

The Pyrate Chronicles

Cross and Skullbones



Book 3

Wayne Savage

The Pyrate Chronicles:
Cross and Skullbones by Wayne Savage

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Although this book is primarily a fantasy novel, it is set to the true historical backdrop of the early 18th century. I have tried to keep the book as authentic as possible while also adhering to the principle of fantasy realism and spirit of postmodernism.

Prologue

London, August 1723

William Benton stood shivering and naked in his dingy cell. He had spent the last hour rigorously scrubbing himself with the soap given to him by Nathaniel Bagshaw and hot water provided by Tom the gaoler, and was pleased with the result. He had even gone as far as to scrub his private parts – not that this would interest the journalist. Maybe he'd ask Bagshaw to bring him a toothpick and some mint and vinegar mouthwash next time, as since he'd been confined to this cell, he'd only been able to rinse his mouth with water and wipe his teeth on the sleeve of his grubby shirt. The water in the wooden bucket was now a murky grey. Wiping himself dry with his blanket, he anticipated Bagshaw's visit and the goodies the man had promised to bring. The church bell struck half an hour before midday, which prompted the condemned pirate to hurriedly dress. He then sat on his creaky bunk and waited to be summoned. He became anxious as the bell struck noon and increasingly irritable with every minute which passed after that. Why couldn't that tardy journalist be on time for once? Benton didn't

doubt the man would turn up, convinced that the tales of his past deeds were too enthralling for the journalist to want to miss out on, but he didn't appreciate the reporter wasting his precious time making him wait. Didn't the fool know that William Benton's days were numbered and that every treasured second he remained alive was worth more to him than gold? How inconsiderate it was for Bagshaw to force him to waste it in a state of nervous anticipation. Despite the lingering annoyance, the ex-boatswain decided he wouldn't waste his time chiding the late arrival, provided he had brought the promised items. After all, spending time berating the man for his lateness would also be to squander his rapidly ebbing existence.

The bell had just rang out a half past the hour when the prisoner heard dull footsteps followed by the jangling of keys, and he was already standing expectantly by the door when the unsightly turnkey slowly pushed the heavy door open.

"Get on with it, Tom!" snapped Benton. "I ain't got no time to lose waiting around all day fer you to open the bloody door."

The squat warden simply snorted and beckoned for the captive to follow him. Not long later, Benton was once more seated in the room opposite his overdue visitor. Nathaniel Bagshaw was dressed in a smart new jacket and freshly pressed breeches, but it wasn't this that interested Benton, no, it was the leather bag resting by the side of the journalist's chair which drew his immediate attention.

"Sorry for being late again," apologized the finely dressed man, "but I was held up at work. Tom, could you bring us some hot water?"

"Yeh, course, sir," mumbled the scruffy gaoler before waddling out of the room.

"It does irk me that you wastes me valuable time

by always coming late, Mr. Bagshaw,” complained the condemned man. “But if you has got me that shirt yer promised, I’ll let the matter drop.”

“That’s very kind of you, Mr. Benton,” replied the journalist calmly, “but haven’t you got all the time in the world, being stuck in this awful place?”

“It may be true I ain’t got so many activities to occupy me time like you has, but, the fact is, I have much less of it to do them few things in than you does, what with me days being numbered and all that.”

“I see. I hadn’t thought of it like that,” answered Bagshaw, wrinkling his forehead. “I’ll try my best to be more punctual next time.”

Benton’s eyes lit up at the prospect that there would be further meetings. “Where’s me shirt then?” he inquired eagerly.

The reporter reached into his bag and produced an immaculate white shirt, which the captured pirate covetingly snatched and held up before the dim light of the window. It had a low collar, lacing at the neck, and modest frills on the sleeves. Benton wrenched his grubby, threadbare shirt over his head and dropped it ungraciously on the dusty floor. Bagshaw winced on being once more witness to the angry scars on the seaman’s upper back, a reminder of the man’s involuntary stint in the British Navy. He was glad when the man had finally concealed the unpleasant sight with his new garment.

“How does I look, Mr. Bagshaw?” asked Benton, doing a clumsy pirouette.

“Splendid, Mr. Benton. I’ll see about bringing you some new trousers the next time I come. The seat of those pants is almost worn through,” proffered the journalist on noticing that the prisoner’s bare ass was barely hidden by the frayed fabric. He wasn’t sure which disturbed him more – the scars on the man’s back or his partially

exposed posterior. "I'm pleased you like it and I'd like to apologize again for being late, but I had to finish an article on the Black Act for my newspaper."

"What's the Black Act when it's at home?" frowned Benton, retaking his seat.

"Well, it's officially known as the Criminal Law Act and it was passed a few months ago," explained the journalist. "It was enacted in response to a series of raids against landowners by groups of poachers, known as the Blacks from their habit of blacking their faces when they undertook their raids. It's widely believed those rogues are of the Jacobite persuasion." Bagshaw took out his notebook and flicked through it until he found the page he was looking for. "An act for the more effectual punishing of wicked and evil disposed persons going armed in disguise and doing injuries and violence to the persons and properties of His Majesty's subjects, and for the more speedy bringing of the said offenders to justice."

"That can't be good," responded the pirate in alarm. "To me it sounds like a fancy way of oppressing the poor folk even more, it does. Tell me more."

"Well, the act deals with any such offender who is armed and with a blacked face, or otherwise disguised. If found so in a forest, chase, down, or royal park, they could be sentenced to death. Similarly, the new law makes it an offence to otherwise hunt, kill, wound, or steal deer in those locations, with the first offence being punishable by a fine and the second by penal transportation. Other criminalised activities include unauthorised fishing, hunting of hares, the destruction of fish-ponds or trees, and the killing of cattle in those locations."

"Sounds a bit harsh. If you ask me, it seems to me the rich folks'll stop at nothing to deprive us commoners of our customary rights."

"Do you really think so?" said Bagshaw, surprised at

the sea rover's uncharacteristically insightful comment. "The poor might not have it so good, but I really don't think you can have armed men with blackened faces running around in the dead of night helping themselves to the property of the landed gentry. Although I can't say I expected any other opinion coming from a convicted pirate, who has also unlawfully appropriated the goods of the wealthy."

"If yer say so, Mr. Bagshaw," mumbled Benton, distracted by the door slowly opening and the squat gaoler entering with a pot of steaming water. "What's the water for?"

"I've brought some chocolate with me. I remember you told me how much you like it."

"I sure do," replied Benton, licking his lips.

The journalist produced a quaintly shaped metal pot and two small cups from his bag and placed them on the table. Then he took out a pouch from which he poured a quantity of ground cocoa beans into the pot. The felon watched him avidly as he then carefully poured piping hot water onto the coarse powder in the pot. After putting the decorated pot on the table, he stirred the brownish concoction into a froth with a stirring rod built into its lid, all the time restlessly observed by Benton. Once satisfied, the journalist poured some of the thick liquid into each cup before retrieving a small, ornate box from his bag and placing it between himself and the man opposite.

"What's in that there box?" inquired the curious seaman.

"Some sugar that my wife powdered for me to flavour the chocolate with. She even added a hint of vanilla," replied Bagshaw with a smile, opening the tiny container to reveal the contents and producing two small spoons. "Use this one for putting it into your chocolate, and the

other for stirring it, please. I don't want you ruining the sugar by getting chocolate in it."

"I don't need no spoon," answered Benton, snatching up the box and pouring half of the contents into the steaming beverage, and, to the reporters horror, spilling most of the remaining powder onto the scratched table surface. The pirate then proceeded to dip his finger in it and move it around, but seconds later he withdrew it with a curse.

"It's bloody hot, it is," he howled, sucking the chocolate residue from his mildly scalded finger.

"That's why I brought the spoons. Now look how much sugar you've wasted," chided the journalist, carefully attempting to rescue as much of the sweet powder by scooping it back into the box, but on noticing the dust and specks of rotten wood he was also gathering up, he quickly gave up the fruitless task. He decided he would take his hot chocolate unsweetened today.

"It tastes better than that stuff them natives gave us in Eldorado. They put chillies in it, they did. All right it was, but I much prefers it with sugar," said Benton with brown liquid dribbling down his chin. "Very sweet, it is."

"I'm not surprised considering the amount of sugar you put in it," responded Bagshaw irately, regretting he hadn't just brought some tea with him like he had on his previous visit. "You know they say that some ladies used to consume it in church to keep themselves awake during the long sermons until the bishops banned it from godly establishments."

"Did they?" said Benton, slurping on his favourite beverage. "Don't blame 'em. Those sermons can be pretty dull, they can. Don't think I ever made it through a whole one without nodding off."

"You mean you attended church?" asked the astonished journalist.

“Me ma used to force me to go when I was a young’un.”

“Well, I must admit those long church services can be a little tedious for the young, and it doesn’t surprise me that women might also suffer difficulties absorbing such a vast amount of fundamental ecclesiastical wisdom for such a long period. They are weaker of mind and will after all.”

“Don’t let O’Malley hear yer say that. She’s have yer balls off, she will,” advised Benton, wiping the rim of chocolate from around his mouth on the sleeve of his new shirt.

Nathaniel Bagshaw was not sure which bothered him more – the thought of being castrated by a deranged Irish woman, or that Benton was using his not inexpensive new shirt to wipe hot chocolate from his face. Considering it futile to berate the man further on his lack of manners, the journalist urged the sticky-faced pirate to continue with his tale.

“Well, what happened when we left that island was ...”

Cross and Skullbones

Unknown location, November 1718

A careening long due

Benton was leaning on the gunwale of the open bow complaining to Sam Taylor about their ongoing predicament.

“Seems like we ain’t ever goin’ to get home at this rate,” grumbled the boatswain. “Just sailin’ with the wind, Ironside is. He hopes we’re being carried by the north-easterly trade winds, which would take us to the Caribbean in the belief we’re in the normal world, but I says we ain’t in the Atlantic, so we could end up anywhere.”

“Yeh, I’m starting to lose me confidence in the captain,” complained Taylor. “Maybe it’s time we had a new one.”

“Careful, Sam, that’s dangerous talk, that is,” warned the boatswain.

“Well, it’s true. I’m sure you could do a better job at bringing us back to known waters, Will.”

“Dare say I could, but you’re one of the few who

believes that,” sighed Benton. “I think we should give him one more chance to bring us home, or at least obtain us some booty.”

“I dare say you’re right, Will, but I’m still not happy, I’m not. I’m sure Captain Wolf is in the sunny waters of the Caribbean by now. We should’ve joined the *Mermaid* before we departed ways with it.”

“What! Join that underhanded shlenter?” exclaimed Benton. “That rogue sailed away with our share of the treasure. I don’t ever want ter hear his name mentioned again in me presence, I don’t.”

“Sorry, Will, but I just ain’t content with me lot. The captain made me topman after Maplebeck got his throat ripped out by them devilish wenches on that accursed island. Up there in all weathers, he sends me,” complained Taylor.

“Doin’ a bit of real work instead of slouching around on deck all day tugging a few ropes every now and then too much for yer, Sam, is it?” replied Benton sourly.

“I thought at least you would understand me plight, William Benton.”

Before the boatswain could give another acerbic reply, an excited cry rang out from the top of the foremast. “Land Ahoy!” Looking up they could see Monkey Boy Will frantically gesturing towards the horizon from high above.

“About bloody time,” mumbled Benton, rushing towards the shrouds to climb up top for a better view.

Perched precariously on the top yardarm, Benton could indeed just make out what appeared to be an island with a low coastline in the distance. He eagerly scrambled back down to the deck, leaving Monkey Boy to keep an eye on the horizon.

“It’s true, Cap’n, there’s definitely some sort of island off the starboard fore,” panted Benton as he reached the

expectant captain, who was standing at the bottom of the foremast polishing the lens of his telescope with an old rag.

“We’d better approach with caution this time,” commented Ironside, taking a step towards the bulwark and raising the metal tube to his eye. “Looks like it has some fine careenage. We’ll be able to finally give *Dream Chaser* that sorely needed seeing to, but not before checking the island’s safe first.”

Three hours later, the pirate vessel lay at anchor off the leeward shore and Powder Keg Pete was pushing off in the largest of the ship’s boats together with a dozen well-armed men to explore the unknown isle. Another four hours after that, the delighted quartermaster returned to inform the crew that the island appeared to be deserted and the waters up to the beach were free of shoals.

“I’d like to explore the island further,” said Faustus on hearing the news.

“There’ll be plenty of time for that while the men are seeing to the hull, Faustus,” replied the captain, more concerned with getting to work as promptly as possible.

Captain Ironside first ordered the men to establish a camp near the beach, which took the rest of the day to set up, before commencing the arduous task of careening.

“We’ll wait until high tide in a couple of days to hove her down. It’ll take us that long to complete the preparations,” the captain told Hans Zimmermann, the ship’s carpenter from Hamburg. “I’d first like to observe the ebb and flow here and find the most suitable spot to beach the ship. We need a strong and stable surface to support the mass of the vessel.”

“We can first thing tomorrow start to remove some of the load from the ship,” suggested the German seaman.

“Yes, Woody, could you organize the removal of all stores, provisions, and ballast?”

“Aye, Aye, Cap’n, and what with the guns?”

“We’ll bring half of them ashore,” replied the frowning captain. “The crew won’t like all that extra work, but it’ll make life easier in the long run. We can set up a small battery in case we’re disturbed before we’ve finished.”

“I will see to it that some heavy tackles are attached to the fore and main course yards, and some others to the main stay.”

“Get Benton to help you. He’s pretty experienced at that.”

“Must I?” asked Woody wrinkling his nose. “That man can be more of a hindrance than a help, if he’s forced to do something he is not wanting.”

“Don’t you worry. I’ll have a word with him,” reassured Ironside. “It’s also in his interest to get the work done as quickly as possible.”

Ironside left Zimmermann to get on with the task at hand. He set about organizing the erection of several tents: a large one for the kitchen facilities and stores, and two smaller ones – one for the women, the other for himself and his wife. The rest of the men would have to sleep on the open beach or under the trees, which they weren’t averse to under the present fair weather conditions. On seeing the tide was starting to ebb, he decided he would take a walk along the beach, but before he got very far he was held back by the angry shouts of an irate quartermaster.

“Come on yer shiftless idlers! On yer feet,” Pete shouted, giving one man a sharp kick on the rear end. “The stuff ain’t gonna move itself from the ship. You too, Benton!”

“I has to wash me feet first, Pete,” explained the workshy boatswain. “I ain’t washed ‘em fer three weeks, I ain’t.”

“Another day of stinky feet ain’t gonna hurt,” snapped the pissed-off second-in-command. “Now on yer feet, or

you won't be getting any grub tonight.”

“You can't deprive me of me nourishment, Mr. Thurlow,” protested Benton. “It's me god-given right.”

“I didn't think yer believed in no god, Billy Boy,” pointed out Pete. “Now off ter work you good-fer-nothing laggard before I loses me temper.”

“No need to speak to me like that,” complained Benton.

Ironside strolled purposefully over to the quarrelling men. Winking at Pete he addressed both of them. “It's all right, Pete, Will doesn't have to do his fair share if he is willing to renounce his ration of the last of that quality brandy that the rest of us will be enjoying once the work is done.”

It was an unwritten rule on Ironside's vessel that anyone found shirking their duties would forfeit their ration of booze, and Benton certainly didn't want to miss out on the last of that good stuff. To be fair, although averse to unnecessary hard work, William Benton always accepted in the end that he had to pull his weight like the others, but never without a certain degree of complaint first. “I didn't say I weren't gonna do no work, I just don't see why I can't just wash me feet first, Cap'n.”

“If you're quick about it, you can, but I want you on board to aid Woody with setting up the winches within the half hour,” replied the captain. “Do you think you could do that? You're one of the most experienced at that task.”

“The most experienced,” corrected the sea rover self-importantly.

Eventually, the entire crew, including Benton with his freshly rinsed feet, were involved in either setting up the camp or preparing the ship for its much needed servicing. Three full days later, after being lightened beforehand, *Dream Chaser* was grounded broadside on the beach in only three feet of water. The vessel had

been painstakingly pulled over with tackles from the mastheads and attached to strong-points on the shore with ropes, which were made firmly fast to trees, boulders, and even a few of the ship's guns. With one side of the ship raised out of the water, the maintenance work could now commence, but not before Woody had prepared a makeshift platform, which was securely tethered to the side of the ship. Now the real work could begin. The crew would remove any maritime growth, which could foster an infestation of shipworms, and repair any damaged or rotten timbers. They would then thoroughly bream the hull by burning and scraping off the old layer of pitch and graving with reed torches and iron tools. After that, they would then caulk the hull by filling any gaps between the planks by tapping in dense strands of tar-soaked oakum with specially crafted hammers. Finally, the hull would be coated with a layer of pitch, followed by one of graving, a protective substance which would improve water-proofing and prevent fouling, a task which no man undertook without constant grumbling, due to the acrid smoke and noxious fumes given off by the unpleasant substance as it was heated. Every now and again, a loud curse would be heard as a man burnt himself on the bubbling brew while it was carefully applied with mops and coarse brushes. Once that had been done, the ship would have to be rotated in order that the tedious process could be repeated on the other side of the hull. Even after completing the second side, the strenuous work would not have reached an end, as the crew would still be faced with the excruciating task of removing the careening tackle; returning the ballast, provisions, and guns to their former places; raising the topmasts, and re-reeving all of the running rigging.

Ironside feared the crew would normally have mutinied on being confronted with such a momentous

task, but, as it was, they had no other choice but to grin and bear it. The prospect of festivities when the work had been finally completed was all that was keeping the men's spirits up. The captain had heard that such after-careening parties could go on for days, but was reassured by the thought that their rapidly dwindling supply of alcohol would probably be polished off by the thirsty pirates in just one evening of merrymaking, although they'd probably require a couple of days to recover from their drunken debauchery afterwards. Then they'd be on their way once again, swifter than before, but where they'd end up next Ironside could only speculate.

"I hope she holds," said Brownrigg, standing with the captain and observing the men as they completed the task of securing the ship. "She's now under a great deal of strain, being tethered in such a compromising position. A sudden gale or rogue wave could easily sink her hull. What's more, a failure of any of the equipment under tension might cause a sudden jerk that could snap the masts like twigs and perhaps crush anyone standing nearby."

"I'm well aware of the dangers, John, but the work has to be done," replied Ironside. "The last time we careened her was ten months ago, and that's way too long, in my opinion."

"You're right about that, Cap'n," acknowledged the experienced seaman, "but I'd much prefer we had a wharf to secure her to."

"As would I, but you know there are no harbours that would tolerate our presence in the lands we know, and we can't be sure we'd ever find a friendly port in these unknown waters."

The surgeon strolled over to join the two concerned men. "I can't believe how much water was pumped out of the bilge, Björn. Did you know your ship was so leaky?"

Have you considered making it watertight?”

“All wooden ships leak,” laughed Brownrigg. “There’s nothing we can do about that.”

“What!” responded the horrified surgeon. “You mean to tell me I’ve been sailing the ocean on a leaking vessel? We could have sunk and all drowned.”

“It’s normally not a problem if we regularly pump it out,” explained the captain, “but it’s one of the reasons we are now here. Regular repairs and caulking reduce seepage.”

“No-one ever told me that all ships leak,” said the distraught scholar. “I might have thought twice about boarding such a vessel, if I’d have known that. Well, I guess I’m stuck here now. Anyway, the reason I wanted to speak to you is that I’d like to explore the island while the men are at work. I’m afraid I’d be more of a hindrance than a help where such physical tasks are concerned.”

“That’s all right, Faustus. Nobody expects you to get your hands dirty,” smiled Ironside. “Why don’t you take young Sam with you? He’s been getting under everyone’s feet.”

“Shouldn’t he be learning how to careen a vessel?” inquired Faustus.

“There’ll be plenty of time for that later. I think a little exploration would do the boy’s spirits good, and if you encounter anything of interest, you can send him back to inform us. He’s pretty nimble on his feet.”

“Unlike me,” chuckled the surgeon. “Do you mind if I borrow your telescope? I’d like to venture to the far side of the island. Who knows what might be visible from the far shore.”

“Sure, it’s in my tent, but please bring it back in one piece, or Cassandra will not be too happy.”

“Yes, of course, Björn, I know how much that gift from your wife means to you, and you already almost lost it

once when Avery sailed off in our ship.”

An hour or so later, the surgeon and the cabin boy were traipsing across the slopes of the deserted island in their search for the far side. The surgeon wiped his sweating brow before removing his woollen jacket, wishing he'd left the heavy garment behind. Young Sam was more appropriately dressed for the warm weather, wearing only a thin cotton shirt and knee length breeches. He had a gourd filled with water hanging on a strap from one shoulder and a small leather satchel containing some refreshments dangling from the other. The boy was in high spirits.

“Where do you think we are, Mr. Quiddington?” inquired the curious youngster.

“I don't rightly know, Sam,” replied Faustus, mopping his perspiring forehead.

“But you knows everything, sir,” stated Sam, unconvinced the surgeon was ignorant of their whereabouts.

“That's not true,” admitted the physician. “And I feel I know even less since we entered that mysterious mist.”

“Yeh, you did say there was no such thing as mermaids, but that's wrong. Of course they exist,” said the frowning boy.

“Maybe I was mistaken,” answered Faustus apprehensively. “Until we encountered those ghastly singing females on that island, I would have staked my reputation that there was no such thing as mermaids. Now I'm not so sure.”

“And you were wrong about them sea cows.”

“In what way?”

“You said it was superstition that they warned people of a coming disaster, but they were clearly letting us know there was danger on the island of the pretty ladies with

the sharp teeth.”

“In hindsight I believe you were right,” confessed the surgeon. “See, Sam, I don’t know everything.”

“It may be true you don’t know much about mythic things, but you knows lots of other stuff, like helping the sick and wounded.”

“I try my best.”

“Where did you learn how to do that, Mr. Quiddington? Did you go to school to learn it?” asked the curious boy.

“I did attend the university in Paris for a year, where I learned the basics, but I must admit most of my knowledge stems from books, and a little trial and error.”

“You’re also good at cutting hair. Did you learn that at university, too?”

“No, that they don’t teach you there,” smiled Faustus. “That skill I acquired from my mother. I had four younger siblings to practice on.”

“You also knows a lot about plants. What’s that one?” inquired Sam, running over and tapping the trunk of a tall tree further down the slope they were walking along.

“That’s a pine, much like the ones found on the Caribbean islands,” replied the surgeon, now in his element.

“And this?” asked the excited youth, running over and touching a three-foot tall shrub with no main large trunk, many thin branches, and small white flowers with a yellow centre.

“That’s button-sage. Don’t touch it, as contact with its foliage can irritate the skin,” warned the surgeon.

“What about that?” called out Sam, running over towards a larger shrub with exquisite pink and white flowers.

“That’s called five finger, but is also known as chicken foot. That’s enough of the interrogation for now,” said the physician, the strain of the heat and physical exertion

dampening his usual eagerness to show off his vast botanical knowledge.

It took another full hour to reach the other side of the island and now the exhausted surgeon was scanning the horizon with Ironside's telescope, where he could just make out a continuous shoreline disappearing in both directions. The excited boy demanded to be allowed to look through the optical instrument, which Faustus saw no reason to deny him.

"Be careful with it, Sam. It's very valuable," said the physician as he handed the youngster the metal tube.

"Course I will," replied Sam, placing the object eagerly to his eye. "There's land over there, Mr. Quiddington. Do you think it's the Americas?"

"It could be, but I'm not so sure," answered Faustus doubtfully.

"I think it's Florida," stated Sam with the certainty of youth.

"Well, wherever it is, I think we should return to inform the others, but first we'll have a rest and eat the provisions."

"We gonna have a picnic?" inquired the cabin boy enthusiastically.

"If you like," replied the surgeon, sitting himself down on a smooth rock and rubbing his aching legs.

The man and the boy stayed where they were for almost an hour, Faustus recuperating his strength and Sam running around wildly and asking countless questions about the flora and life in general. Eventually, the surgeon was ready to commence the strenuous trip back to the camp, which took almost three hours. The ship's doctor was glad the boy ran ahead exploring for most of the journey back, because although he admired young Sam's energy and inquisitiveness, he felt no longer in any condition to deal with the boy's constant barrage

of questions. As soon as they arrived back, Sam ran off to find his sister to tell her about his adventure, while Faustus sought out the captain, who was busy supervising the work on the beach.

“Did you discover anything of interest?” asked Ironside as he saw the breathless surgeon approach.

“Yes, there seems to be a mainland not far to the west of the island,” panted Faustus. “Sam is convinced it’s Florida, but I believe it might be another unknown land.”

“It could be the coast of New Spain,” suggested the Swede, unconvinced by his own words.

“Possibly, but we should proceed with utmost caution whatever land it might be,” frowned Faustus. “We must be careful to avoid any more encounters with diabolical creatures, stranded pirates, or lost Spanish colonies.”

“I’ll check it out once our work is done here. Why don’t you join Jack? He’s about to go off hunting.”

“No, I think I need to lie down,” replied the sweating scholar. “I’d only get in his way and frighten off the quarry.”

“Suit yourself.” Noticing one of the men had left a bucket of pitch precariously balanced on the edge of the working platform, the captain quickly removed his shoes, rolled up his trousers and strode off through the shallow water to address the issue, cursing the carelessness of some of the men as he went.

After a quick word with those working on the hull concerning their inattentiveness, Ironside returned to his tent, where he found Cassandra sitting in the sun darning an underskirt.

“I see you’re keeping yourself busy, dear,” the captain said jovially to his spouse.

“Yes, I thought I’d catch up with some sewing. I’ve even been helping Mr. Magee prepare this evening’s meal. You really are lucky to have him on board. He can make even

the most mundane of ingredients taste delightful.”

“Yes, I guess we are,” replied Ironside. “How are you finding it on this island?”

“I like it here,” the woman replied sincerely. “Maybe we could stay longer after the ship has been done. I have a good feeling about this place.”

“We’ll stay for a while, but I plan to make landfall on the mainland as soon as possible. Faustus says it’s not too far away and I’d like to find out where we are.”

“Do you think we’re back in familiar waters, Björn?”

“That’s what I am eager to find out.”

After giving her a peck on the forehead, Ironside left his wife to continue her chore in the warming sun, pleased she was content for the moment. He decided to check the ropes which anchored the ship to the shore before returning to check the progress of his men.

An encounter with the locals

Captain Ironside was sitting on the beach polishing his telescope when he saw young Sam, who had been keeping lookout on a rocky headland, dashing excitedly towards him. The boy skidded to a halt and started blurting out his news before the captain could speak.

“There’s a dozen small sailing boats heading towards us, Cap’n. I think they must be from the mainland.”

“What!” cried the Swede, springing to his feet. “How many men?”

“About a dozen in each boat,” panted the boy. “They’ve got spears and bows.”

Ironside ran frantically along the beach, calling out for the men to drop what they were doing and fetch their weapons. By the time the boats came into sight most of the men were assembled in a loose formation with muskets and cutlasses at the ready as they warily observed the

newcomers approach. The small boats possessed a single mainsail and were curved up slightly at both ends. In each small craft there were about a dozen rowers and a man at the bow shouting out orders.

“They might be friendly,” suggested Cassandra, who was standing just behind her husband.

“They might be hostile,” countered her husband. “I want you to go back and wait in the tent until we’ve established their intentions.”

The woman frowned and then jogged towards the tent, but instead of staying where she was told she emerged with a small pistol and a dagger from among her spouse’s belongings. She hastily loaded the small weapon as she had seen her husband do on numerous occasions before creeping back and attempting to blend in with the men. If the captain had noticed, he chose not to say anything. The pirates nervously watched as the boats neared the beach and their occupants sprang out and waded through the surf. Ironside noted the tanned skin of the new arrivals, who were both male and female and who were all dressed similarly in colourful linen skirts and coiled sewn sandals. Some wore linen tunics, others were bare chested – both men and women; some wore their hair in plaits and braids, others had a shaven head, while others wore draped head-coverings – both men and women; some wore black eye-liner and dark lipstick – also both men and women. All in all, it was not easy to differentiate of which sex the visitors were, as whether their legs were smooth or hairy didn’t seem to be determined by their gender. The perplexed seamen could only be sure that a few of the bare-breasted ones were women on account of the tell tale mounds on their chests, but even then they couldn’t always be totally sure. Whether man or woman, they were all armed with bronze-tipped spears or short bows.

“They remind me a little of ancient Egyptians,” commented Faustus, watching the unusual group of natives gather further down the beach. “Their vessels resemble those I have seen in books on the subject, as does the appearance of some of them.”

“Do you think they’re a threat?” frowned the captain.

“They’re no threat,” commented Benton. “They’re poorly armed. We could take half of ‘em down with one volley.”

“There’s no need to be hasty,” responded the surgeon urgently. “There could be thousands more where they come from and the ship is in no state to escape in. Besides, we aren’t conquistadors.”

“We’ll try to parley with them, if we can,” said Ironside calmly. “Maybe we can obtain supplies and even find out where we are.”

The sea rovers waited patiently to see what the newcomers would do next. Once they were all on the beach, three of the natives with long black hair and dressed in knee-length tunics left the main group and walked slowly, but proudly towards the mass of seamen. Captain Ironside and Faustus went out to meet them half way. All three delegates were unarmed. The faces of all three of them were painted with thick black eye-liner and dark blue lipstick, and the captain noted that all three were pretty in a sinister sort of way. Once they were all standing face-to-face, one of the raven-haired figures spoke in an unknown tongue, and, to the surprise of the pirate captain, in a firm, baritone voice – it was then Ironside realised it was a man addressing him.

“Sorry, I don’t understand your language,” answered the bemused Swede.

“Are you Men of the Cross?” inquired one of the other emissaries in perfect English, but this time in a higher-pitched voice, revealing this one to be a woman.

“Where did you learn to speak English so well?” asked the puzzled captain.

“From the Men of the Cross,” replied the woman with a hint of contempt for those she spoke of.

“Who are these Men of the Cross?” asked the curious surgeon.

“You know not who they are, therefore you can’t be of their ilk,” replied the woman with what could only be described as relief. “They are a breed of men who came from out of nowhere in strange ships some four-hundred years past. Some say they came from lands beyond the edge of the world, others say they are demons sent to torment us, although the invaders themselves claim to be pious men. They subjugated the lands to the south immediately after their arrival and have been unsuccessfully attempting to encroach on our territory ever since, and force their rigid doctrine of the impaled man on our peoples. Sadly, it is becoming increasingly difficult for our federation to hold them back. We were concerned you might be part of an advance party preparing an invasion of our lands.”

“I can assure you that we are not,” said Faustus vigorously.

“No, we are of no threat to you,” added Ironside. “We are voyagers who have strayed from our path. We seek only to return home. Meanwhile, we landed here to work on our ship and restock on supplies. I hope we have not offended your people in any way.”

“No, you haven’t. It is our custom to welcome strangers who come in peace,” reassured the woman. “My name is Nefertari and I bid you welcome on behalf of my people.”

“I am Björn Gunnarsson, the captain of the ship you see stranded on the beach, and this is Faustus Quiddington, the ship’s surgeon.”

“Welcome Björn Gunnarsson and Faustus

Quiddington,” said Nefertari sincerely. “My people would wish to aid you in returning to your own land, but in the meantime I would like to invite a few of you to visit our city on the mainland, so we can learn more about you and show you our hospitality.”

“I appreciate the offer, but would first have to consult my crew on the issue,” replied Ironside hesitantly, recalling how the last invitation turned out when they were in Eldorado.

“You fear we might take hostages?” asked the woman solemnly. “That might be the way of the Men of the Cross, but it certainly isn’t ours. But I understand your concern, as you find yourself in a strange land, so some of my people will remain here to aid you in your work on the ship.”

“That is a kind offer,” answered the pirate captain, “but, unlike you, I do not possess the authority to decide alone.”

“I have only been mandated to lead this small expedition, otherwise I have no more power than any other of my folk,” explained Nefertari.

“So women can be leaders in your land?” inquired the surgeon, his interest awoken.

“Why shouldn’t they be?” asked the surprised women. “Are they also not entitled to be leaders in the land you come from? I know the Men of the Cross treat their women no better than chattels.”

“Well, I must admit it is not usual where we come from either, but there have on occasion been great women leaders, such as the recently deceased Queen Anne, and Queen Elizabeth over a hundred years ago.

“What are these queens you speak of?”

“They are women who are hereditary rulers of a kingdom, but I must admit it is usually a man who holds such a position.”

“Men can also be queens?”

“We call the men kings. Both kings and queens are known as monarchs.”

“So if I understand rightly, both men and women can be monarchs of a kingdom?” Nefertari stated with a baffled frown.

Faustus nodded.

“But what I don’t understand is why it is not called a queendom when a woman rules.”

“I cannot say why it is so. I guess it’s just tradition,” responded the surgeon lamely.

“No matter, as in our land you will find neither king nor queen,” shrugged the perplexed woman.

“So who governs the land?” asked the inquisitive scholar.

“We all do,” stated Nefertari bluntly.

“Splendid! I look forward to learning more about your culture,” replied Faustus ardently.

“I also,” said Ironside, “but let me first speak to the others.”

The woman nodded and translated the captain’s words to her companions, who then all returned to their people further down the beach to await the reply. Once Ironside had explained the situation to his crew, they all relaxed considerably, milling around the camp enjoying the sun while inquisitively observing the strangers, who were eyeing them just as curiously.

“I think I’ll accompany our hosts together with Faustus,” the Swedish sea rover started to say, but on noticing his wife giving him a stern look, he added, “and Cassandra will come too.”

“Is it safe, Captain?” asked Brownrigg with a concerned expression on his face. “We don’t know anything about them. Maybe they plan to sacrifice you.”

“They seem to be sincere enough,” replied Ironside,

wiping his brow with the back of his hand. “Besides, they are going to leave some of their people here to help us. See to it that they are treated well, John, as I don’t want any unsavoury incidents to occur which might antagonise our hosts.”

“If you’re really sure,” conceded the coxswain, “and of course I’ll see to it that our guests are not abused in any way.”

“All right, John. I’d like you and Pete to oversee the completion of the careening and once it has been completed you are to join us on the mainland. I’ll see to it our hosts are warned of your coming, as I don’t want them to mistake you for these mysterious Men of the Cross.”

“I’m coming too,” stated William Benton, who had been quietly listening attentively to the conversation up until now. “Maybe I can get to know one of them pretty lasses a little better.”

“It’s just like you to go off chasing fair maids rather than doing some honest graft, Billy Boy,” sneered Brownrigg.

“Just ‘cos you’ve got a face like the rear end of a donkey and have no chance of wooing one of them nice women, there’s no need to deprive me of my opportunity, Johnny,” quipped the annoyed boatswain.

“If you don’t shut yer foul mouth, I’ll shut it for you,” snapped Brownrigg, his face reddening.

“All right, John, why don’t you get back to work. I’ll deal with this,” Ironside interceded.

With a grunt, the angry seaman nodded and stormed off, intentionally barging Benton roughly with his shoulder as he passed.

“Hey, watch where yer going, yer clumsy fat oaf,” protested Benton, rubbing his shoulder.

Brownrigg halted for a second, his body stiffening, and all those present expected the offended sailor to turn

on the man who had just insulted him yet again. Ironside tensed, ready to intervene should a scuffle break out, although he knew that now they were on land, he had no right to interfere in the disputes of others. Fortunately, Brownrigg decided not to rise to the bait, instead letting out a derisive snort and tramping off towards the beached ship without glancing back.

“Is it really necessary to constantly provoke John like that, William?” asked the captain sternly.

“It ain’t my fault he can’t take a bit of harmless fun,” answered Benton remorselessly.

“Well, you know what a temper he has, so don’t expect me to step in should you push him too far,” warned Ironside.

“Another reason why I should come with you, Cap’n. I can’t provoke him if I ain’t here to do it, can I?”

“Or you could just learn to keep that big mouth of yours shut,” suggested the captain earnestly.

“Whatever you say, Cap’n,” replied Benton indifferently. “I’ll get me stuff and join you in the boat.”

“No you won’t, Will,” growled Ironside. “We’ve already agreed that only Faustus, my wife, and I are to go. The smaller and less intimidating the group, the better. Anyway, as navigator you’re too important to put at risk, Will.”

“I ain’t fallin’ fer that old chestnut again, Cap’n,” responded Benton defiantly. “I knows me worth, but I also knows me rights, and you can’t stop me from coming, and that’s all there is to it.”

Before the captain could reply, he noticed Sam Taylor purposely striding towards them.

“Why are you disturbing us, Sam Taylor?” asked the boatswain challengingly. “We’re discussing important matters.”

“I’m important too,” retorted Taylor testily.

“Of course you are, Sam,” said the captain placatingly. “What do you want?”

“Me and the boys were talking, and we don’t think it’s fair that you and Faustus always get to be going off to be the guests at feasts while we get left behind.”

“That’s right, Sam. That’s why I’m going with them,” agreed Benton, “but there ain’t no room for scurvy-ridden rogues like yerself.”

“I ain’t scurvy-ridden and I’ve just as much right to go as you do, William Benton,” answered Taylor angrily.

“Firstly, you’ll all be coming once the work is done, and secondly, William will be staying here to help you,” said Ironside firmly.

“All right, if Will ain’t going then the rest of us will stay too, but only if you promises us a feast when we come after doing all that work,” conceded the pirate.

The captain assured him that he would do his best to organise a great celebration for the whole crew when they reached the mainland.

“But I am coming,” replied Benton matter-of-factly. “You just see if I don’t.”

“No, you’re not, and that’s final, Will,” said the captain in an authoritative voice. “You’re needed here. Now return to work, or I’ll put you under guard until we’ve left.”

Benton was about to reply, but then thought the better of it, instead turning and stomping away in a huff. Sam Taylor gave a smug grin before ambling off to rejoin his shipmates. Before leaving, Ironside assembled the pirate crew once more, informing them that Powder Keg Pete and John Brownrigg would be in charge while he was absent. He also warned them not to drink the last of the liquor as he would organise festivities for when they arrived on the mainland. The captain was worried that if they consumed all the remaining alcohol directly

after completing the work that it would be several days before they were in a fit state to cross the narrow strait. He wanted his ship back in good condition and as soon as possible. After the mob of sea rovers had dispersed, Ironside made his way down the beach to let Nefertari know they were ready to leave. Worried he had promised the men something he couldn't deliver, the pirate captain was relieved when the woman assured him they would lay on a lavish feast for his men when they eventually arrived in their city. Before departing the island, the captain took one long look at his stranded ship and the men scurrying about the beach returning to their chores, and satisfied everything was in order he removed his stockings and shoes and waded into the gentle surf. Cassandra stubbornly rejected her husband's offer to carry her to the nearest boat, resolutely hitching her dress high above her knees and making her own way through the warm, shallow water, where, unable to keep the hem of her garment out of the water and clamber over the side of the boat at the same time, she gratefully allowed herself to be hauled aboard by two sturdy natives, one of whom she was surprised to discover was a robust, bare-breasted woman with a shaven head.

The captain noted that only half the small vessels were leaving with them, the other half were being hauled onto the beach. He saw Pete and Brownrigg strolling down to greet those who were staying, but was surprised to see O'Malley suddenly pelting past them down towards the waterline. The astounded Swede watched as the Irish woman waded towards his boat until she was up to her chest in water, then swimming the last short stretch to his boat and pulling herself up over the side.

"I'm coming too," panted the soaked woman, dripping water all over the captain and his wife. "You'll be needing me in case of trouble."

“No, Neeve, we agreed that only we three were going,” protested Ironside. “You have to go back before we’re too far out.”

“No can do, Cap’n,” stated O’Malley wilfully. “You ain’t got no-one with you whose good in a barney, and after what happened in Eldorado, I ain’t letting ye out of me sight.”

“But it wouldn’t be fair to let you come after I told Benton to stay put, would it?”

“That rascal ain’t nothing but trouble. It’s a good thing that you forbade him to come. Me, on t’other hand, has been not’ing but of use to ye,” explained Niamh manifestly.

