

THE DAMNED TREASURE ISLAND

The Pirate Protocol



Michael Lappenbusch

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Chapter 1 - The drunkard in the harbor

I tell you, every hole on the coast has its own stench, but our inn smelled of a strange mixture of wet rope, cold ash, and the excuses of men who never return home. If the sea is a jaw, then our tavern was tartar. My old man polished the counter as if it could stop the waves. My mother counted coins as if they were diseases. And I stood among them like a poorly carved figurehead, a rag in my hand, feeling that the evening owed us a lot of trouble.

He came just before dusk, as trouble always does, with a crate on his back and a look that said, "I've seen more than you'll ever be able to bear." A heavy man, his skin like old canvas, his hands covered with scars as if he'd dug into the belly of the sea with his nails. He threw open the door, looked around as if choosing his victim, and then laid his crate in the corner as tenderly as a father lays down a sleeping child—except that his crate didn't contain a child, but something that makes people stupid: hope.

"Rum," he said, his voice as rough as a pile of sand. "And if it's cheap, bring two."

I placed the jug in front of him. He sniffed it, as if checking whether we were trying to poison him. Then he drank as if he had to burn a hole in the evening before entering it. As he did so, he let his gaze sweep around the room: at the fisherman with the broken earlobe, at the two day laborers sharing a herring, at the mustache who always laughed too loudly when things got dicey. And at me. Longer than necessary.

"What's that kid's name?" he asked without looking at me.

"Jim," said my father.

"Jim." He nodded, as if we had a contract. "Jim, you show me the cliffs tomorrow morning. The ones where the wind flies the seagulls backward. I'll pay in cash or stories, whichever is more valuable to you."

"Bar," my mother said without looking up.

He grinned, so sparingly that it was almost a twitch. "Of course."

Sometimes you can tell from a grin that you'll be cleaning up blood later. I wish I were wrong.

The guy called himself Bill, but there was a hint of "Captain" in the back of his tongue. He refused to say his last name, as if he'd lost it in a harbor where people answer questions with stones. He paid for the first night, but for the following nights, he only made promises, and we accepted them like idiots because his look said it was better not to rush him. I've seen people who were on their last penny—with Bill, I felt like we were his last refuge, and if we took that away, he'd take our teeth with us.

He ate like someone who believes his next meal will be interrupted by gunshots. He drank as if there were a secret in the bottom of the jug, a secret that could only be tasted at the bottom. And he had these twitches when the door opened. A brief freeze, his hand toward his coat, a half-turn, as if trying to avoid the draft. I noticed that he never took his eyes off the box. When the sun moved, he moved with it, so that the shadow was always between him and the box, as if it were an animal that needed to be fed with sun.

That first night, two sailors were playing cards, and one of them said too loudly that the chest looked heavy. "Heavy is good," said Bill, standing up, standing behind him, and putting his hand on his shoulder—a hand so big it looked like a piece of broken railing. "Heavy means you don't want to carry it, friend. Heavy means it would carry you, straight to the bottom." The sailor nodded as if someone had readjusted his neck, and Bill sat back down, drank, and I vowed to only look halfway from now on, so I'd have the other half to run away with later.

On the third day, he came for me at dawn. The light was pale as a fresh ghost. "Cliffs, Jim." He smelled of rum and salt and a sweat that came from a time when men slept on wood and prayed with knives.

We climbed the path, the stones slipping beneath our shoes. "Listen," he said, "if anyone asks for me, a black guy with some kind of... sagging in his walk, as if he'd once stood too close to the sound of a cannon—tell him there's nothing here but stinking fish and a mother who prays too much. Got it?"

"If I lie, I'll get in trouble," I said.

"Kid," he stopped and looked at me, "you're in trouble for breathing. The only question is who you're breathing it for."

He pointed his chin at the sea. "See that? This is the only church that ever taught me anything. And its prayers are storms."

I thought men like him talked like that to impress you. Later I realized: He talks like that because otherwise he'd start shouting.

That evening, a doctor sat in our room, neatly dressed, but with a look that said he'd seen a lot of dirt. Dr. Livesey. He came because the fisherman with the broken earlobe now also had a broken leg, thanks to a barrel sliding off the carriage. The doctor sews, drills, and splints, as if people were pieces of furniture that you put back in place when they wobble. He drank water. In our dive. Water! I thought he was trying to provoke us.

Bill didn't like him. Men like Bill don't like people who fix things. For them, things are only useful as long as they break things.

"Nice hands, Doctor," Bill growled, "clean. Have you ever held something that resisted?"

Livesey looked at him like a teacher at the loudest screamer. "Every day, Captain. Mostly it's men who think rum is a meal."

I laughed, too loudly, and Bill's gaze hit me like the back of a hand. "And you, brat, don't laugh at men who've sailed more than you've walked the streets. Bring me rum."

I brought him the rum. I learned quickly—faster than I would have liked.

Later that evening, a new guy walked in the door. Thin, with one eye that looked away and a mouth that smiled as if he'd never learned how. He had a

graze across his cheek, fresh enough to demand an answer. I felt Bill harden next to me, like a rowing bench.

"I'm looking for a friend," said the thin man. "He calls himself Bill. Or doesn't call himself at all. He has a box and a bad temper and the smell of old rope."

No one said anything. The room held its breath.

Bill didn't get up. He took a single, long breath. "Tell him you didn't see him," he hissed at me, his lips still motionless. "Tell him there's nothing but stinking fish here."

I took a step forward. "All we have today is herring," I said. "And a mother who prays too much."

The thin man looked at me. Then he looked at the room. Behind him, a wind blew through the door, and I heard the sea, as if it suddenly had an extra tooth.

"Oh," he said. "Then say hello to your mother. And say hello to the fish."

He left. And I realized I'd been holding my breath for so long that I was dizzy.

"Good," said Bill. Sweat stood on his upper lip, not from the fever, but from a memory that rippled through the room like a knife through a chamois. "Son, you won't sleep tonight. You keep watch. If anyone comes, knock on the box three times. Three times, not twice. If I knock twice, I'll get up and accidentally stab you."

"Why me?" I asked stupidly.

"Because you're the only one here who could run fast enough to die where I can see it."

The night stretches across the harbor like an old net: full of holes, full of shadows. I sat on the floor, the crate against the wall, my back aching, and my brain constricted every thought so tightly that nothing came out except fear and a few ridiculous prayers I no longer even recognized.

Bill wasn't snoring. He was awake, but he was lying there, like a harpoon pretending to be nothing but wood. His right hand rested on the edge of the table, a finger's breadth from the knife handle. The rum stood beside him, half empty, half promise.

Around midnight, I heard footsteps outside, the clacking of heels on pavement, slow, as if someone were counting the beat to their own heartbeat so as not to notice how fast it was getting. Then a scratching at the door. Not loud. Rather polite. Like someone asking: May I come in to kill you?

I knocked on the chest three times. My ankle ached from the third blow. Bill was on his feet at the same moment. No sailor gets up that quickly—only men who have been late before.

The door opened. The thin man from the afternoon entered, followed by another – broader, with a face like a fist. The wind blew in, bringing with it a chill and that secret salty sound, as if the waves wanted to listen.

"Evening," said the thin man. "Greetings to the mother. And the fish."

"Greetings back," said Bill. His voice was a wire saw. "Now get lost."

"We just want to talk," said the thin man. "About old times. About debts. About... cards."

The word fell into the room, and everything else took a step back.

"Cards?" asked my mother, appearing at the door to the back room, white around the nose and proudly flexing her hips. "We don't play here."

"You can tell," said the thin man, smiling. He showed teeth so neat they looked fake. "But we do. Bill, old friend: The captain wants to know if you're still thinking about him."

Bill blinked slowly. "I'm thinking about a lot of things. Knives, for example."

The Broad took a step forward. "We want the map."

And there it was. The secret at the bottom of the jug. I looked at the box, and the box looked back at me, as if to say: Well, now we're honest.

"No map here," Bill lied without breaking a sweat. "Just smelly fish and a mother who prays too much."

"Then pray now," said the thin man, "for quick fingers."

He took a step—and Bill was already there. Not elegant, not beautiful; just effective, like a falling anvil. His knife shot out like a sudden wind, a short, ugly

blast, and the broad man stumbled back, surprised that blood is the same color as sunsets.

The room exploded. The thin man jumped, I jumped too, but only to the side. My mother didn't scream; she threw a pot. It hit the thin man on the shoulder, hot stew over cold hatred. Bill laughed, briefly, a sound like breaking glass. The broad man fell to his knees, wheezing, searching for his stomach with his hand as if there were a missing key.

"Jim!" yelled Bill. "Back door! Run!"

I ran. Not because I was brave, but because fear has legs. I stumbled through the kitchen, out into the alley, over fish crates that smelled of yesterday, and the night wind hit me in the face like an honest enemy. Voices behind me, the harbor in front, shadows to the left, cliffs to the right. I ran to the shed where we stored the salt. Open the door, go in, close it. I held my breath, as if it could dilute me.

I heard footsteps. Someone stopped in front of the door. A breath, quiet. Then a whistle, a little melody, friendly like that of a man petting a dog. I thought my heart was the size of a pebble. I thought, if I die now, at least I'll die quietly.

The door didn't open. The footsteps continued. I stayed until the whistling was a memory. Then I crawled out the small window at the back, almost fell into the pile of old sails, cursed as quietly as one can curse, and lay on my stomach like a thief who wants nothing but to steal another breath.

When I returned to the inn, it was quiet. Too quiet. That's the worst kind of noise.

Bill sat on the floor, the box pulled up against the wall, his hand bloody, the knife gone. The broad one was no longer there. The thin one wasn't there either. Only a trail leading to the door—a red line that said: We'll be back, but we'll be back again.

"You're alive," said Bill, and I didn't know whether he was relieved or disappointed. "Good. Listen, Jim. There are things that turn men into bundles of mistakes. And there are maps that turn mistakes into ships."

He wiped his mouth. "They want the map. They believe it will lead to something that will explain life to them: gold. Gold doesn't explain anything. Gold just makes you ask fewer questions, until you realize you've been silencing the wrong ones."

"Give them the map," I said, showing I was young. "Then they'll leave us alone."

Bill laughed. No broken glass this time. Just a cough. "Son, if you give a wolf the meat, he'll realize how hungry he is."

He leaned forward and opened the box with a key hanging from a string around his neck. Inside lay a cloth, old, patched, and underneath it, something flat and wrapped. He lifted it out and placed it on the table. It was heavier than it looked—things that change your life often feel heavier than they should. He folded back the fabric.

I saw lines. I saw circles and numbers and a large, arrogant X, as sure of itself as a king who was never deposed. In the margins, notes like curses, neatly written. And the sea, that mocking cow, smiled from the paper as if to say: Come on. I've been waiting for years.

Bill looked at me. "If you're smart, you run away now. If you're stupid, you stay. And if you're anything else, consider this: Sometimes it doesn't take courage to get on a ship. Sometimes it takes courage not to get on one."

The door knocked. As politely as before. Three times, slowly. I felt the room hold its breath again.

"They like it polite," I whispered.

"Politeness is just violence in packaging," said Bill. He rewrapped the card. "And we're out of wrapping paper."

He pulled me behind the counter and handed me the package. "If I fall, you run. To the doctor. Or to whoever you think won't sell right away. This," he tapped the package, "is a promise. For some, the promise of the end, for some, the beginning. For you—" He paused. Men like him don't pause. When they pause, there's truth in the way. "For you, it's a question of what kind of man you want to be, Jim."

The knocking grew louder. Then we heard a voice, soft as butter, friendly as a dog that's already bitten: "Bill, old friend. Open up. There are three of us. We don't want to shout. We just want to... talk."

Bill looked at me and nodded, as if I'd just poured him a drink. "Okay," he said. "Then we'll talk."

He stood up, took a breath like someone about to dive, and put his hand on the door.

I held the map so tightly that it cut into my fingers, and thought: Some stories begin when you run away. Ours began when we unlocked the door.

And when the lock clicked, I knew we wouldn't make it through the evening without a new enemy—or a new reason to wake up in the morning.

You want to know why I stayed? Because some nights look at you so meanly that you stare back. Because as a boy, you think blood is a good argument. Because I saw something in Bill's hands I'd never seen anywhere else: the look of a man who knows his time isn't enough—and who still gives you a portion of it, so you can look into the abyss and come back with a story to keep you awake when everything else is asleep.

The door opened.

And the sea held its breath.

Chapter 2 - A map, a knife and too many bottles of rum

The door opened, and politeness was the first to leave the room. Three figures stood in the frame, as if they had framed him there to auction off their loot later. In front was the one with the buttery soft tone from before—a face that smiled like a blunt knife: it can still cut, but hurts more than necessary. Behind him was a dog-headed man, a scar across his forehead, eyes as empty as a harbor on a Monday. The third was small, a bundle of sinew and bad decisions, with a wooden club that looked as if it had often explained what words couldn't.

"Bill," said the soft one. "We'll talk."

"We do." Bill pushed the door open so wide that it slammed against the wall. The sound said: Something's about to break here, pick something. He leaned against the table as if it were his ship and we were just passengers with too much luggage. "Ask your questions. I only have short answers."

"The card." The soft man pointed with two fingers past his hat, as if there were etiquette when robbing. "You know how it goes. You have it, he wants it. You give it, we go."

"Who is he?" my mother asked, and in that moment I loved her not for her courage, but for carrying it like a weapon.

"Someone who doesn't like to introduce himself," said the soft one. "Call him the treasurer of hell."

"The treasurer should come himself," said Bill, "if he needs to collect so urgently."

The dog's head stepped forward, lifted the clubman, and looked back as if he were small and the law. "We'll take the box and everything in it," he said. "You can keep your breath."

Bill nodded. "The air is expensive."

"Not as expensive as your blood," said the soft one, drawing out the words as if they had sugar on them.

I felt the package under my vest. It made no noise, but it weighed. Not just in my hand, but in my head. Things that change your life suddenly take on weight everywhere.

"Boy," said the soft one, looking at me, "the door let you go safe and sound earlier. Let's not argue about it tonight."

"He has nothing you're interested in," said Bill. "He just has legs."

"I need that too," said the dog's head. "For walking when things get burnt."

"Then it's time to turn on the stove," said Bill, grabbing the bottle from the table, taking a long drag, and slamming the bottle down on the edge of the table so cleanly that the neck snapped off like a bad promise. The sharp glass teeth grinned. "Who goes first?"

The little one threw first. The club sank deeper than my fear, but not deep enough: Bill parried with the mouth of the bottle, wood on glass, an ugly sound that scratched at the bones. I jumped around the counter. My mother grabbed the cleaver—the one she used to turn fish into secrets. The soft one stayed in the doorway, as if to make sure the night didn't escape.

And then the room became small.

Small like a box where you don't know if the cat is alive.

Bill stepped forward, a movement as if his skin had learned how to pull on rope. The dog's head surged—a lot of mass, little idea—and Bill let him through, stepping to the side, mouth of a bottle in the ribs, a groan from another childhood. The little boy got back up, the club circled, hit a lamp, the wick fell, sparks across the table, as if someone had stolen stars from a bad story.

"Fire!" I cried, for I am as wise as bread.

My mother was faster than my mouth. She took the wet bundle of rags from the bucket, threw it on the table, and stamped out the sparks as if she had experience with this sort of thing. I swear, she did.

"Jim!" yelled Bill. "Back door—Doctor! Now!"

I felt the map under my vest, as if it were wriggling, a fish that already knew the net was a bad idea. I looked at the dodger. He smiled. It was a smile that said: Run, I'll meet you later. I hate smiles that make morning plans.

"Go," my mother said, without looking at me. You love people more when they pretend they're not afraid.

I walked. Not heroically. Not even particularly fast. I walked the way you walk when you have to go down a flight of stairs where you know the last few steps are missing. Through the kitchen, out the back door. The noise behind me was a chorus: wood, glass, men who wanted too much in one evening. The wind outside smelled of cold and the promise that you'd get more of it in a minute.

The alley tasted of salt. Footsteps to the left, voices to the right. I ran. My legs found the route before my head knew it: past the shed, over the bundle of rope, through the low gap between the crates. I heard the clubman cursing behind me. He sounded offended, as if I'd ruined a song for him.

"Jim!" a voice. Not Bill. Not my mother. High, too bright for the night. I whirled around, knife half-drawn—my knife, small but honest—and stared into the face of Ned, the cabin boy from the "Diligence," a barge licked more than a spoon in the poorhouse. His hair was in his face and his face was in the dirt. "Are you okay?" he asked, as idiots ask.

"Shut up," I hissed. "If you want to live, pretend you're not here."

"I'm good at that," he said, and for a second I liked him. Then I heard the footsteps again.

We turned the corner. In front of us was the low courtyard where the carts stood, half-empty, half-legal. In the distance were the dock lamps, hanging in the cold like tired eyes. I tucked the package under my belt, where the fabric was tighter, and pulled my coat over it, as if that would help against three men who wanted to "talk."

"To the doctor," I said.

"He lives up the street," said Ned. "But there's a lot going on there today. A wagon overturned, barrels all over the—"

"I don't care about barrels," I said. "I drink from the bottle."

We tore off, across the courtyard, down the side alley. A man stood on the corner, spitting. He spat with such concentration that he didn't even notice us flying past him like two pieces of bad news. Behind us, metal clanged. Somewhere, someone shouted, "Stop her!" and the alley pretended it hadn't heard.

The doctor lived in a house that looked as if one could breathe quietly inside. White window frames, beautifully peeling, a door that said: Order lives here. I hammered. Ned gasped. An old woman opened the door, her gaze as sharp as the scent of herbs behind her.

"For Dr. Livesey," I gasped. "Now. It—it burns."

It might not have burned, but if I have to choose between a lie and a hole in my stomach, I'll take the lie. She stared at me as if she knew that.

"Wait." Door closed. Footsteps. Voices. The kind of heads you hear while thinking. Then he came, the doctor, with his shirtsleeves rolled up and that look that counts things you don't want to count.

"Jim," he said simply. "You look like someone who insulted the night."

"Bill," I said. "Men. Knives. Map."

At the last word, his gaze briefly darkened, not fearful—calculating. I hate it when people calculate things that involve my blood.

"Come in," he said. "Quickly."

We went in. The door closed. The house smelled of alcohol, which isn't meant to be drunk, and of plaster. On the table lay a sheet of drawings of bones, next to it a bowl in which something was floating that didn't like to be asked questions. He looked at my vest. "Give it here," he said calmly.

I pulled out the package. It had soaked in sweat. I placed it on the table as if laying down an animal that might bite if it woke up. The doctor took a knife—thin, short, clean—and cut open the fabric without damaging the contents. He did what Bill hates: He fixed the situation by cutting it open.

There it lay, the map, in the light of his lamp. Lines, coordinates, notes, an "X" that looked like a bad joke about good money. I swore the paper sucked the air out of the room. Ned took a step back.

"Well," said the doctor quietly. "That explains why men are suddenly talking about politeness."

"He wants her," I said. "The treasurer of hell."

"He does," murmured the doctor. "And Bill?"

"Still alive," I said, "when I left." And then I hated myself for the "when I left." Words can carry guilt. Mine carried more that evening than I did.

"Ah, Jim," said the doctor, not kindly, not unkindly. "Courage is a strange thing. It rarely hides where you look for it."

He closed the map. "We'll take this to Squire Trelawney. He has money, influence, a thick skin, and the charm of a cannonball. He'll react foolishly, but he'll be useful."

"And Bill?" I asked more sharply.

"If Bill dies today," said the doctor, "it won't be because you ran. It will be because he stayed too late yesterday."

I wanted to argue, but there was a knock outside. It wasn't polite. The kind of knock that treats doors like wimps. The doctor looked at me, slipped the card into a leather bag that looked like it was made for secrets, and nodded toward the back stairs.

"Keller," he said. "And breathe calmly. Breathe calmly is half the cure."

We walked. Ned in front, me behind, leather bag under my arm. Downstairs, it smelled of earth and of things you pickle to prevent them from spoiling—funny that we were trying the same thing with Truth.

Voices above us. "Open up! Doctor! Open up!"—a forced officialness in his throat. The doctor opened the door. His voice became cool, polite. "What kind of emergency?"

"One concerning boxes," someone said. "And bills."

I crouched, the leather bag in my hands, my fingers as white as the teeth of a man who smiles because he is about to bite.

"Ned," I whispered, "if we have to get out of here—"

"Then we'll run," he whispered. "I'm good at disappearing."

"You better get good at surfacing," I said. "In the right place."

Upstairs, boots split the hallway in half. The voices drew closer. One male, empty, the other soft as a butcher's glove. I smelled the harbor, even though I was standing in a cellar: salt, metal, that subtle hint of fear when it's fresh.

"Doctor," said the soft voice, "we are looking for a boy."

"The city is full of them," the doctor said politely. "What kind?"

"The variety that produces more than it should."

Pause. Wood creaked. I heard a finger move across the table—I don't know where from, but I heard it. The soft voice sighed. "And a man named Bill. And a box that will soon be lighter."

"You're late," said the doctor. "Bill has been either early or late his whole life. Hard to hit. And boxes..." He let the sentence hang like a clothesline.

"May I look around?" asked the soft voice.

"May?" The doctor probably smiled. "Of course not. But you'll do it anyway."

Silence. Then footsteps. I pulled the bag closer. Ned next to me didn't move. A good boy. Or very exhausted.

A board in the floor gave way. A short, nasty noise, as if the house itself had decided it didn't want visitors. "Cellar?" asked the dog's head.

"Wine," said the doctor. "And things that need to rest."

"Well then," said the soft voice. "Let's not disturb the peace."

Her footsteps faded away. The door slammed shut, not loudly, but decisively. I exhaled, and I swear I heard the house exhale with me.

The doctor came down the stairs, slowly, as if time were a ladder. "Good," he said. "They're not stupid. That's bad. But they're not patient. That's good."

"And now?" I asked.

"Now," he said, "you go home. You look after your mother. I'll go to the Squire. And then," he tapped the leather bag, "a few very determined gentlemen will hear what we're up to. And they can decide whether they'd rather die for money or live for a story."

"What about Bill?" I heard my voice as if it didn't belong to me.

"If he's alive, he'll come," said the doctor. "If not—then we owe him a toast. A toast that pops."

He handed me a small package. "Whistle. Two shots. Not because you're supposed to hit, but because sometimes sound kills more than bullets. And—" he looked me straight in the eye, "—don't bother applying, Jim. These men are hiring, and their contracts are final."

We went back upstairs. The house acted as if nothing had happened. Houses like that. Outside, the night had passed, but not far enough. In the distance, a dog barked; nearby, someone laughed, unsure of what. I put the package away, nodded, and stepped out onto the street.

The way back was both shorter and longer. Shorter because my legs knew where to go. Longer because every shadow suddenly gave me an introduction: "Hello, I'm your new enemy."

The door to the inn stood open. Not far, just enough for the wind to peek in. I smelled blood, I smelled rum, I smelled an argument that still felt warm. I went in, quietly. When you've learned to walk quietly, sometimes you're heard—by things you don't want to see.

The room was an accident, regretted too late. Chairs were upside down. A glass that was only a rim. A mark on the floor told of someone who could no longer go.

"Mother?" I cried. My voice sounded like it wasn't getting through.

"Here," she said, her tone so steady I almost cried. She sat behind the counter, the cleaver handle dark with something that never quite fades. "It's... over. For today."

"Bill?"

"Alive. Still." She nodded toward the corner. Bill lay there as if someone had nailed him to the floor to keep him from falling off the edge. His hand clutched the chain with the key that no longer served any purpose. His breathing was heavy, but he was breathing. I almost liked him, then I remembered who I was.

"They'll be back," I said.

"Of course," she said. "People who knock politely rarely have only one visit planned."

I approached Bill. He opened one eye. It looked like a hole into which someone had poured light without hitting the target.

"Boy," he said roughly. "Did you...?"

"Sure," I said. "At the doctor's. He'll get the squire. And then—"

"Then we'll go to sea," murmured Bill. "Where else?"

"Maybe they're going to sea," I said.

He laughed, briefly, like a man insulting pain. "Boy. Treasure maps aren't wallpaper. They don't hang on the wall. They want to go for a walk."

He raised his hand, then lowered it again. "Listen. If—if I can't do it... don't take the first ship you see. Find one captained by a man who'd rather promise nothing than too much. Promises eat people."

"Do you know anyone like that?"

He smiled, half a cut. "Everyone knows one of those. The question is, are they sober right now?"

I sat on the edge of the table. The night outside paused, as if it had been googling us. I looked at the living room, at my mother, whose hands trembled whenever they were still. At Bill, who looked as if he wanted to win half a sea battle before he died, just out of principle. At the door, which moved when the wind breathed.

And I knew: We were already on board. Still without a ship, but with a course. Men with knives had signed us up. A map had hired us. The rum was the contract. And the humor? That was the only thing that didn't bleed.

"Mother," I said. "Pack—just the essentials. When we start, I don't want to have to stop."

She looked at me as if she were seeing me for the first time. Not as a boy. As something that attracts trouble like sea salt. "What are the essentials?" she asked.

"Money," I said. "The Bible, if you want. I'll take the knife. And the memory of where we hide the key if anyone asks."

She nodded. We packed, each in our own way. She tucked coins into her hem. I put the pipe in my pocket. Bill tucked his hand under his head, as if to pretend he was comfortable.

Outside, the first faint glimmer of light came, saying the night wouldn't last forever. Good news never frightened me so much. I sat down, pulled my jacket tighter, and felt tiredness playing with the door. I didn't let it in.

"Jim," Bill said suddenly, his eyes open, clearer than before. "Listen to me carefully. When you meet the men who want the map, never ask them why. Men who say too much why cut off heads to find answers. Ask them how. That reveals how quickly they'll die."

"And you?" I asked. "Why?"

He smiled without words. That was answer enough.

When the city's streetlights went out because the sun began to tell people what they had to regret during the day, I stood up. The street slipped into gray. In the distance, a seagull called. Or whoever feels like that when they laugh.

"Here we go," I said.

I wasn't thinking of heroes. I was thinking of bills. Some are paid at the bar. Some at sea.

And we had a map. A knife. And yes—too many bottles of rum.

Fortunately.

Chapter 3 - The first dead man on the counter

The morning had the color of old tin and the whim of a pawn shop. Nothing glittered; everything was available, if you wanted it cheap enough. Our inn breathed heavily—like someone who's been underwater too long and now pretends they did it for fun. The windows sweated cold mist, the wood smelled of night, and the ashtray held the remnants of sentences that would have been better left unsaid.

I polished a mug that had long since decided it would never be clean again. This polishing was more prayer than work: a pointless circle that keeps you busy so you don't run out into the yard and ask the shadows what they're up to. My mother set out more plates than there were guests; she always sets the table for fear at times like these. Bill sat in his corner, the box within easy reach, his back to the wall like a dog who knows where the kicks are coming from. His hand around the mug, the mug around the rest of the night.

Outside, a seagull hooted, as if it were the siren of an ambulance deliberately late. A cat crept past the window, turning its head as if to say: You humans are inferior animals. I would have agreed with it if I'd had time for philosophy. I didn't.

The door opened, and the wind brought in three smells: salt, wet dew, and a hint of something sweet you smell only once and never forget—freshly spilled blood. Not much. Just enough for the morning to know what today would be about.

The man was thin, his coat too large, his hat too low. His face was like a tarnished spoon: blunt, but capable of cutting your tongue if you're not careful. He didn't look around. He knew how rooms react when he entered them. He went straight to the counter, leaned forward, and the wrinkles around his mouth acted as if they were practiced from a smile.

"Bill here?" he asked, without looking at me. His voice was shaky.

"Maybe," I said. "Why?"

"Because he owes me something."

"A lot of people do that here." I continued wiping as if the cup were an excuse not to breathe.

He smiled crookedly. Between two of his teeth, a hint of tobacco or sin was stuck. "But most of them are still breathing when they pay it back."

Bill put down the pitcher. The sound said glass. The kind of glass you pick up from the floor after an argument. He stood up as if someone had pulled him from his chair by strings. When Bill stood up, the air felt as if it were suddenly too thick to pass through. He walked slowly to the bar, knife not in hand, but close by. "I don't owe you anything, Black Pete," he said. "Except maybe a punch I haven't given you yet."

Black Pete—the name fell into the room like a small bag of stones. Not big, but heavy enough to remind you of gravity.

Pete grinned. His teeth had gaps where knives wanted to live. "Come on, Bill. Give me the map, and I'll go out so quietly that not even the rats will notice I was there."

"Come on, Pete," said Bill. "Take it."

They stood so close that their breath mingled, and I thought: Men are strange. They'd rather share air than truth.

The two fishermen at the back of the table had their eyes sunk deep into their cups, so deep that you'd think they were trying to read the floor to see how this would end. Old Will stared bravely into the corner; walls never give anything away. My mother put down her spoon and acted as if she just happened to be standing right where the cleaver was within easy reach. I knew: when she drew it, it wasn't to threaten.

Pete leaned forward. I saw the moment he decided whether to take the hand or the lie. He took it—too slowly.

Bill wasn't beautiful when he moved. He was functional. The knife came not like a hero, but like a craftsman: short trajectory, steady angle, job done. A pock! and then the quiet, offended lash of skin opening. No stage, no fountain. Honesty. Dark and thick. Blood leaving the world like a bad-tempered tenant.

Pete gasped as if someone had pressed his future into his mind. He wanted to say something, but his words suddenly flowed. He toppled over, not backward like in stories, but forward, face first, directly onto the counter. A muffled thud, a red tongue crawling over wood as if looking for a small town to flood.

I stood across the hall and watched. They say the first dead person belongs to the devil or fate. Nonsense. The first dead person belongs to the one who still looks when the rest want to look away. This one belonged to me. I'll still see his face when I'm rich or dead, or both.

Nobody screamed. Only first-timers do that. The dock workers ducked their heads like turtles, knowing that every movement would be interpreted as consent. My mother reached for the rag, not to clean, but to begin. There's a difference.

Bill pushed Pete off the counter. No respect, no ritual—more like the departure of an empty bottle. He let it slide to the floor, looked at it like an unfortunate receipt, and turned back to the jug. "Take it with you," he said into the silence, without clearly stating who he meant. It works more often than you think. The two fishermen reluctantly stood up and grabbed Pete under the armpits. His head hung, the blood dripped in time. On the way to the door, one of them stopped, looked at me, and in his eyes I could see: You'll never get this bar completely clean again.

The door closed. The silence wasn't empty; it was filled with decisions no one wanted to speak.

"Jim," my mother said quietly, "bucket."

I fetched the bucket and tied my apron tighter, as if it were a shield. The rag turned red like a lie in a hurry. I wiped in bastard circles, and the wood took what it wanted. Some stains remain because wood remembers things you don't want to remember anymore.

"That's what happens when you start the morning without breakfast," said Bill, drinking and pretending to be the waiter of his own misfortune.

"Is this over now?" asked old Will at the corner, as if he were an oracle who only knew questions.

"Certainly not today," my mother said. She had that tone of voice that reminds men of the first time they got angry as boys because someone was braver than them.

Outside, a child ran by, laughing. Life is insulting when it doesn't realize what just happened. I swiped faster, as if to punish it.

The news was faster than a runner. It took less than half an hour before the village blacksmith came in, followed by the tanner, and finally the constable—a man who looked as if he'd been raised by laws and trained by bad shoes. He wore his hat low to keep the doubts out, and his belly out so that authority could go somewhere.

"They say there was... an incident here," he said, which is the polite form of "murder" if you don't know the murderers. Or if you do know them and just don't want to die today.

"An accident with a knife," my mother said, "and a man who gets into trouble faster than God can write new commandments."

The constable looked at the floor, where the wood still gleamed red, like a beer someone saved too late. "The dead man?"

"He left the house," said Bill. "On his own... well, he left."

"Name?"

"Black Pete," I said before I knew it.

The constable blinked. The name made his hat feel heavier. "Hmm. I'll... take notes." He didn't. "Witnesses?"

"All of them," said old Will. "And no one."

"It was self-defense," Bill said. "The man wanted the box." He tapped it with his finger, the way you tap a dog to make it bark. "He was wrong. So was I—I thought he'd be faster."

The constable looked at Bill and decided to be a wise man today. "I write: Dispute among sailors. Further inquiries as soon as..."—he searched for a word that wouldn't mispronounce courage—"...as soon as appropriate."

"That's a good word," my mother said. "Appropriate."

He nodded dutifully toward justice, which rarely leaves the door in this port. Then he nodded to me, as if to reassure himself that I was still there, and left us. His exit was quieter than his entrance, which made him likable.

The tanner stopped at the door. "They say Barlow saw three new men yesterday, strangers. One was missing part of his ear, the second was carrying a parrot, the third looked like a bill." He looked at the box. "Boxes like bills."

"Bills like boxes," I corrected without thinking.

He raised his eyebrow. "Your age is too big for your mouth, boy."

"I'm working on it," I said.

He left. Some advice reeks of leather, yet it doesn't involve a handshake.

It was getting busier. Not with guests, but with opportunities. Everyone who was still awake suddenly found a reason to walk past us. An old pastor pretended to be looking for a lost believer. Two girls from the dock laughed too loudly not to betray fear. The ferryman sat on the edge of the sill and smoked a pipe that sounded like it was feigning bravado. I noticed the town gathering to watch the afternoon unfold. It was that ticklish moment just before the rain turns stupid.

Bill ate without tasting. He sliced bread as if he were slicing longing. Sometimes he stared into nothingness—that is, at the past—other times he fixed his gaze on the box as if something had just moved there. "He's coming," he once murmured.

"Who?" I asked.

"Whoever thinks this afternoon that they haven't lost enough."

"Silver?" I said the name as if I needed to wash my tongue afterward. We hadn't met him yet. But people like him are like the weather: everyone talks about it before it's here.

"Maybe. Maybe just his shadow. Maybe five others who think they're his shadow. Long stories have many shadows, boy."

"Do you want me to get the doctor?"

"The doctor is smart," said Bill. "Smartness sometimes smells like fish in the harbor—good, but no one wants to pay."

"He has the map with the Squire," I said. "Safe."

"Security is a play," Bill grumbled. "It works as long as no one gets up and touches the scenery."

He drank. I drank, too. My mother did what mothers do when men drink: She worked and decided.

Around midday—the sun hung like a dirty plate over the quay—a man I'd never seen before entered, and yet I knew immediately he knew us. Tall, shoulders like a gate that tends to creak. Broken nose; someone had tried to remove his face, but had only managed half the job. He stopped, held his hat in his hand, turned it once as if a screw were loose, and said, "I'm looking for Black Pete."

"We do too," I said. "In the sense of: He was here. Not anymore."

"Did he leave?"

"Yes."

"Which way?"

"The one nobody likes," I said.

He looked at the floor. The floor looked back. Men often talk past each other; floors understand everything. "Aha," he said. "Then my question is irrelevant."

"Ask it anyway," my mother said, "you might like the answer."

He snorted. "I'll have a beer. And a piece of information, if that's what you get with the beer." He laid down three coins. They sounded as if they'd been raised in the hold—rough, worn, ready to work.

I tapped the beer and watched him drink. Neither hastily nor leisurely. Efficiently. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, leaving a small brown streak on the back of his hand that would look like old blood in a few hours.

"He asked about Bill," he said finally, in a way that suggested it wasn't a question.

"He asked for a box," said Bill. No apology, no explanation. Just a direction.

The man nodded. "Then he got what he asked for." He put down the beer, not empty. "Tell Pete if you see him: I'll be back later to apologize. I'll bring flowers. Or flies."

"Name?" my mother asked.

He smiled. It wasn't a friendly smile, but it wasn't one that would kill you either. "Call me the customs officer," he said. "I just collect what's due."

"We pay cash," said Bill, "in lead."

"Lead is a poor currency hedge," said the customs officer, picked up his hat, put it on, and left.

I went to the window. Outside, he stopped and spoke to a thin boy carrying a parrot on his shoulder—a bright green one that croaked "Rum! Rum!" as if the entire alphabet were just that one sound. The boy pointed toward the harbor. The customs officer nodded, patted him briefly on the cheek, a strange, almost tender slap, and disappeared into the crowd.

"Silver's eyes and ears," murmured Bill.

"The young?"

"Everyone. Everyone who listens today is his ear. Everyone who speaks today is his mouth. Great, isn't it? Crime rental to join in."

"And us?"

"We are the advertising."

The afternoon drifted in like cold smoke. Two boys came to eat, pretending to be hungry. They were—but not for our stew. They sat so they could see both the box and the back door. One had fingers like rats, thin and nervous. The other had a scar that ran from his ear to his mouth and looked like a shortcut. They didn't ask questions. They just waited. Waiting is worse when someone else does it.

An old sailor named Jarvey put down five coppers and received a jug. He drank quietly and talked with his hand. "Jarvey," I said, "either talk to us or to God, but stop confiding secrets to your hand."

"The hand talks back," Jarvey said. "More than God does."

"And what does she say?"

"That someone who wasn't on the list died today."

"We don't have a list," I said.

"Then you're young," Jarvey said, turning back to his hand. It acted as if it had just said something very wise.

Around three, the pawnbroker, Mr. Knox, came in, poked at the air as if he could tell its value, and stopped by the box. "It looks heavy," he said.

"Heavy is good," my mother said sweetly. "Heavy stays where it is."

"Nothing stays where it is," he said wisely, scanned the room, found three things he wanted to acquire later, and left.

I noticed how the inn became a theater, and everyone brought their own scenery. The bar was the stage, the box the leading actress, Bill the annoying director who kept shouting "One more time!", and I was the usher who escorted people to the chairs where they would most comfortably die.

As the shadows lengthened, he came again: the softie from last night. This time alone. He entered, carefully closed the door behind him, and stood in the middle of the room. He placed his hands behind his back as if visiting the priest. "Good evening," he said. "I've come to offer my condolences. Is that what you say when a friend changes direction, right?"

"You don't say anything," said Bill. "You drink."

"I rarely drink," said the soft one. "It clouds your priorities." He looked at me. I hated his eyes; they were so kind. "Young man, what's your name?"

"Jim," I said, because lies sometimes taste worse than my name.

"Jim," he repeated, as if he'd never encountered a more beautiful sound. "Jim, here's the deal: We take the box and the map, and you keep the inn and your lives. That's a generous offer. The alternative is... well. Nobody likes alternatives."

"I love alternatives," my mother said. "They remind us that we have a choice."

"Your election was yesterday," said the soft man, smiling as if he were speaking to an honest thief. "Today is administration."

He took a step toward the counter, not close, just closer than I liked. Bill was already standing. The knife lay under his hand like a dog paw on your shoe. "One more," he said. "And you're the manager."

The soft man raised his hand as if he were about to sing a hymn. "Please, not. Not here. Not like this again. The wood suffers. And the young ones remember when wood suffers."

"I remember anyway," I said.

He looked at me. "Of course. You're a rememberer. One day you'll get paid for it."

"Listen," Bill growled. "Tell your treasurer to come himself if he wants to collect."

"He's not coming," said the soft one. "He sent me. Because I'm good at... transitions."

"What's your name?" my mother asked.

He smiled. "I am politeness. I have many names."

"Politeness knocks," I said. "You're already in."

"Exactly," he said. "We've moved on."

His eyes slid toward the box. At that moment, one of those small, stupid things that lead to major catastrophes happened: The back door opened, just a crack. Enough for a gust of cold air. Enough for a shadow to break away. Enough for me to see someone position themselves there.

"Distraction," I said quietly.

Bill nodded almost imperceptibly. His hand didn't move, but his weight shifted, that tiny, naval indication that the next step wouldn't be a step at all.

The shadow slid in—fast and flat, knife first, the wall his friend. I snatched a pitcher from the shelf and threw it. It hit the wall next to the shadow, shattered, and the shards jumped like nervous fish. The shadow twitched. Bill didn't jump. He had already jumped. The knife made the short path it had taken yesterday, only this time the body was thinner at the end. A sound that didn't want to last. The man staggered, stumbled, fell—not onto the counter, but against it, slid down, and dropped the knife as if sorry.

The soft one closed his eyes. One breath. He seemed to be praying. When he opened them again, they were no longer pleasant. Just empty. "Too bad," he said. "You make it hard to keep things pleasant."

"This is a rough house," my mother said. "Beauty dies here first."

He bowed slightly, so politely I wanted to kill him for it. "Not today," he said. "You have guests who don't like that." He glanced briefly at the window; outside, the street moved with a new rhythm. "Tomorrow. Tomorrow the one you fear will come. Or his shadow, which is bigger than he."

"Silver?" I asked. I hated myself for being so impatient.

He smiled. "Names are ships. You get on, you get off. See you tomorrow, Jim."

He left. I swear the door sighed behind him, like someone who's been sucking in their stomach for too long.

We stood in the silence that followed. You think the silence after blood is like cotton wool. It isn't. It crunches. It rubs. It settles on your tongue and tastes of iron and promises. The second man bled less than Pete, but he bled faster. My mother knelt, checked if anything could still be saved, and stood up again without nodding. When my mother doesn't nod, it's worse than when the priest preaches.

"Into the courtyard," she said. "And then to the chapel. Not tonight. Tomorrow morning, when the city acts as if it stands for order."

We dragged the man through the back door. The court received him as courts do: neutrally, businesslike. Halfway through, Bill stopped, holding his side, breathing like someone with too few lungs and too much of a past.

"You're bleeding," I said.

"I'm sweating... memories," he said. "Don't make any sense of it."

We put the man in the back corner, where the boxes are kept that no one opens because the things inside go bad on their own. I thought: If the sea is a judge, then the court is a notary. He signs whatever you put in front of him and doesn't ask any questions.

I washed my hands at the fountain. The water was cold and pretended to be a medicine. It washed away the color, not the meaning.

When I went back inside, I ran into Ned, the cabin boy, who'd suddenly been everywhere since yesterday. He held his cap in his hands as if he were afraid it might run away. "Jim," he said, "there are men on the corner. They're asking for a boy with too much ambition and a man who's lost his name."

"Then they'll search half the city," I said.

"One of them has a golden ear," whispered Ned. "A gold piece where his ear was."

"Will customs now pay with body parts?" I asked.

"He says his captain is doing employee share ownership."

I felt something pulling on my shoulder—a hand no one had placed on it. You know when a story takes hold of you. It feels like a jacket that's too heavy: first warm, then useful, then you can't get out.

"Ned," I said. "Run to the doctor. Tell him: Tonight or tomorrow morning. Squire isn't to talk, just come. No retinue, just the brow. And tell him..." I paused. "Tell him the sea called."

Ned nodded as if this were real news and disappeared as quickly as good news disappears.

The afternoon turned into evening. We did what you do when you're waiting for a storm: We cleared tables so we have cover; we extinguished lamps so the shadows belonged to us; we hid money that could be taken by force tomorrow, and left coins outside so that the force would think it had found something. We provided water—not for drinking. We placed knives where they wouldn't be seen and would still be found.

Bill sat back down, his fingers drumming as if practicing a sound map. "You learned something today," he said.

"Two men died," I said. "I hope that wasn't the curriculum."

"Men always die," he said. "Today you learned that some doors let death in if you don't open them. You'll learn the other half tomorrow."

"Which?"

"That sometimes you have to go through a door to stay alive."

My mother brought bread and cheese, cut hard and straight. She said nothing. Her hands said, "I'm scared." Her chin said, "She picked the wrong table this time."

"Mother," I began.

"No," she said. "Don't ask if everything will be okay. Ask yourself if you'll be okay."

I hated it when she used philosophy as a knife. It worked.

•

Shortly after dusk, Pastor Hargreaves arrived. He wore the black coat that made him look even thinner, and the Bible that didn't make him any fatter. He poked his head in, saw the men who wanted to drink, saw the men who didn't, and decided to speak to me. "Jim," he said, and his voice was bold because it was tender. "They say there were deaths."

"It means a lot," I said. "Today, for a change, a lot of things are right."

"I should pray," he said, but it sounded like a question.

"Pray at the back door," my mother said. "There's someone there who won't run away anymore."

He nodded, walked through, stayed away long enough to simulate a serious conversation with God, and returned. "I'll say a word tomorrow," he explained. "Maybe two."

"Say three," said old Will without looking up. "One for each person who still goes before us."

The priest flinched as if someone had pinched his pericardium. "I'll be back later," he said, and disappeared. Good men know when they're in the way. Great men know when to stay anyway. He was a good man.

Night crept into the courtyard like a lazy soldier. I thought: It's about to happen. I was wrong; it was happening now. The front door opened, not loudly—he who wants to learn comes quietly—and three men entered. One was small, with a face that looked as if he'd been explained justice one too many times. One was thin, nervous, with lips that collected words and then forgot them. And the third—the customs officer from before. He took off his hat, turned it, put it back on. "Evening," he said. "I'm back to apologize. For later."

"We only accept apologies in cash," said Bill.

"I'll pay in information," said the customs officer. "A ship will arrive tomorrow morning, pretending to be looking for supplies. It's looking for, above all, courage. And the map."

"What is the name of the ship?" I asked.

He smiled so that the lamp burned more dimly. "Ships have names. Tomorrow, this one doesn't."

"And who sent you?"

"A man who doesn't like the harbor because it reminds him of home."

"Silver then," I said.

He raised his hands. "I didn't say anything. I just don't want anyone to die on the counter today. The counter isn't to blame."

Bill stood. "The counter catches the blood that falls. That's its job. Everyone has one."

"Your job is tomorrow," said the customs officer. "Today we'll drink. And then we'll leave. We came to count teeth, not bite." He looked at me. "Jim, right? If you're smart, you'll have cold feet tomorrow morning."

"I'm wearing boots," I said.

"Then they'll just freeze," he said, turned around, and left. The other two shuffled behind him, as if they were his thoughts, not quite following.

"He's scared," I said.

"He has respect," Bill said. "Fear is for people with plans. Respect is for people with experience."

"And what do we have?"

"Too much rum and a card."

"All we need is the knife," I murmured.

"We did," my mother said, placing it on the counter, wiping away an invisible stain next to it, and looking at me in a way that made me feel both ashamed and braver.

Later. Late enough that the night already seemed early. Ned returned, glistening with sweat, his eyes wide. "The doctor's coming," he panted. "And the squire. They've got two men with them who look like they'd rather pay than die, but are good at both."

"When?"

"Right away. They're avoiding the main road. The seagulls have spread the word."

"Seagulls?"

"The parrot," said Ned apologetically. "He's... efficient."

Bill laughed briefly, like someone with a tickling knife in their pocket. "Good. Then let's stop waiting for tomorrow and start surviving."

He stood at the counter, placed his hand flat on the wood where most of the stories had died today, and spoke softly so only the three of us could hear: "Listen. If they come back tonight, we won't let them write in the room again. We'll write ourselves. Jim, you stay in front, but not heroically. Mother, you stay close, but not visible. If someone touches the box, you finish what you're breathing—and then you strike. No rush. Rushing makes holes in the wrong places."

I nodded. My mother didn't nod. She reached out and placed her hand on Bill's. Her fingers were warm; his were cold. "You won't leave us alone," she said, and it didn't sound like a plea.

He looked at her for a long time. "I'll try."

"Trying is not enough," she said.

"Sometimes," he said.

The clock in the hall, which never kept true, struck something that should have been five. Outside, the sky was still black, but already tired around the edges. The door opened. The doctor entered, the squire behind him, tall, round, wearing a jacket so loud it insulted the night. Two men followed—one with the kind of shoulders you take for doors when there aren't any; the other with hands that wanted to apologize.

"Jim," said the doctor, his gaze taking in more in a second than others do in a day's walk. He saw the box, the counter, the way Bill stood, and the way my mother acted as if she had the night under control. "It's good you're alive."

"Looks like it," I said. "Today."

The squire wiped his forehead with a handkerchief, as if perspiration were inappropriate. "My boy!" he cried unnecessarily loudly. "We have decided that..."

"Quieter," said the doctor.

"...we have quietly decided," the Squire whispered, now unnecessarily quietly, "that the ship will be prepared. A ship. Not the first one they've been expecting. A different one. A surprise."

"Surprises only work for people who don't plan for them," said Bill.

"I have money," said the Squire, as if that were an argument against anything that breathes.

"Money is great," my mother said. "When you have to dig later."

"We're leaving," the doctor said calmly. "Today, before tomorrow pretends to be innocent. We have a captain in mind who doesn't tell stories. I'd rather have one who doesn't tell anything at all."

"Smollett," Bill said, and for the first time that day, I heard respect in his voice. "If he's anything like he used to be, he's the man who'll bring you home alive without explaining why."

"It has become more expensive," said the Squire, offended.

"Then he got even better," said the doctor.

We stood together, four adults and me, who didn't want to be a child anymore and was therefore just as stupid as everyone else who doesn't want to be a child anymore. The doctor put his hand on my shoulder, that medical, unromantic hand, and said, "Jim, today you watched what others only hear. You'll have to clean a lot more. But starting tomorrow, we'll be mopping different floors."

"Starting today," I said.

"Who contradicts so charmingly?" asked the Squire, and I was about to like him until I remembered that he is late and loud.

Bill was breathing heavily. "We have to go before polite courtesy comes knocking again," he said. "If the softie catches us walking, we'll die politely."

"He's welcome to try," my mother said, picking up the knife, examining the blade in the lamplight, which looked like a new idea, and putting it in her apron.

"Jim," said the doctor. "Take this." He handed me a small gun, a thing so neat I was embarrassed to hold it. "Twice. Not to hit. To say you're there."

"I was there the whole time," I said.

"Then tell the wrong people," he said.

We moved. Not like an army. Like a family that has decided not to plan a funeral today. The squire and one of the men went first to taste the road. The doctor stayed with us. Bill took the box as if it were a tired child—and I wished it were. Children are easier to defend than superstition.

Bill stopped in front of the door. "One more thing," he muttered. "If something goes wrong—and it does—Jim, you don't go back to see who's fallen. You go ahead so one of us can say later how awful it all was."

"I won't run away," I said.

"You will walk," he said. "Running is for people without a goal."

He opened the door. The street lay there like a question. We answered. Step by step. The wind smelled of iron and the laughter of men who wear their courage in their mouths. On the corner, as Ned had said, stood three figures, shadows with hats. One turned her head. I heard—I swear—the faint "aha" of a man who finds something he thought he knew.

"Good evening," the doctor said so kindly, as if this were a welcome. "Beautiful weather for a walk."

No answer. Just movement. Two detached themselves. The third remained. The parrot—not there, but I still heard it screaming "Rum!" in my head, like a church bell for idiots.

"Not now," Bill whispered. "First at the corner. Then right. Then we'll walk. Not until then."

"What if she—"

"Not if. How," he said. "How you live is everything."

We walked. I held the gun as if it were a weak handshake with a troublesome uncle. Behind me was the box. Beside me was my mother. In front of me was the future. I thought of Black Pete, of his blood, how it crawled into the cracks and moved in rent-free. I thought of more of it tomorrow. I thought of Silver, whom we hadn't seen yet, but whose shadow already inhabited half the city.

And then it happened again: no scream, no shout, just a cut. One of the shadows leaped forward, too soon, too eagerly. I didn't hear Bill, I felt him—like a door closing behind you, protecting you from a storm you don't want to see. The blow, the counterblow, the short, offended gasp of a man realizing his

belly isn't made of oak. I raised the gun. No hero, just noise. The crack cut the street in half. Those hungry for courage spat it out.

We ran. Not nobly, not in an orderly fashion. We moved toward the harbor, where the water also carried lies, but at least glittered prettily. Behind us, footsteps, in front of us, the lanterns that had retired too soon. The box on Bill's shoulder, the hope in the doctor's leather satchel, the fear in my throat.

At the corner, a figure turned toward us—broad, serious, wearing a cap. "Smollett?" gasped the doctor.

The figure nodded curtly. That was all I needed to know about him. "Left," he said, "then down. My boat isn't what they expect."

"They don't expect one," said Bill.

"Then we have the advantage," said Smollett.

We shot around the corner. A shadow grabbed my jacket; my mother's knife was where it should have been. A short, clean line. The shadow let go. I smelled the breath of a man trying to find his lungs and stumbled on. The doctor counted in his head—I saw it on his face: one for everyone still breathing, two for everyone who would have a hard time later.

Twenty more steps to the stairs. Ten. Five. Wood underfoot that sounds different—wood that knows what ships do. A row of boats, each the wrong one, one the right one. Smollett pointed. We jumped. The line was released, the water did what water does when it realizes it's needed: It held us.

The shadows we had left behind stood on the quay. One raised his hand as if to wave friendly. "Morning!" he called. I didn't know if it was the soft one. I only knew he was right.

"Morning," I said, my voice calm even though my heart was the drum of a stupid celebration. "Morning."

Later—how late? I have no idea. Time is a liar when it's afraid—we sat in the boat, which detached itself from the harbor like an idea from a stupid mind. Smollett wasn't rowing. He was stirring the water. The squire was panting softly, pretending he was only short of breath because of his dignity. The doctor looked back, and I knew: He's still counting. My mother kept the blade clean, which is ridiculous on a boat, but still it made sense. Bill placed the box in the middle, as if it were the altar of a god he didn't believe in.

"Jim," he said.

"Yes?"

"That wasn't the first dead person you've seen on the counter."

"I know."

"But he was important."

"Why?"

"Because he told you that the bar is sometimes the sea." He looked back at the harbor, which shrank but didn't disappear. "And because now you know that blood is already flowing before you get wet."

