

Doldrums

Leith Harbour, Edinburgh, 1880

Between the water marks, Dullrum hesitated, neither on land nor on sea, lingering in the pirates' grave. On the ship, his cousin waved his hat. *We are leaving*, declared the hat. *It is now or never.*

Dullrum kissed Rose's cheek. The bairn in her arms blinked, eyes like sea-foam and stars. 'You think he'll miss me?' he asked.

She managed a smile. 'He's still figuring out who you are, love. The boy's barely a month old.'

One month. Would he even recognise his son in a year's time? He wanted to say *I wish I could stay*, except all these weeks he'd done nothing but wish, and here they stood, and the ship was about to set sail. As he trudged up the gangplank, Rose called out, but the wind stole away her words.

His cousin, Captain Richard Ross, slapped him on the back. 'That wasnae so bad, eh? Welcome aboard the *Perseverance*, Charlie boy.' Dullrum looked back, but with a lurch, the ship untethered herself and his family faded into fog.

'A landlubber on board a whaler?' remarked a man leaning on the bulwark: the balmy ease of a Jamaican with the rugged tones of a Scot.

'My family are seafarers,' said Dullrum with a touch of pride. 'My father was master mariner at Trinity House.'

'If you're a seafarer, then I'm an Englishman.'

Dullrum took a breath. He offered a sweaty hand. ‘Charles Dullrum.’

‘Second Mate Agwe Spencer.’ The ship swayed and Dullrum clung to the mast. A shout came from the captain.

‘We’d best get to it, Mister Doldrums,’ said Agwe.

‘It’s Dullrum.’

‘Oh, aye. If you say so.’

Since birth, the sea stalked him. It was there in his mother’s tales of sirens and shipwrecks, and in his father’s storm-ravaged soul. It was there in folklore and hymn and the reek of ripe salmon, the sight of the waves off Port Leith drawing near and then retreating, as if debating whether to come ashore.

The sea was an old unfailing friend, unaging yet ever-changing, until the day his father’s ship – the *Jacobite’s Joy* – sailed over the horizon into the starlit north, never to return.

As a lad, he took comfort in scripture. In God’s kindness and a merciful afterlife. He turned from the shore, spent his days at the cathedral in prayer. God lived in the land. The sea – fickle, treacherous and deadly – was the devil’s domain. Since boyhood, he believed he’d be a priest. Then Rose came along and spoiled his celibate plans. But though he knew both Testaments off by heart, he couldn’t work a forge or stitch a wound or shoe a horse. He found no work and his son screamed through the night, while his wife wasted away.

Then one day, his cousin put an arm around him and gestured to the sinking sun. ‘You ken how much an adult sperm whale is worth? Meat, blubber, oil – they’re mountains of singing gold. Just one voyage. One wee whale.’

So here he was. In the devil’s domain.

The wind wailed; the sails swelled. He gripped the mast and uttered a prayer. 'Eyes on the horizon, Mister Doldrums,' said Agwe.

'Dullrum,' he managed.

'Dinnae worry. Give it a couple of days and you'll soon get your sea legs.'

Dullrum envisaged two green crab legs sprouting from his waist. He put a hand to his stomach. Swallowed. The crew were busy with their tasks under First Mate Murdoch's hardened gaze. With a wobble, Dullrum slipped below deck, to be met by a blinding black. He fell to his knees. Hand on his crucifix, he prayed like his life depended on it.

After breaking his fast and losing it overboard, the Netherlands drifted by. His cousin strode up beside him. 'Damn Dutch,' said Captain Ross. 'If it wasnae for them, there'd still be whales in the north. But we'll beat them yet, eh? The Dutch will never make it south of the equator.'

Dullrum closed his eyes. From Scotland, to where the waters of South America crystallise into the wilderness of Antarctica. A year at sea, there and back. A year of salt, sweat, lime juice, dried meat, hard labour, hellish storms, maddening calms, and all the malice of the open ocean.

God give him strength.

The day stretched and the sun submerged. As the ship slipped into the English Channel, the crew started to sing.

On we go, through wrack and toil, we won't be home ere long,
On we go, in search of oil, singing the whaler's song,
Through ocean old and ocean cold, though the storm may be severe,
With oaken hold and timbers bold, the *Perseverance* shall persevere.

It sounded like a hymn, though to what god he couldn't fathom.

France fell behind. Spain met the mirage of Africa. At night, he lay perspiring in his hammock; the ship swaying around him, the world swaying beneath. In his dreams, the *Perseverance* flooded and he floated, drowning in his own sweat.

‘Why does he squat in the dark all day,’ growled Murdoch, ‘vomiting into barrels and muttering prayers, as if Latin will keep the sails strong?’

