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So Deep Do They Dwell

by Justin Stanchfield

They buried Machado without ceremony, wrapping his body in a tattered piece of sailcloth and tossing him overboard. Cristóbal stared in mute fascination at the bundle bobbing off Alcyon's stern, refusing to sink, buoyed by the thin film of sargasso. At last a gray shape rose from the depths, prodding the bundle with its leathery snout, playing with it, testing it like a cork on a fishing net. The shark dived and returned, struck at Machado's corpse and took him down. There was no blood. No blood at all. Cristóbal chided himself for being a fool. The dead don't bleed, he told himself, praying the saints it was true. "Sailor?"

Cristóbal spun. A thickset man, arms knotted like rope, stood behind him. "I am sorry, Señor Aguirre. I..." His voice faltered. "I was tending to Machado's funeral."

"You have other duties, yes?" the First Mate asked.

"Sí." Cristóbal retreated toward the quarterdeck and retrieved his bucket. Eleven days becalmed, the wind itself mired, it seemed, in the stinking black weeds around the sloop. Eleven endless days. He had scrubbed the deck till it shone. He would scrub it again. Anything to be busy. Anything to keep his mind from straying.

He lowered the bucket to the sea with a long rope and brought it back full, sloshing over the wooden brim. He flicked away the bigger pieces of the slimy weed, then picked up his brush, the cloth strands wrapped around a broken piece of plank, frayed and filthy. Hands and knees, he scrubbed, broad circles left to right, until the bucket was empty. He ignored the hot sun on his back. Ignored the ache in his knees and the ache in his belly. Ignored the reek of the slaves rising up through the

iron grates. At seventeen years of age, Cristóbal was becoming expert at ignoring. He picked up the bucket and lowered it again into the sea.

Behind him, someone spat.

"You missed a spot."

Slowly, Cristóbal turned. A wad of phlegm gleamed on his deck. It stretched over the boards, slick and shining. He glared at the mizzen mast. Santos and old One-eyed Miguel, the sail-makers, leaned against the pine shaft, laughing, braying like mules.

The bucket was solid in his hand. It called out to be thrown, to bounce against Santos' turnip-shaped skull. His fingers tightened around the rope bail, flexing, ready to hurl it, water and all, at his tormentors. From the quarterdeck he felt eyes watching the drama unfold, inquisitive and bored. Captain Garcia, wrapped in a coat gaudy as any peacock, and dour Don Carlos, stared at him. Cristóbal withered under their scrutiny.

Without a word, he stepped to the gob, brackish water sloshing against his legs, and cleaned the spot. He stood and tried to walk away. A heavy hand grabbed him by the shoulder.

"We need a coil of rope." Santos grinned, his teeth gapped and yellow. "Go below and fetch it."

"Get it yourself."

The sail maker's grip tightened, thumb jammed against his collar bone. Cristóbal felt himself lifted, swung like a side of mutton against the mast. Santos' grin vanished.

"I told you go below and fetch a coil of rope."

Cristóbal glared at the larger man. "Go to the devil."

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?" Aguirre stood behind them, arms crossed, face impassive. Only the scar running jagged down his cheek betrayed his anger, pulsing white against brown skin.

"This rat," Santos shook Cristóbal for emphasis, "refuses to

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do what I tell him. I asked him to bring us some rope, and he walked away.”

“Is this true?”

“Señor...” Cristóbal’s voice faltered.

“Do as he says. Bring him the rope.” Aguirre turned to leave, then paused. “And you will stand watch tonight? Is that clear?”

“Yes, Señor.” Shaking with fury, Cristóbal put down his bucket and walked to the hatch. A hot, rancid wave of air washed over him, sickness and shit and clinging death. He descended the steep stairs into the throat of hell.