I looked at my hands. They were clean. That was the most disturbing thing of the entire day.

"Are you sleeping tonight?" I asked.

"I'm drinking," he said. "That's the kind of sleep I can still get."

My mother placed her hand on the back of my neck. It was the warmest spot that night. "Tomorrow," she said. No consolation, just a date.

"Tomorrow," said the doctor, "we'll talk to men who steer ships and men who throw money. And then we'll go. With a plan. Not with hope."

"Hope is good," said the Squire, offended.

"Hope is a joke if you don't have a rope," Smollett said without turning around.

I leaned against the side of the ship, which was cold and honest, and let my gaze wander over the black teeth of the masts that bit into the sky. Somewhere out there lay an island where an X was sure it was smarter than all the other letters. Somewhere behind us lay a bar where wood drank blood. And somewhere between the two we were—with a map, a knife, and, God help us, still too many bottles of rum.

The sea was still far away.

But I swear to you: I heard her laughing. And I laughed back. Not because I was brave. But because I now knew what a bar sounds like when it first realizes it's a stage.

Morning.

Chapter 4 - A Doctor with a Cold Heart

The doctor had just disappeared through the door when outside you could hear that special kind of silence that harbor alleys have before they reach an agreement. I pocketed the pistol he had given me and only then realized how small it felt in my hand. Small, but bold. Like the truth.

"One hour," my mother said. She wiped the table, not because it was necessary, but because it was something hands can do when the head wants to scream. "Take the money out of the hem. Not all of it. I'll leave the rest where thieves have to work."

"Bill?" I asked.

"I can go," he growled, stood up, turned pale, sat down again, and cursed quietly at his blood, as if it were a late driver. "Give me five minutes and a reason."

"The reason is: we want to live," my mother said.

"That's not a reason. That's a condition." Bill took a deep breath. "The doctor—" he paused, and this was new, "—the doctor is useful."

"He has a cold heart," I said.

"Better than a warm one that just beats by itself," my mother murmured.

We packed. No drama. A blanket, a knife, the few coins you won't miss if you save them. I also put my pipe in. Not for smoking—I was young, not stupid—but for sound. Sometimes sound kills more than sound. Bill picked up the box as if it were a stubborn animal and tested his balance. It held. He held.

"If he screws us," said Bill, "we'll screw him back."

"He's not fooling around," my mother said. "He's calculating."

"Then we'll count on it," I said. And that was the stupidest and smartest thing I said that evening.

The alley tasted of metal, the wind of a joke no one found funny. We took the side paths that make themselves known with the soles of our shoes, keeping the shadows so they didn't know who they belonged to. On the corner where the cat with the missing ear always slept, this time a man sat, pretending to be a lantern. His eyes didn't burn, but they glowed. He wasn't looking at us, but at the idea of us. That's worse.

"Good evening," my mother said politely, as if we lived there. He nodded politely, as if he were paid to do so. Maybe he was.

"If someone is following," Bill said succinctly, "you're not running faster, you're running smarter. The faster you run, the louder you breathe. Loud breathing attracts knives."

"And what makes knives quieter?" I asked.

"Experience," he said. "And a doctor who sews."

The harbor appeared as it always does: first sound, then smell, then that special glimmer that promises that everything can begin anew if you're stupid enough. The doctor stood among the boats and ropes, as if he'd summoned himself there. No hat, a scant coat, a bright gaze. Beside him were three figures who looked like answers to questions I hadn't yet asked.

"To my right," Livesey said without turning, "Mr. Hunter. Slender, not weak. Thinks before he strikes, and strikes when the thinking is done. To his left: Mr. Joyce. Hands like apologies, but reliable. And—" he jerked his chin behind him, "the man who decides tonight whether we die or just look stupid: Captain Smollett."

Smollett stood there as if he were in a hurry not to talk. Straight shoulders, a face that had never been affected by a cheap thought, and eyes that saw the way. He nodded at us. No handshake. I liked him immediately.

"Show," said Smollett.

The doctor simply raised the leather bag. "Later. Not here."

"Right," said Smollett. "Now for the pick."

"Choice?" my mother asked coldly.

"Who comes with us, who stays behind," said Smollett. "This isn't a walk in the park. I need people who don't look into the water and see stories. I need people who can see water and count."

He stepped forward, once around Bill, as if sizing up the box, not the man. "You're carrying something that will kill everyone if we play dumb." He pointed to Bill's stomach. "And you're bleeding."

"I'll bleed later," said Bill.

Smollett raised an eyebrow that could have been measured. "Don't die today. Tomorrow is full."

He turned to my mother. "You can stab?"

"Yes," she said.

"Can you wait before you stab?"

She looked at him as if he'd asked if she could read. "If it must be."

"Good." He looked at me. "And you, boy?"

"I run fast," I said.

"Everyone runs fast until they stumble."

"I stumble easily," I said.

A brief, twitch of his mouth. Not a smile, but the idea of one. "He'll stay by the doctor's side. If anyone falls, it won't be the boy."

"I'm not—" I began.

"You're not immortal," said the doctor. "That's enough for me."

Smollett clapped his hands once, as if scaring away pigeons. "Good. Next point: We don't take the obvious boat. We take the ugly one. Ugly boats are underestimated."

"What's it called?" I asked.

"It doesn't have a name," Smollett said.

"Then it suits us," said Bill.

Smollett's selection hell wasn't a shout. It was a whisper. Men came out of the darkness, from the pier, from the bar across the street, from the kind of night only the harbor knows when it's getting dressed. Smollett looked at them, asked a question, sometimes two, sent them away or left them standing. It was brutal how slow he was.

"Ever stood guard?" he asked one.

"Eight years," he said. "In the army."

"Being awake is different from standing," said Smollett. "Next."

"Can you swim?" he asked a second one.

"Like a stone," he said honestly.

"Perfect," said Smollett. "Stones sink without much fuss. You don't."

"Are you afraid?" he asked a third.

The man hesitated. "Yes."

"Then you know what to fear," Smollett said, nodding. "Stay."

The doctor stood nearby, hands behind his back, listening. Sometimes he slipped a single word into Smollett's selection, a dry comment that saved a man or ended him. "Not resilient," he said of one. "Will talk when he's allowed to drink," of another. "Smart, but distrustful of reality," of a third, whom I liked. Smollett dryly ticked the air.

"And the Squire?" I asked during a pause.

"Come later," Livesey said. "When we get to the point where he's just a nuisance and no longer causing harm."

The squire surfaced anyway, shining, panting, offended by the wind. "Gentlemen!" he began like a sermon, and Smollett raised his hand.

"Quietly," he said.

"I am a shareholder!"

"Then you have an interest in the ship floating," said Smollett. "Floating is quiet."

The squire paused for a heroic second. "I've arranged for a cook. One-legged man. Very kind."

The doctor and I looked at each other. Bill clenched his jaw. Smollett blinked slowly. "I choose my own cooks," he said.

"He cooks excellently," insisted the squire. "And he knows about ships. A soul—"

"He cooks excellently," Smollett repeated. "That's suspicious enough."

"Name?" asked Bill, even though we all knew the answer.

"Silver," said the squire proudly. "John Silver."

The night pressed its elbow into my ribs. The air became heavier. Even the seagulls forgot to cry.

"Not today," Livesey said coolly. "Tomorrow we'll talk about chefs."

"But—"

"Tomorrow," Smollett interrupted like an old rope. "Today we're talking about survival."

Between selection and departure lay the hour when men drink in the truth. I stayed with the doctor, as ordered. He took me to the edge of the pier, where an old bollard stood like a grumpy uncle. We sat down. The wood beneath breathed salt. The ships' lights hung like crooked stars.

"You don't like me," Livesey said, as if it were a statement about the weather.

"I like that you don't die when it starts," I said.

"That's enough." He pulled out a small flask, took a sniff, didn't drink, and handed it to me. I took a sniff, didn't drink. We agreed.

"Why did you become a doctor?" I asked after a while.

"Because I prefer to judge things rather than condemn them," he said. "And because I have no patience with mysticism. Blood is blood. It doesn't lie, it flows." A pause. "And you? Why are you running toward a life that wants to devour you?"

"Because otherwise it'll grab me from behind," I said. "I have eyes up front."

He nodded, satisfied with the answer, not because it was clever, but because it was honest. "Good answer."

"You gave us orders today," I said. "As if we were your patients. But you're treating us like an operation."

"You're an operation," he said quietly. "A risky one. With a chance of winning."

"Profit? Gold?"

"Gold is a boring disease. Curable. I mean..." He weighed the word as if it were expensive, "meaning. Some things order a life, Jim. Not because they're right, but because they're clear. This map is clear. It says: Here. Not: Maybe. It's dangerous, but it brings order."

"Order is cold," I said.

"Heat is deceptive," he said.

We were interrupted before I could offer any more answers. Two men walked along the planks, one limping, the other carrying a sack that smelled of a boat: pitch, grease, old wood. Smollett took their gaze and handed it to me. "Come," he said.

He led us to the ugly boat. It lay there as if it had been insulted. Wide, not beautiful, without a name. "That's Perch," said Smollett.

"You said it doesn't have a name," I said.

"I'll lie if it helps," he said. "Barsch, because it's tough. Get in. We'll move it."

We got out. Hunter and Joyce followed, quietly like people who aren't new to the business. Bill positioned the crate so it couldn't talk. The doctor took the syringe—that's what I called his bundle of tools in my head—and placed it

within easy reach. My mother tucked the knife into her belt, as if she were suddenly wearing a uniform.

Smollett pushed off. "Don't row," he whispered. "Pull." He demonstrated how to nudge the stillness with a pole. We glided. The water did what it boasted about: it carried us. The lights on the shore shifted, as if undecided whether to bid us farewell or betray us.

Halfway there, a noise came. Not a scream. A "click"—wood on wood, ever so slightly. Smollett paused. One second. Two. From the right, a whisper that the night heard. "There!"

"Not us," Smollett breathed, so quietly that the sentence barely had any words. "They."

A second boat, narrower, hungrier. Three shadows, four—hard to say. Hunter put his hand to his perch. Joyce exhaled and forgot to inhale again. I held the gun, felt the wood beneath it say: Not yet.

"I like to talk," came the reply from the other side. Polite. Softly. "But not with strangers."

The soft one. Of course.

"Then talk to the water," said Smollett, pushing us slightly into the shadow of the barque that lay before us, a dark animal.

"No need," said the softie. "I have an audience tomorrow."

"I have hands today," my mother murmured.

The other boat glided by, searching, sniffing. The parrot called "Rum!" from the distance. Someone laughed. The laughter fell into the water, and the water held it. Smollett waited until the clattering of the strange boat subsided. Then he pushed us against the barque, untied us from it, and then tied us to a post that looked as if it had seen more nights than priests.

"Here we are," he said. "Until the clock on the tower strikes wrong three times. Then we'll move to the big boat."

"What big boat?" I asked.

"The one nobody pays attention to because it's too busy," said Smollett. "The Hispaniola."

The name hung in the air like a ship that has already collected stories. Bill's breathing was heavier. The doctor looked at me as if checking if I was still there. I nodded. He nodded back. I could tolerate that kind of medicine.

Waiting is a torture most men endure willingly and then claim they planned it. Smollett waited like someone who knows how to wait. The doctor waited like someone listening to his pulse. My mother waited like a woman holding a knife the right way round. Bill waited like a man hoping blood has a sense of humor. I waited like a boy who has decided to be less young today.

A sound came from the city, as if many opinions were clashing. Footsteps on the quay, whispers, glances that made no sound yet cracked. Once something fell into the water. Once someone was dropped into the water. Difference.

"Now," Smollett finally said, as the tower lost patience and struck three times something that didn't agree with the clock. "Cast off. Go."

We glided again, this time out of the shadows into a wide, cold alley between ships. The Hispaniola stood before us like a house that refused to be land. Two lights on the stern, one on the bowsprit, a man at the gangplank, sleeping as one sleeps awake: standing, hearing, yet still dreaming. Smollett signaled to Hunter. Hunter disappeared along the side, silent as a thought. One minute. Two. A click, a rope released, a figure bent briefly. Smollett raised his hand. "Aboard," he whispered.

We climbed. Planks beneath our feet that knew other feet. Ropes that knew old sweat. The Hispaniola smelled of work, of men, of everything I expected from a ship that would either take us far or kill us quickly.

"Who's on board?" asked the doctor.

"Tonight? Only the ones I know," Smollett said. "Tomorrow? An army. But we're voting."

"And the cook?" I asked.

"Tomorrow," said Smollett. "Today she's ours."

He led us to the steerage deck and showed us the places where we could become nothing for a night. "Sleeping is forbidden," he said. "Closing your eyes is permitted."

"And you?" my mother asked.

"I never sleep when someone tries to steal my night," he said and left.

The doctor sat down opposite me and placed the leather case next to him. He pulled a card from the inside pocket—not that card, but another one—and placed it on his knees. "Just for playing," he said, "to give my hands something to do."

"I have hands," I said.

"I have something else for you," he said, and pulled out... a book. Thin, leather-bound, untitled. "Write. If you can. Not everything. Just what you'll need later to convince yourself."

"From what?"

"That you were there."

I took it, even though I knew paper would betray you. Then I realized: The doctor isn't just cold. He's cruel in the right way—he forces you to stay awake.

"Jim," my mother said quietly. "If they separate us tomorrow—"

"Let's split up tomorrow," I said. "Today you stay here."

She nodded. She rarely nodded. When she nodded, it meant: There's no better lie right now.

Bill was half-lying, like someone who was resting but didn't want to be lazy.

"When Silver comes," he murmured, "he'll offer a handshake. Don't take it. His hand is a contract."

"I don't like contracts," I said.

"He'll notice," said Bill, closing his eyes. Not sleep. Decency.

Toward the end of the night, when the stars are tired and the rats are gaining courage, Smollett returned, with Hunter in tow and a list in his head. "We're running with the ebb," he said. "The squire is now convinced that quiet is expensive. Good. He's paid. Tomorrow, men will come who will listen to his wages. And men who will listen to other wages. I'll talk to the first. The doctor talks to the second, without them noticing."

"And me?" I asked.

"You listen," Smollett said. "And if you hear something that sounds like a trap, you don't fall for it. That's what separates smart people from dead people."

"Sounds doable," I said, meaning I knew it wasn't doable and didn't want to talk about it.

The doctor stood up. "We have another visitor," he said to me. "Come."

"Where?"

"To the man with the broken earlobe," he said.

"The fisherman? Why?"

"Because he was sitting in your tavern yesterday when the wrong people heard the right thing. And because he's alive. The living talk. The dead are polite."

We quietly climbed down, slipped into the boat, and glided back to the quayside like two ideas that hadn't yet dared to become sentences. The fisherman lived in a box made of wood and hope. The doctor tapped the way he sews: concisely, neatly, irrefutably.

"Who is it?" asked a voice that negotiated sleep.

"The man who wants to listen to you tomorrow," said the doctor. "Open up."

He opened the door. We went in. The air smelled of fish, poverty, two children pretending to be full while they slept, and the kind of fear that lingers.

"You watched yesterday," the doctor said without preamble. "You heard what you weren't supposed to hear. And you're alive."

"I want to go on living," said the fisherman.

"Then you only talk to me. If someone nice comes along, you say no. If someone polite comes along, you say no. If someone pays, you take the money and still say no. Here." The doctor laid down three coins, light and heavy-sounding. "For saying yes to no."

"And if you ask me why?"

"Say: The doctor said I should live."

The fisherman nodded. A boy in the background stirred, muttering "Rum!" in a dream he didn't deserve. The doctor glanced briefly, looked away, and I realized: His heart isn't cold. It's just smart enough not to constantly get a fever.

Outside, on the way back to the boat, I asked, "Why all the trouble for a fisherman?"

"Because stories have holes," said the doctor. "And because the wrong men like to crawl through holes."

"You even sew the city."

"Someone has to."

We were back on the Hispaniola when the sky lit up with a very thin line, pretending to be hope. Smollett had stood at the bow, like a statue thinking. The Squire was snoring somewhere nearby, apologizing with his fortune. Hunter and Joyce were checking ropes as if they were spines. Bill was breathing, my mother was sharpening, I wrote a word in the book: Here.

Livesey stepped next to me. "Another drink?" he asked, holding out the flask to me and again not drinking himself.

"You don't drink."

"I'm counting," he said. "And I still want to remember."

"What?"

"What I'm to blame for."

I looked at him. He looked at the water. He had hands that could kill and save, and he knew that only sometimes can you tell the difference in advance.

"Doctor," I said, "when we come back—"

"If," he said. "That's the right word."

"Then what are you?"

"Probably the same," he said. "Just more honest."

“Do you believe in gold?”

"I believe in consequences," he said. "Gold is one of them."

The city behind us acted as if it were innocent. Men with parrots acted as if they were deaf. A captain acted as if he were stone. A doctor acted as if he had no heart. A mother acted as if a knife were an answer. A boy acted as if he wasn't a boy. An old drunk acted as if he were indestructible. And beneath everything that acted, the sea lay laughing softly, because it knew: It takes what it wants.

“Cast off,” said Smollett.

The Hispaniola stirred, first reluctantly, then decisively. Wood sang, rope sighed, water gave way. We glided out, through the sleeping lights, past the shadows that wanted to endure, and I thought: The doctor is right. Order is cold. But sometimes you're glad someone with cold hands is stitching the wound while you're still searching for warm words.

Livesey stood beside me, and for a moment I saw the harbor cast him in lead profile: a chin that can say "no." Eyes that see "now." Hands that make "later" possible. A heart he doesn't want to show, because hearts are prone to breaking on the open sea.

"Jim," he said, his voice as calm as the part of the sea that lies. "When Silver comes aboard tomorrow, listen to him. Politely. Pick apart his words like I pick apart a wound. And don't sew them up again."

“And if he shakes my hand?”

"Then tie it behind your back," he said. "Your own. So you don't forget who you belong to."

I nodded. The wind picked us up. The city let us go, slowly, reluctantly, with that kind of passive-aggression that only places have that know how many times they've said goodbye. Before us lay nothing—and with it, everything. Behind us lay blood on wood—and with it, a promise that we'd better come back, or someone else will tell the tale.

“A doctor with a cold heart,” I said under my breath.

“We call that fever-free,” he said.

And then we drove out. Without a song, without a sermon, without a dramatic fanfare. With a plan, a map, a knife—and a man who will sew you or bury you, depending on what the world demands. That night, she demanded that he sew. And he did. In the silence that remains when the city finally stops breathing.

Tomorrow we would learn that cold can be a blessing. Today it was our motivation. Cheers.

Chapter 5 - The Fat Squire and His Dirty Plan

The Squire didn't last two hours on board without looking for an audience. He marched ashore in his parrot jacket, as if the quay were his stage and the sea merely a backdrop. I followed him at a distance; Livesey had given me the look that says, "Follow him and count the stupidities."

The pub at the Fish Market was murky—too many truths in the room. The Squire ordered the most expensive thing because he only knew two kinds: expensive and fake. And then he started. His voice had that clang that attracts coins and wakes knives.

"Gentlemen! Soon we—yes, we!—will sail south on a magnificent ship called Hispaniola, where the famous Captain Flint..."

I heard the rustling: chairs being pushed, necks being twisted. Three men at the barrel stack gave each other a nod that sounded like: Payday.

"...and we have a map! A real one! With a big X!" He drew it in the air with his finger, so big it could be seen from the harbor.

The innkeeper polished a glass without looking. The boy with the parrot suddenly appeared next to the door; the bird croaked "Rum!" and the men laughed because otherwise something would have fallen out of their faces.

"A share for everyone who makes themselves useful!" the squire continued. "And an advance on top of that!"

That was the moment I smelled the first wave. Greed tastes metallic, like a cold spoon on the tongue. The right ears were there. And the wrong mouths.

"Who's the captain?" someone asked.

"Smollett! A rock!"

"And the cook?"

"John Silver. A fine man."

"Fine" crept across the floorboards like oil.

I left before I felt sick. Outside, Silver stood on the corner, as if he had an appointment with chance. Crutch, casual weight, smile that tells you: Today you're still safe.

"Morning, Jim," he said without looking at me.

"I didn't say my name," I growled.

"You didn't have to." He nodded toward the pub door. "Our squire sang it ten times. He's got a beautiful voice, that man—if you're deaf."

"He talks too much."

"Talking is cheap. Listening is expensive." Silver tapped his crutch lightly, a sound like a cash register. "Tell your doctor not to carry the card in his coat. He has a way of standing up straight when he's lying."

"He's not lying," I snapped.

"Oh, Jim," he smiled reassuringly, "everyone lies. The good ones call it medicine."

I left. He let me go. That was the most disturbing thing: people letting you go.

Back on board, I found Smollett in the chart room. Livesey was standing beside him; silence lay taut between them.

"Report," said the captain.

I told the story. Not poetically. Numbers, faces, sentences. Livesey nodded in the wrong place—his way of saying: I already suspected it.

"Good," said Smollett. "Then let's play ship. No romance today."

He lowered the rules like a dock crane: – Double watches, but staggered. – Knives only in the galley, officially. Unofficially, he assigned three to places only

those with knowledge can find. – Rum rationed. The squire protested, but instead received a sherry and a look that turns sherry to water. – Deck work according to lists he changed every two hours. Men plan poorly when they don't know who they're going to hate tomorrow.

"And the map?" I asked.

"It's split," Livesey said. "Not cut—split. I'll write a second, false one. Enough true to be believable, enough false to buy us a head start."

"And if they find two cards?"

"Then they believe in luck," said the doctor. "Luck is the drug of fools."

Bill entered, his face tired, his expression sober. "I make the rounds among the old folks. There are always two who only come along because they have back pain. They don't talk—they grumble. Grumble is healthy."

Smollett nodded. "And you, boy—" he pointed at me, "—stay close to the doctor and hear more than you say. If you sense heroism, hold on until it's quiet."

"Yes," I said, and the taste of the word was new. I liked it.

That same evening, Silver's silent audit began. Not big, not loud—a thumb here, a joke there. He stood in the galley, stirring a pot, and men lined up as if for confession.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Tom."

"Tom what?"

"Just Tom."

"Just Tam, then." Silver grinned. "Eat. And if you need anything—come earlier. Early risers get more out of the day."

When I said "earlier," I saw Tom's gaze twitch. A check mark on an invisible list.

"And you?"

"Thick."

"Dick has strong hands. A strong hand is like a good crutch—carries what's missing." Knock on wood. Another checkmark.

He didn't hand out coins. He handed out meaning. Worse.

I stood in the shadow of the scuppers and pretended I were somewhere else. The parrot was silent. When even the parrot is silent, someone is thinking aloud.

"Jim!" Silver suddenly shouted. "Help a one-legged man. Pass me the pepper."

I reached out. He took it. Our fingers didn't touch. "Good boy," he said. "Never think you owe me anything. Debts are just bills with pretty words."

"I don't owe you anything," I said.

"Exactly." His smile said: It will stay that way until you forget.

The following day, the Squire was back in his element. This time he gathered not only our crew, but also half the neighborhood around the masts: tug-of-war participants, cabin boys, two dock girls, even the priest, who acted embarrassed, as if reading a psalm about secrecy.

"Men!" thundered Trelawney, "we are about to set sail to accomplish a deed that will go down in history!"

"Anals," one giggled. Maturity was in short supply.

"With courage, discipline, and good food—thanks to our excellent cook!—we will overcome everything!"

Silver bowed his head humbly, as if he didn't know what "excellent" meant. Three faces in the crowd opened like empty bags.

"Everyone who proves themselves will get their share! And more! I've—" he raised a bag that sounded very much like an onboard cash box "—prepared some small tokens of appreciation!"

Smollett gasped. Livesey stepped forward like a referee.

"Squire, with all due respect: payments are made according to lists. After departure." His tone brooked no argument.

"Of course, of course," Trelawney backpedaled, "everything by the book! I just wanted to boost—uh—morale."

"It stands," said Smollett. "On four walls: work, silence, obedience, rations."

"And the fifth?" someone shouted.

"Return," said the captain. The word was heavier than the bag.

The crowd dispersed. But I saw two men stay in the shadows, eyeing Silver. He let them come. He let everything come. And I realized: The worst thing isn't plans. The worst thing is talent.

In the cabin, Livesey distributed the cards like sins being neatly repackaged. The real one, tucked into his doublet, the doublet in turn tucked under a second shirt that smelled so innocent it seemed guilty. The fake one, meticulously drawn, with one riff that existed and a second one that existed only in his head.

"If they find the wrong one," I said, "they'll hit a rock."

"Better than us," he said. "Rocks don't complain."

"And if they find both?"

"Then they believe in freedom of choice." He smiled thinly. "Freedom of choice kills faster than rocks."

Bill checked the edges. "Crinkle one corner. Real cards sweat."

Livesey nodded and rubbed the edge of the drawer until it looked tired. I watched as the lie became believable. I watched too closely.

"Jim," said the doctor, "go to sleep."

"I want to see what truth looks like before it lies," I murmured.

"There," he said, turning the lamp down. "Half dark."

The next morning, the captain had us line up. Not for the drill—for the thinking. He laid a chain on the table: eyes, hooks, thimbles, all unspectacular.

"This is a ship," he said. "Not a poem. Not a promise. A tool. It doesn't sell you a dream; you rent it to survive. Each of you today finds a place where we could die if it breaks. Explain it to me. Then we'll fix it before it breaks."

Murmuring, cursing, working. Suddenly everyone was busy, hands busier than mouths. Even the shadows had something to do.

I found my place: the nailing bench on the mainmast, two bolts bare, one already red with sea fury. "Here," I said. Smollett nodded, sent Hunter with iron and calm. "Good. That's thinking."

Silver watched us, his eye with the gleam of a man studying a new kind of enemy: people who act beforehand.

On the second night, I slipped into the shaft next to the galley—the only place where words seep like grease. There they were: six voices, a knife, two bad laughs. Silver's baton tapped gently, setting the time for an invisible music.

"Not on board," he said. "Don't be stupid. Smollett smells stupidity like a dog. We're nice men. We work. We help. We'll save the surprise for... later."

"Later when?" someone whispered.

"When X sees land," Silver said. "Not before."

"And if the Squire..."

"The Squire is a gift," Silver said kindly. "You don't open presents on the way to the party. You put them down and wait."

A chuckle. One spat, almost hitting me. I held my breath until my heart was insulted.

"And the boy?"

"Jim?" Silver melted at the name. "The boy is the knife who still wonders if he wants to be a fork. Let him. Knives cut best when they think they're spoons."

They left. I crawled out, cold rage pressing against my warm knees. I looked for Livesey.

"Later," he said when I was finished.

"You always say later."

"Better than too soon," he said. "Too soon only means later with the funeral."

On the third day, Trelawney officially declared himself a co-commander. He distributed handwritten "orders" that looked like love letters to incompetence. Smollett read them, tore them in half, and handed both halves back to him.

"Why?" snapped the Squire.

"Because they sound better in half," said Smollett.

"I pay!"

"Then pay attention."

Livesey stepped in, his tone doctor, his gaze executioner. "Squire, you will take care of the supplies. Quietly. Out of the public eye. You are our... victualler. An honorable position."

The squire beamed. "Of course! You have to delegate!"

"Yes," said the doctor. "We've been doing this for days."

While the men played, my mother did what she always did: she solved problems with thread and courage. She sewed pockets on the inside of her apron that looked innocent. In one, she buried three pistol darners, in another, the letter she hadn't written to anyone, and in a third... something that clinked.

"What is that?" I asked.

"The weight you need if you want to speed up a decision." She showed me a sock with coins. "I don't speak as well as your squire."

"No one talks as badly as our Squire," I said, and we both grinned, which was rare and expensive.

The fourth evening was silent, like a lie about to be exposed. The city behind us was just an edge; in front of us, the open sea—that vast, impudent expanse that pretends to be empty and is full of bills. Smollett stood at the compass. Livesey counted stars, but not romantically—like nails in the sky.

Silver was cooking. The stew was too good. Good stews on bad days are bribery with a ladle. Men's eyes were softening. Soft looks forgive too much. I turned away before my appetite overcame my caution.

"Jim," said a voice I now recognized without a name.

I turned around. Silver was standing there with two wooden bowls. He handed me one.

"I've already eaten," I lied.

"Then eat again," he said. "Eating twice is better than thinking twice."

"I like to think."

"I know." He smiled. "Don't think out loud."

"When I think out loud, I'm closer to the captain's ear."

"And closer to knives," he said, kind as a mother. "Sleep well, boy."

I didn't sleep. I listened. The wind didn't tell stories. That was new.

At night, those who could keep quiet came: Hunter, Joyce, Bill, Livesey, Smollett, me, Mother. No Squire. Not because he was stupid—because he was highly gifted at keeping secrets aggravating.

Smollett drew on the wood with chalk: three arrows, two crosses, a circle. "If they try, they'll do it at the changing of the watch. Here," he tapped the portside ladder, "or here," the companionway by the galley. "Or they'll rely on kindness. That's harder to counter than steel."

"You counter kindness with work," my mother said. "When I'm holding a pan, I'm not nice."

"Good," said the captain. "You stay with the pan."

"I'll take the sock," she said.

"Better," he said.

Livesey laid out two packets: powder and percussion caps, small as tamed curses. "Don't shoot to win. Shoot to buy time."

"Time is the one thing we can't afford," Bill growled.

"That's why we buy it early," said the doctor.

We nodded, each in our own heads. It wasn't an oath, it was accounting.

Just as we were about to part, Trelawney came tumbling down the stairs, his face as red as a grumpy moon. "Guys! I've solved it! We're keeping a list of suspects!"

"Wonderful," Smollett said deadly. "Give it to me."

The squire unrolled a sheet of paper. On it—by God—were all the names. Underlined, doubled, with scrawled notes ("very seaworthy!" "friendly!" "sings well!").

"They suspect everyone," Livesey said.

"This way, no one will escape us!" beamed Trelawney.

"Go to sleep, Squire," said Smollett. "And dream quietly."

He left. We stayed behind, breathing as if air had to prove that it belonged to us.

"Tomorrow we set sail," said Smollett. "With everything we have: too much Squire, too little truth, just enough cold."

"And too much cooking," said Bill.

"We dilute it with work," said the captain.

Morning didn't come—it crawled. Gray as a confession, cold as a cleaned knife. The lines jumped as if in a hurry to get away from us. Men ran, shouted, pulled. Silver smiled, stirred, reached. The squire waved to the town as if he had invented it. My mother stood by the galley, her sock heavy as reason. Livesey examined silently, Smollett knew and said little. Bill held the chest as if it were his last honest friend. I stood at the bow and did what I did best: see, count, remember.

The Hispaniola pulled out of the harbor like an animal that had decided to be polite. Behind us, the city closed its eyes. Ahead, the sea opened its jaws. I heard someone quietly say "Rum." Perhaps the parrot. Perhaps the future.

"Heading south," said Smollett.

"Course trouble," Bill muttered.

"Course order," said Livesey.

"Course money," rejoiced the squire.

I said nothing. My hands were on the railing and the truth was in my mouth: She was small, but cheeky. And she bit back.

Chapter 6 - Contract with the Devil

You know how it is: There are contracts signed with ink, and there are contracts sealed with excuses. This one smelled of both, plus a dash of sulfur—just for decoration.

We were already out, the city a gray ridge in the haze, when Smollett called out: "All hands to the middle deck! Articles!" Honest people call "articles" "embarkation contract." For us, it was: We pretend to be civilized while everyone holds their dagger like a spoon.

The Squire arrived in his sunrise jacket as if he were the flag itself. Livesey stood beside him, his hands behind his back, his face as calm as a closed coffin. Silver hobbled in the middle, crutch as baton, smile as bribe. Bill leaned against the railing, the box under his arm as if it were his bad sleep. My mother tied her apron tighter; when women tie aprons tighter, men confess later.

Smollett laid the book on the table—a thick, salt-stained thing that had seen more confessions than any chapel. "Articles," he said. "Read. Understand. Sign—or get out while the water still looks friendly."

"Friendly?" Bill murmured. "Water is never friendly. It's just busy."

Silver cleared his throat. "Captain, may I?" "No." "Excellent." The smile remained, only his teeth settled.

Smollett read. Not like a priest—like a surgeon. Every sentence excised something that could have festered later.

"First: discipline according to naval law. Second: rum rations according to the list. Third: loot according to the share of rank and risk, at the earliest upon safe return to home port."

"What a pity," someone shouted from the back. "Fourth: No knives on deck except service knives. Fifth: No unauthorized haggling, threatening, soliciting,

or intimidation. Sixth: The captain's orders are orders. Seventh: In medical matters, the ship's doctor's word is the captain's."

"I like this," said Livesey, as if he were being handed an extra-clean needle.

"Eighth," Smollett continued, "whoever violates these Articles will lose their share and rank. Whoever acts against the crew will lose both, and the ground beneath their feet." Silence. Even the seagulls nodded.

The Squire raised a hand to make a speech; Livesey placed two fingers on his sleeve. Two fingers are enough to turn a power outage into a quiet afternoon.

"Questions?" Of course there were questions. False ones. The real question—when we die—was too private for everyone.

One of the new recruits—flat eyes, deep scar, name Dick—spoke up. "Captain, what if we find the treasure and you..."—he searched for a polite word and found none—"...delay the payout?"

"Then I'll hold your breath too," Smollett said calmly. "But only after we're safe. Your part needs me first."

A few laughed because they didn't know what to do with their hands. Silver didn't laugh; he counted. You don't hear it, but you see it in his eye—a metallic click every time a man belongs to him, even before the man realizes it.

Now came the parade of names. Everyone stepped forward, scratching the paper, some like men, others like bills. Silver signed with a gesture so sophisticated it was suspicious: "John Silver, cook." "Cook," said Smollett dryly, "who doesn't command." "I only command peppercorns," said Silver. "And sometimes courtesy."

I wrote "Jim Hawkins," and the ink looked like a sentence that was too honest in the wrong mouth. My hand didn't shake. My stomach did.

The squire affixed his signature like a royal stamp. Large, curved, more ink than meaning. He was as proud as a peacock in a gutter. "Exemplary," he said. "That's how you keep things in order."

"You keep things in order with work," my mother murmured, tying her apron even tighter.

After the mass—thin stew, fat looks—came the unofficial part: the haymaking behind the haymaking. The sea has two surfaces, and you can slip on both.

Silver began his tour, crutch tack-tack, voice warm. He didn't stop anyone—people came of their own accord. That's what you do when you recruit without asking.

"You're Tom, aren't you? Strong hands, soft ears." Tom grinned as if he'd been gifted with a talent. "With us," Silver continued, "the quiet one ends up saying more. Understand?" Tom nodded. "And you, Dick? The scar is new. Old scars tell stories, new ones want to listen. Eat more. Hunger talks too loudly."

He stopped by me every now and then, tilting his head slightly. "Boy Jim. How does ink feel?" "Cold." "Good. Stick with it. It'll warm up soon enough."

"The captain took care of the hiring," I said, too honestly. Silver smiled. "Hiring is like cooking. Half the work happens after the pots are off the fire."

He hobbled on. Behind him, words stuck to men like salt to wood. Hunter saw it, Joyce felt it, Smollett mentally noted it, Livesey... snatched up Silber's sentences like flies and put them in jars—for later dissection.

In the afternoon, Smollett rearranged the watches: triple patrol, alternating pairs. No man stood in the same place with the same companion twice in the same hour. "Habit is the first mutiny," he said. "The second is rum," said Bill. "The third is hope," said Livesey. "I have no remedy for that."

I was given the dog watch at the bow, overlooking the black line where the sky pretends to be water. Next to me stood Ned, the cabin boy from the Diligence, recruited because he was cheap and inconspicuous. "I can whistle softly," he whispered. "Then whistle softly if you hear something loud," I said.

Below deck, the ship pulsed like an animal sorting out its own sounds. Every plank has an accent. If you listen long enough, you'll know whether a step is friendly or paid.

Friendly steps are rare.

Meanwhile, the Squire couldn't stand to remain silent. He burst into the galley as if it were his own saloon and explained to Silver the menu, the morale, and the direction of travel. "I've been thinking," he said, "that a voluntary extra ration of rum would warm the hearts."

Silver nodded politely, as if someone had given him a candle in the powder magazine. "Sir Squire," he said softly, "that's... daring. Warm hearts make slow hands." "Nonsense! My men work better when they know their master loves them!" "Sure," said Silver. "And when love boils over, it's soup." "Soup? Haha! Good joke!" The Squire never understood that some jokes carry knives.

Smollett came over, smelled the soup, tasted the joke, saw the knives. "Rum stays rationed," he said, "or I'll throw the ladle overboard." "My ladle?" asked the squire indignantly. "The metaphorical one." "Ah!" The squire beamed, having found a new word.

That evening, Livesey pulled me into the small room next to the infirmary chest. On the table lay paper, two pens, and a map. He hadn't unwrapped the map. Only a nurse. "We're writing Articles 2," he said. "Another contract?" "For people who don't read." "Pictures?" He nodded. He inked three simple rules into small squares: a knife with a cross above it; a barrel with a number below it; an ear next to a mouth with an arrow from the mouth to the ear, crossed out. "No knife," he explained. "Rum only when the clock says yes, and talking only when the ears ask."

"Looks like a children's book." "Then everyone will understand," he said. "Even those who are too proud to feel stupid."

We hung the notes exactly where men don't want to read: on the thunder beam, on the bulwarks, above the galley. The sea teaches you that shame only works on land.

"And if they tear it down?" "Then at least they looked," said Livesey.

Night crept onto the deck, smelling of wet ropes and bad decisions. I circled the deck, listening to the steady creaking of the gaff, the less steady creaking of the men. Behind the figurehead, I heard voices, quieter than necessary. I glided closer until the words brushed against my jacket.

"When the X appears..." "Silver says, not before." "Silver says a lot." "Silver says the right thing, as long as we want to live." A short, uncertain laugh. "And the boy?" "The boy hears." "Let him. You only hear what you can't forget later."

I stepped out of the shadows. "You guessed right." Two heads shot up, two mouths forming innocence. "You guessed right, sir," I said, looking at her until her gaze shifted. Not courage—extension.

Silver suddenly stood at the railing like a second figurehead. "Boys," he said kindly, "whoever's on watch, is on watch. Anyone who needs jokes comes to the galley; I have one who doesn't stab." The two left. Silver and I stayed. "You can't be everywhere," he said quietly. "I just have to be where I am," I said. "Right," he said. "And I'll only be where you won't notice."

In the morning, Smollett called for an inspection of the crates—ours included. Bill placed them on the table as if he were proposing an argument. Smollett tapped the sides as if testing a barrel: "It's gotten heavier." "It's gotten more honest," Bill growled. "Honesty usually wins."

"Key?" asked Smollett. Bill lifted the chain and looked at me. I nodded barely noticeably. He put it back on. "Good," said Smollett. "The less I know, the later I'll have to lie."

The Squire came forward, taking a deep breath. "I've drafted an amendment, by the way," he said, "according to which special merits..." "No," said Smollett and Livesey simultaneously, the rare duet. "But—" "No." Sometimes a no is the whole cure.

At midday, the weather came. Not much—just enough to make the sails want to talk. We reefed, men cursed, lines sang. In the hustle and bustle, something honest always happens. Dick slipped, Tom grabbed, lost his footing, my mother was faster than physics—the sock in her apron slammed against the knee of someone else who was just trying to know too much. He fell, pretended it was intentional, laughed, and realized no one was laughing with him.

"Everything okay?" Silver called, suddenly in the place where rescue looked good. "Everything's okay," Smollett replied. And his eyes said: I saw you, Oneleg.

Hire isn't a moment. It's a creeping yes. Today there were three too many.

In the evening, lantern light burned like little confessions across the deck. The Squire—of course—had another idea: "We need an anthem! Something to unite the men!" "Work unites," said Smollett. "And food," said Silver. "And fear," said Bill. "And rules," said Livesey. "All right," nodded the Squire, as if he had said it all himself. "Work, food, fear, rules. And an anthem." "I forbid singing," said Smollett. "Until after landing. Singing makes men think they've already arrived." The Squire was offended, but only briefly; vanity has short legs, but comfortable shoes.

Later, the doctor pulled me aside again. "Jim," he said, "today they signed in ink. Soon they'll want to sign in blood. When the moment comes, remember two things." "Which ones?" "First: A knife you don't draw sometimes saves more than one you do." "And second?" "When Silver offers you his hand, take it—but don't be the first to pull it back. Whoever lets go first belongs to the other." "Sounds superstitious." "It's physiology," he said dryly.

I laughed, only to realize I didn't feel like it.

At dusk, Silver made his final rounds. He stopped by me, looking at the water as if it were sending him mail. "Jim," he said, "you signed today. That's nice. But contracts are like weather reports." "Unreliable?" "Right, when you're already wet." "And yours?" "I don't have one," he said, and for the first time, his voice sounded not like warm wood, but like metal that knows its name. "I only have one direction." "Which one?" "To." "Where?" "Wherever the X doesn't lie."

He tapped the deck with his crutch, so quietly that only I heard. "Sleep well, Jim. Tomorrow someone will pay. Maybe us. Maybe the others. They all pay."

The night reeked of decision. The wind died down, as if it had pressed us into our hands and said: Now it's your turn. The water lapped against the side of the ship with that foolish comforting sound children use to wipe away tears. I lay on my bunk, the pistol under my shirt, the small book next to my head—two kinds of writing: one for the captain, one for me.

I flipped back to my ink in the wage book. The line was straight, the ink dry. I ran my finger over it. It rubbed off. Some contracts stay on your skin, no matter how often you wash them off.

Footsteps above me. Not heavy. Not light. Swaying. Silver. He stopped in front of my door. No movement. Just presence. Then on. Even higher: Smollett. Two laps, always two. In between: Livesey, who never stomps. Very quietly: my mother, who can be anywhere without belonging.

I slept because you have to sleep if you want to be awake tomorrow when the devil pays your wages.

And the morning that would wake us said: Land in sight? No. Not yet. The morning said: The contract is valid – until someone breaks it.

We had signed.

The sea had not signed.

The sea never adheres to articles. It is the notary of hell and smiles when ink dries.

Tomorrow we would find out who would pay in installments first.

Chapter 7 - The One-Legged Man and His Fake Grin

In the morning, the Hispaniola smelled of goulash and danger. Both Silver's signature. The man cooked as if he were trying to feed us and smiled as if he wanted us to forget what knives looked like. His crutch tapped to the beat of a polite executioner's song: tak—tak—tak. The parrot perched on the crossbar, like a colorful curse with feathers, and croaked when it got too quiet: "Rum! Piece of gold! Rum!" A bird that insists on the punch line.

Silver placed the ladle down like a scepter, as if we were his court. "Men," he said, "today we have stew that will satisfy even lies." He passed out bowls, and faces softened around the edges. Soft edges like knives. He knew that, we knew that.

I stood in the doorway, half in the light, half in the "If something flies, it'll hit me last" mood. He saw me, but pretended not to. That's more precious than any hug.

"Good morning, Captain," he crooned as Smollett crossed the galley. "I've counted the peppercorns. There are enough to season obedience." Smollett looked into the pot as if it were a witness. "Don't season with rumors," he said, "they burn twice." "Never, sir," Silver smiled. "I only cook what's there." "Then let the squire out of the pot," Smollett said, and left. Silver winked at the steam. The steam winked back; he had the better sense of humor.

Livesey sat down impudently neatly at a stool, as if dirt belonged to him. "Mr. Silver," he began, "I have a question." "Just one, Doctor?" Silver beamed. "Then I'm a made man today." "How many men actually sleep per watch? Not according to the list." Silver brushed three bowls in the row: "Two are always asleep, one dreams of sleep, and the fourth swears he's awake when called. Added up: too many." "Names?" Silver smiled as if testing a good knife. "I have a pact with politeness, Doctor. It never lies—it just doesn't tell everything."

"You know a lot for a cook," Livesey said smoothly. "Cooking is war, only with spices," said Silver, and the parrot yelled, "Rum! Rum!" "The bird disagrees," said Livesey. "The bird is a union," said Silver. "He always wants more."

Livesey left. His gaze lingered, measuring Silver's crutch. Not the weapon—the baton.

The Squire, that walking trumpet, burst in later, exhaling enthusiasm until the room began to sweat. "Silver, my dear! A scent like heaven!"

"Then it'll rain soon, Mr. Squire," Silver smiled. "Heaven is a stingy eater."

"Haha! You're a joker!" "That's the bird," said Silver, pointing at the poultry.

"I'm just the crutch."

"I've decided to grant my men free speech!" the squire announced. "Anyone with suggestions—" "—come to me," Silver interrupted gently. "They may not like to argue with their financier. I translate their wishes into good manners."

"Excellent! Delegation is the heart of leadership!" "And discretion the cloak," I murmured. Silver heard it. He heard everything. He even heard things that hadn't been said yet.

The first small war broke out over lunchtime soup. Dick and another man, a rat-faced man with fingers that were too long, wanted to get to the bread at the

same time. Hands touched, then the old reflexes: shoulder, elbow, the look of a man who wants to be poor again. The knife was already flashing—from his jacket, not his brain. I was two steps away, the distance between "too late" and "I was there."

Silver was faster. He placed the ladle on Dick's hand, not firmly—warmly. "Boy, boy," he said mildly, "bread isn't an inheritance. And knives are bad spoons." "He—" Dick snarled, "—he's—" "He's hungry. So are you. See: already two things in common. Now everyone slides a hand's breadth to the left and acts as if you've never seen each other." They slid. The knife disappeared back into his jacket, insulted. The air smelled less of iron.

"What would you have done if he had stabbed me?" I asked later. Silver held up the ladle. "Me? Nothing. The ladle. It would have made a mistake and hit my arm. Poor people quickly forget how to measure." "You lie with decency," I said. "I only lie when it's good for me," he said. "Decency is a spice."

Later, Bill pulled me to his side, the box in the shadow, his forehead like old rope. "He's collecting," he growled. "What?" "Guessing." I saw it when he said it: those invisible coins Silver pressed into everyone's pocket when they gave them time, patience, an anecdote that fit like a stolen glove. You pay back before you realize you've taken anything.

The evening mass was Silver's theater. He didn't tell stories—he declaimed practicality with a punch line. "I once knew a cutter that had more wind than sail," he began, and the men laughed, realizing he was referring to them without it hurting. Then a brief pause, a glance at the mast: "You're better sail than wind when you're awake." "Awake!" Hunter grumbled from somewhere, which passed for an amen.

"Captain Flint!" screeched the parrot at just the right moment. "Piece of gold! Piece of gold!" "Quiet, you theologian," Silver gently chided. "The bird's always preaching about the wrong hell."

I caught myself laughing. Then I caught myself not liking the fact I'd laughed. Silver noticed both and did me the favor of not looking.

Later, at the bulwarks, as night washed out the sides, he came up beside me without the planks complaining. "Jim," he began, "do you know what I like about you?" "Tell me. I collect compliments for bad days." "You don't walk backward to appear friendly." "I don't like people looking at my shoulders." "Nobody does. But many do. You don't." "And you?" I asked. "You smile when you think." "I smile so that others mistake thinking for smiling." "It works." "Until someone wants to see the bill," he said softly.

"Tell me, Jim," he continued, as if he'd saved the question while he was kneeling, "would you rather be rich or awake?" "Awake. Rich people don't sleep well." "Good," he nodded. "Then you'll be rich enough."

"You want to get me on your side," I said matter-of-factly. "Boy," he said, almost tenderly, "I want you not to get run under a wheel just because you're on the wrong side when it rolls." "And where does it roll?" "To where men draw X's on paper because they're afraid they won't find anything without crosses." "And you don't believe in crosses?" "I believe in hands." He raised his free one. Thick, strong fingers. A scar that said: I've already decided.

I didn't give him mine. He didn't take offense. A good sign. Or a very bad one.

After sunset, Smollett practiced silent insubordination: He publicly ignored the squire – and Silver watched. The captain gave Hunter an order over the squire's head. Trelawney opened his mouth, closed it again, and made the face of a man who hadn't learned to lose quietly. The crew looked back and forth among the men as if they were betting. Silver just cleared his throat, amiably, a referee without a whistle. The tension didn't ease – she lay down and pretended to be sick.

"He's testing us," I whispered to Livesey. "Everyone tests everyone," the doctor said. "The difference is: some insist on grades."

At midnight, I was on dog watch. Water whispered things it didn't mean. The stars acted as if they were far away. Silver came with a bowl—whoever brings soup at midnight wants to talk. "For the soul," he said. "Or the stomach. Whichever is louder." "What do you want in return?" "That you don't fall tomorrow." "And the day after tomorrow?" "We'll talk again the day after tomorrow," he smiled.

"Tell me, Long John," I tested the weight of his name, "why one leg?" "Because two legs are unnecessary if you know where you're going." He tapped his crutch. "And because people hold doors open for you if they think you might need help."

"Do you need help?" "I need an audience." "We're not your audience." "Not today," he admitted. "Maybe tomorrow. Or I'm yours."

The parrot jerked its head. "Rum! Rum!" "Quiet, Captain Flint."

"Why is it called that?" I asked. "Because men eat better when they're afraid."

"Sounds like religion." "Like I said: The bird is a theologian."

The next day, Silver had them do "voluntary" exercises: timed knots, blind loops, line throws over three paces, four paces, five paces—and every time a joke salvaged their pride when things went wrong. Smollett watched, said nothing, mentally taking notes. Even Bill stopped, as if his bones had just heard an old song.

"Knots," Silver lectured, "are like rumors. If you tie them wrong, you have to cut them. Cutting takes work, and you need a new rope." "And if you don't have a new one?" asked Dick. "Then you take your old life," Silver said gently. "And tie it in a different knot."

That hit home. I hate it when the truth is well packaged.

Around midday, a break no one had asked for: a lull. The sails hung like tired tongues. Men scratch themselves when there's no wind—at honor, at boredom, at the past. This is the hour when silver coins ring in heads. Silver used it like a priest uses Sunday. He led the men out of the sun into the shade, distributed water with a care that tasted of love, and asked questions that sounded like interest, not proof.

"Where are you from, Tom?" "Bristol." "Poor city. Rich memories." "And you?" "I always arrive the same way," he said, "no matter where I'm from." Laughter. Bond. Another invisible checkmark.

I stepped closer. "You set a net." "I don't fish," he said. "I rescue fish that think they can breathe on land." "And then?" "I bring them back to the water." "And eat them?" "Only if they're smart." "You shouldn't eat them." "Exactly," he smiled.

That evening, Livesey stood in the galley again, this time with a look that taught the knife to be quiet. "Mr. Silver, I'd like to see your crutch." "I'm glad, Doctor, but I hate to give it up. It's timid." "I pass." Silver handed it over—a friendly, controlled act. Wood, iron cap, more wood. Livesey tapped, weighed, checked the center of gravity. "Hollow." "To make it lighter." "Or to carry something." "A dream?" Silver smiled. "Or peppercorns?" Livesey put the crutch back. "If pepper pops, it's been poorly stored." "That's the cook's job," Silver said, "storage."

"And if I take it from you?" "Then I'll limp more politely," Silver said gently. "But I'll still get there." Livesey nodded, as if he had a diagnosis that didn't yet have a name.

Shortly afterward, the air hissed. A whistle, no wind. Smollett raised his head; Hunter followed, I followed Hunter, Silver followed me, the parrot followed all of us. Two figures at the port companionway, shoulder to shoulder, the wrong proximity. A cloth, gone very quickly. A piece of paper, there very briefly. Wrong map? Right hands? "Stop," Smollett said quietly. The figures froze—only their outer skin. One dropped something. Not the paper—nerves. There were four of us, five of us, and the night held its breath.

"What's that?" asked the captain. "Lookup table for provisions," lied the first, brave as a rat. "I love tables," said Silver mildly. "Shall I read them aloud, Captain?" "No," said Smollett. "Yes," said Livesey. Silver lifted the cloth: a piece of canvas, stained, unremarkable, as if it had never seen evil. Underneath, a tin can. Water. Nothing. And the paper? Gone. "The sea," said Silver, "has read again and not commented." Smollett let go—not she, of the moment. "Go to sleep," he said. They walked, with the kind of walk that tells you your knees will be talking tonight.

"See?" whispered Livesey. "I see we're in trouble," growled Bill. "We are trouble," said Silver kindly.

The night shivered. I found no warmth, except in the question burning within me: Which of us will be the first to rescue the other from behind? Silver stood beside me, suddenly, like the answer to a question no one had asked.

"Jim," he said quietly, "do you like stories?" "Only if they end up lying less than they begin." "Then listen." He pointed his crutch at the water. "There was once a boy who boarded a ship because he thought he wanted gold. Along the way, he discovered that gold is just a color you paint on fear to make it look valuable." "And?" "And the boy decided to stay awake. That was enough. Anyone who stays awake finds what they need." "You talk about me." "I'll talk about anyone who will listen."

The parrot blinked. "Piece of gold! Piece of gold!" "Hiss, Pastor," murmured Silver. "The children are preaching today."

At the dog station, Smollett gave me an order that sounded like a compliment and tasted like a trap: "You go to the mainmast and stay there. If someone is too friendly, you say 'Good morning.' Loudly." "And if they're unfriendly?" "Then you say it more quietly."

I stood at the mast. The mast stood by me. Footsteps came, carrying, not dragging. Silver. I felt the plank recognize him. He stopped at three paces, a polite distance. "Tomorrow," he said. "It's still night." "I'm practicing." "For what?" "For the moment when we have to be friends, even though we aren't."

