

The Gold of Cortés

Book 2: Blood Money

Being a chapter in the saga of the Pirates of the Caribbean

Featuring:

Pirates:

Hector Barbossa
Bo'sun
Chao (Sao Feng's bodyguard)
Clubba
Dog Ear
Eightfinger Bruce
Grapple
Hai-Ming
Hawksmoor
Jack the Monkey
Jacoby
Jian (Hai-Ming's henchman)
Katracho
Ketchum
Koehler
Mallot
Maximo
Moneybag
Monk
Nipperkin
Pintel
Quarry
Ragetti
Sao Feng (Pirate Lord of Singapore)
Scarus
Scratch
Simbakka
Jack Sparrow (captain of the *Black Pearl*)
"Kitty" Sparrow
Tai Huang (Sao Feng's henchman)
Captain Teague
Tom (cabin boy)
William "Bootstrap Bill" Turner
Twigg
Madame Wu (Sao Feng's second-in-command)

Inhabitants of Weymouth:

Mr. Angley (jeweller)
Martha and Annie Beard
Charlotte Edgeway, nee Morris
John Edgeway
Frederick Gaskill, grocer
Jane Morris (†)

Jonathan Morris (†)
Jane Phipps, nee Morris
Stewart (harbourmaster)
Mary Turner, nee Morris
William “Will” Turner

Others:

James Ashby (captain of the *Whitecap*)
Bishop (slave trader)
Chalchiuhtl (princess)
Charles (Mr. Bishop’s butler)
Cox
Abigail Hollingworth, née Beckett
George Hollingworth (EITC agent)
Holton
Davy Jones (captain of the *Flying Dutchman*)
Duncan Marshall (first mate of the *Whitecap*)
Mercer (freelancer)
Nathaniel Pullman (EITC agent)
Ruby (barmaid)
Shun-Nan (teahouse owner)
Tia Dalma (mystic)
Xipilli (prince)

Ships:

Black Pearl (galleon, captained by Jack Sparrow)
Flying Dutchman (former Dutch fluyt, captained by Davy Jones)
Singapore (EITC vessel)
Whitecap (merchant vessel)

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Chapter 1: Swimming Lesson

The sun was high up in cloudless sky, reflected in countless glittering waves. Not far from where the two ships were anchored side by side, a spotless white beach and tall palm trees that provided shelter from the heat rose from the azure waters.

“Beautiful day, isn’t it?” the captain said.

“Aye,” agreed his first mate. “You couldn’t have asked for a better one.”

“Light breeze, calm water,” the captain peered over the rail, “not even a shark.”

“Yet,” mitigated the first mate.

This was followed by a whimpering sound behind them, followed in return by many-voiced, raucous laughter, and they turned around.

“Now, good sirs,” the *Whitecap*’s captain pleaded, “you wouldn’t be so unfeeling as to actually do this, would you? Please – there are wounded among us, and many of us have a wife and children...”

Jack put his arm around the captain’s shoulders. “My good fellow,” he said, “put yourself in my position for a moment. Here we are, having nothing worse in mind than relieving you of your cargo, and what do we find in your brig but two comrades, both grievously wounded – one of them, in fact, already dead from his injuries.”

“And none o’ you moneybags givin’ a damn abou’ it,” added Grapple fiercely.

There was a menacing muttering among the crew.

“We didn’t have the time to look after them!” cried the captain. “We were still making repairs after *their* attack when you showed up...”

“*Their* attack what you successfully beat off by sinkin’ their ship,” Bill reminded him. “And afterwards you fished the two o’ them out to kindly haul them to the gallows.”

The muttering grew louder.

“Please!” The captain lifted his bound hands pleadingly. “Please! If you but take us ashore – I can pay you! Our cargo’s worth and more! Name your price, you will have it!”

“I’ve heard tha’ before somewhere,” Pintel mused.

“You mean the fella who tried to set the Navy on us instead o’ sendin’ the money?” Ragetti spat on his wooden eye and put it back in.

“Aye, tha’ would’ve been the one. Ended up with a belayin’ pin in his guts, didn’ he?”

The captain was looking near a panic now. “No!” he said. “No, please!”

Jack patted his shoulder sympathetically. “Sorry, mate. If it was only me, I might’ve had half a heart to spare you this. But you hear me men. They take the matter very seriously, you see – they think those poor souls in your brig could’ve easily been them.” He stepped aside. “Mr. Barbossa, if you’d do the honors.”

The first mate smiled and gestured. “Gents,” he said, “off you go. Have a nice stay.”

Amidst the loud jeering of the crew the captain was bodily carried to the plank by Grapple and the bo’sun. He stood there for a moment, trembling, then he half-turned and looked at the assembled pirates.

“I swear,” he said in an unsteady voice, “should I survive and return, I’ll see to it that you all hang for this!”

“Put a shot in him, just in case,” Twigg suggested. “We don’t want to bring that curse on us.”

Hastily, the captain jumped.

One by one, the merchant ship’s crew walked the plank and swam towards the small island. Having looted anything of interest, the men of the *Black Pearl* crossed over to their own ship, sank the *Whitecap* and set sail.

“A load o’ barley,” Barbossa said. “Barley, Jack. Nobody in his right mind sails with a shifty cargo like that, it has capsized more than one good ship.”

The captain honored the *Whitecap*’s cargo with a cursory glance. “So eat it?” he suggested, trying on a brown tricorne hat he had found somewhere on the unfortunate ship.

“You could always get into the merchant business, I suppose.” Barbossa crossed his arms and leaned against a bulkhead.

Jack examined himself in a small shaving-glass. "That's what we're about to do, remember?" He straightened the hat. "I really like this one. Makes for a dashing appearance." As though to emphasize it, he stroked his newly grown moustache, his great pride.

"When you've quite finished with your ablutions, *capt'n*."

Sighing, Jack turned around. "You do know our main goal was to get the disguises and the documents."

"Aye, but still the men want some payment once in a while."

"After we've found the treasure of Cortés nobody will ever need any payment anymore. Tell the men to stop whining and get into their roles. We're a merchant vessel now."

"Sailin' with a load o' barley to China."

As though, Bill thought, this latest adventure in their search for the gold of Cortés was in any way more ludicrous than the ones that had come before...

Chapter 2: Five Months Earlier

After their misadventures on the Island of the Four Winds they returned to Tortuga, to once more find new hands and finish overhauling the *Pearl*. Their quest for the last scions of the Aztec royal family would take them deep into Spanish territory and they wanted to be ready for the challenges that they all knew lay before them.

Tia Dalma had left them for the time being; not without regret Jack had bowed to her wish and dropped her off on an apparently deserted coast where the mystic made her home in some village deep in a bayou. Jack was probably the only one genuinely sorry to see the voodoo woman leave. The rest of the crew, at least those who had witnessed her conjuration of the dead priest, were scared to death of her and could hardly be persuaded to stay on the same ship as she – and then only because there was no acceptable alternative.

Bill's feelings towards the mystic were mixed. He felt uncomfortable around her, even more so because she had marked him in a way; she had singled him out for no apparent reason by demanding his knife, the blade of which was still stained and refused to be cleaned. Was it because she knew he had sensed something in her the first time they had met, something he could not find a name for, yet he knew it was there? It was a discomfiting notion. On the other hand she had never given them cause to suspect she meant them any harm. Under her care Rgetti had almost completely recovered. While he still hadn't got used to his new limited eyesight and could often be seen groping for items he was at least on his feet again, and though he seemed subdued at times Bill knew his broken heart would heal eventually.

Bill, however, knew he had something to do as soon as they arrived at Tortuga. It was futile and probably wrong, but it had to be done. Therefore, at the first opportunity, he went to the *Capt'n Flint*. "Where may I find Mr. Mercer?" he asked the landlord, a fat, ugly man whose gray hair fell into his face in thick strands.

"Is he expecting you?"

"No, but he will like to hear what I have to say anyway."

"Wait here."

He left and shortly returned in the company of Emily's man. Bill could tell he recognized him; there was an alert flash in his eyes that betrayed his otherwise impassive face.

The landlord made a move to settle down in his chair, not hiding his curiosity, but a withering glance from both Mercer and Bill sent him scampering. When he was out of earshot, Bill said:

"You should return home, Mr. Mercer." No need for introductions and certainly not for courtesy; he strongly suspected young Beckett's henchman disliked him as much as Bill did him. "There won't be any more particulars on us. Emily's dead."

Mercer's features remained expressionless. "Is that so?"

"Yes. And I hope you at least appreciate her now that you've lost her."

"You came here just to tell me that?"

"I came here to tell you so that I would never have to see you again. The poor girl believed she loved you even though she was smart enough not to trust you. Whatever Beckett pays you, it better be enough to make up for a loss like that. Though somehow I doubt you'll waste so much as a thought on her."

"Wot was she to you, then, that you take such an interest in her?"

"I considered myself her friend. She truly needed one."

At last Mercer smiled. "There never were any 'friends' in her life, Mr. Turner."

"Believe whatever you wish - just keep your distance," returned Bill and left.

He saw no more of Mercer during his stay on Tortuga.

On the other hand, they still didn't manage to lose Mad José. Their insane shipmate had been so happy to see at least half of them returned from the Island of the Four Winds, he apparently hadn't even minded to spend the journey back to Tortuga locked in the brig. Once there, it once again proved impossible to shake him off, no matter how hard they tried, and so they resigned themselves to the fact that their self-appointed protector would stay with them indefinitely.

However, they nearly got into a shipload of trouble one night in the *Pineapple* when Eightfinger Bruce made an appearance, Tom grabbed by the scruff of his neck.

"Which one of you be named Sparrow?" the infamous pirate barked.

Jack disentangled himself from Ruby's embrace. "Captain Sparrow," he corrected. "Might I enquire what you're doing with my pirate apprentice?"

"Yours! Don't make me laugh! He's part o' me crew."

"Is he? Then why did he sail with us?"

"Ran away, the little ingrate." Bruce hit Tom around the head. "Took me a while to find out where to."

Jack leaned back comfortably and stretched out his legs. "Well, seeing we're all free men and whelps," he said, "it seems to me he was well in his rights."

"I hired him." Bruce let go of Tom and planted himself before the young captain. "Therefore I decide what's his rights or not."

Ruby stood and began to clear the table. "I'm outta here," she muttered and left, rolling her eyes.

Jack stirred casually. It was probably an accident that his foot just then managed to trip a patron who was walking past their table. As he stumbled into Eightfinger Bruce, the pirate roughly shoved him backwards into another table. Cursing, its occupants jumped to their feet as their drinks were spilled all over them. A patron grabbed hold of his empty tankard and smashed it on Bruce's head.

Used to the inevitable outcome of the situation, Bill finished his drink and Jack got to his feet gracefully.

"You'd think they'd learn, wouldn't you?" the young captain remarked as a bottle sailed past.

"If they did, it wouldn't work every time you try it." Bill gestured for Tom to follow them and together they made their way through the shouting, wrestling, boxing and tankard-throwing crowd up the stairs to the gallery and from there to the balcony where they took a well-used ladder down to the street.

Chapter 3: From Ichtaca to Charleston

Getting to the Aztec hideout called Ichtaca (which, according to a suddenly very eager Made José, simply translated as “secret”) proved less of a problem than discovering its location. On their way they met with just one obstacle when one night during a complete calm a thunderstorm was brewing on the western horizon. The watch stood ready at the halcyards.

“If half the stories I heard about her are true,” Pintel was saying, “what she did back there was nothin’. Bet she could’ve raised that guy without any of our stuff. Makes you wonder why she took it, eh? Makes you wonder what, if she’s got the power to raise the dead, she might do to the livin’...”

A pitch black night and the air charged with electricity to such an extent that every protruding point in the rigging was brightly lit by St. Elmo’s fire. It was such a beautiful sight that the danger they were in hardly registered with them. Suddenly the thunderstorm broke, right above them. The entire atmosphere seemed to be in flames.

All of a sudden there was a glaring light, completely blinding them, followed almost immediately by an exceptionally violent thunderclap. It had been a terrible blow; Bill found himself lying flat on deck and not far from him Barbossa, and only after some time had passed they were able by calling out to each other to convince themselves that they were still there. Fortunately the thunderstorm did not bring any wind with it because nobody would have been able to perform any kind of action. The only one who could give them a description of the enormous electric discharge was Clubba on the wheel because he had continually watched the compass that was lit by two lamps, and consequently his eyes had been used to the light. From his description they guessed that it had been heavy ball-lightning that had blinded them. Even Barbossa, who had seen many a thunderstorm at sea, confessed he had never seen one like this. But they did profit from it after all, for a fresh breeze began to blow and brought them quickly nearer towards their goal until they caught sight of the high, sheer cliffs on which Ichtaca was supposed to be situated.

In the water of the small bay, the remains of some unhappy men were hanging on the protruding rocks. Their bodies hadn’t decayed but were still hanging there in their torn clothes until time would have erased any traces. They must have been thrown off the cliff and into the sea.

With a sense of foreboding they anchored, went ashore and climbed the steep, narrow, winding path up to Ichtaca. The secret settlement was tiny. Just a score or so one-storey stone houses formed an open square. There were gardens, now overgrown with weeds, close to the surrounding wall. The settlement was also quite deserted. Everywhere were signs of the slaughter that had taken place here – half a dozen dead bodies, broken pottery, ripped fabric that must once have protected the window and door openings from the elements.

Puffs of dust rose under their feet when they picked their way through the devastation. Every hope they might have had of finding anyone alive quickly evaporated. Whoever had done this, they had finished the job.

Barbossa stood looking at a body in the square. “This one is different,” he said.

They joined him. He was right; the body didn’t belong to an Aztec but to a white man.

“And he didn’t drop dead of his own accord, either,” Barbossa continued, pointing to an ugly wound in the man’s chest. “He was killed, probably in self-defense.” He spread his arm in a sweeping gesture. “All those killed, they’re either old or children. There’s hardly anyone in between. Now why would that be, I wonder? Only one explanation for it.”

“Slavers,” the bo’sun replied darkly.

Barbossa nodded. “It would appear their secret hideout wasn’t as safe as the Aztecs believed. Yet it’s strange those slavers found their way that far south.”

“Very strange,” agreed Jack in an absent sort of way. By the looks of it, he was doing some hard thinking, probably being already two steps ahead of the rest of them as usual.

While the crew vented their anger and frustration (“A dead end, once again!” – “Pity we dropped the soothsayer woman in her little swamp village...”), Bill stepped closer to the young captain.

“Mind sharin’?” he asked quietly so Barbossa wouldn’t hear.

Jack looked up innocently. “What?”

“Don’t try. I’ve been sailin’ with you for some months now and I know that look. What’s your plan?”

“Your confidence in me is flattering.” Jack scratched his head. “Actually, there is a plan forming in me mind right now...”

“It better be formin’ quickly or you’ll have a full-grown mutiny on your hands.” Bill watched his furious shipmates. “Now I don’t know about you, Jack, but in my eyes this is as bad as it gets. Slavers!”

“You won’t hear any argument from me, mate,” Jack said. Squaring his shoulders, he clapped his hands. “Gents,” he called, “gents, no need to be upset. I might have an idea how to proceed from here...”

Clothes made the man, as they said, thought Bill. After donning the cleanest and best-preserved finery available on the ship, he felt almost ready to be introduced to the king.

“The last time I dressed up like this was at my wedding,” he remarked.

“Trust me, you look excellent. Even I would be fooled.” Jack looked quite different, as well. After losing the kohl around his eyes and tying back his mane of braids and matted locks, he could just pass for an honest captain who had travelled to far and exotic places and spent a bit too much time there.

“Will you at least tell me who we’re supposed to be foolin’?” Bill asked.

“A gentleman who makes his living by selling his fellow men.”

“Slave trader?” Bill lifted his brows. “Interesting people you know.”

Jack straightened his hat. “I don’t exactly *know* him but I was supposed to do business with him a while back.”

“Do I have to know the particulars of this?”

“Not for now. Let’s go, shall we?”

When they stepped on deck, Pintel was in the middle of another story.

“It’s said you’re in for the time of your life if that witch bestows her *favours* on you.” He grinned, and the rest chuckled lewdly. “But beware. There’s been more than one guy who was never again able to find pleasure with another woman afterwards.”

“I heard that, Mr. Pintel.” Jack turned to address his first mate. “Mr. Barbossa, if you’d look after the ship during our absence.”

Bill doubted Jack with his irrepressible optimism noticed anything, but he could see the inner conflict taking place in Barbossa. Of course he wanted the *Pearl*. He wanted the best ship in all the Caribbean, and he wanted to be his own man again, with no-one to order him around. On the other hand he wanted the fabled treasure of Cortés. Jack was the only one who seemed to have any idea how to find it. Bill didn’t care to bet whether the ship would be waiting for them when they returned.

Walking through the orderly streets of the prosperous colonial town Charleston, Bill and Jack enquired their way to a beautiful white house that indicated the wealth of its owner. On their knocking a solemn butler opened the door.

“Good day, my good man,” Jack said. “Might the master of this house be at home? There is a matter of some urgency we have to discuss with him.”

“I will see, sir,” the butler replied. “Mr. Bishop is currently entertaining a party but if the matter is urgent...”

“It is.”

“Who may I announce?”

“Mr. Brass and Mr. Brass.”

Bill tried to look as though this was nothing new to him.

The butler led them through a hall decorated with paintings and vases of flowers into a spacious room that appeared to be Bishop’s office. More pictures adorned the walls and the gleaming desk alone must have cost a pretty sum. Which once again proved, thought Bill, that there was no money to be made with honest work.

Soon after a tall man with a freckled face and a business-like demeanor walked in.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” he greeted them. “Please excuse me if I keep this short – we are holding a small celebration in recognition of my eldest daughter’s engagement.”

“Congratulations, and please likewise excuse our unannounced visit.” Jack lifted his hat. “We won’t detain you long, then.” He put the hat back on. “Actually, all we need is simple information. I know you to be a man with many connections, Mr. Bishop, so I’m sure you can help us. We are looking for particulars concerning a group of slaves recently acquired in a small Mexican settlement.”

Bishop suddenly looked wary, although his polite smile never wavered. "Now, sir," he said, choosing his words carefully, "you know that our as well as the Spanish treaties with the... indigenous people do not allow us to sell Indian slaves."

"I happen to have it on excellent authority," persisted Jack.

Bishop's tone made it clear that he wasn't about to say anything else on the matter. "As I said, there are treaties in this part of the world."

Jack smiled. "I see. Well, thank you very much for your time, Mr. Bishop."

"Anytime, gentlemen," replied Bishop equally politely. "And now, if you'll excuse me - Charles will show you to the door." He nodded at the butler.

Once out of the office, Jack took quick stock of their surroundings and without missing a beat steered Bill past a startled Bishop towards a half-open door from behind which came the sound of voices.

"Watch and learn, Mr. Turner," he said, ignoring both Bishop and the butler who were hurrying after them.

Unconcerned, Jack sauntered in. Dinner had already been served, and a group of seven people were seated around the table, a stately matron on one end of it, two pretty red-haired girls, two younger, equally red-haired boys and two men in wigs, looking very much alike as to be easily recognized as father and son. Everybody watched in surprise as Jack sidled up to the older of the girls and picked up her wine glass.

"Excuse me but I couldn't resist wishing the happy bride and groom luck in their upcoming marriage."

He took a sip, made a face and put the glass back down. With a shudder, he walked up to the head of the table and the only empty chair. "Now, really, any wine that dry must humiliate the grapes it came from."

Bishop at the door found his voice. "Mr. Brass..."

"Don't you have any rum?" Jack sat down.

The older girl looked shocked; the younger one tried hard and without success to suppress her giggles. Jack winked at her.

"You like boiled fish, love?" he asked, indicating his - or rather Bishop's - plate. "Not one of my favorites, I'm afraid. Oi!" He snapped his fingers at one of the perplexed servants. "Where's me rum?"

Turning back to young Miss Bishop (the servant looked at his master, seeking help), he pointed at something on her plate with his fork. "Are you going to eat that?" He looked closer. "What is it, anyway?"

