

Forgotten One Lost



ater. Water. I could just hear my voice over the flapping of the tattered sail. I licked by cracked lips and tried again. My voice came out in a croak, barely audible. Water-waaaater. Please. Just a droppppp.

The hand holding mine tightened, giving me hope that my plead would not go unanswered. Time passed. I struggled to open my one good eye, the one least decorated by the pus, the blood, the spittle.

It was the shank of the day, past mid-morning. The sun was high in the sky, glowing as it had on so many days. How many days....

I looked over at my neighbor. He was lying face down, his bushy hair, moving on its own, powered by maggots. Alive. Dead. He was dead. He had passed into the Paradise of the afterlife. His final touch, just the squeezing of my hand, had established how he had lived and how he had died. Forgotten to the pages of history.

I heard a clamor at the bow of the ship. I strained to see. All was confusion. My compatriots, those who were less sick than I, were gesturing towards the horizon. Another ship had been sighted. Perhaps this one would not be a slaver. Perhaps these white men would not be without souls. Perhaps Cinqué would not drive this ship away.

I pulled my hand from the grip of my neighbor, regretting that I could not recall his name. The sun seemed to have dazed my mind. He was an Ebo, I recalled, my memory rekindled by the marks on his back. He was an Ebo, and he had just taken a wife.

I managed to pull myself upright. Against the sunbright, I cocked an eye to the bow, praying that my compatriots would still be rejoicing. One of them had grabbed the looking glass. He was adjusting it, madly, imitating the actions of El Capitán. He yelled to the others, causing them to whoop. I stared on, squinting, sensing that Little Banna wanted to leap in his happiness. But his leg had been slashed in the melee. It now dangled, red and blue and black. He would never somersault again, nor dance, nor leap to the kettle drums.

“Where is my knife? Where is my knife?” I was frantic, searching with delirious haste. If a ship was approaching, I must be prepared to fight. Never again would I lose my freedom, my dignity, my self-respect. Never would I fail my compatriots, those who had risked their lives to save mine.

I found it—big, wide, shiny, reflecting in the rays of the sun. It was hot to the touch, but I ignored the pain. Using it as a crutch, I hobbled forward, inching like the lowly caterpillar that I have always despised.

Cinqué saw my approach and came to my aid. He towered over me, giving me support when my steps faltered.

I worked my parched throat, gathering saliva to speak. The words tweaked past, my voice sounding rusty to my ears.

“A ship?” I asked. “Ask them for water, food.”

“Brother, we dare not trust them.”

“Sengbeth, we have no choice.”

“Never—”

“Look around! We are doomed without succor!”

I saw the wheels turn in Cinqué’s mind. His intellect was like a tiger in the night, springing here and there. Who can catch the tiger’s tail?

It was Cinqué who had led the mutiny. It was he who had said that we must arm ourselves. It was he who had found the knives. It was he who had struck the first blow, slitting the throat of El Capitán, laughing as the blood had stained the captain’s pristine tunic. Who would be so foolish? So foolish as to catch a tiger by his tail!

The fat cook, Celestino, had been sleeping off a large meal. Chop. Chop. My blade made that sound a dozen times, a dozen times multiplied by the blows of my compatriots. Finally, our merciless arms stayed. Yet, too final for Celestino. I watched as Cinqué cleaved the body, stem to stern, to wrench out the heart.

The ship was closer, no longer a speck on the horizon. I could see its markings, its sails like plump dough, fluttering in the breeze. It was making good time. Within moments, it would be alongside.

“We are lost.”

“Hide,” Cinqué said to us. “I will talk with them.”

“I will stand with you.”

“No.”

“Yes!”

My hand clenched around the handle of the knife. Cinqué saw it. With a tired grin, he signaled for me to conceal the weapon. I twisted it behind my bare back, my skin jerking from the metal’s radiating heat.

“Ahoy. Ahoy,” a voice from the other ship sang out. “Under whose colors, do you fly?”

I felt the despair. Once again. If I could only understand the gibberish of these whites. They could be friendly. I have heard of such things.

Cinqué took charge and, with gestures, he asked for water. Though the faces of the white men looked spooked, they hoisted a bucket of water over the side and threw over some food. The loose apples fell to the deck, splitting open.

Now I knew why Cinqué had ordered the others out of sight. For it was only by the strongest willpower that I was able to resist the imagined smell of the water, the real sight of the juicy apples. I wanted to break rank, to dash for the tiny bits, bespangling the deck. I wanted to lick where the water drops had fallen. I held my place.

With a hiss, Cinqué warned my compatriots back into the hold. He feared not only for their safety, but for their bodies as well. It was sorrow that one’s body could be bartered. It was shame for me, for any man, to know his worth. I had been purchased in Havana—wherever that is—for 450 gold doubloons.

“How much—this one? Teeth very good. Fit.”

The devil with the steel hat had slapped my chest while he had paraded me around the barracoon. He smelled of piss. I slowed my steps. He jerked, hard, on the chain around my neck. My head bend low, at an odd angle, then bobbed back. I studied some dusty footprints, wondering about the fate of my village. Had Sheba survived? Had she made these footprints?

“You want tow?” The voice spoke again. Again the gibberish. *Doesn’t anyone in this strange, savage land speak Mendi?*

Out of the corner of my eye, the good one, I saw one man on the other ship creep along. My head followed, since my line of sight could not. He was up to no good. I started to gesture to Cinqué, but he had already seen him. Tiger, tiger in the night. Tiger, tiger, burning bright.

