

Overboard!

Michael White

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(Who loved a Spud)

Overboard!



Prologue

~Being the First Bit of the Rest of it ~

To the untrained eye the figure that stood at the prow of the rowing boat as it approached the large moored vessel flying the skull and crossbones would have appeared to be the least likely pirate ever seen in the town of Hard Knocks. Six foot one and a bit tall and bearing a bright shock of red hair over a physique that bore a frightening resemblance to a fishing rod, the figure approaching the ship would have set even the most sea hardened buccaneer running to have a second look, though more out of genuine bewilderment than anything. In his correspondence course school his tutors had remarked repeatedly “His crew would follow him anywhere” before grimly concluding. “More out of curiosity than anything”.

The rowing boat carrying the tall red figure reached the gently rocking hull of The Rose of Mateus and a line was lowered from the ship above to secure the craft. There was a slight pause and then what passed for a rope ladder followed it. Three men sat in the rowing boat, but only one was leaving. He climbed the ladder and with a hand from several of the men above found himself on the deck of the ship, his bright red hair waving in an almost embarrassed way in the breeze.

“So this is a pirate ship.” He thought to himself. It really was quite impressive. Lots of what were presumably pirates seemed to be at work on the ropes, some on the sails. The ship was a hive of activity, most of which made no sense to him at all. There were even a few men working on the thingummy bob on top of the long wooden bit at the front end of the boat. The sharp bit. He couldn't quite recall what the real name of it was, and decided that if that was the case then it probably was relatively important to remember it if he got hired. Making a mental note to look it up in his manual when he got back ashore. He was perturbed at his inability to recall the name of the pointy end as he rarely forgot anything. Actually, it would be more accurate to say nothing, and so he put it down to nerves. It was after all his first time on a pirate ship. Probably nerves, he concluded and turned around to look across the handrail he noticed the two men in the rowing boat below watching him carefully. Ignoring their scowls, he took in the view before him.

The Rose of Mateus was anchored just off the town of Hard Knocks, and across the bay he could see the towers and waterfront of the town, its white buildings and walls seeming almost to steam in the midday sun. As he stood there gazing across the sea a small man dressed in what was apparently quite normal clothing for a pirate approached him. Upon closer examination he noticed that he was wearing an eye patch over one eye, a long pair of what could possibly once have been leather boots, and a dark coloured pair of trousers and shirt. He made a careful examination of the clothing just in case he was hired. He felt that it was very important to fit in.

Lost in his thoughts he considered who would have thought that he would be here today trying to sell himself off as a pirate consultant? Since he had seen the sign in the inn advertising a correspondence course in piratical endeavours he had been waiting for this day. Turning his attention to a large brass plate on the handrail bearing the name of the ship he stepped closer and examined his vague reflection in highly polished finish. He struggled for a moment or two as he caught sight of himself. He practised his best smile in the reflection and realising that it was probably his best feature he determined to practice it a little bit more when he got back to the

boarding house.

It was difficult to say exactly when Neep had hit upon the idea of a career as a pirate, though he suspected it may very well have stemmed from a book cover he had seen somewhere when he was younger in which a heavily muscled handsome man stood with his foot on a chest overflowing with gold and jewels, a knife between his teeth and what could best be described as a scantily dressed woman on each arm. Behind him a black skull and crossbones flag fluttered in the breeze. Neep had memorised this pretty easily, because he never really forgot anything that was written down once he had seen it, even very long passages of text or pictures but mostly on this occasion because that when you are six foot one, ginger and with the general physique of a broom handle, then daydreams featured pretty large in his daily routine. Particularly where women were concerned, scantily dressed or not.

He paused as he remembered his father's final words to him¹ "You're the son of a fishmonger, young man! As am I, and my father before him! If you've got your head set elsewhere then you won't be doing it under my roof!" But he could not deny it. He had his heart set on being a pirate, not a fishmonger. The fact that all he had under his belt was the first six weeks' worth of a correspondence course from "The Society of Piratical Endeavours" (or S.O.P.E. for short) had little to do with it. He even had an eye patch concealed in the trunk at the end of his bed. The fact that he owed two month's rent to Mrs Bunion's boarding house and his correspondence course had stopped being delivered due to lack of payment on his behalf were two very pressing reasons why he had to find work, and piracy seemed an extremely interesting option, despite that in the six weeks' worth of his course so far all he had passed were the modules that covered "treasure burying" and "Grog theory".

Spurred on by his success with these modules Neep had memorised the rest of the manuals and referred to them whenever necessary. It was handy never to actually forget anything once he had seen it, and more importantly able to refer back to it. With all the knowledge that the SOPE course had energised him with, he now considered himself a bona fide consultant on piratical endeavours and was looking pretty desperately for gainful employment, but so far to no avail. Despite this the owners of the correspondence course were now getting very pressing in their demands for the fees for his course, even suggesting in one message thrown through his window tied to a rock late at night that bailiffs may be about to call. The message did not actually mention bailiffs of course, being more broken arms and legs centric, but he thought that that was the likely message.

A nice long journey on a ship full of pirates seemed to be just the thing, as long as he stayed out of the sun. He just didn't have the complexion for sunburn. Adjusting the short thin sword at his side (unfortunately made of plastic – it was free with the first part of the correspondence course he had taken) he turned to face the pirate who was by now more or less bobbing up and down by his side, wondering what the tall red haired beanpole was looking at in the brass plate. Coughing loudly, he said,

"You'll be the con – sul – tant come to see the captain then?" carefully pronouncing each syllable as if it was some sort of foreign language, and as the visitor nodded to confirm that this was indeed the case led the newcomer below deck and through a confusing run of wooden galleys, eventually arriving at what was apparently the captain's cabin. He stood waiting nervously as his

¹ "Final" in the sense as the last thing before he got slung out onto the pavement.

escort knocked on the small wooden door, and receiving permission from within went inside and closed it behind him. There was a small wait during which he heard a number of shouts and exclamations, and then the door was opened once again.

“The captain will see you now.” Said the escort, and ushered him in.

The captain’s cabin was smaller than he had expected. Three small oil lamps hung apparently at random about the room, but it was still hardly what you would call brightly lit. A large table sat in the centre of the cabin, at which the captain sat, poring over what looked like a large map. Several nautical instruments lay on the table alongside the chart.² The captain had a look on his face that was either due to something he had eaten severely disagreeing with him, or more likely, this was the usual expression for the captain of a pirate ship. He looked at the newcomer and thumped a large iron hook that was placed where his hand should have been on the table, causing the instruments to jump several inches into the air and then quickly come back down again with a dull metallic bang.

“More interruptions!” snarled the captain, adjusting his slightly askew eye patch a little. The newcomer took a second whilst the captain was perfecting his scowl to have a closer look at the cabin itself. The first thing he noticed was a large, moth-eaten parrot sitting in a cage behind the pirate. It glared malevolently at him as he noticed it, and then squawked just once.

“He was on the deck.” It spat, before continuing. “Who’s a pretty boy then?” it concluded, and the visitor thought that it couldn’t possibly be talking about itself, for a mangier looking bird he had never seen before in his entire life. Its beak was a dull yellow, its plumage seeming to lack any real colour. If anything, the bird looked washed out. To complete the look, it was noticeable that several grey feathers were lying discarded at the base of the cage. Still it continued to stare at him malevolently.

The captain was another matter altogether. Though seated, he seemed to be quite a large man, though that could possibly be down to the size of his beard, several strands of which seemed to be knotted in braids, numerous silver objects being caught up in it. He thought that it looked like a hirsute charm bracelet. Or another possibility could be that the captain had just enjoyed a soup of nuts and bolts and had forgotten to wipe his beard afterwards.

The pirate pulled a letter from the table and placed it before him. The newcomer recognised it as the one he had sent to the captain the day before. It seemed that perhaps the captain was a reluctant reader as it took him several minutes to go through the note once again before he placed it back down on the table before him, but not before he gave a slightly suspicious glance at the letterhead that seemed to be a drawing of a large chest, overflowing with gold coins.

“So, Mister...” he paused, picking up the letter once again to check. “... Mister Neep. You say in this letter that you have something to offer me that will increase my...” he picked up the letter once again, searching for the relevant phrase, but Neep decided to help him out.

“Piratical endeavours, captain.” He said. The captain plainly did not like having his sentences being finished for him and slammed the letter down on the desk once more.

“Yes. Piratical endeavours,” He repeated sarcastically, putting perhaps just a little bit *too* much emphasis on the word “endeavours”. “It says here that you are a fully chartered, S.O.P.E. registered piratical con – sul – tant, and that with your assistance you could raise my booty and general earnings potential by a cumulative growth rate of some three hundred per cent or so in

²He could tell they were nautical. They were made from brass.

the first year.”

“That’s correct captain. Yes.” Said Neep. Neep knew that most people when hearing his job title for the first time would, perhaps rather unluckily for him, completely fail to get past the Con part of it.

So what’s that mean then?” Sighed the captain, drumming his fingers on the table.

“Well.” Began Neep as the parrot fluttered about in the cage behind him madly for a second or two, and then seemed to edge forward a little in its cage as if watching him warily. It was almost as if it was listening. “It means that with my advice and general know how, I’ll increase your takings three fold in the first year. After that I envisage an annual return of an equivalent number year on year.” He paused, noticing the scowl on the captain’s face increasing. “Then there’s the pension...” he said, trailing off into silence as the pirate held his hand up for him to stop.

“And how are you going to do all of that then?” he asked, and Neep smiled.

“Amongst my professional body it is considered unwise to unnecessarily divulge exactly how my consultative assistance is put into practice.” Neep smiled. He remembered that this was very much stressed in the first module of his course, which had the rather ominous title of, “Smile as if you know something they don’t.” The captain did not seem terribly impressed however, a look half way between a scowl and confusion crossing his face.

“Meaning?” he said as the parrot hopped from foot to foot, watching Neep extremely closely. Neep knew from his correspondence course that the next bit was the hardest part.

“It means I can’t tell you.” He almost whispered and the captain gave an extremely broad smile. Neep however, had a backup plan, and reaching inside his jacket pocket pulled out a small chart. Behind the captain the parrot squawked to life.

“It was inside his jacket!” it croaked in triumph, followed by several what were obviously meant to be clapping noises.

Be quiet, Nutcracker!” shouted the pirate, turning to face the parrot.

“Nutcracker?” queried Neep and the captain merely nodded. “Why do you call it that?”

“Believe you me, you really don’t want to know. What’s on the map?”³

“Well. This is a chart showing growth estimates for a projected five-year plan. It...” But the captain did not allow him to finish.

“The thing I don’t understand is why you seem to think that you can do my job better than I can.” At this his smile increased just a little wider, and Neep noticed for the first time the extravagant and definitive collection of sharp pointed weapons hanging on the side of the cabin in a neat little row. An awful lot of them seemed to have nicks and small indentations in their blades. The short plastic sword banged briefly against his leg almost as if trying to embarrass him as Neep rapidly tried to regain his composure and tearing his attention away from the small arsenal of weapons his eyes came to rest on the map that sat on the table in front of them.

“A small demonstration.” He gulped, picking up the chart. The pirate bristled as he did so, but Neep glanced at it briefly before placing it back on the table. “Treasure map?” he enquired, prodding at the large red cross marked at the top of the piece of parchment, noticing that the ink on the “X” was still wet.

“Maybe.” Said the captain, cagily. Neep smiled.

³ Pirates generally speaking get very excited indeed about the word, “map” the only proviso usually being that it also has the word, “Treasure” in front of it as well.

"You do realise that the chart is upside down, don't you?" He said, watching as the vaguely embarrassed looking pirate picked up the map, turned it around three hundred and sixty degrees and slowly began to turn very pale. He sighed, and then placed it back on the table with a thump, where upon he continued to look at it as if wondering how that had happened. Sadly, there was no one around to take the blame, though Nutcracker did shuffle around in his cage uneasily. Meanwhile, the pirate kept staring at the map as if trying to work out how on Earth you could cross out a large red "X" without making it look like an asterix.