She giggled even harder. "Peacock pie," she answered as best as she was able.

"Swap it for this?" Without waiting for a reply he exchanged his plate for hers, sampled the pie, made an approving sound and stood up, raising his glass. "By the by, beautiful ladies and gentle sirs, I would like to compliment our fine host Mr. Bishop for arranging this most excellent feast in honor of the happy young couple, may they be blessed with long life and even longer patience for the shortcomings of their respective partner that will unavoidably come to light sooner or..."

"Mr. Brass," an exasperated Bishop interrupted, "have you ever been to Singapore?"

Jack paused, his glass still held high. "Regrettably not."

"If you ever happen to go there, make sure to call at my very good friend's, Mr. George Hollingworth."

"Hollingworth," repeated Jack.

"Yes. He's a local agent of the East India Trading Company."

Jack smiled and put the glass back down. Leaving his place, he emptied the groom's glass of wine and blew the younger daughter a kiss. "It has been a pleasure, love. Any other time, I would've invited you to a ride on me ship, but duty calls. Perhaps next time I'm in town." He picked up the silverware at his setting and conspicuously put it in his pockets. "Gentlemen, ladies, enjoy your dinner." Amidst the stunned silence he walked out.

Chapter 4: Autumn

The jeweller's shop was filled with a faintly orange glow as daylight filtered in through window panes of stained glass. On display in open drawers and on small tables standing along the walls were silver bracelets and pearl necklaces, golden rings and small ticking clocks.

"Beautiful," Mr. Angley murmured, the magnifying glass pressed to his eye. "Excellent craftsmanship. Spanish made?" he enquired, looking up.

Mary shrugged. "Probably. I do not know."

He was already bent over the ruby necklace again. "Faultless stones," he marvelled. "Mrs. Turner, this is a very valuable item, quite apart from its beauty. Are you sure you wish to part with it?"

"Yes," she said firmly and pulled her shawl closer around her thin shoulders.

A quarter of an hour later she was on her way to Gaskill, her purse for the first time in many months filled again. It was a grey November day, cold and cheerless. A group of crows had gathered around the carcass of a dead pigeon, picking at and fighting over it, and only reluctantly they gave way when Mary walked right through them. She would have found the way to Gaskill's grocery store in her sleep. She had grown up in that house; it had been her father's until his untimely death. Mary suspected that her father had hoped Will would succeed him in the family business; Jonathan Morris had had no son and his daughters, to his great sorrow, tended to fancy sailors. Mary could only imagine his joy at the birth of his first (and only, though he was not to know it) male heir. Sadly, he had passed away only months after Will had been born and so his daughters had sold the store.

Mary walked inside and found Gaskill reading the *Daily Courant* behind the counter and the store otherwise deserted. He put aside his newspaper and walked towards her: they met at the pot-bellied stove in the middle of the room, which was engulfed by trade goods of the most incredible variety: barrels and boxes filled with fruit and potatoes, smoked ham and sausages hanging from the ceiling, blankets and shirts and mittens piled high. The delicious smell of hot cocoa hung in the air.

Mr. Frederick Gaskill was a small, round man with receding hair and a cheerful expression. "Mrs. Turner," he greeted her with his usual wide smile.

"Good day, Mr. Gaskill." Mary opened her purse and took some coins from it. "I have your money."

If possible, his smile grew even wider. "Mrs. Turner, you know you can always buy on credit here. Because I know you to be a woman of your word." He pocketed the money. "So how do you do? How are things at home?"

Mary sighed. "As well as they can be, given the circumstances."

"Ah, yes." He adopted a more serious mien and gestured at the stove. "Why don't you join me for a cup of cocoa, Mrs. Turner?"

A few minutes later they were seated on some barrels near the stove, talking and sipping the sweet, dark liquid. Mary warmed her fingers on the cup. She could not begin to guess how long it had been since last she had had chocolate. It must have been years and years ago, back when she still lived with her parents.

"I do not think my sister will outlive the winter," she said. "She has been deteriorating fast ever since her husband's death. The girls suspect it as well and are, of course, devastated, so shortly after losing their father. My sister Charlotte and her husband have offered to take them in but I think it is best to keep them with us. It is their home as well as ours, and I do not want them to grow up in an inn."

"Quite understandable." Gaskill refilled her cup as soon as it was empty. "It must be very hard on you, as well."

"Oh, I can cope with it."

He smiled wistfully. "I wouldn't think any worse of you if you told me the truth, Mrs. Turner."

At the friendly rebuke, she returned his smile but said nothing.

After sitting in comfortable silence for a while the grocer began again: "So – have you heard of your husband lately?"

She shook her head. "No. Not a word."

He muttered something under his breath. "Mrs. Turner," he said, "you know how I feel about this..."

"And you know what my answer will and must be. Please let us not talk about it anymore." She accepted a second refill.

"As you wish." He sighed.

In silence they emptied their cups. When Mary rose to leave, Gaskill went to the counter and fetched a small brown bag.

“Here,” he said, handing it to her. “Take this for the children.”

She smelled the faint aroma of cocoa. “Please, Mr. Gaskill, you know I do not accept charity.”

“It isn’t charity, it is friendship.”

Mary was about to protest the matter further when she was seized by a fit of coughing. Pressing her shawl on her lips she tried to suppress it, but it was one of the severe attacks, and she had to grab the edge of the barrel to steady herself while the cough racked her body.

When she was at last able to draw a shuddering breath again she felt worn out and slightly light-headed. Gaskill was looking at her worriedly.

“You are ill,” he said needlessly.

She had to clear her throat and even then her voice was hoarse. “It is nothing.”

“You should go and see a doctor about that.”

“Mr. Gaskill, I already owe him money for poor Lucy and Daniel. I will be all right, I assure you.”

Too exhausted to continue discussing the matter of the cocoa, Mary took her leave, but the expression on Gaskill’s face – part worry, part helpless anger directed, she knew, not at her but at William, and part foreboding – haunted her all the way home.

Chapter 5:
From Charleston to Singapore

The moon was disappearing behind clouds and reappearing again, its light reflected by the rippling waves of the black ocean below. A shadow in the unsteady light, the *Pearl* was lit only by its stern lanterns. One hand on the wheel, the other clutching a bottle, Jack divided his attention between the compass and the rum, while at the same time spinning his most colorful yarn yet.

"... So what was I going to do? The easiest way out meant passing right in front of those ten warships' cannons – not a very tempting option. On the other hand, if I stayed where I was, they'd come for me as certain as the tide. But, seeing as I had me crew as well as those grateful free men at my disposal, I spotted an alternative. You see, that peninsula we were on wasn't too large. You could just see the other shore from where we had made berth. So at nightfall we sailed the *Wench* as close to shore as possible, disembarked, put our hands to it and carried her across the spit of land and into the water again, whereupon we made good our escape."

"Right." Bill grinned broadly and took a swig of his rum. "And the wisest course o' action, of course." "Has nothing to do with wise but with clever." Jack followed suit.

They heard and recognized Barbossa's firm step long before they saw the feathers of his hat followed by the rest of him rising up the quarterdeck.

"Gents," he said. "Mind if I join you?"

Jack eyed him with suspicion. "As long as you bring your own rum."

Barbossa lifted his hand, presenting a bottle.

"Well, that's all right, then," conceded Jack.

Barbossa sauntered over and leaned back against the rail. "I've just come from seein' our newest hand," he reported. "He's much better now. Name's Ketchum, and for gettin' him out of the stinkin' trader's brig he's more than willing to sail with us to the end o' the world, if that's what it takes."

"Good man. I trust you haven't told him about the treasure?"

"No need for that yet, is there?"

For a while they stood in comfortable silence. The wind carried the voice of Pintel on watch to the quarterdeck.

"If you ever ask her for her services, the price'll make a deal with Davy Jones look like a real bargain..."

Jack emptied his bottle. "Have you ever been to Singapore, Mr. Barbossa?" he asked.

Barbossa nodded. "Aye, once, but that was years and years ago in the employ of an honest trader. From what I've heard the waters around Singapore are controlled by the local Pirate Lord Sao Feng. In addition the East India Trading Company doesn't take too kindly to what they call 'interlopers', rival merchants. There's more than one story about 'em sinkin' an interloper ship, so we better tread lightly."

"You've been in the employ of a trader?"

"Hard to believe, is it?" He grinned.

"This Lord So Far. Can we expect help from him?"

"If we can find somethin' to offer him in exchange, aye," Barbossa answered with a wry grin.

One day a heavy swell from the west portended a storm from that direction. They furled the topsails and readied the ship for the storm. Wind and swell increased fast; more sails were furled, the mainsail reefed, and they hove to. The swell still increased, reached an unimagined fierceness, and heavy breakers continually flooded the ship. Where it was still possible, additional gaskets were put in place and lines rigged up on deck to help them across the widest spaces. Everybody knew there were hard days ahead. The faces of the experienced seamen were grave. Amid the howling storm an iron object was fixed to the heaviest hawser and lowered windward from the bow into the water to function as a drift anchor and keep the prow of the ship on the sea. Because of the strong drifting of the ship the hawser was stretched that tight that they could almost see its extreme end.

The last sails had to be taken in, a dangerous undertaking; for hours the crew lay on the yards. In the shrouds of the mizzenmast new canvas was rolled out to support the drift anchor. The already fastened sails had to be furled even tighter, a work that required the most seasoned, most experienced hands, for

the ship threw itself so wildly from side to side that you couldn't even stand on deck without holding on to something. Anxiously the eyes of those standing below followed their shipmates on the yards as the masts traced wide circles in the air.

Jack stood roped up on the quarterdeck under the windward shrouds of the mizzenmast, giving orders yet powerless to do something about the forces of nature. They could see nothing except the spume of the continually increasing waves. Even the majestic albatrosses settled down on the water at the leeward side of the ship, a sure sign that the storm in its ferocity would continue for a long time. Together with the men of the *Pearl* they were the only living beings amid the roaring elements. The mighty waves lifted the ship like a toy, only to send her gliding into a deep trough in the next moment, breaking across the deck. The storm howled through the empty rigging, covering the ship high up into the masts in splash water. The steering wheel had been tied and the relieving tackles rigged to the tiller, to absorb the impact of the waves on the rudder blade. As the *Pearl* wasn't under way, she didn't obey the rudder anymore. A pitch black night increased their helplessness, there was nothing that could be ordered or done anymore, they had to endure whatever was to come. The pressure of the storm on the bare masts tilted the ship heavily to lee and the leeward rail disappeared under the water. Inactive the entire crew lingered on the quarterdeck, for there could be no thought of sleeping or resting. In this fashion passed the endless night with waiting and hoping, but the gray dawn brought no improvement, even though they could see that the *Pearl* hadn't sustained any damage on deck or in the rigging up till now.

But with daybreak came the terrible certainty that the ship was tilting more and more to lee, a sure sign that the load had shifted and thus the worst might happen: Capsizing, the end of them all. In the heavy swell it was impossible to bring the wind on the opposite side of the *Pearl*; to tack would have spelled certain doom. Shipwright Scarus went to Jack and proposed to chop down the topmasts to straighten the ship by reducing the top weight and thereby the pressure of the storm on the rigging. Jack rejected the idea; the falling poles might spring a leak when the *Pearl* passed over them. So it was decided to throw part of the load over board. The storm had lasted just one day, it might continue for days, and it was uncertain whether the crew would still be able later on to do the heavy work. The meals consisted of hart tack with ham or bacon because there was no way to get to the galley, and besides it would have been impossible to keep pots or a kettle on the fire, the *Pearl* rolling and pitching as she did. Nobody had a dry stitch on them anymore, and they couldn't get to the crew's quarters. Well they could imagine what it would look like in the almost certainly flooded room. The crew was allowed to rest in the captain's cabin, but only a few men made use of the permission for there couldn't be any thought of sleeping, too much was at stake.

At noon the order was given: "All hands on deck", which was rather superfluous because the entire crew was already on deck in the expectation that something had to be done if they didn't wish to go down with the ship. The sternmost hatch was opened, one part of the crew were ordered into the hold, while the other part stood roped up on the leeward side of the hatch. The heavy sacks of barley were handed to those standing above and were shoved over board by them, but most of the time they were already washed away by the churning water on deck. In the hold it was stifling hot, and only for a short time the men were able to stand it down there; then the roles had to be reversed, and with sweat pouring off them they took over the work on deck where it was icy cold in comparison. Barbossa stood on the quarterdeck, and whenever an exceptionally heavy sea closed in, a tarpaulin was thrown across the hatch on his command, but it couldn't prevent great masses of water pouring into the hold. Everybody was working for their lives, hundreds of sacks disappeared into the churning sea before they were able to determine that the ship no longer continued to tilt leewards. More and more often the bo'sun passed around the rum bottle to lift the spirits of the men, but their strength waned nevertheless. And on deck the storm and the sea were howling their ghastly song incessantly.

Till late into the night the entire crew were busy throwing the load, for the remaining sacks had to be stowed fast in the hold so the sacks wouldn't slide from the windward side to the newly created empty space at the leeward side, which would have worsened the situation and might have led to a sudden end of them all. At midnight Jack ordered them to stop, for the ship had straightened and he wanted to await daybreak to better assess the situation. Exhausted the watch took turns in frequenting the captain's cabin but they didn't get any sleep. The second gray morning dawned. Undiminished the hurricane blew on and the sea still ran higher but the *Pearl* kept on fighting. Bleak was the view of the towering waves of the wide ocean, how they rolled greedily higher and higher towards the ship as though to swallow it. For the first time Barbossa took command as Jack was close to exhaustion.

There was no work that could be done. Nobody knew what the next hours would bring, whether the load would hold if the weather didn't improve soon. Exhausted, wet and cold everyone found themselves a place where they took a short nap in spite of the ship going up and down the crests and troughs of the waves. Bleak was the view of the deck on which the water swashed and swirled, bleaker still the view of the empty masts which in their hasty movements competed with the flying black clouds. In this fashion passed the third day, until in the evening the order to throw the load was given, for the ship again started to tilt frighteningly towards lee. Summoning their remaining strength they took up the heavy work again, but it seemed as though an inner exhaustion had set in as well, for no-one of the men spoke a word. Even the rum that was passed ever more often was unable to put new life and strength into them anymore.

The third night, too, brought no turn for the better. Everybody was waiting for daybreak. Again the ship had straightened somewhat but they couldn't throw load out of the sternmost hatch anymore, which was still best protected against the breakers, without risking that the load on the windward side would slide towards lee. To open the main and fore hatch across which the sea washed continually would have been too dangerous as the hold would have been flooded.

The morning of the fourth day still brought no turn for the better, and once more Scarus proposed chopping down the topmasts. With a heavy heart Jack agreed but he wanted to wait for the evening. The fastenings of some sails had loosened and had to be tightened again by some of the men.

In the afternoon there was the first sign that the hurricane had hit its peak and would abate soon. For the first time in days the sun peeked through the black clouds. Though those short moments weren't enough for making astronomical observations, they filled everybody with new courage, even though everyone knew hard times still lay ahead when the storm would abate and the ship be even more at the mercy of the high waves with lessened pressure on the masts. The chopping of the topmasts didn't take place, and during the night the worst force of the storm lessened, but the ship was laboring terribly. It no longer rolled or pitched anymore but threw itself from one side to the other. If possible, everyone found themselves a corner where they wedged themselves in, so to speak, or else roped themselves up, following Jack's example. Fortunately the load stayed put, else they would have been done for. Again an endless night. At the dawning of the fifth day Jack gave orders to set the topsails, to support the *Pearl* as best as possible. When the storm abated further the shortened fore course and mainsail were set as well, and slowly the ship began to make headway. The wheel was manned, the rudder beginning to obey it again. Now the drift anchor had to be recovered, a task everybody had been dreading. Jack stood at the wheel and the entire crew had to haul in the hawser and was busy with it for hours. It had to be done with the greatest care, because now the prow was plunging deeply into the sea. Everybody was roped up and breathed a sigh of relief when the work was done without having claimed any victim.

After the hawser had been put below decks, they set the shortened topgallant sails as well, and by and by Jack got back control of his ship, even though she still labored in the erratic sea. The cook was able to get to his galley again, and for the first time in many long days they got a cup of hot tea and a couple of hours later a hot meal as well. The wind was still blowing hard, but the storm was abating. A few hours later the reef-points were loosened. Slowly things got back to normal, the damage was repaired and the rigging thoroughly overhauled, but it took days until all traces of the hurricane had been removed.

Only for a short time the crew were allowed to look after their quarters. They were a mess; for days the water had sloshed inside the room, drenching and smashing everything that hadn't been properly lashed up. There was no opportunity to dry their spare clothes, so whatever they were wearing at the moment had to do. They checked the hold as well, and part of the load had to be put aft to restore the even draft. The heavy swell continued for some days longer, and struggling against it, beating across the wind, the *Pearl* worked her way towards Singapore.

Chapter 6: Spring

The trees and bushes were beginning to bloom again after the long winter and when the spring storms had passed warm air and sunshine followed in their wake.

Mary walked briskly up to the graveyard, a bundle of willow twigs in her hand. It was almost too warm to wear mourning, the black garments attracted the rays of the sun. But it was a pleasant change. She had not felt properly warm for months.

Walking through the orderly rows of graves, Mary noticed happily that even the pain in her chest that was her constant companion now had dulled. Give me a few weeks of sunshine, she thought, and I shall feel like I am born anew.

The fine weather had put her in such a good mood, she found it hard to feel appropriately sad when she reached the graves of her sister and brother-in-law. Lucy had succumbed to her illness a month ago, but Mary suspected her sister had given up on life long before that. It was hard to imagine; Lucy had two wonderful daughters to live for, yet she had always been ashamed of the example she was setting for them.

Mary put the twigs in a jar in front of the simple gravestone and spoke a quick prayer for Lucy and Daniel. Then she turned to the grave next to theirs, in whose stone were inscribed the names *Jane Morris* and *Jonathan Morris*.

Her memories of her parents were nothing but golden. They had been wonderful people, full of humour and understanding. Far from them any thought of marrying their daughters off for money – not that they could have complained in Jane's case, who had settled for a retired sea captain, or Charlotte's choice of established innkeeper John. But Mary was aware of the fact how unusual her parents had been in allowing her to marry William who had nothing to offer but himself. Of course they had not been happy; they had argued, they had warned her, yet in the end they had conceded that it was her own life she had to live, and who were they to stand in the way when their daughter and her chosen husband were so visibly agreed? So when Lucy had one year later admitted in tears that she was with child, they had spared her any reproaches and simply welcomed Daniel into the family.

Yes, she might search the entire world and not find better parents than hers had been.

She adorned their grave as well and spoke a prayer, then slowly left the cemetery.

A group of young men passed her, carrying a maypole, and Mary smiled. It was good to see some things never changed. She turned to face the mild spring sun and closed her eyes. A cough fought its way up her throat and she braced herself against a wall to ride it out. Her breath rattled in her chest but she did not care. She would not let anything spoil this perfect day.

Without hurry she returned home. Her new lodgers were busy with their work, Susan ironing and Judith sewing. Mary had given the two young women permission to work in the kitchen, as it was the brightest room in the house. In return they looked after the girls in her absence. Will spent much of his time at the harbour these days, helping with small chores, and the harbourmaster or the captains were kind enough to slip him a coin or two for it. Mary had been told he was well liked there, but she still hoped someone might take him on as an apprentice when he turned ten. She had already spoken to Mr. Gaskell and he seemed willing.

"It is a beautiful day," she said to the young women. "I trust I can expect some young men to pick you up later on for the May dance?"

"Yes, ma'am." Susan lifted her head from her work and smiled mischievously at Mary. "In fact, I hope to secure myself a husband tonight."

Mary laughed. "Careful there," she warned light-heartedly. "Men are seldom inclined to propose on a May's eve. As for securing, it is the perfect opportunity, just don't go too far."

"Speaking from experience, ma'am?" asked Judith with an impish grin.