The hold was a simmering kettle, damp and unforgiving, steaming every ounce of moisture from the bodies chained to the narrow racks. It was tight below decks, and dark after the harsh sunlight above. Cristóbal thanked the saints for the dimness. It hid the faces, black against black, hid the hatred burning in those dark eyes. The slaves were silent now, too parched to spit at him as they once had, or to jabber curses as he shuffled past. Even the gauntlet of legs striking out at him as he passed was gone, the bravest and the boldest of the Africans too sick now to bother with such a wasted gesture. Strength was something to be hoarded, not squandered on deck rats like himself. He hurried past them, bent double under the open beams.

Clouds of flies pelted his face, striking and lighting, buzzing furiously round his face. Cristóbal swatted at them, batting them away, crushing them like peppercorns against his palm. He found the rope more by touch than sight, the hemp bristling against his skin, then started back toward the stairwell. The thin shaft of light seemed a thousand leagues away, like sunlight poking down from rain-fat clouds. He picked up his pace, anxious to be away from the reek and disease sealed deep in the belly of the sloop, closed forever from the light of day.

Bony fingers closed around his ankle, frail things, a bird’s

talons. Cristóbal jumped at the touch, striking the deck above his head. Something croaked from the lowest rack, a high, tortured voice, speaking wretched Portuguese.

“Agua, agrada?”

It was the boy they had bought from the Arab traders, the little translator they had made such a pet of during the long march to the sea. The boy who had smiled so happily at the antics of the crew, laughing at the shell games Bonitez, the cook, played with him during the sweltering evenings. Now he was chained like the rest, a lamb waiting for slaughter.

“Water, please?” he repeated.

“No...” Cristóbal broke away, hurrying backwards toward the ladder. “I’m sorry. There is none to spare.” He took the steps two at a time, banging his shins against the rough planks. He tripped at the top, sprawled across the same wood he had spent so long scrubbing. He scurried away, the boy’s pitiful voice worming through his brain like maggots. Not even the blistering sunlight streaming between the sails could burn that from his soul.



Night.

Stars littered the sky like sparks from a blacksmith’s forge. Once, when he was much younger and not yet put to sea, Cristóbal had seen the great cathedral in Seville, candles burning row upon uneven row, flickering in the shadows. It had left him dizzy, as if sky and earth were overturned. This was a thousand times worse. He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself, cursing the day that had brought him to the crow’s-nest. The leather belt held him upright, chaffing his waist, binding him to the smooth mast at his back.

Around him only darkness. Black water, calm beyond

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belief, rose and fell in lazy undulations. A wall of mist was slowly advancing from the south, a shelf of gray sliding over the endless sea. Tiny sounds marred the stillness, small noises. Lapping water and the snores of the sleeping crew. Rope creaking through wooden blocks and the slaves rattling coughs. Alcyon was large for a sloop, but crowded, too much cargo lashed above deck, too many slaves chained below. Once she may have been a proud ship, dancing the waves, sleek as any porpoise. Now she wallowed, lumbering like a hag, overburdened and becalmed, a dried-out husk on a dead-calm sea.

The mist gathered around them. It washed over the hull in pale, sluggish waves, an eerie thing drowning the dark waters. A crescent moon staggered skyward, painting the fog in washed-out tones of silver and charcoal. It was easy to see shapes within it, the lonesome dead haunting the chill morning. Cristóbal forced himself to think of other things, more pleasant obsessions. He thought of the shepherd girls in his village, of bright eyes darting his way on crisp autumn evenings. Thought of the fabled whores in Havana and how he would squander every peso on them if ever they made port. Thought of silk-skinned legs and rounded breasts so full they spilled over the tops of every dress. He felt himself stiffen, hand straying to his crotch, lost in his own desperate need.

Without warning, the sweet image was blotted out, smothered by the memory of an old black woman dying on the sand a thousand leagues in their wake. She seemed brittle, a thing made of sticks and mud instead of flesh, a wattle-and-daub woman shriveled in the hot African sun. Flat breasts, sucked dry of life, flopped like empty wineskins against skeletal ribs. Ancient eyes so brown they seemed black, implored, begging for one small taste of mercy.

