

AI-Generated Graded Readers

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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.

The text was generated using ChatGPT and prepared for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

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J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan [Peter and Wendy]* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

Part 1

All children grow up, except one. That one is Peter Pan. When Wendy was two years old, she was playing in the garden. She picked a flower and ran to her mother. She looked so sweet that Mrs. Darling put her hand to her heart and cried, "Oh, why can't you stay like this for ever!" After that day, Wendy knew she would grow up. Children know it after they are two. Two is the start of growing up.

The family lived at number 14. Before Wendy was born, Mrs. Darling was the most important person in the house. She was very pretty and had a soft mouth that seemed to smile even when she was quiet. There was one small kiss at the corner of her mouth that Wendy could never get, though she often tried.

Mr. Darling won her in a quick and clever way. Many young men loved her, but he took a cab and arrived first to ask her to marry him. He was proud that she loved and respected him. He worked in the city and talked about money and shares in a serious voice. Mrs. Darling listened and felt safe.

Wendy came first, then John, then Michael. Each time a baby was born, Mr. Darling sat with a pencil and paper to count the money. "Can we keep this one?" he would say in a worried voice. Mrs. Darling always said yes. At last, all three children stayed.

Because they were not rich, they had a strange nurse. She was a big dog called Nana. She was careful and kind. She gave the children their baths and watched them at night. She knew when a cough was small and when it was serious. She walked them to school and kept them in line. Mrs. Darling trusted her.

Still, Mr. Darling sometimes felt that Nana did not admire him. He wanted to be respected. He liked the house to look proper. He worried what the neighbors might say about having a dog for a nurse.

The house was happy. In the evenings they danced. Mrs. Darling turned and turned until the children laughed. Mr. Darling danced too, though he liked to look

important. Even Liza, the servant, sometimes joined them. It was a simple, warm family.

Then Mrs. Darling heard of Peter Pan.

Each night, after the children slept, she went into their room and put their thoughts in order. If you could see a mother do this, you would think it was like putting things back into drawers. She pushed bad thoughts to the bottom and laid good thoughts on top for the morning.

One night she found something strange in their minds. A name. Peter.

The name was written clearly in Wendy's mind and also in John's and Michael's. Mrs. Darling did not know any Peter. She asked Wendy gently, "Who is Peter?"

"He is Peter Pan," Wendy said calmly. "You know him, mother."

Mrs. Darling remembered that, when she was a child, she had heard of a boy called Peter Pan who lived with fairies. People said he went with children when they died so they would not be afraid. But that was only a story, she thought.

"He would be grown up now," she said.

"Oh no," Wendy answered. "He is just my size."

Mr. Darling laughed when he heard of it. "It is nonsense," he said. "Nana has put silly ideas in their heads."

But the name did not go away.

One morning, Mrs. Darling found leaves on the nursery floor. They were near the window. Wendy said, "It is that Peter again. He forgets to wipe his feet."

Mrs. Darling tried to smile. "How could he get in? We are three floors up."

"By the window," Wendy said.

Mrs. Darling looked. It was a long drop to the street. There was nothing to climb. She told herself it was only a dream.

The next night, something happened.

Nana was not in the nursery that evening. It was her night off. Mrs. Darling bathed the children and sang to them. One by one they fell asleep. She sat by the fire to sew. The room was warm. The three night-lights glowed softly.

Mrs. Darling fell asleep too.

She dreamed that a strange boy broke through from a far-off land. In her dream

she saw Wendy, John, and Michael looking through a small opening at something bright and new.

Suddenly the window flew open.

A boy dropped lightly onto the floor. With him was a small bright light that moved like a living thing. Mrs. Darling woke and saw him. At once she knew who he was.

He was Peter Pan.

He was a lovely boy dressed in leaves. He had all his first teeth. When he saw that she was a grown woman, he showed his teeth at her in anger.

Mrs. Darling screamed.

Nana rushed in and leapt at the boy. Peter sprang through the window. Mrs. Darling ran to look down at the street, but there was no little body. Only the dark night and one bright star.

Nana had caught something. In her mouth was Peter's shadow.

The window had shut too fast for Peter's shadow to escape. Nana held it tight. Mrs. Darling looked at it. It was only an ordinary shadow.

Nana wanted to hang it by the window so the boy could come back quietly for it. But Mrs. Darling did not like it hanging there. She rolled it up and put it in a drawer.

A week later, on a Friday night, Mr. and Mrs. Darling were going to a party. Mr. Darling was in a bad mood because he could not tie his tie. He shouted and stamped until Mrs. Darling tied it for him. Then they danced again with the children.

Later, there was trouble over medicine. Michael did not want to take it. Mr. Darling said, "When I was your age, I took medicine without crying." But when Wendy brought his own bottle, he was afraid to drink it. To hide his fear, he poured it into Nana's bowl.

Nana drank it and gave him a sad look. Mrs. Darling saw and said, "Oh, George, that was your medicine!"

Mr. Darling was ashamed, but he would not admit it. In anger, he decided Nana must be tied up outside.

“The proper place for you is the yard,” he said.

The children cried, but he dragged Nana away and chained her up. Nana barked and barked. She felt danger in the air.

Mrs. Darling felt uneasy too. She looked out at the stars. They seemed close, as if they were watching.

She kissed each child and said, “The night-lights are the eyes I leave to watch you.”

Then Mr. and Mrs. Darling went out into the snowy street toward number 27.

The stars shone above them.

One small star cried out in a clear voice, “Now, Peter!”

Part 2

For a short time after their parents left, the three night-lights burned softly beside the beds. They were gentle little lights, and it would have been nice if they had stayed awake to see what was coming. But Wendy’s light gave a small blink and seemed to yawn. Then John’s and Michael’s did the same. One by one, they went out.

At once another light flashed through the room. It was much brighter than the night-lights. It darted here and there, into drawers, into the cupboard, under the beds. It moved so fast that it looked like a streak of gold. When it stopped for a moment, it showed itself to be a tiny fairy, no longer than a hand. She wore a dress made of a single leaf, and her name was Tinker Bell.

A breath from the stars blew the window open. Peter Pan dropped lightly onto the floor. He had carried Tinker Bell part of the way, and his hand was still shining with fairy dust.

“Tink,” he whispered, looking at the sleeping children, “where is my shadow?”

Tinker Bell answered with a sweet ringing sound like little bells. It was fairy talk. Wendy could not hear it yet.

Peter went to the chest of drawers and pulled them open quickly. Clothes and ribbons fell to the floor. At last he found his shadow. He was very pleased and

forgot that he had shut Tinker Bell in one of the drawers.

He laid the shadow on the floor and tried to press it to his feet. He thought it would join him at once, like two drops of water. But it did not. He ran to the bathroom and brought back soap. He rubbed the soap on his feet and pressed again. Still the shadow would not stick.

Peter sat down and began to cry.

His sobs woke Wendy. She sat up in bed and saw a boy on the floor. She was not afraid. She was only curious.

“Boy,” she said politely, “why are you crying?”

Peter stood and bowed to her in a grand way. “What is your name?” he asked.

“Wendy Moira Angela Darling,” she replied. “What is yours?”

“Peter Pan.”

She looked at him closely. “Is that all?”

“Yes,” he said shortly.

