

**in hot water**

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# **in hot water**

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## Summary

“A geological phenomenon,” Goodsir is saying, sounding softly delighted.

## Notes

This was written & posted on Tumblr for 12 Days of Carnivale 2018.

“A geological phenomenon,” Goodsir is saying, sounding softly delighted. “Geothermal, I should say.” He is looking through his pack for something—a sketchbook, no doubt—charcoal—

“Aye,” says Rae. “It’s a hot spring.” He says this rather in the way he might say “it’s a public house.”

“Lieutenant,” Goodsir says, with the tone of someone who would very much like his enjoyment to be shared, “Edward—please tell Dr Rae that it is of the utmost importance—”

“I’m sorry,” Edward says. “What is it that we’re speaking of?”

“A *thermal spring*,” Goodsir says. “As at Bath, or—or Buxton. A natural source of hot water, rising to the surface from underground well.” He has put his charcoal in his pocket and now he is looking for it again.

“As lovely as it sounds,” Edward says, “you know the captain won’t stand any risk, not now —”

“I understand the risk is negligible,” Goodsir says. “I only ask for volunteers. A few men.”

“The *risk* is negligible,” says Rae. “The effort, on the other hand—”

“How far,” Edward says. “In days.”

“Three by canoe,” Rae says. “Then one or two overland, depending on conditions. Mecredi can take you, if he must.” At this he rises and shouts something down the stairs in some combination of French and Cree which Edward cannot follow even half of. The reply is *ouais*, at least. Rae returns to the table. “Mecredi can take you,” he says again.

“Think of the *collecting*,” Goodsir says. It is the brightest Edward has seen him look in some time. “The specimens may be *entirely unknown*—”

“I’ll put it to the captain,” Edward says.

Later, when they’re alone: “Do you think you can bathe in it,” Thomas says, considering, “Or is it just a little puddle?” The corner of his mouth quirks. “I might go anyway,” he says, with a tired smile. “Just to be warm for a while.”

Edward resolves to put it to the captain as strongly as he can.

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In fact, they set out with nearly twenty men, with Mecredi, a tall grey-headed Métis steersman, at their head. Edward volunteers to lead the expedition; Thomas, of course, joins him, and Fairholme, leaving them disproportionately well commanded, but there is little risk of mutiny at Resolution, and Crozier approves their requests without comment. Word has got out that the springs have healing properties, as at Bath, and their complement is a mix of

adventurers and mild convalescents. None too sick to paddle: there will be portages, Mecredi tells them, even before the overlanding. (Crozier comes down, in fact, to see if they might find a way to take Fitzjames, travoised or carried, but Mecredi refuses it flat: *if you wish holy water*, he says, *have a priest bless it*.)

At the gates Hodgson and LeVesconte see them off.

“Please,” George says, “Stay safe.” There is something harrowed in him now, Edward thinks, and something steely, too. Henry, in his borrowed blanket parka, embraces the three of them, one after the other: it is odd and unrefined and entirely unlike him, and Edward is strangely moved by it.

“Ten days,” Edward says. “Twelve at most. And we have rocket-flares, if we need them.”

“Ten days,” says Henry.

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Luck is behind them like the wind and they arrive on the evening of the fourth day. They come into the clearing and he can *smell* it, that chemical smell, and then suddenly see flashes of green among the grey, even though it is early in the year and there is still snow on the ground, and then the men are *whooping*, running, some of them, and Edward would call them back but Fairholme is with them, and Thomas, beside him, is laughing—he pulls himself together.

“Men,” he roars, in his best first lieutenant’s listen-now-or-she’ll-be-on-her-beam-ends, and they turn to him as one: Fairholme among them, looking guilty. “One volunteer, in first, to make sure it’s safe. Then the rest.”

(“It’s safe,” Mecredi had told him, by the fire last night. “I’ve been in many times.”

“Still,” Edward had said, looking at Thomas, curled asleep beside him. “Caution never hurts.”

