

# THE WRATH OF GOD

BY VERNE R. ALBRIGHT

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Playing Chess with God  
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PO Box 3531  
Ashland, OR 97520  
email: [info@hellgatepress.com](mailto:info@hellgatepress.com)

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***PLAYING CHESS WITH GOD*** (PREQUEL TO *THE WRATH OF GOD*)



## CHAPTER ONE

# GONE

1859. All day, Henning Dietzel had helped victims scattered across what remained of Iquique, Peru. Despite his efforts and those of others, the moaning and screaming had too often been silenced by death. At first, dealing with so many injured had seemed impossible. But by nightfall there were no more wounds to stitch, bones to set, limbs to amputate, or tourniquets to loosen so body parts wouldn't wither.

During seemingly endless pushing, pulling, twisting, and lifting, Henning's back spasms had gone from painful to immobilizing. When there was nothing more to do, he'd finally let himself collapse. An hour later he was staring at the darkening sky, still embedded in clinging mud that had molded itself to his shape.

When the twenty-foot-high wall of water crushed Iquique he'd been miles away on a behind-schedule train. Had he arrived on time, he too would've been dead. While rummaging through the ruins of the quaint, English-style town looking for survivors, he suffered the guilt typical of those who escape death when friends don't.

Had he deserved to live more than those who died? He'd been absent years before when Domingo and Isabel Santa María lost their California *rancho*. They'd welcomed him into their family and made him one of them. Their daughter fell in love with him. He could have saved their home and livelihood. But busy chasing success, he'd lost track of them.

Maybe the tidal wave had been retribution. Or perhaps his punishment was that life went on and would now be infinitely more difficult.

Yesterday, Iquique had been the only port where Peru's nitrate was loaded on freighters to satisfy the world's demand for fertilizer and explosives. Now the town called Queen of the Coast was a scar on a ravaged beach—little more than splintered wood tangled with seaweed, wagon wheels, and debris from houses, businesses, and gardens. Already the town's doctors had ordered volunteers to burn the bloated corpses before their rotting spread disease.

Henning's businesses were gone. His savings would be depleted before Iquique was rebuilt. When he could no longer pay the banks, they'd repossess his flourishing mine, the beach where his loading dock had stood, and the downtown lot where his water hauling business had been reduced to debris.

"Obstacles are those pesky things you see when you lower your eyes from your goal." When Henning was sixteen, his grandfather's saying had inspired him. But now his future was bleak and full of difficulties beyond solution.

With mud sucking away his body heat, he felt suddenly chilly. Another effort to stand was stopped by excruciating pain. Nearby, Encinas Peralta was fast asleep. Once the madam of Chile's most successful bordello, she was now a dear friend who managed his water business and sometimes shared his bed. She would gladly help him get to his feet if he could bear to wake her. But he couldn't—not after her draining hours of helping the injured. He'd sleep where he was.

Maybe things would look better in the morning. Finding a position where the mud supported his back more comfortably, Henning cleared his exhausted mind. Concern for his uncertain future gave way to memories of Encinas telling him how different he was from Latin men and how much she loved his height, blond hair, and blue eyes. Next came random images of his mother the day she died and the Prussian farm where he'd become a man.

The screams of the injured faded.

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With the sun barely above the horizon, stampeding men jolted Henning awake. Rolling onto his stomach he tried to stand, but stabbing pain stopped him again. Through the legs of men rushing toward the beach, he saw a newly arrived clipper ship lowering a lifeboat.

“Bring food, water, and medical supplies,” a nearby man yelled between cupped hands.

“We’re loading everything we can spare,” a distant voice answered.

Near shore, the launch plowed onto a sandbar and wouldn’t come loose. *Sea Witch*, the name of its mother ship, was painted on the prow. Instantly Henning detected something he often saw before others did, opportunity—a chance to get back where he’d been before the tidal wave—if this was the once-legendary *Sea Witch*.

Amidst floating corpses and debris, men waded into the water and freed the craft, then dragged it ashore. The disaster’s scale hit Henning again as *Sea Witch*’s ruddy-faced captain exclaimed, “Dearest God in ’eaven. This must have been the mother of all killer waves.”

Still half asleep Encinas Peralta struggled to her feet.

“Can you spare rum to quiet the pain of the injured?” she asked, practical and efficient though her bloodshot eyes were rimmed with dark exhaustion.

“Bring every rum keg in the galley,” the captain boomed, “and look for bottles hidden in the crew’s quarters.”

“Yes, sir, Captain Jeffers.”

Henning raised his head and called out, “Captain.”

Jeffers slowly turned in a circle, then looked down.

“There y’are,” he said. “What can I do for ya?”

“Is your *Sea Witch* the one that used to bring tea from China to England?”

“Twice she set the record from Foochow to London,” Jeffers said proudly.

“I need to get to England, fast.”

“I can take you. But before I ’ead ’ome, I ’ave to find another cargo.”

“Do you have authority to arrange one on your own?”

“Of course. Do I look like a eunuch?”

“Then I’ll hire your entire ship.” Wincing, Henning struggled to his hands and knees. His voice etched with pain, he continued. “With the world’s nitrate cut off, the best substitute is guano, and I have plenty on Altamira Island, north of here. If the tidal wave didn’t wreck the facilities, my men can load your ship in a day.”

“A day to do what usually takes weeks?” Jeffers asked. “I’d leave myself some leeway if I were you.”

"I don't have any," Henning managed between clenched teeth. Halfway to his feet, he collapsed, face down.

"Wait for the rum," Encinas implored.

"I'll be fine if you'll walk on my back like you did last time this happened."

Encinas removed her shoes and balanced with a foot on each side of his backbone. Slowly sliding them, she traveled the length of his spine and reversed course.

"Can you concentrate on my lower back, gently please," he gasped as her weight forced air from his lungs.

He cried out as his spine popped loudly.

"You okay?" Encinas asked, stepping into the mud.

"Much better," he grunted, struggling to his knees.

