

STEVEN M. WEBB

“There’s Scapa over there,” his father said, pointing ahead. “You’ll probably find Kirkwall over that hill.”

Through the glare of reflected sunlight he could see the green of a hill on a larger island to the north, and the gray and brown shapes of a few roofs and white walls around a wide inlet.

“Are there houses for civilians here, or just the Navy?” he asked his father.

“Kirkwall is the main town here. It even has its own cathedral, St. Magnus, I believe. Norwegian, very old. I might not have time to see it with you. I believe I’ll be working over there.”

His father pointed to several black shapes, low in the water, and a line of huts along the water’s edge. They passed an armored cruiser and two destroyers anchored in the Flow, on the port side of the ship. His father seemed in better spirits and patted him on the back, squeezing his shoulder fondly, more enthusiasm in his voice.

“My hope for you, son, is God-speed at Cambridge with your degree. You’ve done well so far, but I can’t tell what’s in the offing, overseas. Perhaps I’ve seen too much in Germany. The mood is belligerent there, and the Kaiser is an unstable man. I fervently hope nothing comes of it. If it does, though, your place will be in the Navy.”

“I thought that was what you were getting at, allowing me to come with you,” he said, looking at his father.

“But you don’t approve of the seasickness.”

“I hope you don’t mean to show me submarines.”

“Claustrophobia *and* seasickness?” his father taunted.

“I wouldn’t mind seeing the cruiser.”

“It can be arranged. I must ask you, as I probably won’t be with you, look, study, think, and try to answer your own questions. Naval officers, German or English, regard civilians with amusement, or contempt, or both.”

“I understand.”

There were no great wharves or docks in the anchorage. They watched a small gray launch lead the ship to a position well offshore, where the destroyer dropped anchor amid orderly shouting and the grinding of anchor chain. Another crew of sailors lowered a cutter. Their bags would be brought ashore later, and they were directed down a ladder to where the cutter lifted and fell

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against the hull.

Commander Northam, a group of austere, clean-shaven civilians in black overcoats, and then the ship's Captain joined them on the cutter's worn wooden benches. The wind caught at their hair, coats and the hats in their hands, as the cutter was pushed away from the ladder and out onto the choppy black water.

They were being rowed toward a jetty on the north side of the great inlet, and in perspective, looking back, the destroyer appeared puny and under-gunned, against the pictures he'd seen of the Navy's gigantic new *Orion*-class battleships, with their ten 13.5-inch guns. Nothing in the world could match them at sea. Not even the *Helgolands*. He made up his mind then and there on the cutter, that if he were forced to forego his first love, the harmonies of proportion and light in the architecture of great cathedrals and public buildings, then he would gladly serve within the symmetrical architecture of the world's greatest fighting ships.

Glaring sunlight, reflecting off the water near the jetty, made it uncomfortable to look in that direction, where an indistinct blur of sailors' uniforms and darkly dressed civilians were clustered, waiting for them. The cutter bumped against a landing pontoon moored against mossy, barnacled pilings. Commander Northam raised his arm, acknowledging an older lady up on the jetty above them, silver strands of hair whisked sideways in the breeze, holding her brown netted hat with one hand and waving a kerchief with the other.

Sailors secured lines to the pontoon, and the cutter emptied from front to back. Above, a single file of silent men climbed the moss-greened steps. Waiting his turn, he listened to the slap of the waves under the lower steps, wafting the briny stench of oil-killed fish, a few of which rolled in the water off the nearby mudflats. A sailor called loudly for his attention, and directed him to follow his father and Commander Northam, who were already on the pontoon and climbing the steps.

Naval officers saluted the Commander and the destroyer's Captain. Civilians in brown and black coats held their hats and raised collars against the wind. His father was introduced, and shook hands in a semi-circle of unsmiling men, grouped on the jetty.

The sea-sickness affected his legs as well as his vision on the slippery steps. Even the hand-rail had a seaweed-moss that was slick to his grip. In the glare,

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further along the jetty, the silver-haired lady braced herself against the railing, apparently biding her time. Then, as the semi-circle of distinguished gentlemen began to separate, the old lady surged toward the Commander, brushing by those moving off toward shore, and their waiting carriages.

