

## Shore Leave

“Forty-eight hours!” said Bart, with a grin.

“Two whole days and two whole *nights!*” beamed Jez.

Together, the young pirates cried, “Shore leave!” before high-fiving each other, low-fiving each other and whooping.

Their friend, Connor Tempest, shook his head with a grin. At fourteen years old, he was one of the youngest pirates on board their ship, *The Diablo* – but that didn’t stop his friends wanting to lead him astray at every opportunity. He knew how excited they were to have shore leave, in spite of being dedicated members of Molucco Wrath’s crew.

“There’s only one thing better than being a pirate on a pirate ship,” Jez had declared as they’d sailed away from *The Diablo* a few hours earlier, “and that’s being a pirate on shore leave with time on his hands and gold in his purse!”

Neither Jez nor Bart had stopped grinning since they’d set off from *The Diablo* in the small boat. Now, Connor calmly steered them into a cove crowded with ships, while Bart and Jez jumped up and down like excited kids, causing their craft to rock dangerously.

“So,” Connor called across to them, “is this the place?”

“This is it!” Bart said, “*Calle del Marinero* . . . the strip of sin!”

“Erm, that’s not exactly a *literal* translation,” Jez said.

“Quite so, Mister Stukeley, quite so,” said Bart, clearing his throat. “A literal translation would be . . . the Street of Sailors.”

Connor looked up at the steep and inhospitable ridge beyond the mass of ships. Daylight was fading fast and the land was looking darker and more forbidding by the minute.

“Where exactly *is* the street?” asked Connor. “Right now, all I can see is a rocky outcrop. I thought you said this place was crowded with bars and taverns and stuff. How long a walk is it going to be when we get on land?”

“Are you blind, Mister Tempest?” said Jez. “Look around you!”

“We’re not going on *land*,” said Bart. “*This is Calle del Marinero* – right here. It’s a floating city!”

As he manoeuvred their small boat through the mass of ships towering above them, Connor looked more closely at the other vessels. They were crowded with people and strung with lights. Music was blasting out – a deafening cocktail of rock, folk and thrash-shanty. He felt a charge of excitement. The boats themselves were the taverns!

Ahead was a regal junk, each of its red sails bearing the silhouette of a bird in various stages of flight. As they sailed nearer, Connor read the name on the side of the ship – *The*

*Bloody Parrot.*

“Ah,” said Jez, with awe, “*The Bloody Parrot!* I heard that its crew sailed in one night for a look-see and never left!”

“We’ll have a drink there later,” said Bart.

“We’ll have a drink on *every* ship later!” said Jez.

Connor shook his head. He could see how this shore leave was going to shape up. Who knew what state Jez and Bart would be in by nightfall on Sunday? That was when *The Diablo* was due to pick them up from *Calle del Marinero*.

“Aw, don’t look so worried,” Jez said, ruffling Connor’s hair.

“No, no, Mister Tempest,” added Bart, “we shall take good care of you!” He climbed up onto the side of the boat.

“After all, we are – are we not? – the Three Buccaneers?”

Connor nodded. A fellow pirate, Cutlass Cate, had come up with that nickname and it had stuck.

“One for all . . .” cried Bart, his voice booming over the music drifting down from *The Bloody Parrot*. From its top deck, curious revellers paused to look for a moment at the pirates’ small bark.

“And all for one!” cried Connor and Jez.

At last, Connor spied a mooring slip and eased the boat expertly up to the wooden pier.

“Nicely done!” cried Bart, jumping down onto the wooden gangway and making light work of the requisite knots.

Jez dragged Connor off the boat and onto the pier.

“Don’t dawdle! We only have forty-eight hours!”

Connor found himself propelled along the jetty. It soon joined up with others, forming a boardwalk grid. Jez and Bart strode purposefully forth but Connor was slower, his eyes racing to take it all in. In every direction, the floating taverns competed for his attention – *The Saucy Sailor*, *Poseidon’s*, *The Cannon and Cutlass* . . .

One small boat was even a floating tattoo parlour.

Connor paused for a moment to watch the tattooist in action. He had always wanted a tattoo. At the boat’s entrance was a series of flags, displaying the various designs. Wouldn’t it be cool if the Three Buccaneers got matching tattoos? He saw an image of three cutlasses. Now, *that* would be perfect!

“Hey!” he called after Bart and Jez, but they were already disappearing into the thronging crowd.

“Hey yourself!” called a young girl just ahead of him, her ruby ringlets bobbing in the breeze.

She turned and Connor saw that she was actually an *old* girl – a *very* old girl. Her ringlets were an ill-fitting wig, her face was thickly caked in powder and her false eyelashes were as long and thick as a tarantula’s legs.

“I’m Rose,” she said, smiling at him and revealing an

insufficient allocation of teeth. “Wild Rose, they call me. Wanna know why?”

“No time!” cried Jez, running to Connor’s rescue. “No time at all! Now, come on, Mister Tempest. We must stick together!” Connor gratefully allowed himself to be dragged along the boardwalk.

“That was a close call,” laughed Jez. “Better take care, young Tempest. There’s all kinds of danger in *Calle del Marinero!*”

“Hey guys, whaddya think about this?” Bart was up ahead, standing by the gangway to a beautiful old junk. Connor saw its name painted on the side of the boat in silvery script: *The Dirty Dolphin*.

Bart was pointing to a painted sign...

*Arm-wrestling contest tonight.*

*Commences 7:00 pm sharp!*

*Last man at the table wins free beer and yabbies!*

“Yabbies!” said Connor. “Yum! Count me in!”

“Remind me,” said Jez, “what *are* yabbies?”

“In or out-and-move-it-along, lads?” roared a bouncer at the foot of the gangway.

“In!” exclaimed Bart, striding up the gangway.

“In!” chorused Connor and Jez, following close behind.

Connor’s pulse was racing. One thing was for sure – the Three Buccaneers were in for an adventure or two before their shore leave was up!