



The Great Drift: Part Two

by Maia Jacomus

The water was congested with boats of every kind. The usual quiet and stillness of the air was replaced with a constant resonance of talk and motion. If that was not enough to convince anyone of what day it was, there was one undeniable sign: the ever-dim world they knew was brightened slightly by the complete absence of winter fog. In order to celebrate the occasion in her own small way, Luka changed from her autumn/winter snakeskin clothing in favor of her lighter, cooler spring/summer clothing made of woven crane feathers. No one would dare to doubt that it was time to begin the grand spring tradition of the Great Drift.

After their hundredth good-bye and their fiftieth promise to write, Luka and Rurik left the family home they had known their entire lives in favor of the crowded wharf. Luka clutched onto her bag with a stranglehold as they walked through, for fear of her only possessions being swept up by those she brushed against and squeezed between. She could see that Rurik disliked all the activity, as he muttered a curse each time someone banged into him. Admittedly, Luka also disliked being so tossed around, but all the liveliness in the air added to her excitement in a way that she would be sure to note in her travel log.

Finally, after fifteen minutes of pushing through the crowds on the wharf, they found their houseboat, *The Heron*, waiting for them. The boat was larger than Luka expected for holding only ten passengers, and drove her to jump aboard immediately to see the inside. However, she hardly set foot on deck when the captain barred her way. He was an impossibly tall man with arms like thick branches. He had a black goatee on his face, but not a single hair on his head. Luka stared at him curiously; she had never seen him before in her life, and yet she knew everyone in Lagun. He held out his open hand.

“He wants our tickets,” Rurik said, taking them from his pocket. “You can’t just jump on a boat without a ticket, Luka.” He placed the tickets in his hand and said, “She’s with me: Luka and Rurik.”

The captain showed one of the tickets, pointing to where the name of the ship was displayed:

The Heron

Captained by Enzo el’Adal Berat





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Rurik shook his hand. “Good to meet you, Enzo.”

Luka also shook his hand, though his strong silence made her uneasy.

“Which cabin is ours?”

Enzo held up four fingers.

“Thank you.”

Rurik went down the stairs to the narrow corridor, and Luka followed slowly. She mostly concentrated on the next person to present his tickets to the captain, waiting for him to speak. But the last thing she saw before descending into the boat was Enzo signaling a room number.

Cabin 4 was near the back of the boat. There were a set of bunked beds, a changing screen, a closet, and a small table with two chairs near the porthole.

“Aren’t there any candles?” Luka asked, looking in the closet. “I forgot to bring candles.”

“No problem,” Rurik said. “When it’s too dark, you can either go to bed, or go to the common room. I’m sure there are candles there.”

Luka did not let the lack of candles dampen her spirits. She immediately unpacked her travel log to write what she could so far, then unfolded the map she had tucked inside as a bookmark. “So, I think our first stop is going to be Spirit Hallow. It’s a...” She read the information in the margins. “*Spirit Hallow is the most highly populated Spirit haunt of the Stretch. It can be identified by the large dead tree that resembles a hydra. At this point in your journey, you are asked to speak no louder than a whisper and to do nothing which will imbue negativity in yourself or others. How long until we get there, do you think, Rurik?*”

He shrugged as he stowed his basitar under the bottom bunk. “Depends when we leave. Once we’re out, a few hours. I’m sure the captain will let us know once we’re there.”

“But how...would he...?”

“Every boat has a bell, Luka. He’ll probably use it whenever we get somewhere.” He patted the pillow of the bottom bunk. “I want the bottom, if that’s okay.”

“Sure,” Luka said as she stood at the window. “I think we’re starting to move! No...no, that’s the people on the wharf.” Turning around for a moment, she saw Rurik lying comfortably on his bunk with his eyes shut. “You aren’t going to sleep through this whole trip, are you?”

“Everybody’s going to be using these next couple hours to get situated in their cabins; no one’s going to be meeting in the common room for awhile. Besides, I got up early this morning. I’d like to catch up to my usual sleep pattern.”



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“Somebody’s lazy,” Luka said in her singsong tone, the one that she knew irritated her brother.

