

“Bound”

I was surrounded by the jumbled stench of favorite things, repulsive things, and a few things I couldn't even begin to place. The odor felt like home. It could never quite be called familiar; it was constantly shifting; I had grown used to the atmosphere it always created. I *know* this.

A woman in red watched me from across the room. I clearly remember her, through the blur the rest of the night became, because she smiled at me and the gold of one of her teeth held my attention. She seemed so perfect before she smiled.

I'm fairly certain I smiled back at the woman, before she left me. I'm also fairly certain she left soon after she saw me. I probably would have talked to her if she had stayed.

I remember ordering many, many drinks. I was thirsty. After paying off the mute tender sulking behind the bar, I left, bumping into a man in a large yellow raincoat on the way out.

The docks rank of rotten fish and scattered crab guts. Few good people were awake at that hour of the night. I managed to avoid every single one of them. I was instead greeted by human vermin and street leeches of every class of filth, all carrying on like blue bloods at an elusive party. When I attempted to strike up a conversation, I was struck down. Onward walked I.

An ancient whore clung to the thick white wool of my shirt, infecting it with her uncleanness, leaving a greasy hand print. I kept walking, pushing her, I think, into a puking sailor. I was after a lazier sort of sleep.

I stumbled around on my own for a bit, eventually making my bed upon one of the dock's smaller boats, a swaying skiff. After wrapping myself entirely in the thick blanket I found on the craft, I managed to doze off rather quickly.

"Wake up!" it said. A violent shout from the inky darkness blanketing the other side of the room. I could make out only the faintest impression of a person and I am thankful for this. The voice was intimidating enough. "Wake up, " it said again, though my eyes were already straining open.

The creaking of floorboards could be heard all around, but the sounds seemed especially concentrated directly above me. I found the constant swaying of the room more than a little disturbing. Small shadows screeched and scurried about the floor, their hairy backs occasionally tickling my bare feet.

The impression of a man from the corner asked me, softer than before, "Are you awake?" He leaned in slightly and, in response it seemed, the room lurched back.

My head was pounding. My mind struggled against the closing of my eyes. That simple strain was enough to manifest itself as pain. I believe the slightly annoyed tone of my reply, "Yes, I'm awake, damn you," was justified by my condition.

A faint light flickered through the cracks in the wall, traveling along it before eventually settling on the room's only door. The room's only exit. Voices followed the light.

The man in the corner laughed. His chuckles assaulted my ears like the harsh wails of a banshee. Somehow, I knew they signaled terrible things. As his laughter faded,

he began crawling toward me like some kind of bear. I don't think any bear could have been as ugly.

"Better listen good, boy, `cus they're here. This could save you, if you'll take one risk for another." He forced something into my hand. The object felt like it was crudely carved of some hard wood until my fingertip brushed against a thin, smooth metallic edge.

"What the hell is this?" I asked. I had a vague idea of what it was and I knew what it was meant for, so I pushed it back. I didn't know where I was or why I was there, and I certainly didn't think the way to the exit was death. *Anyone's* death.

As he forced the thing back into my hand, we were interrupted by the crashing sound of the door. The faint light from before was suddenly quite blinding. One of my arms shot up to cover my fragile eyes

as the other retreated behind me to slip something into my belt. My temporary companion had retreated back into his shadows, as if he were never there.

"You thought you could fool us, didn't you? With your shorter, browner hair and your poor man's clothes! It almost worked. I have to admit . . . I never would've expected you to lower yourself like that. But . . ." He let out a deep sigh, providing some relief from his senseless ranting. ". . . it was, never the less, inevitable that we would find you."

The stranger by the door sucked on his smelly cigar, blew some of the smoke my way. The two others standing to either side of him closed in on me, each of them tightly gripping my arms.

They forced me to a clumsy stand and began half-dragging me toward the door.

A few moments later, as I passed by the smoker, he spotted the weapon poorly placed beneath my belt. I could only imagine the smile on his face as he retrieved it.

"You thought you would escape again, did you? I'm afraid this trip won't be as fun as the last." I don't know what struck my head then. The sharp pain didn't exist for more than a moment.

