

With Poseidon's breath straining the sails, the ship's bow sliced unevenly through the briny water. As the heavy ocean pressed against its sides, the massive vessel groaned, the only sound accompanying the howling winds. The sea rose and fell rhythmically, sloshing against the hull like a glass of beer hoisted by a drunken sailor. No birds flew this far out into the ocean. No sea life, mammal or fish, rose from the depths to eye those on board.

The sleepy motion matched the routine of the men working quietly aboard ship. Those strung in the sails, like spiders tending their webs, paid no heed to the whitewater slapping against the ship. They tended the cloth lovingly, as if it were a baby's first diaper, for if the sails shredded, the boat and her crew might never see land again.

The crewmen on deck busied themselves with tasks important to the vessel's maintenance. Some honed heavy oak for future repairs, others scrubbed and greased riggings. The lower ranking men twirled lines or pushed heavy mops, fighting their endless battle against wear and tear caused by the sea.

A handsomely dressed man stood before the door to the main cabin. Sensing the sway of the ocean through heavy boots, he peered over the ship's wheel. Squinting, he sighted points of reference only a seasoned sailor would recognize. A gust of wind whistled over his ears, burning his cheeks for a moment. His deeply tanned skin had

weathered many voyages, so he stood silently, allowing the sensation to pass.

"Three degrees starboard," he said without shifting his gaze.

"Three degrees starboard, aye," came the reply.

"Hold new course for two hours."

"Two hours, sir. Aye, sir."

Captain Francisco Pizarro looked out over the deck of his great galleon, the *Asesino de mar*. The largest of the Spanish Armada, it had been given to Pizarro with a commission he'd prayed for his entire life. With a half dozen ships following his lead, he would sail to the new lands known as the Americas. After befriending the native population, he would load his ships with treasure beyond imagination and claim the lands in the name of his home, España.

He lifted his chin to check the men aloft. The sails seemed to be holding well enough. If they maintained their present speed and the winds didn't stiffen beyond the mainsail's capacity, they would make good time.

Placing his left hand on the hilt of his sword, he scanned the deck. The men busied themselves with their respective duties. To a man they kept their eyes from the quarterdeck. Pizarro had handpicked every one and instilled a healthy dose of fear and respect into all of them. They knew if he caught their eye he would deem them lazy and assign additional duties.

All looked to be in order. He inhaled deeply, enjoying the taste of the salty air.

"I'll be below. Disturb me only in case of emergency."

"Aye, sir."

After entering his cabin, Captain Pizarro pressed his shoulder against the warped oak door. He leaned forward until he heard the latch fall. Taking a key from the wide ring on his belt, he secured it, making certain no one could follow him.

Stepping down into his workspace, he removed his hat and tossed it aside. He shouldered his way out of the heavy captain's coat, draping it over the back of his chair. Before taking a seat at his desk, he drew his sword and scabbard and hung them on a hook next to the door. He made the sign of the cross above the hilt, asking his Holy Father to give him strength should he ever have to use it to take another life.

The ship pitched wildly as it careened over a huge wave, but he merely shifted his feet to compensate. To him, the surge in the seas was an answer to his prayer. God had used his mighty ocean to assure Pizarro of His care.

He removed a thick parchment from a case attached to the wall. After placing it on the table and unrolling it, he looked upon a map of the Americas and the seas surrounding the new lands. Using the tools of his trade, a mariner's quadrant and compass to plot his course, he calculated the distance from their current point to their destination.

Lowering his eyes, Pizarro ran his fingers through his thick, curly hair. "Seven months, at least," he said as he sat heavily in his chair.

A voice called out from the deep recesses of his cabin. "I can shorten the trip for you, if you wish."

Pizarro didn't look up. There would be no one to see. No other person, no human that is, occupied his quarters. Even so, he knew the voice well.

"No," he said. "We'll manage on our own."

"As you wish," said the voice. "You've done well, *so far*."

A chilled breath followed the last two words spoken by the spirit. The icy gust crept forward, sliding slowly down Pizarro's back.

The captain shrugged off the sensation. "Play your games, elsewhere, spirit, I have work to do."

"Don't give orders to me, Captain. If it weren't for my influence in the Queen's court, you'd have been decommissioned long ago."

"I've said my thanks," said Pizarro. "You'll get what you want, whatever it is. Leave me to my work."

"I need only your assurance that my orders will be followed after we reach our destination."

"I must satisfy my Queen's commission. Afterward my army is yours to command."

"I care nothing for the gold you seek," said the spirit, hatred coating his words like hot wax around a wick. "You would not be sitting here, or commanding this fleet without me, Captain. Never forget what I've done for you."

"I haven't, and I won't. Now leave me be."

