

*Locked Out of Heaven*

*By*

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The floorboards wept. The *plip-plop* of the colliding waters hindered my rest and caused a ruckus like no other. It was my first night out on the open sea with my father. Every noise chilled my core, and there weren't many. A storm struck only hours into our voyage, though that had ended as soon as the moon replaced the sun. The aftermath was much more sinister, in my opinion. The waters were still. Every noise felt like it echoed for miles.

I could hear my bunkmate, Aksel, breathing heavily. It wasn't quite a snore, but it was still unbearably loud. I wanted to creep next to his hammock and untie one of the ropes. *Yes, untie the rope.* There wouldn't be time to feel his breath on my wrist or the warmth of his pulse against my thumb. I would have to work fast, as he was two times my size and my father's right-hand man. The rustling of my clothes could have disrupted the rhythm of his breaths and the beat of the leaking floorboards. Once the rope was free, I would have to move carefully as I slid under his hammock. I would have to halt my own breathing as my nose brushed his greasy tufts of brown hair. Then, ever so quickly, I would have to push one side of the rope through a hole in the hammock, nearest to the side of his neck, and grab the other side. He would struggle to release another sound as I would use all my weight to flatten his neck between the hammock and the rope.

That would not be the best idea, though. The reasoning behind it was unpleasantly loose, as well. They would never understand why the oil lamp above the oval-shaped hole in the wall terrified me. Aksel was, to me, an obvious threat to my safety. Every *huff*, every *puff*, bounced off of the walls and swam along the tides. I would never know how far they traveled. I would never know if I was the first and last to hear them. *Would you be the last? Were you the first?*

It had to stop. He was *too* loud. They weren't the standard sea spells. They were human. They were unnatural to the natural order of the oceanic environment. We weren't meant to be there so, at the very least, we should have been quiet at such an ungodly hour.

*Ungodly.*

Yes, everything at sea felt disconnected. I believed we were in God's peripheral. Did His eyes ever look where His children did not dwell? We were nearing the edge of our world, the human world, and leaving the Promised Land—our mistake. God would not look for us there. Only fools would dare tread those waters.

Yet, there I was. I struggled to think of where else I would be. My father had expected me to live the life of a sailor since before I was conceived. I'd have been thrown on the streets if I wanted otherwise. *He should have anyway.* Yeah, he should have. At the burdensome age of thirteen, I had no applicable skills. Hell, I had no applicable qualities. My mother had kept me sheltered inside, as my skin would burn easily and the village kids would taunt me for my feminine build. That only kept me in a rut. I wasn't doomed from birth; I was doomed when my parents decided it was so.

He wouldn't admit it, but I brought my father shame. I would witness his face twisted in distaste as we'd roam the market. The men would whisper under their breath, "*Alak, the great sailor, and his rat of a son. O, where did God go wrong?*" The women would snicker, "*Alak, the great sailor, and his polar opposite of a son. The wife cheated, no doubt.*" My mother didn't seem like the type, but who could tell? She talked to no one. Day in and day out she would sit on the wooden bench overlooking the stony shore and breathe. Yes, that's all. She would breathe and stare, never saying a word, only moving to tend to me or household chores. To that day, I

knew nothing of who my mother once was before she became a shell of herself, or why she would only ever look at the water, never letting it brush her skin.

It never bothered my father. He had worked on building a ship with his first mate, Aksel, almost my whole childhood. He was devoted to the task, as he was set on becoming a merchant and moving to Bryggen. We were held in high esteem in my village, a small fishing town around 300 kilometers from Trondheim. My father came from a line of successful fishermen who made good money selling fish to the towns around us. Not only were they fishermen, but craftsmen, as well. They'd built their ships for centuries and, naturally, the skill was passed down to my father. He wasn't satisfied with the small fortune, though. He said it was insignificant in comparison to a merchant in Bryggen, where one could enter the Hanseatic League. The product of this thirteen-year dream was Vilde, a two-deck cog ship built to withstand every challenge the sea could muster.

My father had gone on many voyages in Vilde, testing her strength and resolve. When home from a journey, I'd see him only slightly more than when he was gone. He would pass out drunk in his cabin night after night, awaiting the chance to embark on another trip. My mother would be cursed with his presence when he was hungry or horny, never saying a word as she fulfilled her tasks.

I'd help with a ship chore or two but, other than that, he would leave me be. That's why it was a surprise when he told me to go fishing with him one day. At dusk, we took one of his older fishing boats and sailed a little ways into the North Sea. He stopped the boat precisely at the moment when the moon mirrored the sun and turned to me, a grim look on his face. His dark features were such a sinister placement in comparison to the vibrant backdrop that the sea and sky provided. *"You've got a choice, boy: start earning my name or let the sea drag you to the*

*locker. I won't bring a nameless coward back tonight.*" His words lingered in my ears, as mine were the only ones they could haunt. The painted water no longer held wonder. Each shade made me think of the unknown beasts that lurked within. The reds and purples were demons surrounded by orange, yellow, and pink fire. *Hell.* The choice was obvious.

