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Zenith

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Extract

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LODESTAR

Out on the world's ocean, night is a black war-horse. The white ship bucks upon it like a ghost rider with no reins.

A lone figure at the bow keeps watch, her eyes as dark as the night. She has lost the star. All through the night she tracked it, even when it vanished behind cloud.

The North Star is an old friend. A steering star for the island fishermen, it was their lodestar to guide them home. For Mara, it was a stray jewel dropped from Queen Cassiopeia's crown, falling towards the Long-Handled Ladle that scoops up the soup of the stars. On clear, calm nights Granny Mary would take her out on to the island hills of Wing and show her the stories of the stars. With a finger, Mara would pretend to join the dots of the Long-Handled Ladle, the studs on the belt of Orion the Hunter and the zigzag of Queen Cass's crown.

If you stood at the North Pole, at the very top of the world, said Granny, the Star of the North would be right overhead. It never moves. All the other stars wheel around that anchor in the sky. You can't stand at the North Pole any more though, Granny would sigh, now the ice has melted into the sea.

Back then, when she was little, Mara couldn't fathom the crack of sadness in the old woman's voice.

Now the North Star is her only anchor. A flickering point of hope in a drowned world. The ice cap has melted, but if she can track the North Star it just might lead her shipful of refugees, a floating village of desperate people, to land at the top of the world.

The world's wind rises, boiling up a black brew of sea and sky. The refugees huddle closer as the wind wraps the ship in warrior arms and rides it across galloping waves. Mara clings to the ship's rail as her lodestar vanishes in the wild ocean night.

TUCK

The ocean has eaten the stars.

All that's left are their crumbs. They litter a sea as dark as squid ink or the depths of a whale's eye.

Tuck thanks his lucky stars for the dark and prays for the curfew bell. Meantime, he's running so fast the tail of his faded blue windwrap streams out behind him like a tiny gas flare from the oil rig that anchors the gypsea city of Pomperoy.

The oil lanterns on the boat masts above him glow like a host of shivering souls. If he keeps running till curfew he'll be safe. As soon as the bell clangs the rig flame and the boat lanterns snuff out and there won't be a wink of light left in the ocean night. The gang of Salters on his heels will need cat's eyes to catch him then.

There's a shout close behind. Tuck rakes air into his lungs and makes a leap on to the nearest bridge. The bridge wire twangs and sways. His long, gangly legs are shaking so hard they almost topple him into the water. He steadies his nerve, and his legs, runs along the bridge on to one of the ferries and – aah! – he's knee-deep in squelchy sea tangle outside the reeking, rickety Weeder shacks that

cram the broad deck. Tuck turns around and – *whack!* – gets a face full of stringy ocean wrack that's drying on a line of rope. He fights his way out of the thick, knotty strands only to skid on a litter of sea cabbage – and ends up on his knees.

A Salter's skittering on the cabbage too, right behind, close enough to grab a fistful of Tuck's windwrap, when a great *clang* sends a shudder through Tuck's bones. He shakes off the Salter as the curfew bell tolls across Pomperoy. Now the rig's great oil flare dwindles and snuffs out, along with every last lamp and lantern in the boats and masts.

A whole floating city vanishes into the night.

All that's left is a vast percussion beat. The *clink-chank* and *knockety-knock* of chained boats, cradling a huge human cargo, rocking them to sleep on the world's sea.

Tuck makes it through the ferries and heads into the heart of a noisy throng spilling out of the casino ship, hoping to lose the Salters in the crowd. From here, he's into the maze of boats and bridgeways of Doycha. He keeps running and leaping till he reaches the slum barges then clambers on to the flat roof of one of the boat shacks that crowd the deck of the nearest barge.

He lies on his stomach and covers himself with his windwrap. The sack of stolen salt cakes are digging him in the ribs but he dare not move. A *clatter-clang* of feet are chasing along the bridgeways. Soon, the shouts of the Salter gang are hot in his ears and the barge is swarming with men. Tuck crosses all his fingers and begs The Man in the Middle to send him a wink of looter's luck.

And Great Skua, he gets it. The clang of feet on the bridge to the next-door barge tells him the Salters are moving on.

The stolen salt cakes are making a hard pain in his side. Tuck shifts on his stomach and swallows a groan as the cakes begin to crumble under his weight. He feels the sack burst and deflate. Salt pours out over the shack roof.

