

farewell to the port

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farewell to the port

by Anonymous

Summary

The day Branzy becomes a pirate he wakes up on a small island somewhere in the Caribbean, drunk out of his mind and distinctly lacking shoes.

He thinks, somewhat despairingly, that he really should not be gambling again anytime soon.

or,

The Golden Age of Piracy, and the situations and decisions that drive people to become outlaws.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

"There is a *hole* in the *ocean*!" Ash yells. One of his hands is still pointing in some direction vaguely north, shaky with odd tremors, like uneasy waves crashing against a rocky shore.

His compass lay shattered by his feet.

Spoke quirks up an eyebrow.

"Sure....?"

Ash drops his arm. "You don't believe me."

"Uh, no." Says Spoke.

"Pants!" His Parrot adds.

Ash groans loudly, a sound like creaking planks and rushing waves, and his hands dragged across his face still smell like salt.

The darkness of his eyepatch shows the image of a hole in the ocean. His good eye just shows Spoke and his scuffed boots and squawking parrot.

He groans again, even louder.

"Anyway. Why should I care, exactly?" Spoke asks.

"Other than the fact that there's a giant hole? In the ocean? Right now?"

Spoke nods enthusiastically. His parrot flaps its wings.

Ash considers, for a second, and his eyes drift to the polished wooden planks below their feet, the reflection of the grand three masts stretching high above – he grins.

"I may have... come by a large sum of gold, recently."

Spoke begins to grin too, punched out teeth and all.

"A hole in the ocean, you said?"

And the enthusiasm is so fake and honeyed that Ash just wants to laugh more, because this is what Spoke *is*, at his core, a gun to be bought, never a true ally, never a real friend.

Ash is just fine with that.

They might be sailing to their doom, anyway.

"Where'd you get this ship from, by the way?" Spoke asks, eyes catching the glimmer of golden cannons and crimson sails, halfway to disgust and halfway to awe.

Ash just laughs, and the groans of the ocean below join in with soundless mirth.

◇

Minutes before the royal harbor of Barmond blows up, Zam is watching an execution.

By his father's orders he sits high above the crowd, adorned in his regal attire, all white and gold and heavy, and he sweats under the midday sun.

The people are cheering. It's a terrible joy, harsh like the heat, and there are three boys standing at the gallows.

Their clothes are ragged and torn, a testament to some unspeakable desperation, dirt under their fingernails instead of gold in their teeth.

It is a beautiful day. The sun reflects on Zam's golden buttons, blinding, horrible and a tribute to wealth that should not be.

One of the boys is crying.

Zam averts his eyes, but his father gives him a sharp slap on the wrist and he looks down again.

Pirates are evil, he knows, and there is no mercy he should spare them.

Still, he blinks just a second too long, keeps his eyes closed and hopes he'll miss the moment the wooden floor falls away under the boys' feet; it's a small mercy, to be afforded at least one man's pity in death.

And pity them he does.

The executioner raises his arm. The crowd falls silent, some terrible glee caught in their expectancy, breath caught in their throats, a joyful realization that they are not the ones to die.

And then the world pulls apart below Zam's feet.

It is a terrible sound the world makes as it dies; the roughness of stone grinding against stone, wood splintering and a high-pitched ringing, sharp like a scream, and it booms, it booms like only the fall of an empire can.

Rome burns and Nero sings on the rooftops, Barmond is torn asunder and Zam does not scream, does not cry; all is fire and death and Zam falls from his pedestal down into the crowd, and knows he is going to die.

The twisting bodies of a dying town scatter around him as stone breaks and cannon balls crash into walls and people and houses and the ground is crumbling, hell's open mouth below ready to swallow them whole.

Zam's life slips away, bleeding, into the ocean.

His gaze catches on the gallows again, one last time, the carved *pirates beware!* the most monumental thing he has ever witnessed, and there's still a boy there, struggling against the heavy rope laid against his bare chest.

Zam pulls himself up despite the ringing in his head and the tightness in his chest, and he climbs the steps to the gallows, head held high.

