

It was a fine day down at the docks. The sun was tucked neatly behind a thick swatch of clouds, while the rest of the sky was blue and clear. Fresh salt air blew in from the calm seas, strong enough to be pleasantly cool, and thankfully not stiff enough to sting. One of Hallow's favorite people, Captain Galen, would pull in on the *Silversails* that evening, and he was eagerly anticipating the ship's arrival.

At the present, it was still late morning, which gave him a while to wait. He passed the time by doing his job.

Hallow was a dockhand. It wasn't exactly an illustrious life, but the work was alright, the people were fun, and he tried his best to give it his full attention, which was a bit more difficult for him than other people.

"You alright, Hallow?" asked Fae, their overseer, clapping a heavy hand onto his shoulder. "I know you're usually a bit... dreamy, but this is pushing it, even for you."

Hallow, startled back into the world of the living, nodded mutely.

Fae snickered at him. "Cat got your tongue?"

"Um," said Hallow, blushing.

"Come on, talk to me. What's distracting you?"

Hallow was so grateful for Fae. Not even once had the man made him feel bad about his frustrating inability to focus.

"Captain Galen's supposed to be coming today," he mumbled. "He always brings interesting stuff from far away. He said he would bring something for me."

"Oh, that's right! What a blessing that man is. He's so good to us." Laughing, Fae gently tousled Hallow's carmine hair. "But that's for later. Come on, big guy. Work to do, remember?"

He finished unloading their latest shipment of salt and found himself in dire need of a drink. Judging by where the sun was, it was just about time for his lunch break anyways, so he cleared it with Fae before heading up to the quayside market for a meal at the Cat's Paw Inn.

It was a little before the midday rush, so Hallow was able to get a comfortable seat right by the inn's little stage all to himself. This meant he got to get a good look at the bard. If there was one. There hadn't been a bard playing in the Cat's Paw for a few days since the old one left. Hallow missed the music, missed trying to toss coins into their hat.

A waitress brought him stew and a hunk of bread with a flagon of cold ale. He settled in to eat and was just about to take a bite when someone hopped onto the stage. Hallow paused, spoon halfway to his mouth.

This bard was really quite a sight. He looked like he was from the North, all silver hair and fair skin. Hallow was fair, too, and burned a little easier than he would like, but

not as fair as the bard. He watched the minstrel experimentally strum a few chords on his lute, pale fingers sweeping across the strings. It made him a bit less jealous of bronze-skinned Fae.

The bard noticed Hallow and smiled at him. "Hello."

"H-hello," said Hallow, fumbling his spoon in a glorious display of alpha confidence. It plunked into the stew.

Graciously, the bard declined to comment. "I'm Ullureill," he said, "better known to most people as Reill. What might your name be?"

Ullureill was definitely a northern name. In the wake of processing this confirmation, Hallow almost forgot to answer. "Hallow," he blurted, a bit belatedly. Ah, yes, famed alpha suavity indeed.

Reill smiled. It looked genuine. "It's nice to meet you, Hallow. Do you live here?"

This time, Hallow actually managed to answer in a timely fashion. "Yes, I do!" he said, a big grin on his face. "Welcome to Port Yammetide."

Reill looked around, nodding. "Welcome indeed! I've barely been here a day and it already feels like home. Then again, that could just be my traveler's soul speaking."

"Have you traveled very far?" asked Hallow.

"That I have," said Reill, smile growing brighter. "Perhaps you would like to hear a story later?"

"I would love that," said Hallow, enchanted.

Over the food and ale, he watched as Reill

Perhaps it wasn't really dancing, but Hallow thought it was very close. Reill swayed to the rhythm of his song, luxuriating in the motion. In it, he seemed to achieve what many men chase and never find: Contentment.

Before Hallow knew it, it was over, and a grand round of applause rose up from the audience. Coins jingled as they fell into Reill's instrument case. Hallow added his own to the pile, grinning as he caught the bard's gaze. "That was amazing!"

"Thank you," said Reill, slightly out of breath. His voice retained a bit of its lilt. "I'm really happy you liked it. I think this one may be my best song yet."

"How long have you been singing?" asked Hallow.

Reill did some quick math on his fingers. "Ten years," he said, smiling. "Five of them spent on the road. I've always loved to sing, and I had a wonderful teacher."

Hallow laughed. "That's amazing! I love watching the bards, but I've never seen anyone put on a show like you do."

"I'm flattered," said Reill, eyes sparkling. "Are we still on for that story later?"

Hallow nodded eagerly. He felt a little bit like a puppy. He hoped Reill thought it was cute.

“Then meet me here at the tenth hour,” said the bard. “I’ll tell you about the time I went South.”

Lunch break over, Hallow went back to work, now with two things to look forward to in the evening. He was so distracted he fell into the water by accident, and Sazapri had to fish him out.

“Come now, Hallow, you must have something on your mind,” the enormous woman rumbled amusedly. Alpha and obviously so, Sazapri was the biggest and strongest worker they had, as well as, probably, the jolliest person alive. Hallow didn’t think he’d ever seen her upset once. Still, for all her ham-fisted jubilation, she read people like an open book. Especially Hallow.

“Maybe a little,” he admitted. “Captain Galen’s supposed to be coming in this evening, and I met the new bard at the Cat’s Paw. He’s wonderful! I’m supposed to meet him later, for a story.”

Sazapri grinned, helping him wring out his hair. “Maybe you’ll come back with a story of your own, hmm?”

“Sazapri!” groaned Hallow.

She had the nerve to look affronted. “I only meant-”

“No you didn’t,” Hallow interjected.

“Pff. Alright, fine, you little lobster,” said the big woman, swatting him. “Back to work, now!” Hallow just sighed and rolled his eyes.

Dusk came and went, with no sign of Captain Galen. Ah, well. Ships were often if not usually late, and Galen was a capable man with one of the sturdiest vessels ever made. Hallow had no doubt he’d just been blown a little off schedule.

