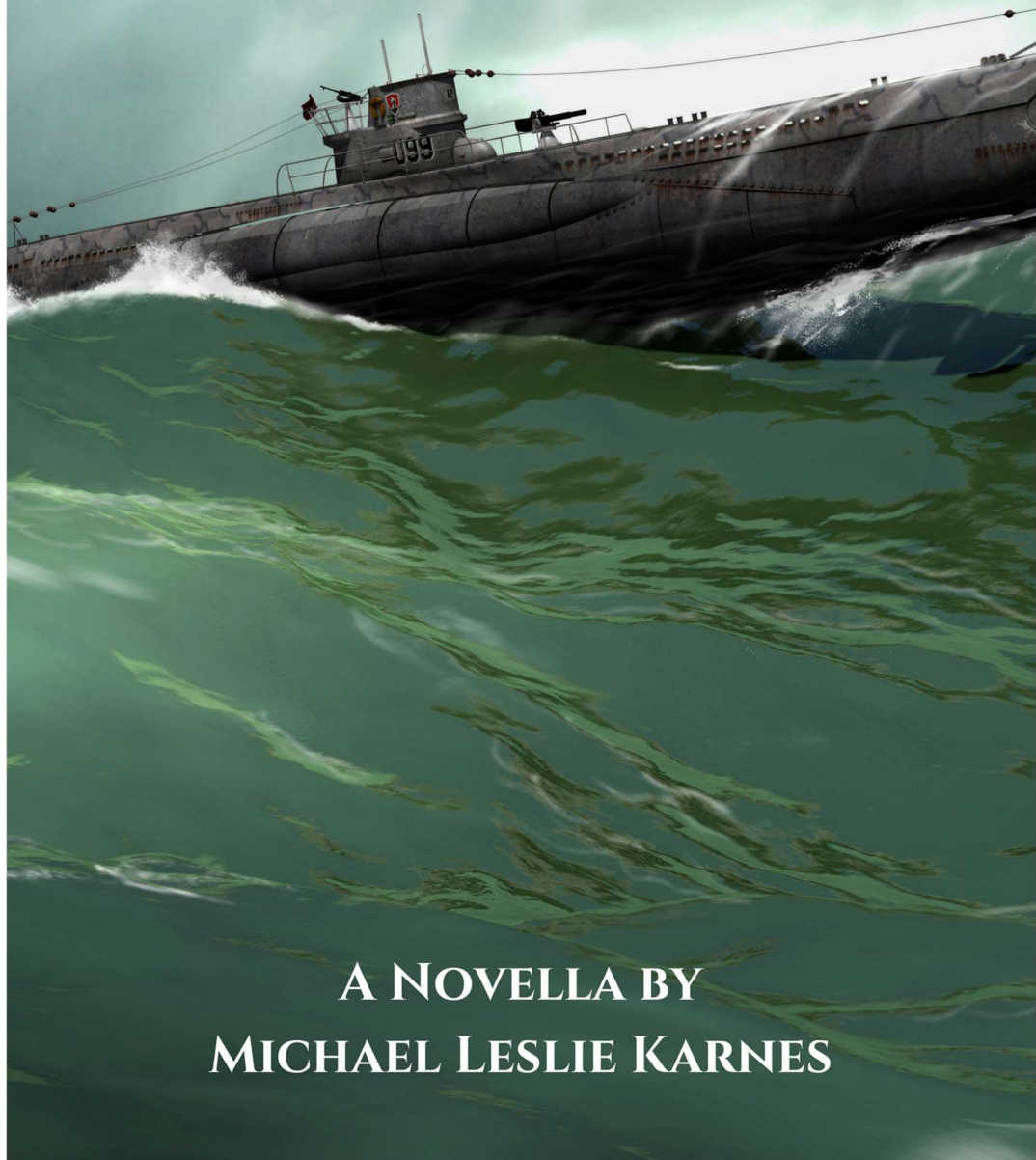


# THE STRANGE TALE OF U-474



A NOVELLA BY  
MICHAEL LESLIE KARNES

## The Strange Tale of U-474

A novella by Michael Leslie Karnes

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### Part I: A Ghost Story

July 23rd, 1971

"Go! Go!" Konrad urged. "The little ones will be fine. I'll make sure that they go to bed early, after the storm."

Skepticism clouded Gretchen's face. "*Papá*, I don't see a cloud in the sky." They stood in the front of the house near the circular drive. Gretchen's husband Javier leaned patiently against the shiny red Buick Roadmaster. He scowled at Konrad over his sunglasses. Konrad returned the look. Neither were serious about their scowls. As far as Konrad was concerned his daughter couldn't have found a more loving husband and father. For the sake of being the overprotective father Konrad went through the pretense of feigning disapproval.

She looked up at him with her big blue eyes, the only feature she inherited from her father. That and her height at nearly two meters. It made her unique in that she resembled her mother in every other way. By all accounts she was Spanish in heritage. Long curly black hair, the olive complexion and an aquiline nose that reminded Konrad painfully of Margareta.

"How do you know it is going to rain?" Gretchen asked.

"It always rains on this day."

"Always?"

"If you don't believe me you can go to the *Listín Diario* and check their records. I am right, you know."

His daughter eyed him inquisitively and bit her lower lip. "Are you sure everything will be okay."

Konrad smiled but his heart was still heavy with grief. "Yes, we will be all right. Go! Have an evening out with your husband. Stay in Santo Domingo if you need to. The storm will probably knock out the power again."

Gretchen stepped forward and kissed her father on the cheek. "I miss her too, *Papá*."

"*Opa!*" Laura shouted. She was the older and more rambunctious of the two. Konrad taught the little ones to call him grandfather in German. Laura's little brother Miguel was reserved. "Can we go play on the beach?"

"We can," Konrad said. "There's just enough time for that, then dinner. Then off to bed early with you."

"*Papá*, call us if there is trouble," Gretchen said. The worry crease crossed her brow just like her mother's had.

"Javier, take care of my little girl," Konrad said.

Javier stood up straight. "I always do *Señor* Meyer." He opened the door for Gretchen and she climbed into the car. Miguel and Laura waved goodbye to their departing parents, he in his short pants and buttoned shirt and she in her little flower print dress.

"Beach!" Miguel said as the car exited the circular roadway.

Konrad chuckled. "Then we shall go to the beach. Did you bring your swimwear?"

"Yes," Miguel said while his sister nodded enthusiastically.

"Well, we should change into our swimsuits and go. The sun will set in a couple of hours."

Konrad had spent the last twenty-eight years of his life on this beach. He could have quickly changed into swimming clothes as fast as his old fishing gear. Not that he wore them much anymore. Other men who worked for him did that now.

Laura and Miguel waited for him when he emerged from the bedroom. "You children look like you are in a hurry."

"Only a couple of hours of sun left, *Opa*," Laura said. She made a show of looking at her oversized watch on her wrist.

"Is that what your little girl's watch tells you?" Konrad asked.

"It's a diver's watch. *Papá* gave it to me last Christmas. One day I am going to dive and find pirate treasure."

Konrad shivered. "There is more to life than treasure. Did you get the towels? Did you get the drinks?"

Laura made a show of sighing and checking her watch again. "That will take too much time!" Despite her protest the little girl ran off to the linen closet to pick out towels while Konrad put bottles of Coca-Cola into a small cooler.

"Lead the way, Laura."

The children rushed out the backdoor and ran along the wooden planking leading down to the white pristine beach. Konrad followed slowly. He was only fifty-one and still in good shape but wasn't in a hurry.

After the house was built Konrad had set up a little table, some chairs and an umbrella. They would only last a few years until they were beaten by the sea and wind before they needed to be replaced. And every few years Konrad would replace them, first by building them and then, in recent years, buying them.

The children set the towels on the beach chairs and ran to the water. Konrad chuckled and they splashed into the surf. He put the cooler on the table and watched them for a moment. "To be young again and innocent to the evil in the world."

A gleam to the left caught his eye. There it was, about a meter and a half away, a single gold coin standing about a third of the way in the sand. The coin canted wildly like a weathered gravestone. It caught the glare of the sun and twinkled invitingly. Konrad's blood ran cold despite the hot summer day. It was the first time the coin appeared today. Immediately he looked to the horizon to see if a ship was adrift, but he saw nothing. He briefly imagined horrible spectres rising from the surf to drag the children into the deep.

Konrad walked to the coin and knelt. He looked to the children to make sure they weren't watching. Konrad reached for the coin. It wanted him to pick it up as it had beckoned several times in the past. The pounding surf faded into a muted roar as his hand trembled. Before he was tempted to snatch the coin he scooped sand with both hands and buried it. Konrad didn't want the children to see it even though they probably never would. He hoped the coin was only there for him but he didn't want to risk the chance. The rules could change in any given year.

Once the coin was covered Konrad shook his head vigorously to ward off the momentary fugue. A splash in the ocean would do him so good. Konrad rushed to join his grandchildren.

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Konrad and the grandchildren got the two hours of sunlight that he had promised them. The sun began to set as black storm clouds gathered on the horizon. It was the storm he anticipated.

"*Opa*, I am thirsty," Laura said.

"Well, it was a good idea for someone to bring drinks with us. A Coca-Cola for each of you. Then I'll make dinner for us. We have just enough time before the storm comes."

Miguel frowned. "Will the storm hurt us?" At five years old he had seen hurricanes in the Caribbean.

Konrad squinted at the horizon. "This one? I think it looks scarier than it actually is. It will pass us by the time you two go to bed."

"*Opa*, I am hungry." It was Laura again.

"Hungry and thirsty? Oh my, what I am going to do with you?"

"Make dinner, I hope."

The serious look on her face forced a needed laugh from Konrad. "Well, I can make some chicken and rice. And we can have some *arroz con leche* afterwards. Does that sound good?"

His granddaughter grinned and nodded.

Konrad dashed into the shower quickly to rinse himself off and then prepared dinner while the children washed. The children had changed into their pajamas they had packed with them. When dinner was ready the peals of thunder were close. Konrad kept his spirits up so that Miguel wouldn't worry. Laura was completely oblivious to the storm.

The three of them sat at the little table in the kitchen breakfast nook rather than the big formal dining room. Konrad liked eating here instead of in there, it reminded him of Margareta. He still felt her presence here even though she had passed. Everything in this house reminded him of her. They had built the home together when the fishing company became prosperous.

Halfway through their meal the window lit up with a flash of lightning and the crack of thunder shook the house. The power went out a moment later.

"*Opa!*" Miguel shouted.

"It's all right, all right. I have a lantern in the cupboard I can light."

"I'm not scared," Laura added.

Despite the darkness Konrad knew the way around his own home. He had walked the hallways many times at night. Konrad found the lantern quickly and knew the matches were in the drawer by the sink. He struck the match and lit the lantern to quell Miguel's fears as quickly as possible.

"Now let's finish our dinner," he said.

"It's dark now." Miguel was disappointed. "We can't watch the television. We can't even play games."

"You'll be sleeping in no time."

"The storm is too scary."

"Tell us a story, *Opa*," Laura said.

"Oh, a war story," Miguel said. He mimed shooting with finger guns.

"No, a ghost story." She waved her arms in the air. "Woooooowooo."

