

The Gold of Cortés

Book 1: The Island of the Four Winds

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

Featuring:

Pirates:

Hector Barbossa
Beak
Bo'sun
Douglas "Doug" Brass (tattooist)
Ian Brass (ship's cook)
Cabin boy
Edward Cobbler (†)
Denton (captain of the *Comet* †)
Eightfinger Bruce
Emily
Grapple
Jacoby
Koehler
Mad José
Mallot
Moneybag
Pintel
Quarry
Ragetti
Redeye Sam
Roksnoer (shipwright)
Scarus (shipwright)
Scratch
Jack Sparrow (captain of the *Black Pearl*)
Tisonnier
Tom (cabin boy)
William "Bootstrap Bill" Turner
Twigg

Inhabitants of Weymouth:

Daniel Beard (seaman)
Lucy Beard, née Morris
Martha and Annie Beard
Charlotte Edgeway, née Morris
John Edgeway (innkeeper)
Joseph Finch (dockhand)
Frederick Gaskill (grocer)
Henry Haynes (dockhand)
Jane Phipps, née Morris
Stewart (harbourmaster)
Mary Turner, née Morris
William "Will" Turner

Others:

Commander Benjamin Beckett (Royal Navy)
Cutler Beckett (EITC factor)
Davy Jones (captain of the *Flying Dutchman*)
Mark (innkeeper)
Mercer (freelancer)
Nauí Ehecátl (Aztec priest)
Miss Prettyink (tattooist)
Ruby (barmaid)
Tia Dalma (mystic)
Director Waite (member of the EITC board of directors)

Ships:

Achilles aka the tub (East Indiaman, captained by Jack Sparrow and Hector Barbossa)
Black Pearl (galleon, captained by Jack Sparrow)
Comet (captained by Denton)
Flying Dutchman (former Dutch fluyt, captained by Davy Jones)
Jolanda (schooner, captained by Hector Barbossa)
Springtide (pirate vessel)
Valiant (captained by Commander Beckett)
Whitecap (merchant vessel)

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Prologue to an Epilogue:
Deep Water

There had been darkness for a long, long time.

Maybe there were creatures, old and unknown to mankind, that lived in these depths, massive enough to withstand the relentless pressure of the ocean's weight. Bill sometimes thought he felt them pass by or even nibble at him. He could never be sure. It was utterly dark down here, a blackness deeper than anything a man of the world of light could imagine even in his worst nightmares. And that was all there was – darkness, and the pain of dying, without being able to die.

He had no way of knowing how long he had been here. It felt like years, and maybe it really had been this long. Every curse he had already spoken, and how he had cursed himself for having been this stupid! Yes, he had doomed the mutinous pirates, and in so doing he had doomed himself to a fate far worse than death. And for what? His honor? His principles? He should have remembered that a pirate had neither honor nor principles. He should have told Barbossa where to find the bloody piece of the treasure. Perhaps he would still have ended down here, but at least the curse would have been lifted by now, allowing him to pass on to whatever afterlife awaited him. He had been no saint, but even hell couldn't be worse than this state. Given the chance, he would lead them to England, to his family, gladly, if it meant escaping this fate. What a fool he had been. What on earth had he hoped to accomplish? To punish his shipmates? To stop them from continuing their murderous rampage in search for the missing gold pieces? Utterly ridiculous. In the end, he had punished himself, and as for stopping Barbossa and the rest of the crew – they had nothing to fear, had they? Most likely, they were into business as usual, only without the caution mortal pirates would show. So why, oh why had he done it? Jack had been his friend, yes, as far as friendship went in their profession. But Bill had stood by and let the mutiny go ahead, even while he disapproved of it, so obviously his conscience left much to be desired. Stupid, stupid, stupid. And because of his stupidity he was here, unable to move, unable to die, neither dead nor alive.

His rage had long passed. His hope had lasted longer, oddly enough, but he had given up on it some weeks, months or years ago; he could not tell when in this timeless place. There was only one thing left now: a grim, burning desire to escape at any cost.

Chapter 1: Wreckage

In the clear, bright light of a full moon they approached the *Comet's* wreck, lying on the rocks of infamous Reaper's Spot, canted sharply to the starboard side like a huge beast that had laid down to die, all edges and sharp angles in the harsh white light.

On Barbossa's order they lowered the anchor at a safe distance from Reaper's Spot. The captain of the *Jolanda* took a long look at the wreck through his spyglass before declaring it safe to lower the boat. "Remember," he told them, "treat lightly. Denton may have been a fool to sail these waters and wreck his ship, but we don't know for certain whether all his crew are dead. Might be they're just waitin' to get hold of another ship."

"So if there be any survivors," queried Ian, "we leave 'em to rot?"

Barbossa scratched his beard thoughtfully. "Nay," he said after a moment. "If they come quietly, we can lock them in the brig and drop them off at Tortuga. Else we slit their throat."

And with that plan they were off.

Carefully circumnavigating the sharp rocks they drew nearer the *Comet's* wreck and went alongside. More than enough lines and sails were hanging over the rail to allow them easy access to the unfortunate vessel, so up they went, Ragetti first, followed by Pintel, Barbossa, Ian, Doug and Jacoby, with Bill bringing up the rear.

The damage looked worse on deck, but yet not too extensive; the mainmast was down and most of the rigging, the rudder appeared to be broken, nothing that could not be repaired, given time and material; yet they knew that below deck things would look very different.

Bill lit the lantern and took the lead. Because of the *Comet's* position they had to wade through the sea water at the starboard side that lapped in with every wave and made the deck treacherously slippery. They had to fight their way through the broken rigging and occasionally bodies, which in the ghostly light was something out of a seaman's nightmare. But the promise of Captain Denton's load was stronger than any uneasiness.

At last they reached the stairs leading down to the gun deck and the cargo hold. Below they heard the unmistakable sound of lapping water. Bill stepped down a few stairs and held his lantern high.

"How bad is it?" Barbossa wanted to know.

The deck was filled knee-deep with water on the starboard side. A few planks had splintered under the impact of the *Comet* hitting the reef. When Bill descended further to the cargo hold, he found a huge leak and the hold almost entirely flooded. A few barrels of what appeared to be rum and a body were floating in the water and bumping on the bulkheads.

"Bad," replied Bill when he returned to his shipmates and related the facts.

Though the thought of the rum barrels cheered them up somewhat, it was definitely not what they had hoped for.

"Oh, aye," Ian said, scratching his mutilated right ear. "Denton's a poor devil if ever there was one.

First he looses his ship and his life and then his cargo."

"Somebody should've put him out of his misery long ago," agreed Jacoby.

They went below and sloshed through the cold water in search of the crew's possessions.

"Feels a bit disrespectful, don't it?" Pintel remarked while breaking the lock of a sea chest and rummaging through its contents. "Like grave-robbin' or the like." He salvaged several sticks of tobacco, a compass and a couple of linen shirts.

Doug pulled a rather pretty chest out of the water, adorned with the painting of a schooner under full sail. "They won't be needin' it anymore," he said. "Look at it this way: Wouldn't they rather leave their worldly possessions to a fellow gentleman o' fortune than consign it to the deep?"

"Aye, you're right, o' course." Pintel started to cram the tobacco into his pockets, caught Bill's eye and thought better of it. Everything was an equal share, after all (at least as long as somebody was there to take notice), so he threw his items into the sack they had brought along for that very purpose.

"A shame 'bout it," Doug mused, looking at the chest. "But I'm afraid it's already started to rot." With a regretful sigh he hacked through the lid, splitting the schooner right in two.

"You can always paint your own trunk like th... Aha!" his brother suddenly cried out, pulling a small piece of bar silver out of another seaman's chest. "Now, capt'n, when it comes to dividin' the lot, I want you to take into consideration that I found this."

"So noted," Barbossa said, turning out the pockets of a coat.

Some trinkets, clothes, knives, pistols, tin cups, a bible, two pipes and a flask later, they put their mind to the galley, though to the disappointment of the ship's cook plunder was sparse there; most of the food had already been spoiled by the water. None of them was too unhappy with the fact that the hard tack had been soaked and thus become inedible.

After they had deposited everything in the longboat, Pintel and Ragetti were ordered to fetch the rum. While Ian, Doug and Jacoby were hauling the barrels their shipmates pushed towards them out of the hold, Bill's eyes wandered to the stern where the captain's quarters were situated. A sideways glance told him that Barbossa's thoughts went along the same lines as his.

"There might still be somethin' o' value back there," he mused.

The captain of the *Jolanda* smiled. "Aye," he agreed. "Has to be worth a look, don't you think?"

And leaving their comrades to work by the light of the moon, they made their way towards the stern. The captain's quarters probably were the only part of the ship still mostly in order. No water had yet penetrated, though the interior was strewn wildly across the floor.

Bill hung the lantern on a convenient hook on the wall, and he and Barbossa started shifting through Denton's possessions. A few gold coins were to be found, a broken bottle of rum, candles, some quills and ink, a compass, a surprising amount of books and even more sea charts.

"Poor devil," Barbossa echoed. "Well, he never was smart enough for a command anyway. It's remarkable he even lasted this long." He shrugged and pocketed some of the coins. Bill was quick to follow. "Let's get the charts and be off. We should've expected there was nothin' to be found here in the first place."

Bill silently agreed. Yet, when they had sighted the *Comet* just lying there they had known they could not let such an opportunity pass.

"So to Tortuga it still is, then?" he asked, picking up the lantern.

Barbossa smiled. "If nothin' worthwhile crosses our path, aye."

Without warning, the door slammed shut. Cut off from the moonlight, the cabin was suddenly very dark, and the lantern's light threw long, unsteady shadows across their faces.

"What in blazes..." Barbossa tried the latch; there was a scraping sound outside, and the captain and Bill exchanged an alarmed glance. As one, they threw themselves against the door. It crashed open, nearly came off the hinges and knocked flat a wild figure that obviously had tried to barricade the captain's cabin with some of the rubble outside. His matted hair had once been black; now it was caked with dried blood and dirt, his clothes were torn, and there was a long, ugly cut that ran across his Indian face and looked as though it might leave quite a scar.

Barbossa drew his cutlass and put his boot on the man's chest. "Who are you, mongrel?" he snarled. The man just whimpered.

"Didn't take too well to bein' stranded," Bill speculated.

"I don't take too well to bein' shut in," replied Barbossa grimly and prodded the man with his blade. "Speak, you bilge rat!"

All he achieved was that the seaman curled up in a tight ball. Sighing, Bill put down the lantern and pulled him to his feet.

"Now, mate," he said, "just tell us who you are. You're one of Denton's crew?"

He blinked and hunched his shoulders. Finally, he nodded quickly and nervously.

"What's your name?"

He licked his cracked lips. "José," he whispered.

"So why did you just try to lock us in?" Barbossa demanded. "And what happened to your captain?" José clutched his face. "No," he moaned. "No... must not... not..." Then he threw his head back and screamed.

In the end, Barbossa had to knock him unconscious in order to shut him up. "This venture's more trouble than worth," the captain grumbled.

They threw the mad pirate into the *Jolanda's* brig and set sail for Tortuga.

Chapter 2: The Turner Household

Today, as on every day, Mary was up and about before sunrise. It was a chill morning, a thick fog hanging on the waters like a white curtain, shrouding the ships that lay at bay, the houses on the waterfront, and creeping through the shutters. Mary stoked the fire, put a pot of water on the stove to warm it and began to prepare a modest breakfast. Oatmeal was almost gone; so was the milk. She would have to remind Haynes and Finch to pay their rent – again. And she would have to brave Gaskill – again. With a slight shudder Mary pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders and set the table for six.

While she was thus occupied, she heard Will leave his room and tap towards the kitchen.

“Comb your hair,” she said before he had even fully entered. “It is no use trying to look scruffy in this household.”

“Yes, Mother,” he replied seriously. “Good morning, Mother.”

She smiled at him over her shoulder. “Good morrow, Will. Please be so good as to wake the girls, there’s a good lad.”

She could swear he was simply growing overnight. There were several inches between his ankles and the hem of his trousers now. He looked quite skinny, as well. Perhaps she should send him off to Charlotte more often; but she resented living on charity, and Charlotte and John were always quick to show how they felt about a mother who was unable to provide for her child. Besides, Mary did not like the kind of clientele Will would be exposed to at Charlotte’s.

She sighed and fought off a cough. More worries. As though it was not enough to look into Will’s dark, serious eyes and know those were not the eyes of a child. Too much responsibility for one so young.

Shortly after, Will returned with the girls in tow. Martha was yawning, leading little Annie who still looked half asleep, her rag doll under her arm.

“Good morrow, girls,” Mary greeted them. “Sit down. Annie, please put the doll away.”

She took the porridge off the stove and ladled it into their wooden bowls. Right on cue, Henry Haynes and Joseph Finch joined them, two large, silent and most of the time well-behaved dockhands who lodged at the Turner home.

Putting their porridge before them, Mary said: “I will need your rent today, gents.”

Both shuffled their feet uncomfortably.

“If you’ll just wait till the end of the week, ma’am...” Finch began, but she had been expecting this and cut him short.

“Today, or this will be your last meal under my roof.”

Gloomily, they tugged into the porridge, murmuring “Yes, ma’am.”

After a silent breakfast the dockhands went to work, while Mary cleaned the kitchen and the children attended to their scores, making their beds, sweeping the floor and Will and Martha then sitting down to do their daily reading and writing exercises that Mary set them. It never hurt to know a few things, and while she herself had only received a modest schooling she was glad to teach that what she knew. Maybe it would help giving the children better future prospects and keep Will from going to sea. In a few years, he might be apprenticed to a grocer and learn an honourable trade that provided a steady income.

Just then Lucy returned. Her beautiful ginger hair was tousled, there were deep shadows under her eyes and she smelled horribly of liquor and tobacco smoke. She leaned unsteadily against the door frame, smiling just as unsteadily with her painted lips.

“Hello, dearies,” she said, slurring the words.

“Mommy!” Annie ran to embrace her, with Martha following more reluctantly, and Lucy bent down to kiss them.

“Have been good girls, haven’t you, dearies? Been good and did what auntie Mary said?”

“Of course they have,” Mary replied calmly, putting her hands on the girls’ shoulders. “Martha, Annie, mommy needs to sleep now. Will you please go and play outside to give her some rest?”

Sensible Martha nodded, took her protesting sister by the hand and led her outside. Will cleared the table and followed them quietly.

Lucy got up with some difficulty, focused on Mary’s stern face and giggled. “Oh, I’m in trouble. Big sister’s going to lecture me.” She fell heavily in one of the chairs.

"I thought you were asleep," Mary said, not raising her voice. "What are you thinking, coming back at this hour?"

Lucy pouted. "It got late last night. Or early," she added, glancing out of the window.

"And you really think it was necessary for the girls to see you this way?"

"Well, I had to come home, hadn't I?"

"Lucy," Mary sat down next to her, "they are your daughters. What kind of example are you setting for them?"

Her sister smiled ruefully. "You're the best example they can find. Me? I'm just an example how not to live your life."

"And Daniel?" Mary asked gently.

Lucy snorted and threw up her hands. "What about him? Damn Daniel and the day we met! What's he good for? Being away and getting no money at all?" She leaned closer to Mary, smiling a toothy and liquor-smelling smile. "Not like your Wil-li-am. He's away but at least he sends money. Once in a while. Should have been quicker and got him for myself, hmm? But now I'm stuck with Daniel and all the drunken sailors in the world who happen to be in need of company."

"Lucy," Mary began, but her sister suddenly sprang to her feet, swaying dangerously.

"Don't you dare lecture me!" she screeched. "You're just as bad as Charlotte! Sitting there in your comfortable home, judging me – have you forgot how a few years back you were just as desperate as I am? You were just luckier than I. Had Daniel got that offer instead of Bill, you'd be in my shoes right now!"

"I am not judging you," Mary replied.

"Oh yes, you are! Think I'm stupid? Lucy the strumpet, Lucy the drunk, who can't take care of her own children! I need money, Mrs. High-and-Mighty-Turner, and how am I going to earn it with a husband at sea? You try it some time – when Bill's finally ditched you for good, for instance!"

Turning over her chair, she ran out of the kitchen and into her room. The door closed with a bang behind her.

Mary slowly got to her feet and picked up the chair. Now Lucy would sleep for a few hours, be Martha and Annie's beautiful, charming, loving mother afterwards, and in the evening she'd be back in the dance halls where she met her various customers.

Nobody should have to live such a life, Mary thought. But she knew the harsh reality. Ordinary sailors did not earn enough money to support a family, so very few of them married at all. Those who did were absent from their wives and children for months or even years. Their wages were paid only after their return, if at all, and in the meantime their families had to fend for themselves. Their wives went into service or took in lodgers – or resorted to prostitution, as Lucy did. Mary knew all this. As Lucy had pointed out, a few years ago she herself had been an ordinary sailor's wife.

Involuntarily, her eyes wandered out of the kitchen window into the mist where on a clear day you could just glimpse the spire of the parish church.

Of course her family had warned her. Of course she had seen those unfortunate women before. Still, she had accepted his proposal, being young and naïve and madly in love. There had been a year of bliss, Will was born, and reality set in. As one of the five daughters of a moderately wealthy grocer Mary had never known hardship, but she learned quickly. She learned to be lonely, hungry, desperate. She learned to be thankful for the meanest of work if it paid. She had never resorted to Lucy's kind of occupation, regarding it as an unforgivable act of infidelity and also having left some measure of pride, but she knew she had only been saved by a stroke of luck.

William had come home one day and told her about an old mate he had met and who had offered him a position on some merchant's vessel in the Caribbean.

"Think about it, Mary, m'dear," he had said enthusiastically. "They're offering good pay. We wouldn't be seeing each other often, but you and William'd be very well off."

And he had been true to his word – in a way. He sent them money from wherever he was now. She had been able to buy this tiny house with an even smaller garden, and at times she was almost rich. Then months might pass without so much as a single coin. And certainly they did not see each other often; in fact, she had not seen him since the day he left for the Caribbean, five years ago.

Mary coughed (it really *was* chilly in here, was it not?) and went to clean her lodgers' rooms.

Chapter 3: A Map and a Raid

In the morning they reached their destination, finding it almost devoid of activity, with the exception of those unsleeping bartenders who cleared their establishments of broken furniture and the last of their customers. With no place to go for a while, the *Jolanda's* men decided to sleep off any residues of the reclaimed rum and head to town later in the day.

Soon the sun was blazing out of a cloudless sky, and with hardly a breeze to cool them the crew sat or lay on deck, dozing, sleeping, playing a game of dice, mending their clothes or – if they felt inclined to work – the sails, fishing, counting their booty or looking at souvenirs and watching the other ships in the harbor.

Doug the tattooist brought some ink, and as Bill was the only one on board (aside from the captain) who was able to read and write more than his own name, the twins dictated him a letter to their sister in Scotland. It was slow business; Ian and Doug weren't used to word written messages to their loved ones, and it had been a while since Bill had actually written something; not that he had ever been good at it. So the three of them worked very hard, with the occasional swearing, crossing out and starting anew.

When the sun started to sink, the crew made their way towards the *Lost Coin*, a most charming watering hole whose owner was indebted to Barbossa for some reason and always gave them a discount. Curiously, the captain carried under his arm one of the maps they had salvaged from the *Comet*.

"What yer lookin' at?" he growled in regard to their questioning faces. "Mind yer own business, ye swabs."

There was also the matter of the rescued pirate. For some reason, Mad José seemed to have grown quite fond of Barbossa, his muddled mind perhaps telling him that the captain had saved his life, and he dogged them at a short distance.

"I might just kill him and have it done with," Barbossa said after several unsuccessful attempts to shoo him away.

The usual crowd had already assembled at the *Lost Coin* when the *Jolanda's* crew entered. Most of Barbossa's men dispersed quickly in search of various forms of entertainment; however, he held back Bill and the bo'sun.

"Somethin' here for the brightest heads," he announced quietly.

They found a table in the "business section" of the inn, a series of booths that provided some measure of privacy. Judging by the giggling noises that came from the booth next to theirs, a different kind of business was taking place there.

They settled down with a tankard or two each.

"Now," Barbossa said after they had drunk to their health, fortune and whatever else a pirate needed these days, "here's somethin' that might cheer you up. We all are on the lookout for money and you, Bootstrap, maybe more so than the rest of us. Have a wife and a child to support, haven't you?"

"Aye," Bill replied cautiously. It was not like he wasn't thinking of Mary and William anymore; but they were part of a life that he had left behind long ago. Long enough to have been someone else's life, something not quite real. He could barely recall Mary's face now – strange, how easily a man forgot what had once been the most important thing in the world for him. He did remember her eyes, though, dark and serious, hinting at a strength of character that maybe he had never truly bothered to get to know. And William. He should be, what, six years by now? Seven? He had lost count. Bill felt some sympathy for the son he hardly knew; his own father had been a seaman as well and had often been absent. But William was better off not knowing him. Life at sea was hard, even cruel; Bill had known that since he was a boy. No, William better had the sense to stay ashore. As for Bill... he had never been a family man. It was at sea that he lived and at sea that he would die.

He drank to his family's health as well.

The captain smiled. "So I propose we go after some gold," he continued. "A quick and easy venture, thanks to our dear friend Capt'n Denton." With flourish he unfolded the map. It was well-worn, fragile at the folds and stained with something that was most likely seawater, rum and blood and showed a crude, almost childlike drawing of an island surrounded by rocks. Tortuga had been added as an anchor point to measure distance and direction. There was something resembling a dragon's head in

the water, half-way to the boldly titled 'Island of the Four Winds'. But the truly interesting part was the cave that was depicted on the isle, bearing a large red X.

They looked at each other.

"I'll be damned," Bill murmured.

Barbossa stroked his beard. "It appears Denton might not have been such a fool after all."

"Providing nobody beat him to it." Thoughtfully, the bo'sun took a draught of his ale. "I wonder where he got it?"

"From someone even less fortunate than he, no doubt."

"Could be some sort of practical joke," Bill remarked. "I mean, who's stupid enough to put such an obvious pointer on a map if there truly be a treasure?"

They all fell silent again, staring at the map.

"But we're going to find out, right?" the bo'sun asked after a while.

They looked at Barbossa.

"O' course we are," he answered gruffly. "Though Bootstrap has a point. Let's go about this venture with some caution."

"Island of the Four Winds," the bo'sun mused. "Never heard of it. Probably the name given to it by the man who drew the map while it's known by some other name in these waters. A clever rouse. That's one against your theory, Bootstrap."

"Maybe he was just makin' it up. Or had no mind for navigation or rememberin' names," retorted Bill.

"Nobody in his right mind would think of a name like that."

"Well," Bill looked over to Mad José who slouched near them, "you could ask him to interpret."

Barbossa laughed. Then he went for his pistol and fired a shot through the partition dividing their booth from the next. They jumped, and with a shrill scream a young, buxom wench exited.

"Thought it was too quiet in there," commented Barbossa. "Eavesdropping, are we? Get out, ye cockroach, or I'll shoot you where it hurts!"

There was a sound of boots scraping on wood, some jingle of weaponry, and a moment later a man peered around the edge of the booth. He was young and wore his dark hair in several braids, held back by a red bandana.

"Now," he said, smiling disarmingly, "there was no need to frighten the poor girl..."

Barbossa grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him closer, and he shut up quickly.

"Couldn't help overhearing," he murmured.

"I bet you couldn't," Barbossa sneered. "Who are you, cur?"

"Oh!" The smile was in place again. "Terribly sorry. I'm Captain Jack Sparrow."

"Sparrow?" Barbossa regarded him closely. "So you're Teague's whelp then?"

The young man beamed. "I see you've heard of me."

"Know your mother from way back. Great pirates." Without hurry, the captain drew his other pistol.

"Sorry, lad, but the best advice has always been: Leave no loose ends. Nothin' personal, you understand."

"Not sure what the Code would say to this," young Sparrow protested.

"I can quote it, if you like." Barbossa cocked his pistol.

"Please do!"

"Second rule o' self-preservation states: Shoot first, ask questions later."

"What's the first rule?"

Barbossa shrugged. "Be somewhere else when the shootin' starts."

"I rather like that one," Sparrow admitted.

And then a heavy rum bottle crashed right through the partition on Barbossa's head.

The *Jolanda's* captain blinked confused, most of the impact having been absorbed by both the wall and his hat, but for a moment he was stunned enough to allow Sparrow to break free of his grip.

"See you somewhere else!" the young pirate yelled and ducked Barbossa's swing.

