



Behind the Stream
(web short)

ON THE HIGH SEAS

R. J DYSON



rjdysonsblog.com.com

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absounpro.com
rjdysonsblog.com



On the High Seas

“I’m scared,” said Joanna, pulling her legs up to her chest, hugging them tight.

“They say it’s normal this time of year,” Heschel replied, scooching closer to her side. Copying her actions.

Chih-ming watched from across the small circle, flashed an awkward smile at Hesch, then looked away with a deep sigh.

“Not the waves...I mean, yeah, the ocean is terrifying... and the storm doesn’t help, but...what I mean is we don’t have a clue what we’re doing here. How do we know we can trust these people? The Chamber has spies and bots everywhere, in every tribe, even on this...this floating

heap!”

Every sound was exaggerated in the hull of the ship. Waves pounded along the starboard side, thundering throughout the interior of the large freighter. Mysterious alarms and bells rang out non-stop, with men and women in waterproof gear running from one end of the storeroom to the other through darkened doors leading to mechanical rooms and stairwells.

With each jarring creak and wailing groan, Joanna shifted in her seat, squeezed her legs, and pinched her eyes closed more tightly. Chih wished he could help but wasn't sure how. He felt helpless. They all did.

“When you were students at C-40, what did you do to overcome fear?” Nuzrene asked, eyes laser-focused on Joanna, though offering the question to all three.

“We didn't really feel fear, did we?” whispered Joanna, eyes closed and head down. “Not until the end, anyhow.”

“I did,” Chih shot back. “All the time. I didn't know it was fear at the time, but looking back, I don't have a single memory...well, let's just say that since we escaped, I now understand why I was hunched over, always staring at the floor as I walked the compound, slinking in the shadows.”

“We obeyed,” Heschel added, looking directly into the subtle glow of Nuzrene's eyes. “It's not that we didn't fear. We did. We all did. Not only did we not have a word to describe it, but we only had one response for every

emotion, for every thought, for every unsettling action thrown our way.”

“And that was?” Nuzrene nudged, cutting the silence. Though he knew the answer. It was the same on every compound.

“Obedience,” Heschel proclaimed with a deep breath.

“So what do we do now that we know what fear is, and sadness, and suffering, and joy, and hope, and freedom to think, and freedom to run? How do people of the light respond to the gritty reality of paralyzing fear in the unknown?”

“We trust The Guide,” said Chih without hesitation, his eyes beginning to glow like the kindling of a new fire.

“You mean the captain? Keely? Mccoy and the elders?” prodded Nuzrene, a faint smile beginning to grow.

“Keely? Really? No...no, not human guides, at least, not most of them. The Guide.”

Joanna looked up and immediately sat a little taller. All of their eyes were aglow. Slowly she released her legs and relaxed her wrinkled forehead.

“The glow,” said Heschel, staring at Chih. “Capital G, Guide. It’s earned the title, hasn’t it? The people of those ancient texts sure seemed to put their full body weight of trust in it.”

“The Guide,” Nuzrene affirmed, ever the teacher. “You’re right, Chih. Absolutely right. So...what are we

waiting for? After all, obedience itself isn't wrong, is it? Wise leaders on supernatural mission invite obedience to healthy unity and community. I want to be a part of that, don't you?"

"Teacheriness just oozes out of you, doesn't it?" said Joanna with a smirk.

"I get where you're headed with that," Heschel cut in. "We trusted The Guide on the compound, which meant we obeyed its guidance, its prodding, its wild leadings.

"Like I said, what are we waiting for? Who are we waiting for?"

The four of them looked around at one another. Heads tilting and eyes squinting. It was a long silence, no one wanting to flippantly toss out a game plan, take the lead, or worse, assume to know what The Guide would do next.

"I know the rumors and whispers floating around... about me being the torchbearer," said Heschel, drawing all eyes toward him at the sound of that last word. "It's true... I mean, I can't say for sure that I'm the torchbearer. McCoy thinks I am. And I guess it makes sense after everything that's happened, but I don't know what that means for us right here and right now. I don't know if I'm supposed to have things figured out, you know? Be the ringleader."

"But you do know what we ought to do," Nuzrene confirmed. "You do know how we ought to respond right now, don't you?"

“Well, I guess I have this tug to just go straight to The Guide and ask, but it can’t be that simple, can it?”

“It’s what the elders would do,” Nuzrene added.

Crossing their legs, each one grabbed the hand of the person next to them.

“Chih, your hand’s all sweaty! Feeling okay?” Joanna wiggled her fingers, though didn’t release her grip.

Chih’s eyes widened, and his cheeks flushed. With a gasp, he tried to shimmy his hand out of hers.

Chuckling, she said, “Cut it out, Chih-ming. I’m not really grossed out.”

After a quick glance at one another, the two of them focused their attention on Heschel, who, with eyes closed, was already beginning to glow head to toe. The storage room was cold, wet, and breezy. The ship rocked in all directions with thunderous echoes, sharp cracks, and creaks.

Yet, holding hands in a tight circle, the environment changed. It was still cold and damp and loud, but it was no longer a distraction. Fear of the unknown or Chamber spies no longer overwhelmed them. Light now physically and supernaturally illuminated this small band of adventurers.

“The Counselor...the set apart Spirit...The Guide,” Heschel began. “You’ll teach us all things and remind us... remind us....”

“Remind us of everything you’ve shown us, led us

through, and shared with us,” Chih continued as a small, unstable-looking orb took shape amidst the center of them.

“And your peace,” whispered Joanna, “that mysteriously supernatural peace that fills my heart...all of our hearts and our minds, bodies, and...and the deepest, darkest depths of who we are...your peace....”

