

The Pyrate Chronicles

Eldorado



Book 2

Wayne Savage

The Pyrate Chronicles:
Eldorado by Wayne Savage

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Contact: info@waynesavage.com
Infos: waynesavage.com

Acknowledgements

This is a book in which *Black Sails* meets *Gulliver's travels* with a dash of the authentic humour of that loveable pirate band *Ye Banished Privateers*. For those interested in learning more about this wonderful band check out their website at www.yebanishedprivateers.com.

I'd also like to thank my darling wife Mona for her patience and for asking all the right questions. She has been especially helpful in ensuring the book could be understood by a more general audience rather than just a small group of pirate nerds and history buffs.

Finally, I have to thank the *Gold and Gunpowder* YouTube channel with its treasure trove of valuable information on pirates and life at sea. It has been a great inspiration to me.

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

It was close to noon and William Benton was sitting on the rickety cot in his dingy cell expectantly watching the locked door. He nervously awaited the announcement that the journalist Nathaniel Bagshaw had arrived to continue the interview about his adventures in strange lands. For a moment he was struck by a pang of doubt. What if Mr. Bagshaw had been lying to him and had no intention of returning to visit him in prison? What if the man had dismissed him as a fraudulent fool, who was simply out to improve his lot in the last few days he would spend on Earth? On the other hand, why would he have gone to all the trouble of sending a barber to shave off his lice-ridden, untamed beard, or why would he have insisted the condemned pirate be given a pail of lukewarm water with which to wash himself, if the reporter did not intend to return. The bells of the nearby church struck twelve and there was still no sound of the gaoler in the corridor coming to fetch him. Several more minutes passed before Benton started cursing Bagshaw as a despicable fibber and feckless dandy. His disgruntlement grew at the thought

of not obtaining any more rum and cake, and maybe he was even more disappointed he would be deprived of the excuse to leave this dank, damp cell and spend time in the company of someone other than that toad-like gaoler.

Lying back on his bunk and covering himself completely with the clean blanket, which had also been issued to him at the behest of that two-faced journalist, William began to sob silently. It was just after the bells struck half past twelve that he was woken from his melancholy by the unmistakable slow, plodding footsteps of Tom approaching the door. Discarding the blanket on the grimy floor, the prisoner sprang excitedly to his feet. Maybe Mr. Bagshaw hadn't forgotten him after all. When he opened the door the squat gaoler was surprised to be greeted by Benton standing directly in front of him grinning hopefully.

"Am I glad to see you, Tom," said William cheerily.

Tom just grunted in response before speaking. "That gentleman is 'ere to see you again, William, although I can't for the life of me see why."

"It's 'cos of me importance," replied Benton. "I'm helpin' 'im write a book, I am."

The gaoler gave an unimpressed snort as he gestured for William to follow him. Eventually, they arrived at the same room he had spent hours in the day before. Nathaniel Bagshaw was already seated, and on the table in front of him, instead of the jug of stagnant water of the day before, there was a steaming teapot standing together with two sets of porcelain cups and saucers. Tom slammed the door shut and the remorseless pirate took his place opposite the journalist.

"Yer late, Mr. Bagshaw. Kept me waitin' ye did," stated Benton with feigned annoyance, but in reality overjoyed the man had not abandoned him as he had feared.

"I'm terribly sorry, old chap," apologised Bagshaw.

“My previous appointment took longer than expected. I had to speak to the witnesses of a street robbery down in Clapham. Nasty business. A wealthy merchant was robbed in the early hours by a gang of delinquents. What’s the world coming to, I ask?”

“Them witnesses more important than interviewing William Benton, are they?” snapped the prisoner.

“No, not at all,” replied Bagshaw hurriedly. “It was for my newspaper. It is they who pay my bread and butter, so to speak. Without the income from them I’d not be in a position to conduct our interview. Believe me, Mr. Benton, I take much more pleasure in hearing about your adventures than I do questioning intimidated servants.”

“Very well, Mr. Bagshaw,” answered Benton, satisfied with the excuse. “Is that tea in that there pot?”

“Yes, I brought the tea and crockery with me and the prison governor was kind enough to provide the hot water, that is after I’d presented him a small parcel of it for his own use. I obtained it for a reduced price from a Dutch merchant friend of mine, although it still cost a pretty penny, I must say. Help yourself.”

“Don’t mind if I do. Never had tea before, as only those with more money than they know what to do with can afford the stuff.”

“You know they say tea was discovered by accident by a Chinese emperor thousands of years ago. They say he would only drink boiled water and that one day some leaves were blown by chance into his cup, changing the colour and flavour. They say he was so pleased with the taste of the brew that he ordered everyone to drink it from then on.”

“Is that so,” replied Benton, filling the delicate cup to the brim through a small metal strainer.

“Careful with that cup. It’s fragile you know,” warned the journalist. “And please don’t waste it. It cost me an

arm and a leg, it did.”

“The cup already has a chip in it, and by the taste of this stuff I’d say you’ve been had, mate,” said Benton, running a finger over the blemish while grimacing at the bitter taste. “I prefers a good ole cup of sugared hot chocolate, I does.”

“Well, my wife wouldn’t let me bring the best family china to a prison,” responded Bagshaw, realising the luxurious beverage was wasted on this coarse man of the sea.

“Understandable,” replied the thirsty pirate, noisily slurping the dark beverage. “It’s better than nothin’, I s’pose.”

“Maybe you’ll appreciate this more,” said Bagshaw, reaching into his leather bag and producing a woollen cap. “They told me at the market that it’s a Monmouth cap.”

“Indeed it be,” replied Benton, eagerly snatching the headwear from the other man and placing it on his scabby, roughly shaved head. “Keep old William’s head warm at night, it will.”

“Glad you like it,” answered the journalist, secretly happy he would no longer have to constantly look at the unsightly scabs and sores on the condemned man’s head while they talked. “So, can we begin now?” Bagshaw took out a notebook, pen, and small bottle of ink from his bag. “As well as the chest of gold that was found on your vessel, you were also found wearing a fancy necklace when they captured you.”

“That necklace was mine!” snarled Benton. “They ‘ad no right taking it from me.”

“That may be so, but the authorities claim it was loot seized by illegal means. Whether rightly yours or not, I’d be interested in learning more about its origin. I’ve only seen a sketch of it, but they tell me it’s made of pure gold

and silver. And then there's the medallion attached to it with the face depicting what appears to be some kind of Aztec deity."

"I'll tell you all about it, but first I want some of that rum and cake," said the pirate, licking his chapped lips.

"You'll get your rum and cake when I'm satisfied with what you tell me."

"So be it," frowned Benton, greedily eyeing the journalist's bag. "Well, what happened was ..."

Eldorado

Unknown location, October 1718

The Spanish flag

Captain Ironside and the quartermaster, Powder Keg Pete, were leaning on the gunwale looking out to sea. It had been almost three weeks since they had emerged from the mysterious mist after leaving Avery's island, and the crew were once again worried they would not find land before supplies ran out. There was a warm breeze and the water was a sparkling blue, leading the pirate captain to hope they had finally returned to the waters of the Caribbean.

"Do you think we'll ever make it home, Pete?" asked Ironside glumly.

"*Dream chaser* is me home, but if ye mean will we make it back to lands we's familiar wiv, then I has to hope so," replied the quartermaster, running his fingers through his long beard, which had just been trimmed and tidied by Faustus, who, being the surgeon, was also responsible for shaving and cutting the hair of the crew.

Faustus didn't really approve of Pete's long beard, saying that as well as being unfashionable and unrespectable it was a pain to keep under control, but the quartermaster insisted on keeping it, claiming that if it was good enough for Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard, it was good enough for him. Faustus finally relented with his nagging, accepting that men often desired to imitate their idols.

"My main concern is still seeing to it that Cassandra is safely back with her family in Bermuda, and, to be honest, if we ever make it back I'll consider giving up the captaincy and settling down with her there."

"But who'll be our captain then," frowned Pete.

"The crew'll vote on it. Maybe they'll even elect you," smiled the Swede.

"I don't really fancy it, but as long as they don't choose that rascal Benton, I'll be happy," answered the long-bearded man sombrely.

Both men looked round as the purser, Charlotte Scowcroft, approached with a sullen expression on her face.

"Here comes Charlie," frowned Pete. "That must mean trouble."

"What's up, Charlie?" said Ironside, turning to face the grim-faced woman.

"The usual problem, Cap'n. Some of what little water we have left has turned a funny colour. We only have one barrel that's still good. We'll need to find some more, or we'll suffer for lack of it."

"Oh, I see," answer the Captain gloomily. "There's little I can do about that. Let's hope we find land soon. We'll have to strictly ration what's left and hope for the best."

"I'll keep me eye on the last barrel," grumbled the quartermaster. "We don't want any of the less honest of our crew helpin' themselves to more than their fair share."

Pete and Charlie headed for the stores below deck, leaving Captain Gunnarsson to ponder their present predicament, which was becoming a too frequent occurrence since they'd entered that damned mist.

That night Björn Gunnarsson tossed and turned in a restless slumber plagued by pompous generals and bloodthirsty buccaneers. He awoke with a start after sleeping for what seemed to him like minutes, but which must have been hours judging by the dim sunlight flooding in through the stern windows. He would have slept longer had it not been for the urgent knocking on the door to the cabin. Cassandra stirred beside him as he slid out of bed and pulled on his shirt and breeches. He sometimes envied her ability to sleep soundly in all but the most clangorous of situations. The sharp knocking persisted.

"Hold your anchor, I'll be there in a moment," the still tired captain snapped.

"What's going on?" inquired Cassandra, sitting up in the narrow bunk, which was barely wide enough for two.

"That's what I'm about to find out," he replied a little too harshly.

Well aware of her husband's disposition to grumpiness should he be deprived of his precious sleep, the drowsy woman thought it better to say nothing. On wrenching open the door, Ironside saw a bleary-eyed Brownrigg, who was in charge of today's morning watch, grinning at him.

"This had better be good," said Ironside admonishingly.

"It is, Cap'n," blurted the coxswain, more than used to the captain's foul moods when forced out of his bed in the early hours. "Land in sight f'rd of the larboard beam."

"What!" cried the Swede, springing into life as if struck by a sudden bolt of lightening.

After quickly retrieving his beloved telescope, the captain hurried out on deck to see for himself. He indeed could see a land mass in the reddish glow of the early morning sun some ten leagues distant. He ordered the ship's bell to be rung to rouse those not yet awakened by their excited shipmates who had been on watch with Brownrigg. The half-dressed boatswain was soon standing by the captain's side.

"Could be the coast of northern Brazil," commented Brownrigg hopefully.

"And I have to say yer wrong as usual, Johnny," stated Benton pessimistically. "By my reckoning we be too far north to 'ave reached Portuguese territory."

"We're presuming we've made it back to our own world," added the captain. "It could be another unknown land, but, even so, we're in need of fresh water again and have no choice but to investigate."

An unexpected sight greeted the astounded onlookers as they neared the coast. They could see a sheltered bay overlooked by an imposing stone fort, but that was not the most surprising.

"They're flying a bleeding Spanish flag!" shouted Brownrigg. "We must be nearing the Viceroyalty of the Rio de Plata."

"You're dafter than I thought, Johnny," sneered Benton. "As I said, we're too far north to 'ave reached Brazil so it figures we can't 'ave found the Viceroyalty of the Rio de Plata, which is much further south."

"Well, how do you explain the Spanish flag, Billy boy?" retorted the coxswain angrily. "We're definitely not in Caribbean waters. That's plain to see. So where the hell are we, if you're so bloody clever?"

"They're flying the Cross of Burgundy, which in itself is not unusual," commented the captain, carefully studying the diagonal, raguly red cross on a white background with

his telescope, "but since Felipe became the King of Spain, they've started using a new flag bearing the coat of arms of Bourbon-Anjou on a white background, although I have seen the older flag still flown from time to time."

"You knows a great deal 'bout flags, Cap'n," said the impressed boatswain.

"I make it my business to know such things, Will. I think we still have one of the old Spanish ensigns somewhere, so maybe we should fly it when we approach."

"We could fly the union jack, as Spain and Britain are at peace," suggested Brownrigg.

"No, just in case, I think we'll pose as traders under licence from Castile," countered Ironside. "Faustus and I speak Spanish, so maybe we can find out where we are once and for all."

"All right," responded Brownrigg begrudgingly, not at all keen to sail under Spanish colours. "I'll go and find that old rag with the red cross on it."

"There don't seem to be any other ships around," said Benton after Brownrigg had left. "That be unusual, I say."

"That's a good thing. There'll be no-one to challenge us should the locals be disinclined to welcome us and we have to beat a hasty retreat."

"We could just sail down the coast and find water elsewhere," suggested William. "I don't really fancy having to deal with the dons."

"If it were only a matter of replenishing our stocks of water, I'd be inclined to agree with you, Will," replied the captain, "but I am keen to discover our present whereabouts. I would dearly like to see Cassandra safe with her family on Bermuda."

"Right you are, Cap'n," shrugged the boatswain indifferently.

Not long later the crew was assembled on deck to discuss the plan of action. Ironside had suggested that

a delegation consisting only of him, Faustus and Emilio Calderon should land, as all three spoke fluent Spanish. Two men were chosen to row them over in the jolly boat. One was the Algerian corsair Asbat, who spoke broken Spanish and no English, the second man was Xenos Theodoropoulos, a Greek from the Ionian island of Paxos, one of the few parts of his country that had not been taken by the Turks. His people might have escaped the Ottoman yoke, but not that of the city state of Venice. He had been a sailor on a Venetian merchant vessel until he jumped ship in Cádiz on learning that after the outbreak of the Venetian-Ottoman War in 1714 merchant sailors were being pressed into service. In 1715, he managed to get a job on a Spanish ship transporting goods to Cuba, which on reaching the Caribbean was captured by the pirate Henry Jennings, a proud man who insisted he was simply an honest privateer. Xenos joined the crew of the pirate ship for a short time. Not being too fond of Captain Jennings, Xenos left the crew in Nassau where he worked as a fisherman for some time until he encountered Ironside on the quayside one day. Instantly taking to the Swedish captain, he promptly joined the crew of *Dream Chaser*. Ironside had chosen him to row the boat ashore due to his fluency in Italian and his reasonable grasp of the Spanish tongue.

“I should go, too,” called out Benton. “Just in case those dons give yer any trouble.”

“But you don’t speak Spanish, Will,” said Faustus.

“Non, it no is verdad. Yo speako bon spagnol,” said Benton defiantly, ignoring the laughs of even those who didn’t understand any Spanish.

“Tu madre es una burra y tu padre un mulo, William,” Ironside said directly to the stubborn pirate. Those few who understood what he had said grinned expectantly at the confused boatswain.

“Sí,” replied Benton, feigning understanding.

Emilio, Faustus, and Xenos roared with laughter at Benton’s reply.

“What? What did you say, Cap’n? Why are they laughing?” asked the flustered seaman.

“Just that your Spanish isn’t quite up to the level required to be part of the delegation,” smiled Ironside, repressing the desire to laugh out loud. “It’d be better if you kept an eye on things aboard the ship while we’re gone.”

“All right, Cap’n, if you say so,” answered Benton, nervously eyeing the giggling Spanish speakers before hastily withdrawing from the assembly.

“Now we’ll inform Captain Wolfenden of our decision,” said the Swede, regaining his composure. “Pete, would you hail him?”

The crew slowly dispersed, leaving Ironside and Faustus alone at the rail.

“A fine way to test someone’s knowledge of a language,” chuckled the surgeon. “Although, scientifically speaking, it would be impossible what you said to Will.”

“What do you mean, Faustus?” frowned the captain.

“Well, his mother might be a donkey, but his father couldn’t possibly be a mule.”

“And why’s that?” sighed Ironside, readying himself for the anticipated lecture.

“Because mules are the sterile offspring of a male donkey and a female horse, which would mean they wouldn’t produce any offspring,” explained Faustus sagaciously.

“I thank you for sharing that crucial piece of knowledge with me, Faustus,” chortled Ironside. “But, enough tomfoolery. Now I must speak to Cassandra before I go ashore.”

Ironside entered the dimly lit cabin to find his wife

dressed and sitting near the large stern window leafing through the ship's log book.

"What was all that about, Björn?" she asked, looking up from the thick book.

"We're nearing land," replied the captain optimistically. "Why are you reading the ship's log, dear?"

"Just to pass the time until you return. I find the roles some people have on this ship quite confusing. I know that Charlie is the purser and that she's responsible for managing the stores and finances. I also know that Andersen is the head helmsman and is responsible for steering the ship, but I'm not really sure to the purposes of Pete's position as quartermaster. Is he a kind of lieutenant?"

"I guess he is kind of a second-in-command, although he acts as more of a counterweight to my authority. His job is to represent the crew should the captain become too tyrannical. He also sees to it that everyone gets their fair share of any plunder we seize."

"I see," replied Cassandra, nodding in understanding. "And what about the coxswain? That's John Brownrigg's role, isn't it?"

"It's pronounced coxsun and he is in charge of the ship's boats," answered the captain thoughtfully. "But to be honest, John is more than that. He's more of a first mate. He would take over if I could no longer perform my duties. John was too humble to accept the position and the position of bos'n was already occupied when he joined the crew."

"By Benton?" frowned the woman. "So what is Will responsible for then?"

"He should be responsible for supervising the day-to-day activities on the ship, which he sometimes does along with John, but really he's more of a sailing master."

"Sailing master?" inquired Cassandra, even more

confused than before.

“His task is navigation and steering – a job of utmost importance. Unfortunately, he’s the most skilled man on the ship as far as that is concerned, so that’s why I am forced to tolerate his recalcitrant behaviour, at least until we can find a willing replacement.”

“Why is he bosun and not sailing master then?” asked Cassandra, wrinkling her brow.

“Because he deplotes the word master. He says it’s not a fitting term for a pirate,” chuckled Ironside. “He demanded he be assigned the post of bos’n and, as the position was vacant at the time, I reluctantly assented.”

“But the title of quartermaster also contains the word master, does it not?” commented the puzzled woman.

“Indeed it does, but it’s not something that bothers Pete.”

“You could call him the quarterman,” suggested Cassandra helpfully.

“I don’t think that’d go down to well with him,” smiled Ironside. “The crew might joke that he wasn’t a whole man, and Pete might start feeling inferior and drink even more.”

They both laughed for a moment.

“Well, I must say it’s all very bewildering,” said Cassandra, wiping the tears of mirth from her eyes.

“You have to bear in mind that we are pirates, and don’t necessarily follow the strict conventions of the Royal Navy. Anyway, you have distracted me from the reason I came to see you.”

“Good news I hope,” said the woman, looking up at him expectantly.

“We’ve sighted land and a Spanish outpost. I’m going ashore in the hope of finding out where we are,” explained the captain hopefully. “It might not be much longer before I’m able to deliver you to the safety of your family.”

"I'm glad we found land, as I knew we would, but be careful, Björn," replied Cassandra anxiously. "England and Spain might now be at peace, but it doesn't mean you can trust them."

"I'll be sailing in under the Spanish flag, so at least they won't shoot us out of the water before we can make landfall. It should be a simple case of obtaining news, water, and supplies. We'll be on our way in no time."

"If only it would be so," answered Cassandra doubtfully. "Nothing seems to be simple as far as this crew are concerned."

Before Captain Ironside could reply, there was a loud rapping on the cabin door. He opened it to find Pete staring at him, his clay pipe hanging from the corner of his mouth.

"Oi've spoken to Cap'n Wolf and he agrees with our plan, but insists on stayin' out of sight 'case we come to grief," mumbled the quartermaster.

"And so he can have the self-satisfied pleasure of rescuing us from our misfortune again, I suppose," replied Ironside cynically, stepping out onto the deck into the early morning sunlight.

An unexpected reception

After taking soundings and adjusting the sails, *Dream Chaser* sailed without difficulty into the bay, which didn't appear to become shallow until very near to the shore, allowing the ship to manoeuvre close to land before dropping anchor. Before disembarking in the jolly boat, Captain Ironside scanned the scene around him. On a bluff to his right he could make out the ends of the barrels of a shore battery protruding over the battlements of an old stone fort, over which the red and white Spanish flag was fluttering in the cool sea breeze. Ahead of him

he could see a small wooden jetty and a narrow pebbly beach. The only sea vessels he could make out were various sized canoes pulled up onto the shore and a piragua moored at the jetty. A handful of wooden shacks lay just up from where the boats were lying, but there wasn't a soul to be seen anywhere. Glancing back up at the fort, a flurry of movement on the walls confirmed the place was not abandoned. Climbing down into the small boat to join the others, he was glad the sea was calm and the waves gentle. As they rowed towards land both the captain and the surgeon marvelled at the colourful fish darting beneath them in the clear water.

They had just reached the beach when they became aware of marching feet. Faustus and Ironside exchanged alarmed looks before stepping into the shallow surf. Once on dry land the five men watched in amazement as about two-hundred soldiers marched into a cleared area near the huts and abruptly stopped and turned to face them. Something disturbed the captain about how the soldiers were dressed as he scanned the rows of men armed with pikes and out-dated arquebuses. Under their metal breast plates they were wearing short, baggy jerkins; their legs were adorned to the knees with baggy, red and yellow striped knee-length hose, and below their knees with long red stockings. On their feet they wore soft, leather shoes, but what was most unusual to the men from *Dream Chaser* was what they were wearing on their heads. They were wearing the combed morion helmets that the pirates had only seen in pictures of the conquistadors of more than 150 years past. Following closely on the heels of the antiquated soldiers came a less well disciplined troupe of men wearing all manner of colourful chequered or striped tunics, or nothing more than vibrantly coloured loin cloths. All wore yellow tassels around their wrists and ankles, some of their heads were

adorned with feather headbands. All were armed with either small, ineffectual-looking bows or wooden-tipped spears. The second group of men clearly belonged to the native peoples of this coast.

The rows of soldiers stood motionless, staring expressionlessly at the newcomers while the multitude of indigenous men observed them curiously. Moments later, a trim-bearded man of apparent importance dressed in a shiny, gilded corselet with an intricately embroidered velvet cloth covering majestically entered the scene riding a fine white stallion. Instead of a crested helmet, he wore a velvet bag-type hat with a narrow brim, and on his legs he wore stuffed and slashed breeches and around his waist a crimson sash. Following close behind were two men dressed in colourfully patterned sleeveless jackets and ostentatious feather head dresses. Their grim faces were marked by sinister, vertical black stripes above and below their eyes, and unpleasant bone crosses dangled around their neck. Two of the natives dashed out to aid the somewhat corpulent man down from his mount.

The man was not as tall dismounted as he had seemed while straddling the back of the regal horse. As he approached, closely flanked by the two baleful figures, the pirates glanced at the splendid jewelled rapier which hung from his waist. As the dignitary neared them he smiled amicably before addressing the new arrivals.

“Bienvenida al Virreinato de Eldorado,” he announced in a deep voice. “Soy el Virrey Jaun Hidalgo de Eldorado.”

Faustus gaped at the man in open-mouthed astonishment. He had never in all his books come across the Viceroyalty of Eldorado. He had encountered the name El Dorado, the Golden one, on several occasions, but the city of gold was nothing more than a myth. Numerous conquistadors as well as the English explorer and privateer Sir Walter Raleigh had searched for the

rumoured city for years, but to no avail. None but a few stubborn souls still believed that it really existed.

“We thank you for your warm reception,” responded Ironside formally in Spanish. “I am Captain Gunnarsson of the ship *Dream Chaser* and we are sailing under commission from Castile. We are delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“Yes, I see by your ensign that you are indeed from Spain, but I do not recognize the build of your vessel,” said the stout man earnestly. “It is not the galleon we’ve been expecting.”

“Galleon?” replied the captain, wondering if he was referring to the one they had been pursuing for weeks.

“Yes, the treasure galleon,” answered the dignitary as if it were common knowledge. “We are waiting for it to return to pick up the gold and silver and transport it to the motherland. Do you know its whereabouts? Why are you here? We haven’t been visited by another ship since its departure.”

“Well, we are nothing but simple merch...,” Ironside started to say before Faustus hastily interrupted him.

“As the captain just said, we are sailing under commission from Spain. Our task is to clear the way for the galleon. We were informed that pirates might be lurking in the area waiting to intercept it once its hold was full of precious cargo. Our assignment is to protect the treasure ship at all costs. We sailed ahead to ensure the coast was clear, so to speak.”

“That is splendid news,” exclaimed the governor, clapping his hands. “We’ve been awaiting it for so long. When do you expect it to arrive? We must begin with the preparations.”

“Oh, in about a week,” said the surgeon convincingly, ignoring the captain’s questioning look. “You have plenty of time to prepare for its arrival.”

"Yes, we wanted to be sure it was safe," Ironside added to the story. "You haven't seen any suspicious vessels prowling the coast, have you?"

"No, we haven't. As I said, we haven't sighted any sea-going vessels since we have been here," frowned the Spaniard. His expression brightened as he continued, "but we are glad you are here, as we have nothing but the small boats you see on the beach at our disposal."

"You say you've been waiting for a long time, Governor Hidalgo," said the curious physician. "How long exactly, if I may ask?"

"We've been waiting since the year of our Lord 1543," replied the dignitary as if it were the most normal thing to say in the world. "That's the last time we saw any of our fellow countrymen."

"1543? But that's impossible!" cried out Ironside and Faustus simultaneously.

"That would make you 175 years old, but you don't look a day over fifty," stated the astonished surgeon.

"I'm thirty-nine, actually," replied the mildly offended official. "But when I said we've been waiting for the galleon since 1543, I meant my people, not I personally, of course. We are descendants of the original expedition of conquistadors who discovered this land of abundance and courageously subjected the natives to their will."

"So you're telling us you've been waiting several generations for the ship to return," said Faustus, scratching his wrinkled forehead. "Has it ever occurred to you that the ship might never return?"

"The islands will wait for me with the ships of Old Spain in the lead, to bring you children from far away, taking silver and gold with them, for the honour of the Lord your God, the Holy One of El Dorado, who has glorified you," recited Jaun Hidalgo with distant eyes. "That's what it says in the holy scripture. The ship is

destined to return.”

Emilio Calderon leaned over to the captain and Faustus and whispered in their ears. “I might not be the most pious of men, and haven’t ever read much of the holy book, but I’m pretty sure neither Spain nor Eldorado are mentioned in it.”

“Which scriptures are you talking about exactly?” ventured Faustus.

“The holy Catholic bible of our Lord Jesus Christ-Quetzalcoatl, of course,” answered the governor suspiciously. “You aren’t one of those heretical protestants, are you?”

“No, I certainly am not,” replied the Anglican surgeon in mock indignation. “But I must admit I’m not as well read up on the holy scriptures as I should be.”

“Glad to hear you’re not one of those despicable fellows. Anyway, you just said the galleon is on the way, so our faith has been justified,” said Hidalgo firmly.

“Yes, of course,” confirmed the captain. Pointing at the soldiers, he continued. “So all these people are descendants of the original mission?”

“The soldiers, administrators, and priests are all descendants,” explained the governor. “We were forced to intermarry with the locals to ensure our survival as we had no women with us. All those who can trace their lineage back to the original settlers are entitled to be a part of the privileged caste.”

“And what about the rest?” asked Faustus cautiously, gesturing towards the group of men adorned in the colourful garments of natives.

“They are our slaves of course,” stated Hidalgo matter-of-factly. “Those ones who aid us in maintaining security are granted additional perks.”

“And the rest?” persisted the surgeon.

“They work the mines and fields. How else could we

extract the silver and gold, and how else would we obtain the food to feed us all?"

"You've enslaved all the natives?" replied Faustus, disgusted, but not surprised, having read countless accounts of the subjugation of the peoples of the New World by the conquistadors. In particular, he recalled how shocked he was on learning how the Spanish had worked thousands of the enslaved natives to death in the mines at a place called Potosí in Viceroyalty of Peru, in order to obtain vast amounts of silver and gold.

"Of course we did. As it says in the scriptures: the hand of the diligent will rule, while the slothful will be put to forced labour; Proverbs 12:24," recited the descendent of Spanish invaders.

"I see," replied the open-mouthed physician, not sure if these words originated from the bible he knew, but had neglected to read. Even if they were words from the Old Testament, he could not be sure the man quoting them had interpreted them correctly. Uncomfortable with this gap in his knowledge, he made a mental note to add both books of the bible to his list of future reading material.

"It is not fitting that we discuss such matters here in the open, so I propose inviting you and a select few to a feast this very evening in honour of yourselves and the imminent arrival of the galleon. You will all be my guests until the ship arrives, but as I do not wish your crew to bring disease and discomfort to the natives, I shall have victuals brought to the jetty where they can be collected and enjoyed by your men while they remain aboard your ship."

"I thank you for your kind offer, Viceroy Hidalgo," responded Ironside gratefully. "I will now return to my ship to inform the others."

"Yes, you do that." The finely dressed man turned to the surgeon. "And meanwhile this man, Mr. ... ?"

“Mr. Faustus Quiddington, ship’s surgeon,” answered Faustus uncertainly.

“Yes, Mr. Quiddington and I will return to the palace and await your arrival. He seems a well-read man and I’ve been wanting for cultured conversation. In fact, I would like to acquaint him better with the scripture.”

Quiddington exchanged a nervous glance with the captain, torn by the fear of being left alone with these strangers in this unknown land and the insatiable thirst for knowledge. After a few moments of pained consideration the latter won out and he warily accepted the invitation. Anyway, he was not really sure he could refuse the offer without offending their host.

“Splendid!” said the governor, once more clapping his hands in excitement. “Return with your selected party in two hours. I’d like to show you around before the feast.”

Ironside nodded slowly, unsure of whether he’d made the right decision to land on this unfamiliar shore. Although he believed Hidalgo was keeping Faustus on land in good faith and not as a hostage, it meant he had no option but to return later that day.

A disconcerting guided tour

It didn’t take the captain long to return to *Dream Chaser*. Once on board he called an assembly to inform the others of the situation. The majority were elated at the news of an abundance of food and drink, although a few grumbled about the prospect of being confined to the ship. Some had hoped to make their acquaintance with any women they might find ashore – for love or for coin. Any doubts were soon dismissed when Monkey Boy Will alerted them all from the yardarm of the foremast that baskets, barrels, and crates were being brought to the jetty.

The crew had agreed that only Ironside, Faustus, and Emilio Calderon, the latter being the only authentic Spaniard aboard, were to attend the feast. William Benton had also wanted to go with them, but reluctantly relented when the captain explained to him that he wanted to minimize the risk. The loss of both the captain and the navigator would be too much for the crew should something go awry. Asbat and Xenos along with two others were to row them ashore in the slightly larger second ship's boat, and everyone was surprised when Benton eagerly volunteered himself for the task, as it was well-known that he was normally averse to any unnecessary physical labour.

"And why do ye want ter row the cap'n ashore, Will?" asked the quartermaster sceptically. "You's always tellin' me how much ye hates rowing."

"I'm in need of a little fresh air," chirped the boatswain.

"Because you can't get enough fresh air on board the open deck of a ship, Will?" quipped Brownrigg.

"Well, if the truth be known, Johnny, I'm really just in need of a break from 'aving to stare at yer ugly mug all day," sneered Benton. "And I also wants to get them supplies aboard as quick as possible, before some thievin' bugger pilfers them, so we can start with our own little feast."

