PANDORA

Written by

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Samson, The Scilly Isles
December 1798

He had not allowed for the weight. The cold he anticipated, the water's sluggish buoyancy, this too he considered. The darkness? The lantern does well enough, and his memory allows for shortfalls in sight. But the weight . . . this is something else altogether.

The lantern itself is manageable. It is bound to his wrist with thick twine, affording movement in both hands, but it pulls down uncomfortably on his arm and the salt water stings where the twine has already rubbed the skin. The ropes looped under each armpit – one for the salvage, one to raise him again – are cumbersome, but they help balance his body as he descends. The sinking weights, too, although bulky, can be endured.

The problem is the harness. Strong tin plate. Domed and airy around his head, further down it constricts his torso like an unforgiving corset. On deck it did not feel so heavy. Below the surface, however, the restrictive leather suit, the iron hoop skeleton that pinches meanly, together with the pressure of water and the winter currents . . . He will demand more money once the job is done.

Luck has been with him so far this night. The sky's inky cradle is starred, the moon full and fat. During the storm he took careful note of his surroundings – the ship finally succumbed on the shoals of two small islands separated by an isthmus, their inlands pitted with stone

ruins. In the moonlight these ruins shone white, a beacon for their small sailboat, and despite the December squalls the ship's starboard beam end is still visible above the waves. No, the wreck was not difficult to find.

So why is it he feels he has been led here?

Thankfully the ship rests in the shallows. He has not used this apparatus before and will not venture any deeper than he must. Twenty feet below the surface. No danger there, he tells himself. And he knows exactly where to look. Under careful instruction the object he seeks was safely hidden within the starboard bow, away from the other shipments tightly packed in the hold, but the ship broke apart in the storm; he hopes his luck stays true, that the crate has not strayed too far along the seabed, that no one else has managed to retrieve it.

The icy water needles his legs and arms. Cocooned in the heavy suit he descends further, breathing with effort, tasting the sharp taint of metal. The air pipes leading from the harness to the surface are long, and he imagines them stretching behind him like a hangman's rope. He holds the lantern in front of his body, looks through the eyeglass of the harness dome, relieved to see the shadow of the ship's ribs. Down he goes, then, searching, squinting into the murk. He thinks he hears a sound below him, something low and plaintive. He tilts his head, feels his ears pop, continues on.

His feet land. Beneath them, shifting grit. He angles his head and tries to look down. But carefully. Too sudden a movement, he was warned, and the water will seep through the harness. Slowly, yes, slowly. There. The corner of something. Using the ball of his foot he pushes himself off, back into the current. Then he sinks again, making contact with the seabed, raising the lantern to eye level. Six feet or so from the ship's remains he just makes out the dark corners of a crate. The blood pulses loudly in his ears. This is it, he is sure. He

edges slowly forward, puts one leg in front of him, then another, his feet dragging through the water. He jumps as something brushes against his shins, and lowering the lantern he watches seaweed dance around his calves.

The crate balances precariously on a large rock. He inches closer, raises the lantern again. The X he painted on its side when the ship left Palermo is clear, even in this deep aquatic dark. For a moment he marvels at how easy all this has been but then the lantern flickers and dips before flaring once again, and he knows that now is not the time to dawdle.

Releasing the twine from his wrist, he places the lantern between two hunks of wreckage so it will not turn up in the current, then unhooks one of the ropes from his arms and begins the painstaking task of securing the crate. He must be careful – there is no room for error – and the rock is a blessing it seems, for without it he would have struggled to lift the crate from the seabed at all. As he works small fish dash and dart about him. At one point he stops, strains to hear within the tin plates of the harness. Is that singing? No, it is the water sickness, it must be. Was he not told that staying under too long can be deadly?

But so soon?

He works fast now, as fast as he is able with the harness weighing him down. He wraps the rope around the crate four times and though his fingers are stiff with cold, he ties knots so tight the rope will need cutting free. When he is satisfied he pulls sharply on it – once, twice – signalling to the surface. The length jumps, slackens, becomes taut. Then, triumphant, he watches the crate ascend in a cloud of billowing sand. He hears the muffled groan of wood, the sluggish surge of stirring water and, so quietly he believes he has imagined it, the soft, haunting, almost-whisper of a woman, sighing.