As one, the *Jolanda's* men were on their feet, drawing their weapons.

"Get them!" Barbossa bellowed.

In less than ten seconds all hell broke loose in the *Lost Coin*. Sparrow was retreating to the wench, who was wielding two heavy pistols with astonishing ease. Several pirates cleared tables and customers out of their way, a small, wiry man hollered what appeared to be obscenities in French and brandished a poker, Pintel and Ragetti found themselves hand-on-hand with two other pirates either

belonging to Sparrow or simply enjoying a good tavern brawl, the landlord went for his well-used club, and the patrons with no party to favor just took it out on the next best man.

With Barbossa right in the thicket as usual and the bo'sun trying to find Sparrow, it was Bill who remembered the map, still lying on the table where they had left it. He spun around. From the other side of the damaged partition the young pirate looked at him.

Both lunged forward.

Sparrow reached the map first, but as he was half hanging inside the partition he was not fast enough to retreat before Bill delivered a blow with his sword; yelping, Sparrow drew his hand back just in time to avoid it getting severed from his arm, and with a small ripping sound that was almost swallowed by the surrounding noise the parchment split in two under Bill's blade.

Dumbfounded, both stared at the ruined map for a moment; then Sparrow hastily wriggled free of the partition, his half of the map firmly in hand, Bill picked up his half and ran to the neighboring booth where Sparrow just made good his escape. Or would have, if not for Mad José. Unnoticed by everyone, the crazed pirate had slipped past them and lay in wait under Sparrow's table. When the young captain passed him, he stuck out his leg, and with a yelp Sparrow stumbled and crashed to the floor.

"Ah!" he said when he rolled over and found Bill's sword pointing at his throat. "Well. I'm sure we can work this out, mate."

"Aye," agreed Bill. "Hand over the map."

"What's left of it, you mean. Brilliant stroke, that. I'm rather glad you didn't do that to my hand... or my neck, for that matter." He grinned nervously.

Bill rolled his eyes. "The map, Sparrow."

"Captain Sparrow, if you please." The young pirate lifted his index fingers. "Now, here's an idea: It so happens that I'm about to acquire a ship and am still short of some members of me crew. Why don't you sign on with me, we pair our resources and find the treasure of Windy Island, aye?"

"Whereupon I'll find myself marooned on the said island with no treasure, no ship and the *Jolanda's* crew ready to feed me to the fishes. No, thank you."

"Mate, with such a bleak outlook on life you'll never make it. Why would I do somethin' like that?"

"You're a pirate."

"Fair enough," Sparrow conceded. "But you don't know me, and I don't know you – in fact, you have the advantage over me because I don't even know your name and you're threatenin' me with that nasty blade of yours. So why aren't we sensible..." something suspiciously pistol-like pressed itself against Bill's back, "... and end this business here and now?"

"Don' e'en breathe, chum," a female voice behind Bill said. "Ya neither, matey." Mad José cowered under his table.

Sparrow pushed the blade away and got to his feet. "Sorry, mate. The map, if you please."

Scowling, Bill pulled his half of the parchment out of his coat pocket. "You better pray you have an escape plan, Sparrow."

"Captain Sparrow. Jack to me friends." He stretched out his hand. "Don't take it too hard. You'll get lucky next time."

At that instant, an all too familiar booming sound drove all other thoughts from their minds. Despite the infernal noise of the fighting other patrons noticed it as well, and within moments the crowd had forgotten any animosity and was rushing towards the exits.

Pushing their way to the front, Bill, Sparrow and the wench emerged to find the harbor in flames. Several ships were burning or sinking, a building on the waterfront had been destroyed by a cannon shot, and as they watched, a broadside hit the trusted *Jolanda*, reduced her masts to smithereens and sent her sinking to the bottom of the harbor.

Not far from them Barbossa uttered an oath he must have been saving for just such an occasion, for Bill had never heard him use it before.

"Who are those kelp-festooned bilge rats?" the captain demanded.

He was not the only one who wanted to know. Their question was answered when through the glare and smoke there came a longboat, another behind it and yet another behind that, until what looked like a veritable fleet of boats was closing in on the docks. Pulling on the oars, readily identifiable in their red coats, were the king's men.

Much as everyone wanted to get even for their sunk ships, at this sight the oldest and noblest of pirate traditions won out as usual. Now Tortuga was a pirate haven and as such the need to disappear arose

frequently, mostly to avoid any unpleasant reunion with an old acquaintance you had double-crossed. For that reason hidden exits, escape routes and hideouts existed everywhere in town.

Caught up in the stampede for a quick way out, Bill, Barbossa, Sparrow and the wench – and the ever faithful Mad José - were swept away from the docks. However, the general confusion hindered more than aided any escape, and before long they found themselves face to face with a group of attacking soldiers. Without missing a beat the wench whipped out her pistols and felled one of the king's men with a precise shot in the forehead; as he hit the ground everyone else drew their weapons.

Over the years Bill had acquired a reputation as a fierce fighter; he was not senselessly cruel as some of his shipmates, nor did he harm those who surrendered, but neither did he give quarter to those who didn't. The soldiers most certainly did not, but as there were only six of them left and with Barbossa who only ever truly began to enjoy himself when in battle – the more savage the better – and an outstanding shot like the wench at his side (and Sparrow who turned out to be a competent swordsman as well), they dispatched of them in no time.

“This way!” Sparrow yelled, taking the lead.

Through a labyrinth of narrow streets and backyards they ran, climbed walls and frightened the few decent inhabitants of the town by barging into their homes through the front entrance and leaving by the backdoor or the other way around. After a quarter of an hour of this exercise Bill began to feel his bad leg painfully but of course they couldn't afford to stop, so he gritted his teeth and ran on.

They battered down a gate in a crumbling wall built out of uncut stone and suddenly found themselves looking into a green wilderness under a canopy of leaves. Without hesitation Sparrow plunged on; all they could do was follow.

“Where are we bound?” panted Barbossa.

Sparrow didn't even turn around. “Salty Cove,” he said, hacking his way through a curtain of green tendrils. “It's a hidden place some miles from here. Nobody will ever look for us there.”

Chapter 4:
Bird in a Cage

“Well,” Sparrow conceded, “at least nobody would be looking for us here if this raid weren’t led by stalwart Commander Benjamin Beckett.”

Bill sighed. Facing them two-deep, rifles at the ready, stood at least twenty men of the king’s Navy.

“Drop your weapons!” ordered an imposing, barrel-chested man with all the trappings of an officer.

“Or I swear I will be deprived of the pleasure of seeing you all hang.”

Disgusted, they let go of their swords. A group of soldiers quickly stepped forth and clapped them in irons.

“Believe it or not,” Sparrow said to the wench, “this is the third time in as many months that this has happened.”

The commander sized him up with mild curiosity. “My, my. If this isn’t Jack Sparrow.”

“Captain, please.”

“Captain of what? You lost your ship when you betrayed your commission.”

“You can’t betray that to which you were never faithful, Commander,” Sparrow pointed out. He gave him a supposedly charming grin. “So how’s my dear friend Cutlass... I mean, Cutler?”

“Entertaining to the last.” Beckett smiled thinly. “My son is well, Mr. Sparrow. Which, I’m afraid, is more than can be said about you. Take them away.”

After spending a miserable time chained in the darkness of the brig of Beckett’s ship, the *Valiant*, they reached a small port that seemed to consist of hardly more than a fort and a handful of houses in the middle of a stormy night and were marched straight into the fortress’ jail. By the light of some torches they were, for the first time since their capture, able to take a look at their fellow prisoners. Bill and Barbossa were delighted of sorts to find half their crew with them. There was also a loud and very dirty group of pirates centered around a brute with bloodshot eyes, some bedraggled-looking seamen who kept well away from both groups, of course Sparrow and the wench, and a rotund man in fine clothing.

“I really must protest!” he cried all the way down to the prison. “I am an honest merchant! I don’t belong with this rabble!”

The guards sneered. “An honest merchant who just happened to anchor at a known pirate port,” one of them mocked.

“Whom ya callin’ rabble?” the red-eyed pirate growled, and the self-proclaimed merchant finally had the good sense to shut up.

Swearing and cursing, the pirates crowded into the cell. Bill, Barbossa, Sparrow and the wench as the first in line managed to occupy the best place directly under the tiny, barred window in the outer wall. Sparrow sat down heavily in the corner, rubbing his right forearm.

“Oi!” he said when Mad José almost sat on him, and the crazy pirate scampered.

Bill looked out of the window that commanded a fine view of the harbor. Aside from the brightly lit *Valiant* there was only one other tall ship lying at anchor. The town, or whatever passed for it in this port, was dark and silent. Wherever they were, it had to be one of the most desolate places in all the Caribbean.

“You don’t happen to have any rum on you, do you?”

Bill sat down next to Sparrow with a sigh. “The Redcoats commandeered it.”

“Shame.” The young pirate kept his right arm clutched to his breast as though it pained him. “Who are you fine gentlemen, anyway?” he asked after a while.

“Name’s Bill. Bootstrap by my mates.”

“I’m sure there’s an interesting story behind that name,” Sparrow said. “And who’s old Scraggly-Beard-Bad-Temper-Always-Quick-With-A-Weapon over there?”

“Barbossa, our capt’n. And you forgot Vicious-Ruthless-But-Also-Very-Clever.” Bill pointed.

“What’s wrong with your arm?”

With a twisted smile the young pirate pulled back the sleeve of his once-white shirt to reveal a large P branded into his skin, recently, by the looks of it. Bill grimaced in disgust.

“Take a good look, mate,” said Sparrow. “That’ll adorn your arm, too, before long, if I don’t miss my bet.”

“East India Trading Company?”

He nodded.

“What’s your dealings with them?”

“That’s none of anyone’s concern, savvy?”

Bill shrugged. Everyone to his own.

They were silent for a time; then Sparrow asked: “So your Barbossa. He’s a good capt’n?”

“The most competent I’ve ever sailed with.”

“Any others of your crew around?”

“Lots.” Bill pointed out the twins, Pintel, Ragetti, Jacoby, the bo’sun and, as an afterthought, Mad José.

Sparrow scratched his nose. “No offence, mate, but it seems to me your crew aren’t very proficient in avoiding capture.”

“What about your own crew?”

Not meeting his eyes, Sparrow began to fiddle with some beads braided into his long hair.

“Technically speaking,” he replied somewhat reluctantly, “I don’t have a crew right now. As I told you, I’m only just about to acquire a ship.”

Bill grinned. “And a crew.”

“And a crew,” admitted Sparrow. His face brightened. “But I do happen to have found one member of it already, excellent Emily over there.” He nodded in the direction of the wench. Her brown hair had come loose from her long braid in the fight and there were long tears in her skirt - Bill suspected the soldiers had tried to have some fun while searching her. Not that she appeared cowed or worried. The way she glowered at the lot of them, her arms folded, spoke quite clearly of her readiness to butt some heads. To judge from the lewd remarks made by the pirates all around, the opportunity for it would present itself sooner than later.

“If you don’t have a crew,” Bill asked, “how did you get to Tortuga in the first place?”

Sparrow rested his head against the wall. “That’s a long story involving a commandeered ship, an obstinate Navy Commander and a borrowed fishing boat.”

“I see,” said Bill, and he did. “So the English raided Tortuga because of you?”

“Wouldn’t put it past Beckett - but I doubt it. I rather think he smelled an opportunity to impress his betters.”

“What’s your history with him?”

“That’s an even longer story involving a failed attempt to carve out a place for myself in the world of supposed moral integrity - which often proves to be much more indecent than the entire Brethren Court put together -, a complete change of outlook and Beckett’s nasty piece of an ambitious son.”

“Said Cutlass.”

“Cutlass, Cutthroat, Cutlet or any other obnoxious thing you can think of beginning with Cut.”

Sparrow made a face. “Little men with delusions of grandeur. Always a bad combination.” He closed his eyes, and Bill began to listen in on the other conversations all around.

“I never thought it’d end like this,” sniffed Ragetti.

“Then yer a fool,” Emily snorted without bothering to look at him. “‘Pirates, ye be warned!’ Tha’s the way it is.”

“There must be a way out,” said Pintel hopefully. “How about... one o’ us pretends to be ill, the rest o’ us call the guards and when he opens the door...”

“Ya could be pretendin’ an’ callin’ fer a long time, dunderhead.” The pirate rolled her eyes. “Think they care? One o’ us ill an’ dyin’, one less ter string up.”

That prospect took the wind out of Pintel’s sails for a moment. “Well,” he began anew after a short while, “what about - you get friendly with one o’ the guards and steal the key.”

At last she deigned to glance at him. “Why me?” She paused, frowning. “Oh, jus’ ferget it...”

Before they were able to discuss further escape plans, Beckett and a dozen of his solders made an entrance.

“I shall now take your names...” he began.

“Don’ ya ha’ one o’ yer own?” piped Emily.

He continued as though he had not heard her. “... to determine whether any of you is indeed an honest man - unlikely though it seems.” He ran his eyes over the bunch of them, and Bill had to confess he might have a point - the dirty, ill-spoken, battle-scarred lot certainly did not inspire confidence.

As the Commander moved from prisoner to prisoner, all manner of names were given, one as likely to be the true one of his owner as the next. Nobody had ever addressed Bill by his birth name for as long as he had gone to sea, so he had no concerns about stating it.

“William Jacob Turner.”

“Jack Sparrow. Captain.”

Beckett sneered. “Former captain, Mr. Sparrow.”

“We’ll see about that,” muttered the young pirate.

“Emily.”

“Emily what?”

“Jus’ Emily.”

The Commander sighed. “Miss Emily...”

“Jus’ Emily.”

“... Much as I hate to contemplate the matter, there must be someone somewhere responsible for your miserable existence and those two persons have names. Simply give me one of them.”

The piratess pursed her lips. “Well, me mother’s name’s Bonny the Beast. Never knew who me father was. One o’ her customers, likely as no’. Wha’ does tha’ make me? Emily Beast? Emily the Illegitimate?”

Beckett massaged the bridge of his nose. “Take down: ‘Emily, last name unknown’,” he instructed his secretary. *Depraved, immoral pirate lot*, his expression clearly stated.

With Emily being the undisputed winner of the encounter and thus the heroine of the day, the pirates one by one drifted into slumber.

To Bill, however, sleep did not come easily. For the first time he rued the day he had decided on pursuing a pirating career. It hadn’t taken much prompting from his old mate Edward Cobbler then; Bill had known there was no possible way he could provide for his family as long as he stayed where he was.

“This venture might make you a very rich man,” Edward, who made no pretence about his new profession, had said. “Rich enough to buy your sweetheart some nice new dresses, some jewelry. Certainly rich enough to feed half a dozen little Turners.” He had winked. “Maybe even enough to buy a nice home in the country. Don’t you want your family to have a better life?”

“Aye, sure,” Bill had replied. “But I also want to see them again and not end my days dancin’ the hempen jig.”

“And where’s your guarantee you won’t meet your end in a watery grave? Nothing’s certain in life, my friend, especially in our profession.”

Edward had found out about that firsthand; barely a year after their talk he had gone to Davy Jones’ locker, sent down by the same broadside that had damaged Bill’s leg. But on that day the allure of adventure and riches had been far too strong for Bill’s law-abiding side to prevail, and so he had taken leave of his commission, said farewell to his wife and son and sailed off on the *Springtide*, his first pirate vessel, to the Caribbean.

It was strange he should miss Mary now; the imminent threat to his life had obviously triggered some dormant feelings. He had never been unfaithful to her, not once in all the years apart, but he knew he would never return to her. Yet Bill did find himself wishing for her all of a sudden. And he almost laughed. If Mary ever found out what he was doing, Beckett and the scaffold would be the least of his problems.

Chapter 5:
A Letter to Port Royal

My dearest William,

I am sending this letter to the hands of the harbourmaster of Port Royal, this being the likeliest way of reaching you.

I hope you are well, as are we. Will sends his love and his thanks for the birthday present – he must have shown it to about everyone he knows and keeps that ugly thing by his bedside now. I should tell you that I do not approve. You must not encourage his boyish fantasies with tales about pagan beliefs, innocent though they might seem to him. Really, that ridiculous story of a spider that bestowed wisdom only proves to me how deeply rooted in the minds of those primitives superstition still is.

My heartfelt thanks, as well, for that beautiful ruby necklace. It must have cost you a small fortune! Please do not spend that much money on my account; whenever shall I wear it? I may put it on for the Christmas dinner at Charlotte's, but it is simply too expensive for wearing it once in a year.

Things here are not for the best right now. Just today, when I returned from Mr. Gaskill's grocery store, Martha and Annie reported they had been given a letter addressed to Lucy. As she was still asleep, I took it and upon turning the envelope over saw it bore the seal of the Royal Navy. With a sense of foreboding did I break the seal. It was not curiosity that motivated me. Lucy is, beneath her tough and world-wise demeanour, very fragile. Whatever event warranted a letter from the Navy, it could be nothing good.

Nor was it. The letter reported that Ordinary Seaman Daniel Beard had been severely wounded in battle and had been transferred to the Navy hospital in Portsmouth. Lucy's presence was required. Wounded, not dead at least, I thought, though it is as yet unclear which is worse. I knew I had to break the news carefully to Lucy; and I had to get her to Portsmouth which was another matter altogether.

As expected, Lucy took the news very badly. She worked herself into hysterics, crying and pulling her hair, so that I had to send the girls into their room in order not to frighten them too much.

Lucy is inconsolable. Already she pictures Daniel as dying or crippled for life, and how, how, she asks, is she supposed to take care of him and the girls alone?

In the end it fell to me to arrange the journey to Portsmouth for two. I cannot let Lucy go off on her own in her state. Jane will look after the children and the house in our absence. As Lucy does not have the money needed for both the journey and her stay there, I will have to help her out.

On a more pleasant note, Mr. Stewart, the harbourmaster, asked me to give you his regards. I saw him just the other day when I took a detour along the waterfront on my way home from visiting Jane. It was on that occasion that I noticed Will standing by Mr. Stewart's side who was sharing a pipe with the weather-beaten captain of the vessel Whitecap. The Whitecap's master was laughing around the stem of his pipe as he patted Will's shoulder.

"No need, lad," said he, "though I appreciate the offer. Come back in a couple of years, and I'll take you on as cabin boy." When they spotted me coming towards them both gentlemen touched their hats and greeted me respectfully. I replied in kind.

"There's a seaman in the making, ma'am," said the captain, nodding at Will. "Asked if he could help my men unload the cargo."

I told him the offer had certainly been very kind of Will but he was not going to be a sailor. We chatted for a few moments, then Will and I left.

I sincerely do hope he gets over his desire to emulate you, William. I would not wish him to take on that dangerous and breadless profession but rather settle for honest work, like a craftsman's or a merchant's. We both know it would be for the best.

*Yours as ever,
Mary*

Chapter 6: Settling In

The new day began when someone tripped over Bill's feet and swore loudly.

"Fool!" another voice hissed.

Bill blinked. Redeye Sam's crew had left their place near the door and crept up on the sleeping Emily. At the commotion she jerked wide awake and jumped to her feet in an instant. At once, Redeye's crew was all over her. She dealt with it quite admirably, kicking and punching and spitting in five directions at the same time. When a pirate with a crooked nose slipped behind her defences and got hold of her long braid, Bill decided the fun had gone far enough. As Sparrow seemed unwilling to do anything except watching the ships at harbor, Bill got up.

"Hey, leave it," he said, pushing aside his unruly fellow prisoners.

Emily's eyes blazed. "I don't need yer help, chump," she hissed. "I've been born aboard a pirate vessel and I've lived among the brethren all me life. I can handle meself."

"Sorry to spoil your fun," Bill said when he had overcome his initial surprise. "Carry on, then, gents." Shaking his head, he returned to his place.

"No good deed goes unpunished, as they say." Barbossa smiled from out of the shadows of his wide brim.

"Aye," agreed Bill, still stunned.

Before things truly got out of hand, the guards brought breakfast and took one of the prisoners away for interrogation. That prospect subdued the lot considerably. While they silently tucked into their porridge, the merchant, for one, was relieved.

"Now everything will be cleared up in no time," he stated. "I've done nothing wrong and the Navy will come to see it..."

The bo'sun gave him a dirty look. "You trust in the king's justice, moneybag, and you'll dance with Jack Ketch for certain," he said. "Think Beckett and his ilk care who they string up? You've been caught in the raid, that's reason enough for them."

The merchant blanched.

"Blockhead," Emily muttered.

Barely half an hour later, the door opened again; their missing pirate was returned.

"Turner!"

Slowly, Bill got to his feet. Well, better to have it done with, he said to himself and followed the guards out of the cell and down the corridor.

Quite a few corridors, staircases and doors later he was ushered into the Commander's office, a surprisingly small and unadorned room with a view on the surrounding hills. Beckett was sitting behind his desk, a cup of tea and what looked like a report before him.

"Mr. Turner," he said without looking up, "I pride myself on being a passable judge of people. You seem like a sensible man to me, one who can be made to see reason."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Indeed." The Commander sipped at his tea. "Don't fool yourself – you are facing the gallows. However, if you were willing to cooperate, I might be persuaded to mitigate your sentence."

Bill waited.

"Are you an acquaintance of Jack Sparrow?"

"No, sir."

"A member of his crew? A shipmate?"

"Oh no, sir, I'm just an honest citizen tryin' to make my livin'."

Beckett's face darkened. "Don't play games, Mr. Turner. You were seen attacking members of the Royal Navy with a sword."

"Was I? Well, sir, you can't expect a man to stand by and watch his home be wrecked, can you?"

The Commander sighed. "So you claim you're not a pirate."

"I most certainly am not."

"You're not a sailor at all."

"No, sir."

"So you couldn't explain the difference between the port side and a starboard side of a ship to me?"

"Wouldn't know them if they hit me," Bill replied good-naturedly.

The Commander beckoned, and one of the guards stepped up and roughly tucked up Bill's sleeves.

“Yes,” said Beckett, “that’s what I thought. A very seafaring motif for a man of the shore, don’t you think?” He addressed his secretary. “Make a note of it.”

Bill shrugged. “Well, sir, when you live among rowdy seamen all your life, it sort of starts rubbin’ off on you.” He labored under no illusion that he would be able to fool Beckett; but where, pray, was the difference between hanging and rotting in a cell for the rest of his life? At least this way he had the satisfaction of frustrating the Commander’s efforts.

“You pirates are miserable liars.” Beckett made a sour face. “Slip of the tongue, Mr. Turner? I thought ‘sailors’ would have been a landlubber’s choice of word.”

“Seems a bit far-fetched to me to hold me on grounds o’ one word, sir.”

“I’m holding you on grounds of being a pirate, Mr. Turner!” The Commander slammed his fist on the deck and gestured. “Take him away.”

The day passed slowly. About half of the prisoners were plucked from the cell and returned; Ian discussed the finer art of prison food with Sparrow who turned out to be something of an expert on it; the merchant jumped at small noises; Pintel, Ragetti and Emily exchanged tales from their lives.

“So you haven’t been with Sparrow for long then?” Ragetti asked, inching closer to the pirate.

“Nah. Came into town the day before we got captured, said he was lookin’ fer a crew. Must’ve brought his ship in by hisself, impossible though it seems, but tha’s Jack.” She shrugged again. “Or mebby his ol’ crew ha’ enough o’ his foolin’ ‘round an’ jumped ship at Tortuga.”

“Still, you signed on,” Pintel pointed out.

“He’s a knack o’ findin’ adventures, an’ he got us on a treasure hunt secon’ day in town.” She smirked. “Even though he’s weird at times.”

Ragetti leaned against the wall. “You’ve known him for long?” he asked, giving her what he seemed to consider a friendly smile.

“Practically grew up with him, an’ yer quite nosy.” She smiled back at him. “Think I’ll let somethin’ slip, think again.”

“Can’t be blamed fer tryin’, can I?” He looked positively flattered.

Chapter 7:
Captain's Log: Prison Break of the Caribbean

Day Three.

Barbossa stumbles back into the cell. "Gentlemen, they'll be hangin' us in four days' time."

I've learned to appreciate that streak in Barbossa since we got here. Even in a situation like this he's still polite. Pretentious, but polite. I mean, who could possibly refuse if he'd been shown the way to the plank with a "This way, sir, *please*"?

