

## DUMP THE RUM

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The Commodore's boots staggered across the wood planks as he brushed past, I bowed my head politely and caught a sickly floral taste of his breath. The Captain of the ship grumbled as he approached his commanding officer. "Commodore," he called out, wielding the word how one might call a child princess. "I have given a few of my men orders to go ashore and search the coast for danger and then return to the ships. Tomorrow you can claim the land and we can return home."

"Home? We've only just arrived Captain. A whole world may live behind those peaks."

"We've proven the Mountain Shores exist in the south, our homecoming will allow the King to send—a proper expedition."

The Commodore stood in silence, gazing out toward the shore as the Captain returned to his post. The sun was at its final resting place on the horizon. The mountains before him climbed as shadowy pillars under the diminishing light of the saccharin sky. Before long the sea below

was just as shadowed. Water, earth, and sky merged into a single gloom. The distant fire of the scouting party's torches was all that remained.

He returned to his cabin. The knife in my coat pocket grew heavy as if it knew its purpose was at hand. I shadowed the Commodore on his descent. I would have followed him into his room, but the smell kept me at bay. Empty bottles of the finest wines littered the floor. The heat had kindled the rancid smell of vomit to an overwhelmingly putrid odor. The last bottle on the ransacked bed held only drops. He drank the remnants and tossed the bottle onto the sheets. "I suppose rum will have to do." He came back into the hull. A few sailors sat playing cards, their eyes questioning me. I couldn't do it here.

I continued shadowing as he made his way below deck to the cellar. The room was lined with dusty bottles and barrels full of the finest pleasures of the sea. It seemed empty, but I stayed hidden just the same. The Commodore tossed off his hat as he scanned the bottles. His hair was platinum, like mine. His frame was lean and postured, like mine. That's what I saw when I was young, how alike we were, but I *experienced* our differences. I drew my knife as I thought back to the nights I spent in the stables. I was covered in mud so this man could learn to ride. I slept in the hay so he could show off the horses I cared for. I lived the life of a peasant, worked as a peasant, and grew as a bastard so he could be great. I saw him prosper day after day, all the while he never learned my name; he didn't even know my face.

My hands tightened on the hilt as he found a bottle twice his age, "Aged 34 years." He gave a dry chuckle. I started around the corner. He popped the cork. I fixed my grip on the blade. He pressed the cold clay to his lips. That was my chance, but I was forced back to the shadows. The sweet burn could not have reached his tongue before the bottle was pried away. The Captain had found his way to the cellar and grabbed it from his hands. "Are these the means by which

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you'd find the courage to claim this land? You'd be drunk whilst raising your father's crest and insult the name of your nation?" He scoffed. "Your titles are wasted on you. *Prince of the Realm, Commodore of the Southern Fleet*. You would opt to live in drunken squalor. Pathetic child."

The captain himself was certainly a couple of years older than the rum he held captive. A well-kept man, whose largest flaw, in the crew's opinion, was sobriety. He dropped the bottle. It rolled along the creaking boards as the liquid spilled. Tiny waves lapped over the splinters as the ship rocked back and forth.

The Commodore allowed his eyes, and surely his mind, to fall into the pool, drifting deep into his thoughts. He'd spent fourteen days on rough seas, fourteen days in drunkenness, just to be commanded to leave by a subordinate officer. His eyes yearned for the substance now left to the rats. The pool seemed to reflect his true face; not a commodore, not a prince. Rather, it was the face of a handsome young man, with reddened eyes and a vacant expression, losing the best of his life to drink. He undoubtedly wanted to explore the land, but why? To be free of his charge? Free from the revulsions of war back home? That's what the Captain saw, but not I.

I saw his desire, not unlike my own. The longing for freedom from the grip of the vines that held him. Free of the spirits that made his days dark. Free from the rum in which he didn't even delight. What was I about to do? I dropped the knife. He brought his eyes to mine and I ducked away. In that last second, something had altered in them as if the fear and shame were pulled from his eyes and abandoned in the rum. A gleam, a spark, had taken their place to ignite something hidden. Something unexpected. "Captain." He ordered with a voice of command I had never heard him use. "We are going inland tomorrow. I will not claim the land until we have seen what lies behind those mountain peaks."

