

The Golden Age

A Collection of Short Stories by Conor Gunn

Dedicated to my family and friends for supporting my love of writing.

Thank you to my supervisor, Kit Fryatt, for guiding me through this process, and Tim

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Story Synopsis

The *Golden Age* is a series of interconnected short stories that catalogue the journey of intrepid explorer James Hawkins and a group of the cheapest sailors money can just about afford as they journey out into the sea to discover the Secret of the World, whether the world is ready to hear it or not.

Taking place in an undefined time period of earth, a planet-scale event has led to a large gap in recorded history. The societies of earth have now finally begun to reform into a new, more fantasy-focused society, where myth and legend once again ignite great ventures of discovery.

The greatest discovery of all lies at the Centre of the known world, the midpoint of the Eurasian continent, but the way is guarded. A sprawling sea now sits in the centre of the continent filled with vicious mountain peaks, making traversal near-impossible, radiating out from the former Kazakhstan city of Druzbha with a radius of 1,373 kilometers. However, legends tell of a group of nine explorers who made the perilous journey and returned home, each marking a part of the path on their tombs. After each of their tombs are discovered, detailing the path through the sea, many embark upon the journey to try to discover the great secret.

James learned from his grandfather at an early age that the greatest weapon of mankind is not blade, nor bullet, nor bomb, but knowledge, and that true power should only come to those capable of wielding it.

The story of the *Golden Age* begins with a quick introduction to the world where an unknown global event has left the world divided and isolated and a void exists in history – a period of time not recorded – no one knowing how long it was. In this new world, many abnormalities, supernatural phenomena dot what is known as the Old World – the Eurasian continent.

The story follows James Hawkins, a young man with the dream of discovering the ultimate secret of the world – The Centre. After the passing of his grandfather, he joins with the prodigy navigator Marco Ricci and some of Marco's crew to form the crew of the *Boundless Hawk* and set out and begin the journey to the Centre.

In their journey to reach the Centre, the crew encounter many of the famed phenomena of their world such as the Floating Island of Avalon that hovers above their home of Angleland, and the roaming storm cloud of the Wildhunt. Their path travels down below and around the Iberian Peninsula, through the glass sea of Sarahn, through the shattered warring isles of the Sun and Moon Clans of Macedon and a mysterious living wave, and into another region of warring clans, Raybya. The crew help to quell the war between two of the largest warring clans and bring the nation on the path to peace. For this, they are rewarded with a large chest of gold and the rank of nobility in Raybya. Once they leave Raybya, they travel down along the African coast to the island of Madisgar. There they hear the tale of the Ferryman who guards the Centre. From Madisgar, they travel to the twin islands of Indin, an alliance of Srahlanka and what remains of the Indian Subcontinent. There, after an encounter with a large sea serpent, they hear more of the legend of the Ferryman. They hear that those who travel to the Centre return saying they were chased out, but many never came back at all.

Upon leaving Indin, the crew make their final journey to the Centre. Once they reach their destination on the map left by the Nine Explorers, they find nothing. Suddenly, they encounter the dreaded, ghostly, Ferryman and his fleet. After making a daring escape, they reach the Centre where they encounter a massive stone island with a single rock corridor entrance. Passing through, the crew experience many strange encounters and soon meet with a giant stone sphere. Deep within the stone sphere, they notice that gravity is weaker there. They also find a strange

well upon a raised platform. On inspection, a strange lifeform rises out from it. After speaking with the lifeform, they discover the being to be the possible source of the gap in history.

Learning that the being may have another half of itself elsewhere and with the chance to learn more about their lost history, the crew are forced to make a decision that would decide the fate of the world.

We jump forward in time to when another crew reaches the Centre. However, when they get to the well, there is nothing but a collection of gold and a note from the *Boundless Hawk* crew saying to not let the Golden Age die. We then meet the crew of the *Boundless Hawk* as they make their way to a place known as the New World to learn about their lost history.

The Golden Age

The current year differs from country to country these days. Depending on where you are, the year is based on when a new kingdom rose. Or it's when we started recording history again. Or maybe, it is based on some arbitrary concept to attach some sense of logic to a world that has long been devoid of it. This is Earth but not as it once was. It may be an alternate timeline, or even a future, or some other science fiction trope. But, for the residents of this world, it is very real.

We shall use the Yan Empire's calendar, as that is the one that dates back the furthest. So, by that logic, it currently stands as the year 1278 PV – Post Void. That 'Post Void' is in reference to the period after the Old World fell and this one arose from its ashes. No one truly knows what happened during that period, or what happened to change the world to what it is now. Vague remnants of the old world are still known; names of countries, fragments of language. However, detailed accounts of ancient history and even country borders are still topics of much debate. The Yan Empire, while not the oldest empire in the world, was the first to keep an extensive archive of written records on their history, and the history of their neighbors when they weren't at war with them. The Yan Empire is known throughout the civilised world as the Burning Spear, or the Infernal Armies. As Yan translates to 'fire', or 'flame'. It is said that the first Yan emperor was capable of manipulating the very flames that lit the torches of the small kingdom. Making them *'dance to his very will or ensnare bandits as if they were his own pet serpents to command.'*

However, none know if this is true, and the first Yan emperor died many centuries ago in 50PV alongside many other warriors in a great war. Many have proposed that this 'great war' may have been what made the world this way. I assume you have heard of *Ragnarök*? The ancient Norse apocalyptic myth. A great battle between all the gods that is to decide the fate of the universe? Well, many cultures have a similar idea, and some believe that a battle much like those

myths occurred on earth and forever changed our world. However, the timelines are difficult to line up, and with the world in the divided, decrepit state it is in, many focus more on surviving, rather than learning.

For now, let's focus on something simple. A new age is brewing in the old world, *The Golden Age* they call it. An age in which people are finally branching out to travel across the world, not in the name of war, but in the name of adventure and exploration. And what sparked this new age, you ask? The same thing that ignites the flames of curiosity and swells the chest of every hardy dreamer who craves to know the unknowable – a legend.

It is said that at the Centre of the known world, the key to everything rests. At the border between what used to be the Old World Empire of Yan and the much smaller kingdom of Kazakh the explanation as to what occurred in that gap in history waits for any who wish to find it.

However, the path is perilous. The world we live in is quite insular. Large masses of sea and land lay undiscovered and unknown to us. Ancient maps still exist of the old world, but they can no longer be relied upon. Whatever happened in the past not only changed our societies, but also changed the landscape itself. As far as the people of this world know, approximately half of the ancient empire that made up the Yan territory has been completely shattered, fragmented; where once land stretched for hundreds of miles without interruption now a raging sea rules and hides the secrets of the past deep within its murky depths. Many ships have tried to traverse the water but numerous tall, wall-like islands block the path for any ship and smaller mounds lie hidden below the surface waiting to tear the ships of the unwary with their jagged spires. Through conversing with other nations over the centuries, it has been found that from the centre of the Old World, radiating out in a perfect circle from that point on the border, the once solid continent has been terraformed into a sea-scape filled with numerous rocky, mountainous islands. Many

explorers before this *Golden Age* sought to find what was at the Centre, but they never returned, supposedly dying in the unholy rapids of the Centre.

'But then what started this Golden Age? What was it that ignited the flames of curiosity? What caused the swelling of chests of those hardy dreamers to know the unknowable?' I am sure you are asking. Well, this Centre has been common knowledge for some time, so surely there must have been some other legend that sparked all this exploring? It is said that at some point in the fourth century PV, a group of explorers succeeded in their journey to the Centre. It is said that nine explorers from nine nations banded together and sailed a mighty ship deep within the raging Centre-seas. And they made it to the Centre and then returned home safe.

No-one knows what they found, and the sailors have refused to talk, but rumour and speculation still follow their exploits. Some say they discovered the secret of immortality, some that they returned with their ship's hold bulging with treasure. The truth, though, was never discovered. All the sailors did eventually die, though they lived long lives and, though they never worked another day in their lives, they did not seem to suffer any hardship, though they lived humble lives. Though they never said what it was that they saw at the Centre, they promised to inscribe the path they took in different parts on each of their tombs so that future explorers could find the Secret of the World for themselves. And for many centuries this was considered mere myth, until recently when explorers found the grave of one of the fabled explorers, Kukai, deep in Mt. Koya alongside a tall stone tablet about twenty feet tall with inscribed instructions of how to pass through the first ninth of the Path to the Centre. Thus, sailors and adventurers far and wide began their search for the remaining graves. Some attempted to go ahead on the journey with just the first ninth, but quickly met with a watery grave.

And so, that is how the *Golden Age* began. A simple myth that entranced the hearts and minds of so many with the promise to unveil the greatest secret of the modern age. And on completion of that journey, who knows what kind of future lies in wait for those who succeed? I ask you now to join me as we take our first steps into a new world and a new *Golden Age*.

About James Hawkins

'The greatest weapon ever known in humankind's history, James, has never been blade, or bullet, nor bomb. Throughout all known history, and the void bisecting us from our own legacy deep into the primordial prehistory of the planet, one constant has allowed us to stand victorious against time, nature and even our own people when nations clash. Do you remember what that is, James? I say it quite often. It is knowledge, James. Knowledge is the greatest, and most destructive weapon in humankind's history'

Those were the words young James Hawkins had remembered from his grandfather, Isaac, from so many years ago. Isaac had been an explorer in the pre-Golden Age, and now James had taken it upon himself to continue his grandfather's legacy as the Golden Age began.

James was a young man of twenty-two, dark skinned with curly black hair. He had been born in a small port town on the East coast of Angleland and would, each and every day, watch the ships go in and out, wondering endlessly about what kind of adventures they would go on. Legends say that the places become more and more supernatural the closer you got to the Centre, and James wanted to see them all. He had books and books and books on people's stories of what they had seen out at sea. From the glass desert of the Sarahn, to the imposing floating Alps mountain range in Switzer. James believed it his goal in life to go and discover everything he could. However, ships were expensive. As were crews. Living on the small island of Angleland,

there were not many great wonders to see besides the floating moving island of Avalon that circled the country, but that had already been completely explored. There was nothing new.

Or at least that *was* the case until, on the other side of the known world, the grave of Kuaki, one of the nine legendary explorers, was discovered deep in the mountains. His tomb marked a small section of the path to the Centre of the world. Thus, throngs of ships, sloops and sailors spread out into the sea to find more of these tombs. But yet, James could still not join them. In the face of a new horizon of discoveries, the very adventure he sought from a young age, he was left behind. In time, his drive for adventure and discovery grew as weak as his grandfather, and soon James took to taking care of him full-time in their home, watching the ships come in and out of port. Every few weeks, he would hear of how they had found the tomb of the explorer Fionn Mac Cumhaill in Ireland, or how they found Tamar of Georgia asleep in a golden coffin. One by one, the tombs were found, and the path was drawn and published by newspapers around the known world. Thus, the second half of the Golden Age began – the journey to the Centre.

James had grown jaded to the world of exploration and adventuring by now, though. His grandfather was weak and grew weaker by the day. At night, before putting his grandfather to sleep, James would hear stories of his travels around the known world. Isaac would tell these tales as a way to cheer his grandson up, but it only proved to sadden him more. Though James had all but given up on his dream of adventuring on the high seas, he still kept a printed version of the path to the Centre pinned to the wall next to the window that looked out over the docks. Throughout the day, he studied the path. It was intricate. And very risky. Only the most experienced of sailors could make it. Many ships would return to port, finding the seas to be too difficult to navigate. For those that did not return, it was speculation as to whether or not they reached the Centre, or simply reached too close to the sun and now lay deep in the abyssal pits of

the dark ocean. James had come to learn exactly which ships would not return from their voyage based on their class. Isaac had taught him quite a bit about ships and sailing over the years. By reading the path, James knew that a smaller ship, with a tight crew, say maybe nine people, was best suited for the journey. A brigandine, or a sloop was better suited than say a massive galleon with a crew of two hundred. The larger ships simply wouldn't have the maneuverability to dodge the many jutting rocks, and they certainly didn't have the size needed. Some guessed that the sheer endurance of a large ship's hull would be enough to tough it out, but sailing is never about brute force. It is a science.

