

We wait until the pub has long closed and all the drinkers have settled in for the evening. The only sounds now are the lap of the water on the shore and the soft night twitterings of the forest creatures. When the last light has been turned off and the stars are ruling the sky, Macrae gets to his feet and dusts himself down.

“Operation Wallaby is a go,” he whispers.

As I pointed out, there are a few boats at the back of the pier, but they are all tightly secured and battened down. A little way further we find a small dinghy which is open, but it has an enormous engine that would surely wake everyone from here to Balloch even if we could jump it. Those are the only boats in this bay, so we head back into the trees and climb over the headland into the next one. It’s hard going, but after a while we notice that the moon has risen. Nearly full, her soft light gives the woods a surreal glow. And when we get back down to the water’s edge, the reflection of her flying high over the night-cloaked mountains stops me dead in my tracks.

I’m still staring at the beauty of it all, trying to find some breath, when I hear Macrae.

“I found her!” he hisses. “Come here!”

I pick my way over to where he’s standing, a little way back from the shoreline with a leaf-covered tarpaulin at his feet.

“The Good Ship Macrae,” he beams. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

I’m staring at an ancient rowing boat with flaking paint and about six inches of moss in the bottom.

“Is this going to float?” I ask.

“Course it is!” says Macrae. “Would Jones and I take you out in an unseaworthy vessel?”

“You will forgive me if I require something a little more buoyant than the blind optimism of a madman and a ginger cat.”

“Sh! Do you want to give the game away? Now see if you can find a dry spot for these beers.”

With the playful slap-slapping of the water on the hull and the drip-splash of the oars as I lift them in and out of the water, I'm seriously beginning to need a pee.

Macrae sits facing me in the stern, still drinking Colonsay lager. The last time I looked Jones was behind me, paws on the prow, scanning the moonlit horizon.

Sweat drips into my eyes despite the cool of the autumn night. We've been out on the water for over an hour and I'm getting a little tired of it.

"Why do I-?" I start.

Macrae leans forward.

"Sh!" he hisses.

I take a calming breath and whisper:

"Why do I have to do all the rowing?"

"Are you trained in night-time animal tracking?" whispers Macrae in reply.

"No."

"Well I am, and Captain Jones was born with that particular skillset, so get your hands on those oars and pull until we say otherwise."

"Can you at least," I say, hauling the boat forward, "tell me which island we're going for?"

"The one with the wallabies on it."

"Obviously, but which one is that?"

"Fatboy said was called 'inch' something."

I hold the oars above the water, dripping.

"Macrae, there are twenty-three islands in Loch Lomond and they don't have bloody signposts on. Tell me you've brought the map."

"Let's try this one. This looks good. I think this is it."

"Macrae, it's about forty feet across. How could a colony of twenty-eight wallabies live on that?"

He looks at me like I'm mad.

"In their burrows."

"Wallabies don't live in burrows."

"Right, right, well let's find an island with trees on it, then."

“No, they don’t live up trees either. Macrae, out of interest, do you actually know what a wallaby is?”

“That’s it! That one there. Come on, row faster.”

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Six islands later and I’m close to complete exhaustion. We’ve gone ashore on all of them, hauling the boat up on the pebbles before disappearing into the undergrowth for a fruitless wallaby hunt. My arms are aching from the rowing, my legs are jammed with thorns and my face is thick with stinging sweat and grime.

“That’s enough,” I say, as I pull us away from the shore once more, “I need bed more than I need any damned wallaby.”

“Wait!” says Macrae, leaning forward. “Look there!” And he points over my shoulder.

I turn round to see Jones twitching his nose at yet another fabulously beautiful moon-shrouded island.

“This has to be it!” he says.

“No, Macrae,” I say, “it doesn’t.”

~

Ten minutes later we’re hauling the boat up onto pebbles again. A silver-plated beach curves away on either side and in front of us is a thicket of the densest undergrowth yet. Macrae points forward and smiles.

“Right then, here we go!” he whispers. “Remember, nice and quiet.” And he paces deftly towards the bushes, Jones at his side.

How can he possibly have so much energy? It’s taking every ounce of my will just to keep myself from collapsing where I stand like a puppet with its strings cut.

I step forward after him and kick my shin straight into a log. I tumble to the deck, cursing and crunching into the pebbles.

“I told you to be quiet,” he says, looming over me.

“Jesus, that’s it!” I snap. “Listen, Macrae, it’s got to be four in the morning. It’s starting to rain. I’m shattered. Let’s just go.”

“Sh!” he hisses.

“What?”

“Look at Jones!”

Jones has slowed to a panther crawl. Suddenly he stops dead, eyes blazing in the gloom. His tail shoots upright and ‘poofs’ to the volume of a feather duster.

“There!” says Macrae.

Through the trees at the edge of the water, a shape is moving.

“I’m not sure that’s a wallaby,” I say. “It’s got a fish in its mouth.”

“I don’t care if it’s got the Declaration of Arbroath up its arsehole. Bag the bastard.”