“She’s got a point, Björn,” interceded Cassandra. “Where’s the harm in letting her come? Anyway, it’s a long way back to the shore now.”

Ironside glanced pleadingly at the surgeon, who just smiled and shrugged. “All right, Neeve, now that you’re here you can stay, but you have to promise to keep out of mischief.”

“I swear by the Virgin Mary I’ll be on me best behaviour, Cap’n,” grinned the woman from the west of Ireland cheerily.

Twenty minutes or so later, the small flotilla rounded the island and came in sight of the mainland. The sea was calm and the sun was shining, the only sounds were the splashing of the oars rhythmically entering and leaving the water and the shrill calls of hungry seabirds. Anticipating what was to come, Ironside looked over at Nefertari, who was perched at the bow of the leading vessel, wondering if the woman’s intentions were indeed sincere. He just hoped he wasn’t heading towards another near disaster. The captain’s heart leapt as he suddenly became aware of a familiar figure, which hadn’t been visible a moment ago, seated directly behind Nefertari. At first, he could not clearly make out the face of the

interloper, who seemed to be amicably exchanging words with the woman in front of him. It wasn't until the man in the boat turned and waved brazenly to him that he realised it was William Benton. The scallywag must have sneaked on board one of the boats and concealed himself while he was addressing the others on the beach. He knew he should have put the wastrel under guard – Yuki would have willingly watched over him. It was too late to do anything about it now, but there would be hell to pay when they reached the shore.

Lonely it be

Not long after the captain had departed, the natives were busily putting up some small tents further down the beach under the watchful eye of the quartermaster. Once they had finished setting up their camp Pete futilely attempted to assign tasks to them, his efforts only resulting in sowing confusion. Growing more and more frustrated at the group of increasingly perplexed faces, the veteran seaman was relieved when Lucienne Beauchêne stepped in to help. It wasn't that the natives understood the woman's French any better than they did Pete's questionable English, it was just that she possessed a greater degree of patience and creativity where communication was involved. Finally, their guests were either busy carrying items to and fro, aiding the cook, or off hunting with Jack Arrow.

Meanwhile, the rest of the crew were taking turns carrying out the arduous work on the hull of the ship, supervised by Brownrigg, who was now attempting to placate an annoyed Sam Taylor.

“That cur Benton is nowhere to be found,” grumbled the topman. “Do yer think he snuck onto one of them boats before they left, or did the captain let him go behind

me back?”

“Ironside was quite firm about him staying here. It’s more likely he slyly smuggled himself aboard one of them boats,” replied Brownrigg with a scowl. “He’s a crafty bugger who doesn’t like missing out on nothing.”

“It ain’t fair if he’s gone and I ain’t,” said Sam, kicking a pebble across the beach sending it splashing into the surf. “I only agreed to stay ‘cos the captain said Benton wasn’t going either. Me and the lads ain’t too happy about Billy Boy tricking us. We’re going to rough him up a bit when we see him again.”

“I don’t have a problem with that, but just don’t damage him too badly. As much as it pains me to say it, he’s the most competent navigator on board.”

“We could manage without him,” scowled Taylor.

“Possibly, but regretfully it’d be better to have him in one piece, at least until we’re back in familiar waters.”

Sam Taylor grunted and clomped away, kicking a larger pebble before him as he returned to rejoin his shipmates. John Brownrigg was slightly concerned about Taylor and his mates’ plans for Benton, as although the cocky boatswain often aggravated him, he had grown fond of the man from Plymouth in a way that a younger sibling might be fond of a bullying brother. He decided he would let Taylor and his friends put the frighteners on Benton, but would intervene before it went too far. Pondering how far he would let it go, the man from Newcastle continued to check the progress of the men.

In the meantime, Charlotte Scowcroft, the ship’s purser, was painstakingly scraping off a layer of old pitch near the bow when she was rudely jostled by one of the other crew members, almost causing her to drop the iron scraping tool into the shallow water below. Turning to see who the culprit was, she was confronted by a challenging sneer on the face of Bart Hogg.

“Watch what your doing, you clumsy fool!” snapped the irate woman.

“More like you’d better watch what your doing, Scowler,” retorted the man venomously.

“What do you mean by that, Bart Hogg?” inquired the purser, tightening her grip on the metal implement in her hand.

“Me and the boys ain’t too happy about how you treated poor Maplebeck. Some even blames you fer his death,” replied the sturdy man menacingly.

“That man was a lecherous cretin who had no-one to blame but himself for his untimely demise.”

“Is that right, Scowler?” growled Hogg, clenching his ham-like fists. “You’d better be careful what you’re saying, wench. The captain ain’t here to protect you now.”

“No, but I am,” resounded a deep voice from behind the brutish landsman.

Bart Hogg slowly turned to see the gargantuan bulk of Samuel Langston, the muscular ex-bayman, looming over him.

“Er, I didn’t see you there, Sam,” said Hogg nervously.

“No, clearly you didn’t. Now what was it you were just saying to Charlie?” asked Langston grimly.

“Er, nothing, Sam,” stuttered the uncouth pirate. “I was just saying that it was a shame ‘bout what happened to old Maplebeck.”

“You were, were you?” answered the man from Bermuda, flexing his dark, glistening shoulder muscles. “I think it would be better if you left Charlie in peace and worked on the stern of the ship with Xenos and Asbat, don’t you?”

“Whatever you say, Sam,” replied Hogg backing away from the larger man. “I don’t want no trouble.”

“I’m sure you don’t, Bart Hogg, but let me tell you this: if any harm should befall our dear purser here, I’ll hold

you personally responsible,” warned Langston, cracking his knuckles to underline his words.

Samuel Langston shook his head disdainfully as the loutish sea rover scurried away to the other end of the platform with his tail between his legs.

“It was most gallant of you to step in like that, Samuel, but I don’t need no man fighting my battles for me,” frowned Charlie. “I could have dealt with him myself.”

“I’m sure you could have, but he has friends among the crew, and you need some too,” replied the seaman earnestly. “Some of them have got it in for you since that incident with Maplebeck. His gruesome death didn’t make the situation any better.”

“But his death wasn’t my fault,” protested Scowcroft. “And some of them resented my presence aboard the ship even before that.”

“True enough,” chuckled Langston dryly. “Some men will never accept a woman who is positioned higher than them.”

“But I’m not in a higher position.”

“Let’s say in a position with more responsibility then. However you look at it, you are held in high esteem by the captain, which is clearly resented by some of the less self-assured members of this crew.”

“I guess you’re right,” admitted Charlie, “and I thank you for your good intentions, but I’d rather you let me deal with any problems in me own way.”

“Of course, Charlie, but remember you do have some friends on board and you mustn’t be shy about asking for help should the need arise,” stated the robust man, placing a surprisingly gentle reassuring hand on Scowcroft’s shoulder.

The woman awkwardly placed her own hand on the larger one resting on her shoulder. “I thank you for your concern, Sam. You’re a good man, but now I have to get

back to work.”

Samuel Langston smiled warmly at the woman before clambering down the timber poles of the platform to return to his task of chopping wood for the campfires, giving Pete, who was stirring a bucket filled with a noxious concoction at the foot of the platform, a cordial nod as he passed.

Satisfied the foul mixture was ready to be applied to the ship, the sweating quartermaster called some of the men over to transport it carefully up to the top of the platform. He then wiped his damp, bare chest with a grimy rag before sitting himself down and pulling out his pipe and tobacco from a small pouch. Lighting it with a smouldering stick from a nearby campfire and taking a long draw on the clay smoking utensil, he looked up to see a smiling figure standing over him holding out a steaming wooden beaker. Pete stared appraisingly at the tall, slender figure, whose pretty features were enhanced by thick eye shadow and purple lipstick. The woman, for the quartermaster was sure it must be a woman, was wearing a dark green, knee-length tunic, and her long, dark hair was shaven at the temples like that of the Tuscaroran, Jack Arrow. It was an unusual haircut for a woman, but quite fetching all the same.

“What be that?” inquired Pete warily.

The smiling native just thrust the cup gently towards the bearded pirate, who gingerly accepted it, cautiously sniffing the contents. “It’s tea,” he stated, sipping the warm liquid.

The native nodded and grinned, revealing a fine set of pearly white teeth.

“I thank ye, miss,” the quartermaster said gratefully, giving a smile which was almost totally concealed by his bushy mass of facial hair.

The native gave the quartermaster what he interpreted

as a flirtatious smile before turning and walking away. The sea rover watched the delightful figure depart, his eyes focusing on the smooth and shapely bare calves, his heart pounding with excitement – such a pretty lass he hadn't encountered in a long time. Making himself comfortable in the soft sand, he sipped his tea and smoked his pipe, dreaming of holding the bonnie native girl tightly in his arms in a passionate embrace.

The day passed without further incident and with fair progress being made on the ship. The crew were now relaxing around one of several campfires enjoying food prepared for them by their visitors. Powder Keg Pete was sitting with John Brownrigg tucking into a bowl of boiled beans, peas, and fresh leeks brought by the natives, supplemented by the tender flesh of wild pigs caught by Jack and his hunting party.

“This be tasty,” commented Pete, smacking his lips.

“Those natives are good cooks,” replied Brownrigg, scraping the bottom of his wooden bowl. “Magee wasn't too keen on letting them take over the cooking for the evening. Sees it as his terrain, he does. But even he's delighted with the end result.”

“That's sayin' something,” chuckled Pete, his beard glistening with the juices from the meal.

Every now and again, the content quartermaster ventured a glance at the pretty young woman, who was seated on the opposite side of the fire with some of her compatriots. Every time he made eye-contact with her, she gave him a coy smile, which produced the sensation of fluttering butterflies in the pirate's stomach. Not long after finishing the meal, the native approached Pete, who was enjoying an after dinner smoke, holding two clay jugs in her hands. With a demure smile, she handed both containers to the seated sea rover, but before he could speak, she had retreated back to the other side of the

campfire. The frowning quartermaster eyed both vessels warily.

“What be in these here jugs?” he asked no-one in particular.

On noticing his confusion, a burly native man with a shaved head, who was sitting not far away leaned over and spoke.

“Irep,” he explained, pointing to one of the jugs. “Henqet,” he said, placing his hand on the other.

Pete shrugged and took a generous swig from the first receptacle. “It be wine,” he stated, pleasantly surprised. Placing the second jug to his mouth, he gulped down some of its contents. “It be beer,” he grinned with droplets glistening in his moist beard.

Pete passed the jug of beer to Brownrigg before slurping at the one containing the wine. Licking his lips, he looked over and noticed that the young woman was gazing at him intently, and he was glad his blushing cheeks were hidden by his facial hair and the lingering smoke from his pipe. He then gave her a grateful nod before taking another mouthful, observed with curious fascination by the attractive native. Overcome with a bout of timid nervousness, the veteran seaman fumbled with his pipe, not daring to look in the direction of the woman for fear he'd scare her away if he showed too obvious an interest. He was abruptly torn from his quandary when Sam Taylor heavily plonked himself next to him.

“I think we should get some of that brandy out for our guests,” suggested the topman voraciously.

“Only ‘cos you want some fer yerself,” answered Pete, annoyed by the disturbance.

“That ain't true,” protested Taylor.

“The captain made it clear we weren't to touch it,” said the quartermaster sternly, “and touch it we won't. Them natives have brought enough wine and beer to satisfy us

for one evening. Content yerself with that, Sam Taylor.”

“It ain’t fair. The captain’s off gallivanting again while we’re stuck here with all the work. A bit of the hard stuff’ll lift me spirits, it will,” persisted Taylor.

“The captain’s not gone to the mainland for the fun of it,” explained Pete “He be takin’ a great risk doing so. Make do with this fer now.” Pete thrust the half empty jug into the other man’s hands, deciding that if he drank much more, he’d end up making a fool of himself in front of the charming lass he so wanted to impress.

Sam Taylor grunted ungratefully as he snatched the clay container and drank thirstily, clutching it tightly as he stood and walked away.

“And don’t think you can help yourself to the brandy,” called out Brownrigg from Pete’s other side to the departing seaman. “Yuki is guarding it with them two nasty swords of his, and I’ve instructed him to behead anyone who enters the store tent without my permission.”

“He ain’t allowed to do that,” stammered Taylor, who froze on hearing the harsh words of warning.

“You can discuss the matter with Yuki if he catches you there,” replied the coxswain earnestly.

Once Sam Taylor had hurried anxiously out of sight, Pete and Brownrigg let out an uncontrolled roar of laughter.

“Did yer really tell Yuki to chop of the head of anyone tryin’ to get their hands on the brandy, John?” wheezed the chuckling quartermaster.

“Of course I didn’t, but Sam don’t know that,” grinned Brownrigg. “Anyway, should Taylor be caught pilfering, he’d be marooned here once we left. The ship’s articles strictly forbid the stealing of communal property.”

Still grinning to himself, Pete furtively glanced over at the fair maid across the fire, who had just stood up. She gave him an enticing smile before walking off towards

the natives' part of the camp, occasionally turning her head to look back at the quartermaster with an alluring glance over her shoulder as she went. Pete needed no further prompting, rising unsteadily to his feet, glad he had refrained from drinking too much wine, as palate-pleasing as it was.

"You're not going off after that native, are you?" asked Brownrigg, realising his shipmate's intentions. "You can't even be sure if it's a woman, Pete."

"It matters not, John. Lonely it be, the life at sea. Ain't seen that much opportunity," explained Pete, wiping his beard on his sleeve and hurrying excitedly after the alluring native, who was awaiting him at the entrance of a small tent. Both disappeared giggling inside.

John Brownrigg shrugged and returned to his jug of beer, observing the flickering flames of the fire and contemplating long lost loves.

Land of the free

It took the small flotilla less than two hours to reach the mainland and Captain Ironside was not disappointed with what he saw at the end of the short voyage. On sailing into the bay he observed dozens of figures rushing about on a sandy quay reinforced at the waterline by a wall of light brown stone. Several T-shaped stone jetties jutted out into the sheltered harbour and most of the vessels moored to it appeared to be fishing boats no larger than the one he was in. A wide, tree-lined boulevard, which was bustling with life, led away from the quay. The people visible on the seafront were similarly adorned to the ones who he was accompanying, and it seemed that both men and women shared the same tasks, whether lugging heavy crates, repairing nets, or patrolling with long, bronze-tipped spears. The quay itself was lined with tall, fine

stone buildings of varying sizes decorated with ornate statues, and he couldn't help noticing a particularly large structure opening out onto the water some distance away. The pirate captain was wondering what it might hold when the boat he was in came alongside one of the jetties with a bump, where a couple of awaiting natives tethered the vessel to a wooden mooring. As he was clambering out he noticed Benton scrambling from his vessel, and, in an uncharacteristically gentlemanly manner, offering a hand to aid Nefertari out of the boat. After Ironside helped his wife out of their small craft, he gestured for her to wait on the jetty while he scurried after the rebellious boatswain who was just about to disappear into the colourful throng.

"Wait there, Benton!" cried out the irate Swedish seaman. "Where do you think you're going?"

The intractable sea rover broadened his stride, pretending not to have heard the captain's words, but Ironside was soon upon him, spinning him around with a firm hand on the absconding man's shoulder.

"I was just goin' to make sure there were no Spanish soldiers ready to capture us, Cap'n," grinned the boatswain sheepishly. "They might be looking for us after what happened in Eldorado."

"I doubt it, William," frowned the captain. "Anyway, what the hell are you doing here? Why didn't you stay back on the island like we agreed?"

"Like you agreed," countered Benton. "I told you I was coming, but you wouldn't listen to me."

"The ship's company agreed that only Faustus, my wife, and I were to go. You went against the agreement and you'll answer for it when the others arrive."

"You, Fausty, and Cassandra, you say?" smirked the other man, pointing over Ironside's shoulder. "Then what in God's name is that Irish woman doing here? I don't

remember any talk of her coming.”

Quickly looking around, Ironside saw Niamh O’Malley striding purposefully over towards them. “It was a last minute decision,” he replied defensively.

“My decision weren’t last minute,” answered Benton. “I’ve been planning it for weeks.”

“How can that be possible, Will?” asked the puzzled captain. “We’ve only been in this land for a couple of days.”

“I’ve been planning to find meself a pretty young lass for sometime now, and no-one ain’t going to get in me way,” said Benton adamantly. “Not you, not the ship’s crew.”

“What are ye doin’ here, yer good-fer-nothin’ blighter?” growled O’Malley disapprovingly when she reached the two men.

“I could ask you the same, Neeve,” retorted Benton.

“I’m here to watch t’e captain’s back in this city of strangers, unlike you who just wants to dodge t’e work on the ship, ye work-shy scoundrel.”

“That ain’t fair, Neeve O’Malley,” retorted the boatswain testily. “I spent two days slugging me guts out getting that ship ready for careening, now I’m enjoyin’ me well earned shore leave.”

O’Malley snorted contemptuously before storming off to rejoin Faustus and Cassandra on the jetty.

“Well, you’re here now and there’s nothing I can do about it, but I want you to stay by my side at all times until the rest of the crew are ashore. Do you understand?”

“At all times?” smirked the sea rover mischievously.

“Yes, at all times.”

“Even when your in bed with yer better half. Might she not have something to say about that?”

“Not then of course, Will. You know what I mean,” replied the exasperated captain.

“What about when yer on the thunderbox doin’ yer necessities?” persisted Benton.

“You don’t know when to stop, do you?” snapped Ironside. “Carry on like this and I’ll have Nefertari slap you in chains until we leave this place.”

“She won’t do that, Cap’n. She’s a good friend of mine. A nice little chat we had in that boat on the way here,” replied the cocky sailor.

“Enough, Will! If you carry on like this, I’ll see to it you’re left here when we sail on, excellent navigational skills or not.”

“There ain’t no need to be like that, Cap’n Ironside. You can rely on old Will not to get into any mischief.”

The captain of the pirate vessel realised he was wasting his time talking to the troublesome sea rover, so gripping the offending man firmly by the arm he roughly led him back to join the others, where, to his annoyance, he was greeted by Cassandra with an amused smile on her face.

Soon the small group were being led by Nefertari through the busy streets, taking in an array of exotic sights, sounds, and smells. They stared in wonder at the colourfully adorned inhabitants of this splendid city and their unusual hairstyles. Most were on foot, but a few rode on small carts and buggies pulled by horses much smaller than those in Europe. The scent of spices and incense wafted through the air, enhanced by the lingering, pleasant aromas from large simmering pots, making their mouths water and their stomachs protest the recent lack of food.

“The architecture reminds me of that of ancient Egypt,” commented Faustus, as a chariot drawn by four small horses rattled past them.

“I don’t know much about such things, but ...” The captain paused in mid-sentence. “Where’s Benton got to?”

It didn't take long to discover the whereabouts of the wayward pirate. They found him in front of a stall laden with loaves of bread of varying size and consistency. The boatswain was heatedly negotiating with the stallholder, who, although not able to comprehend what the English seaman was saying, was well aware of what the hungry customer required.

"I told you to stay by my side, Will," growled Ironside on reaching the recalcitrant crewman, who was holding out some coins to the short, long-haired man behind the stall. The vendor was shaking his head disdainfully.

"I'm starving, I am, but this stingy bugger won't give me no bread even though I'm offering him more than it's worth," complained Benton.

"Leave him be," ordered the captain.

"Won't," retorted Benton angrily. "Me coin is as good as anyone else's." Without warning, he then snatched up a round, crusty loaf from the table to the dismay of the trader. "If he don't want me money, that's his problem, but I has a right to the bread."

"Give it back right now! We don't want to antagonise our hosts."

The perplexed native watched as the two seamen wrestled over the bread, sending crumbs scattering in all directions. Moments later they were each holding half of it in their hands, glaring wilfully at each other. In the meantime, their unruly behaviour had drawn the attention of half-a-dozen men and women armed with spears, who were now purposely striding towards them. If it hadn't been for the intervention of Nefertari, Captain Ironside was sure that they both would have ended up in the city dungeon. As it was, after the woman had exchanged a few words with the vendor and the guards, Benton was allowed to keep the bread, which he happily chomped on as they continued on their way, under the

resentful, watchful gaze of the captain and O'Malley, the latter having ungratefully almost bit his head off when he had so generously offered her a large chunk of his tasty booty. As they continued on their way, the confused pirate captain decided to ask their guide what had just transpired.

"Why wouldn't the vendor accept Benton's coins?" he inquired. "In no land that I know of do they turn down silver. Do you use a different currency here?"

"We have no use for money here, although I'm aware that the Men of the Cross yearn after silver and gold."

"How do you buy things then?" asked the puzzled Swede.

"Everyone receives food tokens sufficient to nourish them well. The same is true for clothing and other items. The tokens can only be used to procure the products they are designated for. They are not transferable and if they remain unused for too long they lose their value."

"But wouldn't it be easier to just use money?"

"That would lead to the accumulation of wealth and a concentration of power," answered Nefertari earnestly.

"How so?" asked Ironside with genuine interest.

"Money, as used by the Men of the Cross, can be used to purchase anything, including people. It would lead to inequality."

"Indeed," interrupted Faustus excitedly. "The more unscrupulous citizens could speculate and charge interest thus forming a ruling elite. Unfortunately, it's the norm in Europe. I find it very commendable that you use such a system." He turned to Ironside. "It is not so unlike the way we run things on our ship. No-one receives more than anyone else."

"But doesn't it deprive the people of their choices?" frowned the captain, a little disturbed by these people's rejection of the gold and silver he and his men so avidly

sought after.

“With the food tokens they can choose the sort of food they want to consume. Similarly, with the clothes tokens they can choose the garments they wish to wear. Many items, like means of transport and weapons are held in common,” explained the woman on seeing that Ironside was not totally convinced.

“And it works?” he asked with a hint of doubt in his voice.

“It has worked for hundreds of years, although it was not always this way,” answered Nefertari. “The Men of the Cross have been attempting to undermine our economy since their arrival. Some of the southern tribes have already succumbed to the corruption money brings with it.”

“I see. So there’s no poverty here?”

“No, even those who choose not to work or cannot work have the basics they need to survive. Naturally, those who contribute more to the community earn more tokens and can obtain better food and textiles, but never much more than they really need.”

“Really? But why was Benton allowed to keep the bread? He’s not in possession of any tokens.”

“That is true,” smiled the woman, “but as you are our guests, I’m allowed to make an exception. You too will receive some tokens for your basic needs while you are here and will be able to earn more if you choose to contribute to our community.”

“How many do I get and when do I get them?” inquired Benton his interest aroused on hearing their guide’s words.

“You’ll get enough to sustain yourself once I’ve arranged for a place for you to stay and informed the administrators.”

“Do I get any tokens for rum and beer?” the boatswain

asked eagerly.

“I don’t know what rum is, but you’ll be able to obtain beer and wine with your tokens if you wish, as it is entirely up to you what you spend your allowance on.”

“Can’t wait,” replied the seaman, licking his lips and happily skipping ahead of the group merrily singing to himself.

*Heave away, haul away, the ship rolls along
Give a sailor his grog and there’s nothing goes wrong*

The group finally arrived at a large sandstone building without any further incident. Faustus was especially impressed with the canopy overhanging the main entrance supported by two ornate stone caryatids carved in a style similar to that of ancient Greece. He was standing before the large doorway staring in awe at the two intricately sculpted female figures draped in ankle-length robes when he realised the others had already entered without him. With one last admiring glance up at the fine structures he scurried after the others into the single-storey building, not wishing to become separated from his companions in this beautiful, but daunting city. When the surgeon caught up with the others, they were standing in the spacious, high-ceilinged entrance hall, which was amply decorated with brightly coloured drapes and vibrant rugs.

“There shall be a feast in your honour this evening,” explained Nefertari, “but first I’ll take you to your rooms, where you can clean yourselves up.”

“We thank you for your generous hospitality,” replied Ironside, “but you don’t need to go to so much trouble on our account. A simple meal would suffice.”

“It will only be a small affair with myself and a few others who might be interested in meeting you.”

Not long later, after passing through several lamplit corridors, they arrived at their lodgings at the rear of the large building, which although not as luxurious as those in Eldorado, offered sufficient comfort. The captain and his wife were assigned a room to themselves, while the other three guests were each given a small chamber containing only a bed and a small bedside table.

“These are the guest rooms. I hope they meet to your satisfaction,” said the woman as she pulled back a drape covering the entrance to the first room. “They’re only designed for sleeping in as we spend most of our time outside.”

“They’re just fine,” answered Ironside thankfully.

“There aren’t no refreshments in the room,” Benton blurted out. “In Eldorado they had snacks and drinks ready for us.”

“William, mind your manners,” exclaimed Cassandra. “Be grateful with what you have been offered.”

“I am grateful,” retorted the boatswain. “It’s just that I’m still a bit peckish.”

“I’ll see to it you get some more bread to eat and fruit juice to drink, but after that you have to use your tokens to obtain more,” said their guide. “Water and soap will be brought to you as well.”

“And when do I get me tokens?” persisted the money-grubbing sea rover.

“All in good time,” smiled Nefertari. “First relax and clean yourselves up.”

“Right you are,” replied Benton, returning the woman’s benevolent smile. Without another word he then disappeared into his room and plonked himself heavily onto the straw-filled mattress and slung off his dusty shoes.

Before the captain could follow his wife into their room, Faustus tapped him on the shoulder. “Can I have a

quick word, Björn?”

“What is it, Faustus?”

“I’m a bit apprehensive about this feast,” he said, biting his lower lip.

“Why’s that?”

“Well, remember what happened at the one in Eldorado? They were going to sacrifice that young man in our presence. And then there was the incident with Benton, who could have got us all killed.”

“I’ll be keeping a close eye on Benton, but do you really think these people might also perform human sacrifices?”

“I don’t know, Björn,” replied the surgeon anxiously. “Their culture seems to resemble that of the ancient bronze age civilizations. I’ve noticed no iron weapons and tools as of yet. Of course, that doesn’t mean they conduct any barbaric rituals, but we should be on our guard until we learn more, which I am very keen to do.”

“Don’t worry, Faustus. After our recent unfortunate experiences, I won’t be trusting anyone who isn’t part of my crew.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t trust all of them, either,” said the surgeon grimly.

“If there are signs of anything untoward happening, we’ll depart as soon as *Dream Chaser* arrives. For now, we’ll make the most of it and enjoy our hosts’ hospitality. There’s not really anything else we can do.”

Faustus nodded curtly before disappearing into his own small chamber.

“What was that all about?” inquired Cassandra, noticing the look of concern on her husband’s face.

“Faustus is a little worried about the intentions of our hosts, especially after what happened in the other places we have so far visited,” replied the captain, taking his wife in his arms.

“I believe they mean well,” said the woman, softly stroking her spouse’s cheek. “I have a good feeling about this place, although the mention of these mysterious Men of the Cross does fill me with dark foreboding.”

“I hope you’re right about Nefertari and her people, dear, as we’ve encountered enough misfortune thus far. As for these Men of the Cross, I shall attempt to discover more about them and where they hail from. They could even have come here from our world and be able to aid us in our return.”

“Be careful, Björn,” warned Cassandra. “They sound dangerous.”

“You might be right with that assumption.”

“Well, I think we should make use of our time alone, don’t you, love?” said the woman from Bermuda, taking a step back and turning around. “Would you unlace me?”

“Of course,” replied the Swede, fumbling at the lacing with anticipation. “What do you have in mind?”

Moments later, after letting her dress and underskirts drop to the floor, Cassandra was standing naked before the pirate captain, smiling enticingly. “What do you think, dear?” she purred.

A couple of hours later, the small group of visitors to this strange land were seated on plush cushions around a low table. The captain had made sure that Benton was seated directly next to him, his wife was seated on his other side. Nefertari and half a dozen other natives dressed in colourful tunics were also sat at the table, on which lay a fine spread of food in ceramic bowls and on silver platters.

“Don’t forget, Will, you promised to be on your best behaviour,” warned Ironside on noticing the boatswain toying idly with an ornate silver spoon.

“Don’t worry, Cap’n, I will be,” grinned Benton, placing

the valuable piece of cutlery back on the red cotton table cloth covering the table. "Look, they've got olives," he said, quickly changing the subject. He was about to help himself to one of them when he felt a firm, restraining hand on his forearm.

"Wait until our hosts allow us to commence eating," whispered the captain. "We don't know if they have any rituals they perform before they start, and we don't want to offend them."

The ravenous seaman reluctantly retracted his hand, eyeing their hosts impatiently until finally Nefertari addressed everyone.

"May we all be thankful for what we have harvested and enjoy the fruit of our labours. Help yourselves."

With those simple, mundane words the feast began. The diners eagerly dished spoonfuls of finely presented food onto their broad plates, there being neither slaves nor servants to serve them as there had been in the other lands they had previously visited. The captain helped himself to several slices of roast goose dripping with grease, while his wife preferred the pork in a delicate wine sauce. O'Malley heaped her plate with a dish consisting of lentils and mutton, while Faustus chose a meatless one of lentils and beans. William Benton piled his plate with a generous portion from each of the dishes and bowls before him until it threatened to besprinkle the clean table cloth. Noticing the Irishwoman staring at him reproachfully, he smiled sheepishly. "I'm hungry, I am. I ain't eaten fer days."

"T'ere's enough on yer plate to feed a man for a week, ye greedy guts," she admonished the man. "And what about t'at bread you wolfed down not so long ago?"

"That weren't enough to sustain a grown man," he answered defiantly. "Anyway, who knows when we'll get the next chance to eat."

“You’ll receive tokens for more food,” interceded Nefertari, who had been listening with interest to the quarrelsome exchange.

“I bet he plans to spend it all on wine and beer tē first chance he gets,” retorted O’Malley.

“Now that just ain’t true,” growled the ravenous boatswain, “and can’t yer just stop that ceaseless nagging of yours fer just one moment, as yer spoiling me enjoyment of this tasty food.”

With an indignant snort, the Irish seawoman tore off a chunk of soft, white bread and dunked it savagely into her resplendent meal.

After emptying his plate, Captain Ironside decided the time was ripe for further questioning their hosts about the land they now found themselves in. He started with asking about the thing that concerned him the most.

“Would you tell me more about these so-called Men of the Cross?” he asked the native woman while dabbing the corner of his mouth with a cotton napkin.

“Certainly,” replied Nefertari as she placed her spoon back on the plate holding the small portion she had been nibbling at. “As I have already said, they appeared from out of nowhere some four hundred years past. Some say they emerged from a mysterious mist.”

“Really? It could have been the very same mist we were lost in,” commented Faustus excitedly.

“That I do not know,” continued the woman, “but what I do know is that they speak a strange tongue, two in fact, one of which is more or less like the one you speak.”

“And the other?” inquired the surgeon, his eyes gleaming with interest.

“The other sounds quite different to yours,” explained their host. “More melodic. I learnt them both when I was living for some time in their capital as part of a diplomatic mission.”

“Maybe you could say some words in that language,” suggested Faustus. “I might be able to identify it.”

“I can try, but I didn’t manage to learn it as well as the one you call English.” She paused and thought for a moment before continuing. “Je m’appelle Néfertari et je suis heureux de faire votre connaissance.”

“By God, she’s speaking French!” responded the ship’s physician almost springing to his feet. “And what is the name of the city you resided in?”

“Lutèce.”

“By Jove, that’s the French name for the ancient Roman city of Lutetia, known today as Paris,” cried Faustus euphorically.

“So what?” said Benton disinterestedly while shoving a handful of olives into his already full mouth.

“It means these Men of the Cross might have originated from our world. Please do tell us more.”

“They are said to have arrived on ships with a single square sail they call cogs, which they still use.”

“Do these ships carry cannons?” asked Ironside.

“What is a cannon?” frowned the woman.

“A large metal tube which propels an iron ball a fair distance by the burning of gunpowder, causing great damage to man and ship alike,” answered the captain, surprised at the native’s ignorance of this widespread weapon.

“Of such a monstrous thing I have never heard,” replied Nefertari in a horrified tone. “These things the Men of the Cross fortunately don’t possess, but they are equipped with strange items forged of a metal foreign to us.”

“Of iron and steel no doubt,” said Faustus knowledgeably.

“Yes, that is what they call it. They wear strange shirts consisting of small metal links made from this stuff you

call iron. They have spears and arrows as we do, but the tips are also made of this metal. Furthermore, they have formidable weapons they call swords and terrifying wooden contraptions that fire arrows that are much more powerful than our bows. The mounts they ride are sturdy, and, in contrast to ours, can bear a rider. The tribes that tried to resist them in the south were unable to withstand their cruel onslaught.”

“Mail armour and crossbows, typical of the high medieval period,” stated the surgeon, “and it would seem they haven’t progressed from the technology of that age, so *Dream Chaser* should be safe should they come for it.”

“Tell me, Nefertari,” said the curious pirate captain. “How have you been able to resist such a superior force for so long?”

“We are fortunate that our lands are separated from the south by vast moors and swamps, as well as impenetrable forests.”

“But they could come by sea.”

“Their forces might be superior on land, but their clumsy ships are too slow and cumbersome to be a match for our redoubtable war galley. They tried to invade once a few years ago, but were driven away after we sank one and captured two of their vessels. They haven’t ventured to try again since.”

“How did yer manage that?” inquired Benton, distracted from his feasting by the tale of a battle between sea craft he was unfamiliar with.

“We rammed one and it swiftly sank. As I said, their vessels were sluggish and awkward compared to ours, so we could pepper the decks of the others with arrows while our warriors boarded them by means of smaller vessels like the one we brought you here in.”

Benton gave an impressed whistle on hearing the account, sending small, greasy morsels of food flying

in all directions onto the now not so clean tablecloth under his plate. O'Malley glared at him with disgust, but the unrepentant sea rover just stuffed a chunk of bread dripping with olive oil into his smudged mouth, further bespattering the fine cloth.

"Is this galley you speak of housed in that large building that opens into the harbour? I noticed it when we arrived at the quay," asked Ironside, casually taking a sip of wine.

"Yes, that's right. It is moored there to protect it from the elements and allow maintenance work to be carried out more easily."

"Tell me more about it."

"It has twenty-six oars on either side, each served by five rowers. Additionally, there are sixty-five sailors, plus eighty-four archers on board."

"That makes a total of four-hundred-and-nine crew members," commented the astounded surgeon. "It must be a vessel of some size."

"It is," replied Nefertari proudly. "It's one-hundred-and-sixty feet in length with a width of twenty-three."

"Sounds like a Mediterranean war galley to me," said Faustus in disbelief, the contents of his spoon falling back on his plate.

"That I must see," said the captain eagerly. "I've never laid eyes on such a vessel before."

"I'll take you to view it first thing in the morning, if you wish," offered the native woman.

"I thank you for your kind offer and your hospitality in general," replied Ironside, contentedly returning to his meal.

"So t'em Men o' the Cross aren't a threat t'en?" asked O'Malley.

"We have to be constantly on our guard, but, to answer your question, we don't fear them, as although

they quickly conquered the southern territories when they first arrived, they had the element of surprise on their side then. In the last fifty years they have made no progress with encroaching on our land whatsoever,” replied Nefertari assuredly. “They occasionally send their missionaries, whom we tolerate until they become too unbearable. They have had minimal success converting our people to their twisted religion.”

“What happens if someone converts?” asked Faustus, pressing the tips of his fingers together.

“They usually leave with the priests, although we do have a handful of proselytes who remain here, but they live on the outskirts of the city and keep pretty much to themselves.”

“It sounds as if the Men of the Cross adhere to a form of Christianity, but what religion do your people follow?” inquired the curious surgeon.

“We don’t really worship any deities, but we do hold ceremonies to celebrate nature and the gift of life,” explained the native woman. “We honour the divine power, Abraxas, but don’t believe this entity wishes to be prayed to. A god that desired worship would be egoistical and therefore untrustworthy. Many of us hold the belief that the Men of the Cross worship Deus Mundi, the creator god, a supreme being that created the material world.”

“Really?” said the surprised physician. “I’ve heard of such a doctrine before, but cannot recall where. Please do continue.”

“This creator god is responsible for the material world and aims to prevent our spirits from ever returning to the divine source.”

“How does he do that then?” asked Benton, wiping sauce from his chin with the sleeve of his shirt. “Does he lock them in cages?”

“In a way,” smiled Nefertari. “This material world holds us back from what is really important.”

“What? Like gold and wine?” asked the boatswain, demonstratively taking a generous swig of the red liquid.

“No, William, it is exactly those worldly pleasures that corrupt our souls,” answered the shocked woman. “No, it’s the beauty of the natural world, compassion, creativity, and dignity that are important to us.”

“It don’t sound like no religion for me,” stated the perplexed sea rover. “I likes me gold and wine too much, I do. Mind you, I ain’t too keen on that Christianity stuff neither.”

“You ain’t not’ing but a self-serving scoundrel, William Benton,” snarled O’Malley.

“If I don’t serve meself, there ain’t no-one else gonna do it for me,” retorted Benton irately.

“Well, I believe it to be a philosophy worthy of praise,” commented Faustus rhapsodically.

“You would, Fausty. You don’t even partake in the pleasure of eating meat,” replied the boatswain, spooning a morsel of pork into his gob. “Tasty stuff, it is. Don’t know what yer missing out on.”

“Although I find your ideas admirable, Nefertari,” interceded Captain Ironside, “I don’t find them to be realistic. At least not in the world we come from.”

“But wouldn’t it be nice to not have to worry about acquiring wealth,” said Cassandra, seemingly taken by Nefertari’s words. “You wouldn’t need to go pirating.”

“That may be so, dear, but we wouldn’t last five minutes in our world with an attitude like that.”

“Maybe we could stay here,” answered the woman from Bermuda sincerely.

Björn Gunnarsson was lost for words at his wife’s suggestion and was, for once, grateful when Faustus embarked on one of his comprehensive lectures.

“Now I recall where I have encountered such a doctrine before. The Gnostics of old made a distinction between a supreme, secretive God and a malevolent lesser divinity, whom they sometimes associated with the Old Testament god Yahweh.”

“Never heard of them Noss-ticks,” commented Benton, licking his fingers.

“There were also the Cathars, a movement that was considered heretical by the Church in the Middle Ages, who also believed something similar,” continued Faustus, unperturbed by Benton’s comment.

“Caff-arse? Sounds like an unpleasant ailment to me,” chuckled the boatswain, although he was the only one who found his quip amusing.

“Please do be quiet, Will!” snapped the annoyed surgeon. “They differentiated between the good God of the New Testament and the jealous one of the Old Testament, whom they called Rex Mundi.”

“And what became of them?” inquired Nefertari affectedly.

“The leader of the Catholic Church, Pope Innocent III, who was clearly not so innocent, instigated a crusade against them, leading to the movements eventual destruction,” came the solemn reply.

“I heard the Men of the Cross use the word ‘crusade’ when I was living among them,” frowned the native woman.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” said Faustus with a nod. “It is a means the Catholic Church, whom I believe these Men of the Cross belong to, fall back on to annihilate those foes it deems to be a threat to their orthodoxy.”

“So you think they aim to destroy us?” said the woman aghast.

“Yes, as soon as the opportunity presents itself, I fear. They would prefer to convert you all, but failing that they

are likely to burn the recalcitrant ones at the stake.”

“That’s terrible,” gasped Nefertari, her face turning pale.

“The Christian Church has a history of being merciless towards heretics. Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis in the fourth century, composed a compendium of eighty heresies, which he called the Panarion.”

“Sounds like a complete git, if you ask me,” commented Benton glibly.

“No-one asked you,” said Ironside admonishingly.

“He compares all heretics, among which he included the Jews, to different poisonous beasts and portrays his book as a kind of antidote to those venoms. He even condemned the philosophical schools of the Stoics and Pythagoreans.”

“Stow-wicks? Pie-fag-gore-eeuns? The first sounds painful and the second just plain evil,” stated the impertinent boatswain.

“You just shut t’at foul gob of yours, or I’ll shut it for ye, William Benton,” growled O’Malley, fed up of the mouthy sea rover’s constant mordacious comments. “I’m tryin’ me best to understand what Mr. Quiddington is sayin’. It’s a difficult enough subject matter to understand as it is, without your incessant blathering.”