"All right, William, you can row us over if you really want to," said Ironside. "Pete and Charlie will see to it that the provisions are fairly distributed." Turning to the scowling coxswain. "John, can you get the other two boats ready, too, and make sure that everyone sticks to the task at hand? No-one is to wander off on their own."

"Aye, aye, Captain," replied Brownrigg dutifully.

As the assembly was dispersing, Cassandra, who rarely attended such meetings, nervously approached her husband.

“What is it, Cassandra?” asked Ironside, registering the look of concern on his spouse’s face.

“I’m coming, too,” she stated challengingly.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, my love,” answered the captain anxiously. “We know nothing of our hosts and their intentions, so it’d be safer if you remained on the ship.”

“No, Björn. I’ve a bad feeling about this place, and don’t want to be separated from you should something unexpected happen.”

“I must admit it is strange to discover a forgotten Spanish colony, but I am sure Viceroy Hidalgo’s intentions are benevolent. Should anything suspicious occur, we’ll leave tomorrow, once we’re all aboard and have enough supplies.”

“I’m coming with you, Björn, and that’s all there is to it,” retorted Cassandra defiantly. Without waiting for a reply the annoyed woman dashed over to the side of the ship where the second boat had just been lowered and started to climb over the gunwale.

“All right, Cassandra, you win, but be careful!” shouted Ironside, not wanting his wife to slip and fall in her haste.

Twenty minutes later the ship’s boat was moored at the jetty and those who were to attend the feast clambered out. Once on dry land Ironside looked around and saw Hidalgo, Faustus and two burly slaves with clubs hanging from their belts rapidly approaching. While the small group strode to meet their smiling host, the captain became aware that he was accompanied by someone other than his wife and Calderon – William Benton was tagging along not far behind.

“Get back to the boat, Will,” ordered the Swede irritably.

“Won’t,” scowled the boatswain rebelliously. “It’s got just as much right to come to the feast as you does, Cap’n.”

"You planned this all along, didn't you, Will?" stated Cassandra with an amused look on her face.

"Might of," responded William boldly. "So what if I did? I'm not stayin' on that ship while you be off gallivanting without me. I'm coming and you can't stop me."

"I'm sure Asbat and Xenos would take you back forcibly if I asked them."

Instead of waiting for a reply, the recalcitrant seaman ran off towards the approaching Spanish official, greeting him loudly and amicably. "Ben-nos dee-ass, sen-your."

"Looks like you have no choice other than to let him come, either," chuckled Cassandra.

"It seems so," sulked the pirate captain, realising how it would look to their host if Benton were to be dragged back under protest to the boat. When he reached William, he whispered in the man's ear. "Remember, we're guests, so please try to behave yourself and try to keep your big mouth shut."

"I'll do me best, Cap'n," grinned the boatswain impishly.

Before continuing after the Viceroy, Captain Ironside looked back to the jetty to see the three remaining men contentedly loading boxes and baskets of provisions onto the boat. The other two ship's boats were halfway to the shore. He hoped Brownrigg and Pete would manage to maintain some kind of order on the ship while he was absent, although he feared the quartermaster was likely to be the one who overindulged the most.

They walked a short distance down a paved road until they reached a wide gate in the low stone wall leading to the town. A large, ornate sign spanned the entrance. A single incomprehensible word was engraved into it, and an intricately painted winged serpent coiled around an exquisite silver cross elaborately adorned either side of the odd word. Neither the scholarly surgeon nor his

companions had any idea of the meaning of the strange word – Txichitixocoatl. Noticing his guests looking curiously up at the splendid sign, Hidalgo spoke.

“That’s the name of this city,” he explained patiently. “The natives pronounce it Teshecheeteeshokoatel. Quite a mouthful for European tongues, is it not?”

“What does it mean?” inquired Faustus.

“It means the sacred city. It is written that our Lord Jesus Christ-Quetzalcoatl visited this city on the back of a llama.”

“A llama!” responded Calderon, clearly astounded by this claim. “I don’t recall there being any mention of llamas in the bible.”

“Your knowledge of the scriptures is lacking, Mr. Calderon,” replied Hidalgo sternly. “Then they brought the llama to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then Jesus Christ-Quetzalcoatl rode triumphantly into Txichitixocoatl. Every child knows that.”

The speechless rigger gaped at the other man, who continued into the town, oblivious to the perplexed faces on those following close behind.

“What did he say?” Benton asked his Spanish shipmate, feeling he was missing out on something important.

“The Viceroy mistakenly believes that Jesus rode into this city on the back of a llama,” answered Calderon in a low voice.

“But that’s mad, that is,” replied Benton in a not so low voice. “I may not’ve spent much time at Sunday school, but even I knows it was a donkey that he rode into Damascus on. What’s the Spanish word for donkey?”

“He rode into Jerusalem, not Damascus,” corrected Calderon. “And the Spanish word for donkey is ‘burro,’ or ‘burra’ if it’s female.”

The boatswain stopped for a moment with a troubled look on his face. The word 'burra' seemed familiar to him. Where had he heard it before? Then he realised it was one of the words the captain had used when he had addressed him in Spanish while still on board the ship.

"Wait a minute, Emilio," called out Benton, jogging to catch up with the man from Havana. "Did the captain call me a lady donkey when we was back on the ship?"

"Well, not exactly. He said your mother is a donkey and your father a mule."

"Why that underhanded Swedish git," snarled Benton. "Both me parents be from Plymuff, and they certainly weren't of the horsey type. The cap'n's got no right insultin' me like that in front of all."

"He was just testing your ability to speak Spanish, Will," reassured Calderon. "I'm sure he meant no harm by it."

"All the same, it be a grievous thing to say to another man. I'll make that bugger pay for his foul words, you mark my words."

The Spanish seaman shrugged and trotted off to catch up with the others while the fuming sailor from Plymouth followed scowling not far behind.

Meanwhile, Hidalgo had invited them all on a tour of the mines before they went to the palace for the feast. As they passed through the town Ironside looked around in wonder at the numerous buildings of adobe brick with roofs of straw. A handful of constructions imitated the early Spanish colonial style, but they were few in number. What astounded the visitors most was a gigantic pyramid with a magnificent stone temple on its flattened top and stairs ascending on all four faces. They had only ever seen such structures in illustrations in books on the ancient civilisations of the Americas.

"It looks very old," commented Faustus. "Did you

know that the Mayans were building such structures a thousand years before the birth of Christ, while we Europeans were still living in mud huts. Amazing, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," replied Cassandra in awe. "How is it that a bunch of warring barbarians from Europe managed to conquer half the world?"

"Probably because we still are warring barbarians," answered the surgeon cynically. "Although the Greeks were a pretty civilised bunch though. In Athens they even had a truer democracy than we have in England, not dissimilar to that found on pirate and buccaneer vessels."

"It seems that we pirates must also be sophisticated, sharing a love of liberty and hatred of tyranny with the ancient Greeks," chuckled Ironside.

"Did they let the women vote?" inquired Cassandra.

"No, only male citizens over the age of eighteen were allowed to cast their vote in important matters," explained the bookish surgeon. "Women, foreigners, and slaves were excluded."

"Oh, that's a pity," responded the disappointed woman. "I guess men will never grant women the right to vote. They're afraid we'd elect to put an end to their nonsense wars."

"Well, I guess it was still better in Athens than it is in the England of today," said Ironside. "As far as I know, only men of real property are entitled to vote."

"For male citizens maybe, but for women I'm not so sure," countered Faustus. "The Athenians were strictly patriarchal and women were usually confined to the home. On the other hand, back then the voting citizens directly participated in the running of their city, not like now, where voters only elect a representative to make important decisions for them."

"So English democracy means that men of wealth get

to choose other wealthy men who act in their interest to oppress the rest of the people,” stated Ironside dispiritedly.

“It would seem so,” agreed the physician. “You’ll never find a more free place than on board a pirate ship. Sadly, I doubt such a system will catch on. If you ask me, the wealthy will always find ways to impose their will on us.”

“I fear you are right, Faustus,” said Ironside. Changing the subject he continued. “Tell me about the time you spent with our host while I was back on the ship.”

“It was a very interesting experience. It appears the mestizo ruling class of this land are followers of a bastardized Christian faith, an amalgamation of Catholicism and indigenous beliefs. I fear many back in Spain would tarnish them heathens and heretics. Their love for idolatry exceeds even that of the papists themselves. I saw pagan symbols combined with Christian ones, a little like what we saw on the sign over the city gate. The Viceroy even read to me from their unorthodox version of the bible which was bound in snake skin. It was all very interesting to observe.”

The captain digested Faustus’s words as they continued walking along the dusty streets of the settlement. Eventually, they reached another gate at the far side of the town.

“Not far now, gentlemen,” said Hidalgo merrily. “The mines are located not far from the wall. I’ll give you a brief tour and then we’ll return to the palace to freshen up.”

On their way to their destination, they passed groups of slaves burdened with heavy baskets being driven forwards by grim-faced soldiers. Those that moved too slowly were spurred on by the crack of a whip or the blow from a wooden club. Only the soldiers took interest in the Viceroy and his guests, saluting smartly as they passed. The indifferent slaves were too exhausted to take notice

of them. Faustus eyed the overworked natives pityingly as they passed by, while Ironside and his wife fought to suppress the anger brewing inside them.

"This is terrible," whispered Cassandra to her spouse. "It's even worse than on the plantations. Maybe we shouldn't have come to this land."

"Yes, it's a heart-wrenching sight. We'll leave this deplorable place tomorrow on the pretext of hunting pirates, but first we need supplies, so we'll need to just grin and bear it for the time being."

The group finally stopped at a dark, gaping opening in the rocky hillside, where Hidalgo gave them a short lecture on the process of mining precious metals, in which only Faustus took real interest. In the meantime, Benton, not understanding a word their host was saying, had sidled off and was now standing over a basket brimming with gold nuggets, which a tired slave had just dropped, spilling its contents on the ground at the inquisitive pirate's feet. Surreptitiously, he nudged one of the shiny rocks away from the others with his scuffed, soft leather shoes. He had just crouched down to slyly claim it for himself when he was disturbed by angry shouts and the cracking of a whip. He looked up, but not before pocketing the valuable stone, to see two guards setting about beating the poor man who had lost his grip on his heavy load. The ship's navigator sprang to his feet.

"Oi, you stop that, you goddamn bully boys!" he shouted at the surprised soldiers. "Pick on someone yer own size, why don't yer?"

William Benton took a step towards the soldier brandishing the whip, but his way was blocked by the second guard who roughly shoved him back.

"Hey, I didn't mean pick on me when I said that," growled the irate pirate. "But what the hell." With one swift movement Benton kicked the legs of the hostile

soldier from under him before the man could swing his wooden club. He then took a step towards the second man, slipping his trusty knife from his pocket. "I said leave him be, you papist hector!"

Before he could reach the offending guard, the one he'd just knocked down grappled him around both legs bringing him to the ground with a dull thud while the other man raised his whip to strike the unknown assailant. Meanwhile, the cowering slave watched the scene with fear and fascination.

"Basta!" shouted Hidalgo on seeing the scuffle.

The Viceroy shouted further commands at the two overseers, who humbly apologized to their leader as they backed away. Benton scrambled to his feet and brushed the dirt from his already grubby trousers.

"What is the meaning of this?" inquired Hidalgo sternly, turning to face the pirate captain. "Why did your man attempt to assault my men?"

"I'm sorry, but back home in the motherland we're not used to the brutality of the colonies," replied Ironside in attempt to mollify their host. "It has clearly upset my man here."

"He's not even Spanish, is he?" frowned the Spaniard. "I suspect he is an Englishman. A fornicating, antinomian Anglican. Why do you allow our enemy aboard your ship?"

"As it happens, he isn't our enemy. Spain and England have been at peace since 1715," replied the captain, "and he might not be Catholic, but he's a top-notch navigator and that's all that matters."

"England and Spain are at peace? What is the world coming to?" answered the Viceroy indignantly. "I'll take your word for that, but please try to keep your man under control. The next time I might not intervene."

"Thank you, Viceroy. It certainly won't happen again,"

said Ironside, beckoning Benton to him. Switching to English. "You are not to interfere again, William. Our host might not be so lenient next time. And put that knife away."

"It's not right, Cap'n," protested the scorned seaman. "They got no right to treat them slaves like that."

"I agree, Will, but remember we are guests. You'll just make matters worse."

"You can't let them hurt him," pleaded Benton, glancing at the random slave, who was visibly shaking as he knelt next to the overturned basket with his gaze fixed on the stony ground. "I've grown quite fond of him."

"You don't even know the man, but I'll see what I can do." Ironside turned to face the official and reverted to Spanish. "I do not wish to impose on you, Viceroy Hidalgo, but would you be so merciful as to spare this man any punishment? For our peace of mind."

"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful," added the surgeon hopefully.

"Hmm, Luke verse six. If you put it like that, Mr. Quiddington, what can I say?" smiled Hidalgo. "Just this once I shall show clemency." The governor shouted at the slave, who gratefully gathered up his fallen load and staggered as fast as he could towards the town gate. He then ordered the disgruntled guards to return to the mine. "Now we will return to the city. I have a little more to show you before we go to the palace to freshen up."

After having made their way back to the city they were taken to a large walled complex, which they were informed housed the palace and the treasury. They were led through the grounds which consisted of a momentous, sandy parade ground and immaculate gardens tended by slaves – both male and female – in thin white tunics. While they passed through beds of aromatic red and yellow flowers, some of which were over three feet tall,

Faustus stopped to admire them.

“Cempazúchitl,” stated Hidalgo on noticing the surgeon’s keen interest. “Or tagetes erecta in Castilian. They have many uses: in incense and oils for our rituals; to decorate our homes; to dye our textiles; to give our food colour; they are even used to treat skin, eye, and stomach ailments by the priests.”

“What a marvellous plant,” commented Faustus, inhaling deeply. Leaning over to Cassandra, he whispered in English. “We call them Aztec marigolds back home. I’ve seen such flowers in ornamental gardens.”

“They’re lovely,” replied the delighted women, sniffing one more closely.

“They’re just flowers to me,” shrugged the boatswain, who happened to be within hearing distance, indifferently. “Though I must admit they be pretty ones. I bet the girls back home would love ‘em.”

“This way, gentlemen,” interrupted the Spanish official, gesturing towards a set of huge, brightly painted wooden doors.

A soldier in a shiny metal breast plate and helmet stood on either side of the doorway holding a long, ceremonial halberd erect. The small group uncertainly followed their guide through an already open wing of the door. They made their way through shadowy, cool corridors of bare stone, passing doorless rooms in which they caught glimpses of artisans busily at work, until they reached another large door flanked by two more similarly adorned guards, who smartly came to attention on seeing their leader approach. The two men pushed the door open on their superior’s command and the sight that greeted the pirates went beyond their wildest dreams.

Before them was a large chamber lit by flickering lanterns. They stared in astonishment at what filled the huge room and William Benton let out a whistle

of disbelief. One wall was stacked with gleaming bars of pure gold and silver, the other was lined with open crates full of jewellery made of precious metals and gemstones. The room held more wealth than all the kings of Europe together could only dream of. It would surely take a hundred galleons to transport it all back to Spain. Ironside gripped Benton's sleeve firmly when he noticed the man slowly shifting towards the nearest open box. Seeing his guests were struck dumb with awe, Hidalgo broke the silence.

"We have been collecting the gold for many years for shipment back to Spain. I'm sure King Carlos will be pleased."

"I'm sure he would be, if he were still alive," said Faustus, "but he has been dead for many years. Now Felipe, the fifth of his name, sits the throne of Spain. The House of Bourbon now rule the land not the House of Trastámara, but I'm sure the current monarch will be just as happy to get his hands on this lot."

"Oh, yes, I forget that things might have changed back in Spain after so many years," replied the Viceroy, scratching his chin, "but as long as it benefits the glorious Spanish Empire, it matters not who sits the throne."

"I must say that your treasure is not particularly well guarded," commented Ironside, strangely uncomfortable at being surrounded by so much wealth in one place. "Only a handful of guards and no locks."

"Why would someone want to steal it?" asked the confused official. "There are nothing but shiny metal bars and pretty stones here. They make nice adornments, but are of little practical value to us."

"If it be of so little value, then they won't mind me helpin' meself to some will they?" muttered Benton excitedly to himself when Calderon translated the words for him, stepping delightedly towards a brimming chest.

The captain pulled the covetous seaman back just in time.

“And besides, everything in this room is the property of the King of Spain,” explained Hidalgo. “Were anyone to be so foolish as to steal from our gracious Majesty, it would mean a certain unpleasant and painful death for the culprit.”

Benton took an exaggerated step back towards the door when Ironside translated the warning. Fortunately, the Spanish official hadn’t noticed both Benton’s and Calderon’s esurient glances at the precious hoard.

“As all women, I see you are beguiled by the beauty of these trinkets, madame,” said Hidalgo on seeing Cassandra’s keen interest in the necklaces.

“Yes, they are beautiful,” replied the awestruck woman when her husband translated what their host had said, “but I wouldn’t call them trinkets. The workmanship is exquisite.”

The Viceroy slowly walked to some shelves near the door, which also held some items of great value. He took down a beautifully crafted gold necklace inlaid with sparkling rubies and handed it to the astonished woman. “A gift for you, madame. The objects on these shelves have not yet been registered as the property of Spain, so I’m able to present it to you in good conscience.”

Cassandra stared dumbfounded at the marvellous present, unsure of whether to accept something worth more than all she had ever and could ever possess – at least legally. Her husband explained that it was a gift and urged her to accept it, which she gratefully did, carefully placing it around her slender neck. On hearing Ironside translating Hidalgo’s words to his wife, Benton stepped towards the governor holding out his hand. “Me also want regalo,” he said hopefully, but the Viceroy just stared at him disdainfully, replying in Spanish.

“What is wrong with this man? I know he is an

Englishman and a heathen, but is he also a halfwit too. He must know such decorations are only fit for women and priests – neither of which he is.”

Captain Ironside tactfully only translated the last part of what their host had said, but Benton, not wanting to lose out on the prospect of free treasure, demanded the captain tell the Spaniard it was not for him, but a woman back home. His pleas were to no avail, as Hidalgo, who had taken a clear dislike to the seaman from the southwest of England, refused flatly to hand anything of value over to someone from a nation he so abhorred, regardless of any treaties which might have been signed thousands of miles across the ocean.

Benton stood staring in covetous amazement at the vast amount of wealth standing before his eyes. He decided he would have failed dismally should he leave this place without at least one valuable souvenir. He waited for a few moments until there was some distance between himself and the rest of the group before foxily shuffling over to the shelf from which the Viceroy had taken Cassandra’s gift. As he saw it, these items were not yet the property of the Spanish monarch, so there would be no harm in helping himself to one of those sparkling necklaces. Besides what right did any king have to more wealth than he possibly needed? On hearing the captain call his name he furtively slipped a piece of jewellery into the pocket of his shabby jacket. As an afterthought, he replaced the stolen object with the gold nugget he had procured from the slave’s fallen basket, the glistening rock now seemingly unspectacular in comparison to his precious new possession, then he hurried to catch up with the others who had already left the huge chamber.

Meanwhile, Captain Ironside was walking side-by-side with his host, his mind still focused on the vast fortune he had just born witness to. Would it be possible

for him and his crew to get their hands on some of it before they departed? They wouldn't need much. Surely it would be hardly noticed. He was suddenly brought back to the present by Hidalgo's cheery voice.

"I see you are impressed by what we have amassed over the years, I just hope our Royal Majesty feels the same."

"I'm sure he will," replied Ironside, "but I was just wondering that if all that gold is worthless to you why do you persist in mining it."

"Worthless to those in this colony, but not to the king of Spain," answered the official. "To be honest, I do not know why those in the motherland are so desirous of such metals. They can't be used to make effective tools or weapons. I presume the women there must require more of it to decorate themselves with than those here. All I know is that the monarch rules by divine right and as it says in the holy bible: Render unto the King of Spain the things that are the King's, and to God the things that are God's."

"But I thought it said render unto Caesar," commented Faustus. "He was the Roman emperor."

"I know not who this Caesar is neither have I heard of these Romans," countered Hidalgo irately. "All that I know is that it is our religious duty to mine the gold which is to be collect by the sacred galleon to be taken to the esteemed and holy land of Spain."

The Viceroy led them to the palace in silence, not wishing to discuss the matter further with his guests. Once in the luxurious building they were taken to their lavish rooms by nervous servants. The captain and his wife were led to a magnificent chamber containing a huge double bed covered in intricately embroidered sheets, while the others were each led to their own rooms. Once the servants had disappeared Benton strolled from his room opposite and pushed through the drapes hanging

in the doorway of the captain and his wife's room.

"What do you want, William?" asked Ironside angrily. "Can't you see my wife is getting undressed?"

Not paying any attention to the woman who was unfastening the back of her dress, the boatswain spoke excitedly. "We've got to get our hands on some of that stuff before we go, Cap'n."

"I was thinking the same, Will," replied the Swede in a low voice. "But not tonight. We've got to find out more about this place before we act, but tomorrow we'll formulate a plan with the others. Now return to your room and prepare yourself for the feast."

"Glad ter 'ear you don't intend us to leave without enriching ourselves a little." Benton slipped his newly acquired necklace from his pocket and showed it to the captain. "Look what I got."

"You took a great risk, William," frowned Ironside, admiringly examining the necklace of pure gold and silver connected to a medallion with an image depicting some sinister native deity engraved on its face.

"We takes a great risk just bein' pirates, we do, so what's the difference?" grinned Benton. "I ain't givin' it back. You can't make me."

"And neither do I intend to, but please keep it out of sight until we're back on the ship."

Nodding, Benton slipped the piece of jewellery back into his tattered pocket and skipped gleefully back to his own chamber to freshen up.

"What did William want?" asked Cassandra, standing stripped to the waist in front of a bowl of steaming, fragrant water washing her armpits with a damp cloth.

"He thinks we should claim for ourselves some of that wealth which will never reach Spanish shores. In fact, he's already started helping himself to it. He pilfered one of the necklaces from the treasury before we left."

"I presume he was envious that I received one as a gift and he didn't," replied the woman, now rinsing her feet in the ornate bowl. "I can't say I'm surprised."

"Of course it is of no surprise. He, like the rest of us, is a pirate bent on obtaining as much Spanish gold as possible."

"Don't say you're considering stealing some of the treasure, Björn," said Cassandra sternly, pausing her cleaning ritual for a moment.

"Well, there is so much of it, and it's never going to find its way to Spain," answered the captain cautiously. "They don't appreciate the value of it here, so where's the harm in helping ourselves to a little. They have more than enough."

"You might end up getting us all killed," gasped the startled women. "As I said, I have an uneasy feeling about this place. We have to leave as soon as possible."

"You think the men will leave willingly, knowing there's a fortune stashed away in the vaults? They'd lynch me for even suggesting it," persisted the captain.

"You don't have to tell them, Björn," pleaded his spouse.

"You can't expect me to keep it from them. If they find out once we're underway, they'll string me up from the yardarm. Besides, although I could count on Faustus to keep quiet, I doubt Benton, or come to mention it Calderon, would keep their mouths shut for long."

"I suppose so," replied Cassandra, realising she was beaten. She sadly admitted to herself that she would never get used to being around a company of gold hungry pirates and the risks they would take to get their hands on their much sought-after booty. Rather than pushing the point she redressed and explored the extravagant room that had been allotted to them.

Elaborately woven tapestries hung from the walls,

which themselves had been coated with paint containing sparkling gold dust. The tiled floor was decorated with both Christian and pagan images and from the ceiling dangled eerie silver candelabras of a design they had never seen before. The furniture had clearly been constructed by the most skilled of craftsmen, in particular the sumptuous raised bed and ostentatious dressing table supporting a mirror of highly polished silver. Cassandra especially appreciated the fragrant scent of mild incense that filled the air, while her husband showed more interest in the jug of corn beer laced with fruit standing on a low table near the door. The couple spent the next hour enjoying their surroundings together, waiting to be summoned to the feast.

The bloody banquet

After a relaxing wait, lounging together on the soft, spacious bed, Captain Gunnarsson and Cassandra were finally summoned to the feast by a servant in fine European attire. Picking up the others on the way, they were led into a magnificent banqueting hall containing two long, low tables surrounded by numerous plush cushions. The room was well-lit and the air heavy with unfamiliar fragrances. Several other guests had already made themselves comfortable, including one of the sinister-looking priests, and Captain Ironside couldn't help noticing that only the male guests were seated at the main table. He hoped they wouldn't try to separate him from his wife, but feared he'd have no choice but to accept it, if they did.

"Please make yourselves comfortable," Hidalgo, who was seated at the head of the main table, welcomed his guests cheerily. On noticing that Cassandra was about to sit herself next to her husband, he addressed her

kindly but firmly. "I'm afraid men and women don't dine together. You'll have to sit with the other women."

"What! Why can't I sit with my husband?" asked the woman testily after her spouse apologetically informed her what their host had just said. "Is that what it says in their damn scriptures?"

"We are taught that women should be silent and submissive, especially to their husbands," explained the Viceroy when Ironside protested on behalf of his wife, "but it is in fact down to tradition. Women do not play a role in politics and religion, both topics often being discussed at such gatherings. I must say, I'm surprised you give your wife so much leeway, especially in view of the fact that she is not of Spanish descent."

Ironside related Hidalgo's words to his annoyed wife, leaving out the parts which might fuel her anger. Reluctantly, she agreed to join the other women so as not to cause unnecessary trouble for the others, cursing as she sat herself next to a jovial women in fine robes and too much gold jewellery.

Once everyone was seated comfortably, if not contentedly, the governor clapped his hands and the same smartly dressed servant, who was, judging by his manner, clearly not a slave, entered the chamber bearing a tray of what looked like freshly rolled cigars. He courteously offered one to each of the men at the table before giving the empty tray to a slave, who had just brought in a slow burning match. The servant proceeded to light each cigar and was a little bemused when Faustus politely declined and tried to hand back the carefully rolled stick of tobacco. The servant simply smiled politely before moving on to the next guest. All the time, Cassandra watched with a scowl on her face. Although she couldn't abide tobacco in any form, she would at least have liked to have been offered one of those cigars. She mumbled to herself that

it was probably written in their cursed scriptures that it was forbidden for women to smoke. She couldn't even complain about the unfairness of being excluded on the basis of sex, as the other half-a-dozen women seated at her table spoke no English and she neither Spanish nor the other strange tongue in which some of them conversed with each other.

Ironside let out a short cough on taking a cautious drag from the strong cigar. Only seldom participating in the widespread habit of smoking, which was all the rage in Europe and the Caribbean, he was unaccustomed to the strength of the brown, leafy cylinder offered to him by their host. He gave the others an embarrassed smile before discreetly putting the cigar out on the edge of the table. In contrast, Benton seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the unhealthy gift, blowing large smoke rings over the heads of those next to him, while ignoring the reproachful glances of Hidalgo and the priest.

After the smoking ritual had ended, the earnest servant collected the butts in a clay bowl and quietly left the room. Moments later, several slaves appeared bearing a variety of food in fine ceramic dishes, which they carefully placed in front of the guests. Among the dishes there were tortillas filled with mashed beans; tamales, a steamed dish made of minced, seasoned meat packed in a cornmeal dough and wrapped in corn husks; an assortment of colourful squashes cut into cubes and steamed; a large pot of sweet potatoes cooked with tomatoes and chilli peppers, which particularly appealed to the herbivorous surgeon. William Benton was just helping himself to a second portion of minced meat mixed with amaranth and spices.

"This stuff's tasty," the boatswain commented, greedily licking his lips. "What's in it? I can't tell if it's pork or chicken."

Emilio Calderon, who was seated beside him, asked one of the other guests and promptly relayed the answer to his shipmate. "It's armadillo meat. It's a delicacy here."

"Armadillo? Is that a kind of pig?" replied Benton unwittingly.

"No, it means little armoured one. It's an animal with a leathery armoured shell," answered the Spaniard. Pointing to one of the many detailed pictures adorning the tiled walls, he continued. "There's one in that picture over there next to that serpent thing."

The horrified pirate unceremoniously spat the contents of his mouth back onto his plate and gasped. "Yer can't be serious! That ain't no food fit for a human. That's sick, that is. You can't eat monsters."

"No, it's not a monster, it's a mammal, just like a pig or a cow," chuckled Faustus. "Why do you discriminate? If you're prepared to eat beef or chicken, why not armadillo?"

"It ain't right!" protested Benton. "It just ain't right."

The disgusted seaman pushed the offending bowl away from him, quickly pulling another plate of lightly fried, round slices of meat towards him.

"Those are snake steaks, William," grinned the physician, piling his plate with sweet potatoes and squashes.

"No!" cried Benton in frustration. "Don't they 'ave no normal meat 'ere?"

"Well, there's some diced iguana in that pot over there," suggested Caldron, spooning a generous helping of the dish Benton had rejected onto his own plate.

"That's not food! I bet they even eat llamas here," growled the annoyed sailor.

"No, they don't," responded Faustus. "Our host informs me that they are rare here and are regarded as a sacred animal."

“That probably ‘cos one of ‘em carried Jesus into this bloody city,” stated Benton sagely. “I think it’d be safer if I stick to what your ‘avin, Mr. Quiddington.”

“I’m glad to see you choose to be a vegetarian like me, William,” stated the amused surgeon, observing the boatswain gingerly ladle some spicy vegetables onto his plate.

“A veggie-what-ion?” inquired William. “Is that one of yer fancy words again?”

“It’s what we call someone who rejects the consumption of animal flesh on moralistic grounds,” explained Faustus. “Many great thinkers ate no meat, such as Pythagoras, Aristotle, and Leonardo da Vinci.”

“I ain’t heard them names before, and, to be honest, they ain’t no normal names you would give an honest man.”

The surgeon shrugged, smiling pitifully at the uneducated seaman next to him before tucking into a juicy avocado. Benton sat in silence toying unenthusiastically with the food on his plate until the slaves entered to carry out the crockery and wipe down the table. Once the table was cleared, the slaves returned with trays holding steaming ceramic cups, placing one in front of each of the male guests. William’s eyes lit up at the familiar aroma of hot chocolate, while Cassandra longingly watched the departing servants in the hope they would return with a cup for her – they didn’t. The disgruntled woman mumbled to herself as she enviously watched the men sipping the warm, sweet liquid. It wasn’t that she hadn’t enjoyed the meal, as she had at least been able to sample the same exotic dishes as the men, but she deeply resented being deprived of the treats only on offer to the male guests. On noticing his wife’s displeasure, Ironside asked Hidalgo if a cup could be brought in for his wife, but the official just smiled contritely and informed him

that it was a pleasure only reserved for men of the upper caste. The captain could only shrug helplessly at his wife, who contented herself with pouring a beaker of pineapple juice, which in itself was a luxury for her, from a clay jug on the table.

Benton happily sipped on the warm drink, having forgotten his discontentment with the meal. He yearningly fingered the thick cigar in his pocket – the one which Faustus had refused – which he had slyly procured while the servant was clearing away the butts of the others. He would enjoy it later when he was back in the comfort of his own room. Meanwhile, the surgeon was deep in conversation with their host.