I take a look around. The others appear crestfallen for some reason. None of them knows how to appreciate really good entertainment. Pity there's no rum, otherwise it would be quite amusing in here. Three meals a day, much better than those Jim the ship's cook, may his soul roast in the kitchens of hell, ever dished out. Yarns of prison escapes, battles on the high seas and treasures on the bottom of the ocean. The ingredients are always the same. And the sea. It breaks on the walls of the Fort. Almost like aboard a ship. Makes you forget you are in one of the most closely guarded fortresses of the Caribbean. Walls, thicker than a rum barrel, passages that wind through the bastion like a labyrinth. And everywhere the pest of the Caribbean: The English.

"Sparrow!"

Ah yes, I almost forgot. Now it's my turn, obviously. It's gotten a bit boring in here anyway. Idly I saunter towards my meeting with Commander Beckett. Soldiers are always in such a hurry. Luckily Beckett is a man of the world. He appears positively flattered when I compliment him on the architecture of his fortress and the luxurious lodgings of his guests.

"Well, Mr. Sparrow, nobody has ever escaped from here. Except, of course, over the cliff." He points at a construction plan on his desk. "But there's always something to add. We are already hanging the pirates almost faster than we can catch them but still we never have enough cells. You wouldn't believe the things a commander has to take care of these days. Repairs, supply orders, there's hardly any time to waste on some buccaneers in the cellar. But you see, Mr. Sparrow, I'm doing it anyway. I hope you appreciate it! Perhaps you remember the *Achilles*. You commandeered it fourteen days ago with a group of fellow prisoners who managed to escape from Port Royal. Of course we're wondering what happened to the gold on board."

"Gold? You know, we were more interested in regaining our freedom than in bothering with a small and insignificant thing like plunder."

"We did find the *Achilles*, of course. But except for a few barrels of rum there was nothing on board," a long look, "and I do mean *nothing* worth saving from the depths. Prove me wrong, Mr. Sparrow. The hangman is bored."

A knock at the door interrupts our chat. I only wish he'd offer me some rum. My throat is parched. I can't in good conscience tell him that we, along with the gold (yes, there was a lot of gold), called at the next port... What a night. The ladies will remember us. I'll have to offer him something he'll believe. Until then this little piece of art on his desk might come in useful.

"Mr. Sparrow, we'll continue our conversation later on. Think very carefully about what you'll tell me. It will make your death, if not your life, much more pleasant."

Déjà vu! The soldiers are pushing me along the corridors. Again. Hold on. There, a familiar face. The boy has swabbed the deck. Now he's carrying a crate full of cabbages.

"Stop, bring him back! The Commander is missing his plans."

A soldier's first rule of engagement: Strike first, ask questions later. Sounds familiar. They must have stolen it from us. When I'm standing in front of Beckett again, I'm rubbing the bump on my forehead. The floor plan is safe in the hands of a boy who thinks sails have to be washed in suds. We are as good as dead.

"He tried to escape, sir. Pelted us with cabbages."

"Mr. Sparrow, did you really believe I wouldn't notice if something went missing? The floor plan, please." Beckett looks a wee bit angry.

"What floor plan?"

I'm still of the opinion they should get wenchies to wear the uniform of the Royal Navy. That way, the now following strip search might be enjoyable. -

Time flies in illustrious company. Only a moment seems to have passed when the door to our quarters opens once more.

“He missed you.” The guards push in another captive. Damn it. The boy. The others take no notice of him. Not surprisingly. Swabbing in here is futile, and he certainly doesn’t have any rum with him. Oddly enough, the boy is grinning.

“Mr. Sparrow, I have it. Now we all can escape.”

Perhaps he isn’t completely useless. Naïve? Aye! Stupid? Definitely! Who else would get himself arrested, just to rescue a few pirates? Particularly as no-one present remembers his name.

“Didn’t they search you? How did you smuggle it in? In your shoes? Do you have anything else with you? A weapon?”

He looks crestfallen for a moment. Of course he never thought of that. Well, if he ever gets the chance, maybe he’ll remember it the next time he has to escape from a prison. Instead he lifts the remains of his shirt. The smell of soap. He still has much to learn.

“Not bad. A bit too colorful for my taste. And no anchors. But I’m sure the ladies will appreciate it.”

“That’s the floor plan. The tattooist hid it within the elements. We’re here.” He points to his navel. I see a large angel with very strange feathers. It’s always nice to know a young man chose the right profession. He’ll become a great pirate - he’s already mad as a hatter. Congratulations. “I didn’t have much money, and it had to be done quickly. Miss Prettyink gave me a special discount. She simplified a few things.”

If I look closely, I can actually spot something. Rum would be a great help here. I beckon to Barbossa.

“Mr. Barbossa, take a look at this unique piece of art. It will show us the way out of this inhospitable place. As you can see quite clearly, our cabin is situated right here.” My finger leaves a red mark on the skin. The ink is still very fresh. I have to be careful, otherwise we won’t be able to make out anything very soon. The boy has gone pale. Well, it can’t harm to toughen him up. “Aye, a map. If we manage to get through that door, we follow that direction,” the boy turns a shade of green, “turn here... and stop in front of that wall?”

You have to hand it to him, he hardly shivers at all. Even without rum. “I passed out there. She had already tattooed half the night and the rum was losing his effect. Those two passages you needn’t mind. And the turn behind it is just for the right brow. Miss Prettyink was relentless. If I were to hang, everyone would be able to see her work up close. She told me she had a reputation to lose.”

“That one?” Barbossa’s finger sternly bores into the – by the way notably female - brow. The boy slumps. “Don’t know how she managed to keep him still all the time to draw this. I’ve rarely seen such a fidgety child. So, if we leave out this artistic nonsense, we can take that route.”

Not bad. “You’ve summed it up nicely, Mr. Barbossa. However, your plan has a small flaw.”

“You don’t say, *Mr. Sparrow!* Which is.”

By now we have the attention of the others. The temperature in the cell has dropped a few degrees.

“The door is locked, Mr. Barbossa. And outside soldiers are positioned. A lot of them.” I raise my voice so that even the last man in the cell can hear us. “We’d need the help of every gentleman in this room to fight our way out. We can’t expect that – although we could lead them to freedom.” The cell has become dead silent all of a sudden. “After all, we still have three days until our execution. Not to forget three meals a day. Who’d want to leave this friendly place with prospects like that?”

Shortly after, everyone is discussing how to best take the guards by surprise. It’s always the same. Point the way to a good fight with a completely unrealistic goal and off they go. Thinking with their cutlasses as usual. The boy is in luck he’s still unconscious, the way they prod at his tattoo. I motion Barbossa, Bootstrap and the rest of our respective crews into one corner.

“Gentlemen, lady, this ingenious plan is doomed to failure, of course.” Stunned faces all around. Sometimes it’s alarming how little imagination and foresight my future crew brings along. Good. No mutiny from a stupid crew. “Out there’s half the Royal Navy. We’d have to fight our way out. But in here we have something much more important than weapons.”

“More weapons?”

“No.”

“Rum?”

“Regrettably not. We have time. To dig.”

“We have that now.”

“Quite so, Mr. Barbossa. But now the guards visit us at odd times to bring us our delicious meals or to take one of the gentlemen to a conversation with Beckett – or with the friendly fellow wearing a mask. No, what we need is a small but effective crew with whom to commandeer a ship and sail off to fortunes and glory. As its new captain...”

“Captain?” Barbossa straightens. Something appears to be bothering him.

“Yes, Mr. Barbossa. The new captain! Captain Jack Sparrow. Who saved his crew from the clutches of the Royal Navy.”

“We’ll be sailin’ under my command or not at all, Sparrow.”

Considering his crew outnumbers mine nine to two and a half, I feel I have to indulge him. “Very well, capt’n, but in that case I would ask you to drop me off some time in the near future. I’ll let you know when. Anyway, once we’ve dug our way out of here...”

“Dug?!?”

They’re really slow off the mark, my new crew. I’ll have to supplement them. “While those gentlemen over there flex their muscles and thrash their way through the fortress, we’ll sap this wall and follow that passage.”

“But that way leads deeper into the fort.”

“Of course. They’ll never expect us there. Besides, it’ll take them some time - with all the dead and wounded - to notice that we’ve gone. And there,” my finger touches a vestigial curve, “we reach one of the chutes they use for garbage-disposal, there we’ll leap into the water. The currents will carry us back to the bay. Where a ship is waiting for us.”

I could bore you to death with a lengthy discussion, but in every good yarn trifles are dropped. Much later, even the boy has come around again, they have to yield to the ingeniousness of my plan. It might help that nobody else has a better idea. Or that those morons around Redeye Sam simply strike when the guards bring the next meal. Pity – that cabbage-grain-and-something-green-mash smelled good. Too bad they insist on taking the boy along. It’s hard to find competent personnel these days. On the other hand, his tattoo isn’t of much use anymore. Too much red and smudged ink, though every tattooist worth his money tells you to keep his work clean. When you can’t follow even those simple instructions...

You have to give it to the lot: The door is open. They run, the boy in front, one hand on his tattoo, up the corridor. Accompanied by shouts and oaths, as befitting a proper pirate jailbreak. I consider insisting on my plan when my future crew rush out of the open door. But it really isn’t the best time to put my authority to the test. Besides, digging is thirsty work. A good captain adapts to the circumstances. What I’m trying to say? Well, the door is open anyway. A crime not to use it. It was made for that purpose, wasn’t it? So we sneak deeper into the fort, anxious to avoid the wider corridors. Me in front. Good thing I’ve a long memory. Every detour is planned, of course. Damn artistic license. I’ll have to talk about it with Miss Prettyink. Our pursuers would never expect us in this narrow cul-de-sac where all the baskets with the bed sheets --- who on earth needs that many sheets? And why are they all starched and mangled? --- are standing. All part of my plan.

Some time later, in fact quite soon, we don’t hear any battle cries anymore. Apparently, the escape attempt has come to an end.

A few times it’s a pretty close shave for us, too. More than once a soldier runs straight past us. But we are quiet and damn careful, two things they simply never expect from a pirate. At last we reach the small passage leading to the garbage chutes. The smell alone would have shown us the way. Splash. Beckett truly keeps good discipline in his fortress. A revolt by the prisoners and still the garbage is professionally disposed of. Both soldiers really are at the task, heart and soul. No conversation about the fair sex or something else. No, just one sack of garbage after the other. Lift and down the chute. And quite a while later the splash. Now we could use the boy. How deep might that be? I steal a glance at Barbossa. He seems to feel a bit uneasy as well. Could be very, very deep. Well, better the sea than the noose.

“Gentlemen, lady, we’ll now storm this corridor. We’ll grab the landlubbers and jump down the chute with them, quickly and quietly, savvy?”

I don’t like the wolfish grin on Barbossa’s face at all. “After you, Sparrow.”

“But not without my captain right behind me... Mr. Barbossa, if you’d be so kind as to take care of the one on the right?”

“My pleasure.”

And then everything is happening very quickly. The three, four yards of the corridor we cover with a few leaps. They never see us coming, feeling to secure, I guess. I clasp the soldier with both arms and jump. He doesn’t have the time to struggle. As we fall, I hear above us the yells of those of my crew who have to make the jump without a cushion. I can smell the sea.... AAARRRGGGHHHH

Chapter 8:
Commandeering the Tub

“Now what do we do?” whined the merchant, who for some still incomprehensible reason had decided to follow them instead of Redeye Sam’s crew (or stay in the cell altogether until his innocence was proven), when they had all clambered ashore, half-drowned. “We need a ship.”

“Of course we do,” said Sparrow. He shook water and seaweed from his braids, clutching the sword he must have managed to pry from the soldier. “Otherwise this whole enterprise – much though I enjoyed the weirdness of it – would have been entirely in vain. Well, gentlemen, our choices are limited. There are, from my point of view,” he peered across the bay to the two ships anchored well off the docks, “two avenues open to us at the moment. We either climb aboard the *Valiant*, silence everyone we encounter and hope we’ll be quick enough about it before her disciplined crew (we’re talking about the king’s Navy here) manage to raise the alarm and tell Beckett where we are – or,” he pointed to the second ship, the East Indiaman *Achilles*, “we make use of the time he does not know where we have gone to commandeer that crewless and unguarded beauty.”

They all turned to look.

“*That?*” Emily stared at him. “Those bloody tubs can’ do nothin’ but roll an’ look posh.”

“But they do have some pretty impressive guns.”

“You must be mad to escape in somethin’ like that!”

“Maybe. But it’s that or go bare-handed against the English.”

“I’d rather take my chances with the latter,” stated Barbossa.

“I’d say you do, capt’n, and good luck to you. Though I’d consider it a wee bit of a waste – not to mention ungratefulness – after everything the poor boy went through. To return to the gallows of your own free will, I mean.” Sparrow spread his hands. “Now, I *do* understand your aversion of being in command of a vessel that’s as difficult to sail as this. If you’d like, I could assume command...”

Barbossa gave him a grim look. “If I’m to get away in that bucket, it will be under my command or no-one’s, understand?”

“As you wish.”

Barbossa glowered at him for a moment longer. “Well, what are you waitin’ for?” he finally said. “Get yourselves aboard!”

Another swim later they climbed on board of the *Achilles* and went to work as quietly as possible in order not to alarm the *Valiant*’s guards to their presence. However...

“We’ll never manage to weigh anchor without them knowin’,” the bo’sun stated the obvious.

“No,” Sparrow agreed. “But we can always hope.”

“Hope for what?”

“That they won’t follow the second rule of self-preservation, also known by them as the first rule of engagement. By the time they have alerted Beckett we’ll be on our way.”

“Departin’ in style, eh?” Emily grinned. “Hands on, I say.”

“Why don’t we just fire a nice li’l broadside?” suggested Jacoby. “That’ll be the end of any pursuit.”

“No!” When everyone looked at Sparrow in surprise, he grinned nervously. “No, just... not now, all right? Remember, they have some fine cannons in that fort, too. Would cut our escape a wee bit short if they sank us right on their doorstep, wouldn’t it? Ready the ship, ready the guns, but get us out of this inhospitable harbor before firing a shot. Trust me on this. You won’t regret it. I got you out of prison, remember?”

Nobody was convinced; Jacoby’s plan made much more sense to them than any mad scheme of Sparrow’s. But they only had one shot, and firing a cannon in the dark was tricky at best. So after contemplating their choices for a while Barbossa gave the order.

“Weigh anchor.”

Clearly relieved, Sparrow was the first at the capstan bars. Bill wondered what he had in mind.

Emily put her hands to the tedious task and laughed. “Now this,” she said, “is more like it! Bring it on, ya sour grapes – let’s hear it fer freedom an’ fortunes!” And unworried, she stroked up a tune.

“Fifteen men on the dead man’s chest –

Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!

Drink and the devil had done for the rest –

Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!”

One by one, the crew joined in the old pirate song and followed its rhythm as they worked the capstan. More than one glanced in surprise at Emily. She certainly was not what anyone had expected; while she meted out insults like a seasoned fishwife and fought like a wildcat, she also showed a seaman's attitude.

As the anchor rose from the depths, hectic activity began on the *Valiant*. The pirates ignored all attempts of the watch to hail them, and after some time a boat was seen being lowered.

"About half an hour till they're on our tail," Barbossa predicted grimly. "All hands to your stations, ye scurvy curs!"

It soon became apparent that the *Achilles* was indeed one of the slowest vessels that had ever sailed on, thanks to her heavy armament. Emily stepped up to the swearing captain.

"Permission ter make a suggestion," she barked and continued without waiting for it: "We happen ter ha' all those pretty cannons aboard – le' me get 'em loaded an' ready ter fire."

The bo'sun scowled at her. "There's just the problem that we happen to have the cannons but not enough men to work them."

"Le' me do the thinkin', a' right?" she snapped. "Jus' gi' me everyone wha' can be spared ter load the damn things."

"All of them?"

"All o' them."

It was a popular sport at country fairs and festivals to compete with others for the title of the fastest log-splitter or something similar. In the spirit of it, a decidedly festive mood had entered the *Achilles*. In fact, Bill thought, it might make fine pirate entertainment – load about fifty cannons in record time. See if your team can beat the other three working on the remaining gun decks. Hope you've finished by the time the Navy's warship catches up with you. If ever he lived to see retirement, he would spent his ripe old age organizing events such as this.

Emily wasn't yelling. She had no breath to spare, working and sweating like a horse alongside them.

Only her murderous stares drove them to further speed.

"Here they come," announced Sparrow, hanging in the ratlines. "Capt'n, might I suggest we make for that cliff over there?"

Barbossa was already steering towards the wall of jagged rocks to their starboard side. "Ready on the guns!" he bellowed.

Emily popped her head out of the hatch and quickly took stock of their situation. "Aft guns! Starboard guns!" she wheezed. "On me command fire the lot o' them! Don' bother ter take aim!"

"They're gaining on us," stated Sparrow. "How unsurprising."

"Well, le's gi' 'em a taste o' our cannons, they're no' there fer decoration!"

Slowly, they sailed around the cliff's edge.

"Bring her abou', cap'n!"

The gunners below deck waited tensely.

"Hold fire," Barbossa ordered. "Let her come to us."

"Er..."

"Shut up, Sparrow."

"Cap'n..."

"Will everyone please belay that!" thundered Barbossa. "I be perfectly able to do my job without your constant advice. Now get yourselves below, the both o' you, and wait for your orders!"

Hastily, Sparrow and Emily retreated.

Peering through the gunports, the crew saw the *Valiant* drawing nearer. And nearer still.

"Not good," muttered Jacoby.

Even the irrepressible Sparrow seemed to have his doubts. When they imagined they could almost smell the *Valiant's* powder, Barbossa finally gave the order.

"Fire!"

"Fire!" repeated Emily at once and touched her glowing taper to the gun. The crew followed suit, running from cannon to cannon to ignite the trail of powder.

The enormous broadside shook the *Achilles*, and for a moment nobody was able to say whether the "tub" had been hit by enemy fire. Coughing, they began to reload the cannons. But no retaliatory volley was coming.

Slowly the smoke cleared and the pirates gasped at the effect of their attack. The *Valiant* was sinking fast; wreckage was floating everywhere. Here and there a Redcoat could be seen clutching a floating plank or frantically waving at them from aboard the doomed ship.

“I won’ say another word against the tub in me life,” promised Emily, beaming and patting the *Achilles*’ hull affectionately.

Sparrow beamed and patted Emily’s back affectionately until she turned around and gave him a furious look. “Well done,” he praised, pulling his hand back quickly. “I hereby appoint you chief gunner of me ship. Now...” He scampered on deck; the rest of the crew followed, laughing and cheering – even Moneybag joined in. “... let’s put some distance between us and them.”

Barbossa observed the unfolding drama on board of the *Valiant* calmly. “Why?” he asked. “They’re no longer a threat to us.”

“We don’t want to be here. Trust me on that.” Sparrow’s voice had lost all traces of mischief, and there was a hard expression in his brown eyes. It was a startling change; even Barbossa, who was one of the most fearless men Bill had ever met, seemed a bit unsettled by it. Still, he put on a brave face. “I never take orders from others, Sparrow,” he stated. “So perhaps you’d like to explain the reason for your sudden hurry?”

The young pirate watched as the *Valiant*’s broken foremast floated by. “Two words, mate... capt’n,” he said. “Grave. Danger.” He turned back to Barbossa. “Might I therefore suggest that we retreat to a good distance to confer about any future plans?”

Chapter 9:
Deal with the Devil

Clouds passed quickly across the sky, billowing sails, primeval beasts, giant birds. They ominously massed at one moment, and shrouded in darkness everything faded away before the watcher's eyes; at the next moment the clouds fluttered in torn shreds before the bright sickle of the moon, clear light pouring widely across the waves and shadows dancing on them.

Sparrow clasped his hands. "Now, Captain Barbossa," he said, "the time has come to drop me off. No need to thank me for rescuing the lot of you... us. Just give me a boat and I'll be on my way.

However," he turned to address the crew, "if there be anyone stout of heart and willing to risk most certain death in order to accompany me on a venture that might secure us a ship like no ship you have ever set eyes upon before, he – or she – will be most welcome to join me."

They blinked in confusion at this barrage of words.

Barbossa furrowed his brow. "What's your plan, Sparrow?" he inquired.

"Ah!" Sparrow turned to face him again. "If you stick around a little longer, you might find out."

"There's nothing out here!" Barbossa pointed out.

Sparrow grinned. "That, mate," he said mysteriously, "remains to be seen."

After a moment Emily stepped forth. "I'll go."

"Good man! Er. Woman."

"And put us all to shame, would you?" Bill ignored Barbossa's furious stare. "I'm in, too."

"And me," said Ragetti at once, ignoring Pintel's disbelieving stare as well as a now fuming Barbossa. Bill could not explain even to himself why he went along with Sparrow's plan (assuming the young pirate had one); curiosity, most likely. There was something in Sparrow's manner that gave the impression he actually knew what he was doing.

They readied the boat. Just as they were about to get in, Barbossa gave the order to drop anchor and leaned over the rail.

"Very well," he snarled. "We shall wait here until you return, but only if you do so till dawn, understand?"

It was probably a good thing Sparrow bent over just then, gripping the boat's gunwale as he sat down. Barbossa would not have liked his smug smirk at all.

"Understood, capt'n," he replied, steadying the boat as the rest of the team got in. "Well, gentlemen and lady - cast off!"

They set off at a good pace and, noticing the waves pounding savagely on the cliffs, they decided it would be prudent to stay well away from them and to head a fair way out to sea before turning west; the waves were hitting the rocks with a vengeance, and they didn't want to risk being drawn on to them and dashed to pieces. The *Valiant* was just visible in the unsteady light when Sparrow ordered them to stop. They looked around in confusion.

"Now wha'?" asked Emily.

"Now we wait."

Bill did not consider that answer very helpful. Apparently Emily and Ragetti felt the same because after waiting in vain for a further explanation the latter said: "Wha' are we waitin' for, then?"

The young pirate was peering closely at the wreck. "Mates," he began with the air of a long-suffering man, "please have some faith in what I'm doing, nonsensically though it may appear to you. I only ask for this one tiny favor – and that you keep whatever you're about to..."

Without warning the sea began to churn and boil wildly. Ragetti yelped; all they could do was try to keep the boat steady. In a huge column of water there rose a massive dark shape from the epicenter of the turmoil near the *Valiant's* wreck.

Perhaps it was good that they got drenched to the skin at that moment or they all would have screamed in terror. As it was, Bill whispered hoarsely: "Angels defend us! Is this what I think it is?"

But there was no need for Sparrow to answer. All seamen were familiar with the tales of the fabled devil of the seas. Some of them carried secret charms with them to ward him off. Others relied on their faith to protect them. It was said that those desperate enough to sell their souls to him were given a hundred years of life, yet where those stories came from nobody knew, for no-one had ever returned from an encounter with his dreaded *Flying Dutchman*.

They were still staring at the grotesque, horrible parody of a ship and listened to the sound of seawater rushing from the scuppers when the screaming aboard the *Valiant* began.

Sparrow's face was lost in shadows. "Let's go," he said. "They'll be finished with their business by the time we get there."

"Go?" Emily asked, horrified. "Go where?"

He scowled. "To the *Flying Dutchman*, of course."

"No' fer all the gold an' jewels in the world!" she announced and for once Bill agreed wholeheartedly with her.

Sparrow sighed exasperatedly. "Did I ask for fearless, steadfast mates to accompany me before we set out?"

"The phrase was 'death', no' 'eternal damnation', chump." Emily crossed her arms in an adamant gesture.

"It's perfectly safe!" he assured them. "Trust me on this! Jones is letting off steam aboard the *Valiant* and will be benignant enough to talk with..."

"Talk?!"

"... when he returns to his vessel. Just - trust me, all right?"

They exchanged glances.

"Please?" tried Sparrow.

Shadows moved on board of the *Valiant*. They looked on with horrid fascination.

"Le's make a deal, mates," Emily finally said. "I won' be shanghaied inter servin' the devil. If it comes ter the worst, le's kill each other quickly an' fer good."

"We don' have any weapons," Ragetti reminded her.

"Sparrow, the sword," said Bill at once.

"No!" The young pirate drew back. "You won't need it, I promise!"

Bill took up the oars. "Back to the *Achilles*, then." Emily and Ragetti followed suit at once.

"All right, all right." Grumbling, Sparrow unbuckled his sword and handed it over to Bill. "But don't lose it."

And so their pact was sealed.

