

THE POLAR REGIONS

Antarctic Explorers

Cook 1772-5
Bellinghause 1818-21
Weddell 1820-4

Drygalski 1902-4
Bruce 1903-4
Shackleton 1907-9
Amundsen 1911-12
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Captain Sima Khatri Aurora Journal



November 5

Preparations continue for the Dyer expedition. They have been going smoothly overall, but our first real incident occurred today. It could easily have been serious, had things happened differently.

One of the hoisting lines came loose, causing a crate of dog sleds to tumble onto the deck. If the crate had not swung slightly to the right before it dropped, it would have crushed Seaman Delacquis to death. As it was, it still shattered his left leg.

Thank goodness for Dr. Semil Elhassan. He had the situation in hand almost before it had happened. He turned broken slats into splints and set Delacquis' leg, calm in the face of such agonized screams. By the time the ambulance arrived, I doubt Elhassan left the hospital with much to do. I have little doubt that he saved Delacquis' leg by acting so fast.

Delacquis was lucky. We all were. But this is cultivated luck. Elhassan is not here by chance. I

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recruited him precisely because of the ability he showed today.

Today's accident puts me in mind of how I first encountered Dr. Elhassan and makes me grateful for his presence. I had only just purchased the *Aurora* in Alexandria. I had come to Cairo, casting my net wider than a port city in my search for the kind of crew I wanted to sail with. What a difference this trip was compared to the one we are preparing for now! I haunted the tougher watering holes, looking for figures that almost fit in, but not quite. I am particular. I wanted to recruit people who could handle themselves when trouble came calling, but who did not set out to be the cause of the trouble in the first place.

I forget the name of the bar where I first saw Dr. Elhassan. I remember its low ceiling, dim lighting, and its atmosphere so choked with smoke that every breath felt like dare. I remember, too, that its prices made it prohibitive to the truly destitute, and it attracted the adventurous members of the more affluent classes...whether they be on their way up

or down the social ladder. I'm not sure that even Elhassan knew which category he belonged to at that moment. I'm smiling now because the story of how I came to enter the bar should be saved for another time, despite its similar adventuresome spirit.

He did not start the fight that broke out in the corner furthest from the door. I don't know what provoked it. Two men went at each other with fists. Then one pulled a knife. The other opponent slashed his adversary across the leg.

There was a lot of blood, sudden and spurting. The first man went down. The second hesitated, as if surprised by the damage he had done. Before he could decide to press his advantage and finish the job, Dr. Elhassan rushed in. He hit the knife-wielder hard enough to knock him senseless. He kicked the knife away, grabbed the man's belt, and then used it to create a tourniquet around the wounded man's leg.

I don't approve of fights, but their violent alchemy has sometimes shown me exactly who or what I need.

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Afterward, I approached Elhassan. After a short discussion, I offered him the position of ship's doctor.

He looked pleased, but then reluctant, as if he were about to turn me down.

"What is it?" I asked.

"You should know that I am not a credentialed doctor."

"I'm not hiring you for the parchment paper your name might or might not be on. I'm hiring you for your skill. Something I just saw on display in astounding quantities."

He appeared startled but pleased. Later, he confided that no one had appreciated his worth that way before. I understood all too well. I have had a lifetime of being underestimated too.

November 6

Loading almost complete. No further incidents with equipment.

Another incident on deck, though, a result of yesterday's mishap. What was I saying about violence providing clarity? That its alchemy shows me my path? I do not need any reminders of Nguyen Ly's value as bosun, but if for some reason I did, I received one today.

Engineer Leiser and Seaman Mason came to blows. Leiser is good friends with Delacquis, and she blames Mason for yesterday's accident. She maintains Mason did not fasten the line properly. She may be right, though Mason adamantly maintains his innocence in the matter. Leiser does not believe him.

They came to blows, but they did not trade them.

I was on the bridge when they lunged for each other on the foredeck. I anticipated what was about to

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happen with a sigh of resignation, but I could not get there in time to stop it. Bosun Ly did, though. If he does not actually have a sixth sense that tells him to be wherever trouble is about to break out, then he gives a convincing simulation of that ability.

He stepped between Leiser and Mason, solid as a wall, stern as thunder.

I had made it out of the bridge by then. I did not hear what, if anything, he said to them. Ly treats words as if they are limited resources, which gives added weight to what he does say. Leiser and Mason retreated. Their relations will never be cordial, but I do not believe they will seek vengeance against each other again. The matter might stew, but to my eyes, disagreements have been put to rest. Bosum Ly met eyes with me and gave me a shrug, as if he had done nothing of consequence.

I first met Nguyen Ly when he presented himself as candidate for bosun in Alexandria. Unlike the other contenders, he provided no

papers and gave no account of his history or his personality. What I saw what undoubtedly what I would get.

"Nguyen Ly," he said. "Bosun."

That was all. He stood before the table we had set up on the foredeck for the interviews and waited.

Dr. Elhassan sat with me. We both asked Ly a few questions, and received only shrugs in response. "Hire me or don't," he said. "You can find me at the Green Asp." Then he terminated the interview on his own by walking away.

We stared, nonplussed, then turned to each other. Ly had been the last candidate of the day. Surely, one would want to make an impression!

"What do you think?" I asked.

"There are other candidates that appear much better on paper," Elhassan said, carefully.

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"But you're thinking that the same might have been said about other candidates for ship's doctor?"

"Yes."

"So am I."

Ly's self-possession had not come across as arrogance. His demeanor had been of a man who knew his abilities. Clearly, he felt no need to make a case for himself.

The Green Asp was a port tavern that catered to foreign crews. Elhassan and I went there for the next four nights. While we saw Ly across the crowded room, nothing of note happened, nor any following interaction between us. Nor did anything occur the following night, or the night after that. On the fourth calm night, Elhassan frowned and said to me, "Does it seem normal to you that we haven't seen a single fight in a place such as this?"

"You're right. These are very well-behaved sailors."

We watched Ly closely whenever he stood up from his table. We realized that what we had assumed was him fetching another drink or stopping to speak with an acquaintance had a different, more rigorous purpose.

"He's managing the crowd," Elhassan said, impressed.

A word here, a restraining hand there, an imposing presence at the right moment, all serving to calm-
ing essences over waters on the verge of troubled or boiling. This one man kept an entire crowded bar from ever erupting.

I knew then that we had our bosun.

Every voyage since then has confirmed me in my choices.

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November 7

This voyage feels like it may be different than any other we've embarked on. I am fortunate in my officers. I know in my bones that I will need everything they can give me and this ship in the days ahead. As we prepare for the cold southern reaches of this globe, I find myself worried for what may come. Yet, I remain steady that I have such strong hands to make the journey with me.