

A Day at the Pond

Duncan was a soft, furry, brown mouse. He had big, round ears and a long, skinny tail. He lived in a house in southern Scotland, near the border with England. It was surrounded by green rolling hills. In the fields, hundreds of sheep nibbled on the tall, waving grasses. Birds of all colors and types built nests in the oak trees and critters, such as hedgehogs and rabbits, lived in the hedgerows. Duncan was lucky. During the winter he stayed warm and cozy. During the summer, the windows of the house were opened up and a cool breeze floated through. He was able to go outside and run around in the fields. Life was perfect for Duncan, except for one thing, Kennedy, a large, white cat with black patches of fur. Kennedy lived in the house with Duncan and he wanted nothing more than to eat Duncan for supper.

One peaceful morning Duncan walked down to the pond in the meadow. The sun's rays danced through the tree branches, which were swaying gently in the dawn breeze. Leaves of all colors and sizes had fallen from the trees growing around the pond. There were maroon, gold, amber, copper, maize, russet and orange leaves lying on the ground. Duncan noticed that several of them were floating on the surface. "I want to go to the middle of the pond," he said. He spotted a copper-colored leaf lying at the edge. He picked up a twig and climbed into the leaf. Pushing away from the side, the leaf, with Duncan standing right in the middle of it, began to bob up and down on the water. "This is fun!" Duncan giggled.

Kennedy was outside chasing birds. Two crows had been nibbling on the ready-to-harvest corn, growing tall in the cornfields. Kennedy had chased them away. He ran over to the scarecrow that stood tied to a wooden pole. "You certainly aren't doing your job," he muttered. "Are you going to just stand there and let the crows eat all the crop?" The scarecrow looked down at Kennedy with its black, button eyes. When it didn't answer, Kennedy said, "I suppose it's up to me to keep them out then." Just then he spotted Duncan down by the pond. He crept silently through the stalks of corn, being sure to stay hidden. "I wonder what that mouse is up to," he smirked. He watched as Duncan climbed onto the leaf and floated into the center of the pond.

Duncan lay down on the leaf and peered over the edge. The water was so clear that he could see huge orange fish swimming through the reeds. He stuck his tiny hand into the water and scooped some up, splashing it on his face. Water dripped from his whiskers and nose and made little ripples across the pond. When he reached the center, he stood up. "What a view! I can see all the fields. Over there is the corn. It's getting tall. There's the pumpkin patch," he said. Just then he spotted something moving in the cornstalks. "What's that?" he wondered. Kennedy crept closer and closer, trying to stay well hidden, but Duncan spotted him. "It's Kennedy! He thinks he's so smart!" Duncan cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Kennedy, I can see you!" and started to laugh. "You can't get me. You hate the water."

Kennedy pounced out of the corn and ran down to the edge of the pond. He was angry that he had been caught. Duncan was right though. There was nothing Kennedy could do. He did hate the water and wouldn't go in it for any reason.

"What's the matter, Kennedy? Are you a fraidy cat? Are you a big baby and afraid of the water?" Duncan teased.

"I'll get you, Duncan. Just you wait and see. You can't stay out on that leaf forever," Kennedy threatened.

But Duncan seemed very content just floating about on the water. Hours passed and he was still happy as could be. He'd taken some cheese with him in a little bag and drank water from the pond. Kennedy, however, wasn't as patient. He was getting angrier and angrier as each hour passed. "I've got to think of a way to get that mouse," he mumbled softly to himself. He sat down on a patch of grass and started to think. "Aha. I've got an idea," he smiled.

Duncan was watching the cat. "What's he up to?" he wondered. Kennedy was picking up stones.

Suddenly one came flying through the air and landed just a few inches away from Duncan. Water came splashing all over him and the leaf began to bob up and down. Duncan nearly fell off. "What's the matter, Duncan? Feeling a little wet?" Kennedy snickered. "Here's another one for you," he shouted and threw another stone. It landed even closer and soaked Duncan from head to tail. Kennedy threw one after another. After a few minutes, the leaf was filled with water. Duncan had to use his hands and scoop it out so the leaf wouldn't sink. "This time, I'm aiming for the leaf, Duncan. Here it goes," he called.

Duncan watched the stone fly through the air. In a panic, he lay down on the leaf and used his hands as oars and rowed as fast as he could. The stone hit the water right where the leaf had been only moments earlier. Duncan rowed and rowed.

"Stop that! You'll kill me!" he shouted to the cat.

"That's the plan. Then I can eat you!" Kennedy shouted.

"If you sink me, then I'll be in the middle of the water. How will you get me then?" Duncan answered.

Kennedy stopped. The mouse was right. He would have no way of getting him from the middle of the pond. He threw the stones down angrily. Duncan wiped the water off himself and finished tossing the pond water out of the leaf.

Several more hours passed. The sun was lowering in the sky and Duncan was quite fed up floating about in the water. His cheese was all gone and he wasn't in the mood to drink anything else. He watched the cat carefully. Kennedy was also getting tired and hungry. "I'm going to get a bite to eat and then I'll be back to get you," he shouted to the mouse and then ran off toward the house.

Duncan quickly rowed the leaf to the side of the pond and jumped out onto the grass. He took some brown leaves and broke them into little bits and put them inside the bigger leaf. He pushed it off into the water and watched to see that it didn't float away too far. When he saw that the leaf stayed near the shore, he ran off and hid in the bushes.

After a while Kennedy came back. He spotted the leaf bobbing up and down near the shore. "Aha, I've got you now," he shouted and ran towards the leaf. He grabbed it with his paw and shoved it into his mouth. Duncan giggled. "What's this?" Kennedy meowed. He began to spit. "Bits of leaves? What happened to Duncan?" He was very angry.

