

La Isla de los Diablos

By

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Southern Caribbean Sea, 1603 Anno Domini

Don Ricardo de Cordoba leaned on the rail as he watched the sun sink into the Caribbean Sea. Like everything else on the poorly maintained Santa Clara, the wooden rail creaked under his weight. The sound didn't detract from Ricardo's satisfaction as he enjoyed the fiery view from the deck of the simple merchant ship temporarily under his command.

The salty breeze at his back took on the

smell of sweat covered by flowery French scent. Ricardo heard boots scuffing on the deck and smiling, turned to greet his second in command.

“Coming out to enjoy the view, Don Miguel?” Ricardo asked as the younger noble grabbed onto the rail.

“Pardon, cousin, but I have no stomach for sailing,” Miguel answered after gulping some air.

“No matter, Miguelito. As long as you have the stomach for conquest and an appetite for riches. This part of the journey will end soon.”

Sweating heavily, Miguel only managed a nod and a tight-lipped smile. Ricardo sincerely hoped Miguel did better on land.

Miguel's four retainers, true conquistadores, were the only fighting men Ricardo trusted among his small army. He needed his young cousin steady.

“Is that it ahead, Ricardo?” Miguel asked before dropping his voice and adding, “Is that La Isla de los Diablos?”

“You have a good eye, my friend. But remember, the name of the island is Santa Felicia. Smugglers and runaway slaves only call it Island of the Devils to scare away colonists.”

“But, Ricardo, three attempts to colonize Santa Felicia have met with disaster. No survivors were found to tell their tale. The island is cursed – or so some say.”

“Colonization is a dangerous business, my

young friend. Lands with the greatest riches will have the greatest challenges as well. Those other colonists arrived with farmers and women and few fighting men. I come with an army. And those runaway slaves who've gone there to hide behind Santa Felicia's overblown reputation will work once again, for a stern master."

Miguel fell silent, which suited Ricardo's mood. Writs to colonize any valuable islands had been snatched up by more powerful men long ago. For someone of Ricardo's limited wealth, dubious family connections and sometimes unlucky military career the governor would offer nothing better than an ill-starred island nobody else wanted.

But, it would be his land. He would make it into a source of wealth. Any runaway slaves he found there would learn to be dutiful workers in his colony. He had just the men to see to it that they did.

It had become too dark to see. The ship dropped anchor to keep from sailing into one of the sandbars or coral reefs common to the area. They would make landfall early in the morning.

Ricardo patted Miguel on the shoulder and headed for the hold. As he had every night since their expedition left Havana, Ricardo inspected his little army. Each of the gallows-bait assigned to Ricardo by the governor submitted to a search before taking up a wooden platter and shuffling to the tiny

galley. Each night, his search turned up some new, homemade weapon, bottle of strong drink or stolen trinket. He didn't know how they acquired those things, but they did.

“Why the long faces, *ninos*?” Ricardo needed these men, criminals or not. “We reach land tomorrow. Soon enough you'll be doing this kind of search with the slaves we capture. You'll do it right or we'll all wake up with our throats cut.” His jest didn't cheer the men.

“I'm sure, *senor*, that you've reserved the nightly search of the Queen of the Slaves for yourself, eh?” The one-eyed “soldier” known as *Rojito* smiled as he said it, so Ricardo chose to treat it as a friendly quip.

“If this legendary Queen of the Slaves exists, I want whoever is the best at searching for weapons to handle her. I'll sacrifice a bit of sport for a safe night's sleep.” Ricardo waved the men on to their meal.

As he headed to his cabin, Ricardo silently prayed the runaways weren't organized enough to have a queen. His forty-seven men would be hard-pressed to control disorganized slaves, even if he had proper soldiers. As it was, he didn't need false tales of devils or a kingdom of escaped slaves to leave him nervous about his new property.

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The morning tide was receding as Ricardo's army completed their landing.

Only two men had been injured as they struggled to offload equipment and provisions from the Santa Clara's longboats.

The narrow strand of dark mud between the sea and the dense tangle of palmetto and brush was all Santa Felicia had to offer in the way of a beach. The men cursed as they waded through the muck and struggled to drag the two small cannon to solid ground. So far, there was no sign of slaves or Indios to oppose them, but Ricardo felt their eyes upon him. Clouds of tormenting insects were opposition enough for the moment.

Don Miguel and his retainers pushed through the brush near where Ricardo's tent was being set up. They were covered in sap and small nicks, but otherwise unharmed.

