

The Spinner

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Zhayim's stumps throbbed. Each beat of his heart sent a dull ache pulsing down his hand, his forearm. The pain kept company with the inexplicable sensation that his severed right thumb and left hand were still part of him. He thought it unfair that the ghosts of his amputated extremities haunted him only in moments of discomfort.

A storm was coming, a big one. Approaching storms always summoned pain and ghosts.

He stood and studied the sky over the aftcastle. The motion rattled the rusty iron chain around his ankle that bound him to the mid-mast.

A thunderhead as black as a rotten tooth benighted the western horizon. Flashes of lightning gave it veins. The distant rumble of thunder rolled over the sea.

The blow had come on fast. An hour earlier the sky had been clear in all directions.

Captain Holst stood near the steering pocket, beside the helmsman, and looked back at the sky through his spyglass. The crew, too, heard the angry sky and looked up from their duties in the rigging, on the deck. A few even gathered along the rails and pointed west. Some immediately cast suspicious glances back at Zhayim, and he took care to hold no eye contact. Others cast their suspicious looks at *Seahorse's* passengers, who sat together in a circle on the deck near their forecastle quarters, oblivious to the dark looks.

The Votaries of Jahlel wore the somber expressions and plain wool homespuns typical of their cult. Eight men, eight women, and a dozen or so children. They spoke little to the crew—mostly just thanking Neem the quartermaster for their meals—but often to their dead prophet and his God. They faced east and prayed as a group every day at dawn, noon, and sunset. Small wonder folks back in Dineen thought they trucked with spirits.

Zhayim assumed they must have paid Captain Holst a handsome sum of coin to transport them to wherever it was that *Seahorse* was headed. Either that or the captain had been so stretched for treasure and passengers that he took whatever they offered.

Probably the latter, Zhayim decided. Holst could not even afford a decent ship's mage. *Seahorse* had no battle mage, no elemental, not even a weather wielder. It had only paunchy Sestin, a third rate diviner.

Zhayim sat back down on the deck and rested against the mast. The Votaries were praying. He enjoyed seeing children aboard but their presence reminded him of the things he'd rather forget. And having little to do left him ample time to remember.

With effort, he wrenched his mind from the past, his eyes from the Votaries, and turned to his duty. *Seahorse* was three days out of port. Zhayim owed a story to the crew, the sea, and the temperamental sea god, old Korsin Foambeard.

He moved through the repertory he'd built over the years and soon settled on his tale. He would tell of Dhost the sailor and the Lissa the mermaid. It had satisfied the god before, and all sailors enjoyed the story.

His mind made up, he stretched out his legs, endured the pain in his arms, and took his ease. The roll of the ship, the creak of its lines, and the familiar sounds of its crew as they worked soon lulled him to sleep.

The soft murmur of voices pulled him awake sometime later. He cocked open an eye and saw six Votaries, all of them children, standing in a semi-circle before him. Ranging in age from perhaps five summers to sixteen, they regarded him with unabashed curiosity.

He did not blame them. He knew how he must look to them, chained to the mast, mutilated, with only his copper pisspot and canvas sleeping blanket for company. Everyone always came to stare at the indentured spinner.

Seeing him awake, they whispered for a moment among themselves before a wide-eyed little girl finally said, "Viis wants to know how you eat?"

"Hush, Ysel," one of the older boys said.

Zhayim opened his eyes and sat up. "With my mouth, of course."

The children laughed. Zhayim enjoyed the sound. The two or three who did not laugh looked a bit green in the face. They were not accustomed to the sea.

"What happened to your hand?" said a thin boy. "And your thumb?"

"A shark, I would guess," said another.

"Not a shark," Ysel said. Her face looked as if the sky had rained freckles on it. "Father says he did something awful and was punished."

"What could be so awful?" said the boy, wide-eyed.

"That is a rude question to ask of an indentured old man," Zhayim said.

The tallest of the children, a young man with dark hair that hung almost to his waist, put a hand on the shoulder of the boy who'd asked the question.

“You are not an old man. And it is you who adopt a tone of rudeness.”

The young man’s directness surprised Zhayim. He had expected the Votaries—persecuted as they were—to be passive.

“What is your name, boy?”

The young man answered with dignity and without hesitation. “Nole ab Tolan.”

“Do all Votaries speak their thoughts with such shamelessness, Nole ab Tolan?”

Nole’s brow furrowed. “What shame is there in speaking one’s thoughts?”

Zhayim smiled, winked. “That depends on the thoughts, I expect, yes?”

Nole did not smile, only cocked his head and looked confused.

“What does he mean, Nole?” Ysel said.

“Your faith does not foster laughter, I see,” Zhayim said.

“We laugh,” Nole said slowly, still perplexed. “When something is amusing. You intended a jest?”

Zhayim felt vaguely foolish, though Nole seemed to ask the question in good faith. He waved his hand, dismissing the children.

“You’ve had your look at the mutilated old slave. Go, now. I am composing a story for tonight’s offering.”

The Votaries murmured. “What kind of story?” a small boy with bright eyes said.

Zhayim opened his mouth to speak, but Ysel, the girl with all the answers and all the freckles, cut him off.

“A sea story, Lorm. He’s the ship’s talespinner. Every ship has one, just as every ship has a weather mage or a diviner or an elemental. His stories keep the sea god appeased.”

“I do not like the sea,” said another boy, one of those green in the cheeks.