Still reluctantly and intent on avoiding any sound they began to row towards the *Dutchman*. Closer and closer they drew to the ship of the damned; higher and higher her hull, slimy and overgrown with seaweed and barnacles, loomed over them. None of them dared speak, but they all remembered vividly the stories whispered on long watches on deck or told more brazenly in the safety of a crowded tavern, accompanied by many a warding gesture. "... *It rises from the ocean depths, its riggin' draped in seaweed and its sails glowin' like St. Elmo's fire. It speeds across the flat water when all other ships are becalmed. Its very beams sigh with human voices, weighed down with a century o' weary toil...*" When they went alongside the maw-like bow, none of them had the courage to touch it in order to prevent their boat from bumping into it.

"The terror of the Spanish Main, you are," Sparrow muttered, but he kept his voice down as well.

"Gi' me swordfights an' cannon fire an' hurricanes any time," replied Emily. The fierce piratess was almost whimpering. "But this jus' ain't natural."

Ragetti nodded fervidly.

Rolling his eyes, Sparrow climbed into the "maw". Bill wouldn't have been surprised if it had closed on the foolhardy pirate.

"Wait here," Sparrow said. "I won't be long." He grabbed a thick strand of seaweed and started hoisting himself up to the forecandle deck. Silently they watched him until he climbed over the rail and out of sight.

"I don' like this one bit," Emily whispered. "Wha' in the name o' all tha's holy's he doin'?"

Bill and Ragetti just shook their heads.

It was spine-chilling, lying in wait next to a ship whose very timbers were cut from the bodies and souls of doomed seamen (or so the stories went), not knowing whether they themselves would join the ranks of the damned before sunrise. They kept quiet, hardly dared even to breathe, and they all jumped when something hit the water next to the *Valiant's* wreck with a loud splash. Emily and Ragetti clasped hands.

Eventually the noises aboard the *Valiant* abated, only to begin moments later very close by. Harsh commands were given on the decks right above them. Emily crossed herself.

Suddenly there was a shout of surprise, followed by loud muttering, followed by – silence. Even the eternal lapping of the waves seemed to abate when heavy, uneven steps thumped on the deck, the only

sound audible in the quiet of the night. Bill found himself silently muttering prayers he had last spoken when he was a boy, long before he had gone to sea.

They could make out Jack's voice but it was too low to understand what he was saying. Several times there was loud, raucous laughter from the crew and they all trembled; but apparently the wily young pirate managed to talk his way even out of a tight spot as that.

Much later – their muscles had stiffened up and tiredness had almost dulled their constant fear – Sparrow climbed down to them again. Glancing up, Bill saw several dark shapes leaning over the rail and he was thankful for the darkness that prevented a closer look at the *Dutchman's* crew.

Jack took his place in the boat. "We're going," he announced to their great relief.

Not needing to be told twice, they pushed off the ship's bow and rowed back towards the *Achilles* as fast as they were able, not minding if it looked exactly like the flight it was. Nor did they talk until they were safely back aboard the "tub" – but they all knew that *safe* was an empty word in dealing with the devil of the seas.

Chapter 10:
The Black Pearl

Emily had opted for hot grog. However, by the time they had crammed into the galley – ushered in, too, by their shipmates who seemed to be terrified by whatever they saw in their faces - they had neither the patience nor the nerve to wait for the water to boil, so they just drank the rum Ian handed them, spilling more than one good drop because their hands still shook uncontrollably. It was thus that Barbossa found them. He regarded them for a long moment from under knitted brows before asking: “So where’s your ship, Sparrow?”

Jack opened another bottle without hurry. “It’ll be here by morning,” he replied. “Might be worth your while to wait for it.”

Bill took another deep draught. Emily, who was by now slightly green under her tan, rose, muttered: “I think I’m goin’ ter be sick,” and stumbled out. Ragetti just slumped.

They lay at anchor for the rest of the night.

There was almost nothing a good swig of rum couldn’t cure, and even an encounter with the *Flying Dutchman* proved no exception. Still, Bill found it impossible to go to sleep; whenever he closed his eyes he saw a dark shape bursting out of churning waters or a grim, skeletal figurehead above a yawning maw. He doubted the others were more successful; he heard Ragetti whimpering softly in his sleep, and Emily tossed and turned in her hammock for the better part of two hours. Finally, Bill gave up and returned to deck where he found Sparrow standing on the quarterdeck. The young pirate seemed lost in thoughts and hardly spared Bill a second glance when he stepped up to him.

“What’s the nature of your deal with Davy Jones?” Bill asked bluntly.

Sparrow looked off into the distance. “That’s really no concern of yours, mate.”

“I think it is,” snapped Bill. “I may not have your razor-sharp wit but I’m not stupid, either. You were baitin’ him, and you were pullin’ Barbossa’s strings when you talked him into commandeerin’ the *Achilles* instead o’ the *Valiant*. You knew Beckett would give chase and we’d not be able to outrun him. Hence the importance o’ the tub’s guns. We’d sink the *Valiant*, and the *Flying Dutchman* would make an appearance to shanghai the drownin’ Redcoats. Petty revenge or just convenience, Jack?” The young pirate heaved a sigh. “A gamble,” he explained reluctantly. “I had no way of knowing whether Jones would show up.”

Though his words merely confirmed Bill’s suspicion, he felt deeply disgusted. “You’re a cold-blooded bastard, Sparrow,” he said.

“Do I detect a trace of compassion for the king’s men there?”

“I pity every poor soul servin’ aboard that cursed ship,” Bill retorted.

Jack shrugged. “It was their choice.”

“And what about you?” Bill asked angrily. “What did you offer Jones in exchange for whatever you wanted to see him about?”

Sparrow just snorted and turned away, apparently bored by the exchange and losing himself in the observation of the horizon. Bill had had enough. Roughly seizing the young pirate by the shoulder, he yanked him around.

“Did you sell us out?” he demanded.

At last he got a reaction. Jack wrenched free of his grip and took a quick step back. For a moment his hand lingered on the hilt of his sword as though ready to draw it; then his shoulders slumped, and he leaned against the rail.

“I’ve not yet sunk as low as that, mate,” he said quietly. “If you must know, I promised him my soul in exchange for a ship.” His eyes grew distant. “A ship,” he added softly, “like no other.”

Though Bill reckoned he was only about ten years Sparrow’s senior, in the face of the young pirate’s carelessness he suddenly felt very old, wise and experienced.

“I hope it’s worth it,” he said, shaking his head. “You must be desperate to barter away your soul for a bloody boat.”

Jack grimaced as though Bill’s very words pained him. “Not just any other boat, mate! A ship that has no peer.” He sighed. “I’m facing some serious competition. My father, as you are doubtless aware of, is a very famous man. I want to make a name for meself, not just being... how did ol’ Barbossa call it? Oh, yes - ‘Teague’s whelp’. So I set out on my own pretty early in me life, and I’ve been more or less successful. Now... now I want something real, savvy? I want that ship. Badly. Jones delivers it and I’m going to be its captain for thirteen years.”

“And after that it’s time to pay.”

“No, after that it’s time to find a way to cheat Jones. What do you expect?” His optimism had something maniacal.

“Good luck.” Somehow Bill doubted the dreaded *Dutchman*’s captain would be so easily thwarted.

“Remind me to abandon ship in time.”

“Luck is my middle name, mate. Stick with me and you’ll be just fine.” He paused. “Why am I telling you all this?”

“Because I’m such a good listener.”

“Obviously.” He turned to watch the dark waters again. “Now, Mr. Turner,” he said, “I expect you to be mum about this. Let’s keep it between the two of us. No need to upset the gang.” Suddenly he tensed. “There she comes now,” he whispered.

Like a recurrent nightmare, the sea began to churn and the *Dutchman* burst forth. Bill wished he had stayed below decks – two encounters in one night simply were too much. Though this time he had the advantage of being on a level with the ship of the damned it also meant he was able to see her crew more clearly, and what he saw he knew he would not be able to forget for as long as he lived.

Shuddering, he turned away to look at the ship she had in tow.

It was a beautiful vessel, that much was apparent even under the layer of mud, seaweed and coral and with its mainmast missing: a galleon, its figurehead an angel holding a bird in its outstretched hand.

The entire ship was black, hull and sails, which would make it a veritable, nigh invisible hunter in the dark. From what Bill could see, it was heavily armed, with at least eighteen cannons on the gun deck; strangely, though, it seemed to have no guns on the bow and stern, which gave it a grave tactical disadvantage during a chase.

A sigh escaped Jack’s lips that was almost a groan of longing.

“Well, mate?” he said softly. “Was it worth the risk or not?”

“Once we’ve cleaned her up – aye, it might be.” Bill watched as the *Dutchman*’s crew cast off the lines connecting her to the galleon.

A sharp, sneering voice spoke out of the semidarkness. “Thirteen years, Sparrow,” it called. “I shall be there to collect the debt.”

Jack gave a short wave. “See you then, mate!” Seemingly unperturbed, he clapped Bill on the shoulder. “Shall we take a closer look at her?”

While they readied the boat, the *Flying Dutchman* disappeared again under the waves.

Bill wiped off the slimy layer on the steering wheel. “How long, do you reckon, was she down there?” he asked.

“Not a year.” Jack tugged at a line.

“We’ll still have to make repairs. She looks like she’s mostly in order but she has taken a lot o’ batterin’.” Bill leaned over the rail to take a look at several leaks from which water was streaming. “A good thing, for a change, or she’d have sunk back to where she came from by now.”

Jack grunted in the affirmative. “Let’s wake those laggards and get some work done,” he said.

Bill smiled. “You’re aware there’ll be foul winds ahead, aren’t you.”

“There always are.”

The arrival of the black ship certainly took the crew by surprise; yet they, like Bill, were captured by her beauty at once. As such, nobody protested being put to work in the wee hours of the morning.

After lowering the anchor they had to pump dry the lower decks, stop the leaks and clean the upper deck. In between the chores Ian crossed over to the *Achilles* to keep them in a good mood with a sumptuous breakfast.

“We shouldn’t stay here much longer,” Barbossa said when the worst damage had been repaired. “No doubt Port Royal has been informed of our escape and Beckett’s givin’ chase, so we can expect them to show up sooner or later.”

“Couldn’t have put it better meself.” Jack wiped the sweat off his brow with his bandana. “Which poses a certain dilemma. We have two ships but not enough men to crew them both. As the Royal Navy will be on our tails very soon, you, gentlemen, are, I believe, in need of a faster ship while I and me chief gunner,” he pointed at Emily, “are in need of a crew.”

“And what’s to stop us from takin’ over the ship?” Barbossa asked, smiling widely.

Considering nine men from the *Jolanda* stood against two on Sparrow's side, even with the only sword on board being in Jack's hand and disregarding Mad José and Moneybag, Sparrow's chances didn't look too good. A realization he apparently arrived at as well.

"Common sense?" he suggested. "If we do happen to encounter Beckett's friends you can barter your captain for your freedom. Besides, I've gotten us out of prison, found us a ship that sank Beckett and his ilk and now secured us another ship that'll return us safely to more hospitable shores. I think that qualifies me for the position – even though I couldn't have done it without my capable first mate Barbossa, aye?"

Barbossa mulled this over. "Aye, *capt'n*," he said at last, not smiling this time and giving Sparrow an ugly look.

"Then we have an accord." Jack made a grand gesture. "Gents: Welcome to the *Black Pearl*, the fastest ship in the Caribbean."

"What's our heading, then?"

"Tortuga for a start. Fame and fortune will follow later."

Despite those exciting new prospects they all felt a slight pang of regret for leaving the *Achilles* behind – she certainly was no vessel any honorable pirate would wish to sail on, yet in the short time they had been her crew the "tub" had actually started to grow on them. With a teary eye they cut down one of her masts to put it up in place of the *Black Pearl*'s missing mainmast, salvaged everything that might be of use, gave the *Achilles* a farewell pat and put to sea.

It soon became apparent that neither the "tub" nor the *Jolanda* could ever have matched the black ship for speed. Even in as bad a condition as she was, the *Pearl* seemed to fly before the wind.

"Blimey," the bo'sun said in awe. "Look how fast she is!"

When the *Black Pearl* was under full sails and speeding through the azure waters, Bill was finally free to pay a visit to his hammock. Obviously hard work was a far better narcotic than rum, for this time no images of cursed ships and dark waters kept him from falling almost immediately into a deep slumber.

Chapter 11:
A Married Woman

“Tell me about Father,” Will begged.

They had spoken night’s prayer by the light of a single candle, the girls already asleep, Lucy, too exhausted to earn money, having gone to bed as well.

Mary smiled at the question – of course Will would ask her, he always did when a day had been taxing – and laid a hand on the covers. “Whatever can I tell you?” she said. “I have told you so much already.”

“Please!” he persisted.

Mary’s thoughts drifted into the past, to the time when she had first met that dashing young sailor with the roguish smile. “Oh dear, that’s a dangerous one!” Lucy had said, giggling and stealing more than one glance at him. But he had only smiled at Mary and she had found herself smiling back at him. And in time, she had learned that he was also gentle and compassionate and ready to stand up against whatever he perceived as an injustice. No fool, her William.

“When you were born,” she began, “your father was at sea. So I lay there, suffering as all women do when in labour – luckily, I had your aunts Jane and Charlotte to help me. And then, just as you came into this world, the door opened and your father walked in. He was so happy, he took you, covered in blood and crying your lungs out as you were, and danced with you across the room, until Aunt Jane got very strict and sent him out of the room. So that was your first whiff of sea air, because your father had come straight from the harbour and even was still carrying his things.”

Will smiled. “I hope he comes home soon,” he said.

Mary leaned over and kissed his forehead. “So do I, Will. So do I.” Taking the candle, she left the room.

Now she had some time for herself before retiring to her lonely bed. Mary savoured that hour of the day. The house was finally quiet, no-one and nothing demanding her constant attention, and she was free to do some reading or contemplating or simply do some needlework and let the day fade away. It was something that belonged to her and her alone.

She decided to write a letter to William. She did not know where he was, nor had he given her any address where to send letters but she trusted he would be at the English settlement of Port Royal now and then. After finishing the letter she went through her mental list once again – early tomorrow they would take the children to Jane; Charlotte and John would look after the house; Finch had been informed of her absence when he had come home and paid his rent; their things were packed, victuals for the journey prepared. What remained to be seen was how Daniel fared and how Lucy would deal with it. Mary had no illusions about the future; it might be very hard for all of them.

She heard someone fumble at the latch, took the candle and went into the hall. When Haynes stumbled in, she could tell at once he had been drinking.

“Is that my money you spent?” she asked calmly.

He stopped, swaying on his feet. Mary did not like the look he gave her, but she knew from experience she had to stand firm now or risk even more trouble in the future.

“My money,” she repeated, waiting for the words to sink into his beverage-muddled brain. “Your rent is over-due as I told you this morning,” she continued, “and I don’t appreciate it when you leave it at the next alehouse.”

He smiled and took an unsteady step in her direction, and she quickly sidestepped into the kitchen to escape his groping hands.

“Now, don’ make a fuss, missy,” he spoke thickly.

“It’s Mrs. Turner...”

“Mrs. Turner,” he mimicked her.

“... and as I told you this morning, I need your money now.” She refused to back down.

Haynes supported himself on the doorframe. “What you *need*, missy,” he said with difficulty, “is a man.”

“Thank you, I already have a husband,” she replied, set the candle down and looked around for some kind of weapon from out of the corners of her eyes. In this state, there obviously was no talking to him.

Haynes leered. “Then where is he?” he mocked. “You better call him, I think.”

“Keep your distance,” she warned.

“Oh, is little missy afraid now?”

“Certainly not.” She hefted a heavy frying pan. “Be sensible, Mr. Haynes. You will bring down every kind of trouble on you if you try to harm me.”

“I’m not goin’ to harm you. Much.” He lurched, and she hammered the frying pan into his face. It connected with a dull thud. Haynes howled in pain but he must have been made out of stronger stuff than Mary expected or else the liquor boosted his resilience, for he recovered almost immediately. Wrenching the frying pan out of her grip, he shoved her backwards into the table. “You’ll pay for that, whore,” he shouted.

Mary tried to get up, but he was surprisingly fast for a drunken man. He grabbed her by the hair and flipped her over roughly, pressing his calloused hand on her lips and putting his weight on her. When she tried to kick him he only laughed.

And just as he started pulling up her skirt the light went out and Haynes screamed. His weight was suddenly lifted from her back. Somebody moved very fast, and Haynes’ scream of pain broke off with a gurgling sound.

“Don’t you ever touch my sister again!” Lucy’s voice said. “Bastard! Are you all right, Mary?”

She hastily struggled to her feet. “Yes.”

Something smashed in the darkness, followed by the sound of something heavy hitting the floor.

“Good. Do you have a light?”

Mary groped her way to the drawer where she kept candles and matches. It took her a while to light the wick because her hands shook badly. Finally she turned around to see Haynes’ prone form lying on the floor, amidst the shattered pieces of a chair. Lucy knelt down beside him and with some effort turned him over. There was an ugly burn mark near his right eye.

“Always go for the vulnerable parts, girl,” Lucy said, searching his pockets with a grimace of disgust.

“You learn that after the first couple of times.”

Mary suddenly felt very light-headed. A strange rushing sound filled her ears and the beat of her heart seemed quite loud.

“Now don’t faint on me,” scolded Lucy. “He’s not worth it. Sit down and take a deep breath.”

Without questioning, Mary obeyed. It was oddly relieving to have someone tell her what to do, though after Lucy’s breakdown in the afternoon the change in her was startling.

Lucy already went on: “No woman has ever died from that, Mary. We still are what we’ve ever been afterwards. They? They’re just cowards who take it out on those weaker than them. How much does he owe you?”

Mary found it difficult to focus. “A month’s rent,” she replied after a long moment.

“Here. I’m afraid it won’t be enough but that’s all there is.” Lucy tossed her Haynes’ purse, then went to pick up the frying pan and hit him over the head with it for good measure. “Give me a hand, will you?”

Between them, they carried Haynes out of the house and left him lying in the gutter, then went back for his few possessions and placed them beside him.

“He’ll be back for revenge,” Mary said when she locked the door behind them.

“No.” Lucy shook her head, ginger curls bouncing. “He’ll be glad he got away that easily. Who would believe him over a respectable woman like you with a witness at your side, if you took the matter to court?”

Of course Mary would never do it. She did not think she would be able to stand the shame of the whole town knowing what had happened, or very nearly happened.

Lucy put her arm around Mary’s shoulders. “Let’s have some tea, shall we?”

Chapter 12: Allegiances and Treason

When Bill woke up he still remembered fragments of a dream. He was quite sure it had been about Mary. Smiling, he watched the rays of the sun fall through a hole in the upper deck and give the dreary quarters a touch of coziness. Dust glittered in the golden rays.

After a while he got out of his hammock, pulled on his boots and made his way to the upper deck where he took a deep breath of the salty air. The sun was high up in a clear sky and the *Black Pearl* made good speed in a brisk wind. Most members of her crew lay on deck, dozing after the short night and hard work. Bill stepped up to the rail to check on their speed. A high bow wave glistened in the sunlight as the *Pearl* ran swiftly; at this rate, they'd reach Tortuga within two days at most. He joined Doug at the helm. "Want me to take over?"

"Aye." His bleary-eyed shipmate spat out a quid. "I was about to wake one of the lot anyway."
"Where be Sparrow?" Bill asked.

Doug spat again. Chewing tobacco was more than simple enjoyment (or bad habit, or vice, as landlubbers tended to say); it was a necessity on night-watches, keeping the senses alert. "Capt'n's cabin. Listen, Bootstrap." He leaned over confidentially. "I don't think we'll be seein' much more of Sparrow once we reach Tortuga. Barbossa..."

"Barbossa wants this ship," Bill completed the sentence.

Doug laughed quietly. "Everyone would want it. And the capt'n doesn't pass up an opportunity like this. Only the best for an important figure like him."

"How so?"

"Never heard of it? Barbossa's one of the Lords." Doug nodded. "All very secret, of course, but when you've been on the *Jolanda* for as long as I have, you learn a few things."

Bill was impressed. The Lords were shadowy, legendary figures, the nine most powerful pirates with agreed upon territory. At least in theory; their titles were passed down from one Lord to his chosen successor, and while the first Lords had indeed been the conquerors of their territory, their descendants were often scattered all over the world.

"Still, Sparrow's no fool," Bill said. "He must know what Barbossa's up to."

"Probably." Doug yawned and stretched. "Well, I'm off."

Bill was left wondering. He was accustomed to the constant backstabbing and non-existing loyalties of pirates. On occasion he, too, had changed his allegiance, yet he saw no real reason why he should support Barbossa this time. Jack was young, aye, and a bit crazy but he had gotten them out of prison and they had yet to find out about his abilities as a commander. Besides, there was the matter of Jack's deal with Jones. Nobody knew of it but Bill and the young captain himself. And it probably wouldn't matter to the former *Jolanda*'s crew if anyone did.

Bill looked around. The only other ally Sparrow had (*other?* a small voice inside his head asked incredulously) had started to mend a sail but fallen asleep on the job. She sat propped against the foremast, her legs covered by the sail, her head resting on Ragetti's shoulder. The pirate was also fast asleep.

Bill frowned as he watched the odd couple. He was not really surprised but that didn't mean he liked the combination. Shared terror or not, Emily was still in Sparrow's employ and had already proven herself to be wily as well as ruthless while Ragetti was not too bright at the best of times. Sighing, Bill resolved to keep an eye on them. As soon as there was a woman aboard, there was trouble – probably the reason why Jack had taken her along in the first place.

Afternoon passed into evening and the crew gradually returned to their chores. Bill saw Emily do nothing more sinister than turning down various advances by almost every member of the crew, some of them nice, some of them less so. On one occasion, things almost got out of hand when Jacoby and the bo'sun banded together for what was probably supposed to be a gang rape but Ragetti and of course the pirate herself beat them back. And so the day passed.

At sunset Barbossa confronted Jack again.

"About the map, *capt'n*."

Jack scratched his head. "I take it you're talking about the one Beckett has. Had. Either way. Now lying either in Beckett's former office for his successor to find or on the bottom of the ocean."

"Please tell me we're not goin' back to the fortress to retrieve it," said Bill.

"Now that you mention it..."

There was a collective groan from the crew.

“... Or rather not,” conceded Jack. “However, do you take me for an amateur, gentlemen? Why, do you think, Beckett – may he rest in peace – never grilled you about the map in the first place?” Clearly enjoying the moment, he unfastened one of his braids and pulled from the strands something that Bill had taken to be some kind of ribbon. On closer inspection, it rather resembled a piece of parchment that had been rolled up very tightly...

“You have the map?” Barbossa breathed.

“Only one half of it, I’m afraid.” Jack unfolded it, and there it was: The drawing of the mysterious Island of the Four Winds with the cave and the red X. “Pity it’s useless for as long as we don’t have the bearings.”

Barbossa and the bo’sun gave Bill a telling look.

“Excellent work,” Barbossa remarked acidly.

“Suppose I should’ve left it completely to him, then,” Bill retorted. “It was your map, for cryin’ out loud. Don’t blame me for leavin’ it in the open and rushin’ off to the rescue, loosin’ Jack in the attempt, if I may point out.”

“You may not,” Barbossa growled, but he looked somewhat embarrassed.

“Question is,” Pintel put in helpfully, “wha’ are we goin’ to do now?”

Which was the question everyone wanted answered.

“We’re still going to Tortuga,” Jack explained, rolling his eyes as though he was speaking to a group of children who were a bit slow on the uptake. “To find us some additional hands and see if we can find out more about the location of Windy Island. And no need to thank me for my foresight.”

No-one did.

Bill took the first night watch. Ian stood at the helm, his wispy gray hair fluttering in the wind. For a while they were joined by a school of small dolphin, playfully bow-riding in the dark water. When the stars came out, the brightest canopy so far, Bill gazed high into the universe. One, two... three shooting stars followed close upon each other. The night was so peaceful, it was hard to imagine the horrors that lurked just beneath the surface.

By unspoken consent the four of them had not mentioned their encounter with the ruler of the ocean again. Jack seemed unconcerned about his ghastly deal and Bill, Emily and Ragetti were still too shaken to voluntarily bring the matter up again. None of the others would be able to understand the sheer horror of having the netherworld enter into your hitherto ordinary life without warning anyway. Lost in thoughts, Bill first noticed Barbossa when he was halfway up the forecabin deck.

“Can’t sleep?” Bill asked.

Barbossa began to fill his pipe. “Noisy bunch down there,” he stated.

