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Captain Rowe

Sebastian Briggs was a naturally curious boy, and when something tickled his fancy, he found out everything he could about it. This was the case with his Uncle Rowe. He would visit Sebastian's home no more than once a month, striding through the door in his long, dark blue coat and strange hat and staying only briefly. Sebastian loved Uncle Rowe, the way he affectionately ruffled his nephew's hair, placed his old cap on Sebastian's head, and listened to his troubles. When he grew up, he wanted to be a sailor like his uncle.

Sebastian's parents didn't like to talk about Uncle Rowe very much, especially about the long conversations they had when Sebastian was told to leave the room. Once, Sebastian had put his ear to the door in the hopes of hearing their conversation, but all he heard was Uncle Rowe's hushed baritone, then his father's deep rumble raised in protest. Sebastian had noticed that Uncle Rowe seemed so much older than his parents, but when he asked them about this a cloud passed over their faces and they changed the topic. When he asked Uncle Rowe, however, the older man had gotten a faraway look in his eyes and told Sebastian that he was just called his uncle because he had known Sebastian's family for a very long time. Sebastian, who was used to his uncle's straightforward way of speaking, was surprised by this sudden change, and decided not to inquire further.

Sebastian had managed to see most of the town of Alnwick by his tenth year, and had noticed that only sea captains dressed like Uncle Rowe, and even then only rarely. In addition, though Alnwick was no stranger to fog, Uncle Rowe's visits always coincided with a bout of especially foggy weather. From the many days of watching at the window and waiting for his uncle's return Sebastian could vividly recall the image of Uncle Rowe striding down the street towards his house, the dark blue of his threadbare but well-cared-for coat contrasting with the muddy grays and browns of the worn street, the fog following a minute or so behind and covering the city like a blanket.

Eventually, of course, Sebastian's curiosity got the better of him, and one day in the fall he snuck out of the house following one of Uncle Rowe's visits and set off at a brisk pace towards the docks. When he arrived, he looked over the handful of ships at the wharf and wondered which one was his uncle's. After a while, a circle of hazy yellow light in the fog and the faint sound of someone whistling a beautiful but melancholy tune alerted him that he was not alone. He ducked around a corner and peered into the fog to see who was there. The mist rendered most of the dock a hazy blur at best, but as the lantern got closer, Sebastian was able to see more of the figure, although the face was still obscured due to the angle at which the figure stood. Hands stuck into the pockets of his long, dark-colored coat, the man walked in the direction of an empty pier, still whistling his haunting melody.

As Sebastian moved closer, his foot accidentally kicked a pebble, sending it skittering across the dock. The whistling suddenly stopped, and he ducked behind a crate, hoping whoever it was hadn't heard him. Sebastian sat in silence for around a minute, then breathed a sigh of relief that the unknown figure had not noticed him. Just when he was starting to relax, without warning, a callused hand roughly grabbed his right arm just above the elbow. Sebastian was pulled to his feet and found himself looking straight into the gnarled face of the mysterious whistler. Straight into the face of Uncle Rowe.

Uncle Rowe's scowl softened into a worried frown as soon as he saw the identity of his would-be follower. "Sebastian? What are you doing here?"

Sebastian, surprised at being discovered by Uncle Rowe and still shaken by the momentarily stern expression on his

normally calm relative's face, managed to get out, "I just wanted to see your ship! I only wanted to see your ship, Uncle Rowe!"

A thoughtful look came over the man's grizzled face. "So, you want to see *The Brighton*, do you?" He let go of Sebastian's arm and led him over to the end of the dock. As a thick fogbank began to form near the pier, the faint, mournful sound of a bell began. Uncle Rowe called out, "Patient, my sweet! I'm coming back for you soon enough!" He snapped the shutters of the lantern closed and the fogbank slowly dissipated, revealing a small but swift sloop approaching the dock.

The ship was old but sturdy-looking, with faded paint that had once been a vibrant shade of red and threadbare sails that must have cracked majestically in the wind during ages past. However, despite its age, Sebastian felt that it had an air of grandness that suited its captain well. "That looks just like one of the old pirate ships I read about!"

Captain Rowe's response, when it came, carried with it a hint of sorrow. "*The Brighton* is a very old ship, but she's never let me down. The wizards in Venice made her to last." After a pause, he murmured, as if to himself. "Just like its curse." As the ship sailed closer to the pier, Sebastian strained his eyes to see the crew, but couldn't manage to make them out. The ship eased up to the jetty and a gangplank swung down. Uncle Rowe confidently strode on board, with his nephew following close behind. Sebastian looked around to see who was ringing the bell, and to his shock, saw the bell rope swinging back and forth on its own, with no one holding it. As Sebastian looked around the ship, it became more evident that there was no one else but them aboard. The ship was doing all the necessary tasks on its own. Uncle Rowe stepped up to the afterdeck and took the tiller, the sails unfurled, and the boat began pulling away from the pier. Sebastian walked to the back of the ship to try and catch a glimpse of Alnwick, only to see an empty expanse of fog in all directions.

