

Chapter One



Though I didn't realize it at the time, I first noticed evidence of our thief after leaving the goat farm in Cedar-By-The-Sea.

We'd spent a full three weeks in hiatus – some of us repairing ships, others recovering from injuries – and every member of the Circus Salmagundi was eager to return to our summer tour. Don't get me wrong: we'd had a pleasant holiday. There were plenty of diversions, and the children blossomed on solid ground. Their daylight hours were filled with farm chores while, in the evenings, they enjoyed playing baseball with the local urchins in the neighbour's hay fields. Sometimes Honoria and Calliope, the Gibson sisters, would sing old vaudeville tunes; Lou Grady told frightful tales of hairy, half-human monsters lurking in the woods; May Tanaka's trained chickens counted beans and sorted coins. There was much to entertain us. No one complained of boredom.

Besides, after the events of Hyperborea, we had no Big Top to call our own, so leaping into the circuit was out of the question. After all, what's a circus without a tent? Hardly worth the price of admission!

But even that loss didn't weigh heavily on us, for fair Fortune had been kind. In appreciation for saving his son's life, a certain candy-coated New York millionaire had generously provided Grover Scott with the funds to replace our ruined Big Top, and as soon as Mr. Scott's

boots kissed the dust of the farm, our employer went to work. He took measurements, then used a neighbour's telephone to contact a manufacturer in Wisconsin directly. No expense would be spared! Mr. Scott paid all fees for a rush order and for shipment by rail, and the company promised that the tent would arrive by the end of July, which frankly, I thought was pure fantasy. Bets were placed, doubts were voiced, but the company was good to their word. Our new Big Top was in our hands by July 20th, 1921. My goodness, what a marvel of modern life!

The tent took twenty strong men a full six hours to raise, but by God, it was worth it: the canvas was striped in vibrant hues of purple, yellow and orange, and the interior had a circumference of 150 feet wide, with two mid-poles and four quarter-poles of polished steel. Side walls were 10 feet tall, sloping upwards to a maximum height of 30 feet, and the two parapets had a 40-foot span. From their spires flew magnificent sailcloth flags, which snapped and whipped in the breeze like the wings of agitated dragons.

Mr. Scott stood at the edge of the goat pasture with hands on hips, looking like a pharaoh admiring his pyramid. "God damn," he whispered, and in his voice, I heard the promise of riches and glory, and the prideful confidence of a conquering king.

The next day, suitably rested and repaired, we bid Cedar-By-The-Sea farewell.

At first, our journey took us south. One might assume August to be a very pleasant month to travel. Certainly, I'd grown accustomed to the friendly inland waters and clement weather of the Strait of Georgia, where the mountains of Vancouver Island offer constant protection from Pacific storms, but our passage bore west along the Juan de Fuca Strait, around the tip of Vancouver Island, and into the open ocean. Once we'd passed the ill-tempered lighthouse squatting on top of Cape Flattery, frightful swells met us. The security of the coastline drifted away, replaced by an endless blue horizon. Faced with this majestic infinity, our three ships became as small, naked and vulnerable as a babe squeezed out bawling into the merciless world.

Greedy waves clawed over the bow. A fan of spray thrummed across the galley window. Grey flannel skies promised sheets of rain before lunchtime. Still, the *Atropos* was a sturdy beast. She'd been a tug in her

early days and she plugged along with a stout heart and even bearing, but a quick glance to starboard showed the *Nona* tossing about like a cork in a barrel. Poor *Nona* had once been a ferry with the Mosquito fleet in Puget Sound and she was not accustomed to the open sea. Goodness, I could only imagine the panic on board! Nancy Crawshank would be tangled in a tornado of frantic dogs. Dr. Kane would be tying down his crates to keep his glass jars from smashing. I heard the distant sound of howling: was it the Geek in his cage, or the old shipboards protesting?

The *Decimo*, half-a-league back, fared a little better. She was an ancient cargo ship, broad-bellied and stout with an immense curved bow that sliced through the waves like a scimitar. Watching her against the shifting curtains of grey rain and upsurging waves, I was simultaneously humbled by the weather's power and impressed by the valour of the old vessel. The *Nona* might be cast about willy-nilly, but the determined *Decimo* rode the swells with conviction. Nevertheless, the *Decimo* carried the larger animals and the bulk of our performers, and they might not be so steadfast. Below-decks would be filled with the scent of terror and loosened bowels.