But, Miguel's face was even more pale than it had been when he was seasick.

“Don Ricardo, I must speak to you immediately,” Miguel said as he came near.

The professional soldiers stationing themselves behind Miguel looked uneasy. That concerned Ricardo more.

“Here, away from the rest of the men,” Ricardo said as he steered Miguel from the rapidly organizing camp. Miguel's armored soldiers stayed in a group, seeming to ignore the questioning looks the rest sent their way.

Out of earshot from the others, Miguel spoke quickly.

“We found no signs of men near the beach. But there were tracks like none I've ever seen. They were as broad as a man's hand,

but deep. Deeper than those of an armored warhorse. They weren't hooves or paw prints or like any other earthly creature.”

“I'll have no talk of devils, Miguel. Just because you haven't seen tracks like these means nothing more than that. How many animals did Cortes or Magellan see that no Christian man had seen before them? Did that make those animals the spawn of the Unholy? No.”

Ricardo felt a little satisfaction as Miguel thought for a moment and then shrugged. The younger noble looked steadier now he'd considered Ricardo's logical argument.

As Ricardo returned to the camp, he saw work had stopped. Men gripped their weapons and peered at the forest, muttering

and crossing themselves.

Ricardo pushed through the men to where Father Gomez sat. Like the rest of Ricardo's army, the priest assigned to him by the governor was here only because he was of no use to anyone else. He was more interested in studying new plants and animals than in spreading the Word of God. As every other time Ricardo found him, Fr. Gomez had a bottle of sacramental wine in one hand. The other held a reading glass to aid him with the tight script of his Bible.

“Reverend Father, it's time for you to bless this place and the men who've come to bring the civilization and the Holy Church.”

Leaning close to pull the bottle from Fr. Gomez's hand, he added, “Steady the men.

The Santa Clara has left and we're here at least until she returns next month.”

With Ricardo's help, the priest climbed onto a barrel and raised his hands to silence the nervous grumbling as the men drew near. He blessed the men and led them in the Lord's Prayer, his voice gaining strength as he spoke.

“We're here to do the Lord's work. This is a strange place and we will see many things which are new to us. But, we are still in God's world. We have His backing against anything, be it man or demon. Do not fear.”

Fr. Gomez climbed down from the barrel before Ricardo realized the priest had nothing more to add. The rest of the men went back to work, not greatly cheered, but

no longer clutching their weapons in white-knuckled grips.

Ricardo sent teams of men to find water, others to fell trees for a more permanent camp above the tide line and Miguel and his men to hunt for food or runaway slaves. With immediate and useful tasks, the men steadied.

Taking one-eyed Rojito to watch his back, Ricardo decided to scout out his new possession. Before long, he found one of Miguel's "devil" tracks. It was so unlike anything he'd seen before, it unnerved him.

Rojito looked at the track and spit, unconcerned. "So, it has no hooves or paws or feet as we know them. If it leaves a print, it must be of this earth. If it's of the earth, a

bullet or a well-swung blade will kill it.”

“I'm sure you're right. I'll give a gold piece to the first man to bring me the beast that makes this track.”

The greed lit in Rojito's eye told Ricardo his offer would overcome any shaky nerves the other men were likely to harbor.

When they returned, the camp was surrounded by a shallow ditch. Men dragged vines and fallen tree limbs to build an obstacle atop the dirt piled behind the ditch. Not a strong defensive position, but by nightfall, there would be no stealthy entry into the camp.

Ricardo opened a small cask of wine and allowed each man a large cup both to steady their nerves and to celebrate their arrival on

his island. The coarse, red wine cheered the men a bit. By the time the cask was empty, Rojito had spread word of the gold piece reward. Four men volunteered to patrol outside the camp that night, hoping to win the promised coin.

“Don't fret,” Ricardo said as he clapped a hand on Miguel's shoulder, “the landing went smoothly. If the slaves had mounted an attack while we were setting up, I doubt we would've done well. As it is, we have solid ground under our feet, our supplies at hand and a bit of a stockade. Now, I hope the slaves try to attack. It will be the easiest way to kill off the troublemakers.”

Miguel shrugged, then said, “This camp should hold against slaves. But, los

diablos?”

“Enough talk of devils, Miguel. We found strange tracks, made by strange animals. Nothing more. Perhaps they will prove to have valuable hides or savory meat. Your devils may be what make my island a source of great wealth.”

