**Fable: Reaver**

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1. **Captain Dread**

All was right with the world.

That was Captain Dread's attitude as he sat at his usual place at the Inn of the Five Fingers, his booted feet resting on the table, his chair tilted slightly back to accommodate his long legs. The inn was packed with Dread's men, their laughing and shouting presenting an unending cacophony of celebration and merriment as they banged their tankards on the tabletops and demanded more drink and food from the overworked and harried barmaids. The girls, identical twin sisters as it happened, did everything they could to keep up with the steady jockeying for their attentions. The real challenge for them, though, was keeping a distance between their backsides and the incessant groping and grasping hands of the pirates.

Dread did nothing to deter them. By his reasoning the girls should be grateful for the attention, not to mention the sizable tips that would be theirs before the evening was out.

Because today was Tithing Day.

"To Tithing Day!" shouted Captain Dread, raising his tankard, the sudsy head of the contents sloshing over the top.

"To Tithing Day!" his men chorused immediately, and there was much cheering and laughter.

Captain Dread allowed his chair to drop forward and he stood, still holding the tankard high and ignoring the brown liquid that spilled over the top. There were enough splatters around on the table and on the floor that a few drops more weren't going to matter. He was dressed in his signature black coat with red trim on the cuffs and shoulders. Tall and thin, with an aquiline nose and a thin mustache that curled upward at either edge, he was notoriously particular about his shoulder-length fine blond hair. His porcelain features contradicted his reputation as the most formidable pirate in the whole of Albion, a notoriety that had earned him the title of "pirate king." A self-proclaimed tide, to be sure, but one that no one would dispute was entirely earned.

He rested his free hand on the pommel of his sword, the Wreckager. The blade was almost as legendary as the pirate king himself, reputed to be capable of cutting down anyone or anything that dared to stand in its way. There were many rumors as to where Dread had acquired it, each more florid than the next. There had also been a sword maker in Bowerstone who, somewhat in his cups one evening, had claimed that he had forged it himself at Dread's commission and Dread had stiffed him on the bill. The sword maker vanished the next morning and was never heard from again.

"My friends," he said, his voice mellifluous, "if such as we can be said to have friends ..." This prompted a series of approving chortles. "Let us take a moment to appreciate all the great port cities of Albion who send us their semiyearly tithing this day! Every six months we receive their grateful offerings in exchange for our protection from any scurvy pirates who might think of attacking them. And I hear there are quite a few of such knaves about." More laughter in response to this. "Personally, I think they're all making the right decision. What say you?"

Raucous cheers and shouts of agreement filled the inn.

The fact that the port cities paid their tithes didn't mean that Captain Dread and his men were being lazy in the practice of their trade. Various sailors that traversed the nine seas of Albion still lived in fear that, at any time, they might come under assault by the most formidable pirate crew that ever sailed. But the tithing provided a nice, steady income for Dread's men, not to mention a perpetual reminder of just who was in charge.

"Let us never lose sight," he continued, "of who *they* are ... and who *we* are. We on the top, and they on the bottom."

"Which is the way we like it!" his first mate, Smiling Jake, called out. Smiling Jake had a distorted grin courtesy of two deep scars, one on either side of his mouth. Smiling Jake had previously been known as Scowling Jake. Then he had made the unfortunate decision to swing onto a ship they were invading with the blade of his dagger clenched firmly between his teeth. The instant he'd landed someone had punched him in the mouth, driving the blade deep into both sides of his cheeks. Much screaming and blood loss later, and once the scars had healed, he'd become Smiling Jake.

Jake's comment received much shouted approval, and that was when a rapid clatter of hoofbeats approached.

Since everyone in the whole of the area knew that on this particular night the crew of the formidable Captain Dread had taken over the tavern, it seemed incredibly unlikely that some passing stranger was intending to stop there for an evening. The only reasonable conclusion was exactly the one that Smiling Jake drew, which prompted him to call out in a merry voice, "Hah! Sounds like we've got our first customer!"

"It does indeed, Jake," said Captain Dread. "Who do you think is the first to deliver their tithe? Bowerstone? Bloodstone? Perhaps one of the smaller ports along the coast, like Bandit Coast?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Captain."

"And a damned sight better than most, I'd wager!" This prompted more laughter, more merriment, as they waited for the new arrival to make his entrance.

A half dozen of Captain Dread's men had spread out up and down the coast, arriving at the towns expected to pay their tithe with the important task of collecting it. Traditionally, no one even contemplated the notion of trying to hold out on some of the earnings because it was generally assumed that Captain Dread would figure it out. This stemmed from the time when the captain had initially instituted the policy and cut down one of his men on the very first outing for doing exactly that. What Dread had never told anyone was that he had no idea if the man had in fact been holding out on him or not. It didn't matter to him, as long as everyone else was too afraid to try it.

The door burst open.

None of Captain Dread's collectors entered. Instead, it was a newcomer, clothes dirty and sodden from what was clearly a hard ride on the road. He strode in, the heels of his boots thudding heavily and the spurs of his stirrups making a jangling sound that was a poor fit for the general atmosphere of the bar. He was carrying a sack, and he called out, in a voice thin and nervous, "Who here is Captain Dread?"

"That's me," said the pirate king. He was still on his feet, studying the man through narrowed eyes. "And you—?"

"A messenger, nothing more." He quickly placed the sack on the table and started for the door. But Smiling Jake intercepted him, shutting the door heavily before he could escape.

With a feeling of escalating concern, Dread untied the top of the sack and shoved down the top of it, exposing the contents.

A collective gasp escaped the lips of the pirate crew. Sitting there in the sack was the head of Murphy Squire, one of their own. Its eyes were rolled up into the top of the sockets. Tar had been spread at the base of the throat, presumably to prevent bleeding and seepage.

Most inexplicable of all was the letter "R" carved in Murphy's forehead.

There was deathly silence then as the men waited for their captain to speak.

"What," he finally managed to say, his voice a barely controlled tremble "is the meaning of this? This man went to—" He paused, trying to remember.

"Bloodstone, sir," Smiling Jake offered.

"—to Bloodstone on my behalf. Who dares treat my emissary and, by extension, myself, in such an obscene manner?"

"I, uh ..." The messenger pointed, his finger trembling. "I think there's, uh ... in his mouth, a ... uh ..."

It was true. The edge of what was clearly a piece of paper was protruding from Murphy's mouth. Dread leaned forward and carefully extracted it. It was the most precisely, neatly folded piece of paper he'd ever seen. He unfurled it and studied the words upon it. Reading was not his forte, so it took him a full minute. The only interruption came when the messenger said tentatively, "Shall I read it to you, sir?"

In one quick move, Dread pulled out his flintlock and fired point-blank. The messenger staggered back, his arms pinwheeling, and he collapsed to the floor. Dread, never having so much as glanced at the man, said, "No, thank you," and slid the weapon back into his belt as he continued to study it, his expression becoming darker and darker as he went.

And what he finally read aloud to his crew was the following:

*I've seen portraits of you. You're much too pretty to be a pirate king, much less one named Captain Dread. Stay out of my territory. Yours respectfully—Reaver.*

"Who in the world is Reaver?" His voice was very soft, very dangerous.

The pirates looked at one another, shrugging, confused, not sure how to answer or what to say.

"I've, uh ..." Smiling Jake cleared his throat. "Well! Speak up!"

"I've heard rumors ... nothing more. About some bloke doing some harrying near Hook Coast going by the name of Reaver."

