

The Call of the Sirens – Second Entry

Curse of the Sea Witch

Our boat was rocking, only slightly, gently – lulling our souls in its metronomic calm. It was as if it felt our presence after all this time; the tension and anxiety building up to the trip, and was loathe to jolt ever so suddenly, lest it blaze the kindling fears and have us turn it back, locked up to and condemned to further years of inaction. A boat needs to sail just as much as sailors do.

We were all sitting below deck; my sister curled up on the little cushioned alcove that my dad fitted in to the pointed helm – spongy leather base cluttered with bohemian cushions from around the globe - reading one of her three books that she packed for the voyage, and my mother had her earphones in – the tinny quality disclosing what she was listening to - whilst shuffling listlessly through the supplies, haphazardly deciding what dinner should be today.

I was leaning against the window, only moments ago, and staring out at the expanse that the circular portal to the outside offered, the silver plated rim a stage for hypnotic reflected crystal ripples. I could feel the soothing warmth stroking at my flesh, and toasting my jumper. I loved days like this, even though my mother and father used to complain a lot, initially, whenever they happened... before fully embracing them.

It was always good to preserve fuel as and when, even if you had much more than needed, it could always be stored and used for the next trip. So, when the weather was calm, the water was still, the clouds were distant memories, and the sun ruled all from above to below, we often allowed the boat, and ourselves, to just *be*. No wind in the sails, no fuel to propel, no direction to aim for... just float – placidly bobbing up and down and up and down - and rest, and enjoy the inactivity. Sometimes we'd lounge above deck, sometimes play cards, sometimes they'd have a beer or three – a little pocket of bliss, which were not often offered in plenitude at sea.

The sky was a solid bright cerulean, and the water, usually a darker blue adopted this jovial hue, with only the glistening streak of sunshine to caress the surface as a kindness to differentiate. They blended in to one another almost seamlessly, ocean and ozone, knit masterfully by the indistinguishable horizon. But, in all, the scene was so still – void of fellow ships, peeking land and even lacking any hint of the raked, timorous stratus clouds that often swept swift sheets of silent shadow across the sleeping surface - that should I wish to entertain the notion, I could half convince myself the window was but the glass cover of a painting.

I could feel my eyelids growing heavy as the ocean rocked me, but not wanting to mess up my sleeping pattern (night at sea can be very boring, or creepy), I decided to go above deck and write, well, *this*.

We'd set to sail three days ago, and even though it has been over three years since we had been on a boat, let alone sailing as a family, it's strange just how familiar it all felt – natural. My centre of balance shifting and anchoring as and when so that walking on tipping deck was as easy as level cement, stepping over this, ducking under that, leaning in my favourite position as if the little nook was made for my body, and avoiding bare contact with the steel rails in which the sun happily stored its heat.

When the day we set out arrived, there were little capillary waves of anxiety lapping over my sands of excitement, each fresh flow whispering that I may have forgotten a few of the jobs. The old saying of never forgetting to ride a bike doesn't quite translate here. Yet, as soon as I was on deck, and we did the pre-voyage checks, my muscles and mind seemed to work in perfect unity, and without actively thinking, I was ticking off the checklist that had been my standard on all previous journeys and jobs.

It seemed my mother and sister were in much of the same mind-set, too. Though, it got to a point when we had all finished our third check (mum's rule) which is when we realised we'd never actually discussed who would take over the duties my father would tend to oversee. He, and my mother, would opt for the more important tasks, even though my sister and I had been capable of doing these for a few years.

But, as we stood there staring at one another, it was as if the remaining tasks had been sucked in to a gaping whirlpool, as had our voices, which was chaotically spinning and whipping them about, before expelling them from its pointed grasp. We as a family plucked up whatever we could salvage until, between us, even his duties were ticked. My mother didn't have to say anything. No, "Peter, can you do X", or "Mel, if you can just Y", which I suppose boded well – even though we'd lost an imperative part of our crew, family, and heart, the remaining commanded a working synergy – "lose an oar, use your hand."