It was on a cold Thursday morning, during his weekly shopping run, that James saw the HMS Discovery, a galleon, make its final preparations before leaving port. The final few crates of supplies were being hauled onto the lower decks. Probably too many, James thought. *'They'd probably weigh the ship down in those tight corners.'* The ship's Captain was a rich man. Sir Ronald Lionhart of the Western Seas was his full title. A title that had been given after finding three of the tombs on the west side of the known world. He wore an ornate red coat with gold trimmings. A decal of a roaring lion had been sewn onto the back in gold thread. He had a long ginger beard tied into an array of braids.

"What have we to fear on this journey?" The Captain gave a hearty laugh as he stepped off the gangplank and onto the dock, followed by a much shorter man with brown hair parted in the middle and glasses with large round rims. The shorter man frantically adjusted his suspenders as he followed the Captain onto the dock.

"Uh, well, uh, sir-sir!" The shorter man stuttered. "I-I just don't think that the Discovery is suited for this-this-this, uh, this journey... sir... Captain." He tried to explain, feeling nervous with every word. "Sir." He finally finished his sentence.

“Marco.” The Captain began with a heavy slap to Marco’s back. “I’ve sailed the Discovery across the English seas, down the coast of Iberia and through the glass seas! There is no journey she can’t face.”

“Well, that’s-that’s-that’s the thing, Captain, I think that there may, uh, may be.” He paused. “A journey! May be a journey that the ship can’t face.”

“Marco!” The Captain exclaimed. “You worry too much!” He stopped at a T-section of the docks.” Now, I have to go give a speech at the town square and mark the beginning of our legendary voyage!” He pumped his fist in triumph prematurely. “Perhaps they’ll give me an award, or maybe a bench? Or, maybe a fountain, I don’t know, but I’m excited.” And with that the Captain went off down the right path of the dock and left for the town square.

The shorter man, Marco, tried to call the Captain back, but when he found his efforts fruitless, he sighed and rubbed his face in his hands. However, his glasses blocked his hands, so he removed the large round-rimmed spectacles and proceeded to rub the bridge of his nose with his fingers and went on to run a hand through his dark hair. James saw him from a distance and felt sympathy for him. He decided to approach. He made his way to him as Marco wiped his glasses with the tail-end of his pristine white shirt.

“Got a problem with your Captain there?” James asked.

Marco seemed almost frightened by James’ sudden approach. He quickly slipped his glasses on.

“No, no, no.” He stuttered. “It’s – it’s just.” He sighed. “The Captain is right; I was just being paranoid.”

James gave him a confused look. Marco paused awkwardly at the gap in conversation and realized he hadn’t introduced himself.

“Oh!” Marco exclaimed. “I’m Marco Ricci. I’m the, uh, navigator for the Discovery.” He pointed to the galleon behind him.

“James Hawkins.” James replied. “Discovery’s a pretty famous ship, where’ve you sailed?”

“Oh,” Marco stuttered again. “We just came back from a voyage to Venice to present the Captain’s findings in his voyage in the floating Alps.”

“Bullshit!” A voice cried from behind them.

One of the sailors from the Discovery suddenly dropped his crate and approached Marco and James. He was a tall, well-built man with a short beard and long hair tied back into a knot.

“Marco here is the only reason we ever made it to those mountains!” He slapped a large, weathered hand onto Marco’s shoulder.

“Really?” James cocked his head. “You got a whole Galleon onto a range of *floating mountains*?”

Marco rubbed the back of his neck and chuckled. His face was turning red from embarrassment.

“Yeah, I, uh. It wasn’t that much.”

“How’d you do it?” James asked with genuine interest. Genuine interest that Marco was not ready for and hadn’t experienced before.

“Well, I... I figured that there had to be some way that those mountains were suspended in the air.” James nodded along. “So, you know on how there’s that deep pit directly beneath where everyone assumes where the Alps once stood?” James nodded. “Well, there’s this really interesting theory going around that the primary changes to the world’s environments since just before the gap in history was mainly gravitational in nature. I figured that the standard gravitational alignment of earth had been warped in seemingly random ways and patterns that pull objects different ways.” He began to speak more quickly and enthusiastically. He was miming his explanation with his hands. “Kinda like currents.” He paused and looked at James, who was still thoroughly invested – much to Marco’s surprise. He decided to keep with the momentum and continue. “So, I watched the waves and the ways that the water moved near the coast. I tested moving stones and boulders around the Alps until I managed to chart a path, much

like you would in Polynesian Outriggers: I followed the ways that the – what I called – Gravity Currents to determine where they would lead, until I finished my chart.” He took a breath as he finished. “From there, it was just a matter of riding the ship up the path and hoping and praying. I’m just glad it worked.”

James was stunned. So stunned that he almost forgot to speak.” That’s – that’s incredible.”

For a split-second James could see a joy on Marco’s face, one that eerily spoke that he had not heard something like that before, like as if he had not been complimented before, and then, quick as it appeared, the look was gone and Marco returned to the awkward man James initially met. This confused James as he quickly looked over to the taller man, who was clearly appreciative of Marco’s genius. Then, the taller man caught James looking at him.

“Oh!” He gasped. “Sorry. Name’s Bill. Though Marco here keeps calling me ‘William’.”

“Because that is your name. Bill is just an abbreviation.” Marco adjusted his glasses.

“Whatever!” Bill laughed and whacked Marco on the back. “Captain’s gonna need that brain of yours for his next voyage!” And with that, he walked back to pick up his rate and return to his job on the ship.

“Yeah, I, uh, I should get back.” Marco was already turning and slowly leaving the conversation. It was only now that James was reminded of the heavy weight of the morning shopping and what he was originally doing. “Yeah, I need to get back home.” James turned to leave as well. “It was nice talking to-” He turned back to say his goodbyes, but Marco was already turned around and bee-lining for the Discovery. Though, he noticed a gold coin on the ground where Marco was standing. James scooped it up, fascinated by its design.

James was confused for a moment. *Had he said something insulting to him?* He quickly pushed the thought from his mind and headed home.

James's home was not too far from where he was. It was just a little further down on the docks, with a good view out at some of the ships currently docked. It was just turning eight o'clock in the morning when he unlocked the front door, opened it, and stepped inside. The home was quite small, housing only himself and his old, sick, grandfather. A large bed sat in the middle of the front room where his grandfather Isaac slept most of the day. The door on the opposite side of the house to the front door led to the bathroom. A set of stairs on the far side of the room led up to the second floor which had James's room and Isaac's old bedroom.

"James?" A weary voice croaked from the bed.

"Hey Isaac, it's me." James replied casually as he placed the morning shopping on the counter next to the front window of the house.

In that moment, James could see another ship out there in the dock. A brigantine, though a small one. A ship suited for a crew of about maybe ten people. Two tall masts towered up and out of view from the window. So high that James couldn't even see the sails which he was sure were all wrapped up. The ship gently bobbed up and down in the water, waiting for someone to take it out to sea. It had been sitting there for about eight years. Its Captain was long retired and he had sold it to the local shipwright. James had sketches and plans made out for how he'd redesign the ship with his own crew. But that was many years ago now.

"James?" The voice cried again.

James pulled himself away from the window. He stopped for a mere second and looked back out the window at the ship, before continuing on to his grandfather's aid.

Just as the day goes, time after time. Again, and again, night had come. And it was silent as ever. The boats were left to sit. The only sound was the gentle lapping of water, causing the boats to pull slightly at their ties to the dock. Every now and again, there'd be a creak in the piers as a town guard would patrol along.

James sat on his bed, draped in weak candlelight. He curiously inspected the gold coin. The writings on it looked to be Sanskrit. He could smell the weak scent of sea salt from it. *I guess Marco grabbed this from Indin.* He thought. The Discovery hadn't left town yet. Perhaps he could find Marco in town before they left and hand it back –

A scream.

His thoughts were interrupted by a scream exploding from downstairs.

Isaac.

James shot up and bolted down the stairs.

Barreling down to the ground floor and skidding to a quick stop, James ran to Isaac's bedside.

Isaac's breath was heavy and desperate. As if every breath became more and more of a struggle.

Isaac's respiratory issues were growing worse and worse by the day.

"Isaac!" James cried as he gripped his weary grandfather's hand. "Just try to slow your breathing! C'mon, just like always. Try to slow it to normal."

But it did not seem to be working. Isaac was only getting worse, his breath becoming more and more gravely. Coughing and spluttering, Isaac raised his other hand to lay on top of James's.

"Come on." James begged. "You got this."

"Stop-stop... Stop, child." Isaac coughed. "The fight is too great. When the winds come to take you, there's no point in struggling. It'll only lead to something worse." He spoke quietly.

"You don't have to-"

"Shut up, you stupid boy... I have been a burden on your life for too long, now."

James was stunned. He wanted to speak, to fight back against Isaac, but he thought of nothing to say.

"Since you were a boy, you have dreamed of sailing, searching for more to this world. And I, the failure I am, held you here for years. But, you are young, and the young deserve to see the world, for they are the ones to inherit it."

Isaac was interrupted by another round of vicious coughs, tearing away at his throat. Gasping for air, he prepared to speak again.

“James, I want you to listen to me. For years I have felt the guilt toil and tear away at my being for keeping you in this tiny port city. In the desk drawer of my room, you’ll find a sealed letter and a locked old rusted box. The letter is my will and in that same envelope, you’ll find a key to that locked box. In that box is your inheritance, boy. Take it. It is money, enough to buy a seaworthy ship and escape this wretched town and find a new meaning to your life besides taking care of an old codger like myself.”

“I don’t understand –”

“My boy, I have been so selfish. The reason I did not show you the money earlier was because I was terrified of being alone in this world, but when I am gone, you can leave me and this town behind, take a ship and find your own way.”

“I don’t know what I’ll do without you, Isaac.” Tears welled up in James’s eyes.

“My boy, I have been bound to this infernal bed for many years now. You have been without me for just as long.” He began to take his final breaths.

“For years I have watched you gaze out that window into the docks and see the ships come and go, and I felt the crushing guilt of what I denied you after so many years of spouting my tales and stories. You deserved better. I can only hope now that I can offer that to you in my passing.” His voice grew quieter and quieter. “Remember this, James; knowledge is our greatest asset. You will never find it sitting in the same place all your life.” Isaac’s head leaned back slightly into the pillow. James paused, waiting for him to speak again. But he did not. James sat completely still for a few minutes simply processing. Isaac lay lifeless before him, and it felt like a mistake. A being once filled with life was now just still. In a poor attempt to distract himself, James moved toward the staircase to head upstairs.

The Hawk's Maiden Voyage

There was somewhere close to fifty thousand pounds in Isaac's lockbox. More than enough for any ship below a galleon. With this kind of money, James could travel anywhere and start a whole new life in a different country and live comfortably for years. He pondered over that idea under dim candlelight. However, when he raised his head to see the abandoned ship in the dock from the window of Isaac's room, he knew what to do.

He bolted down the dock, past where the *Discovery* was docked. He could see a number of people, including Bill, still loading crates onboard. James went further down and turned off to the right further inland. Down the street a little further, he found a small wood and stone home with a black iron sign on the front with white text that read *Undertaker*. Reaching the door, he knocked impatiently. He could hear shuffling inside and after a few seconds, the door creaked open to a very tired and surprised Mr. Janeway, the funeral director.

"James?" He groaned. "What can I do for you at this hour?"

"Isaac passed away tonight." James seemed almost surprised himself. That was the first time it felt real to him that his grandfather was truly gone.

"Oh," Janeway gasped. "I'm – I'm so sorry. I know how much he meant to you."

James handed Janeway a sealed envelope. "He wrote down his last will and testament here. It also details how he wishes to be buried. He asked for it to be left with you specifically."

"Of course." Janeway took the envelope. "How are you, though?"

James thought for a moment. "I'll be okay."

