

DEAD IN THE WATER
a short story by Caroline Koonce

I've always had a hard time connecting with people; it's not something I can fix, it's just the fact of the matter. My eyes are blue, my hands are rough, and I don't fit in no matter where I go. The three fundamental truths of Andrew Soames.

I left home because no one liked me there. They said they did, that I was their son or brother or friend, but there was always something in their eyes that told me they were lying. I'd talk too loud, or knock something over, or lose my way, and the facade would crack. Little pieces chipping away, like an eggshell. I didn't want to see what laid underneath.

So, I left. I hopped on the first merchant ship that would take me, hoping that I'd find what I was looking for. The men down at the docks were always laughing and shoving each other around, like friends were supposed to do. If I joined up with a ship's crew, maybe I could be that kind of guy.

But I didn't really... mesh, with the crews I was on. We worked together fine, but as soon as everyone would split up for cards, or cock fights - no, not that kind of cock - I would be left behind. I'd sit alone at mealtimes. They'd make jokes that everyone got but me. I was outside, looking in at a party I would never be invited to.

And it wasn't just the crews - the officers onboard gave me harsher punishments as well. When other boys were caned for an offense, I would be flogged. I had been knocked about as a child, like all boys had, but this was a pain beyond my imagination. It started to happen so frequently that the scars wouldn't get a chance to heal before a new set was scoured into my flesh. Even now I can feel the salt digging into the cuts, burning them clean as I screamed.

The worst part of it is, I could never figure out why people didn't like me. I looked like them, talked like them, I even acted just like they did. I tried, I really did. It felt like there was the mark of the beast on my forehead, something that told everyone around me that I was not to be talked to, or trusted, or loved. I was completely and utterly alone.

I guess that's why I joined up with the first pirates I saw. Any port in a storm, and all that.

On the night they attacked I'd taken the watch - if I was going to be alone then it was going to be on my own terms. I would sit in the crow's nest and watch the stars as they streaked across the sky. I'd gotten pretty good at identifying constellations; Orion, Cygnus, Ursa Major, Ursa Minor. Ursa Minor's the most important. You can navigate anywhere if you can find the North Star. I'll have to show you how sometime.

It was around three or four in the morning when I spotted their ship - a large, black frigate, near invisible as it cut a path through the dark water. At least thirty cannons lined each side of the ship, each one polished and gleaming. A dark red fog blanketed the water around them, rolling out the carpet for their entrance.

A blood-red flag with a black skeleton flew from their main mast, its tattered edges whipping in the wind. *No survivors.*

A cold sweat beaded on my brow as I rose from my watch, leaning back against the mast. No other ship should be in these waters - the captain had paid a handsome fee to the dockmaster to ensure our voyage remained a secret. Either the master had sold us out, or we had been dealt an unlucky hand. Knowing the dockmaster it could have been either.

It was coming at us fast, eight or ten knots at least. Its black sails billowed in the breeze, and as I looked up at our own I realized that they had stolen our wind. At the sight a knot of fear unfurled in my gut, dark tendrils twisting and lashing against my sides. There was no way to outrun them. We were trapped, dead in the water.

As my eyes drifted up to that blood-red flag for a final time, a faint music began to play in my ears.

I quickly scrambled down from the crow's nest, my hands catching and bleeding on the rigging as I went. I raced for the captain's quarters, banging on the shipmen's doors and calling out as I ran that *we were under attack, to ready the cannons and brace for impact.* I shouted until my throat was raw and screaming, panic surging through my body at the thought of the red flag.

Not a single man stirred at my call. It was as if the ship were full of ghosts, with I the only man among them. I kept running through the halls, incredulous and terrified in equal measure as splinters dug into my bare feet.

I burst into the captain's quarters and almost sobbed to see him lying there, groggy and blinking as he awoke from a deep sleep.

"We're under attack, sir!" I cried, throat hoarse and grating. "A ship is coming our way!"

He fixed me with a bloodshot stare. "You saw something else in the night, boy. Our voyage is protected."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Sir, I know what I saw! We've got to do something -"

“If you don’t shut up I *will* do something,” he spat, his lips pulled back, teeth bared. I stood frozen in the doorway, my hands shaking. A numbness sank into my bones.

Was I hated that much? So condemned, so scorned that the captain would ignore a warning solely because it came from my mouth?

The music grew louder, a thrumming beat lacing itself under the rhythm of the ship. I could hear it more clearly now - an uptempo march, marked by the drum and fife. I’d never heard anything like it. I’ve heard many marches now, but none of them have stirred such a fire in me. As the song rose, blood began to roar in my ears, beating in time. How **dare** he?

