



Long Lost Boys
of Nowhereland

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-Chapter One-
Nibs, in the Snowy Wood

Nibs lived like most any other Lost boy in Nowhereland, without much of anything to his name except a nest in the big trees of the Snowy Wood. So imagine his exasperation when two Pirates surrounded him with swords drawn asking him to empty his pockets. Nibs having only the inside of his pockets inside his pockets pulled those out hoping to satisfy the two but as Pirates are never satisfied with what a Lost boy has to say they demanded Nibs now take off the leather sacks he called shoes. Standing barefoot in the snow is as cold as cold gets and Nibs couldn't help but vibrate from the shivers upon shivers traveling over his skin. The Pirates finished inspecting his shoes but rather than give them back they tossed them aside and began inspecting Nibs himself. They lifted his jacket, dropped his pants, pulled at his arms, patted his pits and even scoured through his matted hair before they were ready to concede that what they were looking for was not there.

You see, just a league and a half away was the Pirates encampment. Some gold doubloons had been stolen from them and these two were sent as the rescue party for their precious doubloons. Nevermind the fact that the Pirates had at one point stolen those doubloons themselves, once something belongs to a Pirate it is a Pirate's property forever. Pirating from a Pirate is simply unconscionable. Unfortunately for the Pirates these thefts occurred all too often and they were rarely able to repossess the stolen goods because, like today with Nibs, the Pirates were astoundingly incompetent at telling one Lost boy apart from any other. *'Short*

or Tall? Skinny or Fat?' This was the extent of the visual identification of a Lost boy among the Pirates.

And so, having found nothing, the two Pirates hurriedly moved on without even an apology, leaving Nibs to put back on his shoes and retie the drawstring of his pants and put his pockets back in his pockets. Nibs felt embarrassed and angry but most of all cold so he decided to trudge over to Highbranch Tree to visit the cafe.

Highbranch Tree, so named for having the highest branches in the Snowy Wood housed the most popular cafe in Nowhereland beneath it's roots. And it was no wonder this cafe was popular as it was always warm and served free hot water. This was a smart business move on the part of the boys who ran the cafe as it kept the place lively so that when someone who actually had the hooves and beaks to afford flavors in their water arrived, they would want to stick around for the fun and would in turn purchase many drinks.

When Nibs arrived it was as bustling as ever with unintelligible chatter and the crackle of the fire and the whistle of the big kettle. Nibs lined up for a mug of the delicious hot water. As he got closer to the front of the line the kettle was getting low so one of the cafe's workers tossed in some more snow and as the line stalled waiting for the water to reheat there was a sudden rapturous amount of hollering and laughing and hooting at the entrance. The excitement was that Slightly and his cadre had entered the cafe and so now the free hot water line would be stalled even longer as the cafe attendants manned the prices counter and brought out the spice rack and sugars and creams and fancy little cookies and cakes.

Who was this Slightly, that could cause such a raucus, you ask? He was easily the most popular musician of Highbranch Tree if not all of Snowy Wood. Maybe you've heard one of his hit songs like *On Doubloons On Doubloons* or *Shipstar* or *Long Lost Birds (In Flight)* or *Plank Walker*? No? Well Nibs knew who he was and couldn't help but feel irritated by the world stopping to serve Slightly just because he was well known and wore a string of Doubloons around his neck and always could afford to buy whatever he wanted. It's not like he was actually really truly talented—Nibs could do any music Slightly did—it was just rhymes and screeches and the occasional blowing in his panflute. And so with knowing that Nibs was feeling this way, what happened next would be of no surprise for you or me.

Slightly waved his hands to silence the cafe and asked them if they wanted him to do a song at which point everyone heard Nibs mutter to himself "*Just buy*

your drink and shut your dumb trap." After which the silence didn't stop and Nibs could feel the whole room staring arrows at him.

Slightly's best friend Curly broke the silence with a stamp of his foot and a bellow of *"You got somethin' to say?!"*

The kettle started to whistle again and Nibs turned to it, hoping if he ignored them they'd just disappear and he could get what he came for. Curly stomped over, the scabbard on his back thwacking in response to each step as he bloviated *"This acorn licker has nothing to say now! Tough guy is shaking in his shoes! Shivering in his shirt! A shimmy in his shorts!"*

Nibs couldn't ignore the barrage any longer and so exploded with a *"Cram it up your nose, you Pirate-pleasing dust-sniffer!"*

Slightly could see this had all the makings of a wolfing and so decided to support his friend, *"Wolf him Curly!"* he hyped and so Curly wolfed away...

"This boy is SO POOR that his nest got NO FLOOR so he's got NO BED, he sleeps on the COLD DOOR."

Slightly punctuated Curly's howl by whipping a blow across his panflute. The audience erupted in fingersnaps and 'Ohhhh's. Nibs thought for a moment then responded.

"Wow, it's SLIGHTLY and his best friend UNSIGHTLY, he's such a WEAKLING, he gets tucked in NIGHTLY."

Nibs thought this was a good wolfing on his part—a real solid howl—but the audience didn't seem to agree. No one made a peep as Curly launched into his next howl.

"Listen to this little BOY BURP with his little BIRD CHIRP, little, little, LITTLE does his WORDS HURT."

Hearing this Nibs thought it very generic, 'little' could mean he was talking about his stature but could be directed to just about anyone and so he thought this howl must be one used repeatedly. Yet, in defiance of Nibs opinions this howl ended the same as Curly's last, with a hoot of Slightly's pan flute and a rain of snaps and a choir of 'Ohhh's. Nibs knew now that this wasn't a fair fight and that good wasn't good enough.

"You call me LITTLE while playing second FIDDLE to some BAMBOO, they're not cheering for YOU, they're cheering for that PANFLUTE."

No snaps, no 'Ohhh's, nothing at all... until one boy scoffed. Just a little sciffing scoff that he caught before it flew too far but that was all it took to make Curly grimace with dissatisfaction and then seeing his face the room exploded with laughs and once they bared their laughs there was no reason to hold back their snaps. Nibs was ecstatic from the validation.

"*ENOUGH!*" Curly shouted as he drew the cutlass from the scabbard on his back and clanged it at Nibs. The cafe sucked back in their laughs and Nibs bit down on his triumphant feelings, in hope of not becoming a pin cushion.

"*Hey, put that away, you're scaring everyone*" said Slightly, trying to calm his friend. Curly glanced away from Nibs towards the onlookers and caught the reflection of himself in their faces. He was being a spoiled-sore-loser, waving a sword around because he lost a wolfing. Curly put his cutlass back in it's scabbard and decided to exit the cafe to cool off.

Once Curly left, the pressure in the room returned to normal, chatting resumed and Nibs let out a big sigh of relief. Slightly ordered some drinks and left swiftly. The hot water line resumed progress but as Nibs reached the front, instead of a hot water, the staffer greeted Nibs with a cup of Honeyed Cinnamon with Cream '*from Slightly*'. Nibs sat down and slurped his drink and thought maybe he had harshly judged Slightly as he enjoyed the warmth from his drink and from the air and from the occasional boy telling him they liked his howls.

Nibs reached the bottom of his cup and having enjoyed the expensive taste of Honeyed Cinnamon with Cream decided he should try to earn some money himself. As he climbed the stairs exiting the Highbranch Tree Cafe he tried to imagine what he could do. The boys in the cafe made money from their culinary skills so maybe his skills could make him money. Nibs trudged through the snow in no particular direction, staring up at the sky through the bare black branches of the Snowy Wood. Slightly made his money from music performances but he wasn't sure how that worked. No one paid to attend those performances so how did that make money? Thinking and thinking, Nibs couldn't come up with a way to make money with his skills and so came to the conclusion that if he couldn't get people to give him money—beaks and hooves—he would go straight to the source and hunt.

It's hard to say if Nibs would be a good hunter or not but he would certainly be a good hunted. Nibs didn't notice Slightly and Curly following him until Curly stepped out in front of him and pressed the cold steel of his cutlass to his neck. Nibs jumped back but had his escape stopped by Slightly's chest.

"*Did you enjoy the drink?*" asked Slightly with a cruel smile.

Being insulted once again, having his life threatened with a sword for the third time this day, Nibs anger reached boiling point.

"*I ENJOYED IT!*" Nibs answered as he smacked away Curly's blade and tackled his face. The snow jumped and sprayed as Nibs choked Curly and as Curly smacked at Nibs head and as Slightly kicked at Nibs's back. All this violence caught the attention of Solomon.

"Stop, stop!" cawed Solomon as he swooped down from his perch. Solomon flapped his massive wing to swipe Slightly away.

"That's enough, boys" Solomon crowed as he pecked at Nibs jacket and pulled him off of Curly.

Finally free, Curly picked up his sword and prepared to lunge but "CAAAAAWWW" dropped it again in fright at Solomon's cry.

Solomon was the largest Crow in the Snowy Wood. Larger than any Lost boy. Larger than the largest Pirate. And if he wanted he could be louder than anyone too. Solomon was a voice of reason and always did his best to look out for the boys of the Snowy Wood, despite himself. It was very tiring being Solomon, trying to bring reason to so many unreasonable, ungrateful, unfaithful humans.

Slightly—being familiar with Solomon's fierce lectures on responsibility and empathy—scampered off. Curly grabbed his cutlass and chased after, leaving Nibs to bear the brunt of Solomon's tirade.

"*Is that any way to act? You could have killed that boy with how you were choking him.*" Solomon cawed.

"*GOOD! I WANT HIM DEAD!*" shouted Nibs out in the direction Curly ran.

Solomon wasn't impressed, "*What's your name, boy?*"

Nibs—while still angry—realized he was a might bit scared of big, black-eyed Solomon, "*Nibs*" he answered.

"*I know life can be hard, Nibs, but it's even harder to live if you don't treat your brothers with respect and kindness*" lectured Solomon.

"*Those aren't brothers of mine!*" snapped Nibs, "*Treat them with respect? With kindness!? They would've killed me! He put that sword of his to my neck! Should I let him slit my throat? Should I let them turn out my pockets?!*" Nibs turned and stomped away.

"*Listen to me*" cawed Solomon, hopping along behind Nibs. "*I understand you want to hurt others for having been hurt. Your brothers feel the same. But think of that world where everyone is inflicting pain on everyone else. In that world we are all wounded*

and hurting one another. How can anyone ever heal in such a violent world? You need to be brave and withstand your pain without inflicting it back on your brothers. Could you do that, Nibs? Could you be the brave one to stop the back and forth of violence? Can you be brave?"

Nibs was sick of being followed by Solomon and so told him what he wanted to hear, *"Sure, I'll be brave."*

Solomon—satisfied in seemingly having gotten through to Nibs—flew off back to his perch but Nibs idea of bravery wasn't at all the same as Solomon's. Nibs decided he needed a cutlass of his very own to protect himself with.

-Chapter Two-
Tootles, beside the Cotton River

You wouldn't think it from the abundance of swords in the Snowy Wood but the ownership of a blade by a Lost boy was strictly forbidden as decreed by Governor Rackham and dutifully enforced by his crew. If caught with a blade—such as cutlass or dagger or rapier or machete or scimitar—a Lost boy could expect to see it confiscated by the Pirates and if they in any way were resistant of the confiscation, be captured—or worse—and held in the brig for 28 days. Another decree banned the sale of swords and materials used to produce swords to Lost boys at punishment of hanging. With such laws you may reasonably ask how it is that there is an abundance of swords in the Snowy Wood? For the reasons: Pirates do not care for laws when there is money to be made, that the patrols of the Snowy Wood by Governor Rackham's militia are few while the swords are many, that when a boy with sword spots an approaching patrol he will stash his blade in the snow until they pass. Swords in the Snowy Wood are truly only ever confiscated after some terribleness has happened with them.

Nibs didn't quite know where to get a sword but he thought—since the Pirates had them—he should trek out to Black Hill at the edge of the Snowy Wood where boys often came to play. Black Hill was not a real hill but rather named for a pile of crumbling ashen branches—from a tree that had been set ablaze long ago—so high and porous that snow never fully covered it. The boys would often fight to be king of Black Hill. Black Hill sounded of boys shouting and sticks cracking under foot and—if you listened closely—distant sounds of clopping horses and orderly adult conversations wafting over from Rackham's Town. In this

noise, Nibs went from boy to boy whispering inquiries of where he could acquire a sword. Eventually Nibs was given the name of *'Tootles'* as someone able to get anything you could want. Nibs was directed back into the Snowy Wood towards Cotton River which—unlike Black Hill—I can assure you is an actual River.

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Twilight had set by the time Nibs had trudged far enough to hear the babble of Cotton River.

A whisper-yell of *"Move it!"* brushed by Nibs side.

Turning, Nibs saw a portly boy with a bow and arrow motioning him to get out of the way. Shocked, Nibs followed the boy's command by dropping to his knees, causing an audible crunch in the snow. That sound carried over to an Elk and sent it bounding off.

"Aw Crud-bucket! You went and scared her off!" the boy complained.

"Sorry."

Ignoring Nibs apology, the boy continued *"That's a prize wapiti I tracked for hours and hours that you owe me, turd-brain!"* with a poke to Nibs head for emphasis.

"I really am sorry" said Nibs, apologizing again. *"Say, you wouldn't happen to be Tootles would you?"*

The portly hunter boy—who was most definitely Tootles—answered, *"Could be."*

Nibs followed along as Tootles marched back home, asking how he could obtain a sword. Tootles—unlike every other Lost boy—lived not in a nest in a tree but instead in a cabin out at the edge of the Snowy Wood, beside the Cotton River.

Tootles tossed his bow and arrows into a drawer, *"So you want a sword, do ya?"* Tootles cabin was filled to the brim with amazing junk that Nibs didn't know the names of: throwing stars, posters, encyclopedias, manga, taffy, wolf-pelt, cassette tapes, basketball, vuvuzela, jeans... well, he could tell jeans were pants at least. *"I can get you a sword for twenty coins."*

Nibs had never once even touched the gold coins that the Pirates used. *"How much would that be in beaks and hooves?"* Nibs asked, knowing it would be more money than he has ever had.

Tootles fetched his calculator, *"I'd say about eight-hundred-and-ninety."*

Nibs fell.

