

## *Chapter One*

“By this holy unction, may the Lord absolve thee of all and any faults or sins thou hast committed.” The young Jesuit priest daubed consecrated oil on the eyes, ears, nose, lips and outstretched fingers of Philippe and Raul, each in turn, as both knelt before him in the tight space of his cabin aboard Portuguese man-of-war, *Conquista*. With the threat of death beyond his cabin door, extreme unction seemed the only appropriate rite for seeking God’s forgiveness and protection on such a desperate night.

These two holy soldiers were all that remained of the priest’s once strong brigade. All the others who had survived their ordeal in the new world were chained in the dark belly of the ship. They might not survive this heavy storm. The hold, their dungeon, was a briny swamp in any storm. This storm was the most terrible storm any of them had ever seen. The worst of it; the crew down there had been denied the holy sacrament of confession. Their last rights had been withheld by this ship’s demonic captain.

*God, forgive them their transgressions.*

The deck rose sharply beneath his feet, as the ship rushed up the face of another monstrous wave. He gripped the vial of oil in his left hand, grabbed an overhead beam

with his oily right hand, and waited.

The crest of the wave broke over the ship and slapped heavily onto the weather deck above his cabin.

The ship fell down the steep back wall of the wave, a few seconds of weightlessness that seemed an eternity, while the priest and his two holy soldiers floated in the thick, stale air of his cabin.

The hull slammed down with a thunderous boom and the priest's bare feet struck the deck hard, bringing sharp pain to his left heel. The ship's wooden beams and braces screamed like a woman in labor from the forces of wind and water.

The priest's feet slid on the wet acacia deck and his oily fingers slipped from the overhead beam. He landed hard on his already bruised knees but somehow managed to keep his grip on the vial of consecrated oil.

*Thank you, God.*

The vial had been filled with precious oil, consecrated by the bishop himself.

*Lord, bless those poor souls in the hold, your valiant brigade. Bless and protect this ship, Conquista, if only for those of us who believe.*

Their cargo had forever changed the faith of some. Their captain had been corrupted at his first touch of the captured medallion chained around his thick neck, now hanging over his once noble heart. This demon now possessing the captain might kill them all.

The priest's faithful saints, Raul and Philippe, helped the priest back to his feet. Only these two had managed to escape the captain's trio of captive souls. With the Lord's help, these two had overcome their three former comrades and had thrown them over the side, lost forever to the unforgiving night and to the deep, dark sea. They had lost their eternal souls by turning from God to bind themselves to their captain, this demon at the helm. Some powerful force now drove the captain from within, perhaps Lucifer himself. This evil force had become evident in the captain's angry eyes.

Sufficient time had passed for the captain to know that his three captive slaves had been dispatched. If *Conquista* survived this storm, he would certainly repay. Hope for the ship now rested with these two faithful soldiers, these two saints, and with the Lord.

If the captain prevailed, the priest would join these two in the deep darkness of

the hold. To what purpose, he could not imagine.

The priest looked from Raul to Philippe. “You both know what we must do.” He’d already told them of his plan.

Both nodded.

Using the Latin, he quickly blessed them both. His soldiers stood, and all three braced from the overhead beams, as the ship rose sharply on another giant wave. The ship fell off the backside, another weightless eternity, and thundered into the ocean with such force that he nearly lost his grip again. Her heavy wooden timbers popped, screamed, and squawked, before the ship settled into another valley of water. She’d been solidly built by Portuguese craftsmen using strong acacia timbers. *Thank you, God.*

The priest said, “If we fail to overpower the captain and free the crew, this ship will surely be lost at sea.”

Perhaps the captain’s plan was to scuttle the ship near some uncharted island and let Joao III, their king, believe that the ship and crew had been lost at sea.

*No matter.*

He corked the small vial of oil and returned it to the fold of his cassock, behind the

band of his cincture, a place that had proven safe for these many months.

Raul said, "Father, we have prepared for the worst. It is time."

Philippe removed a necklace of woven human hair taken from savages in the mountainous Brazilian forest and lifted the heavy gold disk from around his neck. He swung it like a mace, intending to use it as a bludgeon. A confident, good soldier.

Raul left his gold disk around his neck, his chattel, his reward for volunteering to join this adventure nineteen months earlier. He still carried his sword.

While still in Brazil, all of the soldiers had melted down and cast gold in their mountain camp, a just reward for the fierce battle they had won. This done with the knowledge of their still noble captain. They all knew that King Joao III would be well pleased with their captured cargo. It would make him the wealthiest king in the known world.

Raul said, "I left heavy rope at the bottom of the stair. If we can subdue him, we can bind him to the wheel. Hemp rope is surely strong enough to hold any man. Of this, I am certain."