Lorm seemed confused. “The sea god is a false god.”

Zhayim chuckled.

“Whale’s teeth, boy. Speaking thus is why you were forced to run away from New Dineen in the first place. More, it is certain to bring foul weather. And let someone on this crew other than me hear it and you’ll find yourself swimming for shore.”

The boy colored and looked as if he might cry. The other children, too, looked upset. All of them looked to Nole for comfort and Zhayim felt himself an ogre for frightening the children. He had seen frightened children enough in his past and wanted to see no more.

“I did not mean that . . .”

“They are afraid of the sea,” Nole said, patting the young boy’s head.

“There is nothing to fear,” Zhayim said.

Nole took a moment to calm the children, then looked into Zhayim’s face. He nodded at the chain around his ankle.

“Are you a criminal?”

Zhayim had never been asked the question, not directly.

“I was. But I am no longer. Now, I just tell stories.”

One of the crew strode by, a scarred, balding sailor with a reel of line over his shoulder. He regarded the lot of them with a sneer of contempt. “The wretched holding court with the wretched. You best have a good story for us, spinner. That squall is ugly.”

Zhayim nodded, waited until the sailor had his back to him, then made an obscene gesture at the bastard with what was left of his hand. The children gasped and giggled.

“Come,” Nole said to the children. “The spinner has a story to compose.”

The children gave disappointed groans but obeyed. Nole shepherded them toward the forecastle but lingered after.

“We are not running away, you know.”

“No?”

“No. We are on a pilgrimage.”

Zhayim knew little of the Votaries but was aware of no holy sites across the sea.

“To where?”

“To the new world, as foreseen by Jahlel. We will find it at the Far Shore.”

Zhayim decided that Jahlel must have been an excellent spinner himself. The Far Shore was one long stretch of wild jungle, filled with dangerous beasts and disease. He thought of telling Nole as much but thought better of it.

“Mind what I said about loose tongues and false gods. I think there’s space enough in the world for my gods and your Prophet. But they,” he said, indicating the crew, “will not feel the same, especially if that storm catches us.”

Thunder boomed in the distance, as if to make his point. Lightning ripped the western sky.

“I have not seen a storm like that in a long while,” Zhayim said.

“That is not a storm,” Nole said. “That is the end of the old world. And it was the reason we left New Dineen.”

Nole said it all so simply, but with such conviction, that Zhayim could only stare at him, amazed. Nole looked as if he had said nothing more unusual than ‘good eve.’

Zhayim finally said, “Who is telling stories, now?”

Nole smiled, turned, and walked back to his people.

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The western sky devoured the setting sun, turning the sea from vivid blue to dull slate. Thunder rolled over the water like steady cannon fire. Captain Holst studied the storm through his spyglass until it grew too dark to see. Zhayim could not shake the echo of Nole’s words from his mind, and he wondered what the Captain saw.

As night settled on the ship, the Votaries made their prayers and the crew, despite the approaching storm, lowered the sails and prepared for the offering. Zhayim overheard two crewmen as they worked above him on the mid-mast.

“That’s a dark blow, and sure,” the first said.

“Aye.”

“It’s these Votaries. Korsin don’t like them on his sea.”

“We oughta toss ‘em over and see if that calms Foambeard,” the second said.

“Can’t,” the first said, and grunted as he pulled a line taut. “Breaking oath on a berth always brings his wrath. Even more than carting these filth across the water.”

“True,” the other said thoughtfully.

The first studied the sky. “Capt’n thinks we’ll outrun it, anyway.”

The other grunted agreement. They noticed Zhayim watching them.

“What are you looking at, spinner?” the first said.

“Nothing.” Zhayim looked away.

Soon the sails were down and *Seahorse* floated loose on the sea, temporarily at the mercy of Korsin and his currents. The crew lit the twelve shell lanterns that signified the god’s twelve seas and arranged them in a circle around Zhayim. He sat in the center of the light and every member of the crew except those in the high nest gathered around him. Some sat cross-legged, others stood. Silence ruled the deck. Zhayim eyed the approaching storm and began.

“May my words please the ear of mighty Korsin the Old. Spare us from storms, Foambeard, and grace us with calm seas and strong winds.”

As one the sailors nodded and answered. “Hear the words, Lord of the Twelve Seas.”

Zhayim spun his tale. He told of how Dhost the sailor fell in love with one of Korsin's daughters, the mermaid Lissa. Dhost's songs eventually won her heart, but Korsin refused to allow Lissa to love a man. Finally, a despairing Dhost cast himself from his ship and into the sea, to drown or be rescued by his love. Korsin prohibited Lissa from saving the doomed sailor and she watched as he drowned. After Dhost's death, the despondent mermaid won Korsin's permission for mermaids to rescue any sailors lost in the sea after that day.

"And so Dhost's death was not in vain," Zhayim said, concluding.

Satisfied nods from the crew greeted the end of the tale.

"That ought to hold the storm at bay," one of the crewmen said, looking west.

"Aye," said another.

Thunder boomed and lightning split the western sky. The crew's mood changed abruptly. They looked at one another, at Zhayim, then at the forecandle, where the Votaries berthed. Zhayim saw dark thoughts brewing behind their eyes.

"Thrice-damned Votaries," one of the men murmured.

Zhayim thought of the children and tried to placate the crew with his words, the same as he did Korsin with his tales.

