

LESS THAN ZERO

By Sean Macdonald

**A short Adventure
for four 4th Level Players**

INTRODUCTION

The Mount Nevermind Department of Maritime Sciences Assigned to Regions of Cold Temperatures and Otherwise Chilly Climbs lost a ship at sea months ago. The *MNS <0*, referred to by the gnomes as the “*MNS Less Than Zero*”, veered off course on its mission to retrieve an iceberg from the waters around Southern Ergoth. Not so unusual for a gnomish vessel, but it has not been seen since.

Recently there have been local reports about other ships lost at sea, the sides of their hulls ripped open. Those sailors that survived the attacks claim it’s a monster of the deep that is shrouded in a perpetual mist. Its growling and moaning can be heard from its misty shroud just before it strikes.

Was this the same monster that destroyed the *Less Than Zero*? Does it perhaps know the whereabouts of the gnomish ship? Can the adventurers discover the truth about the monster and prevent the attacks on the local ships? Of course, that’s what this whole adventure is about!

PREPARATION

You, the Dungeon Master (DM) need a copy of the *DUNGEON MASTERS Guide, Players Handbook* and *MonsterManual II* to use this adventure. It would also be essential to have a copy of the *DragonLance Campaign Setting* to refresh your knowledge of the tinker gnomes of Krynn.

BACKGROUND

The following information is for the DM only and not to be shared with the players until they discover the information for themselves.

The crew of the *MNS <0* was originally bound east from Mount Nevermind to obtain and haul an iceberg from the magically frozen water surrounding Southern Ergoth. The ship became lost in “the Gale” the stormy region east of Gellidus’ ice-covered empire.

Subsequently the vessel ran into a pirate ship traveling across the rough seas and damaged it near the point of sinking. The pirate crew boarded the gnomish vessel and slaughtered the gnomes for their foolish mistake and dislodged the ship, sending it into the fury of the Gale.

Then something strange happened deep within the magical storm. The restless spirits of the *MNS Less Than Zero* rose from their bodies and inhabited the machines, inventions and even the ship itself! Confused and driven to complete their mission, the broken and storm-tossed ship has been wandering the waters far and wide in search of icebergs.

Lately the ship’s shadowy inhabitants have been attempting to capture and haul back other vessels which, in their confused state, they believe are actually icebergs.

Under the cover of the prodigious amount of smoke and steam that the ship gives off and the sounds of its “growling” engines the *MNS <0* has been scaring the local fishing fleet of a small town into thinking that a monster has been attacking their ships.

The gnomish ghost ship will strike once again, but maybe this time the PC’s can prevent further attacks and save the fishing fleet.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

There are a number of ways you could introduce players into this scenario. The ghost ship could actually be encountered near any coastal community, even on large lakes or rivers. With gnomes, there is no telling just exactly how they arrived there, but it shouldn’t be discounted.

Hired Lord Salruis Goldfen, a merchant lord located in the town of Port O’ Call, has hired

the PC's to protect a valuable shipment from pirates and other dangers.

Reward A reward has been offered for the capture of a beast that has been menacing the local fishing fleet. Perhaps the amount of the reward or type of reward is enough to entice the players into investigating the problem.

Solving a Mystery The PC's have overheard or been told conflicting stories of the sinking ships (it's a monster, a dragon turtle, undead pirates, a great plot between trading companies to increase rates... and so on) and the towns inability to discover the truth prompts the PC's to get involved.

Shanghaied While the PC's are out drinking one night a group of pirates secretly drug their drinks or attack them when they get back to their inn. When they awaken they are chained in the lower deck of a ship that has already put to sea. The ship's priest places a mark of justice upon them to ensure they keep their word.

Traveling The easiest use of this adventure is to simply drop it into an existing campaign when the PC's are traveling from one port to another. The story of the mysterious mist and the sinking of ships can be told to them by the sailors as they are on their way.

