

## **“Night Watch”: *Alternate Genre Assignment***

CAS WR 120

He sighed and looked up from the clear, calm water. He began to pull up the empty net. This had been going on for 2 weeks now, but Malik returned each morning, sure it would be different that day. Fish were the backbone to his town, culturally and economically. So when the pestilence hit, the whole community felt the effects. Markets looked emptier and emptier by the day. People had refused to eat any fish, scared of the sickness they carried. The warm smiles and laughter that had regularly filled the streets had vanished; grim, cautious looks had taken its place. It had all happened so suddenly. Fishermen had first started noticing white spots on some of their catch but thought nothing of it, continuing to sell them. Apparently, the first to die was the fishmonger’s own daughter. Poor Lacey was only 8. He instantly stopped selling fish and frantically told this story to everyone who would pass by. “She was just complaining about her stomach for a few days! Then she starts puking all her blood out!” The story spread as fast as the illness, and the fear followed.

Malik rowed back to the shore. The only sound came from a singular merchant boat that had just docked. The usually bustling docks were quiet enough to where he could hear the water splash against the wood posts. He had just turned 17 and this was his second year fishing alone. He didn’t think anything could be worse than his father’s passing but the pandemic proved otherwise. As he started to make his way home he thought about what he’d tell his mother. Although she’d been understanding, he hated to come home empty handed again. Their savings wouldn’t last them much longer. He’d already started to skip out on breakfast so his two younger brothers would have more to eat.

Before he’d walked too far off, he heard someone calling for him. “Hey! Boy!” He turned his head. “How long you been on the waters?” He presumed he was the captain by his dress and yelled an answer back. “I need men like you on my crew. Who know what they’re doing.” This gained Malik’s interest and started walking back towards him. The captain had heard what was going on in the town and made a stop to drop off some supplies for an old friend of his. Malik had explained his situation to him

when he gave him an offer to join his crew. “My company does long voyages all along the gulf coast and surrounding islands. So if you come with us now, we’ll probably be back here in bout two years.”

The captain saw the shock in his eyes and tried to reassure him. “But by then the plague’ll be gone and you’ll come back to your home how you remembered it. With extra money in your pocket too,” he added with a sly smile. He told him to sleep on it but to come back with a decision before they departed at sunrise.

Malik thought about the interaction on the way home. It seemed like an easy job and the amount of money being offered was enticing. He could send home all of what he did not need at every port they stopped at. This was exactly the opportunity he needed. He could finally support his family again.

He made it home and opened the worn, wooden door to the smell of fresh bread. His mother heard and came out from the kitchen with a loaf in hand.. “Here eat,” She tore him off a piece. “Did you catch any today?” He shook his head as he ate the bread and sat down against the wall. “No, but I found a new job.” He answered. She looked at him with confusion. With the illness going around and the economy at its worst, nobody was looking to hire anybody. He waited until she sat next to him to explain further.

“There was a big boat at the docks when I returned.” His mother knew where this was going.

“I won’t have you working on those slimy merchant ships.” She said, stopping him.

“But the pay-”

“No!”

“It’s only for 2 years.”

“There’s more opportunity here for you than anywhere else. I could convince your uncle to let you work on his farm out in the valley.” She pleaded.

“You know that pay won’t be enough for us-”

“Enough about the money, once the sickness is done you’ll be able to fish again and we’ll be okay.”

He continued pushing, “Nobody will even want fish once it's over, they'll be too scared. The money I was making before was barely enough, you know that mama.”

They were quiet for a minute while they continued to eat the bread. He was going to take the offer either way. He knew he had no choice, even if he was going against his mother. As if she was reading his mind, she broke the silence.

“When are you leaving?”

Malik didn't get any sleep that night. His thoughts consumed him as he reminisced about his little town of Reyport. He'd spent all of his life here. His father had fought and died for the peace they all enjoyed. And now he'd be leaving it all behind. He'd be starting a completely new life. He thought about the countless games of soccer he would play. He thought about how the streets would slowly fill up based on when the other boys finished their work. How they'd play till the sun set, and kept pushing until it was too dark to see the ball at their feet. The jokes and laughter they would share as they walked home, chatting about their days.

