

Over the weeks she was there, nothing was more rare and uncommon than a ship that didn't ask for the dock workers to help clean out the thing. Whatever from hold to hull, they always wanted something done by someone that wasn't on their ship. So few could dare let their 'finest' dirty their shoes on the goo-slathered docks.

But there is was! A large metal barge, a vessel of size and stature, with bulk and chipped paint. For how sterile it looked, it seemed to brim with semblances of life. Figures darting in and out of doors and crates of large size being guided down the rear hold. Being dressed and actually being a dock worker, she could easily sneak up and catch a few words from the captain.

"Enough supplies to last us." He muttered offhandedly to the harbor master. "And none of your men. Our ship sails to... very sunny and green pastures. And we've had stowaways before." He continued in a hushed but clear tone, dripping with experience.

"Just don't make too much noise. The people here would die for a tip; their hourly pay is set anyway." The harbor master only got an off-handed scoff as remark, combined with a lit match.

"If I drop this, what would happen? This chemical spill you call a dock looks like any inspection would slide right off the edge." His tone, sincere and curious, was hardly one of malus and ill intent. Hence a wave removed the flame's eager, before the smoking tip landed, staying upright in the slime.

"I thank you either way."

"Mind telling me where you are going? The logs need to be as complete as possible." The other grumbled and rolled his eyes in contempt, not keen on spilling his quality beans in a place like this. Or perhaps he just detested having to breathe another breath of the toxic swill.

"The summer resorts north. You know, the sunny big shots. We'll get there after a few detours. With that... if I catch you onboard, you'll get unceremoniously tossed in the water. It's not just dock dummies that try to sneak in."

"Your boat hardly looks like a tour boat... or anything that transports." The captain returned another grumble. His mild manners were just ground down by every question he heard every time before.

"Listen buddy. What we do there is our business. Just know we're not there for trouble."

She didn't need a lot more news. The north is where she wanted to go, and this seemed like a one in a million. Probably not a million, but still a neat idea to go along with.

Naturally, it started to occur to her that getting on the boat and staying on the boat would be difficult. She smelled like the rear end of an ammonia spill, they clearly had experience with stowaways and getting on the darn thing wasn't that easy too. A set of finely crafted figures made sure nobody went up or down the boarding plank without getting rolled down like a barrel of laughs, for their enjoyment.

The anchor hole was far too small and likely secured. The crane and crates were checked and inspected, she knew that much. Truly, the boat had a hermetic seal against potential intruders. At least, when one assumes this dock is the only entrance.

Her mind, perhaps not as sharp as she warranted it, did notice another, proportionally the same ship on the other dock. Close enough that the minor glides her oiled wings could manage would suffice. Getting on wouldn't be too hard, as she unloaded it earlier that day and knew its passengers and crew had fled far away to avoid becoming walking chemistry labs.

Of course the vessel's gangplank was still in place, as any-man on-board didn't want to waste any time once they were done airing themselves. And from the ship's port, she observed the other craft's crew. Looking for a hole, a gap, a moment's respite in which her squeaky creaky shoes could sneak across. Hardly did she mind the dock workers that would miss her, especially after her ungraceful fall onto the deck.

Luck was with her in a minor way, as the crew seemed stocked with nose protectors and occupied with lunch formalities. This granted her a reprieve long enough to scope out a cozy place. Anything would do, truly she hadn't a single care about her quarters during what she considered an escape.

Unfortunately the hold was still watched and clearly used for engine access. The front was... stocked with crew and captain. And the bridge. Truly, a great place to get caught or to stage a mutiny, but neither would be on her list of ideas.

Heck, she noticed that some of the vents were alive, strangely enough. They looked and started, like guards on patrol, ready to snack and feast. They didn't seem to talk, or perhaps they were shy. Teeth like rivets, they had, as if to latch onto the metal deck while they did whatever they needed to eat. It gave her shivers. Yep, staying in a lifeboat wasn't a healthy idea either.

Going down below deck to explore was risky. She could get lost, or worst, get found. And so fortune seemed to strike with a nice quiet, shadowy corner. Between the two steam pipes, nestled away. A blanket was tented up, several boxes were stacked around.

Her feathers perked and pulled it up, revealing an awfully comfortable tent. Despite looking like a sailor's sneak-retreat, it was too dusty to have been used. The smell of oil perked out of the vent that stood in the middle, indicating this place likely saw use in colder areas, as the ship's doors had inhumanly cold steel handles.

With the grace of an old truck tire pushed by the winds, she plopped herself down on the dusty pillows and noticed just how numb her nostrils had become. Her greasy wing dragged across the beak, but found no way to undo the damage, temporary as it may be.

"Well, at the least this place isn't a dumb. And with the tropics in sight, I could try to catch some non-acidic rain." She thought to herself with a grin. "Might get cooked with that thing around. I'll just tear a hole in the sheet if it starts getting harsh."