Standing and in obvious pain, he told Jeffers, "If we make London in sixty-five days or less, you'll get a thousand dollar bonus plus a thousand for your crew."

"Not that I want to change your mind, but why the big 'urry?"

"I have to get there fast. Even hours could make a difference."

"*Sea Witch* was demoted to nitrate scow," Jeffers said, "and forced to carry 'eavier loads than she was designed for, but 'er spirit is unbroken. Don't overload 'er with yur guano, Mizder Dietzel, and I'll prove she's still the fastest ship afloat."

"We'll load ballast weight—no more."

"What if I get you to London in sixty-two days?"

"I'll double your bonus and the crew's."

"Ya got a deal," Jeffers replied.

As they sealed their agreement with a handshake Henning asked, "When can we leave?"

"As soon as my launch brings the ship's rum and doctor. I'm going to leave him here to help the injured and pick him up after we load your guano. By the bye, I admire your quick thinking. The price of your guano will go sky-high when it reaches England along with news that there'll be no nitrate for a while. But why are you taking only enough fer ballast?"

"Will you need help in England?" Encinas asked, deflecting Jeffers' prying. Henning never revealed his plans and didn't like to be questioned about them.



“No,” Henning replied gratefully. “But I promised to spend more time with you and taking you along will be a perfect start.” As her sensuous mouth widened into a smile, he turned back to Jeffers. “Is that okay with you? I’ll pay her fare and mine.”

“I may be an old-timer but unlike most captains I’m not superstitious.” Jeffers tapped his temple with an air of superiority. “I welcome women on my ship, and I have an empty cabin that should suit you two nicely.”

“The clothes I’m wearing,” Encinas said when she and Henning were alone, “are the only possessions I have left.”

“We’ll buy what you need as soon as *Sea Witch* makes port.”

She didn’t ask what they’d do in England. Henning would tell her when ready. And having his undivided attention would be a welcome pleasure. They’d known each other fourteen years, but life had repeatedly conspired to keep them apart.

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While waiting for *Sea Witch*’s lifeboat to return, Henning took Eduardo Vásquez, his manager, aside and quietly said, “You’ll be in charge while I’m gone. Captains bringing freighters to Iquique have no way to know it’s out of commission. When they get here, try to talk them into loading guano at Altamira Island. And keep the water business going. The schooners were at sea and the wagons were at the mines when the wave hit.”

“Isn’t that Encinas’s job?” Eduardo asked with his usual gruffness. Nearly as tall as Henning and equally handsome, he had an eye for the ladies. But even though Encinas was pretty and shapely, he’d never forgiven her for having been a prostitute.

“Encinas is going to London with me. You’ll have to handle things here.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Eduardo saluted and clicked his heels.

“Use the profits from our guano and water sales to start rebuilding my dock.”

“Exactly as it was?”

“If you think of improvements we can afford, make them. We have enough in the bank to finance my trip and make the next few payments on the mine. Before you run out of money I should be back with enough to tide us over until Iquique is back in operation.”

“That’ll take fifty times as much as you’ll get for a load of guano,” Eduardo said. “I know better than to pry into your private plans, but what if the wave hit Altamira Island? We’ll soon be broke if your guano diggings are shut down.”

“I’ll let you know for sure when we come back to pick up *Sea Witch’s* physician.”

“You’re the boss.” His voice losing its edge, Eduardo added, “Sorry you lost everything.”

“I didn’t,” Henning replied. “I still have my greatest asset, you.”

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*Sea Witch’s* launch cleared the surf under a pink and orange sky. Oars shattered the reflections of seagulls gliding above as the coxswain called a double-time rhythm. Soon after his demanding voice went silent, the launch thumped against a streamlined hull.

“Let’s go boys,” Jeffers shouted as his men climbed rope ladders. “Breaking a record requires more enthusiasm.”

After her anchors were raised, *Sea Witch* accelerated to fifteen knots. Wanting more, Jeffers had his crew adjust the sails.

“For too long we’ve plodded along with more weight than we should carry,” he exhorted his men. “It’s time to relive the glory days.”

In Peru’s fastest ships the voyage to Altamira Island took twelve hours. Hoping Jeffers could cut that time by half, Henning collapsed beside Encinas on the bed in their cabin.

“I wonder if *Sea Witch* is still as fast as she once was,” he said before falling asleep.

Startled by a knock on the door, Henning vaguely heard Jeffers’ voice announce, “Just sighted your island, Mizder Dietzel We got ’ere in four hours.”

Suddenly wide awake, Henning sat bolt upright. That was unbelievably good time.

From *Sea Witch’s* rail, he saw the familiar mound of yellowish guano above dark cliffs where incoming waves exploded into spray. Rounding the east cape, he saw ships waiting offshore, a good sign. They’d have been sunk if the tidal wave had hit there.

Sails lowered, *Sea Witch* coasted to a stop between the anchored ships and a launch bringing the island's pilot.

Through cupped hands, Henning shouted, "Dock this one at the new loading facility immediately and get every available man ready to load her as fast as possible."

As the pilot's launch turned toward *Sea Witch*, he pointed his speaking trumpet at the dock and shouted, "Suspend all loading immediately. Have every wagon bring guano to the mongaries above number four."

Coming aboard, the pilot gruffly commanded the crew, "Drop your ballast overboard. Come on. Let's go. Double time."

His back still painfully delicate, Henning could only watch as heavy rocks were brought on deck and dropped over the rail. After the last one burst through the ocean's glassy surface, two launches with sixteen rowers each towed *Sea Witch* toward the base of a cliff where British engineers had blasted underwater rocks to create a berth.

Chains on the starboard bow and stern were unhooked from anchors and shackled to iron rings on the cliff. Then the portside anchor chains were attached to buoys. Tethered, the ship rose and fell with the water's surges.

"I've never seen a ship put in position that fast," Jeffers told Henning admiringly. "Ya must've spiked the pilot's hand."

"He gets a bonus for every ship he ties up in less than an hour," Henning said. "What's the ideal weight for maximum speed?"

