

Lost Men

By EUGENE L. MORGULIS

Peter and the Pirates have been at each other's throats for as long as any can remember; it's all been fun and games until the day Pan kills Capt. Hook! With their nemesis gone, the Lost Boys go their separate ways... until they return Lost Men!

Captain Hook awoke livid. What had been a most indulgent dream was now replaced by an irritating ruckus echoing from the mainland. Sounds of whooping, laughing, and hollering had pierced the hull of the Jolly Roger and planted themselves insufferably in Hook's skull. Someone would pay dearly for this.

"Smee!" he shouted.

His first mate rolled out from under the bed.

"Always at your side, Cap'n," he said, rubbing his sleepy eyes.

"Smee, what on earth is that mind-shattering noise? How can a man be expected to sleep!?"

Smee cupped his hand to his ear and listened intently.

"I do believe it's laughter, Cap'n," he said, "belonging to those Lost Boys what live in them treetops with that Peter Pan. Sounds like they's havin' themselves a food fight."

"Oh, they are insufferable," said Captain Hook indignantly. "First, they foil my plans, and now they spoil my sleep. I was having such a glorious dream, too."

"I've an idea," said Smee. "Why don't we

have us a raid of *their* village for once?"

A raid of the Lost Boys, thought Captain Hook. *That's different*. Usually, it was the boys who raided the Jolly Roger, slashing her sails, splintering her deck, and roughing up her crew. The Captain had never taken the battle to them. They were just boys, after all. But Hook was in an especially foul mood tonight.

"Smee, I've had an idea," he announced, raising his finger for effect. "Let's raid that treetop village where those brats lay their heads. Switch things up a bit."

"That'll show 'em, Cap'n," replied Smee, and hustled off to rouse the men.

It was a terrific battle. The Lost Boys were still in the midst of their food fight when the pirates attacked. Terrified, confused, and covered in colorful delicacies, they scattered to the skies, leaving the pirates to relish their quick victory. It did not last.

After composing themselves, the boys sprang to action and, before long, gained the upper hand. In the middle of it all were Captain Hook and Peter Pan, toe to toe. Peter swooped and slashed with his short sword,

while the old pirate parried with his hook and thrust with his rapier. Though they proved evenly matched at the start, Hook soon began to tire. At his age, he could scarcely keep up.

Oh my, Hook thought, as a swipe from Peter's sword grazed his earlobe. *That one was frightfully close. I dare say Pan is in fine form tonight.*

Hook smiled and pretended not to be growing worried. Did the boy seem different tonight? Indeed, in their previous duels, Peter delighted in humiliating Hook, laughing freely as he bested the man again and again. Now, he appeared strangely humorless, furious even, shouting and grunting with each ferocious blow. No aerial twirls or loop-de-loops. Just pushing, pushing forward and attacking, attacking, attacking. Hook wondered whether he had ever seen the lad in such a state. His wondering was interrupted when Peter aimed a wicked slash at Hook's shoulder. The Captain spun and danced away.

"Hi-ho, old boy, another close one," he called merrily. *More than close*, he realized, *the brat actually connected that time.* Hook's sword arm began to bleed, and his rapier slipped from his weakened grip. The pain was great and soon grew overwhelming. Hook fell to his knees at the edge of the waterfall where their battle came to an end.

Peter Pan landed before him. Only then did Hook realize that the boy had been crying. *Best not mention it*, he thought.

"Well played, lad. Well played." The Captain offered a mock salute with his hook hand. "Top marks," he added cheerily.

"Shut up." Peter screamed. "What are you doing here, attacking us where we live, where we sleep? You could have hurt someone!"

Hook laughed. "Oh come now, Peter. No harm done. These good strong boys can take care of themselves. Just a bit of fun to—"

"You're going to ruin everything. Why can't you just stay on your ugly ship? This is our home. It's *ours!*"

Hook looked around. Their little village seemed to him no more than a handful of scattered planks and platforms, bits of wood, and some ropes. A few sheets flapped in the wind, one of which looked suspiciously like the sail that recently went missing from the Jolly Roger. *Pathetic.* No wonder he'd never come here before. Hook wasn't even sure why he'd bothered now. He longed for the comfort of his bed and Smee's happy snores beneath it.