"And why," said Captain Dread dangerously, "did you not see fit to mention him earlier?"

"Because he dropped out of sight a year or so ago. There was no more mention of him. I figured he'd been snuffed. Maybe by his crew; maybe by some bint he'd taken to his bed.

"Apparently that's not the case." Dread drummed his fingers briefly on the table thoughtfully, then said, "All right; as soon as we've received the rest of the tithing, we'll run this bastard to ground wherever he's hiding. In the meantime," and he tried to regain some of his swagger—not an easy endeavor considering how thrown he'd been by the recent events —"let's hoist one for poor Murphy and contemplate how we're going to dispatch this Reaver knave in his memory. To Murphy!"

*"To Murphy!"* they chorused.

He covered Murphy's head back up in the sack and tossed it to one of the pirates. "Now bury this thing in the back somewhere." The crewman did as he was told. It wasn't long, however, before Murphy had company.

Over the next two hours, more messengers came bearing more sacks. Each of them had the head of one of Dread's pirates who'd been sent for the purpose of collecting the money. Each of the heads had messages stuffed in its mouth, all from the selfsame "Reaver." And the arrival of each successive one increased both Dread's ire and blood pressure.

"How is this even possible!" he ranted. "Even the writing on the messages is identical! How can one man be moving up and down the coast, cutting off heads and sending messages?"

He questioned each messenger in succession, and when none of them had any concrete information to offer on Reaver, he shot them just on general principles. The last thing he needed was some messenger going back to whoever sent him and telling his boss about the stupid look on Dread's face when he found yet another one of his men's heads in a bag.

Matters changed, however, when the messenger from Brightwood showed up, bearing a package identical to those his predecessors had brought. The poor bastard couldn't stop trembling. When he extended the bag to Captain Dread, his hand was shaking so violently that he nearly dropped the thing before Smiling Jake stepped in and took it from him. He was unable even to look Dread in the eye. Then, before Dread could say a word, the messenger dropped to his knees and whispered—for his throat was too choked with fear to speak properly —"P-please don't kill me. I'm just a messenger. I'm not even a horse messenger! I came all this way on foot, because that's how unimportant Reaver considers me! I'm not one of his gang. The man terrifies me! Please, please ..."

This caught Dread's attention, and he decided a different approach might be more productive. "Calm yourself, man. Would you like a rum?"

"Is it going to be poisoned? It is, isn't it!"

"If I wanted you dead, I'd simply shoot you or cut your stammering head off. Dolly!" he called to one of the barmaids. "A rum for my friend here, on my bill if you please."

"Thank you sir ... most kind sir," said the messenger gratefully as the barmaid placed the rum in his hand. The poor devil was shaking, emaciated, clearly petrified, but as he downed it he seemed to calm a bit. He licked his chapped lips, and said, "Thank'ee kindly, sir. Most obliged. And very generous for a pirate."

"You may find my generosity short-lived," said Dread with an edge of warning, "if you're not forthcoming with what you know of this Reaver."

"Only ..." He took another deep swig of the rum and set the tankard down carefully, the alcohol apparently serving to steady his nerves. "Only what I've heard."

"And what would that be?"

The messenger glanced right and left, seemingly concerned that he was being observed by the terrifying individual of whom he was speaking. "Well... word is ..." He hesitated once more to gather his nerve and pushed on, "... word is that he started as just another cheap thief, trying to build a reputation. But then he crossed a line."

"What sort of line?" Dread felt as if he wasn't following.

His voice dropped further, so low that Dread had to strain to hear. "They say he cut a deal with ... with dark forces ... that made him immortal. And every year, he then makes fearsome sacrifices to those same dark forces in order to—"

"Wait, wait. Immortal? Are you saying he can't be killed?"

"Oh, he can be killed ... I suppose ... if someone gets near enough. But it's not as easy as all that." "Why not?"

"Because," said the messenger with increasing fear in his tone, "it's said Reaver is the most formidable marksman in the whole of Albion. Can shoot a flea off a dog's head without leaving so much as a scratch on the pooch, is what they say."

"Is *that* what they say?"

"Yes. And he also wields a weapon. A pistol called the Dragonstomper .48. Only five others like it in the world. Nothing can stand up against it. Plus he even had it enchanted so that it never needs to be reloaded. Leastways that's what I've heard."

"Well, what folks say can lend itself to exaggeration, is what I've experienced," said Captain Dread. "I think I'll wait to judge for myself."

"You mean ... seek him out?" said the messenger apprehensively. "Try to kill him with your own hand?"

"I'll succeed. That much I guarantee," said Captain Dread with utter confidence, and this resulted in yet another chorus of affirmation from his crew. Then he looked back to the messenger and pointed decisively at him. "And you are going to tell him all this. Personally. You understand? Go and tell him that Captain Dread is not going to tolerate this insult. Tell him his days are numbered and that he would be smart to set his affairs in order. You will tell him this?"

"Yes! Every word, I swear!"

"Good. And if you fail to do so, I *will* hunt you down. Understood?" "Absolutely, yes. You've made it very clear."

The messenger, bowing and scraping as he went, was out the door as fast as he could go. Dread waited until the door swung closed, then said briskly, "Wisp. Over here, right now."

There was no one stealthier in Captain Dread's band than the man nicknamed Will o' the Wisp, or simply "Wisp" for short. Wisp was so thin that it was said that, when he turned sideways, he was invisible. Shadows made more noise than he did. He was also exceptionally fast on his feet, and quick-thinking besides. Whenever Dread was on land and required a spy to survey the encampment of a potential enemy, Will o' the Wisp was the man he turned to.

"Follow him," he ordered Wisp. "Track him to wherever this 'Reaver' is secreting himself. Learn what you can, then come back here. Then together"—and he smiled in anticipation of it —"we will pay this Reaver a visit. The last one he will ever receive."

Wisp nodded and grinned at that, bowing slightly as he said, "I'm more than happy to obey, Captain." Whereupon he headed out, the door closing so silently behind him that it was as if he hadn't exited at all.

The conversation that followed in the inn was far more subdued as the waning hours passed. Dread was not the least bit happy with the concern his crew was showing. It seemed to him as if this Reaver was accomplishing exactly what he wanted to do: to get into the minds of his men. Captain Dread did not need his men feeling in any way that this Reaver (always "this Reaver," as if to refer to him by his name granted him some sort of power, as opposed to the pretender and callow fool that he most clearly was) was exerting any sort of influence on his crew.

As the sun began to crawl over the horizon, Captain Dread got to his feet. His men were still muttering to one another, speaking in low voices as if not to irritate their captain, and he heard the name "Reaver" being mentioned in all the discussions. The sound of his chair pushing back and the sight of him getting to his feet was enough to instantly command the full attention of his men.

"This Reaver," he said, "is nothing. He attempts to scare us. Imagine that presumption. We are what others are scared of! We are what dwells in the night, and we are what terrifies those who even think about traveling our ocean without paying for the privilege. Well, we are going to show him, my friends. We are going to rain destruction upon him ... on his crew ... on his loved ones ... on anyone and everyone who has ever been stupid enough to associate with—"

*"Reaver!"*

The captain's head snapped around in response to the alarmed cry that had come from Smiling Jake. He was pointing out the window, his hand shaking. His mouth was moving, but no further words were forthcoming.

Captain Dread threw open the front door of the inn and did everything he could to suppress a gasp of shock.

