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about 9000 words

The Longcon
By James Strong

-Quinn-

Any sailor worth their salt enjoys an old-fashioned tall tale. Whether it be telling one, listening to one, or making one up entirely, stories of the sea and its dangers were among the best parts of being a sailor. That is, of course, until you are the subject of one of these tall tales. I was in the Navy when it happened. I was a Petty Officer Cannonner, which meant I got to fire the big guns you see on the deck. My ship, the Longcon, was part of a small patrol fleet that contained two of her sister ships, the Languish and the Lombard. The fleet was tasked with patrolling the waters of the Cayman Trench just South of Cuba. We were a small section of the blockade surrounding Cuba at the time; our goal was to ensure no trade or reinforcements

could make port. The Spanish were losing ground rapidly, and a declaration from the Admiralty stated they hoped the war would be over before the end of the summer.

The day after the announcement, an air of cheerfulness filled the Longcon. After all, when you think about it, for us soldiers, the war was just an excuse to get away from home and go somewhere exotic. Every day was filled with us doing some manner of menial labor, but during the time between our chores, we'd dance, we'd sing, and most of all, we'd tell stories. Truth be told, at the time, I hoped the war would never end. I never cared for life back home; it was isolated and rural, and everyone around me was incredibly dull and close-minded. Out here on the sea, I had met some of the most interesting people I ever had the pleasure, and displeasure, to meet.

The reason I stopped and left the Navy, however, was because of what happened on that one dark and stormy night out in the Caribbean. The day had started poorly. I had slept in through the morning roll-call and was chewed out by my officer. I was forced to work outside along with some of the engineers who had been caught drinking while on duty. We broiled in the early sun for hours, waxing down the hardwood on the outer deck while a flock of seagulls laughed at us. At the time, there must've been hundreds of them flying all around the fleet. By the time we finished our punishment, we took out our cigars and cigarettes and smoked while conversing. I tried to follow along with what the boys were saying, but between the ringing in my ears and the sound of the gulls squawking overhead, I could barely hear anyone. At that time, cannoners didn't have ear protection, and as you'd expect, after a couple of dozen firing exercises, I had developed a permanent ring in both of my ears.

It was only when I really focused that I was able to hear what the men were talking about.

"It's a bad omen to see gulls in such a frenzy," Howard grumbled. The smoke from his cigar hung in the air like the black smog that rose from the Longcon's dual chimneys. His brow rested furrowed, and his black eyes were as beady and piercing as the gulls above us. Howard was the Longcons' chief engineer, and by all rights, he was a man of the sea. He claimed it was a curse set upon his lineage. On multiple occasions, I tried to pry him for details, but he'd always just growl at me and change the subject. I always knew he was a little crazy, but he was harmless. I didn't know then what he was capable of, so I joked around with him a lot.

"Howard. I've been meaning to ask, is there such a thing as a good omen?" I grinned as the younger engineers, who had long endured Howard's Antics as he was their Superior, chortled at my polite jab.

"Aye, there is, the best omen is when boys stop chattin' like housemaids and listen to their elders!" Rousing hysterics sounded from a dozen men, myself included. I threw my hands up and smiled as we heaved joyful sighs, and choked on our own smoke.

"I hear ya, I hear ya!" I laughed.

"No, you don't! You're as deaf as an old man, Quinn!" Another round of laughs and sputters filled my ears.

I shook my head and looked at the sailor standing next to me, whose name was Robin. At the time, I knew him as a short fellow, slim with a sharp-angled face and messy black hair. His uniform was a size too large, and he always had this disgruntled expression on his face. I offered him what remained of my

cigarette, but he merely kept his eyes trained on his feet. No doubt, counting the lines on the hardwood floor. At least that's what I assumed he always did when I looked at his feet.

-Robin-

I envied Quinn's liberty. He was a fair bit younger and shorter than the rest, but still, he stood half a head over me, and that was even with him slouching like a beggar. His hair was cut short, and he had only the beginnings of facial hair; something I would have to remind him to shave soon. Really, I envied all the men's liberties. While most were down to their undershirts, or even shirtless together, I was not improper nor a violator of protocol; I kept my suit on and prim. However, I would tug at the large collar to let a breeze snake around my neck and collarbone whenever it chose to pass by. I made sure never to flinch or express my relief when it did. After all, such emotions were beneath my station. Quinn's caramel eyes never stayed put on one object for long. He'd comment on every wrinkle of my nose whenever I heard him speak, or perhaps a furrowed eyebrow whenever he laughed. Either way, it was as if he could read my thoughts.

"How many floorboards are there today, Robbie?" One of the other men called out.

I did not dare consider answering him, firstly because his question was ill-natured and meant to mock me. I did not count floorboards; I merely did not wish to gaze upon grown men acting like petulant buffoons. Even if I were to chastise them, they would not listen; an overgrown gaggle of children is what they were. In my attempts to remain civil and not join in their circus of buffoonery, I merely averted my gaze.

Secondly, because my name is NOT that accursed shorthand, 'Robbie'.

