about the same level as the crow's nest. The whitish granite of the column is at first largely invisible against the

backdrop of the mist, giving this strange, holy man the appearance of levitating. Mungo is too speechless to cry out at first, and then the ship has passed Simian and he quickly is lost to stern. Mungo thinks it best not to tell his crewmates of this apparition, for surely they would think he was mad. But suddenly Mungo's hardship seems nothing; the hard plank of wood on which he leans is as soft as eiderdown; the ship's biscuit he eats is gateau; the water is wine; his crewmen, so far below, suddenly seem close by, reassuring him that he is not alone. So think now, about this: would the world not be a better place if we were all granted a vision of this man in the mist? There would be no industry for the mattress makers, no jobs for the top chefs, no bonuses for bankers. We would rock ourselves to sleep on bedrock, gladly eat dry bread, shun money as if it were venomous. We would be happy in our misery, and glad in our suffering. It is perhaps a good thing then, that some men stand aloft on their pillars. They are a little closer to heaven, it is true, but they elevate those around them too. So thank Simian as you pass him in the mist, for one day when you pass, you will see only a pile of bones.

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## **Chapter 28 – The Same Boat**

The rum, as it was served in the galley at smugdown, swelled in the bottom of the narrow-topped tankards in sympathy with the great vaporous rollers overboard. Mungo knocked his back in one greedy tide, glad of something to wash away the image of the cruciform man suffering on his pedestal. Stan was sick and didn't drink, whilst Ambrosius sipped his cautiously, the strong liquor burning his lips and his tongue. Jerry gulped his tot without flinching and set his tankard down on the table.

“There, we have paid our service to inebriation, such a shame we could not do it further justice. Fishmael should be here for his rum shortly, so look sharp - or at least less blunt.”

“Whilst we are alone,” said Ambrosius. “I want to know what, as experienced sailors, you make of this mission of ours.”

“What we make of it?” asked Jerry, raising an eyebrow. “We don't make anything of it. It is what it is.”

“Har, har,” trumpeted Mungo. “That man should be a politician. Aye, we do make of it in truth. The last fish? At once it is a fisherman's dream and his nightmare. Who could beat the title of the world's last catch? Then again, who could shake the infamy? I think Fishmael is motivated by both the dream and nightmare of our mission, the mad old dog. For that man rides like a skiff; in his troughs he wallows in his lowness and at his peaks he soars as high as the gulls. When a man lives a wavelike life he savours every part of the crazy cycle, no matter what the height.”

“Why did you ship?” asked Ambrosius.

“What else could we do?” asked Jerry before Mungo could answer. “T’was double pay for a start. That and I would rather die out in the mist than in that stinking City.”

“Do you think we'll find this fish?” asked Ambrosius.

“Aye, we'll find it,” said Jerry, something slow and almost angry in his voice. “We're bound to it, in every possible sense. That fish has already shown itself – I think it has plans for us.”

Ambrosius laughed. "How can a fish have plans?"

"Mark my words, this is no ordinary fish. It can raise us up to heaven or it can drag us down to..."

"Look sharp," Mungo said. "Cap'n's coming."

"Ho there, shipmates," rumbled Fishmael. "I smell rum!"

"Aye, cap'n," said Jerry. "Let me draw you a measure."

"I draw my own measures, laddy, don't you forget it." With this, Fishmael placed his tankard under the grog barrel and turned the spigot. He didn't stop the flow until his vessel was brimming. Jerry and Mungo looked away, Ambrosius couldn't help a smile. Stan couldn't hide a look of disgust.

"Any problems with my measure?" asked Fishmael after a mouthful. "Any of you whipper-snappers thinking your two fingers are thinner than mine?"

"No, cap'n," said Jerry.

"No, cap'n," said Mungo.

Ambrosius was a bit slow on the uptake. "No, cap'n," he said at last.

Stan coughed. "No, cap'n," he muttered.

"Good to hear it," said Fishmael, setting himself down at the table and taking another pull at his rum. "Now, Jerry, fetch some herring and let's have supper."

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, but shouldn't we be saving the supplies?"

"For what?" roared Fishmael. "For another few stinking weeks trapped in this mortal coil?"

"Livin' is somewhat dear to me, sir," said Jerry.

"Pish!" splattered Fishmael. "What more will ye do, half-starved on half rations? Suffer for a little longer? No, that is not for me." Fishmael now lowered his voice to a growl. "Anyway," he said, "we will have plenty of food when we land this bass. As big as a house, she is, and God knows I made her my house for long enough. We will have enough food for a year off her if we cure it properly."

"And how long do you expect us to be chasing this fish for?" asked Stan.

"How long? She has shown already. She mocks us now, but pretty soon she'll get too bold and we'll get a dart in her."

"A dart?"

"Aye, a dart. A harpoon, laddy. Its how they used to fish, back in the days before the City. I have mine in my cabin, sharp as a thorn and a thousand times as strong. It's attached to a rope, so when the head is lodged in the beast's side, she takes it and runs with it. Then we can yank her about, tire her, and then haul her in. 'Tis my dream to see her spout black blood from a dart thrown by my own hand."

"Har, har, I wouldn't like to see what your nightmares are like, cap'n," laughed Mungo.

Fishmael shot the jolly sailor a look that could strip paint, before his features softened. "Aye, lad, aye. Haha. I laugh, but what do ye think the grog is to drive away? I drink all night so that in the day, when I sleep, those terrors will be dulled. Vain are all efforts for my peace, save my pursuit of the white fish."

Mungo nodded. "Aye, we all see your mission, cap'n."

"My mission?" started Fishmael. "Why, 'tis *our* mission, maties. Our glorious fishin' mission. Would any of ye back out of what's ahead?"

Some silences are incriminating.

"Very well, then," said Fishmael. "We're all agreed. To the death of the fish!"

And they all drank.