Afterwards, all my mother said was, "Step by step, babies. Step by step." There was a sadness to it, but still, even the bittersweet smile she offered us, clearly proud of how we did, was the happiest I'd seen her in a long time, and that was before we even set off.

Before long, we had some of the others who were currently docked giving us last minute supplies, and gathering to wave us off. I guess it was momentous that my family were back at sea. And so, we returned waves and smiles, as the boat gulped thirstily further in to the ocean, and the land diminished and faded until it was but a speck, and then, *poof*. We were once again seaborne, and it felt *fantastic*.

The weather has been kind, and I believe were it not, my mother may have capitalised on another reason to delay. I suppose that's a kindness, the fact that from waving goodbyes, to rocking waves, there's been little to nibble at her confidence, and so, as there is not much else to say, I'd like to take this time to tell you about one of the stories that spooked me, ever since I was a hatchling.

The Curse of the Sea Witch

The journey of *The Tiderider* thus far has been fruitful, the ship had docked and stocked, traded and treaded onto the next. They had made good time, with the easterly wind aiding their voyage to such an extent, that they arrived at their last port more than a day before schedule. The captain procured a whole keg at the cost of twelve bolts of bleached wool – a steal by anyone's measure, especially considering they were permitted to keep the barrel - and the crew were soon rolling the oaken delight on to the ship, eagerly ready to crack the tab and drink as much as it could pour.

It was not often they were allowed to consume what they loaded in to the cargo, but if the captain insisted, who were they to refuse? Drunk and bawdy, the captain gathered them together in the night – hearing the hustle and bustle of chatter in the taverns that lined the docks, as well as the chimes and bells clanging in the wind that raced them here – and with high spirits and slurred words, bid them cheers to good fortune.

As they drank and bet and gloated over accolades and feats - the single men boasting about attention they had from the women in their cups; the newer sailor of the crew, a young lad, showing off an emerald ring he won in a gamble with a hag; the gruff first mate challenging the others to arm wrestles for their next day's meat - the crew were offered the choice to dock an extra day, or try to harness the favourable winds whilst they blew.

With their homebound partners in mind – the last time they saw them being a month before, standing on the docks, weeping and waving wary farewells – they chose to travel a day sooner, in the hopes they could return a day earlier.

But, as every sailor knows, fortune is never a guarantee, and its supply could be torn from your grasp within a second. It seemed for this crew, not only had their fortune run dry, but had evaporated completely.

The seaborne gusts that aided their journey remained at the docks; their pace slowed significantly without the billowing sails, and days passed by with little event. After three nights of queer stillness, as superstition flies, those on board couldn't help but entertain the thought something had gone horribly wrong.

The wet slapping sound was all that could be heard as the stem crept, slowly, through the night. The ship barely disturbed the water enough to leave a wake spreading behind. Even if it did, the white foam of disruption would be difficult to see.

The darkness was heavy and pressing. It clawed from every perceivable corner and angle, as well as those imperceptible, as if wishing to devour the lone spluttering lamps and lanterns on board. In the distance, the moon was suffocated and strangled by a crusade of dark and angry clouds – heavy bulks with reaching, wispy pointed palls jagging out like a dark iron mace – that sailed across the sky with mocking ease. Each black mammoth was limned with a silvery nimbus, but even that kindness of natural light did little to guide their way.

Here and there, freckled stars glimmered bravely, but their glow was so lustreless – like guttering candles in a prison chamber – that they seemed almost nervous, timid, at such an onslaught of night. They seemed to adopt a sickly tincture, pallid and glaucous.

Not only did these orbs of usual beauty offer little help in sight on sea, but for the life of them, no-one on board could distinguish what constellation clung above them so nervously. It was common, when compass failed and trajectory marred in to obscurity, for one to realign themselves using cosmic cartography, referring to the mysterious sky above and correcting their progress – so much so that most sailors were nigh on moonlighting as astronomers, but, textbooks and experience failed all. Lands there were none, and direction they had not.

