

EXTRACT FROM PIRATE X

Early one morning, Seth roared, ‘All hands on deck!’ That only meant one thing – a ship had been sighted. Everyone scrambled to the upper deck, cutlasses and muskets in their hands, pushing and shoving.

‘Put your weapons away, you thickwits!’ Seth stood by the main mast, hands on hips. ‘We’ve got to catch her first. To the ropes!’

I peered out across the water, but I couldn’t see a thing – not even a tiny dot in the distance. Blackbeard sent a lookout up to the crow’s nest and stood on the rear deck, giving orders to the man on the tiller. I shoved my cutlass through my makeshift rope belt and took my place on a line, squashed in between Robert and another pirate. The thought of action heated everyone up; they pulled on ropes and shouted at each other like they were getting ready for an important footy match.

Robert pulled on the rope so hard I was nearly jerked off my feet and the guy behind me smacked me on the head when I stood on his foot. With the wind filling her sails, the *Revenge* barged across the water, waves thumping against the hull and spray misting the air. Within minutes our quarry was in clear sight. It was a sloop, the *Betty*, all sails filled with wind, but riding low in the water. Someone hauled up our flag and, as the skeleton and bloody heart flapped above us, the crew cheered. I felt excitement fizz up inside me, until Poxey held up his cutlass and licked the blade as if he was licking blood. My fizz turned to acid.

‘Belay the ropes and attend to your weapons!’ Seth yelled. Now we were closing in on the other ship, I could see its sailors desperately trying to make it go faster, trimming sails and turning to catch more wind, but we gained steadily, minute by minute.

‘No white flag,’ came the call from above.

Blackbeard raised his spyglass again. Where was the Major? ‘George, get your men on the cannon.’ Two dozen men raced below. ‘That means you too, boy!’

I froze, then Robert pushed me towards the steps. Powder monkey time again. Ear plugs would’ve been a bonus. I stumbled below, grabbed my bucket and headed for the gunpowder barrel.

‘Hurry up, lad!’ bellowed George.

I jumped and scooped the stuff out, then ran back up the ladder, trying not to trip and spill the lot across the deck. One of the men snatched the bucket from me and tipped the powder into his cannon. As I scooted back for the next bucket, Poxey dodged round me with a cannon ball and kicked me for good measure.

‘Are you ready?’ Blackbeard barked down the steps.

‘Ready!’ George yelled. The gun ports were opened and four cannon hauled forward. The men on the handles cranked feverishly to lift the barrels up.

‘That’s enough!’ shouted George. ‘We don’t want to go right over them.’

Just then, everything went so quiet that the hair on the back of my neck stood up like dog hackles. All I could hear was the slap of water on the side of the ship, thumps from above and the men’s hoarse breathing. It seemed to go on and on. Was I in a time warp again? Was I about to go back to London?

But before I could even start to feel hopeful, Blackbeard shouted, 'Fire!' and hell erupted. Two cannon fuses were lit, everyone was yelling. I jammed my fingers in my ears. *Booom! Booom!* The others crowded round the ports to see what they'd hit, if anything. George bawled them out, making them load up ready to fire again.

'All hands on deck!'

He held up a hand, but the others bolted for the steps, pushing and shoving, and leaving him to shake his head. He looked at me. 'Cutlass ready, lad. You'll be fightin' for your life.'

Trying to ignore my shaking hands and jelly legs, I followed him up. All my lessons with Robert would've been a waste of time if I couldn't even hold on to my cutlass properly. *Don't be a wuss, don't be a wuss*, but when I made it onto the deck, I froze, my heart pounding in my ears.

We'd come alongside the other ship and pirates thronged the rail, cutlasses flashing while others hung on the ropes, screaming like madmen. The *Betty's* flag hung limply and her crew brandished swords and pistols, their captain obvious in his green coat and white shirt.

Poxy shoved me aside and thrust a long, hooked pike across to the other rail. He and several others hauled the two ships even closer until their wooden sides ground together. As pirates began to leap the rails, an almighty roar came from the stern of the *Revenge* and we all turned towards it. Every hair on my head prickled with fear and a whimper dribbled from my throat.

Blackbeard stood on the rail, one hand on the ratlines, the other brandishing a huge pistol. He wore a sling over his shoulder with five more pistols hanging, ready to

fire, and a cutlass glittered at his waist. Lengths of fuse sparked and smoked in his long, matted black hair, and his yellow eyes gleamed, full of bloodthirsty murder. He looked like the devil, just emerging from hell on a rampage, and clearly everyone else thought so too. His own men fell back, open-mouthed, and the sloop's crew edged away from their rail, their faces white with fear.

Blackbeard roared again and leapt into the mass of sailors, followed by pirates who were also after blood, some firing their muskets first. Men shouted and a spray of red arced in the air.

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You can read more of Will's gut-wrenching pirate adventure in *Pirate X*, on sale now!