"By my estimate there's around two-thousand beaks and hooves currently in the Snowy Wood economy so I won't say it's impossible but I think that by the time you went and removed..." Tootles tapped on the calculator some more *"...fourty-four-point-five-percent of the currency out of circulation, the deflation of hooves and beaks would increase the relative cost of Pirate items like swords to unattainable levels."*

Nibs couldn't comprehend what Tootles was talking about, *"So I won't be able to afford a sword?"*

Tootles opened the door and tossed the calculator outside. *"Sure you can, that was just how much twenty coins would cost in beaks and hooves like you asked."* Tootles picked up some snow before coming back inside, *"You can just pay in coins and not tank our whole economy."*

Nibs thought deeply on how he could acquire 20 of the Pirates gold doubloons as Tootles packed snow into an electric kettle which was attached to a car battery. *"Should I steal coins from the Pirates?"*

Tootles flipped on the kettle, *"Theft has a one-hundred-percent profit margin but twenty is alot of coins even for Pirates. Whether you do one big heist or twenty small snatches, the risk in acquiring twenty coins puts your chances of capture extremely high. If you're caught, that's months and months in the brig and a lash for every coin you stole."* Tootles ripped open a handful of sugar and salt packets and dumped them into a Montana State University mug. *"Plus they'll seize everything you own to return or reimburse what you stole. Often from your neighbors too."*

The water came to a boil as Nibs asked, *"Is there a safer way?"*

"To steal from the Pirates?" Tootles poured and stirred his cup of hot-salty-sweet. *"You could employ others to steal coins for you, this requires significant amounts of capital to pay the thieves and for enforcers to assure they honor their deals and a general amount of persuasion so they don't all just rip you off."*

Nibs laid it all out for Tootles, *"I have no money and minimal skills."*

Tootles took a long slurp, *"Then your best option would be to work for me."*

-Chapter Three-
Slightly, high at Highbranch Tree

Anne-Marie—daughter of Bartholomew and Katarina Sharp—was an adventurous young girl like her parents once were. On nights when the moon was a perfect half-circle, Anne-Marie would climb out of the second floor window of her room and dangle from the window's sill by her fingertips until she had the courage to let herself drop. She would sneak as silently as she could down the cobblestone streets, careful not to be seen or heard by the patrolling nightwatchmen. Ten houses down Anne-Marie would meet with her best friend Khadija before they headed out towards the tree line. They giggled as they left the stone and smoke of their town for the Snowy Wood. They chatted as they trudged passed Black Hill. They squealed with delight as they reached the boisterous crowd outside Highbranch Tree.

"*ARE YOU READY?*" shouted Curly.

"*SLIGHTLY!*" replied the crowd.

"*DO YOU WANT HIM?*" shouted Curly.

"*SLIGHTLY!*" replied the crowd.

"*HERE HE IS!*" shouted Curly.

"*SLIGHTLY!*" replied the crowd.

"Tied up and dried up and sunburned at sea" Slightly appeared, beginning a song that everyone knew and sang along with.

"Poked at and joked at and tossed out to sea" Slightly was swallowed by the crowd as he walked.

"Call me 'Plank Walker'" Slightly requested.

"Plank Walker!" sings the crowd, fulfilling the request.

"Oh-whoa that's me" Slightly stopped walking as he reached the center and everyone scrunched in as close as they could.

"Don't call me 'Plank Walker'" Slightly requested.

"Plank Walker!" sings the crowd, ignoring the request.

"Falling, I'm free" a puff of sparkling pixie dust snowed down.

"I can FLY-OH!" Slightly started blowing a hypnotizing melody out of his pan flute. The boys surrounding Slightly snatched at any specks of pixie dust they could. The outer crowd howled as the pixie dust took effect and Slightly ascended up towards the half moon.

Tootles claimed these songs were *'advertising'* and the concert goes a *'captive market'* when he went about training Nibs to work in the distribution of pixie dust. Concert goers wanting to get in on the flying fun would go to Tootles. For nine beaks you got half-a-dozen grains, enough to get a small hover going. Tootles would signal Nibs with a hand gesture and a point. For nine hooves you got two-dozen grains, enough to get a full four-boys high in the air. Nibs would fetch the pixie dust from Michael—the biggest Lost boy there ever was—and deliver it. For a doubloon you got half-a-cup, enough to get you and a friend up to where Slightly was jamming on his pan flute now. Anne-Marie and Khadija bought a full cup with two coins, so they could fly high all night and still have enough left over to reach their bedroom windows come morning.

"Freedom from Pirates, Freedom from cold"

The crowd gives one big unified clap.

"Never mistreated, Never get told"

The crowd claps twice in quick succession.

"Playing forever, Don't need to fold"

Single clap.

"Living life like big bright stacks of gold"

Curly bridges for Slightly with a, *"Cause I got..."*

"Dobloons on dobloons on dobloons on dobloons on dobloons on dobloons on dobloons on dobloons"

The crowd chanted on and on as Nibs ran around delivering orders, always able to see Slightly and Curly floating above. Tootles had given Slightly and Curly the pixie dust they used and paid them well to perform. With his tormentors always above him as the big shining center of attention—Tootles said this was *'marketing'*—Nibs could not help feeling frustrated as he delivered half-a-dozen grains to the Twins, Marmaduke and Binky.

"Hey! We paid for way more than this much!" complained Binky.

"You tryina cheat us?!" Marmaduke accused.

Nibs didn't think he had missed any signals but then again there was a big singing and flying distraction, *"I'll go ask Tootles."*

"You callin' us liars?!" Binky accused.

"We paid for four-and-a-half dozen grains! This ain't nowhere near that!" complained Marmaduke.

Nibs was certain he hadn't mistaken the modest signal of a half-a-dozen for the big fancy signal of four-and-a-half dozen. *'I'm new, not stupid'* he thought as he proceeded to walk off, ignoring the Twins.

Yes, the Twins were trying to trick Nibs into giving them more than what they paid for. No luck. Marmaduke took a stroll out by Michael to see if there was an opportunity there but Michael took his job as the biggest kid in the Snowy Wood very seriously. Tootles had set up his pixie dust venture very thoughtfully to prevent scamps like Binky and Marmaduke taking advantage.

"Are you a tree? Rooted to the ground? Bare black skin? Reaching for the sky?" sang Slightly, all alone.

"We're taller than these trees. Lifting off the ground. Sprouting feathers. Taking to the sky" he continued singing as a beat of stamping feet rose.

"Loooooooooong" sang Slightly, with everyone's help.

"Looooooooost" they continued, stamping feet faster and faster.

"BIRDS" yelped Slightly before blowing a melody with his pan flute.

"In flight, in flight, in flight, in flight" the crowd sang over Slightly's melody, adding claps to the song.

Curly let out shrieking 'CAW's and others snapped twigs and flapped their sleeves like wings.

Binky had spotted something interesting, one of the two town girls had a big pouch full of pixie dust that she would reach into occasionally to keep her and her friend close to Slightly. If the Twins could snatch that pouch they would have all the pixie dust they wanted. Unfortunately the girls were up far too high to reach by normal means with the tiny amount of pixie dust they had purchased. They could not afford any more but they knew of a method to make the pixie dust they used give twice as much height as normal. Normally no one used this method, the reason being that it made the dust last half as long and—most discouraging of all—was extremely painful. The twins fought over who would be the one to fly as neither wanted to feel that terrible pain. Binky lost the argument because it was reasoned that they would need all the extra height possible and so Binky as the lighter brother—by a feather—would be the one to stand on Marmaduke's shoulders for extra height.

The song had ended but the crowds stamping and clapping continued.

"I LOVE YOU" howled Khadija as Slightly wiped the sweat from his brow.

"I LOVE YOU" howled Anne-Marie.

Curly shook the last of their pixie dust out on Slightly. *"This one is for the girls that love me"* Slightly announced. The two girls squealed with delight as Slightly launched in to his most scathing song about the Pirates.

"White bones on the black, try to keep me down" Slightly barked as Binky climbed his brother's back.

"White stones on my back, try to make me drown" Slightly barked as Binky balanced himself on his brother's shoulders.

"Heard tales of our hardships from way back when" Slightly howled as Binky inhaled the half-dozen grains of pixie dust.

"In tales there's a starship with no Rackham" Slightly howled as Binky screamed out his pain and jumped as high as he could.

"White bones on the flag, it's just a rag" Slightly barked as Binky soared right into the side of Anne-Marie and they spun.

"*White homes in the night, just take flight*" Slightly barked as Binky lost his ability to fly but kept the wrenching pain.

"*Heard tales of sails that could take a ship far*" Slightly howled as Anne-Marie shouted at Binky who was dragging her down.

"*Long gone by dawn ON A SHIPSTAR*" Slightly howled with all his might as Marmaduke caught the pouch that Binky snatched off Anne-Marie.

Seeing his most profitable customers being pilfered, Tootles had to act. Nibs—being closest—was ordered to chase after the pouch which Marmaduke was already opening. Binky's nose began to bleed as he clutched and grabbed at Anne-Marie, desperately trying to not have a hard fall that would cause him even more pain than he was already in. Tootles positioned himself below the descending Binky, preparing to capture him.

Before Nibs could stop him, Marmaduke grabbed a fistful of sparkling dust and tossed it on Nibs and out over the crowd before he ran off into the dark. It was a warm and wonderful feeling to fly for the first time. Nibs tried his best to keep sight of Marmaduke but it being his first flight he could not control his ascension. The newly floating boys of the crowd—all excited—bounced into one another, obstructing Tootles below. Seizing the opportunity, Binky dropped to the ground from a safe height and scampered off. With the help of the party's chaos, all that remained of Binky was a few drops of blood in the snow.

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As the party ended and dispersed, Tootles gave Khadija and Anne-Marie enough pixie dust to reach their windows '*free of charge*'. Tootles called this small act of kindness '*public relations*'. The girls didn't seem any less angry with how the night turned out but thanks to Tootles they would return home without incident and the night's events would soon become an exciting story they retold. Tootles had a far less forgiving quiet-anger. The Twins would be '*held accountable*'.

-Chapter Four-
The Twins, in Rackham's Town

"Thoughts and Prayers" cried the crier without tears,

"Thoughts and Prayers of the two boys that we feared."

The Townspeople crowded round for news entertainment.

A popular program, sometimes people fainted.

"Recounting the prayer of Marmaduke the knife..."

The crier relayed his prayer for a new and better life.

"Recounting the thought of Binky the thief..."

He had thought life was long but now knew it was brief.

Some nodded their heads and other heads shook.

The crier reasoned, *"this fate awaits all who behave like a crook."*

The crowd carried off the events they were told.

But not one of them knew how the events truly did unfold...

Governor Rackham had fallen asleep at his writing table—a common occurrence for him—writing the things that a governor writes. He slept with half his face flattened into the writing table and his moustache smooshed inside one

nostril. The glow of his lamp was now the only source of warmth to him as the hearth had cooled from the dimming of the unattended fire. The only life left in the fireplace was that of Marmaduke and Binky's soot covered bodies squirming out of the chimney and floating into Rackham's study.

This was the tenth house the Twins had snuck into—in three nights—with the help of their pixie dust. They stole anything fancy they could silently carry out Pirate's front doors, to a prepared cart. The cart was now filled with: gold coins, ornamental knives, velvet hats, gemstone necklaces, meringue tarts, silks and pocket watches.

The first find in the Rackham house was a beautifully crafted flintlock pistol which Marmaduke promptly picked up off it's wall mount and tucked up his sleeve. Binky floated up over the sleeping Governor—and without an ounce of hesitation—pinched at the black feather of a gold quill pen and tugged it away from Rackham's loose grasp and into his pocket. It wasn't until Binky floated over to take the silver Persian vase in the corner that a chill struck Governor Rackham's neck and stirred him awake.

Rackham stealthily unsheathed the dagger he kept strapped above his ankle and—in a lightning burst of speed—locked Binky in a hold, threatening to plunge the dagger into the boy's chest.

"Set down my property or I will gut your compatriot like an Albacore" Rackham warned. Marmaduke stood stunned for what seemed like too long so Rackham clarified, *"that's a fish."*

Binky bit at Rackham's wrist and struck his heel into soft Governor belly before commanding his brother to *"DUST HIM!"*

Rackham's grip on Binky loosened in his pain—for which he grunted out some Pirate-talk that I prefer not to repeat—and was peppered with pixie dust by Marmaduke. Binky wriggled free and—not forgetting to grab the silver vase—the two brothers charged out the front door to their cart.

Governor Rackham gave chase but found himself tripping over his newfound lack of gravity. Hearing the racket of Rackham's banging against the first floor ceiling, his family awoke and rushed downstairs. Hearing Rackham's frightful screaming, two night watchmen appeared at the open front door. Once informed, the militia were immediately assembled to retrieve the Governor's property and capture the thieves.

The twins arrived safely home with the Governor's property. Out of breath, they set to quickly getting their booty up the stairs and ladders—of West Black

Hill Tree—to their nest on the middle-trunk floor. They had carved out a space behind a wall in their nest to store all their stolen goods until they were ready to trade them.

"So that's where it all was" Nibs said, announcing his presence.

Nibs had—on order of Tootles—been waiting inside the Twins nest with sword drawn. Binky ran for the door only to be driven through by Michael's blade. Binky's brother cried out for him in shock before tossing the pistol from his sleeve at Michael and grabbing for an ornamental knife to protect himself with. Nibs—also shocked by the sudden burst of blood—was panicked at seeing Marmaduke wielding a knife and instinctively stabbed at him through his back.

Having completed their task, Nibs and Michael escaped. Binky and Marmaduke were left to pour out blood upon blood upon stones upon blood until they were gone forever and entirely from Nowhereland—and on to the next land if there was indeed a next land for them to go to.

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At first morning light, the Pirates had found the cart of stolen goods outside West Black Hill Tree and what remained of the Twins and the yet more stolen goods stored in the wall of their nest. They returned the goods to Governor Rackham and the nine other houses that were taken from. The red stones—one of Marmaduke and one of Binky—were carefully gathered by the Pirates as was standard protocol.

