

OLOFF THE PIRATE SERIES

19. The Skull



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THE SKULL

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Published by:

TREASURE CHEST BOOKS - PUBLISHERS

Strand Mews

Strand

2025

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The cover illustration for the Oloff the Pirate series was generated through AI software, enhancing the narrative. This book is being released in English for the first time in e-book format.

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Published by:
Treasure Chest Books - Publishers, Strand Mews, Strand 7140
South Africa

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Online Store: <https://panther-ebooks.com>
Website: <https://www.softcoverbooks.co.za>

SUMMARY

Oloff van Wagenaar, a Dutch naval captain with a past shrouded in pirate lore, thought he'd finally achieved peace. He'd founded Wagenaarsrust, a haven for his loyal crew, and was on the verge of marrying the woman he loved. But tranquility is a fragile thing, especially when shadows of vengeance stir on the horizon.

The brutal destruction of Wagenaarsrust shatters Oloff's dreams, pulling him back into a world of cutlass clashes and treacherous betrayals. The mastermind is the Skull of Caracas, a ruthless pirate consumed by a burning desire for retribution against Oloff for past humiliations. Haunted by the slaughter of his people and a thirst for justice, Oloff vows to hunt down the Skull. His pursuit becomes a desperate race across the Atlantic, a dance with death where friend and foe blur. He's forced to confront not only The Skull, but also the complexities of his past, and the simmering tensions amongst his crew.

Amidst the chaos, a flicker of hope appears in the unexpected form of Jandien, a pirate's daughter with a complicated history with Oloff. Is she a siren leading him to his doom, or the key to his salvation? Torn between suspicion and a lingering affection, Oloff must decipher her true motives before she becomes his undoing. As Oloff closes in on his hiding nest, he discovers that The Skull's revenge plot runs deeper than he ever imagined, threatening to ignite a war that could consume the entire region. Oloff is pushed to his limits, his skills and resolve tested in fierce battles and strategic gambits. Will Oloff succeed in avenging his people and bringing The Skull to justice, or will he become another casualty in the pirate's deadly game? The line between hero and villain blurs as Oloff is confronted with a shocking choice that will redefine his destiny and the fate of those he swore to protect.

EXTRACT

And then Oloff had just left Jandien in the lurch. At the time, he was sorry that he had to do it to her, because he did not doubt the sincerity of her feelings. Yet there was no choice for him.

He now looked intently into her eyes. They were hard and slightly defiant. Her full lips curved into a smile of malicious joy.

But when her eyelids suddenly flickered, he came to the conclusion that she was not completely unaffected by his gaze, and with the cold logic and reasoning that never left him, even in the most difficult circumstances, he immediately decided that she was most likely still his best means of escape. In the short quarter of an hour there in the cell, he had already come to the conclusion that Cabot and the Skull were careful and cunning enough not to easily give him an opportunity to escape their clutches.

His feet bumped against an object that had not been there a moment before. One of the men along the table in the middle aisle had stuck his foot out in front of Oloff. Oloff lost his balance and fell forward with his hands just in time to prevent him from falling face-first onto the floor stones.

Around him, it echoed and fine dust fell from the roof beams as the pirates went wild. They laughed with a coarseness that can only be found in callous, reckless people. But when Oloff slowly, with one knee drawn up under him, stood up, he heard that they were no longer as sober as before, and he knew how merciless they could become under the influence of alcohol.

His eyes were half-closed when he looked back at the man who had tripped him. The fellow looked once into the blue eyes and his laughing fit suddenly subsided.

19. THE SKULL

Chapter 1

“Stand back, you idiot!”

With his open palm, the speaker shoves his companion against the chest, forcing him back against the wall. They stand motionless. A short distance ahead, a few men stroll past in a dimly lit street, their murmuring voices clearly audible.

“As long as no one sees us up close,” the tall, gaunt man resumes, “it’s likely safe to move openly through the town. Come.”

They walk in the dark shadows of the walls. The sandy streets of Wagenaarsrust are only sporadically illuminated where a lamp burns on a street corner, or where a light shines through an open window or doorway. When they pass through such a pool of light, their facial features are clearly visible.