The uneasiness of the crew was kindling ever brighter each day. The easterlies that augmented their flight until last port were now only a distant memory – some luck they once had – and in their stead, were dying zephyrs that only licked at their flesh, and ever so slightly tousled their hair. A fraction of what they'd need to catch within their sails and skitter across the surface. They assumed a wind was whipping up further where the clouds gathered and raced across the unsailable expanse, but should they head in that direction, hoping to capitalise on it, they could be placing themselves in the yawning of a storm. They would take inaction over that. Though, *The Tiderider* had been tested plenty of times before, it was better to wait and deduce the mood and hostility of them before they found themselves willingly heading in to a squall.

So, they set up a constant watch, allowing a ribbon of hope to flutter, but by the next day, even the clouds were stolen, inexplicably, from their sight, leaving *nothing*.

The water all around them was as inky black as oil, and because of the stilled weather, they may as well have been travelling through such a substance. They had been stuck in this predicament, now, for just over a week – it felt like being out in the deathly doldrums – a sailor's nightmare with time and life stood still – but without the merciless heat.

Here, wherever they were, the days were chilly, the nights were bitter – were anyone to sit still for longer than five or so minutes, their body would be shaking and shuddering as if icy wraiths swooped by and rattled them from within.

When the sun broke the stretched, pitchy night, and they woke from their shallow sleep to dormant weather, they would dutifully poke out their oars, and row, leaving little time for leisure. Yet, each time the paddles punched at the water, offering respite to the gnawing silence, they only seemed to be heading further in to this uncharted void.

By their mapping, they should have reached land four days ago, perhaps five – it was a journey most on board had made before, they followed the co-ordinates and compass as they always did, so the fact that land was shying away, revealing no hint of its existence, had most of the crew nonplussed. Ale and taverns, they should be enjoying, not this icy stillness.

“The lands’ve sunk,” the newer sailor who won the emerald ring at their last port cried out, he having only made weeklong journeys for trading - prior to his attendance on *The Tiderider* - from near border to border with land always but a day within sight. “And the ships and everything we knew! Sunk’n’lost!” He turned to see others staring up at him above their cups and cards, each with a countenance steeped in melancholy and orange flame, and even those in evidence who didn’t bother lifting their heads were listening. But they didn’t want to pay heed – they had their own doubts to drown. “All at’s left is *this*,” he stated, sweeping his arm to indicate the enclosing black walls all around, so close and edifying that ‘distance’ was a subjective term, and could have rightfully be claimed as close as port and starboard.

“We’ve been lost a’fore,” grunted another, swilling the dark liquid in his crystal mug. He hoped that finishing this ale would still his nerves, and didn’t need any such hysterics and dramatics to hinder the process. “The only thing here sunk is your common sense, Scrub.”

Usually, such a remark would ignite a furore of taunting laughter – especially aimed at a green sailor - but after a week of nothing, and even those tested by violent storms and vapid seas were growing uneasy at their circumstance, and so, the humour was bailed from the rejoinder. “Cap in’t worried, none. So neither’nt you be.”

The young sailor grumbled something nonsensical under his breath, before taking to his feet, and walking with a solid *thud, thud, thud* across the wooden decking, heading to the helm, and roosting there. Fumbling with his prized jewellery – probably worth more than he’d made in an entire year as a short-distance trader - he peered out in to the horizon of shadow, which may as well have rested on the tip of his nose.

In truth, the Captain *was* worried. He knew that he couldn’t show it, as it was common knowledge that a ship, like anything, was only peaceable and productive as those in rule, but he had been locked in his cabin day in and day out, pouring over maps, and statements, and trying to sleuth where, exactly, they went wrong.

Had they marked the calendar incorrectly, meaning they skipped land completely and were dead set in the middle of- *No*, he thought, *if that were the case we would have at least seen a speck of it during the Wednesday and Thursday*. But it didn’t make sense, none whatsoever. *Perhaps we- no, a popular route*, he parried his own thought, *no chance of sailing past there without spotting another vessel. Possible that- no*. Any reason, any logic, any understanding faltered and fizzled.

