

The Pirate of Panther Bay

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“I don’t like him,” Jean-Michel said moments after the door had shut.

“Maybe not, but he’s the best quartermaster I’ve seen.”

Jean-Michel shot a piercing glance toward Isabella. She smiled.

“You know who I mean,” he said, clearly irritated. “This isn’t the time for jokes.” He slumped into a chair opposite the desk. “The Dagos’ll back stab you faster than you can blink.”

Jean-Michel’s beard consumed a taught face, far thinner than his body, and it still glistened from the sweat of the afternoon’s battle. His skin, deeply marked by years of sun and salt, barely held the hints of the Old World features that could still reveal his noble family roots. Nights inside the fortress walls of Puerto Rico’s *El Morro* had distanced himself from his family history long ago.

“We’ve taken on new crew from captured ships before,” Isabella said. Her voice was tired and weak now that they were alone.

“*Oui*,” Jean-Michel acknowledged, “but ten? I don’t like the way they jumped at the chance—a little too eager for my taste.” He looked at Isabella with a fatherly tenderness.

“And the prisoner—your ‘boy’. He showed more courage than all the Dago captain’s officers put together. He rallied those marines when we had them down. He’s probably responsible for most of the dead and half the wounded.”

Isabella looked at Jean-Michel, comforted by his tone but surprised. Jean-Michel had an unusual, English-like hatred for the Spanish. He almost always objected to bringing Spanish crew on board, claiming their seamanship was so poor they would run a dingy aground. The Spanish prisoner worried him, and that betrayed a respect she had never seen before. Of course, Isabella had never taken an interest in a prisoner before either. Six months. Was it too soon to put to sea after Jacob’s murder?

Jean-Michel looked around at the cabin, giving Isabella a few moments to collect her thoughts. The ceiling forced everyone except the cabin boy and Isabella to duck. On the port side, a small, deep washbasin filled with fresh water stood ready, cleverly suspended in a wooden frame to keep the water from spilling in rough seas—pirate ingenuity. Above it, a frugal mirror hung securely to the ship’s plank siding. A small bureau on the starboard side held whatever clothes Isabella felt she would need on the voyages—usually just a few shirts and a spare pair of breeches. A small cot, lodged between the bureau and hull, was strategically placed in a corner nook below the aft windows. Her carpenters had re-cut the windows to widen her view at Panther Bay, a comforting gesture after Jacob’s murder.

“We can deal with the boy,” Isabella reassured him with a reluctant smile. “Besides, we can use a few more tars scrubbing the decks.” He looked at her unconvinced. “We’ve seen this before, Mick. We offer adventure and excitement. We promise bounty. Only fools prefer the yardarms and cat-o-nine tails of a European man-o-war.”

“Bounty’s been scarce.”

“If they can’t claim loyalty to me—to *us*,” she said testily, “we’ll send the Dagos on their way. They wouldn’t be the first.”

“And the crew?”

She looked at him startled.

“And the boy?” Jean-Michel continued, interrupting her thoughts.

Why that?

“That’s trickier.” Isabella started to thumb through the folders again.

Jean-Michel closed his eyes and shook his head. “We should have let the *Ana Maria* go.”

“Let her go?! If anything would set the crew off, letting a prize go would have.”

“We should have discussed it.”

“I didn’t have enough information.”

“You had enough to commit this ship.” Jean-Michel’s tone was disciplined and authoritative. “You had enough information to risk almost two hundred men, to sacrifice at least fifteen of them. You had enough to commit *me*.”

Isabella stood dumbfounded. He was right. How had she not discussed this with him? How could she have been so foolish? Was she so consumed by her destiny—her mother’s prophecy—that she had stopped all logical thought?

“Isabella, *mon cher*.” Jean-Michel’s voice became low and urgent. “Times are different. The *Marée Rouge* has a new captain. Dissension is in the crew.”

Was this what he meant when he referred to the crew earlier? Jean-Michel hesitated before saying anything else. “What do you mean? What have you heard?”

“Nothing’s been said to me,” he said quietly. “They know better. But, they move differently at their tasks. They talk. They worry. I see it; I feel it. It wasn’t there on Saint John. But it was on board when we left Panther Bay. It was on board before we engaged the *Ana Maria*. I feel it. On deck. At night most deeply.”

