

## CHAPTER 4

### The Sons of Belial

It sometimes happened, as it did one day, that the bugle was blown. And we prisoners were lined up in rows and columns until the entire open vast space was packed with sweltering men under a punishing pre-monsoon sun. A Gurkha soldier placed an empty ammunition box on the ground. Colonel Merrick strode forward, his boots crunching on the rocky ground, and mounted the box. He stood ramrod straight staring out at us from under his white pith helmet as if we had just crawled out of a latrine. Behind him, guards went from cell to cell looking for contraband, particularly the cells of the Irish nationalist or the English revolutionary. Here would be found the jar of marmalade they sought, as had been found a month ago—the precious commodity that had been discovered missing from the prison kitchen.

The colonel moved not at all as he stood there in his scarlet tunic and black trousers seemingly impervious to the broiling sun. But the guards suffered as the convicts in the parade ground suffered, so the search was done half-heartedly. My stomach growled like a ravenous beast. There never seemed to be enough food even on the best of days. My ribs seemed to stand out more with each passing day on Belial Island. When after three hours the sergeant reported that the purloined marmalade had not been found, Colonel Merrick cursed him for his incompetence with such eloquent profanity as would

make a hardened old tar weep. He had one of those voices that could fill as much space as it had to. Was no other contraband found, then? The sergeant called out a command and a guard ran forward with an armload of books and a small painting. The colonel commanded him to drop it on the ground, which was done at once.

“What’s this, then?” Colonel Merrick got down from the ammunition box and picked a book up and read its title aloud, “The Writings of Marcus Tullius Cicero? I see we have a man with academic pretensions among us, do we?” His face, already red, took on a purple hue when his gaze fell on the painting of Napoleon. “Whose cell did you find these things in?” he asked the sergeant. The man pointed at Father Blondeau.

Colonel Merrick barked an order and Father Blondeau was shoved forward. The colonel pointed at the pile of books. “What were these doing in your cell?”

Father Blondeau answered but I could not hear from where I stood near the back because the priest spoke with the quavering voice of a very old man. We could hear Merrick though as he berated Father Blondeau. We sweated and cursed under our breaths. Some of the convicts, overcome with dysentery, voided their bowels where they stood. The rest of us did not notice the smell for we all smelled of defecation and urine and perspiration and festering sores. Clouds of mosquitoes swirled around us like angry Furies. A few men succumbed to the heat and fainted. They and the men closest to them were beaten while the Colonel fired more questions at the priest. Was he still an admirer of Boney? How did he come to have these books? Merrick’s mustache twitched as he glared down at the Frenchman. “Right! Twenty-five lashes for you!” Merrick said.

My head jerked up in outrage. That would kill the old man.

“No!” I cried, unable to stop myself.

“Who said that?” the Colonel cried, his sharp eyes flicking over us.

My hand went up. “That will kill him!” Believe me when I tell you that, although I fought to maintain an even tone, my insides were twisting into knot upon knot.

The Colonel nodded to a guard. “Bring that impertinent swine to me.”

In the span of a heartbeat, I at once found myself on my knees before Merrick.

“Who gave you permission to speak?” he demanded sharply.

“No one. Let me take the old man’s place,” I replied baldly.

Merrick’s hard eyes bore down into mine. “You fancy yourself a hero, Mason? Willing to take a flogging for this Frog Papist? Very well, but you will get an extra twenty five good ones for daring to speak without being asked to speak.”

And moments later my stay in Hell went from bad to worse. I was dragged to a wooden pole set in the ground, stripped, my wrists tied to an iron ring. Merrick was addressing the other convicts but I could not hear him over the thud of my heart. The wait seemed forever. Over the crack of the whip I heard shrieking and realized that it was my own voice I was hearing. The whip seared my back as if with Hell’s flames. Before each swing the guard shouted out the stroke. I think I fainted after the twentieth.

I woke in my cell some time during the next day with Father Blondeau squatting on the ground beside my bed, a look of concern on his kindly old face. I was lying on my stomach. I tried to move but my body was a mass of searing pain. A cry escaped my lips before I could stifle it. “Do not move, my son.” The priest dipped a rag in a cup. I cried out at the fresh pain. “The vinegar will keep your wounds from being infected. The colonel ordered his sergeant to give me a cup of water and vinegar and to see to you.”