*"I am your son."* And with that, I relinquished my fate to my father.

That night, staring up at the weeping floorboards while Aksel snorted and grunted away, I wondered whether jumping would have been a quicker death. At the rate I was going, I would suffer on these sinister seas until a kraken speared through me—mouth to arse. Even then, I'd be banished to Davy Jones Locker for exploring the cursed waters. Had I made a mistake? *Humans should never leave their sacred shores.* The seven seas were a mystery, one that God intended to stay that way. We were eating forbidden fruit.

I glanced over at Aksel and twitched at every noise he carelessly made. *He'd be quieter fighting for his life—silent, when dead.* After a vigorous smacking of my forehead, I stretched my leg over the side of the hammock and touched my big toe to the semi-cold wood. I added a little weight and the floor did not cry out. Seeing that it was safe to walk, I began my slow trek to Aksel's hammock. It was only a pace away so I arrived with haste. I stood over his hammock and watched the drool dribble into his tightly braided, auburn beard. *Humans are filth.* Not all humans were filth, though. Just sailors.

Skillfully, I plucked a flask from Aksel's half-limp left hand, which was hanging off the side of his hammock. How he managed to keep a grip on the flask while asleep, I could not understand. I strode back to my hammock and laid down, the flask close to my chest. After a few hearty swigs, I figured Aksel would get punished by something sinister soon enough. I didn't need to kill him. *We'll see about that.*

As I dozed off, I began to dream of a gentle voice singing me a soft lullaby, easing my troubles.

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The next morning, the sun shone through the planks directly onto my eyes. My head pounded, sharp and heavy. Shortly after peeking through my eyelashes, I instantly shut them as colored spots filled my vision and a wave of nausea passed over me. The booze from the night before rattled my stomach and urged me to bend over the side of my hammock, choking up the bread and cheese I had eaten the night before. I sighed in relief when I didn't hear Askel's gruff mockery or his robust snores. Thankfully, he must have left early to start navigating. I was surprised that he had not twisted my ear until it was purple for drinking out of his flask.

When I turned my head up from the pool of chunky cream and yellow vomit, I covered my mouth at the scene in front of me. Bile rose to the top of my throat and I swallowed hard. Aksel's body hung from a noose tied to the hook in the ceiling. At that moment, I had no thoughts and only one feeling—dread.

Instinctually, I screamed. I wasn't sure how he died—whether I had killed him or whether something, or someone, else had. All I knew was that I needed to get my story straight. My father would've had no problem sacrificing me to the beasts of the deep that were starving for human flesh.

Eirik, the boatswain, appeared in the doorway. He froze, an unreadable look on his face, and then glanced at me. His eyes trailed to the flask on my lap. In a split second, he yanked me by my collar off of the hammock, causing me to land in the rancid remains of my episode. Soon after, he yanked me onto my knees and slammed his knuckle into my jaw. I cried out in pain as

my teeth slammed against each other and my neck jerked to the right. My legs bumped into the corners of the walls and stairs as Eirik dragged me to the starboard.

“I’ll rip yer tongue out and offer it to the sirens if you don’t give me a good reason for—” my father began to say, a grim shadow overcasting his eyes.

“Aksel’s dead and yer boy here had something to do with it. He had Aksel’s flask. Aksel never let anyone touch his father’s flask.” Eirik stayed focused on me. Though other deckhands and crew members had gathered around the scene, his chilling gaze never wavered. He had already come to a conclusion.

I jumped to action and pushed away from Eirik, stumbling towards my father. “It wasn’t me! All I did was steal a few swallows! I woke up and he was hanging. ,” I yelled fervently. My jaw stung at every word but I was delirious. My eyes were so wide that I feared one would slide out with a sticky “*pop*” and affirm my innocence to my father. I was a wee lad, too feeble and fragile to kill a man as burly as Aksel. Hell, the way my body was trembling so hard that I couldn’t stand up proved how puny my resolve was.

Without a word to me or Eirik, my father quickly strode away. Exhausted from the morning’s turn of events, I crumpled to the floor and wept. I did not know whether I shed tears because of guilt or weariness.

I hummed a lullaby. I couldn’t remember the words, only the melody, but I was pretty sure my mother used to sing it to me. It soothed my nervous jitters and I drowned out the world around me.

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In the midst of mopping the poop deck, I could feel a pair of eyes on me. I was sent to perform my daily chores after my father boiled Aksel’s death down to suicide. Once he got a

good look at his friend's corpse, he retired to his quarters for hours. The crew cleaned the cabin and wrapped Aksel's body for a sea burial. Eirik stood watch of me until my father came to a decision, claiming that something was off about me and I couldn't be left alone.

My father returned, purple pillows under his eyes. The crew gathered around him. "*The boy may damn well be a freak, but he ain't a murderer. He's a coward, through and through. He couldn't even face Aksel like a man, just threw up at his feet,*" my father said with a sour look on his face. Everyone but Eirik grumbled in agreement. Afterwards, we all returned to work and my father silently retired to his quarters.