“When they move,” Isabella asked, trying to manage the fear bubbling inside her, “when they worry, what do they say? What do you feel? Who are the leaders?”

Jean-Michel leaned forward in his chair. “Isabella, it’s hard enough for them to obey a man, but a girl? Jacob gave them everything they could ever dream of. He’s the only pirate captain

I've ever sailed with that didn't need the Articles; they didn't worry about their captain because they knew he would always be elected. You inherited this ship, its crew, and their goodwill. But, things are different since Jacob's death."

"We can keep their stomachs full. We give them wealth, just like when Jacob commanded the *Marée Rouge*."

"Logic and reason protect your mind," Jean-Michel said, his forefinger pointing to his head, "but not our command. Today should have been their first taste of victory *and* wealth under your command. What did we end up with? A victory? Not by their standards. Fifteen men are dead. Another score are wounded. Ten prisoners. Our 'prize'? Two eighteen-pound cannon, some extra shot, clothes, a few small gems, and...papers! How do you split that up? That's not what they signed up for."

Isabella sat, thinking quickly, almost desperately. What would Jacob do? He was so confident; he always had a plan. He seemed to make the big decisions effortlessly. That's one of the things that drew her to him, more than two years ago, once she got past his blue eyes and sun-baked dirty blond waves. "I've got gold saved. I can compensate them from my account."

"You'll need to do that if you want them back. And keep Rodriguez off your back."

Isabella hesitated, as if pondering whether she needed to tell Jean-Michel something else. Something important. Jean-Michel waited, curious. "The Viceroy's not our only worry," she said after several minutes.

Jean-Michel's eyebrow turned up. "The only threat in these seas right now is Yellow Jacket. I don't think he's strong enough to take us on. He's got the attitude, but not the crew. Even with a frigate of 30 guns, he can't match our nimble little brig of 22."

Isabella nodded. "Aye, but he's a rogue. He senses your weakness. If our men are vulnerable, he'll figure out how to use them. I swear he was behind Jacob's murder."

"You may be right, *mon cher*," Jean-Michel said. "But we don't know for sure. The privateers are an odd lot. They have their

own rules. Can't trust 'em. At least I know what the Dagos and Brits are up to. The Americans....? Only God knows."

Perhaps Jean-Michel would add some gold to the pot to keep the crew in line. No, she wouldn't dare ask him for help. This was her mistake, not his. Giving out gold was a small price to pay for their loyalty. "We can't promise success each time out. But I don't have enough gold to compensate them for every failure. How many ships have we captured together?"

"With Jacob?" asked Jean-Michel. "More than a dozen. Sold some off to the Americans. Two we crewed as privateers. I don't know how many we let go. Are you serious? You expect me to keep count?"

Now, Isabella raised her eyebrows: "Isn't that the point? We've captured our share of ships and bounty; we'll do it again. Under Jacob, we captured more than any other pirate in fifty years."

Jean-Michel looked at her poker faced. "A pirate crew is not a patient one. They can't remember much further back than their last tin of rum. And, you're not Jacob."

His point sucked the air from her lungs. She shuddered at a sudden longing for the familiar sweet smell of the sugarcane fields of Hispaniola. Each passing month seemed to make the fields seem less harsh, less evil.

"Six months," she said wistfully, "and his death still haunts me."

"His death haunts us both."

Isabella looked at Jean-Michel, tears lending a sad sparkle to her tired eyes.

"*Mais, ma petite,*" Jean-Michel said, interrupting her thoughts, "battle and loot are not the only things on your mind." He leaned across the desk, and took her hand. "You're not alone."

"Now you sound like my mother," Isabella said quietly, letting her hand rest in his as a small smile broke through. "In the evenings, after we came in from the fields, she would talk about the spirits. The spirits would work with us in the fields, and protect us." She left out what the spirits had told her mother about

Isabella's future before she was even born. She had only trusted two people with that information. She couldn't help but think it led to their deaths. She couldn't afford to lose Jean-Michel now. Not so close to losing Jacob.

"I don't know about spirits or other Gods," Jean-Michel said, "but I'm sure one God—my God—is with you."

"Your God? I don't know about your God," she scoffed. Her voice hardened again. "I'm not even sure I believe the spirits protect me anymore."

