

Two Years and Two Months Since the Shipwreck

They were sitting on a low branch, overlooking a pool. Birds were swimming in the centre of the pool and wading around the outside – not seabirds, but things like ducks that lived quite happily on the island for half the year and then disappeared for the other half. Crusoe had often tried to catch them, but they would always fly away before he could get to them, and he couldn't hit them with a stone from a slingshot no matter how hard he tried.

There's been no sign of your father's crew for a while," he said after a while."

They will be out looking for some passing ship to attack," Friday said quietly. "They will be back, do not think otherwise. There is a safe harbour here, and nobody visits this island."

"And you're still here," Crusoe pointed out. "He wants you back. You're his daughter."

She looked away from him. "I am like a bar of gold, or a necklace set with precious stones, that suddenly decided to wander off," she said. Her voice sounded too controlled, too careful. Over the past few weeks she had grown more and more relaxed in his company, but she sounded now like she had sounded when he first met her. "You never talk about him," Crusoe pressed. "There is a reason for that."

He knew he should keep quiet, maybe change the subject, but he couldn't help himself. There was so much he wanted to know about her. "Tell me his name, at least."

"His crew call him "Red Tiberius". So do the authorities. There is a price on his head that could buy a small island."

"I've already got a small island," he pointed out. "I don't need to buy one."

That made her laugh. "I would like one of those birds tonight," she said. "Roasted, with mangos."

Crusoe shook his head. "I've tried," he said. "They're too quick."

"They are not too quick for me." Friday slipped down from the branch and walked towards the pool. The birds gave her a wide berth but they thought they were safe.

She picked some twigs off the nearest tree and stuck three of them into the mud so that their tops were visible just beneath the surface of the pool in a triangle. Looking around, she found a flat stone beneath the pool which she pulled out and balanced on top of the twigs so that there was perhaps an inch or two of water above it. Crusoe watched, entranced. The birds also watched, completely unaware of their impending fate.

"I will need some vine," Friday said, straightening up. "Can you pull some down for me?"

Crusoe stood up on his branch and reached up the trunk of the tree to where a vine curled around it. Most of the trees on the island were adorned with vines, like strange green decorations. He pulled until it snapped, somewhere above, and threw the length of vine to her.

Expertly, Friday made a loop in the vine and tied it with a slip knot. She tied the other end of the vine to the stone, and then used another couple of twigs, longer ones this time, to hold the loop open above the surface of the water and near the stone.

“Good,” she said. She looked at her handiwork. “That should do it.”

“Do what?”

“You will see.” She climbed out of the pool, being careful not to disturb the birds, and re-joined Crusoe on the branch.

The birds avoided the trap for a while. It was new, and they were wary. Eventually, because it didn't move or scare them, they forgot about it. Over the course of an hour or so they paddled closer and closer to it. The trap was part of their environment now.

And then one bird, less cautious than the rest, swam towards the trap. Its head and neck passed through the looped vine. It paddled onwards, oblivious, as the slip knot tightened around its neck.

Crusoe held his breath. He could see what was going to happen.

The vine tightened to the point where the bird noticed. It struggled to get free, flapping its wings frantically.

And its feet, paddling fast to get it away, knocked the stone off the tripod of twigs. The stone dropped down through the water of the pool until it hit the mud at the bottom, and the vine that was tied to it dragged the bird down with it.

Within half a minute it had drowned: just a few inches from the surface of the water

“I once saw my father questioning some captives,” Friday said as they watched the bird's final, desperate struggles. “They had hidden some treasures on their ship, and he wanted to know where. So he got some... fireworks? Small fireworks?”

“Firecrackers,” he said softly.

“Yes, firecrackers. He tied the firecrackers between the fingers and the toes of the captives. And then he lit the firecrackers on the first captive.” She paused, as the bird's struggles died away. “The first captive didn't say anything. The treasures must have been very valuable. He lost both hands and both feet. The second captive told my father everything he wanted to know, and begged him to take the firecrackers away. He didn't. He lit the

firecrackers on all of the captives, one by one, over the next few hours, and he laughed while he was watching. That is the kind of man my father is."

Crusoe didn't know what to say.

"Right," Friday said. "You get the mangoes, and I'll build the fire."