

Stowed Away

Grick

Beneath a crooked column of moonlit coal fumes, the cargo ship Eurayle slid through the calm waters of the eastern sea weary with travel and glutted with cargo. Swaddled in cast iron, the vessel's principle hold sat laden with all manner of crate and container. Innumerable sizes and shapes fitted miraculously together behind bursting meshes of thick rope, leaving only narrow causeways between them. Sacks and barrels hung in layered nets on the walls and ceiling, all fixed so tightly that the ship's gentle swaying budged them not an inch. Checkered beams of starlight poured through the caged hatch to the deck, shifting slowly back and forth with the waves. Faint whispers of warm ocean breeze came with them, but were drowned out by the well-oiled heartbeat of the ship's engine. Scents from all the world's corners brewed in the humid chamber: silks and furs, spices and metals, seaweed and sawdust, all stewed together in a pungent blend. The night passed in silence, stillness, and stagnation.

That was, until two hands slid out from under the white tarp covering a doublewide crate. Probing forward, the hands gave way to a pale pair of densely freckled arms that braced against the crate's brim to push forth the red crested head of gasping Percea. Shriveled brown leaves with a spicy aroma flaked from her bright braided hair and dull woven vest as she wiggled her torso free. Stifling a cough, she moved with deliberate slowness, tensing her muscles as she lowered herself to a handstand at the base of the crate. Her blood-swollen head thudded painfully, but she dared not make a sound over the ship's slow creaking. Should she alert the dozing watchman on the deck above, a return to slavery would be the least of her worries.

At last she worked her feet free from the wooden lip and "walked" her way down the crate's side till she lay flat on the floor's cool metal and soft sawdust. Rubbing her temples, she knelt for a moment and then stood, bracing herself against a nearby barrel as her legs adjusted to the sea's sway. With a patchy orange sleeve, she wiped sweat and sawdust from her cheeks as she oriented herself to the dim clutter.

Over the course of minutes, Percea mapped her escape. Sealed by a rolling hatch, the door would make noise when she opened it; that much was unavoidable. What mattered was reaching the lifeboat in time. Though she caught only a brief glimpse of the ship's exterior before hiding herself away, she remembered the position of the boats relative to the main deck. Looking up through the bars, she pieced together fragments of the night's constellations. The ship was traveling west, likely along the coast. If she was right, mainland should be on the ships' starboard side. She would sneak to the door, open it swiftly and then dash to the nearest lifeboat upon which she would row to freedom. A rickety plan to be sure, but it was the best she could develop in the time she had. With careful footfalls, she crept forward.

No more than six paces later, a mysterious noise stopped her in her tracks. It sounded like breathing, slightly muffled and a little raspy. Pressing her back against the nearest crate, she

scanned for the source. Surely no sailor would sleep in the sweltering hold. Perhaps a drunkard? If so, he would need to be taken care of before she could attempt to flee. Her expression grim, Percea knelt to reach the slim knife tucked in the trunk of her left boot. Halfway down, however, her ear passed a row of staggered perforations drilled into the side of the crate, and she realized then that the breathing she heard emanated from within the container itself. Knife in hand, she pressed her face against the wood and peered inside.

For such a large crate, much of it was empty. Stalks of straw poked up from the bedding, but shadows at first shrouded much of the interior. As the ship shifted, however, the light from the crate's many holes cast themselves briefly over the olive torso of a youthful boy. Though she glimpsed him but a moment, Percea placed him somewhere between fourteen and seventeen years of age. He lay on his side with the smooth curve of his back facing her; his hairless head rested on his arm. Straw fully covered his hips and legs.

Percea bit her lip to keep herself from calling out in surprise, allowing starlight to pass over the sleeping figure twice more to quell her disbelief. This was no slaver's vessel. Rows of eclectic cargo left little room for shelves of sentient cattle, and she doubted the ship's crew was large enough to handle such a task. Besides, apart from the boy's snoozing and the occasional creak, Percea heard not a sound. She therefore concluded that the boxed boy was the ship's sole captive. He was too large to repair factory equipment, yet too young to keep up with grown men at hard labor. Judging by his sinewy back and almost unnaturally smooth flesh, she suspected the boy was intended for some wealthy eccentric's harem.

Still looking in, she considered rescuing the unfortunate boy, for she too had once nearly met a similar fate. However, her thinking mind quickly dashed the idea; it presented too many complications. Even if she managed to silently pry open the box, how could she be sure the boy would keep silent? When she explained her plan, would he be able to execute it? Would he even speak the same language as her? Ultimately, she judged that two people would be at least twice as likely to alert the ship.