“Things have changed a great deal since the conquistadors were last here all those years ago,” he informed the Viceroy. “The Kingdom of New Spain has expanded and brought great wealth to the Spanish Empire. In fact, so much wealth that the other kingdoms of Europe want their share of it. The English have even established a permanent, thriving colony on the island of Jamaica, and their freebooters have ravaged the Spanish colonies for years.”

“That sad nation of heretical farmers? I find that hard to believe,” frowned Hidalgo. “But the Treaty of Tordesillas divided the world between the Spanish and the Portuguese. It was sanctioned by Pope Alexander himself. And where is this island of Jamaica? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Before the English captured it in 1655, it was known to you, I mean us, as the Colony of Santiago.”

“But why didn’t we claim it back?” asked the perplexed official.

“As I said, the other nations wanted a part of the wealth and have been harassing the colonies of New Spain ever since. The region has been plagued by the privateers of

many nations. In addition to the English, the Dutch and French have shown great interest in encroaching on our territory.”

“But the Dutch are our subjects!”

“I’m sad to say that they revolted in 1579 and threw off the Spanish yoke. The Dutch Republic grew to be quite powerful, although it is no longer as influential as it once was.”

“That can’t be true,” uttered the disturbed Viceroy. “I can believe that a powerful nation like France could be a threat to us, but not an impoverished isle like England nor a subjugated folk like the Dutch. We should have taught them all a lesson. We should have conquered that damp, windswept island once and for all.”

“We did try, but I’m afraid the English subjected the Spanish to a humiliating defeat in 1588 when they thwarted King Philip’s attempt to invade their country,” Faustus informed the other man, secretly enjoying twisting the knife in the wound of this distressed descendant of the once proud and omnipotent Spanish Empire. “They destroyed an entire armada. Some see it as the turning point in the fortunes of our Empire.”

“It pains me to hear it,” replied Hidalgo with tears in his eyes, not realising that it wasn’t only his own empire the surgeon was referring to. “Then it is all the more important that the sacred galleon safely transports the gold and silver back to Spain to save our glorious empire.”

“Yes, indeed it is,” said Faustus with feigned sympathy. “So tell me more about this Christ- Quetzalcoatl. Back home he is simply referred to as Christ.”

“We are fortunate that the true nature of our Lord Jesus has been revealed to us here in Eldorado. We plan to share the good word with our kinsmen back in Spain. I’ve had a few copies of our scriptures prepared to be shipped back with the bullion.”

"I see," responded Faustus, not having the heart to inform his host that this would be a sure way of attracting a visit from the feared Spanish Inquisition.

"You can see the Messiah in that painting over there," continued Hidalgo, pointing to a massive wall mural behind the surgeon.

Faustus turned and stared in fascinated horror at the image that confronted him. The upper torso of Jesus was clearly recognisable, no different from what he had seen many times back home in England, but below the waist no legs were to be seen, instead there was the scaly, coiled body of a serpent, and, in addition to that, a pair of eerie, feathery wings extruded from the Messiah's back. What disturbed the surgeon most of all wasn't the disfigured body, but the forked serpent's tongue protruding from Christ's smiling mouth, on a face which could otherwise be described as a benign. The speechless physician could only stare in awe at the fear-instilling illustration.

In the meantime, William Benton had drained his cup and was now chatting with his Spanish shipmate.

"So, what do yer think of it here, Emilio?" the boatswain asked, scraping out the bottom of his cup with his finger.

"To be honest, I quite like it here," replied the other man sincerely. "They've got delicious grub, the climate is pleasant, and some of the women I've seen here are a sight for sore eyes. I must add that I'm also easily impressed by a bit of idolatry."

"But some of those religious pictures scare the shit out of me," commented the surprised man from Plymouth. "They're unholy and give me the creeps."

"Well, I must admit their images of Christ might diverge a little from what we are used to back home, but I can't say it bothers me. I guess I never really was one for regularly attending church."

"You want the rest of that?" asked Benton on seeing Calderon hadn't drunk all his chocolate. The Spaniard smiled as he pushed the half-empty cup towards the other man. Unable to conceal the disturbed expression on his face, Benton attempted to hide it with the cup, taking an unusually long time to drain it of its contents. All the while Hidalgo was telling the curious surgeon about the birth of the Messiah.

"Christ-Quetzalcoatl was born in a shed just outside the village of Texotlatlahquitepec under a brightly shining star," he explained solemnly. "There were two llamas, a jaguar, and some turkeys present at his birth, and three wise shaman attended the divine birth bearing gifts – a cloak of feathers, some copal, and a bunch of chilli peppers."

"And what were the names of his parents?" asked the astounded scholar.

"Mary and Joseph of course," responded the viceroy admonishingly. "Don't you know anything about the scriptures?"

"I was just checking. I thought they might have had native names. Anyway, could you tell me why those wise men would want to present a baby with a cloak of feathers?"

"Fine feathers, especially those of the quetzal, are of great value. They are of great importance in religious ceremonies, bearing magical properties which promote fertility and abundance."

"I think I've seen some of these quetzal birds in a cage somewhere. They are indeed strikingly colourful."

"In cages? Sacrilege!" cried out Hidalgo, dramatically throwing both arms in the air. "What is the world coming to? I think the motherland is sorely in need of the scriptures I'm going to send them."

"Don't worry, Señor Hidalgo, I believe I saw them in

some godless heathen port,” said Faustus in an attempt to calm their horrified host. He quickly added. “I can understand that copal was presented to the Christ child. Being a very aromatic tree resin, I’ve heard it makes for wonderful incense, but I can’t for the life of me imagine why a newly born infant would be presented a bunch of chilli peppers.”

“Let’s just say they were symbolic,” answered the official, starting to tire of all the questions about his religion.

“Didn’t the original conquistadors leave you a Castilian bible when they left?” asked Faustus, not yet willing to end the conversation.

“It is said that they did.”

“So where is it now?” persisted the surgeon.

“They said someone spilt sugary hot chocolate on it. It was ruined,” replied Hidalgo hesitantly.

“And the version of the scriptures you now have?”

“It is said that on discovering the mishap and after beheading the man who was responsible, all the settlers got together and rewrote it based on what they could remember. The gaps have been filled in over the years by our priests, who regularly receive divine revelations when in an ecstatic trance.”

“How do they achieve this ecstatic state, if I may ask?”

“By ingesting Teonanácatl.”

“Which is?”

“A mushroom. We also call it the God mushroom.”

“I see,” replied Faustus, removing his spectacles and wiping them with a clean napkin. He was about to continue, but thought better of it. It might greatly insult their host if he pointed out that the scriptures he so dearly cherished were actually based on no more than a hotchpotch of memories and the crazy, drug-induced visions of spaced out shaman. He just sat in silence

wondering if this was not in some way true of all religions.

Before the knowledge-hungry surgeon could ask any further questions, Hidalgo called for silence. He announced to the expectant faces that it was now time for a religious ritual. The grim-faced priest rose and left the room, returning a few minutes later followed by a short procession of men. Two of them, who also appeared to be holy men, were chanting strange incantations and swinging small globes suspended from silver chains, which emitted a sweet smelling, smokey incense. They were closely followed by two native guards in bright yellow tunics, who were escorting a dazed, handsome youth dressed only in a skimpy loincloth. The group stopped at the end of the room in front of what appeared to be a small gilded altar. The two accompanying priests took their places, one on each side at the back of the altar, continuing to chant and swing the chains hypnotically, while the sedated youth and the guards remained in front of it facing the onlookers, who were observing the unfolding scene with fascination. Faustus grew increasingly concerned when the guards each took one of the young man's arms and firmly held them outstretched to either side. The guests from the ship were reminded of images of Christ on the cross. Faustus shifted uneasily on his cushion. It wasn't until the priest who had attended the feast retrieved a cruel-bladed sacrificial dagger from the altar and used it to mark out the bloody form of a cross on the victim's chest that he fully comprehended what the baleful shaman intended. The outraged academic sprang to his feet.

"They're going to sacrifice him!" he urgently cried out in English. "They're going to cut out his heart."

The surgeon's anxious words interrupted the ceremony long enough for the shocked boatswain to spring to his feet and dash towards the surprised holy man. Before

anyone else could react, Benton was standing with a small cocked pistol, which he had until now carried concealed in his jacket, pointed at the side of the malevolent priest's head.

"No yer don't, matey," he snarled. "No-one ain't cutting out no hearts in William's presence. I be squeamish like that."

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the Hidalgo indignantly. "Why is the English scum disturbing the sacred ceremony being held in your honour? I'll see to it he is flayed alive. Seize him!"

There was a flurry of motion as the two guards released their grip on the young man and attempted to grab the defiant seaman. The furious pirate was not about to allow himself to be taken so easily, deciding it was time to implement some of the skills he had learned through trial and error in the seedy dockside taverns of the ports of England. After stunning the priest by hammering the wooden handle of his pistol into the side of his head, causing him to drop the vicious dagger and crumple to the floor, the seasoned brawler put the first guard out of action with a swift kick to the groin. Benton grinned at his second assailant when the man tightly grasped the frayed lapels of his jacket with both hands before his sweaty brow connected with the guards nose, forcing him to release his grip as he spun backwards spraying blood on the nearest of the guests.

"Yer don't mess wiv a man from Plymuff," he howled, turning to point the pistol he was still clutching at his aghast host.

"That's enough, William!" shouted the captain, rising from his place. Turning to the stunned official, he attempted to avert disaster for them all. "I am sorry, Viceroy Hidalgo. I apologize for my man." Reverting to English. "Put that pistol away. If you shoot our host, we'll

never make it back to the ship alive, and I'm not about to let you put my wife in harm's way."

In the meantime, a half-a-dozen guards in shiny breast plates had been attracted by the commotion – four were armed with swords and bucklers, the other two with heavy crossbows. Realising the odds were now stacked against him, the plucky pirate slipped his pistol into his belt, smiling sheepishly. "Sorry, Cap'n. I guess I might 'ave got a bit carried away."

"Take him away!" ordered the governor angrily.

"No, wait a moment," pleaded Ironside.

Hidalgo raised a hand to halt the confused soldiers. "All right, Captain Gunnarsson, but only because you are my guests. I'll let you speak on behalf of your man before I decide what to do with him."

"We apologize sincerely for disturbing your sacred ritual, but we from the motherland are not accustomed to acts of human sacrifice."

"Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God – Hebrews 13:15," stated Hidalgo ardently. "Christ-Quetzalcoatl will be angered if we do not feed him the blood of innocents."

"That may be so," conceded the captain, not wishing to antagonise their host further, "but it is not something that a European can accustom himself to overnight. Besides, as I told you before, my man here is an excellent navigator and we'll need him to hunt down the pirates. Unless you can provide someone of equal skills, it would be in your interest to overlook his indiscretion."

Hidalgo sat deep in thought for some time while the guards and other guests looked at him questioningly. After clearing his throat he solemnly gave his reply. "If what you say about this man's worth is true then you are

right about sparing him. As the ritual was in fact in your honour, I will overlook this incident and postpone the sacrifice on two conditions. Firstly, this wretched English sailor is to return to your ship tomorrow and, on pain of death, never again set foot on our fair shores. Secondly, you shall attend the great sacrificial ceremony the day after tomorrow to celebrate Tecuilhuitontli – the Lesser Feast for the Revered Ones. A hundred blood sacrifices will be made. Failure to do so would enrage the lesser gods and endanger the safe arrival of the galleon. There will also be a magnificent military parade and much feasting. You can bring a select few of your people, but not that vagabond over there, unless you wish to offer him as a sacrifice.”

“He’ll remain on the ship,” replied Ironside, despite being slightly tempted to use this opportunity to be rid of the troublesome crewmember once and for all. “We’ll attend the ceremony, Viceroy, and I thank you for another act of leniency.”

As they were escorted out of the feasting chamber by the same servant who had fetched them, Ironside couldn’t help noticing the venomous expression on the thwarted priest’s face and the perplexed looks of the other guests, and he was relieved when they had put some distance between themselves and their hosts. On the way, the captain decided to have a quiet word with Benton.

“Your intentions may have been noble, William, but your actions were rash,” said Ironside harshly. “You could have got us all killed.”

“I’m sorry, Cap’n, but I couldn’t let ‘em cut out that poor lad’s heart. I wouldn’t have slept soundly for weeks after witnessing such a gruesome sight,” explained the boatswain.

“I must admit it would have been a distressing sight for us all. Anyway, to avoid any further incidents you’ll

be remaining on the ship as of tomorrow, so you'd better make the most of your last evening ashore."

"But 'ow am I gonna get me hands on all that treasure if I'm stuck on the bloody ship?" asked Benton anxiously. "I ain't gonna let yer leave it all here."

"Don't worry, Will, we'll hatch a plan tomorrow with the others. And whatever happens, you'll get your fair share. You just have to promise to stay on the *Dream Chaser* until it's all over."

"I promise, Cap'n," replied Benton as sincerely as he could while firmly crossing the fingers of both hands behind his back.

Satisfied Benton wouldn't cause any further trouble, Captain Ironside turned to Faustus, who was merrily humming a rendition of *Hark the Thundering Cannons Roar* to himself. "So how did you know that priest was going to cut out the youth's heart?"

"I've read reports by early Spanish colonists about such rituals being carried out by the Aztecs, and the culture of the natives here seems to be similar, so I presumed the worst. Of course, I could have been wrong," admitted the surgeon.

"And all the trouble caused by William would have been for nothing. As it was, you were proved right. We'll have to quickly and quietly get our hands on the gold and leave this place unnoticed, if we don't all want to end up on their sacrificial altar missing a vital organ."

"So you're really going to go through with it, Björn?" asked Faustus with a concerned frown.

"William's dead set on it and I don't think I'll be able to persuade the others to leave without at least some booty," explained the captain. "Anyway, if we play our cards right, we'll all be rich men."

"If I don't end up excardiated, I might even be able to pay off my debts," pondered the physician. "It'll be at a

great risk though.”

“Pirates are accustomed to taking risks,” stated the sea rover captain with a nervous sensation in his belly.

Eventually, Ironside and his wife were back in their own room contemplating the unusual and eventful evening.

“Their religion terrifies me,” said Cassandra, removing her dress and putting on a soft cotton nightshirt provided by their host. “Can’t we leave tomorrow?”

“I must admit it fills me with alarm to discover they perform human sacrifices,” replied the captain sombrely. “I would have hoped the Spanish conquistadors might have weaned them off it, but it seems their descendants have been isolated for too long. Despite my aversion to papist rituals, I’d find them much more preferable to the bloody liturgy of our hosts.”

“It’s barbaric,” commented Cassandra, rinsing her face in lukewarm, perfumed water.

“Faustus informs me that the druids of ancient Gaul and some of the Germanic tribes of old also carried out such gruesome practices.”

“Well, all I can say is that I’m glad they don’t do it any more. So, are we going to leave tomorrow, or do you still insist on the foolhardy undertaking of stealing the gold?”

“You know we won’t be able to leave before the men get their hands on at least some of it,” answered Ironside apologetically. “We’ll work out a foolproof plan tomorrow, but it might be better if you stay on the ship.”

“No, Björn, I’m staying as close to your side as possible. I’m not going to let you get sacrificed alone.”

Ironside chuckled to himself as he wiped his armpits and chest with a damp cloth. Maybe he’d feel better if his wife were by his side where he could see and protect her, and it might seem suspicious to Hidalgo if he left her on board the ship. The weary captain had just put on one

of the soft tunics and had clambered onto the bed when the drapes hanging in the doorway were gently pushed aside, revealing two figures who gingerly entered the room. Both Ironside and his wife gaped at the visitors – a young man and a young woman – both of whom were breathtakingly beautiful, but what was most striking about them was that they were both completely naked save for an assortment of gold jewellery. Both of those on the bed stared in astonishment as the two youths lithely approached and it wasn't until the girl threw her arms around the surprised Swedish man and the boy slid onto the bed next to the Bermudian woman that one of them realised the purpose of the visit.

"I do believe they have been sent to pleasure us," said Cassandra with amusement.

"You mean sexually?" asked the embarrassed pirate captain.

"Come, Björn. You can't be that naïve," grinned the woman, gently brushing the youth's hand away from her face.

Cassandra's words were confirmed when the young woman slipped her hand under Ironside's short nightshirt. "Do something, Cassandra!" her spouse said with some urgency.

The captain's wife sprang from the bed, pushing past the alarmed young male slave. She gently prised the young woman from her panic-stricken husband and pointed towards the door shaking her head. On realising they were being rejected, both young slaves cowered in front of the woman, ignoring Cassandra's pleas for them to leave, refusing to move from the spot.

"Why won't they go?" asked the stunned captain looking at his wife in bewilderment.

"I don't know, Björn. Maybe you should get that smartly dressed servant to come and fetch them."

As Ironside made towards the doorway, the young woman threw herself sobbing against him, both arms wrapped firmly around his waist. The stalwart pirate attempted with difficulty to prise his delicate assailant from him, not wishing to do her harm, but his wife wasn't as gentle. The girl fell weeping to the floor while the married couple just stared at her in dismay. Eventually, the young man took a step towards them and gestured wildly at the astounded pair.

"I know what he's trying to tell us!" announced Cassandra after a moment of confusion. "If we reject them, they'll be sacrificed."

"What! We can't let that happen," cried out Ironside. "What are we going to do?"

Cassandra, who had a natural talent for communicating, finally managed to inform the naked slaves that although their services weren't required they could stay in the room for the night. Furthermore, the two guests would tell their hosts that the two young slaves had brought them great pleasure. Once persuaded that they wouldn't be ejected from the chamber, the two nervous youths calmed down and each put on a thin tunic offered to them by Cassandra. The unwelcome visitors were allowed to sleep on some cushions in the corner of the room after gratefully accepting some of the refreshments which had been left for the room's occupants, and it wasn't long before everyone had fallen into a restless sleep haunted by strange dreams.

A bold plan

After breakfast the next morning, the Viceroy's guests made their way back unaccompanied to the wooden jetty to be picked up by one of the ship's boats. The sun was shining and all were in good spirits, although Captain

Ironside was a little tense at the prospect of stealing their host's gold. While they were waiting for the boat, the captain told the others about their two young visitors the previous night.

"What do you mean they would have been sacrificed?" stuttered Faustus anxiously. "They sent me a pretty, young girl too, but I promptly sent her away, not wishing to take advantage of her lowly status. I wondered why she became so hysterical when I shoved her out of the room. Do you mean to say I've condemned her to death? I thought I was doing the right thing."

"Maybe it won't come to that," said Cassandra, attempting to calm the distraught surgeon. "Did they also send a slave to you, William?"

"They sure did," replied Benton, looking thoroughly pleased with himself. "And I didn't condemn her to have her heart plucked out like Mr. Quiddington did."

"You mean you took advantage of her?" frowned Faustus.

"Well, I didn't want to offend our host, did I? Anyway, how could I refuse such a beauty. All over me she was. The way I see it, I did her a favour by saving her life."

"You can't have known they would sacrifice her if you sent her away," said the exasperated physician.

"Maybe I did, maybe I didn't, but that ain't the point is it, Mr. Quiddington? I saved my one's life and you condemned yours to a cruel and vicious murder," answered the boatswain self-righteously. Faustus was lost for words.

"But you could have done what we did, William," stated Cassandra. "You could have let her sleep in the corner unmolested."

"I didn't want to offend her by turning her down. As I said, she was all over me, she was. I even thinks she enjoyed it more than me." Turning to Calderon, who

had focused his attention on the approaching boat in an attempt to stay out of the conversation. "What about you, Emilio? Did you get a visitor?"

"I did," replied the Spaniard without turning around.

"Did you send her away?" asked Ironside.

"I didn't," answered Calderon shiftily.

"See, it weren't just me," said Benton.

"I can't believe you two would stoop so low as to take advantage of those young women," said Faustus disdainfully.

"Can't blame us fer takin' a little pleasure where we can, and I'm sure our young lassies are much happier today than yours is," replied Benton smugly.

Any further discussion was halted by the arrival of the boat at the jetty. The boatswain cheerily greeted the two men who had rowed it to the shore, while the guilt-stricken surgeon silently and regretfully contemplated the fate of the young woman he had sent to her death.

On boarding *Dream chaser* Captain Ironside was horrified at the sorry state his ship was in. Some of the crew were lying scattered around the deck sleeping off hangovers, others sat groaning and nursing their sore heads. The deck was littered with empty bottles and food leftovers. There was even an unsightly pool of vomit at the foot of the stairs to the quarterdeck.

"Looks like they 'ad a good time in our absence," commented Benton, nudging the snoring quartermaster, who was sprawled over a pile of rope, with his foot.

"Too good a time I would say," snapped the captain, striding purposefully over to the ship's bell.

After ringing the bell for a good two minutes, most of the crew had grumpily assembled on the foredeck to await a chastising.

"All right, you unseemly lot, the fun's over. First, I want to see this vessel in tip-top condition and then

we'll discuss getting our hands on copious amounts of treasure."

Some of the suffering seamen seemed to brighten up at the mention of loot while others were in too bad a state to care about anything other than sleeping off their discomfort. The quartermaster was one of the former.

"What treasure, Cap'n?" asked Pete cheerfully as if he hadn't spent half the night on a binge.

"It disturbs me that you never seem to suffer the consequences of your overindulgence, Pete," commented Ironside irately.

"Life be too short, Cap'n," grinned the quartermaster. "There'll be plenty o' time ter sleep it all off when I be dead. Now tell us more 'bout this treasure."

"There'll be no more talk of treasure until this vessel is ship shape again," replied the captain steadfastly. "Now get to work. I want the mess tidied up and the decks swabbed within the hour."

The worn-out pirates reluctantly stumbled away to carry out the chores, moaning as they went, some moving more quickly than others.

"Not you, Pete, and not you, John," Ironside harshly addressed the quartermaster and coxswain. "I must say I'm not surprised that you, Pete, drank yourself into a stupor, but I am surprised at you, John. You're normally much more restrained than this. What if the Spanish had attempted to take our ship in the night like Avery did?"

"I tried me best, Björn," replied Brownrigg apologetically. "You know how hard it is to keep this unruly lot under control when they're on a bender, and they were determined to drown their disappointment at not being allowed ashore. In my defence, I held back a little and saw to it that things didn't get too out of hand, and I had Yuki and Asbat to help me. We only had to break up four scuffles, and we did manage to prevent Bart

Hogg from taking a dump on the poop deck just in time.”

“Is that all that happened, John?” asked Ironside suspiciously.

“Well, Neeve did push one of the men overboard when he came on to her a bit strong, but we managed to fish him out of the water before he drowned.”

“Anything else?”

“We stopped Sam Taylor and a few of his mates from breaking into your cabin. They claimed it was a common space for the use of all, but Pete here soon persuaded them otherwise with a few sharp kicks to the behind.”

“But the crew agreed it was to be mine as long as Cassandra was on board,” replied the captain in a concerned tone. “I guess it could have been worse though.”

“There was one more incident,” added Brownrigg hesitantly. “Some of the crew thought it would be a laugh to ply young Sam Powder with rum and then convince him to climb up to the tops’l yard.”

“But he’s terrified of heights,” responded Ironside, recalling the trouble he had had coaxing the boy up as far as the mains’l yard when he first joined the crew.

“Yes, and those mean buggers knew it too,” said the coxswain sombrely. “The youngster panicked when it dawned on him how far up he was. It took Yuki and Charlie an hour to get him down safely. The poor lad spent the rest of the night puking his guts up.”

“Very well, John, I’ll deal with the culprits later. As for you, Pete, you have to remain more sober when you’ve been handed the responsibility for the ship and its crew.”

“I ‘ad everythin’ under control, Cap’n,” answered the quartermaster adamantly.

“It didn’t look like it when I arrived back a moment ago,” countered the captain. “You were out cold.”

“I be entitled to a bit of kip, don’t I?” responded Pete

irately. "Nothin' bad happened, except the men had a bit too much fun. Where's the 'arm in that?"

"I see I'm wasting my time here," muttered Ironside.

"What about this treasure ye mentioned?" Pete asked, attempting to change the subject.

"As I said, I'll say nothing more on that until I'm satisfied the ship is once again in a habitable condition. Maybe you should both see to it that the men are thorough. The sooner they're finished, the sooner we can discuss the vast fortune awaiting us."

The two other men scurried off without a further word to see to it the ship was clean and tidy as quickly as possible, leaving the annoyed captain by himself. While the entire crew were busy with their tasks, the captain stood at the gunwale observing the stone fort on the shore until Benton casually strolled over with his pipe in the corner of his mouth. The boatswain, not having been on the ship the previous night and already knowing about the vast amounts of gold and silver awaiting them in the Viceroy's vaults, had no incentive to help out.

"Look yonder, Cap'n. There's a longboat heading towards us," said Benton, pointing to the rocky headland beyond the fort.

The captain took out his prized telescope and trained it on the small vessel. He could just make out the figure of Captain Wolfenden sitting in the eight-oared boat.

"You ain't gonna let 'im in on the plan, are yer?" asked Benton testily.

"I think I have to, William. We're going to need him if my plan is to work."

"But that swindler will probably sail off with all the loot, like he did with Avery's treasure," snarled the mistrustful seaman.

"There'll be more than enough for all," answered the captain. "You saw with your own eyes how much of it was

in that chamber.”

“I s’pose so, but I’ll be keepin’ me eye on that scoundrel all the same.”

An hour later the proud captain of *Vengeful Mermaid* was standing on the quarterdeck with several members of *Dream Chaser*. He explained that his ship was safely moored in a concealed anchorage further down the coast, and that he was now here to find out more about the inhabitants of this unknown land. Ironside had chosen to discreetly discuss his plan to capture the Spanish gold with a select few before putting it to the general vote. As well as Captain Wolf, the usual faces he consulted in times of trouble were gathered around him: Powder Keg Pete, John Brownrigg, Faustus Quiddington, and, of course, William Benton. Unexpectedly, Cassandra had elected not to retire to her cabin as she usually did on such occasions, but was standing defiantly at her spouse’s side, ignoring the resentful glare of Captain Wolf, who didn’t even approve of the presence of a woman on board a ship let alone at such important meetings. Accepting things were done differently on this ship, he kept his mouth shut on the subject – at least for now. Just before Ironside could reveal his plan to the others, they were disturbed by one of the seamen ascending the steps to the upper deck. It was Sam Taylor, one of those who had tried to gain access to the captain’s cabin while he was away.

“What is it, Sam?” asked Ironside impatiently.

“Well, some of the men and me don’t think it right that we should be excluded from important decisions. We wants to hear what yer going to say, too.”

“All in good time, Sam,” answered the captain calmly. “We must first decide if the plan is feasible before we put it to the vote.”

“This is a matter fer the big boys, Sammy,” said Benton

acerbically. "Not for halfwits and swabbers."

"You ain't got no right ter talk to me like that, Billy Boy," growled Sam, clenching his fists.

"You'll wait with the others, man, or I'll flog you myself," barked Captain Wolf before Benton could respond. The surly captain of the sloop took a step towards the disaffected pirate on the stairs, who quickly backed off and returned to the main deck, grumbling to himself.

"That was a bit harsh, John," commented Ironside when Sam Taylor was out of earshot.

"It's how I deal with disobedient seamen on my vessel. An iron hand could bring some sorely lacking discipline to this ship too, don't you think, Björn?" answered Wolfenden challengingly.

"We pride ourselves on liberty of choice on this ship, John," replied Ironside wilfully.

"Each to their own, Björn," answered Captain Wolf with an air of arrogance. "Now tell us of this plan of yours to get our hands on that gold."

There was a moment of contemplative silence once the captain had explained what they had discovered in their host's treasury. And, surprisingly, it was Cassandra who spoke first.

"I say we should forget the gold, stock up with supplies, and leave immediately," she said with urgency. "We can tell the Viceroy that we're going to hunt down the pirates you warned him about, so we don't arouse any suspicion."

"What is she doing here anyway?" snapped Wolf. "Since when do we involve a wench in our pirating endeavours?"

"Since she seems to be the only one with any sense," retorted the angry Bermudian women. "You men are too full of grand ideas and bravado, and you'll get us all killed with your greed."

“Begone, woman!” replied Wolf in a raised voice. “You are not welcome here.”

“Please don’t address my wife in that manner, John,” warned Ironside. “She has just as much right to be here as you do.”

“No disrespect, but she doesn’t. This is a business for hardened sea rovers, not for weak-willed, nagging females,” answered the other captain sharply. “She, like all women, have nothing to offer but timidity and apprehension. She would dampen the men’s spirits and I demand she return to her cabin where she belongs.”

“Now you listen here John ...” the outraged Swede snarled.

“It’s all right, Björn, I’m going. I want no part in this,” interjected Cassandra, accepting that there was no way she would be able to change their minds and that she was stuck on a pirate ship, after all.

The frustrated woman stormed off to the cabin, slamming the door behind her. Ironside glared with ire at the captain of the sloop, unsure of how to proceed. On the one hand, he didn’t want to escalate the situation, but on the other, he couldn’t let this affront to his wife go unchallenged. Sensing his friend’s anguish, Faustus broke the awkward silence.

“I suggest we all take a deep breath and calm ourselves. What matters now is a dependable plan to obtain as much gold as we can with as little loss to ourselves. We need to concentrate all our efforts on that alone.”

“Yes, you’re right, Faustus,” said Ironside relaxing his tense shoulders slightly. “All right, I suggest we take advantage of tomorrow’s festivities to seize the gold. Most of the soldiers will be participating in the parade. I propose that Captain Wolfenden land unnoticed further down the coast with his men and approach the city from the far side. I’ll send Calderon with you, John, as he

knows where the vaults lie.”

“What about us, Cap’n? You ain’t trusting Wolfie and his men with all that gold, are you? They’ll claim it fer themselves, they will,” stated Benton, ignoring a resentful snort from the captain of *Vengeful Mermaid*.

“I’m coming to that, William,” said Ironside quickly. “We’ll capture the fort, so Wolf’s men and those at the ceremony will have a place to fall back to. What’s more, we have to put those guns out of action so they can’t sink us when we’re making our get away. They have no seaworthy vessels of their own to speak of, so once we’re under sail, we should be safe.”

“If the fair wind holds,” commented Brownrigg. “We’ve been lucky so far with the weather, but it could change at any time.”

“Yes, indeed,” frowned Faustus. “If we can’t promptly up anchor and sail, they could use those small crafts of theirs to send soldiers to board us. There must be over a thousand of them, including the indigenous auxiliaries.”

“That’s true. Just in case, I’ll be sending someone to put those small boats out of action,” replied Ironside.

“I’ll do it, Cap’n,” offered the boatswain a little too eagerly.

“We’ll sort out the details later. How does the plan sound to you, Captain Wolfenden?”

“It sounds fine enough, but how do you intend to take that fort? They’ll see you coming and blast you out of the water before you can set a foot on land.”

“That’s why I’ll be sending a small party of chosen men to row over under the cover of darkness. They’ll lie in wait until most of the soldiers are at the ceremony, then rise to capture it. Frederick Sauer will be in the second wave, tasked with spiking the guns. Once the gold is in the fort, we can ship it in our boats over to the *Chaser*.”

“Who’s going to lead the party to take the fort?” asked

Brownrigg. "Stealthiness ain't me strong point, you know."

"You're right there, Johnny," said Benton provocatively. "I've heard elephants with fainter footsteps than you."

"You ain't ever heard an elephant, Billy Boy," retorted Brownrigg hotly. "Or even seen one."

