

An Easy Victory

“Sound the cannon!” cried Cate. The attack was on. Now *The Diablo* was alongside the target ship. Cannonfire signalled the raid had begun and the sound of grinding metal signalled that the grids the pirates called the “three wishes” had swung down from above to make bridges onto the container ship. Connor had not yet cured his fear of heights and his heart did a familiar somersault as he heard them descend, anticipating his imminent run across the wishes, high above the water. Mercifully, it all happened quickly, and today, there was further compensation in the relative gentleness of the ocean.

“Fours – go!”

The instant the wishes were near horizontal, the teams of fours raced heavy-footed across them. These were the teams of muscle – mostly grown men, including Bart – who began the attack by swirling their broadswords and inducing fear and apparent chaos on the other deck.

“First eights – in!”

Cate’s cry signalled the movement of three teams of eight rapier and épée bearers across the metal grids. These were the first flank of precision fighters. Though the broadsworders appeared more fearsome, it was the first eights who posed the deeper threat. As Cate had once told Connor, using her épée was like “fighting with a needle”. If that needle pierced a human target in the right spot, it would puncture a vital organ and trigger a slow painful death from the inside out. Jez was the last of the first eights, ahead of Connor.

“See you on the other side!” he cried to Connor as he jumped onto the wish.

The 4–8–8 formation in which the pirates of *The Diablo* launched their attack on the container ship was one of Cate’s favourite and most successful manoeuvres. It was her preferred mode of attack on a medium-sized craft, such as the current target, and involved sixty pirates, divided into three teams, which then further sub-divided into 4–8–8. Each pirate in the second team of eight was paired with one in the first – the second acting as a back-up to the more experienced and accomplished fighter. Today, Connor would act as Jez’s back-up. They’d been working as a pair during every attack for the past eight weeks and Connor was learning a lot from his good friend and mentor.

“Second eights!”

The head of Connor’s team made the cry and now the teams of second eights flew across the wishes to join the battle. Connor was the last of his team. Again he thought back to his first attack, when Cheng Li had nudged him forward. Now, Cheng Li was gone and there was just his

own will to push him on. Taking a deep breath, Connor leaped onto the wish and ran into the fray. Now it was all about instinct and timing and precision. Now Connor Tempest inhabited not just the clothes of a pirate but a pirate's skin and soul. As he let out a cry and drew his rapier from its sheath, he felt the blood pumping through his veins. He felt truly alive.

As Connor raced through the melee aboard the container ship, he saw that Jez was running rings around two of the opposing ship's crew. They were dressed head to toe in black and brandishing curved swords with sharp outer edges, which Connor recognised as scimitars. To be brandishing such weapons, he realised that the cargo of the container ship must be precious indeed. The stakes of today's battle would be high.

"Welcome aboard!" Jez greeted Connor, with a laid-back smile. "Come and meet my new friends!"

At the sight of Connor – charging forward, rapier in hand – the two crew members promptly surrendered, dropping their scimitars to the deck.

"An excellent decision, my friends," Jez said, beaming. "Connor, keep them under guard here. I'll be back in a flash."

"No problem," Connor said, standing in the ready position with his rapier covering both men. This was not the end of the battle. He'd been caught out before and he knew that one slip mid-combat could result in a very different result at the end of the fight.

He did, however, allow himself a quick glance across the deck. The attack seemed to be going in their favour. Although the defending crew were well-armed, they seemed to be insufficiently skilled at fighting techniques, and the pirates of *The Diablo* had them on the defensive with Jez's manoeuvre repeated all over the deck. The container ship's crew were brought to the centre of the deck, their scimitars dropping like pine-needles onto the boards. Connor felt flushed with pride. *The Diablo*, under the instruction of its new deputy captain, Cate, was truly an elite fighting machine.

Connor looked into the eyes of his captives. "Always watch your opponent's eyes," Bart had once told him.

"The sword can lie, but the eyes don't." During past attacks, he'd grown used to reading the fear in his prisoners' eyes. This was the part of the operation he found the hardest to deal with. Bart and Jez had told him that this would change in time.

"There's nothing wrong in it," Jez had told him. "It's good to remember that your prisoner is just another guy – just like me or you – another guy with mates and family and dreams of glory. It *only* becomes a problem if you let your guard slip for an instant and allow him back into the

ight.” Connor was already an experienced enough pirate to know that that wasn’t going to happen here. Careful not to let his captives out of his sight, he again cast his eyes swiftly around the deck. It looked like the battle was coming to a close. He could see Cate and Captain Wrathe circling the core of prisoners, all clustered around the mast at the ship’s centre. Further in the distance, Connor saw Bart and his team of broadsworders, guarding the periphery. Everything was under control. Now, just one important manoeuvre remained – the surrender of the defending captain. But where was the captain? Who was he – or she? All the pirates were dressed identically, with no distinguishing marks of rank. Why, Connor himself might be holding the captain captive. Connor watched his prisoners’ faces as he heard Molucco Wrathe call out.

“Captain, come and show yourself. Your ship has been boarded and I, Molucco Wrathe, of *The Diablo*, lay claim to your cargo.”

There was no response. Captain Wrathe’s words hung in the air like the residue of cannonfire.

Jez rejoined Connor. Connor turned to him, expecting his comrade to be smiling, but Jez’s face was serious.

“I don’t like this,” he whispered. “I don’t like this at all. It’s been too easy.”

“Easy is good, isn’t it?” said Connor.

Jez shook his head. “There’s easy, and there’s *too* easy. Something’s wrong.”