

Paralogue

"Well, Waves take 'em. See if I care how much he can't pay. If he can't walk to get a mug of seawater from the beach, he can't have another drink."

"C'mon, give the poor soul a chance, Drav."

"It's final. Have him crawl back to that shell he lives in. He's a Hermit and always will be!"

His head thundered like a squall wall. He hadn't been off the ship long, only a week. Where had his balance floated off to? Jorra helped him up with shakily. He himself hauled the lines, and could steer a ship with his own legs if he wanted. But, Waves take him, he couldn't find the strength to stand. No, not strength, focus.

"I'm fine," he lied. "Just didn't space it out enough is all."

"Didn't space — Huoran," Jorra slowly chided. "Now that is a bigger lie than the former."

He rubbed his head and spit out the sand in his mouth. Why didn't Drav keep this place swept? It was the walkway, wasn't it? Did he expect the Sea Council to order every sidewalk and path clean? *No, but they should*, he thought to himself. "I'm fine," he repeated.

Jorra clicked his tongue twice. "Three lies, one lie told twice? Huoran." He hated it when Jorra treated him like a child. He had nearly five years on him, so why did he insist on saying his name like that?

"Well, if Drav wasn't — well, what I mean is..." He thought. "What I mean is that it's Drav's fault for being an idiot."

"Was he now?" Jorra teased.

"Yeah. And well, so were you! Not even trying to stand up for me."

"Oh-ho, I suppose you can recount every word I said, then, huh?"

Huoran gritted his teeth in frustration. "Look, what does it matter, huh? My gut wasn't feeling well walking in. Glad he threw us out. Probably the whole shack will collapse under a strong gust, Sea swallow him."

Jorra cleared his throat. "That was a bit extreme, don't you think?"

Huoran wasn't in the mood to have an ethics debate. "Maybe, but it doesn't matter now. Where else is there to go?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean is there some place we can go?"

"Some place you haven't been thrown out of, you mean?"

He sighed. "Yeah, that."

Jorra laughed his tinkling laugh that he only did when something really amused him. "Of course, dear fellow." He took his arm in his and began walking around the island.

"Well, at least the sunset is pretty."

He winced at straining his neck, so turned to face it. That blasted old injury again... "Mhmm."

"Much rather be counting Shells."

"Mhmm."

They walked on further inland, though no one ever escaped the sound of the waves. It was civil twilight, though he didn't know what was so civil about it. This was the time where the drunken sailors were thrown out into the sands or stumbled into the beckoning wave and drowned. The drunken rancor started this time too, and judging by the sounds from the taverns they passed, it was already in full swing.

He was so lost in his thoughts he didn't see Jorra halt in front of the very last place he wanted to go. Of course this was the only place he wasn't thrown out of because it was the only place he swore on his grandfather's sail he would never go. *Gilded Flotsam*, he thought. *Great*.

"Well, time to get a drink, eh?" Jorra asked and went inside.

The spiced air hit first, even before the noise of the accordions and lively steel drums. It was "The Tomorrow Waves," some song from his childhood he somehow still knew. A song that fit the atmosphere he had to admit. The marble pillars holding up the upper level seating must have cost a fortune to tow in from wherever marble comes from. He eyed them up and down before entering.

Jorra was already getting a table and chatting up some misplaced wife of some high officer. She had a good 20 years on him, but "Never let a silly thing like 'she is however many years my senior' get in the way of some shells" rang in his head, bouncing around like an abbey's bell. Yes, he was feeling better from the walk, but not entirely better. He hadn't thrown up all the poison for starters.

Jorra waved him over excitedly when the woman turned away, blushing at something Jorra said. *Probably told her his price*, he thought. He sauntered over, trying his best to look like a refined somebody. Jorra leaned in to her and said, "Now, tell me again, who is your wonderful lover?" Huoran rolled his eyes. He was always asking "who is your lover" and "where is your intimate friend" instead of "husband" or "wife."

"He's away for the week. Caught up with the pirates off the coast of Taweldis, I believe."

"Oh, is he now? Taking part of the Hunt with the Circle, is he now?"

She laughed a haughty, smarmy laugh. She wore far too much jewellery for Huoran's taste, but that just meant she was carrying too many shells to notice some missing, especially if she was drinking.

"Sir? For you?" Huoran turned, acknowledging the server who smiled fakely at him.

"Spiced rum, please," he asked.