“Where do you live?” she asked.

“Second to the right, and then straight on till morning.”

Wendy smiled. “That is a funny address.”

Peter felt uneasy. “It is not funny,” he said.

“Is that what they put on the letters?” she asked gently.

“I don’t get letters,” he answered.

“But your mother gets letters?” she said.

“I don’t have a mother,” he replied quickly. He did not want one. He thought mothers were not important.

Wendy felt very sorry for him. “No wonder you were crying,” she said, getting out of bed.

“I was not crying about mothers,” Peter said in a proud voice. “I was crying because my shadow will not stick.”

Wendy saw the shadow on the floor. “It must be sewn on,” she said at once.

“Sewn?” Peter asked.

“You are very ignorant,” she said kindly.

She took out her sewing case and knelt down. “It may hurt a little,” she warned

him.

“I never cry,” Peter said, biting his lip.

She sewed the shadow to his foot carefully. When she finished, Peter jumped up and began to dance.

“How clever I am!” he cried. “Oh, the cleverness of me!”

Wendy stared at him. “You conceit,” she said. “Of course I did nothing!”

“You did a little,” he said lightly.

She felt hurt and climbed back into bed, covering her face. Peter tried to leave, but when she did not move, he sat at the end of her bed and tapped her gently.

“Wendy,” he said softly, “one girl is more use than twenty boys.”

She peeked out from the blankets. “Do you really think so?”

“Yes.”

She smiled and sat beside him again. “I will give you a kiss,” she said.

Peter held out his hand.

“Don’t you know what a kiss is?” she asked.

“I shall know when you give it to me,” he answered.

Not wishing to hurt his feelings, she put her thimble in his hand. Peter looked at it. “Now shall I give you a kiss?” he asked.

“If you please,” she said, leaning forward.

He dropped an acorn button into her hand.

She looked at it and said she would wear it on her chain. It was lucky she did.

They spoke of his age. “I ran away the day I was born,” Peter said. “I heard my father and mother talk about what I should be when I grew up. I do not want to be a man. I want to be a little boy for ever and have fun.”

Wendy listened with wide eyes.

“I lived a long time in Kensington Gardens with the fairies,” he said.

“Tell me about them,” she begged.

“When the first baby laughed,” Peter said, “the laugh broke into many small pieces, and they became fairies. There should be one fairy for every boy and girl.”

“Is there not?” she asked.

“No. Children know too much now. When a child says, ‘I don’t believe in

fairies, ' a fairy falls down dead."

Wendy felt sad. She thought of children who no longer believed.

Peter looked around. "Where is Tink?" he asked.

A soft ringing came from the drawer. Peter laughed. "I do believe I shut her up."

He opened the drawer and Tinker Bell flew out, very angry. She circled the room, flashing and making sharp sounds.

"What does she say?" Wendy asked.

Peter listened. "She says you are a great ugly girl, and that she is my fairy."

Wendy felt surprised. "Why is she angry?"

Peter did not know. He only shrugged.

They sat together on the armchair. Wendy asked more questions.

"Who are the lost boys?" she said.

"They are children who fall out of their carriages and are not wanted," Peter explained. "If no one claims them in seven days, they are sent to the Neverland. I am their captain."

"How lovely!" Wendy cried.

"It is fun," Peter said, "but we have no girls with us."

"Are none girls?"

"Girls are too clever to fall out," he said.

Wendy felt proud.

Peter then kicked John gently out of bed. John rolled onto the floor but did not wake. Wendy frowned but forgave Peter.

"I came to listen to stories," Peter said. "Your mother was telling one about a prince and a glass shoe."

"That is Cinderella," Wendy said. "He found her in the end."

Peter ran to the window. "I must tell the boys."

"Don't go!" Wendy cried. "I know many stories."

Peter turned back slowly. His eyes shone. "Come with me and tell them," he said.

"Oh, I cannot," Wendy answered. "I cannot fly."

"I will teach you."

“Oh!” she cried in joy.

“We will fly over the sea. You will see mermaids.”

“Mermaids!”

“And pirates.”

John woke at that word. “Pirates?” he said, jumping up.

Peter smiled. “Yes.”

Wendy shook John and Michael. “Wake up! Peter Pan is here. He will teach us to fly.”

The boys sprang up. They listened carefully for any sound from outside. All was quiet. Nana had stopped barking.

“Out with the light! Hide!” John whispered.

They hid behind the curtains as Liza came in with Nana. She saw only three sleeping children. Nana struggled, but Liza tied her again in the yard.

Soon Nana broke her chain and ran to the party house, but she was too late.

In the nursery, Peter flew around the room to show his skill.

“How do you do it?” John asked.

“You think lovely thoughts,” Peter said. “And you need fairy dust.”

He blew fairy dust on them.

“Now wiggle your shoulders,” he said.

Michael let go first. He rose into the air. “I flew!” he cried.

John and Wendy followed. Their heads touched the ceiling. They laughed in delight.

“Why not go out?” John said.

“Mermaids,” Peter whispered again.

“And pirates!” John cried, grabbing his hat.

At that very moment, Mr. and Mrs. Darling ran back into the house. They looked up at the nursery window and saw four small shapes flying in the bright room.

They rushed upstairs.

But the stars had blown the window open.

“Come!” Peter cried.

He flew out into the night. John, Michael, and Wendy followed.
When Mr. and Mrs. Darling reached the nursery, it was empty.
The birds had flown.

Part 3

The cold night air rushed past their faces as they followed Peter out of the window. For a moment Wendy felt her heart beat so hard that she thought she might fall. London lay far below them, dark and still, with only a few lamps shining like small stars on the ground. The real stars burned above them, very bright and very near.

Peter flew ahead without looking back. "Second to the right," he called lightly, "and then straight on till morning!"

Wendy tried to remember the words, but she did not know where "right" ended or how long "till morning" might be. John and Michael did not ask. Flying was too new and too sweet.

At first they stayed close together, but soon they began to circle around church towers and tall trees, laughing as they passed. John tried to fly faster than Michael. Michael tried to turn in the air without falling. Wendy lifted her arms and felt the wind hold her up. It was like being in a dream, only stronger.

They flew over houses, then over fields, then over dark water.

"Is this the sea?" Wendy asked.

"One of them," Peter answered carelessly.

They did not know how many seas they crossed. Night seemed to last for ever. Sometimes it was dark. Sometimes the sky grew pale for a while and then dark again. They grew cold, then warm, then cold once more.

After a long time, Wendy felt hungry. She was about to say so when Peter suddenly darted toward a bird that carried something in its beak. He snatched it away and laughed. The bird chased him. Peter twisted in the air and let the bird take it back. Then he chased the bird again.

"This is how we eat," he said.

John tried it. He missed the first time. He missed the second time. At last, after many tries, he caught a small piece of food and felt proud.

Wendy watched with quiet worry. She did not think this was a safe way to eat. But she said nothing. She did not want Peter to feel she did not trust him.

Soon they grew sleepy.

“Do not fall asleep!” Wendy cried when Michael’s eyes closed.

But Michael did fall. He dropped straight down.

“Save him!” Wendy screamed.

Peter waited. He waited until Michael was very near the dark sea. Then he shot down like an arrow and caught him just in time.

Michael laughed when he was safe again.