Before I could scream again he lunged at me, eyes blazing. “*Get out.*” I barely dodged his outstretched hand as it reached for my collar, dropping to the floor like a stone and rolling to the side.

Without missing a beat he pivoted from the doorway and swung wildly at me, his fist connecting with a sharp *crack!* You can still see the break in my nose if you look close - it never really healed right. Didn’t know how to set bones back then.

My blood dripped on the carpet as I crawled away from him, frantically searching for something that I could use to protect myself. I knew deep down that the captain wouldn’t stop with one punch. I would pay for my crimes with my life.

My hands grasped around the girth of an iron paperweight as a great big *whump* rolled through the ship, the cabin tilting wildly. The frigate had docked, but that didn’t seem to matter to the captain. He was a man possessed with a fire and I was the fuse, waiting to burn.

As I looked up at him, a floodgate opened within me. I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to make him scream. I wanted to make him *bleed*. I wanted to whip him bloody where he stood, one lash for every one he dealt me. I wanted to cut his back into bloody ribbons until you couldn’t see where the skin ended and the muscle began.

I wanted him dead.

I thrust the paperweight into the air as he made a final, unfortunate lurch towards me. It connected with his temple, a second *crack!* ringing through the air as he abruptly fell to the floor, knocked near dead by the hit.

I swung it into his head a few more times, just to make sure.

His body twitched as I drove the paperweight home, nerves firing in a last attempt to escape my heavy hand. Dark, clotting blood seeped onto the carpet as a deathly rattle pulled itself from his throat. His eyes grew red and shot through with blood from the force of my hits. And yet, I didn't stop.

I told myself it was self defense, and to a point it was. But after the seventh hit, after he went still and lifeless, I couldn't keep up the lie. I wanted to see his brain smeared across the floorboards, and it had nothing to do with his attack on me.

When I had that paperweight in my hand, I was the one in control. I was the one doing the hurting, and I **liked** it.

As I brought down the paperweight for one final swing, the door to the captain's quarters slammed open. An older pirate, clad in a red captain's coat and adorned with fine chains of gold and silver, strode into the room before stopping abruptly at the scene I had made. He fixed me with a questioning look - I was still holding the bloody paperweight, after all.

"Is that your captain?" He asked, quirking an eyebrow.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Yes sir."

"And why is he bleeding out there on the floor?"

"He was trying to kill me. Sir."

He knelt before the scene, prodding at the captain's smashed head with an ungloved hand. Gray matter coated his fingers as he probed the wound, his fingers perverse and seeking.

"Mmm. To go straight for the kill instead of incapacitating - that's remarkable. And the captain too.." He rose from the body, a smile stretching his face. "What's your name, son?"

In the heat of the moment, I'd forgotten that incapacitating him was an option. I fought down my nausea as I met his eyes. If I wanted to survive this, I needed to lean into the idea that I was the fearsome killer he thought me to be.

I scrambled for what to say, but I only knew the name of one pirate - the infamous Blackbeard. I knew he was a killer, head wreathed in smoke with eyes blazing, slaughtering countless enemies with the ruthlessness of a wild animal. I'd always admired him a little. He knew what he wanted and he knew how to get it. If I was going to remake myself, I would shape my form in his image.

My mouth opened, the words spilling out. “Black Andrew, sir.”

“Well, Black Andrew,” he said, as if every word was the sweetest fruit he’d ever tasted. “You’ve done me a great service today. My name is Francis Spriggs. How’d you like to join my crew?” He stuck out a hand and I shook it, almost unthinking.

As our hands touched, the song thrumming in my ears burst into life, the simple fife and drum now joined by a whole chorus of instruments. My foot began to tap along to the song, unconsciously matching his. He looked down at our feet before clapping a hand on my shoulder.

“Fantastic.” he grinned, teeth sharp and shark-like. “Let’s get you back to our ship and I’ll show you the ropes.”

The sky dawned a blood-red as I climbed aboard their ship *Einherjar*, the bodies of my old crew littering the merchant ship’s deck. I felt nothing as I looked at their scattered forms, and at that thought a chill ran up my spine. Something wasn’t right. I hadn’t liked them, nor they me, but I should have still *felt* something at their deaths.

I pushed the thought to the back of my mind as I stepped onto the deck, the other pirates forming a ring around me and Captain Spriggs.

He rested a hand on my shoulder before addressing the crew. “Men, this is your new crewmate, Black Andrew. He helped out on today’s raid by smashing his captain’s head in!” A loud cheer erupted from the ring, quieting at Spriggs’ hand. “He’s now as much a pirate as any of you. You’ll respect him as you respect me.” He turned to face me, holding my shoulder more tightly. “Pull your weight, fall in line, and you’ll do just fine.”