Quinn grinned and punched my shoulder. "You ought to lighten up a smidgen, little fella."

I let slip a grumble. Quinn tilted his head like a dog who heard his owners cry miles away. I shook my head and brushed him away. I slumped against the cool metal of the hull, in the small amount of shade allotted, it felt better. I had to find a private room to just... ward away this horrid heat that besieged my very being.

Ignorant of my plight, the men began to sing, save for a petty officer whose name I did not know but whose face looked familiar. The ballad was 'My Love Mary Ridge', A classic amongst sailors, but a repetitive and trite story of a woman, accepting the hand of a husband she hates.

I didn't even need to open my eyes to know Quinn was staring at me with some kind of expectant face. I put my hand up in an attempt to dissuade further requests.

"Ah. C'mon, what kind of sailor doesn't sing over a cigarette?" He chuckled.

I shook my head.

"C'mon, you got a great singing voice." Starving seagulls were less insistent than he was.

"Quit it." I retored, blunt and low. He was the worst.

"Then I hope you care to listen." Quinn joined the rest of the men.

I considered giving in to my fatigue, slipping and sitting on the deck, and closing my eyes. Drift away into a blissful ether with the songs of the crew to sing me lullabies as if I

were a babe. I relaxed, inhaling deeply through my nose to meet with the scent of coal and salt.

-Quinn-

I gazed out into the water, and the golden rays of Sol glittered along the surface of the Caribbean. The ocean was our maestro, and we sang in tune with its tempo. This was where free spirits belonged; where I belonged. Salt and smoke in my lungs, every step aboard my darling Longcon, a dance to stay in rhythm with the sea.

Even the gulls took note, landing along the hair of the port bow and screaming in tune with us. Their shrill pitch and off-meter tempo were not blaring enough to perturb me, but the other men laughed and yelled at the creatures as they mocked us with shrill laughter.

They laughed until the crack of powder silenced both parties. The men turned in a panic to Petty Officer Markus. He had the wooden stock of his rifle pressed hard into his shoulder as he shakily eyed the spasming Gull that lay bleeding on the deck. He lowered his rifle and looked between the men.

"I was just tryin' to scare the bastards off! That damn vermin jumped in front of my gun!" He spoke with great haste and a high pitch. I watched as his eyes scanned the crowd for someone, anyone who would support his claim. Old Howard, with a great shout, wrenched the rifle from Marks' grasp and struck the officer over the head. Markus, who was twice as big as I, grabbed his head as he collapsed to his knees.

"Ey! Someone get the Captain, that's gotta be a Court-Martialin'!" He howled.

"Ah, save it, you harbor-rat!" Howard spat, "Any sailor knows that his brethren's souls live within every Gull at sea. Such betrayal will earn any man a seat at the right hand of the devil himself!" Howard raised the rifle to Markus's head, and the man threw his hands up and scuffled up to the rails in a panic. "How would you like to join it? Then you'd become just like them, for some chicken shit navy-boy to shoot because he was bothered by yer poor excuse for singin'!"

"Officer Howard!" The fighting ceased as a shrill voice cut through like a whistle. Robin cleared his throat and glared at the men with a scowl so fierce it invoked the might of a great tempest. "Cease this at once and return to your quarters! Both of you!"

The other men surrounded Howard and dragged Markus to his feet. I watched on, a bothered rumble in my chest as I contemplated what to say. I mulled over my options before turning to Robin, whose eyes had transitioned to the now still, lifeless Gull. Its wings were spread, and it lay on its back. It reminded me of a deer I had shot when I was much younger. I was reminded of that moment because of the guilty feeling that filled my stomach. I stood beside Robin and put a hand on his frail shoulders. He glanced towards me, mustering his usual iron exterior.

"Let's give this sailor a burial at sea. He's earned it." I whispered.

Robin nodded without comment, and together we said the Lord's prayer and with one hand each, let the Gull go so it may return to its beloved home. The sun's light dimmed, and I found myself no longer needing to squint. I gazed across the sparkling waters, hoping to spot a distraction when I saw it. I grabbed

Robin's arm and pointed out at the black mass, with a mighty tower at the center of two even ends, that lingered just beyond our sight. From how far we were, it could have been easily mistaken for a rock. But the finer details came into focus, and my heart sank into the ocean.

"Boys, look-" I turned to the crowd, who were already staring out at the ocean with a mix of worry and anger. I tilted my head towards the lookout's nest, where I could faintly hear the young lad stationed yelling as loud as his tiny lungs would allow.

"Ship! North! It's the Spanish! The Spanish Colors! The Castilla Maria!"

None of us could have known at the time, but spotting the Castilla Maria some 60 miles off the coast of Cuba would decide the fate of every man aboard that vessel. The Spanish Warship, mighty in its build, towered above the water; her mere presence made her ten times larger than the overlooked trio of Cruisers that stared her down. She was a veritable floating fortress that was assigned by the Spanish king himself to protect the port of Havana. Her mere existence had always kept the admiralty awake at night, stirring bourbon as they poured over maps and racked their aging minds on how to combat the prized jewel of the Spanish fleet. But to the common sailor, the Castilla Maria's greatest strength wasn't her guns, nor her armor, or her lightning speed, but instead it was how she had simply disappeared from the Bay of Havana at the outbreak of the war. She had been considered missing for months, with some suspecting the crew betraying their kingdom and fleeing south, or perhaps being swallowed by dark waters around Bermuda.