“Too much fer yer pretty little Irish head to take in is it, Neeve?” sneered Benton before blowing his nose in a fine cotton serviette.

“Why ye grody gowl, ye have a mouth t’hat’d make yer arse jealous,” screeched the furious Irish woman, lunging across the table at the offending seaman, causing him to fall backwards from his cushion in astonishment.

“Enough!” cried out an irate voice. It was not, as would have been expected, the voice of Captain Ironside castigating his unruly crew members, but that of the normally calm and serene Nefertari, who was now

staring red-faced at the two quibbling pirates. “If you wish to continue your dispute, please do so in the yard, as I would like to hear more about your land without further disturbance.”

“But ...,” O’Malley started to say, but ceased on noticing the cautioning expression on the captain’s face. Instead of completing her sentence, she fell silent and glared venomously at Benton, who was sitting opposite her looking as if butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth.

“Thank you,” said their host, regaining her composure. “Now could you tell me more about your god, Mr. Quiddington?”

“The religion where we come from is called Christianity, but it is split into several factions: Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and Catholic. All observe the teachings of the holy bible, but differ on details of doctrine. In the Arabian lands of the east, they also pray more or less to the same God, but they regard their own scriptures, the Koran, to be the true teachings of God spoken through the Prophet Mohamed. Then there are the Jews, who also worship the same deity, and lay claim to being the oldest religion and the chosen people of God. All are said to be disciples of the Book. Further east, they adhere to a totally different religion, a polytheistic and mystic creed they call Hinduism. Furthermore, there are hundreds of pagan religions scattered around the globe, each with their own ideas of the Creator. Unfortunately, there have been countless wars and persecutions committed by all, who believe their doctrine to be the truest one.”

“It all sounds very complicated to me,” sighed Nefertari. “Does it really matter what a person believes? Would it not be more productive to concentrate their efforts on the here and now, and create a just and sustainable society for the benefit of all?”

“Indeed it would,” exclaimed the surgeon, “but, alas,

the ego and pettiness of men hinder this to the extent of making it impossible.”

“This also rings true for the Men of the Cross,” said Nefertari glumly. “But tell me, don’t you also share their Christian faith?”

“It would seem these Men of the Cross adhere to an archaic form of Christianity, which was extremely intolerant. I assure you we do not share their same fanatical beliefs,” replied Faustus reassuringly. “Our society is a little more open to liberal ideas than it once was.”

“They’re still all a bunch of greedy, oppressive bastards though,” commented Benton.

“For once I must agree with Will,” said Ironside, scratching his chin. “It would seem a new religion has possessed the souls of our people – that of money. The desire for great profit can be just as damaging to the small folk as any religion.”

“I fear the yearning for financial gain might one day supersede any religious ideologies,” frowned the surgeon.

“What’s a super seed?” asked Benton, this time sincerely interested in discovering the meaning of the unfamiliar word.

“It means religion will be made irrelevant by the hankering after material wealth.”

“That’s why we gotta get our hands on as much gold and silver as possible before we becomes irrelevant too,” answered Benton, covetously toying with the silver spoon he had been eating with.

“Really, William!” sighed Cassandra. “Do you want us to become like those swinish plantation owners and merchants you so detest?”

“No, I just wants their money,” stated the sea rover matter-of-factly.

“What about your form of government?” asked

Faustus, interested in learning more about this unusual land. “You already said you are not ruled by a monarch. Who rules over you then?”

“No-one rules over us,” said Nefertari spiritedly. “We are all equal, although we do temporarily elect people to carry out certain functions, who can be readily removed from their position should they prove unsuitable.”

“So how do you make the weightier decisions concerning your city? It can’t be an easy task to get everyone to agree.”

“We are a federation and each quarter of the city and each collective holds its own assemblies to decide on its own affairs. They send delegates to the Grand Assembly which takes place monthly. There we make decisions regarding the community as a whole. There is a yearly coming-together of delegates of all the cities to discuss matters such as trade and mutual defence.”

“But what if you can’t agree on a particular matter?” inquired the surprised physician.

“We strive to reach a consensus, but failing that we try to reach a decision everyone can at least live with.”

“Splendid,” replied Faustus, rubbing his hands together. “Sounds a lot like the democracy of ancient Athens.”

“What about the women? Are they allowed to vote?” interrupted Cassandra. “I remember you saying that they were denied the chance to participate in making decisions in that ancient city, Faustus.”

“Yes, indeed I did,” frowned the surgeon.

“Every adult has an equal say in the affairs of state,” stated the native woman sternly. “Why should women be denied that right?”

“It would seem this land is even more progressive than that of ancient Greece,” answered the impressed ship’s doctor. “In my opinion, there is no reason why women

should be excluded from political matters.”

Benton was about to comment, but then clearly thought the better of it on noticing O’Malley staring challengingly at him. Instead he stuffed another handful of olives into his mouth. After some moments of silence during which the visitors to this land of liberty contemplated what they had just heard, the inquisitive boatswain, who had finally eaten his fill, decided to speak.

“It all sounds very nice and all to have so much freedom, but what I don’t understand is why you don’t have no money.”

“To ensure everyone receives what he or she needs while preventing anyone acquiring more than he or she needs,” replied Nefertari frankly.

“I see,” responded the unconvinced pirate before taking a large gulp of wine. “So everybody gets what they need. That sounds good to me, what with my needs being great, especially where wine and olives are concerned.”

“There’s no need to be greedy, William,” chided Cassandra.

“There is plenty for all,” said the native woman. “Although excess and gluttony are frowned upon.”

“I don’t need no gluttony. Just wine and olives,” answered Benton guilelessly.

The captain gave their hosts an apologetic shrug and was about to continue his questioning, but was beaten to it by Benton, who seemed suddenly eager to learn more about the ways of this city.

“What about the men and women here? Some men looks like women, and some women like men. It’s just plain confusing.”

“Well, we are not dualistic where gender is concerned,” explained their host.

“I’m not interested whether you people fight duels or not,” replied Benton restively. “What I wants to know is

why some of yer men look more like women.”

“By dualistic Nefertari means they don’t adhere to the black and white European notion of what men and women are,” interceded Faustus. “You’d find out what she means if you’d care to listen instead of constantly making puerile comments.” On observing the bewildered expression on the seaman’s face, he added, “Childish comments that is.”

“Sorry I spoke, I am,” grumbled Benton.

“Mr. Quiddington is right,” continued Nefertari. “We see no reason why the capability to bear young should determine any other aspects of a persons life, whether it be the tasks they carry out or the way they choose to present themselves.”

“That’s all very well and good, but what if I’m looking for a pretty lass. How can I be sure I don’t end up with some bloke.”

“If you like the person, does it really matter?” countered their host.

“It does to me,” replied the concerned sea rover. “I like lasses, I do.”

“You’re not here to nurture your love life, Will,” pointed out Ironside.

“This culture may seem foreign to us now, but if you grew up here it would seem perfectly normal to you,” added Faustus.

“I doubt it,” mumbled Benton, more to himself. “Nefertari here wakes a stirring in me innards, but it worries me that I don’t even know if she’s really a lass.”

“And that you will never find out, my dear man. If you were from our land, you would know, and it would not matter,” answered the native woman with a combination of amusement and annoyance.

The seaman decided it would be better to say no more on the subject, just fidgeting in his seat uncomfortably while fiddling with a silver spoon and avoiding eye

contact with anyone else.

“But what about marriage?” inquired Cassandra.

“What do you mean by marriage?” asked the perplexed native.

“I mean the joining of a couple in matrimony,” answered the Bermudian woman, astonished by the other woman’s ignorance of this matter. “Björn and I are married and remain true to each other and no-one else. Don’t we, Björn?”

Her husband nodded dutifully.

“Such an institution does not exist in our society. If a couple chooses to stay together, they do so for as long as they wish. Many people choose to take several partners, some take none.”

William Benton’s eyes lit up on hearing these words. “And what about you, Nefertari?” he asked hopefully. “You looking for a new partner? I’d be willing to oblige. That is if yer not really a bloke.”

“Not at the moment, William, but thank you for your kind offer,” replied the woman sardonically.

Benton’s body sagged with disappointment. He then turned his gaze to Niamh O’Malley and was about to speak when Cassandra beat him to it.

“What about the children?” she asked, a little disturbed by the unusual nature of forming relationships in this land.

“Raising offspring is the task of the community. They are given up shortly after birth to a community school where they are brought up and educated. They are all treated equally.”

“But what about the needs of the parents?” asked Cassandra in astonishment. “I couldn’t imagine giving up my child should Björn and I someday have one.”

“Not even for the benefit of the child?” asked Nefertari, raising an eyebrow. “It was decided many years past that

allowing the biological parents to raise their children wasn't always for the good of the young. How a child was raised was often determined by the whim of the parents' ego, who often simply imposed their own will and wishes on their sons and daughters. Children are not our possessions, but the scions of our society – our future.”

“That’s a fair point,” commented Faustus. “My father constantly pushed me to be a lawyer, although I preferred to learn medicine. If he hadn’t died when I was twenty, I fear he would have got his way.”

“I’m not sure if I like the idea,” stated Cassandra dubiously. “I’m sure I would find it most distressing to find myself parted from the one I had brought into the world.”

“The parents are allowed to visit their offspring at anytime, provided the youngster desires it, but we find that as little influence from the mother and father as possible is much more beneficial to the child’s independent development.”

“Well, I won’t be giving any child of ours to any such school,” she mumbled so that only her husband could hear her. “It’ll get all the love and attention it needs from us.”

The captain smiled at his wife as he gave her hand a quick, affectionate squeeze, while secretly relishing the idea of a communal upbringing of the young. He recalled his poor mother, who struggled to raise six children in their father’s absence, a man who had been a stranger to him on his brief visits after years at sea.

“And what about an army?” inquired the surgeon, never tiring in his thirst for knowledge.

“If by army you mean a standing body of men and women who dedicate their life to the art of war, we don’t have one,” answered the woman candidly. “War is a waste of resources, not to mention human life.”

“But what if yer attacked?” asked Benton, his interest in the discussion, which had slowly waned when the topic of children has arisen, now rekindled. “Sounds like them Men of the Cross are nasty, vicious buggers.”

“We have a voluntary citizen militia, who protect against incursions by the Men of the Cross and bandits. Most people serve in it at some time in their life, but nobody is forced. Should we be attacked everyone plays their part in the defence of the town.”

“You mean to say there are bandits roaming the land, although you live in a country of plenty?” exclaimed Cassandra in surprise.

“Alas, there are those few who do not respect the ways of the community, and are therefore forced into exile,” replied Nefertari glumly. “They often form their own small communities and view us as their enemies. They sometimes raid our livestock, seemingly unable or unwilling to rear their own.”

“Why don’t yer just kill ‘em instead of banishing ‘em? Then they can’t raid yer lands,” suggested Benton sagely.

“It is not our way to punish transgressions with death,” answered the shocked native woman. “Everyone who is exiled has the chance to redeem themselves.”

“And do they?” asked Faustus doubtfully.

“Unfortunately, not many do,” said Nefertari dispiritedly. “Those renegades are too self-centred or power hungry to accept their role in our society of equals. Some even find their way to the lands of the Men of the Cross, where they have a better chance of fulfilling their base desires.”

“That’s a real shame,” said the surgeon, rubbing his chin and realising he had neglected to shave in the last couple of days.

“It is, but on the bright side, the majority are content with the way things are.”

“And let’s hope it stays that way,” said the physician encouragingly. “By the way, we do not yet know the name of this fair city and the land it lies in.”

“Our land we call Adeia and our city we call Eleutheria.”

“Astounding,” gasped Faustus. “There’s an island with the name Eleuthera some fifty miles to the east of Nassau, you know. Eleutheria was an ancient Greek word for the personification of liberty, often used in conjunction with the goddess Artemis. The Roman equivalent was Libertas, the goddess of liberty. Unfortunately, I didn’t pay enough attention in my infrequent Greek classes to be aware of the meaning of the word Adeia. Amazing! I must find out more about the language of these people. It may be that they speak a bastardised version of ancient Greek.”

“There’s no need to insult our hosts like that, there isn’t,” snapped Benton. “It just ain’t polite.”

“What do you mean, William?” asked the perplexed surgeon.

“It ain’t nice to call ‘em bastards after all they’ve done for us, it ain’t,” scowled the boatswain.

“No, Will, you misunderstand me,” laughed Faustus. “By bastardisation I mean they might speak a debased form of the Greek tongue, which, I must admit, could be construed as an insult as well. Let me rephrase what I said. Their language could be a derivative of that ancient language.”

“See, told you that you were insulting our hosts,” responded Benton smugly. “And calling them derivatives don’t sound much better either, whatever that means.”

“To be a derivative means it stems from or is related to ancient Greek in some way, you fool,” replied Faustus irately.

“You hear that everyone,” said the illiterate seaman loudly. “Now old Fausty ain’t just insulting our fine hosts, but he’s insulting me, too. If I were a gentleman I’d

challenge him to a duel. He's just lucky I ain't one of them fancy buggers."

"That's enough, William Benton!" snarled Captain Ironside, tired of the man's constant stream of provocations. "I think it's time we retired for the evening as the hour is late."

"Yes, I agree," said Faustus quickly, "but I hope to learn more about your fine land tomorrow. I thank you on behalf of us all for your kind hospitality."

"Shouldn't we help our hosts to clear up?" interjected Cassandra, having noted there were no servants to carry out the task.

"There is no need on this occasion, but I thank you for your offer, Cassandra. Now I'll take you back to your rooms," replied Nefertari, standing and adjusting the hem of her short tunic.

With those words everyone rose and made towards the door after their host, all, that is, except William Benton, who lingered for a few moments, slipping something small and shiny into his grubby shirt. This sneaky act did not go unnoticed, and as the pilfering seaman approached the door he was confronted by O'Malley, who was glaring at him contemptuously.

"You put back what ever it is you just filched, ye ungrateful spalpeen," she whispered forbiddingly.

"Don't know what yer mean," responded Benton innocently.

"I saw ye thieve somet'ing. I saw ye slip it into yer shirt, I did," persisted the woman unperturbed. "If our hosts discover yer deed, we'll not be so welcome here. Put it back right now, or I'll inform the cap'n."

"It's just a little spoon. No-one'll miss it," answered the purloining pirate, producing the small, metal object from the folds of his shirt.

The Irish woman closely observed the light-fingered

sailor as he demonstratively placed the valuable piece of cutlery back on the table, after which she grabbed his forearm and roughly tugged him out of the chamber.

“Hey, there ain’t no need for that. Yer hurtin’ me arm, you is,” complained Benton, as he was forcefully led down the corridor by the aggravated woman.

“Quit yer whinging, William Benton, or ye’ll have more to complain about,” growled O’Malley, releasing the man’s arm and briefly exposing the hilt of her knife so he could see it.

Pushing past the others, Benton swiftly put as much distance as he could between himself and the nettled young woman and was relieved to be finally alone in his own small room. After removing his shoes he plonked himself down onto the straw-filled mattress and retrieved a small, silver object that had been tucked under his belt just above his backside. He smiled to himself, admiring his own ingenuity. That pretty but not so clever seawoman had thought he hadn’t noticed her observing him while he had pocketed that spoon. He’d expected her to confront him about it, but what she wasn’t aware of was that the artful William Benton had been hoodwinking her – he had simultaneously slipped a second silver spoon unobserved down the back of his breeches.

Amorous encounters

It was mid-morning and the sun was shining brightly when William Benton left the complex where he had spent the night, accompanied by Niamh O’Malley, who had been tasked with keeping an eye on the vexatious sea rover. They ambled through the sandy streets with no particular destination in mind. Both were now dressed in colourful indigenous tunics, although Benton had refused to relinquish his breeches, deeming it not proper

to walk in public without them – he was not a Scotsman after all. The boatswain had chosen not to join Captain Ironside on his visit to see the war galley in the harbour, instead preferring to explore and discover what delights this foreign town had to offer. The captain, fearful that the rascally pirate might cause an incident that would anger their hosts, had only agreed when O'Malley had reluctantly offered to chaperone the delinquent Benton. The two shipmates entered a wide, tree-lined avenue which appeared to house a number of eateries and recreational establishments.

“Look. T'ey're playing some sort o' a game with a ball over t'ere,” chirped the Irish woman. “Let's go and watch.”

“Nah, the only balls I likes is cannon balls,” replied Benton dismissively. Pointing at a low sandstone building with large glassless window-openings revealing it to be some sort of tavern, he then made his own suggestion. “What about that drinking establishment over there?”

“Ain't it a bit early to be starting on the booze, Will?” asked the surprised woman.

“They may have some lovely hot chocolate there, though a tot of rum wouldn't hurt either,” answered Benton eagerly.

“All right t'en. It's getting a bit warm out here and I could do with somet'ing to wet me whistle,” said O'Malley, smiling to herself as she noticed the explicit image of an entwined half-naked couple carved above the door, which her companion had clearly not seen.

On entering the spacious hall, the two sea rovers found a small table overlooking the street. O'Malley curiously assessed the décor of the room, taking in the unusual images adorning the walls, while Benton was more interested in eyeing what was on offer behind the bar. The Irishwoman looked with interest at the imaginative erotic images of scantily clad figures of both

sexes engaged in acts of carnal pleasure. Her attention was drawn to a giggling couple, who had been seated at a nearby table, disappearing arm-in-arm through a doorway hung with a heavy drape. She began to suspect that this establishment was more than a place where one simply procured refreshments.

“Where’s the serving wench?” said Benton after sitting impatiently for ten minutes. “A man could die of thirst before he gets a drink in this place.”

“I t’ink we have to fetch our own drinks here,” answered O’Malley, noticing that the barkeeper had been looking over at their table expectantly for the past few minutes.

“It seems they ain’t yet learned how to run a decent public house in this land,” replied the boatswain critically.

“It matters not,” snapped the Irishwoman. “I’ll fetch them. What yer having?”

“I’ll have a cup of hot chocolate, a glass of rum, a pitcher of beer, and some of that fruit juice,” said Benton anticipatorily. “And see if they have any of those olives. I’ve grown quite fond of ‘em, I have.”

“Your wish is my command, sire,” smirked O’Malley, standing and pushing back the chair.

Completely missing the irony in the woman from Ireland’s words, Benton just nodded and slid some of the precious tokens he had been given by Nefertari over the table towards her before turning his attention to the other patrons. He was surprised at how many other guests were present at this time of the day. His gaze was particularly drawn to a group of young women – at least he presumed they were women – sipping on tall glasses of colourful fruit juice. With lubricious astonishment he was stunned to see that one of them was even bare from the waist up. In her case, the lusty sea rover was sure she was of the female persuasion, but when the young native glanced in his direction and smiled, the veteran seaman coyly averted

his gaze, instead turning his attention to the elaborate scenes adorning the walls, some depicting acts so lewd they alarmed even the otherwise worldly pirate. He was in the middle of scrutinizing a particularly intriguing but disturbing scene, in which two figures were entwined in a contorted embrace he wouldn't have deemed possible, when the grinning Irishwoman returned with a tray of assorted beverages.

"I see yer admiring t'artwork, Will," she chuckled, as she clumsily attempted to place the overladen tray on the table. "Could ye get up a moment and help wit' t'ese, William Benton? Unless ye want to be slurping yer drinks up from t'e floor, t'at is."

"I can't," replied Benton abashedly, with both hands on his lap and his gaze flitting from the woman with the tray to the obscene drawings on the wall.

"Ah, I understand, Will. All t'ese smutty pictures given you t'e morning glory," chuckled O'Malley, carefully placing the tray on the table.

"Nothing of the sort," denied the shamefaced seaman. "It's just that me legs is a bit tired and I can't stand up at the moment."

"If you say so, Will," chortled the amused woman, sitting herself down opposite the vexed seaman.

"You've got a dirty mind, you have, Neeve O'Malley," snarled Benton while the Irishwoman sipped her drink with a smile.

Quickly forgetting the incident, Benton thirstily eyed the assortment of drinking vessels.

"Where's the hot chocolate? And there ain't no rum!" he stated ungratefully.

"Sorry, Will, but t'ey haven't heard of t'e stuff. Got you some coffee, beer, and fruit juice t'ough, and yer lucky to get t'at. It weren't easy making t'at fellow behind the bar understand what I wanted. At first, he t'ought I wanted a

bucket of water and a mop, for some strange reason.”

“That’ll have to do,” grumbled the man, greedily delving his fingers into a bowl accompanying the drinks. “At least you got me some olives.” The pirate contentedly chewed on the tender morsels. “It surprises me they’re allowed to have such naughty and immodest stuff painted on the walls,” commented Benton, taking a large swig of beer. “In old England those prudish churchmen would’ve shut this place down long ago.”

“You’d be surprised what them pious churchmen get up to behind closed doors, you would, Will,” frowned the Irish woman disapprovingly. “They ain’t half so chaste and holy as they make out to be.”

“That ain’t right,” replied Benton scornfully. “Men of the cloth should keep their peckers to themselves, like it says in the bible.”

“All acts of coupling outside of marriage are sinful according to t’ bible.”

“That ain’t right, either,” answered the boatswain sternly. “A man has his needs, he does, but a priest ain’t a proper man. He should spend his time being holy and not cavorting around in an indecent manner. That said, I draws the line at some of these indecent images painted on these here walls. They should have some nice pictures of ships, or horses pulling carts, or something.”

“You might be a fearless pirate, Will, but you’re quite conventional when it comes to such matters,” said the woman, smiling into her drink. “Some of them images really intrigue me, they do. But I guess I’m a little more open-minded t’an you are, William Benton.”

“You’re just as depraved as them people who made them drawings, you are,” gasped the incredulous seaman. Then changing tack, he smiled playfully and continued. “You know, Neeve O’Malley, that short tunic suits you, it does. Makes you look like a real woman for a change.”

“A crow’s curse on ye, William Benton,” snapped the affronted woman. “I wouldn’t give yer the steam off me piss, I wouldn’t.”

“Can’t a bloke say something nice about a pretty lass?” responded Benton with astonishment.

“Yer as thick as shite, but only half as handy, ye are,” snarled the irked woman. “That ain’t a t’ing ye say to woo a girl, yer bawdy langer.”

“Sorry I spoke,” mumbled Benton into his half-empty beaker of beer.

The two of them had been sitting in silence supping on their drinks for several minutes with Benton doing his best to avoid O’Malley’s wrathful glare when, to the seaman’s surprise, the bare-breasted young woman he had looked at earlier rose from her seat and circumspectly approached his table. Looking down at him she uttered several unintelligible words to which the boatswain responded with a nervous smile while doing his best not to stare at her exposed bosoms.

“I don’t understand a word yer sayin’, love,” he muttered, fidgeting in his seat.

The woman placed a soft hand on his forearm and spoke again while giving him an entrancing smiling.

“Look here, lass, I don’t think I has enough tokens for yer services today. Maybe some other time, dear,” responded the nonplussed sea rover, shaking his head and abruptly pulling his arm away from her gentle grip.

The expression on the young woman’s face clearly displayed disappointment, and with a miffed shrug she turned away and returned to rejoin her companions at their table. Slightly ruffled by the experience with the alluring woman, Benton leaned back on his chair and observed the comings and goings around him. On several occasions he noted guests approach other tables and then either returning to their own seat with a dejected look

on their face, or cheerily leaving through the door at the back of the room arm-in-arm with the person they'd just approached. It wasn't only the women making contact with the male guests, but on several occasions the other way round. He wasn't always even sure of the sex of the couple leaving together. He was about to comment on his observations to O'Malley, who was sitting sullenly opposite him, when a handsome, muscular man with long, jet-black hair and wearing nothing but a skimpy loincloth, which served to emphasise how well-endowed he was, neared their table.

"No thanks mate," Benton addressed him in an unfriendly tone. "I prefers lasses, I do."

The powerfully built, tanned native ignored the scruffy seaman, all his attention focused on the young, bonny Irishwoman. He tenderly placed a hand on her shoulder and with the other hand pointed towards the door at the back of the café. To Benton's horror, O'Malley smiled knowingly at the attractive young man and with a nod rose to her feet. On realising she intended to leave through the door with this stranger, the stunned pirate spoke in a shaky voice.

"What yer doing, Neeve? Yer can't go back there with that poncey knucklehead. He's even forgot to put his breeches on, he has."

"Why shouldn't I, Will?" replied the woman with a twinkle in her eye. "By t'e way, I've figured it out. T'is place ain't no brothel like I t'ought it might be, but an establishment for finding a partner to engage in acts of the flesh with."

"You mean sexual relations?" gasped Benton, almost falling from his chair. "You mean you don't need no tokens?"

"T'at's right, Will. Don't bother waiting for me. See yer later." With those words the short, pretty woman and

large, handsome man disappeared behind the drapes hanging in the doorway.

The jealousy-stricken sea rover sat alone pondering, green with envy, on what O'Malley could possibly see in that oversized, presuming dunderhead that she didn't see in him. He was a handsome, strapping fellow, after all, at least in his own mind. Maybe she'd like him more if he got hold of one of those scanty loincloths, but he was damned if he was going to prance around in one of those indecent garments – a real man wore breeches – he thought to himself while running his hands over the shabby, worn material of his linen trousers. He admitted they weren't in the best of condition. Maybe he'd procure a new pair. With a pair of new pants, together with his natural wit and charm, the Irish woman wouldn't be able to resist him. After obtaining a cup of wine from the bar, more through luck than adequate communication, he sat a while, struggling to drive the luridly licentious images of O'Malley and that damned native man from his head. On more than one occasion he caught the gaze of the pretty, young woman that had approached him earlier, who was now sitting alone at the table, her companions all having already found a partner. After the third time she looked at him he decided enough was enough. If that filthy-minded Irish wench was having her wicked way without him, he wasn't going to sit around moping all day. No, he'd show her. He'd make her regret that she'd missed out on William Benton's amorous prowess between the sheets. Emptying his cup, he leaped to his feet and strode confidently towards the young native woman, grabbing some flowers from a vase on one of the tables on the way. Standing over her, he gave her what he believed to be an enticing smile, but to anyone observing might have looked more like a lustful grin.

“How 'bout it, love,” he stated optimistically as he

handed her the flowers.

Despite the lewd grin and the water that was dripping from the misappropriated flowers onto her bare flesh, the young woman smiled and rose, taking his hand in hers. Benton followed her to the door in nervous anticipation, pleased with his own masterfulness. He would kill two birds with one stone – he would finally spend time with a well-earned, pretty lass while making that ungrateful Irish woman regret she'd turned him down.

The Men of the Cross

Later that afternoon, the contented boatswain was sitting on a bench under the welcome shade of the trees in an pleasant spot overlooking the bustling harbour. On another bench a few feet away were seated Faustus and Cassandra, who were observing with fascination how the fishermen were skillfully unloading their nets.

“Where’s Neeve, Will?” asked Cassandra casually. “I thought Björn said she was to accompany you at all times.”

“Seems she has better things to do than spend her time with William Benton,” grumbled the disgruntled pirate.

“What do you mean?”

“She went off with some broad-shouldered oaf in that bizarre tavern we were in,” answered the pirate glumly. “She hadn’t come out when I left and I weren’t gonna hang around waiting for her.”

“Oh,” responded the woman, realising what Benton was implying. “Well, I suppose she’s entitled to have her fun. The men do it often enough and no-one bats an eyelid.”

“I disagrees, I do,” countered the resentful seaman. “She should have been watching over me the whole time like the captain said. She’s lucky I didn’t get into any

trouble.”

“I do believe Will’s jealous,” chuckled Faustus. “I believe he harbours a soft spot for our dear Neeve.”

“Shut it, Fausty,” snapped Benton. “You don’t know nothing, you don’t.”

“All right, William, keep your hair on,” smirked the surgeon. Changing the subject he continued. “I must say I do find this land very appealing. Its political and social system are much more progressive than anything I’d ever imagined.”

“It ain’t half bad,” agreed Benton, “but they don’t give a man enough tokens. I’ve already spent all mine, I have.”

“What!” gasped the surprised woman from Bermuda. “But you only received them this morning.”

“Did you spend it all on alcoholic beverages, Will?” inquired the physician.

“No, I spent some of it on beer and wine. Not so keen on beverages, I ain’t. But I also ordered a new pair of breeches to be made by a tailor I found in the high street. They weren’t cheap you know. I also went to the baths to clean meself up and to the barber to get me hair trimmed.”

“I thought you were looking a little more presentable than usual. Trying to impress a certain young Irish woman, are you?” asked Faustus, exchanging an amused glance with Cassandra.

“What’s that ungrateful scrubber got to do with anything,” growled the riled sea rover. “Can’t a man pride himself on his appearance without being subjected to slanderous aspersions. There’s plenty of other willing young lasses to impress here, there are.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear you haven’t been up to any mischief, Will,” said Cassandra cheerily.

“Course I ain’t. I’m starting to grow fond of this place, I am, even if the folks here are a bit on the funny

side. Where's our cap'n, by the way? I hope he's behavin' himself."

"Björn's still with Nefertari assessing that war galley. He's intrigued by it," answered Cassandra.

"More intrigued by that nice-looking native lady more like," commented Benton provocatively.

"Don't say such a frightful thing, Will. I don't believe Björn would be unfaithful to me," said Cassandra, unable to suppress a pang of jealousy and doubt awoken by Benton's thoughtless assertion.

"Don't worry, Cassandra, Björn only has eyes for you," interjected the surgeon comfortingly. "No, he's extremely impressed with that vessel. He says he's never seen the likes of it."

The trio sat a while longer, enjoying a refreshing sea breeze, unconcerned by the curious looks the townsfolk were giving them as they strolled past. To Cassandra's delight, a group of inquisitive children had gathered to observe them until Benton scared them off by pulling out his favourite pistol with the intention of showing it to them. He couldn't understand their fright, as he had been fascinated by firearms as a nipper, and had always jumped at the chance of getting his pre-pubescent hands on one. He shrugged and stuck the offending weapon back in his belt after a few reprimanding words from Cassandra, but the youngsters never dared get too near again after Benton's failed attempt to impress them.

"I do love the amount of liberty afforded to the inhabitants of this land," said Faustus, oblivious to the children.

"Yes, me too," agreed the woman. "If I didn't have family back in Bermuda, I think I'd choose to stay here for good."

"I'm not sure if Björn would be so willing," stated the surgeon earnestly.

“I’d talk him around,” replied Cassandra assuredly.

“I’m sure Nefertari could convince him to stay,” commented Benton with a roguish grin.

“Shut it, Will!” echoed his two marked companions.

The knavish seaman was about to protest that he was only jesting when he was distracted by a flurry of activity coming from down by the quayside, the urgency underlined by the heavy sound of pounding drums which resonated through the warm air. The three guests to this unusual land observed with concern as dozens of figures ran towards the seafront armed with bows and spears. Many made their way hastily to the large building where the captain was inspecting the war galley, others started frantically preparing the smaller boats. It was at that moment that Ironside emerged from between two low warehouses, jogging towards them with a worried expression on his face.

“What’s going on, Björn?” inquired Cassandra anxiously.

“Ships of the Men of the Cross have been sighted further down the coast,” the captain panted. “The natives fear an attack is imminent. They’re preparing the war galley now.”

“Do you judge that the vessel will be adequate to stave off an assault, Björn?” asked the surgeon uneasily.

“Nefertari assures me that together with their small flotilla of support boats they’ll be able to drive off the Men of the Cross as they have done so in the past. Scouts report only three slow moving cogs approaching.”

“But why would they attack with such a small number of cumbersome vessels knowing full well that the Eleutherians are in possession of such a swift and formidable combat vessel, Björn?” said Faustus apprehensively. “It just doesn’t make sense.”

“I guess the Men of the Cross overestimate their own

martial prowess,” replied Ironside, removing his hat and running his hand through his sweat-soaked hair.

“I wants to be on that galley when it sails out,” said Benton, excitedly springing to his feet and grabbing his dusty hat.

“No, Will, we should stick together and wait for *Dream Chaser* to arrive,” replied Ironside sternly. “This affair is of no concern of ours. We are just guests here, after all.”

“Anyway, you didn’t show much interest in the galley when Björn asked if you wanted to visit it before, did you, William?” added the surgeon.

“I was busy then, but now I want to see that fine vessel in action. I’m getting bored with sitting around all day,” persisted the restless boatswain.

“I said no. We can watch them row out from here.”

“Okey-doke, Cap’n,” acquiesced Benton. “I’ll go and find Neeve and let her know what’s happening.”

“All right, but come straight back here,” agreed the captain, relieved the troublesome seaman wasn’t insisting on going on board the war galley, blissfully unaware that the insubordinate sailor had no intention of missing out on the chance of a daring escapade.

William Benton gave the appearance of heading into the town to seek out O’Malley, but at the first opportunity he dodged into a narrow alleyway and doubled back towards the harbour. Closely following a group of men and women with bows in their hands and full quivers strapped over their shoulders, it didn’t take long for him to find the formidable seacraft. Approaching the galley, he looked on in awe at the long, sleek vessel with a thin, pointed prow. He watched with interest as the rowers clambered aboard to man the many oars protruding from the sides, each sweep being longer than the width of the vessel itself. He looked up at the sweating sailors in loincloths scrambling up the shrouds to unfurl the

broad white sails from the two tall masts, one of which stood erect at the bow of the breath-taking sea-craft, the other towering up from its centre. After checking his two pistols were ready for use, he joined the queue to mount the sturdy gangplank leading up the side of the galley at its stern, where he was stopped by a bearded, stern-faced man dressed in a long blue tunic and floppy-rimmed hat. The man addressed the strangely attired newcomer in the unfamiliar language of the natives.

“I don’t understand a word yer sayin’, mate,” replied Benton, attempting to push past the man. “Out of me way. I’ve work to do.”

“You speak tongue of Men of Cross,” responded the other man to the pirate’s astonishment.

“Where did ya learn English?”

“I learn at academy.”

“That’s all very nice and well, but who do yer think you are to bar me way and question me like that?” frowned the boatswain, again trying to shove his way past the other man, who still firmly blocked his way.

“I am captain of this galley,” answered the man, folding his arms challengingly. “My name is Ahmose.”

“I see,” said the sea rover, scratching his chin thoughtfully. “Well, me name’s William Benton and I’ve come ter help you fight them Men of the Cross people.”

“And Nefertari says it all right?” inquired the galley captain doubtfully.

“Of course she did. We’re the best of friends, we are,” replied Benton with conviction.

“Very well,” said Ahmose, stepping to one side. Glancing at the two unknown small weapons tucked into the stranger’s belt, he pointed at them and asked. “What those things in belt?”

“They’re pistols,” answered the sea rover, handing one to the other man for inspection. On seeing the native

wield it as if it were a small cudgel, Benton quickly added. "I forget you people are unfamiliar with firearms." Taking back the pistol he produced a small powder flask from his jacket and proceeded to explain how to use the weapon. "First you pours a measure of powder down the barrel like this. I prefers ready made cartridges, but they're back on the ship." He then took something from a pouch on his belt. "Anyway, next you inserts a piece of cloth wadding down. Makes it all nice and airtight so the powder burns better, it does, also stops the ball from rolling back out when yer least expects it. Then you takes this here metal ramrod from underneath the barrel and tamps the ball and wad down so it sits nice and snug with the powder. Don't forget to put the ramrod back in its holder, or you'll end up firing it at your foes. Might do a fair bit of damage to 'em, but it ain't so easy to replace. You followin' me so far?" On seeing the fascinated captain nod, Benton continued. "Now you needs to prime the gun so you can fire it." Noticing the confused look on Ahmose's face, he added. "You may be wonderin' what that means, so let me explain. You lift up this here little mechanism, which we calls the frizzen, so you can see this little space underneath, which we calls the pan. You then puts some powder in the pan like this. Normally we use a finer powder for priming, which sparks better and don't produce as much smoke, which can be a bugger if it gets in yer eyes, you see, but I left mine back on the ship. It all makes the same bang though. After that, you locks down the frizzen so it covers the primer. Finally, you needs to pull back this hammer-like mechanism called the cock, which holds the flint. Make sure you pulls it back the whole way. It's attached to the trigger down here."

"Lot of work," commented Ahmose, so far unimpressed. "An arrow is more quick."

"I ain't finished yet," chuckled Benton. "When I pull

the trigger the cock snaps forward and the flint smacks the frizzen, which opens up from the force to reveal the pan. This then nicely allows the spark from the flint to ignite the primer, which in turn lights the powder, sending the ball on its merry way. Nothing to it really.”

“I say still it much work,” persisted the galley captain. “Loading bow more fast.”

“That may be so, but does an arrow do this?” replied Benton, aiming the pistol at a shield hanging from the main mast some yards away and pulling the trigger.

The unexpected loud bang caused Ahmose and his unsuspecting crew to jump out of their wits, half a dozen of them even springing overboard in blind panic. After a few moments, the initial shock died down and the stunned captain inspected the shield, and to his astonishment found that the lead ball had penetrated it all the way and embedded itself in the wood of the mast. Scratching his head, he turned to the pirate.

“Arrow still more better,” he said, although this time with less conviction than before.

“If yer say so, Mr. Ahmose,” grinned Benton with satisfaction.

After the clamorous incident, the captain invited Benton to join him at the bow of the vessel, all the time warily eyeing the two pistols tucked neatly into his guest’s belt. Satisfied the preparations were going as planned, the captain relaxed a little and decided to question his guest.

“Where you from, William Benton?”

“I’m from England, I am. Born and bred in Plymouth,” answered Benton proudly.

“I know not of this England you speak of. Is it across big ocean?” asked the perplexed native.

“You could say that,” answered the seaman, wiping his brow on his sleeve. “So, tell me, Ahmose, what are we up against?”

“Up against?” responded the puzzled galley captain. “I not understand.”

“Who are we goin’ to fight against?” inquired the pirate.

“We fight against Men of the Cross,” stated Ahmose plainly.

“I knows that, but what’s their strength?” Noticing the confused expression on the other man’s face, speaking more slowly Benton carefully rephrased his words. “How many ships do the Men of the Cross have?”

“Three slow sail ships come. No problem for war galley,” replied Ahmose confidently.

“By the way, what’s the name of this vessel?”

“It’s name is *Asterope*.”

“That’s a fine name. What does it mean?”

“I know not word in your tongue, but asterope is light from sky.”

“You mean the sun?” ventured Benton.

“No, light from sky.”

“But the sun is one bloody big light, and it definitely sits in the blinking sky,” replied Benton impatiently. Then it occurred to him what the other man might mean. “You mean lightning, don’t yer? Comes with a storm and heavy rains.”

“That is it!” exclaimed Ahmose, relieved the foreigner had so quickly understood him.

“Yer English ain’t that good, is it, Ahmose? Mind you it’s a great deal better than me Spanish and French.” Noticing the other man looking at him blankly, he changed the subject. “Never mind. When are we setting off then?”

Instead of answering, Ahmose looked past the expectant sea rover, who turned to see what had attracted the captain’s attention. Benton’s heart skipped a beat when he saw the fetching form of Nefertari striding

purposefully towards them. The pirate smiled as he took a step forward to greet the attractive woman, but she acted as if he wasn't there, instead addressing the captain in her own strange language. The unheeded seaman fidgeted peevishly, hurt that the alluring native woman had failed to acknowledge him. He waited restlessly for a couple of minutes until he could take it no more.

"It's me, Nefertari. It's William Benton," interrupted the restive seaman. "Ain't yer gonna say hello?"

The woman turned and gave him a hard stare. "I am well aware of who you are, but am unsure of why you are here," she said coldly.

"I'm here to help yer people out," replied Benton cheerily.

"Very well, but please don't get in the way, Mr. Benton."

"Course I won't. I'm a skilled sailor, I am. Are you coming, too?"

"Yes, I am coming, too. I'm to oversee the rowers."

"With a whip, you mean?"

The woman looked at him in horror. "That might be how you do things where you come from, Mr. Benton, but here we are all free men and women. Now I must attend to my duties. Please remain here and keep out of the way."

