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The weather had cleared up the following morning as the Nevermore sailed on through the Atlantic Ocean. It was much warmer than the Baltimore area. Mercury was awoken by the sound of heavy boots running about the ship and the familiar smell of hot oatmeal. She lay motionless with her eyes still closed, trying to process the strange dreams that had plagued her all night. Random images and fragments of the dream melded inside her mind as she pieced them together one by one. She had dreamt that she was having tea with her mother. In her dream, she had finished the last few sips of her tea when she looked down into her cup. Two wavy parallel lines had formed in the last few drops of tea and leftover tea dregs. She saw her reflection in the tea oils that lingered in the cup. A noise from above startled her and in an instant her dream was forgotten.

For a fleeting moment, Mercury did not remember where she was. It wasn't until she opened her eyes that she remembered and her heart sank. Looking at her watch she saw that it was 7:30 AM and her stomach was growling. Her room was horribly warm and thick with moisture. Wiping the beads of sweat from her face, she opened the porthole hoping to let in a little cool fresh air. Instead she was greeted with a blast of humid foulness that reeked of brine and dead fish. Mercury braved the sticky smell and peered out at what seemed to be an endless stretch of clouds and ocean along the horizon. Dressing as lightly as possible, she left her room and made her way to the galley for breakfast. When she arrived she discovered that the crew had breakfast hours ago and were busy manning the ship.

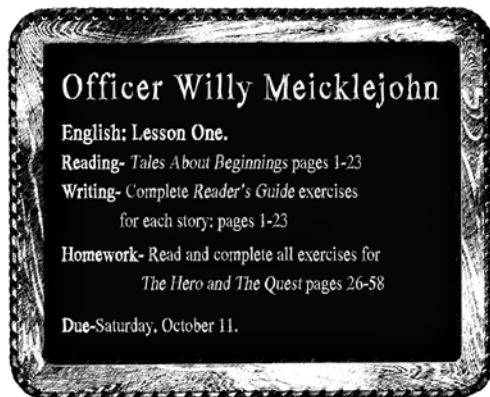
When she entered the galley she saw that beside her place setting was a thick textbook entitled *World Literature*. As Mercury finished eating, Jose told her she was to stay where she was and wait for Officer Meicklejohn because he would be teaching her first lesson. Opening the book, she saw that it was over 1,000 pages long and it covered such topics as *World Myths and Folktales* to *The African Literary Tradition*.

Officer Willy Meicklejohn had short red hair, a pair of beady brown eyes, and tiny round spectacles that seemed lost atop his rotund cheeks. In his massive

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arms, he was toting a small blackboard, a teacher's manual and a composition book. Officer Willy was sweating and wheezing heavily as he made his way around the cramped galley table. With thick, stubby fingers, he reached out and handed Mercury the composition book. She noticed that his nails were well manicured, which was rather odd for someone who worked in such a rough place. When Officer Willy spoke, she noticed that he had a thick Scottish accent and he told her to write *English* on the cover of the composition book.

Mercury got the impression that Willy did not sail often and judging by his appearance he looked more like an accountant than a sailor. She was puzzled as to what a man of his *stature* would do on a merchant vessel, since all the other officers seemed fit for hard labor. As she wrote, Willy made his way around the room, and hung the blackboard on the wall. He had written on it prior to entering the room and it read:



The lesson consisted of Mercury reading '*Tales About Beginnings*' aloud while Willy fell asleep and snored noisily in his chair. She began to wonder as she watched him shudder with each breath, if maybe they should be reading *Moby Dick* instead. Mercury giggled softly at this thought, but quickly continued reading on when Willy stirred in his sleep, mumbling something about pie. Two hours later, when the lesson was over, she was allowed to have an hour of free time alone in her room before lunch.

After lunch, she had her science lesson with Carl, where he taught nautical sciences and geographical navigation. Mercury took several notes on nautical terminology and then they went above to the main deck to discuss nautical

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navigation. Carl explained what marks and knots were and then he showed her how they navigate the ship. Although it was an interesting lesson, Mercury couldn't help but notice Carl's disgusting habits. He must have had a cold, because his congested nostrils buzzed loudly every time he sniffed. Occasionally, he wiped his nose on his disturbingly crusty sleeve, and wiggled his finger in his ear vigorously to clean it out. He spit regularly over the side of the ship and made squelching noises with his teeth like he had chewing tobacco in his mouth. He was possibly the most disgusting man she had met aboard this ship. Carl was also hard of hearing because he kept saying "huh?" every time Mercury spoke. After his lesson, and before dinner, she had study time in her room to do her homework and prepare for future lessons. Luckily, the next day was Sunday and there would be no lessons.