Konrad chuckled and rubbed his chin. "I have a story. It's a little bit of both. It is something that happened on this very night a long long time ago. I can only tell you after you finish your dessert and climb into bed."

Laura eagerly scooped her *arroz con leche* while Miguel looked skeptical.

"Hurry up," Konrad added.

When they were done Konrad took a few moments to put the dishes and serving bowls into the sink. He could always wash them in the morning when the power came back on. The children followed him to the little bedroom he and Margareta had made for the children years ago. Laura and Miguel climbed underneath the thin blankets while Konrad placed the lantern on the nightstand. He pulled a stool from the other side of the room and set it between the two beds.

"A ghost story," Laura reminded him.

"No, a war story," Miguel said.

"Well, it is my story and I will tell it exactly as it happened. It is something that happened to me when I was in the war..."

## Part II: U-474

July 23rd, 1943

Konrad waited for Captain Fleischer to give orders. The captain stood silently at the periscope and watched their target. The crew had been in their positions for hours waiting for the American merchantman to cross their bow. The stench of unwashed bodies hung heavily in the humid stifled bridge of the German U-boat.

They spotted the lone merchantman at noon. It was incredible. A single cargo ship running unescorted through the Caribbean at the height of war. All for the crew of U-474 to take and add to their tonnage. They spent most of the afternoon stalking the merchantman, trying to anticipate when the ship would end up in their crosshairs. The captain of the merchantman was not stupid by any means. The ship zigged and zagged so as to not make an easy target. Twice the German sub had to leave their position, move up at flank speed, and deplete their batteries in the process. The end of the day was almost upon them. If the merchantman wasn't taken now they would have to abandon it and continue their patrol.

Finally, the captain said, "Fire tubes one and two."

Konrad relayed the orders to the torpedo room. The bridge filled with the sound of compressed air pushing the torpedoes. Konrad imagined the trail of bubbles as the torpedoes headed for the American merchantman. Each second that ticked by without alerting the other ship gave them a better chance for success. The crew held their breath and waited.

Konrad checked his stopwatch. "One minute."

"Come on," Fleischer said. "I need nine thousand tons for the record." If the torpedoes hit the ship Fleischer's boat would beat the current record by six thousand tons.

"Two minutes," Konrad said. The torpedoes should be reaching the target.

The sonarman held the hydrophones close to his ear, eagerly waiting for the sounds of explosions. "She's spotted them. She's moving to flank speed." Several seconds later the sonarman reported, "Hit." The 'boom' echoed like a low growl throughout the sub.

"Confirmed," Captain Fleischer said. "Right at the midships. I can see smoke and fire. She looks like she is taking on water." He stepped away from the periscope. "Men, I believe we have our record."

The submariners on the bridge briefly cheered. They were still rigged for silent running and not out of danger yet.

The captain asked the sonarman. "Anything?"

"It will be a few minutes. I can hear the merchantman taking on water. Nothing else."

Fleischer nodded curtly. While the merchantman sank it would mask the noise from anything else. It would also serve as a beacon for any American destroyer in the area.

"Captain," Konrad said. "We need to surface. The batteries are almost depleted. We might be able to get enough charge to evade a destroyer if one approaches." The batteries could only charge if the diesel engines were running but they could only run when the submarine surfaced.

Captain Fleischer rubbed his chin. "You're right, *Oberleutnant* Weber. Prepare to surface."

Konrad gave the order. The petty officers and seamen of U-474 went to quick and efficient motion. Orders were shouted and alarm bells rang throughout the hull. They were already at periscope depth so it wouldn't take long.

When the gray hulled U-boat surfaced the diesel engines engaged. "Let's get some fresh air," the Captain said.

"Schmidt, Holler and Stoltz, bring your field glasses," Konrad said.

"I have this," Beck added. As second watch officer his job to assign lookouts and manage the deck gun while they were on the surface.

Konrad nodded. "Right. Keep a close watch."

The U-boat bobbed along the crystal blue surface of the gentle Caribbean. Captain Fleischer brought along his own pair of binoculars, an expensive set of

Zeiss. He eagerly watched his prize sink to the bottom. Konrad had his own set of binoculars as well. He brought them up to inspect the sinking ship north of their position. The merchantman listed to port and would eventually capsize. The crew of the sinking ship splashed in the water. "Poor bastards," Konrad said.

"They chose this life," Fleischer said. Konrad didn't know the Captain had heard him. "They deserve the consequences that come along with it. Supplying aid and material to the English and communists." Fleischer spit over the rail.

Konrad had noted long ago that the Captain had this mean streak in him. Still, there was nothing any of them could do. They couldn't take on any of the survivors. "Beck," he called out.

He had the other three men scanning the horizon but Beck shook his head. Nothing else was out there. It meant they were safe for now.

Konrad looked west. The sun hung low in the horizon, giving the sky an orange glow and the water a violet hue. A bank of black storm clouds off in the distance flickered blue flashes of lightning.

"We should go home," Captain Fleischer said. Their patrol was scheduled to end the following week. "Better to go now as a success, right?"

"Yes, Captain. We have been out here for a while. We don't know what we will run into going home." The war in the North Atlantic turned in favor of the Allies during the recent months. Getting through to Germany or France would be a challenge.

"Contact," Stoltz shouted from the deck. "To the west!"

Konrad and Fleischer brought up their binoculars. Seconds earlier they had seen nothing. Now a ship bobbed only a few thousand meters away.

"What is that?" the Captain asked.

"She's... old."

Konrad was incredulous. On the horizon was an old wooden ship with her sails in tatters. He wondered how he could have missed it earlier.

"I don't see any colors." The captain referred to the ship's lack of a flag.

"I can't see anything either. She looks like an antique. East Indiaman or maybe a barque."

"How big would you say she is?"

"I would guess a little more than two thousand tons."

"Beck," the Captain called out. "Would you like some gunnery practice?"



The second officer grinned from the deck. "Yes, Captain." He barked orders to the other seaman. They began to uncover the deck gun.

"We might as well add to our tonnage," the Captain said with a grin.

Konrad still watched the mysterious ship through the binoculars. "I don't see any activity aboard. She looks adrift."

Beck and his gun crew drilled for this. The deck gun was ready in ninety seconds. Beck didn't wait for the order to fire. The gun rang out with a deafening boom. Water plumed up a hundred yards away from the wooden ship. The gun crew adjusted for the difference and fired again. This time water plumed up at the ship's waterline. Two or three more rounds of high explosive should take it out.

Beck fired again and again. More water plumes gushed up at the wooden ship's waterline but the ship didn't take any damage. Beck shouted again at the gun crew and they fired their fourth round. The ancient ship floated undamaged.

"That's strange," Konrad said.

"Bad shells?" the Captain asked.

"He's got it sighted accurately and they are exploding but having no effect."

"Try the armor piercing," the Captain shouted.

Beck nodded and loaded a different shell into the deck gun. He pulled the lanyard on the gun and turned away as it boomed. The shell arced through the air and exploded at the waterline of the wooden ship. There was no splintering of the wood as it remained buoyant.

"Beck," the Captain called down, "do you need more practice?"

"Captain, we have the ship sighted correctly. Nothing is happening."

"Try it again."

Another shell of armor piercing went screaming through the air followed by a round of high explosive. Still no effect.

"It's the damnedest thing," Konrad said.

"We'll send a torpedo right through her midships. If that doesn't work nothing will. Bring her around to course 270. Speed of three knots."

Konrad called down the orders and got affirmations from the crew. The torpedoman reported that Tube One was ready while the sonarman reported that there were still no contacts in the area. The diesel engines revved up as the U-boat spun in place to face the derelict ship. With the cruising speed of three knots they only needed a few adjustments of the rudder to line up the target dead ahead.

"Fire," the Captain ordered.

Konrad relayed the order and the pneumatic hiss sounded again as compressed air pushed the torpedo outside of the tube. He didn't even keep time with his stopwatch. It was impossible to miss at this distance. The torpedo streaked away with a trail of bubbles in its wake. In his head Konrad counted off the seconds to impact. Everyone on deck watched with silence as the torpedo homed in on target. In thirty seconds the torpedo hit the wooden ship directly amidships with a boom and a plume of water above the highest mast. Konrad brought the field glasses to his eyes and waited for the water to settle. The torpedo had no effect. "It should have blown up," Konrad said. He turned to the Captain to get a read on him.

Captain Fleischer scowled for several seconds then his face turned into a grin. "You're right, Meyer, that ship should be sinking right now. What we've got here is a mystery. Shall we investigate?"

Konrad barked out new orders to the crew below. It would take only a few minutes to bring the U-boat to the ship and inspect her. While the U-boat drew near Konrad and the Captain brought up their field glasses.

This was no simple fishing boat or old merchantman. She belonged in a museum. Konrad reckoned the ship was a frigate from the eighteenth century. The hull was a weather-beaten gray and her once white sails were mottled and in tatters. The figurehead on the prow was roughly in the shape of a woman but it was too ancient to be certain. The ship carried a tattered and torn black flag on the mast. If the ship had a name it long since worn off due to the elements.

"No one on deck," Konrad said.

"Is she a pirate ship?" the Captain asked with wonder in his voice. Many Germans watched pirate films before all American movies had been banned in Germany.

"How would she have survived a century out here much less two?"

"Bring us around to her starboard side."

Several minutes passed as they circled around her stern and brought the pirate ship to their port side. When they pulled along the Captain said, "See there? The netting?"

The netting on her starboard side reached down to the waterline. Konrad figured out what the Captain wanted. "We could board her."

The Captain grinned. "Maybe she has treasure."

"Best to do this now while we still have daylight. That storm is approaching fast." He nodded off to the west. The storm clouds that seemed distant a half hour ago were dangerously near.

"Can you do it?"

Konrad nodded. "It will be tricky but we can get aboard."

Their plan was simple in concept but difficult in execution. They would bring the U-boat alongside the pirate ship and have men climb up the netting with the bow and stern lines. Once on the ship they could tie the ropes off and toss them down to the U-boat below. After two tries of speeding up and reversing the engines to they were able bring them safely alongside. Once they were close enough two seamen, Werner and Krause, leapt to the netting with the lines over their shoulder and across their body. Both men scrambled up the netting quickly and tied the lines off at the masts. They tossed their lines down to the deck of the U-boat where other seaman pulled then tied them alongside. The U-boat bobbed snugly against the pirate ship.

"Let's see what prize we have won," the Captain said.

They didn't climb aboard immediately. There was no telling if anyone hid below decks. Six seamen were assigned to accompany them and they were armed with four rifles and two submachine guns. Konrad and Captain Fleischer each carried a Mauser pistol in a holster.

The Captain's eyes gleamed eagerly. Konrad had to admit that he was brimming with curiosity as well. This was so detached from their normal routine he thought he would have a future story to tell his children and grandchildren.

Konrad and the Captain climbed up the netting with the other six seamen following two by two. When they reached the top both drew their pistols and scanned the deck for threats. The deck was rotted and abandoned. Debris lay across the deck, with pieces of tattered sail wrapped along the mast and moldy gray rope. An old wooden mop bucket lay on its side doing lazy semicircles on the deck with the list of the ship. Several seconds later the other seamen climbed aboard with their weapons ready. The eight of them stood on the deck for several seconds waiting for whatever would happen next.