"That's exactly my point," grinned the boatswain. "But I've heard you over a league away many a time."

"Enough bickering, boys," interrupted Ironside. "Pete will be leading the landing party. He can move as quiet as a mouse when he's not intoxicated. Are you willing to do it, Pete?"

"Aye, I be willing," replied the quartermaster sombrelly.

"Good, but you have to promise to lay off the alcohol this evening."

"Aye, no worries, Cap'n. I had me fill last night," answered Pete earnestly. "At least for a couple of days."

"I want you to select no more than five suitable men for the task," continued the captain. "Men good with a sword as we don't want to alert the occupants with musket fire."

"But there's a flaw in your plan, Captain," said the concerned coxswain. "We don't have enough boats. Captain Wolfenden will need his to land his men further down the coast and we'll need ours to ferry the men. Three boats ain't big enough to transport the treasure too. It'd take us hours that way."

"That's a good point, John. In that case, when we send some men over to put the Spaniards' small boats out of action, they can bring back the piragua. It's a fair size and should cut down the amount of time we need. Additionally, I'll ask the men to leave one of the canoes in tact should my party need to beat a hasty retreat and not be able to reach the fort."

"I'll see to it," proffered Benton with enthusiasm.

"Maybe it'd be better if you stayed on board. You might be recognised," replied Ironside, not too keen on the idea

of Benton leaving the ship.

“Don’t worry, Cap’n,” replied the boatswain. “I’ll disguise meself. Maybe Mr. Quiddington will borrow me one of his fancy wigs.”

“We’ll talk about it later,” answered the captain before Faustus could object. “The main thing is that we get away unmolested. Once Sauer has finished with those guns they probably won’t ever be firing again, and we can use those on our ship to cover our escape, if necessary.”

“It’s a bold plan, Björn,” stated Wolf, “but it might just work.”

“What ‘bout you, Cap’n?” asked Powder Keg Pete. “Who be going with ye?”

“I think it would be better to keep my group as small as possible. It’ll make it easier for us to abscond when the trouble starts if our number remains small. Faustus, Xenos and Cassandra will accompany me. Viceroy Hidalgo already knows them, so we shouldn’t arouse any suspicions.”

“I would like to say something,” said Faustus guardedly.

“Make it quick,” snapped Captain Wolf brusquely, “as I want to get back to my ship before it gets dark.”

“There’s no need to be like that, John Wolfenden,” retorted the vexed surgeon. “It’s not even midday yet. Sorry, but I digress. What I wanted to say is that we shouldn’t just be thinking of only ourselves here.”

“Why not?” asked Benton with a puzzled frown.

“Because there are greater deeds that a man can accomplish than simply accumulating hoards of gold and silver,” replied the irate physician.

“Like what?” inquired Benton, genuinely perplexed by the surgeon’s words.

“We should endeavour to effectuate the discontinuation of the oppressive exploitation of those in bondage by the overlords who strive to perpetuate it.”

William Benton just stared blankly at the scholarly surgeon.

“I did not come here to listen to such liberal, idealistic codswallop,” exclaimed Captain Wolf. “What do I and my men care about the fate of those savages. I think it’s time I return to my ship. A good day to you all, gentlemen.”

Without further hesitation, the captain of the sloop turned and swiftly headed down to where his boat was waiting for him. Ironside turned to the dejected surgeon.

“I fear we’ll have no time to worry about the slaves,” the captain said with a sympathetic shrug. “We’ll have more than enough on our plates trying to get our hands on that treasure. But don’t look so down, Faustus. I’m sure the day will come when the subjugated will say enough is enough and throw off the yoke of oppression. Unfortunately, we have neither the resources nor the time to play a part in that. Now, let’s get down to business. Pete, could you call an assembly, as it’s time to put our plan to the crew.”

“Don’t look so glum, Fausty,” said Benton cheerily as they made their way down to the main deck. “It was a nice idea you ‘ad, but totally unrealistic. You’ll just have to content yourself with the gold, like the rest of us.”

The gloomy surgeon said nothing while he made his way to where the rest of the crew were congregating. An excited tension developed as the mass of seamen anticipated what their captain would say to them. The crew hung onto every word Ironside said and his motivating speech aroused the emotions of all present. There wasn’t a single voice of dissent among the assembled pirates, who were eager to put their captain’s plan into action, many volunteering to accompany Pete on the nocturnal foray. The prospect of gold had raised the spirits of even those with the heaviest and foggiest of heads. No-one objected when the captain told them that he, his wife, Faustus, and Xenos would be going ashore to attend the

ceremony while the plan was being carried out, none that is except Niamh O Malley, who insisted that she should go ashore to protect the captain.

"You'll be needin' someone who is good in a scrimmage to watch yer back now that William has been banished from t'is land," she said fervently, placing her hand on the hilt of the short cutlass hanging from her belt.

"But you don't speak Spanish, Neeve," objected Ironside.

"No, I don't speak their lingo, but neither does Cassandra," countered the plucky Irishwoman defiantly. "Unless she learned it overnight, that is."

"Let 'er go in me place, Cap'n," called out Benton. "You'll be safer with her at yer side. She'll be all right as long as she manages to keep that chattering gob of hers shut."

O'Malley stared at the boatswain dubiously, unsure of whether he was speaking up in her defence or trying to insult her. Encouraged by the man's ambiguous words, she chose not to give in.

"You won't hear a peep out of me, Cap'n. I'll be quieter than a mouse. Anyway, the Spanish ain't got nothing 'gainst us Irish. We're all Catholics, yer see."

"All right, if you promise not to cause any mischief," conceded the captain, recalling that many Irishmen indeed served in the armies of Spain, which had even landed troops to support an Irish uprising near the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign. "I think I'll also take young Will Huckabee with me," he added as an afterthought.

"What yer want to take that young whippersnapper with ya for?" asked Benton. "Monkey Boy Will won't be of no use if yer forced to fight."

"I might need a messenger boy and Will's as fleet-footed as they come. He's also able to keep a low profile when required."

The face of Monkey Boy Will, who was precariously perched on the gunwale, lit up at the captain's words, but his younger brother, who was still suffering the effects of the rum, looked less than happy at being left alone on the ship with the men who had played the cruel prank on him the evening before.

"Sam Huckabee. You are to assist Mr. Brownrigg, who'll be in charge of the ship. You're not to leave his side," added Ironside on seeing the fear and dismay in the younger boy's face.

The rest of the day was spent preparing for the upcoming raid. The crew were busy until late in the evening cleaning muskets and pistols, sharpening swords, and seeing to it that the ship would be able to depart without delay once they had the treasure on board. Surprisingly, not a member of the crew touched a drop of alcohol that day or night, but whether it was out of discipline, or due to their overindulgence the evening before, the captain could not be sure. No, it wasn't entirely true that no-one on board drank any liquor, as the captain drank nearly a whole bottle of wine in private that evening while trying to justify his chosen career as a pirate to his sceptical wife.

The taking of the fort

Just after midnight Powder Keg Pete left the ship in the jolly boat with five other men. One of them was Konishi Yukinaga armed with the shortest of his two deadly Japanese swords. One of the other carefully chosen men was a Tuscaroran Indian in his late twenties from North Carolina, whom everyone called Jack Arrow on account of his unequalled skill with a bow. His long hair, which was adorned with colourful beads, was shaven at the sides and his tanned face was slim and angular. He was wearing knee-length plain brown breeches, a short

brown jacket, and deerskin moccasins on his feet. A finely decorated quiver was slung over his shoulder, in addition to which he carried a short bow, tomahawk and sheathed hunting knife in his belt. Jack was a veteran of the Tuscarora War, which was waged from 1711 to 1715, when he fought against the white settlers who had dared to encroach on his people's lands. He fled to Jamaica after the humiliating defeat at Fort Neoheroka, where he was forced to stay for the remainder of the war, unable to obtain passage back to his homeland in time to rejoin the fight. He was a practical and taciturn man, who bore no love for the American colonists and their British overlords, and Ironside welcomed him aboard his ship after the Tuscaroran had proven himself to be a competent topman.

The third man was a free black from Bermuda called Samuel Langston, who the others usually called Big Sam on account of the muscular stature he had attained during his time working as a bayman cutting logwood on the coast of Belize. He was wearing a sleeveless shirt, which emphasised his firm arm muscles, and wide trousers, which reached just above his ankles; his feet were bare. His head was always meticulously shaved, which provided a regular chore for the ship's surgeon. Two hanger swords dangled from his belt, although, due to his size and strength, he was known to fight equally as well without a weapon. Sam was popular among the crew because of his gentle and optimistic nature, and he would only kill a man when absolutely necessary. He had made his way to Nassau after questioning the treatment of black and native slaves in the cutters' camps, where he was gladly taken on board by Captain Ironside, who after seeing Big Sam at work, claimed he could take the strain of four men on the braces and halliards.

The final two men were Ned Rainford and Archie

Tinley, both landmen who had been members of the militia in the colony of Massachusetts, and had left service to make their fortune. They had been chosen because of their combat experience, which they had gained fighting the French and their native American allies during Queen Anne's War.

Under the cover of darkness, the small boat safely made its way from *Dream Chaser* to a rocky outcrop just below the leeward side of the imposing fort. After securing the tiny vessel, the six men found a sheltered spot among some exotic shrubs and bushes at the foot of the over twenty-foot high wall, where they made themselves comfortable for the night. Pete took the first watch, paying special attention to how often an unwitting soldier passed them on the ramparts above. The task of scaling the wall daunted the quartermaster, who although was used to clambering up the shrouds of a fully rigged ship had little experience climbing more solid surfaces. He was glad that Jack Arrow was with them. The man was an intrepid and single-minded climber, who would have little trouble scrambling up the wall and securing a rope at the top, so the others could ascend with relative comfort and ease.

After a couple of hours Pete was relieved by Jack Arrow, but instead of finding a place to sleep on the uncomfortable outcrop, he decided to sit with the Tuscaroran for a while.

"So tell me, Jack, why did ye decide to become a pirate?" asked the quartermaster in a low voice.

"Didn't know what else to do," replied the other man glumly. "My people were defeated and I had no desire to return to a subjugated nation. I should have been there with my people at the end, but I couldn't get back. Maybe I should have never left in the first place."

"Why did ye leave?"

“After my tribe’s defeat at Fort Neoheroka in 1713, I had no choice but to flee, lest I be sold into slavery. We fought hard and well until we were overcome by superior numbers and firepower, but the colonists wouldn’t have won without the support of other tribes like the Yamasee and the Cherokee. We held out for three weeks until the fort was destroyed by fire. Hundreds of men, women, and children perished in the flames and the survivors were rounded up. I managed to slip away by the skin of my teeth. A bloody affair it was.”

“War always be bloody,” commented Pete phlegmatically. “What was that war about anyway?”

“After fifty years of peace and trade with the white folk the colonists turned their eyes to the fertile lands within our territory and, in addition to that, some of our people were seized by slavers. We resisted as best we could, but when the white man is determined to take something for himself, he never relents. What’s more, our people were divided and some chose to support our enemies to further their own ends. It was just a matter of time until we were defeated. I have no place I can call home to return to, so I have made a new life for myself on your ship in the hope that I might one day return to avenge my people.”

“That be the saddest tale I ever did ‘ear,” lamented Pete. “Now I thinks I’ll get some kip if I can. We has a busy day ahead of us tomorrow.”

The quartermaster found a spot beneath a wide bush and tried to make himself comfortable. He lay awake fidgeting for a while, mulling over the injustices of the world until he eventually slipped into a restless slumber. Jack spent his watch studying the wall and the movement of the guards until it was his time to be relieved by Yuki. The Japanese man spent the time in meditation and contemplating the day to come. He felt naked without his katana, having only brought his shorter and less

cumbersome wakizashi, which he hoped he would not have to use. He was of the opinion that it was better to achieve one's goals without the use of violence. That said, he was fully prepared to use the keen blade if necessary. He tensed as a shadowy figure crept towards him, but relaxed when he realised it was Samuel Langston coming to take the last watch.

"All quiet, Yuki?" whispered the giant of a man.

"Yes, so it is," replied the ex-samurai. Yuki remained seated when Big Sam squatted beside him. "A strong warrior you are, Sam. Tomorrow glad to have you at my side I am."

"I'm no warrior, Yuki," answered the man from Bermuda. "I was a bayman for many years. That's how I got such strong muscles."

"A bayman what it is?" asked the puzzled swordsman.

"A cutter of logwood, from which a valuable dye is produced. We harvested it along the coast of Belize, which didn't go down too well with the Spaniards. We had to fend off their attacks on several occasions."

"So why here and not there you are?"

"I didn't like the way they treated the slaves. They used them worse than the animals, both indio and black alike. They were no better than the Spanish, and I told them so. No-one dared challenge me directly, but they made my life into such a hell that I deemed it better to leave."

"Slavery sad affair it is," said Yuki, shaking his head. "Even in my own land the lords our own people to the Portuguese they sold. The great daimyō Toyotomi Hideyoshi angry he was and end to it he put."

"I don't know what a daimyō is, but he sounds like a great man," replied Big Sam.

"Great warlord daimyō is and merciless and fearsome warrior Hideyoshi was. Now rest I must," answered the warrior moving away from the other man in a crouch

until he was out of sight.

Dawn finally arrived with its reddish glow, but the six men waited a while longer until they deemed it safe enough for Jack to scale the wall unseen. It wasn't until mid-morning that they heard the shrill sound of a bugle calling the garrison to parade. After waiting long enough for the assembled troops to march out of the fort, their footsteps resounding loudly enough to be clearly heard by the concealed men, Jack Arrow cautiously approached the wall after the sentry on the battlements had made his predictable round. The Tuscaroran agilely clambered up the weathered wall, his hands and feet adeptly seeking out the numerous cracks and crevices. Once safely on the walkway above and after confirming the coast was clear, he secured a sturdy rope to the wrought-iron barrel of one of the guns. The other five men hastily climbed up without incident, although Pete almost plummeted to the hard ground below when his foot slipped from a crumbling foothold. He desperately dangled for a few moments, gripping the rope in terror, before managing to regain his footing. In the meantime, the native American had scouted the area and returned to the five heavily perspiring men, who were awaiting him on tenterhooks.

"I counted eight men and one officer still in the fort. I guess they aren't expecting an attack today," reported Jack Arrow confidently. "There's a bell in the yard, which they could use to sound the alarm with."

"We've got ter stop 'em ringing that bell at all costs," stated Pete sternly. "We'll try to take 'em out one by one. No killin' if we can help it, says the Cap'n. Archie has some cord to bind 'em with."

It wasn't difficult taking out the two men left to patrol the walls. The attackers found suitable spots to lie in wait and pounced on the astonished soldiers when they passed. Langston and the two landsmen managed to

swiftly overpower the pair of guards at the gate without alerting the remaining soldiers, and the four remaining troops were surprised while eating their breakfast in the guardroom, oblivious to the presence of the intruders until it was too late. But where was the officer? Jack left to seek him out while the others bound the prisoners. Ned Rainford was assigned to guard the door. They had almost finished securing the bonds when the man at the door let out a warning cry.

“There he is!” shouted the landsman, drawing his sword and running off.

It seemed that while the pirates had been subduing the remainder of the garrison, the officer had been doing his rounds. He had just visited the gate and had obviously discovered that the guards were missing, as well as noticing the absence of the sentries on the wall. He was now running towards the bell, which hung from a timber frame in the centre of the yard, shouting a warning to his subordinates, unaware they were all already bound and gagged. Rainford raised his sword as he ran to intercept the Spaniard, who, on seeing the stranger, rapidly approached the bell drawing his own fine blade. Pete and the others quickly exited the barrack building, but were too far away to do anything. It was all down to Rainford now to stop the soldier raising the alarm. At least the officer wasn't carrying a pistol, which he could have already used to warn those outside the fort.

Ned Rainford reached the middle of the yard just before the finely dressed officer and there was a sudden unnerving clash of steel on steel. Unfortunately for the ex-militiaman this soldier was a adept swordsman, who quickly dispatched his opponent with a skilled feint and thrust. As the pirate fell to his knees, clutching his punctured belly, the Spaniard lunged for the bell before the others could get to him. The desperate officer had

almost grasped the dangling bell cord when he was suddenly thrown backwards with a colourfully plumed arrow shaft protruding from his throat, falling heavily on the dying pirate lying on the ground behind him. Jack Arrow, who had been on the wall searching for the missing officer, had nocked a second arrow, but on seeing his first one had reached its mark, slid it back in his quiver before rapidly making his way down to join the others.

"I had no choice but to kill him," panted Jack on reaching the others.

"I know. It were 'im or us," replied the quartermaster as he stooped to check for signs of life in the two prone figures. "They're both goners."

"No!" cried out Archie Tinley in despair, crouching to take his fallen comrade in his arms. "You can't be dead, Ned."

"Keep it down, Archie," warned Pete. "There'll be time fer mourning later. Now we's got a job to do. Jack'll go and signal them on the ship while we bar the gate. Archie, you put on one of them uniforms and patrol the wall, so we don't arouse no suspicion."

While the other men went to secure the gate, Jack made his way to the wall where he pulled out a yellow flag, which normally served as the yellow jack, hoisted in times of sickness on board to warn approaching vessels to keep their distance. Standing where he could be seen clearly by the ship but not from the shore, he frantically waved the grubby piece of cloth on the end of a pike he had picked up along the way. He was relieved when he saw the mizzen topsail being set – the agreed signal to acknowledge that he had been seen. Moments later the exiled native American could make out the tiny figures of men piling into the largest of the ships boats. As he waited, he brooded over the death of his shipmate, which he was sure could have been averted had he been quicker

on the release, but his gloominess soon dissipated when he helped the breathless ship's gunner to scramble over the parapet with his heavy bag of implements for putting the guns out of action.

The artilleryman was soon busy disabling the nearest gun by driving long metal spikes with soft points into the touch hole until they were flush with the outer surface. Initial fears that the hammering would attract the attention of those outside the fort were allayed when the beating of drums and the blaring of bugles boisterously announced that the military parade had commenced. On moving on to the next gun Sauer told the Tuscaroran to fill the barrels with sand and iron balls to gain even more time should the Spaniards manage to remove the spikes from the hastily disabled guns. The German assured his comrade that they would be well underway should the guns be somehow made serviceable again.

"You've done this before, haven't you?" commented Jack while watching Sauer skilfully put a second gun out of action.

"Yes, it is so," replied the sweating gunner. "At battle of Cassano, six weeks before I get bad injured, we must spike guns to stop French from using them."

"I see," answered Jack, scratching his head. He was about to continue his questioning when the laconic man from Königsberg quickly moved on to the next gun without uttering another word, leaving Jack to his arduous task of blocking the barrels.

Meanwhile the rest of the men in the raiding party waited nervously at the main gate of the fort, anticipating how events would unfold that day.

A sanguinary ritual

Captain Ironside was standing with those he had

selected to accompany him at the foot of the magnificent pyramid, anxiously wondering if Pete had successfully taken the fort. He was now deliberating whether he had been ill-advised in agreeing to this perilous venture. If they failed, it would mean certain death for them all. Next to him, Cassandra appeared unable to conceal her uneasiness, giving her husband a weak smile as he squeezed her hand reassuringly. Niamh O'Malley, on the other hand, seemed unperturbed by the imminent danger they were facing, chatting merrily to Xenos, who was also putting on a brave face. The fidgeting surgeon was in a state of ambivalence, both fearing for his life, and excited by the new experience at the same time. Meanwhile, the ostentatiously dressed Viceroy was standing not far away surrounded by numerous officials, observing the proceedings with calm anticipation.

The captain and his spouse, who were both lost in thought, almost jumped out of their skins when the air was suddenly filled with the thunderous banging of drums and blasting of bugles, which announced the arrival of the military procession. The pirates stared in awe as almost a thousand smartly dressed soldiers marched into the vast plaza at the base of the huge pyramid. Many marched with out-dated matchlock muskets slung over their shoulders while others carried impressively long pikes; only the officers were mounted.

"The original conquistadors must have left some of their horses behind when they sailed back to Spain," commented Faustus over the noise.

"Why do you say that?" asked the Swede in a loud voice.

"Well, there weren't any horses in the Americas before the Spanish arrived, and this place seems to be somewhere on that continent," answered the surgeon knowledgeably.

"Do you really think we're in a forgotten part of the

Americas, Faustus?" responded the captain doubtfully. "I think it extremely unlikely that the Spanish would neglect a land so rich in precious metals. No, I fear we find ourselves still in unknown territories and that the original ship never made it back to civilisation."

"I must admit you could be right, Björn. The Spanish are frightfully edacious where prizable elements are concerned."

The captain simply nodded, not completely sure if he understood what the other man had just said, and then turned his attention back to the impressive parade. He was encouraged by the sight of so many soldiers in the large square, as it meant that the fort would be as good as unmanned. Although not a godly man, usually holding overly pious lambs in contempt, he muttered a silent prayer to himself that Pete had taken the fort without incident. Before he could finish his silent supplication, his attention was diverted to a group of men entering the plaza from the far side – it was the sinister holy men. They were attired in an assortment of garments made of animal fur and snake skin, but it wasn't what they were wearing that distressed him, it was the large standard adorned with human skulls. The sight reminded the captain of the direness of the situation should they fail. The thought of his wife's head impaled on a pole woke both fear and anger within him.

"So tell me, Xenos, why did ye leave the land of t'e Greeks?" asked O'Malley to pass the time, unimpressed by the pomp of the parade.

"The country I left can't really be called the land of the Greeks any more," replied Xenos glumly in a thick accent. "In fact, it hasn't really been our own land since the days of the city states. First came the Romans, then the Byzantines. We struggled to liberate ourselves after the fall of Constantinople, but what little that wasn't

taken by the Turks is ruled over by the Venetians. Maybe one day we'll be able to reclaim our ancestral home, but I doubt it."

"Jesus, 'tat reminds me of dear ole Ireland. We Irish ain't had a land we can call our own fer hundreds of years, since 'em bloody Brits invaded. First 'e Normans, 'en Oliver Cromwell, may his soul burn in hell. So who's the better master, the Venetians or the Turks?"

"Well, I guess I'd have to say the Venetians. At least they're not godless heathens like the Ottomans, but I still wasn't willing to give my life for them on one of their cursed galleys. That's why I fled."

"Don't worry, Xenos, one day we'll get our fair nations back. I'm sure of it," replied the Irish woman optimistically.

The music suddenly stopped and everyone's attention turned to another smaller procession entering the plaza. Another priest wearing an oversized helmet fashioned from an armadillo shell and a gaudy costume of feathers led a group of twenty or so sullen-faced young men and women dressed only in loincloths. The new arrivals were presumably slaves, as they were being urged along with strange-shaped clubs by other natives attired in crimson tunics.

"There she is!" cried out Faustus in dismay.

"Who?" echoed Ironside and his wife.

"The girl who came to my room in the night," stammered the distressed surgeon. "I told you I'd condemned her to death by sending her away. We've got to do something."

Ironside place a restraining hand on his friend's arm when he made to approach the girl, who was simply staring at the ground in front of her awaiting her fate.

"There's nothing you can do, Faustus," warned the captain. "Do you want to end up as a sacrifice, too?"

"No, I don't," sighed the forlorn physician, "but isn't

there anything we can do?"

"No, I'm afraid not, at least not if our plan is to be a success."

"Maybe I can purchase her freedom," said Faustus, purposefully striding towards the Viceroy before Ironside could stop him. After a few minutes he returned looking more dejected than ever. "Hidalgo says that now it's too late, because she's already been prepared for the ritual. He said he couldn't understand my request as I had consented to her sacrifice by rejecting her."

Cassandra soothingly stroked the arm of the sobbing surgeon, who had hidden his face in his hands to conceal his shame. Everyone was waiting expectantly for the ritual to start when they were disturbed by a commotion coming from the edge of the square. Faustus peeked between his fingers when he heard a gasp from his fellow shipmates, and let out a low groan when he saw what was troubling the others. Yet another bunch of prisoners was being herded towards the first group of sacrificial victims, but this time the pirates recognized them all – it was Captain Wolfenden and the men he had brought ashore to raid the treasury, among them Emilio Calderon, who had been sent to guide them to the vaults. Ironside stared in horror at the other captain, wondering what had gone wrong. The proud captive pirate captain simply shook his head despairingly when he made eye contact with Ironside. The plan had failed. The taking of the fort had been in vain.

"What's Captain Wolfenden doing here?" asked the astonished woman from Bermuda. "Is he a prisoner?"

"It looks like it," replied her husband nervously, contemplating making a hasty withdrawal back to the ship. No, he couldn't leave John Wolfenden to his fate, as, despite their frequent disagreements, they had known each other for too long. But what could he do? There

were a thousand soldiers in the square, not to mention the hundreds of native auxiliaries.

“What we gonna do, Cap’n?” inquired O’Malley urgently. “I may not like the man, but we can’t let him be sacrificed.”

“There’s nothing we can do,” answered Faustus despairingly. “Neither for that poor girl nor for Wolfenden and his men. It pains me to say it, but we have to get out of here before Hidalgo starts to suspect us of being the associates of his captives.”

“It’s not like you to give up so easily, Faustus,” said Cassandra. “I’m sure my husband has a plan. You do have a plan, don’t you, Björn?”

The Swede didn’t answer immediately. He just stood paralysed, staring at the captured sea rovers, who were now being stripped of their upper garments. Meanwhile, Viceroy Hidalgo stepped forward and addressed the throng in Spanish.

“It seems we have thwarted the pirates who our good friend Captain Gunnarsson warned us about. Our alert auxiliaries ambushed them as they landed further down the coast. Now on this holy day of Tecuilhuitontli we will offer an unexpected sacrifice to the Revered Ones.”

“But surely it would be a waste. Wouldn’t they be of more value as slaves?” called out Ironside, desperately hoping to win time to be able to rescue his comrades when circumstances were more convenient.

“I fear not, my dear man,” replied the Viceroy, shaking his head. “Their capture on this auspicious day is a sign from Christ-Quetzalcoatl himself. They will be sacrificed along with the others. But don’t worry, Captain Gunnarsson, you and your men will be amply rewarded for warning us of the danger.” Hidalgo paused for a moment while one of the sinister priests whispered something in the Governor’s ear. “I have changed my

mind. I will spare the one who appears to be their leader.”

“That is very gracious of you, Viceroy,” responded Ironside hopefully.

“Graciousness has nothing to do with it. I have just been advised it would be better to keep their leader alive, at least for now, to obtain information to the whereabouts of possible accomplices. My torturadores can be very persuasive. In the meantime, he’ll see how we deal with pirates in Eldorado. As it will take a little more time than planned to prepare the unexpected offerings for the ritual, I propose we enjoy some refreshments while we wait.”

Ironside watched helplessly as the scowling captain of the sloop was separated from the others and placed under guard not far from where the Viceroy was standing. When Hidalgo was satisfied the prisoner was secure, he called for slaves to bring food and drink for the officials and his guests. Moments later they were being offered a variety of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, as well as a multitude of small snacks. Ironside watched as O’Malley and Xenos downed a generous portion of rum before himself succumbing to the need for something to settle his fraying nerves. He gulped down a small cup of the strong liquid under the reproachful gaze of his wife, who had sensibly opted for a clay beaker of mixed fruit juices.

“Old Wolfie’s gonna spill his guts if t’ey torture him, Cap’n,” stated O’Malley dourly. “Then we’ll all have our hearts torn out.”

“I don’t believe he’ll betray us, Neeve,” replied the unsettled captain. “He might be a pirate, but he’s a proud and honourable man.”

“Don’t be too sure of t’at, Cap’n,” answered the unconvinced Irish woman. “He’d sell his own grandma, if he got a good price for her.”

"She might have a point there," interceded Faustus. "We can't be sure he won't play Judas to save his own skin. We have to do something before the situation becomes too obstreperous."

"What t'e hell does obsitiprus mean?" asked O'Malley. "Benton's right when he says you speaks a whole different language to us."

"Discommodious, fractious, insurmountable." On noticing that the Irish woman was staring at him bewilderedly, the bookish surgeon recalled the captain's words of advice on Avery's island and carefully rephrased his words. "Out of hand, out of control, uncontrollable."

"All right, Fausty. I understands. I may be Irish, but I ain't daft," snapped Niamh. Then turning to Ironside she asked. "So what we gonna do, Cap'n?"

"Let me think a moment," replied Ironside, removing his hat and wiping his brow with the back of his hand.

"We've got to act quickly, or the men in the fort will be discovered," urged the surgeon.

"Give him time to think," said Cassandra. "It's not a decision one can make lightly."

The heavily perspiring captain racked his brains for a solution, fighting back the panic that threatened to overwhelm him. He had to stop, or at least delay the sacrifice, so he could free the prisoners. But how would they escape to the ship? He cursed himself for having ordered the canoes on the beach to be destroyed. Then an idea occurred to him. It was a desperate plan, but it was the only way they might get out of this alive. He just hoped Pete had captured the fort as his plan hinged on it. He called Monkey Boy Will over and whispered detailed instructions to the youngster. The grinning boy nodded and slipped off unnoticed into the crowd.

Ironside grew more and more anxious as the sacrificial preparations were drawing to a close. If his plan failed,

his only option would be to return to the ship with his small group and abandon Captain Wolfenden and his men to their fate. If Pete and his men had failed to take the fort and not been able to return to the ship, he would have to presume them dead or captured. Leaving without them would be painful for all, but they would have no other choice. He doubted the rest of the crew would want him as their captain any longer after such a fiasco. The Swede had all but given up hope when he was snapped out of his melancholy by a thundering cannon shot from the direction of the fort, followed by a second loud bang. Either Pete had been successful and was carrying out the plan conveyed to him by young Will, or the guns of the fort were firing on his ship. Listening carefully while the guns fired again, the captain's experienced ear told him they didn't sound like the heavy pieces of the shore battery, but rather smaller cannons, possibly three pounders. This gave him hope.

"What's going on?" cried out Hidalgo.

"There must be more pirates on the prowl. I think they're attacking the fort. There's probably hundreds of them," replied Ironside, hoping the soldiers would withdraw to defend it. He was confident Pete and the others would be able to make it back to their boats before the soldiers stormed the defensive structure.

"Stay here, Captain! I'll take the men to deal with the attack and then we'll return to complete the sacrifices," said Hidalgo hurriedly.

"We'll help keep an eye on the prisoners," offered Ironside, coolly patting the pistol in his belt on noticing the Viceroy nervously glancing at Wolfenden and his men.

"Very well," replied Hidalgo, anxious to deal with the new threat.

