

The Black Siren
by Howard Freedman
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Somewhere in the Caribbean - 1622

“Land Ho!”

The sound of the voice came from high up the mast. Juan was on watch in the crow's nest when the small island was spotted off in the distance. Captain Juarez heard the cry from below deck. He had turned over the wheel just fifteen minutes ago and according to the charts, there should be no land in sight. This he had to see for himself.

Juarez came up the steps that led from the quarters below and went to stand next to Pug at the wheel.

“Where?” the captain barked in a commanding tone.

Pug had already started turning the wheel in the direction Juan had pointed. The lookout kept a fix on the spot and Juarez followed Juan's outstretched hand until he saw the island. A small island in the middle of a calm sea just a few miles away. Night had not yet fallen but would be mere moments from settling in. The horizon held a light orange cast as the sun began to meet the sea. When the ship adjusted course the sinking ball of light fell behind the small land mass. The captain raised his spyglass and looked toward the horizon. The light was dimming but there was definitely smoke. A plume of gray that gained momentum and intensity even as he watched.

“Um” grunted Juarez as he lowered the spyglass but continued his stare towards the setting sun.

“What is it Captain?” asked Pug behind the wheel.

“You know what they say matey. Where there's smoke, there's fire. And that is a lot of smoke for such a small island.”

Juarez raised the spyglass again for another look. A glow emanating below the tree line became visible, its light gaining strength as the sun lost its battle with buoyancy against the distant waves. The cloud of smoke grew above its source offering some help in illuminating the area as firelight below reflected off it. By this time the ship was close enough to spot the exchange of catamarans.

This scraggly bunch of pirates had been known to crash a party or two but Juarez thought caution to be best. A little reconnaissance first. At the moment it was hard to tell what they would be walking into. They might be outnumbered, although so far their adversaries only appeared to be mere savages.

The smaller boats of natives, all dressed appropriately for the ritual at hand, continued to approach from all directions, presumably from other uncharted islands. The raging fire could not yet be seen from the vantage point of the larger vessel but the glow lit up the light sand beach which welcomed the new arrivals while simultaneously bidding goodbye to those who had already conducted their business. Juarez directed his party up the darker side of the island where whatever festivity that brought the natives was hidden beyond the heavy natural vegetation. The band of pirates disembarked from there and walked quietly through the brush

towards the smoke that kept billowing above. They stopped when only a row of dense bushes separated the motley crew from the pyre in the clearing ahead.

Captain Juarez had thirteen men breathing down his neck, literally, at least for the first few directly behind him. He was the captain so the rest lined up at his back. Juarez pointed the spyglass to where the pyre blazed beyond the brush they hid behind. The whispers among the band of thieves fell abruptly short as Juarez raised one hand. The gesture was meant as an order of silence. Quick to acknowledge the order, the men ceased their jabber and crowded behind their leader to get a look.

Another catamaran glided up to the shore. Two natives in brightly colored garb quickly jumped out upon arrival, one from the front while the other exited from the back of the boat. Between them sat their cargo. Out of the boat, the two turned back and retrieved the reason for their visit. The men behind the captain could only see what was carried from the shore as awkward cargo of various size and configurations. Awkward as the natives had scooped the offerings in their arms allowing shimmering pots filled with items that sparkled when hit by the brilliant firelight. When the natives were half-way up the beach, Juarez with his magnified viewpoint saw what they hastened to bring to the island. Precious stones of ruby red and emerald green shimmered at the top of the golden pots while chains of gold dangled out the sides.

“Gold” whispered the captain.

“Oouh” went the men behind.

“Jewels” continued the captain.

“Aahh” a little louder now from the horde of eager thieves.

With the spyglass still in hand, Juarez followed the natives up the beach until he saw them come before the source of the fire. It burned with intensity atop where the sand beach came to an end and a rise in the land began. The bonfire was as impressive as any the men had ever seen but something else added to the mystery of the event.

An altar of sorts met the approaching gift-bearers. They were greeted there by one attired in a more lavish style. A leader or at least someone commanding authority if only for the ritual at hand. He wore a long robe laden with bright ancient symbols painted throughout. He held in one hand a golden medallion which was otherwise attached to a chain around his neck. His other hand remained free to gesture with the golden staff that it held, all part of the ritual as he touched the medallion to the forehead of each reveler that came bearing sacrifice. He danced about the altar while chanting some foreign ceremony never before witnessed by the band of pirates. The spectacle held the men mesmerized. The current two natives, once anointed by what appeared to be some sort of high priest, continued with their pots of booty around the figure and seemed to disappear behind him. Transfixed by the spectacle at the altar, Juarez and his men didn't immediately notice the next set of natives coming up the beach in the same manner as the last. Their arrival was followed by more blessings from the priest as they rounded the robed man. The previous two natives came running back down the beach, entered their boat and pushed off to return from wherever they had come.

The pirates watched as the scene continued to play out, with each new arrival, their giddiness of pending good fortune getting the better of them. The murmur of the merry men built in intensity with each new pot of fortune that past before them. Pug with a moment of lapse in control, let his enthusiasm get the better of him.

“We're going to be rich mates!”

Discretion had left his state of mind as the words bellowed out of him, the other twelve

mates giving in to the moment with a group cheer as if it were modern times and they just witnessed their team make a touchdown.

Their roar was met by another. As if in answer to the intrusion, the fire seemed to lash out in a suddenly surge of intensity, as if new logs had been thrown onto the hungry pyre and the sudden shift in heat expanded the burning air to create thunder within it. As the fire animated, renewed with life, the men joined Pug in a most audible shivering gasp of surprise.

For a second no one moved, fearful that they may have blown their cover but the priestly figure and those attending the ritual gave no indication of a disturbance beyond the brush.

Juarez looked back over his shoulder and just laughed at the men. "Superstitious, are we."

Before anyone could answer, another wave of natives ran back down the beach to their waiting vessels.

"Perhaps, captain. And it would seem that we might not be the only ones."

The superstition would prove to be more than a reasonable response, but they wouldn't truly realize it until it was much too late.

The procession had continued throughout the night. It wasn't until an hour or so before dawn that the last of the natives, bringing riches to appease whatever gods they wished to gain favor, had ceased landing on the shore. No one remained at the altar except for the one that had commanded the ceremony.

"It's time men." Juarez reached for his sword and held it high. "Let's take what's ours."

With that, the band of thieves stormed the beach and converged on the man that had settled into the throne on the altar out of sheer exhaustion. His eyes were closed, his face showed no fear as if expecting them. But it wasn't them he was expecting. Perhaps it was the gods he anticipated to come and claim payment for another year of protection. Unfortunately, the priest quickly realized what tragedy had befallen their efforts when he opened his eyes as the men gagged him, then bound him to the throne. Once satisfied that they had secured their lone obstacle to riches, they proceeded to enter the mouth of the cave behind the altar, even as the fire above continued to burn.

Within moments, men were running down the beach again, this time with their arms full of bounty. They returned in the direction of their hiding place and scrambled back to the ship with the fruits of their labor after waiting in the dark for what seemed like eternity.

Back at the ship, Juarez directed the the task of sealing their new precious cargo behind the false walls below deck. They knew as well as anyone that the waters carried ruthless men who would sell their own souls for an opportunity of relieving them of such valuables. But their plan had served them well before. Anyone who should try to challenge them along the way would never find any of their treasure. Usually the trick worked and that was enough to grant them safe passage.

