

True Seaborn

I was born within sight of the sea, on a small and justly obscure island many leagues from Ivaldi in the bitter northern ocean. I believe my father had a small streak of whimsy which he allowed expression only once in his life: when he chose my name. One night around a festival bonfire shortly before my birth, a sailor recently returned from service on the greatships told tales he had heard in foreign lands. Father was particularly taken with the story of an exotic goddess, born from the foam of the sea, and he named me in her honor, Seaborn.

Our patronymic, True, was bestowed on the family centuries before, so the story went, by a grateful king acknowledging our ancestor's faithful courage in piloting the royal ship through a storm. The fortunes of the family, indeed of the whole island, have greatly declined since then. We still have a king, or had last time I heard, but he holds court in a collapsing pile of weather-worn stone, where his people pay him very little in taxes, and still less in courtesy.

Our island was once well known for its shipwrights and fishermen, but both trades diminished as the local supply of timber gave out. There was scarcely enough poor wood left to repair the ancient fishing boats and cook the miserable catches. More and more young men took their sailing skills to the service of foreign ships of war and commerce, and many never returned.

I spent my childhood on a fishing boat, as most of us did, and learned to sail, fish, and mend the nets and canvas. But what I loved was the singing. There was a song for every task: chants to give rhythm to the hauling in of nets, ballads to pass the long voyages in search of fish, quiet songs for ending a hard day's work, hymns for safe sailing and good catches. I got the old seamen to teach me every song they knew, and learned to accompany them on guitar and flute. At first I had to borrow instruments, but then old Gribben died and left me his guitar, for which none of his sons had any inclination, and my mother gave me a flute for my thirteenth birthday. Within the year I had fled, like two of my brothers before me, offering my skills to a rare passing merchant ship. Warships came more often, eager to recruit us. But I saw no reason to risk my life in someone else's war; the sea itself is danger enough.

My youth I gave to the big ships, and when after several years I had enough experience to be hired as an officer and paid decent wages, I saved every possible coin. Well, not quite every. Life aboard ship is hardly life at all, except in those intensely alive hours at the very edge of death, facing danger from storms or pirates or sea monsters. But such misadventures are few, so a sailor in port has a great deal of living to catch up on — and that costs money.

My money went freely enough to make me the friends a sailor makes on land: tavernkeepers, prostitutes, wives and widows of men at sea. When I got too friendly with the ale, or was surprised while being friendly with someone's wife, my coins bought the friendship of the police and an exit from jail, usually in time to regain my ship before it sailed. If not, there were others.

I carried letters of recommendation from captains I'd served well, both in port and out. I was capable on board, and could also be relied upon to handle the ship's business on land. A few captains invited me to become a partner, but I had no money beyond what they paid me, and that was never enough to buy a partnership.

In the course of my voyages I collected languages. There is in me some desperate need to communicate, perhaps in reaction to the dour reserve of the people I was born among. They sing, but rarely speak, and even their songs are ancient, unchanged for generations, and are slowly being forgotten. It seems as if my people's creative spark is dying out with their island. So, in my desire to speak to all men, I pestered my fellow sailors to teach me their native tongues, and some of them were happy to do so.

Everyone on a ship first communicates in Bahasa, the simple bastard child of several diverse languages which has become the common tongue of traders. I learned to read and write Bahasa (using the Tendennin script, for Bahasa has none of its own), which (not incidentally) made me more valuable to the captains who hired me. I also learned to speak some Tendennin, some Densk, and some Ivaldin. When I made up my mind several years ago to settle in Ivaldi, I began studying that language, both written and spoken, more seriously. To practice writing I started this log, and have tried for the last two years to write at least a little every day. At first I wrote in Bahasa, but now it is all in Ivaldin. Many days at sea there is not much to report, unless I were to write down details of weather and location already covered in the ship's regular log.

I also collected songs and stories, learning the melodies and trying to write down the words, whether or not I understood them. From the frigid islands of the far north to the balmy tropics, all peoples put their most strongly-felt experiences to music. Though those experiences can be as diverse as rice harvesting in Blidani and battles in bloody Geriko, the resulting songs are usually beautiful, and always interesting.

I had my own stories to tell; every sailor does. But to most people adventure means the threat of death — and, when you stop to consider, who does not face that every day of his life? The dangers of the sea became routine, and I grow quickly bored of routine. The stops in port were too brief to mitigate my boredom; I had visited

many countries, but knew none of them. So I came to a decision: with the little money I had saved up, I would try to make a life for myself on land. And the land I chose was Ivaldi.