Wisp was outside, or more correctly his corpse was outside. He was hanging from the tree, arms and legs splayed, his hands affixed to the branches via nails. His head was slumped to one side. His skin was a sickly white.

Most horrible of all, his eyes had been extracted from his head, leaving empty black sockets staring vacantly at Captain Dread. The eyes had been fashioned into baubles on a necklace, a string having been carefully threaded through them so that they were dangling from around his throat.

He didn't have the "R" carved on his head. Dread wondered why.

Dread was aware of his men's gathering behind him, stunned into silence by what they were seeing. Slowly, Dread approached Wisp's corpse. There was a note attached to it, of course. Just like the others, it had been meticulously folded, but this time affixed to his shirt rather than stuffed in his mouth. Dread detached it from his shirt, unfolded it, and read it silently in his slow, laborious manner.

*I left off the "R" because it seemed like overkill (pardon the pun.) It was a mistake trying to follow me. You're going to run out of mistakes sooner or later, and I assure you I'll be there when that happens. By the way, thank you for the rum. It was very tasty. Yours respectfully—Reaver.*

Captain Dread crumpled the note and allowed it to fall to the ground. "Put the word out," he said. "Five hundred gold for the man who brings me Reaver's head."

*That,* he thought, *should be the end of it.*

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It was not the end of it.

There was not a shortage of bounty hunters who were willing to undertake the challenge that Captain Dread had tossed out there. Nor was there, as it turned out, a shortage of accounts as to what Reaver looked like. That was because Reaver made sure that everyone knew.

Apparently, word of Captain Dread's bounty upon him had reached Reaver's ears. Reaver's response had been to paper what seemed the entirety of Albion with wanted posters that he himself had designed.

The dominant element of the poster was a portrait of Reaver. Dread, upon seeing one of them, could discern the resemblance to the man that he had allowed to slip right through his fingers back at the inn. A face that was long and angular, mouth twisted into a perpetual smirk. He was depicted wearing a top hat and an expression of staggering insufferableness.

The writing on wanted posters was typically fairly succinct. The name of the perpetrator being sought, the reward, and who was to be the payer of it.

Not these posters.

Above the picture were emblazoned the words, *Have you seen me? If so, how lucky you are!* Below the picture, in smaller letters, was *Captain Dread has put out a bounty of 500 gold pieces. Cheap bastard. I'd put out a bounty on him if I were afraid of him. But I'm not So do your worst, my friends. And I'll do mine.*

Even Captain Dread had to admit, with great frustration, that the ploy was a brilliant one. It had a twofold effect: It established in the minds of the people that Reaver was not the least bit afraid of Captain Dread; and worse, it planted the germ of suspicion that Captain Dread was afraid of Reaver.

It grated on him. Putting out bounties was a time-honored custom. It spread the wealth throughout the bounty-hunter and pirate community. It was a way of letting people know that you were too busy an individual to waste time tracking someone down. You had greater concerns and were willing to, in effect, pay others to do your dirty work. It was, in short, a sign of stature and achievement.

No one had ever concluded that posting a bounty meant that the person willing to shell out considerable remuneration was doing so because he was afraid to take on the target personally. Yet that was exactly the perception that Reaver was beginning to spread.

It was a paradigm shift. That's what it was. It was a damned paradigm shift. Reaver was managing to change people's perceptions almost single-handedly. And he was using Dread, and undermining Dread's reputation, in order to accomplish it.

When the summons came in from Bowerlake, where a notorious sell-sword named Valerian supposedly had Reaver strung up like a prize goose, Dread was disinclined to go. His reasoning was that, as the pirate king, it was fitting that he send lackeys to deal with an upstart. But he saw how his crew was starting to look at him, how random people were looking at him. He heard the whispers, saw the sideways glances, heard his name being mentioned in murmurs that didn't sound particularly flattering.

*That son of a bitch is undermining me without having to do a damned thing. How is this happening?*

That was all the impetus that Captain Dread required.

"Jake," he called out, his voice ringing out through the inn. "Round up some horses and an escort. "We're on our way to Bowerlake."

Minutes later Dread, Smiling Jake, and half a dozen of Dread's strongest bullyboys, were galloping down the highway toward Bowerlake. Every minute of the journey seemed like an eternity because Dread felt as if it was yet another minute for Reaver to concoct some sort of trick that would enable him to elude capture. It was at some point during that ride that Dread came to realize that he'd stopped thinking of the irritating little pissant as "this Reaver." He had elevated him to the status of a genuine threat, and Dread found that more disconcerting than anything else.

The pirates arrived in Bowerlake in short order. The town was deserted, save for one, and he was not exactly a resident.

Valerian was there. His boots, with the feet still in them, were waiting at the main entrance to the town.

His legs were discovered a short distance away; his torso and arms were scattered nearby. His head was found on a pike, an "R" carved into the forehead and a note attached to his chin.

*He died a man of parts. Yours respectfully—Reaver.*

Captain Dread roared, furious beyond his ability to contain himself. Then he whirled and faced his petrified men. "Gather everyone. We're going to drive this son of a bitch into the sea and drown him there. He's no longer just a dead man. He's *my* dead man."

It worked.

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Dread bribed practically the entire countryside into being his eyes and his ears. No longer was it merely five hundred gold pieces for anyone who was able to kill Reaver, although that offer continued to stand. Added to that was a reward of a thousand gold pieces to anyone who was able to provide information that led to the capture and/or the death of Reaver.

Suddenly, information was coming in from all over. Everywhere, from Oakfield to Brightwood, people were sending word of Reaver sightings. Fortunately, there was the proviso about not paying out unless, and until, the tip led to Reaver's well-deserved demise. Otherwise, Dread would easily have gone broke by the end of the endeavor.

The problem was that Dread's crew wound up being spread thin and run ragged by chasing down every single sighting. The number of people throughout Albion who appeared to bear some sort of resemblance to Reaver was simply beyond comprehension. "How can this many people look like him?" Dread ranted at one point. "Did he sire an entire town's worth of offspring?"

"Considering the rumors," said Smiling Jake, "about both his potency and how long he's been living, I wouldn't necessarily discount the possibility." That was not a reply that Captain Dread found particularly helpful.

But then word started coming in from sources that were a number of steps higher than the average peasantry: former members of Dread's crew who had tired of the seagoing life and settled down in businesses that they had purchased, often with their ill-gotten gain. And the word Dread was getting from them was consistent and heartening.

Reaver was on the run.

Apparently (according to his people), Reaver was starting to feel hemmed in. Every step he took was dogged by bounty hunters, by townspeople who were on the lookout for him, by everybody and anybody who was hoping to get a piece of him. Word was that he was heading to his vessel, also called *Reaver,* a fact that Dread considered to be massively egotistical. Did Reaver know about, or care about, the way things were supposed to be? Had he no sense of tradition whatsoever? *You don't name your vessel after yourself! You just don't! That wasn't how it was done.*

The *Reaver* was apparently anchored near Bargate prison. Supposedly, Reaver had an active practice aiding escapees from Bargate. Naturally, when they first escaped, they had little to no resources. But Reaver would periodically bring his ship there, take the escapees aboard, and transport them to wherever they might have resources, such as treasure, buried. It was a nice little racket Reaver had going. From what Captain Dread was able to determine—Reaver would simply take the treasure that he was led to, cut the throat of the escaped convict, and toss him into the ocean.

It was contemptible behavior, and yet Captain Dread actually found himself admiring the audacity. He would be sure to congratulate the bastard right before he killed him.

