

The Pirate of Panther Bay

By S.R. Staley

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Isabella stormed into her cramped cabin of the *Marée Rouge*¹, letting the door thump wildly.

How could this have happened? Everything seemed lost. And she hadn't even begun. Her first command of a pirate ship and she let her first prize blow up out from under her! What would her crew do, now? Would they question her leadership? She needed to do something, quickly. She began a frantic pace before the powder-stained windows carved out of the ship's stern.

Two bodies tumbled into the room just seconds behind her. A short, gangly man looked around as if expecting someone to jump or bludgeon him. The larger man discretely latched the cabin door shut. The closed door seemed to give him confidence. He straightened his shoulders and lifted his face forward. The short one stood, holding a jumble of papers and envelopes. Unsure of what to do, his eyes darted nervously from place to place. They stood, quietly, watching Isabella pace.

The *Marée Rouge* heaved over the afternoon swells. The ship's wake churned any remaining links to her prey, the 32-gun frigate *Ana Maria*, off into a fading horizon. How could she have let this prize slip away? God, what would Jean-Michel think?

¹ Translation (from French): Red Tide.

Isabella ran her fingers through locks of hair matted by salt water and smoke. She looked out the window as white caps rose and fell outside her cabin. Isabella smirked at the thought of how well they seemed to match her mood. The sea always seemed to rise and fall with her moods. She felt free—liberated—each time she cast her gaze into the swells.

“Where is he?” Isabella barked.

The two men standing anxiously in front of her exchanged surprised glances.

“Mr. Stiles,” she asked again looking menacingly at the short one, her frustration feeding a new wave of impatience. “Where is he? Where’s the boy?”

“Err...boy?” the gangly man sputtered. If Isabella had cared to look closely enough, she would have seen his indignation. After all, Stiles, like the rest of the crew, knew Isabella wouldn’t be commanding this pirate ship at the tender age of eighteen if she hadn’t inherited it from her lover. Stiles bristled at her attitude.

“The prisoner!” Isabella demanded, impatience mounting with the spray on the cabin windows. “Where is he, Stiles? You’re the quartermaster, right? Aren’t you keeping track of our prisoners?”

Stiles shifted thin, oblong feet uneasily. “Below with the spare shot,” he said finally, lifting his chin from his chest. His British accent was unusually thick. Exhaustion was eating away at him as he tried to collect his thoughts. “We’ve got him bound up good; he ain’t going’ no where soon. Let the sergeant o’ arms take care o’im.”

“Don’t let him nod off,” she ordered, still looking out the window. “I’ll want to talk to him.”

Isabella took a deep breath, hoping to ward off a shudder creeping up through her legs. She needed to control her emotions—she couldn’t show weakness. Her crew followed her because she was steadfast and fearless in battle. That’s what Jacob had taught her. She couldn’t show weakness. Not now. Not ever. She couldn’t let Stiles—or Jean-Michel—consider the thought she couldn’t lead this crew, this ship to victory. She could. She had to. She had her

destiny. Her mother had told her the prophecy. She remembered the night she heard it—near the fields, the smell of sugar cane sifting like perfume through the small cluster of wood huts on the plantation. It seemed like yesterday in her dreams. How could she doubt it? But, the *Ana Maria* was lost...

Isabella absorbed the roll of the sea. It was soothing now, a quaint antidote to the death and mayhem of the past few hours. God, she needed someone to talk to. How could Jacob have left her with this ship so unprepared, so vulnerable? And what of Jean-Michel? What could he be thinking after this? He should really be in command, not her. Why did she still feel she needed *them*?

“Why did we lose the *Ana Maria*, Mr. Stiles?” Isabella asked quickly, “what caused the explosion?”

“Don’t know ma’am,” Stiles said, struggling to keep calm.

“Hah,” she smirked, still looking out the windows. “Some quartermaster! Aren’t you in charge of the prisoners and cargo?”

“Aye, ma’am,” Stiles stammered, “but, I’m not the ship’s boatswain. We barely had time to get the manifest and charts.” A stack of papers and envelopes fell from his arms to the thick oak tabletop separating Isabella from her ship’s officers. The desk provided a welcome buffer.

Isabella turned and found herself lodged up against the desk. Seized from an America-bound slave ship, it consumed the room. The side drawers held the ship’s manifests and stationery. A stark wood-frame chair served as a captain’s chair—her “throne” according to Jean-Michel. Two smaller chairs, stools with backs, sat idly between the men and the desk.

The space was suffocating, but its meager privacy somehow gave Isabella a workable distance from her new job. Compared to Jean-Michel’s quarters—a hammock strung across a cannon separated from the crew by a thin wood screen—her cubbyhole was a palace.

