

# RED RUBY SERIES

## 4. Echoes from the Sky



MEIRING FOUCHE

# ECHOES FROM THE SKY

*by*

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## **ECHOES FROM THE SKY**

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## SUMMARY

Captain Simon Verbeeck, a renowned seafarer, sails the Red Ruby through the treacherous waters of the West Indies, a region rife with pirates and hidden dangers. During a seemingly insignificant discovery, a drifting skiff containing corpses and a cryptic message, throws Simon's well-ordered voyage into chaos. The message, carved into the wood, speaks of a missing ship, the Valencia, and a mysterious command that states. "Go to Barbuda."

Driven by a sense of duty and a thirst for adventure, Simon deviates from his course, sailing towards the small, seemingly insignificant island. But Barbuda is not what it seems. There, he uncovers a conspiracy far grander than he could have imagined, involving pirates, rogue Spanish officials, and a shocking betrayal. He finds himself a prisoner on his own ship, forced to confront a cunning enemy who holds the key to a vast treasure and the fate of the entire region.

Simon must forge unlikely alliances, facing down betrayal and near-certain death, to expose a web of deceit and reclaim what was stolen. A daring escape and a desperate fight for survival propel him back towards Barbuda, not as a victim but as a force to be reckoned with. The fate of the islands hangs in the balance as Simon navigates treacherous waters, battling not just pirates, but a conspiracy that reaches the highest levels of power. Will he succeed in unraveling the truth and bringing justice to the lawless seas, or will he become another echo lost to the sky?

## EXTRACT

The fifth shot, when will it come then? Ben Riley and his comrades turned around and looked up at the battlements of the fort. Where is the next shot then?

The fifth shot did come, but it was swallowed by something much greater, something with the sound of a hurricane. It was a blow that made the earth tremble, that made a large column of fire spring up, and that caused a wind gust that struck Simon Verbeeck with an astonishing blow here where he was standing upright in his boat. A wind gust that made Wilhelm Rieckert turn around in astonishment.

Ben Riley and his comrades were petrified where they stood. They had seen the plume of smoke rise from the fort. They had seen how cannons and crew were flung into the air. They had noticed the giant stream of fire that flashed up through the smoke. And now, they looked bewildered at the smoke that swirled around the white fortress and that had flung black spots against the walls.

Everyone in Barbuda looked at the bewildering phenomenon. Looked at the smoke that was swirling denser and denser from the fort.

Simon Verbeeck's men also looked at it and practically forgot to row until the captain yelled a loud order at them.

It was such an overwhelming phenomenon that no one really paid attention to where the fifth cannonball had fallen.

## 4. ECHOES FROM THE SKY

### Chapter 1

#### MYSTERIOUS FIND

The elegant sailing ship cleaved through the breakers in the vicinity of the West Indies. It was a calm day, and the sea was tranquil. The wind was just right, and the great sails billowed. Those who knew ships would immediately recognize this vessel as an aristocrat of the oceans. Proudly emblazoned on its prow was the name, Red Ruby.

The Red Ruby sat low in the water, having loaded a large cargo of merchandise in Table Bay. This cargo, entrusted to the renowned sea captain by enterprising merchants in the colony of the Cape of Good Hope, was bound for trade in the prosperous West Indies. There was wine, there were hides, there was meat, and all manner of other products from the fledgling colony.

But although it was a calm day, although the horizon stretched far and wide and open, the lookout in the crow's nest had very explicit orders to keep his eyes peeled. This was the domain of the pirates. Here, peaceful vessels were ambushed by those who appropriated the ocean's treasures for themselves. This was the sea where violence and greed reigned supreme.

Simon Verbeeck strode across the deck, checking that all was in order. This large, dark man, broad-shouldered and with clear blue eyes, was a captain who kept a sharp eye on everything. He also knew that the pirates had it in for him, and for that reason, he was doubly vigilant. He surveyed the great billowing sails of his vessel, he examined the crossbeams, he paid close attention to the masts and rigging. He inspected his deck. He was checking for any possible flaws, but everything was in order, for his second-in-command, Wilhelm Rieckert, was a man who knew his duty on a ship. He kept a ship in perfect order, just as a horse lover would always keep a magnificent stallion in good condition.

Simon Verbeeck had just completed his inspection and was about to return to his cabin to study some nautical charts when the lookout, high in the crow's nest, shouted so loudly that Simon froze in his tracks and looked up at the man.

“An object on the starboard bow!” yelled the lookout.

“What is it?” Simon called from below.

“I can’t quite make it out, captain,” the lookout called back. “It’s just something small. It’s not a ship or anything. Sometimes it almost looks like a skiff.”

