

Part 1: Lost and Found

A "Pirates of the Caribbean" fanfiction
by Molly Joyful

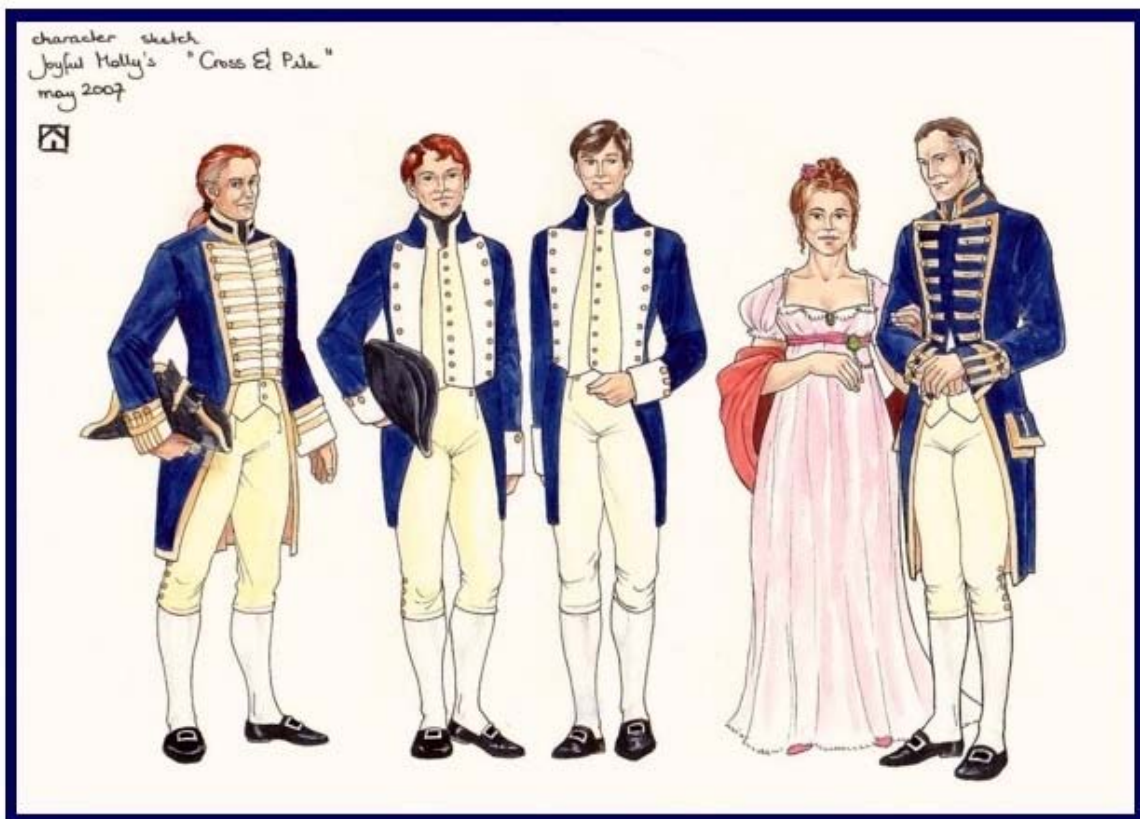


Illustration: Lineae

Overall rating: R

Genre: slash, hint of het

Pairings: Norrington/Gillette, Norrington/Elizabeth

Other characters: Norrington jr., Gillette jr.

Warnings: a wee bit of angst, sap, first time

Author's notes: the quotes at the beginning of each chapter are taken from traditional nursery rhymes.

Summary: 22 years after the victory over Barbossa, all involved have grown older - but not wiser. Norrington and Gillette have old scores to settle, Elizabeth hasn't given up her dreams, and Jack Sparrow has made a discovery which will turn the lives of friends and enemies upside down. When their sons disappear, the grumpy old men have to agree on a ceasefire to save them.

Disclaimer:

**"Oh Disney in your castle bright
You might think fanfic's not right
But see, the pirates, they don't mind
So, just for once, pretend you're blind.**

**Oh copyright, I honour thee
So there's no point in suing me
And C + Ds would be a folly
Respectfully,**

Yours, Joyful Molly"

Once more with feeling and in legalese:

All characters and names connected with the movie franchise "Pirates of the Caribbean" as well as all related images on this page are copyright © Disney Enterprises Inc., respectively is with the respective copyright holders (now there's a word-combination to be proud of!). No copyright infringement is intended, the use of the material is allowed under the fair use clause of the Copyright Law. "The Joyful Molly" is a parody, no profit is made with the fanfiction published here, and overall, I'd rather be in Portsmouth.

The stories and all original characters are mine, mine, mine and may not be used anywhere, also not in excerpts, without my agreement.

Chapter 1

"And all the King's horses, and all the King's men, couldn't put Jamie together again..."

"What a tragedy. Parents shouldn't live to see their children's funerals."

James Norrington was well in the mood for running his sword through the next phrasemonger pestering him with that statement. There had been nothing *left* of Jamie that could have been buried. All he had to remind him of his son was Jamie's lieutenant's patent and a lock of hair, fine like silk, cut off by the hand of his mother when he had been just a toddler.

One shot from a French gun, and the young man had been gone. Norrington had been spared details, but he had fought in enough battles to know that they had probably used a bucket and a shovel to prepare Jamie for his funeral at sea.

"And all the King's Horses, and all the King's Men, couldn't put Jamie together again..." Norrington murmured to himself, which earned him an odd look from his first lieutenant, Frank Jenkins.

"Sir, with all due respect, wouldn't you rather continue this tomorrow? You must be tired."

"Mr. Jenkins, mind your own business. How many are left?"

Lt. Jenkins sighed and consulted the list.

"Let me see... 4 that *could* be him, 3 that *might* be him, and one who's a wild guess."

Norrington's frown deepened. Looking for Gillette at the naval hospital was like searching for a needle in a haystack. The lists with the names of the injured wasn't complete, and many names had been misspelled by some idiot at the admiralty. His search had become even more frustrating when he learned that some of the wounded had been placed in the care of good-natured townfolk.

Then there was the possibility that Gillette wasn't here at all, that "missing" meant "gone forever". Norrington simply refused to consider that option.

Lt. Jenkins had no doubt that Thomas Gillette was dead. But he had served long enough under Captain Norrington to know that the man wouldn't believe in the death of his former first lieutenant until somebody would come forward and present Gillette's body to him.

"Who's closest?" Norrington asked, leaning heavily on his cane.

"One could-be-him, two might-be-him and the wild guess."

"What are you waiting for then? Lead the way."

Jenkins obeyed, careful not to leave his captain behind. He cursed that bloody Lt. Groves who had felt duty-bound to inform Norrington that Gillette had very likely died during the Battle of Trafalgar. Unfortunate, no doubt, and regrettable, but really no reason for Norrington to drag his loyal 1st

lieutenant through the naval hospital of Gibraltar day after day!

Norrington and Gillette hadn't exchanged a single word within the last twenty years. Rumours were afloat that there had been a terrible row between the two men right after the announcement of James Norrington's engagement to Miss Elizabeth Swann, and while most of it was hearsay, there must have been some truth to the claim that Gillette had committed the outrageous act of aiming his sword at his captain.

Norrington had brushed this off as yarn, but how else could one explain that Gillette, no doubt a very capable officer, had never made it past lieutenant, while Norrington was well on his way to admiral?

Thanks God the repairs on HMS *Buckthorn* would soon be finished, and being in charge of his ship again would hopefully bring Norrington to his senses.

Their search hadn't produced a single sign of that blasted Gillette. Jenkins couldn't remember in how many faces they had looked; who would have thought that there were so many red-heads in the Royal Navy?

Jenkins approached a guard and showed him the list. The man scratched his head and pointed at a scrawny man of about fifty years of age. Jenkins looked over to Norrington, but the captain shook his head.

This procedure was repeated two more times in different areas of the hospital. Norrington was tired and in pain, that was obvious from his ashen face.

"Shouldn't we return, Sir?"

"You forget the wild guess, Mr. Jenkins."

"As you wish, Sir. Over there, please."

The wild guess huddled under a coat that was at least three sizes too large for him. One foot was bandaged. The hands were hidden in long sleeves, and all that could be seen of his head was a shock of red hair.

"Jenkins, that's a lad."

"So it seems."

"How likely is it then that he served as my first lieutenant on the *Dauntless*?"

"Not very likely, Sir."

The coat moved, and a pair of brown eyes became visible under a pale forehead.

"Captain Norrington?"

Norrington made one step forward and squinted his eyes.

"You know me?"

The coat nodded.

"Yes, Sir."

"What is your name?"

"Midshipman Thomas Gillette, Sir."

Norrington felt a lump in his throat.

"Good grief. That's not possible."

Thomas sat up, the coat still wrapped tightly around him.

"My father often spoke of you."

Norrington tried to ignore that the lad had used the past form.

"I trust he is well?"

A shadow fell on Thomas' face.

"I was with him on the poop deck when we were attacked. Everything blew up, I don't know what happened to him."

He was brave, Norrington had to give him credit for that. He obviously thought his father was dead, an opinion Norrington yet refused to share.

"Does your family know that you're here, Thomas?"

"Nobody to write to, Sir."

"What about your mother?"

Thomas looked embarrassed, and Norrington decided to delay further inquiries for the moment.

"Sir, what are we going to do now?" Jenkins asked, not affected by the same memories and emotions as Norrington and eager to get out of the hospital.

Norrington looked at Thomas thoughtfully.

"We came here to find Thomas Gillette, we have been successful, we can leave now. Please follow me, Mr. Gillette."

"But Sir, you can't do that!" Jenkins protested.

Norrington straightened up and glared at Jenkins.

"Are you trying to tell me what to do, lieutenant?"

"No, Sir, of course not, my apologies, it's just that we can't take somebody with us and..."

"Now you don't say... I can't wait to see who would try and stop me, Mr. Jenkins. Mr. Gillette here will accompany us; we can possibly not leave him here. Take off that coat, Mr. Gillette; it might have slipped your attention, but it's a French one."

Thomas obeyed, revealing a skinny figure that reminded Norrington painfully of the gangly youth Gillette had been when their paths had first crossed.

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen, Sir. Almost. Next - winter."

"Sixteen then."

Norrington took off his own coat and handed it over to the youth. Thomas hesitated to take it, especially after seeing the disapproving expression on Lt. Jenkins' face.

"Make haste, we don't have all day. It's just a coat. Can you stand up? Yes? Good, lean on Mr. Jenkins here for support."

Jenkins paled upon seeing the captain's coat on Gillette. That was taking charity a little too far in his eyes.

"Pardon me, Sir, but..."

"Not if you continue to refuse following my orders. Mr. Gillette is injured, help him."

"But Sir..." Jenkins tried to protest.

"Mr. Jenkins, you are really testing my patience today. Would you rather serve somewhere else? In the Caribbean, maybe? I heard the dying rate is down to 18% within the first three months of service now."

"No, Sir, of course not," Jenkins hurried to reply. "Come, lad, let me help you."

"Thank you, Sir," Thomas politely replied, but there was also a fine, smug smile on his lips, and

Norrington noticed with great pleasure that young Thomas was a true chip off the old block.

* * *

The journey back to London had been swift and without any complications. Thomas had been in the Royal Navy since his 12th year, and he had felt odd sailing on a ship as a mere passenger. Captain Norrington had offered him to be a guest at his house until he had made a full recovery, and Thomas had gladly accepted. If only his father could have been here as well.

Thomas looked out of the coach that transported him and the captain to the Norrington's home, the one his father had once or twice referred to as a "magnificent cage for two monkeys". Thomas didn't think it looked too bad, just - big. One could probably get lost in there without problems! It was better than the hospital in any case, where the cries of the injured had kept him awake all night.

The coach came to a halt, and James Norrington frowned when he saw the family's doctor leaving the house. As quick as he could he stepped off the coach.

"Doctor Harrow! You here? Good grief, has anything happened to my wife?"

The man wiped the sweat off his forehead.

"Captain Norrington! No, everything is fine with the lady of the house, almost too fine, if I may say so. Please calm her down, the excitement is not good for her. I have very good news for you, though!"

Thomas, who had followed Norrington, stood behind him, not quite sure what to do now.

Again the doctor beamed at Norrington.

"A miracle, Captain! Nothing short of a miracle!"

"What? For the love of God, speak!"

"It's Jamie, Captain! He's alive!"

Norrington could feel how his heart skipped a beat. He trembled, his tongue licking his lips nervously.

"If that's supposed to be a joke, I have to kill you, Sir."