Cristóbal recoiled from the picture, gagging at the thought of her body sprawled on the dirty beach, fresh red blood staining

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her matted hair. Sickened, he stared down at the quarterdeck.

A figure stood beside the aft rail, tall and still, facing the sea. A long coat covered him shoulder to calf, blue velvet, sleek as a raven's wing. Don Carlos might have been a ghost, a phantom seldom seen by the light of day, a rumor whispered among the uneasy crew. Bonitez murmured, whenever Aguirre was out of earshot, that the don's cabin was a temple to the dark one, that he kept a crucifix upended above his narrow cot and spent his days intoning the liturgy backwards. He said the Captain joined him, in every sense of the word, sealing themselves behind the thick oaken doors, forbidding even Aguirre from entry. Santos called them fools, said Don Carlos de la Hoya was just another drunken duke cast out of Court, banished to thrive or die on foreign shores. Cristóbal no longer cared. He felt like an intruder, an insect snared, waiting for the spider to arrive. He watched the pacing man, praying silently he wouldn't be noticed.

Time passed, the mist drifting silently, giving the illusion of motion. Dawn widened on the eastern horizon, a pale line still hours away. Cristóbal clung to the crow's-nest, exhausted and cold, shivering like a sick dog. Don Carlos continued to pace, staring sullenly across the rippling fog, hand above his eyes as if he could see deeper into the dark than mere mortals. Once, as the moon crossed the furled sails, he heard the man cry out, shouting in anger at figures unseen. If madness had a name, surely the man in the long dark coat knew it well.

A soft rhythm caught his ear, swooshing through the cool air. Black wings swung past the moon, eclipsing it, sliding over the stars in a tightening spiral. Glossy feathers sculled the night, dark as soot, dark as heart-blood. Cristóbal stared as the vulture circled low over the topmasts. He heard voices moaning on the breeze, distant and empty. A long line of shadows marched through the fog, stretching out behind the ship single

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file. The line swayed, winding serpentine above the weed-choked waters, a festival of the damned. Closer they drew, faceless things, lost in the hush of the waves. Some wore rags and some wore silks, and some were bound in tattered sailcloth. Machado walked with them, moving on stiff legs raw from the great fish's bite.

A weight settled on the line above Cristóbal's head, drawing the rope taut. He turned, twisting against the belt holding him to the mast. The great black bird craned toward him, razor jaws spread in a leering grin. Leathery legs swayed on the rope, talons flexing against the strands, kneading the hairy fibers. He could smell its fetid breath, urea and blood and rotting meat. The bird leaned closer, watching him, tasting him with eyes so brown they seemed black. The old woman's eyes looked down at him, terrible in their silence.

Cristóbal screamed.

"Sing out!" Don Carlos stood at the base of the mast, looking up. "What did you see?"

Other figures joined him, jostling round the base of the thick pole thirty feet below him, confused, frightened out of sleep. Aguirre was among them, naked to the waist. He put his hand to his mouth and shouted upwards. "What did you see?"

Cristóbal tried to speak, but his mouth was too dry. He forced himself to swallow. The bird was gone, vanished like the parade of the dead. Vanished like the fog drawing away in a great circle from the unmoving sloop. "Nothing. I am sorry, I thought I saw something, but I was wrong."

They muttered below him, cursing the fool in the rigging, and wandered back to their blankets, angry that what little sleep they had was stolen by a stupid boy. Already the sky was lightening, pale pink like the flesh around a virgin's nipple.

Cristóbal stood shaking in the crow's-nest, strapped to the mast, his own urine soaking his legs, sticky and warm. The crew left

him alone, alone until daybreak when they would settle the debt he had borrowed tonight. The last to leave was Don Carlos, a grim figure staring upwards, silent as the dead.



