

Outerbridge Sound

Chapter 1 – The Middelburg

“An Island Group called ‘The Donder Isles.’ Dutch for thunder, because of continuous storms when the islands were discovered. Mainly one large Island, named after the captain of a Dutch ship who discovered the Islands in about fifteen sixty – Janssen Island, or simply Janssen.”

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~ Then ~

~ From the log of the Middelburg June 12th 1590 ~

Captain Maarten Tromp looked down from the top of Castle Point. There was no castle really, just a small wooden building where someone kept watch. Colonists were like that though, always coming up with grandiose names for something quite mundane.

Below him was his ship the Middelburg, a thirty gun warship of the Dutch Navy. Two of her guns were in difficult positions to fire, so really she was only a twenty eight gun fighting ship. Built in Rotterdam though, where all the best navy ships were built. Like him the Middelburg had seen better days, but he was still immensely proud of her and the sixty men in her crew.

“We’re here to be seen really. To deter our enemies in the region, who are many.” He said. “We did bring supplies and I will take your report back with me. I have no orders to evacuate the settlement though and without orders.....I’m sorry, there’s nothing I can do.”

Maarten Tromp tended to dislike the men sent out to lead small colonies. Some were decent and honest, though most seemed to be running away from something, or trying to hide from a bad reputation back home. Witte Corneliszoon was one of the bad ones, Maarten knew it the first moment they’d met and his feelings were rarely wrong.

“I’m sorry, but I must insist that you evacuate the surviving colonists.” Said Witte. “There are barely forty of us left now....Go and look in the graveyard and you’ll see nearly twenty new burials.”

The Donder Isles, (Thunder Isles) had been named after the huge number of electrical storms the original colonists had encountered. Once a year the sea currents brought cold water up from the south, which seemed to trigger some truly tremendous storms. Apart from that though, the Isles were a near tropical paradise. The kind of place where you could push a stick into the ground and it would take root. It should have been a perfect place to create a colony.

“We could have talked about this without coming right up here.” Said Maarten.

“There has already been talk of insurrection....So many deaths. If the islanders knew I intended to evacuate the settlement. I dread to think how they might react. As it is you might need to use your men to restore orders captain. There have been so many deaths.”

“I’ve never ordered my men to fire on Dutch colonists and I have no intention of starting now. Tell me about the deaths, is it a disease of some kind ? As we came through the settlement a woman shouted at me. She was yelling about the devil’s work going on here.....What has killed your colonists ?”

Maarten had seen colony leaders panic a little before, though none had the wild eyes of Witte Corneliszoon.

“We don’t know, that is why everyone is so scared.” Said Witte. “Until a year ago there had only been a few worries about the strange lights over the dead water. The lights got brighter though and

then we started finding.....The way their bodies had been torn apart. It started at the dead water, everyone is sure of it.”

Maarten had orders to drop off supplies, pick up a report from the colony’s leader and generally show a presence in the area. Two days anchored in Castle Bay, maybe four if his men were made welcome. Then it was supposed to be smiles all round as the Middelburg sailed away to another small island colony to the south. Instead he was hearing a garbled tale of mysterious deaths and panicking settlers.

“Tell me about the dead water ?” He asked.

“There’s a large area of water in the centre of the island.” Said Witte. “Fed from the sea by a narrow channel, though the water feels....Different there. It’s darker and there’s a stillness about the place, an unnatural stillness. Deep too, some have said the water reaches right down to hell. Someone once used a weighted rope to try and measure the depth, but they soon ran out of rope.”

“How long was the rope ?” Asked Maarten.

“About eight fathoms...When the lead came up, three of the settlers swear it had a smell of sulphur on it. Maybe imaginations getting over used, I’ll admit to that, but the lights. I saw the strange lights dancing on the water and the strange shapes moving in the water.”

“What sort of shapes ?”

“Difficult to say, the water gets really dark a few feet below the surface. Not like fish though, nothing like a fish. A huge grey shape, thicker than a man. Two of Alida’s children went to fish there, her two oldest boys. Nothing was ever found of them. Since then no one goes near the dead water. It all started there.....All the deaths.”