There was little he could understand, veteran as he was, and so he ensured the men were well fed, though supplies were dwindling, having planned restocking victuals at their next port; well-watered from the near empty ale, drunk men were oft sated men; and most importantly, was careful to exhibit a demeanour and disposition of a calm, relaxed and jovial nature... drowning the tidal anxiety within.

Three more days and nights passed, and they rowed east, hoping to find *some* land in which they could dock and catch their bearings, but nothing. Not even a hint. Just flat sea, muted winds, pale sun and heavy nights. All they could do was wake, row, sleep, hope and repeat.

Being lost at sea was not uncommon, especially back then, but usually there would be reason; furious waves that waylaid your journey, or approaching storms that forced you to turn around, keep a day between you and it, before resuming the course. But, for this, it seemed as if they

just simply entered in to a whole new realm, in which nothing existed but them, their ship, and their doubts.

On the fifteenth day of listless, windless, marginal progress, as the captain strolled across the deck, sharing a swig each of his aged rum with the crew, he began to notice that they were shooting glances with one another – deadly as cannons - through furrowed brows and set, rigid mouths. He disliked that. It was a crew of eleven men, not including him, and three of them had sailed under him for the best part of his seafaring career – their allegiance would never be in question, but the others... if a captain was to survive a mutiny, it was highly likely he'd never sail again.

The next day, he decided to take action.

In an attempt to raise spirits, he decided to introduce a competition. Calling all crew to the main deck, and staring upon their curious faces, wondering which visage masked thoughts of betrayal. To them, he proffered his heirloom rod. Gilded with golden decoration, it was, and passed down within his family.

"The fish swarm to this," the captain declared with a confident smile, "knowing it is their privilege to be caught upon its hook." He handed it to them to pass around, and practice their casts as he spoke. The young sailor eyed it greedily, and when it was his turn to hold it, he traced his hand across the precious patterns – further avarice burning within. "In my life, I've caught four record sized carp with her, and my father, my grandfather, my great grandfather, as far back as our history is written, each have used that very rod to reel in prize catches on our journeys."

He went on to describe the rules of the competition. Each man was to be allowed an hour of fishing per day. They would measure their catches, weigh them, and then cook them. Whoever caught the biggest fish would be exempt from rowing duties the following day. They would also be allowed a celebratory tot of rum, and a larger portion of salted pork and hardened bread, as well as a second helping of the fish stew they'd make with their collective haul.

The response was positive, and loosened the hardened features of the men. They smiled from one to another, the wind-chilled and anxious faces smoothed with the excitement of healthy competition, and the promise of extra food. Though they were still condemned to float aimlessly in these cursed desert waters, they at least had an achievable goal offered to them, and that was antidote enough, it seemed. Taunts were made at the expense of others, as were declarations of unmatched fishing prowess, and straws were drawn to determine the order.

When the sun broke the next day, casting its gift of an azure morn upon the same featureless seascape, the captain was thrilled to see the men up and joking, and singing their rowdy songs as whoever was fishing cast the line, and waited. When they returned below deck, empty handed and disheartened, to resume their rowing, they'd be met with mocking jeers as the next would go above and try their hand.

Though, taunts and claims of angling prowess were soon swallowed and blended in to the insipid surroundings, as four long, eventless days were paddled behind the boat as stiff as treacle, and not a single fish was caught, record-worthy or not. The bait remained stubbornly on the razor sharp treble hook, and by the end of the day would be frittered and worn like jellyfish tendrils. On the last day of the competition, the younger sailor was the last to cast the bait in, but after his hour was up, and he reeled in no catch, he saw that the meat had been tainted – a toxic sickly green.

That didn't sit well with them; waters not fit for fishing were waters not fit for sailing.

The day after the competition ceased, due to it being a waste of meat, it seemed that the lifting of spirits was not only temporary, but only left further depths for their moods to plummet. The

atmosphere on ship and mind was heavy, tense, palpable. Matters were only to be exacerbated as, after a month of this seemingly endless hell, the captain deigned to call the first mate to his cabin and laid out his plans for half-rations for the next fortnight. The provisions they had were near empty, and when he declared his intentions to the rest, he was met with anger and unrest – the three who had sailed with him for most of his career said nothing – and that was almost worse.