On the other hand, if she had guessed his fate correctly, then the boy was possibly the most valuable piece of cargo on the ship. She had neither the means nor the desire to sell him, but he could still be valuable to her in other ways. If something went wrong with the plan, the boy could act as a sort of hostage. With a knife to the boy's throat, she could at worst bargain her way safely off the ship. Of course, she would not actually harm him. He would act as a contingency, and if everything went to plan she would have the satisfaction of saving a fellow slave.

Proud of her quick thinking, Percea ran her hand along the crate's rim, searching for a latch or a nail. Four bolts held the corners in place, and thin wood nails prevented the rest from peeling. The smaller nails she could pry with a little leverage. The trick was making an opening large enough for her to work in her fingers. Without delay, she began whittling at one of the

corners. Her knife, barely used since she “acquired” it, peeled away the cheap wood in long strips. Cutting slowly and controlling her breathing, Petra cleared away a crevice near the bolt within a few minutes. Gripping the bolt’s head between her knuckles, she braced her shoulder against the wood and yanked the metal rod free. Setting it gently on the floor by her feet, she went to work on the second.

Several minutes later, without a sound louder than the whining groans of the hull, Percea loosed the second bolt. Now came the difficult part. Straining her arms, she scratched at the crate’s edge, desperate to find a grip. When her fingers proved insufficient, she reached again for her knife. Sliding it into the narrow slit, she braced against the handle and leveraged her weight forward. In a series of silent shoves, she coaxed the smaller nails free of their holes. Halfway through, however, her knife snapped at the hilt with a sharp *chink*. Cursing silently to herself, she wedged the handle into the widened gap.

Within, the boy began to stir. His breathing grew louder, and moist hay crackled beneath him as he sat up. Afraid that the boy would make some noise to give away her presence, Percea sharply whispered, “Hey, Shh in there. I’m here to help.” The boy made no indication of understanding her. Instead, he turned his head about slowly in search of the voice. “If you can understand me,” Percea continued, “just stay still and don’t say anything. I’ll have you out of there in a second.”

As Percea spoke, the boy sat up on his elbows and raised his eyes to meet her. The light shifted away before they met, but even in shadow Percea glimpsed their piercing green gleam before it faded. Clearly, there was something exotic about this boy, something that warranted his special treatment on a ship unaccustomed to living cargo. Perhaps he had fey blood? Percea nodded to herself. That must be it. Half breeds were an increasingly rare commodity; their beauty and frailty made them valuable items in certain markets. All the better, Percea thought, the crew would loathe to risk such a precious catch. In the worst case, he would make the perfect bargaining chip. In the best, she would be a rich woman upon reaching the shore.

“Stay back,” she cautioned, “a nail might catch you.” Without checking to see if he’d heeded her, she hooked her fingers around the lid’s lip as though hanging from a ledge and threw her weight into a series of tugs. Little by little, the metal bits slid free until the box’s lid resembled the gnarled-toothed jaw of a crocodile. Backing up as she went, Percea popped the barrier free and lowered it gently to the floor. Sodden clumps of straw spilled from the entrance, and an oily odor wafted into the room.

The crate’s interior was larger than Percea had first appreciated. She could lay flat within it without touching either end with head or toe. It completely dwarfed the boy whose torso jutted from the hip-deep pile of hay. He lay on his chest, flopped limply upon the dislodged panel. Rubbing his eyes sleepily, he turned and issued a deep yawn. It came out almost silently, like

the slow release of steam from a valve, and his mouth opened slightly wider than one would expect.

Undaunted, Percea took a tentative step forward and extended her hand. “Let me help you up,” she offered. “I can get you out of here, but we don’t have much time.” Still looking down, the boy scratched the bald back of his head. “Hey, do you even know what I’m saying?” Percea asked. Still no response. She sighed. The boy either spoke no common, or worse was deaf and dumb. Either way, they had no time to spare. Kneeling down, she grabbed his hand by the wrist. “Come on,” she insisted.

Faster than Percea expected, the boy’s head snapped up to look her in the eye. He had much more than a little fey blood, she realized. His eyes gleamed like jade embers split by narrow pupils, and his nose sat flat to his face, barely more than a pair of narrow nostrils. She had meant to help him up, but he rose without her in a smooth, muscular motion as though levitating from the ground until their faces nearly met. Behind him, the straw pile roiled, granting shiny glimpses of muddy green scales. From between the boy’s pursed lips, a forked tongue flicked against Percea’s nose.