"So you see." Continued Neep triumphantly. "There are always two ways to look at something." Then he played his ace. "Besides, I'll work for free for the first year." This made the captain smile just a little wider.

"No payment at all?"

"No. Consider it part of the service." Neep knew that in order to gain some credibility that this was going to be a necessary course of action.⁴ To his relief the captain seemed to be relaxing a little.

"So I have nothing to lose?" he asked.

"Nothing at all, and everything to win."

"Well then. In that case, Mr Neep... Erm... What's your first name, son?"

"Neep, Captain."

"Yes. I know that's your last name. What's your first name? We don't stand on formalities here."

"Oh I see." Said Neep blushing. "My first name and last name are the same. Just call me Neep. It's an unusual enough name as it is." He smiled, pausing as he noted confusion upon the captain's face. "Apparently in the Jakarian dialect it means, "wise". Not my fault." he finally said. "My parents were fishmongers." The captain stared back at him blindly. Failing to realise that he was already in a hole, Neep decided to keep digging. "Seems they were just a bit wordy?" The captain looked at him blankly. "Probably because of all the fish they ate. Brain food." The parrot fidgeted nervously in the cage behind the captain. "Well fish all the rime except for Sundays. It was always crab on Sundays."

The captain decided to say something even if it was in a vain attempt to stop Neep's mouth moving up and down. "What – so you name. It is like, "Neep Neep?" he finally said.

From nowhere there came a loud sound as if something was speeding past them very, very quickly for a few seconds and then just as quick as it had begun it faded, leaving just the sound of the waves lapping against the side of the hull.

"What was that?" said the captain nervously, looking first under the table and then in the shadows in the room before finally focusing his one good eye squarely on Neep. He looked under the table once again before facing the tall ginger consultant who was standing unperturbed in front of him.

"That noise then. What was it?"

"The rushing sound?"

"Yeah."

"I wouldn't worry about that, said Neep, a smile of acute embarrassment playing across his features. He didn't know what the sound was either, only that it happened every time anyone said his full name out loud. The captain however, *did* seem to be worrying about it.

⁴ In fact any credibility at all would be nice. A sudden and hopefully extended absence would also help him to avoid the increasingly brusque letters of demands for money from the S.O.P.E. correspondence course school.

"It's just some interdimensional thing, I imagine." Said Neep apologetically.

The captain continued to stare at him in silence.

"Probably skeletons involved somewhere and what have you." Said Neep, grasping at straws.

At this the captain visibly relaxed. "Ah." he said, "Skeletons. Well, we're pretty big on skeletons around here. Tell you what. You're hired son."

Neep brightened visibly. Suddenly his underpaid rent and over enthusiastic potential bailiffs seemed to be a semi distant memory, with the emphasis most definitely being on distant.

"Just don't go telling everyone on the crew both of your names." The captain added quickly and he tapped his hook against the side of his nose. Neep got the impression that behind his eye patch the captain may possibly be trying to wink.

"A nervous pirate is a dangerous pirate. Capuche?"

"Oh yes. Indeed. Thank you captain." Then he paused.

"Capuche?"

The captain sighed. "It's a kind of coffee I believe." then seeing the blank expression on Neep's face said, "Oh never mind."

There came a loud banging on the door and the captain called out for whomever it was to enter. A short fat man stood in the doorway, his face flushed with what looked like excitement. "Time for the walking of the plank, captain." He squeaked, and having received a nod of acknowledgement left hastily, closing the door behind him.

"Time for you to witness your first plank walk, Neep." Said the captain, rising to his feet. "Good chance to introduce you to the crew as well." With that the captain released the parrot from the cage and placed it on his left shoulder, confirming to Neep that it was indeed a part of the uniform. They left the cabin and headed up to the deck of the ship, where it appeared every pirate on board was waiting for them. A huge cheer went up as they set foot on deck, and Neep noticed a large man wearing a powdered white wig being dragged from down below in the general direction of a small gap in the hand rail on the side of the ship.

The captain acknowledged the cheers and made his way across the deck with Neep in fast pursuit. Many of the pirates on deck openly stared at him as if wondering if he was going to be part of the entertainment too.

"Cretch!" the captain shouted to a large bald man in the crowd. "Fetch a plank of wood!" and the pirate loped off to do so. The captain approached the prisoner and removed his blindfold.

"It was on his head!" Screeched the parrot, but then fell silent at a frosty stare from the captain. "You are to provide our entertainment today, Mr Camberwell." Said the captain, and the prisoner turned a definite shade of green but said nothing.

A few awkward minutes passed before Cretch appeared carrying a long wooden plank, which several of his ship mates then lashed into place so that it jutted a good eight feet over the ocean. Camberwell was led to the edge, and with the aid of one of the captains many swords was prodded to the edge and then on to the plank where he stood teetering.

"Any final words?" Sneered the captain, keeping the sword outstretched before him. Neep edged nearer, and out of the corner of his eye saw several large rats run across the deck and leap into the sea.

"Erm is that quite normal..." he stammered, but all eyes were on Camberwell on the end of the plank who seemed to be considering all of his options, and finding that unfortunately most of them contained an awful lot of water.

“In the name of God!” Camberwell pleaded at last. “Let me go!” Neep felt terribly sorry for the man even though he did not know what it was that he was meant to have done, but he was distracted once again by an even larger group of rats throwing themselves into the sea. He wasn’t sure if he imagined it or not, but he thought that he may have felt the deck move a fraction below his feet.

“Captain...” he began, but the pirate was otherwise engaged and ignored Neep completely.

“Not a chance!” roared the captain, laughing heartily. The rest of the crew took up the cheer and soon the ship was in bedlam. Still Camberwell tottered on the end of the plank.

“Come on, man!” shouted the captain to more cheers to Camberwell who was swaying slightly at the end of the plank. “Get on with it! It will be time for dinner before...” but he stopped suddenly as he too noticed an even larger number of rats running across the deck and launching themselves into the water. “What the...” he began as the ship violently lurched forty-five degrees towards the water, which had the unfortunate effect of throwing Camberwell into the sea along with at least half of the crew. Luckily, though it was probably of very little consolation, they did not now have as far to fall as the ship began to flounder. Neep grabbed hold of the captain who was attempting to get to his feet as if he was looking for someone. They both began to slide across the deck towards the sea as the ship lurched violently towards the sea a little more. The deck was by now resembled a large wooden wall that rose into the air high above them.

“Cretch!” screamed the captain to the sheepish looking pirate who seemed to Neep to be trying to climb the by now almost horizontal mast. “Where did you get the plank from?” Cretch looked guilty at the captain, a mounting panic rising on his scarred features.

“From below decks captain.” he said, and noticing the captain’s blank expression unwisely continued. “From the wall. Just below where you can hear the sea sloshing. Got all soaked I did when I fetched it.” Failing to notice the captain’s rising colour he pressed on. “In fact it was looking decidedly soggy down there when I left. Got out pretty quick, no fear!” To the captain’s amazement he even gave a little nervous salute.

The captain’s jaw dropped open and he began to reply, stepping towards Cretch in a menacing manner but it was too late. Neep never heard his answer for he lost his grip, and with a scream he slid across the deck, bumped off several bits of rapidly moving wood and fell into the sea.

All went black.

Sometime later Neep came to. The sea was completely clear of everything but small pieces of floating debris, and was totally ship free. He had no recollection of grabbing it but he was clinging to the remnants of what looked to have once been a large barrel. He began to paddle and slowly began to move towards the white buildings of Hard Knocks on the shore in the distance. It would take some time to get there, but he reckoned that he could do it. He paddled as fast as he could and made slow but steady progress.

After an hour there was a loud fluttering sound and the bedraggled shape of Nutcracker the parrot settled down onto the piece of barrel he was attempting to paddle to shore. The bird looked completely tired out, and if possible, even more mangy than before. It sat on the broken pieces of wood eyeing him suspiciously. For a while it sat there as if gaining its breath, whilst at the same time taking note of the slowly approaching shoreline. Eventually it turned to face Neep and clacked its beak just once as if tutting.

“Okay.” It said in a defeated voice. “I give in. What have you done with the ship then?”

Chapter One

~The Scarlet Daisy~

The crew of the Blue Nun first spotted the small dot on the horizon as dusk was falling. They thought nothing of it at the time but as dawn slowly broke the next day they could not help but notice that the dot was much nearer now, and seemed to be heading directly towards them.

Mr Dooley, the first mate, raised his eyeglass to the slowly growing dot and grumbled to himself. The crew tried not to look too alarmed at the rapidly approaching ship, but could not discount the frown on the first mate's face either. The morning grew long as the ship rapidly began to gain on them. The crew were of the opinion that this was no more than a coincidence, after all this was a short trip; carrying silk and other bolts of cloth from the town of Hard Knocks to the south, then to the isle of Caprica off to the north. What could go wrong, after all? The first mate resolutely refused to alert the captain to the presence of the other ship, considering everything to be under control, and so the captain remained below decks otherwise employed cheerfully unaware that there was even the slightest hint of curiosity running amongst the crew.

As afternoon began the first mate raised his eyeglass once more to the now barely visible ship veering down upon them, and steadied his arm upon the railing of the deck to get a better view. Several members of the crew working around him heard him suddenly gasp loudly and drop the eyeglass to the deck. He then scrambled about trying to pick it up with shaking hands, which he eventually did, thrusting the device solemnly against his eye once again. He quickly lowered it once again, and grabbed the first member of the crew he could get his hands on.

"Get Captain Nolan on deck now, lad!" he yelled at the shocked sailor, grasping him by his shoulders before yelling, "NOW!" The crewmember made a run for it and disappeared below decks. There was a gap of a few minutes, during which the first mate paced backwards and forwards, occasionally raising the eyeglass to the rapidly approaching ship before pacing the deck once again. Most of the crew were making themselves busy about the deck, though perhaps not very convincingly. Eventually the sounds of a disturbance could be heard and Captain Nolan appeared on deck, clutching what appeared to be a large colourful butterfly and a very long pin.

"What is the meaning of this?" he spluttered at the first mate who merely passed the eye glass to him and nodded off to the now rapidly approaching ship. The captain passed his butterfly and pin to the first mate and taking the eyeglass peered through it for what seemed like a minute or so, but was probably mere seconds. By now the entire crew had given up any semblance of even pretending to work, and were now watching the captain intently. He lowered the eyeglass once more and then quickly raised it back out to sea as if to confirm his original sighting. Slowly he lowered the device and stared at the first mate, before whispering, "The Magpie. That's the Scarlet Daisy's ship." The first mate nodded once.

The captain's secretive tone was sufficiently loud for most of the crew to hear, and the words, "Scarlet Daisy" could be heard running rapidly around the deck, the sound of fear and dread effortlessly creeping into the whisper as it travelled around the ship. From the stern there came a sudden loud shout followed by a dull splash in the water as one of the members of the crew decided to make his own way from thereon.

"Hard to port and get ready to run with the wind!" yelled the captain, handing the eyeglass back to the first mate who struggled to get a grip on it with the butterfly and pin already in his hands.

The captain cast a glance to the sails, and was hardly surprised to see that they were already all raised. He glanced once more to the ship now clearly visible off the port rail, its large black sails bearing ominously the ensign of a large even blacker Magpie upon it. The ship itself was short, and low in the water, but the stern was raised, the small hatches indicating cannons concealed behind them. As Nolan and the first mate stood staring, the rows of hatches began to slowly slide open casually, as if they had all of the time in the world to do so. The bow of the Magpie was long and sleek, seeming to almost skim across the surface of the water.

The wooden hull here seemed almost made of one tree, branches intertwining as the waves crashed across them. The figurehead however, was much larger, showing the form of a wooden skeleton, cutlass outstretched, seeming almost to pull the ship even faster through the water. Nolan gulped and then ducked as the first brace of cannon fire exploded from the ship. There was a momentary pause as the crew almost collectively tried to find something to hide behind, and then a sudden explosion as the main mast of the Blue Nun was hit, crashing down onto the deck, the fore and aft masts quickly following it. There were screams and curses as the deck was littered with broken wood and canvas. The Blue Nun was now floundering.