I lay there in silence as the old priest tended to my wounds. “I owe you thanks, and more than thanks, for what you did for me.” He went on. “The colonel destroyed my painting, but he merely contented himself with confiscating my books, so at least they were not destroyed. Perhaps he will read them and acquire some humanity.”

I twisted round to look at him and my voice was a hoarse rasp. “Did you speak the truth when you told me of the treasure?”

He smiled down at me. “As the good Lord is my witness, I have not deceived you Jonathan. I am counting on you to deliver me and my flock from this hellish place.”

“You did not mention my undersea craft.” Even though the words left my cracked lips, I did not know whether it was a question or a statement of fact.

The corners of Blondeau’s eyes crinkled merrily as he smiled. “And you did not betray the secret of my stewardship of the Emperor’s treasure. Can we not put distrust behind us, my son? We are looking to you to deliver us from here and provide us with a refuge from man’s tyranny over man. Only your fabulous underwater craft can do that.”

I turned my head on the straw filled mattress to look at him and said, “I believe you, Father.” Then I fell asleep again. When I woke it was dark and the priest was gone.

*(Lacuna begins)*

*Note: text smudged here for three pages.*

*(Lacuna ends)*

Monsoon season was almost upon us, and not too soon, as the days were growing even hotter. But I was counting on it for more than relief from the unrelenting sun. I

would use the monsoon to our advantage. My plan was simple enough, with the kind of simplicity that often succeeds, and it was helped by the routine our captors maintained, of having the prisoners unload the supplies from the small packet steamer that came to Belial Island every four months. On the day the ship arrived, the most fit of the convicts would be selected to play the part of stevedores and unload the cargo from the ship. This operation was typically completed by noon. The line reversed course the balance of the day as we convicts hauled sacks of coal onboard the ship. For, with typical British efficiency, a coal dump was maintained so the ships could be refueled for the return voyage to Liverpool. They were fully stocked with supplies for a round trip journey—another fact that would ensure our success. It would stay moored overnight to the end of the jetty while its officers enjoyed a convivial dinner with the Colonel in his fine house.

As I healed slowly, Father Blondeau and I laid our plans each night in his cell, talking in whispers. After obtaining arms from the small blockhouse that contained the prison colony's small armory, we would seize the steamer and make good our escape. He had already spoken to his men and every one of them gladly agreed to join us. My good fortune also lay in this simple fact. Many of the monks had been fishermen so were not strangers to the seafaring trade. I could teach them all they needed to know about steam engines, which, as they were primitive machines, were quite simple to operate.

In a very short while, we would be leaving Belial Island.

While I waited for the packet ship to arrive, the sky grew darker day after day, the clouds piling up on one another in great soggy heaps. Then the rain began to fall. First it came down in fat pellets that left craters in the soil then the fat drops turned to long

glassy grey green rods of water that the soil could not absorb and the earth turned to ankle deep mud as we labored in the jungle cutting down trees. And not a one of us—convict or guard—failed to turn his face up to this refreshing gift from the heavens. Throughout the camp there were loud whoops of joy. Men happily splashed muddy water at each other, the harshness of their incarceration lightened for the moment.

The days slid by while I waited for our main chance. Meanwhile, I seized every opportunity to study the movement of the guards, with equal parts great interest and discretion, as I did not want the bastards to guess at my intentions. As our island was bounded on one side by inhospitable jungle and encompassed by shark-infested waters, the guards were neither punctilious nor overly motivated about the performance of their duties. Why did they have to be when there was nowhere to go? At night they ...

*(Lacuna begins)*

*Note: Text heavily damaged by water for six pages*

*(Lacuna ends)*

It was night. I stood waiting in a corner of Father Blondeau's room with the sharpened wooden stake I had fashioned over the last week while working in the jungle. Every night the sergeant made the rounds checking every cell door to make sure it was locked, peering through the small barred window in the door. I looked at the priest. Could the man act his part? Would he be able to hold up under the pressure? If we failed, we were all dead men. "Are you ready, Father?" My question was rhetorical. Tonight I would die or regain my liberty. We waited in silence. Without the benefit of watches or

clocks, we could only guess at the time of his arrival. What seemed hours later, there was the telltale rattling of the door lock and a murmured, ‘goodnight Father’ from the English guard. Father Blondeau called out. “Help! Help me...please!”