Janeway began to read the notes within the envelope and studied what he must do. “Okay.” He said. “I can handle this. Seems Isaac didn’t want much.” His eyes narrowed at one particular line.

“He doesn’t even want you there?” He looked up to James.

“Yeah.” James explained. “I’m, uh, leaving town.”

“To go and search beyond the tempting call of the horizon beyond our port and find a new purpose in this purposeless world.”

James gave him a look.

“Isaac wrote it down here in the will.”

“Yeah, that sounds like him.” James chuckled.

He backed away into his home. “I’ll tend to this in the morning.” He closed the door.

James took a deep breath. He smiled. He took his sadness over the passing of his grandfather and turned it into excitement for the beginning of his adventure. He bolted back the way he came toward the Discovery. Back to the assortment of workers loading crates, he quickly found Bill again and waved him down, and Bill – looking for any excuse to not have to work – dropped his crate without a second thought and met James halfway.

“Hey, it’s shopping bag boy from this morning!” He waved. “What brings you here?”

“It’s James.” He suddenly remembered he only introduced himself to Marco. “Do you know where Marco is?”

Bill took a moment to look around the dock. He looked left. And then right. Then he turned back to James and shrugged.

“Well, do you know where he might be?”

Bill sighed heavily. “Captain said he was gonna give a speech in the town square earlier. ‘Said he’d buy everyone a drink at the tavern there. Maybe he joined ‘em?”

“Thanks.” James said before bolting off down the dock toward the town square. There was only one tavern in this small town – The Empty Parliament.

The town’s square was marked by a stone statue of Normand Plaintiff, the town’s founder. Supposedly, that was also where he was buried. The town itself was quite small and had become dilapidated in the last few years. Old homes that had never been refurbished, dozens of businesses that had closed down in recent years as fewer ships came to dock. The only thing that kept this small town alive was the few ships that still came. The only area of the town that had been modernised at all in James’s lifetime was the central square. Banks, merchants, and the tavern. Shipwrights and sailors. These larger businesses always found a way to worsen the conditions for smaller shops, whether it being using their close connections with the local government to increase taxes for businesses, or use wagons and workers to block streets for incoming sailors and reduce traffic in other shops. And undertakers, of course. These were the most powerful, and only businesses, that survived long in this town.

Jogging briskly around the square and toward the tavern, James could see the warm glow of the golden candle lights flicker from within. He came to a quick stop as he burst into the tavern. Dozens of eyes suddenly turned to him. He paused. The eyes turned back to their own endeavors. James scanned the interior to find his desired navigator.

It was a wide semi-circular building. At the flat end stood the bar counter and the many dozens of tables radiated around it, curving along the walls in some cases. Currently stood on a wobbly, old table was Captain Lionhart himself drunkenly giving a speech, sloshing his once-full tankard of ale. James could count dozens of pipes spewing smoke into the scene, creating a thick haze of gloom, weakly illuminated in small patches by the orange-gold light of the candles dotted around the walls.

Over in the far right of the tavern, cocooning himself in the corner, under an unlit lantern at a table by himself, was Marco, poring over an array of charts and maps. As James got closer, he could see that Marco had an assortment of tools: different weights of pencil, a compass, a magnifying glass and a mathematical compass. James approached the table and pulled up the chair opposite Marco. The sudden grind of the chair legs on the wooden floor gave Marco a fright and he jumped before looking up and seeing James sitting down in front of him.

“Marco!” James exclaimed.

“James.” Marco replied.

“I’ve got an opportunity for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m in need of a navigator. And you’re a navigator.”

“That I am. But I’m afraid I have to…” He trailed off. “To turn it down. I’m stably employed on the Discovery, and I met you just this morning.”

“C’mon,” James leaned forward on the table. “Whatever about employment, that Captain Lion- whatever, is taking all the credit for all your amazing work. They’d be struggling to get out of the harbor if it weren’t for you.”

Marco was about to reply. Then he stopped himself and let out a heavy sigh.

“What do you want me to say, James?” He chuckled. “That-that-that I’ll simply… leave my life and everything behind me to travel the seas with you?”

James hesitated for a few moments.

“Yes.” He said.

Marco stared at him for a moment and then sighed.

“Look, Marco, you’re an amazing navigator, and based on what I’ve learned about your ability, the Discovery’s legacy, if it was all you, I can’t think of anyone better suited to help me sail to the Centre.”

Marco looked down to the table and sighed. He then picked up his now empty glass and stood up from the table.

“I’m going to retire for the night.” Marco left the tavern.

“No, wait!” James shot out of his chair, following Marco to the porch outside the door of the tavern.

Marco stopped and turned to look at him. James hastily reached into his pocket and removed a small gold coin. Marco’s eyes widened when he saw it.

“You-you dropped this at the port... earlier today.” Presenting the coin to him, Marco hesitantly took it from James’s hand. After a few moments, James spoke up again. “The writing on the coin is Sanskrit. Indin. What was it like?”

“Hot. So damn hot.” Marco laughed as he looked over the coin. “Actually, humid. I mean humid. Flora and fauna beyond anything you’d see here, or anywhere on this side of the world.” Marco traced the writings on the coin with his fingers. “Did you know that the entire original region of Indin may have actually been a subcontinent, and that it’s separated from the rest of the Old World by a massive mountain range, the Himilan?”

“It was a subcontinent?” James asked. “But, there’s so many people there, or so I hear. What’s the Himilan like?”

“My Lord! It’s absolutely huge!” Marco exclaimed. He leaned over the railing of the porch. “It just goes on forever and the mountains there are supposed to be the tallest in the world!”

“God, you’ve really been everywhere, haven’t you?” James joked.

“Haven’t been to the Centre yet.” Marco joked back.

“Where are you from?” James asked.

Marco’s eyes fell to the dirt over the edge of the railing. Then. He raised his head. “Italia!” He said with a heavy accent and flashing his hands about in a small gesture. Although after his grand

performance (well, grand for someone like Marco), he lowered his head and eyes to the dirt in embarrassment.

“Oh,” James exclaimed. “Is that how it’s pronounced? I’ve been saying Itala all my life.”

“Ah, it’s either-or.” Marco waved him off. He hesitated before speaking again. “W-where are you from?”

“Here.” James deadpanned, staring off toward the docks, which were far in the distance from where they currently stood. “I’ve only ever been here. And I’ve heard all these grand and great stories about the world. That sense of adventure. And I just wanted to see the world.” James paused. “What got you into sailing?”

“My father was a shipwright, and a merchant. I spent a lot of my childhood on boats. Charting and navigation were how I made myself useful.”

“Wow, sailing the high seas since you were a kid. I can only imagine how incredible it would’ve been.”

Marco hesitated. “Yeah. I’ve kind of been everywhere.”

“Well, not everywhere.” James piped up.

Marco turned to him confused for a moment, but then he quickly figured out what he meant.

“You’re dead set on going to the Centre?”

“Yep.” James turned back to look toward the docks.

“Why? If you don’t mind my asking, of course.”

“It’s the last great discovery, isn’t it?” James explained. Marco noticed a strange calm in him that he hadn’t seen before. A stern conviction that said James was absolutely serious on going to the Centre. Like it was already written, and he just hadn’t done it yet. “The Old World has been all but completely discovered. Every land, civilization and structure have all been found, charted and written about to high heaven. All but that Centre. And I find that so exciting.”

Marco could understand what he meant, strangely. He recalled the excitement he himself felt when seeking out the tombs of the explorers on the Discovery. It was the first time he had felt that excitement in a while. Sailing shore to shore on merchant runs had grown boring.

“So, why don’t you join me on the Discovery?” Marco asked.

“The Discovery won’t make it to the Centre.” James replied.

“How do you know?”

“Think about it, Marco. Thousands of Galleons have sailed off since getting the full map and they’ve either come back with their tails between their legs, or they don’t come back at all. The nine explorers went to the Centre and came back. I think it’s because they had a smaller ship.”

“But a smaller ship wouldn’t survive the waves. It’d be next to impossible.”

“*Next to impossible.*” James emphasized. “But you need that smaller hull in order to swerve around the jagged rocks and slim water-ways. They didn’t make it because of luck, or mythical power. They made it because they were smart about it. And as great as the Discovery’s reputation is, even you must know that it’s unlikely to make it.”

“And you think you can make it?” Marco countered.

James paused, thinking intently on how to phrase his next sentence before he spoke again.

Finally, he let out a heavy sigh. “I’ve been studying that map ever since it was published in full. Hell, even when it was just shown piece by piece, I’ve been studying it intently.”

Marco leaned in to listen as James went on, “This tiny, little ship with a minimal crew sailed all the way to the Centre in the wake of so many failures. And even after their same path was marked, logged and charted down to every last detail, no one could copy it. There had to be a reason that all these legendary Captains failed. That maybe there was a reason as to why their journey was so successful. I have pages and pages of theories, trying to figure it out, and I think I finally have it.” He paused again. “Marco,” He began again, turning to the navigator. “I don’t think I can make this journey because I think it’d be fun, or some silly dream, I know I can make

it because I'm sure no one knows the path, the strategies and the method to do it all better than me. I've made it my life's goal to discover the great wonders of this world, and they've all gone and been discovered without me. This is my last shot, the last one ever, to live the life of an adventurer and I will not fail because I overlooked some small detail." Marco leaned back, thinking over what he said.

"I need you to trust me." James spoke up again. "I know what I'm doing."

Seeing the determination in James' eyes, Marco could feel the fire of his passion for the journey. The adventure. A passion Marco once held when he first began to sail. Before he joined the Discovery and everything became routine. He, seemingly like James, had nearly given up on the true joy of being an adventurer in place of stability and normalcy. Marco felt great uncertainty and anxiety toward what he was considering. The implications were great, but the possible reward was greater. The risk of the life of an adventurer. And he had to admit that James's theory about ships' size being the key to reaching the Centre had a solid foundation. He remembered that it was only nine sailors. A ship that small would be much easier to maneuver than a galleon. "Fuck it." Marco finally said.

James raised his head in confusion. "What do you mean?" He asked.

"Let's go." Marco turned to him. "Right now."

"Right now?" James was taken aback.

"Right now." Marco affirmed.

The two swiftly headed to the shipwright's office, which wasn't actually open at this hour, but he had to see them after James repeatedly banged on the front door. He was quite surprised that they wanted to buy such an old ship. He questioned that they would need a larger crew, and that he felt unconfident in selling said ship to unreliable buyers.

“The ship is needed as a, uh, secondary vessel for the-the HMS Discovery.” Marco explained through stutters. “We are currently making our plans to travel to-to the Centre, and it seems we will need a secondary, smaller, uhm, ship to make more-more precise journeys?” He ended his explanation with a questioning cadence which made James quite nervous. As he darted his eyes from Marco to the Shipwright, James could see his face contort in thick distrust. Thinking on his feet, he stepped forward.

“Listen, my name is Jonathan Silver, the First Mate of the HMS Discovery!” Marco stepped back a pace as James spoke. “Now, our Captain, Captain *Sir* Ronald Lionhart of the Western Seas, himself, asked us himself to make this arrangement as he was needed in a meeting with the mayor!” The shipwright backed away, intimidated slightly by James’ advance. “So, do you want us to walk into the Mayor’s office and explain to our renowned Captain that the shipwright wished to delay our journey?”

The shipwright only rubbed his temples in response. The room felt silent as James was forced to come up with a new plan.

“We noticed that old ship out on the dock. The tiny one.” James directed out to a ship tied to the terminal. It was the same one he had viewed every day of his life. “Looks pretty old and beat. Bet maintenance for it has been sucking you dry, but a shipwright out here in this town can’t afford to scrap a boat, and letting it drift into the water is illegal. I bet that old ship has been a real pain in your ass.”

The shipwright looked out to it. James could see the change in his expression as he looked at the old ship. The look of a tired man, as if he became worn out simply by looking at the old thing.

“Tell you what.” James began again. “We’ll take that ship off your hands for full price, right now and we can return to our Captain and let him know that whenever we come back to this town, you can buy a high quality vessel from this business right here.”