Nefertari exchanged a few earnest words with Ahmose before turning and walking off down the long walkway that ran along the middle of the vessel. Benton watched her go, a little miffed that she had been so unnecessarily coarse with him. He made up his mind he would win her around. He'd show her that William Benton was an indispensable seaman and companion. He swore he'd have her begging for his attention by the end of the day.

Not much later, Benton was scanning the quayside as the galley was being rowed out of the small harbour followed by two dozen smaller vessels. He could just pick

out the tiny figure of Captain Ironside among the crowd, which had assembled to see the vessel off. Removing his hat, he waved it excitedly above his head at the man on the shore, who, on noticing the disobedient sea rover was aboard the galley without his consent, shook his fist angrily at the grinning boatswain. William Benton chuckled to himself, admiring his own sagacity. He wouldn't let anyone, not even the captain, restrict his independence. Piqued by the lack of respect the captain and Nefertari had afforded him, he resolved to show them both that he was a man of bold deeds. Lost in thought, Benton stood beside Captain Ahmose at the bow of the galley as it cruised along the coast. Eventually snapping out of his reverie, he looked back at the smaller consort boats, noting they had dropped a considerable distance behind, unable to keep up with the swift war galley.

"Don't yer think we'd better wait for them boats ter catch up, Cap'n?" asked Benton, well aware of the usefulness of such small craft when boarding enemy ships.

"First we find Men of Cross. There is no danger from Cross Men's slow vessels. Maybe we not need boats' help," answered Ahmose assuredly.

"I thinks we should wait fer support. Them boats can be pretty handy in a skirmish you know," commented Benton.

"We first spot foe. Then we wait."

"If yer say so, Cap'n," replied the unconvinced seaman, deeming it possible that the captain wished to seize all the glory for himself.

Benton contented himself with observing Nefertari as she encouraged the rowers while the galley pushed onwards, leaving the smaller vessels ever further behind.

Crusaders and raiders

The smaller boats were a fair way behind when the lookout finally sighted three slow-moving vessels anchored just off the outermost of a small group of rocky islands. Benton noted there were two clinker-built cogs and a slightly larger caravel, all outdated by modern standards. There was something familiar about the large red cross which adorned each craft's snowy white mainsail, although he couldn't quite remember where he'd seen such an image before. Fausty would know, but he wasn't here. The captain ordered the galley to head towards the nearest cog and prepare to ram it. Meanwhile, the archers assembled on the platform running from fore to aft, from where they could safely let off their arrows over the heads of the sweating rowers without endangering them. Benton commented that he thought it strange that the three ships were floating there before them like sitting ducks. He worriedly told the captain that he believed the Men of the Cross were either incredibly stupid or they had an ace up their sleeve, but Ahmose, not well versed in English idioms, insisted that there was nothing to worry about and that they'd make short work of their foe, maybe even capturing one of their vessels. The galley gradually increased velocity, the oarsmen and -women working to the rhythmic beat of a drum, and as they passed the nearest of the small islands it was then that Benton spotted it – a small, fast-moving vessel off the larboard quarter sailing from the cover of a skerry. On assessing the rapidly approaching vessel, the sea rover gave a cry of astonishment.

“It's a Bermuda sloop!” he gasped in disbelief. Benton's heart dropped to his feet like a stone on spotting the ominous black flag depicting a crudely embroidered

mermaid under a white skull and crossbones fluttering at the top of the foremast. "It's the bloody *Vengeful Mermaid*, it is!" he cried out in warning. At that same moment, it occurred to him where he had previously seen a picture of such a ship with a red cross on its mainsail – Faustus had shown it to him during a particularly dull lecture about some people he called the Knights Templar. Adrenalin racing through his veins, he turned to Ahmose. "Bloody hell! Cross and Skullbones! Them Men of the Cross are temple knights and those on that other ship are cut-throat pirates. They must be working together."

The captain of the war galley shrugged indifferently. "It is small boat of no concern."

"You don't understand, Cap'n," said the boatswain hurriedly. "That sloop is a fast moving, versatile little vessel, which can sail close to the wind. What's more, they've got guns on board – eight of 'em if I remember rightly, and they're going to stern rake us by the looks of it, if we don't get out of here pronto."

"Guns? Stern rake?" said the mystified captain.

"Like these," replied Benton, patting his pistols, "only much bigger. They might not have the power to sink us, but they'll cause much damage to this vessel and its crew, especially if they fire at our stern. Those iron balls will fly down the length of the ship. No-one'll be safe from 'em and the splinters that'll be flying around everywhere. We've gotta get out of here while we still can, at least back to the cover of our support boats."

"We big and fast. Small boat like annoying fly. Archers take care of it," answered the unimpressed native captain, ignorant of modern vessels and gunnery. He pointed at the nearest cog. "First we ram that ship."

"Then we're all doomed, Cap'n. It were nice knowing yer," shouted Benton morosely as he checked both his pistols were loaded and primed, for all the good they

would do him. Desperately glancing amidship, he noticed Nefertari speaking to one of the archers. Maybe she would listen to him and see sense, he thought as he sprang down from the platform at the bow.

“Nefertari! Nefertari!” he called out frantically, roughly pushing through the assembled archers.

“What do you want, William?” replied the woman testily. “Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“You got to listen to me, Nefertari. That boat coming up behind us has guns. It’ gonna blow us apart if we don’t scarper.”

“Guns? You mean those terrible weapons you told me about yesterday evening?” the woman answered in alarm. “But that’s impossible. The Men of the Cross don’t possess such an armament.”

“They ain’t Men of the Cross. They’re pira..., I mean adventurers like me and Captain Ironside. I know ‘em well, and they’re a pretty ruthless bunch aboard that sloop.”

“But why are they here?”

“I can only guess they’re in the pay of the Men of the Cross. He’ll do anything for a bit of gold that Captain Wolfenden, he will.”

Although the native woman seemed to grasp the urgency of the situation it was too late to do anything about it. Ahmose had just given the order for the crew to brace themselves as the bronze-sheathed, heavy oak ram at the prow of the galley collided decisively with the side of the nearest cog. With an ear-splitting crack, the dull thud of the impact hurled the unprepared sea rover among a group of astonished rowers. Swiftly recovering from the shock, Benton struggled to pull himself to the gunwale and observe the damage the ram had inflicted on the other unfortunate vessel. The large hole ripped in the side was rapidly letting in water as the rowers

attempted with great effort to reverse their vessel and free it from their victim's grasp. It was then that the boatswain noticed something odd about the slowly sinking cog – it was already in very bad shape and, furthermore, there wasn't a soul aboard. With horror he realised they had sailed into a trap and that this dispensable vessel was nothing more than bait. He wildly pushed his way past the irate rowers until he was back on the platform where the archers were readying themselves. Fighting his way through them, he eventually made it to the larboard shrouds of the mainmast and, without hesitating, he quickly scrambled up them so he was high enough to see where *Vengeful Mermaid* was. Almost wetting himself with fright, he realised that the sloop was taking full advantage of the galley's momentary entanglement with the cog. She would be upon them within seconds and there was nothing he or anyone else could do about it. William Benton was clinging desperately to the yardarm, unsure of whether he should dive overboard or stay put, when the nimble sloop sailed across the stern of the larger vessel, releasing the first of its deadly salvos.

From his vantage point, Benton looked on in dismay as the iron balls swept the length of the oarcraft seacraft sending deadly splinters in all directions. He winced as a lethal ball streaked through the closely packed archers, flinging their bloodied bodies in all directions, but the worst was not yet over. Next the *Mermaid's* swivel guns sprinkled the deck with mortiferous cannister shot, a container filled with musket balls, nails, and scraps of iron packed with sawdust to prevent the small projectiles from colliding with each other. The hardened pirate retched as he helplessly watched the wide swath of bloody carnage caused by the disintegrating canister as it sent murderous shards and projectiles spreading out in a conical formation over the decks. He futilely hurled unheard abuse at the

crew of the sloop as he watched them hurriedly reload their guns. In the ensuing chaos, many of the panic-stricken archers had either been flung or had sprung overboard, and those rowers who weren't huddling for safety beneath their wooden benches were frenetically working the oars to pull their craft from the deadly embrace with the floundering cog. Assessing the damage, Benton judged that the injury inflicted on the galley by the sloop's four-pounders was more psychological than physical, but the bombardment had done the trick all the same – the war galley was in complete disarray. Turning his attention back to *Vengeful Mermaid* again, he noticed it had ceased the bombardment and was now changing tack. The experienced seaman then realised what Captain Wolf intended as he set his vessel on a course parallel to the galley. He wasn't going to attempt to board the galley, as, despite the disorder, he and his men would still be outnumbered about eight to one, and, besides, there was nothing worth plundering aboard the war galley. No, that jackal of a captain was going to destroy the oars on one side of the vessel by sailing closely past it hull-to-hull, rendering the sweeps useless. With only its sails to rely on, the galley would be no match for the versatile sloop. If only he could rally enough natives to jump aboard the sloop as they almost touched, he was sure they'd be able to overcome the crew of renegades aboard it, but, alas, there was no way of communicating his intentions to the unnerved crew of the galley, let alone organising an effective boarding party.

William Benton watched impotently as the twenty-six-foot-long mass of floating wood wrenched the oars from the grip of the astounded oarsmen, sending them toppling in all directions. The sea rover winced at the unnerving racket caused by the long sweeps as they split and snapped. Even then, it seemed the malevolent crew

of the sloop were not content with just disabling the galley, but were also firing off deadly musket volleys from behind the safety of wooden mantels especially erected to provide protection from the natives' arrows. A handful of archers who had remained calm attempted in vain to pick off the musketeers, their bronze-tipped shafts ineffectively embedding themselves in the temporary shields or flying wide over the heads of their targets. Suddenly, Benton's attention was drawn to the helm of the attacking vessel, where he noticed Captain Wolf standing as bold as brass next to the helmsman grimly observing the destruction he was causing. The boatswain excitedly fumbled for one of his pistols. He wished he had brought a musket with him from *Dream Chaser*, well aware of the limited range and accuracy of the short weapon he was now holding. If he could just injure that rogue Wolfenden, he might put an end to the vicious attack. Carefully taking aim as best he could from his precarious position on the yardarm, he pressed the trigger and sent the small lead ball in the direction of the captain of the sloop. The frustrated man from Plymouth cursed as Wolf's three corned hat flew from his head – he had been that close to putting that bloodthirsty pirate captain out of action for good. Placing his hand on his bare head, the dumbfounded captain of the sloop scanned the enemy vessel for the source of the shot, his expression changing from one of steely confidence to shocked horror as he spotted Benton perched on the yardarm readying his second pistol. The crewman from *Dream Chaser* was the last thing he had expected to find in this bloody encounter. Captain Wolfenden then scanned the sea in all directions, obviously fearing that if Benton were here then Captain Ironside and his ship could not be far away. When Benton's second shot grazed the shoulder of the exposed helmsman, the ruthless captain seemed to arrive

at a decision, urgently shouting orders for his vessel to pull away from their prey. Gleefully, Benton realised that although he had failed to kill Wolf, he had put the fear of God up the rascal and forced him to call off the attack.

On seeing their ally beating a hasty retreat, the remaining cog and caravel cut their anchor cables before the small flotilla of rapidly approaching native support boats could reach them. Looking down from his perch, Benton could see numerous natives splashing around in the waves around the vessel. His heart missed a beat when he noticed that one of the flailing figures was none other than Nefertari. Acting quickly, the sea rover scrambled down the shrouds, discarding his pistols and clothes before, dressed only in his breeches, diving into the cool, undulating water. Doing his best to ignore the sudden unexpected coldness beneath the surface, Benton was thankful that, unlike many of his shipmates, he was a strong swimmer. He took a deep breath and darted under the surface towards the woman in distress. As he pushed his way towards her, images of the countless summers he had spent as a youth swimming in the river Tamar, that strip of water which divided the county of Devon from that of Cornwall, flashed through his mind. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he reached the hapless native woman just before she disappeared below the surface, grabbing her under one arm and pulling her towards one of the nearing boats. Strong hands lifted the panting pirate and spluttering native into the small sailing vessel. When they were both huddled together in the bottom of the boat, the exhausted boatswain slid a reassuring arm around the shivering woman and was surprised when she threw both arms gratefully around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. When she pulled away and let her head fall on his bare, damp shoulder, the stunned sailor noticed why she had been having so

much difficulty in the water – a nasty, wooden splinter was protruding from her bloody upper arm.

“Yer better get that seen to,” said Benton with concern. “We don’t want it gettin’ infected, do we?”

Until now Nefertari had seemed unaware of her injury and on noticing it she passed out in his arms.

“She’s loosing blood,” shouted Benton urgently to no-one in particular.

Although not understanding the pirate’s words, the crew of the vessel could see clearly what the problem was and quickly set about carefully removing the splinter and treating the wound. Benton watched the process until the sight of the shard of wood being removed made him feel a little queasy, then instead turning his attention to the tumultuous scene beyond the small boat.

The galley had lost most of its oars on its larboard side and the mainsail had been shredded by cannister shot. Captain Ahmose was doing his best to restore order to the confusion on board. Meanwhile, the small boats were fishing disconsolate men and women out of the sea, many of whom bore injuries caused by shrapnel and splinters, while the larger of the small boats were attaching cables to the bow of the crippled war galley in order to tow it back to port. Benton remained in the boat that had plucked him out of the water, his arms tenderly embracing the weakened woman. The plucky pirate was unable to prevent himself from dozing off now the adrenaline rush had subsided and he woke with a jolt when the boat bumped alongside one of the piers.

The drowsy seaman was greeted by the unwelcoming sight of Captain Ironside glaring disapprovingly down at him. Despite his malcontent he held out his hand to aid the disobedient boatswain up onto the jetty. After seeing to it that Nefertari was safely ashore, Benton turned to

explain to the captain what had transpired, but the angry Swede beat him to it.

“What the hell do you think you were doing sneaking off like that, William Benton?” he exclaimed.

“They needed me, they did, Cap’n,” replied Benton unapologetically.

“I am loath to say it, but *Dream Chaser* needs you too,” snarled Ironside. “I fear that losing you would lessen our chances of ever returning home.”

“That ain’t of no importance now, Cap’n,” blurted out Benton. “You’ll never guess who I saw on me travels.”

“Who did you see, Will?” asked the captain edgily. “And what happened to the galley?”

“You’re never going to believe it, but I saw that old crook Wolfenden, I did,” replied the sea rover excitedly. “It was him who scuppered the plans of our dear native friends.”

“Enough of your tall stories, Will,” scowled Ironside. “What really happened?”

“Yer a bit slow on the uptake today, aren’t yer, Cap’n,” responded Benton, shaking his head disbelievingly. “I told yer, didn’t I. It were Captain Wolf and the *Mermaid* who did that damage. Came out of nowhere, they did. It were a trap and them poor natives fell for it hook, line and sinker.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Will!” growled the captain.

“It might not be as ridiculous as it sounds, Björn,” interjected Faustus, who had been intently listening to the conversation from a few feet away.

“Don’t say you believe Will’s flimsy attempt at deception. He’s only trying to distract from the fact he absconded against my wishes,” snapped Ironside.

“Why shouldn’t the *Mermaid* have emerged from the mist in this strange land as we did, Björn?” answered the surgeon calmly. “I’m just relieved that we were discovered

by the natives and not those malicious Men of the Cross. They might have tried to press our vessel into service. They might have managed to convince us that the fine people of Eleutheria were in fact hostile savages.”

“Well, if it’s true, I’m sure that dog Wolfenden didn’t need much convincing, just a sack of gold,” commented Ironside with clenched fists. “If it’s true, it’s a worrying development, but it still doesn’t alter the fact that Benton sneaked aboard that vessel although he promised not to.”

“Firstly, Cap’n, although I did at first agree not to go, it occurred to me that them natives might be in need of a skilled navigator like meself.” After a short emphatic pause, the unrepentant sea rover continued. “Secondly, as I’ve said on many occasions before, you ain’t got no right to go ordering me around like that, specially when we’re not on board the ship. Besides, no harm was done.”

“That may be so, but without a little self-control how do you expect that we should ever return to civilisation?”

“Do we not now find ourselves in civilisation, Björn? When I think about the numerous atrocities committed in Europe and the New World, I find myself questioning who are truly the civilised ones,” said Faustus passionately.

“Now is not the time for one of your lectures on politics, Faustus,” answered Ironside tartly.

“Might I speak on Will’s behalf, Captain Gunnarsson?” interposed Nefertari, who had been closely following the heated exchange, but had deemed it prudent not to intervene until now. “I was not aware that you had forbidden William from boarding the galley, but, if the truth be known, without him I would have surely perished beneath the waves. I owe my life to him.”

“All right, I shall overlook your featherbrained deeds on this one occasion, Will,” conceded Ironside reluctantly. “But I implore you to remember that you are an integral part of the crew and should behave accordingly in the

future. We can't afford to lose you."

"Apology accepted, Cap'n," replied Benton with a smug smile.

"It wasn't meant as an apology," seethed the captain, his face reddening, but before he could continue, he was interrupted by a panting and sweating, stocky native, who pressingly relayed some information of apparent importance to the concerned native woman. Although he was unable to understand a word, the captain sensed a degree of urgency in the messenger's voice. After the anxious messenger had left to spread his compelling news further, the sea rovers all looked expectantly at Nefertari.

"It would seem the Men of the Cross haven't given up on their endeavour to conquer us," explained Nefertari solemnly. "Our scouts report that they have seized a village some twenty miles to the south, which they are now using as a base of operations. They could attack at any time."

"Did your scouts spot the *Vengeful Mermaid*, the vessel that almost destroyed the galley?" asked the troubled pirate captain.

"No mention was made of that frightful vessel," answered the woman earnestly.

"Then she's still out there somewhere," said Ironside, a sickening sensation gripping his gut like a vice. "I just hope Wolfenden doesn't discover *Dream Chaser* while she's stranded helplessly on that beach."

"It would seem that the Men of the Cross indeed have the advantage now the war galley is out of action," commented Faustus. "How long will it take to repair, Nefertari?"

"It will take a couple of days to replace the damaged oars and sail, and persuading enough people to man it again won't be easy after what happened. Twelve of my people were killed and forty-three injured to varying

degrees. Another six are still missing. My people are not used to such unrestrained violence.”

“If only *Dream Chaser* were here,” said the surgeon ruefully. “She would be able to see off the attackers, no doubt.”

“But she isn’t here and it could take another couple of days for her to arrive, providing the crew don’t debauch themselves too much after completing the work,” replied Ironside regretfully.

“Will tē Men o’ tē Cross come over land?” asked O’Malley, who had just rejoined her concerned companions.

“That is unlikely,” answered the native woman. “The coast is too marshy and the forests too dense further inland. It would take them weeks to get here that way, giving us enough time to prepare an adequate defence. No, they’ll waste no time coming by sea now the galley is out of action.”

“I worry that the *Vengeful Mermaid* might be used to bombard the defences,” said Faustus.

“Them little guns may be all right for spreading havoc on an enemy vessel, but they ain’t no good for bombarding the shore,” responded Benton.

“But the psychological effects might be devastating,” countered the physician. “The people of this land are not used to such fearsome weapons.”

“You may be right fer a change, Fausty,” said Benton, stroking his hairy chin.

“There’s only one thing for it,” exclaimed the captain. “I have to return to the island and warn Pete and the others. I’ll take a small, fast boat with a handful of natives. Maybe I can hurry the work along and return here swiftly.”

“That’s too dangerous, Björn!” cried out his wife, who had been sitting nearby, subdued by the unfortunate turn of events.

“I’m coming too, I am,” stated the courageous woman from Ireland.

“No, I want you and Benton to stay here and protect Cassandra and Faustus, Neeve,” ordered the captain, conveniently ignoring his spouse’s expression of concern.

“I weren’t goin’ to come anyway,” said Benton glibly. “I’m stayin’ ‘ere to keep an eye on Nefertari. She needs me after what happened to her before.”

“That’s very gallant of you, Will, but I don’t think I’ll need your further protection now I’m back among my people,” replied the astonished woman.

“I’ll watch out fer you all the same,” persisted the seaman with a noble smile that was tainted with desire.

“You’re t’inking with yer tadger again, William Benton,” snapped O’Malley. “It’s yer duty to take care of yer shipmates first.”

“I can keep an eye on you all, Neeve,” answered Benton, patting his trusty pistol, which had been returned to him by one of the natives along with his discarded clothes. “Don’t be afraid. I’ll let no harm come to you either, Neeve O’Mally.”

“Kiss me Irish ass, William Benton. I don’t need no protection from a self-infatuated scally like yerself,” snarled O’Malley, her face reddening. “I’m perfectly capable of looking after meself in a scrap.”

“If yer say so, luv,” replied the flippant sea rover.

“I do say so, you pesky son of a pooka,” growled the short Irish woman, placing her hand on the hilt of her dagger and taking a threatening step towards the irreverent seaman.

“I don’t know what a pooka is, but I’m sure it ain’t a nice thing to say to one of yer shipmates,” replied the offended seaman.

“A pooka is a creature from Irish mythology, a kind of imp which is mischievous, but not malevolent,”

explained Faustus with glee. Before he could say more on the subject, Benton interrupted him.

“That don’t sound too bad. I do admit I likes a bit of mischief, but I ain’t a bad bloke, you know.”

“No, but you’re one enormous pain in the arse, ye are, William Benton,” yelled the irate Irish woman.

“All right, Neeve. Keep yer hair on,” responded the offending seaman, his hands raised with the palms placatingly facing the angry woman. “I admit yer certainly a plucky lass who don’t need no protection from the likes of me. Anyway, you has that strapping bloke who don’t wear no breeches to look out for yer. That said, what I really resents is what you’re implying.”

“And what’s t’at, William Benton?”

“That me actions are guided by me middle leg. Me main reason fer wanting to stay is personal, it is. I’ve sworn to get me own back on that rogue Wolfenden, should he show his ugly face. That false-hearted bastard dared to fire on a vessel I was on and endanger someone very dear to me,” said Benton sincerely.

“But you barely know the woman,” interjected Cassandra, on noticing the native woman’s discomfort.

“That ain’t fer you to judge, Cassandra,” answered the smitten sea rover with conviction.

The Bermudian woman simply shrugged indifferently in response.

“All right, so it’s agreed. With Nefertari’s assent, I’ll organize a boat and head for the island straight away,” said Ironside firmly, now intentionally avoiding the troubled gaze of his wife. “Should the worse happen and the city fall in my absence, I want you all to make your way up the coast away from danger. We’ll pick you up as soon as we can.”

“Do you really think that might happen, Björn?” inquired the surgeon anxiously.

“I certainly hope not, but I want to be prepared for every eventuality.”

“Can I bring Nefertari?” asked Benton hopefully.

“I’ll be staying here with my people whatever should come to pass,” replied the woman before anyone else could answer.

“Rightly so,” agreed Ironside, “but if absolutely necessary, we might be able to evacuate a few dozen of your people to a place of safety.”

“I thank you for the kind offer, Captain Gunnarsson, but should the city be in danger of falling, we will withdraw inland and seek asylum in one of the other remaining cities of the federation.”

“That sounds like a good idea, Nefertari,” chirped Benton. “You can fetch yer mates and really sort out them Men of the Cross.”

“Yes, we would summon the aid of the Alliance, but it would mean all out war,” frowned the woman.

“You’ll have to be quick about it,” said Faustus. “If your foes establish a foothold here, it might be near impossible to dislodge them when they bring in reinforcements.”

“You are right, Mr. Quiddington, but don’t worry. We’ve already sent out messengers to forewarn our allies.”

Captain Ironside left the small group together with Nefertari to organise a boat for the crossing. While he was standing anxiously on the quayside worrying that he might not reach *Dream Chaser* in time to warn her, he was joined by Cassandra, who was not at all happy with her husbands valiant decision.

“Please reconsider, Björn,” pleaded the distraught woman. “I sense a danger lurking out there.”

“I thought we’d already decided, dear,” answered the captain with mild annoyance.

“No, you decided. I thought we agreed you wouldn’t run off and leave me again while we are still in unknown

lands.”

“But I have to go,” answered Ironside gravely. “If we lose our ship, we’ll be stuck here for ever.”

“Would that be such a bad thing? At least we’d be alive and together,” replied Cassandra imploringly.

“You know I have a duty to the crew, Cassandra. It would be irresponsible of me to leave them to their fate.”

“All right, if you have to go then I’m coming with you,” stated the woman adamantly. “Whatever betides, I want to be at your side. I’d never get over it should some mishap befall you and part us forever.”

“And I would never forgive myself should something terrible happen to you,” persisted the captain. “That is why I want you to stay with the others.”

“No, Björn, I coming whether you like it or not. You’ll have to bind me to the shore to stop me.

“I might just do that,” retorted the irate sea rover.

The marital dispute was interrupted by the dismayed cries of several natives, promptly drawing Ironside and his spouse’s attention to the source of alarm. The captain’s heart skipped a beat on seeing the small vessel cruising about a mile offshore. It was the *Vengeful Mermaid*.

“We can’t leave now, Björn, can we?” asked Cassandra hopefully. “There’s no telling what that picaroon Wolfenden will do to you if you fell into his hands.”

“I regret to have to say that you are right, dear. Neither of us will be sailing for the island now,” answered Ironside, scratching his aching head. “Wolf’s sloop appears to be reconnoitring the area prior to an attack. If Wolf saw Benton on the galley then he’s probably making sure *Dream Chaser* isn’t awaiting him and his allies. A shrewd move, but at least it means our ship’s safe from discovery for the time being.”

“What are you going to do now, Björn?” inquired Cassandra uneasily.

“I’ll help the natives in their defence.”

“As will I,” announced the woman in a defiant tone.

Without giving an answer, Captain Ironside slipped his arm around his wife’s shoulder drawing her close, and together they observed the hostile sloop as she altered course away from the town.

Pirate saviours

Shortly before dawn the following day, Ironside was rudely jolted from his restless slumber by the thundering of what were unmistakably cannons resonating from the direction of the harbour. The attack had begun. The pirate captain sprang out of bed and hastily dressed.

“What’s going on?” murmured his drowsy wife from the comfort of their bed.

“It would seem the invasion has commenced,” answered Ironside gruffly. “I want you to stay here with Faustus until I find out what’s going on. Will you do that?”

“All right, but if there’s fighting to be done, I’m not hiding away like a frightened mouse,” replied Cassandra, producing a small pistol from a drawer in the bedside table and waving it demonstratively.

“Do you want me to load if for you?”

“No thanks, dear, I’m perfectly capable of doing it myself,” answered the woman wilfully.

“Very well, I’ll fetch O’Malley and Benton and head for the docks,” said the captain, realising there was no point pushing the issue. After giving his wife a quick peck on the forehead he grabbed his pistol, sword, and hat and hurried out of the chamber.

Ten minutes later, Captain Ironside and the two other pirates were crouching behind a low stone wall a short distance from the quayside from where they observed the *Vengeful Mermaid* bombarding the shore with its guns

only two hundred yards from the waterfront. Although the damage was minimal, with only a few of the moored boats being destroyed, the fear-awakening sound of the guns had driven most of the native archers into cover. Those who had braved the constant barrage had been driven back by volleys of musket fire and deadly blasts of the swivel guns from the decks of the pirate vessel, and no amount of coaxing would encourage them to stand their ground. Meanwhile, under the covering fire from the sloop, dozens of heavily armed men were disembarking from a number of cogs slightly further out from the shore. The landing party consisted of grim-faced, mail-clad men wearing white surcoats emblazoned with a red cross; others were similarly adorned, but their surcoats were black with a red cross. All were wearing an assortment of helmets and wielding menacing swords and spears. The pirate captain was surprised to see unarmoured natives in brown tunics with red crosses at the oars of the variously sized rowing boats. A dark foreboding started to take a grip of Ironside's insides, who although not unaccustomed to combat, had never faced such a formidable foe. Without firearms, he feared that the lightly armed natives would be massacred.

Suddenly, unable to restrain himself, Benton sprang to his feet. "This'll never do!" Without warning the excited sea rover drew his pistols, ran over to a group of cowering natives, and started shouting and gesticulating wildly at them. "If you be a fighting man come and show us what you can, otherwise them bastards'll enslave the lot of yer!" The agitated boatswain ran towards the quayside discharging both of his small firearms in the direction of the raiders, and to his surprise a number of archers joined him, letting off their arrows in the direction of the pirate sloop. The exchange of projectiles was less than equal with the natives suffering the worst of it. Wolfenden's men

could fire from behind the relative safety of the wooden mantels, which had been erected on the bulwark for that very purpose, while the native archers stood exposed in the open. Realising they were achieving little more than increasing the number of native casualties, Benton racked his tired brain for a better idea. After a moment of painful deliberation, it suddenly came to him.

“Fire arrows! We’ll set the buggers alight,” he shouted at the frightened archers.

After a few desperate moments and a few more injured natives, the enthused seaman somehow managed to communicate his idea to his confused allies. It was a tall, thin woman with beaded hair who realised what the stranger required of them. Once she had quickly explained to the others what was to be done, she disappeared with a handful of others into a nearby building while the remaining archers continued futilely sending their bronze-tipped shafts in the direction of the sloop. In the meantime, Benton reloaded and fired his pistols again, but then realising they took too long to reload he decided he try out one of the natives bows. Ahmose had been right – they were much quicker to reload. It couldn’t be that difficult he thought to himself, watching the archers adeptly loose their arrows. Scooping up a fallen weapon from an injured native, he nocked an arrow and took aim. Drawing back the string wasn’t as easy as he had expected and when he released it the feathered shaft flew less than twenty feet before plopping harmlessly into the water between him and the pirate vessel.

“Useless piece of crap,” he grumbled, discarding the unfamiliar weapon and taking out his pistols again, deciding it was better to stick with what he knew, even if they took a bit longer to employ.

As he began the lengthy process of reloading, he was joined by Nefertari, who nodded in acknowledgement

of his presence there before raising her bow and, despite her injured arm, sending an arrow unerringly in the direction of the sloop. To the seaman's astonishment, the tip embedded itself in the chest of an overconfident pirate, who had foolishly stood up to fire his musket, sending the stupefied man flying backwards onto the deck.

"How did yer manage that?" asked the awestricken sea rover.

"With years of practice," answered the woman impassively, nimbly pulling another shaft from her ornately decorated quiver.

Eventually, the tall woman and her companions returned with several lit torches and a large basket full of queer, long-headed arrows each possessing a small cage which was stuffed with rags soaked in what Benton presumed was pitch or oil. As soon as the archers were in position, the unusual projectiles were distributed and lit, and the first of them were soon flying in the direction of the wooden sloop. Not all of the arrows remained lit long enough to be effective, some going out before they even reached their target, but enough hit their mark to succeed in sowing panic among the crew of the sloop. Not wanting to risk their precious vessel, the pirates ran out the sweeps to allow a swifter retreat, while others hurriedly extinguished the smoking shafts before they could ignite the flammable deck or sails. On seeing the foreign boat turn tail and run, the natives let out a triumphant cheer, but they were soon silenced by the realisation that the armoured men in the smaller boats were nearing the shore. The first of their foe would be on land in a matter of minutes. As the first of the rowing boats reached one of the jetties, the archers started to anxiously pull back. Benton was about to join them in the retreat when he saw Ironside and O'Malley arrive with a large contingent of natives carrying spears and wooden

shields. The battle for the city was about to begin. Benton briefly glanced at Nefertari, who had stolidly stood her ground.

“Well, I guess this is the end. It were a pleasure knowing yer, Nefertari,” stated the boatswain solemnly, both pistols at the ready. “I just wishes I had a little more time to get to know yer better.”

“You still have time to leave,” replied the woman with a wry smile. “You don’t have to die with my people.”

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere, me dear,” retorted Benton resolutely. “It’ll be over me dead body that them cursed buggers’ll get their filthy hands on you.”

“That’s very noble of you, William,” answered Nefertari sincerely with a heavy-hearted smile.

A moment later, Captain Ironside was at their side with sword in hand. O’Malley was close behind him armed with a pistol and knife.

“We scared old Wolfie off with them fire arrows,” imparted Benton excitedly, “but we’ve still got them whoresons with the swords to deal with.”

“No, Will, we’ve just come to fetch you. This isn’t our fight,” responded the Swede sternly.

“I don’t think we has a choice, Cap’n,” replied Benton urgently, indicating in the direction of the arriving soldiers.

A suffocating knot formed deep in Ironside’s guts as he noticed that a handful of the attackers had effortlessly cut their way through the defending natives and were heading straight towards them. Benton calmly discharged one of his pistols, felling the first of their would-be killers, while Nefertari sent one of her deadly shafts into the unprotected throat of another.

“All right, we’ll deal with these varlets, then we’re out of here,” ordered the captain as he prepared for the onslaught.

Brandishing his sword above his head, the captain stepped forward to meet the first of their opponents, narrowly missing being decapitated in the process. Before he could counter, his foe, who was clearly the more skilled of the two in armed combat, rammed the unfortunate captain with his metal shield boss, but before the swordsman could finish off the stunned pirate O'Malley had wrapped herself around the astonished soldier's legs, bringing him heavily to the sandy ground. Ironside thrust his sword into the prone Man of the Cross's chest, the point of his blade barely penetrating the man's mail shirt. Fortunately for him, this didn't matter, as O'Malley swiftly put an end to the opposing combatant with her dagger, discovering all manner of weak points in the armour with an uncanny instinct. Springing to her feet, the unrelenting Irish woman discharged her pistol into the face of a second attacker while Ironside scooped up the fallen soldier's shield. With some difficulty he and O'Malley managed to overcome a man dressed in a black surcoat, who was swinging a small, but fearsome axe at them. Meanwhile, another Man of the Cross adorned in a white tunic decorated with a red cross had just dispatched two natives and was striding towards Nefertari grinning maliciously, deflecting her arrow with his shield as he approached. His blade whistled down and severed the bow the near defenceless woman had held up to shield herself from the attack, and he was about to strike again when he was momentarily distracted by desperate yelling and a thunderous crack as William Benton fired his pistol at another of their foes who had dared get in the way of his attempt to save the woman he admired from her aggressor. With his two pistols now empty and no time to reload them, he threw both of the heavy objects at the man who was poised to strike the alarmed native woman, one of which bounced harmlessly off his shield,

the other noisily striking the man's helmet. Nefertari took advantage of the raider's brief befuddlement, seizing her opponent's sword arm and holding onto it with all her strength while Benton pounced on him from the side and wildly put an end to the would-be murderer with a series of wild stabs and slashes of his hunting knife. Gasping for breath, the sea rover scanned the area around them and was relieved to find that he and his companions had defeated the small group which had broken through the mass of natives.

"You all right, Neffie?" panted the blood-spattered pirate, bending to retrieve one of his fallen pistols.

"Yes, thanks to you," replied the woman gratefully, handing him the other one which had landed by her feet. "That's the second time you've saved my life, Will."

"I aims to please, but now we gotta get out of here. We ain't got no chance 'gainst those temple men and their metal swords and chunky armour without more of these handy little things," the boatswain said urgently as he adeptly reloaded one of the small firearms.

Turning to assess the tumultuous affray spreading out around them, Nefertari nodded in agreement. Although the lightly armed natives were far more numerous, they were no match for the heavily armoured invading warriors, and were being cut down like stalks of ripe corn. By now, all the boats had reached the shore and unloaded their murderous occupants. Some of the defenders had already noticed the folly of resistance and were starting to break away from the throng and sprint towards the safety of the warren of streets behind them.

"Let's go!" cried out Ironside, aware of the rapidly deteriorating circumstances.

"Wait a minute, Cap'n!" shouted Benton above the pandemonium of battle. "Look over there."

The pirate captain hesitated and reluctantly turned

to face the direction in which Benton was pointing. His spirits rose at the sight that greeted his weary eyes. He gasped in disbelief as he saw *Dream Chaser's* clearly recognisable sails slowly approaching just beyond the enemy vessels. Impatience swelled in Ironside's innards as he observed the three-master trim sail, but apparently doing nothing to interfere in the battle. Ironside watched helplessly as *Vengeful Mermaid's* sails caught the wind and slowly built up speed. There would be no stopping her, but why hadn't Pete ordered the attack on the vessels anchored in the harbour? Perhaps he deemed it unwise to involve the ship he had assumed responsibility for in a fight that was not theirs, or he was unsure of who was friend and who was foe. In desperation the captain clambered up a tall statue of a naked, stern-faced warrior, cursing himself for leaving his telescope aboard the ship. All he could do was wave his sword frantically in the hope that someone on the ship would notice they were in distress. When nothing seemed to happen, he swiftly shinnied down the stone leg of his vantage point with the intention of finding his wife and fleeing this madness. They would make their way up the coast, where they would hopefully be picked up by their ship at some point. It was then that the first ear-splitting roar echoed across the bay. With a joyous heart Ironside realised that Pete had decided to intervene after all.

Captain Ironside observed with perverse pride as his ship wreaked havoc on the enemy vessels impotently anchored in the bay. He watched with awe as a roaring broadside raked one of the anchored cogs, felling its mainmast like a tree overcome by a storm. Panic spread through the small, besieging fleet like wildfire as they severed their anchor cables and attempted to flee the unexpected devastation. In the confusion, two of the cogs collided heavily and entangled their rigging, while

an exquisitely decorated caravel ran aground on a rocky outcrop at the mouth of the bay, her hull torn open like a knife slicing through cotton. Unable to resist the flying iron balls and chain shot, a further two cogs struck their sails. Only two vessels, a cog and a caravel, succeeded in reaching the open sea and making a dash for safety. Had *Dream Chaser* pursued these two ships, she would surely have caught and subdued them, but instead of giving chase the pirates were lowering the boats and sending men armed with muskets and cutlasses to aid their captain and his struggling allies on the shore.

Meanwhile, the triumphing Men of the Cross on the quayside gradually became aware of what was transpiring in the bay. The ferocious onslaught stalled as a wave of uncertainty washed over the invaders, giving the natives enough time to fall back and regroup. Reinforced by a large contingent of fresh archers and spear throwers, the defenders sent a constant barrage of projectiles at the enemy soldiers, who, ignoring the orders of their captains to renew the attack, preferred to cower behind the safety of their shields. Occasionally, a man fell screaming as an arrow or spear penetrated a gap in the shield wall, but it was a deadly volley from the arriving pirates firing from a nearing boat that finally broke the resolve of the attackers, who one-by-one threw down their weapons to signal their desire to surrender. After the Men of the Cross had all been disarmed, they were forced to sit in small groups on the waterfront closely guarded by spearmen, who glared at their prisoners with contempt. Captain Ironside singled out one of the captives who appeared to be an officer of some sort, and had O'Malley and Benton bring the man over to where he was seated on a wooden bench. The dour, crestfallen knight clad in a knee-length hauberk disdainfully stared down at the seated pirate captain. The Swede felt uneasy having

to look up at the man and ordered him to kneel. When the proud knight refused to sit on the sandy ground, O'Malley obligingly gave him a short, sharp kick to the back of the knee, forcing him harshly to the ground while dampening his desire to resist by placing the cold steel of her knife against the side of his throat.

"Who are you?" demanded Ironside icily.

"I am Gregory de Beaumont, a noble knight of the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon, more commonly known as the Knights Templar," answered the stony-faced man.

"But weren't the Templars suppressed for heresy some four hundred years past?" replied the astonished captain.

"We are no heretics!" responded de Beaumont with indignation, "but victims of the machinations of that rascally knave Philip, the King of France."

"I thought your order was destroyed."

"No, not all. Those who were fortunate fled across the ocean in our vast fleet."

"So tell me, how did you come to be in these foreign lands?" asked Ironside, gesturing for O'Malley to remove the blade from the side of the man's neck.

"There were rumours of a land of abundance far to the west, so we set sail in search of it before that rogue Philip could seize our ships," answered the captive, warming to his audience. "We sailed for many weeks and were running low on supplies. We had almost given up hope of reaching our destination, and there were those of us who urged that we should turn back, claiming it would be better to return to Europe and disband there, each going our own separate way. It was then we were engulfed by a strange mist, and on emerging from it we found to our relief that we had reached the continent across the ocean. We set about making it our home and bringing the word of God to its heathen inhabitants."