The men broke into a fit, screeching in panic, almost as if they had heard the trumpets of the final hour of judgment day. All I could hear was the blaring of the Longcon's horns as she alerted her sisters to the danger lingering in the distance. I'm sure the officers with us at that time called us to make haste, but I could not hear their orders. I merely followed the others upon seeing them bolt for the doors. Once inside, the horns of war muffled by the steel plating of the hull, I heard the tail end of Howard's ravings: "The Devil Castilla! The Ghostly Maria! I told you a lot about the omens! To yer stations, you lot, lest she claim yer souls and drag you to whatever hell she crawled out from!"

"Battlestations!" The Officers cried, sounding an ear-splitting whistle.

-Robin-

They pushed and ran into one another like maniacs, fighting to be the first to take their positions. From my post upon the Bridge, I heard them through the ship. The Captain barked orders to me, and I relayed them through the rudimentary piping. Their swift yet panicked responses echoed back to me. Once the crew was settled, I had to step onto the wings just above the bridge. Once atop, I flagged down both the USS Languish, the head of the fleet. Their response, direct orders from the Rear-Admiral, came within mere moments. I pressed my lips worriedly and climbed back down the ladder hatch.

"Captain Buchanon ."

I strode to him before ending my march in a salute. He turned to me; the soft clink of his medals and the squeaking of his rubber boots no longer intimidated me, as they had when I

enlisted. He looked at me with an expectant expression. The tan lines in his face wrinkled as he spoke.

"The Rear Admiral has ordered us to approach and fire a warning salvo at the Castilla Maria." I cleared my throat; in the haste of the action, I had raised my pitch. "Sir," I finished at my usual level.

He nodded and stroked his salt-and-pepper beard. The bow of the Longcon was faced towards the Castilla Maria; the fleet had moved just outside the Castilla's effective range. Like a pack of sharks circling a whale, we waited for it to make the first move. Despite the fleet's slow encroachment on her space, she did not move. It was as if the Castilla had disguised itself as a rock and had now emerged just before the final push of the war.

"Call up the front cannons and the boilers. We are to move upon the Castilla Maria and fire a warning shot in front of their bow at 4 nautical miles distance."

A resounding "Aye, Sir!" sounded off, and I marched back to my station. I pulled out my chair and flipped open the communication line that ran to the front-most cannon.

"Front Cannon, do you hear me? Over."

"It's Quinn. What are the orders?"

"Load a salvo, aim for the Castilla Maria's bow, Over." My nostrils flared.

After a moment, he responded, "Repeat that?"

"Load a salvo! Aim for Castilla Maria's Bow! Over." I yelled into the tube.

"Heard you. You gotta speak up, Robin, it's so hard to hear you sometimes."

He hung up, and I hung my head low. Soon after, I rang down to the boilers to inform them that we were to move. The hum of the ship's propulsion and the smell of burnt coal wafted with the seawater as we streamed ahead of the USS Lombard and USS Languish.

Once within a range of five nautical miles, I saw the front cannon turn to angle itself at the bow of the Castilla. The Spanish Battleship lay dormant; no black smoke emerged from its chimneys. Perhaps engine trouble, or an intentional lure meant to snag us when we took a bite. At a distance of four miles, the front cannon unleashed its fury. A muffled blast shook the glass of the bridge, the salvo flew through the air before splashing just short of the bow, and a geyser of scalding salt water coated the side of the Castilla.

The bridge, still stern-faced, clapped in approval. I grumbled about how Quinn's mediocrity shouldn't have been celebrated just because it made for a symbolic spectacle, one that the Castilla Maria did not answer. She sat still, as if she were a dead whale beached.

The applause fell silent as the men looked on in confusion. They turned to Captain Buchanon, who scowled at the silent Castilla. Without even turning over his shoulder, he barked at me.

"Tell the front cannon to fire over the deck!"

I swallowed, and my cold exterior broke. The whole bridge fell silent as their eyes were turned forward, their ears sharply focused on my actions. Times like these, Captain Buchanon reminded me of my father. With clammy hands, I opened the line once more.

"Front cannon, fire another salvo." I gulped, realizing I still had to keep my voice in check. "Over."

One of the other cannoners whose face nor name I knew answered. "Heard! Firing now!" I had hoped to hear Quinn on the other end. In a matter of seconds, the front cannon shot another twin round, this time over the Castilla and out of sight. Another plume of water erupted behind her.

She was silent.

-Quinn-

An armed boarding of the Castilla Maria was launched within the hour. The Fleet had converged and approached her from different angles, hoping to remain in her blind spots for safety. As the fleet rearranged itself around the Castilla, the officers realized that the battleship was adrift. Her anchor was raised, and the currents were carrying her with no resistance.

