

Bart swallowed deeply as his hand subconsciously rose to his neck.

Through the cage bars, he watched mournfully while the hangman placed the noose around the neck of Captain Irad of *The Prickly Rose*. Once the hangman finished off Irad, Bart and the rest of the crew would be marched up the gallows, one by one, to meet a similar fate. The crowd stirred impatiently, anxious to see the famed pirate meet his maker.

"It not be fair," Bart grumbled. "I been with the Cap'n only a few weeks, and never did no raids on the English."

"Quit your complainin', Greenie," Sonia Laveau said in her heavy Creole accent. "Just 'cause I's hitchin' a ride I be captured, too."

Dogbone snorted. "I always said women be bad luck."

Sonia raised an eyebrow. "You want to see what bad luck is, boy?" She pointed a finger at the crewman.

Dogbone's eyes widened and he sat forcefully down in the small space available. "No, ma'am. I be quiet." His head shrunk into his shoulders and he looked away through the bars, avoiding eye contact with the famed voodoo queen.

The other crewman had long since given up hope. They crowded together, staring out to sea, resigned to their fate.

Irad suddenly looked up. His mane of reddish blonde hair whirled around him like a fire as he tossed back his head and laughed.

“Lieutenant Higgins!” he said. “Tis a pleasure to see ye! And here I be worried ye’d miss all the fun.”

Higgins crossed his arms and smiled broadly. The bright Caribbean sun gleamed off his shaved head, making it difficult for direct eye contact with the man. His red coat was neatly pressed, buttons polished, and his regulation sword hung by his side like a trophy.

“Ah, Irad. It’s such a pity that our friendship must end in this way.”

Irad grinned. “Ah, ‘tis indeed sad. We’ve had such great adventures together, like that time in Bermuda...”

Higgins’ smile disappeared. “Yes. Well. Goodbye.” He walked away, signaling to the hangman to do his job.

“Good luck gettin’ off this island and back to Bermuda with the kraken on the rampage,” Irad said over the noise of the cheering crowd. “The man who defeats the kraken will surely be promoted and rewarded beyond his wildest dreams. Too bad ye be killin’ the only man who knows how to do it.”

Higgins turned and held his hand up. The hangman paused.

“What is this trick, Irad? What’s your scheme?”

“Arrr, ye cut me to the quick, ye do.” Irad shrugged the best he could with his hands tied behind him. “Tis just a shame, that’s all. The kraken’s been attackin’ ships in this area forever, and just when I discover how to defeat the beast, I get hanged, taking the secret with me. Ah well, that be life. Or death.” He laughed at his own meager joke.

Higgins shook his head and smiled. "Very well, I'll bite. What's this secret?"

"Come now, Lieutenant. I not be that stupid." Irad gave a reproaching look. "I not be telling ye this for nothin'."

"Bargaining for your life, are you?"

"Of course! You think me daft? Let me and me crew loose and I promise the kraken will not be a problem no more."

Higgins climbed the steps to the gallows and the hangman backed away to give him room. Planting his feet forcefully in front of Irad, Higgins once more crossed his arms.

The crowd grew silent. Bart pushed his way past his fellow prisoners to get a better view.

"You must think me a fool," Higgins finally said. "How can I possibly believe you? The minute I set you free, you'll disappear and never face the justice you deserve."

"I give you me word as Cap'n. I promise that me crew has a foolproof plan to defeat the kraken, which cares not what flag a ship be flying. If we fail, then we be dead anyway. This I swear."

Higgins stared into Irad's eyes for long seconds. "Your promises are meaningless." He walked away and motioned to the hangman, who came forward and grasped the handle that would send Irad through the trap door, ending his life.

Irada merely grinned. "I have given me word, and that is not enough for ye?"

"Three," said Higgins.

"Ye can grab the reward. I promise."

"Two."

"I swears, I tell you. I swears I'll do this!"

Higgins held up his hand and began to speak the final word. The crowd held its breath.

"The Pirate's Code!" yelled Bart. "Swear on the Pirate's Code!"

Higgins spun around to stare at the prisoners in the cell.

"Greenie, ye damned fool!" said Irada. "Be quiet!"

"Swear on it!" Bart yelled. "That way he'll know ye can't break it!"

"Greenie, I'm ordering ye! Shut yer bloody face, ye blasted blowfish!"

Higgins turned to Irada. "Pirate's Code? What is this 'Pirate's Code'?"

Irada stared back defiantly. "No such thing. Ignore the lad; he be crazy from the heat."

Turning his back on Irada, Higgins marched down the wooden stairs of the gallows. His steps boomed in the crowd's silence.

The cage holding the crew of the *The Prickly Rose* stood about twenty feet from the platform. Armed redcoats surrounded it, and a prominent lock taunted the dirty and crowded inhabitants. Higgins stomped and stood before Bart.

"What is your name?" he asked in a deliberately quiet and calm voice.

"Bart, sir, but everyone calls me 'Greenie.'"

“Well, Bart, you look a bit young to be traveling with this crowd of villains.”

Bart nodded. “Aye, sir. I only just joined them. I done nothing illegal at all. I just needed a job, sir.”

“Greenie, I order ye to shut the hell up!” yelled Irad.

Higgins pretended he didn’t hear him. “So tell me about this Pirate’s Code.”

Bart looked at his fellow prisoners, each of whom had murder in his eyes. He gulped. “It be a magical Code, sir. All pirates have to swear by it, in blood. It binds us so that if we makes a promise by the Code and don’t keep it, we gets gravely ill. Boils erupt on our faces, our limbs rot, and within a month, we be dead.”

“Is that so?” Higgins scratched at his nose. “How interesting. I wonder why I never heard of it before.”

“Because it be death to he that mentions it!” Irad yelled. “Greenie, yer a dead man!”

“Please, sir, make him swear on the Code and then set me free. There be no loyalty from me to him.”

Higgins marched back to Irad. Bart winced as the other pirates kicked him.

“Well, Captain Irad. Here, then, is my deal.” Higgins grinned. “I will release you and your crew and will provide you with a ship—no, not your ship, but a nice vessel that will serve your purpose. I will captain the ship to make sure you keep your promise.

“You will swear that you will obey my orders as Captain and that no harm will come to me. That includes locking me in the brig or otherwise restricting my movement in any way. A faster and more powerful English ship will follow at a safe distance. I will send them regular signals in a code you won’t know. You will use your secret to defeat the kraken. Once this is completed, I will return you to a port where you can go free.”

“And me ship?”

“I’m allowing you to live and you want your *Pickled Rose* back, too? I don’t think you realize that your negotiating power isn’t very strong right now.”

Irak growled and mumbled under his breath. “It be The *Prickly Rose*, ye scum-sucking—”

“You must swear all this on the Pirate’s Code.”

“Ye blasted sour-faced bugswallower! Ye don’t leave me no choice. Right, then.” He took a long breath. “I swear, on the Pirate’s Code, that I will obey ye as Cap’n, make sure no harm comes to ye, not lock ye in the brig, and will use all me powers to defeat the kraken in exchange for the freedom of me and me crew.”

Higgins grinned. “There now, that wasn’t so terrible, was it?” He turned to his soldiers. “Wheel the cage down to the docks and get the crew on board the *Fitzgerald*. Make sure none of them escape.”

“What about me, sir?” asked Bart.

Higgins shook his head. “You are too useful to me, boy. I need you with me.”

Bart wiped his forehead as Irad's laugh echoed in his ears.

*For the rest of this story, get "Cutlass and Musket"*

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