"A thousand tons if we balance the load properly."

Henning hid his disappointment. Windjammers carried four times as much but were slow.

"I don't care what your names used to be," the pilot barked to four crewmen. "They're now number one, two, three, and four." He pointed to ropes dangling from a canvas chute being lowered from the cliff top. "Grab those, and keep that chute lined up with the hatch until we fasten it down. When I call your number, do as I say and be quick about it."

Once chutes had been secured to all three hatches, the pilot yanked a string that jingled a bell high above. Trap doors on three mongary storage boxes were slid part-way open and guano from their sloping floors poured into *Sea Witch's* hold.

"Chutes are holding steady," the pilot shouted. "Open the doors all the way."

As the sun went down, loading continued under huge lanterns that lit the diggings and loading area.

After dinner, Jeffers told Henning, “We left most of our food and water in Iquique. After we pick up my physician, we’ll have to re-provision in Talcahuano. Don’t worry, that will gain more time than it loses. The girls at the ‘Ouse of Smiles will raise my men’s spirits to where they can get ten knots in wind that wouldn’t put out a candle.”

Henning didn’t look forward to stopping in Talcahuano, and not just because he hated losing the time. Encinas had once been the madam at the House of Smiles.

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“Unbelievable,” Jeffers said at breakfast, tearing off a chunk of bread from the island’s kitchen. “We’re already ’alf full.”

“The other half will be aboard by dinnertime,” Henning promised.

“Loading a guano ship used to take months.”

“This will be our record.”

“Then it will be my turn to set one.” Jeffers grinned.

Twenty-three hours after the first chute was attached, *Sea Witch* had taken on a thousand tons. As the crew unchained her, Alcalino Valdivia—the island’s diminutive, shy, half-breed manager—came aboard.

“With nitrate unavailable, guano’s price will skyrocket,” Henning concluded his final instructions. “Raise ours every time the trading companies raise theirs.”

Henning needed maximum profits from the coming guano boom to rebuild his other businesses. But he’d be gone for months and Alcalino was prone to mistakes. Leaving the young manager unsupervised was an invitation to disaster, but there was no choice. Henning’s future depended on someone who wasn’t dependable.

## CHAPTER TWO

# FASTER THAN DISASTER

*Sea Witch* cast off with trimmers still leveling guano in the hold. Normally she wouldn't have sailed before the cargo was balanced, but no one complained. After months at sea, every man aboard was eager to reach Chile's finest bordello.

Stopping briefly in Iquique—where the situation was much improved—Jeffers delivered the food and supplies Henning had brought from Altamira Island. Then with the ship's doctor again on board, *Sea Witch* continued on.

After docking in Talcahuano, Jeffers told the crew, "You're free to enjoy the House of Smiles, but only for an hour." Then he warned, "I can easily find replacements in a port this busy. Anyone who drinks too much or isn't back here in an hour will be left behind."

Jeffers selected six men to restock the larders. As the rest of the crew stampeded across the dock, Encinas asked Henning to go shopping without her.

"If someone recognizes me in front of a crewmember, this voyage will be extremely uncomfortable for both of us," she explained.

Henning soon returned with Encinas's new wardrobe across both arms. Stepping from the gangplank to the deck, he overheard the bosun's mate, who clearly hadn't seen him arrive.

"It's strange Dietzel's lady didn't go ashore."

"She's probably making up for lost sleep," the ship's carpenter responded. "From what I hear, she worked as long and hard as any man after that wave hit Iquique."

Good. They hadn't recognized her. She'd no doubt welcomed them to the House of Smiles many times. But she looked different—prettier in his opinion—without her former tight dresses, overflowing bosom, face powder, rouge, and lip wax.

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*Sea Witch's* sails hung limply from her yardarms, framed in blinding sunlight. Henning stopped his agitated pacing and looked down at the ocean's flat, mirror-like surface. Captain Jeffers' speedy clipper was at a standstill. Becalmed for hours, she could remain so for days.

For Henning to succeed, he had to reach London at least a week before ships brought word that there'd be no nitrate for a year. Otherwise, his goal wouldn't simply be difficult. It would be unachievable.

For an hour after *Sea Witch* was becalmed, he and Encinas had paced the deck together.

"This isn't helping," she'd finally said. "I'm going below. Keep me company."

He'd been too agitated to relax, but should have gone—especially after his promise to spend more time with her.

A shapely, wavy-haired combination of competence and allure, Encinas had been his first love when they were eighteen. Her answers to his letters had gone astray while he was in California's gold fields. Thinking she'd lost interest he'd stopped writing. Years later she'd left the only life she'd ever known to run his water business. And enrich his life. She was entitled to more than his leftover time.

Late that afternoon a welcome breeze cooled Henning's brow. Gradually it gained speed until it filled *Sea Witch's* drooping sails and slowly pushed her forward. As if to compensate for its long absence, the wind surged into gusts that whipped the grayish-blue ocean into froth and spray.

The crew drew straws to see who'd stay on deck and risk being swept overboard. Clutching the rail and peering over the stern, Henning saw the rudder come out of the water. Time to go below.

Encinas was halfway up the stairs.

"Oh good," she said, reversing course with a meaningful backward glance. "I want you with me in case this storm affects me the way that other

one did." Years ago during their first cruise, Encinas had found rough seas sexually arousing.

One hand on each wall, they rushed down the narrow passageway. As they hurried into their cabin, the ship rose and fell, catapulting them past the door Henning had opened, then slamming it behind them.

"This is getting bad enough to have excellent results," he joked.

The bucking and rearing grew violent. They'd ridden out that first storm on a sofa bolted to the passenger ship's floor. But there were no such amenities on freighters. Henning wrapped his arms around Encinas from behind and sat them down on the bed. Then wedged himself, back against the headboard, feet pressed to the wall.

"Good thing you're tall," Encinas said.

Uncertainty was the worst part of storms. Even after years at sea, Henning couldn't tell how bad they'd get or how long they'd last.

