

“Shadows have been talking to me,” a haggard man murmurs as he looms over an unkempt table reeking of stale beer. It’s been two full days since he’s rooted himself in the aged tavern, its old wood smelling perpetually of smoke and liquor and salted air. The bags beneath his eyes hang heavy, rich with the weight of sleepless nights and tankards of grog. The watered down ale provided only a margin of solace from the perpetual voice lingering at the back of his mind, yet not enough to provide the sweet, horrific embrace of slumber. His gaze retains a portion of vigil as he slowly glances from side to side, catching the sway of candles upon tables as their modest lights chase back the surrounding darkness. His mind begs for a moment’s repose, the ache in his eyes a constant reminder of his sleeplessness these past two days. It was dread that kept his eyelids open, not wanting to be trapped in a world of darkness with that voice; that incessant voice.

“Better not look behind ya then!” His company jeers, whilst nudging him back and forth. “I think I see one now!”

“What’s that ya say? Oi, me shadow says he thinks you’re a real sissy!”

A round of laughter booms violently amongst them as they pound the table, mugs lifting high into the air and splashing about like an angry storm. Storms were common in Bilgewater, whether at sea or at land, and every sailor welcomed them, relished in them. While his company laughs and raises their drinks the worn-down man lunges for the candle sitting at the table, snatching it away from the downpour of booze.

“DON’T YOU REALIZE WHAT YOU COULD HAVE DONE?!” he shrieks as he surrounds the candle in his embrace.. “We need to keep them lit...all lit...”

The levity of the taproom dissipates as all eyes wander to the man. Murmurs began to swarm him like the sound of waves lapping at the docks. He didn’t notice, unable to distinguish the chatter from the incoherent whispering coming from the dim corners of the room. His hand reaches towards another table, snatching a second candle away from several patrons as he huddles the tiny flames to him selfishly.

“Madness,” the crowd began to utter. “He’s gone completely insane...”

“I-AM NOT-CRAZY!” he cries as he reaches swiftly for another candle, hoarding the precious light as the crowd stares horrified. His bloodshot eyes dart wildly back and forth, scanning the purveyors around him. Someone has to believe him! Couldn’t anyone understand his plight? Was there a single soul that held sympathy for him? A laugh echoes in his mind like a dull ache that gradually escalates in severity. He rakes at his scalp in frustration, his untrimmed fingernails pulling at tufts of unkempt hair.

“No, no no no,” he moans, “why can’t you hear it?!”

He roars at the crowd in anguish, “why me?! Why am I the only one?!”

“All alone...” the voice mocks. The man clutches at his head as if to keep it from separating before frantically scouring the hushed tavern for every candle in sight.

“Shutup-shutupshutupshutup!” he repeats feverishly, like a prayer warding off evil. His heartbeat thrums in his ears as he frantically scours the tavern for every source of light, snatching the little torches and collecting them at his table.

“All alone, all alone...” the words were louder now. The crowd of onlookers chant it over and over in a cacophony that drowns his consciousness.

Clarity has forsaken him, and he could think of nothing more than to gather more light at his table; his mind overwhelmed by the horde of voices. He reaches for the final candle set at a table in the corner of the bar.

“If I can just...stay in the light...the voices will finally...”

As his fingers graze the final candle a symphony of hisses echoes behind him. One after another each tiny flame extinguishes until the candle in his grasp is the sole source of light. He draws the candle to his chest, cupping at the fire protectively as he searches the dim tavern for the rest of the patrons.

Silence is his sole companion now in the empty tavern. “Hello?!” he yells out while continuing to keep the flame near his body, the tiny light his only protection, his only armor against the darkness. Every fiber in his being tenses in anticipation; his brow furrowed as he searches with growing unease. “No,” he whimpers, his voice quivering, degrading in to quiet sobs. “Don’t leave me alone, I don’t wanna be alone...” His pleas were ignored, his only solace remaining in the candle at his chest.

“PLEASE!” he wails, falling to his knees as his body trembles. “ANSWER ME!”

“Darkness.”

The blackness came swiftly, sweeping over the man in a shadowy embrace as the small light of the candle failed him. He could see nothing, could feel nothing, and could hear nothing until his screams pierced the silence.

“Everyone alright?” the bartender yells as he lifts a candle. A lazy confirmation litters the tavern as the small lights are once more rekindled. “Odd breeze,” the bartender says as he places the small torch down. He reaches for another tankard to clean before continuing. “As I was saying,” he said to a weathered looking sailor sitting across from him. “The poor sod in the corner has been shoveling coin out for two whole days now just to laze about here. Poor bastard said he didn’t wanna sleep at home.”

The weathered sailor glances over his shoulder. Across the room at a table pulled farthest away from the rest, sat a man slumped over in his seat, his chin resting on his chest with his eyes closed. “Doesn’t look like he had much trouble falling asleep here,” replies the sailor.

“Aye, well I figure he paid me enough to let him sleep,” the bartender chuckles to himself.
“That’s just the kind of generous man I be.”