Duncan ran as fast as he could back to the house and his

mouse hole. He munched down some bits of cheese and lay in front of the hole to watch for the cat to come back. Kennedy came through the door a few minutes later. He was scowling. He walked right up to the hole. Duncan jumped backwards to safety. Kennedy stuck his face down so Duncan could see. "I'll get you next time," he warned and then went and lay down in front of the fire.

Duncan giggled and giggled. "We'll see about that." He then curled up in a ball and went to sleep, dreaming of his fun day at the pond.

Captain Blackheart



Captain's Log:

My name's Blackheart and I am the Captain of the ship, the *Treasure Hunter*. I've been a pirate most of my life. When I was but a lad of ten, my father, a drunkard, sold me to a pirate for a keg of Tortuga Rum. I don't think my mother worried too much. She took the first swig from the keg. Captain Bloodsword put me to work right away. If I wasn't swabbing the deck, I was fetching his grub and picking the maggots out of it. He wasn't all that bad. He taught me how to pillage and plunder and rifle and loot and kidnap and ravage and all the other things that pirates do. By the time I was fourteen years old; I had my own eye patch, dagger, and knew how to curse with the best of them.

I sailed the seas with Cap'n Bloodsword for ten years, until he died when the British ship, the *HRM Seven Wives* blasted a hole in the side of our ship. I managed to swim away. I found a small island and lived on coconuts, raw fish and rainwater for a few months. One cloudless morning

another pirate ship, the *Red Cloud*, stopped by to bury stolen crates of rum. Captain Goldtooth took me on and I stayed with him until I got my own ship, the *Treasure Hunter*, twenty years ago. He made sure I received an education. He always told me a captain must be educated, above his crew. I owe a lot to Goldtooth. A fine captain he was.

I've got a fine crew of pirates. They're faithful and stalwart and can handle the rigging during the worst storms the seas can dish out. We've been hunted by the British Navy for as long as I can remember. They nearly caught us once, but we escaped by the hair of a stray dog.

That same small island I was marooned on, well, I've buried my treasure there, not far from the booty of rum. I call it Skulltooth Island. It's not shaped like a skull, or even a tooth; I just happen to like the name. My crew and I have enough buried treasure to keep us in the lap of luxury for the rest of our lives. If only we could get back to it. That's my problem. You see, about two years ago a group of settlers from Polynesia rowed over and built a village. There's a hill in the middle of the island and they can see any ship that comes within five miles. Every time I try to fetch my treasure, the islanders fight us off with fiery arrows and not only that, they control sharks. Do not doubt me. I swear on the Jolly Roger himself that whenever we get near, the sharks attack our ship. Some of them are so big that when they charge the *Treasure Hunter*, they break the wooden slats with their snouts; but I and my mates have a plan, we do. Argh! (I threw that in for effect) We're going after our treasure and those islanders are not going to stop us this time.

* * *

Here is my story:

The ship bobbed up and down on the rough sea. The sun, hidden by massive gray clouds, hadn't shown itself for three days. Me and the crew stayed in our cabins, or below deck, avoiding the swells that sloshed over the decks, wiping away everything in their path. Everything that could be tied down had been.

The night lingered far too long for most of us. Though they had their sea legs, the rolling action of the ocean brought even the toughest sailor to his knees. They slept when they could, praying for the night to end. I had to endure an endless night of listening to their moans and groans.

“Ahoy! Land ho!” Silverear shouted. “It's Skulltooth Island. Cap'n Blackheart, should I weigh anchor?”

I opened the cabin door. The fresh sea air whipped the sails, but I enjoyed it and took a few deep breaths before answering. “Drop anchor. The storm's past. I thought we'd end up in Davy Jones' Locker this time. Worst storm I've seen in years.”

“Ahoy, Cap'n Blackheart.” Silverear called down from the crow's nest.

I looked up to see which direction my first mate pointed. “Land ho! Skulltooth Island? Are you sure?”

“Aye, Cap'n. It's Skulltooth. I'll never forget that sight. I'm coming down.” The earrings under Silverear's sweat-stained scarf caught a glimmer of light as the sun's rays burst through the clouds. (Rather poetic of me, isn't it?)

“When are you going to get rid of those fool earrings? You've got enough silver in your ears to buy yourself your own ship.” He ignored me. I stood at the railing, mumbling to myself while the crew cleaned up the disarray from the storm's fury. “I know you're out there sharks. You'll not stop us this time. I want my treasure and I'm going to get it. I've had enough adventures. It's time to settle down.”

“Pardon me, Cap'n, but we've come a bit close. The sharks will soon be attacking our ship, if the arrows of fire don't get us first.” Silverear moved in closer to the rail.

“I've got a plan, Silverear. I want you and Grub to put the nets over the side and catch us a good supply of fish. When you've caught enough, I want you to pulverize them.” I looked down at the waves; my eyes open for signs of a fin.

“Cap'n? Then what?”

“Sweep it all into one of the lifeboats and put it over the side. Make sure you punch a small hole in the bottom of it so the blood seeps into the sea. The sharks will sense the blood and go after it, while we take the ship to Skulltooth Island. I think it will work.” When I grinned, Silverear backed up. I knew my rotting, plaque-covered teeth sent a foul odor with each word spoken. His mouth smelled as putrid as mine. It's one of the hazards of a pirate's life.

“Aye, aye, Cap'n. Grub and I will get on it right away.” Silverear rushed to the back of the ship to obey my orders. At least I didn't have to worry about mutiny.

“That will take care of those sharks. Now to put my next plan in order.” I glanced at the wheel. “Nims! Come here.”

The eye-patched pirate waved an acknowledgment, jumped down the steps and stopped in front of me. “Aye, Cap'n. What can I do for ye?”

