

## Despair and Deliverance

*“Red sky at night, sailor’s delight.*

*Red Sky in the morning, sailor’s warning,” old sailor adage.*

Bishop’s stride was uneven. It was a jolting movement, one leg carrying forward in a smooth swing, only to have the other twitch after it in a horribly unnatural manner. The damage to his leg was from no birth defect, or childhood malady, but it was a lasting reminder, and fitting payment, for his time served in the royal navy.

He knew something was wrong as soon as he pushed through a crowd of vagabonds on Baker Street. The morning was stark and grey, save for a sliver of bare sky far off in the distance. A solitary column of rose colored light spilled forth, splashing across the ill-tempered waves before disappearing once again into the gloom.

It wasn’t the threat of rain, or the morning’s brisk air that made his guts squirm uncomfortably however. Perhaps it was some foul draft on the breeze, or a shifting shadow, lingering just on the edge of sight. Whatever it was, Bishop knew something was off.

The warehouse appeared deserted when he approached, and stopped for a moment, letting his hand come to a rest upon the door. He turned his head to the side, and then to the other, as he considered the docks. Swollen wood, gull shit, and empty crates stacked haphazardly about were all that he could see. The wharfs appeared completely forsaken, save for the lapping waves of foamy brine.

He stepped through and eased the flimsy door closed behind him. The warehouse felt cold, despite the glow of several burning lanterns. For a pregnant moment, Bishop stood there, his own breathing, which was barely audible over the chatter of hungry gulls outside, hanging in the air in vaporous clouds.

*Not a single ship at dock, no roustabouts carrying freight around...hell, not even Gimpy Bell ranting and raving about war and begging for coin,* Bishop thought, as he tried to make sense of the unnatural calm around him. His thoughts instantly went back to the corner crier from the day before. The man had taken up residence within earshot of their bedroom window, and bellowed the city's dire news for time without count. The man's words, which he cursed and rejected at the time, were starting to sink in, and take on a whole new meaning.

"Dark days for the city, dark days for the Empire, dark days for us all," Bishop recited quietly to the open space, considering the crier's words. But the derelict warehouse provided no answers, only its quiet reassurance that something was indeed off.

Bishop's first step forward felt clumsy, the hollow thud of his boot against the rough plank flooring sending a number of rats scurrying for deeper shadow. That morning's freight, which was absent from the wharf outside was one thing, but the absence of yesterday's leftover pallets was an altogether different, and more troubling sight. "No ships, no freight...now what?" he whispered and rubbed his calloused hands together.

Despite his best efforts, Bishop's sense of unease started to turn to panic. His tension worked its way up into his chest and shoulders, forcing the corded muscles to twitch and spasm of their own free will. He flexed his tired hands and rolled his shoulders, but he didn't have the crash of waves or the sway of the deck beneath his feet to sooth him anymore. He felt so horribly out of place, like a grounded bird, or a fish out of the water.

*They're late, that's all...bad weather, and maybe the ships were set back a day...delays...it has to be. It is nothing else, nothing else,* Bishop thought. He tried to push out the darker thoughts and replace them with positive ones. He knew the morning deliveries were problematic. After all, the waters outside the cape were always turbulent this time of year, and

the weather had been particularly foul. If a frigate moved past the shoals in late evening, and the breakers were still crashing, most captains would turn back to the wind, seeking deeper waters, and safer anchoring, at least until night lifted. But that wouldn't explain why the docks were abandoned, or the warehouse so empty. Surely there would have been men lingering, smoking their pipes, or telling tales while they waited, even for the promise of a paying job.

A ragged cough broke him from his troubled thoughts, echoing down a hallway to his right. Bishop shook off his troubled contemplations and endless probabilities, and reached up to rub the sleep from his eyes. With a slight hesitation, he pushed into the dark hallway, every nagging ache and pain now just a little more profound.

A dim light illuminated the lone door in the hallway. Bishop stopped just outside the door, and studied the chipped paint and badly smudged glass. He'd taken the door for granted for so long, never really stopping to appreciate what happened beyond it, or how it affected his own life. Only now, it seemed a weighty thing, horribly out of his control.

With a deep breath, Bishop lifted his hand and knocked. His knuckles bounced against the dark wood, rattling the loose glass within its rotten frame. He didn't do it consciously, but he held his breath, suddenly very afraid that someone would respond.

"Yeah, yeah, who is it?" a gruff voice sounded from within the room, followed by a rather unhealthy sounding cough.

Bishop turned the handle and pushed the door open. He stepped through into the room, taking note of the oil lamp burning high, the heaping stack of papers, and the sickly man seated behind it.

“Why are you...didn’t you read the notice on the door, you...” the man started to curse, but as Bishop stepped forward into the light, his glare softened. “Oh, Bishop, I’m sorry, I thought you were someone else.”