Jean-Michel looked at her sympathetically. "You're not alone," he repeated deliberately, stroking her hand gently. "Jacob saw to that. He had vision, as all great leaders do. And that's why we have the *Marée Rouge*, and a pirate crew more seasoned than any frigate in the West Indies. In time, his memory will fade and you will find your own peace with his death. And your place with this crew will be firm. But, beware of the Dago prisoner. This is a difficult time. Resist him. Be strong!"

Isabella's back tightened. She pulled her hand from his and crossed her arms close to her chest, as if the balmy breeze through the windows chilled her. How could he know so much? She didn't dare confess *those* feelings, not even to Jean-Michel. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," he said, his tone noticeably transformed.

"Don't play games!"

"*Les jeux!?*" Jean-Michel said, mocking surprise. "I don't talk to ghosts before sending my men to their deaths."

How dare he! Isabella's eyes hardened. "*Our* men. Be careful where you tread." Besides, what were those prayers he recites? What was the trinity he traced by using his palm to cross himself?

"Don't pull rank on me!" Jean-Michel rasped angrily, but carefully keeping his voice low and disciplined. "Twenty years hunting these waters gives me rights—and privileges."

"Rights and privileges that *I* bestow at *my* pleasure!" she blurted, instantly regretting the outburst.

Isabella stood, tipping the chair backward as its legs scraped against the floor. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. How could she say that to him? The crew depended on him as much as her, especially now. She leaned over the desk, her palms bracing her. She looked into his eyes. His eyes were calm, even caring.

Isabella looked apologetically down toward the desk. She slammed a fist into the wood. What was she doing? They didn't have time for this! She needed to keep the crew focused. She knew Jean-Michel was loyal to her. Jacob never doubted Jean-Michel. They earned each other's loyalty in this spit of watery hell, fighting dozens of battles and fights that would never be recorded in books or histories. How could she doubt Jean-Michel now? She needed him now more than ever. Indeed, especially now that she knew—she suspected—the Viceroy's plan. Why was she so consumed by these thoughts of betrayal? Self-doubt? Guilt? Destiny? Damn Jacob for leaving her so soon!

Jean-Michel sat, his face reddening with anger. "Don't forget *my* loyalties, *mon cher*. Jacob was like a brother to me, not a lover. My commitment to him goes far beyond his death, or you."

Isabella's face flushed. "Do *not* underestimate me!" She closed her eyes again to regain her composure.

She opened her eyes, redirecting them into his. Isabella relaxed her hand, opening her fist to let the palm brace her on the desk.

Jean-Michel's stare was disciplined and compassionate. "I don't. And, I won't. You're little more than a child, but the fields hardened you more than any battle could ever pretend to...or the walls of San Cristobal's cousin, El Morro. I know."

Isabella paused. She took in a deep breath. A calm began to cloak her mood. "Jean-Michel, I need you. You know that don't you?"

"We need each other," Jean-Michel insisted. "Jacob's death gave both of us opportunities. Your courage keeps them fighting."

"You keep this ship afloat."

"We need each other."

Isabella chuckled at the futility of their argument. She shook her head softly. “A child and an old man. What a pair we will make in the history of this God forsaken blister on the world. One of these days the prison walls of El Morro will protect us from *all* of them!”

“Bold ambitions,” Jean-Michel smiled. “Worthy of Henry Morgan, even, although I hate to credit an Englishman with anything so worthy! Jacob left you a hearty, committed crew. It’s up to you to lead them. So far, we are not scoring well on that account.”

Isabella bristled at the thought the crew would abandon her. “A little gold will help.” Why would they abandon her, anyway? Because she was a woman? Anne Bonny was a pirate at 16, as old as Isabella when she met Jacob! She paused, opening her mouth as if to say something, but stopped. “I’m not the first woman to command a pirate ship.”

“You are the first girl—not even twenty,” Jean-Michel pointed out. “No woman older has lived long as a pirate. None by themselves.”

“But I have you.”

“Aye, but they follow your courage, not my command.”

“Calico Jack provided men and a ship,” Isabella said quickly. “Anne Bonny and Mary Read carried them to victory.”

“Legend, not history.”

Isabella suddenly felt vulnerable again. “I’m not alone,” she said doubtfully, feeling her hope ebb with the cresting waves.

