

**PEGLEG PERCY  
AND THE CHILDREN'S  
BOOK OF PYRATES**

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The title of this book is a misnomer. It's not really a proper children's book. For a start there are no pictures, except the one on the cover, and to be honest it's not a proper adult book either. Really it's for big kids like me, but by all means little kids too, just be prepared for the consequences. I just hope you like spiders.

And just in case you're wondering, any similarities between this book, great crested rhinoceroses, knitted tea cosies, your granny's favourite gladioli, or anything else whatsoever, including certain popular supernatural pirate movies are entirely coincidental. This book was written in 2003 before the aforementioned movies were released, and long before the neighbour's goat got into your granny's back garden...

## Chapter 1 - Dead Man's Bluff

*Remember the number one rule of gambling, children: you make the rules, and if you can't do that then cheat.*

*Children's Book of Pyrates*

'Bug-eyed clod-hoppers,' muttered pirate and general-purpose rogue Victor Bottlecrusher.

He glared at his final opponent across a small wooden table, and tried to shrivel the man with the power of his stare and the strength of his curses. The smoky atmosphere between them had been growing tense, and everyone else had wisely decided to retire from the game, leaving only two, their eyes locked in battle.

Yet the quitters hadn't gone far; they were still drawn to the contest, and they watched the two gladiators with a mixture of fascination and apprehension as the stakes grew ever more extreme. They perched warily on nearby benches; muscles tensed and ready for flight should the encounter to turn nasty, or indeed nastier.

Cuthbert Grimwald, the Fifth, glanced down at his cards and then turned his eyes back towards his opponent. He held a steady measured gaze despite his discomfort from sitting for so long on the tavern bench. The rough slats cut into his ample backside and his broad stomach was crushed up against the

edge of the table. The padding afforded by his luxurious velvet robe did little to help, but he had no intention of letting his discomfort show at this stage of the game, and he carefully regulated his breathing, allowing his facial muscles to relax, so that his flabby features betrayed no hint of emotion.

Victor Bottlecrusher reciprocated Cuthbert's stare with his one good eye, while the other, a glass one, seemed to be eyeing up the barmaid who was working on the opposite side of the busy tavern. He twisted his features into a snarl, an expression which many supposed was his natural state.

'It's your bid, Grimwald,' he growled, almost spitting his opponent's name.

Cuthbert raised an eyebrow but said nothing, then without breaking eye contact, he tossed another small stack of gold coins onto the glittering mountain of jewels and coins rising up between them.

'Call,' he said. He blinked slowly and deliberately then resumed his facial meditation.

Victor ground his teeth, generating a horrible screeching noise which made everybody wince except Cuthbert, who was too busy micro-managing his poker face to notice.

'You're bluffing,' Victor spat.

'Maybe,' Cuthbert replied tonelessly.

'Slippery merchants like you are devious to the end.'

'I deplore interjection, Mr. Bottlecrusher,' Cuthbert pronounced raising another eyebrow, 'but I feel obliged to point out that deception is the essence of the contest, and notwithstanding the demonstrable principles of play I decline to reveal whether I am bluffing on this occasion.'

'Those fancy words won't scare me, Grimwald. I've dealt with your sort before.'

'Of course,' Cuthbert said, 'yet it is possible that all this time I've been playing the game incorrectly. If so, I must apologize.'

'Enough!' Victor roared, banging a fist on the table, causing all the money and the attentive audience to jump a couple of inches. His glass eye rolled and aligned itself with his good one, adding extra intensity to his glare.

Cuthbert was unmoved by Victor's outburst, but the tavern bench had finally become intolerably uncomfortable, so he shifted his weight in search of a better position, grimacing as he struggled.

'Ah-ha!' Victor cried. 'I knew it! Bluffing, see.'

He turned to look at four characters sitting behind him. They were a decidedly motley crew, and they wore intensely malevolent expressions on their faces directed specifically at Grimwald. On cue, they produced toothless grins and nodded in agreement with Victor's words. Victor turned back to Cuthbert, certain of his own interpretation of the merchant's movement, and pushed his entire remaining collection of coins and jewels into the pile.

'I raise five thousand!' he declared triumphantly and his glass eye quivered.

