

TIDES



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To my agent, Joshua Bilmes

Part One



VOYAGE

CHAPTER ONE

Hab gazed at the hundreds of red bladders floating on the sea. His men lowered boats over the side. The tides of Foot and Lag mounted from the south, the sky squalled with rain, and the northeast coast of Paras was ragged with intermittent fog banks. Hab glanced over the stern at the tides, then at his first mate, Guenard, who counted the red bladders with his finger . The ship r ocked with the tide's first unruly push. As ship's captain, Hab knew his place was on board. But he yearned to join the hunt.

"Guenard," he said, "I'm going with the men. You take command."

Guenard turned to him, his bleary eyes widening. "But Captain," he said, "look at those tides." Rain dripped from the first mate's beard. "I'd feel a lot safer if you stayed on board."

"These tides aren't anything you can't handle," Hab said. "As long as the whales don't drag us beyond the southern tip of the Island of Liars, we should be fine."

Overhead, the mainmast creaked in the wind.

"But why do such a thing?" asked Guenard. "Why ride out in the pouring rain with all those hunters? I can smell them from here."

Guenard stared, waiting for an answer.

"Because I was once a hunter myself, and I sometimes miss it."

"And for this you desert your post as commander?" said Guenard. Guenard just stared. "The moons ride high, and the tides lurch like granite walls toward us. How should I set the jib sail? And what of the kedge?" As the first mate voiced his concerns, the *Minden* rocked again,

climbing twenty feet in a matter of seconds. “Should I heave to? Or should I tack directly into the wind? It’s a damnably rough watch when tide and wind are adverse to each other, Captain.”

“Tack into the wind and furl the jib sail,” said Hab. “Set the kedje anchor off the starboard bow. We’ve faced tides much worse than these, Guenard. What’s made you so liverish?”

The first mate cast an anxious glance toward the east. “I should hate to be cast upon the Island of Liars, sir, that’s all.”

Hab glanced into the misty east, thinking about the Liars.

“You don’t have to worry about the Liars, Guenard,” he said. “They’re human beings, just like you and me.”



Hab got into a boat with a hunter he knew well: Jeter, a man his own age. Jeter was tall and lank, with an unruly bang of blond hair hanging over his small blue eyes, a long narrow face, a bony chin, a few pimples, and long yellow teeth crowding the front of his mouth. He loaded the harpoons into the boat.

“I’m coming with you,” said Hab.

Jeter looked at him doubtfully. “Is Guenard sure about the pickup?” he asked. “I’d hate to get lost in all this fog.”

Hab gave him a gruff nod. “He’s an able seaman.”

“But not as able as you,” said Jeter.

With the help of three other hunters and a puller, they soon lowered the longboat into the water and got the small sail hoisted.

They tacked into the wind, letting the tides push them from behind. Hab helped the puller with the paddling. Over the stern of the small boat, the *Minden* grew smaller and smaller. Storm lanterns, haloed by the mist and rain, grew faint as they drew away. Up ahead he saw the bladders, thick and red, two per whale, each the size of a boat, the animals taking on air, herding on the surface.

“Over there!” he shouted, pointing.

A mother and two calves bobbed on the surface. Jeter came from the bow.

“I’ll haul,” said the hunter. “You can have this one.”

Hab gave the hunter a nod and on sturdy sea legs walked to the front of the small boat. He got his harpoon ready. Jeter and the puller drew closer. The small sail snapped briskly in the freshening wind. The tide swelled behind them, slapping into the stern, sending spume over their backs. Hundreds of red bladders heaved upward on the twenty-foot tide, as graceful as dancers. Hab knelt in the braces and tied his legs into place. Closer . . . closer . . . the cow and its two calves suspected nothing. The cow was big. Her blubber alone would pay rent on at least one of his boats.

“A few spokes to port!” he called.

They veered closer. Once in range, Hab stood up, aimed, and fired the cannon, launching the harpoon toward the cow’s left bladder. The slender projectile sang through the air, uncoiling line behind it, and sank deeply into the cow’s bladder. She lurched forward at the sting of the barbed point, arched her back, lifted her head out of the salty foam, and opened her jaws. Razor-sharp teeth ringed the gaping chasm of her mouth. Hab saw two blowholes in the roof of her mouth leading to either bladder. She howled, her eyes flashed with rage, and she slapped her tail against the water. She plowed through the tide toward the boat.

Hab lifted another projectile, rammed it down the cannon, aimed, and just as the cow was going to close its jaws over the bow of the boat, fired.

Funny how they sensed a mortal wound. She stopped her attack. Her bladders hissed air. Blood sputtered into the air like a red fountain. The men cheered. But Hab felt anything but cheerful. Where was his spirit? Ten years ago he would have cheered along with the rest of them. Now he felt empty. This was a good kill. This was going to

make him a lot of money. He was going to sustain the flagging family fortunes for yet another year . With this kill, he would provide for Gougou the occasional box of bonbons she enjoyed so much. He would pay off some of Romal's gambling debts. He would buy a pretty dress for Thia. He might even have enough to erect to his father a small memorial in the seamen's cemetery at Alquay. But would the money ever fill this new emptiness he felt inside, or quell his growing restlessness? He wanted something, but he wasn't sure what it was.