BEGINNING THE ADVENTURE

In order to investigate the problems the PC's will need a ship. Unless they are already traveling aboard one bound for some destination they can find passage on the *Dragon's Pride*, a caravel measuring approximately 55 feet long and 24 feet wide at the beam, with a total height of 64 feet from crow's nest to the bottom of the hull. It has a forecastle and a sterncastle, each with two cabins (for passengers) and a deck above. Its main hold is accessible through a large covered hole in the main deck, also via a small trapdoor and stairway in the sterncastle.

The captain of the *Dragon's Pride* is an Ergothian half-elf by the name of Captain Seacrest (Nob 4/Mar 3). His crew of 27 sailors is a fairly amiable, if superstitious lot and will treat the PC's with an attitude of Indifferent when they first meet unless the PC's take the

time to improve this: (DC 15) Friendly, (DC 20) Helpful.

If the PC's have been shanghaied you can change the following information. The name of the ship is *Zeboim's Slave* and the captain's name is Mad Brunor (Mar 7). The crew's attitude begins as Unfriendly and requires a Diplomacy check to change to one of (DC 21) Indifferent or (DC 30) Friendly.

ENCOUNTER A: MISTY HORIZON

The first encounter can take place at any time during the day or night, but the morning and evening are the most appropriate time for foggy conditions. When the PC's ship is out to sea for at least a day you can have them make a spot check (DC 20) or they can be notified by the sailor from the crow's nest to see the first encounter. You may read or paraphrase the following text:

A thick rolling fog bank is visible on the horizon and it seems to be drifting in your direction. Looking around you can see sailors making warding signs against evil and looking a bit apprehensive. Obviously they are worried about the mist.

Any successful Survival check of (DC 21) can tell that the mist is not naturally forming. The wind begins to die down, but the mist unerringly continues on its course towards the ship. The captain has noticed this and issues orders for the ship to change course.

The approaching mist will continue to target the ship until the mist collides with the PC's ship. Allow the PC's to take any actions they wish or prepare for whatever may occur.

ENCOUNTER B: THE COLLISION

When the PC's have gathered themselves have any PC's on the upper deck of the ship make a Listen check (DC 15) to hear a growling noise emanating from the mist before the collision.

Then read or paraphrase the following:

The haze envelops the ship, but it fails to leave you chilled. In fact the mist is thick, hot and humid. The unmistakable sound of a low roar can be heard from somewhere in the obscuring vapor. The rumble increases to an ear-splitting shriek as the deck beneath your feet violently lurches sideways.

Have all the characters make a Reflex save (DC 15) to remain standing. Any character that was standing at the railing has a 50% chance of falling over the railing into the water 10 feet below, Swim check (DC 10) to remain above water. Those characters that miss the save are knocked prone but are able to get back to their feet immediately after.

Once the players have recovered from the impact of the collision you can read or paraphrase the following:

The ship explodes into action as the well-trained crew begins scrambling to different stations yelling orders and giving signals to one another. The entire ship lists to one side and the sound of the growling is now more intense than ever. Over the railing it's apparent that whatever has struck the ship has damaged the hull and attached itself somehow.

Closer inspection of the damage reveals that a strange vessel that has rammed into the side of the ship just above the waterline.

A metal spike that has extended from the bow of the metallic ship and four metallic arms have extended outward from the puncture on the inside hull of the ship. This effectively has trapped the side of the ship snugly against the bow of the smaller vessel.

The growling intensifies as the iron-shod craft begins to push against the ship with an alarming force. You can hear the sides of the ship straining with the power of the smaller vessel.

The captain is cursing and yelling orders. Evidently his crew refuses to board the other

ship. They have never seen a design like it and the mixture of noises and obvious power of the smaller ship have them cowed.

At this point the captain will suggest the PC's investigate and see if they can either convince their antagonists aboard the smaller craft to dislodge the metal spike or remove it themselves if need be. He can attempt to convince them through a number of different means, if they are there because they were hired he does not have to do much at all, if they are just along for the journey he may offer them a reward or if they were shanghaied the captain may force them over with an armed guard, which gives them the perfect opportunity to escape (they hope).

