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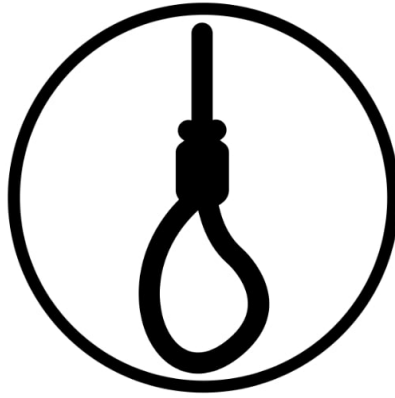


# A Dead Man

by

João F. Silva

## A DEAD MAN



I'M SORRY. I WON'T do it again,” I pleaded, as tears poured out of my eyes like a flash flood swallowing the riverbank.

My eyes were blurry from the tears and the smell of burned pine and oak. The heat from the flames left my skin sweating, and bit at the sole of my boots like a rabid lap dog that waited for its owner’s commands.

“No, you most certainly will not.” My captor appeared to be a normal man, but I’d seen others like him—hardened by life, nothing tender left inside. “But you will give peace to everybody else.”

He picked up his torch and got ready to throw it at my feet. I tried to free myself, but the ropes were almost tight enough to cut the circulation in my wrists, legs, and ankles. Panic settled inside me.

*I don’t want to die.*

*I don’t want to die.*

“I don’t want to die,” I uttered.

“Nobody does. But you deserve it,” my executioner said. I let out a breath of relief as he put the torch back and produced a weathered parchment from his dark cloak. He showed it to me. “Ehcuro of Alarkan, warlord of Ainis. Bane of the Crimson Wars. His battalion took ten cities and killed thousands.”

Every word the man uttered hit me like a rock. How did he know so much? I’d been cautious. Those were secrets not even my closest confidants

knew. Then the fear of death brewed into something worse. A stinging dread, the futility of resisting fate. Whoever or... *whatever* this man was, he had come for me with his smoke and his fire, and I had gone from powerful mercenary and usurper to a frail bag of flesh and bones—about to be roasted like a hog.

“Is it gold you seek?” I asked, though my hope was fading at every moment, as I realised how pathetic and powerless I sounded. “I can pay you. Please.”

“Gold?” the man asked, furrowing his brow. “Do you think you possess *anything* I might wish?”

I swallowed, mustering every inch of courage I had left after years on the battlefield. I eyed him with defiance behind the tears, with eyes that once would have made enemies wet their britches. “There must be something. Anything. Please, anything.”

To my surprise, the man considered this. “*Anything*, you say?”

I nodded and eyed him, expectant. Was that... hope? Hope that I had talked my way out of this nightmare? I had just been surviving year after year. That was the world—a wagon pulled by horses, rampaging through a gravel road with humanity inside. Some fell overboard at the first bump on the road, but here I was, still clasping the wagon despite my faltering grip.

The man’s face lit up as he picked up his torch again, fear shooting back into me, an empty hollowness that made me shake in my bones. Now *I* was the one wetting my britches.

He walked slowly towards me. “There might be something indeed. I’m trapped in here, passing judgement to people like you. But if you’re willing to do anything... There might be a way out for you.”

“Tell me!”

He grinned. “I will give you three other options. Three other lives. If you can find your way to goodness and kindness before your lives run out, I shall let you go. If you revert to your old and... mischievous ways, I will have your soul.”

I swallowed. “What does that mean?”

“You take my place as the one passing judgement, and I will finally rest.”

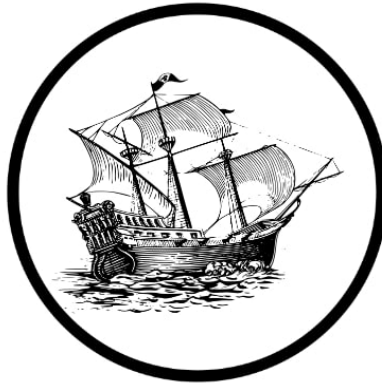
Panic rose like a snake climbing through me, tightening its grip over me, and left through the vocal cords. “Wait!”

