

Chapter Eleven

Blackfoot's final quest began from a little café in Lisbon in the year 1850. It began rather accidentally when Blackfoot and I were having our dinner in that little café. Next to us three gentlemen were earnestly discussing something while having their dinner. We overheard the tit bits of what they had been discussing so eagerly. It was clear from their conversation that those men were learned men having great knowledge of science, geography and history. They seemed to have access to the Portuguese royal palace because they talked of this grave responsibility which had been assigned to them by somebody in the royal court. Soon it came out that they were to retrieve Mayan treasure from undisclosed location. For epidemic and rumors of a destructive curse the Spanish conquistadors did not touch that particular Mayan temple almost two hundred years ago. However, they learned from the natives that there was hidden treasure somewhere around or inside that temple. One conquistador prepared a map showing the probable location of the treasure which the conquistadors speculated consisted of Mayan gold and in a letter to the Spanish royal court he wrote in details about the journey. Before the conquistadors could successfully complete their expedition this conquistador was stricken by a disease which had already wiped out almost the entire native population. Soon afterwards the conquistador who had drawn the map and commenced the expedition with blessings of the Spanish royal court capitulated to the disease and the expedition was abandoned. However, the map and the letter written to the Spanish court somehow found their way into the Portuguese royal court and from there these three gentlemen acquired those documents. They were definitely men of indiscreet nature whom pirates could easily exploit. One of the men was being addressed as Paulo; most probably he was the leader of this team. He was a bald headed sturdy looking man with long beards. All three wore spectacles. They talked of climate of their destination, the topography and

the kind of forest that they had to deal with. It was then that we heard about cannibalism in the Mayan and Aztec cultures. Finally they started discussing when it would be suitable for them to begin their voyage and at one point they came to a conclusion that it would take at least fifteen days for them to prepare for this long and dangerous expedition. Then Paolo showed to his companions the map they had been talking about; we assumed the letter written by the Spanish conquistador was also with him.

All this time we remained totally silent; we were focused on what those three gentlemen had been discussing. I could see in Blackfoot's eyes the savage aroused by the prospect of this expedition. I knew what he was about to do. As the three gentlemen left the café we followed them quietly. When they reached an isolated spot Black foot attacked the men from behind with his long sharp dagger, instantly killing one of them. I held the other with my dagger at his throat while Blackfoot turned his attention to the leader. He extended his right hand and made gestures that he wanted something. Paolo thought that we were after his purse, so very quickly he took out his purse but again when Blackfoot gestured that he wanted something else the man realized what we wanted. At first he handed over the map but when Blackfoot said that he knew the man had the letter of that Spanish conquistador too Paolo didn't take the risk of refuting Blackfoot's claim. Paolo and his companion were so shaken up by this incident that they didn't dare go after the assailants once they had left the scene. By the time they reported the incident to the Lisbon police Fat Mermaid had raised her anchor and unfurled her sails. It was a five hundred ton galleon with forty cannons ready to face anything that came between her and her new destination. Blackfoot assumed that their pursuers would shorten the time to prepare their vessel but even then it would take them at least ten days to set sail for Central America. So Blackfoot

and his men had a five days head start. This would give them enough time to locate and salvage the Mayan treasure and flee from the spot before their pursuers arrived.

Fat Mermaid reached the eastern coast of the Yucatan peninsula by the end of July. Blackfoot had chosen his quarter master Miguel to lead the expedition into the tropical rainforest while he remained alert in his vessel to face their pursuers if they arrived. He gave strict instruction to his quarter master to rendezvous with him exactly at the same point after returning from the temple. If Fat Mermaid was not there for some reason they were to hide in the forest along the coast and wait for her and in case of the presence of their pursuers, their revised rendezvous point would be five miles to the north from their previous position. Miguel was given fifty men for this expedition deep into the Mayan territory.

On the map the Mayan temple was one hundred twenty miles to the North West from Belize and about thirty miles from the eastern coastline of the Yucatan peninsula. The Spanish conquistador's letter gave description of the dangers faced by them two hundred years ago in that rain forest. There was no mention of any large predators in that part of the globe but the tropical rainforest was infested with numerous types of insects, mosquitoes and poisonous shrubs to venomous snakes. Existence of vampire bats and cannibals posed another danger to outsiders but with plenty of weapons Miguel and his men felt pretty secured against any such threat. The most difficult part was making way through the unusually thick forest; advancing only a few miles often took an entire day and there was no way around it.

Miguel's team advanced through the jungle in a single column, each man looking after the rear of the man in front of him. The last two men of the column walked side by side so that the rear of the last two men were not undefended.