Gregory de Beaumont's account of their journey to the land they now all found themselves in was briefly interrupted by the arrival of Faustus and Cassandra, both of whom were clearly extremely relieved the fighting was over. Cassandra threw her arms fondly around the shoulders of her husband, who gently pushed her away, fearing such a show of affection could undermine his authority in the eyes of the prisoner.

"What's going on, Björn?" inquired the surgeon excitedly. "Did we win?"

"Yes, thanks to Pete and the *Dream Chaser*," grinned Ironside. "Now I'm questioning one of the captives. Says his name's Gregory de Beaumont and claims to be a descendant of the Templars."

"That can't be! Their order was dissolved in 1307 by Philip IV of France," responded Faustus with enthusiasm. Ironside sensed a lecture was brewing. "It is said that Philip was deeply in debt to the Templars due to the immense costs of the war with England over Gascony. He accused them of all manner of heretical and unholy practices, such as sodomy and spitting on the cross, but I personally deem these accusations to be nothing but vicious lies disseminated by a tyrant to rid himself of his indebtedness. He had already seized the assets of the Lombard merchants and ordered the expulsion of Jewish bankers, both of whom had also lent him vast sums of money."

"Your friend appears to be a man of considerable intelligence," commented the knight, who had now resigned himself to sitting in the dust.

"No-one asked for your opinion," snapped Ironside. "Although you are right about the superior intellect of this man," he quickly added on noticing the offended expression on the physician's face.

"No-one has the right to deny me the right to speak,"

responded the knight sharply. “You are clearly Europeans and Christians, so tell me why you choose to defend this pagan scum. Why do you not aid our righteous forces as do your compatriots?”

“We are explorers who are seeking out new lands,” lied the captain, “and as for this pagan scum, as you call them, are concerned, they are far more noble and compassionate than any Christian I have as of yet encountered.”

“Don’t be fooled by their devilish deception,” growled de Beaufort. “They’ll lure you onto the path of sin and vice.”

“You don’t appear to be very tolerant for a man who himself has suffered oppression at the hands of the Church,” commented Faustus.

“There is a vast difference between us and these savages,” replied the Templar angrily. “We are Christians and pure of heart. Our noble order was vanquished because of the avarice of a king and the weakness of a pope.”

“You mean Pope Clement V?” said the surgeon knowledgeably.

“Yes, that spinless Vicar of Christ did little to defend us against the unjust accusations and was complicit in our downfall.”

“That may be true, but it doesn’t give you the right to subjugate a civilised and peace-loving people,” replied Ironside, slowly losing his patience with his fanatical captive.

“God gives us the right to guide these people onto the path of righteousness,” answered de Beaufort in a raised voice.

“Guide? Is that what you call what you are doing?” said Faustus with contempt.

The prisoner declined to reply, instead just sneering derisively at the stern-faced surgeon.

“As for those men you employed against us,” continued Ironside. “They are nothing but predatory pirates out for personal gain.”

“That is not true! They claimed to be explorers like yourself. They presented themselves as pious and god-fearing men, regularly attending mass,” answered de Beaufort defensively. “They warned us that pirates were aiding the savages after the attack on the galley. It seems they were right.”

“Better a pirate t’an a hypocritical gobshite,” commented O’Malley fiercely.

“Who is this ugly, uncouth wench?” inquired the knight, turning up his nose in disgust.

“I’ll show you ugly and uncouth, yer grody toad,” snapped the Irishwoman, angrily taking a step towards the captive with her knife raised.

“Let him be, Neeve,” ordered Ironside. “At least until I’ve finished my questioning.”

The woman reluctantly took a step back.

“So tell me, Mr. de Beaufort. You said that Captain Wolfenden and his men are pious Christians, so did they aid you for free?” said Faustus quickly to divert attention from the man’s provocation, more out of desire for more answers than to save the knight’s unworthy neck.

“Of course they did require a sum of gold for their services, but don’t all men deserve some payment for their work?” answered de Beaufort uncertainly. “Anyway, the main thing is that they were willing to aid us against these savages. It was their invaluable assistance which prompted us to take the opportunity to put an end to this pagan society once and for all.”

“Why can’t your sort just leave o’er folk in peace?” snarled the frowning O’Malley.

“That is a good question. Why do you and your ilk feel the need to conquer other peoples? Is the the world

not big enough for all?” inquired Ironside on seeing the captive demonstratively ignore the woman’s unwelcome question. “Your people spent years devastating the Holy Land and what good came of it?”

“There is no room in this world for heathens and heretics,” responded the Templar passionately, half rising from the ground. “As for the Crusades, it was the infidel who first seized those lands and many more from the Christians, who had dwelled there peacefully since the Roman conquest. We were just obeying God’s will by restoring the lands to Christendom.”

“That might be so,” commented Faustus, “but did not the Romans first take the Levant from the original inhabitants by the force of their legions? What about the thousands of Jews who died defending their homeland?”

Gregory de Beaufort glared at the physician with a look of pure hatred on his face, unable to give a satisfying response to the question posed to him. “Heretic and Jew lover!” he hissed venomously.

“That’s enough!” snapped Ironside. “I have one final question for you de Beaufort before you are taken away with the others.”

“You may ask, you uncultured nullifidian,” snarled the prisoner, “but I might not be inclined to answer.”

“You’ll answer the Cap’n, or you’ll get the hiding of yer life, yer jaundiced wackadoo,” growled O’Malley threateningly, taking a determined step towards the kneeling man.

“All right, I will answer one more question, then enough of this nonsense,” conceded de Beaufort, not wishing to be subjected to the woman’s ire.

“I’m interested to know why you and your people have been here so long,” began the captain, rising to his feet. “Why didn’t you ever return to Europe?”

“Why should we want to return?” answered the knight

with a puzzled expression. “Any ships we sent out never returned, but that is of no concern as we have succeeded in establishing a divine theocratic stratocracy under the guidance of Grand Master Geoffroi de Roy. Why should we want to return to a land of impious monarchs and a corrupt pontificate?”

“Speak English man, will ye, fer t̄e sake of t̄e Virgin Mary!” snarled O’Malley.

“He says that he and his people are content with the religious military state they have built up here, and have no desire to return to the selfishness and corruption of Europe,” said Faustus when de Beaufort spat contemptuously at the foot of the woman, mumbling something about blasphemy.

“T’at I can understand,” replied the Irish woman pensively. “I ain’t got no desire to return to t’at woeful place eit̄er, t’ough I wouldn’t much care to live in a land o’ priests and soldiers eit̄er, mind you. And by t̄e way, Mr. Beaufort, you go doing t’at again and ye’ll be wearing yer balls as earrings,” she advised, prodding the offensive captive with her foot almost causing him to topple over.

“I fear we no longer find ourselves in the known world,” explained Faustus. “On passing through that strange mist we’ve all ended up in a realm that is not our own.”

“Enough of your lies, you devil, and keep that Irish witch away from me!” bellowed the knight, staggering to his feet.

Captain Ironside beckoned for two native guards to escort the prisoner away, not being able to bear the disagreeable man’s trying presence any longer.

“And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever,” cried out de Beaufort zealously as he was roughly steered towards a large building where

the other captives were being held.

"I surely do hope I don't ever have ter see t'at nettlesome pissbutt again," commented O'Malley, watching the knight being shoved unceremoniously through a narrow doorway. "Let's go find somet'ing to eat, Cassandra. I'm famished after all t'is excitement."

The pirate captain sat a while discussing the situation with Faustus while Cassandra and O'Malley went off in search of refreshments. Some time later the two women returned with a large basket brimming with bread and fruit as well as a large pitcher of small beer. The two men gratefully accepted a clay cup of the surprisingly cool liquid. It didn't take long for William Benton to be attracted by the promise of nourishment.

"We showed 'em, didn't we, Cap'n?" stated the boatswain through a mouth half filled with bread. "Are there any olives in that there basket?" he added hopefully.

"Yes, but at what a price this victory was," responded the Swede, chewing on a chunk of pineapple.

"You can't make an omelette without cracking a few eggs," replied Benton philosophically, rummaging through the basket. "No bloody olives!"

"No eggs might have been cracked at all if it had not been for Wolfenden and the *Mermaid's* encouraging presence," said Ironside solemnly. "If I ever get my hands on that self-serving rogue, I'll make him wish he'd never been born."

"Not if I get to him first, yer won't," scowled O'Malley, peeling an orange with her knife in such a way that one might think it had somehow offended her.

While they were still enjoying the impromptu feast, they were joined by the grinning quartermaster.

"You took your time, didn't you, Pete?" said Ironside jovially.

"We came as fast as we could, Cap'n," replied Pete

earnestly, attempting to wipe smudges of black powder from his face, but only succeeding in making it worse.

“I was only kidding,” smiled the captain affectionately. “To be honest, I’m surprised you made it here so quickly. I half expected you and the crew to still be celebrating or sleeping off hangovers.”

“The work was done quicker than expected and the men voted to postpone the partying until we reached the mainland. They were impatient to take in the sights of the city and indulge in what it had to offer, they were. They be especially keen to make acquaintance with the womenfolk of this land,” answered Pete, taking a lengthy swig from the pitcher, spilling half the contents down his grubby beard. “I needed that. Fighting be thirsty work, it be,” he sighed.

Cassandra gave the uncultured pirate a disapproving look before handing him her clay beaker, which the man promptly took and filled to the brim.

“Tell me, Pete. Why did you hesitate before intervening in the fray?” inquired the captain, wrenching the basket from Benton’s grasp to prevent him helping himself to more than his fair share.

“Well, at first it weren’t clear what be goin’ on,” replied the quartermaster, wiping his mouth on his sleeve before taking another large swig. We saw the *Mermaid* and like a fool I presumed she must be on our side, but thanks to yer telescope, which I discovered hidden in your cabin, it soon became clear that the bugger was one of the aggressors. When I saw you madly waving yer sword on top of that there statue, I realised we had to be acting quickly.”

“I’m glad you managed to find my telescope, but what about that big old thing I had before my wife bought me the new one? That one was available to all.”

“Well, I regret to have to tell ye that the buffoon Hogg

and some of the lads were playing around with it and the clumsy oafs broke the bugger before I could get it off 'em," answered Pete apologetically.

"That's why I took the precaution of concealing mine. Well, all I can say is that I'm glad you found it and intervened when you did," sighed the captain. "If you had arrived any later the city would have already fallen and you'd probably have been taken captive. *Dream Chaser* would no doubt have been seized."

"I be sure that swine Wolf would be only too eager to get his hands on our fine vessel," commented Pete, belching loudly and earning himself another disapproving glance from Cassandra. "Sorry, it be better out than in," the bearded pirate smiled sheepishly.

"What will happen to all those prisoners?" asked Cassandra, turning her attention away from the ill-mannered sea rover. "Will they be executed?"

"I doubt it, although past enemies of the Templars would have done so on capturing them," replied Faustus. "Did you know that some two-hundred Knights Templar and Hospitaller were decapitated after the crushing defeat of the Crusader army by Saladin at Hattin in the fateful year of 1187?"

"That's terrible," gasped the Bermudian woman.

"Those were dark times, but I don't believe the fair people of Eleutheria would stoop to such barbaric measures. They seem far too just and civilised." There was a short thoughtful pause. "Oh, look. Here comes Nefertari. I'll ask her," said the surgeon enthusiastically. "Greetings, Nefertari, I'm glad to see you are well. We were just discussing the fate of the prisoners. Will they be put to death?"

"Certainly not," retorted the horrified native woman. "That is not our way."

Faustus gave a sigh of relief on hearing these words.

“You could enslave the bleeders,” suggested Benton helpfully.

“Slavery is abhorrent, even of an enemy,” responded the aghast surgeon.

“Well, I don’t normally approve of a man being deprived of his freedom either, especially them poor African fellows, who ain’t done no harm to no-one, but I thinks it would be all right in this case,” countered Benton.

“There’ll be no enslavement,” stated Nefertari firmly. “Although the prisoners will be made to repair the damage they caused before they are released after swearing an oath that they won’t raise their hand against us again.”

“Do you really think they’ll abide by such a promise?” asked Ironside doubtfully.

“Probably not, but we hope they have learned the lesson that we are no easy prey for their insatiable appetite for power,” answered the woman.

“It’s probably for the best. Killing or enslaving the captives might further infuriate the Men of the Cross. They would no doubt seek revenge and call for a crusade. The execution of the knights after Hattin didn’t dampen their crusading fervour one bit,” added Faustus.

“You are right, Mr. Quiddington. We don’t want to antagonise them any more than is necessary,” said Nefertari earnestly. “We will confiscate all their weapons and armour, as well as the ships that surrendered and send the men all back once they have repaired the damage they’ve caused.”

“Next time they show their ugly faces you can bash ‘em with their own weapons,” chuckled Benton. “I likes the idea of that, I do.”

“Enough about the prisoners. The reason I am here is to invite you and your crew to a celebration to be held in your honour this very evening,” said Nefertari with a

smile.

“That be a great idea,” responded Pete with glee. “What the lads be needing is plenty of booze and fine fare to boost their spirits, and maybe the acquaintance of a pretty lass or two.”

“I don’t want the men harassing the native girls, Pete,” commented Ironside with more than a little concern in his voice. “Do you think you could refrain from getting too intoxicated for once and keep a close eye on the antics of the crew, especially the likes of Bart Hogg?”

“You can rely on me, Cap’n,” answered Pete with a boyish grin.

The captain nodded, not so sure he could rely on his quartermaster where festivities were concerned. Not able or willing to deprive the men of a well earned knees-up, he shrugged and hoped there would be no unsavoury incidents, which might try the patience of their hosts that evening. After one last glance at the captured cogs in the bay, Captain Ironside joined the others as they headed back towards the town.

A rowdy celebration

Early that evening almost the entire crew of the *Dream Chaser* were excitedly assembled in a spacious plaza, dressed in their best attire and anticipating the frivolities to come. Only Yuki and old Joe had been left on board with two dozen natives to guard their ship, which was securely anchored in the bay. With the stealing away of their ship in the night by the now deceased Henry Avery not so long ago, Ironside hoped it would be enough to prevent a similar incident from occurring. He wouldn’t put it past Captain Wolfenden to return under the cover of darkness and attempt to seize his vessel. He only relaxed after Nefertari had informed him that native

patrols were closely watching the coast and assured him there was no sign of any further enemy ships. Faustus reassuringly pointed out that the Men of the Cross would not risk another attack with so many of their men being held captive, but Ironside was not totally convinced that the captain of the *Mermaid* would not simply act on his own account regardless, and it was with some effort that he finally managed to focus his attention on the imminent festivities. He strolled over to join Cassandra and Benton, who were standing next to a long table holding a vast array of different dishes – the former was admiring the ostentatious presentation of the food, the latter was hungrily hovering and longingly eyeing the brimming plates and bowls.

“They’ve put on a lovely spread for us,” said Cassandra as her husband approached.

“They certainly have,” agreed the captain.

“Yeah, a heap of tasty grub with plenty of olives,” commented Benton, licking his lips. “I just wish they’d get on and start the feast. I’m starving.”

“You can’t be starving, Will,” frowned the captain’s wife disbelievingly. “You’ve eaten more than your fill since you’ve been here.”

“All this excitement gives me an appetite,” replied the boatswain, stretching out a hand to grab a few olives.

“No, Will!” chastised Cassandra. “Can’t you just wait until the celebration is officially opened like everyone else?”

“It’s just a few olives to keep me going,” responded Benton sulkily. His hand hovered over a small, painted clay bowl for a few moments before he reluctantly withdrew it. “I suppose I can wait a little longer.” Waiting a few moments until the captain and his wife’s attention was diverted, the sly seaman slipped a small bowl of his favourite hors d’oeuvre under his jacket. “I’m just goin’

for a little stroll til the feast begins.” Fortunately for the crafty sea rover, the captain and his spouse were too engrossed in the arrival of their hosts to notice this small act of filching.

Soon the plaza was bustling with pirates and natives who were enjoying the abundance of food and drink to the enchanting melodies of a small band of local musicians playing flutes, harps, and drums. Once they had eaten their fill of food, some of the pirates decided the native melodies were a little too melancholic for such joyous festivities, so they urged their own musicians to fetch their instruments. At first, their hosts were wary of the strange, unfamiliar music of the seamen from Europe, but soon many of them were dancing spiritedly among the merry sea rovers. The party was soon in full swing. Even Faustus danced at one point when O’Malley managed to drag him away from his bowl of sautéed vegetables. Reluctantly standing among the lively dancers, the surgeon stiffly swung his limbs, lending him the appearance of a wooden doll, but it didn’t take long for him to loosen up, and a while later he was swinging his arms and kicking out wildly, like a rag doll being swung around by a small child. After an hour or so of frantic prancing and gyrating some of the pirates decided to take a rest from the strenuous physical activity and sat to one side singing an old seaman’s song known as *Spanish Ladies*. Even Captain Ironside joined in with the chorus despite not being a Brit himself.

*We’ll rant and we’ll roar like true British sailors,
We’ll rant and we’ll roar across the salt seas,
Until we strike soundings in the channel of Old
England,
From Ushant to Scilly is thirty-five leagues.*

Although the natives were unfamiliar with the strange words and melody, many hummed along to the catchy chorus. Having tired himself out, Faustus was seated on a plush cushion tapping his foot to the rhythm of the tune when Nefertari joined him.

“I find this song most intriguing,” she said with a smile. “What is it about?”

“Well, as far as I know, it’s a song about sailors returning home from a voyage to Spain.”

“Spain?” said the woman with a puzzled expression.

“It’s a foreign kingdom to the south of my country, Great Britain.”

“Ah, yes, kingdoms,” uttered Nefertari disdainfully. “Lands where one man rules over all.”

“That’s not entirely true. At least not in Britain,” responded the surgeon, raising his voice so he could be heard over the raucous singing. “In Britain we have a parliament of elected officials to keep the king in check.”

“So you don’t trust this king then?”

“Not entirely,” chuckled Faustus. “There was a civil war some sixty years past when the first king of the name Charles attempted to accumulate too much power. Later, the second King James was ousted due to his authoritarian tendencies.”

“Then why not abolish this unfair system where one man possess so much power?”

“We tried it once, but it proved little better, some say it was even worse. Oliver Cromwell took the title of Lord Protector and became a tyrant,” answered the physician wiping the perspiration from his brow.

“Why not do as we do here and let every man and woman have their say?” inquired the vexed woman.

“I doubt that will ever happen in my land. The Nobles and landed gentry are too well established and defend their gains with the gallows and the sword.”

“That’s terrible,” said Nefertari with a grimace. “That’s certainly not a land I would wish to live in.”

“I can’t say I was too pleased about it either, even though I was lucky to be born into a family more privileged than most,” replied Faustus regretfully, “and now that I have discovered the fair and just land of yours I’m even less inclined to return there.”

“You and your friends would be most welcome to stay here, Mr. Quiddington.”

“I thank you for your kind offer, Nefertari, and it’s certainly worth considering.”

For the next half an hour, the man who had fled England to escape his debts bombarded the native woman with countless questions about her country and its customs, which she was only too happy to answer. Meanwhile, after consuming all the olives he could get his hands on William Benton sat himself down next to O’Malley, who was sipping a wooden beaker of beer. The woman from Ireland was dressed in one of the colourful, knee-length tunics commonly worn by the inhabitants of Eleutheria while her usual garments were in the wash.

“Yer lookin’ lovely this evening, Neeve,” Benton greeted her cheerfully.

“You been at t’e strong stuff, William Benton?” the woman replied abruptly.

“No, I’m as sober as a judge, I am,” replied Benton, galled by the woman’s unfounded accusation.

“T’at ain’t sayin’ much. T’e local magistrate back home was usually as drunk as a lord before midday,” sneered O’Malley. “What do yer want anyway?”

“Just wanted ter say how nice you were looking this evening,” answered the seaman defensively. “Can’t a man give a pretty lass a compliment?”

“Whatever yer after you can go seek it elsewhere, yer goatish wearer of the motley,” came the harsh response.

“Well, I suppose a dance is out of the question then?” ventured the lusty seaman, gesturing towards the musicians who had just started playing a lively jig.

“No t’anks, Will,” came the offhand reply. “I’ve better t’ings to do wit’ me time.”

“Like what?”

“Like goin’ fer a piss,” answered the woman curtly.

O’Malley sprung nimbly to her feet and made her way across the crowded plaza watched by the dumbfounded pirate. How could the ungrateful wench turn him down after all of his heroic deeds? He had even brushed his hair and put on his best shirt. A wave of envy rose in his gut as he saw the Irish woman approach the man she had met in the café, who was slightly more decently dressed than the last time Benton had seen him. O’Malley took the muscular man’s hand and led him onto the dance floor, where they both engaged in a frisky jig. Benton couldn’t believe she’d lied to him about needing a piddle. With a resigned shrug, the spurned sea rover turned away and caught sight of Nefertari standing near one of the tables laden with food. He smiled to himself as he confidently strode over towards the native woman – there were plenty more fish in the sea. He’d show O’Malley that he didn’t need her attention. He’d make her regret turning him down and missing out on his prowess in matters of the flesh. Before he reached the woman at the table he took one final, longing glance at the Irish woman, who was merrily frolicking arm-in-arm with that bothersome, oversized native halfwit, completely oblivious to his presence. Cursing her under his breath, he approached Nefertari putting on one of his most charming smiles.

“How’s yer arm doing?” he inquired.

“It throbs a little, but it doesn’t hurt as much as before,” answered the woman, surprised by the pirate’s concern. “Thank you for asking, William.”

“Well, if yer arm ain’t hurting so much, how about a dance?” Benton asked with a boyish smile.

“At the moment, I don’t feel up to dancing to this spirited music your friends are playing,” answered the woman, placing a hand on her aching arm. “In fact, I think I might go and lie down for a while.”

“I could come with yer,” suggested the sea rover hopefully.

“Why would you want to do that, William?” asked Nefertari with a knowing smile.

“Just to keep you company,” replied the boatswain, unsuccessfully trying to stifle a lustful grin. “You shouldn’t be alone after getting such a wound. Bad for the spirits, it is.”

“All right, William,” responded Nefertari taking the astounded man’s hand. “I’ve never had relations with one of your kind. It could be entertaining.”

The seaman’s heart skipped a beat. Was she really inviting him to her bed, or was she just fooling around with him? Despite the urges stirring below, the woman’s forwardness made the man from Plymouth feel a little uneasy. Wasn’t it the man’s task to do all that seduction stuff? And what did she mean by entertaining? The intimidated pirate was torn between backing away and embracing the comely native woman.

“I ain’t so sure about being entertaining,” he answered nervously. “I ain’t no court jester or nothing.”

The woman appraised him with an amused smile. “Are you coming or not, William Benton?” she asked, holding out a slender hand.

Lost for words, the fearsome pirate shakily took the woman’s hand and escorted her out of the plaza. He quickly glanced back at O’Malley as he left, who was now locked in an embrace with her new-found companion. His attempts to catch O’Malley’s attention in the hope of

making her jealous were in vain, as the woman's lips had just made contact with her partner's and she was now oblivious to anyone else, in particular to William Benton. He smiled confidently to himself, thinking there would be another day, but now he would enjoy the moment, for who knows what the future might bring.

After Benton had disappeared with Nefertari, the situation in the plaza became gradually more and more unruly as the pirates thirstily consumed more alcohol than was good for them. Powder Keg Pete was dancing wildly in circles, his arm linked with a tipsy native, regularly changing partner with a loud whoop. Even after the jig had come to an end the quartermaster continued to spin uncontrollably in wide circles, unable to steady himself, and it was only with the help of several of his dance partners that he managed to come to a stand still. With a string of invectives he pushed his helpers away, swearing he was as steady as a ship on a becalmed ocean. Once they released the intoxicated pirate from their grip he grinned inanely before tumbling over backwards, landing heavily on the sandy floor, and when Captain Ironside hurried over to check he hadn't done himself any mischief he found the quartermaster sleeping like a baby, emitting snores that threatened to shake the very foundations of the city. The frowning captain ordered a couple of the less inebriated crewmen to take the comatose seaman somewhere a little quieter to sleep the drink off, although he was sure the quartermaster would have slept like a log where he was now lying, undisturbed to the raucous festivities raging around him.

While most of the pirates were furiously dancing or drinking as if there were no tomorrow an unsavoury incident was brewing in a darkened corner of the plaza. The troublemaker Bart Hogg had enticed a young native woman away from the celebrations and was now harassing

her with his unwelcome affections. His sly manoeuvring of the woman to a secluded spot hadn't gone unnoticed. Charlotte Scowcroft, who was presently clearer of mind than most of her shipmates, was just on her way back from relieving herself when she noticed the silhouette of the sturdy pirate towering over the intimidated woman.

"You leave her be, Bart Hogg!" growled the purser fiercely, striding boldly towards the predator and his prey. "She clearly ain't interested in your brutish advances."

"Piss off, Scowler!" snarled the seaman venomously. "She's willing if I say she is."

"I said leave her be!" Scowcroft cried out, gripping the stocky man firmly by the shoulder.

Before the pirate woman could react, Bart Hogg spun around and planted his ham-sized fist in the side of the unsuspecting purser's head, sending her sprawling into the dirt. Before the dazed woman could react, the thickset sea rover was crouched on top of her, pinning her down with one hand while raising the other to strike his prone victim. "Not so tough now, are you, you interfering bitch?" bellowed the infuriated bully, his open palm striking the struggling woman's already reddened cheek.

The loutish seaman was about to strike again when he was momentarily distracted by a sudden unexplained weight on his back. The native girl had overcome her timidity and was now clinging determinedly to the robust man, one hand wrapped around the attacker's neck, the other obscuring his eyes. The enraged thug rose to his feet with a neanderthal grunt, flinging the slight-of-build woman from him with relative ease, but as he turned back to deal with Scowcroft he found to his dismay that she was no longer lying where she had been a moment before. The pirate woman had used the momentary diversion to scramble to her feet and as her assailant turned to face her she planted her foot in the

groin of the surprised man. It didn't take long for Bart Hogg to recover from this minor setback and moments later the two sea rovers were both facing each other knife in hand in a tense stand off.

"I'll put an end to you once and for all, you meddling wench," growled the man viciously.

"Give it your best, you boneless worm," sneered the woman, unperturbed by the threat.

Hogg lunged at Scowcroft with a roar of rage, the insult having penetrated as deep as any knife could, but Scowcroft was prepared for the attack, stepping calmly to one side and slashing her opponents upper right arm in the process. Hogg grunted and took a step back, a look of alarm filling his eyes, not daring another such uncontrolled attack. Both combatants warily circled each other with their blades held out defensively in front of them, each expecting the other to thrust or slash first. Neither spoke, neither acted, instead staring at each other with pure hatred, both waiting for the other to make a mistake. Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, the impasse was broken by a deep, stern voice. "Put the knife away, or you'll have me to reckon with, Bart Hogg!"

The aggravated seaman turned to face the person who had addressed him in such a hostile manner, his heart sinking as he saw the towering form of Samuel Langston, the muscular bayman, glowering threateningly at him.

"It were her who started it," stuttered Hogg, now directing his knife at the new threat.

"I doubt that very much," frowned the large man, flexing his shoulder muscles. He then turned to face the agitated woman. "What's going on here, Charlotte?"

"This clodpole was abusing this young woman, which I could not allow," stammered the purser, pointing with her free hand at the sobbing figure a few feet away.

"That's a damn lie!" protested the accused pirate. "She

was begging for it, she was.”

“That I also doubt, Bart Hogg,” replied Langston coolly, shaking his head disdainfully. “Now give me the knife and get out of here. The captain will here about this, and if I have my way your days as part of our crew are numbered.”

“And what if I don’t give up me knife. You can’t have it. It’s mine, it is,” responded the sea rover, fear and uncertainty clearly reflected in his eyes.

“Then I’ll break your useless neck, Bart Hogg,” stated Langston with deathly calm. “It’s unlikely anyone will miss you.”

On noticing that Scowcroft had silently positioned herself behind him, Hogg realised his situation was hopeless. Although he was a strong man, Langston was a great deal stronger. He contemptuously spat at the ground near the feet of his gigantic shipmate as he reluctantly dropped his weapon. He scurried off like an injured dog towards the presumed safety of the disorderly throng in the plaza. When he considered himself to be at a safe distance he cried out. “You ain’t heard the last of this, you lousy croakers! I’ve got mates, I have.”

“I thank you for stepping in, Sam, but I could have dealt with him myself,” said Scowcroft sombrely, once Hogg was out of sight.

“I don’t doubt it for a second, but if you had killed him there would have been reprisals,” replied the woman’s rescuer, “but it’s true that he has a dozen or so cronies among the crew, and no-one can fend off a swift knife in the back in the dead of night. You would have no longer been safe aboard *Dream Chaser* had you slain him.”

“You’re probably right, Sam,” conceded the woman, helping the shaken young girl to her feet, “but what can we do about it?”

“I’ll have a word with the Captain. He’ll know what

to do. All I know is that as long as that wretched man is aboard you won't be able to sleep soundly at night."

"He has to go," muttered the purser to herself.

"Let's return to the festivities. I think you'd better stay where I can see you this evening," suggested the considerate sea rover.

"I'll watch your back too, Sam," added Scowcroft with a grateful smile. "You've made yourself a target for him and his mates by aiding me."

The two pirates escorted the anxious native girl back to her companions before seeking out Captain Ironside to inform him about the unpleasant incident. As they went, Scowcroft glanced over at Hogg, who was now standing among a group of his mates, and was to all appearances boasting about some imagined deed. She doubted he would tell his companions how he really got the cut on his arm. Shaking her head disdainfully to herself, the pirate woman joined in with the final two verses of a familiar drinking song known as *The Butcher and the Tailor's Wife*, which her shipmates were rowdily singing, having tired themselves physically with drink and dancing.

And the butcher's taken off his clothes

A-going into bed,

How he was struck when he did spy

One of the tailor's legs!

"Is this your husband's dog?" he says,

"I'll shoot him for the fright."

"Oh spare my life!" the tailor cries,

"And you can have my wife!"

The situation slowly deteriorated as the evening progressed: a dozen natives were lying comatose around the edges of the dance floor, not used to the strong liquor the pirates had plied them with; Sam Taylor had vomited

in an ornate punch bowl after having just emptied it of its previous contents; a couple of minor scuffles had broken out between wine-soaked crewmembers. Captain Ironside was considering winding down the festivities before he totally lost control of the situation when he heard anxious shouts and screams that reached him from one corner of the plaza. He headed rapidly towards the source of the commotion where he was greeted by the unnerving sight of a man clad in a mail shirt and visored helm, waving a fearsome longsword wildly above his concealed head. The captain was about to draw his sword and meet the sudden threat when it occurred to him that something was odd about the attacking knight. Glancing down at the man's legs, he noticed something familiar about the tatty linen trousers and filthy leather shoes – this was not the apparel of a medieval knight. The metallic laughs emanating from under the metal visor confirmed that this wasn't an escaped Templar on the rampage, but one of his own crew – Zachariah Norton, a sailmaker from New England.

“Take off that armour, Norton!” bellowed Ironside. “You're frightening the natives.”

“It were just a joke,” grinned Norton sheepishly after dropping the sword and removing the cumbersome helmet.

“Your humour leaves a lot to be desired,” scowled the irate Swede, gradually calming down. “If the guards had impaled you on their spears, I'd have been minus a sailmaker.”

“Didn't think of that, Cap'n,” answered the sailmaker, clearly worse the wear for drink.

“Where did you get the armour and sword anyway?”

“Found it in that building over there when I went for a slash,” said Norton, pulling the mail shirt over his head with some difficulty. “There's plenty more of it there.”

The captain recalled that the prisoners had been stripped of their weapons and armour before they had been led off, he just wished the natives had thought to store it somewhere out of the reach of the pie-eyed pirates. This final devilish escapade convinced him it was time to call it a night to avoid further embarrassment in the eyes of their generous hosts. It took the captain a good part of an hour to break up the riotous shindig, but with the help of some of the less intoxicated crewmembers – namely O'Malley, Langston, Scowcroft, and Asbat – he finally managed to drive the drunken pirates like cattle towards the quarters that had been allotted to them. The inebriated crew had grabbed as much booze as they could before they exited the plaza and were staggering and falling as they were stumblingly herded out of the square. Bart Hogg was one of the last to leave, only agreeing to do so when Sam Langston loomed threateningly before him. Once Hogg involuntarily departed, the exasperating sea rover and his mates started singing cacophonously as they slowly made their way down the sandy street, passing an amphora of wine around as they went.

*Oh it's of a wealthy tailor,
In London town did dwell,
And he had a handsome wife,
And her name was Mary Bell.
She's gone to the butcher's,
A joint of meat to buy,
"What is your will, dear woman?"
The butcher did reply.*

Captain Ironside was glad when the sozzled seamen were safely confined to the large chamber where they continued their vinous celebrations until the last of them slipped into a deep, befogged slumber. When he was sure

there would be no further trouble, he sought out the small room, which he and his wife had been given. There he found Cassandra in her petticoat, brushing her long, black hair.

“There you are, darling,” she sighed with relief. “I was starting to think you’d succumbed to temptation and joined that sloshed rabble.”

“No, dear, I just wanted to be sure they’d settled down. Worrying what that lot might get up to, I didn’t dare drink more than two glasses of wine tonight.”

“Yes, they are quite a handful when they let their hair down,” replied Cassandra sympathetically.

“They’re quite a handful under normal circumstances, but when drunk they’re worse than a gaggle of excited children,” responded her spouse bitterly.

“I tried to find Nefertari to apologise for the crew’s unruly behaviour while you were busy rounding up the men, but I couldn’t find her anywhere,” said Cassandra earnestly. “Have you seen her?”

“The last time I saw her, she was speaking to Benton,” stated Ironside.

“You don’t think those two hooked up, do you?” answered his wife in disbelief.

“Stranger things happen at sea,” chuckled the pirate captain.

“I certainly hope it’s true, as I was starting to worry that she had eyes for you,” said Cassandra in all seriousness.

“Whether she did or not, I cannot say, but it matters not as I only desire you, my love,” replied Ironside, taking his wife gently in his arms.

“I’m glad to hear it, Björn,” smiled the woman, caressing his whiskered cheek. “Let’s go to bed.”

“Good idea, Cassandra. I’m knackered.”

“I wasn’t talking about sleeping dear. At least not straight away,” the Bermudian woman smiled alluringly.

Shaking off his fatigue, Captain Björn Gunnarsson stripped off his dusty garments and eagerly joined his wife in the comfort of the plush bed.

A reluctant departure

After a couple of weeks of hedonistic relaxation and no further incidents worth mentioning, the crew of *Dream Chaser* reluctantly voted to sail on in search of a way back to their homeland. The inhabitants of Eleutheria saw to it that the ship was fully stocked with provisions and even presented the pirate saviours with a significant amount of gold and silver in return for their aid, which, to the horror of the whole company, Captain Ironside magnanimously attempted to refuse, deeming that it had been his duty to help those in distress – in this matter the captain was unanimously overruled by the rest of the crew.

“Be you mad, Cap’n?” protested Pete on hearing the unbelievable words uttered by the pirate captain. Realising he would have a mutiny on his hands if he didn’t let the matter drop, he immediately conceded to the wishes of the others and thanked the hosts for their generosity.

The following day, while overseeing the loading of supplies, Ironside was timidly approached by Alexander Birdwell, the seaman with the soul of a woman.

“Can I speak to you for a moment, Cap’n?” Birdwell asked nervously.

“Of course you can, Alexander,” replied the captain comfortingly.

“I wanted to ask you something, Cap’n,” said the young pirate in a quiet voice.

“Out with it, lad.”

“I hope my request doesn’t anger you, but I would like to remain in Eleutheria when you leave,” answered

Birdwell with an anxious grin.

“And why might that be? Are you not happy with us?” frowned the Swede.

“I’m very grateful for all you and some of the others have done for me, Cap’n, but I feel my rightful place is here,” said Birdwell apologetically. “No-one judges me here. Here I feel at home and here I can be myself.”

Ironside remained silent for a moment, appraising the young man standing before him, who was trembling slightly under the scrutiny of his superior. Then with a broad smile Ironside spoke. “Most of us will be sorry to lose you, Alexander, but you must follow your heart. I suggest you quietly say your good-byes to those who are dear to you and slip away before the others notice. I’ll think up a plausible excuse for why you chose to leave the crew.”

“You have my undying gratitude, Captain!” responded the young pirate, joyously throwing his arms around the astounded captain.

“All right, Alexander,” chuckled Ironside with embarrassment, “there’s no need to get carried away. I don’t want to draw attention to the fact you’re leaving. There are some who might resent it and others who might also be encouraged to remain here. I do not feel that all your shipmates would act in the spirit of this free society as you might.”

The beaming youthful seaman backed away a few yards uttering words of thanks before running off to say his farewells to the few who had been kind to him during his time on the pirate ship. Captain Ironside stood for a moment on the quayside scratching his chin and wondering if he himself was making the right decision in parting this fair land. Maybe he and Cassandra would be better off here, and they would certainly never find another such happy and carefree place. It didn’t take him

long to dispel these fanciful thoughts. No, as captain he had a responsibility to get his crew home, if he could, and, to be honest, there were too many souls among the company that would probably end up sowing seeds of discord in this wondrous country, if he didn't get them as far away from it as possible. Snapping out of his reverie, he continued to supervise the preparations, which ran surprisingly smoothly, except for one minor incident when Henry Sands, a competent leadsman from London, was discovered trying to smuggle a young native girl aboard in a barrel. He reluctantly accepted that it would be unkind to snatch the girl from her home, even if it was for love, and when given the choice of staying with her in her own land or staying with the crew, it was with a heavy heart that he chose the latter. The tearful girl was escorted to the shore, where she was comforted and accompanied home by Nefertari.

Early that evening, after some emotional farewells, *Dream Chaser* sailed out from the bay on the ebbing tide. Those not occupied with the sails and rigging crowded the gunwale and watched the land of abundance and freedom slowly grow smaller. More than a few among the crew wondered to themselves if it would not have been better to remain there, especially on learning that Alexander Birdwell was no longer with them. A few wanted to return and forcefully fetch him, claiming no-one had the right to desert their shipmates after signing the ship's articles, but most respected the young sailor's choice. Ironside had informed them that Birdwell had chosen to stay out of love, which was not a complete lie, as any freedom loving man or woman would find it difficult not to become enamoured with that strange, welcoming land.

Once the ship had caught a good breeze and was safely underway, Ironside decided it was time to sort out an

issue which was bothering him – Bart Hogg’s deplorable behaviour at the feast. After speaking to Pete and Faustus, the pirate captain rang the bell to summon the crew to a general assembly. Standing on the quarterdeck, he looked down at a sea of expectant faces.

“We are assembled here to sort out a dark matter,” announced the captain sternly. “It has come to my attention that a member of this company overstepped the mark where our hosts in Eleutheria were concerned. The said person is accused of attempting to take a native girl against her will and assaulting an upstanding crewmember who stepped in to hinder the disgraceful act.”

There was a discontented mumbling among those assembled and Bart Hogg shifted uneasily, averting the accusatory gaze of Charlotte Scowcroft.

“Who’s the cowardly weevil who bullies young girls?” asked Benton loudly, scanning the crowd of frowning faces menacingly.

“It was that weak-willed cur, Bart Hogg!” cried out Scowcroft, pointing reprovingly at the perpetrator, who had shrunk behind the foremast in an attempt to avoid being noticed.

“That’s a slanderous lie, wench!” the thickset man protested on hearing the derogatory allegation. “That girl wanted me. You were just jealous because she was so pretty and you’re not, you unhandsome witch.”

Only the small group congregated around Hogg nodded in complete agreement, the rest vocally expressed their disapproval of the harsh, insulting words.

“You’re a gutless wastrel, Bart Hogg,” stated Scowcroft challengingly. “Even now you are too cowardly to admit you attempted to subject that native lass to your depraved desires. Then you tried to beat me for intervening.”