As I stared out the windows, my expression must have betrayed my concern.

"Don't fret, Rosie," said Magda as she scrubbed the dishes in the sink, an inch of sudsy water sloshing up the side, "Boats love the wild sea."

Gertie moaned. Our bareback acrobat, who could circle around the ring on the back of a galloping horse for hours, sat next to me with her head hung over a bucket. She pressed against me for comfort.

"This stretch is the worst of it. They call it the 'Graveyard of the Pacific'," Magda continued breezily. She spoke with a sing-song accent that I couldn't identify, but which gave her words a carefree lilt. Magda Scott had a calm demeanour, very important for the wife of the circus owner. I'd never seen her lose her temper, no matter what trials our little troupe faced. No calamity ruffled her. She wore a green velvet dress and a crimson handkerchief around her black braids, and when she took a towel to dry the plates, her voluptuous body swayed with the ship as if they were dance partners, following a set routine.

Gertie retched but Magda continued. "A thousand ships have met their doom along these jagged rocks, but with this fine favourable wind, we'll reach the Broken Islands before dinnertime. From there, we head into the Alberni Canal and the water grows calm." She threw us a sanguine expression. "Don't you fret, my ducklings. We'll be in Port Alberni by sundown."

"Thank the merciful Christ," Gertie croaked into her bucket.

Magda put the dishes away in the cupboard. "A spoonful of soothing syrup should settle your stomach," she suggested, closing the cupboard door before the dishes tumbled out. "I have a bottle in the medicine cabinet here." Magda bent to one of the low shelves and pulled out a tin lunch box, and opened it to rummage through its contents. "Where did I put that bottle...?"

Of course, the soothing syrup will work, I thought. That dreadful elixir had been on the market for much too long! Its active ingredient was a generous dollop of morphine, and before the Great War, the American Medical Association had linked the syrup with a string of children's deaths. There'd been grave warnings against its misuse, and while it was still available on the market, at least parents treated it with a measure of respect.

The boat leapt up and crashed down. A splash of foam slapped against the porthole window.

Gertie heaved and belched, then wailed, "I hate the ocean!" Her eyes looked to the heavens as if appealing for salvation. "I hope Bruce and Percy are okay! My poor horses, Rosie! I ought to be with them!"

"They're fine. They're stalwart creatures," I assured her. "I imagine they're just as concerned for you."

This brought a weak smile to her lips. Then into the bucket she plunged her face, and her breakfast made a triumphant encore.

As I held her brown hair, I wondered how the rest of our troupe were faring: fussy Honoria and tender Calliope, the knife-throwers Bill and Wanda Peacock, Argos the blockhead, Dr. Kane and his jars of handmade oddities. He'd spent his holiday creating his newest masterpiece, a monstrosity of taxidermy sewn from sea lion hide and slaughterhouse detritus, and I imagined it careening wildly around the *Nona's* cargo hold at that very moment.

And the others, too: I had no doubt that the animal trainer, Orville Mann, was using a generous dollop of liquid courage to get through this calamity. Neither Cosmos nor Fletcher enjoyed a storm but Orville often abandoned the old bear and the raven when times were tough. He'd be too busy emptying a bottle down his gullet to care about them.

Some folk fared better. Saltchuck Cecil stood on the outer decks of the *Atropos*, singing to the storm, so I wasn't worried about him in the least -- seawater ran through his veins! Nor was I concerned for Martin Spindle, the human skeleton, who suffered from severe fatigue and slept through every adventure. I'm sure May Tanaka and Nancy Crawshank were keeping each other company on the *Nona*, and our ringmaster Alex McGee wouldn't be far away, ready to lend a supportive hand. If a pretty girl was near, he enjoyed playing the role of hero. That man had a great talent for assisting comely ladies in peril.

Another belch, another violent volley of vomit. Gertie gave a meaty moan.