For a while they stood in silence and listened to the ever-present creaking of the rigging. Barbossa’s heavy tobacco smoke filled the air.

“I wanted to talk to you, Bootstrap,” he finally said.

Thinking of Doug’s hints, Bill replied: “Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“We might have to get rid of Sparrow and the wench in the near future.”

Again, the image of the warped, overgrown ship and her horribly twisted crew flashed up in Bill’s mind. “We shouldn’t do that,” he said, perhaps more fervently than he should have done.

Barbossa gave him one of his infamous stares. “‘We shouldn’t do that?’” he repeated. “What’s this, you’re gettin’ soft, Bootstrap?”

Bill quickly damped down his statement. “A mutinous pirate’s the scum o’ all scum. The Code’s very clear on this. The only exception would be if the captain were pointlessly cruel which Sparrow certainly isn’t. Give him a chance. He may not have your experience but he’s resourceful. Might come in useful.”

“That makes him a tolerable first mate but not a capt’n,” said Barbossa grimly. “I won’t be sailin’ under anyone’s but my command.”

“It’s his ship,” Bill pointed out.

“For the time bein’.”

“This isn’t simply a boat he commandeered. He’s payin’ a price what I don’t envy him for.”

Barbossa narrowed his eyes. “Such as?”

“Can’t talk about it,” Bill said curtly. “Sorry.”

Barbossa regarded him closely. “So you’re in his confidence already? That was quick.” He shrugged.

“Well, I can always ask Ragetti about it, I suppose.”

“You can do that.”

Bill’s indifferent tone obviously confounded Barbossa.

“Rotten time for growin’ a conscience,” he grumbled and emptied his pipe. “Get some sleep,” he said.

“I need time to think about it.”

Expecting him to come up with something very unpleasant, Bill stepped down. He labored under no illusion that he had just made an enemy.

When Bill went below, he noticed a faint light coming from the hold. Nobody had any reason to be there except for Ian, who Bill knew to be at the wheel right now, and the captain, so he proceeded quietly as not to alarm whoever was below.

A lonely lantern was spending faint illumination and by its light Bill was just able to make out the entwined forms of two persons. No need to ask who they were.

“Not losin’ any time, are you?” he said.

They disentangled, Ragetti hastily, Emily with a kind of lazy insolence.

“Can’ a person ha’ some privacy ‘roun’ here?” she asked.

“Not you and certainly not on this ship.” Bill aimed a kick at Ragetti’s boots. “Has it occurred to you that she might be actin’ on Sparrow’s orders and is simply tryin’ to enlist your support?”

Ragetti looked completely taken aback.

Emily got to her feet, not bothering to tie the strings of her half-opened blouse. “Yer such an ass, mate, beggin’ yer pardon!” she spat. “Has it occurred ter ye I might try ter have a good time with someone I like? You see me boobs an’ think: Right, all she’ll e’er do is sleep her way up.”

“You got on very well with Sparrow in the *Lost Coin*,” he pointed out.

“There speaks the envy o’ him who misses somethin’,” she retorted. “Besides, wha’ ‘bout ye, bein’ so chummy with Jack an’ all? Don’ tell me yer haven’ considered givin’ ol’ Barbossa the boot. An’ somethin’ else.” She stepped closer and jabbed her index finger in his chest. “If I was tryin’ ter win anyone over the way ya think, I’d’ve started with ye. Or do ya think yerself so much cleverer than me favourite mate aboar’ this floatin’ junk heap?”

“Actually, yes,” he said.

She smiled and provocatively pulled her blouse tight. “Ye’ll never know wha’ ya miss.”

“I have a pretty good idea.” He kept his distance and she laughed.

“Got an advice fer ya, Bootstrap Bill, free o’ charge,” she said, turning back to Ragetti. “Stop havin’ a conscience. Yer too honorable fer our trade an’ mebbey fer yer own good. An’ now, if ye’ll excuse us...”

“Don’t push it,” he warned.

She just blew him a kiss.

Chapter 13:
Tortuga Again

Though Bill felt not sleepy at all after the talk with both Barbossa and Emily, he must have dosed off for a while, because he woke with a start when something cold and sharp was pressed against his throat.

“Le’ me in, Bootstrap,” Emily’s voice whispered close to his ear.

He lifted his eyebrows. “At the point of a knife?”

“An’ keep yer bloody voice down!”

Obediently, he made room and the piratess climbed into the hammock. “Where’s Ragetti?”

“Sleepin’, o’ course. Think me men stay awake after tha’?” She rested her arms on his chest, but all he could see in the darkness was the vague outline of her head. “An’ wipe tha’ smirk outta yer face, ya don’ know the half o’ it.”

“You don’t know I’m smirkin’.”

“I can see a man’s *thoughts* in the dark, mate.” She nestled closer so that her lips almost touched his ear, yet her blade never left his throat. “Now ya listen ter me. I know exactly wha’ happens once we reach Tortuga, savvy? Barbossa’ll try ter keelhaul us an’ ge’ away with the *Pearl*. I’m no’ too keen ter see tha’ happen. So here’s the deal. Jack’s got the map. We beat Barbossa ter it, drop him an’ his mates, get some faithful hands an’ go off sailin’ inter the sunset in search o’ the treasure.”

Bill mulled this over. “And what’s in it for me?” he finally asked.

It really worked; he *could* see her smiling in the darkness. “Yer life, methinks.”

“Not good enough.” For a moment he felt her stiffen, adding pressure on the knife. “I can do sums, you know – right now, there are seven o’ the *Jolanda*’s men against you and Sparrow. So you enlist Ragetti and through him maybe his chum Pintel. Now you’re tryin’ to win me over, and suddenly the odds are about even.”

The blade drew blood. “Is tha’ all ya think I’m doin’?” Emily hissed. “Playin’ the whore? An’ there was Jack, speakin’ highly o’ ya. Told him he was barkin’ mad.”

“No, lass.” He kept very still. “I just think you do whatever you have to in order to survive.”

She relaxed again. “Don’ we all?”

“Aye,” he agreed and kicked the edge of the hammock hard. As it capsized he yanked her head back by gripping her long braid and drove his knee into her abdomen. In a tangled heap they hit the deck. Emily was doubled over in pain and quickly Bill snatched the knife out of her hand.

“Sorry,” he said, “but I don’t take kindly to threats.”

Her reply was a colorful, albeit breathless, speculation about his ancestry. Half asleep, the bo’sun shouted at them to stop the racket; in a place where frequently someone fell out of his hammock or something came loose nobody even bothered to be roused by their small skirmish. Emily visibly fought to keep the contents of her stomach down. Despite her backstabbing attitude Bill actually felt sorry to see her this way.

“I shoulda slit yer throat,” she groaned.

“Next time, maybe.” He stuck the knife into a post. “Can you stand?”

“Wha’d’ya think, ya lover o’ a kraken-spawned sea cow!”

“Stow it, lassie,” Bill warned.

She slowly pulled herself up into a crouching position. “I hate ya.”

“You had it comin’.”

With some difficulty she began to crawl towards the stairs. “Ya better watch yer back from now on,” she spat. “An’ yer front as well!”

Just then a shout rang out from the crow’s nest.

“Land ho!”

They prepared for a long stay on Tortuga. Not only had they to find additional hands and someone who might tell them about the Island of the Four Winds, the *Pearl* was also in need of extensive repair. The bo’sun and Barbossa checked the black ship thoroughly from bow to stern and came up with a long list that was only equalled by the provision list Ian drew up.

The most urgent thing, however, was to get weapons. No self-respecting pirate would be caught dead without a cutlass or at least a pistol, especially in a town where fights were the order of the day, and knives were plain and simple a necessity for working in the rigging (Ian had threatened to nail their guts to the mizzenmast if they kept “borrowing” tools from the galley).

“The way I see it,” Jack said through clenched teeth because Doug was in the middle of drawing a tattoo on the young captain’s arm, “we have to resort to some old-fashioned pirate shopping. There is a place just round the corner, but its owner’s a bit narrow-minded. Wouldn’t hear of an investment in the reclamation of the treasure on Windy Island.”

“How unimaginative o’ him,” commented Bill.

“That’s exactly what I said. So I want you to take a team of three and get us what we need. In the meantime Mr. Barbossa and I’ll be recruiting in the *Faithful Bride*, Mr. Brass and Mr. Brass can procure provisions, and the rest will start repairs under the supervision of our excellent bo’sun.”

“Hold still,” grunted Doug.

“I’ll go shoppin’,” Emily offered. “Considerin’ I’m the chief gunner an’ all.”

Ragetti looked hopefully but Bill put the lid on it at once. “All right, and we’ll be takin’ Jacoby as the explosives expert.”

Jacoby grinned and Ragetti’s face fell.

Bill and Emily had not spoken ten words to each other since their fray. He wondered why she had volunteered to accompany him and resolved to heed her words and watch his back – and front.

In the late (or early) hours of the night they set out for the shop Jack had indicated. It was a small, unobtrusive place in what had once been a long and dingy square and was now mostly devastation. The shop, *Mallot’s Weapons and Farm Equipment Emporium*, was at one end; beyond it, *Messrs. Hatching’s* warehouse led off down a side street. The house was oldish, doublefronted, depressing. There was no smithy attached, indicating its owner was in the selling, not manufacturing business only.

Emily waited till three drunken seamen singing “But one man of her crew alive / What put to sea with seventy-five...” loudly and out of tune had walked past, then opened the latch with the help of a borrowed knife from the galley.

“Blow me down,” she whispered when the door opened at the first attempt. “Ya’d think he’d invested in some decent lock ‘roun’ here, wouldn’ ya?”

Around here, Bill thought, it was probably that futile that the shop owner had abandoned the idea after the first few break-ins.

They went in and lightened their lamp. It was a smallish, seedy shop with an earthen floor and windows that still held the remains of stained glass panes broken long ago; now they had been nailed up.

“Has seen better times, eh?” breathed Emily.

Still, the shop was well-stocked. They quickly began to fill their sacks: cutlasses, knives, pistols, powder and shots, some grappling hooks, grenades... Just when Jacoby went behind the counter to replenish his supply of fuses there was a loud snore, cut short, and Jacoby drew back.

“Trod on him,” he said, startled.

From behind the counter rose a bedraggled-looking figure, pistol in hand.

“What are you doing in my shop?” a man’s voice asked.

“Wha’re ye doin’ here?” Emily asked back. “Ha’ no other place ter sleep?”

“No, my wife...” He stopped as the realization hit his sleep-numbed brain. “Thieves!” he hollered.

“Robbers! Scoundrels!”

Emily was already on her way out. Something clattered on the floor as Jacoby ran past Bill. One of his infamous grenades lay there, smoke rising from its rapidly dwindling fuse.

Bill and the shopkeeper exchanged glances.

“Be seein’ you,” Bill said and managed to retreat a few steps before the grenade reduced one of the supporting beams of the shop to smithereens.

Chapter 14:
New Faces

It was a long journey, full of pain and darkness and whispering voices he couldn't identify. And it was cold, a glacial cold that numbed and paralyzed. As his perception sharpened he realized he was in a labyrinth, with walls binding him on either side, and it was the faint sound of voices that drew him forward. He walked on, turning corner after corner, sometimes seeing faint shapes in front of him that turned into mist when he reached them. Yet someone was with him, he knew this; someone he could neither see nor touch but whose presence was familiar.

The maze twisted and turned and he stumbled on, subtly guided by this presence, and turning into a long passageway he saw light and began to run.

Reluctantly he opened his eyes. A lighted room. Walls made out of uneven boards. The two worlds converged, split apart, the labyrinth receding before certain images of a shop and a blast. Only the voices stayed behind, the sound of many people speaking in an adjoining room and a familiar voice close by.

"Why didn' ya tell me ya was workin' fer him? He'll be after me blood!"

He had never heard Emily sounding so upset – and frightened. Cautiously he turned his aching head in the direction her voice came from and found himself peering through a crack in the wooden wall. The pirateess was standing in a corner of two low-roofed buildings just a few yards away, talking to a dark-haired man some years her senior. Bill didn't recognize him; he was no seaman, that much was apparent at first glance. Any other day, Bill wouldn't have bothered to eavesdrop - but there was something furtive about the meeting.

"I didn' know, a' right?" Emily was saying in a loud whisper. "Think if I had I would've blown his bloody guts out? Ya should've told me!"

Bill could not make out the man's reply but it did not appear to set the pirateess at ease.

"Oh, great, jus' great!" she spat. "An' tha's supposed ter reassure me?"

Again the man said something in a low voice.

"Nah, I won'! Wha'd'ya think? So he can find me all the easier? Ferget it!" Turning away, she clenched her fists and stamped her foot, swearing softly. The man grabbed her by the wrists and forced her to look at him. He was talking rapidly now.

"Yer daft!" Emily cried. "Hear me? Bat-shit crazy! Ravin', barkin' mad! Wha'd he care if I go down, too? Wha'd ye?"

He spoke louder this time, not loud enough for Bill to make out his words, but there was no mistaking his contemptuous tone. Emily grew rigid.

"Wha' ya take me fer?"

This time Bill heard his reply. "You don't want to know that."

Emily's eyes blazed. "Pig," she hissed. "Pig!"

He slapped her hard.

Being used to the pirateess' temper by now, Bill expected her to rip the stranger's eyes out or something equally vicious; to his great surprise, however, she just rubbed her cheek and glowered at him. He was speaking again, for quite a while this time, and with each passing moment Emily's face grew darker. She hung her head and when she spoke again at long last Bill was stunned to hear her choke on tears.

"A' right... a' right..." she sobbed. "I'll do it. Jus'... jus' take good care o' Estrella, promise me. I don' want ter see her ge' dragged inter this mess."

He muttered something and pulled her closer to kiss her. At first she resisted somewhat but eventually she yielded to his growing passion.

Bill turned away and as he did so a shadow fell across him. He looked up, straight into the face of a goddess. She was very beautiful, in an exotic way, with flawless dark skin and bloodshot, hypnotic eyes that were accentuated by delicate patterns.

The entire situation felt more and more unreal with every passing moment.

Bill blinked. "Am I dead?" he asked dazedly.

She smiled, and now he realized she was no goddess after all but a small, dark-skinned, rather ragged-looking woman who wore her dark hair braided in matted locks.

"Not yet, Bill Turner," she said with a heavy accent.

Feeling foolish, he sat up. "Have we met before?" he wondered. "I think I would have remembered."

She smiled more widely. "Suffice to say dat I know all men of de sea." With much rustling of her dress and jingling of her multiple necklaces, beads and baubles she went to a table in one corner of the small and dingy room.

"Where are we?"

"Some shack near the shop." Jacoby stepped into view, looking sheepishly. "We'd hardly pulled you outta the rubble when she made an appearance."

Bill rubbed his aching temples. "How long have I been out?"

"Not long. Half 'n hour maybe."

Certain now that this was neither a dream nor the afterlife Bill took a look around. Their shelter was indeed nothing more than a shack, crudely put together and furnished with a table and some rugs. In one corner lay the prone form of the shop owner.

"Is he dead?" Bill asked.

Jacoby shook his head. "Still out cold."

"Where's Emily?"

His shipmate shrugged. "Said she wanted to check out the shop... well, what's left o' it."

The strange woman returned and pressed a cup containing a pale greenish fluid in Bill's hand. "Here, drink dis. It will make you feel better."

Doubtfully he took a nip of it. It tasted faintly of peppermint and licorice; to his surprise, his headache almost immediately abated to a tolerable degree. He glanced at the woman who returned his look with a wide smile. Bill got the feeling that she knew exactly what he was thinking. Quickly he drained the cup.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Hm...mm." She took the cup out of his hand. "I have many, many, many names. But you may call me Tia Dalma."

This did not make much sense to Bill. On the other hand, nothing made much sense so far. "I suppose, then, Tia Dalma," he said slowly, "we're in your debt."

She flashed him another smile. "Dat you are."

The door opened and Emily walked in. Bill watched her carefully but there was nothing in her demeanor that suggested anything out of the ordinary had happened.

"Back with the livin'?" she asked briskly. "Le' me tell ya, mate, tha' was the first an' las' time I e'er heaved yer bulk anywhere. Yer in luck the soothsayer woman an' her lot made an appearance when they did, otherwise I might've been tempted ter keep ter the Code."

Bill lifted his brows. "Why, thank you."

"How's the shop?" Jacoby asked tentatively.

"Wha'd'ya expect, dork, after ya went playin' in there?" Emily put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

"Second rule o' self-preservation," muttered Bill.

"Oh, har, har, har!" Now the brunt of her anger was redirected at him. "I guess ya like havin' a bloody house fall on top o' ya, do ya? Well, I'm tellin' ya, mate, I've jus' ha' enough o'..."

She was interrupted by a low moan from the shopkeeper. While they all fell silent and watched, Tia Dalma went over to him and helped him sit up. He blinked in confusion (Bill sympathized with him) and obediently drank the concoction Tia Dalma handed him. After a while he came around sufficiently to take in his surroundings and his eyes fell on the three pirates.

"You ruined my shop!" the man groaned.

Bill and Emily quickly pointed at Jacoby. The pirate grinned embarrassedly and shrugged.

"I think we should go now," he suggested.

Without argument Bill and Emily picked up the sacks containing their loot. Quickly, Tia Dalma stepped in Bill's path.

"And what will you give me as payment for my efforts?" she asked.

He looked into her hypnotic eyes. She was such a slight person, he could simply shoulder her aside; yet there was something about her that warned him against such a course of action.

"What could we give you?"

She placed one hand on his chest. "A passage on your ship."

"Well," he said slowly, "that's not our decision to make."

"Den take me to Jack Sparrow," she said with a note of finality.

"You know..." He stopped, remembering. "All right, but does *he* know *you*?"

“He will.”

Bill sighed and shrugged. “It’s not as if I had much o’ a choice, is it? Come along, by all means.”

Smiling, she withdrew her hand.

“Hey!” the shop owner behind them called. “What about me? What about my shop?”

“To Davy Jones with your shop!” Jacoby swore. Bill and Emily flinched. “Our capt’n offered you a share in our profits, didn’t he? It’s not our fault you didn’t take it.”

“But who’s going to pay for the damage?” protested the shopkeeper.

They rolled their eyes and left.

Passing through a larger room full of what Emily had described as Tia Dalma’s “lot” who all made signs of reverence when she passed by they left the tumbledown shack and headed down the streets towards the harbor. On their way Tia Dalma told them people had been afraid of a permanent English presence on Tortuga after the raid, yet either it had been an isolated incident or Commander Beckett’s death had forestalled any such plans.

“How long have you been livin’ here?” Bill inquired.

“I don’t live here,” she answered. “I came to Tortuga because dis is where I must be.”

“Quite the enigma,” Emily mocked.

Tia Dalma looked at her sideways. “No more so dan you, Emily wit many faces,” she replied.

The pirate shot her an angry glance.

When they arrived at the harbor they saw their shipmates had moved the *Pearl* to some distance where the bay was shallow and had canted the ship to one side for careening. Emily groaned.

“Neptune’s fins, why do they ha’ to do it in the middle o’ the night?” she complained.

“The sooner the better. Some planks have to be replaced as well.”

“It was more like a rhetorical question, mate.”

They made their way towards the ship. Several torches had been placed around the *Pearl*, spending just enough light for the crew to carry out their task but also attracting swarms of insects. Barbossa was the process of shooing some of them away with his hat when he saw Bill, Emily, Jacoby and Tia Dalma. He drew his breath in with a sharp hiss.

“What’s *she* doin’ here?” he asked angrily, looking at Tia Dalma.

“Dis is where she must be,” said Emily with a nasty smile.

Tia Dalma ignored the barb. “Are you surprised to see me, Barbossa?”

Deftly he put his hat back on. “Not so much surprised as annoyed. Didn’t you promise not to meddle in our affairs?”

“How could I promise when your doing forces me to meddle, hm?”

At this moment Jack made an appearance, carrying what must at one time have been part of a lady’s exquisite wardrobe over his shoulder. Amidst the torn frills and attached seaweed still glittered some jewels.

“It’s funny what a man may find beneath his ship...” He stopped, ogling Tia Dalma. “Oh. It’s you.”

“So you two know each other,” said Bill.

“Fleetingly,” Jack was quick to answer.

Tia Dalma stepped closer. “You look well, Jack Sparrow.”

“You don’t look too bad, either, love.” He still eyed her with mild, yet pleasant, surprise.

She positively beamed.

“Wants to be taken aboard,” Jacoby reported.

Barbossa put his foot down. “Absolutely not!”

Just then a very upset shopkeeper caught up with them. “Oy!”

Emily groaned. “Oh, fer cryin’ out loud... Ye handle this,” she addressed Jacoby. “It was yer bloomin’ idea.”

“What was?” Jack finally tore himself away from Tia Dalma’s sight.

“Blasting my shop! Stealing my wares! I want compensation!” yelled the shop owner.

Barbossa rolled his eyes. “Why didn’t you shut him up?”

“He would’ve been left lyin’ under his shop if no’ fer her...” Quickly, Emily related the events.

“Should have guessed,” Barbossa said with a glance at Tia Dalma. He took one of the sacks,

rummaged in it for a moment and came up with a heavy cutlass. After test-swinging it in a few moves he stepped up to the shop owner. “Dead men tell no tales, mister. And they don’t complain, either.”

Hastily, the shopkeeper retreated. “Good sir...”

“Hear that?” the *Pearl*’s first mate addressed the rest of the crew. “I rather like the sound of it. You may address me as ‘good sir’ from now on, you scurvy dogs.”

They laughed, enjoying seeing him prod the shop owner with his blade and drive him backwards until he stood ankle-deep in the water.

Tia Dalma’s face grew grim. “Barbossa.” She did not even speak loudly, yet her voice pierced and silenced the guffawing at once. “I did not go to de trouble of saving him life to watch you kill him now.”

“But that’s not my concern, is it?” He smiled.

Quickly, Jack stepped in. “Conciliatory proposal, Mister...”

“Mallot,” squeaked the shopkeeper.

“Mr. Mallot. Why don’t you join us on our quest for fame and fortune? Forget the dreary everyday life. Live the adventure. See sights your neighbors can only dream of.” Jack gestured widely. “Who needs a shop, really, when he can have the world?”

Everyone stared at him. The shop owner blinked in perplexity. Jack looked around.

“Well, who does?” he asked.

“I don’t know nothing about the sea,” objected Mallot.

“Oh, you’ll learn quickly enough.” Jack pointed to the Herculean figure of the bo’sun. “This here fine gentleman will take you under his wing and teach you everything you need to know.” Mallot positively blanched and the bo’sun grinned. “And now that that’s taken care of,” continued the young captain, “step to, gents. I need a word with the lady over there.”

While Bill went to work he heard Jack ask Tia Dalma:

“Perhaps you can help us, love. Ever heard of a cozy little place called the Island of the Four Winds?”

It turned out Jack had already enlisted the help of two shipwrights the same way he had convinced gormless Mr. Mallot – by making them a part of his crew. Messrs. Roksnoer and Scarus were partners with few scruples about their new occupation; repairing pirate ships obviously was as breadless a trade as selling weapons to buccaneers.

In addition, four already tried and tested gentlemen of fortune had signed on. Cutthroats to the core, Koehler, Scratch, Twigg and Grapple had lost their ship in the raid and were eager to find a replacement. This, with the astonishing case of Moneybag who had decided to swap his profession as an honest merchant for the life of a pirate after his ship could not be found upon his return to Tortuga and Mad José whom they still hadn’t managed to lose, brought their number up to nineteen.

For the present, being part of the *Black Pearl*’s crew meant hard work. Though Bill was impressed by how well the ship had withstood the ravages of the deep she still needed a complete overhaul. Thus some time passed until Bill had the chance to talk to Emily in private. The opportunity presented itself when the crew decided to hit the nightlife after a hard day.

Having had a tankard or two (or three or four) in the *Pineapple*, most of the *Pearl*’s men went off in the company of various wenches or in search of a game of chance.

“Be joinin’ ya in a jiffy, mate,” Emily said to Ragetti who wanted to try his luck with the cards. He left and she stretched and yawned.

“Goin’ fer another mug,” she announced to Bill. “Want one, too?”

He nodded. “Sure. Thanks.”

“Yer payin’ .” Grinning broadly, she made her way to the bar.

Bill watched her talk to the innkeeper and hand him something that certainly didn’t look like coins; it rather appeared to be a bundle of papers.

“Well, if it isn’t steadfast Bootstrap Bill.” He was roused from his observations by a smoky voice and the pungent smell of violets. “The only one who ever turned down my advances. Broke my heart, you know.”