Sebastian turned to Uncle Rowe with a look of shock on his face. "Where are we? Why can't I see Alnwick, Uncle Rowe?"

Uncle Rowe laughed. His voice, usually calm and measured, now had a manic quality to it. "First! I may be Uncle Rowe when I visit your house on land, but this is the open ocean! My domain! Here I am Captain Rowe! That is my name on the open ocean! Secondly, you must be more alert! You once told me you wanted to be a sailor, so show me how sharp your eyes are!"

Sebastian scanned the horizon again. Finally his eyes settled on a faint cluster of lights. "There it is! That's Alnwick!"

Captain Rowe nodded in appreciation. "Good eyesight! They might make a sailor out of you yet! But something you must learn is that on the sea, the impossible is not always so, on this boat in particular! You see a cluster of lights and assume it's Alnwick! Venice! That's Venice! A long way from Wales, isn't it, Sebastian?"

Sebastian stared at the lights open-mouthed. Venice! So far in such little time! He noticed a smaller cluster of lights off to the left that they seemed to be steering towards. "What's that? Why are we going there?" But Captain Rowe did not reply. As they got closer, the fog abruptly disappeared, revealing a small, inhospitable island. The rocky shoals surrounding the island were sure to deter all but the most experienced captain, and the entirety of the island itself was occupied by a rocky mountain with a squat, crumbling castle clinging tenaciously to the top. A small, mold-covered dock with a flight of stairs roughly hewn out of the mountain behind it led up to the castle. The boat sailed up and docked, and Captain Rowe ascended the stairs to the precariously perched castle with Sebastian following close behind. After trailing his uncle through a confusing maze of narrow passageways dimly lit by feebly flickering lanterns placed every few feet, Sebastian eventually found himself in a round chamber. Unlike the rest of the castle that he had seen, this room was large, with a vaulted ceiling barely visible from where Sebastian was standing. Also dissimilar to the other rooms of the building, this one was occupied, containing several old men with pointy hats, who were looking at him and the captain.

One of them, a thin man with an impressive mustache and long white beard, addressed Captain Rowe in a wheezing voice. "This would be that boy you were telling us about, Elijah? The great-grandson or some such of that fisherman you used to know? If you think he can be taught, I'm sure none of us would object. You are the expert, after all. He does seem a bit young, though... Does he understand the responsibilities he has volunteered for?"

Captain Rowe stood to attention. "He has not yet made his choice. I brought him before you as is tradition, that you might judge him and determine whether he is worthy."

"There's really no need for that, Elijah. You are among friends..." At this he glared at another one of the old men, a beardless man with a large belly. "Well, mostly friends, and I'm sure we'd all respect the good captain's decision, wouldn't we, Elidarin?"

The beardless man referred to as Elidarin spoke up. "Uxium, you may trust Elijah, but I do not. He is desperate to remove the curse placed upon him as ferryman, and this may have clouded his judgement. I think we should examine the boy ourselves."

"Thinking? That's a first for you, Elidarin!" Uxium sneered back.

"Well, there's a first time for everything, like shaving!" came the reply.

A third old man, a wizened elder with a heavily wrinkled face, spoke up. "Uxium is right. Elijah has been plying these waters for several centuries, long before any of us had even been born yet. His experience is undeniable, and I don't believe there is anyone he can't train. So, boy, are you prepared to devote your life to sailing? You will sail the waters until you can find and train a replacement, never aging, never growing weary, which will be both your gift and your curse. You will gain the life of adventure Elijah tells us you desire, but you will give up your normal life in order to do so. This is your choice alone, and its repercussions will be your burden alone."

After careful consideration, Sebastian shook his head. While he wanted to have adventures and be a sailor, he also recognized his desire for normality. A life of excitement might sound fun now, but it wouldn't hold his interest forever.

Elidarin fixed Captain Rowe with a stern glare. "This is exactly why we need to examine these prospective apprentices more carefully. We'll discuss your behavior later, Elijah, but for now, take this boy to his home." Captain Rowe closed his eyes and sighed with the weight of many a decade spent in vain. He gently took Sebastian's arm, turning to leave the room.

Sebastian sat up in bed with a start. He looked around to see the familiar walls of his own bedroom. As he pondered the strange dream he had just woken from, he heard the faint sound of a clanging bell receding into the distance. Uncle Rowe never came to visit again, and Sebastian found himself drawn to the seaside throughout his youth, especially on foggy days, searching in vain for any sign of an old ship with a tall figure at the helm.