Nolan strode to the rail and watched as the Magpie drew alongside, grappling hooks now securing the ships together. Captain Nolan stood on the deck as if a man stunned, most of his crew now gathering around him and the wreckage of the toppled mast that lay all around them. The crew of the other ship were now busy securing the ropes holding the two ships together, and after a minute's wait several large pirates leaped across the small gap and landed on the deck of the Blue Nun before Captain Nolan.

They stood grinning at the crew of the captured ship as if they knew something that nobody else knew, their grins widening somewhat as a small figure leaped across the gap and was quickly joined by another figure who was concealed completely by a long black hooded cloak that seemed to cover him from head to toe.

The small figure moved forward to face the captain, and a low murmur seemed to pass amongst the now cowering crew of the Blue Nun. Collectively they all moved back a step. "Scarlet Daisy." Said Captain Nolan, doing his very best not to appear either intimidated or even in any way concerned that his ship seemed to be all but completely disabled.

"Captain Nolan." Said Daisy, and gave a slight bow to him before moving towards him. To the uneducated or merely misinformed bystander, herself seemed a somewhat unimposing figure. She was little more than five-foot-high, her long black hair resting in a seductive manner across her shoulders. She was dressed from head to foot in black, a long slim sword hanging languidly at her side. The front of her blouse was cut low, revealing perhaps a little more of her than was appropriate.

Nolan gulped to himself as she strode towards him slowly, reminding him a little of a cat playing with a slightly disappointing mouse. He certainly wasn't going to mention the low cut blouse, he thought to himself.

"Sorry about the sails." She sighed as she stopped directly in front of him, perhaps a little bit closer than was comfortable, deliberately invading his personal space. "I'm afraid that my bombardiers are perhaps a little..." she paused for a moment, looking around the deck at the wreckage of the Blue Nuns sails. "Enthusiastic, shall we say? I am sure that not a single one of them would ever consider themselves to be eligible to join one of the "Sons of The Pinched Fuse." She finished, smiling and Nolan was once again reminded of a cat playing with a mouse. "Still.

Never mind.” She said. “At least nobody seems to be injured.” She paused slightly, before adding, “Yet.” And a wide smile played across her face.

“I’ll be reporting this to the council of Hard Knocks!” spluttered Nolan, and Scarlet Daisy raised a perfectly coiffured eyebrow as he continued. “We are carrying cloth to Caprica. You’ll find no gold or valuables on this ship!” Scarlet Daisy smiled as several of her crew that were now placed around her grunted and smiled at this. The black clad robed figure did not move at all, standing on the deck as still as a statue. Nolan however could not help but feel the figures eyes upon him.

“You are correct to suggest I would not be interested in cloth and fancies.” Laughed Scarlet Daisy and the members of her crew smiled at this too. “I have come for the map, Nolan. Just that.”

“Map?” enquired the captain, his face attempting (and failing badly) to conceal the fact that he did not have the slightest clue what Scarlet Daisy was talking about. “I know nothing about any map.” Scarlet Daisy sighed deeply, and shook her head, her long dark hair shining in the sun.

“Captain Nolan.” She said almost apologetically. “You know exactly which map I am referring to. Please do not attempt to test my patience.” She paused slightly, raising her hand and seeming to study her perfectly polished nails. “Or I am afraid this could all end very badly.”

Nolan tried his best stone faced expression, but Scarlet Daisy merely watched him; waiting. “I have no knowledge of any map.” He said, and tried desperately to out-stare her. Scarlet Daisy tutted slowly to herself.

“Mr Bones.” She said, turning to face the black cloaked figure. “Perhaps we could encourage Captain Nolan here to think again.” She said, and the black clad figure bowed slightly. “Fetch me the Captain’s fine collection from below decks” She said finally.

“Yess.” Growled the robed figure. His voice resembled the sound of rocks being ground together, and several members of the Blue Nun’s crew drew back slightly as the black robed figure pushed past them and descended below decks. From behind Captain Nolan, first mate Dooley pushed through the ring of pirates and raised a finger in complaint.

“Now hold on here...” he began, wagging a finger at Scarlet Daisy. In the limited amount of recollection time that he had left available to him, Captain Nolan would reflect on the fact that Scarlet Daisy had not seemed to move at all. There was however a brief flash as something long, thin and presumably very sharp glinted in the sun, making him blink. Once that was done, Dooley seemed to have lost a finger, and Daisy was grinning almost apologetically to herself. Dooley screamed and turned a very pale colour.

“You cut my finger off!” he yelled, but nevertheless had the sense to step back from the short woman who stood grinning before him.

“Keep a handle on your crew, Nolan.” She sighed. Dooley started to hop from foot to foot, holding his damaged hand up to anyone who would dare to look.

“She cut off my finger!” he was yelling. “Look – I’ve only got four now. It’s...” Daisy nodded once to the four men who surrounded her. As one they moved rapidly, and grabbing Dooley by the arms, carried him to the side of the ship that was not tethered to the Scarlet Daisy and threw him into the sea. There was a loud scream, followed by a splash, muffled gurgling screaming and then silence once again. The four men returned to surround Scarlet Daisy, their poise once again completely immobile, as if nothing had happened. The crew of the Blue Nun began to turn even paler, now to a man almost wishing to be able to disappear into the background. Somewhere on the quarterdeck everyone listened, as someone appeared to have dropped a pin.

“There.” Said Scarlet Daisy sadly. “Silence. That’s better. Ah.” She said as the black robed figure

re-appeared from below decks, carrying several what seemed to be small, flat glass display cases. "Here's Mr Bones. Bring them here, Bones. Let us all rejoice in the captain's fine collection, shall we?"

Nolan shook his head, but was very careful not to move in any way whatsoever. He did however flinch slightly and grit his teeth as Bones lowered four glass display cases onto the deck before Scarlet Daisy. Bones returned to his position behind her and was once again completely immobile. She glanced down at the cases on the deck, all of which seemed to contain several brightly coloured but very dead butterflies, all pinned neatly to carefully maintained felt covered boards. Nolan allowed himself a small gasp, but kept his hands exactly where everyone could see them.

"Bit of a lepidopterist, aren't we?" asked Scarlet Daisy as she picked up the first case and releasing the catches, slid the glass cover off the front of it.

"They never proved nothing." Growled Nolan, watching intently as Daisy released the pins holding the large beautifully coloured but very dead butterfly in place. She held the butterfly up to the sun to examine it, whilst also letting the glass case fall to the deck, where it shattered into several large pieces. Nolan gasped once again. "Circumstantial was all they had. Nothing else."

"Come, Nolan." Said Scarlet Daisy. "The map." She lowered the butterfly to waist level, staring at the captain once again.

"No idea what you are talking about." Gaspd Nolan, his eyes now firmly fixed on the large red butterfly. "Be careful with that." He sighed, "It's a Calopdopian Admiral" is that. Very rare."

"Is that so?" asked Scarlet Daisy sweetly, before gripping the dead butterfly a little more tightly and then ever so slowly pulling one of the wings off it.

"Noooo!" yelled Nolan, and darted forward to seize the butterfly from Scarlet Daisy. Instantly two of the four large men surrounding her darted forward and held Nolan by his arms. Nolan continued to struggle as Scarlet Daisy tore off the other wing and tossed the now dilapidated carcass of the butterfly over her shoulder. Grinning she picked another of the cases up and opened this one too. This one contained a larger butterfly that was such a deep shade of blue it was almost black. Nolan gasped and continued to struggle, but could not move at all, so tight was their grip. The crew of the Blue Nun shrunk back as Daisy raised the butterfly up to the sun to examine it once again. Nolan barely registered the shape of the black clad figure that still failed to move, but he got the distinct impression that beneath the robe Mr Bones was definitely grinning.

"The map." Repeated Scarlet Daisy as she lowered the blue butterfly to waist level, preparing to rip the wings off this one too. Nolan sobbed, attempting to break the grip of the two pirates holding him, but found it impossible to do so. Daisy grinned, and gripped the butterfly even tighter. Finally, Nolan relented.

"Okay." He sighed, and Scarlet Daisy loosened her grip on the butterfly. "I give in."

"Well done." She grinned. "I knew you would see sense." Nolan dropped his head, his shoulders drooping.

"I don't have the map." He almost whispered, raising his eyes to Scarlet Daisy once again, noticing ominously the raised eyebrow. "The Golden Octopus made me pass it to Mad Jenkins. He's in hard Knocks now, meeting with them. This trip was just a decoy."

The black robed figure stepped forward suddenly just once pace, and almost the entire crew of the Blue Nun took a step backwards.

"He lies!" the figure spat, the deep voice once again sounding as if Mr Bones was speaking through a mouth full of stones. Scarlet Daisy cocked her head to one side, her full attention

remaining on Nolan.

“Now why would they do that, Captain Nolan?” she enquired sweetly.

“Stands to reason.” Sniffed the now defeated captain. “The Golden Octopus thinks the map is just a fantasy.⁵ Getting mad Jenkins out of the way on a fool’s errand seems to be a good way of keeping him and the map out of harm’s way, as it were. It would be good for business if they weren’t around anymore.”

Scarlet Daisy watched the captain for a moment before dropping the butterfly to the deck. “I think he is telling the truth, Mr Bones.” She concluded. “I can see the benefit of getting Mad Jenkins out of the way as the captain here says.” Mr Bones said nothing, and Nolan’s eyes fell to the cases scattered on the deck before him. Scarlet Daisy gave a loud whistle, and Nolan noticed the ropes to the grappling hooks that held the two ships together immediately being severed by the crew still aboard the Scarlet Daisy. “Return the cases below decks, please, Mr Bones.” She said. “Ensure everything is returned correctly. We wish there to be no untidiness remaining.”

“Yes, Captain.” Growled Mr Bones as he moved forward and scooped the remaining cases up and vanished below decks with them.

“Thank you for your cooperation.” She smiled as she moved towards the rail of the Blue Nun, carefully noting the distance between the two now rapidly disengaging ships. Jumping up onto the railing she leaped across the gap, followed by the four members of her crew, and was gone. Nolan staggered forward, now released, as Mr Bones re-appeared from below decks and racing across the deck, leaped across the wide gap between the ships. The Magpie seemed to almost buck in the wind, and made swift progress away from the Blue Nun.

“Captain?” enquired one of Nolan’s crew. “What do we do now? Shall we make an attempt to repair the sails?” Nolan just shrugged, and made to the railing around the deck to watch Daisy’s ship depart as it headed rapidly south.

Scarlet Daisy stood on the bridge and gave the order to head south. “We have an appointment with the Golden Octopus in Hard Knocks.” She said, and the crew made ready to move south as fast as the ship could. Mr Bones stood beside her, once again completely immobile.

“You believe Nolan?” he growled and Daisy nodded.

“It falls in line with what we already know. Poor Nolan was just a decoy. He said as much.”

“Sadly for him.” Grunted Mr Bones, followed by what may or may not have been a stone gravelled attempt at laughter.

“Indeed.” Sighed Scarlet Daisy, raising her eyeglass to the now rapidly diminishing shape of the Blue Nun. As she watched there was a sudden detonation that rang through the air and a pillar of fire seemed to erupt from the now distant shape of the other ship. Several louder detonations then

⁵ Much has been made of man’s propensity over all of history to band together, to group when common aims are of mutual interest. Trade bodies, politics, pigeon fanciers – there always seems to be a body of men (and women) who find a reason to bond together. The overall aim of course, is generally financial, and this is particularly true of piracy. The Golden Octopus was formed by Thelonius Smudge, a privateer from Hard Knocks who decided his booty haul could be greatly increased if he and his pirate brothers banded together to make the sometimes demanding area of piracy a little less... fatal. Hence was The Golden Octopus formed, its emblem the golden legs of an octopus, overall forming a somewhat impressive sigil that signified a golden piece of eight legs. The irony was not lost upon any non- pirate ship that encountered The Golden Octopus and they were universally feared throughout the known lands, usually for all sorts of very good reasons.

took place as the Blue Nun's powder store exploded. A dark column of smoke flew high into the air, debris falling down through the grey clouds. When it cleared the Blue Nun was gone.