ENCOUNTER C: LESS THAN ZERO

The *MNS <0* is a ship of gnomish design. The craft is a small iron paddle steamer with an iron-plated hull. The entire ship sits very low in the water with only a foot or two of the upper deck actually above the waterline.

The *MNS Less Than Zero* measures approximately 45 feet long and 15 feet wide at the beam, with a total height of 42 feet from the top of the bridge room to the bottom of the hull.

The craft was designed to accommodate the gnomish physique so the two lower decks are only 6 feet tall from floor to ceiling and doorways are only 3 feet across. This may present some trouble for larger characters or too many PC's trying to maneuver in tandem.

The most likely course to get onto the deck of the gnomish steamer is for the players to climb 15 feet down the side of their ship. Using a rope they can make a Climb check (DC 10) or they can attempt to scale down the side of the ship (DC 20).

Because of the reverberation of the craft's engines all Listen checks on the *MNS <0* take a -2 circumstance penalty per deck, so -2 on the Main Deck, -4 on the Lower Deck and -6 on the Engine Deck respectively.

Once they have dropped onto the deck of the ship you can read or paraphrase this:

Hanging off the bow of the iron vessel is the massive spear of metal that punctured a hole in the hull of your ship. The entire apparatus is covered in wires, gears and bolts, a number of which are now littering the deck surrounding the device.

The deck of the MNS <0 is slick with condensation from the steam and if the players move at anything more than a walk they must make a Reflex save (DC 10) or have their feet slip out from under them. There is a two foot railing around the outside of the ship. Any medium size or larger creature that fails their save while standing near the railing will fall overboard. Luckily it is only a 2 foot drop into the water.

The pipes that sit in 5 foot intervals around the edges of the deck are hot to the touch and cause 1d4 points of heat damage if touched (Reflex save DC 17 for no damage).

A Knowledge (engineering) check or Craft check (DC 10) will plainly reveal that the ship is of gnomish design. But that will be evident to any player that has ever had dealings with gnomes before. A Bardic Knowledge check (DC 20) or Sailor Lore (DC 15) will identify the ship as a gnomish vessel that was last seen in the waters around Southern Ergoth months ago.

1. ICE GRABBER

If the players investigate the ram on the bow of the ship you can read or paraphrase this:

As you step onto the deck of the roaring ship you can see symbols etched into the deck that read “M.N.S.<0” Apparently it’s some sort of identifying symbol.

Now that you are closer you can see that the copious amounts of steam surrounding the ship are issuing from a number of pipes that line the edges of the vessel. Nearly the entire deck and hull seem to be comprised of metal plates welded together.

A Search check (DC 10) reveals the words “Ice Grabber” etched into the side of the ram.

The *Ice Grabber* is inhabited by the spirit of First Officer Gniels Borebit whose job it was to operate the machine. He is driven to capture any large object he can sense and is in direct communication with the spirit of the navigational officer that steers the ship and the first engineer that powers the ship.

Gniels was a finicky gnome that did not like anyone messing with his inventions. As such he takes offense to anyone trying to handle the *Ice Grabber*. Anyone touching the machine will cause Gniels to throw a tantrum punching a second hole in the side of the ship. (Depending on the situation this may be a good thing for the PC’s.)

The *Ice Grabber* is welded to the metal floor and weighs several hundred pounds. It is unlikely that the PC’s will find a way to disable it. Their best bet is to find a control that will turn it off, which does not exist as long as the gnome’s spirit inhabits it, or shut down the engines of the ship so the *Ice Grabber* can be dislodged and pushed off.

2. THE BRIDGE (ECL 4)

If the players enter the control room at the center of the ship you can read or paraphrase this:

The bridge of the ship is a small room. Along the wall facing the front of the ship a massive control panel of levers, dials, buttons and wires covers a metal panel of gnome height with three small chairs situated behind it. On the back wall a number of cabinets with charts, manuals and tools have been spilled out all over the floor.

The main bridge of the ship was the nerve center of the *MNS Less Than Zero*. It was from this room that the ship and many of the machines were controlled.