London
January 1799

PART I.

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.

JOHN MILTON
Paradise Lost (1667)

CHAPTER ONE

Dora Blake has been hunched over her desk since dawn. The stool she sits on is too tall but she has become accustomed to its awkward height. Every now and then she lays down her pliers, removes her spectacles and pinches the bridge of her nose. Often she kneads the knots in her neck, stretches her back until she feels the pleasant crack of spine.

The attic room is north-facing and offers little light. In frustration Dora has moved her desk and stool beneath the small window for this is intricate work, and her lone candle is not fit for purpose. She shifts uncomfortably on the hard seat, replaces her spectacles and applies herself once more, doing her best to ignore the cold. The window is open at its widest, despite the New Year chill. Any moment she expects Hermes to return with a new treasure, something to crown this latest creation of hers, and she has opened his cage door in readiness, the remains of her stolen breakfast scattered beneath the perch to reward what she hopes will be a fruitful morning's hunt.

She sucks her bottom lip between her teeth, angles the pliers against her thumb.

To replicate cannetille was ambitious of her but Dora is, if anything, an optimist. Some might call this optimism mere wilfulness, but she feels her ambition is justified. She knows – *knows* – she has

a talent. She is positively convinced it will be recognised one day, that her designs will be worn all across the city. Perhaps, Dora muses, the corner of her mouth twitching as she eases a particularly tiny wire into place, across Europe. But then she shakes her head, tries to pluck her lofty dreams from the woodwormed beams above her and concentrate. It will not do to be distracted and ruin hours of work at the last hurdle.

Dora cuts another piece of wire from the roll hooked over a nail on the wall.

The beauty of cannetille is that it imitates fine lace. She has seen parure sets on display in Rundell & Bridge and marvelled at their intricate designs; a necklace, earrings, bracelet, brooch and tiara would have been the work of months. Briefly Dora had contemplated creating the matching pair of earrings from her sketch, but grudgingly admitted her time was better spent elsewhere. This necklace is only an example after all, a means to demonstrate her skill.

'There!' she exclaims, snipping the excess wire with a pair of fine-handled clippers. The clasp has been bothering her all morning for it proved damnably fiddly but now it is done, worth the dark early start, the strain of back, the numbness of buttock. She lays down the cutters, blows into her hands and rubs them hard together, just as a flurry of black and white descends from the rooftops with a furtive caw.

Dora sits back and smiles.

'Good morning, my heart.'

The magpie sails through the window, lands softly on the bed. Around the bird's neck swings the small leather pouch she has sewn for him. Hermes' neck is bowed – there is weight to it.

He has found something.

'Come then,' Dora says, closing the window tight against the winter chill. 'Show me what you've scurried up.'

Hermes chirps, dips his head. The pouch strap slackens and the

bird patters back, shaking his beak free. The pouch sags and Dora reaches for it, excitedly tips the contents on the worn coverlet.

A broken piece of earthenware, a metal bead, a steel pin. She can use all of these for something or other; Hermes never disappoints. But her attention is drawn to another item on the bed. She picks it up, raises it to the light.

'*Ach nai*,' Dora breathes. 'Yes, Hermes. It is perfect.'

Between her fingers she holds a flat oval pebble, made of glass, the size of a small egg. Against the grey of the city's skyline it shines a pale, almost milky blue. In cannetille designs amethysts are the preferred stone; the rich purple hue glints brightly against the gold, enhancing the intensity of the yellow. But it is aquamarine that Dora likes best. It reminds her of Mediterranean skies, the warmth of childhood. This smooth piece of glass will do just nicely. She closes her hand around it, feels its soft surface cool against her palm. She gestures to the magpie. With a blink of his black eye he hops onto her fist.

'I think that deserves a nice breakfast, don't you?'

Dora guides him into his cage. His beak scrapes against the wooden base as he scrabbles at the crusts of bread she left for him earlier. Gently she strokes his silken feathers, admires their rainbow sheen.