"Indeed." She repeated, and leaving Mr Bones on deck, made a tour of her ship to ensure that the journey to Hard Knocks was a swift one. As she did so she reflected upon the now presumably drowned captain's attitude to her sudden capture of his ship. Her reputation very much preceded her now of course, but it had not always been the case. As she checked the trim of the sails unfurled above her, the wind pushing the ship sleekly through the waves, she recalled the look on the captain's face at her appearance. The somewhat over the top boots and general dress sense gave most people an opinion of her character before she even opened her mouth. Particularly the low cut blouse. Daisy snorted to herself as she contemplated that most people would be surprised to find that that she was in fact of relatively high upbringing. That it was not common knowledge was very much down to Daisy's almost complete eradication of her past. Yet she remembered her life as a merchant's daughter in the city of Meesha on The Old Coast with fondness that she hid from every other person she ever met. She was not the daughter of just any merchant either. Her father had been supplier of fine silks and trinkets from the far east, as well as other harder to find goods too to the more elite customers of that town.

Her life as a merchant's daughter had been laid out for her in a predictable fashion of course. Her mother, Petrina, had almost obsessively timetabled her life out for her, including presumably marriage to another high-ranking family at some point. As she grew older she began to realise their elevated position in society, and with it the restrictions that certainly her mother placed upon her.

"Daisy." her mother had patiently explained to her one day in that annoying habit of overbearing superiority that she had apparently carefully cultivated over the years. "It will soon be time for your schooling to move into the areas which as a wife you should be expected to perform for your husband." Daisy had raised a perfectly plucked eyebrow at the mention of a husband but continued to listen carefully.

"Yes mama?" she had said carefully. "What subjects are you considering for me?" Her mother had laughed at this, fanning herself as she sat by the open window, smiling gently. Daisy remembered it as if it was yesterday.

"Well you shall require full schooling in the areas of domestic science, staff handling and so forth." she said dismissively, looking up at the ceiling as if trying to remember whether there was anything she had forgotten. "Maybe a little tutoring in sewing and letter writing may assist too." Daisy had said nothing at the time - she knew her mother far too well to argue - but the very thought filled her with dread. Her brothers had no such restrictions placed upon them, being tutored in self-defence, fencing and the like. Daisy was not so much jealous as pathologically perturbed by the fact that if you were in possession of a full set of (admittedly impressive) bosoms then society treated you somewhat differently than those without said bosoms. Daisy rebelled (quietly) at almost every turn against the aspects of her life that her mother tried ever so carefully to enforce upon her.

The kitchen of their family home would soon be useable again, for example. Despite the small amount of gunpowder that had mysteriously found itself in the oven during her last domestic science lesson. Who could possibly be so obsessed with pastries anyway? Several decorum and etiquette tutors had left very suddenly and often under what could be considered to be mysterious circumstances over the years. Daisy simply smiled sweetly at her mother's questioning upon such

occasions, using her charm school lessons to exceptionally good effect as she effectively denied everything.

It was upon such a day that she dropped in to see her brothers who were enrolled in fencing school. She watched enviously as the tutor put them through their paces, the long thin blades flashing in the morning sun shining through the wooden floored classroom as the tutor first backed off and then advanced, easily overcoming his pupil's attacks seemingly with ease. She noticed the tutor looking at her casually out of the corner of his eye, and his attack increased, overcoming his pupil's feeble efforts almost effortlessly. "Show off" she remembered thinking to herself as back in the present she inspected the cannons below decks on her ship. She had been more and more aware of men looking at her over the years, and she dressed modestly most of the time and her tutors had told her to get used to it. "Men will be men." they had said, but she did not feel as if she would ever get used to it.

The fencing tutor however seemed almost to be leering. Nick Blade was, she thought, his rather appropriate name, and he was to most of the society ladies about Meesha someone who could possibly be considered to be a bit of a rake. Daisy thought he was certainly a tool of some kind, though possibly not a rake as such. He was at least six foot four with loose curled blonde hair and blue eyes and a smile that he thought he could charm anyone he turned it on, it would be fair to say that Nick's greatest admirer lived inside his mirror. Daisy had despised him on sight, and he continued to live up to her low estimation of him every time she stopped by to observe the fencing classes, which was increasingly often. Nick of course totally failed to register the fact that Daisy was more interested in the sword fighting than him; a conclusion his finely tuned ego could never even begin to contemplate.

"I see your sister has returned to observe your feeble efforts again." Smiled Blade as her brother made his way out of the training circle. Daisy raised an eyebrow at him and went on her way. Yet the fencing occupied her mind. She found herself balancing a walking cane of her fathers in her hand, swishing the stick backwards and forwards, finding the balance of it in her hand. She lunged forward at the curtains in her room, attacking an imaginary assailant, and at the same time knocking a small glass vase on the table by the window onto the floor, the ornament shattering into pieces as it hit the ground. A small cough from behind her made her spin on the spot, and the cane swung around with ease, and she looked on as horror as her father who was stood behind her met the full force of the stick with his arm.

"Father!" she exclaimed in shock, but to her relief he was laughing, and he gave her a quick hug as the pair of them kneeled down to begin picking up the shards of broken ornament before her mother noticed its demise.

"I would have thought swordplay is not a part of your schooling, Daisy." he smiled, passing her a larger piece of glass.

"But is so unfair, father!" Exclaimed Daisy. "The boys get to do all of the good things while I am forced to endure cooking and cleaning and sewing. It is simply ridiculous!" Her father had laughed at her outburst, and his face was not unsympathetic.

"Society expects certain things of its ladies, Daisy." he had sighed. "As it indeed does of its sons. Rarely do the two mingle."

"That is not much of an argument, father." she chided him. "It seems I am doomed to a life of sewing and making myself look pretty." Her father had smiled his faraway smile and cast his eyes across the walking cane that lay on the floor beside them.

“Sword play is it?” he smiled as the final piece of glass was placed safely off to one side. Standing he picked the cane up, almost as if lost in thought. “Still. Self-defence is an admirable trait in a lady. The world of men is a world of fools.” He concluded sadly. “Maybe I could persuade your mother a little gentle tuition in the use of a sword may be useful.” Daisy almost exploded with delight.

“Father!” she said, hugging him and a week later after some considerable and no doubt protracted negotiations between her father and her mother she found herself enrolled in six month’s worth of fencing classes, under the vigilance of the apparently slack jawed tutor, Nick Blade.

“Well, well.” he said, eyeing her from head to foot as she stood before him on her first day, his eyes seeming to linger on her like molasses. She felt a shiver of revulsion run down her spine. “Nice chest.” he said, a smile crossing his leering face. “Very nice indeed.” Daisy had said nothing and her first lessons seemed to concentrate almost exclusively on the many different ways her tutor could send her crashing to the floor. In her first month she had been so covered in bruises that her mother had threatened to withdraw her from the classes, but her father had to his credit insisted that she should continue.

“Let us not teach our daughter to be a person who gives up on things when times get tough.” he had said to his wife in the voice that brooked no disagreement. Daisy’s heart had soared at his words and she threw herself into learning the art of swordplay with even more gusto.

She was amazed however to discover that she had a talent for it. It was simply a matter of speed and balance combined with cunning and an edge of ruthlessness. Nick Blade seemed to promote all of these qualities in her, and even he eventually came to recognise her talents. Yet he did not seem to wish to further his pupil’s abilities. After all, he had informed her one day, she was a woman. She would be much better employed at the sewing table or in the kitchen. In an attempt to humiliate her, Blade always insisted that she make him a cup of coffee before class started, and made a great show of accepting it as she gave it to him. He had no idea of course that she had been spitting in the cup for at least the last month of course. Yet she spent every spare moment practising. Backwards and forwards she would dance, a walking cane extended before her, swishing effortlessly through the air, thrusting against invisible opponents. It was heavier than a sword of course, and so it helped her build up her arm muscles until it reached the point where a real sword seemed to almost float in her hand.

Her increasing experience seemed to make her supposed tutor even more determined that she should fail. His taunting increased in line with her experience until one day in class she had tried an unsuspected move that she had been practising on her own, and had sent Nick Blade sprawling in the dust. Fury had raged across his face as his pupils stood around giggling at the sight of their tutor sprawled on the ground, Daisy standing above him, a huge grin playing across her face. Classes were cancelled for the rest of the day but the next morning Nick acted as if nothing had happened at all, although Daisy felt that he was just a little wary of her during his training session with her.

She finished her inspection of the cannons and made her way to the stern of the ship, climbing up onto the quarterdeck. Ignoring the sailor manning the ship’s wheel there she stared out over the sea, hardly noticing at all the wake the Magpie left behind it as they sped across the water to Hard Knocks. The ocean receded, and as if in a dream her present surroundings faded and she was in her childhood room again, reading the note from Nick Blade inviting her to a private training

session at the training school that evening. In retrospect she should have known he was up to no good, but she had been young and stupid back then. She was surprised when she had first turned up that he was not wearing his fencing clothes at all, in fact he seemed to have spent some considerable time to make himself presentable. There was a definite smell of cologne about him too.

“Ah Daisy.” he had said as she had arrived. “Thank you for coming to see me. I think maybe this evening your schooling will be concerned...” Daisy had registered the fact that he was moving between her and the door that was the only way out, “Concerned with earthier matters...” he had grinned and catching her before she could move he pulled her to him, his breath hot on her face. “But don’t tell your father.” he grinned. “He may disapprove of your tutor’s ... shall we say, attention?” and with that he had thrown her to the floor and began removing his shirt. Daisy waited until the shirt was raised over his head before leaping backwards and putting all her strength into it kicked him in the groin as hard as she could. Nick fell to the floor like a felled tree, a loud, pitiful groan spitting from his mouth. He rolled on the ground as Daisy rose to her feet and made for the door. But Nick surprised her. As she reached for the handle a small dagger thudded into the wood beside her hand and she drew back in shock, turning to face Nick as he struggled to his feet.

“You stupid bitch!” he panted as he stood in obvious pain, though his face contained more anger than hurt. “You will pay for that even if your family *is* well placed in Meesha. Nobody makes a fool of Nick Blade once, and certainly not twice!” Daisy glanced around the room quickly, taking in the sword racks off to her left and the man advancing towards her, thunder written large on his face.

Daisy edged forwards, her blood up, both anger and fear running through her mind. “Well you certainly don’t need any assistance in making a fool of yourself do you now, tutor Blade? Even the newest pupils snigger behind your back at your dyed hair and fancy clothes. They say you spend more time on your appearance than a woman, Mr Blade.” As rage rushed across his face Daisy lunged for the sword rack and pulled a sword from there as her tutor moved to block the door. Turning to face him she held the sword before her, but was dismayed to discover Nick already had a sword in hand. He nodded at her once as he had done so many times during her lessons, but this time this was not a lesson. They turned on the spot, watching each other carefully, moving in a circle as if in a dance. Soon the door was behind her again but she could not dare move her attention from his eyes to the only possible route of her escape from the classroom. The moment she tried he would have her, and at this moment in time he seemed capable of anything. She raised her sword before her and Nick sped forward, his sword striking at her as if from all directions at once. She quailed at the ferocity of his attack, but she remembered her lessons and blocked his assaults but he continued to rattle her defences, his sword spinning about her, forcing her back towards the wall. She tried a quick flurry of attacks, her sword prodding at his defences but he was fast, and he parried them easily and as he did so he renewed his attack on her.

Nervously she moved backwards trying to withhold his attack. Sweat broke on her brow as his sword flashed all about her, trying to find a way past her defences. She realised he was not playing with her, so furious was his assault. Slowly she moved backwards even more and her foot met with the skirting board of the room, the door behind her. It may as well have been miles away. Then the dagger he had thrown at her struck her back as she edged up against the door and she stumbled slightly, her attention caught by the handle of the dagger sticking in her back.