"You would be surprised." Mary sat down. On a day like this, she felt so much at peace with the world that she was almost inclined to think well of William. "It was a May dance as well that my husband first asked me to accompany him to. Naturally he did not propose to me then, but I think I secured him that night - within the allowed limits, of course."

The young women giggled.

"You have to teach us, Mrs. Turner," Susan said.

Mary smiled somewhat wistfully. "You do not want me for a teacher," she replied.

Chapter 7: Local Authorities

Half a world away from her familiar haunts, the *Pearl* drew nearer the bustling town of Singapore. Hot and incredibly humid, the settlement had been built on a cluster of small islands. In the ramshackle docks tall ships, most of them the Company's impressive East Indiamen, and smaller junks crowded together.

Bill, Jack, Barbossa and Moneybag, already wearing their traders' disguise, stood at the rail and watched their approach. After a while Moneybag addressed Jack.

"Now, captain, no disrespect intended, but what do you know about a merchant's business? About dealing with the East India Trading Company?"

Jack mulled it over for a moment. "They're a nasty bunch."

"Well, yes." Moneybag took a deep breath. "They'll also watch our every step. The Company controls all trade in the East and they don't look kindly on any independent merchant who tries to do business here."

"Not to mention anyone who tries to do business with the local pirates," added Barbossa.

"That, too. We'll have to step carefully."

"Speakin' of which," Bill said, "how *do* we find the local pirates, anyway?"

"I wouldn't worry about that," Barbossa replied. "Either they find us - an independent merchant should be a temptin' quarry - or we'll ferret them out easily. There'll be more than one informer among the dockhands."

As one they turned and watched the busy crowd at the docks. When nobody there made any immediate attempt to report to an unseen master, Moneybag began again:

"Anyway, the point I was getting at, captain: I don't think it would be wise if you pretended to be the captain."

"Beg pardon?"

"The captain of a merchant vessel, I mean," elaborated Moneybag. "If we're to fool the Company, we need to be convincing. And seeing as you have no experience in the trading business..."

"... you're about to suggest that I should promote you, is that it?" Jack eyed him suspiciously.

"Temporarily."

"You want to become captain."

"Just temp..."

"Of my ship."

Barbossa rolled his eyes. Bill sighed.

"Jack," he said.

"Stop makin' a fuss, the man's right." Barbossa scowled.

Jack looked hurt.

Moneybag shuffled his feet and cleared his throat. "Well," he said after an uncomfortable pause, "the first thing we need to do is ask the Company to deliver a letter to our home port, informing them of our lost load. That's how it's done," he added almost apologetically.

"Then that's what we'll do," decided Barbossa.

Jack glared at him. "Since when do you give the orders around here?"

"Someone has to!"

"That would be the captain's job!"

Shaking his head, Bill walked off. Two captains on one ship, he decided, were too much; and a third one probably wouldn't help things. As he passed a group of his shipmates, he heard Pintel say:

"The Aztec gods weren't only pleased with blood sacrifices, you know. In former times, every year ten virgins were cast off a cliff to appease them." He looked around furtively. "Now, that witch ain't no virgin, that's for certain. So what could she have offered them gods instead, eh?"

The shouting match went on for about ten minutes longer and ended with Barbossa as the clear winner - mostly because Jack had to agree to his and Moneybag's reasoning. And so Dog Ear and Nipperkin were chosen by lot for the baboon watch while the rest lowered the boats and went ashore.

Singapore's market at the harbor was an assault on the senses. Stalls were crammed with sacks of herbs, spices, rice, noodles, beans and other goods. The air was filled with the pungent odor of fish heads, eels and cow tongues, mingled with the sweet fragrance of exotic fruits and vegetables. Chart-

makers, glass-blowers and wizened old fishermen sat in the shadow of overhanging roofs or went about their business.

Moneybag enquired his way to the local agency of the East India Trading Company.

“Now,” he said in his new authority as captain before leaving with Jack (who refused to relinquish control of the enterprise completely), “I don’t want to find any of you drinking, gambling or whoring around, understand? Get provisions, get information, but remember we’re in enemy territory.”

Which, grumble as they might, they all accepted.

So they split up. Jack and Moneybag went to see the Company man, most of the crew to buy supplies while keeping their eyes and ears open, while Barbossa chose the unusual task of guarding the boats for himself and Bill.

“Lad,” he called to a young Chinese when the rest of the gang had disbanded, “I’m sure you can find me someone to point the way to my good friend Sao Feng. You might give him this with compliments from Captain Barbossa.” He pulled a piece of eight out of his pocket, flipped it to the dockhand and without watching where he might run sat down on a box and started eating an apple. “And now we wait,” he said.

Every pirate knew the story behind the coins that the nine Lords used to send verified messages to one another or in extreme circumstances to summon the Brethren Court. According to legend, it had been the first Court under the leadership of its first and so far only King who had captured and bound the sea goddess Calypso in human form so that mastery of the oceans would belong to men. A fancy tale; Bill wondered how much of it was actually true. He had seen his share of the supernatural since he first went to sea – but a goddess? The sea had always been dangerous and unpredictable, how could the presence or absence of a deity make any difference to that?

Sao Feng was not a man who kept his guests waiting. No sooner had Jack and Moneybag returned from their meeting with the local Company agent named Pullman (“There’s something decidedly froggish about him,” Jack remarked) when a boy ran up to them to extend an invitation to Shun-Nan’s teahouse to Barbossa and any “followers” he would choose to bring along.

So the four of them set out to see the infamous Pirate Lord of Singapore, Jack, Barbossa and Bill, the boy leading the way. They were all agreed that as captain, Moneybag would be most likely under observation from the Company, so it would be better for him to return to the ship. The streets they passed through grew narrower and shabbier with each yard until they found themselves in a part of town where probably no foreigner had ever set foot in before. Right at the center of it was Shun-Nan’s teahouse, a derelict two-storey building in the customary Chinese style. As everywhere else in Singapore, groups of people stood or sat around without sparing the *Pearl*’s men so much as a second glance.

The boy took his leave, and they entered. In the otherwise deserted house they were welcomed by a well-preserved Chinese woman, her black hair arranged in an intricate knot with long golden pins, and even without knowing the first thing about cloth they saw that her multicolored dress must be worth a small fortune. She bowed before Barbossa.

“Welcome, Captain Barbossa. I am Madame Wu, deputy of Lord Sao Feng, and I bid you and your retinue welcome in his name.”

“Thank you.” Barbossa glanced at Jack from out of the corner of his eyes. “We’re honored.”

She bowed again. “If you will please remove your weapons. Your safety will be guaranteed.”

“No doubt,” muttered Bill.

Barbossa shot him a warning look.

Diligently, they took off their weapons, hidden or otherwise, until Madame Wu appeared satisfied.

“If you will follow me.”

She led them through the teahouse and out on the wide patio that was protected on three sides by a stone wall.

Seated on the patio were three Chinese men. Two of them had long, gray hair and beards and wore a dark blue and a bright red robe respectively, embroidered with golden fish. The third one was younger, yet clearly a martial and commanding figure. His head was shaven but he wore a long mustache. A golden dragon coiled all around his green robe. Behind him stood a pretty young Chinese woman (Jack eyed her up at once), and smaller groups of people were scattered all around, trying to look inconspicuous while probably being armed to the teeth.

Madame Wu led them straight up to the triumvirate and bowed yet again before stepping to the bald man’s side while he rose with an imposing gesture.

“Captain Barbosa,” he said. “I am honoured to finally meet you face to face.”

Now it was Barbosa’s turn to bow and he did it gracefully. “The pleasure’s all mine,” he replied with a touch of humbleness that Bill never thought he had in him. “May I present Captain Sparrow and Mr. Turner.”

Sao Feng - for that was who he had to be - indicated the two men at his side who got to their feet as well. “This is Captain Hai-Ming and his brother Jian.”

A lot of bowing later they were all seated around a low table. The whole “Lord” business seemed to appeal greatly to Barbosa. It was probably the first time that anyone had shown him respect on such a grand scale. Probably, Bill thought, watching him, it also made him realize how big the difference was between Sao Feng, who truly was a Lord of the pirates, and Barbosa himself who didn’t even own a ship, much less an entire fleet.

“And now,” Sao Feng said, “what brings you to Singapore?”

Barbosa adopted an air of indifference that for those who knew him signalled his keen interest. “A small and rather trifling matter,” he answered. “We’re looking for two Indian slaves who supposedly can be found somewhere in this vicinity.”

Bill expected the Pirate Lord to remark on the fact that said slaves obviously were more than just a trifle if Barbosa and Jack had crossed the world to find them; but Sao Feng just nodded with a thoughtful expression.

“Do you have any idea where to start looking?” he asked.

Barbosa opened his mouth but Jack spoke first.

“No,” he said. “None whatsoever.”

Barbosa looked at him, then shrugged with an affirmative smile. Bill stopped himself just in time from rolling his eyes. Jack and his mad plans once again.

Sao Feng’s indifferent face rivalled Barbosa’s. “I’ll be only too glad to help you,” he said, “but I must ask you for something in return.”

“Of course,” Barbosa smiled politely.

“An official of the East India Trading Company called Hollingworth bought a small island just off the coast and set up an operation. As only westerners are allowed access to the island we do not know what goes on there.”

“But you would like to,” suspected Jack.

Now Bill thought he understood what Jack was doing. Probably he had already found out about Hollingworth and where to find him from Pullman. He didn’t need Sao Feng’s help but considered it wise to keep that knowledge for himself.

“Find out what the Company is planning,” said the Pirate Lord, “and I will give you any assistance you may require.”

Barbosa sketched the barest hint of a bow. “We have an accord.”

Returning to the harbor, they waited until they were well out of earshot of any inconspicuous eavesdropper before discussing their audience with Sao Feng.

“What have we learned so far?” Bill enquired.

Jack picked up a dead frog from a stall, examined it and put it back with a grimace. “Sao Feng’s rule is threatened,” he said casually. “Those two greybeards aren’t simply his business partners but his rivals.”

“What makes you think so?” Barbosa frowned.

Jack put on his long-suffering mien. “They and their retinue wore a fish symbol,” he explained with an exasperated sigh. “Sao Feng and his folks wore a dragon symbol. Apparently them guys would like to become Lord themselves and have enough people and money behind them to support their claim. So we better be careful. No sense in getting tangled in local politics.”

Chapter 8: Scapegoats

“A small party might do the trick,” said Jack. “We can’t just come knocking thirty men strong.” He leaned against the rail. “I think as a man of the world Mr. Barbossa should accompany me, as well as indispensable Mr. Moneybag – that is, Mr. Kemp and Captain Ashby. Maybe Mr. Twigg. And you, gentlemen,” he addressed Koehler and the bo’sun, “will come along disguised as our slave retinue.” Jack might have considered it a clever plan; but his crewmen’s faces made it inescapably clear they thought different.

“Certainly not,” declared Koehler, and the bo’sun added:

“That’s what we left behind when we became free gentlemen of fortune.”

Jack sighed exasperatedly. “Yes, but they’ll never expect you to be free gentlemen of fortune, savvy? Which is exactly the reason why they won’t pay any attention to you. Which, in return, leaves you free to go about your business while Mr. Barbossa, Mr. Moneybag and I will be entertaining the islanders.” The bo’sun just folded his arms.

Jack looked from him to Koehler and back. “Gents,” he said severely, “do you want to find the gold of Cortés or not? If not, we might just weigh anchor and get back to business – the find-and-plunder-a-richly-laden-ship-but-be-forever-the-laughingstock-of-the-pirating-world business. Think about it. Wouldn’t be the reception at Tortuga worth all the trouble if we brought back the treasure? Think about the stories you could tell - how you cleverly deceived the English and sailed away into the sunset with a beautiful Aztec princess...”

The crew shuffled their feet. Muttering softly, they threw furtive looks at Koehler and the bo’sun. Pretending he did not notice, Jack peered across the water at the docks but it was already too dark to see anything. “Now where are those laggards?” he wondered aloud.

After their meeting with Sao Feng, Jack, Barbossa and Bill had met Mallot at the docks and ordered him to wait for the last members of the shore party with the remaining boat. So far, neither he nor the missing crew members had returned.

“That’s exactly what I meant.” Moneybag nodded grimly. “Damn.”

“No sense in going back and looking for them,” decided Jack. “Let’s just hope they’ll get back in time and turn in. We’ve got a busy day tomorrow.”

But neither during the night nor in the morning did the men return, so Jack dropped the idea of taking the *Pearl* to Hollingworth’s island. Keeping to the Code would have meant leaving behind almost a fourth of the crew, and for a change Jack and Barbossa were agreed on the fact that this would be a bad idea.

So the crew assembled the dinghy, and laden with whatever gifts they deemed appropriate Jack, Barbossa, Moneybag, Twigg, Koehler and the bo’sun (the latter two without grumbling openly this time, but their faces spoke volumes) set out for Hollingworth’s island.

“Mr. Turner, in the meantime, will be in command of the ship,” Jack said, and Moneybag added:

“And when those lazy scoundrels return, throw them into the brig!”

The morning passed slowly. The ship felt strangely empty without all the colorful characters that usually walked her decks; Bill found he almost missed even Pintel’s weird stories. Standing at the rail, he absent-mindedly watched the docks. There was something nagging at him, had been ever since their meeting with Sao Feng, and he tried to recall every word of their conversation to find out what his subconscious was warning him about.

Finally it came to him, and he wondered why none of them, not even Jack, had noticed it before.

Wasn’t it odd that Sao Feng had offered to help them in finding the slaves in exchange for information about Hollingworth’s island? The slaves, as they already knew from Bishop, were in Hollingworth’s possession. If Sao Feng truly controlled this region, how could he have failed to learn of their arrival? And if he knew of their whereabouts, why had he sent Jack and Barbossa to Hollingworth’s island in the first place, knowing they would find the slaves there and have no need to return to him? There was, Bill decided, something very fishy going on.

It was nearly noon when a boat approached the *Pearl*; however, it was neither their missing boat nor their missing shipmates but a flat Chinese vessel used to ferry goods. Though it indeed carried a load of exotic fruit and the man at the oar certainly dressed and looked the part, there was something in his attitude that suggested otherwise. Sure enough, when he went alongside, his concern was not selling his wares.

"I have a message for your captain," he called upon seeing Bill at the rail.

"He's not here," replied Bill. "You can leave it with me."

"You're in command?"

"Yes. So what's the message?"

Quickly he pushed back his right sleeve to reveal a dragon tattoo; after covering it again he said:

"Your presence is requested by Lord Sao Feng. It concerns your men."

"That's all?" Bill asked, not at all surprised.

"Yes. Ignore it at your peril." He turned the boat and rowed back towards the docks.

"It's got to be a trap," said Scratch.

Bill smiled sarcastically. "Sure," he agreed. "But we need to know what's going on. We can't afford to make an enemy of Sao Feng with half our crew missing." He stepped away from the rail. "Lower the boat. I want you to move the *Pearl* out of harbor – keep her in sight of the Company ships but out of range of any inconspicuous boat that might sneak up on her. Double watches at all times. And send a message to Jack."

Just when he was about to cast off, Mad José clambered down the Jacob's Ladder and into the boat.

"You're not serious, are you?" Bill said.

José simply grabbed an oar.

"Ah, well." Bill shrugged. "Come along, then."

Their reception at Shun-Nan's teahouse was decidedly less polite than the day before. Without further ado they were disarmed and dragged before Sao Feng. The Pirate Lord of Singapore was furious.

"Where is your captain?" he demanded.

"On Hollingworth's island, like you asked him to. Now what's this about?" Bill took a look around.

Hai-Ming was missing; so was Jian. Only Madame Wu stood by Sao Feng's side, her face unreadable.

"You pretend you do not know?" asked the Pirate Lord.

"Know what?"

Madame Wu spoke. "Your men have been found guilty of breaking into honoured Hai-Ming's house and murdering him in his sleep."

"'Found guilty'?" echoed Bill. "Do you have any proof for your accusations?" This was bad. And he had no doubt it might turn worse still.

"Who else should be the guilty?" replied Sao Feng angrily. "You come here for reasons unknown, and in the same night Hai-Ming is slain. I welcomed you as my guests – this is how you repay me. I never thought to see the day that a pirate would sell out his fellow Brethren to the East India Trading Company."

"Now hold on there for a moment," said Bill. "Those are serious charges, and as far as I'm concerned I've not yet heard one thing what proves our involvement."

Sao Feng smiled. "Oh, do not doubt we will find the ones responsible. There are ways to loosen your tongues. As Lord, I hereby declare all men of the *Black Pearl* to be enemies and traitors of our cause, and everyone found in my territory is to be taken captive and brought before me or in case of resistance killed on the spot." He gestured. "Take them away. I shall forward their remains to their masters to alert them of the dangers of invading my home!"

Bill met his eyes. "Mighty convenient, is it?" he said before Sao Feng's men dragged him away.

Chapter 9:
Captain's Log: New Friends

Hollingworth's island is a far cry from the orderly Company headquarters at Singapore. Humid and marshy like the mainland, there are no roads, no walkways, just muddy paths; its harbor consists of a small bay with poles driven into the soft ground to tie the boats to; and the only building visible from an approaching vessel is some kind of wooden, two-storey barrack. Not even the impressive East Indiaman *Singapore* floating in some distance can make up for those obvious shortcomings. I begin to understand why Sao Feng is so keen to learn what's going on here. Nobody in his right mind and without a damn good reason would buy this place.

A sweating Company soldier greets us when we clamber ashore.

"Are you expected, gentlemen?"

Moneybag is in his element again. "Technically, no, my good man," he says. "But Mr. Pullman highly recommended a visit to this place. I'm Captain Ashby, and these two gentlemen are my first officer Mr. Kemp and my second officer Mr. Marshall."

Excuse me?! We'll talk about this, Mr. Moneybag, make no mistake. And don't think I didn't see that smirk, Hector.

The soldier eyes us with what only the most well-disposed could call professional alertness. He must try very hard not to yawn. "Follow me."

"Mind the boat," Barbossa orders, addressing the bo'sun, Koehler and Twigg, which of course translates as "Take a look around and try not to be seen while doing so".

We officers trudge up the muddy path, under the dense canopy of strange trees. Contrary to my expectation, the soldier leads us away from the barrack into more swamp and jungle. Swarms of insects descend on us. This better be good. Pirate-eating poultry, dead priests, hurricanes, Company men, being degraded to second mate and again and again insects. If Bishop lied about Hollingworth, I'll invite myself for dinner every day for a year.

After we've nearly been eaten alive by those bugs, the forest falls away unexpectedly to reveal a huge clearing. Right in the middle of it is a large pond, stretching all the way into the thicket, and right in the middle of that is a pile of stones and rotten wood that must at one time have been a building of sorts. There's an awful lot of people around, most of them, I notice with growing excitement, suspiciously Aztec-like looking workers.

"What's this?" Barbossa takes the words out of me mouth.

The soldier heads towards a group of people standing at the edge of the pond, deep in discussion.

"Excavation," he answers unthinkingly.

Well, that's something we understand. I think I like this Hollingworth already. Lifting a treasure – the dream of every pirate. Which, by the way, is why we are here. To business, gents.

Three of the people our soldier leads us to are clad like respectable rich Englishmen, two are Company soldiers, the last is an Aztec woman that might be quite pretty beneath all that dirt. She is obviously presenting some find to the gentlemen and is the first to notice our approach. Her coal black eyes meet mine for a moment, and I find myself smiling at her. She frowns disapprovingly. Seeing her reaction, the English turn around.

"What have we here?" one of them, a tall bag of bones with a sharp nose, says loudly and jovially.

"Visitors?"

Moneybag introduces us and tells the cover story again.

"Capital, capital!" Bag of bones claps his hands. "Welcome to my little corner of paradise, sirs! I'm George Hollingworth, and these gentlemen are Mr. Cox and Mr. Holton."

The two men bow in turn; Cox has chubby red cheeks and a white beard and is constantly mopping his brow, Holton's pinched, sour face reminds me of a governess I once knew – but that's another story. Hollingworth dismisses the woman and the soldiers with a gesture, smiling broadly at us. "Well, we're always happy to receive guests. So good of Mr. Pullman to mention us! You must tell me all of dear old England, I've been away far too long. But first let me show you around."