Sunday was a day of rest for not just herself, but the whole crew. After dinner, she was allowed to do what she wanted until 8 PM and then it was lights out. She returned to her room that evening to find a schedule taped to her door. According to the schedule, she would be studying two subjects a day. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays she studied Pre-Algebra with Officer Alexis Bays in the morning and Geometry with Officer Reed Fisher in the afternoon. Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays she studied English and Science like she had done her first day. On Fridays her lessons ended early, because of the weekly closed-door staff meetings that were held in the galley.

During these meetings, Mercury's instructions were to remain in her room until it was over. When she asked about what went on in the meetings, she was often told to mind her own business. When she wanted to explore the ship, she was told to stay out of the way. She seemed to be road blocked at every turn and she felt more like a nuisance rather than a guest. In the end, Mercury decided that the fewer interactions with the scruffy crew she had, the better off she would be. More often than not, she was too busy studying and not having fun to even bother.

Sunday was the most boring day on the ship. There was absolutely nothing to do but sit in her room, read her book, and listen to her second hand cassette player with dying batteries. Plus, how many times could she listen to the same album over and over again? When sheer boredom drove her up on deck, she was told she couldn't be there unless she was supervised and of course, no one volunteered. Mercury was insulted by the notion that they assumed she would be



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clumsy enough to fall overboard. It wasn't as if she was just going to get lost or just disappear, where would she go? There were only so many places to hide on a ship, in the middle of open water.

All she had left to keep herself occupied was to draw pictures in her sketchbook. She drew pictures of home, her mother, and pictures of characters from her mother's stories. Unfortunately, her supplies were getting rather low and Mercury hoped that they would make a stop somewhere soon. She desperately needed batteries, pencils, maybe a new book, and some other things. Mercury inquired to the crew as to where and possibly when their next stop would be.

"Depends on what your father wants to do, it's his boat," they would say.

It seemed either than no one knew, or that no one was going to tell her. With the way they had acted about the meetings, she wasn't really surprised at the lack of information.

Mercury had developed a habit of cringing when Captain Brightman was referred to as just her "father." She tried to politely correct them by saying "stepfather," but none of the crew cared enough to be corrected. When the *Nevermore* stopped to refuel in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Mercury was forbidden to go ashore since they were only stopping for a few hours. To make sure she stayed on the boat and remained in her room, Willy was parked outside her door in a tiny chair that squeaked painfully under his girth. Mercury felt like a big cat trapped in a small cage desperate to escape and run free.

Compared to Thursday, Friday was blistering hot. As the *Nevermore* slowly passed through the Panama Canal, the cool breeze that caressed the upper decks of the ship occasionally punctured the sticky mosquito-laden air that lingered in the halls of the ship. Mercury unsuccessfully attempted to invite the cool breeze into her stifling room through her coffee can sized window. She even wedged the door open to help circulation, but the only breeze she got was from Willy's snoring in his room down the hall.

Once into the Pacific Ocean, the intense and unforgiving heat from the sun beat down upon the metal hull of the ship. The *Nevermore* was like a frying pan and Mercury's room was unbearably hot. She was perspiring so profusely that her hands stuck to the pages of her book.

Mercury had several chapters to read by Saturday and was busy plowing through them. Her concentration waned in the sweaty heat of the tropical

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ocean. The room was so hot that she could see the heat rise from the walls as it shimmered in the mid morning sun. She thought about running a cool bath and just sitting in it to read her textbook, but only warm water poured from the tap. Her neck was drenched in sweat and she put on her green hat, twisted up her hair and stuffed it up inside to get it off of her neck. It only helped for a moment and Mercury desperately needed to find a cooler place than her sweltering room. Someplace dark and cool, with enough light to read by was all she needed and she instantly thought of the cargo bay. Relief was just out her door and down the stairs, but *should she risk it* she wondered?

Mercury looked at her antique watch with her favorite superhero on it. It was exactly 12 Noon and lunch would not be on for another hour. She decided it was worth the risk and she quickly gathered her textbook and her coat. Even though it was too hot to wear the coat she put it on to keep her backside dry from the damp cargo bay floor. Mercury also grabbed her bag and threw a couple of pens and a water bottle into it before leaving. Quietly she crept out of her room and slipped down to the cargo bay as stealthy as a cat.