Instantly Nick fell upon her as she stumbled, the blade flashing at her chest. Yet even then he

was merely playing with her, a realisation that clashed strangely with the look of rage upon his face. The tip of the blade tore through her blouse, the clothing falling open. She was powerless to do anything about it as he continued his attack.

“Nice bosoms indeed.” he grinned, his gaze glancing for a mere moment to the blouse flapping uselessly around her, a leer showing on his face. Daisy took the chance as he was distracted and in one fluid motion that would for years later bring a smile to her face, simultaneously kicked the feet from under him while at the same time reaching behind her and freeing the dagger from the doorframe. Nick sprawled on the floor, a look of total incomprehension on his face as Daisy kicked his sword away and at the same time stuck the dagger through his outstretched left hand effectively pinning him to the wooden floor through his palm. Daisy stood on his other hand and straightened her blouse, covering herself up as well as she was able.

“Get off me girl!” he shouted, struggling to free his impaled hand but Daisy pushed his chin up with the tip of her rapier, smiling at him. He struggled against her but Daisy quickly slashed the sword across his face and cheeks twice diagonally. Instantly blood welled across his face and Nick began to scream which settled quickly to a low whimper as she finished the mark on his face, leaving a large deep cut which showed as a large X across his features. The cut was deep, and Daisy was hoping that it was deep enough to scar. He flailed on the floor and Daisy leaned down towards him, her face close to his. He stared open mouthed now as blood cascaded and congealed across his face.

“Make no mistake Nick Blade.” she spat. “You have my mark upon you now, but if I should ever see you again I will kill you without even a thought.” and she spat in his face, before kicking him in the groin one more time just for good measure and leaving him lying there on the floor, impaled through his hand, cut and bleeding.

The gossip the next day was of course all about the extremely sudden and totally unexpected departure of the fencing master and what had happened. None were any the wiser of course, and the next trainer that arrived some weeks later was a much more obliging man from the far east. Daisy continued to practice and learn and eventually even her new fencing master was inclined to agree that there was no more that he could teach her, and so she took to private tuition with a passion. From that day onwards she had not been beaten in a fight of any sort by a man, tutor or not. Nor had she forgotten a rather handy trick with regards to her blouse.

Daisy stood immobile on the quarterdeck, staring out to sea as the ship headed to Hard Knocks. It had been a long time since that night when she had chosen a different destiny though she hadn't realised that at the time of course. She sighed deeply. It seemed like a very long time ago indeed, and yet sometimes it was just like yesterday. Still as a statue she stood remembering, her mind far away not just in distance but also in time, a tear falling onto her cheek as she did so. Gathering her wits about her suddenly she gave a sigh of irritation and wiped away the tear as the ship sailed on into the night.

Chapter two

~ Tea and Sympathy ~

From the quayside of the docks and harbours it is a mere half mile before the main thoroughfare approaches the imposing building that houses the council of the town of Hard Knocks. It could be thought that because of the proximity of the council to the docks that this proved that the council's link with the trade brought in from the sea was very much an important part of the town's revenue, which would indeed be an excellent guess. It could equally be deduced by the large number of skull and crossbones flags flying from numerous ships docked in the harbour that the council were not terribly concerned with where the wealth originated in the first place as long as a certain portion of it ended up in the council coffers. The skull and crossbones flags tended to prove that it was unlikely that this income came in any way at all from fishing.

In reality the island of Hard Knocks was a mass of illegal activity that was built on a basis of ill-gotten gains and plunder. The matter of what was actually illegal or not however was much more difficult to define, for the council itself made the definition of what was and what was not illegal. This decision normally depended on the percentage of the profit that the council would gratefully, though ruthlessly collect from whatever it was that was potentially illegal. The end result of this was a judicial system that usually made decisions as it went along; a system in which hardly anything was able to be definitely defined as illegal at all.⁶ There were in reality very few rules, though the primary one that the average residents of Hard Knocks came across on a daily basis was best summed up by the words, "cash" and "only" though the order in which they appeared was not always terribly important.

The council building itself was considered by all and sundry to be therefore the centre of the town, given the level of riches which passed through it and the cut of the revenue that the council took of the profit from anything that was deemed legal. It was a passable arrangement that was seldom queried by the general populace. Well, not if they wanted to remain a member of the general living populace on an on-going basis anyway.

The council building was large and imposing in the sense that any civil building that was concerned mainly with the accumulation of power and in particular wealth, can be. Large white marbled columns fronted the wide entrance, above which rose three large and spacious storeys. It was in fact the only building in Hard Knocks that had more than two storeys, and its mere presence not only dominated the quayside but the entire town itself. The only other structure in Hard Knocks that rose above ground level was the town jail, which was equally impressive, and although only possessing two storeys, was rumoured to have at least six underground.⁷

The third storey ran the entire length of the building, the centre of which consisted of a large glass fronted dome that rose high above the roof. It was here that the mayor of Hard Knocks had his office, and it was said, though usually in a whisper, that the walls were all made of glass so

⁶ The often quoted plunder and distribution act of Hard Knocks 1137 was of course the main document upon which most of this school of thinking was based. In it the council defined illegal as, "Anything on which a tax to the council is not paid." The act is also known by its more popular title of, "The Anything Goes Act".

⁷ This was of course just a rumour, for anyone that entered the jail and went below stairs was never seen again.

the mayor, Bradley Mackrell could keep his eye on the entire town from his lofty perch. It was in this office at the moment that the mayor had just arrived for the day and seated himself at his long, officious looking desk. Mackrell himself had an aura of power and privilege about him, his large portly frame seemingly wedged behind his large desk, a ruddy complexion framing his bright red hair. His face wore an expression of total indignation most of the time, this expression only leaving his face from time to time to be replaced with a look of extreme slyness that anyone witnessing it would almost instantly not only fear for their lives, but also all of their relatives to at least the seventh generation too.

Mackrell pulled the chair upon which he sat nearer to the desk and took note of the items placed carefully and neatly on its surface. The desk at the moment had a small quill set to one side of a wide blotter, on the other side of which was a large ink well. Several neatly stacked pieces of paper were set to one side, awaiting the mayor's attention. Bradley Mackrell gave a deep sigh and cast his eyes across his desk once again. Mackrell liked neatness to the extent that it sometimes veered towards a kind of madness, but he would from time to time mentally credit his current position as mayor as being down to this desire for neatness to a great degree, as many who opposed him but were now floating several leagues under water would probably agree, if they were able. The mayor began his morning checklist.

Quill.

Check.

Ink.

Check.

Blotter.

Check.

Letters.

Too bloody right check.

Tea.

There was a long pause, during which the wind could be heard howling around the glass dome that surrounded him.

No tea.

"Mr Tea cup!" he yelled suddenly, loudly thumping his fist on the desk. The neat pile of papers scattered a little following the impact. "Mr bloody tea cup!!!" Silence. Mackrell was of the opinion that it was a complete waste of his time and resources learning people's names, preferring instead to refer to them by what he considered to be their duty that they performed for him was a much better and time effective idea.

The mayor considered getting up from his desk but changed his mind. Irritation made him scan around the room, casting a scowl upon the small child like stool in front of and below his large desk. It wasn't bloody difficult now, was it? A simple enough request. Just a cup of tea ready for him when he arrived in his office in the morning. Not hard, that. "Mr Tea Cup!!!" There followed another louder thump on the desk. From somewhere outside the room a faraway voice responded.

"Coming sir." Mackrell sat back in his chair; his by now reddening face threatening to make him look like an over inflated but increasingly dangerous tomato.

"Thee's best be bringing me my cup of tea, Mr Tea Cup." yelled the mayor. "Or as sure as I've got a hole in my bum I'll be kicking you all the way across town to the ruddy jail myself, you puffed

up waste of space, tha knows!"

The main door to the round room slid open a little and a well-dressed man in a crisply pressed suit and butler's tails nervously put his head around the door, a look of surprise crossing his face as no sharp object seemed to be heading at speed towards him.

"There you are Mr Tea-Cup!" yelled the mayor, pointing a small pudgy finger at him in accusation. "Where's my ruddy tea?"

"McDowall, sir." responded the butler with a grimace, visibly resisting the urge to point at himself. "Andrew McDowell."

The mayor waved his hand dismissively. "Whatever, Mr Tea Cup. You've got two minutes to fetch my tea or they'll be measuring you up for a set of manacles by lunchtime." He paused slightly, and McDowall was not surprised at all to see that the mayor's face was turning an even deeper shade of red. "Just get my tea!" he yelled, and McDowall disappeared from the doorway as fast as he could, his footsteps receding as he scuttled down the corridor outside.

Eventually the tea arrived and Mackrell supped at it furiously, his scarlet face slowly returning to its normal hue of just this side of crimson as the tea began to do its work. The mayor was on his second cup, McDowall standing ramrod straight to his side before he decided to take a glance at the paperwork now lightly scattered across the desk. As he casually glanced at a few of the letters he peered over the rim of his cup at the butler. "What have I got on today then, Mr Teacup?" he asked. The butler grimaced once again but was determined not to let the mayor realise just how much his seeming inability to remember his name managed to annoy him. He sighed inwardly to himself, not a single indication of it managing to show on his face. At least he was not Mr Hung Drawn and Quartered like his predecessor, he reflected solemnly.

"Nothing terribly important today, your honour." he said, pulling a small piece of neatly folded paper from inside his suit jacket, consulting it carefully, whilst also at the same time trying to discretely judge the remaining amount of tea in the teapot, an attempt that was unfortunately thwarted by the large white tea cosy that covered it. "A budget meeting at twelve, and policy session at four." The mayor rolled his eyes at this, returning his attention to his tea. McDowell stood back from the desk, and then as if suddenly remembering something stepped forwards once more. Mackrell raised an eyebrow, wondering whether his butler was dancing on duty, and if so precisely what he was going to do to the man to punish him. It wouldn't do for staff to be bringing their hobbies in to work. Oh no. Not at all! "Oh, and we have an emissary from the Golden Octopus downstairs. Apparently he has a message for you."

The mayor placed his teacup back on the saucer and passed one of the letters from the freshly signed pile to the butler. "Give that to Mr Post Box will you?" he said, "And tell him to post it straight away. Not teatime. Not tomorrow. Now." This was accompanied by an impressively loud thump of Mackrell's fist on his desk, and McDowell jumped slightly, before managing another inward sigh as he accepted the letter from the mayor.

"I will make sure I tell Mr Russell that, mayor," he said, and Mackrell rolled his eyes slowly.

"Oh, and bring the bloke from the Golden Octopus up. May as well see what that bloody lot want now."

"Of course." said McDowall, before retiring quietly from the room. As the man closed the door behind him Mackrell opened a large drawer at the front of his desk, and rummaging around for a while began to pull small wooden objects from it, placing them seemingly at random about the desk. To the untrained eye they looked like small chess pieces, perhaps no more than an inch or

two high. Upon closer inspection however there was an assortment of pieces, though they all seemed to have a nautical theme. There were several resembling ships elegantly carved in black and white wood, as well as what appeared to be a couple in the shape of wooden chests, a few anchors, and even several in the shape of small islands resplendent with a single palm tree standing up slightly from the wooden base.

Mackrell paused once all of the pieces were on his desk, eying them keenly. He adjusted several of their positions, moved a few more around, and then took another long hard look at them. Apparently satisfied with this the mayor stood up and crossed the room, strolling across to the large glass windows. He absent-mindedly flicked a small piece of dust from the brightly polished window frame before turning to look down into the docks. The harbour was a mass of large ships, their masts sitting like a small forest of trees that swung slowly in what must have been a quite strong southerly wind.