“You and I are going to row over to Skulltooth. Silverear is creating a diversion for the sharks and the others will sail the ship around to the bay. You and I will row to the north side.”

“Cap'n, we'll need more than the two of us to row that far. Why, it's nearly 5 miles. I'm getting old and my arms can't take that.” Nims sighed and wiped his forehead with the tail of his shirt. Gray, wispy hairs, coated with rime and grease poked out from under a black scarf. A knot at the back kept it on his head during the worst winds.

“We're going. It's my plan. Ready a boat and as soon as Silverear sets the other boat in the water, we're off. Those are my orders. You need a bath, Nims. You stink.”

“Yes, Cap'n.” The grumbling and offended pirate shuffled off to lower the boat into the water.

“I'll feed him to the sharks after we get back.” I shouted, “Bring a shovel too, Nims.” The scent of plumeria, jasmine and honeysuckle floated across the waves to the ship. Even from that distance the island called to me; or was it my treasure?

My plan went accordingly. The boat of fish dropped into the water and once I saw the blood dripping, I knew Nims and I would make it. Silverear lowered us and when our boat hit the waves, we bobbed up and down on the swells. I untied the ropes and off we went. Nims and I rowed hard, we did. Our

arms ached after the first mile, but I wanted my treasure.

Nims tapped me on the shoulder. “Cap'n, the sharks. Look at 'em all.”

I gulped in horror as fifty to sixty gray fins appeared, swimming towards the ship. “They'll not harm us. They're doing just as I planned.” We watched as the sharks rammed the small boat, trying to turn it over. “Let's row a little faster, Nims.”

An hour later we jumped from the water, dragging the boat onto the sand. The *Treasure Hunter* made sail and headed for the bay in the center of the island.

“Cap'n, what do you have in mind, sir?” Nims squeezed the sea water from his loose-fitting pants.

“We're going to get my treasure and get out of here before those islanders can catch us. I'm sure one of them saw us rowing in.” I grabbed the shovel out of the boat and rushed off with Nims right behind me. “By the way, Nims, you look like a bag of potatoes!”

“Right, Cap'n.” He completely ignored the insult. “Where is it buried, Cap'n?”

In return, I ignored him and walked on. I knew exactly where the treasure was. We stopped at the base of a bent over palm tree. “Right here, Nims.” I threw the shovel at him. He didn't argue with me. He simply took the shovel and dug, stopping every few minutes to wipe his brow. I pulled a bottle of rum out of my coat pocket and took a swig when Nims wasn't looking.

“Cap'n,” he said, stopping to sniff the air. “The flowers here sure smell like rum. Oh, what I wouldn't give for a swig of the stuff right now. How deep do I have to dig?”

I shook my head. “Dig until I say to stop.”

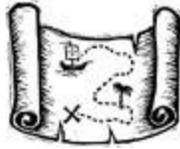
A noise caught my attention. The thick jungle of vines and leafy trees presented a haven for anyone who wanted to sneak up and rob me of my treasure. I turned. “Stay here and keep digging, Nims. I think we've got company.” Before I left I took another glance at the *Treasure Hunter*. She was near enough to the island for me to see the crew on board. Silverear spotted me and waved. The fool!

I crept into the trees, my ears alert for any unfamiliar noises. A branch cracked. I swiftly turned and saw a monkey running up a tree with some soft of fruit in his hand. “A bloody monkey.” Embarrassed that I'd worried for nothing, I headed back to the beach.

“I've got it, Cap'n. Your treasure chest is right here. Could ye give me a hand?” Nims tossed the shovel out of the hole.

I jumped in with him and the two of us lifted it up onto the beach. My heart raced with anticipation. Gold! Jewels! Riches! And they're all mine. A rusted iron lock held heavy chains in place, wrapped tightly around the chest. I pulled the pistol from inside the waistband of my pants and aimed.

“Wait, Cap'n. If you shoot the gun, the islanders will hear it.” Nims grabbed my arm.



“You're right, Nims. What am I thinking? Find a large stone. We'll beat it apart. It's only iron and rusting at that.” I headed into the trees, leaving Nims to search on the beach. I'd only gone a few yards when I heard that same rustling sound in the trees above me. I looked up to see a huge coconut heading for my face. Blackness whirled around me as I fell to the ground.

My head throbbed. I opened my eyes. An olive-skinned face gazed at me. I rolled over on my side, not sure of my surroundings. Ten men stood around me, their spears pointed at my throat. They at least allowed me the dignity of standing. “Hello, gents. I suppose you saw us rowing in. Ah well.”

“You are Captain Blackheart?” One of the islanders spoke English, much to my relief.

“Aye, that's who I be.” I removed my hat and bowed, adding a few illiterate words for their benefit.

The leader stepped forward. “What do you want? Why do you keep coming back to the Island of Fragrant Flowers?”

I nearly burst out laughing, but instead I kept it to a

choking cough. “Island of Fragrant Flowers? What sort of sissy name is that? It’s Skulltooth Island, you fools. Fragrant Flowers. Ha!”

The islanders looked at each other and mumbled something in their native language. “Your ship has been captured and is anchored in the Bay of Flying Fish. Your crew are tied up and surrounded by more of our people, all armed with spears.”

I lifted my eye patch and looked these men over. They wore only a small animal skin tied around their waist. Somehow I didn’t think my crew would be afraid of them. “Why don’t you let us get what we came for and leave? You’ll never see us again. You’ve got me word on it.” I had to make them believe I was stupid, hence the odd word again.

“Follow me.” He nudged me with the sharp tip of the spear.

I glanced in the bushes and saw Nims squatting. At least one of us was free. I hoped Nims would come up with a plan to rescue us.