The only reason that she was being cautious was that she didn't know whether or not she was allowed to be in the cargo bay. After all, she had been told to stay in her room. She felt that if she stayed in there any longer she might physically melt from the heat. She figured *do now, apologize later*. Plus, she wasn't trying to get caught down there, if she could help it. The cargo bay was just as she had imagined, cool, damp, and dark with portholes that let in just enough light for reading. Mercury looked around for the perfect spot as she walked down the tall stacks of wooden crates. Around the last row of crates, towards the back she saw something that seemed out of place, her mother's trunk.

"What on Earth is it doing down here?" she murmured quietly to herself.

Without hesitation she walked over to the old wooden trunk that was small with leather siding and brass fittings. Looking more like a pirate's treasure chest than luggage, and completely out of place among all the crates, the lock on the front was clasped tightly shut. Mercury smirked at the lock, because she could easily pick it and had done so in the past more times than she could count. Visiting her mother's trunk was like visiting an old friend, and made her miss home all the more.

Even though Mercury had combed through it a hundred times before, she longed to look inside once more. One time her mother had seen her do it but



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opted not to scold her for it, but instead she watched to see what Mercury would do. All Mercury did was pick the lock and look inside. She would take out the various objects Damara kept in there, and examine them closely. When she was done she would return them exactly as she had found them. Mercury never took a single thing because it was not in her nature to steal from others. Every now and again, Damara deliberately put something new in the trunk for Mercury to find. Mercury never knew that her new discoveries were intentional.

It had always felt wrong to take anything from the trunk in the past but now... everything was different. Mercury felt that she had rightfully inherited the trunk and it was hers and that nothing in it belonged to her stepfather or anyone else. These things had been her mother's and now they belonged to Mercury. More importantly, they were the only things Mercury had left from her mother, other than her memories and stories. Rummaging blindly in her bag, and wiping what might have been a tear from the corner of her eye, she pulled out a cotton swab and a hairpin to pick the lock. Mercury hoped to find something new and exciting that she had never seen before, or maybe something she had missed in the past.

Mercury's trick worked and the lock popped open and she raised the lid. It was filled with all the other old things she had found in it before. There was a small black pouch filled with tiny gold, silver and copper balls like marbles, with symbols engraved on them. There was a jar of her mother's handmade lilac lotion that Damara put on every day. Mercury unscrewed the lid and put some on her neck and hands. Deeply she inhaled the scent and was reminded of home. She put the jar into her bag and returned to inspecting the trunk.

Nostalgia washed over her like a cool breeze as she turned over a speckled ceramic mug she had made in elementary school. Pushing the mug aside and digging deeper she came across a crystal scepter from Halloween, when she dressed up as a fairy princess as a child. Like a child she waved it in the air with a smile and watched it sparkle in the light. Returning it to the trunk she found a curious sealed envelope. It was an old fashioned envelope that had yellowed with age and looked like it belonged in a scrapbook. Mercury broke the seal and found a tiny lock of curly black hair tied in a navy blue ribbon. She wondered what it meant and looked inside the envelope again, but there was nothing else to tell here whose hair it had been. Mercury returned the lock of hair to the envelope and put it back into the trunk, where she found a collection of pressed flowers and herbs in an old

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herbalism book. Though the trunk was small, it seemed to magically hold many things. Among her findings were old books, a jewelry pouch, a bundle of recipe cards, some well worn tarot cards; a glass ball, and many other treasures.

Tucked in the corner at the bottom of the trunk was something rectangular and strange. It was wrapped in her mother's old scarf with landmarks of San Francisco on it. Carefully, she unwrapped the scarf and discovered an old fashioned, leather bound journal. Mercury had never seen it before, but it looked very old and worn. The deep red leather cover had an intricate design of a landscape embossed on it. There was a tree in a vast field shadowed by a pair of distant snow-capped mountains. The scene lay underneath a grinning full moon and starry sky. The moon had a face on it and its eyes were closed. There was a small silver clasp with an engraved multi-pointed star, which held the journal shut. A tiny red ruby was embedded in the center of it and it looked as though it were a kind of button. Without hesitation she pushed the little ruby and the clasp popped open.

For a moment, Mercury thought that the eyes of the moon had opened as she opened the journal. She gasped and looked closely at it again, just to be sure but she couldn't remember if they hadn't been open before. Mercury wondered if it had been a trick of the light or the heat of the day had finally gotten to her. She stared at it but saw that the moon's eyes were indeed open. Unsure what to make of it, she ignored it and opened the journal to the cover page.