"Oh dear, you must get the wine! I'll pay. Here, let me." She reached into her plunging neckline and withdrew a purse. She took out several shells and laid them out, making sure she tipped enough, but not too much. He caught the glint of lust in Jorra's eyes at the shells. Jorra pushed his sun-bleached, curly hair over his ear and whispered something repulsive in her ear. She blushed and hit his arm but grinned mischievously.

Just what are we doing here? I can just buy the rum — But he couldn't. He had spent every last shell on the gamble game at the table right before Drav threw him out. He was about to win the whole ship too, he had a Crowned Fleet in his hand and the Straights of Gorro on the table. *Waves take him!* he cursed.

The server came back with her wine, but also had a crystal glass filled with a beautiful auburn-brown liquid, sloshing gently inside. He set each down, she threw a couple extra shells, he bowed and turned to go, but stopped. Huoran just took a big sip of the beautiful fire when he realized that the server had halted and the room had quieted. He glanced quickly at Jorra. He stared, white now on his pinky-burned face. Jorra stood at attention and immediately Huoran did the same.

Taller than every other person in the room stood a man with brass on his lapels and cap. His pristine, burgundy uniform stood out among the greens and blues and grays around him. He clasped his hands in front and wore thin, proper gloves. His strong chin guided his head as he surveyed the room, sharp eyes totalling everyone in a fastidious sweep. He surmised the round, felt-topped table where Huoran and Jorra and the woman sat would be his company. When he began walking the accordions picked up the tune where it faltered.

"Good evening, fellow," he addressed in a deep, commanding voice. "Is this seat taken?"

"Commander Shilo, sir," Jorra said, awestruck and quivering. "It's an honor, sir. Of course you may sit with us." Shilo smiled. The smile seemed warmly paternal and simultaneously patronizing. "To what do we owe the pleasure?" Jorra asked.

He removed his cap and hovered it above the table before plopping it down. With his gloved hand he smoothed his freshly-shaven head. "Pleasure of company, gentleman and madam," he answered. "I hope you find my company agreeable."

"Aye, sir, we do," Huoran said, sitting and sipping from the glass.

"Excellent." He smiled, genuinely this time. "And what entertainment shall we have tonight then?" He relaxed in the wide chair, but his body seemed ready to act and jump up, like a

seabeast before springing into attack. Huoran knew how similar he was to his brother, and that's precisely what he didn't like about him. Too perfect, unnaturally perfect.

It took only a moment for Jorra to recompose himself in his all-too-familiar disposition. "Us, sir, or perhaps the music shall entertain you?"

"Yes," Commander Shilo responded. "I'd like that." Jorra had a way to disarm and sneak under the skin of whomever. That was one of his best qualities and why they were friends, it worked on him after he got shunted off to this sun-drenched island too far from anything significant. And speaking of, what was the admiral doing here?

"Business," the commander answered. Jorra or Matild, the officer's wife, must have asked the question aloud. "We need to secure cargo. Talks of some weird occurrences, but fret not, folk, it is nothing we cannot handle."

"Wow, that's incredible!" Matild said, leaning towards him. "To have that much power and ability."

He held up a hand. "It is not entirely that easy, madam. On the contrary, with pirates about and storms disrupting shipments we have our work cut out for us. Luckily, the Wavedashers offer their services."

Jorra interjected before Matild's could continue. "Pirates, Admiral? I had thought they were driven away, far, far away?"

He nodded gravely. "They were, but unfortunately, the storms have roused them. Even talk of The Circle has reached the shores here on Fartide."

A small commotion came from outside. Several keets squawked. Huoran excused himself while Jorra and the commander continued their talk. Matild settled her head on Jorra's shoulder.

"Put your fists down, Dagny!" someone in the dark outside said. The light from inside made it difficult to see what was happening exactly. Across the cobblestone street in a sandbank a tall man and woman circled each other like wounded sharks.

"Apologize, whelp!" the other voice said.

"To you? Ha! Not in a hundred years. You deserved it."

She grunted and lunged. He tried to swerve around her, but the sand caught his feet. She got a strong arm around his waist and threw him into the sand. Huoran strolled over.

"Apologize!" Dagny said through gritted teeth. She held his leg straight up and began to press it to his shoulder. He grunted in pain.

"Never. I —" She pressed his leg closer. "Ah! Okay, okay. I'm sorry."

Dagny made one final push before letting go. Was that a crack Huoran heard just then? Or was it the chatter of the keets on the roof tile? She stood and looked over at Huoran. She scanned him up and down, looking for the polished brass of an officer. She made no attempt to explain

herself to him. She just nodded curtly, put her hands in her pockets, and walked down the cobblestone street.