The voice on the other ship gave directions. The men scrambled to do his bidding. One had a rope. He twirled it, fast, over his head. Then let go. The rope hooked our ship. There were others with ropes too. They let their ropes fly free through the air. Soon, our ship would be tackled, laced tight to theirs. I knew this. I feared this. Yet, I continued to follow the creeping man, hoping against hope that he would show himself to be our friend.

The creeping man bent low, his hand disappearing from view. Then reappearing, holding something. Like the branch of a metal tree, naked, with all of its leaves discarded. He was not our friend. He pointed its broad, upturned horn at Cinqué’s heart.

“No more!” I shouted. No bloodshed. This ship runs red with blood.

El Capitán’s black boy had begged for his life. He was young. He should have been at university. Instead, he was sobbing on his knees in the blood.

“Massa,” the boy had said, the whites of his eyes very white in his dark face.

“Perhaps, we should spare this one—for food,” Cinqué had joked. His humor had recalled the bread crumbs that El Capitán had thrown at us.

“Massa. You’re my massa now. Serve you well.”

“He looks tender,” Cinqué said as he poked him with a knife. “Your age, boy?”

“My mother Mandingo. My father white. My mother Mandingo.” The words had tripped off his lips. He had looked at each of us, seeking a savior.

“More reason to eat you,” Cinqué had said.

“My mother was Mandingo.”

He had reminded me of my son, Foone, when I had broken his toy spear. “Mendi people love peace,” I had told him then.

I wondered if that was ever true as I thrust Cinqué aside. At the same time, I pulled the knife from behind my back. With one stroke, I cut through the tangling rope. But I had brought my weapon down too hard. The knife was stuck, buried deep in the brim of the ship. I struggled to pull it free. It would not come loose. My laughter rippled across the ship. It sounded so strange on my withered tongue that it startled the whites. For a second, a brief second, they were like petrified rock totems to the True God.

My deeds (dare I say brave deeds for I was not a warrior) stirred my compatriots. As one man, they surged from the cargo hold, herding up the sloping steps, onto the deck. They attacked the ropes with a vengeance. Little Banna, a true warrior, hurled his cutlass. His aim was clear and sure. It found a home in the chest of a man with a frisky, gray beard. The wounding paralyzed the white men. To them, we were desperate black inhumans, less than wild beasts.

Long, pointy hooks were thrown to grab us close, to steal our freedom. At that, Cinqué jumped on the ship’s brim. His toes balanced on the edge, preparing to board the ship of the whites. He used one hand to balance himself. With the other, he cut the air with sharp, whooshing sounds. From deep in his gut, a primal wail came.

“Oliiiiiii! Oliiiiiii.” My compatriots howled, their tongues kinetic in warrior’s dialect.

The white men wanted no more of us. They used the hooks to push us away. Tiger, tiger, eyes that glow.

Feeling safe, I turned my attention to the meager subsistence, intending to gobble the whole with no regard to tomorrow. Or to my dignity. How low I was brought in those seconds, rooting with my nose to the wood like a wild pig. I, whose forefathers had built the city of Timbuktu, was brought to this.

I looked at myself. Now that the sharpness of thirst was appeased, I could afford that introspect. My hands: black and gritty. My hair: unwashed and lice ridden. My clothes: torn and bedraggled, exposing my manhood. Can one die from indignity? Even with my compatriots, I felt alone. Forgotten.

As if sensing my thoughts, Cinqué strode over, bringing with him a tin cup of water.

“No,” I said. “Drink yourself.”

He ignored me, dipping his fingers into the cup. The water trickled over his bruised hand. With the precious water, so precious that not a drop should be wasted, he nursed my neck. The water soothed the redness where the coiffe had rubbed raw.

I looked at Cinqué, squinting through my one, good eye.

“I’m going to die.” I spoke quietly but with certain clarity.

Cinqué said nothing. I wondered if he was embarrassed by my candor. Was it cowardice to admit one’s approaching death?

“After I’m dead—don’t throw me in the water.” I could not meet his eye. “Please.”

“But, brother, I can’t carry you all the way home.” Flashing a smile, Cinqué reached into his pouch, pulling out the stub of a blackened potato.

“I won’t,” he promised.

But I knew that he would. What would be the purpose of keeping this useless trunk that my body had become?

Silence fell. We sat together for a long time, our peace unbroken. Except for the sound of Little Banna retching up his feast.

“Little piggy,” Cinqué said.

His words mirrored my thoughts. Suddenly, I knew—

“Tell.” I said. I grabbed his arm and held it tight.

“What—”

“Swear!”

“You’ll see Mendi land again, brother.”

“I know-I-know-I-can’t. I won’t. But, you’ll see home again.”

He shook his head. For the first time, I saw fear in his eyes. Tiger, tiger burns no more.

“Tell. Tell!” I said. “I want history to know how I lived and how I died. Pass it down from father to son, from elder to elder, from village to village.”

He stopped eating, slowly licking his thumb, to stare at me. I knew he knew my life, my death.

“Don’t forget.” I made him promise. “Never forget. Tell anyone who will listen. Make them listen. My story. Told many times over, never forgotten. Once there was a man....” ■■