'There, my treasure,' she croons. 'You must be tired. Is that not better?'

Engrossed now in his meal Hermes ignores her, and Dora returns to her desk. She looks down at the necklace, contemplates her handiwork.

She is, she must confess, not entirely satisfied. Her design, so beautifully imagined on paper, is a poor show realised. What should be tendrils of coiled gold is merely dull grey wire twisted into miniature loops. What would have been shining seed pearls are instead roughly hewn shards of broken porcelain.

But Dora never expected it to match her drawing. She lacks the right tools and materials, the correct training. It is, however, a start; proof that there is beauty to her work, for despite the crude materials there is an elegance to the shapes she has wrought. No, Dora is not satisfied, but she is pleased. She hopes it will do. Surely with this pebble as a centrepiece . . .

There is a bang, the jangle of a distant bell.

'Dora!'

The voice that calls up from three storeys below is hard, sharp, impatient. Hermes chirps irritably in his cage.

'Dora,' the voice barks again. 'Come down and manage the shop. I've urgent business at the dock.'

The statement is followed by the dull thud of a door closing, another one, far off. Then, silence.

Dora sighs, covers the necklace with a piece of linen, places her spectacles down alongside it. She will have to add the glass pebble later, when her uncle has retired to bed. With regret Dora props it against the candlestick where it wobbles briefly before falling still.

Hezekiah Blake's Emporium for Exotic Antiquities stands out against the coffee-house and haberdasher's it sits between. Its window is large and bowed, obtrusive to passers-by who often find themselves compelled to stop due to its sheer size. But the street is where many of these passers-by stay – nowadays few linger when they realise the window with its peeling frame has nothing more exotic in it than an armoire from the last century and a landscape painting reminiscent of Gainsborough. Once a booming establishment it now houses only forgeries and dust-furred curiosities that hold no real appeal for the

public, let alone a discerning collector. Why her uncle felt the need to call Dora downstairs is beyond her; she may well pass this morning without seeing a single customer.

In her father's day, business was brisk. She might have only been a child during those golden years but she remembers the kind of clientele that Blake's entertained. Viscounts would flock to Ludgate Street to request their Berkeley Square townhouses be decorated in a manner that recalled the beauties of the Grand Tour. Men successful in their trade might commission a centrepiece for their shop. Private collectors would pay handsomely for her father Elijah and his wife to excavate ruins overseas. But now?

Dora closes behind her the door that separates the living quarters from the shop floor. The bell tinkles a cheerful greeting as the door slides back into its casement but she remains tight-lipped in the face of it. If it is not Lottie Norris keeping a beady eye on her then the dratted bell Hezekiah installed does well enough to curtail her comings and goings.

Tucking her shawl tight around her shoulders Dora comes full onto the shop floor. It is crammed with furniture, ugly items arranged haphazardly against one another, and bookcases filled to the brim with volumes that do not look a day over ten years old. Hefty sideboards stand side by side, cluttered with mediocre trinkets spread over their unwaxed surfaces. Yet despite the disorder there is always a wide path that winds its way between the wares, for at the far end of the shop are the large doors that lead down to the basement beneath.

Hezekiah's private sanctuary.

The basement had once been her parents' domain – their office, the place where they mapped excavations and restored broken stock. But when Hezekiah moved from his tiny set of rooms in Soho to take over the living he overhauled it completely, erased all trace of her mother and father until only Dora's fleeting memories of them

remained. Nothing in Blake's Emporium is what it once was; the business has dwindled, its reputation along with it.

Dora flips over a new page of the ledger (only two entries yesterday) and scrawls the date in its margin.

