

CHAPTER ONE

A skeletal form stood with a flotsam filled tide slapping at its ankles. It was one of dozens, possibly hundreds.

It held a tarnished cutlass in one hand and a dagger in the other. Both weapons were darkened by time and tide.

The skeleton had little tissue left to its bones. What remained had hardened and made one with what little tattered cloth hung to the corpse.

It lifted its skull, the vertebrae creaked. The skeleton snapped to a widened stance of attack. It raised a sword and screamed.

The others of its resurrected kind roared in response. The army of death ran through the lapping waters.

"Here they come!"

The warning came from Glover's lips. Of the majority of the crew, the young man had joined the Requiem most recently. To hear him tell it, he joined because he decided to. In truth, the dark ship with its history of unnatural adventures and voyages had rescued him from a horrific fate. In truth, the young Caribbean man was exactly where he needed to be. Willful and headstrong, his boyish looks spoke more to his heart than his stubborn and disagreeable nature. An uncanny navigator and map-reader, Glover was young and that youth often landed him in ill waters.

Such as facing a horde of skeletons brandishing cutlasses and clicking eager jaws in anticipation. He stood front line until a gloved hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

"Damn your hide, Glover," cursed Winter Burke. "Are you so eager to fill these bottomless maws with stupidity that you'd throw yourself to them?" Ms. Winter Burke was the only female aboard the

Requiem but she was twice as feared as any man aboard. Her silver mane of hair had given pause to her mother and father when the baby girl was born in her small Irish town of Brody. Her green eyes burned with a ferocity that no one who matched her in swords or dueling muskets could meet her gaze. And that often led to their deaths. A few years older than Glover, the woman was a tiger in all aspects and left nothing on the field.

These two were in front of the twenty odd crewmen of the Requiem who stood ready for battle behind them. Each pirate the equal of any three men in battle and five at sea.

"I can handle them, Burke!" Glover yelled back to the ship's female quartermaster. This is the last wave of the Aqua Mortu!" This was the title given by those who sailed and called the seas home.

The Aqua Mortu were one of the many horrors which rose from the dark depths. They would signal their approach by rattling sounds and ethereal laughter for they were the lost corpses water-logged and bone-bleached by the elements and scavengers of the ocean. These were traitors thrown overboard; these were the shipwrecked taken undertow; these were the souls lost to watery gods who promised salvation in storms with no powers to truly save.

"This may be your last wave, but this is not THE last wave!" Winter stood next to the young man. Swords raised. Glover looked her in her green eyes and nodded. He was far too serious for his age but easily acknowledged the appreciation of Burke's standing with him.

"Then we leave this world together, Burke," the Caribbean said.

She smiled and swung her dual blades. She blocked one attack and sent a now headless Aqua Mortu to whatever afterlife awaited it. "I not be dying yet, boyo! I been awhile without knowing a man! 'Tis bad luck!"

The brown-skinned navigator paused, caught off-guard by the lass' words.

"You be helping me with that, Mr. Glover?" she said with a smile.

Before he could answer, an axe came down at his neck.

The blade was blocked and its wielder dispatched by a mighty scimitar.

"No one need leave anywhere yet," and the aged voice belonged to Ghassan, who strode between the two much younger pirates. Ghassan had served as soldier, sailor, statesman, missionary, healer, spiritual adviser and guide to those aboard the Requiem. Captain Travis found no mission worth sailing without the Syrian's presence. Traveling without Ghassan seemed to be ill in luck. As the man in dark cloth and turban made his way forward, he brought a large contingent of the crew with him. The Requiem had seen many waters. Numerous men of languages and cultures as diverse as possible called the legendary ship home.

"The captain is working on a solution for this problem," the older man reassured. The mammoth scimitar in his hands twirled as he took an offensive stance.

Winter laughed slightly. "Seanathair, truly it be a miracle, how you make the worst of situations seem so...peaceful."