I turned around and gave him my profile—poverty joke: You only show half of what you can afford. "You know I won't fall over." "That's why I talk so much," he said. "So those who want to fall have something to listen to while they do."

"Why haven't you taken over the ship long ago?" His smile had edges. "Because I don't take ships. I let them come to me. They always come. That's their fault. They sail to stand still." "And you?" "I stand still to sail."

Towards morning—that hour that tastes of cold tin—the little scene occurred that later became a staple of the chronicles. Rat-Face had the knife in his hand again, this time where it wasn't visible: at his throat from sleep. A movement, two breaths too long. I raised the pistol, not heroically, just calculating. Silver was there. No trowel this time—his crutch slid under the man's arm, a small lever, a polite correction of anatomy. The knife clanged. No blood. Just shame. Shame is a cheap band-aid—holds for the moment.

"Son," Silver said to the man, "you've mistaken the knife. The right knife is teeth, if you keep your mouth shut." The man nodded as if he understood a

foreign language he never intended to learn. Smollett stepped out of the shadows. "Go belowdecks. Take your honor with you, if you find it." He left. Silver didn't support him. He only supported the order he intended to sell later.

Smollett looked at Silver, not grateful, not blindly. "Today you saved us work." "Tomorrow I'll cost you some," Silver said frankly. "I know." "Good." Three men, three truths, no handshake.

When the sun found the edge and acted as if that were reason enough to go on living, the Squire stood there again, shining, joyful, unable to realize that shine screams at night. "Gentlemen! I have a plan!" Smollett closed his eyes. Livesey inhaled and gave up. Bill grabbed for air as if to reprimand her. Silver smiled so subtly that I almost didn't see the knife underneath.

"We'll give the men double bacon every other day to keep their spirits up!" "Great," Silver said gently, "and on the third day they'll mutiny for diet reasons." "Nonsense!" "Squire," Smollett snapped, "no announcements without me. And without the doctor." "But I—" "No." "I'll pay!" "Then you pay for silence."

The squire snorted and trotted off. Silver followed him for a heartbeat—a hunter who knows the trail. Then he looked back into the pot, as if it contained the year's plan.

I stood there and felt the ship alive: wood, rope, men, lies, a doctor with cold hands and a captain with hard ones. And in the middle: a one-legged man with a grin that says "good day" and means "settlement."

"Jim," Silver said as he left, "tonight I'm cooking something that can handle courage." "Will it be spicy?" "No," he said. "Spicy is for the audience. Courage needs to be quiet."

He hobbled away, tak—tak—tak, and the parrot blessed the scene: "Piece of gold! Rum! Rum!" I laughed because I felt sick, and realized: This is the kind of theater where the curtain never falls. You just keep going until the deck stops asking questions.

Long John Silver was performing. And we had bought tickets without realizing that there were no seats—only edges.

Chapter 8 - The parrot shouts "Rum!" "And he's right."

The day smelled of rum, and that was the most honest thing about it.

"RUM! RUM! PIECE OF GOLD!" croaked the parrot from the crossbar, as if it were the bell of an idiotic monastery. Men laughed because otherwise something would have fallen out of their faces. The bird was right. Rum was the plan, the excuse, the drug, and the sermon. Everything we did was marinated in rum, even the lies.

Smollett didn't ring the rum bell. This made him the villain of a play written by Squire.

"A little extra to boost morale—" Trelawney began, and Smollett just raised a hand. "Morale without work is booze." "Booze is—" "—booze," said the captain, and left. It was the most elegant insult of the day.

Silver stood by the cauldron, stirring kindness into stew and polite anger into men. "Patience, boys," he said, "Rum comes like wind. If it comes too soon, you'll capsize the ship." "Rum!" roared Captain Flint, "Piece of gold!" "You see," trilled Silver, "even the church calls for the blessing."

I stood half in the doorway, half outside—my favorite spot when you don't want to die but have to see who starts first. My mother tied her apron tighter. You learn at sea: When mothers tie their aprons tighter, the evening gets expensive.

In the morning, Smollett checked the barrels. Rum likes to sit where it's not found, until it's found—then everyone finds it. The captain tapped with his brass tap. Dull, duller, too dull.

"A leak," said Livesey, his forehead like a knife edge. "Someone was snorting where they shouldn't have."

"RUM!" preached the parrot. "The bird is an honest man," muttered Bill. He had chalk on his fingers from painting the box, which will never be white, no matter how long you stare at it.

Smollett turned the bung, tasted, and spat. "Stretched," he said. "By you?" The squire was indignant, as if his conceit had been stolen. "By circumstances," said Smollett. "And by idiots."

"I move that the tot be distributed today," boomed the Squire. "Denied," said Smollett. "I'm a shareholder!" "I'm the reason you get your share."

Silver smiled at the barrel. The barrel's contents smiled back—it had less bite than yesterday.

The first scratch came at lunchtime. Dick, the one with the brave scar and the unfortunate brain, tipped some into his stew from a private tin can—a smell that screamed in the air: not approved. Rat-face saw it, wanted to share, grabbed, grabbed into greed, greed into movement, knife snapped open, just as Captain Flint yelled "RUM!" like a bailiff.

I was three steps away—the distance between "witness" and "explain the wound." Silver was already there. The crutch did what crutches rarely do: it planed the decision out of the knife's fingers, a small lever, polite, almost tender. The knife fell, insulted. Dick stumbled, Ratface stumbled, the stew went pffft—and then my mother's sock, a crooked star of lead and coins: pock against Ratface's knee. He sank as if gravity had personally insulted him.

"One at a time," Silver said gently. "Bread, soup, argument. Not all at once. The stomach remembers sequences."

"He took my—" "—Nothing," my mother snapped. "You had nothing. You wanted more. More comes later. Now comes silence."

Livesey stepped forward, turned the knee into a diagnosis, and the diagnosis into a needle. "Rum, Doctor?" Dick asked hopefully. "Alcohol is for wounds outside, not for gaps inside," Livesey said, pouring outside and stitching inside. Dick howled inside and remained silent outside. Education.

"RUM!" cheered the parrot. "You won't get one either," I said. The bird blinked. I could have sworn he was grinning.

Smollett rolled the barrels into the sun. An audit, he called it. Words were his way of giving people a cough. I was sent to the bunghole—not because I was

the smallest, but because I was the one with hands that remembered when my head was busy. I crawled into the gangway, where the barrels stood like fat, silent men, and then the kind of stupidity that gives stories a kick happened: I slipped. My foot sought purchase, found the bunghole, the bunghole gave way, the lid nodded, the world tilted—and I was half in the rum, half in the shadow, completely in the truth.

Rum smells of honesty when you lie in it.

I held my breath, not because I was afraid of drowning, but because voices were approaching. Men. Two, three—then his rhythm: tak—tak—tak. Silver.

"Not today," he said quietly. "Don't be stupid." "He says the tot—" "—is small, but it's there," whispered Silver. "A small tot is better than a big funeral. Wait. We'll be nice until the wind shows the X."

"And the captain?" "The captain is a knot. You don't untie knots with your teeth. You wait until he's wet."

"The boy?" My neck went cold. "The boy is useful," Silver said kindly, "as long as he thinks he's observing. He observes well. And those who observe well later see others fall. That makes men cautious." "And when he talks?" "Then someone listens: me."

The parrot wasn't there—but its shadow sat on my shoulder. I smelled rum, fear, and the dry wood of decisions.

"Water is scarce," a voice murmured. "When we see land, we'll set sail. Then..." "Then you'll be men who can finally walk," said Silver. "Until then, work so you don't have to run." "And the squire?" "It's my favorite gift," said Silver. "You don't unwrap it until the guests arrive."

Someone laughed too quietly. I didn't move. A drop of rum ran down my neck; it was colder than the sea.

"Now go away," said Silver. "The smell will remain. Later we'll say: The sun did it."

Footsteps. The rhythm faded. I crawled backward from my hiding place, smelling like a broken promise, and made it upstairs unseen. In the corridor, I covered myself with linen as if I were work. Livesey's gaze met mine, measured, smelled, understood. He nodded, and the nod said: Later. Always later.

"You stink like truth," Bill said as I stood in the pantry, rubbing salt into my hair. "I know what they want," I whispered. "Land. Water. Then—" "Then men do what men always do when land is near," he growled. "They think they have time."

"Silver—" "—is patience with a crutch," said Bill. "Do you have something I don't know?" "He wants to stay nice until he can stay nice." "Good," said Bill. "Then we'll take away his niceness."

Livesey listened to everything without once saying "hm." When the doctor remains silent, he's planning.

"Do we poison the rum?" my mother asked pragmatically, examining the seam. "No," said Livesey, as if someone had suggested folding the sea. "We mark it." "Mark?" "Gentian tincture. Turns tongues and lips a pretty blue. Harmless. Treacherous." "They look like drowned men then," I said. "All treason is a drowning," said the doctor. "Squire—" "Yes?" Trelawney surfaced as if someone had pulled him from a casket. "You're going to bed now," said Livesey. "Commanders sleep before the storm. It calms everyone down." "Excellent idea! I lead by example!" "Do that," said Smollett. He winked at me, almost friendly. And I realized: Today we're on the same side of the sword.

In the evening, the men received their tots—officially small, unofficially... marked. Silver distributed them. His hand was kind, his eye was bookkeeper. Those who wanted more got more—and tomorrow they'd have blue tongues. The parrot croaked "RUM! RUM!" so aptly that I felt like canonizing him.

"To the Hispaniola!" the squire called as he passed. "To the accounting department," muttered Smollett. "To pathology," said Livesey. "To stupidity," growled Bill. "To the future," smiled Silver. "It's payable."

Men drank. Men sank. Men laughed too loudly to escape detection. I waited for the blue—first saw none, then a hint, then two, then half of Dick's lower lip. He noticed it, licked it, turned bluer. I saw his eyes negotiate. I saw Silver not look. That was the art: knowing where to look creates suspicion.

"RUM!" shrilled the parrot. "You're being damagingly honest," I told him. The bird winked; we had understood each other.

The mock mutiny came sooner than night. Two shadows at the companionway, blue-lipped, bold with courage. One had the idea, the other the knife. The idea sent the one with the knife forward. I stood closer than was good, Smollett stood closer than was healthy, and Silver stood exactly right: on the edge between help and imprisonment.

"Captain," said the one with the knife, "we want to talk." "Talk," said Smollett. "More rum. More share. More—" "No," said Smollett. "We—" "—No." "But—" "No." The third "no" was a wooden wedge. After that, there were only two kinds of men: those who understood, and those who remained stupid.

The one with the knife remained stupid. He didn't raise his hand—just wrong. My mother moved like an answer that had already been written. The sock sang a note that needed no song. The man's knee buckled, the knife stumbled out of his future, Silver set the crutch down like a boundary, and suddenly everything was moving: Hunter there, Joyce there, me with the gun (not for hits, for time), Livesey with voice ("Back! Breath! You—sit down!"), Smollett with another no that made men again things that can work, and Trelawney—God help us—with applause.

"Excellent determination!" he cheered. "Silence," growled Smollett. "Squire, shut up."

The man with the knife suddenly had blue teeth. It was funny. I laughed. Then I stopped. You shouldn't laugh when men realize they're marked.

"Blue is flat," Livesey said matter-of-factly. "Blue isn't dead. Not yet." "What—what have you done?" stammered Dick, working on his own mouth.

"Nothing water won't wash away," said the doctor. "And until you see water, you'll be quieter."

Silver watched—openly at last. "Nice," he said. "Very nice." "Thank you," said Livesey. "I meant you," Silver nodded at us, "and I meant us too. It takes two not to dance a dance."

"Not tomorrow." Smollett looked at him. "Tomorrow we work. All of us. Or no one."

"Tomorrow," repeated Silver, "there will be weather."

We tied him down with a knife—not tightly, just firmly. He didn't cry. Men rarely cry when they realize they're still allowed to. Dick sat next to him, licking his teeth as if he could taste the color. It became quiet. Quiet is not peace; quiet is the brief politeness before the next noise.

"RUM! RUM!" preached Captain Flint. "You see," I told him, "you're the only one without a hangover, and you're still to blame." The bird scratched itself as if I had praised it.

Late—too late to lie upright—the sky drew a thin, bright line from its pocket. Smollett stood at the bow, the compass his silent friend. Silver stood in the galley, stirring water into water and calling it "soup" until men believed in it. My mother slept with one eye, the other cleaning knives. Bill sat on the chest and pretended to grant himself a future. The squire snored to the rhythm of a man who thinks others carry him through the night. The doctor wrote down something that would pass as a solution tomorrow, no matter how we felt about it.

I stood by the figurehead and looked at a strip of land that resembled land. No screams. No cheers. Just that lurch in your stomach when you realize that stories have finally found a destination.

"Land?" I asked. "Not today," said Smollett. "Tomorrow."

"Morgen is an idiot," Bill muttered. "Morgen is our idiot," Livesey said.

"RUM!" the parrot called into the unsuspecting twilight. "Yes," I said. "You were right all along. Rum is the beginning, not the end."

Silver stepped beside me, so quietly that the plank forgot to speak. "Do you see it?" "I see what everyone wants to see." "Good," he said. "Then you've seen enough today."

"And you?" He smiled, that fine, edgy thing. "I see men who have decided to work honestly tomorrow so they can steal honestly the day after."

"Not with me," I said. "Maybe because of you," he said. "Someone has to be awake when everyone else is finally asleep."

The parrot shouted "RUM!" again, and somewhere the water laughed. I laughed back because I felt sick. Laughter is cheaper than fear. And sometimes it lasts longer.

In the morning, we would see the line in the light and pretend it had only been waiting for us. The rum would call again, and someone would answer it. Maybe us. Maybe the others.

The parrot was right. Rum was the gospel of Hispaniola. And each of us was writing a chapter—with our tongues, with our knives, with that little shred of decency that even the lost sew into their hems.

Morning.

Chapter 9 - Departure to Doom □ The harbor disappears, the mutiny grows like mold.

The harbor sank away like a promise finally fulfilled. First the roofs became small, then the masts became teeth, then everything became a gray line that acted as if it had never been there. The Hispaniola stretched, yawned, ground its teeth—and took us with it. You could hear it: the ship wasn't happy. Ships never rejoice; they suffer.

"Goodbye land!" cried the squire, as if he were both the band and the bell. The wind lifted his words and dropped them into the water, where they did nothing.

"Look forward," said Smollett. "Eyes are for direction, not for the past." He stood there like a nail that never bends. Beside him was Livesey, hands clasped behind his back, the facepalm of reason.

"RUM!" croaked the parrot. "PIECE OF GOLD! RUM!" "He's got it," murmured Bill. "Not where to—with what."

I leaned against the galleon and felt the harbor falling out of me. What remained was salt, wood, work—and that thin film that clings to the air on days when men think too much and sweat too little. Moldy weather.

Smollett set things in order. Not loudly. He tightened the reins, shortened the tongues, and rang the bell later. Watches ran like chess moves. No one stood in the same place with the same guy twice. Habit makes you lazy; laziness makes you brave; bravery kills you.

"New lists," he said, handing me a piece of paper. "You run them, you negate them, you contradict me when you're smarter. Quietly." "Yes, sir." "And if Silver helps you, you accept it—and write down how he helps."

Silver heard it without looking. He heard everything without looking. His crutch made that ridiculously polite tapping sound: tak—tak—tak, as if he had rented the time.

"It smells," my mother said at lunchtime, her apron tightened, her gaze more intense. "Of rain?" I asked. "Of bread that will lie tomorrow."

She was right. The first loaf we opened looked like a good Sunday—and tasted like Wednesday in the cellar. A green film on the edges, a gray one on the thoughts. Hunter messed up, spat, cursed. Joyce generously cut off half; my mother cut off the other half and still left slices for the men. "Mold doesn't eat any of your share," she said dryly. "It just reminds you of it."

"The whole ship is a pantry," Livesey murmured, leaning over the bread as if it were a patient. "Damp, warm, dark. Perfect for what grows when no one's looking."

"Mutiny?" I asked.

"Bacteria," he said. "And yes."

He mixed a lye solution from nothing and experience, wiping boards as if he were cleaning thoughts. Silver stood beside him, friendly, interested, exactly the man you want around when hygiene suddenly becomes morality.

"Doctor," he crooned, "I got a tip from an old chef: dry the edges extra dry, otherwise it'll creep back in." "Thank you, Mr. Silver," said Livesey—a tone like a knife that doesn't shine but still cuts.

In the afternoon, one fell. Not far, not dramatically, but enough for the deck to remember him. Tom (the one without a last name) wanted to be smarter than

the wind, stepped wrong, slipped, let go—and suddenly became what men are for a second before becoming people again: an object.

I was two steps too close. Silver was one step too close. His crutch shot out like an extra spar, took Tom's weight, turned him, and returned him to the rail. Tom gasped, Silver smiled, the parrot flapped its wings and screamed, "RUM!"—as if there were a judge standing there.

"It's okay," Silver said very quietly to Tom. "You only fell for a short time. Some people fall for longer." "Thanks," Tom choked. "Thank the crutch," Silver grinned. "She likes compliments."

Smollett came, looked, registered, nodded—not gratefully, just precisely. "Double the belays. Retie the knots. And," he looked Tom in the eye, "you're not going to die on me today. I've got other plans for the day."

Tom nodded bravely. Later, I saw him talking to Silver. Not for long. Longer than was healthy.

Squire wanted to sing. Of course he wanted to sing. Men who have no solutions seek songs. He stood on the middeck, hacking words into the air that were too heavy to fly.

"Men! A marching song! 'Onward to Flint!' – Rhyme or I'll eat you!" "I forbid singing," Smollett said calmly. "Until we see land. Songs make you homesick – and homesickness is always an excuse." "I'm a shareholder!" "I'm a mood doctor," Livesey chimed in, quite mildly. "Today's therapy: rest."

The squire departed, offended, but left a trail of expensive perfume. The scent softened the air. Soft air likes mold.

In the evening, I checked the locker. Beneath it: nothing but wood—and noises. Words that couldn't be seen. I crawled deeper, found the small space where voices liked to pause. Rat-faced, quiet, but with a knife-like voice. Fat, blue around the lip since yesterday, less blue on the inside.

"Shares," whispered Rat-Face. "The cook said silver shares more fairly than money." "Silver is money," hissed Dick admiringly. "He pays with looks." "And the captain?" "He cuts." "And the doctor?" "He sews."

"When?" "When the X is near," they both said together, like good students. And laughed, quietly. Schimmel never laughs out loud.

I crawled back and bumped into a box. Powder. The lid was fresh; the hinges weren't. Someone had touched it yesterday. Not today.

"Small problem," I said in the cabin. "Powder's living in the wrong room." Smollett nodded, didn't raise an eyebrow, just pulled a new plan out of his pocket. "We'll move it when everyone's looking—and no one's seeing." "How?" "With Squire."

It was beautiful and terrible at the same time.

"Men!" the squire trumpeted in the twilight. "The captain's remembered we need a parade! A show of discipline!" "I haven't thought of anything," said Smollett. "But let's show it."

They lined up the crew in two lines. Silver distributed bowls of water—hands busy, eyes busy, mouths busy. My mother counted plates aloud. I took the powder chest like a chair and carried it from the parade ground to the orderly position. Hunter opened the new room. Joyce pretended to sweep, really swept, above all, swept glances. Livesey patted Squire on the shoulder: "Excellent idea, sir." The word "sir" was a noose, which Squire kindly said yes to.

When the box was standing, the ship breathed differently for a moment, as if someone had undergone an organ transplant. Ratface noticed something—but only that he was running out of soup.

"RUM!" whistled the parrot.

"Later," Silver promised the bird. The bird. Not the men. Clever.

The weather came at night. No storm—just this nasty, bony sea that grumbles "Well?" at every step. Men become like bills: attempt, minus strength, plus stumble. Smollett hoisted the sails that could and hoisted those that couldn't. Silver kept the galley running. The stew tasted of dust and comfort. Comfort won.

"You are loved," I said to the ladle. "I am needed," said Silver. "That's better."

"How's your leg?" "Nothing's wrong," he smiled, "except me."

"And how's your conscience?" "It can stay awake. I sleep for two."

We stood in the doorway, he inside, me halfway. "Jim," he said almost quietly, "when things get tough, stick with the crutch." "Yours?" "Any one. Wood holds. People rarely do."

Midnight. Dog watch. The wind whistled honestly now; honest wind never lies. I circled the gratings, counting shadows. Two too many. I held my breath and my hand against wood. There they were – Rat-Face and No-Surname Tom. No knife this time. Words. You can die just as quickly with words.

"I say, enough today," whispered Rat-Face. "I say Silver says no," whispered Tom. "Silver always says yes, only later," grinned the first. "Why not me today?"

I stepped forward. "Because you want to live tomorrow." They shrugged, exchanged glances, and found no encouragement. Silver was already there. I don't know how he does it. He's always there, like an answer that likes the question too soon. "Boys," he said, "I love courage. But I love it when it doesn't need witnesses." "Captain is tough," Rat-Face grumbled. "Because we're soft," Silver said. "Being tough is burden sharing."

"There'll be more shares—" "—when we have the ship, not just the rumor of it." He placed his hand lightly on Tom's shoulder. "Tie your knots neatly, boy. Neat knots are the currency of the wise."

They left. He stayed. "You're saving us and yourself at the same time," I said. "That's the point of saving," he said.

The morning that wasn't morning—just a brighter part of the night—brought the first real dent. One of the new guys, the ones with more arms than brains, had "accidentally" rediscovered the rum crate—the wrong one. Marked residue, blue mouth, great courage. He stomped to the aft deck, demanding a share increase in syllables that reeked of hangover. Smollett looked at him as if he were seeing the weather. Livesey brought water, the water brought clarity,

the clarity brought painful peace: The man sat down. It's called "de-escalation." I call it "a good chair."

"RUM!" the parrot triumphantly exclaimed. Bill grinned. "The bird keeps track."

"He keeps a record," Livesey said. "He calls out when things want to say their name."

"And what's this called?" I asked. "Mold," he said. "And we're the poor ventilation."

By late morning, the last vestige of harbor disappeared from view. Only the sea remained. Vast. Indifferent. Honest. The men fell silent, as always when no one can remember who to fool anymore. Silver stepped to the bulwark, gently bumping his crutch against the wood as if knocking. "Open up," he murmured. "We're coming."

Smollett set a course. "South by southeast, until the water changes color." "Water has fifty colors," Bill grumbled. "Only two today," the captain said. "Wrong and right."

"And what are we?" I asked. "Mobile," said Livesey.

At noon, the Squire preached democracy once again: "Men! Anyone with wishes, turn to me!" "I have one wish," said my mother, stepping forward like a bill. "That you keep your mouth shut while the men are working. Wishes are for after dinner."

The crew laughed—not disrespectfully, just with relief. The Squire blushed like an early evening. Silver smiled him off. "Sir, help me with the salt." "Of course! I'm the steward!" "You see," whispered Silver when the Squire had passed, "even mold can be eaten if you season it properly." "You're garbage cooking with a crown," I said. "I'm survival," he said.

The next test was in the afternoon: A rope was spliced incorrectly. Not fatal, just... hopeful. Someone hoped it would hold. Hope is mold for ropes. Smollett had it reworked. No shouting. Just that quiet "again." Men hate "again." Silver

didn't intervene. That was the most disturbing thing—knowing when to do nothing.

I placed my hand on the warm mast and vowed not to be the first to lie about “again.”

Evening. The sea calmed, hypocritically. The parrot kept quiet—except for the occasional nasty “Piece of gold!” as a reminder of the real reason we were breathing at all. Smollett kept double watch, Livesey sorted ointments, my mother sorted men by not giving them knives. Bill sat by the crate as if it were an old friend worth keeping an eye on.

I stood at the railing, staring into a blue that promised nothing. Silver joined me, staring into the same blue and pretending to see a different color. “Jim,” he said, “mold grows best when you air out the room and then close the door again.” “We’ll leave the door open,” I said. “Today, yes.”

“Tomorrow?” He smiled, politely, tiredly, sharply. “Tomorrow we’ll see if anything blooms for us.”

The wind lay like a dog at our feet. The harbor was gone, forever. Before us was only water and that small, persistent X somewhere in the future, pretending it were a destination rather than the beginning of the end.

“RUM!” the parrot called into the friendly twilight. “All right,” I said. “You prophet.”

The Hispaniola answered with a long, deep creak. That was her way of saying amen. And in the joints, in the jokes, in the plans—there it was, the mold. Invisible. Diligent. Patient as a crutch. And Silver tapped out the time.

Chapter 10 - The Night Full of Knives

Night didn't come, it crawled. First, the wind took on a different taste—metal, as if it had licked the compass—then the men grew quieter, then each sound became important. The ship breathed like someone hiding something.

“Half the lamps,” Smollett ordered. Half lamps make full shadows. Good for the truth.

"RUM! RUM!" the parrot preached, followed by a "piece of gold!" and fell silent, as if someone had heard his confession. Silver tapped his crutch to the beat of the silence: tak—tak—tak. If hope is a heartbeat, then fear is a metronome.

I checked the forepeak. Wood has voices. This one said, "Watch out." I passed.

"Knives handed over!" Joyce called obediently from across the deck, and three dutifully clattering things landed in the bucket—two butter knives, a piece of rust that claimed to have once been a blade. "The rest?" asked Smollett. "Has a conscience," said Silver softly. "Conscience is something you wear under your shirt." "Then there'll be a lot of washing today," grumbled Bill.

Mother tied her apron tighter. The wood next to her was scared.

Below deck, it smelled of salt, rum skin, and old stories no one wants to share. Hunter sat in front of the companionway like a piece of furniture with a pulse, Joyce feigned the innocence that appeals to the wise. I slid between the bunks where men pretend to be lying down; some even live while doing so.

The first knife appeared not in a hand, but as a word. Rat-Face whispered it, and Dick held the sentence as if it were sharp: "Tomorrow." "Tomorrow is cowardly," No-Surname Tom hissed back. "Today no one knows us." "Today we all know us," said another voice. It belonged to no person, but to the night. Then I realized: Silver. So close that his crutch had its own breathing sound.

"Boys," he murmured kindly, "I love courage. But courage in the wrong place is just a stumble with warning."

"Nobody said anything, Cook," Ratface snarled, putting his word away again.

"Good," said Silver. "Then let's stick to thinking. Thinking consumes less."

He slipped away. The silence remained stuck to the boards.

Smollett made the lantern rounds. He carried light as other men carry charges. "He who is on watch, keeps watch. He who is asleep, breathes softly," he said without eye contact, yet everyone still looked at him. "Knives only see the galley. If you need one, ask. If you don't ask, you'll learn to swim."

"I can't," grumbled Dick.

"Then you'll learn to sink," said the captain and moved on. Livesey followed, his eyes like pins: prick, prick, prick.

Squire, about to contribute something eloquent, stumbled his knee against a box and cursed so politely that no one was offended. "I hate darkness," he said. "Darkness doesn't hate you," my mother said. "It ignores you."

There was a small crack—a wooden sound that didn't want a stage. A boy slid out of the hammock—Ned—his shoulder caught an edge, the edge caught his skin. "Damn," he whispered. No hero, just human. I was there before his blood realized it was invited. "All right," I said. "It never is," Ned said bravely. "Don't cry," Hunter grumbled. "That'll wake Knives."

Livesey knelt, opening the lantern just wide enough to let light into the wound, not the night. "Just skin. You're keeping it. Congratulations." The doctor stitched faster than Ned realized what was about to happen. "Rum?" "For outside," we chorused. "Right," Livesey nodded, and poured. Ned hissed, then grinned, so narrow his mouth barely had room. "I don't like you." "That's healthy," the doctor said.

"RUM!" croaked the parrot from somewhere. "Shut up, Pastor," muttered Silver. "There will be no baptisms today."

The threat came without drama. I rounded the row of crates next to the powder room—the new one, not the old one—and a hand grabbed my sleeve. No tug, just possession. Blade on the other side; not on my skin, just there to weigh on a conversation.

"Boy," one whispered. He smelled of tobacco with no provenance. "You see too much." "And you too little," I said quietly. "Otherwise you'd know who's behind you."

He didn't turn. He thought. He let go. "Tomorrow," he said. "Today," I said. "Tomorrow," another voice repeated. Silver. Not a sound before, not a step. It passed. The blade disappeared. The arm too. The fear remained, at most thinner. "Thank you," I didn't say. "Please," Silver didn't say. We had understood.

Smollett called for the halfway "fair" of the night: no food, just faces. Light at the level of the mistakes, not the eyes. "Two things," he said. "First: Anyone who shows knives gets cleaned up. Second: Anyone who whispers is working incorrectly. I like mistakes you can see." "Like the map?" Ratface couldn't help it. "The map?" Livesey smiled so thinly that even the light dimmed. "It's stuck inside me. Have fun copying it."

The squire coughed as if he understood. He didn't.

"We'll pull the timbers on the bow," said Smollett, "and the nerves below deck. Hunter, Joyce: cleat. Hawkins: round. Silver—" "—cook breath," said the cook. "I can quietly."

"And me?" my mother asked. "You count hearts," said Smollett. "I count teeth," she said, lifting the sock.

The first real collision happened where you'd expect it, yet underestimate it: at the water bucket. Two men at once, little patience, lots of pride. Dick pushed, the other heaved, wood creaked, the bucket wobbled, words became harsh. Knives didn't flash; eyes did.

"Back," I said. "You're a child," Dick hissed. "That's why I'm still talking."

Rat-Face chuckled, the sound that wakes the knife. Silver was faster than spite: the crutch settled between bucket and knee, a gentle wedge that redistributed the conversation. "You're cold, boy," he said to Dick, "pushing doesn't warm. Take two breaths. After that, water tastes like water." Dick took one. Just one. Enough. "And you?"—to Rat-Face. "Me? I'm just laughing." "Misspelled," my mother said, dropping the sock—plock against his shin. No heroism, just gravity on purpose. Rat-Face buckled, dignity stumbled after him. The knives stayed where they were: in their heads.

"RUM!" the parrot triumphed. "If you scream like that again, you'll be soup," my mother hissed. "The bird is a union member," Silver grinned. "He's allowed to scream."

Later, Livesey's trick surprised us like a sincere compliment. The doctor stepped in front of these two who whisper too much: "Open your mouth." "Why?" "Inspection." Tongue out. Light on. Blue. Not a deep one, but honest. "You've been drinking secretly," Livesey said kindly. "I'm thirsty." "I'm right."

"Blue?" whispered Ratface. "Blue tongues lie badly," said the doctor. "Sleeping, both of them. With their mouths open. Work tomorrow."

"And if not?" "Then you clean the soup. Without a spoon." That worked. Surprising how much men fear hygiene.

Smollett nodded to Livesey. No thanks, just accounting: Blue tongues—two. Knives—zero visible. Threats—five half-hearted.

There was that hour between two and three when even the rats get serious. One hammock swung by itself, without a man in it; another had two feet too many. I stepped over. "They're not yours." "We share," whispered Tom. "Share is upstairs," I said. "Down here, you share breath." "I'm scared." "Me too," I said. "But more quietly."

"Do you hear that?" he asked. I heard: wood, water, a small metallic sound far back—like someone practicing a knife on something that can't hurt. Tack—tack—tack. Not Silver. That wasn't a crutch beat. That was tooth contact. One of them was sharpening.

I followed. Not heroically, only because I wouldn't have slept otherwise. The sound came from the old forecandle, the storage hatch we've been avoiding for days. I narrowed the lantern. Two silhouettes. No names, just contours: one narrow shoulder, the other broad. The blade brushed against leather, the belt, the wood—learning where there's little friction. "Tomorrow," hissed the narrow one. "Tomorrow," confirmed the broad one. "If Silver—" "Silver opens the door." "And the captain?" "Closes his eyes."

"The boy?" "Sleeping." "He rarely does," I said loudly enough to give "shock" a name. I stepped into the dim light, the gun held loosely in my hand, so it looked like a question. "Say it again so I can hear it properly." The broad one raised his hands, no knife now, just facades. The thin one lowered the blade, which always sounds wrong for blades. "We... uh... repair." "Your conscience?" "The knife." "It was blunt." "And your heads?" "Are tired." "Then sleep," said a third voice. Smollett, quieter than his boots. Livesey was beside him, even quieter. Silver remained just behind me, crutch across—a

railing, not a blow. "We'll talk tomorrow," said the captain. "Today... sleep." They left. Some orders are just words. This one was physics.

"Good," said Silver. "The night doesn't like it when we get loud." "It likes it when we finish," replied Smollett.

It tipped over around four. It always tips over around four. Fatigue is taking its toll. I sat by the bulwarks, my pistol under my shirt, my little book next to my heart, as if ink were a talisman. Silver bent over nothing at the galley, pretending to stir soup. My mother waited in the shadows, and Bill was nothing but a box and his breath.

"You're awake," said a voice that never asks. Livesey. "I want to be able to sleep later." "Later is rare," he said.

A scream? No. A breath that was too loud. Someone had reached into the darkness and found something: fear, fresh. Hunter jumped first, Joyce followed. I ran, Silver limped, Smollett was already there, like men who know the shortest route to trouble.

Ratface was half-lying, his hand on his arm, not much blood—but honest. A cut, made with love. Beside him stood Dick, his lip blue, his gaze worse: that of a man who thinks he's just made a decision. "He's got me—" "Quiet," said Livesey. "He hasn't got you enough. Otherwise it'd be quieter." "Who did it?" asked Smollett.

No one pointed. No one pointed at night. At night, all fingers are cold. "Was it a coincidence," whispered the thin man from before. "Chance has a knife?" my mother asked. "Interesting." The sock rocked. "No one dies today," said Silver. "Not like that. If they do, they'll do it politely." "No one dies here," grumbled Smollett. "Not until I change course."

Livesey untied the rope, the knots on his fingers more perfectly in place than our ropes. "You're alive," he explained to Ratface. "Use this."

Afterward—quiet hysteria. Men pretended to be asleep, guards pretended to see. The night pretended to be over. I sat down by the mast. Wood can provide comfort. This one was just work.

Silver came. "Jim," he said, "if someone speaks to you nicely today, say nothing and go away." "And if they're rude?" "Say 'tomorrow.' Loudly." "You believe in tomorrow?" "I'm counting on it."

"Did someone tell me something?" I already sensed the question was stupid. "Someone didn't tell you anything," he smiled. "That's worth more."

"I'm not afraid anymore," I lied. "Good lie," he nodded. "Save it. You'll need it later."

Dusk painted a thin line, as always—the sea is punctual, only people aren't. Smollett lined up the men without counting. Silver distributed water without flattery. Livesey examined faces without question. The squire woke up and understood nothing, which gave him the advantage.

Then I saw it: the blade in the mast. It wasn't stuck deep, but just right—so that wood would remember. Underneath, a scrap of canvas, impaled, folded twice.

Smollett didn't draw the blade, he just pulled the rag. He read aloud for all of us to hear:

“From today on, knives will be involved. – M.”

"M is for crap," growled Bill. "M is for mutiny," said my mother. "M is for Monday," chuckled the squire inappropriately. "M is for morning," said Silver quietly.

"M is for Mein Schiff," said Smollett, and his gaze turned the "Mein" into a cleat.

The parrot was startled by the silence and yelled "RUM!" as if he were the bell. No one laughed. Even the water was briefly polite.

"Work," Smollett ordered. "Everyone. And anyone who thinks they have the day off should tell me. I'll give them something to do." "What?" Dick ventured. "Breathe," said the captain. "Rhythmically."

We parted, each to his own piece of duty, each with the image of steel in the wood. The night was over, but the knives weren't. And on the blade now stood a word that I carried in my pocket all morning like a bad penny: Tomorrow.

Silver padded past me and tapped the mast once with his crutch, very lightly, almost tenderly. "Not too deep," he murmured. "The wood should live on."

I nodded. We did too. For now.

The night full of knives was over. The blades had only started talking.

Chapter 11 - Jim Eavesdrops on the Devil

There are places where truth is stored without labels. At the butcher's, it's the drain. On a ship, it's the barrel that should be empty but still smells like God had wept inside. I crawled into one of those. Not bravely, just wisely: The guard was coming, I needed air without questions—so open the lid, go in, close the lid. Rum up to my eyebrows, plus the kind of darkness that talks to you.

I had just decided I regretted it when I heard the crutch: tak—tak—tak. Silver's music for "Now It's Getting Serious." Voices followed: Rat-Face, Dick, Tom with No Surname, and two more I recognized only by their flaws. Plus the bird who never shuts up when there's a price to pay for silence.

"Quieter, Pastor," hissed Silver. The parrot grumbled, insulted, "Rum" into the boards.

They stood so close to the barrel that my breathing could hear them. Someone leaned against the staves. I became part of the furniture.

"So," Silver began with that friendly sharpness that makes men feel they're already reasonable. "The plan stays because plans stay, otherwise they're called wishes. We're waiting for land. Not for hope, not for rum—land. Only when the anchor handles are hot will we speak louder."

"Tonight?" Ratface could spell patience, but only up to GED.

"Not today." Silver's voice smiled toothlessly. "Too many people still have blue tongues today. Thank you, Doctor."

A quiet chuckle. Dick licked his lip; I heard him turn even bluer.

"Once the island is up," Silver continued, "we'll do three things in an order even you can manage. First: boats. My men at the oars, not the captain's. Second: loosen the rudder pin on the auxiliary rudder—the little pin that smart people never look at and stupid people never find. Third: cut the kedge anchor if Smollett turns his head. The ship stays—we go. After that, the real work begins: water, ridge, hide."

"And the Squire?" asked Tom, who at least sensed that wealth makes noise.

"We'll pack the Squire like crockery," Silver said mildly. "It clangs loudly, but it won't break. Brings ransom or trouble. Both useful."

"And the captain?" Ratface spat out the word as if it were a bone.

"You let the captain live until he wants to be dead," Silver said. "Smollett is order on two legs. You don't kill order—you use it until it slows you down."

"And the doctor?" "I'll keep him," said Silver. "Ships without doctors die from trivial matters. Men without doctors die from stupidity. I don't want a mass grave of stupidity."

"And the boy?" Dick's voice became small, as always when his courage turns the corner in front of him.

I bit my sleeve to keep from coughing and screaming "no" at the same time. The barrel reeked of confessions.

"Jim," purred Silver, "is... useful. He sees, hears, thinks. You let boys like that run so they'll eventually stay there voluntarily. When he runs, he runs to me."

Ratface laughed crookedly. "The boy is attached to the doctor."

"People cling to what they need now," Silver said. "Tomorrow they'll need something else. I have patience. Patience is glue."

Someone rubbed steel against leather. The sound flowed over the staves as if it wanted to get inside. I held my breath until my heart was insulted.

"How many of us are there?" Tom again. "Enough for one mistake, too few for two," Silver said dryly. "So no mistakes. No rum offshore. No heroes. And if anyone tries to be brave again at night out of boredom, they'll get a job as an anchor."

The bird croaked as if it had learned "Amen."

"And the map?" Rat-face couldn't help himself. I could practically feel Silver grinning. "The doctor has two. One that claims to be real, and one that looks real. The fake one smells like a cupboard. The real one has salt in its wrinkles. I need both. I'll give the fake one to the Squire so he'll like me. The real one... we'll get it from the island."

"How?"

"Because Flint never just dug in the ground, you genius." For the first time, a hint of irritation. "Flint buried people. There's someone on the island who knows the songs. I hear them when the wind is right." A name hung in the air, unspoken. I thought of stories about a goat man who spoke with voices. Silver believed in people, not ghosts. But he listened to both of them.

"Signal word?" whispered Dick. "Mold cleaning," said Silver, and I swallowed curses. That was our word. Or rather, my suggestion last night. He had stolen it from our pocket before we knew it inside. "When I say 'mold cleaning,' you bring the knives for spoons. When I say 'pastor,' you laugh and leave. Laughing and leaving is the bravest thing you can do."

"And if the captain has the guns—" "—he has," Silver interrupted. "We have time for that. Time is better than lead. And we have the boats."

He paused, like men who know how to make an audience lick their lips: "Questions?"

No one dared. So the bird asked, "RUM! RUM!" "Right away, Pastor," Silver breathed, and I felt his breath through the wood.

I coughed. Not much. A crumb of rum stuck in the wrong throat. I bit my tongue. Blood tastes more honest than rum. Dick kicked the barrel, playfully. My head voted against it. The barrel groaned. I didn't.

"What was that?" whispered Tom. "The ship," said Silver. "It's dreaming."

"And if it was Jim?" Rat-face, that dog without a leash. "Then the ship will wear black tonight," Silver said so kindly that the temperature dropped. "But it was the ship."

Silence. Longer than comfortable. Longer than safe. Then again, tak—tak—tak, farther away, heads following, whispers trailing out. The night closed its mouth and let me in.

I waited until the planks agreed with me, then I pushed the lid on and crawled out—rum up to my earlobes, knees weak, nose offended. I was almost at the top when a hand helped me. Not Silvers. Livesey. The man appeared like medicine: just before too late.

"You smell like evidence," he whispered. "I heard the devil," I gasped. "He has a calendar."

"Good," said the doctor. "Then we'll make another one."

We were in the captain's cabin before the darkness realized it was missing us. Smollett stood at the table, the compass pretending to know more. Bill leaned against the chest, my mother against the sock. Hunter and Joyce positioned themselves in the way that says: We'll listen and die later.

I spoke. Quickly. Without embellishment, without heroic deeds—names, steps, words, mold cleaning. I left out nothing except the trembling.

"Good," said Smollett after he'd finished, not me. "Then we're ahead of the plan now, not below it."

Livesey rolled out a neat, ugly sobriety: "Countermeasures: one—boats. We need the wrong people in the right boats. Two—rudder pins. Hunter, you sleep by the auxiliary oar tonight. If someone grabs the pin, you grab their future. Three—kedge anchors. Joyce, you sleep on the line. If they cut, you cut louder. Four—pistols. We'll distribute the shooting ones where it doesn't look like a hero's death: the sick bay, the galley, under the squire's altar."

"I don't have an altar," Trelawney grumbled from the next room, where he pretended to be asleep. "You are one," my mother said. "To kneel on when things get dangerous."

Smollett drew on the table with chalk: anchors, boats, arrows, a cross (our X), two circles. "If they go, we'll let them. I repeat: let them. They'll run the foolishness off our deck. Then we'll turn the tables." "How?" I asked. "By keeping the ship," Smollett said. "Silver wants boats. I want the hull."

"And if he stays on board?" "Then he stays. And cooks. He cooks well. As long as he cooks, he doesn't kill."

"He knows our word," I said. "Clean the mold." "Then we'll get a new one," my mother said, smiling wickedly. "Open the window. Whoever says it, run—to us."

"Mutiny?" Bill asked dryly. "Not yet," said Smollett. "Hygiene first."

"And the map?" I raised. Livesey tapped his doublet. "I have three." "Three?" "The real one, the fake one, and one with just water on it. The Squire's got the latter if he wants to talk again."

"Excellent!" cried the Squire. "You see," said Livesey politely, "you're scheduled."

Bill nodded at me. "Good boy. You overheard the devil and didn't become religious. That saves lives."

"I've become religious," I said. "I believe in impact."

Outside, the night was slowly losing its charm. Silver hobbled his last walk, looking tired like a man who has never slept and has stopped missing it. He stopped in front of the galley, the parrot tugging at his ear. "Morning, Pastor," said Silver. "RUM!" the bird replied. "Morning," Silver said again, softly, as if explaining it to the sea.

I crawled onto the deck, pretending I'd been on watch for hours. Silver saw me, pretending I was a star. "Jim," he said, "you smell like work." "I've been cleaning in the rum," I said. "That explains why you're still awake," he smiled. "Be careful not to fall asleep tomorrow when things get important."

"What becomes important?" "When men see things they've longed for," he said. "Then knives grow. And some hearts become polite."

"What will happen to you when we see land?" "I'll be honest," he said. "For five minutes. After that, I'll be polite again."

"And what will become of me?" "You will decide whether you want to listen when the wrong people finally tell the truth."

He tapped the crutch against the railing. I felt the pounding in my teeth.

We chronicled the last few hours so they wouldn't slip by accidentally. Smollett had them hemmed and hawed as if they were lace lingerie; Livesey handed out bandages like threats; my mother sanded the sock on wood until the wood decided to be good; Bill talked to the box, which didn't answer, and that was perhaps the best thing about it.

I wrote two words in my little book: Silver knows. And underneath: We do too.

The parrot tugged at the silence once more: "RUM! Piece of gold!" "You get nothing," I said. "He gets everything," Silver murmured behind me. "He gets you to listen."

"And you?" "I get that you need me. That's enough for today."

The sun didn't come, it came forward. A thin line at the edge, like a knife being lifted from a table. A man up in Mars rubbed his eyes—Tom, awake at the right time this time. "There!" he gasped. "There—land!"

First, it was a shadow with an opinion. Then a back. Then the teeth of a ridge on which trees grow that have learned to argue with the wind. A bay that pretended to be hospitable. A lighter patch of water: shallow. A darker one: deep. A strip of white at the edge that smelled of surf.

"Land in sight!" yelled someone who dreamed it too often. "Hush," said Smollett. "We have no church."

Silver stood next to me and smiled the smile you give when you have something that no one else wants to give you. "There it is," he said quietly. "The X has its skin."

"Cleaning mold?" Ratface was already half-ordained. "Pastor," said Silver, soft as a slash. "Pastor first."

Livesey approached me. His face was cold—not blank, just orderly. "From now on, no heroics, Jim. Just news. You bring it to me, not to history."

"Yes," I said. My mouth was dry. My heart was dripping rum.

"Open the window," my mother said to me, and I knew: This is not a code, this is an invitation to live.

Smollett gave commands that sounded like nails. Hunter nodded. Joyce grinned nervously. Bill spat overboard, narrowly missing the past. The squire lifted his hat and put it back on backward—fortunately, he remained his own joke.

Silver raised the ladle like a flag and lowered it again. The parrot screeched the gospel: "RUM! RUM!"

And I thought: I've overheard the devil. He has plans. We have time.

Time is the only currency that doesn't rot at sea—unless you leave it behind.

Before us lay land. Behind us the harbor, which we hadn't needed for a long time. Between the two: a one-legged man, deciding how polite he still needed to be.

The bell didn't toll. The sea nodded. And everyone acted as if they already knew how the story continued. I didn't. I only had my ears. And that was enough. For today.

Chapter 12 - Land in sight, hatred in the hearts

The morning had that thin brightness that pretends to be generous. Then the island came. Not like an invitation—like a bill. First there was just a dark shoulder in the fog, then a back with old scars, then this crown of trees that acted as if they had invented wind. The water in front of it was smooth as a lie.

"Land in sight!" someone shouted from the top of the mast. It sounded like he'd practiced it. "Hush," said Smollett, without raising his head. "We're not a church."

The squire raised his hand anyway, as if to bless, and then dropped it again because no one said amen. Livesey stepped beside him, so polite it hurt. "Breathe, Squire. Otherwise you'll fall over—and we'll have to patch you up." "I—I'm perfectly calm," he stammered, his jacket shining with a huff.

"RUM!" screeched the parrot. "PIECE OF GOLD! RUM!" "Pastor, later," Silver crooned, and the bird acted like a retired theologian.

The island didn't smell yet, but it already tasted—iron, dust, green. I felt the men rolling the taste in my mouth as if it were turning into something edible. In reality, it only turned into hatred. That grows faster than trees. It just needs a view.

Smollett guided the ship as if it were a scalpel: "Port a little! Roe! Flag down! Sounder!" Hunter let go of the lead line. "Six!" he shouted. Down again. "Five! Shell bottom!" "I love precise men," murmured Livesey. "I love deep numbers," growled Bill. "Shallow is for the dying."

"Five, fine sand!" Hunter shouted. "One more line, and we'll anchor in the current," Smollett said coldly. "The bay is deceptive—too pretty to be honest."

The squire chuckled nervously. "Then we call it 'Grace Bay'?" "We call it 'Work,'" said Smollett.

I saw Silver at the railing. His gaze was as friendly as a knife with a handle. "Boys," he whispered to his men, "we'll behave ourselves until the captain gives us the boats. Pastor." The right ears heard, and the wrong ones understood anyway. Rat-face nodded like a man who had invented the meaning; Dick nervously licked his now-normal lip; No-Surname Tom kicked the air as if trying to teach it manners.

"Open the window," I murmured to my mother, who was tightening her apron next to me. "Open the window," she repeated as if it were a prayer. In her hand, the sock weighed more than the squire's morals.

The map came onto the table, inside the cabin, where the light always pretends to know more: Livesey spread out one of the three—not the real one, not the completely fake one, but the pretty lie. Crest, bay, hill like vertebrae. Bill bent closer, the box within reach. "See it?" I asked. "I can see how Flint would have laughed," he said. "That reef there eats men who want to get rich quick." "What do we call it?" asked the squire. "Problem," Smollett and my mother said simultaneously.

I'd seen the real map once—long enough to notice a difference: The real one smelled of salt. This one smelled of ink. Ink lies politely.

Silver didn't step over the threshold; he remained in the doorway as if the galley were a border post. "Captain," he said, "if I may humbly remark: The east arm of the bay has less surf." Smollett looked at him briefly. "Humility planned. We'll take the west arm." Silver smiled as if he'd ordered just that. "Of course."

Outside, the island continued to grow—from outline to opinion. On the right edge, a swathe of green, like a scar someone would like to show off. On the left, a bright spot in the water—shallow. In front of it, dark water—deep. And above, seagulls, behaving as if their favorite sin were about to occur.

"Sunder!" cried Smollett. "Four and a half!" "Bottom?" "Silt!" "Another half!" "Four!—coarse sand!" "Good. Anchor clear!" The word "clear" wasn't reassurance. It was a command.

The anchor dropped like a judgment. Chain sang through the jib boom, wood answered, the ship lurched, found its bearings. Two men crossed themselves, three did the same. Silver raised his dipper as if in blessing, then set it down. Wait. He could do that.

"RUM!" roared the parrot—nothing is more inappropriate than the right words at the wrong time. "Give the sermon," murmured Silver. "The service is about to begin."

"Water party," said Smollett. Two words that sound like vacation and ache like work. "We need barrels full before the heat consumes the men. I want two boats. Hunter will lead the first. Joyce the second. Mr. Silver will cook on board and has eyes everywhere." Silver's smile twitched almost imperceptibly. He'd played "I lead" and gotten "you stay." "As you wish, Captain. I like to cook—especially the mood."

"Crew lists," Smollett ordered, laying them out like cards in a gamble. I saw how he planned to distribute them: a sting for each cervix, a babysitter for each shaky candidate. Ratface in boat 2, next to him Hunter—a calm man. Dick in boat 1, next to Joyce—so polite he even puts Messer to sleep. Tom stayed on board, with Silver. Smollett had done the math. Silver, too.

"Sir," the squire interrupted, "I think I should personally—" "You're thinking wrong," said Smollett. "I'll pay!" "Then pay patience."

My mother merely raised an eyebrow. That was enough for the squire to reorient himself: to the railing, silently.

Below deck, Hate was paying house calls. You could tell by the little pleasantries: someone suddenly sat somewhere else, someone else amiably

shared a piece of chewing tobacco. Dick tied his shoes too carefully, Ratface laughed too quietly. I heard words that weren't for me: "Today?"—"Pastor."—"Tomorrow."—"Mold...—no." The word died, as if it had a toll.

"Open the window," I hissed past Livesey. "They don't want anything today. They're waiting to dock." "Good," he said. "Then we'll get them out of their pockets first."

We went through the boats like a confession. Rudder bolts—tight. Oarlocks—tight. One was loose, intentionally. Someone had been playing tricks with metal. I slid my hand under it, felt the grease, smelled the intent. "Open the window," I breathed. Joyce nodded, pulled a second bolt from the tool roll, replaced, cleaned, smiled. "Nothing happened."

Silver appeared in the hatch. "Do you need help, gentlemen?" "Just wind," said Smollett. "I won't provide it," said Silver. "I'll just cook what he brings."

"To work," Smollett commanded, and work came as it always does: in footsteps, curses, weights pretending to like you. Barrels on deck, ropes over the side, oars in, Boat 1 out to sea, Boat 2 following—splash, smack, silence. The bay absorbed sounds like a damp bag.

"Jim," said Livesey, "you stay at the beating and count: men in the boat, men on board, and again. Report anything missing." "Yes, sir." I liked counting. Numbers reveal less than faces.

Silver walked along the deck line, crutch tack-tack-tack, his gaze friendly over everything that would later cease to be friendly. "Boys," he addressed those left on board, "if you see anything, shout. If you don't see anything, shout too. I'm in the pot." Rat-Face pretended to pull his cap off. The hatred in his eyes was fresh. Hatred always has fresh eyes.

"RUM!" croaked the parrot. "Shower your beak, Pastor," said Silver. "We're within sight of temptation."

The boats glided toward the shoreline. I saw the water color change—from lead to green. Hunter signaled: flat strokes, steady oars, no theatrical gestures. Joyce mirrored. The men in the boat acted as innocent as possible. Dick grinned too much. Ratface grinned too little.

Smollett had the deck working: easing the line, dampening the hull, checking the chains. Bill stood by the box as if it were an old dog that would bite if you looked into its eyes. My mother polished the sock with the palm of her hand as if it were a family heirloom. The squire sweated and called it enthusiasm.