As night truly settled in, the dockworkers lined up to collect their wages from Fae and went off, either home or to the tavern for some good fun. Hallow himself went straight to the Cat’s Paw and ordered a simple dinner of bread and cheese. Reill sang again, something fun and bouncy.

Even though his food was long gone, and he had best not order another ale, he was more than happy to stay for the rest of Reill’s performances.

Reill kept at it valiantly. He brought to life song after song, and with him on that little stage, the Cat’s Paw turned into a grand hall of enchantment for the night. But he was only human, and nearing the tenth hour, he bowed out to a hearty round of applause.

Hallow pulled out a chair for him, and he sank into it gratefully, flushed and bright-eyed. A server brought him some ale and a few morsels of bread. Reill took his time with his food, chewing slowly and washing it down with copious amounts of beer.

“You sing with so much energy,” said Hallow, when most of the bread was gone. “It must come from somewhere.”

Reill smiled. “It does! I am from the North, where every day is a bit of a struggle for survival, in its own way. That seems a little bleak, and maybe it is. But we love our home. My mother always says it’s in the little things: the little crackling sounds a fire makes, the little dimples in my baby brother’s smile... even the silence of a snowfall, like the world’s gone still. When you learn to look at the world, really look at it, you see so much beauty in everything it’s hard to keep your heart from bursting. Singing is just my way of making one more thing for people to love.”

Hallow was positively enthralled. “That is such a wonderful reason,” he said. “It almost makes me want to sing, too! But I know I could never sing as well as you.”

“Oh, give it ten years or so,” said Reill, laughing. “I think everyone can sing, if they practice long enough.” He took a deep drink of his ale. “Now, I believe I promised you a story.”

“You did,” said Hallow. “Could we go somewhere more quiet?”

Reill nodded. “Lead the way.”

They left the quayside and went into one of the city squares, where a fountain gurgled happily at its center. There was a bench right at the edge of the water, perfect for a quiet evening talk.

“Two years ago, I was down in Tamaerlaine right when the desert caravans came,” the bard began. “They brought so many strange, exotic things with them. My favorites were the rugs. They were woven so beautifully, I almost wished I had a home to put them in. So I thought to myself, ‘Reill, you are a traveler. You should follow the caravans south and sing in their taverns for a while.’ So I did.”

Hallow leaned in, listening with rapt attention.

“Alas,” Reill continued, “I was woefully unprepared. The sun was scorching, the sand stung my skin and my eyes, and water was hard to come by. But I made it through the desert alive, if battered. After a drink of water and some sticky dates, I was ready to sing again. So sing I did! I was well-received. Being a foreigner does have its perks. While you yourself are surrounded by strange things you have never before seen, you are somewhat of an oddity to the native peoples, and if you play it right, you can be as wonderfully exotic to them as they are to you. I spent half a year there. I really did love the place. The markets were so alive! Ah, I can still remember the scent of fresh kafay on

the morning air. Kafay is a drink brewed from a ground bean,” he said, in response to Hallow’s questioning look. “It’s a bit like tea. They take it with honey.”

“Ooh,” said Hallow, interested. “What other foods did they have?”

Reill got this particularly satisfied look on his face. “Oh, they had so many delicious things! They made water steeped in rose petals. It’s a bit of an acquired taste, but I love it. There were fresh salads drizzled in olive oil, meat and vegetables grilled on sticks... and the bread! It’s like nothing you’ve ever seen. Not loaves, like we have, but flat and moist and chewy. It went very well with their soups.”

What a selection! Despite having recently finished a good meal, Hallow’s stomach very nearly rumbled.

“Yes, there were many delicious morsels indeed,” said Reill. “And, for the most part, the people were wonderful, and the land was very beautiful in a way you cannot find anywhere else. I met many a soul there I think I will have to remember forever. Chief among them was a blind beggar at the marketplace. I believe his name was Amir.”

“A blind beggar?” said Hallow. “That’s so sad.”

Reill laughed a little. “I thought so, too! That is, until I spoke to him. He was just so happy. I couldn’t understand it at all. I asked him why. He smiled at me, and said, ‘What do you think is the meaning of happiness?’”

Hallow blinked. “I... don’t understand,” he said.

“Neither did I,” said Reill, voice growing soft. “Nor do I now, two years later. Everywhere I’ve been, I’ve tried to answer that question. I’ve spoken to sages and urchins alike, but neither could give me what quite seemed like the right answer.”

“What about you?” asked Hallow. “What do you think?”

At this, Reill fell silent for a long while. Finally, he lifted his head and spoke, trying out the words like he had an idea but couldn’t quite find the right ones to capture it.

“If I had to answer that question,” he said, “I think the meaning of happiness... it might just have something to do with a song.”

Hallow laughed. “Does singing make you very happy?”

“It does,” said Reill, smiling.

Suddenly, the position of the moon in the sky became very apparent to the both of them. “Dear me!” exclaimed Reill. “I have kept you far too long. I promised a story, and I’m afraid I delivered a lecture instead.”

“That’s alright!” said Hallow. “I like talking with you.”

“Oh!” Reill looked like he’d frozen for a second. Then a pleased smile spread across his face. “I’m glad. Perhaps we could do this again. For now, I must bid you goodnight.”

“Alright,” Hallow said happily. “Sleep well!”

The next day, he went to work and was bombarded with good-natured teasing from, well, all of his coworkers. Apparently somebody named Sazapri had told everyone he was meeting the new bard in town for a story. The word ‘story’, of course, had been said in the most suggestive tone known to anybody *ever*, which was why he was being ribbed to death and back.

“For the last time, everyone, just because I’m an alpha doesn’t mean I try to sleep with every omega I meet,” said Hallow, exasperated. “Besides, we don’t even know Reill is an omega. You’re just guessing.”

Sazapri rolled her eyes. “Yes, because that smooth, pretty face definitely belongs to an alpha.”

Hallow scratched at his own stubble. “Oh come on, he could be a beta!”

