

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 his 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.