We follow him halfway around the pond to a makeshift bridge that leads to the pile of rubble.

"This island was once the hideout of pirates," he tells us, "but it was abandoned when a tidal wave destroyed the settlement. However, I was amazed to learn there had been a temple of some heathen deity here – you'd never believe those lawless scum to worship anything but gold, would you?"

We all grunt politely.

Hollingworth leads us across the bridge into the ruins. Damaged beyond repair as it is, the temple is still impressive. Pillars adorned with carvings of sea creatures once supported the roof. There are wall paintings of ships caught in a storm, of glittering waves under a full moon, of fishers hauling in their catch. Everywhere, especially in the hip-deep water, the workers are busy salvaging what can be salvaged. I wonder who of the lot may be the two nobles we're looking for.

"I see you employ Indian workers," Barbossa remarks casually. "How quaint. It must have cost you a small fortune."

"Oh no, not at all, Mr. Kemp." Hollingworth smiles proudly. "You see, I can't hire locals for obvious reasons, and have you tried to outbid those plantation owners in the colonies? Please. On the other hand, there's simply no market for Indian slaves. You hire some desperate men to secure you a batch of them and have them shipped here. See, they don't speak English very well, the people here don't speak Spanish, and you don't even need many guards because as conspicuous as they are they wouldn't get far even if they'd manage to escape."

"Ingenious," I praise him. I'd dearly like to introduce him to the bo'sun one day. Guess he'd rip the snob's head right off.

"We have already salvaged some extraordinary items," continues Hollingworth. "I've installed a room for them in my house and I promise you, you will not be disappointed. Please, follow me. I also want to introduce you to my wife."

That's certainly a first. Well, at least for me and probably for Barbossa; Moneybag seems the type of man you'd entrust your wife to.

Back into the wood, swamp and swarms of insects. This time, we head for the barrack that turns out to be Hollingworth's house. A servant greets us.

"Tell Mrs. Hollingworth we have guests," our host orders. "You'll of course stay for dinner, gentlemen?"

"Oh no, we couldn't possibly," Barbossa protests feebly.

"I insist."

We graciously decide not to debate the matter.

Hollingworth leads us into a gallery of sorts. I cannot help but be impressed. If this is only part of the temple's inventory, I wonder why the Singapore pirates never returned to reclaim their treasure. Vases of finest china, bells that shine like polished silver and gold, rings, a nice box adorned with golden crabs and waves of jade. Crabs. I know someone who likes crabs. Perhaps she'll fancy a souvenir.

"Oh my," says Moneybag.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Hollingworth beams.

I can see what they mean. The larger-than-life statue of a woman with floating hair and two fishtails must be made of solid gold.

Hollingworth picks up a long, plain roll made of some darkish material. "Now this is a curious item," he says. "We are in luck it had been stored in a part of the temple above water level, else it would have been ruined." He unrolls it carefully on a table.

"What's this?"

Whatever it's supposed to be, it's old and well-worn. On a reddish brown ground a large disc made of several differently patterned rings is presented.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" says Hollingworth. "If I had to guess, I'd say it's some kind of puzzle. Look at this." He puts his fingers on one of the rings and turns it. "Everything moves," he explains, demonstrating it on another ring. "Depending on how you turn them there are always new combinations."

Moneybag leans over it, frowning. "That's no puzzle," he says. "It's a map."

"A map?" Hollingworth laughs good-naturedly. "A map of what?"

"I couldn't tell you. But," Moneybag turns some of the rings himself and points, "those landmasses reshape with every turn. If you know how, you can charter a course."

Now Barbossa, too, focuses his attention on the strange device. "What about those lunar phases?" He points to the middle of the disc.

While they are all busy figuring out how to operate a map consisting of a dozen rings that may or may not lead to some unknown location, I quickly pocket a nice-looking ring and ponder how soon they might miss the nice box and where to hide it in those impractical trader clothes of mine.

There are steps behind us, and as I turn around I hear Hollingworth say:

"Ah, my dear. Come in. Meet Captain Ashby and his officers Mr. Kemp and Mr. Marshall."

Something big and icy drops into my stomach when I meet the lovely young woman's green eyes and sweet smile.

"Why... hello, Miss Beckett," I hear myself say.

Chapter 10:
Double-cross

“We are in deep now, aren’t we?” said Tom.

“Do tell.”

The hole they had been thrown into made a dog kennel look really spacious in comparison. To top things, they had to share it with two skeletons.

Tom fidgeted, trying to find relief for his aching shoulders, which was difficult as they had been chained to the slimy, mouldy wall half sitting, half hanging in spread-eagle position.

“We’ve been set up,” he began again.

Jacoby rolled his eyes. “How very observant.”

“But who? And why?”

Bill almost shrugged. “Everyone could have his or her reason,” he said. “There’s this Jian fellow – he may have dispatched o’ his capt’n to rise up in rank. Sao Feng o’ course would’ve wanted to get rid o’ the competition. Madame Wu...”

“There’s trouble if ever I saw some,” interrupted Pintel. “Women!”

“She might’ve helped Sao Feng,” continued Bill unfazed, “or tried to weaken his rule to take his place.”

Mallot shook his head impatiently. “The important question is: How do we get outta here?” Everybody heard the unspoken addition “... *before they’ve finished with Quarry.*”

Their unfortunate shipmate had been the first to be dragged away by Sao Feng’s experts for loosening someone’s tongue. Considering he didn’t know a thing about the murder of Hai-Ming, he might put up a long fight before confessing everything they wanted to hear. Bill hoped he would be wise and spill the beans at once. The result would be the same but it would spare him a lot of pain.

“Well,” Grapple replied sarcastically, “if you can just rid yourself and us of those chains, we...” He quickly shut up when there came the sound of steps from the boards above them. Someone hastened down the stairs, drew nearer. They all tensed. The bolt was thrown back, the door opened, and a slight figure, carrying a bundle on his back, hurriedly came in and freed them from their bonds.

Bill eyed the strange Chinese with distrust. “Who are you?”

“My name is Tai Huang. I work for Sao Feng.” He opened his bundle and handed them their weapons.

Bill didn’t sheath his sword. “So why are you freeing us?”

“I am not supposed to do this, but I have to help my master.” Tai Huang was talking quickly.

“Madame Wu is planning something – I do not know what. I have followed her to the docks where she meets with some westerners in one of the abandoned warehouses, the one with the sagging roof. I think Madame Wu had Hai-Ming killed and plans to blame my master for it. You have to help me.”

Grapple laughed harshly. “Why help you? Or your master, for that matter?”

“Because you never make it out of the harbour if you don’t.”

“Is that a threat?” asked Grapple.

Jacoby fingered the hilt of his cutlass. “Kill him and have it done with, I say.”

Tai Huang shook his head. “No, you don’t understand,” he said. “They are watching your ship.”

“So what? They won’t attack us openly. The English still believe we are honest merchants, after all.”

Again he shook his head. “The ones Madame Wu meets with. They work for the East India Trading Company.”

The crew exchanged glances.

“Well,” said Jacoby.

“Puts things kinda into perspective, don’t it?” Ragetti remarked.

“Aye,” agreed Pintel.

Bill sighed. “All right, we’ll try to help.”

Tai Huang looked very relieved. “Thank you,” he said. “But you should be careful. When they find out you have fled, they will call a hunt. Try to stay alive and find something on Madame Wu before the meeting tonight.”

“And what do we do once we have found somethin’? We can’t just walk in on Sao Feng.”

“Meet me at the temple next to the chart-maker’s shop at the docks at sunset. I’ll have thought of something by then.” He pointed deeper into the bowels of the bathhouse’s cellar. “Go that way, it’s unguarded.” He quickly left the room.

Bill watched him go, unsure whether to trust him or not – as if they had a choice. “Right,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Tom hung back. “But what about Quarry?” he asked hesitatingly. “We can’t just leave without him.” Sweet innocence. “You’ve a big heart, lad, but still much to learn.” Bill patted his shoulder. “Come on.”

How they made it to the docks without being detected was nothing short of a miracle. Following Tai Huang’s advice, they left the bathhouse by a secret underground route that led right into canals of Singapore harbor. Diving as much as possible, they finally reached the docks and climbed out of the water when they thought they were unobserved. They searched around and found the building Tai Huang had mentioned. A light was burning inside. When they drew nearer stealthily, they heard voices and crouched down to listen.

“I am certain that after my business is completed, you will hold true to your offer?” That was Madame Wu, unmistakably.

A male voice answered. “Do you still have our contract? You have guaranteed yourself a high standing with the East India Trading Company for turning over this region to us. We would hope that you have prepared an adequate defence, should your loyalty be questioned by the pirates?”

Bill nodded grimly when Tom’s eyes widened. Tai Huang had been right.

The female pirate spoke again. “Since Sao Feng’s bodyguard has come under my power I have all the security I need. It was she who, under his instruction, allowed your agents into Hai-Ming’s hideout for their work. Everything is working as planned.”

“Is it?” the man said. “We’ve received word that the assassins have escaped.”

At this, Madame Wu appeared flustered a bit. “Well, yes,” she confessed, “they seem to have received some help. We have our men patrolling the city for them as we speak. All pirates in Singapore now know that they are murderers, so it is my belief they’ll be found. It’s of no matter, since they will not be able to disrupt the meeting. Security has been doubled at the teahouse after the *incursion*.”

“And what of Sao Feng? Does he suspect your treachery?”

She laughed shortly and derisively. “Quite the contrary,” she said. “Now that Jian believes this to be a Company attack, it has rekindled his fear of such an event taking place in his own haven. His scrutiny has been directed elsewhere, and Sao Feng assumes that without Hai-Ming to spur him on, Jian will crawl back to his hole and behave. The finding of this little trinket should cause quite a stir at the meeting. It will give me great amusement to hear how Sao Feng tries to justify having Hai-Ming’s ring on his person.”

“We look forward to your success at tonight’s meeting,” replied the man. “The plans for the initial occupation have not changed?”

“No, everything will go as planned. Until we meet again.”

The door opened. Peering carefully around the corner of the warehouse, Bill saw a short, rotund man leave the building, accompanied by two soldiers in the uniform of the East India Trading Company. So this was indeed it. Madame Wu had set them up; she planned to set up Sao Feng with the help of his own bodyguard tonight and turn Singapore and its sea over to the Company. If they had ever been in real trouble, it was now.

He waited for Madame Wu to leave as well but nothing happened. Instead, when the Company men were well out of earshot, her voice, slightly raised, said:

“Come forth, westerners. You needn’t be afraid of me.”

The pirates exchanged glances.

“It’s a trap!” Pintel hissed. “She can’t know we’re here.”

“Don’t be too sure,” muttered Bill. He gathered them closer. “Grapple, Mallot, you’ll accompany me inside. The rest of you stay put. You know what’s at stake – we have to expose that woman.”

“How?”

“The contract they were talkin’ about? We need to find it, otherwise Sao Feng will never believe us.”

Gripping their weapons tightly, they walked to the door and entered.

Madame Wu and two heavily armed men Bill remembered seeing at the teahouse were standing in the middle of the derelict building, between piles of debris fallen from the roof which had collapsed from water damage. She watched them with mild curiosity.

“What resourceful Brethren you’ve proven to be,” she said. “I most definitely misjudged you. But then, we cannot always assume that those we ally with are what they seem, can we?”

“I didn’t know we were allied,” Bill retorted. “Or are you suggestin’ you don’t entirely trust your new friends? The Company won’t spare you if they take over this region, you must know that.” She smiled. “Do not assume I am so blind that I cannot see their true intentions,” she said. “But the Company’s presence in Singapore is a fact. Sao Feng may think that by ignoring this fact he can eliminate it, or else he feels so secure in his position that he believes himself invincible. It might take him years to come to see the error of his conviction and by then, it might already be too late.” She folded her hands. “This is not your fight. Return to your ship and leave. I will not try to stop you.” No, thought Bill, of course she would not. It was the easiest way of getting rid of them. Sao Feng and the rest of the Singapore pirates would consider their flight the ultimate proof of their guilt, and Madame Wu would be free to put her plan into action. Killing her for revenge made no difference at all. On the contrary, while Sao Feng might hold on to his title for a while longer, they would still be hunted for murder and rightly so.

Bill heaved a sigh. “It appears we have no choice, have we?”

“No, indeed,” she smiled. “You have not.”

“Well.” He shrugged. “I’d like to say it had been a pleasure, ma’am, but you’ll forgive me if I don’t. Goodbye.” Gesturing at Grapple and Mallot to follow him, he left the warehouse and turned his steps at a brisk pace towards the harbor, his shipmates following. Tom almost had to jog to keep up with him.

“We’re not really leaving, are we?” he asked.

“Of course not.” Unfortunately for Madame Wu and her plans, there was still the unresolved business of Jack and the Aztec nobles. And if there was one thing stronger than a pirate’s desire to survive, it was his desire to lay his hands on undreamed of riches. And maybe, maybe his desire to get even on someone who had double-crossed him. “What we have to do is get the contract and find out what hold that woman has over Sao Feng’s bodyguard, so we can use it to our advantage.”

Grapple shook his head vehemently. “This is madness,” he stated. “We’d have to evade Sao Feng’s and Hai-Ming’s vigilantes, break into Wu’s home, steal the bloody paper, find the bodyguard, practically snatch him from Sao Feng’s den and convince him to cooperate with us.”

He had a point, Bill had to confess. Still, they were not entirely without options...

“I think this is where this Tai Huang fellow might come in useful.”

Chapter 11:
Captain's Log: Old Friends

"It's Mrs. Hollingworth now, actually," Abby says.
"Oh. I see. Congratulations, then."
Hollingworth and my men look from her to me and back, Barbossa and Moneybag with trepidation.
"You are acquainted with each other?" Hollingworth asks. Really sharp, that man.
"Yes." Abby furrows her brow. "Where was it that we met, Mr. Marshall?"
"London," I answer quickly.
"Exactly. Mr. Marshall once sailed in the employ of the Company, you know."
"Indeed? Splendid! Why didn't you tell me, sir? I would have made you doubly welcome."
"Yes, don't be modest, Mr. Marshall." Abby smiles sweetly in a way that tells me I'm in deep trouble.
We retire to the drawing room. Abby sends away the servants and proceeds to pour us drinks. While the gents get into conversations, I go and join her.
She nips at a glass of rum and hands it to me. "Jack Sparrow," she says, the tip of her tongue passing over her lips. I find myself staring at it in fascination. Oh dear.
"Shh. I'm Drunken... I mean, Duncan Marshall, remember?"
"My apologies, Mr. Marshall." Her green eyes laugh at me.
I cast about for something helpful to say. "So – what are you doing here?" Well, it was worth a try.
"What are *you* doing here? Going by an alias, pretending to be a merchant... If I had to guess, I'd say you're up to something." It's startling how much she resembles her brother when she smiles like that. I almost expect her to whip out a branding iron any moment now.
"Me? What gives you that idea?"
She slips her fingers into my cuff. "Don't you trust me, Jack?"
"Well, love," I say, trying to ignore her touch as she strokes my wrist teasingly, "I can't help suspecting you might be a wee bit angry with dear ol' Jack – not that it was my fault, mind! Your brother got quite unreasonably upset..."
"My brother!" She smiles derisively. "After you had fled the scene Cutler was very quick to introduce me to some high-ranking official of the Company. 'We have to do something after that scoundrel took advantage of the poor girl,' he told our father. Less than a year later I was married."
"I didn't."
She pulls back her hand. "My brother hired you on my recommendation. So call it what you want, you did take advantage of me. And then you betrayed Cutler."
"Now that had nothing to do with you," I defend myself.
"He was so angry..." she muses. "You nearly destroyed his standing within the Company, you know." Frowning, she puts a finger to her lips. "And come to think of it, I remember he wrote something about you being responsible for our father's death."
"Only indirectly, love. Nothing personal."
"Not that Cutler cares, on a personal level. He inherited quite a sum. But for reasons of honour he has to hunt you down now. If only to show the public how much he cares."
"So," I dare to ask, "are you going to turn me in?"
"I should, shouldn't I?" The look she gives me would be enough to have three pirate crews slaver at her feet. Whatever happened to the most demure girl of London I once knew? I doubt Hollingworth knows how to keep his wife happy. "But the fact of the matter is, I'll never forgive you nor Cutler for ruining my life. Why should I please him? Why should I spare you? Decisions, decisions..."
All right, she won't turn me in because she wants something. I decide to put my cards on the table.
"We're looking for two particular slaves in your employ."
"Ah." She nods. "Well, you never get to them without my help."
I empty my glass. "And would you be willing to give it?"
"On one condition." Now we're getting somewhere. "Whatever it is you are planning, you make such a scandal out of this that George's career in the East Indies is finished."
Again, she has me stumped. This is getting annoying. "Why?" I ask.
"I want to leave this hellhole with its swamps and fevers and opium addicts. I want to return to a civilized place, and if that means ruining my husband, so be it."
I refill my glass. What a woman. A pirate at heart, though she might not know it. To think I almost married her and let her get away...

“Agreed,” I say. “Shall we drink to us becoming business partners? To our reunion? Or,” I stroke my mustache, “shall we celebrate it... someplace else?”

She takes my drink and another sip, giving me a long look over the rim of the glass. I think my collar is choking me.

“First things first,” she says.

Not without regret we go to rejoin the rest of this cosy get-together. By the looks of it, my men have already gotten acquainted with the upper echelon around here; Barbossa, charming as ever, has started to drink Cox and Holton under the table while teaching them to play Liar’s Dice (there’s already a small heap of guineas before him). Moneybag is having some highly complicated discussion about trading rights with Hollingworth.

Presently, a bewigged servant appears and announces that dinner is ready. Hollingworth offers his arm to Abby, and we proceed to the table. Barbossa and Moneybag keep shooting me glances which I keep ignoring. My plans are my own. Especially those plans I’m still working on.

During dinner, we dish out banalities. Mostly it’s Moneybag and Hollingworth talking. Abby watches, clearly enjoying herself. I’m so occupied by finding a way to talk to the slaves that I almost miss my clue as it comes along.

“Tell me, Mr. Hollingworth, what about your beautiful ship?” contributes Barbossa to the conversation. “Where do you keep the crew?”

“Oh, I dispatched them to Singapore harbour. They’re happier there, and who’d want to keep that rowdy bunch around a sensitive operation such as mine?”

“True,” I chime in. “But aren’t you afraid of pirates?”

“I’d be more afraid of them if I kept my ship in the harbour, truth to be told.” Hollingworth frowns.

“The whole town’s their hideout, I am told. Scum. No, I keep two of my soldiers stationed on the *Singapore*, that is enough.”

“I see.” In fact, I do see. Light. Bright, dazzling light. My wit sometimes surprises even me. “Speaking of pirates, did I ever tell you my remarkable encounter with that, erm, scum at the Horn?”

Chapter 12:
Pirates to the Rescue

The *Pearl's* men cowered in a narrow street near the teahouse and watched the entrance.

“You’re certain about this?” Bill said to Tai Huang.

“Of course. If Madame Wu spoke of a bodyguard, she must have meant her. Sao Feng trusts Chao with his life.”

“Always a bad idea to trust women,” Pintel muttered with a sideway glance at Ragetti. “And women pirates at that.”

“If you’re wrong, we’ll be in the trouble of our lives,” Bill pointed out to Tai Huang.

“Just be careful. Chao is an expert fighter.”

Bill didn’t bother to mention that the odds were eight to one in favor of the *Pearl's* men, but simply watched as the servant of two masters left the teahouse and walked purposefully down the street. After giving her a good head start he signalled to his shipmates to follow her.

The rumors of seamen not being able to sneak around were largely exaggerated, thought he. They were based on the assumption that seamen always were either going ashore (therefore announcing their arrival to any waiting wife/wench/innkeeper) or drunk (and he would’ve liked to see the landlubber who moved stealthily then!). But there was much more to the life of seamen and especially pirates than either of it. Sneaking sometimes meant the difference between the gallows and the freedom of the open seas.

