

Tortuga
(Prologue, a Pirate Tale)

Tortuga Island, located off the northern coast of Haiti, was a premier 16th-century pirate haven and center of European colonial conflict. Originally settled in 1625 by French and English colonists, it became the main base for "buccaneers" (Brethren of the Coast) and privateers, serving as a key center for launching attacks on Spanish shipping lanes until France established control and the era of piracy waned.

This story takes place between 1630 to 1680 when the pirates controlled it.

Tortuga



It served as a vital base for attacking English, Spanish, and French ships. This small island was only rivaled by Nassau. That pirate island was established at a later date. Sometime in the 17th century. That is another story.

Anyone was welcome in Tortuga. Slave, pirates, commoners, and those who never revealed their status. This island was named that because the harbor, bay, and surrounding hills looked like a turtle shell. One Spaniard, detached himself from Spanish control and built a nearly impenetrable fortress using the high walls armed with cannon fire. I say nearly, because eventually, a large Spanish Fleet managed to break in. In the beginning, the population highly favored men. That ratio was about the change due to a captured French frigate carrying high society women headed toward the new America. This dynamic changed Tortuga immensely. Lets face it, rolling in gold doubloons and pieces of eight might interest men for a short time, but women were more precious than any monetary coin.

These highfalutin women soon learned that their status as high society maidens were useless in the value system on this island. Personality and beauty were the most regarded in that order. One such woman was a French courtesan named Cora Pearl. She had been around the block a time or two and knew what men wanted.



Cora Pearl

You might think that this collection of wayward buccaneers would women's worse nightmare. It was just the opposite. Many had been shunned by the women from where they came from and had shy personalities. They retained common courtesy toward the female sex.

Ren was a French slave aboard an English frigate that had been captured by the pirates. He had been conscripted into the French navy. His whole ship had been seized by the English when his hapless Captain was out foxed by the English. His mother had named him Renault, but he shortened it to Ren as time went on. His father had been a blacksmith in their small town and was renowned for making excellent fighting blades. From the time Ren could walk, he had a sword in his hand. As he grew up, he had become excellent at fencing. All the captured slaves were offered freedom, if they joined forces with the pirates. It was a no brainer for him. He soon learned that the pirate code was more democratic than anything he had been exposed to before. Before each adventure, all the crew and Captain signed articles listing the percentage of cut each member would get of any bounty seized. Also, this was the first instance of any kind of work benefit. If you lost an eye during battle, you would be compensated 100 pieces of eight. An arm 200, a leg 500. Medical attention would be immediately available after combat. So that was the situation Ren found himself in as a member of the Tortuga Pirates.

Pieces of Eight



Gold Doubloons



Cora Pearl quickly established herself as the go to for female companionship. She had explained to the bevy of women captured what their options were. Several of them had taken the position that no one man was good enough. You could say that they were the first volunteers for the brothel that Cora had established. One of the youngest ones, Francine, didn't want anything to do

with that. Cora shielded her from the pirates. Cora had taken up with the so called governor, and by proxy carried a lot of weight.

Francine



Carlos had been sent by the Spanish King to oversee Tortuga. A contingent of armed soldiers accompanied him. At first, he had kicked the pirates out, but recognized that they were more valuable to him than the soldiers. He used the soldiers as laborers to build some better housing and fortify the hills with cannons. When they completed his projects, he allowed the pirates back in. He was not a war general, but more of a community organizer. He anointed himself as governor and fancied himself a pirate rather than an administrator.

Here is Carlos in his pirate regalia.



He saw the pirates as valuable suppliers of bounty, both monetary and sustenance. For the most part, they regulated their own action by a hard set of rules. In fact, they were more democratic than the governments of countries trying to root them out. Carlos sent enough treasure back to Spain to keep the King happy for the time being. The pirates didn't keep their bounty long. Spent on women and rum, they soon exhausted their supply of money and ventured out again to attack English, French, and Spanish galleons.

Ren

Ren was a part of a crew that frequently did that. He was becoming quite the buccaneer. His prowess with the sword was unmatched. In the heat of battle, he looked like he was conducting a symphony. Jumping hither and fro, spinning around to catch someone trying to pierce him from behind.