"You want to come with me," Silver murmured behind me. He suddenly appeared. "Where to?" "To the island. You want to hear the trees lie." "Maybe." "Don't do it without me." "Why?" "Because I don't like to see smart children die stupidly." "And stupid ones?" "They die on their own."

He smiled toothlessly. Hatred replicated itself in other faces. I memorized each one.

"Bottom!" Hunter called from the first boat. "Soft! Freshwater river a bit to port!" "Good," murmured Smollett. "That's our source. And theirs." "Ours first," said my mother. "Ours always," he said.

Rat-face whispered in the boat. I couldn't hear the words, but I saw the plan: If water, then pause; if pause, then "oops"; if "oops," then knife. Silver had said something like that. Without saying he had said it.

"Open the window," I said to Livesey. "If they land, 'oops' will be expensive." "Then we'll sell it cheaper," he said. He put his hand on my shoulder. "Can you be quiet when being loud will save you?" "Depends on who's listening." "Good answer."

We brought in the first load of water—two barrels, gurgling, warm in the belly of the boat. Hunter didn't get out. Joyce didn't get out. No one got out. That was Smollett. Not "back and forth"—back and forth. Whoever gets out has earth beneath their feet and ideas in their head.

"Again," Smollett ordered. "At an angle, go in deeper, but no one on land. Silver—food." "Yes, sir," Silver said, and his look said: Too bad. His smile said: Later.

"RUM!" shouted the parrot. "PIECE OF GOLD!" "We should anchor the bird," said Bill. "He's the bell," I said. "He rings when someone's gone stupid again."

By midday, the bay was like a mirror on which bad news is rehearsed. The sun was sticky, the wood sighed, the men polished their excuses. I saw the hatred maturing: it was gaining style. No more open snarls, more like that thin smile that says, "I'll remember that." Rat-face was lugging a barrel of Hunter—too well-behaved, too smooth. Dick was too silent. Tom at the capstan made movements that looked more like thought than work.

Smollett sensed it. He grabbed the squire, placed him in front of the crew, and looked at him as if he were a lantern. "Sir, say a word." The squire shone. "Um... discipline!" "Good," said Smollett, "and now secrecy." "Sec—" "Quiet," Livesey helped. The squire nodded as if he'd just saved the world by not bothering them.

Silver came close, so close that his crutch brushed my boot. "Jim," he whispered, "if you go down, come with me. I have two eyes, and one of them is yours." "And if I don't want to?" "Then at least go my way." "Which way?" "There," he said. "Never back."

Smollett made the decision. You could hear it in his voice when a captain was choosing between the plague and cholera. "We're sending a shore party now. Five men only. Secure the waterline, check the path. Mr. Hunter leads. Mr. Joyce stays on the boat. Mr. Silver accompanies—and comes back with us. Whoever kisses the beach, kisses it briefly."

Silver's smile faltered briefly, then continued. "Of course, Captain. I like short kisses." Cast: Hunter, Dick, Tom with no last name, an old sailor with hands like ship's planks—and... me.

"No," Livesey said immediately. "Yes," said Smollett. "Why?" asked the doctor. "Because he counts," said Smollett. "And because I need someone to count when others already think they've won." Livesey looked at me, examining me like a wound that might not open. "Open the window," he said quietly. "Open the window," I repeated. I felt my stomach twist into a bad-tempered knot.

My mother grabbed my arm. "Come back with everything," she commanded. "What's everything?" "You, heart, truth. If there's room: fingers." "I'll try," I said. She put something in my pocket. It clinked. "For when men suddenly learn geometry and close circles."

Bill raised two fingers, so briefly that it wasn't a goodbye. "If Silver offers you his hand—" "—I won't pull back first." "Good," he said. "And if you don't want his hand, take his crutch. Wood is more honest."

We went to the leeward side, where the boat fluttered like patience on a bad day. Hunter climbed first, Silver last. The parrot wanted to come along; Silver tapped him on the head. "Pastor, you preach from here. We'll take the offering later." "RUM!" the bird insulted us afterward.

Joyce held the boat like one holds a sentence that's getting heavy. Smollett looked me in the face. "Count," he said again. "Yes, Captain." "And if someone whispers something in your ear—" "—I'll say it loudly, 'Morning,'" I finished. Smollett nodded. "Good boy."

We pushed off. The water was suddenly still, like a plane. Silver positioned himself so he could see everyone without having to turn. Hunter set the pace. Dick looked at the island as if it were a wedding he knew would end in a fight. Tom checked his knife for the third time, then placed it under the seat board, then picked it up again—a man stealing his own thoughts.

The Hispaniola lay behind us like a house with all the windows open and yet no one can breathe. My mother stood on the forecastle, small and dangerous. Livesey was a shadow beside her. Smollett was a statue. Bill sat by the crate that no one wanted to carry, but everyone had already divided in their minds.

"Jim," Silver said suddenly, so softly that the water listened. "If you run, don't run into the forest. Forests are pleasantries with insects." "Where to then?" "To what you believe. And if you believe nothing: to the one who counts. Today, the one who counts is the one who stays seated." "And who sits?" "Me," he said kindly. "As long as it lasts."

The island grew larger, we smaller. The beach pressed toward us as if it were hungry. A narrow stream cut through the sand, behind it marsh green, behind it trees with arms. I counted: five in the boat. Two at the oars. One at the heart. Hatred in three faces, politeness in two. Hope in none.

"Land!" shouted Hunter. "Just a quick kiss on the shore and then a quick push off again," Silver smiled.

The keel length rubbed against the sand, the boat wheezed, we jumped—as little as possible. Hunter first, me right behind him, Silver so elegant that the water wasn't even offended, Dick beside me, Tom undecided for too long.

"Water!" Hunter called crisply. We tipped, scooped, and sat. The small stream was clear, tasted of leaves and old promises. In the distance, I heard a seagull laugh. Or the island. Some places laugh.

"No heroes," Silver muttered. "Open the window," I muttered.

Something rustled in the grass. Not a large animal—a burst of air that changed direction. Dick spun around, knife half full, hate full. Hunter raised his hand; Silver raised nothing at all—he just smiled in the wrong direction to measure the right one. I counted louder: "One, two, three, four, five." "Good boy," Silver said without looking at me.

Behind us, far and yet too close, lay the Hispaniola. Her masts looked like index fingers. From the deck came a faint "RUM!"—the parrot, the bell, the chronicle. The wind rose once and then fell again.

Hunter gave the signal: Back up, don't stop. Joyce leaned into the oar. We heaved the boat out, the water let it go, reluctantly. Silver climbed second to last, I last. The trees were at my back, the island was in my stomach, nothing in my hand, a clinking sound in my pocket. I thought of Mother, of Smollett, of Livesey's cold hands. I thought of Bill and the box and the map that smelled of salt. I thought of Silver's crutch, which was very still at that moment.

"One more load," said Hunter. "One more," repeated Silver. "Then lunch."

"Then something," I said so quietly that only my heart heard it.

We pushed off. Behind us stood the island, pretending to wait. In front of us lay the ship, pretending to know who belonged to it. Between the two, we sailed, five men and a boy, with hatred at our backs, courtesy in the boat, and a plan so good it became dangerous.

The boats are in the water. The day is in my mouth. And I'm in the middle of it all, the counter who knows: When numbers start to crunch together, there's someone too many. Or too few.

Who? That would be the question for the next chapter. Today only the bird screamed: "RUM!"—and, unfortunately, was right again.

Chapter 13 - The First Bullet

The island stood there like a claim no one wanted to refute. The bay was smooth, as if someone had ironed the water. Anyone who still talked about "adventure" was a tourist.

"One more load," Smollett ordered. "Same game. No one ashore. No one smart. No one dead."

"RUM!" preached the parrot, as if he had written the liturgy plan. "Pastor," Silver said to him, quietly, and the right men overheard.

I counted the faces on the boat. Hunter in front – calm as a cleat. Joyce in the back – polite as a chair. Dick: lips again without blue, head still full of it. Tom with no last name: too brave for his shoes. Ratface: underdosed on patience, overdosed on importance.

"Open the window," my mother whispered to me as I passed her. Her apron hung lower, her eyes higher. The sock weighed in her left hand, and in her right hand, something disappeared under the hem. I knew what: Last night, Livesey had quietly placed a pistol in her kitchen drawer and said, "Only if it counts." My mother counts well.

We pushed off. The Hispaniola remained behind us, a house in the water, pretending it wasn't full of people with bills. Smollett stood at the railing, a stone profile with a living eye. Livesey beside him—his hands behind his back, as if holding himself so no one else would. Silver was halfway to the galley, his crutch a conductor's baton for normality.

"Shallow!" Hunter shouted as the water turned green. "Soft!" Joyce exclaimed. "Freshwater current there!" Hunter pointed out. "Quick kiss," Silver didn't murmur. Today he didn't murmur anything at all.

We set off. The keel scraped sand like a clean insult. Hunter jumped—only his boots were wet. Joyce stayed in the oarlock. Ratface was too fast, Dick too slow, Tom just right. I kept my eyes on the stream, my hands on the barrel, my head on the one who stayed, breathing.

Then stupidity did what it always does: It introduced itself.

Rat-face nudged Dick—just on the shoulder, but with a plan. Dick stumbled, doing nothing but giving space. The knife passed in the space: short, flat, ugly. Hunter saw it, too late—because he was just water. Tom saw it, too early—

because he thought he was there for it. I didn't have the gun; I only had my voice, and that was in the wrong pocket.

"Morning!" I yelled. Loudly. No code behind it, just an alarm.

The scene paused for a second, like images just before falling. Rat-Face realized he was going too slowly. He reached for Plan B. Plan B was heavier than his brain. From the pocket came a small pistol—one that shouldn't have been there since the night we distributed pistols to make them unattainable. Well. Pistols are like stories: they find people who are happy to carry them.

He raised his hand. At whom? At Hunter? At me? At whatever was in the way? At the present.

I took a breath – so deep it hurt.

The shot that was fired was not his.

It came from the Hispaniola. Not loud. An honest, unspectacular bang—no heroic trumpet, just work. It didn't tear a sail, it didn't rip a hole in the world. It did what it was there for.

Ratface had a new opinion under his right eye. No splashing, no drama—just a body that suddenly wanted nothing more. He fell, as if that had been the plan, and the water took him in, because water takes in everything as long as it sinks. The gun he hadn't fired popped and was history.

Silence. So dense that the seagulls became polite.

"Back!" growled Hunter, his voice ahead of the men. "Back!" repeated Joyce, and the boat obeyed him rather than the sea.

I didn't turn around. I knew who had fired. There were only two who had the courage to shoot without debate today: Smollett – who shoots when thinking is complete – and my mother – who shoots when thinking gets in the way. I saw a familiar posture on the railing: shoulders that regret nothing, hands that had already made up their minds. My mother tucked something back under her hem, her sock still in her left hand. Livesey stood two steps away, counting her pulse – not hers, the ship's.

"Open the window," I said. My mouth was dry as chalk.

Silver made a movement so small that only his conscience saw it: his head – a millimeter lower; the crutch – neither forward nor backward; his gaze – nowhere, so everywhere. His parrot wanted to scream "RUM!" but only made "Ru—," as if someone had pulled the plug on him.

"Pastor," Silver murmured. And now everyone heard. Especially those who had the courage to spare.

Smollett seized the second when weakness is still crouching before it leaps. "Turn the boat around!" he yelled. "Aboard! Everyone! Whoever sets foot on the island will do it later. Barrels will do it today."

We set off. Hunter pushed, Joyce pulled, Dick stared, Tom swallowed, I counted: five in the boat, two at the helm, one in the water, zero bullets left, enough truth. The boat glided, the water held still, as if it knew that words would carry more weight now.

My mother stood on board. No trembling. Nothing at all. Just that calmness that people have who are later frightened. Beside her was the Squire, with a face usually reserved only for operas. He opened his mouth.

"Not a word," said Smollett. "Not one."

"Was... was that necessary?" the Squire squeaked like a tea kettle.

"Yes," said Smollett.

"Was it me?" my mother asked the group, as if asking if the table was clean. "Yes," said Livesey. "And your hand is steady. Good." "I aimed where talking ends," she said. "It wasn't personal. It was... necessary." "Necessary is the politest word for truth," said the doctor.

Dick stood there as if his alphabet had been broken. He looked out into the bay, where the water was already acting as if it had never taken anything in. Tom pressed his lips together, a shade too white. Hunter breathed wrong, then right. Joyce set the barrel down as if it were fine china. The squire still wanted to talk. Silver smiled in the wrong direction and remained the most polite statue at sea.

"Work!" thundered Smollett. "No drama. No heroic song. Work."

Work came. In buckets, in ropes, in movements that seemed to have nothing to do with morality. Men ran. Water gurgled. The ship creaked its amen.

I stood in the lee of the galley as my knees stilled. Silver came beside me, the smell of stew and apologies.

"So," he said quietly. "The first one." "Yes." "The right one." "Yes."

"Your mother has a hand," he said. "She's in need. That's more than that."

"True," he nodded. "Need is the religion of the wise."

"RUM!" the parrot tore himself away again and roared into the light. "Keep the sermon short, Pastor," sighed Silver. "The congregation is working."

For the next hour, she wore boots. Nothing fell over, but decisions were made. Smollett pulled the line tighter than she thought she could. "Double watch. No one ashore without me. Pistols only on signal. Mr. Hunter—boat watch. Mr. Joyce—with the doctor. Squire—silent."

"I protest—" "You may sing inside," Smollett said. "Quietly."

Livesey scanned the faces, his pupils like cold coins. "You—water. You—sleep later. You—don't think. Jim—stay here. You count. If you don't like a number, you say open the window."

"Yes." My voice was there before I called it.

Bill stood by the box as if it were now officially the church. "That was clean," he growled, more to the ship than to us. "I've seen worse firstborns."

"Firstborn?" asked the squire helplessly.

"First bullet," said Bill. "That's always the most expensive." "Why?" "Because from then on, you know what's cheap."

In the afternoon, the hole came into which days fall when they no longer have a plan. The sun hung as if tired from the weight of the water. The island acted as if it were arguing with the wind, refusing to smell. It was silent on the Hispaniola. Silence that lies. Silence that calculates.

Dick sat down in the shade without sitting. Tom stood without standing. Hunter looked at the water without seeing. Joyce stroked an oar as if he felt sorry for the oar. My mother washed her hands without getting dirty. Livesey wrote a

word on a piece of paper and put it away. Smollett looked at the horizon as if he had rented it. Silver ladled soup that suddenly tasted of work. The parrot was offended and silent.

"He was a dog," Dick suddenly said to the air. "He was a bill," my mother said. "And it was due." "He was ours," Dick hissed. "He was one," Livesey corrected. "That grammar saves lives." Dick stood up and walked away. Not far. Just into his next stupidity. Silver let him go, as he lets everything go—until it's worth it.

In the evening, when the lights on land pretended they weren't eyes, the letter arrived. Not on paper—a wooden letter. A blade was stuck in the mast again, deeper this time. Perhaps the same one. Perhaps a sister. Below it hung a scrap of canvas, smeared with tar—letters inside, rough, legible:

"A bullet is not an answer. Tomorrow we'll talk differently."

"Who's 'we'?" asked the squire. "People who say 'tomorrow' when they mean 'today,'" said Smollett. He didn't pull out the blade. "Leave it. Wood should learn something."

"RUM!" growled the parrot, as if he were now in charge of commentary. "The bird's right," said Bill. "Tomorrow will be thirstier."

We ate. Not much. No one wants to be full when they're on watch. Silver set out bowls that warmed more than they filled. His hand was steady. His gaze was... not free, but free enough to be believable.

"Jim," he said later, as Deck and Twilight whispered together. "Your mother did the right thing." "I know." "And you?" He wasn't looking: he was listening. "How about 'right'?" "It doesn't quite fit," I said. "But wrong was worse." "Good," he nodded. "Then you're useful."

"Usable for what?" "For what's to come."

"And what comes next?" "The second sound," he said. "After the first bang, men are briefly sensible. After that, they become clever—or mean."

"You?" He smiled thinly. "I can do both."

Midnight was a lopsided table. Everything rolled slightly in one direction: tiredness. Then I heard it—no shot, no scream. Just that small, stupid clink when metal forgets something it should know. I was on my feet before my sleep could be skeptical.

Hunter pushed himself out of the boat's niche. "Oar bolt," he whispered, picking up his own. "Mine. The right one. Someone tried to put the wrong one in." "Open the window," I said. "It's already open," he nodded.

We searched. Joyce found traces of grease that weren't ours. Livesey sniffed them—"herring"—and jotted down a name without saying it. Smollett reorganized the night: watch in three-way knots, shifts in time with the unease. My mother slept sitting down. The squire slept at all. Silver didn't sleep.

"Pastor," he once murmured into the darkness, without looking at the bird. The bird didn't give mass. Perhaps it was afraid of the echo.

Around three, the air grew thin. Not because there was no air—because everyone wanted too much of it. I stood at the mainmast, gun at my stomach, hands in honesty. Silver came. As always. He stayed at three paces. As always.

"If someone falls tomorrow," he said, "don't catch him. Let him fall. Then help him up." "Why?" "Because men who never fall think they have wings. Men who know what the ground tastes like negotiate better."

"You're always negotiating." "I breathe like that."

"Will you betray me?" "If you force me first," he said. "I don't like children paying the election prices." "I'm not a child." "Not today."

Dusk scratched at the railing. No cockcrow—just the ship beginning to exist anew. Smollett stepped before the men, no speech, just three sentences:

"We're anchoring. We're taking on water. We're alive." "And those?" Dick pointed at the forest, as if the trees were to blame. "Hate later," said Smollett.

"RUM!" said the parrot, relieved that the morning had language again. "Yes, Pastor," sighed Silver. "Mass is beginning."

I looked at the island. It was still there, that bill. I looked at the spot where the water had absorbed a little yesterday. Nothing to see anymore. That's how it is: water forgives more quickly than people. People take longer to calculate.

The first bullet had fallen and hit. Not just flesh. Also what men call "maybes." From now on, every "maybe" was a "show me."

I wrote in my little book: One. And underneath: More will come.

The day took a breath. So did we. And somewhere over there, beyond the greenery, something answered that wasn't a bird: a quiet laugh that needed no humor.

"Open the window," I said. "Open the window," my mother said.

And the Hispaniola nodded—wood, rope, and that thin film of defiance. We were still our own ship. Still.

Chapter 14 - Ben Gunn, the Insane Beach Bum

When land smells, it first smells of something that dislikes you. Ours that day smelled of warm mud, tired greenery, and the kind of secret that men hold dear. Hunter grumbled at the helm, Joyce quietly did what necessity demanded of him, and I looked at the edge of the bank as if I wanted to bite it. Silver stayed on board, which was good for our blood pressure, bad for our peace of mind.

"A quick kiss, then out," Smollett had said. I nodded, and my feet had already decided that "quick" would be a problem later.

We landed. Water slipped away, sand took us. Hunter stayed in the boat, Joyce in the oarlock, Dick pretended to be water, Tom pretended to be land. I was me. I saw the stream, the roots, the wispy shadows beyond—and heard the island breathing. That's when I made the mistake all boys make who see too much: I saw more.

"I'll go a bit ahead," I said, not too loudly, not too quietly. Hunter nodded—a man who understands that some sentences don't ask for permission, just space. I started walking. Two steps of sand, three steps of grass, ten into the shade, and the bay was suddenly a sound from the past.

The jungle didn't swallow me. It tasted it. Air turned to soup. The foliage hung like dirty laundry over everything that thought about the future. Something crawled on my wrist and decided against it; clever creatures. Ants were building their republic, and I trudged through it with the tact of someone who follows orders and likes to think "later."

"Open the window," I whispered to myself, just to keep my tongue awake.

It didn't take long for the island to respond.

He didn't come like a person. He came like a decision. First there was a rustling, then a branch cracked, then a face grinned at me, like a crest of hunger and sun. Hair like burnt dew, skin like a map, eyes like two coins that had changed hands too many times. He wore straps of woven coconut fiber, a skirt made of something goat-like, and on his belt was a blade that had once been a knife and was now stubbornness.

"Phew," he said. "A boy. With eyes."

"A man," I said cautiously. "With a gun."

"Which I can't see right now," he grinned. "So: a boy. With eyes. Good enough."

He jumped half a circle around me, fast, supple, his toes feeling the ground. The smell that clung to him wasn't dirt. It was **Island**. And no more perfume.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Jim."

"Jim—Jim—Jim," he said the name three times. "Sounds like home. I'm Ben. Ben Gunn. Do you know my name?"

"Just a rumor," I said. "Goatman stories."

"Ha!" He laughed like someone who can count teeth. "Goat man. Good lie. Goats are more honest than humans. And better at taxes." He leaned forward, sniffed my jacket. "You bring ship. And trouble. And... Doctor. I smell carbolic acid. And bad decisions."

"I'll bring water," I said, thinking of the boats.

"Water is free," said Ben. "You are not."

He hopped back two steps and sat down on a root as if it were his throne. "Tell me, Jim, is Flint still alive?"

"Dead," I said. "He's been dead for a while."

"Good. His stories live longer than his teeth. And Silver?"

I almost lied. I didn't. "Alive. Cook. Crutch. Tongue like a fishing rod, brain like a net."

"Nice," said Ben, his smile taking on a wrinkled edge. "Silver's alive, the goats are laughing, and I've been here for... three years. Alone. With coconuts." He pointed meaningfully at a half-shell that looked like a confessional for ants. "Coconuts are like little priests. They listen, they nod, and in the end, they give you nothing but thirst."

"Do you also have... cheese?" I blurted out, half from remembering stories, half as an attempt to see if he knew the punchline.

"GOD-DAMN CHEESE!" Ben yelled so abruptly that two birds began a new life. "For three years I've thought of nothing but cheese. Cheese in my dreams, cheese in my shadow, cheese on my tongue. But I have coconut. Coconut makes you live. Cheese makes you think you're already dead and have it good."

"So you want—" "—Cheddar," he sighed, suddenly gentle. "Or Stilton. Or just something that never grew on a tree. But fine. Trade. You bring me a chunk from home, and I'll take you..." He paused to let my stomach join in. "...to something Silver likes."

"The treasure," I said, without bluffing.

Ben tilted his head. "Boy, I said **something**, not **everything**. Treasure is greed in a wooden box. I'll bring you knowledge. Knowledge is greed without weight."

"And what do you know?"

"That maps lie because men draw them. That Flint didn't need an X when he had a hill. That votes hang longer on islands than on land. And that **Silvers** People will become unfriendly tonight when the moon shows its teeth."

"We suspected it," I said. "We have... plans."

"Plans are good," Ben nodded. "The island has plans too. Let's not get caught between them."

Something cracked to the right. Ben was a shadow—flat, thin, gone. His hand was suddenly on my collar, pulling me into a hole that was first dirt and then hiding place. We slid into a hollow that smelled like goat and secrecy. Leaves above us. Darkness before us.

Two men stepped through. I knew their knees. Rat-face was dead; those knees belonged to **the other**. The thin one with the quick eyes, the broad one with the slow hands. They whispered, "Pastor." No whispered reply. Just two gnats who knew too much.

"There," said the thin man, "track. Little boots."

"Child from the Hispaniola," said the broad one. "The one with the eyes."

"Koch wants him alive."

"Captain wants him awake."

"I want him quiet."

They left because the forest didn't like them. Ben released the breath I had thought was mine.

"They like you," he whispered.

"You don't like me?"

"I like what people **do**, not what they **are**" he said. "Come."

We crawled out of the hollow, and suddenly the forest had a path that only Ben knew. Not a straight path; clever. We climbed over roots, walked on stones that didn't give anything away, and through water that washed away tracks. I didn't remember anything. Not because I was stupid—because the island wanted me to forget.

"You were with Flint?" I asked.

"Shortly," said Ben. "Long enough to hear his songs when he pretended to be alone. Flint didn't sing beautifully. But he sang well." "And Silver?"

"He had a tongue. He still has one. Tongues only get shorter when you use them wrong."

"Why were you abandoned?"

"Because I thought I was smarter than those who were allowed to make the mistake," Ben grinned. "I asked the wrong question at the right time. And then the right question at the wrong time: Can I have some of the honey? Answer: Yes—time. Three years."

"Alone?"

"The island has cattle. Voice. Stones. Stars. And coconuts. You're never alone if you don't like yourself. I've grown to like myself."

"You're talking to—"

"—everything," he nodded. "Including me. I'm a good listener."

We came to a small hollow, dry, bright, and rocky. A goat's den yawned at us, and in front of it lay a pile of stuff that could be called human: old scraps of canvas, a tin pot, a bundle of fiber rope, two fish that had just stopped being sad.

"Living room," Ben explained. "Shoes off. Madness on."

I sat down. Ben ripped open a coconut as if he'd promised it and handed me half. "Drink," he commanded. "The land takes, the land gives."

"I don't like it," I said, and drank. It tasted like air that had been in someone's mouth for too long. I finished it.

"So," said Ben, wiping his mouth. "Trade. You bring me a piece of cheese—or bread that's like home—or, for all I care, a night where I'm not alone, without someone tying me up. And I'll take you—" He pointed into the hill. "—to a place where Flint laughed. And another where he didn't. And then we'll talk about boxes."

"Boxes?" "Yes." "Boxes that were heavy and then weren't anymore?"

"Boy," Ben smiled, and his smile was the first honest object in days, "you have eyes. Good. Boxes get lighter when you empty them. And then they get heavier when the stupid people look for them."

"You—" I felt my sentence slipping away. "You have..."

"I survived," he said. "And I remembered things. Nobody needs to know more these days. That's all that scares men with maps."

We listened. The island whispered nothing that seemed about to die. Distantly, from the water, I heard the Hispaniola speaking: wood, chain, a voice saying "Anchor!" I didn't hear a "RUM!" The parrot must have been off duty.

"Your people," Ben muttered, "are building... what?"

"The day after tomorrow," I said. "We'll hold the ship. Silver wants the boats. He still wants Pastor, but he'll soon change his gospel."

"Then you'll need walls tonight," Ben nodded. "And friends who are faster than rumors. I'm both. Sometimes."

"What do you want besides cheese?"

"Amnesty," he said. No humor, just a wish. "If the doctor is good, he'll get a note from the governor in Bristol. I don't want to hang for taking too long to breathe."

"I'll talk to him," I said.

"Do that," said Ben. "And tell him I know where the ground doesn't hold. And where it holds too well. And that I know songs Silver doesn't know. Songs without words. Wind songs."

"Show me one," I asked.

Ben stood, raised his arms as if they were masts, and whistled a line that was embarrassing at first, and then... true. The wind came into the hollow like a dog that's heard the right name. It brushed against the ground, over our hair, over the cave entrance, as if trying to count. And then I heard it: the echo from higher up, where rock makes the air different. Two beats, pause, three beats. Not a drum. A shaft. Air falling into something hollow.

"There," Ben whispered. "Do you hear that?"

"Yes," I said. "Cavity."

"No grave," said Ben. "No treasure.**Away**. For those who need it."

"We."

"Perhaps."

He suddenly ducked, pulled me down, and we were back in the leaves. Voices. This time three. I recognized the middle one: Silver. He spoke softly, so softly that words ran along rather than fell.

"—not now," he said. "Pastor, until I say so. We—" "The boat's ready," someone murmured. "The boy—" "Breathing," Silver said. "I still need him so he can praise me later."

They walked by. I saw only crutches, shadows, intent. Ben held his breath as if he had it on credit.

"He likes you," Ben whispered when Silver was gone. "He likes everyone he still needs."

"Good," said Ben. "Then he won't need either of us anymore. That's when we have to act quickly."

"You said 'we'."

"I said 'trade,'" he corrected gently. "But it sometimes sounds like 'we.' Come on. Just a little further. Then I'll show you the **Stone** who knows where water is inside."

We crept along. The depression became a path, the path became rocks peeping out of the ground as if wondering about the sky. Ben pushed a slab—not big, not heavy, just the right size—and behind it breathed cool air, like another season.

"Here," he whispered. "If your doctor is smart, he'll come tonight. Or you can bring him a message. Tell him: Fish-eye in the rock, two claps, a whistle. Tell him too: No fire. Smoke is a giveaway. And tell him..." He hesitated. His face was suddenly younger than it should have been. "Tell him: I am **tired**."

"You're crazy," I said. "Crazy makes it easier," he said. "But tired makes it hard."

We sat on the edge of the hole and took another breath of air. Coconut was nowhere to be seen; I was grateful. Water lapped against the keel from the bay, and the wind brought us a snatch of Smollett's voice: short, harsh, the kind of words men would rather do than hear.

"What if I bring you cheese and amnesty, and you lie?" I asked.

"Then you ate cheese and heard a lie," said Ben. "I... would rather share a truth again. Three years of coconuts open you up to new hobbies."

"And what if I betray you?"

"Then it'll be quicker," he said, grinning fatalistically. "Than hanging. But I'm betting on you. You look like you'd **to count**. People who count betray late."

We were silent until the silence felt like something we had done. Then I saw the light change, blue to gray to yellow: afternoon on islands is a knife with two sharp edges.

"I have to go back," I said. "Otherwise they'll think I've gotten smart."

"Bring me bread," said Ben. "Or cheese. Or..." He paused. "Tell your mother to look at my face for once without thinking I'm about to cut her. Some looks save more than two meals."

"My mother saves us with a sock," I said. "I'll take what she has," he nodded.

We crept back, slowly, the wrong way around, so that tracks would be angry. Just before the hem, I saw Silver standing at the shoreline. He wasn't looking; **he thought** The parrot was silent. That frightened me more than any knife.

"Go," Ben breathed. "Take the crooked path. If anyone asks, they'll say you're lost. They'll believe that. And when night falls—" "—two claps, a whistle," I said. "And open the window if things get tight."

"How do you know our word?"

Ben blinked. "Words are fish. They swim to those who are hungry."

I skidded the last few steps alone, slapping sand in my face to make myself look like I was working, stumbling once on purpose to make my stupidity seem credible. Hunter raised his hand. "There you are, boy." "I got lost," I gasped. "We all did," he said. "Come on. Boat."

Silver was still standing there. His gaze didn't touch me. He was stroking the air around me, as if he wanted to lick it. "Jim," he said kindly, "you were... long."

"I asked the island if it liked us," I said, pretending to have a sense of humor. "And?" "It's still silent."

"Very polite," he nodded. "I like her."

I climbed into the boat. Joyce pushed off. Hunter rowed. The Hispaniola approached, acting as if she were at home. My mother stood at the railing, her sock a mere fold in her apron waistband, her eyes a decision. Livesey waited, her hands as much as putting things right as they were out of the way.

"Later," I whispered to him as I jumped aboard. "Today," he whispered back. "When the shadows lengthen."

Smollett looked at me like a task without excuses. "You're confused."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you bring anything?"

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the nothingness Ben had given me: air, rock dust, half a coconut fiber cord. I laid the cord down. Livesey looked at it as if reading a diagnosis. "Later," he repeated loudly. "And no fire."

"No fire," I confirmed. "Fisheye in the rock. Two claps, one whistle."

Smollett barely nodded. "Good. Then we'll do what ships do when land is greedy: We stay ship."

The sun fell into its own pit. The light became sharp. On the island, something was moving that wasn't wind. On our deck, we moved what we could: linen, hearts, resolutions. Silver ladled soup and smiled as if spoons had never seen knives. The parrot found its voice: "RUM! RUM!"

"Later, Pastor," I said, more to myself than to him.

The night would come. With mutineers, with words that wanted to become gunshots, and with goats that laughed at us. And somewhere in the greenery sat a man who had spoken to coconuts for three years and still knew how **Trade** goes.

I took my little book and wrote: **Ben Gunn—lives.**
Including: **Cheese.** And below: **Air hole in the rock.**

"Open the window," I murmured.

The Hispaniola creaked its amen. Tomorrow we would find out if delusion was a better compass than greed. Today it was enough that we had met him. He smelled of salt, goat—and a laugh that was no longer quite alone.

Chapter 15 - The Battle for the Log Cabin

When an island takes you seriously, it first shows you the things that can't run away. Today it was the log cabin—Flint's old nest, stockades like bad teeth in a jaw of dirt. A low wooden structure behind it, hatches instead of windows, a roof like a hat after a fight. I liked it immediately. Houses that promise too much also deliver too little.

"In there," said Smollett, without pointing. He never needs to point. "Now. In two waves. Water first, no tinder, rum only on prescription."

"RUM!" the parrot screamed from somewhere behind the trees, and the forest echoed briefly, as if embarrassed. "Pastor," Silver murmured—presumably in the same direction. I smelled his voice before I saw him.

The five of us went forward: Hunter, Joyce, Bill, me, and—yes—my mother. Sock in my apron, something heavier underneath. Livesey and the Squire stayed with the first load of barrels; Silver led the second wave, not in his wake.

Ben had shown us the way: "Fish-eye in the rock, two claps, a whistle." It really was like that: a round hole in the stone, just wide enough for you to get through if you put aside your pride. We pushed the barrels through, one, two, my ribs protested, Bill cursed quietly, Hunter counted regularly, Joyce smiled politely at the death he didn't yet know.

"Open the window," I hissed, seeing the hollow behind it—open field for twenty paces to the stockade. "Open the window," repeated Bill. "And close your eyes for stupidity."

We started, silently, as loud people do when they're learning. The first ten steps were the future. At the eleventh, a tree spoke. Then another. Not with words—with cracks. Wood tore beside me—a splinter as long as my forearm passed my cheek, gave me an ugly kiss, and drew a red line that both of them approved of.

"Cover!" Hunter yelled. He didn't throw himself—he positioned himself. That's a distinction that leaves men standing.

Joyce toppled over next to me. No scream—the body had no time. A hole where polite men shouldn't have one. I saw his face, and it didn't look back at me. He fell so neatly that I almost liked him. I liked him before. That was the problem.

"Go on!" Smollett barked behind us, without moving, and that was enough. We heaved, ran, stumbled, and rammed the first barrel against the stockade as if we were trying to teach the wood how to work. Bill grabbed me by the collar and hurled me through the gate as if I were lighter than the truth. Mother followed, sock in hand, eyes like a nail.

"Again!" Hunter shouted, as what one calls "what a coincidence" was pointed at us. The barrel danced, we sucked in air, the edge of the log cabin groaned, the stockade grew new lead rings.

The second wave arrived like a bad promise and kept: Smollett, Livesey, the Squire (against orders, for drama), two old sailors we called "the dead on leave," and—sweet luck—Silver with a white rag on a stick.

"Parley!" he sang as if the English were a hymn. "Captain! I come in peace!" "You never come in the singular," Smollett said dryly. "Hands up, rag up, crutch down."

He let him in. Not into the hut—into the yard. Between the stockade and the block, where decisions are ruined by wood. Silver entered with that polite tact, crutch tak—tak—tak, parrot silent, eyes warm as a knife handle. Behind him were two nameless companions, with very clear hands.

"Captain," he smiled, "what a pretty hole. Flint had good taste. We could share—you the East, I the West, and the Squire the anthem."

"Offer declined," said Smollett. "I have one more," said Silver. "You give me the map. I'll give you time." "We have time," said Livesey. "You have boats." "Boats are time," smiled Silver. "But I don't like sharing." "Then don't," said Smollett. "Anything else?" "Just one more," Silver tilted his head. "If something goes bang, it wasn't me. It was the island."

"Get out," Smollett said politely.

Silver left, almost bowing to my mother—she didn't bow the sock back—and hobbled back through the gate, the rag pretending to mean something. As soon as the crutch was out, the forest said, "Well then."

The first salvo hit the palisade as if someone had reinvented the lumber trade. Beams barked, splinters flew, blood didn't spray, but dripped—first from wood, then from people. One of the old sailors howled, dropped, and got up again without realizing he was standing. The squire ducked too late, but enough. Livesey pushed him behind the hut with two fingers, where fear is useful: as weight.

"Fire on numbers!" yelled Smollett. "Zero, one, two!" "Zero!" Bill shouted, and his musket spoke sensible Old English. "One!" I shouted, the pistol stung, my hand burning. A shadow in the ferns ceased to be a shadow. "Two!" said my mother, and something under a man's collar learned how closeness hurts. Then four, five, six—not coordinated, but honest. Wood now smelled of oven and mortgage bond.

"They're coming!" Hunter shouted—not panicked, just on time. And they came. Not like in songs. Like plumbers: with tools. Poles, hatchets, a hook that forces every door to be on first name terms. They didn't run, they aimed. An axe bit the palisade as if it were about to marry. A second followed. The hook found a crack. The gate groaned: Maybe.

"Move aside!" Bill growled, and we moved, because Bill was given space. He braced his shoulder against the creaking bolt as if he were the elder brother of wood. Hunter shoved a crate against the gate. Smollett took up a position where questions arise: centered. "Jim—left loophole," he ordered. "Don't aim. Take it away." "Take it away?" "Courage. Take their courage away."

I waited until a sleeve was stupid enough to play dare, and then pulled the trigger—tight, loud, ugly. The sleeve suddenly became realistic. An arm behind it became inappropriately cautious. Words that didn't belong in the prayer book flew around me. Above me, a splinter in the beam chirped, tzzzt, briefly, then silence. Later, I would find it in my hair.

"RUM!" screeched the parrot outside the yard, pretending to commentate on a boxing match.

"We'll distribute rations later," I called back, simply because I was pleased that Witz was still breathing. "JIM!" my mother yelled, "SHOT FOR LITTLE WITZ!" "Yes, Ma!"

They brought fire. Of course they brought fire. A bundle of twigs, tarry, burning, friendly if you're an idiot. It flew over the stockade, bounced against the hut wall, rolled into the yard, pretending it was Sunday. My mother stamped it out as if it were rumors. The squire poured water over it as if it were

flowers. "One more!" Hunter shouted—and then someone threw skillfully. The bundle caught in the stockade, burning in the wrong place. "Bucket!" Livesey was already there, Bill was already tall, I was too short, Mother too fast. She threw the sock—not with coins, but with wet rags inside—pok at the bundle. It kissed the ground improperly. We trampled it to death.

"Run!" shouted someone outside, whose job it was to make work for others. They ran. Or what they thought was running. Three over the dead tree, two at the gate, one to the corner where the hook lived. Silver hobbled behind, not in front. He commanded with a smile. His smile wasn't tired. It was businesslike.

The corner. That's when it happened. Two made it to the wall and jumped, found the edge, found purchase, found—my mother. She was standing inside, the pan in her right hand, the sock in her left, and was just experiencing that equality is only useful when iron is involved. The first one poked his head in to shout. He didn't shout. The pan explained geography to him. The second one came with the knife, got the sock in his knee, buckled, and then Bill was there, politely carrying him back outside: head first, because heads learn first.

"Door!" Hunter gasped, and the gate gave way, a finger's breadth, then two. The hook sang, wood screamed. I jumped in, pushed the box in, felt the power behind it—salt, greed, rum, and that stupid "Today we are heroes." "Not heroes," Smollett gasped. "Just heavier!"

"I'VE GOT ONE!" the squire suddenly shouted from the embrasure opposite, his tone operatic, his content crap. "WHO CARE!" roared Bill. "PULL MORE!" "He's got the hook man," Livesey reported dryly, because facts are useful. Good. The hook fell. The gate remained. One more breath of the future.

Outside, someone whistled—not a bird. A reply whistle. Then silence. Silver ordered. He can order like rain: without a request.

"One more time," he said loudly enough for us. "Then pastor. Then the end."

"Pastor" was her response; we knew the word. The end? Not today.

"Jim!" Livesey stood beside me, his face the opposite of blood pressure.

"Cheek." "Later," I said. "Now," he ripped a splinter from my flesh, as if pulling a bad mood. It burned and made me alive. "You're bleeding nicely. Stop it." A bandage, a stimulant in the tone, done. "Back to work."

I laughed because I wanted fear to think of me as someone it didn't know yet.

They really did come again. Not head-on, not at the same time. Smarter. Three at the gate, one over the blunt post, one flat through a hollow—the hollow we hadn't seen because islands test friendship. The flat one was suddenly **inside** A movement, a shadow, a knife. I saw the blade, saw my mother, saw—nothing. Then Ben Gunn was there—or I was dreaming. A shaggy something behind the man, an arm that could do both—pull and push—the intruder staggered, the blade drew a fake moon in the air, then it was Hunter's turn: a quick blow with the butt, stupid mercy.

"You're not here," I gasped to Ben. "I'm never here," he grinned from a crack, then he wasn't there anymore. Maybe he never was.

"DAMN GOATS!" yelled someone outside, negotiating with God. "One more throw!" screamed another. "Pastor!" sang Silver suddenly, sharp as a whistle. Everything stopped, even my blood. Silence. Truly silence. Not a leaf, not a bird, not a curse. Only our breath, which sounded as if it had paid an entrance fee.

"Back!" Silver ordered his men. "You've tried enough today. Tomorrow we'll learn to read." "READ?" someone yelled, insulting the concept. "Yes," said Silver. "The wall. We read it differently."

They left. Not entirely. Some stayed lying in the grass—because they had to. Some went with them—because friendship at sea means adding up the dead later. The parrot gave an offended "rum" sigh, then he, too, was gone.

Smollett stood for a moment, as men stand who know that standing is recognized work. "Count," he said. We counted. Joyce was still dead, that didn't change. One of the old sailors had a hole in his acromion; Livesey counted him "walking again." Hunter had a black eye and a red head, both okay. I had a face with a story. Mother had dents in the pan, the pan had pride. Bill—Bill had blood on his hands that wasn't his.

"Squire," Smollett said without looking back. "Yes?" "No talk today. Maybe tomorrow. Now—do it."

We succeeded. We reinforced the gate, we patched the loopholes, we added water, we put Joyce under a piece of cloth that hadn't been chosen. My mother stroked his forehead the way you'd say to a child, "The bed's better now." She said nothing. Words are precious when the air doesn't offer anything.

Livesey wrote as if his pen were a weapon: materials, injuries, time. "What do we need?" he asked. "Peace," I said. "And ammunition," said Bill. "And God,"

whispered the squire. "God has the day off," my mother said. "We won't make it difficult for him."

The sun dragged the rest of the day away. The shadows came early. Smollett posted watches, who couldn't be tired. I got the first one—because I count when others calculate. Ben appeared again like a sound. He laid a bundle before me: dried meat that smelled like goat, and two stones that, together, could spark. "No fire," I said. "No fire," he nodded. "Just knowing that it works."

"Thanks," I said. "Cheese," he said. "Don't forget."

"They said 'pastor,'" I murmured. "Tomorrow they'll change the way they read."

"Fire hooks," said Ben. "And ladders. And songs. I can already hear them in the wind. Get your people through the first verse."

He disappeared, as only people who were never there disappear. I remained, my cheek throbbing, saltwater in my mouth, gunpowder in my nose, and a sock beside me that had made history. Mother sat by the gate, half asleep, half judging. Livesey leaned over the shoulder-hole sailor and said things that convinced the pain to come back later. Smollett stood at the corner where the wall begins thinking. Bill smoked something that wasn't tobacco—just tradition.

"Jim," said the captain without looking. "Yes?" "Today was good." "It hurt." "That's why."

"They'll be back," I said. "Of course," he said. "Wood is cheap. Blood is even cheaper. Only our time is expensive."

"Do we have them?" "As long as you count."

I sat down, back to the wood, musket across my knees, pistol warm. I wrote in my little book: **Log cabin holds.**

Including: **Joyce liked.**

Including: **Silver is still laughing.**

And at the very bottom, smaller than the others: **Ben—maybe.**

Night crept into our gaps. Somewhere far away, the parrot croaked "rum" into the darkness. I swallowed dryly and didn't respond. Today was work. Tomorrow we could pray again—or curse, depending on who got up first.

Wood splintered, blood dripped. We weren't drained. Not yet.

Chapter 16 - Silver smiles in the smoke

The morning smelled of wet wood and something undecided. Joyce lay beneath the sheet, as neat as one can only achieve in death. My mother had smoothed his forehead and said nothing; that's her way of saying amen. Bill sat by the gate as if he were the hinge that would decide whether the day would rise.

"Count," said Smollett. We counted. "Damage," said Livesey. We named wood, rope, skin. "RUM!" croaked the parrot from the edge of the woods. "Put him down," my mother murmured. "He's a bell without a church."

The wind freshened from the east. Sounds nice, but it wasn't. First it brought the taste of resin, then the color of anger. I saw the first column of smoke, thin as a thought. Then the second. Then the long, flat drift of gray wool through the pines.

"They're cheapening our lungs," said Bill. "Smoke from the riot," growled Smollett. "Wet everyone. Blankets, rags. Water on the threshold."

We did. Buckets, rags, blankets—anything that could be wetter than day. Livesey dipped cloths in water and rubbed them on our faces as if he were giving us new skin. "Breathe through wet clothes," he ordered. "And don't scream. Screaming is a waste of oxygen."

The smoke crept in, politely at first, then like a guest who knows the kitchen better than we do. The stockade became a coughing shadow. The hut creaked as if it had suddenly developed asthma. I crouched by the left loophole, a cloth over my mouth and nose, my musket in a wet grip. My cheek still burned from yesterday's splinter, but pain is just a sound.

I saw him through the gray rags. White rag. Crutch. His smile like a crack in a barrel where rum is about to leak.

"Parley!" Silver called, his voice warm as wood that loves fire. The white rag looked like a joke in a confessional in the smoke. "Captain!"

"Into the yard," said Smollett. Not friendly. Just matter-of-fact. The gate remained closed; we opened the small door that teaches a man how small he can be. Silver ducked, hobbled in, two steps, kept his back to the smoke, facing us. His parrot wasn't with him. But he had teeth. His smile showed them all.

"One offer," he said. "Two seconds," Smollett said. "More is expensive."

"You give me the map and go to the boat. I'll let you go. No tail wagging, no anthem. Just air."

"We have air," Livesey said through his scarf. "More than you."

"Until the pines become the church," Silver replied, nodding at the smoke. "I wouldn't want to burn you, Doctor. The island doesn't need that many doctors."

"What do you get?" my mother asked dryly. "Me? Order," he smiled. "And you get what's not yours: time."

"We're keeping both," Smollett said. "Out."

Silver lowered the rag, not enough to insult respect, enough to show truth. "Captain, I don't like it when children get stuck in hedges. Leave the boy to me. He's a fast learner. I'll bring him back alive if he bores me."

"Do you hear that?" my mother whispered to me. "Do you hear him insulting us?"

"I hear him calculating," I whispered back.

"Get out," Smollett repeated, and the "r" sounded like it had eaten splinters for breakfast.

Silver bowed—a streak in the smoke. "Teeth then." "Teeth?" asked the squire—it was always the squire who asked when no one needed to. "Those," Silver said kindly, and I saw them for the first time: hooks and branding hooks, on lines, on poles, metal points like wolf's teeth. Men between trees, swaying ladders like bad ideas, and hands that knew what wood fears.

Silver was out again before our breath could register it. His "pastor" sounded hoarse, then no longer. What came afterward sounded like work.

They first threw hooks. Soon they were climbing them like fish that had decided to climb trees. The hooks caught in cracks, tugged, tore, the palisade creaked in offense. Then came the fire tufts, on poles, on embers, slowly, viciously. The smoke laughed.

"Water!" Livesey shouted. "Wet water," Bill barked, hurling a bucket so hard that the bundle went out in a huff. A second one got caught in a fork in a tree branch, making the air swell.

"Left corner!" Hunter yelled. Three shadows, three ladders, one already at the top. I unfroze the musket, didn't aim, and fired—the ladder danced, the man stepped into the void, learning physics. The second held on and got a frying pan on his fingers, instructive and ringing. The third pushed his knife through the gap; I pushed my pistol against it and let him decide if he really wanted to go through. He didn't.

"Goal!" roared Bill. Hook on the latch. Scratch. Pull. The latch said "hm." Hunter was there, I was there, my mother had already been there. We laid boxes, we laid weights, we took a stand. Outside, a "hit!"—inside, a "no."

Silver remained in the smoke, somewhere to the right. He didn't give long commands; he gave short ones. "Now." "There." "Disengage the hook." "Move over." I saw his smile once, between gray and gray, for a second, when a ladder fell and a man with it. He didn't smile at him. He smiled at the order that held.

"RUM!" the parrot finally snarled from the edge of the forest, as if he were the chapel from the fire. "You'll get the incense later," I coughed.

"Jim!" Livesey beside me, his hands bloody from work, not from posing. "Smollett."

The captain stood at the stockade bend, where the story always takes place, and suddenly had less weight on his feet. A glancing blow, clean enough to be dangerous. He didn't get any smaller. He just calmed down. "Keep going," he said, his mouth drinking iron. Livesey dragged him back half a step, bandaged him as he went, and gave him back the world in two sentences: "You're alive. I'll deal with your heroics later."

"Bill, you command the bend," said Smollett. "Boy—left side with the mother. Hunter—embrasure up. Squire—" "Yes?" "Breathe."

We did what words made us do. My mother and I on the left: a notch, a tiny window into hell. Silhouette! Gunshot! A curse that counted. Knife puncture! Sock! A knee that rethinks. Stinging brush! Rag! Air! Everything became work.

"They've got the long ladder!" Hunter shouted. Something creaked on the right that shouldn't have creaked. A head popped over the edge, then another, then an arm pushing. "Knives!" Bill shouted. "Hammers!" my mother replied, handing over one that had apparently lain in the house forever. Bill didn't strike like a hero; he struck like a carpenter. The head disappeared, the ladder wheezed, the men below suddenly had time to make decisions.

I saw movement on my left that I didn't like: two flat, belly to the ground, hands like spiders. I waited. The first one raised his fingers above the threshold of the notch. I put the muzzle on it. Click. A misfire from hell. I hissed, whined, the second one grinned. He stung. Not me—the wood. A crack opened, stretched, became opinion.

"Back!" my mother yanked me away before the knife had decided whether it liked me. The wood broke. A hole. A hand came through. It happens. It happened. I stepped on it. The hand decided to come back later.

"Open the window," I gasped. "Open the window," she said, laughing briefly. Laughter in the smoke sounds like metal.

Out there—a shout, high, fast, like a goat with a notebook. One more. Two more. Then something clattered, as if lots of little hooves were having bad ideas. I grinned before I saw Ben. Of course it was Ben. He wasn't coming—he was haunting. Behind the bushes, he was pushing and pulling something with horns—goat skins on poles, ropes moving leaves, and his voice imitating ten voices. It sounded like a goat commando was coming over the right flank, and the flank hated goats.

"GOATS!" someone yelled hysterically from outside. "GOATS!" a second yelled, and the ladder tipped over because Panic had discovered gravity. "SILENCE!" Silver shouted sharply, and you could hear his voice slapping the Panic down. "Those are wool coats with sticks."

"Wool coats with sticks" slipped away again. Ben disappeared into his laughter, which wasn't laughing.

"Thank you," I whispered into the smoke. He responded with a cough.

It wasn't over. They regrouped. Mutiny with teeth means they don't talk when edges are closer. Three poles came at once—toothed bars, Bill later called them: bars with nails like a mouthful of iron. They rammed them against the stockade and pushed, making the wood creak. One jumped onto one of these bars and tried to ride over it. He looked surprised when the nails were up, too.

"Who built these things?" asked the Squire, between horror and admiration. "Teeth are cheaper than brains," growled Bill, chipping away another prong.

They turned the wind against us. One hurled a bundle of tar at the right moment, at the right pole. Smoke turned to fumes. Air became memories. We fell to our knees, onto the buckets, and onto the wet rags. My eyes burned, my throat turned to rope. Someone sang "Pastor"—no one was listening.

"Lock!" roared Hunter. The gate screamed its "hm" again. A hook grabbed, a bar pulled, the crate slid. "SQUI—!" "—RE!" my mother cried, and the squire jumped, suddenly finding muscles normally used only for talking. He heaved the crate in, Hunter put his back to it, I put my weight, the ship its mind—it held. A knife stabbed through the gap, absently friendly. I saw the lace, I saw my shirt, I saw—the sock. Plock. The arm withdrew, offended.

"Count!" Smollett gasped from somewhere behind me. "Left three, gate four, top two!" I shouted. "Answer!" he commanded. "Left: shot—gate: push—top: hammer!" Bill said, and did it.

And then there was one of those seconds that suddenly became the day: Someone came through. A body, not a ghost, flesh and dirt, in the middle of the yard. He fell, rolled, got up—knife in hand, fear in his back, courage in his face. He saw me, I saw him, we were both too close. I aimed the gun, he the blade. My mother was in front of us. The pan did what pans do when arguments fail. The man went back downstairs, confused and without accusation. I took the blade from him and handed it to my mother. "Souvenir," I said. "Pan," she said. "Leave me mine."

"Back!" Silver, harshly. "Smoke will do us more good than blood today. Back!"

You heard it: First the silence, the heads bobbing, then the footsteps trying to leave. Ladders creak backward, rails fall offended, hooks give up. The wall of smoke remained, grinning.

We squatted, coughed, and held on. Hunter was covered in blood and very much alive. Bill was like wood with a pulse. Smollett was standing again, more on Livesey's hands than on his own feet; the bandage on his side was red, but not plural. The squire sat on the box, breathing as if he'd just relearned the trick.

"Count," Smollett said hoarsely. "We," I counted: all of us, minus Joyce. "They: three less in voice, two less in ladder, one in the yard who's asleep."

"He's not awake anymore," Livesey corrected matter-of-factly after looking. "Believe me, I know what I'm talking about."