The shrill whistle sounded our silent charge onto the deck of the Castilla. We were met with no resistance and quickly realized that she was empty. No cracks of rifle fire, shouting of foreign tongues, or the roar of battle at sea. She was completely and utterly dead.

An air of unease swept across the men. In the distance, the golden rays of Sol became half hidden behind an encroaching grey mass. No longer did the light of summer dance upon the water, turning the sea into a cold, dark green.

As my squad and I held position at the exterior of the ship, we stood in silence. Soft bells rang in my ears as I pondered something Old Howard told me not long after I enlisted.

"Tell me, old timer, is the Longcon haunted?" I asked him, half as a joke.

"Every ship is haunted, son. You see, when a sinful man dies at sea, his soul stays with the sea for all eternity. He can go wherever he desires across the ocean blue, but cannot leave her, no matter how much he wants to. So whenever a ship passes by, he hops aboard and takes root within it. He sets his ire upon the living, furious to have been forgotten and denied a proper burial. He wails into the walls at night, a warning for all sinful men who will join them unless they stay faithful," He has answered.

A familiar chill crawled up along my forearms as I looked up towards the ever-diminishing sky. The sea churned, spurned on no doubt by the will of Neptune. The wind kicked up, blowing away the hat of one of my squadmen. I watched as it slowly drifted into the water before it was devoured by the briny waters.

A commotion from inside snagged my attention from the encroaching darkness. Several men walked out of the hermetic door carrying a naked Spaniard. The man, well into his thirties, howled like a dying animal. He trashed and bit at the boy who carried him, blood hung from the corners of his mouth, and bruises covered his face. Worst still was the dried, cracked blood that dripped from his ears, and he kept crying out the same word over and over.

"¡La Sirena! ¡La Sirena!"

"Someone get the Rear Admiral, and the Captains! He's the only one we've found," An officer ordered. The familiar but uneasy hum of the men buzzed through the air, and though I did not hear it, I could see lightning flash in the distance.

The storm had enveloped us entirely. I had to sit at my station, barking orders through the piping for hours. The USS Longcon was in good condition to weather the typhoon that surrounded us, but the crew was hardly in any shape to proceed. Everyone was murmuring or whispering stories of rumor and paranoia. The worst part was that the entire situation was avoidable had the chain of command followed protocol as much as they chased glory.

The Rear-Admiral was a despotic fool. Captain Buchanon was a coward. But most of all, I was an idiot for ever enlisting in the first place. The rain pelted the USS Longcon like an endless volley of arrows.. The storm was upon us, and we were alone.

"The Admiralty will be most pleased with this victory! The Castilla Maria has long since haunted these waters, and now its fantasy is naught more but history. We shall tow her to Havana to show them how we vanquished her with nary a shot fired. Our names will be emblazoned upon statues, and our story shall make us immortal." The Rear-Admiral's honeyed words did not fool the crew nor me, but Captain Buchanon, spineless and old as he is, took it upon himself to finish our patrol. *"We are to follow the Admiralty's orders and stay behind to secure the waters for the invasion force. And no man aboard is to discuss or speculate what has occurred publicly. I will not have my crew indulging in rumor or fanciful speculation. We will remain resolute and doubtless."* The Captain's speech felt hollow in the face of all that had occurred.

Before the soldiers managed to subdue the mutilated Spaniard found aboard the Castilla Maria, he screamed incoherent warnings or pleas for mercy. It was decided that he was to be gagged and taken by the Rear-Admiral for further questioning.

And then, without much fanfare, the USS Languish and the USS Lombard departed us. They towed away their prize, leaving their sister to finish the mission.

In the absence of the other vessels, a thick malaise hung in the air. An unseen but present discomfort weighed upon the minds of everyone. Glances and half-heard whispers roused more suspicions. The crew's appetite for rumors grew with each passing minute. The air reeked of tension; you could see it in the way the candlelight blazed. Its heat brought a cold sweat to every sailor's brow.

It hadn't helped that both Howard and Markus had been punished before the whole crew for their prior outburst. He lashed the men a dozen times each and set them to work cleaning the boilers. The Captain's intent was clear; there would be no more outbursts or disorder going forward, lest their shoulders feel the sting of the whip.

By the time I was dismissed from my station, my mind still lingered on the sound of the whip and the gnarled bloody mess of the men's backs. They all stared blankly out into the storm, their expressions were vacant, and their arms limply dangling by their sides. At the time, I paid no mind to their behavior, assuming they were as exhausted as I was.

I rubbed my shoulders as I marched down the stairs to my private quarters. It was a small room, but it afforded me privacy, one of the perks of being an officer. Even deep within the bowels of the ship, I could hear the heavy downpour outside.

Exhausted, I approached my quarters when, through the cracked air-tight door at the end of the hall, I heard a roar of excitement so loud I thought it was thunder. Curiosity compelled me to peek my head through the door and spy upon the men with

their backs turned. A large crowd of sailors lay across their bunks or sat on the floor as they looked to a common point of interest. With one hand gripping the top of a bunk for support, and the other holding onto a leather-bound book, Quinn read loudly to the men.

