

The Brakespeare Voyage

By Simon Bucher-Jones and Jonathan Dennis

Chapter 6. In which I murder and unmurder, and thereafter devise a means to personify that which is indescribable in words.

‘Tancreevee?’ he croaked, too drunk for artifice. ‘Nay lad, this is Good Captain Scarratt who has commanded the worlds forever and will do so ‘til the Beast Leviathan is dead. All hail, Scarra...’

I cut him down in the moment of his hailing the imposter. His blood flowed out, then fountained, and my hand turned red in his warm life gush.

All around now chairs and stools pushed back, their heavy wooden scraping sounds telling of men rousing themselves. The air seemed filled with tiny motes of iron, filings following violence’s magnetism. I expected to be dead before too long.

A hand fell on my shoulder from behind. I had heard no sound from that quarter, and the touch, while not hard, sent a tremble through me till I could not hold my knife. My fingers twitched without my will and the blade fell, twisting to end point first a yard from my own shoe. I half-turned bracing for the inevitable beating; ready for the pain. I expected nothing else until the ending of my drab and wretched life. In my heart I believed, at that second, that I had deserved nothing but pain and death, although if I had been charged to name my crime I would have found it impossible to do so: unless it was that I had lived while my mother had died.

Instead I found myself staring into my father’s face, his truest face. I stared into a mask of bone. A stripped skull of narrow cheeked solemnity. My assailant was a member of the Cult of Paradox.

‘How much?’ he hissed. ‘How much do you want to live?’

I scabbled at the Captain’s coin on the slick drink-swilled surface of the bar-top. Should I offer him this bribe, this changing, paradoxical coin? This face that I did not know, that all men knew. This face that was the all-father to the drunk in the pool of his own blood; the man lying with his gasping bubbling breath coming out of the ragged hole, blowing bubbles of bright carnadine. Would he take it as tribute, or as an insult? I could not be sure, and under my breast-bone, hard as a fist, my narrow heart compelled me to live. All time seemed confined to one long painful beat of it as I flipped the coin up with the edge of a nail, and spun it into the Skull’s right eye.

‘That’ll do nicely,’ the masked man said, and grotesquely he winked bringing a flap of empty skin down across the silver surface, draping the traitor’s image with his flesh. I saw that within his mask he had no eyes, only the absences of sockets.

Then a terror not of mere pain or death, rose up within me - for the world with all its samenesses and regularities, its steady, steady, drum-beat of the threshing floor, its carefully calibrated alchemies, its set and majestic purpose, even its insurmountable tasks, which had brought me broken to this pit, was shown as nothing but air and smoke. What was real? If the Captain was not (the Captain whose very shadow is as certain as the tide) what of the crew? If the crew was not, what of the vessel? If the vessel was not, what of us, who walked the hulls of the worlds? If we did not exist, did the whales? If they did not, what did we thresh, we weft-mites and spinners?

The blind hollows within the bone mask saw more than my eyes could, and the hands of the stranger, strong in grey gloves of brocade and false gems, caught me as I began to fall. I had a sense of a great cloak thrown over me, but not one of cloth nor yet of leather, but of something finer and stronger than either. Then everything reversed itself, dark became light and light dark, and off the floor the blood-engulfing body of the drunkard rose, stiff and strange. It bleated words and sounds impossible as to its knife-less throat the lost knife sprang from its floor-sheath. Madly, I looked for myself to take the knife back from its place in his wind-pipe. Instead I saw the gloved right hand of my captor reach up with the peculiar grace of an action done deliberately in reverse (as of a man writing in a mirror after much practice) and twitch it away into the folds of that same, clothless, cloak that held me.

Then, a moment more, and I was back in that selfsame alcove, by the poster of the unknown holiday resort, sitting with my hands before me, empty on the table. My knife, my own muscles told me, was back in the sheath at my calf, the coin, the weight of my pouch told me, was likewise restored to its place.

Next to me at the table was the man in the mask.