The vibrating orb began to steady itself as streamers crept out like jagged branches of lightning, reaching for each student.

“This peace is universally beyond what The Chamber forces or any tribe offers,” Nuzrene quietly added. “Peace from the glow is the opposite of the Anti-Libertas’ loose control or faux safety. Your peace is greater even than what McCoy and the elders can offer, dream, or imagine!”

As they spoke, the glow turned from molten orange to a bright and blinding white, sending streamers out in steady bursts toward the students’ heads and chests.

“So let’s not get roped into lies of confusion and doubt,” shouted Heschel over the roar of the storm, and the waves crashing into the hull, and the swelling electrical hum of the glow. “We can’t let our circumstances chip away at our trust in our call!”

In a blink, the orb broadcasted an image directly into their minds. It was the sight of a man kneeling amidst a circle of elders, pleading for help. Behind him stood a crowd of people flailing and wailing dramatically. The

students shifted uncomfortably at the scene, squeezing one another's sweaty hands. Clearing throats and subtle moans, they watched with sweaty palms and foreheads, each student witnessing the wild scene but from a different angle, as if they were there, each one at a different place in the crowd.

We've tasted it! We've seen it in our kids' eyes! We've heard it call out to us in our dreams! Don't let them force us to deny it anymore. We're begging you, torchbearer... bring The Guide. Bring it here before they return and... and....

"Hesch. Heschel!" yelled a gruff voice from the direction of the bow. Keely was the captain's right-hand man, perpetually living within the confines of a bad mood. "What in The Chamber of Trust are you all conjuring up down here!"

With a blinding flash that seemed to slow time and distort space around it, like looking at the sun through a curved piece of glass in slow motion, the glow imploded at the sound of Keely's downcast voice. Streaks of lightning sucked back into the orb from each student, followed by what sounded like a high-voltage transformer exploding, causing Keely to drop to the ground with a yelp.

Without so much as flinching, the students stood firm, encircling the micro-blast.

One by one, they released one another's hands. Chih,

looking down at Joanna's intense grip, gently squeezed her hand, lifted it up, and, with a smile, said, "I think we're safe now."

"I don't know what Alphabet-outlawed-vooodoo you think you're doing down here, but you better hop to it, man!" said Keely, rising to his feet and wiping his greasy hair back with his wet hands. "No one keeps the captain waiting on the bridge. Not even his so-called special guests."

"The captain is waiting for me? Really?" mumbled Heschel, looking across the dark storage room for the angry man attached to the voice.

"Goodnight, man! I told 'em all a bunch o' children would be a waste of time and food and fresh water and...and you know what? Cap'n said it was worth it." Keely kicked the metal door with his heel hoping to scare Heschel to his feet and into action. "Look sharp! Shoulders back! Hold your tongue unless you're asked for it. Hear me? Move it!"

It was a working ship. A freighter. Old and rusty and smaller than any container ship the Anti-Libertas bothered to deal with. The captain was an old friend of McCoy's. A salty old dog with a wild beard and more discolored and scarred-up tattoos than the ages of Heschel and his friends combined. And a traitor to the Alphabet Coup back in the day.

Most importantly, and secretly, the captain was a person

of the light. He had been growing frustrated, waiting for the arrival of someone—an explainer, a wild-eyed leader, or even a torchbearer like Heschel, to push the mission forward against The Chamber. Waiting and, like many others, losing patience and even a little hope.

Until he'd gotten word about a student and a glow somewhere in the Midwest.

Until he was asked to help.

The stairwells were dark and wet. Heschel winced as water seemed to spray him from every direction. It wasn't his first time out of the hull and into the stairwell. After all, the students served daily in the kitchen, ate in the cafeteria separate from the crew, and spent an hour each day on the deck catching some much-needed fresh air and sunlight and always away from the deckhands. But he never quite managed to steady his sea legs on the steel steps as the ship rocked with the relentless waves.

“Sorry, Keely,” said Hesch. “I didn't know I was scheduled to meet with him today.”

“Yeah, well, just 'cause no one informed ya doesn't mean you're not to blame,” grunted Keely, always ready with a word of encouragement.

Their steps echoed off the curved metal walls and rang out down the long stretches of hall on each floor before ending at the sealed and guarded door to the bridge overlooking the stern. Like the steps, he never really got

used to the bridge, his stomach rising and falling with the ship in the wild ocean raging before them.

“You’re not gonna lose it again, are ya?” Keely barked with a snicker. “You’ll clean it up with your bare hands this time.”

Hesch had only lost his lunch once on the bridge. It was the first meeting with the captain. A short one. And Keely refused to let him forget it.

As soon as Heschel set foot in the room, his palms began to tingle and glow as if he were holding an orange ember from a smoldering campfire. *Help us, please!* raced through his mind. He’d seen fragments of the vision before. Only this time, with the whole gang, it was clear as day. The people had faces, distinct voices, knowledge of the glow, and even the clothes of a culture he’d never seen before. Maybe this time, the captain would be able to help narrow it down. He’d been waiting for a final destination from the student. Something McCoy said would come sooner than later. It was later, only this time, Heschel was closer to an answer. Now the only thing they needed was coordinates.

“Your...your guest is on the floor,” yelled Keely before nodding and ducking out of the room.

“Have a seat, young man,” the captain growled with a voice that carried a familiar tone to it. “This storm’s kickin’ our butts, if you know what I mean. Got any of

that glow juice in ya? Help get us through it in one piece!
Agh, just pullin' your wooden leg! So, any news, or you
and the others just plannin' on stowin' away for the long
haul?