Finally, the Captain said, "We'll pair off. Nobody goes anywhere alone. Meyer see if you can find the cargo hold. I will look for the captain's quarters. You others explore the galley and crew quarters. Understood?"

A chorus of *Ja, Kapitan*s sounded off around the deck.

Konrad turned to one of the seamen. "Neumann, you're with me."

While Konrad, Captain Fleischer and the other seamen were comfortable with navigating their way around a U-boat a sailing vessel, certainly one bigger than a fishing boat or yacht, was new to them. Konrad set about exploring the deck looking for a way down while Neumann followed with his submachine gun. He found a set of rickety wooden stairs leading down into the bowels of the ship. The stench of decay was much stronger here and Neumann gasped for breath behind him.

"Any idea where we are going, *Herr Weber*," Neumann asked.

Konrad chuckled. "None at all. Just going down."

He followed a staircase down then another staircase leading below. This one lead towards the midships. When he reached the end of the passageway he found a wooden door with cracked slats. Konrad holstered his pistol then gripped the doorknob and pulled. The door didn't budge. "It may be warped from moisture and aged." He pulled on the doorknob again and felt the slightest movement with a loud creak. Konrad rested for a second then pulled again with his foot braced against the door frame. The door exploded open with a bang. Konrad tumbled backward and landed on his buttocks. Neumann brought up the submachine gun and aimed the muzzle towards the open doorway. Konrad scrambled up quickly and pulled his own pistol from the holster.

Both waited pensively for several seconds. Finally, Konrad said, "Let's see what we've found."

It was the cargo hold they sought. Above them was an open hatch that measured five meters by five meters. Given the approaching storm clouds the hold was nearly black. Konrad looked above him and saw the first of the black clouds rolling over. After several seconds a break in the clouds appeared and the orange rays of sunshine shone through.

Neumann gasped. "*Herr Weber?*"

Konrad turned to the seaman. Neumann's mouth hung open and with his eyes wide as china saucers. He gestured with the muzzle of the submachine gun. Konrad turned around.

When the clouds had passed and let the sunlight through it illuminated the cargo hold. There, several meters in front of Konrad, stood a mountain of gold higher than his head. Gold coins by the thousands glistened in the sunlight. Jewelry, ornate in design, appeared to be from the ancient tribes of South and Central America, decorated with emeralds, rubies, sapphires and diamonds. Gold cups and bowls along with crucifixes with inlaid jewels were scattered about the treasure pile. A pirate treasure sparkling at them for the taking.

"Get the Captain," Konrad said, surprised at the smallness of his voice.

Neumann trotted out without acknowledging the order, his submachine gun and other accoutrements jingling with his departure.

All of it was right in front of Konrad waiting for him to take it. He took a step forward, his pistol now holstered again. The sunlight danced in his eyes as his hand reached out. Konrad took two more steps then a third.

Another cloud passed over the deck creating a shadow in the hold. Without the gold dazzling his eyes the spell was broken. Konrad became aware that he stood alone contrary to the captain's orders. He looked around the cargo hold and convulsively shivered despite the heat of summer. Shadows danced in the dark and seemed alive. Goosebumps prickled out along the spine of Konrad's back and the length of his arms. The shadows watched and waited for him to touch the gold. His

hand, outreached and only centimeters away, trembled. Konrad pulled his hand back and rested it on the top of his holstered pistol.

"We have treasure," the Captain shouted with a bark of laughter.

Konrad nearly jumped out of his skin. He turned and found the Captain grinning with the Neumann. Konrad sharply exhaled while the staccato of his heart slowed back to its regular rhythm. "Yes, Captain."

Captain Fleischer clapped him roughly on the back. "Startled you there, Konrad?"

"Yes, Captain."

The cloud over the ship passed and the golden rays of sunshine filled the hold again and giving the pile of gold a shimmering glitter. Captain Fleischer ignored Konrad and headed straight for the treasure. He stuck his hand into a pulled out a fistful of coins. "Look at it, Konrad. No matter how this war turns out we are going to be rich men."

"We still have a war left to finish and we can't take this with us."

"True. The *Kriegsmarine* will undoubtedly seize our prize and add it to their war coffers." There were millions of *Reichsmarks* in that pile of gold. "We find someone here. Maybe a banker in the Dominican Republic. For a generous fee they can hold it. We leave you or Beck behind as insurance that nothing happens to it."

Konrad nodded. It wasn't a bad plan, all things considered, but he remained uneasy about the prize in front of him. This ship had been adrift for more than a century and no one had found this treasure yet? It reminded Konrad of bait.

"You stay here," the Captain said. "Devise a plan to empty this cargo hold. We'll need more ropes. This must be finished quickly. I don't like the looks of that storm."

"Yes, Captain. Send me as many men as you can spare. I don't think we have much time."

The Captain looked at his fistful of gold then plunged it into his pocket before exiting.

Twenty men, nearly half of the U-boat's complement, scrambled about the pirate ship. They found some weathered rope and netting in the hold that Konrad judged strong enough to carry the weight of their treasure. Konrad made plans, tested them along with the crew and revised them as problems arose. He supervised to transfer of the cargo from the main deck. The air below deck was stifling and Konrad couldn't shake that feeling that something lurked in the darkness only meters out of his reach. He was also careful not to touch any of the treasure. The word 'cursed' flitted about his mind.

If any of the crew had hesitations they did a remarkable job of hiding them. The men laughed and sang beer hall songs about fetching milk maids. Their patrol would end and they would return home. This prize would boost their morale if they could all keep quiet about it. Konrad shook the thought from his head. He could worry about that another day.

Konrad turned to the west again. The sun hid behind the bank of the storm clouds now and the wind started to pick up. Lightning roiled in the distance with the barest grumble of thunder. They still had a little more time.

Beck supervised the crew that had created a makeshift winch with timber, ropes and netting. He approached Konrad and said, "We'll all be wealthy men."

"If we can get it out of there. I don't think we can get it all."

Beck cocked his head to the side. "Even with what we have now it will be enough."

A fat drop of rain plopped on the top of Konrad's service hat. "Get as much out as you can."

The operation continued with familiar German efficiency. Crates from the hold of the ship were filled with gold, hoisted out by the seamen, swung over to the U-boat and lowered through the galley hatch. Since their patrol was at its end there was ample space where they stored their provisions. It made the perfect area to store their new-found treasure.

Splatters of rain plopped along the wooden deck. Konrad looked up to spy the wind whipping the dirty tattered sails with audible snaps. The ship groaned and listed starboard banging against the hull of the U-boat. Men cried out in alarm and fell along the deck, Konrad included. He scrambled up as quickly as possible. "Herr Weber," one of the seaman said. "The Captain." He nodded to starboard railing.

Konrad looked down to the U-boat below. Captain Fleischer was shouting from the conning tower. He couldn't hear what the Captain said over the roar of the wind. Konrad cupped his hand to his ear. The Captain nodded and made an elaborate winding gesture. *We're finished here* the gesture said. Konrad nodded to indicate he understood.

"Let's get that last crate aboard," Konrad shouted. "Time to go. We have been here too long." Konrad was relieved to depart from this spectral ship.

The seamen hustled to move the last crate through the U-boat galley hatch. Despite the wind and the ship listing back and forth his crew efficiently guided the crate through. When it was done the men scrambled over the side and climbed down the netting. Konrad waited patiently as the wind and rain picked up. Lightning flashed, lighting up the deck with dancing shadows, with the thunder booming like artillery fire only a moment later.

Konrad followed the last man over the rail and work his way down the net. Several seconds later the crew helped him climbed aboard the deck of the U-boat.

Two men, each on one of the ropes mooring them to the pirate ship, had waited patiently with knives in hand. They started sawing through the ropes once Konrad gave them the signal.

"Quickly," Captain Fleischer shouted. "If we stay attached to that ship it will drag us down with her."

Konrad had just started to climb up to the conning tower when the U-boat shuddered and he fell. He scrambled to grab hold of the deck to keep from sliding into the water. Konrad pulled himself up and climbed up the conning tower.

"Hurry," the Captain called out. The two seamen below frantically sawed through the thick ropes with their knives. Both the pirate ship and U-boat started to bob in the water with the occasional nudge against the hull from the older vessel.

"Has the hull buckled?" Konrad asked.

"I can't tell. It is so dark."

Konrad called down into the submarine interior. "Send some men to check the port side on all decks. Looking for leaks."

"We need to be away from this thing and below the surface," the Captain muttered.

The seaman closer to the bow cut away his line first and the second man finished several seconds later. Both men scrambled to get below decks.

"Move us away from here," Captain Fleischer said.

"Yes, Captain."

Even above the din of the storm Konrad could hear the diesel engines rev up. The big motor vibrated through the deck plating under his feet. The helmsman worked the engines and rudder to ease them away from the pirate vessel.

"How did their hull remain undamaged?" Konrad asked.

"What?"

"Our hull is made of steel but it did nothing to theirs."

"Doesn't matter now. We're not tied to it anymore and we can submerge."

"After the crew checks the hull."

"Of course."

They had increased the distance between themselves and the pirate ship by twenty meters. The ship trailed them slightly aft of their position. Konrad felt better being away from that ship.

"We should get below," the Captain said.

"Yes, sir," Konrad said absently. He couldn't take his eyes off the pirate ship as it slipped behind them.

Another flash of lightning arced across the sky. For a moment Konrad's breath hitched in his chest. *We have left someone aboard.* On the deck of the ship had caught figures standing still on the starboard side. He had initially mistaken them for his own crew then realized it couldn't be. The thunder boomed again as the pirate ship fell into darkness.

"Did you see that?" Konrad asked.

"See what?"

"There were men on deck."

"Nonsense. The lightning is playing tricks with your eyes."

The lightning flashed again displayed a row of still figures lined up the starboard side of the pirate ship. Port holes opening along the starboard hull. "Cannons." Konrad said. That could not be. There was no one aboard the pirate ship save for their own men. How could there now be cannons manned and ready? "Captain, I think she is gaining on us."

The pirate ship, despite the lack of sails, chased the U-boat. "It has to be a trick of the light," Captain Fleischer said. The pirate ship sluiced through the water ignoring the rough waves and fierce wind. The ship pulled alongside them now, twenty meters off their port side, and kept pace. Another brilliant flash lit the sky to reveal over a dozen open portholes.

"Captain, I think they mean to broadside us."

Over a dozen cannons fired on them. Instead of gouts of orange flame each cannon emitted fire of spectral blue. Many of the cannonballs missed but some found purchase. The deck gun was sheared off its mount and dumped into the ocean on their starboard side. Two cannonballs tore completely through the conning tower and continued another dozen meters before dropping into the sea. Two additional cannonballs pounded through the aft compartment. Konrad figured these would hit either be the diesel or electric motor.

"Flank speed," the Captain ordered.

A muffled thump sounded from the aft compartment. Beck called up to the conning tower. "Captain, the engine room reports a fire."

"Get damage control teams there quickly," Konrad shouted down. Strange grinding noises sounded throughout the hold. Konrad paused to listen. The transmission case was hit and the submarine slowed to a halt. It would bob mercilessly to the raging storm around them.