Isabella thumbed through the stack deposited by Stiles as the larger man patiently studied her. She paused at a formal set of papers and glanced at a Royal seal on the envelope. She slapped them together angrily and threw them down to the desktop. “Just as

I thought,” she muttered. Isabella turned toward the windows again and breathed deeply.

“*Qu’est-ce que c’est, mon capitaine?*” the larger man asked after a few more awkward moments. Isabella looked at him as if about to say something, then stopped. “*Rien,*” she said, shaking her head “no”.

“The *Ana Maria* was an unfortunate loss,” Jean-Michel continued, this time in English. Even after two decades at sea, his southern French drawl coated his words.

“Aye,” Isabella responded, still deep in thought.

Stiles and Jean-Michel waited another minute that seemed like fifteen. Isabella finally turned. Stiles looked disheveled and a bit off. His mood lacked the cool efficiency she saw on the deck of *Ana Maria*. Before the explosion. Before her swim back to the *Marée Rouge*.

“What’s on your mind Stiles?” she asked matter-of-factly.

Stiles hesitated. Her mood ebbed and flowed faster than a duel of equals. The quartermaster uneasily pulled his shoulders up, putting his head at risk in the low-hung ceilings. “Nothing ma’am,” Stiles said quickly. Too quickly for Isabella’s taste.

The humidity in the cabin was almost unbearable. Isabella turned and pushed open the windows. A breeze cleared the cabin. She drew in a deep breath. Even the smallest puffs of fresh sea air seemed to calm her, just like the fields of Hispaniola. Then, she couldn’t wait to break out of the huts and rush into the openness of the fields. Isabella smiled as she remembered how her mother would shake her head with the other elders. For them, the fields were a penance for an unjust crime. That seemed so long ago. She had come so far. Yet, now, she felt lost. The prisoner didn’t help matters. Pirates didn’t take prisoners, only hostages for barter, ransom, or “entertainment”.

Isabella placed her hands on the window frame and looked down at the swirling water. The ship was steady now, cutting cleanly into the waves. The rudder shuddered against the stiff current, its rhythm kneading Isabella’s tired arms as it accented the gentle creak of the ship. She was home. Why did she feel so alone?

Isabella turned back to Stiles and Jean-Michel. “We’ve sailed together for two years.” The comment raised an eyebrow from Jean-Michel. “Two and a half,” she corrected quickly. Her fingers browsed the pages of the manifest and unconsciously directed her eyes away from Jean-Michel. “Something’s on your mind, Mr. Stiles. Out with it.”

“Nothing, captain,” the quartermaster said firmly.

“You doubt me.”

“No! No, ma’am. It’s a bit different, but we’re ... I ... I’m ... fine with it.” Stiles shifted his weight. “This battle was different,” he added, as if he knew his first response wasn’t enough. “It was harder.” Stiles seemed incapable of stopping his free fall. “Odd in some ways.” Isabella looked at him puzzled.

“Our crew fought well,” Jean-Michel interrupted. “We captured the prize. That’s the important thing.”

“It’s a pity we couldn’t bring the *Ana Maria* home,” Isabella said, hoping a new tone might put Stiles at ease. She sensed some truth behind Stiles’s bumbling speech, and it gnawed at her. “The crew put up a good fight.”

“Aye,” Stiles acknowledged. “But, she didn’t carry much bounty.”

“Some prizes are richer than others,” Jean-Michel reminded him.

“There’s hardly anything in the manifest,” Stiles persisted. Jean-Michel looked at Isabella expectantly.

“We don’t know what she had on board,” Isabella noted. “She sank too fast.”

“She sailed from Cadiz four weeks ago,” Stiles said as if reading from the ship’s log. “The manifest lists dry goods, powder, guns, and a few packets for Viceroy Rodriguez. No gold or coin.”

“The best treasure is not always in the manifest,” Isabella pointed out. “We’ve found hidden gold, diamonds, and doubloons on these ships before.”

“Aye, Captain,” Stiles paused, as if that were the end of it, then said: “The men’ll be disappointed.”

“Maybe so, Mr. Stiles,” Isabella said. Was this all he was worried about? “But that’s why I have you. You keep things in perspective for the men, don’t you?”

Stiles opened his mouth to say something, but a glare from Jean-Michel gave him the discipline to stop. “Aye, captain.”

Isabella and Stiles looked at each other, trading awkward stares.

“So, Mr. Stiles,” Jean-Michel said finally, “what do you *think* caused the explosion? What sent our esteemed captain into the drink?”

The quartermaster shifted his weight again. His eyes darted about. “It was most likely a spark in the powder room.”

