



A Dirk Cleft Adventure
by Vishal K Bharadwaj

Pendragon

Dirk Cleft, man of action, sophistication and wit, brandy drinker, wrestled a cayman in the study of a Brazilian druglord. He pulled the beast towards the desk, and, distracting it with a Dostoyevsky, managed to snap thick rubber bands round its snout. He skulked to the chair by the fireplace, downed three shots of Hennessy.

De Souza had escaped.

In Washington he was debriefed by the Secretary, and later he de-briefed and entered a hot bath with the Secretary's secretary. She gave up no state secrets. He left her sleeping in her apartment and went to a bar. De Souza's escape still played on his mind, and the forty-something's tall frame curved with embarrassment. He absently stroked a greying temple when the news on the bar's TV caught his attention. Clear blue eyes shot up to see pictures of a ship out at sea, smoke rising from its deck.

Pirates. The new kind. The *bad* kind. And on a ship he recognised, the *Pendragon*, captained by an old friend. Further de-briefing with the Secretary's secretary would have to wait.

His contact in Madagascar provided transport and other essentials. A silent torpedo sub took him to the *Pendragon*. The watch was light, and he stripped off the wetsuit and walked out onto deck, letting them spot him. Two hired mercenaries with machetes versus a crack operative in a cream sartorial suit.

Cleft didn't even need his gun.

Below deck in the hold a macabre ceremony was taking place. Several dozen pirates danced around an altar on which a pretty, terrified blonde lay bound. Cleft slipped around in the shadows, slit throats, pilfered grenades. The leader showed himself at the altar, and Cleft walked up, weapon drawn.

"Hello, Captain Sigismund," Cleft said to his old friend.

"Ah, Dirk," The massive bearded Dane said with a smile. "What can I do for you?"

"An explanation would be nice. And the girl, alive."

The explanation was this: Sigismund long believed he was descended from Arthur -- *the* Arthur -- and had off-late tired of shipping goods. New empires could be forged on the seas, with cargo aplenty onboard; weapons, food, toxic waste. And the girl?

"Appease Poseidon. Snoopy reporters are of some use, after all."

Sigismund always had trouble with mythology. Now he had trouble with grenades placed against the bulkhead. BOOM. The bay flooded, Cleft leapt for the girl, Sigismund too. Three writhing forms disappeared under warm Indian Ocean water. Two came up, and the third floated away, lifeless.

The explosion had brought the navy, and soon Cleft was identified and he & the girl were given quarters. And new orders. De Souza was in Peru. A helicopter would be waiting at Toamasina. The captain said they could rendezvous at sea, but Cleft said no. De Souza would enjoy a few extra hours of freedom. The girl settled onto the bunk with a smile as he shut the door behind him.

Her name was Genevieve. Dirk Cleft discovered she was *not* a natural blonde.