I looked around the ring of men, now fighting to hide a smile. They seemed... genuinely happy that I was there. They weren’t rolling their eyes, or muttering under their breaths. They were grateful that I’d helped. They were excited that a new man was joining the crew. They *wanted* me there.

The music swelled louder in my ears. It was the sweetest song I had ever heard.

“Well men, that’s enough talk for today,” Spriggs yelled over the din. “Let’s celebrate!”

At that the cheering rose up once again. The men began to congregate around their loot, jokingly pushing one another as they began to divvy up the spoils. Spriggs stepped into the crowd, grabbing what looked like a doubled share of the loot as a cry rose up among the men. He approached me, goods in hand.

“You were part of the raid too, son,” he said, pushing an equal share into my hands. “You won this fair and square, just like everyone else.” I smiled wide at the gesture, my hands closing tightly around the precious metals and stones.

My voice could barely be heard through the hubbub. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” He turned back to the crew, hands outstretched in joy. “Now, could someone get this man a tankard?”

We partied through the day and well into the night, stuffing our faces with fine food and drinking ourselves stupid. I lounged on a pile of rope, talking with two other men who had also joined Sprigg’s crew recently. I hadn’t *talked* with someone in so long - I mean, I talked to men aboard the merchant ships, but that was a completely different world compared to the easy conversation that flowed between us. It was the happiest I’d been in years.

I should have known something was wrong then. It was just *too* good to be true.

Spriggs’ voice called through the night. “Alright, now who wants to play a game?”

A roar ripped through the deck, all the men rushing to stand at the ready. They formed two lines, one along each rail; their bodies wound tight and ready to jump into action.

Spriggs pulled me aside, bringing me onto the quarterdeck with a pat on the shoulder. “You’re not ready for this game yet. I want you to stand back and watch this first time, tell me what you think.”

He stepped back onto the main deck with a shark’s grin, joining the line along the starboard rail.

“On your mark!”

The men drew their weapons – and only now did I realize that every single man aboard the *Einherjar* had been armed to the teeth, even in their downtime. Sabers, pistols, cutlasses, knives; I even think I saw a mace or two in the crowd. I took an instinctive step back, my eyes widening.

“Set!”

They held them at the ready. Some of the men smiled at the thought of what was to come, some were overtaken by their anger, veins pulsing and teeth gritted with rage. None of them showed any marks of fear.

The music surged to a fever pitch in my ears, overtaking all other sounds. The sweetness of the chorus had turned sour, a frenzied beat pulsing in my skull, enticing me to join the fray.

“Kill!”

At Spriggs’ words a... haze, set over me. A blood-red fog, clouding my vision and scrambling my senses. It crawled into my skin, filled my veins, crowned me with a wreath of poisoned thorns. I blacked out for I don’t know how long – but when I woke up, my hands were drenched with blood and other viscera. The men clapped me on the back, eyes and smiles wide, wiping gore from their own hands and brows.

“Welcome to the crew, man,” one of them said, wringing red from his beard and licking his teeth.

Francis came up behind me, similarly bloodied and covered with gore. The hand resting on my shoulder felt like it plunged to the bone as he craned his neck to face me. “I should have you whipped for disobeying your captain’s orders.”

At the mere idea of a flogging a flinch ran through my body - was the *Einherjar* going to be different? Did I actually escape? Had I gone from a pan into a bonfire?

“But I’m too damn proud of your showing today! You held your own out there, unarmed, as good as any of my men!” he said, that shark smile stretching his face once again. The blood on his hands stained the white of my shirt, a handprint seared into my flesh. “Now you’re really a part of the team.”

Being a part of the team, as it turned out, meant taking part in the games everyday. The men would fight to the death every night and then rise again each morning, born anew like the sun. Every day was the same - ship duties, good food, better drink, and the nightly melee. I never figured out how the ship steered itself in the night, or how we got the bloodstains out of the wood.

The only variations to our days were when we found another ship. It didn't seem to matter to Spriggs what kind of ship it was - merchant, Navy, even other pirates, we slaughtered them all. I don't even think piracy was the goal. Spriggs – he just wanted to kill. And he'd found an entire army of men willing to follow his orders to any end.

We sailed around for what felt like months, never stopping to restock or replenish our men. When one of our men would fall in battle, Spriggs would poach another from the enemy crew, and off we went to fight another day. And so the cycle repeated.

I wasn't special. I wasn't even particularly good. Spriggs picked me because I was young and easy. I bent to his will like a piece of greenwood in a gale. I was putty in his hands. I wanted so badly to feel like I belonged somewhere, even if that meant I belonged with a group of – fucking undead murderers.