Dread's information led him to believe that Reaver was planning to make a beeline for Hook Coast and put some distance between himself and the pirate king whom he had repeatedly insulted. Perhaps Reaver had thought better of his tactics.

*Too bloody late, you pompous ass,* thought Captain Dread.

It took almost no time at all for Dread and his men to return to the *Marianne.* He saw his proud ship moored at the Sinkhole, her customary place of berth, the crew already readying her to make way. The Sinkhole was one of Dread's greatest discoveries. It was a vast cavern, five hundred feet deep and filled with water, situated within a series of caves. Dread had found an entrance to it large enough to accommodate his ship, and that was where he hid her when she was not in use. It was brilliant; who in the world would search for a ship in a cave?

The ornately carved figurehead of a beautiful woman seemed to welcome him back, as it always did. When he saw it, his thoughts flew briefly back to his beloved, long-dead wife. A woman slain during a pirate raid on a peaceful town, while her husband ...

He tore his thoughts away from that. There lay madness, and he had work to do.

Smiling Jake had gone on ahead to oversee the preparations. When Dread strode up the gangplank, Jake immediately shouted, "Captain on the deck!"

A cheer went up from his men. Every one of them had staked their future to him. Every one of them would follow him into the gates of Skorm. And every one of them was dying to see Captain Dread destroy the upstart Reaver, who dared to think that he was somehow superior to the king of the pirates.

"Take us out!" shouted the captain. "We have the wind at our back and a pretender to destroy!"

Minutes later, they had weighed anchor, the canvas of the sails stretching to their fullest, driving the ship out into the welcoming waters.

Captain Dread scanned the vista in front of them, and snarled, "We're coming for you, boy-o. And it doesn't matter how far you run, or how fast, or how valiant a defense you put up. Your arse is mine."

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Dread was in his cabin, studying the navigation charts, trying to determine the flaw in his plan and outthink Reaver. He was starting to second-guess himself, certain that it couldn't be so easy. That alone was enough to make him even angrier with Reaver, because Captain Dread was not in the habit of second-guessing himself. *Bad enough that he's undermining my authority with the people and had my own crew doubting me for a time. Now he's starting to undermine my own self-confidence. Mewling puke must die for this, and it has to be slowly...*

There was a quick pounding at the door. "What?" said Dread, in no mood for company.

Smiling Jake entered with a greater sense of urgency than the laconic second-in-command usually presented. "Captain," he said, "we've spotted *Reaver."*

Dread was immediately on his feet. "You're sure?"

"Hard to miss, sir. She's a schooner with the name *Reaver* etched on it in gold gilt. With sparkles."

"Sparkles?" Dread looked at him oddly. "What do you—sparkles?" "Yes. The sunlight glances off them. It's ... rather nice."

Dread stared at him, then said, "You know I have a gun, right? I could put a bullet in your head anytime I want and just make up the reason afterward and no one would have a thing to say about it."

"Sorry, sir," Jake said, clearing his throat.

Dread strode up onto the deck, his long coat swishing around his knees, Smiling Jake following him. They still had a good steady breeze behind them that was driving them inexorably toward a confrontation. He headed toward the bridge, where the ship's navigator, Taggert, was handling the wheel with his customary confidence. He turned his scarred face to the captain and gestured toward the wheel, silently asking whether Dread wanted to take over. Dread shook his head and, pulling out his telescope, sighted the smaller vessel. He was already planning the sea battle that would take place. No matter what scenario he ran through his head, it turned out with his ship winning the day.

Which made him wonder why it hadn't occurred to Reaver as well. How could the fool not have realized that he and his crew were going to wind up at the bottom of the sea? Did he have nothing but idiots serving under him—?

"Ship ahoy!" Smiling Jake was shouting. "Ready the long nines on the starboard side!"

Obediently, the pirates scrambled to their stations, the starboard cannons being prepared for action.

Dread continued to study the situation, trying to determine something he might have overlooked, some— *Wait a minute ... is that...?*

He refocused the telescope, scarcely able to believe what he was seeing. "Taggert, do you see what I'm seeing?" Taggert had the sharpest eyes on the crew, and if anyone would be able to discern what Dread was seeing, it would be he.

Taggert squinted slightly. "Is that a ... white flag, Captain?"

"So it would seem. And it looks to me like they're lowering a longboat."

"I see that as well."

The *Marianne* was drawing steadily closer to the *Reaver,* and not only could they see the white flag of surrender, there was a single man seated in the boat that was descending to the surface of the water. His hands were tied behind him, and around his mouth was a gag that he was desperately trying to dislodge by shaking his head violently.

Captain Dread instantly recognized the face that he had previously seen staring out at him mockingly from posters.

"Reaver. That's Reaver."

Smiling Jake had now come within hearing distance, and he was staring in astonishment at his captain. "You mean Reaver himself? In that boat?" "I'd stake my life and whatever's left of my reputation on it." "It could be a trick to lure us in," Jake said cautiously.

"Lure us in? We still have our guns—which outnumber theirs two to one—at the ready for any hint of attack. So what would be the trick involved?"

Jake had no answer for that, other than to say, "It doesn't make sense."

"We come around to parley then, but we keep the long nines on them the entire time. They so much as breathe funny, and we rake them. Clear?"

"Aye, sir."

Normally, when descending upon a vessel, the men of the *Marianne* made a great deal of noise. They would shout, ballyhoo, and bang their swords against the railings. Now, though, uncertain of the circumstances under which they were approaching, the pirates were relatively silent. By this point, they could all see the flapping white flag and the man who looked a lot like Reaver sitting in a boat, apparently abandoned.

The two ships drew within trumpet range of each other. Usually, when pirate vessels were this close to each other, any and all conversation would be drowned out by challenges screamed across the waters that separated them. Not this time. This time the individual crews were eyeing each other warily. The *Marianne's* guns remained at the ready. The *Reaver,* by contrast, still had her weapons stowed. The white flag was genuine. They were offering up no resistance.

Captain Dread brought his speaking trumpet to his mouth. The trumpet was long and gold, and when he spoke into it, his voice boomed across the divide. *"This is Captain Dread, the pirate king."* He couldn't help but add, *"You may have heard of me."*

Another man, standing on the other vessel and holding a similar device to Dread's, called back, *"Aye, we have. That's why we're taking this action."*

*"And what action, exactly, is that? Explain yourselves, please."*

*"It's fairly simple: We've mutinied. Reaver undertook this course of provocation against the wishes of all of us, who have no quarrel with you or your office. To him, it's all a big game. To us, it's our skins, and we'd rather keep them on our bodies, thank ye very much."*

*"So you're suggesting,"* said Dread, *"that I take your deposed captain, and I go my way, and you go yours?"*

*"What we suggest is that we have no quarrel with you. We respect your position and your reputation. Reaver's reckless course of action must come to an end. End it as you wish; we wash our hands of him."*

It all made sense. Reaver's men had seen their doom bearing down upon them and responded in a traditional piratical manner. They'd acted to save themselves.

And there was Reaver, unable to speak—which must have infuriated him mightily, since Dread was fairly certain that Reaver was the type who was in love with the sound of his own voice. Not being able to talk must have been killing him.

*Fine. I'll be killing him myself soon enough.*

"Let's blow him out of the water right now," Smiling Jake urged Dread.