“Says the man who tried to sail off the edge of the world,” Mecredi says, and when Edward glances up at him he’s grinning.)

Now that the prospect of safety has been raised, they are more reluctant, but eventually Tom Hartnell raises his hand. “I’ll go,” he says.

“Thank you, Thomas Hartnell,” Edward says, placidly, at five times his normal volume. “Everyone else, back from the water. Doctor Goodsir!” This last at Harry who is already crouching by a little patch of greenery, making furious notes. He takes no notice of Edward’s shout.

“Right,” says Edward. “Tom, strip off. No one goes in clothed! It’s a long walk back to the boats.”

The springs are a series of greenish pools, twisting away into a little canyon up ahead. He can hear the rush of some tributary stream somewhere beyond. The steam rises from them into

the cool air in little irregular wisps.

He hasn't fully thought this through (or perhaps, somewhere deep, he has), because once Tom Hartnell is in the water—"I can stand," he says, and a few of the men who can't swim cheer a little—and the rest start undressing, Thomas puts a hand on his shoulder and says: "Shall we find a quieter one?"

They do, farther up: hardly out of view, but somewhat obscured with the rising steam. Thomas undresses swiftly, with little shame, as sailors do: he is as always very lovely, and the months at Resolution have been good to him: he is approaching *lean* again, instead of *starving*. By the time Edward has got his clothes rolled neatly and set on a rock Thomas is already in the water, holding on to the rocks at the edge of the pool one-handed. (Perhaps, Edward thinks, his own delay is because he was watching, instead of undressing.)

"This one must be deeper," Thomas says, bobbing in the water. "I can't touch the bottom."

The water when Edward slips in is shockingly hot: his breath leaves him in a rush. Every inch of his skin suddenly awake and alive. Around them, snow on the rocks and the few green plants that grow here in the heat. He turns a circle: breathes deep: lets himself drop into the shadowy green depths until his feet touch stone. Holds himself there a moment, entirely, perfectly warm: then kicks back up to air.

Feels, when he breaks the surface, as if the world he comes up in is a different one: subtly, indistinctly, better.

"It's not too deep," he says, to Thomas. "You don't swim, do you?"

"Not really," Thomas says, floating, his cheeks flushed in the heat. "A little."

"I'll teach you, then," Edward says, smiling. "When we're home."

Something crosses Thomas's face, then, which does not belong: not here in this little paradise.

"Will you," he says, with a bit of a smile.

"Yes," Edward says, perplexed. "Unless you don't wish it."

"Will you see me at all," Thomas says, and Edward's heart stutters—beats—

He pushes across the pool to Thomas's side in one smooth motion. Lifts his hand out of the warmth into the cold air which had seemed tolerable minutes ago but now feels like ice: finds Thomas's.

"Yes," he says, "of course."

"They will not confirm my rank, you know," Thomas says, and it is such an absurdity that Edward nearly laughs.

“Well,” he says, “a good thing we need not marry, then—I don’t think my sisters will accept a match below commander.”

“Edward,” Thomas says, sadly, turning his hand in Edward’s.

“Thomas,” Edward says, and kisses his knuckles.

Overhead, the sky is darkening and the stars spreading across it like a plume of smoke. They will watch the aurora, tonight, aimlessly and without consideration: with the steam rising around them and the men shouting and splashing in the distance, with Thomas held steady against Edward’s chest, his head tipped back against Edward’s shoulder. Their hands folded together.

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(Thomas, it turns out, makes a very fine swimmer: his strokes long and clean, his motion smooth through the clear blue South Pacific water. Edward, standing on the deck of the little sloop which they have borrowed for the week with his tin cup of coffee in his hand, will lean against the deckhouse: eye the sail flaked on the boom, eye the catspaws on the water beyond the atoll’s sheltered shallows, eye the squall away to the north which he thinks will miss them, all things being equal.

“Are you coming in,” Thomas will ask, hauling himself out sit dripping on the warm teak planks of the deck at Edward’s feet.

“No,” Edward will say, and crouch to kiss him, and taste salt.)

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