"All right, Peter, all right," Hook said through his teeth. "You have made your point. Your boys have bested my men, and you have defeated me in single combat. I say to you now, unequivocally, I surrender." A slimy smirk wormed its way across his lips. "Now slap me on the fanny and send me off to lick my wounds."

"Not this time, Hook." The boy took a step closer.

Hook rolled his eyes. This was just too much now, and far past the point of fun. "Oh? Then what shall you do, Peter? Toss me over these falls into the pillow-soft waters of Neverland? Heavens, I might twist an ankle."

The assembled pirates began to laugh

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nervously. Smee winked at Tinkerbelle, whose light seemed to dim for a heartbeat.

“I hate you,” said Peter Pan, and put his sword through Captain Hook’s throat.

There were no celebrations for the Lost Boys that night. The pirates slunk away and were never seen again. Hook’s body, too, disappeared, though no one was quite sure what happened to it. Perhaps the pirates had carried it off. Or perhaps it had tumbled down the falls.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Peter, ending the discussion. “He’s gone to whatever horrible place he came from.”

The Lost Boys nodded and got to setting their homes to order, silently mending boards, restringing ropes, and righting furniture. They worked clear through sunrise and into the middle of the day, when Tink magicked up a simple meal for the tired lads. Thomas cried, though not even he was sure why. Another uneasy night followed.

The next day, Peter declared a Day of Fun and Goodness and No Sadness. It seemed to work, for once the boys began to play, no one wanted to stop. Peter orchestrated the activities. They even had a race to the rainbow and back, which Peter let Jonathan win.

And so it went for a time. The boys still spoke of the great battle, but it took on the aspect of game they played long ago. Peter had “defeated” the loathsome Hook, or had “whipped him good,” or perhaps even “taken him out,” but nothing more. They even talked of and trained for their next great

battle.

But it never came. When the Lost Boys realized this, they lost interest in going through the motions. Peter tried to keep up discipline, drilling the children in flying and sword fighting. Perhaps more harshly than he would have liked, but he knew they needed his help. Yet, after a while, Peter’s heart was not fully committed either.

The boys began to talk of home. Not their crumbling treetop fort. Not even Neverland. But their real home. What was it called, again?

“Egglund?” guessed Michael.

“Endland?” offered James.

They tried piecing it together from the barest scraps of memories, but the images they conjured up were too strange and wonderful for even Neverland. Soon it was all the boys talked about, this world of rockets and rock bands and movies and girls.

Peter hovered at the edge of these conversations. He didn’t think “Endland” sounded so great. Neverland was all he had ever dreamed of, an endless summer of feasts, and fun, and adventure. No worries, no struggles, no fears. They were better than kings, here. Rulers without the burdens of ruling. But everything seemed different now. And the other boys were goners.

In the end, it was Tinkerbelle who showed them the way back. No flying this time. The boys merely went to off sleep and never returned. Peter was the last.

He walked down to the edge of the waterfall where he could listen to its music one last time. Peter lay on the ground, lacing his fingers behind his head and gazing up at the

sky, where shooting stars zipped about like fireflies in the night.

Before he closed his eyes, Peter promised Tink that he would always remember her, though he wouldn't. She responded by silently kissing Peter on the cheek. As she did, Peter's body grew heavy, heavier than it had ever been. And he slept.

Peter didn't know what he hated more, the fluorescent light that gave him headaches, or the conditioned air that screwed with his sinuses. *The A/C*, he decided finally. The office was absolutely freezing, and the cold numbed his fingers. He wrapped his hands around his coffee mug before he resumed typing, but they still felt heavy and stiff, like the rest of him.

Just when he longed for a break, he heard a rapping at his office door.

"Jon!" he said, "What a pleasant surprise. Come on in."