“You say settlers have been ripped apart by something ?”

“Yes, it can be quite hard to identify them. Men, women, even a child barely able to walk. The poor thing must have been taken from its crib at night. We need to leave this place Captain Tromp, or you’ll have all our deaths on your conscience.”

Maarten attended church and believed in God, which meant he believed in the devil too. He had no wish to go anywhere near the place the settlers called the dead water, but he had to do something. An evacuation was ridiculous, he’d face a court for carrying out such an act without orders. Someone would see his report when he got home though, someone senior in the Navy. They were bound to ask what he’d done, how he’d tried to help the troubled settlement.

“Today I need to talk to a few of your people.” He said. “I hope that won’t cause you a problem ?”

“I’d rather you didn’t, they’re all close to panic and despair.”

“Yet...I must. My superiors will ask why I failed in my duty if I didn’t. Then tomorrow you and I will set off early, accompanied by several members of my crew, all suitably armed. We will then walk around this place you call the dead water, and we will.....See what we shall see. Agreed ?”

“Very well, though I fear not all of us will return.” Said Witte Corneliszoon.

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Maarten had heard a lot of weird stories from the settlers, much of it different to the way Witte had told him events had occurred. He knew colonies though and the way they worked. The people would tell Witte the kind of story he wanted to hear, something that could go on official reports. Usually there was enough of the truth, so that Witte could take action if he wished to. It wasn’t really lying; the basic idea was still the same. It appeared the dead child hadn’t been taken from her crib. The toddler had been out with an older sister in broad daylight, when something had taken her. In many ways, that was worse than the story the family had told Witte Corneliszoon. No matter what was the truth; the child had died, the body mutilated.

“Snakes took her.....I saw them moving through the bushes.”

The older sister had told him, after he'd promised to keep whatever she told him a secret between just the two of them. The Donder Isles were small, about thirty small islands too small to bother populating and just one large main island of just a few square miles. There had never been a full survey of the main island, but Maarten knew there were no snakes, none at all. At just after sunrise on the second day in the settlement he was leading half a dozen armed members of his crew towards the deep inland area of water the locals called The Dead Water. By his side was a very agitated Witte Corneliszoon, the leader of the small colony.

“Have you ever seen snakes on any of the smaller islands Witte ?” He asked.

“No, there are no snakes here. Why do you ask ?”

“No real reason, just checking every potential cause for the deaths.”

The entire island was only eight miles from end to end, a kind of crescent moon shape with the dead water in the centre. Paths had been left to become overgrown though and Witte was constantly finding excuses to stop. It took them several hours to reach the dark, deep and unfathomed body of water.

“We'll be returning in the dark Witte and I blame you.” He said. “All that endless fussing about over nothing. It will all go in my report, I can promise you that.”

“Do your men have lamps ?” Asked Witte.

There was the look again, the terrified look Maarten had seen in the man's eyes before. There was a lot Witte had seen and wasn't telling, he was sure of it.

“Of course my men have lamps, we're efficient in the navy. Why did you let the paths become so overgrown ?”

“It's not my fault.....People began to stay close to their homes. The deaths.....I told you about all the deaths.”

Maarten walked up to the edge of the dead water and once again, the truth differed from descriptions he'd been given. It wasn't a perfectly circular body of water at all, the circumference varied to make it more of an elongated oval than a circle. There was even an island in the centre, a small rocky island where two small trees had managed to take root. There was a strange feeling about the place though, or all the stories had begun to get to him.

“We'll spread out a little, but make sure you can always see at least one other person.” He yelled.

“We're going to walk round the dead water and.....See what there is to see. Be alert, there's no telling what we might find.”

Philip, his second in command was the first to spot something. It was unforgivable, the bones of two youngsters were in amongst the crab grass close to the water's edge. Witte made several excuses as to why no one had searched for the bodies of the two boys who'd gone missing while fishing.

Maarten couldn't bear to look at the man. Cowardice, weakness and a complete lack of moral fibre seemed to be Witte's problem.

“No one would obey my orders to search for them.”

“Then you should have come and searched the area on your own.”