"Captain says we'll outrun the storm. Isn't that so Captain Holst?"

Holst wore his perpetual frown behind his graying moustache. "We'd better," he said.

"By the gods," said a crewman.

"You'll go hungry if we don't, spinner," said yet another.

"Or you'll go over with them Votaries," another said.

Kleegan, the one-eyed First Mate started shoving men back to their duties. "We'll outrun nothing if you laggards don't get the sails back up. Offering's over and we're still dead in the water with Hellhole and the Pit coming up. Get a move on, dogs."

"Hellhole?" Zhayim said, but no one heard him, or no one bothered to answer him.

The crew snapped to, climbing rigging, tightening lines, getting up sails. Neem the quartermaster soon appeared from the galley and handed Zhayim a tin plate of pickled pork and stale bread.

"We're near Hellhole and the Pit already?"

Neem nodded. "You been too long chained to that mast, spinner. Lost your sense of the sea. We'll be between 'em with the morn."

There was fear in Neem's face. He was right to be afraid.

Zhayim knew Hellhole and the Pit. Both were lawless port towns built on islands beyond the easy reach of the Old Kingdom's navy. Pirates harbored there, and anything could be bought or sold in its markets—drugs, sex, violence, men, women . . . children. Zhayim had seen things in both of the holes that made Dineen's slave pens seem pleasant by comparison.

And the sea between the two towns was as pirate-infested a stretch of water as any man could sail.

Neem wandered back to the galley and Zhayim ate his meal. Afterward, he watched the storm gain ground on them. The clouds devoured stars and left a void in their wake. Zhayim had never seen anything like it and he wondered why Korsin had not looked with favor on his offering.

Presently the crew got the sails up. The canvas caught wind and *Seahorse* got back underway, soon holding its own against the storm.

"I enjoyed your story," Nole said from Zhayim's left. "We all did."

Zhayim turned to see Nole crouched on his haunches near the mast. The young man looked west past Zhayim, toward the storm.

"It seems Korsin did not."

"It was a sad story," Nole said.

Zhayim nodded. "Many good stories end with sadness."

"I had never heard it before."

"No? Dhost and the mermaid is an old sea tale. I don't remember where I picked it up. I have told it dozens of times. Sailors never tire of it. Gives them hope, I think."

"Hope for what?"

"Hope that if they go into the sea, a mermaid will help them get back out. And if she does not, hope that they will drown as peacefully as Dhost."

Nole nodded and echoed Zhayim's words in describing Dhost's death.

"Quiet and soft, like falling asleep."

"Aye," Zhayim said.

Thunder rumbled.

A crewman strode past, noticed Nole, and eyed both of them darkly. "We're floating in the water of your kith, now, spinner. And Korsin spit on your offering."

"Perhaps not," Zhayim said. "We're still running ahead of it."

The crewman grunted and continued on.

After he'd gone, Nole asked, "Why do they speak to you with such contempt?"

"Because of what I was," Zhayim said, and held up his stumps. "They take the left hand as punishment for past acts of piracy, the right thumb to prevent the holding of a blade. I was a pirate, Nole. I was caught, punished, and sold into indenture. I lied when I told you I was not a criminal. I am."

Zhayim expected shock or anger to greet his admission, but Nole continued to stare out at the dark western sky.

"Did you hear my words?"

Nole nodded. "I did. But you did not lie. You are no longer a criminal. So you said, and so it is."

The Votary's simplicity bothered Zhayim, challenged him. "How do you know that, Nole? We have only met this day."

"I do not know. I believe. Did you ever kill anyone?"

Zhayim shook his head quickly. "Never. I was the spinner. I just . . ."

He had just told stories to cutthroats and murderers, watched them do violence to others, partaken in stolen loot. And throughout it all, done nothing to stop any of it.

Nole stood up and smiled down at him. "I knew you had not. You are a kind hearted man, despite your past. I would like to hear more of your stories, as would the children. The elders have approved it. Is that possible?"

Zhayim felt flattered and . . . strangely nervous.

"I know only sea stories, Nole. The children fear the sea."

"Perhaps your stories will ease their fears. In any event, they will help pass the time until we reach the Far Shore."

"Nole . . ." Zhayim started to tell him that the Far Shore was unsettled jungle but swallowed the words. "Bring the children around after your evening prayers tomorrow."

Nole thanked him, bade him good night, and took his leave.

Zhayim lay wrapped in his blanket, hand aching. When he finally slept, he dreamed that he was telling stories to the underfed, terrified children who lived in the filthy slave pens of Hellhole. They asked him to help them, to kill them. He refused. They told him the end of the world was coming and he believed them.

He awoke many hours later to the sound of laughter. He pulled his blanket from over his head and stared groggily about deck. Pre-dawn light cast it in grays and blacks.

Five of the Votary children stood gathered near the starboard rail not far from the forecastle, looking out on the sea. Zhayim heard a splash. He leaped to his feet, thinking someone had gone overboard. The children must have heard the rattle of his chain. They turned around, smiling and pointing at the water.

“Lissa!” Ysel said.

“What?” Zhayim said, his mind still sleep-addled.

“The mermaid,” said a boy not older than ten summers. “Lissa the mermaid! We saw her!”

Before Zhayim could reply, Kleegan shouted down from the aftcastle, “Back to your quarters and your prayers or whatever it is you do, you whelps.”

The children quailed before the big First Mate’s wrath. They lowered their heads and shuffled back to the forecastle.