Tortuga
(Chapter 1)
A Pirate Tale

Carlos had been sending gold and silver back to Spain. He decided, why am I doing that? What has Spain done for me? So he quit. He knew what the consequences of that would be. He prepared for the inevitable armada that would follow. King Philip IV didn't know what had happened. Maybe Carlos had been killed by the pirates. He sent a flotilla of three ships filled with armed solders. When they entered Tortuga's harbor, nothing happened right away. Then all hell broke loose. Carlos had directed the pirates to let them in, then sealed off the harbor exit. No long drawn out chase on the high seas needed for the pirates to capture all three ships and kill all the solders.

Carlos had now switched over to full time pirate. He was hailed as a hero. Also, the pirates had three new ships.

Ren's shipmates cajoled him into visiting the brothel. He was not gay, but paying for love was not in his interest. While there, Pearl saw him and his reluctance to participate. He begged off and walked out the door. On the way out he happened to glance around the room and spotted Francine sitting at a corner table. His buddy spoke up. Don't bother mate, she is not for sale. He just shook his head and kept walking. Pearl had been looking out for Francine and liked what she saw in Ren. A handsome guy with manors. A rarity in those parts. She had heard of him. His swordsmanship was getting high praise from all who came in. She had also heard that even though he partook in the rum that flowed non stop, he didn't squander all his loot. She decided that she might try being a match maker.

There is always one man who thought rules don't apply to him. That would be Jasper.



He was a fearsome warrior not many would care to tangle with. He was always getting into trouble, but Tortuga's rules applied to everyone. He had just served a week in Carlos's jail for fighting and almost killing a man.

All that did was make him meaner and more thirsty. He first hit the saloons and was sufficiently liquored up when his other desire brought him to Peril's doorstep. In the past, she had forbid him from entry due to his vulgar and uncontrolled ways. Not in the mood to be swayed, he burst in and his first sight was Francine sitting alone at her corner table.

Jasper pointed a finger at Francine and said, I want her for tonight. Cora tried to block him, but he was not to be denied regardless of the consequences. Ren happened to be walking by outside when he heard a woman scream. This was unusual coming from Cora's place. She usually had everything under control. Without thinking much, he ran up the steps and entered her establishment. The scene played out before him did not sit well with him. Jasper had grabbed Francine's arm and was dragging her up the staircase to the pleasure chambers above. Ren was usually reserved except when he was in combat. All pirates carried their swords with them at all times. Unhand her you brute! Ren was as surprised as anyone of the words coming out of his mouth. Jasper looked on in amusement. Go back outside boy, before you get hurt. This is none of your business. Unhand her, he said a second time as he drew his blade. Jasper had been in plenty of sword fights and his strength and ability were legendary. Regardless of how little he viewed Ren as a threat, no one draws a sword against him who doesn't have a death wish. He let Francine go. What happened in the next few minutes would have made a good Zorro movie.

Jasper charged thinking he needed to get this over quickly and get on with his pleasure with the most beautiful maiden he had ever seen. Ren just side stepped and with little effort sliced the sleeve off of his shirt. Infuriated, Jasper charged again. Ren retreated then advanced and cut off his other sleeve. This dance of death went on for several more minutes. Even after Jasper changed his tactics, realizing charging was not working, Ren put on a display of defensive swordsmanship never seen before. He could have killed Jasper at any time. Jasper soon realized he was totally out matched. Besides, he was half drunk and all this effort left him totally exhausted. He finally threw down his sword and walked out of the building.

The patrons who had been watching gave Ren a round of applause. Ren tipped his sword at the top of his hat as a salute to Francine and left the building. Cora called after him. Watch your back!

The next day, Cora summoned Ren to her Pleasure House. That was the power she possessed. Not unlike Empresses from the Chinese Qing dynasties from years past who managed the harem. She didn't outright call it that. She gave it a nicer moniker. The Leisure House. In fact, many patrons just came there to have a drink or two and consume some French pastries that she remembered how to make from working in her Mom's cafe. French cafes that serve pastries, coffee, and light meals are commonly called a *boulangerie-pâtisserie* (bakery-pastry shop). These establishments offer items like croissants, crêpes, and espresso. This was very popular among the pirates. They had never experienced such grandeur.