With the cargo stowed, the band of pirates set sail. Before they reached beyond view of the island, their ship had passed back within sight of the beach. The fire was all but extinguished by now. The dim light from their vantage point barely registered on their minds, not noticing that the one adorned in a long robe had broken free and stood at the shoreline waving the golden staff as the words of the incantation left his lips. The men oblivious to the fact that the waters were now cursed, as well as those who sailed it.

The men had been itching to begin the revelry once the shore of the island fell beyond

the reach of sight. Hector had the watch in the crow's nest while Captain Juarez kept vigil at the ship's retreating back end. He was allowing for the chance that there may be some brave, yet foolish, natives in the catamarans that might come after all the gold and jewels that the band of pirates had felt served far better good in their hands than the hands of some invisible god.

By now, morning's first light had filtered over the distant horizon of the otherwise empty sea. Juarez lowered the spyglass and grinned with a sense of ease. He turned and gave the signal with a twirl of the hand high above his head. The coast, as it were, was clear.

The deck of the old wooden sailing vessel erupted with thirteen men who up until this point acted like reserved civilized individuals and not the fraternity of misfits that they truly were. They all shouted, hooped, hollered and knocked one another about as the stash of rum came up from the hold below deck, a ritual that no man dare violate until the captain had given the order to do so. And with the wave of that hand, the order had been given and acted upon with the voracity of a pack of wolves over a slain deer. No holding back for they all knew that the booty they liberated today would bring more than enough to replenish the supply and a whole lot more.

Julio came up last from below with a bottle in hand. By now, everyone had had at least a few healthy swigs of rum and was singing hardily with the spirit of camaraderie. Julio joined them in a dance at the top of the stairs, jumping and twisting about to the rhythm of song. The captain milled about the men, smiling, gripping each man's shoulder in turn as a sign of appreciation for a job well done. As he did with Julio, but the smile morphed into a look of confusion for the man was still dancing about with a strange jangle about him. Not so much strange as highly suspect considering.....

The captain's grip on Julio's shoulder tightened, anchoring the giddy pirate where he stood. He looked into the captain's eyes and immediately knew that the briefest moment of lack of discretion was now surely his doom.

Juarez violently ripped the man's shirt with his free hand exposing the man's bare chest, bare of anything but for the three golden chains embedded with jewels which dangled from his neck.

"You snake!" Juarez yelled. The men nearby that hadn't yet witnessed the unveiling of the traitor were all staring at him now. "You stealing from everyone else? You think you deserve an extra share?" bellowed the captain.

"No, Captain. I'm sorry, Captain."

"Besides, you how we operate. Hide every speck of treasure while out on the high seas, unless you want to put all of us at risk, as well as the booty. Is that what you want, like when the Spanish fleet came upon us and robbed us of our spoils?"

Julio became tongue-tied and could no longer hold the gaze of their leader. He looked about the deck for at least one look of compassion and understanding. He found none.

"Throw him over!" cried one.

Juarez thought about it, for a moment, but offered "That would be too easy." He removed the chains from Julio's neck. "Pug. Hector. Take him and lock him in the hold."

And with that, the two men each grabbed an arm of the compadre turned thief to lead him away. "And take these" Juarez told Pug handing him the chains "and safely stow them with the rest."

It didn't take long to forget about Julio. For most of the men, the act by their fellow crewmate was not foreign, at least in thought. Temptation had clawed at all of them one time

or another. It was only the fear of being caught and the retribution that would follow that kept them in line. Yeah, even pirates have a code of moral conduct, if not in society at large, at least among themselves. Besides when you're out at sea, its not like you have far to run. So with that nasty business out of the way and the culprit left out of sight to contemplate the error of his ways, the party continued.

One bottle led to twelve, one song blurred into countless others. Knees buckled and bodies swayed, partially for the ocean waves, mostly for the waves their heads felt from the overindulgence of alcohol. The weaker of the bunch had succumbed to the floor no longer able to stand. Those who could ventured to their bunks below. The stronger soon resorted to hanging on to the ropes so as not to fall overboard. Hector included. He had never returned to the crows nest once the party was underway, but that mistake was about to be revealed as he looked out toward the northwest from the side of the ship and saw something in the distance.

A ship, he was pretty sure, but like none he had seen before. He tried to straighten up with a quick sobering thought that his abandoning of post could place him in far worse jeopardy than of his mate Julio once the captain hears him yell "Company on the water."

At first no one reacted with alarm. The words seemed to be heard though as they became incorporated into the following verse of song. Hector stood holding on for balance and took the spyglass for a better look at the odd vessel making determined progress in their direction. An odd vessel of a shade of gray uncommon upon the seas. However, the color only brought attention to other details of a ship that did not appear to look like any they had ever seen. Constructed not of wood, of that he was sure as it swiftly closed the distance between them. It was definitely armed though, not with the cannons of the royal fleets, but he could tell nonetheless that some sort of firepower was being aimed at him as he looked through the glass. Men were standing on the deck of the foreign ship which had snuck up on them so close now that its markings were visible.

Pirates? Hardly he thought. He didn't know what they were.

Present Day

It was coming on nine o'clock in the morning, not a particularly busy time for the Dirty Dive Bar and Grill on this or any other day of the week. But this was Sunday and the locals of Meridian were normally sluggish to face the new week. After all, it was a day of rest, so what was the rush. The sun on this particular morning seemed to have the same reclusive attitude as those who dwell below it, hiding behind the puffy clouds that took on more shades of gray than of white. Not untypical for this time of year in the Florida Keys. Rain wasn't in the forecast, but the sky took on a dismal effect that did nothing to elicit much activity about the pier or the nearby docks full of boats of impressive stature.

Jake Landry was one of the few to emerge from below deck. His new boat, Siren Quest, rocked lightly among the morning waves as the tide shifted. Not as new a vessel as some of the yachts that moored nearby, nor not quite as large as some either, but it was as worthy a sea vessel as most that ventured out into the waters beyond the islands of southern Florida.

Jake stood on deck and stretched the morning stiffness from his body. Barely thirty, his toned physique hit the sea air as his unbuttoned Hawaiian print shirt flapped in the breeze, his khaki shorts completing the casual attire of a man of leisure. For the rest of the month he was a man of leisure; then he would have to go back to the city.

The Siren Quest was his uncle's boat. At least it was before Chaz Landry's passing last month. It was a forty footer, fully equipped to sail out on the open water under the power that nature provided. For adventure on one level or pure relaxing on another, the sails were the propulsion of choice. However, the Siren Quest was a boat destined for serious undertakings, demanding control and response in the pursuit of treasure beneath the waves. Two hundred horsepower awaited within the engine that gave the boat its real speed and power.

Since he was a teenager, Jake had been fond of his uncle and the feeling had been quite mutual. He had become somewhat of a sailor himself thanks to Chaz's tutelage, although it was just a leisure pastime for him. He'd sail the family rig on weekends back in Ft. Myers. But his motivation mirrored more his father's when he was young than that of his uncle in one respect. Girls. It became obvious that a nice boat could serve as an effective means to an end.

As a young boy, Jake had heard the stories surrounding his uncle's pursuits of sunken treasure. Some successful, some not. Of course the successful ones were nothing of the nature to bestow immense wealth on him or the family. Only enough to keep the fire in his heart alive in hopes of one day hitting the big score. That is until the day Chaz decided to let what has lain on the bottom of the ocean rest in peace.