Jonathan sat down and acquainted himself with Peter's small office. He cheerfully grabbed a worn action figure sitting on top of the monitor and manipulated its plastic arms and legs before setting it back down at a tilt.

"Nice little set up you got, Pete."

"Thanks. The view could be better, but at least it's not a cubicle."

"Oh, well, I know all about those, har har."

"To what do I owe the pleasure, old man? It's been ages."

"Well, I've been talking with some of the fellas, and we thought it would be fun to get the gang back together for a night out."

Peter stared back, blinking.

"You know," Jonathan continued, "just for a drink or three, har har. You, me, Tom, Jim, Mike. All the old boys."

As Jonathan droned on, Peter's eyes kept shunting to his computer screen, where email notifications and meeting requests popped up every few seconds.

"Sure," said Peter, when he sensed that Jonathan stopped speaking. "You know me. I'm up for anything."

It took another week to coordinate everyone's schedules, but they finally met up in a quiet pub on a Thursday night. The conversation started light. The men exchanged the customary updates about their jobs and their families. They drank. They reminisced about old times, making trouble in the neighborhood. They drank more.

Pretty soon they got to blubbering about their lives. And Peter, who'd said little at first, led the pack, building a consensus of dissatisfaction.

"You remember how it was, don't you," said Peter. "It was all supposed to be so magical, so full of mystery and potential. But it's crap, isn't it? Just work and rules."

The other men mumbled their assent into their glasses. Michael drained his and motioned for another. Thomas burped.

The more Peter talked, and the more they drank, the more the men agreed that something was missing. The grievance was as un-specific as it was all-consuming. A sadness felt, but not understood, like a nightmare that unnerves long after it's forgotten. Where was the adventure they were all

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promised? Had they given it up, or were they cheated out of it? What if it was still there, somewhere, waiting for them to reclaim it?

It was Peter who suggested that they all take a trip together. The men agreed heartily, and drank until they blacked out.

Peter woke in a fog. *Why's it so damn hot?* The sun shone achingly bright, and the air tasted salty in his dry, sticky mouth. Tall grass tickled his wrists. The pounding in his head slowly gave way to a primitive symphony of clicks and whirs played by unseen insects. Where was he, anyway?

Peter looked around to find Jonathan, Thomas, Michael, and James similarly disoriented. Then he saw the narrow snow-capped mountain, rising like a spike above a verdant forest of shimmering trees. Meringue clouds obscured its peak, all framed by a perpetual rainbow that hung in the air like a welcome banner.

He remembered. The others did, too.

"Yahoo!" shouted Michael.

"We're back," said Thomas. "We're actually back."

"I told myself it wasn't real," said James through his tears. "I thought it was all a dream we had together."

Peter put a hand on his shoulder. "It was, Jim. And now we're here again."

"But how could it be the same? It was so long ago."

"I don't think that matters here."

"Do you think there's a wife?" asked Jonathan, and everybody laughed.

The question *who's up for adventuring* was met with hearty cheers, followed by requests to wash up first and maybe figure out a game plan before they all went tearing off to God-knows-where.

"Right," said Peter after making himself chair of the adventuring committee. "First order of business, we establish a base camp. We get our bearings, maybe a snack, and then we launch our first adventure. Yes?"

The men nodded, and began looking around. James recalled that they may have lived in a treehouse at some point. That sounded all right to Peter, but the others were not having it.

"Seems bloody impractical, doesn't it?" said Thomas.

Michael agreed. "Sleeping on grass mats and wooden planks? Absolute murder on the back."

"Only mattresses for me, thank you very much, har har," said Jonathan.

"Fine," said Peter. "No trees."

The men wandered aimlessly for a spell, unsure of what to do or where to go.

"The Natives," said Peter, snapping as it came to him. "I bet they'd put us up. I recall a little princess there who fancied me, if you catch my drift."

"Sure there was," said Thomas. He raised his finger behind his head like a fleshy feather, gyrated lasciviously, and whooped.