Inscribed in those stones was a message from Binky,

'No. I still want to fly. I still want to run. I still want to eat the delicious things. I even want to eat the disgusting things. No.'

Inscribed in those stones was a message from Marmaduke,

'Please. Let me stay with my brother. Let me go to the same place. Let us be together and free. Let us be free of this pain. Please.'

-Chapter Five-
Daxpitchée, trading with the Crow

Cotton River flowed serenely as always, sparkling in the morning sun, bubbling lightly, carrying snow-topped ice drifts that looked like the river's name. Tootles stood on the bank of the Cotton awaiting his meeting as he did every month. Traders from the Crow tribe would float downstream—alongside the ice—on their raft. They would greet Tootles as they approached, referring to him as '*Daxpitchée*' a nickname they made for him long ago. They would hitch down their raft and set about haggling, deciding the amount of gold they would take in exchange for the plastic bags of pixie dust they had collected. They would bring along miscellaneous items from their homeland to aid them in haggling: matches and sweetened corn cereal and a cassette of Rick James Greatest Hits.

Nibs and Michael arrived and waited a distance away, hesitant to interrupt. Noticing them, Tootles told the Crow traders to consider his offer while he convened with his fellows. Michael told Tootles all the important details of the night. Tootles was pleased, especially with Nibs for exceeding his expectations. Tootles took back the sword that he had lent Nibs, tossing it towards his cabin.

"You can buy a sword of your own now, like you wanted" said Tootles, as he pulled a leather sack full of gold from his coat pocket. Placing the sack in Nibs' hand, Tootles was impeded by a- *"what's that?"*

In the heart-pounding encounter and getaway, Nibs had inadvertently picked up Rackham's Pistol and was so shaken that he hadn't noticed it clenched tightly in his fist for hours now.

"*Nice find*" praised Tootles as he pried the flintlock out of Nibs grip and replaced it with the coin sack.

Tootles gave Michael his job-well-done too before heading back to haggle with the traders.

Michael dragged Nibs to the Highbranch Tree Cafe for congratulatory chai and celebratory muffin puffs. Normally so stoic—all business—Michael loosened up quick with a warm drink and a mouth full of dough. The thoughts of the night that were rattling around inside Nibs' head couldn't compete with this new boisterous Michael, somehow even bigger than before.

Laughing about how "*we was hiding so long in that nest that—no lie—I thought we was gonna starve*" and "*my left butt cheek went numb*" and other silliness until they were full and went home to their nests to sleep.

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It wasn't until sunset that Tootles and Michael kicked Nibs awake and out of bed.

"*Let's go get you that sword*" sung Tootles.

-Chapter Six-
Smee's Smithy

Tootles, Michael and Nibs made their way to the blacksmith's workshop out on the northern edge of Rackham's town. The blacksmith—and swordsmith—was a jolly old crook by the name of Smee who had not the slightest reservation about selling his wares to a Pirate or child or even a talking animal, so long as they had the coins. Smee welcomed in Tootles—like the old friend he is—and greeted Michael and was pleased to make Nibs acquaintance.

On being asked to craft a sword for Nibs, Smee fell quiet. He adjusted his glasses. He rubbed at his nose. His bushy moustache twitched to-and-fro.

"*Payment?*" Smee inquired.

Nibs handed over his satchel of gold.

Smee grabbed Nibs by the wrist, "*So you're a righty then?*" and tossed the gold onto a desk.

"*Yes*" Nibs answered as Smee squeezed at his forearm muscles and then his shoulder and cranked Nibs arm this way and that.

"*You're a lunger, I can tell*" Smee professed as he finished with Nibs and started digging into a chest. Some hilts were tossed out, "*Pick any one you'd like.*" Smee got set to work on making a lunging blade to affix to whichever hilt Nibs decided on.

Smee dumped in the charcoals and lit the furnace. Tootles asked Smee to retell the story of the Pirates arrival. Nibs and Michael had never heard this story and for all they knew, Nowhereland had always had Pirates. Smee quite liked telling stories and this story was always a hit so he began...

"There was a great-big-massive storm caused by an angry god that swirled up winds and seas across many worlds: the waking world, the sleeping world, the living world and the dead one. Three ships from three of them worlds got caught up in that storm and were whisked away to the coast of Nowhereland. The ship I was on crashed into the rocks and sank and most of the crew died from drowning or crushed in the timbers—but not Smee, Smee doesn't die so good. The other two ships weathered the storm and made landfall here on the coast of town, but back then it was dead forest like what you boys live in. Everytime we tried to chop one down to make a few cabins you boys would come tumbling out and causing a fuss."

Smee pushed a block of metal into the furnace for cooking.

"At first it was hard living. Quarrels broke out and the two captains of the two crews was both trying to be the one to call the shots. Captain Rackham had reason to believe that we was all stuck here and that we oughta put down roots before we starved. Captain Cofresí on the other hand just wanted to find his way back and—persuasive as he was—got some of Rackham's crew on board with that. Eventually they came to an agreement that Cofresí would lead a small crew on an expedition to find civilization while the rest built up the colony. Cofresí set off with three months worth of food for his five-man crew but then just a month later his crew returned, all skin-and-bones. That crew swore up and down they had been at sea for over a year. Not a one of 'em ever told what became of Cofresí."

Smee pulled out the red hot metal and cut into it and folded it and hammered at it as Nibs and Michael and Tootles chattered about what might have happened to Cofresí out at sea.

"Course you can't blame Cofresí for trying, you see there wasn't much women and ya need women for all the good stuff in life. That's why you boys ain't got nothing really. Rackham had his wife Anne with him and a few other women with his crew so they were able to set up alright. We all started chopping down trees and building cabins. Some of the men started exploring out towards the mountains to the West and Crazy Thomas Cotton went and lived among you lot. We chopped down more trees and set us up a charcoal kiln. These charcoals I'm using is from back then."

Smee dumped some more charcoal into the furnace as he got the metal cooking again.

"That all stopped after you boys got organized and had all sorts of battles. Well, it wasn't much of a fight back then seeing as Rackham had a whole ship of powder for his cannons being put to use in their pistols, not to mention a cutlass on every waistband; you boys had not a damn thing from what I could tell. You kept coming and coming though like the red stones in your chests was apples dropping off the tree. Not that you would know what an apple is."

Tootles bragged to Smee that he had learned what an apple was in a book as Smee cut and folded and hammered the hot metal again.

"You can't learn an apple from a book any more than I can tell you what they are. That's something you got to see and touch and taste yourself. Anyhow, eventually the powder ran out and you boys were attacking smarter: raiding at night, stealing swords. They could have made more powder but the saltpeter was hard to come by so the charcoal that would have been used to make powder came to me for more swords."

Smee stretched out the metal thinner with tongs and carefully hammered it into a thin straight line.

"Then one night when it was decided the charcoal stocks had gotten too low, Rackham and his crew went on a night raid of their own. They snuck into nests and ruthlessly cut boys down one-by-one in their sleep with no chance to fight back. In just an hour they cleared the tree and started sawing at it. Those trees are so big though, they couldn't have it down by morning. The boys come out of the other trees and all of them getting drawn towards the Zzzz-Zzzz sound of the big saws working away. Well they start asking questions—that's never a good thing. Fights start breaking out and in all the ruckus—no one knows how he got up there but—a boy is up top of the tree somehow and he starts a fire somehow."

At just the perfect moment for his story, Smee dunks the red hot metal in a bath of water to cool it and the steam rises up thick like smoke.

"That's the place called Black Hill now. Rackham couldn't have that keep happening so instead of chopping he decreed that we start salvaging wood we need from our cabins and replace them with stone houses. After that things calmed, we pulled out enough food from the sea and the woods and the farms to not be so rough all the time. Rackham started a family, others too. Now we got kids of our own running around and enough barrels of wine we could be exporting if we weren't marooned in this fantasy wasteland. Nibs, you chosen yet?"

Nibs had picked a silvery toadstool of a handle which Smee bolted and melted into place. When it was all done and cooled Nibs was given the sword he had so wanted. A sleek and shining rapier.

Tootles tasked Nibs and Michael with smuggling that sword back home, being careful not to get caught by the nightwatch. Tootles had further business with Smee. To Smee's bewilderment, he witnessed Governor Rackham's pistol drawn out of Tootles' coat. Governor Rackham's pistol being gripped in Tootles' hand. Governor Rackham's pistol not hanging on the wall of Governor Rackham's study.

"That's Governor Rackham's pistol" Smee blubbered.

Tootles ignored the blubbling, *"Saying if I wanted to go hunting with this-*"

"Impossible! There's no powder left!" Smee flustered.

Tootles ignored the flustering, *"Saying if I wanted to go hunting with this and had the powder."*

"You couldn't possibly have the powder! There isn't the elements needed for it on this forsaken land!" Smee niggled.

Tootles ignored the niggling, *"Saying if I wanted to go hunting with this and had the powder, would you be able to make the ammunition?"*

Smee grumbled over to a box and pried it open to reveal it piled up with lead balls, *"No need to make 'em. I have boxes of 'em for scrap."*

Tootles laid down a dozen gold coin, *"Teach me how to load them."*

-Chapter Seven-
Curly, visiting the Cafe

The snow that previously dragged on Nibs feet now simply melted out of his way. The sun was brighter. The crows' caws were in harmony with the unfamiliar sounds of apologies and politeness. Every Lost boy looked towards Nibs in a new way, as if he were a completely different person from the day before. The rapier on his back made this new world possible and it felt amazing. It felt to Nibs like flying but inverted; as if instead of rising up off the ground, the ground was falling away from him.

This fresh empowerment demanded to be used so Nibs set course for the Highbranch Tree Cafe in hopes of wielding this power in the vicinity of Curly and Slightly. Approaching the cafe, Nibs spotted Curly himself hurriedly shoving his cutlass behind a thick flap of bark as two Pirates walked into sight from around Highbranch Tree. After securing his blade, Curly walked right towards the Pirates as innocent as a lamb. The Pirates stopped Curly, as one frisked him the other kicked around in the snow nearby searching for anything that might have been stashed.

Anything is incorrect—the Pirates weren't searching for just anything—they were searching for Governor Rackham's missing pistol. The scouting patrols had increased triple-fold after the pistol was not found among the stolen goods retrieved from the Twins haul.

Satisfied with their search, the two Pirates moved on. After they were out of sight and his clothes were tightened back on, Curly went back to his hidey-hole to

retrieve his cutlass but was shocked to find it empty. He checked other sections of bark to see if there was some other hiding spot he had used in his haste. He searched around in the snow. He considered if the Pirates had found it but was sure he would be in shackles now if they had. Not sure what to do he ran to the cafe to find Slightly—Slightly would know what to do.

Curly rushed down the steps into the cafe—all stamps and stomps—and was about to yell out to Slightly about his dilemma when he noticed Nibs—rapier adorning his back—sat there using Curly's beloved cutlass to serve Walnut Pie. Nibs pointed the cutlass at Curly: broadside up, a piece of pie resting upon it.

"Hey Curly, want a... slice?" offered Nibs with an inappropriate amount of emphasis on 'slice'.

Off to the side, Slightly was quietly eating his slice. Curly bottled his rage and followed suit, walking right up to the point of the blade and taking the pie he was offered.

"Delicious" remarked Curly with a mouthful of walnut filling and not the slightest hint of pleasure in his voice or expression.

All the onlookers in the cafe were impressed by Curly's fearlessness. Not wanting to be upstaged, Nibs offered Curly his cutlass back.

"Thanks for holding onto it for me" said a carefully worded Curly, not wanting to antagonize Nibs nor appear weak.

The two boys proceeded to stare into one another's eyes, chewing loudly on walnut pie. This continued through many bites with neither breaking eye contact until all of the pie was chewed and swallowed.

"I'll see you around" promised Nibs as he ended the staredown and exited the cafe with a triumphant smirk chiseled on his face.

Nibs stood a little taller now and it wasn't just his confidence. Boys born into the Snowy Wood were at most times ageless—with no beginning or end like Nowhereland itself—but at other times they would catch hold of a growth spurt. A bit of growth is a wonderful thing, it gives you the strength to do the bigger things one dreams of. The danger though is that a boy can grow too quickly and—instead of becoming a man or an old man—disappear altogether.

This is not just true of Nowhereland.

-Chapter Eight-
Under the Full Moon

Cotton River was always as always. Tootles stood on the bank of the Cotton, awaiting the returning traders of the Crow tribe. This was not their monthly appointment but an earlier scheduled meeting. Tootles had paid in advance for a very special item that they now delivered in many plastic sacks weighing down one side of their raft.

"Daxpitchée, we have the charcoal you wanted" said the older as the younger hitched the raft to shore. Michael got to work, moving the sacks of charcoal to Tootles cabin.

Meanwhile, Nibs—with his new height and confidence—had been sent into town. Not just the outskirts of town like Smee's smithery but really into the town, which for any Lost boy would be a nerve-racking experience as the Townspeople monitor his every motion. Nibs was especially conspicuous as he clanked down the cobblestone streets, pushing an empty wheelbarrow. It would of course be unwise to have brought his rapier but Nibs couldn't help wishing he had it with him; what he did carry didn't make him feel safe at all.

Nibs met with Khadija privately, in the alley behind her home. Nibs undid his coat and untied the bags of pixie dust packed to his torso, which Khadija took—and quickly hid inside her home—before escorting Nibs to her father's shack and unlocking it. Inside the shack were piles of saltpeter, which Nibs shoveled onto the wheelbarrow and covered with a sheet.

Now slimmer, Nibs pushed his wheelbarrow back out of town and was—unsurprisingly—stopped by a watchman. Nervous Nibs was questioned by the watchman about what he was doing in town—'*fetching flour for the Cafe*'—as he dug through Nibs clothes and stuck his hand inside the pile of saltpeter. Luckily, the watchman was so focused on finding Rackham's pistol that he didn't notice that the piled substance he had reached into felt nothing like flour until long after he had let Nibs go.

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The Snowy Wood was bright as day under the full moon. The Pirates held a party of their own on these bright nights and—you will learn well that—a half moon party is only half as raucas as a full moon party.

Caws, clangs, yells, screams, hollers, shouts.