“And I would’ve showed you your proper place had

not your half-witted lackey saved your sorry ass, you meddling hag,” snarled the accused, his words dripping with venom.

“Choose your words more wisely, Hogg, or there’ll be hell to pay,” Langston’s voiced boomed across the deck.

“I ain’t afraid of you, Samuel Langston,” sneered the thuggish pirate, feeling more confident now he was among his buddies.

Captain Ironside’s heart was beating wildly as he assessed the volatile situation. Neither Hogg nor Scowcroft were particularly popular with the majority of the crew, both only supported by their own small group. He himself particularly disliked the sadistic Hogg, who was more aptly suited to the crew of *Vengeful Mermaid*. In contrast, although Charlotte could be trying at times, he’d developed a soft spot for her effectual and resourceful manner. Hogg, on the other hand, was a nuisance, who was only useful on the rare occasions there was a fight. He realised there would never be peace on the ship until one of them was gone, and he certainly wasn’t prepared to lose Scowcroft. Neither could he forcefully eject Hogg from the vessel, as although not particularly liked by most, it was he, being a man, who was likely to garner the most support among the male-dominated crew should the choice have to be made. Although in no position to expel Hogg from the crew, it was clear to Ironside that he couldn’t let his despicable behaviour go unpunished. He had to set the tone for the future regardless of how unpopular it might make him. He took a deep breath, cleared his throat and addressed the uneasy faces expectantly observing him.

“I judge Bart Hogg’s actions on shore to be reprehensible and if they had occurred on board this ship, I’d have seen to it that he was marooned on the next island we found. That said, we cannot let such indefensible conduct go

unpunished, so I suggest that all privileges be withdrawn from the perpetrator, Bart Hogg, including a share of any plunder, until it be deemed that his comportment falls in line with the articles of this fine company.”

“And who’ll decide when that’ll be?” inquired Powder Keg Pete, whose responsibility it was to see that crewmembers received a fair hearing and judgement, no matter how distasteful he might find their dealings.

“I propose the whole company convene in one month after judgement to discuss the matter once again,” recommended the pirate captain earnestly.

“That be fair,” nodded Pete, although Hogg and his mates seemed to think otherwise. “Let’s take a vote then.”

With Pete’s consent, the vote was taken, the result narrowly to Hogg’s detriment.

“You’re nothin’ but a meddlesome fishwife, Scowler,” bellowed Hogg on hearing the outcome, shaking his fist wildly at the pestiferous woman whose accusations had cost him dearly. “You’ll pay for this, you will!”

“If that’s a challenge, Bart Hogg,” responded Scowcroft calmly, “then I willingly accept – pistols or cutlasses?”

A veil of silence so thick that a knife could cut through it fell over the deck. Everyone turned in unison to face Hogg, expectantly awaiting his response.

Encouraged by those he called his friends urging him to do away with Scowcroft once and for all, the stocky pirate took a step forward. “I’ll do you bad, you barmy shrew, if that’s what you want,” hissed Hogg, placing his hand on the hilt of his dagger.

“To the death then!” stated Scowcroft menacingly, standing boldly with legs astride and both hands supported on her hips.

“There’ll be no fighting aboard this ship,” interceded Ironside swiftly. “It is forbidden by the articles.”

“You’ve no right to stop ‘em, Cap’n,” cried out one of

Hogg's associates.

"You're right in that matter, Thomas Lawford," answered Ironside drily. "So the duel will be fought at next landfall, supervised by Pete and myself."

There was an agitated murmur from the crowd of pirates, who had until now never been confronted with a conflict among their shipmates that had escalated to such a level. Only Hogg's companions and Scowcroft herself seemed pleased by the announcement of the duel, but once Ironside had dismissed the crew and they were going about their routine tasks, they soon put the unsavoury dispute out of their minds. After the others had dispersed the concerned Swede took his valued purser to one side.

"Was that wise, Charlotte?" frowned the pirate captain. "I don't want to lose you. That man's a mean fighter."

"And I'm not?" came the ill-humoured reply.

"I admit you have a fair chance against him, but that rogue possesses a vicious and merciless streak a mile wide. Is there no other way we can resolve this matter?"

"Throw him in the sea," suggested the woman only half in jest.

"That's out of the question, Charlotte. It would cause unrest among the men, even if I managed to make it look like an accident."

"Then there is no other way," answered Scowcroft sullenly.

"But, as I said, I fear losing you," said Ironside almost pleadingly.

"I cannot live constantly looking over my shoulder in fear of a knife in the back," replied the purser, shaking her head. "This is the only way."

"All right, Charlotte, if that's what you really want," replied Ironside with resignation. "Pete and I'll see to it that it's a fair fight. I suggest you keep a low profile for the time being."

“Don’t worry, Captain, I’ll stay out of the way until we reach land.”

With a regretful expression gripping his tired features, Ironside placed a comforting hand on the seawoman’s shoulder. They exchanged rueful smiles before Scowcroft disappeared below deck to inform her friend and companion, Lucienne, of the outcome of the assembly. As he turned to make his way back to his cabin, he saw Faustus approaching him with a morose expression on his face.

“Everything in order, Faustus?” he inquired apprehensively.

“No, it concerns me that Charlotte will have to fight that uncouth devil,” he replied grimly. “He’s much stronger than her, you know.”

“I can’t prevent them from confronting each other on land. Anyway, I’m sure Charlotte can look after herself.”

“Can’t we find a way to save her from this peril? Maybe I could poison Hogg. Then there would be no need for a duel,” suggested the surgeon despairingly.

“I can’t believe you would recommend such a vile act, Faustus,” responded the shocked pirate captain. “You are always the first to condemn murder and unnecessary violence.”

“You are right, Björn,” admitted the concerned physician. “I would be going against my nature, not to mention my oath to save lives, if I committed such a desperate deed, but I see no other way to prevent Hogg from hurting Charlotte.”

“She’ll be all right,” answered Ironside uncertainly.

“I certainly hope so,” said Faustus with an unconvinced smile. “To be honest, I’m regretting leaving Eleutheria. Such barbarous actions are frowned upon there.”

“It’s not too late to turn back.”

“No, Björn, I signed the articles and am not about to

abandon you all. I can be of more service to the crew of *Dream Chaser* than to Nefertari and her people, especially with the extensive medicine chest I was presented with before we left,” replied the surgeon sorrowfully, “but I do hope to return there one day. It’d be a lovely place to settle down and grow old in.”

“I’m glad you’re willing to stay with us, as I’d sorely miss you if you were to depart,” said the captain affectionately. “Maybe we can all return one day. I know Cassandra would be happy to settle there.”

“Where is she by the way?”

“In our cabin. She doesn’t feel comfortable at the assemblies, not being a member of the crew.”

“She’s one of us now, whether she likes it or not,” stated Faustus, removing his hat and running his hand through his ruffled hair.

“Well, I’d better go and inform her of how it went. She’s grown quite fond of Charlotte.”

“As have I,” said the surgeon sadly.

With a sympathetic nod, Ironside turned and made his way to the quarterdeck while Faustus went below to appreciatively admire the contents of his new medicine chest. Meanwhile, Benton and O’Malley were standing on the poop deck watching the distant coast growing ever smaller.

“I’m sorry to leave, I am,” said Benton, ejecting a globule of saliva into the waves below.

“Why’s t’at, Will?” asked the Irish woman, brushing her wind-tousled hair from her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Well, the lasses there are going to miss me, they are, especially Nefertari. I bet she’s heartbroken,” replied the boatswain self-indulgently.

“You do have a high opinion of yerself, don’t ye, William Benton?” responded O’Malley disdainfully. “I

bet she's forgot yer scrawny arse already.”

“That ain't a nice thing to say, Neeve,” said Benton with a hurt expression on his face. “Me posterior is just fine. I didn't get no complaints from the wenches in Eleutheria. You really missed out on something choosing that clumsy oaf over the fine and dandy William Benton, you did.”

“You wouldn't be sayin' t'at if you'd seen the size of his ... ,” said O'Malley with an impish, recollective grin.

“There ain't no need to be vulgar,” the man from Plymouth quickly interrupted. “It ain't fitting for a lass to speak of such matters. Anyway, it isn't the size that counts.”

“A notion spread by the less well-endowed of the male species,” chuckled O'Malley, turning to leave.

“Now that's just plain mean,” said Benton, lost for a witty comeback. As he watched O'Malley descend to the weather deck, the ruffled seaman placed his hand on his crotch, fighting twinges of inadequacy – he had received no complaints from the women of Eleutheria, he reassured himself. He was rudely distracted from the ponderings on his manly prowess by the urgent cries from the top foremast yardarm. It seemed that the cursed mist had arisen once more. With a sigh he wondered where the damned fog would take them this time and he discovered to his own surprise that he secretly hoped it wouldn't take them home – at least not yet. Still irked by O'Malley's hurtful comments, Benton sulkily decided he needed a tot of rum to cheer himself up, and he had just reached the companion hatch when the vessel was again engulfed by the familiar but mysterious fog.

Interlude

“Come on, Mr. Benton, you’re not honestly telling me you encountered the descendants of the Knights Templar, are you?” gasped the astounded journalist in disbelief when the imprisoned pirate finally finished giving the account of his incredible adventure.

“What I say is as true as north is north and south is south,” replied Benton without a flicker of doubt.

“But pirates working in cooperation with Templars? That shouldn’t surprise me. Criminals and heretics make fine bedfellows,” said Bagshaw, scribbling in his notebook. “It also shouldn’t surprise me that your lot aided the natives – heathens and pirates, another jolly mix.”

“It ain’t fair calling them heathens, Mr, Bagshaw. Them natives are me mates,” protested Benton, then asking with a confused frown. “What’s a heathen?”

“An infidel, a pagan, an idolater, an unbeliever,” stated the reporter fervently.

“That ain’t true, Mr. Bagshaw. A nicer bunch of blokes and lasses I never did meet. They know no slavery and enjoy a liberty and equality denied the fair folks of England.”

“I must say I am partial to a certain degree of freedom, but too much of it might not be a good thing. The masses must know their place,” commented the journalist with conviction. “It concerns me that some folk crave after more freedom than is due to them. As for slavery, it’s absolutely necessary for our economy to thrive. It makes more sense that those African fellows tend the plantations than we Englishmen as they’re better suited to it.”

“That’s just plain nonsense, Mr. Bagshaw,” objected the convicted sea rover. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned on me travels, it’s that those dark skinned chaps ain’t no different to us. It’s them rich white buggers you have to watch out for. They would take more than is due to them and leave us with nothing.”

“Well, that might be true in some cases, especially among foreigners,” conceded Bagshaw. “When I think of the overindulgences of Le Roi Soleil, the late King Louis XIV of France, with his extravagant palace at Versailles.”

“I ain’t never heard of no Luh Raw Sollay bloke from France, neither do I know any palace of Versay, or whatever it’s called. All I knows is that there are greedy swines in all parts, who would rob us blind under the blanket of the law. That’s why I became a pirate – to even things out a little,” answered Benton with uncanny passion.

“I beg to differ, Mr. Benton, but no matter,” said the journalist quickly, not desiring to encourage further political discussion. “I’d like to get back to the topic of these alleged Templars, if that’s indeed who they were.”

“I told you that’s who they were, Mr. Bagshaw. What’s more, Fausty told me them Templars were a pretty mighty bunch hundreds of years ago,” commented Benton, dipping his grubby finger in the now lukewarm chocolate beverage and licking the sweet brown liquid off it.

“That’s right,” said Bagshaw, wrinkling his nose in a disapproval. “Some say they had become too powerful.”

“What do others say?” inquired the pirate, scraping out the bottom of the cup with a sticky digit.

“That the Order was suppressed because the King of France was so deeply indebted to them.”

“That’s what Fausty said!” cried out Benton enthusiastically.

“Well, whatever the reason, in 1307 the Templars were arrested and accused of such heinous crimes as blasphemy, idolatry and sodomy,” stated the journalist earnestly.

“They sound like quite a wicked bunch, if you ask me. It probably weren’t such a bad thing that French king bloke getting rid of ‘em,” stated Benton humourlessly.

“It turns out that many of those accusations may have been false, being just a ploy of King Philip to get his hands on the Templars vast funds,” Bagshaw explained.

“He’d have made a great pirate that Philip,” chuckled the ex-boatwain.

“Possibly,” frowned the reporter. Fearing he was losing control of the conversation, he quickly pushed on with what he really wanted to say. “As I was saying, King Philip of France dissolved the Order, condemning many of the leading knights to be burned at the stake. It is said the majority escaped unscathed, simply joining other orders, such as the Hospitallers, or living out their days peacefully. That brings me to the subject of the lost Templar fleet: some say the fleet sailed away with such treasures as the Holy Grail and Ark of the Covenant never to be seen again; others claim there was no Templar fleet at all and that they only had a handful of leased cargo vessels at their disposal.”

“And what do you say, Mr. Bagshaw?” inquired Benton with genuine interest.

“Until I heard your tale, assuming it’s true, I would have said the latter assumption be true, but now I’m not so sure,” admitted Bagshaw, scratching his head. “It also interests me that you claim the city those strange natives live in is called Eleutheria. While researching my book I discovered there is an island called Eleuthera in the Bahamas, which was settled by a group of puritan settlers from Bermuda in 1648, who were led by a William Sayle and known as the Eleutherian Adventurers.”

“Them natives weren’t no puritans, thank the Lord,” said Benton, fondly reminiscing about his time spent in that wonderful city. “Did you know that Eleutheria comes from some old Greek word for liberty,” added the seaman knowledgeably, recalling what Faustus had told him while they were there.

“Yes, I’m aware of that, Mr. Benton. I’m schooled in the classics,” replied the journalist proudly.

“Which classics?”

“What do you mean which classics?” sighed the perplexed reporter. “There’s only one classics, that of the literature and languages of ancient Greece and Rome.”

“Really?” responded Benton doubtfully.

“Anyway, you also mentioned that the land those natives dwell in is called Adeia,” continued Bagshaw, keen to show off his knowledge of the subject.

“That I did.”

“Well, did you know that it meant ‘abundance’ in ancient Greek?” stated Bagshaw with a smug grin.

“That I didn’t, Mr. Bagshaw, and neither did old Faustus. You must be smarter than he is, and that’s saying something,” gasped the impressed prisoner.

“Thank you, Mr. Benton. I was top of my class in Greek and Latin, you know,” smiled Bagshaw self-indulgently.

“Any more hot chocolate in that there pot?” responded Benton, quickly losing interest in matters far above his

intellectual station. "Nice bloke he was, that governor."

"Which governor?"

"The one from the real Eleuthera in the Bahamas, although I think he might have been the governor of Harbour Island. As far as I know, Eleuthera's only inhabited by a bunch of farmers. Can't remember the bloke's name though," said Benton, pouring the last dregs of chocolate into his cup. "Used to buy the plundered goods from the pirates of Nassau, he did. No questions asked."

"Did you know that Charles Vane attacked and looted the island for a whole month after realising it would be futile to attempt to reclaim Nassau once Woodes Rogers had established himself there as the new governor?"

"Don't surprise me one bit," replied the sea rover, slurping on the last of the sweet beverage. "Always was a bit mad, that one. I wonder what became of him."

"They say he was hanged at Gallows Point in Port Royal," explained the journalist. "Seems he got himself shipwrecked and was picked up by a merchantman. One of the crew recognised him for the rogue he was and he was promptly taken to Jamaica."

"No great loss. Never did like him much," answered Benton with a satisfied belch. "Although I wouldn't wish a hanging on anyone. Not even him."

"On the subject of punishments, why wasn't that man Hogg promptly castigated for his deplorable actions? On a naval vessel the captain would surely have had the reprobate flogged, or even hanged," inquired Bagshaw.

"The captain don't have that kind of authority on one of our ships. Anyway, we don't do that kind of thing to our own."

"But duelling is permitted?" asked the astounded interviewer. "It doesn't surprise me that your lot would resort to such a murderous and illegal means to resolve

a dispute, but it is normally an exploit reserved for the aristocracy.”

“We’re all aristocrats, us sea rovers. No man is better than the other on board of one of our vessels,” replied Benton with conviction. “And as for duelling, it says in the code that no man is to strike another aboard the ship and is to settle such quarrels on shore with pistol or sword.”

“But one of the duellists was a woman.”

“Scowcroft counts as a man aboard *Dream Chaser*, and a better man than many in my eyes.”

“I see,” said Bagshaw, scribbling in his notebook. “So what happened to her? Did the duel ever take place?”

“Don’t fret, Mr. Bagshaw, I’ll soon get to that, if you let me finish me story.”

“Yes, of course, Mr. Benton, but first I have a few more questions about your last adventure.”

“Fire away,” said Benton, relaxedly leaning back in his chair and resting one foot on the surface of the grubby table, revealing a tattered, odorous shoe to the world. Bagshaw made a mental note to acquire a new pair for the convict should he be permitted to return, not so much out of charity, but more to spare the assault on his olfactory senses.

“There are two terms you used when explaining the caulking of your ship that, not being a seaman, I’m not familiar with,” said Bagshaw with a poised pen. “What is oakum?”

“Oh, that’s an easy one,” grinned Benton, revealing his chocolate stained teeth. “It’s any old material, usually hemp rope fibres untwisted from ropes that have outlived their usefulness. It’s ideal for stuffing in the gaps between the planks. What’s the other thing you wanted to know?”

“Would you be so kind as to enlighten me to what graving is?”

“Another easy one. Ain’t yer got any more challenging questions?” responded Benton haughtily. “Graving is the stuff that gives added protection to the planking. It’s usually made of tallow, quicklime, white lead, and resin, or something like that. Has to be applied hot. Disgusting stuff it is. Makes me want to retch, it does. I refuse to dirty me hands with it.”

“You mean you don’t help the others with the task of applying it?” asked journalist, unsurprised by the revelation.

“Not bloody likely. I’m too important for such a menial task,” explained Benton pridefully.

“I see,” said Bagshaw, jotting down what he had been told.

“Tell yer what, Mr. Bagshaw, if I ever get out of this cursed place alive, I’ll get yer a copy of the book called *A Sea Grammar* by that Captain Smith chap. It contains all you need ter know ‘bout seafaring,” Benton generously offered.

“Thank you, Mr. Benton, but do you really believe you have any chance of getting out of this godforsaken place? You are condemned to be hanged, after all.”

“Thanks fer reminding me, Mr. Bagshaw,” replied the prisoner sardonically.

“According to your account, you seem to be a bit of a ladies man, Mr. Benton,” commented the journalist after consulting his notes.

“That’s right, Mr. Bagshaw,” acknowledged Benton self-assuredly. “You might not think it now, considering the sorry state I’m in, but when left to me own devices I’m irresistible to the lasses, I am. They can’t keep their lusty hands off me.”

“Is that so?” said Bagshaw with a sceptical frown. “You didn’t seem to have had much luck with that O’Malley woman, did you?”

Benton stood up so abruptly that his chair clattered to the floor. "Don't you mention that Irish fury's name in me presence again, Mr. Bagshaw," the irked pirate said in an angry, raised voice. "Not if you want to hear more of me tale."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Benton," replied the startled reporter. "I meant no offence by my remark. It just surprises me that this O'Malley woman would spurn the attentions of a man who would otherwise appear to be so appealing to the fairer sex."

"It baffles me too," answered Benton in a more conciliatory tone, not wishing to bite the hand that was so generously feeding him. The thought of spending his final days alone in a dingy, damp cell was more than he could bear. The distraction provided by Bagshaw's visits was the only thing keeping the regret and despair, which perpetually hovered above him like vultures awaiting the passing of a dying man, at bay. "Her loss is all I can say. That's all I've got to say on the matter."

"All right, Mr. Benton, I'll respect your wishes," said Bagshaw with a reassuring smile. "Could we now get back to the story as the hour is getting late?"

"Certainly," replied the imprisoned sea rover, licking his lips excitedly. "What happened after we came out of the mist again is ..."

Fiddler's Green

A storm is brewing

Captain Ironside and his wife were sitting at the small table nailed to the floor of their cabin enjoying a meal consisting of ingredients donated by the kind people of Eleutheria and lovingly prepared by the ship's cook, Callum MacGee.

"I really like these sweet potatoes," commented Cassandra, savouring the flavour. "I wonder what's in this sauce."

"I'm not sure," replied her spouse, licking his lips. "All I know is that MacGee stocked up well on spices before we left. I've never seen a man get so excited over a crate of coloured powders."

"Whatever they are, those powders have taken the nourishment aboard this ship to a whole new level."

"Yes, indeed, although I did overhear Benton complaining that the food has become a little too rich for his sensitive palate," chuckled the pirate captain.

"Some people are never satisfied," said Bermudian woman drily.

“Yes, but it seems he has compensated by appropriating most of the olives that were brought on board before we left.”

“You mean to say he’s taken them all for himself?” said Cassandra with astonishment. “I thought it was against your ship’s articles to take things without permission.”

“It is, but in this case the crew have given their unspoken assent,” explained Ironside before taking another mouthful of the delicious fare. “Fortunately for Will, most of the crew detest olives. If he were caught helping himself to the rum store, that would be a different matter completely.”

“I see,” said Cassandra, wiping the corners of her mouth with a cotton serviette. “Do you think we are nearing home?” she asked in a more serious tone.

“That we can only hope, dear,” replied the captain earnestly. “Some of the crew still believe there is a chance of capturing that Spanish treasure galleon before we reach familiar waters, although I doubt we’ll ever see her again.”

“I’ll just be glad to get home. Maybe we should have stayed in Eleutheria. We could have made a good life for ourselves there. I think Birdwell might have made the right decision.”

“If it were just you and me, I might have considered it, but, as it is, I’m still responsible for this ship and its crew.”

“You could have given up the captaincy,” suggested Cassandra.

“I could have,” responded Ironside with a hint of regret, “but all except Benton lack the knowledge and experience to sail this ship for any length of time, and I’m not sure how long the company would have tolerated that man’s roguish ways.”

“You’re probably right, dear,” smiled Cassandra, scraping the wooden bowl clean. “I’m a little worried

about the weather though,” she added after taking a sip of wine. “The sky is unusually overcast since we left the mist. Until now it’s always been fair and sunny when we emerged from it. What’s more, I feel a storm might be brewing.”

“Yes, the lack of sunlight does concern me, but there are no signs that there will be a storm,” explained Ironside. “You’re worrying about nothing, dear. Now that was a fine meal, but it’s time I went out to check if any sails need reefing. You’ll be all right on your own, won’t you?” Cassandra nodded. Satisfied, Ironside then rose and kissed his wife before leaving her alone in the gloomy cabin to contemplate what might lie in store for the *Dream Chaser*.

While the captain was in his cabin, William Benton was leaning against the windward gunwale chatting with Niamh O’Malley, whom he’d forgiven for her unwarranted aspersions concerning his manliness.

“This is the grimmest weather we’ve had since we left the Caribbean,” he commented.

“Yeah, we’ve been pretty lucky wit’ the weather so far,” agreed the Irish woman.

“A storm is on it’s way,” warned the boatswain, licking his index finger and holding it above his head to judge the breeze.

“You really t’ink so, Will?” asked O’Malley sceptically. “It’s a pretty light wind.”

“I’m telling you a storm is on the way,” replied Benton with certainty.

“How can yer tell?”

“Look at them clouds over there in the distance. Look how tall they are. Like towers reaching up to the heavens. A sure sign of bad weather. What’s more, the wind has changed direction and the air’s become a lot damper.”

“Look! Isn’t t’at land on the horizon,” exclaimed

O'Malley excitedly. "Maybe we can make it there before the storm catches up wit' us and find a sheltered cove."

"You're right, Neeve, I can see the shoreline. You've got eyes like a hawk. There's one problem though," replied the experienced sailor, squinting and shielding his eyes from the stinging sea spray.

"What's t'at, Will?" asked the seawoman with a puzzled expression.

"There ain't no way we're gonna make landfall before strong winds take us. We'd be caught on a lee shore."

"You mean we'd run t'e risk of being driven onto the rocks and dashed to pieces?" gasped O'Malley.

"You're more clever than you look, you are. That's exactly the perilous predicament we'd find ourselves in," frowned the concerned sea rover, ignoring his companion's scowl. "I'd better have a word with old Ironside about lying to."

"You mean it'd be better to sit out the storm?" the woman from Ireland asked Benton's departing back as the anxious seaman swiftly made his way to the quarterdeck. With a shrug of indifference, she turned to observe the nearing, ominous dark clouds.

Benton reached the quarterdeck just as Ironside was leaving his cabin. Before the disquieted pirate could address the captain they were both nearly bowled over by an unexpected gust of wind.

"There's a storm on the way! We're gonna have to lie to," shouted Benton as an unusually large wave caused the deck to momentarily slant precariously.

"Yes, could be a squall," replied the alarmed pirate captain, gripping the gunwale to steady himself. Urgently pulling out his speaking trumpet, he shouted an order to the whole company. "Prepare to wear ship!"

They were promptly joined by the quartermaster, who staggered up the stairs fighting to maintain his balance.

For once, it wasn't an excess of rum that was causing him to be unsteady on his feet.

"The sea be getting a bit choppy, Cap'n," Pete panted, almost stumbling over a coil of rope.

"Yes, a storm is clearly on its way, Pete," answered the captain pressingly. "Batten down the hatches and make sure all loose items are secured or moved below. Get some men to lash the guns alongside and secure the anchors with double ring and stock lashing. Rig a lifeline and ensure those who aren't working stay below."

"Aye, Aye, Cap'n," yelled Pete before returning to weatherdeck where he began bellowing commands.

Ironside took a few broad steps to where Christof Andersen was standing at the tiller. "Double man the helm, Christof, and hold the ship's head four points from the wind. Make sure to keep the main topsail just full, but not allowing it to fly back."

"Aye, Aye, Captain," barked the helmsman.

Ironside then turned to Benton. "We quickly need to take in most of the sails."

"Bare poles except for a reefed main tops'l to balance the ship and a backed fores'l, I reckon," suggested Benton.

"Make it so, Will, and quick about it."

"Right you are, Cap'n," responded the experienced boatswain with a grin that failed to hide his anxiety.

Soon the ship's rigging was alive with the bustle of men reefing and furling sails under the watchful eye of William Benton; others manned the braces, while yet more secured the deck. The guns were safely lashed to the side of the vessel under the careful supervision of Frederick Sauer – there was nothing worse than a loose cannon in a storm. Those who lacked seafaring skills, including Cassandra and Faustus, helped take any loose items below deck to keep them dry. All the while, Captain Ironside ran frantically around the deck seeing to it that

all tasks were carried out in a proper manner.

An unfortunate mishap

All except a skeleton watch on deck were huddling below when the worst of the gale and driving rain engulfed the frail wooden vessel. Hans Zimmerman, the ship's carpenter, was leading a small team to plug any leaks below the waterline while the sturdy Samuel Langston was manning the pump with the strength and stamina of ten men to prevent excess water from collecting in the bilges through seepage. Benton was unable to remain below when his beloved ship was in danger. He had insisted on supervising the storm watch, not trusting anyone else with the responsibility. Ironside had readily agreed, accepting that Benton was probably the most experienced seaman on board. He was now standing with Pete at the quarterdeck rail overlooking the weatherdeck worriedly observing the movement of the reefed topsail.

"Somethin' ain't right," he muttered half to himself.

"What be not right, Will?" inquired the drenched quartermaster.

"The wind's got a toehold on the reefed tops'l," Benton replied with some urgency. "Some sloppy bugger didn't secure it right. I have to tuck in those loose dog-ears and rope ends before it blows free."

Without waiting for a response from Pete, Benton scurried to the mainmast shrouds and started scrambling towards the top, his feet expertly finding grip on the soggy ratlines. With a shiver and a shrug, Pete followed, figuring the boatswain would need some help securing the loose ends. Both men cursed the wet and cold as they scrambled up to the topsail yard in the saturating spray from both sea and torrential rain. Benton knew he

was taking a great personal risk, but when it came to the safety of the ship and crew his usual self-indulgent habits were supplanted by an admirable sense of comradeship. With great effort both men finally reached the spot where the sail was coming loose. There was no need for an exchange of words as both experienced seamen knew what had to be done, besides, verbal communication would have been futile amidst the howling wind and roaring ocean – the occasional hand gesture sufficed. The two sea rovers had almost completed their arduous task when the unthinkable happened. A wave of momentous proportions together with a ferocious gust of wind hammered the ship with inexpressible force, knocking the vessel almost on her beam-ends. With a cry of terror, the stunned boatswain was thrown from the yard to plummet screaming into the wildly undulating waves. Pete managed to cling desperately to the yard with both feet dangling helplessly in mid-air for a few moments before his near-frozen fingers lost their grip, sending him after his hapless shipmate into the dark, foreboding depths below.

The fraught man from Plymouth gasped for air as he thrashed towards the surface of the icy water. He flailed wildly, managing to keep his head just above the surface, his limbs growing numb with cold. He helplessly observed the ill-fated quartermaster disappearing into the dark, aquatic abyss, dragged down by his woollen coat, unable to do anything to aid the man who would now forever dwell in Davy Jones's locker. Struggling to keep his head above the surface, he was washed by the billowing sea ever further from the *Dream Chaser*. A thousand thoughts raced through his despairing mind: he wondered if anyone was aware that he and Pete had been washed over board; he reflected on the fate of the ship without their expert navigator. What surprised him

most were the images of Niamh O'Malley floating before him, cursing him for being a fool. How he yearned for her to reach down and save him in those last moments. After what seemed like an eternity, all lucid thoughts began to fade and the last of his strength ebbed like the retreating tide as he felt himself being pulled down into a watery grave.

Spirits of the sea

Wet through and chilled to the bone, William Benton slowly came to his senses. He was aware that he was lying on damp sand in the shallow surf of an ebbing tide. He coughed and shivered as he pushed himself up to his knees to take in his surroundings. The sodden pirate found himself on a narrow beach in a sheltered cove. The sky was overcast and a saturating drizzle engulfed him as he crouched in the wet sand, battered by a chill wind blowing in from the sea. He vaguely recalled plummeting into the heaving, numbingly cold swell. His heart skipped a beat as images of himself disappearing beneath the surface of the violently tossing sea flooded his mind. How did he survive that? He was so sure his end had come. Where was he? Had he been washed up on the shore of the distant coast O'Malley had sighted? Was that even possible? The coastline had been much too far away and the currents too strong to reach without drowning. What about Pete? He was sure the quartermaster could not have made it too. Wiping the sea spray from his eyes with a damp sleeve, the soaked and trembling sea rover groggily pushed himself to his feet. He took a few unsteady steps before pausing. There was something that looked like a bundle of rags lying further down the beach. Attempting to run, he staggered, his legs weakened by the ordeal. Half walking half crawling, he finally reached the

mysterious object half-buried in the sand. He prodded it gingerly with an almost numb foot. The unrecognisable form stirred and with a groan slowly pushed itself up onto its elbows. Benton's heart leaped with joy when he recognised the discombobulated, bedraggled features of Powder Keg Pete staring up at him wide-eyed.

"Urgh," was all the dishevelled quartermaster managed to utter.

"You all right, Pete?" inquired Benton with concern.

"I feels like I been to the bottom of the ocean and back," spluttered Pete, forcing himself giddily to his feet.

"That's just where we might've been, Pete," replied Benton gravely. "You remember what happened?"

"I only remembers bein' thrown from the yardarm and into the billowing sea. After that me mind's a blank," answered Pete, pushing long strands of damp hair from his eyes. "Where do ye think we be now?"

"O'Malley sighted land before the storm hit us. Maybe we were washed up there, as impossible as it seems. By all rights, we should be down there feeding the fishes," said Benton, pointing to the dark, menacing waves.

"Aye, your right 'bout that. I guess old Neptune was with us," said Pete, straightening out his soggy, crumpled clothes. "Let's find some place to shelter from this bloody wind and rain."

The two marooned pirates scanned the top of the narrow beach, their visibility impaired by the constant drizzle and gloomy sky.

"Look! There be someone a coming," gasped Pete in astonishment.

Both men warily observed a figure with a broad, unusual outline slowly approaching them with a lantern swinging from one hand.

"Or something," responded Benton with a shudder.

"Be it a demon?" stuttered Pete with an anxious edge

to his voice.

Benton didn't answer, instead observing the strange form as it grew ever nearer through the drizzle. He prayed the new arrival was not of a violent disposition, because his pistols were back on the ship. Besides, even if he had them with him, they'd be useless as the powder would have been made into a sodden mess by the sea and rain. Still, they'd have been better than nothing – he could have used them as cudgels. He then remembered the knife he always carried for cutting rope and canvas. It wasn't very big, but it could certainly inflict a nasty gash. He surreptitiously slipped the small implement from his damp jacket pocket and concealed it behind his back. He would wait until he was sure the creature was hostile before he revealed it. Both men tensed and exchanged a concerned glance as the glow of the lantern grew more intense. Finally, the figure reached them and the sight that greeted them caused both men to let out a loud laugh of relief when the true nature of the newcomer was revealed. It was not the unholy apparition they feared it to be, but just a man, a man wrapped in a thick oilskin cape, which uncannily distorted his figure.

“You be nowt but a man,” chuckled Pete.

“Aye that I be,” responded the stranger heartily. “What did ye expect me to be?”

“I knew you were a man all along,” said Benton quickly. “Pete here let his imagination run wild.” Pete gave his shipmate a reproachful frown, but before he could speak the untruthful seaman bombarded the man with the lantern with a barrage of questions. “Are you a fisherman or maybe a whaler? Are you an Englishman? Can you tell us where we are? How did you find us?”

“All in good time, my dear fellow,” smiled the man. “All I'll tell ye at present is that me name be John and I'm here to fetch you into the warm.”

“So, you live here do ye, John?” inquired Pete, wiping away the water running down his forehead with a damp sleeve.

“In a manner of speaking. Now come with me lest ye catch yer death of cold.”

“We ain’t going nowhere with you til you tell us where you’re gonna take us,” replied Benton adamantly.

“I’ll take ye to the village yonder,” answered John, pointing to the brow of a hill dotted with oaks and pines. “Unless ye’d prefer to stay here.”

“Will there be rum?” asked Pete hopefully.

“Rum in abundance, me dear chap,” chortled John, whose glistening, bushy beard became visible in the shimmering lantern light. “Beer, wine, and brandy, whatever ye desire. There’s tobacco a plenty to fill yer pipe. There also be warm and hearty fare to fill yer bellies and drive away the chill, all served by fair and fetching lasses.”

“Well, Will, he’s convinced me, he has,” said Pete enthusiastically. “I ain’t spending a moment longer on this damp, cold beach being chilled to the bone. Besides, I needs a smoke and a drink, I do.”

“But we don’t know if we can trust this fellow,” protested Benton. “It might be a trap. He could be a robber, or worse, a slaver. I don’t fancy ending me days on no plantation, ruining me dainty hands and fair complexion.”

“He don’t look like no slaver to me,” countered Pete. “You ain’t no slaver are ye, John?”

“No, I’m no slaver,” smile John reassuringly.

“Ye ain’t no murderer, neither?” continued Pete.

“No, I be nowt but a simple fisherman,” answered John earnestly. “Now are ye coming or not?”

“I’m with yer, John,” replied the quartermaster, eagerly following their host as he turned and slowly made his way

up the beach, the promise of a tot of rum and a pouch of baccy driving all thoughts of his numb, saturated feet from his mind.

William Benton watched the two men disappearing into the hazy drizzle. What should he do? Could they trust this stranger, who seemed too good to be true? He could stay where he was in the hope that Ironside and the others would discover him, but what if the *Dream Chaser* had gone down in the storm? Then he'd be alone and probably starve or die of cold. His thoughts longingly drifted back to a time not so long ago when he was enjoying the comforts and hospitality of Nefertari and her people. Snapping out of his reverie, he realised he didn't really have a choice in the matter and, encouraged by the thought of a drink and a warm meal, the soaked and dishevelled sea rover hurried after the other two men before they completely disappeared. "Wait for me!"

Some ten minutes later the three men were entering a village of low stone buildings with thatched roofs. A warm, inviting glow emanated from the curtained windows and the joyous sounds of song and laughter filled the air. Benton thought it strange that the drizzle had completely subsided once they entered the quaint huddle of dwellings, it seemed even stranger that the cloud cover had dissipated to reveal a red-tinted setting sun. When he mentioned his observations to Pete, the quartermaster simply shrugged and said they had seen stranger things before now. His interest was focussed more on the prospect of rum and a smoke than on his present surroundings. One building stood out from all the others. It was a two-story structure of grey stone with a slate roof. A thin column of smoke danced in the air above a stout chimney. John led the two men towards the wide oak door of this large building, pausing to let his two guests read the creaking metal sign hanging above

the entrance. They could just make out the name of the establishment written in faded paint above the image of a jolly-faced fiddler playing his instrument in a sunlit meadow – Fiddler’s Green.

“It be a tavern,” said Pete gleefully as their guide pushed open the door to reveal a large hall bustling with life.

There was a sudden welcome assault on their senses as the two stranded pirates warily entered the taproom. The reassuring smell of beer and smoke wafted towards their nostrils and the sound of jolly music and song resonated in their ears. Excitedly taking in the inhabitants of the large room, the two sea rovers saw an assortment of men sitting in small groups around sturdy oak tables. Some were fishermen judging by their garb, others sailors, but all were clearly men of the sea. Benton noted the wide variety of clothing: some were wearing baggy knee-length breeches secured at the knee, others had on petticoat breeches with vibrant patterns open at the knee; yet others were wearing long trousers, which reached to their ankles. The assortment of garments the patrons of this establishment were wearing on their upper torso was just as varied: linen shirts, canvas jackets, woollen waist coats to name but a few. On their heads or placed on the table before them, Benton could see numerous items of headwear: Monmouth caps, floppy rimmed hats, tricorn hats, not to mention the colourful scarfs tied in a knot wrapped around some heads. Benton was about to remove his own hat as a sign of respect and to greet the curious eyes looking their way when he remembered he’d left it below deck on the ship, not wishing to lose it in the strong winds. What attracted his attention more than the seated guests were the young, attractive barmaids in their colourful, knee-length dresses, which revealed a generous amount of cleavage – a sight to

sooth the eyes of any man who had spent months at sea deprived of feminine company. He had never seen anything like it in all the taverns and alehouses he had frequented on his travels, both as a pirate and a law-abiding citizen. The delighted boatswain's jaw dropped as a dark-haired women saucily brushed past him with an alluring smile. Unable to take his eyes off the bonny lass as she moved away, Benton almost stumbled over a low stool while attempting to follow John and Pete to an unoccupied table in the corner of the smokey room. Quickly straightening himself up, he looked around to see if the young waitress had observed his mishap, partly relieved and partly irked when he noticed that her attention was now focused on serving a table of scruffy sailors. Only a grinning, grey-bearded fisherman seemed to have noticed his momentary embarrassment. Benton gave the man a curt nod before scurrying after the others and promptly taking a seat without looking back.

The two pirates were overwhelmed by the friendliness off the patrons of this unusual establishment, who were seated at the nearby tables. Not all the greetings were in English, but every one of them was sincere. After making themselves comfortable the two sea rovers paused to listen to an unfamiliar, but merry reel being played by a group of men at the back of the room. One of the musicians was playing a strange-looking instrument, a kind of squeezable box with a small keyboard of small buttons on one end.

"Shiver me timbers! What be that for an instrument?" asked the fascinated quartermaster.

"That be called an accordion," replied John with a smile.

"How do it work? Be it enchanted?" inquired the captivated seaman.

"No, it be as normal as a fiddle or whistle," laughed

John. "It be a wind instrument with two reed organs connected by folding bellows. Some calls it a squeeze box."

"The Devil's bellows more like," said Benton disapprovingly. "It ain't natural."

"Where do I get one?" asked Pete, ignoring the disparaging comment. "Can I have a go at playing it?"

"You just wants one to impress the lasses," quipped Benton, scanning the hazy room for the comely barmaid.