Jake surveyed the docks and found but a few others stirring about, wrestling with their nets, no doubt preparing for another day's catch. Down the pier closer to shore he glanced at the Dirty Dive. It was a landmark of rustic décor at least five years behind schedule on having its once white exterior revitalized. Jake had only arrived in Meridian the evening before, just long enough to stop into the establishment for a quick beer. He had been anxious to settle aboard his new boat so he bought a six pack to go. That beer was now gone. He hoped that the Dirty Dive had a coffee pot brewing at this hour.

"Morning" Jake greeted the man behind the bar. He set down the book he carried and rubbed his weary red eyes half hidden under the brim of a dark cap.

"Coffee?" asked the bartender.

"Yes, please. Black with sugar. Make that two sugars."

Before those words were finished, the man had already reached under the counter for a clean cup and reached for the pot on the burner behind him. He filled the cup and placed the tray of assorted sweeteners beside it.

"You were in last night, right?" he asked Jake.

"Yeah. That's right."

"Vacation?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that, although I'll probably be coming down more often now."

"Oh? How's that?"

Jake stuck a thumb out in the direction from where he came down the pier. "The Siren Quest. My uncle's boat. Well, my boat now."

"Right. Yeah, I heard about old Chaz. Bad ticker was it? Nice guy. He'd been more quiet in recent years though. Not as animated as he once was known to be."

Another early riser came through the door, glanced at the two men and took a seat at the end of the bar near the door.

"So you knew him, my uncle?"

"A little. Everyone around here knows at least of him. Sorry for your loss buddy."

"It's Jake" he said sticking out his hand.

“Todd. Nice to meet your acquaintance” he said as they shook hands.

Jake looked down the bar at the other man. A three day growth on his face, long dark hair and bronze complexion. He could have been a local, someone who made a living on the fishing boats, but Todd's comment discounted that impression.

“Seems like it's a good week for newcomers. Felipe has only been here a week or so himself. Excuse me a second while I see what my other new friend is having this morning.”

Jake sipped at his coffee and picked up the journal he had brought with him. He had been going through his uncle's journal last night. He was nearly through it, just ramblings of a solitary sailor out at sea. But in there somewhere he hoped to find something, anything that might shed a little light on the hush hush stories that had been told through the family about his dear old uncle's exploits. Particularly the one that changed him, or so they say. Jake should have started at the back of the journal. It would have saved him time. The last quarter of the notebook remained blank, but as he sat at the bar, those final pages that were inscribed in his uncle's hand were about to be revealed.

August 21, 1953

9:20 AM

We reached the coordinates I had calculated around nine this morning. The boat was put on a recursive slow spiral course, widening the perimeter by five kilometers with each revolution. We only needed to widen the search circle once before getting a hit on the sonar. Within a moment of the first ping, it became evident that if we had not found the Black Siren itself, we had found something of equal size, and worthy of our attention. Time to meet destiny.

August 22, 1953

12:00 PM

Manny Romano and I had I went down for the first look at just what lay at the bottom of the ocean beneath where our equipment sprang to life, pinging like crazy. The wreck we had been questing wasn't that massive, at least not by today's standards, so the incessant fury of alarm from the sonar seemed a bit curious, even before the dive. Perhaps it was because of bountiful trove of treasured jewels and gold that awaited us after having been so elusive all these years, or so was our first foolish thought. What followed went beyond any attempt of explanation, foolish or otherwise. Something in these waters harbored ill-will for the sunken Black Siren and who ever tried to disturb it. I offer these words now as my only explanation as to why this trip to these waters will be my last and to those who may read these words, take heed.

From where we anchored, it was a thousand feet to the bottom. Not an insurmountable task, certainly not one to be cautioned as perilous to seasoned divers such as ourselves. We went over the side of the Siren Quest like we had a hundred times, but this time with every bit of hope that we had finally turned our dream into reality. The big score. Infamy. Riches. It all would await us upon resurfacing and laying claiming to our prize. This proved to be our second foolish thought, still so early in what would be a very long and mysterious day.

The water remained relatively clear, only darker the deeper we descended. Nothing unusual. With the aid of the floodlights fastened to the bands on our heads, the path to the bottom was easily navigable, and fortunately without unwanted predators who may make these depths their home.

The stern became visible as we came within about eighty feet of the vessel. My heart raced with anticipation for I needed just a moment more before being close enough to read the letters which announced the name of the boat.

And there it was. The answer to our dreams right in front of our eyes. Just below where the the words 'Black Siren' could faintly but still positively be read, the wooden planks that formed the back end of the boat appeared to have been destroyed by some intentional means. The hole was a bit jagged, yet somewhat round, just big enough that a man could easily swim through it. Or out of it. It was difficult to say which may have occurred first. If it was the latter, no doubt the rumors of old tales were true. At first sight, that thought had raced through my mind, quickly followed by the hope that someone else had not already gone in that way and beaten us to it.

Manny and I stopped at the tail end of the boat and gazed through the hole. The rest of the old wooden pirate ship rested angled downward, half buried with years of sediment and muck, as if trying to hide but not quite able to meld with the depths of the ocean. Regardless, whatever formed this hole did so with intent.

Manny went through first and I followed behind. We entered a small room with nothing of interest, certainly nothing of value. A bench, a few crates turned on their side and a couple of open trunks, all obviously empty. A few burlap sacks rested near one wall but whatever they once held had been taken by the sea. Manny gave a brief examination of the walls, his hands gliding across the surface.

It was then that I noticed something behind one of the open trunks. Shoving it out of the way revealed what appeared to be evidence that we had not been the first to discover the wreck of the Black Siren. A wet suit, its neoprene showing no signs of deterioration except for a few ragged edges from curious jaws of native inhabitants dwelling in the bottom of the ocean. The suit lay empty, no human skeletal remains nearby. As omens go, we proved not the brightest at recognizing this as such. Whatever the fate of who once wore that suit, none came to mind to cause either of us to turn and run. My first thought was after years of searching, someone had intercepted our destiny. I turned around and looked at the broken back end of the ship. Mesmerized by the hole, I stared at it. Something odd had happened here, of that much I was sure.

However, Manny apparently was unfazed and turned to the partially open doorway that would lead us to the rest of the ship. It was the sudden rapid rush of water as he pushed the door aside that made me turn back. Anxious to discover what the hold of the ship still held for us, the breach of the ship lost my attention, all thought reverted to continuing with the exploration as I followed Manny through the portal.

The interior of the boat opened up to us. We moved through the hold of the ship, what would have been an obvious place for storage of the riches described by the ship's lore. However, it appeared to be no more endowed with treasure than the small room that had preceded it. Another door came to view ahead of us and luck seemed to be on our side as it was open as if inviting our passage. This time I crossed the threshold first, barely registering then what I remember now – Manny distracted by some unseen force as he studied the

walls once more before following me. Once across, I came upon the crew's sleeping quarters. The bunks were empty. No skeletons had lurked near the abandoned wet suit found at the back end of the ship. In here, this was not the case. Bones of a half dozen men littered the floor. It was the sheer number of remains that sent a shiver through my spine. Whatever the fate that sent the Black Siren into these depths came quickly, with no escape. Omen number two, still unforeseen as having anything to do with us as I continued our search throughout every portion of the boat, except for the deck which remained buried with the ocean floor. If there ever was any truth to the treasure of the Black Siren, then the mystery of its whereabouts was just as grand as the lore itself.