They buried the boys there and then in a shallow grave among the bushes. Maarten spoke a few words over them, though Witte kept to himself a few yards away. If his men weren't so well disciplined, he was sure some of them would have struck the leader of the settlement. It was close to dusk by the time they stopped for a rest and they were still only halfway around the dead water.

“A short break, eat what you brought.” Said Maarten. “We'll return to the Middelburg and begin searching again tomorrow.”

"You don't even know what you expect to find." Said Witte.

"I didn't expect to find two dead boys, left unburied.....But we did."

By chance they were at the closest point to the tiny rocky island that rose up out of the dead water.

Philip noticed the movement on the island, though two other members of his crew shouted too.

"There.....On the island, I saw something plunge into the water." Shouted Philip.

"I saw it too.....Something big....Bigger than a man." Someone yelled.

Maybe it was just coincidence, though Witte gasped and began to run when it happened. Maarten had been through an earthquake once, he knew what the trembling of the ground signified. As the tremors became worse, the dead water began to rise and fall as though it had its own tide.

"Keep still and keep away from the trees." Shouted Maarten. "It's an earthquake, terrifying but harmless. Unless something collapses onto you. Keep in the open and keep low to the ground."

His men were well trained, they'd have gladly followed him into hell without questioning his orders.

Maarten called out to Witte to keep low and stop running, but it did no good. The leader of the settlement was thrown off his feet, to land with a splash in the dead water.

"Dear God, did you see that Philip?" Asked Maarten.

"No, what happened?"

"Something got hold of Witte, or at least I think I saw that. The water was churning and there's all the debris from the trees."

The shaking of the ground hadn't helped, Maarten had trouble keeping his feet. The air had changed too, there was a definite haze obscuring the dead water. Still....Maarten was sure he'd seen, something pull a screaming Witte Corneliszoon under the water. As the shaking of the ground stopped, the lights began on the surface of the water. Strange lights, as if the water was burning. Strange happenings called for decisive action.

"Light your lamps if you have them." Yelled Maarten. "Then follow me, we're leaving this place."

He wanted to say leaving forever, someone else could have the job of investigating what had happened. When Maarten saw something illuminated by the lights on the water, he was no longer a rational civilised man.

"At the run, follow me!" He shouted. "Don't look at the water. Run.....Run for your lives!"

Panic, hysteria, call it what you like, it robbed Maarten and his crew of their wits. A corrosive infectious insanity that made them care about one thing only, escape from that dreadful island. Running in the dusk with just a few oil lamps brought its own perils and one of the crew simply vanished before they reached the track that would take them back to the settlement and the Middelburg.

"Something has Philip.....It's tearing him apart." Someone yelled.

Maarten looked while running, by the light of an oil lamp held by someone several feet away. Even so he saw the blood, lots of blood. Something had ripped Philip in two, something grey, huge and silent. It vanished into the trees before he could get a really good look at it. It left behind it the unmistakable smell of sulphur. Maarten ran blindly and paid the price. His forehead found a solid well grown tree in the dark.

He passed out, though he did remember his men carrying him at one point. By the time he regained consciousness and some of his wits, he was in a boat, with his men rowing toward the Middelburg.

They were rowing as if the devil himself was after them. Just himself and four crew members left, five out of a party of eight, nine including Witte.

"What did you see sir? In the dead water, what did you see?"

Maarten prided himself on knowing not only every face in his crew, but their history too and a few details about their families. In the dark though on a moving boat, he was left with just a voice. It sounded like young Finn, though he might have been wrong.

“Row lad, row with all your strength. I saw hell itself in that water.....I saw hell itself.”

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~ **Now** ~

Sam Hardwick pulled back on the power a little as The Jenny seemed to be creating quite a large wake. He'd already been yelled at by a few angry locals and didn't want everyone in the The Donder Isles to hate him. He had no idea how The Jenny had come by her name. Like so much else in the life of a TV producer, the boat had been hired for the duration. Duration of what ? That was still in the lap of the Gods.

“We're nearly there Nicki.” He yelled. “Time for you to do your voodoo again.”