Even the boys sleeping in the highest nests awaken on the full moon from the clamour, if not from a Pirate squirming into their home and tossing around their valuables. The criers were always prepared for the thoughts and prayers this night would bring. Inevitably, swords would be found. The brig would receive guests. Boys would be obstinate. Red stones would be produced.

This was the Pirates raiding party.

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Sneaking into town on this night was even easier than Tootles imagined it would be. Just one watchman was left on patrol and was far off from the docks as Tootles, Michael and Nibs made their approach with their wheelbarrow and sacks. Parked in the docks was Rackham's brig: two masts, fourteen sails, twelve cannon, a skeleton warrior—dagger between his teeth, saber in hand—charging towards the sea from the prow. A beautiful ship that the three boys boarded without issue. Michael tossed down the four sacks of charcoal off his shoulders. Nibs set down the wheelbarrow of saltpeter. Tootles laid down his sacks of pixie dust, immediately tearing one open.

"Nibs! Untie us from the dock! Michael! unfurl the sails!" ordered Tootles, as a real Pirate captain would have.

Nibs jumped back off the ship and set to untying the ropes latching the ship to the docks. Michael clambered around the ship, untying the sails. Tootles moved down into the ship's hull where he started sprinkling pixie dust all about.

This full moon raid was more raucas than usual; the Governor in attendance, personally overseeing the chaos. Governor Rackham's pistol was of such importance to him that he declared '*no time to be wasted on transporting boys to the brig*'. The criers were not prepared to handle the amount of content this night would bring. Red stones started piling up within minutes.

Awoken by the cries, Solomon flew down—flapping his massive wings at the Pirates.

"Cease this violence, Governor" ordered Solomon.

Governor Rackham—like all Pirates—was ignorant of the animal languages; through this ignorance a Pirate could reason that they were special people that could do as they liked without consequence. In this instance however—while Rackham could not understand the specific words—he could recognize the meaning in Solomon's caws through the emotion and context of the interaction. Despite this understanding, Rackham—thinking himself so very uniquely special—would of course not do as ordered and flailed his sword at Solomon in an attempt to end the pestering.

The single nightwatchman in town, first spotted it—from over the houses and through wafts of chimney smoke—the sails of the brig unfurled and flapping in the breeze.

Nibs hadn't made much progress untangling the thick mess of ropes when the watchman reached the docks. Michael noticed him first and—acting quickly—kicked the boarding bridge off into the water. Tootles arrived and—with only a moment to assess the situation—demanded Nibs unanchor the ship. The nightwatchman—now noticing Nibs—ran over to prevent this and kicked Nibs

about the ribs, sending him rolling away. Nibs clutched at the pain as the watchman approached again.

"UNANCHOR THE DAMNED SHIP!" Tootles commanded.

Snapping out of his pain, Nibs drew the rapier from off his back and—while still laid out on the ground—stabbed at the watchman. A pained cry bellowed out of the watchman and blood stained his pants from the puncture in his thigh. The watchman drew the saber from his waist. Nibs got back to his feet and swiping up at the watchman, sliced through his cheek and ear. The saber clanged to the ground as the watchman clutched at his face. Nibs darted towards the saber, snatching it up, then ran back to the anchoring ropes, hacking at them with the saber.

The ship was drifting out as the sails caught wind and tugged with force at the docking rope.

Through his own gurgling screams and dripping blood and without a weapon—the watchman did not relent in attempting to prevent the undocking of the brig, running again at Nibs. The rope was halfway cut through when Nibs tossed the saber at the watchman's feet to trip him up; as the watchman stumbled, Nibs secured his rapier and took a few steps back from the edge of the dock. Getting back on his feet, the nightwatchman tackled at Nibs. Nibs made a running jump off the dock, grabbing on to the docking rope as far out as he could reach.

Sailing off, the ship pulled at the half-cut docking rope until it snapped.

Nibs swung into the side of the ship—landing hard on his already bruised ribs—his feet dangling into the water.

"GOOD WORK!" Tootles praised from the top deck, throwing down fistfuls of pixie dust at Nibs to help him climb up.

Inside the hull of the ship—where Tootles had been peppering pixie dust—was now a wild show of floating plates and cups and ropes and chains and shackles and cannons and cannon balls and lanterns and so on. Above, Tootles continued by coating the deck and masts and sails. As the whole ship became lighter it began to hop out of the water.

A boy fell out of his nest, landing with a crunch of snow and bone. Another, cut down as he ran out his tree. Solomon did his best to intervene—snatching up boys to safety—but there was only one of him.

Solomon tried again to reason with the Governor, *"You must stop this cruelty! The pain you inflict on others will return to you and your loved ones!"*

Then—as if the caws and shouts and screams weren't enough—the sound of the alarm bell could be heard from town. It was in this moment that Rackham witnessed it through all the clamour...

The universe fell silent, everything frozen in place; the light dimmed and Governor Rackham could see the unmistakable silhouette of his ship sailing passed the moon.

"HARD TO STARBOARD!" Tootles commanded.

The boys pulled at the sails. Not knowing the correct meaning of 'Starboard'—but all taking it to mean up towards the stars—they angled the sails to catch the updrafts. The ship rose higher and higher until even the tallest branches of the tallest trees of the Snowy Wood were looked down on.

Governor Rackham abruptly ended the raid and ordered one brigade of men back to town for inspection, another brigade to keep sight on the flying ship, while the rest of the men were tasked with making sure the boys of the Snowy Wood stayed inside their trees.

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"*HARD TO TREEPORT!*" Tootles commanded.

The boys pulled at the sails—'Treeport' of course meant to sail towards the Snowy Wood—and the ship sailed out over the center of the Snowy Wood.

"*HOIST THE SAILS!*" Tootles commanded.

The boys tied up the sails, slowing just above Highbranch Tree.

"*SCRUB THE DECK!*" Tootles commanded.

The boys mopped the pixie dust off the deck, allowing the ship to sink down onto the crown of Highbranch Tree. Branches snapped off—assaulting the Pirates keeping watch below—as the ship settled in. The center mast of Rackham's brig was now the highest branch of the Snowy Wood.

There was no time to waste on marveling at the feat they had accomplished, Tootles had bigger plans still. The three boys hopped down into the belly of the brig where Tootles led them to a locked storeroom he had noticed during his earlier tour through the ship; Tootles had them unlock the door with their kicks. Inside was a mess of red stones—hundreds if not a thousand. The three all helped in hauling the stones and some powderkegs up to the bridge where they started their work. Nibs and Michael were tasked with pounding the red stones and charcoal into gravel which Tootles would mix with the saltpeter and further grind with a pestle and mortar until it was a fine powder. They were producing gun powder—black powder.

-Chapter Nine-
Black Powder

Tootles had learned the procedure of black powder production from a book and so needed to test that the instructions were accurate—as he knew most books were not-at-all trustworthy. Getting out his favorite gas station lighter—made of transparent blue plastic so you could see the lighter fluid inside—Tootles touched a flame to the first ounce of the powder. Tootles, Nibs and Michael all reacted the same: jolting backwards from the sudden flash and crackle. A lingering sizzle followed and the three boys shock were followed with laughter.

The sound of laughter carried down to the bottom of Highbranch Tree where the first brigade of Pirates kept watch on the ship as commanded. The second brigade was back in town with Governor Rackham. The third brigade's task of keeping boys in their trees became increasingly impossible as dawn broke; boys dripped through the gaps in the third brigade's watch and all invariably gathered towards the oddity sitting atop Highbranch Tree. As the boys gathered, the drama of that night passed among them: boy to boy, neighbor to neighbor, friend to missing friend. It didn't take long before the first brigade—keeping watch of the ship—took on the third brigade's role of crowd control; access to Highbranch Tree had to be maintained for whatever Governor Rackham might decide to do.

Normally after a night raid, Rackham's militia would keep close watch of the border to prevent any retribution from the Lost boys that might endanger the

town. With only a third of his forces to perform this task, Governor Rackham hastily went door-to-door rounding up more able-bodied men and women.

It was at the door of Ibrahim Henriques that the Governor was informed: some Lost boys had been sold a large quantity of Henriques' saltpeter supply by his daughter. With his missing pistol, stolen ship and this saltpeter incident it was now clear to the Governor that a conspiracy was in motion and thought he had a good idea of what it was. Rackham summoned Smee.

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With the protection of the town put in place, Governor Rackham returned to Highbranch Tree. It was decided that the boys living in Highbranch Tree were to be *'evacuated for their safety'* and sent to live in other nests in other trees. Any boy who rebelled during the evacuation were promptly arrested and taken to the town's one remaining ship for *'holding'*.

Smee arrived—escorted by Rackham's right-hand man, Oliver—through the noisy crowd of boys, shouting unrepeatable insults at the Governor.

"I think these boys might not be too fond of you, Governor" jibed Smee with a firm handshake.

"I think the boys up in that ship are producing gunpowder" said Rackham with a firmer handshake.

"You wouldn't happen to know anything about that would you?" asked Rackham with a handshake that resembled a clenched fist of spaghetti.

"Some information-and/or-materials may have passed from I-to-them in the pure-and-honest interest of communal cooperation-and-tranquility-and-common good but I can assuredly assure you that if they may perhaps have abused my goodwill for malicious ends that I—Bo'sun Smee, an upstanding citizen—had no prior knowledge of such intent and will now humbly-and-deeply-and-earnestly apologize for my overly trusting nature that has allowed myself to make the unforgivable mistake of overlooking such malicious intent" blathered a wincing Smee with crushed hand.

The Governor—relenting his handshake—tasked Smee with designing a plan to breach the ship as quickly and quietly as possible. Smee—in the interest of his self-preservation—immediately had the idea of: going to the highest nest in Highbranch Tree, boring the rest of the height of the tree, then boring into the

hull of the ship itself. Satisfied with the plan, Governor Rackham allowed Smee to lead a small work crew in gathering the boring equipment and beginning the task.

On Tootles' treeship, the pounding-and-grinding of black powder production continued into the day. In just a few hours a sixth of a powder keg was filled. It was a mind-numbingly rote task so, before breaking apart a red stone Nibs would read it...

'Why me? Why must all the terrible things happen to me? Bopper and Little Chris and Tootles are always doing way way worse than me and this never happens to them. It's not fair.'

And after Nibs read it, Tootles and Michael would guess at who's stone it was; Tootles was sure this one was Robbie from the coast. Tootles knew Robbie to be smart and brave. Robbie learned to play chess from Thomas Cotton and learned to pickpocket from Little Chris and would go into town to do both.

'Don't shoot! Don't shoot me, Blackbeard! POW-URGH! I'm shot! It hurts! It... It's a sword. It really, really, hurts. You're not Blackbeard. This is my nest.'

Michael thought this one was Jonathon because Jonathon: loved the stories of Blackbeard and had a cutlass like Blackbeard had and went gone after a night raid. These dreaming ones were difficult to guess.

'I'm flying! I'm flying! I'm flying! I'm flying! I'm falling! I'm falling! I'm falling! I'm falling! I'm falling! I'm falling! I'm'

And others were difficult to guess if they were dreams. Tootles thought this one could be Flat Cameron. He got the nickname after the accident.

From up on his perch Solomon could see it all. The three troublemakers in their stolen ship—up to no good. The bloodstained tyrant commanding his forces—down to no good. As terrible as the night had been it was clear to Solomon's eyes that even more terribleness was approaching.

Solomon flew over to Highbranch Tree and boarded the ship. Solomon—unfamiliar with the process of gunpowder production—wasn't quite sure what the boys were up to with their piles of black rocks and red rocks and white dust.

"Tootles! Michael! Nibs!" Solomon cawed, *"You need to return this ship and anything else you've taken from the Pirates. Not because they're good. Not because they deserve these things. Not even because it's theirs. You need to return these things because your lives and the lives of your brothers are at risk!"*

Ignoring the outburst, Tootles put the top on the recently filled powderkeg and carried it into the captain's quarters for storage.

"Solomon, for once in your life you shouldn't get involved" Michael replied, continuing his work with Nibs.

"At least a dozen died last night!" cawed Solomon, spreading his massive wings for emphasis. *"And dozens more may die today if everyone keeps going down this path! Your brothers will be punished for your mischief. Will you be able to bear the heavy burden of their lives on your conscience?"*

'Please. Let me stay with my brother. Let me go to the same place. Let us be together and free. Let us be free of this pain. Please.'

Nibs knew instantly this stone was Marmaduke.

"Nibs, you told me that you would be brave" remembered Solomon, hopping in close to Nibs. *"The brave thing to do in this situation is to give those Pirates what they want for the good of all your brothers."*

"I ALSO told you that they're not my brothers" remembered Nibs, pummeling Marmaduke's stone to bits.

"It's time you left, Solomon" called out Tootles from the captain's quarters.

"Tootles!" cawed Solomon, *"I know you care for your brothers. I've seen your kindness and bravery. I know you will make things right, to protect them."*

Tootles walked out from the captain's quarters and shot at Solomon with Rackham's pistol. Nibs and Michael hit the deck as a burst of smoke came at them from one direction and a burst of feathers from the other. Solomon's caws were nonsensical and ear piercing as he flapped around dropping feathers and blood. He tried to fly away, but with a bullet in his left wing could only manage to fall away; dropping off the side of the ship, hitting a few branches and then the long fall to the ground below.

With only a light covering of snow on the ground it was quite the hard impact Solomon made; landing in front of the crowd of boys, next to Governor Rackham. Everyone was stunned silent... until Solomon regained consciousness and began thrashing about, flipping up piles of snow with his tail feathers. The Governor took command, having Solomon taken to town—fearing any more drama might cause the boys to truly riot.

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"It worked" boasted Tootles, holstering the pistol in his jacket. Tootles leaned over the side of the ship to look down on the fallen Solomon and lamented that, *"it's too bad I won't get to have that beak of his, one that big and loud has gotta be worth a hundred or more regular beaks."* Tootles then walked over to one of Solomon's blood dotted feathers and picked it up remarking how, *"this things even bigger than my dagger!"* before proceeding to twist the calamus of the feather into his hair until it held place.

"How do I look?"

Nibs and Michael had no reply.