Later, as the sun rose fully, the crewman in the high nest shouted.

“Dolphins to starboard!”

Zhayim climbed on a barrel used for rain-catching and saw a pod of dolphins cutting through the water abreast the ship. Dolphins were a good omen. Perhaps Korsin had favored his offering, after all.

The dolphins must have taken up station during the night. That explained Ysel and the other Votary children—they had mistaken a dolphin for a mermaid.

Zhayim sat on his barrel and watched the dolphins dart along and around the ship. They stayed beside *Seahorse* all day. Another pod joined them in the late morning. Another in the afternoon.

Man and dolphin ran ahead of the storm, which continued to draw on, slowly gaining ground. *Seahorse* had every sail out and skipped over the water as fast as she could. Her sails were as fat with wind as an ogre with ale.

Holst stationed a double watch in the high nest, and all of the crew eyed the sea with trepidation, fearing the appearance of sails on the horizon. The ship’s mage, the portly diviner Sestin, cast his fish bones and shells, divined his portents, and spoke his tidings to Holst. The captain received them with a nod and studied the storm and surrounding sea through his spyglass. His red face was troubled.

After nightfall, the Votary children assembled around Zhayim. There was eagerness in their eyes.

“Do you think I will see Lissa again tonight?” Ysel said.

Zhayim looked at Nole, who only smiled.

“Perhaps,” Zhayim said. “But she has her own affairs to mind. Would you like to hear another story?”

“About Lissa?”

“No. About someone else.”

Ysel looked disappointed but the rest of the children nodded with excitement.

Zhayim told them the story of the albatross and the whale, their unlikely friendship, and how each saved the other from pirates. After he had finished, the younger children clapped. Nole asked an older boy to see the rest back to their rooms while he remained behind with Zhayim.

“That story did not end sadly,” he said.

Zhayim smiled. “I changed the ending for the children. I did not want them to have difficult dreams. They seem . . . impressionable.”

“Impressionable?”

“They believed Lissa’s story to be real.”

“Belief is a powerful thing,” Nole said. “Belief makes truth, this the Prophet teaches.”

Zhayim thought the Prophet a fool but did not say as much. “Beliefs are beliefs, Nole. Sometimes they are true, sometimes not. But they never change anything. You could not change seawater to drinking water through belief, could you?”

“If one’s belief was strong enough. You think otherwise?”

Zhayim raised his eyebrows. “I live in the world, Nole. Of course I think otherwise.”

“Then you are mistaken,” Nole said with certainty. “And I pity you. You think the Far Shore a wilderness, yes?”

Zhayim nodded, surprised that Nole knew it to be jungle.

“Perhaps it was, but we are remaking it as we approach. That is why we gather in prayer. By the time we arrive, it will be the new world that was foreseen by Jahlal.”

Zhayim could not fathom the assuredness in the young man’s tone. He did not see any point in offending Nole, so he asked only, “And if it is not?”

Nole smiled indulgently, as if Zhayim were a child.

“It will be. Belief is transformative, so teaches the Prophet.”

Zhayim shook his head, dumbfounded. “Nole, you know that Ysel did not see a mermaid last night, yes? She saw a dolphin.”

Nole looked out over the sea.

“Possibly.” He rose and smiled. “But she believes otherwise. Good eve, spinner.”

“Good eve.”

Zhayim turned Nole’s words over in his mind and did not sleep for some hours. He watched the thunder and lightning in the west and marveled at the Votaries’ credulity. They thought the world behind them ending, and the world before them being newly made.

When he finally slept, he dreamed that he could speak the language of dolphins. He learned that those beside *Seahorse* were led by a dolphin named Akka. They told him they were following the Votaries to the new world. He asked them about the storm in the west. They told him that it was not a storm, that it was the end of the old world and the Votaries had caused it.

Zhayim told the dolphins that they spun a good story.

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He awoke after dawn, pleased that he had not been awakened by Ysel shouting during the night about seeing an albatross or a whale. He looked west and saw the storm had gained ground and intensity. The leading clouds roiled and churned violently, chewing up the sky. Lightning tore across the heavens.

The crew worked throughout the day in funereal silence, tense about the storm, the sea, pirates. Holst stared through his glass. The circles under his eyes could have been drawn in charcoal. The Votaries emerged from their quarters to face away from the storm, toward their new world, and pray.

Zhayim watched, and thought, and worried.

That night, Nole and the rest of the children came to him for another story. Kleegan and the captain watched them from the aftercastle, their mouths hard.

Zhayim looked into the faces of the children and put everything from his mind but the story. It would be his last to the Votaries before he had to make another offering to Korsin. He intended to make that offering something special and to convince Foambeard to quell the storm. If the storm hit them, he feared what the crew might do to the Votaries, to the children, and he had stood by too often in the past while children suffered.

He had intended to tell of the noble sea turtle and the evil shark but instead invented a new story inspired by his dolphin dream. He would tell it first to the children and perfect it in the first telling, then offer it to Korsin on the morrow.

Improvising as he went, he told the children of Akka the talking dolphin and how Akka and his fellow dolphins, like the Votaries, were swimming over the sea to the new world. He told them how Akka outsmarted evil sharks, foiled the sea hag, and, in the end, found the new world.

The children listened, rapt, smiling. When he finished, they clapped. Many stood on their tip-toes to look out over the gunwales at the throng of dolphins that still trailed *Seahorse*.

