

AN EXTRACT FROM *VAMPIRATES 6: IMMORTAL WAR*, BY JUSTIN SOMPER

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The ancient offices of Mizzen, Mainbrace, Windvane and Splice, “lawyers to the pirate community, by appointment to the Pirate Federation, since 2015”, were located at the top of a cliff and took the form of the upper three decks of a pirate galleon, which had been braced directly onto the rock itself. The impression was of a ship sailing - indeed flying - right off the peak into the bay far below. The main conference room of the famous maritime firm of solicitors had once been a pirate captain’s cabin and possessed floor-to-ceiling windows. Once these windows had given out onto a seeming infinity of ocean; now they afforded a queasily vertiginous view down the cliffs.

It was before these windows that old Mr Mizzen currently stood, his back turned – though with no intention of rudeness – to the other inhabitants of the room. Mr Mizzen’s still keen aquamarine eyes travelled from the similarly coloured waters of the bay below up to the ticking clock on the conference room wall. There was reassurance to be found in the tick and the tock, but also a warning. Old Mr Mizzen was under no illusion – the clock was always ticking. Whether fate decreed that one was gently eased out of this life by natural means or snatched from it in the cruellest terms possible - as Molucco Wrathe had been - it was advisable to make the necessary preparations for that final voyage.

A not entirely discreet cough sounded close by Mr Mizzen’s right ear. A sudden arctic chill caused the profusion of white hairs protruding from said ear to stand up on end. Turning away from the window, Mr Mizzen saw that he had been joined by Trofie Wrathe. The glamorously intimidating deputy captain of *The Typhon* was dressed from head to toe in black. A lace veil – patterned with skulls - covered her face, while her legendary golden hand was, for the moment at least, encased in a long black glove, as was her other, regular, hand. It

was not uncommon for visitors to wear black to attend these offices – but though *de rigueur* for funerals, it was not required for the reading of a will. Even through her veil, Trofie Wrathe's penetrating stare caused Mr Mizzen's old eyes to smart a little. She raised an eyebrow inquisitively before asking in her distinctive accent.

“*Must* we wait any longer?”

“I'm afraid we must, Madam Wrathe. It is a matter of some importance that we do not begin the reading of your brother-in-law's will until *all* the beneficiaries have arrived.”

“*Who* exactly are we waiting for?” she asked. “Don't they know that time is short? There's a war on, in case you'd forgotten!”

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Just then, there was the sound of footsteps out in the corridor. Trofie stopped pacing and turned towards the door. Mr Mizzen's eyes travelled in the same direction, as the door opened and the young and breathless Mr Splice entered the room, nodding reassuringly at his superior whilst holding open the door and addressing someone out in the vestibule.

“Please, come this way. The others are waiting in here.”

All eyes turned towards the open doorway.

A figure stepped into the room then paused, turning to face the others.

“I'm so sorry we kept you waiting,” said Catherine Morgan, Molucco's deputy captain, most often known as Cutlass Cate. Her trademark russet hair brought to mind a dramatic sunset.

“It's good to see you again, Cate,” boomed Barbarro Wrathe, rising to greet her. Taking her arm, his fingers briefly brushed the black armband she had sported for the past several months. She was a woman in mourning too, but not, primarily, for Captain Molucco Wrathe.

Releasing Cate's hand, Barbarro indicated the chair which lay vacant between himself and Ma Kettle. Nodding and smiling politely at the others, Cate took her seat, as Trofie sighed with relief. But, as the captain's wife adjusted her skirt, she had a sudden realisation. Cate had said, "Sorry *we* kept you waiting..."

As she thought this, a young man strode through the door. A man of equal years to her own son but whose journey had been charted across far different waters. It was Connor Tempest – the shipwreck victim who had become a pirate but, more than that, the closest thing Molucco had had to a son. Their relationship, like so many of Molucco's, had hit the rocks and ended when Molucco burned Connor's articles. Yet here he was, as dependable as the tide, come to take his seat beside the others. Smiling minimally, Trofie turned to face the front.

"Connor." It was Ma Kettle who spoke first. "Of course. We should have guessed you'd be here."

Connor looked awkward as he stepped into the room, hovering before the others as if recognising that he was the last and least welcome guest.

"Mister Tempest," said Mr Mizzen, lifting his eyes from Mr Splice's excellent notes. "I believe there is a spare chair for you, to the right of Miss, er, Pie. Please sit down and we will commence our business."

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"I, Molucco Osborne Mortimer Wrathe, being of sound mind and disposition..."

A cackle from Ma Kettle caused Mr Mizzen to pause and glance up from the scroll of paper in his hands. "Sound mind and disposition! That doesn't sound like the man *I* knew these three-score-years-and-ten."

Mr Mizzen smiled indulgently then began again. "I, Molucco Osborne..."

“Wait!” Trofie Wrathe raised her right hand and, as Mr Mizzen glanced up once more, she removed her black glove. The solicitor found himself momentarily dazzled by the sight of her burnished gold fingers and shimmering ruby fingernail. Seizing her advantage, Trofie spoke. “I’m sure no one would mind if you skipped some of the unnecessary formalities and cut to the chase.” A row of shocked faces turned towards her, but Trofie was unabashed. “As I said before, there *is* a war on.”