“Where is it?” Simon shouted.

And the lookout pointed with his hand, diagonally forward, towards the horizon.

Simon summoned a cabin boy and ordered him to fetch his telescope from the cabin. When he had the telescope in his hands, he went to the railing and began to scan the sea. Wilhelm Rieckert also approached and stood there next to his captain.

“Well, Simon,” said Wilhelm, “it’s been a voyage without any excitement since we left Table Bay. We might be in for a bit of adventure now.”

Simon paid no heed to his good friend’s remark. He was observing the object, which he now had captured within the lens of the telescope. From here, it did indeed look like a skiff to him. Then, the object would disappear, then it would reappear on the wide swell of the sea.

“See if you can make it out,” Simon said to Wilhelm, handing him the telescope. “I can’t quite see what it is.”

Wilhelm observed the object in turn, and when he was finished, he announced that, in his opinion, it was a skiff.

“A skiff? What would a skiff be doing out here? We’re miles from the nearest land. Perhaps it’s a few mutineers who have been cast adrift by their captain,” said Wilhelm with an uneasy chuckle. Wilhelm Rieckert knew as well as Simon that a skiff in this part of the ocean was something extraordinary.

Simon determined the direction and distance to the skiff. Then, he walked to his helmsman and gave him orders to steer towards it. The Red Ruby turned in the water and pushed its prow in the direction of the black speck on the horizon.

Simon Verbeeck felt a stirring in his blood. He sensed that this black dot, which looked like a skiff to them, could possibly be the start of a new adventure. Therefore, he preferred not to go to his cabin. He ordered that the lookout be relieved. He sent another man to the crow’s

nest. This was a man he selected specifically, because he knew the fellow had eyes like an eagle, and that there would be little on the horizon that he wouldn't spot.

Simon thought quickly. He knew the cunning and slyness of the pirate, for he was the traditional and acknowledged enemy of all pirates. They hated him, and he hated them. Therefore, he didn't want to be lured into a trap. He had previously experienced pirates using this kind of ruse, just to lead a potential victim into a trap. They would put a few men in a skiff and cast it adrift in the water, and when the unsuspecting victim tried to rescue such a skiff, the pirates would then attack.

The new lookout went to the crow's nest, put his hand to his brow, and surveyed the horizon. Simon had ordered him to take a telescope. He extended the telescope and used it to scan the surroundings. But within his wide field of vision, he saw nothing except that bobbing black speck, which was growing larger and larger as the Red Ruby plowed through the water.

Simon remained by the ship's railing, and with his telescope, he kept a watch on the object. He could already see that it was indeed a skiff, without the slightest doubt. A rather long, sturdy skiff. And he noticed something else. That skiff was adrift. It had no fixed direction, and it was apparently not under control. It would then swing this way, then it would tilt that way, as the water swept it along. The sea was playing with that skiff, flinging it this way, then that way.

"There's nobody at the helm of that skiff," Simon said to Wilhelm Rieckert, who had come to stand next to him again. "I see no oars flashing. It's a peculiar business. A skiff in this part of the ocean, and on top of that, a floating, drifting skiff without any direction or course." Wilhelm Rieckert's eyes had widened. He had learned that the sea often foisted strange and unsettling secrets upon you. There was a tingling in Wilhelm's blood, because he, too, just like Simon, had the feeling that they might be in for an adventure here.

Simon suddenly handed his telescope to Wilhelm. "Keep an eye on the skiff and at the same time keep an eye on the horizon, Wilhelm. I don't want to be overtaken from behind by a pirate. We have a heavy cargo. The Red Ruby can't easily make a quick getaway."

Then, he strode with long steps to his cabin, went inside and stood at



his chart table. He worked out their current position, and then he saw that they were already approaching Puerto Rico. He had a plan to call at San Juan and possibly trade a portion of his cargo with the wealthy Spaniards. But Simon Verbeeck also knew that they were still a fair distance from Puerto Rico. It would still take some sailing before they arrived there. And here now lay a skiff in the desolate waters of the southern Atlantic Ocean.

Simon went to the wall chart, which he had had drawn of this region, this area of prosperity, violence, pirates, heavily armed warships, the kingdom of rum and the saber. He pressed his finger on the chart, and determined exactly where they were. He saw that they were far removed from the nearest land. Just as he had surmised, the Bahama Islands lay far off to the right, the island of Cuba lay even further. The string of smaller islands such as Barbuda, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Barbados lay far out in the vastness of the ocean.

Having established that, Simon's curiosity was piqued even more. Could a hurricane have struck a ship somewhere here? Could one of the dreaded whirlwinds have sent a ship to the depths here? This was not an unusual occurrence. When you were caught in the heart of a whirlwind, when the wind became so strong that a waterspout was sucked upwards and then danced across the sea, then you knew beforehand that the end had come for you, for you and your vessel.