After breaking fast, this one ended suddenly. Until certain it was over, Henning kept Encinas securely in his arms.

"Waltz with me when it's safe," she invited, seductively.

"Dancing with me will never be safe," he said. "I don't know how."

"Does this give you incentive to learn?" Getting off the bed, she removed her blouse and the garment beneath.

"That's not fair," he said, standing up.

"Come on, handsome." She crossed her arms, plumping up her breasts. "This is *quid pro quo* and it's your turn."

Suspenders dangling, Henning undid his shirt buttons, revealing the chest hair that had distressed him when it first appeared, and still did.

Encinas ran her fingers through it and asked, "When will you finally believe I find this exciting?"

With a flash of translucent black stockings, she stepped out of her skirt then tapped her foot with mock impatience.

"I know. I know. *Quid pro quo*." Undressed now, Henning turned toward the bed.

"Oh no you don't," Encinas protested with a playful pout. "I've always wanted to dance naked with you."

"Even though I'll go the wrong way every time?"

"Especially then. Unexpected contact is more delicious when we're undressed."

The fleeting brushes of skin were indeed arousing. Again and again Henning pressed against her, maintaining contact as long as he could before she coquettishly escaped with a change of direction or speed.

Listening to her tuneful humming, he lost track of time. The rush to reach his goal became enjoyment of the journey. He hoped she hadn't done this with anyone else...that teasing like this was as special for her as for him.

"Where did you learn to dance so well?" he asked quietly.

"My former profession could be cruel," she replied with her usual candor. "Too often, I met interesting men and never saw them again. I was however, blessed with some romantic moments. But ladies don't discuss such things. And if you and I make love now, every nerve in my body will explode."

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In their cabin the next morning, Encinas woke to see Henning squeezed between the bed and wall at the tiny desk Captain Jeffers had provided. Shivering, he stopped covering a sheet of paper with numbers and adjusted the blanket draped over his shoulders.

"It can't be morning. I feel like I just fell asleep," she said. On her feet in the satin robe he'd bought in Talcahuano, Encinas looked over his shoulder and added, "Desks are meant for work and beds are for sleeping and certain other activities. The bad thing about having one next to the other is that you're an early riser and by the time I'm awake, your mind is elsewhere. What are you doing now?"

"Trying to figure out how to do something that may not be possible," he said, putting his pen down. "Like your bookkeeping at the House of Smiles, numbers help me predict the future."

"Numbers told me what I'd already done, nothing more. What do those tell you?"

"How to proceed once we get to England."

"You're going to do more than sell your guano, aren't you?"

"Yes." The blanket slipped off his shoulders as he slid his chair back.

Straddling his legs Encinas sat on his thighs and said, "I know you don't like being interrupted when working, but don't worry. After last night—



which was delicious by the way—I'm satisfied for a while. So give me a kiss and finish your work."

"I'll spend more time with you soon. I promise," he said after their lips parted.

After breakfast, Henning went on deck to offer the captain encouragement. Instead he found himself silently admiring Jeffers' almost supernatural ability to squeeze more speed from his legendary vessel. Not to mention the energy he put into tasks that should have bored him after decades at sea.

"Look at him," the first mate whispered. "He really wants that bonus."

"Money isn't his principal motivation," Henning replied. "He wants to reestablish *Sea Witch* as the fastest ship afloat."

"So you've already figured out that *Sea Witch* is his mistress? Very impressive. What's yours? Making money? Or that woman you're traveling with? You may not have realized this yet, but one day you'll have to choose between them."

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No matter when Henning came on deck Jeffers was there, his strong jaw covered with stubble because he hadn't taken time to shave. He even ate topside rather than have subordinates fail to make immediate adjustments as conditions varied. He could smell the slightest variations in wind and water currents. And when he did, he was equally driven to order small modifications that saved minutes or major changes that gained hours.

Every time he turned the hourglass beside the wheel, he ordered the first mate to throw out the logline, a wooden wedge tied to a rope with knots at regular intervals. As the wedge bit into the water and pulled the rope from its spool, the mate counted the knots passing over the stern board. After he announced their speed, the men studied Jeffers. If he smiled, they returned to their duties. When he scowled, they prepared to climb the rigging and adjust the sails.

During his rare quiet moments Jeffers would catnap or suck on his pipe and watch *Sea Witch's* bow plow its furrow as if willing her to give everything she had.

One day after lunch Encinas tempted Henning to their room, hugged him, and fell back on the bed with him on top.

When she finally subsided and went limp, he teased, "You done? I don't want to stop before you're satisfied."

She grinned and flushed prettily. "I'm not a circus performer. Five was quite enough, thank you."

"You keep count?"

"Not usually, but I knew this time would be special." A long silence then, "Do you see yourself in Captain Jeffers? I do."

"Is that a criticism?" he asked good-naturedly.

"No, simply an observation."

Lying on her back, rising and falling with the ship, she drifted into sleep.

A shaft of golden sunlight came through the porthole and glided up and down the opposite wall like a giant paintbrush. Watching it, Henning wondered if his grandfather in Germany was still alive.

Full of resentment when he'd left the old man's farm, he now saw *Opa* Dietzel through older, wiser eyes. His grandfather too had hated farming's routines and drudgery, but had accepted them.

"Farmers and mind-numbing work—like badly matched husbands and wives—are parted only by death," he'd once told Henning. "Make the best of your fate. Trying to escape it will make you miserable as surely as it killed your father when it drove him into the military."

Intended to help Henning accept his lot in life, those words worked in reverse. At fifteen he announced his intention to go to sea. Under local law, Grandpa Dietzel could have kept him on the farm until he came of age. No doubt tempted to do so rather than pay a hired hand, the old man had let him go.

"You would have made an excellent farmer," he'd said as Henning packed his bag. "Be an outstanding sailor. No one is as ignorant as seafaring men. With the world at their fingertips, they waste their lives misbehaving. Don't follow their example. Learn everything you can."