Bright sunlight burned the dawn to cinders, wicking away every trace of dew from the deck and sails. The air was still, heavy, an oppressive shroud laced with charcoal smoke and the reek of salt-pork long past its prime. Cristóbal stood in line, tin-plate in hand. A thin slab of parboiled meat landed on it, the edges curled and green. He sat down as far apart from the rest of the crew as he could manage, and took a bite of the tough, briny fare, so salty it made his lips sting. He shut his sleep-starved eyes against the sun and chewed.

A heavy foot sent his plate skittering across the deck. Cristóbal fell backwards, surprised. Santos stood above him, smirking. "Next time you have a bad dream and decide to pee your britches, keep it to yourself."

Aguirre watched from the mizzen. The first mate ducked under a guy-wire and sauntered closer. "Mr. Santos? Gather a crew and count the slaves. I want the dead overboard before the first bell rings."

"Me? I'm a sailmaker."

Aguirre's lips curled in a tight smile. "A sailmaker, eh? Well, now you're a grave digger, too." He turned his back and walked away. Santos glared at him, jaws clenching in and out. He nudged Cristóbal with a foot.

"You heard him. Let's go."

"No. I stood watch all night. Find someone else."

Santos grabbed him by the shoulder and hauled him to his feet. "Don't you ever talk back to me, you little piece of whore shit." He shoved him toward the open hatch. "Get below and

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start looking for dead ones. I'll find help to bring them up."

Cristóbal's face reddened. He wanted to throw himself at the larger man, wanted to send him tumbling over the rail into the sodden weeds below. His fists clenched together so tightly his fingers became numb. Santos jabbed him with a knuckle to the center of his chest.

"I said go!"

The hold was crowded as before, dank and narrow.

Cristóbal descended the steps, hand over his mouth to avoid the stench. He saw another figure coming toward him. Bonitez staggered out of the shadows, pulled off-kilter by the weight of the water bucket in his hand. A simple wooden cup was chained to the bail. It banged back and forth against the cook's bony knees. "You looking for dead ones?" he asked Cristóbal.

"Yes."

"Port side, top shelf." Bonitez nodded over his shoulder. A greasy shock of black hair flipped across his forehead. He brushed it aside. "A woman, the one with the scar on her neck. Might be more."

Anxious to be done, Cristóbal pushed through the cluttered compartment. He found the dead woman and pulled her stiff figure off the narrow rack. Like most of the slave women, she was unchained. Her body thumped against the filth-covered deck, a hollow sound. Cristóbal grabbed her by an ankle, touching her as if she were a leper, and dragged the emaciated corpse toward the ladder. He passed Santos and several others, crowding past them. One of the men missed his footing and stepped hard on the woman's bloated stomach. A blast of foul gas whooshed out her gaping mouth. Cristóbal fought down the urge to wretch and hauled her topside. She landed in the calm water face down, tangled in sargasso, bobbing like driftwood. Cristóbal turned away, sickened by the sight. He heard more bodies thumping up the steps.

Santos pulled the body of a tall man to the rail and heaved him over. He and the others returned a moment later with two more dead slaves. Cristóbal recognized one of them, the little translator boy. Despite himself, he walked to starboard and stared down at the pathetic body.

Wide eyes, white rimmed and glassy, stared up at him. The boy's dark lips twitched, unable to speak, begging. Cristóbal stepped back in shock. "This one is alive!"

Santos shrugged. "He won't be for long."

"You can't toss him over."

"Why? You want to donate your water to a dying negro, suit yourself. Me, I'll drink mine and feed this one to the fishes." Santos bent toward the rail-thin body. The boy flinched and tried to roll, but was too weak. Cristóbal kicked Santos's wrist away.

"I said no."

Santos straightened. "So, now you are giving me orders? I'll break you in half."

"You can't throw this boy overboard. He is not dead." Cristóbal stood his ground, refusing, for once, to back up. "I'll tell the Captain what you are doing."