Ren came in and Cora directed him to the corner table that Francine always occupied. A pot of tea and several croissants were already placed nicely on serving plates. She was the first to speak. I want to thank you for saving me the other night. I can't imagine the horror I would have been put through if you hadn't shown up. At first, Ren was tongue tied. Then he finally got the courage to speak up. It was lucky that they both spoke French. I hate when men think they can do whatever they want to women. I had an unfortunate incident back in my home town. My sister was accosted by several unsavory villains at a time when I was too young to defend her. Well, I am glad that you have grown up. The conversation settled into some talk about their home towns and memories of things that they missed. Someday, I hope I can find a place where I can be happy like I was in the past. Ren opened up about his current state. For now, this is all I can do. I also live for the day when I can live as a free man anywhere in the world.

He left the place with his head spinning with visions of her. She also was enamored by his youthfulness and obviously good upbringing.

They vowed to meet again.

As it were, Ren was scheduled to go out pirating again, and who had signed on as an additional crew mate. Non other than Jasper "The Horrible". The last words that Cora had spoken to him took on a new meaning. "Watch you back!"

Tortuga
(Chapter 2)
A Pirate Tale

We had been out hunting for a week. Even though we were trolling the main shipping lanes, nothing had shown up. Our Captain was about to turn around and call it a bust. As we emerged from a fog bank, just ahead was a Portuguese “Man of War”.



These were almost impossible to take on. Our Captain was one of the shrewdest sailors I had ever seen. We were not a match armament wise, but our strength was in our speed and maneuverability. At first they didn't even see us. That allowed us to get within range of our forward mounted cannon. If the other ship managed to swing broadside, we were doomed. Finally they saw us. The other Captain immediately tried to swing around. Our Captain countered and kept their stern in sight. When we were in range, we fired our

forward cannon. It hit the stern full force. Still, this ship had lots of armament, even from a direct hit. Another try to swing about. Another shot fired into their stern. Finally, we broke their rudder.

Now they were powerless to maneuver. Even dead in the water, they were still a threat. We approached from the stern and threw our grappling hooks over the stern rails. We needed to avoid a side assault. They would have fired their broadsides and obliterated us as shown below.



Now we were close enough to pole vault onto their deck. OK, we disabled their motion, but they had a whole regiment of veteran soldiers and we were outnumbered. It was almost always that same ratio. The difference was, those soldiers had wives and family hoping for their return. We had only ourselves. When you have nothing to lose, except your life, you value that to the extreme. The battle raged on. Ren was doing his normal spectacular sword play. Jasper was cutting his way through throngs of enemies. He was about to get caught between two who had him at a disadvantage when Ren jumped in between and made the odds even. Now Ren was outnumbered and it looked like his number might be up. Also, Jasper was at his back. If Jasper was going to take revenge for the humiliation he had suffered at Ren's hand, now was the time. Ren was doing his best, then a sword almost punctured his right side. Instead of wounding him, one of the two who he had been fighting fell dead. Jasper had plunged his sword into the second man's throat. The Captain of the Portuguese vessel finally signaled surrender.

The Man of War was damaged too bad to be of any use to the pirates. They could have killed all the crew, but instead, they dropped them off at a nearby island. They took all the plunder from the ships' holds and transferred it to

their own. Then they scuttled the ship. Too bad. That would have been a valuable prize.

After returning to Tortuga, it was celebration time. The rum flowed freely and Cora's Leisure Lounge was full to capacity. Ren and Jasper had left the ship as comrades. Each saving the other's life. Now instead of "Watch your back!" it was more like "I've got your back!"

While the other pirates were drinking and whoring, Ren and Francine were walking hand and hand by the shore in the moonlight.

It looked like Cora's matchmaking was a success. Still on a romantic high, both Ren and Francine talked about finding a place away from the pirate's life. At that time, Ren was unaware that a French colony was within reach of Tortuga. Today, it would be called modern day Haiti.

