

- CHAPTER VIII -

SCEVOLA HEST

Among those pirates of whom legends are sung and drunken tavern-tales told, few are as infamous, or spoken of with such awe, as Scevola Hest (*male undead master*), captain of the *Black Contessa*. In the good old days, before the oppressive reign of law and order, Hest's name was spoken alongside Bedwyr the Black, and the original Captain Drac, as an undisputed ruler of that endless empire men call the open ocean. There wasn't a man or woman alive, it was said, that Hest wouldn't kill if given half a reason to do so. He was the sort of pirate that gave pirates a bad name, and nary a one was sorry to hear of his demise; even the most black-hearted scoundrels agreed he'd had it coming.

A pity, then, that Scevola Hest didn't concur—and that he and his deathless crew have sailed the seas every night since, expressing their displeasure on many a mortal soul with the misfortune to cross their path.

Due to the curse placed upon him, Captain Hest, his crew, and the *Black Contessa* itself exist in a ghostly twilight between life and death. In the sunlight, the ship and all aboard her cease to exist. No phantom images, no strange sounds, they simply aren't there. At night, however, or when fierce storms or heavy clouds blot out the sun, the *Black Contessa* prowls the waves, manned by a crew of murderous apparitions. Hest himself would look the typical pirate—captain's coat, cavalier boots, plumed hat, cutlass, and a ragged goatee—were it not for his blatantly spectral nature. His entire form is tinged green-white,

his features decayed or skeletal depending on the angle and the light in which he is viewed.

HISTORY

It was near the end of the Golden Age of Piracy on the high seas, though few saw it coming at the time. The maritime nations, sick of the stranglehold the buccaneers held on the region for over a generation, began to build up dedicated naval forces, devoted to eliminating the pirate scourge once and for all.

One of the first of these "pirate hunters" was the *Vanguard*, a relatively small galleon designed to move in fast on her prey and deliver a crippling first strike. The *Vanguard* sailed under the command of Captain Vincenzo, a proud man from a military family, and the husband of a land-owning noblewoman. Vincenzo was determined not only to sink every pirate he could find, but also to return to his homeland with at least a portion of the bounty lost to those pirates over the years.

A tall order, to be sure, but one in which he might have succeeded were it not for his first mate, Scevola Hest.

In their first months at sea, Hest seemed as perfect a first officer as any captain could want. He carried out orders smoothly and efficiently, and maintained discipline throughout the crew as though his voice bore the words of the gods themselves. Only those sailors who slacked in their duties, or were slow to obey orders, learned of the first officer's darker side, as he delighted in any excuse to wield the

"Should ye e'er be out on the wide open waters,
The sun fallin' westward and night dosin' in,
Should ye hear then a song from the eastern horizon,
Put hand to your rudder, an' run like the wind.
For the voices ye'r hearin', no mortal man uttered,
The flappin' ye'll hear ain't no sail bein' furled,
An' the lights ye'll be seein' don't come from no lantern,
An' the ship come upon ye, she's not o' this world.
The fog she rides is the smoke of Hell's fires,
The winds in her sails are the screams of the damned,
Pray gods she ain't seen ye, for ye'll ne'er outrun her,
Ye'll ne'er see the sunrise, nor e'er see the land.
And if she o'ertakes ye, that vile *Black Contessa*,
And ye stare into deadened eyes darker'n coal,
Let the deep waters take ye, and pray for a drownin';
For although ye'll be dead, ye'll at least have yer soul."

—"The Ballad of the *Black Contessa*,"
traditional Freeport chantey

lash in punishment. Still, he retained the captain's favor as the *Vanguard* took pirate after pirate, until her hold practically bulged with recovered treasure. Finally, Vincenzo ordered the crew to set course for home.

Scholars and storytellers alike disagree as to whether Hest was simply overcome with greed, or whether he had planned his move since before the *Vanguard* even left port. Whatever the case, Hest moved among the crew, whispering of the fabulous riches below, riches *they* had recovered from the deadliest pirates in the world, for which they had bled and risked their lives, and which would now be returned to wealthy nobles who would hardly even have noticed their loss. It was unfair; it was unjust.

Not every sailor aboard agreed, of course, but as the officer in charge of discipline, Hest had those few who refused to cooperate locked in the brig or otherwise stored out of the way until it was time to act.

As the vessel sailed homeward, Hest and the bulk of the crew mutinied. Captain Vincenzo was locked in the brig along with the other uncooperative sailors, and now-Captain Hest set about dividing the riches among the mutineers. That night, when the bulk of the men were fast asleep or drunk in celebration, Hest and his most trusted lieutenants slaughtered the prisoners in the brig. The rest of the crew was told Vincenzo and the others attempted an escape, and were killed in the process.

