



Fates' Exile

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He awoke with his face and body pressed into the hard packed sand of the long white beach. Sea breezes teased his raw, abraded skin, which the sun mercilessly sought to cook.

His eyes stung. The glare of the summer sun reflecting off the powdery white sand created auras of light around the darker forms of sprawled bodies all around him. Groans and coughs arose to be tossed along the dancing breezes and swallowed by the rushing crash of the breakers coming to shore. The air felt light and friendly, unlike the mad ravenous storm winds and vengeful swells that had attacked their cargo ship from all sides only last night.

Was it last night?

"Derek, you okay?"

He pushed himself up to a sitting position and squinted at the dark sandy form from which the question had come. "Yeah, Murphy. I'm alive." He rotated his shoulder and felt the joint grind painfully. "If you can call it that," he hissed. "Where are we?"

"Don't know. It's not Melbourne and it's not Sumatra. I've seen most everywhere in between there, and this ain't any of them."

Slowly Derek's vision cleared enough to make out Murphy's craggy, weathered face and the heavy bruises mottling one eye and most of one cheek. "Are you okay, Murph? You don't look so good."

"Yeah, well it takes more than a squall and a few shiners to lay me low," the old man wheezed. "I've had worse."

"It's awful quiet now, don't you think?" asked another of the crew, a young man named Pete Barnes. "After that storm and all the singing I mean." He gulped nervously, and looked around as if expecting an attack.

"That was just a trick of the winds," Murphy said. "Sailors hear all sorts of things in a heavy squall like that. Some hear their wives or mothers calling them home. Others hear mermaids singing or the snip snip snip of the Fates whittling away at their threads. Me, I heard wind and water and a ship dying."

Derek looked out to sea. He rubbed his eyes to clear the grit from them. Slowly they focused, and with a hand raised to shade them, Derek could make out large shapes past the breakers. Some darkened and solidified into jagged rocks that cut through the waves.

"Holy shit," he breathed.

Murphy and Barnes jerked around to see what he was looking at, and Derek heard their equally shocked reactions. Skeletonized masts and hulls protruded from the water and clung to the very rocks that had murdered them. Sails hung like cobwebs swaying in the breezes. Lines dragged in the sea foam and served as nets for the tidal creatures hunting the water's edge.

"That's a Spanish galleon," Murphy exclaimed. "And that one over there," he said, pointing to another hulk, "is one of those prison ships the British used to take criminals to Australia when it was still a penal colony."



"There's one of those fancy yachts like we saw in port," Pete said, pointing to a smaller boat.

"And a Chinese junk," Murphy added.

Derek heard the dozen or so other men milling about and talking amongst themselves. The din of their voices seemed overly loud on such a quiet beach. Derek felt the urge to tell them all to be quiet. This place commanded it. A chill crawled up his spine and his heartbeat sped up.

"Where are the survivors?" His quiet words silenced all of the men. Derek scanned the beach and the jagged cliffs that enclosed it, but saw no signs of human touch. No remnants of huts or clothing or bones marred the beach's smooth surface. Except where they had lain and where their dinghies now rested, the sand remained smooth and pristine. The breezes quickly resettled the fine crystals once more, erasing even the marks they had made.

"I count at least twenty-thirty ships out there," said Murphy. "No tellin' how many more we can't see. Some of them's newer. Someone must have survived."

"You'd think so," Derek replied. "But where are they. Or at least where's the stuff they left behind?"

"You think the Callisto is out there?" Pete asked.

"I don't know," Derek said, but he too wondered if the cargo ship that had disappeared only a week ago was one of the graveyard hulks clogging up the waterway. Captain Neilson had guided her for over twenty years, only to disappear with the ship he loved. When they had left port the shipping company had told them to keep an eye open for their sister ship. She'd carried valuable cargo along with a crew of twenty-nine. In following her path had they suffered her fate?

Derek half heard the men beginning to argue as some panicked and others denied the seriousness of their predicament. Creaks and groans carried across the water from the piles of wreckage, and Derek wondered how far their voices carried. And then he heard it.

Derek turned and faced the cliffs. The melody whispered to him. It had a sedating affect on them all. As the men quieted, the melody grew more audible to Derek. The winds and waves seemed to bow to its superiority and faded into the background to allow the melody the full stage. The singing wove around the men, binding them to its meter. Derek's breathing stretched painfully to match the long passages without breaking the windless rhythm. The voice went on singing without interruption, climbing and swooping like a graceful swallow hunting insects. It swirled around him and fluttered like a butterfly just out of his reach. The long musical stretches left Derek breathless and dizzy.

A second voice joined the first. It steadied the melody and added a rhythm to it. Breathing became easier for Derek. His chest muscles did not have to stretch as painfully to match the tune, and his body grew flaccid in the song's capable hands.

A third voice joined the other two, and the three soared on the wings of a measured beat. The third voice ended each verse and added renewed vocal strength to the other two. Together the three mesmerized the men on the beach. The song they sang structured the very rhythm of the men's breathing and heartbeats. It beckoned their souls forth and marched them passively toward the rocky cliff walls. Distinctly female, the enchanting voices sang with unearthly beauty and strength. As the men walked toward the cliffs, the winds erased the signs of their passage in the sand behind them. By the time they reached the foot of the cliffs, the beach had returned to its pristine form, already awaiting the next arrivals.