“I see Akka!” Ysel said, and Zhayim smiled.

“Thank you,” Nole said to him, and the Votaries returned to the forecastle.

The leading clouds of the storm caught them the next day. A drizzle wet the deck. Thunder rumbled, promising a heavier downfall to come. The seas furrowed and *Seahorse* rose and fell on the waves. The crew put safety lines across the deck.

The dolphins kept vigil to starboard, somberly chirping over the thunder from time to time. The Votary children waved to them, laughed at them, and seemed more comfortable on the sea.

Zhayim wrapped himself in his sodden canvas blanket, sheltered as best he could from the wind, and worked on his offering. He needed to make Korsin hear.

Members of the crew strode past throughout the day. Some only stared, but he saw the fear and anger behind their eyes.

By sunset the drizzle had turned to full-on rain and much of the sky was black. A noticeable border separated the stormfront from the otherwise clear skies before *Seahorse*. It was like the collision of two worlds.

Rumbles of thunder shook the deck and lightning tore through the sky. The crew gathered around him earnestly. Despite their contempt for him, they needed him now, needed Korsin to hear him.

“Tell a good one, spinner,” they said.

Lighting the twelve shell candles took time, and keeping them stable in the rolling seas proved difficult, but eventually it was done.

Zhayim knew that he had to placate man and god. He nodded to himself, spoke the opening invocation, and spun his story.

He told them of Akka the dolphin and his quest for a new world. Akka led his pod before the storm that would end the world, overcame sharks with his cleverness, waterspouts with

his speed, and the evil sea hag Dirсила with his courage, to arrive, finally, safe in port at the new world.

“Built of belief, Akka’s new world sheltered and sustained them in happiness for the rest of their lives.”

When he pronounced the last word, the rain ceased. Gray clouds still roofed the sky but the storm had abated, at least for the moment.

Eyes widened. Men looked at one another in shock. Zhayim held his breath and remained perfectly still, afraid to move, afraid to break whatever spell he’d wrought.

The crew looked at him, at the sky. Smiles split their faces.

Zhayim exhaled. He could not contain his own grin.

“Well told, spinner!”

“Foambeard heard you and that’s sure.”

Even Captain Holst’s perpetually somber face offered a hint of approval. Zhayim enjoyed the moment, the accomplishment.

The shouts of the crewmen in the high nest turned the mood on its head.

“Ship aft! She’s got no colors!”

The smiles vanished and men whirled around to look aft.

The moment of peace Zhayim had crafted with his story ended with a roll of thunder. A vein of lightning split the sky and silhouetted a three-mast caravel bearing toward them across the waves. Zhayim saw what the spotter had already announced: no colors flew from her mast.

She was a pirate vessel.

“Get the sails up!” Kleegan shouted, and started shoving the men to their posts. “At it, dogs! At it for your lives!”

Zhayim stared, dumbfounded, his mood going from crest to trough in a heartbeat. Korsin had stopped the rain only to visit pirates upon them. The god must have been laughing at his joke in his weedy hell.

Zhayim clenched his feeble fist and cursed the god, loud and long, while the crew scrambled into the rigging and unfurled the sails. Neem the quartermaster and three others dashed into the aftcastle and emerged with three large wooden sea chests. They threw them open to reveal a pile of blades.

“Arm as you can!” Neem shouted.

Sailors dashed by as their duties allowed and received their cutlasses. Zhayim cursed his inability to grip a hilt. He knew how to use a sword well enough.

Nole, wide eyed, emerged from the forecastle and maneuvered his way through the activity on deck.

“What is happening?”

“Pirates out of Hellhole or the Pit,” Zhayim said and pointed aft.

“Pirates?” Nole said.

“Yes.”

Zhayim grabbed the young man’s shoulder as best he could with his thumbless hand.

“If they catch us, Nole, you must fight. Tell the rest of them. Do not be taken.”

Nole shook his head, pulled back from Zhayim.

“No. No. We do not use force. The Prophet teaches only peace.”

Nole slipped from Zhayim’s grasp. Zhayim tried to clutch his shirt, failed.

“Dammit, boy! I know what they will do to you, to the children, to the girls. I have seen it. You must fight.”

“We cannot. Our faith does not allow it.”

Zhayim choked on his frustration.

“Then believe with all of your being that the pirates won’t catch us! Because if they do . . .”

Nole stared at him for a moment, then spun around and ran back to the forecastle. Zhayim waited in vain for the adults among the Votaries to emerge from the forecastle and collect a weapon. They never did. He cursed them, shouted, “Fight, in the name of the gods!”

Thunder boomed and the rain fell anew, harder than before. His story had not even brought them much of a reprieve from the storm.

Holst and Kleegan moved among the crew, shouting orders, threats, and encouragement. Zhayim echoed the curses and threats, though it was not his place. He knew what would befall them if pirates took the ship.

“Move, you sons of whores! Tie that off! Cut it! Move, move!”

The pirate ship drew closer by the moment. Zhayim, unable to do anything other than shout, stayed out of the way and listened to his heart gong in his ears.

The sails unfurled, filled with wind, and *Seaborse* lurched into motion across the choppy sea.

Seahorse lost ground for a few moments more then held her distance, then opened some space. A cheer went up from the crew. The dolphins echoed it with clicks and squeals. Zhayim let himself believe they would outpace the pirates.

