



Chapter 1 – The Sea Beggars - 1572

Dutch sea captain Maarten van der Voort stood on the deck of his merchant ship, the *Dirck*, and watched his men, looking ghostlike in the dense fog, go over the side and into the waiting longboat. It was a cold March night and three in the morning, yet sweat beaded on Maarten's brow, for he knew he was taking a calculated risk with their lives. They were going to attack a Spanish ship before it attacked them.

Earlier that night, Maarten's most trusted sentry had awakened him after hearing something in the distance that sounded like water gently lapping against a ship's hull. Though no other sentry had heard it, to be cautious Maarten sent the man out in the longboat, tethered by a lengthy line to the *Dirck*, to drift silently and reconnoiter. When the sentry returned, he reported seeing a vague outline of a ship, which appeared to be Spanish because it was larger and had a higher stern than a typical Dutch vessel. The ship was utterly quiet, with no movement on deck. There were no other ships in sight.

After weighing the options, Maarten had decided the only choice was to attack first and use the element of surprise to his advantage. He had to hope that the ship was indeed alone and had been separated from its convoy during the recent storms that had scattered Maarten's own fleet, the notorious Dutch Sea Beggars.

Maarten went below to rouse the men and warn them to be as quiet as possible. He explained the imminent threat and need to make a surprise attack before the fog lifted. The men listened intently and without alarm, as Maarten had expected. He knew them well, for they had been together for four years since leaving Amsterdam in 1568 to flee the Spanish Inquisition and join the Dutch revolt against Spain.

Maarten also laid out the risks: "We've taken many a ship with our fleet over the years, but make no mistake, this time is different. We're in unknown waters. And we're on our own." Maarten looked each man in the eye to make sure he understood.

"If we're successful," Maarten continued, "we *alone* will reap the rewards."

The men nodded, understanding the profit potential. Maarten possessed a letter of marque from the leader of the Dutch revolt, Prince William of Orange, which allowed him to seize enemy ships and sell them as so-called prizes of war. The proceeds were theirs to keep, except for the ten percent to be given to Prince William to help fund the ongoing rebellion.

“If any man has a question, or objects to the attack—speak now,” Maarten said. Hearing none, he prepared them for battle, saying in a quiet voice: “Our cause is just. You are brave, and I know I can count on you.” He raised his fist. “To God! To Prince William!”

The men repeated the vow in equally low voices and thrust their fists into the air. All knelt, and Maarten led them in a Calvinist prayer.

On deck, Maarten watched his men slip over the side and into the longboat and made sure the oarsmen were wrapping rags around the oar supports to muffle the sound. He scrutinized the face of the last one down the ladder, his brother-in-law Pieter, to see if his superstitious imagination was getting away from him. If it was, the men would see. Fear was contagious.

Pieter feigned a confident look, but was worried, not only about the possibility of other Spanish ships being nearby, but also the reported lack of noise and movement on the ship. Are the crew dead? From some horrifying disease? Is the ship cursed?

Maarten saluted the two men staying aboard the *Dirck* and then prepared to descend. After pushing a lock of damp blond hair back under his beret and giving a final tug to the belt securing his knife and sword, Maarten stepped onto the rope ladder. Though burly and taller than the average Dutchman, he nimbly climbed down and took his seat at the bow of the longboat.

The eyes of his eighteen men followed him, looking for the slightest sign of doubt on their captain’s face.

Maarten returned their stares with a look of determination and confidence and gave the command to start rowing. His finger went to his lips: silence. The oarsmen pulled as noiselessly as possible, and the sentry pointed the way.

The men squinted into the thick mist, searching . . . searching for the elusive ship. The sentry was the first to spot its hazy image.

Maarten signaled to lay up oars. The longboat drifted soundlessly, and the ship grew more distinct. It was indeed a Spanish vessel. Seeing that it was not too much bigger than the *Dirck*, Maarten thought: good, this should be a fairly equal battle, man-for-man.

He let the longboat drift to the ship’s anchor line, and the boatswain grabbed hold of it. Maarten stood, got a boost from a sailor, and hoisted himself up the rough rope. One by one, his men followed. Only the boatswain remained behind, his job being to prevent the longboat from bumping noisily against the enemy hull and to signal if any other ship appeared.

At the top, Maarten gripped his feet on the fretwork, grasped the gunwale, and peered over. No movement . . . no sentries in sight. He climbed over and squatted. His eyes narrowed and surveyed the deck. Why no sentries? He inched forward. Next to the capstan, he saw a slumped man and another near the hatch. The stupid sentries are asleep! Maarten tiptoed toward the capstan with knife in hand, while his first mate crept to the hatch. Behind them, more Dutchmen came over the gunwale.

Maarten sank his knife into the slumbering sentry’s neck. The man moaned, and Maarten muffled the sound with his hand. The sentry slumped against the capstan, dead.

The first mate stumbled, waking the sentry next to the hatch, and had to lunge to stab him. A groan escaped, as he died. The first mate crouched next to the hatch with his knife poised, and crew members joined him.

From below deck, footfalls. The hatch opened with a creak. A Spaniard peeked out. “Fernando?”

The first mate stabbed him with quick jabs.

“Ahhh!” The man fell inside, and the hatch slammed shut.

Maarten hurried to the forecastle door, sword raised. His crew assumed positions behind him. Below deck, men shouted in Spanish.

An officer burst through the forecastle door. Maarten rammed his sword into him and pushed the crumpled body aside. A hefty deckhand emerged wielding a long dagger. He dodged Maarten's sword and smashed into him, sending them both tumbling. The man landed on top, banged Maarten's hand onto the deck until he released the sword, and then raised his own dagger. Maarten twisted to get out of its reach and thrust his hand into the deckhand's face, his fingers gouging into the eyes.

"*Aargh.*" The man jerked his head back but Maarten's fingers only dug deeper. His dagger started slashing wildly, and Maarten threw up an arm to shield himself. The blade grazed his forearm, and another swipe hit his upper arm. Suddenly the man bolted straight up, his body twitched twice and collapsed onto Maarten, knocking the wind out of him. Maarten's first mate knelt down and with great effort shoved the body off. After yanking his pike out of the man's back, the first mate pivoted to face the next foe, while Maarten caught his breath.

On his feet again, Maarten retrieved his sword in time to swing at a Spaniard emerging from the forecastle, felling him. Seeing a man atop Pieter, Maarten charged, knocking him over and then finishing him off with a hit of his sword. He pulled Pieter to his feet.

Maarten paused to assess the melee. Nearby, one of his men was strangling a flailing Spaniard. Next to the mast, another was under attack, and Pieter was slipping and sliding across the bloody deck to aid him.

A figure appeared in the doorway at the stern of the ship, and Maarten's eyes fixed on him. His haughty demeanor and impeccable clothes told Maarten that he was the captain, and an aristocrat.