A face appeared in the door’s opening to my right. My heart was in my throat, as I stood there rigid, my breath slow and even, the sharpened stake clenched in my fist.

“What’s wrong?” asked the guard.

“Help...help....oh God...help....”

I heard the jangle of keys, then a key sliding into the lock and the door opened.

Father Blondeau turned on his bed and moaned loudly. The guard filled the doorway, unaware that he stood on the verge of life and death. All the roiling fury over the many injustices that had been visited upon me drove away any lingering compassion for my fellow man. I felt a blackness rise within me then. The stick became an extension of me and I do not think I breathed a breath, as I stood there tense as a ship’s newly laid-on standing rigging.

“What’s the matter with you?”

“I am sick...dying....this is it.”

“The infirmary opens in the morning,” he said with the casual cruelty of one whom lords it over someone in an utterly helpless position.

Then the old priest did something that at once impressed and frightened me.

“I won’t make it....” Father Blondeau coughed violently, his body contorting on the bed. “I need to tell someone where I hid it before I die....”

“Hid what?”

“Napoleon’s treasure.... I need to confess my sins to spare my immortal soul...”

That brought the guard into the room.

In one motion I kicked the door closed, clamped my hand over his mouth and drove my stake into his neck with such force that its bloody point emerged from the other side. I will not deceive you. It was done with unabashed savagery. The man was dead before he hit the floor. I stood there for a moment holding the bloodied instrument, eyes wild as a rabid dog with my entire frame vibrating. It was then that I realized that I was forever done with all the conventionalities that were the hallmark of a civilized man. I had resolved to quit that hellish place and, in time, to have the means to enter into a voluntary exile from the so-called civilization that had founded it. I loathed mankind.

Father Blondeau marked the change in me. He looked up at me with the eyes of one who has seen a fine thing go away for evermore. Although I held him in high esteem and thought him a friend, I could not have cared less what he thought of the matter.

I bent over and took the heavy brass key ring from the still warm hand, and removed the revolver from its holster and tucked it in my waistband. We put the guard in the bed covering him with the thin threadbare coverlet that was the sorry comfort of the convict on cold nights. The priest was kneeling beside him murmuring.

“We have to go,” I hissed. It began to rain hard outside.

Father Blondeau rose and we crept from the cell like mice entering a pantry guarded by cats. I led the way unerringly. In my mind, I had made the trip many times before. As an engineer it had taken little effort to note the layout of the prison and estimate the distances involved from one objective to another—and it had taken even less effort to commit it to memory. I crept along with the old priest behind me, every sense alert. There was one guard to pass. He had no set route, just a wandering patrol, but I



knew that during the monsoon season the guards often huddled somewhere out of the rain. It was no different tonight. It began to rain harder by the minute. But it could cease as suddenly as it started and we needed it to conceal our movements.

After an anxious time, a time when every twig or sloshing seemed to shout our passing and every errant shadow seemed to want to hold us back, we reached the other wing of the prison block. Now the rain was coming down in sheets and there was the ominous rumble of thunder somewhere out over the sea.

We got to the first door. I looked at Father Blondeau and he nodded. I unlocked the door and a wraith of a man emerged. The three of us moved onwards in silence going down two more doors. I looked at the priest again and he nodded. I unlocked that door and out came another man looking spectral in his white rags. We went from door to door until all the monks had been released. There were soon thirty of us and I do not doubt that but for the hard driving rain and the thunder we would have been discovered.

We entered the jungle behind the prison cellblock and began to circle round toward the armory. The rain was pelting the heavy ceiling of foliage above us and the mud was halfway up our calves. With the priest and his followers walking behind me in single file, we headed in the direction of the blockhouse. I used hand signals to indicate where we were going. At a fork in the track, I pointed to the right to show that we had to pass the rear of the colonel's residence to reach the armory that was beside the storeroom and the barracks.