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## Chapter 29 - Sargasso

A ship is an island of life. Barnacles cling to her hull, along with bearded kelp and weed. Worms slowly eat into her wood, it being their bolt-hole garden of Edam. Shrieker birds circle overhead and settle on the rigging, glad of a rest after flying for long hours over their sushimi-bar sea. Rats eat her biscuit and sleep amongst her bilge. And then those great barnacles, those wily worms, those avian overlords, those artful rats, those Piscadors; they live too on their mobile continent, federated along one keel, to steal a good phrase. So it almost seems out of place, an anachronism even, to have this happy island nation ruled over by a despot such as Fishmael. His tot of rum fills a whole pint pot, his herring is cut thick and unfairly chunky, his privacy commands utmost respect, as does his attendance when he calls for it. And his madness, aye, his madness seems almost to be a self-awarded medal, worn in that fashion so beloved of dictators. Bright and gleaming, pure gold, the alchemy of insanity works its magic on this dubious accolade, almost giving it the appearance of nobility. For it must be said that a man unsure commands no respect, yet a man certain can lead an army, and the ability to lead is often mistaken as nobility. What does 'noble' mean? Is it honour or elevation by which we choose to define this word? Perhaps Fishmael is very noble, very elevated, almost as high as a Stylite, only much more comfortable. After all, men like Fishmael stand on their pedestals too, and we all look up and see them. This craning of the neck is often perceived as admiration.

So, up-lookers, look down, down slumped at the ship's table where Fishmael sits drunk as a lord. He is alone now, everyone else having gone on deck to go about their duties (or, in the case of Stan and Ambrosius, to escape the dark presence of the captain). He mutters to himself.

"...would eat me? Nay, not again. I would turn its stomach sour. No, the fish will be *my* dish, not the other way round. Then why do I feel foolish, foolish and hunted? I feel as if I am being hunted by my own heart, that is it. How can a hunting troop stand if its members are divided? In the same way how can my soul stand dividied up between my demons? It is as if a pirate worm has taken over me, climbed over the bulwarks of my soul and commandeered me. Parts of me recoil at my goal, yet parts delight. Aye there are even parts of me that delight at my recoiling!

"'Tis not right to have so many facets; I am not a stone, no amount of polishing will make me sparkle. I long to unite all these disparate threads that fray inside me, but the only cord I can see that unifies them seems to be a noose, and that is not for me. I doubt that in death I would sleep restless – I would forever be turning in my grave at the dead comprehension of my failure to weigh in that fish. I hate that fish! But I am becoming repetitive. Is there anything else I feel towards that overgrown halibut? Its progeny have sustained me and the rest of this planet for cod knows how long, after all. Is there respect there? Gratefulness? I accept that the fish is a mighty beast, well-formed, aesthetically perfect – a true Vitruvian fish, no less. I can admire it as I would admire a mountain, or the Smug, or Xiphias, or some distant star. But get up close, where I could smell the rotting krill, that stench that I spent so long inhaling... aye it is the stench that is the worst! Things are so often beautiful until y'get a whiff of their body odour. If a mountain sweated, if a star farted, if a rose belched –

would we be able to look at them the same afterwards? I think 'tis true that the passion is gone from any relationship when one of the couple feels comfortable breaking wind in front of the other. And, with this fish, Nature has farted in my face! Yes, I *hate* that fish, I *hate* that fish...”

Call it soliloquy, call it raving, call it what you like – the captain muttered on and drank by himself until morning was close, whereupon, before the Smug had a chance to peep at him over the horizon, he slunk off again to his chambers to try and snatch some sleep. The nightmares came as soon as his head touched the pillow – before he was asleep even. He lay watching the wooden planks of his ceiling morph and warp, and, like some jaded ex-hippy struck with the repercussions of his ergotism, his fancy cast the planks into the shape of his nightmare quarry. A ghastly mobile this: a fish, mouth agape, ever advancing to consume, never reaching. Those eyes that could see for a million miles, they stared at Fishmael, into Fishmael, through Fishmael. He had no secrets from this fish, no psychological defences, for she was as much a part of him as he had been a part of her for that foetid, gastric month. And then, as sleep came over him, he was paralysed. He would try and move his arms or legs, but could only raise them an inch or so of his bed. Pinned invisibly thus, like some dark butterfly in a collection, the fish would start talking to him. The thing that distressed him the most about this was the relentless amicableness of his enemy.

“Hiya! Hows it going Fishmael, the big F, the Fishmaester, old boy? It's certainly been nice weather recently. How are you?”

“Curses on ye, ye vile sturgeon!”

“Haha, whatever mate. You been up to much?”

“Blast ye!”

“Not much then. Me neither. I floloped a bit yesterday, saw a few sea-cucumbers congregating in the shallows, the tykes. It's the Smug that's brought them out.”

“A pox on ye, ye abomination!”

“Okay, a bit of banter there, very good. I love banter, it's so joyful! Hey, I'll tell you what, I hope you like krill as much as me. Now that all my mates are dead you'll have as much lovely krill as you can eat. The seas will be full of the stuff! Mm, mouthwatering, tasty krill.”

“Shut up! Shut up! I'm going to catch you and then you'll be sorry!”

“Sorry? I'm never sorry about anything, only joyful. Where are you going on your holidays this year? I'm thinking of swimming out to this little archipelago a couple of hundred miles east of here. Their reefs are fantastic apparently. You want to come too?”

“Arrrgghhh!”

“Guess that's a no. Well, I'll have fun all by myself. You know, normally I take a few of my best buddies along with me but they're all dead now. Still, you've got to look on the bright side – at least all the Smug-lounging spots will be free! In fact, hey, I prefer places when they're less touristy, nice and quiet. Don't you?”

“Die, ye scurvy sea-dog!”

“Sea-dog? I saw one of them once. Quite a nice species actually, although he did try to eat me. Can't bare a grudge though, I am absolutely delicious, to blow my own trumpet a bit. Hey, if I was him I'd try to eat me too.”

“Silence, ye infernal beastie! You'll be spouting black blood as soon as I...”

And so on. Fishmael spent every night locked in the same excruciating fantasy. He would wake exhausted and bathed in sweat, his muscles aching from where he had

been trying to break out of his paralysis and lunge at the fish. The more agreeable the fish was, the more livid Fishmael became; livid and determined to mete a terrible fate on this indomitable ichthyian.