Tootles sat back down with Nibs and Michael to work and so they followed his lead but the mood was different now. Nibs stopped bothering to read the stones and found himself repeatedly distracted by the feather in Tootles' hair bobbing up and down as he ground the black powder.

Thick white clouds approached, engulfing the ship in a frozen mist.

-Chapter Ten-
Smee, climbing Highbranch Tree

"*A blizzard be coming*" Smee informed the Governor as his crew hauled the boring equipment inside Highbranch Tree.

"..."

"*And I'll be going*" Smee continued—recognizing the Governor's disdain towards him would not be conducive to a polite discussion of the weather.

It was Smee's first time inside Highbranch Tree's lobby. As with many massive things, from the outside Smee could certainly comprehend that this tree was large but it was only once he was inside that he could feel the inverse—that he was small. Highbranch Tree was so large that its evacuation was still in progress. Pirates were climbing up it—floor by floor—to shepherd boys out, arresting any who were defiant. A party of boys were dropping down and out of the central core of the lobby as Smee's crew were busy affixing the heavier tools to themselves.

Each floor of Highbranch Tree had as many as a dozen nests and this hollowed core connected each floor. The quickest way to climb up was to grab one of the ropes dangling aside the wall and to use the horizontal slots carved into the wall—laddering all the way up—as foot holds. The quickest way down was to fall. The second quickest way down was to jump out and grab at one of the pairs of pulley ropes dangling in the center of the core. The pulley construction was very simple, a rope through a hole at the top of the core with a large knot on either side—too large to go through the hole—so that each pair of pulley ropes could only

move a distance of about four floors. To quickly and safely descend, one would switch their hold back and forth between the pair of pulley ropes.

Unable to even see the top from inside the core, Smee felt even smaller and daunted by the climb ahead of him.

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As there was such a long trip to the top floor of Highbranch Tree, very few boys lived up there; the boys who did could afford a regular supply of pixie dust to make the trip. With so few occupants on the top floors, there were fewer—but larger—nests. On the top floor there were just three nests and a hall that led to a small carved out spiral staircase; the staircase led to the floor above the top floor—the largest nest in Highbranch Tree, the largest nest in all of Nowhereland, more spacious than any house in town—this was Slightly's nest.

Smee and his crew were drenched in sweat when they arrived at the top floor of Highbranch Tree.

Slightly was sleeping but Curly had been wide awake since the nest started shaking that night. All night Curly checked out a window hole for developments on the ground. Typically the full moon raids never reached them but after being awoken, Curly had the sense to barricade the door and prepare for an intrusion.

When Smee's crew tried to enter Slightly's nest, they found the entrance locked and begun chopping it down.

Curly had the time to kick Slightly awake and hand him all of their weapons and doubloons and dump the last of their pixie dust on him before sending him flying out the window. As the sweaty Pirates finally burst in with swords drawn, Curly dropped to his knees and put his hands on his head to show that he was no threat.

One or more of the crew may have considered that it would be easier to run Curly through with a blade and be done with him rather than waste their time and effort on arresting and escorting him but as Curly had given himself up peacefully—and Smee was watching—they did things the right way. Curly was escorted down twelve floors, where he was then handed over from Smee's crew to the evacuation crew.

The evacuation crew tied Curly by the arms and escorted him down the rest of the way and outside to the prisoner transport crew.

The prisoner transport crew packed Curly on a cart with other imprisoned boys and as they were carted away. Curly finally got to witness what disturbed him that night—crowning Highbranch Tree.

Once the cart had reached the town's docks, Curly and the other boys were handed off from the prisoner transport crew to the brig crew.

The brig crew escorted Curly inside the brig.

-Chapter Eleven-
Crows, in the Captain's Quarters

Black powder production had moved to the captain's quarters to get out of the cold wind and to prevent the moisture making the powder unusable. The mood of Nibs and Michael had not lightened; Tootles having had enough of it decided to justify himself—which was very rare indeed.

"Smee told you a story of Captain Cofresí going out to sea with his crew for a year and coming back dead in a month, remember? And then next thing he's talking about how good Rackham's crew are doing here. What he left out is how those things are connected. If you go out to the docks, next to the ships—well, just the one ship now—you can see winches with ropes snaking out to sea. At the end of those winch ropes is a barge with all sorts of crops on it. They call it the 'Cofresí Barge'. For as long as I had been in Nowhereland, nothing had ever grown before the Pirates arrived. I've got books that tell me that—at some time these trees we live in must have been green—but I never seen it. Nothing ever grew in Nowhereland for the Pirates neither until after Cofresí went out to sea and died. The Pirates learned from his voyage how to make things grow. What they do is pack a barge with dirt, seed, snow and they push it out to sea and then they pull it back in a few weeks later and it's covered in food. Cofresí made that possible with his sacrifice. That's what you call it when something bad has to happen to make something good happen. 'Sacrifice'. Cofresí wanted to eat so much that he went and got himself eaten. Now all of them can eat."

A second powder keg was filled up and Tootles pounded down the lid as he continued, *"I think we're going to end up getting what Solomon wanted. When we get it, we'll name it after him."*

Tootles—having started—couldn't stop talking now, *"I can't help remembering a story I heard a long time ago from the Crow. Not Solomon, I mean the traders. Not the current guys but the younger one's father's father's father's father's.... give or take. He told me the story of a crow. A bird."*

"It went... there was a tribe of men called the Chia who's camp was being infested with many crows who stole their food and shiny things. The Chia were unhappy with the thieving crows and so asked their Chief to do something about it. The Chief gathered the council of the Chia—which was himself and the most brave warriors. The council decided that to deal with the crows they must cull them."

As an aside Tootles added 'cull' is a shorter way of saying 'kill them all'.

'Killthemall'

'Killemall'

'Kiliall'

'Clull'

'Cull'

"And so, the cull went forward as the council decided but the Chief said to not cull the youngest crow. So, the Chia murdered all the crows in their camp that didn't flee and then followed all the crows who fled back to their nests and murdered them there. Some of the crows fled their nests to go far away from the Chia. Those that stayed were all killed. All except for the youngest crow who was given to the Chief. The Chief named that crow 'Shepita' and raised him, teaching Shepita the language of the Chia and then the language of their neighbors, the Kuachee. When the Chia were hungry, Chief would have Shepita scout out herds of Buffalo and Elk so that the warriors could have a good hunt. When the Chia were afraid of attacks by the Kuachee, Chief would have Shepita go to the Kuachee camp to spy on them and learn their plans so that the warriors could ambush them. The Chia quickly grew to be the largest and strongest tribe because of all that Shepita did for them. In return, Shepita was beloved by the Chia."

A cheerful knock on the door of the captain's quarters interrupted the story and the door opened.

"Nice ship you got here, Toots" joked Slightly as he came inside, dumping his baggage against the wall and closing the door.

"*Pirates raided my place*" he informed them, walking around the work being done in the center of the room.

"*And I think Curly's been arrested*" he continued as he hopped up on top of the captain's desk.

"*So, whatcha fellas up to?*" asked a slightly yawning Slightly as he got himself into a comfortable lounging position on the desk.

"*You comfortable?*" asked Tootles—not wanting an answer—"I'm telling the *crow cull story.*"

"*That's a good one*" approved Slightly, "*but what's with all the rocks?*"

"*One day, Shepita went off on a scout and did not return for a week and when he returned was very sad. The Chia women asked Shepita what made him sad but he did not answer, so they gave him elk fat to chew—hoping to cheer him up—but he was still sad. The warriors of the Chia council asked Shepita what made him sad yet he did not answer, so they gave him tobacco to smoke but he was still sad. Then the Chief asked Shepita what made him sad but Shepita still did'nt answer. The Chief said he would leave to find what made Shepita so sad and that he would kill it. Shepita stopped the Chief from leaving the camp and finally spoke, saying that he met great medicine men who looked into the future and divined that a great storm would come and lightning would strike every member of the Chia council, killing them. The Chief asked why such a thing would happen and Shepita answered that it was a punishment. The Chia would be punished for dominating their neighbors and nature. Shepita said he was so sad because this punishment was his fault.*"

Slightly noodled out a sad and foreboding melody on his panflute for emphasis.

"*The Chia people were made very sad learning of all this but the Chief and Council were very brave and decided they would protect the Chia one last time. The council would go away from the camp so that when the storm came to punish them, no one else would be hurt. Shepita scouted out a suitable location for the council to set up the camp where they would die. The day before the storm, the council left for their death camp and the Chia people wept for them. The council made themselves comfortable as the thunder approached: wrapping themselves in warm buffalo hide, chewing elk fat and smoking tobacco. However when death came for them it wasn't through divine lightning but from their enemies, the Kuachee warriors, sneaking upon them with their axes.*"

Slightly added to the drama with sharp stabbing sounds.

"*With the bravest warriors of the Chia dead, the Kuachee then raided the Chia camp. Anyone they did not decide to take as a slave or wife was killed. Shepita was*

already long gone when the Kuachee culled the Chia. You see, because... Shepita had never met any medicine men, he had met his crow relatives that had fled the cull. That is when he heard the story of his origins."

The room was quiet for a bit as they all pondered the meaning of this story of avian revenge on man.

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"The crow is you, right?" hypothesized Slightly, "Thomas Cotton taught you all the Pirate ways and then you killed him with them."

"That's hearsay" rebutted Michael on Tootles behalf, "Cotton drowned all himself."

Nibs was not familiar with any of this history, so paid close attention to the argument.

"I heard said that Tootles tricked Cotton into drowning himself" rumored Slightly, "That he made a story of gold in the river and Cotton dived in chasing that gold to a cold, gurgling bleeghhhh-" Slightly went limp off the side of the desk with his tongue drooping out and his eyes rolling into his head, which made Nibs laugh.

"Thomas was an adventurer, he chased the frontier" concluded Tootles very seriously, "He told me himself that adventurers like him have light feet and heavy heads. He was bound to drown eventually."

"Isn't it just like the crow cull in the story, that he took you in after what happened?" questioned Slightly, still upside down.

"What happened?" asked Nibs, being immediately chest slapped by Michael—who also didn't know what happened but had the good sense to realize it was something terrible and had the sensitivity for Tootles feelings to not so flippantly ask about it.

"What was that for?" responded Nibs, oblivious.

"This is black powder we're making" said Tootles, answering the question Slightly had since entering the room.

Slightly launched upright, *"This is blackpowder?! You've made blackpowder?! Blood stones are used to make blackpowder?!"* Slightly frantically got out one of the

many ballpoint pens he carried and scribbled words on the light side of his forearm.

Nibs had known Slightly as popular and talented and respected but now got to know him how those close to him knew him: someone smart and silly and blown away by sudden winds of inspiration. Nibs was finding it harder to hold onto past animosities.

-Chapter Twelve-
Anne-Marie, bears witness

In town, Solomon was laid out in a cart being poked into by the town physician. A crowd of folk had gathered to the cawing of this massive creature—that they had only ever seen from a distance, perched out on the tops of the bare trees—as he had a bloodied iron ball wrenched out from his wing. Among the onlookers was young miss Anne-Marie Sharp who—while fascinated with the scene—found herself drawn away to the sounds of cursing and dissent just over her shoulder where some Lost boys were arguing with some Pirates.

Wandering over towards the ruckus, Anne-Marie heard bits and pieces of the boys disturbing complaints of what had been occurring on the other side of that tree lined border. Getting closer, Anne-Marie couldn't help but notice that her town's border looked like how her little brother liked to make her bed when she was out, a line of toy soldiers placed on it's edge.

The physician finished up his work on Solomon and instructed that he be taken inside—somewhere warm. Rackham's men requested the help of the nearby patrol crew in the moving of Solomon off of his cart, which gave Anne-Marie the opportunity to sneak over the border.

Anne-Marie heard the rattle and murmur of a cart across the way before she saw it through the trees: packed with Lost boys who were tied together by ropes snaking from neck-to-neck. She followed the path the cart had left behind in the snow, the many paths by many carts making many trips.

Before long Anne-Marie was in among the crowd of boys outside Highbranch Tree. She tried to blend in but was immediately noticed as an oddity: first by the boys and then by the brigade managing the crowd who ordered her to return to town but were too occupied to escort her. Anne-Marie—having a habit of ignoring the orders of adults—instead stayed and listened to the complaints and anger shouted by the Lost boys about how they had been wronged and their missing friends.

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The boys who never stop looking up noticed him first, the boy who hopped out of the treeship and floated down like a feather. It was Nibs descending down; coming to a stop just short of the ground, floating at eye level to Governor Rackham.

The Governor grasped at the handle of his sword in preparation for what he expected might come. Nibs made it known that he was the emissary of Tootles for the purpose of issuing demands. Tootles—through Nibs—demanded the retreat of all Pirates from the Snowy Wood and the release of all boys being held prisoner. The crowd of boys cheered in support of the demands.

"What-" Rackham replied carefully, *"What should compel me to cede to such ridiculous demands?"*

With a slight nod of his head, the Governor ordered his men to seize Nibs. As light as Nibs was to float, he was just as light being slammed to the ground. A crowd of gasps followed the snow's crunch. After being seized and searched, a shake of their heads informed the Governor that Nibs had no weapon on him. Now knowing that Nibs had not been sent as an assassin Rackham could relax and knelt down beside Nibs.

"I am not an unreasonable man" Rackham quietly professed, *"I am willing to release the prisoners. I am even willing to allow you boys to keep my ship—it looks magnificent up there. In exchange though, I must demand the burning of your black powder and the return of my pistol."*

Rackham stood back up and motioned to his men to unhand Nibs who then floated back to his feet, face half covered in snow.

"Go, float away" said Rackham, dismissing Nibs to return with his offer.

"Tootles said there will be no negotiations" scowled Nibs.

Rackham thought for a moment, reading the expression of Nibs' angry yet annoyed yet furious yet indignant yet brave face.

"If you're unwilling to negotiate how can you exp-"

Rackham's carefully worded and logically sound retort was interrupted by the boom and smoke of cannon fire.

Anne-Marie had never in her life heard such a noise or seen such a sight as the treeship's cannon launching a cannonball that landed some ways behind her and the crowd, bursting a geyser of ground snow.