I awoke writhing against what I assumed to be the stern of an impressive ship. My wrists and ankles were outstretched, pulling down on four separate ropes. The pain in my head returned, yet it was blunter, less concentrated, and more regular. Waves splashed about constantly below, only a light mist ever reached me. My wonderful, warming shirt had been removed as a contributing factor to my torment. The cold, bitter wind cut into my flesh and stung my nipples. The coarse hairs of the pinching ropes scratched at my wrists.

I remember the sun most vividly. The damned, blinding sun. I felt as if my eyes were on fire.

My light, gentle flesh burned terribly under the great yellow orb's relentless assault.

I think I fainted from the pain. I remember waking up waste-deep in water. I was wriggling about in a losing battle against the immense chill. The ropes granted me very little slack. I was so preoccupied with my torture I didn't even realize the boat was sinking.

Smoke. There was lots of smoke. At the time, I could only smell it. Shattered wooden objects drifted along in front of me. The cold, floating, bloated hand of a fallen sailor bumped into my stomach. Though I could not see the vessel of my enemy's enemy from my rather restricted position, everything around me screamed of a battle.

A savior in white, an angel, leaped into the water with a dagger between his pearly teeth.

The man soon had my restraints undone. His clumsy work with the blade left a creak of blood trailing from my right ankle. I was supremely thankful for the timely aid, did not voice as much until safely pulled aboard. Between greedy draws on the mug of grog I was handed. The disgusting, watered-down sailor's drink sated my thirst without quenching it. What could have quenched it? I retreated below deck as quickly as possible, not wishing to endure the sun any longer. The crew I named my blessing, thankfully, was polite enough to agree to question me there, rather than out in the open. They claimed never to have seen anyone as susceptible to the sun's rays as I.

I was, as much to my dismay as theirs, unable to answer most of the questions asked. I regret leaving so kind an interrogation unsatisfied, was even further in the dark than they. Where they knew with whom they had fought, I had not a
clue.

My headache had left me for a while, following my rescue. It returned to me when I was through being questioned and ready to sleep. I was granted a humble, surprisingly private, sleeping quarters; which is to say that it was not quite so humble as the areas in which many of the sailors were forced to sleep.

I held in my hand a golden rose, the scent of which lured forward my flushed, peeling nose. Nostrils pushed against petals, nostrils pulled in air and the petals and the scent. The rose turned black and shriveled and became as dust. The dust was sucked into my nostrils. A terrible jolt rattled my head, then I lost control to a fit of sneezes.

The rose formed within my hand again. It was glass then, not gold. It slipped from my hand and I could hear it crash into the floor.

The fantasy shattered in front of me. I shattered within it. The sound of the breaking

pieces echoed through my mind until they woke me, and I realized they were not imagined. I sent my blanket floating to the floor beside the dingy little bed. The wool from the blanket must have irritated my wrists and ankles. When I stood, they felt again itchy and restrained. It was a struggle standing and walking through the temporary haze waking had cast on my poor, strained eyes.

I rubbed my temples soothingly and vainly as I stumbled, pajama-clad, toward the source of the noise. Eventually I found the captain kneeling down on the floor, scooping pieces of a shattered vase into his rough palm. "Should have known it wouldn't work," he said. "Thought I could keep the damned thing from falling like that. Of course it falls eventually."

He hadn't seen me. Mistaken identity if any at all.

I wandered back into my quarters and repulled the chaffing wool covers. It felt warm.

I dreamed of sand, miles of sand. An ocean of sand slowly drowning me. It blew harshly across my nakedness, causing my fragile flesh to ooze. Though my eyes pressed tightly shut, they burned and ached from sand and sun. Ropes held me crisscross. My wrists and ankles oozed the most.

Robed nomads looked down on me from all sides smiling wicked satisfaction.

It was their territory I had invaded,
their mobile temples I had desecrated, looking for the artifact. I was the
stranger, the
heathen, the
thing deserving of slow death.
Bloody savages.

My headache had not vanished when I awoke. Breakfast was not filling, water

was not quenching. What could quench the emptiness?

Things I knew brought comfort. I was not some miserable conquered man, dying slowly fading in the sand. I was an adventurer, a treasure hunter, an infamous scourge of the high seas. Mad Malcolm the Pirate, whose sword slices nearly as swiftly as his wit. This is his ship, my ship, my crew. I am *not* dying! I am moving, so alive.

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