Weighing the options for a few moments, the shipwright eventually broke and accepted the deal, and like that, the ship was given to James and Marco.

Later, on the docks, the two overlooked their new purchase.

“What should we call it?” James asked.

“Hm?” Marco turned to him.

“Every ship always has a name. Like a Christian!”

“Christening?” Marco corrected.

“Yeah, that.” James confirmed. “Something that perfectly describes our journey, our values, our goals!” James exclaimed. “Something that defines us!”

“The Poorly-planned?” Marco joked.

James turned to him, trying to mask his enjoyment of the joke. “No, more like –”

“The Impulsive?”

“Marco. Please.”

“The Buyer’s Remorse?”

“I’m leaving.” James turned to continue down the docks.

“The HMS Half-Assed Journey!” Marco shouted.

“Just help me with the crew.” James sighed.

Marco jogged up next to him and quickly slowed to a walk.

“I can probably get William to join in. We have a rapport.”

“Is that like a pet, or something?”

Marco turned away from his new partner on the seas and looked straight forward. “I may regret this decision.”

Fortunately, the walk from the as-of-now unnamed vessel to the HMS Discovery was very short and they quickly reached it, finding Bill and a few other crew members still stacking boxes and crates for the journey. Though they seemed to be almost finished.

“You’re still packing food?!” James called as they approached the crew.

Bill lifted his head and smiled.

“Yeah, they’ve got us packing enough food for a straight shot to the Centre. We’ll be eating like kings!” Bill explained.

“But wouldn’t that weigh down the ship?” James questioned. “Surely the better plan would be to pack enough for a short journey to a port closer to the Centre and pack up there?”

“Captain’s orders.” Bill shrugged.

“William.” Marco stepped forward.

“Marco.” Bill answered.

“We have an opportunity for you.” Marco began.

“What kind?”

This time, James stepped forward. “How would you like to be a member of the crew to reach the Centre?”

Bill shrugged.

“Well, Marco and I have recently come into possession of a new vessel and are in need of a crew and –”

“Sure.” Bill interrupted.

“Wait.” James was taken aback.

“You’d join us just like that?” Marco questioned.

“Sounds like fun.” Bill explained. “Sailing’s fun. And sailing a boat with you guys could be a lot more fun than sailing to and from port after port for the Captain’s speeches. So, yeah, I’m in.”

Bill began to approach the Discovery. “If you guys are in need of more crew, I can see if there’s anyone here who’s up for something different.”

James and Marco, genuinely astonished, looked to each other and back to Bill.

“Sure.” James agreed.

“Sounds like a plan.” Marco agreed also.

Moments later, at the docked, still unnamed, ship, Marco and James saw Bill approaching with two other members from the Discovery crew.

“That’s only two people, James.” Marco whispered.

“I’m aware, Marco.”

“That makes us a crew of five, James.”

“I’m aware, Marco.”

“You said we needed nine.”

“Yep.”

“Five is not nine, James.”

“I am aware of that, Marco.”

They stopped whispering as Bill approached with his two new crew members.

“Well,” Bill announced. “Here they are!”

“Are there more coming?” Marco tilted his head.

“Nope!”

“Alright.” Marco sighed in defeat.

“Look,” James stepped between Bill and Marco, keeping his eyes on Marco. “Five will have to do. I don’t know if Captain Lionhart would even let you guys go willingly. The last thing we need for the journey is supplies.”

“And do you have a plan for that?” Marco crossed his arms.

“Well, I didn’t,” James began. “Until I noticed just how many supplies the Discovery was hauling.”

“You want to steal supplies from the Discovery?” Marco asked.

Bill and his other crew members were cheering.

“Yes, but, Lionhart is not an idiot. He wouldn’t be such a successful Captain if he were. Once he notices that his supplies were scuttled by ‘bandits’, he’ll either restock, or sail to another port on the way to the Centre to restock there.” James shrugged. “Seems like a perfect plan to me.”

And even though Marco felt uncomfortable with the idea, he decided against his better judgement in place of this adventurous spirit he had listened to in the beginning.

“It’d work as our severance, I guess.” Marco sighed.

Thus, the five of them boarded the Discovery. Funnily enough, it was the first time that James had ever been on a ship. The gentle rocking of the waves bobbing the ship up and down threw him off his balance for a moment, causing him to disassociate himself from the current situation. For that moment, his adventurous fire dissipated as he took stock of his life.

Isaac’s death.

The realisation of it simply killed his spirit. The complex emotions of sympathy and mourning of his grandfather, but also the anger, and the frustration at the man who hid money from him.

Money that could have paid for a carer, to allow James to go out at sea at a far younger age. His motivation faded. He felt alone.

A sudden burst to his chest. A crate thrust into his hands. He looked up to see Marco looking concerned with a tilted head. James awkwardly nodded and set off toward their still unnamed boat.

The walk to that boat seemed so much longer as he sat in the enclosed, harrowing asylum of his own mind. Thoughts whizzing past. Intrusive thoughts that threatened to tear him apart and

eviscerate his dreams of adventuring. The sheer silence of the docks didn't help. Not a sound at night. Not a sound to distract him or rip him from his thoughts.

Marco, Bill, and the crew continued as if everything was normal, taking only a few crates from one ship to the next. However, Marco noticed that James was still only taking his first crate. On their last run. Marco was carrying in the last crate onto the ship, crossing the gangplank.

"Hey!" A voice called from the docks. Turning, they saw the faces of the town's guards. With fear in his eyes and welling in his heart, Marco acted quickly and tossed the last crate as James finally stepped onboard. Ignorant of the scuffle around him.

Bill hastily untying ropes and Marco unfurling sails. James noticed none of it, stepping down into the lower deck of the ship to place the crate. The gentle dancing light of the lantern and the soft creak of the hull gave a calming atmosphere. However, it was the rock of the ship that centered James. Much like it had initiated all these thoughts, its familiarity eased him for a second.

Enough to rationalise.

Isaac was selfish. He was greedy and he was desperate. But, most of all, he had been lonely.

Fearing that he'd lose his family forever if James had set off earlier. He did not approve of Isaac's actions, but he understood them. He chose to remember his grandfather as the adventurer who always loved him. Who always had faith in him. Because right now, none of what Isaac had done mattered as James was essentially free. Not free from Isaac, but free to live his dream of adventuring.

James climbed the stairs to the main deck as the ship was already sailing away from port, and the sun slowly crept over the horizon.

"Welcome back." He turned to see Marco leaving the helm and approaching him. "Not having doubts, were you?"

James smiled. "No." Then he thought. "Well, yes. But, then I thought 'Fuck it'."

Marco smirked.

James walked over to the port side of the ship and looked back toward port to see a group of guards shouting from the dock.

“They catch us?”

“Yeah. But we got away.” Marco approached the portside as well. “Have to admit. It was more fun than any trip on the Discovery.”

“The Boundless.” James said suddenly.

“Hm?” Marco turned to him.

“That’s a good name for a ship.” James said calmly. “I think.”

Marco thought it over and looked out over the sea.

“The Boundless Hawk.” He finally said. He turned to James with a smile.

“I like that.”

Meanwhile, at the edge of the dock, a very hungover Captain Lionhart approached, unhappy that he was called to make his way there after just falling asleep in the tavern. Rubbing his head, he turned to one of his crew men, who was in a state of panic.

“Sir!” He cried. “We’ve been robbed!”

“Robbed, you say?” The Captain asked, groggily.

“It was Marco!” Said another crewman.

“Marco?!” The Captain turned to him, seemingly no longer held back by the prior intoxication.

Then, he let out a hearty laugh. “What did the boy take?”

“About a week’s worth of supplies, sir.”

‘So, you’ve finally begun your own journey, have you lad?’ The Captain thought to himself as he watched the small ship head out into the sunrise.

“Sir?” The first crewman asked. “We’ll have the Discovery ready in a few seconds.”

“Let him go!” The Captain ordered as he turned to leave the dock.

“Sir?”

“We’ll call it his severance and restock!” He shouted. “He was worth far more to this ship than a year’s worth of supplies.”

“And the other three?” The crewman asked, following the Captain.

“Marco’s worth would pay for each of them. I hold no ill will.” Thus, Captain Lionhart left to return to the tavern.

The Ghosts of the Ferryman

At last, the Boundless Hawk had reached the innermost region of the Centre, marked on the explorer's map as the 'Inner Sanctum'. This part of the map was found in Gorjia, in the tomb of Queen Tamar. It was said that her tomb lay in a golden wreath coffin, inside a golden palace buried within a tall mountain that was only uncovered by uttering the keyword 'Adeki'. How James wished he could have been there to see such a sight.

However, none of that mattered he thought to himself as he stepped onto the lower deck of the ship where he saw his trusted friend and navigator hard at work. As James approached the table, he placed one of the plates of food he was carrying down onto it, stepping around to the opposite side and sitting down atop a barrel.

"So," James began. "We've officially crossed into the Inner Sanctum?"

"That we have." Marco replied, taking the food from the plate without even looking and continuing to work as he ate.

"We're on the edge of discovery now." James boasted.

"We're also at the point where most ships capsize." Marco's gaze darted up to look at him.

"Don't forget that." His eyes did a double-take as he noticed the eyepatch before looking down to the map.

“So far I’ve been correct though in my theories.” James countered. “With a smaller ship and minimal crew, we’ve been sliding through those rocky mountains with no bother. Don’t forget that.”

“A smaller ship wasn’t so great when we encountered that sea serpent.” Marco countered. “Or that living wave.”

“Now sorry,” James began. “It wasn’t a ‘living wave’, it was just some stone that pulled the water in like your, uh, gravity currents theory.”

“I know, I know.” Marco chuckled as he stood up from the map, stretching his arms and back.

“So,” James started a new train of thought. “What do you wanna do with your treasure?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” James shifted his seat on the barrel. “With the treasure from the Centre? Where are you gonna go? What are you gonna do?”

“Thinking kind of far ahead, aren’t you?” Marco wandered around the deck, over to the brass monkeys filled with cannon balls. He made a note to restock them. Then remembered that they weren’t going to visit another port for a long time and felt a pulse of anxiety shoot through his stomach.

“Yeah, but we’re basically there now, right?” James laughed.

“Not really.” Marco leaned against a support pillar, cleaning his glasses. “You remember what they said back in Madisgar: ‘Those that don’t shipwreck, always return saying they were chased.’”

“You mean that myth of the Ferryman that wharf master in Indin told us?”

“Considering the world we live in,” Marco slipped his glasses back onto his face. “I don’t consider any stories to be just myths.”

After a moment of silence, James let out a laugh. “You’ve been down here in the galley for too long, Marco!”

Marco didn't know what he was more surprised by – James's dismissive response, or the fact that he knew what a galley was.

Before he could respond, James stood up from the barrel and headed toward the stairs up to the main deck. As he passed Marco, he patted him on the back.

Rising up the stairway, James shifted the eyepatch to his other eye allowing him to see in the daylight without needing to adjust his eyes to the light.

What surprised him most about the Inner Sanctum, as he approached the starboard of the ship, was just how open it all was. Where earlier they had swerved and swayed between towering rock pillars and supernatural anomalies, here it was just a vast open sea. Looking back toward the stern he could still faintly see the end of the outer sector of the Centre, marked by a clean wall of detached rock pillars and boulders, cleanly cutting at a ring that expanded out into the Inner Sanctum. Toward the bow, a wall of fog. A dense, milky white veil masked the path ahead. The sea was unnervingly quiet. They kept the ship running. (He remembered having to teach some of the crew Bill had thought that running actually meant facing the boat into the wind and *not* that the boat had little legs.) The wind was strange here, both he and Marco noted. Their compass spun in endless circles and it seemed that the wind pulled toward the Centre. From all directions. A constant breeze of wind pulled in from all angles. Which was great for them. But if they needed to maneuver the odd wind currents may prove difficult. Marco believed that this may be some form of unique new kind of gravity current.

The sea wasn't completely empty, actually. Small islets and short pillars poked out from the water every now and again, but they were sparse and not near their path, so James didn't pay them any mind.