As the new day approached, he finished packing up his little sack of belongings and went to wake his family. They said their goodbyes and embraced each other quietly. He stepped outside and sighed as the door closed behind him. He then turned and started to make his way down the dim streets.

The waves were heavy, as they made their way through the storm. Thunder clapped above them as the crew frantically moved around the deck, yelling orders at each other. Malik, Harlo, and Lance struggled not to slip as they carried buckets and oakum down into the hull. The bilge had started leaking and the water was up to the ankles now. It had been a week since they departed from Reyport. The three boys were the youngest of the mostly older crew and had become rather close because of it. They scrambled down the stairs and started working on the leaks, stuffing the oakum into the holes and

covering them with wood planks. After a stressful but quick hour, they finally had them all sealed, and the storm seemed to have died down. They had barely started to lean against some barrels to rest before being yelled at to help scoop water out.

It was a hot, sunny day as they docked at a busy port along the gulf. The whole crew was excited to reach the town. Being a popular trading post, there were bars, brothels, and good food. Everything a young man would dream of after living on a ship so long. Although Malik was usually only excited to reach land so he could send letters and money home, Harlo and Lance got him excited to drink with them at the bar this time. The captain had some “important business” that caused them to stay there for two nights, so this left them to do whatever they wanted as long as they weren’t on duty to watch the ship. He split them into groups of four and the boys ended up getting the last night shift along with a slightly older crewmate. This made them have to condense all their fun into the first night.

“Look, we can drink and play some games then end the night off with a lil trip to the brothel.” Lance reassured Harlo with a nudge, as they walked off the pier and into the center of town.

“You and Malik can do that yourselves, but my heart’s telling me my love is in that bar,” Harlo responded passionately, locking eyes with the bar at the end of the road, “and I’m *going* to find her.”

“Last place you’ll want to find your soulmate is in a bar,” Lance laughed, “Malik what do you think about my plan?”

He was zoned out, scanning the commotion in front of him. He had made eye contact with the bar at the end of the street and it made his stomach feel the way it had when he’d left his home, ten months prior. Lance reached around Harlo and smacked the back of his head and he regained his senses.

“Ow. What?”

“You like my plan right?”

“Yeah, of course” He put on a mask of confidence and sped up his walk to lead them into the bar.  
“Let’s go boys”

He had never drank before so he just mimicked whatever Harlo did, as although he was a year younger, he seemed to know what he was doing. While Harlo took to speaking to every woman in the building, he and Lance had been on a four-game winning streak against some barflies in darts. It seemed as if each sip Malik took made him better; a wave of confidence had taken over and he felt like the man. Some of their crewmates that were there had started cheering them on as they were about to win another game when a pair of slick haired sailors playing across the bar had taken notice of the clamor. They walked over and watched the two boys shout as they won again, slapping each other's hands in victory.

Lance had noticed them standing close by, arms crossed, and silent while everyone else cheered.

“What? You two want a game? Don’t just stand there looking stupid!”

“Betting drinks?” the one with a mustache asked.

“Yea, but we don’t need more charity, we have enough already.” Malik responded provokingly.

“How about coin then?”

The boys looked at each other blankly for a second.

“50 coin,” Lance said proudly.

Malik looked at him confused but didn’t get a look back as he held out his hand for the mustached man to shake. He knew they both didn't have that type of money. What if they didn’t win? How would they pay them? These thoughts left quickly as the victories and drinks they had made him confident they’d beat them.

Lance handed a dart to the barefaced of the pair and they threw for the bullseye. Malik patted his back as his dart landed closer and they began their game. It was an intense game and most of the bar was entranced by it, jeering at the opposite pair they were rooting for. Both Malik and the barefaced sailor had thrown a bust, causing some taunting between the four of them. The score was 35 to 62 and the boys thought they had it in the bag. The mustached man stepped up and kissed the dart in his hand. The room quieted down and he took his first throw: a perfect bullseye. Lance looked at Malik and muttered under his breath, “Find Harlo, if he gets this we run.” With a cheeky grin, he waved to the crowd to settle down before his next throw. He bent over slightly, sticking his rear to the boys, and kissed at them mockingly

before cocking his hand back and forth. A twenty. The small crowd erupted, leaving the two of them befuddled on how he won that.

Malik scanned the room for Harlo and found him at a table next to the door chatting it up with a lady in a fluffy red skirt. Suddenly a hand grabbed his collar and pulled him.

