

Irada poked at the lifeless body.

"He ain't gettin' any more dead, Cap'n," said Bart.

"Aye, I suppose you're right," Irada sighed, tossing aside the gnarled stick.

"He was a good man, he was, and a brave one, too. Greenie! What be his name again?"

"Daniel, sir," Bart replied, clenching his teeth at his captain's apparent refusal to learn the names of any of his recent crew.

"Daniel, eh?" Irada scratched at the five day's growth of beard that apparently had become a new nesting place for the small sandy bugs that infested the island. "Not exactly a name to strike fear into yer enemies. Ah, well, here's to ye, Daniel."

The three remaining pirates raised their hands in salute to their fallen comrade, and Bart licked his lips wistfully, wishing for a drink to make an honest toast. The relentless sun burned their skin, and the Caribbean wind extended little reprieve. Bart rubbed his brow with a dirty cloth and glanced at his captain.

Captain Irada's long untidy mane of golden-red hair swirled in the breeze like a cold fire engulfing his head, the steely resolve in his eyes guaranteeing no mutiny would deter the mission. Sweat drenched his fine linen shirt and days of climbing over rocks, crawling through quicksand, fighting giant scorpions, and surviving a series of strange explosive traps had taken its toll on his usually immaculate presentation. It would be difficult to perpetuate his reputation as the

lady-killing “Kissing Pirate” in his current state; the women would seriously resist his advances, as opposed to merely feigning protest.

Kneeling, Irad spread the parchment wide between his hands, the two remaining staring over his shoulder.

“Blast and bugger, it still says the same thing!” he spat. “Ye’d think Daniel’s death would have satisfied it.”

Bart bit his lip and glanced at the first mate who, as usual, remained deathly silent. “What was supposed to happen?” he asked.

“Arrr, I don’t know,” Irad admitted, scratching at his unshaven face. “But every other time we did the right thing, the next clue would appear on the bloody map.”

“I don’t trust it,” Bart shivered. “It be terrible voodoo magic.”

“Aye, ‘tis indeed,” Irad said, eyeing the young lad. “But if that’s what Rummy Jack made, then that’s what it be.”

“How do ye know it be his?” Bart asked, backing away from the dreaded magic.

Irad stood with a bit of difficulty, leaning slightly against his cutlass for support. “Ye don’t know, do ye?”

Bart shook his head. “I follow orders, Cap’n, and don’t ask no questions. But it’s been five days now, and a dozen dead. I don’t want to be the next, and I’d like to know what makes you so sure this ain’t a trap.”

He stared somewhat defiantly at Irad who tilted his head, pursed his lips, and looked down at the young sailor. Bart had just recently agreed to join the

captain and his crew with the promise of great treasure, but nary a doubloon had been sighted. Instead, the young sailor watched as one after another died from a variety of strategic and mysterious traps. To make matters worse, the captain seemed to care little for the lost men. Bart, being the youngest, had been instantly dubbed “Greenie” for both his inexperience and the color of his favorite cap. The constant use of the name had soured his enthusiasm for this seemingly foolish quest.

Without turning his head, Irad gave a glance to his first mate, whose dark skin glistened under the oversized hat. A boyish grin filled the first mate’s face, soon accompanied by a shrug.

“Right ye are, lad.” Irad smiled, turning back quickly. “Ye ain’t been with me that long, after all. Ye don’t know the bloody truth.”

Bart wiped his filthy hands on his filthy pants and blinked uncomfortably, unsure of his captain’s intent.

“Rummy Jack’s been sailin’ these waters for years, as ye know,” Irad began. “Stealin’ from the Spanish and Dutch but mostly stealin’ from *me*! These be my waters, and he knows it! The Pirate’s Code be nothing to this scurvy villain!”

Bart nodded, aware of the rivalry.

“So when I discovered that he had buried his treasure and had a voodoo queen make a magical map, well, I says to myself, ‘Irad, that treasure be rightfully yours,’ I says. ‘Twasn’t that hard to have Betty get that map for me when Rummy be visitin’ her once.”

“Betty?” Bart asked. “Ye mean Buxom Betty?”

“Aye, ye know her then?”

Bart smiled broadly. “*Everybody* knows her.”