The Rat and Flea is one of the most popular taverns in the port of Sujeira. Located in a prime spot on the dockside, the tavern captured a lucrative demographic of sailors who, after staggering drunkenly off their ships, staggered drunkenly into the tavern then rapidly found themselves unable to stagger anywhere else. Unsurprisingly, the tavern was an unruly place and wasn't for the fainthearted. Today it was as busy and as loud as ever, with crowds of sailors standing or sitting around, catching up with each other after their voyages.

In a corner of the tavern, away from the showdown between Victor and Grimwald, a second game of Dead Man's Bluff was underway. This particular match was a bit more cordial than Victor and Cuthbert's game, nevertheless the bets were no less valuable in their own way, although not what a gambling man would

usually expect to be playing for. Among the few conventional coins and gold rings, was a silver hook that apparently doubled as one player's left hand, several gold teeth, a treasure map, and a jewel encrusted fake ear. Four players sat around the table, dressed in the blue tunics, gold buttons, and pointed blue hats, recognisable as the style worn by merchant captains across the whole of the Heinish Archipelago. As they studiously studied their cards and ignored the raised voices and commotion from the other game, the waitress arrived and deposited four more flagons of beer on the corner of the table.

'That'll be four bits,' she said with a curious nasal tone.

The participants exchanged glances in the time honoured tradition of hoping someone else would pay before the awkward silence embarrassed each man into offering himself.

'All my money's there,' said the one armed player, nodding towards the pile of miscellaneous body parts.

'Mine too,' said another.

The waitress was uncompromising. 'Look gents,' she said. 'I don't care who pays. I just need four bits. If you still have trouble deciding, Bert over there can help out.'

The waitress looked over towards the bar and all the card players followed her gaze to observe a fine figure of a man standing behind the counter. Bert, who could have been described as the fine figure of six men if measured by normal standards, was busy drying a glass like all competent bar staff should. He noticed his audience and gave them all a cheerful smile and a wink that contained more implied menace than a whole brigade of soldiers.

The waitress turned back to the table. 'Shall I just take this four-bit coin off the table here and let you sort it out between yourselves then?'

The four men nodded dumbly, and the waitress smiled and walked away, coin in hand. The men sat

in silence for a moment, waiting for the waitress to move out of earshot.

‘Why’d you let her take from the pot?’ asked one of the men who was sporting a large quill in his hat-band.

‘Why are you blaming me? I didn’t see you protest,’ replied the one armed man.

‘You could’ve paid. It was your turn.’

‘It was not. I paid- last time we were here.’

‘That was two years ago. None of us can remember who paid back then.’

‘Come now, gentlemen,’ said the fourth merchant, holding a white clay pipe between his teeth. ‘Us men of the sea should not argue amongst ourselves over things like this. What is four bits to us; the scourge of the waves?’ He smiled warmly at his three colleagues while they stared back in a bemused silence.

‘You’re absolutely right, Percy,’ the quill wearer said, suppressing a smirk.

‘We should not cut each other’s throats for four bits,’ Percy continued. ‘We must save our energies for pillage and mayhem!’

‘Whatever you say,’ the quill wearer said in a soothing tone.

He and his friends had learnt that it was always best to humour Percy when he was in one of his moods, which was most of the time as it turned out. Percy was well known across the Heinish Islands as an eccentric, and he was the source of much mirth amongst the sailors and townsfolk. Percy was under the delusion that he was a pirate; a ruthless brigand who would show no mercy to anyone.

The unfortunate (or perhaps fortunate) thing was that Percy was, in fact, the worst pirate that had ever sailed the seas. For a start he was scared of blood and would pass out at the first hint of red. There was even a rumour that he had almost drowned after fainting and falling overboard when someone painted the railings of his ship cherry red by mistake. Secondly,

he was obsessively friendly and was completely incapable of hurting anyone.

Unsurprisingly, his warm and charitable nature was frequently exploited by less moral men, and he was completely oblivious to the ill will that others often showed him. Quite why he believed he was a ferocious pirate, yet would sail across the doldrums to return a lost wallet, was one of the enduring mysteries of contemporary seafaring. Yet the incongruities of his actions never dawned on Percy. He was, quite simply, as loopy as a coil of rope.