For days at a time the sky remained overcast as monsoon rain kept pouring non-stop. Wet and slippery track made movement more painful but on the fourth day the sky became clear. As the hot sun rose over the thick forest canopy the humid atmosphere underneath the canopy made movement a bit uncomfortable for the outsiders. In the afternoon the team came to a halt under a giant golden shower tree. The tree stood in an opening like an umbrella; only a few yards from the tree the ground suddenly dropped over hundred feet straight down like a cliff. At the bottom of the cenote a fresh water pool attracted everyone's attention as they could all use a bath to refresh themselves in the oppressive heat of the jungle.

The cenote could easily accommodate twenty to thirty largest galleons in it and by the look of its crystal clear blue water one could easily get an idea about its depth. At the surface shoals of different types of fish could be seen swimming. The expeditionary team had the necessary tools with them for barbeque, so they decided to have smoked fish for meal after the bath. However, they could not find any way to climb down the walls of the cenote; finally they found a crevice created by the long and thick roots of a large tree. Through that crevice the team climbed down to the sandy shore of the pool. A small waterfall enhanced the natural beauty of the cenote many folds. The water of the pool was unusually cool and refreshing; all of them quenched their thirst and filled their water containers before diving into the pool for a bath. There seemed to be an undercurrent, so Miguel warned the team members not to swim too close to the rocky wall on the other side of the pool for he suspected the presence of underwater cave below the wall. If anyone was dragged down into the cave by the undercurrent that would be the end of that unfortunate swimmer's adventure. The swimming experience was followed by spear fishing, thus providing the necessary resources for smoked fish and potato wedges.

At night the team members checked their weapons before laying down for rest while two of them remained awake as guards; they were to take rest after four hours when others would take over the role of guarding the sleeping team. After breakfast the team resumed their journey towards the interior of the peninsula. Around four in the afternoon the team faced its first obstacle when a group of native surrounded them from all directions in an opening. None among the expeditionary team could speak the Mayan language. So sign language was the only mode of communication. The natives were mostly armed with spears, bows and arrows. A few of them possessed the old muskets but Miguel and his companions had doubts whether they knew how to operate them properly. Miguel counted twenty of them, the rest were up in the tree hiding behind foliage. Miguel told his men not to display any sign of hostile intent but to be ready to shoot at seconds notice. With hand sign he tried to convey to the native chief that they meant no harm to them. Then he showed them a drawing of a temple and immediately he understood what they were after. Vehemently he shook his head, forbade them to go in that direction; with sign language he showed that curse from the sky would strike them if they moved in that direction. When Miguel conveyed to the chief that he was determined to go there the chief looked back at his men and said something, consequently all of them aimed their primitive weapons at the expeditionary team. With a highly tense voice Miguel told his men to drop and start shooting the moment they heard him fire the first shot. Miguel had a double barrel shot gun and a colt revolver hanging from his waist. Very carefully he turned around as if he was about to tell something to his men but the barrel of his shot gun was pointing towards the chief. With a smile on his face he uttered, "Boys, here it comes!" then he pulled the trigger. The shot blew off the head of the native chief; even before his lifeless body could hit the ground Miguel's men dropped to the ground and the natives were hit by a volley of fire from their firearms. Instantly

many of the natives fell dead from their hiding places; some managed to throw at the intruders whatever they had, eventually hitting three of them. Realizing that they had no chance against the well armed intruders the natives disappeared into the forest like ghosts. Miguel's men who were hit by spears and arrows were not mortally wounded, it seemed like they would survive but when they began choking and spewing out foam he knew the spear and the arrows had been laced with poison. Within a few minutes all three lay dead in front of their peers. Miguel's intuition told him that they could not be far from their destination, so he commanded his men to take the weapons of his dead buddies and move in the direction the natives seemed to have fled.

It took Miguel and his men ten minutes to reach the temple. The temple was placed over a small pyramid. The pyramid occupied approximately hundred square feet; the area occupied by the pyramid formed a perfect square and from its base the stairs rose roughly fifteen feet from the ground. The rectangular temple stood at the apex of the pyramid; the size of the temple was fairly small, it had no walls around it, so the roof was supported by pillars made of cement like substance. A wooden alter occupied the center of the temple and on it a skeleton of a human sacrifice welcomed the unwelcomed guests. Parts of the skeleton were scattered all around the temple floor, indicating the ritual of cannibalism.