Quietly, keeping to the shadows, the *Pearl's* men followed Chao. Bill’s only worry was that they might lose her in the labyrinth of small streets and backyards, unknown territory to them. But she never altered her course, and soon Bill got a sense of direction. She would emerge at a small square he remembered, the crossing of several alleys, well away from prying pirate ears – in short, the ideal spot for an ambush. Directing his shipmates to parallel running streets, he quickened his strides.

They didn’t have to wait long. No sooner had they reached the square and hidden themselves when Chao emerged from the mouth of the alley. They pulled back deeper into the shadows. The bodyguard took a glance around without breaking her stride. The crew paused a moment longer, tensing, then bolted from cover, swords and cutlasses ringing clear of their scabbards. Chao started at the sound, but she drew her sword without even hesitating for a moment.

Bill knew they were outclassed from the moment the sword came out of nowhere to parry Jacoby’s first wild slash. Chao was a veteran fighter and could have given Barbossa a challenge. She took advantage of Jacoby’s surprise at once, jumping forward and stabbing at his throat. He evaded the blade at the last possible moment, tripped and crashed into the wall of a ramshackle hut.

Meanwhile, Chao ducked easily under Mallot’s swing, stepped sideways and twisted, her blade flicking hard against Bill’s to turn it aside. The ring of steel on steel echoed off the walls surrounding the square, and Bill’s hand went numb for a moment. Chao spun to follow through, kicking him in the stomach and sending him stumbling back. Mallot attacked and swung his hammer at her head, but had to turn away quickly to avoid Chao’s blade. Her sword cut his shirt. His own momentum propelled him headfirst into Jacoby who’d just gotten to his feet again. Both went down.

But Chao stumbled as well. Mallot might have missed his mark, yet she was forced into a funny hop to avoid getting her arm or shoulder smashed.

A grappling iron went past her throat by a mere inch. Chao stabbed blindly, still trying to regain her footing, and Grapple battered her sword aside. The impetus was enough to floor her. The sword caught in his hook, Grapple pulled once and disarmed her. At once, Pintel, Ragetti and Tom were upon her.

“Don’t mention it,” Grapple said as he helped Bill up.

“I won’t.” Bill walked over to where Chao lay helplessly with Pintel and Tom pinning down her arms and Ragetti sitting on her legs.

“Kill me, then,” she spat. “For whatever good it may do you.”

Bill shook his head. “We won’t kill you...”

“Yet,” Jacoby interrupted, joining them and rubbing his shoulder.

“... but you’ve been duped,” Bill continued, shooting his shipmate an angry glance. “Madame Wu plans to implicate you along with Sao Feng.”

Chao’s eyes widened, then she dropped her head. “It does not matter anyway,” she said. “Madame Wu has got everything in her favour – with Hai-Ming dead and Sao Feng about to get set up for his murder, she will become Lord. Jian will support her on this. And the Company men, they don’t know

what they have coming to them. They have funded Madame Wu with weapons and money, so she could prepare a small force to help the Company take over the area from within. But she will betray them and kill them at their next meeting. The Brethren will think she's a heroine."

"Why did you betray Sao Feng?" Bill asked.

"I had no choice!" she cried. "Madame Wu took my family as hostages. Besides, do not think Sao Feng is innocent in this. It was his idea to frame you for the murder. He just did not know Madame Wu planned on turning the tables on him. That is where I come in. I will plant Hai-Ming's ring on him during the meeting, and he will be caught red-handed, so to speak."

Bill was thinking hard. "Do you know where Madame Wu keeps your family?"

Chao seemed to follow his thoughts. "In her personal junk, but going in there is like suicide," she said. "She has stationed her bodyguards there. Do you think I would not have tried to free my family myself if it were otherwise?"

"Granted," Bill allowed. "But you're only one person – we are eight. I think we can take them out before they have a chance to harm your family."

Chao regarded him in silence. "If you do," she finally said, "I will be forever in your debt. If you do not, I will kill you."

Which was fair enough in Bill's opinion. "Head back to the teahouse," he ordered. "Tell Madame Wu that we're dead and proceed with your plans. We'll check out the junk and see what we can do."

Reluctantly, his shipmates turned her loose. She stood up, picked up her weapon and bowed.

"Until we meet again," she said before turning and disappearing into the dark.

Mallot scratched his head and worded what was clearly on the mind of everyone present: "I wager we'll see her again at the harbor."

"No, we won't," replied Bill at once.

"And why's that?"

He shrugged. "A gut feeling."

"Oh, wonderful!" groaned Pintel. "What a great inscription that'll make on your gravestone!"

"We'll get gravestones?" Ragetti asked interestedly.

"Aye, the kind with the 'I was an idiot to ever have signed on with this crew' marker on it!" his friend snarled. -

Singapore's harbor at night was a dark and shadowy place. Mist rose from the murky water. Still, by the glow of the traditional red-paper lanterns strung across the crooked bridges of the harbor it wasn't too hard for the *Pearl's* men to find Madame Wu's personal junk. Her vessel was an exotic, yet beautiful ship painted in bright, almost garish colors. Carefully climbing up the cable at the bow, the pirates peered over the rail and quickly made out a guard on the main deck and another one on the quarterdeck. It was a sensible arrangement, Bill had to admit. By the time any intruder (in this case, the *Pearl's* crew) had disabled one of the guards, the other would have long sounded the alarm. This left them only the risky option of a coordinated attack. Some of their group had to swim to and climb the quarterdeck and take on the guard at the same time the rest of the group confronted the guard on the main deck. No room for errors; also, they had to be quick about it or risk facing the entire force of Madame Wu's bodyguards stationed on the ship at once.

Bill started to explain his plan to his shipmates in whispers when Mad José began to gesture wildly, shaking his head. From out of his shirt he pulled a long, thin tube and a small box. While his shipmates watched, frowning in puzzlement, he took a miniature dart from the box, fitted it into the tube and put the tube to his lips. Taking aim, he blew into the tube. The junk's main deck guard slapped a hand to his neck, went a few steps and collapsed without a sound.

The pirates looked at José with new respect. Their mad shipmate indicated they should wait for him, climbed aboard, and moving silently up the stairs and cowering down, he disposed of the second guard in the same manner. On his signal, they went aboard as well.

"Right," Grapple muttered, like the rest of them refusing to acknowledge the one man army Mad José had revealed himself to be. "Now where on this bloody boat might we find the brig?"

Though the design differed in several aspects from the ships they were used to, they made out quickly the captain's quarters, situated halfway between the main deck and the quarterdeck.

"If the damn contract is on this ship, it's bound to be up there," whispered Bill. "I'm going in; you try to find the brig and be quiet about it."

He had barely taken three careful steps up the stairs when Pintel cautiously opened the door next to them.

“Oops.”

Quickly Jacoby threw a grenade without lighting the fuse. There was the sound of it connecting hard with something and a dull thump.

“What are you doin’?” Bill hissed.

Pintel shrugged and grinned sheepishly. “Wrong door. Crew’s quarters.”

“Barricade it!”

His shipmates hastily piled up whatever they could find, and Bill continued up the stairs, shaking his head in disbelief. They were all going to die.

Madame Wu’s quarters were of an elegance Bill had never before encountered on a ship. Maybe signing on with the Chinese wasn’t the worst thing a pirate might do.

Bill looked around and tried to figure out where in all the cushions, silks and incense burners he would hide a secret contract. It wasn’t easy, especially when the hammering on the deck below made it clear that the crew wasn’t contend with just sitting there and excepting their captivity.

He opened small, lacquered drawers and chests, sifting through what appeared to be Madame Wu’s complete personal possessions and business papers without caring if he left them a mess. Luckily for him, there were only a few documents bearing the Company seal; he read through their contents as fast as he was able. Several minutes later the secret contract rested safely and securely in the inner pocket of his coat.

When he returned on deck, his shipmates had just taken off the grating of the main hatch.

“The brig is always below,” said Pintel in explanation to Bill’s raised eyebrows. “We figured this might be the fastest route.”

Bold as brass and twice as noisy, they went right into the cargo hold, and just as Pintel had predicted, it didn’t take them long to find the brig. An enormous cutlass came out of nowhere, and before Bill could even register, Mallot’s hat was separated from his head and launched high in the air, landing on one of the kegs of gunpowder. Whether this was merely strange irony, or some mystic had actually decided it would all begin at the drop of a hat, it didn’t matter. About a dozen heavily armed pirates appeared. The battle was then joined, and chaos ensued.

There was a scream, and a pirate launched himself at them, arms flaying wildly. Grapple threw his hook and plugged him off his feet, smashing him into the kegs. A determined Chinese decided to remind Pintel of his presence with a swing of his club. Despite doing his best to keep an eye on the pirate, the club connected. The man moved in a blur. Ragetti cried out: “Behind you!” at the same time the club impacted with Pintel’s left shoulder. He spun a half-circle, staggering back against a bulkhead. The pirate stepped forward, grinning as if certain that he could not fail, until he found Ragetti’s blade poking out of his ribcage.

They now had a distraction to end all distractions, and Bill ran, Tom at his side, Mallot charging before them, using his hammer to beat in the head of anyone so unfortunate as to get in their way, until they raced through the doors of the brig. A group of frightened-looking Chinese huddled in the tiny, miserable room, about nine or ten of them.

“You’re Chao’s family?” Bill asked.

They looked at him with blank faces, then at each other. At last a boy of maybe twelve years spoke.

“Chao?” he repeated haltingly.

“Yes, Chao. Come on!” Tom gestured urgently.

You didn’t need to speak English to understand it. Quickly the captives got up and followed them into the hold where the battle was still raging.

“Time to go!” Bill made himself heard over the clamor. “Jacoby, cover the retreat!”

“Aye!”

Yet retreat was easier said than done. For one, Madame Wu’s men understandably weren’t too keen to let the *Pearl’s* crew go, and besides one of Chao’s relatives was an old woman who could hardly walk, let alone run. It didn’t help that the prisoners were frightened out of their wits, either. Not that Jacoby particularly cared once it came to his favorite pastime.

The first two explosions got their enemies off their back, mainly because they ripped a hole right through the hull. For a moment both parties stood and stared, then one of the Chinese pirates yelled something that wasn’t hard to figure out.

“Aye,” agreed Bill. “Abandon ship!”

As both sides scrambled up the stairs, fighting friend and foe alike to get to the exit, Ragetti, running past Jacoby, patted his shipmate on the shoulder.

“Good work.”

Jacoby shrugged with an apologizing grin.

Shepherding the hostages to safety amidst the chaos was another endeavor altogether.

“Hurry up, grandma!” cursed Mallot when the old woman fell behind again. Finally Grapple made short work of it, picked the frail old woman up and carried her like a child.

How they finally made it off the sinking ship, swimming to the docks, evading hostile pirates and Company authorities alike and getting Chao’s family to some relatives by means of a lot of sign language and guesswork, Bill could never recall in later years. Dripping wet and in a terrible hurry they ran back to the teahouse.

Chapter 13:
Exposure

Chao was already waiting for them.

“You’ve made it!” she said with obvious relief. “I did all I could to keep Madame Wu’s people out. The meeting is about to begin. Have you found my family?”

“Yes, they’re safe. Now give us the ring.”

Led by Chao to placate the bodyguards, they hastened onto the patio where Madame Wu was just reporting something in Chinese. Her inscrutable mien slipped when she saw the *Pearl’s* men.

“What?” she said shrilly. “You’re supposed to be...”

Jian was on his feet in an instant. “The assassins!” he yelled. “Kill them!”

“Yes! Kill them!” Madame Wu agreed.

“Stop at once!” shouted Sao Feng. “Hold, or face my punishment!” He eyed the group. “I will hear you out,” he said when the clamor had died down, “first though, I would like Madame Wu to continue. She appeared to be about to mention something important?”

“Ah... yes,” Madame Wu said shakily, still looking at the *Pearl’s* men. With a visible effort she turned to face Jian. “As I was saying, new information has come to my attention. I regret to bring this forward, but I now have cause to believe that our own Lord was involved in honoured Hai-Ming’s murder...”

“What?!” Sao Feng flared up. “You treacherous snake!”

“Silence!” Jian thundered. “Madame Wu, do you have proof for these accusations?”

“She has no proof!” bristled Sao Feng. “Lunatic wretch!”

“The proof is here,” Bill said. He threw the ring on the table. “Madame Wu intended to plant this ring on Sao Feng and falsely accuse him of the murder.”

Everyone craned their necks as Jian quickly picked up the ring and examined it. Astonished, he said: “It is Hai-Ming’s ring!”

There really was something to acting in style, Bill thought. Enjoying the moment, he pulled the contract out of his pocket and put it on the table in front of Sao Feng. “This proves Madame Wu’s false play,” he said. “A pact with the East India Trading Company. She planned to depose you and then hand the domain over to the Company.”

Madame Wu did not wait to see Sao Feng’s reaction, but simply broke and ran.

“Not so fast, m’lady!” Quickly Bill drew his knife and threw it after her. With a cry of pain she stumbled as the blade pierced her shoulder, and at the next moment Chao caught up with her and roughly dragged her back.

Sao Feng stared down on his treacherous deputy with a look that would have curdled milk. Bending down, he pulled the knife out of her shoulder and weighed it on his hand, watching as blood streamed from the wound. It wasn’t a life-threatening injury, more painful than anything else, but the sight seemed to give him some satisfaction.

“You have done well,” he said to the *Pearl’s* men. “What else have you discovered in the last few hours, I wonder?” He turned to the assembly. “Make it known that the hunt for these Brethren is withdrawn. They have earned the right to remain within my territory.”

Less than impressed Bill stretched out his hand; he had not forgotten Chao’s words about Sao Feng being the one who had set them up in the first place. “I’ll take that, if you don’t mind,” he said, indicating his knife.

The Pirate Lord looked at him, then at the black knife. Slowly, he handed it over, sizing Bill up while doing so.

Then suddenly a bodyguard stumbled out of the teahouse, shouting something in Chinese. The assembly murmured in alarm and went for their weapons.

“What’s going on?” Tom wanted to know.

“The Company!” Chao explained, sword in hand. “They have found us!”

Bill glanced at a stunned Madame Wu. “Turned the tables on you after all, didn’t they?” he said. She just stared at him in helpless shock.

“Don’t you have a backdoor?” asked Pintel, eyeing the walls.

“No! Besides, they have the compound surrounded.”

Bill swore. “Jacoby!”

“Aye!”

“Clear the way, will you?”

His shipmate grinned wickedly. “My pleasure.”

They ran for the house. When they had almost reached the doors, a group of Company soldiers rushed at them from the inside, but Chao and the bodyguards threw themselves into the path of the attack, swarming over the soldiers to bear them to the earth and certain death.

Inside, the enemy were engaged in hand-to-hand combat with those bodyguards not yet killed. Sao Feng, Jian and their followers as well as the *Pearl*'s men joined the fray and dispatched them in no time, yet outside many more soldiers were rallying.

“Stay back!” Bill warned as Jacoby lit two grenades and threw them in the middle of the approaching soldiers. Two explosions followed; soldiers flew in every direction. The rest of them regrouped, but the pirates were among them so quickly that most were killed before they could defend themselves. Sao Feng led the way, cutting a path through the ranks almost at will, the pirates flocking to his side. Bill went with him, a steady presence at his shoulder. Jian fell behind, too old and slow to keep up, calling after them to go on, not to wait.

Then abruptly they found themselves in the midst of reinforcements, troops who up till now had been surrounding the compound. Bill broke for the fringe, trying to avoid being slowed, but several of the soldiers managed to get in front of him, and he was forced to stand and fight. He closed with the nearest, swinging his sword in a bright arc, and the soldier went down. Others fought to reach Sao Feng, recognizing him now, calling out to their fellows. Again, Jacoby cleared the way, and the pirates ran for the protecting labyrinth of Singapore's narrow streets.

“Where to?” panted Bill.

“My most honoured uncle's temple.” Without looking back, Sao Feng turned a corner, another one, jumped over a small canal and ran on.

Within moments, Bill was thoroughly lost. All he could do was follow Sao Feng, wondering how the Pirate Lord kept his bearings in the labyrinth. Finally, all sight and sound of their pursuers abated, and through a series of criss-crossing streets Sao Feng led them to the harbor and the temple where Bill and the rest had met Tai Huang earlier that day. By now Bill was limping pronouncedly; it had been a while since his leg had last made itself felt that badly. Still, it was better than feeling nothing and swinging on the gallows. Besides, he was not the only one who looked mangled. Almost everyone was bleeding from some wound sustained in the fight, Pintel had hurt his ankle while jumping the canal, and all of them were wheezing.

Crowding into the small temple's interior, they were greeted by Tai Huang. He and Sao Feng quickly exchanged some words in Chinese before the Pirate Lord turned to the *Pearl*'s men.

“I believe you have met my most trusted helper,” he said. “I entrust him only with the most sensitive of operations.”

Tai Huang bowed, smiling.

Bill and his shipmates looked at each other. The missing pieces started to fall into place now, yet the picture they formed was not one the crew was eager to see: They had been played out the entire time.

Quietly Bill said: “Am I the only one to think we're in over our heads?”

Chapter 14:
Captain's Log: Monkey Business

"... So what was I going to do? The easiest way out meant passing right in front of those ten pirate ships' cannons – not a very tempting option. On the other hand, if I stayed where I was, they'd come for me as certain as the tide. But, seeing as I had me crew as well as those grateful free men at my disposal, I spotted an alternative. You see, that peninsula we were on wasn't too large. You could just see the other shore from where we had made berth. So at nightfall we sailed the *Wench* as close to shore as possible, disembarked, put our hands to it and carried her across the spit of land and into the water again, whereupon we made good our escape."

"Ho ho!" Hollingworth laughs. "You're pulling my beard, Mr. Marshall!"

Why is it that nobody ever believes this story in any of its variations? Well, we'll see who's laughing last this time. "I'd never presume, sir," I say. "I can understand your amusement, but I'm quite willing to back up my words." I turn to address the table. "What say you to a wager, gentlemen? Lend me your beautiful ship and your workers and I bet you that I'll prove the truth of my tale."

Stunned silence, followed by hesitant tittering on the part of the Company men. My officers exchange glances.

"I take that bet," Abby suddenly says. She folds her handkerchief slowly and deliberately before lifting her head and looking me in the eyes. There lurks the ghost of a smile in the corners of her mouth. "What are the stakes, Mr. Marshall?"

A lot of Aztec gold and a trip home to olde England against a most disgruntled crew and a swamp island near Singapore, love, as you well know. "Are fifty guineas acceptable, Mrs. Hollingworth?"

"Quite acceptable, Mr. Marshall."

Abby's husband is probably as taken aback as he looks. But her tactic is a clever one; no gentleman ever pulls back where a woman dares to tread. Clearing his throat somewhat nervously, he says: "I'm in, too, of course."

"Excellent!" I beam, looking around. "Anyone else?"

Barbossa slams his hand on the table. "Absolutely!" he declares. "I'm with my esteemed colleague." Now the race is on.

"Just for the sight of it," Cox proclaims, mopping his red face. "I wager you won't be able to do it, sir."

Moneybag smiles. "My money is on my officer."

"Not in a million years – I side with our gracious hosts," pipes Holton.

So the lines are drawn, as I knew they would be. Abby and I exchange a delicious, knowing smile.

"Well," I say, getting on my feet, "I'd better talk to my troops, then. If anyone would be so kind as to show me the way?"

"But of course." Without suspicious haste Abby rises as well. "Follow me, Mr. Marshall."

As we walk towards the slaves pens side by side in the darkness, I make rather lovestruck attempt to change the course she is set for.

"You should come with us, love."

She takes my arm. "What, and sail with you into the sunset?" she asks playfully. "No, I don't think so, Jack. I don't think I could stand an entire ship full of unwashed pirate lads. I crave the comforts of home."

Well, it was worth a try. "But if you ever change your mind," I say, stealing a quick kiss, "you'll find me at a charming place called Tortuga."

