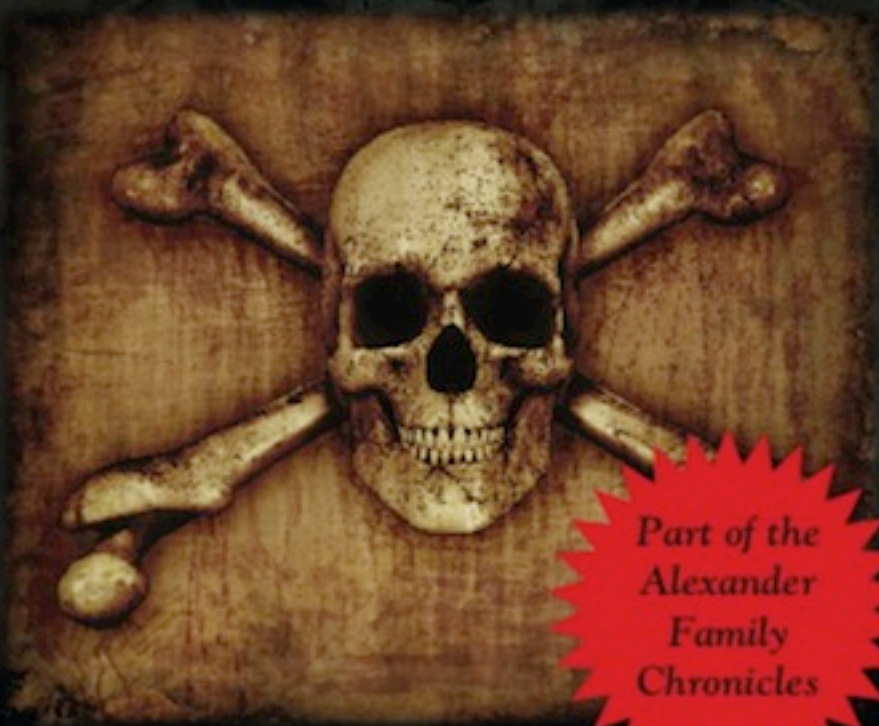


PIRATES' REVENGE



*Part of the
Alexander
Family
Chronicles*

DOUGLAS BOREN



Rafe Alexander joined the pirate crew of the Cutlass, and learned of the brutality his mother endured at the hands of Ramirez, his own father, whom he had never known. Joining the fleet of the Black Widow, queen of the largest pirate fleet of all, he vowed to exact his revenge. The Black Widow also wanted vengeance against Ramirez. Together, they would become the most feared and powerful force the Caribbean would ever see...

Pirates' Revenge

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Pirates' Revenge

Douglas Boren

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Chapter Five

A fortnight later the *Cutlass* was ready to sail. Her crew was anxious to get underway, and Sam Newell realized he could put it off no longer. They would leave on the predawn tide the next day.

He was at the King's Arms, determined to spend his last few hours in port with Maggie and Rafe. He smiled when Rafe pleaded to spend some time with him, but Maggie would have none of it.

"A wharf side tavern at night is no place for a boy," she stubbornly said.

"But..."

"Enough! I mean it! Nor do I want you out on the streets at night. Especially with the trouble you had not too long ago."

Rafe opened his mouth to protest further, but Newell cut in. "Your mother's right, lad. I know, I know, you think you can handle yourself and you're no longer a boy. And you're not far from right. But honor your mother's wishes, lad. She knows best for you. Besides..." he winked. "I'd like me some time with her me self before I ship out."

Rafe grudgingly acquiesced. He shook Newell's hand and said, "I can't wait 'till you return, Cap'n. May you have fair winds, and send tons of galleons to the bottom of the sea."

After Rafe left, Maggie did the best she could to be near her Sam, but The King's Arms was busy, and her duties kept her from him for long periods of time.

Newell didn't seem to mind. He sat watching her as he smoked his pipe. Noting the grace of her step, the complexion of her skin, the rise of her bosom. "My God," he thought. "I *do* love the woman. She'll make a fine wife, and once this damned war is over, we can settle in Jamaica."

Around eleven o'clock that evening, his first mate, Robert Sands came in and sought him out. "'S'cuse me Cap'n, but we've a problem aboard ship."

With just a hint of irritation, Newell asked, "what is it, Mr. Sands?"

"One of the crew, Dobbs, came aboard almighty drunk, sir. You know him, nary a meaner cuss alive when he's been drinking. Anyways, he gets into a fight with Green."

"Lawrence Green?" Newell asked.

“The same,” Sands asserted. “Fought like a couple of savages, they did. Both sliced and bloodied. Well, the rest of us crew eventually separated them and tied them up, but both are howling something fierce. Each is threatening to kill the other first chance he gets. Carrying on loud and mean, sir. Finally the harbor police came to see what the ruckus was all about. They be askin’ for you now, sir.”

The captain sighed with disgust. “Very well, Mr. Sands. I’ll be along shortly.”

“As you say, sir.” Sands left for the ship.

Catching Maggie’s attention, he made his excuses. “I’m sorry, love, but duty calls. I’ve got to sort out some trouble among the crew. Can’t leave in the morning with bad blood aboard.”

“I understand, Sam,” Maggie said. “Will I see you before you leave?”

Sam winced. “I hope so, I truly do. But I can’t say for sure. In case I don’t, I’ll be takin’ my leave of you now.” He kissed her briefly on the lips.

She hugged him back. “I love you. Hurry back, and be safe.”

As it turned out, Sam was unable to see her again, and she left The King’s Arms shortly after they closed at two am. The London streets were particularly foggy this night, and she shivered a little as she pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders.

Although she had done so for years, she always felt trepidation whenever she had to walk the streets alone so late at night. Maybe she should have let Rafe stay this evening.

Increasing her pace a bit, she tried to put such thoughts from her head. She had been born and raised on Gin Alley. Except for her brief stay at Cheswyck, she’d lived here all her life. Most people knew her, and she’d not had any sort of trouble before.

And yet... Rafe had, hadn’t he? Just a few weeks ago, at that. An icy sliver of fear started to slide down her neck.

The streets were quite dark now. There was no moon, and even if there had been, the dense fog would have obliterated any illumination. Worse, many of the street lights were out, as well.

Her heart pounding, she fought to suppress her growing trepidation. She almost made it home, only a few yards from her front door, when two dark figures emerged from the fog.

She gasped in surprise, and then her stomach sank when she recognized them. They were the same two who had attacked Rafe. What had he called them? Freckles and Fatso.

Freckles spoke first, his guttural raspy voice crackling from his crushed voice box. "So the Alexander wench comes home at last. We've been waiting for you."

"And," Fatso interjected, "the way she's clutching her purse, I'd say she's got a lot of coin in there."

"I know you," Maggie cried. "You're the blokes who attacked my Rafe. Be off with you!"

"Bah!" Freckles rasped. "He got lucky, that's all. We'll have another go with him once we've finished with you." With an evil sneer he brandished his knife, a long thick bladed piece of steel, curved at the end.

"Well," Maggie said with smugness, trying to cover her fear, "he *has* improved your voice!"

"Damn you bitch!" Freckles slapped her with his backhand across the face.

She staggered back a few steps, her mind whirling. With desperation, her hand reached inside her purse. Where was the derringer Sam had given her? "Just in case," he'd said.

Fatso grabbed her purse even as her hand closed around the gun. She retreated several steps until she felt her back against her door. "Help! Robbery! Help!" she shrieked at the top of her voice. "Rafe... somebody... help me!"

The two ruffians stopped their advance for just a moment, as if unsure what to do. Just then, a light came on from inside the house, and Rafe could be seen looking out the window.

"Damn you woman, I'll have that purse!" Fatso snarled and rushed toward her.

Not really aware of her actions, Maggie reacted instinctively. In one fluid motion, she pulled her pistol from her purse and fired it directly into Fatso's face, only inches away.

The back of his head erupted with a volcano of blood, brain and skull from a hole over an inch wide. He was killed so instantly, even his face, what was left of it, showed no surprise.

For perhaps two seconds, though it seemed much longer, both Maggie and Freckles stood motionless in shock. Neither could believe what had happened. Absently Maggie's clutch on her pistol relaxed and it clattered on the street.

Then any semblance of control or rationality that Freckles might have had vanished entirely. With a broiling rage he growled, with slobber and epithets pouring from his lips. In a moment he pounced on her.

With his first blow the knife tore into her left lung. This was followed immediately with two more stabbings to her chest as her blood spewed a crimson pattern on her blouse.

She sank to the street, speechless, but Freckles' wrath was unspent. He kicked her in the face several times, cursing.

The knife rained down upon her too many times to count. It was like a drummer, pounding cadence with a staccato of piercing, ripping, shredding brutality.

Rafe came running out the door, his dirk in hand. There was already a growing pool of blood surrounding her body.

As her life, like her blood, drained from her body, Maggie saw in a grey haze Freckles' head being pulled back by Rafe's hand clutching his hair, exposing his neck. Rafe swiped the keen edge of his knife across his throat in one swift motion. The blade cut deep, nearly taking the head off.

As Freckles fell back onto the street, Rafe's long blade stabbed his chest, cutting his heart in two.

Rafe knelt to Maggie's still form, crying. "Mother! Tell me you're alright!"

Barely breathing, red frothy blood bubbling from her lips, Maggie whispered, "Go to Sam. He'll know what to do."

"Mom, don't die! I love you!" Rafe cried clutching her blood soaked body close to his.

With her last breath, Maggie smiled a little and said, barely audible, "I love you too. My precious son."

And then she was dead.

Rafe sobbed uncontrollably, not wanting to believe it. How could this be? His mother... his sweet, good mother, who never hurt anybody, was gone! His mind reeled, not willing to accept it.

But then two things brought him back to reality, forcing him to accept it.

The first was his awareness that his trousers, having knelt by Maggie's lifeless form, were saturated with her blood. His legs felt cold, clammy, and sticky.

The second was the clamor of voices and running footsteps coming from down the street. Someone was shouting, "Murderer! Murderer!"

But it was the policeman's whistle that made him move. Yes, he had committed murder, and regardless of the circumstances, he was guilty. The fear of prison, and the hangman, jolted him to his feet.

The crowd was closer now, and Rafe could just see the policeman. His mother's warning echoed in his mind, "Go to Sam. He'll know what to do."

Without even glancing down for one last look at his mother, he ran. He had only taken a few steps when the policeman shouted, "You there! Stop! Stop!"

But stopping was the last thing Rafe intended. He dashed toward the docks. Jutting this way and that, zigzagging, he cut through several streets and alleys, trying to lose his pursuers.

How long he ran, he didn't know. He could hear more and more police whistles blowing and running feet from several directions. He ducked down a dark alley to catch his breath and realized he was still clutching his dagger as with a death grip. Resheathing it in his belt, he felt no satisfaction for avenging his mother's murder. Nor did he feel guilt for his own act of murder.

He heard the running footsteps coming closer; he looked around desperately for an escape. There was nothing except a large rain barrel, standing against the wall in the rear of the alley. Quickly he removed the lid and seeing that it was mostly empty, clambered in. He was just replacing the lid over the top when he saw the policemen enter the alley.

Rafe did his best to slow his breathing, still panting from his running. In the darkness of the dank barrel, he could hear them walking around, and talking. This went on for several minutes, and then their voices began to drift away.