As I stroked her brow, I thought of my own strange, surprising, and unconventional hero. What about the Geek, I wondered. How did he fare?

He hadn't spoken to me during our recuperation in Cedar-by-the-Sea. My encounter with the Hyperborean Society and my escape from Jedediah Island had been the talk of our troupe, and everyone wanted to hear the story and ask a million different questions. I'd been hounded constantly by well-intentioned friends. There was always someone at my elbow, visiting my bedside, bringing me a cup of tea, or offering to do my chores; it became most tiresome! With precious little time alone at the farm, there was no opportunity to slip away and speak in private with the taciturn Geek, but it didn't seem to matter. He showed no interest in speaking with me, either, and had quickly reverted back to his feral state.

In spite of this -- or, perhaps, precisely *because* of this -- I thought of him often. His secretive nature only made me more intrigued, and I craved another quiet conversation with the eccentric creature to whom I owed my life. Of course, I wasn't about to reveal the Geek's intelligence, or tell anyone that the lock on his cage was broken. Who would I confide in? And honestly, who would believe me? No, if the Geek

wished to play the part of a mute and mad wild-man, ripping apart chickens with his bare hands and frightening the children, I wouldn't ruin his act.

But that didn't mean my curiosity was satisfied.

Another crash, another cascade of seawater breaking over the front of the *Atropos*, another whimper of misery from poor Gertie.

"Ah, here it is!" Magda exclaimed, holding aloft a small green bottle. She withdrew a spoon from a drawer and poured out a generous dollop. "Swallow this, my duckling," she said, "I've misplaced my lucky silver spoon, but a tin one will do."

Gertie gulped down the medicine like a starving dog devours a rasher of bacon.

"...thank you..." she croaked with abundant gratitude, collapsing back onto the galley bench. Her complexion was waxy, her eyes sunken and desperate. "I've never felt so miserable..."

Magda corked the bottle. "Seasickness is a terrible malady."

"I'm normally fine," she moaned, "What if Mr. Scott thinks I'm no good for this sea-faring life anymore? If he figures I've gone soft, he'll sack me!"

"Tut-tut, I won't tell my husband," Magda assured. "And neither will Rosie. We shall keep your condition between us girls."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," I said, "Even in the middle of Egypt, Napoleon's men complained of seasickness while riding on camels. It's not the ocean that causes it, but the swaying motion."

This didn't comfort her. Instead, she looked horrified.

"Will I feel like this on the back of my horses now?!"

"No, that's not what I mean!" Damn, I only made the situation worse! I smoothed my hand over her clammy cheek. "Any of us could feel queasy. It's not a weakness or a fault. You'll be fine again tomorrow, I promise."

"Listen to Rosie," Magda assured, "She was a nurse in the war, remember? She knows these sorts of things."

"I wasn't a nurse," I corrected, then turned to Gertie, "Has the soothing syrup helped calm your stomach?"

"I think so," Gertie replied. Her voice turned dreamy. "I feel a little better."

“Good,” I replied, “But no more! It’s too addictive.”

Gertie hummed as she reclined along the bench, closing her eyes. A healthy blush returned to her cheeks. “You always say that.”

I raised one eyebrow. “I beg your pardon?”

She had no food left in her stomach and the morphine hit her hard. Her pupils had already dilated into black buttons. “You always tell us you weren’t a nurse. Do you not like nurses?”

Her assumption made me grin. “I have great respect for nurses,” I assured her, “Perhaps that’s why I correct it – I don’t have the patience to do their job. I’m not talented enough to be a nurse.”

“But you know lots about illness,” Gertie continued, “You’re always comforting us when anyone’s sick.”

Magda’s thick dark brows drew together. “Gertie, you know we do not ask about people’s lives before they joined the Circus Salmagundi. This is a place of refuge and a fresh start for those who need it.” A massive wave pummelled the port side; the vessel heaved to the right but Magda didn’t seem to notice. She waggled her finger to Gertie. “Keep your questions to yourself.”

“I don’t mind,” I replied, feeling a sudden closeness to Gertie, no doubt amplified by the storm. “Long ago, when I was young, I trained to be a doctor.”