He watched the whale with joyless eyes. He tried to concentrate on the hunt, to shake these more melancholy thoughts from his mind. Mortally wounded. Funny how they knew . They were smarter than a lot of men realized. Following instinct, the cow turned away and headed toward land, like they all did whenever they were mortally wounded, off to beach itself, to run itself aground in a final bit of shallows before it died. Hab let out line.

"She's heading toward Paras," he said to Jeter . "We might as well settle down for the ride."

"Should we wound the calves?" asked Jeter.

Wound, but never kill. The bladder whale would secrete a poison into its meat if killed outright. A slow ride to shore, while the whale slowly suffocated, made sure the meat remained edible. Hab looked at the calves, raising their own hideous heads out of the water , looking around in bewilderment, wondering where their mother was.

"No," he said. "Let the bulls have them."

Fifty yards to port, the cow lunged out of the water, a dark gargantuan shape in the surrounding gray, her bladders now half full, like ragged red flags, still gushing blood. The harpoons held fast. She fell with the force of her forty tons into the water , sending spray everywhere, slapped her tail three times, then went under once again. Hab let out more line. The boat lurched and headed west, towed by the whale, the age-old pas de deux between the whalers and the whales of this stormy coast. The rain came down harder .

“Light the torch,” ordered Hab. “Guenard’ s going to be relieved when he sees us moving away from the Island of Liars.”

One of the sailors lit the torch. The flame cast a fitful white reflection over the surface. The boat lurched again and gained speed as the whale dragged the men through the water.

“How far do you think she’s going to take us?” asked Jeter.

“About a hundred miles,” said Hab. “She’s a strong young cow.”

The small craft headed west at eighteen knots, with the tides occasionally sloshing over her port side, at times nearly capsizing her . The sailors bailed her out once in a while. Hab was cold, wet, and tired. He stared out into the rain, making sure the lines stayed untangled, winching the small capstan whenever the cow gave some slack, forcing himself to stay awake. He raised his collar higher and felt some cold rainwater trickle down his back.

When dawn broke, the cow was winched to within twenty-five yards of the bow. The water was dark, with little islands of foam here and there. The fog was gone. The sky was still overcast. The rain had stopped. The cow’s bladders lay draped over her back like a couple of collapsed tents. She had to stay surfaced now or she would drown. Seabirds flocked around her , pecking away at the delicate crimson membrane. Hab took out his telescope and scanned the Channel of Liars. Far to the west he saw the coast of Paras, the hilly province of Dagu, not much in the way of beach, bleak and rocky .

“We’ll be there in an hour,” he said.

“The Golden Land,” exhaled one of the sailors.

“We’ll all have a taste of blubber,” said Hab.

They reached the treacherous coves and inlets of Dagu in less than an hour. With the tides receding, Hab saw both high - and low-water marks along the coast, a difference of fifty feet, the high-water mark strewn with seaweed, the low-water mark a line of foam over the mud flats. Dagulanders waded in the shallows gathering the succulent morsels of shellfish the tides had left behind. The bladder whale veered

north, looking for a suitable sandbar on which to beach itself. The cow dragged the boat along the coast for several hours. Rain fell again, but it was a warm rain, pushed northward by the Auvilly Currents.

Up on the hill, Hab saw an encampment. Strange. Who would camp out on that treeless hill this late in the season? He lifted his telescope and had a look. The people up there were dressed in the traditional blue of Jondonq. His own people. Two thousand miles from home. With three ships harbored against the rocks. What were they doing here?

“Are they whalers?” asked Jeter.

“I don’t see any whaling vessels.” Hab unstrapped his legs and got up from his harpoon chair. “I need a swim after a night in that chair. I think I’ll have a look.”

“I’ll mark the spot on the map,” said Jeter.

“Have Guenard pick me up on the way back.”

Hab dove over the side and swam for shore. It was, he knew, an uncharacteristic action. To leave the ship and go out on one of the boats was strange enough. But to jump over the side of the boat and swim for shore—that was even stranger. He stroked strongly and surely, his legs scissor-kicking precisely through the waves. The waves lifted him up and down. Here was another side of himself he every so often discovered, a restlessness derived from his poor dead father, Duq. He lifted his head out of the water and stared at the shore of Dagu to see how far he had to go. He was like his father because his father wanted to know. His father wanted to discover. His father could never sit still or stay in one place too long, but had to be roaming or sailing in his ever-insatiable quest to know. Hab kicked harder, stroked harder. Every so often his father came back to him like a ghost. Sheer determined effort at whatever he happened to be doing at the moment seemed to be the only way to appease his father’s ghost.

So he swam for shore. Swam as surely as the whales swam. Curious about the encampment on the hill. As a good Parassian, wanting only the truth. As his father’s son, wanting only to know.