

The Thud of A Shell

Story by MC1 Eduardo Otero Santos

The polliwog revolt of the previous night was a testament to their poor judgment. He knew this much now. Soaking wet, slimy with seawater, dirt and uncertainty, Jack could barely hold himself up on his knees grating against the cold, wet non-skid underneath. Struggling to keep his eyes open, he caught a hazy glimpse of the horizon and the imposing silhouettes looming gigantic before his eyes. His tired lungs filled with air -- drags of salty, chill mist that stung with each inhale. He felt the fog freezing his skin and as he took a weary look around, he saw his fellow wogs – a brethren of lowly landlubbers, scallywags, scum of the Earth – kneeling beside him.

Next to Jack, Paul's blood-shot, panicking eyes met his. His lips moved and a cacophonous ditty soon suffused the air. The wog's bodies were battered and bruised, but their spirits remained intact. They sang in unison – their polliwog song – as they awaited judgment, and for an instant as fleeting as wet sand slipping through his fingers, Jack felt a shred of relief. Against all odds, after all they'd been through, they were still standing – if only figuratively. Yet he couldn't help but wonder for how much longer.

Succumbing to their weight, he allowed his eyelids to close shut, and he remembered. He saw the calm waters of days long gone, smelled the salty, gentle breeze of a nurturing sea cradling the ship in its sway. He felt the deceitful caress he had foolishly attributed to Queen Salacia – a far cry from the goddess he figured now sat a distance away in front of them next to her husband, His Majesty, Neptunus Rex.

He remembered his sailing days before the Ruler of the Raging Main and his terrible court boarded his vessel, before the revolt, before the accusatory summons, before they approached the line. He reminisced fondly, but hopelessly, for he knew it was all in the past now. His voyaging days as a slimy polliwog, as the court referred to them, were swiftly coming to an end.

Davy Jones, the royal messenger, limped and shambled across the deck in front of the ranks of polliwogs, inspecting them

one by one. Soon, it'd be Jack's turn. He shut his eyes in terror, attempting to avoid his fate as he heard the messenger's sloppy steps drawing ever closer until he felt a gust of death upon his slime-covered face. With a harsh tug on his hair, Jack's head was pulled back and his eyes opened, as if possessed, to meet the frightful sight in front of them.

Davy Jones' revolting visage dripped with saltwater and seaweed. Jack felt it fall on his face, adding to the slime, flowing in long lines down his neck and into the ruined clothes sticking to his body. Seconds that went on for days in Jack's mind dragged by until finally, with a dreadful growl that pierced his ears, Davy Jones let go. The salty wraith shuffled on, making his way along the rows of shaking polliwogs lined across the deck.

The royal scribe had recorded the proceedings and noted the sentences and punishments for their shortcomings, for their ill-conceived schemes, for being the lowly slime that they were. Davy Jones' deliberation, after all the tests, trials and tribulations of the past day, would be the final step – the moment of truth. Were he to approve it – and upon the judgment of Neptunus Rex himself – the slimy wogs would become trusty shellbacks; loyal servants of the court and worthy of the dreadful mysteries of the deep.

A sound of thunder cut through the air like a razor and as Jack's eyes squinted in disbelief, he saw him. Along the horizon – amidst the silhouettes he hadn't been able to see clearly moments earlier – his Royal Majesty, Ruler of the Raging Main, king of all creatures in and upon the seven seas and judge of all those who go to sea in ships, rose tall.

King Neptune sat alongside his Queen Salacia on a pearl-shelled chariot, pulled by fish-tailed horses that trembled in a quake

of raw power. Jack saw the members of His Majesty's court gathered around, awaiting the messenger. Their images grew distorted in the fog, but the sounds came clear as a fair winds day. Jack heard the King speak in ancient tongues of the deep, summoning his messenger. He was ready to hear the verdict. Davy Jones turned to the court as the oozing stench of watery doom pervading his garbs whipped Jack across the face one final time.

Jack continued to stare at Neptunus Rex, struggling to hold his gaze, trying to discern fantasy from reality when, suddenly, the King lifted a golden trident that flashed like lightning. As he did, a titanic wave formed along the distance, extending toward the ends of the Earth, making its way to the ship with a deafening roar.

Turning to see a dumbfounded Paul still kneeling next to him, Jack found his brother wog still covered in slime, stare fixed forward, mouth agape. So he shifted his eyes forward once more, back to the horizon, back to his fate, and closed them one last time. He finally gave in, let his head fall into his chest as the wave's terrifying bellow grew louder, closer, and then...

Jack's eyes sprung open to the sound of a whistle. "Reveille, reveille," the 1MC blared. "Heave out and trice up. Reveille." With an involuntary spring of his back, his head smashed into the lamp overhead and in his painful daze he could tell: he was in his rack. He rolled out, felt the warm deck underneath his feet and with an aching head and a pounding heart, he slowly returned to his senses. He was aboard his ship, his home, USS Nimitz – another day deployed.

As he scrambled into his salty coveralls, still confused, he caught a glimpse of a familiar face in the corner of his eye and turned to look, it was Paul. His friend stared back at him, and for a moment they shared a look which lasted mere seconds, but felt like an eternity.

Jack's eyes stretched open, trying to take in the moment, putting the pieces of the last few days back together like the morning after a long night in a foreign port. Had it been real? Was it all just a dream? What did it mean?

His mind raced as he looked deep into Paul's stare, desperately searching for answers he knew he might never find, but just as he was about to give up, he saw it. A twinkle began to shine in Paul's eyes and a knowing grin slowly formed across his lips, the revelation of an insane secret known by all across the deckplates.

"Crazy, huh?" Paul muttered as he shuffled toward Jack. "Let's get going, bro. I'm trying to get some chow before cleaning stations."

Before Jack could conjure up a reply, Paul slung his arm around him, slapping a fraternal pat on his back. He couldn't feel the contact but he could swear he heard it. It was a peculiar sound, different, new; it was the thud of a shell. 🐚

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