The Company soldiers are less than happy to have the slaves assemble in front of their huts, yet in the presence of their master's wife they keep their grumbling to a minimum.

"Is there anyone to speak for the slaves?" I enquire and am promptly referred to a haughty-looking couple. I recognize the woman; it's the same one that I saw with Hollingworth & Co. earlier this day. Aha!

While Abby kindly diverts the soldiers' attention by telling them about the wager, I begin stage two of my plan.

"I take it you are Princess Chalchiuitl and Prince Xipilli," I address the couple, hoping I'll get the names out at least partly intelligibly.

They don't even bat an eye. "I have never heard of them," the woman says coldly.

Was my pronunciation that bad? No – she’s lying. Trying to. Girl, you’ll never be able to fool a master of the trade. “I’m terribly sorry to hear that. Because it is my intention to free said royal couple from a miserable life of servitude.”

“Is it now?” Seems brother dear is a bit more eager. “Why?”

“Out of the goodness of my heart?”

He shoots me a withering glance. All right, so much for lies. “I think we can come to a mutually profitable agreement, your Highnesses. I get you out of here, and in exchange you give me a tiny bit of information...”

“No,” the Prince interrupts.

“Pardon me?”

“No,” he repeats. “You will free all of us, our people as well as us.”

This is what I was afraid of. “That complicates things.”

“Nevertheless, that is our condition.”

Hark who’s talking. Too bad he really is in a position to make demands. Gritting my teeth, I manage a smile. “As you wish, your Princeness,” I say.

He is visibly satisfied. Same old story. Throw him a bone, and he’ll swallow anything that comes next. I explain my plan to him, and though he doesn’t look happy he doesn’t protest. Perfect.

“And in exchange for our freedom, what would you ask of us?”

Damn – I forgot sister dear. Obviously she is still opposed to a rescue.

“Just some information, love. Won’t cost you a thing.” After all, who leaves a heap of gold just lying around can’t be too interested in keeping it.

“Like what?”

What is it with women? I offer her an escape from this here inhospitable island, and she keeps nagging me about details.

“Can’t we discuss this later, dear? Because we don’t have an infinite amount of time on our hands.”

Luckily, in the now following whispered, yet fierce discussion brother dear seems to have the better arguments, for she gives in with a grumpy expression.

“Alright. But you better be true to your word.”

“I always am, love.”

Now that that’s over and done with, for the *really* tricky part...

It’s a shame I’ll never know what Hollingworth’s men think of their commander-in-chief when half an hour later he orders them to take the *Singapore* close to shore and disembark. My people stand ready to do their part.

“This is the craziest plan I’ve ever heard of,” mutters Barbossa.

“And one that’ll make us very rich men,” I remind him. “Alright, ladies and gentlemen,” I lift my voice, “to stations, if you please!”

We all get to the ship. Once aboard, the bo’sun takes over to instruct our new crewmembers in the use of the capstan. As I wait for them to weight anchor, I can’t resist looking back towards the island and catch a glimpse of Abby standing next to her husband, a faint smile on her lips. Ah, well.

The familiar rumbling of the anchor being fastened tells me it’s time to go. Of course almost everyone ashore is now expecting us to get back into the water and deliver on our claim. This kind of idiocy surprises me all the time. I mean, no commander worth his title would ever let an unknown group of people get in so much as spitting distance to their ship without a proper guard. Or even lend them all his boats to do so.

“Well, full canvas, I’d say. And keep your heads down, because I’m afraid they won’t take too kindly to it.”

Naturally, it takes my people a while to get acquainted with the workings of a ship, but I swear there’s no better teacher than shots whizzing past your ears while Hector and the bo’sun yell at you. I’m truly proud of my new crew when we finally leave Hollingworth’s island and its frustrated inhabitants behind and sail into a glorious eastern night.

“Which course, capt’n?” Barbossa at the wheel asks.

“Singapore, of course, Mr. Barbossa, to reclaim our fair ship and our missing comrades before we set sail for home.” I straighten my hat when I see the royal couple approach. “Your Highnesses. I trust everything went to your satisfaction?”

“It did.” It’s remarkable how dour even approval can sound when coming from her lips. “We are in your debt.”

Her brother nods in agreement.

“Well,” I smile at her, “we wouldn’t want that to be the case, would we? You could settle said debt immediately by telling us where to find the legendary treasure of Cortés.”

They both look surprised – and a trifle disgusted. I wonder why.

“It was not the treasure of the betrayer Cortés,” Xipilli says vehemently. “It was blood money – paid to stem the slaughter he wreaked upon our people. He took the gold willingly enough, but the killing didn’t stop.”

“Either way.” I look at the lovely princess expectantly.

“Very well,” she says grimly, “you have saved our lives and for that we owe you a reward. Which is why I must give you fair warning, captain. Because of Cortés’ treachery our gods placed a terrible curse upon the gold. The mortal who removes but a single of the 882 pieces from the stone chest it was delivered in to Cortés will be cursed to a horrible existence, to be neither dead nor truly alive. Food will turn to ash in his mouth. Drink will not satisfy. And all the gold will not buy him release from this cursed state – until he returns it to its resting place.”

Barbossa snorts derisively.

“That is interesting,” I smile. “I’m surprised Boney didn’t mention it.”

“Who is Boney?”

“Oh, some dead priest living... er, I mean, er, resting on some lovely place called the Island of the Four Winds.”

“Nauí Ehecatl!” Xipilli exclaims. “He is dead?”

“Aye.”

“You have spoken to him?”

“He was the one who told us about your not-so-secret hideout.”

The prince is livid. “Nauí Ehecatl would never have betrayed us! What have you done to him?”

“Nothin’!” Something’s telling me to keep my mouth shut about the details of Tia Dalma’s chat with ol’ Boney. “We simply convinced him to trust us, same as you. Besides, you might just ask what he did to us, but that’s neither here nor there. Now, about the bearings...”

Chalchiuítl exchanges a glance with her brother. “The treasure is hidden on an island that cannot be found except by those who already know where it is,” she says after a long moment.

“Yes, that’s frequently the case,” I agree.

She pulls me aside and lowers her voice. “The Spanish named it *Isla de Muerta*, the island of the dead,” she says. “With good reason. I will not do you a favour by giving you the bearings, but if you insist, I’m honour-bound to do so.”

I flash her a smile. “I insist, love.”

Her face falls. With a sigh she takes my arm and leads me into my quarters, straight to the chart table. After scanning the map of the Caribbean coast I put before her for a while she points at some spot amidst the wide blue of the ocean. Now I’m not a sceptical man, but how exactly she can locate the place where our best and only chart makers have found to be nothing but sea is beyond me.

“You’re sure about this, dear?”

The flint in her eyes is back. “If you do not trust me, then why do you ask me?”

“No, it’s all right!” Hastily I put a marker on the spot. “Much beholden, your Highness.”

A lesser man would be running away in the opposite direction as fast as possible by now. Her stare is murderous. I wonder why old Cortés ever messed with her ancestors if they were only remotely like her. Luckily I already had my share of that with dear Tia Dalma in her more... moody moments.

Before Chalchiuítl has a chance to retort, there is the familiar shout of a ship being sighted. I just hope the lads don’t get greedy now. We already have one ship too many.

But when I get on deck I immediately recognize the black shape on the water, almost blending in with the dark sky and the dark sea. I’m surprised just how happy I am to see her again.

Suspicious lot that they are, it takes us some time to convince the rotten scoundrels on the *Pearl* that it’s really us in this posh vessel. I guess it’s mostly Barbossa’s furious yelling that turns the tide in our favor.

When we are finally floating alongside the *Pearl* and I’m allowed to go aboard my own ship, I’m greeted by a verbal kick in the teeth by Bootstrap who makes very clear his opinion of Singapore, foreign (i.e. local) pirates and our endeavor as a whole. And aye, he’s glad to see me alive.

The story he tells me after he’s given vent to his not so positive feelings I would have found hard to believe were it not for the facts that Bootstrap’s an honest soul and that I’ve seen my share of

backstabbing pirates, so I absolutely believe Sao Feng capable of all the dastardly betrayals ol' Bill Turner tells me about.

"So you've successfully destabilized the balance of power in Singapore," I conclude.

"Congratulations. Couldn't have done it better meself."

"Thank you." Bootstrap peers at the *Singapore*. "Looks you've been busy, too."

I shrug modestly.

"Any plans yet what to do with her?"

"No," I confess.

"And those Aztec guys? There's no way we can take them aboard the *Pearl*, you know."

I raise my brows. "Mr. Turner, you are not suggesting we leave them to the Company's tender mercy, are you?"

He never bats an eye. "No, I'm just pointin' out some problems."

"You are not suggesting, either, that we let them take the *Singapore* to make their own journey home while we sail away?"

"You know better than I that they wouldn't make it past Ceylon without help."

"Even though they would slow us down."

"Even so."

"Mr. Turner?"

"Aye, capt'n."

"There are times when I truly appreciate your compassion and clear thinking."

"Thank you, sir."

"And there are times when I don't. This is one of them." I scratch my head. "You realize, of course, that we are pirates, the terror of the Spanish Main, not nannies."

"Aye."

"If there only were some Company ships within firing range – that would simplify decision-making."

"Perhaps I can help," Moneybag's voice interrupts our struggle conscience vs. convenience. We turn to face him, expectantly.

"I think, captain," he says, "it's time to part ways. I want to be my own master again. Seeing as there is a ship nobody wants and a group of people I can teach to become my crew..."

I knew it was a bad idea to let anyone but the captain pretend to be in command. "So it's back into the fold for you?"

"Not with some guineas on my head, no." He laughs. "But I reckon there's always demand for someone who can pass as a Company man."

Makes sense. Think about all the things you could get into port without anyone asking questions... Of course nobody expects Moneybag and his yet-to-find-their-sealegs-crew to make it as far as the Horn – but then again, we've all seen much stranger things, and the sea is a fickle mistress.

"I will go with you," an unknown, heavily accented voice suddenly says.

Perplexed, I look around until I realize it is Mad José who has spoken. He steps forth to join Moneybag.

"Hey!" Pintel protests.

Judging by their expressions, the other lads feel the same. Mad or not, he has sort of become a mascot to my crew. Thinking about it, people have called me mad, too.

"I am sorry," José has the decency to say. "And I will miss you. But I belong with my people."

Don't let anyone stop you, as they say, that's against the spirit of piracy (and well outside the abilities of a pirate captain). So I put a good face on it.

"Well, fair winds to you both. I guess this calls for a parting drink..."

My men cheer up at once.

Chapter 15:
Tortuga again

Battered and somewhat more experienced they returned to Tortuga for a quick stop and real food (not to mention rum) before setting out for what they hoped was the last leg of their long journey to the hiding place of Cortés' gold.

Tortuga hadn't changed at all in their year of absence: Seedy as ever, its harbor full of buccaneer ships, its docks and streets full of drunken pirates, shouts, laughter and gun shots echoing across the water.

When they entered port, Jack suddenly grimaced as though he'd bitten on something sour.

"Oh, bugger," he muttered.

"What?" asked Bill.

Jack pointed. "That ship."

"What about it?"

"That is the ship of feared and famous Captain Teague," explained Jack with a sigh of resignation.

"My dad's ship."

The town, when they went ashore, was humming with talk about the arrival of Captain Teague. A wench called out to them as they passed by: "Hey, Barbossa, Jack, they've passed the word they want to talk to you!"

Guided by helpful Brethren, beggars and wenches to the *Faithful Bride*, the *Pearl's* captain and crew joined the rowdy and noisy and somewhat even more numerous than usual patrons in the tavern.

Above the din, the sound of someone playing the guitar could be heard.

"Jacky!" A woman with pale blond hair, a cat-o'-nine-tails hanging on her belt, strode towards them, roughly pushing drunken patrons out of the way.

"Hello, Mum." Jack allowed himself to be hugged.

"Good to see you alive, lad." She squeezed him, patted his back and turned to beam at Barbossa.

"Hector, you old scoundrel! How are you?"

He smiled thinly. "Still the same, Kitty."

"I can see that." Playfully, she traced one of the scars in his face with her index finger. "Just can't keep out of a fight, eh? Same old Hector." She put her arms around both men's shoulders and steered them towards a table at the back of the tavern. "When we heard you were sailing with Jack, we almost couldn't believe our luck," she reported. "So we came here, and we've been waiting for you for the past two months, with some breaks to keep the lads busy."

"Waiting for us?" echoed Jack.

"We're here on business." At the sound of the deep, rasping voice everyone shut up. Seated at the head of the table was a tall, thin man with long black hair and a black beard. His face with the strong nose was lined, yet his piercing eyes belied his age as he idly strummed the strings of a guitar. "I'm plannin' to retire from this trade," he said, "so I have to name a successor."

Jack seemed taken aback for a moment. "Retire? But you're Captain Teague, the scourge of the Caribbean, feared even among pirates. You've a good ship and a good crew – why would you want to retire?"

"I want to do it because I want it. People, they're always expectin' you to act in this way or that – where's the freedom in that? Let me tell you somethin', Jacky." He put the guitar away. "If you do somethin' just because you try to live up to the expectations of others, you might as well shoot yourself. It's the worst kind of cage you can find yourself trapped in and the most perfidious. Besides, I already have another offer that'll keep me busy. Now. We're all here, so let's get over with the procedure." He gestured casually. "Sit down, will you?"

They all obeyed, Kitty Sparrow taking a seat to Teague's left, Jack to his right, with Barbossa next to him and the rest scattered randomly around the table. Captain Teague stood up, his sharp eyes taking in the lot of them.

"As I said," he declared, his hands flat on the table. "I'm about to retire. So you all and Barbossa in particular are witnesses to the fact that I name Jack Sparrow my successor – piece of eight will be handed over in private. Accordin' to the Code, that honor-binds you to speak the truth, should his claim ever be challenged."

Barbossa bowed his head in recognition, but behind his smile Bill thought he looked slightly troubled. Not that Bill blamed him; pirates as a rule didn't hold much stock with honor, yet this was different.

The Pirate Lords were as much their government as the Brethren acknowledged, and the naming of a new Lord with reference to the Code was very serious business. No-one, not even the most opportunistic, lying, bloodthirsty pirate would dare to give false witness in this matter.

Teague emptied his pint and grabbed the guitar. "Walk with me a bit, Jacky," he said.

Dutifully, Jack got to his feet. "Where will you go now?" he asked.

"Shipwreck Cove. It's not a bad place to spend your time."

"Right," Jack replied lightly. "And we'll be on our way to get the treasure of Cortés tomorrow."

Laughter erupted around the table.

"You've been telling that story for two years!" an old salt said chuckling.

Jack turned to face him. "Aye," he agreed, "but this time it's for real. I know where it is, and I'm gonna find it and bring it back. And when I do," he leaned forward with a smile, "I promise you, there'll be a great and most enjoyable party that'll last for a week." Sniffing, he leaned back again. "Of course, no mockingbirds will be invited."

Chapter 16: Mutiny

Something was afoot. You could always tell by a certain restlessness among the crew, by the way they never quite met your eyes, the furtive whispering. Though Bill recognized the signs quite clearly, he wasn't so sure about Jack. His carefree captain possessed abilities none of them could ever dream of, but in many respects he was too young, too inexperienced, too self-absorbed, too trusting even. Combined with a ruthless first mate like Barbossa and the prospect of a lot of gold, it made for a mixture as harmless as powderkeg and tinderbox. Even more worrying to Bill was the fact that he himself was being kept in the dark. The translation of it was simple: Too close to Jack, not to be trusted. Bill didn't fancy the danger this implied.

They had left Tortuga only two days ago, in the wake of Captain Teague's departure. Suddenly, all of their light mood, their usual bantering seemed to have vanished, turned to tension and cold, greedy expectation. They were about to find and take the largest treasure in Caribbean history, short of finding El Dorado. Their baser natures responded to it. No-one needed Barbossa or the bo'sun to flog them to their posts; they all worked harder than ever, almost willing the *Pearl* onwards.

It was in this state of mind that they chanced upon the trader.

It was a Spanish ship, built for transporting good safely, not quickly. With the prospects they faced, she shouldn't have appealed to the *Pearl's* men at all; yet there was greed and bloodshed in the air. For once, Jack did the right thing and let them go ahead, even though Bill knew he disapproved. Knowing Jack, Bill suspected he would have preferred to swindle the Spanish out of cargo and ship.

The trader didn't put up much of a fight, the *Pearl's* speed and weaponry was clearly superior to her own. The pirates' victory, however, proved to be short-lived. There was only so much space in the *Pearl's* hold, even less when they took into account they had to save some for Cortés' legendary treasure that would soon be theirs. It was Reaper's Spot all over again, mused Bill – they hadn't been successful since their fateful discovery of the old chart. Now even in abundance they were lacking. It was almost enough to make him believe in the curse of the Aztec gods.

One of their captives suddenly yelled a warning that ended in a resigned groan when Barbossa opened a large box standing next to the captain's quarters. Out shot something small and furry, jumped into the rigging and crouched there, screeching and spitting. It was a monkey with dark fur and a white face, a capuchin, as Bill remembered they were called. It had amused him at the time to learn they were named after the Capuchin monks they resembled. This specimen, however, was far from offering the other cheek. The way it bared its teeth at them was positively vicious.

"Now, now," Barbossa said soothingly. "Nobody's going to lock you up in the dark again, little fellow."

"I give you two weeks," muttered one of the Spanish seamen. "At best."

It turned out he wasn't exaggerating.

Within less than a day the entire crew deeply hated the little monkey. It jumped around in the rigging, continuously hissing and spitting at them; at times, it tried to block their way and bit and clawed like an angry cat when they attempted to shove it aside. It upturned their quarters and the galley in its search for food, threw tools and personal affects into the sea and generally made a pain of itself. The only exception was Barbossa whom it seemed to love and who was the only one able to handle their newest shipmate. When it sat on his shoulder, contentedly gnawing at a peanut or searching for lice in his hair, it was at its best behavior.

On the third day Barbossa, the monkey perched on his shoulder, walked up to Jack and spoke the words.

"Everything's an equal share," he said, "that goes for the location of the treasure, too. The men feel they have the right to know."

Maybe even an unobservant captain like Jack noticed the danger lurking behind the request. But anyone but the most intimidating captain would have thought twice about going against the will of (almost) the entire crew. Jack took a look around, into the grimly determined faces staring back at him, and faltered.

"Well," he admitted, "I suppose, generally speaking, that's true."

Barbossa just smiled.

"And, after all, we've come through some tight spots together, aye, lads?" Jack tried, but not quite succeeded, to match that smile.

“So we have,” agreed Barbossa.

“No need for distrust, I say.”

“By the depths of me black soul!”

Jack hesitated, then he walked off into his quarters. The crew waited in silence. After a longer time than it should have taken him to find even anything very well hidden he returned with a chart tugged carefully under his arm. There was a universal shuffling as the crew crept closer.

“Maybe it’s a good thing for everyone to know the location,” Jack said, his nonchalance recovered as he quickly stepped out of reach onto the quarterdeck. “For, gentlemen, the passage is fraught with peril, and we’ll need every hand – or eye – to have a sharp lookout.”

With flourish, he unfolded the chart. Barbossa immediately grabbed hold of one corner. In an area where there seemed to be nothing but water for miles around was a spot marked with a large X in red ink.

“So there you have it,” Jack proclaimed. “The dreaded Isla de Muerta.”

In the tense silence on board the creaking of the rigging was suddenly very loud.

Of course Bill offered to take the first nightwatch and of course Barbossa readily agreed. There were things to be discussed below decks.

“Take the boy with you,” Barbossa ordered. “He can make himself useful for once.”

So they waited, Bill at the wheel, Tom on watch, the former making sure he was able to draw his sword in an instant, the latter blissfully ignorant.

The night was very still. Nothing seemed to move except the waves and the *Pearl* riding them, flying before the tiniest breeze as usual. She was a fine ship, one of her kind. Bill gripped the sturdy wood of her wheel almost affectionately. It was strange to think back now to that first time he’d had set eyes on her and to all the tight spots, as Jack had called it, they had come through with her. She was Jack’s first and only love, Bill knew. Losing her would break his heart, such as it was. But things being as they were, Jack probably wouldn’t be needing a heart for much longer.

