

The Pirate Chicken – Chapters 1 & 2

The universe, like the body, keeps score. It scars just as easily and remembers every scratch, even when the memories have long faded. —Skipper, the cat

When I came to, I was lying on my back with my ears ringing and my head on fire.

I yanked off my burning tricorn hat and whacked it against the ashen ground until I managed to extinguish it. A stabbing pain lanced up my left arm as I did so.

A spark managed to catch onto my hair. I clamped a hand around the afflicted strand and dragged my fist down it to smother the flame.

I raised my aching arm overhead, wincing. Blood oozed down a deep gash cut through my no-longer-white blouse from my forearm to my shoulder.

The taste of iron was overwhelming.

Pressing on the crook of my elbow, I reflexively gritted my teeth.

I contemplated slipping back into unconsciousness. I was feeling heavy and tired. So dreadfully tired. If only I could rest for just a little longer...

Reluctantly, I rolled my head from side to side instead to assess my surroundings.

I lay in the center of a charred clearing peppered with soot and ringed by a jungle. No other flames were on or around me. The stumps of broken bamboo trees and their fallen counterparts littered the landscape, and the air felt heavy with smoke. It was a perfect gray circle of destruction, yet somehow I remained relatively unscathed within it.

What happened here?

I couldn't recall.

Come to think of it, I couldn't really remember anything.

What was I doing here?

Who was I?

I didn't know...

But what I did know was that I had to stop the bleeding.

I untucked my poet blouse from my slops and unsheathed one of the daggers hanging from my shoulder belt to cut the bottom hem off. I bound my injuries with the strip of cloth, wincing as I deftly wrapped it tight.

I rose to my feet with a groan, alternating between clutching at my arm and my head.

The ringing in my ears persisted with all other sounds tamped down.

I swayed a bit as I took stock of the curved sheath at my hip, the blunderbuss in its leather holster on my baldric, the cartridge box of ammunition on my belt, and a much-needed flask in my pocket.

I took a swig from the flask.

It was empty.

Figures.

I thrust it back into my pocket and dug deeper to find some crumbs of hardtack, which I ravenously consumed. It left a dry taste in my mouth and left me even hungrier.

A trail of debris burned beyond recognition snaked off to the West, so I picked my way over the uneven terrain to follow it for want of any other landmarks.

I left the smoldering hat behind.

Just at the edge of the clearing lay a satchel. I knelt down to pick it up and slung it over my uninjured shoulder. A twinkling in the dirt caught my eye and I spotted a silver chain with a broken clasp.

The ringing increased in pitch as a flash of memory tried but failed to break its way through my brain fog.

I instinctively felt my neck and a surge of panic washed over me.

Something was missing.

And whatever it was, I knew I had to reclaim it or my life was at stake.

I snatched up the chain and drew my cutlass.

I began hacking through the dense vegetation with a renewed fervor.

*

As I sliced through the singed ferns and shrubs with berries burnt to a crisp on their branches, side-stepping the towering rubber trees and brushing stands of purple hair out of my face, I eventually came upon a shipwreck at the edge of the floating island.

I went to inspect the wreckage.

The air brigantine was hardly recognizable amidst the mound of ballast and timber, yet I could just make out both of its fallen masts peeking out from under its torn crimson sails.

If this was the airship I was on, it was a miracle I survived.

I wonder what could be said about the rest of the crew.

I peeked over the ledge. The cloud deck below reminded me of a churning fuchsia sea.

I turned back to the rubble. I did not encounter any bodies, skeletal or otherwise, though my confusion grew with every step.

All I could salvage amidst the detritus was some rope and a sextant.

I pocketed them both and moved closer to the masts.

One of them had a faded map etched into its splintered wood. There were no identifying names; just dots and curved lines bridging the landmasses. But I could read them all the same. I traced a few paths to various dots based on the rising sun, my lack of proximity to any other islands visible to the naked eye, and my position on the border of this island.

If I could get to the nearest port, I could figure out exactly where I was and where to go.

But, where was I going in the first place?

I turned away and hopped off the broken deck.

CRUNCH.

I glanced down. My ankle-high boot was wedged in a tangle of branches next to a nest on the jungle floor containing half a dozen eggs. I stepped back. My eye was immediately drawn to a wire-encased amethyst lying between the eggs, twice the size of my thumbnail. I was flooded with relief.

This was it.

I felt the air hum. The light lavender crystal sparkled as it caught the afternoon sunlight flitting through the growth above. It was mesmerizing. Breathtaking.

I knew with an absolute certainty I would rather die than part with this prized possession.

Just as I reached forward to pick it up, a flurry of brown flashed before the nest and a disapproving squawk assailed my ears.

A wild chicken emerged out of the brush. The fowl was so small it could have fit into both the palms of my hands. It stood protectively in front of the eggs with its neck feathers raised and its wings drawn down and away from its body, the tips pointing to the ground.

It probably thought I was going to eat its eggs, which actually did sound like a great idea, what with my stomach grumbling.

But first, I had to get that crystal.

I shot my hand past the chicken and curled my fingers around the amethyst. But the fowl pecked at my fingers with such force I cried out involuntarily and dropped the crystal, wrenching my hand back to nurse it.

The chicken noticed the flash of purple, swiveling its head with a newfound intrigue.

It glanced back at me. We locked eyes.

"Don't you dare..." I ordered.

But, of course, the chicken pecked at the crystal and threw its head back to swallow it whole.

"NO!" I lunged forward.

The chicken hopped into the air and dashed forward in a blur. I suddenly felt something incredibly sharp puncturing my shin just above my boots. I yelped in pain as a barrage of stinging ensued all over my body. My legs pricked from the breeze kissing at my newly-pecked wounds, exposed through my ruined stockings. The chicken was moving so fast I couldn't even see it. I tried to fend off the mess of wings and slashing claws by waving my own arms wildly about. That hardly seemed to slow it down.

Amidst the squabbling, I finally managed to find purchase on the creature. Grabbing onto one of its legs, I pulled it off balance towards me and flipped it upside down, keeping the chicken clamped in place by my side.

It thrashed about, clucking madly.

"Spit it out!" I commanded, shaking it as if the crystal would just fall right out.

Naturally, the chicken refused, squawking at me in defiance.

"Fine, we'll finish this later," I grumbled as I miraculously managed to stuff the chicken into my satchel and scooped its eggs into it as well. I clenched the flap firmly shut as the fowl floundered.

The hairs at the back of my neck prickled, and I suddenly felt like I was being watched. I turned around, but I couldn't see anything beyond the wild flora.

My stomach growling lurched me back to the situation at hand. I was all out of hardtack and alone in the jungle. I needed food. And fast.

Worst case, I did have a chicken and some eggs...

Once I found some kind of civilization, maybe I could learn more about what happened.

Rediscover who I was. Who I was with.

What if I didn't like what I learned?

Maybe some things were better left unearthed...

Focus, I chided myself. Food first. Panic later.