So the days passed with Fishmael below in the murky world of his bunk with this nightmare on repeat, and by nights he emerged into the silver-tainted air, full of fresh hatred. Months went by in this fashion; Mungo, Ambrosius and Stan taking turns in the crow's nest, Jerry at the wheel. When they were not aloft Ambrosius and Stan also helped out by performing various duties such as swabbing the deck, taking soundings, feeding the petrels and, at Fishmael's insistence, sharpening the harpoons every twelve hours.

Life aboard was pretty monotonous, the tot of rum at smugdown being the only highlight. Some nights, when Xiphias was full and fat, Fishmael would have them release a buoy on a rope to stern and urge them to practice darting harpoons at it. Surprisingly, Ambrosius seemed the most adept at the harpooning – something which he put down to his endless hopeful re-casts as a young fisher.

“Ye be our lead harpooner, lad,” Fishmael told him one moonful night. “Tis a great honour. Just make sure ye only weaken the fish, though. I will have the kill.”

They sailed on. They were well beyond the normal reach of fishing expeditions when increasingly they started seeing patches of weed floating in the mist, held buoyant by nodular bladders that lined the fronds, giving them an obscene, bulbous appearance. At first the crew thought nothing of it, but gradually the weed got thicker and thicker and the ship slowed to a sluggish crawl. Fishmael cursed the plants, but even in his monomania he accepted that there was little to be done – the weed stretched on as far as the horizon in front and to the sides, and there was no question of turning back. Days passed at this crawling pace, then weeks. It was difficult for the crew not to be disheartened – Fishmael's swillings had severely depleted the rum, and the herring was half gone already. Then one sun-drenched day, a cry from aloft:

“Thar she blows!”

“Curses!” shouted Fishmael from below. “You definitely see her?”

“Aye, cap'n!” yelled Ambrosius, who was on masthead duty. “A giant white tail-fin. There it is again!”

“Blast!” Fishmael cried, storming up the companionway onto the deck. He squinted in the sunlight, raising his hand to his forehead to shield his unconditioned retinas from its intense glare. It was only in such direct smuglight that it became clear to his crew that Fishmael was not in fact of a naturally swarthy complexion as they had assumed by their moonlit glances at him. No, that was just dirt; underneath the grime, it was evident that Fishmael was almost albino in his paleness, having shunned smuglight for so long. He would be furious at the suggestion, but this quality he shared with his quarry.

“Dead ahead, not more than half a kilometre!” shouted Ambrosius.

“Full speed!” shouted Fishmael from the quarterdeck.

“The petrels are going flat out,” replied Jerry. “This is the fastest we can go.”

“She's heading this way!” shouted Ambrosius.

“She mocks us!” shouted Fishmael, at the taffrail with his telescope to his left eye. “I can see her, the pallid, good-for-nothing codfish!”

The fish came closer, until she was clearly visible to the unaided eyes of all on deck. Fishmael disappeared down into his cabin and came back up with his personal harpoon, sharpened to a point of infinitesimal deadliness.

“Arrrgh, can we go no faster?”

Jerry shook his head. “I’m sorry captain. We’re carrying twenty tonnes of weed.”

“Then we shall lower the jolly boat and go after her that way. Come down from up there, Ambrosius lad, we need you. Get your harpoon and grit yer teeth, we’re going to catch us a fish!”

“Aye, cap’n!” shouted Ambrosius.

Two minutes later Ambrosius was in the jolly boat, harpoon in hand, along with Stan, Mungo and Fishmael. Jerry lowered the four of them down into the weed-strewn mist, and they pulled the throttle of the outboard petrel until the bird was flapping like the clappers. Mungo was at the front of the boat, clearing the weed out the way with the end of his harpoon, with Stan at the back trying to untangle the rudder. Despite their best efforts within minutes the jolly boat was tangled in a green mass of weed and they slowed to a crawl that was little faster than the main ship.

“Hell-fire!” cursed Fishmael. “Dart at her! Harpoon her I say!”

“But she’s too far,” said Ambrosius.

“Dart at her!” cried the manic captain.

Ambrosius shrugged, then, with a javelin-throwers technique, launched his harpoon at the fish. It was a valiant effort, but still fell a good twenty metres short.

“Ye throw like a woman! Let me try.” Fishmael threw his harpoon, but his throw was nowhere near as powerful as Ambrosius’, falling more than thirty metres short. Fishmael sank to his knees and dragged the harpoon, now attached to a mass of slimy green weed, back into the boat. He remained kneeling, staring mutely at the fish that was fifty metres and a thousand miles away. The petrel spluttered pathetically to stern and then stopped flapping. Stan looked overboard.

“Heat stroke,” he said. “She’ll be okay again if we give her some water and rest her for a day or two.”

“Choke her!” shouted Fishmael.

Stan shook his head. “No, that will do nothing. I will not senselessly strangle a perfectly good bird.”

Fishmael boiled, too angry to speak. His eyes moved to the harpoon in his hand, then to Stan.

“Begging your forgiveness, but he’s right, cap’n,” said Mungo, quickly. It was with great subtlety that his hand tightened around the shaft of his own harpoon. “That bird’s served us well, t’would be treachery to kill her for no reason. We would never catch the fish even if she were flapping full tilt anyway.”

Fishmael spoke through gritted teeth. “I never had you down as a turncoat, Mungo.”

“I am no such thing, sir. I was just giving you my honest opinion as a seasoned mist-farer. If you really want me to I’ll strangle that bird for you, but I had to raise my concern sir, just so you could know the opinion of your crew.”

Fishmael spat a black globule overboard. “I care nothing for the opinion of my crew,” he said. He turned and looked out towards the fish, which was joyfully undulating on the horizon. He looked back to Mungo. “But if I have a mutiny on my hands, then that fish will go free for sure. So leave the petrel be, if it pleases ye. That fish has eluded us for now, but our chance will come again. But bear this in mind: ye

will not kill that petrel on my orders, but mark my words, if ye so much as hesitate at darting after the fish when the moment is right, my cutlass will be thirsty for your blood – aye, thirsty for anyone's blood who joins ye as well. Ye are bound by the contract, 'tis true, by blood even, but more than that; ye are bound by my sword. My cutlass has many chinks, and she will have many more before I go down to the mist.”