‘He’s a tender soul,’ said the captain, ‘but there’s salt in his blood. The sea will harden him.’

One morn, Dullrum staggered above deck to find no land anywhere. All he saw was his reflection in the water, a haggard wraith of a man. ‘Lord, I beg of thee...’ But could God hear him, way out in the abyss? Was he still Christian after so long without confession and communion?

‘You’re nae looking too barry there, Mister Doldrums.’

‘It’s Dullrum.’ He steadied his breath. ‘Tell me, Agwe... Who do you pray to?’

Agwe raised his brows. Men consulted him on navigation, not religion. ‘My mother loved Mami Wata, who’s all the seas and oceans. A serpent woman, kind-hearted and cruel.’

‘Do you believe in such things?’

Agwe chuckled. ‘She also said there are tiny people who live in rum bottles and grant wishes, but I ain’t never got a wish.’ He studied the aching distance. ‘Still, nothing seems impossible out here.’

Dullrum followed his line of sight. ‘Aye. I suppose you’re right.’

At midnight, he awoke to an almighty clamour. Above deck, rain raged down, the clouds black and blazing. The ship thrashed, knocking Dullrum off his feet. He slid towards the bulwark. The waves rose and crashed.

They were under attack: they were being boarded by the sea.

Sobbing, soaking, he held on, fingers fumbling on glassy wood. Murdoch's voice hollered through the storm. The first mate ran over as another wave reared. Dullrum clung tight. The wave fell upon them, filling his eyes and hair, and then retreated.

Taking Murdoch with it.

Lightning struck the sea and burned the night. Behind him, men ran to and fro, slipping and sliding, yelling and labouring. While he lay there, unmoving. It made no difference, young or old, wise or foolish. It meant nothing once the sea took you. 'How are you so cruel?' he screamed. He'd been asking the same thing ever since his father was swept away.

But this time, the ocean answered. *'In the same way God is cruel. With a smile.'*

When the storm passed, east was north, and west was south. Agwe studied the sun. When evening fell, he scrutinised the stars. He uttered a sigh. 'We have drifted into the Atlantic's breathless heart.'

And it was there the doldrums claimed them.

The sails hung limp, the air a moist heat clinging to their skin. The storm left them work enough at first: they bailed water, took stock, treated injuries. But their wounds were deep. Saltwater had spoiled the lime juice, the sea had claimed several of the crew, and the captain had broken his leg and fallen with a fever.

It was beyond even a master mariner's skill to move a ship through becalmed seas. They waited. They paced, ate, played cards, slept, awoke, paced, counted clouds, carved birds into the bulwark, tied and untied knots until their fingers bled.

Day one of the doldrums was the first day Dullrum kept his supper down. It's the stillness, he thought, yet the ship still rocked and swayed. The days died and decayed. On a morning of clear-skied madness, the cook and the

cooper tried to kill each other. The crew stood by; the captain retched in his cabin. Dullrum forced the men apart. 'You want to fight, you can take it outside!' And he pointed overboard. They stared. Trading a bewildered look, they staggered away.

The captain summoned the crew to his bedside. 'Charles.'

'Captain?' said Dullrum.

His cousin swallowed a cough. 'We lost so many to the storm, but you seem to have found yourself.' A weak smile. 'I knew you had it in you, First Mate Dullrum.'

It took a moment to sink in. The men inclined their heads. In the shadows, Murdoch's wraith raised a briny brow.

Come evening, Dullrum stood swaying on the deck. Agwe approached. 'You hear that, Agwe? Singing. Someone's singing!'

'It's the sea, sir.'

'It's the whales. Agwe, wake the crew, the whales are singing!'

'There's nae any whales. Nae for a while yet.'

'Then... could it be sirens?'

Agwe held out a bottle. 'Drink your rum, First Mate Doldrums.'

Dullrum took the rum. This time, he didn't correct the name.

If the doldrums sent them mad, the first wind made them deranged. When the sails stirred, the crew ran in circles, waving their shirts, rolling on the deck. The *Perseverance* opened her eyes, and in a silver moment she parted the blue, the wind caught in her hair. He knelt and put his head against the mast. He didn't say, 'Thank you, Lord.' He said, 'Thank you, O terrible ocean, fairest of all monsters, for bearing us on your scaled back and permitting us to pass.' In his mind's eye, he saw Charles Dullrum, clean-shaven, hand on his crucifix,

staring with undisguised dread. And Doldrums laughed, raucous as a gull, laughing all the louder as Dullrum turned away.

Half a world later, ice rose before the bow. He unfurled the map and found only white. They were beyond the margins now – they'd sailed over the edge of the earth.