The man in front has a flat face and a nose that tilts upward, so that his nostrils appear wide and round between his high cheekbones. His eyes are set deep under his forehead, and when he opens his mouth, his face takes on the appearance of a skull in the pale light.

He walks with the bearing of one accustomed to giving orders. The other follows about a step behind him and is clearly a subordinate.

“Their ships are naturally there in the river,” says the one with the flat face.

“Most likely, Captain.”

“We’ll first see what it looks like there.” The Captain speaks in a subdued tone. “Then, we’ll find a solitary fellow who looks like he’s seeking company, and we’ll ask him a few questions in a secluded spot. The town is too deserted for my liking.”

“Perhaps some of them are at sea, Captain.”

“I’m not interested in speculations. We’ll find out soon enough whether Oloff is here, or not.”

They walk on in silence for a while. On the right, the soft roar of breakers on a quiet, expansive beach can be heard. A short distance ahead, the tree-lined banks of a river are visible in the starlight. Somewhere in one of the other streets is a place of entertainment, a coffee or wine house, because they can hear the music in the evening

stillness.

The Captain laughs softly and scornfully. He makes a gesture with his arm that encompasses the surroundings.

“Calm and peaceful,” he remarks snorting. “Here Oloff the Pirate and his men came to hide like a bunch of jackals. Apparently, they thought their sins would never pursue them.” He laughs again. “But Oloff made a mistake when he tangled with the Skull of Caracas.”

“It was a mistake indeed, Captain,” the other agrees.

“It’s a mistake for anyone to incur my wrath, wouldn’t you say, Casser?” The Skull’s voice is scratchy like a vulture’s. The sound of it is almost amiable at the moment, but the threat is quite obvious. The Skull likes to keep his men in check with fear.

“That is so, Captain,” Casser replies tactfully.

Through the dense shrubs, they reach the riverbank. Here under the trees, it is so dark that they can only see a foot or two ahead of them. Nevertheless, they can discern the outlines of a ship lying stately at anchor in the gently flowing Kars River.

“There’s only one,” the Skull remarks as they stand on the edge of a sturdy wooden quay.

“Then it’s probably as I said, Captain,” the other replies. “A bunch of them are at sea with the other ship.”

“How do you know there’s only one other ship?”

“They say that Oloff the Pirate had two ships.”

“Maybe he only has one now. Come.”

They walk back along the main street of the village. The settlement lies on the slopes of the green hills on either side of the river. The village is here, a few miles from Cape Agulhas - almost hidden in the hollow around the mouth of the river. No roads lead to this southernmost point of Africa. The Skull, however, assumed that visitors would indeed show up here, and travelers would pass through here.

Therefore, he and Casser don’t slip back into the shadows when a man emerges from a house a short distance ahead of them. He turns in their direction, and when he reaches them, the Skull addresses him. They are quite far from the nearest lamps, and the Skull feels assured that their features will not be clearly visible.

“Good evening, friend.” He modulates his raspy voice. “Good

evening,” the man replies.

“We’re looking for help and a place to stay overnight,” the Skull explains. He hopes that the man wasn’t with Oloff back then at San Dieres where Oloff and the Skull clashed. “Is there such a thing to be found here?”

“There is,” the man assures them heartily and without the least suspicion. “We have a comfortable inn where all strangers and travelers are gladly received as guests of Captain Oloff.”

“Captain Oloff?”

“He’s the leader of our community,” the man replies simply.

“Then he’s an innkeeper?”

“Oh, no.” The man laughs. “What I mean is that the inn is freely available to all visitors.”

“That sounds agreeable,” says the Skull, in a serious attempt not to reveal his contempt for such misplaced charity.

“But you spoke of help?” the man then inquires, almost eagerly.

“Our boat is lying here behind the isthmus on the beach. We come from the Cape and don’t know the sea around here.”

“Is the boat damaged?”

“No. As it was getting dark, we realized that we were close to the shore. We didn’t want to sail into the deep sea at night, and we looked for a landing place. Luckily, we saw the lights of your town from the crest of the hill.”