I would have accepted any hand, and he knew it. Any port in a storm, and all that.

The thing that snapped me out of his control was during an attack on a merchant ship, a three-sail schooner called the *MV Eirene*. We were making our rounds throughout the ship, doing... what we did best. I had been assigned to flush out the kitchen and storerooms, and I burst through the kitchen door, cutlass and pistol in hand.

Huddled there on the floor was a boy no older than twelve, rail-thin and shaking in his tattered clothes. I'd seen many ship's boys, I'd killed many of them, but something about this wide-eyed boy's surrender opened a pit in my stomach. This was no glorious battle. This was a man killing a child with no means to fight back, simply because he'd been ordered to. Because he *wanted* to.

I was no better than my old captain. I was far, far worse.

My cutlass and pistol clattered to the ground as I fell to my knees in front of the boy, a red smoke pouring out. I coughed violently, expelling the fog that had piloted my body for the last few months. Instead of hanging in the air it dissolved into a fine mist - a destruction, not a transference.

The music in my ears abruptly stopped playing, the chorus crashing to a halt, cut off mid-phrase. I laid on the ground, my head reeling but clear for the first time since I'd stepped onto the *Einherjar*.

I instinctively knew that I was now vulnerable to injury. The fog and music had acted as pilot and healer in one, and that if I returned to the *Einherjar's* games tonight I would not resurrect come morning. There was no way to avoid the games if I returned to our ship, and so two options

presented themselves before me: I could accept my death, a final penance for my crimes; or I could run away. I'd need to steal a dinghy from the *Eirene* - the *Einherjar* didn't have lifeboats.

I think you know which answer I chose. I grabbed the boy and ran to a lifeboat under cover of darkness, quickly unfurling the ropes tying it to the *Eirene* and rowing away from the whole bloody mess.

How I managed to escape without Spriggs' noticing, I'll never know. A dark part of my heart says that he let me go because he **knew** I was weak, that he didn't want the shame of his crewman flaking out on the mission. The rest of my heart says that Spriggs was single-mindedly focused on his kills and thus wouldn't notice an errant man on the run. The rational part of my brain says that it was probably both in one.

We were silent for the entire voyage, the oars' splashing cut through with our ragged breathing. Speaking felt wrong, somehow. It was a heavy quiet, suffocating us and tying our tongues. The barest beginnings of penance.

The boy and I made it to Nassau three days later, out of our mind with thirst and hunger. As soon as we landed the boy dashed off into the dock's crowd, the dinghy rocking from the force of his steps. I couldn't blame him for it, I would have done the same. One of my biggest regrets is that I never learned his name.

After that, it was a matter of keeping myself fed. People now looked at me with disgust and fear instead of pity. I was branded by my crimes, the mark of the beast carved into tender flesh, pulsing and radiant. My shame invisibly displayed for all to see, with no way to cover it. I thought I had found community with Spriggs, maybe even a friend or two I could call my own, but I had left the ship almost completely alone, blood forever staining my hands.

My hair falling out from malnutrition, starving and desperate, I crawled onto a pirate's ship late one night with the intent of begging for mercy. I was discovered the next morning and held at gunpoint while I explained my story - leaving out the more unbelievable bits, but enough to convince them of my skill. I was hired on the spot after a quick demonstration with my cutlass and knife.

Ever since that day I've been torn between three points, like a man strung upon a cross. I'm good in a fight - it's one of the only things I'm good at, and one of the only ways I can put coins in my pocket. I pride myself on knowing my way around a blade and gun, even though the thought of using them makes my stomach crawl up my throat. Some days I can't even pick up a knife.

On other days, I have to hide my weapons while the red fog tears its way through my veins. I don't think the fog is there anymore, not really, but on my worst days it shoves itself down my throat and turns me into someone I no longer recognize. Into someone who would have slaughtered that wide-eyed boy where he stood. The thought keeps me up at night.

And still, after all that bloodshed and heartache, I am lonely.

It's gotten better since I joined up with the *Ranger*. I've actually made some real friends now. People who want to eat meals with me, spend time with me, listen to my tales and share theirs in return without some kind of ulterior motive or larger force at play. I didn't know I could have that.

On most days, with the *Ranger* standing behind me, I feel whole. The nails come out of the cross and I can relax into my body, let it sag in all the right places. I can sit with Charles and the crew on the deck while he tells us stories. I can taste the juice of the orange as it bursts in my mouth. I can listen to the waves and know in my heart that everything is quiet.

But some days, I hear a frenzied march playing in the distance, led by the fife and drum.