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Sample file

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Sample file

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Hallfrid

By Alice Hathaway

Blood. Diffusing into the currents, spreading. Confusion clouds my vision. This is not the blood of shark's teeth piercing flesh. The red rains from above, spilling downward.

Shouts ring out, muffled by the water. My sister, she is crying at me, begging me to go. I can see, beyond her dark, animal eyes, the human recognition of love. Of fear.

Come away, sister. There is danger here. She follows me as I swim upward.

I ignore her, darting toward the glowing surface of the water. Men are crying like children do. Why?

Please, let us come away.

Her pleading makes me hesitate. But I must know the truth. Desolation has fallen across our ocean. This could be the answer.

The screams continue. Each is bright and clean and cut short.

Then, a deafening thud. A whimper. Time lurches to a punishing halt. I turn and there is my beloved sister, forced downward. Her flippers surrender to the water. A harpoon sticks from her middle, trailing her life behind.

NO. I scream. I swim. I nudge her with my nose. I dive below her and try to keep her from descending under the weight of the weapon. But as she grows lifeless, she becomes even heavier. I cannot keep her afloat. I wait for help. There is none.

Her lifeless body rolls off mine and floats down, so peaceful. I am motionless, sickening realization surging through me. My dearest sister. Gone. Why?

I swim back upward, with every shred of my strength. All I can see, when my head breaks the surface, is a woman, standing on the helm of a ship. Her great coat drenched in blood. A harpoon in her hands. Beside her vessel is another ship, and upon its deck is my brethren. A whale. Pierced clean through the lungs.

The grief grows inside me and sharpens until I can only think one single thought.

I will see this woman dead.

These men disgust me. Repulsion forms a heavy, tar-like stone in my throat. They laugh and drink and belch, bloodstained harpoons rest in a neat line along the wall. A starving dog whines outside the door, it scratches a quiet rhythm, the heartbeat of this place. It's a jolly scene, one might say. This is a room of merriment.

A man rattles dice in an empty cup before slamming it down onto the wine-marked table.

"Bollocks, no, not again!" His voice barrages through the tavern.

They do not notice me watching. They gather in the warm belly of the room, and I drink silently from the back corner. The candles melt into puddles on the tables. A second death. The thought makes bitterness flower on my tongue.

There are no windows — that would only let the cold in, and none have the desire to gaze upon miles and miles of white wasteland. This is not their home; they see no beauty here.

The blissful emptiness is nothing in their eyes. I pity them.

The barmaid tried to talk to me at first:

“Oh, blessus, finally another lass around here.”

I said nothing, simply slid a muddy coin across the bar and retreated to my table. I saw her pick up the coin, grimace in disgust, and wipe it clean with her rag before tucking it into her bosom.

The men’s words drift toward me, and I devour them as they come into earshot. I wait for the topic to change, will it to. The conversation remains on their game of dice, their longing for their wives, the never-ending misery of the cold. *They should grow used to it*, I think.

The night is half gone when another stranger arrives. I look up, keeping my face blank, heart hammering behind my ribs with grim hope. The door bursts open with a frigid blast of air, a snowy squall engulfing a massive figure.

“Shut the damn door!”

He does so, and stomps his boots onto the floor, creating a small pile of snow.

“Could’ve done that outside!” The barmaid shouts, slamming down a tray of mugs.

“There’s only more snow out there, darling.”

She scoffs, and so do I, under my breath. The newcomer positions himself among the small party of men, throwing back his hood. He has long dark hair, a hooded gaze.

“More bad news, boys.”

I lean forward. The barmaid gives me a strange look, suspicious. I sit back, avoiding her watchful eyes.

“Bad news, eh?”

“Just came down from Longyearbyen. Ships wrecked all along the coast.” The man shakes his head, a sigh escaping his thin lips.

“Our ships?”

“Not ours. Johanssohn.”

They mutter their half-hearted grief for their friend. Perhaps it is because he is not their friend at all, he is their business rival. I do not know, and do not overly care. I wash back a gulp of ale and grimace in satisfaction as it burns a trail down my throat.

Now they wonder what caused the tragedy.

“What else could’ve done it, but the Big Blue?”

I place down my tankard. The Big Blue, it’s all they seem to speak of. Their ale-addled dreams give them delusions of danger. Perhaps it eases their guilt, for what they’re doing. Perhaps they do have hearts.

“I saw the wreck,” the newcomer confirms somberly. “Either all men abandoned ship, or the beast smashed them itself.”

The men go quiet. I narrow my eyes, their blurry faces cut to pieces by my eyelashes.

“Any survivors? Perhaps they can confirm.”

“Just the girl.”

That is when I lean forward again. The rest of the men grunt and shift uncomfortably.

“She’s nothing but trouble.”

“Shouldn’t be here by any rights.”

They fall quiet again. The girl. *The girl.*

I need her name.

“Hear she’s bought her own ship now. Calling it after herself.”

“Herself?”

“Well, she’s the only respectable female she knows, I reckon.”

“I heard that!” The barmaid barks.

“Still, feels like bad luck.”

“I don’t know. Might be one day soon we’re all aboard the Hallfrid.”

Hallfrid. I stand and take my cloak, striding from the tavern. The men start, realizing they’d never noticed me behind them. They watch as I clip outside, into the icy tundra in nothing but a threadbare dress. The cold wraps around me, an embrace. I walk against the snowy wind toward the sea, which has been tugging at my heartstrings with increasing fervor.

My cloak is silken soft, grey-spotted blue. I wrap it around my shoulders and walk into the ocean. When the water breaks over my head, the cape becomes my skin and I swim.

My search goes on, weeks pass. Restlessness is taking over me. I dream of her; I see the blood on those hands. Her face, shrouded in the blue cover of the night. I visit every whaling village, every outpost on the coast of the island. I wait in the taverns, straining for a mention of that name.

Hallfrid. I ask the wearied fishwives if they’ve heard of her, seen her near. Most say no or ignore my sharp questions. I do not dare ask the men. They’ve already closed their ears to one who looks like me, unless I am whispering seducing poetry, my lips on their grizzled beards.

Hallfrid. Hallfrid. *Hallfrid.*

From one of the taverns, I hear her name. They speak of her fixation with the Big Blue.

“She will not rest,” they say. “Until she kills that whale.”

“She’ll die like the rest of them.”

Yes, I think. She will.

There is an aurora in the sky tonight.

I trek to the tavern; one I have never visited before. The snow reaches up to my knees, clinging to my stolen boots, eager to accompany me. I stomp my feet as I come to the wooden door. I push inside.