The boom and shake halted the work of Smee's crew, who had bored upwards about the length of a shrug.

"Pathetic" was Tootles assessment of the cannon's firing distance as he proceeded to have Michael and Slightly prepare another shot.

"How about this time we give it some of this?" reasoned Tootles, taking out a small amount of pixie dust—from the nearly depleted bag—and rubbing it on the cannonball before loading it with the blackpowder to be fired.

The shocked silence of the crowd became tumult.

Rackham had Nibs arrested.

The crowd could no longer be confined.

Anne-Marie witnessed a boy run through with a sword.

Rackham called for a retreat.

The crowd of boys followed after the retreat in spite of drawn swords swiping at them to stay away.

The ship's second volley fired: soaring further than the first, dropping branches all along its path atop the Snowy Wood, erupting another geyser of snow just outside of Rackham's town.

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Tootle viewed this—between the passing clouds—with the aid of a spyglass he had found on board.

"The branches slowed it down" observed Tootles, "the next one will make it."

Changing his focus, Tootles could spy the entire scene of Rackham's bloody retreat. Nibs being carried with them as they disappeared behind trees. Returning his focus below the ship, Tootles could see just Anne-Marie left behind among the red snow and red stones. Weeping.

"We're gonna run out of pixie dust soon." announced Tootles, holding up the last of it. "Michael, there's one bag left in the cabin in the usual spot. Fetch it."

And with that, Michael flung himself off the ship towards the whitest patch of ground and a mere grain of pixie dust to soften his fall just enough to not shatter his bones.

"Slightly, there's a girl down below who's crying, see?"

Slightly put the spyglass to his eye.

"Her friend has a heap of pixie dust and they're both big fans of you."

Slightly looked down at his fangirl.

"Her name is Anne-Marie. Her friend is Khadija. Convince them to lend us what they have."

And with that, Slightly took slightly more than a grain of pixie dust and floated down to Anne-Marie.

Tootles was left to captain the ship.

-Chapter Thirteen-
The Prison

Nibs was tossed in the brig. The brig was full to the brim with wails and complaints and the stink of armpits and feet and a last meal puked—sitting soggy in the only unfilled bit of floor. Nibs was lucky the pixie dust still hadn't worn off yet—so he could stretch out, unencumbered by gravity—but also unlucky in that all the eyes and stinks were warm airs rising up to him.

"Look what you've done to us you idiot-bastard!" shouted Curly, stealing all the eyes in the brig.

"We're in here 'cause Tootles and his puppies went and stole that ship!" Curly informed his brigmates—ignoring or ignorant to the fact a portion of them were there from the raid finding contraband in their nest.

"Tootles has a plan." Nibs slowly descended into this pit of judgments and frustrations as the pixie dust's effect was nearing its end. Nibs' felt an increasing need to justify his actions.

"The Pirates won't hassle us anymore. They won't make stones of us anymore. We've made black powder." As to perfectly punctuate Nibs' declaration, another cannon volley could be heard off in the distance.

The brig murmured with questions of what black powder was and answers from those who knew of it.

"Like any of that matters!" rebutted Curly, not buying it. "The Pirates ain't like us. They're not gonna yell at you like I am now. They don't wolf. You threaten a Pirate, they will kill you without a second thought."

"Tootles knows that" Nibs argues, sinking to Curly's level. "That's why he got us a ship of cannons and piles of black powder so they have no choice but to negotiate."

"Negotiating is the Pirates' invention" Curly informed everyone, "it's just a trick they pull on themselves into thinking they're fair as they rob you. Pirates come to you and negotiate you out of having a sword. They negotiate you out of having a friend. We used to wolf on the full moon before negotiations were invented. Boys ain't never been on the taking end of a negotiation. You negotiate with a Pirate, they will kill you without a first thought."

The boy's murmurs were getting sharper as Curly convinced them to his way of thinking.

Curly grabbed Nibs by the collar, "If negotiating was legitimate you wouldn't be here with us, now would you?"

After that, there was nothing Nibs could say to convince the boys not to insult him and spit on him and smack him and beat him and remind his ribs that they were still sore. Nibs crunched up into a ball on the floor as the boys kicked at him and Curly howled. This continued on until a Pirate came down in from the deck asking for Nibs and everyone quieted down and gave over their Nibs-ball to him.

"We won't forget you!" was Curly's sarcastic farewell as the rest of them booed Nibs out of their prison.

Nibs was escorted off the ship—bruise first. A huge sausage-hand clenched into his arm, pulling at him to limp faster.

The *clunks* of the brig became the *creaks* of the docks.

Nibs heard all the noise of the new prisoners arriving, the arguments of where to fit them all, the women furiously tugging at the pulley ropes to bring the Cofresí garden barge in.

The *creaks* of the docks became the *click-clacks* of cobblestone.

Nibs was pulled into the town's interior. Quieter than the docks but still people bustling around with heaps of clothes and stacks of books and Nibs could hear boys chanting in the distance.

"Eee-ihh. Eee-ihh. Eee-ihh."

"Ree-ihh. Ree-ihh. Ree-ihh."

"Ree-Nihh. Ree-Nihh. Ree-Nihh."

Just as he thought he might finally make out the chant, the *click-clacks* became the soft drum of a wood floor covered with rug. The door slammed shut behind him. The noise outside was gone.

Sausage-hand loosened his grip as he escorted Nibs down the hall, passed the staircase and towards a closed door that had the sound of a conversation and some odd instrument being played on the other side of it.

The door opened.

Nibs limped inside to see Governor Rackham, Rackham's young daughter and the massive heaving-and-wheezing lump of Solomon.

-Chapter Fourteen-
Negotiations over Tea

"Welcome Nibs" Rackham greeted, "This is my daughter, Belle."

Belle gave Nibs a quick *"Hello"* before returning to toying with Solomon's wing—opening it a little, closing it a little, paying close attention to how the feathers overlapped to accommodate this movement.

"Would you like a cup of tea, Nibs?" asked the Governor and without waiting for an answer continued *"Oliver, go brew us a pot of Rize."*

"Yessir" responded Sausage-hand before leaving the room.

For a moment everything was silent except for the odd instrument of Solomon's breathing and the winds of the coming blizzard shaking the rafters.

"I'm sure you noticed out there..."

Rackham rested his hand on a cannonball sitting on his desk.

"...we're having to evacuate all the homes along the treeline."

Rackham place the tip of his index finger on top of the sphere and spun it with his thumb and middle finger, revealing a crudely carved inscription on it's side:

FREE NIBS

"This message landed inside the home of Mr. Collins."

Rackham lifted his leg and abruptly asked, *"Do you like my shoes?"*

Nib's response—actually being waited on this time—was, *"They're nice."*

"They were constructed by Mr. Collins."

Rackham lowered his leg.

"He is our best shoemaker. I don't know how angry I would have been had he been injured. I probably..." he thought a moment, tapping on the cannonball.

"I probably would have had you drowned."

Solomon's breathing pattern changed with a *gurgle* and then a long groaning caw. Belle's attention was drawn to Solomon's open beak and the massive slug of a tongue inside.

Rackham continued, *"Lucky for you, Mr. Collins was not injured and in all likelihood I will free you as Tootles requests. This is of course dependent on your willingness to negotiate terms. Tootles is, in actuality, willing to negotiate, is he not?"*

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Tootles had laid this all out for Nibs before he left Highbranch Tree. That the opening offer to Rackham would be a refusal to negotiate, peppered with a cannon blast. That Rackham's counter-offer would be to capture Nibs. Tootles explained to Nibs how the Governor would try to manipulate him with fear and relief to extract information and favorable terms. Tootles explained exactly what Nibs was allowed to say and offer during the negotiations of his capture and what to absolutely never cede.

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"He is" Nibs admitted as the door opened and Sausage-hand walked in with a tray of teacups and teapot and a bowl of beetsugar.

"Splendid" exclaimed Rackham to either Nibs' response or the tea's arrival.

"...If all Pirates keep out of the Snowy Wood and you release the prisoners" continued Nibs as the tray was set down and the tea poured.

"That won't be happening" said Rackham giving himself one spoon of sugar, "my men will stay and I will only release one prisoner. You."

"There's a blizzard coming" Nibs warned, "how will you withstand a blizzard if all your houses are like the shoemaker's?"

"You saw the state of our holding facility" said Rackham giving Nibs three spoons of sugar—anticipating his guest's tastes—"we cannot humanely hold our prisoners with such crowding, especially during a blizzard. We will be forced to house as much as half of those prisoners in the town."

Rackham and Nibs sipped their tea.

"You think Tootles won't fire on his own" Nibs surmised, "but I'm not so sure he wouldn't. He doesn't want you to release them because he cares about them. He wants you to admit defeat."

"What about you, Nibs? Will you accept their deaths as a result of your actions?" Rackham questioned.

"If they die" Nibs answered, "it will be because of y-"

"Don't let your brothers die" interrupted Solomon with a coarse 'caw'.

"Daddy, the bird spoke" said Belle to her father.

"You must be doing an excellent job to make him feel better" said a much cuter Rackham to his daughter.

"...because of your refusal to negotiate reasonably" finished Nibs, ignoring Solomon.

"A release of half the prisoners" Rackham proposed, "that is a reasonable offer."

"Agree to it" cawed Solomon, "free them."

Nibs appended, "And a ban on Pirates entering the Snowy Wood without invitation."

"You're so insistent on the removal of my men's protection" mused Rackham.

Rackham and Nibs sipped their tea.

"Just destroy the powder in exchange for the prisoners" cawed Solomon.

The naivete caused Nibs to choke on his tea, *"As if he would honor that."*

"What's that?" asked Rackham.

"Nothing." Nibs didn't think it would be a good idea for Rackham to know Solomon was trying to contribute to the negotiation.

"I can see the presence of my men will be a sticking point" determined Rackham, "so let's say I agree to withdraw them on condition that my pistol is returned."

Nibs informed Rackham that "The pistol isn't mine to bar-"

"The governor is finally willing to be brotherly" cawed Solomon, "you should give him a ch-"

"Just shut up!" snapped Nibs, "you don't understand how this works at all!"

"Are you talking to the crow?" Rackham inquired, "You can understand it?"

"The pistol isn't mine to bargain with" Nibs informed Rackham.

"Accords are reached through mutual understanding" Solomon caawed, "compassion is better leverage than threats."

"I always thought there was something about this bird" remarked Rackham, "it understands what we're saying."

Nibs had had enough.

"All you need to realize is that even if you bring the boys to town" Nibs slammed the table as he stood, "we will fire and fire and FIRE and FIRE AND FIRE until this WHOLE TOWN is a RUBBLE HEAP if you do not remove your Pirates from OUR woods! That is the ceasefire."

"Bold" acknowledged Rackham, "I will concede you this."

"GOOD" barked Nibs, "after the blizzard, at noon of the first clear day, you will meet with Tootles at Black Hill to negotiate a full treaty."

"Sounds perfect" Rackham glibly concurred. "If that is all, Oliver will see you out."

Nibs took his leave, escorted out by Sausage-hand.

"Belle, you said the bird spoke?" Rackham asked his daughter as soon as Nibs had left, "What did it say?"

"The bird said" Belle puffed up her chest, "caaw caaw CAW caw."

"I see, I see" Rackham subsequently tickled his daughter to death.

Sausage-hand escorted Nibs out to the border where the line of Pirates had their swords drawn and pointed at the raucous Lost boys to keep them from invading the town. The ceasefire that Rackham had agreed to was administered by Sausage-hand spreading the word the order to not enter into the Snowy Wood except for one messenger who—with Nibs approval—would go into the Snowy Wood to issue the order to the straggler crews. Sausage-hand also made it a point to issue the command of moving prisoners into homes before Nibs was permitted to leave town, so that he would witness it.

The line of soldiers closed behind Nibs as Michael welcomed him back to the Snowy Wood. Michael had quickly finished retrieving the pixie dust bag from Tootles' cabin without issue. Now, they waited for Slightly to return.

-Chapter Fifteen-
A Thimble

Slightly was tapping on the window of Khadija's room. Khadija was shocked to find THE Slightly tapping at her window. Anne-Marie hurriedly explained to her friend the distressing situation happening and Slightly's need for the pixie dust. Being imprisoned in her room by her father made Khadija empathetic to the story of the Lost boys persecution, however she was raised to be shrewd so she was not going to just give the pixie dust away. Khadija's condition was that the pixie dust was a loan that must be repaid. Slightly agreed to the loan. Khadija issued a second condition, that the loan would have an interest equivalent to an extra teaspoon of pixie dust per day. Anne-Marie was aggravated by her friend's adult-like haggling but Slightly simply agreed to the interest. Khadija's third condition was to have the first day's interest paid in advance.

"And how are we supposed to do that?" snapped an angry Anne-Marie.

"A kiss" answered Khadija, presenting her lips.

"I don't have a kiss" answered a naive Slightly.

Anne-Marie berated her friend, *"I can't believe you're trying to steal a kiss from him."*

"It's not stealing, it's a transaction."

"That's WORSE."

"Do you have a kiss?" Slightly asked Anne-Marie.

Anne-Marie had an idea. She reached into her pocket, saying "*this is a kiss*" and pulled out a thimble.

"Looks like a thimble to me" said a not-that-naive Slightly.

Khadija took Slightly's face in her hands, saying "*this is a kiss*" as she mushed his lips into her lips.

Anne-Marie was shocked to see her best friend smooching her idol. Slightly was shocked to experience this thing he had never even thought to try before. When Khadija finished, Slightly immediately pulled out his ballpoint pen and kneeled to the ground, pulling up a pant leg. Khadija used her fingertips to feel her lips, touching at the same feelings that Slightly was now scribbling furiously on his calf.

"You got your kiss" whisper-shouted Anne-Marie, "*now give us the pixie dust.*"

"Do you want to know how it felt?"

"No. Just get the pixie dust."

"I don't have it with me" explained Khadija, "*well... I did have a little with me but my father found it and he-*" Khadija giggled—her father had dumped the small packet of pixie dust he found in the outhouse. "*I hid most of it in the bird-house hole.*"

Anne-Marie didn't need to hear anymore, 'the bird-house' was what they called a particular house that had a peculiar hole just below the arch of it's roof—it would obviously make for a good hiding spot if you could reach it.