"God forbid I would ever joke about such a matter, Sir! It is true, Jamie is alive and here! A bit worse for the wear, and it will take some time for him to recover, but I swear by all that is dear to me: he is up there in his bedroom, by now possibly hugged to death by his mother!"

"Oh my God..." Norrington murmured. He could hear Elizabeth's laughter, answered by a cough and some muffled words that could only come from one person. Without paying any further notice to the doctor or Thomas, he limped into the house, ignoring the pain in his leg.

"Who is Jamie?" Thomas asked.

Doctor Harrow looked at the young man over the rim of his glasses.

"Why, James Norrington, the son of the house, of course! Thought to be killed while serving on the *Temeraire*. Quite alive, though!"

"The *Temeraire*? But..."

"I have to leave, I'm already very late. Please give my compliments to Mrs. Norrington, I will return to look after Jamie in the evening."

The doctor nodded and left a very confused Thomas behind. Should he stay here and wait? Or knock on the door? Or just go in there?

The Gillettes had never distinguished themselves by shyness, and so Thomas decided to enter the house. He could still leave if he was asked to.

He stepped through the open front-door and sat down in a chair, waiting for the things to come.

* * *

Norrington stood in the door of his son's bedroom, hand clasped firmly over his mouth, or he would have screamed. Yes, it was Jamie - pale, gaunt and his arm in a sling, but it was his son.

Alive.

Elizabeth sat next to him on the bed, holding his uninjured hand, crying and ruffling his hair from time to time.

"Father!" Jamie cried out, and tried to sit up. Alas, he winced and sank back in the cushions. "Ouch. That bloody splinter! Will take me weeks to sit on my arse again."

"James, the language!" Elizabeth said disapprovingly and out of habit, only to break out in tears again.

Norrington crossed the room. Elizabeth stood up and threw her arms around his neck.

"He's back, James! Our boy is back!"

He returned the hug, then patted Elizabeth's shoulder and let go of her, sitting down on a chair next to his son's bed.

"Jamie - is it really you? But we were told..."

Now this was difficult. He wanted to hug Jamie, but he feared he could cause him pain. So he just took his hand and pressed it. He had to touch him, to be sure that he was really alive.

"I don't know who was blown apart, but it wasn't me, father! Maybe Collins, I really can't tell. There were fire and noise, and something hit me. Next thing I knew I was in the water and..."

He broke off and turned his head to the other side, not wanting his father to see his tears.

"It's alright, Jamie. You don't have to tell us now."

It would probably have been appropriate to break out in song and dance about the return of his son, and cry and laugh, but that was just not the way James Norrington was. Elizabeth would probably call him cold-hearted later on, but he knew his son would understand.

Jamie gave him a grateful smile.

"But I have to tell you how I was rescued, father."

"Jamie, you must be very tired, and..."

"... but listen, it was..."

"James, not now. You need to rest," Norrington said firmly.

"You just can't stop ordering people around, can you."

Norrington almost fell off his chair, and Jamie nodded.

"You're right, lieutenant. He never lets me finish a sentence!"

Slowly, very slowly Norrington turned his head towards the door. There were now strands of grey in the red hair, wrinkles around the eyes, and the lines in his face had deepened, but that aside, Thomas Gillette was still the same sarcastic bastard he had been twenty years ago.

"Would have never made it out of there alive without him," Jamie explained. "Took us a while to get here, though, and then we learned that you all thought I was dead!"

"Gillette?" Norrington croaked.

"Yes, Captain Norrington. *Sir.*"

Elizabeth took Gillette's hand and held it.

"I don't know how we can ever thank you, Mr. Gillette! I promise you my husband will do whatever he can to repay your kindness."

"Or you could get rid of Jenkins that git, and have Lt. Gillette as your 1st, father!"

Gillette snorted.

"A simple 'thank you' will do, Jamie."

"I - thank you," Norrington said, tongue-tied all of a sudden.

"Oh, nothing to thank me for, Sir. It's been my pleasure."

Norrington shook his head, hoping that his brain would start working again. It helped a little, and he suddenly remembered that he had brought a visitor with him.

"I will be forever in your debt. The first instalment of the repayment is waiting for you outside the house. As for the rest - we will see."

"I don't understand..."

Norrington arched his eyebrows.

"Of course you don't. You haven't changed a bit, Thomas."

Chapter 2

It was cold and rainy outside, and Thomas could see the passers-by through the window of Captain Norrington's library. The ladies were anxious to keep the hems of their dresses out of the puddles, and the gentlemen enjoyed the sight of exposed ankles and, thanks to gusts of wind, nicely shaped calves in silk stockings.

Thomas sat in a large leather armchair opposite Jamie's. The son of Captain James Norrington tapped his fingers impatiently on the armrest. It was a good thing Thomas could concentrate on more than one task; this allowed him to look out of the window, read a book and hold a conversation with his new friend at the same time.

"What are you reading?" Jamie asked, shifting on his seat.

"It's called *'Modern Chivalry: Containing the Adventures of Captain John Farrago and Teague O'Regan, His servant'* by Hugh Henry Brackenridge."

"Oh, I know that one. Boring. Father buys the oddest things. American he is, that Brackenridge chap. They know no bounds over there, not even when it comes to the titles of their books."

Thomas shrugged.

"It's very funny. Here we have an American with humour, so I'm hopeful that there are more."

Jamie, whose ideas about the former colonies were rather conservative, decided to change the subject. He shifted again and groaned.

"Damnation, I still can't sit on my arse. This house has turned into a bloody hospital! Your foot, father's knee and my arm. Three-legged cats, all of us."

Thomas looked up from his book.

"But at least you are here and can complain. Others were less fortunate."

"You sound like my father. Are you sure they didn't mix us up when we were babies?"

"Considering that you are four years older than I, it's not very likely."

"True, that. And you look like the spitting image of your father. I suppose that helped mine greatly to identify you."

"There weren't that many Gillettes at the hospital."

They were treading on dangerous ground now. Jamie knew that he would have to talk about the battle and the way he had been injured if he asked Thomas for his time at the hospital. He wasn't ready to talk about this yet, neither about his fear nor his horror upon seeing Lt. Collins, who had

been only one year his senior and a friend, being blown to pieces.

"To think that my father rescued you, and yours rescued me! What might the odds of such a coincidence be, I wonder? It's almost unbelievable."

Thomas closed his book and put it aside.

"When we arrived, your doctor talked about a miracle. And I suppose that's what it is."

"A miracle, yes. That's true."

For a while the two young men sat in silence, though Thomas could tell by the frown on Jamie's face that he was raking his brain over something important.

"Tom, have you ever enquired for the reason why your father fell out with mine?" he finally asked.
"They must have been good friends, from all I know. What happened?"

"I did ask once, but he didn't reply. It was obvious he didn't wish to discuss it, so I never approached him about it again. How about you? Did you ask?"

"Talking to my father is like holding a conversation with a tongue-tied clam, and about as informative. He only said they had a disagreement, and that was it."

"What is your opinion?"

"I don't know. My father can be a very difficult man to get along with, I guess your father didn't feel comfortable serving under him anymore. What do you think?"

Thomas blinked.

"I think it was a matter of the heart."

"A matter of the heart? Good grief, Tom! We're talking about our fathers here, the mere thought is disgusting! They are *old!*"

He shuddered, and Thomas had to laugh.

"They were young once as well. I think - I think they fell in love with the same lady. Maybe your mother? She's very beautiful and kind. They both courted her and then she chose your father, and mine couldn't stand it and left..."

Thomas drifted off, lost in his fantasy of a tragic love affair.

James laughed.

"My mother said that your father used to hate her. He once told my grandfather that she needed a

good spanking. Imagine!"

"That sounds very much like my father. Well, then maybe it was another lady."

"Maybe your mother?"

Thomas quickly looked away.

"No," was his brusque reply. "Your father would have never... it must have been somebody else."

"Heh, probably. See, that's why I'd choose a good ship over a woman any time. You know what you get, you can't get cheated, and you'd very likely never fall out with your best friend."

"I'm awestruck by your conclusions, Mr. Norrington, without a doubt based on many years of experience."

Jamie threw a cushion after Thomas, who ducked and laughed.

"Sarcastic git," Jamie said, and he would have poked his tongue out at Thomas if he hadn't felt too old for such behaviour. It was a good thing Thomas was here; he liked the midshipman, though he seemed to be far too serious for his age. He was good company, yet Jamie still felt terribly bored and useless. As much as he loved his parents and enjoyed everybody's attention, he was eager to return to his duties.

"It's driving me insane to sit here all day, waiting for my bones to heal. Don't you long for the sea as well, Tom?"

"Of course I do. The faster I can return to my duties, the quicker I can take my lieutenant's exam. Only one and a half years to go, but it seems to me like an eternity."

Jamie snickered.

"That's nothing compared to the exam itself, Tom. They will rake you over coals. That sure felt like an eternity to me, replying to all those questions and seeing them frown."

"Thank you so much for your encouragement, Lt. Norrington."

"You're very welcome, Midshipman Gillette. If they ask you to make and shorten sail, you can tell the captains of the examination board that you have no idea how it is done, but that you could recite a love poem."

"Just you mock me, Jamie. I still think an unhappy love was the reason for their disagreement."

Jamie steepled his fingers.

"If that's the case I will find out. I'm like a truffle pig when it comes to disclosing secrets."

"Just make sure you won't end up with an apple in your snout," Thomas replied, and reached for the book to continue his reading.

* * *

Elizabeth stood at the end of the dining-room table and eyed the decoration critically. The maid chewed her lip, worried that she might have forgotten something and would be reprimanded. Elizabeth was usually neither stern nor pedantic, but today was her 22nd wedding anniversary, and she wanted things to be perfect. She walked around the table and rearranged some flowers, refolded a napkin and was finally satisfied with the result.

"Thank you, Alice. I'll call if you should be needed."

Alice curtsied and returned to the kitchen, relief obvious on her face.

"It looks perfect, dear. Just like you," Norrington commented. He was standing next to the fireplace, hands clasped behind his back, watching his wife's efforts with an amused smile.

"You've never been a convincing liar," she replied, and winked at her husband. "We should have married in summer, then we could have a picnic. Just you and I, without those blatherskites and swanks. And I could definitely do without their wives, bunch of viperish, empty-headed old cats that they are."

He laughed.

"If you should feel tempted to chase the lot out of the house, be my guest. I'll gladly lend you my sword for that noble deed."

"Don't tempt me, James. It would be a much-welcome diversion."

Norrington looked at the portrait above the fireplace, which showed him and Elizabeth on their first wedding anniversary. A beautiful young woman with a whimsical smile, holding an infant. Behind her a not-so young and rather uptight-looking commodore.

Elizabeth, who saw him looking at the painting, came to stand next to him and put her hand on his arm.

"Jamie looks like a cherub on that painting, don't you agree?"

"Yes, it's amazing. In truth he resembled a dried prune."

"James!"

"He's turned out fine, mind you. And I'm very glad that he has your spirit rather than mine. I'm afraid he'd bore all the lovely young ladies craving his attention out of his head otherwise."

Elizabeth leaned her head on his shoulder.

"You're not boring, James. You've never been. Just a bit - reserved."

Norrington looked at her, his face suddenly quite serious.

"Have you ever regretted it, Elizabeth? I mean, marrying me?"

She frowned.

"That's a very odd question, James. Especially on this day."

"This day or any other; I sometimes wonder. I wouldn't hold it against you, my dear. I'm just curious."

Elizabeth tapped her index finger on her lips.

"Regretted? No. No, I can honestly say that I haven't regretted my decision for a moment. But I admit that there have been times when I contemplated how my life would have been if I'd turned you down."

"And you realised that being the wife of a blacksmith with twelve children would not have been your idea of an ideal life."

"James, he only has ten children, and his wife looks happy enough."

"My apologies, my dear."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"It seems to be your intention to celebrate this anniversary with an interrogation, James. I can't say I'm surprised, I've expected something in this direction."

Norrington arched his eyebrows.

"You did? Actually, no, it's not my intention to interrogate you, Elizabeth. Not at all. I was just thinking."

"Of Thomas Gillette?"

"Elizabeth!"

She sat down in one of the armchairs next to the fireplace and stared into the flames.

"James, we're married for twenty-two years today. Do you really think me to be so blind?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about choices, James. You asked me if I ever regretted that I accepted your proposal. How about you? Any regrets?"

"I really can't see what..." he began, but Elizabeth cut him off.

"I wouldn't hold it against you either, James. But I'm curious. Did you regret it?"

"No," Norrington said firmly. "Never."

"But you did wonder at times what it would have been like if..."

