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Opening extract from

The Dread Pirate Fleur and the Ruby Heart

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CHAPTER 1

The Pandora Inn, Truro, Cornwall, 1692

'Wake up, girl. Wake up *now*. There's no time left.'

Fleur opened her eyes to see her father staring down at her. Even in the shadowy gloom of the starless night she could see fear blazing in his eyes like fire.

'Father?' she mumbled groggily. 'What's wrong?'

At that moment someone thundered on the door downstairs. The boom roared and echoed relentlessly around the silent bowels of the old inn and Fleur shivered; it was as if the devil himself wanted to get in. She sat up in bed and watched her father stride over

to the window and peer down through a gap in the curtains.

'Father, what's happening?'

The hammering downstairs grew even louder and the solid oak front door cracked as it buckled under the pressure. Her father stared down at the rabid gaggle standing outside and sighed as if exhausted. Fleur noticed then that he had thrown on a pair of breeches under his nightshirt and a huge cutlass hung from his belt; the blade glinted menacingly. He turned to face his daughter and began to speak.

'Child, I hoped that this day was never to be. But here we are.' His voice was rough with sorrow and anger. 'I've been lying to you.'

Fleur opened her mouth to speak, but at that moment a heavy cloud scudded away from the moon and its light poured in through the flimsy curtains. Her father stood in the pooling moonbeam, like a terrible dark thing trapped in a silver cobweb. His face was drained of all warmth and joy, his entire being racked and crippled with emotion. She shivered again and curled into herself. Who *was* this person? This wasn't her beloved father, a kind and gentle man. Fear fluttered in her belly, for he was all she had left.

'I'm sorry, Fleur, but I lied because I had to and that's

all there is to it.' He came towards her and sat on the edge of the bed, then reached out and touched his fingertips to hers. There, for a moment, was a glimpse of her beloved daddy.

'I don't understand. What have you lied about?' she said.

He shook his head and almost smiled. 'Almost everything. I'm not who you think I am.'

'Yes you are,' she replied defiantly. 'You're my father, the landlord of the Pandora Inn.'

He nodded. 'Aye, girl, I am that. But I am also so much more and it's almost time for me to own the truth.'

They heard the inn's door begin to crack; the crowd below started shouting.

'Give yourself up, you land-loving turncoat. We know you're in there.'

A pistol was fired into the night.

'We've come from hell and we'll carry you back there with us. Henry the Heartless, come and meet your maker!'

'But, Father, listen, it's all right,' Fleur said with relief. 'They ain't looking for you. They're calling for Henry the Heartless, not John Morgan. Shouldn't we just let 'em in?'

She started to get up but her father pushed her back onto the bed. Their eyes met and a chill seeped into her heart, for she knew in an instant that John Morgan had never really existed at all.

'I'm sorry, daughter,' he said quietly, 'but there's no time left. My real name is Henry Hart, although some will know me as Henry the Heartless.' His voice faltered with emotion. 'We have but moments together. Child, do you trust me?' He gripped her arms tightly, bruising them.

'Aye, Father,' she said firmly. 'More than anything.'

He nodded and released his grip. 'I cannot stop what is about to happen but I have made provision for you.'

Terror squeezed at Fleur's heart so tightly that she could barely breathe. 'What do you mean? What's going to happen?'

He stared into her eyes with such intensity that she fell silent.

'You'll have to be patient for a while, but someone *will* be coming for you.'

'Who?' she asked.

A smile brushed his lips as he looked down at his daughter with love and pride. She belonged to him, that much was evident, with the same tumble of thick black curls as his own, the pale, delicate face, and a wildness

about her that could never be tamed. But those huge, brilliant green eyes were all her mother's.

'There's too much to explain. But I have asked him to tell you everything. It will be all right, I promise you.'

Fleur nodded and tried to speak but her bottom lip trembled as she tried not to cry. None of this made any sense. Her father stared down at her and suddenly his steely expression crumbled and softened. He swept her into his arms and she buried her face in his chest. He smelled as he always did, of pipe smoke and the Cornish sea. She felt his ragged breath; his heartbeat thundered like the hooves of a runaway horse, and she knew then that he was scared too. She had to let him know that she would be brave; she couldn't let him down.

'Daddy,' she whispered. 'Oh, Daddy, I don't understand any of this but I promise to do as you ask and have patience. I know that you will always look after me.'

A mighty sob roared through his body and he was almost overwhelmed, but he took a deep breath and steadied himself. 'I know you will, my brave girl. You're my daughter, never forget that. You will hear all sorts of things said about me, but you are the only person who

knows me for who I am. Your mother believed in me.' His voice cracked as he remembered his beloved Rose, lost to them both years ago. 'And I hope you can do the same. I *was* the man they will say I am . . . once; but that was long ago and much has changed. I put all the darkness behind me and hunted out the light. I chose to be a good man.'

