

Prologue

London, August 1723

The tired-eyed man scratched his armpit as he cursed the vicious little creatures that had taken up residence in his shabby clothing. He cursed the dank, dark cell which had been his home for the last few weeks. He cursed the fat, pompous judge who had put him here, but most of all he cursed Lady Fortune for allowing him to be caught.

He knew there could be no redemption for his crimes. There could be no forgiveness for the villains of all nations. He knew it was just a matter of time before he would be sun-drying like a scarecrow down at Execution Dock. Resigned to his imminent end on this earth – yes, this earth, for he was now convinced that this was not the only one – his mind wandered nostalgically to the adventures he had experienced as a member of Captain Ironside's crew. He regretted the disagreement that had separated him from his old companions and the loss of untold wealth that had been within his grasp.

Scratching his crotch, he became aware of heavy footsteps in the cold corridor beyond the iron door which was keeping him in this living hell. Who could it be? It

was too early for his supper of thin gruel and stale bread. Expectantly staring at the food hatch, he was surprised to hear the key turning in the heavy lock. The door swung open to reveal the ugly face of the gaoler grinning at him, displaying a row of brown, rotting teeth.

“William Benton, you got a visitor,” hissed the squat man, his foetid breath blending with the odour of damp and urine which already permeated the cell.

The man called William Benton rose unsteadily to his feet towering some six inches over the unpleasant man at the door. His once moderately handsome face was now patched with dirt and sores; his stubbly chin now a matted tangle of thick, lice-ridden whiskers; his long, dark brown hair rudely shorn, leaving isolated clumps of hair mingled with unsightly scabs.

“Who wants to see me?” croaked William. “I’m expecting no one.”

“Some man in a fancy coat. Now, you goin’ to come with no trouble, or you want me t’put them nasty manacles on yer?”

“You’ll get no trouble from me, just as long as you keep that foul mouth of yours shut, Tom,” replied William sullenly.

The gaoler gave a low, porcine grunt, gesturing for the prisoner to follow him. William knew he could easily overpower this base creature, but he was also aware that he wouldn’t get very far – too many guards, too many iron bars. All the same, it might be worth making a dash for it, as ending his life on the point of a blade couldn’t be any worse than dancing the hempen jig, but his aching bones and weary heart dissuaded him from this coarse act. No, he would rather find out what this stranger in a fancy coat wanted of him.

After descending a gloomy stairwell he was led into a brighter room with a large worm-eaten oak table and two

rickety chairs. A pitcher of water and two clay cups were the only objects on its scratched and defaced surface. The man who had been seated on one of the chairs rose as William shuffled into the room. Tom didn't enter, but slammed the door shut and went grumpily about his business.

"So you're William Benton, are you?" inquired the man in an educated London accent.

"Aye, that I be, and who might you be?" answered William eyeing the other man suspiciously.

"I'm Nathaniel Bagshaw from *The Daily Courant*," said the other man, extending his hand in greeting, which he soon regretted when William's calloused, grubby appendage touched his own soft, clean hand. Registering the confused look on William's face, he continued. "*The Daily Courant* is the name of the newspaper I work for."

William looked the man up and down appraisingly before answering. Nathaniel Bagshaw was no longer wearing his long, fancy coat, which was draped neatly over the back of one of the chairs. He couldn't have been much older than thirty years old. His clothes were spotless and neatly pressed, his manner was confident. He had a comely face with a narrow nose, on which were perched a pair of copper-framed spectacles. His short, curly hair was neatly trimmed, as were the long sideburns on either side of his smooth face.

"Very interesting I'm sure, but what do you want me for?" asked William curtly.

"Please sit and I'll explain," replied Nathaniel amiably, gesturing to the chair without the coat on it. "Would you like some water?"

"I'd prefer something stronger."

"I might just be able to arrange that later, if you are willing to oblige me," smiled the reporter.

"There's no harm in listening to what you have to say,

I s'pose?"

"Well, as I already said, I work for a newspaper and knowing you are a convicted pirate I'm sure my readers would be interested in hearing your story. Tales about pirates are all the rage at present. I already know you were found by *HMS Deal Castle* drifting off the coast of Bermuda three months past. I also know that the sloop you were found on was flying the yellow jack. I was informed that your ship was boarded after some initial reluctance and that you were the sole survivor on board. The bodies of twelve other men we found, all dead of scurvy. You were in a malnourished state but lacked the symptoms of this scourge of all sailors. How is it that you alone survived?"

"I believe it was due to me private stash of lovely fruit preserves," answered William cherishingly.

"Why didn't you share them with the others?"

"I didn't realise at the time that it was 'cos of the jam that I might of remained alive while the others didn't. Anyway, they drank the last of the hot chocolate without giving me any, so I wasn't about to share me favourite preserves with them, was I?"

"Hot chocolate? I thought all you pirates drank was rum," replied the surprised journalist.

"Rum, brandy, wine. We drinks it all, but there's nothing like a cup of fresh hot chocolate to calm the nerves, there isn't. That is if we managed to get our hands on a cargo of cocoa beans."

"Very interesting. Now it also seems you were the bosun on a larger pirate vessel."

"There's no proof of that, there isn't!" replied William frantically. "It's all lies and slander. They've got it in for me. They always have."

"Maybe you're right, but the chief witness for the prosecution was sailing master of a ship you captured. He

swears you led the plundering of his vessel and threatened to cut his ears off if he didn't tell you where his valuables were hidden. How do you explain that?"

William slumped back in his chair. "I guess there's no use denying it now, what with me up for being hanged. I told Captain Ironside we shouldn't of let him go after we took what we wanted, but he thinks he knows better. He always does. Should of sunk the bugger together with his ship instead of letting him sail on his way. We did him a favour and he goes and accuses me of being a damned pirate in front of the whole world. That's bloody gratitude!"

"Well, I guess he sees it differently, but what's done is done. All that remains is for you to tell your story. In fact, I'm not only planning to write an article for the news sheet, but am also hoping to write a book on the subject of pirate adventures, and I believe you could be of great help to me there."

"A book about me?" asked William, weighing up any possible benefits for himself.

"Not only about you. You may not be aware, but a book is in the process of being written about known pirates such as Blackbeard, Stede Bonnet, and Ned Lowe. It's to be called *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates*. I hope to publish my book, *A Detailed History of Opprobrious Pirate Adventures in Lands lying far across the Sea*, first, if I can, but it must contain some stories that are less well known to the public to be a success. That is where you can help, as little is known of your Captain Ironside and what has happened to him."

"Who's this Ned Lowe character you mentioned?" inquired William.

"You don't know who Ned Lowe was?" asked the astonished reporter. "A cruel man of our own fair nation

who started pirating in the year 1721. His fate is uncertain, but some claim he went down with his ship in a storm off the coast of Brazil.”

“They tell me it is now the year seventeen hundred and twenty-three of our Lord. We were lost in strange lands from the summer of 1718 until they found me. That’s probably why I’ve never heard of this Captain Lowe,” answered William, scratching his unevenly shaven head.

“That would explain your lack of knowledge of current affairs,” stated Nathaniel, taking a sip of water and quickly spitting it back into the cup and wrinkling his nose.

“You won’t get no decent food nor drink in here,” William laughed. “So tell me, Mr Bagshaw, what’s in it for me, if I cooperate?”

“Well, I can’t do anything about your sentence, but I can make your last days a little more bearable. For instance, I could grease the palms of that unsavoury fellow who brought you to me to see to it you get better nourishment and maybe more sanitary conditions.”

“I guess it won’t hurt to better me conditions til I share the fate of Captain Kidd down at the docks. You know he was hanged down in Wapping in 1701. They had to hang him twice, ‘cos the rope broke on the first attempt. I hope I gets a good clean hanging. No messing about like,” explained William sagely.

“Yes, I remember hearing about it, although I was only a child at the time. They say some in the crowd called for Kidd’s release, claiming the breaking of the rope was a sign from God, but they hanged him anyway. His body was gibbeted over the River Thames at Tilbury Point for three years as a warning to future would-be pirates,” replied Nathaniel earnestly. “Why don’t you start by telling me something of your background?”

William scratched his left armpit rigorously. “I started me career as a seaman on a merchantman out of

Plymouth, and although the painstaking labour on that vessel didn't agree with me, it was better than what came next."

"And what was that?" inquired Nathaniel eagerly, reaching into his satchel to produce a steel dip pen, a bottle of ink, and a leather-bound note book.

"I was press-ganged into the Royal Navy when on shore leave in Dartmouth. Me own fault I guess. Shouldn't of got myself so fuddled with drink. Woke up with a head like a bag of chisels and found meself on board a fifth-rater on me way out to sea. I went to hell and back on that ship. The second lieutenant didn't like the cut of me jib, you see. I'm sad to say the cat o' nine was a dear old friend of mine. Couldn't keep me mouth shut, you see. But after one dark day when the officer on deck flayed the skin off me neck," William pulled down the collar of his filthy shirt, revealing the angry scars on his neck and upper back, "I decided it was time to jump ship in Jamaica, and I fled to the island's interior, hanging out with a group of maroons until that infernal ship had left port. Then I managed to secure passage to Nassau where I joined Captain Ironside's crew on *Dream Chaser* and, due to me experience, soon became his bosun."

"Maroons, you say. By that do you mean men marooned after a shipwreck? I thought you had to be alone on an isolated island to count as being marooned."

"No, maroons are escaped slaves and their descendants living in hidden communities," sighed Benton. "Nice bunch when yer get to know 'em."

"Really? You learn something new everyday," said Bagshaw, scribbling in his notepad. "And this *Dream Chaser* was last recorded leaving Nassau a few weeks before Governor Woodes Rogers arrived to enforce the King's Pardon. What happened after that?" asked Nathaniel, dipping his steel pen into the ink.

“We chose not to accept King George’s clemency. Captain Ironside said the *King’s Proclamation for Suppressing of Pirates* revealed the Crown’s weakness. That they couldn’t overcome us by force alone, so they sought to divide us, and by God it worked. The lily-livered ones, such as Benjamin Hornigold and Henry Jennings, were all too ready to accept it. Ironside said we would be stronger if we held together, but I guess too many were tired of a pirating,” sighed William. “Most of those men of spirit who still desired liberty fled before English warships appeared in the bay.”

“But that still doesn’t answer my question. What happened next?” persisted Nathaniel with pen poised.

“Shiver me timbers! You’re not one for patience, are you? I was getting to that. As I said, we sailed out of Nassau and were planning to join up with Blackbeard on Ocracoke Island, but first the Captain insisted on stopping off in Bermuda to drop his wife ashore. She had left Nassau with us and he feared for her at sea, so he decided to drop her off where she had family,” explained William, pausing to scratch the back pit of his right knee. “It was then we saw her.”

“Saw who?” ask Nathaniel, pausing his note taking and looking at the other man in anticipation.

“Sink me! None other than a Spanish treasure galleon. We couldn’t believe our luck. We’d have never dared attack the treasure fleet itself, what with its man-o-war escort and all that, but this ship must have got itself separated from the rest of the fleet during the storm that had raged ahead of us the previous night.”

“Blackbeard! A treasure galleon! This story is going to be more enthralling than I expected,” stammered the reporter. “You do know that Blackbeard sails the seas no longer, don’t you?”

“Strike me tops’l! You mean old Ed Teach has gone to

Davy Jone's locker?" gasped the pirate.

"Yes, sadly for some, but not so sad for others. Lieutenant Maynard found the pirates anchored near Ocracoke Island on an evening in November of 1718. Apparently, Blackbeard was on the other side of the island entertaining guests and had not seen fit to set a lookout, which allowed the pirate hunter's two sloops to get close. At first it seemed Maynard had bitten off more than he could chew after Teach managed to put one of his two sloops out of action with a broadside, but the lieutenant had presence of mind to keep most of his men below deck in anticipation of being boarded, telling them to prepare for close quarter fighting.

After the pirates' grappling hooks hit their target and several grenades broke across the sloop's deck, Teach led his men aboard, emboldened at the sight of Maynard's apparently half-empty ship. It was then that the rest of Maynard's men burst forth from the hold, shouting and firing. The plan to surprise Blackbeard and his crew had worked! The pirates were taken aback by the sudden assault. I'm told that Teach fought his way across the blood-smeared deck, which was already slick with blood from those already killed or injured. Maynard and Teach fired their flintlocks at each other, then drew their cutlasses. They say Teach broke Maynard's cutlass at the hilt, but alas the pirates were pushed back towards the bow and Blackbeard was surrounded and isolated. Teach fought like a tiger, but to no avail, as he was soon overpowered and slain by several of Maynard's crew. On seeing their fearsome captain dead, the remaining pirates quickly surrendered. They say Maynard hung Edward Teach's severed head from his ship's bowsprit. They also say Teach had been shot five times and cut about twenty before he finally fell. Some say he was the Devil himself!"

"Well I'll be buggered! I knew him personally and a

fine captain he was too. I'm lost for words," exclaimed the distraught pirate.

"Maybe you can tell me what happened after you sighted the treasure galleon," asked Nathaniel hopefully, perched on the edge of his chair.

William paused to scratch his balls before speaking. "Sure I'll tell yer. Here's what happened next ..."

Fog of War

The Atlantic Ocean, August 1718

The Mist

Somewhere between the Bahamas and Bermuda three ships were heading north under full sail. The largest of the three, *Dream Chaser*, was a three-masted, fully-rigged ship carrying a complement of thirty-two cannons. It had once seen service as a slaving ship until it was commandeered by its present crew. The second ship, *The Blood Rose*, the largest of the two consorts, was a two-masted, twelve-gun brigantine with a square foresail. The smallest vessel was a swift Bermuda sloop with only eight guns and was called *Vengeful Mermaid*.

Standing on the quarter-deck of *Dream Chaser* was a man in a long, brown coat which had seen better days. A red scarf sat on his long, slim head covering his short unkempt hair. His close-set, cool blue eyes worriedly scanned the horizon. The man was Björn Gunnarsson, known to his crew as Captain Ironside. He was no novice to the post of commanding a vessel, having once served as captain on a brig in the Swedish navy, that is, until

he was dishonourably discharged through no fault of his own. Now his contempt for the iron discipline in the navies of all nations knew no bounds, and he only reluctantly agreed to command *Dream Chaser* after he was unanimously elected to the position by the ship's current crew.

Although it was a fine day with a good wind, he couldn't suppress the uneasiness he felt inside. It wasn't that circumstances were so bad, rather they were unexpected. He had no regrets about turning down the King's pardon, but had realised it was becoming too dangerous to stay in Nassau with that madman Charles Vane, who had seized control of the settlement. He did regret that he had no real choice but to depart from the isle of New Providence, and having to bid farewell to many of his former companions pained him. He would even miss that turncoat Hornigold, who had only too readily accepted the pardon. What worried him now was that he would probably have to drastically change his plans. He had originally been planning to drop his wife, Cassandra, off in Bermuda before heading towards Topsail Inlet in North Carolina to join up with his old friend Edward Teach, but the recent sighting of the stray Spanish treasure galleon, which had been separated from the main treasure fleet by a storm, had awoken in the crew a fresh and keen thirst for gold. He feared they would not be swayed by his argument that their ship was in urgent need of careening, which he had planned to undertake when in the Carolinas. He could only hope that *Dream Chaser* and her consorts would quickly catch up with the Spanish vessel and take it with little effort, so he could then bring Cassandra to safety. The thought of engaging another ship with her on board provoked uneasiness in his guts. That which was worrying him even more was the thick sea mist into which the distant

galleon had just disappeared, probably in an attempt to evade her pursuers. He hoped to use this to dissuade the crew from further pursuit, but didn't fancy his chances at success, and for that purpose he had ordered the sails to be trimmed, so the other two captains could board his vessel to discuss the issue. Suddenly, a rough voice beside him tore him from his thoughts.