The captain shook his head. "No. No, he doesn't get off quite that easily. Haul him up here," Captain Dread told his men. "Take his longboat as well. Can always use another one." Then, bringing the trumpet back up, he called over to the other ship, *"And what's to stop me from blowing up your ship once I safely have your offering on board?"*

*"Nothing save your appreciation of our gesture."*

*"A gesture that comes from a desire to save your own lives."*

*"And what's the harm in that?"* called back the pirate from Reaver's ship. *"Helping us just helps you in turn. What's wrong with both sides going their separate ways, and in one piece?"*

Captain Dread considered it for a moment, tapping his index finger on the trumpet. Finally, he said, *"Very well I can be generous. In exchange for your offering, I give you safe passage. Cross me again, in the slightest way, for any reason, and I'll blow you to Skorm."*

*"Thank you, sir! Thank you!"* The crew of the *Reaver* burst into a repeated chant of "Hail the Pirate King! Hail the Pirate King!" Captain Dread was briefly tempted to blast some holes in the ship while they were still cheering him, simply because the notion appealed to his sense of humor. He ultimately decided not to, feeling it would be poor form.

Minutes later, the mighty Reaver, self-styled terror of the nine seas, was standing on the deck of the ship. His arms were held firmly by two of Dread's bulkiest men, Trigger and Longshanks, who were testing the bonds to make certain they were secure. The longboat in which he'd been sent over was being hoisted onto a set of pulleys and suspended off to the side. Meanwhile, the good ship *Reaver* sailed off, still cheering Dread's name. It was almost charming in a way.

"He's definitely unarmed, sir," said Trigger. "No swords, no daggers, and certainly no legendary gun."

Dread nodded in approval, then strode slowly around Reaver, studying him from all angles. "Well, well. Your pictures do you justice," said Captain Dread. "Allow me to welcome you personally to the *Marianne."* He took two quick steps forward and drove a fist deep into Reaver's gut. Reaver grunted into the gag that secured his mouth. "Welcome aboard."

This prompted a roar of raucous laughter from his men. Reaver sagged, held upright by Dread's men. His knees buckled inward, his ankles bent. Apparently things were dizzy around him because he had to shake his head abruptly in order to refocus on Dread.

Smiling Jake was holding a dagger and saying in a singsong voice, "Let me gut him right here and now."

"If I wanted to give him the easy way out, I could indeed have just blown him up while he was still in the water. No, no, this one deserves special treatment. Remove the gag. Make sure his hands stay tied."

Using his dagger, Jake sliced the gag out of Reaver's mouth. Reaver stretched his jaw, moved it from side to side. "Have anything to say for yourself?" said Dread.

"Oh, a good deal indeed," said Reaver. "Always, at any time. First of all, I want you to know that this is an absolutely smashing ship. And by that, of course, I mean that it's a ship that I'm going to enjoy smashing into tiny pieces. Second ... seriously ..." and he looked Dread up and down in contempt, "that hat with that coat? At *this* time of year? As much of a threat as I pose to you, Captain Dead ..." "Dread," said the captain through gritted teeth.

"For now," said Reaver indifferently. "For the time being you're not dead. But the day is young. Anyway, as I was saying ... although I will admit that talk is cheap—"

"Will someone shut him up!" Dread said, his irritation beginning to show.

One of his men advanced on Reaver from behind, his fist clenched, clearly ready to punch Reaver in the head.

He never got close. The moment the pirate got close, Reaver—without even deigning to look at him—lashed out with his right leg and drove his foot straight into the man's privates. The pirate went down, moaning, clutching at his crotch. The other pirates took a step back, many of them wincing in sympathy as men typically did when seeing one of their fellows receive that particular injury.

Without missing a beat, Reaver continued, "—and that sometimes it's best to let actions speak with greater volume than words. Where was I? Oh, yes, your ensemble. I swear, if you were allowed to go around representing the best that piracy has to offer, while attired in that hideous fashion disaster, anyone with a scintilla of taste would wind up killing you for that alone."

Captain Dread had had enough, but he worked to keep his grim smile firmly in place. He had no intention of letting his crew think that, even for a moment, Reaver was getting to him. "We'll see how chatty you are, Reaver, once we're done keelhauling you."

"Good heavens. Now you have me shaking in my extremely fashionable boots. My friends," and he raised his voice and addressed the assemblage around him, "I'm looking for a volunteer!"

"A volunteer?" Dread studied him as if he'd lost his mind. "For what? Just out of curiosity."

"I'm going to need someone to survive what's to come, so that he can spread the legend of what I'm capable of accomplishing."

The pirates exchanged confused looks. Apparently interested in spite of himself, Smiling Jake said, "And what would that be, exactly?"

Reaver replied as if it should have been the most obvious thing in the world. "Why, my dear fellow: I'm going to kill everyone on this ship." A brief silence, then, followed by a roar of laughter from Dread's crew.

Reaver didn't seem the least bit abashed by the reaction. Indeed, he rather seemed to enjoy it, as if he thrived on disbelief. "It's true, my boys. Stem to stern, top to bottom, soup to nuts. There's going to be more stiffs than you'd find at one of my raunchier parties, and I mean that in several different contexts. I leave it to you to sort it out during the brief time you have left."

Dread waited until the laughter died down a bit, and said, "Gentlemen, kindly escort ex-Captain Reaver to my cabin."

"Ah! No doubt you desire to have me provide you firsthand tips as to how to make yourself over into someone who can inspire fear and awe in all those you meet. As opposed to now, when the only response you get from me is fear that you're going to bore me to death and awe as in, 'Aw, isn't that charming, he thinks he's dangerous.' Or are you thinking of having your way with me? If so, I insist that you buy me dinner and a drink first. That just seems the least you can do. And you strike me as a man who always does the least he can do."

This actually prompted a chuckle among the crew. Dread fired them an annoyed look, and they immediately quieted down.

They dragged Reaver down to the captain's quarters, making sure to keep his hands bound. Reaver struggled, pushing, shoving his body against them, trying to get away, but they managed to restrain him. "Not so chatty now, eh? Starting to realize you're a dead man walking?" Dread called to him as he watched Reaver's gyrations. Finally, he was pushed into the quarters with such force that he staggered slightly but managed to keep his feet. Captain Dread sauntered in behind him, seating himself casually behind his desk. There was a wooden seat opposite him, and he gestured for Reaver to take a seat as the door to the cabin clicked softly shut.

"I'll stand, if it's all the same to you," said Reaver. "So you wish to die on your feet?"

"Actually, I wish to die in an amorous encounter crushed between two large-framed women. *That* would be a death for the ages."

"How sad that you seem to have so little appreciation for your predicament that you waste your last moments in sexual fantasies."

"How sad for you," returned Reaver, "that you are so much of a eunuch that carnal knowledge is something you're not the least bit interested in. At least that's what I hear."

Dread's jaw tightened a moment, then relaxed. "Very clever. Hoping to provoke me so that I'll kill you quickly instead of slowly."

"So I heard wrong? Great Avo, is my virtue at risk? I mean, that's what they say about you in Bloodstone, when they're not laughing about you behind your back."

"You lie. Bloodstone," said Captain Dread coolly, "is the crown jewel in my empire. I own Bloodstone. They wouldn't dare speak derisively of me, behind my back or otherwise."

"I would tell you to go right on believing that, but you aren't going to be alive long enough to care one way or the other. And once you're dead—just for you—I'll be sure to make Bloodstone the crown jewel of *my* empire. I'll even do it up right, behave like a true king of pirates should. I'm thinking I'll build a mansion there. Have hot-and-cold running guests."