"Good. You run tell the Captain. Tell Don Carlos, too, you little motherless bastard." Santos crossed his thick, hairy arms. "I'll wait right here."

A crowd gathered, bored men hoping for a fight. Cristóbal pushed through them. He met Aguirre coming the other way, Don Carlos and the Captain in his wake. His mouth went dry. "Señor, pardon..."

Aguirre scowled. "What trouble have you caused this time?"

"I..." Cristóbal swallowed, fighting for words. "Santos wants to toss a live slave over. You can't let him do this." He stared down at his feet. "It is the boy, the one you bought from the Arabs, padrone."

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A soft splash split the humid morning. Cristóbal spun. Don Carlos and Captain Garcia shoved him out of the way and walked to the railing. They leaned out over the sea. Cristóbal rushed to join them, just in time to see sleek, gray jaws close around the boys legs, dragging him under. Garcia turned to him, face impassive as a ballast stone. "Looks dead to me."

Santos began to laugh. Furious, Cristóbal lunged at him, head down, charging like a bull. The sailmaker grabbed him, swung him in a wide arc, and slammed him against the quarter-deck. Stunned, Cristóbal fell and lay gasping, his air gone, spots dancing in front of his eyes. Aguirre leaned over him.

"How stupid are you boy?"

Another shape crossed in front of him, blocking the sky. Don Carlos knelt down, close enough that Cristóbal could feel his breath warm on his face. "I know you. You were in the rigging last night, yes? What did you see?" the Don whispered. "When you cried out, what did you see?"

Cristóbal managed to sit up, desperate to pull away from the gaunt, glowering man. "I saw nothing..."

"Speak up."

Cristóbal's heart pounded inside bruised ribs. "I saw..." He shut his eyes tightly. The vulture with the old woman's eyes stared back at him. He shivered. The crew had gathered around, crowding to hear. "I saw nothing, padrone. A trick of the moonlight, that's all."

"Little fool." Aguirre pulled him to his feet. "Take him below. Maybe a few days sleeping with the cargo will teach him what happens to stupid boys who pick fights."

Rough arms grabbed him, dragging him down the steps. Still smarting from the pain and the indignation, Cristóbal felt the manacle snap around his left ankle. The men shoved him down, bent double, and stuffed him into the same narrow rack where the starving black boy had been chained, the plank not

yet cold.



Cristóbal dreamt of water, cool and sweet, flowing from a mountain spring. He dreamt of soft breezes that smelled of pine and distant rain. But mostly, he dreamt of that terrible beach. Over and over he watched the scene, saw himself as a hummingbird would have seen him, flitting from view to view in fevered jumps. Saw himself and the others herding the slaves along the banks of the sluggish river, the jungle sweating around them while mosquitoes buzzed round their faces, so thick you swallowed half a dozen with every breath.

He thrashed on the rack, trapped in the endless dream, the shackle chaffing him to the bone. Cristóbal saw figures in his delirium, shadows moving through the hold, slaves marching to the sea. Saw the Arab's haggle with Don Carlos. Saw the brackish bay open in front of them, Alcyon at anchor, waiting their return. "Leave me alone," he called out, his throat dry as dust. The figures marched past, uninterested in him. Only once did they turn, just long enough to laugh, then moved on, the dream returning in hazy waves. Again he stood on the stinking, muddy beach.

A storm had passed in the night, littering the salt pans with dead fish and branches snapped from nearby trees. Flies swarmed in the searing African air. Cristóbal stood with his crewmates, mute and exhausted, while Don Carlos made a final inspection of his purchases before loading them into the long boat. Events played out, unbreakable. He saw the don cull a short black man, bearded and angry, out of line, smiling perhaps for the first time since they had left Spain. Even the Arab traders shook their heads in dismay as the heavy pistol raised to the captive's ear.