"Elizabeth, please. We really shouldn't hold such a conversation on this day. This or any other, as for that."

"Ah, the return of the commodore. You've been like that back then, James. Always reserved, never revealing your feelings. You hinted, I had to guess. We could have both spared ourselves a lot of grief if you'd only once told me that you loved me."

"A blind could have seen that I loved you!"

"I'd have preferred it if you'd told me."

"Elizabeth, I'm sorry. I know I haven't been the man you were dreaming off, and I'm well aware that it hasn't been easy for you to live with me. But I hope you never doubted my feelings, for they were and still are sincere."

"I know they are. As sincere as the ones you hold for dear Mr. Gillette."

His hand grasped to the mantle of the fireplace for support.

"Elizabeth..."

She looked up to him.

"We are so much alike, James. Has this never occurred to you? We both had to make a decision, and we both chose the option that allowed us to love and be loved without ending on the gallows. Can we be blamed for this? I don't think so."

Norrington limped to the armchair next to her and sat down. He took her hand, and she smiled at him, caressing his knuckles with her thumb. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"Elizabeth, dearest Elizabeth; what can I say? What do you want me to do?"

"My father wrote that he would come to visit us. He wishes to spend some time with Jamie while

he's still here and recovering. He will keep me company, so you could spend some days at our cottage and recover from your injuries. I suggest you'll take a friend along - you could talk about old times."

He stared at her in complete bewilderment.

"Elizabeth! Are you aware what you are suggesting here?"

He looked in her face for a sign of sarcasm or wickedness, but all he could find was understanding and a loving smile. The cheerful, pretty girl he had married had grown into a beautiful, mature woman, and he felt privileged that he had been allowed to accompany her on her way.

Norrington cleared his throat.

"I - well. This is - twenty-two years, and you still manage to surprise me, Elizabeth."

"That's what keeps a marriage happy," she said, and kissed him.

Chapter 3

It was a good thing the housekeeper of the cottage, Mrs. Burton, had already arranged everything for the arrival of Captain Norrington and his guest and lit a fire. The weather had worsened since their departure; due to the rain and heavy gales their journey had taken far longer than expected, and James and Thomas had arrived at 'Birch Grove' wet to the bones, exhausted and in a foul mood.

However, after a quick change of clothes and a cup of rum with a lacing of tea things had improved, and the excellent grilled lamb with roasted potatoes had found their greatest approval.

"Very unwise thing to do, Sir, travelling in this weather," Mrs. Burton grumbled while clearing the table, disapproval obvious on her face. "Especially with your leg and all. Your wife should've kept you home, that's what I say. Young women nowadays, no common sense... wouldn't have had that with my Henry, no, Sir!"

The two men had a hard time stifling their laughter. Mrs. Burton disappeared in the kitchen, and if the ferocity she handled the tableware with was anything to go by, she was tearing strips off poor Elizabeth.

"She scares me, James," Thomas whispered. "She looks like the boatswain we had on the *Dauntless*."

"True," James whispered back, "if he'd had whiskers, she'd be the spitting image of him."

Some time later, Mrs. Burton returned to the dining room, already wearing pattens, a thick coat and a large scarf.

"Leaving you now, Sirs. I'll be back in the early morning, preparing breakfast."

"No, please, my dear Mrs. Burton, that certainly won't be necessary. Lt. Gillette and I are both exhausted from our journey, and we will very likely not be up before lunch. It will be fine if you are here in the early evening."

Mrs. Burton glared at James and waved his words aside.

"Ah bah, nonsense! It's not good for a man to skip breakfast, Sir. Can't have you and the lieutenant here starving, now can I?"

"Very kind of you, Mrs. Burton, but I must insist. I couldn't bear the thought of a lady out in such beastly weather that early in the day."

"If you say so, Sir," she grumbled, but it was obvious that she was flattered. "Have a good night then, gentlemen. Fire's lit in the bedrooms. You better take young master Jamie's one, Sir. It's warmer there; at your age, one has to be careful."

"I thank you for your concern, Mrs. Burton. I wouldn't know how to manage without your help, considering my advanced age."

James' sarcasm was lost on Mrs. Burton.

"No need to thank me, Sir. My Henry's been just like you, never listened to my advice. And where is he now? On the churchyard. Hah!"

With those encouraging words Mrs. Burton left, and the two men let out a sigh of relief.

"A housekeeper can be quite a humbling experience. Looks like she has a weak spot for you, James."

"With a bit of luck, she might dote on you in future."

"I fear for my life. And now please tell me: why are we here?"

James twiddled his thumbs, then he swiped an imaginary bread crumb off the table.

"There are some things we need to discuss."

"For example?"

James sighed. It was difficult to find a start, so he just said the first thing that crossed his mind.

"I think you should make captain."

Thomas' face hardened.

"You have dragged me to this cottage in the middle of nowhere to tell me *that*? Certainly you must be jesting?"

That was not going well.

"No! I - it's just because Jamie suggested that you should serve under my command again. I wanted to tell you that I don't desire this."

"I have no desire to serve under your command again, either."

No, that was not going well at all.

"That's not what I - it's just that - I wondered if -"

"You used to be able to form coherent sentences," Thomas interrupted him. "Maybe you should try that approach?"

James cleared his throat.

"I wouldn't want you on my ship because I couldn't give you orders anymore. Considering that I had

twenty-two years to find the right words, I'm not doing very well, I suppose. I feel like an old fool."

It finally dawned Thomas what this might be all about.

"You should have felt like a fool back then. I told you that I love you, and asked if you returned my feelings. If I remember correctly, your reply was 'yes, but I think I'll marry Elizabeth'..."

"I'm aware that it was not the most diplomatic answer."

"And now you want to apologise? This is very embarrassing, I'd rather see this conversation coming to an end."

"We've lost twenty years, Thomas. If we can manage not to get ourselves killed, we might still have ten good years ahead of us."

"For us?"

James saw the mixture of hope and fear on Thomas' face, just like on that terrible evening so many years ago.

"Stay here. Please. With me."

Thomas leaned forward.

"When we first met, it was the Royal Navy Article Of War no. 28. Then it became no. 29, and now it's no. 30. The numbers may have changed, but the consequences in case of breach are still the same. 'Punished with death by the sentence of a court martial', James. Are you absolutely certain you want this? "

"Absolutely."

"Ah."

They sat in silence for a while, watching each other; Thomas scared of making a decision, James afraid of what that decision might be.

Finally, Thomas stood up and pushed the chair back.

"It's your house, James. Lead the way."

* * *

James headed for Jamie's bedroom. He wouldn't have felt comfortable staying with Thomas in the same room he usually shared with Elizabeth.

Hallway and corridor had been chilly, and the small bedroom was warm, thanks to the efficient Mrs.

Burton. She had heaped at least three covers on the narrow bed to make sure poor Captain Norrington wouldn't freeze to death during the night. Thoughtful soul that she was, she had also put the cordial he used to take in the evening on the bedside table and, to James' greatest embarrassment, the chamber pot next to the bed.

That just couldn't work.

"This is the most ridiculous, embarrassing, idiotic and pathetic situation I've ever been in," he stated, and kicked the pot under the bed. "I suggest we go downstairs and get drunk instead. This is absurd!"

He turned around, but Thomas stood between him and the door and made no attempt to step aside.

"Would you be good enough to move?" he snapped.

"I thought you'd never ask."

Thomas reached out and began to open James' cravat, the tip of his tongue firmly pressed in the corner of his mouth and a concentrated look on his face. He used to look like that while studying a nautical chart or making notes.

"What on earth are you doing, Thomas?"

"I'm trying to undress you. But please continue your twaddle; I can open buttons and listen to you simultaneously."

"You say that as if it was the most normal thing to do."

"You twaddling?"

"You undressing me."

Thomas put the cravat aside. He began to fiddle with the bow in James' pigtail, standing so close to him now that James could feel his breath on his skin. James wasn't quite sure what to do with his hands, so he clasped them behind his back, as if he were on deck of *HMS Buckthorn*.

The bow joined the cravat, and Thomas put his arms around Norrington's waist, pulling him close.

"You used to be smaller," James muttered.

"No, but you held your nose so high that you seemed to be taller."

James had often wondered what it would have been like if he'd kissed Thomas all those years ago. Awkward and clumsy, their noses bumping, and very likely also nothing short of a battle, as none of them would have allowed the other to take the lead without arguing about it first.

Now *Thomas* was kissing *him*, a scenario that had never really crossed his mind, and it was not like

anything he had ever imagined. Neither awkward nor clumsy, but loving and right. Thomas teased him, nipped on his lower lip, then withdrew only to kiss him again. Thomas' hands were now on James' back and on the nape of his neck, playing with his hair. His skin tingled, and he could feel the heat beginning to spread in his body. It was like running a fever, or like being drunk from heady wine.

"It *is* the most normal thing, James," Thomas whispered in his ear, then nuzzled the exposed soft skin of his neck, which seemed to be an even more intimate act than the kiss. James unclasped his hands and returned the embrace hesitantly. Thomas sighed happily and buried his face in James' hair.

"Now isn't it a good thing the days of the wigs are over," he said, and had to chuckle when James sniffed indignantly.

"I still feel that we've looked more dignified wearing wigs."

"As if one needed to wear bleached horsehair to look dignified. I hated them. Especially on you. The way you look now, *that* is dignified."

They kissed again, and from the confident way Thomas touched him, James guessed that this was not the first time he broke that bloody useless article no. 30. He could have asked him, but he'd rather not know. Not 'when', not 'why', and certainly not 'who'. It made him feel a little inadequate, what if he did everything wrong? It had always been him who had the knowledge, and Thomas had taken his orders. Now there were no ranks between them anymore; if caught, they'd be hanged with the same kind of rope.

James forgot all about ranks and hangings when Thomas' hands caressed his backside, pressing him close to his body. If Thomas' reaction was anything to go by, it couldn't be completely wrong what he was doing.

Shoes, stockings, waistcoats, shirts and breeches piled up on the floor, a mess of silk and wool and linen that James wouldn't have tolerated under normal circumstances. Now he didn't even notice. He was mesmerised by the sight of Thomas: the sharp contrast between weather-beaten face and hands and the white skin on the rest of his body. There were countless scars; of some James knew the origin, others were unknown to him.

"You must have quite a few battles behind you," Thomas said, and reached out to run two fingers along a scar that went from James' collar bone down to his ribs. James shivered; not only because the touch aroused him, but also because Thomas had obviously mused about the same things. They were a perfect match, despite their differences.

"A few. Just like you."

Thomas smiled. He took James hand and lied back on the bed, dragging him along. James shifted until he lay on top of Thomas, in a position that was comfortable for both of them. The feeling of Thomas' body and the knowing smile on his face alone almost made him come. James had to take a few deep breaths to calm down and gather himself before he kissed him.

James realised that Thomas allowed him to take the lead, knowing well how awkward he would feel in the role of the novice. It was overwhelming, the care and the tenderness, the love for Thomas; James was carried away by it like a leaf in a river. He had to kiss and touch him, explore every inch of his body, every hair, every mole, even every bloody freckle, and Thomas had a lot of them. The discovery of a treasure island could not have excited him more than finding a spot just above Thomas' hipbone that made him squirm and cry out when caressed.

Their bodies rocked against each other; Thomas' fingernails left angry red welts on James' back, and he bit down so hard on Thomas' shoulder at one point that he could taste the coppery flavour of blood in his mouth. This sensual frenzy couldn't last long, and it didn't. Their movements became increasingly erratic; Thomas was strong, and James had to be careful not to be thrown over and out of the bed. He pinned Thomas' hands above his head, holding him down while grinding against him.

"Finish this!" Thomas hissed, bucking under him. The command, accompanied by a wanton look from under short, ginger lashes was enough to push James over the edge. He cried out, and Thomas followed suit, repeating James' name over and over again. James collapsed on top of him, trembling and close to crying, desperately trying to catch his breath. There was so much he wanted to say, a thousand thoughts racing through his mind, but he didn't have the strength left to speak. He reached for Thomas' hand and kissed each finger, then rested his cheek in its palm.

"I love you," he murmured, twenty-two years delayed, but fortunately not too late.

* * *

Thomas ran the tips of his fingers over the scratches on James' back, as if his caresses could make them disappear and soothe the throbbing pain.

"I'm sorry that I hurt you," he said. "I didn't want this. It just - happened."

James, who had been a dead weight resting on his lover, stirred and pressed a kiss on the skin just below Thomas' ear.

"I didn't notice anything."

"Still, I'm sorry."