Another boom sounded off to port startling Konrad into a jump. Bare seconds later a broadside of twenty cannonballs from the pirate ship punched through the night. Again, most missed but three of them hit the bow along the waterline. The pirate ship moved laterally towards them along with the wind and waves.

Lines hurled through the air, arcing high then coming down along the fore and aft hull including the conning tower amidships. Captain Fleisher screamed with pain. A rusty grappling hook a half meter long had buried into his thigh. The line had pulled taut and pinned him against the conning tower.

"Captain, I think they mean to board us," Konrad said.

"Cut me loose, damn you!"

Konrad called down into the submarine. "Get as many men as you can spare on deck. Rifles and submachine guns from the armory. Prepare to repel boarders." He looked to the pirate ship again which was almost close enough to touch. Several spectral figures crawled like fast spiders along the lines. More lines arced out from the ship to seek purchase on the U-boat's hull.

On the U-boat men scrambled out of the galley hatch and conning tower armed. Neuman was third out of the conning tower with his MP-40. His mouth hung open and then he asked with a quiver in his voice, "Are those pirates?"

"Whoever they are shoot them," Konrad said. "Where's that knife?"

Another seaman quickly handed him a bayonet and scrambled onto the deck. Almost immediately gunshots sounded off along with the peals of thunder. Konrad turned to the Captain and quickly cut the rotting rope off the grappling hook. He studied the grappling hook pinning the Captain against the side of the conning tower. There was no easy way to do this. "This is going to hurt."

Captain Fleischer winced and nodded. "Do it."

Konrad grabbed the grappling hook and braced his foot against the side of the conning tower for leverage. He pulled and the hook came loose with a metallic screech. The Captain fell and grabbed his thigh. Even with the rain-soaked uniform his pants were black with blood.

Konrad didn't wait. He turned toward the fight only to find chaos. Men fired at spectres covering the deck. Neuman was indiscriminate with his submachine gun firing in every direction and screaming. The ghostly pirates and their cutlasses cut their way through his shipmates. Hauptman, the poor fat kid from the galley, was cleaved in half from his right shoulder to his left hip. He blinked once and tried to speak before his top half slid off onto the deck. Another pirate cut Beck's head clean off then casually kicked it into the roiling ocean. Baum, from the forward torpedo compartment, had his arms ripped from both sides by two of the spectres. He turned and ran into the ocean. Neuman still fired in all directions but his bullets had no effect. He swiveled the gun in every direction and sprayed bullets as the pirates approached. Neumann never saw the pirate who came from behind and rammed his cutlass through his lower back. He dropped the submachine gun and

looked at the cutlass poking from his belly. The pirate withdrew the cutlass from his back and another pirate ghost rushed forward, thrust his hands into Neumann's open belly, and pulled out his entrails.

An explosion ripped through the aft deck. The petrol tank must have caught fire. On the fore deck the spectral pirates scrambled into the U-boat through the open galley hatch. The Captain had managed to stand and now drew his pistol. Konrad quickly scaled the ladder to the deck and drew his own gun. He stepped forward and fired at the closest pirate. There were at least twenty of them on the aft deck now. When Konrad fired they all stopped and turned. Twenty pairs of ghostly eyes watched Konrad passively. Without pause Konrad fired again.

The closest pirate turned and faced Konrad. He wore a tri-corner hat over the stringy hair on his skull. The pirate's nose had long rotted away and the skull was a ginning visage. It was hard to tell what colors the clothes the pirate wore. They were shredded in tatters and the leather boots were covered in green mold. The pirate leapt and knocked Konrad on the deck. Konrad tried to get up but the pirate leapt atop him. He was pinned to the deck. The pirate's face was bare inches from his own. The pirate's eyes glowed a fierce spectral blue with tiny black pinpoints of pupils. It screamed in his face, its breath a foul collection of rotted fish and seaweed, the scream a rage from the darkest belly of hell.

Hot tears coursed down Konrad's face toward his temples. His still had his pistol tightly gripped in his hand. If today was Konrad's day to die he would do it fighting. Konrad brought the pistol up into the things face and fired. The pistol cracked and... nothing happened. Konrad fired again. The thing staring him down screamed again. Konrad fired the pistol until the magazine emptied. The thing still sat on top of him, the bullets having no effect. Now the pirate brought up the cutlass with both skeletal hands, the tip inches above Konrad's nose. Konrad dropped the pistol from his hands. For several heartbeats the cutlass hung in the air. Then the pirate pulled the sword aside and shrieked again. A plaintive note of impotence echoed in its rage.

The pirate leapt up from Konrad then turned to the conning tower. In a single leap it jumped to the top of the tower. Konrad got up from the deck quickly to witness the pirate plunged its cutlass into Captain Fleisher's heart. He picked up his pistol from the deck. Konrad had another magazine in his belt, but bullets seemed to have no effect on the pirates. He holstered his pistol and considered his next move.

The U-boat made the decision for him. Another explosion from aft rippled through the deck. Konrad found himself flying and off the starboard side of the U-boat. He was dunked in the water, disoriented, then found the orange glow from the fire on the deck to be his guide to the ocean surface.

Konrad gasped for breath when he surfaced. The U-boat was fifteen meters in front of him. The aft deck fully engulfed in flames while the galley hatch burned as well. The submarine would sink in only a few minutes. Konrad needed to put as much space between him and it before it went below. He would be sucked down if he didn't swim away. The U-boat started to list to port and threatened to capsized.

He turned and swam out to sea, arms pinwheeling and legs flapping with fury. The roiling sea fought against him while lightning illuminated the sky with accompanying peals of thunder. A groan sounded behind him and the steel hull of the U-boat twisted in the water. Konrad turned briefly. The U-boat had fully capsized with the bow completely submerged. She would sink now, and he could only watch as the U-boat bubbled and plummeted to the depths.

Now at the mercy of the sea Konrad bobbed in the water as the storm raged around him. He treaded water with his leaden legs as he gasped for breath. But as soon as the U-boat sunk below the surface the storm began to subside. The rain stopped and the clouds above gave one last groan of protest before becoming silent. Even the waves, violent only a minute before, became gentle while they lapped at his face. A tangy stench of petrol along with the deeper scent of oil filled the air. Debris floated about, papers from the Captain's cabin, the last of their vegetables and bits of wood from the crews' quarters. Konrad looked around for a something big he could hold onto. He spied what appeared to be a wooden table about ten meters to his right. He kicked and swam toward it, his lungs aching as he drew in breath for this newest exertion.

He guessed correctly. Konrad flipped the table so that the legs faced up. He wrapped his arm around one of the legs and watched as the clouds overhead clear and move to the east. A half moon hung over the glassy sea while the stars shined above.

The visage didn't last for long. A luminescent fog bank rolled across the sea towards him. It emitted a light of its own, a dull white but bright enough that he could see bright red blood seep from the cuts on his hands. Konrad had never seen a fog like this in his young life and he feared this was an ominous return of the pirates to drag him down into the depths.

The fog bank engulfed him and muffled any sounds from the sea and air. "Hello?" Konrad said. He didn't expect an answer, but he wanted to hear his own voice in the fog. It was diminished though, a hollow sound, as if he could hear with his hands clapped over his ears.

Something tugged on his leg below the surface. *Sharks?* There had to be blood in the water but Konrad figured that petrol and oil would force them away.

"Konraaaaaaad," someone called from the right.

"Who's there?" Konrad asked.

"Konraaaaaaad."

"Captain, is that you?" It couldn't be. He had watched the Captain ripped apart an hour earlier.

"Konraaaaaad," another voice called from the left. More voices joined reaching him through the luminescent fog bank.

"Who's there? Identify yourselves."

Once again something tugged on his ankle below the surface. It had to be sharks. The voices called his name again then his ankle was gripped and Konrad pulled under the water. He kicked and fought his way back to the surface to find himself surrounded by the voices. Just below the water unseen hands tugged at him. Konrad feared that he would be pulled to the murky depths.

1971

Laura and Miguel sat upright in their beds, mouths agape and eyes wide. Lightning lit up the little bedroom immediately followed by a crack of thunder that shook the house. Both grandchildren jumped.

"I am never going to sleep again," Miguel said.

"What happened next, *Opa*?" Laura asked.

"I don't know. I passed out during the night and found myself on the beach the next morning. That is how I met your *Oma*." That wasn't the entire story but Konrad realized he made a mistake in telling this one. *What was I thinking?* Such a horrible story for children to hear. He never told the story to anyone, much less Margareta or Alberto, his father in law. Konrad suspected Alberto knew more but they rarely spoke of it and always in a cryptic manner.

"I am never going to sleep again," Miguel repeated.

Konrad smiled and gave a light chuckle. "You will sleep just fine. You both will." They may sleep all the way through the night or they may have nightmares. Sometimes people wake up. Konrad had learned over the years that people reacted differently. "You can keep this lantern in here if it will help. I can find another one to light. Listen."

The storm had hit them quickly and just as abruptly disappeared into the night. The cracks of thunder only moments before were protesting groans that would soon die off.

"Now lie back and sleep. If you are still awake after a few minutes shout out. I am going to clean up the kitchen a bit."

The grandchildren crawled under their sheets. Miguel stifled a yawn and closed his eyes. Konrad quietly stood up and turned to them one more time before closing the door. Despite the darkness that surrounded him Konrad knew his way around. He had been living here for twenty years. It was a matter of feeling his way through the dark and making the correct turns. He found the spare lantern kept under the sink and the matches in the kitchen drawer. The lantern lit on the first match giving a soft warm glow to the kitchen. Konrad took a few minutes to clean some of the plates that they had set aside earlier. That didn't take long. Now he had to prepare for his evening.

With the lantern in hand he went to the master bedroom. There, on a high shelf in the closet, was his pistol and ammunition in an old wooden cigar box. Konrad reached for it and carefully pulled it down. He made his way back to

kitchen, set the cigar box and lantern on the little dinette table, then checked the cabinet next to the new refrigerator. It held a half bottle of Kentucky bourbon. Konrad grabbed a glass from another cabinet and set it on the table alongside the bourbon.

Ignoring the bourbon Konrad opened the cigar box. It held the same pistol that he wore that day twenty-eight years earlier, well maintained by his ingrained German efficiency and in excellent working order. Konrad believed in taking care of things.

He loaded the magazine into the pistol and chambered a round. Konrad carefully set the pistol on the table then closed the cigar box. After that he opened the bourbon and poured a generous portion in the glass.

Konrad sipped the bourbon and waited.

### Part III: Love, Life and Prosperity

1943 and after

The screeching of the gulls pierced his skull. Konrad jerked and opened his eyes only to find himself blinded by the sun. He raised a hand to ward off the harsh sunlight. Someone stood nearly two meters away and watched him silently.

Confusion clouded Konrad's mind. Why wasn't he on the bridge of the U-boat? Then terror flooded him and he remembered what happened the day before. Konrad tried to kick himself away from the figure near him, his heels digging into the sand.

*"Está bien, espera aquí. Voy por mi papá."* A woman's voice. Konrad raised his hand again to block the sun. She was a young woman in a light blue cotton dress with the hemline at the knee. One of the islanders with lighter brown skin instead of the dark black. *Cuban?* Spanish of some sort. He really couldn't see her in the sunlight, only that she had her hand extended in a "wait here" gesture. *"Papá,"* she called as she ran up the beach.