“No, you aren’t.” Jean-Michel was at least trying to reassure her, but the pit of her stomach knotted.

“But I’m not Anne Bonny either. I don’t have a wealthy father to whisk me away if I lose. My gold can’t buy a plantation... yet.” Her shoulders straightened as she seemed to gain resolve. “The plantations seasoned me well enough to take anything this life can throw at me.”

“I’m betting on that. Jacob hoped for it.”

“If anyone questions my skills,” Isabella continued, renewed resolve thick in each word, “or my courage, let them

challenge me. I'll put my command on the line." She grabbed the hilt of her sword still at her side. "A fight to the death."

"And if they take you up on the offer?"

"Set it up."

"Choice of weapons?"

"Saber, cutlass, foil, pistol—their choice," she said confidently.

"Daggers?"

"Yes," Isabella confirmed unflinchingly, "even daggers."

Jean-Michel nodded. "Jacob would be pleased. Your skills may finally match your courage."

Isabella let a sheepish smile break through. But, would a duel be enough? Isabella sorted through papers on her desk while her mind raced. "It's a shame the Spanish captain had to die."

"No Dago is worth such thoughts," Jean-Michel said bitterly.

"Mick, respect the dead."

Jean-Michel tapped his fingers on this thigh. The dead officer. The unusual interest in the prisoner—her "boy". These were unsettling. Isabella, like Jean-Michel, hated the Spanish more than any other race. The mere mention of King Charles or his lap dog Rodriguez in San Juan was enough to send her into a brood. Her hatred dogged the Spanish trading routes. *Los conquistadores* had a black, unfathomable place in her soul. Jean-Michel didn't fully understand it, but he respected it. Her hatred was so close to his own feelings it seemed to bind them together. Why the interest in the boy?

"The Captain was Spaniard filth," Jean-Michel spat.

"He fought well. It was his chosen life. Besides, aren't you French brethren now, allied with Charles III in aid to the Americans against the British?"

"He's still a Dago, in service to the Court. My values don't shift with politics...or Royalty."

"Most of us have Spanish blood," she reminded him.

"You are Creole. Your Spanish blood did not come by your will. Or your mother's."

“True. Nor does my British blood. Only Africa’s blood is true.”

“Jean-Michel, *mon ami*,” Isabella said abruptly, pushing the manifest aside, “bring the prisoner to my cabin.”

“That’s not a good idea, *mon cher*,” he said, invoking a fatherly sternness.

“Why Mick!” Isabella exclaimed, the flicker of a cagey smile evident once again. “I’m shocked. What are you thinking? That I would fall for a Dago Royal? Don’t worry. The overseer’s whip is still fresh on my back.” She looked at him again and rolled her eyes. “He’s only a boy,” she insisted, although she wasn’t so sure herself.

Jean-Michel sighed. What could he do? He turned, ducked under the beams, and squeezed himself through the doorway. The door closed respectfully as he pulled it shut.

Isabella sat slumped in the rough wooden chair, legs sprawling under the desk, grateful to be alone. The sudden silence sent her head spinning. Even the steady creaking of the beams and hull didn’t seem to soften the effect. The loss of the *Ana Maria* weighed heavily again, thickening her brain. What was so different about this ship? She struggled to understand the emptiness pitting her stomach. Was it the prisoner?

She sat, feeling isolated and distant. Jean-Michel even seemed like a stranger now. How could that be, after all they had been through? Did he think she was losing her grip? Was she losing her edge? She longed for someone to talk to. She needed to talk about the ship, Rodriguez, Jean-Michel, the prisoner—everything. She closed her eyes and rested her head on her forearms.

She smiled as she remembered Jacob, sitting in a rickety old chair in their room over Carl’s pub in Charlotte Amalie. It was their safe haven. They could be together without worrying about soldiers or privateers. He would wrap his arms around her as they

lay together in the bed, letting the breeze cool them at night. If they were lucky, the moon would brighten the room just enough they could make out every crease of their faces, every curl of their hair.

Carl complained because he could never rent their bed when they were in port. He wouldn't take their money, either! "Cursed pirate treasure," he would spit, although he never seemed to have trouble taking buccaneer gold at the bar.