I felt both relief and shame from my father's words, but I tried not to dwell too much on the situation as I fulfilled my duties. Only when I noticed Eirik's presence, did I stop my actions. He was leaning against a wall, eyes narrowed and lips drawn tight. When I turned fully in his direction, he jeered and spat at my feet. As he walked away, I pressed a hand to the sore spot on my face and gripped the mop tightly.

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The sun had fallen and my dreadful thoughts had returned. I was back to fearing for my safety, not only pertaining to the creatures of the night but to Eirik, as well. I was in the galley, drinking water to cool off, when I saw him again. Immediately, he stalked towards me. I tensed, setting the cup of water down and raising my hands in surrender.

"I didn't do anything, I swear it," I yelped as he pinned me against the cupboards and dug his left heel into my toes. *He'll never let you go. Kill him.*

"You may have the others fooled, but I knew Aksel better than any of 'em. He would have never died without a fight, especially when we were so close to fortune." I couldn't tell if it



was sadness or anger, but Eirik looked deranged. His eyes were wild and every word was laced with poison. “Either you tell ‘em or I’ll strike you down myself for the lies you’ve spun.”

*You or him?* Without a second thought, I sank my teeth into his arm. As I yanked my neck to the right, some skin and parts of the flesh on his arm separating from the force, I kicked his knee and pushed him away. One of the kitchen knives glinted on the counter. I grabbed it with haste and plunged it into the side of his neck, dragging it haphazardly from one side to the other. His scream drowned in the pool of blood spilling from his mouth.

Dropping the knife, I fell to the floor, dizzy from the adrenaline. The sight in front of me swam from the tears beginning to fall. I had killed Aksel. I knew it then. Wrapping my arms around my legs, I rocked back and forth. The melodic lullaby returned to my thoughts and aided in comforting me.

“O hell.” A voice interrupted my dazed state and shook me back to reality. Standing at the head of the galley, was the head cook. I never cared to learn his name, as he tended to hole away in the galley. He looked me up and down, eyes lingering on the blood dripping from my chin. “You monster,” he whispered shakily.

*They’re the monsters. You never asked for this.* My head started to pound and the voice bounced around my skull like an endless echo. The cook’s face started to melt, eyeballs slowly rolling out of their sockets. I grabbed the knife and he ran towards me. Closing my eyes, I struck at him, stabbing wherever I could to kill the monster before me. Once I heard the thump of his lifeless body hit the floor, I ran out of the galley.

I was frantically humming the lullaby to calm myself. The blood on my face had started to dry and limited my facial movements. My hands were sticky and fixed to the knife like glue. More and more faceless men approached me. I faltered. *Just listen to the lullaby. All will be well.*

My eyes fluttered shut and I surrendered to the music in my head.

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I woke up with a start, sweat binding my hair to my forehead. My muscles felt like they were on fire and I could hear the song clearer than ever, reverberating off the crystalline waters. I glanced up and saw that I was in the captain's quarters, my father's bunk. He sat in front of me, a deep frown on his face with skin paler than my own.

"Do you hear it? The lullaby?" I looked at him expectantly, though I knew deep down that only I heard it.

"Haven't heard a floorboard creak since you butchered them."

I froze. "What?"

"You killed them all. My whole crew. I watched as you gutted 'em, a smile on your face." He put his head in his hands. "And I did nothing. Even then, I couldn't bring myself to kill my own son," he cried. Sobs racked his body. I had never seen my father cry. It looked so unnatural as if his body was never meant to shake in such a way.

"I-I don't believe it. I could never—," I stopped mid-sentence after catching a glimpse of my appearance in a mirror. It wasn't sweat covering my face; it was blood. I was covered in red, minus the whites of my eyes.

Startled, I backed away from the mirror and from my father, who had started coughing up blood. I ran to the door and threw it open to find corpses enveloped in sand. Their faces were back to normal. Their eyes were glazed over and sand leaked from the corners. It was almost as if their tears were composed of sediment. A storm brewed overhead and lightning struck the bodies, morphing them into glass, sand, or fire.

“N-no. This can’t be,” I stuttered. *It is.* “But mother’s lullaby, it stopped me!” I turned away from the dreadful truth in front of me.

My father was standing. Twenty or so stab marks littered his torso. “Don’t you remember?” His head tilted to the side. “You never heard yer mother’s voice.”

I thought back to my childhood and remembered all of the silent moments I shared with my mother. The loneliness I felt was never her fault though. I remembered then how I threw my porridge at her one day, screaming that I hated her for never loving me enough. She smiled at me, a sad look in her eyes, and revealed the stump in her mouth where her tongue used to be. Later in life, I learned that the rumors in the town were reality. My father had cut off my mother’s tongue for infidelity.

My father set ablaze. Vilde’s walls around me collapsed, turning to sand. Chains rose up from the ground and darted toward me. They wrapped themselves around my body, binding me to the ship. After a better look around, I realized that there were no more waters. There were only sand dunes, littered with ship wreckage.

A bright red locker door stood in the middle of the terrain. A silhouette stood in front of it and I heard their next words clearer than my own thoughts.

*Did you enjoy my song?*