Konrad tried to sit up but his head exploded in pain. He laid back down in the sand and closed his eyes. He only needed a few more minutes of rest.

He awoke again with a man kneeling beside him. The man looked down on him with a face weathered by years in the sun, expressive brown eyes and a thick salt and pepper mustache. The pretty woman he saw minutes ago hovered behind the man. The man offered a steel canteen. *"¿Agua?"* Konrad reached for the water, unscrewed the top and gulped. *"Despacio,"* the man said. *"¿Hablas español?"*

*"Nein, sprichst du Deutsch?"* Konrad asked.

"No. Do you speak English?"

"Ja. I mean yes."

The man offered a warm smile. "I am Alberto. This is my daughter Margareta."

"My name is Konrad. Thank you for the water."

"German?" Alberto eyed the tattered remains of the *Kriegsmarine* uniform. His eyes lingered on the holstered pistol.

Konrad followed Alberto's eyes. "This? You can have this."

"It would make me more comfortable."

Konrad slowly reached and removed the pistol from the holster. He handed the pistol over by the butt end. Konrad took a risk here but the man had been generous and friendly thus far and Konrad's instinct told him that the man was a good person.

"I can take you to the house," Alberto said. "You can rest up for a few days. We can take you to the hospital later and find one of your people. Can you walk?"

"I think so."

"I can't carry a big man like you in my arms but I can help you walk to the truck."

Konrad nodded and Alberto helped him up. He slung one arm around his neck while Margareta supported him on the other side. She remained silent, gazing at him with curiosity but without fear. They walked him up from the beach to find a small truck. It had been cannibalized from two other trucks, the front half painted sky blue while the bed was dull rusty red. Alberto and Margareta helped him into the truck bed. They left Konrad while they climbed into the cab. Konrad felt his eyes close again even as the truck gently rumbled away from the beach. A short while later he woke again when they stopped.

A small neat house stood a hundred meters from the beach. Konrad looked in both directions and saw other houses more than a kilometer away. A back porch attached the house faced the sea with several lounge chairs. The walls were painted a soft orange color, like the beginning of a sunset. Lush green plants hung from flower pots suspended from the porch ceiling.

Alberto and Margareta helped Konrad into the house. They took him to a bedroom with a small wooden bed. Konrad collapsed on the waiting bed with a clump. Margareta helped him out of his soggy boots.

"Lie back and rest," Alberto said. "Margareta and I can tend to your wounds. There is food and more water when you are able."

Konrad was afraid to sleep. The haunting apparitions from the night before were still fresh memories in his head, but he was exhausted and slept immediately.

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Konrad woke up feeling ravenous. He nearly hopped out of the bed but found himself naked. He looked around and found his uniform cleaned and stacked on a nearby chair, including his underwear. Alberto and Margareta must have undressed him while he slept. He had been bathed with his wounds tended as well. Konrad was a bit ashamed but grateful of the hospitality of his hosts.

Outside the bedroom an earnest discussion occurred between father and daughter. It wasn't quite heated but voices were raised. The discussion abruptly ended and someone, presumably Alberto, drove away in the truck. Konrad donned the clean uniform and peeked his head outside the bedroom door. He treaded carefully to the kitchen to find Margareta wearing a white cotton dress and sitting at the table waiting for him. She met his eyes immediately as he stepped into the room. The aroma of food filled the kitchen and Konrad's belly rumbled again.

Margareta smiled and said, "*¿Tienes hambre?*" She mimed putting food in her mouth.

"Yes," Konrad said.

She stood up and waved for him to sit at the table. Konrad took a seat while she went to the stove. Margareta scooped out spoonfuls of food on a ceramic plate. She set it in front of him along with utensils then fetched a glass of water. "*Arroz con pollo,*" Margareta said. Chicken with rice.

Konrad dug in, careful to take measured bites lest appearing like a starved barbarian. "What day is it," Konrad asked. She furrowed her brow. Konrad looked around and spied a calendar on the wall. It had a painted picture of a beach with a bottom portion of the calendar featuring tear away months. He pointed at it.

"Ah," she said as she stood up. Margareta pointed to the 24th, Saturday. "*Tú.*" The day they found him. She pointed to Sunday and then pointed toward the bedroom where he stayed. The she tapped to calendar twice on Monday. Konrad had slept through the entire previous day. Alberto was likely off fishing.

Margareta sat down again and watched him eat. This was the first time he could really take a close look at her. She was really a beautiful young woman with a pixyish face. Margareta was only a handful of years younger than Konrad. She had long black hair that hung down her mid back. Margareta was short, maybe 152 centimeters, a lean body with some muscle. She was not a kept possession but rather worked around the house.

When Konrad finished she snatched the plate away and scooped out another serving. Konrad could only eat half of the second helping before he felt full. They stared at each other for a couple of minutes then Margareta started teaching him Spanish in earnest.

Alberto arrived home just as the sun started to set. He smiled at Konrad. "I see you decided to wake up today."

"Yes. I had no idea I slept through the night. Thank you for your hospitality."

Alberto waved it off. "Let's have some dinner." He went off to the bathroom where Margareta had already run him a bath. Alberto bathed quickly and changed into some fresh work clothes. The dinner prepared was fish seasoned with coconut and ginger. This was not something typical served in Germany but Konrad loved it. The spices made the dish more flavorful. After dinner Alberto grabbed beers from the icebox and nodded toward the back porch. Konrad followed his hosts outside. Alberto popped the cap off the bottle and handed the cold beer to Konrad. The sun barely clung to the horizon giving the sky a warm orange hue.

"How do you feel?" Alberto asked.

"Much better," Konrad said. "You two have done so much for me."

Alberto translated for Margareta and she said something back. "She says she has been teaching you Spanish?"

"Yes, today. I am fluent in French and English. I have a gift for languages."

"Then you should learn Spanish quickly."

They passed the time watching the sunset and enjoying their beers. Little talk occurred but each time it did Alberto translated for his daughter to include her in the conversation.

That was how they passed the next several days. Alberto would go off to fish in the morning. Margareta would teach Konrad some Spanish. He would help her with chores around the house. When Alberto arrived in the evening he would bring back part of his catch for the ice box. They would eat, watch the sunset with ice cold beers and a chat a little.

When Alberto returned home on Thursday he told Konrad, "We have to decide what to do next. How are you feeling?"

"I feel good. Strong," Konrad said.

"Do you feel like you need to go to the hospital?"

Konrad shook his head. "I don't think so. I have recovered well and my wounds are healing."

"Do we need to find your people?"

Konrad frowned. The German army had already surrendered in Stalingrad earlier that year. Just a couple of weeks before the Allies had begun their invasion of Sicily. The German army would soon be forced out of North Africa if not already. In the North Atlantic U-boats were sunk at an alarming rate. If Konrad returned to Germany he would just be pressed back into the *Kriegsmarine* service. Konrad was in no hurry to go home. "I would like to stay here for a while."



Alberto nodded.

"You two have been so kind to me. I would like to repay you. Is there any work I can do that would make up for it?"

"I could use some help on the boat. How much do you know about fishing?"

Konrad smiled. "Very little, but I can learn."

"Tomorrow is Friday. Take the day to think about it. On Saturday we rest. On Sunday we got to church and then rest. If you haven't changed your mind we go out on Monday. We'll buy you some more clothes. I think going to church in a German Navy uniform might draw attention. We can add it to your debt and then you will be paid a wage. Do you agree to those terms?"

"I do."

Konrad didn't need to think anything more about it. He didn't want to return to Germany. He removed all the insignia from his uniform to dampen down the suspicion and they did buy some more clothes for Konrad. It was added to his debt as he expected.

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Their lives became a daily routine. Alberto and Konrad would go out to the boat in the morning, fish all day, keep a few choice catches for themselves so that Margareta could serve it as dinner. Margareta kept up with the house during the day and cooked the meals. At night Konrad would learn more Spanish from her and the three of them would finish the evening with beers while watching the sunset.

On the weekends they did light chores around the house. On Sundays they attended church and enjoyed a midday meal with other parishioners. Konrad's Spanish improved so that he could hold his own conversations with the parishioners and other fishermen.

Konrad also became aware that he was falling for Margareta. He suspected she felt the same way about him. In early December he mustered the courage to ask Alberto if he could court his daughter.

Alberto scowled although amusement twinkled in his eyes. "She is my only little girl. If you hurt her I will hang your balls off the bow of the boat."

"Yes, sir. I understand, sir." With that Konrad's courtship of Margareta began. On a Saturday night Konrad and Margareta took the ramshackle truck into Santo Domingo to have dinner at a small seafood restaurant that the other fishermen in the area approved of. After dinner they took a walk along the cobblestone sidewalk next to the beach as the sun began to set.

"You never talk about that day," Margareta said.

"Which day?"

"The day we found you on the beach. The day before an American cargo ship sank off the coast. It was long rumored that it sunk by a German submarine. Then you washed up on the beach the next day."

"It was the war. Not something I really like to talk about. I would rather go fishing with your father and try to steal kisses from you."

She punched him playfully in the ribs as he put his arm around her shoulder. "*Papá* says we should never talk about that day. 'Secrets of the sea,' he says. It's like you two have secrets that you leave me out of. What do you talk about on the boat?"

"We talk about fishing. I talk about you. Your father scowls at me but doesn't really mean it. Sometimes we talk about the news of the war."

"But you never talk about that day?"

Despite the warm evening Konrad shivered. "No, we don't." Alberto had never once asked him what happened on that night last July. Konrad had long suspected that Alberto already knew.

\*\*\*

In early June all the talk was of the Allied invasion of France. With the Americans advancing through Italy and Russians from the east Hitler's Thousand Year Reich would come to an end by Christmas. The news should have elated Konrad but Alberto's mood had darkened. He barely spoke and his scowls were now genuine. Konrad feared that scowls had to do with something else. The anniversary of the day U-474 sank was upon them.

On a Friday after a day of fishing the men climbed in the truck to return home. Alberto started the truck and made his way to the main road. "I need to tell you a story," Alberto said. "Don't say anything, don't ask questions, just let me tell story and you think about it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Konrad said.

"I am a man of God, and as a God-fearing man that makes me superstitious too. Even though I am a simple fisherman I like to read, listen to music and engage in the arts. I think I have passed along those traits to my daughter. So despite my superstitions I am still a skeptic when it comes to ghost stories. Being a fisherman sometimes you are trapped at sea late at night and hear and see unworldly things.

"The waters south of here have long been rumored to be haunted. Tales of a cursed pirate ship that comes back to earth on the anniversary when it sank, offering its riches as bait to the unsuspecting passerby. I first heard this story when I was a child and paid no attention to it. It was only a story, right? Until the *Valentina's Bounty* disappeared.

