

## Books by Hubert L. Mullins

### **Horror**

*Blood & Salt*

*Under Bethel*

*A Menagerie of Suffering*

*Ghost Train of Treblinka*

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*Better Left Buried*

### **Sci-Fi Drama**

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*Birth of the Vampire*

*The Vampires of Hope's Covenant*

*Rage of the Vampire*

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*Ilha da Queimada Grande*  
*33 Kilometers Southeast of Brazil*  
1774

They chased the ship with black, square-cut sails for three days. The winds were rough, the sea choppy enough to send *Salvador 1's* bow right into the air. Captain Pedro de Cortés's crew was tired, but it would all end tonight. Tonight, they would board the ship with the black, square-cut sails and recover all that was stolen.

"It's there, just floating by the rocks," said Lucas da Ponta, his first mate. The man stepped up to the captain and pointed through the fog. He stank of fish and sweat. The days had been long and hot and full of restless pursuit.

"We need to slow, lest we hit the rocks just like them," said de Cortés, for surely that's what had happened. The ship wouldn't have given up so easily, not with half the Portuguese Navy prowling these waters.

Although it was difficult to see, the moon's silvery glow wobbled the water and cast an eerie reflection upon the ship's dark hull. It was painted red—the pirates would've had the world believe it was bathed in blood, but de Cortés knew better. Actual blood washed away on the harsh saltwater.

The ship was sitting just in front of craggy rocks that rose steeply into the air. The island was mountainous, but smaller than most this far out from the mainland.

Lucas squinted with his spyglass but it offered him only a slightly better view.

“Can’t see the crew. All’s dark belowdeck. Ship is sitting level. Ain’t a single hole.”

“Anchor?”

“Aye. It’s dropped. Mooring is piss poor with them jagged rocks.”

“Then they’ve decided to rest for the night,” said de Cortés. He turned to his crew. “Ready yourselves. We’re going to broadside them.”

“Still no movement,” said Lucas, keeping watch.

*Salvador 1* cut to the west once they were within sixty meters of the ship. From there, the island looked as ominous as the quiet vessel. He recognized this place—de Cortés’s family fished on the island just to the south when he was a boy. Even then they avoided it.

*Ilha da Queimada Grande*, they called it. The slash-and-burn island had been attempted to serve as a banana plantation

countless times, yet something unfortunate happened to all the hands that tried it.

“I see the crew,” said Lucas. “Something’s not right with ‘em.”

“What do you mean?” de Cortés asked, and now even he could see the ship without needing the spyglass.

“There’s three of ‘em up top. Just standing there starin’ back. I don’t see no guns.”

“We will soon enough. But let’s show them ours before they show us theirs.”

“Wait,” Lucas said. “Hold fire.”

De Cortés stared at him incredulously. The whole starboard side was ready to launch a volley that would scuttle the ship. But he’d expected them to fight back, to at least raise anchor, drop sail, and run. If they weren’t putting up a fight, there was no need to lose the priceless artifacts to the bottom of the sea.

“Muskets,” said de Cortés.

His crew, primed and ready, raised their guns. *Salvador 1* was passing in front of the ship, now with its lettering visible close to the waterline: *Atégina*.

Now, de Cortés could see what Lucas had meant—the crew *did* look strange, oddly stoic. It was too dark to see faces beneath tricorns but he didn't like how they stared back, as if taunting them. It made de Cortés's blood boil—a captain of the Portuguese Navy should be escorting gold ships to India, not taking bounties from Tubarão.

“When our bows are even, open fire,” said de Cortés, and he stepped away from the wheel so he could aim his musket.

The first crewman of the *Atégina* was in sight, standing next to the wheel, hands gripping it as if he would pull away from the rocks without bothering to raise anchor. De Cortés was unnerved by this ghost ship, as he would've preferred them firing back instead of this awful silence.

The moment the ships were aligned, the night filled with a cacophony of smoke and fire. Muskets unloaded in a straight line across *Salvador's* 1 deck, a barrage of pelting iron that peppered the *Atégina's* railing and hull and on occasion, crewmen.

Even after being shot, they didn't move.

De Cortés fired at the captain whose tricorn aimed toward the ground to obscure his face. The man's head exploded on impact but the flyaway wasn't what de Cortés was

expecting. He'd seen men decimated by cleavers, bullets, and guillotine blades. That resulted in a thick pop, like a melon exploding under a rock. Viscera all over the place. Not this time. The captain's head blew apart in heavy chunks and splashed into the water below.

With every shot spent, the night returned to silence. De Cortés waved the smoke away from his face and stepped toward the stern of the ship as they passed the *Atégina*. None of its crew fought back. None of its crew even moved.

“Lay anchor. We're boarding them,” said de Cortés.

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Ten minutes later, the captain, along with Lucas and two other crewmen, were rowing toward the *Atégina*. The ship groaned against the wind but there were no other sounds—no whispering, no movement across deck, no drunken laughter.

“I don't like this one bit,” said Lucas. “They're waiting to trap us.”