"And so! Brave Ulysses told his men to pull the beeswax from his ears and tie him to the mast of the ship. For he desired to hear the beautiful song of the sirens! The men complied, and as they sailed through the waters, Odysseus fought against his bonds so that he might jump into the water, as the siren's song compelled him to do!"

Most of the men aboard were illiterate. A basic literacy test was required for someone to join the Navy, but most had either cheated or were accepted due to the need for manpower. Quinn, however, not only knew how to read but had packed books with him. Most of the time he would hold story nights where a few of the men would gather around and listen to him go through a chapter before retiring. But before me was easily the largest crowd I had ever seen him gather. The entire crew quarter was enraptured by his story.

"What are you men doing?"

"Ah, Robin! I was hoping you'd join us! I was in the middle of regaling the tale of the siren to the men here."

"I am not surprised you would do something so foolish, Petty Officer Quinn. But please, justify your actions to me."

"Obviously, the Castilla Maria was vanquished by a pack of Sirens, the Spaniard even said as much! I'm trying to warn the crew as to what dangers we might face, after all, knowledge is power!"

Some men even hold up bits of candle wax they had cut small enough to fit in their ears.

"Quinn said that this stuff will protect us!" They giggled as if they were schoolboys.

I could feel the fury well up deep within me.

"Officer Quinn! Cease this buffoonery at once!" I ordered.

A wave of groans sounded off behind me, but I ignored them. Quinn looked to the men and gestured for them to calm down.

"C'mon Robin, can't you let us have some fun?"

"That's Officer Robin to you! Besides, the Captain ordered this crew not to indulge in rumor or speculation. Such talk will cause chaos. We will remain steadfast and-"

"Ah, shut up, Robbie! Let us have some fun!" One of the men from the crowd yelled. The crew laughed with delight, and they cooed with 'ooos' and 'ahhhhs' as I turned on my heel to address their jeering.

"Who said that? Who the hell just said that?! Come forth this instant!" I screamed. My face felt hot, and my knuckles were as white as snow. None of the men answered me seriously. The only response I received was more cheering, laughing, and giggling. Their laughs reverberated twice over, filling the room with such noise I squinted from the ringing in my ears. I let out a shout, which was overpowered by the howling of the crew, and stormed out of the quarters and into the hallway.

I set my sights on the stairs. Even now, I'm not sure what my plan was. Maybe I was going to report the entire crew to the Captain, or perhaps I was going to throw myself off the ship. The second option seemed more likely when I heard Quinn yelling after me.

"Robin, wait!" His voice echoed up the stair shaft right as I reached the same level as the deck. I hastily spun the door outside open and stepped out into the rain. To my annoyance, he stepped outside after me, still maintaining distance. The storm was upon us in force. The waves thrashed high enough to splash the deck, and the rain on my bare skin stung. The sheer wrath of the tempest around us would make any experienced sailor quake in their boots. Even still, Quinn pursued me; his persistence bordered on insanity.

"Robin." Quinn said flatly, "Officer Robin!" he said, performing a mediocre impersonation of Captain Buchanon. A long silence passed before he called out again, "Robbie!"

"What do you want from me?!" I screeched. Thunder erupted overhead, the force enough to shake the Longcon to its course. I had only been outside for a moment, and I was drenched from head to toe. I could only pray Quinn mixed up the tears streaming down my cheeks for the rain.

"I want to apologize." He answered.

I whirled around and stepped back towards him, "Do you not understand what kind of predicament we are in? Something completely unprecedented has occurred. Talking at this time will only breed rumor and doubt. That is the last thing this ship needs! I do not want to hear your apologies! I do not want to hear from you at all! Keep your foolish tongue still and be silent!"

"Oh, I see! You want me to rot in my cot like a good little cabin boy? Is that what it is?" Quinn's face morphed into a sneer.

"Yes, Quinn! I want you to just shut up! Such an order can be fulfilled by children, but for you, it seems quite impossible!"

"We found a ship that has been missing for six months, empty, with the only survivor aboard screaming about sirens! How am I not supposed to talk about that?" He slammed his fist into the wall, "Hell! We're anchored in the same water where the Castilla went missing! Who knows what will happen to us with this storm! The men are scared, and I'm trying to lighten the mood! But the only thing you care about is browning nosing for Captain Buchanon!"

I smacked him square across the jaw. I felt him flinch, but as he recovered, he turned to me with a stern expression. Even worse, he was silent. All of his petulant childish antics had vanished, and in their place was a judgmental, almost pitying expression. It felt as though I was going to explode with sheer anger. My jaw clenched, and I ground my teeth together. How dare he pity me, after everything he did? He didn't deserve the right to express pity.

"Let me back inside. I will report your disrespect to the Captain." I attempted to push past him, but he moved in my way and opened his mouth.

"Robin-" He tried to speak.

"Officer Quinn! I will not hear any-" I yelled before being cut off by Quinn again.

