



Gaargh, the first snow flakes were soakin' into the briny seas by the time I regained me beloved crew, rescuin' most of 'em from Kneehorn's infamous Inhospitable Atoll. Ice caught in me beard and I got me first chillin' sense o' the Christmas to come.

The nearest harbour, Isla del Morbida off the coast o' Spain happened to be Monty McBuboe's home town. Me foul cook'd been a vagabond for years an' were dead against a return. Arr, but I be cap'n here and we were in sore need of a port to weather the, well, the weather. The waves be less fun when 'tis freezin'.

As we drew near the lads were full o' Christmas cheer, already swingin' an' swiggin' rum in the riggin'. Ye hamlet seemed quiet from the water, in spite o'

the festive buntin' and lanterns. The dearth o' folk were a mite worryin', but the crew vanished nonetheless like rats as soon as the gangplank fell. They were scarce out o' sight afore there were screams an' hails o' abuse – all seemed well.

Minutes later, the Doktor dragged a bloodied Johnny Scuttle aboard. Some dock worker'd lunged out the dark an' taken a likin' to Johnny's noggin, forcin' Gunther'd to use 'is surgical skills defensive-like. But Scuttle were drippin' fearfully so we left 'em together.

Billy'n meself strolled down the bloody pier an' found the man Gunther'd so neatly nailed up. We gave 'im a prod an' leaped for our hearts as 'e gnashed 'is gory teeth at us, in spite o' the cold steel in 'is heart. 'Twere not natural, 'im growlin' so we put iron through the rest of 'im. The bits jiggled still so we booted 'em into the harbour. Barry announced it a bad omen for the season, an' in time-honoured fashion sought to o'erturn the ill luck by paradin' naked about the Grim Bastard. 'Twere another good reason to see the sights, besides me chewed-up crewman.

The village were possessed of the grisly décor of a Slavic serial killer turned interior designer. The plain stucco clashed with the blood sloshed walls an' trestle tables strewn with body bits. It seemed Christmas'd gone wrong. The terrified locals, an' me crew were bein' menaced in the middle o' the square by a horde o' ragin', champin' loons. Their eyes were glazed an' their gobs a-drool, seekin' to slake their thirst for human blood. Or so we assumed, not

knowin' the exact details, but familiar with the general principles o' a zombie plague

A noise at me side 'ad me spinnin' 'pon me peg to the sight o' a pustulent creature lurchin' from the shadows. 'Twere but Monty. He dragged us into an alley where a tiny crone burst out from behind him, hiss'in' in 'er toothless way, "the curth, the curth!". Aarr, she fair scared the cockles off the lot of us; Billy pulled some groinal muscle in surprise. By the light o' a gutterin' candle she lisped to us their woes.

Some days before, as the town began to gird itself for Christmas a magical man arrived and amazed 'em with 'is conjurin'. 'Twere all most jolly till the magician turned the Mayor's daughter into a mermaid, who promptly flopped about an' died from lack o' water. The townsfolk, bein' of a provincial nature, knew a witch when they saw one an' acted accordin'ly. As 'is toes caught fire the conjuror cursed the town to a terrible death. Naturally they laughed this off an' toasted marshmallows and the like. The next day were less cheery when some fool, on hearing a a loud bangin' from within the crypts, opened 'em an' so unleashed the undead fiends. By now they were either zombified, hiding or munched upon. There were but little 'ho ho' here.

Me instincts were simple: gather what crew remained an' cast off post-haste. This simple plan gave the crone some form of fit, judgin' by the spittle an' gurnin'. Monty on t'other hand looked somewhat sheepish as the crone flung

a pendant at 'im in a beseechin' manner. I were about to step in, for Monty's a mite fragile an' I be not payin' for more breakages.

Monty sighed an' took the proffered pendant. As 'e did so, an unearthly glow enveloped 'is crumblin' frame, an' on 'is head, a crown shone bright. The crone were supplicatin' wildly; we settled for some all-purpose genuflectin' instead. She insisted on shriekin' "at latht you've returned mathter – to thave our thouls" until Billy clipped 'er with 'is pistol, for there were wailin' a-plenty past the wall. Monty'd the decency to look embarrassed an' confided that Lord Montague del Morbida were 'is birthright. He'd fled in shame, havin' fleeced the peasantry with holy tithes to ward off ye evil spirits; the leprosy were a sort of uniform. Arr, the poor lad blamed 'imself and begged for me aid.

Gaargh, a new plan formed quicker'n a cloud o' seagulls about a beached whale. We booted the crone out into the street to scream a diversion, while we ran to the cemetery atop the hill. Monty were loathe to leave 'er, but since he'd left the whole village to the gastronomical mercies o' the undead, one more ought to be no more gallin'.

Monty's glow grew brighter, lightin' up the ancient graves surmountin' the peak. He strode amongst 'em, mutterin' darkly, causin' a tomb to pop open, revealin' a cache o' weaponry. Monty passed to each of us a ghoulish green sword which hummed and buzzed in our 'ands as we swung 'em experimental-like. They cut clean through the first zombie to find us like a spoon through oven-baked jellyfish.

That signalled our charge and we fell upon the hell spawn with our holy weapons. 'Twere more fun than puffer-fish cricket, though twice as messy. Afore we knew it we was hackin' into the livin'. It were clear that the village idyll were over an' I drew Monty aside. I grasped 'is duties an' all, but frankly, havin' doomed 'is people anyway we might easily turn this tragedy into treasure. Honour and greed swapped slaps behind 'is eyes till 'is righteous glow faded an' he were me larcenous an' leprous chef once more. I passed 'im a finger he'd dropped earlier an' we set about findin' the remnants o' the crew.

Much, much later, after we'd drained the seafront of ale we tottered back aboard the Grim Bastard. Frightful bellowin' issued from belowdecks, accompanied by a grim Germanic giggle. Aarr, we'd forgot about young Johnny Scuttle. Somethin' hinted at this not bein' a complete recovery, but insulated by drink, we flung back the bolts.

At first I trusted not me eyes, drunk as they was. A nightmare clambered from the dark, with Johnny's head if not his body, for it had far too many arms, and seemed part turtle. Loomin' into the lamplight I espied fine needlepoint what digressed into a charmin' depiction o' the village at sunset across the chest. The Doktor chuckled in delight, "ja, ve haf been most busy viz zis plague, es ist most interesting. See, young Johnny – ach his brain ist gone, but he has now ze four arms, just sink of ze scrubbing! Now, votch him scamper."

Gaargh, me sternness an' horror lost out to drunken mirth as poor Johnny scuttled about, snappin' toothlessly like a violently senile crab. I thought t best to chain 'im up but Sharon insisted that Johnny'd be a fine pet and set about knittin' 'im a six-limbed romper suit for rovin' the boat.

'Twere an odd Christmas, though not without profit. We left the town afire behind us and totted up our gold. Gaargh, we sailed on into a new year o' bright dreams an' broken hearts.