With tanks of air rapidly depleting, we had no choice but to make our return to the surface. We began working back to the stern and its hole that would lead us out of the ancient vessel. Now that my mind's eye had given up focus on the sight of gold and other relics, it was easier to see what was there. Not that much was, but there was an eerie detail that eluded me on the first pass. Having stirred up the muck on the ship's floor as we moved through it, the surface became more exposed. It was riddled with holes. Not like at the stern of the ship. These were nowhere near that large, yet there was something reminiscent of their quality, something that seemed all too familiar. And out of place.

During the war, I had seen walls of decimation like this. The type only created by the firepower of a machine gun. Yet weaponry of that nature had not been invented during the time this vessel had sailed the open seas. And save for the ominous hole at the back of the boat, only these newly discovered breaches of the hull gave any indication of what caused the Black Siren to sink in the first place. Like someone gunned them down.

Lore said the boat just disappeared. And I guess it did, to the bottom of the ocean.

Manny must have missed the flooring too with his preoccupation of the walls. I moved to the one side I last saw him searching the surface with his hands. Nothing looked unusual to me, but as I rubbed my palms across, something suddenly felt terribly wrong. I felt a rush of heat through me at that moment that made me quiver with fear. I thought Manny must have been oblivious to my concerns and had gone on ahead of me. I was only too happy to quicken my exit and entered the last chamber. I still hadn't ran into Manny, and once out the ship, he didn't seem to be anywhere in sight. I looked at the gauge of my scuba tank and it was very near empty. Surely Manny's must have been as well. Surely he had gone on ahead of me fully expecting me to be close behind.

The surface of the water had become a bit choppy since our descent. The Siren Quest bobbed erratically on the waves that seemed to take on a life of their own. I yelled for Manny but he did not answer. I climbed the ladder at the side and did not see any of his gear. I called for my companion again, still with no answer. After removing my gear, I descended the steps to the cabin below. There lay Manny in the corner of the room. His body uncomfortably hunched there, frozen in place, his eyes wide open with a look of one who had just seen a most horrifying ghost.

Manny Romano was dead. And I had never been more scared in my life. I may not have seen the ghost that scared the life out of my friend, but I knew then, that while in the hold of the Black Siren, I had felt it. And I wanted out of these waters as fast as I could manage.

I've written these words now safe back at port. For some reason whatever took Manny spared me and I have resolved never to return and to let that power be left undisturbed. I offer that advice to who ever may find these pages.

As Jake just stared at the blank part of the page where his uncle's words trailed off, the sense that someone was there next to him drifted into acknowledgment. He felt the warmth of breath from the other man he found standing near his side and just behind enough to read over his shoulder. It was the man who had been sitting at the end of the bar.

"Interesting reading, Mr. Landry." It wasn't a question but a statement. Obviously the man had been reading the private journal over his shoulder.

"Have we met?" Jake asked as he closed the journal, then placing a hand on top, a reaction to the feeling of his privacy having been violated.

"No, Jake, we have not." The man's eye's were dark and penetrating and they dug into Jake's level of comfort. "But allow me to introduce myself." He stuck out his hand and offered a smile that bordered on corrupt or at least of questionable sincerity. "Felipe. Felipe Romano."

"Romano. That name has a familiar ring to it." Jake looked the man in the eye as unsettling as it was. "How is it you know my name, Mr. Romano?"

"I'll start by clarifying the familiar ring to mine. You see, you just read it. The story of your Uncle Chaz and my uncle, Manny Romano."

The name should have been more obvious. Jake looked down to the journal on the counter, his hand still resting on top, his fingers tense and protective. He had just read the name a number of times from the last entry in the journal. The name Manny repeated many times. His uncle must have referred to him by Romano at least a time or two. It just sounded too familiar to be coincidence.

The Romano standing next to him registered the recognition Jake put together to the journal. "My uncle may be dead" said Felipe, "but certain information did not die with him."

"OK, that explains the familiarity of your name, but I still want to know how you know me" Jake came back. Then another recognition it him. The boat. His uncle's passing. "Have you been following me?"

"No, Mr. Landry. At least not directly. But I have been watching to see who inherited your uncle's boat."

"The boat? Are you interested in buying the boat?"

"Not the boat, Mr. Landry." Romano's eyes shifted attention down to where Jake's hand rested. "But I would be quite interested in the journal."

"The journal?" Jake picked it up and held it in his hands firmly, felt its worn cover, fraying at the binding. "What would it be worth to you?"

The man looked at Jake giving him a fiendish grin. "That would depend on if it holds the information I seek. A map to be precise. Or perhaps just the simple coordinates to where my uncle lost his life."

Jake didn't know much more about the fateful voyage their two uncles took nearly twenty years ago than what he had just read and the rumors he heard growing up. Rumors

that spread like folklore by friends and acquaintances who tried to explain the change that had taken over Chaz Landry. The journal entry only enforced the belief by some that it was something of a ghostly encounter that turned Chaz Landry into a weary, withdrawn old man. Jake didn't know what to think. He hadn't really known his uncle that well before the fateful day. He was still quite young then. For all he knew, the uncle who always seemed so distant had been that way forever. Just another crazy searching for lost treasure. How many times did such a quest ever come to bear the riches it promised? Except in the movies that is. And ghosts? Yet here was the nephew of one that not only had tried, but died mysteriously in the process.

"From what I've heard, going back to that wreck could be rather perilous" Jake told him.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Landry?"

"No." The answer came quick without having to mull over in his mind if there was any glimmer of reservation.

"Neither do I." Romano looked serious now, the smirk gone and a demeanor of all business had taken its place. "I think whatever had frightened my uncle to death was nothing more than a fear brought on by dwelling on superstition."

"You mean the tale that the pirates were cursed by the high priest who could only watch as the raiders looted the sacrifice. And that was somehow supposed to explain how they just disappeared."

"Yes, that's right. That story. Although there is still a mystery as to what happened out there at sea, but the story I've come to know doesn't involve anything supernatural."

Jake let that sink in for a moment as he took another glance back at the journal, his hand still guarding whatever secrets it held. He had seen the references to the coordinates this man wanted in the previous entry of the journal, but Romano's remark alluded to perhaps another version of what transpired that day. After all this time, anything would be nothing more than speculation. Regardless, he was intrigued.

"So, let's hear your story" Jake prodded.

"There was a survivor that day. One who wasn't seen when the ship was attacked. He had been locked in the lower compartment of the stern when the commotion above became apparent. He heard the attackers speaking in a language that was oddly out of place for those waters. The ship vibrated from the onslaught of this enigmatic enemy that had come aboard. Voices shouted words he didn't understand, muffled at first but became louder as they descended into the hold of the ship. But it was what came next that truly put the fear in him, the sound of some strange, yet unmistakably violent weapon that took his mates down, one by one as he heard the screams through the wall of his prison. Somehow he managed to escape out the back of the ship. No one knows for sure how, but the threat of certain death waiting behind a single wall has been known to pump substantial amounts of adrenaline into the bodies of mere mortals."

Jake listened to Romano, with reserve at first, but as the story unfolded, the words held a firm grip on his attention. Everything Romano said took on a level of plausibility securely anchored in the words his uncle left in the book under Jake's fingertips. Could Romano have read enough over his shoulder to create this elaborate embellishment? It didn't seem likely. At first, Jake found the description of the day that changed his uncle's life forever to be just another layer to the rumors he had heard since a small boy. Just folklore, mildly intriguing. But that intrigue grew to something greater as he considered Romano's account of what happened on the Black Siren generations ago. It all seemed to fit perfectly with what his uncle saw roughly twenty years ago. But one big question sat at the top of Jake's list.

“So, Mr. Romano, just how do you know all this?”