Reacting quickly, Percea snatched away her hand, but the naga was faster. It snatched with a surprisingly strong grip, digging shallow red streaks in her forearm with its nub claws. She used the shift in momentum to plant a dropkick in the creature’s human abdomen. It’s otherwise placid face winced, but the blow did not stop it from surging forward and tackling her to the floor.

The explosive push exposed much of the naga’s sinewy length. At the waist, the minute scales of his human-like torso grew in size as his body faded to a sinewy column about as wide as his ribcage. Faded green broken by twin black streaks ran down his back all the way to the tip of his tail, and mossy freckles mottled his otherwise olive underbelly. Twisting and writhing, the naga’s flexible body sought to entangle the young woman as they rolled across the floor.

The grapple was brief and vigorous. Percea planted several jabs to the side of the creature’s head, and she landed an elbow that would have shattered the creature’s collar if she’d had any more momentum. However, she was all but powerless against the speed and size of the creature’s coils, and within moments it had looped half its length around her, pinning her legs and one of her arms with crushing force. As she tumbled around in the naga’s grip, she scooped one of the bolts from the floor in her free hand just before it was pinned against her thigh.

As abruptly as it began, the struggle ceased. The naga slowly refined its grip, closing the gaps between his coils until he covered the woman completely between her feet and shoulders. Still young, he had barely enough length to fully subdue her, and his human torso still hovered close to her head. Guided by instinct, he slowed his movements and conserved his energy, tightening his coils just enough to hold her in place, but not enough to crush her. A splintered bone jutting from the skin would be dangerous for what he intended to do next.

Percea's instinct, on the other hand, urged her to thrash and struggle and rage against her thick bindings. Wisely, she ignored them; it was a fight she could not win. By the ship's silence, she judged that no one had heard the encounter. For a moment, she considered calling for help, but she quickly discarded the thought. She preferred her odds against the naga to the Euranyle's crew. She would be keelhailed to shreds if she was lucky and shipped back to the slaver's if she wasn't.

Besides, even if she did cry out, they might not arrive in time. Though she had never encountered a naga before, Percea's homeland had made her quite familiar with snakes. At no point in their fight had the naga bit her. Clearly, he lacked venom, and so he must be a constrictor. Every bit of breath she wasted would just allow the creature a tighter grip. She had no help to depend on, and no way to break free of the creature's grip. All she had was a plan. Not her best, she knew, but at least it would be a better idea than opening that damned crate.

Looming inches from his prey, the naga took in her scent with frequent flicks of his tongue. The flavor intoxicated him. It was sweet and promising, like the flank of a boar, but without any of the rigid hairs or thick hide. Past the shoulders her lithe figure would be easy to consume, yet it would yield so much meat. Moreover, his entire life he had taken his prey unseasoned, yet the aroma of a strange spice lay thick over her. His human stomach groaned audibly, and his jaw hung limp. Strands of saliva accompanied his tongue as he daintily lapped her cheek. Ordinarily, he might have stripped his prey of its tasteless garments, but his body, sore and needy from so many weeks in his cage, quivered with mad urgency.

That's it, Percea thought, I knew these bastards wouldn't be smart enough to feed you before boarding you up. Probably didn't want to clean up any snake shit at port. You're starving, aren't you little boy? Been at sea a long time, eh? Well I have what you need. One fresh hunk of juicy meat, seasoned to perfection. Here I am, helpless in your grasp. Exhaling slowly, she closed her eyes and relaxed her muscles.

The naga responded immediately. Bracing her head between his hands, he straightened his human torso directly above her head as though preparing to dive down upon her. With a dull *pop*, his jaws unhinged. His eyes rolled back as he opened his mouth wider and wider until his angled fangs almost made a perfect oval as they drew parallel to one another. In spite of himself, he let out a brief "ahh," from the strain. A tendril of saliva dribbled down onto the crown of Percea's head.

Opening her eyes, Percea looked up at the approaching maw. Past the peeled lips, over the rows of needle teeth, and behind the retracted tongue pulsed the pink void of the naga's throat. As wide as the naga had stretched, it still looked barely large enough to accommodate her hand, much less her entire body. But Percea had no illusions. The creature could swallow her whole within minutes, and it would no doubt succeed unless she could make her plan work. Just before the descending gap closed over her forehead, she spotted what she was looking for. A

small, fleshy tube poked out from the bottom of his mouth. It looked like the probing feeder of a sea slug, but Percea knew better. It was an extension of the naga's trachea, the only thing allowing it to breathe as it ate something as large as her, and it was the only thing that could get her out of this alive. Before darkness closed around her eyes, she committed the image to memory. If she didn't recall it perfectly, it would be the last thing she ever saw.

