

Mare Nostrum

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**Para
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You know why.

LET'S SET SAIL!

Mare Nostrum. Our everyday sea. That's what the Romans called it, without knowing exactly how far that sea stretched, which in principle was only the Mediterranean. That sea that begins with the beauty of a beach and never ends, because the sea is infinite. A setting of endless horizons, stormy reactions, and limitless routes. The theater of romances, battles, and abundant, fertile life. From its surface, another world begins, that of the depths with its mysteries. It gravitates tirelessly with its heartbeat of waves, tides, and currents. An eternal challenge to the dreams of sailors and adventurers. An inexhaustible source of food for humanity.

Here I present some stories that have the sea as their virtual setting, the Mare Nostrum, yours, mine, everyone's.

THE LIONESSE PIRATE

Jeanne de Clisson, the beautiful woman of Breton lineage, tore her lungs apart screaming in front of the French soldiers that she would avenge the unjust death of her husband Geoffroy de Chateaubriant, ordered by the French king Philip VI. Who ordered him to be beheaded in the public square of Nantes, as a warning to all French rebels. It was a total injustice ordered by the continuous political disagreements between the two countries that would eventually unleash the Hundred Years' War between France and England. Her purpose was to resolve who would control the additional lands that the English monarchs had accumulated since 1154 in French territories.

Not only had her husband's death been unjust, but it was extremely violent without necessity. Jeanne was sunk in her misfortune as a young widow and with two children from her marriage, who could not understand the hatred among men and even less that of their mother who, dressed in black crepe, every minute of the day promised herself and her children to avenge the injustice of her husband's crime.

An uncontrollable rage was born in her chest, which led her to devise an

intelligent plan to avenge the affront. It is not known for certain how she decided to set sail to fight against the English who controlled maritime traffic in the English Channel.

First, she sold all her properties, lands, and jewels. And with that money she armed two

black ships with red sails, soon known as the Black Fleet. they were fast ships, designed for ambushes and quick escapes, resistant to

all maritime conditions. The flagship where she would command the fleet she named Revenge.

To hide her femininity, she wore trousers and a black wide-brimmed hat that hid her hair, with gloves and a heavy coarse leather coat. She roamed the low neighborhoods and the bustle of the docks in search of men who would agree to embark with her on a dangerous venture. It was easy to find among the scum, sailors eager for adventure and common men who accepted promises of good dividends as a result of premeditated piracy, since at that moment all the English felt an exacerbated hatred against everything that smelled of France. The crime that took her husband's life would be avenged with the same violence.

Jeanne joined the side of John of Montfort in the Breton War of Succession, supported by the English, and became a privateer in the service of England. Before setting sail, Jeanne gathered the entire crew at the old dock in Marseille and from the bow of Revenge, with a firm and authoritative voice, launched her first warning.

"Listen carefully, men of the Black Fleet! You know we are on a

mission of vengeance." The men shouted cheers and vulgar cries. "Our red sails are the symbol of blood and revenge. Every minute of the day—whether in peace or war—you must submit to strict discipline. Any fault will be punished severely. Any act of cowardice or treason will be punished with death. You will have no rest as long as there are English ships within our reach. And whoever does not agree to accept these conditions, there is still time!

You can leave here the way you came." The sailors shouted their cheers of approval again. And Jeanne raised her saber, proud of her attitude. "If you agree, welcome aboard!" The access ramps were lowered by the officers, and the men began to board, one by one, up to forty on each ship.

For the rest of the day and all the next day, the work on board was to find the men most skilled in handling a ship and assign them their positions as sailors. The rest were provided with bows and arrows to immediately practice their aim on sacks that had been hung for that purpose. In fact, when the time for skirmishes came, all the men, including the captain Jeanne (she), would be warriors with swords, crossbows, axes, and catapults. At that time, cannons for ship armament had not yet been invented.

Jeanne, for her part, worked with her officers on the tactics they would use in critical moments of boarding enemy ships.

The day to set sail arrived, and everything on board was jubilant. Thousands of people had gathered on the docks and nearby areas to bid farewell to the Black Fleet, honoring them as heroes they were not yet, but Jeanne's purpose was known to all.

The sails were hoisted, and the ships immediately shook as if struck by a whip on the stern, leaping smoothly into the waters of the Mediterranean.

Tears ran down Jeanne's cheeks; they were tears of happiness as she looked to the sky seeking her husband to share those thrilling moments when her promise began to become reality.

She set out to sea commanding her ship and her crew of mostly ruffians and two or

three sailors with war experience, who would be extremely important to help her in her new role as ship commander. At first, many of the ruffians turned sailors, upon discovering that their captain would be a woman, were about to quit during preparations. But Jeanne was an intelligent woman, and among those hired on board, she had two men with experience in navigation and war. One was Olivier IV de Clisson (he), also surrounded by an aura of nobility that he knew how to disguise very well to appear as an ordinary naval officer like so many others. He was a handsome young man, not much older than Captain Jeanne. A man with broad shoulders and enviable musculature, his steps firmly crossed the deck, checking every detail of the rigging and sail installation. He soon won the goodwill of the crew, and Jeanne looked upon him favorably, surely thinking he would be very important in their endeavors.

The second officer and commander of the second ship would be Johny Sinclair, a merchant ship navigator, carrying under his sailor's cap many sea memories turned into experience. The men soon learned to obey and handle the rigging and sails to achieve the necessary maneuvers. They spent every hour of the day practicing with bows and arrows until they achieved absolute skill, eagerly seeking their first victim. Before that happened, the opposite occurred: a storm came from the west to shake them violently for two days, serving as a challenge for all in handling the Revenge and its sister ship. The storm lost its intensity on the third day, and by the afternoon, before the sun hid behind fleeing clouds, the lookout announced sighting a ship flying the English flag. The captain ordered the pirate flag to be hoisted immediately to the top of the main mast. "All to your battle stations!" She positioned herself on the stern castle next to the helmsman and began issuing orders to head toward the enemy ship, which, upon identifying the pursuer as a pirate ship, immediately turned to get as far away as possible, certain they would be attacked. In less than half an hour, there was an enemy ship to port and another to starboard, maneuvering stealthily to get as close as possible to their prey.

At the right moment, Jeanne gave the order: "ATTACK!" and a rain of arrows flew toward the English ship's deck. Some arrows carried a flaming torch at the tip, which, upon hitting their target, started fires. The English were not cowards and responded to the attack bravely, but the captain knew he was lost against the enemy that outnumbered him on both sides and saw how the pirates were closing in stealthily, like lions stalking their prey silently. Jeanne waited for the precise moment to deliver her deadly blow, closing the distance without ceasing to shoot her lethal arrows until the two ships boxed in the English and firmly lashed the sides together. At the order of "BOARD THEM!" the men, weapons in hand, leaped to fall like birds of prey upon their victims, who, faced with the numerous group of assailants, found it impossible to defend themselves and fell decapitated or mutilated. The scene was hellish: pieces of men rolled across the deck, Englishmen trying to flee or throwing themselves into the sea, others agonizing, fighting in pools of their own blood, screams of horror, and groans of pain rising from that bloody sea. When there was no one left to kill, the

English captain appeared on the stern castle brandishing his sword. When one of the pirates moved toward him menacingly, Jeanne stopped him cold with the order: "Stop, leave him to me!" The English captain threw his sword to the ground, surrendering. Jeanne came to the deck and faced him, saying: "Captain, I will spare your life in exchange for you being the messenger to carry the message to your cursed king that the Breton lioness is on a vengeance raid for the crime committed against my husband's life and that I will continue destroying his ships as far as my strength will allow.

ean turned proudly and ordered her men to return to their respective ships.

"DIE, ENGLISH PIGS!" roared Jeanne, enraged by her first triumph, paying little attention to her own wounds, until it became clear that the Revenge was listing from the gashes in its hull.

Her crew was already trying to patch the holes, and the second officer suggested they seek refuge on the Spanish coast, a country with which they had good relations, or at least no conflict. So they headed to Alicante, where they would find facilities to repair the damage.

Jeanne clenched her teeth with the fury running through her veins. Despite the damage to her ships and the men wounded in battle, and three deaths, she could consider her first combat encounter a triumph, and they celebrated that night at dinner in the officers' mess, with wine and food prepared by the chef as best as possible. The French tradition of fine dining could not be set aside, even if served with the frugality imposed by the situation.

Jeanne sat at the head of the table, with her officers at her side. The chief gunner and the doctor completed the group.

Oliver served the wine, and as he poured into Jeanne's glass, he could not avoid locking his gaze on her deep Mediterranean blue eyes, letting it wander down until it was lost in the emerging depth of the neckline that covered Jeanne's beautiful breasts. Oliver was caught by the captain and, after a nervous blink, diverted his eyes toward the crystal glass half-filled with the purple elixir of the Spanish fields.

"To our captain!" said Oliver, raising his glass.

"To England!" Jeanne toasted.

Jeanne did not overlook the incident and sighed discreetly. She was in the bloom of her age, no more than twenty-five, carrying the memory of her husband, who had left her in the wasteland of desire. Oliver's presence would be inevitable. He was a gentleman, yes, but both were trapped in a world that could fit in a fist and vanish in the

midst of a storm.

The crew was released from their duties when it was learned that the shipyard workers would take at least two weeks to repair the malignant holes in the *Revenge*. They scattered among the dark alleys to find the path to intoxicating fountains and rest in rented beds where women offered the horizons of their warm and foul depths.

Jeanne did not neglect her ship and remained attentive to the progress of repairs. She told the cook and his assistant they could go down to town on the condition that they served her meals punctually in her cabin.

Oliver, brave, astute, and charming, became Jeanne's emotional support. His closeness in battles, his unwavering loyalty, and his ability to make her laugh in the darkest moments ignited a spark, very near the powder keg of emotions—languid at first, but certain.

Jeanne, though hardened by war, was still human. Perhaps at first she subtly rejected him without closing the door, faithful to the memory of her husband, which gradually faded in the wind that in turn drove Jeanne to find freedom in her sentimental life. It was not betrayal, because Geoffrey already sailed the infinite spaces of God's kingdom, and she navigated the seas of reality, where her womanly impulses throbbed thirstily.

On a quiet night on deck, under the Mediterranean stars, Jeanne scanned the horizon with a lioness's gaze. Her hair, loose for the first time in weeks, danced with the damp, salty wind, framing the beauty of her face. The sword hung at her hip, but her hands were empty, resting on the wooden railing. The sky over the Mediterranean was clear, studded with stars that twinkled like embers in the darkness. The *Revenge* sliced through the waves with elegance, its black silhouette gliding like a shadow across the silvered waters.

"I had never heard the song of the stars with such beauty," said a voice behind her.

It was Oliver Smith, her second-in-command. Tall, with a firm yet warm gaze, he approached cautiously, as if afraid to break the spell of the night.

"I didn't know you were a poet," Jeanne replied without turning. "It's not poetry, but looking at you, it's natural to imagine paradise."

She smiled faintly, trying to maintain the distance between Captain and Officer, even if he was the first.

"I remind you, Officer Oliver, that we are here to fulfill my purposes."

“And I also have mine, Madam Captain.”

The silence between them filled with the creak of sails and the murmur of water, cutting Oliver’s illusions.

“Why do you stay here, Officer Oliver?” she asked softly, to divert the conversation. “You could be in England, living a quiet life. Not on this ship, among blood and fire.”

He stepped closer.

“Because destiny brought me here, and here I am, beside you—and that is what I want.”

Jeanne finally looked at him. Her eyes, which so often burned with fury, now shone with something softer. Something that was not weakness, but feeling.

“Enough, Oliver!” she said, gifting him a smile with disguised coquetry.

“What beauty!” exclaimed Oliver with a deep double meaning in his words, looking directly into Jeanne’s bright eyes.

“Yes, it is a beautiful night,” she said, knowing it was not Oliver’s reference. Though only for a moment, she let him savor her sweet smile, which contrasted radically with the face of the lioness captain. Oliver enjoyed it and carried it in his mind for the rest of the night.

The night remained calm until the lookout on the mainmast announced seeing a vessel to the southwest. Jeanne confirmed it with her spyglass. It was an English merchant ship.

The conditions were perfect, because Jeanne attacked at night to approach stealthily and strike by surprise, without lights and under orders to maintain absolute silence. When the enemy discovered them, it was because they were already alongside, and in seconds the men of the Revenge were leaping onto the enemy, intimidating them with savage shouts and furious sword thrusts.

Jeanne, in her light steel armor and saber in hand, attacked alongside her men, and Oliver, beside her, guarded her back. Her combat tactics gave no respite to the victims until they accepted defeat, for lack of arms or by declared surrender. Jeanne chose the survivor who would be the messenger of her message and ordered the ruthless execution of the rest.

Her attacks multiplied; they only rested when it was necessary to go ashore to replenish gunpowder, weapons, and replace the wounded and dead men. In addition to replenishing essential provisions—and a barrel of wine, which was never superfluous. Day and night, they slid over the waters like a voracious bird of prey.

There were days full of monotony that contrasted with those of battle, which left the entire crew exhausted. And days of storm or dead calm.

Time flew swiftly, and Jeanne had become a legend of audacity and piracy. It was already her third year of war, and the English navy was making efforts to put an end to her. The *Revenge* was fast and in the hands of the *Lioness*, who knew how to escape with precise tactics. Its holds were already loaded with gold and precious jewels from her many raids.

That night, the *Revenge* sailed peacefully through waters near the Strait of Gibraltar when they sighted two English ships heading east. It was a clear sign that together they could repel the *Lioness's* attack—or, at best, defeat her.

Jeanne ordered all lights extinguished and silence kept. But there were no orders to head toward the English ships.

“What’s going on?” Oliver asked.

“They won’t catch us off guard. My chance will come.”

“You’re right...”

With stealthy maneuvers, Jeanne managed to slip away and put enough distance between them to spend the rest of the night in peace.

“Dinner in my cabin?” Oliver proposed. Jeanne looked a little surprised but didn’t hesitate to accept. It was as if she had been wishing Oliver would take the initiative.

“At ten o’clock?” Jeanne needed time to change her ragged pirate clothes for something more feminine.

Oliver had given orders to the cook, and at ten sharp he knocked on Jeanne’s door. She emerged with her hair perfectly combed and wearing a pale blue dress with a wide neckline—a trophy from one of their raids.

Minutes later, the cook arrived with dinner: two plates of fried fish and a jug of wine. The pair toasted and ate amid laughter and comments about the anecdotes of their warlike campaign, making it seem like an innocent game rather than barbaric acts with bloodshed and many deaths.

The cook spread the secret among the crew—a rumor that ran from mouth to mouth, sparking mocking and disrespectful comments.

In Oliver’s cabin, another kind of battle unfolded between two naked bodies that tirelessly enjoyed the sweetness of love. The next morning, under the crew’s discreet glances, life aboard the *Revenge* continued with its purpose: to spot an English ship on the horizon and, with the same stealth as lions stalking prey, Jeanne gave orders to slowly close the distance, as if waiting for nightfall to launch a surprise attack.

The usual carnage began, along with the plundering of the ship’s cargo. They took anything of value; what wasn’t was tossed into the sea like trash.

The ship itself became a victim of barbarity. They tore the sails, cut the rigging until it was left without any chance of navigation, and finally burned the remains or sank it—celebrating another victory against the English crown.

The sky over the Mediterranean was clear, studded with stars that twinkled like tiny diamonds on the vast canvas of infinite depth. The Revenge sliced through the waves with elegance, its black silhouette gliding like a shadow across the silver waters. On deck, Jeanne de Belleville gazed at the horizon. Her hair, loose for the first time in weeks, danced with the salty wind. The sword hung at her hip, but her hands were empty, resting on the wooden rail.

Oliver took her hand, respectfully, without rushing her.

Jeanne's hand still rested in Oliver's when a scream shattered the night's calm:

"Enemy ship astern! Hoisting black sails with a golden cross!"

The lookout, high on the mast, pointed urgently toward the horizon. Jeanne immediately let go of Oliver's hand, her face hardening as if the tender moment had never existed.

"To your posts!" she roared with a commanding voice. "Ready the bows! Load the catapults!"

Oliver was already running to the helm while the sailors sprang from their rest and stormed the deck like a pack of beasts thirsty for blood. Jeanne donned her helmet, adjusted her sword, and climbed to the command bridge. The Revenge turned nimbly, facing the enemy that approached at speed. The black sails of the other ship billowed like raven wings, and the golden cross gleamed under the moonlight.

"Oliver," Jeanne said without looking at him. "Tonight, there will be no more stars. Only fire."

He nodded, knowing the captain's heart would beat once more to the rhythm of war. A second ship emerged from the black depths of the night, harassing the Revenge from its flank.

"Let's get out of here!" Jeanne roared. The Revenge was fast, and its sails drove it forward with power—but a catapult shot struck and exploded in the middle of the deck.

"Damn it!" The crew rushed to extinguish the flames, dangerously fanned by the wind. The English doubled their efforts to catch up, firing more catapults. Finally, they gave up, believing the fire would destroy her.

But the Revenge did not surrender. The fire was controlled, and by the time the sun peeked over the horizon, she sailed calmly—brutally wounded but still seaworthy. Jeanne once again felt the need to seek land for repairs. Two days later, they anchored at the French port where they had been before. They found refuge in a small Italian bay, out of sight of the English, and devoted plenty of time to repairing material and psychological wounds, for the weight of nights of war and days of tension hung like lead on the crew's spirits. Jeanne apologized to Oliver each night, saying she needed her solitude. Oliver understood perfectly, for he too felt the toll of war, which had sapped his physical strength.

Thus passed two weeks, time lulled by the songs of land birds and the gentle waves

that seemed to caress the hull of the Revenge. One morning, Jeanne left her cabin with a smile on her face and appeared in the officers' mess at breakfast time. It was already late, and when Oliver saw her, he went to greet her. Only the two of them were in the dining room, and Jeanne seized the intimacy to reveal her plans. She kept her cheerful expression and immediately told her lover of her decision to end her campaign. Oliver shook his head in surprise—and even more when he heard the continuation of her plans.

Patiently, without haste, they waited for the Revenge's repairs to be completed.

When calm returned to the Revenge, Jeanne gathered the entire crew on deck and announced that her campaign had come to an end. Some men were surprised, but most were happy when they heard they would be rewarded. One by one, they received a handful of gold coins and another of silver coins, leaving them satisfied to have survived the dangerous campaign and with good money in their pockets.

When she reached the last three sailors in line, one of them, Claude Liason, was chosen to stay aboard with the same rank and double the reward. "À votre service, ma capitaine," he said, saluting with his right hand touching the brim of his hat. He would be the key piece to handle the sails of the Revenge as best as possible.

The next day, a military band of musicians bid farewell to Jeanne, who, from the bow, gave the order to set sail and waved to the crowd gathered on the dock. Oliver understood that now he was a deck sailor and no longer the second officer he once was. He obeyed gladly, without knowing for sure what Jeanne's plans were, which she revealed little by little, fueling his expectations.

One of those nights, Jeanne spoke to Oliver to confess the purpose of this voyage: "You'll agree, my dear Oliver, that we should put an end to this campaign of vengeance. It's been six years of fighting, and I think we've done enough damage to the English. We have more than enough wealth in the holds."

"Agreed, my dear," Oliver replied with a satisfied gesture. "And what do you plan to do with that treasure?"

"That's exactly my point. We'll find a hidden place that only the two of us will know, to recover it at the right time. Meanwhile... we'll retire to live rich and in peace. What do you think?"

"Of course. And where do you plan to find that hidden place?"

"There's an island west of the Italian peninsula called Sardinia. That's where we're headed. Check the charts and set the course."

Oliver didn't ask more questions, leaving the mystery to be solved in time.

"You command, Jeanne. You're still the captain of the ship—and of my life." Jeanne rewarded the answer with a passionate kiss that lasted until they both rolled to the floor, losing balance from the Revenge's sway.

"I love you, Oliver," she said, as if all their nights of shared danger and moonlit love had not been enough to prove it.