My crew sat in the sand with wrists bound and backs together. Waves lapped at their bottoms and crabs crawled all over their legs. The leader, Gopher, as I named him, pushed me into the circle. One of the other natives bound my wrists with palm frond strips. I must admit they were tight. We had no way of escaping them without our knives.

The others gathered around Gopher. I counted twenty-two of them. No women were in sight.

“Say, Cap’n,” Silverear whispered. “How are we going

to get out of this mess and where's Nims?

The other crew members heard and turned to look at me. "He's hiding. I'm sure he'll come up with a plan to rescue us." I saw the look for hopelessness on their faces. Even I knew Nims was worthless. To think of him as a gallant knight coming to our rescue was simply preposterous.

Gopher ordered one of his men to start a fire. Within minutes the flames burst from the dried wood and brush.

"They're not going to eat us, are they, Cap'n?" Jigsaw nudged me with his elbow.

"I don't think so. They're not cannibals." I scoffed and spat in the sand.

Gopher walked over to me, kicking granules of wet sand in our direction. "Captain Blackheart, what is it that you came to find and where is the other man?"

I gave him a dumb look. "What other man? I rowed here alone. As for what I came to find, it's a chest of old papers." I had to think fast. He wasn't falling for it. "The papers show I own land. They're deeds. Yes, deeds for land in Tortuga."

"Tortuga? I am not familiar with that place." Gopher stared with eyes of stony gray.

"It is not in these here parts. It's in the Caribbean. It's an island. That's why we want to get the chest and leave." I tried to keep eye contact with him so he'd believe me.

"And where is this chest?"

"Back where you captured me. Say, you're not planning

on eating us, are you?" I watched as the flames roared higher.

Gopher laughed. His buck teeth jostled up and down. I found it strange that he had all of his teeth. "The fire is to roast a turtle. We will escort you and your crew to the chest and then make sure it gets on your boat. You must make an oath with us that you will never return to your Skulltooth Island."

"Deal! You've got my word. What sort of oath?"

"Each of you must perform a ritual."

I didn't like the way Gopher said the last word. "A ritual? Is that some sort of Polynesian thing? You don't expect us to summons some ancient dead tiki god, do you?"

Gopher glared at me. "Don't mock me, Captain Blackheart. I would rather cut all your tongues out and feed them to our wild dogs than have to listen to your lies one moment longer. However, if you succeed at the ritual, you can have your freedom."

Silverear bashed me in the side with his elbow. "Cap'n; we'll do it, whatever it is. I want the deeds from the chest and to be on our way."

"Very well. What is your name, sir?" I knew it wasn't Gopher.

"You can call me Dakini. I am leader of the Puulami tribe. Stand, all of you."

A spear thrust in my face, barely missing my nose. As we struggled to stand, several islanders walked past dragging

a giant sea turtle.

I followed Dakini through the trees to the spot where he'd captured me. Praying that Nims was smart enough to stay hidden, I took them to the chest. I noticed Nims had put it back in the hole. "There it is. Now, if you'll help me get it out of the hole, we'll be on our way. Once the chest is on the ship, safe and secure, we'll do your native ritual."

Dakini ordered Chappy and Zeedal to lift the chest out of the hole.

Relief washed over me when they set it on the sand without bursting the lock. "Thank you, mates. Now, if we can get it to our ship?" I nodded with arched eyebrows.

"Carry it!" Dakini commanded my men. Chappy and Zeedal handled it, though a few times they tripped.

I knew if the chest burst open and the natives saw the gold, we were dead men.

Dakini allowed Silverear and Chappy to row the chest to the ship, accompanied by two spear-holding natives. Once it was safely stowed in our hold, they rowed back.

"Now, Captain Blackheart, it is time for the ritual."

The turtle had been thoroughly gutted. The shell lay to the side. One of the men sat polishing it with a thick leaf. The meat was being skewered and prepared to roast.

"What do you want us to do with a turtle shell, mate?" Amused by the sight, I let out a chuckle.

"You, Captain Blackheart, and your men, are going to do

the first task in our ritual. We are taking you up to the top of the mountain in the center of the island. There you will slide down the mountainside.” Dakini scowled. “And let me make this perfectly clear; you are not my mate.”

“Slide? On the shell? What sort of joke is this?” I shook my head back and forth.

“This is no joke. There are three pits; you either swerve around them, or you go so fast that you fly over the top of them.”

“What exactly is in these three pits?” I glanced at Silverear.

“The first pit is full of bamboo canes that have been sharpened to points. I’d do my best to avoid that pit. The second one is full of snakes.”

“Snakes? What sort of snakes? Poisonous?” Chappy’s eyes darted back and forth in anxiousness.

“One could say there were slightly poisonous. I think it’s best you try to avoid that pit too.”

“And the third?” Silverear asked before I opened my mouth.

“The third pit holds a rare treat. A rare plant grows on this island. It’s not an ordinary plant. The sap is made of androxious miglianton, otherwise known as ‘pirate killer’.” Dakini laughed out loud.

“And what does this ‘pirate killer’ do?” Zeedal’s voice quaked with fear.

“One drop on your skin and it bubbles and boils in agonizing pain. We’ve filled the entire pit to the top with it. Any other questions?” Dakini looked at each one of us.

Silverear snapped with sarcasm. “I suppose we should avoid this pit too?” Instead of getting an answer, he received a sharp jab in his lower back.

“You say this is a ritual. That would mean you’ve all done this before, am I right?” I felt my legs shaking.

“You are right. We natives, as you call us, used our skills to survive the ritual. If you survive, you will move on to the next part of the ritual.” Dakini turned to one of the other natives. “Take them up the mountain. Have Captain Blackheart go last so he can watch his crew.” He climbed into a chair and four of the strongest natives carried him up the mountainside.