“Why don’t you go fishing off the side of the boat - with your teeth?” Rurik suggested as he turned onto his side, his back to her.

She made her way to the door. “I *could* make use of my overbite,” she said with a click of her teeth.

“And with a mouth as big as yours...”

“I love you, too, brother dear,” she sang as she left the room and closed the door behind her.

Luka walked down the corridor swiftly, greatly disliking how narrow it was. Her plan was to stand at the stern of the boat as it set out, and to wave at all those she was leaving behind on the wharf. But as she set foot on the deck, she was alarmed to find the wharf almost entirely empty of people, as well as boats. Moments later, she watched as Enzo used his massive arms to turn the waterwheel and start *The Heron* on its way. There was no one for Luka to wave to; looking up, she saw that all the people were back on the boardwalk, going their own ways again. It rather disappointed Luka, being a less climactic departure than she had expected, and so she merely sat herself on the deck and watched as Lagun grew smaller and smaller with distance.



Hours later, the passengers of *The Heron* gathered into the common room to greet one another. Luka was happy to find that they were all as excited about the trip as she was - her brother being the only indifferent one. There were no other sibling pairs; the other passengers were traveling with neighbors or friends.

Cabin 1 was occupied by Yuli and Yakim, two boys of eighteen who had been waiting for this trip since they were thirteen. Yuli was the only son in a family with five daughters, and Yakim was an only child; growing up as neighbors, they treated each other exactly like brothers. Once they arrived in Alkat, they planned to go into business together as skimmers and tanners, and work together to hunt the reptiles that would provide for their business.

Cabin 2 was occupied by Kuzma and Darya, the former being nineteen and the latter being twenty. Both girls were frequent customers of the house of imports, and had only just





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decided to go on the Great Drift for the purpose of exploring new establishments of such a nature, with different goods to offer – Kuzma particularly collected painted vases, and Darya collected hats. Both expressed an interest in opening their own dining house which would serve cuisine from all regions of Gallidon.

Cabin 3 was occupied by Esfir and Ilya, an uncle traveling with his eighteen-year-old niece. Esfir was talented in designing, crafting, and repairing boats, a business needed much more in the large city of Alkat than in a smaller city like Lagun. Ilya's only ambition in joining him was finding a husband, as no one in Lagun suited her fancy.

While everyone already knew each other, they were interested to learn what it was each planned to do with their life. It made Luka feel rather unprepared, as she had very little planned besides applying for a job wherever there was open employment. She knew that Rurik planned to make a living playing his basitar, but she was never quite confident about his actually attempting such a risk. Yet, if he did in fact have a backup plan, she was never told of it.

No one knew who occupied the final room, Cabin 5, nearest the galley and common room. They never saw anyone go into the cabin, nor saw anyone come out. And everyone knew that the captain resided in the one cabin which sat on the deck. The travelers could not think of any excuse reasonable enough that would warrant one neighbor to so ignore another, and so everyone developed an almost instant dislike for the unidentified persons occupying Cabin 5.

The first night that they spent together on the boat was passed by telling stories of the previous autumn. For while neighbors knew each other well enough, the floods of the torrential autumn rains often drew families into themselves, causing them to rarely leave their homes, except when absolutely necessary. *One neighbor's struggle is another neighbor's lesson* was a well-known phrase that had been coined during the autumn floods, and it was how hardship stories came to be told - the difficulty was relived, for the sake of helping a neighbor through any similar difficulty they might have in the future.

Esfir concluded the solemnity of such discussions by mentioning their captain. "You know, most captains - especially houseboat captains - can't row for more than half an hour together before taking an hour break. I've heard this man Enzo can row for an entire hour together, and only needs a half hour break. Seems we got the efficient one."

"Do you know Enzo?" Kuzma asked. "I've never met him before."





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Everyone else chimed in that they did not know him, either.

“All I know,” Esfir said, “is that he comes from Adal Berat. Chief Terenti had received a letter from him; he volunteered to come down to Lagun to assist with the Great Drift.”

Ilya sighed dreamily and said, “He has such big muscles...”

Esfir elbowed his niece with a scoff and said, “He’s thirty-nine years old.”