Too petrified to move, Rafe stayed still for a very long time after they left. How long he waited, he didn't know. The next thing he knew he was sobbing, tears running down his face. The reality of what had happened started to sink in.

Finally his aching knees protested their cramped quarters and he had to move. Ever so furtively, he opened the lid an inch and looked around. His eyes were accustomed to the dark, and he could see no one. He didn't hear anything either. Swallowing his fear, he climbed out of the barrel and stole a look around the corner. The streets were empty.

On the move again, he ran ever closer to the docks, hopeful that he had eluded the police. He no longer heard the whistles blowing, or the running footsteps, and he began to think that he had shaken them.

It was an hour before dawn when he finally scrambled his way to the docks. For a moment he was seized with fear for at first he didn't see the *Cutlass*. Was he too late? Had she already sailed?

But then as he ran down the wharf he saw her, just getting ready to disembark. The gangplank was about to be taken away when he ran across it and leapt on deck, too fast for anyone to stop him.

Some of the crew would have undoubtedly thrown him overboard if Captain Newell hadn't been on deck. "Rafe! What are you doing here? You can't..." then he looked down at Rafe's blood soaked pants. "What happened?"

Panting for breath, nearly exhausted, Rafe collapsed into his arms.

"Mr. Sands!" Newell barked. "Bring him to my cabin at once. Fetch some water as well."

"Aye, Cap'n," Sands replied.

When they were alone in the captain's quarters, Rafe relayed what had happened. Newell was silent and serious. Finally Rafe said, "Captain... I killed a man tonight. What shall I do? What's to become of me?"

Taking a deep breath, Newell answered, "I loved your mother. I love you. I can't help she's gone. At least you gave the murdering slime that did it their due." A brief moment of silence, he continued, "You are my son now. I'll shelter you, raise you, and train you to be a proper sailor. We leave for the Caribbean immediately."

Rafe knew he was leaving nothing behind. Everything, everyone he knew or loved was gone. His only future, he knew, was aboard the *Cutlass*. He never saw England again.

Society of Scoundrels

Chapter 17

The gathering was not just unprecedented, it was unheard of. The very thought of it was preposterous, yet it was happening. Amid dangerous secrecy, desperate confusion, and effervescent fear, the diverse group of men had come to Fort-de-France on the isle of Martinique in mid-February of 1726.

It had all started with that island's largest, richest plantation master, Jean-Luc Mettauer. Time after time his ships bearing the season's cargo had been brutally plundered by pirates. The situation had become intolerable, even as he was quickly approaching financial ruin. *Something* had to be done.

The French navy gamely tried to stop the bleeding, but had proven powerless to do so. Their resources were too few, while the pirates were too great. Petitions for aid to France had gone unanswered. They were alone. If anything was to be done, they had to do it themselves.

But what, Mettauer wondered, could they do? He himself was down to his last two ships. Those of the French navy were spread woefully thin.

Out of desperation, he and the other plantation owners had done the unthinkable: looked to other countries for salvation.

The effort might have withered away without results if not for one man—Don Carlos Ramirez of Punta Cana. Try as he would, he just could not rebuild his fleet without serious setbacks at every turn. Like the Frenchman, he found his country's naval resources were powerless to protect him.

Thus, when Ramirez became aware of Mettauer's call for an international conclave of planters, the Spaniard enthusiastically lent his support and was instrumental in its success. Many weeks of travel throughout the region to garner support, through cajoling, pleading, threatening, or reasoning had paid off far beyond either man's expectations.

Fort Saint Louis sat on a long peninsula probing the bay of Carnage'. It was in the great hall of this bastion that representatives of four nations gathered, to discuss what could be done to save their economy and people's lives.

Ramirez and Mettauer had been very persuasive. Attendance came not from just French and Spanish colonies, but British and Dutch as well. There

were a fair number of shrewd and pragmatic men who knew both the importance and potential for this meeting.

In all, there were a dozen plantation masters coming from all across the Caribbean. Diverse in culture, language, and background, they were willing to put old animosities aside, forget their past wars with each other, for the common benefit of all—ridding the Caribbean of the scourge of the pirates.

For decades, they had fought and been at the mercy of the Brethren of the Coast. Though there had been hangings, such as Calico Jack, Stede Bonnet and others, the rise of the pirate tide was at its zenith. They all knew the biggest and most dangerous threat of all was as yet un-cowered and unbeaten: the Black Widow.

As further proof of the desperation of the times, as well as the ludicrousness of the gathering, each country also had military representatives, though they were there in an unofficial capacity. British captains, French admirals, officers of Dutch and Spanish warships came to discuss ways and provide means for dealing with the horrendous and growing threat.

Jean-Luc Mettauer addressed the congregation. “Monsieurs, fellow planters, distinguished guests, gentlemen of the navies, I am most pleased to see that you are here today. This shows your courage and foresight. It also shows the dire situation we face. Not a single one of us in this room has been untouched by the loathsome acts of the pirates. We have all suffered in our own way.”

Nodding appreciatively to the naval officers, he said, “Despite the valiant efforts and sacrifices of our military protectors, one and all, we yet find ourselves at a crossroads. Are we to roll over and submit to the forces of evil that plague us, or do we find the will, and the way, to turn the tide, and rid ourselves once and for all of the terrorists who threaten our very way of life?”

The room was instantly filled with the clamor of oaths, threats, and bewilderments. They were all motivated, to be sure, and held high expectations for their almost unholy alliance.

Ramirez stood and strutted commandingly at the rostrum. “Gentlemen, we face not just a band of brigands and thieves, though that is what they are. I have known the Black Widow from her very beginnings. I rue the day she escaped my wrath only to become the queen of a nation. For sirs, it *is* a nation we face. A *pirate* nation. A nation that is no less resourceful, or powerful, as any of our own. It is a growing nation, both in size, and influence, and if we do not stop it, at its birth, she and her cutthroat minions

will rule the entire Caribbean one day. And by then, it will be too late. Nothing will be able to stop them.”

Again the room was filled with grumbling, the four languages rising in a cacophony of anger and fear.

Captain, formerly lieutenant, Snow, called for order. “Senor Ramirez is correct. I myself have seen what they are capable of against our military might. I know something of their armaments and tactics. His majesty’s finest warships were sunk before my eyes. No one naval fleet of any one country can stand against them. We must put aside our mistrust and our differences and unite against them. With or without our government’s blessings.”

Dutch Captain Johan Van der Sloot growled, “What you are suggesting borders on treason. Acting without authority, aligning with you. Gott in Himmel! We could all face prison or death.”

Captain Mendoza, of the *Obrador* cut in. “Senor, you will face death anyway when the Black Widow sends a dozen ships into Willemstad! Better you should die trying, than to fear reprisals that may or may not come. Dutch islands are at opposite ends of the Caribbean. You cannot possibly mount any kind of effective force by yourself. The Black Widow’s fleet is larger than any of ours, and still growing. But together, we can outnumber her, and beat her once and for all.”

Mettauer agreed. “The Caribbean is a big sea, and we are spread thin at various ends of it. The pirate nation can pick us off one by one, growing ever stronger until it’s too late. We *must* act now!”

Admiral Mojico of Spain stood. “The Frenchman is right! In the past few months my armada has suffered terrible losses at their hands in Caracas, Maracaibo, Cartagena, Panama, Havana, and San Juan. I understand the British have suffered similarly in Port Royal and Georgetown. All of us, all of our military strength, just gets weaker, while these terrorists keep getting stronger.”

Van der Sloot demurred. “I am not suggesting that we do not try. I am all for an alliance—financially, militarily, and otherwise. All I am saying is that whatever we do, we had *better* be successful or we won’t have to worry about the pirates. Our fate will be decided by our governments.”

“But how can we proceed?” asked a planter from Guadeloupe. “Where can we strike them? They are like ghosts who disappear in the night.”

Ramirez, arrogant as ever, bragged, “I have operatives working on that even as we speak. There is some evidence that perhaps their lair is somewhere in the southern Caribbean. Where, I do not know as yet. I am

hopeful that before this convention concludes, we will have an answer. Then we can plan how, when, and where to strike.”

The rest of the day was spent arguing and complaining over issues of who would be in charge, who contributed more and financial timidity. In the end, it was agreed to resume talks the next day.

But the power plays behind the scenes and manipulations by the two most influential participants continued that evening. Mettauer invited Ramirez to dinner at the Hotel Belain d’ Ensambuc in order to plan their strategy for the morrow’s consultations.

Ramirez was delighted to see a beautiful young woman accompany the Frenchman. Of average height, about twenty-five years old, her brown hair grazing her bare white shoulders in seductive ringlets, her low cut neckline displaying ample cleavage, her pale white skin, and pink, almost pouty lips inflamed his lust at once.

“Ah, monsieur Ramirez,” Mettauer welcomed, “I am glad to have this opportunity to get to know each other better. May I present my daughter, Monique Champlain Mettauer.”

Ramirez lightly kissed her proffered hand. “It is a great pleasure to meet you mademoiselle. I only hope your beauty does not distract me from serious conversation with your father.”

Monique blushed. “You are too kind, sir. Rest assured, I shall not interfere with your important plans.”

Mettauer said, “There will be time for that later, non? First a fine dinner with French wine to celebrate our new found friendship.”

Ramirez agreed, “My thoughts exactly. There will be time for the talk of war later. May I call you Monique?”

She fluttered her eyes and responded, “Of course monsieur. I am glad my father has found someone like himself who recognizes our problem and has the courage to take bold initiatives.”

Ramirez was silently fighting a war inside himself. He was instantly attracted to the girl sexually, and fought his quivering erection that was trying to grow. But he knew this was no trollop to be taken at will. High society of these French would dictate tact, diplomacy, and most important, patience. He vowed to himself that he would have this woman, even if he had to go through the sham of a marriage. He couldn’t afford another disastrous parley like the meeting with the Vinsons. There was too much at stake to let his penis do all the thinking for him.

Accordingly, he was the consummate charmer. He deftly impressed them with descriptions of his estate at Punta Cana, his fleet, and his vast

financial station. By the time he finished his resume', Jean-Luc knew that this Spaniard was arguably the richest, most influential and powerful man in the Spanish Caribbean. Impressed, yet naïve to the true nature of Ramirez, he felt this man a possible candidate for matrimony with Monique. Such a union would not only benefit his daughter, but cement the two vast financial powers that he and Ramirez represented. The possibilities were astounding. He shook his head a little. First, they had to defeat the pirates.

For her part, Monique felt reserved about the Spaniard. True, he was rich, powerful and charming, but there was something in his eyes that she didn't trust, something that made her ill at ease. She was polite, and listened attentively, but she had already decided that she didn't like him.

And so it was that during the courses of fine French cuisine, the three of them talked expansively, coming to know each other surprisingly well. Each held their personal feelings and ambitions to themselves, but one thing became apparent—the two families would be connected in the future, whatever the outcome of the looming war. None of them could have imagined how their future would play out.

Eventually, the hour became late, and Monique excused herself “If you gentlemen have no objection, I will retire to my room. I'm sure both of you have more important things to discuss.”

Ramirez stood and bowed slightly. “As much as it pains me to see you leave, my dear, I must agree with you. Your father and I do have business to attend to. I hope I will have the opportunity to see you again. Perhaps tomorrow.”

Her pleasant smile belied the sincerity of her words. “Perhaps, sir, if nothing dire should occur.”