‘It’s my go isn’t it?’ Percy asked.

The others nodded, and Percy looked at his cards theatrically.

‘Oh dear, it seems I’ve run out of money,’ Percy declared, clicking his teeth against his pipe.

‘Well, fold then,’ the quill wearer said.

Percy sat and cogitated for a while, chewing his pipe.

‘No, no. I do have something else,’ he said.

He reached down and fished around under the table while the others looked on rather apprehensively, wondering what Percy had down there that he could use as a stake. Had they realized that a clue lay with the various things piled up on the table, then they would not have been surprised when Percy reappeared above the table holding his wooden leg.

‘You can’t use that,’ the one-armed merchant protested.

‘Why not?’ Percy asked offended. ‘This stake’s as good as any.’

‘It’s worthless.’

‘It’s low mileage,’ Percy argued.

‘Do we look like we need a false leg?’ the one-armed man asked.

‘Never hurts to be prepared,’ Percy added. ‘Besides, I might win.’

‘Oh, let him use it,’ the one eared man said.

One-arm sighed. ‘All right, but we’ll have to place

our cards this round.'

They all nodded in agreement since none of them had anything left to bet anyway. One by one, they all placed their cards on the table, and the quill man's eyes gleamed when he realized that he had won. He was the only player lucky enough to have all his body-parts in place, and his one-eared, one-armed and one-legged opponents sat watching him as he rose to his feet and gathered his booty together.

'So until our next meeting then,' he said to them all. 'In two years?'

The losers grunted a reply, and the quill wearer slapped Percy on the back.

'You really shouldn't spend so much time in the tavern, you know, Percy,' the quill wearer said. 'You know how easily you can end up legless.'

The man laughed as he strode from the tavern, waving Percy's leg like a fabulous trophy. Percy just smiled, quite happy to lose his leg in the spirit of fair play.

Cuthbert sat in silence and considered Victor's latest increase. It was large. Obviously Bottlecrusher was feeling confident, but then again Cuthbert himself had stretched his chances during the game and he couldn't give up now. He searched around inside his huge robe and produced an enormous red ruby, which he balanced carefully on top of the pile.

'Call and raise another five thousand,' he said dispassionately.

Victor stared in astonishment at the huge gem, and his glass eye quivered. The gem cast a magical pattern of red light over the gold and silver coins, and almost mesmerised the pirate. He wasn't an expert on precious stones, but he estimated that it must have been worth at least ten thousand pounds, easily doubling his own stake. Victor groaned inwardly, he didn't have anything left to bet, and if he couldn't match Cuthbert's stake then the merchant would win

the whole pile.

He searched his pockets, but he knew it was hopeless; all his gold and silver, including that of the henchmen behind him, was now piled up in the centre of the table. But then his hand fell upon another object in his pocket. He toyed with it for a moment before letting it go. He couldn't risk using it, since he didn't know for sure how deep his opponent's pockets were. The indications were that they were pretty vast within the recesses of the fat man's enormous robe.

'I can't match your bet Grimwald,' he said at last with a measure of contempt that might have chilled another man's heart.

Cuthbert was not fazed the by pirate's tone. 'Oh dear,' he began. His voice was almost mocking in its innocence. 'That is unfortunate. So do you fold?'

Bottlecrusher gritted his teeth; he had no choice but to surrender.

'You win, Grimwald.' The words grated past the pirate's teeth as though they had to fight their way out.

'That is very obliging of you Mr. Bottlecrusher,' Cuthbert said cheerfully, collecting his cards together but not offering to show them. He picked up the giant ruby and kissed it.

'This is my lucky charm,' he said, tucking it away inside his robe and patting the pocket.

'Hang on,' Victor said. 'I want to see the hand of cards that lost me all my money.'

'Oh, I don't think you'd want to see those,' Cuthbert replied shaking his head.

'Oh yes I do. Now show.'

'If you insist,' Cuthbert replied. He slowly spread out the cards and laid them on the table. Victor shook his head in disbelief when he saw that there wasn't a run or pair amongst them.

'I knew it!' he roared and grabbed his own hair. 'You slimy sea-slug! You did bluff me!'