Ghassan smiled, more like turned up part of his mouth. The man's face was long darkened and leathered by the desert and its sun. "Peace is within, Bin'nt," he answered. The term "senathair" was used in Winter's homeland for elders and seniors. In the world of Allah and the lands of the Arabs, "bin'nt" was used for daughters. The words showed the relationship between the young silver haired pirate and her older male counterpart.

Glover tightened his lips. "If you two are done with the reunion, the captain said we are to hold this position, buy him time for his talismans and charms. Prepare to make a stand for he will most likely fall into some skirt-tail and we'll all die." The Aqua Mortis creaked in unison as they regrouped and took a massive stance in preparation to charge.

Ghassan nodded. "No, Mister Glover, prepare to win." The trio nodded. The skeletons hissed and ran forward. The crew of the Requiem roared and did the same.

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"Are you certain this will work?" The question came from the full lips of Saoirse, the woman who, along with her father the mayor, had sent the call to the nearby governor for aid. As with such occurrences, the right people in power made both the necessary calls and shadowy deals to reach the Requiem, her crew and her captain.

It helped that the money promised was bountiful and the mayor's daughter was beautiful. Two facts that kept Captain Nabopolassar "Bo" Travis focused on the scrap of map on the makeshift table before him. He stood slightly while reading the ancient and the arcane. The pirate was not too tall but not too short. His body was hidden under the black and leather coat often worn by the lord of a craft. A bright red sash hung around his waist, its ends billowed in the visiting winds conjured up and about.

Travis wore gloves with bracelets of unusual assembly. Some were beaded while others consisted of metal and yarn.

His boyishly mischievous face betrayed the dual flintlocks and double-swords at his sides and down the bandoleer type sash from shoulder to hip. Bo had blue eyes which could appear as clear at times, especially when at sea. His jaw was defined and carried with it a few permanent scars. His hair was feathery in style and dirty blond in color. It had body and a slight puff to it all while ending in a short ponytail tied wild and loosely.

Leather pants ended into the boots' fold-over. They were tight enough to avoid slowing down a swim or catching a mayor's daughter's attention.

As Travis read his volumes and lore, numerous ornate talismans and bones covered the aged pieces of paper. Bo was reading over ancient texts in languages long lost even amongst the oldest of librarians throughout the world.

"Am I certain?" the captain asked. He put out a gloved hand and shook it slightly, telling the girl of the chances. She shook her head. Saoirse and Travis were huddled in a small room on the top floor of a dilapidated building that barely held up to the storms that often pounded Pearl Bay. The Aqua Mortis' screams could be heard through the shanty walls and doors.

"Then my town is going to die with these demons..." The population of Pearl Bay had retreated to a secondary set of buildings and shelters. Saoirse' father was amongst the first and more seriously wounded.

"Aye love, don't be so glum," Bo answered back, "I didn't say the chances were bad just not all good...THERE." Travis watched and a browned die shook and fell onto one side. Travis ran one hand to a thin necklace around his neck - a seashell charm hung from it.

The room went cold and a foul odor overtook the air in the small room.

"WHAT'S HAPPENING?!?" the woman called out.

"TIS PART OF THE EXORCISM! THE AQUA MORTIS HAVE TO BE CAST AWAY!" With those last words, Travis and Saoirse were hurtled back by an erupting specter that tore from the piece of paper. It was a mammoth torso of a skeleton that was screaming with a deep rumbling voice.

The room's temperature plunged once again. It bit at the girl's skin and Bo's as well. It reminded him of times when the Requiem sailed through jagged ice and snowy landscapes. His breath hung in the air with each puff. The offending odor of conjuring filled their nostrils. Saoirse coughed and held her face while Captain Travis worked through the smell. He knew the aroma of sulfur and brimstone well.

The two turned their gaze to the apparition in the room. It returned their stare with a reddened gaze. The pirate stood in front of the woman as the entity moved slowly, studying and analyzing. Travis looked the ghostly form over. "Jaysus and Jack Ketch," the pirate said, "Ye be a biggie, don't ye?"

The skeleton pulled back slightly and then lurched forward. Its jaws snapped and it spoke in some unknown language with a dozen voices in unison. It reached for them repeatedly.