Jeanne, dressed in her ornate captain's coat with her saber at her waist, called Claude and revealed part of her plans. "Claude, my friend, you're the lucky one among all the crew who fought with me against the yellow dogs, and I'll reward your loyalty if you keep my last secret. Do you swear?" The sailor accepted immediately with a military salute and an exaggerated bow.

They sailed until they found the promised island and, while coasting, discovered a small bay surrounded by a dense tropical forest of palms and sturdy trees. "I think this is the place I've been looking for," Jeanne said after carefully scanning the coastline with her spyglass.

Claude warned of a reef that posed danger to the *Revenge*. Oliver dropped anchor immediately, and the ship slowed until the anchor held firm in the sandy bottom of the bay.

They lowered the rowboat, and Jeanne, accompanied by Oliver and the sailor, went ashore to inspect the terrain. On a parchment sheet, Jeanne made notes and searched for the most suitable spot to hide the treasure. She ordered the sailor to start digging a large pit in the sandy soil, which was easy to excavate. Everything seemed perfect for hiding their treasure. They returned to the ship to load three chests Jeanne had prepared—the most valuable spoils from all their raids against the English. Claude, the strong man of the operation, rowed vigorously until the boat scraped the beach sand.

The chests were unloaded to the chosen spot. Jeanne instructed Claude to dig deeper at one end, making the pit look like a grave "just in case someone passes by." Oliver protested, "But this is an uninhabited island!" Jeanne replied calmly, "Better safe than sorry."

Claude kept shoveling until reaching the desired depth. Jeanne and Oliver handed him the chests to place at the bottom. Jeanne seemed satisfied and ordered Claude to cover the treasure. When he finished, he stood before Jeanne, barely his shoulders and head above the edge of the pit.

Jeanne's final words sealed the fate of her plan—and Claude's head role in it, leaving the secret buried forever beneath the sands of the hidden bay.

Oliver could not suppress a cry of horror. The scene before him shattered his composure, and for the first time, he doubted Jeanne's love. The fortune they carried could change everything, and for a fleeting moment, he wondered if he might be next. Then reason returned—she would need him to sail the *Revenge* back to France.

Suddenly, a dry thunderclap shook the earth, as if nature itself condemned Jeanne's crime. Hurricane winds swept toward the sea, and Jeanne and Oliver clung to each other, feeling the storm's reproach. A torrential downpour followed, making it impossible to return to the ship. The raging wind and waves rendered the rowboat useless. It was the law of the sea and the will of nature. The once fierce pirate now seemed fragile, seeking shelter in the arms of a man. They tried to shield themselves with giant leaves, but the wind tore them away as quickly as they covered themselves.

What they did not imagine was that the *Revenge* was fighting the same storm. The anchor lost its grip, and the ship drifted helplessly into the open sea.

At dawn, only a persistent drizzle remained. Oliver stirred and woke Jeanne, exhausted from the night of rain and cold. "We're safe," Jeanne whispered after a long yawn. "Let's check the ship," Oliver urged. But before reaching the beach, Oliver froze. "I don't see the masts!" Jeanne stifled a cry of terror. They ran and fell to their knees in despair—the *Revenge* was gone. "The anchor chain must have broken," Oliver concluded. Fortunately, the rowboat with its precious cargo still lay on the sand.

"Let's get out of here," Jeanne commanded, regaining her voice of authority. "Let's take something to eat," Oliver replied. He remembered a tree with wild fruit and hoped it was edible.

By midday, with bitter fruit and leaves for shade, they dragged the boat into the water and began a journey without a fixed course. They had no charts—only the hope that heading north would lead them to France or Spain. It would be a long voyage, but it was their only chance. The sun and stars would guide them. They agreed to take turns rowing and sleeping. It was the kind of voyage no sailor wished to face, yet they embraced it. They carried the chest of riches—the promise of a life of comfort, if they survived.

Each stroke of the oars deepened the silence and isolation. They spoke constantly to ward off despair, inventing dreams and expectations to keep hope alive. The next day, the coastline vanished, leaving an endless horizon in every direction. Their eyes searched for land, but it was futile—they had been at sea for only four days. Exhaustion overcame them, and they let the wind carry them when favorable, knowing they drifted aimlessly otherwise.

When the sun rose, Oliver said aloud, "Hello!" to wake Jeanne. "Fifth day, my dear." "No, it's the sixth," she replied, scanning the horizon. "I'm not sure."

"We should keep a log before we lose our minds."

"I'm already mad," Jeanne said, and they laughed—sound swallowed by the vast emptiness.

It was Jeanne's turn to row, and she soon felt the boat moving faster. A current was carrying them. But by evening, the western sky warned of trouble. The wind rose, waves swelled, and the boat pitched violently. The chest of treasure lurched at the bottom. They clung to the sides in terror. A storm at sea was one thing—a storm in a rowboat was another. The tempest unleashed its fury, and they could only hope for survival.

Then came the blow that overturned the boat. The chest sank into the depths, and Jeanne and Oliver fought to stay afloat. They clung to drifting oars—their only lifeline. Time lost meaning. The night felt eternal.

At dawn, Jeanne realized she was alone. She screamed Oliver's name into the silence, her voice tearing through the emptiness. No answer came. Her terror turned to bitter tears, mingling with the salt spray. For the first time, she felt absolute defeat. After all the wealth and power, all that remained was a fragile existence—and a single piece of wood that barely kept her afloat.

The entire day passed, and Jeanne no longer felt her legs, exhausted from constant kicking. Hunger had vanished, replaced by a weakness that flooded her body. She found relief floating on her back, clutching her single oar—the last hope of survival.

Then she saw it: the shape of a white sail, billowing not far away. She tried to raise her arm to signal, but the effort felt like tearing it from her body. Anguish welled up in tears. The sail seemed closer now, yet she could do nothing but cry out: "Here! Over here!" Her voice faded as consciousness slipped away—until a strong hand lifted her arm. It was a fisherman from a French boat who had spotted her and hauled her aboard. Jeanne collapsed onto a bench, regaining awareness only when a sip of hot coffee slid down her throat.

When she opened her eyes, she saw the fisherman speaking in French. Relief washed over her—she was safe. Then came the words that revived her spirit: they had rescued a man at dawn who asked them to search for his companion. "A man?" Jeanne gasped. "Yes," the fisherman replied, pointing to Oliver, sleeping deeply among a tangle of nets.

Jeanne leapt forward with a cry: "Oliver!" He stirred, bewildered, as Jeanne fell into his arms. Tears mingled on their cheeks, words lost in the miracle of survival. The fishermen, moved by the scene, uncorked a bottle of wine and offered them fish soup—cautiously, after their days without food.

When they disembarked in Plymouth, England, they walked unsteadily, supporting

RED WHALE

Heberto, at the helm of his sailboat, hummed sailor tunes with his out-of-tune viola voice. His father had left him that sailboat so he could chase his childhood dreams of discovering the sea—as if it weren't already discovered. His longing was to go beyond that blue line where the sea blends with the sky, where the ocean surely hides its most intimate secrets, secrets few dared to unravel. At eighteen, he was already an expert sailor. He listened intently as the bow sliced through the gentle swell with the softness of a cheerful melody.

He loved sailing farther than the fishermen usually ventured, letting himself be wrapped in dreams and fantasies. Suddenly, the sailboat creaked from the tip of the bow to the firm stern called the poop. The wind swelled the mainsail with greater force, and Heberto thought it was a sign that his journey into the unknown was beginning. On the surface of the sea, fins and snouts of marine creatures appeared—creatures his eyes had never seen before. He locked the helm and loosened the mainsail's halyard a bit to observe those strange beings more closely, and at the same time pulled out his notebook. He didn't want to miss a single detail of the events, for he loved writing sea stories.

Fascinated by the spectacle, he lowered the sails to drift and enjoy it fully. The sun was sinking on the horizon, and darkness grew like the shadow of a ghost. The water was so clear he could see life pulsing on the seabed, where coral reefs thrived, inhabited by crustaceans of whimsical shapes, cautious octopuses crawling along, and vividly colored marine plants clinging to limestone rocks. Amazed, on the edge of fear, he watched silent giants brushing against the keel, fish glowing in the dark, moving in dense schools to the rhythm of ocean waves. He wrote as fast as the images reached his eyes, violent strokes of his pencil capturing the variety of forms to enrich his story—one that all his friends would read in astonishment. A dolphin leapt joyfully near the starboard rail; Heberto took it as a friendly greeting. Perhaps it was the same dolphin he had seen before. Soon, the rest of its pod arrived, making a racket with high jumps out of the water and splashes that drenched Heberto with playful abandon.

He spent hours in a trance, reveling in the spectacle above and below the waves. Then he realized it was time to return before his family grew alarmed. He set the sails—the mainsail and the jib—and took the helm, a broad smile lighting his face.

A lightning bolt lit up the ocean with its instant brilliance, followed by a thunderclap that seemed to shake the sailboat. Heberto searched for the source; he knew well what it meant and grew fearful, eager to speed up and escape the storm, to reach

land as soon as possible. The wind felt heavy, howling with menace. A shiver froze his spine. He had sailed through storms before, but for some unknown reason, this one felt different.

The waves rose, pounding the vessel with force. Heberto clenched his teeth and gripped the helm.

—“Damn it!”—he roared—“This is getting tough.” He knew it was absolutely necessary to stay calm and keep an open mind to maneuver wisely. But would that be enough?

He managed to reef the mainsail and lower the jib completely, making the squall more bearable. That was when he saw a red light emerging from the depths. The water glowed with phosphorescent flashes, like commercial streets with their bright marquees, and then the song became clearer—a sequence of long, slow notes that sounded like words in an ancient tongue. Heberto remembered that whales sang; it was their language, able to travel great distances underwater like secret messages. First, it was an immense shadow beneath the surface, emitting those red flashes. With a sweep of its tail, it moved slowly toward the sailboat, like an island gliding with astonishing slowness, until it stopped alongside. Heberto leaned as far as he could, wanting to plunge into that fantastic vision. It was a whale, yes—but not like the ones in his marine fauna books. This one was different, smaller, and shimmering with psychedelic lights. Heberto was stunned, wondering if it was real—or was he losing his mind? No, he reasoned, he was in full possession of his faculties.

The red whale surfaced until its enormous black eye met Heberto’s gaze. And then, he thought he heard a murmur, like a song that reached his mind as a mysterious breath. He closed his eyes and let the sound enchant him, like the mythical sirens’ song.

“You are not alone,” he heard clearly.

Around him, other shapes began to appear—creatures impossible to believe: fish with crystal wings, jellyfish glowing like lanterns, and a shark with eyes like stars. Were they real? Or was it his imagination? He no longer knew what to make of that fantastical scene. He covered his eyes with his hands to shut out the visions. The red whale passed beneath the sailboat and brushed the keel for a few seconds. Heberto felt the reality of those moments again and watched the whale vanish into the distance. Trembling with emotion, he tried to find an explanation. The answer was always the same: a red whale had left him a message.

The storm was also subsiding; it was no longer a concern. It was time to return home. He felt too exhausted to wrestle with waves, sails, and helm. He preferred to sit and recover his calm. The rocking of the sailboat lulled him, and sleep overcame him.

The bright rays of the next day woke him.

Throughout the return voyage, he couldn’t shake those images from his mind. Where had those luminous monsters come from? Was it just the phenomenon of phosphorescence? Nothing. Everything sank into an unbearable silence. The fish, the dol-

phins, the whale had vanished in an instant. His eyes searched for any sign of life. All was fused into the deep darkness of night.

The sway of the boat and the dreamlike haze of what he had lived closed his eyes again, and he slept deeply until the sun's rays woke him the next day. He stood and shook his tousled hair.

—“I'm alive, damn it!”—he shouted, running his fingers through his unruly hair.

—“What happened to me? Was I dreaming, or was it a nightmare?”

He hoisted the sails and set his course back to land.

As he neared the beach, he moored the boat to its usual buoy and disembarked, heading for the golden sands. Heberto felt his legs buckle from the long journey and collapsed on his back, savoring the pleasant warmth of the sand, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand. He didn't notice a girl approaching, watching him curiously without saying a word. Her shadow covered Heberto's face, and he uncovered his eyes to look at her. He had never seen her before.

—“Hello, little girl. What's your name?” The girl didn't answer.

—“Don't you want to talk?”—Heberto insisted kindly. The girl didn't answer but gestured with her hand that she couldn't hear.

—“Are you deaf?” he asked, realizing the foolishness of his question.

The girl smiled. She looked about ten years old, with a charming little face, a pert nose, and long hair tied in a braid. Her clothes were sad, worn by time and faded by the sun.

Heberto showed her his notebook as a way to start a conversation. The girl leafed through it carefully, smiling at the drawings of fish and sea monsters.

The girl said in her melodious little voice, “My name is Lía. Wait for me here, I'll be right back.”

She returned the notebook and ran off, her braid swaying gracefully like a chestnut-colored wake in the air. Soon, Lía came back with a notebook in her hands. Heberto sat up to receive it. His surprise was immense when he saw it was full of drawings—better than his, yet the figures were very similar to those in his notebook. He leafed through it carefully to the last page of drawings. Then he thought it might be better to communicate with signs, and he asked if she had seen the red whale, pointing to it in his notebook. Lía understood perfectly and replied, “I've seen it only in my dreams.” Her words deepened Heberto's astonishment. How could it be a dream for her when it had been reality for him? Doubt overwhelmed him, wondering if he too had dreamed when he lay on deck during the squall. But no—by no means, he told himself—the drawings were witnesses to reality.

—“I didn't dream it,” he said. “I saw them last night, out there.” He pointed to the horizon and remembered the words: “You are not alone...” Was it referring to Lía?

Perhaps. How could he know?

—“Take me to see them,” Lía asked. “I want to see my red whale.”

The next day, past noon, Heberto and Lía set sail with a gentle, favorable wind. Lía, in a nearly transparent dress from wear and a straw hat, savored every moment of the voyage, gazing at the horizon and breathing the breeze. Sitting beside Heberto,

who firmly held an indefinite course, Lía began to tell her story without being asked. She had been deaf since birth. Two years ago, she was adopted by Doña Lupe. She never knew her parents, who abandoned her at the doors of a nuns' orphanage when she was barely a year old. The orphanage took her in, giving her a sad life of loneliness and cold for eight years—years she didn't want to remember. Doña Lupe was her mother in the reality of her orphanhood, a good woman who gave her love and her poverty. She was the widow of a fisherman and had no other children. Lía went to school for the first two years only to learn to write; it was useless to attend if she couldn't hear the teachers. The other kids mocked her deafness. To compensate, God—or whoever—gave her another gift: the ability to create fantasies in her mind and firmly believe her dreams could become reality, perhaps because poverty reinforced her illusions and frustrated desires. But she was sure that someday she would meet her red whale. Now she was on her way to do so.

Night was falling when they reached the place where Heberto had been before. He couldn't be sure, for he had no landmarks, but he didn't think it necessary to be in the exact spot. Night draped the sea like a velvet cloak. He lit the navigation lights to avoid being struck by another vessel. Lía leaned on the rail, anxiously searching for a sign.

Suddenly, the water stirred—not like an ordinary wave, but as if something immense breathed beneath the surface. Heberto felt the hull vibrate, and Lía trembled with expectation. Her eyes shone with a mix of fear and wonder. She pointed toward the horizon, where a reddish glow emerged slowly, as if the ocean were revealing a secret. The red whale appeared in all its majesty. Its skin seemed like liquid fire, illuminated by the moonlight. Heberto held his breath. Lía, on the other hand, closed her eyes and placed her hands on the boat's rail. She heard the song—not with her ears, but with her heart: a deep vibration that shook her fragile little body. She raised her arms, expressing her joy. Her dream was coming true in all its fullness.

Heberto heard the sharp yet sweet song of the red whale—a song Lía could not hear but felt with her other senses.

Heberto had read that sirens' songs had a definite purpose; it was their language. Seeing Lía's expression as she tried to imitate it, he realized this was a message of love between two beings so distant physically yet so united in feeling. Lía shed tears that gleamed as they ran down her cheeks.

Heberto was not alone.

The whale slowly approached the boat and turned until it was directly in front of Lía, who stretched out her arm in a futile attempt to touch it. The whale showed its eye, dark and shiny like a huge black pearl. And then, Lía began to draw without taking her eyes off the whale, drawing as if her fingers were following the rhythm of that invisible song. Heberto watched her, realizing that she could hear it better than he could, and rested his arm on the girl's frail shoulders. He too was trembling with excitement and happiness at having given Lía the pleasure of fulfilling her dream. Lía continued to murmur the song, and the whale dimmed its glow and silently began to sink until it disappeared from view.

We sat on the stern bench without saying a word; it wasn't necessary. We both continued to enjoy that fleeting vision. Lia was shivering with cold, and I wrapped her in my woolen coat. She curled up next to me, seeking my warmth. She was just a child, I know, but her company was so sweet...

Lía took out her notebook and picked up her pencil. She wanted to draw her impressions of her wonderful encounter with the red whale.

Dawn arrived like a caress on the ocean. The sky was tinged with golden hues, and the sea was an immense plain of a blue so beautiful it was indescribable.

They set off for home, and when they reached the beach, Lia immediately went to tell her mother that she was back. She didn't return to the beach, but her mother did. She knew Heberto and knew he was a good boy, but she couldn't contain her anger and angrily complained to Heberto for taking her little girl away. She asked him to leave her alone. "She's just a girl, and you're a young man. What do you want with her?" Heberto had no words to apologize, because he knew there was nothing wrong with his encounters with Lía. He liked being with her, yes, but it was just a friendship with innocent feelings, with which he could give Lía the pleasure of enjoying her fantasies.

"Well, I already told you, Heberto, I don't want you to see her again!" And Doña Lupe turned around and left Heberto with his anger in his mouth. "I don't care what she says," he muttered, clenching his fists. "Lía will come to the beach whenever she wants."

Only a few days passed before Lía's punishment of being locked up was over, until her mother needed her to go to the beach to buy fish. When Heberto arrived from the day's fishing trip in his father's boat, Lía ran along with the other women to choose the best fish. Lía took three small sea bass and asked Heberto for the price.

"It's nothing, Lía. Keep your money and buy whatever you want."

And so the days passed. Lía managed to sneak out of the house and meet up with Heberto. They soon learned to communicate, she with her voice and Heberto with gestures, not with sign language, but with his own way of expressing himself, and they even found it very funny because there was often confusion. With each passing day, the two felt more attracted to each other. They would walk along the beach holding hands to enjoy the sunset. Lía would make a gesture of distress with her hand and run home before her mother came to look for her.

One day Lía said that her mother would have to go to the city for two days, and they immediately planned to go out and look for the red whale. The next day, before sunset, they met on the beach, next to the fishing boats. This time they would go in the motorboat. It would be more uncomfortable, but faster. They arrived at the same place as before, and Heberto dropped the anchor to stay in the same spot and wait for nightfall. They assumed it would be the right time for the encounter. When it got dark, he lit the Coleman lamp, as fishermen do to attract fish. He picked up the grap-

nel and moved to a deeper spot, and they waited. Lía sang the whale song, each time with greater intensity, but she was unable to communicate her desires. There was no red whale or any other color whale. As a last resort, she splashed the water with her hands and waited, peering into the depths... nothing... Heberto found the answer. "Lía, don't bother. Now I remember that whales are migratory, and what we saw was a wonderful coincidence, but now they must be far away from here. "Then...?" Lía murmured disappointedly. "Every year they follow the same route. Maybe next year we'll see it again, but for now it's useless to look for it." Lía looked at him with tears in her eyes and took his hand to bring it close to her heart, which was beating with discouragement. Heberto took Lía's hand and kissed it tenderly.

Lía showed him her notebook, in which she had written: I love you...

Heberto smiled at her and made a gesture touching his lips and his heart.

They returned in silence; there was nothing to say. But as she gazed out over the ocean, she knew that everything was different now. The red whale was not just a miracle: it was a reminder that the ocean was alive.

Around him, other shapes began to appear—creatures impossible to believe: fish with crystal wings, jellyfish glowing like lanterns, and a shark with eyes that looked like stars. Were they real? Or was it his imagination? He no longer knew what that entire fantasy scene could be. He covered his eyes with his hands to shut out the visions. The red whale passed beneath the sailboat and brushed the keel for a few seconds. Heberto felt the reality of those moments again and saw the whale fade into the distance. He trembled with emotion, trying to find an explanation. The answer was always the same: a red whale had left him a message.