About half an hour later the crew assembled on deck. Bill imagined Tom’s alarmed face, the boy wondering what was going on.

“That was quick,” he said quietly. “I expected you to wait for a couple o’ days at least.”

Barbossa walked up to him, smiling his false and dangerous smile. “That’s what I like about you, Bootstrap,” he said. “You tackle situations head-on. Now, *Captain* Sparrow won’t last the night, it’s decided, and we’re offering you the simple choice of either joining us or him.”

Bill kept his hands on the wheel but shifted his stance unobtrusively. Barbossa was a veteran fighter but not as strong as Bill. He felt confident he might be able to finish off his former captain before the crew was upon him...

“I won’t have any part in killin’ Jack,” Bill said. “Whatever else, he hasn’t deserved that.”

To his surprise, Barbossa conceded at once. “Very well, we won’t kill him. He might do it himself, but the choice will be his and our hands will be clean.”

The meaning was clear. “Maroonin’?”

“Aye. We’ll drop him off on some nice little island – palm trees, shade, coconuts, the lot.”

Bill chose his words carefully. “Accordin’ to the Code, maroonin’ is for traitors and those capt’ns what blatantly ignore or dishonor the Code, or for shipmates what are considered a genuine pain in the behind. When a crew’s not happy with their capt’n, they simply choose a new one. That’s how it’s done. Maroonin’ the same as killin’, in my eyes.”

“Is it?” Barbossa’s benign act ended in an instant. “Well, I for my part do consider Jack the said pain. If you so value his company, you can join him in his new home.”

Bill laughed harshly. He wasn’t as stupid as that; better Jack than him, in true pirate tradition. But neither had he any intention of bowing to Barbossa’s intimidation tactics.

“I never said that,” he replied. “Get rid of Jack if you wish, but do so in some civilized manner, that’s all I’m askin’.”

“You forget that he knows of the treasure and of the location of the island,” Barbossa reminded him.

“So lock him in the brig until we’ve found the gold.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing!” cried Tom who had made his way to the foot of the stairs. “Bill, you always seemed like one of the few honest souls aboard – you can’t be going along with this!”

Barbossa coolly took the wheel. "Shut him up, Bootstrap, or we will."

Seeing the leering faces below, Bill got down on deck and none too gently grabbed Tom by the scruff of the neck.

"Now you listen to me, lad," he hissed. "The crew's set on their plan. I may not like this any more than you do, but neither do I want to share Jack's fate, whatever it may be. And if you know what's best for you, you just keep your head down."

There was no mistaking the accusation and rebellion in the boy's mien but he checked his tongue.

Annoyed, Bill let him go and he slunk away to the back of the crowd.

Barbossa raised his voice, not caring whether or not Jack heard him. "Now let's put the matter to the vote. Who of you supports Bootstrap's suggestion of takin' Jack to a safe port?"

The crew eyed each other. There were a few raised hands, others tentatively raised and then quickly withdrawn. Bill found himself wishing for Emily; she would have butted any waverer's head.

Barbossa smiled again.

And suddenly there was a yelp from the door to Jack's quarters, some rough jostling, and Koehler shoved Tom forward to meet Barbossa's stare.

"The little rat was tryin' to sneak into Sparrow's cabin."

"Bad idea, boy," Pintel grinned. "You should've listened to ol' Bootstrap."

It was surprising how much rotten-teethed grins could look like daggers.

The boy looked terrified. "No, please," he said. "I never tried to... mates..." He glanced around pleadingly but found no friendly face. Bill silently cursed the boy's stupidity. He had warned him. Did he think this was a game, trying to cross two scores of pirates bent on disposing of their captain?

Barbossa nodded at Koehler. "Do it quietly," he said.

Tom's eyes widened; he tried to cry out, but Koehler's hand closed on his mouth, and with a quick movement the pirate's blade silenced him forever.

"Have you gone mad?" Bill hissed when the boy's body went overboard. "He wasn't a danger to anyone!"

Barbossa shrugged indifferently. "You can't make an omelette without breakin' eggs, as they say."

"Oh, aye, and that'll be an omelette what you'll choke on, mark my words!"

Annoyed, Barbossa drew his cutlass. "Keep questionin' my orders, Bootstrap, and you'll get the same."

Bill glowered at him but held his tongue.

With a smile Barbossa signalled to the crew. "Let's wake Sparrow, shall we?"

They literally caught Jack out cold. An empty bottle was rolling around in his cabin, and he himself sat slumped over his hat and some charts, snoring softly. When Grapple and the bo'sun roughly dragged him to his feet, he blinked groggily into the light and the faces all around.

"Whasgooin'?"

"The crew decided they want another capt'n, one who has their best interest in mind," explained Barbossa.

Jack was awake and almost sober in a flash. "I see. And are all of you of that opinion?" He looked around.

Bill met his eyes for several moments before averting his gaze.

"Unanimous decision," Barbossa claimed not quite truthfully and signalled. "Brig."

By noon they had found the island. It was, as Barbossa had promised, a beautiful place with palm trees and a gorgeous white beach, surrounded by turquoise water. Still, all its beauty did not diminish the fact that it was small and by all appearances had no freshwater source.

Barbossa had the plank brought out and sent Mallot and Grapple to get Jack. When everything and everyone was in place, he mockingly addressed Bill.

"Now, as you so kindly reminded me earlier, Mr. Turner, there's the Code to consider. So would you mind pointin' out if I'm remiss in anythin'?"

Bill scowled. Barbossa ignored it. He produced a pistol and carefully loaded it before Jack's eyes.

"One pistol with one shot," he said, passing it to Jack's guards. "An isolated island outside the Trade Winds." He gestured. "Uncharted, too. So this is where we bid you farewell, Jack."

Jack grimaced as Mallot and Grapple placed him on the plank. "I'm sure we can work something out," he said weakly.

"Of course you are." Barbossa smiled. Grapple roughly shoved the pistol into Jack's sash. "Goodbye." Faced with the eagerly drawn blades of his former crew, Jack swallowed and took a few careful steps backwards. The plank wobbled slightly under his feet.

"I think..." he began.

"Aye," Barbossa replied, still smiling. "Be off, Jack."

When Jack took another steps backwards, a change seemed to come over him. Bill had seen him confused, in a playful mood, drunk, thinking up some crazy scheme to thwart his enemies – in essence, a big child. There was nothing childish at all in the look he now gave Barbossa and the crew. He took in the sight of his beloved *Pearl*, now in the hands of another, one last time, and jumped. He crashed into the turquoise water, resurfaced and swam towards the spit of white sand and palm trees. The last Bill saw of his friend and former captain was Jack climbing ashore as Barbossa ordered the crew to their posts and looking at them as the *Pearl* resumed her course towards Isla de Muerta.

Chapter 17: Blood Money

The darkening sky was spattered with storm petrels, soaring and swooping above a wild, white-water sea. Like battlements, sharp ridges stood out against the background of gray clouds, foreboding, intimidating. Breakers surged against the steep, black stone walls of the fortress that was Isla de Muerta.

“Probably some volcanic activity,” Ragetti, who sometimes revealed surprising glimpses of education, remarked.

“Hold on!” Pintel stared at him. “You mean this whole thing could blow up at any time?”

“Nah. You’d hear it rumble before that,” his friend reassured him.

The *Pearl*’s crew stood and looked in awe at this hostile bastion of rock and sea. The Spanish had chosen its name well.

They rounded a wide staircase of broken lava on the southwest side of the island and entered calmer waters. Dark as night the entrance to a cave yawned in the black wall.

“Heave to,” Barbossa ordered. “And let go the anchor.”

Eagerly, they complied. When the *Pearl* had come to a stop and the anchor had crashed into the waves, they lowered the boats, went in and with bated breath rowed towards the opening.

One after the other the boats moved in; lamps were lit, and hearts beat faster in expectation. Steep, uneven walls of black stone rose to both sides of them, sometimes so close that they might have just stretched out their arms to touch them, sometimes widening as to allow two or three boats to go side by side. Arches curved high above their heads.

Inside the stone labyrinth, there were signs of previous trespassers as well; the remains of some unfortunate souls could be seen on the bottom of the shallow waterways or lay on narrow strips of sand. A sword embedded in the back of one of them caught the lanterns’ light. How fitting, Bill thought as his boat glided by. Out of the corner of his eyes he noticed a crab near the skeletal remains, turning with the boats’ passing as though watching them curiously. It reminded Bill of something but he could not recall of what.

And suddenly their journey came to an end. The water under the keels got shallower still and lapped on a broader strip of sand. Here the molten and cooled lava had formed openings on higher ground, and from somewhere deeper in the stone labyrinth daylight was illuminating their way. They got out, pulled the boats ashore and continued on foot. Passing massive blocks of black stone, they stumbled up the rise in the ground, through a narrow corridor, and all of a sudden the walls fell away to form a wide, dome-shaped area. Massive blocks of black stone rose out of the sea that had reclaimed large parts of the cave, black stalactites supported overhanging ledges like pillars and formed a natural gallery, shafts of light fell through openings in the ceiling. And there, placed on an outcrop, stood the chest. There could be no mistaking it. So large it almost resembled an altar (or a stately coffin, a small, nasty voice in Bill’s mind whispered), strange symbols had been carved into its stone surface, skulls, Aztec deities.

For a seemingly endless moment they hesitated, hardly daring even to breathe for fear the wondrous sight might vanish before their eyes. For two years they had sailed the Seven Seas in search of the legendary treasure, had tricked, betrayed, plundered, killed and occasionally bled for it. It was hard to believe the gold of Cortés was finally within their reach.

Giddy with expectation they scrambled up the outcrop and drew nearer with baited breath. Nobody had the courage to touch the stone lid. What if someone had beaten them to it? What if there was nothing in it? What if...

Finally Barbossa put his hand to the lid and shoved. It didn’t budge, and at once all of them lent their strength to the task. The lid fell away with a dull rumble.

It was a sight beyond belief.

The maddening gleam of gold dazzled their eyes as the torchlight was reflected by hundreds and hundreds of strangely formed coins. Here it was, the treasure they had sacrificed two years of their lives to find. For a long moment they just stood there and stared, still not entirely believing what they saw, broad grins forming on their faces.

Again it was Barbossa who first dared to touch the gleaming pieces. They did not disappear under his fingers nor did any Aztec ghost materialize to punish the defiler. Slowly he lifted one of the coins out of the chest and held it high to catch the flickering torchlight. And then he laughed.

Joining in, the cheering crew dipped their hands into the chest and came away with dozens of the gold pieces.

“This is it, lads!” shouted Pintel. “We’re rich!”

Jostling and shoving, everyone tried to get his share. It was as though the gold had a strange power of its own; even Bill forgot for a moment his guilty feelings about Jack and his deep resentment [of?] his shipmates, and when he saw Simbakka trying in vain to reach the chest he tossed him a handful of the coins, laughing. Solid gold. This was enough to allow them to live comfortably for the rest of their lives. More drunken on the golden gleam than he could ever be on rum, Bill’s imagination ran wild. This was his second chance; he would buy some decent place, send for Mary and William, live among respectable people, maybe start his own shipping business...

As befitting blood money, a skull formed the center of the strange coins, its mouth opened in a silent scream. Bill had never really been superstitious, but when he examined it he had to fight crazy urge to drop it back into the chest. Here was a warning, written all too clearly.

The sun’s final rays broke through the clouds, stretched out from the horizon and covered the island in a haze of gold and red, illuminating the cave. And then the light was gone, and only wan twilight remained. Bill felt a momentary chill, as though something other than the time of day has changed – he felt a brief but intense longing for company, for human contact, but he was alone among the throng. Looking about, his shipmates seemed alien and distant, their cheers and shouts a language he had no recollection of, their faces twisted by the light of the lanterns into something grotesque.

And then the feeling passed, the language returned, the faces normalized.

Suddenly sober again, Bill pocketed his coins and climbed down the outcropping, leaving his shipmates to their salvaging. There was no returning, no second chance for him, he was a wanted man and a pirate to the core. Living ashore? Never. He would always feel like a stranger among the respectable, narrow-minded people, landlubbers who sniffed at seamen, thinking they were just a rough, rowdy bunch when they came ashore. What did they know about it, about the awe and terror of what lay beneath, about craving the comfort of a lover’s arms and a life-affirming celebration of surviving the inexorable sea – and also about the freedom that was only to be found on the open waters?

Chapter 18:
Captain's Log: Marooned

Actually it's quite nice here. Dry. Very dry. Makes the clothes dry quickly. Would have been a shame about the hat.

- Hat? Which hat?

- A captain owns a hat. I am captain, therefore my hat has to be somewhere around here...

- Hang on, let's think for a moment. Aren't you missing anything else?

- Ship, crew, hat... which was magnificent.

- You're nearly there, mate. What happened? You remember? Lots of rum, sweet dreams and that ugly man who screamed mutiny all of a sudden?

- ...

- And if he hadn't, we wouldn't even have noticed. Barbossa could've just said "Aye, aye, capt'n!" while delivering the rum to your quarters.

- ...

- Though I consider myself surprised at Bootstrap. Well, maybe not surprised – would you have gone against Barbossa and his gang?

- Of course not, I'm not mad.

- Disappointed, then. But at least he wasn't one of those yelling "Off with his head!"

- You mean as much rum as I could drink?

- Ahoy, Captain of the Shipless Void! Barbossa's sailing the Caribbean Sea with your ship and your crew!

- What's your point?

- Are you still a captain? Being completely without a ship and all?

- I'd say it's the attitude what counts.

- Arrr.

- Anyway, it's just a temporary situation. The *Pearl* was given to me by the slimy git, after all. Therefore she's my ship. I've just... lent her... handed her over unintentionally... for the time being? In any case I'm still the legal owner.

- And Barbossa?

- He just holds possession of her. By custom and practice, tops. Wait and see, the others will soon realize who's the true captain. They'll miss me.

- Hm.

- Well, maybe we should be close by when Barbossa makes his first couple of mistakes. And he will make them. No imagination, no sophistication whatsoever.

- If you say so. Better get started, then. Think of a plan how to return to the *Pearl*. Because on this here island nobody is interested in what Captain Jack is doing.

- You're right. Concentrate.

- Oh, and, er, Jack?

- Aye!

- It might help not to talk to yourself.

Good point. I should promote the man.

Inventory taking:

Ship: 0

Crewmen: 1. Not much, but it's the captain, so that's at least worth half the crew.

Weapons: 1 pistol, 1 shot, powder (wet)

Provisions: none

Clothes: a very fashionable outfit for a pirate of the world, sadly without a hat (damn)

Right. This doesn't get me anywhere. I'm marooned on this blasted island in the middle of nowhere. A spit of land, some palm trees. Nothing you couldn't circumnavigate within half a day. The chance that a ship might pass by and pick up ol' Jack... But shoot myself like a dastardly coward? No, Captain Jack Sparrow'll give his adversary a run for his money. So I start exploring the island. What do we have here... sand. Even as an emergency ration completely useless. Palm trees. Coconuts can be quite delicious. Imagine canard stewed in coconut milk. Or pork with grated coconut. Or beef with coconut

crust. Or, aye, coconuts. Downright tempting. What else? More sand. Sea turtles. Don't taste so bad. You throw them on rocks to crack the shell. Well, those are missing here. Probably the reason why there still are a lot of sea turtles.

Three hours later I have paced off every inch of the island. Except sand, more sand, palm trees, even more sand, sea turtles and a lot more sand I have found nothing of interest. What would have been of interest? Well, a boat, a house, actually anything pointing to the fact that this isn't the most forsaken island in all the Caribbean. I mean, the recreational factor is immense: Quiet, sunshine, palm trees, sandy beach – but the entertainment is meagre and from the culinary point of view the thing is a disaster. In the end I'm so discouraged that I simply lay down on the beach and hope an escape plan will come to me in my sleep.

Half a day later I wake up with the following ideas:

- I could swim. - Aids: 0. - Chance of survival: 0.
- I could hold on to some sea turtles and hope they'd get me to the nearest settlement. Don't the beasts always follow the food? – Aids: at least 2 sea turtles. – Chance of survival: Depending on the intelligence and loyalty of sea turtles? 0.
- I could burn the trees and hope someone would see it and feel called to save me. - Aids: Wood. - Chance of survival: If I killed off my only food source...

After a while my brain goes on strike in the face of all the heavy labor and reminds me that all blood has withdrawn to deeper regions. My stomach is waiting for feeding. Those small hints of my brain – oi, island, marooned, pistol with only one shot – are ignored. So I do what every man in my situation would do. I get back to my only chance of survival and hunt sea turtles. The beasts are awfully fast, by the way. But they don't reckon on Captain Jack. I don't want to boast but I see through their tricks pretty quickly. Can't let them know, of course. Would make any future hunt all the harder. Let them think they have a chance. Fair fight and all that.

I've got one. Now what? There are no rocks. I once heard water is supposed to be as hard as stone when hit from a great height... But I don't want to throw the thingy back into the sea. So I wrap it into the remains of my shirt and haul it up the nearest palm tree. Once learnt, never forgotten. Good thing I'm used to climbing every mast. Looting expeditions keep you fit. After all, you can't just say in the middle of a fight: Excuse me, this is too taxing for me, I'm captain and only do the mental work.

- Are you talking to me?

- Me, why?

- Didn't we plan to stop this?

- Er.

- Weren't we agreed that a sane man who's still master of his ship only talks to real persons?

- If you put it that way. Shoo. Where was I? Right, rocks, no rocks anywhere...

I confess, this complete absence of rocks almost puts me over the edge. You have to take into consideration all that has happened to me in the last twenty hours or so. The mutiny, my crew, the *Pearl* lost to Barbossa, the plank, this island in the middle of nowhere. Considering all that, I think I did rather well. I even found a solution to the most pressing problem, the food issue. And now this. Nowhere even the tiniest rock. I just can't put up with this new freak of nature - I rip the packaging off the sea turtle and hurl the beastie down onto the sand.

Thump.

Thump? Now what's this? Is the shell empty to be thudding on sand? Semi-empty? Hang on. Thump? That's the sound of a shovel hitting a chest...

I've never climbed that fast in my life. All right, we're not talking about palm trees, but take a mast for comparison. I curse the irony of fate. There I cross the world with my crew and my ship in search of a treasure. They mutiny, throw me overboard at an island and what do I find... And what will I do with the gold? I mean, right now is possibly the one moment in history where gold would be completely useless. But as long as I'm searching for treasures, my brain and my stomach are mollified. Gold is better than anything else. Better than saucy wenches, better than rum. After all, with gold you can buy even more saucy wenches and more rum.

The sea turtle isn't far. I stomp around it in a wide radius, eagerly listening for another Thump. What a beautiful sound. I get on my knees – not out of awe but to dig. There's wood beneath the sand. I could

slap myself for not noticing it on my first tour of the island. The layer of sand isn't even that thick, as though somebody has relied on the remoteness of the island. Wise man - which pirate would stop at an island that has nothing to offer but some palm trees and a lot of beach? This way, if you don't circulate a map with a big X, the treasure won't be found for centuries. But no, every pirate fears his own forgetfulness. Would be a wee bit embarrassing to tell posterity: Aye, gold, I had a lot of gold and I buried it. Somewhere between here and Tortuga. On an island. The hiding place is great, we've been trying to find it for two years now. No, you better draw a map with a big red X. And just so you won't lose it you show it to a couple of people – preferably wenches, they never forget something like that – and then one day you wake up without a map and without gold and you hope it's only the wenches, not your own crew, who are looking for the treasure. But never mind.

Soon I've uncovered several planks. Must be a gigantic treasure, not even to fit into a chest anymore. They even went to the length of building some kind of cellar for it, but they must have felt very secure because every simpleton could open the hatch. Carefully I climb down a wooden staircase into the sandy ground. And before my disbelieving eyes opens up... paradise. Paradise in bottles. This has to be the rum stock of a small town. These days, smuggling almost gets the same sentence as piracy but it's certainly a lot more lucrative. All pirates would be rumrunners if they'd manage to keep their hands off their own wares. Quite a few great merchant careers have been shipwrecked that way.