“Clive,” the silver-haired lady called, grasping the Commander by the arms and hugging him. She then poked him in the chest, as if admonishing him over some private disagreement. The Commander grinned and looked away, out at the destroyer.

“You must be Hugh Merlo,” the lady said, turning to his father, asking about the journey, as she held her hat on against the strong breeze.

While they talked, he waited, not anxious to be introduced. Hand on his forehead, shielding his eyes against the dazzle off the water, he felt the pressure of someone staring at him. Turning into the morning light, the person’s eyes caught his glance, sun-filled as it was, and held it, filling him with an impression of strength assessing his own. A tremor of nausea rose from deep within him. The bright light off the inlet, and the focused power within the young woman’s eyes made him momentarily blink, wanting to register other features. Uncertain, as to who, at the edge of the world, would regard him with such attention, he squeezed the hand-rail for support and stared back. Knees trembling, throat constricted, he watched as she moved out of the glare, light on her feet and almost his height.

A moment passed slowly, beyond awareness of the jetty or the hand-rail. The smooth forehead, long, brown hair pulled backward, the clear, evaluating eyes, hazel-brown and wide apart, luminous cheeks and an elegant nose, would have spoken to most people of exceptional beauty. To him though, there was a familiarity about her presence, an impression of assignment and purpose, along with the strong chin, and no smile. A girl his age would surely say something trite, as an introduction at least.

When she didn’t speak, he studied her lips, which were feminine and generous. Her eyes continued to appraise him, moving slightly, as if she were reading a book. At sea for two days, his giddiness now made him vulnerable, unable to match eyes with someone beyond his understanding. There was no indication of hostility, but her power and dignity suddenly terrified him, and he found himself wondering if he’d said or done something to wrong her.

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Without air in his lungs, or a moment to wipe the dried salt from his face, he felt he was under the gaze of an earth-bound deity. Ten feet away, the girl's authority and beauty, and the steady manner in which she regarded him, was both alarming and compelling. In the seconds that passed, he knew a low estimate from such an immortal would be sharp and binding.

"And you must be Curtis," the older lady in the hat said nearby, making him gasp. "I'm Mrs. Houston, and this is my granddaughter Jennifer."

"Pleased to meet you," he said, shaking the lady's hand. Then, taking the tall girl's warm, magnetic fingers, he spoke just three syllables, a key that moved unseen tumblers in an interior lock.

"Jennifer," he said, daring to look into her eyes again, feeling in her touch that she was human, even with the sun behind her. As he spoke, a whoosh of something pressing, shooting outward from the center of his chest made him catch his breath, his head dazed by exhilaration. Her eyes, in the same moment, told him his voice had passed a test of strength, and that it was acceptable for him to accompany her. Only half aware of his surroundings, he floated next to her as people moved in ones and twos off the jetty toward the modest naval buildings above the tideline.

Someone drove them in a carriage around the inlet, and over a grassy hill, though who else was in the carriage was of no importance to him. In only seconds they were approaching a sign among trees, on a gravel road at the edge of the Royal Burgh of Kirkwall. He stepped down from the carriage before it stopped moving, onto what appeared to be the main street, took Mrs. Houston's hand, then helped Jennifer down onto the cobblestones.

Despite the sense that his body was still at sea, and pulsing shocks occurred within his chest with each eye contact, he began to be sure that she was close to his own age, and not ageless. Already, she'd laughed about her grandmother's formality, and asked him to call her Jenny. More remarkable, he could feel a fine, filigree line of perpetual attention forming between them, as he navigated Kirkwall's cobblestones on sea-legs. As tour-guide, Jenny seemed at home and familiar with the town, reaching for his hand, pulling him along, body, mind and soul, while he attempted not to be overwhelmed by her presence. In looking up for just a moment, he wondered at how quickly the sky at the edge of the world had changed to a turquoise blue.

