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Wasandria

Sebastian's adventures

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For my children

1. The journey

It was already late afternoon. Most of the luggage was piled up in the hall packed and ready, with the exception of one old suitcase, which refused to close despite the efforts of Dolores the Nanny. She was kneeling on it, quite flushed in the face by now: "I'm going to have to pack it all over again," she murmured, exasperated. Louise continued to hop about her in a state of exhilaration and Mother flew through the house urging everyone to hurry along.

"Always the same fuss before we set off for the summer holidays," thought Sebastian. "Six hours in the motor car and then the ferry: I suppose there's no hope we'll be in time to make the crossing before dark."

Of course, their destination was well worth the excitement and bother of the journey: Wasandria! The island was a place of special magic for Sebastian and his little sister, who spent the holidays with their Grandmother there. It was to be his eleventh summer on Wasandria and, as usual, Mother would accompany them; she would generally leave after a week to return to the mainland and her work as a reporter. This year she was to travel to Burma to research an article about a Burmese freedom fighter.

“Do come along, Sebastian!” Mother’s voice rang reproachfully up the stairs. “Louise has been sitting in the car for ages.”

He quickly packed the last and most important things into his battered leather satchel: compass, catapult, notebook and his star-shaped medallion. The latter he had kept hidden under his mattress since he had found it and made it his own on Wasandria two summers ago; in the year of 1928. Ever since the medallion had been in his possession, his sleep had been uneasy and a strange feeling would linger on when he awoke, but he could never quite recall his dream.

“Maybe this summer I’ll be able to discover the meaning of the medallion,” he mused as he wrapped it in an old silk handkerchief belonging to his father.

Dolores had just crammed the last suitcase into the motorcar when Sebastian dashed out the front door. At last, they were on their way! As usual, there was little room to spare in the car with the two children and Dolores squashed together amongst bundles and bags on the back seat and Mother in the front with Hector. Mother’s articles were so sought-after that the newspaper she worked for had put the car and driver at her disposal to enable her to move about from one news story to the next with the greatest possible ease.

Hector was a dour man with meagre, arching eyebrows, and a narrow moustache over tight, purple lips. He was a man of few words, which suited Sebastian perfectly because the boy was quite content not to have to talk to him. It was only to Mother that Hector showed himself to be in any way pleasant or obliging. Although he was meant to take his leave while Mother was in Burma, he had insisted on postponing his arrangements in order to drive the family to Wasandria. Not only that, but when he learnt that there were various repair jobs to be done in Grandmother's house, he had offered his services for the holidays claiming to be a great handyman. Mother, of course, was delighted not to have to make the journey to Wasandria by train and bus and she was sure Grandmother would be glad of Hector's expertise about the house. To Sebastian, however, it was obvious that Hector was keen to get to Wasandria at all costs. There was something fishy about him.

Until now Hector had not even known the way to Wasandria. It wasn't until they were on the point of leaving that Mother had given him the map on which the whole route to the ferry in Gondals was marked in red.

Hector's predecessor, Karl, who had mysteriously disappeared the previous year, had marked the directions on the map. There was a

rumour that he had been involved in dubious transactions, and it was said that he had been blackmailed and forced to flee to a far-off country; it was even suggested that he had been murdered.

Mother dismissed these stories as nonsense: “Karl was madly in love, and he simply followed his Lisbeth to Argentina”, she said. Nobody really knew the truth, but the fact remained that no sooner had Karl disappeared than Hector turned up at the office and was employed at once to replace the old driver. Karl was soon forgotten.

Sebastian was greatly looking forward to seeing his Grandmother. She was a tall, lean lady with a distinguished Roman nose and the liveliest, sparkling blue eyes he knew. Her snow-white hair was always elegantly pinned up, and she invariably wore a long, black skirt with a high-necked, long-sleeved, white blouse. On a black velvet ribbon around her neck hung a golden locket encircled by a small gold snake with eyes of turquoise.

Why Grandmother set such great store by the secrecy surrounding the whereabouts of Wasandria was no longer known, but each person who came to the island had to sign a declaration that the secret would be kept. Wasandria did not feature on any map - even the post came no further than Gondals, where Grandmother picked it up.

That the people of Gondals considered her to be obstinate and slightly eccentric on account of this secretiveness did not disturb her at all: it meant they kept their distance, and she was spared their curiosity. Despite her stern appearance, however, Grandmother was mild as a lamb at heart, especially to her grandchildren Sebastian and Louise.