Still he dare not move. A stray Salter might have lagged behind. Tuck listens so hard his ears tingle and once he's as sure as he can be that the gang are all gone, he sits up.

What a waste of a night. Chased all across Pomperoy by a gang of Salters and all for a burst sack of salt. Tuck scoops up as much of the spill as he can stuff into the pockets of his windwrap.

'Gotcha, scummy barge rat!'

There's a hard scrape of a laugh and a burning grip on his foot. A Salter's got him by the ankle and he's not letting go.

The worst crime in a city whose roots are pirate is not killing (there's often a reason for that). It's looting. Tuck has seen people rope-lashed and hung from the Middle Bridges, all for a loot gone wrong. Ransack and plunder were once the lifeblood of Pomperoy, but there was a time when boats of prey grew scarce and the city's taste for piracy turned in on itself. Pomperoy almost ate itself up.

So every night that Tuck goes out on the loot, he's risking *his* blood, if he's caught.

Tuck kicks hard against the Salter's grip. He doesn't want to be rope-lashed or hung. It doesn't matter that he's only taken a single sack tonight – looted night after night and resold on the barges, Tuck's stolen sackfuls have been undercutting the Salters' market price for weeks now.

They've been keeping Tuck and his Ma in style, those little salt cakes. Great Skua, so what? Tuck kicks harder. After Da died the Salters took their boat and he and Ma ended up in a barge shack so he's only taking back a

snitch of what's his. He and Ma have gorged on every delicacy he could spy on the market gondolas: sugar-kelp snaps, tangles of ocean noodles, rainbow baskets of briny cucumbers, the finest seaweed bread, crisp-baked anemones. For the first time in a while, Tuck's started to see some flesh on his skinny bones.

The Salter yanks on Tuck's ankle so hard he's brought crashing on to the deck. Tuck chokes as his neck is locked by an iron grip. Blood rushes to his head. The sting of a knife grazes the skin of his throat.

Tuck feels his looter's luck running out, faster than a trickle of salt.

MARA

Dawn reveals a brutal ocean, a roaring grey desert of sea.

'Mara.'

The ocean is so loud it almost drowns out Rowan's voice.

Mara turns from the ship's bow where she has been all night, though there's been nothing to see but the dark. And now, as day breaks, there is nothing but grey. She tries to smile at Rowan, but the blasting wind has made her face feel as rigid as stone.

Rowan throws a dirty blanket around her shoulders and hands her a plastic packet full of powdery yellow stuff.

NOOSOUP, she reads on the garish label.

'Gulp it down fast with some water.' Rowan makes a face and hands her a water bottle. 'Horrible. But it's food. There's crates full of it below in the hold.'

Mara wipes her wind-streamed eyes with the blanket, smearing her cheeks with its dirt. She scrapes a dark tangle of hair from her face and grimaces as she puts the packet to her lips, recoiling from the synthetic smell. But she's weak with hunger so she forces it down.

'Now,' says Rowan, as she wipes her mouth, 'tell me what happened. You vanished from the boat camp. I thought you must be dead. But here you are with a fleet of ships in a mass break-out from the city.' His haggard face breaks into a grin. 'I'm impressed.'

Mara returns a wry smile, but it disappears as she begins her extraordinary tale.

After the loss of her family on the journey to the New World, then more deaths in the boat camp around the city walls, Mara wished she were dead too. She was the one who convinced her people to flee their sinking island and make an exodus to the sky-scraping city of New Mungo. But inside the city wall she found a drowned netherworld at the foot of New Mungo's great towers. There Gorbals, Broomielaw, Candleriggs, Molendinar and the others survived as Treenesters in the ruins of a lost city. Mara saw the rooftops glimmering with ghostly phosphorescence under the sea. When Gorbals and the urchins were snatched by the sea police, Mara stole into the sky city to find them. And there she met Fox, the grandson of Caledon, the architect of the New World.

'Fox didn't know about the boat camp,' Mara insists. 'He knew nothing about the outside world. The City Fathers make sure of that. Up in New Mungo,' she remembers, 'it's like living on an island in the sky. You forget about the outside world, just like we did on Wing.'

'If refugees arrived on Wing, we wouldn't have built a great big wall to keep them out,' Rowan retorts.

'What if thousands landed on our shores? What would we have done?'

After a long moment, filled by the roar of the sea, Rowan returns to the here and now.

'How on Earth did you steal a fleet of ships?'