Gertie gave a pleased gasp. “Really? A lady doctor? I never knew there could be such a thing!”

“I haven’t practiced medicine in many years, and most of what I learned was... under unorthodox conditions.” I patted her hand. “Of course, that was a long time ago. I’m not that person anymore: I’ve been married and widowed, we’ve lived through the War To End All Wars, we lived through the Spanish Flu pandemic. The whole world has changed.” I smoothed a lock of sweaty hair away from her face. “I much prefer to be a tattooed lady in a circus, playing her little ukulele to entertain the children, and keeping herself out of too much trouble.”

Magda snorted. “With that, you have not been very successful!”

“I’ll strive to be better in future,” I promised, placing one hand over my heart. “I won’t stick my nose where it doesn’t belong. Believe me, I’ve learned my lesson.”

The circus owner's wife cast me a sidelong glance, full of mischief and playful doubt.

"I'll believe it when I see it," she purred.

Ah, but I *had* learned my lesson! My experience with the cult of madness on Hyperborea had burned me and branded me with a new respect for my own vulnerability. It provided a stark reminder of the evil in men's hearts. I suffered from sleepless nights and terrible visions, and I was keenly aware that I'd ventured too close to death. When I closed my eyes, that mad circle of figures loomed around me, hands outstretched, hungry to rip my body apart and feast on my innards; I could not sleep, I could not eat, my dreams provided no sanctuary. Each face was a reflection of my dead husband. When I promised Magda that I'd seek out no more trouble, I meant every word from the marrow of my bones.

Of course, I couldn't divulge this to her. I couldn't burden anyone with my troubles! In her cryptic fortune-teller's way, Magda had tried to warn me of impending danger, yet I'd made poor choices and put myself directly in trouble's path, as blithe and naïve as a kitten. A hefty portion of guilt accompanied my nightmares, but it was my responsibility to bear those scars in solitude. That was my punishment. Bruises had faded, but terrors persisted. The horrible events of Hyperborea continued to haunt me, long after they'd come to a close.

Perhaps worst of all, the golden cup fashioned from the top of Lydia's skull remained neatly wrapped in a burgundy shawl and hidden under my bed. I'd promised her husband that I'd bury her mortal remains at sea but I hadn't had a moment's peace to do it. At the farm, there was always someone nearby. Even during the wee hours of the morning, Lou or Hugo kept a close eye over the boats and company, and I couldn't guarantee any privacy from their watchful gaze to find a spare moment to drop the cup into the sea.

No, to be honest, I'd never really found the courage to do it; I felt conflicted about letting Lydia go. I couldn't dodge the gut-curdling thought that her fate had, very nearly, been my own. A month had passed since I'd been trapped, held captive, and almost murdered by the savages under a lunatic's control, and no matter what I did to assure myself that I was finally safe, the presence of Lydia's skull remained a

stark reminder that I deserved to feel unsettled. Prudence was a lesson I needed to learn.

If I was worn out and skittish and spooked by my own shadow, it was no one's fault but mine.



The Alberni Canal is a narrow, crooked finger of water zagging between tall mountains. Where it meets the Pacific, a spattering of islands interrupt the waves and protect the coast; these are the Broken Islands, aptly named. They look like shards of jagged pottery, each one thrusting up from frothy breakers and topped with fuzzy hats of moss and Douglas firs.

Our boats wove between the islets, taking care to avoid the shallows and rocky outcrops, but as the minutes passed, the turbulent currents grew calmer. Bucking waves became less violent. In the galley, the dishes stopped rattling and the chairs stopped sliding across the floor. The water in the sink no longer danced. Finally released from the grip of nausea and drowsy with morphine, Gertie stretched out along the wooden bench to sleep. Magda offered to keep watch over her, so I withdrew to the outer decks to dump out the bucket and enjoy a breath of fresh air.

The coastline funnelled in and the beaches drew close on either side. When we turned a promontory, the turbulent ocean vanished from sight and suddenly, we were puttering along a protected inlet; all three boats seemed to heave a sigh of relief. The *Atropos* fell into line behind the *Decimo*, and the *Nona* brought up the rear. Forested hillsides were soon replaced by barren dirt peppered with stumps and roots, for the march of modern progress had logged them of their coverings and left them bare. Fishing boats, wooden rowboats, and canoes became a constant presence as they ferried people between little villages and isolated cabins. The weather shifted from cool and damp to sun-dappled and warm.