Two arquebus shots rang out, coming from the dense jungle. A pistol’s discharge followed after a heartbeat and then the blood-chilling scream of a man in agony.

Ricardo grabbed a torch and raced in the direction of the scream, Miguel and his retainers following closely behind. He pushed through sharp-bladed fronds and clinging vines, fighting the feeling that the forest itself was against him as well.

Ricardo swung his blade, clearing his path and showing the forest who was master.

Despite the light from his torch, Ricardo tripped over the first of his scouts and landed on the body of a second man. He struggled to his feet on blood-slicked ground. Around Ricardo, his four scouts lay in pieces. Each man was cut in half, torso separated from waist.

“Madre de Dios,” Miguel whispered. The tough conquistadores behind him crossed themselves, looking around and ready for a fight.

One of Miguel's men dropped his sword and reached into the brush, dragging out a skinny old man. “Here's our murderer.”

“Do you believe this wretch was able to cut

four armed men in half?” Ricardo asked as he eyed the emaciated man.

His features blended Caribe and African. Faded whip scars over his protruding ribs told of long years of slavery. Other than a rag around his hips, the only coverings the runaway had were broad stripes of white paste on his arms and torso.

“No, not me,” the slave cackled, “It was los diablos.” His eyes shone brightly as he peered at the surrounding forest. “They protect their island and their people.”

More men came from the beach camp. Their panting fell silent as they saw what remained of the scouts.

The corpses’ ragged severing cuts were the same whether the men wore tough

brigandine or mail shirts. These men were cut with something heavy, like a scythe. Scythes were weapons of peasants and slaves. Hardly the thing a devil would use.

Ricardo ordered the nearest to gather up the scouts' bodies.

“But, Don Ricardo, there are four heads and chests but only two pairs of legs. Where did the bottom halves of the other two men go? Is their flesh being eaten by diablos?”

“Back to camp,” Ricardo shouted. “We'll look for the creatures who killed our men when we have sunlight.”

He kept his thoughts about flesh-eating Indios and Africans to himself.

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At dawn, Rojito brought the captured slave to Ricardo's tent. The runaway's face was bruised and his bright-eyed amusement was absent.

“Don Ricardo, this man and I spent the night having a long conversation. The kingdom of runaways sounds more like a village, but a strong one with a ditch, obstacles and a real stockade.” He grinned at Ricardo before adding, “And they have a Queen. This painted stick says she's beautiful, but he thinks he is a handsome man himself.”

“Did he tell how many of their men attacked my scouts last night?”

Rojito snorted, before saying, “He claims it was los diablos. He says they protect the

island, but won't harm the people of the Queen of the Slaves. She has made some sort of Devil's Pact to protect them and only them."

Ricardo grabbed the runaway's chin.

"Well, your Queen of Slaves has been replaced by the representative of a true king. You'll take me to her, now."

"I'll guide you, but I don't think los diablos will let you reach her. They protect us, but you have nothing to protect you."

"This is my protection," Ricardo said, tapping his breastplate with the tip of his sword and then raised the sword, "and this."

"And the Lord," Fr. Gomez said from behind Ricardo.

"Yes, and the Lord," Ricardo nodded.

“Those should be more than enough to stand off your devils, old man.”

“Of course, the great man is right,” the runaway slave giggled. “You must know more than a simple slave.”

Rojito looped a rope around the runaway's waist, “You'll be with us the whole way. Let's go.”

Ricardo left the men injured during the landing and another four to protect the camp. He took the rest of his army and both cannon. Taking the slave village quickly would secure the island and give his men shelter. A bold plan of conquest, worthy of a conquistador.

The runaway practically skipped as he led Ricardo's army inland. Rojito kept one hand

on the runaway's rope and a pistol pointed at the man's back every step of the way.

“Come, come, hurry,” the slave cackled.

“The Queen and los diablos await you, you must not make them wait. Waiting long will make them angry.”

Their pace was limited by the strength of the men dragging the cannon. Only the heat, the weight of their armor and the clouds of stinging insects swarming in the steamy air opposed the army's steady advance to the clearing where his scouts had been ambushed.

Ricardo was surprised by how much blood the four scouts had lost as they died. The clearing was liberally splashed with dried, rusty red. He led his force through quickly,

anxious to reach open ground. The dense, choking forest thinned as they pressed inland.

“Good land here,” Don Miguel said as they moved into a rich, sparsely treed field.