Bishop nodded, as he pulled his hat from his head. “Quiet out there...” he added quietly, after the freight master went silent. Conrad Jenkins was a large man, easily 21 stones. He had been a strapping figure earlier in life, strong and fit, but as he aged, and his body broke down, his muscle eventually softened. He spent most of his time now in his office, perched in his chair.

“Yeah, quiet...uh, oh, you don’t know? You didn’t hear?!” Conrad Jenkins asked in surprise, almost knocking over the pile of papers as he sat up and swung his hand around for his cane. “I mean, uh, how would you know? Well, it’s like this Bishop...the docks have been closed up.”

Bishop stood still for a moment, working over a spot of worn fabric in his hat with his thumb and forefinger. “Closed,” he repeated back slowly, “the whole docks?”

“Culliver Saint closed down everything...the shipping company, the warehouses, everything! They came after the last whistle yesterday, men with wagons to carry away the freight, men with crates to carry away the ledgers, and even soldiers...with their muskets,” Conrad finished, emphasizing the last word with an obvious sneer.

“Saint sent the soldiers to clear everyone out of the docks. They ran everyone off that wasn’t packing and moving...but you’d already gone for the day,” Conrad finished with a wet cough and slumped down onto his desk. His nose, pock marked from illness at an early age, was swollen and discolored, and his cheeks were flushed.

Bishop felt his feet and hands go numb, and searched for a response, but he kept going over the strange news in his head. It seemed so abstract, so shocking, that he couldn’t quite wrap

his head around it. “But why send soldiers?” he finally managed. Conrad Jenkins shifted uneasily in his chair, and bent low once more to cough into his handkerchief. Bishop had been around the slums enough to recognize consumption, and reflexively took a half-step back.

“I can only tell you this. The Queen of England, Anne of the Stuarts, is dead. They say a new King will be crowned...a German, George the first. England is in turmoil, and it is already spilling over into the colonies. Those soldiers were no Red Coats, Bishop,” Conrad exclaimed forcefully as soon as he caught his breath. Then he wiped his mouth and gulped down a mouthful of air. “In truth, you shouldn’t be here now. Culliver Saint gave explicit instructions, that no one would be allowed anywhere near the docks. He was with a man in fancy dress, a royal perhaps...from Europe, Russia maybe, although his accent was strange. Bad things are stirring Bishop.

“Saint left instructions for anyone who showed up to be run off, even promised to throw anyone in chains that questioned them, and have lashed those who refused. They have some big...” Conrad Jenkins paused for a minute as he looked about the room, as if searching for something familiar to jog his memory.

“Something is being delivered to the docks. Even I don’t know what it is, although it sounded like he was expecting a ship. He doesn’t want a bunch of eyes around to see it when it gets here. You’d better clear out, Bishop, before someone sees you. I’d hate to think about what they would do if they knew you were here. You’re one of the good ones, Bishop,” Conrad finished and sneezed into a handkerchief. Once he finished wiping his nose, he took a deep breath, and raised his hands up before him, as if to speak. After a long moment, where both men locked eyes, he dropped his hands onto the desk with a slap of meaty palms, and exhaled slowly.

“I’m sorry, Bishop. I know how things are out there. No jobs and no money. There is just no...hope, and now we could be looking at another war,” he finished and flicked his hand forward, silently shooing Bishop out.

“Hey, Bishop,” Conrad Jenkins croaked. Bishop froze after turning painfully on his gimpy leg.

“I know you’re not for leaving Renee by herself, but the *Steadfast* is at dock in Boston, and taking on deck hands, riggers, and carpenters. Its sailor work, but its work,” the older man offered gently. Bishop returned a crooked smile, and let his gaze drift down to his leg. Conrad’s smile broke, and he nodded his grim understanding.

Without another word, and thoroughly confused, Bishop turned back to the door and solemnly limped out of the room. He stopped only to close the door to the small, dingy office, as Conrad Jenkins slumped back down onto the desk, sickly, and thoroughly exhausted.

## Part Two

### More News

Bishop ambled quickly as he left the warehouse, pushing himself harder than was perhaps wise. The quickened pace drove the pain deeper into his leg, until it ached clear through to the bone.

Troublesome thoughts swirled in his mind, battering him like a hurricane. Before he knew it, he was spiraling down avenues darker and more mysterious than he had ever dared wander, all spurred on by Conrad Jenkin's cryptic words.

As he walked back around the large building, Bishop's shoulders started to sag. He felt more than just the burden of an oppressed city crushing down upon him, but also his young wife, and the responsibility he carried as a husband.