“And you two could be working,” said Fae, with a wink. “But you’re not.”

That was their cue to get back to it. A few minutes later, a massive merchant ship pulled into the harbor, and Hallow had to skip his lunch break in order to finish unloading the endless crates of rich people stuff.

“I hate merchants,” complained Maakava, grunting as he and Hallow hoisted a box of silks onto their shoulders. “Especially this one!”

“Yeah, Dantril’s a bit particular,” Hallow agreed.

Maakava raised an eyebrow disdainfully. “A bit?”

“Alright, a lot,” Hallow admitted.

When they finally finished with the last box, it was just about to get dark, and the both of them were absolutely famished. Fae was waiting for them with stew in bread and some flat ale.

“On the house,” he announced cheerfully. “Courtesy of Dantril, surprisingly.”

Maakava, in the middle of a drink of ale, suddenly spewed it into the water. “Not on my life!” he declared.

“What’s his problem?” asked Fae, watching him stomp off.

“I don’t think he likes Dantril very much,” said Hallow, stooping to pick up Maakava’s fallen sandwich. “I mean, I don’t, either, but free food is free food.” He took a decisive bite.

Fae laughed heartily. “Our Hallow, a practical man!”

Dusk came and went, still with no sign of Captain Galen. Hallow decided he’d give it another day before he got really worried.

On the bright side, evening had arrived, and that meant he got to see Reill again.

They went back to the little bench by the fountain. "I like this place," said Reill, smiling at the burbling water. "It's so calm."

Hallow made a mental note to bring him out to the docks sometime. The peace of the ocean at low tide with the shimmering moon above it, like a great big pearl...

When reality resumed for him, Reill was looking at him expectantly. Hallow blushed. "Sorry," he said. "I... have this bad habit of spacing out sometimes. Um, what was the question?"

Laughing softly, Reill repeated himself. "I was just wondering... since I rambled on so much last night, I hardly know anything about you, save for your name. Who are you, Hallow? Tell me about yourself."

"Oh!" Well. "Er, I'm just Hallow, really. Nothing very interesting about me. Certainly not as interesting as you," he said, with a short laugh.

Reill hummed noncommittally. "Tell me anyways?"

"Oh, alright," said Hallow. "But I'm warning you, it's really not anything to get excited about. I'm a dockhand. I earn my living unloading boxes down at the quay."

"From the merchant ships?"

"Yeah," said Hallow. "Rich people stuff, and the like."

"Do you know any of the merchants?"

Hallow nodded. "I know a couple. Captain Galen is my favorite! He sails all over, and he brings the strangest things. Some of them are even magical. One time, he brought a huge shipment of enchanted tapestries from some faraway land that I can't even pronounce. I didn't have enough money to buy one, but he saved a broken one just for me. I like it very much. It's of a white horse. In the morning, it has wings, and in the evening, it has a unicorn horn. The background changes with the seasons, too."

"That sounds beautiful!" said Reill, looking truly interested. "What about the other merchants? What are they like?"

Hallow snorted. "Well, there's this one man called Dantril. He's quite thoroughly unpleasant, if you ask me. I missed my lunch break today because of him. He had a shipment that just couldn't wait, you see. He bought me and Maakava food, though, so maybe he's not all bad."

"Ah! I was wondering why you weren't at the Cat's Paw this noon," said Reill, a pleased expression on his face. "I thought perhaps you'd gone to a different inn for lunch."

Hallow took a moment to parse the fact that Reill had actually noticed his absence.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Unless Sazapri's being really insistent, I usually eat at the Cat's Paw."

“Who is Sazapri?” asked Reill, and then asked a series of similar questions, launching Hallow into a thorough explanation of who he worked with and what they were like.

“Sazapri is this huge woman from across the sea. She's about as alpha as it gets, and she's also just a very happy person. Still, you have to watch out for her. She'll read you like a signpost. And then there's Maakava. He comes from a poor family to the North, so he really hates the merchants and the rich people who buy from them. He's grumpy all the time, but we like him anyways. Oh, and Tamani Taiga. He's not from the South, but his parents are, and he speaks their language. He hates getting unexpectedly wet, but other than that he's pretty even-tempered. He helps when Maakava's angrier than usual, and he always gives good advice. Sabjar is sort of our mother. She's very sweet. She got married eight years ago, and now she has a little one at home! Sometimes she brings him out to the docks, when her husband can't watch him. His name is Tennebrath, Tenn for short, and he's probably the quietest little boy I've ever seen. He swims like a fish, too. And of course Fae, our overseer. He's the one who does most of the talking with merchants. We all like him very much, I think. He cares about us, and he doesn't get angry when I space out, which is wonderful, because I was fired from the smithy because of that.”

He probably could've rambled on for another minute or so, but he stopped, because Reill had got this adorable little sideways smile and his eyes were sparkling and Hallow had probably made enough of a fool out of himself already.

“That's so charming!” said the bard. “It's almost like you have your own little family at work.”

Hallow's mind stopped mid-thought.

“...Yeah,” he said, a little caught off-guard. He smiled. “I really have, haven't I?”

They talked for much longer than they should've. It was mostly Hallow giving long, rambling answers to Reill's questions about his city.

“I really do love it here,” he said, as he finished up one of his blathers. “I've been in this city all my life. I grew up here, at the quayside. There's just something special about being this close to the ocean... I don't really know what it is, but I like it very much.”

Reill gave a soft laugh. “It must be very special indeed, for it to have produced you.”

At this, Hallow's mind made a *meep* noise. Maybe his mouth did, too, because Reill's eyes slid halfway shut and he smiled.



“There's just something about you, Hallow,” he said. “Talking with you makes my soul feel light.”

There was a moment of silence, wherein Hallow blushed like mad and tried to think of something to say that didn't sound completely idiotic.