Cuthbert shrugged and sorted the coins into little stacks. 'You know what they say; easy come, easy go.'

The henchmen had had enough of their captain's humiliation, and three of them surged forward to confront the merchant, but Victor raised his hand, suddenly calm.

'No, no, gentlemen. That wouldn't be courteous to our rightful winner now, would it?'

The men relaxed their aggressive postures a little and slid back onto their seats, although a cautious eye would note that they still resembled coiled springs.

'Come now, Mr. Bottlecrusher. It's been an interesting game, but now I must take my leave.'

'Not yet. Double or nothing,' Victor said emphatically, although he felt as if the words were somebody else's as they slipped out.

'Don't be ridiculous. You don't have anything left.'

'Just let me worry about that. Double or nothing.'

Cuthbert shook his head. 'I want to examine your stake before I agree to that,' he said. 'I'm not accepting I.O.U.s.'

Victor's mouth curled into a snarl, but nevertheless he reached into his tunic and produced a small wooden box. It was very ornate with a decorative grain, and it was strengthened with brass brackets and corner pieces. He unlocked it using a small silver key then handed the box to his opponent, who took it curiously and peered inside. Cuthbert's eyes widened as he realized the significance of what he saw within.

He stared at Victor. 'So,' he said, 'the rumours are true.'

Victor leant forward. 'Don't tell everyone,' he growled quietly. 'So, double or nothing or not?'

'Certainly,' Cuthbert replied, closing the lid, which locked with a quiet click. He balanced the box on top of the pile of riches. The player on Cuthbert's left, who had long ago resigned himself to just being the dealer, distributed the cards and watched the two men nervously.

One of Victor's comrades, the smallest amongst them, leaned forward and whispered in the pirate's ear, only to receive a biting admonishment.

'I know what I'm doing, Mr. Raven. If you can't hold your tongue go outside.'

The small man sat back down with a resigned look on his face and the two adversaries examined their cards. Cuthbert remained as impassive as ever, but a tiny, almost imperceptible flinch crossed Victor's face. The pirate suppressed it quickly, unsure whether Cuthbert had noticed, but he knew that the merchant was no fool. Victor asked the dealer to exchange two cards, and Cuthbert did the same.

'Well then,' Cuthbert said finally. 'What have you got?'

'You first,' Victor replied curtly.

'Oh no, my friend, you raised the bet, so you place your cards first.'

Victor's henchmen, who were able to see over his shoulder were growing edgy and were fidgeting in their seats. Victor calmly and confidently placed his cards face up.

'Four barrels, straight,' he said.

For a moment Cuthbert's expression was unreadable, but then he assumed an introspective air.

'Four large gold,' Cuthbert said finally, slowly laying his cards on the table.

Victor stared down at his opponent's cards and then at his own. His eyes grew wider and wider until it seemed that his glass eye might actually fall out.

'Cheating!' he bellowed, rising to his feet.

'How exactly?' Cuthbert asked innocently, looking up at the pirate. 'You haven't taken your eye- eyes off me for a moment.'

Victor considered this for a few seconds while his glass eye drifted inwards to examine the end of his nose.

'Great blubber-chewing flatfish!' Victor growled. He turned to the man who had dealt the cards. 'Then

*he* did it,' Victor spat, pointing viciously at the dealer. 'This mangy seadog must be working for you, Grimwald!'

The dealer shrunk back in his chair under the withering glare of Bottlecrusher.

'Don't be ridiculous, Mr. Bottlecrusher,' Cuthbert protested.

'Devious to the end! Lads.'

Victor's comrades responded eagerly to the signal to advance. They produced a variety of strange, but lethally sharp, implements from their clothing and moved around the table towards Cuthbert and the hapless dealer.

Raven, the man who had questioned Victor's prudence, seemed disinclined to participate in the slaughter and hovered at the rear. Yet even without Mr. Raven's help, there were quite enough sharp objects being waved around to frighten the dealer. The man leapt onto his chair and then dived across the room maniacally, bumping into chairs, tables, and other people, spilling drinks indiscriminately before stumbling out of the tavern door. Obviously, he rated his chances of survival against the other patrons more highly than he did with Bottlecrusher's hit squad.