Peter laughed too. “There he goes!” he cried as John began to fall.

Wendy felt fear twist inside her. Peter saved John as well, but always at the last moment. He seemed to enjoy the game.

“Be more careful,” Wendy whispered.

Peter only smiled.

Sometimes he lay on his back in the air and floated, as if he were resting on water. “You can sleep like this,” he said.

They tried. It was hard at first, but soon the wind held them. Wendy felt herself drift and nearly forgot where she was.

When Peter grew tired of resting, he would cry out, “We get off here!” and fly on again. They had no choice but to follow. They did not know how to stop.

Once Peter flew away so fast that they lost sight of him. The sky felt empty without him. Wendy felt a small fear in her heart.

“What if he forgets us?” she asked softly.

“He would not,” John said.

But when Peter came back, he looked at them as if he did not know who they were.

“I am Wendy,” she said quickly.

His eyes cleared. “Yes,” he said. “Wendy. If I ever forget you, just say, ‘I am Wendy,’ and I will remember.”

It was not a comforting answer.

At last, after many nights and days that seemed to mix together, Peter slowed. “There it is,” he said calmly.

“Where?” John asked.

“Where all the arrows point.”

They looked and saw golden light in the sky, like a million small arrows. They pointed down toward a dark shape in the distance.

The island.

As they came closer, they began to see things clearly. A bright lagoon. A river winding through trees. Smoke rising from a camp. A small boat broken on the sand.

“There is my cave!” Michael cried.

“There is my boat!” Wendy said.

“Look at the smoke!” John shouted. “The red men are there.”

They spoke as if they knew the place well, though they had never been there before. It felt like something remembered from a dream.

Peter did not look pleased that they knew so much.

Then the golden arrows faded. The sun went away. The island darkened.

Fear fell upon them.

The trees below looked black and sharp. Strange sounds rose from the ground. Wendy’s hands felt cold.

They flew lower. Branches brushed their feet.

“They do not want us to land,” Peter said quietly.

“Who?” Wendy whispered.

He did not answer.

Tinker Bell had been asleep on his shoulder. Now he woke her and sent her ahead. She flashed like a tiny star and vanished among the trees.

Peter paused in the air, listening. His face was no longer careless. His eyes shone in the dark.

“Would you like an adventure now,” he asked John softly, “or tea first?”

“Tea first,” Wendy said quickly.

Peter smiled a little. "Tea," he agreed.

They moved forward again, pushing through the air as if it were thick. Wendy felt as though unseen hands were holding them back.

Below them, shadows moved.

A howl rose from the trees.

Michael pressed closer to Wendy. "Is that a wolf?" he asked.

"Perhaps," she said, though her voice shook.

Suddenly something rushed up at them from below. Wendy gasped. But it was only a large bird that flapped away again.

"Do not be afraid," Peter said. "I am here."

He sounded brave. He looked brave. Yet even he glanced behind him more than once.

They were very near the ground now.

"When I say, drop," Peter whispered, "you must drop straight down and hide."

"Hide where?" John asked.

"Anywhere."

Wendy's heart beat so hard she could hear it.

"Now!" Peter cried.

They let go.

Wendy felt the air rush past her. The trees rose up fast. She shut her eyes.

She landed softly on something cool and wet.

Grass.

She lay still and listened. John landed somewhere near. Michael gave a small cry and then was quiet.

For a moment all was dark and silent.

Then a far-off sound came through the trees.

It was like a drum.

Wendy sat up slowly.

The Neverland was real.

And they were in it.

Part 4

Wendy stayed very still on the damp grass. The air smelled of trees and water. The drum sound came again, low and far away. John crawled toward her on his hands and knees.

“Are you hurt?” he whispered.

“No,” she said softly. “Where is Michael?”

“Here,” came a small voice. Michael rose from behind a bush, brushing leaves from his hair. “I landed like a cat.”

They looked around for Peter, but he was gone.

“Peter!” Wendy called, but very quietly.

No answer came.

The drum sound grew louder. It was not only a drum. There were voices too, rising and falling like a song.

“The red men,” John said.

They crouched lower.

Suddenly Tinker Bell flashed past Wendy’s face. The tiny light circled her head, then darted away through the trees.

“She wants us to follow,” Wendy breathed.

“Or she wants to lead us into danger,” John answered.

But they had no better guide. They crept after the small light.

The trees were thick. Roots twisted across the ground. Once Michael tripped and almost cried out, but Wendy covered his mouth gently.

They came to a small clearing. In the middle stood a group of dark shapes around a fire. The fire lit painted faces and feathers.

Wendy’s heart jumped.

“Do not move,” John whispered.

Tinker Bell flashed higher into the air and vanished.

The drum stopped.

For one long moment the clearing was silent.

Then a sharp cry broke the stillness.

“Hugh!”

The red men sprang up. One pointed toward the trees.

“They have seen us!” Michael gasped.

“Run!” John cried.

They ran.

Branches struck their faces. Leaves tore at their clothes. Behind them came shouts and the sound of feet.

Wendy felt her breath burn in her chest. She held Michael’s hand tight. John ran ahead, pushing branches aside.

Suddenly something caught Wendy around the waist.

She screamed.

It was Peter.

He had dropped from a tree like a shadow.

“This way!” he whispered.

He pulled them toward a large hollow tree. At its base was a small dark hole.

“Down!” Peter ordered.

John slid in first. Michael followed. Wendy hesitated only a second before lowering herself into the hole. It was narrow and tight, but she slid down and landed softly below.

Peter dropped after her.

They were in a round underground room. It was lit by small lamps made from shells. The walls were smooth and warm. There were small beds made of leaves.

“This is our home,” Peter said proudly.

From behind curtains and from under tables, boys began to appear. Thin boys with bright eyes. They looked at Wendy with surprise.

“A girl!” one cried.

“A real girl!” said another.

Peter stood tall. “This is Wendy. She has come to tell us stories.”

The lost boys stared as if she were something from a dream.

“Will you stay?” one asked.

Wendy looked at Peter.

“We have no mother,” Peter said lightly. “We are rather lonely.”

Wendy felt something warm move inside her. She saw the small beds, the torn clothes, the boys’ eager faces.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I will stay for a little.”

The boys cheered quietly.

Peter smiled, but his smile was quick and bright, like a flash.

“But first,” he said, “we must talk of danger.”

The lost boys grew serious.

“The red men are on the war-path,” Peter said. “And there are pirates.”

“Pirates!” Michael breathed.

“Hook,” one boy whispered.

At the name, even Peter’s face changed.

“Captain Hook,” he said in a low voice. “He lost his hand to me. A great fish ate it.”

“And now the fish follows him,” said another boy.

“Yes,” Peter answered. “It likes the taste.”

Wendy felt fear again, but also strange excitement.

“Where are the pirates?” she asked.

“On their ship,” Peter said. “In the bay.”

Above them, faintly, the drum began again.

Wendy shivered.

“You are safe here,” Peter told her. “No one can find this place.”

As he spoke, there was a distant boom, like a gun.

The boys looked up.

Peter smiled.

“Unless they know where to look,” he said.

Part 5

The boom came again, louder this time. Dust fell softly from the roof of the underground home. The lost boys froze where they stood. Michael crept closer to

Wendy and held her hand.