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"Sometimes," Don Carlos said, loud enough for all to hear. "The best lessons are those learned the fastest." Fire jumped in the pan, barrel jumping as the charge went off, a puff of white smoke belching out. The slave crumpled to the sand and lay twitching, eyes rolled back in his head. Don Carlos handed the empty pistol to a nearby crewman for reloading, and moved down the line. He stooped down and lifted a green branch, long as his forearm, swinging it like a king's scepter. He paused in front of a withered old man, his shoulders bent low by the tortuous march, and tapped him with the stick. "This one. He won't survive the passage."

The crewman raised the pistol, but Don Carlos stopped his hand. "No," he said, taking the weapon. "He is not worth the powder. Use your knife."

Cristóbal had turned away, avoiding the horrible cries of the slaughtered. One after another the don selected the sick and the old. One of the Arabs rushed forward, jabbering broken Portuguese, offering to buy back the culls. The Spaniard ignored him and moved down the line. Satisfied at last, he nodded toward the longboat.

Relieved, Cristóbal helped put the remaining slaves into the low-sided boat. Tepid seawater sloshed against his shins as they pushed the boat into deeper water. He started to step aboard, picking up an oar as he did.

"Wait."

Everyone turned.

"That one." Don Carlos pointed with his stick. "The old woman at the stern. She is not worth taking." He pointed at Cristóbal. "You, take care of her."

"Señor, I have no knife," he lied.

"Then use what is in your hand."

The oar was heavy, the wood dry and split, in need of oiling. "But, Señor..." Cristóbal's voice faltered, his stomach twisting

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in knots. Others led the old woman ashore and shoved her to her knees on the wet sand. "I can't..."

The bastard smiled again. "Oh, I think you can."

Ashamed and angry, furious at a universe so arrogant it allowed men like the don to live, Cristóbal raised the oar above his head. The old woman looked up at him, understanding at the last what was coming. Her eyes implored what her throat could not. Cristóbal shut his own eyes and swung. The wood hit her hard, not on the head, but on the shoulder. She cried out in pain and toppled forward, curled into a ball, clutching her broken collarbone.

"Finish it, you idiot."

Cristóbal swung the oar again. It shattered against her skull. She stiffened like a fish struck with a stick, but still she breathed. Tears streamed openly down his face as he struck again and again with the broken shaft, striking until at last the shriveled body lay still. In his dream he felt the oar hard in his fists, felt the force of his blows passing through his wrists. In his dream he saw the old woman turn, her skull crushed and dented, lifeless eyes watching him, blood oozing from her broken nose as the shadow of dark wings slid silently across the wet sand.

Something touched his arm.

Cristóbal bolted awake, screaming in terror. Bonitez slapped his hand over his mouth, silencing him. "Shut up, you fool. They'll find me down here." The cook handed the wooden cup to Cristóbal. "Drink this, and for the love of the virgin, be quiet."

"Gracias." He drank greedily. "Thank you."

The cook snorted. "Don't thank me yet. Better I should let you die."

"What's wrong."

Bonitez looked over his shoulder, making sure he was unno-

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ticed. "Last night, One-eyed Miguel died. He had no blood. None at all. The night before it was Tio and Ramirez." He gave Cristóbal another cup, half-filled. "Soon, there will be no one left to die. I have to go."

"Wait.... please. Don't leave me down here. I'm rotting."

"Rotting?" The cook snorted. "We all are. All day and all night, the Captain argues with Don Carlos while Aguirre stands by and does nothing. We should abandon this ship while we still can."

Slaves tried to grab the bucket as Bonitez hurried down the corridor. Cristóbal watched him go. Far in the distance, he swore he heard wings swooshing above the empty sails, while watery voices laughed beneath the ship. Something brushed against the thick hull, scraping, dead fingers scratching at the planks.