Victor's men turned to follow the escapee, but the pirate stopped them.

'Leave him,' he barked. 'Grimwald is the man I want to see strung up! We should be able to wring a fortune out of his fat stomach!'

The henchmen grinned broadly and produced earthly laughter that would have chilled the blood of most people, yet Cuthbert seemed remarkably unconcerned for his personal safety and remained seated. He gathered his winnings into a large sheepskin bag that until now had been tucked beneath the bench. The henchmen were rather puzzled by this and hesitated. They had never dealt with a victim who had just sat and waited to be beaten into a jelly, and their small brains couldn't make sense of it; prey was

supposed to run.

'Get him!' Bottlecrusher growled and the men took another uncertain step forward. Cuthbert raised his hand calmly and several other men, who had been mingling unobtrusively amongst the anonymous groups of drinkers in the vicinity, suddenly turned and stationed themselves defensively between Cuthbert and his antagonists, brandishing pointy weapons of an even bigger calibre than Bottlecrusher's.

Outnumbered, Victor scowled and his comments degenerated into a string of meaningless expletives.

'Septic ulcerated- jelly-brained- stinking filth piles-rotting- sons of a motherless seabass!'

'Well, if you'll excuse me,' Cuthbert said, 'I'll let you wax lyrical alone.'

Victor recovered his composure slightly. 'Devious to the end. Take your winnings Grimwald, but beware; I won't forget.'

Cuthbert struggled to his feet, lifting his great weight with some difficulty. He closed the big bag and cocked his head to one side with a smile.

'I will look forward to our next meeting then,' he said smugly.

'Rest assured, it will be more enjoyable for me than you, Grimwald.'

'My dear Mr. Bottlecrusher, I hope you're not considering coming after me in your ship. I'm sure you know that I sail under the official protection of Prince Segulis. He would not be amused to hear that you had interfered with his favourite merchant.'

Cuthbert smiled again and then, still surrounded by his wall of protection, he navigated his way through the throng and left the tavern. Victor watched him go with growing fury, but was impotent against the merchant's guards. He slumped back onto the bench and hammered his fists on the table.

Raven whispered in the pirate's ear. 'That wasn't wise. Prince Segulis will be very angry that you have

lost the-'

'I know that you snivelling cod-faced pygmy. We're going to get it back.'

'How?'

Victor rubbed the stubble on his chin thoughtfully then grinned, displaying a row of chipped and broken teeth.

'You, Mr. Raven, are going to help me,' he growled, placing a firm hand his comrade's shoulder.

Percy sat on an old tar barrel outside the Rat and Flea and observed the bustling scene thoughtfully. He repositioned his hat, while a small black and white dog perched on his shoulder and licked his ear lovingly.

'You know, Polly,' he said to the dog, as the wooden roadway creaked under the weight of passing traffic, 'it's been a while since I've had such a good game of Dead Man's Bluff.'

The dog yapped enthusiastically, something that would have deafened a man not already mostly deaf in his right ear.

'Percy, please sit still,' asked a tall character with a finely chiselled moustache who was standing beside the barrel. 'Midge will end up putting it on backwards if you don't.'

Percy looked down at Midge, a heavily built man who was kneeling down and attempting to strap a new wooden leg to Percy's stump, which ended just below the knee.

'Sorry, Midge. Do carry on, old chap,' Percy said cheerfully, patting the big man on the shoulder. Midge, a man of very few words, nodded and carried on with his work.

'Do you know how many of these you have lost in the past year?' the tall man asked.

Percy thought about this for a moment then shook his head. 'I couldn't begin to imagine.'

'Seven.'

‘Really? Fancy that. How’d I lose that many?’

‘I can only guess that you have a God given talent, Percy,’ the tall man replied with resignation. He stepped aside as a short convoy of oxen-drawn wagons rumbled slowly along the wooden dock, laden with bails of straw piled so high that they blocked out the sun for a while.

‘There was that time, a few months ago, when a big dog thought my leg was a stick,’ Percy said reflectively. ‘He gave poor Polly a complex. I’m not sure you’re right though, Richard old chap, it doesn’t seem likely that it’s my divine purpose to spread happiness and joy by handing out my wooden legs.’