“That is a gun from the ship,” one of the boys whispered.

Peter tilted his head and listened. He did not look afraid. His eyes shone in the dim light.

“He is angry tonight,” Peter said. “He smells us.”

“Captain Hook?” Wendy asked.

Peter nodded. “He does not sleep well. He hears the clock inside the great fish and thinks of his hand.”

“The clock?” John said.

“Yes. The fish swallowed a clock once. Now it ticks inside him. Tick, tock, tick, tock. When Hook hears it, he trembles.”

The boys laughed softly, but the laughter sounded thin.

Another boom rolled through the night.

Wendy felt she must be brave. “What do we do?” she asked.

“We wait,” Peter said. “We always wait.”

They sat down on the small beds. One of the boys brought Wendy a seat made of woven grass. They watched her as if she were something bright and new.

“Will you tell a story?” a boy asked.

“Yes,” Peter said quickly. “Tell us about the glass shoe.”

Wendy smiled a little. She began to tell the story of the girl who lost her shoe at the dance. The boys listened with wide eyes. Even Peter lay on his stomach and watched her face.

Above them, the drum stopped. The night grew still.

When she finished, there was a soft sigh in the room.

“And they lived happily ever after?” one boy asked.

“Yes,” Wendy said.

Peter sat up. “That is a very good ending,” he said. “I like that part best.”

There was a faint sound from above, not a drum now, but something else.

Tick.

Tock.

The boys looked at one another.

“The fish,” one whispered.

Peter jumped to his feet. “Out!” he cried.

The boys moved quickly. They blew out the shell lamps. The room went dark.

“Stay with me,” Wendy said to Michael.

Peter climbed up the narrow tree trunk that led to the surface. One by one the boys followed. Wendy felt her way after them.

She came out into the night air. The island was darker than before. Clouds hid the stars.

From the direction of the bay came the steady sound.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

Tock.

“He is near,” John said.

Peter crouched behind a tree. “Stay low,” he whispered. “He cannot see well in the dark, but he listens.”

The ticking grew louder.

Then another sound joined it.

A slow step.

Crunching leaves.

Wendy held her breath.

A tall shape moved between the trees. It had a long coat and a large hat. One arm ended in a shining hook that caught what little light there was.

Behind him walked pirates, rough and silent.

The ticking stopped.

Captain Hook stood very still.

“I hear nothing,” he said in a soft voice.

His voice was calm, but there was anger under it.

One pirate shifted his feet.

Hook turned his head slowly. “You moved,” he said.

“No, sir,” the pirate answered.

Hook lifted his hook slightly. "You tremble," he said.

"It is cold, sir," the pirate replied.

Hook smiled without warmth. "It is fear," he said.

Wendy felt a chill run through her.

Peter leaned close to her ear. "He thinks the fish is near," he whispered. "He always fears the ticking."

Hook raised his hand. The pirates froze.

From far off, faint and soft, came the sound again.

Tick.

Tock.

Hook's face changed. For a moment he looked afraid.

"Back to the ship," he said sharply.

The pirates moved away.

The ticking faded.

Wendy let out her breath slowly.

Peter stood up at once and laughed softly. "He ran," he said. "He always runs when he hears it."

The boys laughed too, but Wendy saw that their laughter was not full.

"We should go back," she said gently.

"Not yet," Peter answered. "There is more to see."

He moved toward the trees again, light and quick.

Wendy hesitated.

The Neverland was beautiful and terrible at the same time.

And she knew, deep in her heart, that this was only the beginning.

Part 6

Peter moved through the trees as if he were part of them. The lost boys followed in a line, quiet and low. Wendy held Michael's hand and tried not to let the branches catch her hair. John walked just behind Peter, trying to look brave.

The night was thick now. The clouds had covered the stars. Only the sound of

the sea could be heard in the distance, slow and heavy against the shore.

“Where are we going?” Wendy whispered.

“To the lagoon,” Peter answered softly. “The mermaids sit there at night.”

Michael forgot his fear at once. “Mermaids!” he breathed.

They came out of the trees and saw the water shining faintly in the dark. It lay smooth and still, like a sheet of black glass. Rocks rose from it in strange shapes.

Peter raised his hand for silence.

For a moment nothing moved.

Then, from the water, a face rose slowly. Pale and shining. Long hair floated around it.

Wendy gasped.

A mermaid leaned on a rock and looked at them with calm eyes. Then another rose beside her. Soon there were many.

They were beautiful and quiet, but their faces were cold.

“They do not like strangers,” Peter whispered. “Do not go too near.”

One mermaid saw Wendy and stared at her. She lifted her hand and made a small wave, but her eyes were not friendly.

“Why does she look at me so?” Wendy asked.

“She thinks you are too warm,” Peter said lightly. “They do not like warmth.”

Michael stepped closer to the edge of the water.

“Stay back,” Wendy warned him.

Suddenly one mermaid flicked her tail. Water splashed high. Michael jumped away.

The mermaids laughed, but it was not a kind sound.

Peter laughed too. “They are in a playful mood,” he said.

Wendy was not sure she liked their play.

A small shape flew down and rested on Peter’s shoulder. Tinker Bell glowed softly in the dark.

She made sharp sounds.

Peter listened and nodded. “The red men are near,” he said. “We must hide.”

The boys slipped behind rocks. Wendy pulled Michael down beside her. John

crouched low and tried not to move.

From the trees came shadows again. The red men moved toward the water, silent and strong.

They did not see the children.

One red man pointed to the lagoon and spoke in a low voice. Another answered.

Then they moved away again.

Wendy felt her heart slow.

“It is not safe anywhere,” she said quietly.

“It is safe with me,” Peter replied at once.

She looked at him. His face was bright, full of pride.

He truly believed it.

They returned through the trees toward the underground home. The night seemed to watch them from every side.

When they reached the hollow tree, Peter stopped.

“You may go down,” he said to the boys. “I will fly for a while.”

“Where?” Wendy asked.

“Anywhere,” he answered.

He rose into the dark air and vanished among the branches.

Wendy felt a small ache inside her. She did not like it when he went away without looking back.

She led the boys down into the underground room. They lit the shell lamps again. The warm light made the place feel smaller and safer.

“Will you tell another story?” one boy asked.

Wendy sat down and began a story about home, about mothers and warm beds and morning light.

As she spoke, the boys leaned close. Even John and Michael listened as if they had not heard such things before.

“And the mother waits by the window,” Wendy said softly, “and she keeps the light burning.”

One of the lost boys swallowed hard.

“Does she truly wait?” he asked.

“Yes,” Wendy answered. “She always waits.”

There was silence after that.

Wendy did not see Peter return, but she felt him near. He stood in the shadow, listening.

His face showed nothing.

When the story ended, he stepped forward.

“That is enough,” he said quickly. “We must sleep.”

The boys lay down in their leaf beds. Michael curled close to Wendy. John folded his arms and closed his eyes.

Peter did not lie down.

He stood in the middle of the room and looked at Wendy.

“You may stay,” he said, as if granting a favor. “You shall be our mother.”

Wendy’s heart lifted and sank at the same time.

“For a little while,” she said.

Peter smiled, bright and quick again.

“For ever,” he answered lightly.

But Wendy did not reply.