On the next outing, things did not go quite so good as last time. It looked like a repeat of the last capture, but this time the frigate had a long range rear cannon. Something the last frigate did not have. The Captain was performing the same maneuvers as last time when a blast from their rear cannon tore through our main sail. Now we lost our speed and were at the mercy of the other ship. A reverse course and good wind put the English frigate broadside of us. It didn't take many shots for our hull to be pommelled to shreds. We had no choice other than to surrender or we would have been blasted to the bottom of the sea. We were all taken prisoner and brought to an English penal colonial. This was not good. Many a pirate had been tried by a sham jury and hung by the neck. It looked like this was going to be our fate too. Jasper and I were shuttled off to the same jail enclosure. We don't know where they took our Captain. These were just make shift bamboo huts. They might as well have been made of hardened steel. All the prisoners were short chained ankles and hands to a log that ran the length of the hut. Breaking out might be possible, but how to get out of these chains was the real dilemma. It was a real disgusting situation too.

Many of the prisoners got diarrhea from the lousy food and couldn't use the out house until the morning. The smell was unbearable. The only option for

escape was to somehow get hold of the keys. One of the benefits of being so skinny and the years of fencing practice was that I was extremely agile. If I could get some kind of lubricant, I might be able to slip out of these chains. Nothing in sight looked like it would work. The answer came in the form of our nightly meal. It was some kind of gruel with a greasy substance no one could identify. Rubbing this mush, not fit to be eaten, on my hands and ankles, allowed me, with a great deal of pain, to pull out of the chains. I almost had to break my bones to do it. I talked to Jasper and told him my plan. Many of the prisoners had been waiting for a long time before their trial date came up. Some didn't even live long enough. The procedure, when someone died, was to notify a guard and two would come in, unchain the corpse and remove the body. I started yelling that a dead person was next to me. Jasper did a good job of looking dead. When the two guards arrived, one bent down to check if Jasper was breathing. That was when I rose up and put a chain around the other's neck and strangled him. Jasper miraculously came alive and grabbed the second guard before he could yell out. We still didn't have the keys. The other two outside guards did. Unaware of what transpired inside, I snuck out and disabled the other two. With keys in hand, I released all the other prisoners. We didn't want to alarm the whole camp. There was a ship moored in the harbor with only a few hands on board. With the weapons we got from the guards, we silently overcame the sentries. Now we had a ship and a full crew. We sailed away in the night. The breakout wasn't discovered until early the next morning. By that time we were a far distance from the colony. We still weren't in the clear. We had no provisions. Without an adequate water supply, we couldn't make it back to Tortuga.

Besides rescuing our own crew, we picked up a few others. One in particular said he was a French prince. He had been aboard another French frigate when it was overtaken by an English war ship. He had been on his way to a French colony when taken prisoner. He said he could provision our ship if we took him to the colony he had been headed for. Without another plan, we decided to trust him. After all, we had saved him from a life time in jail or worse. So maybe he was trying to repay us.

Francois was good for his word. When we arrived, he left to talk to the city authorities. The next day wagons full of supplies rolled down the hill. Now dressed in his princely attire, he did look the part. He thanked us for saving him and said we were welcome back anytime. We bid him farewell. On the voyage back to Tortuga, Jasper was voted the roll of the new Captain. That was fine with me. His experience was well known. I also think this new responsibility cubed his wilder side. Back in Tortuga, he no longer presented the violent personality from the past.

A Pirate Wedding

Francine welcomed me back with open arms. Tales of my rescue raised my status among all the buccaneers. Jasper especially sang my praises. Marriage in Tortuga was not common, but a few of the original French maidens chose somewhat respectable and decent looking gents rather than join the brothel. Ren proposed to Francine and she accepted. It was customary in French society for the bride's family to offer a dowry. This seemed like an outdated and backwards custom to me. It almost seemed like a father was paying a guy to take his daughter off of his hands. That is not entirely correct. Here is the explanation:

A dowry is a transfer of property, cash, or gifts from the bride's family to the groom or his family, traditionally intended to secure the bride's financial security, aid in establishing a new household, or serve as a substitute for inheritance. Its purpose functions as an expectation to compensate the groom's family for taking on the financial responsibility of the wife.

That makes some kind of sense. I guess it would be worse if the groom just paid the father for access to his daughter. That would seem more like a cattle auction. OK, I get it.

Ren had enough bounty not to need anything extra. Cora stepped up though wanting to keep some semblance of French custom. Here is what she gave Francine for her dowry. Cora was probably the richest person in Tortuga.