Peter rolled his eyes and gathered the men to brainstorm. They recalled vaguely a little city of teepees on the bank of a river. No one could agree on which river it was or how many rivers there were in Neverland, or on anything else really. But someone, prob-

ably Peter, picked a direction, and off they went into the forest.

As they walked, Peter saw why the leaves shimmered. It was a trick, actually. Each leaf was green on one side and milky white on the other, and when the wind blew, they all flickered back and forth like moonlight on a green sea. Peter plucked one and twisted it playfully in his fingers. On an impulse, he nibbled on its green edge and found it pleasantly sweet. He flipped it over and nibbled on the white, surprised to find it bitter. *Neat.* Peter was luxuriating in the peace of the moment when someone rudely poked his shoulder. It was Thomas.

"I'm just wondering where we're going. Do you happen to know, Pete?"

"We're going to find the Natives, Tom."

"Well, it's been two hours, and," Thomas swiveled his head in an exaggerated fashion, "I don't see them."

"You have to be patient," said Peter. "This is a big place." He resumed walking in the direction they had selected, or near enough.

"I don't remember it being so big," called Jonathan from behind.

Peter chuckled to himself. *I don't remember you being such a big whiner.* Still, Peter had an inkling that they were moving much too slowly. Probably just old bones. Some clean air and physical activity would whip them into shape. He picked up the pace.

After several more hours of wandering and arguing, even Peter was frustrated. When he couldn't take any more of Jonathan's ceaseless requests for a break, which

he voiced with every belabored breath, Peter gave in. The men sat with their backs against tree trunks, stewing in the summer heat.

"Pete," said James softly.

"I don't know where we are, okay," he snapped back.

But James only nudged him and nodded toward a branch. There, Peter spied a red and yellow-feathered bird, with a long elegant tail, that seemed to be looking right back at him. She had a stateliness about her, like a grand society dame, commanding her perch with gentle dignity. She was precisely the kind of thing Neverland excelled at producing. Something so casually beautiful, you almost forgot to marvel at it.

"Which way to the village, pretty birdie?" rasped Thomas, ruining the moment.

But the slight was immediately forgotten, because, to everyone's surprise, the bird actually pointed. The motion was quick, just a flit of her wing, but it was unmistakably purposeful.

"See?" said Thomas, arms crossed, "Practically the other way."

Peter ignored him. "Show us the way," he asked the bird. "Please."

The bird did nothing at first, except fuss with her plumage and adjust her footing. But, after a few more entreaties, she hopped up, spread her fiery wings, and flew off in the heading she previously indicated. As he watched her go, Peter felt a familiar stirring in the pit of his stomach.

"Come on, lads, after it!" cried Peter, taking off with a skip.

"Where?" asked Jonathan, who was still

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on the ground, wringing the sweat out of his socks.

“Follow the bird!”

“Hang on a sec.”

“Run.”

“Pete, wait.”

“Run, God damn it!”

They arrived at the tribal village around sundown, by which point their clothes were filthy and covered in sweat. Jonathan wheezed hideously. Thomas had turned an ankle. Michael was missing a shoe. Peter had a few new cuts and scrapes, and his heart rioted in his rib cage, but he couldn't have been happier. Not even the others' pathetic performance in the forest bothered him now. Just moments ago, he'd nearly throttled Jonathan, who, needing literally to be pulled along, had caused Peter to lose track of their winged guide. Luckily, by that point, they were close enough to hear the river. They found their way to it shortly after and spotted the village on the other side.

Across the rushing water, a handful of women and men were washing clothes as children splashed on the shallow banks nearby. Beyond them stood rows of marvelous conical structures that were teepees in name only. Some were enormous, three stories tall at least. One, Peter noticed, was being worked on by three men arranged vertically, standing on each other's shoulders. The bottom man tossed tools up to the topmost man, who in turn dropped tools for the bottom man to catch. Altogether they resembled a juggling giant. Near them, barefoot teenagers flung a woven multicolored

disc back and forth, showing off by jumping over each other and snagging catches between their legs.