Spears were shoved into our backs, forcing us to move through the jungle towards the mountain. Grub and Jigsaw were nearly in tears. Zeedal wet his pants. Silverear and Chappy snarled at the natives. I kept my eye on the path, ever

watchful for an escape route and wondering where Nims had hidden himself

Once we reached the top, I had to agree it was a grand view of the island and offered a clear view of all approaching ships. The *Treasure Hunter* looked like a pile of tiny sticks from up here.

Dakini arrived with his entourage, climbed from his throne and pushed Zeedal forward. “You will go first. Down at the bottom, if you make it alive, awaits Ribani. He will escort you back to our village and then bring the shell here so the next pirate can take their turn.”

“Cap’n? Do something. Help me. I can’t do this.” Zeedal squealed in terror.

I walked over to him and placed my hand on his back. “Zeedal, do your best, mate. Think of the treasure on the ship and what you can buy once we get back to the Caribbean. Spiced rum, honeycakes, stuffed hens, meat pies smothered in stew...” I had to lick my lips. I was making myself hungry. “Hang in there, mate.

Zeedal sat on the shell. Instantly Dakini pushed him off. I looked to the bottom of the mountain, if you want to call it that. I’d call it a large hill. I saw the three pits and cringed when I heard Zeedal’s screams roar back to us.

“Swerve to the left, Zeedal!” Silverear cupped his mouth and shouted. “Now to the right.”

I watched as my crewman survived all three pits and disappeared into the jungle. “He made it! I knew he could do it. That’s my mate, Zeedal.” I slapped hands with my crew

and we laughed with relief.

“Don’t get too excited. There are still five of you left. The next one might not be so lucky,” Dakini said, grinning.

Ten minutes later Ribani appeared with the shell. He and Dakini mumbled whispers and then Ribani grabbed Jigsaw and threw him onto the shell.

Jigsaw turned to me, but didn’t say a word. His eyeballs nearly bulged out of their sockets. He reminded me of a cornered rat. When Dakini pushed him off, Jigsaw didn’t let out a peep. He raced down the mountain, heading straight for the first pit.

“Swerve, mate, swerve!” Silverear shouted, but Jigsaw headed straight forward.

I nearly swallowed my tongue when the shell, with Jigsaw holding on, went straight into the first pit. Ribani ran down the hill and stood at the rim. I heard laughter. He waved to Dakini.

“It seems your friend is lucky. He went into the first pit, but the shell protected him from being impaled by the bamboo. By doing this, he’s avoided the second and third pit. I wouldn’t try it, if I were you. He was very lucky.” Dakini scowled at me crew.

We stood in silence watching Jigsaw climb out of the pit. Aside from a few splinters, he was unharmed. Ribani delivered him to the village and came back with the turtle shell.

Grub went next. After watching his first two mates go

down, he knew how to steer the shell and missed all three holes. When he disappeared into the rainforest, I saw a blur move to the side. “Nims.” I whispered into the trade winds and no others heard me.

That left Chappy, Silverear and myself. As expected, the three of us passed the so-called ritual without any problem. At the bottom of the hill, I walked back over to the three pits. I nearly wet my pants when I saw there was nothing inside any of them, except a few pieces of bamboo lying in the bottom of the first pit.

“What’s this? You were joking with us, ye were.” Silverear stood next to me. “That’s unfair. Even we pirates have a code of honor. Enough of this trickery.”

Spears lunged at us and stuck in our backs forcing us all the way to the village. There sat Zeedal, Jigsaw and Grub, sitting around the fire eating roasted turtle. After we’d had our fill, Dakini announced, “Time for the second ritual.”

“And what would that be, mate?” I ripped off a piece of meaty flesh with my teeth.

“Anxious? Ah, well. Each of you will be hung by your ankles from the tallest palm on the island.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Silverear said, swallowing a sizzling bite of blubber.

“You’ve not let me finish. The tree has been coated with bee’s honey. In just a short while, hundreds of thousands of vampire ants will be climbing the tree, devouring the honey. Oh, did I mention you will be doused in honey too?” Dakini snickered. “Did I mention that vampire ants are particularly

fond of human blood?”

“Ye forgot to mention both those things, conveniently. If ye’ve all passed this ritual before, how did ye survive? Surely ye can give us clues,” Chappy said.

I heard the bushes rustling behind us. Unfortunately, so did some of the tribe. They ran off and a few moments later they came back to the village with Nims.

“Nims, you fool of a pirate. You could have stayed hidden. Why didn’t you go to the ship and hide, or come up with a plan for our rescue? Now you’re in as much danger as the rest of us.”

“Sorry, Cap’n,” was all he could say.

“Finish eating. Vampire ants love the smell of roasted turtle.” Dakini taunted us.

I threw my meat back into the fire, as did the rest of the crew.

“Take off your clothes.” Dakini stood with his hands on his hips. “They’ll probably fall apart. Have any of you ever washed your clothes, or yourselves?”

“Take off our clothes? For what reason?” I wasn’t about to cooperate without a fight.

“Do you want them to get dirtier when we douse you in honey?” Dakini chuckled.

We stripped down to our skivvies and stood naked, putting up with sneers and jests from the Puulami. Seven natives came towards us, each carrying a wooden bucket of

honey. The first one, Caroo, barked a few commands in his native tongue. I didn't understand a word, but knew what he wanted us to do. We followed about a hundred yards into the jungle and stopped in front of a palm. Dakini was right. It was a tall tree. Caroo took Nims, who cried and whimpered like a blubbering infant, and tied a rope around his ankles. One of the other natives climbed the palm and wrapped the rope around the fronds and then came back down with the end of the rope in his hand.