From here he can see the podium his father had built to view these deaths more easily, and it is burning, and there's a wicked thing in the flames, a glory older than time in destruction – here is Zam, governor's son, bejeweled and streaked with soot, and there will be no empire for him to inherit, but there will be a legacy.

A legacy that begins here, in severing the noose around a pirate's neck and standing tall amidst the rubble of something dark and heavy.

A colossus laid to rest, finality in open fire.

The boy does not spare him a second glance. Zam does not want him too.

They are connected enough in this, judge, jury and executioner, in the flames that make all people equal.

When the stone breaks away beneath Zam's feet and the cold ocean embraces him, smothering in its darkness, he feels so terribly tired that he does not struggle at all.

With limbs of lead, Zam watches a spectacle of fire and ash just out of reach, made abstract by the waves.

Time passes like smoke on the water.

Zam drifts, clinging to a piece of burnt wood, and the water is calm but a storm rages in his mind, dark and terrible.

Barmond is gone, and so is Zam, every version of him that has ever mattered, blood in the water a horrible omen.

Zam will die here, and it will be justice.

Zam will die here, and it will be for naught.

He drifts.

He drifts, until there is suddenly a hand extended down to him, and the blinding sun obscures the face of his savior.

Zam takes it, because he wants to live, and because he cannot drown here, and there is only time to regret the decision when they row him back to the main ship.

High above, the black flag flutters promisingly in the wind.

◇

The day Branzy becomes a pirate he wakes up on a small island somewhere in the Caribbean, drunk out of his mind and distinctly lacking shoes.

He thinks, somewhat despairingly, that he really should not be gambling again anytime soon.

Gambling is a pirate's game, anyway, and Branzy is only a simple merchant.

Illegal wares? He doesn't even know what those *are*, no sir!

He's not rich, is what he's getting at.

Still the people throw him suspicious looks here, from their collapsing, groaning houses and dirt streets, from their rotten porches and empty taverns.

It is like the whole island is decaying.

Slow and poisonous, like an infected wound, the Golden Age has sent the worst of itself here to die; pirates and thieves and deserters, all things unholy, and the stench of a rotting corpse carries over.

There's little trust here anymore for men like Branzy, well dressed and silver tongued, no respect to earn.

Tortuga is a rotten place, this century's own Gehenna, and nothing is sacred in its dark grasp.

Branzy thought there might be business here, beyond the scope of small pleasantries exchanged at village markets, beyond the hunger pangs of a bad season; pirates, he had heard, could be exceptionally rich.

And exceptionally scummy, Branzy now thinks, with neither shoes nor gold to his name.

He is somewhere away from the harbor, because the stink of fish does not have him reeling yet; a small blessing, ultimately, and an even bigger curse, because he does not have his ship in eyesight.

A place like Tortuga requires vigilance, the sort of paranoia that makes every rain cloud a thunderstorm, every creak of the planks a sign of loose nails.

There's a distinct possibility his ship is gone.

Branzy wanders, because it's his only option – no one here cares to speak the Queen's English, and even if they did, they would not help him. Not without the added incentive of a heavy, gold filled wallet that Branzy no longer possesses.

Oh well.

The dirt is soft beneath his feet, wet and muddy with morning dew, and Branzy has nothing to his name except the clothes on his back, a certain kind of freedom in it, foreign and golden.

Branzy smiles to himself, on an island far away from home with neither ship nor gold, tasting liberation in the air.

There are footsteps behind him, squelching through the mud – Branzy does not turn to look, because he fears a knife in the stomach or a bottle smashed over his head, because he knows the tale of Orpheus; he keeps walking, hums a tune like a lyre's sweet song, and squashes every wrong footed thought of death deep down.

They keep following him regardless.

Always one step behind, a discordant note in Branzy's melody, sharp and dangerous.

He does not turn around.

"I don't have any gold." He states plainly, to the bloody sun rising over the rooftops of the world, to the swaying trees just in his peripheral; never once looking behind.

The footsteps stop. Whoever is following him is standing close enough to Branzy that he can feel their breath on his neck, warm and wet.

They laugh, and it is a harmonious sound, too soft for an island like this.

"Believe me, I know that... Branzy."