The room was the first place they were alone after four weeks running from Spanish pirate hunters off Hispaniola. He had taught her everything that mattered—how to use a sword, how to live as a freedman, how to command the respect of rogues and ruffians like the ones they seemed to fight in the streets of Charlotte Amalie. He was her world, her future, for two years. "Jacob," she whispered. "Why did you leave me so soon? We had so much to do, so far to go."

A tear grew and began a slow, searching journey down her face. For an instant, it tickled her cheek. Then, it dropped. She saw it fall, painfully slowly, its smooth oval shape splattering onto the tabletop. The tear had fallen onto the Royal Seal. The letters began to dissolve.

Isabella blinked. She lifted her head swiftly and surely, eyes wide and determined.

"Enough" she insisted loudly, bringing the palm of her hand down on the desk with a crack. She straightened herself, forcing energy through her arms and hands. She picked up the letter that should have introduced Juan Carlos Lopez de Santa Ana to the colonial viceroy of the West Indies. What role did her prisoner play in this game? She folded the letter and put it back down on the desk.

She stretched her arms, shaking them out of a slumber. She was stiff. She walked awkwardly over to the washbasin. Isabella stared into the mirror, transfixed, as if captured by a ghost. Her hair was wild and matted. Soot from spent gunpowder and the smoldering deck fires stained her face with long, dark streaks, making her eyes seem like deeply recessed holes. The desperate swim from the *Ana Maria* had dissolved the edges, giving the lines

a pattern resembling Carib Indian war paint. She unbuttoned her silk blouse, and let it silently slip from her shoulders. Years climbing rigging gave her arms a crisp definition. The sun had deeply tanned already dark skin. Her shoulders and breasts, protected from the weather, remained strikingly clean and smooth. The contrast was surreal.

She dipped her head over the basin and splashed warm water over her face and neck. She rubbed vigorously, buffing the streaks from her skin. She lifted her head, half afraid, half hoping the person in the mirror had disappeared. She let the water bead comfortably on her skin. The tint of gunpowder was gone. Droplets cooled her as they dripped from her forehead, down her cheeks, off her chin, onto her breasts and stomach, and gently soaked into the waistline of her breeches. Destiny. How could she think she was destined for anything? She was a slave, freed by bizarre events beyond her control.

Isabella pulled her arms close to her chest, eyes closed, hands kneading her shoulders tenderly. A familiar warmth overcame her as she remembered her nights with Jacob in Charlotte Amalie. Her fingers worked rhythmically toward her shoulders. The tension in her muscles evaporated with each rolling fingertip. Is this what Jacob's embrace felt like? How could she have forgotten?

Isabella's fingers jerked her from the fantasy. The scars! Even the calluses earned daily on the *Marée Rouge* could not deaden her fingers to the legacy of the overseer's whip.

"Damn Spain!" she spat, violently shaking the last drops of water from her hair. "Damn their kings. Damn their God. I will not stop until they are purged from these seas and these islands."

Isabella looked into the mirror again. Her vulnerability was gone, replaced by buccaneer determination. She *had* a destiny. She was sure of it. She couldn't let anything—anyone—get in her way. The dissent in the crew would be dealt with, soon. Her prisoner will be the key.

She blotted away the last drops of water and pulled a clean shirt from a rack in the corner. The oversized sleeves billowed in

the cross breeze as she clasped the cuffs closed. The pleats would have framed a similar man's body perfectly. They conveniently hid Isabella's femininity. She smiled as she remembered the surprise in her prey's face—they always underestimate her. Twenty-two guns and a two-masted boat against a 32-gun frigate? They never counted on pirate bravado and 200 souls with nothing to lose! She tied a scarlet sash securely around her waist.

Isabella reached into the breast pocket of her overcoat and pulled out two brass buttons. Any human signs of the Spanish captain and his lieutenant had been buffed cleanly away in the pocket. More casualties of her destiny. How long would *their* faces haunt her? One night? One week? One month? At least the boatswain played the game smart. He was allowed to live and lead the remaining tars to safety and serve the Empire on another day.

Isabella opened a small drawer underneath the wash basin. She let the buttons fall haphazardly into the drawer. Jiggling brass filled the room as the newest markers joined more than a dozen others. Isabella locked the drawer, and walked over to her chair. She was ready.