Dakini pulled at it and Nims inched off the ground. When he was level with my chest, Caroo poured the bucket of honey on Nims. It was thick and amber-colored and oozed all over his body. Nims continued to waller.

“Shut up, mate. You're making a rotter out of yourself. Pirates do not whine.” My temper flared.

Once Nims was thoroughly covered, Dakini pulled the rope again. Up Nims went, until his feet touched the palm fronds. Caroo did a little dance and then pulled a box from the bushes. He opened the lid and tipped the box over. Thousands of black ants, the size of my thumb, raced over to the tree and started eating the honey.

“Your friend, Nims, as you call him, is lucky to be going first. The only ants he has to deal with are these. By the time the last of you has their turn, you'll have seven boxes of ants. I wonder who I should save until last.” Dakini's gaze wandered from me, to Grub, to Jigsaw. “I think it will be,” the man said, stalling, “you.” He slapped Chappy on the back.

“Me? Why me? I don't even like honey.” Chappy's legs nearly gave out on him.

Nobody listened to his complaints. Our eyes focused on the hungry ants. In that short of a time, they had licked the entire bottom half of the tree clean of honey and were moving up to the top. Nims swung back and forth, trying to shake as much honey off as he could. Blobs of it plopped near our feet. A few stray vampire ants ran over to the golden nectar and ate it. That's when I noticed their fangs. "They've got teeth! Sharp teeth at that! You don't live by the code, Dakini."

"A pirate's code is no code of mine. The Puulami have their own code. This is one of our rituals and your only way of survival." Dakini folded his arms across his bronzed chest.

My mind wandered in silence. "Dakini, you've only lived on this island for say, two years? How much of a ritual could it possibly be after that short of a time? How long does my mate have to stay up there, hanging upside down, bare-bottomed? When does the ritual end? Does he have to die?"

"The ritual ends when he is cleaned of the honey. We hope to get him down before the vampire ants begin to eat his flesh. As for the rest of your nonsense, how dare you question the Puulami customs! You pirates are nothing but scallywags."

"You speak very good English for a Puulami native. Is there something you'd like to share with us? Why is it that the others can't speak anything but their native language? Come to think of it, you look familiar. I've been searching my thoughts since I first saw you. I know I've seen you before. I don't think you're a Puulami native at all. Are ye? Argh! Me thinks me smells a rat." (More pirate slang)

I saw Dakini's eyes dart from side to side. I was about to

say something when a loud scream came from above. All gazes turned to Nims. The vampire ants had reached him. They swarmed all over his feet, eating the honey.

“Get them off me!” Nims shook and squirmed in horror, but couldn’t help but laugh. “The bloody ants are tickling me to death.”

“I can’t stand this any more.” I reached over and hit Dakini’s hand. He let go of the rope and after it unwound from the palm fronds, Nims came crashing to the ground.

“I’ll catch you,” shouted Silverear. He and the others raised their arms in hopes of stopping Nims from getting killed. All that was accomplished was that he crashed into them and knocked all to the ground. The honey spread over them, sending the ants crawling in every direction. They jumped up and brushed the ants off.

By now Dakini had his wits about him once again. Before he could order us speared, we ran off into the forest. None of us had on a stitch of clothing, or shoes, but we kept running, heading for the beach with myself leading the way. “Come on, mates. To the beach! We’ll swim to the ship and make sail.”

Like a row of hippopotamus, we raced across the sand with the lions (natives) in chase behind us. Being leaner and fitter than we pirates, the natives closed in fast. I leaped into the water and my mates followed. I didn’t look back, but swam to the ship. Spears splashed around us, but for some reason the Puulami didn’t enter the water. I was soon to find out the reason for that choice.

“Sharks!” Grub’s shriek echoed across the water.

“Sharks! They’re coming for us. We’re gonna die, Cap’n.”

I stopped and turned. At least a hundred gray fins jutted from the water. “Keep swimming. We can make it. Go!” I reached the ship first, grabbed the rope and pulled myself up on to the deck. Silverear, Nims, Jigsaw and Chappy followed, plopping themselves on the wood in exhaustion. I looked over. Zeedal and Grub were still in the water. “They’ll never make it. Get the cannons ready.”

I turned to give orders to me crew. There were four pirates, running about the slippery deck naked and dripping wet. I had to control myself not to laugh.

Silverear aimed the cannon at the sharks. BOOM! The cannonball roared towards the demonfish. Zeedal had hold of the rope. Only Grub was still in the sea. BOOM! Another cannonball sliced through the air into the water. The sharks, instead of in a mass, swam off, away from each other, forming a circle around Grub. “Smart sharks!” I pulled my eye patch back.

“What’ll we do now, Cap’n?” Jigsaw bumped into me. “They’ve surrounded him. This reminds me of the time I served on the Bearded Maiden. We docked at Oak Island. Ten British ships surrounded us. All seemed lost and hopeless. Just then the *Hempen Jig* appeared out of nowhere. The Jolly Roger waved in the wind and I knew we’d be all right. If it hadn’t been for the bravery of Cap’n Dungbie, we’d have all died in British dungeons.”

“What did you say, Jigsaw?”

“I said it reminded me...”



“No, Captain who?”

“Cap’n Dungbie, of the *Hempen Jig*. Do you know him?” Jigsaw jumped when the cannon fired again.

“Swim Grub. Swim!” Silverear shouted, leaning over the railing.

“That’s it! That’s who he is. I knew that I knew him. Get Grub on board and prepare a rowboat to take me back to the island.” I saw the look on Jigsaw’s face.

“What? Are ye mad, Cap’n? Back to the island? They’ll boil you in hot oil and eat you for grub.” Jigsaw slobbered as he spoke.