Thankfully, before he could respond, Reill smiled and wished him a good night. He bid the bard a clumsy farewell and ambled back to his little house, where he got into bed and lay awake for a while, thinking about what Reill had said. When he fell asleep, it was with an entirely-too-pleased smile on his face.

At work, his friends had apparently decided to stop teasing him. A merchant who'd gone up North had arrived, bringing with him wealths of sealskins, whale fat, and scrimshaw. Sabjar was particularly delighted with a little carving of a tiny leviathan, but she lacked the funds to buy it. “Ah well,” she said. “Some things in life are just not for us.”

In the end, Maakava ended up being more upset than she was, complaining for an hour or so about how much he hated rich people. Tamani managed to distract him by challenging everyone to a swimming race. Unfortunately, it would have to be during their lunch break, and as there were many more ships due in the afternoon, as much as he would like to Fae could not give them more time.

All the dockhands lined up at the edge of the pier. “Get ready, get set... go!” yelled Fae, clapping his hands. Almost perfectly in unison, everyone dove into the water.

A few seconds later, most of them came back up for air, but not Hallow. Years ago, he'd learned how to hold his breath longer than most people could, and he used that now to get some extra distance in on the initial leap.

When he did come back up, he was in the lead, but Sabjar was close behind him. He could hear little Tennebrath at the pier cheering for his Mama. Grinning, Hallow surged forwards, legs delivering a powerful kick that propelled him nearly halfway to the buoy that marked their turnaround point. He dove back under, eyes open, long used to the saltwater. The sun wove pretty patterns of light on the white sand below. He thought about Reill, about why he sang, and made a note about it before he came back up right by the buoy and swung himself around it, heading back towards the pier.

Sabjar was gaining on him. She was a lean, lithe woman, who likely weighed less and spent less energy keeping herself buoyant than Hallow did. Even so, he just had too much of a head start on her. Maybe in a long race, she would've won, but not this one. Hallow reached the pier first and hauled himself over the side, water crashing down off his body to splatter on the wooden planks. He flopped onto his back, gasping like a fish.

“And the winner is... Hallow!” declared Fae, grinning.

Hallow laughed giddily, taking the offered hand. Fae pulled him to his feet. He started to wring out his hair, but was interrupted by the rest of the workers getting out of the water and coming over to congratulate him.

“Well done! Almost forgot you could swim like that,” said Maakava, much happier now.

“Aye! Next time, I’ll have to get a better head start,” said Sabjar, grinning. She was promptly distracted by Tennebrath running over to give her a great big hug. The strong woman scooped her son up to sit on her shoulder. “Well, I’d best take this one to lunch with Papa. Goodbye, everyone!”

They waved goodbye to her, and Sazapri clapped Hallow on the shoulder so hard he thought was going to fall over. Not a particularly fast swimmer, she'd come in last, but Sazapri never seemed to care. She winked at him. “Someone's here to see you.”

Hallow turned and looked in the direction she was pointing. He was met with a very welcome sight.

“Reill!” he exclaimed in delight. “What are you doing here?” He blanched. “I mean, not that I'm not glad to see you. I am! Glad to see you. It's just that you're not normally-”

In the amount of time it took for Hallow to blurt that, Reill flew over and laid a finger over the dockhand's lips. “It's quite alright, Hallow,” he said, mirth in his voice, and drew away the finger. “I knew what you meant. To answer your question... well, it was halfway through when you'd usually be at the inn, and I thought I'd better bring you something to eat in case you had to miss your break again.” From the basket at his side, he produced a loaf stuffed with meat and tomatoes alongside a bottle of ale.

Hallow was struck dumb for a moment. “F-for me?” he stuttered.

Reill's laugh was warm. Reill laughed so much, but he never seemed to be laughing *at* Hallow.

“Yes, for you,” he said, laying a hand on the dockhand's arm. “And me, too. If there's time?”

Uncertain, Hallow looked in the direction of Fae. Fae was emphatically mouthing *YES*.

“There is,” said Hallow, feeling the beginnings of a grin spread over his face.

Reill looked so pleased. “Then let's sit!”

They took a spot at the end of another pier, dangling their feet over the water.

“If I'd known we'd be having such a picnic, I'd have brought some wine,” said Reill. He held his bottle of ale up to the light and swirled it, smiling at the way the liquid sloshed against the glass. “How are you liking your sandwich?”

“It’s good,” said Hallow happily, and promptly stuffed his face with another bite. Two seconds afterwards, he realized he had something he wanted to say, and tried to backtrack, except you can’t exactly backtrack from eating a bite of food. Thus, he was forced to awkwardly chew as fast as he could and swallow.

This would have gone swimmingly, but for the fact that he had literally bitten off more than he could chew.

“Stars, are you alright?” exclaimed Reill, worriedly patting him on the back as he hacked up a piece of sandwich.

“Mm,” said Hallow. He groaned. “Mm. Mph.” He cleared his throat. “Yes. Yes, I’m alright.” His face felt like it was on fire.

“Here.” Reill pressed his ale into his hands, rubbing a hand up and down his spine in a soothing manner.

Gratefully, Hallow washed down the acid reflux with beer, relaxing into Reill’s gentling. “I was meaning to tell you,” he said, when he was fully recovered. “We had a bit of a swimming race just now- that’s why I’m sopping wet. When I was under the water, I saw the sunlight make a net on the ocean floor, and it made me think of you, and the little things in life.”

Reill made a happy noise and fussed with Hallow’s hair. “Will you tell me about this net of sunlight?”

So Hallow did. Not very eloquently, but Reill got the picture well enough.

“How do you open your eyes underwater?” asked the bard. “The ocean has always made my eyes hurt.”

“There’s salt in my blood!” Hallow declared proudly, patting himself over the heart. Reill laughed. Then, more seriously, he said, “I don’t really know. I remember the waves stinging when I was very little, but I think I just got used to it. The water is very clear here, so there’s no sand that gets into your eyes. The ocean floor looks so pretty underwater.”

The bard leaned against him and sighed. “I wish I knew how to swim!”

