Aaron Waite — Doorstopper

Why is Dhrelal built up so much and then unceremoniously fridged after several pages? To me, it seems like a bait-and-switch beginning, where the reader starts to get invested in Dhrelal and then *psych!* she dies and we switch to a completely different character several thousand years later and there's no clear bridge between the two. In other words, I as a reader felt cheated when this character I'd spent time with in the beginning of the story was replaced by another seemingly random individual who wasn't connected to Dhrelal in any obvious way. I assumed Dhrelal was going to be the main character, and having that assumption thrown back in my face was jarring. That said, if this story is going to be structured on POV- and time-jumps, then I don't have a problem with the character switch in principle. If that's going to be the case, that information should be included in the description/blurb of the story to prime the reader's expectations, or else they'll feel cheated.

If Dhrelal doesn't play a major role in the main story, she should either be cut from the beginning and just referenced to by characters in the present day as appropriate, or her introduction should be *very* short and only contain the details that are relevant for the main story. With the story the way it currently is, I don't see the reason to include Dhrelal at all if Flank is going to be the main character.

Generally speaking, it's best to start off a story *in medias res* or at the very least in a "characteristic moment." This doesn't have to be as heart-stoppingly dramatic as regaining consciousness and plummeting from a burning airship,* but ideally there's a situation that the POV character (POVC) is reacting to, often one said character finds tense or stressful. This allows for characterization (via POVC's reaction to the situation), *relevant* exposition (what the reader *needs to know* to understand the situation) and a plot point (the situation itself) to all happen simultaneously. This is efficient and doesn't waste a reader's time at the start of a story.

In the opening of "Doorstopper,"** nothing really happens until the end of the second page when she has a brief conversation with Holt. I'm not saying Dhrelal can't take some time to reflect on herself, but by nature reflections are slower-paced and require a reader's prior investment in the character to work without seeming needlessly expositive. Conversely, jumping straight into the conversation without explaining Dhrelal's ~unique~ circumstances would be needlessly confusing. The explanation of who/what Dhrelal is could be tightened up a lot, since her opinion of herself and her circumstances can be shown through a conversation with Holt rather than being told in exposition.

*not saying there's anything wrong with that, it works well in the context of *Pilfer!*
**I don't know if it's a short story/novella or novel, so I chose quotes rather than italicization

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The prose style was hit-or-miss for me personally, which is just a subjective opinion and therefore doesn't carry much weight, but I thought the metaphors/similes in *Pilfer!* worked better overall and were also used more sparingly. That said, there are still plenty of lines that I really like, especially "There was no death on the *Test of Mettle*."

If Dhrelal recognizes at some point that every addition to her is a strain and that her capacity for housing people is finite, why does she never turn anyone away? For that matter, there wasn't even *one* person out of the 70 (71?) people who was willing to take their chances with death?

Has Dhrelal become ageusic? (lacking the sense of taste) If she isn't, then she can surely have one of her living crew bring her a morsel of food or spices or even seawater if she wanted to taste it, even if she doesn't need to consume it.

The phrase "facing the dichotomous cavern of the end" sounds like an indirect invocation of heaven and hell (Dhrelal is also called a "savior" in the following sentence). Is there some religion present in-universe that believes this, or is this phrase just meant to emphasize the difference between their knowledge of life and their uncertainty of what happens after death? Is Dhrelal supposed to be a corrupted messianic figure who can only give a low-budget immortality rather than "true" eternal life?

I don't understand the bit with the stowaway, and I don't understand what the latter part of this sentence means: "They'd brought the girl in, her mother pleading flame for the smoldering wick before her." I initially didn't know if the mother was part of the crew or not and thought she was just some rando, so that could be made more clear. Why would she sign on to Dhrelal's crew if she has a nine-year-old daughter? If the mother is willing to permanently abandon her child, this implies she doesn't care about her, so then why does she plead on her child's behalf?

Putting that aside, why is the girl subsumed into Dhrelal? She presumably still has the rest of her natural life ahead of her, so why become one with Dhrelal prematurely? Why not officially make her a part of the living crew if the girl is there to stay? Dhrelal is explicitly stated to know the cost and the "crushing expectations of the Drudgery," so why is she on board (heh, ship pun) with absorbing a child?

I wrote the previous two paragraphs and only now realized that the girl was mortally wounded in the incident, which is why the mother wanted her to join Dhrelal. That could be made *way* more clear, because I thought the girl was just discovered after her hiding spot was

busted and then absorbed into Dhrelal for no reason (although the questions in the first paragraph still stand).

Is the Endless Tide the name of the ocean? It sounds cool at first glance, but if you think about it, that's a very generic name: of course tides are endless; that's not unique to a particular body of water. Additionally, the existence of tides means there's at least one moon orbiting this planet. Multiple moons would mean the tides are, in a word, screwy, but still very much present. I doubt it's relevant to your story, but I wanted to point it out because the presence of a moon (or moons) is an extra detail about your world that the reader can infer from what's given, so it's important not to contradict that.