If their plan worked, if they could subdue the captain and free the crew from

below, they might yet save the ship.

*If not, well . . .*

*Dear Lord, Thy will be done.*

The ship jumped up the face of another wave and they all braced. It fell off, crashed down, and settled into another valley.

The priest silently prayed again, for the courage to do his small part, to incase that blood red crystal skull in the captain's cabin. One man had already died trying to open the elaborate gold case. A horrible rotting of his flesh had started in his hand and had quickly consumed his whole body. A deadly poison had somehow been injected, possibly snake venom or frog sweat. One could only guess.

When the captain had hung the blood red pendant around his neck, it had settled upon his chest and had instantly changed him. The evil medallion must hold the key. The blood red crystal skull and medallion must be linked by some invisible force. With the skull freed from the box, with the medallion around his neck, the captain's power had become insurmountable. Only God could overcome such power.

The priest gripped the wooden cross hanging from his neck. He'd carved it from

Brazil wood, a tree rich in red dye. His hope lay in power only the cross could bring. He took a deep breath and let it slide out, ready now, as were his men.

He nodded and Philippe removed the heavy stick barring his cabin door. That stick and his faith were all that had protected him over the past three days.

They all braced, as the ship rose up the face of another wave and fell off the backside. The heavy crash and downward jolt caused him to again bite his swollen, bleeding tongue.

He slumped back and stared at his bare feet, wincing from pain, blinking back tears. He dared not let them see his fear. He clinched his teeth and stood.

Raul opened the raised cabin door and cautiously stepped down to the narrow passageway. He looked back and nodded, *We're safe.*

Philippe and the priest followed Raul down into the passageway, where seawater rushed down the narrow passage deck, lower than the cabins, and out through scuppers to rejoin the sea.

Overhead lanterns swung with the sway of the ship, affording barely enough light to find their way. They hurried aft to where the main mast penetrated this and two lower

decks on its way to join the keel.

The acacia mast moaned from the strain of gale force winds.

The rigging whistled from the weather deck above.

The tattered sails snapped and cracked noisily with each gust.

As planned, his soldiers left him, each taking a separate ladder up to the weather deck, where they hoped to remain concealed. Raul's hemp rope had already been stored near the ladder to the high stern deck.

The ship lurched upward at the bow and the priest grabbed the mast.

The wave crashed over and the ship fell off.

After a moment of weightlessness, the ship crashed back into the sea.

Water spilled down both ladders as the priest rounded the mast, squeezing his wooden cross, hurrying aft toward the mizzenmast.

The stern passageway led to the captain's cabin and stepped up higher than the rush of seawater.

He rounded the mizzenmast, as the ship rushed up the face of another wave.

Water broke over the bow, the ship fell off, quicker than before, and slammed

down, driving the priest to his knees. The severe pain from previous bruises and salted abrasions brought tears.

He climbed slowly to his feet and faced the captain's cabin door, so close. Evil artifacts and precious gems had been stored within.

*The captain hoards it for himself.* Why else would he imprison the soldiers and most of the crew, if not to keep this valuable cargo for himself?

Melted down, the gold and precious gems would make Joao III the richest king in all of Europe. Out here in these islands, the captain would become one of the richest men on earth, a king unto himself.

In the mountains of Brazil, the king of those savages had surely been the richest king in the new world.

Their scouts had learned of this mountaintop tribe from other tribes they had already conquered. They'd followed the mythical stories up the mountain into darker and denser forest, seeking a mysterious skull of power and the vast wealth that surrounded it.

They'd heard many stories about its vast wealth and power, too many for it to be a myth. It had turned out to be tangible. *It has real power.*

He'd seen that power, high in the mountains of Brazil. That morning, after the sun had finally risen, the priest had managed to get the dark crystal skull into that elaborate, white gold box. When he'd closed the lid, the latches had worked as if by magic, both securing the skull and protecting it. In sunlight, he'd been able to touch it, but he feared the night.

Perhaps the box had served those savages as a prison for the beast within. Perhaps the native chieftain had only let this evil out for certain nocturnal rituals, to maintain his power over those who feared the unmistakable power of the skull. The savages would fear his power, as the Portuguese priest feared the captain's power.

He must set his fear aside. The power of the captain must be controlled. To do this, the skull must first be secured. Its power must be imprisoned.

On that dark night, at the height of this evil power, the priest's fear seemed impossible to suspend.

*I must . . .*

The ship jolted upward at the bow and he braced from the bulkheads on both sides. The ship slammed back down and seawater swirled in the passageway behind him.

He crossed himself, kissed his wooden cross, and opened the door.

The dark crystal skull rested on a pentagram chalked onto the deck, close, inside the open door. Hollow eye sockets pulsed red from deep within.