Within minutes the perplexed Viceroy was marching

the large body of troops and auxiliaries out of the square to deal with the attackers, leaving only a handful of his own men to guard the prisoners together with Ironside and his people. This was a mistake he would live to regret for the rest of his life. On observing the last of the soldiers exit the plaza, Ironside knew he had to act quickly. He sent O'Malley and Xenos to deal with the four guards watching the prisoners while he and Faustus approached the two men guarding Captain Wolfenden. He told Cassandra to wait where she was, but the excited woman was having none of it, instead she produced two small loaded pistols, which had been concealed under her dress, and pointed them menacingly at the astonished priests and officials. On seeing what was happening, Captain Wolf threw himself against one of his captors, knocking the stunned man to the ground, and Faustus was waving a pistol in the second guard's face before he could react. Ironside quickly cut Wolf's bonds, and freed the grateful captain, who gave the guard on the ground, who was attempting to scramble to his feet, a vicious kick to the head, sending the dazed man sprawling backwards unconscious. Meanwhile, O'Malley and Xenos approached the four soldiers posted to watch over the prisoners. The nearest had realised something was awry when he saw the small woman hurrying towards him with cutlass in hand, so he lowered his pike and thrust it towards her chest when she was near enough, but the plucky Irish woman was no longer where she should be. She had waited until the soldier had begun the jab before throwing herself to the ground and rolling under the long weapon. From her vulnerable position on the ground she gave a sharp kick to the baffled guard's groin, causing the dismayed man to drop his pike and crumple up in pain. In the mean time, Xenos had managed to grab hold of a second soldier's spear and was unsuccessfully

attempting to wrestle it from him. Fortunately for him, O'Malley was not far away and had seized the first soldiers weapon, thrusting it into the thigh of the man who was struggling with the Greek, allowing her shipmate to then easily overwhelm his opponent. The other two soldiers were quickly surrounded and almost crushed by the bodies of the captured pirates who pressed in on them from all sides before they could come to the aid of their hapless comrades. O'Malley swiftly cut through the cords binding the prisoners' hands while Xenos saw to it the soldiers were secured. It all happened so quickly that the group of onlooking priests and officials were powerless to act or flee.

The freed pirates gathered up the few weapons the guards had been carrying, and then bound the priests and officials with the ropes that had been used to bind themselves. At the same time, Faustus was urging the confused sacrificial victims, who hadn't been bound, to flee. When the scared youths failed to react, the flustered captain shouted at them.

"Freedom! Libertad! Liberté! Freiheit!" he cried at the top of his voice shoos them away as he would a pack of stray dogs.

The frightened prisoners exchanged concerned glances until one boy of no older than fourteen turned and pelted towards the southern gate of the city crying out strange words in his own tongue. One by one the rest of the slaves broke away from the crowd and sprinted after the youth, who was no longer in sight, until only the young woman who Faustus had cast out of his room remained. The girl just stared at him appraisingly, which unnerved the surgeon.

"I'm sorry for sending you away," blurted out Faustus in Spanish, in the hope she would understand him. "Now go before the soldiers return. You need not die this day."

"Thank you," replied the young woman in a thick accent, smiling as she stepped forward and kissed the astonished physician on the mouth before turning to run and catch up with the other fleeing young men and women. Faustus stood dumbstruck, his heart pounding, as he watched the naked back of the slender woman disappearing into the distance.

While the surgeon was freeing the slaves Ironside sought to find out what had gone wrong with the plan.

"What happened, John?" he asked with a frown.

"We were ambushed just after we landed and sent the boats back to the ship," replied Wolf regretfully. "There must have been a hundred native troops who had been concealed among the trees. Two of my men were struck down by arrows. We didn't stand a chance."

"I guess we underestimated their vigilance," said the Swede.

"Well, you did forewarn them when you told them that pirates were in the vicinity, but it's of no matter now. We have to get out of here before the soldiers return."

"All right, let's go. If we get to the jetty and signal the ship, they might be able to send the boats to pick us up before our hosts are alerted to our absence."

"And leave without the treasure?" said Wolf in a tone which indicated he had no intention of leaving without it.

"You can't be serious, John," answered Ironside, flabbergasted. "There's no way we'll manage it."

"You return to the safety of your ship, Björn, but me and my men are going after that gold. We'll snatch what we can while the soldiers are still occupied. I gave my crew orders to bring the sloop to the bay after I disembarked. They'll pick us up."

"But that's madness!" stuttered Ironside.

"We can only do it if we don't waste time yapping like fishwives," snapped Wolf. "Now are you with us or not?"

“Allright,I’mwithyou,”repliedIronsideapprehensively, “but at the first sign of trouble, I’m heading off back to the jetty.”

Unsure if he had made the right decision, but sure of how his wife would react if he told her, the captain of *Dream Chaser* quietly informed Faustus of what he intended. The shocked surgeon briefly tried to talk him out of it, but soon relented when he realised he was wasting his breath, agreeing to escort Cassandra back to the beach and take the remaining canoe back to their vessel. Without even looking at his wife, he swiftly informed O’Malley, Xenos and Calderon of the plan, giving them the option to return to the ship with Faustus, if they wished – all three chose to accompany their captain without question. Ignoring Cassandra, he ran after Captain Wolfenden and his men, who were already heading towards the palace grounds, closely followed by his three crewmembers. Cassandra stared open-mouthed at the departing men.

“Where are you going, Björn?” she screamed. “Come back now!”

She would have headed off after her husband, if Faustus hadn’t restrained her. “We’ve got to get back to the ship, Cassandra.”

“He’s going after the gold, isn’t he?” asked Cassandra, near to tears.

“I’m afraid so,” answered the surgeon earnestly.

“Without speaking to me first?”

“I think he knew you would be against it.”

“Too bloody right I would have been. The damn fool! If the Spaniards don’t kill him, I bloody well will,” cursed the furious woman as they swiftly made their way to the beach.

A case of mistaken identity

On receiving Jack Arrow's signal that the fort had been taken, the largest of the ship's boats had been sent with Frederick Sauer to the fort. The other vessel was packed with enough men to sail the piragua over to join the others. One of the men in the boat was William Benton, who despite being forbidden to set foot in Eldorado had insisted on coming. Just before reaching the wooden jetty, he informed the others that he had an important message for the captain and that they weren't to wait for him, but to leave one of the canoes undamaged so he could return in it alone. His shipmates were unconcerned by Benton's announcement, being far more interested in getting to the fort in the two boats in the hope of picking up vast quantities of gold.

After checking his two pistols and tucking them in his belt, the defiant boatswain sneaked off towards the town gate, and, ignoring the cacophony of drums and bugles, merrily sang a rendition of the popular song *Captain Kidd* with slightly modified lyrics to himself.

My name is Captain Benton as I sailed as I sailed
My name is Captain Benton as I sailed
My name is Captain Benton, God's laws I did forbid
And most wickedly I did as I sailed as I sailed
most wickedly I did as I sailed

The two native guards at the open gate festively offered him a swig from a clay jar as he passed by, clearly unaware he'd been banished from their land. The grinning pirate took a generous gulp of the fermented liquid, handed it back, and tipped his hat to the two tipsy men before strolling nonchalantly into the city. On his way to the palace he only encountered servants and the occasional

bored guard, resentful at not being included in the auspicious ceremony. Benton greeted them so heartily that none of them suspected for a moment that he had no right to be there. The cheeky seaman even helped himself to a jug of rum punch from a large tray, which was being carried by slaves towards where the ritual was taking place, but this time he restrained from drinking any.

He had considered making his way to the vaults to plunder its contents, but had decided it would be too risky alone, so he made up his mind to see what he could find in the palace while its occupants were away. He would then dash back to the jetty and take the canoe back to the ship. He would end this day a rich man, whether Ironside's plan worked or not. He made it past the guards at the main doors with ease after offering to share the jug of alcohol with them. The soldiers were only too pleased to be relieved of the monotony of guard duty. The boatswain shared the contents of jug with the two guards, but was careful only to take small sips. He waited until the two sentries had drunk enough not to care about him slipping past them into the large hall of the palace. Once inside, he took a random passage, searching any rooms he passed for anything of worth. On exiting the third chamber, he was already pleased with what he had discovered: three gold necklaces, six gold rings, a silver statuette, and a gem-encrusted ornamental box. He patted the small sack holding his loot, wondering whether he should call it a day and return to the ship while he still could, but his avidness for gold got the better of him – just one more room, then he'd leave.

He was just about to enter another drape-covered doorway when a surprised, finely dressed servant emerged.

“¿Qué hace usted aquí, señor?” asked the astonished man, whom Benton recognized as being one of the

servants at the feast he'd recently attended.

"Bonjour," answered Benton, grinning sheepishly.

"Ha sido desterrado de esta tierra, señor."

"Buenos tardes," replied the pirate, quickly walking away from the bemused servant, slowly breaking into jog once he rounded the corner.

"¡Guardias! Hay un intruso en el palacio," Benton heard the man cry out.

Although he didn't comprehend the words, William Benton was only too aware of their meaning, and on hearing a flurry of footsteps he quickly disappeared behind a colourful drape concealing the room behind it. He quickly scanned the contents of the chamber, which housed a single large table pushed against the far wall and a variety of garments hanging on hooks on the walls. Forgetting the guards who were searching for him, he rummaged through the unusual objects on the table's surface: there were two ornate daggers with black handles and blades with a strange wavy form; there were bottles containing unfamiliar scented liquids; there were small bowls containing a variety of coloured powders; there were pots of different coloured paints; there was even a finely polished human skull, but what captured his interest the most was the gilded box the skull was resting on. On opening it he discovered an assortment of rubies, emeralds and sapphires, which he promptly emptied into his sack of plunder. Thoroughly pleased with his discovery, he decided it was time to leave, but first he had to avoid the guards who were looking for him. He could hear movement in the hallway and presumed the soldiers were searching the adjacent room. It was only a matter of time before they found him. His heart pounding, Benton scanned the room, but saw no other way out of it. On the far wall hung an assortment of gaudy costumes and feathered headdresses, and on running the cloth of one

garment through his fingers a daring escape plan quickly formulated in the pirate's excited mind. He swiftly removed his shirt, breeches, and soft leather shoes, and stuffed them into his sack, and then hastily slipped into a knee-length, turquoise skirt and a multicoloured feather headdress. After doing that he hurriedly smeared a black paste from one of the bowls under his eyes and across his forehead to mimic the appearance of the nefarious priests. As an afterthought, he painted the form of cross on his bare chest with a red paint-like substance he found in a clay pot. Inspecting himself in a highly polished silver mirror, he admired his handiwork. He admitted he might be a bit paler of skin than the indigenous clerics, but on the whole he believed he could pass for one of them. He was about to exit the chamber when he noticed a wooden bowl on the edge of the table nearest the door, the contents intrigued him enough to make him stop for a moment. It contained what appeared to be tiny, dry, shrivelled mushrooms, and as he was feeling a bit peckish, without thinking, he popped a handful into his mouth before leaving the room. The earthy taste of the spongy, fibrous fungus didn't appeal much to his finical palate, but he chewed and swallowed them anyway.

Strolling down the corridor as if he owned the place, it didn't take long before he was confronted by a dozen native troops armed with spears and clubs. The bemused auxiliaries stared at the strange sight in wonder, and Benton felt sure his disguise had fooled them, until he noticed they were staring at the two pistols tucked into a leather belt he had also found in the room, and it was then he realised he might not look so convincing after all. He was about to turn and head in the opposite direction when he felt a wave of euphoria suddenly wash over him, and instead turned back to face the men who were motionlessly observing him. The boatswain found

himself transfixed on the scene before him, taking in every detail with a peculiar, enhanced perception which he was completely unaccustomed to – he even noticed a black, hairy spider as it scuttled across the ceiling above the auxiliaries' heads. Furthermore, the edge of his vision was tainted by an intense swirl of glowing, distorted colours. Then it happened. It was at that very moment that he achieved enlightenment. Now he knew the divine truth. He knew now that he was more than a wretched pirate, he was in fact the Messiah. Despite his epiphany the group of native guards warily advanced towards the inanely grinning seaman with weapons poised to strike.

"I am your saviour," shouted the enraptured boatswain. "I am here to deliver you all from bondage."

The mystified natives stopped a few feet in front of the ranting pirate priest, unsettled by the unfamiliar words.

"Freedom! Libertad! Freedom! Libertad!," cried out Benton flailing his hands wildly above his head. "Freedom! Libertad! Freedom! Libertad!"

The astounded auxiliaries exchanged perplexed glances until one of the men, at least understanding the Spanish word uttered by the deranged shaman-like figure hopping up and down on the spot and chanting his self-devised mantra, took up the words, imperfectly repeating them to his colleagues. It wasn't long before the whole group were faithfully repeating Benton's catchy chorus. Moments later, four sword-wielding soldiers in metal helmets and breastplates rounded the corner, attracted by the din. They exchanged some heated words with the native troops, who seemed to be defying their order to seize the intruder.

"Yo-ho! Hi ho! All rise against the gov'nor!" screeched the crazed pirate, drawing his two pistols and pointing them at the nearest two soldiers.

Although one of the firearms fizzled and let out only a

disappointing pop, the other emitted a thunderous crack, sending one of the soldiers spinning backwards, his metal armour providing no extra protection against the deadly projectile. There was a tense, pregnant pause as all eyes became focused on him, and through the kaleidoscopic haze Benton became vaguely aware that he might be in grave danger, he even doubted for a second that he might be the Messiah.

Fortunately for Benton, and to his amazement, the native guards seemed to heed his call to rise up against their oppressors and, without warning, threw themselves onto the three startled remaining soldiers. The revolt soon spread throughout the palace and its grounds as more and more of the repressed indigenous population joined its ranks. The pirate, saviour, and political agitator stood hazily contemplating the momentous events unfolding around him and his own role in their instigation. He was sure they were fighting for him, their saviour. It was then he heard two thunderous cracks coming from the area to the north of the palace, where he knew the fort was located. What was going on? Had the plan failed? Were the Spaniards bombarding the ships? He had to find out. Moments later the curious, fuzzy-headed seaman was slowly making his way through the rioting natives, greeting and encouraging them as he went, towards the back of the palace to where he would be able to get a good view of the fort.

Flight to the fort

Although under the impression he was making his way to the other side of the palace with all haste, the dazed pirate took the good part of an hour to get there. He had been constantly distracted by small skirmishes between those he believed to be his followers and the

Viceroy's men. More than one time he halted to shout encouragement, even stopping a few times to intervene when he saw one of his people in distress. Despite his muddled condition, he was still capable of reloading his pistols, which he discharged on more than one occasion at the guards in metal breast plates. When he did finally emerge from the regal building into the spacious area between the rear of the palace and the fort, he was startled to see that Spanish soldiers were amassing there, assembling under the sporadic cannon fire from the fort, which although falling short of the ranks of men, served as a warning not to get too close to the stone fortification.

Once Hidalgo's troops had formed up, a group of auxiliaries were urged forward bearing heavy assault ladders. It seemed that not all of the natives were aware of the uprising yet, or were aware, but had remained loyal to their masters. Incensed by the thought of the people he was saving being used as cannon fodder, Benton acted quickly. Running back into the palace, crying out his slogan for freedom, he gathered around him as many of the native rebels as he could before leading them out to fall on the rear ranks of the soldiers outside, who were now slowly marching towards the fort. On seeing their brethren attacking their masters, those carrying the burdensome ladders promptly dropped them and joined the fray. With a grin of satisfaction on his face, the rebellious boatswain contemplated what to do next. His only option now was to return to the jetty as originally planned and make his escape in a small canoe.

His head gradually clearing, he strolled purposefully through the fine halls to the front of the palace, where he was greeted by the sight of hundred of slaves arriving to join the revolt. He even thought he recognized the pretty young woman who had visited him in his room. He briefly toyed with the idea of trying to convince her

to come with him, but dismissed the thought when he became aware of a group of men laden down with sacks and chests heading towards him. They were neither natives nor Spanish descendants – they were pirates. Waving his arms he ran frantically towards them. To his horror, one of Wolf's men raised an antiquated musket and took aim at the wild man in the colourful feathered headdress hurtling towards him. Benton screamed out his own name, but this didn't stop the pirate from pulling the trigger. The burning cord made contact with the powder, unleashing a loud bang and a cloud of smoke, but fortunately for the heavily disguised boatswain, the weapon wasn't very accurate and the ball whizzed a mere inch above his head. Another of Wolf's men dropped the heavy sack he was lugging and drew his sword, taking a few steps towards the hysterical shaman-like figure, which was gesticulating wildly at him. At that moment another man ran forward and placed his hand on the swordsman's shoulder – it was Ironside.

"Is that you, Benton?" the captain asked warily.

"Of course it's me, Cap'n," cried out the relieved seaman.

"What the hell are you doing looking like Montezuma after an all night binge?" replied Ironside. "You're lucky I'm here, otherwise this man would have run you through. What are you doing here anyway? Shouldn't you be on the ship?"

"Montewho? Never mind. No man's got the right to banish me from any land," panted Benton.

"But you'd have been put to death if they had caught you."

"There's no way they was going to catch old William. Far to crafty for that I am. Anyway, I had a calling I had to follow," explained Benton earnestly.

"Which was?" asked the perplexed captain.

“To free the slaves from bondage just like dear Fausty said.”

“You mean you were on an altruistic mission?”

“Eh?”

“Were you on a mission for the good of others?”

“I was.”

“And it had nothing to do with procuring valuables for your own benefit?”

“Well, I thought it wouldn’t hurt to enrich meself along the way.”

“So how far did you get with instigating a rebellion?” asked Ironside mockingly.

“Pretty far. The slaves are in full scale revolt, and all because of me,” answered Benton proudly.

“Really?” replied Ironside in disbelief. “No, that can’t be true. Now in all seriousness, we have to get out of here before the soldiers notice us.”

“We won’t get much trouble from those soldiers,” stated the boatswain smugly.

“And why’s that?” inquired the exasperated captain.

“Because, as I already said, they’ve got their ‘ands full with rioting slaves.”

“Enough of this foolishness. We need to get to the boats as quickly as possible.”

“If yer don’t believe me then where do yer think all them slaves are going? They’re all off to join the uprising. They’re attacking the soldiers besieging Pete in the fort, they are.”

Ironside stopped to look around at the infuriated crowds of slaves entering the palace grounds bearing all manner of weapons, mainly farming implements and crude wooden spears. Come to mention it, it was strange that such a large mob was raging unchecked. Maybe there was indeed some truth in Benton’s words. Worryingly, some of the angry natives were pointing in

their direction. If they were to return to the jetty they would have to pass through this outraged mass, and he feared that the rebelling natives might not differentiate between soldier and pirate. He himself had been a guest of the Viceroy after all. Benton noticed his captain viewing the chaotic scene before him.

“We ain’t gonna get through that lot unscathed,” he told Ironside candidly. “We’ve got a better chance if we try to get to the fort. Pete’s still there by the sound of them guns. Hopefully, the soldiers and natives’ll be too occupied with bashing each other’s brains in to take notice of us.”

“You may be right, William,” conceded Ironside wiping his sweaty brow.

The captain of *Dream Chaser* turned to Captain Wolfenden and his men, who were also nervously observing the growing aggravated crowd. After exchanging a few brief words, the two captains hurriedly instructed the rest of the men to skirt around the large, majestic building towards the fort. They had only made it halfway there when they were confronted by a large group of indigenous rebels, who clearly took them for masters. The pirates dropped their load and reached for their weapons, but before anything untoward could happen, Benton stepped forward shouting and pointing furiously in the direction of the soldiers. The group of natives glanced at each other uncertainly for a moment, then turned and headed off towards the battle, crying the chant of freedom.

“How did you manage that, Benton?” asked Captain Wolf in astonishment.

“I am their saviour and they respects what I says,” replied Benton, unconsciously scratching between his legs.

“They must believe you to be one of their mad priests,”

scoffed Wolf. "Although you look more like a wild man of the woods to me."

During the frantic dash to the fort the pirates were intercepted by soldiers on several occasions. O'Malley took down one astonished man with her cutlass and Ironside shot another with his pistol. Captain Wolf's men were more concerned with hauling their booty to safety than fighting, only reluctantly dropping their load when absolutely necessary. Ironside, on the other hand, had abandoned his loot, being more concerned with seeing his wife again while he was still in one piece – he now deeply regretted having left her to participate in this mission of folly.

Benton led the way as they rounded the corner of the palace, where they caught sight of the fort and the mayhem between them and their goal. Unfortunately, the pirate-shaman thudded into a startled soldier, falling heavily to the ground, letting go of his precious sack in the process. The soldier regained his composure much more quickly than the stunned seaman, raising his sword to strike his prone opponent, but just before the blow fell O'Malley thundered into him and knocked him to the ground. The plucky Irishwoman was instantly on her feet and cut the hapless Spaniard down before he could recover from the collision. In the next instant, she and Ironside each grabbed the dazed boatswain under the arms and carted him unceremoniously through the skirmishing throng.

Glancing over his shoulder Ironside saw one of Wolf's men being brought down when a soldier jabbed the end of his long pike into the unlucky pirate's thigh. The man fell screaming to the ground, but was ignored by his comrades, who were far more intent on rescuing their treasure than aiding an injured shipmate. Only Xenos showed some pity for the fallen man, throwing a spear

at the approaching foe, which just bounced harmlessly off the man's steel breastplate. The Greek realised there was no hope of reaching the wounded pirate in time and was himself at risk of being cut off, so he pelted after the others leaving the heavy sack of gold he had been carrying on the dusty ground behind him.

Under covering fire from the battlements of the fort, most of the sea rovers finally made it to the large wooden gates, which were opened slightly to allow them to squeeze through. Ironside was the first to enter and was greeted by the concerned face of Samuel Langston. Looking up at the walls he saw Pete and half-a-dozen other men frantically firing and reloading their muskets, while Frederick Sauer commanded a handful of men who were operating two small brass guns, which had probably been placed facing land in case of an uprising. The captain thought it ironic that it was his men who were the ones firing them and not the soldiers. The Viceroy had clearly never anticipated a simultaneous slave revolt and pirate raid, and, to tell the truth, neither had he. On seeing Captain Ironside below, Pete hurried down to greet him.

"What be goin' on, Cap'n?" asked the panting quartermaster.

"The original plan failed when Captain Wolfenden and his men were captured, so we had to improvise," answered the flustered Swede.

"Did ye get any treasure?" inquired Pete hopefully.

"We did get some, but I had to abandon mine in order to get here safe and sound," replied Ironside, looking at his empty hands in anguish. "It seems that Neeve and Xenos have also returned empty handed."

"But not Wolf and his men," said Pete, pointing to the captain of the sloop and his subordinates, who were already half-way to where the boats were moored.

"Calderon, neither," added Ironside on noticing the

Spanish rigger was also not far behind Wolf, lugging a heavy sack.

"I just 'ope Wolfie be willing to share this time," commented the disappointed quartermaster.

"I'll be back in a moment, Pete," said Ironside, quickly running after the fleeing pirates. Being unladen with loot, he easily caught up with Wolfenden.

"What's the hurry, John?" panted Ironside. "We're in control of the fort, and the natives and soldiers are at each others throats."

"For now, Björn," replied Wolf urgently. "There's no time to waste in getting back to the ships. I've already lost three men and two more are injured. You'd do better to get going, too."

"What about the treasure, John?"

"We'll talk about that later, but first we've got to get out of this godforsaken place," replied Wolf before continuing on his way.

Dissatisfied with the other captain's reply and actions, the captain of *Dream Chaser* quickly made his way back to his men at the gate. He decided Captain Wolfenden was right – there was no point wasting any more time in Eldorado. When he saw the quartermaster was once again on the ramparts, he sprinted up the steps to join him.

"Oi thinks it be time to make ourselves scarce, Cap'n," said the worried seaman as his captain approached him.

"What's going on, Pete?"

"Them soldiers have driven back the natives and is now bringing some cannons up – twelve pounders by the looks of it. They intends to bombard us in the fort."

Ironside scanned the scene below. "Yes, you're right. It's time to get going, but grab any water and supplies that might be in the fort on the way."

"Already seen to that, Cap'n." Pete then shouldered

his musket and shouted in a booming voice. “Skedaddle! Back to the boats!”

Ironside and his men had already reached the far side of the fort when the first of the guns boomed out sending their load to thunder against the wall they had been standing on a few moments earlier.

“Keep going!” shouted the exhausted captain. “It won’t take them long to discover we’ve abandoned the defences. Then they’ll surely storm the fort.”

When they arrived at the boats, they found that Wolf and his men had already been picked up and were rowing with all their might towards the sloop, which was anchored not far from the shore. A pang of anger rose in Ironside’s chest when he saw they had also taken the piragua, which was now laden with treasure, but at least the devious captain had not seized his boats – his trust in John Wolfenden was growing less by the day. He was just about to clamber into the second largest of the *Dream Chaser’s* boats when he felt someone tugging at his sleeve. Looking around he saw Niamh O’Malley with a worried expression on her face.

“What is it, Neeve?” snapped the captain.

“It’s William, Cap’n,” she replied anxiously.

“What about him?”

“He ain’t with us. To be honest, I don’t t’ink he even entered t’è fort wit’ us, Cap’n.”

Ironside scanned the men who were hurriedly clambering into the boats, and it became immediately apparent that the troublesome boatswain was not among them.

“Shit! I thought you had hold of him when we entered the fort, Neeve.”

“I did, Cap’n, but I had ter let go of him to squeeze between the gates. I didn’t t’ink to check if he’d followed me in. Maybe he was captured.”

“Or maybe he went back for the sack he dropped when he ran into that soldier. God damn that cursed man.”

An illusion is shattered

As he watched the treasure-laden pirates squeezing one by one through the narrow gap in the gates, Benton realized with horror that he no longer had his precious sack with him. The thought of leaving all those gems behind was more than the boatswain could bear, what's more, his favourite shirt and shoes were also in that sack. Without hesitation, he turned and ran back to where he believed his loot to be, weaving in and out of the combatants in the melee raging about him. He was relieved to find his bag of goodies still lying next to the body of the soldier O'Malley had slain, and quickly grabbing it he then assessed the scene around him. Much to his consternation he observed the natives – his people – being driven back by reinforcements, which were closely followed by a number of still loyal auxiliaries dragging heavy guns mounted on wooden carriages. At that moment it became clear to him that he'd never make it back alone to the fortification unscathed. Running back around the side of the palace, he urged the natives, who were still arriving in droves, to aid him in attacking the soldiers in the hope of clearing a path to the fort. Unfortunately, with their numbers bolstered, the soldiers managed to drive the new wave of attackers back with volleys of concentrated musket fire, convincing the dishevelled seaman that he would be unable to rejoin his shipmates this way. He would have to make it to the jetty and abandon his followers, so it was with a heavy heart that he started jogging away from the palace towards the town.

He had just made it through the palace gates when he

noticed a dozen or so of the natives following him not far behind. They seemed to think he had a plan. Benton turned and attempted to shoo them away, but to no avail – the perplexed auxiliaries just stood there staring expectantly at him. Benton realised he was wasting precious time, so with a shrug he continued back to the jetty with his heavy sack slung over his shoulder. He had almost reached the town gates, with an ever growing number of natives on his heels, when he heard the clattering of galloping hooves. Looking around he saw two dozen cavalymen armed with deadly, long lances charging directly towards him and his followers. The heavy mounts plunged into the dispersing crowd, the riders jabbing in all directions at the fleeing slaves, but Benton didn't wait to discover the fate of his infelicitous devotees, instead sprinting towards the jetty with his sack of booty pressed firmly to his chest.

The beach was not far away when Benton was alerted to the thumping of hooves nearing him from behind. He spun around just in time to see one of the lancers heading right towards him, intending to skewer him on the lethal tip of his long weapon. Benton screamed in despair as the horseman began a deadly jab, but before the point penetrated the bare flesh of the terrified pirate, he stumbled backwards over a loose stone and landed with a painful thud on his rear end – the tip of the long spear harmlessly passed through the air where he'd been standing just a moment ago, while the horse hurtled past the stunned seaman. The cavalryman reined his steed around and was about to return to finish off the prone figure sitting helplessly in the dirt when the shrill blast of a bugle penetrated the air. With a snort of derision the mounted soldier turned his steed and galloped off after the rest of his unit, which was withdrawing back towards the town, leaving the fortunate sea rover to stare after him in relief and disbelief – this must be a sign that he

surely was chosen by God.

Rubbing his posterior, Benton clambered to his feet, immediately scanning the area for his precious sack. He saw it lying a few yards away not far from his feathered headdress, which he had lost in the fall. As he was scooping up the bulging sack, he found himself surrounded by some of the natives who had been following him and had survived the cavalry charge. They were curiously running their hands through his ruffled, exposed hair, and over his sweat-dampened skin, the priestly paint having been smudged beyond recognition by profuse perspiration. The natives exchanged confused glances until one of them exclaimed loudly. “Extranjero!”

The bemused boatswain might not have understood the meaning of the word, but it became increasingly apparent to him that his followers were no longer regarding him with the same respect they had previously afforded him. Were they losing faith in their saviour? Benton started once again chanting his mantra of freedom – this never failed to rouse his disciples – but this time the disgruntled natives failed to take up the chant, instead muttering malcontentedly to one another. It was at that moment that the man from Plymouth realised the game was up, and that if he didn’t quickly make himself scarce then his one time followers might lynch him. Grinning sheepishly at the hostile faces bearing down on his frightened form, an idea occurred to him, and although it might be the oldest trick in the book, his options were limited. Suddenly looking beyond his would-be assailants, he pointed and shouted one of the few words he knew in Spanish. “Soldados!”

The alarmed natives hastily turned their heads to look in the direction in which the scruffy foreigner was pointing, but saw nothing of significance. In the meantime, the perturbed seaman made use of the

momentary distraction to hotfoot it towards the beach with his sack grasped firmly under his arm. William Benton ran like he'd never run before, hotly pursued by a small mob of infuriated rebels. As he made it to the beach, he threw his bag of loot into the only canoe which appeared undamaged, but glancing over his shoulder was horrified to see that the furious locals were almost upon him. There was no way he would make it far from the shore before they seized him and dragged him out of the tiny vessel unless he acted swiftly. Reaching into his sack he hurriedly retrieved his two pistols and aimed them at the approaching men, who, on seeing the deadly firearms, stopped as one and eyed him warily. The natives were aware that such a weapon only fired one round, which meant there would be only two shots, but none of them wanted to become one of those two unfortunate victims. Even when he tucked one of them into his belt so he could push the canoe into the gentle surf, not a single man on the beach was willing to be the one to die at the hands of the imposter. His pursuers' hesitation gave him time to spring into the canoe, and, paddling with one hand, he struggled to put as much distance between himself and those who desired so much to put an end to him. Eventually, he was far enough away from the shore that there was no longer any danger of being captured. Breathing a sigh of relief, he inspected his two pistols. His heart skipped a beat when he discovered that neither held ball nor powder – he'd neglected to reload them before leaving the palace. Maybe it was better he'd been ignorant of the fact. Looking up into the sky, Benton cried out thanks to the heavens. Divine intervention had saved him from a sticky end. Still under the illusion that he was a saviour sent by God to free the enslaved people of Eldorado, he asked himself why they would turn against him in such a way after all he had done for them. Then

he recalled a story from the bible he had heard on one of the few occasions he had attended church as a young man. Didn't the people who Jesus came to save string him up? Yes, his ungrateful followers hung him from an olive tree or something. And didn't Fausty once say that one pope was beaten to death, although, to be honest, he did also say that His Holiness was caught in bed with another man's wife. Whatever the reason, and with the effects of the hallucinogenic mushrooms wearing off, Benton decided that being the Messiah maybe wasn't as great as it was made out to be, and as he paddled towards *Dream Chaser* he came to the decision that he would refrain from religious enterprises for the foreseeable future, finally admitting to himself that he made a better pirate than holy man.