The Natives' motions looked effortless, as if their bodies were weightless. Peter remembered feeling that way once, too, unladen by the years of cares and worries that hung on him like a wool cloak in a rainstorm. Just standing there watching the Natives' naturalistic grace made Peter feel lighter.

The other men were still recovering from their run through the forest, and they decided that Peter should do the talking. There was no bridge, and the river looked too dangerous to cross, so Peter waved to get the washers' attention.

“Noble friends,” he called out over the rushing water. “My name is Peter. You may remember me and my associates here.” He motioned over to the men, some of whom waved awkwardly. A small girl, scarcely more than a twig with twin braids, waved back and was quickly ushered behind her mother's legs.

Peter continued. “We have been gone a long time. But we're back now, as you can see, and we are in need of some lodging. Your hospitality would be greatly appreciated.” After more silence he added, “and rewarded.”

The villagers went back to their washing. None even made eye contact, save for the little girl, who stared unnervingly from behind her mother's trunk-like legs.

After some time, an official-looking retinue came out of one of the structures, carrying baskets. They walked easily over the

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river water, perhaps stepping on submerged stones that Peter had failed to perceive.

“Look lively, lads,” said Peter. “The villagers bring tributes!”

The other men hobbled over eagerly and tried to stand straight, while the Natives set their baskets on the ground.

A lithe, bright-eyed woman of indeterminate age strode forward to address them.

“We are pleased to offer you these gifts,” she said in a clear, careful voice. “We hope they will help you on your journey.”

“Oh. Well. Thank you,” said Peter. “But we have already journeyed far, and we would very much appreciate it if you had some spare rooms for us.” He hesitated for a beat, but decided it was no time to be coy. “We would like to stay here with you, please,” he added.

The woman shook her head. “Our apologies, but we do not have a place for you here. There is a town at the end of the river. Perhaps you will find it more suitable.”

A clamor rose from the men, but Peter hushed them.

“Maybe you have a quest or something we could help with. We’re seasoned adventurers.”

“I see that you are,” said the woman with no hint of sarcasm. “But nevertheless.”

Peter thought he heard some of the Natives laughing, but decided it was only the babbling river.

“Don’t you know who I am?” he said.

“I know who you think you are.”

“And who’s that?”

“Someone you used to be.”

The woman’s nonsense answer tore at Pe-

ter’s chest. He searched her voice for any hint of gall or mockery, but found only casual indifference, which was worse. Peter welled up.

“I’m sorry,” he said finally, more to himself than to the woman. “I just thought this would be easier.”

“I know,” said the Native woman. “Seek the town at the end of the river. You will find it better suited to you.” With that, she bowed and proceeded lightly across the invisible bridge with the rest of her folk. Peter tried to run after them, but he was beat, and the river was impassable.

“What the hell, Pete?” asked Michael.

“Come on, guys,” said Peter. “This isn’t the place for us.”

In the baskets, Peter and the men found clothes, food, and provisions, which they carried with them down the river. Once out of sight of the village, they changed, washed, and ate.

“I think this is for the best,” said Peter as they picnicked on the riverbank. “I don’t think I’m suited for teepee living. And neither is Jon’s back, I’ll wager.”

“Har har,” said Jon.

The journey to the town was miserable. Jonathan complained about the insects, and Michael lost his *other* shoe. Around midday, Peter glimpsed a golden stag standing against the green and white foliage on the other side of the river, but there was no way to cross, and Thomas mocked him for suggesting they risk it.

“Because you had such luck with the magic bird, eh, Pete.”

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“Shut up, Tom,” said Peter, wondering if he could use Thomas’s corpse as a flotation device.

After pressing on for the better part of the day, they began to see signs of civilization. A dirt path became a crumbling road, which led to a harbor town at the mouth of the river. A grey ocean lay beyond. The men ventured forth, chattering and slapping each other’s backs in relief.