Mettauer grumbled, “Dire? Whatever do you mean, Monique?”

“We are at war after all. It would be a pity should the pirates attack us this very night.”

Ramirez laughed. “With so many military ships in port? I doubt that. Pirates may be ruthless, but they are not stupid.”

She gave a slight courtesy. “Until the morrow, then.”

After she left, Mettauer said, “She may be more right than she knows. Naval vessels or not, these pirate's audacity and nerve is growing. It wouldn't be the first time they attacked a town.”

Ramirez shrugged. “If you are referring to Morgan's sacking of Maracaibo, I remind you that was many years ago. And these are very different pirates.”

“I know... they are worse.”

On the far side of the dining room, another working dinner was going on. The table consisted of the military representatives to the conference. Admiral Mojico and Captain Mendoza represented the Spanish contingent, while Johan Van der Sloot spoke for the Dutch. Captain Rousseau and Lieutenant Le Blanc spoke for the French, and Captains Snow and Locke watched over the British interests.

Mojico was saying, "I never thought that I would sit at the same table with counterparts from your countries. This is truly an astounding event."

"And one that had better remain a secret," Van der Sloot countered.

"I for one am glad to see it," Snow exclaimed. "The truth is, all of us have taken heavy losses these past few months. Our defeat at Port Royal was more severe than we like to let on."

Rousseau nodded. "That's what I was led to believe also. Monsieur Mettauer is right. If we do not unite our forces, we are lost. The pirates have weakened us too severely to think otherwise."

Captain Locke sighed. "So we are in agreement as to what needs done, and our willingness to do it. What we need now is a plan, and ships."

"Those will be hard to come by," Mojico muttered. "Between the pirates sinking them, and finding available ships with captains I can trust to join us, I doubt I can contribute more than four."

Captain Snow agreed. "I'm in the same situation, I'm afraid. I'll be damn lucky to get four myself."

"Four seems to be the magic number," Rousseau commented. "I'll try for that many, but it will be difficult."

Van der Sloot swore, "Scheiss! I doubt that I can muster more than one... my own. *Possibly* one more, but I'm not sure."

Le Blanc looked at Mendoza. "What about the planters? Will monsieur Ramirez contribute to the fleet?"

Mendoza shrugged. "I cannot speak for my *Patron*. I take my orders from him. I will ask permission to bring *Obrador* into the fleet, but Senor Ramirez will always do whatever he wishes. As for the other planters, I do not know."

Snow said, "I doubt if many of the planters even have ships. Mettauer and Ramirez are probably the only ones. The others will have to contribute in other ways. Provisions, money, and men."

Locke observed, "I count possibly fifteen ships, give or take. That's fairly impressive. I doubt the pirates could surpass that. I'm beginning to feel optimistic already."

Meanwhile, Mettauer and Ramirez were in deep conversation.

"I would know your opinion of the conference so far," Ramirez asked.

"A good start, I think." He chuckled. "No one has shot anyone yet."

Smiling, Ramirez said, "It is a unique gathering to be sure. But Jean-Luc, these men are well motivated, and inspired, to the same purpose. It is our common goal, our desperate desire that overcomes our differences and makes us willing to work together."

The Frenchman agreed. "Yes, I believe it so. I think the planters are all on board with whatever we propose. It is the military that holds the key to success."

"Look at them over there," Ramirez pointed unobtrusively. "They are locked in the same discussion as we are. They have all been bloodied and suffered at the hands of the bitch-whore! With the right prodding and persuasion, I think they will agree with our plans."

Mettauer rubbed his chin. "I think we are winning the persuasion part. What kind of prodding do you mean?"

Ramirez shrugged. "Oh, you know, every man has his price. We planters can make it... lucrative for them to do what they already know is right."

"Hmm. I see what you mean."

Ramirez continued, "I myself will donate a ship to the fleet, if we can pull one together. My ships are well armed, and my men seasoned. We fought off the Black Widow's invasion once, and this time we can finish the job."

Mettauer raised his eyebrows. "You would risk your own ship? Mon Dieu! These are desperate times. I have but one ship, but I am willing to use it to end this terrible threat, if possible. If we don't stop them, I will be financially ruined anyway."

Ramirez poured them another glass of wine. "This is very good. Does it come from your estate?"

Jean-Luc beamed. "Why, yes, it does. I'm very proud of it." His face darkened. "Alas, my vineyard was burned by the heathens last year."

"You will have your revenge, my friend."

"I hope so."

Changing the subject, Ramirez said, "Your daughter is quite lovely. I should like to get to know her better."

"She's been all I have since her mother died. She runs the affairs of the house, and has an independent spirit. She is the light of my life."

“And rightly so. When this nasty business with the pirates is over, you must come to Plantacion del Sol. Let me host you as you have done to me.”

“It would be our pleasure, sir.”

The next day was very productive for the conclave of conspirators. Despite a prolonged spate of bickering and arguing, Mettauer and Ramirez were able to guide the meeting through to at least one accomplishment by noon. They agreed that henceforth, they would be known as the Caribbean International Alliance, otherwise known as the CIA. This formalized their new found identity, which in turn promoted a greater measure of unity and cooperation.

The two leaders of the conference stunned everyone when they announced their intention to contribute one ship each to the fleet. This display of commitment, even sacrifice inspired all the military men to make good their promise of their own ships, as they had discussed the night before.

Not to be outdone, the remaining planters promptly swore their promises of money, provisions and men to the cause. It seemed that all in attendance were showing their courage and resolve, despite their former differences.

After lunch, things again broke down when the military officers began squabbling over who would lead the fleet. No one, it seemed, was willing to take orders from anyone beyond their own country's rank.

Acrimony and insults threatened to scuttle the whole conference. The officer's egos and personalities, fueled by generations of national mistrust seemed insurmountable. Heated exchanges grew more frequent, and less civil. The CIA could have died on the spot before it really began if not for one sinister event.

The commandant of Fort Saint Louis barged into the room, breathless and wailed, “*Pirates!* A large fleet of pirates just offshore!”

Pandemonium overwhelmed the room. Fear and loathing were etched on the faces of everyone. Swearing, Ramirez left, following Snow and the others to the rampart overlooking the sea.

True enough, the large body of ships could easily be seen, but they were far offshore, at least two miles. Only through a telescope could their identity be known.

Ramirez looked through the glass, silently counting. “Fourteen! I count fourteen ships!”

Snow, also with a spyglass, confirmed. "That's what I count also. And they are pirates, alright. I can see their Jolly Rogers."

"They seem to be heading south," Locke said. "Perhaps they shall pass us by."

Mettauer crossed himself. "Mon Dieu! I hope so!"

Ramirez frowned. Though they could make out the ships, they were too far away to see clearly who was on board. After looking at each ship several times, he said, "The Black Widow isn't among them."

"That's odd," said Mojico. "She almost always accompanies her fleet."

"Unless," Rousseau opined, "Her numbers have grown so large she has more than one fleet. She could have a similar armada elsewhere. I'm telling you gentlemen, this bodes ill."

They all stood watching as the pirate fleet sailed by. The atmosphere was tense. Could they be so lucky?

Finally it was apparent that the pirates would indeed pass them by. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Snow said solemnly, "Gentlemen, we were most fortunate. I doubt we could have withstood their attack. If anything should remind us of the importance of our venture, this is it. I strongly suggest we reconvene and discuss our options amicably."

They all agreed, and as Ramirez turned to go, Monique came up to him.

"Monsieur, I heard there were pirates nearby. Is it true?"

He took her hand. "Mademoiselle, fear not. Yes, the scoundrels passed by, but they are gone. We are in no danger."

Visibly shaken, she relaxed. "Oh, thank God."

Playing on her vulnerability, Ramirez squeezed her hand. "Monique, I would fight for your safety, and honor, to my last breath."

"Thank you sir." She released his hand. "Is my father inside?"

"Yes."

She thought a moment. "Tell him please, that I will see him later. You men need to finish your business here and get after those pirates. I shall bother you no more."

When Ramirez reentered the conference, he found the mood had dramatically changed. A new willingness to compromise seemed evident, and ways to overcome their differences eagerly sought.

In the end, it was decided that each ship officer would command his own ship, and that all of the various officers would assume equal rank for the duration of this mission. Moreover, it was agreed that the fleet commander would be elected from their ranks by the attendees of the convention.

Perhaps because of his inherent rank of Admiral, perhaps because of the number of Spanish delegates, Admiral Mojico of Spain was elected fleet and expedition commander. Captain Snow was elected his second in command most likely because of his prior experience. These results were honored by all, and it looked like things were really shaping up for their venture.

Toward the end of the afternoon, the planter from Guadeloupe suggested that they elect a permanent head of the CIA so that the progress they made these few days would be carried on long after they adjourned. In essence, it was to give permanence to the Caribbean International Alliance.

To no one's surprise, except for possibly Ramirez, Jean-Luc Mettauer was overwhelmingly elected. As he thanked the delegates for their trust, he quickly recognized the value of Ramirez as a friend, and announced his intention to name him his vice chair.

That evening Ramirez again dined with the Mettauers. He took this opportunity to describe his estate, brag about his wealth, and impress them regarding his plans. He was fast becoming infatuated with Monique despite their age difference. That she was young enough to be his daughter didn't bother him in the least, and oddly enough, didn't faze Jean-Luc either. Though neither voiced it, both saw the possibility of a marriage with Ramirez and Monique as a way to cement their alliance and further increase their wealth.

Monique offered, "I am very happy that you, father, and you, monsieur Ramirez are leaders of the CIA. I know it is in good hands, and perhaps the spirit of cooperation and joint enterprise may continue after this war is over."

"Yes," Mettauer agreed, "I was thinking that the CIA could prove very beneficial to us plantation owners even after we have dispensed with the pirates."

Ramirez wiped his mouth on the fine linen napkin. "Yes, I have always endeavored to look beyond national boundaries and find associates that will be mutually beneficial. The nationality of such a person means nothing to me."

"That's very progressive and bold thinking," Mettauer said.

Ramirez laughed. "My first such associate was an English Lord, believe it or not, during the war. Though our countries were at war with each other, we shrewdly worked together and built an empire."

"How strange," Monique said. "Is this lord still associated with you?"

His face darkened and his ears turned red. "No, I'm afraid not. The Black Widow killed him and stole the ship that he was delivering to me."

She gasped, "How dreadful!"

“Yes.” Ramirez downed his glass of wine and poured himself another. “It is all so ironic, so unfortunate. This war could have been avoided all together.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jean-Luc.

“Lord Victor, my English partner, and I offered the resources of our vast and powerful holdings to a man named Terry Vinson, who himself operated a large and successful shipping company in the Caymans. The logic and beauty of us working together seemed obvious to Lord Victor and I, but he refused. Instead, he and his wife tried to take what was ours by force. They sank some of my ships and became pirates.”

Monique was incredulous. “Surely not! Pirates?”

“Yes,” Ramirez said, feigning sadness. “Though he was killed in battle with my flagship, his wife escaped, and is the very foe we face today—the Black Widow!”

Mettauer shook his head, thoughtful. “It is such a shame. If they had been decent, honest people, they could have joined with you and would have prospered. Instead they were greedy, tried to take it all, and launched the very pirate nation that threatens all decent law abiding citizens in the Caribbean. A shame!”

Monique slapped her hand on the table. “I hate pirates! I hate this war!”