“That survivor was a distant relative of ours. His name was Julio Romano. And please, drop the Mr. Romano and call me Felipe. We shouldn't be so formal if we're going to be partners.”

“Partners?” Jake tensed a second. He had only known this man for a few minutes and even though he couldn't put his finger on why, there lived within him a level of suspicion of the stranger, regardless of the conceivability of his version of the legend.

“Tell me Jake, does your uncle's journal contain the information we need to find the wreck of the Black Siren?”

Jake's eyes diverted from Felipe's to gaze down at the book on the bar. Involuntarily, his fingers rapped the surface in contemplation. His prolonged silence and body language was all the answer Felipe needed.

“Partners then?” Felipe said. “Unless you wish to sell me the information I lack. The coordinates to the boat.”

Jake looked back at him and asked “Why do you want to go there? They never found anything, except...” He paused having trouble picking the words.

“Except what? Except ghosts, Jake?” Felipe laughed. “I thought you told me you didn't believe in ghost.”

“Yeah, that's right. But I just don't see the point is all.”

“Oh, there's a point, alright” Felipe came back. “Your uncle may not have seen any gold, but I'm willing to bet it's still there. Just as Manny did, I know the secret as to where to look.”

“So why didn't Manny find it?”

“Something must have happened before he had the chance. Maybe it was just a heart attack.”

“Or maybe something frightened him to death” offered Jake, reminding him of his Uncle Chaz's words.

Another glimmer of a smile crossed Felipe's lips. “Perhaps. But I don't scare so easily.”

What did he have to lose, except a day or two at sea in his new boat and write the last entry of the legend of the Black Siren.

“So I take you to the wreck, and you find the gold. We split 50-50?”

“Sure. Partner.”

It was only natural that Jake Landry followed the passion bug that bit his elders. His father Brent had always been interested in the water. The typical stuff as a kid. Rafts, canoes and hanging out at the marina with the rest of his teenage friends. Including his brother Chaz. When they went to college, they got their first taste of more aspiring nautical adventures. It didn't take long to discover that a man in white with a sailboat could be found quite alluring to the pretty coeds. So they learned the ropes, as it were, in the sailing club. For the siblings, it started out as a hobby that turned into a passion. Although the direction of that passion took the brothers in divergent directions. Brent Landry courted Emily Pratt by taking her out on the boat each weekend until it was in her blood as thick as it was in his. And Emily Pratt became Emily Landry.

Chaz however was always the more daring one. Maybe obsessive would be a better term. Sailing wasn't just a means to meeting girls. It was a classmate of his who got him interested in looking for the undiscovered wrecks that the sea tried to hide, and the treasures that they held for whoever found them. The day Chaz first read the story of the Black Siren,

he became obsessed with finding the two hundred old ship. No one had yet to discover its resting place in the ocean and it wasn't to be found in some far off corner of the world, but somewhere southeast of their Florida home. If the stories were true, it was a quest worth pursuing. So Chaz Landry saved his money and within a few years, he bought the boat that became christened the Siren Quest.

And now his nephew Jake sat on deck of that boat, drinking a glass of wine, watching the sunset and going through the journal one more time before embarking on a crazy journey with which he still may have a few reservations. While he differed from his uncle in some respects, they shared a sense of adventure that tugged at him now. Just the thought of it, as crazy as it might seem to a more rational person, the allure of finding sunken treasure spoke to his inner soul. He didn't know this Felipe person, only what you can gather about a person in a day. It still felt like destiny calling. His uncle and Manny. Now Felipe and him. What did he have to lose?

Felipe looked through the binoculars back toward the docks. Their boat was within range of shore so that any curious eyes might notice it. Perhaps someone back at shore was looking out at them. But Felipe wasn't too concerned. It was a glorious sunset and any eyes diverted out to sea would be looking past where they were moored and taking in the hues of the glowing orange horizon. As far as anyone else was concerned, whoever had anchored out beyond the reefs was just taking in the spectacular view away from the lights of the town. Not that they cared what anyone else thought. Except maybe Jake Landry.

"What's our friend doing?" Nick sat back as he crushed the can of his third beer and threw it ten feet across the deck to a waiting wooden crate. He reached for a fourth from the cooler resting at his feet, doubling as an ottoman. He was comfortable. Cool and unconcerned with the nature of his friend's plan. He only questioned the need for such an elaborate approach.

"He's just sitting there, going over the journal. Relaxing with a bottle of wine."

"Uh." Nick never liked wine. That wasn't a man's drink. Maybe their mark wasn't a man, he thought. Why his partner wanted to do this the hard way was beyond him.

"I still don't understand why we don't just steal the damn book and go get the gold without leading him along, saving us some dirty work."

Felipe put the binoculars down and turned to give his simple minded friend a tired look that said we've been through this before, you moron. But he kept the harsh words to himself. Sometimes friendship transcends the little flaws they find in each other and they had been friends a long time.

"Because I don't like leaving anything to chance, OK? Maybe we could get the journal away from him. Maybe he'd sell it to us, but I get the feeling he wouldn't give it up so easily. Maybe we could sneak aboard and steal it without being caught, but if something goes wrong, there are too many people near by. Too many ifs."

Nick just took another chug of beer and didn't say anything.

"You know the plan" Felipe continued determined to get his point across. Nick didn't say another word and just stared at his partner. Felipe looked him straight in the eye, hoping he would actually listen to what was being said so they wouldn't have to go through it again. "He thinks we, that is just him and me, have formed a team. Two guys needing each other to fulfill a dream that our uncles could not. Once we locate the boat and I verify that the treasure is still there, our new friend meets with an unexplained accident, while his companion seemingly remains lost at sea and the Siren Quest ends up in the bottom of the ocean near

the old wreck. If anyone should come looking for us and somehow find the boats on the ocean floor, it will be just another story to be told. More folklore about the obsession of two generations searching for gold. But they won't find any gold, will they? Because you and I, my friend, will disappear with it, off to live the life of kings in Venezuela.”

Nick crushed the fourth can and flung it away. He threw up his arms in surrender. “OK, Felipe. You're the boss. I just hope your storybook plays out. And as far as stories go, I don't like surprise endings.”

Ocean waves were relatively gentle now that they were over twelve hours out at sea. At seven this morning, Jake Landry and Felipe Romano, the two descendents of a once ill-fated team of treasure hunters, had embarked on the same quest that had left one of the old hunters dead and the other a mentally and emotionally scarred man for the rest of his solemn life.

The surf began a bit choppy as they departed with the shifting of the tide, but Jake still figured an early start was the only approach. Like throwing all caution to the wind, particularly for the new owner of the Siren Quest. No story of any great adventure ever started in the middle of the afternoon. Well, maybe some did, but where was the glamor in that? This adventure was a day and a half cruise out according to the calculations that Jake had made the night before. The wind was up earlier but the sea air was blowing calmly now. The calm before the storm of sorts that brews at the bottom of the ocean.

Jake was at the wheel. Felipe sat quietly off to the side. The boat moved smoothly at a steady pace that should put them in the vicinity of their destination by mid-morning tomorrow.

“Want me to relieve you for a while?” Felipe asked. “You look a little tired.”

Jake kept the exact coordinates as to where they were heading a secret. It was obvious to anyone who knew that the sun rose in the east and set in the west that they had been going south for some time now. But he needed a rest and they were far from the end of the line.

“Sure, that would be great” Jake said, motioning with one outstretched hand to come take the wheel.

Felipe took the con and Jake told him “just keep the current heading for now” before taking a seat on the bench along the starboard side.