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### **Chapter 30 – Asymptotic Freedom**

The fish stayed on the horizon for two more days and nights, and Fishmael had no sleep for all this time. He would stand by the foremast shrouds, looking out at his nemesis as it bled into the hated Smug, these two symbols of light and life being one in their antithesis to the tenebrous captain's deathly, black, bubonic loathing. At long last the fish sounded, and so did the captain, muttering acerbic curses as he descended into his own underworld beneath the quarterdeck.

If ever in this life you find yourself spending a lot of time below, so to speak, think of Fishmael. He shuns the light, he fights against it, rages against it and dedicates his life to extinguishing it; yet in all this fury, beneath the grime of his iniquity, he himself becomes an albino – as white as snow, as white as starlight. Hunt the thing you hate too much, and the hated thing becomes you; in the end, you will hate yourself.

Fishmael has decided to stub his toe (in the process of kicking, but stub it nonetheless) against the infinite, the ineffable. In what ways has Fishmael become like the fish? Well, they are both now muses. Fishmael the hunter, fish the hunted. Fishmael evil, fish good. Fishmael corruption, fish innocence. Fishmael hatred, fish joy. They are polar opposites, granted, but they are alike as poles. Indeed, in the same way that the asymptote could be said to be both infinitely positive and infinitely negative at the same time, and neither, so could these two agents. Because, in fact, there are not two asymptotes but one – the utmost positivity and the utmost negativity are actually a singularity, where one is nothing without the other. So too Fishmael would be nothing without the fish. And the fish nothing without Fishmael? Is this really true? It is a painful thing to conceive, but is the fish completed by its aggressor? All those billions of years ago, when the fish first swam, perhaps there was something that followed it across space to its new home. Perhaps that thing was the essence of Fishmael, conceived in the great mind of the universe from the start. And this dark conception, made all the darker by the spark of free-will inside him, was not made to hunt the fish, but *chose* to.

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### **An Interlude - Mungo's Song From The Topmast**

*“If it is your job to kill,  
Down amongst the mist and krill,  
Weigh high your anchor,  
Weigh conscience low,  
And lift your thoughtless arm to throw.*”



*For what thinks your arm of love,  
Would you make the dart a dove?  
Weigh high your anchor,  
Weigh conscience low,  
And cock your hat to him below.”*

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### **Chapter 31 – Hunger and a Roar**

You may say 'let Mungo cock his hat to his diabolic captain, for that is but a raindrop in a storm', but, when it comes down to it, a storm is made of raindrops. Besides, Mungo does not wear a cap, he wears his agaric bandanna, and he would never take it off in the sight of anyone, for he has a patch of baldness like a monk's tonsure that reveals an unsightly piece of head-cheese underneath. So don't be so lenient on this Cheddar-headed ruffian, because, despite his coarse lovableness, he is complicit in Fishmael's mission. Let your indignation run free like a wild stallion; do not throw ropes round her neck and try and saddle her, as she is running rampant for a reason. Similarly do not sympathise with Ambrosius or Stan or Jerry, for all are guilty of that atrocity of silence when asked 'Would any of ye back out of what's ahead?'

Such thoughts aside, time passed as is its habit, with dragged heels and a morose gait, crippled by boredom. The rum was the first to run out. Without the lure of inebriation, Fishmael had no motive for leaving his cabin, save for mealtimes, which he took alone in the dead of night. In this respect he did not hold back his appetites, for his monomania burnt fuel like a steam engine and required a lot of stoking with base nutrition. A month went by and six months rations were gone – the captain did not make any announcement to explain to his crew that this was the case, but instead remained locked in his cabin. When Jerry knocked on the door, then bellowed, then knocked again, there came a rumble from inside:

“See you the fish?”

“No, cap'n, but the crew want to turn back. We are out of rations.”

“Blast ye, disturb me not save for when the fish is sighted! We will not turn back – remember your contract with me, and remember on what pains you may break it. We carry on, and on... to the ends of the world we will hunt the fish!”

So it was that the crew sat about listlessly, trying to expend as little energy as possible. Hunger was now all that motivated them; the top mast was manned not to please Fishmael but to improve the prospect of catching the fish and hasten their gargantuan last supper. After a fortnight of this, shrunken stomachs cramped and moaned, their gurglings now dead, emptiness seeming to stretch in front of them like a wasteland; an emptiness that filled them with knives. There has, throughout history, been a holiness associated with fasting; here was its antithesis, here in these unsatiated stomachs. These knotted, acetic pits might as well have been full of brimstone, for they bred demons which possessed their possessors, making their cheeks hollow and eyes dead and all thoughts only of big hunks of fishy flesh, slithering gull-like down shrunken gullets. It is appropriately lowering, starvation, for it reminds the starver that they are made of crude matter, and that without it all the quicker faculties are stripped, until the bare, bleached bones of animalism are there for all to see. Like a dog with his

chew toy, Mungo took to chewing a short length of rope; this habit spread, until the whole crew were doggedly exercising their canines. More time passed.

*“If it is your job to kill,  
Down amongst the mist and krill...”*

Discordant and cracked, Mungo's trill as he came down from his shift in the crow's nest died in the ears of its listeners. Silently Jerry took his place, scaling the mast with stringy muscles standing out from sparse flesh. Dark things were happening with each person's metabolism; cannibalistic biochemical pathways were beginning to be trodden, first lightly, then with ever heavier a footfall. First went fat, then muscle, then the very marrow was savagely chewed. Even the nature of the spirit is called into question by such extremes, as it is eroded by something as simple and terrible as hunger.

Without the captain there to enforce discipline, the skeleton crew ate the petrels' rations, then, in an admission of hopelessness, the petrels themselves; they were left drifting on the foggy currents, knowing now that even if they spied the fish they would have no means of pursuing her. Still, the topmast was manned, for the mind works in strange ways and, even though all rational hope is gone, some irrational spark may remain.

It was in this driftwood-like state that Jerry hailed from the topmast the presence of the fish with a weak cry that was half a crow's squawk, half a dying man's anger. “Thar, thar on the horizon, thar she blows!”