Creatures: The spirit of the ship’s pilot, navigation officer Gnodwick Steelsails, dwells within the control panel of the ship. Anyone attempting to touch the controls in an effort to move the ship or dislodge the ice grabber could cause it to explode. Pushing buttons or pulling levers for more than one round results in an explosion.

Fire Trap: CR 4; mechanical; location trigger; automatic reset; multiple targets

(10x10 area); 4d6 fire, DC 14, Reflex save half damage; Search DC 25, Disable Device 25.

Treasure: A search of the cabinets will reveal that the manuals and books are water logged and rotted. Within the cabinet they may find a manual that is still intact with a successful Search Check (DC 10). The book is entitled “Sailors Lore and Other Tall Tales” penned by one Rikken the Redhanded. It details a number of marine legends and sailor myths that when read fully over the course of 24 hours will increase user’s Knowledge (nature) check by +2 when dealing with marine matters. It will also increase Marine Lore by 2.

3. POOP DECK

If the players investigate the stern of the ship read or paraphrase this:

The wooden deck on the rear of the ship is slick and seems to be damaged as if it was chopped up by an axe. A trapdoor lays at the center rear of the deck.

The wood of the trapdoor has swelled with seawater and is now lodged in place.

Wooden door: Wooden; 1in thick, hardness 5; hp 8; AC 5; Break DC 10

4. EQUIPMENT ROOM (ECL 3)

If the players get through the trapdoor you can read or paraphrase the following:

A set of rickety stairs leads down into a dark room. The smell of stale saltwater and death permeates the space and is slightly sickening.

The area is cramped and appears to be an equipment room. Shelves with netting hold a variety of strange tools along each wall. Scraps of metal are scattered around the room. In the far right corner of the room is huddled a small figure.

The rooms below deck are not lighted and require some type of light source if the players do not have darkvision.

Creatures: The figure in the corner is the body of Gneinstein Bolts a minor technician aboard ship. It was his job to keep the various inventions and machines in working order. He was run through by a pirate and left for dead.

His spirit transferred into the *Ice Crusher VIII*, a machine in the other corner of the room that he had been working on.

Once the players have entered the room you may read or paraphrase this:

A machine in the corner of the room springs to life and approaches you making terrible grinding noises and metallic shrieks. Looking like a metallic lobster the machine wields two drills in the place of claws which are now spinning ominously as it closes.

Gneinstein is confused and does not realize he has actually died. He attempts to approach the players and plead for help as he has been unable to escape this room for some time. Not realizing the full extent of his predicament he may actually hit the players for a couple rounds before he understands he is hurting them. If they begin to attack he will defend himself as he moves back against the door to area 5. If he takes damage he will assume they are pirates and will remain with his back against the wall and defend his position as best he can. Most likely this will be interpreted as if he is guarding the door. If the machine is destroyed Gneinstein’s soul will be freed.

Automaton, Pulverizer (1): hp 28; see *Monster Manual II* page 27-28.

Treasure: A successful search of the room (DC 15) will uncover a small bag of gems that was lost by one of the Pirates when they attacked. It had fallen beneath one of the counters buried beneath some old oily rags. There are 5 gems worth 100 steel each.

5. GALLEY (ECL 5)

The door to this area from Room 4 has been damaged making it difficult to open.

If they have made a successful search of Room 4 they can discover a pry bar to pry the door open. They can pry it open with a Strength check (DC 15).

Iron door: iron; 2in thick; hardness 10; hp 60; Break DC 28.

Once the players have opened the door read or paraphrase the following:

You open the door leading to the ship’s galley. Most of the cabinets are hanging open and food stuffs have been spilled out all over the

cramped counters. The floor has a thin layer of seawater on it. Hanging from above are a number of wires from the control room above leading down into holes in the floor.

Treat the floor of the galley as an electrical trap. As the players pass through the room the wires will come in contact with water on the floor.

Electrical Trap: CR 5; mechanical; location trigger; automatic reset; multiple targets; 5d6 electrical, DC 15, Reflex save half damage; Search DC 25, Disable Device 25.