"Sure ye can have a go, Pete," answered John, beckoning for the accordion player to come over to their table after they had finished their jolly tune.

Powder Keg Pete warily took hold of the curious instrument with both hands, gingerly squeezing it and randomly pressing buttons. It emitted nothing but a pathetic wheezing sound.

"No, you have to hold it like this," grinned the accordion player, a squat, bald-headed man with a bushy, brown beard.

Pete tried again, frantically pushing and pulling the squeeze box, but, try as he might, he could only produce a disagreeable sound, which resembled more the cry of a dying cat than musical tones. After minutes of futile fiddling with the instrument and noticing the amused smiles of those sitting nearby, Pete handed it back to its patiently observing owner. "I think it be broken."

Chuckling, the bald, bearded man reclaimed his pride and joy, playing a melodious tune as he made his way back to join the rest of the band.

"It ain't broken, Pete," chortled Benton with malicious glee. "It's just that you have about as much musical talent as a lobster."

"Don't look so glum, Pete," interceded John on noticing the disheartened expression on the quartermaster's face. "It takes any man years of practice to play as well as

Francis over there.”

Benton was about to make another biting comment about his shipmate’s musical ability when his attention was drawn to the dark-haired barmaid, who was approaching the table with a charming smile lighting up her face.

“What would you fine fellows like to drink?” she asked in a voice which melted Benton’s heart.

“We don’t have no coin to pay for no drinks,” frowned Pete, glancing at their host with concern.

“Don’t worry about coin, Pete. You can order whatever your heart desires. It’s all on the house.”

“It be on the house? What sort of drinking establishment demands no payment?” asked the quartermaster suspiciously.

“There is no need of coin here,” answered John earnestly. “Besides, you’re my guests.”

“Then it be rum for me,” replied Pete cheerily, in need of no further convincing. “And a pipe of yer finest shag.”

“Right you are, luv,” answered the woman. The barmaid then turned to face Benton, who was staring besottedly at her. “What about you, me handsome?”

Benton’s heart fluttered at being addressed so flatteringly. Despite always having thought of himself as a good looking chap, he still always appreciated it when a member of the opposite sex confirmed this fact. He wondered why O’Malley had never said this to him. There must be something wrong with her, unlike this fair maiden standing before him, who was obviously of a more intelligent and appreciative sort. Realising the dark-haired woman was patiently awaiting his order, the smitten sea rover decided he had to say something before she took him for a witless fool.

“Me name’s William Benton,” he blurted out before he could stop himself.

“And my name’s Maria, but what is it you would like to drink, Mr. Benton?” replied the woman with a calming smile.

“Er, beer ..., no, rum ..., er, no, brandy,” stuttered the blushing pirate. Realising he was indeed starting to make a fool of himself, he decided that he needed to reassert himself. Taking a deep breath and ignoring the smirking quartermaster, he once more attempted to place his order. “If the drinks are free then I’ll take a tot of brandy and a quart of ale. Have you got any olives?”

“I’m sure I can find some out back, although there’s not normally a demand for them here,” answered the woman cordially.

Not long later the raven-haired serving woman returned, skilfully balancing a tray on her arm while she distributed the drinks. The two thirsty pirates gleefully accepted the alcoholic beverages, Benton greedily tucking into the bowl of fresh olives dressed in herbs and oil the moment they were placed in front of him.

“You’re a gem,” he said with a half-full mouth to the woman as she was about to leave the table. “Fancy joining us, me pretty,” he added, patting his lap invitingly.

“Maybe later, luv,” she replied flirtatiously, looking back at him and smiling as she weaved her way back to the bar.

The content seaman gave the departing woman an acknowledging wink before returning to his beloved olives.

“Got somethin’ in yer eye, have yer, Will?” frowned Pete. When his shipmate, who was lost in the enjoyment of his favourite snack, failed to answer, the quartermaster continued to speak. “Do ye always have ter bother the ladies so, Will? Can’t yer leave ‘em in peace fer a moment?”

“I ain’t bothering her, Pete,” said Benton before taking a large swig of ale. “She’s clearly interested in me. Even

called me handsome.”

“I bets she says it to all the punters,” growled Pete.

“She didn’t say it ter you, did she?” snapped Benton.
“Yer just jealous, you are.”

The quartermaster simply grunted, downed a generous tot of rum, and started stuffing rough tobacco into his clay pipe, which had miraculously survived his wild thrashing about while he was sinking into the dark depths not so long ago. A few moments later, a man in petticoat breeches and a striped linen shirt joined them at the table. He appeared to be a friend of John’s, who introduced the man as Richard. Pete appraised the clean-shaven newcomer for a moment before speaking.

“Be you a sailor?” he asked curiously.

“Yes, a sailor in the Royal Navy, I was,” answered the man, beckoning a barmaid over to order a tankard beer. Benton was disappointed it wasn’t the woman he’d taken a shine to who came over.

“What ship were ye on?” continued Pete.

“I served on HMS *Association*,” answered the man proudly. “Gunner’s mate, I was.”

“That name sounds familiar,” said Benton absently as he scanned the room for the dark-haired woman whose name was Maria.

“A sturdy 90-gun second-rater she was,” answered the man called Richard. “Played a leading role in the capture of Gibraltar, she did.”

“Why aren’t ye serving on her now?”

“Me time was up,” answered Richard solemnly. After quickly downing his beer, he stood up. “Must be on me way. It were nice meeting you two fellows.” With a slight bow, Richard took his leave of the two pirates.

Pete scratched his head and exchanged a glance with Benton, who was looking very pleased with himself, just having succeeded in ordering a large jug of rum for the

two men. He filled Pete's and his own cup to the brim, but when he tried to do the same for John, the old seaman stood and excused himself, informing them he had some business to attend to and would rejoin them later.

"Nice place here," commented Benton. "I wonder if they've any more olives." On noticing the quartermaster was lost deep in thought, he rapped on the table and tried to attract his attention. "Anyone at home in there?"

"Uh, what?" responded Pete in surprise. "Oh, I were just pondering upon that Richard bloke. Says he served on a second-rater. Wonder what he's doin' here."

"What did he say the name of his ship was?" asked Benton.

"HMS *Association*? That name ring any bells with yer?"

"Come to mention it, it does," replied Benton, his interest now awoken. "Now it's all coming back to me. There was some disaster back in 1707 when a ship of that name ran aground off the Isles of Scilly."

"Tell me more," ordered Pete, taking a deep swig of rum.

"Well, funny thing is, that very same ship was blown all the way to Gothenburg during that bloody big storm in 1703."

"The Great Storm?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Seems she survived that when many other ships didn't, only to be wrecked on rocks when returning from the Mediterranean."

"That Richard bloke must be one of the survivors," said Pete, stroking his glistening beard.

"Funny thing is, I heard that ship went down with all eight-hundred of its crew. Not a man survived."

"You think Richard be lying to us?" frowned the quartermaster.

"It's the only explanation, ain't it?" answered Benton

quickly.

Both men stared uncertainly at each other for a moment before simultaneously taking a large gulp of rum. Both stranded pirates sat in silence for a while, listening to a slow, but pleasant tune with a catchy chorus, to which most of the visitors of the tavern were earnestly singing along with.

*Put your money on the barrel,
Rum and baccy on the quay,
Put your money on the barrel,
Drink to the spirits of the sea.*

“I ain’t heard that one before,” commented Pete, wiping his lips on the sleeve of his still damp coat, which was giving off steam in the warmth of the crowded taproom.

“Me neither,” responded Benton appreciatively. “Nice song, though.”

Both men sang along heartily with full cups raised when the singers reached the chorus again. By the time the song was over both their cups were nearly empty and both men were beyond tipsy. Benton waved merrily to his favourite barmaid as she passed his table carrying a large jug of beer, his heart skipped a beat when she cast an entrancing smile in his direction. He was watching the woman disappear into the crowd while Pete was busy refilling his pipe when a curly haired, clean-shaven man wearing a red-striped waistcoat over white linen shirt and brown breeches, which were open at the knee approached them.

“D’ye mind if I join ye?” he asked in a thick west-county accent.

“Don’t see why not?” replied Benton, appraising the man, who looked somehow familiar.

“Where be ye from?” inquired Pete, squinting at the

newcomer, whom he judged must be in his late thirties, through glassy eyes.

"I'm from Dartmouth, I be," grinned the man, revealing a gap in his upper front teeth.

"Dartmouth!" responded Benton in a voice loud enough to attract attention from the adjoining tables. "I got family in Dartmouth, I have."

"A small world, it be," chuckled the man.

"Be ye a sailor?" slurred Pete, leaning forward to get a better look at the speaker.

"That I be," answered the man spiritedly. "I wuz sailin' on a trader 'til it went down off the coast o' Milford Haven in the mighty storm o' 1703."

"I heard a lot of ships were lost in that bloody storm. One of the worst ever, it was," said Benton, recollecting the tales he had heard of that fateful day in November. "Maybe you knew me cousin Robert, though I only met him when I was a nipper. He were also lost at Milford Haven in the storm. Some thirty vessels went down that dark day."

"Aye, maybe I did know him," replied the sailor from Dartmouth cryptically. "Anyhow, I got ter be on me way now." To Benton's surprise the other man then took hold of his left ear and tweaked it affectionately. Ignoring the astounded pirate's protests, he continued to speak. "You've put on a bit o' timber since I last laid eyes on thee. Ye ain't that scrawny runt ye used ter be."

"Geroff me!" howled the astonished boatswain, brushing away the other man's hand irately. "Just who do yer think you are?"

The ear-tweaking man just laughed and walked towards the door of the drinking establishment, oblivious to Benton's furious stare burning into his back. The strange seaman opened the main door, letting in a welcome draught of fresh air. Before he stepped out

into the cool air, the man from Dartmouth turned and answered the man from Plymouth's question in a loud voice. "Me name be Robert Benton." A moment later the door slammed shut.

Benton's eyes were transfixed in unbelieving horror at the closed door. It took him over a minute to recover from whatever shock had just hit him. Pete, who was engrossed in smoking his pipe, started when his shipmate sprang to his feet and bolted towards the door, jostling some of the customers and almost upsetting a table in the process. He wrenched open the heavy oak door and scanned the twilit street, only to discover there wasn't a single soul in sight. He contemplated going out in search of the mysterious man who claimed to be Robert Benton, but then thought better of it, deciding he needed a large swig of rum to calm his nerves. On returning to the table, he found that Pete had just ordered a bottle of brandy. Snatching the glass receptacle out of the quartermaster's hand, he took a generous gulp before plonking himself heavily down on his chair.

"What were that all about?" asked Pete, snatching back the bottle and topping up his own cup.

"Uh?" replied Benton, staring blankly at his shipmate.

"Do ye know that man?" persisted Pete.

"Er, I think it may have been me cousin Robert," stammered Benton disbelievingly.

"How can that be? Ye said yerself that he went down with his ship at Milford Haven," said Pete sceptically.

"I know I did. That's what me father told me, but now I'm not so sure," explained the perplexed sea rover. "Twelve I was the last time I saw Robert. He was a couple of years older than me and as big as a horse. Used to take pleasure in pushing me around, he did. He especially liked to tweak me ear and call me a scrawny runt, just like that bloke did."

“Do ye think yer father lied to you about him being dead?”

“That might be the case, though he had no reason to,” answered Benton, scratching his head.

“So you run after him ‘cos ye wanted to be sure?”

“Yes, that’s right, Pete.”

“It be a shame you didn’t find him.”

“It sure is, because if it had turned out to be Robert, I’d have punched his lights out as pay-back for all them times he tormented me,” snarled Benton.

Both men simply stared at each other for a moment before bursting into hearty laughter. Pete then refilled the cups with a hand that was growing increasingly unsteadier. The sounds and smells in the room seemed to grow intenser as the men continued to drink, as did Benton’s desire for Maria. On more than one occasion the woozy boatswain was delighted to attract the smiles of the attractive serving girl, which he interpreted as interest on her part. He was dreamily contemplating how to win the pretty young woman’s affections when another man approached their table and sat himself down without first asking permission. The man was dressed in very baggy knee-length breeches tied at the knee and a long, brown sleeveless leather waistcoat over a frilly sleeved white shirt. On his head he wore a black, floppy brimmed hat adorned with a large, red feather.

“What do you want?” asked Benton, annoyed at being disturbed in the hatching of his amorous plan.

“Buenos tardes, amigos,” said the man jovially. “You are not molested if I sit me here, no?”

“Hey, you ain’t a Don, are you?” asked Benton suspiciously.

“Who is this Don that you speak about?” inquired the puzzled man.

“He means if you be a Spaniard,” interceded Pete in a

hoarse voice.

“Yes, I am a man of Spain,” replied the man proudly.

“Bugger off then, Pedro, you ain’t welcome at our table,” snapped Benton.

“But my name not is Pedro, it is Francisco,” responded the bemused Spaniard.

“Leave the poor fella alone, Will,” slurred Pete, who was now slouched over the table with his chin just inches from its polished surface.

“And why should I do that?” demanded Benton.

“Because I wants to know what a Spanish bloke is doin’ ‘ere,” answered Pete with an edge of hostility in his voice. He then turned to the visitor sitting at their table. “So tell me, Francisco, what’s your story?”

“My story?” frowned Francisco.

“Yeh, yer story. Where yer from and what yer doing here?” Pete rephrased his question impatiently.

“Ah, mi historia,” exclaimed the Spaniard on realising what Pete was asking him.

“Get on with it, you Spanish git. You’re starting to bore me,” prompted Benton testily.

“La paciencia es una de las mejores virtudes,” replied Francisco inperturbably.

“Enough of yer Donnish gibberish!” snapped Benton threateningly. “Speak English or piss off.”

“Bueno,” replied the Spaniard with the palm of his hands placatingly held out facing the antagonistic Englishman. “I was a sailor on a treasure ship, which sank in a storm off the coast of Florida.”

“In what year?” asked Pete in a moment of alertness.

“In the year of our Lord 1715.”

“What were the name of yer ship?”

“The Santísima Trinidad.”

“Cut the crap, Pedro. You weren’t ever on that ship,” snarled Benton.

“I have said already my name is not Pedro, tonto,” replied the man, rising challengingly to his feet and placing his hand on the hilt of a dagger tucked neatly into his belt.

“And me name ain’t Tonto!” cried out Benton, pulling out his small knife as he sprung to his feet and glared with eyes filled with loathing for the Spaniard.

“Calm yerselves. I thinks it be better if ye leave us, Francisco,” suggested Pete surprisingly lucidly for a man who had consumed so much alcohol.

“As you wish, señores,” said the Spanish sailor, backing away from the table until he was a safe distance from the two men, then turning and disappearing into the crowd muttering insults to himself in Spanish.

“Good riddance to that lying, half-witted mooncalf,” growled Benton while watching the man disappear from view. “And me name ain’t Tonto.”

“Sit down, Will,” said Pete firmly, taking a swig from his cup to conceal an amused smile. He, unlike Benton, knew that ‘tonto’ was the Spanish word for fool, but desiring to drink in peace, he thought better than to tell his companion this. He was sure this knowledge would send his drunken shipmate hurtling off in search of Francisco, and who knew what might happen then. Once Benton was sitting and his cup overfull, Pete asked a question to find out why his comrade had reacted the way he did. “Why do you think he’s lying about being on that Spanish galleon called the Santísima Trinidad?”

“You know which ship that bloody Don was talking about, don’t you?” responded Benton, his mood lightening slightly.

“No, enlighten me, Will. I be a little slow on the uptake today, as I don’t see no reason to disbelieve him.”

“You probably know that ship better as the Urca de Lima.”

“Now that be a name I’ve heard before. So ye mean to tell me Francisco claims he was on one of those eleven ships laden with treasure that went down in a hurricane off the coast of Florida and attracted the attention of Henry Jennings and a whole load of other pirates?” asked the astonished quartermaster.

“Indeed I do.”

“And why don’t ye think he were on that vessel?”

“Because I heard well over a thousand men perished that day. There were only a few survivors,” explained Benton as if it should be crystal clear why Francisco was lying.

“But it could be that he be one of those few survivors,” proffered Pete. “Why do ye think he’s lying?”

“Because he’s a Spaniard and it’s in their nature,” answered Benton with a self-satisfied grin.

“If yer say so,” said Pete, unconvinced by his shipmate’s prejudices.

After a moment of silence, Pete took out his pipe again and began stuffing it full.

“Bad for you that is,” commented Benton, observing the other man at work.

“Who says?” frowned Pete.

“Faustus says so, and he knows a lot of things.”

“He don’t know much about sails and rigging.”

“Fair point,” conceded the boatswain.

The mood of the two shipmates bucked up again as they continued to drink their fill and joked about their shipmates, until Benton noticed that Maria had placed a knitted black shawl over her head and shoulders and was making her way towards the door.

“Where’re you going, Maria?” inquired Benton as she passed closely by his table.

“My shift is over,” she answered cheerfully.

“But you can’t go!” the love-stricken pirate cried out

urgently.

“And why not?” the woman asked, wrinkling her forehead.

“Because I’ll miss looking at your pretty face, I will,” replied Benton hastily, realising the woman was just moments away from leaving his life forever.

“Then come with me,” suggested Maria with an inviting smile.

“What?” was all the astounded seaman could say, not believing his luck and his ears.

“Come with me. That is unless you have more pressing affairs to attend to.”

The dumbstruck sea rover simply stared at the smiling woman, his mouth opening and closing like that of a goldfish in a bowl.

“Are you coming or not, William Benton?” asked Maria with finality, beckoning him to follow as she turned and approached the door.

Benton gave Pete, who was grinning inanely at him, an astonished glance, the veins in his temple pounding with apprehension and desire.

“Don’t keep the fair maid waiting, Will. You’ve been staring at her all night, you have. Now’s yer chance,” said the quartermaster, urging Benton to go with a wave of his hand.

“What about you? Can’t leave you all on your own, can I?” stuttered Benton.

“I’ll be all right,” replied Pete, patting the half full bottle on the table. “Besides, maybe I’ll find a nice lass of me own.”

The lusty pirate didn’t need telling twice. Fearing Maria would leave without him, Benton sprang to his feet, stumbling over a stool as he dashed towards the waiting woman, who was standing in the doorway with a hand stretched out towards him. Maria managed to grasp

Benton firmly with both arms before he could fall flat on his face. The embarrassed pirate deeply inhaled the sweet scent of roses as Maria held him firmly in her arms for a moment before she gently pushed the red-faced man away with a hearty laugh. Taking him by the hand, she then led him out into the cool air outside.

Sitting alone at the table, Pete simply shrugged and refilled his cup. It didn't take long before he was joined by another customer of this intriguing public house. The inebriated quartermaster appraised the man, who was smiling down at him, through narrow eye slits. At first he thought two men were standing over him, but with a little concentration he slowly realised there was only one. Despite his unclear state of mind, he was somewhat surprised by the man's attire. For sure he was a seaman, but the man's garments appeared to be of a bygone age. Swaying unsteadily, he looked the man up and down. He was wearing baggy, brown breeches tied just below the knee and a white shirt with frilly cuffs. Over the shirt he wore a brown waistcoat which was a little puffed out at the shoulders. What Pete found most unusual was the narrow ruff around the man's neck, something he had only seen in pictures of sailors in the time of King Henry and his daughter Queen Elizabeth. The last thing the quartermaster observed before the man addressed him, were his neatly trimmed beard and the ornately handled rapier hanging from his belt.

"May I join thee?"

"Don't see why not," slurred the quartermaster, filling Benton's discarded cup and sliding it towards the man, who was now seated opposite him smiling as if he were an old friend. "I be Peter Thurlow. Who be you then?"

"Mine name is Peter Hawkins and I was first mate on a King's warship," replied the man jovially.

"On which of King George's ships did ye sail on?"

inquired Pete.

“King George? I wot of no King George. The ship I sailed on was the pride and joy of King Henry,” responded the surprised sailor.

“You pullin’ me leg, Peter? I ain’t in no mood fer no games,” growled the vexed pirate.

“What doth thou mean? I am telling thee nought yet sooth,” said the slightly offended man.

“But King Henry died hundreds of years ago. You sure ye ain’t sozzled?” frowned Pete disbelievingly.

“I hast only drunk a single stoup of wine this e’en. What art thou accusing me of, sir?”

“Forget I said anything, Peter,” replied the sea rover in a more conciliatory tone. “What were the name of the ship ye served on?”

“Well, ‘twere bid the *Mary Rose*,” answered the odd-looking seaman haughtily.

“Enough of yer shite, Peter Hawkins!” screeched Pete, hammering a furious fist on the table, which resulted in half the contents of his cup slopping over the rim.

“Thou art a discourteous fellow and I bid thee good day, Peter Thurlow,” replied the man reproachfully, emptying his cup before standing and storming away in a huff.

Powder Keg Pete’s head was spinning as he watched the outraged man depart. His fogged mind mulled over what the man who shared the same Christian name with himself had just said to him. The words he had uttered could not possibly be true. Every seaman worth his salt knew that in years long gone by the *Mary Rose* was acting as flagship when it sank in the English Channel during battle, either at the Battle of the Solent against the French or fending off the Spanish Armada – he couldn’t recall which. They said the open gun-ports were flooded when the ship heeled over while going about. Nearly

everyone on board perished when the vessel filled with water and was dragged to the murky depths below. Who does this Peter Hawkins think he is, spreading such untruths about himself? Maybe the man had said it in jest, or maybe he took old Pete for a fool. Whichever it might be the plastered pirate was in no state of mind for such mendacity. In his drunken haze the quartermaster was ready to believe many things he might otherwise not fancy when he was sober, but this story was way too far-fetched. He decided it would be better to forget his encounter with that odd fellow and resignedly returned to his rum and tobacco.

With both elbows resting wearily on the table and his hands supporting the weight of his increasingly heavy head, Pete wondered how his shipmate was faring. With a pang of envy he scrutinised the room for a woman that might take his liking, but found his bloodshot eyes were unable to focus clearly on the occupants of the smokey room. Through blurred vision he could just make out John the fisherman returning to the table with a jug of ale in one hand.

“Be ye all right, Pete?” he asked with a concerned frown, on noticing the glum expression on his guest’s face.

“Never better,” mumbled the pie-eyed quartermaster. “Just a bit miffed by that bloke Peter Hawkins, who claims he sailed on the *Mary Rose*. He must hold me for a dimwit. Tell me John, his weird tale can surely not be true, can it?”

“You’ll find all sorts in this place,” replied John evasively. After sitting himself down next to the soused seaman and filling a beaker with ale, he continued. “Now, there’s something I want ter ask you, Pete.”

“What be it?” inquired the sea rover, eyeing the other man suspiciously from under heavy eyelids.

“You like this place, do you not?”

“It be a pleashant enough eshtablishment, shpite there being a few odd shouls here,” answered Pete, his speech growing ever more slurred.

“How would ye like to stay here?”

“Yer means forever?” asked Pete in drunken astonishment.

“Yes, indeed,” continued John. “You’ll be one of us. Your glass’ll never be empty and yer pipe always full, all in the company of worldly seamen with an intriguing tale to tell.”

“Sounds temptin’, it do,” replied Pete, trying hard to focus on the man who was apparently offering him a place in paradise.

“So, is that a yes or no, Pete?” asked John in a solemn voice.

Thoughts squirmed their way slowly through the quagmire of Pete’s addled mind. Even in his muddled state, the veteran pirate recognised that this place was all he ever dreamed of when he was at sea. If he stayed, he’d never have to worry about the likes of Woodes Rogers and his pirate-hunters; he’d never have to spend a cold night on an exposed deck; he’d never want for rum and baccy. But what about his shipmates? He’d certainly miss Captain Ironside, as he would the rest of the crew – even Faustus and his many unfamiliar words. It was a weighty decision, one which he spent what seemed like an eternity contemplating while John sat patiently observing him, occasionally taking a sip of ale. He felt his mind becoming bogged down in conflicting thoughts, both for and against staying in this wondrous place, until it suddenly hit him. He promptly made up his mind. He wanted nothing more than to return to the *Dream Chaser*. And what was it that had pushed him into reaching this conclusion? It was the thought of spending the rest of his life in a bar

with that self-opinionated rascal William Benton! After a short fit of coughing, Pete looked John directly in the eye and gave him the answer to the tortuous question. "As temptin' as it be, John, I desires no more than to see me old shipmates again."

John nodded with a smile that failed to conceal his disappointment. "Very well, Pete. If that be yer choice, I bid ye farewell."

"Eh?" was all the confused pirate could utter in response.

There was so much that the otherwise taciturn quartermaster would have liked to have said, but instead he found himself unable to bring forth a single word. His tongue had grown as heavy as an iron cannon ball and the room started to sway and spin. Fight as he might against the numbness and senselessness that was rapidly engulfing him, he could do nothing to prevent his throbbing head from sinking slowly to the sticky surface of the table. The last thing he recalled before he sank into a peculiar, inebriated slumber were the haunting voices chanting the song he had previously heard just after entering this bizarre, but heavenly tavern.

*Put your money on the barrel,
Rum and baccy on the quay,
Put your money on the barrel,
Drink to the spirits of the sea.*

An amorous liaison

William Benton was relieved to find Maria patiently awaiting him in the street, her raven hair glistening in the silvery moonlight. Without a word, she took his hand and led him away from the drinking establishment. As he accompanied the enticing woman down the narrow,

cobbled street the starry-eyed pirate paused for a moment, his attention having been drawn to a group of boisterous fishermen seated on lobster baskets around a crackling fire, who were merrily singing an enchanting, but unfamiliar song. Maria didn't attempt to hurry the captivated sea rover along, instead affectionately sliding an arm around his waist.

*Wrap me up in me oilskin and blankets,
No more on the docks I'll be seen,
Just tell me old shipmates, I'm taking a trip mates,
And I'll see you someday on Fiddlers Green.*

"That was a pretty tune. I ain't ever heard it before," commented Benton once the song had come to an end and the small group of men had taken out their pipes and tobacco pouches.

"No, it's only known to the inhabitants of these parts, but one day I'm sure it will be known by all," replied Maria, giving Benton's hand a gentle tug. "Come, the hour is getting late."

After one quick glance back at the joking and laughing fishermen, the merry boatswain hurried excitedly after the fascinating woman without sparing a single thought for his shipmate, who was sitting alone in the tavern. Not long later, they were standing before a quaint thatched-roofed, stone cottage.

"Is this where you live?" asked Benton in anticipation of what would take place once they were snugly inside.

"Yes, it is," replied Maria, softly pushing the door open.

"Don't you lock yer door?"

"No, no-one does. That's not necessary here," she answered, gently pulling him into a small room lit by candles and a roaring fire.

Several thoughts ran through the tipsy pirate's tired

mind at once. One was the thought of all those potential valuables behind all those unlocked doors, another was who had stoked the fire and lit all those candles, as it was clearly no easy task. He was about to inquire about his second thought when he was distracted by the sight of a large, inviting bed covered by a colourful, patchwork quilt and all manner of plush cushions.

“Do you want some wine?” inquired Maria, already pouring a glass of the red nectar from an ornately decorated crystal decanter.

“Yeh,” replied Benton absently, more interested in the luxuriant bed and what pleasures it might hold in store for him. Sitting on a small stool, the agog sea rover slipped off his shoes, instantly regretting doing so on quickly becoming aware of the sickly odour emitted by his lower extremities. “So, where ya from originally?” asked Benton, surreptitiously pouring a few large drops of wine on each foot and wiping them dry with a napkin he found lying on a nearby table.

“Here and there,” answered Maria elusively while rearranging the bedclothes.

“That ain’t no answer,” frowned Benton, throwing the used napkin into a dark corner. “You sounds like your from Bristol.”

Maria stopped what she was doing and looked at her guest uncertainly before answering. “Yes, that’s where I’m from,” she said, looking unconvinced by her own words.

“I spent loads of time there in me youth. What part are you from?” persisted Benton with genuine interest.

“It is of no real importance,” the woman answered with an air of mild annoyance. She sat herself down on the bed and removed her dusty shoes, revealing a fine pair of dainty, lily-white feet, which surprisingly looked as if they had just been freshly washed. “Do you want some more wine?” she asked noticing Benton’s glass was

already empty.

“Nah, I think I’ve had enough for one evening,” responded the randy pirate, blatantly staring at the alluring woman’s bare feet and fearing that any more alcohol might have a detrimental effect on his libido. “It’s a nice place you’ve got here. Do you live here alone?”

“That’s nice of you to say so, and, yes, I do live here alone,” the woman replied with a pleased smile.

“If you live here alone, who lit the fire and all them candles? You couldn’t have possibly done it, having been in the tavern for the last couple of hours,” continued Benton with a perplexed expression on his face.

Maria seemed to stiffen for a moment, but instead of answering she turned her back to him. “Can you unlace me?”

Eagerly springing to his feet, Benton quickly forgot any thoughts of the mysteriously lit blazing fire and flickering candles. After fumbling with the lacing at the back of Maria’s dress for what seemed like forever to the enlivened seaman, the garment slid to the floor revealing the woman’s slender, lithe naked form. When she turned and threw her arms around him, kissing him passionately on the lips, the aroused man’s heart was pounding so hard it threatened to burst forth from his chest. The lustful pirate was soon out of his grubby clothes and moments later the two lovers were entwined and writhing wildly together on the bed. After several minutes of intense intimate relations, Benton was lying panting on his back after a climatic heavenly release. Maria was lying calmly on her side with her elbow resting on the bed and her hand supporting her head, observing the spent pirate contentedly.

“How was it for you, love?” he asked, turning on his side to face the smiling woman.

“Wonderful, my dear,” she replied, caressing his hair

affectionately.

Her answer seemed to satisfy Benton, confirming his powers of seduction and ability in bed, despite his experience in the art of love being restricted to fumbling backstreet encounters with naïve, young lasses in his youth and the services of obliging, but less than truthful members of the oldest profession when he grew older. Maria's response dispelled the wisp of doubt that had been nagging in the back of his mind since his amorous liaison with Nefertari in Eleutheria not so long ago. That woman had been so demanding of him, seemingly never satisfied with his rigorous attempts to gratify her. Her constant exactions had begun to make him feel a little unsure of himself in the department of love-making. That said, he had grown fond of Nefertari and had learned a thing or two. Maybe, he'd show Maria what he had picked up from the other woman after he had got his breath back and had rested a moment, if he could be bothered.

"Would you like to stay here forever, my love? You could spend your days drinking in the tavern and your nights with me," purred Maria.

"Sounds like a lovely idea, Maria," replied Benton chirpily. "I'm sure me shipmates would also love it when they get here."

"I'm sorry to say they won't be coming."

"Now how do you know that? Did the *Dream Chaser* go down in the storm? Are Captain Ironside and the others all dead?" asked Benton with concern.

"No, your shipmates are all alive and well," answered Maria earnestly.

"So how do you know they ain't coming?" persisted the agitated seaman.

"I just do," said the woman firmly. She softly stroked the troubled pirate's hairy chest as she spoke. "It would just be you, and possibly Pete. But why worry about the

rest of the crew? You would have all you ever desired and needed right here.”

“You said ‘possibly Pete’. Why possibly?”

“He might choose to stay, or he might choose to leave. Anyway, you don’t really need him as you’d have me all to yourself. Besides, you’d make plenty of new friends.”

“You mean like that fibbing Spanish bloke Pedro, who claims he sailed on the *Urca de Lima*?”

“There are many others who you would surely find more amicable,” responded Maria with a hint of desperation in her voice. “So, are you going to stay here with me, my love?”

William Benton mulled the offer over in his weary mind for a few minutes, while Maria observed him hopefully. “Well, I’d love to stay and spend the rest of my days with such a pretty young lass like yourself,” he explained, gently pushing away the woman’s distracting hand, which was slowly making its way down his sweaty torso, “but I really must be finding me shipmates. They need me.”

“I’m sure they’ll do fine without you, William,” answered Maria before clambering energetically on top of the supine seaman.

An array of disordered thoughts flapped about in his mind like a loose sail. Why was he hesitating to accept the extraordinary offer of a life time? He only had two real needs in life – a woman and a bottle of rum. All the gold and jewels he had accumulated only really served to satisfy these simple requirements. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. There were other non-material reasons he had turned to piracy: the camaraderie, the respect, defying the cruel masters who would deem it appropriate to misuse a man for want of profit. He might not miss everyone in his crew, but he would certainly miss O’Malley, but why leave the pretty, willing woman now

crouched on top of him, who was clearly predisposed to his charming demeanour, in the hope that the feisty Irish woman might one day see fit to share her affections with him? “Will you stop doin’ that with yer hands. I’m trying ter think,” he snapped, momentarily distracted from his thoughts.

“What’s there to think about, Will? Are you staying here with me, or not?” replied Maria, leaning forward to kiss him firmly on the mouth.

After fleetingly enjoying the contact between his lips and hers, Benton wasn’t yet ready to give his answer, still unsure of what to make of this strange place and the mysterious woman perched enticingly on top of him impatiently awaiting his reply. It bothered him that she had said the others couldn’t join him here with such certainty. And what if Pete decided to leave? Then there’d be no-one from the world he knew left here to share his experiences with. Perhaps he would make new friends, but the folks here seemed an odd bunch, even to this worldly pirate. On the other hand, he was sure he would never again in his life be subject to such a delightful proposition, so maybe he should just count his blessings and embrace this golden opportunity. As much as he wanted to, he could not bring himself to say yes. There was too much bugging him about this wondrous place – it was just too good to be true. Instead of answering in the affirmative, he found himself slamming the door to this seemingly irresistible prospect of happiness shut with such a finality that he surprised even himself. “Thanks fer the generous offer, Maria, but it’d better if I returned to me shipmates, wherever they be, but maybe we could enjoy each other’s company for a few more days before I go off in search of me companions.”

“No, William, that is not an option,” replied Maria sadly.

“Well, at least we can enjoy a few more hours of frolicking together,” suggested Benton hopefully.

“No, not even a few more minutes.”

“You could come with me,” responded the piratical sailor desperately.

“No, I must remain here. You are to leave on your own, William,” answered Maria sternly.

“I don’t see no reason for haste. That just don’t make no sense, Maria.”

“There are many things in your world and beyond that make no sense to mere humans,” replied the woman phlegmatically. “I’ll ask you one more time, William Benton – do you desire to stay or not?”

“Sorry, love, but I can’t,” said the anguished seaman.

“It pains me to hear it,” replied the enigmatic woman with tears forming in the corners of her sorrow-filled eyes. With a sigh of disappointment she unfastened a locket on a silver chain, which was the only item she was presently wearing, and with a mournful smile pressed the shiny object firmly into the calloused hands of the man lying helplessly beneath her, who was observing her with growing despair. “Take this, lest you forget our love.”

“What is it?” asked the perplexed sea rover, but before he could examine the gift, Maria leaned forward and kissed him warmly on the lips. At that moment the woman and the room beyond her began to grow hazy. His muddled mind desperately struggled to remain awake, but, try as he might, he gradually lost awareness of his surroundings, until he finally slipped into a peaceful, all-embracing darkness. “I’ll never forget you, Maria,” were the last words he managed to utter before the enchanting woman’s face totally faded from his vision.

A rude awakening

“Wake up, sleepy head!” said a harsh female voice.

With great effort William Benton forced his heavy eyelids open, his sluggish mind struggling to remember where he was. Slowly he recalled the mind-bending experience of the night before. His head filled with images of the merry patrons of the drinking establishment that had supplied him with copious amounts of liquor. His heart skipped a beat when he called to mind the striking features of the ravishing, but mystifying woman he had spent a blissful evening with. Through the slits of his leaden eyelids, he could just make out the silhouette of a woman standing over him in the dim daylight that flooded in through the open door. But why was this female figure dressed in the attire of a man and not the pretty, knee-length dresses the barmaids wore? Groggily pushing himself up onto his elbows, he started to wipe away the gunge from his eyes that was muddling his view on the corner of a rough woollen blanket. “Maria?” he croaked before his vision was completely clear.

“T’ere ain’t no Maria here, Will, just me, your adorable shipmate Neeve O’Malley,” replied the woman with a mix of scorn and sympathy. “T’ought ye were dead, we did.”

“But where’s Maria?” repeated the muggy-headed man of the sea.

“You must’ve been dreaming, William Benton. There ain’t nobody here but me,” frowned the Irish woman. “And, by the way, why are ye dressed in nowt but yer birthday suit?”

Benton froze as he became aware of the reality of the present situation. He was indeed completely naked save for a mangy, threadbare blanket partially covering his grubby, hairy legs. With an embarrassed grin, he promptly covered his indecency and ventured a brief glance around

the room. The lavish décor of the night before was no longer to be seen, instead he saw only rotten wooden furniture coated in a thick layer of dust. The inviting, sturdy bed he had made love to the woman of his dreams on not so long ago was now a rickety, crumbling frame; the plush mattress he had been lying on before he passed out was now damp and mouldy with straw poking out of gaping holes. The chamber had grown noticeably colder and the air considerably moister. The forlorn pirate shivered as he looked mournfully up at O'Malley.

"I don't understand, I don't," answered the dejected sea rover. "Last night this room was illuminated by a hundred candles, to the light of which I made love to the most beautiful women you ever did see."

"Sounds to me as if yer time in t'e water has addled yer brains, Will," scoffed the woman, observing him disdainfully with hands supported on her hips.

"Where's Pete?" Benton asked, sitting up suddenly. "He'll confirm me story. He's probably still in the tavern."

"If by tavern you mean t'at old, derelict stone building across the way, sure he's t'ere. The Captain and Faustus are wit' him now," replied O'Malley exasperatedly.

"Old, derelict building!" cried out Benton in disbelief. "Last night it were the most wondrous place on earth, where streams of rum and ale flowed more abundantly than water from the bilge pump."

"Pull t'other one, William Benton. That place ain't been frequented for many years. Next ye'll be telling me you were served by pretty, young lasses. You really are away wit' t'e fairies," chuckled the woman mockingly.

"Well, actually ..." responded the perturbed seaman hesitantly, his words faltering on seeing the derisory expression on his shipmate's face, deciding it would be better to say no more on the subject.

"It's time yer saw the place for yerself, Will," said

O'Malley with a slight hint of compassion. "It may finally dispel t'em delusions brought about by yer misadventure in the water." With a frown she added. "I'm glad to see yer sorry ass again, Will. Thought we'd lost you fer good, we did."

Without warning, Benton sprang from the bed and firmly embraced the astounded Irishwoman, almost knocking her off her feet. "It warms me heart to hear you all missed me, Neeve," he replied in a wavering voice, tears forming in the corner of his bloodshot eyes.

"There ain't no need to get all emotional on me, Will. After all, who else'd navigate the ship if you were down feeding the fishes?" she answered sternly, roughly pushing him away. "Now put yer bloody clothes on and then let's go and find the Captain. The dust in here is making me nose itch."

"Would you have the decency as to look away while I get meself dressed," said Benton, gathering up his shabby garments, which were scattered haphazardly around the room.

"You think I ain't seen it all before?" scoffed O'Malley. "I grew up with five brothers, I did."

"But you ain't seen me pecker before, and you ain't gonna see it again until you earned the privilege," replied Benton, pulling up his stained trousers and fastening the buttons demonstratively.

The Irishwoman deigned no reply to her shipmate's self-applauding comment, instead snorting dismissively as she took several steps towards the doorway. "I'll wait fer you outside, yer presumptuous cockalorum," she said without looking back.

"No need to start using Fausty's words," the hurriedly dressing seaman called out to the woman's back as she left the room, irritably slamming the door behind her. "Maria wouldn't disrespect me like that," he muttered to

himself with a pang of yearning. Maybe he hadn't made the right decision after all.