"Water," my mother said, and that was both a command and a consolation. We didn't drink. We drank later. We wet cloths, we cleaned the air. The roof sweated resin.

"RUM!" the parrot dared again. "I'll give you communion wine right away," my mother hissed. "The bird keeps a record," said Bill. "If he screams again, it'll be another attempt."

He didn't come. Not today. The smoke lingered, as if it were Zins. The mutineers retreated into their trees, into their murmuring, into Silver's order. Once, for a brief snatch, I saw his face—between the trunk and the smoke, not large. He smiled. Not broadly. Precisely. A smile that says: I have lost what I could spare.

"He's testing us like water tests depth," Livesey murmured. "And we're not shallow," Smollett replied. He didn't waver. He just didn't let it be noticed when he was dozing.

In the afternoon, we shored up what was standing. We patched the gap on the left with a plank that had more nails than friendship. We tied the bar as if we were marrying it. We laid wet blankets along the inside wall to give sparks something to do. Ben peeked in twice, dropped something (dry goat meat; two stones; a handful of salt), grinned, and was gone. The squire didn't ask "How are you?" anymore—he helped.

"Status," Smollett said in the evening, when the air felt like air again. "We're alive," I said. "We're holding," Bill said. "We're scarring," Livesey said. "We're eating," my mother said. "We're planning," the squire said boldly. "I'm planning," Smollett corrected. "You sleep. In shifts. Jim—dog watch. If the smoke thinks he's a preacher again, wake me first, then wake God."

I nodded. My throat scratched finer than sandpaper. My hands smelled of powder, water, and goats, in that order. I sat down at the left notch, where the wood had new stories to tell. In the distance, the island sounded as if it were laughing behind my hand. From the forest, a short whistle—Ben. I didn't answer. Today was inside.

Smollett sank into a half-sleep, awake only by his gaze. Livesey wrote with a needle in the air. The squire snored in musical notation. Bill smoked the end of a day. My mother laid the pan very gently next to the door, as if it were a dog. The parrot called "RUM" into the lurking twilight, more softly, as if it were listening itself.

I thought of Silver in the smoke, of that smile that never widens. I thought of his teeth, which never have to make noise when the others are already gnawing. I thought of boats, of chains, of the wind that might shift tomorrow. I thought of the Hispaniola out there, which belongs to us as long as we count.

And I thought of Ben Gunn's rock eye, of the tunnel wind, of "two claps, a whistle."

"Tomorrow," I wrote in my book. Below: **Smoke is cheap. Time is not.**
And below: **Silver smiles. I don't. Not yet.**

Night crept over the palisade, settling on our tiredness. The smoke drifted away like a guest stealing cutlery. Somewhere a rat snapped at a crumb. Somewhere wood sighed. Somewhere outside, Silver sorted through the remains of his day.

"Open the window," I whispered to myself. "Open the window," the hut answered.

Tomorrow we wouldn't meet him in the smoke. Tomorrow we'd meet him by the water. Or he'd meet us. And one of us would smile then. I hoped it would hurt me. That would mean it was worth it.

Chapter 17 - Jim runs, death follows

The night lay like a hand on our heads, not a tender one. The smoke had cleared, but it had left its fingerprints: in the cough, in the eyes, in the thick way you think when air suddenly becomes a luxury. Smollett lay sideways like a knife in a cloth, awake without eyes; Livesey wrote breath counts in the silence. My mother cleaned the frying pan as if she were getting married again tomorrow. Bill sat by the gate, sounding woody with patience. The squire snored like a democracy session.

I was on dog watch, on the far left, the gap with the new plaster made of a board that had more nails than a future. I saw nothing and heard everything: the wood trying never to crack again; the island swallowing its own tongue; a rat that considers war a private matter. And in between, my heart, that unprofessional thing.

That's when the stupidity happened. Or the decision. Usually the same thing. I thought of the Hispaniola. Of the boats. Of Silver's smile in the smoke. Of Ben Gunn's hole in the rock—the **fish-eye**—and the goatskin pan, which he had only half-joked about. And the fact that while we had room for fear in the hut, we had no room for surprises. Surprises lie on the water. You have to get there before they come to us.

"Open the window," I whispered to myself, and this time the sentence wasn't a code, it was a run.

I put away the pistol (one, not two—justice is worse provided for than sin), and left the musket behind; too long, too loud, too honest. A knife in the boot, a whim in the gut. I put my hand on the bolt; Bill felt it without looking.

"Where to, boy?" "For a walk," I said. "Wood will kill you," he growled. "Water faster," I said. "Bring both back," he said, sitting down more firmly. That was his blessing.

I crawled through the small door that teaches men to feign humility, and I was outside. The forest smelled of wet fur and old speeches at night. I remained silent until my breath was calmed, and only stood when the island allowed me to be tall again. The stockade remained behind me like a back without a knife.

The path wasn't one; that's the good news. Where there are paths, people are waiting. I used what Ben calls "goat sense": always where it looks impractical. Brushwood washed my face with thorns, lianas politely wrapped my neck around my neck, and swarms of mosquitoes formed unions on my blood. The ground had a sense of humor: first bony, then slippery, then suddenly not there at all. I sank up to my ankles, then to my honor. Mud is nature's auditor. It checks what you're carrying and takes what's loose.

Wood cracked behind me. Not a mouse, not a rat. Men. Two. Maybe three. Death doesn't sort feet precisely; it runs with whatever it wants. I ducked, fingers against clay, ear against darkness. The wind whispered to me that it would rather talk to the wrong people today. "Pastor," one hissed, barely breathing. "Quiet," said the other, and his voice had the kind of courage that comes from bottles.

I buried my face in fern, let the night consume my contours, and waited for the moment when waiting would become too expensive. A shot? Not yet. The pistol in my jacket breathed warm air. I called it "Maybe."

I slid a bit, quietly, for a long time, crawling, like a conscience. And because gods have a sense of humor, I stepped on something that cracks when it's money—driftwood, old, dry, loud. "There!" someone shouted, that loudspeaker of stupidity, and I ran.

I ran without style. Through brambles, over roots that say "no," through the folds of the ground where islands store their laughter. Twice shots rang out. One killed a leaf, the other the air. The bullet next to me whispered something

loving into the shell of my ear; it gave me a warm tug that later hurt. I ran faster. Death ran with me, a dog that never tires. I called him "Snapper." He snorted.

The forest became sparser, the trees standing farther apart, as if arguing. The night took on edges, the sky a faint blue that only pretended to help. To the right, the hollow I knew—Ben. To the left, a strip of land that was too clean, to be honest. I smelled water. Not much. A stream that doesn't have its papers with it.

"Left!" I gasped to myself. I took the wrong path, the right one: a gully that takes cattle and tries to get rid of men. I jumped, slipped, fell. I didn't bang my teeth, but I did bang my knees. I stayed down there until my lungs realized they weren't the property of the island. Up above, curses. Someone laughed at my fall. I made a note: We'll laugh differently later.

There it was:**two claps, one whistle**. Short, far ahead, a tone only liked by people who are taking risks today. I didn't answer. I ran over there.

The **fish** **eye** wasn't sleeping. It saw me coming and opened its mouth as if it had summoned me. I crawled inside, tucked in my chin, my stomach, and the fear escaped. Behind me were voices, close, too close. One reached out, grabbed my sleeve, got the fabric, not me. I left the sleeve there, because sleeves are cheaper than blood, and crawled on. The stone smelled ancient and conciliatory.

The walk was short and honest: two body lengths, the world was suddenly made of granite instead of conversation. I smelled goat. Ben. I smelled goat hair, old salt, grease. And there she lay: the **Goatskin pan** A thing between wit and wonder. A floral boat, light as guilt, built by someone who wanted to insult the sea: a skeleton of branches, goat hides over it, treated with resin. Two paddles whose life began as a happy life on boards.

"Looks like death," I said loudly enough to regain my courage. "Or late chances," said a voice that liked the cave. Ben stood there as if he had rented the rock. "Two men are howling behind you. I can help lose one, the second one will be close."

"The one with the quick eyes and the width?" "The wide selection," he nodded. "The thin one is missing. Someone already got him today." "Me," I didn't say.

"Go shore," Ben whispered, "down the north arm until the beach is teeth. Then cross over. The Hispaniola is in the trough. The current will pull you in if you

don't insult it first. And Jim—" "Yes?"

"When they shoot: big, small, big. Unrhythmic. Men are rhythm. Flow is not."

"You're not coming with us?" "I have to do what I do best somewhere else: making fake noises." He blinked. "And when you come back, bring cheese. Or I don't care. The main thing is that you come."

Behind me, the corridor filled with "Here! He must be here somewhere—" I jumped. The pan took on me as poverty takes on quick ideas. I grabbed the paddles, which looked like they'd heard of work, and pulled the thing into the gully behind the cave—a narrow, black tube of water, silent because it could plan. The pan floated. Ben grinned. "Two splashes coming back," he said. "One whistle," I said. "Window open," he said. "Always," I said. Then I was gone.

The stream did what streams do when they don't like a boat: It pretended it was too shallow. I pushed, I lifted, I pulled, I cursed (quietly), I smelled earth that belonged to no one. Behind me, a curse flew into the passage, bounced off a stone, and came back insulted. The broad man didn't fit. It was mathematically beautiful.

I reached the erosion scar where the stream tips toward the shore. The sky was now somber—oyster-colored. The sea stood ahead, gray and large, like an answer. Surf laid claim to the sand. I waited for the brief pause between two "equals." Then I was out. The pan took waves like compliments: skeptical, but why not.

To the right, the island faded into the distance. To the left was water where men want to become gods but are more likely to become fish. I paddled with impatience and an unrhythmic approach, as Ben likes. Three short ones, two long ones, one not at all—the current took me like a joke it didn't want to understand, but laughed nonetheless. I kept the shore in the corner of my eye, the middle in my stomach. I smelled salt, wet seaweed, something dead that had dignity, and—far out—tar. Ship tar. Hispaniola.

She lay where a good plan would have placed her: half in the lee, half in the current that held the ship on a lazy leash. The masts were lines against the morning, the yards, slanting thoughts. I saw people on deck? First shadows. Then two. One with a hat, one without balance. One gestured as if he still knew how to argue; the other retorted horizontally. Even from the water, arguing tastes of rum. Officially: two mutineers on board. Unofficially: opportunity.

Behind me, the island decided not to miss me. In front of me, the ship pretended not to see me. Between the two: the pan, which looked as if it might

decide at any moment that it would rather be a goat. I paddled, my arms burning, the wood feeling like roast chickens being insulted in my grasp. A seagull laughed; I made a mental note to change my sense of humor later.

"RUM!" croaked the parrot somewhere over there, louder than the sea, quieter than fate. I grinned. The bird really was keeping a record. "Pastor!" someone yelled from the shore. Not to me. To someone who was late. I paddled. I was now more vector than human.

The water became deeper and friendlier. The pan slid when I didn't interfere. I forced myself not to be perfect. Left, right – pause – right, left – pause – two left – nothing. The boat followed chance, which is no chance: current, shear, backflow. I quickly made a mental note: Math can save lives, even when it stinks.

A shot. From land. Too late, too far, too much the version of a man who thinks distance works for him. The bullet twitched in the water and died a clean death. I bowed inwardly; you shouldn't let your opponents take everything away from you.

The Hispaniola was big now, big enough to be frightening again. Its hull was a wall whispering "Come closer" and meaning "Get out of here." I placed the pan in the shadow the ship cast on the water. Voices. No songs. This time it was an argument, dry, personal. One laughed, the other drank the laughter from the air and choked. A bottle fell. A curse rose. A fist threw itself. If God has a sense of humor, this is how it was.

I clung to the side of the boat like an excuse. A soft spray of sea spray. The wood in front of me was black and old, with scars that belied my eyes. I groped for the rope that tugs the current as if it were an anchor. There it was: thick, wet, busy. It vibrated; that was its pulse. I placed my hand against it. My heart tuned in.

Plan: Closer, look, listen. Cut at night. Now just live. New plan: Once you're sitting under a ship that everyone thinks belongs to them, you understand how few things truly belong to you: your breath, your decision, laughing at the wrong time. I didn't laugh. I breathed.

Above me, a body clattered against the railing. It shouted "Oof" and "I'll kill you," both not quite as well articulated. A second body clattered back. A knife fell. Not a second word was spoken. I laid the pan against the hull, searching with my fingers for the outrageous seam where planks pretend they should

hold. I found it. I held on. I was now officially the stupid boy everyone would later think was clever when he told it all while he was alive.

The current was nice. It took me where I wanted, without knowing I wanted to. I slid the pan along the hull, slowly, like someone putting someone to sleep. I felt the friction in the heel of my hand, the truth in the wood. The bow lay in the water like a forehead. I thought: Not today. Don't cut, don't loosen. Listen first. And then at night, when men think that plan = sleep.

Behind me, on the island, the landscape howled briefly—a sound as if someone had realized they couldn't pay me anymore. Maybe they had found the hole. Maybe they had forgotten Ben. Maybe Silver was negotiating with the truth. He can do that.

I squeezed myself under the figurehead (which looked as if it would gladly go home itself), and suddenly I clearly heard the two above. "—I'm telling you, we're waiting!" one of them spat. "And I'm telling you, we're taking—" the other sounded like a bottle in his throat. Something crashed. No music. A decision. Death, my dog, stood above, wagging his tail to see who he'd run to first this time. I didn't pet him.

The pan nodded at me as if to say, "So what?" I nodded back, "Not yet."

I looked up. The railing was close enough to make you think you're big. I was small. I stayed small. I pushed the boat under the overhang, where the ship has a crease, and left it. I lay down flat, fingers on the line, eyes on the wood, ear to the argument. There was salt on my tongue, and the kind of fear that doesn't scream because it's listening.

"Open the window," I whispered into the hull. It creaked its "amen."

The current stroked my back like a cat reminding you of a bill. On the island, someone called "Pastor." The parrot squawked, insulted, "Piece of gold!" The ship breathed. I breathed. Death sat down next to me and waited, politely, for once.

It wasn't my turn yet. It was almost there. Today I just ran. And I got there.

Tomorrow we'd see who was cutting it—I'd give them the leash, they'd give me the story, or I'd give them the air. Today I was lying under the belly of a wooden animal, pretending I wasn't the idiot who wanted to ride it.

Dawn dawned, the word fit. I held the pan with two fingers and the future with one. I just had to keep going.

The rest would fall by itself.

Chapter 18 - The Trap in the Thicket

Beneath the belly of the Hispaniola, you learn how loudly wood can breathe. Arguments rumbled above me—no choir, just two men trying to beat their arguments out of each other's faces. I held on to the line, the current stroking my back like a cat pretending not to scratch your hand. Plan for later: trim hawsers when the water changes its mood. Plan for now: live.

I released my fingers, pushed the goatskin pan back into the shade, didn't give the current the right way—left, left, nothing at all, right—and the little trough carried me along as if I'd tipped it. Land became edges again, trees became bad ideas again, and the island acted as if it hadn't seen me. I didn't believe it.

The northern arm of the bay was a mouth full of teeth: coral, roots, silt that loves you until you stop breathing. I waited for the briefest breath between two murmurs and slid the pan into a scar in the shore—a black slash of roots and leaves, stinking like truth. I got out like a thief who knows the ground is witness, and dragged the thing behind me until it hung among the mangroves like a bad memory.

Two claps. A whistle. Ben didn't respond. Either he was listening somewhere else or he wanted me to finally do what I had mustered up the courage to do earlier.

The forest now smelled of day. Work, therefore. I pushed myself into the greenery, my pistol warm under my shirt, my knife where it had been before, when I was wiser. Thorns caressed my cheek, which yesterday had already been splinters. I was a sound without a voice.

Behind me, another one. Not mine. Not a bird. Not a goat. Men. Two. "Pastor," hissed one. "Pastor," answered the other. The parrot croaked a disgruntled "RUM" from far away, like a bell that no longer takes itself seriously.

"Open the window," I whispered to myself and crouched down. A trail pretended to be a path—a softly trodden game trail, with a faint murmur of water at the end. Anyone who wants to hunt will be fooled here. Good spot.

"Ben," I muttered to the air, "lend me your goat logic." The island lent me a bending sapling, just high enough to correct a life. I pulled it down until it brushed the future, tied it with goat fiber I found in Ben's junk bag (he leaves breadcrumbs, all fiber), and laid the loop flat against the earth, with leaves so delicate that only guilt will lift them. A stick laid across as a trigger. Two small hooks no one sees. On the other side, a bed of thorns that's been hungry for weeks. Bait? I took the tin cup from my belt that I'd been carrying around since Port Talk (two lifetimes ago), rubbed it on tar—the Hispaniola sheds tar like bad jokes—and set it on the edge. Anything that glitters is made for idiots, and mutineers are just professional idiots with knives.

I crawled back, three steps, five, until the fern voluntarily gave me its eyes. The voices came closer. One snorted, the other thought aloud. "Coracle," said Snuff, "has made a trail." "The boy," said Loud, "is a thread. You pull—and Silver knits."

I held my breath until he turned his back on me, insulted. The two of them tumbled into the grass like pigs in tin. The first one saw the cup first. Of course. The brain recognizes brilliance faster than danger. He bent over, his foot planted exactly where I'd ordered it. The trigger clicked, the sapling clicked, and suddenly a man was hanging in the grass, legs flailing, throat open to the air he didn't like. He slapped the trunk once, insulted.

The second one jumped right—sideways, knife out, right reaction at the wrong time. He saw the cord, didn't see me. He cut, not the right spot, just his chance. I was already half on my knees, half in that state where he pretends he knows what he's doing. I raised the gun, as calmly as one raises a pillow. He raised the knife, as loudly as one raises an excuse.

The shot was more of a no than a sound. No cinema. Just work. It did what shots do when you don't abuse them for honor: It ended a movement before it interested you. The man fell into the bed of thorns as if he had ordered it. It accepted him as if it had paid for it.

Silence. The hanging man rasped air through a throat that didn't appreciate the conversation. He reached for the noose, found it, and I saw his fingers making a decision. I stepped out, still small in the knees, as big as a decision makes you.

"Don't scream," I said. "Afterward." He looked at me, and his eyes said: There you are, the boy with the old look. I didn't cut the noose. I left it to gravity. The forest did the rest—no opera, no heroics, just physics, as Bill says.

"One less," I said, because sentences sometimes need weight to make you stand up straight again.

In the thorn bed, the other man experienced what is called "peace," without a priest. I didn't go close. I went close enough that his knife fell into my pocket. And his gun, which I'm sure never wanted to give up, got a new owner: me. I smelled gunpowder, tar, fear, and a hint of rum, which the island doesn't like.

I heard the forest breathing, and a little bit of it was me. Far to the left, a "Hey!", far to the right, a "Pastor!", and in between, my heart, finding its own rhythm again. The parrot bleated from the distance, "Piece of gold!", offended that no one was listening.

I pulled the hanging man into a leaf hole that smelled like "Later." I covered him with palmetto, not out of tenderness. For accounting purposes. Silver counted. I counted, too. Two less would have been nice. One less would have had to be enough to keep me from going stupid tonight.

"Open the window," I whispered to the bush that had just done everything for me. It rustled as if it had a sense of humor.

"Jim," said the air behind me, and I almost fired again—not with lead, but with a curse. Ben stood there, a goat over his shoulder who hadn't been allowed to have a say since yesterday. "Fine. Clean. No drama."

"You took your time," I hissed, because adrenaline tends to be ungrateful. "I had to lead them here," Ben nodded. "Two came, one stayed. That's logic. And—" he pointed at my cheek, "—you're bleeding nicely again."

"I'm practicing," I said.

We did what men do when the scene has too many clues. Ben untied the noose, saving only the branch, not the man. I quickly wiped the cup in leaves and tar, then put it back. We varied the ground, laying down branches like we were bad squirrels. It looked like a forest again, to those who weren't looking.

"Silver?" I asked. "Back there." Ben pointed with his chin, because hands were more busy. "He sends the people, he doesn't come. Smiles, says 'air,' and means 'time.' You took both away from him."

"He notices it." "He miscalculates it," Ben grinned. "Noticing is a luxury."

"I have to get back to the Hispaniola," I said. "Tonight we cut. Or I cut. Or I get cut. One of these."

"You cut," said Ben, as if the island had given him a piece of advice. "The current turns towards evening. That's when the rope gets soft, the men get stupid. Then you untie it. And then you let them see how many can swim without a song."

"And the log cabin?" "Holds," he said. "Bill is wood. Your mother is iron. The doctor is a needle. Smollett plays a nail. The squire is... paint. Stays with it, rarely useful, but gives courage."

"I still need—" "—two hands, four eyes, three lives," Ben chuckled. "You get one: a better knot."

He showed me a trick only goats and criminals can do: twisting a rope so it will do its thing; tying a knot so that it doesn't exist if someone pulls on it without patience. "With this, you untie it when you pull; and it breaks when someone pecks. Peck is their talent."

"Open the window," I said, putting it in my hands.

We remained silent for a breath. Silence is more useful than noise, if you like each other. From the East came words no one needed. Dick wasn't there; Dick was nowhere. Silver would count—the corners of the mouth turned down millimeters, no ripple, just streaks in the water.

"Go," said Ben. "Fisheye back. I'll turn up the goats' volume so they hear you, not see you."

"Cheese," I remembered. "Meat today," he waved his hand. "Cheese tomorrow. If you can make it by tomorrow."

We slid to the shore, each in his own way: he like a cat, I like someone who'd just learned to walk. The pan hung where I'd left it, looking like a bad joke that worked. I pushed it out, smelling tar in the air again: the wind shifted slightly; the day was taking hold.

"Jim," Ben said, just quietly enough for my gut to hear. "If you want to cut, don't do it because you have to. Do it because you want to. Seil can hear that."

"I want to," I said, and for a moment I believed it more than anything.

I pushed off. The water took me like an excuse. Behind me was a forest that acted as if it no longer had an appetite. In front of me lay the ship that had belonged to all of us for longer than is good. Beside me was the sound that had a name since this morning: One less.

The parrot screeched somewhere, "PIECE OF GOLD! RUM!" as if he had the chapter headings memorized. "Not today, Pastor," I murmured. "Today we count."

I paddled left, right, nothing, right. The pan laughed at me, quietly. The line lay before me like a note that can only be sung cleanly once. I placed my fingers on Ben's knot, and suddenly the day was easy.

Behind me in the thicket, someone started screaming. It wasn't long before the trees did what they do best: pretend they were just wood.

I didn't smile. Silver smiles. I'm saving mine for later.

Today, it was enough for me that the forest had signed for us. In thorns.

One less.

The rest didn't know yet.

Chapter 19 - The Treasure Curse

Evening laid a cold hand on the bay's forehead. The smoke from earlier was gone, but the air still stank of half-truths. I lay deep in the shadows beneath the belly of the Hispaniola again, fingers on the wet line, and felt the ship breathing: **vrrr**, fine, even, like someone pretending to be asleep to hear the knife.

Above me, two men were arguing in a language familiar to every port: rum with subtitles. One called the other a "half sail"; the other laughed as if he knew what a full sail was. A bottle flew, time ducked, and the planks acted as if they hadn't heard anything.

I thought of the word "treasure curse," which is used when men have too little sleep and too many reasons. Curse is just the polite name for **Consequences**. Anyone who listens to money for too long eventually becomes stupid. And stupidity has a beautiful voice in the dark.

The current lifted me slightly on the line, then lowered me again, like a cat trying to see if I'm still fit to twitch. I thought of Ben's trick: don't cut like a farmer, untie like a thief. A small knot here, a fold there, a twist against the blow—the rope becomes polite when you know its mother.

There it came: the first **Agree** Not from the ship, not from me. Something rolled over from the forest that sounded like salt and scorn. Not a human choir, but a single sentence that had too many ears:

"Daaaaaarby M'Graw... Ruuuuum, you dog...!"

The words floated across the water as if they had fins. I froze, not out of belief, but out of recognition. Ben. That was **Ben** His throat could do things that land men in prison. It mimicked Flint's larynx, scratchy, too warm, too confident, like a ghost smoking cigarettes.

Two voices shouted in unison from the shore. One was running on sand, the other was running out of conviction.

"Did you hear that?" – "I didn't hear anything!" – "Flint!" – "Shut up—"

The wind took offense at their sentence and carried only the remaining part: "—Gold— rum— the dead—"

Silver's tone answered. I didn't hear him, I **felt** him. That calm edge in the air that tells men: "If you're afraid, I'll get you. If you're brave, I'll get you later." He didn't yell. He gave orders. "Pastor," short. "Line," short. "Time," shorter.

Ben didn't let go. He didn't sing—he **counted**: Sailors' names that had become graves, like bills: "Allardyce... Pew... Tom Morgan... Darby..." The sea provided the accompaniment that makes all songs sound equally guilty.

The rope vibrated in my hand, as if it wanted to listen too. I whispered to it, "Not you. Work." I slid my fingers under the hackle, found the small splice some clever man had once made "just in case," and gave it Ben's twist. The thick wet acted offended, then **resulted** it. A few hemp fibers groaned, I didn't. One more tug, and the **Thimbles** sat freely, as if she knew that we didn't need any papers tonight.

I solved it slowly—if you solve it quickly, physics punishes you. In the distance, Ben sang "Darby M'Graw" again, this time quieter, higher, closer. Someone on the beach was crying. Seriously. A man's voice that never cries, except when the bottle is empty or hell has a nickname.

"Take the bolts off," I murmured to the rope, and it **became** away. The thick ribbon almost flew into my face—I ducked, the end piece whirled over my shoulder like a disappointed blade and slammed into the water, where it immediately acted as if it had never been there.

The ship **twitched** Not much. Like someone who decides to lie differently in their sleep. The current grinned. The wind nodded. And the whole wood said quietly: Finally.

I pushed the goat pan free, just enough to avoid a splash, and let myself be carried aft in the shadow of the hull. Footsteps crashed above me. "What was that?!" - "Nothing!" - "Everything!" - "Shut up and pull hard!" - "What?!"

The rope they were about to "tighten" was no longer on the agenda. The Hispaniola began what broken marriages and cheap promises do: **to have an abortion.**

From the forest, the voice again—now a second one beneath it, thinner, more wooden. Ben played echo and counter-chorus. He made "rum" sound like bells and "gold" like something that would later betray you. Something broke in someone's throat. "Flint!" someone cried, and then he cried "Mother!" which is worse.

"Shut up, you idiots!" Silver's tone remained calm. "Ghosts don't breathe tar pans. That's a man." He sounded almost friendly, and that was precisely the rawness of it.

The Hispaniola had now grasped the idea. The keel caught the current, the current set its course, and the ship pushed its stern off the bottom into favor. I paddled only as much as necessary to keep from getting caught between the plank and the truth. The bow turned, slowly, like a thick thought.

On deck, the two shadows tumbled side by side. One fell, the other didn't help him up. Instead, it fell on top of him. At sea, that's the same as saying "good evening." A fist bounced off an idea. A knife appeared briefly, caught the light, and disappeared again. "Leave the line!" - "Which line?!" - "The one you don't have!" - "Then grab it!" - "I—!"

I glided on, the pan a whistling mystery beneath me. The ship picked up speed—not a pretty one, just an honest one. The wind tugged at the yardarms as if jealous. The bay responded with a small undertow that would later take its revenge.

"Do you hear that?" a shadow gasped above me. "They sing—" "—you'll sing right away if I—" There was a rumble. No finale. Just a worsening of the situation.

The first real fight was now breaking out on the shore. Silver's men barked, not biting, because the wind filled their mouths with Ben. Again "Darby," again "Rum." Ben dragged the syllables into the night like an iron file on glass. I had to laugh. Quietly. I was awake enough to imagine him grinning, goatskin around his shoulder, mouth full of Flint's shadow. A pleasure. A dangerous one.

I let the pan slide off the hull. The Hispaniola was now free enough to manage without me. She headed northwest, where a star is a poor compass if you don't have a heart. I hung back a bit. Don't lose it. Don't touch it. In between is the narrow land where people like me live.

The sea stretched my arms. I paddled in Ben's **Unrhythm** Left—left—nothing—right—long—short. The boat caught the current like a truck going up a mountain. I thought of Joyce under the sheet, of the gate, of my mother's frying pan—of things that pull you on, that will never learn to swim.

Behind me, the noise grew quieter. Not because the ghosts gave up. Because men lose their voices when they speak with fear. Silver knew that. When he laughed, it was in his stomach. I didn't hear him laugh. I heard him **to count**.

Above me, on deck, a **screeam**— the real, rude one, the one who doesn't need a stage. One of the two had finally made a decision. Wood developed a wet streak, which the sea immediately claimed. Something heavy slammed overboard, making a thud like the truth. I ducked, but the body passed me, half man, half bill. I saw no face, only arms that still had a question. The water offered no answer.

"One down," I whispered, and this time it didn't sound like pride. More like, "Great."

At the bow, a face appeared for a moment over the railing: young, too young for the number of knives in his eyes. He didn't see the pan. He saw the moon. He saw the current. He probably saw for the first time that ships don't float, but **agree** He disappeared again, slipping, cursing. My dog, Death, trotted behind him, waiting for someone to hand him his hat.

The Hispaniola was now really pushing out. The bay let her pull, not willingly. I stayed alongside, the little shadow that pretends to be a wave. At one point, a cross-edge caught me—a current with an opinion—and threw me sideways.

The pan tilted halfway, water laughing in my face. I cursed in languages unfit for print and caught the boat the way you catch a stupid friend: firmly, but without reproach.

Far, far away, I heard Ben's playing once more: a long, thin "Ruuuum" that crept back to the shore, where men had already learned to be nothing. I imagined Silver putting down the smile like a tool that just didn't fit. He's not a man who believes in curses. He believes in **Effect**. And tonight, someone else had rented the effect.

The night drew closer. Stars pierced me like alms. I stayed on course: ship's shadow, me, current, period. My arms burned free; burning is honesty. My mouth tasted of tar and lies. My brain of cheese. Ben had corrupted me.

There was a movement at the bow of the Hispaniola, then silence. No song, no prayer. Only decisions that no longer questioned. I waited. Not for courage, for **Possibility**. There came a point where the water does less than you think and wants more than you can. That, my gut told me, would be the moment tomorrow morning.

I turned my head toward the island. Nothing. No "Pastor." No "Rum." Just the great, warm silence of wood and guilt. I knew: Smollett isn't sleeping, Livesey is counting, my mother is banging on a pot in her dreams, Bill is smoking. The squire is practicing a speech that won't be appropriate tomorrow. Ben is crouching on a rock, laughing soundlessly. Silver is lying on his back, staring up at the sky as if searching for an argument he hasn't yet used.

"Treasure curse," I said quietly to my boat. "That's what you call it. In reality, it's just **we**." The pan was silent because it was right.

I pulled in the paddles, let myself drift, and laid my head against the edge. Death, my dog, came closer, sniffed my ear, and lay down next to me. "Not today," I said, and he understood. Good dogs understand "not today."

Slowly, I lowered myself to the rhythm that only water can. The Hispaniola in front of me, large, stupid, mine. The moon behind me, small, old, not mine. Between the two, I, the boy who looks too old. I held my hand to the knife that wouldn't finish speaking. It remained silent. That's a good thing.

The voices in the night fell silent. Not because there were none left. Because I finally heard the right one: the fine, thin tone that linen makes just before they **go** are. Tomorrow morning I will hear him again. Closer. And then I will not solve. Then I will **take**.

I wrote in my little book, without light, only with my tongue in my head:

- **Off leash.**
- **Ben = Flint's voice.**
- **One man overboard.**
- **Ship drifting NW.**
- **Tomorrow: up.**

I put the book away. The pan sighed, the sea nodded, the wind suddenly had no opinion. That's the good thing about nights: They don't judge. They just count.

The treasure curse? It's not in boxes. It's in throats.

Today he sang for the wrong people. Tomorrow he might sing for me. Then I hope I press my lips in time.

I lay down more flat, the pan under my back, the current under my feet. The Hispaniola glided as if it knew we'd have another honest look at each other tomorrow. I didn't close my eyes. I just let it work less.

The night held its breath. I held the future. And somewhere on the island, the parrot croaked a very quiet, very late "rum." Fine by me. Today I was sober enough to carry on living.

Chapter 20 - Whiskey in a Powder Keg

The dawn was the kind of light no one ordered—pale, like a way out that's too expensive. The Hispaniola drifted northwest, the wind swaying now and then, and the current did the rest like an accountant with patience and hate. I lay in the goatskin pan, leaning against the hull, my fingers on the rope I had freed last night. The ship breathed deeply:**vrrrr**in the wood,**clak**in the chain,**psch**in the water. It sounded like an animal just realizing that the stable no longer has walls.

Voices above. Two. The ones from yesterday's argument, now hoarse, now hollow. One laughed with too much gum. The other spoke with a knife still in its sheath. Rum has different dialects; today it sounded like "I don't care right away."

"Touch me!" The board rattled, someone laughed at the sound that needed no punch line. Then the sound that always comes too late: **adangling wick** Someone had lit a lamp, even though day was ready. Men love lamps when there's powder nearby. Stupidity loves company.

I waited until the railing came so close that my hands wanted to say "du" to her, pulled myself up on a caulking seam, wedged my foot into a tackle that was begging for help, and I was on top. Not on it—on it. I lay against the bulwark, the port side tilted toward my face, smelling tar, salt, the residue of smoke, and—whiskey. Honest, legs apart, warm as sin.

Two figures on deck. One was a tall, flat northerner (from his posture, not the map), whom the crew called Israel when they wanted to annoy him—because there was something hard inside him that never went away. The other, shorter, rounder, called O'Brien, without O'Certification; someone who knows songs but not bills. Between them, an open barrel, a pan in which they were briefly warming the whiskey over the lamp—because God wants it to be drunk properly. Next to it: the lid to the powder room leaning open. Whoever had arranged this today liked lotteries.

"To your eye," said O'Brien, pouring too much into himself. "To your mother," grumbled Israel, friendly as a spade. "She's dead." "Then she won't drink with us," said Israel, raising the pan. A drop burned his beard and went out, as wise drops do.

I crawled, as slowly as a fuse grows old: hand-hand-knee-breathe-nothing-anymore. The railing finally accepted me like a secret told too late. A quick tug—and I was inside. The planks felt like tongue beneath my feet. I stayed low. The bowsprit showed the sun its backache, the yardarm hung crooked, the main boom was firm but offended.

"Hold this," said Israel, handing O'Brien the pan and grabbing the lamp. "Too dark to be ugly." He laughed. O'Brien laughed too. Everyone laughs the same way about Whiskey.

I slid to the tiller, which was only half-fixed. A piece of rope lay there, useless, an invitation for people like me. I put the tiller in the chock, threw two half hitches and one that looked like I'd tied next to it—and it was fixed. Not pretty, just honest. The boat reacted like a stubborn dog: first head away, then here it is, because of the rope. Good. I eased off the jib sheet a bit, let the wind blow it the wrong way. The yard groaned: All right. We made half a degree more "out of here." He who sets the course tells the tale.

"Did you notice that?" O'Brien smelled something his head couldn't. "What?" Israel only smelled whiskey. "The nose of the ship." "The ship has no face," said Israel, setting the lamp down next to the pan—far too close to the shavings someone had been too lazy to sweep away yesterday.

I slid further, under the mainmast, the twisted rope above me like the patience of all of us. A torn-open chest lay there, nails inside, rags, a handful of powder dust that hadn't yet had a say. Further aft was the hatch behind which the powder cellar lay—the door ajar, the latch half-open. **Window open**, I thought, but today it was the wrong window.

"To Flint," murmured O'Brien, raising the pan. "To ghosts," grinned Israel. "They never drink with us and make the bill very expensive." "Flint sang." "I'll sing him something," said Israel, spitting, targeting the sea.

The pan sloshed. Whiskey poured over the deck planks, seeking friendships, and found them by the lamp. A fine, thin **thread** A tongue of fire licked up at the edge and said he belonged here now. O'Brien danced, Israel cursed, and I held my breath for a moment. Israel wiped it with his sleeve; the sleeve was greasy; the fire didn't need much persuasion. Burning can develop very personal relationships.

"Water!" yelled O'Brien, looked around, and found barrel, rope, and the world. No bucket. Just the pan itself. He blew on it the way men blow on embers when they want the opposite. It flared up nicely. He dropped it. The bottom of the pan clanged against the deck joint and didn't hold. The fire didn't.

I was there before stupidity burned the bridge: a jump, a hand, a kick—the pan back into the leak of the whiskey strip, lamp up with two fingers that burned themselves and immediately took it personally. I put the lamp on the railing where it could be without marrying anyone. Then I was air again, a face between shadows.

"What the hell—" "Rats," said Israel. "Rats can't lift lamps." "Ours can."

I heard my heart; it wore boots. I smelled the powder room, its door ajar, as if about to say, "Look, surprise." I smelled the whiskey, acting as if it were a lubricant for courage. I smelled—Silver's voice. Not here. In my head. **Series. Time.** And above: Ben Gunn's words that only I heard: **Unrhythmic.**

"Listen, O'," Israel said suddenly, with a clarity rum rarely allows. "We don't bind ourselves to the mast, we bind ourselves to the truth." "Which one?" "That I drink first."

He snatched the pan from O'Brien's hand. A gush of whiskey sloshed—this time away from the lamp, toward the hatch. It left a trail that looked like a punctuation mark:**comma**-right now**Point**I swallowed inappropriately. O'Brien saw the trail too. His face did math for a moment. Then it did Faust.

It derailed with the magnitude for which men love the sea: all at once. O'Brian hit Israel. Israel laughed and hit back. One reached for the pan, found the lamp, lifted it wrong, cursed right. A knob rammed into a board. Wood gave way. A crack opened. And out of the hatch: a powder of powder dust, flirting with the air.

"No," I said, soundless.

I now had two options: play hero or play ship. I chose ship. I ducked, sprinted into the jibe, took the line from the capstan, clamped it to the nail board on the other side, and untied the first loop—the yardarm turned briefly, offended, then**baked**She was clean. The jib was picking up the wind incorrectly, which was now correct. The Hispaniola tacked differently, her belly turned into a shoulder. The entire deck briefly read "Attention."

"Your nose!" O'Brien shouted, this time accusingly. "Your face!" Israel barked, hitting him so hard that the blow was work. O'Brien staggered against the hatch. The lid swung open completely. The smell of gunpowder took a step out and said, "Hello."

I jumped. A push against O'Brien's shoulder, more balance than struggle. He didn't tip over, but he did tip out of the way. I slammed the hatch cover against it with my hip. The latch wouldn't budge. I coaxed it with my palm—click. I breathed quiet curses. Israel saw me at the same second. And the lamp I'd parked on the railing saw me too—it slid on its own, because the yardarm was now saying "hello." It slid over the side.**fell**not,**fell**Not yet. I slid a truth between them—fingertip, stupidity, gravity—and caught it. A drop of oil splashed, caught my shirt, and I smelled myself burning. I extinguished the flame with a breath that was a prayer and set the lamp**far**away—onto the pump board wood, where only idiots would push them.

"Who the hell—" O'Brien blinked. His pupils knew what they saw: boy. His mouth didn't. "Hawkins."

Israel laughed. It sounded like metal in a bucket. "The doctor's little one. Well, look at that. Did you just save our lives or ruin our hell?"

"Both," I said. "For now."

They staggered closer. No gun in their hands, knife yes, brain no. I had a gun; it lay warm in my belt and wanted to talk. I held it still. Talking was my job.

"I suggest," I said, "we drink to good order. I'll serve. You sit down. The lamp stays off. The powder room stays closed. We're a well-mannered suicide, not a stupid one."

O'Brien stared at me as if I'd inherited the world and was selling it off cheaply. Israel did what experienced men do when a boy sounds cheeky: He tested the boy's speed. He came one step, just one, with that casual force that says, "I'm thinking two strokes ahead." I raised the gun so slowly it was indecent. She looked at his chest, then at his forehead. He stopped, grinning crookedly. "You're brave, boy."

"I'm tired," I said. "Courage comes later."

"And where," mumbled O'Brien, "are you going, helmsman child?"

"First, away from the shore," I said. "Too far for Silver's voice, too close for your minds. Then we'll sort this out. Then we'll talk about maps. Then about mercy."

"Mercy," Israel repeated, tasting the word as if it were a bone. "All I need is rum and oars."

"You've got rum," I said dryly. "I've got the rudder." I nodded at the fixed tiller and the sheeting, where my knots still acted as if they were the better ones.

He saw it. Israel was not stupid, just **drunk**. A calculation settled in his mind: two against one—plus lamps—plus powder—minus brains—right later. He raised his hands, friendly as a rope. "All right, little one. You set the course. We'll only drink when you say so. I love being led."

"You love to survive," I said. "That's about right."

We held a minute's truce in a kitchen that was never built for it. O'Brien sat on the edge of the cargo hatch, Israel stayed standing, placed the pan on the barrel lid (cold, thank goodness), and pulled the lamp even further away. My heart beat with gratitude, then returned to rhythm.

"Did you hear Flint's ghost, Hawkins?" O'Brien grinned, as if he were the first person to annoy me. "I heard Ben's voice," I replied. "That's better."

"Ben?" Israel raised an eyebrow. "The goat?" "The goat with more brains than your entire pack," I said, more pointedly than cleverly.

Israel laughed. "Boy, you're salt. I like that."

He bent down—too quickly. I was already half a step back, my gun higher, my fingers serious. "Slowly," I said. "Whiskey's dripping. Powder's listening."

He stopped. "You'll be a captain one day." "I'm getting old. That's enough."

We had two more full breaths of peace. In the third, the ship did what ships sometimes do: It decided to dance a little. A short, cold jerk from Lee, an unwilling pitch—a wave that briefly greeted us on its way to something else. The pan slid off the barrel lid, not far, just enough. Whiskey sloshed, dripped, drawing a thin stream from the barrel to the hatch. The lamp rocked by its handle, even though it was farther away. A crack in the wick glowed—curious.

"Don't move," I hissed. "I never do that," Israel grinned.

O'Brien did the wrong thing. He jumped up—"I'll get WATER!"—and in doing so ripped the lid off the barrel. The pan tipped completely. A golden-brown stream rolled out, so pretty it would have pleased the heavens themselves. It hit the edge of a black powder sack that some genius had once placed there "for later," irritated the powder, which first played, then became serious, and moved on—a trail that looked like an invitation to dance. The lamp bobbed. **Aspark**He jumped, small as a cheeky thought. He fell on Whiskey. Whiskey likes to laugh. He giggled. A flick of his tongue, a shhh.

I was there, as fast as panic with practice: shirt off—rip it off—wet it in the bilge tub—throw it. I knelt, I strained, I cursed, I prayed (to whom, it didn't matter), I smothered the tongue's childhood. It shrank. It considered whether it wanted to live. I gave it the wrong answer.

"Boy," said Israel, "you and I, we—" "Shut up," I gasped, "and stand still."

The trail was almost dead. Then the ship did that little dance again. The lamp tipped, not over, just askew, enough that a hot drop slid from its belly and landed right where whiskey kissed the floor. It made **psch**—not big, but **honest**A needle of light took off, hungry, small, fast as a lie. It ran across the deck, right to where the powder sack had been insulted.

I patted the wet shirt, missing by a rib. The trail**glow**A spark leaped—up—down—into the dark crack of the hatch. Beneath it lay nothing but dust, hope, everything.

O'Brien screamed, "Mother!" Israel said, "Now!" and grabbed the pan as if that could buy time. I fell onto the trail with all my weight, shirt over it, hands on it, tongue between my teeth as if I could light fire**intimidate**.

It made**zssss**—No bang. Just that nasty little sound of powder just learning to speak. I pressed harder. Water from the tub, another, another scoop, the light from the lamp, which now couldn't signal anything.

The trail**died**—not pretty, but dead. A remaining piece jumped like a louse, trying to escape into the crack. I caught it under my thumb. It coughed up a tiny bit of light, then just a smell.

"RUM!" croaked the parrot far back, as if he had sensed the moment. "If you offer me alcohol now, bird," I gasped, "I'll get religious."

I stayed like that, shirt-soaked, belly on deck, breath in the wood, until my head realized it was allowed to continue. My hands burned as if I'd ripped a story from someone's mouth. I sat down, slowly, and watched as the water turned the remains into dark stains. Israel stood there, the pan in his hand, as if he no longer knew what it was for. O'Brien wept, quietly, honestly, without an audience.

"So," I said, my voice as thin as caulking. "We're not drinking anymore."

"We'll drink later," Israel corrected, and for the first time, there was something like respect in his voice. "When we still have faces."

"Deal," I said. "And now we clear**on**. You move everything that can burn away from what explodes. Hang the lamp on that hook there. The pan—from the ship. Whiskey—stopper it. I'll hold the gun and your morale."

"And if we don't want to?" O'Brien was again offended instead of remorseful. "Then I'll help you die," I said calmly. "Quickly, cleanly, soberly."

Israel nodded once, inaudibly. "Go ahead, O," he said. "The boy means it. And so does the ship."

We worked. We. Two mutineers, one too-clever boy, a deck that never forgets. The lamp soon hung high and dumb; the whiskey got its lid back, and the pan

flew overboard, where it gurgled and learned that the sea mocks all fire. I mopped the trail until only wetness glittered. Israel stuffed the powder sacks deeper under the hatch, and O'Brien finally fetched buckets, water, decency.

An hour later, HERE was no longer a carnival. The ship lay more cleanly in the wind, the sheets lay like sentences someone had corrected, and my hands stopped shaking. I freed the tiller and set a course—not homeward—**away from anyone who wants our wood**O'Brien mumbled something about "land," Israel mumbled something about "later," I mumbled nothing. Words are like dry grass near lamps.

"Boy," Israel finally said, the sun just high enough for faces to regain real contours, "you'll get your comeuppance if you don't push us into God."

"I get my**Life**", I said. "The rest is a bonus."

He grinned. "Then go up into the mast later if you want to eat courage. He lives up there."

"I live here," I said, tapping the tiller. "The ship and I are enough. You sometimes."

The deck fell quiet, but not still. At sea, nothing falls still before someone ceases to be human. O'Brien lay down for a while, probably dreaming of mothers and bottles that never empty. Israel leaned against the side of the ship and pretended to rest. I saw his wrist consider something. Great men still play.

I sat down, my little book on my knee, and scribbled:

Lamp fast – powder fast – I faster.

Hispaniola listens to me – with grumbling.

Israel smiles like someone who is about to count his teeth.

A gentle wind blew from the leeward, bringing a new mood to our yards. In the distance—a sound from an island, not Ben, not Silver. Only forest. People grow thin in the warmth. The ship grew large in my hand.

"Whiskey?" O'Brien asked with the utmost malice, lifting the lid a finger's width. "Stop," I said. "First of all," Israel grumbled, "not in a powder keg."

He grinned at me, and in that grin lay the world that will explode around our ears tomorrow if we're not careful. "You made a good move, Hawkins."

"I still have more," I said.

He nodded. "Me too."

The sun crept higher. And somewhere in the belly of the Hispaniola there was still enough gunpowder to transform us all into stars. We sat above it, smelling of fire, acting polite, and it was the most ridiculous thing of the entire day.

The bulwark suddenly flickered **tiny-apinhead** Light, where whiskey had disappeared into the crack in the plank. A remnant glowed, secretly, from the first flicker, deep between the wood and the hemp. Barely visible, only smelled. Psss. So faint that only guilt could hear it.

"Don't move," I said for the second time that morning, "and only breathe when you need to."

I knelt, ripped my shirt wet again, pressed it over the tear, felt the heat still thinking. I pressed until my hand felt only water. Then I lifted it millimeter by millimeter. A spark crept—and died, insulted.

I stayed for another second. Two. Three. My heart pounded. **drum**, my tongues **sand**. When I finally let go, the air was air again, no plan.

"Before the explosion," I said, and it sounded like a chapter title.

"What?" asked O'Brien. "Nothing," I said. "Keep cleaning."

I tied the lid tighter, I hung the lamp even higher, I tidied up even more. And as I did so, I laughed, very quietly, very ugly. Not out of joy. Out of defiance. It was the laughter of someone who knows: Today we only survived the foreplay.

The Hispaniola pushed its nose into calmer waters. The sea pretended to have a sense of humor. The sun acted as if it wanted to burn something later. Israel looked at me as if we were now colleagues in a bad business.

I wrote the last line of the morning in my book:

**Whiskey gone. Lamp hanging. Powder insulted – alive.
Us too. For now.**

And deep in the woods, right at the bottom, where men have no say, something held its breath.

Chapter 21 - The Storm Breaks Out

There are days when the sky grits its teeth and you hear it in your gut. Today was one of those days. The air hung heavy, like a promissory note no one can read anymore, and the sea was smooth in the wrong way—not friendly, just bored. Birds were invisible. The parrot somewhere on land croaked "RUM" in my memory, but the sea said: Calm. In a minute.

Israel leaned against the railing and pretended to smoke the weather. O'Brien sat on the barrel like a king ruling his kingdom with a pipe, making faces at the future. I stood at the tiller, my hands sweating, my gaze like a nail. *Hispaniola* moved as if she had already been convinced.

"Reef," I said, more to myself than to them. "We?" grinned O'Brien. "Little captain, those clouds are just theater." "Theater burns too," I said. "Up, Israel—reef the mainsail. Oh, take the jib down, or she'll take *you*."

Israel saw the edge on the horizon—that linear darkness where water and sky conspire. He nodded. "The boy's right. Today, the church is playing." He stomped to the mast, gnarled, deft, with the hands of a man who recognizes ropes like lies. O'Brien hesitated, then did it anyway. Rum slows men, but not deafens them.

We pulled out canvas as if it were bad news. The mainsail was reefed, the jib a slack—smaller belly, less opinion. I gently lowered the tiller to leeward, gave it back—*feel*, not *think*, Bill had taught me this without words. The *Hispaniola* nodded, pretending to listen to us.

The first gust came like a dog that doesn't bark: suddenly there, teeth in the seam. The afterdeck tilted half a household to starboard. Green water leaped over the bow, scouring the planks as if it had a debt to collect. O'Brien slipped off the barrel, landed awkwardly, and laughed, because stupidity always laughs first. Israel cursed like a bishop. I stood wide, tiller against the wind, teeth clenched.

"Pumps ready!" I yelled. "Already there," Israel growled, kicking the bilge pump, which groaned like an old horse that still pulls. *Clank—ch—clank—ch*. Music for men who want to live.

The sky did what men rarely manage: It made a decision. The light fell, the gray became serious, a wall appeared that looked as if it were made of wet metal. "Open the window," I whispered, and the sea listened.

The second gust struck. Not politely, not one after the other. It was *on it* The mast creaked, the yard whistled, a block flew past my ear like a failed idea. I tasted tar and fear. *Hispaniola* She lay on her side until you saw the planks from the inside. Then—groan—she straightened up *something*.

"Deer!" Israel yelled, his hands on the jib sheet, "DEER, you bastard!" I gave the tiller a little, not panicking. The bow pulled three fingers away from the wind, the sail bellowed like a bull, then it settled again. We were a ship again, and not a wet mistake.

A wave didn't come from the front. It came from the side, like a slap in the face. It jumped *above* us, grinned, and left. O'Brien grabbed the railing, pretending to kiss her. Israel laughed briefly, mirthlessly. "That was just the greeting."

Then it really happened.

The front ripped toward us, gray-black, without wrinkles, nothing human in it. The first spray whipped our faces like pins. Eyes became slits. My shirt stuck like a confession. I steered, my hands burned, my knees did what knees do when they have friends: they held. *Hispaniola* climbed the first ramp—high, higher, too high—fell into the hole behind it, all weightless, stomach in my throat, soul in the bucket, and then the bow of the ship slammed into the valley, the bolts screaming "Now!" Water over—*green, difficult, cold*. It ripped the barrels from their place, half tore O'Brien away, and tore a curse from my stomach that had gone astray.

"Halve it!" Israel howled. "Another reef!" "Too late," I said, and the sea confirmed it.

We were sailing before the wind, not because I wanted to—because it wanted to. The storm took us in its grasp, pushing us before it like a naughty child with its toy. The mainsail growled, the jib screeched, the tiller vibrated as if there were an animal inside trying to break free. I stayed on, as tough as chewing gum on boots. A jolt that rearranged the world ran through the ship; from the mainmast, there was a sound like *crack*—Not the mast, God forbid, but the mainyard had a change of heart. It hung askew. A topmast broke. A block flew, hitting O'Brien on the temple. He looked surprised and sat down without invitation. Blood? Yes. A lot? No time to count.

"O!" Israel cried. O'Brien said "Mother" without a voice. It was almost tender. Another wave took the answer from his mouth. He slipped, kicked, and was suddenly on the gunwale, hanging. Israel jumped; the storm laughed and

tripped him. It caught O' by the collar, *almost* The next sea battered both of them. I yanked the tiller so hard my arm burned, gave edge, and took it back. The bow obeyed reluctantly. When I looked again, only one remained. Israel. O'Brien had chosen the sea. Or the sea had chosen him, as always—diplomatically.

"One down," I said harshly, and it didn't taste like victory.

Israel turned slowly around. Something in his face had decided that *now* The politeness is over. He didn't come right away. First, he tied a rope around his waist, a boatswain's knot, and sat in the night. Then he took the knife—not boldly, just decisively. He didn't smile. Israel smiles when he beats. When he kills, he is polite.

"Boy," he said as the storm began again, "you've had your lesson. Now I'm taking mine."