Stepping up the small three steps up to the stern, he approached their helmsman, Dilbert, but they just called him Dil. He was one of the crewmembers that Bill managed to bring over to their ship. The other was Lily, whom they referred to as Lil. James and Marco thought that Bill must

have recruited people based on the rhyme alone. It seemed the closer they reached to the Centre, the less enthusiastic people were to join in their quest. Many seemed content to reach as far as they did, others were discouraged and afraid of this tale of the Ferryman. Whilst stopped at port in Indin, he and Marco heard from a supposed survivor of the Ferryman. The legend spoke of a ghostly ship that guarded the Centre, commanding its own fleet just as ghostly as itself. Now, the Boundless Hawk had encountered many strange things in its journey; from horrors of the deep oceans to vicious warping gravity currents that rode high above the seas. But they had never, *ever*, seen anything that even came close to being a ghost. Or a spirit of any sort.

So, James had thrown it aside as some form of local tale, a warning designed to discourage the locals from leaving the town toward more dangerous seas, which Marco didn't believe because the seas here in the Inner Sanctum were so calm. Then James suggested that because of the odd wind currents, or gravity currents, that pull the wind inward may prevent other, less experienced, sailors from returning and ending up shipwrecked. Marco agreed to disagree with this theory, insisting that he must study and chart the Inner Sanctum so they could navigate it properly should anything unexpected arise.

Dil looked positively, absolutely bored out of his mind standing in front of the wheel, every now and again adjusting it to keep the ship straight.

"Any news, Dil?" James asked looking off the stern. "See anything?"

"Water, Captain." He replied.

James sighed and hopped down the stairs, stopping in front of the main mast and looked upward.

"Lil!" He called. "See anything?!"

After a few seconds, Lil responded. "Water, Captain!"

James looked between Dil and Lil, amused at their seemingly coordinated response.

Just then, Marco hopped up the stairs onto the main deck, shielding his eyes for a moment as he adjusted to the light.

“How’re we looking?” He asked, approaching James.

“Nothing.” James sighed. “There’s absolutely nothing out here.”

Marco was uneasy. For a realm so dangerous, it should not be so calm and easy to cross.

Suddenly, the wind picked up on the sails. The ship sailed faster toward the Centre, the wall of mist still quite a way away.

“That’s normal, right?” James furrowed his brow at the sails, having learned a small amount of information from Marco’s extensive theories on gravity currents.

“Yes.” Marco said hesitantly, crossing the deck over to the steps up to the helm. “The closer we get to a central point, the more powerful the pull, but…” He paused.

Marco inspected the sails, then he scanned the sea around them. Finally, he brought his eyes to the wall of mist ahead of them. And in that moment, it all clicked.

“Stop the ship!” He cried, leaping down the stairs to the main deck and sprinting down the stairs to the galley.

“What do you mean?” James questioned, trying to follow him, but he stopped just at the stairs.

He threw his judgement aside and followed Marco’s order.

“Tie the sails!” James ordered. “Drop anchor!”

The crew did as they were ordered. The sails were quickly pulled in and secured, and the anchor was dropped, but the ship did not stop.

Seeing this, James turned to his First Mate. “Bill! What’s happening?!”

Bill, standing next to the capstan, the anchor completely released, turned to his Captain looking bewildered.

Just then, Marco leapt up the stairs onto the deck, holding his spyglass. He bolted toward the bow and looked through. “Why are we still moving, James?!” He exclaimed.

“I don’t know.”

“Ooooooh, no.” Marco whispered as he lowered the spyglass.

“Marco?” James asked.

“There’s a theory that if the space of this whole Centre area stretches around one thousand four hundred kilometres outward from Kazahk, that it may be more sphere-like than it appears.”

“So, the anchor can’t reach the bottom.” James sighed.

“And currently, the gravity currents are strong enough to pull us without the sails...” Marco continued.

“Shit” James whispered.

“Captain!” Bill cried. “What do we do?!”

James thought for a moment, and then set off running around their small ship giving orders.

“This Sanctum is a fucking trap!” He exclaimed.

Just then, from the mist, a gargantuan skull of glowing green smoke forced its way through the veil. And opened its maw wide, releasing a piercing howl. And from that maw’s pit of pure shadow, a single ship of the same ghostly glow slowly glided outward and toward them. James stopped at the helm, looking out at the approaching ship. He slowly stepped away and toward the bow. He walked along the bowsprit to gaze out.

“Shit...” He whispered to himself.

And then, alongside the skull, another skull on each side pushed out. Then, more. Then, even more. A long and expansive line of skulls, each with their own maws unhinged unleashing their own ghostly vessel onto the waters.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit...” James leapt off the bowsprit and bolted for the stern. “Raise sails! Raise anchor!” Seeing that it was just Dil on the deck, he leapt down to help. Looking back to Bill at the helm as he worked, he ordered. “Hard to starboard, Bill!”

“But Captain, if we turn too much, we’ll lose the wind!”

“Hard to starboard!”

Bill complied and tossed the helm to the right, and soon after the ship began to creak and whine as it slid to a hard-starboard position, pulling into a broad reach.

“Lil!” James called. “Stay up there and let us know of anything getting too close!”

“Aye!” She waved from the crow’s nest.

James turned around to see Marco holding his spyglass to the horizon of ships.

“What’s that I see?” He asked sarcastically. “A fleet of ghost ships sailing toward us?”

“Not now.” James grumbled.

Looking out to the wall of mist, the ships were still a great distance away. And moving quite slowly. Lil found herself growing bored of watching them.

“Captain!” she called. James stopped “They’re moving pretty slow! We might be able to outmaneuver them!”

“Do ghost ships obey normal ship physics?” Marco asked.

Lil squinted her eyes through the spyglass and took her own thoughts and Marco’s words as she scanned the sails of the ghost ships. They were inverted.

“They’re sailing in irons, Captain!”

James gasped. “The bastards aren’t even sailing, they’re drifting! They’re just waiting for us to get close!” James stood and thought for a moment.

“Remember, James.” Marco approached. “We can only sail at a decent speed in a radius around the sanctum. The wind’s all pull on that location.”

James came to a very rough conclusion.

“Bill! Pull us into a beam reach!”

Bill saluted and swung the helm to shift the ship to a perpendicular angle to the ghost fleet.

Four cannons sat on the ship. Two at each side. As they were turning, James grabbed a cannon on the starboard side and brought it to the portside. Dil did the same.

“What about the balance?!” Marco cried.

“I have bigger things to worry about!” James replied. “Dil! Load every cannon! Prepare to fire as soon as they get in range! The plan is to break a path in the fleet and use the gravity current to pass through before they can crowd us!”

“Can our cannons even sink a ghost ship?!” Dil asked as he slid the cannon over to the opposite side of the deck. “Wouldn’t they just fly through the hull?!”

“I’m improvising, Dil!” James exclaimed. “I’m really just improvising!”

“Captain!” Lil called from above.

James, Bill and Marco looked up to her and then off the stern to see the ships emerging from the skulls, slowly inching out at a perpendicular angle had now begun to turn into a beam reach and their sails pushed forward filled with the fury of the wind. And so, they began to pick up speed.

“Oh no...” James whispered as he whipped his head around to look off the bow. And there he saw the ghostly ships emerging from the skulls now ahead of them at their angle doing the same movement and catching the wind.

“How’re we on that anchor?!” James asked.

“Does it even matter?” Dil asked.

As the ships both ahead and behind and even to the portside began to approach, James tried to slow his breathing and not panic. Marco had now retreated into the lower deck.

“Okay, okay, okay.” James spoke. “They can’t fire anything at us from any angle. We’re good for now, but we won’t be good for long.”

“They’re in range, Captain!” Dil cried from the cannons.

James took a moment to think but decided they had no other choice. “Fire!”

With a thunderous *Boom*, the far-left cannon unleashed a plume of orange and grey smoke, launching a metal ball high into the air. The crew of the Boundless Hawk watched the ball as it sailed through the air and after a few moments of complete silence, the ball crashed down into

one of the ghost ships, plummeting through its deck. The boat suddenly exploded into a puff of green smoke that quickly dissipated.

The crew of the Boundless cheered in joy. There was hope after all.

Then their joy was gone as quickly as it came as that dissipated smoke quickly reformed itself into a ghost ship once again and continued its advance.

Before James could get a word out, a harrowing boom of thunder infested the seas. Looking back to its source, James traced it back to the first skull that released the first ship. From its left and right, a pair of skeletal arms reached out from the mist, the bony hands plunged themselves into the water. Pulling itself, the smokey construct unveiled more and more of its form, ending at the bottom of the rib cage. The massive skeletal beast hovered above, only supported by its two giant arms. Beneath the ribcage sailed one titan of a galleon, ten times the size of any known galleon in the Old World. Green and misty, a ghost like the others, it slowly sailed out, perpendicular to the Boundless.

Just then, Marco appeared from the stairs, holding a set of papers of sparsely written notes.

However, he stopped as soon as he saw the beast emerging from beyond.

“The Ferryman,” he said.

Though it was just as far away as the other vessels, its immense size allowed the crew to discern far more detail. Three distinct holes were visible along the aged hull, each breach quickly falling into a dense void of darkness. Many ropes and ties appeared to be flailing in the wind. Four tall, towering masts spired out from the deck of the ship. One on the bow, two on the centre deck and one on the stern. Various cracks and splinters painted the logs of ancient wood. And on the tallest mast, the right-most mast on the main deck – near the bottom where it connected to the ship – a section was absent, as if the entire mast had been blasted from its hinges by an incredibly precise cannon ball. Yet it hung in place almost frozen in time. Higher up on each mast, sails were currently unfurled, allowing the ship to drift gently as it tossed giant lapping

waves of water left and right as these mighty waves were sliced, bisected by the front of the ship. And there lumbering on the main deck from point to point. Pulling ropes, moving crates and climbing ladders. Through his spyglass, Marco could see at least eighty, or ninety, shambling, rugged, mindless humanoids. Their eyes sunken and glazed over, unfocused and drifting about as their bodies moved from post to post, their bodies dripping with what he guessed was seawater, with a constant flood of the same ocean water pouring from their open, haunting cracked jaws. People of all eras, from the Golden Age, Pre-Golden Age and even older than that. Marco recognized the style of clothing from old manuscripts and paintings. After a moment of staring in pure horror, Marco turned the spyglass over to the stern, to the helm. There stood a tall, tall man. Standing far, far taller than the rest of his crew. At least nine feet, he guessed. A crooked pirate Captain's hat sat upon a ghastly white skull with eyes like fireballs that glowed and pulsed with a desperate energy to stay alive at all costs. His jaw hung low, detached on one side and dangled hopelessly. The rest of his body was masked in an old tattered pirate's coat and a cloak of dense mist that flowed from his sleeves.

Suddenly his head clicked toward Marco's eyes in the spyglass. Marco jumped back in fright. He quickly raised the spyglass again to see the Captain throw his head back and unleash a terrible shriek across the open sea. The sea rippled and danced to his words. And with one thunderous thump, the massive sails unfurled with a clap and the ghostly Captain tossed the wheel to force his giant vessel into a broad reach, his ghostly crew groggily crawling to the sails to angle them correctly to the wind.

"We need a plan, James!" Marco called, pulling James from his daydream watching the Ferryman's ship.

Thinking quickly, James looked to the ships approaching along their portside. Then to the cannons set up on the portside of their ship. Then he looked ahead off the bow. A vast open sea, with only a few piercing pillars of sea worn stone. He focused his eyes on one of those pillars as

it edged ever closer with the movement of their ship. Then back to the advancing vessels. A plan was brewing.

“I have a plan!” He finally called out.

“Is it a good one?” Marco asked, watching the ships of the portside.

“I have a plan!” James repeated. “Dil! Go to the harpoon!”

A harpoon stood bolted on the starboard bow. They often used it for what the crew called ‘extreme fishing’, though they never caught anything.

James rushed to the cannons. Choosing one at random, aiming at one of the ships and he fired.