His heartbeat thumped loudly in his ears, pulsing in rhythm with the skull.

He clutched his cross and breathed deeply, slowly, trying to control his heaving chest, desperate to overcome his paralysis of fear.

*I must . . .*

The bow of the ship lurched upward and the door slammed shut.

After a weightless moment, he braced and waited for gravity to slam the ship back down.

Water rushed down the passage behind him and he clutched his cross. With his other hand, he opened the door again.

*Don't look at the eyes.*

Still clutching his cross, he stepped over the threshold and entered the captain's cabin.

Wooden trunks and cases had been stacked up to overhead beams, leaving no

space to move. He looked about the cabin quickly, searching for the white gold box. It sat on the deck, near the captain's ladder to the high stern deck, to the ship's helm.

He let go of his cross, stooped, and seized the skull by the horns. His hands sizzled instantly from the touch, bringing pain worse than any he'd ever felt. Smoke from his burning flesh stung his already tearing eyes.

*I must . . .*

The ship rose up the face of another wave and the cabin door behind him slammed shut. He held fast, drifting weightlessly as the ship fell off. The hull slammed down and threw him toward the captain's ladder. His left arm slammed against the white gold box. He rolled onto his shoulder and held tight to the demon horns.

His flesh smoked and burned like fire.

He squirmed up to his elbows and pressed the skull forward, lifted it over the open box, and let go.

His fried skin peeled from his hands and clung to the red crystal horns, disappearing in a flash of white-hot flame.

The skull settled into the box. The eye sockets still pulsed bright red.

The priest's badly burned fingers curled, useless. He closed the lid with the back of his hand.

The latches moved mechanically, locking the box.

It was done.

Light flooded from above.

The captain stood in the open doorway at the top of the ladder. His eyes pulsed red, in rhythm with the medallion at his chest, in rhythm with the priest's pounding heart.

Flashes of lightning silhouetted his long black hair, sucked skyward by the wind. His maniacal laugh paralyzed the priest with renewed fear.

Heavy air pushed the priest against the deck, making it impossible to draw breath.

The bow of the ship lurched upward and the captain braced into the ladder. He stepped down toward the priest.

The priest left the deck, weightless with the drop of the ship, unable to grab anything with his badly burned hands.

The ship slammed into the sea and the priest's face smashed into the deck.

*Odd.* He felt no pain from his hands or face, only from his aching knees.

The ship rolled and lightning flashed from above.

Philippe's heavy gold disk cracked into the side of the captain's head but barely dazed him. He held fast to the rail and shook it off. Blood flowed from under his long black hair and flooded into his ear.

The priest struggled to his feet, as Philippe hit the captain again, maybe harder.

Raul grabbed the captain's hair from behind and helped drag him onto the high stern deck.

The ship lurched upward and the priest braced between the bulkhead and a heavy trunk, waiting for the ship to fall off the back of the wave. The ship slammed down hard and buckled his knees. He sprang up and slid his shoulder against the bulkhead, climbing the ladder onto the stern deck, where the bite of cold rain chilled the sweat from his face.

Fingers of lightning streaked through the heavens, momentarily lighting a gray-green ghost, a giant mass beyond the ship's bow, out past the frothy spray of another gigantic wave.

*An island?*

*Very close.*

The ship lurched and Raul slid helplessly across the deck, plunging into stacked monkey cages.

The monkeys screamed and held tight to the bamboo bars of their cages, watching the struggle between the captain and Philippe.

Philippe held the captain's neck from behind, pulling him toward the wheel.

Raul scrambled back to his feet, lunged forward, grabbed the captain's hair above his eyes and stopped.

The captain's eyes burned with rage.

"Don't look at his eyes," shouted the priest.

*Too late.*

Raul let go and backed away.

The captain struggled to free himself from Philippe, holding Raul helpless with his angry glare.

The hemp rope lay by the newly broken monkey cages.

The priest dove and grabbed the rope. Hemp bristles stabbed into the skinless

flesh of his hands, not bringing any real pain.

*Odd.* He felt no pain, except in his knees.

Raul fell with the sudden rise of the ship and the priest lowered his shoulder into the captain's belly.

They floated in space for a weightless eternity.

The glowing medallion sizzled against the side of the priest's face. He could hear it, but there was still no pain.

The ship slammed back down and all three men tumbled to the deck.

Philippe held tight. *Brave, strong Philippe.*

Together, they wrestled and dragged the captain to the wheel and lashed him tight. Neither man looked into his eyes.

The ship rose quickly and dropped, with nothing to grab, and they floated above the high stern deck.

Lightning flashed bright and illuminated a tall, green spire, close beyond the bow.

The ship slammed down with the jarring crunch of wood against stone.

Wild screams of chained men drifted up from the hold, men dying in the dark.