"Later," I snapped. "Heaven wants you first."

He came anyway. No one walks in this weather—he crawls upright. Two steps, a block slams between us, a rope whips my arm, I almost lose the tiller—heel it again, don't let go, Jim. Israel seizes the second, is tight, knife low, eyes flat. I have the gun. I pull. Click. *Pisses*. Wet powder has a sense of humor: it dies quietly.

"Too bad," said Israel, and meant it.

I threw the useless iron in his face. He ducked reflexively—a sailor. I jerked the tiller hard, the bow jumped a hair, a wave lifted, tilted, both lost our balance, we slipped, and slammed into the companionway bulkhead. The knife clattered to the deck, Israel cursed, and I jumped. No swordsman—just desperate. I clutched his jacket, he breathed rum and wind, we wrestled, the sea rubbing us against each other like two boards about to strike sparks. He was stronger. I was younger. That doesn't help at all.

A freed mainsail jib came by like a mace. It grazed Israel's shoulder—not fatally, but informatively. He was really roaring now, half in pain, half in storm. I took advantage of the noise and sprinted, sliding forward, leaping over a rope, grabbing a boat hook. Israel raised his head, saw me, saw the hook—and laughed. "Little one, I'm cooking on the fire that bakes you."

"It's burning wet today," I gasped, gripping the tiller with my knee, the hook with both hands, and not poking him in the chest—no, under his feet. The hook

wrapped its claw around his ankle—pulling—lost, it's a stop. Israel didn't walk nicely. He walked wide, uncomprehending, stumbled into the railing, bounced, and got caught on the lifeline—the line on his hip singing a note I didn't recognize. I yanked again, he yanked back, the hook slipped, I almost fell, the tiller hit my thigh, I howled.*inside*.

"Deer!" no one yelled, but I gave in anyway. The ship listened to me as one listens to the youngest officer—hesitantly, but finally. We came a little into the wind with the bow. The mainsail roared, the jib hissed—heave to, Jim. I took the jib sheet tight, let the mainsail out a touch, enough that it *back* The ship settled more stably—not comfortably, but not suicidal. The wind and waves were now fighting with each other, not with us. We slipped sideways, but in a controlled manner. The pumps sounded contentedly offended.

Israel ripped off his lifeline, found his knife again, and was suddenly back. Waves? Never mind. Wind? Later. Me and him and the next minute. I had the hook, he had the blade. He was no longer mocking. He was breathing and acting.

He stung. I didn't parry—I went long on him: hook to wrist, down, body in, rib cracks "hello," knife briefly looks at my jacket—fabric open, skin on—superficially, but it's bleeding, as it should. I pushed him, he staggered against the broken yardarm lying across the deck, slippery, nasty. He stumbled, half fell, got back up—and the yardarm rose at the exact moment a wave lifted the ship. It took him as a riding horse. He didn't ride well. A splint ripped open his forearm. Not pretty, not great, but his fingers briefly lost the argument.

"Knife," I said, and kicked it under the bulwarks with my boot. Away.

He really roared. Not from pain. From rage that hasn't learned to read. He grabbed me with both hands, not elegantly, very effectively. We rolled across the deck like two sacks missorted by fate. His knee searched for my neck, found the edge of the collarbone, did his best, I did more. My hand groped blindly—rope, block, block—and then the second pistol, which I had shoved dry into my coat lining because Livesey had prescribed distrust. I pulled. I didn't know if it was dry. I only knew that Israel's face was very close and very determined.

"Not like that," I gasped, and pulled the trigger.

The bang went off. No big trumpet—a brutal, honest *Bam* that insults the air. Smoke in rain, sparks in spray, the recoil, my arm, his head. He suddenly became... somewhere else. No drama, no blood fountain stuff. A twitch, a look that was surprised that physics classes were held on Sundays. He lay, half on

the broken yardarm, half on the deck, his mouth open like the hatch. The sea reached for him, not greedily, just dutifully.

"Stay down," I said stupidly.

He stayed. Long enough for me to realize: Israel Hands, a man with hands like laws, had just finished his shift.

I was breathing like a leaking pen. Hands were shaking, knees were laughing hysterically, my arm was burning in two places I didn't want to see. The ship rolled steadily, furiously but not wildly. Heaving doesn't keep you nice or safe—only above now.

I crawled back onto the tiller, tied it *reasonable*, checked the sheets, adjusted the mainsail slightly, the jib stayed back, the bow was too windward, I gave in. The *Hispaniola* She now lay like a dog in the wind—mouth open, teeth out, but she no longer bit herself. Water still came over her, but as an insult, not as a judgment.

I pumped—clank—ch—clank—ch—until my back told me: "It's about to break." I didn't listen. I pumped until Lenz got a piece of her mind: "It's okay." Then I crawled over to Israel. His ear was still warm. His gaze was already on someone else. I took the leash from his waist, because using a rope on a dead man is bad form. I put a tarp over him. No religion, just order.

"One less," I said again, and this time it tasted of nothing.

The storm didn't let up. It simply changed its tactics. After an hour—or ten—the break came: the air suddenly became lighter, the rain finer, the wind made that nasty gurgling sound when it's about to change direction. The sea wasn't good; it was wrong. That's the eye. In short. Liar.

During the pause, I saw what was important: to the north, a dark band, not a cloud. Land. And in front of it, as soon as the spray gave way, a bright stripe that wasn't a wave: surf over a reef. We were drifting diagonally toward it, not immediately, but soon. I had the ship veer around—it was losing altitude, but not quickly. Was that enough? Maybe. Maybe not.

"Open the window," I said. I tied a second reef in the main—fingers numb, knots still neat. The jib stayed back. I put the bow a little farther away from the wind, then back in again—playing between bearing off and luffing, like a conversation in which neither is right, yet both continue to talk. *Hispaniola* raised his nose. The reef wasn't listening.

The second wall of the storm came shoving in, thicker, darker, offended that we were still there. It didn't hit us right away. First, it let us lick our hope. Then it took it away. Gusts screamed like children with knives. Rain stung like wiry little people. The waves weren't dancers now, but stairs built by hell. We climbed. We fell. Climbed. Fell. I spoke to the ship, half-aloud, dirty, loving: "Shut up, my girl. Keep it open. Breathe. Yes. Good. One more."

The surf to windward was closer. White on black, the alphabet of death. I calculated like a bad student: drift versus distance. Time versus luck. I needed one more trick.

I reached into the cockpit and pulled out the sea anchor—not a large one, just a piece of cloth shaped like a hat rope with character. I tied it to a long line, secured it, cursed, and threw it out to leeward. It took hold, hesitantly at first, then firmly. The ship took offense, turned its head a little more to the wind, didn't push forward, but stopped dying backward. A reef remained a reef. We remained us.

An hour later—or two—I was an old man with youthful mistakes. My hands were raw meat on purpose. My back was an opinion. My eyes were pebbles, only looking for anything in the way. I was still at the tiller, the tiller was at my side. The pumps were singing. The water didn't subside. But neither did we.

Every now and then I laughed. Briefly, ugly. Because I thought: Silver smiles in the smoke—I smile in the rain. And mine hurts. Good sign.

Once a wave came across, too high, too wide, too tired to let us live. It was everywhere. I was beneath it, in the salt, in the void, my hands gone, the tiller gone, and time stopped to make itself a sandwich. Then it spat us out. I was hanging from the bed of nails, my fingers blue, my head rattling, Israel's tarp was gone—it wasn't him. He stayed. Maybe out of spite. Maybe because the sea wanted him later.

"Stand up," I said to myself. I stood up.

When night came (too early, too big), the second wall moved on, and the wind shifted again. Not much. Enough. The reef slowly slipped out of the direct line. We wouldn't go over it. Not today. Tomorrow is also a kind of enemy.

I tied the tiller tightly, as tightly as one bandages hope. I crawled under the bulwarks, pulled Ben Gunn's goat fiber from my pocket, and tied my hand, which stopped bleeding because it was occupied. I leaned my head against the wood. It vibrated. It was alive. I laughed again because I couldn't stop.

"RUM!" I heard the bird in my head, somewhere Land, somewhere Silver, somewhere Mother with a pan, Smollett with a bandage, Livesey with a look. "Later," I said to the bird, "when we have faces again."

The sea remained large, but it had stopped explaining to us why we had to die. It was just work. Work consumes fear. Sometimes.

Just before the true blackness, I saw a new shadow to windward—high, shadowy, like a wreck or a hut on stilts. Or just a storm specter. I didn't notice it. Tomorrow. Everything important happens tomorrow. Today we were just negotiating.

I wrote in my little book, with a wet pencil that did what it could:

- **O'Brien continued.**
- **Israel—finished.**
- **Heave holds. Sea anchor holds. I hold.**
- **Reef close. We're still there.**

Then I put the book away, put my hand back on the tiller, the other on my knife (dry), and waited until the night decided whether it wanted anything else.

Nature versus man? 1-0 today. But we still have injury time.

Chapter 22 - The Cave of Spirits

The morning after the storm felt as if someone had pickled my bones in vinegar. The Hispaniola lay beside me like a dog that's learned to pant on command. The sea anchor was still pulling, the yardarm was askew, Israel lay under a tarpaulin that concealed more truth than decency. I tied the tiller, checked knots, and gave the ship a sentence for my journal: "Stay alive, I'll be right back." Then I slid into the goat pan, which smelled of old grease and defiance, and let myself drift to the North Arm.

The surf was tired, but not friendly. I searched for the crack that looked like a freak in the rock—that dark wedge beneath the roots—and caught it in the pause between two "fuck yous." Sand crunched, mangroves scraped, I pulled the boat up as if dragging a dead friend over the threshold. Two slaps. A whistle.

Nothing. Then a second whistle, so thin it was more intentional than sound. Ben. He emerged from a clump of ferns, shaggy, alert, his eyes witty insect traps.

"You look like a list," he whispered. "I am one," I said. "Israel finished, O'Brien gone, ship angry, I'm hungry." "Then come, I'll show you a place where air collects stories and goats apologize."

The path wasn't one, so it was just right. It led under treetops that stank like wet dog, then over edges that looked like torn ribs. Ben walked as if the stone belonged to him. I followed behind, pretending my feet knew what ground was.

We entered a crater, half crater, half gully. A hole gaped in the middle, a different shade of black than the shadows: the black that continues within. The air smelled—I'll be honest—like God had forgotten to sweep it: guano, rotten goat meat, old tallow, salt, fungus, and a lodger, "whatever," with a sense of humor.

"Welcome to the **Cave of Spirits**" grinned Ben, 'or as I call it: God's Big Refrigerator—without God.'

"I'm going to puke," I said honestly. "Do it on the left. My dining area is on the right."

We climbed in. First at an angle, then steeper, then crawling. Ben's hand found rocky protrusions that I took for insults. He showed me niches that looked like the mountain's entrails, and tubes he had drilled himself, or that time had drilled and just made friends with Ben: pieces of bamboo, mussel shells, old bottlenecks in walls, all placed so that the wind would say things that cost men dearly.

"I had Flint sing here," Ben murmured. He whistled briefly, the sound ran down the tube, jumped somewhere, came back—deeper, rougher, older. It became "Darby M'Graw... around... you dog." I got goosebumps in places that had previously been private.

"Ghosts are cheap when you have a workshop," said Ben, proud as an executioner with professional ethics.

On the floor: boxes made of seaweed rope, a pot that had seen war, bundles of goat fiber, rags soaked in tallow as "candles," next to three round, pale things that looked as if someone had confused soap and debt.

"Is that... cheese?" Ben's face glowed like sin by candlelight. **Yes.** Well, almost. Goat fact, fermented in mussels, salted with tears. You don't get used to it, but you survive."

"Not for the faint of heart." "Then eat." He gave me a morsel. I bit. It tasted like a sheep had decided to die in my mouth. I chewed bravely, choked briefly, Ben laughed, and the cave laughed with me—echoes are sadists.

"Enough cooking," he said, lighting a tallow candle. "Now for the... coroner's examination."

He led me deeper. The walls were notched—not of a natural kind. Lines, counts, names. J. Flint, carved into it, arrogantly, beneath smaller hands screaming "present," and later, hands screaming "gone." Around a corner lay a pile that wasn't a stone. I stopped, my stomach wondering if it liked democracy.

Bones. Not fresh ones. Old ones, cleaned by the salt of time, a riot of sorts: thighs, ribs, skulls, one with a gold tooth that glittered as if it weren't missing anything. In between, scraps of linen, a decadent tricorn hat, fingerless rings, a knife whose handle looked like a tolerated mistake.

"Flint liked **Degrees**", Ben said quietly. "Not always with the priest. And sometimes the island helped him. Here is his book—without paper."

I wasn't sentimental. I was awake. I saw the gold tooth, thought, "Squire," then "no," then "open the window." I didn't take anything. I just talked to the air: "I know why Silver doesn't like ghosts. They're competition."

"Behind the pile," said Ben, "it goes down into the belly. That's where the voices become real." He flicked the tallow candle higher; the smell changed from "hell" to "cellar in hell." We squeezed past the bones (not for the faint of stomach, indeed) and entered a room that sounded. Not "loud." Sound. Every step wrote us a footnote. Drops somewhere over there fell like clockwork. The wind passed through a crack and came back as a sentence.

"Here," said Ben, "courage becomes cheap and lies expensive. I've tried it many times."

I saw large abrasions on the wall. Not fresh, but younger than the bones. Wooden skeletons. Traces of crates. The floor tells stories, if you like it.

"You moved the treasure," I said, not as a question.

Ben nodded, looking both guilty and proud. "Not all of it. Not far. Just enough so that men who are greedy now will be sad later. Part of it is through here—down below, sea access. I put it in the **Herring maw** pushed—a crevice of brackish water where only someone who is hungry and has no shoulders can fit in."

"And the rest?" "Hidden, distributed, sung. I don't want to die for a box. I want to live for a **Note**—from the governor, from the doctor, from you, if necessary."

"Amnesty," I said. "Cheese," he said. "And amnesty."

I laughed briefly to make my stomach forget what it had just seen. "Plan?" "Plan," Ben nodded. "The mutineers believe in Flint's **Main chamber**. You lure them in here with your voice and promises. I let the pipes do the talking; you let patience turn into panic. I have something at the entrance." He grinned crookedly. "Nothing fatal. Just educational."

"And if Silver comes himself?" "Then it'll be expensive," said Ben. "Then we need the second exit. There." He pointed to a shadow flap in the wall, as inconspicuous as a guilty conscience. "Narrow. Slippery. Smells of the sea. He who is afraid of narrowness dies wisely."

I was just about to say something like "Fine," when we heard what caves do so well: **Foreign** A pebble rolled at the entrance. A voice whispered, "Pastor." Another: "Stilton stinks in here." Laughter. Then: "Flint?"

Ben put his finger on my lip. "Now I'll show you the organ."

He blew through a conch, briefly. The wind took the sound, the tube bent it, the cavity ate it, and suddenly Flint was there—not louder, just everywhere. "Ruuuuuum... Darby... bring the rum, you dog..." The names fell from the ceiling like drops.

"Holy—" a voice at the entrance said. Click. Then someone stumbled in, saw bones, and dropped almost everything they'd brought with them on the floor. Another one followed, slimmer, with faster hands and a slower soul. "I... I'm not going any further." "You're going," hissed the thin one. "Silver won't laugh if we turn around." "Silver never laughs." "Then he's laughing today."

"Give them pressure," I breathed. Ben nodded and let the wind run through a row of bottles. It turned into whispers, which everyone interpreted as their own fault: "...you... I see you... you let me... you—" The thin one cursed, the other whined. He stepped on the trigger that Ben had so lovingly hidden under

guano: a tilting plate, barely large, precise enough. It made **scrap**, and a goat tallow lamp hanging from a branch fell down beside them—not down, just harshly enough to **Everything** to be able to. The light turned faces into mistakes.

"RUM!" croaked the parrot, the Chronicle, in the distance. "Shut up!" screamed Slim, and through the echo it sounded as if he'd been talking to Flint. His companion ran. Slim ran after him, stumbled, got stuck—on what? On someone. I saw the tip of a boot emerging from the pile of bones, then the click of a gun that came from nowhere—only from memory. He didn't scream for long. The echo did the follow-up work.

"Just educational," Ben had said. Educational enough. We heard the two of them outside, cursing and **pastor**yelled as if the priest were now in charge. Footsteps. Away. Silence. Then that vibrating non-noise when men stuff their decisions back into the bottle.

I exhaled. Only now did I realize how I'd been holding onto the air like a thief. "One injured." "And one who now pees at night before fear wakes him," Ben said matter-of-factly. "Job done."

We went deeper into the belly. Ben showed me a niche in the rock: three crate bottoms, empty, but with marks in the dust; beside them a few sacks, heavy enough to smell hope. He ripped one open—inside nothing but forks, spoons, plates, old, silver, not **the** Silver, but silver. "I'll keep the heavy guys down below—for tomorrow. I'll leave the light ones up above—for their greed."

"You know what you're doing." "I know what fear can do," he said. "And what smell can do."

He was right. The cave now smelled so much of us that I could taste myself. The scent of tallow candles mingled with old goat, guano left a signature over everything, and somewhere in the back was that shiny metallic hue—not heard, not felt—of things too valuable to leave alone.

"And now?" "Now you wait here," said Ben. "I'll slip through the Maw and bring word to Livesey. He needs to know that you're alive, that the ship is alive, that Israel... well, you know, and that more than one voice lives here."

"Can you do it?" "I'm a goat," he grinned. "I can sleep on walls."

I watched him disappear into the shadow flap, which was even narrower than I'd feared. Alone with tallow and skeletons and a voice that was just tired, my legs felt like someone else.

I sat down on a box that was no longer anything and listened to the drop insulting time. I wanted to write. My pen preferred the smell. I wrote anyway: **The cave stinks worse than the truth. Ben can play the organ. Two men: one with a brain injury, one with a knee injury.** Then I stopped. Not what I heard. What I not heard: outside no birds, no Wind in the branches. Just that smooth, flat stillness that places have before they decide whether they want to be a court or a church.

And then—I swear—I heard Livesey.

"Jim?" Livesey said. Not loudly, not hurriedly. Just his balance between "dimwit" and "good boy." "Jim, if you can hear me—stay where you are."

I stood. The sound wasn't coming from the pipe with Flint's voice. It was coming from somewhere else. A second crack? A third organ that Ben hadn't built? I waited until words had legs again.

"Jim. It's the doctor. Open the window." That was ours. No mutineer says our word as if he knows what's inside.

"Doctor?" I called back softly, to the wall, to the hole, to everything. "Quiet, boy," came the muffled voice. "They're circling. Silver is sewing courage into them. Can you go out to the **Southern Lobe** Not in front. Not by the bones. The other exit." "Ben is—" "By me," said Livesey. "He stinks worse than the cave—and grins. Good. Listen to him. Now."

I looked at the shade flap. Dark, wet, cramped. The smell of the sea. "Not for the faint of heart," I muttered and laughed, because otherwise my stomach would.

Outside, in the distance, metal scraped against wood: hooks, bars, patience. One voice said "air," another "time"—SILVER. He was there. Not inside. Before. And once he's before, he finds doors you don't have.

I extinguished the candle, took a second one with me, didn't touch it, and put tallow in my pocket. I grabbed one of the small boxes that only pretended to be empty (inside: spoon—mockery), and went into the hatch. One breath, two, the world narrowed, my head bigger, my stomach offended. Water kissed my knees, cold, water that had lived before. I crawled until crawling meant walking, and walked until walking meant swimming. Behind me the cave, in front of me the sea, somewhere Livesey, somewhere Ben, somewhere Silver, who had already lost patience on the stove again.

Above me, the wind howled briefly—nothing much, just a warning. I heard "Pastor" in the distance, I heard the parrot "Piece of Gold," bored as an accountant. I heard myself say, "Open the window."

I emerged into a crevasse that only offered thin strips of sky. Rocks on the left, rocks on the right, and a scour line straight ahead. I raised my head. On the ledge stood the doctor, silhouetted in a hat. He smelled of carbolic acid and night. Ben beside him, stinking like a joke that only he still enjoys.

"Boy," Livesey said quietly, "I'm glad you prefer visiting caves to coffins."

"Here you get both in one package," I said. "There are notches, bones—and a bang, if we're lucky."

"We have visitors," Ben murmured. "Silver brings the fine tongue and the coarse hooks."

"Plan?" I asked. "Plan," said the doctor. "You're leading them into the wrong hall—Flint's Echo. Ben is playing the ghost. I'll come from behind with Truth. If someone's left who can count, we'll talk. If not, we'll keep quiet until silence is worth something again."

Above us, in the other throat, there was a clinking sound, as if someone were dropping grounds. I suddenly smelled gunpowder again—not much, just a memory. I thought of the Hispaniola, of the crooked yardarm, of Israel under the tarpaulin, of the tiller waiting for me. Of my mother with the pan, of Bill, who is wood, and the squire, who is paint.

"Not for the faint of heart," I repeated. "Excellent," said Livesey. "I don't have one."

We threaded our way back into the darkness. The doctor was behind me, Ben in front of me, voices ahead of us. The cave twisted the smile I didn't have and bared its teeth.

And deep inside, behind the bones, Flint cleared his throat. Or Ben. Or simply the island.

No matter. The men would listen. And one of us would be less afterward. Or more. Today it smells like both.

Chapter 23 - Silver's Offer

The cave smelled of everything no one wants to bring home: goat tallow, guano, old salt, and the rest was lies. Ben crouched in front of his ghost organ, his lips pressed together as if they were about to sign an alibi. Livesey stood behind me, carbolic acid in his lungs and a placid expression. I held the pistol low and dry. Outside, metal scraped against rock. Pastor. Unanswered. Still.

Then he was there. **Silver.**

Crutch, white rag, the smile that never sweats. Two pieces of meat in his wake—one with an eye scar, one with sweaty hands. Silver lifted the rag just so we saw it and forgot about it.

"Parley," he said. The cave made the word sound more disgusting.

"Just mouth," Livesey replied. "Hands where stupidity sees them."

Silver grinned and let his fingers do the talking: empty, polite, unarmed—which, for Silver, means poor weapons. He stayed on the threshold, where guano sticks and men can quickly become sensible.

"Well," he began, "so here we are, standing at the neck of the island, pretending to be teeth. Doctor. Boy. Goatman in the shadows—I greet the whole organ."

Ben let the shell sigh slightly. A scrap of flint blew back: "Ruum..." Silver didn't even blink. He just nodded, as if paying respect to a trick.

"My offer," he said, "is serious without being boring. I get the map. I get the way—not your catechism, way. In return, you get: air, water, and access to the boat today. No hunting, no 'pastor,' no random nails in the back. We take our half, you take yours, and the rest of the island can continue sleeping with ghosts."

"Half of what?" Livesey asked so dryly that even the guano coughed. "Of what's there," Silver smiled. "Not of what men sing."

"Aha," I said. "You have no idea what's there."

"I know enough," he replied mildly. "And time too little. My people love me until they're thirsty. So I'll make it short: Jim, my boy, you come out with me—just one step, just one ear—and hear what I have to offer. Without a doctor. Without a mind. Men talk differently when they don't have an audience."

"He talks the same everywhere," Livesey said. "Only the knives change pockets."

"Doctor," Silver inclined his head, "I hear the right kind of frost in your sentences. Respect. But this is the boy who tomorrow will either live or become a legend. And if I had the choice, I'd choose to live."

I waited until his eyes lit me up so warmly I almost sweated. "Say it, Silver. I'll count."

He rested both hands on the crutch as if it were a pulpit. "Jim. I'm sick of mistaking idiots for my career. My offer: You come over. You stand behind me, not in front of me. You're the tongue or the ear, whichever you prefer. I'll make you quartermaster within three days—from my side, not the doctor. If I fall—and men like me only fall from within—everything that's attached to me falls to you. I keep my share, you get yours, plus the future, minus the collar."

"And if I say no?" I asked, as if the world consisted of two letters. "Then I'll keep my dogs on a short leash tonight," Silver said, still smiling. "Maybe not tomorrow. I can keep them away from you—or wave them toward you in a friendly manner. The poison in that: Sometimes they listen to me. Sometimes they listen to their fear. I offer you, boy, the only door that doesn't have a knife."

Ben breathed another breath of Flint—this time very gently, just a breath: "...Darby..." Silver winked at the pile of bones. "And you, old captain, I loved while you still had teeth. Now it's our turn."

Livesey cleared his objection: "My offer is simpler. You put down your crutch and your tongue, come out with your hands white, and we'll hand you over to justice, not revenge. You'll live—and learn needlework in the penitentiary. Your men will get water and a way to transform themselves into minor errors. Today. Two hours."

"Two hours," Silver repeated, as if tasting the word. "In two hours, my pack will have three new opinions, Doctor. Some already have them: One's sitting out there bleeding from his knee because the island has given him a good education."

The one with the eye scar snarled. "The brat—" "Shut up, Tom," Silver smiled, without looking. "Let men talk."

He took off the rag. A small sign: Now I'm the one counting, not the flag. "Doctor, you're smart. You know we have two clocks. Yours: reason. Mine: hunger. I can bypass your watch, I can eat your door, I can stroke 'Pastor' in your boy's ear tonight until he falls asleep with me. But—" he looked at me again, warmly, "—I don't want to. I like the brat. I like the way he drives the ship. I like the way he says no, like he's been doing it for twenty years."

"I'll say it again," I replied, "so you can frame it:**No**."

A brief, honest moment flashed across his face, smaller than a spark. Then he smiled again. "Then repackaged: I'll leave you the log cabin. I'll take the coast. You keep the doctor, I'll take the boats. If the wind changes, I'll change too. Give me a map—or just a destination—and we'll send each other postcards. No man without a voice. No boy without a future."

"Fascinating," said Livesey. "I hear a lot of sugar. Where exactly is the poison?"

Silver tapped the crutch lightly into the guano. "Already. Already you've fired shots. Already the boy..."—his gaze briefly resembled a knife—"...has converted Israel Hands." The cave held its breath. Ben grinned in the shadows. Livesey gave a tiny nod. I held the gun tighter.

"I know," Silver continued gently. "I saw it on the yardarm and on the sea's face. Good thing. A captain who doesn't know the dead is just a tourist. So—" he raised the rag again, a dramatic pause—"—let's leave it at that. You wear yours, I'll wear mine, and the rest will be gold."

"They are conspicuously silent about where exactly," Livesey said.

"Because that costs the evening," Silver countered. "I also have an offer with a watch:**Dawn on Dead jaw**— the rocky hollow with the two teeth. You bring: just the boy and a small box as proof that you're gone, not a wish. I bring: myself, two men, and a halt. Then we'll show each other, from the edge, where our feet will step next."

"And if we don't come?" I asked. "Then we'll come," Silver said kindly. "Different door. Different music. Pastor won't sing anymore."

Ben shot him back, sharp as a razor blade: "Darby—you dog—hell freezes over—" Silver's men unconsciously crossed their fingers. Silver smiled at the echo. "Flint, you old shopkeeper. You once called me a scumbag. You were right. I'll call you Mentor today."

Livesey took half a step forward. His shadow grew longer, his tone shorter. "Final number, Mr. Silver. Water and bandages for three of your men today. In return: your two knives and those two"—he nodded in Tom's direction—"leave the threshold alone. Tomorrow, when the morning is morning, we'll talk at the Dead Man's Jaw. No sickle draw, no torch. He who cheats doesn't die heroically.**Completed.**"

Silver considered the word. Then he nodded. "I like your style, Doctor. It's more expensive than mine. Good. Tom, put down the blade. You, Scar, too. We're not tying anyone today. We're just tying sentences."

The two reluctantly laid their knives down visibly—not far, just deep enough in the guano that an unsteady hand could later retrieve them with drama. Silver took half a step back, letting the rag sink further. "One more thing before I go: Your ship. I saw it turn its nose. Well done, Jim. Hands was a dog, but he could oar. Now he doesn't row. And your sea anchor? Nice. But the wind—" he breathed into the hole—"likes to change religions. Never leave the tiller alone. Never. Not even when you think there are three of you."

"How touching," I said. "He's giving us tips. The only thing missing is him leaving us food."

Silver laughed. "I'll leave you with something better." He turned the crutch and pulled a small**Plug**—Cork, thick, damp with oil. He placed it on a rock next to the threshold, so casually that my blood ran the other way. "A souvenir. So you remember I'm serious."

The crutch tapped in farewell. Silver turned, half-step, rag up, men up—away.

I exhaled. Livesey wasn't breathing at all. Ben smelled. Then I smelled it, too. Not right away, only when the draft changed the cave's greed:**oil**. Very fine. Another scent, beneath the goat's tallow: a fragrant, thin oil.

"The plug," whispered Ben. "Turn it over."

I fell. The cork was hollowed; on its flat side was a thin, almost invisible**Wick Trail**, which ran like a vein in the dirt—out, out—out along the wall, to where Tom was just standing. "Sugar. Poison," I said.

Ben was already on his knees, the tallow candle in his fist,**out of**"Don't blow, kick," he hissed. We kicked. On purpose. With honor. With everything. The wick cracked, tore, and released an oily smoke that smelled like "in a minute." I ripped another armful of moist guano and slapped it on like it was powdered

sugar for a wedding no one wanted. Livesey pressed down with his boot, the edge of his mouth saying: two seconds, then more.

Outside, a breath later, air hissed – only briefly – as if someone had held a lamp closer than was sensible to the wrong wall. No kiss of flame reached us. No organ, no concert. Just the non-existent. We had the **Gift** resigned.

“Silver’s offer,” said Ben, “always comes in two parts: a handshake and a boot behind the knee.”

"He's just testing our attention," Livesey said. "More important than his small wick is his big one." **Appointment.**"

"Deadjaw," I said. "Dawn."

"You're not going alone," said the doctor. "I'm not going at all," said my gut. "You're going," said Ben. "By voice. Not by card."

"And if it's an ambush?" "Then some will die," Ben explained kindly. "But maybe the right ones."

Livesey looked at me, that clean-cut kind of look that knows only two possibilities: lie or work. "So," he said, "we give him his sugar. A straw man of a box—silver spoon, not treasure. We give ourselves the poison: a position with a fallback. Ben, you build my escape whistle into the rocks. Jim, you—" "—don't hold the tiller alone," I muttered. "I have to go out first. Secure the ship. Check the sea anchor. And Israel..."

"Israel stays where it is," Livesey said. "The dead are the only ones who don't bring about a new opinion."

Ben lifted a conch shell and whistled a thin, "One long, two short." It ran through the tubes, coming back like a sentence only we understood. "Signal for window open from outside," he explained. "If I do it three times fast, one long, it's a race. Everything else is just fiction."

I stepped to the threshold, where Silver had been standing. The guano still bore the imprint of the crutch. The cork lay beside it, harmless. I picked it up, examined the furrows, the soaked wick, the delicate end that had almost given us a new hairstyle.

"Sweet words with poison," I said. "Tasteful in the first moment. Killing in the second."

"It was a test," Livesey nodded. "Whether we hope or work. We work."

"And tomorrow?" I asked. "Tomorrow we'll eat the sugar out of his hand and give him wood between his teeth," said Ben. "The dead jaw has thin lips. I know his tongue."

"One more thing," the doctor added, his voice quiet, his heart audible. "Jim: When he addresses you—he will—stay rude. Politeness is the lubricant for his knives."

"I can be rude," I said. "Ask my mother."

We extinguished every candle that was standing stupidly, treading on the oil one more time until the cave only smelled of what it already was: an archive of bad decisions. Then we crawled through the side hatch into the narrower light. Outside, the sky briefly considered whether it wanted rain. Not today.

"Back to the ship," said the doctor. "You, Jim. Ben and I to the cabin: water, news, joke. And then everyone who wants to say 'no' again tomorrow can sleep."

I nodded, heavier than my head. In the crack below, the sea gurgled, as if clearing its throat before an important speech. I smelled tar in the distance; the Hispaniola was still there, defiant, crooked, alive. I threw the cork deep into the crack. Not as an insult. As a reminder.

"Dawn," I said to myself. "Dead mandibles." And underneath: **Silver smiles. I do too—with teeth.**

We parted like thieves before a temple. Ben disappeared to the left, Livesey to the right, and I went down. The island held its breath, the cave held its mouth, and somewhere in the trees the parrot practiced its only prayer.

Later, in the shadow of the ship's hull, hand wet, pencil offended, I wrote in the book:

- **Silver: Deal + Wick.**
- **Dead jaw, dawn – wrong box.**
- **Secure the boat first – never helm alone.**
- **Sugar tastes good, poison works.**

Then I put the book away, put my hands on the paddle, and let the pan cut through the bay like a bad idea. The wind changed, just a breath. It was enough

to know: tomorrow it will be more expensive. Good. I had some change: anger, wit—and a pan that had endured worse.

Silver? He'll be on time. Poisoned politeness is always on time.

Chapter 24 - The Final Betrayal

The night hung over the bay like a wet carpet. I had stroked the Hispaniola's back once more—floating anchors, double-rigged tiller, every line as tight as if our lungs were hanging on it. "Never alone," Silver had said. For once, I believed him. The ship continued to breathe, *vrrrras* if it knew that men are rarely punctual.

I slid back to the shore in the coracle. Mangrove shadows smelled of old rubbish. The path to the log cabin had become shorter since yesterday; fear has scissors. As I crawled through the narrow door, I saw: Smollett, thin as a blade in a cloth; my mother, pan beside her knee, feigning sleep; Livesey awake with quiet eyes; Ben grinning into the darkness that loved him; Bill at the latch, wood that thinks.

"Ship is holding," I whispered. "Wind can shift, but doesn't want to."

"Good," said Livesey, without praise. "Dawn Deadjaw. Ben, you do Flint. Jim, you do no. Squire, you keep your mouth shut today."

"Of course," the squire crooned, his voice creased. He looked like a man warming his dignity in his pocket because it's drafty outside. "I'm just... exhausted. This island has no armchairs."

I lay down in a corner, closed my eyes, and did nothing. Sleep hung before my nose, but I couldn't eat it. The hut creaked, the way old houses talk when they know conversations will be expensive. At some point, the squire stood up. Very politely. Very quietly. He lifted the blanket that had been placed over Joyce—just a finger's breadth, as one does when one isn't truly grieving, just checking to see if guilt is sleeping.

"Where to," my mother murmured, not awake, not blind. "...to pee," the Squire breathed. "Sorry." "Left," she said. "Right is life."

He went to the right.

"Open the window," I whispered to myself and followed. Bill looked at me, a look that said, "You're counting right, boy." I counted to three, and then I was outside. The moon was halfway through its vacation, the rest was good for shadows. I walked bent over, not because of romance, but because of lead.

The squire was no ranger. He stepped as men step who have never paid for loud shoes. I saw the pale hem of his shirt between the bracken and the arrogance. After a hundred steps, he turned off, down the wrong path that smelled of harbor. After two hundred, he stopped. A white rag rose, not large, not high, merely appointed. I remained in a crouch, which hates bones, and waited until the mistake took on a face.

He came from nowhere—Silver. Crutch, shadow, laughter that only half-reached. Next to him was Tom Scar—the cave knew his knee—and a new guy with teeth that didn't like each other.

"Sir Trelawney," Silver crooned. "The man with the powder and the good-looking face. What an honor."

"Mr. Silver," the squire breathed, "we are gentlemen, even if circumstances..."
"...fill our pants with sand," Silver helped kindly. "Gifts?"

The squire pulled a piece of paper from his waistcoat. Not large, not bright, but paper is king on islands. "No treason," he said, which always means it is. "Only exoneration. I bring you—a token of my sincerity." He opened it. A sketch. Not original, but not imaginary either. On the left, the bay, on the right, the ridge, an X, squiggles next to it. I recognized Ben Gunn's hollow, not the belly. But the direction was right. Enough to set dogs loose.

"And for that?" Silver asked gently. "For the men of the morning, grace. For me—" The squire smiled as if he saw himself on a stage. "—a written word. That I may see my means again later. The world is small, Mr. Silver. It's better to live in it when you're not constantly on your knees."

"Of course," whispered Silver. "I'll sign heaven for you. With rum." His men chuckled, the squire heard music. "Anything else?" "One small detail," stammered Trelawney. "Our code. When we call for windows, it's go. Two claps, one whistle. So no one—miss me?"

Silver smiled. It was small. The dangerous kind. "I'm not missing anything, sir." He took the paper. "Dawn. Deadjaw. You come to me—with the boy. I'll give you back all the words you lost today."

The squire nodded as if he'd been presented with an opera. He extended his hand. Silver placed his crutch between his hands as if it were a matter of etiquette. "Gentlemen," he said, and disappeared so quietly that the night held the door open for him.

The squire stood for another three breaths, practicing a speech. Then he turned around—and suddenly had a hand on his collar. Mine. He didn't say "Mother." He didn't make a sound that would save anything.

"Left is pee," I said. "Right is life. What did you want?"

He looked like someone had dropped a mirror on his head. "Boy... I—" "Later," I growled. "You go first. Into the cabin. Not a word. No excuses. I don't like operas at night."

He obeyed. Not because I was strong—because he was caught. Some men then temporarily know what the truth is.

Inside, four eyes saw me: Smollett, silent but sharp; my mother, sharpened; Livesey, made of stone; Ben, hungry, but for justice. I nodded toward the door. "He's misplaced his mouth." "Squire?" Livesey's voice needed no teeth to bite. "For... mercy!" he burst out, quieter than cowardice, "for you! For—" "us?" my mother asked, and the word sounded like a pan. "Who exactly? The ones who breathe? Or the ones who pay?"

"I—" He searched for mercy in the dirt. "I only gave the direction. Not the heart. A... warning shot."

Ben snorted. "A warning shot aimed at us. Nice English word."

"Enough," Livesey said, and the room grew tighter. "Squire, you don't talk anymore. Tomorrow, other weapons will talk. We need sleep, not regret. Sit down. If you get up before I say so, my good friend's frying pan will shoot you in the leg first, then I'll shoot you in the rest."

He sat down. That was his best contribution of the day.

We waited the rest of the night like people who know that waiting is work. Just before dusk, we quietly packed: Ben his shells, Livesey scarves, and nasty humor, I my gun, rope, a small box with **silver spoons**—gleaming and useless—, my mother the pan (it stayed, but she polished it goodbye like a promise). Smollett stayed lying there, awake, awake, never more awake, but his body was a red-letter bill. Bill stayed by the door, wood until the end.

"Squire stays here," Livesey said. "Tied?" Ben asked. "Tied," my mother confirmed, and did so, neatly, not roughly. "Just his hands. So he doesn't put them in the wrong pockets for once."

"Doctor..." the squire tried. "Later," said Livesey. "If there's still later."

We walked. The forest acted as if it knew what was in store for us and held its breath so we could hear every sound. The Dead Pine lay a quarter of an hour to the east—two rocks tasting the sky, between them a mouth that devours stories. Ben took the right flank, I the left, the doctor in the middle, without commas. A breath of wind blew over us, as if it embarrassed us.

"Open the window," I whispered. "Close the window," Ben murmured. "Until I whistle."

We saw them long before they saw us: Silver's silhouette, small, polite. Two men with him, one behind, two around him. I smelled soup. A soup of men's breath, metal, and a lie, preheated. Silver raised the white rag. "Punctual, like poverty," he cried softly. "Boy. Doctor. I'm touched."

"Save," said Livesey. "You need saliva to lie." "Always," Silver admitted. "But today I'm speaking truth with teeth. Come on. A step. Or two."

Ben breathed a note. Flint flew through the ravine, making the stones try to stay dead. Behind us, a sparrow or my heart trembled, both new.

"Open the window," Silver suddenly called out—**two claps, one whistle**I froze. This was ours. The tone was so right it was wrong. Too round. Too clean. Not polished like real work.

"Wrong," Ben hissed. "This is a stage. Not dirt."

"Back," whispered Livesey, without moving his mouth. We slid half a step into shadow, twisting ourselves against rocks. And right there—just next to it—the first salvo crashed. Not from the front. From **top left** A ledge. Two mouths. Ratchets into the rock next to my ear. Stone splashed. My face registered splinters. Ben laughed dryly. "Hello, Tom Scar."

Silver sighed piously. "Oh, you. Always suspicious. I swear, I just wanted to see if your code had been corrupted." "It was corrupted," Livesey said. "By you."

Everything happened as it should when things go wrong: One on the left slipped, cursed, and accidentally fired again; one on the right raised his head

too early; Ben made Flint's tongue sing again; those on top crossed their fingers, those on the bottom slipped, and I, I saw Bill—**Bill**—on the edge behind us, where he shouldn't have been. He had followed. Wood with legs. He ducked, raised the old musket, did what wood can—hold and break. He held his breath, broke the silence—a shot, honest, old. One of Silver's men fell from the ledge like a perverted prayer. Bill grinned briefly. An answer came. Bill didn't fall. He just sat down, as if he'd found a chair that was never there.

"Bill!" I screamed. "Later," Bill said, grinning blood in my face—too much, but not enough to stop. "Window... open."

Ben tugged at me. "Work, boy!" We worked. Livesey threw smoke into words: "Two on the left, one on top, Silver in the middle, doing nothing, wants everything." I rolled, fired—no heroic shot, just a takedown. The man on the top left looked elsewhere; the one on the right suddenly saw better. Ben whistled a retreat into the tube; the cave was getting on their nerves, Flint's "Darby" was ringing in their ears, and for a moment they weren't sure whether the past was eating the present.

Silver stood there. Not rigid, just there. The crutch was a line, his smile a clamp, holding the words I didn't want to hear. He raised his free hand. "Doctor. Boy. Again: My offer. Yesterday's, plus one more thing: I forget that yours is his own..."—he glanced briefly toward the log cabin, as if he knew**everything**—"...has."

"Shut up," I said. "You know the men. Not us."

He nodded as if I were his new favorite instrument. "I don't even need to know you, Jim. Just your**Weaken**. And I know her. The Squire is a chandelier dangling in a storm. Your captain does the right thing until it kills him. The doctor does the right thing when it hurts. And you—" he smiled, warmly, knife-warm—"do what needs to be done."**must**."

Ben whistled "Run" (three short, one long), Livesey threw his hand forward—"Left!"—and we went. Not away. Through. A hedge of dwarf palms stood between us and a better post; we went through it, skin and leaves speaking the same language that hurts afterward. I smelled guano—the cave?—no, Ben's tallow in his shirt; he threw a lamp,**out of**, against a rocky cliff; the fake wick that Silver wanted to give us yesterday remained his today—and did nothing. It's nice when gifts don't work.

Up above, someone called "Pastor," but down below, no one answered. Silver whistled, his tone, and the shooters switched nests, too late. I had the new

angle, Livesey the breath for it, and Ben the organ. We discouraged them. Two shot too early, one didn't shoot at all. The parrot croaked "Piece of gold!" from some tree, as if that would save something.

Silver saw the hour slipping away. He raised the white rag, real white this time, no trap. "Enough." "Yes," said Livesey. "For**She**" Dawn is already here," murmured Silver. "Then: noon. Same place. They bring no more words, but bread. I'll bring fewer knives. And if either of us wants to be wiser again, I'll tell him to hold his neck."

"Just one more thing," I called after him. "Tell the Squire we don't need his handshake. We have ours."

He understood without me pointing. His smile this time was thin, like hunger. "I knew the chair was wobbly. Thanks, kid."

He disappeared. Not quickly. Insultingly unfazed. His men crawled away, blood remained on the ledge above, and Bill remained below, holding his stomach and swearing it was just the world that had shifted inside him.

We pulled Bill back into a hollow that smelled of old water. Livesey ripped off his jacket, ripping out a piece of his soul, and tied him up. "Shot clean. Entrance cleaner. You're alive."

"I was... wood," Bill grinned palely. "Today you were more," I said, realizing I was angry—at everything.

"Back," said the doctor. "Pick up Squire. No speeches. Verdict later." "No verdict," I growled. "Work."

Ben went ahead, letting the cave whisper an insult to the wind—Flint had the day off. Halfway to the cabin, I stopped. "Doctor?" "Hmm?" "What's worse? Betrayal or stupidity?" "Stupidity with a badge," he said. "Leave."

The hut welcomed us as if we hadn't just left to settle the score. My mother stood in the doorway, the pan weighing less than her gaze. The squire sat, hands forward, leash neat. He looked like someone who would gladly recount how noble his bad decisions were.

"Is... anyone alive?" he ventured. "You," my mother said. "Bill," I added. "Not yet. Thanks to you."

He slumped a little. Not enough. "I wanted—" "—mercy," Ben helped, kind as a splinter. "That was appreciated. Next time, bring us bread, not letters."

Livesey sat down opposite him. Not a table, but a court. "Squire Trelawney, in the name of this small, miserable, breathing republic: You remain silent until I say that words are once again favorable. You eat what is given to you. You go nowhere. And if we die, you die last, so you can see what you have done. That is mercy. Mine."

It was so quiet that the pan heard my agreement.

Outside, the wind picked up a notch. The sea said it was in the mood for conversation again. I sat down in the corner, fetched the box with **silver spoons** out, opened it, closed it. It was just the thing for lunch: sugar without sugar. Silver would laugh. Good. I wanted him to laugh before he felt.

I wrote in my book, my hand still salty, my pencil stubborn:

- **Squire → Silver (piece of card, code).**
- **Ambush detected at the dead man's jaw (wrong tact).**
- **Bill, who was hit, is alive. One of them remains on the rock.**
- **New appointment at noon. Spoon box.**
- **Judgment postponed. No trust.**

I put the book down and watched the squire's gaze search for words he no longer liked. My mother placed bread before him, hard as reason. He broke it slowly, as if his fingers were learning.

"Open the window," said Bill from his corner, half asleep, half stubborn. "Open the window," I said back.

Lunch would be more expensive. Betrayal earns interest. I had small change: anger, wit—and a friend who was made of wood and still bled. That's enough for now. Later we'll pay with large bills.

Chapter 25 - The Massacre on the Beach

Midday lay on the island like a hot lid. The sand was pan-fried, the air was bacon, and the bay at Dead Man's Jaw shone greasy, like a guilty conscience. Two rocky teeth looked up at the sky and pretended it was staring back. We came from the west, through beach grass and false cooling, each with a different reason not to die.

"Take the dunes, not the lane," Ben hissed. "Lanes love bullets."

"Box?" I asked, and lifted our little play: a wooden box, neat, heavy-sounding, inside only silver spoons that the Squire had once stolen with feeling—from himself.

Livesey nodded. "Make it believable. If you fall, fall on the lid."

Bill came after us, as stubborn as wood and as pale as chalk. The bandage across his stomach looked like a poorly explained argument. "I'm just decoration," he growled. "But good decoration."

"If you fall, fall *quiet*", I said.

The tide crept in. Not quickly. But steadily. A narrow trickle stretched across the sand like the handle of a knife, testing our taste. I memorized it: *Water wants to eat with us today.*

Silver was on time. Men who serve poison with sugar always are. He stood as announced between the teeth of the jaw, white rags correct, crutch skeptical. Four were visible with him, two in the bushes, pretending to be skipping school. The parrot perched on top of his right tooth and croaked "RUM!" as if it were a weather report.

"Doctor," sang Silver, warm as tin by the fire. "Boy. Ben in the shadows. And—" his gaze slid across the beach, settled on Bill "—Woodman."

"No parley," Livesey said. "Just an exchange: words for a path."

"I have enough words," Silver smiled. "I have too little path."

I put the box in the sand, flicked open the snap fastener, let *only* Shine enough to make his boys' throats click. "Proof of participation," I said.

Tom Scar licked his lips like a dog that's been taught to read. A man next to him—fat, young in the mouth, old in the liver—took a step and immediately lost two points of sympathy. Silver raised his crutch and stopped it like a bouncer.

"So," the doctor murmured. "Now you know we don't just bring air. And we know you don't just carry rags. Come on, Mr. Silver. Show your teeth, we'll save time."

"I offer you," said Silver, "three options: First, you leave, take your captain, your pan, your mercy, and leave the boy with me. He won't be unhappy. Second, we

share tangibles—each continues to breathe, and I forget that the squire is a man who plays cards like queens. Third, we fight, and the beach eats its lunch."

"Fourth," I said, "you're going swimming. Alone." The parrot squawked, "PIECE OF GOLD!" as if to garner applause.

"Jim," Silver smiled, "you're the kind of future I'd invest in if I believed in such a thing. I'm just the present."

The first shots were fired before anyone was morally exhausted. Not by us. Not by him. By the island, which decided that boring negotiations were insulting to the sand. A crack in the upper left, a muzzle, the sun in its mouth, the stone next to Livesey's hat suddenly had a hole made of nothing but opinion.

"Up!" Ben yelled, and we were already down. Palm root, driftwood, sandbank—everything became cover, if you spell it right. I snatched the box toward me, tipped it, and the spoons rained down like silver stars playing war. Dick laughed briefly, bent down, got a piece of lead up his sleeve, and stopped bending.

"Rogue!" howled Tom Scar and ran, Hook first, Hatchet behind. Two of his brothers danced awkwardly sideways—men playing ball, without a ball. Silver stayed where he was. He's learned this: When the dogs run, the whistle is valuable.

The first close-range man came too early, shouting "Haaa!" with too much vowel and too little substance. My gun did what guns do when you give them a good readiness beforehand: *Bam*, small, honest. The man stumbled, his hook sailed on, hit the sand, and stayed there as if the beach had wanted to adopt him. I rolled, took the second shot *not*—Too wet—, drew a knife. On the left, I saw Ben, who didn't need the organ; his cane did the trick. He ripped the legs out of an idiot's day, put the future under his chin, friendly but decisive.

Livesey? He practiced medicine with shots. Two, counted, both of them put men on their asses, without pathos. He didn't shoot faces. He shot arms. He hates work he'll have to fix later. Still, we worked.

"RUM!" croaked the parrot, and the sea responded with a slap against the surf that could be read as "Amen."

Bill actually got to his feet, as if someone had pulled him on an invisible leash. He raised the musket, whose lock knew more stories than gunfire. He didn't aim well. He aimed like a man who had never been to the right school, but had

often been in the right alley. His shot took the decision out of the hands of the man with the axe. He fell within himself, not around himself.

"Good," I grumbled, "wood can shoot."

"Wood can do anything," Bill growled, and a bullet wasn't offended—it searched for him. It found his shoulder as if there were a sign on which *Meet me* Bill shrugged and stopped. "Later," he said to his shoulder. I almost believed him.

Silver now made a noteless sound: "Hmm." His men heard this. Two took cover, one went in—left, a clever dog who knows bones lie at the edge. I crawled toward him, felt the sand in my teeth, tasted something oily—someone had dripped lamps. (Silver likes wicks. I like boots.) I stepped, not stupidly, *on purpose* The wick gave way and wasn't connected. Thanks, Ben.

The clever dog only saw my hat and shot it off more honestly than necessary. I let him say "Ha," then I gave him the knife. *not* in the stomach. I gave it to him in the thigh. That's uglier and more useful. He flew, his hair covered in sand, and called my mother things she wouldn't hear.

"Open the window," someone shouted behind me.

"Wrong!" Ben yelled. "Wrong timing!" And that's exactly why I survived, because something clicked at the top of the dune and bit into the sand right where my head had been.

"You're wasting my men, Tom," Silver said in a conversational tone, as if he were in a kitchen. "Two forward, one on the right, Dick—on the left—you're young, do something young: run."

Dick did something young: he ran into the surf, yelling "Mother," laughing all the while, which was everything you'd expect of him, and just then a wave came along that had no desire for comedy. He went under like a promise. We saw him again. Once. Then he was a brown shape in the foam. The parrot croaked "PIECE OF GOLD!" as if trying to save the director.

Tom Scar was harder to kill. He kept going despite the hole and the sand and the organ, and now *no* Knife more and *more* Teeth. He jumped over the driftwood I had loved a moment ago and was suddenly with me. His presence smelled of water-rotten wood and fresh stupidity. He grabbed my jacket, yanked me up, as if to show me. His eye, which hadn't yet become a scar, was searching for God. Found me. Bad luck. I pressed sand into his teeth, then my

knee into the truth, and there was Bill—oh Lord—Bill—who, instead of disappearing, picked up my mother's frying pan. He had it with him. No idea how. He slapped Tom across the left cheek, so hard she cried on the right. Tom fell as if he didn't know what ground was. I stabbed. Knife? No. I didn't need it. Sometimes it's enough.*Earth*. His was now earth.

"Back!" Silver barked. Not cowardly.*Correct*. He pulls dogs back when they start thinking. Two crawled, one ran, one stayed lying down, one pretended he didn't know he was dead. We didn't catch up. We held on. The surf widened the edges. The sea was hungry.

"Water!" Livesey shouted, and I realized: Don't drink—think. The tide is now a weapon. I jumped up, took the open box, and tipped spoons into the wet sand. They slid, glistened, and sang. Silver's boys know what silver sounds like. One broke discipline, ran greedily into the foam's edge, caught the current on his knees, almost fell, stood up, cursed, and saw the wave too late. It took him by the sides, turned him like laundry, and washed him back—right to Ben's stick. It gave him a quick thump.

"You're a pig," he panted to the sea. "I'm a goat," Ben corrected.

Two more attacks, and then it was just noise. Shots no one could count; screams everyone knew; hooks hanging in driftwood as if they were about to get married. I cursed every romantic lie poetry tells about battles. There are no pretty pictures when sand rasps your tongue.