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Whatever the distance they walked within Kirkwall, he experienced little of it, his body carrying him like an obedient porter. They entered a white-washed doorway off the main cobbled street, and paused in an oak-beamed hall while he was given directions. Then he crossed a narrow, patterned beige carpet leading up a candle-lit stairway, to a bed by a curtained window, and fell into a white pillow cupping his face.

Late in the afternoon he washed, combed his hair, changed clothes and came downstairs to find his father in the dining room, drawing, erasing and re-drawing U-boat sketches for the Commander. When Mrs. Houston came into the dining room, his father spoke with her, requesting only light food, citing the lingering effects of seasickness.

Candles could already be seen in the windows of the homes across the street, wherever curtains were not drawn. Mrs. Houston drew two sets of drapes across each window and a stillness settled throughout the thick-walled house. Roaming from the dining room to the library, Commander Northam waxed enthusiastic about the engineering sketches, requesting more details, asking questions as he paced. At a word from Mrs. Houston he agreed to be patient, admitting that the work would take weeks to unfold. "But we have the clues," he said, several times. Mrs. Houston wiped her hands on her apron, then returned to her soft singing in the kitchen, stirring and tasting a chicken and onion soup their stout cook had simmered from local stock.

Glancing around at the thick window casements, oak-beam ceiling and whitewashed interior walls of the centuries-old house, he noticed Jenny looking at him from the living room. She turned her eyes away several times, returning to a portfolio of papers she seemed to hold dear.

At the dinner table, he felt more at ease as each spoonful of soup warmed him, and with her occasional glances came waves of relief: the imagined attachment was intact. His curiosity began to ripen; why did she look at him so intently, and why did it feel both familiar and dreamlike, as if he were running in place, trying to touch her, but unable to get closer?

When the tureen and breadboard emptied, Jenny took dishes to the kitchen as the sub-arctic summer light faded slowly outside the yellow-curtained windows. Watching her lift and carry, he felt there were now several unseen filigree ribbons, shafts of feeling passing between them, across the table, and

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from room to room. The lines traversed space in an instant, as formless, yet delicately-made ribbons of greeting, that seemed to move ahead of any actual verbal communication or close physical proximity. While Jenny was in the kitchen, his eyes were fixed on the kitchen door, and he felt, then thought he saw the lines beginning to coil and braid together, doubling the almost-visible bond. Other than these unspoken lines of communication, the two of them said almost nothing to each other, during dinner or afterward, allowing their fathers' talk of U-boat engineering to cover their mutual exploration.

At an early hour of the evening, he and his father went upstairs to wash and get some rest. He shared a bedroom with his father, who seemed exhausted, and fell asleep quickly, snoring in a soft burr on his side. The night began to stretch into sleepless staring at the dark ceiling, and long after all should have been dreaming, he noticed that the filigree lines to her felt stronger, and had color: peach, turquoise and amethyst-tinted ribbons of pastel light gently touched and stroked his face, making him smile. It was as if her fingers were playfully lacing iridescent braids through his hair, conducting energy from what he imagined as a glowing ball of fire, whose warmth he could feel from the other end of the house.

Too early in the morning a sea-wind bore rooster calls, as the first pale sunrays penetrated the mist over the houses of Kirkwall. The Commander's boots could be heard squeaking on the boards in the hall and on the stairs, and then there were voices downstairs. A moment later, his father swung out of his bed and pulled open the drapes, telling him it was time to get up. The words seemed garbled, but his mind cleared quickly as a shock of awareness ran through his body, part fear, part excitement. She was in this same house.

Washed and dressed, he came downstairs with his heart thumping, and listened to his father and the Commander recreating U-boat dimensions over steaming hot tea and porridge at the table in the dining room. Jenny sat opposite him, keeping her eyes on her bowl and getting up frequently to help her grandmother or Mrs. Bedford, the laughing, pudgy cook they'd brought with them from London. Jenny's long hair was braided in a single rope, and she wore a thick woolen pullover in blue, white and red patterns, Norwegian-style.