On the fourth day they relented and brought Cristóbal above deck. He stood squinting, hand over his eyes, legs covered in his own filth while the sores around his ankle wept. The sky was pale and formless, dull white clouds stretching from horizon to horizon like a sack over their heads. The sails still hung slack, the lanteen drooping against the ropes, the mainsails faded and gray.

Aguirre slid the mop bucket across the deck with his foot, seawater sloshing out. He tossed a rag at Cristóbal. "Clean yourself. You're the new cook."

"Bonitez?"

"Dead, like the others." Aguirre stepped away. Cristóbal dipped the rag in the bucket and tried to scrub the grime from his face and body. He counted the men around him as he did, struggling to keep track of who remained and who was gone.

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The deck felt empty, stripped to the bone. He staggered forward to check the larder, putting thoughts off Bonitez's death from his mind. The food in the wooden casks was nearly gone, worm filled crumbs littering the bottom of the barrels. He tipped the nearest water barrel. It was light, no more than a few gallons left. In the dimness of the little pantry he cupped his hand and drank until his stomach hurt. He pulled out one of the hard, moldy biscuits, tapped the grubs out against the wall and stuffed it in his mouth. It hurt his teeth to chew. All he heard were the sounds of his own jaws, grinding the hard-tack. It was the sound of tree limbs on a windy night, slapping against a wall. The sound of dead fingers peeling back the wood, splinter by splinter, from a starving ship's hull. A cobbler's stool sat in the corner of the tiny room. Cristóbal slumped to it, still weak with fever, and began to cry. The floor was wet, seawater beginning to seep through a thousand tiny holes.

A pistol shot cracked the silence. He rushed back outside.

The door to the quarterdeck swung, creaking on its hinges as Alcyon rocked in the sluggish waters. Don Carlos stepped out, swaying, his hair tousled. A deep cut sliced beneath his right eye, blood staining his once immaculate collar. Sulphur-laced smoke drifted out the cabin door. The don spotted Aguirre.

"It was self-defense. The fool came at me with a knife."

Aguirre stared, dumbfounded. "The Captain? He is dead?"

"I am captain, now. Yes, I think that's right." Don Carlos brandished the empty weapon. "I am Captain, now." He pointed at Santos. "You there... you have another body to throw over."

Santos stared around him, mouth gaping, looking for support among those who remained. None moved. The sailmaker raised his arms, palms up. "Señor? Am I simply to throw Captain Garcia over like one of the slaves?"

"Yes. He was a murderer, he deserves nothing more." Don Carlos was more confident now, strutting back and forth in front of the cabin door, throwing his arms about.

"And then what?" Aguirre challenged.

The Don stopped, turned, and nodded. "Ah yes. Then we shall load the longboat and leave. If the wind won't take us from this cursed place, then the oars will. Make ready the boat. Do you hear me? Make ready the boat."

Cristóbal stumbled toward the crowd, desperately hoping he was locked in yet another nightmare and this too would fade away. Aguirre was coming from the opposite direction, his face livid. Cristóbal stepped in front of him.

"Señor, what are we to do?"

The first mate glanced over his shoulder at the don. "Pray, if you remember how." He shoved past, bellowing as he did.

"You heard the man. Make ready the longboat, and God have mercy on us all."



They emptied the last of the water into a single cask, pouring the precious liquid from barrel after barrel, desperate to catch every drop. Even so, the barrel remained little more than half way to the top, a few days ration at most. Cristóbal counted twelve men, thirteen including himself. Unless land was closer than he expected, the longboat would soon suffer the same fate as Alcyon. He turned toward the hold, the hatch wide open.

"What about them?"

"The negroes?" Santos cleared his throat and spit. "Let them die."

"No." Aguirre rocked a final barrel on its rim. A few gallons sloshed in the bottom. "We leave this for them."

"Why?" Santos reached for the barrel. "It's all the same in

the end for them.”

Aguirre shoved the sailmaker’s hand away. “I said no.”