He reached for the gold locket around Fleur's neck and flipped it open. Inside was a tiny sketch of Rose. He stroked the beautiful face staring back at him with a fingertip and closed his eyes. It was enough to give him the strength he needed. Suddenly the door downstairs exploded and the raggle-taggle group stormed into the inn: there were huge crashes as they started smashing everything up. Fleur and her father sprang apart.

'Remember, you can choose who you want to be too,' he said. 'My blood runs through you like salt in the ocean.' He smiled to himself, a small, sad smile. 'I have oft wondered whether I have caged you, stripped you of your fins. I see you stare into the sea as if you belong among the waves. And you do, my fearless mermaid. And yet I wanted you to have a better life, a safer life. But I always feared they would find me and so I have taught you much of what I am and what you could be without you ever fully realizing it. All those

skills will be of use shortly. I just hope that I've taught you enough. I have always loved you, my beautiful Fleur.'

Bottles were thrown at the wall and doors kicked down as the cries for Henry the Heartless grew louder. The storm was almost upon them. Something wild flitted through her father's eyes and his body tensed. He was almost lost to her.

'Daughter, you have to hide.'

'No!' Fleur exclaimed. 'I can't leave you.'

'You have to.'

Fury surged through her suddenly and she stamped her foot with frustration. 'No, Father, let me fight next to you,' she begged. 'You know I am capable and fast – and stronger than any girl has any right to be. I can help you.'

He squeezed her shoulders tightly and smiled sadly. 'No, my little rebel. There are too many of them and you are no match for animals like these. They're ruthless to the core and will show you no mercy.'

'But why teach me all those fighting skills if I can't use them at the right time?' demanded Fleur.

'This ain't the right time,' he replied firmly. 'But remember what I taught you well because you'll be needing everything I armed you with soon enough.'

Fleur clung to him as the tears finally poured freely down her face. 'But I—'

'You have to live, Fleur. Don't you see? I have to know that you will survive or this will have all been for nothing.' He stared down at her in anguish. 'I would have my soul boil in hell for you.'

Footsteps thundered up the stairs.

'There's nowhere to hide.' Fleur looked around in panic.

Her father walked over to a small cupboard and flung it open. She peered into a tiny space cluttered with clothing and frowned.

'But it's too small.'

Her father bent over, swept the clothes aside and gently pushed the back of the cupboard to reveal a compartment big enough to hide someone.

'What's this?' she exclaimed.

'It was built just in case,' he replied gravely.

Feet stormed across the landing.

'I love you, Fleur,' her father whispered hoarsely. 'Remember, I promise by all that is great and good that he *will* be coming for you – you're not alone.'

They embraced once again quickly, and then she crawled into the space. Her father closed both doors firmly but Fleur pushed the secret panel open slightly so

that she could see through the cracks in the cupboard door.

'Henry the Heartless,' a voice roared, 'has all the fight gone out of you now ye be a lubber?'

Fleur heard the sound of a sword being drawn and someone else began to speak. It was a few moments before she realized that it was her father. His voice was harsh with fury.

'Oh, I have all the fight I need,' he said. 'I've been waiting for you to come, you ratty sea dog. What's been keeping you?'

As footsteps entered the room, the space thickened with tension.

'Aye, you say that, but you ignored the message we left for you.'

'You thought I'd come because you summoned me? Hah! You're more stupid than I remember then. I'd rather dangle from the yardarm than answer to anyone.'

Through the crack Fleur watched her father toss back his unruly mane of black hair and laugh. It was so strange hearing him being called Henry. The men inched towards him like shadows following the dying sun. They were a strange, battle-scarred assortment, wearing a mixed bag of colourful, ill-fitting clothing. Nasty weapons hung from them like leaves on trees.

'Where is he, Henry?' someone asked evenly. 'Tell us or we'll give you a bellyful of pickling brine.'

Fleur shuffled forward slightly to see who was speaking. He was huge and brutish, with a straggly mess of dirty red hair and a broad beaked nose. He was a striking man, handsome almost, but there was a cruel arrogance about him. He wore an eye-patch and two of the fingers on his left hand were missing.

'Where is who?' Fleur's father replied bluntly. It was almost as if he was enjoying it.

'You know who we mean,' someone spat at him.

Fleur's father laughed dangerously and she stared at him in amazement. He was changing before her eyes. He'd always been a strong, proud man, but now, silhouetted against the moon, he looked even taller. Pride and fear ran through her as goose pimples erupted over her body.

'Say his name. If you dare . . .' her father replied quietly.