In a flash Fishmael was on deck, blinking in the midday Smug. His paunch was gone, his face was gaunt, but those eyes, those obsidian, vulture eyes that caught the light like diamonds, they were unchanged in their elemental extremism.

“Flog that petrel!” screamed Fishmael.

There was silence.

“To the pits with ye, flog that petrel!”

“There was no more fish to feed the petrel. It's dead,” Jerry said. It may not have been the whole of the truth, but it was not quite a lie.

“Blast!” Fishmael ran to fore and then, with surprising nimbleness, ran out along the bowsprit until he was as near as possible to the fish without jumping overboard. He stood there shaking his fist at the white shape now just visible with the naked eye.

“She comes towards us and then stays just within sight, the scallion!”

“What would you have us do, cap'n?” asked Jerry.

“I would have ye get out and flap your arms if I thought I could make a petrel of ye. Hellfire! Curses! Blast!” Fishmael walked back along the bowsprit and jumped down onto the deck. “You wouldn't have ate my petrels, now, would ye?”

Silence.

“Ye mutinous scurvy hounds, ye have deliberately foiled the mission you were bound to on oath! All manner of curses on y' heads!” Fishmael drew his cutlass, spittle flecking his red lips like cream on strawberries. “Well, ye pustules, what will it be? Shall I carve ye for your treachery?”

Nobody spoke, but fists clenched. Then Fishmael shook his head and sheathed his cutlass once more in his belt. “T'would be too easy for you. Why should you have such an easy end whilst I am left here to die in the throes of agony? No, I will let hunger work her ways on ye, 'tis much more fitting; for it was your bellies that drove you to treachery and it will be your bellies that punish you for it.” Then Fishmael looked out once more to the horizon where the fish frolicked. “All cordiality between

us is gone, I know this, but I will make one more order. Keep it for your own sake, not for mine. My order is this: keep those harpoons sharp as sixpence, for who knows, the fish may come to gloat and then we can dart at it. Think of the fry-up we can have then, me mutinous hearties. Now I will be fore with my eyeglass, watching the fish, aye, talking to it a little maybe, trying to coax it nearer with every incantation I know. Do not disturb me in my arts, else there will be more than curses.” Fishmael's hand rested on his cutlass hilt. “Now stop staring at me so. You all knew what you were getting yourselves in for when you shipped with me. Nobody on this ship is innocent.”

With that, Fishmael went fore and, with back to his crew, put the telescope to his eye and focused intently on the fish. How quickly the smuglight reflected off the fish and travelled to this lens, quicker than thought this archetypal image of fishiness travelled over the mists to refract through glass and sit large and proud on Fishmael's retina. Hours passed. What a shame Fishmael didn't have an in-built screen-saver, for that image of the fish was, minute by minute, being etched on the back of his eye. But what other use for that eye now, other than to receive this image? Death was near for the fishless crew, so why not burn this image onto the back of Fishmael's retina for the rest of his short life? So the lithographic vigil continued.

Time passed. The crew muttered amongst themselves about Fishmael, his madness and the cursed nature of their voyage, yet none had the courage to go and confront Fishmael. What would be the use? They had no means of propulsion, so they could not turn back for the City even if Fishmael were to give his consent. As the boat drifted listlessly, so too did the crew, in and out of consciousness and caring. The demonic captain stood erect in the bow, like some grotesque statue, eyeglass trained on the fish. From time to time Mungo would sing, then when he had not the energy to sing he would whistle, then when he had not the energy to whistle he would hum, then he fell back into silence. As the days and nights passed, all hope fled.

“This silence is playing tricks with my head,” said Mungo one gibbous night. “I could have sworn I heard a rushing noise, as if we were travelling through the mist. But here we stand, dead as a doornail.”

Xiphias was romping out obesely over the skinny sailors, bathing everything in silver and lead. Since they had sighted the fish, nobody had been up the topmast. Everyone but Mungo and the captain was asleep.

“There, a roaring sound. Maybe I'm going mad for want of fish – I've heard that people who go without piscoline lose their sanity so. But with all my lugholes' might I'd swear I could hear it, like a waterfall. Hey, Jerry.” Mungo prodded Jerry, who stirred slightly.

“What? I was filling my face with fish fingers in my fancy, Mungo. Let me back to my dreams.”

“But can't you hear it?”

“Hear what? I can only hear a doomed buffoon disturbing me from my only refuge of sleep.”

“Cock your ear, please Jerry. The silence is too loud!”

Jerry sighed, then he listened. “I can't tell if its my head or not,” he said dismissively.

“Two people can't both hear the same thing in their head,” said Mungo. “Here, Ambrosius, Stan,” he nudged them. “Strain yer lugs and listen. Can you hear that rushing sound?”

Ambrosius looked around blearily. “Yes, just about,” he said after a moments hesitation.

Stan was awake now too. “Yes. It's getting louder.”

“What in the name of cod can it be?” asked Mungo. “It sure ain't the wind in the shrouds; I've grown up with that all my life and it has never made such a noise. Why, I can feel the vibrations through the planks. Whatever is making that sound is powerful, though far off yet.”

Jerry groaned. “Who has the strength to climb the mast to find out what it is? Any takers?”

Nobody volunteered.

“I knew it. It's me again then,” he said. He struggled to his feet unsteadily. It was like watching a newly born foal taking its first steps – his wasted legs looked as though they would snap at any point. “Watch this skeleton climb,” he said with a deathly grin. He hobbled over to the main mast and took a deep breath, before starting his painful ascent. Only a sailor with a lifetime's experience of masthead duty could scale this wooden monolith in Jerry's kitten-weak condition. When he got to the crow's nest he collapsed against its rail.

“What can you see?” hailed Ambrosius from below.

“Nothing,” shouted Jerry. “There's just mist, as far as the eye can see. It looks like my climb was a waste of... wait... the horizon... must be my eyes... no, definitely...”

“What?” shouted Ambrosius.

“There's a dip on the horizon, like... sort of like a saucer, only vast... must be a mile or more across! Have ye heard the like of it Mungo?”

“I'm stumped,” replied his crewmate from below. “Like a saucer you say?”

“Aye, and the roaring must be coming from it. Say, Mungo, you've seen those marks on maps saying 'thar be monsters'. You give them much credence?”

