

Leviathan



"Damn you for cowards! More sail! More sail!" shouted Captain Shoat from his position on the aft-deck. The hurricane howled, tearing at the sails, threatening to rip them again, threatening to tear me out of the rigging. I had twisted a rope many times around my body and right arm, but as the wind caught me and I swung into open air again, I felt as if I would be better off being flung into the wild sea, for I was being wrenched apart by these ropes, and the great swell of the sea threw the ship back, and again I was clinging to the rigging, trying to hold on before the wind caught me again. If the sail tore any further what could I do to stop it? I was helpless against the force of the wind, but I feared to try and climb down, for Captain Shoat had reloaded his pistols. Already he had killed half again as many men as the storm, but truly, it was not he that we feared, nor the storm either.

"The cannons! The cannons! Ready a broadside!" Shoat shouted, and indeed, below the pitching deck, certainly every able man still standing who was not bailing would be feverishly reloading the cannons for another broadside.

And the men on deck were wailing with fear, and I could hear prayers in English, and in Latin, and in some languages I didn't even know, and I found myself mouthing the words to a prayer that I didn't even know I remembered as I swung there like a flag in the wind, clinging to that rope that would either save me or hang me or both.

And the sea was like mountains, moving mountains, and we sank from mountaintop to valley and rose back again, but the next mountain broke; for there it was again, and the men screamed, and I choked on my breath, and Captain Shoat shouted "Devil take ye!" and he shouldered the gibbering helmsman aside, and leaned hard on the wheel, and the ship lurched sideways, flat to the wind, and the deck pitched, and the mast dipped, and the sail cracked like a whip, and I was thrown, but the bloody rope grabbed at my shoulder and I

bounced back, but the other swabbies, they vanished into the waves.

"Fire! Damn you! Fire!" shouted Captain Shoat, as the wave became a mouth, and a great black shape that dwarfed the ship lunged up from the water with a speed and fury that dwarfed the storm, and a full broadside of eight guns fired, full into the face of the monster, and it roared, and its gaping jaws were turned aside, but its head struck the hull, and the ship pitched even more sharply than before, and I was thrown against the rope, and I felt a sickening crack, and I knew it was my shoulder breaking apart, but no, no. The mast had snapped, and it toppled into the sea, sweeping the tatters of the sail over the deck and into the waves, so that I felt the canvas at my back just as I felt the water at my face, and for a very long instant, everything seemed to move so slowly, as I was plunged into the dark, dark green ice cold sea, and it was at once so quiet, and the wind so absent, and I could see the mast sinking so gently, and I could feel the ropes around my arm and my body pulling, but the pain felt so soft and distant now, and suddenly I was jerked up out of the water again, and the wind howled, but the wind was nothing to the horror cracking of timbers, and I saw with the clarity of the doomed that I was suspended upsidedown, tangled in the strands of the rigging that stretched from the mainmast and sail, sinking into the sliding valley between the waves, and the ship. The mast and sail pulled me down, but the ship pulled me up, up, up higher than the mountaintops of the waves, and there was a mighty cracking and splintering from above, for the Leviathan had siezed the ship and was lifting it in his jaws, and though I could not see him, I heard the voice of Captain Shoat, screaming with wordless rage, and I heard the retort of one of his pistols, and then another, and then there was the mightiest crack of all, and the upward pull gave way, and the downward pull won, and I fell to rejoin my old friends the mast and the sail, and I had no chance to take in a breath, for the sea jumped up to meet me, and again the silence and the cold, and the slow smooth soft pressure.

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