"The small council's ready for yer, Cap'n," said a man dressed in a long, shabby, grey coat with a long, black beard and blood-shot eyes standing beside him. It was Peter Thurlow, the quartermaster, also known as Powder Keg Pete after early one morning after a drunken binge he was discovered to be sleeping in the powder magazine atop a row of powder kegs, oblivious to any danger to his own person or to the ship. To the horror of the boatswain, who found him, his clay pipe, half-empty tobacco pouch, and tinder box lay not far from his prone body. It would have been cause to relieve him of his duty on any merchant or naval vessel, but the crew had seen the funny side of it and no sanctions were brought against him. The quartermaster stared at Ironside expectantly, scratching his broad, red nose.

"Call them up to the quarterdeck. I think it'd be better if we first discussed the matter out of earshot of the rest of the crew," answered Ironside with the wisp of a Swedish accent.

"As ye wish, Cap'n," answered Pete before trundling off to fetch the others.

A few moments later Pete returned with the few most trusted members of his crew and the captains of the other two ships close behind. The first was the boatswain, William Benton, a man in his mid-thirties with long, braided, dark brown hair and near-handsome features marked with days of stubble. The second was the coxswain, John Brownrigg, a tall man with a round, angry-looking

face and long, greasy brown hair. He sported a short beard and wore a threadbare waistcoat with no shirt. Next came Faustus Quiddington, the ship's surgeon, a man of about forty years whose thirst for knowledge was insatiable. His friendly face was topped by a brown tricorne which he had comically secured to his chin with a leather strap to stop it blowing away in the wind, having already lost three such hats in that way. Under his hat he wore a short grey wig, and a pair of brass-framed glasses perched on the bridge of his nose, both of which the man felt made himself look more intelligent and respectable, but which were in fact the butt of endless jokes among the crew behind his back. Ironside had once tried on the surgeon's spectacles one time he had left them atop the binnacle and discovered that they contained nothing but normal glass with no benefits to one's vision, but he had tactfully chosen to keep this discovery to himself. After all, the man was knowledgeable on many subjects and spoke fluent Spanish, French, and Latin.

Close behind came the proud captain of *Vengeful Mermaid*, John Wolfenden, better known as Captain Wolf, his strong, lupine features even lending the appearance of his namesake creature. He kept his beard trim and tidy and his angular features were punctuated by a pair of mirthless brown eyes. He had once been the first mate on a merchantman out of Bristol, but after slaying the captain in a fit of temper, the rest of the crew elected him captain and voted for a life of roving and plundering. For some unknown reason, he chose to wear the fine attire of a Spanish officer, consisting of a blue coat with silver trim, a red waistcoat, and a tricorne with silver edging – some say out of mockery, others out of vanity. Finally, came by far the oldest of the three captains, Captain Callum Magee of *The Blood Rose*, an Irishman who stood out in contrast to Captain Wolf with his flabby, round face and

ruddy complexion. He was content to wear a short white jacket, stained vest, and white headscarf. Not an ounce of ostentation could be found about his person.

Once they had all assembled around him, Captain Ironside opened the debate. "As you have seen, the galleon has disappeared into the mist and I ask if it would be a sensible act to continue to follow it not knowing its precise course."

"The mist will surely soon pass," growled Wolf. "The prey was last seen larboard on the bow, sailing free. If we quickly change tack, we'll be running before the wind, at least for a while. I estimate we can catch her in a matter of hours."

"But what if she changes course within the mist. If that fog persists, we won't know about it until it's too late," countered Brownrigg abruptly.

"What say you, Ironside?" asked Captain Magee, wiping sweat from his brow with a well-used, silk kerchief.

"I say we continue the chase, but if we haven't neared her by nightfall, I suggest breaking off the pursuit and resuming our original course for Bermuda," answered Ironside, deciding that a compromise might be the best course of action. "Captains Wolf and Magee are, of course, free to choose their own course of action."

"But we'll have little chance against that galleon without *Dream Chaser's* guns. What choice do we have if you choose to leave us?" mumbled Magee.

"Anyway, the prize is too far ahead and out of sight, I says. What if we lose ourselves in that damned mist, or even worse, we encounter a British or Spanish warship when the mist disperses?" persisted the coxswain. "I says we give it up and sail to St. George's Town as planned."

"Only 'cos you can't wait to get to the brothel," jeered William Benton. "We'll find that ship. Leave it to me and me back staff, Johnny."

“You can’t use your bloody back staff, if you can’t see the sun, Billy Boy,” responded Brownrigg, his face reddening.

“What do you know, blockhead? You just stick to sorting old rope and leave the important tasks to the men,” snapped William.

There was a moment of strained silence as rage consumed John Brownrigg’s ruddy face, and then, without a warning, he lunged at the cocky boatswain, grabbing him by the collar. Before anyone else could react, William had planted his right fist into his assailant’s belly, causing him to release his grip and double over. Quickly recovering from the crafty blow Brownrigg uprighted himself and took a swing at Benton, narrowly missing the man’s chin, but the moment William produced a small knife from his pocket, Captain Wolf saw fit to intervene, firmly gripping the arm holding the offending item.

“That’s enough! We’ve no time for this foolishness. That galleon will be half way to Cádiz if we dilly-dally further,” he growled, glaring threateningly at *Dream Chaser’s* boatswain.

William grinned sheepishly as he pocketed the small weapon and Brownrigg turned and stormed off. “Do what you want! See if I care,” he grumbled to himself as he descended the steps to the main weather deck. After giving Benton a stern look, Ironside turned to the ship’s surgeon and spoke.

“You’ve not said anything yet, Mr. Quiddington. Do you think we have a chance?”

“I tend to agree with you, Captain. If we don’t find the Spaniard by dusk, we should abandon the chase,” answered Faustus, adjusting his spectacles.

“And what say you, Pete?”

“Oi says let the crew vote on it,” replied the quartermaster in a guttural voice.

“So be it. Pete will assemble the crew of this vessel while Wolf and Magee return to their own ships and consult with their people,” stated Ironside authoritatively. As the small group was dispersing Ironside placed a firm hand on Benton’s shoulder. “Not you, Billy Boy.”

“What is it, Cap’n?” asked the boatswain innocently.

“I’ll say this only once, William. If you ever pull a knife on another member of this crew again, you’re off this ship, and I don’t care if we’re in the middle of the ocean. Do you understand?” said the captain grimly.

“Aye, Aye, sir. Loud and clear. Can I go now?” he replied with a hint of insolence in his voice.

Captain Ironside stood for a moment shaking his head while he watched Benton leave the quarterdeck. He wondered again if he had made the right choice in appointing William Benton as boatswain. The man might prove to be more trouble than he was worth. He may be one of the most experienced seamen aboard, but the man’s penchant for antagonising the other crew members gave him cause for concern. He decided if the man caused any more trouble before they reached Bermuda, he would set him ashore once they arrived. He doubted the rest of the crew would object.

While the others were conferring, Ironside returned to his cabin, where his wife was anxiously awaiting the outcome of the discussion. On entering the shadowy interior of his own private space, a luxury only afforded to him on account of his wife’s presence, he found his spouse cleaning the grubby stern windows.

“They’ll let in more light if they’re clean, Björn,” said the slim woman without turning around.

“I’m sure they will, but I haven’t had time to do it recently, have I?” he chuckled.

Cassandra Baines turned to face him and smiled. She had a slender face with high cheekbones; a face which

seemed to smile even when it wasn't. Captain Ironside called her his African princess, despite the fact she was a free Bermudian who had never seen that far off continent. It was not something she minded, as she had always harboured a fondness for the land of her ancestors in her heart.

"So, what did they say?" she asked, wiping her hands on the front of her long, dark green cotton dress.

"They're voting on it now. If they vote to chase the prize, it'll be some time before we're in Bermuda and it worries me to have you aboard while taking a ship by force," frowned Ironside.

"Why? Because I'm a woman?" she answered teasingly.

"No, because you're my wife and I don't want you in harm's way," he replied, taking her in his arms.

"It is not the hunting down of that Spanish ship which concerns me, dear, but rather the sudden mist. I have a bad feeling about it. I feel it would be better to abandon the pursuit, for all our sakes."

"There's little I can do, if the crew vote in favour, short of taking a jolly boat and rowing us both all the way to St. George's Town," he grinned.

Cassandra looked up at him seriously. "You have to stop them sailing into that mist, my love, or we may never see Bermuda again."

"And what shall I tell the crew? Shall I tell them my wife has a funny feeling about it? No, I can't. They'll laugh me off the ship and we'll have a new captain by daybreak tomorrow. Don't worry, it'll be all right. I promise," Ironside said consolingly.

A knock on the door interrupted the intimate conversation. The captain opened it to see the quartermaster grinning at him with his tobacco-stained teeth.

"The vote 'as been made, Cap'n."

“So what’s it to be, Pete?” Ironside asked apprehensively.

“Three quarters of the crew voted to continue the chase and the other two ships’ve signalled us that they intend t’do the same,” answered the quartermaster, retrieving his pipe from a long pocket.

“So be it. Order the men to raise the tops’ls. We’ve got a prize to catch.”

Not long after, all three ships disappeared into the mysterious mist.

Captured

It took about an hour before the small fleet re-emerged from the mist. What greeted them was totally unexpected. The air resonated with the thundering of cannons and the screaming of men, for they had emerged in the midst of a raging sea battle in the mouth of a wide river estuary. Through the smoke and chaos Captain Ironside observed mighty men-o-war, first and second raters brimming with guns, pounding each other into oblivion. The flags they were flying were unrecognizable to him, some were white bearing a black eagle others red with golden eagle in the centre. Beyond the harum-scarum scene he could see a coast brimming with stone parapets and bastions from which more guns were adding to the din of the battle. Ironside realised he would have to act swiftly if he was to avert disaster.

“Four points to starboard,” he shouted desperately at the panic-stricken helmsman, “and have a care of the lee-latch!”

“Four points to starboard, Cap’n!” repeated the man frantically as he tightly gripped the whip staff.

Benton and two other men rushed to aid the overstrained seaman just as an iron ball tore a gaping hole in the upper mizzen sail. “Coming round, sir!”

Shouted the boatswain as they struggled with the long, wooden appendage, causing the vessel to momentarily tilt dangerously.

“Ready about!” shouted Ironside as he hurried down to the main deck where he encountered Powder Keg Pete and John Brownrigg already seeing to it that the sails were appropriately adjusted. Pete turned as the captain neared him.

“They’re bloody well firing on us now!” the black-bearded man cried out. As if to emphasize his words, another ball tore through the larboard shrouds narrowly missing the coxswain.

“She’s coming about too quickly. I just hope *Dream Chaser* can take the strain,” panted Ironside.

“Oi believe she can take it. Shall we man the guns?” inquired the quartermaster.

“No point. We’ll be blown out the water by those monsters and we don’t want to flood the ports. Only thing for it is to scarper and regroup.”

“Who are them buggers anyway?” asked the perplexed quartermaster.

“Damned if I know. They definitely aren’t British or Spanish though, maybe ...” answered the captain.

Pete didn’t wait for a reply, instead rushing off to help a fumbling crew member with one of the halliards. Ironside gripped the gunwale as the ship abruptly slanted leeward, and supporting himself on the bulwark he spotted *The Blood Rose* half a league off the starboard quarter. He looked on in horror when he saw one of the large warships turning so its larboard cannons would soon be facing the smaller vessel. The hostile ship was flying the flag with a black eagle on a white background and must have been carrying more than ninety guns. The quartermaster joined him at the rail again, whistling in disbelief.

“*The Rose* is turning too slowly!” cried Ironside desperately. “If that bloody leviathan gives off a broadside, she’s done for.”

“They’re panickin’. The sails are all ahoo!” stated Pete anxiously. “She’ll land on her beam ends, if she’s not careful.”

“It won’t matter if that man-o-war discharges all her cannon at her.”

And it indeed came to pass. Moments later there was a deafening roar and a thick veil of smoke arose as all hell broke loose, the huge vessel hurling a broadside at the hapless brigantine. Captain Magee’s ship stood no chance. Dozens of iron balls thundered into the wooden sides of its target, sending lethal splinters in all directions, and both masts collapsing onto the deck, crushing men or smothering them with the fallen sails. A second broadside tore *The Blood Rose* apart, causing it to slowly founder.

“No one can have survived that,” groaned the horrified captain. “It seems they’ve mistaken us for the enemy. Raise the Union Jack! Surely they won’t fire if they think we’re a King’s ship. The Brits aren’t presently at war with anyone except us pirates, as far as I know.”

Once Pete had run off to carry out the task, Ironside scanned the scene of smoke and wreckage looking for *Vengeful Mermaid*. He was relieved to see she was as of yet unharmed. Captain Wolf had obviously seen the danger and was sailing away due west close to the wind – the opposite direction in which *Dream Chaser* was now heading. When he would see her again was uncertain, but at least she was in one piece. Fortunately, his own ship was making good speed and the ship that had destroyed *The Blood Rose* was turning too slowly to be an immediate threat. They would be long gone before she came about.

They had put some distance between themselves and

the sea battle when the wind started turning foul, forcing them gradually towards the rocky coastline. Looking from whence they had come, Ironside was surprised to see that the mist had completely lifted and only open ocean lay in that direction. The gravest danger now was any hidden reefs on this unknown coast. "Hale up the brails!" he shouted, instructing the men to adjust the sails. He also ordered for soundings to be taken. He wouldn't risk running aground, not after managing to escape that mayhem. On returning to the quarterdeck, he found Brownrigg sullenly awaiting him.

"What's goin' on, Captain? Where the hell are we?"

"I have no idea, John. This is all a mystery to me," shrugged the disconcerted pirate captain.

"We've got to get away from this shore with all haste," urged the coxswain shakily.

"We'll make too slow progress working to windward. I think we should follow the coastline and try to find a cove to shelter in until the wind changes in our favour," replied Ironside not sounding totally convinced by his own words. "You were right, John. It was a bad idea to follow that galleon into the mist."

"Aye, but not in the way I thought, Cap'n. It matters not. I'll see to it that we follow the coast." Brownrigg then descended to the main deck hoarsely shouting orders.

Ironside inhaled a deep breath of salty air to steady his nerves when he noticed the ship's surgeon ascending the stairs to speak with him.

"How goes it, Faustus?" he asked with forced cordiality.

"Bearing up, Captain, but I am somewhat confused to our whereabouts. Judging by the climate, we no longer appear to be anywhere near the Caribbean or the eastern seaboard of the Americas. In fact, if I didn't know better, I'd say we were off the west coast of Ireland. At least, the landscape there bears many similarities to this one,"

explained the physician nervously.

“Maybe we’ve drifted much farther north than anticipated,” ventured the captain, realising for the first time that the air had become somewhat cooler since they left the mist.

“So far north that the climate is completely different? In such a short time? I think not, Captain,” answered Faustus firmly. “I say something peculiar is afoot.”

“Sails ahoy!” came a sudden cry from atop the ship’s foremast.

The captain rushed to the bow, where Brownrigg was already standing, to get a better view and saw that a vessel was indeed rounding the headland ahead. Moments later a second and then a third appeared. They were much smaller than the huge warships previously encountered, nothing more than armed sloops carrying eight to ten guns, and they were flying a different flag to the one that had sunk *The Blood Rose* – the one with a golden eagle on a red background. *Dream Chaser* may be larger and better armed, but those smaller ships would be more nimble in this unfavourable wind.

“We’d do well to make ourselves scarce,” said Brownrigg soberly.

“Aye, if it were possible, but I fear we wouldn’t get very far in this traverse wind. Those sloops are more manoeuvrable. They could take us fore and aft,” frowned Ironside, unsure of the best course of action. On open sea under fair winds, he wouldn’t hesitate to put up a fight, but under these conditions he would be risking his ship and crew by taking evasive action. His only option was to continue straight ahead where they at least had a degree of wind to propel the ship onwards. He would find out what those ships wanted, but would be prepared for a fight, should their intentions be hostile.

“Bear down and beat to quarter!” shouted Ironside,

ordering the men to prepare for battle.