Benton was only halfway to the ship when he realised the crew were preparing to sail without him – the topsails and jib were almost set. Between bouts of frantic paddling, the almost unrecognizable boatswain shouted dementedly for his shipmates to wait for him. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw one of the crew observing him from the gunwale – it was Bart Hogg. Benton desperately cried out the man's name in the hope the thickset landsman would recognise him, but to his horror the man raised a long musket and took aim at the shabby figure in the approaching canoe. Benton shouted even louder and waved his arms hysterically, almost capsizing the canoe, but Hogg paid no heed to his distressed calls. Would he now die at the hands of one of his comrades – albeit one he couldn't stand – after all he'd been through?

By happy chance, John Brownrigg appeared next to the grim pirate who was wielding the musket and prevented him hitting his target by pushing the barrel towards the heavens as he fired. Benton let out a deep sigh of relief as

he watched the two men on board the ship exchange some heated words which ended with Hogg angrily storming away towards the stern. Not long later the recusant pirate was being aided over the bulwark by his protector to land heavily on the deck of the ship.

“Am I glad to see you, Johnny, me dear old mate,” gasped Benton, pushing himself to his feet. “How’d ya know it were me in that canoe?”

“I’d recognize your ugly mug anywhere, Billy Boy,” replied Brownrigg, scratching his chin. “But to be honest, I wasn’t really sure it was you. All I knows is that Bart Hogg was far to ready to use his musket, and I thought one man in a canoe couldn’t pose much threat to our vessel.”

“Well, whatever the reason be, I loves ya, Johnny. Your the best,” said the boatswain with uncharacteristic sincerity.

“You must have been in some scrape to say that to me, Will,” answered the coxswain mistrustfully. “By the way, what’s in that sack?”

“None of yer business, you nosey git,” snapped Benton, clutching the bulging bag firmly to his breast.

“That’s more like the William Benton I know,” chuckled Brownrigg to himself.

Another case of duplicity

The ship was some distance from the coast by the time Benton had cleaned himself up and donned his usual seaman’s attire, and he was now standing on the quarterdeck with the captain and several other members of the crew, enthusiastically explaining how he’d escaped an unjust retribution.

“What bothers me most is how ungrateful those natives was after all I done to help them,” complained

Benton. "How could they turn on their saviour who led them in their fight for freedom?"

"I t'ink it be time you came back down to earth, William Benton," said O'Malley after patiently listening to the astounding tale. "It seems to me you got a bit high-and-mighty, you did. Fancy believing you was some sort of messiah. You're not right in the head, if you ask me. Some might even call what you says blasphemous."

"Well, of course I didn't really believe I was the Messiah, did I," replied the pirate, not wanting to appear a fool in front of the young woman he admired. "It was all part of me plan, you see. Like when the Incas thought that Spanish bloke Cortés was a god."

"Actually, it was the Aztecs and not the Incas," corrected Faustus. "And I'm sorry, Will, but I fail to see the comparison. It seems to me you were lucky that, beyond all comprehension, you somehow convinced them you were one of their vile priests."

"Aztecs, Incas, they're all the same, but I protests that you're wrong about me not bein' their saviour, Fausty," answered the offend ex-saviour. "I believes I was chosen by God."

"But you've always claimed that God might not even exist. No gods, no masters is what you're always saying," commented Brownrigg.

"What do you know about God, Johnny?" snapped Benton. "You just ain't bright enough to understand such divine matters."

"No matter," interrupted the surgeon. "Whatever you believed, William, if your story is true, you somehow managed to animate the indigenous populace into insurgency against an overweening oligarchy. An admirable act in itself."

"No, but that ain't right, Fausty," protested Benton. "What I did was stir up the natives into a revolt against

their cruel masters.”

There was a moment of perplexed silence.

“That’s enough of your talk of inciting rebellions, Wat Tyler,” said Ironside with a grin.

“But me name ain’t Wat Tyler, it’s William Benton. You knows that all too well, Cap’n,” objected the flummoxed boatswain.

“He’s jesting, Will,” interceded O’Malley. “Wat Tyler was t’e leader of a peasant revolt a couple of hundred years ago. Even I knows t’at.”

“In 1381 to be precise,” explained Faustus the bookworm. “Tyler was a blacksmith from Kent who led a rebellion against King Richard’s unpopular poll tax and the Statute of Labourers, which attempted to fix maximum wages during the labour shortage following the Black Death. He was ...”

“I knew that,” interrupted Benton defensively. “What ‘appened to him anyway?”

“If you really knew about him, you’d know he was killed by one of the King’s knights.”

“Oh, is that so?” replied the seaman dejectedly. “I guess it don’t pay to be no rebel leader nor saviour. They all ends up dead in the end.”

“Well, you can’t really blame the natives for reacting how they did when they found out you weren’t one of them, William,” said the captain pensively. “They’ve been oppressed for years by conquerors of European stock like ourselves, after all, and the original conquistadors were extremely brutal and merciless.”

“S’pose you’re right, Cap’n,” admitted Benton reluctantly before changing the subject. “So where’s all the treasure from the vaults then?”

“It be on Wolfie’s ship, it be,” answered Pete regretfully. “Seems our people left theirs behind while trying to save others.”

"On Wolfie's ship!" cried out Benton. "That's the last we'll see of it then." Noticing that the others were curiously eyeing his sack of booty, he added. "We better be gettin' back to work then. There's a good breeze up top."

"Before you go, maybe you'd like to let us know what's in the sack that you haven't put down since you've been back on board," asked Brownrigg with interest.

"Oh, nothing, Johnny. Just some odds and ends I picked up along the way," replied Benton, anxiously trying to conceal the bulging bag behind his back. "So, it's back to work then. I thinks its time we set the fores'l. We'll be needing more lift of the bow."

"Open it, William," ordered the captain. "If you've found anything of value then it should be shared with all, especially as Neeve and I lost ours saving your life."

"It's just a few small gemstones, Cap'n. It was me who put in all the hard work finding them, so I should get to keep 'em," answered the boatswain beseechingly. "It ain't my fault you dropped yer treasure along the way."

"Actually, it was, ya gold-grabbing gombeen," snapped O'Malley. "Or should I have left yer to be skewered by t'at soldier?"

William Benton had no reply to that.

"I says we let him keep it," said Powder Keg Pete to the surprise of the others.

"You do?" said Benton in disbelief. "At least someone here appreciates all the trouble I went through to get me hands on it."

"Yeh, ye can keep it all, Billy Boy, but ye'll be departing in the jolly boat on yer Jack Jones."

"You'd let him have our jolly boat, Pete?" frowned Brownrigg.

"O' course he'd have to pay for it in gems. We'd also take more of them pretty stones to pay for any food and drink he takes with him," replied the quartermaster.

“What do ye say, Will? Be it a deal?”

“Er, but ...,” stammered Benton, clutching the sack more tightly.

“Yer as bad as Captain Wolf, ye are, William Benton,” snarled O’Malley. “Wantin’ to keep all that treasure for yerself.”

It was those few harsh words from the plain-spoken Irish woman that finally pushed the covetous seaman into relinquishing his loot.

“Just me little joke, everyone,” he grinned shamefacedly, grudgingly handing the sack to Ironside. “Of course I was going to share it with all of ya. But I asks if I can keep them two necklaces as me share of the booty, Cap’n.”

The captain produced a handful of precious stones to the astonished gasps of the others before replacing them and handing the sack to the quartermaster.

“See to it that the loot is kept safe until we can distribute it fairly, Pete,” he said earnestly. “And I think we should let William keep the two necklaces, as without his foolhardy escapade we might be left with nothing.”

Nobody objected to the captain’s generous words, so the quartermaster rummaged around in the depths of the coarse bag, and on finding the two pieces of jewellery, he placed them in the anticipating hands of the thankful boatswain.

“Well, I guess the plan to obtain the gold wasn’t a complete waste of time,” said Faustus passionately. “We, or rather William, incited the oppressed to renounce their subjugators, and procured a few gemstones in the process. I think ...”

“I told ye t’at yer shouldn’t trust old Wolfie, Cap’n,” interrupted the annoyed Irish woman. “I told ye he’d be away with the gold at the first opportunity.”

“Yes, you did, Neeve,” replied Ironside, dabbing his damp brow with his sleeve. “I thinks it’s time I had a word

with Captain Wolfenden. Will, can you signal to the sloop that I'm coming across, and, John, can you prepare one of the boats?"

"Our number is greater than theirs, so I say we should board 'em and seize the treasure," stated Benton firmly. "We can also take our share of the gold they took from Avery while we're at it."

"I'd prefer to talk first, Will," answered the captain calmly. "After all, John Wolfenden and I have been through a lot together. I think we should give him a chance to share first before we resort to any drastic actions."

All consented to Ironside's desire to parley, although Niamh O'Malley and William Benton both had their reservations.

About an hour later, Captain Ironside was aboard the sloop sipping wine in Captain Wolfenden's cabin.

"So you're saying we should divide our share of gold with you and your men after you abandoned yours while we were fleeing to safety?" asked Wolf coolly.

"That I am, John," replied Ironside scornfully. "The way I see it, it was a joint initiative arranged and agreed upon by us all. It is of little importance who actually carried the gold back. The plan relied on the cooperation of both crews, without which it might have failed completely."

"My men and I see it differently, Björn," answered the captain of the sloop unflappably. "We took five casualties – two of whom are now dead, and another looking as if he might die from his wounds."

"Your men seemed far more concerned with saving their gold than aiding their comrades. Furthermore, I lost a good man too, John."

"Would he have been injured, I would have apportioned him a share according to the articles, but as he no longer lives, he'll no longer be needing any compensation."

Unless, that is, he has any immediate family on board, in which case I'd be willing to consider a small payment."

"You know full well he has no family on board," growled Ironside. "I can't believe you would deny my men their due. I think your greed has got the better of you. Gold sickness, the Aztecs called it."

"Sorry, Björn, but that's what my men have decided, and I'm inclined to go along with their decision. What would you have me do? Would you have me seize it from them and hand it over by force? I would then no longer be captain of this ship."

"Come on, John. We both know that your crew fear and respect you and will do anything you ask of them."

"I wouldn't be so sure, Björn. This sickness for gold, as you call it, can seriously diminish the timidity of any man, not to mention their loyalty. Besides, I'm not willing to oppose my men on this one. You'll just have to accept it."

"But I won't!" bellowed the furious Swede, standing so abruptly that his stool crashed to the floor behind him. "This time you have gone too far, John Wolfenden."

"What are you going to do about it, Björn?" asked the other captain icily, his hand sliding surreptitiously towards a pistol lying on the surface of the table next to the half-empty wine bottle.

Noticing the sly movement of his counterpart's hand, the captain of *Dream Chaser* swiftly drew his hanger-sword in response, the tip of the blade coming to rest inches from Wolf's expressionless face.

"You weren't considering using that on me, John, were you? I thought we were friends, but it seems I was sorely mistaken."

"Of course not, Björn," rejoined Wolf, calmly easing his hand away from the small firearm. "Just a precaution, as I feared your temper might get the better of you. It

seems I was right.”

“To hell with you, Wolfenden, you Janus-faced swindler!” yelled Ironside, resheathing his weapon despite his anger. “We’re through!”

“Are you suggesting we part ways?” inquired Wolf with surprise.

“Yes, I bloody well am!”

“Even though we are misplaced by the inexplicable mist. Would we not do better to remain together – at least until we return to familiar waters?”

“Until now I believed that, but presently I believe my men and I would fare better without a double-dealing trickster at their side.”

“But we have only claimed what is due to us, Björn. That is not cause enough to desert us.”

“How could we ever trust you in the future?” asked Ironside irately.

“How can I convince you otherwise?” countered the other man.

“By giving us our share of the gold.”

“Then I bid you farewell, Björn. You can see yourself off the ship,” replied the cold-blooded sea rover, casually refilling his cup with wine.

The livid man from Sweden stormed out of the dimly lit room into the dazzling sunlight outside. Once his eyes had readjusted to the bright light, he stomped purposefully towards the side of the ship where Brownrigg was waiting for him in the ship’s boat, casting venomous glances at any of Wolf’s men who happened to cross his path. As he reached the gunwale, his eye caught a sight that caused his blood to boil even more intensely. Crouching by one of the small guns was none other than Emilio Calderon, who was hungrily running his hands through a generous heap of pieces of eight. On seeing Ironside staring at him, the shifty Spaniard immediately

looked away, scooping the coins into a small sack and scurrying quickly out of range of the reproachful glare. As Ironside climbed down into the boat, he regretfully pondered the loss of an experienced rigger. On the other hand, he thought the duplicitous man from Havana might be much more at home among the cut-throat crew of the *Vengeful Mermaid*.

The voyage continues

“So where be the gold?” asked Pete, watching the captain clamber empty-handed onto the deck.

“That old scoundrel denies us our fair share,” growled Ironside, tucking in his shirt as he stood upright.

A number of anxious crewmembers congregated around Ironside, desirous of good news, but were soon all disappointed by the disheartening tidings conveyed to them by their angry captain.

“Take ‘em now before they can escape our clutches,” cried out Benton, drawing his cutlass emphatically.

Glancing over at the departing sloop, Ironside toyed with the idea of seizing the ship and the gold from the unscrupulous captain of the sloop, more out of a desire for revenge than for the lost gold, but he decided that the losses it might entail were too great – Spanish treasure was nice, but a healthy, undebilitated crew and a sound, undamaged ship were preferable.

“I can’t believe that scoundrel Calderon defected,” snarled Brownrigg.

“I can, Johnny Boy,” said Benton. “He always was a bit of a shifty weasel. They bribed him with enough gold to pay off his debts and more. I says we seize the treasure now and then keelhaul the ungrateful Spanish bastard.”

“I’ll wring that bugger’s neck if I ever gets me hands on ‘im,” added O’Malley heatedly.

“He be a self-serving opportunist like many others aboard this ship,” commented Pete, fixing his gaze on Benton.

“It’s one thing to take an opportunity when it’s dangling like a carrot before one’s nose,” responded Benton defensively. “But it’s another thing to betray yer shipmates.”

“Do ya t’ink them natives’ll be successful in their rebellion, Mr. Quiddington?” asked O’Malley, ignoring the boatswain’s self-justifying comment.

“I certainly hope so, Neeve,” replied the surgeon hopefully. “Even if they do fail, the seeds have been planted for better organised and orchestrated insurrections in the future. I am convinced that even should their endeavour now founder, they’ll surely succeed at some time in the future.”

“T’at’s what I hopes fer dear ole Ireland, I do,” responded the Irish woman, rubbing her chin, “but I fears it may take more than one attempt. We on poor old Erin’s Isle have been tryin’ fer years, we have. We even managed to beat an English army at Glenmalure, we did.”

“Oh, yes, I read about that,” said Faustus enthusiastically. “In 1580, Fiach MacHugh O’Byrne led the rebellious clans of Wicklow to defeat a superior English force led by Baron Arthur Grey by drawing them into the rocky, boggy landscape of the glen. A complete route – an astounding victory for the Irish.”

“Indeed it was, but t’em Brits tanned our arses for it in t’e end. Made us pay dearly, they did,” stated O’Malley dolefully. “Some says we were wasting our time.”

“At least your people tried, Neeve,” said Benton consolingly. “What yer people lacked was a skilled and experienced rebel leader like meself.”

“Yer nowt but a feckless gobshite, William Benton,” snorted the vexed woman. “If O’Byrne couldn’t bring us

our freedom, then there's no way on heaven and earth that a prideful vagabond like yerself could do it."

"You wouldn't have made it past the first tavern, Billy Boy," chuckled Brownrigg. "You'd be pouring whiskey and ale down your neck while them poor Irish buggers were fighting for their lives."

"Give 'im credit, John," grinned Pete. "He'd at least stagger as far as the nearest brothel house and continue his leadership from there."

"You don't know nothin'! None of yer," growled the irked seaman, storming away to the raucous laughter of the others.

Once the general cachinnation had died down, Ironside spoke in a more serious tone. "Although I am less than optimistic to the outcome of Benton's rebellion, I feel that we need not be disheartened, as none should ever cease in their attempts to throw off the shackles of oppression."

All those present nodded in agreement.

"Maybe we should return to aid them," suggested Faustus. "With our support they might be triumphant."

"I doubts it'd make a difference, Faustus," answered the quartermaster. "We'd only end up getting ourselves killed. I say we lets this business run its natural course. What I don't understand though, is how one man could incite such a rebellion on his own. Do yer really think Benton was responsible?"

"It is feasible," answered Faustus. "There are many examples in history of when one person made a great difference – Julius Caesar and Jesus for example."

"You ain't seriously comparing that ranklingscapegrace with them great personalities, are you, Faustus?" said O'Malley disdainfully.

"Stranger things have happened," replied the physician. "But what are we to do about the revolt?"

The general opinion was to leave Eldorado as swiftly as they could, even Faustus finally admitting the futility of their returning to intervene on behalf of the downtrodden. With those sobering thoughts, they all dispersed to continue with their duties. Only O'Malley remained at the bulwark, staring out to sea lost in memories of her subjugated homeland. Her reverie was disturbed by William Benton placing a hand gently on her forearm.

"Don't you worry, Neeve. Yer people'll be free one day," said Benton reassuringly.

"What do ye know, William Benton!" snapped the Irish woman, abruptly pulling her arm away from the man's soft touch. "You're one of them self-serving English feckers yerself, ye are."

"That ain't true, Neeve," replied Benton with a hurt look on his face. "Besides, I got something for you."

O'Malley looked down at the boatswain's hand as he retrieved an object from his waistcoat pocket. She gasped when he unexpectedly handed her one of the valuable necklaces he'd been allowed to keep.

"This one's fer you, Neeve," Benton said with a smile.

"And why would ye be wanting to give me such a precious gift, Will?" asked the woman mistrustfully.

"Because you lost your own treasure saving me life," answered Benton earnestly. "And because ..."

"Because what, William Benton?" inquired the woman from the west of Ireland with an interrogating glare.

"Er, because, because ..." stuttered the hardened pirate.

"Out with it," demanded O'Malley.

"Because, because I just thought you deserved it. No other reason," blushed Benton as he pressed the piece of jewellery into the woman's calloused hands. "Got to go. They needs me to supervise the trimming."

With that, William Benton turned and scurried off,

leaving the Irish woman to stare after him in astonished disbelief. As she held the shiny, priceless item up to the light to examine it more closely, she heard the amiable voice of Captain Ironside addressing her while he approached.

“Are you all right, Neeve?”

“Yes, Cap’n. It’s just t’at all t’is business of rebellion brings back memories of home. I yearn for an Ireland that is happy and free.”

“We all yearn for such a place, Neeve,” replied Ironside affably. “Neither England nor Spain be a bed of roses for the muddled masses. Only the wealthy can lay claim to freedom, although I doubt they are truly happy. I wager they don’t sleep well at night knowing the penniless unwashed covet what they possess.”

“Maybe you’re right, Cap’n, but t’ere’s something else.”

“Feel free to tell me, Neeve.”

“It’s William, Cap’n.”

“Has he been giving you bother. Just ignore him.”

“No, Cap’n. Just the contrary in fact,” replied O’Malley, holding up the necklace. “He gave me t’is. Said it was fer saving his life, but I ain’t so sure. It ain’t like him to freely give up items of such value.”

“Do you think he harbours feelings for you?”

“I don’t know, Cap’n, but I’m mistrustful of him, I am. Maybe you should take the necklace and put it to be shared wit’ t’e others, or at least I should share it wit’ you. You lost your loot saving him, too.”

“No, Neeve. You keep it,” said the Swede, pushing the hands holding the precious object away from him. “You saved his life without a thought for your own. Push any other thoughts out of your mind.”

“There’s one more thing, Cap’n,” said the woman with foreboding.

“What’s that, Neeve?” asked Ironside warily.

"I t'ink t're's someone you've been avoiding since we've been back."

"Yes, there is, Neeve, but I think she hates me for running off to seek the gold and leaving her."

"No, Cap'n, hates you she doesn't, but she has a right to be angry with you fer runnin' off like that. Ye ain't gonna make things better by dodging her like ye are. It's time to face t'e storm. It'll blow over soon enough. She loves ye after all and you loves her."

The sympathetic Irish woman gave the captain a reassuring smile as she gently nudged him in the direction of his cabin in the stern. Ironside grinned nervously before striding purposefully towards the rear of the ship, more anxious than when he'd been fighting his way to the fort. He cautiously pushed open the narrow door to the cabin to find his wife seated near the window darning a petticoat. When she failed to look up at him, instead fixedly continuing with her needlework as if her husband were not present in the room with her, the courageous pirate captain just stood watching her while unable to speak. With difficulty, he eventually forced some words out from his dry throat.

"I'm sorry, Cassandra," he murmured. "I shouldn't have run off and left you like that."

After a few moments of awkward silence, the woman from Bermuda spoke in a stern voice. "Too bloody right you shouldn't have gone off like that, you damned fool. You could have been killed, and then I'd have been left alone at the mercy of these blood-thirsty pirates."

"That's not fair, Cassandra," stammered the captain. "They wouldn't dare touch a hair on your body. Faustus and Pete would see to that."

"That may be so, Björn, but you could have made me a widow today, and for what? A sack of gold? That I find hard to forgive."

"I said I'm sorry, dear. Won't you please forgive me?" pleaded Ironside.

"Don't you 'dear' me, you reckless arse. I didn't ask to come aboard this ship of rogues and miscreants. I wanted to go home and you promised to take me there."

"But you know that's not my fault. It's that damned mist."

"No, Björn, it's because you chose to pursue the treasure galleon that we are in this mess, and for no other reason," snapped Cassandra.

"But I had no choice. The crew voted to chase it," stammered the captain despairingly.

"And you did little to prevent it," scolded the angry woman.

"I thought they'd give up after a brief pursuit. How was I to know that strange mist would engulf us and strand us in unknown lands?"

"You're the captain, Björn, and you should've taken me home before going off on one of your foolhardy chases. I blame you for our dilemma."

"But ..."

"Now leave me, Björn," commanded Cassandra. "You can sleep on the deck tonight."

"But I'm sorry, Cassandra. Please forgive me," implored the captain.

"Leave me!"

Björn Gunnarsson saw he had no other choice than to leave the woman he loved alone. With a heavy heart, he promptly left the cabin and for the rest of the day he sullenly immersed himself in his duties as captain, refusing to speak of the matter with any member of the crew. To his shipmates' astonishment he even climbed the rigging to help trim the topsail.

It was getting dark when Ironside finally settled

down in a corner of the quarterdeck sitting himself on some blankets brought to him by Pete. He ignored the pitiful looks of Christof Andersen, who was on duty at the helm. Taking a large gulp from a small flask of rum, he contemplated the distressing situation. It was bad enough that they were lost in undetermined lands with no knowledge of how to return to their own. He could live with that, but what pained him the most was being deprived of the love and attention of his beloved spouse. How could he regain her trust? Niamh had said it would take time, but how long? What if they were to perish in a storm this very night? Dying in the belief that Cassandra no longer loved him was more than he could bear. He took another swig of rum. Closing his eyes, he let his thoughts drift to fairer times, to those golden days on Nassau and time spent in the company of his fellow sea rovers of the Flying Gang. He recalled how he had met Cassandra one evening on the quay while his men were on a binge in a nearby tavern. He had not felt like participating in the festivities that evening, instead choosing to enjoy the golden sunset over the sea. Cassandra had also been taking in the glorious view and it hadn't taken long to strike up conversation with her. He had known in that instant that she was the one for him, but now he had ruined it all. How would she ever be able to forgive him for putting the gold over her? He was about to pour more of the intoxicating liquor down his throat when he was shaken by a soft voice.

"Can we talk, Björn?"

His heart skipped a beat. Opening his eyes he saw Cassandra standing over him, her features obscured by the twilight shadows.

"Of course, Cassandra," he replied keenly, resealing the small metal flask and placing it in his jacket pocket.

"I've been thinking, Björn," said the woman as she

sat down beside him. "What you did was in many ways deplorable, but, I must admit, I knew what you were when I agreed to marry you, so I guess I have only myself to blame."

"What do you mean?" frowned the Swede.

"I mean I knew you were a pirate, and I knew what pirates are like. I had hoped you were different, but did I err in my judgement?"

"No, you didn't, Cassandra," answered Ironside earnestly, "but I was torn between my love for you and my duty to the crew. I didn't want Wolfenden getting his hands on all the gold again, although it seems I wasted my time and unnecessarily invoked your ire."

"Yes, you did, but at least you have finally seen sense and parted ways with that devious tyrant. I fear he was a bad influence on you. Also, I must accept you are bound to do what is right for your crew while you are captain, and I do not wish to be a burden for you."

"You are no burden, my love," replied the captain, taking his wife's hands in his, "but your presence on board does not make my life any simpler. To be honest, the thought that I might have been lost in this mist without you, and never have seen your fair face again is a notion that disturbs me more."

"Oh, Björn. What are we going to do?"

"I can only promise that I'll not undertake any daring deeds without consulting you first, but I can't promise I'll not undertake any at all in the future, should my duty demand it."

"That'll have to suffice," replied Cassandra, affectionately stroking her spouse's cheek.

"What are you saying, Cassandra?" asked the surprised seaman.

"I'm saying that life is too short and uncertain, and I'd be a fool to not forgive someone so dear to me for a single

transgression, but, that said, I'll not forget it and can only hope you'll pay more heed to me should need arise."

"Aye, that I will," smiled the relieved pirate captain.

The reconciled couple embraced and kissed passionately until Cassandra rose, taking her husband by the hand.

"Maybe we should retire to the comfort and privacy of our cabin," she said alluringly.

Björn Gunnarsson didn't need telling twice. Springing to his feet like a frolicsome lamb, he suddenly paused and looked out to sea.

"What is it, Björn?"

"It's the mist again," Ironside replied solemnly.

"Let us hope it takes us home this time."

The captain of *Dream Chaser* didn't answer, instead leading his wife by the hand into the dimly lit cabin and closing the door firmly behind them – the certain present being far more enticing than an uncertain future.

Interlude

“What! You claim to have discovered a forgotten Spanish colony,” exclaimed the astounded Mr. Bagshaw. “While I concede that might be possible, I find it impossible to believe they took you for the Messiah.”

“It’s as true as I sit here, Mr. Bagshaw,” replied Benton immodestly.

“Well, it is said that the Aztecs believed that Hernán Cortés was their god Quetzalcoatl, due to the fairness of his skin or something.”

“No, Mr. Bagshaw. That was the Incas.”

“I think you’ll find it was the Aztecs, Mr. Benton,” said Bagshaw firmly.

“If yer say so, Mr. Bagshaw,” answered the unconvinced seaman. “But they did believe I was some sort of saviour, otherwise they wouldn’t have followed me instructions to rebel.”

“It is plausible that they thought you were one of their priests, and therefore a mouthpiece for their God. On the other hand, I doubt that you alone were responsible for the uprising.”

“I was, too!” retorted the aggrieved pirate.

“What I believe is that there existed a simmering resentment against the oppression they had been subjected to for centuries. It is likely your incitement was

the straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak."

"There weren't no camels involved," replied the confused sea rover. "There might have been some llamas, though, and the odd armadillo."

"Ah, yes, armadillos," said the journalist, tactfully changing the subject. "You didn't seem too keen on eating its flesh when it was served at that feast."

"No, I wasn't. It weren't proper food. In fact, they didn't know what proper food is there."

"What is proper food to you then?"

"Beef, pork, turnips, and peas for instance, although I must admit I am partial to them exotic brown things – potatoes I think they call 'em."

"Did you know that the ancient Romans ate flamingo tongues, dormice, and even ostrich meat. They were a civilized people, you know."

"Then they were just as funny in the head as them folks in Eldorado," replied Benton, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

"It seems to me that you're a rather fastidious eater, Mr. Benton," chuckled the other man.

"I ain't no fasteatydus eater," snarled the offended convict. "I chews me food nice and slowly, I do."

"I mean to say you are quite fussy regarding the food you eat. I thought pirates ate anything they could get their hands on."

"I ain't fussy, neither," growled the ex-boatswain irately. "I told ya I loves potatoes. I also likes turtle meat. Tastes like chicken, it does, but you can't eat too much of it on account of it making yer skin all greasy. I even ate tomatoes once, although some say they're poisonous. Didn't do me no harm though. So don't you be callin' me fussy."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Benton. I take it back," said the journalist placatingly. "Coming back to Eldorado. You

say it was conquered in the age of the conquistadors. That's very interesting."

"Yeh, they conquered Eldorado in the reign of King Henry the Eighth, Faustus told me."

"Those Spanish were quite atrocious, you know," said Bagshaw discerningly. "They mercilessly and cruelly slaughtered and enslaved entire populations."

"Yeh, they were a bunch of brutal, gold-greedy gits," added Benton knowledgeably.

"But is it not also true that you pirates are, as you say it, gold-greedy. What with plundering the ships of upstanding merchants."

"That ain't true," snarled the incarcerated pirate fiercely. "Well, it may be true of the likes of Captain Wolfenden, but certainly ain't true of me. Didn't I freely give that precious necklace to Neeve O'Malley?"

"Ah, yes, Miss O'Malley," said the journalist, scribbling on a sheet of paper. "Why did you give it to her? Is it because you were in love with her?"

"I said I didn't want to talk about her, Mr. Bagshaw," scowled Benton. "If yer only gonna insult me and pry into me private affairs, I says it's about time you were on yer way."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Benton. I meant no offence by it," responded Bagshaw consolingly. "I'm just trying to ascertain the facts for my book."

"Ass-er-tain?"

"Find out, discover," the journalist answered quickly. "Have some more tea, Mr. Benton and continue with your tale. I'll make it worth your while."

"If that be the case, I might be inclined to continue." The piratical storyteller filled his cup with the now lukewarm liquid and slurped it thirstily before going on. "Well, after leaving Eldorado, what happened is ..."

The Siren's song

A strange encounter

Benton was fastening his breeches on returning from doing his business at the bow when he encountered Captain Ironside doing a round of the ship.

“The heads are in need of a good cleaning, Cap’n” commented the boatswain as he strolled past. “It’s getting a bit whiffy up front in this warm weather, it is.”

At first, the captain was unsure of what the seaman was referring to, but then realised he was talking about the latrines at the bow of the ship. With he and Cassandra having their own private facilities adjacent to their cabin, he’d never paid much thought to where the others defecated. That was another chore to add to the list of tasks to do, together with careening and general repairs – they would have to find land soon before the hull started to rot.

“Didn’t someone see to it when we were moored off Eldorado?” asked Ironside. “Why’s it so bad so soon?”

“I don’t think we got round to it. What’s more, I told the men to always slop their bum slugs on the leeward

side, but they doesn't listen to me," shrugged Benton. "And this warm weather doesn't help the matter."

The weather was much warmer than it had been for while, which led the captain to hope they might be back in the Caribbean.

"We'll find land soon, Will," he said optimistically.

"But when, Cap'n? We've been sailin' fer weeks with no sight of land," complained Benton. "Charlie says supplies of fresh food and water are running low again."

The boatswain wandered off muttering to himself without waiting for a reply. Sighing to himself, Ironside made his way amidship where he found Niamh and Brownrigg splicing rope.

"I wonder what happened to the *Mermaid*?" said Brownrigg on seeing the captain approach. "We ain't seen it since we left the mist."

"And I hope we never have to see t'eir ugly faces again," snarled O'Malley, throwing a piece of useless rope to the deck. "Good riddance to t'em, I says."