Having left the city and its traffic far behind, the travellers drove on past fields and meadows as the sun's last rays fell on the land. Sebastian leaned sleepily against the window, rested his head on his bulging satchel, and closed his eyes for a while. He pictured their arrival on Wasandria, wondering what it would be like to be there again, looking forward to the week ahead and the arrival of Frederick, his best friend, who was coming to stay.

When Dolores began to snore softly, he smiled; he thought she was a brick. She was neither boring nor strict: he could do more or less as he liked without her interfering, and she even went exploring the caves under the sea with him. You could only get to the caves when the tide was at low ebb-otherwise you could easily get drowned. If you were caught at high tide, it would be really dangerous. That last time Dolores had brought a torch from Gondals especially for the expedition. And it was there in the cave that Sebastian had found

the star-shaped medallion, which was now safely tucked away in his satchel.

The loud drone of a ship's horn jerked him from his sleep: Gondals Harbour! He wound down the window and peered sleepily out into the darkness, taking a deep breath of the clear, fresh, sea air. The familiar smell of diesel and fishing boats filled his nostrils. His right foot was full of pins and needles and the clasp of his satchel had left an imprint on his cheek.

Hector had parked the motorcar by Pier 11, and there was not another car in sight. Sebastian recognised the outlines of a ship beyond, its mast light shimmering softly in the mist. The sea was calm and at first there was nothing to be heard but the rattle of shrouds against the mast. Then, from close by came the barking of the harbour dog and soon he appeared out of the mist followed by his owner, Jonas, limping along with his wooden leg. Once, Jonas had been a whaler, but on his last outing his leg had got caught up in the unreeling of the harpoon line and the harpooned whale had been so strong that it had pulled him overboard into the sea. Ever since then he had been Captain of the ferries in Gondals. He was a good friend of Grandmother and so he was the one who was taking them out to Wasandria. He had a wide grin on his face and a crumpled cigar in

his mouth as he greeted Mother with a hug: she had known him since she was a child.

Struggling out of the mountain of luggage surrounding him on the back seat, Sebastian stumbled from the car. Jonas limped over and hugged him too, enveloping the boy in a fierce aroma of fish, cigar, salt water and rum: every year the same welcoming ritual took place. Dolores and Louise waited in the car while Hector stood at the quayside wall smoking his cigarette and squinting out over the sea. But all that met the eye was a thick wall of fog.

“The sea is calm tonight, just as though it knew you were coming,” said Jonas cheerfully, “and Grandmother gave me tea and sandwiches for you in case you were hungry on board. There’s sweet liquorice for you, Louise, and cucumber sandwiches for Sebastian and for Dolores, something to stop the seasickness. The dear lady can’t wait to see you. Hector, will you step up here please and pass me your Declaration of Discretion?”

Hector took a somewhat crumpled document out of his jacket pocket. “How kind of the old dame to permit me to land on her island,” he mumbled ironically. Jonas chose to ignore the remark and slipped the paper in amongst the others already collected in a fat black book:

“Time to be getting under way! I’ll help Hector to stow the luggage. Louise, Sebastian, the same procedure as every year: you join Mother and Dolores in the tavern, and I’ll come for you as soon as everything is ship-shape. But watch out,” he called after them, “they changed owners a couple of months ago and the lemonade tastes a bit funny sometimes!”

Then off he stomped towards the ferry in his heavy leather boots with the black book under his arm and Dolores’ bag in the other hand. Hector started to line up the suitcases –no less than twenty-one pieces - on the wooden landing-stage, and while Mother was rummaging in the glove compartment for a torch, Dolores took Louise by the hand, and they went over to the Harbour Bar. For Louise the smell of pipe tobacco and brandy and the guffaws of the gruff seamen were alarming, but her brother thought it was great. Most of the people inside were friends of Jonas and they all knew him by name.

Going on ahead, he opened the door and marched in confidently; he was glad to see that there behind the counter stood big Henrietta. “If she’s still here it must mean the new owner is a nice man.” Scarcely had this idea crossed his mind when a rough hand grabbed him by the collar: “What is this young boy doing here?”

Sebastian turned around and found himself looking into a pair of coal-black eyes belonging to a face covered with a huge, black

beard towering above him. Luckily Mother appeared in the door just at that moment.