Angry after their years of conflict, Henning left without saying *auf Wiedersehen* but remembered his grandfather's advice. At sea, he studied tides, currents, and prevailing winds. While his crewmates frequented bars and brothels, he befriended merchants who taught him what they did and

why. He also learned Spanish...improved his English...bought books instead of drinking or gambling...and was truly happy for the first time.

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When Henning came in, Captain Jeffers was at his desk, backlit by the windows across *Sea Witch's* stern. As he looked up, a nervous twitch pulled his mouth to one side. Then again. The stress of a two-month effort to constantly be at his best was taking its toll.

“Good news,” Jeffers said, offering Henning a glass of champagne. “We’re two days ahead of the record and only a day from London. Even a teetotaler can drink to that.”

“I’ll celebrate when we’re at the dock,” Henning replied. “But right now, I need a huge favor. Will you please assemble your men so I can offer them another bonus?”

“Fer what?”

“Signing and honoring a pledge to keep quiet about Iquique’s destruction for two weeks.”

“That kinda guarantee should be prepared by an attorney. Why doncha wait ’til we get to London?”

“If I do, the crew will spread the word long before I can hire a lawyer,” Henning replied.

“In that case, I’ll witness their signatures. It’ll be pure theater but should make an impression.”

Wearing his dress uniform—white breeches and a blue coat with fringed shoulder epaulettes—Jeffers addressed his men from the bridge.

“Each of you will take a verbal oath and sign ’is name or put ’is mark on a legal document,” he concluded with a stern glare. “You’ll receive a bonus if you honor your pledge, and go to jail if you don’t.”

Jeffers came down the stairs and stood beside a table. One-by-one, crewmembers stepped forward and recited a pledge, one hand on a Bible, the other raised. Carrying the hand-lettered parchment they’d signed, Henning followed Jeffers to his cabin.

“It’ll be a miracle if summa those donkeys don’t drink too much and blab everything,” Jeffers said, closing the door behind them.”

“With any luck,” Henning said, “their companions will be too drunk to remember what they heard.”

“I da thought ya’d want us to spread the news and drive up the price of yur guano.”

“Don’t worry. The price will go up in good time, all by itself.”

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Sixty days after leaving Altamira Island *Sea Witch* reached London, a new record if only she’d left from a port where a certified dockmaster recorded departures. But even if their accomplishment wasn’t official, the crew had earned a celebration. While the men secured the lines, Henning hurried ashore and hired a pub owner to deliver ale and plates heaped with bully beef, potatoes, and cabbage.

“This is how food oughta taste,” the first mate needled the cook, theatrically smacking his lips. “The crew and I will gladly pay for you to take lessons from whoever prepared it.”

The cook scowled as the men cheered lustily.

“Don’t let anyone leave,” Henning told the mate. “I’ll pay the first bonus as soon as I return from the bank.”

Henning arranged storage for his guano, then hired a cabriolet carriage—a cab as people in New York and London called them. Back after making a withdrawal from his bank’s London branch, he stood at the top of *Sea Witch*’s gangplank and paid each crewmember’s bonus as they left on shore leave.

“Remember,” he told each man, “no one gets another penny if even one of you violates his pledge.”

With only a skeleton crew still aboard, Henning hurried to his cabin.

“We leave for Hamburg in three hours,” he told Encinas.

“Did I miss something?” she asked. “Or is this the first time you’ve mentioned Hamburg?”

“I’ve adjusted my plan because it requires absolute secrecy. Being Prussian I won’t attract as much attention in Germany. Besides, I know Hamburg because I grew up there.”

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After taking Encinas to a downtown hotel, Henning explored Hamburg's docks amidst huge brick warehouses, wide canals, and squawking seagulls. His long strides sped him past dock workers as he went from freighter to freighter.

Finally he asked the dockmaster who pointed out a ship that had brought nitrate. A windjammer, it would have taken at least four months to get there, meaning it had left Iquique long before the tidal wave.

He called to the captain on its deck. "Permission to come aboard please."  
 "Granted." After Henning came up the gangplank, the captain added, "Either you've got a twin or you had a sudden change of plans. Remember me? I loaded at your dock in Iquique. At the time you told me your grandfather lives near Hamburg, but you didn't say anything about visiting him."

"I'm as surprised to be here as you are to see me," Henning said as they shook hands, "and I'm in the market for nitrate. Who owns this shipment?"

"You'd be buying back your own nitrate for far more than you were paid."

"Yes, but after it's been transported halfway around the world."

"You could've shipped it for a lot less than the difference you'll pay."

"I would have if I'd known I was going to need it."

"Is the price of nitrate about to go up for some reason?" the captain asked suspiciously. "If so, I should tell the owner before giving you his name."

"If I knew the price of nitrate was going up, why didn't I just bring it from my mine?"

After considering this, the captain said, "The owner is Jaeger & Sons and their office is on Deichstraße."

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By the time Henning joined Encinas in their hotel room, he had bought Jaeger & Sons' shipload along with the nitrate in their warehouse, all at the normal wholesale price.

"I won't be able to spend much time with you for a while," he said as she turned down their bedding. "But I'll make it up to you."

“We arrived before news of the tidal wave, didn’t we?” she asked, feline eyes gleaming. “You’re going to buy nitrate at the regular price and when the Germans find out Iquique is shut down, you’ll sell it for more.”

“A lot more. But to recuperate what the tidal wave cost me, I have to purchase an enormous amount. And quietly. If dealers find out how much I’m buying, they’ll raise the price.”

“How much do you need?”

“All I can find.”

“Can you afford that much?”

“Only by financing it with small down payments.”

“Sounds risky.”

“You have no idea.” He loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar. “I could wind up in debtor’s prison.”

Next morning Henning arranged for Encinas to take a guided tour while he continued his search. Wednesday and Thursday, Encinas explored Hamburg and its French boutiques while his mission continued in secrecy as absolute as he could make it. Morning and afternoon he changed cabs to keep any one driver from knowing too much.