"She was a fishing boat with a crew of seven including the captain. Bigger than our boat so they needed more men but brought in a bigger haul. She went out on a

day in late July and was never seen again. The crew went down with save for one man. He was a deckhand by the name of Juan. When search parties went to find *Valentina's Bounty* they found the wreckage floating on the sea. Juan was clinging to the largest piece. He was promptly rescued and brought back to Santo Domingo. After that he told the tale of the cursed pirate ship to anyone who would listen. They were on their way back to port with a storm closing behind them. The derelict pirate ship was directly across their beam. They went to render aid but we all knew better. They were hoping to find something valuable. Juan was to man the helm as the captain and crew boarded the vessel. He said they were excited as they found treasure aboard. The men moved as much as they could but the storm chased them too fast. Juan wanted to get his hands on the treasure as well but the captain wanted him at the helm. So he watched as all the gold was stored with their fresh catch. When the storm caught up to them they cast off immediately. Their attempt to flee was short lived. They were boarded by ghostly pirates who set about slaughtering the crew. Juan said a pirate had him pinned in the wheelhouse ready to run him by the sword but the pirate leapt away. Soon the ship sank leaving Juan clinging to life. He said he was surrounded by a bright fog with the drowned voices of his crew begging him to join them.

"Most people laughed at Juan. It was too fantastic of a story to be believed by anyone other than children. I know that Juan never returned to sea and he spent the rest of his short life drinking himself stupid. On the anniversary of the date that *Valentina's Bounty* sank Juan ran into the bar with excitement. 'Drinks for everyone,' he said.

"How are you going to pay for it?' the bartender asked.

"With my share of the gold. I woke up on the beach this morning and the gold waited for me in the sand. Waiting for me!"

"Let's see it,'

"Juan reached into his pocket and pulled out nothing. Everyone laughed and the bartender threw Juan out. Juan looked at his hands as if he expected a gold coin to appear before his eyes.

"That night a fast-moving storm hit Santo Domingo. Normally, we islanders take these storms seriously but I was so tired and sleepy I was out before the storm ended. Back then I lived in a boarding house in Santo Domingo. I checked around the next day and everyone else reported strange experiences. Some slept through the night as I had, like innocent babes. Others reported that they were plagued with nightmares. Still there were some that said they woke up in the middle of the night with a sense of fear and disquiet, like something was wrong with the world. 'It was queer,' they remarked. One thing that was for certain - Juan was never seen again.

"You see, I think the dead couldn't take Juan before because he never touched the gold. Not satisfied they came back to tempt him. They laid out another trinket of gold before his eyes and Juan couldn't resist the temptation."

Alberto turned toward Konrad. "Do you understand, Konrad. Never touch the gold."

Konrad stared ahead through the windshield. Even though it was a warm day he was covered with sweat with it running off his brow and stinging his eyes. *I never touched the gold that day. I never touched the gold.*

\*\*\*

July began and the mood turned pensive around the household. Neither Konrad nor Alberto said much. Their silent dinners became a brief affair and they stopped having beers at sunset. Margareta cornered Konrad on a Saturday morning. "Why are you and *papá*, so angry with each other?"

Konrad arched his eyebrows. "We're not angry."

"Then why are you two in such foul moods?"

"It will get better. I promise." The next day was the anniversary of the U-boat sinking. Konrad's stomach knotted up as he worried what the day would hold for him.

On Sunday they had a light breakfast and dressed for church. Alberto wore his same suit that he had for years. Margareta had a bright yellow flower print dress that Konrad had purchased as a gift. Konrad himself had even bought a tailored suit from town. They exited the house when something glittered in Konrad's eye. He turned to see a gold coin sitting precariously on the porch rail. Only a small coin with the word "*hispania*" pressed along the edge and a simple cross in the middle. The coin shined as if freshly minted. Konrad stared at the coin the watched himself as he reached for it with his right hand. He felt like a man possessed with the coin urging him to put it in his pocket. All the sounds around him, the sea breeze, the screeching gulls and the distant crashing surf faded away as he could no longer hear the blood rushing in his ears and the muffled time of his heartbeat.

"Konrad!"

He turned and saw Alberto and Margaret watching him from beside the truck. "Are you coming with us?" Alberto asked.

Konrad turned to the coin for an answer but it disappeared. He looked at the porch and the opposite side of the railing. The coin was completely gone. "Yes, I am coming." He turned to join them as they climbed into the truck.

The ramshackle truck rattled down the road. The anxiety lifted from Konrad with each passing kilometer. "You know," Konrad said. "I think this is going to be a good day. I think this is going to be an excellent day." He laughed.

For the first time in weeks Alberto smiled.

Konrad enjoyed church that day as well as the communal lunch afterwards. He felt downright jovial. After lunch they made their way back home. When they

returned Margareta began a pot of beans for dinner while Alberto offered Konrad a beer from the icebox. They sat out on the back porch watching the surf crash in the distance.

"This is the best mood I have seen you in for weeks," Alberto said.

Konrad held out his bottle to clink in a toast which Alberto returned in kind. "The best mood I have seen you in, too," Konrad said. "I think we don't have anything to worry about."

"That's good."

They sipped their beers and both men dozed in their chairs. In the early evening Margareta woke them and announced dinner. After they went inside she remarked, "It looks like we are going to get hit by a storm."

Konrad looked west to see purple storm clouds off in the horizon. It was nothing unusual. There were always storms in the Caribbean.

During dinner all three had laughed as Alberto regaled them with outlandish fishing stories from his past. Konrad and Margareta had heard them before but Konrad took comfort in their familiarity. It reminded him of old times.

When they finished dinner, lightning flashed across the sky. "I think the storm is going to be big," Margareta said.

Alberto cocked his head as if listening to the weather gods whisper in his ear. "It's going to be fierce but it will move quickly before it does any damage."

"Well, I am going to clean up."

Alberto looked at Konrad. "No beers at sunset tonight."

Konrad smiled. "It's just some rain. Like you said, it will pass."

Alberto reached across the table and clapped Konrad's wrist with affection. "Maybe we can sleep through it. Get some rest before tomorrow." His mouth gaped in a yawn.

The storm swelled in strength as the lightning intensified and the thunder shook the house. Alberto sat dozing in his easy chair while Konrad lit a couple of lamps to give them light. When Margareta finished she yawned and said, "*Oh por Dios*, I am so sleepy." She went over to her father and shook him awake. "*Papá!* Go to bed. If you fall asleep in this chair again you know your back is going to hate it tomorrow."

He grunted and slowly rose from the easy chair. Margareta looked at Konrad. "Are you going to bed?"

"No, I will wait out the storm a bit. You go to sleep. I will see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, love," she said and blew him a kiss.

Konrad didn't feel the slightest bit tired. Maybe the nap on the porch earlier in the day had satiated his fatigue. Just as Alberto had predicted the storm vanished as fast as it appeared. Konrad sat in Alberto's easy chair, turned on the radio to play some music out of Santo Domingo and opened a copy of *Moby Dick* written in Spanish that Alberto kept on a meager bookshelf.

He read with the music playing quietly in the background. The storm must have affected the town as well. Soon the music disappeared to be replaced by a static crackle. Still, he had plenty of light to read by. After reading a few more minutes Konrad started to notice that he could see the words on the page clearly. He looked up to find the windows flooded with a steady stream of white light.

"Curious," Konrad said. He closed the book and laid it on the end table. Konrad went to the front door and peered out. Konrad shivered as he saw their little house engulfed in a luminous white fog. He opened the door and it gave a squeak from a hinge that needed oil. He took a step on the wooden porch and it protested a muffled creak under his weight.

"Is - Is there anyone there?" Konrad called out.

The fog swallowed up his voice. It reminded him of having his head between pillows. He cupped his ear, straining to listen, and finally caught a sound. *Thump-drag*. A pause of several seconds then another *thump-drag*.

"Who is out there? Show yourself?"

*Thump-drag*.

*Thump-drag*.

*Thump-drag*.

"Answer me, damn it!"

"Konrad," a voice called from the fog. "*Come join us. We came back for you. The crew needs you.*"

Konrad gave a startled yelp.

*Thump-drag*. The sound approached even closer. Konrad's first thought was Margareta and her father. "No! Go away! You can't be here. I never touched the gold!"

"Konrad, we still need you to join us."

*Thump-drag*. The sound was right in front of him. A gray green hand landed on his bare foot. He felt the weight of it and the fingers closed to seek purchase. The hand belonged to the corpse of the Hauptman from the galley. Konrad

remembered that he had been cleaved from shoulder to hip. The kid's grey bloated entrails dragged behind him.

"No," Konrad shrieked. He pulled his foot behind back and backed into the house. Konrad shut the door then locked it.

"Margareta," he said. He had to wake her. Konrad strode across the house in several seconds and barged into her room. He knelt by the bed and started shaking her. "Wake up! We need to leave now!" Still, she slumbered, unaffected by Konrad's attempts. He tried shaking her again, this time wildly, but she still did not wake.

"Alberto," Konrad called out. "You have to help me wake Margareta up and get her out of here." He rushed from her room to her father's.

*"Konraaaaaaaaaaad, joooooooooin us."*

Alberto slept unaware of the submariners and pirates now surrounding the house. Konrad tried shaking Alberto but it was to no avail.

"The gun," Konrad said.

He went back to the living room and opened the closet. The cacophony of voices came from every side of the house now. Konrad found the cigar box where he put away his weapon during the previous year. He slipped the magazine in the grip and chambered a round. He turned around to find himself face to face with pirates and his own dead crew. Konrad had never heard them come in.

"I never touched the gold," Konrad said.

Captain Fleischer stepped forward, his lips eaten away by the sea life giving him a grinning macabre visage. *"Konrad, join us. The crew needs you."* The Captain extended his hand like a dead lover reaching for a final embrace.

"Never," Konrad said.

*"Then we'll take her instead."* Each of the ghost heads turned towards Margareta's bedroom in unison.

Konrad took aim with the pistol and fired at Captain Fleischer's head. The round passed through the apparition and smacked against the wall. Konrad fired blindly two more times, busting a window pane in the process. He rushed to Margareta's room to find three of the pirates standing over her sleeping form. The tallest was the pirate captain and he held his cutlass high above Margareta's chest with both hands.

"No," Konrad shouted and fired the pistol again, busting another window. Margareta groaned in and tossed her head as if having a nightmare. The pirate captain leapt atop her and turned to Konrad. It shrieked at him and waited. Konrad took aim then paused. He lowered the gun. "You want me to shoot. You know the bullet will pass through like it always has and hit her."

The pirate captain shrieked again and reached as if to choke her. Konrad wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand. He put the pistol back into his pocket and smiled. "You can't take her. You can't take Alberto. You can't take me unless I go willingly. I know your tricks."

He backed away from Margareta's room, spied more spectral pirates hovering over Alberto in his room and then he went into his own bedroom. Konrad took the pillow from his bed and walked to the bathroom. This would be the hard part. Konrad climbed into the tub and mashed the pillow over his ears. Still, Captain Fleischer called out to him. Konrad realized the pillow was useless. They spoke directly into his head, still begging for him to join them. Konrad looked up once to see the entire crew of both dead ships standing over him. They reached and tugged with their skeletal fingers but they could not take him. Konrad closed his eyes again and waited.

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Margareta's voice pulled Konrad out of a feverish dream. "Do you always sleep in the bathtub or just after you have a wild party?"

Konrad bolted upright in the tub. "Huh?" He shook his head to clear it. Margareta stood above him in her white linen nightgown with a bemused smile. "The house is a wreck, Konrad. What did you do while *Papá* and I slept?"