*Do I want this?*

“Ah, it’s too late. I can’t simply stop the execution now. Best of luck, though...”

I screamed for my life. For my next three lives, as the man’s torch fed the flames that already danced beneath me.

I was dead. And about to die thrice more.



THE BLISTERING SUN ALMOST blinded me as I woke up. My mouth tasted salt, rotten sardines and *aguardente*. Getting up was a struggle and only achieved by holding on to every old piece of oak in the damned ship. The ship rocked from starboard to port in sickening motions. How degraded and blistered my skin was from the sun. I swallowed and my throat nearly stayed shut with dehydration.

*I am in worse shape than the ship.*

“Water!” My voice hoarse and muffled by the waves crashing into the stern. I sought the shades of the large triangular sail, but it was little comfort. Where were the others, anyway?

“Water!” I tasted blood in my tongue as I coughed again.

What was the point of having a first mate if he wouldn’t listen to his captain? And where were all the others? The quartermaster, or the boatswain?

I dragged my dead leg through the deck and used my cane for support while praying to the gods so that the *Vera* wouldn’t rock enough to throw me off into the shark-ridden water. I took the stairs down to the cabin, preparing my voice to shout at the lazy bastards, but it was dark below deck, and it took a while for my eyes to adjust. In the meantime, a pestilence settled into my nostrils.

“Matias?” I asked. “Fernão? Lopes? Where in the thousand waves are you?”

*Where are they?*

Then, in the darkness, I saw them all. One by one, all the twelve members of my crew had gone to their forever sleep—their bodies scattered



on the floor. Blood all over them.

*Dead. Just like that. All of them.*

Their faces were hollow, their bodies all bones and no flesh. They had been starved, feuding over who got to eat whatever food was left. And now they had all lost their minds and killed each other. Months at sea will do that to you. This was my fault. I was the one who couldn't find my way back home.

Seamen weren't supposed to be emotional or cry like babies. We ventured through the waves above the depths of the underworld, hunting fish and hoping the fish wouldn't eat us first. This time, I couldn't help it. My eyes poured a fraction of the sea upon seeing their bodies laid lifeless, their faces contorted with fear, and their eyes blank.

Paranoia settled in me. My leg was dead, my hip ached more than I was willing to admit, and my skin was falling off from sunburn even when I was in the shade. *What will I do without you, boys? What?*

There was no one to drive the ship or raise the sails or navigate. I was completely alone, except for the mice that insisted on feeding on the only food I still had. A strangely familiar feeling of dread settled in me, and I collapsed to my knees, panting.

*What is this? This feeling?*

"Ah, we meet again," a strange, powerful voice echoed from behind me.

I flinched and fell to the floor next to my dead crew. Out of panic, I crawled on the cabin floor, dragging my limp leg with me. "W—who are you? Show yourself!"

Instead of a reply, wet sounds came from the darkened area. My eyes widened when I finally saw it. A raging panic shook me to my core. I couldn't move, like there was a hole in my guts and I was bleeding out from it. A giant Man o' War with long, vicious blue tentacles slithered its way towards me. Slowly, biding its time. Playing with me. Enjoying it.

As the creature's tentacles enveloped me, and I struggled, I remembered. I remembered everything—being another man, in another life. Perhaps in another world. Another death.

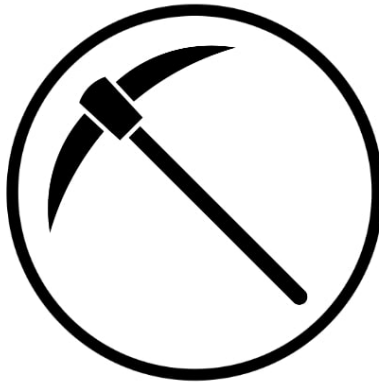
"You haven't found your ways yet, old friend," the Man o' War said inside my head as I failed to escape its paralysing stings. "You know what that means."

“I’m just a fisherman, now. I’ve killed no one. Harmed no one!” I said in between breaths, the venom spreading through my blood.