Thomas drew lazy circles and patterns on James' back, wrote his name just for the fun of it and ran his fingers through James' hair, playing with it. He delighted in the feeling of wrapping a strand around a finger, or pushing a lock behind James' ear.

"We're lovers now," Thomas said. "I like the sound of that: lovers. That's better than 'senior officers'."

"Absolutely. It should be a special rank."

Thomas smiled wickedly at James.

"Would the lover serve under the captain, or the captain under the lover?"

James rubbed his cheek on Thomas' chest and closed his eyes.

"This depends on the ability of the captain to move in the morning or not."

* * *

"Do you want more of the ham, grandfather?" Jamie yelled. He had to yell, otherwise Weatherby Swann wouldn't have understood him. The former governor was still in best of health and, despite his age, very popular with the ladies for his charms and wit, but unfortunately, he had become very hard of hearing, which made conversations between him and his family rather tiring.

He reached for his ear trumpet, and Jamie repeated his question.

"Ham? Yes, certainly, my dear boy!"

The servant hurried to Mr. Swann's side, and while she heaped more meat and potatoes on his plate, Mr. Swann turned to his daughter, who had already finished her meal and was discussing a book on poetry with Thomas.

"Elizabeth, dearest, you still haven't told me where James is."

"James is staying at our cottage, father."

"Yes, yes, you said that," Mr. Swann replied impatiently, "but I still don't understand what he's doing there at this time of the year!"

"Actually, I'm rather curious as well," Jamie said, and looked at his mother. "Usually, you two stay there in summer, but now it's November. It must be terribly dull, especially with that weather."

Elizabeth looked from her father to her son and folded her hands on the table.

"James is hunting foxes," she said.

Mr. Swann held the ear trumpet to his ear.

"I'm sorry my dear, could you repeat your answer? I fear I haven't heard you quite right. I understood you said he went on a fox hunt!"

Both he and Jamie laughed.

"Well, yes. James *did* go on a fox hunt."

"I always thought father doesn't care for hunting?"

Elizabeth looked at Thomas, who followed the conversation wide-eyed and slightly confused. Then she smiled at her son.

"That is true, Jamie. But he's very fond of foxes."

* * *

END OF PART 1

Part 2: Cross and Pile

*A "Pirates of the Caribbean" fanfiction
by Molly Joyful*

Overall rating: PG-13 to mild R (depending on chapter)

Genre: slash, hint of het, drama, romance, adventure

Pairings: Norrington/Gillette, Norrington/Elizabeth mentioned, and then there's... eh. Wait and see.
;-)

Other characters: Norrington, Gillette (heh!)

Warnings: a wee bit of angst, h/c

Author's notes: "Cross And Pile" takes place five years after the events in "Lost And Found".

Chapter 1

***"I wish I may, I wish I might,
Have the wish I wish tonight."***

"Dr. Henry! Please come here immediately!"

Upon hearing Admiral Norrington's voice, Dr. Henry quickly left his cot, put on breeches and shirt and hurried to the sickbay.

"Good grief! What has happened, Sir?"

Two men placed a limp figure on one of the cots; in a distance, Dr. Henry could make out the form of a man in a lieutenant's uniform. He squinted and recognised Norrington's son, Jamie.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Take this for your trouble," Norrington said, and handed the two men some coins.

"Our pleasure, Sir."

They made their bows and left.

"Your help is needed, Dr. Henry. The lieutenant here is injured."

The doctor looked down at the young man; he was none of the officers serving aboard HMS *Buckthorn*.

"Beaten up badly, the poor lad. Has there been an attack?"

"Brawl at a tavern," Admiral Norrington muttered. "You know what young men are like."

"Unfortunately yes," the doctor sighed. "You'd think they'd have enough of this after a battle; why they have to break each other's bones while on shore leave, I'll never understand."

Norrington didn't reply, just looked with great worry at the battered face of Thomas Gillette the younger. The mere thought of Tom being involved in any kind of brawl was ridiculous. Unlike his quick-tempered father, he was very quiet, calm and eager to be on good terms with everybody.

But Norrington couldn't tell the doctor what had really happened.

"There are many things I'll never understand," he said, then turned to his son who looked very angry and upset.

"Jamie, I wish to talk to you in my cabin. Wait there for me."

"I have to..." Jamie began, but his father cut him off.

"I'd say you've done enough," Norrington snapped. "Do as you're told!"

The doctor looked up from his patient, surprised to hear the admiral lashing out at his only son in such a way. He wondered if maybe Lt. Norrington knew more about the incident - he wouldn't have been surprised. When there was trouble, Jamie Norrington was usually right in the middle of it.

"As you wish, *Sir*," Jamie grumbled and left.

Norrington returned his attention to Tom, who had opened one eye and looked around, a confused expression on his face.

"I'm so sorry..." he murmured. "Where's Jamie? I have to tell him that..."

"That's not important now. Be assured I would have done anything to prevent this from happening if I'd known."

"I deserve it. Everything. So stupid of me... I only wanted to try... oh, my head hurts. And I can't see you well."

"That will pass. Dr. Henry will look after you, and you'll be back on your feet in no time."

"My father... oh God, what will he say..."

"He will understand, Tom. Now stop fretting about it, you should rest."

Tom drifted off into unconsciousness again, and Norrington looked questioningly at Dr. Henry, who frowned and shook his head.

"That eye's lost, Sir. The lieutenant must have been hit hard. Eh, but he still has one left to look at the girls with. Pity, though."

"Yes, a pity," Norrington agreed. "I'll leave Lt. Gillette to you. I have some matters to discuss with my son."

"I'll do all I can, Sir," Dr. Henry assured, and thought to himself that he wouldn't want to be in Jamie Norrington's shoes for the next hour.

* * *

Norrington hit his fist so hard on the table that his writing slope jumped in the air. He grimaced upon the stabbing pain in his hand that he had to suffer as a consequence. Jamie noticed the odd expression on his father's face, but he was too angry to care.

"How could you do such a thing? Is this what we have taught you? To be a traitor to your friends? What on earth were you thinking?"

Jamie paled. Never in his life had his father been so angry with him, and God knew he'd given him enough reason to blow his top during these last years.

"You're very unfair, father! Why, I've done everything to protect his honour! I didn't tell anybody who he was, and..."

"And now you probably even expect him to be grateful for your generosity? Do you have any idea what you've done to Tom? To your best friend?"

"I've saved him from a court martial and kept his name out of it, that's what I did! No, I don't expect anybody to be grateful, but I really don't think I deserve your anger. Better a bit of a beating than the pillory!"

Norrington reached across his table and grasped Jamie by the lapels of his coat.

"A bit of a beating? Do you know that he lost an eye? Not to mention the humiliation!"

Jamie tried to free from his father's grasp, but James Norrington did not let go.

"How was this any of your business in the first place?"

"He was lucky it was me who found him! He broke a bloody Article Of War!"

Norrington suddenly grew tired of the matter and let go of Jamie, who gasped for air.

"The mere thought of Tom breaking an Article Of War is ridiculous."

"I can't believe you're angry with me when it was him who did something so - disgusting! I saw it, I was there! How could I not - it was my duty!"

"Your duty is to use your head. You've lost your best friend, caused him serious harm, and all because of something which was quite possibly nothing but a bet or a misunderstanding!"

"It wasn't," Jamie insisted stubbornly. "There was nothing to misunderstand at all."

The admiral began to pace up and down his cabin.

"It's your good luck you're my son, otherwise Captain Gillette would very likely shoot you."

"If he'd taken better care of his son, this would never have happened in the first place! But that's probably his mother's blood. From all we know, she was..."

Norrington spun around, his face red with anger.

"Don't you dare! One more word, Jamie, and you will receive the first corporal punishment in your

life from my hand! Return to your ship and pack your sea chest. You're herewith reassigned to HMS *Bilberry*; she'll follow us to the West Indies in three weeks, and in Captain Edison, you'll find a like-minded zealot. Until then, I suggest you return home and look after your mother."

Jamie took a step back.

"You can't just send me away like this!"

"I can and I will," Norrington replied firmly. "It might have slipped your attention, lieutenant, but *I'm* the admiral around here!"

The two men glared at each other. Finally, Jamie sighed and hung his head.

"I really didn't intend this to end in such a way. What will happen to him now? Will there be a court martial?"

Norrington shook his head.

"No. We've lost Lt. Trevor last week. I'll keep Tom here as his replacement."

"Here? As a lieutenant? Now that you know what - what he does?"

Norrington straightened up.

"Should you be unhappy with my orders, I suggest you send a petition to the Admiralty. Who knows, with a bit of luck, they might hang me, and you'll receive a recommendation."

Jamie realised that he had been going too far, and decided to give in for now. He would confide in his mother; she had always managed to arbitrate in disputes between him and his father.

* * *

"I hate him! And I hate Captain Gillette! And most of all, I hate Tom! How could he get me in such a mess in the first place? I can't believe I've been so wrong about him!"

"Stop the ranting, Jamie, and tell me the whole story, right from the beginning," Elizabeth said, trying in vain to mend one of her husband's shirts. She couldn't sew; it was work she usually left for one of the maids, but she found it very comforting to stick the needle in the fabric and imagining it was the backside of Admiral Jenkins' annoying wife.

"The *Buckthorn*, the *Aprium* and the *Bilberry* were waiting for the *Aronia* to arrive. I had supper with father, then returned to the *Aprium* for the first watch. Tom was on shore leave. Now, I've told you that our crew has a reputation for being a foolhardy lot. Well, a boy came to inform me of a brawl in a tavern which had started between some of our midshipmen and some local lads. The captain was visiting his wife, so I left the command to Addams and ordered some marines to follow me and bring the brawlers to terms."

"A very sensible thing to do. That can't have been the reason why your father lost his temper."

"I told you he was being unreasonable! Well, upon arriving at the tavern, we found that the brawl involved over thirty people, some even joining in from the street! It was difficult to get some sort of order in the chaos, but I did my best. One man hit Nichols over the head with a bottle and then fled through a backdoor, so I followed him."

She bit off a thread.

"Probably the appropriate thing for an officer to do. And then?"

"Then - then I saw something which was rather unpleasant, things became heated, there was another brawl and Tom was injured."

Elizabeth put the shirt aside before she could ruin it completely.

"Jamie - I said I want to hear the whole story. What did you see, what happened, and how was Tom injured?"

Jamie shifted on his seat and blushed.

"This is nothing I could tell in front of a lady."

"I'm not a lady. I'm your mother. I changed your nappies when you were a baby, so there's nothing that could possibly shock me anymore. Out with it, now."

"I really don't think-"

"I didn't ask you to think. I asked you to talk. Bloody hell, Jamie, how can I help you if I don't know what this is all about?"

He looked down at the floor and ran his hands through his hair. It was one of those gestures so typical for James, and looking at her son now, she thought once again how amazing it was that two people could look so much alike yet be so different.

"There were - people."

"And?"

"They took some liberties. With each other."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes.

"Dear God, this is worse than pulling teeth. Did you find some of your midshipmen shagging the local strumpets? Not very shocking, it happens all the time."

"Mother!"

"Yes, yes, I know, inappropriate language. Please continue."

Jamie cringed.

"Mother, those people were all men!"

She arched her eyebrows, not outraged in the least.

"Ah. So you walked in on a couple of mollies. And that shocked you? Can't have been the first time you've come across this; there are quite a few of them, or so I've heard."

Under normal circumstances, Jamie would have considered brawling midshipmen a bigger problem than some men kissing in the backroom of a tavern. As long as such things didn't take place on his ship and under his nose, he didn't care.

But this had been different.

"One of them was Tom."

"Oh no, the poor lad! It must have been terribly embarrassing for him!"

"Poor lad? *Embarrassing*? Mother, how can you say such a thing? This is against the Articles Of War! If it was embarrassing for anyone, then it was for me, his best friend!"

"Well, he didn't bugger *you*, did he? What did you do?"

"I - I don't really know. I was so upset and disgusted. I yelled at him, then I grabbed him and hit him, hit him again, and then father arrived..."

He broke off, shrugging helplessly.

Elizabeth stared at her son as if he had suddenly sprouted a second head.

"Are you telling me that you beat up Tom?"

"Better a bit of a beating than the pillory."

"I can't believe it! You have the bleeding gall to talk about morals? Only last month your father had to pay that Collins-girl a hefty sum because you got her in a predicament, and she wasn't the first!"

"That was completely different!" Jamie protested. "He kissed - some guy!"

For lack of a vase, Elizabeth threw Norrington's shirt at her son.

"If we were on a ship, I'd fetch the cat myself and give you a good beating!"

"Mother!"

"You and your bloody Articles Of War! And how's Tom now?"

"Father said he's lost an eye."