Jake was ready for a nap but there was something about a sunset that could not be dismissed. With a proper vista near shore, the melding of nature's colors down to a single line as that final twinkle of light is pinched away, can be an awesome sight. Even for those who may never have tried to venture any closer to that magical spot off in the distance. This sunset seemed especially glorious out on the open sea. For one who sails, to take in the beauty without distractions, just you, the water and the sky, the sight holds a deeper emotional response. A somewhat richer communal experience with nature.

This sunset was to last at least another twenty minutes before disappearing below the horizon. As Jake gazed out and waited, he noticed another boat seemingly running parallel to them. Not very close, but somewhere between where they were and the edge of the earth. He got up and walked back to where Felipe stood. On a ledge in front of the wheel were the binoculars.

“What's up?” Felipe asked as Jake reached in front of him.

“Just want to take a look at our company.”

Their company was a few miles off the starboard side. To the naked eye, it didn't look

any bigger than a tiny toy silhouetted against the setting sun. In reality, it was about the same size as the Siren Quest. At the very least, large enough to carry a little golden cargo back to shore. Through the binoculars, Jake still couldn't see much detail or activity, particularly in that orange glow of light, getting richer as its source descended to the horizon.

"Another treasure hunter?" quipped Felipe. "What are the chances of that?"

"Yeah. Who knows. It's a big ocean." Although Jake believed those words, he would feel comfortable only as long as it kept its distance.

By ten the next morning, the Siren Quest neared the coordinates that Jake's Uncle Chaz had chronicled in the journal. Jake was at the wheel and had cut back on the speed of their approach. As the boat moved a bit slower in the water, the blood in his veins began to rush with anticipation. Jake looked through the binoculars again. The other boat was still there. Their company, still a few miles off, did seem to be looking for something. Perhaps it was just another treasure hunter seeing how it seemed to zig-zag along its course as if looking for its prize somewhere out there. It was obvious, however, that they didn't have an exact predetermined destination, unlike Jake and his new partner.

Felipe had been relatively quiet since sun up. Jake made him a bit nervous with his obsession with his real partner's boat. While Nick might be stubborn, sometimes dense in seeing the big picture, he wasn't entirely dumb. Felipe watched Jake view the other boat as it randomly made abrupt changes in course. Enough to look preoccupied with its own agenda, yet always remaining within sight of the Siren Quest. And Felipe knew their boat had slowed down. Jake had been rather mute this morning as well but Felipe didn't need to be told that they were almost there.

And then Jake cut the engine.

"Felipe?"

"Yeah" he said jumping up from the bench near the rear of the boat.

"Lower the anchor."

Gladly, he did as instructed. Once the motorized chain lowered the lead weight, Felipe came towards Jake who remained in position. His hands were no longer on the wheel but fiddling with the dials on the sonar device. As the display refreshed every few seconds, a shape materialized on the screen. Standing beside Jake now, Felipe saw it too, and for someone normally calm, collected and in control of his emotions, it would only take a slight touch to feel his pounding heart.

"That's it?" he asked. "The Black Siren?"

"Well, there's definitely something down there" said Jake, equally beside himself.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Felipe had turned before the words finished leaving his mouth, headed toward the rack where their scuba tanks awaited.

Felipe lowered his goggles, inserted the mouthpiece and jumped off the side of the boat. That gave him a twenty second head start over Jake who finished making his adjustments before following. He worked at a swift pace yet not frantic or in a panic. So what if Felipe got there first? It wasn't like he could cheat him out of what treasure lay below. A scuba suit left little room to hide any appreciable amount of loot.

The boat rocked mildly on the surface. With only modest waves lapping above, the sea seemingly accepting them into her depths as the two descended towards the bottom. Hundreds of miles from any shore, the water maintained a relative translucence. Only the distance between the Siren Quest and the bottom served as a veil obscuring view of the boat

some thousand feet below.

Within a few minutes, Jake caught sight of the old pirate vessel, the view still a little murky at first. He would need to be another hundred feet or so closer before its features would break through the expanse of water between. Still, there didn't seem to be movement other than his own. No other pair of legs pulsing through the water around the ship. He kept vigilance, glancing around the vicinity of the boat as he advanced on it, a little quicker now. No Felipe in sight, perhaps more importantly, no other unwanted encounters with predatory inhabitants of the deep.

Once within fifty yards or so of the vessel, Jake came face to face with the back end of the old ship. The wooden exterior looked a bit worn but the letters, battered with decay, survived in sufficient strength to be read.

'Black Siren.'

And below those words, the portal to the mystery of his Uncle Chaz's journal. A sizable hole from broken off planks on the stern.

The light mounted on Jake's head gear pointed the way. He stopped long enough to pan the interior before swimming through the breach. Only a small room with a few trunks and crates. No denizens of the deep. No sign of Felipe. At the far end of the visible chamber was an unbarred passageway to the rest of the ship. Jake left the vulnerability of the open ocean floor and swam into the hull.

The beam of light panned the initial chamber as Jake slowly and methodically turned his head to offer a clearer view than what had been available outside the ship. The space didn't seem to hold much purpose, at least nothing important. Remnants of containers for storage were few. Dilapidated sacks that once held some supplies, grain perhaps. A crate or two that lay about empty. Two trunks rested along opposite walls between where Jake entered and the passageway that led beyond. They remained open but neatly turned toward the wall. Curiosity led Jake towards one. As he put a hand on the lid with the intent to pull it around, something caught the light from on top his head.

Bubbles. Something was behind there and he quickly retracted his hand. The water in the area rushed in waves as Jake suddenly moved backward. He changed focus to his belt, trying to retrieve the small spear gun attached. The density of the water slowed his motions as if walking in a world of intense gravity. His fingers worked awkwardly, partially from the adrenaline feeding his nerves, but the rubber gloves only added to a lack of dexterity. Still fumbling for the weapon, the trunk came around in what seemed like slow motion as it also fought through the pressure of the water. Then the beast on the other side showed itself.

The shark was young, only about four feet long. Its size did nothing to put Jake at ease, its teeth all too obvious to ignore. Jake's rush of adrenaline only multiplied his awkward movements while trying to unclip the weapon at his side. The sudden intrusions flustered the fish as well. First, the one who entered a moment before then the other who disturbed its hiding place in a surprise attack. The fish wanted out as much as Jake, and it swam past him just as the spear gun became disengaged from the clip on Jake's belt. Taking no chances, he fired at the beast as it went through the portal leading to the rest of the ship. The vibrations in the water sent hope that he had hit the shark now out of view. He waited with the gun still poised for another shot when something else came back through the portal.

Felipe. Wearing a necklace of gold and laden with jewels. He swam past Jake in a dead heat, a knife in his hand, no longer meant for Jake but for his own protection. At first Jake thought the shark was the reason for his sudden retreat. Felipe didn't appear to offer any other explanation as he rushed by, but only because Jake misjudged the source of fear in his

eyes. A trail of red followed Felipe. His side the source of the blood. There was no spear, but Jake figured he must have been grazed by the errant shot meant for the shark.

Felipe was about to cross through the breach at the back of the ship when another rush of water seemed to flow through the chamber. It was then that the passageway that led into the bowels of the ship suddenly fell closed and the latch engaged into locked position. Jake noticed a red tint seeping into the water coming from his side. When Felipe hurried past, the edge of the knife must have caught him. There was a six inch tear in his wetsuit and a surface slice to his skin underneath.