“Wait!” cried out Brownrigg. “They’re signalling us.”

Shielding his eyes from the sun, Ironside could just make out a figure at the prow of the leading sloop waving a yellow flag in one hand and a blue one in the other.

“Belay that order!” bellowed the captain. Turning to the coxswain he asked, “I know not the meaning of such a signal. Do you know what they want from us, John?”

“No, those signals are foreign to me, but I suggest we find out rather than getting entangled in a conflict with those sloops. We don’t know how many more of them there might be around that bluff.”

“Aye, you’re right there. We’ll slow down, but not strike our sails, just in case,” replied Ironside. Turning he shouted, “Bring her to!”

Men scurried hectically around the deck arranging the sails so the ship would make no more progress. Ironside waved at the other ship in the hope they would see that *Dream Chaser’s* intentions weren’t belligerent.

“What’re ya doin’, Cap’n?” called out William Benton angrily, who was dashing towards him. “We can take ‘em. Why did you belay the order to fight? They’ll think we’re yellow.”

“First we’ll see what they want,” answered the captain firmly.

“But them dogs sunk *The Rose*. I say we stick it to ‘em,” persisted the irate boatswain.

“If you’d been paying attention, you would have noticed that they aren’t flying the same flag as the man-o-war which attacked us. In fact, they’re flying the flag of the opposing side to the one on that damn ship.”

“You know what they say, Billy Boy,” intervened Brownrigg. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

“Suit yerselves!” snorted Benton, storming off towards amidships.

The entire crew of the now near stationary ship waited with nervous anticipation while crewmembers of the leading sloop lowered a longboat and rowed slowly towards them. Ironside was aware that the other two vessels were using the time to manoeuvre themselves into more advantageous positions should the encounter turn sour. In the meantime, Ironside ordered the chief gunner, Frederick Sauer, to see to it that the guns would be ready to fire on his orders, should it become necessary. After quickly reassuring the sceptical Cassandra that all would be well, he made his way to the leeward side to await the new arrivals. Pete and William were already leaning on the gunwale watching the approaching boat.

“We’ll all be hanged,” the boatswain muttered. “It’d be craven not to resist.”

“We cud put a fight, but at what price,” snapped Pete. “I says the cap’n is right to parley first. You saw what ‘appened to *The Rose*.”

“We’d be hard put to take on three sloops, not knowing if reinforcements are lurking around the corner,” replied Ironside, ignoring William’s grunts of disapproval. “We’ll fight if we have to, though. I’ll not give up this ship so easily.”

The longboat soon reached *Dream chaser’s* larboard side and a man dressed in a smart green tunic with a red trim, spotless white breeches, and a black three-cornered hat clambered up the ship’s ladder. Pete helped the man, who was obviously an officer, over the gunwale. The young, clean-shaven, pale-faced man finally spoke after adjusting his hat.

“Herzliche Segensgrüße, meine Herren. Ich bin Kapitän Otto Krüger und bin hier im Auftrag der kaiserlichen Majestät Wilhelm Ludwig Friedrich der Prachtige. Würden Sie mir bitte sagen, wer Sie sind, woher Sie kommen, und was Sie in unserem Hoheitsgebiet zu

suchen haben?”

“Speak English, man! We don’t understand your gibberish,” snorted William.

“Verstehen Sie kein alamannisch? Sind Sie aus dem Nordland?” continued the officer.

“I think he’s speaking German,” interjected Faustus. “Go and fetch Woody or Frederick. They can translate for us.”

“Forget Frederick, his English is pretty weak,” said Ironside. “Bring Woody.”

The captain gave a signal for Kapitän Krüger to wait, which the smiling man seemed to understand. Moments later William returned with another slightly taller man dressed in green and white, loose-fitting trousers, a beige cotton shirt, and a leather skull cap. The man was from Hamburg and he was the ship’s carpenter, Hans Zimmermann, who the other crew members preferred to call Woody.

“What are you wanting, Captain?” asked Woody in a strong north German accent.

“I think we’ve encountered some of your countrymen and I want you to translate for us. Tell him we’ve veered off course and are unsure of our whereabouts,” said Ironside calmly.

“Aye, aye, sir,” replied the carpenter before turning to the visitor and addressing him in German. After a brief exchange of words Woody turned to the captain looking confused.

“He says he is not German and that he knows nothing of a land that is called Germany. He says we have entered the territory of East Holstein, which is presently at war with West Holstein. He seems to think we are Northlanders, and because he does not recognize the British flag he thinks we must be coming from a more minor northern island. He is wanting to know why we are here.

What do I tell him?” said the German seaman.

“Tell him we are English merchants, no, tell him we are merchants from the Northern Islands who were driven off our course by a storm,” answered the captain.

Woody relayed what Ironside had said. “He wants to know what we carry.”

Ironside thought for a moment. What did they still have in the hold? They had a few barrels of wine and vats of brandy they had plundered before learning the British were on their way to Nassau. There were also a couple of crates of tobacco and quite a bit of rope, not to mention the twenty barrels of quality gunpowder they had stolen from a Spanish merchantman. “Tell him we’re carrying a mixed cargo: wine, brandy, tobacco, and gunpowder.”

Hans Zimmermann quickly translated. “He seemed especially interested in the gunpowder. He says we are welcome in the port of Steinburg, the capital of East Holstein, and that his ships will escort us there.”

“Tell him we gratefully accept his offer,” replied Ironside, deciding it was the best course of action if they wanted to find out where they were.

Kapitän Krüger seemed genuinely pleased that his offer had been accepted and quickly returned to his own ship. *Dream Chaser* made slow progress around the headland, escorted by the three more versatile sloops. On rounding the rocky bluff the entire crew marvelled at the sight which greeted their tired eyes. An enormous city spanned the coast to the east and west with a large harbour sheltered by a breakwater and protected by numerous forts. Captain Ironside scratched his chin while he wondered if he had made the right decision.

There were several merchant vessels anchored in the bay and yet more moored at the dockside. On the quay dockers were busily loading and unloading cargoes, and sailors were coming and going from the numerous

taverns not far from the waterfront. As they neared the harbourside, the crew saw some small boats coming out to guide to them to their assigned mooring place. Some time later, Ironside was observing the men securing the stern and head lines to the wharf when he became aware of the sound of marching feet. Turning, he saw a tidy column of soldiers dressed in smart blue tunics with a red trim, wearing short wigs under their black tricorns, and resting their erect muskets on their left shoulders, marching towards the ship. The officer leading the soldiers ordered them to halt and to right face when they were level with *Dream Chaser*. Ironside realised there was nothing they could do should those troops try to storm his ship. Even if he could get back into the bay, he would have to abandon the few men already on shore, and no doubt the guns of the forts would then take his ship apart. He only hoped their intentions weren't hostile; his only option being to tell the crew to remain calm.

"There must be two companies of soldiers down there," comment Brownrigg nervously. "What're we going to do?"

"Stay calm and cooperate, I would say," replied Ironside, his hand tightly gripping the gunwale. He waved Woody over and instructed him to find out what the soldiers wanted, and after some minutes the carpenter returned with a gloomy expression on his face.

"They say we must leave the ship and be escorted to our temporary quarters, and that we must leave all our weapons on board. He says it is a necessary precaution, because of the war with West Holstein. He says we have nothing to fear," reported Zimmermann glumly. "What will we do, Captain?"

"I guess we have no choice but to comply and hope for the best," shrugged Ironside. "Brownrigg, inform the crew to leave their weapons, but to take any concealable

valuables with them.”

The grumbling crew made their way down the gangplank one-by-one and fell in between the soldiers, who flanked them on both sides. Captain Ironside was, of course, the last to leave the ship together with his wife, looking back as he reached his disheartened men to see some of the soldiers boarding his beloved ship along with what looked like a group of customs officials. The motley procession was observed by crowds of intrigued dockworkers and sailors as it made its way along the wharf, finally stopping in front of a large warehouse into which the captives were ushered by the muzzles of muskets. The spacious interior contained stacks of old, empty crates and barrels. The only windows faced the street and were some fifteen feet above their heads, and not having been regularly cleaned let in little light. The stale air was tinged with the scent of old wood.

The soldiers didn't leave instantly, but waited outside the open main doors until Kapitän Krüger arrived. He informed them via Woody's translation that it was a necessary inconvenience and that they shouldn't view themselves as being prisoners despite the sentries who were to be posted outside. He also told them he had ordered some blankets, candles, food, and water for them, and that they weren't to leave the building unescorted, at least for the time being. Additionally, he informed them that their ship was safely under guard and that he had even instructed a sailmaker to patch the damaged sails as a sign of good will. When he was finished he left and the heavy doors closed behind him with a thud.

“Not prisoners, eh?” snarled William. The crew exchanged nervous glances. “We're all gonna hang, I tell ya, just because our captain wasn't willing to engage those sloops like I said we should.”

“We have t'ry and escape,” came a higher pitched

voice with a strong Irish accent from among the crowd of crewmembers. The courageous words came from Niamh O' Malley, one of few women on *Dream Chaser*. Captain Wolf would never have let a woman serve aboard his ship, claiming it would bring bad luck, but Captain Ironside didn't hold with such superstitions; he claimed it was how capable a sailor a person was that mattered, and O'Malley was as efficient as any of the men, all be it a little hot-headed at times. With her broad face and rosy cheeks – topped by unkempt, curly, brown hair – some might even say she was pretty, if not for the seemingly permanent smudges of grease and other dirt on her face. The diminutive, hot-tempered woman from the west coast of Ireland, dressed in knee-length, patched breeches, grubby stockings, and a stained white shirt, stepped forward and repeated her statement of defiance.

“Now that would be foolhardy, me dear. You want to ask all those nice soldiers out there just to let us go, or do you think we can overpower them without any weapons?” sneered William.

“Just ‘cos you lack the courage to make a break for it, you t’ink we should give ourselves as beaten,” snarled the Irish woman.

“You claim I’m lacking in courage, but I was the one who wanted to take on those sloops. At least we had a fighting chance then. My dear Neeve, it’s about time you learned the difference between bravery and stupidity.”

“Ya feckin’ eejit, I’ll have ya!” screeched O’ Malley, lunging at the cocky boatswain.

Unruffled, Ironside stepped between the fiery woman and her target. “That’s enough, Neeve. We’re already in enough shit as it is, without you lot at each others throats.” Turning to the smugly grinning boatswain. “And you’d do better to keep you’re big mouth shut, if you can’t speak reasonably, William Benton, or I’ll tan your hide myself.”

“Sorry, Captain Gunnarsson,” replied O’Malley, giving the captain a mollifying smile. “I’ll behave meself, but t’d be easier, if that gobshite’d stop acting the maggot.”

“I know, Neeve,” answered Ironside, biting his lower lip and giving the offending crew member a hard stare.

Benton laughed derisively as he made his way to the back of the warehouse and sat down on an old crate. O’Malley stepped back into the mass of men, from where she observed Captain Ironside admiringly.

“As much as it irks me, I have to admit that our bosun is right. I believe it would be better to wait and see what fate has in store for us before taking any rash action,” said the captain, addressing all assembled.

“Aye, that be the best course, Cap’n,” growled the quartermaster in agreement.

The crowd of a hundred and twenty demoralized seafarers dispersed into smaller groups, or sat alone on one of the crates contemplating their disquieting circumstances. Ironside sought out Cassandra near the main door and affectionately took her hands in his.

“I have to admit you were right, my love,” the Swede conceded, planting a soft kiss on her forehead.

“About what, my dear?” asked the woman with a loving smile.

“I should have heeded your instincts about sailing into the mist. I fear I may have doomed us all.”

“It was not solely your decision, Björn, and it’s not your burden to bear alone either,” replied Cassandra, kissing her husband tenderly on the lips.

The General

It was early evening when the despondent crew members were roused from their apathy by the grating sound of the large doors being dragged open. The

occupants welcomed a rush of cool evening breeze which drove out some of the stale, sweat-laden air from the warehouse. Standing at the door was Captain Otto Krüger accompanied by dozens of soldiers carrying crates and barrels. A handful of soldiers with fixed bayonets cleared the way for their comrades to be able to bring in the promised provisions unmolested, leaving quickly once their task was accomplished. The crew waited expectantly as Captain Ironside approached Krüger at the entrance, beckoning Hans Zimmermann to join them, where they were informed that the crates contained bread and apples, the barrels salted-pork, water, and small ale; more soldiers were on the way with blankets and candles for the night.

Ironside also learned that he had been summoned for an audience with one of the generals and was to come right away. He let the crew know that he intended to meet this general to find out more about where they were, and that Woody and Faustus would accompany him. After reassuring his wife that he would be all right, and retrieving his smartest tricorne, which he had especially brought with him from the ship for just such an occasion, he left the dimly lit building with Krüger and an armed escort. As he left, he looked back through the doorway to see the seamen delving hungrily into the crates and thirstily pouring small ale into the few small, clay cups provided with the casks.

As they were led through the streets, which could have been located in any of the capitals of northern Europe, Ironside couldn't help notice the military overtones all around him. Infantry columns marched down the main thoroughfare; mounted lancers filled the central square; teams of workhorses dragged heavy artillery pieces to their destinations. Eventually, they arrived at a grand, majestic building at the foot of a tree-lined hill,

its magnificent facade adorned with imposing columns and grandiose statues. Ironside covetously eyed a row of eighteen pounder cannons which stood either side of the gravel path leading to the main entrance, the largest on his ship being only eight pounders. Captain Krüger left the escort at the foot of the polished steps up to the entrance, which was flanked by two guards in colourful uniforms and rimmed helmets, stiffly holding eight foot halberds before them. They reminded him of pictures he had seen of soldiers from two centuries before. They then passed through lavish, oak-panelled corridors filled with operose officials and scurrying servants until they reached a set of ornate oak doors guarded by two more of the comical sentries, who shouldered their pole-arms and saluted when Krüger approached. The soldier rapped three times on the heavy door and a moment later it was opened by a thin-faced, clean shaven man wearing light-brown breeches, a dark-brown waistcoat, a long black jacket, a clean white wig and silver-rimmed spectacles.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” he addressed Ironside and his companions in accented, but fluent English. Waving at Krüger he added, “Wegtreten, Kapitän Krüger. Ich bestelle Sie wieder, nachdem der General mit den Herren fertig ist.”

“Jawohl, Herr Staatssekretär,” barked the officer before turning and smartly marching away.

“Please come in, gentleman,” bid the smartly dressed man, waving them into a finely decorated ante-chamber. Before entering the main room the official stopped and turned to face the three men. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Secretary of State Johan Wartenburg and will be present at your audience with the General.”

“How do you speak such good English, Mr. Wartenburg?” asked Ironside, relieved he wouldn’t have to rely on Woody’s shaky translation the whole evening.

“English? I’ve never heard it called that. I presume it’s a colloquial name for your tongue. I learned to speak Northumbrian, as we call it, during my time as a diplomat in the Northern Isles. I spent two years in Westminster, the capital of Albion, and another year in Oxmantown, the biggest city on Hibernia. Unfortunately, the General doesn’t speak a word of Northumbrian,” smiled Wartenburg. “And you, I have been told, are Captain Björn Gunnarsson, but who are these other two men you have brought with you?”

“This is Faustus Quiddington, the ship’s surgeon and a man of letters,” said Ironside, pointing to Faustus who attempted to look as intellectual as possible. Pointing at the scruffy seaman he continued, “The other is Hans Zimmermann, ships carpenter and Ger., I mean Alamannisch speaker. I thought I might need him to translate.”

“No need. He can wait here. The General won’t wish to have a common seaman in his presence. I’ll have a servant bring him some refreshments.”

Woody shrugged and planted his rear-end on an elegant, plushly cushioned chair. “It is in order with me, Captain.”