He puzzled over Conrad Jenkin's odd and mysterious news. He struggled through the realization that the docks, which employed so many people in the city, and provided one of the only avenues for goods to merchants, had been so readily closed. He reached down and confirmed, yet again, that his pockets were empty. That day's pay would have gone for fresh bread, meat from the butcher, and much needed soap for their washing. At a time when sickness was so prevalent, he could ill afford to return home penniless and empty handed.

The toe of his boot snagged a brick, and the resulting scuff of his boot echoed painfully off of the walls, and ground. Although he could not see them, he knew that people were watching him, hidden within the shadow of their doorsteps or peering out from behind pleated curtains. Now, of all times, when he wished for privacy, and a semblance of stealth, he could be afforded neither. Their silent, watching eyes reminded him that he had limped through town all day,

fighting against crowds of men just like himself, only to be turned away for even the most trivial jobs.

The darkness of early autumn drew out the shadows, and made the ole' brick and stonewall district even darker than usual, a fact that drove even its saltiest inhabitants to cling longingly to the day's last sunlight. Bishop knew deep inside that it was this desperation to scorn the night that drew people to their windows and doors, and not necessarily his procession of defeat. Still, he couldn't help but to curse their silent judgment.

Despite the ache, Bishop picked up his pace. Despite his fear of facing his wife, and sharing the dire news, he longed to be home. It was the one place where he felt at peace anywhere.

He turned down an alley, navigating the tricky circuit of refuse and iron waste bins with all the grace of a puppet, dangling from tangled strings. Behind him a cat howled angrily, and hissed before taking off like a ball, shot out of a cannon. He stumbled out of the alley and nearly bowled over a group of men standing together in the street. They grumbled, and guffawed as he pushed past, and he waved away the thick, swirling clouds of their pipe smoke with his hand.

“Walk that barrel fever off somewhere else mate!” one of the men growled, his pipe still clutched between his teeth. Bishop ignored them, despite his inkling to turn and counter. It wasn't the first time he had been mistaken for a drunk because of his limp, and he knew that it wouldn't be the last.

Finally, as he passed the lone burning gas lamp on the lane, he turned and strode onto his steps. His feet felt excruciatingly heavy as he plodded towards the door. The burden on his shoulders continued to grow heavier, working slowly to drive him down, and into the ground.

Bishop ran through the day's events in his mind one last time, trying desperately to find some small glimmer of hope, or even a positive spin, but it felt dismal, and hopeless. He hated the idea of telling his young wife, and hated even more the look that would crest her face. It meant that he would have to say it out loud, to acknowledge it, and make it real. He knew that she loved him, and supported him. But he also knew that she would worry, as she always did, especially now when there was such little good news.

Bishop reached the top of the stairs and took a deep breath. He reached out and grasped the handle, one troubling thought surfacing like a water-logged buoy. *The Steadfast was taking on crew*, he allowed himself to repeat silently for the first time since leaving the docks. He knew the ship well, if only from its reputation. It was a frigate, of sleek line and canvas, manned of twenty-six, six pounders. It was said to be the fastest sail from the colonies to the islands.

Bishop shook his head, dismissing his preoccupation with the enticing news. *They would never take me on. I won't even mention it to her*, he decided resolutely, knowing full well that Renee would encourage him to inquire after a berth.

Before he could stop himself, he pushed through and closed the door behind him. The small home was warm, and smelled pleasantly of wood smoke, and cooking food. His stomach turned over instantly, reminding him that he hadn't eaten all day. It just added to the hollow pit that had already formed inside of him.

Bishop hung his coat by the door and had barely sat down to untie his boots when Renee appeared around the corner. He looked up into her cheerful face, and forced a pained smile. She looked radiant, despite the flour plastered on her apron, and the food stuck in her hair. *She is so beautiful. I just want her to be happy*, Bishop thought.

“Well, you made it home in good time today. Must have been a light day?” Renee asked with a smile, wiping her hands on her apron.

Bishop cleared his throat as he pulled off his boot, and then neatly slid it next to its opposite. He stood with a grunt, and absently straightened his shirt before lifting his gaze to his wife’s face. He started to speak, to unload his burden of bad news, except she burst forward, her hands flying into the air as she wrapped him in a hug.

“Oh I was going to wait, I wanted to, but I can’t hold this in any longer. I need to tell you now, or I might burst. You have to know, you just have to!” Renee cried out excitedly, and Bishop pushed away and held her out at arm’s length.

“What happened? Tell me what?” he asked, bewildered and alarmed.

“I’m with child!” she sobbed happily, throwing her arms around him once again. Bishop pulled his wife into him and squeezed her tight. He was only faintly aware that she was crying, weeping quietly in elation and joy. She moved to pull away, but he squeezed her tighter yet. He couldn’t bear the thought he her seeing his tears, and the pain behind them.