"I doubt they're faring much better than us, John. Anyway, whatever has befallen them is no longer a concern of ours."

"Aye, you're right there, Cap'n, but maybe ..." the coxswain started to say before he was interrupted by an excited chattering at the larboard gunwale.

The three pirates swiftly made their way to join a small group of enlivened seamen, whose gazes were fixed on the gentle waves below. They were promptly joined by Faustus and several other crewmembers.

"Mon dieu! What on earth is zat thing?" asked Jean-Baptiste Bonheur, a fugitive Huguenot, who had fled the failed Camisard Rebellion in Languedoc some years before. "C'est sûrement un monstre. Eet must be fifty feet long."

Looking down, the captain was shocked to see a

greatly elongated fish-like creature with a reddish dorsal fin along its entire length from between its eyes to the tip of its tail. At the head of the fish there were a dozen elongated dorsal fin rays, forming a distinctive red crest. All those present turned to look questioningly at the ship's surgeon, who was normally knowledgeable in such matters.

"I've never seen likes of it," stammered the delighted scholar. "Stubby pectoral fins and long pelvic fins. It reminds one of a very long oar."

"It's a sea serpent," said O'Malley. "It'd eat ya alive, it would."

"No, I don't think it's dangerous," replied Faustus. "If you look carefully you can see it has no teeth. I think it's quite harmless."

"Jesus, Joseph and Mary, it don't look harmless," exclaimed the Irish woman.

"It seems to be a solitary creature. I expect it normally dwells at greater depths. I wonder what brought it up to the surface."

"Probably the reek of the excrement on the bow of the ship," commented Benton, who had been attracted by the agitated crowd.

"I doubt it, Will," frowned the physician. "I'll wager it feeds on small sea creatures. It's no threat to us."

"Can we eat it?" inquired the boatswain, licking his lips and reaching for his pistol. "It'd keep us going for weeks."

"It seems we would be more of a threat to it than it to us," replied Faustus sardonically, placing his hand on the arm holding the pistol. "You can't seriously be contemplating murdering such a fine specimen of a creature."

"Too bloody right I am," grunted the hungry sea rover, wrenching his arm from the surgeon's grasp. "I've had me

fill of slop and ship's biscuit, I have."

To Benton's disappointment and Faustus's relief, the magnificent giant fish disappeared into the depths as quickly as it had emerged, leaving the awestruck pirates to stare at the lightly undulating surface of the sea and wondering if what they had witnessed had been real or not.

An unsavoury incident

Captain Ironside was standing on the foredeck scanning the horizon with his telescope in the hope of sighting land when he was disturbed in his fruitless endeavour by Niamh O'Malley.

"Cap'n, there's been an incident, there has," she explained hurriedly.

"What's happened, Neeve? Benton's not up to his old tricks again, is he?" asked the captain irately.

"No, Cap'n, it has nowt to do wit' William. No, it's Charlotte, it is."

"What's she done?" inquired Ironside, astonished that his trusted purser could be involved in anything untoward.

"She's beaten one of the men senseless, she has," the Irish woman answered, not attempting to conceal her delight. "With a belaying pin."

"Why would she do that?" asked the surprised captain. "I can't believe she would do such a thing without good cause."

"The cause was good enough, Cap'n," grinned O'Malley. "You know Lucienne, that pretty French lass we have on board as a passenger?"

The captain nodded as he recalled the only other passenger he had taken on board at the request of Charlotte Scowcroft. Lucienne Beauchêne had been a

prostitute in Nassau who had developed a fond friendship with the purser. He had hardly seen her since leaving New Providence and had scarcely spared her a thought. As far as he knew, she spent most of the time below deck in a private cabin, which had been magnanimously granted to her and Charlotte by the crew, only venturing out at night when the deck was almost deserted. There were envious rumours among the men that the two women nurtured a less than platonic relationship, but that was of no concern of his. At first, he had been concerned that the ex-whore might invoke jealous rivalries among the male members of the crew, but as it became clear she had no interest in instigating such competitiveness Ironside had quickly forgotten about her presence aboard his ship.

“What happened?”

“The man in question made some indecent proposals to sweet Lucy, still under the impression the girl is a harlot on offer to all for a few coins, despite Charlotte having made it clear enough on more than one occasion that it was no longer her trade.”

“Who was the man?”

“It was that lecherous topman from Barbados, Derrick Maplebeck, it was,” replied O’Malley, spitting in contempt. “Deserved all he got I say, so don’t you be too hard on Charlie, Cap’n.”

“All right, Neeve,” frowned Ironside. “Where is he now?”

“Mr. Quiddington is treating his wounds in sickbay, he his.”

“I’m sure Charlotte didn’t act without sufficient provocation, Neeve, but there’s no excuse for beating up a shipmate. It says so in the articles.”

“You leave her be, Captain Gunnarsson, or you’ll have me to answer to,” threatened the angry Irish woman.

“Don’t worry, I’ll sort it out,” answered the harried

captain.

It was at moments like these that Ironside regretted his appointment as captain. If he was too hard on Derrick, he would arouse discontentment among many of the men, but, on the other hand, if he was too hard on Scowcroft he would evoke the ire of O'Malley and many others. He just hoped Pete would back him up whatever the outcome. A sickening sensation arose in his stomach as he made his way to find Faustus and his patient. Descending below deck, he eventually reached the lamp lit, partitioned cabin that served as both the sickbay and the surgeon's living quarters. He found Faustus meticulously cleaning the facial wounds of the battered topman as he entered.

"No serious damage," stated the physician. "Just a few cuts and bruises."

"She damaged me good and proper," complained the beaten pirate. "I won't be in no fit state to work up top for a while, I won't. She's mental she is."

"It's seems you got what was coming to you, Derrick," said Ironside coldly. "What were you thinking, harassing a female passenger like that?"

"I didn't do nothing wrong, Cap'n," protested the bruised seaman. "She led me on she did. It were that Scowcroft. She was jealous that the whore prefers me."

"Or so you claim, Derrick. As far as I know, Lucienne has showed no interest in any of the male members of the crew since she's been aboard, and now you maintain she is suddenly interested in you. Did you offer her any coin?"

"Maybe I did, but it's true that she wanted me, Cap'n. What she desires and needs is a real man," replied Maplebeck hotly. "Scowler should be punished according to the articles. No-one's allowed to attack a shipmate on board."

"What does the code say about such matters, Faustus?"

inquired the captain, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"It does indeed say that none shall strike another on board the ship, but that every man's quarrel shall be ended onshore by sword or pistol," answered the surgeon earnestly.

"And if someone contravenes this rule?"

"That they shall suffer what punishment the captain and the majority of the company shall see fit."

"Hmm, a word, Faustus," said the captain, gesturing the surgeon to one side and speaking in a low voice. "I would hope to resolve this without resorting to drastic measures."

"Yes, indeed, Björn," replied the concerned physician. "Let us first speak to Charlotte."

"Bring her to my cabin and ask Pete to join us, if you would," requested Ironside, giving the self-proclaimed victim a stern look before leaving the cabin.

A quarter of an hour later, the captain was standing in his cabin together with Pete and Faustus, Cassandra was seated in the background near the stern window. Ironside had at first insisted his wife leave the men to deal with the issue, but reluctantly relented when his wife declared it was a matter which concerned all women aboard the vessel and wished to offer her support to Charlie, asserting that the purser's life was hard enough as it was in the man's world aboard a ship. Ironside stiffened as there was a harsh knock on the cabin door.

"Enter," called out the captain as calmly as he could.

Charlotte entered with such a scowl on her face that the three men deemed the nickname allotted to her by some of the men to be apt on this occasion. The three men just stared at her, unsure of how to commence the questioning of this respected member of the crew. Noticing the men's reluctance to broach the subject of the unsavoury incident, the Bermudian woman spoke first.

“Tell us what happened, Charlotte.”

“It was that rakehell Derrick Maplebeck,” blurted out the outraged woman. “He made an indecent proposition to dear Lucy, and when she rejected his coarse advances he presumed to place a lecherous paw on her breast. At that moment I arrived to witness the distasteful scene and I saw red. No man touches Lucy in such a lewd manner and gets away with it.”

“But was it necessary to beat the man so badly, Charlie?”

“So bad I didn’t beat him,” objected the woman from Kingston. “I gave him a few blows with the belaying pin I happened to be carrying to drive him away from Lucy. The man now claims I beat him half to death to gain sympathy. He wants me off this ship, so he can get his filthy hands on me poor Lucy, and besides, she hardly ever leaves our cabin for fear of just such molestations. If she can’t be safe in our cabin, where could she hide away from the brutes who would freely ravish her? I had to send a message that none were to trespass in that sacred space.”

“Rightly so,” agreed Cassandra. “The man should be punished.”

“Unfortunately, it says in the articles that none is to use violence against a shipmate on board this ship. All disputes of this nature are to be carried out on land,” said Faustus.

“Oi think none has them articles in mind when he be forced to act out of anger and passion,” commented Pete in Scowcroft’s defence.

“That may be so, Pete, but it doesn’t alter the fact that the articles exist for the good of the crew and we should all abide by them, otherwise there would be no order at all aboard this vessel,” said Faustus solemnly.

“You speaks like a lawyer, Mr. Quiddington,” growled

Scowcroft. "It were Maplebeck who were clearly in the wrong."

"And he too should be punished," replied the surgeon quickly.

"Only he should be punished," said Cassandra bitterly. "His act was gutless and vile."

"We would have to put it before the crew," pointed out Faustus.

"Most of whom are men," objected Cassandra. "Who do you think most will side with?"

"You're right, Cassandra," said the captain placatingly. "We'll have to try to resolve this matter without bringing it before the crew, as it's an issue which could split the company, and that's the last thing we need in our present predicament."

"I could challenge that damn bully to a duel to take place when we finally reach land. I'll put the bugger out of his misery," suggested the purser.

"That might be an option, but I think it would be better if you left us and returned to your cabin and remained there while we discuss all possible solutions," said Ironside, indicating towards the door.

"Aye, Captain, if that's your wish," replied the tall woman defiantly.

Those still present in the room waited until the purser's footsteps could no longer be heard on the dry wooden planks before resuming the conversation. The first to speak again was Cassandra.

"It's a shameful affair, something I might expect aboard Wolfenden's ship, but not yours, Björn. I always believed you selected your crew more carefully."

"Sorry, Cassandra, but it's not as simple as that. If it were a matter of only choosing those whom I truly trusted, then the crew would consist of few more than those in this room. Pirates are by their very nature a

dubious bunch,” explained the captain.

“Oi thinks a duel on land be the best way,” stated Powder Keg Pete, stroking his long, black beard.

“But Charlie could be killed,” replied the captain’s appalled wife.

“She can look after herself,” chuckled Pete. “It’s Derrick you’d have to worry about.”

“It would be a shame to lose such a competent topman,” responded Ironside. “Let’s first try to find a solution which doesn’t involve the loss of a crewmember.”

“What is most important is that we don’t neglect the ship’s articles. That would be fatal for morale and discipline,” added Faustus, wiping his spectacles on the hem of his shirt.

“Yes, you’re right, Faustus. We’ll have to punish both or neither,” answered the captain.

“Charlie would probably content herself if none were punished as I thinks she regards her beating of that rascal as chastisement enough. On the other hand, it seems to me that this Maplebeck is out for blood after the humiliation at the hands of a shipmate, who, to make matters worse, be a woman. That be a harsh blow to his manly pride,” said Pete.

“Maybe apologies all around would suffice,” suggested Faustus.

“And what should Charlie apologize for, Mr. Quiddington?” asked Cassandra heatedly. “In my eyes she did nothing wrong.”

“I thought she might be willing to apologize for not conducting the matter on land as specified by the articles,” replied the surgeon. “And as for Maplebeck, I thought he could apologize to Lucienne for his lewd behaviour.”

“Yes, that might work, Faustus,” said the captain hopefully. “Failing that, we’ll have to take it before the crew, then I’ll suggest a duel to sort it out. Faustus, will

you fetch Charlie, Maplebeck, and Lucienne. Cassandra, would you be so kind as to leave us for a while.”

“Why?” inquired the woman testily.

“You are not a member of the ship’s company, dear,” answered Ironside tactfully.

“And if I join the crew, I can stay?”

“You don’t really want to join the crew. You detest the pirate way of life. Anyway, what nautical skills do you have to offer?” replied the mildly annoyed pirate captain.

With an offended grunt, Cassandra left the cabin without another word. Ironside scowled at the quartermaster, whose amused smile was not completely concealed by his beard. Not long after the woman’s aggrieved departure, Faustus returned with the three who had been summoned. The captain and the surgeon seated themselves on wooden chairs while Pete leaned seemingly disinterested against the wall. Charlotte Scowcroft stood belligerently eyeing the captain with a reassuring hand on Lucienne Beauchêne’s forearm. Derrick Maplebeck was standing nervously on the recalcitrant sea woman’s other side with his gaze directed at the worn planking. Ironside cleared his throat before addressing the trio.

“We have decided it would be better for the well-being of the ship, if apologies were to be offered and accepted.”

“I ain’t apologizing to no-one, Cap’n!” replied the purser with clenched fists.

“Please hear the captain out, Charlotte,” interjected the surgeon. Charlie reluctantly assented with a barely perceptible nod.

“I suggest that you, Charlotte, apologize to me for the trouble you have spawned for the company by not redressing the affront to your friend on land, as stipulated in the articles, and to Mr. Maplebeck for denying him this right.” Ignoring the smirking topman, the captain continued. “You, Mr. Maplebeck will beg the forgiveness

of Lucienne Beauchêne for the unspeakable act of disrespect and lewdness you committed against her. Failure on anyone's part to comply with my wishes, will result in the matter being taken to the crew." There was a moment of tense silence as the captain looked at each in turn. "What do you say, Charlotte?"

"I have no qualms with expressing my regrets that I have done you a disservice and therefore call for your forgiveness," replied the purser graciously. Curling her upper lip, she gave a quick contemptuous glance at Maplebeck. "And as for him, I apologize for not complying with the right accorded to that prick Derrick by the articles. I should have challenged him to settle the matter ashore. Therefore, not wishing to deny him his right, I now throw down the gauntlet and challenge him to a duel at the next available opportunity."

"What do you say, Mr. Maplebeck?" the captain sternly asked.

"I says I am truly sorry for any misunderstanding that may have arisen concerning Miss Beauchêne. I meant no offence by my actions," said the topman anxiously, doing his best to avoid Charlotte's venomous glare.

"And what do you say to Miss Scowcroft's challenge?"

"I accept Miss Scowcroft's apology for denying me my right, but I must decline the offer on account that I don't fight women," answered the topman shakily. "I would rather let the matter drop."

"Very gentlemanly of yer, Mr. Maplebeck, but that don't resolve the issue," commented Pete, folding his arms.

"Are you scared I might tan your ass in front of the whole crew?" snarled Charlie.

"No, it just wouldn't be right," stuttered the pirate. "Hurting a woman goes against me nature."

"But molesting them doesn't, you worm," snapped the

purser.

"I says that if yer ain't willing to fight then ye gives up yer next share of the treasure to Charlie as recompense. What do yer say, Derrick, fight or cough up?" suggested the quartermaster.

"On the condition that Lucienne accepts his apology," added Faustus.

The French woman exchanged glances with Charlotte, who nodded slightly.

"I accept ze apology of Monsieur Maplebeck," she said in a quiet voice.

"All right, Derrick. Now ye only has to decide if you're to duel with Charlotte, or give up yer share," said Pete.

Gazing at the floor, Maplebeck mumbled a few intelligible words.

"Louder, Mr. Maplebeck, so we can all hear," commanded the captain.

"I say I'll give up me share, but only 'cos I don't fight no women."

"So it be decided. The matter be closed," concluded the quartermaster, ignoring the purser's snort of derision. "Derrick, you come with me to sign for the share you're to give up."

Pete strode towards the door grabbing the topman by the sleeve and leading him out of the cabin. As the man left, Ironside couldn't help noticing the hurt and vengeful glint in the scorned pirate's eyes.

"He doesn't fight women indeed, my arse," commented Scowcroft wryly. "That pathetic excuse for a man better watch his step, or I'll leave him no choice."

"Don't you think he's been punished enough, Charlie?" responded Ironside. "He's been humiliated and lost a share of treasure as well."

Before Charlie could reply, the slender, dark-haired woman, who had said very little until now, spoke. The

captain took a real look at her for the first time, wondering why he hadn't really done so before. He presumed she must be adept at keeping a low profile despite her previous trade, which had no doubt required much social interaction. He noticed she had a high forehead and slender nose, and was quite pretty despite her tired, red-ringed eyes and doleful expression. Her long red and black dress had surely once been magnificent, but years of smoke, spilled drink, and rough handling had taken its toll on the once fine garment.

"Ze man iz clearly scared of you, Charlie ma chère, but you should not push 'im, for he may feel like a rat cornered, and zey can be très dangereux," Lucienne said, placing an arm gently around the annoyed purser's waist. "Leave 'im be and he will forget this maudite affair."

"Just keep your head down and watch your back," said the captain in agreement with the French woman. "At least until this unsavoury business is forgotten. Should he or his mates give you any trouble, let me know before you decide to do anything rash."

"Don't worry, I will," sighed Charlie. "We'll keep to ourselves for the time being, as I fear most of the men will sympathize with that wretch."

"I'm sad to say your words are too true," frowned the surgeon.

"It heartens me to know there are at least a few respectable men on board this vessel and you all have my deepest gratitude," said Scowcroft with thankful tears in her eyes, promptly turning to lead the French woman out of the cabin.

"I am relieved we could settle that without resorting to harsh measures," said Ironside once the two women had left. "The last thing we need is a split in the crew. I wonder if Wolfenden was not right about not allowing women on his ship."

"You cannot blame women for the brutish behaviour of men," responded Faustus. "John Locke understood the substantial inequalities that women in our society suffer."

"Who be John Locke?" inquired the quartermaster. "Be he a pirate?"

"No, he was a fine philosopher and physician, quite an enlightened man. A free thinker and empiricist," explained Faustus fondly.

"You mean he supported the building of empires?" asked the puzzled quartermaster.

"No, Pete. An empiricist is someone who holds that true knowledge or justification comes primarily from sensory experience. A great man as was the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza."

"I ain't heard of him, neither," replied Pete indifferently.

"Really, Pete, they were among the great minds which have helped to drag us from the quagmire of dark ages."

"If yer say so," replied Pete, taking out his pipe and tobacco as he strode towards the door. "All I knows is that I don't need no fancy philosophers to tell me what's fair and right."

Faustus shot a frustrated glance at the captain, who was smiling approvingly at the fine and true words uttered by Pete, before following the quartermaster out into the bright sunlight.

An unheeded warning

The following day, the monotony of the voyage was broken by the excited cries of Sam Powder, who had, despite his great fear of heights, ventured up to the lower yardarm of the foresail. He had remained there all morning, but whether it was because of he was proud of his achievement, or because he feared climbing down again on his own had been unsure until now. Captain

Ironside believed the boy was now crying for help, because the latter was true. He was about to send Yuki up to aid the youngster in his descent when it became clear what the youth was shouting.

"Mermaids!" the delighted cry informed the surprised crew below.

The captain rushed to the foot of the foremast, where Pete and several other crewmembers had already assembled.

"What the hell be you rambling about, Young Sam?" shouted up the quartermaster.

"Mermaids to the starboard fore," came the enraptured reply.

"There don't be no such thing as mermaids, you rascal. Now get yer arse down here," ordered Pete impatiently.

"No, it's true, Pete. See for yourself," answered the boy, pointing frantically.

Some of the crew dashed towards the bow, while others eagerly scrambled up the shrouds to get a better view. Another cry came from above, but this time from one of the seamen who had clambered much higher than the cabin boy had dared.

"An island!"

Ironside took out his telescope and scanned the horizon and indeed sighted an island in the distance, and, to his amazement, there were hundreds of strange creatures in the water between them and their potential source of provisions. "What are those things?" he asked Faustus, passing him the metal tube.

"They're not mermaids," chuckled the surgeon. "They're sea cows. I read about them in a book by Cristovao de Lisboa, but have never had the pleasure to see one for myself. They've often been mistaken for mythical mermaids by sailors over the centuries."

"They must've been three sheets to the wind to mistake

them beasts fer mermaids,” commented Pete. “Them things be as ugly as toads.”

“I heard you can eat them buggers, though I ain’t tried ‘em meself,” said Benton, always thinking of his stomach. “I met a bloke who swore they tastes as good as any beef he’d had.”

“Really, William. Do you view every living being as potential food?” gasped Faustus.

“More or less, but not armadillos though. They ain’t no proper food, and snakes and lizards ain’t no good neither. That reminds me, there’s still some of that tasty fish stew that Magee cooked last night, and all this talk of food is making me peckish. You should consider hooking a few of them fishy-cows, Cap’n, ‘cos as much as I likes that stew, it’d be a nice change to have something different.”

Not being particularly interested in aquatic creatures which were not on his dinner plate, the boatswain turned and made his way to the ship’s galley, licking his lips as he went.

“So they’re not mermaids then, Mr. Quiddington?” asked a disappointed voice from behind the physician.

Looking around, he saw Sam Powder, who had in his enthusiasm for mermaids descended from the mast without the aid of others. “No, Sam, I’m afraid not.”

“Have you ever seen a real mermaid?” inquired the boy expectantly.

“I can’t say I have, but that’s probably because they don’t exist. They’re just a myth, Sam.”

“The do exist too,” replied the unperturbed youngster. “I heard many stories about sailors seeing them.”

“I don’t doubt that many sailors believe they saw them, especially after a few tots of rum, but I’m sorry to say that they’re just a legend,” answered the surgeon. “Although some say that these creatures we see before us do warn of disaster or bad weather.”

"You think there's disaster or a storm in store for us?" asked Sam nervously.

"Don't worry, Sam, it's all just superstition," replied Faustus. Encouraged by the gathered audience of more than just the boy, he effusively embarked on a lecture on mermaids. "They say mermaids are prophetic beings. It's written, for instance, in the story of the Nibelung that Hagen and Gunther encountered some mermaids – Meerweiber they called them – bathing in the waters of the Danube."

"What's the Nibelung?" asked Sam with interest.

"An old Germanic legend. Hagen stole their clothes, and seeking their return, one mermaid gave a false prophecy that Hagen and Gunther would find honour and glory when they entered Etzel's kingdom."

"Who be Etzel?" inquired Pete, who was also listening intently to the tale.

"He's better known as Attila the Hun, the barbarian king. Anyway, later, another mermaid told Hagen that the other mermaid had lied, and that if they went to Etzel's land, they would die there."

"And did they die there?" asked Sam, engrossed in the physician's account of the ancient legend.

"Yes, indeed they did," answered Faustus gravely, "but mermaids have not always only been the bearers of ruinous portents. Sometimes they are benevolent. I once heard a tale from some escaped slaves about Mami Wata, who was some kind of mermaid or water spirit." Seeing that the listeners were enthralled by his words, Faustus continued contentedly. "They say she can sometimes take human form, but is never fully human. They say she is associated with healing and fertility."

"What's fertility, Mr. Quiddington?" asked the boy eagerly.

"I'll tell you about that when you're a little older, Sam,"

Faustus surreptitiously smiled at the adults.

"All right, Mr. Quiddington, but I hope to see a mermaid one day, but only if it's one of them good ones," commented the boy hopefully.

"It's highly unlikely, Sam, as I've already said they aren't real."

"But didn't that Columbus fella report seein' some when he first arrived in the Americas," asked Pete, observing the sea mammals splashing about in the water below.

"Yes, he did, but they were no doubt sea cows and other aquatic creatures, which vivid imaginations and ignorant minds turned into mythical beasts," said Faustus firmly.

The seamen assembled around Faustus gradually dispersed to return to their duties after Ironside gave the order to head towards the mysterious island, leaving the captain and Sam Powder alone at the gunwale. Moments later, they were joined by Cassandra, who had only just heard news of the strange creatures and the island.

"What are those things?" asked the fascinated woman.

"They aren't mermaids," said the cabin boy sagely. "They're sea cows. That's what Mr. Quiddington says. He says they warn of disaster, he does, but he says mermaids don't exist and I don't believe him. I hope to see one some day."

"They look a bit concerned," said Cassandra. "I think they're trying to warn us of something."

"How can you tell they are concerned, Cassandra?" inquired the perplexed Swede. "They don't have human faces."

"I know, but look at how they frantically swim between us and the island. I think they're warning us not to sail there."

"Come on, Cassandra, you can't possibly tell if they're trying to communicate something to us," replied Ironside

testily.

"I believe they are trying to warn us. I have a bad feeling about that island. Please let us heed their advice," pleaded the woman.

"Mr. Quiddington did say they tell of disaster, Cap'n," Sam reminded the captain.

"Haven't you got some swabbing to do, Sam?" responded Ironside a little too harshly. Deciding the naïve youngster didn't merit such treatment for his youthful enthusiasm, Ironside added. "You did well climbing the rigging today, Sam. I beg you to keep it up, but now I'd like you to return to your chores."

After taking one last, longing look at the creatures below, Sam turned and skipped away merrily singing an invented song about mermaids to himself.

"We have to make landfall on that island, dear," said Ironside calmly, gently placing his arm around his wife's waist. "We're in desperate need of fresh water and other supplies, and the ship needs a good careening."

"What's a careening?"

"We need to beach the ship so we can clean and repair the hull. Too much growth and foulness creates more drag, thus slowing us down and hastening rot."

"Sounds important, Björn, but do we have to do it here?" frowned the Bermudian woman.

"Not necessarily, but we are in need of potable water," replied her spouse resolutely.

"All right, dear, but don't say I didn't warn you," conceded Cassandra, "but please be careful. You might hurt those poor beasts if you run into them."

The ship sailed towards the island despite the large number of sea cows between the vessel and its destination. The captain of *Dream Chaser* was relieved that the creatures swam out of the way or dived into the depths as the ship neared them, as he didn't wish to harm any of

these curious marine cows. Unsettled, he just hoped his wife's fears were erroneous, but had she not been right with her predictions thus far?

An alluring song

A couple of hours later, while the vessel was nearing the island the air resonated with an eerie, but splendid singing. The crew could make out the abundant, lush greenery along the shoreline, but what intrigued them the most were the slender, barely clad female figures standing on the beach emitting beautiful, but melancholic tones.

"We're steering too close to land, Cap'n," warned O'Malley as the ship neared the shore. "We'll run aground if we ain't careful."

But Captain Ironside wasn't listening to what the Irish woman was saying, his attention being fully captivated by the alluring song drifting over from the women on the beach. The captain focused intently on the figures with his telescope. There must have been a dozen of them, all with long, flowing hair and unnaturally beautiful features, standing before a background of a meadow starred with flowers.

"Bring her closer in!" shouted the captain with a dazed expression on his face.

"What ya doing, Cap'n?" cried out O'Malley. "We're gonna hit a shoal, ya chucklehead."

Ignoring the woman's words, the captain made his way down to the weather deck with unaccustomed speed.

"Lower the boats, John!" he cried.

"Aye, Aye, Captain," shouted the coxswain obediently.

O'Malley watched with amazement as one of her shipmates sprang from the bulwark, too impatient to wait for the boats to reach the water, and was soon swimming frantically towards the shore as if his life

depended on it. She thought she recognised the man who had sprung overboard to be Derrick Maplebeck, but couldn't be sure due to the splashing water. Moments later there was a dull thud which sent a shudder through the ship when, as the Irish woman had predicted, *Dream Chaser* ran aground some four hundred paces from the beach. With a horrified grimace, she looked on helplessly as the crew, unperturbed by the mishap, scrambled and fought to get into the boats, desperately desiring to catch up with the man in the water, who was already halfway to the beach. Some men had already sprung into the small vessels before they had been completely lowered, other clumsily fell or were pushed overboard by their demented colleagues. The increasing chaos prevented the boats from being lowered with the usual efficiency.

"What's going on?" ask Cassandra, lured out of her cabin by the agitated cries of the men. "Have we hit rocks?"

"Fer the dear life of me, I've no bloody idea, but I presume it has somet'ing to do wit' t'ose scantily clad maids on the beach, and their mediocre singing."

"Where's Björn?" asked the baffled woman.

"Down there, he is."

Cassandra sighted her husband as he was roughly pushing the quartermaster out of the way, so he could scramble over the gunwale more rapidly. Pete cried in dismay as he plunged into the water, but instead of trying to get back onto the ship he started swimming towards the beach despite being a poor swimmer with a clumsy doggy paddle. The two women were shocked to see the habitually courteous ship's surgeon trip a man up in order to reach one of the already overcrowded boats more quickly before it completely left the side of the ship.

"Come back here right now, Björn Gunnarsson!" screamed Cassandra to no avail, watching with horror as

her husband disappeared over the side.

“T’ey’ve lost t’eir minds, t’ey have,” commented O’Malley, running her hand through her unruly hair. “We’ve got to do something.”

The two women ran down to the main deck, where they found Charlie and Lucienne despairingly attempting to restrain Brownrigg, who was desperately trying to join the others. With what seemed like superhuman strength, the coxswain fiercely shoved the two women, who both flew several yards across the deck. There seemed to be no stopping the men in their endeavour to reach the enticing women on the island. As she was helping the distraught Lucienne to her feet, O’Malley saw a head emerge from one of the hatches leading to the lower deck. It was William Benton, who had been below deck helping himself to an unauthorized ration of brandy, when, suddenly losing his thirst for alcohol, he realised he had to reach the source of the tantalising singing, which had even penetrated the dark, damp hold of the ship.

“Wait fer me!” he shouted as he scrambled onto the deck.

Without a moment’s hesitation, O’Malley signalled for the four women to pounce on the unsuspecting boatswain. Once he was pinned to the deck, she took a lump of wax from her pocket and stuffed it unceremoniously into the trapped pirate’s ears.

“Maybe t’is’ll help,” she muttered, additionally wrapping the man’s scarf around his head so it covered both ears for good measure.

Benton gave the women a confused look, making to remove the scarf from his head, but when O’Malley admonishingly rapped his knuckles with the hilt of her knife, he relented.

“What’s going on?” he inquired in a loud voice.

Scowcroft and O’Malley gruffly hauled him to the

bulwark, so he could see the omnishambles below. Some men were splashing frustratedly in the waves while others fought over the oars in the boats, resulting in the small craft rotating helplessly in the water – one of which had all but capsized. Only the first man who had jumped overboard had neared the beach and was now struggling through the surf to reach the singing women.

“Them women have bewitched the men,” said O’Malley, pointing towards the figures on the beach.

Not being able to hear the woman’s words, Benton realised for himself that the strange beings on the beach had something to do with the bedlam raging in the water. “Them wenches have bewitched the men,” he informed the others loudly.