"Let's go" Anne-Marie said to Slightly who had stopped writing and was now staring at the pen in his hand.

"I know where it is" she continued, pulling Slightly around to the side of Khadija's house.

"My pen went small" Slightly remarked, "*is this normally what happens when you ki-?*"

Anne-Marie shushed Slightly as she spotted Khadija's father just around the corner—half naked, furiously scrubbing clothes in a washing tub.

"Gross" Anne-Marie giggled, seeing the brown poop trail leading to the outhouse.

They snuck across the street and continued a few houses down to the bird-house, now they just had to figure out how to reach the hole. Anne-Marie knew of where to get a ladder but not how to get to it and bring it back without being noticed.

"*Kneel down*" Anne-Marie commanded. Slightly obeyed. Anne-Marie stepped up onto Slightly's shoulders and—once they had gotten their balance—ordered Slightly, "*lift me up.*" Slightly managed to stand straight up and even got up on his toes. Anne-Marie stretched her hand up as high as she could but still they couldn't reach the hole and she relented and hopped back down to the ground.

"*Maybe we can use a stick or something?*" Anne-Marie mused.

"*I got an idea*" said Slightly just before he planted a kiss on Anne-Marie's unexpected lips. The shock made Anne-Marie's eyes open wide. Her idol's face right up against her own made Anne-Marie's eyes shut tight.

"*I think it worked*" laughed Slightly.

When Anne-Marie finally realized the kiss had finished and found the courage to unclench her eyelids, she saw a noticeably taller Slightly before her.

"*Look how big my hands are*" said Slightly, showing off his freshly elongated fingers.

Slightly directed Anne-Marie to put her hands on the wall and then grabbed her hips and pulled her butt back.

"*What are we doing?*" asked a flustered Anne-Marie

"*Keep your back flat and your knees slightly bent*" ordered Slightly before taking a few steps back, "*here I come.*"

"*What are you-*" before Anne-Marie could get out her question Slightly had bounded towards her, stepping with one foot on her lower back, bounding a second time up towards the hole. Slightly just barely grabbed onto the edge of the hole as Anne-Marie collapsed to the ground.

"*Push me up, push me up*" repeated Slightly, his feet dangling just low enough that Anne-Marie—once fully outstretched—could reach them.

Just a slight push gave Slightly the purchase to pull himself up into a stronger position from where he could fish around inside the hole.

"Got it!" exclaimed Slightly, pulling out the bag of pixie dust and dropping down.

After they had finished catching their breath, Anne-Marie and Slightly headed back to the town's border.

They intended to get passed the guards the same way they had gotten in—Slightly crawling underneath Anne-Marie's dress—but this time she was stopped as they attempted to pass. The guards didn't even notice the odd bag Anne-Marie was holding as they explained the terms of the ceasefire to her.

Once Slightly understood what was going on, he bolted out from under Anne-Marie's dress and Anne-Marie—without missing a beat—tossed the bag to Slightly. The guards tried to chase for a moment before Slightly and Anne-Marie started shouting '*ceasefire*' at them. Other Lost boys started to gather and help with the shouting of '*ceasefire*' like it was a game of tag and the Snowy Wood was 'safe'. The guards becoming wary of all the disorder and attention decided to back away and make sure Anne-Marie was kept in town.

Anne-Marie desperately wanted to join the Lost boy's resistance but as Slightly and the guards backed away from one another she knew this was all she would contribute. Slightly blew a kiss to Anne-Marie before running off.

Slightly rejoined Nibs and Michael and they headed back to Highbranch Tree, trading their stories and cracking jokes about Slightly's huge hands.

-Chapter Sixteen-
Democracy

Smee's boring crew had breached the top of Highbranch Tree and needed now only to bore through the hull of the treeship. They were the only Pirates left in the Snowy Wood after the retreat and had no way to send word to Rackham that they were ready to breach. A debate erupted among Smee and his three boring crew.

Smee—wary of rocking the figurative boat—argued to cautiously await for orders from the Governor.

Crew member John—an ambitious sort—argued for haste to end the siege.

Crew member Joaquim—confident in his swordsmanship—added that the blizzard might strand and starve them if they waited.

Crew member James—naturally very anxious, had thoughts of many worst-case scenarios for both choices but kept them to himself and so instead—called for a vote.

It might surprise you to know that Pirate culture is highly democratic.

"Show of hands to wait on orders" called James as he and Smee raised their hands.

"Let's prepare to breach" said John, taking victory from what looked to be a split decision.

When contested on this John reasoned that '*as members of Rackham's militia*' Joaquim and James and hisself were capable of making an informed presumption of the Governor's intent; whereas Smee was an uninformed citizen and thus unqualified to vote. With the vote retallied as two-to-one, they set to boring through the hull. They would breach.

It might also surprise you to know that this kind of manipulation is a common occurrence throughout democracy.

Tootles was waiting. Not for the return of his friends. Not for the second bag of pixie dust. Tootles had felt the odd vibrations coming from below and went down to the hull of the ship where he could hear the faint sounds of Pirates debating. Tootles was waiting with sword and pistol when the boring machine broke through.

Joaquim was first to die, having no chance to show off his swordsmanship when Tootles blindly thrust down into the open hole. Joaquim flopped off the high bunk down to the floor, gushing out a blood so dark that the red could be mistaken for black.

John was second to die, unable to unsheathe his sword in the stress of a surprise attack. Tootles took no time dropping down into the room and piercing John's chest.

The two who had voted to wait, James and Smee, had backed away towards the exit. James had not wanted this—he had worried about this exact scenario—but now seeing his two compatriots bleeding to death he could feel no other choice but to attack.

James was third to die, a single step forward being all he achieved before Tootles unloaded a pistol shot that landed in his gut.

Smee made his escape: out of Slightly's nest, down the spiral staircase, through the hall to the core. Not brave enough to leap out to the pulley ropes, Smee laid on the floor and cautiously backed himself on to the laddering and made his way down step-by-step.

Tootles gave Joaquim, John and James a few more stabs to make sure they were dead before exiting Slightly's nest. Tootles walked down the spiral staircase step-by-step. Step, step, drip. Step, step, drip. Tootles walked down the hall reloading his pistol, his bloodied sword held in his armpit while he pressed in the powder and stuffed down the ball.

Smee had almost climbed down a single floor when he could feel Tootles descend behind him on the pulley rope. It was in Smee's character to beg for his life but he was too scared in this moment to even do that.

Smee was fourth to die, he thought.

"Pirates are so inconsiderate" declared Tootles, "We Lost boys have the decency to dissolve away when you cut us down, leaving behind a stone with a nice little poem inscribed that you can fit in your pocket. Our deaths are so easy to deal with. Why are your deaths so much more trouble than ours? It's really not fair."

When Slightly, Nibs and Michael arrived back at Highbranch Tree they were greeted by Tootles who informed them there was an entrance made for the ship that they could use now. Smee exited Highbranch Tree pulling a sled. Smee was not fourth to die, he was tasked with returning the boring crew's bodies to Governor Rackham. John, Joaquim and James: covered in a blanket, their legs poking out, feet dragging in the snow. Michael and Nibs exchanged puzzled pleasantries with the passing Smee.

"Something looks different about you" Tootles thought aloud of Slightly, noticing that all his friends had outgrown him.

"Have you heard of a kiss?" Slightly launched into the story of his growth spurt which he had already told to Nibs and Michael twice over—each iteration elongating the description of his complex, emotional journey that was ignited by a kiss.

"You're taller" Tootles interrupted, leading the boys inside Highbranch Tree. *"Nibs, did he agree to the place?"*

"Yes, it all went as you expected except..." Nibs thought of what Tootles might do if he reported Solomon's condition, *"Rackham intends to move his prisoners to town so that firing on the town is firing on our boys."*

Tootles had expected that.

The boys entered the core of Highbranch Tree and proceeded to use two grains of dust each so that they could gallop up the laddering of the core to the top floor.

The crow's nest of the treeship shook along with the branches as the force of the blizzard increased.

Smee pulled his sled in a sea of white.

-Chapter Seventeen-
Hospitality

Sausage-hand escorted a Lost boy through the cold stone town and into the warm home of Governor Rackham.

"Welcome" Rackham got up from his seat to greet his guest, "Curly is it?"

Throughout town, boys were being welcomed into homes but none were even slightly as welcoming as Governor Rackham was to Curly. Some boys were offered bedding, a boiled potato, an introduction. Other boys were offered none of that. Curly was offered a guest room, a hot bath, fresh tomatoes, buttered scones, slow-cooked venison, a pipe of tobacco, participation in the family games. All at once if he could hack it.

In the steam and smoke of a pipe and bath, Curly and Rackham bonded over their mutual distate for Nibs. That nosy nobody. Ill-informed ignoramus. Blithering butt-baby. Spittle-spewing sabre storage.

In between the chomps of venison burger, Rackham and Curly agreed that how things had been weren't so bad to be worth all this fussing. Who was Tootles to be making demands on their behalf? That blubber-belly in his cabin with his piles of treasure was more Pirate than the Pirates to start with and now he's out there with a ship of gunpowder.

The family game that night was the intense combat boardgame of 'Cannon Fodder' in which two dice were rolled to decide the position of the treasure on the board and each player had a galleon game piece and a half-minute sand clock.

Unlike boardgames you may be most familiar with, there was no partitioning of player turns; every turning of their emptied clock allowed a player three units of action to spend on their galleon's: forward movement or turning movement or the firing of their cannons up to three spaces on either side of them. The player would turn their clock with a *slam* and shout '*one*' '*two*' '*three*' as they executed their actions. Three peg holes in each galleon allowed cannon markers to be placed when they were hit; three cannon pegs and they were sunk, sent to their home docks to restart. The player who reached the treasure would place it on their galleon and try to sail it back to their docks; if accomplished they would gain a point and the treasure placement would be rerolled.

Young Belle Rackham was not particularly good at Cannon Fodder but she loved nothing more than sinking opponents. Mother Anne Rackham was fiercely competitive and always first to the treasure. Curly was fresh meat: sinking repeatedly, lagging behind in clock flips.

In the intensity of the sea battle, no one took notice of Governor Daddy leaving to answer the knock at the door. The cold and windy slammed against the warm and cozy. Oliver had brought news of Smee's return.

Curly was awoken by the draught let in the warm cave of his comforters.

"*What does 'keeeeh' mean?*" the intruder asked.

Belle dragged Curly out of bed and out of the guest room and down the stairs and across the hall and opened the door into her father's office where laid the big heaving Solomon.

"*What does 'keeeeh' mean?*" Belle asked again, pointing to the source of the keh'ing she wanted translated.

"*It doesn't mean nothing.*" Solomon's keh'ing was a pained wheezing as he slept.

"*Let's not disturb the bird*" said Governor Rackham, surprising Curly. "*He needs his rest if he's going to heal.*"

The governor escorted them out of his office and closed the door gently as to not wake Solomon.

"I have some clothes for you." Rackham gave Curly a thick warm jacket and pants and gloves and boots and a hat made of wools and deerskin. The fabrics made Curly itch some but they were warm enough to insulate him from the blizzard he and Rackham were to head out in.

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It was impossible in all the white for Curly to know where they were headed, he just followed along behind Rackham. With how little could be seen through the flurry, Curly could easily have escaped but it never crossed his mind. They arrived to men gathered around, working with ropes and pushing up a large slab of stone. Curly walked ahead to see what they were doing with the ropes but Rackham grabbed him and pulled him close.

"Watch where you're walking" Rackham warned him, *"you nearly fell in."*

The men were using ropes to descend the casket of James into his grave.

Rackham went to Joaquim's grave—which already had the casket placed—picked up a fistful of soil and said some kind words about the man before tossing the soil down. Men shoveled in the rest of the soil to fill his grave. Rackham hugged a man and another and another. Some looked like they might cry but if it weren't too cold for tears.

This repeated for Jame's grave and then John's grave—which Curly had nearly tripped into. The dirt was packed in. The gravestones secured. The wails and hugs exchanged.

Rackham and Curly had been last to arrive but now they were last to leave. Before they headed back, Rackham made Curly aware that Tootles was responsible for these men's graves.

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Whether at home in their nests or imprisoned in the ship or imprisoned in the town, the Lost boys huddled together for warmth. The great blizzard did not relent and so—as the fuel for the fires diminished with each passing day—everyone else began to huddle as well.

It would be a full cycle of the moon before the skies cleared and the scheduled meeting between Tootles and Rackham at Black Hill could take place.

-Chapter Eighteen-
Peace talks at Black Hill

It was noon at Black Hill—which for all the snow might as well be called 'White Hill' now. Rackham arrived with his right-hand man Oliver and a Pirate by the name of Nicholas who was scarred across the ear and cheek—that you would remember as the nightwatchman. Tootles arrived with his right-hand boy Michael and his lead negotiator Nibs. Tootles and Rackham took turns lifting their coats and shaking their hips, proving they were unarmed before stepping forward. Oliver, Michael, Nicholas and Nibs hung back on their respective sides; swords at the ready for if the talks should break down. Tootles and the Governor shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. Tootles offered that they take a walk as they spoke and in good faith Rackham agreed.

"Not to be rude but I'm surprised that you held to our ceasefire. I thought for sure you might have your men sneak on to our ship, try to take it by force. Have an epic battle in the blizzard."

Rackham assumed this was an insinuation that he had broken the terms of the agreement by leaving the boring crew in Highbranch Tree.

"I assure you, my failure to recall all of my men from the Snowy Wood was not intentional but rather a grave oversight. I apologize to you as I apologized to the friends and family that those deceased men left behind."

"Them? No worries. I killed them before receiving the ceasefire. I meant after that. You were true to our agreement. That's why your town isn't rubble. That's why we can talk here like this."

Trudging side-by-side through the snow, circling Black Hill—Tootles in the inner circle, Rackham in the outer—they approached the Snowy Wood side of the Black Hill clearing. Oliver and Nicholas tensed up in anticipation of a trap but Nibs and Michael didn't make a move.

"A little bird told me that traders come in on Cotton River. That was your source of charcoal, was it not?"