The night that the captain marked the second month, they had less than four days of food left – they were ragged, bedraggled, thirsty, and had no-one to aim their anger at except the man who they served under. All hopes were feeble. The situation was dire.

He woke to three figures standing above him, that night, and the cold threat of steel beneath his chin held in place by the green sailor. Behind him, two of the others stood – one staring doubtfully at the captain, the other flitting nervous glances to the door.

“Seems to me we’s fell in a spell of ill luck,” the green sailor said, his eyes wide and pupils narrow. “I know for sure I’s done nothing to bring it my way, and the talk o’the ship has me thinkin’ you’s gone and made a deal with th’devil’r’demons to have started us out right, and now that deal’s gone sour.”

He grinned, leaning forward to whisper the last. The captain could smell the stench of rum on his breath, and realised he’d braved himself with the help of alcohol – stolen from his own supply - but the madness that took hold of him shone through. “Seems to me as if your luck is worst of all, now, dunnit?” The blade bit in to the captain’s flesh, slightly, and drew a slithering warm ruby river that tricked and tickled across him.

“I’d bet my ring that should I go’n give this a little jolt and drip the devil’s debt outer you, we’ll be baggin’ wind come sunrise,” he whispered, though his hands were trembling, a shine of flitting fiery green burst from the prize he’d just betted, dancing against the cabin ceiling. “Don’t you?”

The captain couldn’t say a word, nothing came to his mouth and a part of him realised he wanted this to happen – a swift death was better than a slow, hungry, dehydrated one in which he would have to see his crew drop one by one beside him. And for a while now, he had realised more like as not, that was their fate.

But, he was saved of having to say anything, as the silence outside was broken.

The man leaning over him began to blink rapidly, and shake his shaggy head. “Mad-”

“No, no,” the captain interrupted, finding his voice. “I can hear it, too.”

There was a chant coming from outside the cabin. Outside the ship. A dull, monotonous chant with only one peeling voice that stood out. A woman’s voice.

“Remove the knife, and we forget this happened,” the captain promised.

The young sailor paused for a moment, then shuddered before taking a step back, and sheathing the knife – his first mate’s the captain realised – in to his belt.

Wide awake, with adrenaline and ebbing pain, the captain stood, reaching for his neckerchief to tie around, hiding and stanching the flow, and made his way out the cabin, passing the meagre warmth of the torch directly outside. The three men who were moments ago intending to kill him, were now standing beside him, in awe and wonder. The four made their way portside, and the hatch to the lower deck swung open, as the rest of the crew clambered above, letting the chill of night envelop them as they traced the source of chanting.

In the direction of the dull, repetitive tone and the screeching wails, in the distance, they could see three queer flickering glows; torches mounted on another ship, though their hue was a

strange colour; garish, greenish. The vessel was similar in size to theirs, and almost identical in construction. It, too, had its sails furled.

Words were passed from one man to another, as they took in the sight, but the captain scarpered to the wheel, in order to change course and veer closer to the only other form of life they'd seen since sailing last.

We're saved, he promised himself. *Food and direction, but minutes away!*

He could hear some of his men whispering in awe, and praising the lord for salvation. Though, as they neared the other vessel, which was stationery, with the chanting growing louder, faster, their praise turned in to terror-stricken prayers as they crossed themselves.

The captain, instantly, could see why.

As they pulled up beside the other ship, and the orange glow of their own light mingled with the fiendish green of their neighbour's, in this fiery marriage of luminescence, they could see, painted bold and brazen on the side of this ship...

The Tiderider.

The air around them blazed from icy and gnawing to heavy and humid within a second, though each of them felt the presence of goose pimples on their body. The ship they were looking upon was their very own – a mirror image, down to the flecked paint across the rim. The only difference was the colour of the flames.