“Not a jot – not until now, maybe. That said, I'm quite happy with being eaten if it will speed up my end, har, har.” Mungo's laugh was pitiful, but such a brave attempt at jollity showed his inner strength.

Fishmael turned to them now. “Mates, ye hear that roar?”

“So we're you're mates now, Fishmael?” asked Mungo. “No, we are mutineers now, good and proper.”

“Come now, ye would baulk at my little joke? I was pulling yer legs when I called ye treacherous. Never so literally could we all be in the same boat, mates. Tell me I'm not going mad and that ye can hear that roar.”

“Aye, there's a roar, but you are mad as well. And if it's a monster then we'll feed you to it first for getting us into this mess, mark my words.”

Fishmael put up his hand. “You feel a breeze?”

Mungo looked askance, then put up his hand as well. “Aye,” he said after a while, “I feel it. What of it?”

“Twas dead still a minute ago,” said Fishmael. “Now there's a breeze. But it feels like no natural breeze. It doesn't come in gusts, but keeps dead steady.”

“I can feel it on my face,” said Ambrosius. “It's almost as if we were moving.”

“Aye,” said Mungo, his normally hearty voice cracked around the edges with a preternatural fear. “I have a feeling in the pit of my stomach like we're picking up speed. What manner of magic is this that draws us forward?”

“Look at the moon,” said Fishmael. “She's drawing to the left. That means we're turning too.”

“We're being taken over by ghosts!” said Mungo in a whisper. “Cod have mercy on us all!”

“Nonsense,” said Ambrosius. “Now let's look at this logically. We're accelerating, whilst turning at the same time. There is a saucer shaped dip on the horizon. Now saucers are circular. I reckon if we're accelerating and turning at the same time it's a fair bet we're on a circular course. I reckon that saucer is dragging us round...”

“Aye!” cried Mungo. “Now I know – I've heard of such a thing before; we're heading for the maelstrom!”

Jerry drew in breath over his teeth. Fishmael ran to the bowsprit and looked out. All manner of flotsam and jetsam studded the mist, carried on by the current.

“What's a maelstrom?” asked Ambrosius.

“I've heard of it, too” said Stan. “It's a giant whirlpool they say travels the world, sucking down ships to their death. Some say it's as old as Expiscor and is where the oceans are stirred to keep the mists even. I always thought it was an old sailors' story and nothing more.”

“Haha!” cried Fishmael from his position fore. “Then there is hope for us yet! Look, the fish is caught up in the current; she's too close now to swim free!”

“It's true!” shouted Jerry from the topmast. “She's right on the edge of it, going round and round like us.”

“Bless my barnacles!” Shouted Fishmael. “If she keeps swimming against the current as she is doing, then she'll move slower towards the centre than us. We'll catch her yet!”

“Aye, and be dashed to pieces a couple of minutes later,” said Mungo, hands on head.

“We're picking up speed pretty fast now,” said Ambrosius. “I can feel it in my stomach.”

“Can't we weigh anchor and try and stop ourselves?” suggested Stan.

“Never!” cried Fishmael. “We shall be on the fish in minutes. I shall not have my kill taken from me by some whirlpool.”

“Don't listen to him,” said Mungo. “Here, help me with the capstan and we'll heave the anchor down.”

Mungo, Stan and Ambrosius rushed over to the great wheel and started to turn it, lowering the huge metal anchor down into the mist. Fishmael turned purple.

“Ye treacherous wretches! Stop, I tell ye, we are nearly on the fish!”

The crew continued lowering anchor.

Fishmael drew his cutlass, but hesitated. He knew he could not take on three men, even with a weapon and an evil will. Besides, he still had it in his mind to lower for the fish when he was closer, and that required someone else to lower the jolly boat. His dark mind worked fast and, before his crew could notice, he ran over to where the anchor rope was paying out over the side.

“This ship shall not be stopped!” he yelled, and brought down his razor-sharp cutlass on the rope. There was a whipping noise as the taut fibres snapped and the

anchor plunged down into the mist, rope streaming out behind it like a flagellum. The crew were jerked to the floor by the sudden release of tension on the capstan.

“You crazy old rat, you've just severed our only hope of surviving,” roared Mungo, picking himself up off the deck.

“Have not a shred of doubt, Mungo, we are hell-bound, and we shall pay the underworld's boatman with this fish's blood! Now make ready the jolly boat and grab ye harpoons. We lower for the fish.”

Mungo, Ambrosius and Stan were on their feet now.

“You think we would set out in the same boat as you, Fishmael? You are on your own.”

“Blast ye!” shouted Fishmael. “Then if ye want rid of me, lower me alone and I will go after the fish myself. Perhaps it is best that I alone am her nemesis.”

The crewmen hesitated. They wanted rid of Fishmael, it is true, but now they were about to meet their end they had each become urgent philosophers and theologians. Perhaps helping some crazy captain kill the last embodiment of goodness was not such a sensible final act, after all.

“None of ye will help me?” bawled the captain.

“No,” said Stan. “You're on your own.”

Fishmael shuddered with rage. Up above dark clouds were gathering, as though they too were being sucked towards the vortex. The moon was temporarily hidden, but a pale light still bathed the ship, only this time coming up from the mist below. The small phosphorescent creatures in the vapour were being agitated by the swirling torrents of mist, and, in their distress, they were glowing softly just as they did in the wake of the ship. There was a flash and thunder pealed from above, cutting out a particularly foul curse from Fishmael.

“Very well then, ye scumbuckets,” said Fishmael. “I shall make my own chances.” In a trice he went below and emerged again with his harpoon gleaming in the moonlight. He tested the edge with his finger, which testified sharpness by yielding forth a droplet of blood, black in the moonlight. Fishmael laughed, and with that the captain jumped into the jolly boat and, drawing his cutlass, slashed the ropes that held it in place.

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## **Chapter 32 – Into the Maelstrom**

The jolly boat fell into the mist and was swamped by the greenish-white foam before the swim-bladder buoyancy tanks, stimulated by the vapour, kicked in and brought the boat bobbing to the surface. Everything was slanted. The roar now was deafening and Fishmael, being light and easily carried along by the current, was carried ahead of the main ship.