“Then come,” the man offers immediately. “I’ll help you bring the boat around the point to the bay. It will be safe here, and there’s sleeping space for all of you.”

Without hesitation, the man falls in beside them. He introduces himself as Samuel Hechter. He was on his way to the wine house to seek a little entertainment. He is unmarried and has no other obligations. But it is still early. He will take the gentlemen Schmidt and Casser along later and introduce them to some of the other residents.

As they walk up the hill in the darkness, the Skull can barely suppress his laughter. Later, he will introduce himself to everyone in the town, with the tip of a sword and the flames of a burning torch.

“I didn’t know about the settlement,” he continues the conversation.

“It’s Wagenaarsrust,” Samuel answers conversationally. “We built it

here a year or two ago.”

“Did you come here from Europe?”

“We are the crew of the ships of Captain Oloff.”

“Oh, of course!” the Skull exclaims as if a ray of light has struck him.

“The captain you speak of, who was formerly known as Oloff the Pirate. Later it turned out that he was actually a captain in the Dutch fleet who only moved among the pirates to eradicate them.”

“You sum up the matter correctly,” Samuel concedes with a laugh.

“Under the leadership of Captain Oloff, we’ve had considerable success.”

“So I understand,” says the Skull. “And now you’ve decided to settle here?”

“I would very much like to meet Captain Oloff.”

“Unfortunately, he is in Europe at the moment.”

They have reached the ridge of the isthmus from where they can dimly see the white beach below. For the Skull and Casser who know that the ships lie at anchor a quarter of a mile from the coast, the dark hulls are immediately visible. They assume that Samuel Hechter will see them too.

Without the slightest warning, Cassel came up slightly behind Samuel, and hardly has he uttered the last words when the butt of the pistol catches him hard against the side of his neck. He collapses like an ox. For a moment, the Skull looks around them. When they crept into the village earlier that evening, they had already determined that no guards were stationed outside the settlement. The residents apparently expect no threat.

“We’ll drag him to the beach,” the Skull orders harshly. “It doesn’t matter if we leave tracks. In any case, by tomorrow, nothing will remain of this treacherous scoundrel’s nest!”

Without taking into account the clods, sharp stones, dry branches, and thorns on the ground, they grab poor Samuel by an ankle each and drag him down the slope behind them like a piece of wood.

On the beach, a few men who had been standing close to a ship’s boat hurry over. They pick up the unconscious Samuel and throw him into the boat. The Skull takes his place in the stern, and at his sharp command, they push the tip of the boat between the breakers. Foam

splashes into their faces as a breaker crashes against the bow. But then they glide over the gentle swell to the nearest of the five large ships lying there rocking at anchor.

The Skull is first up the wooden ladder. Over his shoulder, he shouts at the crew of the boat.

“Load him up and then bring him to the captain’s cabin!”

Down the passage, under the massive ornate beams, he reaches the reception cabin of the ship that was once the flagship of a Prince of Spain before it fell into pirate hands. Without ceremony, he pushes the door open.

In front of the porthole of the dimly lit cabin, a man jumps up. The young woman he was sitting next to looks quickly and slightly confused at the Skull.

“Can’t you knock before you come in!” says the man by the window. His burly figure bends forward slightly, he holds his shoulders like a hawk that is about to pounce on its prey at any moment. His features are sharp, yet full, and his lips are thick and sensual.

“There is no time for politeness and romance now, Cabot!” the Skull throws back harshly.

“Romance my foot!” says the girl. She is pale, but it looks as if she is sun-tanned again. Her black hair is long and hangs loose, and her features are beautiful. Her dark eyes glow awake, but like a cat’s looking for a toy, drowsy yet cruel, perhaps coquettish as if she longs for the company of men, and yet hard as if she would like to hound and humiliate them after she has provoked them. “We were just sitting and chatting,” she adds.

“A pleasant sort of chat, Jandien,” says the Skull roughly.

“And what does it have to do with you anyway!” Cabot snarls at him.

“Niles, but I have to do the dirty work while you sit here and...”