A small leaf blew past the window outside and Mackrell watched it as it drifted off towards the harbour. He had been mayor of the town of Hard Knocks for some fourteen years now, and it seemed that every year his hold on the town increased just a little more. It was a fine juggling act of course, and one that relied mostly on fear of action rather than action itself. A multi storey prison helped as well, of course, but these days he relied more on the members of the Golden Octopus to reinforce his less popular policies, while he merely directed their actions from afar. The cartel of pirates collectively known as The Golden Octopus needed keeping sweet as well though, and he was always careful to ensure that they had more than their fair share of their noses in the trough.

It had not always been that way, of course. All of those years ago when he had stood for election he had relied more on his family, most of whom were now growing increasingly familiar with the accommodation afforded by the town prison, or the seemingly bottomless depths of the Hard Knock's harbour. Back then though they had certainly helped him rise to the lofty position he now stood in, both figuratively and literally. This had involved the use of various methods of political persuasion⁸ and a ruthless dedication to ensuring everyone turned out to vote for him,⁹ as well as ensuring his political opponents were effectively rendered unelectable.¹⁰

The Golden Octopus however was a curious organisation. It was effectively a council in its own rights, but gathered to represent the interests of all pirates whether they wanted it to or not. Mackrell was to say the least wary of any organisation that sought to dominate the huge amounts of gold and treasure that passed through the entirety of The Seven Tines, and Hard Knocks in particular. However it was a mutually beneficial arrangement given the pirate's general lurch towards total anarchy. The Golden Octopus dealt with the distribution of all sums gathered by the pirates, acting as a largely legislative body by dealing out its own unique form of justice by its own hands.¹¹ This left the mayor with both the funds and the manpower to run the rest of the city. That both bodies found this mutually beneficial went without saying, and both parties were keen not to be seen to rock the boat. Mackrell though had the advantage of (seemingly) operating out in the open, whilst the activities of The Golden Octopus by and large did not. Of course to all intents and

⁸ Swords.

⁹ More swords.

¹⁰ Mackrell was a pragmatist. If his opponents failed to keep breathing on an on-going basis then they were to all intents and purposes completely unelectable. Zombies had no vote.

¹¹ Swords again.

purposes neither organisation gave the general populace of Hard Knocks and indeed the Seven Tines in total any idea at all of what it was up to at all. Fear was an important advantage for both parties, thus creating a situation where it was very difficult for most people not in either organisation to come to a final decision as to which party of the two they were most scared of. This was a situation that the Council and The Golden Octopus had worked very very hard for the last fourteen years to achieve.

He stood there for a moment longer, lost in his thoughts as from his lofty perch he watched the ships swaying in the harbour. Concentrating on the narrow dockside streets below him he suddenly noticed a small scruffy looking man carrying what was obviously a large broom. Mackrell's eyes locked onto the labourers at almost exactly the same time, and the man nodded, doffed his cap and then scooted off into the shadows. The mayor smiled slightly to himself. Such incidents were rare. Hardly anyone at all ever cast their eyes on the dome, even though it was completely transparent. The word in the taverns of the entire islands that made up The Seven Tines was that Bradley Mackrell watched everyone from his viewpoint. Hardly anyone therefore dared to cast his or her eyes up at the dome, just in case they found that this was actually true. The common assumption was that Mackrell was indeed watching. The mayor reluctantly turned his attention away from the streets below as he heard the door opening on the other side of the room.

"Erasmus Blake." announced McDowall from the other side of the room as he ushered a large, swarthy looking man into the room. Blake was dressed from head to foot in black leather, a small tri cornered hat of the same colour completing the look. As he entered the room he swept the hat almost casually from his head and bowed slightly.

"Mayor." he said, his voice deep and oily. Mackrell nodded in response and motioned for the butler to leave. Mackrell was of course familiar with Blake, as indeed he was with every member of the Golden Octopus, and he knew that the man was a relatively highly ranked member of the organisation, a fact that he considered very carefully. Obviously the messenger had something of import to relate, or more likely request of him.

"That will be all Mr Tea cup." he said and as the butler left the mayor motioned for Blake to take a seat as he placed himself back behind the desk. Blake sat himself down, noticing as he did so that the chair he was now sitting on had considerably shorter legs than the one the mayor was now sitting in. Mackrell peered over the desk at him suspiciously. "What can I do for you, Mr Blake?" he asked, and the large pirate smiled nervously, taking in the array of wooden playing pieces on the surface of the large desk. As he did so the mayor leaned forward as if he was suddenly totally oblivious to the other man, and tipped one piece in the shape of a ship on to its side. It clattered loudly as it tipped over. Blake tore his gaze from the wooden piece to see Mackrell staring at him with a large broad grin, waiting for his reply.

Attempting to gather his thoughts, Blake could not help but stutter a little, his composure temporarily lost before a cool air of calm seemed to settle on his face once again. "The Golden Octopus wishes you to know we have collectively reached a solution for several..." he paused slightly as if searching for the right word. "Ah... problems you have brought to our attention." The mayor leaned over his desk towards the pirate and winked broadly, before turning his gaze to a small piece that almost seemed to be in the shape of a mermaid. Blake moved back slightly. He was more used to being on the giving end of a spot of intimidation, and was surprised to find that the mayor wasn't intimidated by him in any way whatsoever. Quite the opposite seemed to be the

case in fact. True to form the mermaid was tipped on to its side. Blake grimaced inside, but his face was a perfect picture of total composure. The pirate could not help but feel that cracks were possibly beginning to appear in his mask of serenity, however.

“Problems, you say?” enquired the mayor, a dark look running his ruddy features. Blake felt himself twitch slightly. Mackrell cast his gaze to the ceiling as if trying to place a previous conversation he had had with the Golden Octopus, before lowering his gaze back to the pirate sitting before him. It seemed to Blake that the mayor was running through a very long and potentially lethal checklist in his mind. “You mean that not right in the head insane bastard, “Mad Dog” Jenkins?” he enquired brightly. Blake smiled back at the mayor, a slight twitch playing across his face before he had a chance to subdue it.

“Indeed.” he nodded. “Whilst the Golden Octopus is reluctant to distance itself from one of its own we feel a certain element of...” he smiled smugly at the mayor, “Concurrence with, and perhaps more than a little sympathy with your opinion that Mad Dog Jenkins is... ah... bad for business?” The mayor twitched slightly as Blake finished. He had a pet hate for any bugger that finished a sentence by raising their voice into a squeak.

“Bad for business, you say, old son?” smiled the mayor before reaching forward and taking hold of one of the pieces in the shape of what could have been a capstan, before moving it to the other side of the desk and then after a moment returning it to where it had been in the first place. Blake smiled thinly, trying his very best not to look rattled.

“Bad for business you say? Well let’s take a look at Mr Mad Dog, shall we?” The mayor fumbled below his desk and produced a large ledger from a drawer and banged it down on the table, carefully avoiding the pieces on the top of the desk. Licking his fingers, he flicked through the ledger before stopping about half way through the book. He prodded the entry he was obviously looking for with a grin. “Here we go. Last year during a sortie down the gold coast of Maritane he had flogged half of the crew by the end of the first day and keel hauled the other half by the end of the second. Upon encountering a school of dolphins he had them flogged too. Lost half of his ruddy crew trying to catch ‘em. Then there was the unfortunate incident with the ostrich.”

The mayor paused slightly as if trying to remember something. Carefully he leaned over and tipped over another piece in the shape of a ship, whilst at the same time sniffing loudly. “Or at least we think it was an ostrich.” Noticing Blake’s gaze was now fixated on the several fallen playing pieces scattered about his desk Mackrell loudly slammed the ledger shut. Blake squeaked out loud and rose a foot or two into the air before settling back on to his chair. Attempting to gather his wits he noticed that the mayor was smiling sadly. “Now an unfortunate loss of life I can cope with. After all, it’s not a job for the feint hearted piracy, is it now?” Blake found himself nodding in agreement. “But I have a great deal more difficulty in the fact that he also threw half of his no doubt ill-gotten gold over the side of his ship on his return journey because he said, “It smelt funny.””

Blake shuffled uneasily on his short chair. “Indeed.” he agreed. “Nevertheless we have come to a plan that ah... solves our problem with Captain Jenkins flights of Erm... fancy, shall we say.”

“What’s that to be then?” enquired the mayor, tipping over a playing piece shaped like a barrel and then quickly moving another piece that looked like a small wooden chest right to the edge of the table. Blake stared blankly at the wooden chest as Mackrell leaned in closer to the pirate, a broad grin playing wildly across his face. Blake could not help a picture of a cat looking at a cornered mouse forming in his mind. “Davy Jones’s with a mortar filled overcoat is it? Too good

for him, I say." Blake smiled.

"Not at all." Said the representative of the Golden Octopus, and he leaned in closer to the mayor himself. He was by now not surprised at all to discover that the mayor did not flinch or move at all. Nevertheless he continued. "We are dispatching Captain Jenkins on a search for the lost island of Capability Jones." He paused as a deep silence set about the room. Mackrell was not moving at all, almost as if he had suddenly been frozen to the spot. Blake could hear the wind whistling outside the dome, and somewhere quite nearby but presumably outside the large round room he thought he could just make out the sound of a kettle whistling. Suddenly the silence was broken as the Mayor flew back in his chair, roaring with laughter. Blake smiled briefly, before taking his chance to add, "We believe he has a map." The mayor continued to roar with laughter, his face now turning a very unhealthy shade of purple.

"The lost island of El Bongo?" he roared, and Blake nodded, relaxing back in his chair himself. "Well tha has played a blinder there, son!" he snorted. "A bigger lot of nonsense I've ever heard in my life. Hidden island with a great treasure?" Mackrell burst into laughter once again, tears now rolling down his face. "In all my years!" Blake noticed that the kettle had now stopped whistling. "I must have seen about twenty different authentic copies of that map over the years. Every one of them completely the same too. It's just a load of old bilge water. Ruddy Capability Jones hasn't been seen for some thirty years or more. Bugger just vanished." The mayor attempted to compose himself and fell into a long chain of deep chuckles. Blake smiled sweetly.

"We believe the captain may be gone for some time." he said, and the mayor slumped back in his chair. "If indeed he returns at all. The ah... statistics available to The Golden Octopus would seem to indicate that his return is by no means... certain." Blake sat back, pleased with the reception of the plan, but then decided to press his advantage whilst the mayor was so obviously amused. "Which brings us to a small matter you could assist the Golden Octopus with." he said. Mackrell gathered himself. It was not unusual for the members of the Golden Octopus to return a favour with a request. Blake sat back on his chair, waiting to see which piece the mayor would move next. He rather fancied it would be a smaller ship just to his left, or more likely another wooden chest in the centre of the table. To his dismay however, the mayor sat completely still.

"What's that then?" he asked, his eyes never leaving Blake's face at all.

"There's a young man set up shop in town, offering his services as a pirate consultant."

"Con -sul -tant?" spluttered the mayor. "Ruddy hell - right under my nose as well." Blake twitched as a small ships wheel on the edge of the table was suddenly tipped onto the floor. It was a well-known fact of course that the mayor did not have a great deal of time for modern thinking business practices. The only focus group he had time for was usually gathered around the safer end of a thirty-two-pound cannon, and as far as he was concerned "blue sky thinking" could only be achieved by a large amount of gunpowder and a match.

"Absolutely." nodded Blake. "The Golden Octopus feels that he would most definitely be detrimental to business. In fact, we believe he may have had something to do with the sinking of The Rose of Mateus last week." The mayor looked solemn.

"Aye. A bad business, that. What's the name of this con - sul -tant, then?"

"Neep Neep mayor." pronounced Blake. From nowhere there came a loud sound as if something was speeding past them very, very quickly for a few seconds and then just as quick as it had begun it faded, leaving just the sound of the breeze blowing against the large glass dome.

"What was that?" asked the mayor, looking nervously about him.

“Dunno.” mumbled Blake, taking a casual glance under the desk. When he straightened up again he could not help but notice that the mayor seemed lost in thought. There was a gap of about a minute during which the clock on the wall seemed to tick louder and louder by the second. Finally, the mayor seemed to reach a conclusion.