Silver continued to stay out of the sleazy corner. He stood so that nothing would accidentally hit him, yet everyone thought he was in the thick of it. Once our eyes met. He briefly raised his crutch and pointed at Bill. I understood: *I know he's bleeding. I can have him if I want him*. I raised the gun (the second one, dryly), pointed at him. He understood: *You too*.

"Jim," Bill grumbled, "if I fall over, I won't fall into the sand. It'll eat my boots."

"You're not falling over," I lied. "Not yet."

He held on just long enough for his shoulder to decide that bones are better off soft. He sank like a man who's finally allowed to sit down. Livesey was already there, carbolic, hand, *Work*. "You're alive," he said, as if it were an order.

A brief lull arose as both sides sought air simultaneously. The parrot pretended to negotiate with the wind. The tide slurped. I counted heads. Ben counted

bullets. Livesey counted scarves. Bill didn't count at all; he was saving. Silver counted *Possibilities*. And then there was no peace.

Where did the next shot come from? From behind. *Our Dune*. I turned around. A shadow, a stranger—a mutineer who had found the back way. I was too slow. My mother wasn't. She suddenly stood there, pan like law, gaze like a storm. Where had she come from? From *right* where life dwells. She knocked the future out of the shadow's head. He toppled over, a helpless puppet.

"I was worried about the boy," she said briefly. "And bored in the cabin."

"Mother," I stammered, "I love—" "Later," she growled. "Clear that one. The tide will help."

We pulled him forward a bit, right up to the glistening tongue of water. The wave brought the rest of it, as if it had been waiting for a command. Two more stood there, not knowing whether they were brave or tired, and watched. I saw them watch their friend swim away, and how their courage depended on it. One ran. One shot and hit the shadow of his own shot. Silver whistled that noteless note again. The poor dogs came back on command.

"Enough," he called to us, the White-Flap diploma in his hand again. "Enough for today."

"Today doesn't count," Livesey replied. "Only tomorrow."

"Morgen" suddenly had a headwind. A dark line was coming from the north, neither a cloud nor a boat. *woods*, I thought, *Wrecking equipment* But it was moving deliberately. A raft? No. A sloop without a mast, just oars, four men inside, two still serviceable. Not ours. Not theirs. *By whom?* I memorized the riddle and put it in my bag, which was already too full.

Silver also saw the sloop. He was calculating. "We're not alone in this misfortune," he said cheerfully. "That's reassuring."

"Not me," growled Ben.

The battle didn't continue, it was petering out. No one had the right mixture of lead, blood, and greed. Silver raised the rag higher, stepping back. "Doctor, you bind your wounds. I'll bind my language. Tonight we won't sing. Tomorrow we'll renegotiate: you with *Facts*, I with *Pay*."

"I'm coming with bread," said Livesey. "And a bad temper." "I'm coming with you," said the parrot. "RUM!" "Not you," Silver hissed high, and the bird insulted the air.

They left. Quietly. Not noble. Just professionally. The beach stayed and did what beaches do: It acted innocently. Blood retreated in pink threads, turned brown, and disappeared. The tide licked the edges clean, leaving only footprints, which it later also consumes. I knelt, hands on the sand, and suddenly felt the need to wash myself with seawater, which forgives everything. I didn't. Water forgives *nothing*. It only deletes.

"Count," said the doctor.

We counted.

We: me, Ben, Livesey, my mother, Bill (half voice, all defiance).

She: Three in the foam, one by the teeth, two in the bushes, which were now very quiet. Tom Scar—quiet at last. Dick—signed by the sea. Another without a name—gone. The sea is unscrupulous and orderly.

Ben squatted next to Tom and pulled out his gold tooth. "For the Squire," he explained. "So he'll have something to hold when he feigns remorse." "Leave it," my mother said. "He'll get bread, not a tooth." Ben put the tooth back in. "Then it'll be a souvenir for later."

We cleared the ground as best one would after a massacre. We pulled our dead—no dead—(God or coincidence, I'll ask later) and theirs—with sticks, not with hands; people are still superstitious on islands when November is on their minds. We pushed driftwood over them because funerals are a luxury, and the tide does the rest. I mentally did the math: Blood → water. Guilt → remains.

Bill was half attached to me, half to Livesey. "I stink," he said. "Of work," said the doctor. "Of the sea," I said. "Of life," said my mother, and that was finally something.

"Ship," I remembered aloud. "Drifting anchor, tiller, and—" "—and a sloop that doesn't seek friends," Ben added. He jerked his chin across the bay: The thing was closer. Four figures, torn but not free. They were heading for the North Arm, where my coracle sleeps. None of Silver's guard. None of ours. Island riffraff? Or the kind who's always late to parties but still empties the fridge.

"Not now," Livesey said. "First us. Then new problems."

We walked back to the hut, slowly, in a pile, each with a different pain. The beach did us the favor of slowly erasing our tracks. Nice. I hate niceness from things that don't have to suffer.

At the gate, Bill suddenly stopped and looked back. The tide had a broader tongue, already licking where screams had just been. He raised the pan he was still holding (when did he even get to hold it—no, later) and tapped it briefly against his forehead. Honor, in the language of those who have no time.

"Boy," he grunted, "write down: the sea lies."

"It's already in," I said. "And underneath: We don't lie to each other."

The hut took us the way it takes people who come in dirty: with my mother's gaze. She tied Bill tighter. The doctor washed hands and removed things from people who didn't belong there. Ben fried goat meat on a pan that had already seen too much. I sat in the corner with my book, my pen still salty, and wrote:

- **Dead Jaw: Parley → Crash.**
- **Tom Scar: End. Dick: Sea. Three more: Sand/Surf.**
- **We're alive. Bill's alive. Mother's life.**
- **The flood washes away blood. Guilt remains.**
- **Sloop NW, foreign. Check ship.**

When I raised my head, the Squire was standing in the shadow, bound, cleaner than all, looking at me as if he had something to say *must* I raised my hand.

"Not. Not today."

He sat down again, and that was the best decision of his day.

Later, when the sun excused itself and the bay bathed in bronze, Ben and I went to the edge again. We saw the beach posing as if untouched. A spoon still lay there, half-buried. I picked it up, wiped it on my trouser leg, and held it up to the light. Silver laughed somewhere. I didn't hear it. I knew it.

"Tomorrow," said Ben. "Tomorrow," I said. "More drama." "And more truth," he said. "The kind that gets more expensive the longer you don't buy it."

"Open the window," I murmured. The sea nodded, as if to insult me: Of course. And then closed again.

On the way back, I heard the parrot far away, definitively, ritualistically: "RUM! PIECE OF GOLD!" I stopped. It sounded like someone had drunk a church. I

laughed briefly, for no reason. My lungs were dust and salt, my hands were work, my head was old.

Nature washes because it can. We keep it because we have nothing else. The beach was beautiful again. That was the worst.

Chapter 26 - In the Belly of the Island

The island sets its teeth in the evening, and you hear them grinding. We waited until the beach turned bronze and the sea calmed down for dinner. Then Livesey took the bag with carbolic acid and his commanding voice, Ben took the shells and his guilty conscience, and I took the small box of silver spoons in case someone asked us to prove we were stupid. My mother didn't give me the pan, but she did give me the look: *Come back alive or I'll kill you*. Bill lay on the planks, more Picasso than man, and said, "Open the window," as if those were his famous last words. The squire remained silent, bound, polite.

We headed east into the green that doesn't like you. The woods smelled of warm sweat and old decisions. Ben knew every bump by its first name. "Here," he whispered, "Flint once said 'mercy' and ripped the throat out of the man next to him." "Historically interesting," Livesey murmured. "Feet, Ben." "I talk to them," Ben grinned.

After a quarter of an hour, the air stank of something found only in two places: poorly cleaned taverns and caves. Guano, wet stone, fungus. A groove in the ground became a rutted path that politely pushed you into the depths. Ben's "fisheye" was just the anteroom; today we wanted to go to the Herring's Maw.

The entrance was a rocky gully between two roots, so narrow that you had to excuse your heart before taking it with you. "Tallow," said Ben. We rubbed our foreheads with goat's milk, which smelled as if someone had pulled candles out of guilt. We tucked the candle itself behind the ears of the night. "How deep?" I whispered. "Deep enough that they don't lie down there anymore," said Ben.

We crawled. First on our knees, then on our elbows, then on a new organ I must have gotten that day. The water was ankle-deep, then knee-high. It tasted of salt and algae, which has often thought about men. Air? Limited availability, mediocre quality. Bats? Yes. They hung on the ceiling like sad thoughts and almost fell off as we talked.

"Don't cough," Livesey muttered. "Cough later if it's rude." "I always cough rudely," I said, and didn't.

After ten minutes of crawling, which took two years, the abyss appeared. Imagine a crack the sea forgot to close. Rock on the left, rock on the right, brackish water in the middle, pretending to be a river visiting. Ben had worked here like a carpenter who hates a church: skeleton branches over the water, improvised footholds, *a pulley* Made of tackle, chamois waxed, stolen from somewhere, repaired with goat fiber.

"Here," he said, pointing to a pile in the shadows: skeletons of crates. Planks with notches from iron hoops, rope marks, sawdust, and next to them three real crates that looked as if they had once said "please" on a ship and then never again. One was half open; you could see Spanish doubloons, so yellow they hurt. Another had tin and silverware, plates, goblets; the third had only sacks that looked like flour, but were heavier—silver bars.

I said nothing. My tongue knew that every word would fall down here and have to come back up again at great cost. Livesey gave a dry cough that said "receipt." Ben grinned, but without showing his teeth. "I said: I gave them a piece of my mind." "Not all of it," I said. "Not all of it," Ben nodded. "Some of it is deeper. The rest is gone." "Gone where?" "Into the mouth of the island, boy. Or into other pockets. Either geology or society."

I stepped closer to the open box. The coins smelled of *nothing* That's the worst thing about money. It has no smell until you hold it. Then it smells like you.

"Work," Livesey said curtly. "Two crates out before the air takes us. The bars last; they're waiting to see if we're alive."

We lashed the tackle, Ben climbed like an insect on his own web of threads, I pushed from below, Livesey held his ground, sighing clinically when rope scraped against skin. The first crate grumbled as if an old man were changing his mind. Step by step, it lifted the decades, drip by drip, it let the past fall away. The pulley sang the work song of the poor.

"Quiet," Ben whispered. "Don't push. They're holding grudges."

We had the box halfway over the edge when the water in the gap *moved*, without any wind. A breath of the sea that tells you: *I am connected*. "Tide's coming in," Livesey said. "Time frame shrinking." "Open window," I gritted, and pulled again. We set the thing on the rock that looked like an anvil and lowered it into the "safe" buffer. The second crate was the one with tin

and silver; lighter, but more capricious. Plates clattered like bad excuses. A goblet slipped out, fell into the water, and didn't sink. It danced. Ben chuckled. "See? Some things are too vain to sink."

Between two sighs, we heard voices. Not echoes. Strangers. From deeper below, where the chasm spits into the sea. A sloop. Oar scraping. Curses in none of our registers. A bright "Heave!"—which reeked of the Navy. Then again, not. One voice said "Maledición," another "Hold fast." *General store*.

"The one from the raft," I murmured. "From this morning," Livesey nodded. "None from Silver." "Makes it better?" "It does *different*," he said.

Ben blew through a conch shell, very gently. The sound rolled down the crack, hit the water, and came out as *Ghost cough* Back. Below, the oar faltered. "Qué demonio...?" A laugh, but not one that lasts long. Someone hit a rock. An oar cracked. The water laughed along with him.

"Go on," said Livesey, "they'll find the side tube if they're smart—or they'll learn to swim." "I have a counteroffer," whispered Ben. "I'll let Flint's lungs sing. They'll turn around and go die somewhere else." "Sing quietly," I said. "I don't want Silver singing along."

We got to work. Sweat always runs into your eyes in caves; it has time. The second crate rose like a very offended queen and landed next to the first. I was dizzy from the oxygen no one had ordered. Livesey breathed *divided* and looked at me: "One more. And then out. You're going stupid." "I'm always stupid," I grinned. "Today, functional stupidity."

The third crate—Barren—was a dog who didn't want to come along. We doubled over, repositioned the pulley system, and Ben whispered to the rope like a child who'd messed up. Wood scraped down in the tube, and the strangers cursed again, this time in more English: "Starboard—no, other starboard—" *Clonk*. One man cried in a language everyone knows. Another said, "Shut it."

"Jim," Ben panted, "knot. Here. Turn it like before—only the wrong way around. Then it'll be right." I turned. It went right. The box lifted. An "Ah!" went down our three backs. We lashed, trembled, sang off-key, and suddenly it was up, heavy as sin, where air has a mind again.

"Out," commanded the doctor. "Now. No interpretations, no greed, no viewings." "I just—" I began. "—live," he said. "Look at it later."

We retreated into the crawling world as fast as one can go backward in a birth canal. Behind us, Ben blew the conch once more—this time *Darby*. The crevice responded as if Flint himself were smoking around the corner. A prayer was interrupted below. Wood struck stone, water took it seriously.

The exit seemed narrower than the way in. That's how birthdays are. I was almost out, my shoulders were hunched, my heart was in my throat, and speaking to me in an unfriendly tone, when I heard above me *Steps*. Not strangers. Ours. "Mother," I said automatically, because only she acts like that.

"I tried," she snapped at me before I could see her. "But the Squire has legs. And bad ideas."

"What—?" "He's gone," she said. "East. Alone. Pretended to pray. I told him he has no religion. He wanted to prove it."

"Close the window," Ben growled. Livesey forced outside air into my lungs with a look. "Search later. Carry me first."

The crates lay in the vestibule like three arguments against modesty. We built a short towpath: tugs, ropes, cursing. Ben in front, me in back, Livesey set the pace—"Pull. Slide. Hold. Don't die." In the distance, on the shore, echoes of men's voices wafted, voices I didn't like: Silver's whistle without a note. He was still far away. Or he made it sound that way. That's his art.

"Where to?" I asked as we passed the first crate through the bushes. "Fisheye niche," said Ben. "From there into the gully, then along the edge to the north arm. We'll put it in the pan, make two short, quiet runs." "And the sloop?" "It'll take care of itself," said Livesey. "Or the rock will take care of itself."

The forest made noises that reminded me of knives. We were carting. Carting means three men playing oxen and pretending the ground is friendly. The box giggled with every bump. "Right away," I lied. "Two more breaths. And then two more." That's how you win wars: you cheat your lungs.

The fish's eye smelled of Ben. Grease, salt, and an old joke. We pushed the first crate into the back water channel that crept toward the shore: some kind of secret bloodletting known only to goats and criminals. I braced the pan as if it were a boarding donkey. We put the crate in—it didn't fit. Of course not. "Lid off," said Ben. "Just the innards. No romance."

I loosened the iron clamps and lifted the lid—the thing squeaked like a mouse in a cathedral choir. Beneath it: gold, neatly arranged in sacks packed by someone with a knack for lists. *Flint*, probably. I picked up a sack—heavy—and

placed it in the pan. The pan sighed. "Two sacks per trip," Livesey calculated. "More and you'll become seaweed." "I can do three," I said. "You can do two," said the current.

We made the first run. The pan shot down the channel like a bad idea, and I followed, half running, half rowing, until the opening to the north arm revealed the sea, which acted as if it had nothing to do with it. I pushed myself out, doing Ben's unrhythmic left-left-nothing-right, and landed in a creek that smelled of ships: tar, salt, hope.*Hispaniola* The tiller was still tacked to the side, the sea anchor acting as if it were free for the day. "Hello, girl," I murmured. "I brought you presents." I lifted the sacks on board and hid them aft under the half-loose pump plank, where only people who are too tired look.

Back. Second load. Then third. The pan and I were now colleagues. On the fourth trip, I heard Ben's whistle on land—three short, one long.*Run!* I left the pan, threw myself into the branches, and slid through the gully as if to apologize. Ben stood with his legs apart next to Crate Two, which was half submerged in the water. Livesey held his pistol and his pulse. Squire came out of the woods. With him came two men with faces the island didn't recognize: the same ones from that morning. One had a navy bandana around his head, the other a tattoo that looked like a "false anchor."

"I wanted to... mediate," the squire gasped. "These gentlemen—" "—have oars," Ben finished. "And a bad temper."

The one with the cloth bared his teeth. "We're castaways. We just want to share what God—" "God has no share here," Livesey said so dryly that a lizard changed direction. "Hands off the box."

"Share," repeated the tattooed man, and his hand already parted the air toward my pan. I would have liked to take his hand away. Instead, I took away his distance: I was where he thought I wasn't. A move Bill calls "unsightly but effective": knee, rib, sand. The man made *uh* in Spanish and suddenly smelled like a human.

"Squire," said Livesey, "you now walk behind Ben and think of nothing. If you think of something, I'll think for you." The Squire nodded, the way people nod who still manage to nod. He looked at me like his mirror this morning: *He'll hate me later.* I already did it.

"There are four of us," the Navy guy argued, "you're—" "—three and a pan," I said. "Count again."

The sea had been counting and now joined in: a surge pushed the arm of the channel forward, a tide with an opinion. The water lifted Crate Two, the tackle groaned, the rope rubbed, the knot briefly considered death.

"Pull!" yelled Ben. We pulled. The box came a breath, stopped, came half a breath, stopped. The tattooed man "helped" without being asked, grabbed the edge—not to save, *toplunder*—and the moment his fingers touched the edge, the tackle gave way. The box slammed down on his hands. He screamed as if the island had taught him manners. "Good sound," said Ben, and we had breathing room again.

"Listen," pressed the Navy man, who at least pretended to have ears. "Out there—" he pointed toward the sea, "—is a flat-bottomed scull with two dead men and a rat. We're the kind of men who don't have a choice these days. Share with us, or we'll bring trouble you don't own."

"We already have enough problems," Livesey said gently. "You'll have to be patient until we use up the ones we have."

"He means no," I translated.

They looked at each other. That little perplexity men get when their sequence of threat, plea, and prayer doesn't work. Then Silver came. Not in the flesh. In the air. His whistle, that noteless note, rolled over the mangroves as if the island had written it. The two strangers flinched, as if someone had touched their future.

"Who is that?" growled the Navy. "The man," said Ben, "who categorizes people: *Paying and too late*."

"We are now", said the tattoo. "You are *too late*", I said.

That decided the moment in a primitive way. The Navy man did what men do when they sense a third man arrogant enough to eat everything is coming: He decided immediately. He grabbed the tackle rope and honestly helped pull. "Deal," he gasped. "You get two, we get one. Then we'll be gone before your devil speaks." I saw Livesey. He saw me. A nod that meant "temporary solution." "Pull," I said.

We took out crate two, dragged it into the fisheye, and prepared it for frying. The strangers pulled off the remaining tarpaulin to grasp the edges; they toiled, not nobly, just wearily. The squire carried one end as if to make penance with weight. Ben whistled. *neutral*, the cave said OK.

"The third?" the Navy panted. "Tomorrow," said Livesey, "or never. The air is getting bad." "So is my mood," the Tattoo continued. "Bad is better than quiet," I said.

We drove box two to *Hispaniola*. Two trips, two times skin on wood, two times "don't tip over." The second time, I saw Silver's men beyond the bay line as dots growing larger. No rush. The man is never in a rush. He has time—until he realizes someone else is using it.

"Last," Ben pressed as I pulled the pan back into the trough. "Bags empty? Good. Bars later. Now plate crate. If he catches us here, he'll monologue us to death."

We loaded Crate One into the pan—not all the way, just the belly. The lid was back on to tidy things up. A rope was tied over it like a beggar's belt. Livesey tied knots, which he can also tie with veins. The Marine stood off to the side, watching the sea, as if he were standing watch for us. Maybe he was. Maybe he was playing for himself.

"What's your name?" I asked the Navy. "No name today," he said. "Good name," I said. "Keeps you warm."

The tattooed man grinned, even though he didn't like grinning. "You're cheeky, boy." "I'm working on getting old," I said.

We pushed off. In the opening to the North Arm, the water was now higher, more greedy. It wanted to have its say. I paddled like someone who knew that men who could talk were following him. The *Hispaniola* shrugged as I came. I hid the plates under the pump board. The pan said *enough*. Back.

When I reached the fisheye again, it smelled of smoke. Not fire, just an experiment. Silver. He wasn't there yet. But his scent likes to send out advance warnings: lamp somewhere too close, wrong time. "Wick?" I snarled. "Kicked," said Ben. "Not again today."

The three of us stood over Crate Three. The bars were silent. They always are. They're the quietest bastards in the room. "Morning," Livesey decided. "Out now. Navy friends go west, we go east. No more visits. Anyone who does will get my courtesy back."

"Deal," said the Navy. "And you?" I asked the tattooist. "I can swim," he said. "Not today," said Ben. "High tides kill beginners."

We parted like thieves being polite for once. The squire stayed with us, his gaze on the floor where people had left blood in places, without a receipt. I would have preferred to leave him there. Later, said Livesey's hand on my arm. Always that "later."

The walk back to camp took an hour in lingering light. The mangroves held their breath, the cicadas chimed as if they were chimes. Far away, "Pastor" barked. Silver rounded up his pack. If taste, then metal.

"You know that's only half," Ben said as we saw the edges of the hut. "The best half," I said. "Wrong," Livesey said. "The portable half."

The cabin smelled of goat fat and fresh bandages. My mother looked first at my hands, then at my eyes, as if she were counting. Bill grinned crookedly. "Did you steal it from the island?" "Just borrowed it," I said. "With interest."

We heaved the sacks in, the crate of plates next to it, and covered everything with the old sail, which stank of Smollett's "no." The squire sat down in the shade, the rope in his hands whispering "good thing." "Tomorrow," Livesey said crisply. "Bars." "And after that?" my mother asked. "Then the ship," I said. "Silver wants a stage. We want to set sail."

Near midnight, Ben and I sat outside under a sky tattooed with stars that help no one. The parrot somewhere in the trees was twisting its only Lord's Prayer. "Tell me," said Ben, "when you're old and you want to give someone a lie—what will it be?" "That money makes you happy," I said. "And I'll say it in such a way that it's almost true." Ben laughed, softly, evilly, kindly. "You'll live, boy."

I wrote in my book:

- **Herring's Throat: three chests (coins, plates, bars); bars remain.**
- **Stranger (sloop): temporary use instead of war.**
- **Two trips to *Hispaniola* → stow aft.**
- **Silver in air; wick attempt died.**
- **Squire almost makes a mistake again; mother saves with a look.**
- **Tomorrow: parallel bars. Then out.**

As I closed the book, the wind shifted, a gust from the east, smelling of smoke we hadn't lit. From the direction of the cave. I stood. Ben stood faster. Livesey stepped out the door, silent as a knife.

Someone had turned on the light down there. Not us. Not a ghost.

The island's belly responded with a sound only tin money can produce: a faint, distant tinkling. Someone was testing the wrong spot with a crowbar.

"Silver?" I whispered. "Maybe the Navy guys with their newfound stupidity," Ben said. "Or both," the doctor said. "We'll know tomorrow. Today we're not shooting in the dark."

I thought of the bars, cold and sensible underneath. I thought of the men who think they're wiser than air. I thought of my mother, pan in hand, and Bill, who's wood and bleeds.

"Open the window," I said. The forest nodded. Night fell back as if it hadn't heard anything. And I felt rich, like a thief with debt in my pocket. Money doesn't clean anything. It only pays for the next morning.

Chapter 27 - Silver's Departure

Night still lay like a wet carpet over the island, but someone had turned over the edge. From the direction of the cave, there was a smell of light that no one wanted turned on. Not a fire, just an attempt. I looked at Ben. He looked back at me with the face that said, "It wasn't me," yet still reeked of tallow.

"It's burning quietly at the Maw," I whispered. "Quiet fires are polite murders," Livesey murmured, smoothing the carbolic spirit like a prayer wheel. "Ben and I will watch. Jim, you stay—" "—with Schiff," I finished. "He's set it up so we're splitting it wrong."

"Him?" my mother asked, even though we were all using the same name. "Silver," I said. "Who else smiles in the darkness?"

We parted like weds: the doctor and Ben to eat rocks, I to the north arm, where the air is lower and the mosquitoes are allowed to bite. The squire remained bound and polite. Bill didn't snore, he just breathed defiantly. My mother held the pan as if it were a court of law.

The path to the water was so quiet that the mangroves were counting their bones. I smelled tar. I smelled rusk. And then I smelled silver—not as a metal, but as a man. There's a note in the smell: rum on intent, pipe tobacco on lies.

I crawled the last three steps until the root edge in front of me swallowed the water. The north arm was black, but not empty. Something slid through the

channel I'd insulted a thousand times with the pan. No coincidence. Coracle? No. Bigger. Shallower. Sloop. Two oars, a puny mast, tied down like a dog in a bad mood. And in the middle: Silver. Crutch slung across, parrot on a thin rope, two sacks like two short, fat coffins in his belly, a small barrel of water, a biscuit barrel strapped on top. He didn't row. He had others row—the tide did it. Perfect moment: the water rose, the arm carried, the forest held its breath so it could hear where we breathe.

"Silver," I said into the night as if I were reading a bill.

He didn't raise his head. He knew where I was anyway. "Jim, boy," he crooned, so softly it was insulting, "I knew you couldn't resist watching me work."

"You've tried to set us on fire twice," I hissed. "The third time, your smile will fly off."

"Never believe in three," he breathed. "Two are enough:*Distract...take.*" He tapped the sack with his crutch.*Sounds.* Doubloons don't laugh, but they show teeth.

"How much?" "Only what an honest thief can carry," he grinned. "Two bags of yellow worms, some cutlery from the sacred box, water, rusks, a parrot—and the realization that the island is no longer good for me."

The parrot chanted the only prayer he had practiced: "RUM! PIECE OF GOLD!" "Shut up, Pastor," Silver said lovingly. "The boy is working."

I jumped into the pan. No time for a "plan." Paddle in, uneven rhythm out: left—left—nothing—right. The channel carried me along, but Silver was ahead of me, and his boat had the belly for the current. I came within half of my length over a hedge of roots that hate anyone in a hurry.

"Leave the bags," I growled, "and I'll let you run off with the bird."

"Boy," he smiled, "you're the kind of cop I wish I'd met as a kid."

He placed the crutch against the stern, turned the sloop sideways into the channel, caught wind that wasn't wind. The boat glided. I slapped the paddle, rudely but honestly. "Stop," I shouted. I had the pistol, the second one, the dry one. I raised it, not too quickly, not heroically. Just properly. "Silver. No further."

He looked at the muzzle as if he could count his teeth inside. "Are you sure you want to shoot, Jim?" His voice didn't become cold. It became friendly, which is worse. "Here, in the gully? The recoil will scrape the boat, you'll fall into the mud, the current will kiss you, you'll kiss the root—and tomorrow someone else will be telling your jokes."

"Maybe," I said. "And maybe I'll meet you. Then no one will tell your story anymore."

He nodded, as if we both understood the world. "Then I offer you advice instead as a parting gift. One: Never trust men who say 'grace' while already having their hand in your pocket—Squire included. Two: Never helm alone. Three: If you're rich, leave the island at the first wind. Poverty here has taste, wealth does not."

"Four," I said. "If you want to leave, leave without our stuff."

He laughed softly, and the current laughed along with him. "Boy, I've already spared you two lives. Call it interest. I'll just take my tenth—let's say, fifth—and spare us all a sermon."

Mangrove rustled behind me. Someone was crawling. Ben. His whistle didn't come—too risky. Instead, the root whispered, "Right away." I held my breath, the gun steady, the pan unsteady, and watched Silver raise the crutch millimeter by millimeter: not like a weapon, but like an oar. He gave the sloop a gentlenudge, right against the current slight tipping point of the tide. The boat got a nose. My pan got angry.

"You leave your men behind," I said, just to *something* to do. "I'll let them live," he replied mildly. "They wouldn't last long with me. I'm not so hungry for explanations anymore. The island is eating itself."

"And the beach?" "Washes clean," he said. "Not free."

Ben was behind him now, somewhere in the shadow of a root, a black thread between two grays. Silver didn't hear him. He only knew that something lived behind him—it always does. "Ben," he said into the darkness without looking back, "let's part politely today. I treated you to cheese, treat me to bread."

Ben didn't answer. He threw. Not a knife. Rope. A loop flew flat, quietly, cleverly. It looped around the front bag—not Silver. Smart bitch. I yanked at my side, the water jerked back, the loop swung, the bag jolted into the sloop. Silver grinned approvingly. "Nice throw. Wrong target."

"One more," growled Ben. "Too late," said the tide.

Silver gave the sloop another nudge. Then, from the right—out of the wrong channel—a second boat came into the shadows: the small sloop of the stranded. Two men inside, the one from the Navy with no name, the one with the wrong anchor. They saw us, saw the bags, saw the bird, saw the future. For a second, they didn't know which greed they were feeding first. Then they did what all those who arrive too late do: They miscalculated.

"To the side!" hissed the Navy. "To my side," Silver corrected gently, suddenly friendly to their railing. He slid over with his crutch as if he were helping them park. "We share speed, not prey." "We'll take both," growled the Tattoo.

Silver let him believe it. For one breath. Then he nudged her bow against a root claw waiting underwater for guests. *Krch*. Wood said "ouch." Water said "now." The small sloop lost its poise, began to lean, the Tattoo lost its edge. The Navy pulled himself together, countered, cursed honestly. Silver helped him—half a turn—and the moment the two were still spelling "friend?", Silver was in her boat. Crutch like a lever, two sacks heaved across, water barrel a kick, biscuit barrel after it, parrot on the shoulder. "Thanks for stepping in, gentlemen. Requests for sympathy, please write to the reef crest."

"You dog!" croaked the parrot, exemplary.

I shot. Not at heads—at the barrel. The water barrel punctured at the rim, and the jet ripped Silver's calf wet. He laughed. "Jim. You're learning. Don't kill, make it scarce."

He pulled two quick oar strokes, which weren't pretty, just right. The stranded, stranded sloop pushed out into the open channel that kisses the outer channel. The tide lifted its back, smiling. Ben didn't jump after him. Neither did I. We're not stupid. You don't jump into the water after a man who's married to water.

"Silveeer!" I yelled, because sometimes the heart has to scream before the brain can function again. "I'll get you!"

"Not today!" he called back, kindly, as if he'd asked my mother what time it was. "Today the wind will take me. Tomorrow you'll take yourself. And take the squire off the hook—he's too decorative for the gallows."

The parrot ended our dialogue with an operatic "PIECE OF GOLD!" Then there was only the stroke of the oar, the current, the channel. Silver took the island's mouth like other people take a door—without turning around. I heard him

whistle again, that note without a sound, that thing that sorts the hairs on men's necks. He didn't whistle "Pastor." He whistled "Adieu."

"Overland afterward?" Ben rasped. "Only if you have legs made of brass," I said. "He's got the wave. We've got sand."

We pulled ourselves out, gritted teeth, wet to the point where no priest would bless. A trail remained behind us: three coins in the mud (scorn), a piece of wick (instinct), a cork (memory). Silver always drops small change—to make you think you've won something.

The camp smelled of early morning carbolic acid and my mother. Livesey came toward us, tallow on his forehead, no smoke in his hand. "The cave?" I asked. "A wick on a wet wall," he said. "More psychology than chemistry. We kicked him before he was justified. And you?" "He's out," I said. "With two sacks, water, a biscuit, a bird, and an opinion about us."

"How much is gone?" my mother asked. "Little enough for happiness," I said. "Much enough for anger." Ben grinned crookedly. "That's the best mix for long days."

We walked to the *Hispaniola* lifted the pumping board. Losses: A sack of doubloons gone (not both), two plates I found particularly ugly (thank God), a cup that was never our friend. There were still sacks—more than I have fingernail moons. I breathed a sigh of relief—not from relief, but from work.

"Count later," the doctor chided, bandaging my small graze as if it were a big one. "Today we're counting distances, not coins."

Bill lifted his head from under the bandage. "He's gone?" "He'll take what he can carry," I said. "Good," Bill grunted. "Then we'll carry more."

The squire stood in the doorway, silken misery, bound, clean as a miscarriage of justice. "He—Silver—" "—didn't thank you," I snapped. "He just showed you how to walk. Lessons you didn't need."

He lowered his gaze. For once, it was good that he could do it. My mother placed bread in front of him, firm as a consequence. "Eat. Work is the same."

We packed. No "plan," just the form of the day: bars tomorrow at low tide, coins in the pan today, tiller never alone, anchor ready. Ben tinkered with the pulley, sang outrageous things to the cave. Livesey wrote notes for later

courtroom prose and bandaged Bill tighter so he'd stay stubborn longer. I trudged between ship and rim, pan and sail, coins and curses.

In between, I stood on the north arm, where the water acted as if it knew us, and looked at the line where the channel kissed the sea. No boat. No white rag. Just head and hope. I picked up one of the three doubloons Silver had left us, rubbed it on my wet shirt, and held it up to the sky. It shone as if all were well.

"Don't forget," Ben growled behind me, "money has no memory. You have to give it to him."

"I'll give him a bad one," I said. "One that hurts."

In the afternoon, as the sun once again mercifully forgot about the island, the nameless Navy briefly approached the edge of our world, kept his distance, and raised his hand: neutral. "Your devil is gone," he shouted. "Our devil was more honest than yours," my mother called back. He nodded, as if he'd known this for some time. "We're moving to the western edge. If there's wind, then we'll go." "If there's law, then later," Livesey added dryly. He grinned. "Later is my favorite word."

As dusk again turned the knife in the light, we sat on the threshold. Ben chewed cheese that tasted of crime. Bill slept, stubborn. The squire didn't practice speaking. Livesey sorted plasters like cards. My mother polished the pan as if it were a halo with dents. I wrote:

- **Silver out.** Two bags, water, rusks, bird.
- **Wick in cave: failed attempt, kicked.**
- **Losses bearable, work unbearable.**
- **Bars tomorrow. Departure soon.**
- **Rule 1: Never tack alone.**
- **Rule 2: Leave the island before it likes you.**

As I closed the book, I heard it again, very far away, perhaps only in my head: that noteless tone. No "Pastor." No "Darby." A whistle that means "Get ready."

"Open the window," I said. "Open the window," the island replied, pretending it didn't miss us.

Chapter 28 - The return journey begins

Dawn doesn't wake us, it apologizes. We stood again at the mouth of the herring's maw, and the island breathed at us obliquely. Ben smelled of goat tallow and sin, the doctor of carbolic acid and judgment. I smelled of the sea and tiredness, and the water smelled of now or never.

"Bars first," said Livesey. "As long as the air hasn't decided to become economics." "Open the window," Ben growled, and we crawled in like bills no one wants to read anymore.

The bars were silent to us: gray, heavy, honest. I don't like honest things when I have to carry them. Ben tightened the tackle, I tied knots that could be trusted to a lawyer, and the doctor counterbalanced it with a pulse. The box moved as if we hadn't explained childhood to it well enough. Drops fell from the lid like poor excuses. A surge from below: the tide was writing haste on the wall.

"Don't tear," Ben breathed. "You're holding grudges." "Everyone here is holding grudges," I said, pulling harder anyway.

Halfway up, the world lurched. The knot rubbed, the rope squealed, the parallel bars groaned as if they were hearing work for the first time. Then, pop: the box fell to its edge. We pulled it onto the footrest, Ben cursed in an animal language that insulted both goats and God, and I only let go when my hands hurt like a school lesson.

"One's enough," the doctor decided curtly. "We're not getting a hero's cough today. Get out."

We pushed the crate through the fisheye, over branch rolls, along the gully. The rope ate bark, the crate ate us. My brave pan was waiting at the north arm, pretending to be a cart. Two trips later, the belly was full: sacks, a crate of plates, and the bellies of ingots—hidden under the pump plank, exactly where men with bad backs don't like to look.

"That's it," said the doctor. "No more going into the abyss. Anyone who wants to go into a hole today can dig mine, if I'm wrong."

My mother waited on the beach, her pan on fire and her gaze on the ground. Bill stood his ground, because stubbornness is the best prosthesis. The squire remained silent, bound, and had the face of a man who would gladly confess if it meant applause.

"Ship," I said. "Now."

The Hispaniola took to us like a dog that's learned to respond to its name again. We got to work: splinting the mainyard, threading a spare tackle on the broken topmast, cutting the jib down (the storm had made her arrogant), replacing the windward jib, adjusting the claw halyard, checking the chainplates, pumping the pumps until the belly no longer sounded like an old organ pedal.

"Compass," I said. "Compass," Livesey said, holding it up as if it were a patient. The needle trembled at first, as if thinking, then it was... wrong. "Iron," Ben grumbled. "The bars. Nails. Your conscience." "Then we'll sail like poor poets," I said. "For stars and offended seas."

"Tiller," Bill murmured, "never alone." "Never," I replied. I tied the tiller tight—just enough so it would go along, not so much that it commanded us.

We're trimming. The load is centered aft, sacks are along the keel line, a plate box acts as a counterweight to leeward; the bars are deep so the ship doesn't swell. The doctor wouldn't let anyone stand still: "He who has hands is guilty, and he who has guilt is working."

Ben fetched his conch shell again. "Last whistle, last church," he grinned, blowing flint into the leaves. A remnant of "Darby M'Graw" stumbled out of the cave, so quiet that only men with indigestible pasts could hear it. The island didn't answer. It was done with us.

"Come on," I said. "Open the window, head out."

The North Arm is a false friend. At low tide, it kisses you; at high tide, it drinks you. Today, it lifted us like a stingy host—so high that we could see the reef crests, so close that we knew them all too well. Ben was at the sounding board, the doctor at the jib, I was at the tiller, Bill at the pump, my mother at the watch.

"Two fathoms!" Ben shouted. "Too little for pride," I replied, "enough for us." "Three and a half!" Ben cried in the next breath. "Leave out, then pull tight!" I barked. The jib belloyed, the ship nosed, the channel got a bad mood. A crosswash caught us by the stern, turning us a fraction too early—the tiller

sung abuse at me, I sang back. We slid almost toward the white teeth. "Port!" Livesey coldly. "Port!" I, not cold.

A swell of water rose onto the bow, tasting like a coffin. The depth sounder showed two, and the truth was equal. I tacked to windward again, the jib heaved briefly, the Hispaniola pitched—whoa—and was through. Behind us, the reef growled, insulted, like a priest whose collection had been stolen.

Then the outer water was beneath us. Deeper, darker, more honest. The North Arm let go, and the ship settled into a long, lingering oscillation that says: Now you can think. I hate being able to think again.

I turned the tiller a hair southeast—not by compass, by gut feeling. Ben watched him as if he knew what I didn't. Livesey tied everything that was loose to what I knew where it belonged. My mother sat down next to Bill and handed him water that tasted of victory. The squire remained silent for the time being because his mouth didn't yet know how to speak without excuses.

The island remained on the horizon. It acted as if it had invented us and now forgotten us. The parrot somewhere back there screamed "RUM!", very small, very wrong. I raised my hand to the umbrella board and didn't salute. I'm not a soldier. I'm a boy who has more hands than are healthy.

"Tighten the jib tack," I said. "And put a foot on the mainsheet." "Aye," Bill grumbled. The man could deal with wounds and sheets. Not so much with regret.

We walked. Not fast. Stubbornly. The Hispaniola doesn't have the body to dance. She's built to force men to tell each other the truth.

In the afternoon, the silence that always seems like a trick came. The wind turned to glue, the water to skin, the sky let the paint fall. The needle in the compass continued to play its own game. Ben placed a spike under the lid; at sea, only bad luck, superstition, and patience can demagnetize. We had superstition and a little patience.

"Do you see that?" my mother asked, her finger pointing toward the port side. I saw it too late and pretended I'd always seen it. No one was sitting on the railing, their legs over the sea, their hands in their laps. No one had a face I recognized: O'Brien. He grinned toothlessly. "Rum," he said. I blinked. He was gone.

"More ghosts today," Ben muttered. "Fewer heads, more room." "If one of them touches the tiller, I'll shoot," I said. "Do that," Livesey said. "Aim for reason."

We kept watch, even though there were hardly any people who were allowed to be on watch. First watch: Ben and me. Middle watch: the doctor and Bill (with seat duty). Dog watch: Mother and I—yes, laugh if you like; my mother can stay one night longer than me when she's angry. The squire was given the most difficult task of all: sleeping and not thinking about the restraints.

Before sunset, we poured three fingers of rum overboard. "For those who had to pay," said Ben. "And for those who are still paying." "Pastor," I called toward the island, "sermon's over." "Amen," said the sea, saying nothing.

Night came like a bad-tempered curtain. Stars popped up, one after another, pretending to be maps. I was heading for the Southern Cross, which is the wrong way here, so I was heading for the Three Liars—three stars that stand in a row and tell you you're on the right path, even when the road isn't easy. Ben called them "Flint's Fork." I called them "Shut Up."

"The compass is a bit useful again," the doctor reported later. "Or my faith is growing." "For whom?" I asked. "The metal or you," he said. "Today it's both."

He sat down next to me at the tiller, placed his hand on it, not heavily, just "I'm here." I thought of the phrase that had chased us through the days: Never till alone. I like rules when I'm too tired to be intelligent.

"The Squire wants to talk," said the doctor without looking. "Save it," I said. "Today we sail, tomorrow we judge." "Will we judge?" he asked. "In the head," I said. "Not in the neck."

He nodded. That's the bad thing about the doctor: when you want to hate him, he's doing the right thing.

During dog watch, I heard footsteps again, not on deck. But below us. Salty, hollow, like someone crawling along the side of the ship. I leaned over Lee, saw only black. Then pop. A bubble. Another. "O'Brien," I whispered, and the sea giggled. Mother nudged me on the calf with the pan. "Don't interfere," she said. "They only listen when you feed them." I laughed softly. "Like men."

Bill slept because his body made a decision. Ben snored, but rhythmically—his form of discipline. The squire probably dreamed that someone was forgiving him. The stars did what they always do: they lied beautifully.

Towards morning, the wind shifted a notch and blew into our side. The Hispaniola went "hm!" I gave the rudder, Livesey gave the sheet, and we were halfway back on course. The compass was already giggling less, perhaps because it understood that I hated it even without it.

"Caution, windward," Ben warned suddenly, more quietly than superstition. "There's something there." I squinted until the darkness crumbled. There was something there. Not slender like a frigate, not crooked like a wreck: a sloop with a canvas, bigger than Silver's rental car, smaller than hell. It lay offset across our bow, just enough to make it debatable whether it was blocking us. No light. No rag. Just intention.

"The strangers?" I whispered. "Or Silver's next idea," the doctor suggested. "But he doesn't have windfall money for two ideas in a row." "Compass?" I asked. "Say maybe," he said. "Stars?" my mother asked, raising her chin. "Say 'Try it,'" I said.

I weighed three things against each other: our belly full of metal, our hands full of tiredness, and our silhouette full of maybe. Ben saw my head working and grinned crookedly. "Open the window, boy. If you want out, you have to go through the draft."

"All right," I said to the tiller. "We'll go a few points lower. If she wants to cross us, she'll do something about it." "And if she wants to ram us?" asked the doctor. "Then she'll learn how heavy guilt is," I said, tapping the pumping board, beneath which lay the stuff that sends men to church.

The ship obeyed because I begged it to do so well. The sloop stayed there. No waving, no whistle, no "Pastor." Just a dark idea against a black sky. The needle bobbed ever so slightly again. I heard a note without a note somewhere far away. Maybe it was just my head.

"Changing of the guard," I said. "We're not sleeping anymore," my mother said. "At least we'll breathe more slowly," the doctor said.

I sat down on the bulwarks for a moment, letting the salt splash across my face, which tasted like a much-needed slap. Then I wrote in my book, as crooked as the tiller would allow:

- **Bars out.**
- **Compass is acting up (iron). Course by stars + gut.**
- **Reef: close, but we.**
- **Last flint from the cave. End with church.**

- **Night: O'Brien at the gunwale—ghosts or brains.**
- **Luv: dark silhouette without manners.**

I closed the book and placed my hand back on the wood, warm from hands that no longer count. The island behind us was a blur. In front of us lay lines that didn't care if you were rich.

"Never tack alone," I said under my breath. "Never," Ben and the doctor replied without looking.

The silhouette finally moved upwind. Not away. With us. That's what those do who weigh up whether they want your life or your money.

"Open the window," I murmured. The wind pretended to have a sense of humor. The sea pretended to be neutral. And somewhere in the back of my mind, someone who had long since passed over the hills continued to whistle his farewell—tone without a note, poison without a bottle.

Chapter 29 - The harbor looks different

Dawn came with the elegance of a poorly folded napkin. The silhouette to windward was still holding the line, but doing nothing, and that's always suspicious. If it doesn't bite, it plans. I held the tiller, the tiller held me, and the Hispaniola's belly was full of metal, which makes any conversation difficult.

"They're staying with us," Ben muttered. "Let them," I said. "I'll go with the flow and step on their toes."

We drew a line lower—not much, just the touch that teaches physics respect. The current from the western bend took us along whimsically; the dark sloop stayed parallel at first, then tucked into a false belly—set. Those who don't like currents fall in love with rocks. I gave the windward tack, the doctor gave the jib, Ben gave the depth sounder.

"Three and a half," he shouted. "Enough lying," I said. "Go on."

When the sun decided that it had no patience today, **country** Not island—**City**. Plumes of smoke like bad mood in the sky, two towers that acted as if they still knew what bells were for, and in front the **mole**, an irritated lip made of wood and stone. The bell buoy in the outer harbor rang because someone had told it the weather. People like to build teeth for the shore so that ships bite properly.

The silhouette decided to head upwind. It couldn't keep up any longer; it set off into a tributary that didn't lead to us. Perhaps wiser than us. Perhaps poorer. "Get out of here," I thought after it. In the same breath, I thought: Or we will.

"Yellow?" asked Ben, looking up where a quarantine flag should hang if you're as out of this world as we are. "Yellow," said the doctor. He didn't dig out a flag, but **Agree** "I'm a doctor. No smallpox, no plague on board, just moral stains. Is that enough?" "Enough for me," I said. "Not for customs."

There was no way around it: In the harbor entrance, a **pilot** in his nutshell, as if he'd already written the bill. He arrived like all pilots: confident, tired, offended by the weather. "Name of the ship?" "Hispaniola," I said. "Port?" I said the name we least regretted—a city that loved papers and forgave men who paid more than they boasted. He sniffed. "You reek of trouble and rage. Who's piloting here?" "I," I said. "He," the doctor said at the same time. The pilot grinned. "Then we're living dangerously. Mainsail to half sail, no jib showing off. Keep clear to leeward, the breakwater is biting." "Tiller," Bill grumbled. "Never alone," I confirmed.

We entered the outer harbor. Buoys, tows, and ringing that only tired the sky. Everywhere **Eyes** Boys at the pilings, women with baskets, men with broken hips and functioning teeth. A customs boat pretended to have seen us by chance. Behind his face sat a man who liked bills. I didn't like him.

"Throw fifty shillings to the survey," muttered Ben. "That's what you get here, the flag, not absolution," replied the doctor.

We docked as if we had agreed—me at the tiller, Ben on the bow line, Bill at the stern (with a swearing cushion for a shoulder), the doctor at the spring. The pilot shouted the usual half of the language, and I shouted back the other half: "Ahead—stop—hard to port—line clear—spring engaged!" The Hispaniola sighed, rubbed against the **Dolphins** like a cat with force, and lay there. No applause. The smell of the harbor knew how to become a spectator: tar, fish, beer, tin, life.

There he stood, the **customs officer**, with a hat and a face like a grid. "Papers." "We have stories," I said. "I have stamps," he said. "I have a doctor," said the doctor, revealing himself. "Health certificate: No one more contagious than the city." "And cargo?" The man looked right past the pumping board where our sins slept. "Gypsy wares," said Ben dryly. "Plates for the poorhouse. Spoons for the priest. Ingots for no one." I stepped on Ben's foot. "Fish. Salted. And a

few **Family pieces** from the inheritance of my uncle, who unfortunately decided to be seaweed."

"They're called household goods," the customs officer drawled. "Duty-free if poor—duty-paid if rich." He smelled us. "You don't smell poor." "We smell **tired**." My mother corrected from the gangway with a pan that looked like an argument. "And if you make the boy sick, you'll smell of carbolic acid." The customs officer examined the pan. It was more convincing than our faces. "Provisional clearance," he growled. "Pilot stays on board until the fees—" "—are paid," the doctor sighed, pulling out his purse. "I'll pay in tonality. You clock in at speed."

The **Customs boat** released, letting us breathe, but not think. The first **writer** with a feather nose: "Name? Trip? Cargo? Adventure?" "Write: Nothing your wife wants to read," I said. He grinned. "Especially then."

Linen were firm, **hatch** sto, **mouth** dry. I stood on the gangplank and looked at the harbor that had been my living room a month ago (or was it years?). Now it was something different. Not uglier. **Honest** Everything was pulling on the oars: ships, men, stories. The pubs breathed outward to leave space inside. Children threw a dead fish like a ball. A cat wondered if it was God.

"Do you recognize it?" my mother asked quietly. "It has the same teeth," I said. "But our flesh is different."

Ben tapped me. "Audience," he whispered. Three men stood less than ten paces away: sailor types, but not our kind. One with a scar whose name wasn't Tom; one with one missing ear; one with a look that liked pawns. They didn't pretend to be curious. They **counted** "Friends of Silver?" "Or enemies without direction," said Ben. "Same kind of shoes."

The Squire volunteered for the first time. "I am going to **Admiralty Clerk**," he said. "Turn me on. Turn us on. I know—" "—all the right people," my mother finished. "That's the problem." "He doesn't go alone," the doctor decided. "And he doesn't talk for long. Jim, Ben—you come with me. Bill stays. Never till alone—here she's called deck."

We marched off: wooden planks polished by fate, the smell of Altbier and new wages that wanted to be heard. The writer with the feather nose hopped backward and wrote to us like legends. I would have liked to have him in the **trough** dipped.

The **Admiralty Office** smelled like offices smell: old, awkward, damp leather. Behind the desk sat a man who looked like a burst paragraph. "Concern?" The squire began, powder in his voice: "We—" "No," said the doctor. "I." His voice was a scalpel. "Privateering? No. Piracy? No. Self-defense? Yes. Wrecking law? No. Health? Yes—except for brain rot in certain classes." The paragraph adjusted his glasses. "Cargo?" "Household goods, silverware, re-stamped morals," said Ben, pleasantly.

"Names?" "Hispaniola." "Captain?" The doctor looked at me. I looked at myself. I raised my hand. "Preliminary." The man jotted down, without humor.

"Submissions. Screening. No deletion until—" "—until I sign," said someone behind us who wasn't there and wanted to be late: **Navy without a name** He stood in the doorway, grinning like bad weather. "Saved you guys back in the Maw." "You were pulling your weight," I corrected. "Right," he said cheerfully. "I'll keep pulling. Maybe I'm pulling the right strings." The paragraph looked between us as if he'd gotten a circus he didn't order. "Names?" "No names today," said the Navy, and I still liked that.

We left the office with papers that pretended to be on our side. Outside stood the **City** with arms and teeth. A bell called someone, another insulted him. We passed a pub door with a golden **Parrots** at and wrote "RUM" in lacquer. I stopped. Ben did too. "Coincidence?" I asked. "The world is small," said Ben. "Silver folded it."

Back on board, it smelled of ship and waiting. Bill had tied himself to the railing with the lead so he wouldn't get any foolish ideas. My mother handed out bread that was as hard as principles. The pilot grumbled, "If you want to leave, you'll need a tow—or a miracle." "We don't have either in cash," I said. "We have muscle and the truth." "The port won't take it as collateral," he grumbled, but not unkindly.

I lifted the pump board, just a finger wide, just enough to let air in and **Greed** could get out. Coins slumbered like bad babies, plates looked like priests, bars like decisions. "The plan remains," I said. "Transship tonight: half into the old salt flat by the Crooked Seagull, half under the floor in the shed of—" "—the man who once wanted to thank you for doing nothing," Ben added. "He's reliably lazy."

"Squire stays on board," said the doctor. "I—"

"You stay," my mother snapped. "When you leave, you take a flag with you that says 'Idiot Leadership'."

We worked on the harmless things during the day so that the dangerous ones would be completed more quickly at night: clearing ropes, changing fleets, oiling a new capstan gear with curses. The customs officer came twice, counting both times incorrectly, but dangerously. I gave him the look: "Don't ask—I have answers you won't like."

In the late afternoon, when the light grows thinner and men lie more honestly, a boy came from the quay who looked as if he could bring news to those who do not like to sit. "A man with a crutch," he said, "has just **Parrot** paid for a rum and left a coin—notched." The air around us changed hands. "Ask about his third toe," Ben told the boy. "If he laughs, you're dead. If he doesn't laugh, tell us where his back is facing." The boy nodded and disappeared the way messages disappear: too quickly and wearing the wrong shoes.

"He's here," I said unnecessarily. "Or we'll see him everywhere now," the doctor said. "Both are expensive."

Dusk plastered itself over our eyes as if it were a bandage no one had ordered. I cleaned the pan—the right one—and placed two bags in its belly. The doctor gave me the hand that said: Do it, but come back. Ben hung the shell around his neck as if he had church planned for the evening after all. My mother polished the pan like an oath.

"Night class," I said. "About the **City moat water** behind the tanner's bay, under the bridge, then into the salt shed. Second load to **Blacksmith's bar** Third load—when stars become friendly." "And if not?" my mother asked. "Then it's us," I said.