"Christ's sake, Robin, turn around! Someone's out there!" He grabbed my shoulders and spun me around to see. Another bright flash of lightning filled the sky as I saw Chief Engineer Howard and Officer Markus leaning over the edge of the railing. Both men stood there shrouded in the darkness only for a moment

before another blinding flash illuminated the sky in time to watch Howard push the other man over the ledge and into the abyss below.

My whole body began to shake as Howard's cackling echoed through the darkness. He stepped away from the rail and turned to us with a knowing smile.

"Sorry you had to see that." He chuckled. His rubber boots squeaked as he approached us. Now that he was closer, I saw that in his hands was a bloody kitchen knife.

"They seem to be terribly hungry. I had hoped that foolish boy would suffice, but it seems like they want the whole crew. Now Robin, you've been alright, so I'll let you off the hook, but Quinn, I think we both know you earned this, Quinn. Now, be a good lad and make it easy for me. Jump in. You know you want to."

"Howard, what the hell is wrong with you?! Step back!" Quinn shouted. He started to step back towards the door, and I joined. I slipped around him and watched Howard from behind the safety of Quinn's body. Old Howard did not listen, and it was only when he stepped into the faint light cast from the door that I saw he had dried blood trailing down his ears.

"I'm not gonna die at sea, sonny." He whispered before suddenly lunging forward.

With a startled yell, Quinn pushed me back inside and slammed the door shut behind us. Not content with standing around, I moved around to his side and assisted him with bolting the door shut. All the while, Howard banged and shouted on the other side, hurling demands and curses at us until, eventually, he went quiet.

-Quinn-

The time between sealing Howard outside and scrambling up to the Bridge is a blur to me now. When we reached the top, Robin and I burst the door open, shouting for assistance, but our words fell on deaf ears. To our horror, it was empty save for the silhouette of Captain Buchanon standing at the wheel, gazing out into the darkness. I turned to Robin, who, with some hesitancy, approached the Captain.

"Captain Buchanon, sir!" He saluted, to no response from the Captain. Robin repeated, thinking he had not been heard, but still gained no response. He looked back at me, and I nodded, taking a step forward to jump in case anything would happen. Robin put a hand on Buchanan's shoulder, and the Captain jumped to life, screaming as he drew his pistol on us. In the faint light of the bridge, I saw that, just like the Spaniard and Howard before, Captain Buchanon had gouged out his ears. He looked between both of us with wild eyes, his index finger twitched on the trigger as he spoke.

"Officer Robin. Do you and the petty officer not hear the song?" He asked.

"Song? What-" Robin cut himself off, upon realizing the Captain could not hear, he merely nodded. Captain Buchanon laughed a painful wheezing laugh as he leaned against the wheel.

"Well, aren't I one unfortunate soul. You're Petty Officer Quinn, right?" He asked, looking at me. I nodded.

"Well, that's why you're fine! Robin here told me that you can't hear, but how are you fine? You ain't deaf." The Captain pondered.

Until that moment, I had never seen Robin look so uncomfortable. His eyes darted to the floor of the bridge before

turning to look out the window. He gasped audibly, and I walked over to see what it was.

All around the Longcon, just beneath the ocean's surface, were thousands of glowing eyes. The pale green lights stretched on and on until they disappeared into the darkness of the storm. It was almost as if the starry night sky had flipped and was now beneath us. It was then that I heard it: the siren's song. A low melodic chorus sung by a thousand voices in unison. It was and still is the most beautiful thing I have ever heard. It made me tremble and shake on the spot. Every nerve in my body suddenly compelled me to go outside to listen, to get closer...

"No! Get out of my head!" I shouted as I covered my ears. Robin shouted for me and grabbed my arms to help.

"What's wrong? What's happening?! Quinn, answer me, damn it!" He shouted.

"You can finally hear it, can't you, Quinn?" Captain Buchanon sighed as he too knelt beside me. I felt him take my hand and push into it the hilt of a knife. He gave me a knowing look. My hand shook as my fingers grasped the dagger.

"Quinn, don't you dare! This is madness!" Robin wasn't merely shouting; he was ordering me not to harm myself. I slowly raised the knife, letting myself reflect in its blade as a flash of lightning illuminated the visage. After a moment standing there, I brought the knife to my side and tucked it into my pocket.

"There's another way. Some wax will help." I said, forcing myself upright.

I looked towards Captain Buchanon, who was shaking his head. Even if he couldn't hear, he could still tell what I was trying to say.

"You're a fool, lad..." He hung his head low and looked out into the night. His eyes met those of the thousands of waiting sirens. He clenched his fists and rose. "Before either of you goes out for a swim, there's work to be done."

He pointed out across the bow and spoke. "We must lock the doors and keep the rest of the crew from jumping to their doom. I'll go to the officers' quarters, you two go to the crew's quarters! Now hurry!"

Robin choked on his words, no doubt trying to express the danger of Howard, but Captain Buhcanon had already marched out the door. I put a hand on Robin's shoulder, gripping his sleeve as I felt the pull of the song outside tug on me once more.