The remaining two men followed Secretary Wartenburg into a spacious, ostentatiously decorated room with gilded candelabras, polished oak panelling, and a huge, roaring fireplace with an intricately carved surrounding. A variety of antique weapons and massive paintings in gold frames lined the walls, and plush, exquisitely woven rugs partially covered the smooth parquet floor. Seated behind a large, elegantly carved mahogany desk was the figure of an oversized, grandiose man in an extravagantly fine uniform, overladen with an array of medals and other decorations. Captain Ironside fought to suppress a smile on seeing the man’s plump, round face, which sported a

comical, bushy walrus moustache and was topped by a well-groomed, blue-tinted, long wig. This was obviously a man of high importance, or at least a man who deemed himself to be so, although the captain thought he looked more like a pompous, over-fed buffoon.

“Ich bin General Wilhelm Ferdinand von Pumpnickel. Willkommen, meine Herren. Bitte setzen Sie sich,” commanded the seated man in a voice that seemed a little too high for his portly stature. “Möchten Sie ein Glas Wein, oder vielleicht einen kleinen Kognak?” The man’s bulbous red nose betrayed his own love of the offered alcoholic beverages.

Wartenburg translated and both men politely accepted – Ironside a cognac, Faustus a glass of red wine. The general rang a small brass bell and instantly a servant dressed in a short, yellow tunic and tight, snow-white breeches scurried into the room. Moments later he brought the drinks on a shiny silver tray. Once everyone was seated comfortably the general addressed the two men before him.

“He wants to know exactly where you are from and what you are doing in East Holstein?” explained the Secretary of State.

“Tell him we are merchants from Great Britain looking to open trade relations, but unfortunately went astray in a thick fog and erred into a battle before the coast of this unknown land,” replied Ironside, taking a sip from his glass and nodding in approval at the quality of the spirit.

Wartenburg translated and for a moment Ironside thought he might have said something to displease the pudgy senior officer, who at first gave a dissatisfied frown as he digested what the Swede had just said, but moments later his wide mouth letting out a hearty guffaw, revealing an impressive row of gold teeth.

“The General says you North-landers are known for

your keen sense of humour. He finds it hilarious that you claim to never have heard of the great kingdom of Holstein,” said Wartenburg, humouring his superior with a polite smile. “I told him you are really private traders from Albion, hence the unknown flag your ship was flying. You are lucky the General is in a good mood today, as he is known to be short-tempered when his gout is bothering him.”

“Yes, please tell him it was just my little joke and that you are right,” smiled Ironside nervously.

“In fact, Captain Ironside’s ship was chartered by the consortium, which I represent,” added Faustus quickly. “We were hoping to trade with East Holstein despite the ongoing war. The flag was designed especially for our syndicate before we left, combining the colours of the emblems of the participating families.”

“Why East Holstein?” asked Wartenburg after relating Faustus’s words to General von Pumpernickel.

Ironside looked hopefully at the surgeon, who answered without hesitating. “Our competitor chose West Holstein, but we would prefer to do business with the fairer East Holstein.”

“Die Scheißkerle!” exclaimed the general on hearing this. After the two Holsteiners briefly exchanged some more words, the Secretary of State turned to the two Europeans.

“The General says he’ll sink your competitors ships if he ever sees them, be they from Albion or not. He also said that although the northern lands are cold, wet, and uncultured, they are not our enemies, and he sees no reason to deny those from that land willing to support our emperor’s cause.”

“Tell him we are grateful for his understanding,” replied Ironside. “Unfortunately, one of our ships was destroyed in the sea battle that we inadvertently strayed

into, and the whereabouts of our third ship is presently unknown.”

“The General apologizes that the West Holsteiners destroyed your ship, and wonders if your competitors had a hand in the dastardly deed. He says the West Holsteiners are callous and barbarous,” translated Wartenburg sombrely.

“Please forgive my ignorance, but why are East and West Holstein at war?” inquired Ironside.

Von Pumpernickel broke out into a rant when Wartenburg posed the captain’s question to him, and the official waited patiently until the general had calmed down before giving his reply. “Some claim it is a civil war, others a war to suppress a rebellion, there are also those who call it a war of succession, but whatever you choose to call it, it is a conflict that has been raging for over forty years. Long ago, there existed just the one large city of Steinfelsenburg spanning the Jägerstrom river in the single, united kingdom of Holstein, but for many years it has been divided into East and West Holstein with two separate capitals – Steinburg and Felsenburg – the river acting as the border. Our beloved Emperor Wilhelm Ludwig Frederick von Holstein is the rightful heir to the throne, but his younger twin brother, the usurper Frederick Wilhelm Ludwig von Holstein claims it was rightfully left to him by their father Ludwig Frederick Wilhelm von Holstein.”

“Forty years seems a long time for a war. Why hasn’t peace been agreed upon yet? Surely it would be to the benefit of all,” asked the astounded surgeon.

“Yes, it would be for the best of the majority,” answered the Secretary of State, casting a furtive glance at his superior, “but it seems the military-industrial juggernaut has become too powerful and there are those dark interests that I fear have no desire for peace.”

“Was sagen Sie da, Herr Wartenburg?” snapped the general, not accustomed to being excluded from a conversation. The Secretary of State said a few quick words which seemed to reassure the general that they weren’t talking about him.

“But now to the reason why General von Pumpnickel has summoned you here. It does in fact have to do with the war and the upcoming campaign, which the General assures me will be the mother of all battles,” said Wartenburg calmly. Faustus shifted nervously so he was perched on the edge of his seat and Ironside downed the rest of his cognac in one. “The generals have invested most of their manpower in the forthcoming assault and lack personnel to man all the guns on the ramparts overlooking the river across from Felsenburg. You have over a hundred men on your ship, many of whom I presume are experienced in gunnery, and the captain would like them to form a Geschützgruppe – sorry, but I’m not sure of the correct word in Northumbrian.”

“You want us to man your batteries?” exclaimed Ironside. “But this isn’t our war. What if we refuse?”

“I fear the General might see fit to change your status from that of guests to that of prisoners, possibly on charges of espionage, which would mean death by fusillading. I’m sorry, but in matters of war I have little influence,” answered Wartenburg with a genuinely apologetic expression on his face.

“I guess we have little choice,” said Faustus, looking at his captain.

“I guess not. Aye, we’ll do it, but then we want to be allowed to go on our way unmolested,” nodded Ironside.

“Certainly, Captain Gunnarsson. In fact, you’ll receive payment and be provided with any provisions you might need.”

The general seemed delighted when hearing of

Ironside's acceptance of his proposal. "The General is most grateful for your co-operation in the struggle against the evil usurper. He says you have made an honourable choice to fight on the side of justice and order against the pseudo-kaiser Frederick Wilhelm Ludwig."

Shortly after General von Pumpnickel ended the audience, the three members of *Dream Chaser* were taken back to join the crew at the docks, escorted by Kapitän Otto Krüger and a platoon of smartly dressed infantrymen. Woody seemed content with the refreshments he had received while awaiting the other two men and showed little interest in what had gone on behind the closed doors.

"I was impressed by your inventive story, Faustus. It seemed more plausible to them than the truth. I thank you for your quick thinking," said Ironside as they were approaching the warehouse where the rest of the men were being held captive.

"A believable lie is more powerful than an unlikely truth," smiled the surgeon sagely, adjusting his hat. "Let's just hope this military campaign is over quickly, so we can be on our way again."

A day out in Steinburg

The occupants of the warehouse were woken from their restless slumber by the heavy doors being dragged open once more, but this time, instead of musket-wielding soldiers, they were confronted by the solitary figure of Kapitän Krüger, who informed them all they had been granted the freedom to roam the city provided they returned by nightfall. After ravenously devouring the remainder of the bread and apples, the crew excitedly poured out of the large, stone building.

"Let's find a decent tavern!" shouted Pete to numerous

roars of approval.

“I’m off to find the nearest brothel. Who’s coming?” cried William enthusiastically.

“Make sure you cause no trouble!” Ironside cried out after the departing crew members. “I don’t want to have to haul any of your asses out of the local gaol. And be back by dusk!”

The crowd dispersed in various directions, some following the quartermaster, others the boatswain, yet others went off in smaller groups to explore the city. Only a handful, including the captain and his wife remained. Cassandra wanted to visit the markets to see what wares were on offer in this unknown land, and her husband and Faustus had just agreed to accompany her when a thin, uniformed man approached them.

“Captain Gunnarsson?” asked the clean-shaven, narrow-faced man.

“Aye, that be me,” replied the Swede warily.

“I’m Leutnant Hertling. I’ve been sent to show you the batteries your men are to be manning,” he answered in accent-free English.

“You speak Eng ..., I mean Northumbrian very well, Leutnant,” said Cassandra.

Despite his evident surprise at being addressed by a woman, he answered politely. “Yes, my mother is from Albion. That’s why they sent me to show you around.”

“All right, my love, I’ll leave you to the dreary stuff,” smiled Cassandra, giving her husband a quick kiss on the cheek before heading off in the company of a small group who didn’t share their comrades propensity for boozing and whoring.

The only ones remaining with the captain were Faustus, and two other men. The first was the ship’s first gunner, Frederick Sauer, a taciturn ex-artilleryman from Königsberg in Kingdom of Prussia, better known to

the crew as Sourface on account of his constant sullen expression which was made worse by the extensive scarring on his face from burns he had suffered as a result of an exploding cannon, which one of his men had failed to sponge out adequately. His faded blue coat and beige breeches were marked by powder stains and scorch marks, but the artilleryman's white-edged tricorne, which he cherished lovingly, was surprisingly unsullied. The second man was the fearless Konishi Yukinaga – more commonly referred to as Yuki – a native of Japan, who claimed to be an exiled samurai from the Land of the Rising Sun. He had a face which could change from severe to jovial and vice versa in a matter of seconds, and although not tall in stature, he was of a robust sort. His attire consisted of a black, cotton kimono, and a pair of unusually wide, white trousers, which he referred to as *hakana*; it was an outfit which was the source of much amusement to the European seamen, unaccustomed to such exotic garments, but which none dared ridicule to his face, the pair of razor-sharp and keenly polished Japanese swords – one long, one short – he normally always wore in his belt no doubt acting as a deterrent.

As it turned out, both men were only still standing in front of the warehouse because they had not really understood what was going on, both on account of their weak grasp of the English language, but in Sourface's case also because his hearing had been impaired by countless cannons discharging in his vicinity over the years.

“What is happens?” inquired the gunner in a deep voice.

“We are going to take a look at the guns. Why don't you come with us?” answered the captain slowly and deliberately.

“I come. I want see guns that they have,” grinned the German, revealing his brown, gappy teeth.

“Good. And what about you, Yuki?”

“Come with Captain Ironside I will,” replied the samurai, bowing courteously. “My swords with me I have not, but with my bare hands you I will protect.”

“Thank you, but I hope that won’t be necessary,” chuckled Ironside, smiling at the surgeon. He then turned to the patiently waiting officer. “Please lead the way, Lieutenant Hertling.”

A little later the curious group was on its way through the crowded streets of Steinburg, attracting inquisitive looks from soldiers and civilians alike. It took half an hour of twisting and weaving through the busy throng before they reached the ramparts overlooking the river. The passing soldiers, who smartly saluted the lieutenant as they climbed the steep stairs up to the top of the great wall, failed to hide their incredulity at the sight of his companions. Eventually, they reached a large gun platform from which they looked disbelieving out over the battlements, where they could see the wide tidal river flowing far below.

“Impressive it is,” stated Yuki without the flicker of emotion.

The other men stared in silence at the vast array of crenellations, turrets, and gun emplacements on this side of the river as well as on the far bank, which they were informed was Felsenburg, the city ruled by the Emperor’s brother. Any army attempting to storm either side would be completely wiped out. The only vessels on the river were the numerous half-sunk wrecks of warships; the only way across was a gargantuan bridge, which was pocked with craters and strewn with debris where it had been hit by balls of iron in the countless attempts to assault the gates over the last forty years. It was wide enough to march a hundred men across side-by-side and seemed sturdy enough to withstand the rampages of another

forty years of conflict. Ironside marvelled at the colossal, reinforced wood and iron gates at the opposing end of the bridge, and, although he couldn't see it, presumed there would be a similar one this side too. As for the guns, there were a multitude mortar and rocket batteries, not to mention the wide assortment of cannons, ranging from the smaller twelve pounders to huge siege guns that must have weighed over five tons.

"Down there you can see the only way across the river for a hundred miles," pointed out Hertling.

"Does it have a name?" asked Faustus, who was of the opinion that all great works should possess a name.

"Yes, it's called the Verbindungsbrücke," replied the Holsteiner.

"Oh, what does that mean?" inquired the surgeon, clearly impressed by such an important sounding name.

"It means the 'connecting bridge'. It connects Steinburg to Felsenburg."

"Oh," responded Faustus, disappointed that such a strikingly monumental name could have such a mundane meaning. "I think I prefer Verbindungsbrücke."

While they were talking, Frederick Sauer had wandered over to a large, decorated cannon and was staring at it with intense interest.

"A Schmetterling," he stated in wonder.

"That's a fearsome name for a type of gun," said Faustus, walking over to join the gunner.

"Nein, a Schmetterling," repeated the man, lovingly pointing at the iron barrel.

To his surprise the surgeon saw a large, beautiful, black and red butterfly resting on the warm iron. "You mean that butterfly?"

"Ja, butterfly is Schmetterling in German," answered Sauer, not taking his eyes off the insect.

"How can such a delicate thing have such a fear-

inspiring name? Such a creature should be named according to its beauty. The French say papillon, the Spanish call it mariposa – appropriate names, don't you think? But come off it, a Schmetterling? That's ridiculous. That's a name more suitable for a weapon of mass destruction.”

Faustus stood shaking his head as he realised his words were wasted on the half-deaf German, who simply continued to stare in awe at the butterfly. Meanwhile Captain Ironside was walking along the wide walkway together with Yuki.

“Impressive it is. Never anything like it in my life I have seen,” commented the Japanese man as they strolled towards a mortar emplacement.

“So, tell me, Yuki, I've been meaning to ask you how you ended up in the Caribbean, so far from home,” said Ironside, who had taken the man onboard after he had displayed an astounding lack of fear of heights and for his exceptional capabilities with the sword.

“My sister Ejima shamed she was, and victim of political intrigues her family became. Many arrests, some executions. In exile with my friend Ikushima Shingorō to island of Miyake-jima in Philippine Sea I went. For two years I was there, but life for me it was not,” replied Yuki, concentrating hard on selecting the correct words. “Fisherman's life for samurai honourable it is not, so passing Spanish ship to New Spain I took. Many jobs I had, but life of warrior I yearned. Of Nassau and pirates I heard and to that island my way I made.”

“To become a pirate?”

“To become warrior of sea. Captain Gunnarsson honourable man I heard, so him I sought. Now here I am and no regrets I have.”

In the meantime Faustus decided again to attempt to strike up a conversation with the laconic gunner, who

had abandoned the butterfly and was now admiringly inspecting the guns. “They tell me you were an artilleryman in the Prussian army, Frederick,” he said, speaking loudly and clearly.

“It is true,” answered the Prussian, running his fingers down the side of the barrel of an eighteen pounder.

“Please tell me more,” persisted the physician.

“I fight in Spanish Succession War. I fight at battle of Blenheim – great victory for the Grand Alliance against Spain and Bavaria. I fight at the siege of Hagenau, but cannon explode, because I given inexperienced gun crew. Kill all but Frederick Sauer.”

“What happened next?” prompted Faustus when he noticed the German making his way towards a heavy mortar, seemingly believing he had spoken enough for one day.

“I survive, but burns bad. I don’t can fight for long time. When better I want not to be a soldier more, so I go to Hamburg and work in cannon foundry.”

“And then,” elicited the surgeon after a long silence.

“In seventeen hundred twelve there gives plague in Hamburg and I go from the city before I get sick also. I take job as gunner on a merchant ship. Ship is captured by pirates off the coast of South Carolina. Captain Burgess offer me position of head gunner on the pirate ship and I accept. Money and conditions bad on a merchant ship. Later, Captain Burgess take the King’s pardon, so I join Captain Ironside’s crew. He is a good man. Now that is enough. I must look at guns,” replied Sauer with a finality that invited no further questions.