“You’re pathetic. You will claim the land on the beach, and we’ll be off. These men are tired of following empty orders from a child. We entertain your father’s wishes, but your *station* is ornamental. You have no authority here.”

The Commodore pushed past the Captain and made his way to the deck. I rushed out after the Captain. A watchman was stationed in the crow’s-nest and the Commodore was calling to him. “Watchman. Blow your horn.”

“Commodore?”

“Blow the horn, Watchman!”

The watchman lifted his horn and it gave a great bellow into the night. The decks of the ships soon filled with people. “What is the meaning of this Commodore?” The Captain snarled.

“It’s time for an expedition sailor.” He took the captain’s hat and tossed it to the nearest man—me. “Congratulations. You’ve been promoted, Captain...”

“Florence,” I said in reflex. I elaborated as the shock set in. “Ichabod Florence.”

“Captain Florence, give the order; ‘Ready the longboats.’”

“This is an outrage!” The old captain sneered. “Commander Florence is loyal to me.”

“No,” The Commodore corrected, “You, *sailor*, are loyal to *Captain* Florence.” He nodded back to me. What just happened? The man I was about to kill, the man I loathed, had just handed me a dream, though not the one I wanted. I looked into his eyes; he was acknowledging me for the first time in my life. Is that what I wanted? I had to find out; I warily gave the order. It took a moment for the men to stir, but soon enough the longboats had been readied and the men of the ships awaited my orders. “Now, Captain; Have them burn the ships.”

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The old captain's eyes widened, sinking into his skull. I could feel my own sinking just the same. I started carefully, "Commodore—"

"Burn the ships, Captain. Dump the rum. Grab a torch. Burn the Ships." My eyes locked with his. His father's eyes, the eyes I too possessed. Soon enough I held a mixed sense of fear of his authority, empathy toward his desire, and emerging compassion for this man who shared my blood, compassion that may have been there all along. It drove me to compliance. I yelled clearly into the night as my eyes remained locked with those of the Commodore. "Dump the rum! Grab a torch! Burn the ships!"

The men stood questioning the order. The old captain loosened his shoulders and a smirk grew on his face, "The Commodore is drunk. Get back to work."

The men started to move, heaving the boat back up and returning to their jobs. The Commodore wavered. His breath almost silenced his words, "I can't go back."

That voice. I knew that voice too well. It was the voice I used when I was felt hopeless, during long lonely nights in the hay. It was a voice reserved only for the times when death began to look finer than life. I stole a clay pot from a drunken deckhand and hopped up on the portside rail. With my fingers along my lip, I sent a sharp whistle into the still air. The men brought their attention back to me and I repeated the order louder, clearer, and with newfound authority. "Dump the Rum!" I shattered the pot on the deck and took up a torch from a sailor. "Grab a torch!" I heaved it into the night. The men didn't move. The old captain stepped up beside me. "Come down, Commander Fl—" I pushed him off the rail. He tumbled into the black waves below with a scream. "It's Captain Florence. This fleet is under command of the Commodore,

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anyone who fails to comply will be charged with mutiny. Now, burn the ships!" I dropped the torch and a stretch of rum-soaked wood began to burn.

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Before long the Southern Fleet was ablaze. 140 men in longboats rowed to the shore as the sun began to rise over the horizon. The fires roared across the ships as they sank into the brazen water that now separated many fearful faces from their homes.

The Commodore knew he would never see the land of our father again. He tore the badge from his uniform. "It's a new day Captain Florence." He said staring at the mountain peaks. "There may be seas, swamps, deserts, or ice, we may fall, we may thrive, but we are going over those mountains."

I forced a smile, though fear of the choice I made lingered. "I'm glad to have been of service Commodore."

The Commodore pat my shoulder. He may have heard the rum-fueled blaze behind him, but I never once saw him look back.