

Green Fire

By Frida Westford

Sofia Martinez sighed. She was tired of the sand that blew off the desert. It got into her hair, her eyes, her clothes and the food.

She couldn't complain. Everyone on the dig had to put up with the sand and insects, a constant for the two weeks they had been here. Dr. Charles Snyder, the head of the expedition to Namibia, had made it clear that any student who couldn't put up with the conditions and do her job would be dropped from the program.

It's a small annoyance, she told herself. And that was not what upset her. She had thought her lifelong fascination with the past and its buried secrets had been a kind of escape from an all-too-mundane and austere life. Later, she had dreamed she could turn this passion into a profession. It was ironic, she thought. Now that she was here, she wanted to be somewhere else, dealing with her own family's past. It was that damned letter her grandmother had sent.

"*Señorita Sofia*," the prissy, *Castillian*-accented voice broke in, "is everything ok?"

"*Sí!*" She said a bit sharply. Then she looked up at Carlos, a fellow student, and smiled. The dark young Spaniard had an exasperating string of names she'd never get right, but she liked him. He was good-looking and extremely polite. They enjoyed making comments to each other that the Anglos did not understand.

She refocused on the dirt and gravel she was sifting for evidence of the ancient environment and early human habitation in these hills. They overlooked the great Namib Desert that stretched west to the shore of the Atlantic Ocean.

This was what she had struggled for. She had earned the grades for a scholarship to go to the university, and then a place in the elite graduate archaeology program. She had persuaded her worried parents that she could make a living in this field. Despite the discomfort, doing fieldwork was exciting.

It was her family history that angered her. Her mother's mother, *Abuela* Isabella, had written from Mexico City when she learned that Sofia was going to Africa. She had sent a genealogy chart going back to the sixteenth century and a rough emerald set in a small gold ring. Sofia was, it seemed, descended from Spanish grandees. There was a betrayal in 1789 that had never been forgotten. That was why Sofia's branch of the family had never been wealthy, why Sofia was the first of its women to go to college. Grandma Isabella's letter told a lurid story that had caused Sofia to have strange dreams about a sunken ship. Now she must shake them off and work. She slapped at a fly. Well tomorrow would be a change.

That night, over dinner, Professor Snyder reminded the students that he would take them on their promised overnight trip to the Atlantic coast tomorrow. They were to see the archaeological and mineral exhibits in the Walvis Bay Museum.

"We can get real baths," murmured Wilma, the only other woman among the half dozen students, "and get the sand out."

Sofia grinned. "For a couple of minutes. There'll be a lot more sand where we're going." She turned to the professor. "Can we visit the dune sea?"

Professor Snyder smiled tolerantly. "Unfortunately for you sand lovers, we'll be passing north of the biggest dunes, but we'll see Dune Seven."

That night, Sofia dreamed more vividly than she had before. Ragged, fierce-looking men with long hair came out of the mist—pirates! They pointed their cutlasses at Sofia and then turned to face someone she could not see. There was a green fire as the dream faded.

“The jewels,” Sofia whispered as she woke in the darkness. *Mamá* had said that Sofia’s eleven-times-great grandmother had a necklace of emeralds and pearls. She thought what a beautiful house she could buy for her parents and how she could pay off her college debts. *This belongs to me, or rather to Mamá!* And she felt from her dream that she would find it where the dunes met the sea, only hours away.

She lay and listened to Wilma’s soft snoring until it was time to get up. When she dressed, she put on the ring. She should not have brought it to Africa, but it fit her little finger so perfectly that she could not leave it behind. Was that when the dreams had started, when she first tried it on?

They left well before dawn in the big gray, white-roofed Landrover, thus avoiding the worst of the desert heat, and arrived at the low, white-painted hostel in time for a late and welcome breakfast. The museum was in the town library. It was small, but interesting in itself and for the discussion with the curator about museums and the importance of the past. He did not, of course, mention pirates.

In the late afternoon the group broke up for shopping trips. Sofia and Wilma found themselves in a small curio shop. The owner, Mr. Patel, looked searchingly at Sofia, his eyes lingering on the ring. “You will be going to Sandwich Harbour?”

“We’re only here for the day. We’re part of an archaeological field trip.” Sofia noticed that Carlos had come in and his dark eyes were riveted on the old shopkeeper.

Mr. Patel continued. “Ah, you must see it. It is a place of dreams. Over eighty years ago the ship appeared and was lost again in the sand.”

“The Eagle shipwreck?” Wilma asked. “It’s in the tour book.”

“This is much older.” The old man would have gone on, but Wilma checked her watch.

Sofia stood transfixed. Her Spanish ancestors had sailed on the galleon San Vicente, leaving their infant daughter in the care of her paternal uncle. According to *Abuelita* Isabella, pirates boarded the *San Vicente*, took the treasure and the women, including Sofia’s eleven times great-grandmother, and sank the galleon off the coast of Southern Africa.