Her shrug was as attentive as her attention was focused. The vent seemed to become possessed by the creatures she saw elsewhere, meaning they were not just actual, functional vents, but also a rather functional and nasty security.

The creature figured she deserved a demonstration of the security measures, even though this one might not have been planned with that in mind. It did a mighty lunge, causing the metal to bend with as much noise as your own arm would, enclosing the bregull in a prison of sorts.

"This is... gooey, dark, slimy, warm. Didn't know they had dogs around here." She sneered like a snide shark. Her body shook a shiver when the metal rivets bolted down, and a heavy swallowed started to push her down.

The fleshy sides were short. Short enough that she felt metal the moment it went below the deck, indicating how this exotic anomaly existed. While she might not be inclined to engorge on such scientific curiosities now, it did become apparent that this vent wasn't meant to eat things at all. Perhaps the sheet and boxes were there for her protection.

See, the end of the tube was right above the engine room. Not where the steam churned out, nor was it the main exhaust for the room itself. In fact, it seemed to have no practical purpose, perfectly aligned with the ship's appearance of being hacked together by jet-pack-powered welders and an overturned bucket of metal sheets.

Covered in drool (which, curiously, did stick to her chemical coating) she landed on a pipe. A rather cold one, probably used for water or cooling. As she gained her night vision and orientation, she started to assess it as a place to hide. Surely, a bird had no trouble sleeping on a horizontal stick!

The drool dripped, and she smelled dog-breath-like that she had half a mind to make fun of herself. Subsequently, the drool took away her ability to hold on, causing her to flip and hang upside down instead. Not alike a bat, more alike a drop of water. And with those wading boots on, she had no nimble feet to attach.

With her feet clenched around, she moved to rub her eyes clear of the drool. It was then that one of her long speculations given a datapoint; it wasn't glue in those boots. As such, they slipped off her feet, staying in place by their low weight and frozen-in-place attitude.

A dull, slightly sticky echo bounced off the wall. The 'floor' wasn't too far below her, neither was the floor all that cold. It was nice and warm, nothing steamy, and seemed to clench around her

like a blanket. Most know that floors don't behave like that, and she correctly assessed she had falling into a frying pan, metaphorically, and a large, open container of thick oil, literally.

She contemplated whatever her originally tumble at the harbor was in non-oil substances, as this thick, crude material was so much like tar it was hardly like the stuff that polluted the harbor. Her mind nodded at how it was indeed impossible to fly, if not jump, at all with a layer of this all over. With sputtering and gawking, she clawed and flapped her wings and feet to find a ledge.

Now, I shouldn't need to say that a freshly docked ship would refill this supply to the brim, and as such it had. Could be the reason the lid was open in the first place. It was still rising, allowing her to grip her way out.

By the time she held on, her sputtering caused many strands and strings of tarry oil to fly out. Her eyes were shut under two layers and her body felt sucked down and heavy. All her strength was pooled into a single pull, which got her high enough that she landed on a ledge adjacent to the tank.

Boy did she feel heavy. In the oil, she was at least 'buoyant', but without that she felt like she wore twenty sets of clothing, each soaked in water. Probably made of wool. Heck, considering just how odd this stuff was she wondered if it was oil at all.

Truly, she didn't care. The sputtering complaints and sarcastic remarks were unintelligible, even to herself. All she knew, and all she cared about, is that nobody noticed any of it. If that's not a sign of a solid hiding place, the person who composed the criteria should be fired.

Naturally, a woman like herself doesn't just want a pole to sleep on. She wanted at least a sheet, some pillows, a few cans to keep herself occupied. A boat like this could easily miss a few meals. And with her inactivity, she needed very little. With hope (and maybe a stolen book or three) she'd pull through it!

Her inner ear perched as she noticed the vent (alive or not) did let her hear deck commands. With this, she could be certain to know if they'd arrived yet or not. A smile crept along her face. Escape. That word just echoed in her head.

As did fatigued. Maybe it was the fresh air, or the tar, or the whole 'swallowed by living metal', or just the emotional victory. In her daze, she didn't notice the vent had also swallowed the sheet that was above it, as well as a pillow or two. Both of which landed gingerly on the boots, whose v-shape provided a tidy shelf.

"This place... just as bad..." She grumbled and groaned, feeling very sore. After all, the substance was quite thick and constrictive, meaning every muscle was pulled or strained somehow. "But it doesn't stink... it's room and cozy... and there's no dumb fancy pants to pull up his nose..." She said under heavy, suppressed breaths of air.

"Everyone, the Bold Bucket of Bolts is leaving ship." She heard through the vent. "All aboard!" A series of subtle, yet clearly vivid and powerful steps marched and ran across the gangplank. Seemingly a room over, monsters began to awake from their slumber and doors were opened, locked and knocked on. And for a moment, she swore she heard a man cuss at the vent for eating up stuff.

"Serves ya right... metal munching creep." She uttered, before taking an involuntary siesta.