'Fox wiped out the city's communications. It was a big risk but he – he—'

Mara bites her lip, hoping the noise of the wind and the ocean drowned out the tremor in her voice.

'The grandson of the man who created the New World helped you break out of the city?' Rowan looks puzzled.

'Fox wants to change his world. That's why he had to stay.' She feels Rowan's eyes studying her face, trying to read the meaning behind the catch in her voice. Mara rushes on; there's plenty more to tell. Rowan looks increasingly bewildered as Mara tells him about the statue in the netherworld that is her image and the story the Treenesters say is carved into the drowned city's stone. It's a promise left by their ancestors, they believe, that one day they would be rescued from the deathly netherworld. When Mara arrived and they saw her face, the face in the stone, they were convinced that she must be the one to do that.

And strangely enough, she has. Though whether they will all find a home in the world, luck and fate will decide.

Mara has still to tell the tragic story of Candleriggs, the ancient Treenester, but Rowan looks exhausted and so is she. It's far too much to tell all at once.

And there are some things too painful to tell.

'It's crazy,' says Rowan. 'Our life on Wing was so hard and there were people dying in the boat camp and living in trees. Yet all the while the people of the New World were . . . are . . .' He breaks off, swallows hard, beyond words.

'Living in castles in the sky,' Mara finishes. 'In luxury you wouldn't believe, built by slaves the people know nothing about.'

'So who do they think built their walls and towers?

Who builds bridges all across the sea?' Rowan demands. There's a spark of anger in his weary eyes.

'They never think about that.' Mara grabs his arm. 'If you'd ever been inside a sky city you'd see why. Rowan, it's *amazing* . . .'

In her mind's eye she sees the vast cybercathedral which seemed to be created out of light and air, the silver sky tunnels sparking with speed-skaters, the wild and savage beauty of the Noos.

Rowan is frowning into the wind. 'This Fox . . .'

Mara's heart skips a beat, but she is rescued from questions she is not ready to answer by a sudden cry. She turns to see her friend, Broomielaw, struggling across the heaving deck with her baby in his papoose on her back.

'What if the world is all ocean?' says Broomielaw, crashing into Mara. They grip on to each other as the ship rolls up over a wave. The other girl's large eyes are shadowed and scared. 'What if there's no land? What if this is all there is? Ocean and ocean and ocean. I don't like it, Mara. I hate this wild world. I wish we were all back inside the wall on the Hill of Doves, safe and sound in our trees.'

Mara keeps a steadying arm across the sleep-slumped baby on Broomielaw's back.

'You *weren't* safe,' she reminds her friend. 'The sea was rising. Sooner or later, it'll swallow up the Hill of Doves just like it swallowed my island, and then what would you have done? There's land, Broomielaw, I'm sure there is, at the top of the world. It's in my book.'

'What if it's a drowned land too?'

It chills Mara's heart, that thought.

'And it's only the word of an old b—' Broomielaw grimaces as if she's swallowed an insect and spits out the

word '–book. What's that worth? You shouldn't trust those *things*.'

'You lot trusted your whole future to a story set in stone,' Mara retorts. 'It's your stone-telling legend as much as anything that's brought us here. You'll believe in an old stone statue but not a book.'

'You can trust stone.'

There's an edge of granite in Broomielaw's soft face.

'A vast land of mountains locked in ice.' Mara murmurs the words. She knows them off by heart; she's been chanting them like a mantra, over and over, to make herself believe they're true. 'If the Arctic ice is melted, the land must be free.'

But those mountains worry her. After all, the reason Mara's people abandoned their island, Wing, was because the rising sea had forced them further and further upland towards barren mountain rock. And they couldn't survive on that.

Broomielaw squeezes her hand. 'Sorry, Mara. I'm just so tired and the sea is making me sick. Baby Clayslaps couldn't settle all night.' She gives Mara a look. 'Like you.'

'Oh, me.' Mara pulls away.

Broomielaw grabs her arm. 'Tell me about the sky city. What happened to you up there? Something bad, I can tell.'

Mara shakes her head. How could she describe the wonders and horrors of a New World city to a girl who has lived her whole life in the ruins of the drowned world? Yet Broomielaw knows all about the cruelty of New Mungo towards those beyond its sky-scraping towers.

She also knows the pain of a broken heart.

'Tell me,' Broomielaw urges.

Mara hesitates. Rowan has gone into the control cabin and is deep in conversation with some of the boat-camp refugees.