Warm water rushed over them, as the ship crunched and slid across a rocky reef.

Heavy waves crashed and seawater washed over the ship.

Screams of men had been replaced by those of the monkeys, and the sea  
swallowed them all.

\* \* \*

Michael Crooke wakened with an upward bolt.

The Boeing 737 out of San Juan, Puerto Rico, had just dropped through an  
atmospheric downdraft. His momentary weightlessness had been followed with the jolt  
of wings grabbing air.

*Man.*

His knees ached from the back of the lowered seat in front of him, and the palms  
of his hands itched, reliving flashes of his dream, a storm at sea. A chill gripped his back  
but quickly faded.

The little frog-looking guy sitting next to him in the aisle seat turned toward him  
and smiled, hard to miss in his Hawaiian shirt, tomato red with big green leaves. They'd  
departed LAX on the same flight to Miami and had taken the same flight from Miami to

San Juan. Michael had noticed him among the other passengers, boarding and getting off. He hadn't noticed where the little guy sat on the previous two flights, but he couldn't help noticing him on this flight.

He scrubbed Michael's elbow with his shoulder. "Boy, were you having a dream. You were mumbling and squirming all over the place, and speaking Portuguese. At least I think it was Portuguese. It wasn't Spanish. I speak a little Spanish. You have to, living in Southern California these days."

"I don't know any Portuguese, and I don't speak a whole lot of Spanish." His recent dream had vaporized, nothing left.

"Wasn't Spanish. Must have been Portuguese."

Michael had little patience for this uninvited conversation. Exhausted from the long boarding procedures in L.A., Miami, and San Juan, he still needed rest. He asked, "You want the window seat?" He hoped that might keep this little frog at bay.

The guy laid his chubby little hand on Michael's arm, stopping him from standing. "No. That's alright. You guys deserve all the breaks you can get."

Michael didn't want to be rude but he was tired. He'd been travelling for what

seemed a week. He needed a shower. He needed some good food. He needed a bed. He half stood to look for an empty seat. He found none.

He remembered a comment. "What do you mean, us guys deserve breaks?"

"You're military, right?" This guy already knew the answer, smiling, head bobbing up and down.

"Yes, I am." Michael looked out the window, trying to avoid the conversation. Blue Caribbean waters blinked up at him from 30,000 feet below. A few scattered, puffy, white clouds floated through the void, creating a great sense of elevation.

The frog tugged at Michael's arm, demanding attention. "I can always tell. I've been watching you all the way from L.A. I mean, you look familiar, but I just can't place you."

Michael studied his face, his person, Hawaiian shirt, white shorts, furry legs, tire-tread Mexican sandals. No, he didn't know this guy. He would remember. "I get that a lot. I have a familiar face."

The guy shrugged, unconvinced, still searching his memory. He blinked it off and smiled. "What branch you in? I mean, can you talk about it?"

“Sure. I’m a Marine, Marine Corps Reserve.”

“I knew it.” He squirmed, ecstatic. “I can always tell. You’re an officer, right?” His smiling, wide-eyed face bobbed up and down.

*Trapped.* He’d been taught never to be rude by his parents, taught always to be a gentleman by the corps. “Major Michael Crooke.” Michael offered his hand.

“I knew it.” The guy wrapped both hands around Michael’s and stared into him. “Your name’s familiar, too. I’m sure we’ve met someplace.” He let go. “I’m Dikran Bedrosian. Pleased to meet you, pal. I never miss an opportunity to say, thank you.”

His name sounded familiar. Maybe they had met somewhere. Michael looked closer. No, he had definitely not seen this guy before and his name wasn’t on any terrorist lists. No Armenians were currently on their lists, none that he knew of. Still, the name hung in his brain; Dikran Bedrosian. But from where?

Michael shifted away from the chair in front of him, down in the full back position, very uncomfortable on Michael’s knees.

The obese woman in front of him snored loudly, reeked of booze, and slick with sweat.

Farther forward, other passengers had settled back, getting their rest. Michael put his chair back one click and stretched his legs under the fat lady's seat, still cramped.

"So . . ." Dikran put his chair back a click, getting shoulder to elbow again. He tapped Michael's arm. "You seen any action? I mean, can you talk about it?"

"Not much." Michael didn't like talking about combat; not here, not now, not ever.

"So?" Dikran spread his hands and smiled, lingering in the here and now.

"We spent some time in the middle east."

"And?"

"And what?" Michael glared into the little twerp's smiling face.

He ignored Michael's irritation. "Did you kill any diaper heads?"

"Sorry. That's classified."

"So, where you headed? I mean, are you stopping in St. Marten?"

Michael turned and looked out the window.

Below the scattered clouds, a smaller airplane crossed their path, flying north.