There was a dark beauty to this pale land, a silence in the rising mist. Old sailors recalled the Arctic, the play of colours in the sky, the groans of bears from afar. But no whaler had ever braved the Antarctic before.

Doldrums lowered his voice. 'Agwe?'

'Aye, sir?'

'How long before we find one?'

'Who can say? They love the deep places where they hunt giant squid. Still, they must surface to breathe.'

Doldrums searched the waves, staring through the fathoms to where sperm whales battled krakens and mermaids played dice in the gloom. Without warning, he remembered Rose. A phantom, flaming, holding to her heart an ageless faerie boy, the vision so bright he had to turn away. He ate with the crew. The daily special: lukewarm gruel with weevils. Peering into the bowl, he thought, *I have forgotten her eyes.*

Despite their searching, there were no whales to be found. The drinking water was all but gone. They'd eaten nothing fresh in weeks and their teeth ached in their gums.

The door creaked. A lamp sputtered. 'Captain,' said Doldrums, 'we're low on provisions.'

His cousin lay abed. A beached turtle on its back. 'Where are we?' he groaned.

'The Antarctic, Richard. We just need to find the whales.'

‘Dead. All of them. Dead.’ He coughed. ‘Damn Dutch.’ And with that, he fell still.

The crew gathered on deck. They removed their hats as Doldrums and Agwe carried the captain’s body and hoisted it overboard. The sea claimed him, as was her right. In a low voice, Doldrums sang.

On we go, through wrack and toil, we won’t be home ere long,
On we go, in search of oil, singing the whaler’s song,
Through ocean old and ocean cold, though the storm may be severe,
With oaken hold and timbers bold, the *Perseverance* shall persevere.

When he turned away from where his cousin wasn’t, Agwe handed him the captain’s hat. *What now, Captain Doldrums?* said the hat. He looked on at men weary and wretched, stone-faced and sea-fearing. His gaze fell on the horizon. ‘*There!*’

A whale. Sleek as a bullet and grey as winter, a lonesome giant on the starboard side. ‘Harpoons!’ he shouted, and a storm broke out onboard – weapons readied, boats lowered, Agwe leaping to the helm. Then a second shape resolved into sight.

A ship, loosing clusters of rowboats, swarming about the whale. Harpoons pierced the water and blood spread into the blue. From the mast, a Dutch flag waved.

The crew quieted. Agwe whispered, ‘That may be the only whale in the entire Antarctic.’ Doldrums said not a word. Even if they survived the journey home, they would have nothing to show for it. Nothing for their families. Nothing for Rose and his son.

The sea is beautiful and bitter. She washes away morality until you become a spirit of the moment, calm and then wrathful, at ease and then at war. Doldrums put on the hat. ‘Make sail for the whale.’

Agwe frowned. ‘Captain?’

‘We’ve endured storms and doldrums and sea-madness. We came to this frozen circle of hell to hunt, did we not?’

Nods among the men.

‘Will we let them steal our prize before our eyes?’

Shouts.

‘The sea is cruel. She takes what she will. We will have our reward, even if we must strike down those who stand against us. The *Perseverance* shall persevere!’

A cry went up from the crew. Agwe swung the wheel and the ship rolled to face the whale. Perhaps they’d succumbed to sea-madness after all. But by all the deities of the deep, he wouldn’t return home empty-handed.

‘Land ho!’ called Agwe.

Leith unfolded before them. The ship moored with a shiver and a sigh, and a freshness brushed his face.

‘Captain Doldrums?’

‘Aye, Agwe. Tell the men to unload.’

Anyone would think it was solid gold, the way the crowds cheered — barrels brimming with oil, bones heavier than grown men. But this treasure was mightier than gold, and harder won.

On the end of the gangplank, Doldrums hesitated. He closed his eyes, drew a salty breath. He stepped off the ship and the earth roiled beneath him, ancient and alive.

‘Charles?’

With a gasp, Dullrum opened his eyes. ‘Rose!’ he cried, her face consuming him so utterly, he almost missed the second one frowning at him. ‘Who’s this then?’ The boy in Rose’s arms blinked, returning the question. She handed

him over and the two considered each other. A curious wee creature, brow furrowed, as if the world was some grand question yet to be gleaned. But at last they reached a truce, and his son smiled.

‘Welcome home, love,’ said Rose.

The words struck him like a storm. He was home, but only half of him. Charles Dullrum turned round, and on the prow of the *Perseverance* stood Captain Doldrums, lips cracked and eyes bright, holding a harpoon dripping with blood. Waiting. Impatient to return to the wrack and the toil and the joy.

Dullrum stood on the land as Doldrums floated on the sea, and across the unbridgeable waters, their eyes met.