He smiled at the slender woman with the copper-colored locks holding an empty tray. “How can I ever make up for it, Ruby?”

“You can’t. It’s a matter of pride.” She started clearing the table. “Can I get you something?”

“No, thank you.” He stopped. “On the other hand...”

The barmaid pursed her lips. “Want some company?”

“Still married, love.” He nodded towards the bar, pulled a coin out of his pocket and handed it to her. “But do me a favor and find out what kind o’ papers Mark was just given.” Quickly she pocketed the money. “Anything for you, Bill.” She picked up the tray and left just as Emily returned.

“Cheers!” The pirateess banged a full tankard on the table. “Looks as if me favorite mate’s losin’ big. I better go an’ check on him.”

Bill held her back. “Have a moment?”

She frowned, looking down at him. “Depends.”

He drew a chair up with his foot. “I know it’s not my business but - are you in some sort of trouble?”

She grew stiff. “We all are, mate,” she said cautiously, sitting down.

“I’m talkin’ about some serious trouble. The chap I saw you with...”

“Wha’ chap?” She looked positively alarmed now.

“Dark hair, a bit too inconspicuous, unpleasant conduct?”

All blood left her face.

“What was that about?”

She was breathing very fast. “Ye keep outta this!” she snarled, upset.

Her reaction seemed to confirm even his worst suspicions. “Does Ragetti know?”

Emily moved closer so that she could be heard above the tavern’s din even as she lowered her voice.

“Look here, matey, I don’ answer ter any man, be it Ragetti, Jack, Barbossa or ye.”

“But to your friend, by the looks o’ it.”

In the blink of an eye, she had whipped out her pistol and pressed it under his chin. Bill kept very still.

“Easy, lass.”

Her wide-open eyes spelled death. “Breathe one word abou’ it... one word... an’ I swear I’ll blow yer bloody brains out!”

He did not doubt it for a moment. “I’m just tryin’ to help,” said he soothingly.

“I told ya before,” she cocked the pistol, “I don’ need yer help.”

“There’s no shame in acceptin’ it.” He forced himself to remain calm. Whatever her connection with that man, whatever matter of life and death they had been talking about, Emily obviously was determined to keep it secret.

“Ya’ve no idea wha’ this is abou’,” she said quietly.

“No, but you could trust me with it.” He eyed her as she slowly drew her other pistol. “Now what? You can’t shoot me more than once.”

“I can make sure.”

He did not look away. There was a fierce determination in her eyes and, beneath it, a deep fear. For how long they sat there, locked in the decisive moment before pulling the trigger and becoming killer and victim, Bill could not say; it might have been minutes or barely longer than a heartbeat.

Abruptly, Emily lowered her weapons. “Ya know wha’, Bootstrap?” she said and he thought he detected a trace of genuine amazement in her voice. “I think ya really mean wha’ yer sayin’.”

“I do.” Grimacing, he rubbed his throat. “Sweet westerly, lass, you gave me quite a fright.”

She put the pistols away. “Good.”

“Now, will you let me help you?”

She avoided his gaze and shook her head. “Ya can’ help me,” she said. “I ha’ ter do this on me own. But I appreciate the offer. It’s more than anyone e’er did fer me.” She picked up her tankard and left for the card table.

When she was gone, Bill breathed a deep sigh of relief. That had been much closer than he had liked. By all appearance he had stirred up a hornets’ nest. He looked over to the table where Emily did her best to help Ragetti win by distracting the other players with her buxom charm, all witty remarks and laughter. There was nothing that indicated her agitation of just a moment ago. He realized then and there what a brilliant actress Emily was. She might deceive them every day, with every word she spoke, and they would never know it. Not a pleasant thought at all.

Ruby returned. “Pages ripped out of a diary,” she reported. “Notes of some kind. Mark says he was paid to deliver them to a Mr. Mercer at the *Capt’n Flint* - in person. Someone’s trying to hide something, eh?”

“Aye,” agreed Bill with a sinking heart and tossed her another coin. “It sure looks like it.”

It took them a month to get the *Pearl* seaworthy, and that was because Jack insisted on doing the vital repairs only.

“We’ll see to the rest when we get back,” he said.

For a change, Barbossa did not disagree with him and Bill could see why. Keeping a pirate crew ashore for a longer period of time was not a smart thing to do. They drank (well, more than usual), started tavern brawls every other night and they began to talk. Very soon the whole town seemed well informed that the *Pearl*’s crew was going after treasure, and it became nearly impossible for any of them to walk around on their own as there were frequent attempts to bully or weasel the bearings of the Island of the Four Winds out of them. Interest in joining the crew soared high. Even the wenches became a problem. After learning the crew members might be prospective rich customers they clung to them closer than barnacles to a ship’s hull, trying to coax promises of generous gifts or even of marriage out of them. Not to the amusement of the other patrons – by the end of the month fights seemed to erupt wherever the *Pearl*’s men went.

“I never had such a good time,” Twigg remarked wistfully when they were finally ready to set sail. Twice Bill had caught sight of the unsavory Mercer character lurking in the shadows. Emily, however, had kept her distance, probably thanks to the fact that Bill had alerted her to his knowledge of their relationship. Still, she had been gone quite a few times on her own and Bill had a very good idea where to.

Perhaps the most alarming thing of all had been the dramatic change in the relationship between Jack and Tia Dalma. There could be no doubt whatsoever that the young pirate and the mysterious woman had gotten much closer than the usual relationship between captain and passenger allowed. She had moved into his cabin and he had started wearing several strands of his dark hair in matted locks.

“Women!” Barbossa had said, shaking his head. “Never get too close to them – metaphorically speakin’, lads, o’ course,” he had added amidst the raucous laughter of the crew. “Otherwise, you’ll end up with them wearin’ yer trousers – still metaphorically speakin’.”

“Judgin’ from personal experience?” Emily had asked innocently and this time the joke had been on Barbossa.

All in all, decided Bill, it was a good thing to finally weigh anchor.

By some mystical means Tia Dalma had been able to provide them with the bearings of the Island of the Four Winds. Nobody on board, except maybe Jack, quite trusted her on that, but without the missing half of the map they had little choice. One positive side-effect of it, however, was that Barbossa apparently had given up any thought of mutiny or commandeering the *Pearl* and instead concentrated his considerable talents on finding the treasure.

A late addition to the crew came aboard just one hour before departure, a scrawny boy of perhaps fourteen years by the name of Tom who was, as far as they were able to determine, fleeing from his former captain, the notoriously hot-tempered Eightfinger Bruce. Ian enlisted his help at once. By now the crew’s numbers had swelled to almost thirty which made the quarters a bit cramped but meant less work for everyone – except the ship’s cook.

The sun, rising above the glittering waves, found the black ship leaving Tortuga fast behind.

Chapter 15:
Mail to Portsmouth

If Mary had ever seen a place of misery, it was the hospital of Portsmouth.

Dark and crammed, the ordinary sailors and soldiers who had been wounded or taken seriously ill ended up here; you did not find any officers at St. Christopher's. For many of those poor souls it was also the place where they spent the last days of their life.

Four days ago Mary had woken Lucy and the children before sunrise, helped them pack the last of their things and off they had gone to Jane, the eldest of the Morris sisters who was widowed and had offered to take care of the children. It had been a tearful goodbye for the girls; Lucy who had relapsed into her moody thoughts had been too occupied with her worries about Daniel and the future to notice much of it, just telling Martha and Annie in an absent way to be good. Will, as usual, had tried to be brave enough for them all. Mary was proud of him.

They had walked to the mail station to await the coach that would take them to Bournemouth where they'd transfer to another coach to Southampton and from there to Portsmouth. While Lucy had sat down on a bench Mary had walked up and down the station's front. She had known she would be coped up inside the coach for a long time. The fresh, cold morning air had felt good, though she had had to cough a few times. She had not slept at all during the night after Haynes' attack. When Lucy had retired Mary had kept sitting in the kitchen, listening anxiously to any sound from the front door but there had been none.

The coach had arrived, their luggage put on the roof and they had boarded the carriage with a few necessities as well as their luncheon wrapped in a handkerchief, and thus they had travelled to far Portsmouth. The last leg of their journey they had shared with a seasoned sailor who entertained them with stories of his voyages. Though Mary was glad for Lucy's sake as it seemed to take her sister's mind of Jacob and her present worries, she had found herself to be faintly troubled even while she had enjoyed the tales. Apparently Mr. Gibbs had taken it upon himself to look after the two women travelling alone, for after their arrival in Portsmouth in the evening of the third day he had not left their side until he had personally seen them to a comfortable inn.

After spending the night there, glad that nothing moved beneath them for a while, they set out early in the morning to St. Christopher's Hospital. A tired-looking young doctor greeted Lucy and Mary upon their arrival.

"Mrs. Beard," he said, visibly uncertain whom to address until Lucy took a step forward. "I'm glad you came. Your husband is not too well, I'm afraid."

Lucy swallowed. "He's not going to die, is he?" she asked fearfully.

"No, I do not think so. But we had to amputate his right leg and arm in order to save his life."

Lucy took a shuddering breath.

"I am sorry," the doctor added hastily.

Pale as death, Lucy stumbled to the wooden visitors' bench and sat down heavily. "Oh no," she murmured. "Oh no, oh no..."

Mary sat down next to her and touched her shoulder. "Please, Lucy, control yourself," she admonished her.

"What am I going to do now, Mary? What am I going to do?" Her sister did not appear to have heard her. She looked at Mary with despair. "This is even more terrible than I thought."

"At least he is alive." Although she knew better, Mary tried to comfort her.

Lucy shook her head violently. "He's a cripple!" she whispered. "He won't find any work now. If it had been his leg only... or his arm... but both? This is awful!"

"Lucy..."

"I'm ill, Mary."

The sudden change of topic left Mary puzzled for a moment. "Ill how?" she asked.

Lucy still shook her head. "You know," she said. "Ill."

It took Mary a while to understand. Then she straightened in shock. "Oh, Lucy. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"It didn't matter. But now... Daniel's crippled, Mary, and I'm not going to be able to earn money much longer." Lucy was crying openly now. It was startling after having seen her that night when she had taken on Haynes single-handedly. Mary realized her sister was wise in the more rowdy aspects of life, yet helpless in dealing with any other problems.

She took a deep breath of the stale air. "How long have you known?"

"For about a week."

Slowly, Mary got up and went back to the young doctor. "We would like to see Mr. Beard now," she said and was surprised how calm she sounded.

"Certainly, Miss..."

"Mrs. Turner," she corrected him. "Mr. Beard is my brother-in-law."

He gestured. "Right this way, Mrs. Turner."

Mary turned to her sister. "Are you coming, Lucy?"

"I can't," Lucy moaned. "I just can't!"

"Yes, you can," said Mary brutally. "You are his wife, for shame! Do not expect me to do everything for you!"

"I just told you..."

"I know what you just told me, but it makes no difference. Your husband needs you now. We will see to the rest later."

Lucy got to her feet, white as a sheet. As they followed the doctor into a large room packed with wounded soldiers and sailors and filled with the sound of whimpering, cursing and screaming, she said softly: "You are a very hard woman, Mary."

"That's what I had to become in order to survive."

They proceeded to Daniel's bed. He occupied a cot in the middle of the large room, looking wan and sickly. Almost immediately, Lucy began to sob again. Mary shot her an angry glance.

"Mr. Beard," the young doctor said, "you have visitors."

Daniel's eyes fluttered open. When he saw Lucy, a ghost of his broad, confident smile appeared on his lips. "Lucy, m'girl."

"Hullo, Daniel," she sniffed. Mary literally had to push her in order to get her step up to his bedside.

"How... how do you feel?" she asked awkwardly.

He laughed in a hollow sort of way. "As well as a man might feel, given the circumstances. But how are you? How are the children?"

"Fine, we're... fine."

He looked at Mary and nodded in greeting. "Mary. Glad you came along."

"It was nothing. Here, let me help you." She propped up his pillow so he could sit up. "How long have you been here?"

"Ten days, they tell me. I was out cold for most of the time."

"Are you in pain?"

He swallowed. "You have no idea."

Mary turned to gesture at her sister. "Lucy, come here and sit down."

Lucy, however, just stood there, clasping her hands, her eyes wide, her mouth opening and closing as though she tried to say something but not a sound came out. Finally she turned and fled the room.

Mary quickly looked at Daniel; he was suddenly ashen pale.

"She needs time, Daniel," Mary said. "Both of you do."

"Aye," he replied, but she knew he did not believe her.

Excusing herself, she hurried after Lucy. Her sister was leaning against the wall in the hallway, white as a sheet.

"I can't take it," she moaned. "I just can't take it, Mary. I don't know what to say to him."

"For pity's sake!" said Mary exasperatedly. "Will you please stop behaving like a spoiled child! Do you have any idea what Daniel is going through at the moment? Do you even care?"

Lucy was slowly rocking backward and forward on the balls of her feet. "I'm not like you, Mary," she cried. "You always know what to do... you're always able to do the right thing..."

"Do the right thing?" Mary twisted her finger around the small golden chain with the cross pendant that she wore around her neck. "No, Lucy. I've made the biggest mistake of my life when I married William, I know that now. I need someone here, with me, to help me. I prided myself on being able to take care of things alone. But I am just a woman. And nobody takes a woman without a man at her side seriously. Now go back in and see what you can do for Daniel. Tell him we are going to take him home and everything will be all right. I will join you in a moment."

Lucy regarded her in silence for a few moments before reaching out and taking Mary's hand. "Do you still love him?" she asked.

“What kind of a question is that?” Mary pulled her hand back. “He has been gone for five years. Five years, Lucy! Living on scraps of his attention, a letter now and then - I doubt any love could survive that! Will does not even remember him! He won't come back. I should declare him dead and marry Gaskill.”

“You wouldn't be happy with him.”

“I am not happy now.”

Slowly Lucy shook her head. “There was more than one time I cursed Daniel to hell and back, you know, wishing I'd never met him. And then something like this happens and you realize – however hard your life has been, you don't want to lose him.”

“I have already lost William.”

“Jane lost her Henry. You will lose Bill the day some dirty sailor knocks on your door, can't look you in the eye and twirls his cap in his hands before he stammers his condolences and tells you the story of how your husband was washed overboard in a storm or killed by an enemy cannon or fell from the mainmast and broke his neck. That's how it works. We are sailor's women, Mary. We can only enjoy our men while they are here and then let them go again. Face it, we wouldn't love them if they were otherwise. Picture it. You are at home, worrying about what to do with stupid Lucy, keeping the children from skirting their duties, and suddenly Bill walks in. What would you do? Stare at him, slap him, yell at him and then kiss him.”

Mary touched her brow. “He will not come back, Lucy,” she said wearily.

“You don't know that.”

“He will not come back.” Mary spoke forcefully. “And I certainly would not yell at him. I would probably send him away.”

Lucy smiled wistfully. “No, you wouldn't.”

“I would.”

“You wouldn't. Trust me on that.” Her sister squared her shoulders and walked back into the room.

Mary clasped her hands tightly to keep them from shaking. What would Lucy know of it? How could she pretend to know what Mary would do? It had always been Mary who had borne the brunt of every worry in their household. There had been a time, long ago, when she had believed she had found someone to rely on. Someone to share the burden with. Of course, she had been foolish to think so. You could not rely on others. Especially men. Especially men who lied to you. And William had lied to her. Never had she believed the story of that merchant. It was all part of his world, a sailor's world, part of the strange and secret brotherhood that no-one not belonging to it could ever hope to understand. But she knew her husband, that adventure-seeking, freedom-loving streak of his. He had imagined it charming to have a family, but he had never been prepared to take on responsibility for them. They were a burden to him. And when he had come to realize it, he had left them. It was that easy.

I have been a fool, Mary said to herself. What have I been thinking? Have I really tried to convince myself he would return one day? They were right, all of them: he will not. Maybe he'll continue to send money to ease his guilty conscience – oh, the money! Doubloons and pieces of eight and louis d'ors, yes, of course, an honest man's pay!

“Damn you, William Turner!” she whispered. “Damn you!” Hastily, she wiped her eyes.

Chapter 16:
Captain's Log: White Squall

My luck is incredible.

I got my ship back, found myself a crew, a capable first mate, the rarity of a fine ship's cook and a woman (though her temper sometimes frightens me a bit) and we're off to find a treasure. What more can you ask for?

Well, actually, the one thing that would make everything perfect is a hat.

Not that I'd ever tell him so, but I must confess I envy good Hector. Apart from those ridiculous feathers his hat is grant, just the thing a good captain needs. Aye, the man's got style, I have to give it to him.

The rest of my crew, they're the usual wear-what-you-can-salvage types but I do wonder how Emily manages to scamper up the rigging in that skirt of hers. Amazes me all the time. It proves an incentive for the gents, though; they're always hot on her heels – pity they pay more attention to her legs than to the lines and sails.

Other than that, we're just fine. The fine weather is holding, a clear sky and a steady, light wind from south-east that fills the sails and cants the ship slightly to port, bringing us closer to our destination at a speed of about eight knots.

"Land ho!"

As we draw nearer we recognize the shapes as a mass of rocks that resemble the shape of a dragon's head, exactly like the one marked on the missing half of the map. We are closing in on our goal. - An hour or so later.

I have the most curious dream in which dear Abby chases me all through Shipwreck City with a branding iron in her hand, chiding me for selling her brother's soul to Ol' Tentacleface for thirteen years. And just as she catches up with me and I can almost smell the disgusting odor of burnt skin, Dad picks me up and says: "You still have a lot to prove before I make you my successor, Jacky." Perhaps I'm still deep in my slumber because when I open my eyes I see another sight I don't want to be seeing. Besides, why else would Mad José be in my quarters and rummage through my possessions?

As it is a dream I curiously watch him going about his business for a while. He looks for something on the chart table, carefully lifts the lid of my sea chest and rifles through its contents. When I still refuse to wake up even after he has shifted his attention to my clothes and pulls the half of the map out of my coat I begin to suspect this whole scenario might in fact be quite real. Lifting Tia Dalma's arm from my chest I give a sharp "Oi!" and have the satisfaction of seeing him jump. With a fearful glance over his shoulder he scampers. Well. That is definitely not what I had in mind.

I start running after him and remember just in time that darting around on deck in nought but your skin really is irreconcilable with the status of being captain.

By the time I've gotten into my pants and shirt, Mad José is already halfway down the deck.

"Hold him!"

Luckily my crew for once have the good sense not to question orders. Emily and Ragetti break off that sorry excuse for spending time with one another they call mending sails and race after José; reliable Bootstrap who has been teaching young Tom the art of steering hastens down from the quarterdeck; the guys swabbing the deck seem for some reason happy to leave their work, blissfully unaware of the oaths following them as the rest of the crew stumble over the buckets and brushes. Quarry, so named because once he opens his mouth and shows his teeth any onlooker is involuntarily reminded of one, actually throws a belaying pin after Mad José who is making for the rail; unfortunately, at exactly this moment Grapple tries to make a dashing appearance by sliding down a line from out of the rigging, and the heavy wooden handle collides with his head. We'll have to rehearse that.

Beak finally catches up with José but with a sudden lurch our ship's lunatic deposits the map into the white-capped waves and broken water of the Caribbean Sea.

The crew crowd at the rail in plain horror.

"Lower the boat!" I yell at them. Why do I always have to do the thinking for them?

Before they have time to comply, a heavy gust hits us seemingly out of the blue. The sails are suddenly filled to the utmost, ready to tear, and the ship pitches sharply to port. I grab Mad José to steady myself.

“Douse canvas!” I shout as the realization sets in: We have been hit by one of the infamous White Squalls and we have to fight for our very life.

Under the enormous pressure of the sails the *Pearl* cants that far leeward that the port rail vanishes completely under water and the waves - as she is now speeding at the rate of about fourteen knots - foam across the deck.

Barbossa cries: “The rudder down!” He jumps to the wheel to help and luff it, so that the storm, if possible, hits the sails lengthwise. But in vain, the pressure on the fore sails is too hard, and the ship, steered in the once taken direction, ploughs at breakneck speed through the suddenly churning, high running sea.

Bootstrap, too, helps press on the spokes of the wheel, but because of our speed the pressure on the rudder is too great to turn it into the intended direction.

Following my command the crew unfasten the sheets of the jib and the flying jib; with a deafening noise they flap wildly in the storm. They try to strike the topsails, which is perilous work while the torrents thunder across the deck. The storm presses the yards against the masts; although the crew pull on the halyards with a strength born of despair, trying to haul down the yards, the sails come down only slowly and partly.

While working in the leeward rigging Koehler is caught by the roaring waves and washed overboard. I can hear Tom yelling: “Man over board!” Sweet naivety. As though amidst the raging chaos anybody had the time to react to it.

Because of the water on deck the lines have become fouled, so the crew has to use their knives to cut the halyards. Both main and fore sail flap in the wind, banging like cannon shots, until they hang in tatters on the yards, the topsails having been blown off.

The pressure on the masts lessens, the ship straightens up somewhat. By degrees I get back control over my vessel, the squall dies down gradually. Since the pressure of the fore staysail, which has been blown off, too, has abated, Barbossa, Bill and Tom with a combined effort manage to turn the rudder to some degree and slowly head the *Pearl* into the wind, though she still hurtles at full tilt through the waves. The worst danger is over.

Koehler, fortunately, has managed to grab the main boom that protrudes over the rail and cling to it. When the ship straightens up he climbs aboard, battered, his clothes torn. He has swallowed a lot of saltwater and collapses once he feels the deck beneath his feet.

But what a sight the deck is! Everything that hadn't been fastened has slid towards lee and has been washed overboard. A lot of tools are missing. Even the heavy pigsty has torn free of its fastenings and has been swept to the stern, smashing a lot of things on its forced passage. Both inhabitants are unharmed; they have been washed that clean that they can do without a cleaning with water and broom for a while. Barbossa looks at the mess and simply shakes his head.

Repairs are made, the felled lines spliced, spare sails rigged and a few hours later order has been restored. As quickly as the squall had set in, as quickly the former light, constant breeze has superseded it and the sea has calmed. But much longer and it would have rushed over the *Black Pearl* - again. I don't even want to think about it. Possibly the darkest moment in my career to see her go down the first time.

However there's no reclaiming the map, that much is certain. The crew express their feelings by not too gently throwing Mad José into the brig.

Chapter 17:
The Island of the Four Winds

A faint pink glow appeared behind grey, dancing nimbus clouds. A lone star hung in the center of the low eastern sky. Right where the horizon met the ocean, a pale crimson light began to fight its way through a cushioned, violet hedge. Bill lifted his head and noticed another star, this one very bright, high above their port stern. Slowly, the violet hedge was illuminated from behind, with escaping streaks of bronze radiating out towards patches of egg-shell blue. Overhead, the night was still navy, punctuated with dirty clouds and several dawdling stars, so that the higher canopy seemed to be a negative image of the lower. Next, a trail of grey smoke ebbed from the horizon. The waves beneath the lightened area of sky gained phosphorescent pathways, and, eventually, a golden wash began to bathe a whole quarter of the sky, producing glowing flecks in the east-facing clouds.

Off the starboard bow loomed an unchanging sliver of dark purple. Land ho! The sky was bleaching to a brilliant ivory over a pattern of purple-grey, white and pink, with lengthening slashes of turquoise. The ivory sheen spread higher, revealing that the quadrant of sky below held a premonition of majesty, a veiled fierceness.

The trade winds filled their sails. A fuchsia-edged light-ball began to glow behind the purple hedge, soon brightening to a luminescent orange, while the swell before it became a deep teal with golden highlights. The nimbus clouds, highlighted with a ferocious gold-orange, edged out from their hideaway. Whispers of grey rain cloud floated feeble above, their borders becoming a searing gold. Suddenly the entire hedge became transparent, allowing the pink, orange and gold light to bleed through with dramatic speed. Those parts too dense to be illuminated became darker silhouettes; but even they gave up their stance as the very first glow of the sun's circumference appeared above the horizon. Now a bridge was constructed between two of the largest banks of cloud, so well-formed it could be a walkway between two ethereal palaces.

