

THE
GOLDEN
EAGLE

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THE RAPE OF XANLATA

Santa Marta, Spanish Conquered Territory, 1530

Sebastian Alfonzo de Martinez looked with pride on his new house in the small town of Santa Marta in the Spanish-conquered territory that people would know one day as Colombia. The house possessed lavish decorations and space as befitted a man of his stature. After all, did he not have a commission from King Phillip II himself to conquer and bring to God the heathen peoples of this Spanish outpost?

As the representative of the King and of God, he had achieved his holy mission in record time. He had devastated and enslaved the natives and had bought them to God with fire and the sword, in the process enriching himself and Spain with gold and silver in abundance. Most of these precious metals were as graven images, almost certainly those of the pagan gods. They had melted these abominations down and turned them into ingots for transport to Spain. Even now, a galleon was loading. It would sail within the week. He intended to be on it, his work here almost completed. There was only one more task and tomorrow he would begin it: the subjugation of the last of the *Muisica* strongholds, *Xanlata*. He expected to do this without difficulty and sail homeward bound in a fortnight. He would return in a year or so; there was always more treasure to find and more of God's work to do.

Xanlata, Spanish Territory, 1530

Sebastian Alfonzo de Martinez sat on a rocky outcrop and watched as the town burned below him. Screams of terror and the groans of the wounded filled the air. Down there his troops were looting the town and raping the women. They were not discriminatory, for they had been a long time away from their wives, and they spared few from their attentions. Only half a dozen of the younger and more attractive remained reserved for Sebastian and his officers.

As dusk fell on the burning town, the soldiers formed up the survivors. The soldiers would take them to Santa Marta to be used as slave labour in the town's expansion. The women would perform important work in the kitchens and bedrooms of the officers, the men would build the town and its gardens. There were plans for a Governor's mansion and a cathedral to the greater glory of God. Sebastian fully expected to return as that governor.

As he watched the column set off for Santa Marta, the approach of one of his junior lieutenants, Orlando de Mandrao, who carried an ornate wooden box with him, interrupted Sebastian's dreams of gubernatorial splendour. The box was small, but he struggled to carry it. He placed it on the ground beside Sebastian's feet and invited him to open it. He was wide-eyed with wonder.

The column had moved out along the valley. Only these two men remained. Sebastian knelt and opened the exquisitely carved box, the lid a perfect fit. He could not understand how these primitive heathens could perform work of such precision given the meagre tools they used.

As his eyes fell on the contents of the box his heart leapt and his senses were almost overwhelmed. The image he lifted from the box was very heavy, almost certainly pure gold. It was an effort to lift it with two hands. He saw the statue of an eagle, wings folded, perched on an orb that was the biggest emerald he had ever seen. Two smaller emeralds served as the majestic bird's eyes. The whole thing was about a foot in height, and, in the reflected light of the burning town, it glowed with a lustre that was spellbinding. Avarice flooded Sebastian.

I must have this, he said to himself, I must. He turned to his lieutenant. 'Who else has seen this?' he demanded.

'No one else sire, I have only just discovered it. The men took all the other gold objects from the building; they left this, thinking, perhaps, that it was nothing more than a wooden box.'

'You have done well. See that no other knows about this. I will take it home to the King. It is fitting that he should have the most pleasing thing in all the world.'

They mounted their horses and followed the straggling column of soldiers and prisoners. The trail they took led through a high pass in the mountains before descending to the town of Santa Marta on the plains below. As they rode, Sebastian could not take his mind from the contents of the box strapped to his saddle.

The large emerald itself was worth a fortune. How much could he do, could he become, with such wealth? Any woman in Spain would be his, any high office he desired. He must have it for himself!

It was a long ride, and the soldiers were tired. They had spent much energy and adrenalin in the fighting and the rape and pillage that followed. None spared a thought for the natives; after all, they were doing them a favour, bringing them to the one true God and the promise of eternal life. Many had vied with each other to see how many women they could violate; they were now entering that state of detachment that exhaustion brought just before sleep overtook them, and they struggled with their stupor. Any who fell asleep on duty could expect the lash but still they were less than alert, completely unaware of what might happen behind them.

As they climbed into the high pass, the trail fell away to a dizzying gorge down which the swift river cascaded from rapid to rapid. A sudden idea struck Sebastian. *Now was his opportunity to gain ownership of the treasure.* He stopped his horse. 'He may have a stone in his hoof, I will check,' he said to Orlando as he dismounted.

His companion halted beside him to wait. He too got down to ease his saddle soreness and stood while Sebastian checked the hoof. Sebastian rose from his crouch and looked at his lieutenant. 'I am

sorry, *mi amigo*, but you have seen too much. You must go to God with your knowledge,' he said, drawing his sword.

The surprised Orlando was slow to react. The sword plunged into his side, and he fell to his knees, still trying to understand what was happening. Sebastian withdrew his weapon and, with a swift kick, propelled the younger man over the edge. Panting with his effort, he leant on his sword until he recovered his composure. Orlando had fallen with hardly a sound, shocked into silence by his sudden demise.