"Hello?!" the captain called, yelling above the clangour and clamour of voices, but none replied. He cast a loaded glance to his men, and saw through their hollow, hungry and gaunt faces, that they were harrowed through and through.

The green torches danced hypnotically, placed in the exact formation the men had mounted their own. It is difficult to say how long they stood there, frozen in terror, but the captain finally thawed. His men, like him, were hungry, they were tired, they were creeping toward the cusp of madness.

"Get the plank," the captain ordered.

"But-" a voice finally responded, though it was weak, toneless and hollow. Barely audible beneath that dirge-like chanting.

"*Get* the plank," the captained demanded again, this time his tone brook no challenge. He did not take his eyes off this new ship, this old ship, this strangely familiar ship.

A series of scuffles and bangs took stage behind him, but soon the plank was fed over the short distance and linked both *The Tideriders* together. Ignoring his crews' pleas to stay, the captain was already half way across – one side orange, the other green - balancing on the board with only the still blackness beneath him.

He hopped down on the other ship with a thud that made all his crew, on the original ship, wince with fear. As soon as he made contact, the chanting and the screeching ceased, filling the world with roaring silence – only the snapping of their own torches, and the beating of their horror in their chests. He paused, at the sudden eerie stillness, looking back at the aghast faces of his men.

"Hello?!" he called once more. The voice seemed to boom and bound across the water; a crackle of fear evident, but again, there was no reply. No voice, no chant, no screech.

He bade them arm themselves and then join him, but it wasn't until the first mate shook out of his trance and withdrew below decks that the others followed suit. One by one they reappeared, dagger or cutlass in hand, creeping across the plank, bathed in ember and emerald, which painted easily across their pale faces.

When gathered, the captain took a step toward the young sailor who had held his life at the edge of a knife, and seeing the boy had a cutlass in hand, unsheathed the dagger from his belt, much to his first mate's confusion, and tightened his fingers tensely about the grip.

"Let's search," the captain whispered to their wide-eyed fear. Their own ship let out a creak of discomfort, causing them all to tense for a moment before being brought back by their captain's voice. "First, the cabin."

They approached quietly, with trepidation – the green torch silent and cool, whatever world it was conjured from evidently void of the kindness of warmth. *Foul things afoot*, the captain thought, the captain knew. He tiptoed further, and with hands a tremor, reached for the door's handle – the handle *he* had designed – turning to his crew and counting down from three to one. In one swift motion, the door flung open and the captain barged through, dagger readied as his men poured in behind him.

They need not have been so cautious, nor readied for combat. Within, there was no waiting ambush, though, that may have been a kinder alternative. The door creaked open to a putrid stench, that seemed to physically knock them back. Covering their nose and mouth, they pushed forward, only to find, on the bed, greying and mottled, the very man who bade them follow seconds ago.

The captain whimpered, looking down at his own festering cadaver – seeming like a stranger, but him no doubt; the fiendish light poured in, revealing a pool of blackened blood crusted in to his sheets, and staining his night robe. The very night robe he was presently wearing.

They could see a blackened gash swiped across his neck.

The green sailor whimpered, and though the captain was a fraction of a second from retching, one hand held protectively about the neckerchief, he placed the three fingers of his dagger hand on, on the lad's shoulder – calming and soothing his panic. Whatever this foul magic was, *they* were still his charges. He turned to look at the lad, and saw behind him the other two that were complicit exchanging flitting glances of terror.

The captain crossed himself with his spare hand, reached for the mirrored tapestry that adorned his wall, tore it off and whipped it over his murdered counterpart as a shroud. Muttering a prayer, he then urged them to back out, closing the door behind him. The first mate begged to go back aboard their own ship, claiming that this was some black magic, some devilry, that nothing good could come from it.

But the captain wouldn't hear of it. Whatever world they had sailed in to had something to do with this very phenomenon – this was the climax, perhaps an answer to an end, and at the very least, if this ship had any provisions they could pilfer, they could at least regain strength, extend their own lives a little longer.