Deep above them, the sea rolled on.

And somewhere in the dark, faint and far away, there came once more the steady sound.

Tick.

Tock.

Part 7

The ticking came again in the night, though it was very far away. Wendy lay awake in the small leaf bed and listened. Michael slept with his hand curled in her sleeve. John turned once and then was still.

Peter did not sleep.

He sat cross-legged on the floor, sharpening a small knife with calm care. His face was bright in the shell light, but his eyes were far away.

“You should rest,” Wendy said softly.

“I never rest long,” Peter answered. “There is too much to do.”

“What must you do?” she asked.

“Be captain,” he said at once.

He rose suddenly and blew out the lamps. “Morning soon,” he said. “We rise early.”

Wendy closed her eyes at last.

When she woke, light was coming down through the hollow tree. The boys were already moving about. Peter was gone.

“Where is he?” she asked.

“Hunting,” one boy said proudly. “Or fighting. Or flying.”

Wendy stood and brushed leaves from her dress. She felt a strange mix of happiness and fear. She was in a place where anything could happen.

Peter returned not long after. His hair was wild, and there were marks of mud on his legs.

“Adventure?” John asked at once.

“Perhaps,” Peter said. “The pirates are restless.”

“Let us fight them,” Michael cried.

Wendy frowned gently. “We should eat first,” she said. “And wash.”

The boys looked at her in surprise.

“Wash?” one repeated.

“Yes,” she said firmly. “And you must mend your clothes. You cannot fight with torn sleeves.”

Peter laughed. “See how useful a mother is,” he said.

Wendy tried not to smile too much.

She found a small stream near the trees and made the boys wash their faces and hands. She tore strips from old cloth and began to mend holes. The boys watched in wonder.

“You truly know how to do that,” one said.

“Of course,” Wendy replied. “Mothers know.”

Peter watched her from a tree branch.

“Do not make them too neat,” he called. “They are lost boys.”

“They are still boys,” Wendy answered.

Peter did not reply.

After they had eaten and washed, Peter stood up straight.

“Now,” he said, “we fly to watch the pirate ship.”

Wendy felt a chill. “Must we?” she asked.

“Yes,” Peter said. “Hook is planning something.”

They flew low over the trees toward the bay. The pirate ship lay dark on the water. Its tall mast cut the sky.

Peter landed in a tree near the shore. The others followed, clumsy but careful.

On the deck of the ship stood Captain Hook.

Even in the daylight he looked pale and sharp. His coat was dark red. His hook shone bright.

He walked slowly across the deck.

“Where is Smee?” he asked in a low voice.

A pirate stepped forward. “Here, captain.”

“You slept?” Hook asked.

“Yes, captain.”

Hook raised his hook slightly. “While I did not?” he said.

The pirate shook.

Wendy gripped the tree branch.

“He is always angry,” Peter whispered.

Hook turned toward the forest. His eyes narrowed.

“They are near,” he said softly.

Peter smiled.

“He knows nothing,” he whispered back.

At that moment, a loud ticking came from the water.

Tick.

Tock.

The great fish rose near the ship. Only its back could be seen, but the sound was clear.

Hook froze.

“The beast,” he hissed.

He stepped back from the edge of the deck.

Peter laughed softly in the tree.

But Hook’s head lifted suddenly.

He looked toward the trees.

For one second his eyes met Peter’s.

Wendy felt her breath stop.

Hook’s face did not change, but his gaze stayed steady.

Then he smiled slowly.

“Soon,” he said, almost to himself.

Peter’s smile faded.

“We go,” he whispered sharply.

They flew back toward the forest, fast and low.

Wendy’s heart beat hard.

“He saw you,” she said.

“Let him see,” Peter answered.

But his voice was not as light as before.

When they reached the underground home again, Wendy felt the air grow heavy.

The Neverland was bright and beautiful in the sun.

But danger was never far away.

And Captain Hook had looked straight at Peter Pan.

Part 8

The look that Captain Hook had given Peter did not leave Wendy’s mind. Even after they had returned to the underground home and the boys began to talk and laugh again, she felt that something had changed.

Peter did not speak of it. He leapt onto a table and called for a game.

“Let us pretend,” he cried, “that the pirates have taken us, and we must escape!”

The boys cheered. They loved to pretend.

Wendy tried to smile, but she was thinking of Hook's quiet voice and slow smile.

They played for a long time. Peter tied their hands with rope and then cut them free. He made them march in a line and then break apart. He leapt from chair to chair as if it were a ship in a storm.

"Now you are afraid," he told Michael.

"I am not afraid," Michael said, though his voice shook with laughter.

"And now," Peter said, "I rescue you!"

He struck at shadows and rolled on the ground. The boys watched him with shining eyes.

Wendy clapped her hands gently.

"Enough," she said at last. "You must rest."

"Rest?" Peter repeated, as if the word were strange.

"Yes. Even captains rest."

The boys lay down. Peter sat apart, looking up at the roof.

"Tell us a story," one boy called softly.

Wendy began again. This time she told of a mother who left her window open for her children. Of how she watched each night and hoped they would come back.

Peter turned his face away.

"She always waits," Wendy said. "Even if many days pass."

"What if she closes the window?" one boy asked.

"She will not," Wendy answered firmly.

Peter sprang to his feet.

"Windows close," he said quickly. "They forget."

Wendy stood up too.

"Mothers do not forget," she said.

Peter's eyes flashed. "They do," he said. "They grow tired of waiting."

The room felt very small.

"You are wrong," Wendy said quietly.

Peter laughed, but it was not his happy laugh.

"We shall see," he said. "If you ever go back."

Michael sat up. "Go back?" he repeated.

Wendy knelt beside him. "One day," she said softly.
Peter turned away and climbed up the tree trunk without another word.
That night, when all were asleep, Wendy woke to a small sound.
It was Tinker Bell, glowing faintly near her face.
The fairy made quick sharp sounds.
Wendy did not understand her words, but she felt that Tink was troubled.
"What is it?" she whispered.
Tinker Bell darted toward the tree trunk and back again.
Wendy rose quietly so as not to wake the boys. She climbed up the hollow tree
and came out into the night.
The air was cool. The forest was dark.
In the distance she saw a faint light.
Not the soft glow of a fairy.
A moving light.
She crept forward.
Through the trees she saw shapes.
Pirates.
They were moving toward the hollow tree.
Wendy's heart leapt.
She turned to run back, but a shadow fell across her path.
A tall shape stepped from behind a tree.
Captain Hook.
He bowed slightly.
"Good evening," he said in a soft voice.
Wendy could not move.
"You are the little mother," Hook said. "How charming."
She found her voice. "Leave us," she said.
Hook smiled gently. "Leave you? My dear child, I have come to invite you."
Behind him, the pirates moved closer.
"Invite me?" Wendy asked.
"To visit my ship," Hook said. "I have heard you tell stories. I should like to

hear one.”

Wendy shook her head.

“No,” she said firmly.

Hook’s smile faded just a little.

“Perhaps,” he said slowly, “your brothers would enjoy the sea air.”

Wendy felt fear like ice in her chest.

From the trees above came a sudden shout.

“Hook!”

Peter dropped down between them.

His eyes burned bright.

“You are too early,” Peter said.

Hook’s hook flashed in the dim light.