“I think it would be a much more ah... useful outcome if the Golden Octopus dealt with Mr Neep directly, don’t you think?” said Mackrell darkly. Blake nodded in agreement and with his business now finished rose from his stool, as he now thought of it.

“Agreed. The Golden Octopus did not want to be seen to taking an ah... interest without consulting you first, of course.”

“Of course.” agreed the mayor. The relationship between the council and The Golden Octopus worked like a well-oiled piece of machinery. There was of course the occasional “misunderstanding”, but nothing that could not be sorted out with the use of a large amount of gunpowder or a finely sharpened sword. Such incidents were of course rare, but when they did occur they were savagely and swiftly dealt with. This also goes some way to explaining why such occurrences were rare in the first place. Both parties seemed to have a finely tuned sense of exactly where the line was that they should not cross, and went to great lengths to ensure that they were at all times on the correct side of it too.

“Well if that concludes our business?” Blake nodded and the mayor shouted for the representative to be shown out. The mayor completely ignored the member of the Golden Octopus as he was led from the room by the butler, now seeming to be fully occupied once again with the small wooden pieces on his desk. Blake reached the door, gave a nervous bow to the mayor who simply waved his hand in dismissal without looking up, and the messenger from the Golden Octopus left the room feeling more than a little rattled.

Once Blake had gone Mackrell opened the draw and with a half-smile upon his face he swept all of the wooden playing pieces back into it. He went to close the drawer but then remembered the budget meeting later on. Rummaging around for a minute or so he then placed more pieces onto the top of his desk from what appeared to be a completely different set of shapes and pieces. This set seemed to mostly be in the shape of small bags of what was obviously meant to be gold, the occasional hangman’s noose, and several in the shape of what appeared to be hands with all the fingers cut off. There were also several shaped in the fashion of small wooden cash tills amongst them. Arranging them once again seemingly at random he stood back satisfied, then crossed his office and stood staring out of the window across to the sea again. Suddenly he burst into loud laughter. “The lost island!” he roared, “The map. Oh my. What a pig’s ear that will be.” He burst into laughter even louder than the first time and then suddenly roared across the room. “Mr Tea Cup! Mr Tea Cup! Stop mithering thisen and fetch me more tea!

Chapter 3

~ Bed knobs and Bailiffs ~

Neep raised his head from his pillow and sneezed loudly. From the street below he could hear the furious sound of loud banging on the front door of the boarding house. Groggily he pushed the blankets away and edged his feet into his slippers by the side of the bed. He sat there for a moment as the loud banging continued and yawning, pulled himself to his feet. As he did so he sneezed loudly once again, the result of which was his night cap flew through the air and landed on the small chest at the foot of his bed. Neep gazed at it for a moment still half asleep as the banging on the front door started again. This was this time accompanied by deep voices calling to open the door. With a sinking feeling in his stomach he thought he heard the word, "bailiff" mentioned. Swaying slightly, he crossed to the small window and parted the moth eaten curtain slightly, carefully glancing down into the street below.

He jumped back quickly as he saw two very large men standing before the door. The largest one of the two caught the movement of the curtain and Neep jumped back into the room just as the knocking began once again.

"Ere!" shouted one of the men from below. "We know you're in there, Mr Neep. You owe the Society of Piratical Endeavours a few bob, you bad boy!" There was a loud snickering from below at exactly the same time that Neep registered the sounds of Mrs Bunion, his landlady, making her way up the stairs yelling his name. Almost as if in protest at this rude awakening, Neep sneezed loudly once again.

"Mr Neep! Mr Neep!" there came another loud banging from the door of his room as his landlady reached his door. As if in unison the banging from the front door began once again, only this time louder. "You've brought bailiffs to my door, Mr Neep!" shouted Mrs Bunion through the keyhole. "Shame on you for setting money collectors on the house of an old lady." Neep blushed deeply as he stood in his nightshirt in the centre of the room uncertain of what to do. Mrs Bunion was not done yet though. Through the keyhole came the sound of her raised voice. "And what with you not having paid rent for the last month. Turning the place into a regular den of thieves you are, Mr Neep, and that's for sure!"

Neep considered returning to bed and pretending to be asleep but the loud banging from the street started twice as loud as before. There was a sudden loud crack of what could only be the besieged door and Neep was relieved to hear Mrs Bunion head back across the landing towards the stairs. "Don't you think I be forgetting about you Mr Neep!" she called and Neep automatically took a step backwards away from his room door as she shouted to him. "I'll be back in a moment to deal with you! Taking food from an old woman's mouth you are!" There was a further bustle as she descended the stairs, turning her attention on the bailiffs. "If you've broken that door you'll pay for it you pair of dullards! Don't think you can come around to a defenceless old lady's house and go on breaking her door! I'll take a stick to you; I will so help me and see if I don't!" Neep sighed a breath of relief as she disappeared down the stairs, where there now came a rather more muted banging on the door. Crossing the room once again he looked through the curtain to see the door fly open and Mrs Bunion rush out, flailing at the two bailiffs with what appeared to be a small stick. Though the two men were without doubt huge, she set about them with a vengeance, much to the amusement of several passers-by. Grabbing a pair of trousers and hastily putting

them on, Neep kept a close eye on the progress of Mrs Bunion's assault in the street below whilst at the same time searching for his boots.

Although the two bailiffs had retreated to the other side of the street, and were now cowering before Mrs Bunion it was obvious to Neep that they were not to be deterred. His head spinning with the boot search whilst at the same time keeping an eye on the street whilst at the same time also trying to calculate the amount of his unpaid subscription to his correspondence course and then finally factoring in a month's rent made his head spin even more. He knew that it was definitely a tidy sum, or more accurately a sum that he quite simply did not currently possess. Turning out his pockets he discovered the only thing in there seemed to be a handful of rusty looking groats, a small amount of sand and the remains of what could have once possibly been a small crab. The swim back from the sunken Rose of Mateus the week before had taken him some two hours, the first half of which Nutcracker the parrot continued to query him about the whereabouts of the ship. Eventually he seemed to have succumbed to boredom and flew away. He had not seen it since, luckily.

Finding his boots Neep sat on the bed and rammed them on quickly. He had a little difficulty with this as they both seemed to contain a certain amount of sand. Ignoring this he threw on a shirt and looked on the window once again to see that the two bailiffs seemed to be gaining confidence and were slowly advancing in the direction of the boarding house front door, Mrs Bunion now being in swift retreat. Neep gulped. He realised that he had no time to lose. Grabbing hold of the window frame he pulled himself forward and stepped out onto the thin wooden window ledge, vertigo making his knees tremble as he did so. He was not so good with heights.

"Oo!" Came a growl from one of the bailiffs in the street below. "We've gone and got us a jumper! That's never happened before!"

Neep tried not to look down into the street. It was not a considerable height, but the cobbled stones of the street below would make this unimportant if he jumped. Mrs Bunion's voice rose from the street below, a mix of fear and downright annoyance with a small twist of inconvenienced. "Oh Mr Neep! What are you doing on the window ledge, silly boy! Don't you go and jump now! Don't you dare go and jump!"

Neep checked his jacket was completely buttoned up and edged along the ledge sideways. As he did so the ledge of the boarding house across the street slowly became nearer. Followed closely by a now gathering crowd in the street below he edged even further and judging the distance carefully launched himself across the gap to the building across the street. There was a loud "Oooo!" from the street below but Neep landed nimbly on the ledge and grabbing hold of the window frame edged up onto the rooftop.

"Ere!" came a cry from below as the bailiffs suddenly realised what Neep was up to. "He's getting away! Quick! The stairs!" Neep raced across the flat rooftop and leaped from one building to the next, to loud sounds of applause from everyone below with possibly the exception of the two bailiffs who had by now disappeared into the interior of the building Neep had just left behind him. Racing over the roof he yanked open a small trapdoor on the roof of the next building and quickly descended down a ramshackle staircase in near darkness to the next street below. Sticking his head out of the doorway carefully and noting the distinct absence of any bailiffs made his way out of the door and tore along the street at full pelt. Leaving pursuit behind him he made his way to the first cross roads and headed west along the main street. The sounds of pursuit had by now disappeared behind him, and merging with the crowds that were bustling along the markets ll

around him he slowed his pace.

From the high street it was only five minute's walk to his shop, and he had a moment of panic before he found the shop keys in his pocket. Sneezing loudly, he crossed into a side alley which upon reaching the end of he turned left at the end, then first left and crossed the much quieter street where his shop stood. He paused to look at the front and felt himself swelling with pride at the shop sign (still to be paid for) across the still drawn blinds that covered the shop window.

In large golden letters it read, "Mr Neep Esquire, Piratical Endeavours Consultant. Treasure recovered (and buried), Gold earnings increased by 400 per cent or your money back. Grog recipes improved." Removing the keys from his pocket once more he crossed the road, and looking carefully about him went to open the door.

Which oddly was already open. Neep leaned closer to inspect the lock and saw that it appeared to be shattered, fresh splinters of wood littering the floor. Leaning carefully on the door he pushed it slightly and the door swung slowly open, the rusty hinges creaking loudly. Neep stared into the darkness of the shop and glancing behind him to check the coast was clear he edged inside. "Stand aside!" he yelled loudly at the top of his voice, scaring himself slightly as he attempted to stare into the darkness of the store. "I have my cutlass at the ready to deal with robbers!" he continued loudly. Silence. Neep leaned back on the door which creaked slowly shut and made to open the blinds on the shop window. Light flooded into the room and Neep was shocked to discover that the shop had been ransacked. Several storage cupboards had been wrenched open, and the drawers scattered across the floor. The fact that the drawers and cupboards had been completely empty was irrelevant. They had still been thrown forcefully to one side.

Neep took a moment to look at his shop. It was definitely a little smaller than his father's fishmongers store, and was almost completely empty of anything other than a small counter (upon which nothing rested) and a small piece of parchment that was still carefully pinned to the wall behind the counter. Sneezing loudly once again Neep stopped to stare at the piece of parchment, which seemed to be the only thing in the shop that had not been touched. Neep sighed loudly as he looked at the piece of paper. To the casual reader it seemed to indicate that Neep was a fully qualified piratical endeavours consultant. To the more careful examiner however, it merely indicated Neep's enrolment on to the correspondence course. Neep leaned it and tore it from the wall, the small pins scattering on the floor as he did so. It appeared that the piece of paper was below the attention of even thieves and robbers. Sighing once again (only louder this time) he leaned against the counter despondently.

As he stared about the ruins of the shop and the papers strewn about the floor his mind went back to the time before he had owned a shop, or begun the correspondence course. It was not that long ago, but somehow it seemed like a lifetime. In his mind he pored over every detail.

It had all seemed so different when he had first enrolled on the correspondence course. The ongoing payments were not a barrier to the course initially, as Neep reasoned that once he was engaged in the trade of piracy then there would be no shortage of ready cash to hand. The deposit for the course was a definite problem though. One gold piece was not an unusually high amount, but to the son of a lowly fishmonger it may as well have been a small fortune. He had managed to save ten groats by working all hours for his father but needed another ninety to make one gold piece. He had sat on the quayside of Hard Knocks head in hands, for the correspondence course was his way out of what he thought of as a life of drudgery and fish, with the emphasis most definitely being on the fish.

He was certain a life of piracy, gold and infamy awaited him. He could feel it in his bones and as for the gold that was surely meant to be his he could almost smell it. As he sat there moping he could hear the sounds of laughter from a tavern nearby, and deciding that there was no way that he could increase his wealth any further and that the correspondence course was therefore out of reach he decided to go and get drunk instead, his plan not being so much to drown his sorrows but as to obliterate them.

He entered the bar of The Slaughtered Chicken tavern, blinking at the clouds of smoke that obscured most of the room, the pub being particularly crowded. His height gave him an advantage of course and peering about the room he began to make his way through the heaving masses to the bar to get himself a drink and begin his night of forgetting his woes. He was half way there when he heard a commotion from his left from a small round table around which were sat several men who to Neep's cursory glance seemed to be almost certainly engaged in piratical endeavours. He decided this because of the number of beards, eye patches and looking seruptiously under the table the collection of peg legs too. They appeared to be playing cards.