“He is my son,” she said curtly, drawing Sebastian with her towards a table at the back of the room. “It looks as though the lemonade isn’t all that has changed around here. But Jonas will be here to fetch us soon, I expect,” she assured him as they sat down.

He placed his satchel carefully on the table and glanced around the room. The walls were stained brown with tobacco smoke, the floor was wet and dirty, and apart from Henrietta’s there was not a familiar face in sight. In Snorre and Erke’s corner, (two Swedish fisherman who could always be found drinking their beer there), sat a couple of lowering strangers in dark coats with the collars turned up. They were speaking a language Sebastian did not understand.

Now the black-eyed man who had taken him by the collar came up to their table. “I’m Duro,” he growled. “What will you have? But let me tell you, children are not admitted here after dark.” Mother paid no attention to his remark about children and ordered four drinks. These were brought up in no time, but as the man was putting the tray down on the table, he stopped short. He stared at Sebastian’s satchel.

“Where did you get that satchel?” he asked brusquely. “It was a present from my father, and he was given it by his father,” answered

Sebastian in a steady voice. Before he could continue, Duro had reached out for the satchel and was opening it.

He appeared to be looking for something and before they knew what was happening, he had turned it upside down and all its contents tumbled to the floor. In a fury, Sebastian sprang up and tried to pull the satchel away from Duro while Louise, quick as lightening and without a word, gathered up the things from the floor and hid them inside her jacket. Mother drew herself up to her full height: "This is outrageous, how dare you..." Then they heard Henrietta's voice raised urgently from behind:

"Duro, what's going on? Leave them alone. Don't you know that's the family of the old Lady of Wasandria?"

"But the satchel..." stammered Duro, distracted for a moment by Henrietta's scolding tone. "My grandfather had one exactly the same. Where did you get it?" In a thrice, Henrietta had taken the satchel out of Duro's hands and returned it to Sebastian, who, with Louise's help, packed his belongings back in again. Duro turned on his heel and, glowering angrily, retreated behind the bar. Everybody had been watching the incident, and there followed an undercurrent of murmurs and whispers from all corners of the room.

"He seems a bit abrupt, but actually he's not such a bad fellow," said Henrietta in a conciliatory tone. "Things have changed around

here, you know, since old Hannes was driven out...” She indicated with a slight nod of her head towards the company of dark figures Sebastian had noticed earlier. These three, no doubt becoming aware that they were the object of attention, wasted no time in getting up and slinking from the premises.

“One day,” continued Henrietta, “that lot came into the harbour on a ship from France. Old Snorre was out at The Desdemonia at the time and, presuming that such a big boat must have a large and hungry crew, offered to sell them his fresh fish. And one of the crewmembers did actually take him on board and down to the galley where the ship’s cook bought all his biggest and best fish. It was only yesterday, though, that Snorre in a state of great agitation, told me what he had seen. Apparently inside the ship everything is completely modern and below deck there is a huge space, a sort of headquarters with all kinds of instruments and screens, as if it was a research ship. When Snorre asked what it was all about, he was hurried on deck by two sailors who saw him over the side and away in his boat without another word being spoken.

“And what has that got to do with Hannes?” interrupted Sebastian, “why has Hannes left?”

“Well, you see,” replied Henrietta frowning slightly, “Hannes had a fight with some of the foreign ship’s crew members who used to

come to the tavern nearly every evening. Nobody knew what it was all about but one night Erke saw Hannes down on the jetty talking to these men in the dark. There was some disagreement and Erke distinctly saw how they pinned Hannes' arms down and took some papers out of his pocket. Then Hannes ran off and that's the last anybody saw of him. And all of a sudden, I found myself alone, in charge of the Harbour Bar. So, I asked Duro to help me out. He's my second cousin once removed and he grew up in Gondals: our family comes from here, you see."

"Well, well, what an interesting story." Mother interjected, but you could see she wasn't all that pleased that Sebastian and Louise should be listening to such matters.

"Henrietta, it is so nice to see you again. I expect Jonas will have everything on board by now, so we'll be on our way. We'll see you again before long, I'm sure. A friend of Sebastian's will be coming to stay with us on Wassandria and no doubt the children will enjoy showing him the sights of Gondals... with its many cultural treasures," she added vaguely as they moved towards the door. Sebastian made a wry face at the thought of visiting the "cultural treasures" of Gondals for the hundred thousandth time. Apart from the sweet shop and the antique shop, he actually found Gondals dreadfully boring.