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Lía pulled out her notebook and gripped her pencil, wanting to capture her impressions of the marvelous encounter with her red whale.

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—“It's nothing, Lía. Keep the money and buy whatever you want.”

And so the days passed. Lía managed to slip out of the house and meet Heberto. Soon they learned to converse—she with her voice and Heberto with signs, not with sign language but with their own way of expressing themselves—and it was even fun, because there were often

On Sundays, they devoted themselves to enjoying life, and sometimes they went sailing for pleasure. One of those times, to savor the beauty of a full-moon night at sea, they headed to the area where whales could be seen. It was Lía's request, eager to see her whale once more, and she let out a cry of joy when, in the distance, she spotted the back of a whale swimming toward them. Both leaned on the rail to welcome their friend. For a moment, the whale remained still at a distance, showing only its back, silver-lit by the moonlight. Lía sang louder, hoping the whale could hear her—though that was impossible. Yet the whale began to approach slowly, and euphorically they noticed its glow was red, growing more intense as it drew near. Great was their surprise when they saw that beside her was a calf, also red, though less luminous than its mother.

“Look, Heber! She came to show us her baby!”

They both gazed in fascination as the whale glided beneath the boat and continued on its way. Lía and Heberto jumped to the opposite rail to watch it disappear.

“She has a baby!” Lía repeated.

“Do you think she's trying to tell us something?” Heberto said with a mischievous smile.

Nine months later, Lía woke up agitated and cried out, telling Heberto the time had

MARBELLA

In the bustling port of Plymouth, located in the southwest of England, under an April gray sky, the masts of the Providence rose like war lances pointing toward the heavens. The breeze carried the scent of a rough sea. It was the first decade of the eighteenth century.

Rodrigo Solana, barely twenty years old, was saying goodbye to Alicia, the woman he loved with a divided heart. Alicia owned only half of his heart. But the force of destiny was stronger than his own sentimental desires. He was an adventurer by nature, just as his father and grandfather had been, and there were no ropes or shackles that could bind him to solid ground.

Rodrigo was only sixteen when he left home under the pretext of wanting to see the world. His parents were unable to stop him, for his father and grandfather had both been sailors in the Spanish fleet, and his grandfather had lost his life in a battle with filibusters when Rodrigo was only seven years old—and already dreaming of becoming a sailor. With the help of his father, Don Ramón Solana, he was enrolled as a cabin boy on the “Traviata,” a ship that traded with New Spain across the immense Atlantic. That was his first voyage, lasting eight long months until his return to Spain. He met Alicia and departed on his next journey, leaving her with a promise. She agreed, but did not smile. Her blue dress fluttered absently like a defeated flag, and her eyes filled with tears, victim of a premonition whispered in inaudible murmurs. “When I return,” he said, taking Alicia’s hands in his own, “I will be a complete man. We will marry, as I have promised you. Four or five months, nothing more, that is all I ask.” In those moments, time was the hardest dimension to predict. And Rodrigo Solana knew it well, but preferred to ignore it.

“I will wait for you,” Alicia replied. “But do not make me wait longer than a lonely heart can bear.”

Rodrigo wanted to say more, but the boatswain’s whistle cut his words like a blade. It was time to depart.

Two years later, after tempests and fiery sunsets, Rodrigo was a seasoned sailor and had been hired as third officer on the Providence—a three-masted merchant ship, sturdy, with a capacity of one hundred tons and sails already stained by storms and squalls of many years. Its flag bore no allegiance; it was a worn rag that seemed to conceal more than it revealed. Rodrigo knew this ship sailed under suspicious purposes, hidden beneath the guise of an importer of exotic products from South American lands. Suspicious, yes—but that was precisely what ignited Rodrigo’s spirit. It meant adventure, and they promised him money, a great deal of money, if they succeeded in their mission.

The vessel slipped away silently, ropes tightened and sails filled with a warm wind that drove it forcefully toward the horizon. The Providence’s prow sliced through calm blue waters; it was low tide, and the ship advanced at more than ten knots.

On board, reality was swift and harsh.

The captain, known only as “One-Eyed” Gorran among the crew—who avoided speaking his name aloud and instead used the respectful “Sir Captain” when addressing him directly—was a man with an angular face, gray beard, and a thunderous voice that tore at the ears. His face bore a deep scar earned in a tavern brawl that had left him blind in his right eye. His vocabulary was that of a vulgar butcher, and his orders were like powderless shots—delivered without a shred of respect for any subordinate, from the boatswains downward.

“Hey! Move your arses, sons of bitches! This isn’t a pleasure cruise! Let’s see if the idiot at the helm knows how to hold a seventy-degree course—or shall I make ropes from his guts to hang rats?” That was the most decent language he could muster to enforce obedience.

Most sailors lowered their heads and rushed to obey. But Rodrigo was not a man to bow so easily. He was hired as third officer and took pride in it, pacing the deck to check the order of operations.

“Damn it! An order can be given without curses,” Rodrigo protested against the captain’s arrogant commands, raising his voice just enough to be heard.

“Who the hell dares to criticize me?” the captain thundered like a storm.

Silence fell. Even the wind seemed to stop.

“I do—and why not?” Rodrigo said, his gaze fixed on the captain, chest thrust forward in defiance.

“I’ll show you why, you son of a whore! Tie him to the mainmast!”

Three servile sailors dragged him to the mainmast and bound him tightly.

Gorran looked at him with the eyes of an old beast and let out a sarcastic laugh.

“Twelve lashes—to teach you how to speak to a captain.”

The entire crew was summoned to the deck to witness the punishment, to serve as an example.

And the count began... ONE... TWO...

Rodrigo did not cry out in pain. He did not beg for mercy. Each blow marked his back and drew blood, but none broke his spirit.

From then on, the sailors looked at him with a mix of respect and camaraderie. He was a low-ranking officer, but he knew how to treat his men.

Time passed in its majestic monotony—the same panorama every day, the same as yesterday and tomorrow, surrounded by the immensity of the ocean and a horizon without end or beginning. A profound silence broken only by the creak of ropes and the flutter of sails in shifting winds. Crossing a tempest was a welcome variation, though it meant cold showers and grueling work until the hurricane winds exhausted their attempts to dismast the ship—after which, at dawn, with the sun peeking over the horizon, joy returned to keep carving ephemeral wakes across the waters.

Three weeks later, all were called to the deck by the captain with grim news: the second officer had been found dead. His neck cleanly sliced by a well-sharpened knife, like those of the cooks—still bleeding. The captain ordered no investigation. He summoned the cooks as the only suspects. No inquiry, only a command: ALL HANDS ON DECK! Without prayers or words of mourning, the body was slid off a plank toward the sharks.

Right there, the captain faced the cooks, shouting in each man’s face:

“One of you sons of bitches killed my officer!”

The men remained silent, chins buried in their chests.

“The murderer will hang right now! Step forward, the guilty one!”

The four cooks stepped back. No confession.

“All four to the gallows!” the captain roared.

The lackeys pounced, binding the cooks’ hands behind their backs.

“A moment!” came a shout from the poop deck.

The captain’s furious gaze sought the speaker.

A sailor advanced with firm steps, hands in his pockets.

“I know who killed him!” he said, voice steady, eyes locked on the captain, who gripped his sword tightly.

“Speak, if you dare, you miserable son of a—” the captain bellowed, unsheathing his blade.

The man stepped back twice, raising his hand to point at the captain.

The crew roared in shock. Half a dozen men fell upon the captain, disarming him and awaiting orders—from whom? There was no authority now. Captain and first officer were gone. By natural order, Rodrigo was elevated to second officer. He approached the mutinous group, raising his hand for silence.

“You all know me. I could have killed the captain in revenge for the lashes, but... justice comes on its own. I ask you for clemency for this man who is still our captain...”

The enraged crew’s shouts cut him off. All clamored for death—by hanging or butcher’s blade. Rodrigo called for silence.

“We are not murderers! We will publicly strip him of rank and record it in the log,” he said, pointing to the scribe. “And we will give him a chance.”

The crew stood expectant at Rodrigo’s firm words.

“We’ll set him adrift on a wooden raft, abandoned to his fate in the sea that is his world.”

Approving cries mingled with those demanding immediate death.

Rodrigo ordered the carpenter to prepare a simple raft of planks with oars and a

small mast for a spritsail. Thus he ended the meeting and retired to his cabin. The One-Eyed Gorran was sent to the deepest part of the bilge, bound hand and foot, until the hour came to face his destiny. Rodrigo knew he was capable of anything to regain his freedom.

Soon, whispers spread from mouth to ear, eager for news of the case.

The captain's steward said that when he brought dinner to the captain, he found him playing cards with his first officer, who had a good pile of winnings at his side. The captain, already drunk, asked for another bottle. Dinner was a thick roast pork shank that the first officer found too tough and requested a good kitchen knife. When the steward cleared the table, he heard Gorran and the officer arguing heatedly, accusing each other of cheating. He did not want to witness the quarrel and left abruptly, forgetting to take the knife. After that, he knew nothing more—the steward retired to sleep in his hammock.

The next day, as the bell tolled noon, Rodrigo climbed to the poop deck. He wore his third officer's attire for important occasions. He rang the bell vigorously, calling the crew and summoning the officers to stand by his side.

The Providence veered sharply. But the other vessel was faster, and within half an hour it had closed the gap.

Rodrigo called all hands to the deck. "Everyone... ready for whatever may come!"

The pursuing ship showed no flag. Suspicion tightened in Rodrigo's chest, and he ordered: "Heave to!" The Providence slowly lost speed until it lay still, rocking gently.

Rodrigo waited for the next move from his pursuer.

"What do you intend to do?" shouted the pilot from his post on the poop deck.

"We'll see what those intruders want."

"They're pirates!" the pilot replied.

Rodrigo tried to grasp the situation. He could not imagine what this was about, but he expected nothing friendly. Then a voice from the visiting ship reached his ears.

"Ahoy, Providence! I want to speak with Captain Gorran!" it called.

"Yes, Gorran here!" Rodrigo shouted in a gravelly voice, trying to mimic Gorran's tone, under the suspicion that something dark was looming.

"We've brought your share of the treasure!" bellowed the real Gorran, now hidden behind the helmsman. Rodrigo's men were already crowding along the port rail, weapons in hand.

A week earlier, the pirate ship had rescued Gorran—half-starved and on the brink of madness from sunstroke. They hauled him aboard, and Gorran struck shady deals with the pirate captain to hunt down the Providence.

The pirate vessel maneuvered alongside, and the buccaneers leapt aboard.

Rodrigo's men met them with equal fury, wielding swords and the few firearms they possessed; others brandished clubs, having nothing else to repel the attackers. Men fell on both sides—it was a battle to conquer or die. Rodrigo, with Gorran's saber in

hand, cut down pirates left and right with the rage of one defending not only his own life but the world beneath his feet.

Little by little, the furious cries faded into groans of pain from the wounded and the icy silence of the dead.

Rodrigo saw Gorran vault the rail and strode toward him with firm steps. It was the captain reclaiming his ship against the captain now commanding the same vessel. Their swords clashed, sparks flashing at every strike. Rodrigo was not what one would call a skilled swordsman, but the moment lent him strength to defend and deliver fierce blows. A swift slash from Gorran severed Rodrigo's armed forearm, forcing him to grip his blade with his left hand, which robbed him of skill. Gorran seized the advantage, and with a sweeping stroke of his saber, disarmed Rodrigo, who stood bewildered, searching for any abandoned weapon and keeping his distance from Gorran, who advanced resolutely, sword aimed at Rodrigo.

"The tables have turned now, you filthy rat! I want my ship!"

Rodrigo raised his hands, retreating defenseless. Gorran advanced, preparing his killing blow—then froze, staggered, and his weapon fell from his hand. He roared like a beast and collapsed face-first with a dagger buried in his back. Some unknown sailor had saved his captain's life.

The pirate ship slipped away silently until it vanished into the darkness. Lightning crashed over the sea—and over the soul of every survivor on both ships.

"Let's get out of here!" Rodrigo ordered, leaping over Gorran's corpse. "And throw this swine to the sea. The sharks won't let him come back!"

Those who could cheered the remark with raucous laughter.

At dawn, the Providence sailed on, wounded and adrift for lack of men to handle her.

The ship's doctor, Mr. Holtz, hurried tirelessly up and down to tend the many wounded, friend and foe alike. It was essential they return to their posts as soon as possible—and offer the pirates work and redemption.

"Anyone who refuses my terms can jump overboard!" Rodrigo shouted, his arm bandaged and his heart pounding with excitement.

"No more violence! We're going home!" was his first order, greeted with loud cheers from most of the crew.

"Hip... hip... hurrah!"

The Providence swung westward.

But the return was not easy. A cyclone in the Bermudas, an English patrol that interrogated them and threatened to seize whatever they carried—Rodrigo accompanied them during the inspection, but they found nothing of value. And not only did they forgive their lack of riches, they left them a generous supply of medical goods needed by Dr. Holtz to finish his work.

Fourteen days after the buccaneer attack, the wounded were recovering thanks to Dr. Holtz's efforts and the resources at hand.

Rodrigo was healing too and took things calmly—he had every right. It was a night of brilliant moonlight casting its glow over the vast ocean plain, beneath a sky strewn with bright stars—the ancient map for sailors through the ages. The stars, the sun, and the moon had been their guides to calculate position. Now Rodrigo knew how to use the astrolabe, which allowed more precise calculations. He went to sit on a bench at the forecastle and let his imagination sail through the depths of the universe. Sweet memories of his beloved Alicia came to mind, and he sighed long and deep—he truly loved her, and at that moment he wished he had Icarus' wings to fly to her. He smiled, shaking his head at the irony, for Icarus died of excessive ambition when the sun melted his wings. What more could he do to keep his love for Alicia alive? Nothing... this voyage seemed endless, and he had yet to achieve his goals. A deep concern stirred within him, for it was his duty to keep his crew fed and find a way to make the journey worthwhile for the ship's owners. Sooner or later, the day would come when he must return and render accounts in Plymouth.

His mind wandered through mists and shadows. The Providence was a maritime beast that faithfully obeyed its sailors' commands. It was a small world within the vastness of the real one—a world each man aboard had chosen for reasons of his own. Such is a sailor's love for the sea: it begins with a kiss that whispers "I love you" and ends with another that says "farewell." Today I must set sail, weigh anchor, stow my sorrows, and head out to sea. Tomorrow—a chance landfall and hope for another tomorrow... but tomorrow does not exist yet, for who can know if it will come? There are raging storms, furious foes, sunsets painted by God. At sea there is everything and nothing—until destiny overtakes us. Rodrigo thought for the first time about his future—yes, it was time to face fate. When the day came to return to Plymouth, he would take the exam for the rank of Captain at the Admiralty. Why not? He was already a captain now, by twists of fate or whatever, but he was commanding a ship in mid-ocean. Only the official license was missing. He rose and walked solemnly, long strides echoing across the deck, hands clasped behind his back, eyes scanning every detail of navigation, savoring the salty taste of the breeze and its gentle caress.

Rodrigo ordered a westward course, to keep along the coast in search of a port where they could buy goods desired in Europe—also food and fresh water for the crew's sustenance. The crew moved like men bewitched, asking no questions about their destination.

It was a tranquil night of tropical warmth. The Providence glided silently, leaving a long wake of white foam gleaming in the moonlight, fading into the distance.

The sea was not deep at that coastal stretch. The leadsman, tasked with measuring depth, announced: "Thirty fathoms and falling!" Enough for the Providence's draft. The helmsman stood alert at the wheel.

Suddenly, an alarming crack shattered the night's silence and the men's calm—the Providence lurched violently. Rodrigo ran to the starboard rail to find the source of the noise... the answer came at once.

"Leak on starboard bow!" voices rang out. The Providence listed, wounded in her

flank—gashed by some cursed reef.

Rodrigo dashed to the forward hold; water gushed through the breach. It had to be plugged at once or the ship would be lost.

The carpenter arrived swiftly with five men to tackle the damage. They worked hard, nailing planks and canvas over the hull's torn side. Others, without waiting for orders, were already manning the pumps without rest.

Dawn was breaking when they managed to control the problem. Rodrigo knew there was no safety in sailing on like this and concluded it was urgent to find a place to haul the ship ashore for permanent repair. The emergency patch had saved her, but it was temporary—the water's pressure at that spot would be intense even at low cruising speed.

At day's end, Rodrigo went down to the hold to check the repair—a hold sunk in deep silence, water up to his waist. He reached the patched breach, which still trickled small streams—but nothing alarming, only constant pumping needed. Turning to leave, he found himself facing a black chest with yellow-metal fittings, floating aimlessly. Rodrigo had never seen it before, and curiosity stirred. Once on deck, he ordered it hoisted and called the smith to open it. The fittings resisted, but at last, when the smith pried the lid open, he let out a horrid cry and leapt back.

Rodrigo stepped closer, startled, and had to stifle his own cry. Other sailors crowded round to see. Inside the chest lay a skeleton, reeking foully, clutching a parchment in its bony fingers. With his fingertips Rodrigo tried to take the parchment, but the skeleton would not release it. Rodrigo tugged harder and tore it free. At once the skeleton collapsed, each bone falling separately to the bottom of the chest.

"Throw it to the sea!" he ordered

No sailor moved; they waited until the blacksmith sealed the chest tightly, drilling holes in its bottom so it would sink. Then they heaved it over the starboard rail. Inside, the clatter of bones could still be heard. Was it an ill omen? The sailors wondered, men who believed devoutly in all the legends and myths whispered from mouth to mouth—about ghosts, the dead, and their spectral presence.

Rodrigo's thoughts were far different from those of his men. First, he had to see what the mysterious parchment was about, and then draw conclusions. He locked himself in his cabin to study the moldy, foul-smelling yet intriguing scroll. It depicted a small island with its coordinates clearly marked. He endured the stench, covering his mouth and nose with a whisky-soaked handkerchief, because curiosity outweighed pestilence. He tried to clean it without erasing the drawing, using a fine-bristle brush to sweep away the mold and reveal strange symbols that surely hinted at something important. His gaze sharpened, his breath quickened. Leaving drawn parchments to guard a secret was the only way, in those times, to preserve information—words could be carried off by the wind or reach unwanted ears. Everything could change depending on who deciphered the maps. Thus he uncovered signs indicating a path from the beach to what seemed the summit of a hill, crowned by a black blot marked with the classic pirate skull. He shook his head, half incredulous. Could it be a hoax

or a deadly trap? How had that chest reached the hold? Gorran's shadowy dealings came to mind. The possibility of treasure stirred Rodrigo's imagination. He would not leave it to chance. He would not need to raid anyone or fight other pirates. "The loot belongs to the one who finds it," he said aloud, "or to the one who wins it by force." He searched his navigation chart and found a small island matching the one on the parchment. Another coincidence: it was not far. "Is it my fate to find that treasure?" he murmured with excitement. He calculated the distance with his compass and figured it would take at least two or three days to reach the island at their current slow speed.

What was clear was that the island had a small inlet marked by a rock at the southern entrance—ideal for repairing the Providence. He plotted the course toward the island and went up on deck to give orders. The Providence swung sharply to take its new heading, surprising the officers most of all.

When he went down to dine in the officers' mess, he received their greetings, and all kept a tense silence. They watched him, waiting for an explanation about the parchment, the most important event of recent days besides the Providence's torn hull. Rodrigo scanned their faces one by one, and when he reached the last, his face lit with a broad smile. "I suppose you want to know something about the parchment." All nodded. "Well, nothing... it's a navigation chart, blurred and of little or no importance..." Rodrigo wanted to keep the secret until he was sure what it meant. Dinner was served, but the officers' doubts remained.

Among the crew, too, whispers about the parchment grew louder. Whether out of suspicion or disbelief, no one was satisfied with Rodrigo's silence.