"While you're at it, why don't you add an arena so you can stage battles to the death?"

Reaver's eyes widened. "That... is brilliant. A simply *brilliant* idea. I am absolutely going to steal that from you. I hope you don't mind. In point of fact, you'll be far too dead to care by the time it happens, but still..."

"Just how in love are you with the sound of your own voice?"

"No more so than everyone else is in love with it. It's quite a list; people book months in advance just to hear it. You're lucky I'm jumping you to the head of the line. What with your impending demise, I felt it was the least I could do."

Dread took that in, then laughed loudly and deeply. "You are an entertaining little bastard, I'll give you that," he said when he'd regained control of himself. Then he grew serious once more and allowed the silence between them to grow for a short time. With unexpected quiet, he said, "There was a man once. He looked like me, sounded like me, but he was a doctor. He had not always been such. Once he had been a very brutal man, a terrible, threatening man. But he had changed, and he had become a good and decent man, and he treated rich and poor alike because he elevated human dignity above all else. But even more important than that was his lovely wife, whom he loved with all his heart. He had changed ... for her. Remade himself into a man of peace rather than war.

"And one day, while he was in another village nearby, tending to the sick ... pirates swept into his town. They plundered and ravaged, and his wife caught the captain's eye. And he ..."

"Took her?" Reaver actually sounded genuinely interested, even faintly saddened, although it was impossible to tell if he was simply being ironic.

"Yes. Took her, ravaged her. She lived just long enough to tell her grief-stricken husband what had happened; and then she died. And her final breath unleashed the beast that resided within the man.

"And that man tracked down the pirate who had brutalized her, and he killed the man. The man who was known far and wide as Captain Dread.

"And he took the pirate's name, and his ship, and his crew. And he took to the seas and became the most destructive force that anyone who sailed had ever seen."

"Until the arrival of myself, of course."

"You." The edges of his mouth twisted in a sneer. "You are such a pathetic waste of a pirate that your own crew wanted to have nothing to do with you. They betrayed you."

"Well, that's another subject entirely." He raised an eyebrow sardonically. "Let me guess: The late, lamented woman in question was named Marianne. Yes?" "That's correct. And I immortalized her with this vessel."

"This vessel and about 90 percent of the pirate ships out there. Was that deliberate on your part? Did you insist that there be dozens of brigantines named *Marianne* in order to confuse any who might pursue you? Having so many decoys in order to avoid your enemies ... again?"

"That," said Dread in annoyance, "was something that simply happened spontaneously. Other pirates wished to honor me and so renamed their vessels after mine."

Rolling his eyes, Reaver said, "Why you would want to rule over such a bootkissing lot is beyond me."

"Better to kiss the boot than be kicked by it, as you are now learning."

"Ah! Back to me, then. Which is excellent since I'm my favorite subject. Oh, and by the way, if it will make you feel any better, I'll be saving you for last."

"Meaning that I'll be the last person you kill?" He was amused by Reaver's misplaced confidence.

"Well... not *ever.* But during this little outing, yes, that's right."

"And how do you propose to do that when you are weaponless, and your hands are tied behind you?" There came a sudden banging on the door. "Sir!"

Dread immediately recognized the voice as belonging to Longshanks. "What is it?" he said with irritation. "Sir, my dagger is missing."

*Why the blazes is he telling me this? Am I his mother?* "Just go wherever you last saw it!"

"Sir, the last place was in my belt when I was hauling Reaver down here—!"

That was the moment that Reaver brought his arms around. They were no longer secured behind his back. Strands of severed rope were falling from it, and Reaver held up the dagger with a lopsided grin.

"He shouldn't have let me get close," said Reaver, "but if he's that nostalgic for his knife, I'll happily return it to him." And before Dread could react, Reaver slammed a foot into Dread's desk. It struck with enough force to thrust the desk backward, right at the pirate king seated behind it.

Dread started to shout a furious warning, but he didn't have the time. The desk slammed into him, shoving him back against the wall, momentarily pinning him. The moment was all Reaver required as he turned and yanked the door open, revealing a surprised Longshanks standing there, his eyes wide with shock.

"And so begins the soiree. Allow me to cut in," said Reaver, and he jammed the dagger into the base of Longshanks's throat, just under his chin. Longshanks tried to cry out, but it was a purely automatic reflex since he did not, in fact, have anything in his throat capable of producing sound. Blood seeped from his mouth and around the blade that was buried in his throat.

Reaver shoved him aside, clearing the path, as Dread—with no leverage—struggled to get the desk out of the way. "Now we dance," Reaver called out merrily. "Everyone grab a partner because it's going to become positively giddy," as he ducked out of the room.

Dread had been so filled with rage that he had, for a brief time, been literally inarticulate. Now, though, he finally pulled air into his lungs as he bellowed, "All hands! Reaver's loose! Find him! Find him and bring me the bastard's head!"

1. **Reaver**

Reaver, still chuckling to himself, heard the sounds of running feet up on the deck. Naturally, they were all going to be heading down on the assumption they could cut him off. "Let them come. The more the merrier."

There were cannons on the top deck, but at that moment Reaver was more interested in the secondary guns on the lower deck. They were lighter, more maneuverable. He strode in just as two of Dread's pirates entered from the other end. Both of them had swords drawn, and when they saw Reaver, they started shouting, "Here! He's down here!"

Reaver never stopped moving. "You fellows don't have the balls to stop me. Fortunately, the same could not be said for me." He picked up a cannon ball and, displaying astounding— nearly supernatural—strength, he flung it with the speed and force of a discus. It struck the foremost pirate in the head, crushing his skull instantly. Seeing the fate of his companion, the second immediately turned and tried to run, but an instant later a second perfectly placed cannon ball struck him in the spine. There was a loud and very satisfying crack, and he went down screaming.

Wasting no time, Reaver yanked one of the cannons out of position and swung it wide. It rolled back effortlessly on its wheels. "This is nice to see: a well-oiled weapon. I know I certainly prefer to keep *my* weapon oiled at all times. Never know when I'm going to have to wheel it out."

It only took him seconds to toss in gunpowder and shove the cannonball into place, even as he heard the sounds of pounding feet. He pulled the door shut behind him and slammed home the bolt, blocking off—at least temporarily—access to the deck from the aft section. "No, no, can't have the guests in quite yet. Didn't they pay attention to the invitations? The party isn't scheduled to start for another minute yet." The locked door served as a fail-safe should the vessel be boarded by opposition; it was a way of slowing them down so that, in a pitched battle, the *Marianne's* cannons could continue to be used against the enemy ship. This time, however, the enemy was making use of the lock himself.

Shoulders could be heard thudding against the aft door, along with shouts of the self-evident, "It's locked! Why is it locked?"

"I'm having carnal knowledge of your sister. The poor thing is just so shy," Reaver called. He wasn't concerned about the forward section. That was covered.

A mass of pirates appeared at the door in the forward section, which was still invitingly open. The foremost of them—the navigator, Taggert—was holding a curved pistol.

"You call *that* a *gun?"* Reaver said disdainfully as he lit the fuse of the cannon that was aimed right at them.

The pirates let out a collective cry of horror and tried to turn and get out of the way. The cannon fired.

It went off with such force and velocity that it not only crushed the bodies of the pirates, but it kept going and blew a hole in the prow.

*"What in Skorm was that?"* came the screams from the other side of the aft door.

"No worries," Reaver said calmly as he wheeled the cannon around toward the aft. "You'll have your explanation in just a few moments."