When the naga closed around the top of the woman's head, it let out a muffled moan. Even stuffed with the woman's greasy braids, the taste exceeded his expectations. He worked his jaws left and right, savoring the size and texture of the skull and sending slow rivulets of saliva dribbling down the woman's face. Tucked in the folds of his mouth, his tongue emerged briefly to lick across the bridge of her nose. Reflexively, his coils relaxed in pleasure. Percea took the opportunity to sneak in a deep breath.

Heh, I'm fucking delicious, aren't I? Percea thought. *Too good to pass up, and far too good to wait for me to pass out. Go ahead, eat me up; it's safe. I'll slide down nice and easy. Don't take too long, though. I only have so much air in here, and I need to be awake when we get to the good part.*

As Percea expected, the naga slid easily over her head. His cheeks and bulged tremendously to accommodate her, and his upper and lower jaws had stretched so far apart one could barely tell they were still connected. When he passed over her ears, the creaking of the ship and the whistling of the sea breeze gave way to the rhythmic squelching of peristalsis undulating against her ears. Gulping and twisting, the naga practically fell around her neck before reaching the barrier of her shoulders. His ribcage stretched from his body as her head entered his chest.

For several moments, the naga strained against his meal's shoulders. Even stretched wide enough to accommodate the woman's entire head, the naga's mouth left inches of shoulder hanging off either side. Balling his hands into fists by his side, he tugged with his coils and thrust with his mouth as he attempted to take her shoulders in all at once. As he pushed with his coils, however, he only succeeded in shoving her arms further up her body, broadening her shoulders and preventing him from proceeding. The naga boy punctuated each shove with a grunt of frustration.

Stupid kid, Percea whined to herself. *Am I really the first person you've ever eaten? I guess I'll need to help out a little. Can't have you taking so much time on something so simple.* Though still pinned, Percea found room to wiggle her shoulders back and forth. Though she hated wasting the energy, it was the only way she knew to get the creature to proceed. Timing herself with the naga's attempts, she twisted such that the creature took in her shoulders one at a time. Once he wrapped around the first, his lips stretched with frightening ease to accommodate the second, and he soon wrapped his whole mouth around the torso several times larger than his head. Percea held in her breath as the naga's teeth pricked into her back and chest.

Working its sore muscles for the first time in weeks, the naga groaned around his captive as he advanced down her chest. Working back and forth from side to side, he marched his jaws over her, tugging his strained lips behind as they wrapped around her ribcage. The crest of her head bulged his human belly, and his chest had doubled in size to accommodate her. His human hands ran along the contours, appreciating how incredibly full she would make him. One after another, his coils sloughed away as he passed under them. The woman's heartbeat thrummed against his palate.

For several gulps, the naga made exquisite progress. When he reached her breasts, however, he slowed to a crawl. By volume, they did not provide a substantial barrier. However, stray spices pinned beneath the woman's shirt combined with the organs' tenderness compared to the rigid shoulders coaxed the naga into taking his time and lolling over them with his tongue.

Quit that, you brat! Percea raged. Though uncomfortable, the naga's licks did not concern her. Rather, she feared for her plan. The naga stopping here proved doubly disadvantageous. Not only had he slowed down at a critical juncture, the pressure of his jaws chewing around her chest threatened to drain her of air. If she passed out now, she was doomed. Limited in her range of motion, she splayed her elbows and pressed her arms out against the naga's cheeks. Already wrapped around the widest part of her body, each push against the taut flesh produced a pained whine and a quick gulp from the naga. Reluctantly, and somewhat angrily, he continued to swallow. Comparatively tasteless, his prey's tunic offered him little reason to linger. The fabric caught in his teeth, and it knotted uncomfortably in his throat.

Before long, he had taken in all of Percea's waist. The incessant tugging of the naga's coils had rolled her pants up her legs, balling them over her groin and adding to the natural width of her hips. This inhibited him slightly, but he made steadier progress than with her shoulders. Now that his impressive inner muscles had a firm grip on her torso, he no longer needed to fall or push upon her. He lowered himself to the straw, level with his prey. The woman's legs twitched numbly as he slackened his grip. Reaching forward, he felt along the woman's thighs, tugging at them gently with his claws as they neared his dripping maw.

When her hips reached the back of his throat, he lifted his prey above him and relaxed throat, taking in the woman's balled fists in a single swallow. As soon as they entered his mouth, two things stopped him abruptly. First, a peculiar taste washed his mouth. It had the metallic tinge of blood, but with none of the warm satisfaction. It overpowered his taste buds and soured the woman's flavor. Second, he could no longer breathe.