Mercury was taken aback, because the page was covered in circular shapes, triangles and pictographs. There were only a few words on the page that she could read: *The Field Journal of Damara S. Eos.*

From this inscription, Mercury gathered that the journal had belonged to her mother before she was remarried to the Captain. Mercury did not know what the "S" might have stood for and she did not recall her mother ever mentioning any other name than Eos. In fact, Mercury had never known what her mother's maiden name was. She knew was that Eos was a family name because it was Mercury's middle name too. Although she was sure she had never seen the journal before, it felt strangely familiar at the same time.

Flipping through a couple of the pages she discovered that she could not make out a single word. It was covered from page to page with nothing but the same circular symbols that were on the cover page. Towards the back of



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the journal she found an elaborate bookmark. It had a purple leather strap with more of the same symbols embossed on it.



Attached to the end of the leather strap was a beautiful silver medallion with a sparkly royal blue stone embedded in the center of it. Capital letters surrounded the stone and spelled out funny words. The medallion was a small round disk, about two inches in diameter, thin like a coin and weighty for its size.

She was about to inspect the medallion further, when she heard footsteps heading in her direction. Knowing she would not be able to make it back to her room in time without being caught, she hid behind a back wall of crates. She was breathing louder than necessary and clasped her hand over her mouth to quiet herself. Moments later, she heard the heated voices of Carl and Alexis as they entered the cargo bay. They were discussing some “special job,” they had been volunteered for in hushed paranoid whispers. From what she could make out, it had to do with something they were ordered to retrieve down there. Alexis muttered something about “the girl,” when Carl quickly shushed him.

“Watch it... her room is at the top of those stairs. If she hears any of this she might bolt the second we dock. If that happens the Captain will be furious and we will be up in our necks in who-knows-what!” Carl sneered, tugging at his bandana.

“Yes, I understand, but it’s kind of strange how he’s having us do it and not himself. You’d think if he didn’t want to make the whole thing look suspicious he’d just act like he was taking her out to the movies or something. Then just arrange for that lady to pick up the girl,” Alexis said.

“I told you, to watch it... No, we it is going to be done like the Captain said in the meeting. Besides it is better this way, you see. We are going to ditch her in a market in San Francisco. The Captain has arranged for Nimmy to come find her and take her, like she is one of those missing kids you hear about. Nimmy will play dumb about daddy’s boat, and keep her there until we and the Captain comes and claims her in March!” Carl said cunningly as he sniffed the air curiously. “Do you smell lilacs?”

“No,” Alexis replied.

“Are you sure? It smells like lilacs. Strange?” he said continuing to sniff the air.

Mercury cringed, she had put too much of the lotion on and she feared that he was going to sniff her out. There was nothing she could do but shove

her hands into her pockets to weaken the scent.

“I smell nothing but fish and mildew. What does it matter? You know I am not so sure about the Captain’s plan. His daughter is pretty smart and she is bound to figure it out. What did the Captain want with these silvery doohickeys any how?” Alexis asked, picking up a small crate with contents that clinked like they contained metal plates.

“They are presents for Nimmy—you know there is something off about that woman and I don’t know what it is. . .,” he sighed. “The Captain wants us to wrap them up for her. We took them off of this cruise liner in the Caribbean the other night, out of this wealthy couple’s room. Do you believe they just left their door wide open? They were so drunk. Anyway, the Captain wants to wrap them up and then we are to give them to his daughter like presents. Nimmy will be waiting in the market to claim her. The presents are for Nimmy as a kind of payment for keeping her. We are to arrive there in about three days; we are heading north at the moment. What time have you got?”

“12:18,” Alexis said inching closer to the porthole just over Mercury’s hiding place to look at his watch in the light. “I believe there is wrapping paper in one of the closets in the galley.”

“Good, we will go back to the galley then,” Carl nodded.

The two men grabbed a few boxes and left for the cargo bay. For a moment Mercury couldn’t believe what she had just heard. Her fear about being found had faded into unbelievable outrage. From what she gathered, she was to be ditched somewhere in San Francisco, in three days time. In addition to this news, there was the disturbing revelation that her stepfather was a criminal and in the middle of the night, they stole from unsuspecting cruise ships. Mercury shook her head in dismay; unsure about what to do she knew that just sitting there fuming wasn’t going to help her situation.