6. INVENTION ROOM (ECL 3)

As they enter this area you can read or paraphrase this:

Much like the equipment room you first passed through, this room also has a number of tools scattered around, but it also has a number of half finished machines, arms, gears and metallic parts joined together with leather straps and organized in strange shapes.

One machine looks complete however and it is situated atop the body of another gnome. The gnome has been dead for some time and is lying in a pool of dried blood. The skull of the creature was obviously crushed by the powerful hammer of the machine.

Creatures: This is another machine that is possessed by the spirit of a gnome. Gnewton Torquewrench was the lead inventor on the ship in charge of the iceberg-exploring machines. Gneinstein was his assistant. Gnewton was killed by pirates as well and possessed the body of the *Hammerer Mark V*. By accident he crushed the skull of his body not even realizing what he had done. He also wishes to escape, but has been reluctant and mostly unable to leave this area of the ship. He will attempt to shake hands with the players which will result in an attack with his powerful hammer. If he is attacked he will fight back. If the machine is destroyed his spirit will be set free.

Automaton, Hammerer (1): hp 35; see *Monster Manual II* page 27-28.

Treasure: Along with a number of useful tools that could be acquired a successful

Search check of the room (DC 17) exposes a compartment along the wall nearest the door that contains 5 platinum rods. Each rod is a foot in length and weighs 5 pounds. The rods could be sold to a blacksmith for 50gp each.

There is a trapdoor in the rear of the room with a set of stairs leading down beneath it.

7. COMMON ROOM (ECL 5)

The trap door to this room from area 6 is barred from area 7. The only way to open it is to break it down or chop through it. The players can either dislodge the hammer from Gnewton and use it to beat down the door or they can find a hand axe among the tools of Room 6 with a successful Search check (DC 10) and chop down the door.

Trap door: Wooden; 1in thick, hardness 5; hp 10; AC 5; Break DC 13

Once they have broken through the trapdoor you can read or paraphrase the following:

The room below is in total darkness. The sound of the engines is nearly deafening now as it roars out of the opening you have made. The room below is a mess much like the other rooms you have passed and a terrible smell emanates from the room below.

If they players look around the room before descending they can make a Spot check (DC25) to see a machine sitting in the darkness behind the stairs.

Creatures: The clockwork horror hiding in the shadows is a machine inhabited by the spirit of Gnikola Tester, the Chief Security Officer of the ship. He was working on a clockwork security spider with a "Death Ray" (patent pending). His device was not quite finished when the pirates attacked. Upon the gnomes death his spirit melded with the machine and now he is on the lookout for any intruders. He is the most dangerous of all the gnomes on the ship and is highly intelligent. He will not allow the players to leave the ship alive if possible. He will wait and try to surprise the last person to enter the room.

As the last person enters the room Gnikola will blast them in the back with a lightning strike. Then he will try to make his

way up into area 6 even risking an attack of opportunity so he can ambush them again when they make their return trip. If the clockwork horror is destroyed Gnikola's soul will be set free.

Clockwork Horror, Gold (1): hp 50; see *Monster Manual II* page 47-48.

If the players enter the room you can read or paraphrase this description:

This room has pieces of broken furniture and rotting paper littered across the floor. Among it lay four bodies of gnomes splayed out in different positions. On the wall a number of diagrams of different machines, and nautical charts hang at awkward angles. Here and there large areas of the walls have been charred as if by a blast of some sort.

Players that search the wall of diagrams and make a successful Search check (DC 15) will uncover designs of the ship's engines.

If the bodies are investigated they seem to have been killed by swords not energy blasts. The blasts were caused by Gnikola testing his death ray.

Treasure: Under one counter is a box of six identical potions. The gnomes purchased six potions of water breathing to experiment on during their voyage. Unbeknownst to them only five are of Water Breathing and one is spoiled. Anyone drinking from the spoiled potion must make a saving throw (DC 16) or fall unconscious (ie. helpless) in 1d4 rounds at which time the water breathing wears off. See page 301 of the *Dungeon Masters Guide* for the helpless condition and page 304 for drowning.