She shrugged. “Yeah...okay...”

“Anyway, Chief Terenti usually doesn’t pull captains away from their usual post, but when he found out how advanced Enzo’s Spirit Mastery Gift was, he thought he would be ideal for the route through Spirit Hallow.”

Ilya’s eyes lit up again. “Ooh, so he’s a noble, too?”

Esfir tilted his head impatiently. “A boat captain? No, dear.”

Rurik just shook his head. Luka took note and mentioned, “Rurik doesn’t believe in commoners having the Gift.”

They all fell into silence as the bell rang from the deck above.

“We’ll soon find out,” Esfir whispered.

Everyone silently rose from their seats and scaled the stairs up to the deck. *The Heron* sat drifting, barely moving down the waterway that had been cleared of vegetation for proper travel. Just off the left of the waterway, Luka almost immediately spotted the large, dead tree with crooked branches resembling a hydra with three snaking heads. Everything and everyone was nearly still and quiet. Luka twitched each time she thought she felt something on her neck, only to realize it was the humid air and nothing else. She calmed herself by looking to her brother, whose head was tilted up and whose eyes were closed. It was the first time she ever really understood him - she had always assumed his expressed doubts were because he did not believe in the existence of Spirits. But, as she now observed, he did believe in them - his strong convictions about them were what caused him to believe that only those who were noble, more directly connected to the gods, could possibly communicate with them. Such a discovery made her feel guilty for all those times she had fought with him on the subject, now knowing how she might have offended him.

Luka linked her arm with Rurik’s as they stood drifting, wondering if they were alone or completely surrounded.

“How long will we be here?” she whispered.



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“About an hour,” Esfir replied, “while the captain eats lunch.”

“Isn’t there something we can do for the Spirits, while we’re here?” Darya asked.

“We have two bald men on board,” Yakim remarked. “I don’t think we have anything to worry about.”

Rurik took a small cloth from his pocket. Unfolding it revealed a small tuft of the hair he had shaved off at the celebration the day before.

“Good idea,” Yakim said.

Rurik stood at the side of the boat, and let the hairs fall into the murky water. Some patted him on the back to acknowledge his deed, then all returned to silently observing their surroundings.

Suddenly, Enzo burst out from his cabin and looked around. A thump sounded from below deck. He put his fingers to his head and closed his eyes tight.

“What’s going on?” Luka asked.

“It looks like he’s trying to talk to the Spirits,” Yuli said.

The hatch flipped open with a bam, and the outsider that Luka had seen in Lagun emerged, her fists flailing in the air, her teeth grit. She stumbled to the side of the boat and thrust her arms out. A splash emitted from the water below. As she caught her breath, she snorted a bit of dust and walked the length of the boat.

“Is that the thief everyone’s been talking about?” Ilya asked.

After circling the deck, the outsider approached Enzo with a pat on the back. He dropped his focus and nodded, returning the gesture. The outsider then noticed that all the passengers were staring at her.

“Sorry about all that,” she said, walking their way. “I’m Lani Ouranos...oh, that’s Lani Ouranos e’Kinbornu.” When no one responded, she added, “That’s from out in the Sea of Grass. I’ve been living in the Stretch for...must be about a year now. And don’t worry, Enzo talked to the Spirits to keep them calm. I’m done creating a ruckus.” Still receiving no response, she simply nodded, wiping stray red hairs from her face. “Guess I’ll just head back down to my cabin.”



Lani Ouranos e’Kinbornu was the only conversation that evening at supper. It was



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concluded that she was of some nobility, to possess a family name apart from her place of origin. But seeing as she was so far from home, they supposed she was disinherited, likely due to her addiction to narcotics and the kleptomania that resulted. The biggest mystery was how she seemed to have an understanding with the captain.

When Luka finished her meal, she excused herself, claiming she was going back to her room. But she passed Cabin 4 and approached Cabin 5. Taking a deep breath, she rose her fist, but found she could not bring herself to knock. Instead, she went back to her room to write in her travel log. At the end of her entry, she added, '*More information on Lani Ouranos to be inserted...later...*'



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