As Felipe disappeared from view, Jake took notice of the blood circulating in the water, that around him and what trailed out the opening. He suddenly put all thought on the shark. It was now behind a closed door but he wondered how many more might be around. If any were, they would surely smell the blood. He needed to get out and head to the surface. Jake kicked furiously but cautiously watched his surroundings as he went up. Just as on the way down, there was not another pair of legs following suit. What if Felipe was wounded beyond ability to make his ascent? He didn't wait to find out and kept going.

On the surface, Jake removed his mask and caught his breath. Treading water, he appeared to be alone. All alone. There was no boat. Surely Felipe didn't get to the surface in time to abandon him. There wouldn't have been enough time. Not to completely disappear without a trace of the Siren Quest.

Jake searched around him, looking out to sea in all directions. There was a ship in the distance but it wasn't going away from him. It seemed to be coming his direction. He flailed his arms in the air to get its attention. Most likely they couldn't see him yet but it still remained on course. He needed to hold on but for a few more minutes, minutes that would seem an eternity as blood in the water kept him on edge. The scuba tank, still about half full, became heavy in his weakened state. He allowed the straps holding the tank to fall from his back as he unlatched the buckle holding the apparatus taut against him. With one hand out to his side, he worked to keep afloat while kicking his legs with just enough energy to allow his head to bob above water. The other hand held onto the strap of the scuba gear trying to keep it loose in the water with a diminished buoyancy.

The boat was closing on him. Close enough that he started to yell help repeatedly throwing the free hand in the air for as high and long as he could without falling beneath the rippling waves.

When the boat came to about a hundred yards away, Jake heard someone yell back.

"Captain. Man in the water. Port side." It was Hector in the crow's nest, one hand on the mast, the other pointing out to the point of the sea where Jake could be seen holding on in the water.

"Prepare the rope." The Captain made a minor adjustment in course as he caught sight of the flailing man. The Black Siren positioned about ten yards from where Jake tread water. Pug threw the rope with a wooden plank attached in the water. As the boat pressed slowly by, Jake was able to place his free arm around it, but his grip was weak against the current. He needed both arms if he was to maintain hold. Reluctantly, he let go of the scuba gear he had been fighting to keep with him. It quickly drifted away as Jake put both arms around the plank. As soon as he did, Pug and the others watching from the side of the ship hoisted him up. When within reach, they pulled him over the side and laid him on the deck.

Jake coughed as he spit out sea water and breathed erratically. A dozen men had come over to look at the odd man they had pulled from the open sea. The Black Siren had not encountered another vessel since leaving the island the night before, so to find anyone adrift

in the ocean was baffling enough.

Their celebration had continued all morning, each of the men relishing the clear sky and calm breeze in varying degrees of inebriation. But the morning just seemed to get stranger. Julio's indiscretion had just been revealed a short while ago. Having banished their traitorous brother to the make shift brig below, the rest of the crew continued to pass the bottle. Soon after, they found themselves huddled around a man wearing something most peculiar.

At first they thought he was some sort of dolphin man. Part man. Part fish with a taut dark gray skin covering all but his head and hands. Or so it seemed to those who never had even fathomed the invention of the wetsuit that would not come to be for a few hundred years in the future. They watched Jake with apprehension as he gained his bearings, themselves trying to sort the sight out within their alcohol laced brains.

Jake stopped coughing. His breathing finally settled into a less frantic pace and consciousness came front and center as he looked up into twelve heads peering down at him. Twelve faces of hardened dark skin from years of sailing the seas of the New World before a more civilized time. The odor of twelve men who surround themselves with water but whose cargo carried not a single bar of soap. Their eyes stared hard back down at him, a collective look of bewilderment. Besides the gray rubbery covering, those staring eyes realized that this man was foreign, not like them. Clean shaven, short hair contrasting the hygiene of the filthy band who commanded these seas.

Pug, in a spurt of defiance toward the stranger, showed no fear, but perhaps a hint of caution, as he reached into the middle of the huddle. He directed his hand to where a puddle of sea water mixed with dribbles of red seeping out of a gouge at Jake's side. Pug's fingertips were within inches of touch when he let his hand pause just above the deck. Jake didn't move. Pug took that as an invitation to tug at the source of blood. Jake winced but tried to show as little fear as possible. It was just a minor wound. The pirate's fingertip didn't linger at the cut but tugged on the mysterious skin that encompassed the man fished from the ocean. He tugged until the rip grew bigger and the men realized it wasn't his skin at all.

"Wet suit" Jake told him. He didn't immediately realize how pointless the remark was. He did realize that for some reason they were intrigued by it.

"Stand up" the Captain bellowed.

The men moved back slowly with their eyes remaining trained on the stranger as if they stood before an alien who may unleash some unknown power at any moment. Jake propped himself up with one arm sitting up at the waist.

"Up. Up." The captain grew impatient.

Jake stood the rest of the way, still in the middle of a circle and faced the captain.

"Who are you, little man?"

Jake stood five ten, hardly little. Even though he was surrounded by twelve men of equal size, he wasn't about to argue the point.

"Jake" he said. "My name is Jake."

"Uh. What are you doing out here? Where is your boat? Who are you with?" The questions came fast and demanding.

"I don't know what happened to my boat. I was diving below looking over the wreck of the Black Siren."

The captain looked at his men. He needed to see if he heard right. The looks on their faces confirmed that he had.

"The wreck of the Black Siren, you say?"

"That's right. I was with a Felipe Romano, a descendent of the survivor of the ship."

The captain looked back to his men again. Romano. They all shared the same recognition.

The captain unleashed a hardy laugh. "Romano, you say?"

"That's right" Jake replied, not yet understanding the joke.

"The *wreck* of the Black Siren, you say?"

"You've heard of it?"

"Yeah, I've heard of it." the captain said with an underlying sense of pride. "We've all heard of it, haven't we boys?"

"Ay, Captain" came the voices in a most inharmonious chorus.

"You see son, you're standing on the deck of the dauntless Black Siren. And as you can see, it's no wreck."

Jake let those words sink in as he glanced around him. None of the men were adorned with a single modern thread. The ship was as rustic in detail as any he had seen in the movies and museums, but as none encountered in his sailing experience limited to his age. Even the sails shown of wear, tattered by years of use as well as neglect. But surely this was beyond crazy.

Jake looked to the captain. "Do you know of a Romano?"

"Ay. I don't know Felipe, but Julio Romano is locked up down below for trying to steal more than....what was coming to him."

"The gold!" Jake blurt out, before realizing a confession of knowledge best left unsaid. "So, it's true."

"You know of the gold? How?"

And then it became obvious to the captain. Julio. There could be no other explanation. Somehow this stranger to the rest of them was an accomplice of Julio's.

"Grab him" the captain shouted to his men. Then addressing him again, "How many others know?"

"No one. No one still alive anyway." Jake looked hard at his captor. "But you are in danger. You are going to be attacked."

"Attacked? By who?"

"That part is still a mystery, but the legend only has one man surviving."

"Ha. Let me guess" scoffed the captain. "That one man is you no doubt?"

"No. I'm not even supposed to be here."

"You said it mate. Maybe you belong back in the sea."

The men shuffled their feet and tightened their grip on the stranger, waiting for the captain to give the word.

"I beg of you" Jake pleaded. "Whoever Romano's ancestor is, that's who supposedly survived."

"Then you have no worries mate" the captain said to Jake. "If he survives, maybe you will." He then turned to the men anxious for their orders. "Lock this scalawag up with that other vermin below."