‘I wasn’t serious,’ Richard said, but Percy wasn’t paying attention.

‘They’re not particularly useful to anyone else,’ Percy continued, ‘although I suppose you could make a table out of them. You’d need four though.’

Richard shook his head with exasperation as two men wandered by and noticed Percy sitting on the barrel.

‘Ah, look, it’s Pathetic Percy the Pitiful Pirate,’ one of the men said, laughing. ‘How is the buccaneering leg-end these days? Get it? Legend?’

‘It’s good to see you hopping about again,’ the other called, exchanging laughs with his colleague.

Richard stepped forward and placed a hand on the hilt of his sword while Midge began to stand. The two jokers hastily disappeared into the crowds.

‘Ah, many a jest brightens the day,’ Percy said, unconcerned by the biting edge to the comments. Midge returned to his work, and Percy’s tall companion sighed, frustrated that Percy was just too good-natured to realize when a joke was actually at his own expense.

‘Why did you gamble your wooden leg on a game of cards?’ he asked.

‘I’d run out of money,’ Percy said indignantly, ‘and, besides, it seemed to be the theme.’

Nonplussed, Richard shook his head. Percy rubbed Polly's chin with his finger and then fed the little dog a cracker, which it crunched ravenously. The would-be pirate smiled at his friend.

'Come Richard, do not be so glum. Do I look glum that I have lost a trivial piece of wood? As surely as a tree grows has our stout Midge attributed me with a new appendage.'

Percy hopped off the barrel and tried out his new leg. He walked a few steps this way and that and pushed his weight onto it.

'A grand job!' Percy said and he danced a little jig.

Remarkably, Polly the dog remained balanced on Percy's shoulder during all this, but his master's dance was brought to an abrupt halt when the end of the leg wedged in a large knothole, and he had to pull hard to free it.

Undaunted, Percy clapped his friends on the back.

'Let us prepare for the morrow,' he continued. 'We have a few days before our next employment, so let us scour the coves and inlets along this shore for bounty and adventure!'

Richard raised a doubtful eyebrow as Percy strode off down the dock. Midge tossed the sack of spare wooden legs over his shoulder and followed the others. Unlike his friends, he easily forged his own path through the crowds since not many people wanted to bump into someone who had a fair chance of beating a mainmast in a tug of war.

A forest of masts is an enduring feature of a port town and Sujeira was no exception. It was the busiest port on the island of Bedasilha, and it had developed along the shore of a large circular bay formed by two mountainous headlands, which curved round, leaving a broad entrance enigmatically known as The Pincers. A castle stood on each of the headlands, intended to guard the harbour and town from enemy ships, and the formidable defences had proved their worth many

times, fending off the advances of hostile pirates and navies alike.

A dense array of higgledy-piggledy houses and shops stepped down the steep side of the bay, eventually reaching a broad, dockside road that ran along the shore. A long line of piers jutted into the water from the dock road, and they were always crammed with tall ships of all sizes. The ships were often moored so close together that their yard-arms jostled for space, and the crew of one ship had to climb across the deck of another to reach the jetty or, indeed, cross from ship to ship by leaping between the rigging.

The jetties were wide enough for three wagons to fit abreast, and both day and night they were crowded with men, wagons and horses, loading and unloading ships from across the Heinish Islands and beyond.

Chains of muscle-bound stevedores manhandled barrels and chests, carrying them up and down the gangplanks with apparent ease and tossing them, like sacks of goose-feathers, onto the waiting wagons or into the cavernous holds of the fat cargo ships.

Cargo that was too heavy for the stevedores was lifted using great pulleys and capstans. The wooden cranes creaked and strained, moving loads between the wagons and ships, either to be despatched all over the island or taken on the next leg of the journey across the oceans.

For many years, the dock had also supported a colony of woodpeckers. The birds, deluded by some curious mental aberration, believed that the masts were a forest, and after harvesting acorns from real trees nearby, they were content to roost on the yard-arms and hammer acorns into holes in the woodwork. The woodpeckers had become such a tradition that sailors believed that it was a lucky blessing to carry a crop of acorns across the sea. The birds however, had never quite grasped the concept of ships as moving objects and many a confused bird had discovered that its lunch, hammered lovingly into a ship's mast, had

disappeared.