If Dhrelal enjoys the feel of the sun, why doesn't she keep her door open during the day? Even if her stench wafts out, she's the captain and can tell her living crew to suck it up (and life at sea smells anyways).

If Holt has been on the *Mettle* for five years, why is he still not accustomed to her? Five years is a long time to get used to weird stuff, so I don't understand why he blanches when he enters.

What is written on the piece of paper Dhrelal looks at, or is the reader not supposed to know? Is this a list of the names of the people in her collective? If it isn't and it's meant to be a vague detail to hook the reader, it's really heavy-handed. If it is a list of all their names, that could be made more explicit.

I don't know Dhrelal's motivations, which is a problem. At the bottom of the first page, the reader is told that she is looking for something called "Paragon," and it's not explained what that is or why Dhrelal is searching for it. The explanation of what Paragon is doesn't need to be revealed right away, but it's imperative to establish character motivations (especially POVC's motivations) to preclude character choices happening seemingly for no reason.

It becomes clear that Paragon is a place, and there is a very tall spire on it, and it's implied that Paragon is the land of the Horizon Gods (HGs), whoever they are (I don't have a problem with the lack of explanation about the HGs at this point in the story). This is all well and good, but *why* is Dhrelal searching for this place? What does she want? I cannot stress enough how important it is that the reader knows the answer to that question for the POVC.

I also don't understand what Dhrelal's plan is. Holt says they're going to make landfall, which I assume means they're going to beach the *Mettle* (I doubt there's a friendly port to put

into if the HGs don't want Paragon to be found—this also assumes that Paragon's coastline isn't entirely cliffs and has a beach somewhere to put ashore). I mentioned tides earlier as a minor detail, but now those are very important. If Dhrelal beaches the *Mettle* at low tide, they don't have much time to do … whatever it is they're planning to do before the *Mettle* is caught by the high tide and is forced to put out to sea again to prevent being swept away or listing.

If Dhrelal beaches the *Mettle* at high tide, they have a lot more time for their unspecified activities, but they'll be trapped on Paragon until the tide comes back in, so they don't have an escape route should their expedition go sideways. Dhrelal should definitely care about this, since she's trapped on board the *Mettle*. A multiple-moon system would mean the tides have even more of an effect on the planning of this operation. Dhrelal, as an immortal pirate queen, would presumably know the tidal schedules and take this into account.

In other words, what the crew of the *Mettle* is trying to do and, more importantly, *why*, should be clear to the reader. Sure, they're looking for the land of the HGs, but what are they hoping to accomplish and why do they want to do that? Without that information, it's very hard for the reader to engage with the story or connect with the characters.

I don't understand the details surrounding Dhrelal's suicide. I have no idea why she killed herself, and if it's the girl acting unilaterally to kill Dhrelal and co., I still don't understand it. Dhrelal just got what she wanted: she found Paragon, and then just offed herself in her moment of triumph. If she wanted to kill herself, why did she wait until finding Paragon? Why does she seemingly hint at her suicide to Holt? I don't know what this character wants or why she does what she does.

Also, why does Dhrelal have a knife? She doesn't need one, not even for eating (since she doesn't eat), and a knife would be useless for self-defense, given how difficult it is for her to move in the first place. She has no need for weapons or culinary utensils, so there's no reason for her to have a knife in her cabin.

If the girl is the one who takes over and kills Dhrelal, why? Does she resent Dhrelal for keeping her alive in this state? If she does, wouldn't Dhrelal be able to sense this in her mind?

How does the *Mettle* get new crew? Do they put into ports for repairs, supplies, and crew? If Dhrelal is a pirate queen, does that mean she can only put in at pirate havens, if such a thing exists? What does Dhrelal's current first mate tell people to convince them to sign on? (I'm assuming the first mate handles all the logistics, since Dhrelal is confined to quarters) Is the *Mettle* and/or Dhrelal famous? If they're famous, that must mean they must also have enemies or people who are opposed to Dhrelal and/or her mission.

Additionally, how does Dhrelal enforce discipline? It's mentioned that bathing her was a punishment she'd used (despite the fact that no one can bathe at sea, unless I've completely misinterpreted the tech level and Dhrelal is commanding a modern destroyer or something); it

sounds like the rate of disciplinary incidents is non-zero. I don't understand what "force" binds her crew together as a cohesive unit. I get that Dhrelal is searching for Paragon, but does her entire crew share this fervency? Do they know what Dhrelal's objectives and motivations are, or were they deceived? A pirate crew is not bound by the same forces like duty, respect for the chain of command, and service to a shared nation that hold together a professional military's navy: what prevents the crew from committing mutiny?

I don't understand what an Arm is: initially, I thought it was just a title for the infantry who rank higher than the Flanks, but they're chained together for some reason? It's even more confusing because "arms" can mean a body part, armaments, or an emblem, but "Arms" doesn't seem to be any of these. I don't have much to say about this piece of the story, but that's mostly because I have no idea what's going on or *where* it's going on (even with Dhrelal, I knew she was at sea, and then at Paragon). I also don't know what Flank wants besides mere self-preservation, which is usually a given for any character.