The mustached man had noticed him looking towards the door. “Don't you look for an escape boy!” he shouted drunkenly in his face, “Pay up!” Filled with rage and caught off guard, Malik brought his right hand up towards his face.

The boys laughed as they sat in a circle on the main deck, telling Harlo about the events of the night before. At first he was mad they ruined his chances with his “soulmate” but lightened up once he heard how Malik punched the mustached man in the face. The hit stunned him, giving them the perfect opportunity to grab Harlo and make a dash for it. They had run all throughout the dimly lit town to escape the two money hungry sailors, hiding in alleyways and ditches. Snickering all the way back to the boat, like little children playing hide and seek.

It was past midnight now and they were done with their stories. A small lantern sat, fluttering in the middle of them. The ocean gently rocked the boat, quietly splashing against the helm. Malik moved a little further into the corner with his back against a barrel so he could write in his journal away from their peering eyes. Harlo sat crisscross, reading a book against the light while Lance laid with his hands behind his head, looking up at the stars. He told the two boys earlier to wake him up if he fell asleep, but they decided to let him get some rest once they noticed he'd fallen asleep.

Malik updated his journal every night with words about his day. Tonight's seemed like his longest one yet. He wrote about drinking for the first time and how it made him feel. He wrote about the intense game of darts and the punch at the end. He wrote about how they escaped, laughing like madmen, and the feeling of adrenaline coursing through his veins. But most importantly, he wrote about his new brothers. How he finally felt at ease. How the homesickness had left him.

As he mopped the floors he heard a familiar voice call his name. “Malik!” He turned to face Lance walking towards him.

“Cap said we’re set to dock in about two hours and to relieve you of your duties” he said with a grin as he grabbed the mop from his hand. “You excited to go home?”

“Of course,” Malik replied, “I can’t wait to see my mother again. My brothers are probably my height by now,” he joked.

They finished up their conversation and he began to head down to the quarters to pack his things. He sat to write in his journal again before coming out again to say his goodbyes. He felt the same feeling in his stomach from when he left. He’d spent the past two years with these men, and he felt as if they were a family now. He thought about the countless nights they’d spent playing cards together before sleeping. How the old navigator seemed to always have a story to tell during their games. How they’d sing songs during their dinners and the sleepless nights they’d spend together during storms. He got up from his bunk and grabbed his bag. He started to make his rounds around the ship, saying farewell to the brothers he’d made on this voyage. It was especially hard with Harlo, as began to shed a few tears. As he slowly made his way up to the deck, he took in everything around him. He’d hated life as a sailor at first, stuck on the sea and constantly homesick. But now, he felt as if it was a part of his identity and leaving it behind felt weird.

When they finally reached shore, Malik was relieved to see his town buzzing with activity again. He said his final goodbyes and hopped off the boat, onto the familiar gray dock. He saw a few fishermen his father knew and cheerfully said hi to them. They responded with blank looks. Maybe they just didn’t recognize him from how much he’d grown? He didn’t pay too much attention to it and continued to walk off briskly, excited to go home. On the way, he ran into some old friends he used to play soccer with. He thought they’d be excited to see him, but they looked at his sailor hat and continued walking, with only

one of them offering a wave. This confused him, but he continued on, with the only thing on his mind being his mother.

He made it to the worn out door of his house and knocked thrice. The door opened quickly, and he looked up to see his brothers jumping into his arms. His mother heard them and walked around the corner with a warm smile on her face. After they were done embracing, she called the brothers inside and told them to set the table. Malik walked in and hugged her for a long minute.

“You’ve grown.”

“I know.”

“You’ve missed a lot.”

“I know.”

“The sickness is gone. But they don’t like sailors here,” She explained to him, “a great deal of other merchant ships came after yours and poached all the young fishermen. They all left thinking they'd help their families but it just hurt the rest of the community.” It all started to make sense now. He realized he still had his sailor’s cap on. This explained the cold looks he got as he made his way towards the house. He felt as if he betrayed Reypport. All those years he spent there, the hardships his father had to go through, seemed like it was all for nothing now. He thought he had found himself a new identity, but at the cost of his old one. What once used to be his home, felt like just another port his crew would stop at, with unfamiliar faces and sour looks.