"I will fix it, I promise."

He pulled his aching body out of the tub. He stepped gingerly into the hallway then into the main room. Alberto stood surveying the bullet marks on the wall and busted window. Additionally, a lamp had been knocked over and broken as well as the stuffing gouged out of the sofa.

"She's right," Alberto said. "That must have been some party, and my poor daughter and I slept right through it uninvited."

"You might have slept through it," Margareta said. "But I had the most awful nightmares."

Konrad stole a glance at Alberto. Alberto slightly shook his head. They didn't need to talk about this with her.

Konrad hung his head down. "I promise to fix it, sir."

"Do you need to take a day for yourself?"

"No, sir, I would rather fish."

Alberto grunted. "Then let's have some breakfast and head for the boat."

The old pickup truck belched and farted on the sandy beach road. Alfredo asked him, "Is there anything you need to tell me about last night?"

"I would rather not talk about it, sir. You are not angry with me?"



"Shooting a gun around the house is dangerous. I would not like to see you shoot one of us or yourself. It didn't escape my notice that it was the one-year anniversary of when your submarine sank."

Konrad remained silent.

"Do you have this under control?"

"Yes, sir, I do. I promise, no more shooting guns in the dead of night."

"I am surprised it woke neither of us. But we were so sleepy last night that we were dead to the world. I don't think that is a coincidence either."

Konrad reflected on the horrors of the previous evening. There seem to be limitations to what the pirates and his fellow submariners could and could not do. They could grab and tug at him but they could not hurt him. He, of course, could not hurt them. They tempted him with gold but if he didn't touch the gold they couldn't take him. Those around him would fall asleep, immune from the horrors that befell Konrad. A brief raging storm would roll through quickly and then the strange ethereal bright fog to herald the spectres' arrival. "Sir, I think I have a handle on what is going on, and I promise not to let it happen again. I will have everything fixed by the weekend."

Alberto chuckled. "If I know my Margareta she will have most of it fixed by the time we return home. She has quite the fondness for you, you know?"

"I am fond of her." Margareta remained the brightest point in Konrad's day.

Their haul that day was bountiful, mostly red snapper and flounder. The work was backbreaking, but Konrad relished it after the harrowing night in the bathtub. When they returned home they found that Margareta had fixed most of the damage. "I leave the windows to you," she said.

Konrad felt confident that he had a handle on this thing after all.

\*\*\*

The war didn't end by Christmas as many predicted. Instead, the *Wehrmacht* pushed back and would extend the war by another six months. Konrad pulled Alberto aside one evening after a day of fishing and declared his love for Margareta. He asked her father for permission to marry her. Alberto gladly gave it.

The fishing business proved to be lucrative. They were making good amounts of money. Konrad remembered his mother and father in Bavaria doing bookkeeping for the farm. It gave Konrad ideas for expanding the business. Soon, another fishing boat to was added to the Castillo & Weber Fishing Company.

The war in Europe ended in May and soon gave way to June. Another upcoming anniversary of the sinking of U-474. With that Konrad became obsessed with learning more about the ghostly pirate ship haunting the waters of the Caribbean. When they went to Santo Domingo on the weekends Konrad would

excuse himself to do research at the little library in town. His only starting point was the *Valentina's Bounty*. He found accounts of what happened and the storm that occurred a year later. People reported strange accounts of nightmares and dread in the middle of the night. Konrad tried to research back further but could only find reports here and there of ships reported missing around July 23<sup>rd</sup>.

One afternoon the young bespectacled librarian approached Konrad as he read a newspaper account from the 1850s. "Is there anything I can help you with, *Señor* Weber?"

Konrad looked up from the page he was reading. "Have you always lived here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know anything about the accounts of a pirate ship that sunk off the southern coast?"

"Just the stories that I heard when I was a little girl. Tales of a ghost ship that returns on the anniversary of its sinking."

"Do you believe in those stories?"

The librarian laughed. "We live in modern times. There are no such things as ghosts but try to tell my mother that."

Konrad asked a few others around Santo Domingo about their own personal accounts. They freely shared their stories with him but Konrad remained discrete with his inquiries. He didn't want to give anyone the impression that he was crazy.

Everything happened in the pattern as he predicted. The gold coin appeared, this time sticking out of a bowl of white rice for dinner. Neither Alberto or Margareta saw it. Konrad picked the bowl up from the table and carefully scooped the coin the trash. Margareta was confused but Alberto said nothing and scooped rice on his plate. Konrad passed on the rice.

The storm soon followed. Alberto and his daughter made their excuses for bed. Then the luminous fog appeared. Konrad knew they would make their way in and taunt him. He grabbed his pillow and light blanket and headed for the bathtub. Konrad couldn't explain it, just that the tub felt less exposed than his open bed. The voices of his dead shipmates echoed through his head along with the angry shrieks of the spectral pirates. If he followed the rules he was safe. But what if they changed the rules? That gave Konrad pause.

The second anniversary of the sinking passed and Konrad found himself awakened by a bemused Margareta in the bathtub. "What is it with you and bathtubs?" she asked.

He gave an embarrassed smile. "We all do this in Germany. Didn't you know that?"

Shortly after the Americans dropped two atomic bombs in Japan Margareta asked, "Can you imagine such horror?"

Konrad said nothing but he could imagine a greater personal horror that got into your face with fetid breath and reached into your skull with their waterlogged voices beckoning you down to the depths.

While the winter neared Konrad and Margareta cemented their vows in a ceremony at the church in Santo Domingo. The parishioners celebrated with a feast. It was the happiest day in Konrad's life thus far.

When they returned home that evening Alberto said to them, "I would imagine you two will want to move into the city now."

Konrad looked at Margareta and she nodded. "We would like to build a house on the beach with you," he said.

"You mean, next to this house?"

"No, *Papá*," Margareta said. "We would like for you to live in the house with us."

"I am an old man," Alberto said. "A young married couple needs their own space. Besides, it is too expensive."

"Sir," Konrad said. "The business is doing well and the expense would be all mine. We can build a larger house like the ones in the American magazines. Let us do this for you."

"I don't know," Alberto said, but it was already settled.

They continued to live in the small house on the beach while they waited for the new big house. Konrad and Margareta slept in his room together while ensuring the utmost discretion to keep her father from getting embarrassed. By the end of summer, after the third anniversary of the sinking of U-474, the new house was ready, with Alberto's bedroom the furthest away from theirs.

The business continued to prosper. A third fishing boat was added along with the fourth. Castillo & Weber had a reputation for sniffing out the best fish and they soon added another boat to catch crab and lobster. It made Konrad wonder. Was all this good fortune the opposite side of the cursed gold coin that seemed to follow him everywhere on July 23<sup>rd</sup>? Only one day a year to worry about as opposed to the other 364.

In 1947 their daughter Gretchen joined their lives. The only thing she gained from Konrad was his blue eyes while she looked exactly like her mother. They named her after his mother in Germany. Konrad had never been back to Germany after the war. Although his mother, father and sister were alive when he last saw them he made no attempt to reach out. The furthest he strayed from the island was to Miami for some business dealings. Again, Konrad wondered if it was related to the curse. Was he tied to the island never to return to Europe? He didn't know

and he didn't care to explore it much further than that. He led a different life now, the world of Nazi Germany left in the past.

Every year the damned pirates and his dead crew showed up. In 1956 Konrad thought he would be clever and take Margareta to a *hacienda* near Havana. The spectres followed him there as well. He remembered a harrowing night being chased by ghosts in the *hacienda* courtyard while every guest remained asleep.

In 1961 the spectres offered a new trick. Early in the year Alberto died in his sleep. Konrad missed his father in law and did his best to console Margareta. When the pirates returned on July 23<sup>rd</sup> they brought the visage of Alberto with him. He appeared in two forms, as the man Konrad remembered just before he died and as a rotting corpse alongside Captain Fleischer. He beckoned for Konrad to join them.

"It's a trick," Konrad shouted. "Alberto would have never wanted this. Damn you all and your trickery."

Alberto showed up the next few years after that until he finally faded away.

#### Part IV: Death and Melancholy

By January 1971 the Castillo & Weber Fishing Company was the most prominent business on the island. Everyone took notice of Konrad and his family. Konrad remained so busy handling the company business that he couldn't go out on the boats any more. Each one was captained and crewed. Konrad made sure to pay them a generous wage.

Konrad worked the books on Tuesdays. He kept forgetting to put on reading glasses, a new accessory given that he just turned fifty-one. He had nearly added a column of numbers up when Javier, his son-in-law, entered the office along with Gretchen.

Konrad scowled at him but immediately dropped the pretense when he saw Javier's eyes. "What is it?" he asked him.

"It's *mama*," Gretchen said. "Oh, *papá*, there has been an accident."

"She was at the shop in town," Javier continued. "She loaded the fruits and vegetables in the trunk and another car hit her. They have pulled her from the wreckage."

Konrad's heart pounded in his chest. Not his Margareta! "Where is she?"

"At the hospital," Javier rounded the desk and gently grabbed Konrad by the elbow. "We'll take you."

Javier pushed the Buick Roadmaster around the winding island roads, the tires screeching in protest at the speed as it took the turns. Konrad sat in the passenger seat while wringing his hands. He was filled with dread. They reached the hospital forty-five minutes later. Javier had barely put the car in park before Konrad leapt

out and headed in. He walked straight into the emergency room. "I am looking for my wife!"

Three nurses stood in the room along with a doctor. No one said a word. The nurses looked at the doctor expectantly. The doctor cleared his throat. "*Señor* Weber. If you would just come with me."

The doctor gently pulled Konrad by the elbow and escorted him away from the emergency room down the hall. "Can you take me to my wife, please?" Konrad asked.

"I will, in a moment."

"Is she all right?"

"*Señora* Weber suffered grave injuries in the car accident. She was pinned between the two vehicles for some time. Your wife was immediately rushed here where we tried to do everything we could for her. I am afraid that there was nothing more we could do."

"My wife is..."

"I am sorry, *Señor* Weber."

Konrad covered his mouth and stifled a sob. "Margareta."

"I will take you to her."

The doctor lead Konrad to empty exam room. There she lay, on her back with her eyes closed, looking as if in peace. A clean white sheet covered her from foot to neck. The room was cleaned. If there had been chaotic trauma the staff took care to clean it up before Konrad arrived. A single fluorescent light fixture hung from the ceiling over the table. Otherwise the gloomy dark room featured no windows and faintly smelled of antiseptic. A single wooden chair sat against the tile wall. Konrad pulled the chair away from the wall a couple of inches, the wooden legs screeching against the tile floor. He winced at the sound then gently sat down in the chair. The table holding his wife was a couple of meters away. His wife had her eyes closed as if she were merely resting in the afternoon.

A memory came to Konrad unbidden. Their wedding day, the happiest day of Konrad's life. They stood before the priest at the altar. Margareta had worn a simple white dress decorated with lace. When the priest said that he may kiss the bride he turned toward her and lifted the veil. Those expressive brown eyes would be what he would always remember from that moment. She smiled as he leaned down for the kiss.