Ramirez took her hand and said with all the false reassurance he could muster, “A war it is, my dear, but it will not last much longer. Very soon, we—your father and I, with the resources of the CIA— will stamp out the pirates of the Caribbean forever.”

The next day, the convention broke into two groups: the plantation owners and the military. The former discussed the boring but necessary details of putting together the operations of the CIA. By-laws, accounts, and agreements of various sorts were hammered out, and by the end of the day, all felt they had breathed life into something that was bigger than themselves, and something quite good.

At the same time, the military men also worked on the details regarding the fleet. Now that the command and hierarchy had been decided, it went remarkably smooth and rapid. They were able to put together on paper, the entire strike force, along with general rules of engagement for the conflict. They were quite pleased with themselves for they had accomplished much in a short time.

All of the men had been working very hard, and were exhausted by the time the day ended. Although anxious to retire, Mettauer enjoined them to stay a bit longer, for a presentation that Monique had prepared.

She stood before the gathering, her small frame erect and proud. “Gentlemen, I commend you for what you have accomplished these past few days. Each of you has done your part to assure the success of our mission. I wanted to do something to contribute also.”

She then held up two rectangles of multicolored cloth. “I have been working on these with a local seamstress to give to you the one thing you don’t have but sorely need. I present to you your new flag, the flag of the CIA!”

Applause filled the room, and everyone’s fatigue was forgotten. No one had even thought of such a thing.

There were two flags. The first one consisted of two red triangles bisected by an upside down pyramid shaped triangle. Within the latter were three stripes; on the bottom was white, the middle blue, and the top was black. A yellow rising sun occupied the majority of the black stripe. Across the bottom of the flag, in large print were the letters CIA.

Monique explained, “I must admit, I had a little trouble with this one. I wanted to represent the blue of the sea, the black of our rich island soil, the white of our purity of purpose, and the red of the blood we are willing to sacrifice for it. I also wanted a rising sun, representing the dawn of a new day, a new day of international cooperation.”

Applause once again filled the room and cheers rang out. It was a distinctive flag, and a beautiful one.

Monique continued, presenting her second flag. “After I finished the first one, I realized that each of our nations that make up our society and our task force should be recognized. They need to be honored for their bravery and free thinking.”

This flag was simpler. A light blue diamond dominated a darker blue field. Within the diamond were the letters ‘CIA’. At each corner of the flag were miniature icons of each of the countries the CIA represents—Spain, Holland, France, and Britain.

This time, the cheers and applause were so loud that they were heard from several blocks away. Monique blushed at the attention, and shuffled her little feet slightly.

“They are beautiful,” Rousseau said. “You have captured the spirit of who we are perfectly.”

Mettauer beamed. “I had no idea my daughter was so artistic.”

“The problem is,” Monique continued, “That I cannot decide which of these I like the best. They are both so fine, and inspiring. I was hoping you gentlemen would decide.”

“They are both wonderful,” Ramirez agreed. “I am extremely impressed.”

They all studied the flags for several minutes, and many comments were made about each of them. Finally, in the end, Captain Snow proclaimed, “None of us can decide either. We will use both of them.”

Mettauer agreed. “I will have sufficient quantities made up as soon as possible, certainly before the fleet sails. The pirates will learn to fear these flags just as much as we fear theirs.”

The last day of this secret, unlikely convention would see the full range of emotions descend on these desperate and courageous men. They would feel the hilltops of hope, followed by the valley of despair, but it would end on the plain of grim determination.

Admiral Mojico was almost gleeful when he announced, “Sirs, you will be delighted to know that we have finalized the makeup of the fleet. The actual vessels will rendezvous here at Fort-de-France within three weeks at the most.”

He had distributed a sheet of paper to each of the delegates for their perusal. When they all had a chance to look it over, he continued, “You will see that the strike force is made up of four squadrons of four ships each, for a total fleet size of sixteen. The squadrons are mostly divided along nationalistic lines, except for the last one which is comprised of two Dutch warships and two heavily armed ships supplied by Senors Ramirez and Mettauer. It should be understood that although consisting of squadrons, it is a single attack force. The actual battle plan and how the fleet will be deployed will be decided once we get the intelligence Don Ramirez has promised. Once we have the attack plan, we can leave at a moment’s notice.”

Mettauer and Ramirez looked at the roster with satisfaction. It was more than either of them could have hoped for.

**Caribbean International Alliance
Strike Force**

British

1. *Terminator*..... Captain Snow
2. *Newcastle*..... Captain Crittendon

- 3. *Trevor*.....Lieutenant Worthington
- 4. *Endeavor*.....Captain Locke

Spanish

- 5. *Barraquilla*.....Captain Montoya
- 6. *Montiera*.....Captain Fernandez
- 7. *Castillo*.....Admiral Mojico
- 8. *San Marcos*.....Captain Enrique

French

- 9. *Sainte Marie*.....Captain Vichey
- 10. *Desirade*.....Captain Mitterand
- 11. *Versailles*.....Captain Rousseau
- 12. *Josephine*.....Captain Le Blanc

Dutch and Planters

- 13. *Taleburch*.....Captain Van der Sloot
 - 14. *Kudaarebe*.....Captain Stuyvesant
 - 15. *Seine*.....Captain Dusailles (Mettauer)
 - 16. *Obrador*.....Captain Mendoza (Ramirez)
- Fleet Commander—Alonso Mojico
Vice Commander—Horatio Snow

The rest of the morning was exuberant and hopeful, with repeated congratulations offered to the military men. No one dared ask exactly where these precious ships would come from, or how to cajole their officers into participating in such an unauthorized expedition. It was enough to know they had them, and if their commanding officers weren't concerned about it, neither would they.

But after lunch, the harsh reality of their situation came back with terrible news. A British naval officer, sooty, tattered and obviously fatigued came and sought a private word with Captain Snow. After several long minutes, Snow dismissed the man and addressed the convention.

"Gentlemen, I'm afraid I have grievous news. That pirate fleet we saw yesterday was coming from Antigua. It has been reported that they inflicted heavy damage to our facilities there."

"What happened?" asked Locke.

"The entire fleet of fourteen ships attacked the harbor at St. Johns. There, they sank five man-of-war before they could even get under sail. They also shelled Fort James extensively, reducing it to a pile of rubble."

"That's unbelievable!" Locke gasped.

“There’s more,” Snow muttered. “After departing the harbor at St. Johns, they were brazen enough to attack the naval headquarters at English Harbor. As you may or may not know, Admiral Nelson only began building the facility last year.”

“They actually attacked Nelson’s Dockyard?” Locke asked incredulously.

“They not only attacked it, they nigh well destroyed it,” Snow said. “The various buildings still under construction were pounded into rock piles. And the ships in the harbor....”

“Oh my God, how many?” Locked whispered.

Snow cleared his throat. “There were fifteen of his majesty’s finest warships in English Harbor at the time. Ten were destroyed utterly, the rest severely damaged.”

Locke asked, “And Admiral Nelson?”

“He was not there at the time. He is unhurt.”

Ramirez asked, “These ships that were destroyed, were any of them the ones that you had assigned to our fleet? Do we still have your contingent of warships?”

Snow nodded. “Yes, fortunately the only ship involved in the whole horrid affair was the *Trevor*, and she was damaged, but should be fit for duty by the time we sail.”

A pall of silent fear and revulsion saturated the room. This was frightening and depressing news.

Rousseau said, “With the heavy British losses, coupled with the losses we’ve all had over the last four months, this is backbreaking. This is disastrous!”

Mettauer solemnly intoned, “Gentlemen, it is clear that until such time as we get help from Europe, whenever that will be; we are the only thing that stands between the pirate nation and the civilized world. It is up to us and us alone to turn the tide, to stop them while there is even a small chance to do so. If we fail, the entire Caribbean will become little more than a pirate lake.”

It was then Ramirez was approached by one of his subordinates. “*Jefe*, I have news from Cartagena. The messenger is right outside.”

Ramirez excused himself and hurriedly left the room. Out on the rampart where they had earlier seen the pirate fleet, a man awaited him, head bowed, and hat in hand.

“You have something for me?” Ramirez demanded.

“*Si, jefe.*” The man gave him two large sheets of paper.

Ramirez studied them. One was a map, the other a comprehensive report, explaining its significance. A sardonic smile curled his lips.

A joyous, animated Ramirez strutted back into the conference. "I have it," he exclaimed. "I have it!"

"What are you talking about?" asked a planter from St. Eustatius.

"My operative has finally reported to me. The information he has given me is extensive and precise. I know *exactly* where the Black Widow's lair is located. I know her strengths, but most important, I know her weakness! Friends, do not despair! She is as good as dead! The pirates, one and all, are on the brink of extermination!"

Chapter Nineteen

The Black Widow felt apprehensive, frustrated, and bored. It had been nearly three months since the fleet embarked on its ambitious mission, and as of late, there had been little or no word on the status of her men or their doings.

True, she had learned early on of the pirate's huge victory over the impressive Spanish armada at Cartagena. Beyond that, information was sketchy at best.

She and her longtime friend Captain McDonie were leisurely sitting on her verandah one afternoon.

"Rob, it's damn aggravating, not knowing what's happening."

McDonie replied, "Aye, reliable information has been hard to come by. After Cartagena, there have been a few reports of ships sunk by unknown persons. Could be ours, but who knows?"

"And then there's Port Royal," she remarked.

"McDonie smiled. "The debacle at Port Royal could *only* be the work of Rafe. No one else."

She sighed with longing. "I miss him, Rob. Very much. And the not knowing. It's hard."

He briefly touched her hand and said, "I know, Tica, I know."

The Black Widow raised her eyebrows at the use of her given name.

But after a moment she smiled and said, "It's been a long time since I was Chantica. Few even know of it. You've been a good and loyal friend all these years. It's ok, Rob, just for when we are alone."

"I've seen a bit more of Chantica in you lately, and a bit less of Black Widow. Rafe has opened your heart."

She nodded. "Yes, Rafe has enabled me to find my heart again. It feels like love, I admit. But Rob, there will *always* be the Black Widow. At least until Terry has been avenged, and Ramirez is dead."

"Ramirez," McDonie muttered. "I'd almost forgotten about him."

Her face became stern. "You can believe *I* have not! True our agenda has been altered, due to serious circumstances, but Rob, rest assured, his destruction is ever on my mind."

"Of that I have no doubt." McDonie grinned.

“If the fleet is as successful as I hope, there will be no one to come to his aid. Indeed, there will be none who can stand in our way. And once he has been dealt with—”

“There is none in the whole sea to stand in our way,” McDonie finished. “We will be the pirates of the Caribbean, all of it, like a pirate nation.”

She flipped her wrist dismissively. “I care nothing for that. My goals are far less lofty.”

“One step at a time, eh?”

“Right.”

She suddenly stood and paced the verandah. She balled her left hand into a fist and hit the open palm of her right hand three times.

“Damn, I can’t take just sitting here any longer. Pass the word to the others. Make ready for sea. It’s high time we had ourselves a raid.”

McDonie smiled widely. “*Now* you’re talking! All three ships?”

“Absolutely. The *Viuda Negro*, *Deliverance*, and *Flying Dragon* will sail in two days’ time.”

“Leaving none to defend our home?”

She shook her head. “The risk is greater to the ships at sea than those here. We need what strength we can. Besides, the land forces left behind may well be enough, at least against a small invasion.”

“What if they fall to a larger force?”