And that has Branzly turning around, like Orpheus so desperate to save his lost lover Eurydice, like Achilles, robbed of half his soul on a beach somewhere far away – Branzly turns around, and cements his destiny.

"Are you Blackbeard?" He blurts out stupidly.

There are bits of of fuse and candle wax in the stranger's hair, a memento of some great act, of fire and intimidation – scars cross over his face like lightning, lichtenberg figures of the ocean sea; he is smiling, a predators grin, some dangerous glint in his eyes, sharp like gun metal.

Branzly swallows.

"No." The stranger says, amused, "No, I'm not. But that's irrelevant. You owe me something, *Branzly*. Seven crates of rum, if I recall correctly?"

Oh, god. Branzly suddenly remembers, like a wave crashing into his frontal lobe, the game of One & Thirty he had partaken in in some dingy bar, table lit by only a single candle.

The stranger had been there, smiling then too, and Branzly had bet on his own victory with the kind of surety that can only come from alcohol.

Seven crates of rum indeed.

"Alright, uhm, how about we go back to my ship and I'll give them to you...?"

"Your ship," The stranger draws, "The 'Jackdaw', was it?"

Branzly nods, and the stranger shakes his head pityingly, golden earrings glinting in the sun.

"What a shame... I'm afraid you don't *have* a ship."

And even though Branzly sort of knew that already, it still cracks some part of his heart clean down the middle, a mast splintering in a bad storm.

"Do you know what we do here to merchants like you, who can't keep their promises?"

The stranger draws his sword, a beautiful thing, from its sheath, its hilt inlaid with gems; transfixed, Branzy wonders if it is as sharp as it looks.

"And what if I wasn't a merchant?" Branzy blurts out, panicked in a way that makes his chest seize.

The stranger pushes his sword back into its sheath, considering.

"Well, if you were, say, a pirate... I might be inclined to let you pay off your debt by working on my ship for a while."

Branzy grins shakily.

"Then it's my pleasure to, uh, be in your service...?"

Mirth blooms in the stranger's eyes, gorgeous like a new morning's sun, more precious than any gold.

"Welcome aboard the Queen Anne's Revenge, Branzy." The stranger says, arms spread wide with terrible glee, "And greetings from her captain as well. You may call me Clown."

Clown, Branzy thinks, What an odd name.

◇

One of these days Red was going to kill Ash, and he would make it as agonizing and torturous as humanly possible.

Standing on the planks of a ship that is most definitely not his, with ripped sails and a black flag high above, he fights the urge to just burn it all down.

The HMS Royal Sovereign is gone, and in its place is a ship Red knows like the back of his hand – The Empress, Ash's pitiful excuse for a proper pirate ship; a brig, two masts and highly focused on speed instead of attack power.

Like Ash's fighting style, a quick in and out rather than the long, arduous battle the war ships of the

Royal Navy like to engage in, the Empress is suited to quick jumps in and out of combat, to risky escapes through rocky waters.

Red wants to chase him to the edge of the world just to have the pleasure to watch him die.

The Royal Sovereign was one of the navy's best, a ship of legend; three rows of cannons and three masts, a striking figure on the battlefield, nicknamed the HMS Fearless for Red's cunning and brave battle strategies.

And Ash has taken it from him.

Red is furious, and some odd shame takes hold in his stomach – how could a single man steal the navy's most precious ship?

How could Ash possibly have stood in Red's place by the grand, golden wheel?

How *dare* he?

It is by far not the worst thing Ash has done. Sometimes Red still tastes the sharp gunpowder tang of an exploding watchtower, the blood like little gems laid into the stones – but Red is no saint either, and there is a reason Ash wears his eyepatch and sails without a crew.

They are mutually destructive, two parasites clinging onto each other, and the only remaining question is who's blood will be sucked dry first.

Too cowardly to outright kill each other, too ambitious to simply let the other go.

It's an endless circle drawn with blood, with loss and death, but neither will give up.

They can't. Not anymore.

And Ash may be crafty, but stealing a ship like this should be impossible – at least alone.

"Sir!"

Red turns to face one of the navy's errand boys, red faced and panting. There are two rolls of parchment in his hand.