“On the contrary,” he replied calmly. “I am exactly on time.”

The pirates closed in.

Peter stood tall, small and fierce.

Wendy stepped back toward the hollow tree.

The night held its breath.

And the fight was about to begin.

Part 9

For a heartbeat no one moved. The trees stood dark around them. The pirates formed a half circle. Hook’s hook caught a thin line of moonlight and shone cold and sharp.

Peter smiled.

“You have come far from your ship,” he said lightly.

“I go where I please,” Hook answered. His voice was smooth and quiet, but there was heat under it. “And tonight I please to take you.”

“Try,” Peter replied.

Hook lifted his hand.

At once the pirates rushed forward.

Peter sprang into the air. He moved so fast that Wendy almost lost sight of him. He darted between two pirates and struck one's hat from his head. He landed on a branch and laughed.

"Too slow!" he called.

John and the lost boys burst from the hollow tree behind Wendy. They had heard the voices and come up quickly. Michael held a small knife, though his hand shook.

"Stay back!" Wendy cried, but it was too late.

The fight broke open around her.

Steel met steel. Feet slid on leaves. Shouts filled the night.

Peter flew low and struck at Hook. Hook met him with the hook and a short sword in his other hand. The two moved in tight circles.

Wendy pulled Michael toward the tree. "Down!" she whispered. "Hide!"

Michael shook his head. "I must help!"

"You must live," Wendy said firmly, pushing him toward the hollow.

A pirate lunged toward her. John leapt between them and pushed the pirate back. John's face was pale, but he did not run.

Peter and Hook circled again.

"You have grown bold," Hook said softly.

"I never grow," Peter answered.

Hook's eyes flashed.

He struck fast. Peter twisted in the air and avoided the blow, but the hook tore a branch behind him.

The ticking began.

Tick.

Tock.

It came from the dark water beyond the trees.

Hook froze.

For one small second, his face showed fear.

Peter saw it.

He laughed bright and clear. "He is near!" he cried.

The pirates hesitated.

The ticking grew louder.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

Tock.

From the bay came a heavy splash.

Hook stepped back slowly.

“To the ship,” he said through his teeth.

“Run!” Peter called.

The pirates broke and fled toward the shore.

Hook followed, but he did not turn his back fully. His eyes stayed on Peter until the trees hid him from sight.

The ticking moved after them, steady and sure.

Then the night was quiet again.

Peter landed lightly on the ground.

“He ran,” he said with a grin.

The boys cheered weakly.

Wendy came forward slowly. “Are you hurt?” she asked.

“Hurt?” Peter laughed. “Never.”

But she saw a thin red line on his arm.

“You are bleeding,” she said.

Peter looked down as if surprised. “Oh,” he said. “That.”

“Sit,” Wendy ordered.

The boys stared. No one ordered Peter.

But Peter sat.

Wendy tore a strip from her sleeve and tied it around his arm. Her hands were steady now.

“You must be more careful,” she said softly.

Peter looked at her for a long moment.

“Careful?” he repeated, as if the word were new.

“Yes,” she said. “You are not alone.”

Something moved in his face, quick and hard to read.

Then he smiled again, bright as ever.

“I like fights,” he said.

Wendy felt a strange sadness.

The boys climbed down into the underground home again. This time they were quieter. The shell lamps were lit once more.

Peter stood in the middle of the room.

“He will come again,” he said.

“Yes,” Wendy answered.

“And we shall be ready,” Peter went on.

The boys nodded.

Wendy sat beside Michael and held him close. John leaned against the wall, trying not to look tired.

Peter turned toward the tree trunk.

“I will watch,” he said.

“You should rest,” Wendy said.

“I never rest long,” he replied.

He climbed up and vanished into the dark.

Wendy listened to the night.

Far away, over the water, the ticking faded.

But she knew the danger had not ended.

Captain Hook had not come only to test them.

He had come with a plan.

And next time, the ticking might not save them.

Part 10

The days that followed were bright and busy, but the shadow of Captain Hook did not leave the island. Even when the sun shone warm on the trees and the lagoon glittered like silver, Wendy felt that the danger waited just beyond sight.

Peter behaved as if nothing troubled him. He played at hunting, raced the lost

boys through the trees, and showed Michael how to sit on a high branch without fear. He laughed loudly and often.

But sometimes, when he thought no one was watching, he would stop and listen. Wendy saw this.

She did what she could to make the underground home feel safe. Each morning she woke the boys gently and made them wash at the stream. She mended their clothes and told them when to eat. At night she tucked them into their small beds of leaves and told them stories.

“And then,” she would say softly, “the mother kissed her children and left the window open.”

The boys loved that part best.

Peter did not always stay to hear the ending.

One afternoon, while the boys were playing near the lagoon, Tinker Bell flew to Wendy in great anger. She made sharp, fast sounds and darted toward the trees, then back again.

“What is it?” Wendy asked.

Peter landed beside her.

He listened to Tink for a moment, then his face grew serious.

“Hook has a new plan,” he said.

“What plan?” John asked.

Peter smiled, but there was no joy in it. “He cannot beat us in a fair fight,” he said. “So he will not fight fair.”

Wendy felt cold.

“What will he do?” she pressed.

“He will try to trick us,” Peter answered. “He is clever in that way.”

The boys grew quiet.

That evening, when the sun had begun to sink and the trees turned dark, Peter sent two boys to watch the path toward the bay.

“If you see anything strange,” he told them, “fly back at once.”

Wendy stood near him.

“Let us stay inside tonight,” she said softly.

“Inside?” Peter repeated. “And hide?”

“Not hide,” she said. “Be careful.”

He looked at her as if he did not understand the word.

Before she could speak again, one of the boys came flying back, breathless.

“A voice!” he cried. “From the trees!”

“What voice?” Peter demanded.

“A woman’s voice,” the boy said. “Calling.”

Wendy’s heart leapt.

“What did it say?” she asked.

The boy swallowed. “It said, ‘Wendy, come home.’”

Michael ran to her at once. “Wendy!” he cried.

John stared into the dark trees.

Wendy felt her knees grow weak.

Again the voice came, soft and sad.

“Wendy, come home.”

It was very like Mrs. Darling’s voice.

Peter’s eyes flashed.

“It is Hook,” he said sharply. “He is trying to trick you.”

The voice came again, closer this time.

“Wendy, the window is open.”

Wendy pressed her hands to her ears.

“Do not listen,” Peter ordered.

But the voice was so gentle.

“Wendy,” it called, “your mother waits.”

Tears filled Wendy’s eyes.

“It is not her,” Peter said. “It cannot be.”

From behind the trees, a shape moved.

Pirates stepped out slowly, pushing before them a small figure.

It was one of the lost boys.

His hands were tied.

Behind him stood Captain Hook.

Hook bowed slightly.

“Good evening,” he said in his soft voice. “We bring you a message.”

The bound boy struggled.

“Run!” he cried.

Hook placed the tip of his hook under the boy’s chin.

“Now, now,” Hook murmured. “We would not want harm to come to anyone.”

Peter flew forward at once.

“Let him go!” he shouted.

Hook smiled faintly.

“Come down from your branch,” he said. “Lay down your knife. Then perhaps I shall be kind.”

The forest was still.