Seconds later, when the cannon detonated again, the result was an annihilated door, more annihilated pirates, and a gaping hole in the aft of the ship as well.

Then he tilted the cannon one more time: upward. It was not an easy endeavor, because it wasn't designed to go back that far, and Reaver was going to have to apply sheer muscle power in order to accomplish his design. And it would need to be quick because he would have to light the fuse first; he'd be unable to do it while he was hoisting the cannon.

"If I do this correctly," he muttered, "before the mast is going to be the worst place for them to be standing." He struck the match, then lit the fuse. Then, as fast as he could, he grabbed the muzzle and pulled back with all his strength.

The cannon tilted back on its wheels, and, just before Reaver's arms gave out, it exploded upward with such force that Reaver was knocked on his ass.

The cannonball blew through the ceiling and the upper deck.

There were cries and shrieks from above, and the sound of timber slowly cracking, then giving way. Seconds later, a massive thud shook the entire vessel, accompanied by abruptly terminated screams.

It had worked perfectly. The projectile had struck the mainmast, which had held together for a few seconds before giving out. The entire thing collapsed, like a vast tree, crushing any number of the crew above.

Reaver stepped over the mashed bodies of the pirates, stopping only to pick up the fallen pistol and a sword. He looked at the pistol appraisingly. "Not a bad weapon, actually," he said, and shoved it into his sash. The sword, along with the belt, he buckled around his waist. He studied it momentarily, then shook his head. "That's the amazing thing about me. On a lesser mortal, this would seem like overkill. But damn me if it isn't true: I can make anything work just by dint of wearing it. If that alone doesn't raise me above the common thug, I don't know what does. If you've got the buckle for it, then swash it, that's what I say."

He stuck his head out the forward section. The breeze threw salt air in his face, which was invigorating as always. He discovered, to his amusement, that he had emerged through the nether regions of the female figurehead of the *Marianne.* "Please excuse the intrusion, milady," he said mockingly, and eased his body through. The figurehead's arm, still intact, was within reach, albeit not easy reach. Reaver stretched out his hands, his fingers coming close, missing, closer, missing again.

Realizing he was going to have to commit, Reaver threw himself toward the outstretched arm. He just managed to snag it, almost slipped, but then got a firmer grasp and secured it. He swung his legs around, braced them against the prow, and hauled himself up. His feet almost lost their purchase for a moment but then landed squarely on the figurehead's outthrust bosom. "Women: such supportive creatures," he said to himself as he shoved his way up and onto the deck.

Chaos had been unleashed upon it. The ship was lurching wildly, the oil lamps along the deck swinging to and fro. Some pirates were already dead and others were dying, crushed under the mast and unwilling to admit they were goners. Others were struggling under the rigging, pinned there like so many fish.

However, Reaver was annoyed to discover that things had not gone quite as well as he'd planned. He had, in fact, missed his target. The upper reaches of the mainmast had indeed collapsed, but most of the lower section was still there. Not quite as many of the men as he'd expected were incapacitated.

And the ones who were still on their feet saw him, let out a roar of fury, and charged toward him.

The foremast was partly destroyed, but the aftmast was still upright. Reaver took the opportunity to leap upward and grab the rigging. He started ascending. Single bullets flew past, and Reaver twisted to keep his body out of their way. He looked down at his assailants, tossing off a cheery wave. " 'Tis a pity you lot never sailed with me. I could have given you lessons on marksmanship."

"You'll be the one getting a blood lesson, you will!" one of the pirates called up to him.

The canvas of the sail was fluttering near him, and he looked up, studying the guylines that were keeping the large triangular sail affixed to the mast. One was near him, and, pulling out his sword, he cut it loose. The sail fluttered with greater fierceness in the air, but otherwise it held firm.

"They should really make these things out of stronger fibers," he said as he continued to clamber upward. As he reached the top of the rigging, he went on—as if he were actually having a conversation—"It could deter people from doing something like this."

He cut the upper ropes binding the sail to the mast and stepped aside as the sail unfurled and tumbled past him.

Below him, the men shouted warnings to one another, but it was too late. Pounds upon pounds of canvas, no longer held aloft by the ropes, collapsed upon the crewmen below. It missed a few of them, but most of them went down beneath its weight.

Reaver saw a guyline swinging in the breeze near him. "Ah. Looks like my ride is here." With no further thought or hesitation, he leaped toward it, catching it one-handed, and slid partway down it, then kicked off the mast. The rapid slide shredded the skin on his left hand, but rather than cry out because he was in pain, he laughed for more or less the same reason.

The kick sent him whipping through the air in a rapid arc. Pirates saw him coming, pointed, shouted, went for their swords ... they did everything except the one thing they should have done, which was to duck.

Reaver's sword flashed, cutting through jugulars, slashing across chests, sending blood spurting in every direction. He was there, he was gone, then back up and around a second time, hacking away at pirates he'd missed the first time.

Upon the third circuit, a couple were ready for him, or so they thought. They crouched, figuring that they could stab upward at him without being threatened themselves. No such luck. On the far side of the arc, as he dangled momentarily over the waters of the sea, he looped the rope around his right foot. As a result, when he swung toward them a third time— just as he drew within range—and released his hold on the rope, suddenly he was upside down, swinging his blade across their bellies, spilling their guts onto the deck in great splashes of gore.

The position was untenable for a long-term effort, and so Reaver swung his blade up and severed the rope above him. He hit the ground, his momentum carrying him into a forward roll, and he bounded to his feet. "Now that alone," he said cheerfully, "is worth the price of admission."

He then started moving across the sails, discerning the struggling lumps beneath the cloth and stabbing them, one by one, through the heart, the liver, the kidneys ... whichever organ happened to catch his fancy. Those who cursed him and his name, he allowed to live for as long as it would take for them to die of the wounds he was inflicting upon them. "No need to worry," he called out cheerfully, "there's plenty for all!" Seeing that there were still a few men alive, albeit pinned or their bodies broken beneath the mainmast, he advised them, "Not to fear, gents! I'll be with you soon enou—"

Abruptly something slammed into Reaver from behind. He staggered, yanked out the gun in order to deal with whatever it was, and had just enough time to register that it was the man named Smiling Jake. He was holding a belaying pin in one hand and a knife in the other. He came in fast, his bizarre smile at odds with the pure rage in his eyes, and he used the belaying pin to knock the gun from Reaver's hand and send it tumbling to the deck some feet away.

Reaver swung the blade at him, but Smiling Jake was fast and sidestepped the attack.

He drove the knife forward and, had it struck the target, would have gutted Reaver. But Reaver slammed down the base of his palm onto the top of Jake's hand, sending the thrust off to the side. The point drove into Reaver's greatcoat and was momentarily tangled there, snarled in the rich brocade.

"You see there?" said Reaver. "When you fight me, you fight my entire wardrobe."

Reaver stepped in close, grabbed Smiling Jake's belt with one hand, swept Jake's feet out from under him, and shoved Jake over the side rail. Smiling Jake screamed and tumbled into the water, striking his head against the ship as he went, leaving a long red smear against the hull as he disappeared under the water.

Reaver nodded in approval and turned to retrieve the gun.

Captain Dread was standing between them, holding his sword, the Wreckager, in his hand. The blade was trembling, revealing the cold fury in him.

"Well, *that* was stealthy of you," Reaver said cheerily. "Everyone else dead?" "Get him, Captain!" came a shout, then another, "Kill him!" and a third, "Gut the bastard!"