The Man o’ War, my eternal captor, only laughed. “Your crewmen killed each other for scraps as you, the captain, cannot find your way home. What about the ravenous, dark-skinned folks you were paid to transport against their will? The service which got you more gold than you had ever seen in your life, and which you used to buy this great ship?”

My eyes fell to the floorboard. I would have to try again.

The Man o’ War laughed and his tentacles tightened, until a suffocating haze took over me.



*HIT. PULL. HIT. PULL.*

I found comfort in the familiar drop of the pick—its blade breaking rock and pulling dirt. The steady, controlled, and methodical motions were a blessing, the only constant in my life. The only certainty. There was a thrill to it, finding whatever was lost underneath, waiting to be found.

*Hit. Pull. Hit. Pull.*

The fruits of labour, right in front of me! Was it iron ore, copper? Perhaps something nicer... My life meant something down here, halfway to the underworld. With every hit and pull, I wondered what demons I would find when I made it down there.

*Hit. Pull. Hit. Pull.*

I stopped and rested my pickaxe aside, just long enough to wipe the sweat off my forehead. The youth days were over, but what else was I to do? Only this.

Grunts echoed across the mine, in tune with the good old *hit and pull* as my mates scattered around, each with their own section to dig. And they dug in a soothing cacophony of grunts and metal clashing with stone.

My break was short-lived as a dreadful whooshing noise broke the near-sacred constant rhythm, ending with a snap and a squeal of pain.

“Ah!” one of my mates screamed as the whip found his back. Caught slacking off, he was.

*Not me. I wielded the pick again. Not me. I do what I’m told.*

*Hit. Pull. Hit. Pull.*

But wielding the pick was hard when one of your best mates screamed in pain under the foreman's whip. The bastard had a mean streak, so better to stand down. Mind my business.

*Hit. Pull. Hit. Pull.*

"Obedient, are you?" someone said, and I fell onto my backside.

"Nearly gave me a heart attack. Who the fuck are you?"

A strange man came forward. Not one of us. I clasped my pickaxe to defend myself. Whoever this was, he wasn't here for anything good. An eerie sense of meaninglessness took over me, overshadowing my existence. Everything I had ever done. And yet, it was so... familiar.

He paused, pointed at the foreman and the other miner. "Where's your solidarity?"

I swallowed and couldn't muster a word as strange memories flashed through my mind. Of past lives and past deaths. An ancient warlord and a fish boat captain I had been. A sinful man both times, filled with vengeance, anger, and greed. Not anymore, though. Now, I was a good, hard-working man, proud of what I did. Proud of not making waves. Proud to do what I was meant to do.

"I just want peace," I said.

The man scoffed and laughed right in my face. "Peace? You seek peace as your peers face their personal underworld in life?"

I shrugged, though something in the man's voice told me there was still something I missed. Still something I utterly lacked.

"You don't get it, do you?" he teased.

My fear turned to anger. Why should I be afraid? Why should I let it control me? My conscience was clear. I had nothing to fear.

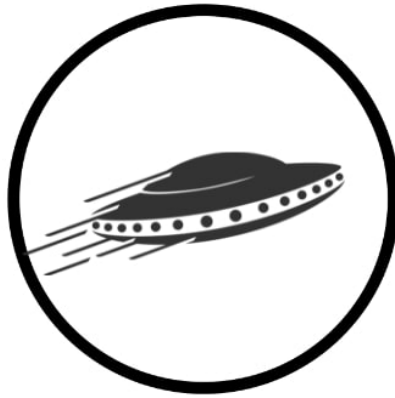
"Get what, exactly? I paid my dues and behaved. I've laboured like an honest man my whole life without taking a thing from anybody. Ask anyone. I'm as honest and good-hearted as they come!"

"No," the executioner said, shaking his head. "You're a coward, aren't you? Unwilling to help friends if that means the slightest trouble to yourself."

I fell to my knees. Was that what others thought of me? A coward... My confidence shattered in a million pieces like a broken glass window, impossible to fix. I wept like a babe, powerless. "What now?"

“It’s simple enough. You’ve already been busy digging your own grave,” the man said.