Saoirse ducked quickly while Captain Travis stood, defiantly stopping the creature's lunge. The pirate held out a bundle of rosaries, crucifixes and other holy items. As Bo spoke to the spirit, his voice went from bargaining to demanding to absolute yelling. All of Travis' words were in an unknown tongue. From its accent and flow, the language was that of the giant skeletal phantom occupying the room.

Some unknown level of cursing came forth and the skinless Goliath thrust out an arm and sent the blond pirate soaring across the room. He slammed into a wall and fell still. The emissary of the watery dead snapped a gaze onto the girl.

She backed up slowly. Her eyes wide and lips trembling.

The phantom swayed with each of her steps. Its translucent form clicking teeth, jaw and fingers in some level of anticipation. It suddenly screamed out and swung an ethereal blade at Saoirse.

She screamed, awaiting the cut and her death.

Sword clanged with sword as Travis' cutlass parried the wraith's attack. Enchantments, blessings and secret smithing allowed Bo's tangible weapon to lock with the translucent sword of the ethereal. It was just a part of the captain's furtive nature. Tales of his dealings with things both of this world and the next were often whispered of in taverns and at port.

Travis shifted and countered the creature's attack. Saoirse did not move for both fear of being caught in the sparks of swordplay and astonishment at the battle prowess of the living and the dead.

Captain Travis returned to his verbal attack. He held out rosaries and crucifixes once again. His voice went entirely to demanding and with the combination of his strikes and his words, the manifestation shuddered, shook and began to fade ever more.

The pirate's skin ran slick despite the room's plummeting temperature. He continued his verbal assault as he stripped off his dark leather coat and white silk shirt. With his rising voice, his body shook and every lean muscle rippled as if the captain's body were to burst.

His cutlass rotated in his hands. Its handle comfortable and moving slowly in a long-time companionship of muscle memory and practiced conjure. Bo continued to speak, chant and command in dead tongues and lost language.

The spirit roared out shortened bursts which seemed to defy Travis' chants. It staggered and its misty composition faded in and out.

The phantom shook with apparent rage and screamed out as it reached for the Requiem's captain. Smoothly and in peak of the building crescendo to his exorcism, Travis spun and decapitated the shade. Its skull flew across the room and shattered into nothingness.

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Outside, Ghassan, Winter and Glover clashed swords against an army of the undead. Several of their crew-mates had fallen. Wounds littered all three. This was a front held but a front losing ground.

"The captain better hurry!" Glover yelled over the sounds of swords, firing muskets and the hiss and scream of the watery skeletons. "Or these bastards are going to add us to their ranks!"

"Only if Allah wills it!" Ghassan answered back, his scimitar shattering one skeleton who was quickly replaced by two others.

Glover, typically little of words, especially soft ones, threw himself between the Syrian and a swinging sword's edge. It caught him partially in the shoulder. Winter cursed and took the attacking set of bones apart.

Ghassan held Glover and nodded. He truly smiled this time under the beard and mustache. The young man growled through the wincing pain. "We shall see what Allah has waiting for us on the other side."

Just then, the Aqua Mortis froze in their approach, their attacks and their inevitable victory. The crew of the Requiem stopped as well.

They watched.

They collectively held their breaths.

Then, the skeletons shattered into nothingness.

Winter Burke grinned wide through her silver hair and emerald eyes. She smiled at her fellow crew.

"REQUIEM!" she yelled out.

The crew of the Requiem collectively cheered. "AYE! AYE! AYE!!!!!"

Ghassan patted the young navigator on the back. Glover nodded.

Her eyes on the beach-front celebration, Saoirse looked from the window back to the sweaty and panting Travis. The pirate wiped his brow; his conflict with the supernatural had left him spent.

The girl's eyes narrowed, combing over the young man's glistening torso. Years at sea had cut his lean body with rippling muscle. His skin was tanned and tattooed in enigma and mystery. Equally alluring as his physique was the amount of cut and scar atop it.

Captain Nabopolassar Travis' gaze met Saoirse's.

"Now, lass," Travis gasped, "About me' payment?"

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