'Don't make me do that again,' he said. 'It's quite forbidden, which of course is a reason to do it, but there are better reasons why not.' I would like to believe that I was taken by magic, or by the science - as I would learn - of paradox, but the truth is I was a ragged youngster who had had but five hours sleep in the two days beforehand, and I was at the tail-fin ends of endurance. I could do nothing but lay my face on my arms and weep immense dry tears. Without transition, as my eyes were blurred with the effort of divining water from ducts dry as the Black Whale's heart-springs, the light changed. Smoke night, to daylight. The walls from dirty slabs of plaster held together by posters papered over layer upon layer became something as translucent as fish-flesh to the sushi knife. I was in an egg. In a room oval as a womb, lit by light warm and radiant that came from all sides and yet cast from me no shadows. This did not disturb me, though the means by which I found myself there did. I knew of these devices from the alchemists, who called them 'rebirth cells' or 'anchorite pods' depending on the use to which they were put: that is whether they were heal-alls for the body or for the soul.

'I have put you aside for a time, my sensitive young sprat.' The voice of the masked man came through the muffling surfaces. 'The waves of change are sweeping across the worlds of the voyage. It is a gambit too desperate to hold, Tancreevee will not vanish so easily, from the memories of men, no, nor from those of his weeping women. The people who have done this think that they can wipe time away, erase their mistakes like lines on a slate. But time remembers all and you, with your father's heritage, tasted the first rush of it, when all but you and I forgot. You have that strength in you that will unlock the mysteries of the time that was. You'll know who to kill when the time comes round again, when the imposed one, the False Captain, stands on the bridge of the worlds.'

I barely understood him. But I felt a power in my chest, central - bounded by the rhythms of my own body - and it burned with all the aches of my wretched existence. It was the absence of my father, it was the death of my mother, it was the sheer gall and bloody insolence of the worlds that spun and moved and plotted and loved and died without any thought for me. It was revenge - the hot beat of revenge - the song that never requires an encore if it only be performed correctly.

The walls of the alchemists' bunkers rose high and dark against the sky. Built to restrain the powerful forces they commanded, their walls were thick slabs of stone, studded with broken sea-shells. Buried in their surfaces, trilobites and ammonites, and sketchy-veined oceanic crinoids predominated. The effect - and it was an effect, the lakes having none of the above species in either their present or their prehistory - was that of vast, squat works designed by a small child using a rendering-fat container and the brittle shells of lake-snails. The iconography was intended to suggest that the work done in the smelting yards, on the threshing floor and under the red-veined eyes of the Jonah-cult supervisors in their whale-skins, and their great false fish-masks, was done in homage to the clean ocean of the outer-world.

'We make the bait the great fish tries
To hunt the deep whales of the skies
Who bear the future in their eyes.'

The old songs that we heard at the womb's breach never leave us. Hearing my mother's voice in my head I carried my vengeance in my clenched jaw like a hairline break that might make my bones shatter and my skull fly off in a cloud of living shracknel, twisting and turning in the air in a great, expanded scream. Thus, I returned to my place of labour, curiously freed. Yesterday, I had believed my future depended on cracking the coded arts of these toiling men, in understanding and manipulating their mirror-bright sarcasms and their iron disdain for the workers on the threshing

floor. Now they looked like idiot children pressing fake shells into fake settings. Had I grown beyond them, or fallen into that disdain of the world which is the province of the insane? I could not tell. I had been offered the black helm of Paradox: the skull which is worn on the outside as it is within, and I had been offered that great and glorious prize which the scripture of the alchemists, and the legends of the lake folk, and the songs and stories of my childhood all agreed was the thing most to be desired. Something to hunt and to kill.

I began by looking for the flaw that Father Kercovian had assured me would exist, for anyone other than he and I who would remember the True Captain. Later - I took as an article of faith - there would be many, an army of the Memorious, bearing the True Sigil of The One Who Vanished For Us, but here - on the first day under the dull grey glare of a fake and hollow sun, sightless in the blinded sky - I sought only the most fleeting evidence that the truth was not a lie or dream of my spinning, whirling, freed, mind.

I wrote the words 'Tancreevee Lives' on the blank black board, in a corner of the chief alchemist's study, and watched them crawl and writhe into praise of the usurper. 'Scarratt lives'. Clearly the triumph of my foe could not be undone with a single slash of bone-white chalk. Indeed, outside of the teaching cell of paradox, away from my Mentor, I was finding it hard to fix the syllables of the True Faith in my mind. Tanlevee, Kancreevie, Cretanvee swam through my brain like fish too small to hunt, too lithe to hook, too nondescript to taxonomise. Then an inspiration came to me. Any attempt to name the True Captain was erased by time, eaten by the changes resonating along the backbone of the worlds of the voyage. It could not be inscribed, couldn't be recalled, couldn't be delineated. No picture could be made of him that would not become Scarratt's odiously smug visage, no song or poem dedicated to him that would not hosanna his successor. In this circumstance, awakening others would be nigh impossible. Maintaining my own heightened recall - fuelled by rage and bile, and the dead of my past - was difficult enough. And, yet, every word could not be erased, and context is everything.