The spirit gazed at the creature sitting before him. He wanted to burn Pizarro, fry his skin so he could hear the terrifying screams that fueled his evil presence. He would strap the insolent captain to the bowsprit of his vessel during a violent storm, watching eagerly as he slowly gagged and drowned.

The thoughts of doing away with his latest servant gave him strength he hadn't felt since Vipero had failed him. Victory had been within his grasp, but Magnifico and his guide had snatched it away. For that they would pay a horrible price.

The spirit dampened his desire to annihilate Pizarro. He needed the fool a while longer, so he melted into the bulkhead behind him, enjoying the strength of the sea.

If only I could control the oceans. He would hurl a wave the size of an island at the captain's tiny fleet, smashing the boats into kindling. Then he would pour the might of the sea over and through the lands of the new world. The guide's people would be wiped away in one swift stroke.

"Continue your mission, Captain."

Pizarro didn't answer. For a second time he made the sign of the cross, this time gliding his finger across the beaded cloth of his uniform. His hand shook with the movement.

Lifting his index and middle fingers to his lips, he pressed them lightly against the soft skin. He closed his eyes, asking for protection for his wife and children.

He rolled up his maps, gathering them together neatly before returning the parchments to their secure hold. He walked a few steps,

holding an overhead beam when a wave threw the ship portside. Standing with his feet wide before a wash basin, he dipped his hands into the cool, fresh water. He rubbed his face briskly before grabbing a rough cloth coated with soap. He dipped it, applied it to his face, then rinsed again. Without looking, he yanked a towel from a worn, brass ring. Finally satisfied, he ran his eyes up the wall and caught his expression in an oblong mirror.

His face showed what he expected, the rough, tanned skin of a life at sea. The hair, still thick and wavy, had accepted a few gray strands before the Asesino de mar set sail, but he could still summon the fierce scowl that had beaten back many a belligerent crew.

He blinked, staring at his eyes. At one time they'd glistened with a dark golden hue so brilliant even men fell under his spell. Women had no chance, even his beautiful Juliana. She'd fallen for him at their first meeting, although she played to his attentions with the perfect tone of detachment. He smiled, his mind drifting, and then caught his eyes in the mirror again. They had faded during the voyage, as had his faith. Always a man of unshakable belief in himself, his choices, and his savior, Captain Pizarro's insides had shriveled since the Asesino de mar set sail. The pale lifelessness of his eyes showed the sickness in his soul.

He wanted to pray, but the words wouldn't come. His sin would separate him from his faith for all time. He wondered how terribly God would punish him for striking a deal with a fallen angel.

Present Day

"It's the first light of dawn," said Racquel.

"The dawn of a new age," added Diego.

Beyond the small range of hills lay the Pacific Ocean, the gateway to the Americas over five centuries ago. The sky overhead still wore its midnight hue, but the horizon in the west had begun to cheer a little. The deep, reddish coloring preceding the sun's first kiss glowed on the hilltops like the embers of a freshly lit fire. Diego squeezed Racquel's hand, preferring the gesture to a spoken word. He glanced sideways without moving his head and noticed her breathing deeply with her eyes closed.

"You might not be able to enjoy it if you don't run home this minute," said Sullivan. He'd approached so silently neither Diego nor Racquel had heard him. The two teenagers looked around and saw him, hands in his pockets, staring at the ever lightening horizon.

"Your parents will be up and about in no time. I'd give good odds the first thing they'll do is check your bedrooms to wish you good morning."

Racquel's eyes went wide. "My bedroom? I haven't slept there in months!"

Diego looked at Sullivan and smiled.

"If I were you, I'd go now," said Sullivan. "Find your way to your room without disturbing anyone. Pull the covers up and nestle

them around your neck. Remember what it feels like to sleep in a soft bed."

"And when my parents charge into my room asking a hundred questions at once?"

Diego turned his smile toward Racquel.

"What's with the silly grin?"

"C'mon," said Diego. "Let's go."

"I'll take Racquel home," said Sullivan. "You live right up the street, but she'll need a little help."

"Alright," said Diego, turning to Racquel. "Text me in a while. Let me know what happens."

"Okay," she said, puzzled. She looked up and met Sullivan's eyes. They looked kind but worn. When he smiled at her the lines beside his eyes stood out.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "I want to go home."

Sullivan pulled his hands from his pockets as he strolled away from the horse club. He looked like a man taking a carefree walk by the ocean. Racquel fell in step beside him, looking at the light dancing on top of the hills.

A lone car turned a corner at the far end of the street. As he did every morning at dawn, the driver stopped every half block, hustling an armful of newspapers toward various homes. Half asleep and focused on his job, he barely noticed the man and the young girl walking toward him. If he'd worked a normal shift, or if he'd slept

more than a few hours the night before, he might have noticed when the two strangers vanished into the misty dew of the morning.