In low spirits, Benton hurried after his unappreciative shipmate, taking one last rueful glance back at the bed where he had last seen the woman who had won his heart. Emerging from the run-down dwelling, he looked up at the overcast sky. Pulling his jacket tightly around himself to fend off the chill breeze, he strode hastily towards O'Malley, who was now waiting restively in front of the large, ramshackle building that had been a splendid, welcoming tavern the evening before. In fact, all the structures in the village appeared to have been abandoned a considerable length of time ago; some of the houses no longer had roofs, others were little more than rubble. Looking out towards the bay, the downcast pirate was glad to see a sight that raised his spirits slightly – the *Dream Chaser* lying unspoiled at anchor. He was pleased to discover that although it was a lot colder than he remembered it being on his arrival, the sea was calm and the wind mild. While making his way to the derelict inn he observed some of the crew busily collecting water from a well while others were felling a tree and sawing wood, presumably to repair damage caused by the storm. He noticed yet others searching the ruins for any items which might be of use, among them John Brownrigg, and for a moment he considered approaching his old shipmate and recounting his sensational adventure, but on recalling O'Malley's sceptical reaction to his tale, he promptly decided against it. Anyway, that old sourpuss would probably just be jealous that Benton had experienced the time of his life, so he decided to first find Pete before speaking to any other members of the crew. When he reached O'Malley, who was impatiently awaiting him with folded arms, he glanced up at the old sign hanging lopsidedly above the door of the dilapidated

building to see the familiar image of the merry fiddler playing in a sunlit meadow. It was clearly the same one he had seen on his arrival the day before, even if the paint was flaky and the image now greatly faded. Despite rot having eaten away at the edges of the wooden board, he could still just make out the words 'Fiddler's Green', although he might not have recognized the letters had he not previously seen them in better condition. He asked himself how it could have deteriorated in such a short time, but realised he could also ask himself the same question regarding the rest of this now clearly abandoned village.

"I don't buy it, Neeve," he said on reaching the frowning woman.

"And I ain't selling nowt," responded the Irish sea rover coarsely.

"There ain't no need to be like that. You know perfectly well what I mean," snapped the irritated pirate. "I just don't believe you only missed me for me navigational skills."

"What else would I miss ye for?"

"For me undeniable wit and charm for a start," grinned the seaman boyishly.

"Don't flatter yerself, Will," sneered O'Malley mischievously. "The whole crew have enjoyed the past few days free of your infantile humour and spiteful remarks. We do all agree we missed Pete though."

"Now that's just plain mean," replied Benton, aghast at such a clearly spurious claim.

"Yer a bit full of yerself, Will. You can believe what yer like as far as I'm concerned. Now let's go inside. It's getting rat'er chilly out here listening to your conceited twaddle."

"Maybe I should've stayed here with Maria," answered the dejected pirate, now deeply regretting his decision.

“She properly knows how to appreciate William Benton, she does.”

“She must have been a bit lacking upstairs, if you ask me. Maybe you should have stayed with her, if she ever existed outside of yer imagination. You sound like you would make a lovely couple,” said O’Malley before stepping into the dark, damp tavern.

The fuming seaman was lost for words on hearing his shipmate’s scathing comment. He stood for a few moments contemplating how he would make her eat her unkind words before following the offending woman through the doorway.

While O’Malley was urging Benton to get dressed and accompany her to the tavern, Captain Ironside and Faustus Quiddington were meanwhile already in the tumbledown public house attempting to wake Pete, who they had found slumped in a deep slumber over a decaying oak table with a dusty, empty bottle clutched firmly in his right hand.

“Wake up, sleepy head,” Ironside urged the sleeping man in a soft voice while gently shaking his shoulders.

“Eh? What be going on ? Where be I?” mumbled the quartermaster grumpily, gradually becoming aware of his surroundings. “I be in need of another tot of rum,” he called out to a non-existent barmaid.

“You’ll have to wait til we’re back on the ship, Pete,” chuckled the pirate captain, relieved to find his old shipmate in one piece. Firmly seizing the seated man’s shoulders he continued. “I can’t express how glad I am to find you still alive, you old dog. We’d given you and William up for dead.”

It slowly dawned on the discombobulated sea rover that he was no longer seated in a bustling bar filled with the seamen of many nations, and for a few seconds he

looked up uncomprehendingly at the two concerned faces looking down at him. It took his groggy mind a few moments more to register to whom the faces belonged. Eventually, the penny dropped. “Cap’n Ironside?” he croaked.

“None other,” smiled the captain. “Who did you expect to see – Sir Francis Drake?”

“Nothin’ would surprise me in this tavern,” replied Pete, rubbing his sore head.

“But this place looks like it has been abandoned for years,” said Faustus with a puzzled frown. “There’s not a soul to be seen for miles.”

“I don’t understand where all them folk have got to. It were a thriving establishment when we got here. Full of seamen and the drinks flowin’ like water,” answered the dazed quartermaster. On noticing the incredulous looks he was getting from the others, he temporarily put all thoughts of the previous evening aside and pushed himself unsteadily to his feet. “No matter, all that counts is that you found us. I never been more happy to see anyone in me life.”

For a moment it seemed as if the delighted pirate was stumbling, but, in fact, it was no more than a blunderous attempt to embrace the Captain. Ironside put his arms around his now weeping shipmate, holding him tightly for fear the other man would collapse in a heap should he let go. After a minute Pete released Ironside from the clumsy hug and threw his arms around the unsuspecting surgeon. Faustus, overwhelmed by this sudden intense show of emotion, was unsure how to react. He decided the best course of action was just to let it happen, giving Pete a collegial pat on the back; openly displaying his feelings had never been his strong point. Eventually, the overjoyed sea rover released the relieved physician, who was glad to escape the rough, vice-like grip. Pete plumped

down into his seat again, rubbing his blood-shot eyes.

“Where’s William, by the way?” inquired Ironside.

“He went off with some comely wench last night and I ain’t seen him since,” croaked Pete, unaware of the sceptical, worried glance his rescuers were giving each other.

“Tell us what really happened to you both after you were flung overboard,” said the Captain earnestly.

Pete licked his dry lips and avidly recounted the tale of how he and Benton had survived the storm. He told them about the strange man named John, who had discovered them washed-out on the beach. He explained how they had been brought to this building, which was full of life on their arrival. He described the motley assortment of seamen they had discovered within the walls of the inn. He then related how they had been offered all they desired to eat and drink. It wasn’t until Pete arrived at the part where Benton went off with one of the serving women that Ironside decided to interrupt the quartermaster’s implausible account of what had happened.

“Now I’m ready to believe a great deal, Pete, when I take into account what has befallen us since we entered that damned mist, but you’re stretching it a bit far this time, don’t you think?” said the Captain, raising his eyebrows doubtfully. “The intake of salt water can do strange things to a man’s mind.”

“So ye don’t believe me, Cap’n?” asked Pete with the sorrowful look of a scolded puppy.

“Let’s just say it would be better to suspend our belief until we are able to find more evidence of the veracity of your tale,” responded Faustus tactfully.

“So ye don’t believe me then,” frowned the quartermaster, checking the empty bottle he had been found holding for any overlooked contents. On assuring himself it was indeed empty and had, in fact, probably

not held liquid of any sort for at least a decade, he sadly placed it gently back on the table.

“If me story ain’t true, how come I feels so crawsick and me mouth’s as dried-out as pirate’s bones left to dangle sun-drying,” complained Pete, rubbing his throbbing temples.

“We can only deduce that your near-death experience beneath the waves together with the exposure to the chill of the sea has led you to feel afflicted with such a capulous disposition this morning,” explained the surgeon wistfully.

“You sayin’ I be mad?” cried out Pete in dismay.

“We aren’t saying that, Peter,” responded Faustus with a sympathetic smile, “but you have to admit your tale is difficult to believe, although it does seem true that this was clearly a drinking establishment at one time or another. In fact, I find the name on that old sign hanging above the door to be quite intriguing.”

“What do you mean?” inquired Ironside.

“Although the paint is somewhat faded, I could just make out the name ‘Fiddler’s Green’ on it.”

“And why do you find the name so interesting?” asked the pirate captain, seating himself opposite the quartermaster.

“Well, you obviously haven’t heard the legend.” On seeing the two perplexed faces staring at him, he enthusiastically continued. “The origins of the myth of a place called Fiddler’s Green are not entirely clear, but some scholars suggest that it may have been inspired by the Greek myth of the Elysian Fields.” The surgeon’s two shipmates looked at him blankly. “It was said to be a paradise for the dead, in the case of Fiddler’s Green for deceased men of the sea.”

“Like Davy Jones’s Locker?” asked Pete with a glimmer of comprehension.

“Yes, but much more pleasant – more like heaven than hades. It is said that liquor flows freely. There are even some more fanciful claims that bottles of rum grow on trees. Furthermore, the winds are always fair and the fish even jump out of the sea, not waiting to be caught.”

“I didn’t see any of that,” said Pete, “but there was an unending supply of alcohol.”

“You said you were asked if you wanted to stay here, but you turned them down. Is that right?” inquired the physician pensively.

“Yeah, that be right.”

“Well, if it were some sort of paradise you temporarily found yourself in, maybe they gave you the choice to either join them permanently or return to the land of the living,” continued Faustus in a more serious tone.

“You mean I were dead?”

“If your story is true – and I’m not saying it is – you might have been in some kind of purgatory.” Noticing Pete’s confusion, he quickly rephrased what he had said. “You might have been in some kind of middle state, between life and death.”

“Do you really believe that, Faustus?” inquired Ironside in surprise.

“It’s just speculation,” admitted the surgeon, joining the other two men at the table.

“Well, all I can say is that I’m happy to find you alive regardless of what might or might not have happened to you in the meantime,” said the pirate captain cheerfully. “Although if what you told us is indeed true, I don’t understand why you chose to return to the harsh life at sea. The place you claimed to have been in seems to be all you’ve ever dreamed of.”

“Aye, that be true, but me comrades-under-sail be more important to me than any amount of drink. I couldn’t leave ye alone in these strange lands, could I?”

Picking up the dusty bottle and once more checking it was really empty, he added. "That be said, the next time I find meself in such a wondrous tavern, I'll probably stay fer good."

"Hopefully not in the foreseeable future though," chuckled Ironside.

All three men laughed heartily before falling into a thought-filled silence. Pete was the first to speak again. "So, tell me, Cap'n, how did yer find me?"

"I must admit that it was by pure chance that we discovered you here," answered Ironside, stroking his heavily bristled chin. "We all presumed you and William had perished after disappearing overboard. We all believed that no-one could have survived the harshness of that storm. With heavy hearts, we gave you up for lost. Once the winds had died down, we could clearly see the shoreline and, as we were in need of fresh water and some timber for minor repairs to the masts and yards, we swiftly made landfall. It didn't take long for one of the men to find this abandoned village, so I ordered some of the crew to search the derelict buildings for anything that might be of use. This being the largest of the structures, Faustus and I decided to check it out. That's when we found you slumped over this table snoring like a baby."

"I guess I have to count meself lucky," said Pete solemnly. "If ye hadn't found me after I turned down the wondrous offer to become a permanent patron of this tavern, then I'd have had to spend the rest of me days stuck in this here abandoned village with none other for company than William Benton."

"A fate I'd wish on no man," chuckled Ironside.

The three men sat in silence for a while until they were rudely disturbed by the woodworm-ridden door being heavily flung open. Looking around, Ironside shivered as the chill breeze flowed through the gaping doorway

and flooded the room with cold, but his discomfort was soon dispelled on seeing Benton entering the room close on O'Malley's heels. Despite the boatswain's frequent intolerable behaviour, which all too often drove the crew up the wall, Captain Ironside was delighted to see the man again, but whether it was genuine affection, or the relief of not losing such a skilled navigator, he could not be certain.

"I found t'is git snoozing stark bollock naked in one of the o'er buildings," said O'Malley harshly. "Ranted 'bout meeting a pretty lass last night, but I t'ink he's got sea water in his brain, I do."

"But I'm telling the truth, ain't I, Pete?" stammered the man from Plymouth, desperate to be believed. He paused for a short moment, taking in the shadowy, dusty bar-room. "What's happened to this place, Pete? It were a thriving drinking establishment last night. Tell 'em, Pete. We had the time of our lives. We met many strange men of the sea, we did. Remember that annoying Spanish bloke called Pedro. You remember me leaving with that pretty lass Maria. Tell 'em, Pete."

"Sure I remembers, Will, but that Spanish fella's name was Francisco, not Pedro," the quartermaster corrected his shipmate, "and that Maria sure were a handsome woman."

"See, Cap'n. It's all true," said Benton excitedly. Turning to O'Malley, he addressed her smugly. "Now do you believe me? Pete wouldn't lie about something like that."

"No, I don't believe he would lie, but what I t'ink is that the sea water addled his brains too," replied the unconvinced Irishwoman. "There's clearly no sign t'at anyone has been here for several years."

"Maybe you're right, Neeve," responded Pete uncertainly. "Maybe our near-drowning experience affected me memory."

“It is possible that the lack of air to your brain made you delusional,” confirmed the ship’s surgeon.

“Come on, Pete,” cried out the frustrated sailor. “You know it were real. It weren’t no dream. It was as real as we are standing here, I tell you!”

“It does seem strange they both claim to have had the same experience,” commented Ironside.

“Shared delusions are not uncommon in such mutual traumas,” replied Faustus with a wrinkled forehead.

“What the hell are you talking about, Fausty?” snapped Benton irately.

“He be sayin’ our time in the water together drove us temporarily mad,” said Pete drily.

“Well, I wouldn’t go as far as to say that,” said Faustus, “but your near death experience does seem to have adversely affected your minds for a short time. It’s understandable and nothing to be ashamed of.”

“We weren’t mad! It were real, I’m telling you,” answered Benton adamantly.

“It might have seemed real for you, William,” said Faustus sympathetically.

“You’re nothing but a stinking blatherskite, Mr. Quiddington!” shouted Benton. “It were real for me and it were real for Pete, and it was real for all them folks here last night.” Without waiting for a reply, the indignant sea rover turned and stormed out of the room, muttering angrily to himself and slamming the rickety door behind him as he exited the building, sending a shower of dust and dirt fluttering down from the ceiling onto the remaining occupants.

“I’m not familiar with the word blatherskite,” said the Swedish sea captain, breaking the stunned silence.

“A blatherskite is a person given to voluble, empty talk,” explained the surgeon. “I know that doesn’t generally apply to me, but you don’t think it’s true what he said

about me stinking, do you? I know I don't get to wash myself as often as I'd like," he added with concern.

"None of us do, Mr. Quiddington. No, don't ye be worrying about what t'at gobshite Benton said to you. He's just pissed off we don't believe that tall tale of his," said O'Malley consolingly.

"Well, it did seem real," said Pete in a quite voice. The quartermaster then stood abruptly and strode towards the door mumbling to himself. "I got to get out of this place. It be doin' me head in. I no longer knows what be real or not. The sooner I be back out to sea, the better."

Those remaining in the rundown room exchanged bewildered glances before following their shipmate out into the cold morning air, deeming the time appropriate to return to the ship and leave this forsaken place.

Under way again

A couple of hours later Dream Chaser raised anchor and sailed out with the ebbing tide. The sails were set and the ship making good headway. There was a fair wind which carried the pirate vessel swiftly away from the unfamiliar island. His work done for the time being, William Benton strolled along the main deck whistling a melancholy melody to himself until he spotted O'Malley and Brownrigg standing at the gunwale, sniggering as he strolled past.

"Hey, what's so funny, you two?" he inquired with a twinge of paranoia.

"Nothing, Will," replied the Irishwoman suppressing a grin. "Just a private joke."

The unconvinced boatswain scrutinized his two shipmates closely before turning to resume his stroll.

"Off to the tavern, are you, Will?" Benton heard Brownrigg say when he was a few yards away.

“What you talking about, Johnny Boy?” he snapped, turning to face the two smirking faces.

“Well, we thought you might have found a secret tavern stashed away in the hold that no-one else can see,” chortled Brownrigg, pleased with his own joke.

“You’re nothing but a chubby-faced fool, John Brownrigg,” growled the irate seaman.

“Maybe you got a pretty lass tucked away down in the bilge,” continued Brownrigg with a self-satisfied grin.

“You shut your fat mouth, or I’ll shut it for you, do you hear?” snarled Benton, clenching his fists.

“It seems our dear William can’t abide being on the receiving end of humour,” commented O’Malley with a frown. “Good at dishing it out t’ough.”

“There ain’t nothing to joke about. It were all real what happened to me, it were. You just ask Pete,” retorted Benton, his face reddening.

“I just spoke to Pete and he didn’t seem so sure about it. Said the salt water and lack of air might have confused him. Seems the same happened to you, too,” stated Brownrigg sternly.

“You know nothing, John Brownrigg!” replied the irked sea rover in a raised voice. “It were as real as this here ship.”

“You’re delusional, ye are, William Benton,” said the woman from Ireland. “And put t’at belying pin down. There ain’t no need for violence.”

The affronted pirate slowly removed his hand from the nearby device for securing rope which he had unintentionally grasped in momentary anger, giving Brownrigg a short, sharp stare before turning and storming off towards the rear of the ship. Standing alone on the poop deck, he muttered to himself, convinced that what had happened to him was real, no matter what anyone else said. How he missed Maria. How he

now wished he had stayed with her. The gloomy pirate looked out over the grey, billowing sea and wondered whether he could return to Maria's reassuring arms by jumping into the uninviting water. Maybe he'd wake up back in that curious village. But what if he didn't? What if he just ended up as fodder for the fishes in those dark, cold depths? Then he'd be depriving his shipmates of his outstanding navigational skills and pleasurable company for nothing. He spat an unsightly globule into the sea and sighed. No, it was too risky. Besides, he'd never live it down if O'Malley discovered his bloated corpse washed up on a beach with his extremities gnawed away by sharks, so instead of plunging into the murky sea below, he carefully removed a small, shiny object from his waistcoat pocket. Holding the locket on a silver chain up to the light, he cherishingly admired the fine craftsmanship. He flicked it open with his thumb and stared longingly at the miniature portrait of the attractive young woman who had been his lover for one short night. Becoming aware of someone approaching, he placed the treasured object back into his pocket. Moments later, Pete was standing next to him leaning on the low railing and looking contemplatively out to sea.

"You all right, Will?" the quartermaster asked, producing his pipe as if from nowhere. "You wishing you were back with that lass?"

"I do miss her, Pete," Benton replied mournfully.

"But ye only knew the girl fer one night."

"It felt like I'd known her all me life, it did," answered the heartbroken sea rover. "She were the only one who ever understood me, she was."

"That may be so, but there were something not right about that place, Will," replied Pete sombrely. "It wouldn't have been right to stay there. It would've meant we were no longer of this world."

“So you believe it all really happened then?” said Benton, perking up.

“Aye, I do. That place left me with the hangover of me life, but it be better not to talk about it with the others. They wouldn’t understand, ‘cos they weren’t there,” explained the quartermaster sagely, purposefully stuffing tobacco into his pipe.

“I suppose you’re right, Pete,” agreed Benton with resignation.

“What I wants to know is who them people were and where the hell they all got to. The mystery of it all does make me doubt a little that it could’ve really happened,” added Pete, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

Benton took out the locket once more and showed the tiny portrait to his shipmate.

“She sure is pretty,” commented Pete, closely scrutinizing the item of jewellery.

“And she sure was real,” said Benton with a knowing grin. “Of real flesh and bone, she was.”

Both men chuckled for a moment before observing the vast expanse of water in silence for a while.

“I’m off to find a light fer me pipe,” said Pete finally, straightening up and turning to head down to the main deck, where he knew a slow match to still be burning.

“Wait a minute, Pete, look over there!” said Benton excitedly. “It’s that bloody mist again.”

“Let’s hope it bleeding well takes us home this time,” replied Pete earnestly before scurrying away with his full pipe clutched firmly in both hands.

Epilogue

“An astonishing tale, Mr. Benton, but I tend to agree with your shipmates that an excess of salt water might have affected your brain,” said Nathaniel Bagshaw, seemingly unimpressed by the condemned pirate’s latest yarn.

“It’s all true. I swear on me dear old mother’s grave,” responded Benton in a hurt tone.

“All right, I’ll suspend my disbelief for the moment,” smiled the journalist.

“That’s mighty nice of you, Mr. Bagshaw,” answered Benton sarkily.

“What interests me more than the quaint tavern you purport to have visited is your knowledge of the Great Storm of 1703. I’d just turned eighteen at the time. I remember it taking off half our roof and uprooting the apple tree in our garden. The whole street was a terrible mess after.”

“Yeah, that was one hefty gust of wind blowing in from the Atlantic,” commented the sea rover.

“Gust of wind! It was the worst storm ever to hit the south of England,” replied the astonished reporter.

“Except for that one in the bible,” pointed out Benton.

“Everything was under water then, it was. Only that Noel bloke along with a horde of animals and his wife survived that one, on that ship called the Arch that he built.”

“All right, I stand corrected. Let me rephrase that: it was the biggest storm for hundreds of years,” conceded Bagshaw. “By the way, his name was Noah and the vessel he built was called the Ark.”

“You’re probably right, Mr. Bagshaw,” agreed the convict. “All I know is that it was big but had no cannons on it. Lucky for him there weren’t no pirates back then.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Bagshaw, humouring the condemned pirate. “So, tell me where you were when that monstrous storm hit, Mr. Benton?”

“I was working on a fishing boat down in Plymouth that year, I was. Good times they were, though the work were hard and the hours long,” replied Benton nostalgically.

“Were you out on one of the boats when the storm struck?”

“Lucky for me our vessel was in for repairs. I remembers the flooding though. Had to wade up to me waist in some streets. Didn’t have no dry socks for a week. The harbour was pretty badly damaged and our boat was totally wrecked even though it were pulled up high on the beach for repairs. To be honest, most of the town looked like it had been hit by a broadside from a hundred Spanish warships.”

“Yes, a terrible business,” said the journalist, shaking his head. “They say some four thousand trees were destroyed in the New Forest in Hampshire alone, and hundreds of buildings lost their roof. The chimney stack collapsed on some houses, tearing the building down with it. Over two thousand buildings were damaged in London alone in this way, including Westminster Abbey, which lost it’s fine roof. Hundreds of people were

killed by collapsing buildings. Shocking it was. It comes as no surprise what you told me about the floods, as I heard that extensive flooding swept through the entire West Country, drowning hundreds of people and farm animals. In the countryside, many roads were apparently impassable for weeks afterwards due to fallen trees.”

“It’s them poor animals I feel sorry for,” commented Benton with a sorrowful expression on his face.

“What about the thousands of people who perished on land and sea?” asked the surprised reporter. “Surely you feel sorry for them too.”

“Sure I does, but them little sheep and piggies are innocent they are. Mind their own business they do.”

“I see,” responded Bagshaw, rubbing his chin in puzzlement. “I suppose all God’s creatures are of some importance.”

“It’s also a shame about them windmills,” added the imprisoned sea rover, scratching his left armpit.

“What windmills?”

“I heard hundreds of windmills were damaged by strong winds, some even catching fire due to their sails spinning too fast. No decent bread to be had for weeks.”

“That’s all very interesting, but coming back to your account of your time in the tavern: what about the man you said you spoke to while you were there?”

“You mean Pedro?”

“No, not him, although I believe his name was Francisco.” The journalist paused for a moment, realizing he was being unwillingly drawn into Benton’s fantasy world. “No, I meant the man you claimed was called Robert. You seemed to believe he was your cousin who died in the Great Storm.”

“Yeah, that were strange, that were,” frowned the prisoner.

“Are you sure it was him? Do you think he could have

survived his ship going down after all?"

"Well, me pa went to the funeral, although no body were never found, mind you. Food for the fishes I expect," replied Benton.

"Do you think it was really him or might he have been an imposter?" asked the journalist, scribbling in his notebook.

"As I hadn't seen him since I was a teenager, I guess I can't be completely sure it were him I really met, but, on the other hand, I don't see what benefit he might've had from lying to me. Maybe he was part of an elaborate scam to trick me out of me riches."

"Quite possibly," replied the unconvinced interviewer. "One should never trust strangers and foreigners."

"If that bloke were me cousin Robert, he were neither a stranger nor a foreigner. That said, I wouldn't trust the bugger one inch, neither. He always was a crafty weasel, he was," said the man of the seas with finality.

"I see," said Bagshaw, scribbling something else in his little book. "What about the duel?"

"What duel do you mean, Mr. Bagshaw?"

"The one between that Scowcroft woman and the thug you called Hogg. You told me it would take place the next time you were all on land. Well, from what you said to me, it seems that most of the crew were on land when you were discovered in that abandoned village."

"That is indeed true, Mr. Bagshaw, but yer gettin' a bit ahead of yerself," answered Benton uppishly. "I'll be getting to that at a later date."

"You're presuming there will be another time, Mr. Benton. You're getting a bit ahead of yourself too, don't you think?" replied the amused journalist.

"But you have to come back, Mr Bagshaw," responded the pirate almost pleadingly.

"And why's that?"

“Because I ain’t got to the most important part of me tale yet.” After a short, pregnant pause he continued in a more conspirational tone. “Besides, I know where more gold is.”

“Really?” Nathaniel Bagshaw eyebrows rose at these words and he quickly jotted down some more notes.

“What you writing there?” asked Benton, leaning over to get a better look.

“Nothing that would interest you. Just notes for my upcoming book,” answered the reporter, snapping the notebook shut.

Benton wiped his grubby fingers on his new shirt while eyeing the other man suspiciously. Nathaniel Bagshaw winced at the sight, unable to grasp how a grown man could soil such a fine garment in such a short amount of time. He now realised he should have just brought him one of his old shirts, but, alas, he had erroneously expected Benton to take much more care of the gift. He shrugged, admitting to himself how foolish he had been expecting an imprisoned pirate to appreciate good quality. “I have another question, Mr. Benton,” the reporter said, trying his best to avert his eyes from the offending brown stains.

“Fire away, Mr. Bagshaw.”

“You mentioned something about a strange instrument called an accordion.”

“I did,” replied Benton warily.

“Could you tell me more about it?” asked Bagshaw, reopening his notebook.

“All I can tell you is that only the Devil himself could have made such an instrument. I weren’t too partial to the sound of it at all,” explained the prisoner.

“It could be that your ears are not accustomed to such sounds. There are many instruments from far away lands whose music would at first be strange to our English ears.”

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, them instruments can stay in them far-away lands. A fiddle and flute is all you really need for a good, danceable tune, although I must admit those guitar things the Dons like so much ain’t too bad, but those foreign accordion things’ll never be popular among honest seamen, if you ask me,” said Benton with the certainty of the ignorant.

“Oh, I was hoping you would be able to enlighten me to the workings of the aforementioned instrument, as I have a friend who is a fine instrument maker,” said Bagshaw with a sigh of disappointment. For a fleeting moment, his entrepreneurial spirit had enticed him with images of himself as an influential businessman, whose new discovery had enriched him beyond belief.

“Sorry, Mr. Bagshaw, but I ain’t got the foggiest idea how that damn squeezey box works,” replied Benton. “Maybe you could ask Pete if you ever get to meet him.”

“I doubt that’ll happen, Mr. Benton,” responded the journalist, crossing out something he had just written down in his notebook. “Now, about this Maria women you mentioned. Do you really believe she was real?”

“Indeed I do, Mr. Bagshaw,” smiled the captured sea rover, revealing his grubby, long neglected teeth. “In fact, I can prove it.”

“And how’s that?” answered the astonished reporter.

“She gave me a shiny, silver locket with a pretty, little portrait of herself in it, she did,” replied Benton undoubtingly.

“Do you mean to say you still have it?” asked Bagshaw, even more surprised.

“Not exactly,” replied Benton glumly. “Them Navy blokes took it with the rest of the gold when they found me on that sloop. Once I gets it back, I’ll show you.”

Nathaniel Bagshaw was about to inform the hopeful seaman sitting across from him that he shouldn’t get his

hopes up as far as the alleged locket was concerned, but instead he said nothing. It was better not to mention it if he wanted his interviewee to continue with his intriguing tale, be it true or not. Disappointing him with the news might make the man less inclined to continue his account. The journalist was unaware that William Benton would have done anything to stay out of that dark, damp cell, and that no amount of disappointment would deter the prisoner from going on with his incredible story.

“You don’t believe me about Maria and that tavern, do you, Mr. Bagshaw?” said Benton, breaking the momentary awkward silence.

“Well, you must confess that what you’ve told me does beggar belief, Mr. Benton,” replied the journalist defensively.

“I admit what I say might be hard to believe for some, but I’m telling you it happened. I don’t care if you don’t believe that the inn existed, but if you cast doubt upon the being of someone so dear to me, it’ll be the last time we have a cosy little chat like this,” responded the pirate testily, sincerely hoping his visitor wouldn’t call his bluff.

“Very well, Mr. Benton. I’ll take what you have said at face value,” answered Bagshaw placatingly, jotting a few words down to emphasise his sincerity, ignoring the fact that the prisoner had only known the so-called love of his life for just one night, if he had even known her at all.

“Then I’ll be willing to tell you more ‘bout what happened,” replied Benton, concealing his relief.

“I’m willing to accept that Maria did exist and that you fell instantly in love with her, but what about this O’Malley? Didn’t you harbour feelings for her?” asked the journalist, realising his error the moment the words left his mouth.

“Now don’t go spoiling it all again, Mr. Bagshaw,” said Benton admonishingly. “I told you not to go mentioning

that woman in my presence again, didn't I?"

"Yes, of course, I'm sorry, Mr. Benton. Please forgive me," said the journalist hurriedly.

"I'll forgive you just this once, but don't go saying that name again, or I'll be out that door in a flash," replied Benton magnanimously.

"All right, thank you, Mr. Benton, but now I must be on my way. We'll continue our conversation tomorrow then?" asked Bagshaw tentatively, closing his notebook and taking up his leather bag from the floor.

"Sure, Mr. Bagshaw, but there's a few things I'll be needing," stated the convict matter-of-factly.

"Tell me what it is you require," answered Bagshaw, reopening his little book.

"Well, I'll be needing some more of that hot chocolate, for a start, with sugar of course. I'd also like some toothpicks, mouthwash, some paper, a quill, a bottle of ink, two pairs of socks, a bottle of rum, some of those nice cakes your wife makes, a loaf of bread, some cheese, a needle and thread, three candles, a tinderbox, a new pair of trousers, and a jar of olives, if you please, Mr. Bagshaw," said Benton without pausing for breath between words.

"That's quite a long list," replied the journalist, slightly miffed at the numerous demands. "I'll see what I can do, although I can't make any promises about the olives, as they're not so easy to get around here at this time of the year."

"Can't blame a man for trying," grinned the pirate boyishly.

"By the way, tomorrow I might come in the company of another gentleman who is interested in your tale. I hope that's all right with you, Mr. Benton."

The imprisoned sea rover eyed the other man suspiciously, ambivalent to whether an additional visitor would be to his benefit. Finally deciding it would be in his

favour – the more folks interested in his plight the better, and, besides, the more people who came to see him, the more food and other goodies he might be able to get his hands on to make his stay in this hellhole slightly more bearable. “Who is this other person then?” he inquired warily.

“His name is Sir James Berkeley.”

“I’ve heard that name before,” frowned Benton. “He’s one of them aristocrats and has something to do with the Navy, don’t he?”

“It doesn’t surprise me that you’ve heard of him. He’s the Third Earl of Berkeley and First Lord of the Admiralty.”

“Why would such a bigwig navy fellow lower himself to enter such an unsavoury establishment to visit a condemned man?” asked Benton mistrustfully.

“It seems he’s interested in finding out more about the source of the gold found on your vessel when you were captured,” explained the journalist, packing the items on the table carefully into his bag.

“And why would I want to tell him that?” retorted the pirate in disbelief.

“You may not be aware, but it’s his interest in you that led to you getting your own cell in this place,” replied Bagshaw earnestly. “Otherwise you’d be sharing a room with ten or more other reprobates and cut-throats. If you were to displease him, he might have you transferred, and, furthermore, it might mean the end of our cosy little get-togethers.”

“Why’s that?” answered Benton with an edge of panic in his voice.

“It was Sir James who suggested I come to visit you.”

“So yer really just here because of the gold?” answered the prisoner resentfully. “You told me you were writing a book on pirates. Don’t say you were lying to me?” The

offended pirate rose from his place with clenched fists and leaned threateningly towards the other man.

“No, no, I assure you I’m not lying to you, Mr. Benton. I am indeed writing a book, but Sir James is a good friend of the family and asked me if I would test the waters, so to speak.”

“What waters?”

“I’m speaking figuratively. He wanted me to find out more about you and your story.”

“So he can get his grubby paws on more gold?”

“I suppose so,” conceded the journalist.

“I can’t say I’m happy to hear that, but I guess I ain’t got no choice in the matter,” sighed Benton.

“Yes, it would seem your choices are very limited at present, Mr. Benton.”

“No matter,” said the pirate boatswain, sitting himself back down heavily, causing the rickety chair to creak under his weight. Then eyeing his visitor’s bag he asked. “Have you got some of your wife’s lovely cake for me today?”

“I’m sorry, but my wife hasn’t had time to do any more baking since I last saw you. Maybe next time, Mr. Benton,” replied the journalist, rising to his feet.

“That just won’t do, Mr. Bagshaw. I was so looking forward to it, I was,” said the clearly disappointed prisoner. “How’s a man meant to survive on that watery gruel they give us? What’s more, I’m sure that git Tom spits in it. And stale bread – that’s no nourishment for a growing man.”

“Well, I hardly think you are still growing, Mr. Benton, but to compensate you for today’s lack of cake, I’m willing to give you the packed lunch my wife gave me for today,” answered Bagshaw reluctantly.

“Packed lunch?” said Benton, his eyes lighting up.

“It’s only some bread, cheese, a hard-boiled egg, and a

piece of cold mutton.”

“That’ll do,” replied Benton, eagerly holding out his hands.

Nathaniel Bagshaw grudgingly handed his lunch, which was neatly wrapped in a white cloth, to Benton, who keenly accepted it.

“Thanking you very much, Mr. Bagshaw,” he grinned, holding the small bundle tightly to his chest like a new born baby.

“You’re welcome, Mr. Benton,” replied the journalist insincerely. “Until tomorrow and a good day to you.”

With a nod Bagshaw hurried to the door with his bag firmly clutched under one arm. He knocked on the solid oak door with the other and restlessly waited until a scruffy guard came to open it. Without looking back, he exited the room, glad to be away from that trying expirate, as there was only so much time he could bear to be in the presence of that exasperating man. Close on the heels of the guard came Tom the gaoler, who beckoned the prisoner out of the room with a snort and a toothy, condescending grin. All the way back to his dingy cell, Benton hugged the small parcel as if it were the dearest thing to him in the world.

“What you got there? A wean?” croaked Tom in a rare moment of loquaciousness.

“None of yer business, Tom,” growled Benton as defensively as a dog would protect its bone. “And don’t go getting no funny ideas about confiscating it neither. I got friends in high places, I have. You probably ain’t heard of him, being the nobody that you are, Tom, but I’m a close acquaintance of Sir Admiral Buckley, I am. What do you say to that, eh?”

The squat, taciturn turnkey simply grunted before stopping in front of the open cell door and indicating for the prisoner to enter. Benton stepped into the room. “It

won't be long before I'm out of here, you just wait and see," stated the condemned man, almost believing his own words.

The door slammed shut in his face with a heavy clunk.

Plonking himself on the threadbare mattress on the tottery bedstead in the corner of his uninviting cell, Benton unfolded the cloth and examined its contents. All in all, it had been a good day. He'd drunk some delicious hot chocolate; he'd received a new shirt; he'd even been given something to supplement the substandard sustenance he received in this place. One thing bothered him though. He was ambivalent about this admiral bloke coming to visit him. What if he were a miser, who wouldn't give him a single bean. Maybe Mr. Bagshaw wouldn't be so generous when a second person was present. After all, one person was so much easier to manipulate than two. Well, he'd have to wait and see. For now he would relax and enjoy the unexpected meal laid out before him. Tearing off a piece of cold mutton with his teeth, the condemned pirate sat in semi-darkness, contemplating the next visit.

Author's note

The incredible encounter between pirates and Knights Templar in the story *Cross and Skullbones* was inspired by the dubious documentary *Pirate Treasure of the Knights Templar* hosted by Bobby Kesselman, which was aired on the History Channel in 2015. In the documentary the renowned underwater explorer Barry Clifford and historian Scott Wolter apparently unearth evidence in an attempt to find hidden links between pirates and the Templars. Another inspiration was the 2003 book *Pirates and the lost Templar fleet: the secret naval war between the Knights Templar and the Vatican*, in which the author David Hatcher Childress makes the claim that when the eradication of the Knights Templar began in 1307, their fleet disappeared from its base at La Rochelle and that a portion of it became the first pirates to fly the Skull and Crossbones, raiding throughout the Mediterranean, later preying on the ships coming from the colonies in the Americas.

The Knights Templar, or The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Jerusalem to be more exact, were a medieval military order founded in about 1119 to protect Christian pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land. They were active there during the Crusades and developed a significant banking system, which gave them considerable wealth and influence across Europe – too much wealth and power for some. On Friday 13th October 1307, Philip IV, who was in dire need of money and mistrustful of the Templars, had all the members of the Order in France arrested on trumped up charges of blasphemy, idolatry and sodomy. Under pressure from Philip, the Order was eventually disbanded by Pope

Clement V in 1312.

Did the Knights Templar have their own fleet? It is more likely they rented vessels when they required them. This was a common medieval practice. Merchant ships of the period – which doubled as warships – were privately owned, often by their captains. Rent included the captain and crew. There are existing records which show that the Templars did own a handful of oared war galleys and at least four merchant caravels or cogs, but these were probably sold off after the order was disbanded.

In the story *Fiddler's Green* the characters meet some seamen who talk about the ships they served on. All the mentioned vessels were involved in some disaster or other. They were real vessels caught up in real disasters. HMS *Association* was a 90-gun, second-rate ship of the line shipwrecked off the Isles of Scilly in 1707 while returning from the Mediterranean after the Toulon campaign during the Spanish War of Succession. The entire crew of eight-hundred men went down with the ship when it struck the Outer Gilstone Rock due to a navigational error. Later in the story, a man calling himself Robert Benton said his ship went down at Milford Haven during the Great Storm of 1703. A convoy of merchants ships along with their naval escorts were sheltering there at the time the storm hit, resulting in the loss of thirty vessels. The Spaniard Francisco claimed he was on the crew of the *Santísima Trinidad*, also know as the *Urca de Lima*. This was one of the eleven ships of the Spanish treasure fleet that was wrecked in a storm off the coast of Florida in July 1715. According to records, around 1,500 sailors perished with a small number surviving. Pirates and privateers such as Henry Jennings and Charles Vane rushed to the area to grab as much of the gold and silver before the Spanish could salvage it.

The story *Fiddler's Green* is based on the maritime

myth of an after-life of a paradise for seamen which was popular in the nineteenth century, where there is perpetual merriment, music, and dancing. The origins of this myth are not entirely clear, but some scholars suggest that it may have been inspired by the Greek myth of the Elysian Fields, a paradise for the dead. A mythical afterlife similar to Heaven, Fiddler's Green was said to be a place of bliss and happiness in which fiddle music was played for all eternity. One of the first mentions of the legend was in 1856 in Frederick Marryat's novel *The Dog Friend*, which in reality means that Faustus Quiddington would probably never have heard of it in the early eighteenth century. The myth is thought to have developed from every seaman's desire to be on dry land in a tavern that never closes, where beer and other alcohol flow freely. Fiddler's Green as an eternal resting place has been featured in many books, poems and songs since the 19th Century. The idea was popularized in a folk song by the English folk singer John Conolly, later made even more well-known by the Dubliners on their *Plain and Simple* album in 1973. The chorus of this song is featured in the story.

On a final note, the characters encountered an unknown instrument in the story *Fiddler's Green* – the accordion. Although this instrument is associated with pirates and sea shanties it wasn't invented in its basic form until 1822 by a German instrument maker called Christian Friedrich Ludwig Buschmann. It was apparently introduced to Britain in 1828, soon becoming popular despite unfavourable reviews.

Books by Wayne Savage

The Pyrate Chronicles:

Book 1 - Dream Chaser

Book 2 - Eldorado

Book 3 - Cross and Skullbones

Book 4 - Dark Armada

End of Empire:

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