The commotion seemed to be regarding the rejection of one of the players who seemed to be in difficulty of settling presumably his losses. Neep edged closer. This left a space at the table. His heart racing, he almost hovered on the spot, indecision seizing him. In the months ahead Neep would often marvel at the sheer audacity of what he did next, though he wasn't entirely sure whether it was in fact audacity or just plain stupidity. Leaning over the table he took the now empty chair and sat himself down. "Good evening gentlemen." he said trying to give an air of confidence he definitely didn't feel. He wasn't by any means a gambler, but he had played cards with his father many a time, more to kill the time between filleting fish. "Blackjack is it?"

The seven men sat around the table eyed him suspiciously, casting glances amongst themselves, but the man facing him on the other side of the table just nodded to the others. Neep felt pleased. Blackjack was the game he had played with his father. Well, he had used to. His father wouldn't play cards with him anymore, considering it to be a complete waste of time. This was down to one simple fact. Neep had a memory that a doctor had informed his anxious parents as lithographic. Put simply, Neep had only to see a document once - even glance at it - and it was indelibly etched into his mind for him to recall as and when he wanted. Not just words either, pictures were the same, although his limited drawing ability definitely hampered his ability to reproduce a picture at will. Words were different, however. Numbers too. Even playing cards. The pirate seemingly in charge eyed him up and down once again.

"Good evening, sir." he announced, his voice deep and vaguely dangerous, "Blackjack it is. A groat a hand. And you are?"

"Mister Neep." he said, carefully avoiding using his Christian and surname as he usually did. "Aces high is it?" The pirate (for Neep had definitely decided that was what he was) nodded and placing one of his eight groats on the table Neep settled into the game and collected his cards that were dealt to him. Neep looked at the deck of cards the dealer was holding. There was always something exciting about a playing card; exciting but equally dangerous.

The first three games he lost and they passed in a flurry. Conversation was definitely at a minimum, the other players watching him carefully with an air of suspicion. After a few losing hands Neep felt them begin to relax somewhat, and so he turned his attention to the dealt cards. A lithographic memory was a decided advantage at Blackjack, though it was not a complete solution. The cards he saw laid down gave him some idea as to which ones had been dealt, and

therefore a much more useful estimation of those that had yet to be dealt. This meant that higher value cards could be predicted giving him a definite edge on the other players. Neep's father was definitely wise not to play against him.

As the night wore on Neep won three out of next five games and his pile of groats increased slightly. His success rate didn't seem to perturb the pirates greatly, though Neep suspected that the mugs of grog foaming and spitting in front of them may have had something to do with that. He may very well have been wrong however, as the head pirate seemed to be eying him more suspiciously than the other six.

"How about we raise the stakes to a gold piece a game?" he asked and Neep glanced at his pile of groats, and was surprised to find he now had accumulated winnings of one gold piece and twelve groats. His mouth went dry. He had enough to pay for the correspondence course now! Yet he could see what the pirate was trying to do. For some reason the pirate's suspicions had been raised, and if Neep lost the next game he would be penniless again and out of the card school altogether. Yet he didn't want to stop. He recognised the fault was in his character. It wasn't a gambling thing. He just didn't want to lose face. He wanted to win, and this had got him in trouble more than once.

"Certainly." he heard himself say, and all the pirates smiled almost simultaneously, possibly having noticed the very visible deep breath that Neep had taken when he answered. "A piece of gold it is." The cards were dealt and the game began. Neep watched the bankers cards carefully. Ace of spades folded by the pirate to his right, the two three and six of hearts gone, king of hearts and jack down. Diamonds seemed low. He glanced at the ten of diamonds in his hand and gulped. "I shall stay where I am." he said and the head pirate smiled. There were three players left in the game now and the head pirate signalled that he would do the same. The remaining man on the other side of the table grinned nervously and asked for another card. Queen of clubs. He folded his hand and pushed his seat back from the table.

"I'll raise you." said Neep to the head pirate, gritting his teeth. The pirate stared at him carefully, glancing casually at the eight gold pieces now lying in a neat pile on the table.

"But you have no more cash Mr Neep." He smiled, and so I think you may find you have to show your hand." Neep gulped and showed his cards. Ten of diamonds, King of Diamonds and an ace of diamonds. The pirate in front of him visibly quailed at the sight of this, turning over a hand of paltry cards amounting to a mere eighteen. Neep smiled and collected the eight gold pieces, scooping them into his pocket and standing.

"Surely you will give us a chance to win our money back?" smiled the pirate, but Neep was already pushing his way across the crowded bar. He had been lucky, he reflected as he glanced about the ransacked shop. He knew the area around the docks pretty well and soon he was back safe and sound with nine gold pieces safely stowed in his pockets. His heart raced! Now he could afford the correspondence course, and maybe even take on premises!

Initially a shop seemed like a good idea. Even the lowliest piratical consultant had to have premises to trade from, after all. Neep smiled weakly at the thought. Piratical consultants did seem to be pretty thin on the ground, which is probably why he had thought that it was a good idea right from the start. Then there was the correspondence course. Offered by the brothers Maudlin, it guaranteed an incredible return on the monthly fees. The only problem was in convincing any pirates to actually take the idea on board as it were. Neep smiled sadly to himself at the pun and mentally added up the cost of his correspondence course so far, his rent with Mrs Bunion, and

the rent on the shop before turning his pockets inside out. Nine gold pieces had not lasted very long at all. A small cloud of dust descended from his trousers and fell onto the dust covered shop floor. Once again, Neep sighed deeply before slowly drawing his attention back to the shattered door and the general state of disrepair his shop seemed to be in. Crossing the floor and moving behind the counter he reached down and picked up a bunch of papers that had been strewn across the floor, slowly getting up and placing them on top of the counter.

He remembered with relish the letter he had received from the S.O.P.E. correspondence course inviting him to turn up for enrolment at the salty pipe pub a few days after he had sent a letter concerning registration. He had been surprised when he turned up at the pub however to find that he seemed to be the only person there applying for the course. He had met with a Mr. Mathias and duly handed over his gold piece, and his address had been noted. He gave his new shop address as where he wanted the weekly instalments of the course to be delivered, and had been handed a course handbook and certificate

"Before you go though" said Mr Mathias, snatching the course material back off him, "You need to register with the representative from the Golden Octopus over there." He pointed out a tall stocky man who appeared to be cleaning his teeth with a dagger in the darkest recess of the tavern common room. "They need to make sure that your future piratical endeavours - your potential piracy if you will - is up to their high standards." Neep looked cautiously at the man from The Golden Octopus but Mathias more or less pushed him towards the corner.

"Ah Mr Neep." He took up a piece of parchment from the table in front of him. "Ah... piratical consultant it is, then?"

"Aye." said Neep brightly, getting into the part as he took a seat in front of the representative from The Golden Octopus.

"Mr Melvas." said the pirate introducing himself as they shook hands carefully, each counting their fingers as they withdrew their hands. Neep nodded.

"Just a few formalities as it were." he said. "Make sure you are ah... up to speed with the world of piratical activities and pitfalls and so on.

"Good good." said Neep, giving him his best smile.

"Ever been beheaded?" asked the pirate, picking up from the table and hovering over the parchment expectantly.

"Evidently not." said Neep, smiling. The pirate glanced up at him from the table as if to check and then placed a large cross on the paper.

"Stabbed or strangled?"

"No."

"Eyes gouged out, spleen ruptured or limbs missing?"

"Nope." said Neep, holding up both his hands. More crosses were added to the parchment as the interview continued all as far as Neep could see in the same column.

"Now Mr Neep we need to advise you of some of the pitfalls that are liable to come your way during a lifetime of piracy." Neep got the definite impression that Melvas was trying to put him off.

"Ever been on a sinking ship?" he asked brightly.

"Not up to this point." he said. Melvas brightened visibly.

"Oh." he said. "Drowning can be a horrible way to go, you know." He smiled broadly. Very nasty."

"Not a problem." said Neep. "I can swim." Melvas grimaced and placed another cross on the parchment.

"What about buggery?" he asked.

"Is it compulsory?" smiled Neep.

"Of course not!" said Melvas irritably, shuffling in his seat.

"Well no thanks then." said Neep.

"It could happen..." said Melvas attempting a look of concern.

"Any statistics on the likelihood?" queried Neep. Melvas shuffled in his seat again.

"Not to hand at the moment." he said.

"I'll take the chance then." said Neep as the representative from The Golden Octopus sighed to himself before crossing the paper once again.

"Sudden death." said Melvas.

"I would prefer a little notice if at all possible really."

"Being stranded on a remote desert island with just a penknife and one pair of trousers and..." Neep noticed that Melvas seemed to be racking his brains to embellish his question if that was indeed what it was. "With a population of cannibals... and an... Erm... army of witch doctors." he finished with a flourish.

"Not very likely now, is it?" said Neep.

"Why not?" said Melvas, peering at Neep intently.

"Well I don't have a pen knife." said Neep with a smile. Melvas grimaced and rolled up the parchment.

"Well that concludes our interview Mr Neep." he growled darkly, "Though one piece of advice I will give you for free. If I were you then I would most definitely beware of treading on the toes of The Golden Octopus. They don't take kindly to the world of consultancy I think you will find."

"Thank you for the advice." said Neep, missing the veiled threat completely.

"Good day Mr Neep." said Melvas as he departed, nodding darkly to Mathias on the way out. Mathias took Neep's hand and shook it, handing him back his papers and course book when he was done, not that Neep needed it. He had flicked through it once when he was given it and it was all in his head waiting for retrieval straight away. His lithographic memory was very much of an advantage not just for card schools.

A noise from outside in the street brought him back to the present, and startled, he tripped over a number of papers on the floor. He thought he had a vague concept in his mind that bailiffs were as far as he knew not allowed to enter a building unless they were invited in. Just a bit like vampires. Like most people he had a vague notion of what a bailiff could, and could not, actually do in the execution of their duty. Applying this rule of logic to the current state of the front door and interior of his office seemed to be threatening to give him a headache. Noticing more papers scattered on the floor Neep bent down to pick these up too, noting as he did so that they all seemed to be demands of payment from the correspondence course.

As he stood up to place the papers on the counter he was shocked to see two large, swarthy looking men stood inside his shop looking at him in what could only have been a predatory manner. Neep was equally startled to see that neither of them seemed to be the bailiffs that he had seen in the street just minutes before.

"Mr Neep, is it not?" said the larger one of the men as he smiled in a causally evil manner. Neep noticed the man's dark leather coat, long black boots, and dark floppy hat, topped with a long black feather. Of far more importance however was the long, carefully polished flintlock pistol pointed in his direction.

“Yes?” asked Neep, and was not in the slightest bit surprised to find that his voice sounded as if he was singing from the treble section of the Hard Knocks choir. The man’s smile increased just a little more and the other man beside him gave a small chuckle in a low, deep voice. “Is it about the correspondence course?” Neep continued to squeak. The two men seemed to both smile a little wider.

“In a way I suppose it is.” Said the man with the gun. Neep decided to try the outraged approach.

“I didn’t think it was allowed for bailiffs to have guns!” yelled Neep. “I am calling a constable about this!” The two men stood perfectly still in front of Neep almost as if daring him to move. The only change in either of the two men’s stance was the slight rising of each of their left eyebrows.

“Oh but we are not bailiffs” said the second man, producing an impressively long knife apparently from within his sleeve, and began paring his nails with it. The first man moved a step closer and waved the gun towards the shattered door of the shop.

“No, Mr Neep. We are...” he paused, glancing to the ceiling as if trying to pluck a word from the air. “Messengers.” He finally settled on before casting his gaze in Neep’s direction again. “Yes. Messengers. We are from the Golden Octopus, Mr Neep.” He paused slightly watching the colour drain from Neep’s face. “And the Golden Octopus wants a word.” He waved the pistol at the open door. “Shall we go?”