A shadow slid over the deck, long, graceful wings, every feather picked out in detail against the sun-parched wood. Cristóbal stared upward. No trace of the bird was to be seen. Nothing but a blached sky, blue-white like a day old corpse. He crossed himself. “None of us are going to live. She will see us all dead and drowned. Every one of us, she will drink our blood dry.”

“Shut up!” Santos grabbed him around the throat and shook him. “Do you hear me? Shut up!” He shoved Cristóbal away. Aguirre stepped between them.

“Stop it, both of you. This solves nothing.” The First Mate stood, fists clenched, daring Santos to try him. “All right, lower the boat. I’ll get Don Carlos.” He nodded at Cristóbal. “You, go open the leg chains.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.” Aguirre passed a heavy set of brass keys to Cristóbal. They jingled in his hand. “And be quick. We won’t wait.”

The hold wreaked of death, a moist, maggoty smell, soured meat and shit and wriggling things that never see the light of day. Warm seawater rolled around his knees. Already the sloop was listing to port. Soon, she would slide under the dark sargasso, lost forever. The flies were worse even than Cristóbal remembered. He gagged, bile rising in his throat, threatening to spill out. He unlocked the long chains running through the iron hoops securing the leg irons. Here and there a slave would look up at him, gaunt face wondering at the sudden change.

“Go. You’re free.” Cristóbal pointed at the hatch. “Free. Understand?” He pulled the chain through several hoops to prove his point. Still, none of them moved. Cristóbal suddenly realized he had no idea how many were alive or dead, or how

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long it had been since any of them had seen food or water. Far in the distance a bird screamed, laughing. Feet scuffled above, lightning footsteps dancing on the wood. He pointed at the hatch, then bolted topside.

The longboat was gone. Aguirre lay on the deck, curled in a ball, bright blood gushing out a gash in his throat. A dark-handled blade stuck out of his shoulder. He clutched at it feebly, gurgling as his life spilled out. Cristóbal ran to the rail, leaned against it, staring at the boat inching away.

“Wait! Wait for me!”

Santos looked up once, then bent back to his oar. Don Carlos took no notice at all. Slowly the boat faded into the haze, a dark shape wavering in the heat, a long trail of open water closing slowly behind it.

He heard something, a soft, whispering rush of feathers. Cristóbal turned, knowing full well what he would find. The bird stood on Aguirre’s body, talons tipped crimson. The old woman’s eyes watched him, cool and detached. The bird opened its mouth, panting, hissed once, then spread its wings. Cristóbal felt the air rush around him, felt dark feathers brush his cheek. The vulture screamed once, then wheeled to the west, following the longboat’s wake.

A single figure crawled up from the hold, a spindly black man, impossibly thin, blind in the sunlit glare. Cristóbal helped him to the deck, led him to a safe place below the mainsail. The man stared at him, stared at the distant horizon far behind. Cristóbal pointed at the sails then shook his head. The black man seemed to understand. Together they wandered back to the rail. Even the patch of open water was gone now, the seaweed closing in once again.

A single cloud rose in the east, dull white, an indistinct column gathering just over the horizon. Cristóbal squinted, his vision blurred. The clouds didn’t drift, didn’t fade on the wind.

66 Harpur

It took him a long moment to realize they were sails he saw, tall masts hung with yards of flapping sailcloth. A ship. It veered toward Alcyon, listing gently to port. Cristóbal hadn't even noticed the wind beginning now to blow, thick with distant rain and the promise of land. He sank against the rail, laughing sourly at fate, too exhausted to even feel relief. The black man beside him pointed at the ship, the squat hull gradually growing more distinct against the haze.

"Sí. Yes, I think they see us." Cristóbal didn't care if his words weren't understood. He smiled and nodded, pointed at the sky and crossed himself. He closed his eyes, waiting for the ship to arrive, and let himself drift asleep, dreaming of green meadows and cool, gushing streams.

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