

*“Soon may the Wellerman come, to bring our sugar and tea and rum...”*

The chorus rose from below the decks. On a still night such as this, the voices of the other sailors were clear and harmonious in the air. Even all the way on the top ropes, Nicholas could make out the individual voices.

*“One day when the tongueing is done, we’ll take our leave and go.”*

Even without any sort of breeze, the salty night air cut through his sloppes as if they weren’t even there. As if he was naked, suspended fifty meters above the deck. Alone, with the rancid scent of rotting whale mixing with the salt of the sea.

His hands were numb as they gripped the wooden top mast. His eyes were locked on the horizon.

There was a soft boundary, where the sea met the sky. Where the sparkling stars were eaten by the black waves. Where the mysteries of one unknown met the other.

A bright crescent above the black abyss, hung among the pin-pricked sky, lay the moon. A blazing semi-circle of radiant fire in the sky. She sat among the Western stars, a shadow of her Solar Brother.

“Oi, Mister Walker,” a call came from below that made Nicholas jump.

The wild gray and brown hair of Leo Volkov slowly rose from the top mast.

“Brought ye’ some grog,” the Russian seaman produced two warm, dry mugs.

“We ain’t supposed to drink on the top sails,” Nic muttered, taking the tin mug anyway.

“ ‘s jus’ grog” Leo said, turning to face the moon as well.

They drank together in silence. The residual heat of the hot water and rum reminded Nic of the wood stove fires back home.

It had been so long since he had been warm.

*“She had not been two weeks from shore, when down on her a right whale bore”*

The songs of the deck rose through the sails with a wavering discord. Coals in Nic’s belly were turned by the grog, their white hot undersides exposed.

Roused by the alcohol, the two men broke the silence and told tales of home. Nic told of the Welsh countryside where he had grown up, with its rolling green hills and overcast skies. Leo told of harsh Russian winters in the inner city of Moscow, growing up in a small apartment with his many siblings, parents and grandparents.

Off in the distance, the sea gobbled up the incandescence of the moon. Reflected light in the sea was made even greater by the blackness that surrounded it. It almost seemed like the waves had a sick ghostly light of their own.

Then the “light” split. One patch of light, perhaps a league in size, broke off from the crescent lunar reflection and arced away into the blackness towards the North.

Nic’s jaw dropped as he watched this dazzling display from atop the mast. The glow that emanated from the sea took on a different color, something not quite crimson, it was too pale, but something not quite blue, it was too vibrant.

It was a color he had never seen before. His brain reeled, barely able to comprehend what his eyes were showing him.

“Blyat..” Leo said quietly next to him. “chto eto za fignya,” the fear sent the man back to his native tongue.

At least Nic wasn’t seeing things.

Then, just as quickly as it had appeared, the light was gone.

Nic and Leo were left staring out at the waves. Just the waves.

The two topmen looked at each other and smiled. Both were still nervous and scared, but felt the comradery of the shared oddity.

They returned to their grog. This would not be acknowledged in the logs. The last thing they needed was Petty Officer Sherman giving them heat for making false entries.

*"The captain called all hands and swore, he'd take that whale in tow"*

Suddenly, everything was bright as day. The two topmen found themselves at the center of a pillar of light, encasing the entire ship. They could only see the blinding brightness as it surrounded them.

Where there was once sky and sea, there was now white light. Tendrils of darkness stretched across the would-be horizon and formed into a black forest devoid of all trees and sense of life.

The roots and branches twisted in unreal and unfathomable ways. They went from spindly to overgrown and thick over a few seconds, then pulsed and were bare again.

A horrible organism of tragedy and hate, it closed in. Tentacles of inky ebony reached across the sails and the mast towards the men.

Nic heard a scream, quiet then loud, then gone.

He looked to his companion and saw an afterimage of where the man had been. A bright silhouette instead of a shadow.

Lines of light led from the not-shadow, off into the sea. Nic squinted and he could see that the lines were like a golden chain of sunlight. He reached to grab them. As his hands got close, he could feel an unfathomable burning, but his palms came away unscathed.

From deep below the surface, Leo could still hear the singing of the crew, leagues above him, now just a pinprick of light in an ocean of unnatural darkness.

*"One day when the tongueing is done, we'll take our leave and go."*

He went to scream, but he was deaf under the infinity of crushing darkness. All of his limbs were heavy and near locked in place. It took all of his energy to get his arm to twitch. And the cold. Sweet Jesus, the cold.

Above, Nic was plunged into darkness as well. It was a different kind of darkness. Weightless and freeing. He could see past the darkness, into infinity. It was bright, impossibly bright, that was where the darkness had come from. The contrast of the blinding light compared to the dark world he knew, had overloaded his senses.

His entire world was a black dot on the horizon of infinity.

Completely disoriented, he reached for the ship's bell, at least where he thought it was.

But then, Nic could see the real world again. He saw the ropes and sails fly past him as he tumbled through the air. His stomach in his throat, Nic briefly wondered what was happening before his body hit the deck with a sickening crunch.

Nic's body was completely mangled. There were several compound fractures in his legs and his arms. A lung had been punctured and his breathing was ragged and labored. The blood pooled fast, hotter than it should have been, almost boiling. One of his eyes had escaped from his skull, finding freedom among the waves. The other had burst entirely and hung from the socket like a wet butcher's sack.

But he was alive.

The crew moved quickly to assess and handle the situation, despite the late hour and despite their drunkenness.

They got Nic below decks in the doctor's cabin quickly yet carefully under close direction. The deck was quickly swabbed.

Normally, the crew knew better than to crowd the doctor's cabin but today they did not abstain.

Captain James Earl Peake could hear the rabble halfway across the ship from his cabin as he made his report.

Sitting across from the Captain was Petty Officer Sherman, who had been the last to see Nic before his accident.

"Aye, the last I heard, Volkov was taking him a half ration of grog" Sherman was saying.

"Where's his report?" the captain asked.

Silence.

The captain sighed and turned back to his paperwork.

"What do you think happened to him?" Peake did not look at the petty officer.

"Dunno, sir" Sherman said

Peake narrowed his eyes, considering the evidence.

"Keep quiet about it until the morning." It was a command.

"Aye, sir" Sherman looked down as the captain made eye contact.

"You're dismissed."

The clock read half past midnight as Captain Peake finished his report. He had seen the awful state Topman Walker had been in. He would not survive.

As for the Russian, Peake wasn't sure what had happened to him. Perhaps he had seen what was happening and tried to save the poor lad. Fell overboard as he tried to climb the ropes in the near pitch darkness.

Still, the signs were clear. No wind, sober sailors, a dark night. Lord only knows what drove him to do it, but it had been a suicide. Selfish bastard even took another with him.

Nicholas Walker was blind. But he could hear. He couldn't talk, not the way his lungs had been destroyed in the fall. The best he could do was half gasps and wheezes.

He listened to the chatter of the crewmates around him. Dosed with enough morphine that his whole body was numb, he figured that was for the best. They said horrific things about how he looked. Many of the men wretched upon coming to visit.

None of them had kind words either. They called him selfish, said that Leo didn't deserve what Nic had done to him. If he had tear ducts left, he would have cried.

All there was left to do was wheeze and die.

Nicholas Walker passed the third hour into the new day.

If only Leonard Volkov had been so lucky.

His voyage into oblivion lasted an eternity. While his body was being crushed, compacted, compressed, to a thousandth of its original size, his senses were dimmed to the point of nullification.

Leo did not know when it had begun.