8: CABINS

These cramped cabins are unremarkable. They look like normal crew cabins although built for smaller people with two gnome-sized bunks lining one wall with one bunk folding out above the other. A small stand of drawers is bolted to the wall next to the bunks.

The drawers primarily hold clothing, small personal effects, writing utensils, inks, pens and parchment and small tools.

In room 8b there is a gnome lying on a bed that seems to have died in his sleep unlike the other gnomes that were cut down in some manner.

The gnome is Gnehemiah Northstar, the captain of the ship. He is holding the ship's log in his hand. Reading the journal will reveal that the gnomes made the mistake of ramming into a pirate ship. The pirates boarded them and slaughtered the crew. The captain hid in a bulkhead until the pirates left. But he was trapped below deck by the clockwork horror in area 7.

The Captain theorized that the machines and the ship itself are inhabited by the spirits of the crew. He believed the engine was inhabited by the spirit of the engineer and the clockwork horror by the chief security officer. Unfortunately he was unable to convince Gnikola to set him free and suffered a heart attack shortly after his discovery, but not before he was able to write it down in his journal.

9: ENGINE ROOM (ECL 6)

If the players investigate the engine room you can read or paraphrase this:

Steam sits like a heavy fog in this room and the light from the engines that are glowing red hot give the room a hellish glow. The grinding of the engines blast like multiple explosions. It's almost as if the engine is full of rage and seething in anger.

A successful spot check (DC 25) will reveal a control panel along the far wall with what appears to be a shutoff valve. But getting there unscathed will not be easy. The engines are possessed by the spirit of Gnuemann Ninefingers the ship's engineer. He was known for his volatile temper and the invasion of the ship caught his ire. His anger now fuels the heat necessary for the steam engines to continue running.

There are a couple of ways to shut down the engine.

1. Diplomacy: If the players have discovered the nature of the ship they may attempt to speak to the spirit within the engine room and use diplomacy. It is currently Hostile. With a successful Diplomacy check (DC 25) his

attitude can be shifted to Indifferent and he will shut down his engines for a day to allow them to cool down. (Gnome players receive a +10 circumstance bonus on this check.) After a day he will start all over again and fire up the engines once again.

2. Manual Shutdown: There are a number of specs for the engine that are pinned on the wall in area 7 that indicate the location of a shutoff valve on the far wall. It takes two rounds to shut off the valve. The valve will be extremely hot to the touch and delivers 2d6 points of damage (Reflex save for half) if a player touches it without any insulation.

3. Calm The Spirit: A successful *consecrate* spell cast in the engine room will calm Gnuemann and stall the engines for as long as it is in effect. This should give the characters enough time to dislodge the *Ice Grabber* from the damaged ship.

4. Bash and Trash: If they just can't think of any alternative or if other methods have failed they may be forced to simply beat at the engine until it is demolished.

Engine: break DC 30; hardness 10; 90 hp

In any case every round they spend in the room while Gnuemann is Hostile they must make a reflex save (DC 20) for half or take 2d4 points of damage from scalding steam shooting from different pipes scattered all over the room.

CONCLUSION

The adventure is over when the players manage to shut down the engine and escape to the top deck safely (bypassing Gnikola if he was not destroyed in area 7).

From here how you proceed is up to you. Perhaps the players wish to tow the ship back to the nearest port or even back to Mount Nevermind. It would be worth it for the scrap metal at least. Or if you don't want it recovered the engine could blow out and it could sink. If they players are escaping a situation where they were shanghaied then perhaps they can persuade the spirits of the ship to help them escape.