The captain and his men spent almost three hours on the wall assessing the guns and deciding which ones his men would operate, for there were far too many pieces of artillery for the pirates to man them all, and he learned that, except for a few aged veteran gunners, all available

manpower was to be concentrated on the assault on Felsenburg across the river. After pausing to enjoy the fresh, salty breeze blowing in from the sea for a moment, he suggested they return to the docks to find out what the rest of the crew were up to. He sincerely hoped they had managed to behave themselves, but somehow he doubted it.

They were walking down the street towards the wharf, which housed numerous drinking establishments, when Ironside recognized one of his crew members, Sam Taylor, a swarthy, curly haired sailor from Portsmouth, slumped against the wall adjacent to a tavern door, clumsily trying to light his clay pipe. The rickety sign above the door bore the ominous name *Schwarzer Kater*.

“Have you seen the quartermaster, Sam?” inquired the captain with an uneasiness lingering in the pit of his stomach.

“Uh? The quartermashter? Yesh, he’s inshide,” slurred the seaman, spilling the contents of his pipe.

Ironside and Faustus warily entered the public house, but Yuki and Sauer preferred to stay outside, the latter helping the helpless, drunken sailor to light his smoking utensil. The quality of the air deteriorated within a matter of seconds as the two men stepped into the tavern. The intensely smoky atmosphere caused their eyes to water and Faustus excused himself when he was suddenly overcome by a fit of coughing. Ironside sighed as he took in the riotous scene before him. Many of the men, including Powder Keg Pete were already in an advanced state of inebriation, a couple of his men slumped comatose with their heads on the soggy, stained tables. The harassed serving girls were struggling to keep pace with the orders for more ale; the chubby tavern keeper, who seemed more than happy to be doing such roaring business at this time of the day, urged them not to dally

with encouraging shouts. In the middle of the throng he saw a red-nosed Brownrigg perched on a stool singing surprisingly melodically what was no doubt a Jacobite song at the top of his voice.

*Cam ye o'er frae France? Cam ye down by Lunnon?
Saw ye Geordie Whelps and his bonny woman?
Were ye at the place called the Kittle Housie?
Saw ye Geordie's grace riding on a goosie?*

A group of soldiers near the bar were growing increasingly agitated by the unknown song in an unfamiliar language.

“Singt auf Alamannisch!” cried out one of the soldiers gruffly. To the annoyance of the infantrymen Brownrigg simply sang the next verse considerably louder.

*Geordie, he's a man there is little doubt o't;
He's done a' he can, wha can do without it?
Down there came a blade linkin' like my lordie;
He wad drive a trade at the loom o' Geordie.*

The soldiers briefly exchanged some words and then they too started singing vociferously.

*Es waren drei Soldaten
es war ein junges Blut
sie hätten sich Eins begangen
der Marschall hätt sie gefangen
gefangen mußten sie sein*

As the drunken cacophony threatened to escalate into a bar room brawl, Ironside could bear no more, so he bellowed until his lungs almost burst in a screech which transcended all language barriers. A sudden silence fell

over the smokey, dimly lit room, and the captain was surrounded by the sheepish grins of both seaman and soldier alike.

“If anyone dares to antagonise the locals any further, I’ll see to it that the offending person receives a reduced share of the next plunder,” chastised Ironside. “Now, Woody, tell the soldiers that no offence was meant and the next round of drinks is on this lot.”

Despite the demurring groans from the men, they all settled down and the soldiers seemed appeased. Woody joined the uniformed men at the bar, glad of the chance to express himself in his mother tongue, as although he spoke the same language as Frederick Sauer, the gunner was not renowned for his conversational talents. Satisfied that the risk of disorderly conduct had abated, the Swede sat himself down next to a blurry-eyed Powder Keg Pete.

“Ave a drink, cap’n. They got rum and wine and cherry beer. Can yer believe it, cap’n – cherry beer. That’s beer wiv cherries. Never had the likes of it in me life. Cherry beer, cap’n, but they calls it Kirschbier. It tastes of cherries, it does. Can yer believe it, cap’n – cherry beer,” garbled the boozed up quartermaster.

“All right, Pete, you’ve made your point,” Ironside interrupted the overenthusiastic drinker. “I’ll try some, if it’ll make you happy.”

Pete grinned like a child on its birthday as he poured some reddish-brown liquid from a jug into a nearby tankard after pouring its previous contents onto the straw-covered floor, spilling a great deal of the beer on the already sticky, grimy table in the process.

“They also got a potent spirit made from ‘erbs called yay-ger-my-ster,” slobbered the quartermaster.

“I think I’ll pass on that. I’m going to try to find Cassandra after this one,” replied Ironside, wishing now that he’d stayed outside with Yuki and Frederick.

“Don’t want no aggro from yer better half, eh?” commented Pete knowingly, before downing the contents of his tankard in one.

It wasn’t long before the singing started up again, although this time most of those present joined in with the well-known sea shanty. The soldiers were not irritated any more, some even tapping their feet in time with the melody.

*The northern wind it blows
Oh, wherever Johnnie goes
Do another lap ‘round the capstan Johnnie
‘Round and ‘round she goes
The Highlands white with snow
And stowed away the plough
So do another lap ‘round the capstan Johnnie
‘Round and ‘round she goes*

On a table in a dark corner of the tavern Brownrigg, who’d had his fill of singing, was sat with Christof Andersen, a Danish seaman from Aarhus who had been on *Dream Chaser’s* crew for some time. He had an angular, sympathetic face topped by long, brown hair tied back in a pony tail. He had served on a British merchantman, but jumped ship in Jamaica after he had been flogged for being caught siphoning off some of the strictly rationed rum from a keg with a musket barrel after already polishing off his own daily ration for breakfast. He was a good humoured man known to be incredibly loyal to the captain.

“What was that song you were singing earlier, John?” asked the inquisitive Dane.

“It’s a Jacobite tune about that sausage-eating fool King George,” replied Brownrigg, viewing the other man through glassy eyes.

“I’ve heard about the Jacobites, but I cannot say I know much about them,” said Andersen, fiddling with the gold ring in his left ear.

“We’re the supporters of the exiled, true king of the British Isles – the second Stuart king with the name of James,” answered Brownrigg fervently.

“So you’re one of them?”

“I certainly am, as are many others on our ship. I had to flee for my part in the rebellion in 1715. I was a sailor on the privateer taking James from France to Peterhead in Scotland. We arrived too late for the disastrous battle of Preston in November of that year, and had no other choice but to flee to the Caribbean after dropping poor old James back off in France.”

“And that song you were singing. Although my English is not normally so lacking, I failed to understand a single word of it,” frowned the sailor.

“It doesn’t surprise me, as most Englishmen have difficulty understanding the Scottish dialect. In fact, I only understand it because most of my friends were from over the border,” chuckled the man from Newcastle.

“Who is Geordie Whelps?” asked the puzzled Dane.

“That’s King George. A whelp is a naughty child,” replied the grinning coxswain.

“And what is this place called the Kittle Housie?”

“That’s a brothel.”

“And why was King George riding on a goose there? Doesn’t sound very practical to me.”

“Goosie is the name we call the Duchess of Kendal, George’s mistress. In essence, it’s a song about the King’s marital problems. Among other things, he had to leave his wife Sophia imprisoned back in Germany after she had an embarrassing affair with a Swedish count. Now I need another drink,” stated Brownrigg, abruptly standing and walking over to join Captain Ironside, leaving the

perplexed seaman to ponder what he'd learned about the new British monarch.

"Have you seen Cassandra, John?" inquired the captain when the coxswain planted himself down heavily on the bench next to him.

"I believe she's back at the warehouse. Declined my offer to join us for a drink, she did," grinned Brownrigg.

"I don't blame her. A few hours with this rowdy bunch is more than any civilized person can take," replied the Swede only half in jest.

Ironside spent the next few minutes trying in vain to relate what he had seen on the city ramparts to the sloshed quartermaster, who was sitting, bleary eyed, across the table from him, but soon gave up when the only response he got was an inane grin from the unresponsive man, whose long beard was glistening with beer. In the meantime, Niamh O' Malley had sidled up close to him, smiling tipsily.

"Hey, cap'n, how's she cuttin'? I t'ink our quartermaster's completely flustered," chuckled the Irish woman.

"He indeed seems to be," agreed the captain regrettably.

"Hey, cap'n, you an' me ain't had a chance for a real chat since I been on board."

"No, it's doesn't seem we have," answered Ironside apprehensively.

"So tell me, cap'n, why's it t'ey call ya Ironside? I 'eard yer real name's Björn Gunnarsson," asked Niamh, staring at him attentively.

"That's because I was hit in the side by a musket ball during a sea engagement with the Danish fleet. Everyone thought I was a goner, but fortune must have been smiling on me that day, because my life was spared. I had just put the silver hip flask my father had left to me back in my breast pocket after taking a swig of brandy to calm my nerves. It saved my life by stopping the ball from entering

my body, where it surely would have done for me. I came out of the battle unscathed – save for a nasty bruise and a ruined family heirloom,” recounted the ex-naval officer, instinctively rubbing the spot which had been hit those many years ago. Reaching into his pocket he produced a battered and dented object. “I still keep it with me.”

“As a lucky charm?”

“Partly, but also to remind me that death is always looking over our shoulders, especially when one has chosen a life on the open sea.”

“Aye, that’s so fecking true. So tell me, how does a naval officer end up as a pirate captain?” asked the sea-woman, eyeing him admiringly.

“Well, Neeve, it was never my intention, but fate saw to it that I became one. Originally, I was the captain of a Brig in the Swedish navy, but was discharged by Admiral Erik Johan after my ship exploded off the coast of Porvoo in southern Finland.”

“How did it happen? Was ya hit by cannons?” asked O’Malley eager to learn more.

“If that had been so, then I’d probably still hold my commission, but, alas, I don’t know how the explosion came about; the first I knew about the fire was when I heard cries of fire down below. Fortunately, most of the crew survived and they blamed it on a seaman they called Luckless Leif. They say it was the third ship he had been on which had caught fire. Sadly, he was one of the few who died in the explosion, so we’ll never really know what happened. Anyway, the Admiral held me personally responsible, and instead of assigning me another command he had me quietly pensioned out of the navy,” explained the captain, staring unseeingly ahead as his mind was enveloped by images of that fateful event.

“What a shithead that admiral was. His loss and our gain t’ough,” said the woman from the west of Ireland,

placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“I guess so, but I’d already had my fill of authority by that point, which I presume didn’t help my case, and at least it got me out of that ill-fated war against Russia and Denmark,” replied Ironside, snapping out of his gloomy reverie. “What about you, Neeve? How did you wind up so far from the Emerald Isle?”

“I ‘ad to flee the long arm of the law, on account of me unlawful deeds,” replied the woman with a hint of pride.

“What were you? A cutpurse? A swindler?” asked Brownrigg, who had been eavesdropping the whole conversation with keen interest.

“No, John. I was a pirate even then. We used to sail off t’ west coast of Ireland in a ketch belonging to me uncle, but the pickings were lean in that area. Me uncle never dared stray too far from home and it was only a matter of time before the British Navy caught up with us,” O’Malley cheerfully explained.

“So did the Royal Navy finally catch up with you, then?” asked Ironside.

“Yes, they feckin’ well did. One night, after successfully taking a small merchant vessel, we found ourselves trapped in a cove by a British frigate and me uncle struck sails without hesitating – we’d have not stood a chance with our four pounders – would’ve been like pissin’ into the wind. But I wasn’t about to let meself be taken so easily, was I? So before the Sassenachs had pulled alongside to board our vessel, I strips off all me clothes and springs into the sea.”

“You took off all your clothes?” inquired the astonished coxswain.

“Yes, everything. I was as naked as the day I was born, save the coins in a pouch around me neck. It was a long swim to t’ shore and t’ currents were sometimes known to be treacherous. I wasn’t going to let meself be slowed

and dragged down by sodden wool and linen, was I?” replied O’Malley challengingly. “Bloody freezing it was and I t’inks me numb limbs’ll give out, but persevere I do. Stiff as a wooden board was I when I finally reached the pebbly beach, but I knew me life was at stake, so I crawls up t’è beach and hide in t’è trees until I’m able to safely be on me way. I creep towards an isolated cottage and borrows meself a dress from a washing line. I heads back to me village, but one of the crew must have snitched, ‘cos I was told by a dear old friend that the magistrate was searching for me. First I went into hiding in the countryside, but then I heard that me uncle and the rest of the crew had been strung up. T’at’s when I made me way to Cork and took the first ship I could get passage on – one which happened to be sailin’ to Jamaica.”

“Now that’s a sight I’d have loved to have borne witness to,” sneered a voice from behind. “Neeve O’Malley in the all together, what a delightful image it conjures up.”

Looking around, they saw that William Benton had entered the smokey tavern followed by two other crewmembers. The boatswain was looking thoroughly pleased with himself.

“Scarlet for yer mother fer havin’ ya, William Benton,” screeched the irate Irish woman. “Ain’t anyone ever told ya, it ain’t polite to go earwiggig conversations yer not party to.” Benton simply stood where he was grinning lecherously. “What are ya gawking at ya feckin’ scut. Yer langered y’are, Billy Boy. Crackin’ Jenny’s teahouse not satisfy ya enough?”

“Oh, we’re plenty satisfied, aren’t we boys. A top brothel it was, albeit a little on the costly side,” replied Benton giving a sly wink to the two shipmates who accompanied him, both of whom just stood there smirking libidiously. Without awaiting the inevitable scathing reply, William turned and staggered towards the bar, waving for his two

cronies to follow.

“Loscadh is dó ort, William Benton!” the annoyed woman called after him.

“What did you just say to him, Neeve?” Brownrigg asked.

“I said I hoped that he may be burned and scorched, I did. The filthy sod deserves it, he does.” Those at the table all laughed at O’Malley’s harsh words.

Ironside emptied his mug and decided he would try to motivate his crew to return to the warehouse before things got out of hand again. Most reluctantly agreed to leave the drinking house, but it came as no surprise that Benton flatly refused, shouting about how he was a pirate and therefore a free man, and that no king nor captain would force him to do what he did not wish to do. Captain Ironside had to admit the boatswain was right – he couldn’t force anyone to leave against their will – so, shrugging, he left with the majority of the those crewmembers who held a least a small degree of respect for his position. As he left he glanced back at Benton, who now sat laughing with a handful of men who shared the troublesome boatswain’s opinion.

On stepping out onto the cobbled street, he saw that Pete was already staggering down the middle of the road, supported by two shipmates, leading another rowdy verse of the crew’s favourite shanty.

*So high the waves do roll
In this godforsaken hole
Do another lap ‘round the capstan Johnnie
‘Round and ‘round she goes
But Lochaber’s in bloom
In the bonny Highland June
So do another lap ‘round the capstan Johnnie
‘Round and ‘round she goes*

As the captain briskly walked to catch up with the others, he noticed Faustus exiting a small teashop opposite. The surgeon waved to him with one hand while putting on his hat with the other.

“It seems you may have made the wiser choice in establishments, Mr. Quiddington,” chuckled Ironside.

“Yes, a quiet and cosy little place. The owner’s from Albion, so I could have a nice little chat with him and his friends,” said the other man contentedly.

“Did you learn anything interesting?”

“Indeed I did, Björn,” replied the surgeon lightly tapping the tips of his fingers together. “It seems that not everyone supports this infernal war. There are those who have been clandestinely working towards peace for many years only to find their plans thwarted again and again by powerful vested interests. They say the war is waged by tyrants on the backs of the small folk.”

“They always are, Faustus,” answered the captain phlegmatically. “They always are.”

“It would seem that the ruling elite on both sides are as bad as each other, and my fear is that by manning those guns we’ll be aiding one despot against another.”