A series of booms from the pirate vessel carried across the water and Kleegan shouted.

“Flamelings!”

Zhayim cursed.

Six thin lines of fire traced a glowing arc through the sky between the pirate vessel and *Seahorse*. At the front of the glowing trails flew half a dozen flamelings, shitting fire. The cackling of their mad laughter was audible even over the wind.

Zhayim knew, then.

The pirates had an elementalist aboard, and magical cannons.

Seahorse had only a diviner.

The ship was doomed.

The flamelings rode the propulsion of the cannons over the sea and steered a course for *Seahorse's* sails. All of them struck the canvas, giggling maniacally, and the mainsail, topsail, and spritsail went up in flames. The flamelings burned themselves out in an orgy of fire but they had done damage enough.

Men scrambled madly out of the rigging and down the mast. Two fell and hit the deck hard. Neither moved, and Zhayim did not know if they were unconscious or dead. The spotters in the high nest screamed, helpless, as the flames burned around them. The rain was not enough to put it out.

A shower of embers and flaming ropes fell around Zhayim. Trapped by his chain under the burning sails, he could do nothing but wait to die.

“Arms for every man!” Neem shouted, as *Seahorse* lost its wind and slowed.

Kleegan prowled the decks, a cutlass clutched in his hands.

“Now we’re down to it, lads! Give them hell and fight for your lives! Your very lives!”

Zhayim knew *Seahorse's* crew would fight. And he knew they would die. He had seen it before. Crossbow bolts would fall as thick as the rain. The pirates would lower a boarding ramp and storm aboard. Men would scream, shout, bleed, and die. And in the end, the pirates would have the ship.

Zhayim hoped the flames reached him before the pirates did.

Even as the thought crossed his mind, the rain turned to a downpour and quenched the flames.

Korsin was still laughing.

Zhayim stared at the forecandle doors, still closed. He imagined Nole and the Votaries within, praying, *believing* they would be safe.

He knew better. The world dealt harshly with belief. The Votaries would soon learn it.

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The bolts dropped ten men before the grapnels hit the gunwales, the boarding ramp fell, and the pirates swarmed aboard. Blades, shouts, and screams rose into the night air. Blood slicked the decks. Zhayim tried to choke a passing pirate with his chain, lost his grip, and was knocked unconscious with the hilt of a cutlass.

Daylight, rain, and thunder awakened him some hours later. Ropes bound him at arms and elbows. He felt like a feast pig, trussed and waiting to die. The smell of smoke filled his nostrils. The sound of crying filled his ears. He opened his eyes to find himself aboard the pirate caravel.

Dark-eyed pirates moved purposefully about the deck. Their crimson sashes, swarthy skin, and high colored shirts told Zhayim they hailed originally from the Leenash Isles and harbored in Hellhole, told him, too, that they were killers. The corsairs of Leenash were notorious even among other pirates.

Barrels, crates, and sacks—the stores and cargo from aboard *Seahorse*—lay scattered in a disorganized heap over the deck. Crew worked in tandems to heave it and move it below.

“Get it below and out of the rain before the blow hits us full force,” shouted a muscular, tanned pirate in a leather jack. A cutlass hung from his belt. Zhayim assumed him to be the First Mate. He noticed that Zhayim was awake and leered at him.

The Votary children sat in a row beside Zhayim. Sobs shook Ysle and Lorm. Others looked too dazed to cry. Nole sat immediately to Zhayim’s right, his eyes on his feet. All the children had manacles about their ankles and a chain ran through all of their iron rings, linking them all together.

Zhayim’s mouth went dry. He had told them to fight, hadn’t he? Told them they should not be taken.

Black smoke poured into the sky from the remains of *Seahorse*. She burned a short crossbow shot to starboard. Zhayim knew the pirates would have executed every adult

member of the crew and the children's parents. They had saved the children to sell in Hellhole's slave market. And they had saved Zhayim to provide them with sport. He knew what would be his fate.

"Nole . . ."

Black boots stopped before Zhayim. He looked up into the scarred, bearded face of the ship's captain. The man's eyes looked as hollow as empty barrels. He eyed Zhayim's hand, his severed wrist, and spat at his feet.

"You shoulda taken the gallows, yeah? Worse for you."

Some of the crew nearby, heaving boxes and hefting sacks, chuckled. Thunder rumbled and the First Mate ordered the men to load the spoils more quickly.

"I was just the spinner," Zhayim said. "Bought out of the pens in Dineen."

The captain smiled coldly. One of his front teeth was gone.

"Well, you came a long way from Dineen just to breathe the sea. You know the way it goes, yeah?"

Zhayim did know the way it would go. Captured pirates were punished on land with amputation or death, their choice. Those who elected amputation and survived, if caught at sea again by the fellows, were punished again, by being weighted and dipped.

"Ain't got much time before the full force of that storm hits. You'll be breathin' Korsin's air ere that, yeah? You make it a good show for the men or I'll pull you back in and feed you to sharks. Yeah?"

Zhayim swallowed the fist forming in his throat.

"Piss off."

The Captain stared down at him a moment, turned, and walked away, chuckling.

"Get the swag below and set up for a dip," he shouted to the crew. "On the doublequick, now!"

The crew hooted and laughed.

A lifetime of regrets rushed through Zhayim's mind. He had done little of worth in forty summers of life. He'd had opportunities, lots of them, but let them all pass.

Beside him, Nole shifted.