The Black Widow shrugged. “Then all they will get is a chunk of real estate. *We*, and the rest of our company, will still be ruling the sea. Once we’re reunited with Rafe and the others, we’ll be damn near invincible.”

Pirates are sea faring creatures, loathe to remain on land for any length of time. Having been cooped up for three months was oppressive to everybody. It was with great satisfaction, even glee, that the pirates once again felt the rolling deck of a ship beneath their feet, and inhaled the sweet, fresh salt air into their lungs.

Not wishing to sail too far away from home, the Black Widow and her trio of ships cruised the waters off the northeast shore of Venezuela, as well as the islands of Trinidad and Tobago. The *Viuda Negro*, with her black hull and sails, struck terror into any who saw her. It was as if the Devil himself had been unleashed upon the sea. The *Flying Dragon*, with its flag of a blood red skeleton on a black field further enhanced the aura of deviltry. And the *Deliverance* sliced through the waters with decisive and menacing purpose, showing it would brook no resistance without dire consequences.

At Isla de Margarita, they chanced upon a small group of Spanish ships enroute from Caracas to Spain. A single treasure galleon was flanked by two protective naval escorts. Perhaps out of boredom, perhaps out of arrogance, the pirates attacked with great enthusiasm.

The *Viuda Negro* pounced on the first naval vessel with a vengeance. Exchanging broadsides, the air reverberated from the thunderous clash of numerous cannons. Grey gun smoke soon enveloped both ships as each maneuvered for position to make the killing blow.

The Black Widow showed no fear, standing confidently on the upper deck, directing her fight. Ignoring the bullets that whizzed by, she coolly fired her pistols into the Spanish crew. Once these were exhausted, she took personal command of a swivel gun and strafed the Spanish deck. Her eyes glinted with mad satisfaction as her nostrils smelled the pungent aroma of burning death. She was once again in her element, and her heart and soul were uplifted by the macabre and bloody scene that played out before her.

There were few, if any, ships in the entire Caribbean more heavily armed than the *Viuda Negro*. As desperately and courageously as the Spaniards fought, there could be only one bloody conclusion: a complete and total pirate victory.

Concurrent with the Black Widow's savage battle, McDonie and Pratt ignored the treasure galleon as it tried its best to escape. There would be time for it later. Instead, the *Flying Dragon* and *Deliverance* maneuvered in concert with each other against the larger and more powerful warship.

It was a good thing they did, for they had all they could handle against the barrage of bigger, superior cannons. It was only their speed, and critical cross fire that saved them. The *Deliverance* received a massive blow to her foredeck, killing three men. McDonie himself was nearly killed when a storm of grapeshot from a swivel gun narrowly missed him.

The *Flying Dragon* eventually delivered the killing blow. Two of her port side guns fired penetrating shots into the side of the Spanish ship, igniting the powder magazine. The resulting explosion tore the ship into pieces which quickly sank to the bottom of the aquamarine sea.

As expected, the treasure galleon was quickly surrounded by the pirate trio. Although the *Viuda Negro* had received cosmetic damage, and lost four men with as many wounded, she was still a terrifying sight. The Spanish captain quickly surrendered and begged for mercy.

Uncharacteristically, the Black Widow was willing to give it. Whether it was a feeling of missing Rafe, or a heady victory yielding massive wealth,

she couldn't have said. Showing mercy was something she, or her men, were unaccustomed to.

Using the Spanish crew as labor, a full ton of silver pieces of eight, a dozen gold bars, a smattering of spices, coffee, and sugar were transferred to the *Viuda Negro*. When it was all done, she addressed the frightened and exhausted prisoners. "You are lucky I decided to spare your lives. Believe me; it would give me more satisfaction to throw the whole lot of you to the sharks. Return to your masters in Caracas. Tell them that the Black Widow still rules the sea. Tell them that they have not seen, or heard, the last of me."

And with that dire warning, the Spanish ship was allowed to simply sail away.

For the next ten days, the pirates sailed around the vicinity of Trinidad and Tobago. The seas were calm, the winds steady and brisk, and the sun bright and warm. Not once did they find any ships to prey upon. It was, in a word, boring.

All of that changed on the evening of the eleventh day. As often happens in the tropics, a severe late afternoon thunder storm engulfed them with strong winds, pounding rain, and fearsome lightning. Although brief, it lasted until well after dark, and when it finally abated, the ships had become separated from each other.

For hours they searched to no avail. No lanterns, no calls could be discerned. It was as if the sea had swallowed them up.

The Black Widow was up by dawn, her spyglass scanning the horizon. Her breast was full of hope, and yes, worries. The slate gray skies were giving way to a brilliant blue by late morning when the lookout called, "Sail Ho! Three points of the starboard bow!"

The Black Widow looked, her heart racing. After just a few minutes, the topmost sails of the *Deliverance* could be seen. She breathed a sigh of relief. McDonie *would* weather the storm, she mused. But what of Captain Pratt and the *Flying Dragon*?

When the two ships came within shouting distance, the Black Widow called out, "Ahoy *Deliverance!* How do ye fare?"

McDonie hollered back, "a little water logged, but no worse. How about you?"

"The same. Any sign of *Flying Dragon*?"

"None," McDonie replied. "That damn storm blew us all to hell. They could be anywhere."

"Aye. Still, the prevailing winds and currents are what they are. Set a course south-southwest."

“Toward Tobago?”

“Aye. It’s as good a place to start as any.”

By late afternoon, they were becoming more and more worried that *Flying Dragon* might have perished in the storm. Indeed, they had seen no ships, of any kind, all day. Frustration was gnawing at the Black Widow’s gut like a surly dog with a bone.

Suddenly there was a cannon shot from the *Deliverance* signaling that they had spotted something. By the time *Viuda Negro* had come alongside, the Black Widow, with her spyglass, could see what McDonie had.

It was the *Flying Dragon* all right, but she was not alone. Grappled onto her was another ship, a frigate. They did not seem to be in battle; there was no smoke, or gunfire. They were just sitting there, sails taken in, still upon the water.

The Black Widow frowned. What the hell was going on? As they drew closer, and could see more clearly, she could see the other ship’s flag. Surprise reverberated through her breast.

It was a Jolly Roger, a black flag with a strong arm holding a cutlass. Looking at the bow, she identified the ship’s name as *Diablo*. These were other pirates?

When the two ships finally came within fifty yards of the *Diablo*, McDonie and the Black Widow could clearly see Captain Pratt waving to them from the wheel deck. Standing next to him was a lanky, shorter than average man, with dark brown hair, cropped close to his head. A dark moustache, sans beard, accentuated his face, which seemed to exude a thrill of anticipation.

The Black Widow cupped her hands around her mouth. “Ahoy, Captain Pratt! I see you survived the storm. Is all well?”

“Couldn’t be better,” Pratt replied. Gesturing to the man next to him he said, “This is Captain Brunty, a fellow pirate.”

Brunty gave an informal half salute. “I invite you aboard the *Diablo*, for I would parley.”

The Black Widow had no intention of going aboard a stranger’s ship, regardless of how benevolent things appeared. If it was a ruse, she would find herself captured and cut off from help.

She simply said, with a serious sternness that was unmistakable, “Once I have grappled our ships to yours, I will be expecting both you and Captain Pratt aboard the *Viuda Negro*.”

Brunty’s face fell as his smile faded. Turning to Pratt he said, “not very trusting is she?”

Pratt chuckled. "The boss *always* has things her way. She's the boss." Shouting over to the Black Widow, he said, "Aye, boss. We'll be there shortly."

In a matter of minutes the two captains stood before the Black Widow on *Viuda Negro's* aft wheel deck. Brunty could scarcely contain his eyes, for she was a beautiful sight. Standing tall and proud, her comely hips shaped within the tight fitting dark brown breeches, her full bosom straining the white cotton shirt revealing her ample cleavage, her raven black hair tied back, covered with a crimson bandana... these were the things that burned desire into his mind. Her hands on her hips, ever near her sword and pistol told him that she would brook no disrespect, and was ready for anything that he might say.

Looking at Pratt, she said, "I'm glad to see you, captain. I feared the storm had swallowed you."

Pratt shook his head. "Nay, boss. T'was a little thing, but we were blown off course to be sure. The ship and her company are well."

Looking at both men, speaking to either, she asked, "how did you two happen to be together?"

"We were caught in the same storm," Brunty answered. "We'd just completed our traverse of the Atlantic from Africa when the nasty squall caught us. When the skies cleared and the sun came up, we were as surprised to see the *Flying Dragon* one hundred yards away as they were to see us."

Pratt broke in. "Not knowing who they were, we thought we had a fight on our hands. Fortunately, Captain Brunty was able to convey his peaceful intentions."

The Black Widow looked at Brunty. "So, Captain..."

"You can call me Robert... or Bobb-o if ye wish."

"So, *Captain*, what brings you from Africa to the Caribbean?"

Brunty took a deep breath. "I was a sometime compatriot with Captain Bartholomew Roberts. The *Diablo* would, from time to time, team up with Captain Roberts around Senegal and other parts of the West African coast. But when he was killed by a British Man-of-War, I decided to vacate the region with haste."

The Black Widow's eyes grew wide. "Black Bart is dead? How?"

Brunty nodded. "Yeah, but it was his own damn fault. They were at anchor off Cape Lopez after capturing many prizes the day before, and were celebrating with a heavy drinking spree. The next morning brought a well-armed frigate named *Swallow* upon them, as well as their hang over. Hell, many of them were still drunk, and many more addle headed and slow. They

could barely scramble the ship for action. As the ships passed, the *Swallow* fired a broadside of grapeshot at point blank range. Roberts was killed instantly, having been hit in the throat. His crew threw him overboard still clad in all his finery, including a splendid jeweled cross, partly to avoid the corpse being captured. After three hours of battle, the pirates surrendered. What followed was the largest pirate trial and execution ever at Cape Coast Castle, in West Africa.”

The Black Widow shook her head. “A shame. He was one of the most successful pirates ever. How did you escape?”

Brunty answered, “I wasn’t there for that fight. I learned all this at the crew’s trial. With Roberts gone, and British warships dominating the area, I felt it wise to vacate the place for less dangerous climes. So we sailed here and met up with Captain Pratt.”

The Black Widow observed, “You were probably wise to do so. But I like not the prospect of a competitor in these waters.”

Brunty swallowed hard. Despite himself, he was feeling quite intimidated. “Captain, even the African shores have heard the name Black Widow. Your reputation verges on legendary. I would be honored if you would accept my ship, my crew, and myself into your service. Captain Pratt has told me of you conditions, and I find them more than acceptable.”

The Black Widow was thoughtful. If Brunty had joined with Black Bart, as he claimed, he could be relied on for loyalty as well as fighting skills. Roberts would have had it no other way. She looked over to the *Diablo*. A well-kept ship, boasting nearly twenty cannons. Her crew looked lean and mean. Adding *Diablo* to her fleet would be a good idea. There was no way of knowing what was left of Rafe’s fleet. T’would be best to strengthen herself, that’s for sure. Besides, it would be better to have him with her than to compete *against* her.

She extended her hand, and shook his. “Very well, Captain Brunty. Welcome to our society of scoundrels.”

Rafe was morose. Over three months at sea with countless battles, had left him tired, battle weary, and a bit despondent. He had witnessed, nay, *caused* so much killing, so much brutality, he was just losing the taste for the life he found himself in.

