

A wave, deep and black as coal, crashed the ship's storm-worn bow. It spat a cold, salt mist that passed from one man to the next and bit worse than wild dogs. The old ship, made of wood and steel, creaked and moaned as it rose and fell with each giant swell. Harsh winds, fast, strong, slapped the men's faces like ex-wives and froze them deep to the bones. The storm screeched and howled, whipped and flailed. The sea was hot and mad; mad with a rage that stirred men of faith to pray and cry out.

Still they worked: tight on the ropes, true on the wheel and sail. No fear broke their ranks. They were hard men, men of the tide, of star lit nights and cold love. Men of quick graves and long lost homes. Men of death.

A voice, rough and deep, stung by drink and smoke, strained to be heard, but heard it was.

"Keep y'er wits, men. The damn bitch in heat. Get that rig an watch y'er feet. Brace y'er..."

The voice was drowned by a stiff crash at the bow. It shook the deck and line as if they struck a wall. Some, caught off guard, fell and slipped to the stern as the ship rose on a steep swell. Hands clawed at the deck to slow their fall. Some cried out. Men, firm and quick, reached out and pulled the lads back to their feet. They rose and were fast to their posts, no qualm or thought about it. Some with blood on their hands. Some with blood on their face. To quit was to drown, to sink. To quit was to die, and drag the ship and its crew to the deep. To the dark.

A young boy, not yet able to grow a true beard, pulled hard on a thick rope. It was latched to a mast that moaned with each gust of wind. The boy turned his gaze up to the tall, gray sails. They were full, then slack; they tugged left, then right. He could hear the threat. So new to the sea and its ways, but he knew. If they didn't get the sails down, and soon, they would tear, or worse, bring the whole rig down on their heads. If it did, well, then his days at sea would have been short. He pulled hard on the coarse, hemp rope. The muscle in his arms ached. He could feel the skin of his palm tear, but bore through the pain.

The voice boomed again.