Hallow’s brain stopped working. “Y-you don’t know how to swim?”

“No,” said Reill, craning his neck to look up at Hallow. “I’m from the North, remember? It was too cold to swim, and I never had time to learn once I got traveling.”

“Well, we’re going to have to fix that!” said Hallow. “Everyone should know how to swim.”

“I’d like that,” said Reill, smiling. He looked so... happy. Hallow reached over and tucked a strand of hair behind his ear.

They sat like that for a little bit, until the rest of the dockworkers began to come back from their hurried meals. Fae wanted to give them more time, but Hallow felt bad about it and Reill had to go back to the Cat's Paw, anyways. Still, they could've spent the whole day together like that, talking about everything and nothing at all.

Captain Galen didn't come in that evening, either. Hallow was now officially worried.

"Hallow, ships are late *all the time*," Tamani told him. "And it's Captain Galen! He's tough. He's also probably two days away in the middle of the ocean complaining that he ran out of mead or something. We'll see him soon, don't worry."

The cool sea breeze licked over his sunburnt arms and back. Hallow frowned and shivered as his hairs stood on end. It was colder than usual. He looked up.

Out in the distance, a storm was brewing.

The last sliver of sun was disappearing beneath the glittering waves. Reill sat out on the front porch of the Cat's Paw, tuning his violin. He finished, and began to wipe it down and polish it with the utmost care.

The instrument itself was of low quality, but in Reill's mind, it had great worth. It was a gift from someone very dear. He rarely played it, and as such, was probably losing his proficiency at it, but he was loathe to wear it down. It had been in his possession since before he'd taken up his occupation, and he hoped to have it for much longer. He maintained it studiously, obsessively, out of fear that it would one day fall apart.

It was strange. He never really used it, but Any moment now, Hallow was going to come trotting up the boardwalk, sunburnt from a day of hard work, brushing his salt-swept hair over a broad, freckled shoulder. He'd take his seat by the stage, eat his meal, smile up as Reill sang. He was a simple, wholesome man with a simple, wholesome life, a home to put a tapestry in, and his own little family of friends.

Stars above, he *wanted* that. He wanted it more than he'd wanted anything in a long time. To belong to somewhere, to have someone glad to see him when he came home... oh, a home. What a thought, that he could have a home to come back to again.

Oh, Hallow. Reill was very glad to have met him. Hallow restored his faith in the world. Look, here he came now.

"Hello, Reill!" said Hallow. "What is that instrument you're holding?"

"A violin!" replied the bard. "It makes quite a pretty sound. Listen." He played a short dyad.

Hallow's eyes grew wide. "A fiddle!" he blurted. "I love these! I heard one being played once, when I was very little. I've always hoped to hear one again."

Fiddle? Reill scrolled through his mental list of definitions. Oh right. That's what people usually called them.

More importantly.

"Then a fiddle's music you will hear tonight!" he declared, smiling at Hallow's delight.

Acutely aware of his odd obsession, Reill collected his violin and headed to the stage. He shuddered. What if it broke? What if... what if he'd forgotten how?

Then he looked back at Hallow, smiling so excitedly and sitting straight in his chair like he was about to burst right out of it, and his spirit stilled.

There, behind the lids of his closed eyes: A little thread, a little thing of potential. He followed it, and at its end there sat an old friend, a song he'd known once and forgotten, waiting there to be found anew.

He didn't sing that night. The violin did, in words no one could quite understand.

The music came to its natural end. Reill loved ending violin pieces almost as much as he loved beginning them. That last note hung in the air until it became so light it cut off and floated away, and then the spell was over.

Although, not for Hallow, it seemed. He sat with his eyes half-shut, his smile soft, hands folded over his lap like he did when he spaced out, as he tended to do.

Bowing himself off the stage to enthusiastic applause, Reill took his seat at their little table, and began fretting over his violin again. It... was fine. Well, of course it was fine. He hadn't expected it not to be. But expecting was one thing, and seeing was another. Seeing was substantially more reassuring.

They sat in companionable silence, stealing little glances at one another with happy smiles. It felt almost conspiratorial to him. Nobody knew about it- well, of course people *knew*, they just didn't *know*. They couldn't see the secret play of delight between them, joy buzzing in the air. Reill watched out of the corners of his eyes as Hallow leaned back, openly gazing at him, nothing behind it but admiration.

And in that moment, Reill realized he loved him.

"You make everything better," said Hallow, his smile so tender, Reill's heart was melting.

A sprig of curly red hair detached itself from the general mass shoved behind the dockhand's ears. Reill gently put his violin back in its case and reached over to tuck it back in.

"Is something the matter?" he asked, hand still curled around Hallow's cheek.

“Nothing that music can’t fix,” said Hallow.

The world seemed to slow. They looked into each other’s eyes, blinking slowly, something raw in the air, something open and good between them. Reill leaned forward, wanting to be close. Hallow’s palm smoothed up the side of his cheek, so warm, and he pressed into it. He wanted...

Hallow kissed him.

It was soft and chaste, so perfectly gentle, just a light press of their lips. Immediately afterwards, Hallow pulled back, red in the face and embarrassed, but Reill wouldn’t let him retreat too far away. Smiling so hard he thought his face was going to break, he stroked a thumb over the dockhand’s strong, bristly jaw.

He was so happy, his soul felt incandescent.

“Hallow... come here for a moment?”

Hallow made a soft noise and tried to walk through the table.

“Ow,” he gasped as his hip struck the edge. The look of shock and wounded hurt on his face... it was too much for Reill, who released an undignified little squeak, stood up, stumbled over to the other side of the table, and threw his arms around him. He buried his face in Hallow’s curly red hair, breathing in the smell of ocean salt.

“Let’s go to the docks,” whispered Hallow. “We can look at the moon over the water.”

“Alright,” said Reill. He let Hallow take his hand, smiling up at him- not very far up, just a little bit, maybe two inches or so. Together they went, down to the sea, tucked into each other side-by-side, legs dangling into the cool salt waves as they murmured to each other both everything and nothing at all.