As the isle of Martinique slid further behind their stern, the pirate fleet awaited the coming night with indifference.

They were *all* tired, Rafe knew. After leaving Jamaica, they rounded the western tip of Cuba without incident. His desire to see Havana was abbreviated at best. The city boasted no less than four forts, two of which guarded the entrance to the Bahia de la Habana.

Havana was a large city, teeming with people, many of whom were Spanish *Soldados*. To land, or even attempt a raid would be suicide. To everyone's surprise, there were relatively few Spanish warships in port, only five.

With the *Devil's Claw* in the lead, the pirate fleet sailed by the city single file, just far enough off shore to be barely within cannon range. One after another, ship after ship poured fire into city buildings, the forts, and of course, the five warships, still lying at anchor. It was a veritable parade of death and destruction, as dozens of cannons were fired from fourteen pirate ships.

To their credit, the Spanish tried to muster a gamely defense. Those in Castillo del Morrow, and Castillo de la Punta, flanking the harbor entrance, were able to score several direct hits, and many near misses on the pirate force.

Of the five warships, only one was able to weigh anchor and try to maneuver to fight. But it was for nothing. The continuous broadsides of fourteen passing pirate vessels sank all of them with dramatic effect.

The entire affair lasted about forty-five minutes. In the end, only the *Ranger*, the *Revenge*, and the *Whisper* sustained any damage, and none of it was serious, although seven men had been killed. The rest of the fleet was unscathed, and could boast the destruction of five Spanish men-of-war, significant damage to at least two forts, with large loss of life and cannon, and finally, extensive sections of the city of Havana were on fire. Several huge columns of black smoke towered over the city, while the inhabitants screamed and ran in panic.

Two days later, as they neared the eastern tip of Cuba, they encountered a very large French fleet, en-route from Port-au-Prince to New Orleans.

If Rafe had any intentions of avoiding them, his hand was forced when all eleven of the French warships set upon them, despite the pirate's slight numerical superiority. The pirate's reputation had preceded them, stirring fear and dread throughout the region. These Frenchmen were on a search and destroy mission of their own. They were determined to wipe out this pirate threat at all costs.

The French fleet sailed in tight formation. Diamond shaped, they would act as a wedge, slicing the pirate fleet in two, thereby negating their

numerical advantage. This tactic had worked well for them in past wars; these French were seasoned, experienced, and motivated. Like a huge juggernaut, the diamond shaped mass of warships bore down upon the pirates.

While Rafe may have lacked military training, he was by no means inexperienced. In Sam, he had learned from one of the best. This was further augmented by timely tips from Sands, McDonie and Belcher, seasoned captains all.

When Rafe saw the French formation, he immediately saw the danger, and the answer. Hastily, he divided the fleet into two inverted triangles of six ships each. He made sure that each six ship triangle had as many Brigantines as sloops to assure the proper balance of firepower and speed. In reserve, holding slightly back behind the two flotillas, *Devil's Claw* and *Cutlass* sailed as guardian angles, ready to intercede wherever necessary at a moment's notice.

As the two shapes came ever closer to each other, the familiar gut wrenching feeling consumed Rafe. The anticipation, fear, and anger of battle burned in his belly, and his mouth became as dry as a stone in the desert.

Sensing this, Angus clapped his hand on Rafe's shoulder. "Here we go again, lad. I have little doubt we shall prevail today, as we have numerous times before."

Rafe smiled, "Angus, see that you don't get yourself killed today. First mates, and first friends, are damned hard to come by."

The two fleets were now a mere one hundred yards apart, sailing at frightening speed toward each other. For a moment, it looked as though the French commander's plan might work, slicing through the pirates and causing disorientation and confusion.

But at the last moment, the two pirate triangles separated and quickly transformed into two columns of three, sailing at the very periphery of the French diamond. Suddenly, four French ships at each extremity were surrounded by enemies twice their number. *Cutlass* veered left, following that flotilla, while *Devil's Claw* did the same on the right. They found themselves positioned perfectly for a one on one fight with a single French vessel. The rest of the French fleet had been out maneuvered and over sailed their prey and effectively taken out of the fight.

A pall of gray smoke hung over the water, punctuated with flashes of orange as the cannons fired almost continuously. Visibility was extremely poor. The smell of gunpowder and burning wood permeated the air.

Although it seemed an eternity, in reality it was less than fifteen minutes, when the opposing ships separated.

The two pirate triangles regrouped and found themselves at the rear of the French fleet. Rafe was gratified to see that all of his ships had made it. Straining to see through the smoke, he saw that all six of their French opponents were sunk or sinking. In one single pass, through fancy maneuvering and grim determination, the pirates had reduced the French fleet to half of its original size!

Though still afloat, several pirate ships were damaged. *Adventure Galley* had lost one of her masts, and there was a tangled mess of rigging and sail. The *Fancy*, *Rising Sun* and *Wydah* were intact but had suffered no small number of casualties. In addition to the dead, there were several who would lose eyes, or limbs. Rafe signaled for those four ships to hold position, while the rest of the fleet turned to once again engage the French armada, who was even now bearing down upon them.

Rafe shook his head. Why didn't they just sail away, he wondered. He had cut their strength in half, and he still had double the ships at his disposal than they had against him. Surely they could see how pointless this was.

But the French came on. Now in a small triangular formation, they sailed right for the heart of the pirate fleet.

But it was like the waves of the sea smashing against a solid rock. The French ships were obliterated in short order while the pirates fired small arms into the water, killing any would be survivors.

Two miles off the northwest coast of Hispaniola is a small, rocky island called Turtle Island, better known as Tortuga. As far back as 1630 the first buccaneers had thrived there, forming the beginnings of the *Confederacy of the Brethren of the Coast*. Though not the hotbed of pirate activity it had been in its hey-day, Rafe nevertheless decided that the fleet would harbor there to make their repairs and heal their wounds.

Although they worked hard, most of the pirates found time for extensive whoring and drinking. Rafe didn't interfere. The men had earned their recreation, and his expedition was only a little more than half complete. It was still a long way to Islas las Roques, with the navies of four countries to stand in their way.

That thought made him glad once again for the addition of *Viper* and *Demon*. Both Serey and Simmons had proven themselves invaluable when things got rough. Besides that, he liked them personally and had become good friends with them.

Ten days later, they left the pleasures of Tortuga for the rigors of life at sea once again. Now fully repaired and rested, each ship and crew looked forward to the coming days and weeks with anticipation; they were headed home. True, there was much to accomplish first, and many dangers to face, but they felt good, just knowing that each passing day brought them a day closer to Islas las Roques.

Next on the map was San Juan. It rankled Rafe to pass by so close to Punta Cana and Ramirez, especially with such a strong fleet at his hands. But he knew Chantica, aka the Black Widow, had her plans. As much as his heart burned for revenge, he knew hers burned hotter. It was tempting, but....

San Juan proved to be a disappointment. It was well defended, like Havana, by a fort known as Castillo de San Felipe del Morrow at harbor's entrance. Unfortunately, there was only one Spanish Galleon in port at the time.

"Hardly worth the trouble," muttered Moores.

As for the attack, Rafe hit upon an unusual, yet daring plan. He positioned all seven of the Brigantines, the most powerful ships in his fleet, in a semi-circle facing del Morrow. No less than seventy cannons blasted away at the fort, pinning down or destroying its gun crews. Meanwhile, the fleet's fastest ships, the seven sloops and schooners, boldly sailed into the bay and surrounded the *Condado*.

The Spanish captain wisely surrendered immediately when he saw the overwhelming force of ships against him. In return, the pirates spared their lives but had them all strip naked and jump overboard and swim to shore.

After looting everything of value—powder, shot, small arms, weapons—anything at all—they blew up the Spanish warship and sent it to the bottom of the bay.

Their mission complete, the seven sloops and schooners sailed out of the bay, continually blasting the rear of del Morrow with devastating effect. They also caused significant damage to other buildings in the city.

By the time the pirate fleet reconnected and left the area, San Juan, like Havana before her, was a burning ruin, a pall of smoke hanging over her. It would take the Spanish a great deal of time and resources to rebuild their cities, and replace their ships. This would be time and resources *not* directed toward the pirates of the Black Widow.

After stopping for provisions and water in a lovely bay in Virgin Gorda for a few days, Rafe set his attention on the one port he had dreaded the most: Antigua and Nelson's Dockyard.

For some reason, he was more intimidated by the British navy than any other. Perhaps it was because he knew them better, having been around them in Port Royal and before that, in London. Lord Nelson's reputation as an effective, even brilliant strategist was well known.

But as it turned out, Admiral Nelson was not in port when the pirate armada struck. Their brutal, devastating attack of St. John's and the naval facilities at English Harbor resulted in the loss of fifteen British Men-of-war. Incredibly, the pirate losses were minimal; some cosmetic damage to the *Cutlass* and *Devil's Claw*, while the *Demon* lost eleven good men and *Whisper* lost nine.

Accordingly, many of the captains were not surprised when Rafe decided to by-pass Martinique. They were all battle weary. Their hearts simply weren't up to another battle so soon. Had they known of the events going on at the time, they would have felt differently. Within their grasp was the chance to kill the infant CIA, and neutralize their biggest threat of all. Even Ramirez could have been killed, did they but know it.

But in their fatigue induced dullness, ignorance prevailed, and the mighty pirate fleet sailed by, unaware even of the fright and terror they had caused the people there.

They anchored for the night in a quiet bay on the islet of Bequia, in the Grenadines. It was peaceful there, and Rafe finally let his feelings be known to his best friend.

"Angus, I just don't know that I have the heart for this anymore. So much death, so much destruction, all caused by me, at my command."

"Lad, T'is natural to feel as ye do. It's been a long three and a half months. We all miss home. You miss your lady. It's been a damnably long time at sea for us. Perhaps the longest many of us ever had. But Rafe, don't despair, you've done damn well!"

"I suppose," Rafe said.

"You suppose? Lad, look at what we've done under you leadership! Sixty-nine ships sunk all told. That's sixty-nine ships that won't harass or kill us! But Rafe, we did this with no losses of our own! In fact, we even gained two ships in the process. This has to be one of the most successful, brilliant military expeditions the world has ever seen. All done by a bunch of pirate rogues with little discipline but a lot of loyalty... loyalty to you, Rafe. You should be proud, not depressed."

"You're right in what you say, Angus," Rafe said. "I just wish we were home."

“Soon, lad, soon. And then we can revisit our plans to settle with Ramirez.”

Rafe’s eyes regained their fire. “Yes, there’s still Ramirez.”

On the first morning out of Bequia, Jake was on watch in the crow’s nest atop the *Devil’s Claw’s* tallest mast. He was thinking about his homeland, and how he came to be where he was. “I was once known as M’Bele G’Tinga,” he thought. “I lived on the West African coast and I miss my family so much.” A frown crossed his face. “But that was another life, years ago, before the slavers came.”

“The pirates liberated me and named me Jake,” he mused. “They taught me English, the ways of the sea, sailing, navigation, and most important, how to be a good pirate.”

He squinted as the sun shone in his eyes. The salty wind in his face felt good. “I’ve had a good life since then,” he thought, “if a violent one. The pirates treat me and my fellow blacks as equals. The work is equally shared, as is the reward. I enjoy the company of my fellow pirates too,

“Especially Baka’mu.” He smiled. “That large Indian and I often talk long into the night about our time as slaves, and of our homeland.”