"New from her Majesty, the Queen, and the northern outpost sir!"

He takes the two letters, and shoos the boy away.

Her Majesty's letter is simple, but devastating – only her grace has saved Red from the gallows, back when he was nothing but pirate scum, and she can withdraw that mercy whenever she likes.

The Royal Sovereign was always her favourite ship.

The outpost's news are much more uplifting; the ship has been sighted just offshore, heading towards some unknown location north.

Red grins. Ash, try as he might, had never been one for subtlety, and a ship like this could not be hidden away in mist or cloud.

Here's his chance for payback.

Red turns North, to where sky and sea meet, and opens the sails.

The Empress was a quick ship, after all.

Ash will be wishing for her speed very soon.



By the time Vitalasy realizes he has no future he is eighteen years old and still tending to the same soil as ever, as his father and forefathers before him.

He regards the callouses on his hands, the deep ridges dug into them by crude tools and harsh winters, and he forbids himself to dream of more.

There is no dream here. Any semblance of it lay stillborn in the earth, a seed that will never grow, a desperation cutting bone deep.

So Vitalasy is a farmer in a village that barely has a right to a name, and he is tilling the soil, and that is his life.

That is his future.

He eats and sleeps and keeps on living, and he does not dream. He does not wonder about the tales told in dark corners of taverns, about the men with golden teeth and gun powder hair, about grand ships and dark, terrifying waves.

He does not dream, nor wonder, nor keep his ears open down in the market for the old wives tales of riches beyond measure out in the open waves.

Because there are martyrs and man of legend, but others are doomed to a much more frightening fate – unimportance, racing against the hands of the clock, and still not mattering by the end of it.

Vitalasy is ordinary, and that is his eighth circle of hell.

(Curiosity killed the cat.)

There is a man in their village. A newcomer, a stranger the old women throw suspicious looks from their wilting rocking chairs, with hands sunburnt and odd; with only one eye and the other speaking of some unknowable darkness.

They call him Subz by his request.

Vitalasy watches him, the way he moves and talks, fluid like the pull of waves, watches him and is filled with some senseless longing – there is something about the man that makes Vitalasy want to start dreaming again.

So there is a stranger in their village, but to Vitalasy he is much more; familiar and sweet like the smell of his bedsheets – because he knows where Subz goes to sell his fish and where he sits when the sun is about to go down, bathed in red light, and Vitalasy knows where he lives and how his face twists with some unknown feeling when he's all alone, and he knows that bitterness has sunken into his stranger's bones like poison, and that he is very alone here, in a town that does not exist on any map, and that sometimes, the sea calls to him too.

So there is a stranger in their village, but Vitalasy knows him like he knows the call of the waves.

So he isn't a stranger at all.

By the time Vitalasy cracks he's almost nineteen, and Subz is not much of a stranger to anyone anymore.

It is a busy night in town – there are sailors taking refuge from some terrible storm in their dingy tavern, loudmouthed and made loose by alcohol, and it is rare to see light still seep out of clouded windows so late into the night but the faces of these sailors are strange and foreign, and they have everyone distracted.

It is the perfect opportunity.

Vitalasy does not know how to sail a boat, but that realization only comes when he's already standing on deck of the small sailing vessel, shrouded in complacent darkness.

He considers the planks beneath his feet, the mast and sail, considers Theseus' ship and wonders – if he sets sail here, completely reconstructs his life, will he still be Vitalasy then, or some other, stranger creature?

His reflection in the saltwater does not reply.

"What exactly do you think you're doing?"

Face to face with a man Vitalasy was so convinced he knew, he still finds himself speechless.

The air smells like salt and the waves rock the ground beneath his feet, and Vitalasy stares into Subz's eyes, feeling freedom slip away into the mist; wondering, even now, if he is still allowed to

keep dreaming.

Maybe this is the end for him.

Has he failed even in this, a dream older than time, has he failed to flee?

Subz stares back at him, unflinching.

"Uhm." Vitalasy stammers, "Uh—"

"You don't know how to sail a boat, do you." Subz deadpans.

Vitalasy nods, still a little breathless and wide-eyed, still scared of something he cannot really name, but Subz just gives him a wry smile.