“This earth will yield sugar cane and rich crops of plantains and tomatoes. My father's plantations produce best on this type of land. Perhaps my portion can be from here to those low hills?”

“Miguelito, let us subdue the devils and runaway slaves before we worry about dividing up my land grant, eh?”

“And what of the devils, cousin?” Miguel glanced around, “They don't like the light of God's good sun, do they?”

“Miguel, there are no devils. Those scouts

were ambushed by slaves swinging scythes. Don't let foolish legends turn you into an old woman.”

“I'm not being an old woman,” Miguel snapped. “Those men were killed in a small clearing. What weapon could you swing in that tight space and cut a man in half? I tell you, there is something unnatural about this place.”

“Unnatural?” Ricardo chuckled. “When some ragged slaves try to rush us while swinging some weird sort of chopping blade, you'll see what real soldiers can do. We'll slaughter the first dozen and the rest of those stinking slaves will grovel at our feet.”

Ricardo snapped his fingers to challenge

Satan. “That will be the end of the whole Isla de los Diablos legend. Years from now, you’ll bore your grandsons with stories about how we turned that ghost tale into a joke.”

A scream sounded behind them.

Ricardo spun around to see a monster dart from some tall reeds and grab one of his men. It was nothing like Ricardo expected. The devil was the size and roughly the shape of a small horse, black plates covered its body as a type of skin rather than strapped armor. Its head was wider than tall, with scythe-like blades protruding like external jaws, only, parallel to the ground. Hardly a red-skinned man with horns and wings, but horrible in its own unholy way.

The devil's victim screamed again, hammering fists on the devil's hard face while the creature's blades dug into the man's sides. With a violent twist of its head, the devil severed its victim at the waist. The man died in a spray of blood, red froth pouring from his mouth.

Ricardo's army broke. Men dropped bales of supplies, the ropes for pulling the cannon and even their weapons to flee from the creature.

The devil lunged out, grabbing a fleeing man in its terrible jaws. Its thin, stick-like legs jutted from its sides, shuffling to turn it in Ricardo's direction. The second man fell from its jaws, in two pieces.

Several paces to Ricardo's left, Fr. Gomez

raised his gilded cross and cried out to the devil in Latin. Ricardo didn't recognize the prayer or command, but the creature turned from Fr. Gomez to face Ricardo. His feet were frozen to the ground.

Ricardo looked down at the pistol in his hand. He didn't recall pulling it from his belt, but he pointed it at the charging devil. Black, shining blades opened from its face as that demon from Hell rushed to cut Ricardo in half. He saw soft, gray flesh and some sort of mouth in the gap between those blood-dripping scythes and shot at that point.

The devil stopped short, with a whistling sort of scream. Ricardo dropped the spent pistol and pulled his other pistol from the

top of his boot. The shining black eyes protruding from the devil's armored skull seemed to focus the hate of the damned at Ricardo.

He shot at the left eye, a gray smear of lead on the devil's armored head marked the bullet's near miss. The devil was a dozen paces away, shaking its head from the impact of the bullet. Ricardo drew his sword, voicing a wordless shout of defiance as he waited for the devil to attack.

Don Miguel rushed in from the devil's right side, swinging his saber at the beast's skull. From the left, Miguel's halberdier used his weapon's axe-like blade to lop off one of the devil's spindly legs.

Ignoring the attacks, the devil lunged at

Ricardo. Using his sword simply to fend away the devil's jaws, Ricardo skipped back out of danger.

With a twist of its head, the devil shrugged off Miguel's attempts to stab it in the skull. The young nobleman stumbled back, tripping over one of the devil's bisected victims.

Miguel's halberdier stepped in and with a powerful swing, cut away the devil's two remaining legs on its left side.

The devil gave a shrill whistle and fell to its left, ragged leg stumps trying to push it at Ricardo again.

Miguel's other retainers rushed in, broadswords hacking at the devil's tough, armored hide. Miguel swung a powerful

blow at the devil's thin neck, severing its still snapping head from its unholy body. A dozen other men, courage regained, poured in to chop and stab at the devil.

It didn't die like a natural beast, but it did die.

“Do you see it, men?” Ricardo climbed up onto the dead devil's back. “It's terrible, but it can die. Steel and lead will kill it.”

Shouting it out to heaven made his words seem true as an antidote to terror.

The ragged slave ran to the devil's side and he fell to his knees. Patting the slain devil's side, the slave began to croon.