Wendy felt the world turn very small.

Peter hovered in the air, eyes bright and fierce.

“You are a coward,” he said.

Hook did not answer at once.

Then, very softly, he spoke.

“Perhaps,” he said. “But I am patient.”

The ticking did not come.

The fish was not near.

And for the first time since Wendy had come to the Neverland, Peter Pan had no quick laugh ready.

The trap had begun to close.

Part 11

The trees stood black against the fading sky. The tied lost boy trembled where he stood, his hands pulled tight behind him. Captain Hook kept the tip of his hook beneath the boy’s chin, not pressing, but close enough to show what he could do.

Peter hovered in the air, but he did not move closer.

“Let him go,” Peter said again, his voice low now.

Hook's eyes did not leave him. "Come down," he replied softly. "You first."

Wendy felt her heart beat so hard that she thought Hook must hear it. She stepped forward without meaning to.

"Please," she said, "do not hurt him."

Hook turned his head slightly and looked at her.

"Ah," he said. "The little mother speaks."

Peter darted lower. "Do not talk to her," he snapped.

Hook's smile deepened just a little. "How quick you are to defend," he murmured. "It would be a pity if that quickness failed you."

The bound boy made a small sound.

"Peter," he whispered.

The other lost boys shifted uneasily in the shadows.

"We could rush them," John whispered to Wendy.

"No," she breathed. "He would strike first."

Peter seemed to understand the same thing. His body was tense, ready to move, but he did not attack.

Hook spoke again, calm as ever. "You are brave," he said to Peter. "But bravery is not always enough."

"You are afraid of the ticking," Peter answered sharply.

For a moment Hook's face tightened. But the night was silent. No tick. No tock.

"The beast is far away," Hook said quietly. "And tonight I have no need to fear it."

He lifted his hook slightly. The boy gasped.

"Stop!" Wendy cried.

Peter's eyes burned. "What do you want?" he demanded.

Hook's gaze sharpened. "You," he said simply.

The word hung in the air.

"Come to my ship," Hook went on. "Alone. Lay down your knife. Then I will release the boy."

The lost boys stirred in alarm.

"No!" Michael whispered fiercely.

Wendy stepped closer to Peter. "Do not," she breathed.

Peter did not look at her. His eyes never left Hook.

"And if I refuse?" Peter asked.

Hook's voice did not change. "Then I shall take him with me. And perhaps others another night."

The forest seemed to press in around them.

Peter lowered himself slowly until his feet touched the ground. The movement was small, but it felt very large.

Wendy caught his arm. "You cannot trust him," she whispered.

Peter glanced at her then. His face was bright and strange.

"Trust?" he repeated lightly. "I do not trust him."

"Then do not go," she said.

He smiled at her, quick and shining. "He cannot keep me," he said. "No one can."

Hook watched the two of them closely.

"Well?" Hook prompted softly.

Peter stepped forward one pace.

At once the pirates tensed.

Wendy felt as if she could not breathe.

"Release him first," Peter said.

Hook tilted his head. "You ask much."

"You ask more," Peter replied.

For a long moment no one moved.

Then, very slowly, Hook nodded to one of his men.

The pirate cut the rope at the boy's wrists and shoved him forward.

"Run," Peter ordered.

The boy ran at once, stumbling past Wendy into the trees.

Peter stood alone between the pirates and his friends.

Hook smiled faintly.

"Now," he said.

Peter lifted his chin. "I will come," he answered.

“Peter!” Wendy cried.

He did not look back.

The pirates moved in around him, but they did not touch him. Peter walked with them toward the dark path that led to the bay.

Hook walked beside him.

Wendy felt her heart break in two.

The lost boys gathered close to her.

“What do we do?” John whispered.

Wendy wiped her eyes quickly.

“We follow,” she said.

Her voice was steady now.

“But carefully.”

In the distance, beyond the trees, the sea waited.

And on it, the dark shape of the pirate ship.

Part 12

The pirates led Peter through the trees toward the shore. They did not tie his hands. They did not touch him. Yet they stayed close, as if they feared he might vanish into the air at any second.

Hook walked at Peter’s side.

“You are quiet,” Hook said in a smooth voice.

“You talk too much,” Peter answered.

Hook gave a small smile. “We shall see who talks more before the night ends.”

The trees grew thinner. The smell of salt air grew strong. The dark shape of the pirate ship rose ahead, tall and still on the water.

From far behind, hidden among the trees, Wendy and the boys followed at a distance. They moved carefully, keeping to the shadows.

“Stay low,” Wendy whispered. “Do not let them hear you.”

Michael clutched her hand. John moved ahead to watch the path.

At the shore, a small boat waited. Two pirates stepped into it first. Hook

motioned for Peter to enter.

Peter leapt lightly into the boat without fear.

Hook stepped in after him. The boat pushed away from the sand and slid across the dark water toward the ship.

Wendy crouched behind a rock and watched. Her heart felt tight and heavy.

“We cannot let him go alone,” John whispered.

“No,” Wendy said. “But we must be wise.”

They waited until the boat reached the ship and the figures climbed the rope ladder to the deck.

The ship was quiet. No ticking sounded from the water. The great fish was not near.

“Now,” Wendy said softly. “We go.”

Peter stood on the deck of the pirate ship as if it were his own. The pirates formed a circle around him. Lantern light flickered on their faces.

Hook stood opposite him.

“You are brave,” Hook said. “I give you that.”

“You say that often,” Peter replied.

Hook’s eyes were dark.

“Bravery,” he said slowly, “is best when it ends.”

Peter did not answer.

“You have cost me much,” Hook went on. “My hand. My sleep. My peace.”

“You chose to fight,” Peter said.

Hook lifted his hook slightly. “And I shall choose again.”

He gave a small signal.

At once two pirates lunged forward with ropes.

Peter sprang up into the air. He flew high, above their reach.

Laughter broke from him.

“You cannot catch me!” he cried.

The pirates jumped and grabbed at air.

Hook’s face did not change.

“Close the sails,” he ordered quietly. “Bring the net.”

A large net was thrown upward. It spread wide in the lantern light.
Peter darted to one side, but another net rose behind him.
He twisted and flew low, but the masts and ropes limited his space.
For a moment, just one moment, he was forced down.
The net fell over him.
The pirates pulled hard. The ropes tightened.
Peter struggled, but the net held.
Hook stepped forward slowly.
“You see,” he said softly, “even you may be caught.”
Peter’s eyes flashed with anger.
“Let me down,” he said fiercely.
“In time,” Hook answered.
From the dark edge of the ship, unseen by the pirates, small shapes climbed quietly over the side.
Wendy was first.
She had waited until the nets were thrown and the pirates’ eyes were lifted.
John followed her. Then Michael and the lost boys.
They crouched behind barrels and coils of rope.
Wendy’s heart pounded.
Peter was trapped in the net at the center of the deck.
Hook stood before him, calm and pleased.
“I could end this now,” Hook said. “But I prefer a little more sport.”
Peter stopped struggling.
He looked straight at Hook.
“You are afraid,” Peter said suddenly.
Hook’s eyes narrowed.
“Of what?” he asked.
“Of the ticking,” Peter answered.
At that exact moment, from somewhere beyond the ship, over the dark water, came a faint sound.
Tick.

Tock.