At sunset on the third day, just as Rodrigo had calculated, the lookout cried: "Land! I see a small island to the south-southeast." Rodrigo climbed to the bridge and ordered the helmsman to steer toward the bay with a huge rock at its southern entrance. The parchment's details matched reality—so far. At the end of the bay, behind a row of palms and tropical shrubs, stretched a small village of humble houses roofed with palm leaves. Even through the spyglass from the deck, it was hard to spot inhabitants. A rustic pier of old timbers thrust its frailty into the calm waters.

"Lower sails! Only the mainsail and a staysail. I want depth reports every minute."
"Yes, sir!" came the leadsman's voice.

They dropped anchor about a hundred meters from the widest beach in the inlet. Rodrigo waited for the first hours of the next day to go ashore in a barge and inspect the beach conditions. The island seemed deserted and proved suitable for repairing the hull. He noted the tide schedule so that at the highest point of high tide they could haul the Providence onto the sand like a dry dock, allowing the carpenters to

work freely. The site had about three or four fathoms' difference between high and low tide—enough depth for the Providence's draft.

The sun fell like molten lead after midday, and the hour to maneuver the Providence approached. They set the sails so the ship would gain momentum and drive as far up the sand as possible. The sailors, gripping heavy beams, stood ready to brace the vessel as the tide ebbed.

"Good work!" Rodrigo shouted from the bridge when the Providence stood secured on the beach, perfectly upright. Master Rubiales, the chief carpenter, could begin his task. "Rubiales," Rodrigo called in a ringing voice. "Captain. I need three days to fix this damned breach."

Rodrigo would have time to set his own plan in motion. With the parchment in his pocket, he took his two officers—the first and second—under the pretext of seeking fresh water to refill the ship's casks, which was true, for there is no sweeter water than that from a spring on solid ground. But in his mind pulsed his private scheme to explore the island. He carried the mysterious parchment and consulted it often to confirm his course. At the foot of a hill they found a small waterfall feeding a beautiful blue lagoon where several young women bathed naked. The men, far from discreet, approached the shore to feast their eyes on what they had not seen in three months, and the women, noticing them, fled for their clothes and ran off in the opposite direction, leaving a trail of laughter and the playful bounce of their plump little backsides.

"Now that we know where there's fresh water, let's move on," Rodrigo ordered, leading the climb uphill after checking the parchment. The next step was to find a tree split by lightning, its branches charred.

"With all respect, Captain," said the first officer, "I think this isn't the way back."
"Who told you we want to go back?" Rodrigo replied mockingly. The officer shook his head, at a loss for words. The captain's actions remained somewhat mysterious. They had already found the freshwater source—the initial purpose. What was he seeking now?

The answer came at once. "You're wondering what I'm looking for, aren't you?"
The officers nodded.

"Well, we're hunting buried treasure," Rodrigo said, waving the parchment under their noses.

The officers stepped closer, eyes gleaming with surprise.

"Now I can tell you, and I trust you'll be discreet. This is the map from the mysterious chest, and so far every blurred sign has matched. Now we seek a cave that should lie to the left of that blasted tree." They walked left of the tree, unsure of the exact di-

rection or distance. They reached the hilltop without finding anything. They descended, disappointed, over a scree of black rocks forming the crest of a cliff.

Officer Herbert stumbled and tumbled down the slope, howling in pain. Rodrigo and the other officer rushed to help their comrade, who lay bloodied from a head wound. They helped him up, but he could not keep his balance, his knee gashed and bleeding.

“Look, Captain!” cried the second officer, pointing to a hole among the cliff rocks. The two ran to inspect it, dropping Herbert like a limp sack. The hole was hidden in the undergrowth, but closer up they saw it widened into a cave. They entered cautiously into heavy darkness. The officer who smoked a pipe struck a match, its feeble flame barely enough for a few uncertain steps. The match burned out, and they had seen nothing. He lit two matches at once, and they froze when a sharp roar rang out—a beast bolting past them in flight. When they regained their composure, they saw a mound of earth a few yards away with a stake driven at what seemed its head. The matches died, and they were the last. There was nothing more to do. Rodrigo had half the information, which was useless. They would have to return prepared to explore again—with lamps, shovels, and men to dig. They left the cave and went for their companion to head back to the beach camp.

They returned to the ship under the inquisitive eyes of the entire crew. An injured officer, whom the Captain and his second took to Dr. Holtz’s infirmary.

All was forgotten when the captain summoned the crew, who expected answers about the map’s mystery. Rodrigo raised his hand for silence and delivered his message:

“Three days’ leave! Every living soul is free from this moment—enjoy it! But on the fourth day, we sail at high tide! Whoever isn’t aboard will stay to run his damned luck!”

He also offered twenty coins so they could drink themselves senseless—if they found the source to quench their ambitions. Shouts, applause, and laughter erupted. Some began to run, eager to go ashore.

When the sun set on the horizon and the shadows grew longer, revealing secrets and concealing indiscretions, all was quiet and peaceful in Providence. Rodrigo went to the warehouse where the carpenters were working and told them they could go out and have fun as soon as they finished their workday. Rodrigo found himself with nothing to do and no orders to give. He also felt like going to explore the town. He walked down the dreary alley until he heard the music of an accordion. A sign above the window that spilled light onto the dusty street read “El Paraíso” (Paradise). The name of the place seemed like an irony in poor taste, but it piqued his curiosity, and he went to take a look. Inside was a sad little bar and two or three tables where some of his sailors were drinking beer accompanied by women, and a man was pla-

ying sea shanties in the corner. The men immediately stood up when they recognized their captain, who signaled them to “rest” and continued on to the bar. He sat down at one of the tables and immediately a woman with fair skin and black hair approached him. Rodrigo ordered a dark beer. The same woman brought it to him and sat down next to him without asking his permission. Her eyes were tired, but there was a spark of irony in her smile. She introduced herself: “My name is Isela, but you can call me Chela if you buy me a drink.” Rodrigo signaled to the bartender, and they brought Chela a drink. They drank while Rodrigo kept his eyes on the woman sitting on a stool at the bar with an empty glass in her hand. She looked beautiful with her leg crossed, revealing a good part of her long, sensual thigh. Her skin was light-dark, and her face had large, lanceolate eyes and a mouth with full, shiny lips like sweet cherries. Her abundant black hair was tousled and fell down her back like a torrent of pleasant water, giving her an appearance of uncontrollable liveliness. She wore an emerald dress that matched her intense green eyes. Her skin glowed like polished copper. It looked smooth and warm.

“Don't get your hopes up, sailor,” said Isela with a tone of envy.

“Why not? She works here too... doesn't she?”

No one can catch Marbella.

Rodrigo looked at her in surprise.

“Your friend?”

“My sister in life, not by blood. We came here together when we still believed that youth was eternal. But I've learned that beauty fades. Hers, on the other hand...” Isela sighed, “hers burns brighter with age.”

Rodrigo looked down, uncomfortable.

“And you think she's happy here?”

Isela let out a brief, almost bitter laugh.

“Marbella wasn't born to be happy or unhappy. She was born to be free. That fire of hers can't be extinguished by chains or promises. Whoever loves her will have to navigate a perpetual storm. Do you think you can change her destiny?”

Rodrigo didn't answer, staring at the woman at the bar and deciding to find out for himself. He made his way to the bar. Isela muttered a couple of curses and made an offensive gesture with her hand.

“May I sit down?” Rodrigo asked, pointing to the stool.

She didn't answer. With a certain disdain, she pointed to the chair next to her.

“Marbella,” she said at last, introducing herself. “You don't look like a sailor.”

Immediately, the young captain detected from her accent and figure that she was half French and half Caribbean.

“And what are sailors like?” he asked.

“Thirsty. Hungry. Lost. But... you don't seem lost...”

Rodrigo looked at her.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

Marbella showed him her empty glass.

“What would you like to drink?”

“Whatever you're drinking, sailor. And tell me, what are you doing on this remote island?”

Rodrigo wasn't in the mood for a long story and returned the question.

“And what is a beauty like you doing in this sad dive?”

“Someone who dares to stay.”

“Stay? Why?” asked Rodrigo out of simple curiosity, while he indulged in devouring her with his eyes, inch by inch, the long path of sensuality that began at the tips of her graceful toes, crowned with scarlet polish, to where the emerald silk covered her fountain of pleasure.

“To give you all my love...” continued the beauty, with a look so sensual that Rodrigo had never seen in any woman before. Those green eyes were like a path to an unknown world with promises of inconceivable lust, and to understand it, one had to dive in headfirst without hesitation.

Rodrigo couldn't wait any longer, he cast his net to catch mermaids... “How can we find a room? I want to have you all to myself...”

Marbella flashed her charming smile, revealing a row of perfect white teeth as soon as she saw the shiny silver coin in his hand. She took him by the arm and they walked happily away through the puddles on the muddy street.

With every step they took, they recounted their lives in short comments. Marbella was the daughter of a French pirate who arrived on the island by accident and intentionally got two or three black women pregnant. Her real name was Marlene Labelle, which became Marbella to remove her French roots and highlight her beauty when she realized that the treasure between her legs was highly sought after by sailors who arrived on the island by accident.

That night, Rodrigo did not return to the ship, but remained shipwrecked repeatedly in Marbella's arms, under broken mosquito nets and amid whispers in French and the moans of a crazed captain.

“You have a shadow,” she said, caressing the scars on his back. “And it's not from your body. It's from your destiny.”

“I don't believe in destiny,” he replied, not knowing what she meant, for he knew full well that he had been in the hands of his destiny for twenty-one years.

“You will. When you have to face it. Your destiny is to find a treasure.”

Rodrigo sat up, surprised.

“How do you know about the treasure?”

Marbella smiled.

“Everyone in life is looking for treasure. Not everyone finds it.”

“Why?”

“Because it's not written in their destiny.” Her words sounded with the certainty of a fortune teller, and Rodrigo preferred to change the subject and return to that of her-flesh and its magical fluids.

The next morning, they woke up with the difficulty that hung over them from the night's activities. “Let's go to the beach!” Marbella suggested. They walked to a hidden cove that Bella claimed as her own. The sand burned their feet, and Marbella, in a juggling act, took off her dress and ran naked into the blue waters. Rodrigo did the same without juggling and swam until he found himself in front of the green eyes that sparkled enchantingly with the water at his waist. Marbella separated herself and, swimming like a dolphin, sought deeper waters. When Rodrigo caught up with her, she hung on his neck and wrapped her legs around his waist, skillfully adjusting herself until she achieved wet penetration.

Later on the beach, Rodrigo realized that this was his third day of living in paradise. It was time to return to reality. Marbella thought differently. Naked, she spoke to him as if the world were a fiction written solely for the two of them.

“Why not stay, Rodrigo?” she whispered. “You could be the king of this island. You will be my king. I would make you forget what you left behind in your homeland, and that cruel sea that only brings death and tragedy...”

Rodrigo caressed her cheek, looking at her with eyes that begged for understanding. “Because I didn't come here to forget anyone,” he said, and the memory of Alicia echoed in his mind. Marbella sat up slowly, her gaze inquisitive. “Then what did you come here for?” The question was devastating. He hesitated to answer for a few moments. Of course, his purpose was adventure per se, and he was already living it, and now he was looking for a treasure that was hidden somewhere on that island, according to the parchment. Was she another of the island's treasures? Maybe he was lying to himself, maybe now he knew it was his destiny. And he had to make it clear to her. So he took her hand and said in a hesitant whisper, “Destiny brought me to you because I have to repair my boat, and I want to take you with me.” She looked at him in surprise.

“My destiny is on this island,” she said softly, narrowing her eyes.

“Don't be so sure. Your destiny will be when you face it.” Marbella smiled mischievously because he remembered that he was repeating his own words from the first night.

At dawn, Rodrigo returned to the Providence. He slept for an hour, just long enough to recover the energy expended in navigating a sea of waves burning with inexhaustible sensuality, illuminated by the sparkle of her green eyes. He went out on deck to breathe. The sea was calm. But he felt something moving beneath his feet. As if the island itself were breathing. And now, that woman who had turned his mind upside down with her kisses and the magic that flowed between her legs... What was her destiny? How could he have said he didn't believe in destiny when he was sure that his destiny was the force that carried him along these paths of a sailor's wandering life? No, the possibility of finding that treasure hidden in the tiger's lair, or whatever that beast was that had almost swept them away, still throbbed in his head. He went out on deck dressed in his captain's jacket and with his sword at his waist. He was accompanied by one of the sailors he could trust. “Find a shovel and come with me,” he said. The sailor followed him without asking any questions. It was an order to be obeyed, and that was all he had to do.

Lieutenant Roberto, the second officer, who was on watch on the forecastle, saw Rodrigo leave and followed him at a safe distance so as not to be seen. They entered the dense vegetation, where he had returned earlier. Shortly afterward, they were intercepted by a man dressed in a white linen suit, backed by three men in British military uniforms without insignia, carrying large-caliber carbines. Rodrigo stopped, surprised, and greeted them with a curt “Hello!”

“I am Major Philander, and I have come to close the deal with Captain Gorran.” Rodrigo shook his head. It was clear that he was in big trouble.

“Captain Gorran died bravely in an attack by filibusters who boarded us,” he lied.

“Now I, Rodrigo Solana, am the captain of the Providence.”

“Well then, hand over the box, and the matter is settled.” Rodrigo gathered his courage and assured him that he knew of no deal and that there was no such box, to close his invented story.

“Well then... Have a nice day, Major... or whatever you are,” he said mockingly and moved forward to continue on his way. Immediately, Philander's guards blocked his path, pointing their guns at Rodrigo's chest. With a sudden and violent movement, the tip of his sword was six inches from Philander's neck. The soldiers drew their weapons. “Now I'm in charge, my friend. This is my new deal. If you kill me, I'll take my secret to the grave. And you'll be left without your treasure.

And if I kill you...” added Philander, fixing his gaze on Rodrigo's and letting out a growl that broke Rodrigo's concentration. With a violent swipe, he deflected the saber that threatened him and jumped out of reach. At that moment, the henchmen understood Philander's order and fired. The sailor fell dead, and Rodrigo collapsed with a wound in his chest. Philander leaned over Rodrigo and pulled out the parchment that

was sticking out of the side pocket of his jacket. Philander unfolded it with a triumphant laugh and, with his men, disappeared into the dense jungle.

Lieutenant Robert was not far away, hidden in the undergrowth, and cautiously approached the direction of the shots. He watched in horror as the soldiers fled and saw the two bodies on the ground. Without hesitation, he approached. Rodrigo was alive but bleeding profusely. He felt the sailor's jugular vein and realized there was nothing he could do. He lifted Rodrigo and carried him away from the scene on his back. As soon as he came out into the open in full view of the *Providencie*, he shouted desperately for help.

Minutes later, Dr. Holtz was trying to save his captain's life. He had lost a lot of blood, but there was no way to give him a transfusion because there was no blood on board. He did what he could after removing the bullet from his chest, which fortunately had not touched any vital organs or broken any arteries. But his condition was very critical, and extreme care was needed.

The afternoon slowly fell over the horizon painted with dazzling rays, the sailors returned with swollen eyes, sleepless faces, and joyful memories. The entire crew was already on board and soon learned what had happened to their captain. It was the day they were scheduled to set sail, and all that remained was to wait for the precise hour of high tide to let the ship return to deep waters.

"One hour to go!" shouted the first mate. Time flew by, the high tide arrived on time, and the *Providencie* began to pitch as if hesitating to return to the sea. As soon as it floated enough to free itself from the supports, its masts pointed vertically toward the sky, the men began to remove the support beams, and amid cheers and cries of triumph, the *Providencie* floated joyfully once again. Everyone cheered. The barges that were waiting for it rowed it to the dilapidated dock, which bravely received it. The first officer went down to the infirmary to consult Rodrigo. "Captain," he said proudly, "we are ready to set sail."

"Let's go," said Rodrigo with a groan.

Marbella, who had not seen Rodrigo since the night before, arrived at the dock panting from running and with anguish on her face.

"HEY!!!... Wait!... I want to talk to the captain." The gangway was still leaning against the pier, and upon recognizing Marbella, the officer motioned for her to come aboard. She was led down to the infirmary and could not contain a scream of horror when she found Rodrigo lying there.

"My love! What happened to you?" Rodrigo looked at her with sad eyes and said nothing. The officer told her what had happened. The two looked at each other with pleading eyes.

"We are about to set sail, ma'am," said the officer, letting her know it was time for her to return to shore. Rodrigo raised his hand, seeking Marbella's. She squeezed it and tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Are we leaving?" asked the officer.

Rodrigo fixed Marbella with a pleading look, without letting go of her hand.

"It's my destiny," she said in a trembling voice.

-Let's go! William ordered the officer, who went out immediately to carry out the order. The men on the barges received the order and began to row hard, to take the Providence in search of the wind, they unfurled the sails and the boat regained its life, sailing the sea with grace and determination. On board everything was not calm. The crew muttered and reluctantly complied with orders. What was happening? Evil traditions were in the air. They claimed that it was bad luck to have a woman on board, and that the consequences would not be long in coming. To their satisfaction, dense black clouds swirled on the horizon and threatened a storm of great caliber. The order never came to change course and flee from the threat. The lightning began to thunder with such force that it seemed to split the horizon into pieces. The captain was secluded in his cabin, in the care of a beautiful woman who lavished all her attentions on him. The wobble of the Providence began to become unbearable. William resented it in his bed. Marbella held his hand and tried to stop his involuntary turns.

"The sea is thick. murmured the beauty. William said in his tremulous voice. They should shorten sails...

Marbella stood up as if she had heard an order. She got out of the cabin, with difficulty reached the aft bridge, where Rykers, the second mate, was, she held on to the base of the rudder and shouted with all her might. "Shorten sails!.

Rykers looked at her in surprise and admiring the beauty of the body that was shown as if it were a fantasy. The rainwater made it stick to her body, resembling an erotic painting. Rykers repeated the order, to make his hierarchy present, and the sailors climbed on the masts and yards to shorten the rag. Providence settled in better elegance and were able to change course. All night the storm chased them like a hunting hound, and the lightning illuminated the raging sea for an instant. By noon the next day, the storm had turned into minor gusts, but the sailors were exhausted from the hustle and bustle of the whole night, confirming their suspicions that this storm had been the product of the curse for bringing this woman aboard. The night came with a splendid moon that was reflected in the sea like a silver path. . Marbella enjoyed it on the port railing, and she could not suppress a long sigh, William's condition was not improving.

Perhaps," said Dr. Holtz, it would be convenient to go to a port and seek help in a formal hospital, where they have all the resources and the possibilities to apply them. When Marbella told William, he said that there was no way he would abandon his ship, and he did not talk about it any more.

From that day on, Marbella spent the hours when she could leave William resting and without pain to go and sit on deck, paying attention to the ship's handling. She learned -theoretically- what each sail was for and learned the language of the wind, which she found very amusing, since a change of direction or strength immediately required the mobilization of the sailors to make the necessary corrections and maintain the course and speed of navigation. At night she would talk about it with William between laughs and caresses.

Marbella walked on deck as if she had been born on that boat. The sails swelled more strongly, the dolphins jumped near the hull as if sent to celebrate. One morning, she asked for a couple of buckets of fresh water, which had been collected in abundance by the rains of the storms. Without a word, she slowly undressed before the astonished – and not always discreet – gaze of the sailors, and threw herself into the water from the starboard gunwale. When she saw a group of dolphins frolicking next to the hull of the Providence. She swam as if he had gills instead of lungs. She played with the dolphins, who took her, as if she were one of them. Rickers looked at her from the bridge, with the eyes of a starving dog. The show was beautiful... but also dangerous. Men watched her, between fascination and lust. Providence had also slowed down, as sailors loosened their sails to enjoy the spectacle. When Marbella got tired, she asked for a rope to be thrown to hoist it, several ran to do it at the same time, as if fighting for the right to be next to the green-eyed mermaid. They no longer looked at curses, on the contrary, they now celebrated having a woman of those sizes and volumes on board. She let herself be hoisted, wet, bright with sunshine, and laughed without worrying about the desire that burned around her. she bathed with the water from the buckets. Humming a melody that perhaps he was inventing, she threw jets of water with a gourd on his head and dripped along his beautiful body, giving it an unusual brilliance.