The outer edge of the two banks, where the sun's reflection was becoming unbearably bright, suddenly shot a straight-edged vortex of light heavenwards. The edges grew broader and soon the nucleus became too bright to view. Eventually the hedge seemed to shift off the horizon a little, leaving a gap through which rays could escape from the central orb; yet the orb remained hidden. Finally, there it was; a radiance too intense to be witnessed except through the luminous path it created in the slate-tipped sea. At this point they could see signs of verdant streaks in the mountains of the Island of the Four Winds. The clouds, all bleached to the palest ivory, hid the summits of the island, while below them lay soft brown valleys and greed ridges that seemed to vary with the angle of the rising sun. "I bet," said Ian, "there's some game to be found here, if only goats. We could go a-huntin' and have some fresh meat on the table. And while we're at it, we should also replenish our freshwater supplies." They sailed the eastern coastline up north and lowered the anchor at some distance from a small natural harbor.

Jack peered through his spyglass. "If memory serves," he said, "we have to make our way to those mountains over there. What say you, Mr. Barbossa? Might take us a day? Two?"

"One and a half, I reckon." The first mate squinted into the morning sun. "Takin' into account we might need some days to find the hiding place and be slower on our way back we'd better take provisions for a week with us."

The longboats were lowered and the crew eagerly prepared for their profitable shore leave. When Jack announced, however, that Moneybag, Mallot and Tom were to stay behind the three fairly rebelled.

"I need you to look after the ship, all right?" Jack explained after listening patiently to their accusations of how he was planning to double-cross them. "We might have to get away quickly – no telling what we'll encounter on this island. So we're relying heavily on you, mates."

Ian shouldered his way past them, four pineapples tucked under his arms. "And if you wish to pull your weight in the meantime," he remarked, "you can fill the water barrels."

"And don't forget to swab the deck," said the bo'sun.

Emily handed two coils of rope to Scratch in one of the boats. "Don't touch the powder, ya bilge rats," she warned.

"Except when somethin's amiss," corrected Barbossa. "In that case fire a shot."

"But not just because you happen to see a shark or something," Koehler added. "Serious threats only." When their three shipmates had slunk out of earshot Doug grinned. "That should keep them from under our feet for a while. Landlubbers."

The boats were held by bow and stern lines but they plunged and bucked like a recalcitrant donkeys. It was nimble work getting in and stowing the provisions as they heaved and dropped.

“Mind your fingers!” cried the bo’sun as Roksnoer’s hand gripped the gunwale swinging in to thud against the ship’s hull. The last man dropped from the Jacob’s ladder and slowly the crew moved the boats out of the shadow and shelter of the ship.

They jounced through the waves towards the shore. In spite of the early hour it was already quite hot and they were glad when they were able to moor the boats after long and arduous work on the oars in the harbor, a small, curvet inlet with steeply sloped, verdant hills rising out of dark jade waters, topped by loftier, misty summits beyond.

Enormously tall palm trees rose into the sky, pointing to misty, shimmering peaks, while closer to eye level grew an orchard of avocado, mango and papaya trees, beside chestnuts and all manner of exotic, flowered vines. Ian picked them luscious mangoes to eat as they climbed up a narrow, muddy trail with slippery rocks and treacherous drop-offs. Eventually they spied a cascading ribbon falling some three hundred feet from the cliffs above. At the base of the waterfall, a perfect pool had formed in the rocks. Near ground level, a protruding platform dispersed its flow so that one could sit in the pool and receive a gentle sloshing from above.

As they progressed, they discovered some collapsed huts but nothing worth taking. The lush vegetation had reclaimed the gardens; the only thing left aplenty were large stalks of bananas. Still, they felt they should bring back something special. They had seen many of the red parrots with multicolored wings, so now the order of the day became parrot hunting. But they didn’t succeed as the birds were too shy. When Scratch spotted a nest high up in a tree, it had to hold young parrots, of course. Emily hitched up her skirt, allowing them all a good look at her shapely legs, and started to climb. It wasn’t easy; the tree had a long, smooth trunk, and the nest was high up in a small crown. Still, she managed it swiftly, drawing close to the nest and stretching out her hand. But suddenly she yelped and pulled her hand back. If she had been quick to climb the tree, it was nothing compared to the speed with which she slid down again. Something fell out of some hidden pocket within the pirate’s skirt and hit Barbossa squarely on the head, bending the feathers of his hat.

“That’s the second time now,” he grumbled, bending down to pick the item up.

“Parrots!” Emily exclaimed and she reported that in fact the nest belonged to an ant colony, a cluster of large, ugly green insects.

Everyone was inclined to forgive her for fleeing because the bites of those ants were said to be poisonous.

Only after a while did Emily notice Barbossa standing a little aside with a small, leather-bound book in his hands. She suddenly got very still, mirroring the *Pearl*’s first mate.

“Gi’ tha’ back, Barbossa,” she said quietly.

He looked up from the pages and gave her a long, unreadable look. The crew, sensing something was afoot, went silent.

“‘Furthar nodes on crue’,” read Barbossa aloud for all to hear. “M. – tatoo of ancer, rigt forarm, drown by D.B. Cabbin boy Tom – came aboard rigt befor putting to see. Last name unnoun. Aboat fourteen yeers old, fare hare...’ What’s this, your own private log?” He skimmed the pages. “My, my. Bearings. Ours, to be exact. Each change o’ course put down, very accurately in fact. Mastered the art o’ navigation, have you, missy?”

Emily cautiously took one step away from the crew. “Ya ne’er know when it might come in useful.”

“Aye, doubtless. Now what have we here? ‘If B. interestit – I.B. tells D.J. controlls jiant see monster cracen. Cant confirm it but possibel.’” He slammed the book on the ground and drew his cutlass just as the pirate reached for her pistols. With a cry of pain she dropped one of her weapons when the blade cut deeply into her right hand. She managed to fire the other pistol but missed her target and the shot only took off the bent feathers on Barbossa’s hat.

His face was frightening to behold when he stepped closer and pressed the tip of his blade against her throat.

“So pray enlighten us,” he said grimly, “who’s this ‘B.’ that’s so damn ‘interestit’ in what goes on aboard our vessel?”

She closed her mouth defiantly, clutching her bleeding hand.

Everyone was staring at her in disbelief. In an audible whisper Pintel admonished his friend:

“Told you. You just can’t trust a woman, and a woman pirate as that.”

Bill thought back to the scene he had witnessed in Tia Dalma's shack. Now he had a very good idea of what it might have been about, yet he couldn't bring himself to speak.

It was Jack who answered the question for Emily. "That would be short for 'Beckett', I imagine," he said.

Barbossa glanced at him sideways. "He's dead."

"Not that one." Jack waved the remark aside. "He's got a son in the employ of the East India Trading Company. Bloody ambitious upstart."

Barbossa signalled to the crew to seize the pirate and picked up the book again. Several previous pages had been ripped out.

"How much have you told him already?" he demanded, shaking the book in her face. "Half our lives' stories, I wager."

"Go ge' yerself keelhauls," she spat.

"I'm very tempted to let *you* have the honor!"

She snorted contemptuously and looked past him at the young captain.

"Sorry, Jack," she said.

He returned her look with a mixture of disappointment and disgust. "I may be able to understand why you'd betray us, love – but to that weasel? Whatever happened to the Code of the Brethren?"

"Ter blazes with the Code! It's every man fer hisself, ya know tha'."

"Not if it means betraying our kind to our mutual enemies." He sighed. "Tie her up, gents."

Not needing to be told twice, they dragged her away. Barbossa rounded on Jack.

"We have to confer about this. It's serious."

"Beckett has every reason to follow us," agreed the bo'sun.

Jack shook his head. "But he can't. If she spilled the beans about us, there'll be a fine record of each one of us in the Company's register, nothing more. She couldn't give Beckett our bearings; she only noted them down for future reference as she had no way of conveying them from out here. Let's face it, gentlemen – we've been in worse fixes. Probably every one of us has already some guineas on his head. The trick has always been catching us."

"Which will be all the easier now that she blabbed!"

"Yes, but we can't undo that, can we?" argued Jack. "Let's find the treasure and get back to friendly shore where we might spend it, then we can worry about any warrant that might or might not exist."

Chapter 18:
Emily

They ate a cheerless meal in the shadows of the trees and rested during the worst heat of the midday sun. While everyone else was dosing, Bill took his water skin and went over to the tree Emily was tied to.

The pirate sat leaning against the trunk, unusually calm and collected, as Bill thought. She looked up when he stepped closer.

“Knew ye’d come,” she said.

He knelt down beside her and pulled a reasonably clean cloth out of his pack. “How?”

“Yer blasted conscience, Bootstrap.” She watched him dress her wound. “Already told ya it’d get ya inter trouble one day, an’ I’m tellin’ yer so again. Yer a good man - despite all tha’s happened... e’en despite the fact I might be the one wha’ll get ya hanged, ya still want ter help me.” She shook her head in exasperation. “Yer married, ain’t ya?” she asked abruptly.

“Aye,” he replied.

“Thought so. Yer loyal, Bootstrap, which is hard ter find in our profession, so o’ course ye’d be equally loyal ter any lady-love. No’ a bride in ev’ry port fer ye, eh? Have any children?”

He looked up. “A son.”

“Nice.” She smiled wistfully. “How old’s he?”

“About seven.”

“Seven. Me daughter’s six now. Wee strip o’ a girl. Me Estrella.”

“Pretty name.”

“Ain’ it? Named her after a friend I once ha’. Some woman in Port Royal looks after her.”

“Why not keep her with you?”

“With a life like mine? Nah. She’s better off livin’ with honest, respectable folks.”

Bill was struck by the similarity between their respective positions. Wasn’t it because of the same reason that he kept well away from William? “Don’t you miss her?” he asked, not entirely sure he wanted to know the answer.

“Terribly.”

“And don’t you think she misses you?”

Hastily, she bit her lower lip. “She barely knows me,” she said. “I left her when she was only two years ol’. All I’m doin’ now is sendin’ her money.”

This was getting spookier every moment. But at least, Bill thought, William had his mother to take care of him...

As though she had read his thoughts Emily inquired: “How long since last ye’ve seen yer family?”

He shrugged. “I don’t rightly know. About five or six years ago.”

“Years!” squealed Emily. “Mate, tha’ be a romance, fer sure! Wha’re ya, a bloody whale-hunter? If yer such in love with yer missus, ya better drop anchor there once in a while ter keep her from sailin’ off with another cap’n.”

“Mary would never do that.”

“Aye, tha’s wha’ ye all like ter think.” She rolled her eyes.

He didn’t like the direction their talk was taking. “What about Estrella’s father?”

“Thought ye’d figured tha’ one out,” she answered with a twisted smile. “He’s the chap with the unpleasant conduct, as ya’ve called him. Met him one night in London.” She stared off into space.

“Things were different then.”

To Bill, it sounded like wishful thinking. He knew the kind of men Emily’s lover belonged to. Bullies, cowards at the core, who revelled in their petty power over others. And they always found women willing to be abused and to believe whatever hollow-ringing vows of love they were told because they desperately wished them to be true. He’d just never imagined Emily to be one of those women.

“For shame, lass,” he said, shaking his head slowly. “You could have anyone. Why put up with him?”

She shrugged helplessly. “I can’ explain,” she said. “It’s jus’... one o’ those things. An’ besides, as he’s le’ me know on occasion, it ain’ too easy fer him, too – considerin’ I’ve ha’ more men than baths,” she added with a wry grin and quickly changed the topic when Bill frowned. “Anyways, mate, wha’ I really wanted ter talk ter ya abou’. I’m tellin’ ya square, I don’ like this island business. I ha’ some time ter think abou’ it. Now we both know the sea, an’ we know this is guesswork at bes’, but from wha’ I been told abou’ yer findin’ o’ the map...”

“Who told you?” Bill interrupted, then answered his own question. “Ragetti.”

“Don’ ya go blamin’ him. He’s a sweet one, though no’ very bright, an’ I won’ see him hurt on me account.” She accepted a sip of water. “Now, from wha’ I been told, *I* figure Denton was on his way back when he ran afoul o’ the reefs.”

Bill furrowed his brow. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Makes a lot o’ sense ter me. He go’ the chart from who knows where, set out ter reclaim the treasure an’ found it gone.”

“Then why did he keep the map?”

“Mebby ter sell it ter someone stupid enough. Or worse.”

“Worse how?”

“Mebby he ne’er came ‘round ter dispose o’ it. Remember the mad one in the *Lost Coin*? I don’ think he was tryin’ ter help ya there – he tried ter get the map fer hisself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m jus’ sayin’ wha’ I’m thinkin’, an’ this whole business smells fishy ter me.”

Bill thought about it for a while. “Why tell me?” he asked. “Why not your friend Ragetti?”

She heaved a sigh. “Like I said, he ain’ too bright, an’ he’s bloody superstitious an’ would probably spook the whole crew. Besides... he’s probably feelin’ a bit betrayed righ’ now.”

“I wonder why,” Bill remarked sarcastically. “Well, if you think I can convince Jack and Barbossa – and the crew, for that matter – to turn back without first lookin’ for the treasure, you’re very mistaken.”

“If no’ ye, than who?”

“You flatter me. How come?”

“Because yer the only pirate I’ve e’er met wha’ I trust.”

He smiled thinly. “Whatever happened to ‘slit your throat’ and ‘watch your back’?”

“Ah, well. As ya said, I deserved wha’ I got.” She took another sip. “Please le’ me go, Bootstrap,” she suddenly said.

“You know I can’t do that.”

“I’m more useful ter ya without me hands tied.”

“You’ve given us ample reason to doubt it.”

“Wha’ would ye ha’ done in me stead?” She stamped her foot in frustration. “We’ve sent Beckett’s dear father down ter Dav...” she checked herself, “ter the bottom o’ the ocean. Next thing I know, me man’s workin’ fer him an’ I might only be able ter save me life by spyin’ fer them both.”

“You don’t believe him, do you?” Bill asked sceptically.

“It’s a chance. I don’ know abou’ this Beckett fella but I know me man. If he’s got paid ter act as Beckett’s angel o’ wrath, he won’ e’en blink while slittin’ me throat.”

Bill didn’t bother to ask why she still kept up with Mercer if she knew he would sacrifice her without a second thought – it obviously was all part of “one of those things”.

“Much though I hate to echo Barbossa,” he said after a while, “but how much *have* you told them about us?”

“Everythin’ I knew. Which ain’t much,” she quickly added. “No pirate likes ter talk abou’ his past, righ’? Told him abou’ our meetin’, how we ended up in prison, o’ our escape, the *Pearl*... Ya name it.”

“About the map, too?”

“‘Course. I’m divulgin’ fer me life, remember?” She grimaced in disgust. “Sweet mother Calypso, I hate bein’ such a rat!” Furiously, she shook her mane of tousled brown hair, her braid having come loose during her capture. “Ya know wha’ they ha’ planned fer me?” she asked after a while.

“No.”

“Mate, I want ya ter promise me somethin’.” She looked at him intently. “If it came ter some perfidy o’ them, like torture, I want ya ter slip me a weapon. I can take almos’ anythin’ but I won’ be left cryin’ an’ whimperin’.”

“Well,” Bill thought about it, “I can’t speak for Jack, but I’ve known Barbossa for some years now, and I can honestly say that unless you have some important information he needs to know he won’t bother with torture but go for a clean kill.”

She nodded. “At least tha’s somethin’.”

“But I promise anyway.”

“Thanks. I owe ya.” Suddenly, she smiled. “A shame, Bootstrap,” she said with a ghost of her former light tone, “tha’ we haven’ met some years earlier, eh? Might ha’ made a fine couple. Maybe wouldn’ ha’ managed ter mess up our lives so completely, either.”
He chuckled quietly. “Aye. Maybe.”

“And just because she says she has a bad feelin’ about this venture, we are to turn back?” sneered Barbossa just as Bill had expected him to.

“It’s not all about bad feelin’,” Bill said. “If it were, I wouldn’t have said anythin’. But I’ve been thinkin’ about it, and I reckon she’s right. Given the position o’ the *Comet*, she might just have chartered a course from the island to Tortuga.”

Barbossa looked daggers at him. “The seas are wide, Mr. Turner. Now step to!”

And that was about the end of their conversation.

When Barbossa had left them, Jack put his arm around Tia Dalma’s waist and gave Bill a long look.

“Well, mate,” he said, “I see she got to you as well. I’m not as surprised as I probably ought to be.”

Bill frowned in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Jack pointed to the tree Emily was tied to. “Our *belle madame sans merci*. The breaker of many an honest pirate’s black heart.”

His insinuation was so absurd, Bill could not help laughing. “Stop talkin’ nonsense, Jack. There’s nothin’...”

“Ah!” Quickly, Jack lifted a finger. “But there is. She has a way with men, you know. I could tell you about that one guy...”

Bill groaned. “Please, Jack, not another one o’ your bizarre anecdotes,” he pleaded. “I tell you, I’m not in love with her.”

“Of course you are,” said Jack, getting serious. “You’re in love with her for the same reason as me and Ragetti and every other man who ever got too close to her: because she embodies the best of all there is to life.”

Tia Dalma lifted a hand and stroked his cheek. “Jack Sparrow,” she said, “I tink you just said someting very wise.”

He flashed her a smile. “I have my moments, love.”

Chapter 19:
The Winged Hunters

In the afternoon, when the worst heat of the day had abated, they continued their walk. Because everybody preferred to keep an eye on Emily rather than leave her tied to the tree where she might possibly free herself (which only showed, thought Bill, what they all believed her to be capable of), they took her with them, hands tied and led by Grapple on a long rope like a dog on a leash. After some miles the jungle slowly began to thin and finally gave way to an open landscape littered with rocks as though a giant's hand had strewn them across the ground. They had reached the foothills of the green-sloped mountains.

Somewhere in the distance the sound of rushing water could be heard. When they followed it for another mile they suddenly found themselves at the edge of a long and narrow gorge, like a scar in the lush landscape. Its sheer walls were full of holes, probably the entrances of small caves, and many stone ledges ran along them. At its bottom a shallow stream of water meandered towards the sea. The sun was burning down on their side of the gorge; the walls on its far side lay under the shadow of large trees and underbrush growing densely on top of them. The gorge stretched out to both sides, and as far as their eyes could see there was no way across it.

"We'll have to climb, then," Jack stated, peering over the edge. He took a rope, fastened it around a boulder and slowly lowered himself to the topmost ledge. Nimbly, he descended to an adjoining one. The rest of the crew followed, Emily slowly and awkwardly without the proper use of her hands. The heat seemed to be reflected and multiplied by the stone walls, and the sweat was soon running down their bodies in streams. In single file they made their way to the bottom of the gorge.

"Odd, all those holes," Pintel remarked at one point.

Jack grunted in acknowledgement and jumped the last bit of the way into the rivulet. The muddy water hardly came up to his knees. From somewhere deeper into the gorge there came a faint screech and a flapping noise made by some kind of bird.

"I mean," continued Pintel, hanging on with both hands to one ledge and angling with his feet for another, "couldn't this be the place we saw on the map? An ideal place for hidin' some treasure, I'd say."

They all stopped and looked around.

"There's a lot o' holes," Twigg said. Several others muttered in agreement.

Bill joined Jack and Tia Dalma in the rivulet. The bottom was uneven and slippery, and something broke under his foot when he stepped on it.

"Decidedly odd," the young captain said.

Barbossa waded into the stream as well. "What is?"

Jack bent down and groped for something in the murky water. His hand closed around it and with a flourish he pulled out a human skull. They drew back with startled exclamations.

"That is," Jack answered.

Apprehensively, they eyed the rivulet.

"Are there..." Doug swallowed hard. "Are there more of them?"

Jack made a few steps to the other side of the gorge. The ground seemed to give beneath him several times and at one point he stumbled and fell with a yelp that was cut short when he hit the water.

Spluttering, he quickly emerged again.

"Aye," he reported amidst spitting out a mouthful of brackish water. "There are."

That was certainly no news they were keen to hear. As one, all heads turned towards the walls. Those pirates still on their way down hastened their descent, Emily nearly being pulled off her feet by Grapple in his haste.

"What are we dealin' with, capt'n?" Ian enquired.

"Damn me if I know," replied Barbossa, one hand on the hilt of his cutlass.

"Sorry to contradict you, mate, but I believe the question was directed at me." Jack examined the skull from every angle. "Well, Mr. Brass, I can't give you an answer just yet, however I do believe we should have paid more attention to the only person on our ship who's already been here."

They looked at him with blank faces. Bill and Emily exchanged glances.

"Told ya," the pirateess muttered.

Barbossa frowned. "Who?"

"Mad José, o' course," Bill answered for Jack.

“Him?” Barbossa narrowed his eyes, still addressing the young captain. “We picked him up on Denton’s ship.”

“Aye, which apparently had just escaped from this lovely isle with half its crew missing,” said Jack. He let go of the skull which sank back into the muddy water at once.

Uneasy, they fingered their weapons.

“You mean there’s no treasure at all?” Pintel asked.

“Oh, there might well be,” Sparrow allowed. He leaned against the stone wall and began to pick his teeth. “The problem, as we can all see – or rather can’t see,” he added with a glance at the rivulet, “seems to get to it.”

Suddenly the strange screech rang out again, closer this time. They all jumped and drew their weapons. They waited and listened for a while, yet the sound didn’t repeat itself.

At last, Barbossa jerked his head. “Spread out,” he ordered. “Search the caves, but keep your eyes open.”

They complied. Danger or not, they were still pirates and driven by the lust for gold. Within moments the crew competed with each other in entering the caves first. Bill caught sight of Emily, pleading silently with him, and he went over to Grapple.

“I’ll take over,” he said, taking hold of the rope. His shipmate, being keen on searching for the treasure, didn’t argue the point.

Bill drew his knife and severed her bonds. “Make no mistake,” he warned. “If you try to run, I’ll have to kill you.”

“Afraid I’d convince the boys on the boat yer all dead an’ sail off without ya?” She rubbed her wrists. “Somethin’ like that, aye.”

“Good plan.” She set out for the nearest ledge. “Guess I would.”

Climbing up, they found themselves in an as yet unclaimed cave. At the entrance they were met by a horrid smell of carrion and glanced at each other in alarm. Without a word Bill handed Emily a torch which she lit and drew his sword.

Just as they were about to enter Barbossa caught up with them.

“Goin’ somewhere, missy?” he asked pointedly.

“Cave?” she suggested.

He snatched the torch out of her hand. “Messrs. Pintel and Ragetti!” he called. Hastily both climbed up to them. “Keep an eye on our Delilah for a bit,” Barbossa commanded and rounded on Bill. “Have I missed somethin’ in the last few moments – an order by our dear *Captain* Sparrow, perhaps, that she ought to be set free?”

Bill sighed. Naturally there was no way of telling Barbossa of her wish to go down fighting if it came to that. “She’s slowin’ us down if we have to drag her along all the time,” he explained. “Besides, what can she do without a weapon? I’ll take care she won’t run off.” At least the last part was true. Barbossa snorted but any reply was cut short by a low cooing sound from out of the depths of the cave. They all froze, weapons at the ready.

“A nesting bird,” Barbossa said, gesturing with his cutlass. His grim smile did not reach his eyes. “I suggest we let our lady handle this.”

“Yer lady in yer dreams, Barbossa,” Emily commented, and the smirk vanished from his face in an instant.

“I’ll go with ya,” Ragetti offered.

“Thanks, but I can handle meself.” She glared at Barbossa. “Will someone gimme a light?”

Reluctantly, he handed her the torch.

“You shouldn’ be goin’ alone, though,” Ragetti persisted.

“We’re no’ talkin’ abou’ tyin’ the bloody knot here, are we?” She took the torch and kissed him hard on the mouth. “Cheer up, mate,” she said. “A pirate can’ cheat the devil fore’er, but many times.”

Carefully she inched forward, the torch stretched before her as far as her arm allowed. The light touched rock, countless bones of small animals, picked clean, the dirty remains of a coat, two large, glittering black eyes. Pintel hissed, and Emily stopped dead in her tracks.

The creature before them was certainly not a bird - it was something out of a nightmare. Nearly as tall as a man, it had a face not unlike a monkey’s. Leathery skin covered its thin body; its feet ended in sharp claws, and it sported a bat’s wings, but big enough to fit its size.

Slowly, Emily retreated, never taking her eyes off the creature. It blinked. Then it straightened lazily, stretched its wings, shook itself and impossibly quickly chased after Emily, its upper part of the body parallel to the ground. When it pulled back its lips, it revealed rows of sharp teeth.

Emily drove the torch into its face. It howled shrilly, knocked the torch out of her hand with a quick movement of its head and clamped its teeth around her neck which broke with a sharp crack.

Ragetti screamed and ran forward.