"We prayed to the Prophet for safety, spinner. We *believed* we would be safe. I do not understand."

Zhayim could not look at him. "I know."

The crew hurried at their tasks. *Seaborse* sank below the waves. Zhayim swore he heard the dolphins chirping and clicking out in the water.

Nole asked, "What did he mean by 'dip?'"

Zhayim cleared his throat. "They will throw me overboard and gradually add weights to me until I go under for good. If I let myself drown easy, they will pull me back up and . . . do worse."

Nole said nothing for a time, then, "I am sorry, spinner."

Zhayim nodded, though he knew that his fate would be much more forgiving than Nole and the children's. He looked up from his despair, at Ysel, Lorm, the rest. They were sobbing. He made up his mind. He could not stand by again while children suffered.

He leaned toward Nole and spoke softly, so only Nole could hear.

"You cannot let them take you back to Hellhole, Nole."

Nole swallowed, looked around at the crew.

"They said they will not hurt us if we do as they say."

Zhayim seized Nole with his eyes.

"They are lying. They just want you to stay quiet until they can get you to port. They will sell you, all of you, and . . . I've seen what happens to children after that. Believe what I say, Nole."

Nole looked him in the face, his eyes red-rimmed, his long hair flattened against his scalp. Zhayim fought back his own tears.

"Please believe me, Nole."

Nole stared at him, blinked, looked away, looked back, nodded. "I do believe you."

Zhayim felt a hundredweight lifted off his back.

"Good. Very good. There is only one way to prevent them from taking you back. Do you understand?"

Nole looked at him, puzzled, his brow furrowed.

Zhayim looked at the children, at Nole. "Do you understand, Nole?"

Realization dawned. Nole's eyes widened. He looked to the children, crying, hurt, terrified. He chewed his lower lip. Zhayim saw the doubt in him.

"It is worse than you can imagine," he said. "Nole, it is worse. Did you see what they did to your parents? To the crew?"

Nole nodded. Zhayim knew the Leenash pirates would have cut throats and cast them over the side.

“It will be worse in Hellhole. It will be prolonged. Do not let it happen, Nole. You must not. I must not.”

Nole looked at his hands, closed his eyes, opened them, looked at the children, inhaled.

Zhayim waited. He could do nothing else, but Nole and every child had to believe what he would tell them or it would not work. Surprise was their only hope. If anyone hesitated, even for a moment, it would fail.

Nole finally looked up at him and nodded. His voice was a whisper.

“I understand. But how?”

“The water. When they are all watching me. I will call to you, to them.”

Nole shook his head and Zhayim saw the fear in his eyes. “They cannot swim. They are terrified of the sea.”

“I know. But I will tell them a story.”

“A story?”

Zhayim nodded. He did not have much time.

“Children, listen to me. Children. Make them hear me, Nole.”

“Listen to him,” Nole said.

Some of the older children comforted the younger and all of them looked up at him through tear-stained eyes. He felt a flutter in his gut. He was not sure he was doing the right thing. He believed he was, but how could he know?

He reminded himself of the tortures he had seen in Hellhole and steeled himself.

A low roll of thunder sounded and the patter of rain masked his tale from the crew. Korsin granted him that, at least. He did not waste words on the niceties of storytelling. He only needed them to believe the core of the tale.

“Do you remember how I told you of Akka the dolphin?” he said.

A couple of the children nodded. The rest merely stared.

“I did not tell you everything about Akka,” he said. “It is Akka and his kin who swam beside *Searhorse*, and Akka and his kin who swim out there right now.”

Ysel and Lorm craned their necks and looked out over the water.

“Akka came to me in a dream and told me his purpose. He had not come to follow you to the new world. I misunderstood him. He said something else.”

The children looked at him, anticipation in their eyes.

“What did he say?” Ysel said.

Zhayim smiled. “He said he had come to *guide* you to the new world. He is your guide, sent by the Prophet, and he is waiting for you to come to him. The new world is not over the sea at the Far Shore. It is under the sea. Right here.”

He almost told them their parents awaited them there, but could not bring himself to do it.

“In the water?” Lorm said, nervousness in his tone.

“Yes. It is not to be feared. He will lead you to the new world,” Zhayim said. “This one is ending, children. We must hurry. Akka is waiting.”

“How can we get to Akka, spinner?” Nole said, playing his part.

“I will go into the water first,” Zhayim said. “These pirates think to tie me with ropes and weights but Akka will chew them off of me. I will call for you when the new world is ready. When I do, you must stand together, run to the side of the ship, and jump into the water. All of you at once. Do you understand?”

He saw skepticism in some of the children’s eyes.

The thunder died down, the rain slowed, and by all the gods he heard the dolphins clicking in the water. The children’s eyes widened.

“There!” Zhayim said. “He is calling to us. Do you hear him?”

They nodded, wonder in their expressions.

“Remember, when I call for you, come running and jump straight in. Akka will take you to the next world.”

“The new world,” Lorm said. He looked past Zhayim with wide eyes, to the sea, to the sky.

“The new world.” Zhayim agreed with a nod. He shared a look with Nole.

The pirates came for him, cut him loose from his bonds. They would replace them with different bonds soon enough.

“Listen for the call,” he said to the children.

“We will,” said Nole, his voice tight.

“We believe you, spinner,” said Ysel.

“Shut your hatches, all of you,” one of the crewmen said, pulling Zhayim to his feet.