While now rich men, none of the crew could return home without finding themselves on the uncomfortable end of a hangman's noose. Their appetites whetted by the treasure they already had, it took precious little effort for Hest to convince them to turn to piracy. Why, they could be the greatest pirates to sail the seas! They had military training, one of the best ships ever to set wood to water, and an intimate knowledge of the strategies the navies would use to catch them. In a final fit of vicious irony, Hest rechristened the vessel the *Black Contessa*, named for the mourning widow of Captain Vincenzo.

Over the next few years, Captain Hest painted his reputation across the oceans in the blood of countless victims. Word of his crimes spread through every maritime nation, and even many citizens of the growing community of Freeport were reluctant to allow the *Black Contessa* to make berth at their docks. But it was a single encounter in Hest's fourth year of piracy that cemented his place in maritime legend, though he didn't know it at the time.

Her name was the *North Star*, a schooner out of Hest's own home port. While often the bearer of valuables, on this journey she carried a cargo of a different sort. The *North Star* had been commissioned to carry an entire congregation on a religious pilgrimage to distant lands, where they would offer prayers at an ancient shrine, newly



rediscovered, to the gods they shared with their eastern brethren. The only valuables they carried were small personal possessions, hardly enough to make the effort of taking the ship worthwhile.

Hest, of course, knew none of this when he ordered the *North Star* heave to or be sunk.

With the entirety of the crew and passengers held prisoner on deck, Hest and his men searched the holds, and came up almost empty-handed. In a fit of pique, Hest ordered everyone—men, women, and children—executed.

It was then that the high priest of the congregation stepped forward, daring the raised blades of Hest's men. "The gods are watching you even now, Captain Hest," he said, his voice steady, "Do this thing, and you will forever be denied the light of Heaven."

Slowly, Hest strode forward, until he stood directly before the priest. "Then I will navigate by the stars," he replied, his mouth quirked in a scornful smile, "and by the moon, and by the fires of Hell." And Hest himself slit the high priest's throat, even as he ordered the *North Star* burned to the waterline.

Perhaps it was the priest's curse, or perhaps it was Hest's own mocking refutation, but something caught the ears of the gods that day.

When word of the *North Star's* destruction reached land, the uproar was deafening. Desperate to quiet the

populace and the various churches, the government dedicated an entire fleet of pirate-hunting warships, under the command of Commodore Cosimo Ulisse, specifically to running down and sinking the *Black Contessa*. It took months for Ulisse to track down Captain Hest, another week of cat-and-mouse chases and games across the open water, and it cost him no fewer than three of the ships that sailed with him. But when all was said and done, the *Black Contessa* finally went down under a hail of catapult stones, Hest screaming defiantly from the prow until the moment the waters closed over his head.

Thus ended Captain Hest's reign of terror over the high seas—as a mortal man. Alas, what arose under the combined influence of the high priest's curse and Hest's own burning hatreds was something far, far worse.

GOALS AND MOTIVES

One might expect that, as a centuries-old spectre, Captain Hest would have no true goals or motives left to him. Goals, perhaps not. But Hest has plenty of motive for his ongoing reign of horror. Everything the captain of the *Black Contessa* does, every move he makes, every drop of blood he spills, is driven by an endless, burning, hateful spite.

It would be easy to assume the *Black Contessa* roams the waves at random, madly and mindlessly attacking anything that crosses her path, much like Freeport's infamous Kothar the Accursed does aboard the *Winds of Hell*. Where Kothar frequents Freeport's waters exclusively, however, Hest considers the entire ocean his hunting ground, appearing around Freeport only sporadically. And where Kothar's tactics do indeed border on the mindless, Hest's madness has, as the saying goes, more than a bit of method.

Hest despises the living, and now that he himself is not counted among them and has few needs of his own, he has dedicated himself to inflicting pain, suffering, and sorrow on others. He carefully plans his raids as though he were still alive, still vulnerable, and still gave a damn for the value of his haul. Where possible, he chooses victims who will be missed, who leave behind loved ones, or hold important positions in governments, churches, or other elements of society. Hest revels in violence and physical pain, but his true joy and delight come in the suffering of the living left behind. Hest accumulates stolen goods, sometimes hiding or destroying them, not because they hold any value to him, but because they hold value to others. The more an object's loss will cause someone pain, the more eager he is to take it. It's not important that he have it; it is important that others don't.