Closer up, the town proved a less impressive sight. Carts and horses shambled down waste covered streets around squat brown houses that leaned against each other like old drunks. Everything about the place assaulted Peter’s senses, from the sooty industrial air to the vulgar grumblings of the townsfolk. They were the worst of all. Everywhere Peter looked, he saw dull-eyed mopes plodding through their daily routines and churlish fishwives braying at some unintelligible gossip. The men quickly discovered them to be even less hospitable than the Natives. No one spoke to them, barely even acknowledging their presence. Nor did they have any luck at the town’s shabby inn.

“No money, no beds,” growled the proprietor before he slammed the door.

As the sun dipped low and the weather threatened to turn, Peter and the men had yet to secure a place to stay. Thomas complained loudly that Peter had not been persistent enough with the Natives, who had at least been willing to treat with him. Peter was about to tell him to shut the hell up when a rough-looking fellow with a milky

eye shouldered past him.

“Watch it,” barked Peter.

The man sneered and cuffed Peter on the ear, sending him into the mud. Michael and Jonathan responded with a string of *Woahs* and *Hey, nows*. Peter responded with a rock to the oaf’s mouth. The man reeled back, clutching his broken teeth, and for the second time in as many days, Peter shouted, “Run!” This time, no one argued. They scrambled away from the man’s muffled screaming and toward the harbor.

The ships there hung no lanterns and swayed in their moorings like tipsy shadows. Among them, Peter and the men desperately searched for someplace—anyplace—to hide. Finding none, they pushed onward to the farthest end of the dock, where a hulking, dilapidated wreck sat half-submerged. The ancient ship looked like it was held together with seaweed and seagull droppings, but lacking any other options, the men climbed aboard through a rusted porthole. They sat there for a time, afraid to say a word, filling the slanted darkness with their desperate panting.

After several minutes of near silence, Peter ventured a chuckle. “What did I tell you?” he said, stretching his legs. “I knew we’d find a bit of adventure sooner or later.”

Thomas was livid. “You enjoying this, Pete?”

“I was.”

“Well, I’m not. Where are we? What are we doing here? Everything is different. Everything!”

Peter laughed. “Oh, Tom. Neverland’s the same it always was. Always has been

and always will be. We're just seeing a new part of it, that's all. The only thing different is you. Actually, I take that back. You're the same miserable grouse you always were. Well, I won't let you ruin this for me again. So, if you don't like it, you can get off my ship."

"Your ship?"

"That's right. My ship. I got us here. I found the damn thing."

Thomas threw his hands up in exasperation and was about to say or do something nasty, but James cut in.

"Why not take a night apart?" he suggested.

"Yes," said Michael. "Might be safer anyway to split up. We'll regroup in the morning."

Each man set off to find a private place to spend the night. There was more to the ship than the outside suggested. Peter poked around and soon found himself in a spacious and well-appointed room that could have only been the captain's quarters. He sank into a plush and dusty chair behind the massive oak desk and fiddled with the charts and instruments. *Now there's an adventure*, he thought. *The captain of my own ship*. And why shouldn't he be the captain? It had been his idea to come back to Neverland. It had been his idea to seek out the town, and the harbor. And hadn't he always been the leader? He even knew a captain once. What was his name? Peter couldn't recall and was too sleepy to devote any more energy to it.

He peered about the darkness for a bed

and smiled to see one made and ready for him. Getting from the desk to the bed was difficult, as he was on the verge of exhaustion, but a man helped him over to it and tucked him in.

"Thank you," muttered Peter. "Uh..." He struggled to recall the stocky man's name. "Who are you, again?"

"Why, it's me, sir," said the man cheerfully.

Peter could only blink dumbly.

"Wouldn't ya know it," said the man up to the ceiling. "He never remembers me, me, me, me." He winked as he sang.

"Smee?" mumbled Peter. He was already half asleep.

"There ya go, Cap'n. I knew ya'd get it. Smee. Always at your side!" He did a jaunty little jig, which made Peter chuckle. Peter liked him.