At the end of Jones Bay the water became a little choppy, as the Atlantic Ocean met the narrow channel leading into Outerbridge Sound. Called Dead Water by the original Dutch settlers who hadn't lasted very long. After they'd been just about wiped out in about fifteen ninety, the British had arrived, as they tended to do. Some names had been translated from Dutch and retained, but someone obviously decided dead water would never do as a name. Outerbridge was one of the first English settlers and a lot of places on the islands still bore his name. His family were still major movers and shakers in the region.

“Have a go yourself this time Sam. You have to do it eventually.”

Nicki Outerbridge arrived back with drinks and a few nibbles on a tray. For someone whose family counted their money by weighing it, she'd turned out to be remarkable down to earth. Mid-thirties, gorgeous and yet still single. He knew there had to be a story there somewhere, a few snippets of gossip to add to the reality TV mini-series he'd been commissioned to make.

“Oh come on Nicki, just one more time.” He said.

He was getting to know her. The way she sipped at the chilled coke she'd just got out of the fridge, the slight hardening of her stare. Just three days, four if you counted the day he'd arrived, and already he knew she was going to make him do it.

“No Sam, it's time you did it.” She said. “I've seen tourists hire a boat in the morning and come to see the sound in the afternoon. You can do it.”

“Fine.” He said.

He didn't feel fine, tackling the narrow channel to get into Outerbridge Sound was dangerous, people had died. Not just over enthusiastic tourists either, two fit young Israeli students had died the year before, both experienced boat enthusiasts.

“Yay, about time Captain Sam ran the gauntlet.” Said Ilaria.

Ilaria D'Andrea, their pre-production scout, she'd found all the great locations for a river monster series that had been picked up by one of the big networks. She worked for him, he signed her pay cheques, but she still teased the crap out of him.

“Alright, I'll do it.” Said Sam. “Where's Dom ? He must want to come and taunt me too.”

“Dom is nursing a headache from last night.” Said Ilaria. “One too many Mai Tais after dinner.”

“I heard that.” Shouted Dom from below.

Dom Trecca was their special effects guru, who doubled as a location scout. A little too fond of the booze, thought it didn't seem to get in the way of him doing his job. So far it was just the three of them on Janssen Island, the main island in the group. With Nicki to help of course, they'd never have

been there if she hadn't written a piece about the mysterious monster of Outerbridge Sound. A monster who arrived every hundred years or so to create mayhem and slaughter the population. "Get on deck Dom, that's an order." Shouted Sam. "I want everyone up here when I do this for the first time."

"He's right, that is a good idea." Yelled Nicki.

He'd read a few articles about the sound, of course he had, it was useful background for the show. Every year one or two boats collided trying to go through the channel at the same time. Usually the result was two trashed boats, but no serious injuries. Sometimes there were deaths though and invariably the dead had been below decks at the time. Dom slouched up the stairs and sat next to Ilaria.

"They should put up traffic lights or something." Said Dom.

"Traffic lights cost money and our government are allergic to spending money." Said Nicki.

"Here we go." Said Sam.

The trick was to wait for just the right moment, when the water in the channel was heading in the same direction you wanted to go. The problem was that the channel was long and narrow and a boat coming the other way might decide to power up and go against the flow of water. Rarely, it really was rarely, the two boats would collide. Dom watched the flow of water and the other end of the channel, while trying to keep The Jenny fairly straight and aimed in the right direction. It wasn't easy. Nicki squeezed his arm very gently.

"Now." She said.

Sam increased power and went for it. As they entered the channel the weird currents began what Nicki had told him about when she'd piloted the boat on the three previous visits to the infamous sound. The churning water could try and push you against the rocks on either side, or stop the boat dead in the water. Just a few yards into the channel and he thought it was worse than white water rafting, a lot worse. Sam had three people expecting him not to kill them and an expensive hired boat with lots state of the art technology onboard, which was also very expensive.

"Wow, Nicki didn't bounce us about this much." Said Ilaria.

As quickly as it had all begun, it was over and The Jenny was heading into the dark deep waters of Outerbridge Sound. It was all such a relief, until Sam remembered he had to do it all again to get back into Jones Bay.

"I still can't get over the size of the sound, it's so much larger than I thought. The pictures don't do it justice." Said Ilaria.