“It would be much more interesting to visit Henrietta with Frederick and find out more about the research ship and the disappearance of Hannes,” he thought to himself. “And unpleasant as he seems, I’ll wager that fellow Duro has a story to tell.”

At that moment Jonas appeared in the door and beckoned to them. It had begun to rain in the meantime and when the travellers reached the moorings they were drenched. The little boat, which normally took holidaymakers on day trips, was also used as the ferry to Wasandria. Jonas’ ‘pride and joy’ was freshly waxed and painted bottle green - a job he devoted himself to in the winter months. Dolores slipped on the wet gangplank and would have gone overboard if Hector hadn’t caught her just in time.

The other passengers were helped across by Jonas and given a jovial welcome: “It’s nice and warm below deck; the stove is lit, and there’ll be something to eat on the table. I’ll need you to put on your life jackets, though. The sea may be calm at present but the weather experts in the harbour report there could be a wind getting up. Hector I could do with your help above to undo the hawser - when I say the word.”

The cabin, with its familiar, woody smell, was bathed in the soft light of the lamps; as cosy as could be. It didn’t take long, after they

had eaten Grandmother's provisions, for the gentle rocking of the ship to send the weary passengers to sleep. The only one to remain wakeful was Sebastian. He knew that time flies when you are asleep and seems to drag on forever if you are waiting for it to pass but there was nothing, he could do about that- he just couldn't sleep. The state of joyful anticipation he was in was keeping him wide-awake. "I think I'll go and see what Jonas is up to," he said to himself. "Maybe I can help in some way."

Jonas was standing at the helm with a mug of tea and rum and a variety of instruments, dials and gauges before him. You could see the sea through the salt-water-spattered windscreen and the weather station's forecast had been right - for now the waves were white-crested and the wind was blasting louder and louder.

"Hello, Jonas," said Sebastian going over to him.

"Oh, there you are," replied Jonas. "But would you not prefer to go back below and enjoy a bit of peace and quiet while you can. All hell will be breaking loose here shortly." Sebastian hardly hesitated: of course, it was vastly preferable to be in touch with things up here. Below deck you didn't know what was going on outside and besides, a snoring Hector was hardly his idea of company.

Just then a voice came in over the wireless: “Attention all shipping in Gondals Bay and within a radius of ten sea miles! A Beaufort scale force 12 gale is approaching...it will reach you out there in about eight minutes.”

“No cause for panic,” said Jonas grinning. “Around here you get five or six summer storms a year and they always come in at around force 10 on the Beaufort scale. It can’t get much worse than that.”

Hardly had the words left his lips when the first squall whipped across the ship and swept it high up on a wave. The bow of the ship slammed down into the next wave, and water streamed across the windscreen. For a moment one could see nothing. Sebastian turned pale and squeezed his eyes shut. He clutched onto the old brass rail so tightly that his fingers turned blue. His stomach plummeted; this felt worse than any roller coaster ride.

“You can open your eyes again,” Jonas assured him, “my old Titania can handle this.” He was no longer grinning though and to distract the boy he asked him to do something for him: “Be so good as to hand me over my pills. They’re in a little silver box on the shelf beside you. They’re for my heart, you know, and I’m always forgetting to take them.”

Still white as a ghost Sebastian felt about on the shelf 'til he found the pillbox and held it out to Jonas. Just then there came a second squall even more horrendous than the last. Jonas who had his hand out-stretched to take the pills, lost his balance and was flung violently against the back wall of the cockpit where he lay quite still. Throwing himself down on all fours, Sebastian crawled over to his side and shook his shoulder, calling him repeatedly by name. "Wake up, Jonas!" he shouted. But it was no good: Jonas didn't move. He was unconscious.

The gale flung the rudderless ship into the waves. In a panic Sebastian saw the helm swivelling furiously round and round. Outside it was pitch dark and the sea whipped relentlessly against the windshield. A variety of things - a torch a splice knife, a compass, a transmitter, and Jonas' pillbox - was rolling about on the wooden floor. He couldn't get to his feet. With each new wave he was thrown back down again. Suddenly little lights on the instrument board began to blink and there was a wireless transmission: "Attention, attention all shipping! Steer clear of the harbour. The wind is beating in towards the harbour wall. Danger to all shipping approaching Gondals Harbour."