“Here, fishy fish!” was his cry as he tied the end of his harpoon rope to one of the thwarts. He turned to stare the fish, now swirling round and round on the ever-steepening sea, his eyes rolling in nystagmus like a drunk as he followed his prey. “I am so happy to see you again, my very own worst enemy. Can you see my harpoon? I will pierce your belly-button for you, but I have no diamond stud to put in it.”

From the deck, Mungo, Stan and Ambrosius watched, and Jerry called out from the topmast.

“He's madder than I thought! See how he rushes towards his own fate, just because he thinks he can have revenge on the fish first.”

“Aye, har, har, he's batty all right. But what about us sane 'uns. We're as doomed as he is - I'd give us ten minutes more o' this mortal coil and then we're at the centre of this thing and dashed on the mistbed for sure.”

“We might live yet,” said Ambrosius. “Does anyone know where this thing goes?”

“The abyss, and the rocks at the bottom of it. That's our fate,” said Mungo.

“Well, I'm not giving up that easily. Here, lash yourselves to something that'll float. Perhaps it will just whirl us round and throw us out in a different direction.”

“Har, har, no chance of that but there's nothing to loose by trying. I'll get some rope.”

Mungo disappeared below and came out carrying some lengths of spare rope. “Here you go, lash your bones to a barrel or stave, that way your skeleton will be bobbing about merrily for the next hundred years. Har, har, what a glamorous grave!”

Stan and Ambrosius did not find such dark humour amusing. They lashed themselves to thwarts and Mungo lashed himself to a barrel.

“Here, Jerry, you still alive up there?” shouted Mungo.

“Aye,” replied the lofty sailor. “But not for much longer.”

“You got any rope up there?”

“No, but I reckon if I brace myself against the sides of the crow's nest it'll take a crowbar to shift me. I'll be like a bass in a barrel.”

“Har, har. Well, say your prayers gentlemen, and watch your last spectacle, for that diabolic old Fishmael is about to launch a dart at the fish.”

The crew's attention was directed once more into the maelstrom, where Fishmael was just twenty metres or so from the leviathanic bass. There was no terror in the eyes of the fish: she appeared to be enjoying every minute of her perilous descent. There was even a vague smile on her fishy lips, in sharp contrast to the manic sneer on the captain's face. Fishmael lobbed the harpoon at the fish, but he was weak with hunger and it fell short, disappearing down into the mist to one side until the rope caught tight. Fishmael hauled the harpoon back on board, clearly exhausted by the effort but driven by the hatred that burned in his boiler rooms. He sank to his knees, genuflect before the fish, and steadied himself for another throw. Lightning flashed and the harpoon shot from an arm that seemed moved by Thor himself. And then it came on like a seizure, an ichthyian ictus – the Fish was struck, just below the gill. She bucked and whinnied in pain.

“The damned scumbag, he's got her,” said Ambrosius, onboard the ship. “It's not right.”

And it wasn't. The moment the fish was speared the heavens opened and sheets of rain lashed down, as if to wash the wound. Fishmael's jolly boat, tiny in comparison to the house-sized fish, skittered across the waves as she tried to propel herself away, the rope from the harpoon pinging as it took the strain.

“Well, at least he'll be carried to his death,” said Stan. “The fish has changed tack – she's going with the current now, not against it. He'll be at the centre of the whirlpool in no time.”

Rain quested down into the heart of the vortex, churning the mist into a frothing broth that glowed and fizzed angrily. Now came another fork of lightning, only this time not from above: the mist below, churned by the maelstrom, had built up such a charge that electricity was arcing and snaking about in its funnel. A zap of

illumination glinted off something metallic protruding from the fish's lower lip like a trendy piercing – Ambrosius' jaw fell open as he recognised the hook as the very same one he had used in his year-long fishathon. He had unwittingly come close to landing the fish himself.

“Har, har, like the jaws of hell!” cried Mungo, as another fork of energy lit up the vortex.

Ambrosius gulped, as did Stan. Up in the topmast, Jerry swayed about alarmingly as the ship leaned from one side to another. He had his eyes closed and was trying to think nice, non-fatal thoughts.

*“Onward ichthyian soldiers,*

*Marching off to trawl...”*

Mungo was doing his best to keep everyone's spirits up, but his song was all but drowned out by the crash and howl of the tempest and the boom of the vortex, which sent vibrations up through the boards and made it seem as if the very world were in a washing machine.

Down in the maelstrom, Fishmael was cackling like a demon, savouring every tremble of the fish's thrashings through the line, as if her pain were nectar dripping down a style. Here, for the watching crew to witness, was the oldest battle known; the battle between good and evil; weak, ethereal, suffering good and strong, corporeal, revelling evil.

The fish thrashed frantically, flipping feistily, flopping ferociously, flordily fighting for freedom from the harpoon. Lightning was above, lightning was below, the mist was whipped up into a complex broth by rain, wind and electricity. Every movement of the frightened fish's tail-fin seemed to rouse the mist up into new heights of chaos; a witches cauldron could not be more arcane, more enchanted with potency. And then something happened: the fish's blood, washed down by the rain, hit the eye of the maelstrom. Every fork of electricity was suddenly a pulsing vein of some great unfathomable being, the rain his sweat and tears, the wind his breath. Of course, the maelstrom was confined by the laws of physics, but it was being extremely creative with them. Peculiar forms flashed and vanished in the vortex, unruly rune-like bolts of electricity, wailing phantoms of light, guttural ululations that made the sailors tremble; all save Fishmael, who was focused only on the fish. With the blood of the fish, the vortex was given some bizarre spirit of life. Like a great cyclops opening its eye for the first time, a great iris of black opened at the heart of the whirlpool.