When he picked up his room key at the reception desk Friday night, the clerk had unsettling news. A man waiting in the lobby had asked for him by name.

Mirrored walls made the brightly lit lobby seem larger. Henning looked from face to face until a shifty looking man sidled up, then furtively led the way to an isolated corner table.

“My name is Werner Schmidt,” he began innocently. “I’m a newspaper reporter and would like an interview for my article about your attempt to corner the nitrate market.”

Hiding his astonishment Henning asked, “What are you talking about?”

“You’re wasting your time,” Schmidt snarled with a predatory grin. “I know everything that happens in Hamburg because I reward hotel doormen and cab drivers for telling me when they see potentially interesting stories. And yours turned out to be fascinating.”

“This story has twists and turns you’ll never uncover,” Henning said. “Hold your article for two weeks and I’ll give you an exclusive interview well worth the wait.”

“News has more impact if it appears while events are still in progress. In this particular case, for example, nitrate merchants will realize they’re selling their product far too cheaply.”

Henning had seen Schmidt’s column in the *Hamburgischer Correspondent*. The man was definitely a writer but obviously a blackmailer as well.

“By some auspicious coincidence,” Schmidt said, “I know your grandfather. Being unschooled, he hired me to read him the letters you sent during California’s gold rush.”

Henning wasn’t sure his grandfather was illiterate but couldn’t remember having ever seen the old man with a book or newspaper.

“I’m planning to visit *Opa* while I’m here,” he said. “Is he still farming Lord Marcus Becker’s land near Maximilian Academy?”

“You haven’t heard? He and Herr Becker both passed away.”

Stricken, Henning glanced away and was chilled by a younger version of his *Opa* reflected from the mirror beside him.

“I also write biographies,” Schmidt continued, “and group them in commemorative volumes. Your grandfather wanted yours included in the one I was working on when he died.”

“As poor as *Opa* was, I don’t see how he could have paid you.”

“Paid?” Looking hurt, Schmidt cleaned his glasses with an expensive silk handkerchief. “These biographies are a labor I perform to preserve history that would otherwise be lost. There is, mind you, the little matter of the engraving needed to reproduce your likeness. You’ll also have to reimburse me for my expenses while doing research. Then there’s your share of the printing costs. And you’ll want a hundred copies—at a discount, of course—for friends and family. That adds up to...” He wrote an amount on his business card and slid it across the table.

“You’re wise to demand your hush-money in words that won’t incriminate you if I go to the authorities,” Henning said, taking out his wallet. “But I’ll pay only half that much.”

“My price is firm,” Schmidt growled.

“I was hoping you’d say that. I’ll feel like I’m getting more for my money if I have you kidnapped.” Henning’s eyes narrowed and his mouth tightened as he snapped his wallet shut.

Schmidt looked away and said, “Okay, you win. But you have to pay now.”

“Half now and half in two weeks,” Henning snapped, folding the money inside his newspaper and offering it. When Schmidt reached, Henning pulled it back and coldly threatened, “If you don’t keep your side of the bargain, you’ll spend months in a cage.”

After Schmidt left, Henning sat for a while—too angry to be good company for Encinas. And plagued by guilt. He’d stopped writing his *Opa* after getting no answers. But if what he’d just heard was true, the old man had treasured those letters and undoubtedly been saddened when they stopped.

In their room Henning hugged Encinas as if he hadn’t seen her for a long time.

“I felt useless touring Hamburg while you worked,” she said after he let go. “So I made inquiries and found four warehouses full of nitrate in Oststeinbek. Thanks to a Spaniard who translated, I charmed a postal clerk into drawing a map that shows their location.”

Holding Encinas’s face between his hands, Henning kissed her and said, “This was a perfect time to remind me that there are people like you.”

The next morning he showed her map to his new driver. By noon, he’d made his largest purchase yet.

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When Henning stopped hurrying through Hamburg’s streets and took time to look around, he experienced surprisingly sweet nostalgia. The arch-shaped passageways, gothic spires, columns, vaulted ceilings, and castles reminded him of his hometown’s glorious history as a powerful, independent city-state.

He found an almost sensual pleasure in speaking his mother tongue again. And felt blessed to have come from a place with such high standards and to have attended a school as excellent as the Maximilian Academy for Boys. He’d enrolled there as a poor sharecropper and graduated as a potential capitalist.

“I’m seeing a new side of you,” Encinas told him one night in their room. “When you speak German, you’re not the same.”

Her tone said she preferred the Spanish-speaking Henning.



On his eleventh day in Hamburg, a ship brought word of Iquique's destruction. The news raced across Germany via chains of telegraph towers with semaphores that relayed coded messages between operators equipped with telescopes. Newspapers picked up the story, expanding it as ships brought more details.

By then Henning had a significant stockpile of nitrate. After speculators bid prices as high as he thought they'd go, he sold out for an amount that would go a long way toward putting his businesses back on a strong footing.

Celebrating, Henning and Encinas dined on caviar and lobster under crystal chandeliers in Hamburg's finest restaurant. As they savored paper-thin pancakes in orange sauce for dessert, Henning said, "Tomorrow I'll take you to Hammaburgh Castle and Ahrensburg Palace."

"I saw them while you were buying nitrate. Do you have family we can visit?"

"No. I was the only son of an only son. My father's resting place is in Hamburg's military cemetery. My mother and grandfather are in paupers' cemeteries. Tomorrow I'll visit papa's grave and try to find out where *Opa* and my mother are buried."

"May I go with you?"

"Of course."

He was glad she wanted to come along. She'd distanced herself during his sixteen-hour days, making him doubt she'd be interested in his highly personal mission.

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Among rows of white crosses on a lush, clipped lawn, Henning and Encinas placed flowers on Colonel Dietzel's grave. It was precisely where a sergeant in a starched and ironed uniform had said after consulting a wall map.

Later an attendant at the downtown Hall of Records informed Henning, "Your mother and grandfather were buried in pauper's graves outside the city limits."

"Which ones?" Henning asked. "I want to mark them with headstones."