Mercury grabbed her textbook, her mother’s journal and quickly shoved as many trinkets as she could into her bag. She carefully closed the lid of the trunk and locked it, checking to make sure she hadn’t dropped anything. Looking around to make sure the coast was clear, Mercury dashed up the stairs and into her bedroom, closing the door softly behind her.

Safely in her room and breathless, she was too angry and worried to think straight. She dumped her book and her mother’s journal on her bed and began



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to pace back and forth. Each time she would stop and stare at herself in the mirror as if to ask her reflection the questions that were bombarding her mind. Too many questions with no answers... *How could this have happened? Why? What had she done to deserve any of this? What was she going to do? Who could she tell? Who could help her? How was she going to get out of this fix?* The situation seemed hopeless and grim.

The knowledge of what was going to happen meant that she had three days to figure out a way to escape and get help. Mercury reached into her pocket and discovered that the business card from Mrs. Solis was not there. Remembering that she had been using it as a bookmark in the textbook she sat on the bed Indian-style, and thumbed through the book to find it. She found the card and stuffed it safely into her inside coat pocket, without bothering to mark the page. The *other* bookmark that had been in her mother's field journal had fallen out and was lying beside her pillow. She picked it up and looked at it, and for a moment she forgot her immediate troubles. The ship suddenly lurched as if it made a sharp northerly turn. Her mother's field journal fell off the bed, hit the floor and slid to the far corner of her room just out of reach. Mercury heard a small click as if it locked itself on impact when it hit the wall.

She reached for it, and saw that the eyes of the moon had closed and it gave her the chills. The ship rocked violently again, forcing her to hold on to the wall for support. She thought she would pick the journal up when the instability ceased, but the boat rocked on and shook in a violent manner that frightened her. Tearing her eyes away from the journal and trying to hold on to the walls she gazed at the medallion. Mercury became transfixed by the way the light from the window made the blue stone shimmer and shine. She thought she heard the twinkling of chimes in the distance, but dismissed it as falling utensils in the galley.

The rocking steadied and she heard the echoes of the crew members running about above. Nervous and scared, she felt a sudden need for security and secrecy. Mercury happened to glance at her watch and saw that it was 12:26 PM. Soon the others would be coming down to their quarters to freshen up for lunch. Releasing the frayed rope that held the shower curtain to the side, she pulled it across so that she shut out the light from the porthole. This made it difficult to see clearly, so she pulled out her fish-shaped flashlight. Holding the medallion up in her left palm for viewing, she squeezed the flashlight with her right hand and shined it at



the medallion. Once again she heard the twinkling sound, this time it was like the sound of shattering glass on the floors above her.

The stone was more than just a smooth and glistening blue gem; it was like no other stone she had ever seen before. Mercury recalled a blue opal she saw in a jewelry store once, but this was far more beautiful than any opal she had ever seen. Colorful flecks of shiny material sparkled in the light trapped within the crystalline veins of the stone. The side she was examining was old and worn like pewter. The Roman letters were beautifully etched around the stone and spelled out three words separated by stars that she had never heard before. Flipping the medallion over she discovered that the reverse side was rather plain in comparison to the front. It was gold plated with two big indentations in it that divided it into four equal sections like the head of a screw. Mercury turned it over once more in the center of her left palm to look at it closely again. Slowly she sounded out the words on the medallion.

“Cupitor. Clavis. Repercetre,” she said aloud.

In the flashlight’s beam the stone shimmered and she suddenly had the uncontrollable desire to touch the gem. As she rubbed her thumb across its glassy surface, something happened to her that she could not describe nor even fully understand. Blinding light flooded her senses and she had the incredible sensation of an unseen force pulling her inward as if she was being sucked through a tube. The room quickly faded away and the world around her spun in a centrifuge of color and light. It was as if she were spinning tremendously fast on a merry-go-round. Just as Mercury was starting to feel horribly dizzy and sick the spinning stopped.

The next thing she knew she was looking upward at a partly cloudy blue sky and she had the sensation she was flying. *But I can’t fly,* she thought. *Am I dead, is this heaven? Oh my!*

Nervously she looked over her shoulder and down. To her extreme surprise, the Nevermore and the Pacific Ocean had vanished, quite literally into thin air; all she saw was a dense forest below her.

“What the...” was all she managed to shout.

Knowing full well that she could not fly, it was as though gravity had finally agreed with her. The next thing Mercury knew she was falling fast towards the mysterious forest below.