"That would be 'no,' then."

Dread was beyond speaking, beyond rage, beyond anything other than wanting to see Reaver dead. He charged, whipping the sword around, and Reaver hurriedly brought his own appropriated blade up to meet the thrust.

The impact of the two blades was so violent that it almost knocked the sword out of Reaver's hand. The vibrations alone were enough to make Reaver's arm almost numb.

Reaver quickly backpedaled, assessing the situation. The Wreckager was simply too strong; no ordinary pirate cutlass was going to be able to match it.

Seeing that Reaver was retreating, Dread was newly emboldened. "Hah!" he bellowed, and followed Reaver implacably. There was no artistry in his attack. He was simply hacking and slashing, anticipating that sooner or later Reaver wouldn't be able to dodge.

It was not an unworkable or unreasonable expectation. No matter how much Reaver strove to stay ahead of him, sooner or later the Wreckager was going to strike home.

"Not so chatty now, are you, you arrogant fool!" bellowed Dread. "You've nothing to say now!"

"Quite the contrary: So many jibes and japes are rattling about in my head, I'm trying to be selective and choose just the right one for the occasion."

Reaver attempted an attack, trying to come in from the side. No chance. The Wreckager was too big and powerful, as was its owner, and Dread was easily able to deflect. Not only that, but by committing to the attack, Reaver almost lost half his face from Dread's return thrust.

"Coward!" shouted Captain Dread. "Cowardly fool! Afraid to match me weapon for weapon, are you? I knew it! You pretender! You nothing!"

One of the few remaining pirates had grabbed up the gun that Reaver had been carrying and was now taking aim, waiting only for Dread to give him a clear shot. Reaver made sure to maneuver around so that Dread remained between them.

The boat that had brought Reaver over was hanging just off the railing. Seeing his opportunity, Reaver vaulted over the railing and landed squarely in the boat.

"Ohhhh no you don't!" Captain Dread called, coming to the rail and waving his sword angrily. "You don't get away that easily! Try to lower yourself to the sea, and I'll use the cannon to blast you to pieces! Now get back up here and die like a man!"

"That's very sound advice," said Reaver. His hand was reaching under the bench seat that ran across the middle of the longboat. "Might I offer you some as well?"

"And that would be?"

There was the sound of adhesive being torn free and suddenly Reaver yanked out a huge, curved pistol from under the seat. "Instead of searching prisoners for weapons, search the ships they come in. Oh, and you might want to duck."

Captain Dread had barely enough time to shout an alarm before Reaver fired the Dragonstomper .48. The roar of the pistol split the air like thunder.

Reaver stuck his head above the railing just long enough to sight where the other pirates were standing. Not counting Dread, there were five of them at various places on the deck. Then he ducked below the railing, presenting no target, as he brought up the Dragonstomper and fired repeatedly without looking where he was shooting, seeing only the memory in his head of where they'd been.

He heard five bodies thud to the ground.

"That was tidy," he said cheerfully, and vaulted over the railing ... only to see that Dread was at the opposite railing, aiming his own gun at Reaver.

The Dragonstomper was a far more powerful weapon, but also much heavier than a normal pistol. Consequentiy, before Reaver could bring it to bear, Dread got off his shot. Reaver tried to avoid it but was only partly successful as the bullet grazed his arm. He went down to one knee, gasping in surprise.

Dread's pistol had a second shot ready. "It's how you perform in a crisis that determines what sort of man you really are. *Show me what you've got, Reaver!"*

Reaver winced in pain and, as the ship lurched under him, he fired.

Dread moved only slightly, and the bullet whizzed past him. *"Hah! You missed, you—"*

And then he screamed as his head went up in flames.

The bullet had struck an oil lantern hanging near Dread at the precisely correct angle, and the hot pellet ignited the oil, sending a gout of fire directly at Captain Dread. It enveloped his skull within seconds, greedily, even eagerly.

"I didn't miss," Reaver called cheerily over the shrieks. "I had to make it just a little 35 challenging for myself."

Dread batted at the flames, but he was already blind with agony. The skin was melting off his head in great rivulets that dribbled down his coat. Insanely, he swung his sword around as if he were battling an unseen foe, his brain cooking and turning to gray paste.

The pirate king sank to his knees like the humblest of supplicants. A bare and scorched skull occupied the space where his head had been. His eyes dissolved, and Dread pitched forward, his body atop the sword, the flames from his head leaping onto the fallen mast as if they had their own minds.

"I feel a poem coming on," Reaver said cheerfully, addressing the corpse as if it were still alive. "Tell me if this works for you:

*"Captain Dread very much liked to boast*

*He deserved to be pirate king most,*

*But then he met Reaver*

*That gay old deceiver*

*And next thing he knew, he was toast."*

"Now be brutally honest, old man. Too little? Too much?" He waited for a response from the burned remains of Captain Dread, and when none was forthcoming, said cheerfully, "I'll take that as approval. And, by extension, an endorsement of my new tenure with the title you once bore ... and I do mean *bore.* The king is dead, and long live the king. And trust me, when I say long live, that's not just hyperbole."

Within seconds, the entire mainmast was ablaze. Black smoke blasted skyward with the intensity of an inferno.

Reaver dashed to the side of the ship where the boat in which he'd arrived had been lashed. Quickly, he cut it loose and it dropped down to the water.

Tossing off a quick good-bye kiss, Reaver leaped off the ship, landing in the water beside it. He went under for a moment, then swam back up. Moments later, he had managed to haul himself into the boat. He pulled the oars out from the bottom, adjusted them, and started rowing.

He watched impassively as the *Marianne* buckled and collapsed from the intensity of the flames. It took a few minutes, but eventually the vessel slowly and irresistibly sank.

When it did finally go down, it cleared his view of the horizon, and he was able to see his own vessel, the *Reaver,* heading toward him. The smoke had been their signal to know that their captain had disposed of the so-called pirate king. Everything had worked out perfectly according to plan, although admittedly the plan itself had called for some serious improvising.

Yet Reaver had never doubted that he would be able to do what was required. He rather liked improvising. Kept his wits sharp. Kept him from getting lazy. Kept him Reaver.

There was an unexpected splash from nearby. He looked toward it and saw Smiling Jake breaking the surface. Jake coughed up water, blinked it furiously from his eyes, then treaded water. He looked startled when he saw Reaver sitting there calmly, and even more surprised when it was clear that the *Marianne* was gone.

They stared at each other, the two pirates, and then Smiling Jake—smiling as ever— managed to toss off a salute even as he fought to stay afloat, and said, "Permission to come aboard, sir?"

Reaver considered it. Then he smiled.

"Permission granted," he said, and he pulled out a hand and hauled Jake in. Jake flopped onto the floor like a freshly landed trout. As Jake lay there gasping, Reaver continued, "I assured the late Captain Dread that he would be the last person I killed. So I'm bound by what I laughingly call my 'honor' to stick to that, provided you don't provoke me." He paused thoughtfully, then went on, "You're the one I picked, you know. The one who I was planning to let live. A boon, I might mention, that I can retract at any time."

"Aye, Captain," said Jake.

"No, *I* captain," said Reaver, and then added, "And I also the pirate king. And it is, it is a glorious thing to be the pirate king. By the way, you really do have a lovely smile."

A nice day. A sunken enemy who really *had* looked much too pretty to be called Captain Dread, the king of pirates. His ship on his way to pick him up. And a perpetually cheerful-looking companion to help him while away the time.

All was right with the world.