“They've had plenty of opportunities already,” said de Cortés. “Something is quite wrong here.”

“Look at the hull,” said Lucas. “It's got no holes, cause I see no bubbles, but look at how far into the water it goes. Thing must be laden with riches!”

That would've been nice. The bounty was well worth the trouble—but only if they retrieved it. He had memorized the posting in Tubarão. Sixteen chests covered in filigree and silver, enough to buy ten ships . . .

“Maybe,” de Cortés said. “Keep your wits about you.”

The captain was the first one out of the boat. There was a small gap between the craggy rocks and the ship's netting stretched over the side. In his younger days, de Cortés could've easily scaled the ship, but not tonight. Tonight, he felt every single year of hard labor under his belt.

If not for the railing, he would've backed off the deck and gone into the water, such was his surprise at the top.

“*Porra,*” he cursed, even before his men climbed aboard.

There were three crewmen on deck. Two were facing him, the other toward the water—but his head was blown off.

All of them were made of stone.

He touched the nearest sailor—or was it a statue? The craftsmanship was so exquisite that he could see every carved button on the man's jacket. Every tooth in his grimace. Every eyelash and every hair in his eyebrows. The coloring was odd, like some kind of blown sandstone.

“What is all this?” Lucas asked, approaching the headless statue, the one de Cortés had thought was a man.

“It’s a decoy,” he said. “Nothing more.” He pulled out his cutlass and eased down the steps to the cargo hold.

At the bottom, he could see nothing, as the space was too enclosed for the moon’s light to reach. But he found the lantern on the wall and passed his sword back to Lucas while he searched his pockets for his flint kit. After a few strikes, he had the fire going and Lucas and the crew’s reaction to the hold made him fear he was about to be ambushed.

Behind him, seated men. At least forty of them, all crammed across the deck in nearly perfect rows. They were shirtless with veiny arms and grimaces on their faces.

And all of them solid stone.

Lucas said, “That explains the extra weight.”

“More statues?” de Cortés said.

“I don’t think so,” said Lucas, and he took the light from the captain’s hand and moved to the nearest seated stone figure. He directed the light toward the ground, where an iron shackle was clasped around the stone ankle. The other end ran the length of the deck, branching off to each stone figure. Why would the crew of the *Atégina* go through this trouble?

“Look here,” de Cortés said. Lucas followed his finger to the small compartment at the side. It was enclosed in bars, like a tiny holding cell, only now the door was open and the space inside empty.

Empty of treasure, at least. De Cortés flipped through several exquisite tapestries stacked in the corner.

“Seems as if they took it all,” said Lucas.

Back on deck, de Cortés pointed to the loading wench. It was extended over the rocks of the island. “They moved it. Whatever they had, they’ve taken it inland to hide.”

“Then let’s go after them,” Lucas said.

Their path was easy to follow, at least until they reached the grass. Several deep footprints marched right up the hill. Either the crew was made up of burly men or they carried something exquisitely heavy. Once the island leveled out, de Cortés took in his surroundings.

Waist-high grass for most of it. A lush forest capping the southern rim. The hill rose abruptly to the north. De Cortés took one step toward the high grass when he saw a shape emerge from the forest beyond.

It was slow-moving, bulky, and staggered with a drunken gait. The moonlight passed between the clouds, but a

stretch of silvery light illuminated the high grass between the group of de Cortés's men and the approaching shadowy figure.

“Arms ready,” he told his men, yet he was not prepared to open fire. He'd been so transfixed on the stone men that he'd forgotten to reload his musket.

The figure came closer, and now they could hear an awful, wailing sound from its throat. It raised its arms as if to wrap around de Cortés and he could see something hanging off them—like dozens of twisting ropes.

It shuffled closer and when it stepped into the light, de Cortés wasn't ready for what he saw. At least one of his men turned and fled toward the ship.

A man, most likely one of the pirates from the *Atégina*, was covered in so many snakes that it was impossible to see just how large or small he was. Serpents of gold and black and green. Some were spotted and some were striped. Thick ones wrapped around his legs, slowing his movements, while the rest dug their fangs right into his flesh. Some bit his neck, others his face, and some his arms. A pair of small ones even hung from his earlobes. Blood trickled from a dozen fresh wounds. His bloodshot eyes were bulging from their sockets.

His skin—in the spots where it could be seen, at least—had taken on a ghostly pallor. From blue lips, he tried to speak, but it came out raspy and full of white foam.

At last, he dropped to his knees, his eyes glazing over. Through a wet gurgle, he managed, “You . . . shouldn’t . . . have come . . . *here*.”

The forest beyond filled with an incessant rattle.

It grew so loud, so powerful that he was certain tribesmen from the north would blast out of the trees with a thousand drums. But no, the off-putting rattle, once sounding from everywhere, narrowed until it was just behind the man. And it grew louder, more frenzied, and most of all . . . *closer*.

Before he collapsed into the grass, the man looked at de Cortés and from his blue lips, said, “She’s . . . coming.”