“Yes, I suppose I have a good life, of a sort, but I still miss home. The pain of missing my wife and little girl child is almost more than I can bear.”

In his times of introspection, when he was alone like this, his thoughts were always of Africa.

His homeward thoughts were rudely shaken off when his eyes spotted a ship on the horizon.

“Sail ho!” he shouted. “Sail ho, three points off the port bow!”

Instantly the ship stirred with life. Gun crews made ready. Men loaded their muskets and pistols. Rafe took his spyglass, searching, Angus by his side.

“It’s a schooner,” Rafe observed, keeping the glass on the ship. “The sails have all been struck, there are no colors flying. It seems to be just drifting aimlessly.”

“Has she been damaged? Any signs of battle?” Angus asked.

“None as I can see,” Rafe answered. “She’s just sitting there.”

Angus scratched his beard. “Strange it is, lad. Most strange.”

A half hour later, the *Devil’s Claw* was approaching the derelict ship, followed closely by the *Adventure Galley*. At this close proximity, they could

make out the ship's name, *Aristad*. They still saw no crew however, nor any other sign of life.

Rafe turned to Angus. "Make ready to board her. We'll get to the bottom of this yet."

"Captain!" Jake called from the crow's nest. "From here I can see the decks. There are people lying around all over it. Can't tell if they're alive."

With a growing sense of urgency, Rafe maneuvered the *Devil's Claw* alongside the *Aristad's* port side and grappled the two ships together. A few minutes later, the *Adventure Galley* did the same on the starboard side. The rest of the pirate fleet stood one hundred yards away, ever watchful of any surprises.

The sight and smell that greeted Rafe and the boarding party was overwhelming. The decks were littered with scores of bodies, some dead, some barely alive. They were men and women, all nearly naked, all black. This was a slaver ship. But where were the white captors and crew?

Rafe barked his orders. "Get water to everyone still alive immediately. If any are strong enough to eat, feed them. Search below decks. See if there are any signs of the crew. And have Jake brought to me at once."

About that time Captain Taylor Moores swung over from the *Adventure Galley*. "Phew! This place stinks! Looks like the niggers revolted and took over the ship. Dumb bastards didn't know what to do with it once they had it."

Rafe nodded. "Aye, that's how I read it too. Appears they've been without food and water for days."

Jake came to Rafe's side. "You wanted me, Cap'n?"

"Yes, Jake. Search among the survivors for anyone you can talk to, anyone whose language you know. Find out what happened."

Jake nodded slightly. "As ye say, Cap'n."

Moores looked around. "Not a bad ship, once she's been cleaned out. No real damage anywhere. I say we sell the niggers and take the ship into the fleet."

"I haven't decided what to do with it yet," Rafe said testily. "As first to board her, it's *my* right to salvage, not yours."

Moores started to fire back a nasty retort, but thought better of it. Fuming he stalked off, inspecting other parts of the ship.

Rafe surveyed the scene before him. Thin, dehydrated, nearly naked, sunburned men and women lay on the deck, many unable to move. Some were so bad, it was difficult to tell if they were alive or not.

Baka'mu, at Rafe's side, observed, "They fought for their freedom and found it. They knew it was better to be brave than slave. We have to help them, Rafe."

"They are being fed and watered as we speak. Angus is looking them over too."

"That's not what I mean," said the Indian.

"What then?" Rafe asked.

"They deserve their freedom. They fought for it and won. Don't sell them back into slavery."

"I don't *want* to..."

"Remember the slaves we saw in Charleston? How you said it was wrong but there was nothing we could do for *them*? Well there is something we can do for these people. Let them stay free,"

"Outside of taking them into our community, that's easier said than done," Rafe said. "They are in a strange, foreign culture, and don't speak the language. Their black skin is inescapable and marks them. They can't move among any island or come across any ship. The first time they see a white face, they'll be enslaved immediately. I feel for them, but there's only so much I can do."

"You can give them a fighting chance," Baka'mu said. "It's a start."

A few minutes later, Jake made his report. "Cap'n, the *Aristad* left Africa six weeks ago with a cargo of two hundred blacks, mostly men. One of the daily routines was to bring small groups from below decks to exercise and breathe fresh air for a few minutes, to help assure the survival rate. It was during one of these times, ten days ago, that a group of them was able to overcome the crew. The *toubab*, the whites, were all killed and thrown overboard. But these are jungle people, mountain people. Many of them had never even seen the ocean before. They had no idea what to do, how to control the ship, navigate, anything. They've just been drifting since they took the ship. They ran out of food and water almost immediately. Cap'n, there are only sixty left alive! I'd say another eight or ten of them will die soon. All of them are weak, dehydrated, and starving. But all of them have a light in their eyes, Cap'n, the light of freedom."

"You are not going to put out that light, are you, Rafe?" Baka'mu challenged.

Rafe shot him an annoyed look, but ignored him. Addressing Jake he asked, "If we bring them into the pirate society, as crewmen, workers, whatever, just as happened with you and your mates, would they accept that?"

Jake shrugged. "Sure, if the only other choice is death or slavery. But Cap'n, they want to go *home*. We *all* want to go *home*."

"Including you, I suppose?"

"Yes sir. And if you'll allow it, we have a chance, for the first time, for us to make it. There are enough blacks in the crews of the ships to man the *Aristad*. We have the know-how to cross the ocean, to survive the sea. We can take these people, and ourselves back to Africa. All you have to do is give us the ship, and release us from the crew."

Rafe was thoughtful for several long moments. A tense anticipation seemed to hang in the air. Finally he said, "You'll have to totally re-provision before you go. Enough to last eight weeks"

"Aye."

"Once you leave us, you'll be totally on your own. There will be no friendly ports. Every ship you come across should be considered enemy. You'll have no friends."

"Aye, Cap'n, but—"

"And if you are lucky, and *do* make Africa, it will be even more dangerous there. Those waters are teeming with the slave ships of every nation in Europe. Your chances of getting recaptured are very high."

Jake boldly touched Rafe's upper arm. "Cap'n, I appreciate your concerns and warnings. I know them to be true. But none of them outweigh the prospect of a future of freedom at home with our families. It is well worth those risks, and more."

Rafe looked deep into Jake's eyes. They were determined, yet pleading. Excited, yet tired. His kindly face pulled at Rafe's heart, and he couldn't refuse him. He looked to Baka'mu, who nodded ever so slightly. He breathed deeply in through his nose and sighed loudly saying, "very well. The *Aristad* is yours."

Jake's face beamed. "Thank you Cap'n."

"One condition," Rafe cautioned.

Jake raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"I'll not have any of my ships suffer from crew shortage. We've taken casualties on this voyage, and some ships have barely enough crew to continue. My *first* responsibility has to be to the fleet, and then to the Black Widow. I'll not allow a wholesale exodus of blacks leaving our ships shorthanded to the point of danger."

Jake nodded. "I understand, Cap'n. We won't do that to you. I will hand pick only about fifteen myself. Chances are, most of the blacks have been pirates so long, they'll prefer to stay with you."

“Then we’re agreed, Rafe Said. “Go select your men.”

After Jake left, Baka’mu said, “You made the right decision, Rafe. All men deserve to be home.”

“What about you, my friend?” Rafe asked.

Baka’mu’s face darkened. “My home is on Hispaniola. I would like to return there and live out my days with my tribe and family. But that is impossible until Ramirez is dead.”

Rafe placed his hands on his friend’s shoulders. “Hopefully, that will be soon. We’ve both waited long enough.”

Later that day, a furious Captain Moores confronted Rafe. “Are you *crazy*? Are you really gonna just let the niggers go off with the ship? Do you realize the worth of what you are throwing away? Thousands!”

Never one to be intimidated, Rafe’s back tightened and he looked Moores straight in the eye with hard determination. “I realize the *value* of what we are doing, and it’s worth a hell of a lot more than your worth by selling them. They have their lives back, and I’m *not* going to take back my word.”

Moores was not convinced. “You’re nuts! The boss won’t like it either. She’ll be mad as hell.”

“You leave the Black Widow to me. I take full responsibility for this.”

Moores gave a disgusted chuckle. “Humph! Easy to get your way with the boss when you’re *screwing* her all the time—”

With a blurry speed that belied his boiling rage, Rafe grabbed Moores by the throat and backed him against the mast before he, or anyone else knew it. His dagger was in Moores’ face.

“*One more word!*” Rafe shouted, spittle hitting Moores’ face. “One more word and I swear I’ll slit your nose!”

With the tip of Rafe’s dagger painfully pricking his nose, Moores was a mixture of anger, shock and fear. Rafe’s hand closing tighter around his neck made it difficult to breathe. The look in Rafe’s eye was unmistakable... he was *not* bluffing. No one around them said or did anything. This was between the two of them.

His blood pounding in his ears, Rafe fought to control his temper. Panting, he stared down his adversary for several long moments. After what seemed like a very long time, Rafe finally said, “Never again will you speak thus about the Black Widow! *Never!* Understand?”

“Ye... yes,” Moores’ voice cracked.

“Never again will you question my decision or authority. On *any* matter. Do I make myself clear?”

Again, Moores' dry throat could only manage a garbled, "yes".

Rafe relaxed his grip on the neck, but kept his knife at the face. "If either of these things should ever happen again, I *will* kill you! Believe it!" He lowered his blade. "Now get the hell off this ship!"

Without a word, Moores turned and stalked purposely away.

Looking around at the men staring at him he raised his voice saying, "Back to work you scabrous dogs! This is not some holiday!"

Escorted by the *Devil's Claw*, with the rest of the pirate fleet sailing nearby, the *Aristad*, manned by seventeen pirates of African descent, sailed to the small islet of Carriacou, nominally part of Grenada. They spent four days there, fully re-provisioning the *Aristad* with food and water for its Trans-Atlantic voyage.

It was an uneventful time for the pirates. Repairs and wound healing were nearly accomplished, and everyone seemed anxious to get back under sail to make the last leg homeward.

It was noon of the fifth day when the *Aristad* sailed eastward, leaving the protection, camaraderie, wealth, and friendship of the pirates behind. It fired a cannon as a farewell salute, then caught a strong wind and swiftly sailed toward the horizon.

Rafe and Angus stood at the rail of the foc'sle, watching them go.

"Do ye think they'll make it, Rafe?" Angus asked.

Rafe shook his head imperceptibly. "Everything is against them. And it's not just the perils of the voyage, or the danger of enemies. It's actually finding their homes and families. Africa is a big continent. Even if they make landfall, they'll have hundreds, maybe thousands of miles to go to try to even find them. All in a hostile land, beset by hostile people. I suspect most won't make it. But I *hope* they do."

"Aye", Angus said, "so do I."

The pirates of *Islas las Roques* had been busy in the nearly four months Rafe and the fleet was circumnavigating the Caribbean. In addition to their raid at *Isla de Margarita* and the acquisition of Captain Brunty and the *Diablo*, all three pirate vessels had been careened, sails and rigging replaced or repaired, everything received a fresh coat of paint and been fully cleaned and refurbished.

The land defenses had been improved. The stone wall at the top of the ravine that came from the desert plain was five feet high and over three feet

thick. The two mountain howitzers guarded the approach with well-practiced gun crews and almost unlimited ammunition.