Here is a picture of the happy couple.



Whoops, wrong picture. This is not them either, but you get the idea.



Cora supplied the wedding dress. Of all people, Jasper was the “Best Man”.

Oh, you might think this tradition was not prevalent during this time, but it was. It began in the 16th century in Europe. It was particularly appropriate for pirates.

"Best" Fighter: The best man was not just a friend, but the "best swordsman" or strongest warrior among the groom's allies.

The Role: He stood beside the groom at the altar to guard against family members trying to take back the bride or to prevent the bride from escaping.

I guess Jasper was the right choice for this role.

It was a spectacular affair. Cora lent them the upper most elaborate room for their honeymoon suite.

That night, I told Francine about the French colony where Francois now resided. It represented the freedom we both had talked about and seek. They filed those thoughts away for now concentrating on their present happiness.

I had planned to take her away from all this danger and violence. Events that occurred in the next months prevented us from taking that journey.

Tortuga
(Chapter 3)
A Pirate Tale

Carlos had forgotten all about King Philip. King Philip had not forgotten about Carlos or Tortuga. With the treasure deliveries dried up and not knowing what happened to his three war ships, he sent a whole flotilla of war ships, a dozen or so. When they reached Tortuga harbor, the pirates gave a good accounting of themselves, but it wasn't enough to counter the fire power of all those French frigates. Tortuga was seized by the French army. Jasper and Ren were dinning at Cora's when the cannon fire broke out. They both knew what was going to be next. The Spaniards hated the French and hated the pirates more. We need to get off this island. If we get caught, we will either be executed or made slaves. Neither fate works for me. I know of some caves up in the hills where we can hide while we check out the situation. Cora, grab whatever food and water we all can carry and you all follow me. We spent two nights in the caves. Ren slipped down toward town to get some information. When he returned, he had some bad news for Cora.

Carlos had been caught and executed. So were many of the pirates. The only ones left unmolested were the women and shopkeepers. Actually, I am not sure about the women. Molested might be too mild of a word for what probably happened to them. As I said before, we really need to get off this island. Jasper came up with the solution. On the northern end of the island, I know of a small sailboat tied to a tree. I sometimes “borrowed” it and did some fishing. I am sure we can make the owner an offer he can’t refuse.



The safety of the caves was only temporary because the Spanish soldiers were scouring the town and hillsides.

The owner was an old man. We explained to him what was happening in Tortuga. We are going to venture north. We know of a safe haven about one

days journey. Your boat has enough room for all five of us. You can have my boat. I am too old to leave this island. I have been here all my life and that life is now short lived. I guess he had some kind of incurable illness although there was nothing visible that we could see. I handed him a satchel full of coins. Perhaps you can use these to buy medicine. The only medicine I need now a days is a sufficient supply of rum. I said, I understand, as we bid him farewell and thanked him for the use of his boat. If Cora had been devastated by Carlos's death, she hid it well. From what I had seen of her personality, I imagined she had endured her share of hardships. It didn't take long for her to bounce back. Before we reached Haiti, she had already eyed Jasper as a fine replacement for Carlos.

At the time of their arrival, the settlement was called "Saint-Dominque". The indigenous people were first conquered by the Spanish following Christopher Columbus's "Discovery of America". Later, the French took over and brought African slaves to work in the sugar cane fields. Indigo and cotton were also extremely profitable exports. When the slaves revolted in 1791, they brought back the original name "Ayiti". Later, the A sound was dropped and it became Haiti.

Francois welcomed Jasper and Ren as if they were old friends. At that particular time, slaves worked the sugar cane fields. Ren wanted nothing to do with slavery. Having been a slave himself, he sympathized with them. Francois told them he would help them settle in. Whatever you need, I can get it for you. Ren spied a nice small plot of land with an ocean view. He told Francois, this is where I want to live. Jasper also thought this was a good idea. He chose a plot a mile or so farther down the coast. Francois supplied them both with material and awarded them two slaves. Ren accepted, only because he wanted to quickly make a home for himself and Francine. Instead of treating his slaves like slaves, he treated them like the human beings they were. When his house was finished, he told them they free to go. Neither wanted that. They said they would like to continue working for Ren. He let them build their own small structure and gave them the freedom to move around as they wished.