Miguel selected twenty men to guard the outer perimeter of the pyramid while ten of his men surrounded the temple. Then Miguel began searching for the Mayan treasure with rest of his men. They started with the interior of the temple but after an hour long digging and scrapping the floor of the temple revealed nothing. Soon afterwards the ground around the pyramid drew their attention; all night they dug for hidden chamber but it looked like the temple had nothing to offer. The men were exhausted and hungry; they needed to eat and rest. In their pouches they had dry bread, smoked fish and guavas collected from the forest. Blackfoot would not allow the

expeditionary team to carry alcoholic drinks. So they quenched their thirst with the water they carried. The men who searched for the treasure were then told to take rest while the men who had been guarding the temple joined the search. As the first light of dawn tore into the fabric of the night two men went to the outer perimeter of the pyramid to respond to the call of nature where the jungle bordered the pyramid ground. The ground where they stood felt too solid to be soil; they hit the ground with their shovel and they were right. It was a slab made of the same substance the pyramid was built with. When they brushed off the rotten leaves and mud from it they noticed two iron rings attached to the slab. Their hearts were filled with joy as they whistled to their team members to have a look at their finding. Under the removed slab Miguel's men stared in awe at the stairs entering a tunnel. The stairs went down twenty to thirty feet before leveling out and heading towards the base of the pyramid. Miguel assumed that it would end right below the temple almost hundred yards from the entrance of the tunnel. At the end of the tunnel they found four separate empty chambers. Miguel and his men began digging the chamber floors and in each chamber they discovered one brass chest full of Mayan gold artifacts like pendants, bells, figurines and flat discs with mythological scenes of human sacrifice. The eyes of all who were there glittered in the reflected light of their burning torches.

Miguel didn't wait, he ordered his men to carry the chests and head towards the coast. He feared reprisal attacks from the natives but his fears never materialized. In three days they reached the eastern coast of the Yucatan Peninsula but instead of Fat Mermaid they saw a Portuguese brig. The vessel was anchored about a mile from the shore; the crew of the vessel noticed Miguel and his men with the chest and immediately two boats were lowered to carry two groups of armed men to the shore. Miguel and his men started running in the direction Blackfoot had told them to. Fat Mermaid was on the other side of a huge rock, quarter of a mile into the

sea, which obstructed the view of Miguel and his men. Once they saw Fat Mermaid they began firing their guns to draw attention. By this time the men from the Portuguese brig had already landed on the shore and they were chasing Miguel and his men. From Fat Mermaid Blackfoot was watching the drama unfold on the beach. He sent two boats to rescue his men from the beach. Upon seeing those boats Miguel and his men dug their heels into the beach and began firing at their pursuers. Blackfoot joined them by firing his cannons. Now the pursuers were against two hostile groups, one on land another at sea. So they decided to abandon their chase and return to their boats.

Before heading back to the old world Blackfoot positioned his galleon so that he could unleash his cannons against the brig which sought to pursue Fat Mermaid and her prize. The captain of the Portuguese vessel was well aware that his vessel alone had no chance against Blackfoot's galleon which was better equipped for a naval battle, so he withdrew his vessel and decided to maintain safe distance from Fat Mermaid. Blackfoot told his navigator to chart a course so that they could take advantage of the Gulf Stream and the westerlies. Couple of times Blackfoot made his coxswain reverse the direction of Fat Mermaid in order to catch the Portuguese brig but being lighter than Fat Mermaid every time it managed to outrun Blackfoot's much heavier galleon, so Blackfoot gave up trying to shake off the Portuguese vessel. Instead he kept waiting for a storm that would allow him to shake off his pursuer. On 18th August when Fat Mermaid was about hundred and twenty miles east of Bermuda Blackfoot encountered what he had been waiting for and a storm it was. Never in his life had he seen a storm such as this one. It didn't look like a storm at first as the sky was overcast with gentle wind blowing from the north west since dawn that day. At midday, out of nowhere, suddenly a huge dark column formed a few miles from the stern of Fat Mermaid. The position of this pitch dark cloud formation was

only a mile from the portside of the Portuguese brig which had been stubbornly following Fat Mermaid. Within minutes the column just slammed down onto the ocean surface with such ferocity that wind speed increased to over hundred miles an hour within few seconds. It was a tornado rarely seen over sea. The force of the tornado created a vortex in water right below where the dark column had formed. From all around the vortex water rushed toward it like iron splinters are attracted to a magnet. Blackfoot could feel the water around his vessel slowly moving in that direction; the force of the current was relatively weaker as Fat Mermaid was nearly three miles from the vortex. Realizing the possibility of being sucked into the mile wide vortex Blackfoot screamed at his coxswain and his oarsmen to steer the vessel as far as possible and as quickly as possible from the hungry monster. However, the pursuer of Fat Mermaid was not so fortunate for the Portuguese vessel was only a mile from the monster. The masts of the doomed vessel had already been blown away by the terrible force of the tornado; with his spyglass Blackfoot could see the oars on the starboard side of the vessel madly rowing in order to avoid the fate which awaited the unfortunate vessel. Blackfoot could see many of her petrified crews on the upper deck holding on to the rails; one of them looked like the gentleman who had become Blackfoot's victim in Lisbon. A number of them jumped into water when the vessel had been completely sucked into the vortex.