Ricardo studied the huge beast. Despite its hideous appearance, it seemed somehow familiar. It had to be an animal of some

sort. And if so, it was of God's world and not from Hell.

Over the fallen men, Fr. Gomez opened his Bible and read the Last Rites. His voice was steady. He only paused to brush his pages clear and move his glass to focus on the words.

“Well done, Don Miguel,” Ricardo shouted over the murmur of the men returning to their places. “You and your men have each earned a gold piece for killing this so-called devil. I appreciate your courage,” he said as he tossed each of Miguel's men a promised coin. He added two more to Miguel's halberdier, certain the man had saved his life.

The background drone of Fr. Gomez's

voice stopped suddenly. He waved Ricardo over, holding his reading lens over a spot in his Bible.

“You must see this, my lord.” Fr. Gomez held out his open Bible, with his reading glass holding the page down.

Annoyed, but unwilling to insult God right before a battle, Ricardo looked at the page and read aloud, “Man may make plans in his heart, but what the tongue . . .”

“No, Don Ricardo, use my reading glass.” Fr. Gomez said.

“Very well, Father. Man may make plans in . . .”

“No, not the Holy Word, use the glass to study the ants crawling on the page.”

“Please, Father. I don’t see what this has

to do with the animal we just fought or those slaves . . . oh.” Under Fr. Gomez’s reading glass, the large, ant on the page looked to be the size of Ricardo’s hand. And it looked like a tiny version of the devil he and his men had just killed.

Emotions fought inside Ricardo. For an ant to be so huge was unheard of. But, it was also a natural, if unprecedented, thing. For the first time since he took the writ for Santa Felicia, Ricardo believed in his heart there were no real devils here. He also understood it would be hard for everyone to see that truth.

“Men,” Ricardo shouted, climbing back onto the slain devil’s back. “This creature is no spawn of Satan. It is merely an ant.

Larger than normal, but an insect nonetheless.”

The gathered men muttered and a few cocked the heads to get a different view of the creature. One of Miguel’s men started to laugh and raised the gold coin Ricardo had given him. “Here’s a florin just for squashing a bug. My father always said the New World was where a man should go to become rich.”

A few men chuckled.

Ricardo decided to keep the men’s spirits up and added, “Think of it, ninos, when you’re at a bar and some fellow tells you he had it hard because he served in a swamp where the mosquitoes were as big a crows, you can say you’ve fought ants as large as

horses.”

From his place near the back of the ant, Rojito said, “You can say that and for once in your lives, you won’t be the biggest liars in the tavern.”

Nerves steadied, the men picked up their weapons, supplies and the ropes for pulling the cannon.

“Between those hills,” Don Miguel's voice caught Ricardo's attention. The young noble pointed toward a notch in the hills. Tall, trimmed wooden trunks marked the slave village. White paste like the stuff the old man had spread on his limbs covered the wooden gates.

“Men. We can stand out here all day and kill these large bugs easily, or we can take

the village and have a nice meal. Which plan suits you best?” Their nervous shouts told Ricardo how fragile the men's courage was, despite having killed a devil.

The runaway slave led the way to the village, his steps dragging. The path was clear, winding through indifferently tended fields of maize, beans and squash. Dropped tools marked where workers had been recently.

The stout gates of the village were closed when Ricardo's army arrived. The faces of the men on the wall were as varied as slaves, Indios and sentenced prisoners of all the Caribbean colonies would be. They ranged from pale, red-haired Irish to bristly haired Africans as black as midnight. Ricardo saw

only a pair of firearms, but many arrows and spears pointed from the wall.

Don Miguel approached the gate, calling out in a fine, court-trained voice, “Open and receive Don Ricardo de Cordoba, master of this land by the grace of the King of Spain.”

A young woman stood up above the gate. Her blonde hair framed a face of exotic beauty, mixing Indio cheeks under eyes as dark as the heart of Africa. Ricardo's voice stuck in his throat at the sight of the Queen of the Slaves. She was worthy of a seat beside any throne on earth.

“Who dares claim this place? I lead this village in the name of the free people of La Isla de los Diablos.”

Ricardo had no intention of taking the

village peacefully. At his signal, both cannon fired. The gate shook and groaned at the impact of iron cannonballs.

Arrows and stones flew from the walls, but only a few of Ricardo's men were hit. Crossbow bolts and arquebus lead came back with a vengeance and men on the wall fell back screaming.