Before we cast off, I lingered at the bow for a breath. The harbor before me was the same stomach I grew up in. But its acidity was new to me. The wood sounded the same, the tar smelled the same, the wind uttered the same sayings. I was **different** I heard phrases that were once just noise. "Never tack alone." "Open the window." "Money has no memory." "Water washes away blood. Guilt remains."

I turned around. The squire was sitting on a box and looked as if he wanted to plead guilty voluntarily, if only it sounded nicer. Bill nodded at me, an oak donkey. The doctor stood like justice without a judge, Ben like a crime kept as a pet. My mother held the pan. Home is where someone threatens to kill you if you don't come back safe and sound.

The boy came back, breathless. "Crutch is gone. Coin was still there. Bartender said he rented a small sloop—to **Downstream**." I took the coin. The notch on

the edge was so clean it offended her. I held it up to the harbor light. It blinked once, as if it were a joke. "He takes what he can carry," I said. "And we take what we can hold."

"Jim," Ben murmured, "the harbor doesn't look any different." "No," I said. "But we do."

We pushed off. The pan quietly ate the harbor water, as if it didn't want the walls to listen. The city above us purred with a hundred voices and smelled of things that shouldn't be talking. I paddled, Ben whistled the race tune in the back of my head, the doctor let his carbolic calm hang over us like a lantern. Behind us remained the Hispaniola with my mother and Bill, both of whom looked like consciences with shoes.

"Open the window," I said, so quietly that only the wood noticed. And the city made room for us. Not much. Just enough space to give a new person so they don't fit back into the old one.

Chapter 30 - Settlement in the Inn

The harbor alley spat us out like a dog spits bones. The parrot hung crookedly above the door, in gold that had long since only pretended. Below, in chalk: *Those who live, drink. Those who don't, lie beneath the planks.* Finally, a motto that doesn't require Latin.

"Fits," Ben murmured. "Short, honest, friendly."

Inside, it smelled of rum and sweat and stories no one wants to pay for anymore. Landlady Nell had arms like anchor chains and eyes you wouldn't want to tell the same lie to twice. Behind the bar, bottles were stacked, and beneath the floorboards—or so the ravens of the alley said—there was more than sawdust. I believed it immediately. Some houses have cellars, some have registers.

"Table in the back," said Nell, without knowing us. "Those who belong in the front pay double or sing. You look more like doubles."

"We don't like to sing, we don't like to pay, we don't like to talk," the doctor said kindly. "That's why we're at the back."

We took the next room: bumpy floorboards, blind window, door that had learned bad manners from other people. Ben checked the cracks, Mother placed the pan on the table like an official seal, and the squire sat on the chair closest to the wall. I stayed standing. I've learned: sitting is a luxury, especially when you don't yet know who did it for you.

"Nell," I said, "we need rum, water, bread, and if anyone asks what our names are, say 'later.'"

"That's what everyone's called here," she grumbled, putting down three pots: clear, brown, and something in between. "Left is truth, right is lies, middle is marriage."

"Left," said the doctor, taking a glass of water. "The truth needs fluids." Ben took the right. "A lie requires courage." I took the middle. "Marriage needs witnesses."

The door rattled without opening. Not wind. Listen. Ben pulled his tongue out of wood and whistled softly: *once long, twice short*. The cracks responded with silence that felt caught.

"So," the doctor began, laying the knife of words on the table. "Reckoning. First money, then debt, then sleep."

"The order is correct," I nodded. "I hate men who settle debts before money. It sounds noble but ends up being expensive."

Mother shoved a piece of paper toward me, on which she had pressed numbers with a pencil and force. Sacks (counted), plates (counted, unfortunately), bars (counted and cursed), bribes (appropriate), on-board cash box (an empty word with hope). My mind buzzed and I came up with a result that smacked of work.

"My rule," I said, "we don't count in parts. We count in work. Whoever pulled gets the prize. Whoever talked gets the water. Whoever disturbed gets the door."

"And treason?" The Squire whispered it like a prayer bead. "Treason gets supervision," said Mother. "And bread without butter."

I arranged the pencils like balls. "Ben gets the goat tithe for paths that would have been wet without him. The doctor gets the survival rate—not in coins, in power: he decides who goes on the ship and when, and who goes into the hole.

Bill gets wood money: share plus care. Mother gets..." "The first sack and the pan stays mine," she said. "Right," I said. "I get the right to say no if someone gets too greedy. And the squire gets—" "—that we don't carry him to market today," said Ben.

"Decision?" asked the doctor. Hands. All of them. Even the squire raised his, out of habit. Mother flicked it off him.

"Second point: guilt." The doctor drank water as if it were high voltage. "Squire, you speak once, and that's enough for this year."

The squire stood. He made a face he'd practiced when he was still winning prizes for speeches about courage. "I... I didn't sell us out. I was looking for a door we could get out through. Silver... he..." "...painted one for you," I helped him. "He paints well. It just won't open."

"I'll take any blow," said the squire, "but I beg you: give me a task, not a chain." Mother tilted the pan. "You'll be given the worst task: sit, keep quiet, and watch." "And if it burns?" he asked. "Then you give water," said the doctor.

There was a knock. Not like with guests. Like with bills. Nell poked her head in. "Customs. And the one with no name. And two who stink of Kai." "Come in," I said. "But the knives stay out. And if you don't understand, learn from my mother."

The customs officer arrived first, with a book and a grim expression. Behind him was the nameless Navy man, grinning like the wind. Then came two dock rats with arms that could be used for furniture. They lined up according to their type: cash in, wait, cancel.

"I'll just take a seat," said the customs officer, sitting down and holding his pen out like a dagger. "And the tax." "I'll just take a breath," said the Navy. "And a word." "We'll just take a ticket," said the dock rats. "So yours."

"Nell," said Mother, "give them the middle one. They'll know what marriage tastes like."

Nell gave as if giving were her weapon. The customs officer sipped, barely flinching. "Very well. Cargo clearance. You have on board: household goods—nice, but not necessarily private. Silver goods—malleable, but formal. Ingots—they break the compass and awaken the laws. And also rumors." "Rumors pay poorly," said Ben. "They pay with visitors," remarked the customs officer. "And with a hook on the gate." He opened the book, the page where he'd already

won when we played dumb. "Suggestion: You donate to the harbor poorhouse..." "...ten percent," I said. "Ten is impudence," he said mildly. "And twenty is theft," said my mother. "Fifteen and I'll bake you pancakes you didn't deserve." The customs officer looked at the pan, testing how hungry he was. "Fifteen. And I forget I read Barren." "And we forget you have friends who know too much," Ben whispered. The customs officer smiled thinly. "We get along disgustingly well."

"Next," I said, turning to the Marine. "You want a share?" "I want balance," he said. "Today you needed me, yesterday I needed you. Tomorrow you won't need me, that's the problem. I just want a piece of paper—not gold—that says: When the going gets tough, I'll be on your right, not your left." "I'll write you something better," said the doctor, pulling out a blank receipt. "Medical report: This man has done his duty. He's too impractical to be hanged." The Marine laughed, genuinely. "I'll take it. And one more in the middle, for flushing."

"And us?" The two dock rats weren't here to laugh. "We'll keep the alley clean while your deck's full. That costs money." "Sure," I said. "You'll get work. Tonight, back at the salt shed. Two carts, three ways, no questions asked. If you ask, you carry the pan. If you don't, you get coins that taste like salt." They looked at each other, calculating the odds against the pan. "Deal."

"Fine," said Nell. "But I have one more thing to say: A man with a crutch paid here this morning and forgot a coin—with a notch. I saved it because coins don't like to travel alone here." She laid it on the table. A small, dirty sunrise thing, the notch so clean it made her laugh. The Navy whistled softly. The dock rats acted like it was nothing. The customs officer acted like he didn't see any coins. Mother acted like she was about to fall in love with someone. Ben didn't do anything—that's what happens when he's working.

"And?" I asked. "He drank rum on us," said Nell. "He said: *Tell the boy: Whoever lives, drinks; whoever doesn't, lies under the planks.* Then he's in the river. Not alone."

The sentence hit home. Silver had a way with words that reeked of the future. I pocketed the coin. "The man has style. And the city has bridges. We'll see him one more time, then we won't."

"Enough poetry," the doctor said. "Now the accounting: payments, packages, papers." He pulled out the bag the customs officer was allowed to see and the other one he wasn't. Coins moved. Signatures grew. Nell did the math without counting.

The dock rats laid out old cart passes for us—stolen, but usable. "Two loads today, one tomorrow. If the watch asks, bring her salt. If she asks more, take her to Nell." "And I'll take her to the door," Nell growled.

Noise grew in the dining room like yeast: voices, chairs, a lazy harmonica. The wall next to us was as thin as guilt. Somewhere in the main room, a man argued with his shadow and lost. Floorboards spoke as if they had once had to carry people who *no* have paid.

"Squire," said the doctor gently, "now comes your part. No drama. Just yes and no. Do you have a slip of paper in your waistcoat that will prove precious to us later?" The squire looked as if he had forgotten how to speak. "Yes." "Give it here," said Mother. He fished it out: a sketch—small cove, wrong path, X where there is no more gold. Signed: *T*.

I took it, tore it into three pieces, and put it in three pockets. "Now it's where it belongs: everywhere and nowhere."

There was another knock—faster, more nervous. Not customs, not the Navy. City Guard. Nell took a breath. "Stay calm and let me lie," she hissed, and was out before we were found guilty.

Ben stood up, straightening his back. "If they want in, they'll have to duck. I like to duck." "No one ducks," warned the doctor. "If there's blood, it won't be ours."

We heard Nell's voice, honey-sharp. "Men, you're late. That noise just now? That was laughter. And if you want to pay for that, get in line at the back, that's where the customs are." The guard muttered something that sounded like teeth, but the door remained closed. Nell came back, gave us that look only women who stay awake all night have: *You owe me some peace and quiet later*.

"We owe you everything," said Mother. "I'll only take money today," said Nell, grinning briefly.

"Time," I said. "First load."

We stood up like people who had just decided not to die. The dock rats took the carts, Ben the kick, I the sack. The doctor stayed with the customs officer. *in the middlesit*, because the middle is the most dangerous spot—and his mother stayed next to him, pan like a wall. The squire stayed where he could do the least damage: in the chair.

The Parrot's backyard smelled of beer, cat, and plans. The alley was a slit of stone; past barrels that are never empty, crates that never live up to their promises. We loaded two sacks onto a cart, threw salt over them to make it look like a bad winter, and rolled off. Ben didn't whistle—that was the signal.

At the salt shed, the guard had eyes that needed money. I gave him a piece of the future in copper. He gave us the past in silence. We hoisted the sacks under the floor, into the corner where salt becomes a conscience. Ben marked the spot with a cross, which looked like a mistake. I placed a coin next to it. Notch facing up. So I'd know my name later.

Back. Second load. Bill suddenly stood in the yard, broad as a solution. "I want to see how money *difficult*" Looks like," he grunted, picking up a sack as if it were hay. I would have loved to beat him back onto the ship, but today wasn't the day to forbid men from being stubborn. I let him.

Between the first and second loads, eyes found us in the alley: the same guy with the ear too close to the quay, this time with a friend who looked like he'd just fallen out of a story. "Do you need protection?" "Only if you keep quiet," I said. They nodded, walked alongside, said nothing. Good men. Sometimes the best friends are the ones without names.

After the second load, the customs officer, the Navy, and the doctor were still sitting there as if they'd just delivered a sermon on reason and the congregation was asleep. The customs officer stood, smoothing his pages. "You're legal now, until tomorrow morning. After that, the law will be hungry again." "We'll feed it today," I said. "No," said the doctor. "We'll give it a diet."

"One more small thing," said the Navy, closer to me, more quietly. "Down at the pier, someone has a lamp on—much too early. Not a fisherman. More like... anticipation." "Silver?" asked Ben. "Or someone pretending to be a preface to him," grumbled the Navy.

"Third load *tomorrow morning*", decided the doctor. "Today we'll finish the billing."

We filled the table with bread, water, and whatever helps swallow the truth. Nell brought a slate and chalk. "If you're going to do it here, do it properly. I like my floorboards to know why they creak."

I wrote:

- **Customs**— paid (15).

- **Navy**— Note (no coins).
- **dock**— Cart & Mouth (2×).
- **Nell**— Protection & stage (a lot).
- **Bill**— Wood money & stubbornness (priceless).
- **Squire**— Supervision & seat requirement (permanent).
- **Mother**— Pan-fried dish (legal).
- **Ben**— Paths & Organ (Goat Tithe).
- **doctor**— Law & Peace (Boss).
- **I**— Tiller & book (never alone).

"Is something missing?" I asked. "Yes," said Mother. "Silver. Line *for what it still costs us*" I drew a line and left it blank. That was more honest than any number.

In the main room, laughter grew louder, then stopped. Someone tried to listen through the wall and heard themselves. Ben drummed his fingers on the table, in time with *Open the window*. The doctor looked at me as if he wanted to prescribe me a whole year of sleep.

"Last point," he said. "*He who lives, drinks*. That applies today. Not tomorrow. Today, those who work drink. Tomorrow, those who drink today will also work." "Amen," said Nell, who suddenly looked like a church with a bar.

We drank a little, just enough to quiet our mouths, not our brains. The customs officer made another silent round in his head, nodding. The Navy vanished like a bad mood in the wind. The dock rats dispersed, Gasse was neutral again. Bill leaned in the frame like a law that doesn't apply today. The Squire... was silent. That was his greatest contribution.

I stood, put my hand on the chalk, and wrote under the blackboard, small but legible: "Never tack alone." Nell read it and nodded. "And if someone comes in here with a crutch and wants to play priest—" "—he'll get water," said Mother. "And the pan," added Ben.

We walked alone. No pack, no parade, just men and a woman who had experienced more than the street would have us believe. Outside, the night smelled of rust, cold, and possibility. The lanterns cast lies on the pavement that could be mistaken for shadows.

Halfway to the quay, I stopped. On the beam above the parrot hung something that wasn't there before: a plug with a thin wick carved into it—dead, twisted, surefooted. Below, in chalk: "*No fire today. I'm already gone. — JS*"

Ben stepped on it anyway. Habit. "He can't stop," I said. "Neither can we," said the doctor.

We carried Bill back to the ship, so calmly that even the water became polite. My mother walked beside me, smelling of work. Behind us remained the inn, which was court today and kitchen again tomorrow. On the chalkboard in Nell's room was our account, and beneath the planks lay the stories that no one had ever picked up.

"He who lives, drinks," Ben murmured. "He who doesn't, lies under the planks," I said. "And today we're just putting sentences under the planks. They last longer."

I sat down at the bow, the book on my knee, my hand salty, and wrote crookedly:

- **Parrot:**Reckoning → paid, lied, lived.
- **Customs service:**Enough for now. Navy: Notes instead of coins.
- **Squire:**Sit, be quiet, later.
- **Dock:**two loads, shut the mouth.
- **Silver:**Coin with a notch, plug without fire. Gone, but close.
- **Morning:**third load, pier with lamp, plan departure.

I closed the book. In the harbor, a gentle wind crept up the masts, as if it wanted to hear what Holz had to say. The city continued to purr, because cities with money never sleep. I placed one hand on the pumping board, beneath which our answers lay, and the other on the tiller.

"Never alone," I said. "Never," the wood answered. And somewhere back in an alley, someone laughed with a crutch in his voice—not maliciously, just punctually.

Chapter 31 - The stories no one believes

In the morning, the city smelled of cut-open barrels and burnt Sundays. I was sitting on the Hispaniola, which suddenly acted as if it had never had bad company. Beneath the pumping deck lay the answers men send to churches. Above the deck, the city strolled, in sentences that hadn't existed yesterday.

Nell was faster than any printer. Her counter made a print run of one: "There was the boy with the tiller and the doctor with the cold heart and the goat with

the quick tongue. They say they carried gold. I say they carried the city so it wouldn't fall on its face." The alley laughed like a barrel overflowing and pretended to disbelieve nothing. Alleys like to do that.

At the quay, three tugboats sawed the story into equal-sized pieces. The first: "The boy held the tiller with his teeth while the storm renailed his mustache." I don't have one. The second: "The doctor pulled a man's bullet while reloading his musket." Possible. The third: "Ben Gunn killed a ghost with cheese." The cheese part is bordering on criminal; we'll leave the rest alone.

The customs officer came in the evening, without a book and without a hat, and drank from the middle of the marriage jug. "I saw them," he said to his own hand. "They had that kind of dirt on their shoes that doesn't come from the harbor." That's the highest thing a customs officer can say when he wants to praise.

The city wrote the first version of the truth on the wall, with chalk that loves rain: "Goat band steals island's teeth." I would have been insulted if I'd had time to spare.

At the same time, the Admiralty was preparing the second version: Protocol. Livesey stood in front of a table that looked as if it needed to be buried, and spoke the paragraphs in the face. I stood in the back and pretended to be a chair.

"So: no letter of marque," said the man with the quill, "no commission, no royal anything—and yet you bring a cargo that clearly didn't come from your grandmother." "Correct," said the doctor. "And you insist that no one be hanged?" "Correct." "On what legal basis?" "On the basis that I'm a doctor, not a gallows house interior designer." The paragraph looked at me. "And you?" "I sail," I said. "And keep track of who lied and when." "For what?" "So it'll be cheaper if it happens again."

They recorded, deleted, and replaced. "Mutiny" became "interim disagreement." "Belly of the island" became "cave with no relevant name." "Silver" became "that person." I saw how words behave when they're given boots: They stand at attention and lie in rank and file.

At the end, I was allowed to sign to confirm I was home. I signed: "Open window." The man narrowed his eyes as if he had a bone in his brain. Livesey smiled so kindly that the man washed his hands afterward.

The Squire wrote to the company as if she were a widow with time on her hands. The paper whispered decency, the ink stank of remorse for the audience.

"Dear friends, I must report how difficult it has been for me—" I tore off the sentence and gave him a new one instead: "I've learned that grace doesn't grow in the parlor." He stared at me as if I'd stolen his tie. "I'll be despised," he said. "Better now than never," I said. He nodded slowly, and that was the first real sentence he ever wrote. He signed his name, without a title, and I almost liked it.

Ben Gunn Meanwhile, outside the "Parrot," he founded a church that became my favorite, even though I have nothing to do with God. His pulpit was an upside-down box, his Bible a goatskin, his Eucharist smelled of cheese and courage. "Brothers and bastards," he preached, "I have seen the herring's maw, and I tell you: whoever wants the truth should help carry it. Whoever only wants to hear will get ringing in their ears." A woman laughed loudly. A child asked if ghosts liked cheese. "They love it," said Ben, "but they can't stand it." He ended up selling "holy wax rags"—rubbed-off wick tips on which, if you were illiterate, you could read Flint's name. I didn't buy any. I tossed him a coin with a notch instead. He caught it, shoved it in his pocket, and pretended it was a joke to come back later.

On Sunday, we finally got the pastor out of the cave and into the pulpit. He had a voice like dry bread and eyes like receipts. "Sons and daughters," he said, "there have been reports of young people embarking on dangerous ventures and yet finding their way home safely." "It happens," I whispered. "From this we learn," he continued, "that the Lord—" "—sometimes doesn't have time," Ben said loudly. The pastor cleared his throat toward heaven. "...that the Lord may use tools we don't immediately recognize—" "Pans," my mother said. "—and that wealth is only a blessing if it doesn't tempt us." "Too late," the squire said very quietly. "Amen," said the doctor. It sounded like, "Evidence closed."

The brass cash register clinked more than usual. People like to donate when they believe someone else is paying.

The nameless Navy man sold his version at the dock the old-fashioned way: for beer and pats on the back. His story was the most honest because it was the unkindest. "The wind shifted," he said, "Reef wanted to eat, the boy wouldn't give it to him, the doctor sewed, the goat pushed, and the one with the crutch laughed last—because he always laughs when he's stopped listening." "What about the gold?" asked someone who already smelled of gold. "Just as heavy at sea as on land," said the Navy man. "Only dumber." "And the ghosts?" He drank. "Most of them are just men nobody paid." I liked him a lot.

In the evenings, newspapermen came with noses like grappling hooks. One carried a quill longer than his patience. "Working title," he said, "The Island of Screams: A Record of Shocking Bravery." Does that sound good?" "Sounds boring," I said. "Write: 'Those Who Survived Were in Trouble.'" "That won't sell." "Then write 'honey' in bold," I said. "And let the dead keep their names." He nodded as if I'd refused him a raise and defiantly wrote 'honey' so large that the page wobbled. I would have preferred to dictate 'pan' to him, but I wanted Nell to have guests tomorrow, too.

Silver received his frames as a gift without even entering the room. On every corner where a lamp burned too early, the message was, "The One-Legged Man was here." Some swore they heard him whistle without a note—no song, just intent. In a harbor tavern, someone said he saw Silver on a barge, laughing crookedly with two oars. "And then?" "Then he paid me to keep quiet." "How much?" "Enough for two days of courage and three days of shame." Good currency.

I heard another version—the best one. An old man, blind as a freshly washed mirror, sat on the bridge pier and said to no one: "The one with the crutch left a boy alive. Twice. That means he chose to be human. Sometimes that happens." I tossed him a coin. He heard it, shook his head, and pushed it back to me. "Save it. For when you have to decide again."

We had side jobs that were never advertised. Third load, before the first stroke of the clock, salt sheds, blacksmith's bars, the dock rats did what they were poorly paid for, we did what no one thanks us for. "Why are you hiding half when you could hide the other?" Ben asked. "Because the city is just as greedy as we are, only with a receipt," I said. "If we hide everything, they'll find

everything. If we hide half, they won't find half." He nodded, because his inner goat can do math.

My mother counted differently. "I don't want to know the total. I want to know how much bread there will be tomorrow. Is that enough for you to stay stupid without starving?" "Enough," I said. "And a little for no."

Bill said nothing. He stood at the bow in the evenings and gazed into the night, as if someone were standing there who owed him peace and quiet. Sometimes he smiled. Maybe the ghosts. Maybe himself. Maybe wood.

The final version of the story belongs to me. Not because it's the best. Because I have the hand that writes it. And a pan in my back that keeps it honest.

What I write is hard to believe:

- That fear is sometimes the wisest officer.
- That greed doesn't disappear when you become wise; it just learns to speak more quietly.
- That truth at sea is what helps you for an evening—and on land is what has to be paid for in the morning.
- That Silver isn't the devil. The devil would have better manners.
- That Ben isn't joking. He's just surviving them.
- That Livesey isn't cold. He just has his hands free because he doesn't constantly take his heart for a walk.
- That my mother is God, only with a pan.

And that I—please—am not the hero that people like to sell: I am the one who counts what's left over when the heroes boast to the barmaid.

In the evening, when the harbor bell pretends not to call us, we sit on deck. The Navy leans here and there, never paying with lies. The customs officer comes by, discreetly smelling of flatbread. The squire doesn't bring a note for once and looks as if he's naked—that's progress. Nell brings the slate inside so the rain doesn't get any wiser than we do.

Sometimes I hear O'Brien scratching at the side of the ship. "Rum," he says. "Water," I say. "Piece of gold," screeches a parrot somewhere, real or imagined. "Bread," says my mother behind me, and I eat because she's right.

If anyone asks how much treasure we really had in the end, I say: Enough for a no. Enough for a ship that can sail again. Enough for sleep that doesn't dream of judgment. Too little to buy tongue and pan—they remain free.

The day the newspaper came out with the headline "Treasure," the boy from the dock brought me a sheet of paper depicting us as heroes with toothpaste grins. I laughed and wrapped plates in it. "Blasphemy," said the doctor. "Recycling," I said.

That evening, I wrote the last sentence on the page and left space underneath. Not out of modesty. Out of politeness—for all the other versions that would come, when men get thirsty again and women send them home.

"Open the window," I murmured. The harbor nodded. And somewhere, very far away, someone whistled the note without a note, very quietly, like a memory that had become polite. I raised my hand to the tiller.

"Never alone," I said. "Never," said the wood. Then we turned out the light and let the city continue to tell what it had bought: Not the truth. Just a good story.

Chapter 32 - One last look back

Dawn cast a gray swirl over the harbor, pretending it was pity. The Hispaniola stood still, like a dog doing what it doesn't understand. Our answer to all the questions we'd rather not hear slept beneath the pump deck. The wind hung above deck, waiting to see if we were lying again.

"Today," said the doctor, "we'll look. Once. Then never again." "I've seen enough," growled Ben, but tied the shell around his neck anyway, as if he needed it against the memory. My mother reached for the pan. "In case the past gets cheeky." Bill pushed himself up, wood that doesn't give up. "I'm coming with you. I was there when it broke." The squire lifted himself as if to ask if he could come. "You come," said my mother. "You look. You say **nothing**."

The **Navy without a name** and acted as if he happened to be on time. He held up a **telescope** whose brass was so spotty it seemed honest. "For your ghosts," he said. "It focuses automatically when you hit your own stupidity." "Useless on you," said Ben. "I turned off longing," grinned the Navy man. "It works as an optic."

We walked up the pier. Planks that have seen more people than a courtroom; stones that know what men sound like before they fall. Up above, at the fire beacon, there was only wind, salt—and**chalk**that someone had put down. No coincidence. Nell's handwriting: "Write what you see." I took the chalk. I saw**Water**. I wrote**Island**.

"Let's see," said Ben. I held the telescope to the edge where sea meets sky, pretending it was final. Of course, there was**nothing**Islands don't follow you like bad witnesses. But eyes know how to lie. And ours were happy to do so.

"**Dead jaw**", I said, and the telescope immediately gave me a picture: two rock teeth against the pale light, and between them the**White-winged bat**who always overpromises. I heard the first salvo again, tasted sand and bile, smelled Ben's tallow candles and Silver's thin oil. "Sweet words, poison wick," I murmured. "We kicked him." "Yes," my mother said, "and you're kicking him now."**again.**" She put the**Plugin** my hand, which I'd been carrying in my pocket ever since like a bad lucky charm. I placed it on the concrete, and Ben pressed the sole down until it turned to wood. "Are you starting to get it, Jimmy?" he grinned. "You kick until it's history."

"**log cabin**" said Bill. The image tilted in the tube—boards, blood, splinters of wood, faces I don't even want to count anymore. Bill smiled as if someone had handed him back a pocketful of pain. "I fell and didn't realize it. Sometimes that's the best thing that happens to you." "Sometimes," said the doctor, "it's just dumb luck. Don't trust it."

"**Herring maw**", said Ben, and my hands went cold. The pipe opened the rib of the island like a knife: water, rock, silence that knows what it's doing. I heard wet rope sing, felt bar smiles on fingers that had long since become calloused. "Would you have crawled in there again if necessary?" I asked Ben. "I'm Goatman," he said. "I crawl to the truth, even if it stinks of fungus." "And you?" he asked back. "I'm Jim," I said. "I crawl for**No**."The doctor nodded as if I had passed an exam that no one had announced.

"**fisheye**", said my mother. I saw the small channel that our**Pan**loved. I saw the water doing what it always does: work. Every time I see that crease in the coast, I know: civilization is just a better word for pans that know where to go. "The pan isn't moving today," she said, placing it next to the beacon anyway. "But it's watching. Anyone who hurts us will get the sound in their teeth."

"**Beach**", said the Squire so quietly that it almost passed for thought. The lens threw me our**Midday**to my forehead: Tom Scar, Dick in the foam, the tide

pretending to only talk about the weather. I heard my own shot again, smelled the salt, the blood washes, but not us." "I thought I could act with mercy," he whispered. "The island laughed at me." "The island **Calculated** taught," my mother said. "Grace is not a bargain. It is the bill after one has learned to be silent."

I drew the five places with chalk on the concrete, crude, bold, misproportioned, but accurate enough for our lies. Ben placed curved lines between them that looked like goat paths and were called **Truth**. The doctor wrote next to it: "**Never tack alone.**"

"This also applies **here**", he said and placed his hand – not heavily – on my back.

"Write down windows too," Bill asked. "For later, if we close down again." I wrote it in bold. The wind licked the letters as if it were about to deliver them.

We stood in silence until the silence crept up from the harbor and settled on our shoulders. Below, on the planks, men laughed, unwilling to know why. Up at the beacon, we stood like witnesses, agreeing to remain honest, at least today.

I got the **Notched penny** Out of the bag—Silver's little joke that hurt because it was good. I put it on the chalkboard, right on the X that was never right, and asked into the air, "What did she take from us?" "**Sleep**", said the doctor. "**Childhood**", said my mother without hesitation. "**vanity**", said Ben. "Luckily." "**Friends** who we were, not who we are," grumbled Bill. "**Enemies** that we needed to find ourselves," I gritted, hearing the sound of conversation with a crutch in my head. "**Courage on credit**" added the Squire, as if finding words in an empty cupboard.

"And what did she leave us?" "**No**", I said. "**Regulate**", said the doctor: "1) Never sail alone. 2) Leave the island before it likes you. 3) If someone says 'mercy,' count knives." "**Pan right**", my mother said. "Those who live, drink – those who don't, lie under the planks." "**joke** that last," said Ben, and his eyes were briefly older than his face. "**Wood** that remains stubborn," laughed Bill.

I put the penny back in my pocket, as if one could save memories. "One more ritual before we go down?" Ben nodded and pulled something from his pocket that looked like dirt—and it was. "**Wick crumbs**", the last remnant of Silver's polite murder attempt. "Where to?" "Into the water," said the doctor. "So the sea can unlearn something." I took the crumbs, held them up to the wind, and let go. They clung to my hand for a moment, as if they weren't finished with us.

Then the gust took them and threw them into the harbor. The harbor maden**othing**. Sorry, Wick. Today, only the sky is burning.

"And now: What do we don**ot**?" asked the doctor. "We're going**not**back," I said. "We'll talk**not**big," said my mother. "We celebrat**enot**more than we pay," grumbled Ben. "We're hanging**no one**", the doctor added quietly. "We forget**not**", said Bill. "I disagree**not**" murmured the Squire, and that was his best prayer.

I brought the telescope to my eye one last time. The edge of the sea was gray, like a scar that doesn't ask who it belongs to. And of course, I saw him.**not**. No rag, no barge, no whistle without a note. Just the wind pretending to play a syllable. "He's gone," I said. "Or you are," said the doctor. "That's enough."

We began the descent, slowly, as if each of us were carrying a crate. And he did. Down at the foot of the pier stood a boy from Nell's tribe—the same one who had brought us the crutch shadow yesterday. "They said," he panted, "the one-legged one made it over the edge today. Down the river, out of town, two oars, no flag." "Of course," I said. The boy held out something else: a**Note**On old wrapping paper, damp, ink smeared. "Boy: Hold the tiller. Never alone. — J." I smiled as wide as I could without losing anything. "Tell whoever gave it to you: I can read." "I told him," the boy grinned. "He laughed like he knew."

Back on board, the Hispaniola had not become more beautiful, only**more attentive**Wood listens when men are honest. I went to the pump board, knocked twice —**our**Sign, not his — and said: "We're leaving. Today. Not tomorrow. The gold travels, the debts stay here. Anyone who wants something from us comes to the pier — without a crutch."

"Tugboat?" asked the Navy.**No**"I said. "Wind is enough. Once you're out through the North Arm, you don't need help getting home. And home isn't here. Home is the hole we dig ourselves when we have to say no." The doctor nodded. "We report departure, give due dates, leave copies for those who need the truth later. Then we sail. And if anyone asks us where we're going, we say:**away**."

Before we released the lines, I walked one last time over the plank towards**Parrot**Nell stood in the doorway, wiping as if the boards were lines. "Seen?" "Nothing," I said. "Enough." She nodded. "That's how happiness begins. Not with 'a lot'. With 'enough'." I laid the**chalk**back. "The beacon now has words. The rain will read them. If he understands something, we'll be in peace." "Rain is smarter than men," said Nell. "But only when he has time."

On the way back to the ship, the city creaked like a bed for people in a hurry not to sleep. I stopped at the dolphin, pulled the **Notched penny** out again, kept him above water. "Another look?" asked Ben. "That's not one," I said. "That's a **Point**." I dropped the coin. It clattered and was gone. No romance. Just **Ending**.

We solved the **Linen** The Hispaniola did not jerk – she! Bill was at the sheet, Ben at the forestay, and the doctor was making things right by finishing tying knots. My mother laid down the pan as if it were a talisman that mustn't be thrown overboard. The squire sat on the mast and held on to what he was allowed to keep today: the mouthpiece.

"Half jib, go mainsail!" I shouted. The wind took us like a waiter who's finally ready to call it a day. The pier moved backward, the harbor played "Take care" without any strings. Chalk glinted briefly at the top of the beacon, then a gust came, and then it was over. **Work**.

Out there, where water meets ground that no one cares about anymore, I turned the rudder a notch and said the sentence that replaces all others: "**Never tack alone**." The doctor put his hand on it. Ben nodded. Bill breathed. My mother stood there and was **God** in civilian clothes. The nameless Navy man raised his hand in his boat; he will be missed without a trace. Nell later scratched the slate clean, I know that. The city will paint new stories. Ours is enough.

The island? It stayed where it belongs: beyond the horizon, under the breastbone, in the inventory. It destroyed us – exactly into the form we need to **further** to come. Broken like a bone that now grows, as it **should**.

On the log sheet, I wrote the last entry under "Review":

- **Dead jaw:** Sugar words/wick – kicked.
- **log cabin:** Wood/Blood – paid.
- **Herring maw:** Work – worn.
- **fish-eye:** pan – driven.
- **Beach:** Flood – washed, guilt – remained.
- **Regulate:** 1) Never sail alone. 2) Leave the island before it likes you. 3) Count knives, not promises.
- **Ending:** No return trip. No heroism. Just course.

I closed the book, the wood creaking in agreement. In front, water opened up that has no opinion, and behind it remained land that has too many. The wind whistled no note, only **Intention** Far out, far away, I might have heard a sound that wasn't one. Or just my hand on the rudder.

“Open the window,” I said. “Open the window,” said the sea. And we went, no faster than yesterday, no wiser than tomorrow – but **enough**.

Chapter 33 - The Silence Afterwards

For the first two days after departure, the Hispaniola was so quiet that even the nails in the deck became polite. No one sang. No one whistled except for the wind. Even Ben left Flint's organ in his bag. Only the water made its old shushing noise, as if it wanted to lie us to sleep. Sleep didn't come. He's a cowardly dog; he only dares to venture into houses that don't think.

I held the tiller, and the tiller held me back. "Never alone," I murmured, and the wood said, "Right." The compass acted as if it were useful again—perhaps because the bars were low and our superstitions high. I still headed for **Belly and edge**, two old acquaintances who rarely lie at the same time.

"Work before words," the doctor decided, and with that came consolation. We mended the jib, gave the mainsail a new eye, and shaved the rope that had been called "later" yesterday. Ben measured the forepeak, spoke to rats in a language that only goats and losers understand. My mother cooked with the pan, which since island times had not only been used **Pan** It wasn't just a bell, a seal, a law. When she landed, it sounded like "commencement."

At the first meal after the port, the table had too many edges and too few voices. Bill sat like a tree that had decided not to fall. The squire held his hands under the table as if they were interrupting an audience. The doctor said "eat" as if speaking to a wound.

“For whom?” asked Ben as bread and cheese were passed around. “For **the**”, said my mother, and tapped the pan handle softly three times. That was our bell toll: once for **Joyce** (who became quiet in the hut), once for **O'Brien** (who called us “Rum” from the water and is now silent), once for **Thick**, who was given legs by the tide, just not the right ones. We ate. No one spoke. The cheese tasted as if it had decided to take a piece of ghost-catching for everyone.

After dinner I made **Roll call** Not out loud. In my head. I named names and the sounds that went with them. O'Brien's laughter like a loose nail. Tom's panting courage, which ran too long and once too short. The anonymous guy from the

gutter whose future my mother beat out of his head—he was perhaps a bastard. Bastards have mothers. That's the whole jurisprudence at sea.

"Will you write this down?" the doctor asked. "Only if it hurts," I said. "Then write everything down," he said.

I wrote: **Name → Number**. Not the amount. The number of times they **saved** have, intentionally or not.

- **Joyce** → 1 (shoulder given before he fell)
- **O'Brien** → 2 (his stupidity once gave us the right cover)
- **Thick** → 0 (he was a lesson, not a hero)
- **Tom Scar** → 1 (Enemy who fired another shot at his end – bought us time) In the margin I noted: **Silver** → uncountable (enemy who made us live twice; debt account with no interest rate). I hate math with people. It's always wrong.

Later, the squire stood at the stern, holding a folder that smelled of theater. "Jim," he began, "I have here—" "—paper," I said. "Let it breathe." He held out a **Waiver** Beautifully written, straight lines. He bequeaths his share to "the families of those who fell, or to the city where there is no salt, but hunger." He wanted to swim in **Honor**. I handed him instead **Work** "You'll stay a cashier," I said. "You'll go through the lists with Ben, with the pan behind you, and you'll listen to who gets the bread. **cracks** in the mouth. Not who cries the loudest." He nodded, and the nod was the first that didn't sound like a masquerade.

In the afternoon, the sea was as flat as a liar. No waves, just old thrust pretending to be friendly. We sailed in silence. Without wind, a ship is **Furniture**. Then men are the opposite of music. I heard the front edge of a story no one wants to tell and the back edge of one we had long since sold.

"Jim," said the doctor, "you're breathing like someone carrying a rock." "I'm just carrying a **coin** that I threw into the water yesterday," I said. "Good load," he said. "Keep the **Emptiness**. It's easier to balance than false weight."

The pump took its toll. Bill pedaled until his bandage said, "To hell." I took the handle off him. "You're wooden," I said, "but I'm young and stupid. Let me be tough so you can keep being stubborn." He grinned so sweetly that the wind could have learned a thing or two.

That evening, the only event happened that I will remember for a long time, when I decide whether to lie today or not. Between two breaths of nothingness, the sea suddenly hummed differently. Not louder. **Deeper** Ben

raised his head, as goats do when the mountain changes foot.

"What?" **Reason**, he said, and that was no shock, just **To know** I put the tiller a hair's leeward, just out of politeness. The Hispaniola acted as if she were offended and went along, out of spite. A dark **Dent** in the water passed us by as if it wanted to send us a warning. If I were romantic, I would have **Back** called. I'm not romantic. I call it **Luck** when silence stops.

"Say something," whispered the squire, who can't hear unless he's allowed to. "I already have," I said. "With wood."

In the dog station, I sat at the bulwark, my feet in the week's salt. Next to me was the pan – yes, it also **Guards** – and the air full of voices that do not speak. Then Ben walked up and down and preached for **No one** "Listen, you invisible ones," he murmured, "we are taking two things with us: your **Miss** and your **Mistake**. Both have weight. We pull one, we let go of the other, otherwise we'll never get there." "Amen," my mother said, without looking at him.

The doctor has a theory so dry it crackles: **Guilt is a muscle** if you don't use it, it degenerates. If you train it too hard, it tears. Train **moderate**: recognize what you could have done differently; leave what you couldn't save. "And drink water," he added. "Rum only makes it louder, not better." Ben took a sip anyway. "I drink so **quieter** will," he said, and that was the most honest lie of the day.

Later, when the stars looked like nails in a coffin lid, which **closes**, without lying in it, the Squire stood there again. "Jim," he asked, "when will this end?" "Never," I said. "It will only **lighter** when you work." "I've worked all my life." "Wrong," I said. "You have the **Money** let them work. Now it's your turn."

He was silent, for the first time without drama. Good men don't become better through quotations, but through **silence** that they can endure. I'll give him chances until he no longer needs them. That's my no to the island.

On the third morning, Bill called out, "Land," as if he had no other way to say hello. It wasn't our harbor. It was **coast**, gray, indecisive, like a face caught in a big lie. We kept our distance. I had no desire for new stories that would bring up old scores. The Hispaniola grumbled: Onward. And so we did.

Noon. We made again **Fair** Mother banged the pan once more. I read the short sentences that are not prayers: "For **Joyce** who held the bolt." "For **O'Brien** who now knows the side of the ship differently." "For **Thick** who wanted to learn how to drink water." "For all the nameless ones who **Time**" Given without knowing it." Then we ate, and each forkful was more honest than ten sermons. I

watched the bread circle in the air before disappearing into my mouth. Eating is the opposite of war: you take in something to avoid having to fight.

In the afternoon, the Squire and Ben sorted lists. The "**List of hands**"—who carried which burden, when, how often. Who **Pan right** acquired (pan right = if you make a mistake once, Mother will still give you the plate). Who has only **Customs** made—rightly, but without honor—and who has **No** said when it was expensive. "Do you pay the families?" asked the Squire, as if he did not have the pen himself. "We pay **Work**", I said. "Money too. But first work. We're building two things for the city: a **ramp** at the salt shed, so that old backs curse less, and a **web** who doesn't think about rain." "From the treasure?" "From **Debt account**" I said. He wrote it down. It looked good when he obeyed.

At dusk the first words of **pastor** from the sky again—either the real parrot far back in town or the fake one in my head. "RUM! PIECE OF GOLD!" "Water! **PIECE BREAD**!" my mother replied, throwing him a crumb, which the sea immediately claimed for itself. "Good dogs. Sit, stay."

I laughed, for the first time in days, more than a crack. Laughter doesn't shorten the deck, but it does make walking on it **straight**. Then I chopped the last **Wick crumbs** from the strap it was in and threw it over his shoulder. "In case the past comes back looking for a lamp." "It always comes back," said the doctor. "We just **faster**."

At night, the silence returned, and this time we were prepared. Ben sat down next to me, not because he wanted to talk, but because he knew that **next to** is good. The doctor put out a jug of water. My mother positioned the pan so it caught the moonlight. Bill was asleep and pretended he could. The squire was awake and pretended to be asleep. Everyone put on their best show. I held the tiller. "Never alone." "Never," said the wood, and the stars nodded like old women.

I thought of **Silver**. Not with hate. With **accounting** He had cost us less than he could have. He had given us more than he needed to. That annoys me forever. It's easier to hate people when they're consistently crap. He was **Person**. That is his impudence.

In the morning the air was clear, like a question that no one had asked for an answer to. I wrote the **Account balance** the world in the logbook:

- **Gold**: enough that we can say "no" when money wants to talk.
- **Losses**: 3 names I'll never pronounce wrong again.
- **Fault**: not payable, but operable: ramp, jetty, bread.

- **Regulate:** 1) Never pin alone. 2) Leave places before they love you. 3) Count knives, not promises. 4) **Silence hears better.**

As I put down my pen, the Squire stood beside me, his lips torn open like a repair. "I shouldn't have betrayed him," he said. "Who?" "Us," he said. "You taught us what **No mercy** is," I said. "No one teaches for free."

He didn't cry. Men like him hold back tears like letters. It didn't make him better. It made him **more honest**. I'll give him bread for that, not a medal.

On the last evening before we reached the bay that doesn't quite call us home, but is close to it, we all sat at the level of the pan. I put the **Notch** **area** hand on the bulwarks—where yesterday the coin lay, which now knows the reason. "Toast," said Ben, who never makes long toasts: "To those who were missing, so we know who we are." "To those who stay," said my mother, "so they can kick us in the ass when we forget." "To the **silence**" said the doctor. "She's the only one who listens when we don't know what we're saying." "On the pan," said Bill. "Because she doesn't preach, she just feeds." I raised my cup of water. "On **No**" I said. "Because it's often the only thing we can afford."

We drank little. We never skimmed on the wrong things.

The night passed without disturbing me. I wrote the **Final note** for today in my book:

- No heroism today.
- Today **Work**.
- Today, silence has said more than Silver has ever lied.
- Today we weighed: coins against names. The scales were broken—good thing.
- Tomorrow we dock and pay **further**.

I closed the book. The Hispaniola creaked like an old woman who knows what she means. In front was water that doesn't ask questions. Behind was an island that we no longer need to see to feel. Inside me was a hole the size of a **man's**, who laughed as he left, and one **list**, which I will not write in full because that would be the wrong honor.

"Open the window," I whispered. "Open the window," the wind answered with a gentle push that was not a promise—just **Movement**. We moved on. It wasn't any easier. **Better**. And if someone says gold is worth more than loss, I'll invite him to dinner. He'll get bread. And **silence**. After that he talks differently.

Chapter 34 - Rum and Forgetting

The city had dressed up for our downfall: lanterns like fake stars, cobblestones that giggle when someone falls, and a wind that warms lies to body temperature. On the Hispaniola, everything was so tightly lashed that even our excuses held firm. Beneath the pumping board lay a future that shouldn't be spent if you want to look in the mirror tomorrow.

"So," said the doctor, "a **Mug**. Not two. Then water." "Water is the silent form of theft," Ben growled.

"Rum is the quick form of stupidity," said the doctor. "Then we're efficient today," I said.

We walked along the quay like men who pay the dentist and still buy sweets. The sign of the **Parrot** It hung crookedly and gleamed as if it had just lied. Below it, in chalk: "Drink quietly today, work loudly tomorrow." Nell's handwriting. God bless her with small bills and big pans.

Inside it smelled of rum, tar, onions and **rumor** Nell set before us the round table, the one where people become honest because the corners are missing. My mother placed the pan on it like a captain with his commission. The squire sat down so primly that the chair was insulted. Bill stood behind him like oiled wood.

"Rules," said Nell, and her voice would have pushed a bull backward through a door. "First, anyone who drinks **pays** Secondly: Whoever speaks, **thinks** Third: Whoever lies, **learns** know the pan. Fourth: Whoever cries gets water. Fifth: Whoever says "Silver" says it **quiet**."

"I'll start with water," said the doctor. "So the medicine doesn't get jealous." Ben raised the jug of rum. "I'll start with God." "God comes later," said my mother, tipping half a truth into his cup.

The nameless Navy man leaned in the shadow of the door, playing bouncer for fate. "Today I'm a witness," he said. "Tomorrow I'll be a guy again."

We drank the first glass like one would toast a bill—with respect and the hope that the final figures would be polite. The first heat trickled down our throats and did what all cheap miracles do: It promised a future on credit.

"On the **absent**", I said, 'so that they don't forget us when we try.' 'On the **Pan**", said Ben. "On **No**", said the doctor. "On **Still**", my mother said. The squire raised his glass and missed a leap. That, too, is a start.

After the second (and last, if you ask the doctor) the truth got the better voice.

The squire stood. "I have..." He searched for the word that men like him can only get on prescription. "...failed." "That's not a word," said Nell. "It's a costume. Put on something." **Real** on." He breathed as if the air suddenly had more teeth. "I sent you to your death so as not to look stupid alone. And when death didn't come, I insulted it by **Silver** I can move numbers, but not guilt. I am not asking for forgiveness. I am asking for **Work**." "Approved," I said. "You will **Note** wear and **mouths** count. If someone crunches their bread, their name goes on the list. Not the one you write. The one in my mother's head."

Ben clapped slowly, as one fires up an unsteady lantern. Bill nodded, briefly, as if driving a nail. The doctor raised his glass of water. "You've got it, Mr. Squire. That doesn't mean we've forgotten it. It means we've **use**."

"Next," said Nell. "Who else? I have until panlight."

Bill stepped forward like a carpenter praising a beam. "I was **Fury**. I only had one direction: forward. That's good when you're ramming; bad when you have to count. I stopped when the bullet forced me. I don't want to wait for another one to teach me. I'm taking **two**: Stubbornness and calm." "Approved," said my mother, and I swear the pan sounded approving.

The nameless Navy man raised the rum as if it were binoculars. "I once **not** betrayed, even though it would have been more lucrative. I am not a saint. I am just a man who has no desire for **gallows humor** in the first person. If you call me, I'll come. Not for money. For order. That's as rare as good rum." "Order accepted," said the doctor. "You'll get a slip of paper that won't sanctify you in any church, but will make you useful at the port gate."

Ben was already on the table. Of course. He doesn't give speeches, he **happened** "Brothers and bastards! I, Ben Gunn, offer you the holy cheese!" He pulled a round object from his pocket that smelled of suspicion and clamped it on the jug like an altar. "He who bites confesses with his teeth. He who laughs lives. He who cries gets water." "Get down there, prophet," said Nell, "before you convert my table."

I didn't drink much, enough to smear, not to extinguish. The rum was like a friend who encourages you to do something stupid and then carries you home. You just have to know when to use it.**unfriend**may.

Later, in the midst of this doughy beauty that the night likes to knead, I clamped my knee to the floorboards and listened to the noise like a bad weather report:**Storms are brewing at the bar, isolated gusts of wind, pan pressure is rising.**

Nell tapped the handle once against the rim of the pot. It sounded like "Quiet now" and "More rum" at the same time. A masterpiece.

At some point the door made that movement that doesn't come from the wind. All heads half tilted.**Parro**ton the sign outside squeaked. The room held its breath. A man with**crutch**? No.**None**. Only the sound—that whistling without a note—so distant that it could only be a flattering memory. I put down my glass. My hand was steady. My mother lifted the pan and let **itsing**Ben whistled softly against it—no "Darby," no "Pastor." He opened the window. The sound outside died, as sounds die that don't have the courage to enter.

"He's gone," said the doctor. "And still expensive." "We pay in**Quiet**", I said. "That's the currency that never suits him."

Then the night made its**Main trick**She sat us down, one at a time. The counter, the table, the corners—little islands everywhere, this time without treasure. I wrote on a napkin what I wanted to remember if the city acted like we were fairy-tale characters with receipts again tomorrow.

- **Those who live, drink. Those who work, save. Those who lie only realize it when they need water.**
- **Money is silent. We are not.**
- **Never tack alone.**
- **Open the window.**
- **Pan law beats priest law.**
- **Silver owes us stories, not coins.**
- **We owe the dead a ramp, a walkway and peace.**

I folded the napkin and tucked it under the leg of the wobbly table. This is how truths stay.

Later, when rum and breath became heavy, something rare happened:**silence**didn't put us to sleep; she put us**awake**The squire stared into the wood as if he could carve another man into it. Bill massaged his bandage

with his eyes. Ben sorted cheese crumbs by guilt. The Navy looked at the door because doors are the most honest things in taverns. The doctor wrote **nothing**—a good sign. And my mother put the pan down. That meant: **Enough**.

"Final round," said Nell. "One more. Then forget it." "I don't forget anything," I said. "I'm just filing." "Then call it **Forget**" Boy," she grinned. "The city loves words with rounded corners."

We drank the last one, the **small** that only moistens the tongue and does not awaken stupidity. I put the coin—not the one with **score**, who's now sleeping on the counter at Grund—a different, honest one. "For those who'll be sitting here tomorrow and won't know why it feels good." "We have plenty," said Nell. "More will be coming."

Outside, the air was as cool as a clean cut. We stood for a moment in the courtyard, and the city acted as if it doubted that we were serious about the **Morning**. "So that's it?" asked the Navy. "That was never **What**," said the doctor. "It was **Work**." "And work doesn't end," I added. "It just postpones the construction site."

We returned to the Hispaniola. Planks sang beneath shoes, ropes hummed in the night, like old horses who know when to leave them alone. I climbed aboard and placed my hand on the tiller. "Never alone." "Never," said the pan behind me. It sounded content.

I sat down on the bow, the book on my knee, the city as a lantern behind me, the water as a lie in front of me. I wrote the **Outro**, and it tasted like salty iron and a laugh that still has teeth.

OUTRO – Inventory of a bad dream (for people who stay awake)

1. **The treasure:** A pile of metal that remains silent until you force it to speak. Useful when you want to say "no." Useless when you need "sorry."
2. **The island:** Broke us in all the right places. Thanks for nothing.
3. **Silver:** A devil who doesn't like churches because he knows pans are better. He let us live—twice. That makes him dangerous: **human**.
4. **Ben:** Goat man, organist, vinegar preacher. He survives jokes because he breaks their legs.
5. **Livesey:** Cold in tone, warm in calculation. He stitches wounds and sentences.

6. **Mother:**Law with a grip. When she says "water," even Rum gets religious.
7. **Bill:**Wood that has learned to be soft without breaking.
8. **Squire:**Vanity on a diet. He learns to count, this time with**People**.
9. **Me (Jim):**Pin, book, no. I'm not a hero. I'm the cashier of truth.
- 10.**Regulate:**

- Never tack alone.
- Leave places before they like you.
- Count knives, not promises.
- Silence hears better.
- When the wick beckons, step.
- When the sea washes, keep the guilt—otherwise it washes**you**.

I dropped the pen and listened again to the word that holds all this crap together:**Further**. No man gets full from it. But fullness makes one tired, and tired men fall—into bed or into the sea. More keeps you awake.

"Jim," the doctor said quietly behind me, "The end?" "The end in**drunk**", I said. 'That means: tomorrow**begin**.'

I stood up, turned off the lantern so the stars wouldn't lose their jobs. The harbor was decently silent. I laid my hand on the wood that had carried us more than we deserved. And if you ever hear this story in an inn, with more gold and less pan, then you know what to do: Drink**Water**. Ask for the**ramp**at the salt shed and the**web**who doesn't think when it rains. If both are there, it was me. If not, look for me. I'm the one at the table without a backrest, the**No**practices until it gets tired.

The wind lifted an edge, the night nodded, and the Hispaniola creaked its favorite phrase:**Open the window**.

We left the city, the island, the ghosts, and the rum behind us in exactly that order. And the forgetting? It came as it must: not as mercy. As**Crafts**You do it a little bit every day and never really stop.

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Author: Michael Lappenbusch

E-mail: admin@perplex.click

Homepage: <https://www.perplex.click>

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