I found Cecil at the prow of the *Atropos*, salt-blasted and sopping wet. His white shirt clung to his wiry frame. His denim overalls were dripping.

“What a ride!” he laughed.

“I’m glad to see someone enjoyed it.”

Cecil was a rail-thin man with goggled eyes the colour of cornflowers and a broad, snaggle-toothed smile. He had a remarkable talent for holding his breath and, when the light was just so, the shape of his face had a fishy profile, like a rock cod hauled to the surface. He wore his thinning hair slicked back with macassar oil which only added to the effect.

“My mother is the sea, Miss Rose!” he replied, “There ain’t no place that feels more like home.”

“It would be a tragedy for the circus if you were swept overboard. What would we do without our Saltchuck Cecil?”

“Mr. Scott would dredge up somethin’ to stick in the tank,” he replied, referring to the glass box in which he dunked himself nightly, “Maybe a big old wolf eel, with a round head as speckled as an egg.”

I leaned against the railing next to him to admire the view: rocky slopes, the broad channel, and a slight chop on the surface of the water.

“The canal is wider than I expected.”

“It narrows up ahead and gets plenty deep.”

The shoreline was strewn with boulders and sandy coves. “Aren’t canals man-made, for barges and big ships?” I said, “This one certainly doesn’t look it.”

“Ah, that’s because it’s not really a canal.”

I glanced at him. “Then why call it one?”

“When the Spanish explorers mapped the area in the 1700s, they named it Canal de Alberni on their charts, and the title stuck.” He waggled his hand towards the steep sides. “I heard stories of big seafaring ships that thought they could use the canal as a short-cut to Vancouver, only to get as far as Port Alberni and realize, they gotta turn around and come right back out!” He chuckled at their misfortune. “Really, it should be called an inlet – that would solve a lot of troubles.”

I craned over the railing, hoping to see houses materialize around the next bend. “How long until we reach town?”

“Which one?” he laughed. “There’s two, you know: the twin settlements of Alberni to the north and Port Alberni to the south. They sit

within a stone's throw of each other, but they're divided by a deep ravine with only a single road to connect them."

"How curious!"

"Stubborn, more like it," he said. "Folks are either from one or the other, and mighty proud of it. But Mr. Scott figures, if he sets us up close to their shared border, he can make twice the money with half the effort. We'll be playing for two towns, not just one. Of course, we'll not reach it for a while." He patted at his vest pocket, then slumped his shoulders. "I must've left my watch in my berth... I'd say it's around five o'clock now. The inlet is 25 miles long, and going at this speed, I wager we'll make port before eight o'clock."

The calculation had come to him as easily as a man reading a bus schedule.

"I'm continually astounded by how much you know about the coast, Cecil."

"That's because I hardly set foot on land before I was ten." When he smiled, his weather-worn face wrinkled deeply, itself becoming a map of inlets and fjords. "I s'pose it only makes sense that I'd still live on a boat, even though I'm not a fisherman like my father. I've never slept well on dry land, Miss Rose. There are no waves to rock me to sleep." He tipped his head back to enjoy the wind in his face. "As a wee boy, I spent my time diving down as deep as I could go, and it made my lungs strong – I didn't realize I was anything special! I thought everyone could hold their breath for five minutes."

This caused me to look up sharply. "You don't use any tricks in your act?"

"None needed."

"I figured, maybe, a hose for a bit of air..." I stammered, afraid that I'd insulted him. "I mean, Argos uses a collapsing needle for the trick where he jabs it through his cheek. He showed me. I just assumed –"

"That everyone in the sideshow must be a charlatan? Even just a little?" He chuckled to show me there were no hard feelings. "Your tattoos are real, not painted on. And you really play your ukulele and sing... and quite well, too. Just like you, my act is legit. I really can hold my breath for a full five minutes without any strain at all." A commo-

tion across the water caught his attention. "Look there!" He pointed to the *Decimo*, a few lengths ahead. "What's going on?"