"I'm afraid that's not possible. These are mass graves, and there's no record of exactly where anyone is. Sorry."

"I feel like I just became an orphan all over again," Henning told Encinas outside.

For days he'd known it was too late to thank his *Opa* for taking in a lonely child, teaching him the value of hard work, and granting him the freedom to follow his dreams earlier than the law required. But marking the old man's grave would have provided some consolation.

A makeshift funeral was underway in the pauper's cemetery, a vast field of waist-high weeds. With a withered old couple looking on, Encinas and Henning watched workers shovel dirt into a trench, covering thirty-six wooden boxes stacked nine wide and four deep.

After the burial, Henning hired a crew. While they cleared and burned the cemetery's weeds, he and Encinas visited Hamburg's sculptors. From one, Henning bought a half-size bronze statue of a peasant couple wiping their brows on tattered sleeves. The next day he hired craftsmen to install it at the cemetery's entrance.

"My father's remains are here," one of the craftsmen said. "Wish I could do something like this for him."

"You are." Henning patted the man's shoulder. "This is for everyone here."

The following afternoon, the statue's pedestal was surrounded by a fresh concrete slab with imbedded bricks spelling out:

### Those Resting Here are Remembered

"This will please a great many people," Encinas said.

"Me included," Henning replied. "Not only are my grandfather and mother buried here. When I went to visit *Fräulein* Lange at Maximilian Academy's library I was told she's here too."

"Why didn't you take me when you went to see her?"

"I did it during your nap because I didn't think you'd be interested."

"Why? Because you don't care about *my* past?"

"I care. We often talk about your life."

"But never about how or why I became a prostitute. Is that a sensitive subject? Are you ashamed of me?"

"What makes you think that?" Henning asked.

But she had a point. Lately he often found himself thinking about her past, uncomfortably and against his will.

A crowd entered the cemetery. Apparently people who'd happened by during the monument's construction had spread the word. Judging by their clothes, those who'd come to see it were poor. Admiring the statue and talking excitedly, they stood at a respectful distance rather than scuff the still-uncured concrete.

Among such poor people, Henning was self-conscious in his knee-length, black frock coat, matching trousers, and linen shirt with standing collar. Encinas also looked overdressed. Her high-waisted ivory-colored dress was closely fitted down to beneath the bust then fell to her ankles. The crown and floppy brim of her bonnet were adorned with feathers and ribbons.

"People as well dressed as you seldom come here," a man told Henning. "Who's the lovely lady and why did you put up this monument?"

"The lady is my business partner, Encinas Peralta," Henning said a trifle stiffly. "And the monument is to honor everyone buried here, including my *Opa*, my mother, and a dear friend."

Long isolated by the language barrier, Encinas enjoyed the gathering crowd's attention. Her dark beauty—exotic in Germany—brought compliments, then questions. Henning translated the inquiries and her responses until besieged by side conversations. Without his help, she could no longer follow what was being said.

Silently she felt bored, then discarded, and finally upset.

"Why did you introduce me as your business partner?" she asked Henning as they walked to their cab. "I'm not your wife, but couldn't you call me something more personal and special...your friend, perhaps, or companion?"

"I'm sorry," he replied. "The question caught me off guard."

Twice in an hour Encinas had raised awkward topics that cried out for discussion. But Henning's feelings were in turmoil. He still found her physically attractive, and greatly respected her competence. But in the years they'd known each other, they'd spent relatively little time together and quite naturally had been on their best behavior. During the voyage from Iquique, however, they'd seldom been apart—never more than an hour—which had been too much for him but not enough for her.

His long days hunting for nitrate had provided a respite, but she was clearly determined to have more of his time from now on. Henning sympathized and

didn't want to hurt her. But it was increasingly obvious that their expectations were radically different. Was it wise to stay in a relationship where she wasn't getting what she needed and he was giving all he could?

They both deserved better. But he wasn't ready to say goodbye.

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The deadline for paying the rest of Werner Schmidt's blackmail came and went with no sign of the opportunistic reporter. He still hadn't appeared by the time Henning and Encinas sailed for England.

"Why do you suppose he didn't come for the rest of his money?" Encinas asked as their ship cleared Hamburg's harbor.

"Perhaps because I discouraged him by mentioning the possibility of having him kidnapped," Henning speculated, grinning slyly.

In London, Henning found that Jeffers' men had kept their pledges until news of the tidal wave arrived on *British Miss*. He paid their second bonuses, then sold his guano for ten times the normal price and booked a stateroom on *Deutschland*, a passenger liner. The accommodation struck him as decadently luxurious, but Encinas reacted as he'd hoped.

"I love it," she breathed, flopping down on the overstuffed mattress.

"I know I'm a day early," Henning said, "but happy birthday. I've arranged for the kitchen to prepare your favorite dinner tomorrow night."

"I hope you didn't order a cake with candles," she said impishly. "I don't want the whole dining room to know my age."

"No candles, but I taught the head waiter a German birthday song. Don't worry. Dinner will be in the privacy of our room. No one else will hear."

Late next afternoon, Encinas changed into a French corset that lifted her breasts and pushed them together. Then she put on the strapless blue evening gown she'd picked out when Henning took her shopping. Sitting at the dressing table she tilted its oval mirror until it showed cleavage that would've been unacceptable in *Deutschland's* dining room.

She knew Henning would enjoy the display as much as she appreciated his romantic gestures. But she found it troubling that her appeal to him was mostly physical. And that his mind and heart weren't completely available, even after their many years together.

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After waiters brought Encinas's birthday dinner, Henning pulled out Encinas's chair.

"Are you and I compatible?" she asked, sitting down.

Henning sat, draped a napkin across his lap, and said, "I often ask myself that question."

"How do you answer?"

"Well, we've never had the slightest unpleasantness between us."

"Compatibility is more than that, don't you think?"

Stirring his iced tea Henning watched the lemon slice revolve. Only days ago he'd cradled Encinas's face in his hands and professed his joy that there were people like her in the world. Now he felt like nothing he said or did pleased her.