That night, in the officers' messier, Marbella came after William. "It was the first time he had left his cabin. The officers greeted him with applause and cheers. She walked in discreetly dressed in her baggy skirt and a white linen blouse that William lent her. Let us remember that Marbella had neither time nor purpose to pack up. The men stood up when they saw her.

"Madeimoselle," said one, with an exaggerated bow. "Captain of desire," whispered another, thinking that no one else heard him. Marbella laughed, thanking them for the attention, although one of them was not so subtle when he offered her a chair next to him. It was Lieutenant Rykers, an impetuous young man, the son of some fallen bourgeois, who began to insinuate himself shamelessly.

"With that skin..." You could mistake her for a mermaid," he said, touching her arm as she sat down and she withdrew his hand gently, without losing her smile. Which did not go unnoticed by William.

"And you seem to want to jump into the sea without knowing how to swim. William said with a cold look at him. Was he jealous? Marbella was asked

When they finished dinner and were served a cognac, William stood up with the glass in his hand, and everyone looked at him expectantly.

-Gentlemen... I have an important announcement to make..." Everyone had their drinks and the expectation was on their faces.

"It is well known to all of you that my health has not improved enough. The doctor has even suggested that I should stop my way to go to a hospital. Voices of surprise and denial came from the mouths of the officers. "One moment," William asked. - I don't accept it either. But in the meantime: Even with my limitations, I will continue with you on this journey. - The expressions were repeated. Each of the seconds on board imagined the possibility that one of them would be named "Acting Captain" So in my place... (expectation)... will remain as captain ... Mrs. Marbella!!

-;;WHAT?? ... Damn! ... It's not possible.-

"Whoever is not satisfied." William ran his index finger over them in an energetic gesture. Hand over your sword and coat and we will take you as a passenger. And he finished dinner to retire to his cabin, next to him walked Marbella who still did not get over his amazement at the sudden event. she waited until they reached the cabin to explode.

-Are you crazy??? ;;What are you doing??

"I know what I'm doing and so do you. You have already told me of all your observations on how to handle the boat, and I am sure you will be able to fall off the cliff properly. - You also have the strong character to command and be obeyed.

-William... I don't know... I hope you are not wrong, and I will do it for you and under your advice.

The next day Rickers rang the bell with unusual fury. Marbella was standing next to him wearing William's coat and his sword at his waist, although the belt could not fit the size of his delicate waist. But she showed a panache and a cold gaze ready for anything.

The men did not know what awaited them, but they were surprised to see Marbella invested as captain.

Rickers, who spat out anger, introduced Marbella as captain. Men responded with varying cheers, "Damn... A woman in charge!! she already took the fuck out of us!! ... Another said aloud, "If that woman sends me to hell—" I'm leaving happy... As long as I see her buttocks, I'll obey her on my knees... HA... HA...!!!

The others laughed. But Rickers didn't stop.

The next morning, everyone had something to do on deck, waiting for the captain's bath. Rickers wanted to hide that he was interested in the course, next to the rudder, but no one believed him. Murmurs ran from mouth to mouth. His interest in the captain's favors was known to all.

For several days, he repeated his flattery.... Small frictions, vague queries and unnecessary command suggestions. William was well informed of everything and it bothered him.

One night, on the deck, Rickers found Marbella alone, looking at the moon.

"Beautiful night Marbella," he said, taking her arm and bringing her to him.

She let go. She gave him a dry slap.

William was lurking in the shadows. And he saw it all.

"Rykcers!" His voice thundered.

The lieutenant turned. He tried to explain himself, but William already had him by the collar of his coat. - No officer has the right to touch what does not belong to you!

"You're disrespecting a woman who is your superior and me personally," William roared, and hit him to the ground.

The sailors hushed together. No one intervened.

Rykers got up bleeding from his eyebrow. He looked at Marbella with spite, and withdrew without saying a word.

That night, Marbella discussed the problem with William in his cabin.

"Did you know that a man who defends a woman... is at risk of losing her?"

"Why?"

"Because we don't want owners. Only allies.

"You're mine," he said.

"I'm not yours or anyone else's," she replied. And she kissed him, with the intensity of someone who promises nothing... and gives everything.

"I am not your owner Marbella, but I love you with all my soul.

"I love you too, William. But I want to be free, especially now that you have put me in charge of your ship.

Marbella adapted well to her position and kept a close eye on the pace of the ship, although she noticed that the men were tense. They feared that the curse would bite their lives.

Even the cook, always drunk and cheerful, now walked around with a crucifix hanging from his neck and salt in his pockets.

William recovered day by day and paced haughtily up and down, trying to maintain support for Marella, if he did not want to keep the suitor Rickers at a distance. The atmosphere on board had become tense. And it wasn't just because of the differences between Rickers and William. It was something else.

"What's going on on this ship?" Marbella asked one night, while William was writing in his logbook.

"Nothing that hasn't happened before," he replied without looking up.

"Don't lie to me. I feel it on my skin.

William closed the notebook, and look deeply into her eyes.

-We are approaching enemy waters.

Seconds later, as if William had sniffed it, the announcement of the lookout screaming was heard.

"A dark ship is approaching from the west. No flag, Madam.

Marbella raised his spyglass, Rickers was also looking towards the ship with his spyglass

The brig's silhouette was black, with red sails fluttering against a red evening sky. It did not show emblem or nation, or name on in the hull of the ship

"Pirates?" Marbella asked, to Rickers

"I don't know," he murmured. But it's hunting us.

William climbed onto the bridge with awkward steps.

"What the hell is going on!?"

Rickers explained calmly. But William interrupted him curtly. - "I'm asking the captain.!!"

Marbella hesitated for a second before saying.

"We are being chased by that ship without a flag. It came out of nowhere from the west. "They can reach us," added Marbella, "it is a brig lighter than the Providence."

William was impressed by Marbella's appreciation. And what are we going to do?

William asked.

"Whatever you command, sir.

"I remind you, "ma'am," that I am not in command." As they talked, the brig was shortening the distance.

"Then let's get ready to refuse the boarding," Marbella said firmly and began to hand out orders.

Holtz, the doctor, went on deck.

He had a notebook under his arm and his eyes were red.

"It's no ordinary boat," he said without anyone asking him. I've seen those sails on old maps.

"And what do those maps say?" Marbella asked.

"That the one who sees it, dies."

"Don't come at me with idiocies, doctor.

"Prepare artillery!" he shouted. Turn south! I want the wind in our sails!" William ordered, although he realized that he had just usurped the command. The brig was approaching within a mile.

The brig did not open fire, it only sailed silently, like a night hunter after his prey. At dusk, the *Providence* veered sharply through fog banks.

But the brig was still there. Silent. ... Only making its menacing presence felt.

Marbella looked at it in fear, it was not the same to sail a blue sea as to wait for an attack. From the deck, a sailor tore his shirt halfway through the deck and let out a heart-rending scream... IT'S THE CURSE!! - Everyone looked at Marbella, as if she was the culprit.

"We can't run away any more," William said at dawn.

"So what do we do?" Marbella asked.

He looked at her compassionately. And he said, caressing his cheek, "Let's attack first.!"

They loosened sails on the Providence and the phantom brig was put to the sidelines. They threw cables that had a strong grampin at the tip, to catch the Providence from the railing. When they had three grips, they pulled the cables until they had the hulls at par. The attackers jumped first on the Providence men and blood began to flow on deck. The others were trained warriors, there were whites and black men, but they were all like wild beasts unleashed. The Providence men defended themselves as best they could, but they had no chance to win. Rickers was fighting with another officer. William took the sword from Marbella's waist and launched an attack, leaving her unprotected. The enemies saw her and went to attack. But three sailors with spears in their hands stood in front of their captain and courageously began to repudiate the attacks, fell one after the other and the attackers went on Marbella, which already had in her hands the spear of one of its defenders and managed to knock down one of the attackers, but fell prey to the other two. She defended herself like a cornered beast, the ruffians soon overpowered her and took her by the arms. Rickers emerged victorious from his first duel and was already engaged in another. William couldn't take it anymore, he was exhausted without energy and chose to move away from the battle deck, appearing to be mortally wounded. He did not hear the desperate cry of Marbella that she was being taken captive by to take her to the pirate ship as if she were the most precious booty. When the heat of battle died down and the ghost ship was gone. The people of Providence began to count their losses. William dragged his footsteps, wounded in one leg and his left arm. He found Rickers prostrate in a pool of his own blood. He continued searching, anxiously looking for Marbella, went down to the cabins and when he did not find her he went back up to the battered deck. "They took her, sir!" - said a sailor between groans about his wounds. William felt his heart being broken in one fell swoop. He let out a roar of a wounded beast and with his fist raised pointing to the sky, he swore and cursed with all the courage of his heart that he would find his beloved mulatto, at any cost. -And how was he going to achieve it? He had practically no men, and no boat either, for his mainsail and mizzen sail had been torn. It was almost impossible to repair them. Maneuvering the ship without them was impossible and he had to let himself drift wherever the winds and currents took the Providence.

Two weeks passed that were hellish. Sometimes motionless under a scorching sun. and endless nights adrift. Men kept dying and those who lived starved to death. There were attempts at cannibalism, which William managed to control, forcing people to fish whatever came out of the sea for their own salvation. The cook took

anything, dolphin, tuna, turtle... and yet he made some seafood soups, "as if to raise the dead." But the definition was rejected, as they could still remember all the dead comrades.

On board the brig

The ship was a two-masted brig, its gaff sails on the mainmast and the foremast were red and square, which made the brig a ship fast and easily maneuverable, it had no name and did not need it, because it did not have a flag that identified its nationality. Its crew was about twenty men who shared the booty obtained in their battles. The captain was a sinister man who only cared about seeing his men risking their lives for booty. The bloody spectacle gave him deep satisfaction. But the previous assault brought him an unexpected surprise.

When two pirates arrived at the captain's cabin of the brig, carrying Marbella who was shaking furiously trying to free herself with elbows, screams and bites. of the strong arms that held her The captain stood up, speechless before the beauty of Marbella.

-j Let her free!. -

Marbella managed to slap the nearest one and kick the butt of the one who was walking away The captain celebrated with a loud laugh.

Marbella looked at him with the fury that came out of her eyes.

"Don't worry, ma'am," he said in a melodious voice and looking at her with lust. "You are welcome on board," and offered his hand to greet her. Marbella took a few steps back and the captain advanced to maintain the short distance that separated him from those bright eyes and a statuesque body. "I'm Alejandro," he said. Marbella was also enraptured by the beauty of that man's face and his marked musculature of white skin, golden by the sun. Unconsciously Marbella offered her right hand and he brought it to his lips. Marbella violently withdrew it and with the other hand slapped it, which the captain in a reflexive act caught in the air without reaching his face. And he smiled pleasantly at him.

"You are a beautiful little shrew, madam..."

"Marbella," she said, changing his defensive attitude for that of submission, she had no choice, because she was part of a booty, although she did not like to define

herself in that category, but his sensitive glands faded before the gallantry of that beautiful man. They were reciprocating feelings.

-And what was Marbella doing on that filthy boat? - he asked, offering her a seat on a soft sofa in front of his desk.

"I was the captain. sh said, sitting down and crossing her leg, almost in a fit of sensuality that left the captain speechless.

"And what are you going to do with me, Captain Alexander?"

The captain ran again over Marbella's legs, keeping the answer to himself, that was probably not going to like Marbella. Or maybe will?... he would find out, she was in his hands, he had nowhere to go.

"Allow me to take you to your cabin, Mar...beautiful.

Alejandro offered his arm gallantly and Marbella leaned on it, feeling the warmth of his body. When the door closed behind Alejandro Marbella was amazed at the luxury that surrounded her, there was a bed covered with a light cover simulating the skin of a tiger, she had her own bathroom that she took advantage of immediately because not only did she feel the discomfort of the sweat of a long day but she also wanted to be beautiful for when they met the captain again, She wished she had had her beauty items and clothes more suited to the occasion. But she could not lie to herself, when she saw herself in the mirror she realized that they were not indispensable. Now, it was not as when she was in the sight of the highest bidder, in that dirty and turbulent place that was called the golden leg, spread out on the bed and felt as if the tiger skin were embracing her, communicating its warmth and beauty. An hour later, the knocks on her door brought her back to reality: when she opened it, she met one of the sailors who told her that he would accompany her to the captain's cabin for dinner. She gladly agreed and followed the sailor through the narrow corridors until she reached the door of the captain's cabin, the sailor knocked softly and the door opened, Captain Alejandro, dressed in his best clothes, burst into smiles to receive his guest.

Marbella showed a completely different attitude to the one she had presented at the beginning of his interview with the captain. They served dinner with exotic dishes that were the specialty of the cook on board. Marbella noticed at once that it was far superior to what she ate daily aboard the Providence. They talked like two old friends until they finished the bottle of an exquisite French wine. As soon as they finished dinner, Alejandro invited Marbella to move on to the sofa which was a luxurious piece of possibly French or English furniture. He brought a bottle of cognac and 2 glasses when he was filling the one in Marbella she tried to refuse it because she said that she had already drunk enough but the captain insisted that she at least take that glass to toast her beauty. Marbella accepted it knowing that she was losing her mind but she did not lose anything because she recovered it when she felt the warmth of his hands skilled in undressing women. He let himself be undressed with grace that he did not lack and began to unbutton the shirt of his sexual invader. Alejandro blew off the candles of a candlestick to leave only a lamp that with its weak flame romantically illuminated the room but that light was enough for Marbella to

distinguish the caliber of the instrument that hung from the captain's crotch. She had to suppress her groan of admiration and did not have to imagine what awaited her because soon the captain jumped on board. Marbella's mind unconsciously traveled many miles to the Providence and she remembered with a sigh, William's love, which was immediately erased from her when she felt the fiery invasion That brought her to ecstasy. The flame of the lamp was extinguished and darkness invaded the cabin until the new day entered through the porthole of the cabin. Alejandro rang a bell and in a few minutes breakfast was served. Nothing new for their tastes, the same as in any ship lost in the oceans.

The next morning the watchman's voice reached the captain's ears, and he jumped to his feet

- Port in sight!! .

The Captain went up to the deck to find out what it was about, he went down immediately to consult his navigation table that he had neglected distracted by the presence of Marbella.

Marbella watched attentively to Alejandro's movements.

"Cartagena de Indias," said the captain, rubbing his hands effusively. "Well, it's a good place to take a break, he went up on deck to give orders to enter the roadstead and hang at the dock. He knew that a ship like his without a flag would have no problems because he had friends in the harbor master's office, and he could be received. Two hours later, the red-sailed ship was secured at the wooden dock of the heavily walled city, as witnesses to the time, in the late 16th century, when had to defend itself from tyhe repeated pirate attacks

the captain showing off his beautiful company under the Earth and greeted 2 or 3 friends who came out to welcome him and to envy the woman he was carrying on his arm. They went to eat and drink in one of the best restaurants in Cartagena de Indias that sported the color of its flags and its tropical atmosphere.

Marbella was surprised to see the number of black and white people in full camaraderie. Alejandro explained to Marbella that this city had historically been a port for the African slave trade and that with the passage of time they were part of the Colombian culture. They drank the traditional coconut lemonade to which Alejandro could not resist adding a good part of Jamaican rum that made it more attractive to the palate, Marbella enjoyed with his eyes and with his palate the egg arepas and fried fish with bananas, everything was delicious, but in his mind something else was boiling.

A group came and with their traditional music brightened up the space and invited the people who were in the restaurant to dance happily

They took a break and one more glass of brandy and Marbella told her that she needed to go to the bathroom, Alejandro stood up and she left at a brisk pace. The plan he had devised was already underway. After 10 or 15 minutes Alejandro looked in all directions hoping to see Marbella who did not return from the bathroom. He went to the Ladies' room and had the audacity to open the door to see if Marbella was inside. There was no one there and anguish appeared on his face. He returned to his table, paid the bill and realized which Marbella had fled. He rushed out into the street and on 2 occasions he thought he saw her and when he caught up with that person he saw that she was a mulatto like the many who were walking on the street, he asked a policeman if he had seen a mulatto woman in a blue dress and the policeman told him yes, I have seen hundreds of them daily, it was a joke and he had to accept it as such. He went to his boat and returned with all his men to turn them into dogs of prey that would look for Marbella even under the stones. Night came and they never found her, Alejandro had to retrace his steps, convinced that he had lost her because he did not think that a hostage will always seek his freedom. They set sail the next day, and as the docks grew smaller and smaller, Alexander, with desolation on his face, raised his hand to symbolically say goodbye to the woman who had given him, for a few nights, the pleasure she had never had before

The right move.

As soon as she left the bathroom of the restaurant, Marbella stealthily slipped down a corridor to the back of the restaurant, crossed the kitchen and found the horizon of his freedom ran down the street unbridled until she saw the city At her feet, she had achieved what seemed impossible, although now she will find herself in a place in the world at an unknown distance from his beloved William. That was her destiny and she would have to live it as it will arrive.

That night she slept on the stone wall of the colonial fortress and the next morning from there she was able to look towards the dock and discover that the pirate ship, from his capture, had set sail. she felt the pleasant blow of her freedom and thought that it would not be difficult for her to rebuild her life in that Colombian city, after the long road of her life, of sold pleasures, since she began to be requested by men to then reach the golden leg to earn a living and then to the journey with William, with whom he thought he had found true love, and that would end with the kidnapping of that beautiful pirate. Still, she didn't think that being abducted was a step of bad luck. She recalled that he once told William that he would believe in his destiny when he had to face it. Now she was just at that point where a fork in her destiny had brought her to this city of bustling people, of music, and of lights that adorned the nights with their joy. That Marbella lived between laughter and tears...

And it didn't go badly, because although she had to accept, on several occasions, when she was at the limit of her existence, to accept a handful of money, which did not hurt her, because it filled her stomach for a couple of days. She bought clothes and paid for a small room to sleep in. Still, it was no longer the life she wanted. William had taught her that there is another way and she found it accidentally, when she was walking along the dock and between sighs she looked at the horizon and the ships that traded between that port and those of Spain and France. She dreamed of finding one that would go south and take her back to her charming little island. But she never found it.

One night, walking along the historic wall, she ran into an elegantly dressed gentleman who watched her come with her princess steps. He greeted her and she answered with her luminous smile. By the second or third date, the two were hooked with no possibility of escape. He invited her to dinner and she told him briefly how she had Rodrigo Pérez was a high-level export merchant and offered her the moon and the stars Marbella accepted with short-term deliveries. She didn't want to make another mistake that he would have to regret later. In one of the proposals, which could be the last, because Marbella was cooling Rodrigo Pérez's illusions with her postponements and insecurities. She held out her hand and Rodrigo kissed her tenderly. Their dreams were coming true and Marbella accepted that they lived together in a house in front of the beach of the Caribbean Sea that was full of luxuries and sun that came through its large windows.

Every morning after having given her body for love, when she got up she would stand in front of the window and contemplate the immense horizon of the sea. She sighed deeply for the many satisfactions that the sea had given her, the days and nights she had lived with William were fading among the pleasures she enjoyed in those days, but memories cannot disappear and she would always remember it, although Rodrigo was making her live truly happy.

Back to the Providence

The time on board the Providence passed uncounted, the ship was abandoned to the whims of the sea and its gales and the men who remained on board, moved like sleepwalkers without will, ate whatever it was and slept day and night. William spent all his time locked in his cabin, he had no obligation, because there was nothing to do. What did it matter that the wind did not drive him. What the hell did longitude and latitude matter, for that matter it was exactly the same to be here or there. A

loneliness that made them feel that they were their own world, the only one in the entire universe.

One night when the sea looked like a black mirror, he heard a distant voice.

-jj! AHOOOYYY the Providence!!!

With uncertain steps William went on deck.

"Here in the Providence," he said in his weak voice. But the silence of the night was such that they heard him. They asked if they needed help, for they had obviously seen the disastrous state of the Providence. It was an English-flagged ship, called the "Hope" with three masts and a shiny red hull with white lines that approached silently the gunwale of the Providence. The captain, a young man with bushy long sideburns that went down to his curly blond beard, asked permission to board, as protocol dictates. William made a caravan to welcome him.