"Dear God, Jamie! What have you done? He's your best friend!"

Tom had lost an eye, and no matter how much he protested, Jamie knew very well that it was his fault. He had often bantered with Tom about his 'dreamy eyes', so fitting for a young man who had always his head in the clouds or his nose in a book. Tom would still be able to read with one eye, wouldn't he?

Jamie felt the same seething rage as on that rotten night one week ago. If only Tom had hit back; things would have been different. But he hadn't done anything, had just taken blow after blow and looked at Jamie in disbelief, with those damned eyes of his.

Dreamy, yes - that's the way Tom had looked while kissing that...

Jamie swiped the teapot off the table next to him. It crashed on the floor, tea and shards flying through the air.

Chapter 2

***"I saw a ship a-sailing,
A-sailing on the sea.
And, oh, but it was laden
With pretty things for thee."***

Tom sat on his sea chest in the late Lt. Trevor's cabin and stared at the door, concentrating on a knothole in the wood. Maybe, if he only tried hard enough, he could force his left eye to see again? Experimentally, he covered his right eye with his hand, and sighed when everything went dark. Tom blinked; quite obviously, this was one of the obstacles in life that even the most stubborn mind couldn't overcome.

He felt better than he had some days ago, but Tom knew that he looked truly terrible. The bruises had turned all shades of purple and yellow. His left eye was bloodshot and watery, and he couldn't close it. A look in the small shaving mirror confirmed that he was now squint-eyed. Fantastic - maybe he should wear a patch? Tom shuddered; he'd rather look like the idiot that he felt he was than like a pirate.

Well, at least the eye wouldn't have to be removed, Dr. Henry had assured. The doctor, a man of practical thinking, had pointed out the enormous costs of a glass-eye, which would have to be imported from Venice, and had counted Tom lucky despite his injury.

"More of that kind of luck, and I'll drown myself," Tom muttered. His world had changed within only a few days. A week ago, he had been lieutenant on a mediocre ship, serving under a mediocre captain, his career stalling. Now he was lieutenant on an excellent ship, serving under a skilled captain and, in his humble opinion, one of the best admirals the Royal Navy had ever had.

Tom knew that he was biased as far as Admiral Norrington was concerned, but he had never really managed to overcome the serious case of hero-worship he had developed after Norrington had found him at the hospital in Gibraltar. Serving on HMS *Buckthorn* was a dream come true.

However, a week ago, he had also still had a best friend. He and Jamie had served on the same ship for three years, and now he would have to adjust to a life without him. Losing an eye was terrible, no doubt, but losing Jamie's friendship hurt just as much, though in a different way. How could he ever forget the shocked and disgusted expression on Jamie's face? Tom had always known that Jamie was hot-headed, but he'd never expected him to lose his temper in such a way.

But then Jamie had probably never expected to find his best friend in such an embarrassing, despicable situation, either.

Tom dreaded the moment when he would have to face Jamie again, but even more he feared what his father would say. Unlike Jamie, who was a master in spinning yarn and inventing convincing tales, Tom was a very bad liar. It couldn't be helped, he would have to tell the truth.

He stood up and put on his coat. There was no point in delaying this any further, better to face the

music now. Admiral Norrington had been very kind, not once had he mentioned the reason for Tom's injuries. The admiral had even introduced Tom to the crew and his fellow officers as an "outstanding man" and pointed out how very glad he was to have Tom aboard the *Buckthorn*.

Outstanding man - the laugh! His father would probably not agree with that assessment. Tom checked one more time that all the buttons on his waistcoat were closed and the cravat tied the way it was supposed to be, then he reached for his hat and headed for Admiral Norrington's cabin, where Thomas Gillette was waiting for him.

Tom felt like a condemned on his way to the gallows.

* * *

"Good grief, Tom..." was all Gillette could say upon seeing the battered face of his son.

"It's... good to see you again, father," Tom muttered, then lowered his gaze and tried to concentrate on the buckles of his shoes.

"I will return later," Norrington said, and stood up. Before he left, he put his hand on Tom's shoulder and squeezed it.

"All will be well, Tom."

"Thank you, Sir."

After Norrington had left, Tom stood for a while in silence, unsure what to do.

"Tom, I'm not here to rip your head off. If anything, I'd like to rip Jamie's head off. Come, sit down. Please."

Tom looked up in surprise.

"You know that Jamie...?"

"Yes, I know. But I want to hear the story from you."

Hesitantly, Tom crossed the room, hat still firmly pressed under his arm, and sat down next to his father at Admiral Norrington's table. A half-finished letter lay atop the writing slope.

"Son?"

Tom shook his head.

"It was entirely my fault. I've behaved in a way completely unacceptable for an officer - for any gentleman, actually. While it was not my intention for this to happen, I assume full responsibility for everything, and would like to apologise for my outrageous behaviour. I have..."

Gillette cut him off.

"Oh good grief, you sound like James! This is no court-martial. I'm your father. You know that you can always confide in me; I would never let you down. Just tell me what happened, in your own words, and for once without trying to excuse the formidable Jamie Norrington's behaviour, will you?"

Tom took a deep breath, then he put his hat carefully on Admiral Norrington's table. His hands trembled, so he folded them.

"We were on shore leave. I've been looking forward to our mission; I've never been to the West Indies, and as you and Admiral Norrington have spent so many years there, I was curious to see everything you've told me about with my own eyes. Ironic, considering what happened, isn't it? There was one lieutenant, Reynolds, who had served in the Caribbean for five years, and he invited me for an ale, I suppose to tell me grisly tales and scare me."

Gillette nodded. People often assumed that Tom was easy to scare due to his youth and gentle nature, but in truth he had a heart of oak where his duties were concerned. One didn't make it lieutenant that young by being a scaredy cat.

"He didn't succeed, I suppose?"

"No. But I drank more than I should have. Actually, I was rather drunk. There was another officer at our table, and he struck up a conversation. He had served on the *Britannia* during Trafalgar, so we had many stories to share. It was - he was very kind. Suddenly, some men began a heated argument over a woman, and before I could go to see what our men were up to, a huge brawl had started. Chairs were thrown about, bottles smashed - the usual. I tried to call our men back, but I'm afraid nobody listened to me, and I wasn't quite steady on my feet anymore."

Tom shuffled his feet, and Gillette guessed correctly that the worst part was yet to come.

"Take heart, Tom. There's nothing you have to fear."

"We had to duck behind the table so not to be hit by glasses or chair legs, and he said this was the right moment for a strategic withdrawal. He took my arm and led me through a door to a backroom of the tavern. There were-

Tom broke off, face crimson with embarrassment.

"There were - men. And they were-

"What? Tom, please continue!"

"-kissing. They were kissing. Some of them. I couldn't see much, there were only few candles and, as I said, I was rather drunk."

"Oh."

Gillette leaned back. He had braced for everything - orgies involving officers and strumpets, gambling, illegal religious gatherings. But that, of all the people in this world, his son had to walk in on a couple of mollies!

"It happens, as you know," Gillette said carefully. "Of course this is against the law, and I imagine you must have been surprised, but how has this anything to do with Jamie?"

Tom hung his head.

"The lieutenant asked me if I was shocked. I was, yet I wasn't. It was all wrong and I should have reported them, but it was so - so peaceful? It was such a contrast to the brawl in the tavern. I can't really remember what happened then, but I was handed wine. Red wine, very heady. I shouldn't have drunk it, but - oh God."

He buried his face in his hands.

"I could hear the yelling and the fighting next door, but somehow it didn't bother me anymore. I felt dozy, and then he asked me if I'd mind if he kissed me."

"He did *what*?"

"I said I'd neither mind nor didn't mind, and I really didn't. Then we- well, and just then the door opened and Jamie came in. He was furious and first attacked the lieutenant, then he yelled at me and-

"-beat you up?" Gillette finished the sentence.

Tom didn't dare to look at his father, out of fear to see disgust in his eyes.

"You lost your eye because Jamie Norrington beat you up over a bloody kiss? Just who does he think he is? I hope you've broken his nose and a couple of bones during the fight!"

Tom startled, staring at his father in disbelief.

"There was no fight! Of course there wasn't! What makes you think so?"

"What makes me - Tom, you certainly did not just take the beating, did you? I know he thinks he's invincible, but you're taller and stronger, you could take him out at any time!"

"I could never hit Jamie, father. He's my best friend. Was my best friend."

Gillette stood up and began to pace up and down Norrington's cabin.

"Fine friend, that! How unfortunate he doesn't share your moralities!"

"Please don't be angry with him! He actually helped me, he didn't tell anybody and kept me out of trouble. Not everybody would have done that!"

Gillette kicked against the door of Norrington's night cabin.

"I hope you'll forgive me if I won't go and thank him!" he yelled. "You've been taken advantage of, you were drunk, that lieutenant shouldn't have..."

"Enough!"

Tom jumped up.

"I'm twenty-two years old, I'm a lieutenant of the Royal Navy and I could drink you under the table if I wanted. So please stop treating me like a boy! Nobody took advantage of me. Nobody made me drink. I made a mistake, willingly and without pressure, and I have to live with the consequences. I would - I would lie if I said that losing Jamie's friendship and respect doesn't hurt me. And I'd certainly rather have two good eyes than only one. But it can't be changed anymore. I'll never do such a stupid thing again, and I can understand why he was upset. He's not inclined that way."

Gillette halted his pacing.

"By God, and isn't that the truth! If there has ever been a man who couldn't keep his yard in his breeches, then it's Jamie Norrington! I wonder if the admiral knows how many illegal grandchildren he has, or if he's given up on counting them! Maybe that's why Jamie was so eager to get to the West Indies - no girls left at home!"

"Father! Please!"

Tom sank down on his chair again.

"Please. Don't speak about him in such a way. I know what he's like - he always told me. I was always the first to hear about Betty and Emily, Jane and Susan, Anne and Mary and Catherine and..."

He broke off. Yes, he knew it all, had always listened patiently and with an understanding smile. Jamie had no idea how hard it had been for Tom to pretend he was interested. He couldn't know how much he hurt Tom. And Jamie would never know, not if Tom could help it.

Gillette caught the brief, pained expression on Tom's face, and a little voice in the back of his head told him that his son was not suffering from a headache.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Tom? Please tell me. You're my son, I love you. I'd do anything to see you happy."

Tom shook his head.

"Thank you, father, but no, there is nothing. There is nothing anybody could do - all is fine now."

* * *

"How did it go?" Norrington asked upon Gillette's return.

"I guess you know what happened between our boys?"

Norrington nodded.

"Of course. But I felt it was his right to tell you in his own words."

"You know how I feel about you, James, but I'd really like to break some of Jamie's bones. It's a good thing he's not here now. Tom survived Trafalgar as a lad, only to lose an eye through the hand of his best friend. That's idiotic. He says he's not a boy anymore and that he can handle everything, but I'm not so certain."

Norrington came to stand beside Gillette and put his hand on his shoulder.

"I feel with you, and with him. But he's right, Thomas - he's not a boy anymore. Tom is an excellent officer, he just lacks some self-confidence. I'll keep him here on the *Buckthorn*, and I promise you that I will not let him go before he is fit to be captain."

"You will not rest before you've made every single member of the Gillette-family a captain."

"We all need our pastimes."

Gillette rubbed his cheek on Norrington's hand and closed his eyes.

"I've missed you. Good God, have I missed you. How are you, James? I didn't like what I read between the lines of your letters."

"I'm fine, basically. But I'm getting old. I am old. And I can feel each of my years twice, Thomas. I'm tired of having to bow my head so not to bump it on the ceiling. I'm having enough of the war, of battles of - everything. I don't want to see you or Elizabeth only every other year. I'm weary of it all. Do you know that I've last seen you 382 days and ten hours ago?"

"You've always been a man who attached great importance to accuracy. I didn't count the days, but I know that there were far too many. I'm looking forward to Port Royal. I guess it has changed significantly, but I'm determined to find some secluded place where you and I can spend some time together."

"I hope so," Norrington said wistfully.

Gillette let go of Norrington's hand and headed for the door. The admiral looked very disappointed.

"Are you leaving already? I've hoped that we could have a glass of wine..."

Gillette didn't reply, just opened the door and yelled for Jenkins, Norrington's first lieutenant. It didn't take more than a few moments for the man to appear, as usual nervous and with the eager anticipation of a dog who hoped that his master would throw him a bone.

"Lieutenant, Admiral Norrington and I have very important matters to discuss regarding our mission."

Gillette lowered his voice and looked over his shoulder, as if he was worried somebody might overhear their conversation.