The creature shook Emily's lifeless body in its mouth and let it fall to the ground. For a moment it seemed to them as though it was grinning at them gloatingly. Then it jabbed forth its winged arm that ended in a wicked claw. Blood spurted as it hit Ragetti squarely in the face.

And then, literally, all hell broke loose.

Pintel fired a shot into the creature's forehead and with a strange gurgling sound it collapsed; there was a loud flapping as from all over the face of the cliff similar creatures took flight, probably attracted to the smell of blood; screaming, Tisonnier was carried off; Beak fired at one of the creature's descending on them, missed and was the next to die; Jacoby threw grenades, cackling madly and blowing up winged hunters in mid-flight; Barbossa took another one down with a shot; Ian panicked and ran only to be picked up by a creature in flight and gutted alive. Howling, Doug threw himself at it. He managed to cling to his brother's legs until the creature under the added weight plummeted down into the water several feet beneath them where it and Doug grappled with each other. Like vultures, other creatures circled over them, then dived.

For a mad moment Bill felt the urge to come to his shipmate's help; he had almost stepped out of the protecting cover of the small cave they had sought sanctuary in when he heard a voice from somewhere above him.

"No!" Jack called. "Up there!" He pointed to the top of the cliff. "They need open space to fly. I doubt they'll follow us if we keep to the trees. That's our only chance."

Meanwhile, the creatures were swarming the gorge. "We're not makin' it back to the ship, are we," Bill stated.

Jack shook his head. "Not for a while. Now I suggest we get moving unless we want to end up on the dinner plate of our lovely new acquaintances."

In all their life the pirates had never run or climbed as fast as they did now. Jack and Tia Dalma led the way, Bill, who forgot all about his bad leg, hard on their heels, followed by Barbossa, with Pintel half-carrying a semiconscious Ragetti who was still clutching his blood-streaked face and the rest of their crew in hot pursuit all over the side of the cliff. Halfway up Roksnoer was picked up by another creature and carried away, screaming for help. They closed their ears to his screams and to the gruesome sounds echoing around the gorge, their thoughts centred solely on their escape.

Suddenly, one of the creatures grabbed Jack's shoulders and hoisted him up. His sword clattered on the stones as he lost his grip on it. He tried to hold on to something but the walls were too smooth, and he was being pulled closer and closer to the ledge's edge.

Bill took a leaf out of Doug's book, caught hold of the young pirate's bandolier with one hand, drew his sword with the other and pulled with all his strength. As the blade pierced the creature's flesh, a bubbling black liquid oozed from the wound, staining the blade and burning wherever it touched their skin. Cursing, Bill let go of the sword.

His maneuver, however, had the desired effect. Howling painfully, the creature loosed its grip and tumbled out of sight; Grapple and the bo'sun seized Bill just in time to save him and Jack from following their attacker over the edge.

The young captain looked slightly green. "Thanks, mate!" he gasped.

Several other creatures closed in on them.

"Thank me when we're out o' here," Bill said.

"And there you're right."

They hastily withdrew.

Two other pirates were carried off till the decimated crew finally reached the top of the cliff and stumbled off into the jungle. Looking over his shoulder, Bill saw the boldest of the winged hunters give chase. But apparently Jack was right; in the thick underbrush the pirates were at an advantage and soon shook off their pursuers.

Chapter 20:
Little Hut in the Jungle

Exhausted yet too agitated (no-one would actually use the word 'frightened') to stop they made their way higher and higher into the mountains. The forest grew still denser as they went. The groping, tangled branches blocked out what little sunlight was left. Their footsteps were muffled; whispering leaves and the slow dripping of water were the only sounds they heard. Beyond the watching trees, the shadows were impenetrably thick.

"Whatever were they thinkin'?" Scarus panted at one point. "Those what drew the map, I mean. You'd think they'd warn everyone away from such a place, don't you?"

Nobody answered and Scarus himself did not push the matter. Probably talking was just his way of coping with the shock.

They stumbled on for what felt like miles until Ragetti collapsed. Tia Dalma knelt down beside him and began to rummage in her bag.

"Maybe we should rest," suggested Jack unnecessarily.

They flopped down where they stood, breathing heavily. Only Barbossa remained standing and looked around with distaste.

"Too open," he objected. "Over yonder the ground appears to be risin'. Maybe there's some cave to be found."

"Spare us," Quarry groaned. "We've had enough caves for the rest of our lives."

"Swab," replied Barbossa crossly.

Bill watched Tia Dalma beginning to work on Ragetti's face and found he had not the stomach to sit and think. He struggled to his feet again. "Let's go," he said.

Bill and Barbossa roamed the forest for a while longer, following the sound of water tickling nearby until they came upon a small creek. After drinking their fill they set out again. The creek led them deeper into the jungle until they suddenly stumbled into a clearing of yellow, sickly grass. The decayed remains of a wooden hut stood there, now little more than a shell of crumbling walls. A gaping hole that might once have been a doorway led into the rotting building. The roof had collapsed, leaving the interior open to the sky; the floor was nothing but bare, beaten dirt. But the creek ran close by and there was even an old fireplace in front of the hut.

"Cozy," Barbossa said.

They went to fetch their shipmates.

While Tia Dalma cared for the wounded as best as she was able, the rest of the survivors lit a fire against the approaching darkness and began to clear away the remains of the roof. Centipedes and beetles scurried away from under the rotten boards. Some smashed clay pots occupied one corner of the hut; in the other lay the skeleton of a human still clad in the shreds of a once-colorful robe.

Alarmed by their exclamations, Tia Dalma joined them. Barbossa stood looking down at the skeleton. "Didn't get himself eaten, by the looks of it," he said.

Tia Dalma knelt down and took one of the bones in her hand. Closing her eyes, she moved her lips silently.

"Yes," she agreed after a moment, "him lived here for a long, long time and died a peaceful deat. A priest of a doomed people." She opened her eyes wide. "An Aztec priest."

"How can you tell?" Pintel asked.

She just looked at him, and he blanched.

"So," Jacoby said hesitatingly, "are we supposed to bury him or somethin'?"

"Not tonight," replied Barbossa at once. "Let him lie there. It's not like he'd take up any space we need."

They had a cheerless meal by the campfire's light, too tired to even fight the mosquitos that descended on them in droves.

Bill slept poorly that night.

He dreamt he was with Mary – now there was a thought – and she seemed so real, down to every small detail he had almost forgotten: her serious dark eyes, the few unfashionable but very becoming freckles, the way she smiled, first curving one corner of her mouth, then the other; he could even smell the scent of her hair and skin. And then it was no longer Mary but Emily, smiling at him, Emily lying on the ground of a cave littered with bones, her eyes blank and staring, her body broken, while the winged hunter grinned at him, the smell of decay heavy on the air, turning into something once-human

that grinned at him from aboard the twisted nightmare of a ship which smelled like rotting seaweed and everything that had ever died in the ocean.

Expect it was the moist, earthen smell of the jungle with a trace of smoke; a campfire burnt nearby, and there was the low murmur of two familiar voices.

“Somethin’s botherin’ me,” said Barbossa.

“Me, too.” That was Jack, sounding depressed. “There’s no rum.”

Barbossa refused to be distracted. “What’s an Aztec priest doin’ out here on his own, surrounded by a flock o’ man-eatin’ beasts? And why would someone bother to draw a map o’ this place?”

“He was stranded here and sent a message in a bottle,” suggested Jack.

“It was written in English.”

“What’s your point?”

“Aztec, Sparrow. Rings a bell?”

“The Aztecs... were conquered by Cortés.”

“Aye.”

“And they had a lot of gold.”

“Aye.”

“According to legend.”

“Accordin’ to legend, aye.”

“But this particular Aztec had no gold.”

“No, he had not.”

“Strange, considering he was a priest. Which means... he had something much more better than gold.”

“Aye.”

“Which was entrusted to him because he was a priest.” Jack jumped to his feet in growing excitement.

“So he went into seclusion on an island only the most foolish of the brave would dare enter, and those would end up in the bellies of our winged friends. The secret was safe with him – and he carried it into his grave,” he added soberly. “Most likely, the location of this island was only known to the Aztecs. Denton learned of it...”

“From Mad José, probably for nothin’ more than a bottle of rum,” completed Barbossa. Bill could almost hear him smiling broadly.

“Yo ho ho.” Jack pounded his fist into his left palm. “Mr. Barbossa, I knew I was right in making you me first mate.”

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“Still, the question is what to do now. Dead men...”

Jack pursed his lips and slowly turned to look at Tia Dalma, keeping watch over the unconscious Ragetti.

Chapter 21:
Captain's Log: Dead Man Tells A Tale

She gives me The Look.

"Very well," she says, "but I demand payment."

And there you think: friendly turn...

But Tia Dalma is different from any other woman I've ever met. She is... well, she's like the sea, actually. Possessive, rough, gentle and mysterious. At times she is your home. Another time you're fighting a nearly hopeless battle. You can only hope the hurricane will blow itself out and that which is left of you will be able to sail on with some new canvas and tar. In short, Tia is heaven and hell at the same time. The sea in its purest form - adorable, dirty and full of treasures. I don't want to drop anchor anywhere else. Well, most of the time.

Barbossa hasn't learned to rightly judge her yet, that must be why he's smiling now. She has given her consent, hasn't she?

Raising the dead is dangerous. I think. But the thing that worries me is: Why has she given her consent? And what will be the price we have to pay for it?

Tia Dalma is a true pirate. Everything she does, she does for one reason only: She's in the mood for it. The Why beats me. But she has her reasons - reasons mere mortals like ourselves will never understand. And the price might - from her point of view - be fair but it will cost us more than we bargained for. There's nothing for free. Quid pro quo. No matter if our lives depend on it or not. Pirate to the core. For that I love her.

"You want me to bring you knowledge of the dead. I want you to bring me knowledge of him who cannot die. Knowledge for knowledge, hm? Dere is dis chest. An old friend of mine and Jack has hidden it. I would want to know where."

Wicked lady. That was good. Had it been gold or any other valuable item, they others would never agree. They never understand what gets us into the deeper trouble. Those yarns, spun by old salts in the evenings by the fireplace, have cost more lives than any treasure.

"You want to know where it is."

Ah, Hector, you think you're so clever. You could just have your thoughts tattooed into your eyeballs. You give her the location and lift the treasure yourself. Aye, that might be interesting. I wager a thousand guineas on her. No matter what it is and who lifts it, it will be exactly as she wants it to be. "I want your word and dat of your crew dat you will bring me dis knowledge."

"You got it!"

Barbossa shoots me an angry glance. Thought he'd play captain, eh? No, important decisions are made by Captain Jack Sparrow only. I'm the man with the ship and the plan. And something's telling me I'm in deep now. Tia's vocabulary is extensive but *Parlay* doesn't exist in it.

I don't know what's more beautiful, Tia Dalma's purring because she's had her way or Barbossa's muttered oaths. I only wish there'd be rum. The crew would appreciate the upcoming spectacle much more if they were drunk. Don't want them to run off screaming; after all, the priest has seen better times. I wonder how he'll be able to speak, being completely gutless and all. On the other hand, maybe it's a good thing there's no rum - there's enough poultry on this island to eat the entire Royal Navy. I'm sure they'd like pirate-pickled-in-rum. But we need at the very least six men to crew the *Pearl*.

"Bill Turner," Tia says.

A curious habit of hers, addressing people by their full names. I asked her about it once and her answer was unhelpful as usual. "Dere is power in names, Jack Sparrow," she replied. "Everyting dere is to know about a person is written in him name." Like I said, unhelpful as usual.

"Give me your knife," she orders.

Bootstrap obeys without questioning her. That's my Tia. Though I'd dearly like to know what she needs any sharp object for...

A gorgeous bonfire. Who wouldn't want to wake up when there's a nice fire and something yummy to eat? I confess I'm unable to appreciate Tia's culinary arts. I'm trying, honestly, but she's... different in that aspect, too. Now, for example, she's beheading the large snake she has picked up somewhere (are there snakes around? And I thought mosquitos were a problem!) and lets the blood drip into a pot. The meat ends up in the fire. That smells delicious for a while but is done far too soon. And we don't have enough salt with us to eat it nevertheless. But maybe skeletons like it that way.

“Jack, stand over dere. Barbossa – dere...” Tia Dalma would make a great captain. Or a dog trainer. A sea dog trainer perhaps. Even good Hector slips on his place without protest. But of course they’re just following their captain’s good example. Discipline is important. Follow the man with the ship and the plan, and gold and rum will follow you all your life. It’s written somewhere. All your life. If you’re not at sea at the time. Or in prison. Or... well, never mind.

The situation is almost funny. A bunch of tried and tested cutthroats are standing solemnly around some bones. Tia passes the pot around.

“Speak after me: ‘Quetzalcoatl-Ehecatl – my blood for your sacrifice.’”

“The witch ain’t gettin’ my blood.”

“Mr. Pintel!” Barbossa does what he does best – he gets loud. “Show some respect! You’ll do what yer told! Think if it were dangerous, me or the captain would go along with it?”

Tia Dalma’s charming smile is more frightening than anything she could ask of me. “When you have spoken de words spit into de pot and pass it on to de next man. Den, when I tell you, spill some of your blood on de eart.”

Pintel isn’t as stupid as he looks. He doesn’t dare to mutiny openly, otherwise we might have all the blood we need, but he presses the pot into my hand first of all. Damn.

“Capt’n, maybe you could show us how it’s done?”

A heavy burden to bear, being captain. “Quetkotehekat – my blood for your sacrifice!” I spit in defiance of death and pass the pot on to Barbossa. Either you have authority or you haven’t. Nothing to do with disgust.

Now Tia draws some symbols on the ground around us. She picks up some dirt and scatters it in all directions, all the while singing strange sounds – a drunken cat sounds more melodic. Whenever someone of the crew dares to stir she glares at him murderously, so very soon nobody seems even to breathe anymore. That’s my crew. Discipline like the Navy.

Some time later, I’ve nearly fallen asleep, she rushes forward with a cry and pours the brew on the bones. Silence. The jungle is still. The fire crackles. The flames are blazing.

There are bones, just bones, ugly, dirty bones, nothing else. Somebody starts laughing, and everyone else joins in. This is a good one. We are the captain and crew of the *Black Pearl*, the terror of the Spanish Main, and we’re standing ceremoniously around some dirty bones.

Wait, did they just... No, they can’t have moved. They’re just bones. Bones, bones, bones... I become absorbed in the contemplation of the flames and recite my mantra... bones, bones, bones...

On said bones, dramatically assembled by Tia Dalma, something has materialized. It can’t be flesh or skin, it’s the wrong color, even in the misleading light of the bonfire. Kind of grayish stuff. It’s remarkable how mad a heap of bones can look. They garble something definitely unfriendly sounding. Anyone speaking Aztecish, please step forth.

Tia Dalma actually begins talking to the bones, ignoring the rest of us. It’s gotten cold here, somehow. I don’t like this. I wish I knew what she and Boney are talking about. Tia takes the knife, cuts her hand and flicks her blood at both Boney and the earth. Boney snarls. When she passes the knife to me I quickly follow her lead. My beauty is driving a hard bargain here. Boney doesn’t appear impressed or willing to cooperate; I get the feeling he’s just waiting for someone to make a false move. Luckily my crew is so scared, I’d have to carry them in order to move them from the spot. In the end, Boney simply collapses.

Tia looks tired. “Dere is a treasure.” At least some manner of success. “But only de royal family knows where it is hidden. De knowledge is passed from generation to generation and now dere are only two of dem left, Princess Chalchiuhtl and Prince Xipilli. It was de duty of dis priest to keep deir haven secret from de conquerors. He was not happy when I forced him to disclose it.”

“Yes, yes, now where are those illustrious nobles?” Barbossa can be so impatient when he’s angry – or was it the other way around?

“I will show you on your charts.” She begins to lay out the bones in an orderly fashion. “For years and years he kept him secret,” she says very quietly, “all for notting.”

I decide to come to her aid. Yes, even in a situation like this I rarely forget my manners. “You should rest, love. We’ll clean – this here - up. You’ve helped us a lot.”

Her eyes blaze but she lets it pass.

We dig a grave for the bones. Nobody cares much to stay here any longer but nobody wants to risk returning to the *Pearl* in the middle of the night, either. So we all huddle on the edges of the clearing,

as far away from the grave and the fireplace as possible. I can't even begin describe how happy I'll be to finally feel the planks of my ship under my feet again.

Chapter 22:
Bound For New Shores

They returned to the *Pearl* by following the coast. There was no thought of hunting parrots or enjoying the lush countryside with its generous supply of fruit; all they wanted was to get back to the *Pearl* without suffering another attack of the winged hunters or meeting someone else returned from the dead. When they finally caught sight of their ship by the end of the third day none of them had probably ever been gladder in their entire life.

Half an hour later they had left the Island of the Four Winds and its horrors behind them for good. Sparrow stood at the helm while Moneybag, Mallot and Tom were told the grisly story of the expedition by the surviving crew members.

Bill went below to reclaim his knife still in Tia Dalma's possession. The mystic had been very subdued on their way back and the crew, not surprisingly, had given her a wide berth. When Bill found her in the crew's quarters looking after Ragetti, she pulled the knife out of her pack without so much as a glance.

"You all right?" he asked reluctantly. He was not afraid of her, not really; but after having witnessed what she was capable of he wondered what she might have done to him that night on Tortuga, had he refused to bow to her wishes. "You've been awfully quiet these last three days."

She smiled somewhat forlornly. "Dere's always a price dat must be paid. Life is about balance. I wonder what might come of dis."

"I thought the blood..."

"Bah!" She waved his remark aside. "A sacrifice owed to de god. But Naui Ehecatl did not wish to come back. We stole him secret from him and made him betray him vows. What's de price for dat, hm?"

Bill had never thought about it. If he followed Tia Dalma's line of thought, the result was not pleasant. "Balance, you say."

"Yes." Her bloodshot eyes bored into him. "What vows might you be made to betray, Bill Turner?"

He shrugged. "I'm a pirate. Betrayal is part o' the game."

"Ah." There was a shrewd expression in her eyes now. "So you have to learn first what it means to betray. And if you do, you will not be able to undo it."

He felt vaguely unsettled by her prediction. "Can you foretell the future?" he asked.

"I can see how de currents flow. But de sea is always changing, don't it? Be careful about your choices. Dere are currents swirling around you and I cannot yet say where dey'll lead you."

"To an early and wet grave, I reckon," he attempted a light tone.

She weighed his knife on her palm. "What do you tink awaits you dere?" she asked.

"Heaven or hell, I guess. Most likely the latter."

"Have you some loved one who went before you?"

He frowned. "Someone who has already died, you mean? Well, my parents, for a start."

"And were your bond to dem strong enough to light you a lamp on your dark journey?"

It was an abstract way of thinking, yet Bill thought he understood what she meant. "I don't think so," he confessed.

She handed him the knife. "Den, I fear," she said, "you will find hell on your passage indeed."

Bill watched her walk away, wondering what she had just tried to tell him. Balance. Cause and effect. Death and the afterlife. She was a deep one, no doubt about that.

Just when he was about to tuck his knife away he noticed the change that had come over it. Muttering a soft oath, he stepped closer to the light but there had been no mistake – the formerly bright blade was stained black.

"Cause and effect," he grumbled. This was what came from going along with Jack's mad schemes.

He went to check on Ragetti. Their shipmate had been unconscious for most of the time since his collapse in the jungle. Tia Dalma had administered what help she could; half of Ragetti's face was covered in bandages. Softly, Bill stepped to the makeshift bed.

"How's he?" he asked.

Pintel who looked after his friend sniffed. "The eye's gone for good," he said in a somewhat unsteady voice, "but I think he'll live."

Their shipmate was very pale under his tan; he seemed to have regained consciousness, yet he gave no sign that he heard them.

“It’s up to him now,” Bill said. “Let me know if he needs anything.” He had almost turned away when Ragetti spoke in barely more than a whisper.

“It’s a shame abou’ Emily.”

Bill stopped. With the fight and flight going on, the appearance of the dead priest and the lengthy journey back, he had almost forgotten about the piratess. Or maybe he had just repressed the memory of her gruesome death. Sighing deeply, he knelt down beside Ragetti and rested a hand sympathetically on his shoulder.

“Aye,” he said, “a shame. She was the best o’ us lot.”

“She didn’ deserve to die like that.”

“No. But at least it was a quick death.” Bill hesitated. “She really liked you, you know.”

Ragetti nodded weakly.

Bill got up and returned to deck. Thinking of Emily made him realize there was something he had to talk about with Sparrow, and if now wasn’t the best time to do it, then when was?

“Tell me somethin’, Jack,” Bill said, stepping up to the young captain. “What would you have done with Emily – had she survived?”

Jack squinted into the setting sun. “That wouldn’t have been my decision to make, would it? The crew had a lot to say in that matter.” He checked the compass and corrected their course. “But I thought a bit of keelhauling might do the trick.”

Bill drew his knife and tried to clean the stained blade on his coat – with little to no success. “That wouldn’t by chance have appealed to you because Barbossa suggested it, would it?” he asked casually.

“Actually, it was Emily who gave me the idea.”

Bill waited but no further explanation was coming. “And if, in the process, the rope had... let’s say... slipped?”

Sparrow made a face. “Now, mate, what kind of pirate would tie a sloppy knot such as that?” he replied.

Bill smiled. “A good man, I guess.”

“Well, I’m glad we’re not talking about people I know.” Sparrow gestured towards a bottle tucked safely away in a corner near the stairs. “Pass the rum, will you?”

Chapter 23:
Three Months Later

The office was small in comparison to those of higher ranking agents, yet still luxurious as befitting the Honourable East India Trading Company. High, narrow windows opened to London's Leadenhall Street, polished boards made up the floor, a silver clock ticked softly on a desk of mahogany wood and the room was filled with a faint but pungent smell of sealing wax.

The inconspicuous man with the dark hair standing by the window would have looked like just another clerk but for his eyes. Cold and calculating, they were also constantly alert to any movement and took in every detail of the room, especially the only two personal items in it: Two small portraits on the desk, one of an imposing man in the uniform of an officer of the Royal Navy, draped in mourning band, the other, drawn in pencil, of a pretty, demure-looking girl. It would not do to disregard any information, no matter how insignificant it might appear.

Mercer was no gentleman; he had worked his way up, out of the gutter, through talent and ruthlessness alone. When Cutler Beckett had first hired him he had expected it to be nothing more than a simple commission; however, his work had satisfied the ambitious young writer* so much that he called on Mercer again. And again. Unexpectedly they found themselves entering a partnership that benefited them both. Some skeletons in the cupboard exposed, some competitors eliminated, and Beckett was rising through the ranks, accumulating wealth and power; Mercer was rising with him.

His latest commission had been carried out successfully as usual when in a strange twist of fate he had learned of the death of Beckett's father – and that his own intermittent lover had been one of the people responsible for it, a fact that he had put to good use.

Cutler Beckett listened to his report without interrupting him. Already Mercer could see the younger man's sharp mind working behind his calm face. When he had finished, Beckett was silent for a while. "Jack Sparrow," he finally said; it was hardly more than a sigh. "I should have guessed." He got to his feet and went to a window. "Did they find what they were looking for?"

"I'm afraid the *Black Pearl* returned to Tortuga with few survivors, and none of them appeared to be any richer than before – except for stories."

"As credible as the one about this Davy Jones character."

"My source isn't likely to have lied about that, sir."

"A true legend, then?" Beckett shot him a glance. "Did your source tell you more about it?"

"That she did."

"She?" repeated Beckett. "My, my. A woman sailing with a pirate crew. I'm impressed. She must be formidable indeed." He turned around. "I would like to hear it."

"According to legend, Davy Jones once cut out his heart because of rejected love and hid it away. As long as his heart's still beating Jones can't be killed. My source couldn't say whether it was true."

"But if the first part of the legend is, so may be the rest." Beckett nodded. "I see. She said nothing about the hiding place of the heart?"

"It's unknown to anyone."

"Well," Beckett said after a while, "maybe that information might be of some use in the future. For now... did your source mention what Jack Sparrow plans to do next?"

"I'm afraid she didn't return to Tortuga. However, by the looks of it Sparrow was planning on staying there for a while to repair his ship."

"I see." Beckett returned to his desk and looked at the two portraits. "You have done well, Mr. Mercer, as usual. Expect compensation for your troubles shortly. Now there is another matter I would like to entrust you with. You know that Director Waite is ailing..."

* A junior rank in the EITC, apprentice factor.