It was soft. Very far away.

But it was there.

Hook went pale.

The pirates froze.

The sound came again.

Tick.

Tock.

Peter's face broke into a wild smile.

Wendy gripped the edge of the barrel.

The great fish was near once more.

And everything was about to change.

Part 13

The ticking grew louder over the dark water.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

Tock.

The pirates looked at one another with fear in their eyes. One dropped the rope he was holding. Another stepped back from the edge of the deck.

Captain Hook did not move at first. His face had turned white, but he stood very straight.

"It is only the sea," he said quietly.

But the sound came again, clear and steady.

Tick.

Tock.

A heavy shape moved beneath the water near the ship. The surface broke for a moment and closed again.

The pirates cried out.

“The fish!” one shouted.

Peter laughed from inside the net.

“He has come for you!” he cried.

Hook’s eyes flashed with anger and fear together.

“Silence!” he ordered.

But the pirates were already backing away from the rail.

In that moment of fear and noise, Wendy moved.

She ran low across the deck to where Peter was trapped. John followed close behind. Michael clutched a small knife in both hands.

“Hold still!” Wendy whispered.

She began to cut at the net with shaking fingers.

The rope was thick.

Peter stopped struggling and held himself still.

“Faster,” John breathed.

The ticking grew louder still.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

Tock.

Hook turned sharply at the sound of rope tearing.

He saw Wendy kneeling beside Peter.

“You!” he cried.

He strode forward, lifting his hook.

John leapt in front of Wendy.

Hook swung his hook downward.

John stumbled back, barely avoiding it.

The pirates were in confusion. Some stared at the sea. Others shouted orders that no one followed.

The net tore open.

Peter burst free.

He flew straight upward, high above the deck.

“Now!” he shouted.

The lost boys sprang from their hiding places. They rushed at the pirates while the men were still afraid of the ticking.

Peter dropped down in front of Hook.

The two faced each other once more.

The ticking was very loud now.

The great fish rose beside the ship. Its back cut through the water like a dark hill.

Hook’s breath came fast.

“You will not win,” Peter said.

Hook struck at him, wild and fast. Peter flew aside and struck back.

Steel rang in the night.

The ship rocked as the fish struck its side.

Pirates screamed and ran.

Hook stepped back toward the rail without seeing it.

Peter pressed forward.

“Tick!” Peter cried.

“Tock!” the sea answered.

Hook’s heel hit the edge of the deck.

He looked down.

The dark water moved below him.

The ticking was right beneath him now.

For a second, fear took all the strength from his face.

Peter raised his knife.

Hook lunged once more.

Peter twisted away.

Hook lost his balance.

He fell backward over the rail.

There was a splash.

The water closed over him.

The great fish turned at once.

There was a sudden rush of foam and a deep roll in the sea.
Then only waves remained.
The ticking faded.
Tick.
Tock.
Farther.
Fainter.
Gone.
The pirates who were left on the deck dropped their weapons.
Some fell to their knees.
The lost boys stood panting.
Wendy held Michael close.
Peter landed lightly on the deck.
He looked at the dark water for a long moment.
Then he turned back to them with a bright smile.
“He is gone,” he said.
The boys cheered weakly.
Wendy felt both relief and sadness.
The night air felt different now.
The great enemy of the island had fallen.
But the Neverland did not feel smaller.
It felt very quiet.
Peter walked to the rail and looked out at the sea.
“The ship is ours,” he said lightly.
The lost boys looked at him in wonder.
Wendy stepped beside him.
“It is over,” she said softly.
Peter did not answer at once.
He watched the dark water where the ticking had been.
And for the first time since she had known him, Wendy thought she saw in his face not laughter, not pride, but something like thought.

Just for a moment.

Then it was gone.

Part 14

The pirate ship lay quiet on the dark water. The wind moved softly through the sails. The pirates who had not run away stood in a small group, heads lowered.

Peter turned to them.

“You may go,” he said lightly. “The sea is wide.”

The pirates did not argue. They lowered a boat and left the ship without a word.

Soon only Peter, Wendy, John, Michael, and the lost boys remained on the deck.

“We have won,” one boy said in wonder.

“Yes,” Peter answered. “We have won.”

But Wendy did not feel joy as she thought she would. She looked at the empty water where Hook had fallen.

“It is finished,” she said softly.

Peter sprang up onto a barrel.

“Now we sail!” he cried. “We are pirates!”

The boys cheered.

They ran about the deck, laughing and shouting. They raised and lowered ropes. They called out orders in loud voices.

“Captain Peter!” one shouted.

Peter bowed.

Wendy watched them for a long moment.

Then she turned to John and Michael.

“It is time,” she said quietly.

“Time?” Michael repeated.

“To go home.”

The words felt heavy and strange in her mouth.

John looked at the island in the distance. The trees were dark shapes against the sky.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “Home.”

Michael’s face changed.

“Will mother truly be waiting?” he asked.

Wendy knelt and held his shoulders.

“She will,” she said firmly. “She will keep the window open.”

Peter heard the word.

“Home?” he said sharply.

Wendy stood and faced him.

“Yes,” she answered. “We must go back.”

The boys grew quiet.

Peter’s face brightened in his quick way.

“You may come again,” he said at once. “When you like.”

Wendy shook her head gently.

“We cannot stay for ever,” she said.

“Why not?” Peter demanded.

“Because we grow up.”

Peter’s smile faded.

“I do not,” he said.

“No,” Wendy agreed softly. “You do not.”

For a moment they stood facing one another in the quiet night.

Then Peter looked away first.

“Very well,” he said lightly. “We shall take you back.”

The boys made ready at once. They did not argue. They did not beg to stay.

Wendy felt proud of them.

They flew from the ship back to the island once more. They did not land.

The trees below looked dark and deep.

“Good-bye,” Wendy whispered.

The Neverland did not answer.

Peter led them into the sky.

They flew over the sea again, past clouds and stars. This time the journey felt shorter. Or perhaps Wendy did not notice the time.

When at last they saw the lights of London below them, Wendy's heart leapt.

"There," Peter said calmly. "Second to the right."

They came to the nursery window.

It was open.

Light shone softly inside.

Wendy's breath caught.

They flew in quietly.

The room was as they had left it. The beds stood ready. The floor was clean.

And by the fire, in a chair, sat Mrs. Darling.

She was asleep.

Her face was pale, but gentle.

Wendy ran to her and knelt beside her.

"Mother," she whispered.

Mrs. Darling stirred.

Her eyes opened slowly.

For a moment she did not understand what she saw.

Then she cried out softly and held her arms wide.

"Wendy!"

John and Michael ran to her.

She held them all at once, laughing and crying together.

Mr. Darling rushed in behind her.

Nana barked with joy.

The nursery filled with sound and warmth.

Peter stood by the window.

He watched.

Wendy looked back at him.

"Come," she said gently.

Peter shook his head.

"I do not belong," he answered.

She stepped toward him.

"You will come again?" she asked.

“Yes,” he said at once. “To hear stories.”

Wendy nodded.

Peter smiled his bright, quick smile.

Then he flew out of the window and into the night.

Wendy ran to the window.

She watched until she could no longer see him.

The stars shone quietly above London.

And somewhere far away, over the dark sea, the Neverland waited.