Shaken, and stifling tears, the captain lifted the hatch, shrugging the hands of his men away. An eruption of the same emerald glow of the flames burst from below, flaring in to the air with such an immense energy that it seemed to pierce through to the heavens themselves. The captain swiped his hands through, briefly, as if expecting to be scalded, but no – it felt of nothing. No heat, no cold, *nothing*.

Before they could force him back, he descended below decks.

Though the smell in his reflected cabin was appalling, it paled in comparison to this. So, too, did the horrors. Each member that followed him were already present. Slumped in a corner, curled in foetal position, lying flat - first mate to surgeon, skeletal, starved; their flesh clinging to their bones like ill-fitting vestments. Their eyes bulged in sunken pools of blackened bruises, staring lifelessly at the green-tinted wood above. Some of them had suffered bite marks, either imprints of teeth sunken in to the flesh, or chunks had been torn and rent apart.

They could hear whimpering, high-pitched, meek cries. They followed the sound, revealing to them the source of the emerald glow.

The body of the young sailor sat, shaking and shuddering feverishly, in the cargo hold - fumbling erratically with his hands, chewing at greyed, sickly meat. His entire body aflame, as he cried emerald tears.

As the living group stood, staring, racing through any and every prayer and Hail Mary they knew, the sound of chanting took up once more – and they realised, though their counterparts were dead, the voices were their own.

The green light snuffed out as the young lad's body slumped to the deck, and the sound of the woman's screech momentarily pierced the night - tearing their souls and wits from their bodies, until they snapped back and began to clamber above one another to ascend back through the hatch. Harboured a harrowing horror like nothing they'd ever witnessed before.

They scarpered back across their plank, and as they took one look back at the other ship, they could see a figure had now appeared.

A woman, dressed in a ragged, threadbare travelling cloak, floating at least six feet above the deck. Though there was not a hint of wind, her clothes billowed wildly – charged with some unseen force. A shock of wiry, greyed hair spouted sporadically from her head – not an inch of smooth skin could be found amongst the pocked, wrinkled face. She peered out through eyes of as black as the night, but resting on her drooping bosom, attached to a necklace, was an emerald of glowing green. She raised her left hand, showing spindly fingers which seemed to undulate as if drowned, and slowly, with her right hand, indicated the base of her wedding finger.

Suddenly, everything clicked in place for the captain.

The lad stole from a Sea Witch.

Focusing all might in to his shoulder, he barged in to the young sailor, knocking him to the decks, placed one foot upon his chest, gripped the emerald ring - seeing that it now shared the horrid glow of the necklace – and though it felt like scorching metal to the touch, he pulled.

The younger sailor was screaming, bellowing for help, crying to his mother on land and the father above for mercy – his flesh was sparking with ghastly flames, loosing acrid gout of smoke. The ring seemed to tighten the more the captain pulled, and the witches blood-curdling cackles resounded across the entire ocean. With swift action, the terrified screams of the green sailor exploded in to shrieks of visceral agony. The captain had relieved the nearest crewman of his cutlass, and swung with all his might at the wrist of the thief. The hand severed clean off, and was hurled on to the demon ship beside them.

It landed with a wet thud, causing the floating beldam to screech once more with twisted glee, then with a hiss, the other ship fizzled in to a furnace steam of green cinders, leaving only the faint, sickly sweet smell of festering flesh.

The plank splashed in to the ocean, and slid down the side of their boat. The surgeon darted to the whimpering boy, fussing over the stump he held before him, but the others were keeling over, retching the plague of dread from their guts.

That night, no-one slept but the young lad who swiftly lost consciousness. The captain stayed below with them, wishing to be amongst company, rather than alone in his cabin – and they read passages from the bible, and shared prayers and hymns. The break of dawn seemed like a farfetched dream that would never arrive, but, after what felt like another month, the pink tendrils of sunlight drifted in to the sky above, slowly scorching away at the frigid cursed darkness.

And borne on the miracle of such bright rays, they felt, to their pleasure and shuddering relief, a healthy and hearty gust.