He introduced himself as John Radcliff, captain of the Hope that was dedicated to the transport of goods that he bought in different countries of South America and Mexico to take them to Europe. William had to apologize because he had nothing worthy to offer to his visitor who treated him with all kindness and good manners, the captain then reversed the invitation and took William to his boat where they drank a good whiskey and William wanted to tell him his whole sad story.

Seeing William's desolation and the impossibility of overcoming his conditions, he extended an invitation to travel with him as a companion and his men to join the crew of the Hope. William thought for a few seconds about the proposal and told the captain that he gladly accepted but that he could not abandon his ship, it was a commitment more of honor than of obligation, because in reality that ship had not been delivered to him personally, it was the unforeseen events that had put the Providence in his hands. William hoped to be able to train him to return and deliver him to his owners, no matter what state he was in, the important thing was to fulfill it out of honor rather than obligation. Radcliff made him see that this was practically impossible and that it would be an almost heroic act that no one would thank him for because Providence was already a lot of useless sticks and boards. William reconsidered and thanked to radcliff for making him see the reality that was as much as recovering the life he thought was over. once again fate opened its arms offering him a future, although totally unpredictable. after a week of sailing north, Captain Radcliff consulted his navigation charts and told William that the next day they would be entering Colombian waters, the precise destination was Cartagena de Indias, a

port that William had heard only from historical references. and so it was, before the sun finished its daily routine, The ship moored at the dock of Cartagena de Indias.

The next morning Radcliff cleaned up and put on his colorful captain's coat and went to land in search of his business contact, whose name was Rodrigo Pérez. He visited him in his office and took them all morning to arrange the operations of that trip, he would take a good load of sugar and various spices.

The next day wagons began to arrive loaded with packages and boxes that William was in charge of receiving and accommodating in the warehouses of the Hope.

Rodrigo Pérez arrived along with the last cart that carried a few boxes, it was a business gift and explained that it was coffee beans, a product that was being promoted in the highlands of Colombia. Captain Ratcliff thanked him and assured him that it would be a great business since coffee was in exorbitant demand in all European countries.

Laughing and seriously, Rodrigo Pérez mentioned that the best Colombian export product could be that of women of abundant beauty and joy, which was an established genetic wealth, although he recognized that this would be impossible and as if in a separate line he said: captain here there are mulatto women who are worth in ground gold what they weigh even if it is not much because they are slender and sensual like no other. he realized that mentally he was describing Marbella, his own wife. William sitting not far from them listened bitterly to the description of those mulattos, he had already noticed it when walking along the pier seeing the people who circulated around the place and who without being able to avoid it reminded him of his beautiful Marbella.

That night Rodrigo Pérez told Marbella that he had met a man who came as a guest on Ratcliff's ship, who told him his sad story. Marbella was surprised and listened to him attentively, wanting to ask him a thousand questions. Well, she soon realized that it was William. "I would like to meet that man," she said in a bold gesture, that Rodrigo did not suspect why her interest. I think they will set sail this morning, he told him and continued with the story. William had refrained from mentioning Marbella in his story, it hurt him so much that he didn't want anyone else to know about it. It is not possible to imagine what would have happened if William at that moment heard that his longed-for black girl was in his hands.

Marbella, without saying a word, apologized and went to lock herself in the bathroom. She cried her misfortune and more so, when she realized that she had

had him so close and that it was impossible for her to run out to look for him on the dock.

The next morning, as soon as the sun peeked over the blue horizon, Ratcliff would cast off his moorings and start way home. The Hope set sail on a voyage that would take them at least four to six weeks of a long journey across the Atlantic Ocean to reach their final destination, the port of Plymouth, England

When Marbella found the excuse to go to the dock. She hurried her steps with her eyes straight ahead looking for the brig that Rodrigo had described to her. She went down to the dock to buy something from the native fishermen who offered the riches of the sea, aboard their boats. The sails of the Hope were fading over the horizon. Marbella looked at the horizon as if it were attracted by a magnet that worked forcefully on her eyes, she continued to sigh with full nostalgia, for a boat that would take her to her beautiful little island.

William looked deeply at the land from the stern bridge, surrounded by that immense sea that seems to have no end, that Mare Nostrum, which belongs to no one and that all seafarers take as their own, . That is how William looked at it, with bitterness chiseling the face of a sailor who leaves leaving on land the dearest of his being. He could never understand why that feeling brought cold tears to his eyes.

CHANECO

As evening fell, Don Augusto, Chaneco's father, walked slowly, carrying on his shoulder the cross he had commissioned from the carpenter three or four days earlier. That night, a novena was being held for the death of his son.

With the recitation of the nine-day Rosary, the murmured words of the Our Fathers and Hail Marys would be reborn, along with the cries that still lingered, like the memories that remained from the day of the wake with its prayers of discontent. Because everything is fine except when fate takes one's life.

Doña Fina, the mother and widow, placed the cross, which still smelled of fresh paint, on the small table where the altar was, with the image of the Virgin and four candles with a vase of white lilies. They placed it there very carefully, as if not wanting to disturb the peace of the moment, and put small bouquets of flowers around it.

"It's very pretty," said Elsa, very pleased, only to prompt Doña Fina to correct her immediately, with the right that came with being the mother of the deceased. "It's a very good size." And she moved one of the vases she had placed there herself a few moments earlier a little further back to the precise spot.

Little by little, ladies arrived with their heads covered in black mantillas, crossing themselves, and they gathered in corners to chant: pray for him... Holy Virgin, as if demanding that all the saints and virgins save the souls of the dead. The night wore on and the men stayed outside the house, pushing the conversation of isolated words with the bottle that passed from hand to hand, to the rhythm of the sad notes of a group of four musicians who accompanied the pain with their purple notes that smelled of the cemetery.

The hours slowly passed, just as the prayers that did not reach dawn realized that it was time to take the cross to the cemetery when they heard the church bell calling for 7 o'clock mass.

"It's better to go early," said Doña Fina, "before the sun gets any higher."

And they walked down the freshly swept cobblestone street in silence, dragging their feet as they had when they carried the coffin. Now they were only carrying the cross, but it felt just as heavy. Taking Chaneco's cross to the cemetery marked the end of the long journey that had begun on the day of his death. There, the mourning for the deceased began to slowly fade away, and the memories of Chaneco also dissolved, little by little. And conflicting stories began to emerge: that he had been drowned,

that he had been killed because he had a large wound on his head. That his hands were tied... that it wasn't like that, that it was *Ciro* who found him with the crowbar and the oyster knives... how the hell could that have happened to *Chaneco*... I know, because I went with *Tobias* to look for him... in the end, no one knows what happened, and the only certainty is that he died and is now buried. Walking behind the cross carried by her brother, the widow *Elsa* carried a small bouquet of flowers. She was accompanied by about twenty men and women. As the procession passed by, windows opened and heads appeared. "It's *Chaneco's* funeral," *Evodio* said to his wife, getting up from his chair. "Let's go accompany the cross." And so *Chaneco's* friends and the family's acquaintances joined the procession. They arrived at the cemetery when the bright May sun began to beat down on their bodies like fire. The tomb received its cross, a wooden cross painted black with white edges and a small gabled roof to cover the plaque with the inscription that read *Susano Mijares*.

02/20/1860-05/16/1983. Rest in peace.

"Twenty-three years, damn it, it's not fair, and he leaves behind two kids!"

Before...

Even though he wasn't in a hurry, he walked quickly and never stopped with anyone longer than necessary. He would say hello, exchange two or three jokes, and continue on his way as if he were always in a rush. Most of the time, he would pass by with his fins and visor inside his small backpack, carrying the lobster hook or the crowbar for prying off oysters in his other hand.

He would arrive early at the beach below the lighthouse and, without wasting any time, begin diving. He knew the place like the back of his hand.

Other fishermen never went there, "because there's a very strong current," they said. For *Chaneco*, it was his favorite spot. He went down again and again until he had caught enough at the bottom of the sea to consider the day a success. And if he was lucky with his harpoon, his wife *Elsa* would have plenty to sell to the restaurants. "I don't know how he does it," they said about him. *Chaneco* laughed at the rumors and said it was just pure luck.

His favorite fishing spot was the rocky area in front of the lighthouse, where almost no one ventured into those waters. He liked it because he found large snappers there and because he already knew where the lobsters hid.

Once he saw a huge one, but it wasn't easy to catch. He returned the next day and dove down three or four times before finding it. There it was, stuck between two rocks. It weighed more than a kilogram.

Chaneco had the necessary patience, but his lungs were beginning to cry out for fresh air. He waited until the last moment of his endurance to come up and fill his lungs with fresh air again. In his new attempt, and before the lobster could escape, the rod shot forward like an electric shock and the hook dug into its legs, sticking into its shell at the precise moment of the pull.

The animal clung to the rock with all its strength, feeling the breath of death. *Chaneco* was about to burst, but he did not let go of the rod. In the last seconds of his pos-

sibilities, he reached out his hand to pull it from its legs, causing it to lose its support and surrendering its life to the fisherman.

LATER

"... Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners.

Outside, the band reluctantly played the sad notes of "God Never Dies," and the beat of the drum could be heard like the heartbeat of a weary heart.

Inside the hut, the women's stifled cries inflamed the men's eyes. "Chaneco is gone," they repeated, refusing to believe it.

Susano, Chaneco, Mijares lay on two tables. He had finished his journey and was now in no hurry, resting in silence.

Beneath the sheet that covered him, his bare feet protruded, wide and hard as turtle flippers, strong as grappling hooks. No shoes fit him, for he never wore them. New black pants hung from his ankles. The cooperative brought them to him, said Lenchó, to make himself important.

His solid chest seemed compressed by the unbearable weight of the white shroud.

His head was uncovered so that everyone could see his swollen, cold face, no longer wearing the smile that always hung from his eyes. He was quiet as he had never been before, for he always spoke even when it was not his turn.

Neither the women nor the old people knew what to do. They said they had to put a handful of earth under his body, as was the custom, earth from the place where he had died, but how could they put sand from the bottom of the sea where he had drowned?

... so... so so the musicians redoubled their wailing to accompany the mourning.

They drank coffee and shots of aguardiente to wake themselves up. The night was long. The stories were repeated. They no longer remembered how many times they had told the same stories, nor how many times they had repeated the same lamentations.

Chaneco is gone. The sea is a bitch.

AFTER

"... Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners.

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... so... so so the musicians redoubled their moans to accompany the mourning. They drank coffee and shots of aguardiente to wake themselves up from their sleep. The night was long. The stories were repeated. They no longer remembered how many times they had told the same stories, nor how many times they had repeated the same lamentations.

Chaneco is gone. The sea is a bitch.

THE CAVE...

It was around 2:00 in the afternoon, the time when the weight of the sun makes it impossible to do anything, when the things that need to be done have already been done, and those that remain will be left for tomorrow. The time when the heat scattered the moods, filling everything with drowsiness. At that hour, Ciro ran up the road to Puerto Angelito.

"Elsa... Elsa!" he shouted with his last breath. Chaneco's wife looked in the direction of the road without stopping to scrub the clothes she was washing in the shade of the almond tree.

"What's wrong with that boy, shouting like a madman?"

"Elsa... Elsa... Elsa!!..." Suffocated by the run and the anguish, Ciro could say nothing else when he reached the woman.

"What the hell is going on? Tell me what's happening."

Elsa drowned... Chaneco went into the cave and didn't come out.

As if she were running out of steam, her movements scrubbing the clothes slowed down until she seemed paralyzed. At that moment, she didn't know what to do or what to say; rather, she seemed not to have understood Ciro's words.

That same morning, around 7:00, she saw her husband walking down the path to the lighthouse carrying his hook and small bag. "I'll be back soon," he said. "I'm feeling a little tired."

In the water, Chaneco felt happy. What he hadn't been taught, he discovered on his own sooner or later through practice. That's why he knew how to find the octopuses that scattered to confuse him, he knew how to clearly distinguish the best oysters disguised as rocks, he knew what time the lobsters came out of their caves, he learned to see the color of the swell and understood the flow of the currents. And what he didn't know, he made up.

Chaneco took in the sea at a glance.

"There's a bit of a swell," he said to Ciro, "but it's fine down there, there's no current to bother you.

He put his visor on his forehead and, with his spear and fins under his arm, jumped into the water. When he was ready, he swam around until he found something that interested him. He came across a large snapper, an animal weighing about 15 kg, and he wasn't going to let it live. Chaneco came up for air and went down into the deep, dark cave. He entered, determined to hunt the snapper. At the bottom of the cave, the fish felt protected. Chaneco spotted it when his head began to explode and his thirst for air demanded that he return to the surface. He realized that he needed to descend with less effort, so he went to find the oyster bar to weigh himself down and descend faster and with less effort. Chaneco descended like a lead weight, and there was the snapper, feeling harassed. He stuck the crowbar into the rocks to support himself firmly and aimed carefully.

Shock!!..., the rubber bands exploded, and the harpoon went straight into the animal's gills. Mortally wounded, it began to struggle, desperately trying to free itself from the harpoon. Chaneco also felt that he had to get out of there. With the darkness and the churning water, he couldn't see anything, and the snapper was pulling on the harpoon line with all its strength, pulling him backwards. Chaneco redoubled his efforts, throwing himself backwards, and felt a blow that seemed to split his head in two. The water turned red with his blood running down his neck. He looked for the exit, but a brutal tug on the line pulled him back.

Chaneco redoubled his efforts by throwing himself backwards and felt a blow that seemed to have split his head in two. The water turned red with his blood running down his neck. He looked for the exit, but a brutal tug on the rope tightened around his right hand and dragged him back to the bottom of the cave. He realized that the harpoon rope was tangled around his arm and that the cave had another narrow exit where the snapper was still pulling to escape. There was no escape. He struggled to free himself. He felt the rope strangling his arm. He could no longer resist the lack of air, cursing himself for forgetting the knife. He could have cut the rope... he had been told many times not to make the rope so long on his harpoon. It was no longer the time to think about that. He needed air, his jaw and throat were locked, he felt the final blow of suffocation, life was slipping away... he thought it would be best to stay there and sleep, and then see what to do later.

His body floated peacefully, for the first time without haste, in the imposing silence of

the sea.

A LOVE IN EACH PORT

Adventure arises where you least expect it, whether climbing the foothills of the Himalayas or lying on the edge of the bed after an Amazonian orgasm.

Isabel wasn't looking for anything other than rest and solitude. She was trying to get rid of the pain her fiancé had caused her when she discovered what he was really like as a person. Her long brown hair waved in the strong south wind that whipped Karet Beach, on the coast of Quintana Roo, very close to the Mayan archaeological sites. Her green eyes sparkled as she scanned the horizon, thinking of all the adventures since ancient times when the world was yet to be discovered and the courage and boundless dreams of sailors grew with each step as the curtain of ignorance was lifted.

Isabel returned to the reality of her moment and found it difficult to detach herself from her past. Her beauty and tenderness had not been enough to prevent her boyfriend from cheating on her with her best friend, Cristina, who was anything but "Cristina." To escape Pietro, who revelled in his Italian roots, Isabel had decided to take a vacation, hoping that the distance and tropical sunsets would wash away the smell and memories of three years of a relationship that had ended so bitterly. And until the very last day, she couldn't explain how she had put up with Pietro's excesses for so long, so she also thought that even though it hurt,

Isabel returned to the reality of her situation and found it difficult to detach herself from her past. Her beauty and tenderness had not been enough to prevent her boyfriend from cheating on her with her best friend, Cristina, who was anything but "Cristina." To escape Pietro, who reveled in his Italian roots, Isabel had decided to take a vacation, hoping that the distance and tropical sunsets would wash away the smell and memories of three years of a relationship that had ended so bitterly. Until the very last day, she couldn't explain how she had put up with Pietro's excesses for so long, so she also thought that, even though it hurt, she was happy to be free of commitments again.

Her only dream was to finish her archaeology studies so she could devote herself fully to researching the great secrets still held by our ancestors.

TWO MONTHS EARLIER

Isabel and Pietro were returning from a party. Pietro stopped the car at Isabel's house and made no attempt to get out to open the door for her.

"What's wrong with you? You haven't said a word since we left the party," Pietro said reproachfully. He slid his hand onto Isabel's knee, and she immediately pulled away with a sharp rejection.

"Are you sure you want to talk to me?" Isabel said, without turning to look at him and in a tone of disgust.

"Who else would I talk to?"

"Well, Estela, who you were flirting with and couldn't take your eyes off..."

"HA! Now you come to me with that.

"You think I haven't noticed? I know about your affair with Estela..."

"It's not my fault that your friend is a little slut and goes around provoking people with her charms."

"PIETRO!... Don't make things up. YOU'RE THE SCUMBAG... I'm not willing to put up with your excesses anymore. This is over."

--My love!... Pietro cried out, holding her by the arm as Isabel tried to get out of the car.

--LET GO OF ME!

--CALM DOWN ISABEL!... I don't want to lose you...

With a violent jerk, Isabel managed to break free, opened the door, and walked away quickly. Her hair fluttered like stormy waves, and she was unable to hold back her tears of anger.

The next day, Pietro called her cell phone, but Isabel did not answer. Pietro immediately called again, and before he could say a word, Isabel spoke first.

--" ¡¡We have nothing to talk and never will!!!.

THE BEACH

A wave washed over Isabel's feet... Her footprints were left imprinted in the wet sand and remained visible until the next wave washed them away with its soft foam.

Her steps carried her gently across the sand, and the breeze made her hair flutter. The sun's rays had already begun to gently tan her white skin, and her mind remained lost in thought.

"Hello!"

She didn't hear the first greeting. And the man she had just passed a second before repeated, raising his voice.

"Hellooo!"

Isabel stopped and looked up in surprise at the source of the voice. It was a young, handsome man, perhaps five years older than her. His skin was tanned from many hours in the sun, and his face was weather-beaten, his body almost sculptural, his eyes black and his gaze penetrating like an eagle's. His torso was bare and he wore white pants rolled up to his knees.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't hear you. I was so lost in thought that..."

The man didn't let her finish.

"I did notice... Sorry for interrupting your dreams."

"Well, I wasn't exactly dreaming..."

"Alejandro..." said the man in a soft voice with a cheerful smile on his face, extending his right hand. "...But everyone calls me Alex."

Isabel couldn't refuse, and she extended her hand as well.

-About Alex...I mean...

--Well, yes, I live in California... in San Francisco, but I was born in Mexico.

Isabel nodded with a sweet smile.

Without being asked, Alex briefly told her his story as he invited her to continue walking along the beach.

He had emigrated to the US ten years ago, looking for a new world. He had found it when he almost accidentally ended up on a cargo ship and discovered that this was the world he was looking for. Since then, he had never left his new profession as a sailor.

How interesting!!! Isabel exclaimed.

“Do you think so?”

The switch to informal address seemed so natural to Isabel that she had no qualms about following suit.

“Well... yes. New horizons every day, full of adventure. And... In every port, a new love...” Isabel finished with a mischievous smile.

“Well... that's not entirely true, those are just stories made up in the sailors' shadows.

“And you? Tell me about yourself...”

“Haaa, there's not much to say, especially in front of a globetrotter,” he said with a modest expression on his face.

“Don't tell me, in principle... you're here, alone on a distant beach

“And talking to strangers?” said Isabel mischievously.

Not exactly... I don't think there's any danger in walking around here...

And I'm not a stalker... Ha ha ha.

“No???” Isabel replied in the same playful tone.

They both laughed, looking into each other's eyes.

“Can I walk with you?”

“Yes... of course.”

The two began to walk, and conversation flowed easily, as if they were old friends, even though they didn't really know each other. But they wanted to get to know each other because there was a natural empathy between them.

“Well... you haven't answered my question.” Alex interrupted.

“I'm an archaeology student at INAH, and I hope to devote myself to researching pre-Hispanic cultures.”

“INAH?”

“It's the National Institute of Anthropology and History.”

“That sounds very interesting!” said Alex, not so much because he believed it, but rather because it was a subject he knew nothing about.

He was a sailor with a deep gaze and a charming smile. Although he seemed intent on hiding his past, he was attentive and pleasant.