Got you now, you oversized worm. From within the naga's swollen waist, Percea celebrated silently. Her free hand clutched the gagging naga's trachea, clamping his airway and denying him even a small breath. Around her, the naga choked and struggled, thrashing his tail against the walls of the crate and clawing her legs with his hands. *This is how it feels. Who's the constrictor now, bitch?*

Of course, she knew this would not be enough. Even if they had started simultaneously, the naga could hold its breath many times longer than her, and two minutes had passed since it first forced her into its suffocating throat. With her chest under enormous pressure, her lungs already burned. It would surprise her if she lasted another minute before passing out. In spite of all its inefficient panicking, it would best her in a contest of endurance.

However, she didn't intend to make this one. By grabbing the naga's windpipe she intended to startle, not strangle, it, for in her other hand she held the metal stake from the cargo room floor. Pinned as she was, there was no way she could effectively wield it as a weapon. Even if she managed to stab the beast, the wound would likely be shallow, and the naga would simply disgorge and disarm her before feasting again. Instead, she braced the bolt against the roof of the creature's mouth and put all her strength into holding it there. When it realized what she had done, it would instinctively bite down to try and free itself. When that happened, she would use the force of the bite to drive the nail into the serpent's skull, killing it and giving her an anchor with which she could drag herself free of the corpse. Any moment, it would happen. Concentrating, Percea braced herself to deliver the killing blow.

Two seconds passed, then three, then four, all without the anticipated bite. Clearly panicked, the naga continued to struggle, swatting her legs now rather than scratching them and heaving uselessly in an attempt to dislodge her. Desperately, he tried to reach into his own mouth to tear away the woman's hand. However, his jaws stretched so tightly around his prey that he could not open wide enough to accommodate his hands.

When the naga tried to pull back his own lip, Percea realized what had gone wrong. Young and inexperienced, the naga could barely fit himself around her. Had he not been starving, he might not have even tried. Stretched to his limit, the naga could barely edge her forward or back. He had neither the strength nor the room to open wider or bite down. The creature was trying to bite her, she realized, but instead he merely chewed at her rear, scratching her lightly and giving her no opportunity to place her strike.

Within seconds, the naga's frightened tightness and frantic wiggles squeezed the last of the air from her lungs. Numbness spread over her, and her grip on the creature's windpipe loosened. Gasping, the naga boy slowly regained his composure. Sliding back over a slimy section of his meal, he pried the nail from her hands and tossed it to the side. It skittered clinking over the metal floor.

Rattled from his perilous experience, the naga absently slurped the remainder of the woman's limp legs. Settling back into his crate, the naga allowed himself a few licks at his meal's toes before he clacked his jaws shut around them. The long bulge passed through him with relative ease, gliding down his human torso and into his serpent half. His meal swelled him even at his widest point, and the woman's vague contour remained visible as a distended

hourglass in his scales. The naga boy laid his human half atop it stroking it as it traveled, fascinated by the sensation of such a large meal.

Once she reached his stomach, Percea awoke to rancid air searing her nostrils. Immediately, she reached for where her weapon would have been. When she found nothing, she slumped back with a fatigued sigh. Out of ideas and aching all over, she surrendered to the stomach's ministrations. Though oppressively tight, the muscular walls massaged her with surprising gentleness, and the caustic fluid it rubbed into her, though certainly deadly over the course of hours, posed no immediate danger. She could last for as long as this diminutive pocket of air remained. Based on the stuttering belches he heard around her, however, she wouldn't be around for long. *How long does a naga even take to digest something my size? She wondered. Days? Maybe a week? I might just make it ashore, after all...*

Hugging his bulging middle, the naga boy belched out the last of the air, leaving only a quivering lump of delicious meat. Slithering the back of his box, he nestled once more in the straw as drowsiness overtook him. As he lay on his gurgling bed, the ship slowly rocked him to sleep.

The next morning, three friends of the flogged watchman found the naga dozing in its crate. Placid from its meal, it barely acknowledged them with a lethargic glance as they replaced the crate's lid, adding in a few extra nails for good measure. One of them found the hilt of a knife nearby. The blade was broken, but the metal of the pommel was worth a few coins. A heated argument and a fistfight later, it went to the least bloodied of the three. Briefly, they discussed whether they should hunt for the knife's owner, but a thundering gurgle from the naga's crate convinced them that a search was not warranted. Stowaways were the captain's problem, not theirs. Besides, things like these had a way of working themselves out.