The 'little bird' Rackham spoke of was Solomon—translated by Curly—who had been loose-beaked in conversations during his recovery.

"You think you're gonna get access to Cotton River? Wrong. Non-negotiable. The key demand is full sovereignty of the Snowy Wood, Cotton River included. Without that there is no peace treaty."

"Sovereignty..." Rackham was somewhat thrown off by Tootles' knowledge of the concept. *"My sovereignty over the town allows me to grant you boys access to the goods and activities of the town. Your sovereignty of the Snowy Wood could grant us similar permissions. A mutually beneficial arrangement."*

"It's not 'my sovereignty', it's every Long lost boys birthright. For me to make deals now with what is their right would be a mistake. I won't be making the mistakes of your people with your Kings and Governors."

In emphasizing this, Tootles shifted their circling of Black Hill wider out and slowed their walking pace.

Rackham was amused, *"You seem to think you have, all on your own, uncovered democracy but we too practice it. You mistakenly think a King and a Governor are the same. A Governor acts with the approval of his community whereas a King acts with no approval but his own. Right now Tootles, you are more King than Governor but I'm sure that is just transitional, correct? A sovereign Snowy Wood will soon find that having a leader to act single-mindedly on their behalf is a necessity and I would suspect that you would be their choice to lead them."*

Tootles was unamused by Rackham's condescension, as if he had no knowledge of the differences between monarchy and representative democracy. He was tempted to unleash a tirade on the Governor about the tendency of representative democracies to deteriorate into powerful elites of oligarchies,

partocracies, militancies and fascism but he suppressed the urge. There was no point.

"Ask for something I can give."

"My pistol" said Rackham.

"Why the pistol?" Tootles was surprised that Rackham would not first and foremost want his ship and cannons returned.

Curly and Solomon landed on the Treeship at noon ready for a fight.

Solomon had achieved his own peace deal with the Governor in which he would fly on to the ship during the Black Hill peace talks to destroy the gunpowder, in exchange for the ending of raids in the Snowy Wood. Curly agreed to help.

They thought at least one boy would remain on the ship to man the cannons but the ship was deserted. Solomon looked around but there was no black powder to destroy either. Curly—having become accustomed to the design of these ships whilst playing Cannon Fodder—noticed two cannons missing from their ports.

"That pistol is a very dear sentimental object to me. It holds the memories of every battle, every lost friend, every hardship and most every terrible thing I have done. I've found it a preferable arrangement to have those memories contained in the vessel of that pistol, hung up on the wall of my study, such that it reminds me of those things for only the moments when I catch glimpse of it. The alternative is that my pasts float aimlessly, haunting my nights. You might not understand but without it I have not slept well at all."

"I understand" Tootles dug into his pocket, *"I have an object like that."*

Tootles stopped walking and turned to Governor Rackham to present his transparent blue gas station lighter. Rackham had not seen anything like it before so Tootles demonstrated lighting it for him.

"A *tiny torch*" remarked Rackham as Tootles handed it over for Rackham to try.

Rackham sparked the lighter—*ktchh ktchh*—unable to make it burn.

"*You have to hold it down*" Tootles informed him.

ktchh ktchh—sssnnn—ktchh-fwoom

Rackham succeeded and for a moment was enraptured in the tiny flame.

"*And what memories is it that this object holds for you?*" As he returned to their conversation, Rackham noticed blood dripping from Tootles' nose.

"*The day I burned down Black Hill's Tree and everyone inside it.*" Tootles jumped and flew up and on to a branch reaching out over the clearing.

"*RUN*" shouted Curly, arriving on the back of Solomon.

"*CLEAR*" shouted Nibs.

"*CLEAR*" shouted Michael.

The warning was too late. The side of Black Hill facing Rackham exploded of snow and sticks and ash. The tree trunk behind Rackham exploded of bark and wood and a puff of snow from below.

Governor Rackham—no longer able to hold his own weight—collapsed and saw that his left leg had been mangled from the kneecap down: still attached but limp, jelly-like, the bones shattered. Rackham's right side had a terror of its own, his right hand having been taken clean off; yet he was lucky that the wound had been burned as it was severed such that his blood loss was minimal.

Curly jumped off Solomon flopping down into the snow. Curly pushed himself up to find that he was almost touching Rackham's right hand—still holding the blue lighter.

Oliver and Nicholas ran over to help their Governor but were met by the drawn swords of Nibs, Michael and Slightly who now emerged from the smoke of Black Hill.

Tootles wiped the blood from his nose and dropped down from his branch, brandishing Rackham's pistol. Guttural sounds came from the mangled mess of Rackham who lay in the snow, shivering with pain. Tootles pointed the pistol at Rackham's head, giving Oliver and Nicholas no choice but to lay down their weapons.

"This is so STUPID!" Curly shouted. Curly wept.

Nibs, Michael, Tootles, Slightly were all astounded that Curly would weep for a Pirate. In just a month away, this brave-if-not-belligerent boy they had known as Curly had been replaced with a sobbing-tyrant-apologist.

"This is what you wanted" said Nibs poking at Nicholas. *"You can't negotiate with Pirates, remember? We're doing it YOUR way."*

Curly—through his tears—reached out to hold Rackham's hand. Curly stood up, cradling Rackham's hand in his hands and trudged over to Rackham. Curly gave Rackham back his missing piece.

From picking up the hand to setting it down, Curly had become noticeably taller and wider. Michael was once the lone enlarged oddity among them but as everyone around him grew, Tootles had become the oddity.

Having heard the cannon fire: many boys, townsfolk and Pirates arrived on all sides of the Black Hill clearing.

"Enough of this crap" said Tootles, kicking away Rackham's severed hand.

"Kill them."

"They've surrendered" said Nibs, not willing to ever again take someone's life so lightly—not even someone he hated as he did that nightwatchman.

"KILL THEM!" demanded Tootles.

Slightly—seeing Khadija and Anne-Marie in the crowd—couldn't bring himself to act so cruelly.

Michael—always on Tootles side—also ignored this demand.

"You're right Tootles" Solomon interrupted, *"enough of this crap. Enough of this blood. Enough of the hatred in your heart. Enough causing pain."*

"You want me to kill you again?"

"I want you to grow as your younger brothers have grown" said Solomon, pecking at a question Tootles had not thought to ask for millennia.

"How come they grow and I don't?"

"B-b-because you" spoke a fragile Rackham, *"only c-care for yourself."*

"I care for everyone born from the Snowy Wood" Tootles rebutted.

"Yet you enc-courage them to fight us and each other over gold and tr-trinkets."
Tootles business had not gone unnoticed by Rackham.

"It's Cotton's fault the traders wanted better than hooves and beaks and stories. It's your culture that ruined everything."

"Yet you b-b-burned them alive." Rackham had not forgot what Tootles said to him before the cannons fired.

"You were slaughtering them, what choice did you leave me?"

"You're misremembering" cawed Solomon, *"the Pirates certainly took those trees by force but there was no deaths before Black Hill."*

"If you really c-cared for these boys, why grind their stones?" Rackham propped himself up with his good arm. *"Seems to me, Tootles, that you want the power of f-f-fire and flight more than anything else. You only care for yourself."*

The crowd had grown larger around Black Hill. Lost boys and Pirates and Townspeople all intermixed from spending the blizzard together. Rackham's wife crying and reaching out for her husband but being held back by the militia who dared not approach.

Curly sat beside Rackham's hand. Nibs, Slightly, Michael, Oliver, Nicholas, Solomon all frozen in place.

No one cheering. No one excited. Everyone just watching and waiting on what Tootles would do.

Tootles considered that he was not the good guy. Not the heroic revolutionary. That maybe he had twisted some of the details of his life stories. That he was not always the victim. That not every action he took was justified. That he was not deserving of vengeance. That he was not Shepita.

'You only care for yourself.'

"Maybe you're right" answered Tootles as he shot Governor Rackham.

-Chapter Nineteen-
Thomas Cotton's letter

Governor John Rackham did not die.

Curly, Oliver and Nicholas came to Rackham's aide. Solomon flew off to fetch the physician that had saved his wing. Tootles, Nibs, Slightly and Michael escaped. No one chased after them as Rackham's screams kept their attention.

The peace talks were pointless—as political talks of political figures so often are. Peace had been successfully set in motion before the talks began. You see, winds form where warm airs and cold airs meet. The colder the cold airs and warmer the warm airs, the stronger the winds. The stronger the winds, the better separated the airs are kept. The less the airs can mix, the longer they maintain their contrasting temperatures, the longer the winds are sustained.

It's the same with people.

Conflict forms where different groups meet. The greater the difference between these peoples, the greater the conflicts. The more they fight, the less they interact. Once the segregation of peoples takes hold, the conflicts can continue in perpetuity. Only through great effort or great happenstance does the cold air warm or the warm air cool, then all at once the winds are changed.

The boys of the Snowy Wood and the people of Rackham's Town had primarily interacted adversarially—occasionally spectatorially or transactionally, barely ever neighbourly much less friendly. It was only through the efforts and happenstances of conflicts and winds that Townspeople were forced to house Lost boys over a month-long blizzard that led to a mutual empathy between the two groups. Peace was inevitable from that point—but one could theorize that the absence of Rackham's centralized leadership during this period accelerated the process.

The bullet was fished from Rackham's eye socket. His leg amputated from the knee down with a saw. Bone fragments and necrotic flesh carefully picked away from the stump of his severed hand. Even while enduring this painful recovery, Rackham was thankful to be alive. His left leg was replaced with a peg, his right hand a hook, his left eye a patch. His thankfulness for life was incrementally torn away by the daily suffering of his impairments. His thoughts tormented his nights. Curly negotiated with Tootles for the return of Rackham's pistol so that he might sleep. The pistol was no help. Rackham became a prolific drinker. His previous demeanour of austere-nobility was replaced with belligerent-narcissism. When he would drunkenly accost Lost boys in the streets—causing a scene—Solomon and Curly would arrive to preach temperance but it had no effect.

Solomon's preaching had gained a more receptive audience with the help of Curly's translation. Curly who had once found these cawing sermons obnoxious now found in them ideas of great merit and in relaying them a sense of purpose. However, Curly's competitive spirit found him in opposition with his closest friend—Slightly—for the town's attention.

Despite his firing of the cannons that debilitated Rackham, Slightly was welcome to town. More than welcome, he was bribed to visit town. The sins of his past all but forgotten with the popularity of his new love songs. Slightly had been an icon for the Snowy Wood but with his change of subject matter and newly gained audience, he was soon dismissed by many Lost boys as a fraud. In his place rose Nibs.

With a return of freedom to the Snowy Wood came the return of wolfings on the full moon. Nibs became renowned for verbally brutalizing opponents and popular figures and the occasional tourists from town. Tourists like Anne-Marie

and Khadija, whose parents were now in love with Slightly just as they were and so—to continue their rebellious streak—were left no choice but to welcome insults and howl along. They gathered on the ship of Highbranch Tree from where their howls could echo to the furthest reaches of Nowhereland when Nibs wordplays struck its target. Those echoes were the only thing that still connected Tootles to the Snowy Wood.

Tootles of course was not welcome in town for all the havoc he had orchestrated and while the wolfers may have spoke ill of the Townspeople, Tootles was the last true hold out. Tootles found himself increasingly isolated in the Snowy Wood as everyone around him—in one way or another—warmed to all of Nowhereland being one shared community. Tootles retreated to Cotton River, he read his books and hunt his wapiti and occasionally meet with Michael, requesting something or other. Michael had taken over Tootles' relationship with the traders.

In any case that's how I heard it had occurred. It is from the events to a witness or a gossip and then through Michael and the traders that I'm given this tale—and as you should know, stories are warped as they're exchanged. I admit that I may also have inadvertently damaged the veracity of certain events in my extrapolations of contextual elements. Some characters I had known well and was confident in extrapolating on, others I knew barely and one key character I never had the chance to know. Being enthralled by the tremendous transformation that occurred, I have transcribed this history of Nowhereland to the best of my ability in the hopes that you—the reader—can learn from it. To end, I would like to share with you a letter I have written to be taken on the traders next trip...

To whom in Nowhereland receives this letter that may still
remember me, it is Thomas Cotton.

I have arrived safely in the new world. Just barely. Twas a treacherous journey that I may have easily died on. I was interested in seeing their camp but the traders of the Crow Tribe refused to take me with them, leaving me no other option but to do it myself.

Over two days I built a raft, kitted up with food, clothes, compass, axe, rope, knife, flint, gold, silver, spyglass, papers, quills, ink. Ready

for anything. I was however not ready for the rapids which capsized my raft and sent all but the clothes on my back wayward.

Tumbled and spun and carried off by the currents I had the chance to look back towards the calm waters I had come from and the Snowy Wood beyond it were all becoming small and bright but clear as if viewing the map of the world on a glowing globe that flickered of the sun and roared of voices and erupted again and again of plumes of snow crystals and on either side of me were orbs of light floating toward Nowhereland and from those orbs of light emanated the distinct sounds of sobbing mothers and I could just make out the figure of a young black boy in the light.

I awoke on a raft and was told by the familiar voice of the Crow trader to stay face forward. At the time I found it quite odd to be saved by the traders that I was two days travel behind. He spoke brashly that I had not been saved out of kindness but that my body risked impeding their raft. Deer traveled on the banks of the river alongside us. The Crow accounted for every second as they guided down the river with precise movements until soon we had reached the Americas. Being finally allowed to turn around I came to see that the familiar voice was from a much older man than I had known and soon I realized that I too was a much older man.

The traders tradition is to take two trips in their lifetime, the first as an apprentice, the second as a teacher. Traveled well, the weeks on the river, through lands of Summer and Winter, take no more than twenty years of their life. Traveled poorly, I was lucky to only have aged around sixty years. 'You should never look back' they say in the Americas and while, as an explorer, I do not regret looking back to see what few have ever seen, I tell to you: dare not follow me without the permission and escort of the Crow Tribe.

By the time this message has reached you I will have died but know that as I write this I have only just settled and have every intention of continuing to explore further with all the life I have left. I trust you all will similarly be living your life to their fullest.

Accompanying this letter will be a journal of my journeys.

Read on, friends.