“We’ve got to go; we’ll be late.” Wilma took Sofia by the arm and the three students left the shop.

They met the others at Crazy Mama’s, a favorite eatery for tourists on a budget, specializing in pizzas. Sofia asked Professor Snyder if he knew anything about an old, buried wreck at Sandwich Harbour.

“I’m afraid I’m not up on the local legends, Ms. Martinez.” Snyder’s tone was disapproving. “There are hundreds of stories about treasures and lost diamond mines. I hope you don’t think treasure hunting is the point of our profession.”

Sofia felt her face flush. “Of course not.” She didn’t dare tell any of these people about her *abuelita*’s story and certainly not about the dreams.

Surprisingly, cool, aristocratic Carlos defended Sofia’s interest. “Shipwrecks yield much information, as do buried treasures properly excavated.”

Snyder shrugged. “Yes, but there’s a big difference between archaeology and salvage.”

Carlos sat next to Sofia in the back of the truck when they returned to the hostel. “Thanks for defending me tonight,” she whispered in Spanish.

He whispered back. “We *compadres* must stick together and, in any case, stories like that are exciting. I got a book for my nephews, to encourage them in their English.” He handed her a small souvenir book, *Pirates and Shipwrecks of Southern Africa*. “You may borrow it until I can send it to them.”

“*Gracias.*” Sofia smiled. “I’ll enjoy it.” She put it in her tote before anyone else saw it.

While the others sat around discussing the day, Sofia slipped off to look at the book Carlos had lent her. The section on Sandwich Harbour included a drawing of a shipwreck, obviously later than the Eighteenth Century, but the text mentioned earlier wrecks, some now buried in the dunes. “At the narrow mouth of the lagoon,” it said, “some insist there rests the *San Antonio*, a pirate ship, sunk in 1789 with a huge treasure aboard.”

Sophia pulled her overnight bag from under the bunk and opened it to retrieve her grandmother’s letter. She saw that her red jersey and khaki jacket were not quite as she had left them. She was particular about folding her clothes. The letter, too, showed signs of having been handled and replaced quickly.

Sofia shook with fury. Though nothing seemed to be missing, it was a violation. She could not prove anyone had searched her bag, nor did she have any way to know who had done it. Would Wilma, who was rather nosey, go through her things? Sophia did not think so. Hearing her roommate’s voice, Sofia hastily put the letter and Carlos’s book into the shoulder satchel she always had with her. She reached for her notebook as Wilma came in.

The pirates came out of the mist again and this time their wild, evil faces were clearer. Sofia felt danger, though she knew she was dreaming. The apparitions seemed to have a message; they silently pointed their blades at skeletal posts rising from the sand. A man in velvet, apparently the leader, turned and pointed at Sofia's hand.

She saw that the gold ring was on her little finger. Then she was dazzled by green fire. The emeralds! *Her* emeralds. They represented a future for her and her family that was free of want and worry.

Sofia woke with a start, dressed as quietly as she could in the dark, and went out into the cold, clear night. The stars shone gem-bright. In the west, a gibbous moon was setting.

It was foolish to think that these visions were anything more than dreams brought on by Grandma's letter and old Patel's tale. But what if the ship were reemerging from the sand? She of all people had a right to be there, to seek the treasure. She would not be greedy. She wanted only what was hers. The necklace was enough. Could she rent a desert car and just go? Sure and get kicked out of the program and maybe arrested.

When the others woke before dawn, there was a surprise. Dr. Snyder assembled them. "I had a call from camp and the government inspector can't be there tomorrow, so there will be no digging. By popular request," he looked at Sofia, "I've arranged a day trip south to the Dune Sea. It is a unique environment."

Snyder had hired a guide who would see that the Landrover was not stranded. A formation of pelicans flew over as they left. "The Namibian Air Force is seeing us off," the guide said. The trip was slow and bumpy, but the towering red dunes were wildly dramatic. Carlos's eyes were dancing.

He was good looking and likeable, Sofia thought. But he was a European aristocrat. *I'm a lower-middle class woman from Chicago. We have little other than language in common.*

Sofia did not have to ask. It was usual for tours to stop briefly at Sandwich Harbour. The site was beautiful, thronged with flamingos and other wildlife. The only remnants of human industry were some timbers and a Nineteenth Century metal hut. The lagoon and the great dunes that marched down to it guarded their secrets. She managed to hide her disappointment and was careful not to react when the guide mentioned lost treasure ships. Sofia wanted to remain here and search. *I'm obsessing; this has to stop.*

“Sofia?” She whirled to see Carlos standing in the shadow of the building. “I believe the ship *was* there and if the sand shifts again....”

“It will reappear,” she finished. “But the chances are so slight.” Then the wind picked up, riffling the sand.

Carlos’s eyes blazed excitement. “We can stay behind and find a way to explain.”

“Why? Are you after the gold?”