“We're heading straight for it!” screamed Ambrosius, trembling uncontrollably on the mist-swamped deck of the main ship, lashed and clinging to the thwart on which rested his last chances of further life. How strange that, in an emergency, we put faith in small objects – a safety line, a helmet, a button marked “STOP” – and suddenly they symbolise our hope in all its material essence. So it was that the sailors were bound to their ship, their island, their wooden, half-stove, sinking, diving, rolling, pitching, part-swamped hope, bound to it for dear life, bound to it for want of anything better. Somewhere in each of them there was some spark, some tiny, faltering spark that urged them to hang in there, for surely the universe is not so cruel a place as to snatch their beloved perspective from them so soon, when they had so much more to learn. For if there is a good higher power, then the lives of the sailors may be preserved in goodness, to allow them to live a full and happy life. If, on the other hand, there is an evil higher power, then the lives of the sailors would surely



again be preserved, for the world is full of suffering and they would be stuck on it for another few decades. But then, there is the chance that there is a higher power who is brutally indifferent to the plight of mere mortals, or there is no higher power at all, in which case these poor sailors might as well swallow their tongues.

Never closer were such higher issues to these lowly mariners. Round and round their heads their incantations went, as round and round the whirlpool they went went, faster and faster. The ship's deck was now horizontal, and they were glad of their lashings. The main ship, Fishmael and the fish were now very close together, being forced into an ever-smaller circle by the vortex. The fish bucked and brayed, but she could not shake the cruel harpoon from its side. Then, for a second, a peculiar, victorious look crossed over the fish's face, as if her pain had merely been an act. Then, whipping her lissome body round, she swam with all her might against the current. Within a minute she had crossed the bow of the main ship, the line still projecting out from her side and back into the jolly boat, where Fishmael raved. The fish swam round the main ship, bringing the harpoon line round the mast. Fishmael hurled obscenities from his puny vessel, but he was powerless to stop the fish from having its way – he was left as purple and pointless as a plum. Round and round the mast the fish swam, until the harpoon line was well and truly secured to the mainmast. Fish can't laugh. This is true. However, they can open their mouths in a wide grin and rock from side to side a little so as to suggest mirth. The fish did this, and then, with one joyous flip of her tail, jumped clean out the mist. She described a perfect parabola through the air, then flopped bodily into the black iris in the heart of the maelstrom, whereupon she promptly disappeared in a flash of light and a smell of peppermint.

“Pull us in, do ye,” cried Fishmael. “Very well, I'll follow ye fishy, follow ye to the ends of this globe and beyond – into the heart of darkness I'll descend, and then I'll strike a light, puff on my pipe to guide me and slake my cutlass with ye blood!”

With that, the jolly boat was pulled into the dark disc in the middle of the vortex and vanished.

“Er...” said Stan.

“Er...” said Ambrosius.

“Er...” said Mungo.

“Er...” said Jerry.

Er indeed.

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### **Chapter 33– Er...**

So watch open-mouthed as the rope tightens and drags the main ship towards the black dilation at the heart of the maelstrom. Listen as the brave or reckless mariners - Ambrosius, Stan, Jerry, Mungo - give vent to what they think are their final ellipses of bemused terror. What a stupid last word “Er...”, but it must be a very common one. The man who looks up to see the grand piano falling on him says “Er...”, the man who notices the boulder rolling down the hill towards him says “Er...”, the man who hears the gallows drums and feels the rope around his neck says “Er...”, as if this simple sound is such a good indicator of a following sentence that the universe must surely wait for a finish. The meaning of “Er...” is the same across all Expiscorean cultures, it is true, but more than that consider this: would a Piscador, upon meeting a bizarre

looking alien with three heads and tentacles for eyes, say “Er...” and instantly be understood? It is a reasonable guess to say 'yes'. So perhaps it is appropriate that such an utterance was all the doomed sailors could extol before their ship was dragged into the void with a pop and the aforementioned smell of peppermint.

The thinness of the remaining part of this book as you hold it between your thumb and forefinger, ready to turn this last page and stare at the unashamed advert for the next part in this trilogy, gives away the sad truth that there is no room to complete this story in this volume. However, think back over what we have read. We have read of a world at the end of its resources. We have read of a foiled love turning a hero into a villain. We hear of madness breeding power; and how easily good men are driven to follow this power because of desperate circumstances. We have read of people starving and nothing being done to stop it. Above all we have heard of hope, and its frailty.

So please, if you will, buy the next book in this series. In it you will see some familiar characters and circumstances – doubly familiar, for not only have they their roots at in this first book, but their types have also sung and danced on our own planet Earth.

I leave you then with one final scene. The Smug, in all its conceited glory, is just rising over the Hundred Boughs. Sonorous birdsong is all there is to be heard, a poetry of twittering, unpretentious stanzas, a ballad, a litaney, a war against silence. For there is only silence in death, and that is always something to be raged against; the only time when all meekness is enemy and aggressor. Sing out, birds, for death and silence are close. Lying on the floor of her hut, too weak to move, is Sunbeam Lightning, her plain face haggard and taut, her skeleton flesh tight around her frame. She doesn't have long. She is the personification of Expiscor. For its populace are all hooked on one thing or another, or rather lower thier hooks for their vices, for it is not the fault of the vice but of the indulger. They don't have long, either. Run quick, fisher and man, to your box of things, and extricate from there some ingenious contrivance with which to make fishful once more the mists. They have assumed the infiniteness of the fish for too long, and now ahead lies the vortex, the unknown. Whatever you do, don't become a Fishmael; don't even ship with him. In mad times, madness can have a certain magnetism, but if you must rave then rave against the tyranny of this surrogate righteousness. Behold now Sunbeam and don't forget – our love can die in all its physicality along with us, leaving only a henge of bones in the mist, a calcareous temple for the ants to explore. Sunbeam's tidal chest rises and falls painfully; the world breathes in much the same way, in troubled gasps of beauty followed with long exhalations of utmost agony. Ride out these waves, you Piscador, you sailor, you fisher of men, and remember that a calm sea doesn't make for an experienced mariner. Until next time, Expiscor bids you...

FAREWELL

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About the Author:

A passionate writer, Fish Stocks Limited is my first venture into the world of eBooks. Although this is only my third novel, I have considerable experience of writing as part of my university course. I also have received payment from Dailey

Swan Publishing for a number of short stories to go in their anthology and had short stories published in MediaVirus magazine (as editors pick) and in The Absent Willow Review magazine.

For other books check out my author profile on:  
<http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/MichaelSummers>

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[fishstockslimited@hotmail.com](mailto:fishstockslimited@hotmail.com)