Sebastian looked through the saddlebags on the now riderless horse. He removed most of the gold he found and placed it in his own saddlebags. He felt sorry for the horse for he had done no wrong, but he could not leave him alive now; Orlando's fate must look authentic. He struggled with the animal as it fought frantically to maintain its footing before it plunged into the abyss to join its rider in the valley far below.

Sebastian opened the box and lifted out the statue again. The brilliant emerald glowed in the faint moonlight. 'You are mine,' he said aloud. 'You will bring me fortune and fame. Anything is worth possessing you, anything!' Suddenly, he recoiled in horror. The green eyes of the eagle seemed to swivel towards his face, a baleful look in them, as if condemning him for his avarice and fratricide. They appeared to be saying, 'You have me now, but I will be your demise.' He almost dropped the magnificent bird in his shock as he felt the icon's condemnation deep in his soul. Quickly, he put it back in the box and tried to compose himself. But a feeling of dread that would never leave him assailed him. He had sold his immortal soul for a box of treasure.

When they reached Santa Marta, Sebastian reported the death of his lieutenant to the commander of the garrison. By the time they despatched a burial party to find the body, its journey through the rapids and waterfalls of the Rio Gonzo and the depredations of predators had removed any evidence of how the unfortunate Orlando had met his end. In any case, Sebastian was now at sea and would not reach Spain for many months.

After a long and tempestuous voyage, they approached the great

harbour of Cádiz; Sebastian's sumptuous home in Granada lay a day's march away. He left the ship on a glorious spring day and assembled his retinue of servants to begin the last stage of his long journey. In Granada awaited his wife and children, whom he had not seen for over five years.

On the homeward journey, he had been loath to open his box; the feeling of dread still travelled with him. He had taken aboard one of the young captives from Xanlata. She had an unpronounceable native name and spoke no Spanish. He had named her Rosa and had availed himself of her supple body almost daily on the voyage. She displayed little emotion and was compliant as he used her, but her dark eyes were unreadable.

One day he finally opened the box and took out the statue to admire it. It relieved him to see no sign of the contempt he had seen in the emerald eyes; perhaps he had imagined it in the aftermath of his killing frenzy, but still the dread remained in the recesses of his mind. He had demonic dreams in which everyday events mixed with horrors unimaginable. Demons and goblins merged with hellfire and the staring eyes of his victims, Orlando, and the countless natives he had put to the sword, burnt at the stake or raped without mercy. Always the gleaming emerald eyes of the golden eagle roamed through these dreams, watching him with contempt. He would awake in a heavy sweat despite the cold, trembling in fear.

Sebastian dreaded going to sleep. He looked drawn and thin, for he had little appetite for the unappealing food on board. He began to drink heavily, hoping the wine would give him dreamless sleep. His companions remarked on his condition, but he ignored them. Some of them thought that his dusky travelling companion was too demanding and contributing to his emaciation. They hid jealous smirks, but he was too senior to them for any familiarity; after all, he had the ear of the Royal Court and could call down vindictive retribution upon them.

One evening, as they neared the straits of Gibraltar, greed tempted him to open the box again. He lifted the gleaming eagle and placed it on a bench. In its eyes there was no sign of the malignance he had seen

before. He reached out to stroke it just as Rosa entered the cabin. Her eyes fell on the bird and she screamed in naked terror. She covered her eyes and turned away. She began calling out in her native tongue, seemingly crying for help, or praying to some higher being. Suddenly, she seized Sebastian's dagger from the side table and backed away toward the door of the cabin, finally turning to flee to the upper deck.

For a moment he hesitated, then followed her. When he emerged from below, he saw her, high on the poop deck, raising her arms to the heavens and screaming manically once more. She saw him and directed a stream of what sounded like invective at him.

He called out to her, but she seemed not to hear him. Still weeping, calling a plaintive prayer, she stabbed her arms and bare legs with the dagger, before plunging it into each of her eyes and leaping from the deck into the sea.

He turned to see a group of sailors, led by the chaplain, crossing themselves and averting their eyes. The priest, his eyes ablaze with religious fervour, held aloft his crucifix. 'I knew it to be so,' he cried. 'These women are witches, spawn of the devil. They lead you into temptation. We must destroy them.' He turned to his companion priests. 'See to it; remove the abomination from this vessel. Only then will we be able to enter the gates of Heaven!'

They hurried below, seeking three more Indian girls the crew had loaded on board for their convenience, and dragged them weeping to the deck. Still waving the crucifix and muttering imprecations, the priest ordered them all to be cast overboard. No one lifted a hand in their defence. The crew crossed themselves again, and with downcast eyes, went about their business.

Down in his cabin, Sebastian once more looked upon the statue. The eyes were gleaming in the light from the oil lamp, but there appeared to be no malice in them. Hurriedly, he put the bird back in the box and closed the lid. Was there a last glare in those eyes? He dared not open the box again.

Sebastian Alfonzo de Martinez reached his home the day after they had docked in Cadiz. He was feeling feverish, his head ached and he could not eat. He greeted his family, but apologetically for his illness,

attributing it to the arduous journey and his disrupted sleep, and made his way to his bed.

Before he did so, he concealed the box in a secret cavity in his bedroom wall. He told no one of its whereabouts.

Two weeks later he died from the typhus.