"Between you and I, lieutenant - this mission is of enormous importance. I will therefore stay aboard the *Buckthorn* tonight and discuss the details once more with the admiral. We may not be disturbed - the papers we'll work with are secret, under no circumstances may anybody but us see them. This is highly confidential, do you understand?"

Jenkins' face lit up.

"Of course, Sir! Absolutely! I will make certain that nobody will interrupt you!"

"Thank you, lieutenant. I knew I could rely on you," Gillette said with all the pathos he could muster.

"You can, Captain Gillette, absolutely! Anytime!"

"Good, good. Please send news to my ship, and now good night."

Gillette closed the door in front of the lieutenant's nose, then locked it.

"Thomas, you're evil. He'll sit personally in front of my door all night long, convinced that the fate of Britain rests on his shoulders!"

"I hope you didn't expect me to wait till Port Royal - you should know me better," Gillette replied, and wiggled his eyebrows. "Now forget your world-weariness for a while, James. Come, you suffering old man."

"I really don't think that's a good idea, Thomas," Norrington protested. "This is far too dangerous!"

"I have full confidence in Mr. Jenkins."

Before Norrington could voice any further protests, Gillette had already pushed him gently in the adjoined night cabin. A cot, a sea chest, a chair - that was just about it. Norrington had never attached great importance to luxuries.

"Thomas, you can't do that."

"That's what you think," Gillette said, and began to remove his coat. "You better take your coat off as

well, James. If I do it, you might lose some buttons."

Norrington, who had gone through more buttons during the last five years than in all his life before hurried to follow the suggestion. While he was at it, he also unbuttoned his waistcoat and untied his cravat.

Gillette chuckled.

"I knew you'd change your mind."

"Am I that obvious?"

"Very obvious."

* * *

Gillette had made light of it, but he knew how much it had taken for James Norrington to admit weariness and pain. He also knew that the man wouldn't have wanted him to discuss the issue. But it was obvious that this was not the time for passionate love-making. Maybe there would never be such a time again. It was good the way it was, though - just being here with him, skin on skin, finally being able to touch and feel and taste him.

Over the years, Norrington's body had become a map that Gillette knew by heart. He had learned where to touch to make him squirm, how to make him gasp, even giggle. Yes, Norrington could giggle, ticklish as he was, a secret very likely not even Elizabeth knew, which filled Gillette with great pleasure.

Like an explorer found his way through unknown territory, Gillette created a new map of Norrington's body in his head. He would have to remember to touch Norrington's joints only lightly, because any pressure made him grimace in pain. Digging his fingers in the left shoulder was fine, but he had to be careful with the right. Norrington gave in to Gillette's searching, exploring hands, enjoying every caress and not putting up any protest when Gillette told him to let him do all the work for once, that there would be other nights when he could return the favour.

So there were no bite marks on Gillette's skin tonight, no scratches on Norrington's back. He came, face buried in Gillette's neck, with little more than a soft gasp. Tiny kisses on his forehead, behind his ear; Gillette's callused hands holding him with a gentleness nobody would have guessed in the tall man. But Norrington knew, and that was his little secret - nobody but he knew what it was like to be loved by Thomas Gillette.

"I often wonder what would happen if they'd found out."

Norrington, head rested on Gillette's chest, sighed.

"So do I. If I look at Jamie's reaction, we can only hope they will never learn about it. They wouldn't understand."

Gillette stroked Norrington's hair - he was probably the last admiral still refusing to cut off his pigtail, and that was fine for Gillette. He enjoyed wrapping the strands around his fingers; there was something very comforting about it.

"There's something I don't understand though, James: why did he beat Tom up? It doesn't really make sense."

"Why?"

"I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd reported Tom immediately, or if he had just pretended that he hadn't seen anything and closed the door again. But such an uncontrolled attack? Your son is a hot-head, I know that, but this is out of character."

"They are friends. It must have been a huge shock for him. That aside: I remember a young lieutenant who drew his sword and threatened to cut me in two rather than allowing me to marry Miss Elizabeth Swann."

Gillette cringed.

"I'll never hear the end of it, will I? You forget one very important detail, James: said young lieutenant was terribly in love with you. He still is, actually."

He pressed a kiss on Norrington's nose.

"Let's try to catch some sleep before the formidable Mr. Jenkins decides to come and check on us."

Norrington smiled, then he closed his eyes, dozing off very quickly. For a brief moment, he had an uncomfortable feeling, as if he had missed something important that Gillette had said, but before he could further think about it, he had fallen asleep.

* * *

"Give me a hand, Jamie, will you? That thing's disgustingly heavy!" Elizabeth called, and her son hurried to his parent's bedroom. To his great surprise, Jamie found his mother dragging a black sea chest towards her wardrobe.

"What are you doing there, mother? Wait, let me help you. Where do you want this thing to go?"

Elizabeth straightened up, wincing and rubbing her back.

"I forgot that I'm not seventeen anymore. To the wardrobe, love, it's easier to pack."

"Pack?" Jamie asked, highly confused. "I've packed everything I need. Does father need anything?"

She grinned; something he found rather distracting in any woman, but especially in his own mother.

"That's not your father's sea chest, Jamie. It's mine."

Jamie stopped mid-movement and stared at his mother in complete confusion.

"Yours? You have sea chest? Why do you have a sea chest? What for?"

"Because every sailor needs one, Mr. Norrington, Sir."

He reached out and put his hand on her forehead.

"You seem to run a fever, mother. Shall I send one of the men to fetch the doctor?"

Elizabeth gently pushed her son aside and began to pack various pieces of clothing in the chest, which was dark with age and had a bird painted on its lid. Jamie blinked. It was difficult to tell, as the colour had faded over the years, but it looked like a finch. Or a starling. Or a sparrow?

"Bah, nonsense," Elizabeth said, throwing a skirt over her shoulder. "I'm not ill, I'm excited! It's the first time in ages that I'll go to sea again, and I can't..."

Jamie almost fell over the chest.

"What? To sea? You can't go to sea, mother! You're a woman! And you're running a fever! And I won't allow it! And I leave for the Caribbean in two days!"

"I know," Elizabeth replied, completely unperturbed by her son's protests. "That's why I'm packing, Jamie. I'm coming with you."

Chapter 3

***"Let not outward charms your judgements sway,
Your reason rather than your eyes obey;
And in the dance, as in the marriage noose,
Rather for merit than for beauty choose."***

- Soame Jenys, 1729

"If I wouldn't know better, I'd say the French have paid Mother Nature to keep us away from Port Royal, Sir."

"There have been storms in the Caribbean before that Corsican pain in the neck was born, Mr. Jenkins, and there will be storms long after he and all of us have perished. I'm not looking forward to this, but at least the French will have their share of the fun if they should be out there."

The sea was rolling under the *Buckthorn*, and Norrington could smell that peculiar odour announcing a storm. It brought back many memories, and most of them not entirely pleasant.

"Mr. Jenkins, I want only men on duty who have sailed these seas before. We'll try to circumnavigate the storm, but we can't take any risks."

"Yes, Sir."

"Any news of the *Aronia*?"

"No, Sir. Not a sign of her in three days."

"Well then. Captain Gillette knows these seas like the back of his hand, I have no doubt that we'll meet him in Port Royal in a few days."

Norrington made that remark because Tom stood close by. He wanted to let the young lieutenant know that everything would be fine with his father.

"Mr. Jenkins, make sure the midshipmen know what they have to do. Maybe you should tie young Mr. Blackley to a barrel until this is over, or he might be washed overboard again. Mr. Gillette, you will stay with Mr. Jenkins at all times."

Tom, who had been watching the massive yellowish cloud bank on the horizon with increasing fascination, turned his head to the admiral.

"Yes, Sir!" he said, then followed Jenkins, who shouted orders and looked from time to time over his shoulder, probably to make sure that Norrington could see what an excellent job he did.

Norrington looked through his spy glass. The storm approached quickly; it would be difficult to circumnavigate it. The *Buckthorn* was not in the best shape; should she be hit with full force, she'd very likely not make it. He winced when he collapsed the spy glass; every joint in his hands ached, the

simplest manual tasks were torture.

"To think that we once sailed through a hurricane, Thomas," he said to himself and shook his head. Then he clasped his hands behind his back and watched the men preparing the *Buckthorn* for the storm. His knees hurt as well, but as long as he was standing and not walking around, it was bearable. Now was not the time to retreat to his cabin and have a rest, and if things should become really bad, he could still ask Jenkins to tie him next to little Blackley to a barrel.

* * *

"Have I already expressed my delight in your presence aboard my ship, Mrs. Norrington?"

Elizabeth considered for a brief moment the heavenly delight of saying 'no!' and hitting Captain Edison over the head with the decanter in front of her. However, she decided that it would be too great a waste of excellent wine, so she smiled charmingly across the table instead.

"You have, my dear Captain Edison. Several times, actually. Words can't express how I feel about your gentleness."

Edison beamed at her, then he gesticulated at Jamie with his fork.

"I'm also honoured to have your son serving under my command. Excellent officer, chip off the old block, don't you agree, Mr. Kyle?"

"Lt. Norrington's skills are indeed very - striking," Lt. Kyle replied politely. Jamie's glare across the table did not escape Elizabeth. She arched an eyebrow at her son, but he averted his eyes.

"As I've stated again and again, Mrs. Norrington: a good family makes a good officer. I've expected only the best of your son, and I haven't been disappointed."

Elizabeth emptied her glass for the third time and hoped it would be replenished soon. It was so easy to see through Edison's servile flattery, and it was only bearable when drunk. What would she have given for a good glass of rum right now!

"Certainly the character of a person should be taken into account as well," she replied. "Being born into a good family might be helpful, but a good name is something a man has to make on himself."

Edison laughed.

"My dear Mrs. Norrington, I'm well aware of your husband's opinion that every man is the architect of his own fortune. I hope you will forgive me for mentioning such a delicate matter in the presence of a lady, but didn't we just recently see that this is nothing but a theory? Take the young man Admiral Norrington has taken under his wings, Thomas Gillette. His father had a reputation for causing trouble, and the son's not much better. He's often involved in brawls, I heard, and only recently lost an eye in a fight. You must admit, that's not behaviour worthy of a gentleman!"

Elizabeth counted silently to three.

"Captain Edison, may I remind you that Captain Gillette is an old friend of my husband? He's more of a gentleman than most officers I've met, and so is his son."

"Of course, of course!" Edison hastened to agree. "It was not my intention at all to insult friends of your family. Lt. Gillette is still very young. Maybe, in time and serving under a captain with a firm hand..."

Lt. Kyle cleared his throat.

"With all due respect, Captain Edison; I've had the pleasure of making Lt. Gillette's acquaintance some weeks ago, and found him indeed to be a fine gentleman; courageous, amicable, very enthusiastic and generous."

Elizabeth gave Lt. Kyle a grateful smile.

"That is my impression of Lt. Gillette as well. And the firm opinion of my husband," she added, glaring at Captain Edison. Then she looked at her son, expecting him to speak in favour of his friend, but all Jamie did was picking at his food, not looking up from his plate. He was very pale with exception of some hectic red spots on his cheeks, a sign of great anger.

"Well, well, now look at this, time passes so swiftly when in charming company," Edison murmured. He had well noticed that Elizabeth Norrington didn't share his opinion on young Thomas Gillette at all, and the last thing he needed was her enmity. His career was stalling, and he counted on Admiral Norrington's influence to change that state. Certainly the admiral hadn't sent his only son to serve aboard the *Bilberry* without reason. This had to be a test, and Edison didn't intend to fail it.

"Yes, very late, indeed," Elizabeth agreed. "Please forgive me, Captain Edison, I can't express how grateful I am for your hospitality, but I feel most tired. Would you be very upset with me if I'd return to my cabin?"

"My dear Mrs. Norrington, how could anybody be upset with you!" Edison protested. "I feel privileged that you had supper with me."

They all stood up and the men bowed in Elizabeth's direction.

"Jamie, would you be so kind to accompany me back to my cabin? I feel a little weak," Elizabeth said in a honeyed voice.

"Good grief, I hope it's nothing serious, Mrs. Norrington?" Edison cried out. "Do you want me to call the ship's doctor?"

"No, no, you are too generous, dear captain, I'm very sure that I'll feel much better after a short rest."

"If you are certain... Lt. Norrington, please, do accompany your mother."

Jamie bit his tongue; nobody but a fool like Edison could fall for that tone.

"But of course, my dearest mother," he replied sweetly, "do you think you will be able to walk, or do you desire me to carry you?"

"I really don't think that will be necessary. Ah, isn't it a blessing to have such a loving son, my dear Captain Edison?"