“Believe me, Faustus, if I could get us out of this mess I would, but our ship’s heavily guarded and our only way out of this damn land is to comply with the general’s demands,” explained Ironside remorsefully. “Anyway, our targets are only to be military ones. I’ve been informed we are to offer supporting fire and take out the enemy batteries that are able to shoot at those crossing the connecting bridge.”

“Enemies, you say. We, as sea robbers, have plenty of enemies – the Brits, the Spanish, the French – but this nation, wherever it may be located, isn’t yet one of them,” pointed out the surgeon.

“But it would be, if they knew who we really were,”

responded Björn Gunnarsson assuredly. Seeing that they'd reached the warehouse he added. "We'll speak about it again later. Now I want to find my wife."

Captain Ironside was comforted to see Cassandra sitting on a crate near the entrance, enjoying the warming rays of sun. She stood with a relieved smile as he approached.

"There you are, my dear. I was worried you would return in a similar state to our quartermaster. I am so happy you are able to restrain yourself from such debauchery, unlike most of the crew," she smiled.

"While they were indulging themselves in gluttony and fornication, I had the dreary task of assessing the gun emplacements, although I did partake in one tankard to please Pete."

"Only to please Pete?" asked the tall woman, raising her eyebrows sceptically.

"Well, I must admit that being in the presence of that lot when they're on a bender, caused me to require something to calm my nerves," grinned Ironside boyishly.

"That I can believe, my love."

"Anyway, how was the market?" the captain inquired, desiring to change the subject.

"It was splendid. It had wares, many of which I have never seen before, from a multitude of lands, all of which I had never heard of. I even got you a present, although it cost a pretty penny," said Cassandra, stooping to reach behind the barrel and retrieving a three-foot long bundle of rags.

"Thank you, my dear," her husband replied, gingerly accepting the gift and carefully unwrapping it. "A telescope!" exclaimed the Swede, placing it to his right eye and looking out across the bay. "Wow, the image is so much clearer than to what I'm used to and it's not half as heavy as it looks."

“Yes, I thought it would be better than the cumbersome, four-foot thing you found on that French merchantman. Do you like it, dear?”

“I love it, Cassandra!” he proclaimed, taking his spouse in his arms and kissing her affectionately to the dismay of passers-by. “Let’s go for a stroll down to the end of the harbour so I can try it out. By the way, where’s Pete?”

“Sleeping like a baby as are most of those who returned with him from the binge.”

Arm-in-arm, the contented couple made their way down the quay laughing and joking about the antics and misdeeds of various members of the crew.

An invitation to dinner

The next day the crew was a little more reserved than on the previous day. Many were nursing severe hangovers; others had spent all their hard earned plunder the day before. Most of the crew were resting in the warehouse or having a quiet drink in one of the nearby taverns. Ironside spent most of the day wandering through the city with his wife to view the sights it had to offer. On returning to the docks they were greeted by Faustus and Woody conversing with a tall, severe-faced man dressed in a black tail-coat and spotless white breeches. His cylindrical hat sported a large white feather.

“What’s going on, Faustus?” asked the captain, smiling at the stranger, who responded with a polite bow.

“This man’s a messenger from General Pumpnickel. He says we are both invited to dine at his residence this evening with him and his wife,” answered the surgeon jovially.

“I think it would be better to accept, as we don’t want to anger our hosts. His wife will be there, you say? Then I shall bring mine too.” He turned to face Cassandra. “That

is, if you wish to accompany us.”

“Of course I do, Björn. After all you have told me about him, I’d like to see this grandiloquent military man for myself,” grinned the woman, revealing her pearly white teeth.

“The man says he will fetch us at seven of the clock,” Woody informed them.

“Good. That’ll give us plenty of time to freshen up. I saw a bathhouse a couple of streets away. Maybe we should pay it a visit,” suggested Cassandra.

As the bells of a nearby church struck seven, the black-coated man reappeared and led the spruced up trio to the magnificent building where the dinner was to take place. The three invitees had gone to great efforts to make themselves look presentable, although they still appeared scruffy in comparison to the primly attired servants. They were received by the Secretary of State, who led them into a magnificent, spacious dining room adjacent to the chamber in which they had previously met the general. Seated at the head of a long table with a decanter of wine in one hand and a silver goblet in the other was their host; on his right sat a moon-faced, heavily made-up woman dressed in an extensive, yellow and orange mantua gown, adorned with a lace neck frill and sleeve ruffles. A combination of natural and false hair was piled, curled and frizzed high on the top of the stout woman’s head. The haughty lady stared at them appraisingly while they entered and were shown to their seats by an anxious servant.

“Die Dienerin darf draußen bleiben,” snapped the woman in a shrill voice.

“I’m sorry, but the Gräfin seems to be under the impression that your wife is a servant,” replied Wartenburg apologetically.

After the Secretary carefully explained who Cassandra was, the seated woman exchanged a few brusque words with her spouse before nodding disdainfully and indicating for the guests to take their assigned places.

“The General you already know, but let me introduce you to his wife Gräfin Viktoria Luise Adelheid Mathilde Charlotte von Teutoburg,” said Wartenburg with an awkward smile.

The portly lady smiled pleasantly at the two men, although she completely ignored Cassandra, who simply shrugged resignedly.

“Die Wilden taugen nur als Bedienstete,” barked the General, who up until now had been silently observing the arrival of his guests.

After an exchange of words with the two nobles Wartenburg turned to Cassandra. “I do apologize, Mrs Gunnarsson, but the aristocracy in our land are of the opinion that the natives of the Southern Isles are only suitable as servants and slaves,” continuing with a paternal smile, “but I must add, it is not unknown for common men in the colonies to take indigenous wives.”

“It would seem that it is not so different here to where we come from,” scowled the Bermudian woman.

“Wir finden dem guten Kapitän eine hübsche, dralle Holsteinische Frau,” commented the General cordially, pouring himself some more wine.

“The General said they would like to find a pretty, buxom woman for the captain to take as a wife,” translated the official. On seeing Cassandra regarding their hosts with open enmity and on the brink of rising from her seat, he continued. “I beg you to excuse the General’s unrefined sense of humour. I’m sure no harm was meant by it.”

The insulted woman sat back in her seat fuming soundlessly, filling her goblet to the rim with wine.

“If the General goes on like this, we’re out of here,” warned Captain Ironside.

“That would not be very wise, captain. The General would deem it an insult, and it might endanger your status as guests in Steinburg. I implore you to endure his witless humour, so you can conduct your task and sail on your way as heroes and not end up languishing in the dungeons as enemies of the state,” Wartenburg beseeched the irked pirate captain.

Sensing the uneasiness of his guests, the General had presence of mind to summon his musicians in an attempt to diffuse the tension. Four neatly dressed men shuffled into the room: the first was carrying a viola, the second an oboe, the next a tall harp, and the last was dragging in a small, ornate harpsichord with the help of two flustered servants. As soon as they had taken up their positions, they instantly started playing melodies not unlike the ones in the theatres Faustus had often frequented back home in England.

“They’re playing extracts from the latest symphonies by the most renowned of Holstein’s composers – Bootheven and Mazort. Their music is said to be known even in Albion. Have you heard of them?” asked Wartenburg, tapping his fingers rhythmically on the oak surface of the table.

“I can’t say I have, although I must say this one does sound familiar,” replied Faustus, taking in the sophisticated tunes with relish.

While both hosts and guests were enjoying the music, servants dressed in red breeches, blue tunics, and bright red wigs brought in an assortment of dishes containing regional delicacies. Curiously eyeing a large plate holding a crispy joint of roast meat, which had been placed near to him, Ironside inquired what it was.

“That’s Schweinshaxe,” replied Wartenburg. Observing

the confused look on the captain's face he added. "It's a cut of slow-roasted pork."

Ironside and his wife tucked into the tender meat, while Faustus, who did not willingly partake in the flesh of living beings, turned up his nose in disgust. Despite the disapproving glances from their hosts, the physician contentedly heaped his plate with potatoes, carrots, and peas. After they had finished the main course the servants carried in a large cake consisting of several layers of chocolate sponge sandwiched with whipped cream and cherries. All three guests eagerly helped themselves to the rich gateau, which they washed down with wheat beer and schnapps. It escaped none of those present that the General and his spouse were accustomed to overindulging in food and alcoholic beverages – both becoming increasingly boisterous from the effects of the latter.

"Wir werden unsere Feinde mit unserer Wunderwaffe vernichten!" bellowed Pumpernickel, knocking over his goblet. Unnoticed by the inebriated man, a harried servant promptly cleared away the mess and refilled his drinking vessel.

"You must excuse the General when he's in his cups. He tends to get unduly excited," said the Secretary contritely.

"What did he say?" asked Cassandra. "I hope he wasn't being insulting again. I've had more of that than I can take for one evening."

"No, no. He's just raving about how this time we'll overcome our foes."

"How can he be sure of victory after forty years of stalemate?" inquired Gunnarsson, unconvinced by the General's substantial claim.

"This time we do indeed have a secret weapon, but I'm not really sure of the translation. The military council call it the *Festungstorvernichtungssprengkörper* mounted

on a *gepanzerte Dampfstormwagen*. It's a powerful explosive device for destroying the enemy's gate, and is to be transported over the bridge by an armoured steam carriage, which will hopefully deflect any cannon balls targetted at it. Our scientists have been working on it in secret for years" explained Wartenburg.

"A steam engine that can carry an explosive charge!" exclaimed Faustus in disbelief. "I've heard of such devices being used for pumping water out of mines, but one that powers a vehicle so that it can propel itself is unheard of. I could make a fortune, if I knew how such a contraption worked. It would change the world!"

"As I said, it's secret – at least until it has been used to defeat our foes, but if it were to become commercially available, we could discuss a lucrative contract with your corporation in Albion," answered the official in a low voice.

On hearing the Secretary of State mention the secret weapon, the General went into another rant.

"He says victory is assured and that there will be no mercy this time," disclosed Wartenburg. "He says our forces will exact a terrible retribution on the people of Felsenburg for their years of supporting his brother the usurper."

"You mean they plan to massacre the civilian population?" blurted out the surgeon, exchanging a horrified glance with the captain and his wife.

"It would seem so," frowned the unhappy official. "They've chosen to ignore my advice of offering clemency, which would aid a swift reunification and restoration of the kingdom. He informs me that the attack will take place at dawn in two days from now, and that you and your men should be fully acquainted with the guns by then."

Pumpnickel gradually seemed to lose interest in his

guests the more alcohol he consumed, until he finally dozed off in his seat snoring loudly. The bleary eyed, red-nosed countess downed another schnapps, all the time glaring at Cassandra as if she was her worst enemy in the world.

“Was macht sie hier! Hol das Küchenmädchen hier raus, Wartenburg. Sie besudelt den Raum,” screeched the boozed up aristocrat, spitefully throwing the leftovers on her plate at Cassandra.

Although not understanding the words directed at her, Cassandra only too clearly understood the offensive intent. The Bermudian woman leapt to her feet, placing a hand on a nearby carving knife. “Why you snooty, puffed up old shrew!”

Her husband quickly placed a restraining hand on his affronted wife’s forearm. The outraged woman pulled away, but stopped when she noticed that the unbearable noblewoman too had collapsed back into her chair in a drunken stupor. It was unclear who was snoring the loudest – she or her husband. At this point, Wartenburg decided it was time to call it an evening and instructed the servants to take their comatose master and mistress to their rooms before sorrowfully leading the three guests out of the room.

“As you can see, the General can be a difficult man, and his wife no less so. I do apologize on behalf of my countrymen for the deplorable manners of our aristocracy,” said Wartenburg as they reached the main hall.

“Aristocrats are the same everywhere. They believe they are entitled to much more than the rest of us, but one day their time will come, and they’ll find themselves short a head,” stated Ironside passionately.

“Dangerous talk, Captain Ironside. Better to keep those thoughts to yourself. Anyway, I apologise again,”

repeated the Secretary, summoning a servant to escort them back to the docks. "What concerns me most is the inevitable massacre should the army succeed in capturing Felsenburg, but there doesn't seem to be anything I can do to stop it."

Not long after, the subdued trio were being led back to the warehouse, also unsure of how the impending slaughter could be prevented.

Visitors in the night

Captain Ironside was woken from his restless slumber by someone gently shaking his arm. Opening his heavy eyelids he saw Christof Andersen, who had been on watch duty, smiling down at him.

"We've got visitors," whispered the Dane.

"Who is it?" asked the captain sleepily.

"Two members of *Vengeful Mermaid* are here to see you."

"What!" exclaimed the suddenly wide awake Swede, jumping to his feet and pulling on his boots.

Cassandra stirred, but he decided not to disturb her until he had found out more. He followed Andersen towards the two figures standing near the entrance, silhouetted in the candle light. He recognised the two men instantly: the first was John Loxton, a wiry Englishman, known for his superhuman swimming ability; the second man was Antoine Legrand, a muscular Frenchman from Marseilles, who had spent some years on a Mediterranean galley after being caught breaking into an apothecary.

"How did you get here? Where's the rest of your crew? Are they all right?" inquired Ironside hurriedly.

"They're doin' fine, Captain Ironside, jus' fine," answered Loxton calmly.

"So where are they? Tell me everything," ordered the

captain impatiently.

“They’re across the river in Felsenburg. We were captured and put to work repairing vessels. Seems that both sides lost all their warships in that battle we mistakenly sailed into. Captain Wolf got us swiftly away after what happened to *The Blood Rose*, may their souls rest in peace. That’s when we were escorted into port by three sloops. At first, they were suspicious of us – thought we were spies, they did – but in the end they realised we had nothin’ to do with the war. Seem to think we’re from a country called Albion, wherever that is. We heard on the grapevine that *Dream Chaser* had been taken to Steinburg, so Wolfie sent us out in a rowing boat to find out if it were true. With the mighty Antoine on the oars, it only took us four hours to get here.”

“But how did you find us so easily? We could have been anywhere,” asked the perplexed captain.

“Luckily, Antoine here can speak a little German, so we made a few inquires and were told by some sailors that strangers were residing in this here warehouse. Wasn’t so hard really,” smirked Loxton, looking thoroughly pleased with himself.

“So what does Captain Wolf intend to do?”

“Well, Admiral Achtermast over there in Felsenburg said we could leave in a couple of weeks after helping to construct some new ships. Old Wolfie hopes you can join up with him, either before or after he leaves. We’re to return with your answer as soon as we’re rested,” replied the seaman, readily accepting a small cup of rum which the Dane had just offered him. “We can’t leave Felsenburg any earlier, ‘cos the Admiral needs warships to defend against the usurper in Steinburg.”

“The usurper? We were told that the usurper sits in Felsenburg,” said Ironside, scratching his hairy chin. “Seems we’re caught up in an imperial power struggle.”

Turning to Andersen. "Go and wake up Mr. Quiddington."

After a few minutes and several glasses of rum for the visitors, Faustus appeared in his shirt and breeches. "What's going on, Björn?" The disquieted surgeon attentively listened to the captain before continuing. "It seems we might have an opportunity to prevent the wholesale butchery of the civilian population, Björn."

"What do you suggest we do, Faustus?" asked the puzzled pirate captain.

"We warn the West Holsteiners of the attack. Mr. Loxton, you are to inform them of the planned assault with the gate-destroying device. Tell them to evacuate all civilians from the city, and prepare defences within the walls," answered Faustus decidedly.

"But that won't stop the attack, Faustus," commented the unconvinced pirate captain.

"No, but at least it will be soldiers fighting soldiers. Maybe the attack will fail and the stalemate will continue. Should that be the case, it doesn't really matter, although I believe the attack might succeed, but at least we can hopefully see to it that the population of Felsenburg will remain safe until the thirst for retribution has died down. I'm afraid there's nothing else we can do," lamented the ship's physician.

"You're right, Faustus. We can't prevent the battle, but we can limit the casualties to the inhabitants of the city, who are not deserving of the terrible fate otherwise in store for them," said Ironside. "Do you think you could return right away, John? Time is of the essence if they are to prepare an adequate defence."