"Captain's right. We need to secure the rest of the crew. We'll deal with Howard when we find him." I sighed. He gave me a pitiful look, and I grimaced. "C'mon, don't give me that shit. Get moving!"

With much effort, I exited the bridge and descended the stairs along with Robin. He had to drag me away from the door as I passed by it. Minute by minute, and moment by moment, the song rose in volume. A grand choir so moving, so unearthly in its beauty, it brought me to tears.

"Pull yourself together," I struggled to tell myself as I entered the crew's quarters with Robin. It was a nightmare inside. Men were lying out on the floor, clutching onto their sheets, stuffing wax into their ears, but to seemingly no avail. They screamed and cried and grit their teeth as they tried to fight the will of the song. The ones that were in their cots were muttering to themselves, praying, begging, though I could not hear their pleas over the incessant ringing and the pull of the song.

We shut the door. Even if a single man found a way to snap away from the lure of the song, we knew we had to keep the door sealed. There was no way to bolt it shut from where we were, and so we had to find a way to block it. I leaned on the door valve, breathing in stuffy, hot air, which made me choke as I exhaled. It felt as though I was being sapped of my energy, my will to stay awake and upright.

"Quinn! Quinn!" Robin yelled. I wasn't sure how long he had been trying to get my attention. I looked at him, my eyes half lidded as a throbbing headache coursed through my head.

"I'm going to get something to block the door! Stay here!" He said before he ran off towards his room down the hall. Just as soon as he left, I felt someone slam on the door. Muffled cries for mercy echoed on the other end as I felt the valve begin to turn open.

"No! No!" I yelled, quickly smacking my face to pull myself awake. I clamped down on the valve and fought against the force on the other side.

-Robin-

With little regard, I threw my room door open and grabbed my desk chair. From down the hall, I could hear Quinn's struggle, but more concerningly, the sound of the door groaning as it began to open. I ran back to Quinn and hastily propped the chair against the valve; it offered a modicum of resistance, but not enough to stop the valve from turning entirely. So I joined Quinn in holding the door.

I'm not sure how long we stood there battling the crew; it felt like hours, but it couldn't have been more than a few minutes. Every so often, I'd glance towards Quinn, and every

time I'd see his condition worsen. His eyes were wide open, but had begun to dull, as if he was dying while standing up. His grip weakened, and sweat covered his brow. He gasped and smacked himself, only to follow that up by smashing his head against the door. Though I could not hear the song, I could see through one of the portholes that the seas' thrashing grew ever more violent.

"Robin... I'm sorry." Quinn whimpered as he smacked his head into the wall again.

"Now is not the time for this! Focus, Quinn!" I yelled at him, my hands burned hot with how hard I was pulling the valve.

"Oh, for the love of... yes, it is you daft fool!" He snapped back. The fact that he was able to bicker even when he looked half dead was a testament to his sheer stubbornness. "I'm sorry for always bothering you. I've been an ass since the moment we met, and I don't want to be remembered that way! So let me own up to it! It's the least I can do."

I felt the valve slip as Quinn began to falter. I pulled it with all my might, I dug my heels into the ground. My muscles screamed at me to let go, lest they tear. I looked at Quinn, my eyes and my lungs stung.

"I don't care if you own up to it! You're gonna pay for all the torment you put me through! And not by some siren, by my own two hands!" I shouted, out of breath, tears rolling down my face.

"Yeah, karma's gonna get me!" He gasped as, with a sudden burst of strength, he helped push the valve back. I blinked, confused as to where his sudden burst of strength had arrived from. But in a flash, it dawned on me.

"Quinn, keep talking-"

The sound of a gunshot blasted through the hallway. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched the bullet bounce off the door and ricochet into Quinn's knee. He cried out in agony like a kicked dog and collapsed. By some inhuman will, he still held onto the valve, attempting to keep it shut. I faltered; the sound of the shot rang in my ears so loud I couldn't hear for a few seconds.

Dazed, I lifted my head to see him standing at the end of the hall, barely illuminated by candlelight: it was Howard. A flash of lightning revealed that in his hand was the Captain's revolver, coated in blood. He pulled the hammer back and gestured with it for us to step aside.

"C'mon now, boys, you know what needs to happen. If you let all the others take a swim, they might stop singing."

I did not grace that madman with a response. My head was pounding, and my heart was racing as I searched for any answers. Alas, the gap between Howard and me was too wide, and even if I were to catch him off guard and snatch the gun from him, Quinn wouldn't be able to keep the door closed.

In a single moment, the solution came to me, and with a heavy heart, I shouted, "Quinn! Let go!"

He looked at me, confused, but without much effort, I was able to pry Quinn away from the door. The valve spun wildly, crushing the chair in two as the door burst open. A dozen men, manic and covered in bruises and blood, bolted down the hall directly towards Howard. In a panic, Howard fired the gun, hitting one man and sending him to the ground. This did not deter the others, who ran right through the old sailor, crushing him underfoot. Howard died on the floor of that hallway,

screaming as his ribs and skull were crushed by the stampede of men.