The pirates put their knives to his back and walked him to the rail at mid-ship where four lines of fine rope awaited him. Three were tied to rusty dinghy anchors; one, the retrieval line, was tied off to the railing.

Zhayim barely heard the chuckles, the taunts, the curses from the rest of the crew. He stared out onto the rough water. It looked as black as the sky. Thunder rumbled. A few dolphin fins broke the surface and he smiled.

“Hello, Akka,” he whispered.

“Make it quick!” shouted the First Mate. “Storm’s coming in hard.”

Zhayim looked up at the sky, knowing he was soon to see it no more. The roiling, black mass of clouds looked like nothing he had ever seen. The sky behind the front looked like a vat of pitch.

“It’s not a storm,” he said, and meant it.

“You say something, dead man?” the crewman tying ropes around his waist said.

Zhayim looked at the man, at all of them, and spoke loud enough for Nole and the children to hear.

“It is not a storm. It’s the world’s end and it’s taking you down as sure as these weights will me.”

The crewman attaching the weights sneered and punched him hard in the stomach. The rest laughed. Zhayim doubled over, coughing.

“Quick, now,” said the First Mate. “A dip for this dog!”

The crew hooted affirmation.

The crewman beside Zhayim jerked him upright and finished tying the fourth line around his waist. He tested each line with a yank, pulling Zhayim off balance.

“All tight, Captain,” the crewman shouted back to the Captain.

“Remember what I told you,” the captain called to Zhayim. “Now, over with him.”

The crew cheered as two crewmen seized him by his biceps and threw him without ceremony over the gunwale. When he hit the water, the impact and cold knocked the breath from him. He felt like a vise had closed on his chest. Instinct took over. He wanted air, needed it. He righted himself and came up, gasping.

The ship was a bobbing wall of wood before him. The sky a roof of black. The water stung his eyes.

The pirates, all of them gathered at the side or on the forecastle, jeered, laughed, and pointed.

“Swim, boy!”

The four lines attached to Zhayim’s waist looked like umbilicals, stretching back up to the weights on the deck. The crew began to chant.

“A weight! A weight! A weight!”

A crewman hefted a weight, held it over his head to the cheers of his fellows, and cast it into the sea. It hit the water, sank below the waves, and jerked Zhayim under. It felt as if it were a hundredweight. He kicked his legs, swam for his life, and broached the surface.

“Huzzah!” shouted the crew.

The weight dragged on Zhayim. His arms burned. His legs felt like lead. He looked up at the grinning faces, the empty eyes. Something bumped into him and he gave a shout of surprise.

A dolphin. They were all around him. He was losing strength. He gulped air, prepared to shout to the children, but the crewman lifted another anchor and the rest of the crew chanted:

“A weight! A weight!”

He would not be heard over the shouts. He imagined Nole readying the children, waiting for him to call.

The crewman threw the anchor into the water. Zhayim braced himself but it did no good. The weight pulled him under and took him down the full length of the slack in the rope still attached to the third anchor back on the boat.

He struggled to swim upward, kicked, pulled at the water with his arms. He could not make any progress. His lungs burned. Exhaustion ate at his muscles. He strained, blew out the little air left in his lungs, kicked, and moved up.

He broke the surface, gasping, his entire body on fire with fatigue.

The crew cheered.

Zhayim gasped, caught as much breath as he could, and shouted, “Now is the time! Now, children!”

He saw a few of the pirates turn around in surprise before the two anchors pulled him back under. He saw forms about him, dolphins, and waited for a splash that did not come.

Despair gripped him and he tried to swim up but his body would not answer. Thoughts raced through his mind, images from Hellhole, from his childhood, from the days of his life before he had ever taken to sea.

A dolphin bumped into him. He could hear them clicking, squealing, and chirping at one another all around him.

The children hit the water as one.

They sank like stones, legs kicking, arms flailing, all of them attached together by the chain that would drown them in the sea but save them from hell. The dolphins chirped and swam away from Zhayim, toward the children.

Zhayim saw spots in the water, little flashes of orange like torches. His body was dying for lack of air.

The dolphins swam a circle around the sinking children and the manacles opened. The chain sank while each of the children, freed, took hold of a dolphin's dorsal fin.

The dolphins did not swim for the surface but down toward the depths.

Zhayim looked down and saw a glowing doorway shimmering below. Light poured out of it—sunlight. He thought at first that Akka and the dolphins were carrying the children to the new world but realized he was delusional. He was dying, seeing spots, inventing images.

He had just told them a story, only a story.

But he could not take his eyes from them.

The dolphins carried their riders ever deeper, away from Zhayim, away from the pirates, away from the old world.

Zhayim, his lungs ablaze, could only watch. He would have swum for the bottom himself, but two lines still attached him to the pirate vessel.

Among the children he saw Nole in the lead, one hand on a dolphin, legs kicking him ever deeper into the sea, toward the light. Nole and the children swam down, down. Zhayim watched them go, more and more spots dotting his field of vision.

Words surfaced in his air-deprived brain.

Belief is transformative, so teaches the Prophet.

We believe you, spinner.

Zhayim wanted to believe, too.

Nole, on his dolphin, in the lead, near the lights, reached out a hand for the glowing doorway. He looked back toward Zhayim and smiled, his eyes alight..

Zhayim smiled in answer and his burning lungs acted of their own accord, gulping for air.
Everything went quiet and soft, like falling asleep.