'I – I had to leave someone behind.'

And she killed someone, but she can't tell anyone that. There wasn't time to dwell on that in the panic to escape New Mungo but there was time enough on the ship in the depths of the night.

She is rescued from Broomielaw's probing by the ship lurching over a wave almost as sheer as a cliff. They hang on to the rail and hope for their lives. Clayslaps howls, hurled out of his sleep.

'Take the baby below deck!' The wind whips away Mara's words.

'Come with me,' Broomielaw yells back, fighting the wind to make for the stairs.

'I'll be down soon,' Mara promises.

She turns back to the ocean. The exhilaration of escaping the city is gone. All last night, blanketed in darkness, she still felt close to Fox, felt the ghost of him beside her, his kiss, the heat of his fingerprints on her skin. Now, in daylight, she is confronted with the ocean that lies between them. The adrenalin is gone and the only thing left is rock-hard grief that feels as if it is crushing her from the inside out.

The wind calms a little. And so does Mara. Head thumping, she scrubs her eyes, turns around and rubs them again.

A long line of jagged grey teeth bite the horizon. The southern horizon. Not North, where the ship heads.

Mara races to the stairwell.

'Land!' she shouts.

A mass of sleepers rouses in an instant. When they

surge on deck Mara curses at the stampede she has caused. There's a dangerous rush to the ship's starboard.

Mara searches the mob and grabs Rowan. 'It's behind us. We need to turn back.'

But Rowan is shaking his head. 'No, no, that land's no good for us.'

'We've sailed too far!' The shouts go up all over the ship. 'Back, turn back!'

'It's no good.' Rowan tries to make himself heard above the din. 'It's all New World land.'

His voice is as frail as his body. No one hears – except Mara, who climbs on to the ship's rail to look over the heads of the other refugees.

'You sure, Rowan? How do you know?'

But Rowan is pushing through the crowd, still trying to be heard. Yes, it's high land, he's shouting, but it all belongs to the New World. Look! The sky above those mountains is swarming with air ships. They take off and land all day and night. There's no chance of refuge there, he insists, not unless you want to be a New World slave.

Word spreads across the ship and people slump on deck or troop dejectedly back below stairs to the hold. Mara jumps down from her unsteady perch on the rail.

'I thought I'd got it all wrong again,' she confesses, 'but why didn't we see it on the journey *into* New Mungo?'

She doesn't want to think about that journey, when the sea claimed almost everything and everyone she loved.

But she has Rowan. He is the last link with her island people and the life she lost. She has the Treenesters too and the urchins. She must keep reminding herself of what she still has in the world because what is lost is more than she can bear.

'We missed it in the dark,' said Rowan. 'We reached

New Mungo at sunrise, remember? It was only when I was working on the sea bridge that I saw there were high lands and found out it was a New World colony.'

That spell of slave labour has wrecked him. Mara wishes she could magic back the old Rowan: quick-witted, never-say-die Rowan, who explored worlds through his hoard of books. Not this broken boy who, like her, has lost *his* world.

He's watching her as she looks at the endless sea, trying to catch the tails of her thoughts. He always could, just as she could always sense the weather of his moods. Now, Rowan's misery engulfs her like an icy wind.

'We'd never find it, Mara.'

He means Wing, their island, where Tain and the other old ones were abandoned to the rising sea.

'We could try.' Her voice cracks. It's an empty hope.

A wave thunders on to the deck, crashing over Rowan's head and knocking Mara off her feet. Another sends her shooting across the deck until she smashes into the wall of the control cabin. Weak as he is, Rowan scutters across the slippery deck and grabs her. Together, they scramble into the shelter of the cabin.

Mara rubs a bashed shoulder, shakes soaking hair out of her eyes.

'You want to play hide and seek with an island and a great big ship?' Rowan wipes his streaming face on his arm. 'In a sea like this?'

They are sailing across the very ocean their island lies in yet it's impossible to find it and rescue anyone who might have survived. Like so much of the Earth's land, Wing might already have slipped into oblivion under the waves.

Mara looks at the switches and buttons of the control

deck, at the flashing numbers and symbols on the radar screen. Fox programmed the navigation disk to take them due North; beyond that, they are on their own.

The reek of the ocean fills the cabin. Rowan thumps a fist on the control deck. Seawater splashes from his hair into bitter blue eyes and drips on to the radar screen like tears.