“Sit and what?” Cabot laughs suddenly, but his lips only twist in a sneer.

“What should I have done, paced up and down on deck and rubbed my hands together nervously until you returned!”

“The fact remains that we have to work together.” The Skull ignores Cabot’s remark. “We are all here with the same goal. We must make equal contributions.”

“I will do my part as soon as it is necessary.”

“The Skull is perhaps referring to me, Cabot,” the girl interrupts them. “You keep your hands off Jandien, Skull!” Cabot hisses. “I’ll decide who keeps their hands off me!” Jandien stands up nimbly. She looks at him defiantly. Cabot lowers his eyes.

Everyone knows that he has been courting this daughter of a pirate captain for years. In their stronghold on the north coast of South America, the hidden harbor of San Dieres, a few miles west of Caracas, it is obvious daily how Cabot looks at Jandien with longing in his eyes, and it is just as clear that she deliberately seeks the company of other men to provoke Cabot.

Yet there is not one man in San Dieres who can say that he has ever held the flower of this pirate community in his arms. The ordinary crew would not dare. She is the daughter of a captain, and the officers have discovered that she can handle them like clumsy children.

Until one day a large, flamboyant ship with the black pirate flag at the masthead sailed into the harbor. A rather young man with red hair and blue eyes walked into town on his high-heeled shoes. A few days later, he won Jandien’s heart, and then he suddenly disappeared.

He left three embittered people behind. He humiliated the Skull to the ground in front of the entire community. He insulted Cabot by taking Jandien from him, who Cabot never possessed, but still considered as his property, and also stealing his most precious possession, the blue ruby. And Jandien had to stay behind in San Dieres. She saw the gloating in many an eye and knew what people thought. She, the haughty one, who had every man in San Dieres at her feet, had given her heart like a schoolgirl to a stranger who had used her for his purposes to get the blue ruby in his hands and then pushed her aside like a rag.

This young man was Oloff the Pirate.

Immediately, Cabot and the Skull hatched revenge plans. Months later, they found out that Oloff had founded the village Wagenaarsrust at the southern tip of Africa and that he had settled there with the crews of his ships. And Jandien came along because she wants to see Oloff the Pirate die with her own eyes.

“I knocked one of the fellows out cold,” the Skull now informs them. “He’ll probably come to any moment. We can interrogate him.”

“But what did you find out?”

“They live there like a bunch of self-satisfied heroes,” sniffs the Skull. “Nowhere is there a guard.” His face twists with hatred. “But Oloff is not here.”

“What!” Cabot clenches his fists. “Where is the scoundrel?”

“Apparently in Europe. We’ll get more details soon.” He yanks the cabin door open. “Casser!” he bellows down the passage. “Bring that fellow!”

“But when do they expect Oloff back?” asks Cabot discontentedly after the Skull has pushed the door closed again.

“We’ll hear. It doesn’t matter, though,” he adds. “In any case, we can start tonight by removing the bunch who are here, and burning down his alleged resting place. There is one of his ships on the river. I...”

Someone knocks on the door.

“Enter!”

They drag Samuel Hechter over the threshold. The young man stares at the three in the cabin in confusion. It is clear that he does not yet fully understand what is going on.

“You can go!” the Skull snarls at Casser and the others, and as soon as they are out, he turns to Samuel. “You say Oloff is in Europe?”

“Yes. But... but what do you mean by this action against me?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just answer our questions and we’ll let you go.”

“But you lied there in the town.”

“It was a white lie.” The Skull grins. “Now forget the things that bother you. When will Oloff return?”

“I don’t know. He’s been gone for a few months already.” Samuel provides the information readily. Everyone knows where Captain Oloff is, after all. The residents of Wagenaarsrust have nothing more to hide and no double game to play. They were formerly known as pirates, but their name has been restored to honour.

“What did he go to do there?” Cabot inquires.

“He went to get married with...”

“Married!” It is Jandien. Her eyes flame with anger. A hot flush rises in her cheeks. “The scoundrel is going to get married!” Then she becomes aware of Skull’s scornful look. She calms down. “Who will marry him!” she says contemptuously.