A distant scream let out, fitful and desperate. He shifted his ears. That sounded like... but it couldn't be. He adjusted himself to the noise, figuring it came from... *The beach*, he thought, *down by the beach!*

He sprinted across the sand until he had a clear view. He saw a beached ship and several glowing buckets by the water. A few GlowBarnacles shimmered in the shallow night water. He saw a figure stumbling on the beach by the beachgrass before something — something like the night itself — curled around his leg and pulled him back. Blindingly fast he tumbled back with a splash into the water. Huoran rushed down to the lapping waves, searching for the person. For a moment all was silent except for the crashing waves.

He focused on the sound of the waves, focused on *listening*. Some footsteps behind him and something slapping the water by the ship. He turned to see Dagny running down to the beach. A few other bystanders came out and peered down. The sight of a ship on its side and glowbs being extracted wasn't an uncommon occurrence. But then why were they staring so intently?

The light emanating from the ship grew dim. He turned back in time to see an onyx colored tendril worm along the ship's hull, obfuscating the GlowBarnacles as it passed. A cold shiver came over him. Oh, Zuona, he *hated* to freeze like he did. Old battles —

Suddenly, a few people who had sheltered in the ship bolted from it. At least half a dozen sailors and deckhands, no doubt wanting to put a few extra shells in their pockets, ran like mad to the safety of dry land. Tendrils chased and wrapped around their leg or arm or torso. They cried out in alarm and so did Huoran. "Help! Get the Commander!" The rush of battle animated him to act.

Huoran came upon the closest tendril to him. He held his long knife — when had he drawn that? — and began to hack at the thing. The captive woman cried out and clung to the beach. Blow after blow he struck it until it withdrew. He didn't see any blood. The girl pulled herself up on the beach.

He went after another. Beside him Dagny fell upon one and with her hatchet hacked away. He heard some orders being barked and thought he heard the word "cannons". They both managed to save two men, but the others were not so fortunate. In a blur the captives vanished under the churning waters.

He cursed and together they guided the two up the beach. Dagny slung the man, who had obviously broken legs, across her back. Her small mouth grimaced, but she stepped onward. He was last, guiding the man in front of him. On the shallow top of the island some fifty feet away he saw the silhouettes of artillery and a tall figure commanding them. He barked some order and several people clambered down to meet them, taking the wounded. He felt a slimy coarseness on leg. Before he had time to react he was pulled onto the sand, wind knocked out of his sails. It dragged him, but not with the alacrity of the others. This thing was almost cautious as if it didn't know if it had someone or not. Commander Shilo threw an angry finger towards the sea and yelled "Fire!"

Boom. BOOM. BOOM. The thunderous roar of cannon fire sounded and balls whistled above him and beside him. The cannonballs flew into the water and blew up jets of water, showering him with sand and water.

BOOM. BOOM. Boom. They ricocheted across the water like skipping stones and exploding on the surface. This seemed to have done something, for the tendril quivered and let him go. He scrambled back up the beach, retreating to the grass.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. The cannons roared again. He stopped his ears with his hands and searched the shoreline for any more of the things.

Jorra came up to him and pulled him away around the side of a building. There the medics were treating the wounded. Dagny stood nearby, calming her breathing. In the light of a nearby streetlamp he saw that she was as strong as he. She looked over at him. She held him in her eyes, reevaluating him, and then nodded respectfully.

“Halt!” Commander Shilo ordered. Huoran glanced around the corner while a medic came up and treated his bleeding leg. When did it start bleeding?! The commander withdrew his revolving pistol and had a squad follow him down to the beach.

The ship, Huoran saw, was slowly being pulled out to sea. The buckets of glowbs were gone, too. The commander turned this way and that, fanning his men out to find anyone else.

Then, to his utmost horror, he saw the stars on the horizon disappear. As the men searched, something large grew from the water, slowly and almost imperceptibly. But he saw it. He saw most things others didn't. Commander Shilo noticed it just then and fired his pistol at it. The unaffected tendrils whipped down to the whole group. Huoran's breath caught in his throat.

A sudden cacophony of waves crashed upon the island, more thunderous than the cannon volleys. White engulfed the beach and the scene. The white was as if the waves crashed onto some gigantic outcropping of rock. The white consumed the oily, writhing tendrils. The commander and his men fell back, shielding their eyes. Another wave broke upon the mass and then Huoran saw it.

The Wavedashers had come.