“And what are you doing here, Alex?”

“Traveling,” he replied, eager to avoid the subject.

“Just like that... with no destination?”

“I let destiny take me wherever it wants.”

“Of course! An adventurous sailor.”

Alex remained silent, his gaze lost somewhere, perhaps at some point in his life.

“And now, where are you headed?”

“To invite you to lunch,” he replied, looking at her with the intensity of his dark eyes.

“Hmmm.”

“Do you accept?” he insisted without looking at her.

“Yes, with pleasure, Alex.”

At the end of a long walk, they reached the village and found a nice little beach restaurant.

They ordered a couple of beers and began to browse the menu. Everything was tempting, with fish and seafood freshly caught from the sea by local fishermen.

“I don't know what to order... Everything looks so delicious,” said Isabel with joy in her eyes and intense cravings on her palate.

“I'm going for the shrimp salad,” said Alex, closing the menu to confirm his choice.

“I'll have the fried fish. Hmmm!”

Between bites, they continued their conversation with the intention of getting to know each other better. Isabel did most of the talking, and Alex listened attentively. Chewing loudly on the shrimp...

“I'm at the end of my degree now, I just have to submit my thesis,” Isabel said, unable to hide her pride.

“And do you know what topic you're going to choose?”

“Yes, I want to devote myself to researching Mayan culture, there are still many secrets to be discovered.”

“Interesting...”

“Do you think so?” said Isabel, somewhat disappointed by Alex's apparent lack of interest.

“Don't take it the wrong way,” replied Alex. “The thing is, I know nothing about Mexican culture, and I don't know what to say to you.”

“Well, then tell me about yourself. I'm sure you have a lot to talk about.”

Alex began to speak with a certain modesty in his attitude. He told her that he had been a sailor based in San Francisco, California, for ten years. He worked for a merchant shipping company that had destinations all over the world, although he was mainly assigned to Europe. Until he reached a point where he felt tired and quit. He had a small amount of money in the bank, because in that line of work, salaries accumulate since there are no travel or living expenses. It wasn't that he didn't like city

life, but he was used to the sea and missed it too much, so he bought a small sailboat to live on and enjoy the sea.

-Yes, it occurred to me because she is my partner in life.

The next day, five minutes before the appointed time, Isabel arrived at the small wooden pier where half a dozen fishing boats were moored, rocking gently on the waves of a calm, deep blue sea. At the opposite end, the mast of the only sailboat there stood out. With slow steps, as if wanting to prolong those moments that separated her from the start of her adventure, she reached the edge of the My Lady. A sailboat about 9 meters long, white and displaying its name painted on the stern.

"Hello!" she greeted, seeing no movement on the deck.

"Hello!" she heard Alex's gravelly, vibrant voice behind her.

Isabel turned around in a graceful spin, her face beaming with joy.

"Ready?"

"Here I am."

Alex was carrying a Mexican basket covered with a white tablecloth.

"What did you bring?"

"Something to eat... right?"

Alex couldn't help sprinkling his speech with a few words of English and apologized for it, as it was the language he normally spoke in San Francisco and on boats.

"Don't worry, I understand you, even though my English is very basic."

Alex jumped onto the deck and reached out his hand to help Isabel jump over. Immediately, with the skill that his many hours of sailing had given him, he set about preparing the My Lady to set sail. He released the rope that tied him to the dock and started the auxiliary engine to move a hundred meters away from the dock. He hoisted the mainsail and the jib. Immediately, the My Lady stood up bravely as she felt the wind's momentum. Alex took the helm and turned off the auxiliary engine. Isabel sat near the helm and scanned the horizon, enjoying the breeze on her face. She immediately thought that she had to rise to the occasion. Alex had pulled off his sweatshirt in one swift motion and looked at Isabel with a suggestive glance that she understood immediately. She took off her low-cut blouse and stood up to remove her pants. Her beautiful body, with long legs, languid hips, and breasts suffocated under the straps of her blue bikini, looked splendid in the bright morning sun.

"You're beautiful, Isabel!" he said as his eyes lustfully scanned every inch of her Venusian body.

Isabel hid her slight blush and looked at Alex with the same lustful intent. She couldn't help it. Alex was a strong man with well-defined muscles. Bulging pecs and a formidable abdomen. Isabel wanted to imagine what was under those pants, and she closed her eyes, embarrassed by her audacity.

The My Lady glided swiftly at a good speed, heading north.

“Where are we going, Alex?”

“Over there...” he said, extending his arm to point to a spot on land. “There's a small bay that's a paradise. You'll see.”

They continued sailing, and Alex occasionally made adjustments to the sails to stay on course. Isabel watched his every move, admiring Alex's sailing skills. Meanwhile, the conversation flowed pleasantly. An hour later, Alex said cheerfully,

“We're getting there.”

“Duck down!... Coming about!” he ordered in the voice of a captain accustomed to giving orders. He turned the helm to port and the boom of the mainsail swung violently over their heads. The boat stabilized in its new direction and resumed its speed, which at that moment was about seven knots. They entered a small bay with calm waters under the bright sun, lined with palm trees and tropical vegetation. At a certain distance from the beach, Alex released the halyard that tensioned the mainsail and asked Isabel to do the same with the jib. She had already learned some maneuvers in the three-plus hours they had been sailing.

“Aye, aye, Captain!” she said jokingly, but immediately preparing to obey the order.

The My Lady slowly slowed down until it stopped, rocking gently.

Alex nimbly jumped to the bow on the deck to pick up the anchor and throw it into the sea. The cable slid about 10 meters and the anchor touched the bottom.

“OK! Let's go ashore.”

“Swimming?” asked Isabel, somewhat surprised.

“You can swim... can't you?”

“Yes... of course...”

Without answering, Alex went down to the cabin and returned with a bundle that he skillfully unrolled.

“It's a dinghy—well, an inflatable raft.”

For a few minutes, he pumped the hand pump until the dinghy reached its shape and the necessary pressure. He launched it over the starboard side and brought it close enough for Isabel to board. He returned with the food basket and some towels, which he handed to Isabel.

With a pair of small oars, they reached the beach where gentle waves delivered their foamy edges and receded to make way for the next wave. They heard the scratchy sound as the dinghy touched the sand and jumped ashore.

“This is beautiful, Alex! Just like you said, it's paradise.”

“How did you find it?”

“A sailor's eye... HA HA HA.”

The sky was filled with large clouds that were tinged red by the setting sun. The horizon was lost in the infinite sea.

Alex didn't rest, venturing into the thick vegetation to gather logs and brushwood to make a fire. Isabel helped as best she could, spreading out towels and a tablecloth to set the table for dinner.

“Are you hungry yet, beautiful?” “Yes, it's about time.”

“Let's have a drink first, while the food is heating up.”

Alex opened the bottle of wine and poured two glasses.

“Sorry they're plastic cups, but it's dangerous to have glass ones on the boat.”

“Yes, I understand, don't worry... CHEERS!”

Alex knelt down next to Isabel to clink glasses in a toast.

“And thank you for giving me this incredible experience.”

Alex made a modest gesture and brought his face closer to Isabel's, who continued the movement until she kissed him on the lips.

They both put down their glasses and rolled onto the towels to continue kissing intensely. Isabel let out a moan full of sensual satisfaction.

Despite his concentration, Alex's sense of alertness made him notice out of the corner of his eye that a couple of men with suspicious attitudes were walking in their direction.

“How's it going, friends? What brings you here?” --Alex stepped forward to intercept them.

--“Same here, buddy,” --said the man in a hoarse voice, eagerly scanning the scene.

Isabel looked at the man, very frightened. Alex squeezed her hand to reassure her.

--“What do you want?”. --he asked in a strong voice.

“I want the watch,” he said, pointing to the one Alex was wearing on his left wrist. A flashy Rolex.

“And I want the gringa,” said the other, staring at Isabel with hungry eyes.

“Ooh... well, that's not going to happen!” said Alex, jumping to his feet and brandishing a club he had left within reach. The first man lunged forward with a long knife in his hand, and before he could take a third step toward his victims, Alex rammed the club into his throat, knocking him down. The man let out a cry of pain and collapsed. A blow to the throat was fatal, Alex knew that perfectly well. He advanced toward the second man, who didn't wait for the attack and ran away as fast as he could.

"Let's get out of here... immediately," said Alex, his fists clenched with rage and his breath heavy. "It won't be long before other men arrive, alerted by the one who fled."

They quickly gathered their things and jumped into the dinghy. The fallen man writhed in the agony of suffocation that heralded his death.

A gunshot pierced the silence of the bay. It missed the couple, but the dinghy let out a hiss and began to deflate rapidly.

"Let's jump into the water," Alex ordered.

With the water up to his neck, Alex held Isabel with one hand and told her.

-Dive in and swim as far as you can underwater. Come up for air and dive back down.

-Understood," said Isabel, and she immediately dove back down as more shots whistled past Alex.

A few minutes later, they were sailing in the moonlight on a sea that welcomed them pleasantly.

"Phew, my love, what a scare!" said Isabel, her face still contorted with anguish.

"I'm sorry, dear. And I thought it was almost paradise."

"Even in paradise there were poisonous vermin," said Isabel, trying to soften the incident.

"Well, the bad part is over, even though they ruined our night."

"The night isn't over yet, Alex..." said Isabel with a mischievous look. And in a way, suggesting that she was willing to continue the fun. She didn't want to miss the opportunity to kiss him again, to feel another skin that would convey its warmth to her, to forget the previous one.

"That's true... and we have a beautiful night ahead of us..."

The moon shone brightly in a sky dotted with sparkling stars. The My Lady sailed silently, cutting through the gentle waves and leaving a long foamy wake that faded into the darkness.

"I'm sorry we lost the wine," said Isabel, shrugging her shoulders and with a gesture that looked like a smile masking her frustration.

"Ah... darling, that can be fixed right away. Sorry for the poor service on deck... Take the helm and keep it steady in this direction."

Alex went down to the cabin and soon returned with a bottle of wine and two glasses in his other hand.

"Case solved... HA HA HA

Isabel welcomed him with open arms and said cheerfully, "See? The service on deck isn't so bad after all, ha ha ha ha.

"Apparently not.

"CHEERS!!..."

"Cheers," said Isabel, raising her glass.

"To the Goddess of the Night!

"Which one is that?" Isabel asked innocently.

"You, my love... You are my goddess..."

They both took a long sip.

"Haaa. I needed a good drink."

Two hours later, with the bottle almost empty, Alex went to the cabin and returned with a piece of paper in his hand. He poured what was left of the wine into both glasses equally. He rolled up the piece of paper and put it in the empty bottle. He put the cork in, pushing it down as far as he could. Then he threw the bottle into the distance.

"What was that?" Isabel asked, intrigued.

"A message to the eternity of the seas."

"And what did it say?"

"Do you want to know? You'll have to retrieve the bottle," Alex replied with a cold stare.

Isabel understood that it was a sailor's ritual and chose to remain silent.

Long minutes passed in silence, perhaps they were trying to get the bitter experience out of their heads.

"Tell me one of your stories," Isabel broke the silence.

"I don't like to talk about myself," he replied curtly.

"What are those scars on your chest and back?"

"Ufff... it's a long story.

"Well, we have all the time in the world," Isabel insisted.

Alex shook his head and stared out at the horizon for a long time, as if trying to retrieve the memories stored in his mind.

Alex shook his head and stared intently at the horizon, as if retrieving memories stored away in his mind.

He was aboard the Brandenburg, a ship loaded with food supplies for those affected by the civil war in Somalia. Captain Randall knew it was dangerous to sail through the Gulf of Somalia, as there had already been several cases of hijacking by Somali pirates, who demanded MILLIONS for the release of the ship after they had stolen the cargo they were interested in. But as captain, he would have to face his destiny and deliver the cargo to Mombasa, Kenya.

But in your case, they were carrying aid.

Yes, but they didn't know that, and besides, they didn't care. The fact is that at some point, as we were sailing through the waters of the Gulf of Somalia, two boats with armed men appeared and approached us to board the ship. The captain gave orders to arm ourselves, but as a commercial cargo ship, we didn't have any weapons to repel them. All we could do was try to handle the situation as best we could. The captain ordered us to hide in the cabins or holds while he tried to negotiate with the pirates. The bandits ordered the ship to be taken to Mogadishu, a port on the coast of Somalia. The captain refused, of course, and offered them \$25,000 that he had in the safe to cover fuel costs and the living expenses of the crew and the fifteen or twenty sailors.

They replied that they weren't begging for money, that they wanted TEN MILLION.

They refused any deal and then took the captain hostage. From the moment the pirates were spotted, El Capi radioed MAYDAY...MAYDAY! reporting the situation and asking for help. The response was that reinforcements would be sent immediately from a nearby warship. Two helicopters took almost half an hour to arrive. When they had already taken the captain hostage in one of their boats, we came out of our hiding places, believing that we were alone, but soon three black men assaulted us, threatening us and taking us back to confinement in one of the cabins at gunpoint. I knew that something had to be done in our defense.

There were six of us and three of them. So I got brave and elbowed the pirate behind me to the ground. My companions tried to do the same. Immediately, shots rang out. I felt a spear of fire pierce my chest and I fell. The helicopters arrived, and one went to rescue the captain, while the other lowered ten or twelve soldiers like spiders on their threads, and they took control of the situation, killing the three bad guys. They took me immediately to the support ship to treat my wound. I barely made it alive because the bullet went through my chest and I lost a lot of blood. But they saved my life... That's one of the stories I carry in my conscience as a sailor... HA HA HA

Phew! You have a lot to tell.

Yes, said Alex, without giving the matter much thought.

Fifteen minutes later, the lights of the village appeared on the port side. They moored the My Lady bow and stern, and closed the hatch with a padlock. They walked along the pier, dragging their feet, trying to prolong the charm of the day.

"I'll walk you to your hotel," Alex said in a whisper, without looking at her.

"Yes, thank you," Isabel replied, as if she didn't care about the compliment.

When they arrived in front of the hotel, Alex asked,

"Do they allow visitors to guests?"

"Don't worry. My bungalow is isolated from the others."

They made their way to the bungalow. It was understood that he had been accepted as an intruder, and she had accepted his very direct proposition.

They entered the room. Isabel immediately gave instructions.

“Get some drinks from the minibar while I take a bath to wash off the salt water.”

--“What would you prefer?”

--“Whiskey...”

She went into the bathroom, and Alex followed her with his eyes. A few seconds later, as he took a couple of bottles out of the refrigerator, he noticed that Isabel had left the door open enough to allow an indiscreet glance inside, and he approached with a caution that was unnecessary, because when he arrived he heard Isabel's sweet voice.

--“There's room for two,” she said happily when she noticed he was looking at her.

Alex didn't wait a second. He put the bottles aside and pulled off his clothes to go through the door.

--“Here I am, beautiful.” They kissed intensely under the rain from the showerhead, which gave off a steamy atmosphere as it rolled down their bodies. She took the soap and a soft sponge from the soap dish and began to rub Alex's chest. She continued with his abdomen and kept going down and rubbing until Alex's response was immediate. Sensual moans filled the air until, exhausted, they turned off the shower to go to bed and begin a heavenly night.

The next morning, the sun's rays streaming through the large window woke them up.

They smiled at each other and found no words to express the pleasure they felt at that moment. They ordered breakfast from Room Service and enjoyed it without worrying about getting dressed. Now they really felt like they were in paradise, as through the window they could enjoy the view of the garden with its lush tropical plants and, in the distance, the blue mountains crowned by whimsical clouds.

After making love as if it were their first time, they got dressed and went to the beach to reminisce about the moments when they first met. After eating, they enjoyed a bottle of Merlot wine with their seafood meal. They made their way to the pier until they reached the My Lady, which was patiently waiting to be released from its moorings.

Alex hadn't said a word in the last few minutes. Isabel tried to start a conversation without success.

“You're very quiet, my love...”

“It's just that the moment is approaching,” said Alex, shaking his head and hiding a sad expression. “What moment?” A dark premonition stirred in Isabel's mind, but she fought mentally to hide it.

“The moment of departure.”

--“Are we going sailing?”

--“NO... I'm sailing by myself...”

“WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?!” Isabel cried out in anguish.

Alex was silent for a few seconds, not knowing how to get out of this situation, which probably hurt him as much as it hurt her.

"TELL ME WHAT YOU MEAN... please!!!

--“I love you, Isabel. You're the most beautiful woman I've ever met in my life, but...”

– BUT WHAT!!!- Bitter tears rolled down her face. In those few hours since meeting him, she had begun to hope that this man was the one she had been searching for for the rest of her life. But... fate was screaming at her that this was not the case.

“I can't stay stuck in one place, Isabel. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but... the world, the sea... that's my destiny... I want to live like this and... I want to die in some unknown place, travel among the stars, chase the sun as it rises each day. I don't want to die tied to a single dock.”

“Very romantic, but you're an idiot, Alex.”

Alex looked at her with pleading eyes.

“You only used me for one night!” she shouted, offended.

“That's not true... we met at a time when you also needed comfort, and... I could give it to you.”

“Alex, please!” she said, her face bathed in tears.

“Don't make it harder, beautiful. I beg your understanding...”

“I'M NOT GOING TO BEG YOU, ALEX. I just want you to be happy... GOODBYE!”

Isabel walked away slowly without looking back. Her heart was beating fast and she felt her legs buckling.

NARCOSIS

The advanced diving group was divided into the boats that would take us to the place of the final dive of the course, we all already had the experience given by the forty hours of diving of different characteristics.

. They loaded their tanks and laughed with continuous jokes. Miguel,- "Che" because he was Argentine by origin. He was not yet a graduate instructor but had distinguished himself as the leader of the group we had formed, more by friendship than by ranks.

We liked the guy, and he was always attentive to help with the equipment or with the spirit, Sometimes we arrived at the dive with a personal problem that took us out of the necessary concentration. Che was there to give encouragement and a pat on the back, which was always well received.

The boat carrying the instructor-head of the operation, was setting the course. he chose for this graduation dive, a place without any reference, he simply knew it by the smell that gives the many years of diver and instructor at the Jacques Cousteau diving school. It was a kind of maritime trench. With 40-metre-deep waters and an unattractive landscape. The primary purpose was the experience of going down to that depth, until the air capacity in a tank was consumed. At first it did not seem to have a major problem, but it was necessary to comply with the program, under penalty of not obtaining the long-awaited Advanced Diving diploma.

In each boat there were two teams of four men and an instructor, who monitored behavior and recorded the entrances and exits. It was also necessary to show calmness, ability to equip oneself and return to the group. When it was our turn to leave, we sat on the gunwale of the boat with our backs to the water, and at the signal we dropped on our backs with the air regulator in our mouths. Well, we'll skip the technical details that aren't necessary.

Che was three or four meters deep waiting for those of his team to be ready. We made the OK sign with our hand and started to descend slowly. Before I reached ten meters, I began to feel the pressure of the water with a severe earache,

which disappeared when I made the necessary compensation. I placed myself behind Estela, one of the three women in the whole group. Very beautiful with white skin and long legs that shone in the water and that was diminishing as the light was lost little by little, as we gained depth. I felt lucky to have Estela on our team, we were good teammates. The two of us stood

behind Che, who turned from time to time to make sure we were all okay, confirming it with the OK sign.

As we had been warned, the landscape was null. We were surrounded by water on all sides in its oceanic immensity. I consulted my console, it was perfectly fine, barely less than a quarter of it was consumed, I noticed that the deeper it was, the faster the pressure was consumed. We were going down slowly, it was almost exasperating to be in the middle of nowhere, and no matter how far we descended, everything around us, before and after was the same panorama, inert water around us. We now understood the importance of this test. One could well burst, because there was nothing fun about that dive, like when we were walking on a coral reef with the beauty of its colors and the multitude of marine fauna, or even a scare, like the time we found a wandering shark that didn't know what to do in the face of a whole mob of divers throwing their noisy jets of air bubbles. Here it was the opposite, the only life I saw was that of another group that was nearby, going down faster than us.