Reill wanted so badly to make this his own, to make it his home.

Hallow went to work the next morning with a huge smile on his face and not a lot behind it. He’d stayed up way too late talking with Reill at the docks. It was almost disorienting to be back there again, with the sun shining down on everything rather than the moon.

His friends, of course, took this to mean something entirely different.

“You uh, get some last night?” Fae asked him, with a wink and a grin.

“Yeah, Hallow! You’re lookin’ a wee bit too pleased today,” Sazapri added.

“Congratulations, Hallow,” said Sabjar, patting him on the shoulder.

“Congratulations what? I’m not having a baby,” Hallow grumbled. “And no, Fae. I did not ‘get some’ last night.”

“Oh, I’ll bet you got more than some,” laughed the overseer. “There’s rather a lot to be got, what with those legs of his.”

Hallow sighed, exasperated. “Will you stoppit? I did not sleep with Reill!”

“You say it so convincingly. It’s almost like you believe it,” said Maakava in the dryest, flattest tone of voice Hallow had ever heard him use.

“All of you are terrible people and I hate you,” said Hallow, with little bite to it. Fae just laughed and clapped him on the back, giving him a thumbs-up.

Later when they were having a bit of a break after a particularly heavy crate, Tamani patted him on the back for a very different reason.

“It’s okay,” he said between deep breaths. “I believe you. Everyone else, they’re probably just teasing. Probably aren’t sure, either. Don’t know about Fae, though. He’s weird.”

Hallow laughed. “Fae *is* weird! But... thank you, Tamani.”

Tamani nodded solemnly. “Of course. Some people tend to think of us alphas as total lechers who chase every tail we see. You and me, though. We know it’s not like that.”

“Not even a little bit,” said Hallow, with feeling.

They got back to loading crates and finished up just before the lunch break. Since there was nothing else to do, Fae let them go a little early.

“Hey, Hallow, why don’t you come drinking with us?” Sazapri offered. “Celebrate that new conquest of yours?”

“Okay, first of all,” said Hallow, who was starting to get annoyed, “Reill is not a ‘conquest’. Secondly, *I never slept with him*. Will you please stop?”

“Sorry,” said Sazapri, looking suitably chastened. “I guess you’re not coming with us, then?”

Hallow shook his head. “No, I think I’ll stay here and swim a little.”

“Alright, then.”

After she left, Hallow went back to the edge of the docks and took a good look at the great, glittering expanse of water before him. The sun was high in the sky, beating down hot and bright, making the surface of the ocean sparkle so much it was hard to look at. Squinting, he smiled, marveling at the waves he loved.

Reill came into his mind. His songs felt like the ocean, fluid like water, fierce like the waves, melodies as soft as the gentle undercurrents beneath the spray. Hallow’s heart felt warm, and suddenly he felt a strong urge to go see him.

It was a really hot day, though, and he needed that swim.

Halfway through it, Hallow came up for some air and heard a commotion at the dock. He turned around, concerned, and his eyes widened as he saw Reill roughly yanking his arm out of the hold of someone a good bit bigger.

As he got closer, he began to hear more and more of the argument.

“Would you leave me alone?” said Reill, irritation evident in the way he snapped the words. “I am simply here to see my friend. I want nothing to do with you.”

“I think we all know he’s more than your friend,” said the other man, leering. “We saw you leave with him the other night. Think you could talk him into sharing?”

“I do not appreciate the implication you are making, and I suggest you leave,” Reill replied stiffly. “Now.”

The man’s face darkened. “Don’t you dare order me around, *omega*.”

It was surreal, watching this happen. The things that horrible man was saying... they’d always been looming ideas to him, things that “some people” thought, but of course it was all wrong, and people didn’t *really* think like that. Not here. Apparently, he’d been sorely mistaken, and how he was left to hope he could reach the docks before something serious happened.

“It was a suggestion,” said Reill in an even tone. “A very well-meant suggestion. I repeat, please leave.”

The man’s response to this was to spit on the bard’s cheek. Reill huffed in outrage and made to wipe it off. As he did, the man gave him a sharp push. His heels went over the edge of the docks and he landed in the water with a splash.

Hallow very suddenly remembered that Reill didn’t know how to swim.

Luckily, at this point he was about twenty feet away from the whole ordeal, which meant that basically he was already there. He dove straight into the ocean with a crash and closed the distance like a drawstring closes a bag. Kicking upwards, he brought himself behind panicking Reill, wrapping his arms securely around his chest and going up.

As soon as his head was steadily above the water, Reill started coughing, hacking up the brine in his lungs. It took a while to get most of it out. Hallow wanted to move them onto the docks, but he didn’t think Reill was calm enough to be gotten out of the water just yet. A little bit later, the bard’s breathing evened out, and his thrashing stilled.

“Are you okay?” Hallow asked nervously.

“Y-” The sound stuck in Reill’s throat. He cleared it. “Yes. I’m alright now.” Part of him seemed to deflate, and he melted a little into the embrace. “Thank you, Hallow.” His voice was raspy and strained.

Hallow hugged him tight. “Come on. Let’s get out of the water.”



Reill's limbs were still shaky, but between the two of them, he got up on the dock just fine. Hallow was quick to follow. They sat on the planks a good distance from the edge while Reill slowly calmed down, leaning into Hallow's broad torso.

"I cannot believe," he said after some time, "that actually happened. I almost just *died*. I wasn't - I just wanted him to go away! I don't understand," he added plaintively.

"I don't understand either," said Hallow. "I thought... I didn't think anybody was like that! I thought that stuff was all just stories. I'm so sorry, Reill."

Reill sighed. "It's alright, Hallow. None of this is your fault. I think I meant what I said about this city the other day- this feels *exactly* like home."

He sounded so despondent when he said it. Hallow felt his heart break a little.

"C'mon," he murmured. "Let's get you to your room."