Ten days passed without any incident after the demise of fat Mermaid's pursuer. Because of the hurricane season the ocean was very rough, twenty to thirty feet high waves made fat Mermaid toss like a toy ship. The return journey would have been a nightmare for a person suffering from sea sickness but fat Mermaid's crew were all used to this kind of experience. In a strange way, to them it provided not only the inconvenience of being tossed around but also thrill and entertainment. On eleventh day another incident rattled the crew of Fat mermaid. Around

midday a fire broke out in the galley which was on the upper deck of the vessel. Somehow fire came in contact with the unattended cooking oil which was next to the stove. Once the flicker of the stove touched the cooking oil it exploded into a fireball turning the entire galley into a furnace. The fire couldn't do much damage to the other decks as they were below the galley. It was quickly extinguished by the crew before spreading out on the top deck. Soon afterwards Blackfoot launched an investigation to find out the cause of this fire and it was discovered that momentary carelessness on the part of one of the four assistants who worked with the cook round the clock to provide meals to the one hundred and fifty crews of Fat Mermaid was the root cause of this accident. Everybody knew what the punishment was for such violation of safety code; after the flogging other pirates carried the senseless pirate to the medic for treatment. However, this incident was nothing compared to what was to follow.

The day Fat Mermaid caught up with the cannery current, one of the pirates developed symptoms of small pox. At the time it was one of the most feared diseases in Europe with fatality rate as high as ninety percent. The crew had fever the night before and in the morning developed the typical symptoms of small pox. Immediately he was placed in quarantine in a cabin next to the hold of the vessel. No one was to go near the cabin except the crew who was given the responsibility to provide food and medicine to the stricken pirate. Every day in a plate food and medication was left before the door of the quarantined pirate. On the third day the previous night's food and medication was found in the plate indicating that the stricken pirate had succumbed to the disease. The pirate who was given the gruesome task of disposing off the corpse wrapped himself up completely in cotton bandage like a mummy before throwing the dead pirate out into the ocean. That very night another five pirates developed the disease, ominous indication of an impending epidemic. This time Blackfoot didn't show any mercy; he

shot the stricken pirates in the head and instantly discarded their bodies. Now the other pirates where haunted by the question who would be next? At one point they demanded that the vessel docked somewhere; to Blackfoot it looked more like a mutiny, so he didn't let the situation go out of control. Out of nowhere when a small island appeared before Fat Mermaid he sailed along its coast and noticed a cove. Immediately he decided to drop the anchor inside the cove.

The moment Fat Mermaid dropped her anchor, like rats most of her crew abandoned the ship, some getting into the small boats while the rest simply swam to the shore. Later some of them set fire to the cursed vessel, sending the burning vessel to her watery grave in the deep lagoon. By now Blackfoot realized that he had little control over his pirates, so he didn't try to find out who was responsible for it. However the burning fire had attracted the attention of some islanders who reported the incident to the town council of the small French Town. When the town folks quietly surveyed the spot the weapons carried by the pirates betrayed the identities of the pirates. Within twenty four hours the Mayor of the town surrounded the forest where Blackfoot's men had taken refuge. Blackfoot had a rough idea about the number of those who encircled Blackfoot's men, the number wouldn't exceed hundred, so crushing them was not a problem for him. Their problem lay somewhere else; if he attempted to route them out of desperation they might bring in the French navy. Blackfoot didn't want that to happen, therefore, he negotiated an agreement with the islanders. According to this agreement the islanders would let Blackfoot use their harbor for safe passage of his men away from the island and in return Blackfoot would hand over to the town council of the French Town two of their Mayan chests.

The day the agreement was being implemented everything was going on smoothly. First batch of Blackfoot's men had left the island on an Italian merchant vessel but when Blackfoot was about to board another vessel with the remaining two Mayan chests two French brigs with

soldiers moved in. Blackfoot realized that the Mayor of the town Jean Dominique had betrayed the agreement; he used the agreement to acquire the Mayan treasure and buy time. A firefight broke out between the soldiers of the French brigs and Blackfoot's men, Blackfoot and most of his men were killed but a few were taken as prisoners.

At this point Miguel took a deep breath and said that he was with the first batch of Blackfoot's men who had left the French Town on the Italian vessel. Later he heard what took place afterwards from one of the prisoners who had been released from jail a few years later. Everyone at the table was totally consumed by Blackfoot's history. By the time Miguel had finished his tale Rob's time piece was showing quarter past twelve midnight. Miguel said to Rob that he could help him acquire what he wanted to buy from the black market but he would need two three days to arrange everything and that his valuable assistance was conditional. Rob didn't ask Miguel what that condition was, instead he said to everyone that he had a tale of his own if they were interested in it. Upon hearing this Raymundo smiled at Rob, at a leisurely pace lit a cigar, stood up and went behind his bar and fetched two more bottles of rum.