“Since I was a small boy, I have loved pirates.” He put his hand over her mouth and pulled her into the lee of the hut out of sight of the others who were being hastily shepherded to the Landrover.

Sofia gasped when he took his hand away. “Now what?”

“What did you dream last night?”

“How do you know about my dreams?” She was beginning to be afraid. What did she know of Carlos or his reasons for bringing her here?

“Because I, too, dream that the ship emerges from the dunes.” He led her to the mouth of the lagoon. There she saw some sticks had emerged from the base of a dune. She knew they were the jagged tips of broken masts. *San Antonio!*

Darkness began to wash over them as a dry cloud they had ignored reached them. She lay face down in the hot sand. Her back was burning, scoured by sand that the black wind heaped on her by inches, now feet. Soon there would be nothing to breathe but sand. Her hands scrabbled and dug, not upward to free herself, useless anyway unless the wind died soon, but downward seeking what was hers.

After what seemed hours, the storm let up. Sofia managed to rise and continued digging with her hands, until pain at last brought a measure of reason back.

“What the hell are we doing? What if they don’t come back for us?”

Carlos shrugged. “Someone will come and we will be rich.”

Sofia stared at him. Surely aristocratic Carlos *was* rich, or.... “Did your family lose its fortune?” There were many ways this could happen.

“Yes, slowly over generations, then after the civil war, quickly. But it doesn’t matter now. Dig, the treasure is beneath us.”

“Just two of us? Did you even bring a shovel?” She was rational enough now to see the folly in this. And the sun was setting. It would be dark and cold soon.

“It waits for us. We will share it, *prima*. We will be rich and free.”

“I’m not your cousin.” She replied in English.

“Sí. You are, Sofia.” He was speaking in such pure Castillian Spanish that she had to work to understand it. “I am descended from *Don* Roderigo as you are descended from his sister-in-law, *Doña* Juana.”

“You went through my things!” she cried, “and read my *abuelita’s* letter. How do I know you aren’t lying?” But she felt it was true. In his warped way, he was trying to make up for the wrong done to little Isabella by his many-times-great-grandfather.

Night fell quickly and the others did not return for them. In sudden panic, Sofia ran in what she thought was the direction of the parking area. The darkness curdled as mist rolled in over the dunes. Everything was drowned in the fog from the cold sea. She heard laughter and cursing from many directions, but saw not even shadows. Seeking the only living being she knew to be here, she called out to Carlos. A woman’s voice answered, leading her into thicker fog and finally to the masts.

Carlos still dug. He had found a stick and was shining a flashlight into his hole. He lifted up glinting sand as if it were coins and jewels. He ignored her when she called his name.

Suddenly she saw green flashes in the sand near him. She ran and thrust her hands towards them. She found only quartz sand, but she dug deeper. She had seen the emeralds; they were hers. She felt something; sticks? No, it was a bony hand that pulled at her!

“Let it go, child,” said the woman’s voice she had heard before. “They are liars and thieves, but they cannot hold your soul against your will. Speak to your cousin. Try to save him.”

“Carlos stop!” Sofia shook him until he pushed her away. He continued digging. She sat shivering beside him the rest of the night trying to coax him back to reality. Nothing she said got any reaction from him.

As the fog began to burn off in the first hint of sunlight, she saw that the dune above them looked unstable. She dragged at Carlos. “We’ll be buried. Listen! You don’t owe me anything. You are smart and can earn your own fortune.” He looked up at her as if she were a stranger.

“It is here, Sofia. We need boxes, carts.”

She slapped him hard. “Will you listen? There’s nothing here but ghosts and death. If the gold is down there, they will never give it up. My great-grandmother is trying to help us. Come now; the dune!” Sofia managed to pull Carlos to his feet and dragged him a short way. But he was much bigger than she and struggled with strength as desperate as hers.

A fresh wind blew; the fog had thinned to wisps. The dune loomed up black against the sky and Sofia felt rather than saw the first rain of sand from its crest. Then she heard the rumble of the slide. She continued to pull Carlos, but lost hold of him as the sand covered them.

She began automatically to claw her way to air, praying she was digging in the right direction. She was sure that she would pass out and it would be the end. At last, her right hand met no resistance. She pushed her head through the clammy sand for moments just breathed the cool, blessed air.

Then she dug for Carlos. He had been in her grasp as they were buried and must be near. She saw no movement and heard no submerged struggle. Still she dug until long after she knew that he must have been too long without air.

She sat and wept as sunlight struck the dune tops. Somewhere there were voices. Sofia thought one of them was Wilma’s, but it did not matter. She had been stupid. If she had discouraged Carlos instead of encouraging him and letting him lead her to the ship—but she had thought wealth was important.

“*Está libre, nieta.*” The voice from the darkness spoke from inside her. “Be free, granddaughter. The important thing is that you did all that you could do. You did not fail him or yourself.” Sofia wept cleansing tears at this last message from her ancestress.

She rose and walked toward the voices of the people who had come to look for her.