"Tipple of rum to help you sleep, sir?"

"Maybe just a tipple."

Smee poured the sweet-smelling brown liquid into a crystal glass and dribbled it into Peter's mouth. He then dabbed his chin with a lacy handkerchief. Peter winced when the delicate cloth touched his face, which still throbbed hotly from where the awful man had smacked him. Smee must have perceived this, for he placed the cool glass against the bruise with a sympathetic susurrantion.

"We'll be safe tonight, Cap'n," he said. "But tomorrow, the townsfolk will come lookin'. Ol' Smee knows a few of 'em. How 'bout I smooth things over for ya?"

"Oh, could you, please?"

"Certainly, Cap'n. And tell ya what.

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Maybe Ol' Smee'll set ya up with a little house there. Even find you and your mates some proper work. What d'ya say?"

Peter began to say yes, but a familiar weight pressed the air from his lungs and he was unable to speak. The thought of returning that stinking town was unbearable. There had been no malice in the old sailor's words, and yet Peter was overcome by a pressing desire to bash his genial face in.

"No!" he choked. "I'm never going back. We have to leave. Set sail as soon as possible."

"Surely, Cap'n. Surely. The Jolly Roger'll be scrubbed and ready by first light. She'll be in ship-shape, she will! Don't you worry."

"Excellent," said Peter, much relieved. "You're a very helpful fellow, Smee."

"That I am, Cap'n. Ol' Smee will make all your dreams come true."

Peter smiled wide as he drifted off to sleep. Finally, a chance for some adventuring. And not just kid-stuff, either. He would sail the open seas, find action, treasure. Women maybe. It might get rough, but he was prepared to fight for it. No one would take it away again.

He dreamt a lifetime's worth of adventure. Whether it lasted a night, or a year, or longer, he could not say, for such things had no meaning in Neverland. But he dreamt it with such conviction that the rest of his life became as insignificant as a grain of sand on the ocean floor.

In this dream life, he sailed the Jolly Roger up and down the coast of Neverland and to the places beyond. It was great fun.

And it was easy, too, with Smee always at his side to trim the sails or discipline the men. Peter even amused himself by playing the role of "the Captain," a dastardly gentleman pirate with a quick wit and a quicker temper. He did it so much that it became second nature. Then first nature.

The Captain wore his hair long and kept a neat beard. His clothes were tailored and accented with fur collars and silky ruffles. While the rest of his crew hacked away with cutlasses, the Captain favored an elegant rapier. It made him feel light, and he wielded it with playfulness and flourish. One time, a crewman named Thomas mocked his swordplay as *prancing*, but the Captain did not mind. Just as Thomas did not mind ten inches of steel through his belly. The Jolly Roger lost some of her crew after that incident. But no matter. The Captain had already forgotten their names.

If he was hard on the crew, he was even harder on the townsfolk, punishing them for their prior inhospitality. They came to heel soon enough, and before long, his pirates drank free at every pub. All doors opened for the Captain. And when one didn't, he smashed it to splinters and took what he wanted.

It was by this attitude that the Captain came to gain his most prized possession. He acquired it during the siege of Mermaid Cove. There, the Captain put on a great show, strutting along the deck of the Jolly Roger and shouting ransom demands into the mouth of the cavern where the merpeople held court.

"We demand pearls," he called. "We de-

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mand ambergris. We demand the Coral Crown of the Deep.”

“Oh,” he added, twirling his mustache, “and a pot of steamed lobsters for my men. Chop chop!”

The crew laughed and lobbed obscenities into the darkness.

They heard no response but a strange popping noise that seemed to be coming from all around them. Their confusion turned to terror when the horde of man-sized octopi climbed over the side-rail. The pirates hacked at their grasping tentacles, but even one was enough to strangle the life from a man’s throat. The Captain fought fearlessly, dodging the monsters’ suckered limbs and skewering their bulbous skulls with his rapier. When he dispatched the last of the creatures, the Captain ran to the railing and shouted, “I said lobsters, not calamari!” The men cheered behind him. But the merpeople were not beaten yet. A deep tone sounded from the cave, quiet at first, but rising in intensity until the very sea began to boil. Before the men knew what was happening, they were beset by a squadron of flying fish, whose iridescent insect-like wings cut like razors. The Captain hit the deck just in time, but several crew members were not so quick. When the onslaught was over, the Captain hopped up on his feet, punted a stray head, and roared into the mouth of the cavern.