High Alchemist Parlexican stormed out of his class-room, scarlet edged mortar-board a tilt on his flushed and livid head. 'Who has done this? No-one will leave these halls until I have an explanation for this atrocity!'

Across the white shell-encrusted walls of his laboratory-lecture room the words CAPTAIN NO-ONE were written in what gave every appearance of being... blood. I knew this because, of course, I'd written them. I could feel the black-burning copper distress of the world as I did. It longed to eat them. It longed to switch them into a hymn to its new master, but Scarratt was not 'no-one'. And the word 'no-one', unlike the true name of the Lost Captain, wasn't impossible to write or carry in one's mind.

I had decided the nature of my campaign. I would make the 'space' for the true Captain to inhabit. I would breed doubt and inculcate the shape of him, dark and empty, into every dialogue and discussion of the polity. There could be only one way to do that, and as the wound on my arm throbbed with delicious sacrifice, I dedicated myself to it. I would mark the No-name of the Captain upon the face of the worlds.

I was also at first intemperate and found myself remembering a number of old scores and slights. The Jonahs in their thick whale-skin vestments imported from other worlds, supposedly products of the Voyage, but cynicism suggested probably force-cloned monoculture material from one of the Biologist Clusters I particularly reviled. They had scorned my father's ragged faith, and their proprieties had held my mother at the edge of the community. The farting lads of my sleeping cell I merely disliked by comparison, but still, I found enjoyment for a second in the idea of confounding them all with some impossible occurrence.

There, in the sea-shell strewn corridors of the Alchemists, I inwardly debated vengeance. Slaying the blubber-coated imbeciles, though, would accomplish nothing: it was not that I rejected revenge but simply that such an act would be too small for the new powers I felt Kercovian held in trust for me. They were unworthy of the attentions of the Un-named.

In the end, the most surprising thing was how easy it was to leave three things behind, the alchemists, my thoughts of local revenge, and the town of my childhood. I slipped away from the bunkers while Parlexican interrogated my fellow apprentices with a tongue as feared as his lash. I went almost dancing down the fish scale cobbled streets that lay gleaming and shimmering in the silvery noon.

When he finally noticed I was gone - when he managed to remember my name - he would be sure to send some novice or errand boy to my home to inform me that I would be punished on the morrow for disobeying orders. They would not find me at home. Parlexican's threats held no fear for me. I had no intention of returning to the bile-vats.

My first skipping rush abated, I slowed down as though walking through town. I could not recall the last time I had seen it in the middle of the day. How quiet it was, but for the distant ringing from the bunkers. How small it was: a toy settlement in a memorial globe. Most of its people - men, women, and children - were behind me, serving the voyage, serving the traitor. The only people I saw, and who saw me, were a pair of shopkeepers, sweeping the cobbles in front of their shops, preparing for the evening's business, shooing away an emaciated ginger flecked cat.

The Father had given me an address. It belonged to a small rented room above the town's Jonahite Reading Rooms. I slipped through the door and found Kercovian chuckling over a book he had 'borrowed' from downstairs. It was the *The Verifiable, True and Eternal Voyage of Captain Scarratt: Annotated with Guidance for the Faithful*. As I came in, he closed the book and set it aside.

'I love a good work of fiction,' he said, and adapting a high sing-song diction quoted, 'My first sight of the Great Bridge at the end-of-all-worlds was of a mass of darkness, against a darker sky, but darker still was the heart of that traitor whose acts would bring down my command in flames and ice.' Gripping stuff!

A single lake-gas lamp sat on the table in front of him. Its flame spluttered theatrically with his words as if a breeze was passing through the bare windowless room. I felt it scouring the white wood table and twin chairs with the sting of salt. There was a clean patch of wall where a picture had been recently removed. It now sat on the floor, facing the wall. I turned it around for a look. It was the traditional portrait of the Captain, of the kind that once even my mother had owned in sepia-cuttlefish inking. For a moment, in this place, in the presence of the father, I hoped that the portrait would bear the face of the true Captain, but it was not to be. Scarratt looked back at me, indolent and ignorant of his vast crimes.