The next couple of days I spend in delirium. The sunshine, the beach and countless samples of the rumrunners' stock reconcile the captain in me and myself like never before. Perhaps in this mood I'd even have forgiven Barbossa. At least that's what I tell the rumrunners when they pick me up. I don't know whether it's their big heart or their passionless calculating that secures me a passage on their ship. After all, I'm obviously one of their best customers.

I'm looking forward to meeting Barbossa again face to face. I swear, he'll always remember the day that he almost killed Captain Jack Sparrow.

Chapter 19:
Balance and Swirling Currents

“Four hundred pieces we have reclaimed,” Barbossa announced. “Four hundred pieces in six months. At this rate, gents, we’ll have the rest o’ them by the end o’ the year and be rid of the curse!”

The crew cheered, only Bill listened quietly. The hated moon’s white rays illuminated the *Pearl* from bow to stern, so that he stood engulfed in brightness. He didn’t shrink from the sight of his tattered, skeletal form. On the contrary, it reminded him all too clearly of what he had done and strengthened his resolve. In his mind’s eye he could still see the delicate work the goldsmith had done to one piece of the cursed coins, fitting a loop to it and adding a fine golden chain. Bill had paid him well - not with Aztec gold, that would have been poor payment indeed for the service he had done him -, wrapped up the medallion and, along with a note, had given it into the care of a ship bound for England.

For six months the *Pearl*’s crew had “reclaimed” the gold, as Barbossa put it – and not one of its owners had survived. True, at first Bill, too, had wanted to get rid of the curse as quickly as possible. But it seemed as though their greed had taken on a life of its own; there was no mercy, no purpose anymore, only senseless slaughter.

The first two weeks after their return from Isla de Muerta had passed in a kind of blur. Aztec gold flooded the shanty town. Suddenly, the *Pearl*’s crew were heroes. Talk of hidden treasure was old news in the taverns of Tortuga, but Barbossa and his men were among the very few who had actually found one and brought it back. Doors opened wide to admit them. Wenches crowded around them. Rum flowed in rivers, and every day was a feast. Even the miserable lives of Tortuga’s beggars and cripples were suddenly golden as the crew generously filled their bowls.

Yet by and by, amidst their delirium, they had begun to notice that something was wrong. There was no sensation, no satisfaction in what they did, be it eating or drinking or enjoying the wenches’ pleasurable company. And then one clear, moonlit night a terrified screech had echoed through the streets of the town, and Hawksmoor had come bursting into every tavern to summon the crew to the ship, to demonstrate what had gone wrong – to prove the curse they had all laughed at was, in fact, quite real.

And that, from Bill’s point of view, had effectively been the beginning of the end.

Their need to lift the curse became all-consuming. There was no room for anything else, and those who had at first welcomed the *Pearl*’s men soon learned to dread them. By now, Bill was so thoroughly disgusted by his shipmates’ actions that he didn’t even mind the insatiable hunger and unquenchable thirst anymore; after all, once you’d learned you wouldn’t die of it, you just got kind of used to it. And once you did you had an edge over the bunch of rightfully cursed pirates whose every thought was centered on their needs.

“You won’t succeed,” he announced calmly.

His words seemed to cut through the cheering like a knife. One by one his shipmates fell silent and turned to stare at him. Even Barbossa seemed perplexed.

“And what do you mean by that?” he asked.

Bill returned his stare unfazed. “I made sure we’d remain cursed just as we deserve. What would you do once the curse be lifted? Go on killin’ and plunderin’ and maroonin’ shipmates on lonely islands, I bet. So I said to myself: Keep them busy for some years longer. And I sent one o’ the pieces to my family. Of course I won’t tell you where to start lookin’, and the only ones who could tell you are either dead or outside your reach.”

A stunned silence followed his speech. Nobody moved or made a sound. Even the ever-present creaking of the rigging seemed suddenly dulled, and the mist that surrounded the *Pearl* wherever she went closed in.

After a very long time Barbossa slowly and clearly asked: “You did *what*?”

Bill shrugged. “You heard me, capt’n.”

There was something in Barbossa’s face that promised slow torture, flaying, hacking off limbs and beheading – but if you were unable to die, these things held no real terror. And Barbossa knew it. He closed his eyes, breathing heavily and shaking his fists in a helpless fit of rage. Then, suddenly, he got very still. He opened his eyes again, and this time Bill shuddered at what he read in them.

“All this time,” Barbossa said quietly, “I kept up with your moral talk, Bootstrap. You weren’t happy with leavin’ Jack behind, fine, that was your bloody prerogative. I’ve let you preach. You ain’t no

better than the rest o' us, whatever you believe, and I always hoped you'd come around. But this is the final straw. Tell us where to find the piece, *now*, and I'll let it pass."

"And if I don't?"

"Don't test me on that," Barbossa warned.

Bill shook his head. "Not goin' to happen, capt'n."

Oddly, Barbossa smiled at these words. "That was your last mistake, Bootstrap," he promised. "Ever." He signalled to the crew. "Get him!"

It was as though a spell had been lifted. They had listened to the dispute with growing disbelief as the realization slowly sank in: Their salvation had slipped through their fingers to disappear into an unknown distance. No food to still their hunger, no drink to quench their thirst, maybe for years to come, maybe for all eternity. And the man responsible for it was right there, standing before them. As one, the bloodthirsty mob surged forward. In an instant Bill found himself held, kicked and punched for good measure.

"Tie him up," Barbossa commanded. "And get me one o' those cannons."

Nobody questioned his orders. Despite his predicament Bill was puzzled, though – if the captain intended to shoot him, he might as well save the powder. Bigger weapons made no difference whatsoever to those who could not be killed.

It was only when Barbossa picked up a length of rope that Bill suddenly got a very clear idea of what the plan was. Now he struggled, but he was bound too tightly to escape and still held by half a dozen hands. With a growing dread that bordered on panic he watched as his shipmates heaved a cannon on deck.

Barbossa certainly enjoyed the moment. He took his time fastening one end of the rope to the cannon, swinging the other end and then beckoning for Bill to be brought closer. The crew gleefully obeyed. In pure animal terror Bill fought against his captors, fear adding to his strength as he struggled for every step – in vain.

"Any last words?" Barbossa enquired, smiling. Accompanied by the jeering of the crew, he fastened the loose end of the rope to Bill's bootstraps and nodded once.

With a combined effort, Bill and the cannon went overboard.

Crashing into the water was like a shock. Bill fought the useless urge to breathe, he didn't need to breathe, it was impossible for him to suffocate, drown or die in any other way, yet when the waters closed over his head it was a simple reflex to gulp for air.

Within moments, sunlit, azure waters faded from his view. He sank down into the still world of the depths, farther and farther from the light. Fishes swarmed around him without sparing him so much as a glance. He was not the first poor soul they had seen passing this way.

Bill worked as fast as he could to free his hands or lose his boots, only too aware by the slowly increasing pressure of the water that his time was running out. Twilight gave way to blackness. He felt rather than saw himself sinking, deeper and deeper into the abyss, the grave of so many seamen, the cannon's heavy weight pulling him down relentlessly. Water tugged at him. He managed to free one hand, but his movements slowed with every yard he sank. The weight of the water pressed down on him; it felt as though he was being crushed bit by bit. Hell, he *was* being crushed bit by bit. His eyes and ears hurt. Still sinking deeper, down towards the bottom of the ocean, he freed his other hand. It was pitch black all around him. Summoning all his strength, he fought against the water's pressure to draw his knife, the trusted blade that had been stained black since the day Tia Dalma had raised the dead priest on the Island of the Four Winds. No time to sever the rope or work off his boots; he'd simply have to cut the straps. His movements were sluggish. It took ages to feel his way in the complete darkness, to slip the blade beneath one of the bootstraps and sever it. Something was crushing his ribcage, and by now his eyes and ears felt ready to burst.

The first strap gave way. Bill no longer had the strength needed to move, yet move he had to.

Impossibly slowly, he felt for and found the second strap. When he severed it, bit by bit, he felt his ribs break. The pain was bad, but it was everywhere, his body no longer able to withstand the ocean's weight.

The black blade finally cut the last strap. Probably the cannon dropped away; Bill no longer felt any difference. He could not move, except still drift downwards. He could not die. There was no escape, not ever. If there truly was a hell, he thought, he was in it. For all eternity.

He hardly felt it when he touched the bottom of the ocean and came to rest there.

Chapter 20:
Two years later

It was a grey, rainy morning when they laid Mary Turner to rest in the grave next to her sister Lucy's. Will stood by the grave; he did not cry as he had not cried all those painful months that had seen his mother grow weaker and weaker and finally be consumed by her illness. Pneumonia, the doctor had said and shaken his head regretfully. There was nothing that could be done. Three days ago she had died, not unexpectedly and too far gone already to recognize her son standing by her bedside. In a way, it had almost been a relief to let her go.

Will watched the rest of the family leave the cemetery; he had been given some time alone by Aunt Charlotte. He knew she and Uncle John expected him to live with them from now on, same as Martha and Annie; but Will had had enough time during his mother's illness to think about his future. There was nothing now that held him here. Yesterday, he had found himself a ship that sailed to the Caribbean; he would earn the passage by signing on as a cabin boy, and once there, he would try to find his father whom he had never met.

Contrary to popular belief Will knew his father was still alive – or at least had been about one and a half years ago when he had sent Will a gift, a strange medallion on a golden chain, adorned with the image of a skull.

"My, what an unusual trinket," his mother had marvelled.

Will had worn it ever since, though at his mother's counsel he had concealed it under his shirt.

"The others would not understand," she had said. "They all think your father is dead, and trying to convince them otherwise would just be inviting their ridicule."

Will believed her. He had had enough experience with the people of Weymouth to know she was right. Which was why he would never tell Aunt Charlotte of his plan. She would try to hold him back, and he could not allow that. He had an obligation to tell his father of his mother's death. Besides, his father was the only parent he had left now.

Taking a quick glance around to make sure he was unobserved, he left the graveyard by another route and made his way to the waterfront. He had already stashed some of his belongings at the harbourmaster's place where he now picked them up and said goodbye to his friend.

"Take care of yourself, lad," Mr. Stewart said wistfully.

"You too, sir." Will shook his hand. "I'll write as soon as I can."

"Aye. And..." The harbourmaster hesitated before continuing: "And when you see your father, say hello from old Mr. Stewart. I liked him a lot, you know – an honest soul, not like the riff-raff you often find in his profession." He patted his shoulder. "I really hope you'll find him."

Epilogue:
The Flying Dutchman

Unbeknown to most men, there were predators in the fathomless depths of the ocean. Seamen whispered stories about them, tales never told aloud lest in telling they might bring those horrors upon themselves. Creatures, old and timeless, gliding through the black waters they were a part of. Some of them hunted for survival, preying upon others of their kind and devouring them. Some hunted for far darker reasons. Misery breeds misery, and for some existence had become so unbearable that they were only able to find release or meaning or the ability to feel anything at all by watching others suffer. To them, those others had no right to be happy when they themselves were miserable. They had no hope of release from their suffering, and it was easier to live with that terrible knowledge when there was no one else who dared hope. So they went about, snuffing out even those smallest candles of hope, of compassion, of love. The world went dark around them.

The *Flying Dutchman* had become chief among these predators long ago. It groaned under the weight of a misery it had never been meant to carry, twisted in pain and grew ugly sores. It cried for release like all the souls bound to it, silently, yet clear to see for those who had eyes to see. But misery closes our eyes to the obvious.

It is said that the captain is the soul of a ship. Never had it been truer than in the union of the *Dutchman* and its captain. The ship of the dead had become the ship of the damned by the choice of its captain, who, like we all, had closed his eyes to escape his own suffering. He knew that release from his misery could only come through him, and him alone. It meant turning back, painful though it might be. But it was easier to hate, easier to defy and to blame than to forgive, and Davy Jones feared the terrible pain of rejected love more than the eternal damnation he was living in. And so he tried to convince himself that he did not feel, and he suffered in silence.

Like a beacon, desperation called to him. He had seen it in its thousand forms, for desperation was no stranger to those who went to sea. Yet, old as he was, he had never been drawn before to the deepest depths of the ocean. If there was suffering down in that black abyss, it was not of human origin, and it was human souls that Davy Jones was interested in. But there was no mistaking it: Something, *someone* was down there, impossible though it seemed.

Jones strode on deck and gave the order. The *Dutchman* went down, down into the lightless depths, a predator other predators were keen to avoid. –

And suddenly, things changed.

After what felt like or had been years of darkness and pain, Bill moved. Not of his own accord, but there were hands, by all the saints, *hands* that carried him. He knew not where to, nor was it important. He moved, away from a seaman's purgatory.

He felt himself lowered again, and then there was more movement; the surface he was lying on shuddered and then lifted, and bit by bit the crushing weight that pressed on Bill decreased. His bones knitted as his body slowly put itself back together. He realized he was still clutching the black knife and, by the stars, his hand obeyed when he tried to move it. Water floated out of his lungs as he could not suppress a relieved laugh. Slowly, impossibly slowly, Bill got to his hands and knees. Still, the pressure continued to lift. And then, the faintest of lights reached his eyes, and he turned his head upwards, saw the light grow brighter and brighter, the black waters fading to grey and then to azure. He saw the sails of the ship – for that was what he was on – sway in the current of the water and then break through the surface of the sea, the rest of the ship following with a thunderous roar in a huge column of water, its speed shooting it several feet into the air. When it fell down to float on the waves, all the water inside of Bill decided it was time to leave for good. He coughed up what felt like half the ocean, breathed the salty air that had never smelt nor tasted so delicious, coughed some more, breathed again. It was as though he was being born again.

Heavy, limping steps came down the quarterdeck.

“And what manner of creature are you?” a sharp, sneering voice asked. “I’ve seen my share in my time but nothing like this.”

Bill slowly turned around. It was only now, coming face to face with the devil of the seas at last, that he realized he had on some unconscious level been expecting it. Perhaps it had been preordained ever since the day he had first beheld the *Flying Dutchman* and realized to what fate he had unintentionally condemned the *Valiant's* men.

As most seamen were a practical and not too pious lot, their fear of the afterlife was probably justified. Bill, however, had no reason to fear death; it was returning to his own private version of hell that he dreaded. Therefore, as much as he feared him, Captain Davy Jones did not appear to him so much as a herald of doom but in a bizarre twist of fate as a savior. -

As the pirate related his story of mutiny, cursed Aztec gold, treachery and subsequent punishment, Davy Jones smiled to himself. Mortals had not changed since his time. Greedy, backstabbing and apparently fearless in life, they all shivered in their boots when it came to dying, and more than one was willing to barter away both body and soul in order to postpone the moment of transition. His own crew was living proof of that. And it seemed that even those who were immortal were not immune to fear, nor were they content with their fate.

“An interesting yarn indeed,” he admitted. “But tell me, what am I to do with you? I didn’t pull you up out of the goodness of my heart.” He smiled. “I was merely curious. So – do I throw you back in now?”

There it was again – the terror in his eyes. Immortal or not, they all acted the same in the end. It was almost too easy.

“No,” the pirate said fervently.

Davy Jones regarded him slyly. “And what,” he asked, “would persuade me not to?”

To his credit, the pirate didn’t quake. “I’m sure we can come to some sort of agreement, sir,” he said.

“I swore I’d do anythin’ to escape that fate.”

“But are you willing to back up those words?” Jones enquired.

The pirate simply looked at him, and there was no hope, only quiet acceptance, yes, and dread, in his eyes. “Name your terms, sir,” he said.

A low chuckling filled the deck as the *Dutchman*’s crew shared their captain’s dark amusement. Davy Jones smiled.

“One hundred years before the mast,” he said. “Those are the terms for everyone aboard. After that time you’re free to go. And what are a mere hundred years to you? After all, you have eternity at your disposal, have you not?”

The crew laughed, a malicious, soulless laughter all the fiends in hell would be proud of.

Eternity or not, one hundred years at that moment stretched endlessly before Bill. Yet, he would even have agreed to ten times that span if it meant avoiding a return to the bottom of the ocean.

“I accept,” he said quietly.

Epilogue to an Epilogue:
Calypso

“I missed them. I just missed them by about two weeks on Tortuga, and since then my life has revolved around running after them. I hear of one sighting of the *Pearl* and go there only to find her long gone, another ship sunk, another town sacked, another bunch of people killed. It seems I simply can’t catch up with them, and in the meantime the legends of Barbossa get more and more fantastic the more carnage he leaves behind.” There was no smile on the face of the pirate with the mane of matted locks and braids as he lay sullenly in his chair, feet propped up on the table.

“Aw, poor Jack.” Tia Dalma touched his cheek with the back of her hand. “Lost de love of him life once again, and who now to help him get her back?”

He looked gloomier still. “I have no idea.”

With a small, yet commanding gesture Tia Dalma got him to remove his feet from the table. “What would you do, once you’ve found de *Pearl*?” she asked, sitting down lightly on his lap. “How would you reclaim her from Barbossa and him crew?”

If possible, his face darkened further. “I’ve no idea, either,” he confessed, unable to conceal his frustration.

Tia Dalma placed her arms around his neck and smiled. “Well, Jack Sparrow,” she said, “it’s difficult getting what you want if you don’t know what it is you want.”

“I know exactly what I want,” he stated vehemently. “I want my ship back, and I want to place this shot into Barbossa’s treacherous heart.” He patted the pistol in his sash.

“Dat is someting, at least.” Her lips closed over his and she felt his gloom disappear amid his all too human reaction to her touch. –

Later she watched him sleeping, as easily satisfied as a child, suddenly unworried. He was an interesting one, this Jack Sparrow; else she would not have felt drawn to him. Hers were all men of the sea, but she claimed only those who were special as her own. Besides, she had read the currents. There had been a new determination to their flow for some time now. The ever-vague shape of the future was growing more and more solid with each passing year. Events had been set in motion, things were drawing to a conclusion, and she knew she had to act. This was her chance. If she missed it, she would be lost forever.

The first steps had been made. One of the Pirate Lords was hers, yet his mercurial temperament made it difficult to foretell what his actions would be; Barbossa was far easier to predict, but not so easy to manipulate in regard to her plea. Both men had become mortal enemies all of a sudden. She knew she had only to wait and one of them would fall into her hands as certain as the tide. And all she needed was one Pirate Lord with enough cleverness, power of persuasion or charisma to sway or outwit all the others. The rest would take care of itself. The currents had told her so.

Slowly she walked into the main room of her hut and scooped up the compass lying on a table. Opening its lid so that its map of the heavens and its beautiful craftsmanship could be admired in its full glory, she placed it on a smaller table next to some vials and interesting-looking trinkets. Knowing Jack’s magpie behavior, he would not fail to find and take a liking to it.

The terrible, violent longing for the sea made her ache inside, day after day, year after year, century after century. She had chosen this spot, far inland, as her earthly refuge, for living near the sea yet unable to become one with it would have been the cruellest torture imaginable. Still, there was no cure for homesickness, and things she knew to be vain and ridiculously insignificant looked so important while trapped in this single form. How could humans even begin to understand her? The swamp people revered her. The pirates feared her and came to her for help – the sheer nerve of it! But understand her? Never. In the end, she stood alone.

She picked up her music box locket and held it tenderly on her palm for a moment. Her thoughts wandered. He who had been and still was in her heart, he who had abandoned her. She felt no bitterness towards him, only a bittersweet sadness. Why had he not had faith in her? Theirs would have been eternity. What did ten years matter? But he had still thought like a mortal, something she had failed to recognize. She had expected him to understand; and thus their love had been lost. No, she corrected herself a moment later, not their love. She still loved him and she knew him to love her still. But a second chance to be together had been denied to them – up till now. She would be free of her mortal form, and once she was she would persuade him to reclaim his heart and his duty. And they would be together always.