The cannon ball blasted through the ship and it vanished. A few moments passed. James counted the seconds before it reformed and continued sailing.

“Ten seconds. That’s not a lot of time.” James said to himself.

He looked back to the pillar slowly approaching. He swore to himself. He quickly began to move one of the cannons over. Marco quickly ran to his aid as they managed to move both cannons over to the Starboard side.

“What’s the plan?” Marco asked, following James.

“Blow up one of the ships. Use the harpoon on that rock that’s slowly approaching and whip around. While we’re going through, use the remaining cannons to destroy one on either side.”

James explained. “Seems easy enough.”

“Yeah.” Marco replied. “Easy.”

James crouched next to the cannon he was going to use and kept darting his gaze from the sights of the cannon to the ever-shortening distance of the pillar, waiting for the perfect moment to arrive. They only had one chance at this.

“James!” Marco cried.

James turned to him to see him pointing off the stern. James followed his finger to see the titanic ghostly skeleton rear its head back and throw it forward with an open jaw, releasing an

overpowering scream that rippled the waters toward their vessel. Their ship was suddenly tossed about on violent waves, pressing them off-course. The crew of the Boundless were thrown about off their feet. The large looming beast then reverted to its original pose, continuing to drag itself along the sea as the ship below it moved forward.

“Bill!” James called as he stood up. “Get us back on course to that pillar!”

Bill did as commanded and tossed the wheel to quickly spin the ship in the right direction. The pillar was now off the starboard bow, causing the ship to run in close hauled as opposed to a beam reach.

“We’re gonna be without the wind for a while!” Marco realized.

“We may have to take that chance!” James replied.

There was a tense few moments of silence as Dil awaited the order to fire the harpoon. James darted his eyes back and forth between the ships and the pillar. Due to their angle, the cannon wasn’t able to destroy the ship off the portside for the first part of the plan. James tried to think of ways to reorganize the plan. How to move the cannon in time, how to gain enough speed without the wind. Would this plan even work now that he was thinking about it more? “James!” He heard Marco call again. He quickly turned to him. Marco was currently standing at the stern of the ship. “Forget the first cannon, just ram them!”

“Ram them?!” James asked.

“If the structural integrity of whatever matter is weak enough to be dissipated by a —” Marco stuttered and quickly gave up on his explanation. “Just trust me!”

After a few seconds of thinking, James threw caution to the gravitationally controlled wind and trusted his friend.

“Forget the first cannon! Dil, fire at that pillar on my mark!”

James waited for the right moment to turn to gain the exact momentum they’d need to whip around the pillar and when they were finally there;

“Fire!”

Dil fired the harpoon. It burst from the barrel and sunk deep into the side of the pillar’s rock face with the whine of metal scraping against stone. The rope quickly tightened, pulling an equally straining whine from the ship as it suddenly turned and began to circumnavigate the pillar. At the apex of the turn, James bolted to where the harpoon was planted and drew his survival knife.

One he had bought when travelling through Indin and cut the rope. The ship continued its momentum straight toward the armada of ships heading toward them.

“Raise sails!” He ordered and the crew raced to comply. The wind immediately barreled into the sails and launched the ship forward.

Lil gazed through her spyglass to the ships slowly approaching on the left and right to see their ghostly crews suddenly shifting from maintaining course to loading cannons, unprepared for their quarry’s sudden shift in movement. Least of which was the ship directly in front of them. It had no means to fire at them from this straight-aligned angle and they had no means to dodge or escape due to the lack of wind.

“Brace!” James called as he gripped the ropes hanging from the mast. The crew followed. James gritted his teeth as he hoped that Marco was right.

Then, as the ships collided head-on...

A lush and vibrant explosion of green particles burst as the Boundless Hawk sailed through unscathed. Little green lights hung around the crew in the air like emerald fireflies, or will-o-wisps as they sailed by. However, that whimsy was quickly extinguished as Dil saw the crew of the ship just off the portside readying their cannons. Without a second thought, he bolted for the cannon nearest to him on that side. James saw him move, saw the opposing ship and ran for the cannons on the opposite side of the ship. One after another, their cannonballs fired as the ships on either side of them exploded in a similar green haze. And as the cannons continued their momentum through the air, they continued to scatter more ships into a dense fog of green as the

Boundless Hawk sailed past enemy lines. They could hear the hollow cacophonous roar of the giant ghostly skeleton in the distance as they vanished within the veil of the dense fog.

The crew sat in complete silence as the boat gently rocked on the easy waters inside the fog. No one made a sound. For a moment they all just looked out into the mist, expecting the Ferryman's crew to follow them. But, they did not. After a few moments, Marco approached James. He held his Captain by the shoulders

"James..." He began. "I think we just did it."

James looked to him, slowly grasping the situation.

"We made it to the Centre." Marco explained.

James slowly stood up and wandered away from Marco over to the mast. Suddenly he hopped up onto the ladder and rapidly climbed about halfway up. He hung by one arm and leaned out from the mast and released a powerful cry of freedom. Afterward, he dropped to the deck and ran to Marco, embracing him.

"We did it!" He shouted.

What we Gain

For two weeks, the Boundless Hawk sailed in complete silence with no sights on the sea, enraptured by the misty veil around them. James theorised that they might come out the other side in Yan territory, perhaps having missed the Centre. Marco had explained to him just how large the region they had entered was, and that it was likely impossible to cross it in two weeks, even with the gravity current winds pulling their sails. Yet, sometimes at completely random moments something quite like a whale's call would erupt from far in the mist. Though, they never could see its form through the thick mist around them. It seemed when they passed the Ferryman and the fleet that came with it, the large stone wall was just that – a wall. Not long after they had escaped the fleet, the rock wall quickly vanished into the mist leaving them seemingly alone in an open sea for the last two weeks.

At this point, Bill had given up on using the helm. The wind currents were strong enough to keep the boat focused on moving straight ahead. Lil had left the crow's nest as there was nothing to see. And Dil was supposed to spend his time practicing knots but found the majority of time was used wandering the small ship from stern to bow, deck to deck. Marco had assured them that there was a landmass on the horizon. He claimed that by watching the pattern of the waves approaching their ship, he could determine the presence of a landmass far in the distance.

Though that claim was made eight days ago, and the crew was starting to feel as though maybe

that may not be the case. Bill proposed that maybe the oncoming wave may have just been one of the creatures they could hear in the water. Marco tried to explain that that wasn't how it worked, but the crew didn't listen to him. They had not considered this vast emptiness as part of their journey. Supplies were running low and soon the ship would need to dock at a port in order for the crew to survive.

James spent most of his days sitting off the edge of the bow staring into the mist. At one point he had a spyglass with him, but after three days of nothing but mist he left it in the galley. Bill, Dil and Lil slept through most of the day, only performing small jobs when needed. They spent most of their time doing nothing as there was nothing to be done. Marco confined himself to the galley where he scanned maps and charts of the Centre hoping for some indication of land. The explorers who had made the trip previously only marked the Inner Sanctum and then from there it was simply the Centre. Was there a reason they hadn't mapped this region? Perhaps the area was just so massive that they saw it as unnecessary. Maybe it was some sort of trial? Was this both the explorers' and the Centre's final test for any who wish to discover the secrets of this world?

Marco's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sound of a hollow screech from beneath the water.

The hull.

The ship suddenly ground to a halt. James had to quickly grab onto the railing of the ship to avoid falling overboard. Bill darted from the helm to the stern of the ship, with a theory. There he saw his answer. He could see the chain from the anchor pulled tightly against something deep below. In all the silence and serenity, they had forgotten to raise the anchor. The boat's position had shifted to a slanted angle to the angle of the water.

"Marco!" James called.

Marco immediately bolted to the bow, fearing what danger awaited them. The boat had run aground, the mist was thick and the wind was only pulling them inward. He had no idea how they could get out of this. They had come so close to the Centre, only to be stuck here. Marco reached the bow to see James looking out into the mist, standing atop the bowsprit. He turned slowly when he heard Marco approaching.

“Look.” He said quietly.

Marco slowly and hesitantly approached the bow and looked into the mist. Looking closely, he could see tall stone walls with a gap directly in front of them giving way to a long corridor.

James moved his gaze from the view downward toward the water. Seeing the ship beached before him, he had a thought.

Marco saw his Captain and best friend simply step off the bowsprit and vanish below. He leapt for the starboard bow and called out to him. Only to see James standing in shallow waters.

Moments later, the crew had disembarked from the ship into the shallow water and made the trek toward this wall. Passing through the ghostly barriers, the stone monolith ahead became clearer.

They found themselves at the bottom of a deep, deep valley of black sharp stone decorated with small white dots. As they moved further and further in, one could swear they could see vague details of wailing faces carved into the walls that bookended them. Soon, the water had retreated from the floor below, leaving only small puddles and a dreary damp air. Footsteps splashed and splattered with the slosh of wet gravel and mud, that wasn't really mud. Though it sloshed like mud, it would dry very quickly midway through your step and become a sticky, tar-like substance that would revert to its muddy structure once it was plunged into the puddles again.

After around twenty minutes of walking in silence, the group saw small fluffy white bulbs which descended from the mists above and floated and fluttered around them, but quickly passed by, vanishing into the mist. Shadows danced along the walls. Bill finally caught one in his vision

(and not just the corner of his eye) and followed it. He ran toward it into the mist, only to find the black stone, white dotted wall with the carving of a wailing humanoid skittering along the wall.

After hearing footsteps, James, who was at the front of them, stopped the group and turned around. Bill was gone.

“Bill!” he called.

Five solid seconds of shivering silence surrounded them. Mist crept along the floors like ghostly serpents slithering to quickly silence their quarry. From above, the darkness created by flowing clouds seemed to creep and crowd overhead. The quiet nature of the stone corridor drilled an ever-present aura of dread.

Then, emerging from the mist... was Bill.

The group breathed a sigh of relief. But Lil gasped as she saw the shadow of a tall, lanky figure looming behind Bill in the mist. She could only see it from the neck down.

She darted forward and yanked Bill back. Looking again, they saw the creature was gone.

“We are *not* alone in here,” she spat through heavy breaths.

James thought for a moment, looking between the group and the wall of mist behind them.

“Let’s pick it up.” He turned to leave. “I don’t want to be around here when nightfall comes.”

They walked for another fifteen minutes with no end in sight. However, they continued to see the tall, lanky figures standing just out of sight to either the left or the right, caped within the mist, their dark forms just watching the crew as they made their way through.

Then, a voice, hollow and sorrowful, reverberated off the tall walls of the sharp stone valley. The group turned around as they detected the source behind them. It soon faded. James sighed; his breath shaky. He slowly turned around to continue on only to see one of those figures standing in front of him.

The mist gently pulled away from the figure, unveiling a deep, dark brown skinned creature with skin that looked as though it were stretched over the monolithic being. Its feet were long, with nails that stretched out into jagged edges like broken glass. James could see the creature's hands. Long spindly fingers that did not have nails, instead morphing into the legs of a spider, or some form of insect. In its chest was a deep hole that reached through to the other side. It emitted a deep red light, surrounded by three golden rings constantly revolving around one another. As James slowly looked up to its face, it released a scream much like the one from seconds ago, but more rageful and gravelly. The hollow siren exploded with the sudden force of a gale wind as the group were pushed back. Then, it suddenly stopped. They all looked up to see the creature and the mist gone.

The sharp stone valley stretched on for another few hundred feet before it abruptly ended. The group could see another stone structure ahead.

"Marco?" James spoke up. "Any ideas on what just happened?"

"I'll be honest, James." Marco replied. "If I had theories on this, I'd want you to throw me into a sanatorium."

The ten minutes it took to reach the end of the valley were filled with dread. Dread for what lay ahead. Dread for what dangers may lie in wait for them. Dread that the discovery they had been searching so long for may be something that was better off never found, that they may endanger others in doing this.

Upon the end of the valley, the stone walls opened out wide, stretching for what seemed miles into a wide stone, circular chamber. A giant cylindrical ring with the top open to view cloudy skies. Before them sat a long, cracked and misaligned stone bridge. It didn't look like it was carved or built. It seemed more forced, as if the stone around them had been pulled into this form. But over time whatever force that bound it began to loosen its grasp and now the pathway was broken and sectioned, making crossing this part quite a challenge.