Hallow walked the bard right up to the door of his room at the Cat's Paw. No more stupid was going to happen today, not under his watch. He made sure Reill was settled in before he went to go grab a quick lunch.

A lull in the business arrived. Radde, the bartender and Hallow's longtime acquaintance, came over to have a word. "Is Ullureill not singing today?"

Hallow shook his head. "He nearly just drowned. I think- well, I *hope* he's going to take the afternoon off to recover."

Alarmed, Radde nodded. "Sounds reasonable. Tell him to take all the time he needs - I'll let him keep his room. How is he?" they asked.

"Okay, I think," said Hallow. "He was a little shaken up, but he's tough."

"I'll believe that, no trouble," was Radde's soft response. "Take care of him, Hallow. He'll appreciate someone looking out for him."

"Oh, I definitely plan to."

Radde watched him go with a frown, studying the bunched-up anger in his big shoulders, alpha fury radiating off of him. They'd seen plenty of backs exactly like that one walk out of their bar - often because Radde had thrown them out themselves - so often that they almost forgot that particular one carried Hallow's face.

"You're not okay," Sazapri remarked at Hallow, who'd lifted something a little too powerfully and nearly pitched it off the side of the docks. Thankfully, she'd caught a hold of it before that could happen. "Did something happen today?"

Hallow made the closest sound to a growl a human could physically muster. "Somebody pushed Reill into the water today."

Sazapri had to choke back a laugh. "And you're *this mad* about it? Come on, Hallow, it's just some water."

"Sazapri. *Reill can't swim*."

Her eyes widened. Hallow nodded with increasing degrees of sharpness as the gravity of the situation made itself clear to her.

“Stars above, they could’ve killed him! Did you recognize this person, Hallow?”

“No,” he ground out. “But I know I’ll recognize him if I see him again.”

“And let me guess,” Sazapri said. “You’re going to go looking for him.”

Hallow nodded. “At the very least, he needs to understand what he very nearly did,” he said, softly. “If that’s not enough, then I’ll make sure he never does it again.”

Sazapri grinned. “That’s the spirit. Show that idiot who he’s messing with.” She clapped him on the shoulder and went back to work.

Later on, as he was about to leave, Fae stopped him.

“I heard from Sazapri what happened today,” he said. “Hallow, I understand you think you’re doing what’s right, but are you sure this is the way?”

This was all so frustrating. His head hurt. “I don’t know, Fae,” he said. “I... I think I need to be less angry. Before I do anything. Which, I definitely still am going to go do something, but not while I’m this...” he gestured down at himself disparagingly.

Fae nodded. “I think it’ll be good for you to cool down a little. Whoever it was isn’t going anywhere. Besides, I bet Reill probably wants to see you.”

Hallow nodded. He wanted to see Reill, too.

To his great surprise, Reill was once again performing. He wasn’t singing, though. Instead, he’d brought out the little fiddle, playing something cheerful. And despite Hallow’s worries, the song helped. It took all the fury out of him. He felt like himself again.

Reill was happy to see him, too. He noticed as soon as Hallow sat down, and they exchanged a quick grin. When he was done, he packaged the fiddle with substantially more care than he’d given his lute and hopped into the seat across from the dockhand.

“How are you doing?” Hallow asked him, noticing how his hair didn’t shine because of the salt in it.

“Much better,” said Reill. “I went up on the roof for a bit. I think the heights help to calm me down. How are you?”

“Good,” said Hallow. He grinned. “Better, now that I’ve seen you.”

Reill’s face broke out into a surprised, pleased grin, a very faint dusting of pink across his cheeks. “I think that makes me feel better, too,” he murmured.

They sat and talked for a bit. Neither of them said anything about the incident. Hallow decided he wouldn’t mention how angry he’d gotten. Reill didn’t need to know about that. So instead, they talked and laughed over silly stories they had to tell, like the time Reill’s little brother tripped and fell into a vat of wine.

Reill seemed to love his family very much, Hallow thought. He always spoke so warmly of them. It didn't seem like he'd seen them in a while, which must be why the light was going out of his eyes a little as he thought about them.

"Well, I'd better go," said Reill, when the hour grew late. "I think I need some more rest. Will I see you tomorrow, Hallow?"

"Yes, of course," said Hallow. He thought for a moment. "How about I meet you *here*?"

"That seems like a great idea," said Reill, a little ruefully. He smiled again. Both of them stood and exchanged a brief embrace. "Good night, Hallow."

"Good night, Reill!"

Happiness fizzed through the dockhand's soul as he made the moderate walk home. He went by the docks and took a path into the city, passing by the square with the fountain and remembering when he'd been there with Reill. He paused at the edge of the fountain, a smile bursting forth onto his lips.

The moment passed. He walked on, heart warmed. Hallow was so distracted that he very nearly didn't manage to duck the large club being swung at his head.

With a yelp, he sprang back to a safe distance, drawing the dagger at his belt and facing down his adversary, a woman much smaller than him. She nervously shifted back and forth across the balls of her feet, adjusting her grip on what was evidently an oar.

"F-filthy alpha! You'll p-pay for what you've d-done!"

"What?" Hallow was confused. No, Hallow was beyond confused. Hallow was *mystified*. "What are you *talking* about?"

This did not seem to register with the woman. She swung the oar again. Hallow sidestepped it easily and caught it, wrenching it from her grasp. The woman went sprawling, faceplanting into the dirt.

"Okay, crazy lady," said Hallow. "What's your problem?"

"W-we s-saw you with tha-that omega," she stuttered, scrambling to her feet. "S-stay away from h-him! H-he does-doesn't want it!"

Hallow blinked several times in rapid succession. "Which omega?" Did she mean... "Reill?"

"S-stupid alpha," said the woman. "A-all you do is h-hurt! Alphas are-are bad! Stay aw-away from him!"

"Uh..."

"W-We're w-watching!"