"Right, well... Anything you're good at?"

Vitalasy blinks. "Tending to the cabbage patch...?"

Subz laughs at that, and it is a sound like wind blowing into open sails, wild and uncontrollable and yet sweet, promising freedom and some unknown joy, and it makes Vitalasy want to smile, too.

"That's promising." He giggles, bright and wholly made of some odd light, "Really, really promising! Oh, damn it all, let's just go. That's what you were planning to do, right? Steal this boat."

Once again, Vitalasy nods, a little dumbfounded. Maybe Subz had had him figured out for much longer than he could've imagined, too.

There's something oddly mutual in their expectant gazes, something like recognition, something like the creeping realization that they are not very different at all.

They pull the anchor up, open the sails, and it is a windy night, and freedom, to both of them, looks a little like the joy on the other's face.

And so Vitalasy is free.

And so Subz is no longer alone.

(But satisfaction brought it back.)

◇

There is a moment, some terrible silence stretched thin between them, where Ash thinks Spoke is going to kill him.

They are sitting on deck, with Spoke cleaning his gun; an old thing, scarred by fire and smoke, and it is silent.

Even the ocean lay calm beneath their ship, gentle and tamed.

They have been sailing for three days now.

But here is Spoke, and his grip on the gun is odd, fingers ghosting over the trigger, and his eyes are so very empty; Ash blinks against the sun and the glinting metal and does not want to die.

He asks the first question that comes to mind.

Just to break the silence.

Just to have said something.

"Why'd you name your parrot, uhm, Parrot?"

Spoke shrugs. "He named himself."

"What?"

"Well, I asked 'What's your name?', and he said 'Parrot!' so I was like, damn, I guess your name is Parrot now."

Ash laughs, and the sound rolls out his mouth and into the air like a tidal wave, sudden and unexpected, strange in its beauty, and the white foam on the waves dances with it.

Spoke smiles too, and it makes his eyes a little less empty, a little more human.

There is still that silence, all horrific, chewing up empty air – it seems otherworldly now, stretched between them like a tightrope.

Ash feels, like electricity crackling across his skin, that same anxiety, that same horrific anxiety he had felt back then, staring into the open maw of a terrible sea.

Silently, Ash gets up. He gestures for Spoke to do the same.

They stand, side by side, peering over the reeling like little kids.

Ash's breath catches in his chest.

The foam on the waves is like chewed up bones and there's a hole in the sea, there's a hole in the sea and it groans like an empty stomach and it is *hungry*.

Ash glances into the depths of it, the darkness that swallows, and Spoke is next to him and the world is a terrible mix of nothingness and glinting sunlight and this will kill them.

This will kill them.

Spoke swallows, and the sound ricochets in the emptiness, his hold on his gun tightening—

Ash closes his eyes.

There's a hole in the ocean.

He was right.

End Notes

woe, another historical au be upon ye!

my friend [pancake](#) came up with the idea for this au originally so many many kudos to them!

if this all feels like a giant setup for a bigger fic, you'd probably be correct, because i'm planning to make this into a mini series exploring each of the characters a little more!! :D

there are a few historical notes for this fic, though it won't claim it is entirely accurate!

The Queen Anne's Revenge was Blackbeard's ship. Clown is supposed to be a sort of Blackbeard character! The candlewax and fuse in his hair are another reference to Blackbeard, who would light them in battle to give himself a more demonic appearance, effectively scaring his enemies away.

The HMS Royal Sovereign was a real ship, but it's most famous for its appearance in Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag!

One Thirty, the card game Branzly mentions, was popular with pirates and is a predecessor to Blackjack.

The island known as Tortgua is actually called Île de la Tortue, and was a massive pirate hot spot, but it's far from the only one! A less popular, but more interesting one is Nassau, which was actually declared a "pirate republic" at one point because there were just about three times as many pirates living there as locals!

Red is a sort of Francis Drake character who starts out as a pirate but eventually enters the service of the Queen to hunt other pirates.

Branzy's arc is inspired by Stede Bonnet, who I'm sure most of you know because of Our Flag Means Death (which I haven't seen yet,,,,,).

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