The women managed to restrain several other men and stuff their ears with wax and cloth to prevent them from joining their mesmerised comrades in the water. One was Josiah Badger, who had been lying in a hammock below deck, resting his aching back when he heard the captivating singing. His old bones had hindered him in reaching the boats before they had been sloppily lowered. Another inhibited crewman was Frederick Sauer, who due to his impaired hearing had required a considerable time to register the magnetic melody. One other man who had not yet reached the gunwale was Konishi Yukinaga, who they found convulsively clinging to the foremast, frantically chanting some sort of mantra in his own strange tongue in an attempt to resist the hypnotic song by sheer will power. Once O’Malley had crudely stuffed his ears with wax, he gave a disturbed, but grateful smile. Only two of the other male crewmembers seemed unaffected by the compelling chorus from the shore. The first was Monkey Boy Will, who was quick to come to the women’s aid, the second being Alexander Birdwell, a fisherman from Folkestone, who had been pressed into

the Royal Navy in 1712 at a young age. The wiry youthful seaman with a slender face and doleful features was generally reserved and normally kept to himself, only seldom partaking in the frequent boisterous celebrations enjoyed by his shipmates. By his pained expression, Birdwell appeared to be torn between joining the others in the water and remaining on board with the women. He relaxed a little after Scowcroft smeared a globule of tallow into his ears.

“There’s somethin’ not right with them women, as pretty as they are,” bellowed Benton, shielding his eyes from the sunlight as he assessed the aesthetically pleasing figures on the beach.

“Too bloody right, Will. Take a closer look,” said O’Malley, handing the perplexed boatswain Ironside’s telescope, which the captain had recklessly abandoned on the deck in his haste to leave the ship.

“Stone the crows, them damsels ain’t wearing much, are they?” exclaimed Benton excitedly, grinning lustfully as he lowered the metal tube.

“Take another look, Will,” shouted the Irish woman impatiently, tapping on the metal tube and pointing towards the beach.

Benton placed the telescope to his eye once more, licking his lips as his focus landed on the bare breasts of one of the raven-haired singing maidens, only reluctantly wandering up to the face after O’Malley thumped him hard on the arm. “Ouch! What did yer ...?” His voice faltered for a moment. “Hang me from the yard arm! Them maids have got teeth like bloody sharks. Me eyes must deceive me.” The astounded pirate zealously rubbed the lens before replacing the optical instrument once more to his eye. “It’s bloody true! Wait a minute, that fool Derrick is already on the beach. He’s running towards them scary lasses with arms open wide.” After a stunned

pause, the pirate cried out in alarm. “No, No, No!”

“What’s happening?” shouted the Irish woman, unsuccessfully attempting to wrestle the telescope from Benton’s grasp.

“No, that ain’t right!” Benton cried out in horror. “One of them evil wenches as bitten out the poor bugger’s throat, she has. They’ve got claws, too! Blood everywhere.”

The hardened sea rover staggered back dizzily, thrusting the metal tube into O’Malley’s outheld hands. The woman grimaced as she looked through it at the gory reception that Maplebeck had received from the monstrous beautiful women.

“At least the others won’t be making landfall any time soon,” commented the woman sombrely.

Looking down they could see the three ship’s boats were indeed getting nowhere fast, the men still struggling over control of the small vessels with a vehemence that chilled the onlookers.

“We have to do something quick!” roared Cassandra.

“We’re out of effective range for that smoke pole to be of any use,” O’Malley snapped at Charlie, who was anxiously raising a musket she had just fetched and loaded.

“Musket no good,” agreed Sauer in a loud voice, “but eight pounder very good.”

Looking around, they saw the half-deaf gunner pointing at one of the nearby guns. Without another word, those still on the ship sprang into action. Fortunately, the vessel sailed with the guns always loaded for times of emergency – and this was such a time. The artilleryman carefully aimed the only one of the stranded ship’s guns which could be effectively targeted at the diabolic creatures still singing on the sand and greedily anticipating a further meal. They had to fire quickly, as the boats were slowly nearing the shore with some of the

swimmers already nearing the beach. Once satisfied the gun was adequately ranged, Sauer waited for the up-roll of the waves before giving the command to fire. The raggle-taggle gun crew took a step to the side, and Scowcroft, standing safely to one side, touched the hastily ignited linstock to the powder-filled touch hole. A thunderous roar sent an iron ball hurtling towards the terrifying forms on the beach, taking the head clean off one of the fiendish maidens before landing heavily in the flower-strewn meadow beyond, churning up a large cloud of dust and earth. There was a lull in the bewitching melody as the stunned, alluring sorceresses looked down in dismay at their decapitated sister, who was lying motionless on the sand in a pool of gore. The men in the water seemed to come to their senses for a brief moment, exchanging confused glances, but seconds later the unperturbed, ravenous females on the beach resumed their enchanting melody.

“Nachladen!” screeched the Prussian, realising his work was not yet done.

O'Malley carefully mopped out the interior of the barrel with a wet sheepskin swab to extinguish any embers from the previous shot, which might inadvertently set off the next charge of gun powder prematurely. Next, Scowcroft placed some gun powder wrapped in parchment into the barrel, which Sauer pierced via the touch hole with a thin metal spike. After that, the purser added some old rope as wadding to seal in gases when the lit gunpowder burned, which Benton forced in with a wooden-handled rammer. Cassandra and Birdwell struggled to load an iron ball into the muzzle, and then Charlie added some more old rope and canvas to stop the ball rolling out should the barrel be depressed. The woman moved out of the way to allow Benton to once again apply the rammer. Scowcroft retrieved the linstock, which Yuki had been holding for

her, and then the others ran the gun out. As soon as the gunner had sighted the large weapon and everyone had jumped back a safe distance, the purser touched the match once again to the powder.

This time the iron cannonball didn't hit any of the ungodly women, instead thudding into the beach, churning up the sand and throwing two of the infernal creatures off their feet. The second ball seemed to do the trick though, as the demonic beings on the shore abruptly ceased their eerie chorus, deciding there would be no further easy meal this day. The creatures swiftly left the beach via the meadow, dragging the corpses of Maplebeck and their slain companion clumsily behind them. One of the fiends turned and let out a blood curdling screech as a third shot struck the meadow not far behind them before disappearing over the brow of a hill after the other hellish damsels.

Reason and rationality gradually returned to the men in the boats and water, who slowly made their way back to the ship in dazed confusion. Clambering over the bulwark, Ironside caught a whiff of the lingering gun smoke as he was greeted by Cassandra and the others.

"What the hell is going on?" he demanded. "What were we doing in the water?"

"You really don't remember anything, Björn?" asked his surprised wife, throwing her arms around him.

"Not a thing," he replied, making way for other men to climb aboard.

"Ye were bewitched by some singing lasses, ye were, Cap'n," explained O'Malley. "But we women saved ya, we did."

"What on earth are you talking about?" said the captain, scanning the shoreline. "There's no-one there."

"That's 'cos we saw 'em off wit' one of the guns," the woman replied. "With the help of Frederick of course."

You can take the wax out now, Frederick.” O’Malley gestured for the grinning half-deaf gunner to clear out his ears.

“I’m sorry, Neeve, but I have no memory of it. To be honest, I can’t really believe a group of women could bring a whole crew to act against their will.”

“It’s true,” said Benton, throwing a small lump of wax overboard. “There were a dozen pretty ladies singing a ghostly tune. They had the sweetest of bosoms and ...”

“They were demons, they were,” interrupted O’Malley. “If Fredrick hadn’t taken one’s head clean off and scared away the others, they’d be enjoying the feast of their lives this evening.”

“You mean they enchanted us with their singing?” asked the distraught Swede.

“Turned all the men’s head to jelly, they did. I’ve seen the male of species do some curious things for the love and lust of a woman, but I ain’t seen nowt like I saw today. Ye were all at each others throats to be the first to reach ‘em.”

“Not me,” said Benton smugly.

“Only ‘cos ye were no doubt up to mischief down below,” retorted the annoyed Irish woman. “If ye had been up on deck I bet you’d have reached t’em lasses even before poor Maplebeck did. T’en there’d have been no more William Benton to plague me days.”

“That just ain’t true. That’s slander, it is,” replied the offended boatswain, but before he could say anything more in his defence, the soaking wet surgeon spoke.

“What you say defies all logic. There must be some plausible explanation.”

“We saw what we saw. We ain’t making it up,” answered O’Malley defiantly.

“Nothing seems to have been logical since we entered that cursed mist,” said Ironside bleakly.

“Well, eet seems zat poor old Maplebeck got ‘is woman after all,” commented Lucienne without a hint of humour or malice in her voice.

“Or ratèr she got him. Serves t’e randy bugger right,” said O’Malley with a spiteful grin.

“Don’t you think you’re being a little harsh, Neeve. Although I agree he deserved to be banged to rights for his behaviour, I wouldn’t wish such an end on any man,” responded Scowcroft, sorrowfully shaking her head.

“Good riddance to him, I say,” snarled the Irish woman unrepentingly.

“Whatever your opinion of him, we lost a competent topman today,” lamented the captain. “Now we have to set about getting the ship off this damned sandbar and as far away from this accursed island as possible. Fortunately, conditions are fair.”

“The sea’s starting to come in, Cap’n, so with a little help from the boats and an extra fathom, we should be able to tow her free before we get ourselves stranded even more,” said Benton.

“Make it so, William,” replied Ironside. “The boats are already in the water.”

It took five arduous hours to free *Dream Chaser* from the sandbar. As luck would have it, the flowing tide enabled the ship to be towed cautiously away from the island and into deeper water. While the cumbersome task was being carried out, O’Malley and Scowcroft patrolled the beach, each with three loaded muskets, in case the deadly women should return – all were relieved when the vessel was under sail without further incident. As they sailed along the coast of the lush island, Ironside regretted they had not been able to land to stock up on provisions. He could have ordered the men with wax in ears to storm the island and hunt down the diabolic singers, but who knew what other untold dangers might

be lurking on that fair isle. The captain was reassured he had made the right decision on passing several rotting carcasses of ships wrecked upon the rocks along the shoreline. He was astonished when Faustus informed him that one appeared to be an ancient Greek trireme – a galley with three tiers of oars on each side.

Unexpected confessions

Two days after the ship had lost sight of the deadly island, Cassandra took her husband aside and told him she wanted to discuss a matter concerning the two male members of the crew who had not been affected by the enchantresses' enticing song.

"How could it be that Will Huckabee and Alexander Birdwell were not influenced by those fiendish women when the rest of the crew behaved like birdbrained halfwits?" she inquired in the privacy of their cabin.

"It beats me, dear, but we should count ourselves lucky that they remained in possession of their wits, although I'm sure Neeve, Charlie, and Frederick would have been successful without Monkey Boy and Birdwell. It might be that Will is too young to be moved by such alluring songs, although I've no idea why Alexander remained unaffected."

"Maybe we should ask them, Björn. The suspicion nags me that they both might be hiding something from you."

"It might be better to let sleeping dogs lie," frowned the captain.

"But don't you want to know if any of your shipmates are withholding something from you. I know I would," persisted his spouse.

"All right, if it bothers you that much, we'll ask them," relented Ironside, "but I do not wish to push them on the

matter too much. First, I'll send Pete to fetch Will to see what he has to say."

Half an hour later Monkey Boy Will was standing nervously before the captain and his wife. Ironside had sent the inquisitive quartermaster away, preferring not to reveal any secrets to the crew until he at least knew what they were. There was probably nothing unusual to discover, but he wanted to satisfy his spouse that nothing was amiss and quickly put the matter to rest. Appraising the youngster who was anxiously staring at the floor, he was unable to find the right words to begin his questioning. It was Cassandra who spoke first.

"There's no need to look so worried, William. It was just that the captain was wondering why it was that you weren't attracted by those singing women when all other males lost their minds because of it."

"I don't know, Mrs. Gunnarsson," mumbled the teenager, gazing at his bare feet.

"It's all right, Will, you're not in any trouble," reassured Ironside. "It's just that I'm concerned with your well-being and that of the ship."

"You promise you won't tell anyone, Cap'n?" asked Monkey Boy Will with a desperate look in his eyes.

"You have my word on it, Will," replied Ironside sternly.

"And I'll guarantee he keeps it," added Cassandra encouragingly.

Not looking up, the intimidated boy muttered a few unintelligible words.

"Speak up, please," said the captain softly.

"I said me name ain't William, it's Elizabeth, and I ain't fifteen years old, I'm seventeen," the red-faced youth confessed with a nervous glance at the couple seated before her.

There was a moment's silence as the pirate captain

digested the news, although Cassandra didn't seem at all surprised.

"You ain't going to throw me off the ship, are you, Captain Ironside?" the young woman asked pleadingly.

"No, of course not, but why did you keep it a secret from me?"

"I didn't think you would let a girl on board and young Sam wouldn't have lasted long without me to watch out for him," explained Elizabeth fretfully.

"That might ring true where most pirate captains are concerned, Will, I mean Elizabeth, but you know that there are already two women serving openly on this ship – Neeve and Charlie."

"I expect she believed that you didn't wish for any more women on board, Björn, and was also afraid of all those men knowing her true sex," commented Cassandra. "Is that not so, Elizabeth?"

"Yes, some of those men scare me and I ain't as courageous as Neeve and Charlie," stuttered the girl. "I also find it much easier to take care of my little brother when everyone thinks I'm a boy."

"What are you going to do, Björn?" asked Cassandra with a frown.

"I tell you what I'm going to do," answered Ironside resolutely. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing." Noticing the confused expression on the girl's face he continued. "There is no need for anyone to know, if you do not wish it. We'll say you were too young to be affected by the bewitching melodies, if anyone should ask. I'm sure the crew will accept that. You've been doing a great job so far, both fitting in with the crew and looking after young Sam, so I see no reason to change things, but should your secret be discovered, don't hesitate to come to me. Your place in this crew is assured, young William Huckabee. You can leave and go about your duties as normal, but can

you please first bring Alexander Birdwell to my cabin?"

"Of course, Captain. Thank you, Captain," stammered the relieved young woman as she hurried towards the door, almost stumbling over her own feet in her haste to leave the presence of the man she both feared and respected.

Once Monkey Boy had left the cabin, Cassandra stood and threw her arms around her husband. "That was a kind thing to do, Björn. That's why I love you so."

The captain stood and embraced his spouse. "I must admit my decision was partly to avoid further unsavoury incidents on the ship. I would fear for the safety of such an inexperienced, young woman amidst a horde of lusty pirates."

Cassandra smiled and passionately kissed her husband until they were disturbed by a feint knocking on the door. Ironside opened the small door to the cabin to find Birdwell smiling nervously at him.

"You wanted to see me, Captain. I hope I've done nothing wrong," said the seaman guardedly.

"Nothing to be worried about, Alex," replied the captain assuredly. "Please come in."

After the captain had retaken his seat, he appraised the slender sailor with delicate features and long, blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. He then commenced with his questioning in a more direct manner than before, not wishing to beat about the bush this time. "Alexander, I have to ask you this, and it's nothing to be ashamed of, but are you really a woman who is disguised as a man?"

The dumbfounded young pirate stared at the captain before letting out a mirthless laugh. "What makes you think that, Captain?" replied Birdwell.

"No offence meant, but only the women were unaffected by those bewitching melodies, and O'Malley told me that you didn't seem as drawn by it as were the

rest of the men,” answered Ironside awkwardly.

“It is not true I was completely unaffected by the song, but I was able to resist better than the others,” answered Birdwell defensively.

“And why do you think that is?” inquired the curious captain.

“I know not,” answered the young seaman, averting his eyes from the captain’s concerned gaze.

“Are you sure you don’t know?” persisted Ironside.

“I’m sure. I don’t know why it was that I wasn’t influenced as strongly as the other men. Can I go now?” responded the ex-fisherman with a hint of desperation in his voice.

“All right, you’re free to go about your duties,” replied the Swede, not desiring to push the matter too far.

“Just a moment, Alexander,” said Cassandra as the man was turning to leave. “Do you truly declare that you are not a woman in disguise?”

“No disrespect, madam, but you’ve no authority to ask me such a question.”

“You are right about that, Alex,” interjected Ironside. “Do you really believe this crewmember to be a woman, Cassandra? What does it matter if it is so?”

“It matters not in the grand scheme of things,” answered the Bermudian woman soothingly, “but for the safety and well-being of Alexander, it would be better for you to know.” Turning to Birdwell, whose face had turned quite pale. “Your secret would be safe with us if you do disclose it. I understand that life among so many men must be easier if they think you are one of them, but someday your true identity will be discovered, and then it would be better you have the support of the captain.”

“She’s right, Alex,” conceded the captain. “Just answer the question and I’ll accept your answer. Are you really a woman?”

“Some may claim that my features and build tend towards the feminine, but I assure you that the body I was born into is one of the male of species, which I can prove to you, if necessary,” replied Birdwell resolutely, making to undo his breeches.

“That won’t be necessary,” stammered Ironside hastily. “After all, there is a lady present.”

“I am no lady,” chuckled Cassandra, “but as Björn says, it isn’t required that you prove anything to us. This isn’t the *Vengeful Mermaid*. We only show interest, because your welfare concerns us.”

“All right,” said Birdwell, buttoning up his trousers. “I’ll tell you why I think I was less affected by that demonic song than the rest of the men. I believe it is because that although I was born in a male body with dangly bits and all, I do not really feel I possess the soul of a man.”

“What do you mean?” asked the perplexed pirate captain.

“I think what Alexander is saying is that he feels like a woman who is trapped in a male form. Is that not right?” said Cassandra before the other man could answer. Birdwell simply nodded.

“But how can that be?” exclaimed Ironside with bewilderment. “Every time we returned to Nassau you were always one of the first to rush to the brothel to visit that short, dark-haired Irish prostitute, Naughty Nellie I think they used to call her.”

“That is true, but not for the reason you think. I found a soulmate in that woman. She was cursed like myself, but for her it was the case of a man trapped in the casing of a woman. When we were alone together, we could be who we really feel we are. You won’t tell the others, will you?”

“No, of course not,” said Cassandra calmly. “They wouldn’t understand your predicament. Just one thing

though. You said you were cursed, but aren't you not fortunate to have been born in a man's body, albeit with the yearnings and sensitivities of a woman. Life for us females means playing second fiddle to men and submitting to their whims and desires."

"Is it really that bad?" inquired Ironside, frowning at his wife. "Do you feel you must submit yourself to my whims and desires?"

"Not me, Björn. I'm lucky to have found you, but when I look around the world I see thousands of women condemned to be chattels, caged birds, and whores. Even Neeve and Charlie, who try hard to fit into a man's world, have their work cut out. It's just sometimes I feel my life would have been easier if I had been born a man," answered Cassandra resignedly.

"It is true that in many respects men have it easier, at least where relationships and power are concerned," admitted the seaman glumly, "but that doesn't alter the fact that society doesn't allow me to be the person I really am. Therefore, I can never be truly content with my lot. I just have to grin and bear it."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Alexander," said the captain thoughtfully. "It would definitely not do for the crew to be aware of your secret. They'd make your life a misery. It'd be better to tell any who ask that you were with fever on that day, therefore the enchanting singing had less of an effect on you. As it is, your frequent visits to Nellie have the crew believing you are a hot-blooded male, and I would deem it better, for your sake, that they continued to believe that. Maybe one day you'll have accumulated enough booty to quit this life and live as you please." The captain smiled sympathetically. "You are now free to continue with your tasks."

"If you need to talk, you can always come and speak to me," proffered Cassandra just before Birdwell left. The

man with the soul of a woman smiled at her with moist eyes before disappearing through the narrow doorway.

Just as Birdwell was leaving, the quartermaster arrived in the doorway with a contented grin on his face. After entering the dimly lit room, he took out his pipe and tobacco pouch.

"Please don't smoke in here, Pete," said Cassandra reprimandingly. "The smoke fouls the air and makes my eyes water."

"Sorry, ma'am," replied Pete stuffing the offending items back into his jacket pocket. "Why were Birdwell in here? Has he done some mischief?"

"No, I just wanted to ask him some questions about the incident with the crooning witches," answered Ironside circumspectly.

"That lad weren't lured by them yodelling lasses, were he? Why do ye think that be?" asked the ever curious second-in-command.

"That's what we were asking him about," said Cassandra quickly. "He seems to have been a bit under the weather, his senses were dampened by fever."

"Better send him to see Fausty. We don't want no sickness spreading on board."

"Yes, yes, Pete," answered Ironside evasively. "What interests me more is why you are here. Out with it, Pete."

"Well, we has sighted another island. Looks green enough and there be plenty of seabirds. Problem is, it don't look like a suitable place for careening. The coastline be too rocky."

"Then careening will have to wait," replied the captain, stroking his hairy chin. "We need fresh water and victuals. We'll approach it cautiously and then send an advance party across to check it is free of danger. See it is done, Pete."

Scooping up his telescope, Captain Gunnarsson left

to join the quartermaster on the quarterdeck closely followed by his wife.

A well-earned respite

The crew of *Dream Chaser* were enjoying a well-earned respite from the tribulation of their perilous voyage. The island had been thoroughly scoured for hidden hazards and once the captain was sure that no danger was lurking in wait for them, he allowed the eager crew ashore. They had been on the bountiful isle for over a week, fishing, collecting the eggs of irate seabirds, and hunting unsuspecting wild pigs, which were available in abundance on the island, supplementing what they caught with wild root vegetables and an assortment of herbs. The ship's cook, Callum Magee, prepared a nutritious salmagundi, a cold dish containing a variety of ingredients, which the Irishman varied daily. As well as replenishing their stores of smoked meat, the crew spent the time they weren't relaxing making repairs to the sails and rigging. Captain Ironside regretted they weren't able to careen their vessel, which was sorely in need of it, but was glad the crew had the opportunity to recover from their trauma at the hands of the diabolic women. After a particularly tasty bowl of salmagundi with eggs and fish, Captain Ironside and his wife were sitting together with Faustus and Pete around a roaring fire in the pirate camp not far from the bay where the ship was anchored.

"You know what I think those accursed beings were?" Faustus asked no one in particular.

"What be they?" inquired the inquisitive quartermaster.

"I believe they were sirens."

"What are sirens?" Cassandra wanted to know.

This was the signal for the surgeon to embark on one of his informative lectures. "They are mythical creatures,

which until now, I would have told anyone who claimed to have encountered them that they were barking mad. The ancient Greeks claimed they were beautiful, human-like beings with alluring voices. They dwell on some small, flowery islands called Sirenum Scopuli. In the classic book by Homer called the *Odyssey*, they attempted to lure Odysseus and his crew to their doom.”

“Did they survive?” asked the alarmed woman.

“Yes, but Odysseus was so curious as to what the sirens would sing to him, he, on the advice of Circe the witch, had all of his sailors stuff their ears with beeswax and lash him to the mast.”

“There were a witch, too?” asked Pete in disbelief.

“Yes, she helped him by giving him advice.”

“But why would a witch help him? Wouldn’t she rather bewitch and eat the poor bugger?” said the unconvinced quartermaster.

“No, she wasn’t that kind of witch. No, they were lovers.”

“She be more of an enchantress then. Be she pretty?”

“I suppose so, Pete, but that’s another story. Now as I was saying, our hero commanded his men to bind him tightly to the mast and not release him no matter how much he might beg until they were away from that terrible island. When he heard their beautiful, alluring song, he ordered his crew to untie him, but instead they bound him tighter until they had passed out of earshot. Some other authors claim that the sirens were fated to die should someone hear their singing and escape their clutches unharmed, and that after Odysseus passed them by they flung themselves into the water and perished. It would seem that this part wasn’t true.”

“Maybe they be different sirens,” suggested Pete.

“It’s possible,” admitted Faustus, “but what concerns me more is that these creatures even exist. All but the

most gullible believed them to be no more than legends. If such creatures live then what other dark terrors might be lurking in wait for us in these mysterious waters?”

The pirates spent another full week on the island until Captain Ironside deemed it prudent to sail on in search of their much yearned for homeland. Fully stocked with water and provisions, *Dream Chaser* departed from the small benevolent landmass on its uncertain voyage, and it was no surprise to anyone on board when they awoke one morning to find themselves once again sailing into the unnatural mist.

Epilogue

“Really, Mr. Benton, don’t you think your tale is becoming a little far-fetched?” proclaimed Nathaniel Bagshaw. “A lost Spanish colony is one thing, but an encounter with mythical beings from Greek mythology beggars belief.”

“It’s what I saw, Mr. Bagshaw. There were a dozen scantily clad maidens whose song no man could resist. Except me, that is.”

“Didn’t you say that the only reason you were prevented from joining the others in their folly was because you had been out of earshot in the hold helping yourself to brandy?” pointed out the journalist.

“I admits that did help give me time to gather me thoughts, but even without them circumstances, them there wenches wouldn’t have got me against me will. William Benton is too clever for that,” replied Benton free from doubt.

“But didn’t you also say you had to be wrestled to the ground and that this O’Malley woman plugged your ears with wax before you could spring overboard and join the other men?”

“It were nice of them women to try to help, but they

was mistaken to think I was in need of it," answered the boatswain self-assuredly. "Didn't want to hurt their feelings by telling them so. No, when I was so rudely accosted I was on my way to take control of the situation, I was, what with Ironside losing his head and all that."

"I see," responded Bagshaw sceptically. "According to the legend, no man can resist the siren's song."

"Except me."

"If you say so, Mr. Benton," replied the other man. Deciding there was no point pushing the issue, he changed tack. "I must say that your account of the events that took place in Eldorado is much more convincing than that of mythical beings. I admit, it is possible that this land of gold could be situated in some forgotten part of the American continent. Your necklace might be proof of that, but as far as the sirens are concerned, you have no proof they exist, so you'll have to excuse me if I suspend my belief on that subject."

"Please yourself, Mr. Bagshaw," answered Benton indifferently.

"Being a strict Anglican myself, it deeply concerns me that a land might exist where there is an amalgamation of Catholicism and heathen belief."

"Amalgeemayshun?"

"A blend, a mix, a fusion," explained Bagshaw.

"Why didn't you just say that?" grumbled the condemned pirate. "You sometimes speak like Mr. Quiddington, you do. It drives me up the mainmast, it does."

"Sorry, I forgot that a common seaman's vocabulary is somewhat restricted," apologized the journalist.

"I ain't common. I'm special, I am," retorted the offended seaman.

"No, I didn't mean that," responded Bagshaw hurriedly. "I just meant that uneducated sailors normally have no

need for a wide repertoire of words.”

“You sayin’ I’m stupid?” answered Benton threateningly, half-rising from his chair.

“No, not at all,” stuttered the journalist nervously.

“No matter, I like you, I do, so I’ll let it drop,” said the ex-boatswain, slouching back into his seat. “But why do say the religion of them folk in Eldorado is so bad? One bloody religion is as bad as another, I says.”

“I must protest, Mr. Benton. As a church-attending member of the Church of England, it deeply offends me you would compare my fair denomination with that of idolatrous papists and pagans.”

“The way I sees it, is that all them priests want, whatever their faith, is to trample us small folk down and fleece us for every penny they can get.”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit harsh, Mr. Benton?” asked the shocked reporter.

“That may be so, but it’s the way I sees it. Priests and merchant captains is what drove William Benton to his piratical ways.”

“So you’re giving them the blame for your robbing and plundering way of life?” inquired the astounded listener.

“I guess I am,” replied Benton resolutely. “Anyway, all this talk of religions and mythologies is beginning to make me tired.” The imprisoned sea rover demonstratively gave a gaping yawn, revealing his recent lack of dental hygiene.

Noticing the waning interest in the man sitting opposite him, Bagshaw decided to ask some more trivial questions concerning the ship. “Tell me more about the toilet facilities on board. I always thought seamen just did their number twos over the side.”

“Some do, but it’s only advisable when the weather is fair. Otherwise a man might disappear over the side never to be seen nor heard of again,” replied Benton, his

interest reawakened. "The ship's toilets are at the bow of the ship. The head we call it. Seats with holes down to the water, so when we takes a dump the brown stuff is washed away."

"And why did you tell the men to always use the leeward side for their business?"

"Because that's the sheltered side, it is," said the pirate, surprised at the other man's lack of knowledge on the matter of bowel movements aboard a ship. "On the windward side the mess could be blown back against the hull of the ship. A bugger to clean up it is, you mark my words."

"I see," said the journalist, scribbling furtively in his notebook. "One further question. You said this Scowcroft woman beat a shipmate with a belaying pin. What on earth is one of those?"

"See, you ain't so clever as you think. Everyone knows what a belaying pin is," replied Benton with a self-satisfied grin.

"I'm afraid I don't, not being a man of the sea. Would you be so kind as to enlighten me?" responded Bagshaw patiently.

"Course I will, Mr. Bagshaw. A belaying pin is a solid wooden thing used to secure the lines of the running rigging."

"Running rigging?"

"You don't know what running rigging is?" sneered the sea rover. "Just like Mr. Quiddington you are. Knows dozens of fancy words, but when it comes to important matters, as dumb as a haddock, he is."

"That may be so," answered Bagshaw as calmly as he could, taking out his ornate pocket watch and looking at the time piece. "Our time is running out, so I'd be obliged if you'd answer my final question before I leave."

"Got any rum and cake for me?"

“I do.”

“All right, I’ll answer yer question,” smiled the prisoner, eyeing the journalist’s leather bag. “The running rigging is the ropes and lines used for raising, lowering, and moving the sails on a ship, as opposed to the standing rigging, which is for supporting the masts and bowsprit.”

“Thank you, Mr. Benton. I believe that will be all for today. Maybe we could resume our talk on the morrow?” the journalist asked hopefully, intrigued to learn more despite the incredible nature of what he had heard thus far. “Although my wife unjustly claims I’m wasting my time listening to the incredulous tales of a condemned man.”

“Where’s me rum and cake?” inquired Benton wolfishly.

Nathaniel Bagshaw rummaged around in his bag and produced a small bundle and a pocket-sized bottle of rum. The pirate swiftly pocketed the bottle before greedily unwrapping the cloth, which held half a dozen small buns. The astonished journalist watched in awe as the hungry convict stuffed a whole one into his mouth.

“Whad are dey?” ask Benton with a half-full mouth.

“They’re wiggs. My wife made them herself. Sweetened dough leavened with ale and flavoured with herbs and caraway.”

“Tell her they’re very tasty,” stated Benton, stuffing the bundle under his grubby shirt. Bagshaw offered him another small package enclosed in brown paper, which the sea rover eagerly unwrapped, holding its contents to his nose. “It’s soap! I can’t eat soap.”

“I thought you might freshen yourself up a bit for my visit tomorrow,” suggested Bagshaw gingerly. “It was just a thought.” Benton stuffed the small bar contemptuously down the front of his threadbare breeches. “I’ll bring you some more items when I visit tomorrow.”

“Rum and cake?”

“Yes, all right, if that’s what you want.”

“And maybe a new shirt. This one reeks a little.”

“If you promise to wash before I see you again.”

“Right you are, Mr. Bagshaw,” agreed Benton, slipping the bar of soap from his trousers and sliding it up his frayed sleeve.

After the journalist had been escorted out, Benton was led back to his cell. Tom the gaoler paid little attention to the clearly visible bulge under the prisoner’s shirt, his interest having been quelled by a shilling the journalist had placed in his palm with instructions to be more lenient towards his charge. When William Benton was finally back in his dank chamber, he plumped down onto the creaking bunk and assessed the booty he had obtained that day. After carefully placing the soap on the small rickety table, he tucked into an impromptu meal of wiggs washed down with rum. He smiled to himself as he pictured his future self attired in a clean, new shirt feasting merrily on rum and cake.

Books by Wayne Savage

The Pyrate Chronicles:

Book 1 - Dream Chaser

Book 2 - Eldorado

End of Empire:

Book 1 - Blood in the Snow

Book 2 - Honour and Betrayal

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Infos: waynesavage.com

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