With that, she scampered off into the darkness, leaving Hallow standing bewilderedly at an intersection, holding a knife in one hand and an oar in the other.

It bothered him. Anyone else would have probably just brushed it off as some random crazy person, but Hallow had a way of getting bothered about things that everybody else just ignored for far too long than was prudent.

Instead of staying home and making breakfast, he decided he'd go out and see Reill. Maybe he would feel better if they talked for a bit. And so, as dawn became morning, Hallow found himself pushing open the doors to the Cat's Paw.

"Good morning, Hallow!" chirped Radde. "What brings you here at this hour?"

Right, he'd forgotten. Radde was a morning person.

"Um, just looking for Reill," he told them.

"Ah! He should be down in a bit. I'll fix the two of you some breakfast."

"Thanks, Radde." Hallow took a seat at the bar and watched them disappear into the kitchen.

The Cat's Paw actually belonged to Radde, who was to all appearances just a simple bartender. They were truly anything but. Radde had been kidnapped and taken across the sea at a very young age. Using nothing but their wits and a pinch of magic, they'd escaped a life of slavery and come to Port Yammetide, where they were adopted by the inn's previous owner. A few years ago, the owner died, leaving the place to Radde, who'd passionately maintained it since.

It was the sort of story Reill might like. Hallow wondered if Radde had told him about it.

A few moments later, the stairs creaked as light feet walked down them. "Hallow!" exclaimed Reill, delightedly rushing over and hopping up on the stool next to him. "Good morning! I didn't know you sometimes came here this early."

"I usually don't," Hallow admitted, familiar warmth spreading across his chest. He couldn't help but grin. "But, well... I kind of wanted to see you."

Reill tilted his head to the side and made a noise of concern. "Is everything alright?"

"Maybe?"

"What's the matter?"

And so, Hallow clumsily explained what had befallen him last night.

Reill's brow furrowed. "That's weird. I don't like it at all. Any other day and I might be laughing, but this happened way too close to my own incident to be a coincidence."

Radde chose that moment to return with two plates of what they called their "Hearty Breakfast Special." It consisted of chopped pork, eggs, tiny fried potato cubes, and white cheese. This all came with a side of toast and jam. With it, they brought out a

pot of tea, setting it all down on the bar counter via the means of a massive tray with a clatter. “Oh, so you met *those* people,” they said. “The Omega Protection Society, or some other hoity-toity name like that. Sounds all very fine and good, but what they really like to do is convince perfectly happy omegas that their lover is taking advantage of them.” They began unloading the tray and retrieved two mugs from under the counter to pour tea. “I don't allow them in here. They're awful.”

Reill made a very aristocratic noise of disgust. “They certainly sound like it!”

Hallow frowned, remembering the other incident. “Is there another group like them? Except... full of bad alphas?”

Radde snorted. “Of course there is. Alphas and omegas have been going at each other for centuries. Sometimes they're so busy with the hate, I wonder where on earth they find the time to fuck each other, too.” Hallow choked on a piece of toast; Reill probably did the same thing, but hid it better. “There's bad crowds, but nothing so organized as the Society. My rule is, if anyone wants to cause trouble, then they can get out of my bar.” They sighed through their nostrils. “I think I'll... check some things later, Hallow, make sure no one's planning anything. In the meantime, eat up!” They flashed a bright grin and left.

“Sound advice,” said Reill, smiling. He took a bite. “Oh, this is *heavenly*. What have I been *doing* ordering fruit all these days when I could've had this?”

Hallow chuckled. “I don't know!” He tucked in with great enthusiasm. “I haven't been here for breakfast in ages. I forgot how good of a cook Radde is!”

“Indeed they are,” Reill happily agreed, taking another bite. “How long have the two of you known each other?”

“Years and years,” said Hallow. “We've pretty much been friends ever since they got here, which was... how long ago now? Stars, I can't really remember. Must've been nearly twenty, since I remember my parents having been there. My da never really liked Radde, but Mumma did. I remember she took us out to dinner one time. Can't quite remember where, though. Radde might remember! They don't forget much.”

Reill blinked. “Forgive me,” he said, “but... your parents. Are they...?”

Hallow nodded. “Mhm! They've been gone a long time. It's alright, though. I never really knew them that well, and I liked growing up in the orphanage. I had lots of brothers and sisters, and the matron was very kind. She was enough of a mother for me. I ought to take you to meet her someday.”

“I'd like that,” said Reill, smiling a peculiar smile.

“What about your family?” Hallow asked. “Where are they?”

“Oh,” said Reill, “back home. Let's talk about something else, shall we?”

So they spoke of birds, how they would fly north for the summer and south for the winter, and how Reill did that, too.

Reill was like a dove, Hallow thought later as he strapped a crate of granite to their old, squeaking winch - gentle, lovely, graceful. He luxuriated in the warmth of the sun. It shone from directly behind the crate, so that the edges of the wooden box looked like gold. Reill was right. Beauty was everywhere.

Captain Galen still hadn't arrived.

He went to the Cat's Paw and felt moodier than usual. Yesterday had been stressful, and he was still worried about the Captain. Despite Reill's best efforts, he couldn't cheer up very much. But that was alright, because Reill didn't seem to mind.

In the night, he lay in his modest bed with an arm to one side, wondering what it would be like to have a person there. It was very easy to misunderstand him when he said things like that, he knew from experience, but that was really all he meant. He just wanted someone to sleep beside.

The next day, he woke up feeling much happier, for whatever reason. He ate his gruel and went off to work.

"Captain Galen's been officially pronounced missing," Fae said to him sadly. "You were right to worry after all, Hallow. I'm sorry. I know he was your friend."

Hallow stiffened. "Don't say 'was', Fae."

"Hallow..."

"We don't know. He might still come back."

"Hallow." Fae adopted his signature look of patience and stretched out his hand like he was about to touch Hallow on the shoulder.

"Don't," said Hallow. "Just... please, Fae."

Fae drew back, sighing. "Alright."