"Curtis, I must apologize," the Commander said, getting up from the table.

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"I did promise your father I'd arrange a day-tour of the cruiser, but I'm informed she's departing this morning."

"That's quite all right, sir. Thank you for trying."

"Well, lad, perhaps there'll be another arriving while you're here. They come and go as the Admiralty pleases. And I'll keep my ears open, because I'll warrant you'll be serving on one of them before too long."

"Perhaps Curtis could see St. Magnus," Jenny said, from the kitchen doorway. "You said he's going to be an architect." The rosy skin on her cheeks and her long neck seemed to glow, flushing as she challenged her father. There was a maturity in her eyes and voice, delivering an edge of disapproval, and yet it somehow pleased the Commander, because he smiled and hugged her shoulders.

"We agree. Quite the place for an architect," the Commander said with apparent amusement, reaching for his coat. "And a work party with brooms. Take candles and mind the cobwebs."

"Not if it's howling out there. Listen to that wind, straight off the ice-cap," Mrs. Houston said, walking around Jenny, who drew her single brown braid over her right shoulder and glanced in a way that made his heart jump.

"If the weather doesn't improve then, lad, there's a fine library here. You'll be able to tell which books are mine. However, you're welcome to read whatever you find," the Commander said, with his hand on the front door.

"Son, it's important I spend a full day on the water," his father said, also buttoning his coat. "Perhaps Jennifer and Mrs. Houston could show you the sights."

"All right. I would like to see the church."

"It's actually a cathedral," Jenny said, one magnetic glance connecting with something that yearned in him, her eyes telling him there were mysteries to be shared. "There's nothing like it in England. I can show you."

He nodded his acceptance, but she avoided his eyes and moved back into the kitchen. His father and the Commander bundled up with scarves, locked their briefcases and stepped outside, where there were horses stamping on the cobblestone street, and a carriage waiting to take them to the anchorage.

"Now, Curtis, before you go anywhere," Mrs. Houston called, striding out of the kitchen still wiping her hands, crossing the floor to make sure the front

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door was closed. "I want you to choose some colors, over here."

Mrs. Houston led him to a bay window where a comfortable chair was surrounded by tables neatly laid out with linen bags of woolen thread and knitting needles. He reasoned now that the broad-shouldered creation Jenny wore had been made by Mrs. Houston, and not bought locally.

"You may not have all summer, but I do, so I can have something just for you in a week. What colors do you enjoy most?" she asked.

"What colors do you have the most of?"

"I have plenty of blue and plenty of white, but look at all of these."

"Blue and white would be perfect. Thank you."

"Well then, stand still while I unroll my tape," Mrs. Houston said, stretching the tape measure across his back, from his neck to his waist, and from shoulder to wrist. "Goodness me, you're going to be taller and wider at the shoulder than your father. What a sight. There, let me write that down. This will be the largest one I've made. Quite the thing for this cold wind."

"I didn't expect this, thank you. Jennifer's is beautiful."

"Yes, well, yours will be handsome rather than beautiful. Now, Jennifer, if you're going to St. Magnus this morning, be aware that some Presbyterian clergy have been there lately and may not wish to be disturbed. Perhaps they may buy it one of these days. Not enough Catholics to keep it going, I expect."

"Yes, Nana. I think I can see blue sky out there," Jenny said, and then turning toward him with a smile, tossed her braid back over her shoulder. "I'll fetch my hat and gloves."

They left the house a short time later. "Father told me the gale you sailed through was a bad one," she said, pulling her scarf tight. "You look much better today."

"Worst trip I've ever had on a destroyer," he said, pleased when she looked at him and laughed into the wind, the little lines at the corners of her eyes crinkling. "I thought your grandmother was going to chaperone."

"She'd rather not walk too far in this wind." Jenny removed her woolen hat before the wind did, and stuffed it into a pocket. "She trusts me. I don't know about you, though."

Another sideways glance and a smile made him wonder how she managed to express both purity and playfulness at the same time. Even more intriguing

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was her evident interest in him. “When we came ashore at the anchorage, were you expecting someone else, someone you knew?”