Irada gave a quick snort of a laugh and continued. “I paid her quite a few doubloons for it, and she delivered. Had the map in me hands faster than a rat off a sinkin’ ship. But when I open it up, it be blank. All it says is ‘ye need the right key.’ ‘Twas a clue, no doubt.”

“The right key...” Bart mumbled as he stared at the ground, brows furrowed.

“Key Largo, ye damned fool!” Irada spat. “The easternmost key, farthest to the right on the map.”

Bart nodded. “Aye, that be brilliant!”

Irada smiled. “There’s a reason I be captain, ye know.”

Rubbing at his sunburned nose, Bart asked, “But if it be just a map fer himself so he can find the treasure again, why did he want these traps and puzzles?”

Irada slapped the lad across the back of his head, propelling Bart face forward into the sand. “Ye bloody dinghy boy! Rummy knows how to get by all these things. He needs the map to remember where they all are. The scallop sucker probably will have that voodoo witch with him when he comes fer it, too. She made most of the traps so can probably conjure up some way to get past them all.” He grinned, and with a nod added, “Ah, Greenie! Wish I could see Rummy’s face when he learns the treasure ain’t where he thinks it be.”

Bart rose slowly, keeping his distance. “Right, but what now? Daniel be dead from the dart. I’ll not be touching that rock to get one fer myself. Cap’n,” he added.

Irada stared at the map, brushing aside pebbly sand. Each time a clue had been solved or a barrier passed, more of the map became visible. Following the clues required traversing the island in nonsense directions.

The grizzled captain ran his dusty finger over the sandy parchment, tracing the path. “Skull,” he finally muttered.

Bart leaned forward. “What?”

“It be a skull!” Irada proclaimed. “Look here! The trail we made be the outline of a skull, and right now we be where the nose be!”

With a confident smirk, Irada marched to the large incongruous stone blocking their way. Upon first encountering it, they knew instinctively that it was their target, as it did not fit the land topography in the slightest. Irada reached out his hand, and ignoring Bart’s cries, confidently traced an outline of a skull. Not a glimmer of worry crossed the captain’s face, as if he did this sort of thing every day.

“No dart,” Bart whispered.

“Aye, but now what?” Irada asked, glancing down at the map which remained unchanged. “That should have —”

A low rumbling interrupted the pirate’s words as the three jumped back involuntarily, staring at the wall. Crumbling like sugar flushed by rainwater, the

formerly solid stone fell softly and dissipated through the ground. Within seconds, no sign remained of its presence.

“Voodoo magic!” Bart gulped as Irad nodded his agreement.

Blue lichen illuminated a tight path leading down into a salty cave, a cool inviting breeze washing over their faces. Irad nodded to his first mate and an already lit whale oil lamp was soon in his hand. Without a word, the pirate captain rolled up the precious map, held the lamp high and took confident steps forward. The two remaining followed cautiously.

Cave walls sculpted smooth from years of falling salt water made traversing the narrow passageways tricky, but Irad marched on, oblivious to the danger. Bart blinked nervously, trying to keep up, while the first mate sighed disapprovingly at his hesitancy.

Key Largo itself was barely above sea level and as the trio dogged the twisted trail it became clear that they were soon below the ocean. Turning an anxious eye to every shadow, Bart whispered, “There be no caves in the keys. 'Tis voodoo...”

“Voodoo... voodoo... voodoo” echoed back his voice from a distance, and suddenly the lamp illuminated a broad and tall grotto, salty water dripping down its edges and stalactites, forming a small pool in the center. The steady droplets into the pond matched the three’s heightened heartbeats. Irad held the lamp low and crept toward the pond.

“There! See?”

Bart felt his heart pounding so loudly he thought he'd wake the dead. Moving slowly cautiously, he peered into the shallow pool. A large red "x" shimmered from beneath, prancing in the water.

"Rummy Jack's treasure!" Irad licked his lips. "It be here!" He moved forward, only to be held back by Bart's strong arm. "What be this mutiny, Greenie?" he demanded. "Leave me go!"

"It be a trap!" Bart cried. "A big red 'x'? That be too obvious! A trap, I tell ye!"

A voice echoed through the chamber. "Listen to Greenie."

For the rest of this story, get "Rum and Runestones"

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