The men laughed nervously.

'You'll be thinkin' we believe in the legend, won't you?' Someone sneered. 'That if we say his name out loud, he'll come and have our hearts' blood.'

'Say his name then, if you think it nonsense,' Henry retorted.

Swords were drawn. The flame-haired man walked over to him and stood so close that he recoiled from the reek of his enemy's foul breath. The man leaned in and spoke in a venomous tone. 'William Hart – or should I say, William the Heartless?' He looked about the room theatrically. 'See, it wasn't that hard – and hell's bells, what a surprise, he hasn't turned up.'

'He'll wait until you're sleeping,' snarled Henry. 'But don't worry, he'll wake you before he kills you. It'd be no sport for him otherwise.'

'But that's not always been the case, has it?' The man replied.

With one hand Henry raised his cutlass like a wand; with the other he held a huge staff aloft. Fleur tried not to gasp out loud as she watched him spin the stick in his hand as if it were as light as air. She had never seen it before, even when her father had taught her stick-fighting in the woods nearby. The staff was a strange thing indeed: it was almost as long as Fleur herself and appeared to be forged from a wealth of curiosities. The bottom half was made from different types of wood, with ancient-looking sharks' teeth embedded at its base. At the centre of the staff was a wide ring of gold set with a huge ruby. The top half seemed to be made from a huge snaking tusk that spiralled into a sharp point. Fleur

couldn't take her eyes off the blazing ruby. It blinked in the shadows like the bloodied eye of something ancient and timeless; she could feel it seek her out in her hiding place. Her father stood between her and the motley crew like a giant rock. His hands didn't shake and she could feel the energy surrounding him like a magnetic field. He was a warrior.

There was a pause, like the lull before a storm, and then all hell broke loose. Swords swished and glinted as they were drawn, and then everyone was upon Henry at once. She watched as he fought them off, one by one, and couldn't believe what she saw. She had often witnessed him take on drunks at the inn; she had observed his discipline and strength when he taught her how to protect herself. But this was like nothing she had ever seen before. It was as if he was possessed; a whir of lightning dancing in chaos. His sword blazed and clinked as if it had a life of its own and the staff twirled about in a lethal dance. He was untouchable. Men lay dead at his feet.

But then a pistol was fired – two shots – and he cried out with pain. His knees buckled beneath him and he sank to the floor. Fleur tried not to scream and leaned forward to see who had shot him. A wiry man wearing a blue bandana was carrying the smoking pistol. He spat

out a stream of vile oaths before shuffling backwards to join the other men. He had his back to Fleur, so she couldn't see his face, but through the rents in his filthy shirt she could see tattoos of hangman's nooses and skulls inked onto his back. She wiped away her tears and narrowed her eyes to stare at the crude black images: she would never forget those tattoos – she owed as much to her father.

The red-haired man stood over Henry and laughed. 'Did you think we'd forgotten about your fighting skills, Hart? I was prepared to lose a few men finding out if you were still as talented after all these years, but I'm not stupid. I can see time hasn't stolen anything from you.'

'It's stolen everything,' Henry replied mournfully, struggling to sit up and spitting out a mouthful of blood.

The man kicked him down again and held a long thin rapier to his neck. 'Tell us where he is,' he demanded.

'I don't know,' Henry replied.

'Tell us or we'll kill you.'

Henry laughed. 'I'm already dead.'

The red-haired man pushed the sword in a little deeper and a couple of beads of blood glistened at Henry's throat.

'Some folk say you had a child. What if we found the brat and fed him piece by piece to the sharks?'

The laughter stopped abruptly. 'I don't have no children,' Henry hissed through gritted teeth. 'Why would I want to bring life into this godforsaken world? You can choke me and let me rot, but you won't find no family of mine. All you have is me.'

'I'll grind your mealy-mouthed jib into the dirt until you're barely breathing and then we'll rip this inn apart. The last sound you'll hear will be your own cries for mercy.'

Fleur tried to swallow away the fear that choked her.

'Be damned.' Henry groaned, spat out more blood and laughed with everything he could muster. 'You'll never catch William. And I will never turn on him. Now finish me, before I find the strength to kill you all.'

They were the last words that Henry spoke. With a bloodcurdling cry the one-eyed man plunged his blade into Henry's throat and the other men soon joined in. Fleur turned away and bit her hand until she tasted blood – it was all she could do to stop herself from shouting out. But she was done with crying; fury burned within her, and instead she wanted revenge on every man left standing in that room. As she cowered in the secret

cupboard, listening to them rip her home apart, a name echoed around her head like a whisper: *William Hart*, *William Hart*, *William Hart* . . .

She wasn't alone. Someone was coming for her.