“Go and get some clothes on. I’m beginning to feel nauseous looking at you.” I felt a gag in my throat. “Bring me some clothes too. All of you, except Silverear, go and put some clothes on.”

“He’s got the rope, Cap’n,” Silverear said. He pulled the last of my crew up and over.

Grub collapsed, vomiting water. I saw the blood on his leg. “One of those sharks started taking a bite out of me, Cap’n. I kicked it in the eye and it let go. That gave me a chance and I reached the rope in the nick of time. I can still feel the jaws snapping shut behind me.” Grub gasped for breath between each word.

Jigsaw showed up with clothes on and a clean set for me.

“Cap’n, what are you doing?” Silverear saw Jigsaw lowering in the rowboat.

“I’m going back to the island. You and Grub get dressed. Take care of his wound and stay here. I’ll take Jigsaw with me. If we’re not back in an hour, sail on. You’ve got the gold.”

“We’ve not opened the chest yet, Cap’n,” Silverear reminded me.

“Wait until I get back before you do, or I’ll make you walk the plank.” I sighed and slid down the rope into the small boat. Both Jigsaw and I rowed to the island. I saw the natives lining up on the beach, their faces registering disbelief. When we neared the beach I climbed out into the water and slogged to the sand. “Dakini, may I have a word with you, please.”

“Came back for more? That can be arranged. If you think I’m letting you and your pirate friend go again, you’re sadly mistaken.”

I ignored Dakini and walked into a hedge of bushes. “Dakini. Please.” I waited for him. He put out his arm and urged his fellow natives to stay in place.

“What is going on, scallywag?” Dakini held a spear in his hand, ready to pierce my heart.

“I’ll tell you what’s going on, Captain Dungbie of the *Hempen Jig*.” I saw the look of shock on his face.

“Who? What is all this about?” He turned for a quick

glance at the islanders.

I was surprised to see how quickly he collected himself. “Enough of the pretense, Captain. So this is where you ended up. I’d heard you vanished into thin air. You heard about my treasure, didn’t you? You came here hoping to find it and never could, until we arrived. You convinced these uneducated natives that you’re some sort of god and they made you their leader. Very good, Captain. Island of Fragrant Flowers? Bay of Flying Fish? A bit feminine for a pirate captain, isn’t it, Dungbie? And why did you let us load the chest into our hold?”

He realized he’d been caught. “As for the gold, my natives will simply kill you all and take it back. Isn’t it nice that the natives can’t understand English. There’s no way they’ll ever know.”

“I’ll know.” Ribani stepped out from one of the bushes. “You see, Captain Dungbie, I was one of your crew.” Dungbie gawked at the native. “Yes, you see now, don’t you? I was sent to find you. I came across this island and made sure my skin got dark before I joined you. You never suspected and neither did I of you. Now what shall we ever do, Captain.” Madness reeked in his voice.

I looked from one fraud to the other. “Well, well, well. You do have a predicament here, don’t you? The way I see it is that you have two choices. You can come and join me and my crew, sail the seven seas, pillage, plunder and all that nonsense, or you can stay here and keep up your game. My guess is that you’re both tired of eating turtle meat and coconuts. Come with me and you can feast on some good old-

fashioned pirate food.”

It took about two seconds for them to make a decision. After coming up with a trumped-up excuse to satisfy the natives, they left Caroo in charge and came back on the rowboat with us.

“Crew, I’d like you to meet our two newest crewmen. This is Dungheap and this is Ribeye. Give them some clothes and put them to work swabbing the decks.” I glanced at Dungheap. His glare was ice cold. “Well, you didn’t think I was going to let you off easy, did you? I hope you enjoy your new names. By the way, do those vampire ants...”

Dungheap shook his head back and forth.

“I thought so,” I scoffed at his gall.

Nims dragged them down into the hold and put them to work. Silverear and the others gathered around the chest. I took my gun and shot the lock off. With slobber drooling from his mouth, Chappy lifted the lid. Thousands of doubloons, golden and shiny and jewels of every color in the rainbow sparkled and glimmered in the midday sun. “My treasure, at last.” I picked a few up and let them slide through my fingers.

The ship shook with a thunderous boom. Silverear ran to the railing and looked over. “It’s the sharks sir. They’re trying to sink us.”

“Make sail, mateys. Avast! Let’s be on our way.” We ran around like chickens without heads until we were under way. A breeze blew from the south, carrying us northward,

away from Skulltooth Island and the sharks.

So there you have it. I've got my gold, jewels, two new crew members and a stiff wind taking us home to Tortuga. What more could a pirate ask for? (Besides a keg of rum. that is)

Log entry – January 6, 1825 – by Captain Andrew John Thomas Blackheart.



The Pink Stones



Gareth sat on the chair, staring at the jar of pink gems. "I will not be happy until the entire jar is full. I must go and find some more." He finished nibbling on some chocolates and then grabbed his staff. A pink glass ball sat on the top, held by prongs of wood. "Off I go." He grabbed his carrying case on the way out. "Ah, a lovely day; perfect for gathering pink glabberdungs. I'm so lucky to live near the forest."

After he reached the edge of the pines and oaks, he took a deep breath. "Lilith will be so pleased when she comes home and finds the jar full. I'm sure she'll want to take them to the village wizard and sell them. Fairies always have to sell

things. I'd be happy letting the jar sit there so I could look at it any time I wanted, but not Lilith. She'll need some fairy dust or a new wand. Ah well. It is my own fault for marrying a fairy."

As Gareth stepped into the forest he immediately saw some pink glabberdungs. "Well, well, well. This might not turn out to be such a bad day after all."