Loxton exchanged an uneasy glance with Legrand. "Do you think we could manage another four hours of rowing, big man? It's you who does most of the work."

"Oui, zat is possible. I 'ave need only of a leetle nourishment first," replied the sturdy Frenchman.

A short time later, after being thoroughly briefed by Captain Ironside, the two members of *Vengeful Mermaid* were stealthily making their way back to the quayside carrying a bundle of bread and cheese, and small bottle of rum.

Before returning to the warmth of their blankets, Ironside and Faustus clandestinely discussed a few significant modifications to their plan, so it would not only prevent a massacre of the civilian population, but hopefully additionally make life difficult for the two tyrants.

The day of the attack

Two days later just before dawn, the sleepy crew were assembled in the shadowy lantern light of the warehouse. Ironside stood imposingly before them, dressed in a freshly cleaned coat and neatly polished boots that he only wore when he was ashore.

“As you all know, today is the big day,” stated the captain, ignoring the excited mutterings around him. “Today is your chance to show off your skills as gunners when we man the batteries in support of the assault on Felsenburg. We are entering battle, so I will be exercising my right to absolute authority during this time. Is that understood?”

There were nods and murmurs of consent from all but a few men who were congregated around William Benton.

“What’s really going on, Captain Ironside? I heard you intend us to do more than just fire off those guns. We want to know what you’ve in store for us,” demanded the boatswain to the grumbles of agreement from his small following.

“It is better you don’t know all, William,” answered

Ironside in a hostile tone. "It is important you follow my instructions unquestioningly, if we are to get through this in one piece."

"Why should we follow you, when we don't know nothin' 'bout what's goin' on?" persisted Benton. "We're not on *Dream Chaser* now, so, the way I sees it, you don't 'ave no authority over us."

"This is about reclaiming our ship and leaving this god-forsaken land. If you don't wish to be a part of the crew, you and your chums can go your own way." The captain turned to the rest of the crew. "Do the rest of you agree with me, or shall we elect a new captain here and now?"

"Oi says we trust the cap'n," growled Powder Keg Pete. "He ain't let us down yet." The rest of those assembled vocally expressed their agreement with the quartermaster. "So are ye wiv us, William Benton?"

"Then I guess we ain't got no choice. We're all with you, cap'n," assented the recalcitrant sailor with some reluctance.

"Good, I'm glad we could settle that like reasonable men," said the captain a little more calmly. "Unfortunately, our weapons are still on the ship, but I'd like everyone to take any they're able to lay their hands on during the course of the morning and conceal them on their person: knives, cudgels and the like, as we might be needing them later."

"Like these," grinned Niamh O'Malley, producing a hunting knife, a thin stiletto dagger, and a small Spanish wheellock pistol from beneath her baggy clothing.

"Where did you get those, Neeve O'Malley?" asked the astonished coxswain.

"Smuggled 'em off t'e ship, I did. T'ought we might be needing them. Seems I was right," replied the woman merrily.

“You took a bit of a risk, but I’m glad you did. Now make sure they remain hidden,” bid the captain.

The Irish woman slipped the sheathed blades into the belt under her shirt, but instead of concealing the small pistol she stepped forwards and held it out to Ironside. “You take it, cap’n. Ya needs a weapon befitting of an officer. Shame I couldn’t bring ya out yer backsword, but twas a little too long ter fit down me trousers.”

“You could have smuggled me out a musket while you were at it, Neeve?” commented an unidentified voice from the crowd. “What about a cannon, too?” rang out another voice mirthfully.

The hall was filled with laughter at the thought of the fearless young woman sneaking an untold number of weapons under her clothes past the unwitting guards. Nobody doubted her temerity.

“All right, all joking aside, here’s the plan,” said Ironside sternly and clearly. “I’ll be leading the main body to the ramparts where we will undertake our task of firing the guns, but I want everyone to be ready to act when I give the order to do so. Mr. Brownrigg, I want you to take a dozen men to retake *Dream Chaser* as soon as you hear a large explosion. Not before, mind you.”

“What if that giant petard the generals want to blow the gate with doesn’t go off?” asked Brownrigg.

“That’s why I want you to wait. If it doesn’t go off, then the plan is off, and we’ll have to hope General Pumpnickel is a man of his word and grants us free passage for the aid we are lending to his war effort.”

“Why don’t we just wait til after the battle, if he’s goin’ to let us leave anyway?” grumbled William Benton. “Why go to all the trouble of retaking our ship by force, when we can get it back peaceably?”

“Firstly, we don’t know how far we can trust the General to keep his word. Secondly, there’s more at stake

here than just us and our ship.”

“What can be more important than us and our ship?” scowled the troublesome boatswain.

“The lives of thousands of innocents, Mr. Benton!” interceded Faustus.

“What do I care ‘bout the fate of your so-called innocents. Nobody’s innocent s’far as I’m concerned. We should be putting ourselves first and escaping this shithole of a city with all the booty we can carry,” growled Benton to the concurring murmurs of his closest supporters.

“Looting and running riot will get us all hanged, Billy Boy,” snapped Brownrigg.

“We’ll use the confusion caused by the battle to escape. There’s no need to draw any extra attention to ourselves. If all goes according to plan, you might have time to help yourself to some of the goods in the warehouses on the docks before we leave. How does that sound, William?” responded the Swede placatingly, wiping a thin layer of cold sweat from his brow.

“S’pose we’ll have to be content with that,” mumbled Benton.

“Good,” replied the captain. “Cassandra and those others who are not able to take part in either manning the guns or reclaiming our vessel will wait here until they are fetched. Yuki, I want you to stay here and keep watch over them, if you would be so kind.”

“An honour it would be, Captain Gunnarsson,” answered the samurai with a low bow.

The restless congregation of outlaw sailors lingered anxiously until a grey-bearded old man in a blue military jacket and tricorn finally arrived to escort them to the gun emplacements. The disorderly mob that meandered through the crowded streets was a strong contrast to the neat columns of disciplined infantrymen marching to their positions. The captain and his men did their best to

ignore the contemptuous stares of the smartly uniformed officers and derisive sneers of the soldiers in the ranks as they passed.

Eventually, the mass of pirates swarmed along the wall, taking up the positions designated to them by Chief Gunner Frederick Sauer. It turned out that the old man who accompanied them, Olaf Mörser, was an artillery captain who had been assigned to oversee the bombardment.

“What about those strange rockets things that look like giant fireworks. I’m sure they’d make a big bang,” commented Benton, stroking the sturdy wooden launching frame which housed a row of the elongated projectiles.

On seeing the boatswain fondling one of the rockets, Captain Mörser hurried over and chided the seaman in Alamannish.

“What’s ‘e sayin’?” snarled Benton, tightly clenching his fists. “He insultin’ me?”

Luckily, Woody stepped in before the quarrelsome pirate offended the old man. “He says the rockets must not to be used. He says that although they have a fair range, they lack aerodynamic stability and are therefore inaccurate. He also says that they have a tendency to explode prematurely. He says that they have stopped using them after an incident when a rocket changed direction in mid-air and flew back and exploded in Steinburg, killing two townsfolk and injuring a horse.”

“Interesting,” replied the boatswain, stepping back cautiously from the dangerous contraption, smiling to himself as he strode away to join one of the gun crews.

Meanwhile, Captain Ironside was inspecting his men, and when he was satisfied all were at the ready he called over the two cabin boys he’d brought along for a specific purpose. The youngest was Sam Huckabee,

a fourteen-year-old boy from Bristol, whom the crew called Sam Powder. The short, brown-haired boy with a round face stood eagerly next to his taller older brother, William Huckabee, better know as Monkey Boy Will. The fifteen-year old had a pale, feminine face which was dotted with smudges of grease and dirt. His mid-length, mousey blonde hair was tied back with a cotton band and his oversized breeches held up with a length of mangy, old rope. Both boys attentively anticipated the task the captain had in store for them.

“I want you two to go and observe the main gate. Make sure you remain unnoticed, which shouldn’t be too difficult in this chaos. Speak with no-one and only return when the last of the soldiers has left the city. Do you understand?”

“We’s to watch the gate, Cap’n,” replied the oldest of the two boys.

“We’s only to return when the last soldier’s left the city,” added the younger boy proudly.

“Yes, and then one of you is to get back here as quickly as you can once that has happened. The other will continue observing the gate until we arrive,” instructed Ironside sternly. “Do you think you can do that?”

“Of course we can,” said Monkey Boy Will assuredly.

“Off you go then. The bombardment is about to begin.”

Captain Ironside watched the two boys scurrying down the steps, confident that at least Will would carry out the task at hand. He trusted less in the ability of Sam Powder, who was a nervous, fidgety young lad, whose dreadful fear of heights caused the captain to doubt his future on the high seas. That said, he couldn’t bring himself to be too harsh with the boy, as he and his brother were both orphans, which he had rescued from a treacherous life aboard a Bristol merchantman. He was glad to see their confidence and contentment were growing day by day,

and he hadn't given up all hope on young Sam quite yet.

Looking around, Ironside noticed Captain Mörser was expectantly holding a thin sword limply above his head. Moments later an unseen bugle blared out a signal and the old artilleryman jerkily lowered the tip of his weapon – the bombardment was to begin. The captain quickly squeezed lumps of wax into his ears and shouted at the top of his voice. “Fire!”

All hell was set loose as numerous iron cylinders discharged their loads at targets on the other side of the river. Using his new telescope, the Swedish captain observed many of the shots taking large chunks out of the opposing battlements and sending enemy artillery men scurrying for cover. Frederick Sauer's expert sighting of the guns resulted in three of the enemy's pieces being put out of action before they could even react. After the shock of the initial torrent of missiles, the soldiers of Felsenburg slowly recovered and sporadically started to return fire, but by that time the accumulated smoke – the fog of war – had decreased visibility, forcing both sides to fire blindly at each others fortifications. Ironside was pleased that they had so quickly achieved their aim of making it difficult for their opponents to target the bridge.

“Look, Cap'n,” shouted the quartermaster through the unbearable din, pointing at a stack of half empty powder kegs. “They got Spanish powder just like we got. Even ‘as the same seal.”

“Just continue firing, Pete!” ordered the captain, unable to make out clearly what the other man was saying.

Placing his telescope to his eye again, he was astounded by the sight that greeted him as he focused on the bridge, where the smoke was less dense. A huge armour-plated vehicle was making its way ponderously over the bridge towards the huge gate to Felsenburg, leaving a billowing trail of steam in its wake. Any cannon balls aimed at the

monstrous contraption which met their mark simply ricocheted off the thick metal plating enclosing it. A machine propelled without the aid of horses – it was a marvel to watch. When it finally reached the gate at the other side, he observed two men protected by cumbersome metal scales emerge from the self-propelled wagon and start running back towards their own lines. Despite their armour, both men were taken down by volleys of musket fire from above the gate before they got very far. With nervous anticipation, Captain Ironside wondered what would come next, but he didn't have long to wait when a momentous explosion shook the air, loud enough even to drown out the constant pounding of the guns for a short moment.

“Take cover!” shouted the captain as he dived behind a wall just in time to avoid the rain of stone shrapnel that had been hurled indiscriminately far and wide.

He was glad to see that his men had suffered nothing but minor cuts and bruises, but Captain Mörser, who had been too slow to react, hadn't been so lucky. A large chunk of flying masonry had all but taken his head off – it was a ghastly sight which the captain knew he wouldn't be able to forget so quickly. Taking advantage of the old man's fatal mishap, Ironside retrieved the dead man's fallen sword and attached the scabbard to his belt – it could come in useful later in the day.

Looking back down at the bridge he could see a gaping hole where the massive reinforced gates of Felsenburg had once been located. No-one within its immediate vicinity could have survived that blast. He then saw the vast army of East Holstein leaving the wide-open gates of Steinburg and starting to cross the bridge towards the gaping breach in the enemy's wall. First came the burly pioneers to clear a way through the rubble for the rest of the army, then appeared all manner of troops.

There were proud grenadiers, followed closely by ranks of disciplined line infantry; there were lightly armed fusiliers and finely adorned guardsmen, then there was a loose formation of dismounted light dragoons, and finally came the poorly equipped militiamen with their pikes and outdated muskets. But that was not all. Next came Emperor Wilhelm Ludwig Frederick von Holstein on a fine white stallion surrounded by his flamboyantly adorned generals and the elite palace guard, followed by rows of mounted men: cuirassiers in shiny metal breastplates; lancers holding their long and deadly spears high; smartly dressed hussars waving their polished sabres above their heads; carabinieri with their deadly carbines and sabres, succeeded by fearsome dragoon guards. Last of all came the light horse artillery to support the troops in their struggle to take the usurper's city.

Ironside wondered if the opposing generals of Felsenburg had heeded his warning, for if they had not they were surely doomed. Unprepared they would stand little chance against the onslaught of this martial behemoth.

The captain was roused from his thoughts by the sight of Monkey Boy Will rushing up the stone staircase two steps at a time.

“Have all the soldiers left the city, Will?”

“Yes, cap'n. They're all gone but for a dozen or so militiamen, most no older than me,” wheezed the boy.

Captain Ironside gave the order for the guns to cease the bombardment. Once the firing had fizzled out, he ordered the men to gather up anything they could use as a weapon: rammers, handspikes, wormers, and scrapers, even long-handled powder scoops. The cabin boy, closely followed by the sword-wielding captain, excitedly led the crudely armed mob of pirates down to the city gate.

“Take a score of men and see to it those gates are

closed and barred,” Ironside shouted to the red-faced quartermaster. “The rest of you seize the sentries, but don’t hurt them, they’re no more than lads.”

The few young guards at the gatehouse were completely overwhelmed without the least resistance, and Pete and his group of men, quickly joined by others, were soon busy at working on the two huge capstan-like devices which painstakingly dragged the massive gates shut. “Do another lap ‘round the capstan, Johnnie!” shouted the panting quartermaster encouragingly.

It took Faustus’s extensive knowledge of mechanics to operate the complex locking system, which was composed of a confusing assortment of chains, cogs, and levers. As soon as the gates were securely shut, Ironside ordered the men to watch the streets leading from Steinburg in case there were still troops on this side of the wall, and to see to it that the captives were bound, gagged, and secured. They were then to await his return while he and Faustus, followed by a dozen men armed with muskets snatched from the prisoners, ascended a narrow tower overlooking the bridge. Although he couldn’t see what was happening in the city across the river, the unmistakable rattles and roars of musket and cannon fire, interspersed with the screams of wounded and dying men, told him that a fierce battle had ensued in the streets across the river in Felsenburg. It could be that the forces of East Holstein were looting and ransacking the captured city, or it could be that Emperor Wilhelm Ludwig Frederick and his generals had met with unexpected resistance – only time would tell.

Captain Ironside patiently waited and observed through his new telescope, until he spotted a trickle of battle worn soldiers emerge from the gaping hole at the other side of the bridge, soon turning into a torrent of scared, tattered men. It seemed the generals of

Felsenburg had indeed heeded his advice. Some of the attacking regiments had broken and were attempting to escape the fray. When the first of the fleeing troops reached the middle of the bridge Ironside ordered his men to fire continuously at the ground in front of them, driving them back into the devastated city from which they had just come. With no way of retreat, the troops of East Holstein were forced to regroup and return to the ferocious conflict, giving the crew of *Dream Chaser* more time to make their escape.

“Now’s the time to make ourselves scarce,” stated Ironside coolly. “Let’s get back to the ship with all haste.”

The pirate captain swiftly returned to his men below, leading them with cries of urgent encouragement through the deserted streets to the clangorous backdrop of the still raging combat across the river. After a few hundred meters, the fleeing crew were suddenly startled by an eerie screeching sound. Looking around, Ironside was horrified to see that someone had set off the rocket battery, sending all but one across the river in the direction of Felsenburg. A single deadly projectile had deviated from its course and was now heading in the direction of the retreating pirates.