Jake pleaded as they drug him down the stairs. "Please, listen. We're all in danger now!" The words fell on deaf ears. Two men held him before the door as a third unlocked it, opened it only enough to push the new prisoner in, then re-secured the latch.

Jake pushed himself off the floor and stood up. He came face to face with the other inhabitant of the small chamber in the back end of the boat.

"Felipe?"

Romano stood up and backed against the wall taking sight of the stranger with the dark rubber clinging around his body.

“Who are you?”

Jake said nothing else as he studied the man. He looked close at his features. The eyes, the nose, the chin. Perhaps if he were to run into Felipe again some years down the road, he may still be able to confuse this man with the one he had met only a few days ago. But on closer inspection, this man was not Felipe, only someone who resembled him so closely that he undeniably must share the same genes. The alleged ancestor. The story had become all too real.

“Jake. My name is Jake.” And he sat down on an empty crate across from where the pirate stood.

“Why did you call me Felipe?”

“Sorry, you look like someone I know.” He wasn't about to tell him the connection. The look of distrust on the man's face did not show any sign that he would be receptive to his explanation.

“My name is Julio” he offered, loosening his guard, but just a bit. “What are you doing here? Where did you come from?”

Jake sighed and looked around the chamber. “It's a long story, Julio.”

He unzipped the binding wetsuit and stepped out of it. Julio watched from across the room, the act only contributing to his apprehension of the man and his strange garb. Jake went to the back wall, his hands exploring the surface.

“But we have to get out of here” Jake told him.

Julio took a seat on another crate. “The captain will feed me to the fish if I try. I don't know what threat you have posed, but I think he'll let me live. He just needs time to forgive me.”

“What? For stealing a few trinkets of gold?”

The mention of the treasure caused Julio to jump back in alarm. “What do you know of the gold?”

“I only know of.....rumors. And I know it's well hidden. But that's not what is important right now. Our problem doesn't concern the gold.”

“Ah. You don't know the Captain. Nothing is more important than the gold.”

“Not if you die in vain trying to protect it.”

Hector cried out again, this time the sound of his voice drowned out by the whine of the strange gray vessel that had moved swiftly in the water without the benefit of sails and was now slowing to flank the side of their ship. The approaching vessel was of equal match in size to the Black Siren, but its defiant approach, the way it stood high in the water, the foreign nature of the men on board, had a sobering effect on those catching sight. Markings on the side seemed to serve as identification to the raiders of the pirates celebration, but the Nazi symbol meant nothing to men living in a time a few hundred years before their existence.

“Sieg Heil!” der Kommandant offered with an outstretched arm, hand with tight fingers pointing out and up. He wanted to know what side these oddly dressed men were on.

To Captain Juarez, the words meant nothing and perceived the jester as none too friendly. And neither did the other men standing opposite his crew along the side of the ship. His men standing ready with swords, the others at their ready with some unperceived form of weapon.

Juarez raised his sword in the air and yelled “Leave these waters or prepare to have

your heads removed by the scourge of the Black Siren!" The rest of the standing crew joined in unison with their war cry that usually served well for intimidation of all but the most fierce, or naïve, of foes.

In this case, it was the crew of the Black Siren who proved to be more naïve, and less fierce, regardless of their reputation.

Sie sind Spionnen

"They're spies" said der Kommandant to his men.

Killen sie

"Kill them"

Their war cry came without hesitation in the form of unrelenting fire from automatic machine guns. As the facing men were gunned down, the Nazi soldiers boarded the Black Siren chasing down those at the back who scrambled to make it down below deck. The chase continued into the bottom of the ship, gunning down all in their path and laying fire to the bottom of the boat to hasten its descent.

Julio looked about in confusion at the sound of a barrage of footsteps coming down the steps that led to the chambers beyond where they were locked. He heard the loud voices first, a language he only half recognized as belonging to a people from the continent that hadn't been known to sail these waters. Then the scurry of his own brethren with panic in their voices preceded the fire from automatic weapons. The sound was just as foreign as the voices he heard but Julio knew it was from a weapon nonetheless as the pirates' words turned to short burst of screams while succumbing to their deaths.

Jake knew that sound the guns made and frantically looked about for cover.

"Quick. Hide" he pleaded with Julio as he grabbed his wetsuit, not wanting to leave any evidence of their existence. "It's our only chance."

Julio watched Jake unfold one of the two trunks sitting along the wall on either side of the locked passageway. Jake slid behind with the open side resting close to the wall. Julio followed his lead.

"Offnen die tueren!"

Open the door!

The latch on the door disengaged. One of the foreigners pointed his weapon through the open doorway and let out a burst across the floor in front of him, the spray of bullets following to the end of the ship and up the side where he riddled the planks with enough holes that water began rushing in. The chamber appeared vacant. They had done their damage and retreated to leave the doomed vessel for their own.

Panic seized the two who remained. Water accumulated on the bottom and relentlessly continued to come in. By the time the water had reached knee high, Jake heard the whine of the Nazi boat as it sped away. A barrel floated among them. He grabbed it and began forcefully attacking the back end of the boat using the barrel as a ramming device. Weakened from the barrage of small holes, the planks broke into pieces creating a much larger opening. Water rushed in faster and within seconds, the chamber was full of ocean. Julio swam out first. Jake followed and swam in the direction of the surface as the Black Siren slowly took the weight of the ocean in its bowels and receded to the bottom.

Jake came to the surface struggling with the last of the breath he had taken before being submerged in the ill-fated ship. He was overwhelmed with relief that he had escaped the horrors below but remained cautiously vigilant as he tread water. He needed assurances

that the attackers were indeed gone.

It took him a moment to realize that they were a thing of the past, not only figuratively but literally. He had emerged back in the present, bobbing in the water just a few yards from the Siren Quest. The ladder off the side beckoned to him and he hastily answered the call with all his remaining strength. He stood there in his shorts and bare chest having long since abandoned his wetsuit. He breathed heavily from exertion, things in the distance still a bit blurry from the salt in his eyes. Even so, he detected movement of another vessel and reached for the binoculars resting where he had left them at the wheel of the boat. He focused in the distance as the other boat retreated heading north away from him, obviously in a hurry, not relying on the sails but taking full use of the inboard motor to rush away from the cursed waters. It was the same boat he had kept an eye on as he and Felipe made their way out to this spot in the ocean.

Between the two boats, as if coming out of nowhere, a catamaran made its way into view. Jake retrained the binoculars in that direction. Someone stood at the front end, wearing a colorful headdress and robe belonging to some ancient native priest, shaking a staff carved with curious symbols. Behind him in the middle of the boat was someone all too familiar looking, tied to the shaft where the sail of the catamaran blew in the ocean breeze. A gold necklace laden with jewels hung around his neck.

Felipe.

Or was it Julio. It was hard to tell.

Whoever it was, the captor payed him no mind as he continued his chant and sailed off to conclude his business. As far as Jake was concerned, his business was concluded as well.

The sea seemed to take on a serene calmness in contrast to the adventures of the last few hours. Under normal circumstances, it might be a nice day for sailing with nothing but the wind and the sails to carry a man through the sights and smells of the open sea. For Jake, that thought became drowned out by the sound of the engine coming to life. At the moment, there was only one sight and smell that registered as welcomed. That was a scotch on the rocks served up from the safety of the Dirty Dive Bar and Grill. Jake put the Siren Quest on a straight course to the shores of Florida. And just in case any other Romanos awaited him there, he threw his late uncle's journal over the side, its pages devoured by the wake he left behind.