Sujeira was also Cuthbert Grimwald's homeport, and he had lived in the town for many years. He was from a long line of merchants and had inherited a small fleet of ships from his father, Cuthbert Grimwald the Fourth.

Astute at business, Cuthbert the Fifth had earned huge amounts of money delivering only the finest goods, like gold, jewels, and the kinds of prestigious, luxury items that many households desired to set them apart from their neighbours. He was not in the least bit interested in the types of cargo that his fellow businessmen were forced to carry just to earn a living. Cheap wine, livestock or ore were derisible to Cuthbert, and he had managed to corner virtually the entire market in luxury goods and was the envy of his peers.

Cuthbert's success was largely due to an intensive program of wining and dining the nobles and men of power in the cities across the Heinish Islands, and he often managed to do this without any cost to himself. There were rumours of certain underhanded tactics involved in his business negotiations although nothing had ever been proved by his rivals. His marketing drives meant he had to travel continuously, using his own ships as transport, but this enabled him to keep an eye on his captains, dissuading any who felt like wandering off with his precious cargo.

Cuthbert stood on the forecandle, at the bow of his flagship, and surveyed the busy scene below. The crew was loading the hold with the finest silks; a cargo that he had managed to win after the supplier received an offer he couldn't refuse. Cuthbert looked down at the jetty and saw his captain talking with some other men.

'Graves,' he called impatiently, 'have you selected the crew replacements yet? I don't wish to miss another tide. I have appointments on Preguisila in a

week.'

'I'm doing it right now, sir,' the Captain replied, cursing under his breath. He scrutinised the men who were lined up before him, all hoping for a job on Cuthbert's ship.

'Well, you heard Mr. Grimwald,' he said. 'We have a hard voyage ahead, across some treacherous water, so I don't want any landlubbers in disguise messing things up.'

The men sucked in their stomachs and tried to look tough, although the diverse selection of tatty and dirty clothing conspired to make them look more like an army of clowns.

'I recognize some of you wastrels,' the Captain continued, 'but others, I'm not sure about.'

He walked along the line of men and stopped.

'You,' he said, prodding a man in the chest. 'What's your name?'

'Raven, sir,' the man replied, privately cursing Bottlecrusher for losing the merchandise and forcing him to infiltrate Grimwald's crew. He had better things to do than rush around sorting out Bottlecrusher's foolish screw-ups.

'What experience do you have?' Graves asked.

'Merchant sloop, ten years,' Raven replied, making up his answer on the spot.

'Which one?'

'The Annabel, sir.'

The Captain let out a cough. 'The Annabel! She sunk, with all hands I believe.'

'Not all hands, sir,' Raven said, basing his answers on scraps of conversation he had overheard whilst in the town. 'About five of us survived.'

'It wasn't you that caused the sinking now, was it?'

'Of course not, sir. I am a good sailor. One of the elephants stuck its tusks through the hull.'

'Elephants?' Graves replied incredulously.

'Yes, sir.'

'How in all the Six Seas do you get elephants on

board ship?' Graves asked.

Raven had not overheard the answer to that one. 'It's a long story,' he said.

Graves shrugged. 'Very well.' He looked along the line of men again. 'How many of you have mended sails before?'

A few men raised their hands.

'Fair enough,' he said. 'Well, I guess you will all have to do. Sign in, and you four with sail mending experience are to see the Bosun at once. The rest can help with the loading. We will be under sail before sundown.'

The Captain marched up the gangplank, leaving the men to their work. Raven joined the chain of workers lifting the sacks of silk. A woodpecker swooped low overhead, and he watched it as it circled the ship then landed on the mizzenmast, looking for an appropriate but untimely place to secrete an acorn. Captain Graves and Grimwald appeared on the fo'c's'le. The merchant began talking to the Captain animatedly although Raven was too far away to hear. Raven tried to imagine where Grimwald would have hidden the small wooden box. It seemed likely that he would keep something so valuable very close, perhaps within those huge robes that he wore to cover his enormous bulk. Raven knew that he would need to plan the recovery very carefully.