I led the priest and his men toward our objective. We stayed within the verge of the jungle, dropping to the muddy ground and flattening ourselves when a guard came walking toward us along the path that wound round the perimeter of the prison. I slowly

cocked the revolver. We lay in the mud with the rain pelting down around us until he had rounded the corner. I rose, motioned the others to follow, and we moved onwards slowly. The colonel's house was brightly lit and I could see him with the officers from the ship on the veranda. Laughter and cigar smoke wafted our way. How I wanted to go and shoot that one-armed bastard, but I stuck to my larger purpose.

I studied the barrack from a screen of dripping ferns. Every window was dark with the only light coming from a lantern over a doorway. My gaze flicked to the kitchen. Its windows were also dark. But it was the little stone blockhouse that held my utmost attention—the place where the tools that were the *sine non qua* of our liberty were stored.

Father Blondeau was lying beside me staring at our objective. I turned to him and whispered. “I will go first to make sure it is safe. When I signal, send your men.” Then I rose and bounded along at a crouch to the blockhouse and flattened myself against its side. I peeked around the corner and looked into the prison yard. The rain was coming down so hard I could scarcely see the buildings on the other side. It then occurred to me that there was every possibility that my companions would not see my signal. I swung around the corner and unlocked the door, then shimmied back to the corner and waved.

The priest and his men came running toward me and I ushered them inside the building. Inside were racks of gleaming muskets and pistols with boxes of ammunition. We seized what we needed, loading our weapons in the dark and I was surprised at how ably and quickly the peaceful monks were able to accomplish this feat, even though Father Blondeau had informed me, somewhat mysteriously, that they would be able to do just that. I poked my head out the door just in time to see a solitary figure emerge from

the heavy curtain of rain. With my heart hammering in my chest I counted to three hundred then eased the door open.

The doorknob was yanked from my hand with such a violent force that it very nearly pulled me forward off my feet.

“What’s this then?” asked the guard who had apparently sought shelter under the blockhouse eaves. I pulled him inside by his tunic and got him in a headlock, cursing when his teeth clamped down on my arm. I stabbed him with the stake again and again until he was dead and on the ground. I felt the stares of the others on me as I rose.

Father Blondeau surprised me, though, by reaching out and touching my arm. “God bless your immortal soul. You did what you had to do,” he whispered, and then nodded toward the door. “Do you think we are discovered, my son?”

My grin was savage. “Even if we are, now that we are armed we still have a chance. But no, Father, I do not believe our absence has been discovered.”

I cracked the door open and looked outside. The rain was decreasing by the moment. “Let’s go,” I said, and we exited the building and melded back into the jungle.

The last leg of the track led toward the strand, bone white when dry, black as Hades’ marrow now that it was wet. I could hear the waves surging against the shore.

We gained the strand and I cast a hungry look toward the moored vessel. A guard tower stood between where we crouched and our objective. I studied it carefully. The lone guard seemed to be asleep at his post. So it was under such slack measures, I thought, that we poor souls had allowed ourselves to be held captive for so long. But I knew that this was deceptive. The guards were lax in their duties because of the very obvious fact that there was no refuge for the fugitive on the island, and who would ever

dare to conceive of as bold a plan as mine? I watched the tower for a long time. The rain was now coming down in a fine drizzle.

More ill fortune!

But I was undeterred.

God himself rot in Hell, I was getting off that island or dying in the attempt.

*(Lacuna begins)*

*Note: Text severely water damaged.*

*(Lacuna ends)*

Had someone not discharged his Navy revolver into the belly of a midshipman we might have gotten away without further incident. That shot, echoing like Zeus' thunderbolt, brought the colonel and his guests out onto the veranda of the official residence. Naval officers and guards came running toward us shouting. I won't conceal the fact that we had already slain most of the crew after taking the ship by stealth. There is no point in describing the scene act by act—our actions were those of men who know they have only one chance to reclaim that which God bestows upon every man upon his nativity. It is only through the actions of men of ill will that any hindrance of liberty is ever imposed upon other men. There was no doubt in my mind that ship would be haunted by the shades of the poor souls we had killed. I did allow the few remaining alive to depart the ship. Not from any misguided sense of compassion but to provide a screen between our attackers and us. They scurried along the jetty with cries of 'cease fire!' while we exchanged musket-fire with the Gurkha soldiers and British prison guards.