"Colder than the ocean, about five degrees colder." Said Nicki. "Very little flow of water to and from the Atlantic, so pollution builds up too. Lots of debris from seasonal hurricanes, all of it rotting slowly away somewhere down there. Needless to say, swimming in the sound is a definite health risk. Especially after what happened to the glass bottomed boat."

"What happened to the glass bottomed boat?" Asked Ilaria.

"We're going to look at that tomorrow." Said Sam.

"A depth no one has measured and the most deadly body of water in the world." Said Dom.

"You're right Dom, the body count is pretty scary." Said Nicki. "Some of the population think the statistics will put off the tourists though, so no deadly body of water talk in the bars, alright? Some of the population still call Brits limey bastards, so don't stir them up."

"But they're..... You're all descended from Brits." Said Sam.

"Oh, don't say that in Rum Runners Bar. After a few generations no one here likes being called a Brit. Anyway, we've quite a diverse population. Labourers came from the West Indies to help with the

construction of a few military defences during one of the wars, I forget which, and some of them remained. Similarly the Irish came to help construct the harbour and sea walls around Castle Bay. Some of them remained and raised families here. The second most common surname in The Donder Isles is Flynn."

"And the most common?" Asked Ilaria.

"Outerbridge of course."

There it was, that strange stillness in the air as Sam steered towards the tiny rocky island in the centre of the sound. A great many had tried to measure the depth of the sound and all had failed. The most successful had measured the depth as just over a mile, in the exact spot Sam brought The Jenny to a stop.

"Put the sea anchors over the side or we will drift." He said.

No one exactly rushed, though they did end up with about eight sea anchors to try and keep them in place. No anchors on the bottom of course, there were no anchors designed to go that deep. They'd still move slightly with the slight inrush of water from the channel, but not enough for it to be an issue.

"Ideally a huge vessel from someone's navy is needed to measure the depth." Said Sam. "Maybe they could even send down a robot submersible. But.....They'd never fit through the channel, so we'll do the best we can."

"Ever the optimist Sam, ever the optimist." Said Ilaria.

Ilaria D'Andrea was about forty with long dark hair. A husband back in London who she seemed to dote on, but no kids. Sometimes Sam thought she saw him as a surrogate unruly child.

"Are we launching the underwater drone?" Asked Dom. "It'll need unpacking from its crate."

Like him, Dom Trecca was thirty, their birthdays were only a few days apart. Dom had a wife and two kids back home in London. Unlike Ilaria he rarely mentioned his family and there seemed to be very little doting going on.

"No, we'll drop the sonar probe down to about a hundred feet first." Said Sam. "Let's get a look down the rabbit hole."

None of them were experts with the technology, the drone had only arrived the day before on a cargo plane. Jannsen Island, the locals referred to it simply as Jannsen, had an airstrip. No international airport, just a small landing strip for supplies from the USA. Just about all freight and tourists arrived by ship. Without the regular stopover by visiting cruise ships, the island wouldn't have had a tourism industry.

As for Jannsen Island, the main island in the group. It had been named after the captain of the first Dutch vessel to land there. He had run into the island group during a tropical storm and lost half his crew, but a discovery is a discovery. Why the British never changed the name was one of those strange things that just happen.

"I'll run out the probe cable." Said Nicki.

It took a while for everything to be organised, though Sam was sure they'd get better at it. All four of them huddled around a laptop computer, which was connected to the sonar probe by a box of tricks none of them understood.

"If we see anything big moving around we'll use the hydrophones next to listen to what might be going on down there." Said Sam.

"Then the drone?" Asked Nicki.

The underwater drone was at the bleeding edge of underwater technology and on loan, at a price, from a world famous oceanographic institute. It was worth a small fortune and there was still some

doubt if the insurance company would cover the cost if it was lost. Of course none of the others needed to know any of that.

"We're primarily looking to get an accurate depth today, but yes, if the sonar and hydrophones indicate anything worth looking at, we'll use the drone." He said.