At the rails of the stern deck, I spotted two burly figures, wrestling and shoving each other. Nearby sat a huge black bird, watching the men tussle; Fletcher's presence meant one thing.

"That's Orville, but who's he squabbling with?"

Cecil bent forward, squinting. "The fella in the grey overalls? That must be Farley, one of the coal trimmers. What do you think they're on about?"

"I have no idea, but Fletcher looks like he's enjoying the show."

The raven cawed as if to goad the men on, bobbing its head in excitement.

"I tell ya, those two have been giving Mr. Scott a headache, ever since our show in Powell River," he said, "They've always been a couple of tomcats, but now, the easy liquor has made 'em ten times worse."

Prohibition had only recently been lifted and, for some folks, moderation was a real struggle. It was almost as if they thought they might lose their liquor again, so best to guzzle it all up while the law allowed.

"Stella told me," I said in a modest whisper, though we were the only two on deck, "They've been drinking themselves into a stupor almost every night, passing out and neglecting their duties. She's had to feed Cosmo on more than a few occasions."

"What does our bearded lady know about bears?" Cecil asked.

"Nothing at all, but she learned quickly," I replied, "Stella says Farley's a bad influence."

Cecil gave a grunt of disgust.

Like a wealthy couple in an opera box, we watched the show unfold from our distant vantage. We couldn't hear a single word, nor could we intercede in any way, but body language was adequate to tell the tale: Orville wore a sloped cap to hide his balding head, and Farley swiped the hat from his crown, revealing a shiny scalp surrounded by a corona of greasy black hair. The younger man had a longer reach, and Orville tried without success to retrieve his cap, much to Farley's amusement. Farley waltzed away, swinging it wildly.

But Orville would not be taunted. If he could not grab his cap, he'd try another approach. The two men took to shoving each other.

"Look, now," said Cecil, "Here comes Bill Peacock to break up the fight."

From the *Decimo's* wheelhouse came Bill, a knife-thrower for many years, who had developed a pair of muscular arms and two stout legs. He wedged himself between the combatants, demanding a truce, but they shunted back and forth across the deck. Suddenly, the cap leapt out of Farley's hands and flew in a wide arc, over the rails and into the water. The hat was quickly swamped in the *Decimo's* wake and lost. Orville let out a parade of wicked curses. Of course, Farley thought this was a rum development – his hyena cackle rose on the wind.

It was all too much. Orville's curses became a wordless roar. He surged forward like a bull at a crimson flag. One fist pulled back and launched towards Farley, but the young man dodged, and Orville's punch landed with a solid crunch on Bill's chin.

Cecil and I gasped. Fletcher took wing, cawing madly.

The knife-thrower slumped to the deck. At first, I thought he'd been knocked out cold, but a few seconds later he was crawling to his shaky knees, and Orville was bending down to help him, and Farley was buckled over in riotous laughter. Bill Peacock's face flushed scarlet. Orville begged for forgiveness, but Farley's callous mirth made everything so much worse.

"Good God!" said Cecil, "Did you see that left hook?!"

"Mr. Peacock is going to give them both a piece of his mind!"

But before Bill could utter a word, his wife Wanda burst onto the stern deck, her blonde hair streaming behind her like a war banner. How dare anyone strike her husband! She was a tall woman, very regal in bearing and surprisingly strong. Another woman might crouch to her beloved, simpering and lamenting, but not Wanda. The force of her rage sucked all the wicked humour from Farley's face. He stumbled back a step or two as she seized Orville's ear and gave it an unsparing twist, and without letting go, she dragged the animal trainer into the *Decimo's* stern lounge, fully prepared to portion out her own form of justice.

"Gawd! She might just kill Orville!" Cecil hushed.

"He's lucky she didn't toss him overboard," I replied.

Alerted by the sounds of a scuffle, more people arrived on the stern deck. Bill was helped to his feet by Alex and Nancy. May gave him a napkin to wipe the blood from his split lip and swelling chin. They pressed close with their questions, concerns, and curiosity. Seizing opportunity, Farley melted into the crowd to slink away.