“Again,” Ricardo shouted and the cannon roared, one after the other. The right hand gate sagged and toppled back into the village.

“You fools,” the Queen of the Slaves shouted from above the gate. “You'll bring los diablos down on us as well as yourselves. You'll destroy us all.”

Ricardo called up, “This island and all

upon it are mine, by decree. Accept me and my rule and all will be well.”

He ignored the reed arrows bouncing from his cuirass and the buzz of a slung stone passing his ear. He had to show courage now to enjoy command for the rest of his life.

“Look behind you,” the Queen shouted as she pointed past Ricardo.

Five giant ants rushed toward the back of Ricardo's army. These giants were larger than the one his men had killed earlier. Their oversized heads were more pointed and their scythe-jaws were twice as long. These were warriors.

“Turn around men, we're under attack from behind,” Ricardo bellowed as he waved his

sword. The arquebusiers in the rear turned and fired a volley into the devils. One of the creatures fell with strange, whistling cry and another stampeded off apparently blinded. Scarcely in time, the two cannon were spun and fired into the nearest devils, each iron ball shattering one of the brutes.

The last devil tore into Ricardo's men. Halberd blades and swords hacked, while its deadly scythe-jaws slashed. The devil-ant was cut to pieces, but at the cost of seven of Ricardo's men.

When Ricardo reorganized his army, the village defenders were gone from their wall. Only the Queen of the Slaves remained and her eyes were wide.

Swaggering up to the gate, Ricardo called

up, “Have you nothing more than these over-large insects to defend you? If not, submit now and spare yourself pain.”

The queen shook her head. Not so much in refusal, but seemingly in disbelief.

At Ricardo's nod, Rojito led three other men cautiously past the fallen gate and into Ricardo's new village.

From the gate, Rojito waved safe entry.

“Men, gather up our fallen and the cannon. Into the village and man the walls.”

Silent, but obedient, the men filed behind the walls. Ricardo's new capitol was not much to look upon. Steep hillsides made a bowl with the stout palisade blocking the only easy access. Perhaps forty huts filled the space. Wide, fear-filled eyes looked out

from the doorways and windows of the huts.

“Prop up the gates again, brace them. Place the cannon behind,” Ricardo ordered. Weird whistling, like the death throes of the devils sounded from the forest. Men rushed to prepare the defenses.

Don Miguel approached, leading the Queen of the Slaves as if she were a royal princess. His conquistadores formed a guard around her, apparently ensorcelled by her regal manner.

“Cousin, the um, Lady Juana, has information you must have.”

Seen up close, the Queen of the Slaves was even more impressive than she had seemed above the gate. Miguel's awe of the woman still struck Ricardo as unseemly.

“Speak your piece, wench.”

Ricardo had no intention of falling under her witch's spell.

Her obsidian eyes flashed with anger, Ricardo could see how these runaways had taken her as their queen.

“You've stirred up their nest, killed their soldiers and broken our protection. You may hold my people under your boot, but soon we'll all be dead.”

Her voice, when not shouting from a wall, was as arresting as her appearance. Her Spanish was softened by a French accent.

In battle, confidence was worth more than numbers. Conquistadores had proven that lesson time and again against heathen Moors as well as in the New World. He would

honor that tradition.

“I've killed your so-called devils and do not fear them. I'll do so again if you send more against me, witch.”

Sadness changed, but didn't lessen her beauty.

“You still don't understand. I don't summon or control los diablos. I learned to make los diablos ignore my people. We take the white paste from the walls of their nest so our village and any of our hunters smell like they are part of their nest. It fools los diablos and protected us. But, now they've smelled you and will see all men as a threat to them.”

Ricardo recalled the bones of men and cattle stripped clean by hordes of ants. In

the Caribbean, the tiny creatures were more a force of nature than individual animals. He felt the confidence of the Conquistador fading, replaced by the unfamiliar feeling of dread.

“Don Ricardo,” Rojito called from the wall.

Ricardo raced up the ladder to get a view of the fields beyond the village. A column of giant ants, large headed warriors, emerged from the forest. Their black-armored column following the path toward the wall. Dozens were in the column already and more continued to follow out.

Ricardo turned to assess his defenses. The thirty men holding the wall and manning the cannon looked at him with naked fear. They

would not run, but only because they knew there was no escape.

The Queen of the Slaves dropped a curtsy as smoothly done as any he'd seen in Madrid.

“Welcome to your domain, Don Ricardo. May it bring you all that you and your men deserve.”

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