The sonar was disappointing Sam had been afraid of that. Murky water to say the least, with centuries of organic debris lurking at the bottom. One water sample brought up from just a few fathoms by a previous team of monster hunters, had looked like pea soup. Sam had seen the pictures.

"See that sort of dark area in the middle?" Sam asked. "That is where the detritus of centuries is too thick to be penetrated by sonar."

"Pea soup plus." Said Nicki.

"Yes, but we do have a trick up our sleeve." Said Sam. "A very expensive trick, the sacrificial transmitting device."

"If it works." Said Ilaria.

"Alright, tell all....What sacrificial transmitter?" Asked Nicki.

"Water proof and hopefully pressure proof." Said Sam. "A sonar transmitter with a powerful battery, weighted to drop like a stone and hopefully drop right through the pea soup stuff that starts at about a hundred and twenty feet. We'll only get a simple ping, but it will give us an accurate depth when it hits bottom."

"If there is a bottom." Said Nicki. "My grandfather always believed the sound went right down to hell."

"Remember that line for when the production crew arrives." Said Ilaria.

The sacrificial transmitter looked like a bomb, a long round tube coming to a point at either end. There were no fins though or anything else on its polished stainless steel surface that might get caught up on something on the way down. Sam unscrewed a plug that had several washers and a surprisingly long thread. He used the end of a pen to press a tiny button inside.

"Got anything?" He asked.

"Yes, a nice strong signal." Said Dom.

The transmitter had been Sam's idea and it had cost the equivalent of a full week's costs for the entire production budget. He hated to look at anything like that, but the backers in London always seemed to look at everything that way. The transmitter had to work, it had to give them a headline for a press release.

"Alright, I want everything recorded from this point." Said Sam. "Get one of the portable cameras Dom, one that gives a nice steady image. We're hoping for the first authenticated depth for Outerbridge Sound people, our first headline."

It all needed a quick intro to camera with the date and time, though much of it was likely to be filmed again later, with a suitably mysterious backing track and all of them in far better clothes. The important thing was to get it all on film, with the four of them willing to state it was the truth, exactly how it had happened. When they were ready Sam handed the transmitter device to Nicki.

"Crap, it's heavier than it looks. What do I do with this?" She asked.

"Weighted to drop fast, just drop it over the side."

"Really, I just.....Drop it into the water?"

"Yes, simple as that."

They watched the blip on the screen as their sonar probe picked up the transmitter. It took a while, water can be a lot tougher to drop through than air, especially water full of debris. When the signal

went the transmitter hadn't bottomed out, or been crushed by the pressure at such a depth. It looked as though the device was still dropping, but the debris had become too thick, or the distance simply too far for the transmitter to be picked up.

"I'm seeing it and I don't fucking believe it." Said Ilaria.

"Cameras are rolling, keep the language clean." Said Sam.

"She's right though.....Fuck ! Is that really the depth in miles ?" Asked Nicki.

"The bottom of the Mariana Trench is about seven miles down, two US navy guys went down there, right to the bottom in about 1960." Said Dom. "Ilaria is right, no one will believe this, they'll say we faked it."

Even the software connected to the sonar probe didn't seem to believe it, the number of miles kept flashing, as though it thought someone needed to correct it. The transmitter had gone silent while still dropping and its last recorded depth had been at eight and a quarter miles. It was crazy, it had to be wrong, yet the evidence was there, they'd even filmed it.

"Has to be a glitch, the Atlantic just isn't that deep." Said Ilaria.

"Yeah, has to be a glitch." Said Dom.

Nicki was just grinning at him, as though he'd just proved her crazy old grandfather wasn't crazy after all. It was a grin that said the sound might go right down to hell after all.

"We're going to put out the press release." Said Sam. "We'll say we have it all filmed and confirmed by very expensive technology."

"Your choice boss, but.....They'll never publish it." Said Dom. "Not even on the back page with the 'an alien ate my kitten,' type stories."

"They might, it's been a quiet month for news." Said Ilaria.

"It'll be printed, I've still got a reputation in the industry." Said Sam. "They'll publish it and the public will make it go viral on social media. After that the finance guys will let us have the budget to get the production crew out here. Eight and a quarter miles guys, eight and a quarter fucking miles."

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