Below them was a deep dark void, though James swore he could hear rushing water, or waves, more like. However, what caught all their eyes was what lay ahead. The broken stone bridge led directly toward a massive stone dome, the other half succumbing to the void below. The closer they reached, they could see it curve into a sphere toward the bottom. At the end of the bridge lay a small dark hole in the sphere that they assumed was an entrance. The entrance to the Centre. The sphere was so massive that its top reached beyond the holdings of the ring and began to fade away into the clouds above. The wind, now blowing more gently, gave an easy pull toward the sphere, toward the Centre, and even more toward the entrance at the end of the bridge. The wind passed through the stone corridor as a frightening howl.

“Forward, I guess.” James spoke hesitantly. He moved onto the bridge.

Marco looked down at his compass. It had stopped. Maybe it was frozen. Or maybe it had broken from all the spinning earlier with the Ferryman. Impossible to tell. He simply lowered it, sighed heavily, and moved on.

It was an awkward climb across the broken bridge. They jumped and pulled themselves up and over the uneven platforms. It didn't help that the same muddy-then-tar-like substance was present there as well, making the ledges more difficult to climb and the jumps more dangerous as one could simply slip off and then be forgotten to the void in seconds.

“So,” Bill spoke up from the back of the group. “Are we just not going to talk about the fleet of ghost ships we fought a while back?”

“I mean, do we have to?” James asked.

“I'd like to talk about it.” Bill exclaimed. “Marco, you're the smart one. Any ideas on what that was?”

“Well,” Marco hoisted himself onto a platform and turned around to sit himself down on the ledge. “They were probably guardians for the Centre. They certainly seemed to be protecting it. Who, or what, they were, though? I haven't a clue. Perhaps they're the souls of sailors who

failed in their quest for the Centre? Who failed at that part to the Ferryman?" He thought for a moment. "Maybe every sailor who sinks to the Ferryman's ships joins the crew in the afterlife?"

"Huh." Bill expressed. "So, if we'd died there, we'd be members of his crew?"

"Potentially." Marco stood up and continued on.

"Or we'd just be dead at the bottom of the ocean." Lil joked. "Occam's Razor and all."

"Do you think the pay is better on his crew?" Dil asked.

"Crew that size probably has some good benefits." James joined in.

"Yeah, but you'd never get any time off." Marco laughed. "Guarding the secret to the fate of all humanity seems like a full-time job."

Reaching closer to the stone sphere, the group could see it in more detail now. It was made of a singular solid grey stone, smooth and seamless with no cracks, or splinters aside from the one entrance at the end of the bridge.

"Marco," James called. "You don't suppose that's formed naturally!"

Marco took a moment to stop on one of the platforms to think. He looked over the sphere with a look of pure confusion. He then turned around and looked back to the giant ring structure around them and to the valley they had entered through and back to the stone sphere.

"No." He replied. "No, I don't, James!"

Finally, James reached the end of the bridge and at last he was met with the entrance. It was an archway ten feet wide and fifteen feet high at its peak. Looking into it, James only saw darkness. Scanning the outside of the entrance there were no discernable markings or inscriptions. James had spent years of his life studying different forms of ancient writing in the hopes it would help him understand any writings found at the Centre. But there were none. When James was younger, he imagined the Centre as a sprawling green land with ancient structures filled with writings and artwork that would depict and explain the ancient cultures predating the void years. Thus far, this was nothing like what James expected.

He was lost in his thoughts as the crew caught up to him. Marco laid a hand on his shoulder and James was pulled from his thoughts. They all paused at the threshold of the entrance.

“So, this is what we worked toward.” Marco turned to James.

“I guess it is.” James scanned along the stone face once more before looking at Marco.

A silence fell.

“Are we gonna go in, or just stand here?!” Lil took a step into the darkness.

Moments later, the others followed with James and Marco taking the lead. Darkness surrounded them, with the only light coming from the entrance behind them and a vague, small light far in the distance ahead of them. Without a word, Dil pulled a lantern from his bag and lit it. A small flickering orb of light gave view to the ground around them. It was the best they could ask for right now. There was no way of telling how far the darkness around them reached. Most likely as far as the walls of the sphere. Marco judged by the echo of their footprints that this was the case. He had grown so used to the rhythm of their footfalls, that he noticed when that rhythm was broken.

Other footfalls. He darted his eyes around and found that the source was sparsely all around them. He could see vague shadows shifting in the darkness, most likely the same figures they had seen before. Thankfully, they did not seem to be dangerous, merely observers. He mentioned it to the group and hoped that they would remain as only observers. Judging by how far away the opposite light was, they may not be able to outrun them should any danger arise. The closer they got to the opposite light, the more splash there was at their footprints. The same muddy-then-tar-like substance again.

It took another twenty minutes of walking to reach the light at the opposite end. The light was coming from another entrance into another chamber. Though this one was much smaller. Three feet high and three feet wide. The edges were jagged and uneven unlike the entrance into this

first chamber, implying that it had been cut, or carved. Stepping through, they entered the next chamber.

A dimly lit, oval-shaped room that looked somewhat like an egg with the peak reaching the ceiling. The room seemed to stretch on for miles. Miles and miles of jagged, pointed rocks. Their points facing toward the outside walls, each of them pointing outward from the centre of the room. All along the walls surrounding them, the shimmer of light reflecting off water danced and dazzled on the stone surface. The knife-like rocks were tall and large. They'd have to find a path through them to reach the centre of the room. The crew felt the air become lighter as they made their way through. They felt faster, more agile as they soon began to run and dart across the rocks. Dil leapt from one to the other, performing a long, high, sustained jump. Marco's mind was running with theories of how this was happening.

"This could be the source of all the gravitational anomalies across the world!" He called as he leapt high into the air. "The general destabilization of gravitational fields in this one region denotes the existence of a device, or object that is causing it!"

James stopped his own leaping and paused. He looked forward, toward the centre of the room.

"Do you think the source is at the centre of this room over there?"

"I'm willing to bet!" Marco smiled.

"I'll race you!" Bill flashed by in a massive leap.

Within an instant, the entire crew joined in a race toward the centre, much like all the ships in the original race toward the Centre of the world. The weaker gravity made it only more exciting as the lead would be taken in an instant by a single jump, only for it to be stolen by someone else darting from below. Then, someone from the back of the line would rocket forward with a well-placed and well-planned jump that landed them in the running for first place.

Lil was the first to reach the Centre of the room. She landed on one of the jagged rocks and took in the view of the structure in front of her. A platform, it was lower than the jagged rocks

surrounding it, leaving it hidden. The platform held more jagged rocks, but they were curved and morphed into the shape of flower petals. It seemed that the 'flower' had blossomed, opening out to reveal some kind of well in the very Centre filled with water that shined brighter than the sun. The others caught up to her not long after and were equally confused by the sight. Marco was the most confused. It didn't match with his theories at all.

"Are we actually at the Centre right now?" He asked.

James looked around the room. As dark as it was, he could still see as far as the back walls.

"There's no other openings here." He said. "I guess this is it."

There was a long silence before Marco spoke again. "I don't get it."

"What do you mean?" James asked.

"The source of all the gravity currents in the world are a well?"

"Maybe it's what's in the well." Bill pondered before leaping toward the well.

His feet grazed the tips of the rock petals as he slowly floated down to the floor of the platform.

Marco looked to James. James only smiled and then leapt away too. Bill and Dil jumped forward as well into the platform. Marco watched them. He sighed and then jumped away too. The floor of the platform was smooth stone. Completely level. No sign of the muddy-then-tar-like substance from earlier. It was a completely smooth, almost carved surface, centering into an equally smooth well that released a beacon of bright light with no discernable colour. It's almost as if as you were just figuring out the colour, it would suddenly shift to a completely different gradient. The well itself was around ten feet in diameter. It was impossible to tell how deep it was due to the bright light that would scorch your eyeballs.

Marco inspected the rock petals around them. He noted that they were equally smooth as the floor. Almost as if they too were carved. Bill approached the well, covering his eyes as he approached. He placed his hand in the water. It rippled. It was cold. It felt like water, or at least a

liquid. He pulled his hand from the well and stepped away. He tasted the water on his fingers. Fresh, crisp, unsalted water.

Suddenly, the chamber was filled with a blinding light. Everyone turned to the well. The light was so powerful that they could no longer see the well. They became enraptured in a sea of light. Marco took a step backwards. He heard his shoes make a squishing noise, and his foot felt cold. He could feel water rushing by his feet. The light weakened and the chamber became visible once again. At the well, a geyser-beam of light fired out from the depths and burned into the ceiling above them. Marco saw out of the corner of his eye, small orbs slowly rising around them. Turning to look he saw that they were droplets of water rising slowly from the rushing water around them. Like rain in reverse, the droplets arose further and further into the air. Marco waved a hand through them and the droplets would separate and multiply into new droplets and continue rising, but never stick to his hand. It was then that he noticed that the air felt lighter. He felt light-headed. As the beacon from the well began to shine brighter and brighter, Marco knew that this was the source of the gravitational currents. Then, the droplets froze in the air, but before Marco, or anyone, could react, or speak, the light exploded once again as the entire chamber began to shake and quake, finally ending with the strange sound of something breaking the water's surface.

The light died as everyone took a moment to adjust their eyes. The only sound left in the hollow, deep chamber was the sound of drops of water dripping off of something and splashing into a pool. Finally opening his eyes James saw that the chamber was filled with the strange, shifting shapes of light refracting through water, dancing and shining across the floor and walls. It took a few seconds more to adjust to the weaker light at the well.

No, it came from just above the well.

An object dangled just above the well expressing the same colourless light. James rubbed his eyes one more time as this shining shape became clearer. It was a sphere. Or, more like a globule

shifting and changing form but willingly condensing itself into a sphere-like shape. Its colour appeared to be silver, but James could see the reflection of themselves on its surface, almost like it was made of water. It hummed weakly. Water droplets were still held frozen in the air. Marco, curious, stepped forward and it hummed louder. Vibrating their inner ears until he retreated where it resumed its weak humming.

“Can–can–can you help me?” It spoke with a distinct crackle and as though it spoke through some kind of heavy filter, a strange speech pattern that repeated some words as if it were forcing out the words.

The group stayed silent. James turned to Marco. Marco only shrugged.

“Who–Who are you?” It spoke again.

After a moment of silence, James stepped forward. Marco flinched to stop him but hesitated and stayed still in the end.

“My name is James Hawkins. I’m the Captain of the Boundless Hawk.” James introduced himself. “We’re explorers looking for the Centre of the World.” He hesitated. “Are you... it?” He asked, unconfident in his question.

“The–the Centre?” It asked. “That is much-much-much further down I’m afraid.” It paused. “Do you mean me–me–me?” He paused again. “It has been so-so-so long, I’m a-afraid I don’t quite know where I am anymore.” Its form shifted as it expressed remorse. “I’m–I’m sorry.”

“So, who... or what are you?” James asked, looking back toward Marco. He looked back to the form. “How did you get here?”

“I fell–fell–fell. No–no–no. I was built–built. That doesn’t seem right. Maybe–maybe–maybe, it is some combination of the two–two. Both, I–I think. I don’t quite remember.” With each contradiction, its form shifted and changed. “It has been so–so long.”

“What do you remember?” Marco asked as he stepped forward.

The form paused for a moment, as if thinking.

“I remember falling–falling–alling.” It shifted downward slightly before moving back up to where it was. “Then, a crash and... a crater!” Its globular form broke from the spherical shape and spread around in a colourless flow. “They found–found me. Part of me. But not all of me–me–me. Brought me – the part–part of me.” The form shrank back into the spherical shape.

“They brought me somewhere–somewhere–somewhere deep–beneath–underground.”

“What do you mean by a ‘part’ of you?” Marco asked.