Edison nodded, and Lt. Kyle had to hide a grin. He had seen Dorothy Jordan on stage in London and considered her to be a great actress, but Mrs. Norrington's performance that night was definitely on par.

* * *

Elizabeth grasped her son by the arm and pushed him into her cabin.

"What on earth have you been thinking, Jamie? How could you allow that - that self-pleased, bloated toad of a captain to talk about Tom in such a way?"

Jamie looked over his shoulder and quickly closed the door.

"Mother, you have no idea what you're talking about!" he snapped. "It wouldn't have been appropriate to contradict Captain Edison, and please do me the favour and don't smile at Lt. Kyle all the time!"

"I beg your pardon? Do I need your permit now to smile at people? Unlike you, he had the guts to speak in favour of Tom! Just so you know, I happen to like Robert Kyle. Quite a dashing young man, reminds me a bit of your father when he was younger."

Jamie threw his arms up in horror.

"Good grief, don't say such a thing, that's sickening! Mother, your 'dashing young man' is the lieutenant who... the one I... with Tom! That one! At the tavern! Oh God, father has no idea what he's done to me; now I have to serve under this damned bugger!"

Elizabeth giggled, which upset Jamie even more.

"As long as he doesn't take it literally... well, I call this fair, justified and perfect punishment. 'Very generous young man' - I like that Lt. Kyle even more now, he's got a sense of humour! So, does he treat you harshly? Unfairly? Has he harassed you or made you an indecent offer?"

"No," Jamie grumbled. "He's a very capable officer, strict but fair."

"Awe - how terrible! My poor, poor Jamie. So the man doesn't even give you the satisfaction of ill-

treating you, how inconsiderate of him! After all you've suffered, you'd really be entitled to some self-pity."

"Why is nobody taking me serious, but treating me like an idiot?" Jamie protested.

"Very likely because you behave like one," Elizabeth replied dryly. "Ever since we left Britain, you're sulking, moping and behaving as if the world was hating you."

She took her son's face between her hands.

"Jamie, this is a matter which only concerns Tom and you. Believe it or not, I can even understand your point of view, though I don't agree with it. But we'll soon arrive in Port Royal, and you will have to work with him, whether you like it or not. It's nigh impossible to avoid people there, trust me on that. For goodness' sakes, do at least try to behave civilised towards Tom. That's the least he deserves."

Jamie turned his head away from her touch.

"Fine parents I have - looks like everybody's more deserving of your concern than I. Why don't you and father just go and adopt Tom?"

"James, that's enough now. It's childish and nonsense!" Elizabeth said firmly, but Jamie couldn't control his temper anymore.

"I am sick of Thomas Gillette! Sick of both of them! Father spent weeks looking for Thomas Gillette after Trafalgar, weeks! I can't remember him wasting even one day looking for me! And now I've risked my career to protect Tom from the consequences of his... well, whatever that was! And all you and father do is berating and mocking me for it! You don't need me? Fine! I don't need you, either!"

"Jamie, how can you say such a terrible thing! Don't you know that your father..."

Jamie flung the cabin door open and stormed out, not allowing her to finish the sentence.

* * *

Seeing the *Buckthorn* coming into port took a great load off Gillette's mind. The storm had been quite vicious, and he had been worried sick about Tom, Norrington and the ship under his command, knowing that the *Buckthorn* wasn't in the best condition.

Two of the *Buckthorn*'s topmasts had sprung and the sails were damaged; Gillette counted himself lucky that he had managed to get the *Aronia* to Port Royal with only minor damage.

He frowned when he saw Norrington, though. The admiral left the ship leaning heavily on Lt. Jenkins and Tom. Had he been injured during the storm? Gillette quickened the pace.

Norrington's face lit up upon seeing Gillette, but his smile turned into a grimace of pain when he

tried to free from the two men steadying him. That was not the way he wanted to appear in front of Thomas.

"Thank you, gentlemen, you may return to your duties now," he ordered. Tom looked very doubtful, but obeyed, while Lt. Jenkins protested.

"Sir, I don't think this is a very good idea. Wouldn't it be better if..."

"It would be better if you would do as you were told, Mr. Jenkins, unless you prefer to swim back to Britain, that is!"

Seeing that Norrington was in one of his moods again, Jenkins let go. Norrington swayed, but he clenched his jaw and managed to stand straight when Gillette arrived to greet him.

"Admiral Norrington! I can't tell you how happy I am to see you! And Tom my lad! You as well, Lt. Jenkins."

"I'm very happy to see you again, father!" Tom said, giving Gillette a wide smile. Jenkins produced a sourly grimace which barely passed as grin.

"Good to see you as well, Captain Gillette," Norrington replied, trying hard to sound nonchalantly. "A nice little storm that was, wasn't it? We had to throw some guns overboard and took a bit of a shake, but we didn't lose any men and the ship's still here. How about the *Aronia*?"

"Only minor damage, Sir, and no losses, either."

"How are things in Port Royal? Has everything been prepared?"

"Hasn't changed much, Sir. And your house is ready for you to move in; it's been well look after."

"I hope so, I've paid enough for it all through the years! Have you found suitable accommodation as well?"

Gillette grinned.

"I took the liberty to take quarters in the house of the late Mr. Mercer, Sir."

"Good grief. I hope you fumigated the place before you moved in. Very well then, please accompany me back to my temporary home. We have many things to discuss. Mr. Jenkins, Mr. Gillette, take care of everything."

"Yes, Sir," the two lieutenants replied in unison, bowed and returned to the ship. Gillette waited until they were out of earshot, then he sighed.

"What's wrong, James? You look terrible."

"You always say the nicest things, Thomas."

"I'm serious. Are you injured?"

Norrington shrugged, which was a mistake. He groaned in pain, and Gillette sighed.

"I see. Stubborn bastard. Come, let me help you," he offered, but Norrington shook his arm off.

"There is no way in hell that I'll return to Port Royal in any other way but on my own two feet and with a straight back. It's not far to my house, those few steps will not kill me."

"But I might if you continue to be so difficult!" Gillette snapped. "There's nobody left here who could find joy in your suffering, James."

"Evil people might die, Thomas, but their spirits often linger on. And just in case the ghost of Lord Cutler Beckett should haunt this place, I will not give him the satisfaction of seeing me limping through the streets like a shaky old man. If it makes you feel any better, though, you may carry me up the stairs to my bedroom once we arrive."

Norrington began to walk along the jetty, slowly and stiff-legged like an old cat, and Gillette followed him, ranting and raving.

Chapter 4

*"Then, after an hour, they went to a bow'r,
And play'd for ale and cakes;
And kisses too, - until they were due
The lasses held the stakes.
The girls did then begin
To quarrel with the men,
And bade them take their kisses back, and give them their own again."
- Soame Jenys, 1729*

Governor Wilkins had obviously never learned that brevity was the soul of wit. He was supposed to brief Norrington and the officers on the problems at hand, and he did so by using a lot of words. Too many for Norrington's taste; his patience was running thin after an hour of the Governor's ranting and complaining.

"... outrageous..."

Dear Weatherby had kept meetings short and to the point; what a pity that Norrington's father-in-law was not governor anymore.

"... and as I've said again and again..."

Norrington pretended that he was listening intently to the Governor's word flood, but in truth he was looking at the large map on the wall of his office. It wasn't the same as the one Lord Cutler Beckett had put up almost thirty years ago. There were no white spots left, the world had been split up among the major players in the game for fortune and riches. "Terra Incognita" was no more, and Norrington felt outdated like wigs and pigtails.

"... three lost frigates..."

Norrington decided that he had given Governor Wilkins enough time to make his point. Judging from the faces of the assembled officers, their patience had been stretched to the limit as well.

"I understand," Norrington said, interrupting Wilkins mid-sentence. "And the government understands as well, otherwise we wouldn't be here. Somebody is capturing our ships, and we'll find out who it is. At the moment it looks like our French friends are involved. I have no idea if that is true, and even less of a clue how that could be done, considering that we've destroyed most of their fleet. But I don't want to rule out the possibility."

"It must be the French!" Wilkins insisted, and wiped the sweat off his forehead. He looked sickly and thin; Norrington suspected he might have caught March fever.

"Who else would do such a thing?" Gillette asked.

"Well, there is Spain. Then we shouldn't forget our former brothers in America who have shown

amazing creativity in the field of annoying Britain. There are still some pirates left, and-

"Pirates? Now please, Admiral, with all due respect - their days are over."

"Of course. I'd just like to point out that-

Norrington was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Come in if you must," he said, and one of the marines on guard entered.

"Excuse me, Sir, but there are a captain and a lieutenant to see you, Admiral Norrington. They say they've just arrived."

Norrington's face lit up.

"Ah! So the *Bilberry's* already here then? Excellent news! Please send them in!"

However, it was not Jamie who entered the office, but a lieutenant Norrington had never seen before, accompanied by the much-disliked Captain Edison.

"Admiral Norrington! What a pleasure!"

"I'm glad to see you've had a safe journey," Norrington stiffly replied.

"Indeed! And what a pleasant one as well, considering the company," Edison said, a wide smile on his face. Norrington had no idea why the man grinned like an idiot. Having a sulking Jamie aboard for weeks could possibly not have been that enjoyable.

"This is my first lieutenant, Mr. Robert Kyle," Edison introduced the officer who stood behind him.

"Excellent man. Your son and your wife are rather fond of him."

"My - wife?"

Norrington stared at Edison, then at Kyle. The officers pricked up their ears, hoping for some interesting gossip.

"Your son accompanied her to your house, that's why he's not here. He probably didn't want a lady to be alone in a place like this," Edison babbled on. "Good grief, what an ugly little town - and so dirty! Disgusting, really."

"Eh. Yes. My wife is at my house now, you say?"

"Indeed."

Norrington rose stiffly from his chair, and the officers followed suit.

"Governor Wilkins - gentlemen - I suggest that we continue this highly interesting conversation tomorrow. I can possibly not leave my poor, helpless little wife alone in the wilderness of Port Royal."

There was some chuckling and snickering, and Gillette bit his tongue so not to laugh out loud. Elizabeth Norrington was anything but poor or helpless; the fact that she had come here without Norrington knowing was proof of that.

It was her right to be here, after all she was Norrington's wife, but still, Gillette couldn't help feeling a pang of disappointment. Once again, he would have to share his lover.

* * *

"Elizabeth! Now that's what I call a surprise!"

"James!"

She ran across the entrance hall and into his arms. Norrington saw Jamie standing next to a table, leaning against the door to the drawing room, arms crossed over his chest and frowning.

"I hope you're not upset with me, but I just couldn't stay at home!"

Norrington laughed and kissed her.

"How could I possibly be upset with you for being here? I should have known, we're married long enough."

She looked good, blushing with excitement and her eyes shining. A look in the mirror showed Norrington that the same couldn't be said of him. Was that really him, that tired old man with the greying hair? Mirrors should be banned.

"You're the best of all husbands," Elizabeth declared, and kissed him on the cheek. "Now tell me, how are you? You look a little tired, love. And Port Royal - have things changed much since we've left?"

"I am tired; the situation here is rather complicated, but I'll tell you more about that later. Port Royal hasn't changed all that much; Turner's smithy is still there, though Mr. Brown has relocated to the local cemetery, so I've been told."

"Poor Mr. Brown! Jamie, did you hear that? The smithy is still there! I'll show you around Port Royal one of these days if your father doesn't mind."

"Good to see you again, son," Norrington said stiffly. "I trust you are well?"

Jamie's bearing didn't encourage a more open approach. He frowned at his father and shrugged.

"As well as one can be after serving under an idiot of a captain for a couple of weeks," he grumbled.

"Jamie, that's going too far!" Elizabeth said sternly. "Show your father some respect."

Norrington knew that he should have reprimanded Jamie for his impertinence, but he felt too tired to argue with his son.

"I see that you've decided to spend your time in Port Royal sulking and moping. Very well then. I didn't expect you to arrive so early, but your room will be prepared soon. We can continue our argument during supper."

"Too kind of you, father, but I prefer to stay with my men at the fortress."

"As you wish. Sleep under a bridge if it pleases you, Jamie."

Jamie had prepared, actually hoped for a confrontation with his father; Norrington's resignation took him by surprise.

"Well - I'll go then," he snapped, and took his hat from the table.

"Do that."

Elizabeth looked from her son to her husband. Should she try to mediate between the two? Or let things take their course? In the end she decided that this was an issue the two men would have to deal out among themselves.

Jamie bowed formally in direction of his parents.

"I wish you a good evening. Mother - father..."

With that he left, exposing his mother to the great temptation of kicking his backside while he passed by.