Finally my report console marked 35 meters deep and we stabilized in that place for 1 minute or 2, it was like recess time, to go around the place spending time and air. We started kicking in circles enjoying the new experience. Estela and I were walking together and suddenly she called my attention to point out that in front of us the sandy aridity ended, marking a kind of terrace on the extensive plain. It was impressive, it was scary because the sea became something deeper and darker as if it were the portal to another world. It was intriguing and became something of a challenge. What was beyond?, The question rang in my head, asking me to find out.

I touched Estela's arm to tell her to stay in that place with signals. He accepted it and I jumped into that unpredictable abyss.

My console was 39 meters deep, and I was falling slowly without making any movement of my hands or fins. It was fascinating to feel like astronauts, in an infinite space... now it was 42 meters away... 43... I knew I had crossed the safe line. I felt something in my head, I couldn't know what it was. 44 meters. I ente-

red a nebulous space, of lethargy, a yellow shark emerged and passed by me quickly, the clouds dissipate and I see some Doric columns that touch at their upper ends, Suddenly they light up red, then blue and continue to flash in colors until they dissolve in the depth and become a horrible monster with four legs and a snake's head. I don't feel threatened, but I tremble in terror.

Estela is also terrified on the edge of the precipice and decides to go in search of Che who is nearby. He tells her that his partner is lost in the depths. Che does not hesitate for a second and throws himself on the border.

I'm running out of air, but I don't want to get out of there, I'm in a fantastic world. I feel something pull my arm, it's a huge four-legged octopus. I have no idea what's going on anymore, I'm dizzy, I can't think about anything, I'm short of breath... the octopus is placed in front of me, it seems to me that it is Che, who rips off the mouthpiece of the regulator and forces me to put his in my mouth, Every three breaths, Che, again exchanges the mouthpiece of the regulator, so we both breathe. We are ascending so much that I see the clarity of the water again. I'm still very dizzy, we breathe. We continue to ascend at the necessary pace, and I begin to see the radiant clarity of the water... We reach the surface and Che signals to the nearest boat. I feel lost, and I am recovering my sight when they have laid me down on the bench of the boat. We arrive at the beach and they put me in a car that leaves quickly.

I open my eyes and I don't understand where I am. Che is sitting next to me and talking to me and asking my name... I don't remember. He tells me that we are in the hyperbaric chamber, where they have raised the pressure to simulate forty meters deep. Che speaks to me to help me regain my senses. He tells me that he took me out of a depth that caused me Narcosis, that he has erased my memory, that I will recover it as the decompression is achieved. He is also subjected to the same process, because he went down to where I was and we ascended at a faster speed than is required in those conditions.

At the next meeting of the diving school, he asks me to narrate my fateful experience to the group of beginners, for the example of what not to do and to narrate what narcosis means.

For my part, I publicly promised myself that I will be careful not to exceed 40 meters in depth, unless I carry the necessary air-nitrogen mixture in a tank.

Although the fantastic dream I lived is something worth repeating.

FISHING DAY

The day had not yet begun, but I was already on the beach waiting for my fishermen. The darkness was heavy, the sea black, and the horizon blended with the infinite sky. Only a few stars, the brightest ones, flickered with their timid silver glow. I was expecting a long day of fishing, as agreed with my fishermen: we would set out at five in the morning.

First came Sabás—or Sebas, as he answered to both names, though I believe his real name was Sebastián.

“Good morning, Capi,” he said, placing his small lunch bag along with his ropes and hooks under the first bench of the boat—his usual spot. The custom was that fishermen without boats would join the boat owners for convenience. I had my usual crew of six men, punctual and, above all, good fishermen.

Minutes later, Beto and Matías arrived with their brother Manolo. Only Lencho and Pedro were missing, and two minutes later they emerged from the darkness, panting from running, trying to arrive on time but failing.

“Sorry, Capi, we overslept.”

“Don’t worry, we’re still on time. Let’s go!” I said as an order. Everyone stowed their bags and stood by the boat’s edge, waiting for the signal to push the boat over the sand to catch the first wave and make it float.

“Push!” I shouted energetically, and we all jumped aboard. My place was at the stern, next to the outboard motor. At the second pull of the starter cord, the engine roared to life, and with the tiller in hand, I accelerated to half speed as we passed between the boats anchored in the fishermen’s cove. Then I gave it more power—we had a long way ahead, perhaps an hour or more, to reach the offshore fishing ground known as “afuera.”

That was the name given by the seasoned fishermen to a spot hard to locate, because at that distance in open sea, the usual coastal landmarks disappeared. It was said that robalo were biting well there, and our shared ambition drove us to find it, even without certainty of its exact position. We ventured out, loaded with an extra tank of gasoline and some tacos for lunch. I dared to think one tank would suffice for the trip out and the other for the return, unless headwinds or contrary currents interfered. It wasn’t reckless. It was the same routine every day, except this time a bit farther.

The sun was already shining intensely at a considerable height, which Sebas estimated as “past ten.”

--“I’d say just ten,” Lencho corrected.

I discreetly checked my watch—it was ten fifteen. No need to contradict either of them and their primitive reading of the sun.

At ten thirty by my watch, I eased the throttle and said, --“Let’s start trying here... who knows, maybe we get lucky...” We were surrounded by an immense horizon; the land was no longer visible to the west. It was impressive to feel in the middle of that vastness, all flat and the same color beyond the horizon. I recalled Joseph Conrad’s adventures in *The Mirror of the Sea* and wished I could write a description with even a hint of those beautiful lines. But I settled for the simplicity of my own narrative.

The boat rocked gently. I dropped the grappling anchor, and the rope ran out without touching bottom. The men prepared their lines, and I passed around the tin with a kilo of peeled shrimp for bait. It always seemed a luxury to use these crustaceans as bait, but the locals insisted that if you wanted good robalo fishing, it had to be shrimp—and so we did.

I also had my nylon line and medium-sized hooks. A shrimp is threaded onto the hook, leaving the sharp point exposed at the other end. Then the line is cast, and the hook sinks quickly under the weight of the sinker.

The next step is to wait, eyes fixed on the water, until feeling a slight vibration in the fingers holding the line. A fish has bitten the shrimp, and as you pull, the hook pierces its palate. “The fish dies by its mouth,” says the saying—and so it is, a constant phenomenon of survival. The fish must eat to live, but unfortunately chooses the deceptive lure that traps it. The fisherman gives a sharp tug, driving the hook deeper, and begins hauling in the line until the naïve snapper breaks the surface, thrashing desperately to free itself.

The fisherman removes the hook from his catch with a broad smile and shouts of joy, celebrating the prize—two or three kilos, perhaps. He marks it with his personal sign before tossing it into the bottom of the boat with the others. Each fisherman has a different mark to separate their catch at day’s end.

Matías has chosen to gut them immediately, since the entrails are the first thing that begins to rot. With his sharp knife, he slits them open along the belly and skillfully removes the intestines and viscera of his fish, throwing them into the sea. The youngest of my fishermen do the same, adding their personal mark. I look at this practice with suspicion, but I don’t want to make them change their methods. My experiences in diving tell me that blood attracts sharks. Their nose acts like a radar, detecting

particles of scent in the water and using them to swim in the right direction until they locate the source. We all remain excited and the ropes keep pulling.

The guts float near the boat. Suddenly, the fin of a shark appears on the surface of the sea. I am the first to spot it, thinking; Don't say I didn't warn you, but I did. There's the shark. The boys look at it and shout, terrified. The shark swims in stealthy movements around the boat, measuring the situation... It still doesn't show itself, only the fin silently cutting through the water.

--"Pull in your hooks". -- I tell them when I see the fin moving away. Everyone hauls in their lines, and Matías's line brings up a fish bigger than all the others we've seen. As it reaches the surface, the fish thrashes violently. Matías lets it thrash before giving the final tug to bring it into his hands. An instant before he can grab it, the shark leaps from the depths to snatch it away, its thrust so strong that it strikes the boat's gunwale. Matías jumps backward and falls into the water over the opposite side. The others scream and stretch out their arms to try to rescue their companion. I don't know what to do; I'm trying to catch my breath. I had never seen a shark so close, with its jaws wide open to seize its prey. It was truly terrifying to see that set of rows of teeth like sharp daggers and the cold stare of its round black eyes.

The only thing I could think to do was yank the motor cord to start it and move closer to Matías to shield him with the hull of the boat, though I doubted that was possible. Still, I tried with two violent pulls on the starter rope. Matías flailed desperately, trying to reach help. Sharks can sense the fear of their prey, especially when the prey makes frantic movements that provoke them.

When Matías was about to reach the hands of his companions, he let out a chilling scream and stopped swimming. The men didn't let him go. Immediately, the water around him turned red with Matías's blood. Horrified, we all watched as the shark silently carried him away until it disappeared. The motor was running and I gave chase. It was about fifty meters to where I had last seen it. My hands trembled uncontrollably, my breathing ragged to the extreme—not only was it a man's life, that man was part of my crew and therefore my responsibility.

We reached the point where we thought we should search. Pedro stood at the bow and shouted, "There, Captain!" pointing at something he had spotted. I turned to head in that direction, and our terror grew when we found a mangled leg floating in a horrifying scene. All eyes scanned around, trying to find Matías's body. I circled, convinced it was all over. If we had seen a shattered leg, it meant the killer had swallowed the body and left only pieces, which would be even more macabre to search for without any benefit.

"It's useless to keep looking, boys. I feel it just like you do, but there's nothing more

we can do.” The men wept without caring to hide their tears.

“We lost a man to the unbreakable laws of the sea,” I said, trying to find some consolation. “The sea has given you life, in its daily harvest of living creatures, to sustain your families. No one blames you for taking the lives of fish, turtles, and whatever we find in the depths. The law is that the big fish eats the small one. You are the big fish, and today a much bigger and more powerful fish took one of our small ones. This doesn’t mean we accept it—I wouldn’t have the courage to explain it that way to his family... But you know the sea better than I do, and you know the sea is powerful and indifferent, just as it can be beautiful and generous.”

The boys listened without saying a word, their strong chests heaving with painful sobs. Their eyes, red from crying, glared with hatred at the vast expanse of blue waters that hid mysteries and treasures since the beginning of time.

THE ADVENTURERS

We were a group of five daredevils, united by the restless idea of complicating life in search of adventure. Not that we truly complicated it—but sometimes work was an obstacle easily solved with excuses and lies. Luis had already buried his grandmother three times, and Jorge was supposedly attending his wife's fourth childbirth—a convenient pretext for missing two or three days of work. What only we knew was that Jorge was a happy, lifelong bachelor. The rest of us were a mix of free spirits—divorced, single, or self-employed. Those conditions allowed us to indulge in our adventures.

We had climbed mountains at home and abroad, explored deep jungles, navigated wild rivers, and jumped in free-fall parachutes. Each time, the adrenaline revived us, demanding more and more challenges.

"Anyone thought about what's next?" Luis asked during our Friday coffee meeting.

"Yes, it's time to do something," someone replied.

"We've been inactive for two months."

"Three," Jorge corrected. "Since we went to the Lacandons."

"Of course—how could you forget? That was when you got lost in the jungle, you fool!"

We all burst out laughing, remembering the tense episode. Jorge didn't find it as funny and hid behind the smoke of his cigarette. "Enough!" he said with a smile to end the topic.

It happened while we were trekking through the dense jungles of Chiapas, searching for the Lacandon tribe—like looking for a needle in a green haystack. We followed the Tulijá River with only a scant map in hand. We decided not to hire a guide to avoid looking like tourists. Even walking in a tight line, the group sometimes stretched out to jump obstacles or cross streams. Suddenly, we realized Jorge was no longer behind us. We shouted his name—no answer, only the cries of monkeys breaking the silence. We retraced our steps carefully, unwilling to lose another man. As dusk swallowed the light, we camped where we thought Jorge had strayed. We lit a big fire, both for warmth and as a beacon, and agreed to keep it burning all night, taking turns and shouting "JORGE!" into the darkness to guide him back.

And so it was—the dawn light dissolving the shadows when a distant cry rang out. It was Jorge.

"Where the hell were you?" he barked, as if we were the lost ones. We laughed it off, relieved.

"You abandoned me, you bastards!"

"Enough! Come have some coffee."

"Coffee? A lousy cup won't make me forgive you—I'm starving!"

Jorge didn't seem scared. He's a man of grit and had proven it before. Humor was his way out of trouble. We had breakfast and resumed the trek, more careful to stay together. The jungle taught us how easily its tangled depths can confuse a wanderer—every direction looks the same, and one wrong choice can lead to being lost.

The Plans

After that brief digression, we returned to planning our next adventure. Luis suggested the sea this time. Everyone liked the idea immediately, though it was vague—"the sea" meant an entire world. So we needed a purpose. Ideas flew until Jorge proposed one that thrilled us all:

"Let's go to the Galápagos Islands," he said firmly. "A paradise full of wonders."

We asked for details, thinking he meant flying or taking a tourist boat—hardly adventurous. "Of course not," Luis clarified. "We'll sail from Puerto Escondido, Mexico's southernmost point, on a raft without an engine—only sails—like Thor Heyerdahl's Kon-Tiki, which crossed from Peru to the Tuamotu Islands using currents and wind."

The discussion exploded with excitement, even as we admitted it was madness. None of us had sailing experience, let alone on a raft.

"That's exactly what makes it an adventure," someone said.

"Our starting point," Luis added, "is to imitate the Kon-Tiki as closely as possible."

By the next coffee meeting, we had sketches and plans. Departure: Puerto Escondido. Destination: Galápagos Islands. The raft would be built from wooden planks, designed by Carlos Román, an engineer who knew materials and structures. He would handle design and maintenance.

The biggest challenge, as always, was money. This wasn't a backpacking trip or a hike—it was a costly project. The sailing time was impossible to predict, meaning we'd abandon city life and work for an indefinite period. The distance? About 2,500 kilometers.

Each meeting made the project more fascinating—and more daunting. After countless notes and debates, we agreed to organize as a formal crew, assigning roles and responsibilities from the start to tackle every obstacle.

The roles were assigned:

- Jorge Ruiz – High school geography teacher: Navigator and radio operator.
- Luis Almeida – Provisions manager: responsible for food supplies, cooking setup, and meals on board.
- Carlos Román – Architect: raft design and maintenance during the voyage.

- Ernesto Martínez – Photographer and videographer.
- Me – Captain, by majority vote. My experience managing projects made me the natural choice, though the responsibility was immense. I accepted—partly because I enjoy leading, partly because I had no choice.

At the next meeting, Jorge brought news that sounded bad but turned good. Sailing to the Galápagos was nearly impossible—we'd be fighting southern currents and prevailing winds. His proposal: change course. Start from Puerto Progreso, Yucatán, cross the Gulf of Mexico to Florida, then head east toward the Bahamas—or Cuba—using the Gulf Stream. A shorter distance, easier navigation, same thrill. "Open for discussion," he concluded.

Everything else remained: time, money, and commitment. Jorge requested the expedition for late December, during his school break. We agreed: December 15, departure from Puerto Progreso.

We camped on the beach to build the raft: a platform of wooden planks, a small cabin at the stern for sleeping and operations—maps, shortwave radio, and logbook. Each day, excitement grew as the project took shape. Curious onlookers called us crazy, and we answered with jokes: "Building a ladder to the bottom of the sea!" or "A cage for underwater dragons!" Their reactions amused us endlessly.

Two weeks later, the raft was ready—beautiful to our eyes, with a palm-leaf roof and tar-sealed deck. Technical details would bore the reader, so let's skip them.

We set sail.

Helpers pushed the raft into the high tide. A motorboat towed us a few miles offshore. Families and friends waved white shirts and handkerchiefs, wishing us luck. We waved back until the beach vanished.

The first day was pure adaptation—a new world, our tiny floating universe rocking gently on the waves. We raised the sail for the first time, unsure of the outcome. The wind filled it softly, as if knowing it was our maiden attempt. The raft glided smoothly, and we cheered like proud parents at a child's first steps. Hours later, the pleasant experience turned rough—Jorge and Ernesto were seasick, kneeling at the edge. None of us were sailors; we knew it would pass in a day or two—unless the sea grew violent.

Night fell, revealing a breathtaking sky pierced by millions of stars. We marveled at the constellations that once guided ancient navigators. We had a compass and sextant—Jorge calculated our position twice daily, logging it in charts and the logbook. After 24 hours, we had covered about 220 kilometers—a humbling figure, but we

learned that distances at sea are another world.

We organized shifts for steering, cooking, and sail handling—sometimes needing two men. Six-hour rotations ensured rest and meals. As captain, I oversaw navigation and supplies, a task I relished.

By the end of the first week, we believed we were nearing Florida's tip. But the seventh sunset brought a dark omen—storm clouds swallowing the horizon. The wind roared, waves crashed, lightning split the sky, and rain lashed us mercilessly. We shortened sail, clung to the deck, and prayed for calm. Then came disaster—the cabin tore away, taking maps, instruments, and more. We were beaten, soaked, and freezing, clinging to the raft as it groaned under the fury of the sea.

A cry pierced the storm—Ernesto had been swept overboard while filming with his waterproof camera. "Man overboard!" I shouted. We saw him struggling in the waves. I grabbed a lifebuoy and hurled it, but the wind carried it away. I hauled it back and threw again, harder, as Ernesto drifted farther.

"Damn it!" I cursed as the lifebuoy missed again. I stood up, risking being swept overboard, and felt hands gripping my ankles as I hurled it with all my strength. I collapsed to my knees, exhausted—then a violent tug on the rope nearly tore it from my hands. Ernesto had his arms through the lifebuoy. Luis and Jorge crawled across the deck, and together we hauled him aboard. He was spent, coughing desperately, but alive. Never had the name "lifesaver" been more fitting for that orange ring of cork.

The incident left us shaken and silent. We prayed to God and every saint we'd never called upon before. But storms aren't divine—they're nature's way of balancing the world's climates. That night felt eternal.

The wind roared, the raft pitched, and cold gnawed at our bones. I wondered what my companions thought during those endless hours of danger. Perhaps the same truth: an adventure without risk isn't an adventure. "Cheer up, everyone," I shouted. "No storm lasts forever!" Replies ranged from a grunt to "Shut up!"

Morning came at last. Sunlight revealed our haggard faces. We had survived a night from hell. But now we were adrift in the middle of nowhere—360 degrees of horizon, no instruments, no radio. The storm had stripped us bare: the cabin gone, the rudder lost. Only the mast and sail remained, our fragile hope.

Days crawled by in monotonous survival. Two sardines per day, strictly rationed—thanks to a box wedged near the mast. Water was precious; we sipped sparingly from five bottles Luis had tied beneath the cabin floor. Surrounded by endless water

we couldn't drink, we prayed for rain under a merciless blue sky.

A week later, Jorge guessed we were near Florida's southern tip—though currents might push us toward Cuba, which none of us would mind for its music and color. Two days later, with a favorable wind, spirits lifted—until a patrol boat appeared on the horizon. It closed in fast. Through a loudspeaker came the order: "Stop or we'll open fire!"

We lowered the sail, terrified. Armed officers boarded and shouted for us to raise our hands. "What is going on?" I demanded. The commander replied coldly: "You're under arrest—suspected Cuban migrants." We burst out laughing, which only hardened their faces. We protested, insisting we were Mexican adventurers. "Whatever," came the indifferent response as they cuffed us.

Without IDs—lost to the sea—we had no proof. I regretted not securing official clearance from Puerto Progreso. Our pleas fell on deaf ears. The patrol sped toward Miami, and an hour later we were herded into a detention hall crowded with Cuban migrants. Our sunburned faces and ragged clothes made no difference. Bureaucrats ignored us until Jorge, fluent in English, convinced them to let him call a lawyer in Mexico.

A week later, salvation arrived—a lawyer with documents proving our identity. Hours of paperwork finally won our freedom. Meanwhile, we feasted on the meager meals in detention, which tasted heavenly after days of hunger.

Another week, and we landed in Mexico City. Coffee and beer gatherings turned into endless retellings of our misadventure, friends roaring with laughter at its absurd ending. At the last meeting, the five of us sat in silence, eyes locked, the same question on our lips: "So... what's next?" No one dared to ask aloud.

It wasn't the last, of course. But that's another story for another time.