They do make sales. Over the course of the month money drips slowly but steadily in, like the water from their leaking roof. But each sale is based on lies, on showmanship. Hezekiah attaches all sorts of fantastical histories to his objects. A wooden chest was the means by which a slaver transported two children from the Americas in 1504 (made only the week before by a Deptford carpenter); a pair of ornate candlesticks belonged at one time to Thomas Culpeper (served up by a blacksmith in Cheapside). Once, Hezekiah sold a brothel keeper a green velvet sopha he claimed was owned by a French count during the Thirty Years' War, salvaged when his 'most glorious' *château* burnt to the ground (the count was in fact a desperate widow who sold it to Hezekiah for three guineas to go toward paying her husband's debts). He even furnished the upper rooms of a molly house with six Japanese screens from the Heian period (painted himself in the basement below). If his customers cared to question the authenticity of these items, Hezekiah would have felt the cold hard floor of the Old Bailey beneath his knees long before now. But they do not question. The calibre of them, their appreciation of fine art and antiquities, is distinctly lacking.

Forgeries, Dora has discovered over the years, are not unheard of in antiquity circles. Indeed, many with money to spare commission copies of items they have seen in the British Museum or have admired abroad. But Hezekiah . . . Hezekiah does not admit to his deceit, and there is where the danger lies. Dora knows what the punishment is for such trickery – a heavy fine, a turn on the pillory, months in prison. Her stomach twists sickly at the thought. She could have reported Hezekiah, of course, but she depends on him – her uncle, the shop,

they are all she has – and until she can make her own way in the world Dora must stay, must watch the business sink year by year, watch the Blake name become worthless, forgotten.

Not all of the stock is counterfeit, she concedes. The trinkets Hezekiah has accumulated over the years (and from which she sneaks supplies every now and then) make for a small and steady income – glass buttons, clay pipes, tiny moths suspended in blown glass, toy soldiers, china teacups, painted miniatures . . . Dora looks down once more at the ledger. Yes, they make sales. But the money that comes in is just enough to pay Lottie's wage and feed them all, though where Hezekiah finds the coin to fund his little vanities Dora does not know, and nor does she wish to. It is enough that he has sullied the living her father left behind. It is enough that the building falls to ruin, that there is precious little left to pay for the repairs. If the place belonged to her—Dora shakes the melancholy thought from her head, trails a fingertip along the counter, lip curling when it comes up black. Does Lottie never clean?

As if on cue, the bell tinkles again and Dora turns to find the older woman poking her face through the crack in the door.

'You're up, missum. Are you having breakfast? Or have you already helped yourself?'

Dora eyes Hezekiah's housekeeper – a stocky soft-mouthed woman with small eyes and straw-coloured hair – with scorn. Outwardly she looks as though she would fit the role perfectly, but Lottie Norris is as far from excelling in the domestic realm as Dora's uncle is from mastering athleticism. No indeed, Lottie is in Dora's opinion altogether too lazy, too opinionated and, like tar on a gull's wing, noxious, hard to remove, and wily with it.

'I'm not hungry.'

But Dora *is* hungry. The bread was consumed over three hours ago, yet she knows that if she asks for more Lottie will make a point of

mentioning to Hezekiah that she has been stealing from the larder and Dora has no patience for his hypocritical lectures.

The housekeeper steps into the shop, looks at her with eyebrows raised.

'Not hungry? You hardly ate a thing at dinner last night.'

Dora ignores this, instead raises her finger to show the black.

'Shouldn't you be cleaning?'

Lottie frowns. 'In here?'

'Where else do you suppose I mean?'

The housekeeper scoffs, swings a stout arm through the air like a fan. 'It's a shop for antiquities, isn't it? They're meant to be dusty. That's the charm.'

Dora turns her face away, purses her lips at Lottie's tone. Always she has treated Dora like this, as if she were nothing more than a servant herself and not, in fact, the daughter of two reputable antiquarians and the niece of the current proprietor. Behind the counter Dora straightens the ledger, begins to sharpen the pencil to a fine point, biting down the bitter words on her tongue; Lottie Norris is not worth the breath it would take to scold her, nor would it do any good if she did.

'You sure you want nothing?'

'I'm sure,' Dora says shortly.

'Please yourself.'

The door begins to close. Dora lowers the pencil.

'Lottie?' The door stops. 'What was so important at the dock that Uncle had me mind the shop?'

The housekeeper hesitates, scrunches her stub nose. 'How'm I to know?' she says, but as the door swings shut behind her, infernal bell tinkling, Dora thinks Lottie knows very well.