What Gareth didn't know was that Brog was already in the forest gathering the glabberdungs. After Gareth had filled his carrying case, he headed deeper into the forest in hopes of filling his pockets. "Once Lilith takes the jar, I can start a new jar just for me." It didn't take long before he noticed that there were fewer and fewer glabberdungs lying on the ground. He spotted a footprint. "What's this? Someone is trespassing in the forest and by the looks of it has been collecting pink glabberdungs. I'll have none of that!" Gareth hid the carrying case and went in search of the stranger.



Behind an old oak tree Gareth spotted Brog. He was bent over picking up glabberdungs and putting them into a dirty gray bag. Gareth also noticed that Brog held a shiny gold axe over his shoulder. "Drat! He's armed with an axe and all I have is this staff." Gareth groaned and moaned. "How will I ever get those glabberdungs away from him? I know, I'll offer him a trade." Gareth ran after Brog. "Excuse me! Excuse me! I'd like to have a word with you."

Brog stopped and turned around. "What do you want?"

"Excuse me. My name is Gareth and well, you see, this is my forest. Since it is my forest, anything in this forest belongs to me. I'm afraid all those glabberdungs you've got in your bag are mine."

Brog put the bag on the ground and laid his axe on top of it. "Yours, you say? Since when do you own the forest?"

"I've always owned it. Now, sir, I would be happy to offer you a trade. Why don't you come with me to my cottage and you have pick anything you like. It's yours. All I ask is that you let me keep everything in your bag." Gareth felt quite proud he'd come up with such a great idea.

"I'll come with you and see what you have to offer." Brog followed Gareth back to his cottage. He looked through the house, but didn't see much. He spotted the jar of glabberdungs.

"Oh, you can't have that, but you can help yourself to anything else," Gareth said.



Just then Lilith walked in the front door. She stood still. Her gaze wandered to Gareth and then to Brog.

Brog grunted. "I know what I want. I want her."

"You want Lilith? She's my wife," Gareth said.

Later on that night, Gareth sat in his chair looking at his jar of glabberdungs. The jar was full to the brim and a second jar sat next to the first one. He giggled as the pink gems sparkled.

Brog carried his axe over his shoulder and Lilith over the other one. After all, Gareth said he could take anything in the house except the glabberdungs and that's exactly what Brog did.

Oliver Picklenose



Oliver Picklenose lived in a meadow full of daisies, tulips, daffodils and pansies. Every day he'd see butterflies, bumblebees, dragonflies and birds. His home was a large, spotted mushroom. He was called Picklenose because his nose was wrinkled and scrunched up. He preferred to be called Oliver, which is what his friends called him.

A stream flowed through the meadow. It wound about like a snake, from one side to the other. Frogs, lizards, fish and bugs

lived in the stream. Sometimes Oliver sat on a stone and watched all the animals at play, wishing he could swim.

Being such a small elf, he didn't dare go in the water and risk being washed downstream, away from the meadow.

As he sat with his legs dangling over the side of the stone, one of the other elves ran up to him. "Hey Picklenose, I don't like you. I want you to leave the meadow." The elf pushed Oliver into the stream.

He fell under the water and then bobbed to the surface gasping for breath. "I can't swim. Help me!" An oak leaf floated past and he grabbed onto it and pulled himself up. The leaf carried him down the stream, past the willow and aspen trees, past the fields of buttercups and poppies and past the oak trees that were so familiar to him.

When the leaf bumped into a branch that stuck out over the water, Oliver was knocked off. He grabbed the branch and pulled himself to the banks of the stream. His clothes were dripping and he shivered with the cold. "I want to go home." He sat on a clump of grass and cried. Something behind him moved. "Who's there?" Oliver stood and looked around. "Where am I?"

Huge blue flowers, clustered and fragrant shot up from the ground on long green stems. Wild roses blossomed, carnations, begonias and nasturtiums grew around him. "This is pretty." He wandered between the vines and leaves, pushing them out of the way. "This is even prettier than the meadow."

A furry brown mouse ran across the path. It saw Oliver and stopped. "Who are you? What are you doing in Bluebird

Woods?”

“Bluebird Woods? I fell in the stream and it carried me here,” Oliver said.

“You'd better come with me. These woods are filled with bluebirds and there's nothing they'd like more than to eat something as small and tasty as you.”

Oliver ran after the mouse, following it into its burrow. “My name is Oliver Picklenose,” the elf said.

“I'm Gerania and I'm a mouse as you can see. That's an odd name.” The mouse looked at Oliver's nose. “Though I can see why they call you that.”

“I'd rather you just called me Oliver, thank you.”

“Oliver it is. Are you hungry, Oliver? I've got some toadstools and rose hips to nibble on,” Gerania said, showing the elf the pile of food.

“I'd love something to eat, but I only eat honey and daffodil pollen,” Oliver said.

“You'll not find any of that here. You'll have to make your way back to your own meadow. You'd better hurry on your way and be careful of the bluebirds,” Gerania said. She pushed Oliver out of her burrow. “Goodbye now.”

Oliver looked up at the trees. They were much taller than the oak trees and willows and aspen in his meadow. He made his way down to the stream. “I might as well make my way back along the banks. At least I won't get too lost.”

He walked all day long, climbing over tree roots and stones.

A dark shadow fell on him and when he looked up, he saw a bluebird. It flew down and grabbed him with its claws, carrying him high into the air. "Let me go! Let me go!" Oliver squirmed and wiggled and finally the bluebird let go of him. He fell through the air and landed on top of a fluffy dandelion. "That was close."

Oliver looked around. "I'm back home in my own meadow. Hurrah!" He ran through the poppies and tulips and climbed up the branch of a flowering bush. He sat among the leaves and blossoms, happy to be home again. Butterflies flew past. Bumblebees buzzed him and dragonflies zipped by. "There's no place like home." Even though the other elves didn't like him and called him Picklenose, Oliver was happy to be there.