“I...I apologize for staring,” she said, breaking off as they stopped and stood together on a patch of grass, looking up at the entrance to the old cathedral. Apparently not wanting to continue the thought, she pointed toward the main doors. “There’s never anyone inside, any time I’ve been here. It’s almost empty. No pews left.”

“It’s magnificent.” He breathed in a lungful of cold salty air, walking on brittle grass to view the lee side. “The red and yellow stones make it warm. I’ve never seen warm-looking cathedrals, or churches, anywhere in England. A little small for a cathedral though, and quite a mixture of styles. How old is it?”

“Almost eight hundred years. Built by the nephew of St. Magnus. His masons began quarrying these stones in 1137.”

“St. Magnus? A saint, at the edge of the world?” he asked, watching the smooth skin on her high cheekbones turn rosy in the chill morning air, while she tucked her gloves into the pockets of her long dress. The way her eyes pondered his, before answering, made her appear lovelier than any girl or woman he could imagine. He’d known her for one day, and yet the thought of leaving her, for the halls of Cambridge and his career, sent a stab of pain through the center of his chest.

“Magnus was the Norwegian earl of these islands,” she said, turning to him in surprise, placing her hand over her heart. “I...” An awkward pause followed, then she took a breath and looked up at the cathedral. “There was a warlord named Hakon, who wanted what Magnus had. Hakon was a thoughtful type, who spent his days thinking about being an earl and being respected. He tricked Magnus into a meeting on Egilsay Island, and had him executed with an axe. What made Magnus a saint was that he prayed for Hakon when the executioner couldn’t go through with it, asking for mercy for Hakon’s soul. Then Hakon made someone else split Magnus’ head with the axe. And in the weeks afterward the people noticed miracles, healings that couldn’t be explained.”

“What happened to Hakon?”

“He became earl. I thought you’d ask, what happened to Magnus? Water under the bridge now. I want to show you inside,” she said, moving off the

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grass, touching his shoulder as he walked ahead of her, up the worn stone stairway. "Tell me what you feel, after we go in."

At the top he paused, turned to her, and she urged him with a gesture to put his hand on the door. "Go in," she whispered.

He wondered why she would whisper outside the double doors of an empty cathedral, and in her eyes he saw an anxiety, which he guessed had a connection with rumors of ghosts, or local folklore about the unmaintained interior. Her concerned expression seemed to make her far more attractive, and more statuesque and compelling than any cathedral, or any ghost story for visitors. Less than two feet from his eyes, her smooth white forehead seemed bright with her vitality, and he noticed how symmetrically the part had been made in the middle of her soft brown hair, pulled back on each side to a white silk ribbon on her braid. Her intelligent, perfectly balanced face offered a living mystery that made him smile, in genuine appreciation and wonder, though perhaps she might be thinking he was merely being irreverent about the local folklore.

"It's all right," he said, assuring her. He turned the handle, held the door open, and stepped over the threshold into the cool, musty interior. Two steps further, he stopped. "Oh..." he said, remaining motionless, with Jenny next to him. It was not the unkempt empty shell he'd expected, and a confusing sense of *déjà vu* held him in surprise as the door closed behind them.

So as not to appear disoriented in front of her, he shifted to the state of mind he was sure about, that of architectural design, and the purpose of dimension and proportion. The walls, arches and pillars were the same red and yellow blocks as the exterior, sandstone, he decided. And it was small for a cathedral, just two-hundred, perhaps two-hundred and fifty feet long, he thought, walking further in, across the dimly-lit stone floor.

The partially cloudy sky outside provided filtered light, sifted through peak-arched, stained-glass windows set high in the thick walls. The colored panes depicted the crucifixion and other biblical scenes, which the analytical part of his mind believed had been installed or improved one or perhaps two centuries ago. Ancient stone crypts lined the interior, inscribed with strange, unreadable Norse glyphs. There were no rows of pews or wooden relics remaining. Roof beams arching high above were shaded in darkness. Slabs of flagstone