Not good enough, Isabella thought. “Were any of our men below decks at the time?”

“Don’t know for sure. We only have a count for the ones wounded in the battle.”

Isabella nodded. She was sure there was more to Stiles’s strange line of questioning. What was it?

“The *Ana Maria* would not have been much use anyway,” Jean-Michel observed. “We wouldn’t have been able to repair her forward mast. Besides, we seized two eighteen pounders. They’ll be fine additions to the cliffs over Panther Bay.”

Isabella thumbed through the manifest again. How many times was this? Three? Stiles stood patiently. Why didn’t he just come out and say it?

Isabella asked again: “What else, Mr. Stiles?”

Stiles paused. He shook his head, avoiding Jean-Michel’s eyes. He suddenly seemed to lose his self-discipline: “It’s the crew; they ain’t sure what’s goin’ on.”

“What do you mean,” she prodded, startled.

The quartermaster hesitated.

“Speak your mind. You’ve a witness here in Jean-Michel. There will be no retribution.” That’s another valuable lesson Jacob taught her.

Stiles looked at Jean-Michel. “The men don’t know why you took the prisoner.” Isabella sensed Jean-Michel’s eyebrows rise in silent agreement.

“That’s a fair concern,” Isabella admitted. How could she explain this? She wasn’t sure herself. She followed her gut, and it said this was an exception. She didn’t have time to think. The ship was sinking, and she had to salvage what should could. She knew this man needed to be saved...held. After all, he single handedly rallied the Spaniards in a counter attack. His presence was unmistakable. He had a power, a character, she had not seen among the Spanish before. He was a key. She just didn’t know to what.

“First,” she began, “as captain, I set the rules and enforce them. You know that; this is not an ordinary pirate ship. You are not an ordinary crew. You were hand picked. We operate under the shadow of Jacob. I am the captain. Jean-Michel is my lieutenant. I’m not elected by you or anyone else. Neither is Jean-Michel. You choose to follow or leave. So, you accept my decisions whether you like them or not.”

Stiles winced at the sharpness in her tone.

“Second, this prisoner is not ordinary. He was a civilian on a Spanish war ship. Don’t you think that’s odd? We’re at war with the Spanish Crown. It’s a fight we can’t afford to lose. We have our goal, but not a map. It’s a puzzle, perhaps even a riddle. This man is an important clue.” The explanation was unsatisfactory, but the best she could muster. She needed time to think. She was drawn to this prisoner—his courage, his purpose, his determination. It intrigued her. It frightened her. And she felt guilty. What would Jacob think? So soon after his death?

Stiles looked puzzled. “Why him?” he said at last. “He’s a boy.”

“I’m a girl,” Isabella retorted impulsively. She looked steadily into his eyes as if challenging him.

“No,” Stiles corrected calmly, “you’re my captain.”

She felt her face flush. She hoped her skin, darkened even more by the sun and open sea, would not betray her. She dared not show him how she felt. Not now. Especially not now. “Some

things are more important than bounty,” she said in a quick, steady voice.

“What’s more important than gold?” Stiles scoffed.

Isabella looked at him, unsure if he was serious. The quartermaster shifted his feet again. “The Spaniard’s taking up space and rations. He ain’t signed on. We ain’t sure o’ his future disposition.”

Isabella let the tension mount before answering. “Mr. Stiles, the boy’s disposition is my affair. And Jean-Michel’s. He’s secure below decks. Isn’t he? Saint John is less than two days sail with these winds; our rations are rich enough for one more mouth. We’ll decide what to do with him when we get to Panther Bay.” She stopped, then added: “The gallows still work, don’t they?”

“Aye, ma’am,” Stiles responded, clearly surprised at the suggestion the prisoner might be hanged.

“This civilian was given a special escort in the navy of King Charles III,” Isabella continued, hoping to finally satisfy Stiles. “I suspect the Dagos’ll make another attempt to secure their trading routes. The British and Americans are squeezing them even with the so-called revolution in the colonies. ‘Criminals’ such as us cost Spain far more during competitive times like these.”

The quartermaster still wasn’t convinced. She could tell.

“Fifteen more minutes on the *Ana Maria*’s deck, and the prisoner wouldn’t be here.” Her tone carried a finality that neither challenged. “That’s all for now, Mr. Stiles. Come back when you have a complete report from the boatswain. I want to know how and why the *Ana Maria* sank. I don’t care much for swimming in these waters. I want a complete report on our stores, munitions, and battle capabilities. Two days is long enough to meet another ship, and we need to be ready.”

“Aye, captain,” Stiles said crisply. He turned and walked out the door.