He stomped his foot on the mine’s floor and it collapsed from under him, creating a cloud of dust and a storm of rocks, falling a million times harder than a tempest.



“I WANT TO TALK about your recent deployment to Oshan.”

Atther Prusson was tall and well built. In his mid-thirties. As he spoke, he leaned on one leg of his giant Tama Mechanical, built of titanium. His friend dressed in a tight green shirt and sat on the Tama’s right foot, smoking a cigarette. Another man had his face inside the Tama, and his legs sticking out as he repaired something inside the gigantic suit with the aid of a crane droid.

I moved my wheelchair forward as using the exoskeleton was too bothersome these days. “What about it, captain?”

“It came to my attention you thought it could be a suitable planet to build a new colony. The howlers keep pressuring us and I’m not sure how much longer we can keep this war going. With the resources we have here, at least.”

How I understood Captain Prusson’s pain. Losing loved ones and comrades was at every corner, and they were stuck in an endless war against an elusive enemy. *What are we even fighting for?* I had wondered several times in my youth.

“Don’t worry, captain. I will send you a copy of all my findings.”

Prusson smiled and saluted me. “Thanks, doctor. If you don’t mind, there are a lot of Tama suits to fix.”

“Of course. I’ve got other patients to help as well. Take care of yourself.”

Prusson left, jogging. A young, athletic body, a sharp mind capable of great, bright things. Humanity was in great hands. I knew it—though I wouldn’t be around long enough to see it. I stayed for a little while, watching

Prusson and his friends around the giant mechanical suit. If he was the head, the others were the arms and the legs of the mech. A perfect harmony needed between the five pilots, as they all became one while immersed in the Tamatin fluid inside.

I smiled as I rode my wheelchair back to my ship, the *Herald*, which had also seen better days. They wanted me to stay longer, to receive a medal for my medical work, but it didn't matter, as long as I could still reach their front lines and give medical help to the troops. That's where I belonged. I'd be gone soon.

Dusk was falling as I entered my sphere-shaped starship. Inside it, I found the old pilot droid the rebellion had got me.

"You know how to pilot this ship?"

"Yes," the droid said. "I know how to pilot three hundred and sixty-three starships."

"Good, good. Do you have a name?"

"I'm a product of Dovsky Advanced Global. Model number 589. My friends call me DAG-5."

"Friends?"

"Yes. Do you require an explanation about what friends are?"

"No. DAG-5 it is, then."

"You're an old friend," the droid said.

*What?*

Feelings and memories came rushing through me, almost knocking me out of the wheelchair. Three other lives. Continuous reincarnation. Complete lucidity. Ignoring the fear of the fate that awaited me and the powerlessness to change it, I rushed to grab my holopad.

*I must record this experience. Maybe someone will find it one day. I can only imagine what they'd achieve with this ability.*

DAG-5 smiled in its metallic face. "You've come a long way; I'll admit as much."

"I always hate seeing you; I'll admit as much."

DAG-5 smiled again, though this time there was no malice. The delight in applying punishment was all but gone, as was the dread I always remembered overwhelming my senses. "How did you think you did?"

"My opinion doesn't matter."

“Clever. Then you know your journey is reaching the end. You have the experience of four lives, but you redeemed yourself with this one. You’ve dedicated your life to the aid of others while seeking no personal betterment.”

I swallowed. “So this is it, then.”

“I will allow you to cross to the other side, even if I wished I could take your soul and have you replace me in this eternal duty. You will rest your spirits at last.”

I smiled and had to tap into my emotional suppressants to keep from breaking down into a pool of tears. This was the end. The very end.

DAG-5 created a ball of light and it floated toward me.

There I saw myself again.

A flame burning bright in a bleak evil world, ruled by cruel people.

A single drop of water in the ocean, adrift in the currents.

A grain of sand in the dirt, steady yet motionless.

And now, little more than a sprinkle of stardust seasoning the void, wondering if destiny was forever or if I would turn up again as a blade master, a fisherman, or a miner.

“Wait,” I said. I had to do this.

“What?”

What was true selflessness? True kindness? “I’ll take your place. I can be the one to pass judgement. Let me help you get your peace.”

END