When he came out on deck and looked at the sunny day, at the calm blue sea, it was as if a whirlwind was impossible for Simon.

When he reached the railing, Wilhelm Rieckert was still standing there. Wilhelm looked at Simon, and there was a message in his eyes.

"It's as you say, Simon. That skiff is directionless. I see no one in it."

Simon looked up at the lookout. "Do you see anything in the skiff, Gerritse?" Simon yelled.

"It seems to me there are people in the skiff, captain," yelled Gerritse from the crow's nest. "But I detect no movement. It seems to me they are lying in the bottom of the skiff. In any case, I detect no oars, and there is certainly no one at the helm."

Simon turned away from the railing and walked to his helmsman. "Slightly to starboard," Simon ordered.

The bobbing, drifting skiff was now not far from them. And with every

step they took closer, the feeling rose in Simon that they had something peculiar to deal with here. He was restless and uneasy. Now he was at the railing, now he was at the helmsman, now he was back in his cabin at the wall chart.

“Keep your eyes peeled, Gerritse,” he yelled to the lookout, when he came out on deck again. But he could see that Gerritse was keeping his eyes peeled. He kept turning in the crow’s nest and with the telescope, he surveyed the entire horizon. From that crow’s nest, one could see far and wide across the sea.

When the skiff was about a kilometer from them, Simon gave a new order. He ordered that their heavy longboat be made ready to be lowered. A few seamen prepared the boat, swung it to the side, and lowered it over the side with heavy ropes. There, they left it hanging, after they had tossed the oars into the boat.

Simon considered for a moment to shorten some sail so that the Red Ruby could move slower. But then he decided against it. In this part of the Atlantic Ocean, a man should always make sure that he had full sail so that there could be no interruption in his journey.

When they got close to the skiff, he himself went back to the helmsman, stood beside him, and gave him clear orders.

When the prow of the Red Ruby had slid past the strange skiff, Simon ran back to the railing and yelled an order for the longboat to be lowered. Together with four seamen, he jumped into the boat as they lowered it. The boat hit the water with a great splash, and when they were in the water, the bow of their boat was almost touching the strange skiff. The Red Ruby slipped past them, and Simon and his few men rocked and bobbed on the swell caused by the passage of the great sailing ship.

The seamen grabbed the side of the strange skiff, and in a flash, they had fastened the skiff’s rudder bar to their boat, so that they could not drift apart.

Simon Verbeeck looked over the side of the strange skiff, and then he shuddered. He recoiled from the scene he saw. He noticed how his hardened seamen went pale.

In the bottom of the skiff lay four corpses. They were already in a dreadful state of decomposition. Clearly, these people had already been

dead for several days, they had already been exposed to the violence of the sun for several days.

There was no sign of food or water with them in the skiff. One oar lay obliquely across one of the corpses. There was no sign of the other oars. Simon scrutinized the corpses carefully. There was no sign of a struggle. There was no sign that any of them had been injured or maimed. They had simply died in the skiff, so it seemed.

What immediately struck Simon Verbeeck, and what made him even more curious and suspicious, was that one of the corpses was dressed in the captain's uniform of the Royal Spanish Navy. The other three corpses were those of lesser, ordinary seamen. And when Simon paid closer attention, he saw that there were cleats in the skiff for three rowers.

"A captain of the Royal Spanish Navy," one of Simon's men remarked. "So I see," said the seafarer. "Yes, so I see."

But that wasn't all that Simon saw. The perceptive man had noticed something else in the skiff, something that drew his attention just as sharply as the uniform of the Spanish sea captain. It compelled him to climb out of his own boat and into the strange skiff. The stench was disgusting, but Simon braved it in order to observe this thing that he had now noticed, up close.

He stepped carefully over the corpses, then stood bent over, and he examined the inside of the strange skiff with its strange cargo, for it was indeed strange to find here in the open sea, miles from the nearest land, a lost skiff with a Spanish sea captain and three ordinary sailors in it.

On the inside of the skiff, something was clearly written on the wood.

Simon began to read it, and his lips formed the words almost aloud...

Simon Verbeeck squatted in amazement in the belly of the skiff, and as he read the words, his index finger moved along the letters. He had previously encountered instances on his wanderings where there had been writing on oars or on the inside of abandoned skiffs. But in most cases, the writings had amounted to swear words or words of defiance against life, or else they were last messages. This also seemed like a last message to him, but it was a particular message. A message that provided information. A message that was intended to give an indication of something great and important.