

John Troup sat cross-legged in the bowels of *The Amethyst* surrounded by pirates. He had counted less than a dozen five minutes ago, but their numbers had swelled steadily since then. They crowded around him, jostling and jeering, as John urged himself to remain calm. The air lay thick and stale this far down in the ship below the waterline, and he found it difficult to breathe in the confined space.

Something sharp—a dagger or a hook, maybe—jabbed him from behind, but the young lad didn't flinch. He didn't dare blink. Instead he concentrated on the playing cards fanned inches from his nose. John forced a smile as he squinted at his burly opponent, an oarsman named Gutshot.

"Wotcha grinning at, Short Stack?" grunted Gutshot.

John remained silent, ignoring the insult. The ring of pirates cackled. Some slapped Gutshot on the back and bared their rotten teeth at John. He didn't care. Sure, he was the smallest one there, but at not yet thirteen he was also the youngest. It wasn't much of a joke. John's smile widened as a thin stream of sweat trickled from Gutshot's brow.

John gazed down at the stockpile heaped on the deck between them. *Not exactly a treasure trove*, he thought—a single ducat, some hardtack biscuits, a tin of purple shoe polish, a bloodied earring Gutshot had ripped from his own ear, and a scarlet cricket ball. John studied his cards again. He really didn't want to lose that cricket ball.

"Ready, Shoe Shine?" asked Gutshot, with a wink to the crowd.

John kept his face frozen, but that name hit harder. As cabin boy to the captain, shining shoes was one of his duties. Hardly his most important duty, he'd argue, but it was a chore that took up much of his day. He rubbed his waxy fingers on his britches. Captain Damson owned a lot of boots.

"I'm ready," John said, and then added in a voice he hoped sounded menacing, "Do your worst."

Gutshot wiped the side of his face, glanced at John, then quickly took his hand away. To nods of encouragement, he said one word in a low growl: "Jacks."

John's heart beat in his throat. He peeked at his cards, let out a breath and flashed a genuine smile.

"Go fish," he said.

The reaction was swift and loud. The crowd erupted in a racket of taunts, threats and curses, the majority directed toward John. He tried to slow down his breathing as money changed hands reluctantly around him; most of the onlookers had bet against him, it seemed. A fight broke out in one corner.

John continued to stare at his opponent, who was slowly raising his hand. With his eyes fixed on John, Gutshot hesitated, then removed a silver ring from his little finger. He rolled it around between a fat finger and thumb; a small jewel embedded in it glinted in the low light. John gulped as Gutshot flung it onto the pile. He growled something offensive about John's mother, then formed his ringless hand into a fist.

John no longer worried about losing the cricket ball. He worried now about losing his life.

A pirate burst into the compartment. "A ship's been sighted!" he said, gasping. "We're getting ready to attack. All hands on deck."

Eyes lit up around John. He could see their thoughts merging into a single hopeful word: *Treasure!*

The crowd dispersed rapidly, climbing over each other, yelling and cheering. Even Gutshot raced toward the exit, cards tumbling from his sleeves as he went. The meager gambling pot was forgotten in the confusion and soon John found himself alone. He picked up his cricket ball and tossed it from hand to

hand. He scooped up the rest of his winnings and dropped them into a small wooden box by his side, already near to overflowing with tins of polish, brushes and old rags.

The silver ring was missing, he noticed, and John spent a few moments puzzling over its disappearance. He hadn't seen Gutshot retrieve it, and it couldn't have fallen between the cracks of the deck. It was too big for that. He felt around him in the dark, but came up empty-handed. Shrugging, he bowled the cricket ball down the length of the deserted compartment, listening to the echo.

He was used to the solitude. It didn't bother him so much now. Being the sole cabin boy to the captain placed him on a higher level than the other boys his age on board. They didn't socialize much. In John's estimation they held lesser duties, like hauling buckets of gunpowder to refill the cannons during a battle. Powder monkeys, they called them. John, on the other hand, attended to his captain's important needs—serving him tea, for example, or setting out his clothes and warming his bed. And, yes, polishing his boots. *So many boots.*

John cocked an ear at the sound of cannons being rolled into position. The confrontation with the unlucky soul who had crossed their path would begin soon. Like any captain of a pirate ship, Damson would want to look his best as he battered his foe into submission. John hoped the blighters put up a fight. He pictured the smoke, the deafening booms, the cheers as masts tumbled and sails were reduced to confetti. *It may actually happen like that this time*, he thought. Admittedly, none of their previous encounters had ever been that successful, but there was a first time for everything. And he would be in the thick of it, itching to do his part.

Retrieving his prized cricket ball, John hoisted the wooden box of supplies onto his shoulder and scampered off to join his master on deck.