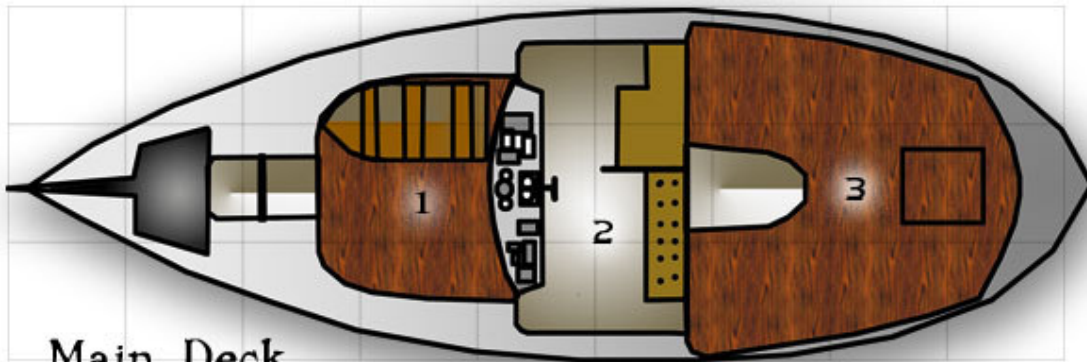
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sean Macdonald has been dreaming about Krynn for almost two decades and is webmaster of the largest kender website on the Internet, the Kencyclopedia. He has had the good fortune to lend a hand in the development of DragonLance by working on the DragonLance Campaign Sourcebook and the Age of Mortals. He is currently part of the Whitestone Council and is looking forward to the future of gaming in DragonLance.

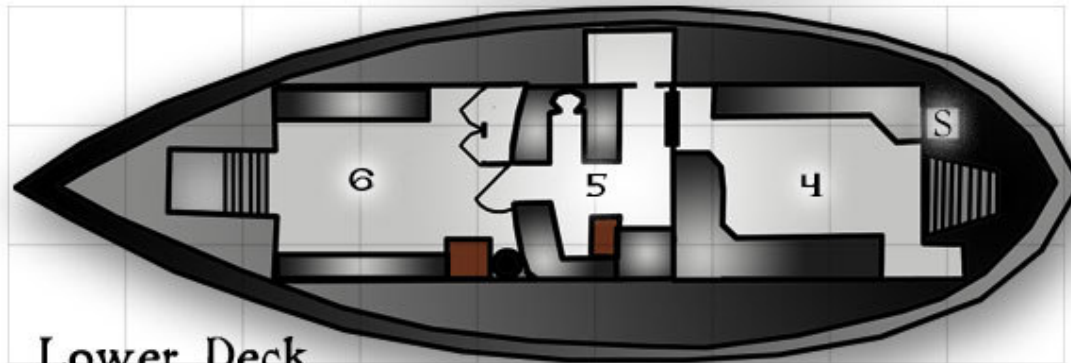
SPECIAL THANKS

Thanks very much to Neil Burton for his quick once over of this adventure!

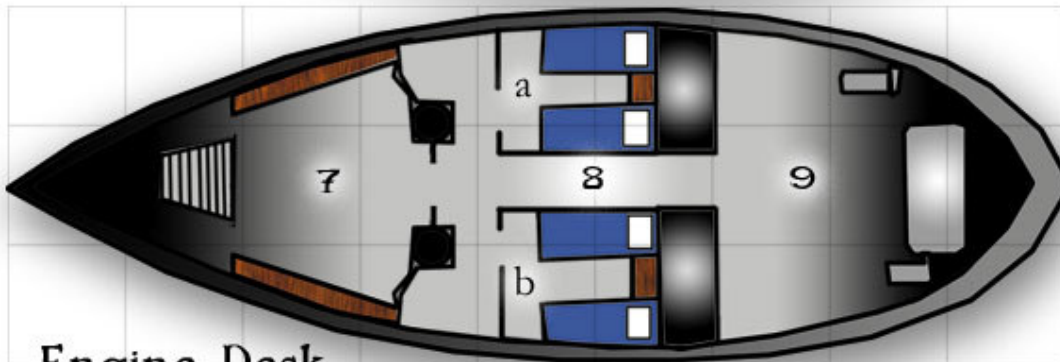
Layout for the MNS ◁◁



Main Deck



Lower Deck



Engine Deck