The weekend that he taught Margareta how to drive the truck. He went over the controls patiently, detailing how to start it, how each pedal worked and how to shift the gears on the column. She concentrated and paid attention to every detail as he demonstrated how to drive along the empty sandy beach. Then it was her turn. She got behind the wheel, started the truck successfully and popped the

clutch. That was when she promptly lost control and drove it straight into the surf where the truck immediately drowned.

Margareta gasped and turned to Konrad in the passenger seat. His face was so serious when he said, "You have successfully killed the truck." Then Konrad cracked a smile. Margareta's hands flew to her mouth to cover her laugh. Then they both laughed for several minutes. The truck was pulled from the surf and Konrad repaired it within the week.

He remembered the joy on Margareta's face when Gretchen was born. Margareta had gone through labor most of the night until the sun rose in the morning. Konrad had paced the waiting room anxious for any news of the delivery. When the nurse told him he could come back he followed her quickly. He remembered the sight vividly as he entered the hospital room. Golden rays of sunshine spilled through the window and over the mother as she held their newborn daughter. She beamed a smile at the bundle of joy in her arms unaware that Konrad had entered the room. Margareta looked up to see him standing at the doorway and beckoned him to come closer to meet his daughter.

One day when Gretchen was seven years old she returned from school crying. A rare day when Konrad happened to be at the house as well. Margareta pulled Gretchen aside and asked her what had happened.

"The other children make fun of me," Gretchen said. "They make fun of my blue eyes."

"Those other children are silly," Margareta said. "Do you know who else on the island has blue eyes?"

Gretchen sniffled. "*Papá*?"

"That's right. You have pieces of your *papá* and me inside you, and you love your *papá* very much, right?"

"Yes, very much."

"Your eyes are very pretty. They are as blue as the sea. So pay no attention to those silly children. You know what is true in your heart."

Konrad had eavesdropped on this conversation outside of Gretchen's bedroom. Margareta never mentioned it but he suspected that she knew he listened. Between Konrad, Margareta and Alberto they were always intuitive about one another.

Konrad now remembered the sadness in Margareta's eyes when Alberto had passed. She wore a black veil on the day of his funeral. Konrad had stayed at his wife's side day and night in the week that followed. She said nothing to him beyond a few words of what she needed. Her eyes spoke for her. Between them they had an understanding that she needed to grieve and he allowed her to do that. Two days after Alberto's funeral Margareta sat on a lounge on the beach. Konrad had watched her from the window while absently biting his knuckle. She returned to

the house and found him. Margareta took his hand and lead him to the sofa in the living room. They sat down and she curled against him. She needed to be held. Konrad remembered that her hair smelled of sunshine.

Konrad's favorite memory of their time together was the picnic they took on the sea. It was a couple of years after Gretchen had been born. Alberto agreed to take the baby for the day while Konrad and Margareta enjoyed themselves. Konrad prepared one of the fishing boats, making sure it was scrubbed clean of fish guts. Margareta had packed the picnic lunch along with a bottle of red wine. They set out in the late morning heading for the open sea. Konrad piloted the boat far away from the island and the known fishing areas. When they dropped the anchor Margareta unpacked their lunch. Konrad surprised her with a bottle of champagne that he had spirited away. They enjoyed their lunch and laughed about days past. Drunk on champagne he leaned in for a kiss. She kissed him back and then she leaned forward for another. Soon they were wrapped in each other's arms. They made love on the open deck of the boat under the midday sun miles away from prying eyes. They returned early in the evening with silly smiles on their face.

Despite the hot tears running down his face Konrad couldn't help but smile at the memory. He loved Margareta more than anything in the world and now she had been taken away from him. Konrad stood up and slowly approached the bed on which his wife lay upon. He reached out his right hand and caressed Margareta's cheek. After some time had passed Konrad gently planted a kiss on Margareta's forehead then another one on her lips. He turned and left the room.

Konrad mourned the passing of his wife for the entire week after. It was the first time the office of Castillo & Weber Fishing Company had been closed. On the day of Margareta's funeral nearly everyone on the island turned out to pay their respects. The captains of his boats as well as the other fishermen expressed their condolences along with the mayor, the governor as well as the businessmen and shop owners. The church priest presided over the funeral.

After the brief period of mourning Konrad threw himself into his work. He opened the office before sunrise and left long after sunset. Konrad busied himself with an expansion project of adding two, maybe three, boats into his little fishing fleet. The work kept his mind off Margareta's passing. The nights were different. Gretchen and Javier took special care to visit nightly with a prepared meal for Konrad. He knew his daughter worried about him. "I am fine," Konrad would say. "I promise." His Margareta was still gone, ripped abruptly from his life and leaving a gaping hole in his heart. They couldn't enjoy the sunsets with their ice cold beers anymore. Her side of the bed was painfully empty. Konrad worked so hard that he threw himself into bed and fell immediately to sleep. Sometimes during the night he would wake and see Margareta on her side of the bed, watching him sleep with a smile that radiated love. He would reach for her to find that she wasn't there. A trick of moonlight and shadows. On these nights Konrad would weep until he fell back to sleep.

This was Konrad's daily melancholy.

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The glow outside brightened. It was the twenty-eighth time he had seen that annual glow. Konrad finished his dollop of bourbon in a single gulp and poured some more into the glass from the bottle. They would come now to torment him. Entice him to join their ranks of the undead. It didn't matter what he did, they would still make their way in, call out his name, their lungs filled with briny sea water giving their voices a nauseating gurgle. One by one they would come to him until they filled the room. It was a matter of which one would appear first. Probably Captain Fleischer.

The glowing fog filled the windows of the kitchen with ethereal light. The sounds of the ocean had disappeared. An eerie absence of silence when you were accustomed to the constant crash of the surf. A creak of a wooden board protested on the porch. They were coming again. Every night for the last twenty-seven years.

Footsteps shuffled around the house. The undead nudged up against walls banging against the adobe siding with their shoulders, elbows and hips. Captain Fleischer appeared first. "*Join us,*" he gurgled. The captain held the rusty grappling hook that had penetrated through his thigh.

Others faded into the room, like a photographers black and white photo revealing figures in the development process. A motley mix of his comrades along with the walking skeletons of the long dead mysterious pirate ship. Neumann stood before him, his lower abdomen a gaping black hole. He cradled his rusty submachine gun in his arms. Beck stood off to the side, his head reattached to his body with industrial fishing hooks. Schmidt remained remarkably intact. He only had a knife wound to his chest keeping his uniform mostly pristine. Holler was a walking charred corpse, with cracked skin revealing bright red beneath, like molten fissures of lava. Stoltz had lost his left arm in his defense against the pirates. He had a small colony of one-inch orange starfish growing on the right side of his face. And beneath the table was Hauptman who caressed Konrad's foot with his hand while he glared up at him.

They whispered promises of wealth and gold into his ears while they nipped and tugged at his clothing. They couldn't take him but if Konrad swung toward any of them his fists would find no purchase as they swished through the apparitions.

Impossibly all the apparitions filled out the tiny kitchen and breakfast nook. Layers upon layers of ghosts shifting in and out like double and triple exposures on a photo. Then he spotted a shadow behind them all in the shape of a woman. She moved between the other ghosts never giving Konrad a full view. Her throat rattled as she made her own plea. "*Join me, Konrad. You can't leave me alone like this.*"

"Margareta?"

The apparitions bristled at Konrad's voice and leaned forward with anticipation.

"*Please, Konrad, come join me. I am so lonely and cold here. I need you.*"



Konrad scowled. "Lies! You are nothing but a pack of liars!" He threw the whiskey glass at the apparitions. The glass sailed through the fright of ghosts and smashed into pieces against the far wall. They leaned forward more and cackled laughter from their waterlogged lungs.

"Lies," Konrad repeated as hot tears streamed from his eyes. His worst fear had come to life, the return of his beloved Margareta. "Lies," he said again. Konrad reached forward and placed his trembling hand on the pistol. He rested his finger above the trigger guard.

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Laura sat bolt upright in bed. Something was wrong. In the soft glow of the lantern she saw Miguel in the other bed, sitting up right with his mouth in an O and eyes wide with fear.

"A nightmare woke me up. And a sound."

Laura shook her head to clear the fog of sleep. "What did you hear?"

Miguel frowned. "I don't know." Tears started to well up in his eyes. He was such a baby.

Laura stepped out of bed and grabbed the lantern.

"Stay here," Miguel said. "Don't leave me here in the dark."

"I want to see if everything is okay."

"I don't want to be by myself."

"Well, come with me."

"Okay." His voice trembled. Miguel stepped out of bed behind his older sister. She reached for the door handle and turned it slowly. When she pulled the door open it squeaked. Laura cringed, paused for several seconds, then moved on with her brother closely following.

*Thump-drag.*

"What was that?" Laura asked.

"What?"

"That noise."

"I didn't hear anything."

*Thump-drag*

It was coming from the back porch, the side that faced the beach. Laura walked slowly, creeping across the wooden floor on her bare feet.

*Thump-drag.*

She walked past the kitchen. A soft glow was emanating from the lantern light in there, but she was more interested in that eerie sound.

*Thump-drag.*

“*Opa?*” Miguel said from behind her. She felt him leave her presence as he veered off into the kitchen. “*Opa?*”

*Thump-drag.*

Laura moved to the back porch, almost unaware that she was creeping along the floorboards and she didn’t notice the fresh patch of goosebumps that prickled her skin. She had to find out what that noise was. Laura took one step, then another, towards the back porch. The surf, normally a rhythmic pounding, had almost ceased its roar. Laura reached for the doorknob.

“*Opa, wake up,*” Miguel said in the kitchen.

Laura steeled herself as she twisted the knob. With a quick mental count to three she snatched the door open. She was braced for anything but there was nothing there.

Miguel was crying now. “*Opa, please wake up. Laura, I think opa is sick.*”

Laura stepped out on the back porch with the lantern. The roar of the surf came crashing back to her ears giving her one last shiver. She took another step toward the beach with the lantern held forward as a talisman to ward off evil. There was nothing there. She was about to turn away when flash on the sand just off the step caught her eye. Laura bent down and brought the lantern closer so that she could examine what she found. Laura smiled. It looked like one of those chocolates wrapped in gold foil that *papá* gave them at Christmas. But this one was real. Laura’s imagination ran wild. All the chocolates she could buy with that single gold coin! A new bicycle. She even felt generous enough to get her little brother something.

“Laura, come help! *Opa* is hurt. There is so much blood. He won’t wake up!”

Laura reached out and picked up the gold coin. She put it in the pocket of her pajamas. Now she had to see what the big baby was crying about. With a flick of wrist she checked her diver’s watch. It was nearly midnight.

The End

Afterwards and Acknowledgments

My primary resource for research was [www.uboat.net](http://www.uboat.net). If you ever wanted to know about U-boats then that is the first place to check. I also had another viewing of *Das*

*Boot* (please don't watch that other U-boat movie with Matthew McConaughey in it). U-474 is a Type VIIC. I had to research the uniforms, the armory, the men and their ranks. I poured over schematics trying to find the galley hatch after mistaking it as the cargo hatch. There is no registry for U-474 so I claim that as my own. As for the pirates I let my imagination run wild. I already knew enough pirate lore. The unknown and unnamed ship is an English privateer. The specific ship type is a frigate.

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