“I do not know–know–know.” The globular form shifted slightly again. “I know that this is not me... the true me. The part they took–took–took–stole, they changed me–me, into something else because of what they saw in me–my part.”

“What did they see in you?” James asked.

“James.” Marco called his attention. James turned to him and saw Marco wave his hand through the still hovering water droplets. “He–it–they can manipulate gravity.” He explained. Then Marco lowered his head in thought. “But why? He asked. “What would they want to *control* gravity? The effects on our waters would destroy us!”

“They did not want to control their gravity.” The form spoke.

The crew turned to the shape once again.

“I’m sorry. The more I speak about it, the more I remember–remember–recall. They believed the control of gravitational fields–fields–forces, would allow them to travel far beyond their own world and search the stars.”

“But, even with control of gravity, a wooden ship would never survive in outer space!”

“Wooden?” The form asked. “Oh dear. Oh dear–dear–dear–no.” The form shifted again. “It appears I’ve been buried here for longer than I had thought.” It lowered itself again. “Tell me, James Hawkins of the Boundless Hawk, what year is it?”

“1278 PV.”

The form did not respond for a long, silent, moment.

“That means nothing to me.” The form floated across the chamber toward the crew. “I fear my abilities—gift—*power* may truly have gone from my control.”

“What do you mean?” Marco asked as he stepped toward the shape.

“I’m sorry, I’m afraid I don’t truly understand your perception of time. So linear and narrow.”

The form floated to the other end of the platform. “What was moments ago for me, may have been much—much longer for you.”

Marco looked to the form with a tilted head, then to the well that it arose from and finally to Bill. He shifted his attention to the still hovering droplets of water all around them. He trailed his hand through them and pondered. He cycled through all his theories and knowledge on the subject of gravitational fields and forces and what their manipulations may cause.

“You say it was moments ago.” Marco spoke to the form. “It sounded like you meant some kind of event.” He approached it. “In our time, there is a current void in history. That’s what the ‘PV’ stands for Post Void no one truly knows how long that void was. But it is believed that there was a large-scale event across the world that may have caused that void.”

“What are you proposing, Marco?” James asked.

“Our entire world is affected by multiple large-scale gravitational anomalies and fluctuations. There are a lot of other strange things occurring, but it always comes back to gravity.” Marco continued to trail his fingers through the droplets surrounding them. “So, it’s only logical to think that was all caused by the very thing that’s shaping gravitational fields in front of us right now.” Marco paused as he lowered his hand. “I have to know, what happened from your perspective before Bill put his hand into the water?”

The crew turned to him. Bill looked down at his still wet hand. James turned to Bill and then back to Marco.

“That’s what woke you up, isn’t it?” Marco spoke up again.

A silence fell over the chamber as the form shifted its shape incessantly.

“You are quite like the others.” It muttered.

“Others?” James stepped forward a few feet closer to Marco fearing that shape may retaliate.

“Some came here before you. There were more of them. They spoke of none of this. No void. No–no–no–no change.” The droplets slowly began to rise up. “They saw me, spoke to me. I told them what I was, what I could do, but they never spoke of wooden ships, or lost time–time–time–history. For days they stayed here... outside. Outside of this chamber. They would come to me and ask questions about what I was. I told them what little I could recall. Then, they would leave and go back outside. These memories continue to form as I speak more and more with you. On their last day, they spoke to me and asked for me to use my abilities to push–*crush*–compress some sooty black stones. It was wondrous. I changed them into shiny stones that they then took with them.” It hesitated. “Then I never saw them again.” A strange golden glow emitted for only a moment within the shape. “I had created something beautiful, even though it was small. I felt what they all called ‘pride’.”

“The nine explorers...” James whispered. “They didn’t find treasure here.” He spoke louder.

“They found you. They took the story of what they found to their graves and lied about such treasure.” James paused. “But why?”

“I do not know.” The shape replied. “They, in the time they were staying here, seemed fascinated by what I was, what I was capable of, and the world I was once in.” It shimmered slightly. “But they never spoke of their own world. Never spoke of a void and never alluded to any kind of event.”

“Well, we have to right that!” James exclaimed. “We have to go back and tell everyone it was a lie! If the people continue to think that there’s some kind of treasure here, they’ll keep throwing themselves at the seas and dying!”

Marco continued to look the shape up and down as James continued.

“If the people knew what we discovered!” James spoke to the crew. “This would change everything about our world, our history! We can end the Golden Age!”

“We can’t.” Marco said.

James tried to reply but stuttered over the flood of a million questions. “Why?” Was all he could muster. He took a few seconds before speaking again. “What do you mean we can’t?!”

Marco hesitated before speaking, thinking his words over carefully.

“James, we can’t let the people know that this entity exists.” He finally said.

“Why not?” James asked, his anger replaced by sadness. “Think of the changes this could make!”

“You’re right, it will change a lot!” Marco agreed. “But maybe too much.” Marco approached James, laying a hand on his shoulder. “A power like this is too much for anyone to seek control of it. That desire to control was what created our world as it is, I can only imagine it will be much worse with our seemingly primitive technology.”

James’ eyes began to fill with tears. “But then, what was this all for? All our time, all our effort? Finding this place meant everything to me, Marco.”

“And you did it.” Marco laid a hand on James’ cheek. “You are one of the few people in history to make this journey, but that leaves you – and us – with the responsibility of what must be done with this knowledge.” Marco began to tear up as well. “The Golden Age must not die.” He croaked. “Now go.” Marco stepped back and directed James toward the shape. “I trust you to make the right decision.”

As James stepped forward toward the shape, he felt fear. Fear of what his choices will mean for the world. If he keeps the entity a secret, thousands more will attempt this journey and die in a world all hooked in a lie. If he told the truth, millions would work tirelessly for this power and may cause a catastrophe much like the one that created the void in their timeline. *Is this what they felt?* James thought as he was basked in the warm glow of the form. *When they reached the*

Centre – those nine explorers – were they prepared for the responsibility, or were they just simple sailors from backwater towns like me?

James took a slow, deep breath and thought. Leaving now with nothing more to say felt odd. He needed one last question. One last idea. The shape shimmered in front of him as if it were waiting for him to speak, as if it knew he wanted to ask a question. James looked at all the droplets still rising around them. He looked over the chamber and the strange petal formations of the rock structures surrounding them. It was then that he had an idea.

“How did they leave you?” He asked.

“Whom?” The shape asked.

“The explorers before us. How did they leave you?”

The droplets fell all around them in a split-second rainfall suddenly shifting to complete silence.

“Alone.” It finally replied.

James raised a hand to the shape and touched it. It was like passing through a thick mist. This being, whilst having the appearance of a globular, liquid-looking form, felt like thick fog as his hand passed into it for a moment until he brought it back. James lowered his hand to his side and looked to the floor of the chamber. He then looked back to the way they had come in.

“I’ve made my decision.” He finally said.

The waves lapped gently against the rocky, shallow shores of the entrance way to the Centre where the Boundless Hawk had run aground some time ago. And then, as history seemed to repeat itself, a ship crashed into the shore, grinding, and scraping loudly against the stone. A pair of worn leather boots landed in the shallow waters. Sir Ronald Lionhart took his first steps onto the shores of the Centre. His crew of the HMS Legacy, a ship smaller than the Discovery

followed soon after. They found themselves at the bottom of a deep, deep valley of black sharp stone decorated with small white dots. In complete silence they walked through the empty valley. No one in sight, a clear road to an end to the valley. Soon, they quickly found the giant stone sphere structure. They quickly made their way across the now even more broken bridge. They quickly made their way through the dark void of the inside of the sphere. They quickly reached the inner chamber of the sphere to find the room of stone flower petals. They quickly crossed the chamber and to the centre where they found the well, and in it...

They found nothing.

High above them in the chamber, a note of paper hovered, but was slowly falling to the ground.

But, very, very slowly.

“Hello.”

The note read.

“Congratulations, you have made it to the Centre. I’m sure it was a difficult journey. We are sorry to tell you that the treasure you sought has long since left. But, we offer you a new prize. Deep in this well you’ll find more gems than in all the world. Take as much as you wish and spread the word of the Treasure at the Centre of the World!”

Sincerely,

The Crew of the Boundless Hawk.”

Lionhart turned to his crew and a deep rumble began in his chest. At first his crew thought their Captain was growling only to realise that it was a laugh. A hearty laugh.

“Well done, boys.” He said.

He wiped the tears from his eyes and scooped up a handful of gems.

“It appears coming second is not such a bad thing.”

As more and more crews would reach the Centre as the years went on, word would spread of the mysterious crew of the Boundless Hawk. Some thought they were myth, whilst some believed them to be real. All their stories from across the Known World ended in the same way;

The intrepid explorer, James Hawkins, took his crew to explore that which lay beyond the Known World in search of what else lies out there. Vanishing from the horizon as their small, rickety old ship soared and sailed across the waves.

“And we are officially now in uncharted waters.” Marco exclaimed as he viewed his map.

“So, from now on...?” James began to ask.

“We’re officially on our own.”

“What do you think we’ll find?” James asked, keeping his eyes on the horizon as the two sat on the bow of the ship.

“Hopefully somewhere warm!” Dil cried as he passed the mast and began raising the sail

“Well, there’s supposed to be somewhere warm across this ocean.” Marco began as he folded the map. “There’s supposed to be a whole other continent somewhere over there. With all kinds of hot areas, tundra, mountains, wetlands, lakes the size of countries.”

“And is that the same place we’ll find what we’re looking for?” James asked as he stood up.

“I mean.” Marco offered his hand up to James “It’s a good place to start.” James pulled him up to his feet.

“Okay!” James clapped his hands and began to walk down the deck of the ship. “How likely is this to work?” He looked back to Marco.

Marco shrugged. “Should work.”

“Good enough for me!” James exclaimed. “Everybody, tie your lifelines to the mast of the ship. Keep ‘em tight because if you fall off, it is unlikely we’ll be able to get you back!” Dil had already begun tying himself to the mast, paranoid he’d fall overboard. Lil dropped from the crow’s nest and began to tie her waist to the mast. “Bill!” James called. “Go get the chest and we’ll see if this works!” Bill hopped down from the helm and down below deck. He came up a few seconds later hauling a treasure chest. It was a large treasure chest they had been gifted whilst passing through Raybya for their help in uniting two tribes on the brink of war. It was around five feet long and three feet tall. Luckily, Bill was very strong, and he dragged the massive chest onto the centre of the deck.

“Let’s bring out our newest crew member!” James called to Bill. Bill nodded and opened the chest to reveal what seemed to be a chest-full of grey, misty liquid that shimmered and shifted to different colours as the light bounced around it. It slowly rose out from the chest and reformed into the globular form from the Centre.

“Have you found my vassal-child-piece?” It asked.

“Not yet.” James shook his head. “But, we’re following a lead that says it could be somewhere on a mysterious other continent out there.” James pointed toward the bow and off into the sea.

“I seem to recall such a place.” It said. “It was where they took the piece of me after I crashed at what you call the Centre.”

“Think you can give us a lift?” James asked, tying his lifeline to the mast.

The shape shifted as it always did when it was pondering. “I believe I can, Captain.”

Suddenly, the waters around the ship began to roil and tumble as slowly, so slowly, they were pushed and forced back from the hull of the ship, creating a perfect semi-spherical dent in the sea that left the Boundless hovering in the water. The Boundless creaked and croaked and cried as the wood was pressed against by some unseen force. Then, as if from some wondrous fantastical

fairy-tale, the Boundless began to rise further and further into the air until it reached above the clouds.

“Now!” Marco called and Bill lowered the sails.

Unfurling and immediately being thrust forward, the sails caught the power of an invisible current in the air.

“Are you sure that you can keep the ship in the air and control the gravity currents at the same time?!” James asked the shape.

“I believe I can!” It replied.

“I’m surprised Marco isn’t losing his mind about all this!” James exclaimed.

He looked over to Marco who was leaning against the railing, screaming in joy into the wind.

James smiled as he looked back toward the bow and felt nothing but pure excitement as the Boundless sailed into its next adventure.

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