



# Autumn

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*At first light the huntsman sets out with horns, guns and dogs, putting his prey to flight and following its tracks*

- Antonio Vivaldi 1725

Baffin Island, Canada's Far North - September 1851

Tommy looked around the cabin to make sure that all was neat and tidy. That was his job. He was the Captain's boy and he had to tidy things up in the Captain's cabin. It really should not matter, certainly not

now. Who would ever see the inside of the Captain's cabin again? Indeed, who would ever see this grand vessel again? The ship was as good as doomed, trapped in the ice as it was. Even as he looked around at the spanking clean cabin, Tommy could hear the creak and the groan of the ship's main timbers as they fought against the crushing forces of the thick blocks of ice pushing against the sides of the ship.

It was hard to believe that it was only the beginning of September and yet here they were in a cold, harsh, winter climate like nothing the young lad had ever seen before. Tommy had grown up along the Scottish coastline, spending much of his time looking over the cliffs at the deep, blue sea that seemed to stretch forever. He had laboured on the family croft, tending the sheep; but he had spent his days dreaming of a life at sea. His chance had come last spring. Tommy's family had been forced off their land and they had moved to the big city of Glasgow in the hopes of finding work. Unfortunately, so many other families had been forced into similar dire straits and were also seeking work in the big city. The small crofts had met on hard times and the families were unable to keep up with their rent. They had lost everything: their crofts, their homes and their livelihood.

With no food, no money and nowhere to go, the family had moved around camping out wherever they could. First, Tommy's parents became ill. Then his younger brother and sister took sick. There was no money for doctors or medicine. Somehow, Tommy was the only one who did not get sick. He took on the burden of the family's welfare and spent the days wandering the streets of Glasgow, picking up odd jobs here and there. It was never enough to really help his parents and siblings. One by one, Tommy's family, weakened by the hunger and the cold, had succumbed to the illness. Tommy was left alone. He started to hate the sights of the big city. There were too many reminders of all he had done in a vain attempt to just survive. It was a crushing blow to lose an entire family and suddenly have nowhere to go.

Tommy had wandered out into the countryside and made his way along the coast of the Clyde. He fished and dug for food and managed to survive as he wandered. He soon found himself in the bustling community of Greenock. Fascinated by the ships he had seen from the hills surrounding the city, Tommy had made his way to the docks. It was there that he had quite literally run into Captain McTavish, who signed him on immediately as the Captain's boy. The Captain, it would seem, had taken an instant liking to Tommy since he reminded him of the son he had so recently lost.

Captain McTavish was in command of the HMS Brianag, which, at 330 tons, was a sturdy looking vessel. It was 102 feet long, certainly considerably larger than anything Tommy had seen from the cliffs near his family croft. It could make use of either its sails or its 20 horsepower steam engine to move across the water. The ship accommodated a large crew, twenty-four officers and over a hun-

dred men, which now included Tommy. The young lad had found it difficult to keep from gaping in wonder as the Captain showed him around the ship.

"It's a fine ship for an Arctic expedition, my lad," the Captain had explained with obvious pride. "Searching for the northern passage is a family dream. My father sailed with Sir John Franklin many years ago. It does not seem so long ago that they sailed away on those fine ships, the HMS Terror and the HMS Erebus. That was in 1845. He never returned. My older brother and I were both at home when my mother lay on her deathbed. We promised her that we would not stop searching for Father. My brother was the first to try to follow his route. He wanted to find Father's lost ship; but they were stopped by massive mountains of ice that would dwarf the size of our bonny hills of Scotland. He was lucky. His ship managed to free itself from the ice and return safely to Greenock. He's out there again, somewhere on the northern seas. I remember my father once saying that it would take a brave man, a brave crew, and a strong ship to follow this adventure. I believe him. I must follow through with the promise I made. I must at least try."

The Captain then abruptly perked up and patted Tommy fondly on the back. "I do hope you are a brave lad, Tommy," he smiled at the boy. Tommy nodded timidly. At this point, he would have followed anyone to the ends of the earth on such a fine ship as the Brianag, being so well named after the Celtic goddess who was known for her strength. Besides, he was too tired, too hungry, and too lonely to argue. On the Brianag Tommy would be fed, he would have companionship, and he would have a sheltered place to rest. After months living out in the open, nothing about the Captain's talk of the cold north frightened Tommy.

"Aye," Tommy had agreed.

"Excellent," the Captain had praised Tommy. "We need more lads like you to venture to the far northern seas. It is imperative to have a strong spirit, a strong mind, and a strong body if we are to find this elusive Northwest Passage. And we will, Tommy. We will. The HMS Brianag will go down in history, and so will we."

Now, Tommy wondered if he had made a rash decision all those months ago. At first, the trip across the northern Atlantic had been quick and uneventful, though rather rough at times. Then they had entered the cold waters between the frozen landscapes. The great mountains of ice appeared to be getting closer and closer to the ship until the ship could no longer move. It had been frightening, but the Captain had bolstered the crew and rallied their hopes, until the food supply dwindled and the ice started to crush the ship's hull. The men were getting sick and dying. Some had already abandoned ship, preferring to try their luck on the frozen landscape then wait to be crushed along with the ship. Soon, it was only Tommy and the Captain left on board. The First Officer had already made his departure with the remainder of the men. It had been a blow to the Captain to lose his command and now he would lose his ship.

"Come along then, Tommy," Captain McTavish called from the doorway to the cabin. He leaned against the doorframe and shuddered with the deep cough that had wracked his body for the past few nights. Tommy looked at the Captain with concern etched across his brow. The Captain noticed Tommy's concern. Clearing his throat, he pushed himself away from the doorframe and pushed his shoulders back, holding his head high. He forced a smile on his face that did not quite reach his eyes. It was an effort. Tommy could see that and it worried him all the more. "The light is already bad enough," the Captain stated in his usual command voice. "No point in dawdling here any longer. We have to make headway while we can still see where we are going."

"Where are we going?" Tommy asked the Captain in a timid voice.

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