But there was a nasty diabolical addition to the Black Widow's rear defenses. It was known that the flat roof of her house afforded an excellent view of the desert beyond. No invasion force of any size, once they came close, would escape detection. It was on this rooftop that a catapult was constructed and placed in such a way that it could lob projectiles far down the narrow ravine. Not as far as the cannons, but far enough to suit her needs.

The catapult's projectiles were clay pots, about two and a half feet in diameter. The tops were closed and secured with woven lids. It was what was inside these clay pots that the Black Widow's devilish and dark mind had conjured. Each housed at least four rattlesnakes. Considering that there were six of these pots ready to be vaulted into an enemy force that meant that two dozen poisonous and angry snakes would fall from the sky onto the hapless and unsuspecting attackers. Once these 'pots of poison' had all been launched, the rooftop still made a good point for sharpshooters to add their fire to the defenses.

Obtaining these rattlesnakes was not that easy. True, there were many on the desert plain, but the pirates were loath to capture them. Two were actually bitten in the process, but they eventually recovered, though painfully. It was only with the Black Widow paying ten pieces of eight to anyone brave enough, and fast enough, to capture the serpents that there was anyone willing to attempt such a dangerous task.

For her part, the Black Widow had to be kept busy. Her longing for Rafe, and frustration of her mighty fleet being gone for so long was infuriating to her. Even after the snake defenses were finished, and the ship repairs completed, she was still anxious and at times, short tempered.

One of the ways that helped pass the time was practicing her swordsmanship. Everyone knew she was far more accomplished than most of them, but there were those, like McDonie and Brunty who enjoyed the swordplay with her, and were happy to oblige her requests.

It was mid-afternoon under a partly cloudy sky, aboard the *Viuda Negro* when Captain Brunty and the Black Widow were sparring, their bodies clammy with sweat, and the air reverberating with the clang of clashing steel. Everyone's attention was suddenly diverted by the thunderous boom of the bay entry gun battery. It was a signal of ships approaching. Were they friend or foe?

Scarcely able to contain her excitement, Chantica clambered up the rigging into the crow's nest to get a better view. Heart racing, she thought, "could it could be Rafe"?

Even without the spyglass she could tell that it was a large number of ships approaching. Quickly she counted them. Fourteen! Fourteen ships were bearing down on her. But her fleet only held twelve, if indeed they all survived, which was doubtful. Her heart sank. Not only was this not her fleet, but more than likely, an invincible force of her enemies! Her small force would never be able to withstand them. A cold sliver of fear slid down the back of her neck.

"Can you see who it is?" McDonie asked.

Ignoring him, she raised the spyglass for a better look. After a few tense moments to get her focus, she finally found the lead ship. A wave of relief, followed by another of excitement came over her. There was no doubt that she was seeing the *Devil's Claw*! Though she still couldn't quite see Rafe, she could see the name on the bow. Quickly scanning the other ships, she saw other familiar names—*Queegah*, *Cutlass*, *Rising Sun*...

"It's the Fleet!" She hollered down. "They've come home!"

"Can you tell which ships made it?" asked Captain Pratt.

Again she scanned the fleet with her spyglass. The ships were closer now, and she could identify them easier. It took her a few minutes, but she eventually was able to identify all of them, including the two new vessels, the *Demon* and *Viper*.

She sucked her breath hard when by chance, the spyglass caught Rafe standing at *Devil's Claws'* wheel. God he was so handsome! She nearly trembled with excitement.

"Well?" Pratt persisted.

The Black Widow smiled, lowering the glass. "As impossible as it seems, every ship that left has come home. We didn't lose a one! It also appears that two more ships have joined the fleet."

"Damn!" McDonie swore. "Seems impossible! No losses at all?"

Her face darkened a bit. "I'm sure there were losses of men, if not ships. We need a full report immediately. There will be a captain's call at my house within a half hour of the fleet's landing. Inform your first mates as well."

A little over an hour and a half later, Rafe's fleet had either docked at the wharf or anchored in the bay. A throng of cheers filled their ears and there was an atmosphere of celebration pervading the air.

The Black Widow boldly strode aboard the *Devil's Claw* and threw her arms around Rafe's neck and kissed him passionately. She was oblivious and

uncaring of the eyes that watched them. She didn't care. Her love had returned to her.

Finally breaking the kiss, Rafe whispered, "God, I've missed you so much!"

"I've been nearly crazy without you," she breathed. "I'm so glad you're home, and unhurt."

"It seemed like we were gone forever instead of four months."

She hugged him hard. "Well, you're back now, and I'll not let you go ever again."

"Tica, we have a lot to talk about."

She stepped back to a more professional stance. "Yes, I want a full report at once. All captains and first mates to my house as soon as you can."

"Aye," he responded. "I'll see they're all informed."

The Black Widow's war room was crowded, hot and stuffy. The open windows mercifully allowed a gentle breeze, but the number of people in the close quarters made for a thirsty debriefing. Accordingly, rum and grog were in abundance.

The three new captains—Serey, Simmons, and Brunty—were introduced to all. They received throaty shouts of encouraged welcome that only pirates could do.

Addressing Serey and Simmons, the Black Widow said, "I *thought* the Port Royal prison break was Rafe's doing. Welcome to my band of brigands."

"Actually," Rafe said, "It was more Freeman and Serey's doing than mine. We all had a hand in it in our own way, to be sure, but they're the ones who pulled it off."

The Black Widow sat in her high backed chair behind her massive desk. "I want to hear *everything*. From start to finish. Leave nothing out."

For over two hours the pirates gave their report. Rafe did most of the talking, but occasionally a captain would cut in with information related to his viewpoint or experience. In chronological order, every engagement was related, in great detail.

She was surprised to discover that a dozen ships had been sunk before they ever cleared the Venezuelan coast. Her jaw dropped in amazement when she heard of the sinking of ten galleons at Cartagena.

She was amused when Angus told her they had disobeyed her orders not to plunder, and had taken not one, but three treasure galleons. Rafe assured her that her ten percent off the top was secure in the hold of the *Devil's Claw*.

When she heard the details of the whole Cayman-Port Royal affair, her heart swelled with pride and vociferously congratulated and complimented the men on a job very well done against incredible odds.

She chuckled upon hearing of the burning of Havana and San Juan. "Damn Spanish bastards can fry all night for all I care," she muttered.

When learning of the defeat of the eleven French warships with the elegant and crafty formations and maneuvering she slowly shook her head with wonder. Surely her captains were the best the sea had ever known.

But it was the British defeat in Antigua that left her speechless with awe. Such a smashing and overwhelming victory was almost unimaginable.

Then it was time for Rafe to relate the *Aristad* episode. Without mentioning names, but with a coy look to Moores, he admitted he'd lost a great deal of value, but argued that he'd done the *right* thing, the moral thing.

The Black Widow was thoughtful for a few moments. "I've never been a fan of slavery. My mother was a slave. True, we could have used the ship, and gained more men. But it was Rafe's call, *his* decision. And I'm sure he did what he felt was right. I can't disagree with him. I consider the matter closed."

Rafe cleared his throat. "In all we fought twelve battles, sinking sixty-nine warships. Additionally, we significantly burned or destroyed three cities, two forts, and took three treasure galleons for a rather nice profit to us all. Along the way, we lost no ships, although we did suffer the loss of one hundred and ten men. Finally, we gained two ships with very fine captains and crew. I think anyone would agree it was a very successful expedition."

The Black Widow threw her head back with laughter. "Successful? That doesn't begin to describe it. You were far more successful than I dared hope for. This will have to be considered one of the most successful military operations in history! I am *so damn* proud of each and every one of you! From the captains to the swabbies, all of you deserve praise and recognition."

"Well," Rafe said, "I doubt there is anyone out there who can threaten us for a long time. I think we've assured the safety of Islas Las Roques for the foreseeable future."

A chorus of cheers and oaths filled the room with half drunken pirates feeling very good about themselves.

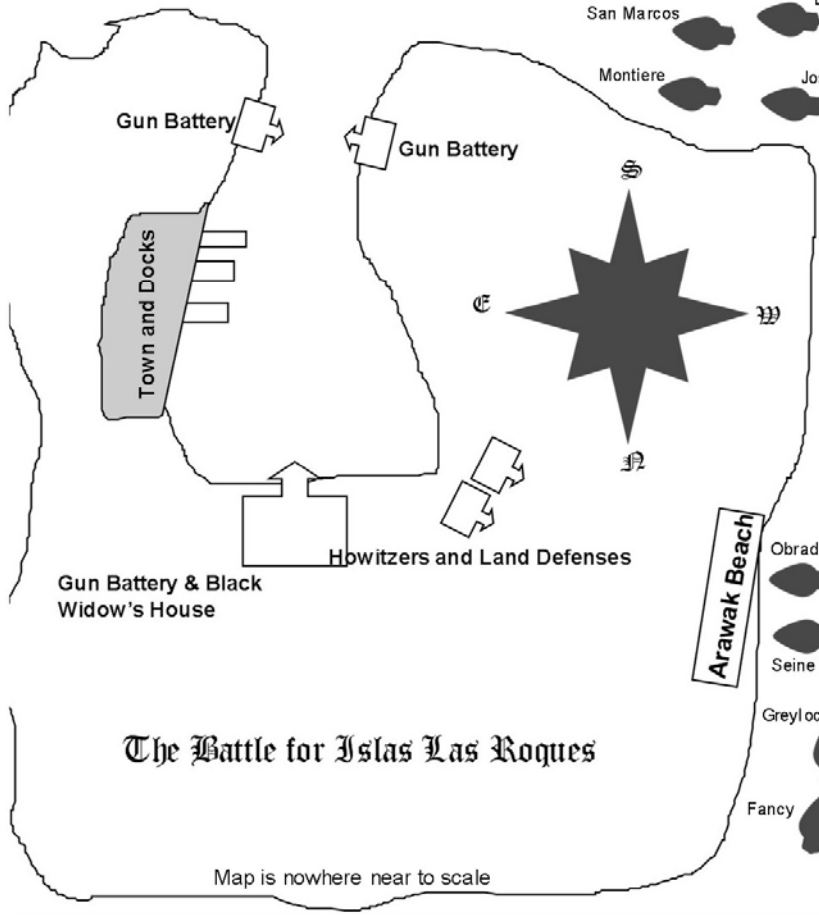
"Enough talk," Sands bellowed. "It's time to party, and party hardy."

With a dismissive wave the Black Widow let the men go, among singing, swearing, and general merry making. This night would rival the biggest celebration the pirate nation would ever see. Boundaries of

moderation were shattered. Alcohol intake set new records. Sexual cavorting was rampant.

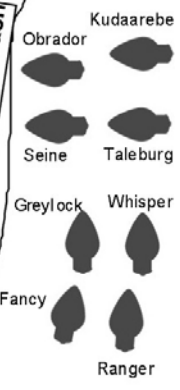
After they left the house, the Black Widow took Rafe's hand and led him toward the bedroom. "Come on," she said huskily. "It's time you used your tongue for something besides talking."

**A Dish Best Served
Cold**



The Battle for Islas Las Roques

Map is nowhere near to scale





Rafe Alexander joined the pirate crew of the Cutlass, and learned of the brutality his mother endured at the hands of Ramirez, his own father, whom he had never known. Joining the fleet of the Black Widow, queen of the largest pirate fleet of all, he vowed to exact his revenge. The Black Widow also wanted vengeance against Ramirez. Together, they would become the most feared and powerful force the Caribbean would ever see...

Pirates' Revenge

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