Jasper followed Ren's example. Having two additional hands came in handy. Letting them feel like they were free, made them hard workers and eventually friends. Cora didn't waste any time being lonely. Before we knew it, she had moved in with Jasper.

The soil here was very fertile. Francine put in a vegetable garden. Each harvest, she would go to market and sell some. Cora continued baking her French pastries that also sold well at market. Between the pastries, vegetables, and fresh fish that Ren and Jasper caught each day, they earned enough money to keep an adequate supply of rum.

(Life was good)

Tortuga
(Epilogue)
A Pirate Tale

Ren had lived the life he had dreamed of now for the past 30 years. Getting on in years, he looked a little frail. Francine had never lost her beautiful glow. At 50, she was still a stunning figure. Ren ventured into town mostly to buy rum. There was one shop he always checked out. The proprietor was a friend of his often receiving some of the fresh vegetables and fish. He also loved the pastries baked by Cora. He sold various weaponry.

On one such occasion, Ren spotted a fancy French sword. Crafted in a style Ren was quite familiar with. Pierre said, this just came in. One of the finest I have ever seen. I agree, I know the craftsman. You do? Yes, he is my father. I'm not sure if he is even alive today. I would like to buy this.

About that time, two ruffians walked in. Pierre said, these two are trouble. Just ignore them. Ren had led a fairly private life near the seashore. Over time though, rumors spread about the mysterious man and beautiful wife. Ren had not picked up a sword during all those years.

Well, if it isn't the niger lover. We heard about how you give your slaves so much freedom. Does that freedom include sharing your beautiful wife. Ren

had thought to just ignore them as Pierre had suggested, but they had just crossed a line. You must apologize for your crude remarks about my wife as he pointed his father's sword at them. We don't apologize to anyone, especially one who is pointing a weapon at us. They said this as they both drew their swords. Ren had not picked up a sword in all these years since he had left Tortuga. For him though, this was something embedded in his psychic. I would say, it's just like remembering how to ride a bike, (if bicycles had been invented at that time). When the fighting was done, both men lay on the floor mortally wounded. When the local authorities investigated, Pierre confirmed that the two had attacked Ren first. Ren asked about purchasing the sword. Pierre said he had never seen such fine swordsmanship in all his years. That blade belongs in your hands. You can have it for free. Getting rid of those two troublemakers is payment enough.

Ren and Francine lived out the rest of their lives in peace. He never had to pick up a sword again. Jasper and Cora enjoyed the same fate. Neither couple had any children.

Tortuga Today

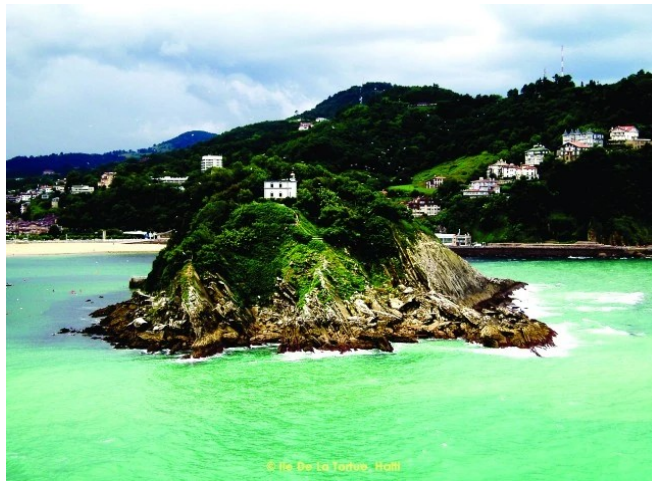
Tortuga (Île de la Tortue), located off Haiti's southern coast, is now a quiet, rustic, and mostly undeveloped island known for its rugged terrain, beautiful untouched beaches, and lack of infrastructure. It serves in stark contrast to its historical role as a bustling 16th-century pirate haven. Current residents focusing on fishing and farming. The area is mostly visited for its remote beauty.

The population (over 25,000 as of 2003) lives in small communities, relying on limited transport and navigating the island's mountainous terrain.

Then



Now



The End