“War or no war,” answered Mr Mizzen, “certain ceremonies must be observed.”

Now Barbarro entered the fray. “My wife has a point,” he said. “We are somewhat late beginning and several of us are due at the Pirate Academy for a Council of War this evening.” Barbarro glanced carefully at Cate, then back to Mr Mizzen. “I think we all want to ensure that we leave here in good sailing time.”

“Very well,” said Mr Mizzen with a sigh. “I shall, as you say, *cut to the chase.*” He observed his audience through his spectacles with cool detachment. “Who gets what. Of course, that’s what you all came to find out.”

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The solicitor scanned Molucco’s will once more then resumed reading with renewed vigour. Barbarro wondered whether he was imagining it or if Mr Mizzen was actually trying to impersonate his dear departed brother.

“My ship, *The Diablo*, has been my home for many years – one of the few constants in my life. I have thought long and hard as to who should be the heir to my ship and I have decided to entrust it to my nephew, Moonshine Wrathe.”

All three attendant Wrathe’s listened carefully as Mr Mizzen forged on. “Moonshine, I hope this ship is the making of you as a pirate captain. If rigging and cannon and old deckboards could talk, this old galleon would have plenty of tales to tell under my captaincy

and - I've no doubt - under yours too! Take good care of her, my boy. I trust you will make me proud."

"Thanks, Uncle Luck," said Moonshine breezily. "Though I'd have preferred a ship that wasn't in Vampire hands..."

"Presumably," Trofie interrupted, lifting her veil as she addressed Mr Mizzen, "the ship comes with a significant financial bequest?" Her ice-blue eyes bore into the lawyer's.

"No doubt all will be revealed as we proceed," said Mr Mizzen firmly, turning from her. He was enjoying himself now, back in his stride.

"To Cate Morgan, who has served with me in varying capacities for the majority of her maritime career and proved herself to be one of the finest piratical minds of her generation. To Cate, I leave fifty thousand, but with a small condition attached. I have gifted *The Diablo* to my nephew Moonshine and it is my hope that this ship will be the making of him - but timber and sailcloth alone cannot accomplish a task of this magnitude. Cate, I had the great privilege to know you as my deputy aboard *The Diablo*. Now I ask you to resume that position, as deputy to Moonshine, for a period of three years. That should be sufficient to give him the support and grounding he needs. I hope you might stay on for longer than that but, even if you choose not to, at the end of the three years, my gift of fifty thousand will be yours."

Barbarro laughed. "I'm sorry, Cate," he said. "I'm not laughing *at* you. Just thinking how my brother was an inveterate deal-maker to the very end."

"And beyond," Cate said. She could feel both Trofie's and Moonshine's eyes upon her. No doubt, they were trying to read her thoughts and emotions. She studiously avoided glancing their way, looking instead directly at Mr Mizzen.

"May I take some time to consider this proposition?" she asked.

Mr Mizzen nodded. “Captain Wrathe allowed for that. He knew that you would want to weigh up the pros and cons.”

“Pros and cons!” snapped Trofie with irritation. She felt her husband’s warning touch. It drew out some of her sting. “Well, really! He’s given her a fortune and all she has to do is mentor our son.” Barbarro was silent but reflected that, in Molucco’s position, he might have upped the ante still further to sweeten the deal.

“To my dear brother Barbarro,” Mr Mizzen continued, “I leave you... nothing.”

*Nothing.* The word seemed to ricochet around the conference room. The tension and surprise was almost audible.

“I leave you nothing,” repeated Mr Mizzen, “because you are as wealthy as me in your own right and there are others who will benefit far more from a leg-up. I trust you will not think ill of me on this account. Brother Barbarro, it was one of the deepest sadnesses of my life to lose our brother Porfirio. And one of the greatest joys to be reunited with you in the twilight of my days. We wasted so much time. I learned the lesson, but a little late, that blood is thicker than all the oceans.”

As Mr Mizzen paused to draw breath, Trofie inquired, “Is there a personal message to me?”

“Only this,” said Mr Mizzen pointedly, as he cleared his throat and found his place once more. “My precious family, my dear, dear friends, if you have been doing your sums – and knowing certain amongst you, no doubt you have – you will know that there is still the whale’s share of my fortune to apportion. My accountants can confirm the total sum, though I estimate it to be in the region of...”

“Twenty-eight million!” Trofie finished the sentence for him.

“Twenty-eight million, eight hundred thousand,” corrected Mr Mizzen with a smile. “And I am passing on this wealth, which I have built over many years and all seven of the oceans, to my friend, Connor Tempest.”

All eyes turned to Connor. Both Moonshine’s and Barbarro’s faces registered surprise. Trofie looked in urgent need of medical help. Ma Kettle was smiling, as was Sugar Pie. Cate’s expression was harder to decipher. As for Connor himself, he had no idea how to respond to what he had just been told. When he’d been asked to come to this office, he had expected to leave with a token gift - if that. His last meetings with Molucco had been awkward and the captain had left him in no doubt that any relationship they had once enjoyed was now over. Yet, according to Mr Mizzen, he was about to inherit nearly thirty million. The figure was so far beyond his reality that his brain was simply numb.