“Skedaddle!” cried out the terrified quartermaster. “Run fer yer lives!”

Fortunately for the fear-stricken, scattering pirates, the missile veered away from them at the last moment and crashed into the facade of an ironmonger’s store a hundred feet behind them, sending stone, timber, nails, and frying pans flying in all directions.

“Who set off those bloody rockets?” barked the relieved, but irate captain, poking his head out from the cover of a low stone wall.

At that moment, he saw a grinning William Benton hurriedly scampering down a stone staircase leading

down from the ramparts, looking thoroughly pleased with himself.

“Did you set off those damn things?” shouted Ironside angrily.

“Yeh, I did. I wanted ter see what’d happen. Never seen any thing like it, I haven’t,” smirked Benton.

“You nearly got us all bloody well killed, you ignorant bastard!” cried the outraged captain.

“Sorry, but it ain’t my fault they’re so unreliable. A goddamn sight well worth seeing, though,” laughed Benton, unperturbed by the captain’s chiding words.

“Everyone back to *Dream Chaser!*” growled Ironside, realising the futility of reprimanding the rebellious boatswain further at the present time. He’d deal with him later.

“First to the warehouses to see what booty we can take with us,” roared Benton, rapidly sprinting past the other running pirates.

A hasty departure

The breathless seamen finally made it to where *Dream Chaser* was berthed, and Ironside was overjoyed to see Cassandra awaiting him on the deck of the vessel. Some of the crew had already started loading wooden crates from the warehouses onto the ship, and he had to wait a moment for two of his men to lug a heavy wooden box up the wobbly gangplank before he could gain access to his ship and his wife. After hugging his spouse, he was greeted by a smiling John Brownrigg.

“You managed to take back the ship without any trouble then?” said the captain, patting his shipmate on the shoulder.

“It was easier than expected. There were only two guards, mere lads, they were. I guess every able man was

needed for the assault,” answered the coxswain cheerily.

“Where are they now?”

“Bound and gagged in that warehouse over there. They’ll be found soon enough. Kept their muskets, though. You can never have enough of them, you can’t.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t have to hurt them. There’s been enough bloodshed for one day,” said Ironside with regret.

“What’s more, they repaired the damaged sails and shrouds, and even given the deck and bilge a good clean. Shame they didn’t careen her too, but I guess beggars can’t be choosers.”

“It seems Kapitän Krüger is a man of his word, I just hope he didn’t perish in the battle,” muttered Ironside scratching his chin. “See to it that the men are promptly back on the ship. We need to get out of here before our absence is discovered.”

“I’ve already commandeered a couple of long boats, and the men I charged to find them are ready to tow us out of the harbour. We’re in luck as the tide is starting to ebb, so it shouldn’t take too long,” explained Brownrigg, striding towards the busy gangplank. “All aboard and make to cast off posthaste!” he shouted, bringing men scurrying out of the nearby warehouse both burdened and unburdened.

Unfortunately, it was a little more difficult than he had hoped to get everyone back on board, and the captain was frequently forced to hail the men with a speaking trumpet using a combination of commands and expletives to finally get all of them back onto the ship. All but William Benton and three other men, who were still rolling barrels down the quayside from the far end of the quay, were now on board. The exasperated captain urged them to leave their plunder and immediately return to the ship, but desisted when he saw a figure dressed in

a long black jacket, spotless white breeches, and smart tricorne heading towards them from the other direction followed by a squad of musket-carrying men – militia he presumed by their lack of uniforms. Ironside cursed the intractable boatswain and momentarily toyed with the idea of leaving him behind. It would certainly remove one source of constant strife from his life, but he realised he lacked the heart to do it, and anyway he needed the skilled navigator, at least until he had found an adequate replacement.

Björn Gunnarsson's heart skipped a beat when he recognized the stern expression on the face of the approaching man – Secretary of State Johan Wartenburg. There were only a dozen men with him, but they would clearly arrive at the ship before Benton and the others. Without hesitation, he called Pete over and instructed him to gather a handful of men with muskets, who were to conceal themselves behind the gunwale, as well as loading one of the swivel guns as an extra precaution. He sincerely hoped he wouldn't be forced to open fire on the Holstein official. Despite his inherent aversion to all those who called themselves politicians, he had grown quite fond of this man, so he waited for him to reach the foot of the gangplank before calling down to him. "What can I do for you, Mr. Wartenburg?"

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed his men ducked out of sight, shifting nervously, and on his other side Powder Keg Pete leaning nonchalantly against a loaded swivel gun, which he had had the sense to direct towards the heavens so as to appear less threatening.

"I wish to speak with you about what has been going on, Captain Gunnarsson. Could we please speak privately?" On seeing the agitated sailors watching him from the deck, the official ordered his men to shoulder their arms and take a step back. "May I come aboard?"

“Certainly, if you come alone,” responded the captain with forced cordiality, silently cursing Benton for dawdling and himself for not having pushed the men harder to depart earlier.

“Join me on the quarterdeck, Mr. Wartenburg,” said Ironside once the Secretary of State was aboard. Both men climbed the wooden steps observed by a multitude of curious faces. “What can I do for you?” asked the captain innocently.

“You carried out your task as agreed,” answered the official. “But it seems that everything didn’t go according to plan. It appears the West Holsteiners were prepared for the attack, as if someone had warned them, which resulted in a cataclysmic battle, in which all the generals of both sides met their end. Both kaisers also perished in the fray and I’m told they were both killed by the blasts from rockets fired from our own gun emplacements, which is most unfortunate. I’ve also been informed that someone barred the gates to prevent the return of our forces. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“No idea about the gates, but I must admit one of my overzealous men did ignite the rockets against my orders, and he’ll be punished for it,” replied the Swede with a poker-face.

“It matters not. It may even have been for the best, but don’t tell anyone I said that. On seeing their superiors fall the soldiers of both sides quickly called a truce and a peace treaty has already been negotiated by the civilian authorities, which have now taken control of both cities. It would seem the war is over and the reunification of the two kingdoms is in sight. It will take time to rebuild our society, but both sides are in agreement that the time of the generals is past. The united cities are to be ruled in the future by a joint council of elected members. The people

are weary of war and will greet the change. It would seem that whoever closed the gates and prevented a retreat put an end to a war that could have raged for another forty years.”

“I’m pleased to hear the war is over,” said Ironside, grinning inwardly. He and Faustus could never have hoped their plan would have been so successful. They had believed they would only have been able to save the civilian population of Felsenburg by their actions.

“Furthermore, I’ve been tasked with asking you if you and your men would care to remain in Holstein and oversee the construction of a new combined navy,” continued Wartenburg, producing a rolled up document from the inside of his jacket.

“It seems to me you and your people were well prepared for such an eventuality, Mr. Wartenburg.”

“You could say we were. I was part of a clandestine movement on both sides of the river struggling to bring an end to the infernal conflict which has plagued our land for so long. We were awaiting an apt opportunity to dismantle the war machine dominating our realm. We had already drawn up detailed plans for the transitional phase. I would never have believed it would be on this day though, but we were ready all the same. The best we hoped for was a victory to end the civil war, but I fear, even then, the generals would have turned their attentions north towards the neighbouring kingdoms of Meckburg and Pomrania, and when the generals wage war, it is the common folk who suffer most.”

“If we don’t end war, war will end us,” came a voice from behind the two men. Looking around they saw Faustus, who had obviously been listening in on the conversation. “Those are the words of the philosopher Plato.”

“I’ve never heard of this man, but he does sound wise,” commented Wartenburg. “So what say you to staying in

Holstein?”

“I fear we must decline. The men are itching to return to their own domain and our journey will be a long one,” replied the captain, shaking his head.

“I understand. It is a fair way back to Albion,” said Wartenburg with an understanding smile. “Won’t you at least let us honour you with medals and a feast?”

“Medals are for military men, and although a feast sounds tempting, it would be better for all, if we were on our way,” replied Captain Ironside stoically.

Suddenly, the men’s attention was drawn to a commotion on the quayside. He saw Benton and several other pirates pelting towards the ship, having abandoned the barrels, a mob of angry dockworkers and merchants hot on their heels.

“I think it’s time you indeed left. It seems the local traders aren’t too happy with your men helping themselves to their wares. Don’t worry, I’ll deal with that lot. Let us just say the items your men acquired are a reward for your aid. I’ll see to it the council covers the costs,” smiled the Secretary of State, waving his men back to allow the fleeing sailors aboard. “Farewell and a safe journey,” added the man before quickly making his way down the gangplank and placing himself and his men in front of it before he attempted to appease the furious throng.

The ship was ponderously towed away from the wharf until it was in a position where the crew could set the sails and catch the wind. As they drifted away from the quayside, the seamen warily eyed the forts at the entrance to the harbour, hoping Wartenburg had had the time to warn the occupants that their ship was allowed to pass, for if they opened fire, *Dream Chaser* would be done for, but, as luck would have it, it seemed that the occupants saw no reason to fire, or, alternatively, the forts had been stripped of manpower for the attack on Felsenburg.

Whatever the reason, the guns remained still.

While they were nervously watching the shore, the quartermaster and boatswain were spiritedly checking the plundered crates and barrels which had been hastily brought on board, and which were now stored safely below deck.

“All in all, it be a good catch,” grinned Pete. “There be cocoa beans, loaves of cane sugar, an’ bundles of cinnamon sticks in these here crates, and those over there contain clothes. I be in need of a fresh pair of breeches. Someone brought aboard a great deal of hemp rope, too.”

“I’m more interested in what’s in the barrels,” mumbled Benton, testing the contents of one with a ladle and spitting it out in disgust. “It’s just bloody drinkin’ water.” He hopefully tried another. “That’s more like it! Brandy, and good stuff it is, too.” The boatswain slurped down a generous helping.

“Don’t you go drinkin’ it all, Billy Boy. Leave some for the rest of us, or they’re be trouble.” Benton took one more gulp before replacing the lid and wiping his mouth. “Let’s get the cook to prepare us some nice hot chocolate. I ain’t had any for bloody ages,” said Pete, ushering the boatswain towards the upper deck.

Once they were under sail, Captain Ironside reported to the crew what Wartenburg had said. Most were relieved to be away from that strange land, but a few, including Benton, resented being deprived of a feast. Finally, the pirate captain managed to convince them all that they needed to try to pick up the trail of the Spanish galleon, and the thirst for treasure helped dispel any further desire to remain in Steinburg. The captain then addressed the matter of William Benton’s irresponsible actions, and some, egged on by Niamh O’Malley wanted to dump the pestiferous pirate on the first isolated island they found and leave him there, but after Benton protested that he’d

rather die than be marooned on an island with no ship, no crew, and no bottle of rum, the majority pleaded for leniency. In the end, Benton promised to cause no more mischief and called for the distribution of hot chocolate and brandy in a successful attempt to divert attention from himself.

They were almost out of sight of land when the ship's purser, the only other female crewmember on board, approached the captain with urgency. Her name was Charlotte Scowcroft, although she preferred to be called Charlie, but was meanly nicknamed Scowler by many of the male crewmembers on account of her grouchy demeanour. In fact, in the absence of these aforementioned fellows she was generally warm and kind-hearted. What often soured her mood was the macho bravado and misogynist outbursts of some of the men, an all too common occurrence. The Jamaican born daughter of a tavern-keeper was a tall, wiry woman with a narrow, tanned face and long brown hair which was always neatly tied back, and who favoured men's clothing as being more practical and comfortable.

"What's wrong, Charlie?" asked Ironside, noticing the look of concern on the woman's face.

"It's the powder, Cap'n," replied the woman, tucking her thumbs into her loose-fitting trousers.

"What about it?" frowned the captain.

"It's all gone. There ain't a single barrel left of that Spanish stuff we stole, nor any of the less good stuff we purchased in Nassau. All we got left's what's in the powder flasks for our muskets," said Charlie miserably.

"What do you mean it's all gone?" exclaimed Ironside. Then he vaguely remembered Pete mentioning something about seeing Spanish powder while they were on the ramparts. He cursed himself for being too preoccupied to realise it was their own powder they'd been using to

fire at the enemy. It would definitely make capturing a Spanish ship into much more of a challenge. They couldn't sail back after plundering the warehouses, even if Wartenburg put in a good word for them, and, anyway, he didn't fancy returning to that unknown country. No, they'd somehow manage. They were pirates after all.

“Sail to starboard!” came a cry from the main yard.

Captain Ironside quickly fetched his telescope and his heart was filled with glee to see it was *Vengeful Mermaid*. He ordered for the sails to be adjusted to let the other vessel catch up, and side by side both ships re-entered the mist which was forming anew ahead of them.

Interlude

Nathaniel Bagshaw sat gaping wide-eyed in disbelief at what William Benton had just disclosed to him.

“You mean to tell me you discovered an unknown Germanic land? That’s not possible, I say,” stuttered the journalist.

“It’s true I tell ya. Saw it all with me own eyes, I did,” responded Benton menacingly. “You sayin’ I’m a liar?”

“No, of course not, my dear man, but you must admit it does all sound very far fetched,” replied Nathaniel conciliatorily. “All right, let’s say it’s all true. I still find it hard to believe that a band of pirates managed to put an end to a forty-year long war.”

“Well, those generals certainly weren’t goin’ to do it, were they? It took good ‘ole William Benton to end the war. If I hadn’t shot off those rocket things, those two emperors probably still would’ve been alive, and the war would’ve raged on for many a year.”

“So now you’re personally taking credit for ending the war, are you?” frowned Nathaniel sceptically.

“More or less, but, of course I wouldn’t’ve managed it without the help of me shipmates,” answered the prisoner with conviction.

“If it is true what you say, then it was a noble deed. War is such a horrid matter,” said the other man earnestly. “In 1706, my older brother, Rupert, fought at the Battle of Ramillies in the Spanish War, and he’s never been the same since. He saw more bloodshed there than any man should witness in his lifetime.”

“I ain’t ever heard of this Battle of Ram-mee-yee.”

“A bloody affair it was. The allied forces were led by the Duke of Marlborough against a combined force of French, Spanish, and Bavarians somewhere in the Spanish Netherlands. Our foe was routed with some 12,000 dead and wounded plus another 7,000 or so taken prisoner. Our armies were more fortunate, losing less than 5000 men, but it was a terrible slaughter all the same.”

“Yeh, war’s pretty shitty. I wouldn’t want to be a soldier. I prefers the freedom of the high seas meself,” commented Benton phlegmatically. “Although I was in Queen Anne’s War on a privateer.”

“That’s the same war my brother was in. It’s just another name for the part of the Spanish War of Succession which was fought in the Americas,” commented Nathaniel knowledgeably.

“Back then I was still a sailor in the Royal Navy, I was. That’s before I jumped ship, that is. I served as helmsman’s mate on a British frigate then, but was lucky to experience nothin’ more than minor ship engagements with few casualties,” continued Benton, scratching his itchy head.

“Yes, you were indeed lucky,” replied the journalist as he scribbled in his notebook. “But what interests me is your self-professed antagonistic attitude towards other members of your crew. You don’t seem to have been very popular, do you?”

“Sure I was popular. It was just that many of the crew

were severely lacking in a sense of humour. I must admit I was partial to pulling their legs from time to time. Just a bit of fun, it was,” grinned Benton unabashedly.

“Is that what you call it?” responded Nathaniel, unconvinced by the other man’s words. “What about you setting off those rockets, although your captain expressly forbade it?”

“I ended the war, din I? Anyway, I was interested to see what would happen. Can’t blame me for bein’ curious.”

“And the looting?”

“I’m a pirate, ain’t I? And it weren’t just me,” said the ex-boatswain defiantly. “And the way I sees it, what we took was payment for our troubles.”

“Very well, Mr. Benton,” said Nathaniel Bagshaw. “I’d be grateful if you’d continue with the account of your adventure, if you would.”

“Course I will. Well, what happened next is ...”

The adventure continues in the next story:

Long Ben