"Quinn! Hurry and close the door again!" I yelled. Too many had streamed out, and if we had any chance of saving the rest, we had to act quickly. But I was foolish and did not realize that my only friend was already gone.

Wordlessly, he began to crawl down the hallway. I spotted him just as I started to close the door again. I gasped and lunged for him, only to be knocked to the floor and bash my head upon it. Darkness enveloped me for a time, but when I roused myself from being knocked out, I gasped. Without a moment's thought, I scrambled to my feet and sprinted down the hall and up the stairs. Men lay sobbing or screaming along the path, fighting to hold on to what little remained of their will. But amongst the bodies and victims, I did not see Quinn until I stepped outside.

My eyes followed a thin trail of smeared blood to the handrail, where I was able to see Quinn begin to lift himself over the side. Several other sailors lay across the deck or grasped onto the rail. I watched in horror as a few men jumped overboard. I ran out onto the deck of the Longcon; the full wrath of the storm was upon us. The rain was so sharp it cut my skin and blinded me. The whole ship shuddered in agony. Momentum lurched forward and then back, pushing and then pulling everything in less than a moment. The sound of the metal hull creaking stirred worry of its breaching, but the Longcon was resilient.

It was a different story. It took every ounce of strength I had not to fall over and tumble into the sea myself. Waves as high as mountains crashed against the sides, and by the time I reached Quinn, he was already leaning out over the side halfway.

"I got you, Quinn!" I yelled, I could barely hear my own voice, "I won't let you go!"

Momentum was not on my side. My boots skid along the rain-coated deck, and I slip, nearly careening over into the water along with Quinn. I looked out into the sea to see those thousands of blue eyes, watching, waiting, eager for us to take the plunge. Even then, I could not hear their song, but the dread they instilled made my ears ring, and my heart nearly burst out of my own chest.

I called out to Quinn many times to no avail. I racked my brain, trying to think of something, anything to do to help him. I gasped as I realized what I had to do.

"I met a lass named Mary Ridge! I saw her leanin' over the Harbor bridge! She filled my days with toil and strife! Twas exactly why I made her my wife!" I sang, practically screaming the words out as I tugged on his sleeve. I couldn't hear myself, but I continued anyway, my voice locked in battle with the wind and the rain. I wasn't sure Quinn could hear me, but I had to try. He was a self-centered idiot, but he was my friend. He did something few men like him would have done and owned up to his actions.

He joined. He looked into my eyes and sang with me, a surprised smile wormed its way to his lips as he slumped against the handrail, stomping his feet to try and make a beat. And then another man, and then another did. Until eventually, all the crew that remained was belting out sea shanties into the wind. We sang for hours, we sang until our voices gave out, and we sang more still. The chorus of the Longcon raged throughout the night until the first rays of dawn marked the end of our nightmares. As the light cast itself upon the water, the storm

dissipated, and the eyes of the sirens disappeared into the deep abyss of the Cayman Trench.

-Quinn-

Never had I been happier to feel the scorching heat of the Caribbean wash over me than that morning. My throat was sore, and a bullet was still lodged in my knee, but I was alive. By some miracle, a good chunk of the crew had survived, though most were catatonic, ranting and raving much like the Spaniards we found on the Castilla Maria. The rest of us set to work preparing to leave.

Robin was the highest-ranking officer still alive on the ship and immediately set to attend to the wounded. I was hauled off below deck and held up in the infirmary along with many others. My time spent there was half spent lying on my back looking up at the ceiling blankly, and the other half was spent in an unsettlingly dreamless sleep.

But at one point, sometime later in the afternoon, I woke up to see Robin leaning over me. He sat down and let out an annoyed sigh, "You're awake."

"You almost sound disappointed." I wheezed; my own laughter hurt me.

Robin rolled his eyes and sat me up, forcing me to down a glass of water. Once I was done, I coughed loudly for a few moments before slumping back up against the wall. My eyes turned towards Robin, who sat illuminated by what little sunlight the portholes let in. And it was only then that I realized how gorgeous she was.

"Thank you, Robin. I... don't know how I'll ever repay you." I said as a half-thought.

"I'm sure you'll come up with something," Robin hummed in response, not really paying attention.

A brief silence filled the infirmary as I checked around to see if anyone else was there. My cursory glance spotted no one, and I turned my full attention to Robin.

"Y'know. I always thought Robin was a strange name for a man." I said.

She was quiet for a while, and a small amount of dread visibly crept onto her face.

"Is Robin your real name?" I continued.

She gulped and nodded, "Yes."

"It's a pretty name," I grinned as I spoke, "You might just be the most interesting woman I have ever had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of."

Robin's shoulders slouched, and she frowned at me. Not in anger or sadness, but something close to disappointment.

"Are you going to report me to the admiralty?" She asked, worry hung in her words.

"Why would I do that? You're more likely to report yourself for violating naval conduct." I chuckled. Robin paused, and for the first time since I had met her, she laughed. I joined her, and we laughed until the pain in our chests stopped us from doing so. But even as we fell silent, outside, flying just along the surface of the water next to the Longcon, I heard the seagulls laugh with us.