The cavern roared back. From within came a deep grumble, like an ancient oak breaking in half. Two yellow orbs flashed in the darkness, and before the men realized that they were eyes, the behemoth was al-

ready on the ship. One swish of its tail swept four men overboard, and the thunder from its maw sent five more into the sea. It was as much a crocodile as a dragon is a gecko. None but the Captain stood to face it.

Their battle would be told and retold a hundred different ways, but the end was always the same. The Captain’s hand sat in the beast’s belly, and his blade stuck hilt-deep into its monstrous eye.

That was how the Captain earned the name that would be his legacy. The hand was obviously lost, but Smee tended well to the wound, and fitted it with a brilliant prosthetic. In time, the Captain grew to cherish it. The wound gave him character. Under its moniker, he became a legend of the high seas. Wherever Hook went, the men cheered, and the rum flowed, and the gold clinked.

He was even happy, at times. Like when the salty air filled his nostrils, and the Jolly Roger rocked gently beneath his feet. Or when the lovely strains of Smee’s violin drifted over the deck, while the crew sang sea shanties. Times when Hook felt no anger, no regret for the choices he’d made or pirate he’d become. When he lay atop the stern of the ship—his ship—fingers laced behind his head, beneath a celestial canopy bursting with shooting stars that zipped about like fireflies in the night and reminded him of a memory more beautiful than any dream.

These moments of peace promised to stretch into eternity, if Hook could only hold on to them.

But he never could. There was always an-

LOST MEN

other ship to take or port to conquer. Always another mutiny to crush or an upstart challenger to put in his place.

Worst of all was that Peter Pan. A mere boy, who neither respected nor even feared Hook. He and his gang of hellions seemed to live for no purpose but to torment and humiliate the Captain. No matter how ingenious Hook's plots, no matter how crafty his schemes, this Peter Pan would always get the better of him. He had terrible battles with the lad who, true to his demonic nature, flew through the air and crowed like a banshee.

Hook was powerless to stop him. When facing the Pan, his sword no longer danced and sang with a life of its own, but felt clumsy and sluggish. Hook slashed fruitlessly about the air as the boy flew in circles, laughing. His crew fared no better, bruised and bloodied by those brats as the Jolly Roger splintered around them.

And yet, though he'd never admit it (and he'd kill anyone who alleged it), Hook had affection for the boy. There was a hunger, a violence in Peter that likely even he himself didn't recognize. But Hook saw it as clear as a mirror. He felt a kinship with the lad, living beyond the bounds of society, beyond its rules and its comforts. Pushing his lackeys toward ever more fun and adventure. Not merely living a dream, but fighting for it.

Let him have his fun.

Sure, Peter Pan and his Lost Boys roughed up Hook and his pirates from time to time, but the crew gave as good as they got. Truth be told, those children were more of a nuisance than a threat. And speaking of

nuisance, what was *All. That. Racket?*

Hook awoke to the sounds of shrieking children. It was unbearable. Such a lovely dream ruined by those disrespectful and insufferable twerps.

As the peace of the reverie faded, a familiar restlessness crept in from the edges of his consciousness, like an awful secret begging to be screamed. Hook would sate it as he always had, setting a new course and rousing the men to another violent adventure.

Indeed, Smee's idea—strike that—his idea of a raid on the Lost Boys was intriguing.

Yes, Hook thought, *switch things up a bit.*

Eugene Morgulis is an attorney and writer living in Los Angeles. His fiction has appeared in Fantasy Scroll Magazine and the Adventures of Pirates Anthology from Zimbell.