'I heard what you did,' Kercovian said. I turned to face him. He sat perfectly still, gloved hands resting on the table. His skull faced me. The flickering from the lamp provided the only impression of movement.

'I came directly here,' I said. 'How could you have heard about it?'

'I didn't say I heard about it today.'

Kercovian reached out and extinguished the gas lamp. In the darkness, I could feel the walls of the teaching cell forming around me. Kercovian pulled a glowing sphere from beneath his robes and set it on the table. The sphere flared brighter than a dozen oil lamps, brighter even than the midday sun outside. I had to throw my arm across my face until my eyes could get used to the light. Even when I was finally able to open my eyes, I could not look directly at the sphere. It burned steady, with nary a flicker. Its brilliance picked out every detail in the room, the cracks in the wall, the hairs on the back of my hand, the pits on the father's bone mask. Kercovian rose from his chair, eclipsing his half of the room.

'Your training begins now,' he said. 'Lesson one is shadows.'

With that last word, the darkness behind Kercovian spun to my side of the room and engulfed me.

Hours later, I slumped in my chair trying to massage some feeling back into my protesting muscles and picking at the edges of my numerous cuts and scrapes. Kercovian sat on the other side of the table, toying with my belongings which I had quickly shed during the training as they got in the way. He had pulled out one of my Captain's coins, the same coins that had led to our meeting. He

put the coin on the back of his hand and rippled his fingers to make it dance across his knuckles. The sight of Scarratt's face on those coins still stung me.

'I should rid myself of those forgeries,' I said.

'You'll be needing them. Travel is expensive,' Kercovian replied. 'But if it makes you feel better.'

He flipped the coin in the air and I heard the sound of his shadow blade striking the coin. I couldn't help but flinch at the sickly scraping hiss after the day's training. The coin clattered to the floor and Kercovian motioned for me to retrieve it. His blade had shorn a fine sliver from the front of the coin, leaving a blank space where Scarratt's face had leered. I looked down and saw the face on the floor. I kicked it away.

'A Captain No-one coin,' Kercovian said. 'Keep it as a souvenir. You'll be spending the others.'

'Is it not early to be talking of travel?' I asked. 'I've barely begun here.'

Kercovian pulled my inherited bone mask from its carrying pouch, muttered something about a 'stripped down imitation,' and began to tinker with its innards.

'Your work here is already finished. You just don't realise it yet. You picture a great struggle, but you will be surprised by how receptive the people of the Voyage will be to your Captain No-one. The changeover was sloppy to begin with and, on top of that, everybody loves a good blasphemy. Here.'

He slid my father's mask across the table to me and motioned for me to put it on. In my life, I had tried on my father's mask maybe a dozen times, mostly on sullen drink-filled nights when I would get the idea that doing so may bring me closer to the parent I had never known. Once, years before, I had been sick in its empty sea-shell interior and it had taken nights of scraping with throssle and lyre to clean the smell away. It was as much mine as my own skull.

Even if I had not seen Kercovian altering the mask, I would have immediately noticed the difference in its weight. The inside now held numerous metallic devices similar to the ones that littered the alchemists' rooms in the extraction plants. I placed the mask over my face and was surprised that it now fitted perfectly. My vision was different through the mask, but when I tried to focus on the difference it slipped away as if hiding from me until I was ready.

'Go get yourself a drink. Say goodbye to Eskalov. Tomorrow we leave as two priests of paradox.'

I gathered up my belongings. Reluctantly, I removed the newly altered mask and stowed it away for the walk home. Outside it was cold, dark and damp. The hour was late. Three stars of the Great Mast had already crested the starboard horizon. My aching muscles spoke up for their need for drink. The only reason the tavern was still open was a trio of besotted old men by the door, nursing their last drinks between profane tales of the local women. The keeper did not want to serve me at first, but I assured him that I only wanted one quick drink and then I would be on my way. I took my drink to the table farthest from the tavern's existing clientele. I took a deep draw of the sour mash-beer and, exhausted, closed my eyes and let my head fall forward. When I opened my eyes, there it was, freshly carved in the surface of the table, by the blade of some alchemy student from Parlexican's class in all likelihood: CAPTAIN NO-ONE.