A random musket ball smashed through the wooden railing of the bridge where I knelt with my musket, just missed my face, and buried itself in the housing of the starboard paddlewheel housing behind me. The air was filled with the crack of musket fire and the sharp bark of pistols. Musket balls rained down on us as our foes advanced along the jetty toward us. Below me I could hear the men firing the boiler. It would take an hour for the water to be hot enough. I would have cut the lines and hoisted sails but the wind was blowing hard against us, and there were too many musket balls in the air to send men aloft. No one would have lasted long up there.

To make matters worse, I observed soldiers wheeling the small brass cannon to the mouth of the jetty. I cursed the lack of rain that might have been our salvation.

It seemed to happen so slowly: The men training the artillery piece on us, the colonel shrieking orders like a banshee and waving his one arm like an inmate of Bedlam, a soldier pulling the lanyard. A tongue of orange and yellow flame stabbed toward us.

My heart was thundering in my chest. One shot to the boiler or the engine or the paddlewheels and we would be lost. Lost... The shot whistled overhead harmlessly.

I shouted to the men to direct some of their fire at the artillerymen. Then I heard the chuffing of steam and the walking beam just forward of the funnel began to seesaw on its pivot. Clouds of dark smoke were beginning to pour out of the smokestack.

“Keep the men shooting,” I cried to Father Blondeau. I crawled for the stairs and dropped down to the deck and bounded toward the helm, shouting for the lines to be cut.

Another stab of flame from the cannon and the gunwale railing just below the bridge exploded into a deadly cloud of flying splinters. The paddlewheels began to rotate.

I took the helm and gave it a turn and we moved away from the jetty. More gunfire and then The Lord in his mercy opened the Heavens again and the shore was obscured from view. I guided us out to sea. Through the heavy curtain of rain we saw shadowy figures on the strand and long thin spears of yellow red light.

A musket ball slammed into my arm passing through the muscle—I am sure I cried out—but my grip on the helm never faltered. My feet were planted wide apart on the deck as I guided us all to freedom. Now the rain was coming down hard and the seas were dark and heavy and running hard abeam so that I had to bear down on the wheel. I reckoned our speed at about four knots, as fast as we could go under the circumstances.

*(Lacuna begins)*

*Note: more water damage.*

*(Lacuna ends)*

Father Jacob's face, weathered by many years of sorrow and a million disastrous broken dreams, crumpled in utter joy even as he lay dying in my arms. He had been lying on the bridge when the hull below it was struck by the cannon ball.

“You will look after my flock, won't you Jonathan?”

“They are my family,” I replied truthfully, “and you have been a teacher and a friend. I will care for them as you would.” Tears ran down my face, for I had developed a real fondness for the old priest.

Father Blondeau stared wide-eyed at the dawn. “See? He is calling for me.”

I was silent, frozen, still cradling him in my arms. I did not know what to say. Finally, I spoke, my voice cracking, “Father, I am so sorry I failed you.” My heart ached for the loss of my dear friend, my confidante, and the man who had made our escape worthwhile.

He reached up and clutched my arm. “Because of you, I will die a free man. I am well pleased with our escape, and I go happily into the arms of my Lord.” Just then the sun rose, sending vermilion light skipping across the sea below the clouds.

He clutched my arm. “Look for the eagle...steer straight on...” A death rattle issued from his throat and he went limp in my arms.

For a few moments, no one spoke. All was silent except for the heavy sound of the wind through the rigging and the deep sorrow that enveloped us all.

I was still holding Father Blondeau up to face the sunrise and looking toward her myself when a big man, even in his state of emaciation, stepped forward from the group of monks who stood round us. “We owe our allegiance to you now. Father Blondeau told us that if something happened to him we were to obey you in all things.”

I looked up at him, all too conscious of the many eyes on me.

The man said, “You are in charge now.”

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Jacob.”

I nodded. “You will be my second in command.”