"During our last days in Hamburg," he said, "the light in your eyes went out and you stopped saying you love me. Were you upset because I was working such long hours?"

"I'm a hard worker too, but I make room in my life for other things. The only other thing that seems to interest you is fucking. I want to be more than your whore."

Henning hid his reaction. Encinas's often vulgar language was a painful reminder of her time at the House of Smiles.

"My life won't always be so hectic," he said. "Lately I've had more than my share of emergencies."

"Your days will always be an endless succession of emergencies."

"There will be times when my work comes first—"

"Will there ever be a time when it doesn't? For you, the urgent always takes precedence over the truly important."

"Would you like to stop running the water business and move in with me at Salamanca?"

"I'm afraid I'd be lonelier there than in Iquique," she declared, chewing a bite of asparagus. "Being alone with someone you love is worse than having no one."

"I can't change who I am—not even for you."

"Do you love me or are you simply reluctant to part?"

Henning wasn't sure. Maybe what he felt was friendship and respect—important but no substitute for love. And as painful as losing her would be, it would also be a relief.

His decision to sleep on the couch that night didn't surprise Encinas but made her feel desolate and adrift. Years at the House of Smiles had convinced her that men not interested in her body weren't interested at all. Resigned to losing Henning's love, she didn't want to also lose his friendship.

Or her job. Short of the unthinkable—returning to the House of Smiles—she'd never find work that paid as well. Or offered the freedom and challenges she'd come to enjoy.

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Nine weeks later, Encinas joined Henning at the rail as *Deutschland* passed Iquique's octagonal wooden lighthouse, rebuilt after the tidal wave.

"Welcome home," he greeted her.

Onshore, new structures sprawled across the flatland behind the beach. Already bigger than before, Iquique was still growing amidst carpenters, lumber piles, and frantic activity. It had reached the distant cliffs and was spreading north and south along the coastal shelf.

The crew lowered *Deutschland's* sails and she coasted toward an empty berth at Henning's partially reconstructed wharf. Carpenters there were framing a warehouse with raw new wood. Nearby, stevedores backed down a ship's ramp, their hands slowing the descent of rolling water barrels.

Swirling a scarf above her head, Encinas returned his greeting.

At the foot of the gangplank Eduardo and Henning exchanged their usual *abrazo*. Then Henning took Encinas's arm and helped her board a carriage while the ship's porter filled its cargo compartment with their luggage.

On the way downtown, Henning's most burning questions were answered before he asked them.

"With all these construction crews in town, the water business is flourishing," Eduardo began. "Iquique's reconstruction is ahead of schedule, and we're almost ready to load ships again. With no nitrate available, guano's price went sky-high. I sent dozens of ships to Altamira Island and went there twice to check on Alcalino. He did a surprisingly good job."

Hotel Estrella had been rebuilt and carpenters were adding another wing. When Henning requested a separate room for Encinas, Eduardo politely wandered away.

When he was beyond earshot, Encinas looked up and asked Henning, “Has anything changed since our last conversation?”

“Not as far as I’m concerned,” Henning replied, touching her cheek. “Unless you quit, you’ll be in charge of my water business as long as I have it. And from my side at least, our friendship is as strong as ever.”

“From my side, too.” Obeying an urge to wrap her arms around him, Encinas received a tender hug in return.

Eduardo rejoined Henning as the bellboy carried Encinas’s luggage up the stairs with her close behind.

“Doesn’t look like either of us will ever marry, does it?” Henning asked sadly.

“In my case that’s because I don’t want to.” Eduardo elbowed Henning’s ribs. “What’s your excuse?”

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The following day, Henning sailed to Altamira Island on *Intrepido*, the ship that delivered its supplies. Stepping from her gangplank to the dock, he was apprehensive. It had been five months since he’d left Alcalino Valdivia unsupervised. His young mistake-prone manager had done well according to Eduardo. And during their voyage, Captain Gustavo Medina had passed along encouraging news. Alcalino had used him to monitor trading company prices.

“He increased yours every time theirs went up,” Medina had reported.

Good news. If the sometimes careless Alcalino hadn’t taken advantage of rising prices, desperately needed profits would have been lost.

But coming ashore, Henning saw warning signs. On the dock’s far corner, birds were pecking the eyes of a dead dog. And though it was crucial to make certain *Intrepido* unloaded enough food for the island’s thousand workers, Alcalino was nowhere to be seen.

“I’d have been here sooner,” Alcalino called out from an approaching one-horse, two-wheeled vehicle. “But knowing you’d want to look around, I took the time to hook up your buggy.” He sent a worker to bury the dog, then explained, “He wasn’t there earlier when I made my rounds or he’d already

be in the ground.” Turning to Captain Medina, he asked, “How long before you start unloading?”

“A couple of hours,” Medina replied. “My ramp needs repairs.”

“I’ll be back by then,” Alcalino said.

After Henning climbed aboard, the young half-breed didn’t hand over the reins as usual. Instead he proudly took Henning around the island—first the diggings, next the loading platform, finally the warehouses and office. Everything was running smoothly.

Alcalino monitored *Intrepido’s* unloading while Henning went over the books and found them in good order. He closed the ledger and went outside. Having made sure all the ordered food was delivered, Alcalino was lowering his bicycle from Henning’s buggy.

“No one could have done a better job,” Henning told his beaming manager. “As your reward, I’m doubling your salary and giving you a month off. I’ll look after things while you’re gone. You should consider visiting your father. He’ll be proud of the man you’ve become.”

“After you left, I wrote asking for his help,” Alcalino replied. “To my surprise he came and stayed a month. I learned a lot and enjoyed him more than I thought possible.”

“Did he admit you’re his son?”

“Not in so many words, but yes,” Alcalino called over his shoulder as he peddled away. “I’ll be back after I oversee some repairs at the loading platform.”

Henning shook his head in amazement. He’d read about unpromising men who suddenly blossomed, but Alcalino was the first he’d ever seen.