"I'm so sorry, James. I have no idea what's wrong with the boy, he's been like that all through the journey."

"I guess I better prepare for six months of sulking."

Elizabeth gently stroked his face.

"If he doesn't behave, we can still throw him overboard; I'm quite certain Gillette wouldn't mind giving us a hand. Ah, James, it's so good to be with you again. And this place still looks the same! The stairs - remember? You've carried me up there on our wedding day! What a foolish but very romantic thing to do!"

Norrington chuckled.

"Oh yes, I remember! You've had far too much wine and insisted on sleeping in the entrance hall as there were three stairs, all of them moving, and you feared you could fall and break your neck!"

"I wasn't drunk in the least. I just wanted to see how you'd react."

"Ah, so I've been tested! Did I pass?"

"Of course you did! Jamie was born nine months later, after all."

She grinned, and Norrington quickly looked over his shoulder to see if any of the servants had heard that most unsuitable remark.

"Elizabeth, now please! Would you want me to carry you up the stairs again?"

"Oh James - would you do that? What a wonderful idea!"

"Certainly, my dear."

She was touched. He always seemed to be so stern and earnest, but she knew that deep inside, he was even more romantic than her. He made her presents, gave her flowers and, on some very special occasions, had even written poems for her. Terrible poems which would have made those not knowing him cringe, but to her, they were little treasures.

Nothing could have made her happier than being carried up the stairs like the young bride she had been all those years ago, but she also knew that there was no way in hell James Norrington could manage that. From the looks of him, she worried if he'd even be able to walk up the stairs alone.

"See, that's one of the many reasons why I love you, James. But I fear I've hurt my back on the journey. It might not be a good idea to carry me around. Maybe some other day?"

Norrington pressed a kiss in her hair, which smelled of tar. He had always failed to see why women were described in books as smelling of roses and daisies. Elizabeth smelled like herself and like the sea, which was all he needed and wanted.

"You're the best of all wives, Elizabeth. One day I will carry you up those stairs again."

"If not, I will carry *you*, darling," she replied cheerfully. "Now let's go upstairs and celebrate my arrival. After weeks around Edison, that spit-licking bastard-son of a warthog, I need a real man, preferably naked!"

* * *

Tom had been serving as a midshipman during the blockade of Brest, had been to Cadiz and later fought in the battle of Trafalgar. Those were the seas he knew like the back of his hand, but the Caribbean? A completely different kettle of fish. Listening to the stories his father told was one thing, but actually being here in Port Royal quite another. They had been briefed, and so he knew they

would be looking for French ships. Or Spanish ones. Or ships of unknown origin. Someone had even mentioned pirates, but that seemed too far-fetched. Hadn't Admiral Norrington freed the Caribbean of that plague years ago?

Tom took his duties very serious, so he sat in a small office, hunched over a pile of maps, and studied them carefully. Admiral Norrington had been kind enough to allow him searching the library for maps and books that might be useful.

He liked Port Royal. People were friendly, and there were so many fascinating things to discover. He had strolled through the local market, a dizzying chaos of colours, smells and voices. There were fruits and vegetables on sale he had never heard of, and it seemed to him that the sky couldn't be any bluer than here in the West Indies.

The only hair in the soup was Jamie. Tom had hoped that it would be possible to just work together, but while Lt. Kyle managed to approach him in a professional way and pretended that the embarrassing incident had never happened, Jamie was unbearable. He seemed to have entered a state of permanent sulking, interrupted only by short phases of snappiness. Tom tried to avoid him whenever possible, but being briefed in Jamie's presence was an ordeal.

If it hadn't been for Jamie, Tom would have been happy in Port Royal. The heat was terrible, of course, and there was no escape from the sun, but unlike his father's, Tom's skin tanned rather nicely, which made an odd contrast to his red hair. Not that it really mattered; with that dead eye of his, he had a mug only a mother could love, and he had no mother.

Tom returned his attention to a map of Tortuga when he was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Come in!" he said, without looking up.

"Good morning. So you are the one who hoarded all the maps?"

Tom startled, then slowly turned around.

"So it seems. Is there one you need, Lt. Kyle?"

"Yes, I would need a map of the northwest coast."

Tom began to look through the pile in front of him, then he pulled out a map and handed it to Lt. Kyle.

"Here, please."

"Wonderful, thank you."

There was a moment of awkward silence, then Lt. Kyle cleared his throat.

"I'm actually rather glad to find you alone. I want to - I wish to apologise."

"I wouldn't know what for."

"Oh, you do."

Instead of doing the decent thing and get himself out of the office, Kyle pulled the second chair next to Tom and sat down.

"I have to apologise. It was unforgivable what I did; I should have never approached you in such a manner while you were drunk."

Tom stared at the map in front of him.

"You should have never approached me in such a manner in the first place, Mr. Kyle. May I remind you that we have both violated an Article Of War, and that it's only due to incredible luck and Lt. Norrington that we didn't have to face a court martial?"

"You call that 'incredibly luck'?" Kyle asked, pointing at Tom's eye.

"This is not up to you to decide. I consider the discussion ended, please do not bring this matter up again. Any further word would be an insult."

Kyle sighed.

"Please hear me out before you show me the door, will you? I apologise for approaching you while you were drunk; but I will not apologise for approaching you in the first place. You're a man of honour, you're good company, I admire your wits and find you very attractive. If you call that insulting, then so be it."

Tom gave the lieutenant a suspicious sidewise glance.

"Why are you saying those things? What do you want?"

"I will be honest with you, Tom. My wife's a wonderful woman, and we have two beautiful children. Of the ten years we're married, I've spent less than two with my family. That's not much, and while it might be fine for people like Admiral Norrington or Captain Edison, it is not enough for me. I don't enjoy being lonely. We'll be here for at least six months, Tom. We could spend those six months as good friends."

Tom just stared at Kyle, trying to process what he had just been suggested.

"How dare you make such a suggestion? You, a married man? Don't you think of your wife?"

"My wife has nothing to do with this. Nor has the wife of any sailor who ever sought out distraction and company in a harbour. This is the nature of things, Tom. I'm sincerely fond of you. I wish to spend time with you and get to know you better. And I'd really, really like to kiss you again."

"Are you insane?"

The lieutenant realised that he might have been a little too forward, but he was convinced that he had assessed Tom correctly. He reached out and ran his fingers through Tom's hair. It was a light touch, the young man could have moved away at any time, but he didn't.

"Port Royal is full of beautiful girls, Tom. If you're so inclined, find yourself one and enjoy her company. I would be honoured if you'd enjoy mine as well, though."

The wheels in Tom's head were turning. Whatever he did now couldn't be blamed on the rum later on. There would be no excuses. If he agreed to this, it would be out of his own free will, and he would have to carry the consequences. If found out, those consequences would be worse than the loss of an eye, and Tom was well aware of it.

He reached in the pocket of his coat.

"You have been to the West Indies before, haven't you?"

"Indeed. I've stayed in Montego Bay for a year," Kyle replied, slightly confused by the question.

"Then you can certainly tell me what this is? I bought it on the market this morning."

Tom showed Kyle a yellow, oddly shaped fruit. The lieutenant smiled and let go of Tom, taking the fruit in his hand.

"Five Fingers. That's what we call them. This one is yellow, so it's ripe. Tastes very good - fresh and sour, just the thing you'd want if the sun means business and tries to burn your brains out. Wait a second..."

He pulled his penknife out of his pocket and cut the fruit in half.

"See? If you cut it, it looks like a star. That's why some call it star fruit, but 'Five Fingers' fits better. You'll need five fingers to eat it without making a mess."

He offered Tom the fruit, and the young man took a bite. At first he pulled a face; the skin of the fruit tasted and felt like wax, but then he smiled.

"I like that. Keep the other half."

While he took another bite and watched Kyle chewing on the fruit, Tom considered his situation. Was he lonely? Of course he was. These last years, it had been Jamie he had shared everything with. He had been his friend, his companion, his confidant. But Jamie was gone. What joy could there be in the discovery of a strange new fruit if there was nobody to share it with?

Tom waited till Kyle had swallowed the last bite of the fruit, then he kissed him. He tried to

remember how it had been kissing him on the night he had lost his eye, but he couldn't quite remember. Did it matter? The earth didn't shake, the sky didn't fall down, but he liked the warm, tingling feeling that spread all over his body.

To hell with Jamie Norrington. He didn't need him. He wouldn't waste his time anymore daydreaming over somebody he could never have. It had been nice wondering what it would be like to touch Jamie, and being touched in return, but Robert Kyle's fingers were real, and they were busy unbuttoning Tom's breeches.

* * *

"And here is the place where your father proposed to me!" Elizabeth declared, beaming at her son and opening her arms wide, as if she wanted to embrace the memory.

"How romantic - next to ruins and on the edge of a cliff. I suppose you blushed and breathed 'I will!'"

Elizabeth laughed.

"Oh no! I fainted because the corset was laced too tightly and I fell over the cliff. Your father wanted to jump after me, but needless to say, Thomas Gillette held him back."

"You did - what?" Jamie asked in disbelief. He made a step forward, carefully not to get too close to the edge, and upon seeing the sharp rocks down, down below, he paled.

"It's a miracle you survived!"

"Truth be told, I had a bit of help," she said, an odd, mischievous smile on her face. "I've longed for many years to see this place again, Jamie. See those trees? That's where we celebrated our wedding, and it was also here that I told him you were on the way."

Jamie rolled his eyes.

"He must have been overwhelmed with joy," he said, voice dripping with sarcasm. "Let me guess: 'Good grief, Elizabeth, how exciting! Do you want me to get you another cup of tea?'"

"Now listen, young man, while I have to compliment you on your comedic talent, I can't tolerate your behaviour towards your father any longer. I'm beginning to wonder if his theory regarding corporal punishment has been wrong all along and if we'd been better off if we'd given you a bit of a spanking once in a while!"

Jamie folded his arms over his chest.

"He doesn't care, mother. He didn't care for me back then, and he doesn't care for me now. He dragged me aboard his ship when I was twelve; and it was certainly not thanks to him that I returned from Trafalgar alive. I know I'm not the son he hoped to have, but trust me, he's not my idea of an ideal father either."

Elizabeth turned away, looking out on the sea.

"What do you know, Jamie? What do you know. When you were born, I've been terrified. Oh, you men think having a baby is the fulfilment of every woman's life, but trust me, that was not the case with me. The only babies I've ever seen were cutely dressed, beautiful little things, sleeping peacefully in their cots. I had no idea of the pain I'd have to endure to bring you in this world, and when they handed you to me, I cried. That should be my son? This shrivelled, mewling red thing, covered in blood?"

"Mother, I - "

"Shut up and listen, Jamie. I had no idea what babies look like when they are born. I was afraid of you! And your father - ah. He told me not to worry, that all would be fine, and then he went to your cot and lifted you up, carrying you around. You were so tiny in his hands! He showed you the house and the garden, his uniform, introduced you to your grandfather and his brother, the dogs and even the cat sleeping on the front porch. And he told you that you were the most beautiful and wonderful child that had ever been born. My father laughed and told him it was pointless to talk to a baby like one would talk to an adult, but your father insisted you'd understand."

"I can't remember that," Jamie murmured.

"Of course you can't, silly. You were two days old! Two days later, your father was deployed to Sicily, and when he returned, you could already walk. He loves you so much, Jamie, and he missed out on so many things. You grew up, and he wasn't there. Can you really blame him for wanting to have you around? He didn't take you as a midshipman aboard his ship because he wanted you to become a famous naval hero, Jamie - he did it so he could see you. Otherwise he'd done what every other officer would have done and sent you to serve under the command of a befriended captain."

Elizabeth sat down on a large stone, stretching her legs and blinking into the afternoon sun.

"Talk to him, Jamie. He's not as healthy as he wants us to believe. You never know - Jamie, nothing is worse than missing the right moment to tell someone that you love him. I know that. I don't want you to experience this as well. I know you disagree on many things, and you are a spoiled brat, all in all, but Jamie - of the three things your father loves most, you are the one he'd chose above all others. Always keep that in mind."

Jamie had listened with increasing confusion and a feeling of guilt. He put his hand on his mother's shoulder, looking at her beautiful face.

"You really think he would choose me over you and the sea?" he asked.

Elizabeth looked up.

"The sea? Why - ah. Yes. Of course, Jamie. He would."

* * *

Jamie was in a bad temper when he made his way to the tavern. The weather matched his mood; for days they had been plagued by torrential rains and gales, which had turned the streets of Port Royal into mud. He hated the squishing sound under his feet. He also hated the mud, Port Royal, his father, the world in general and, most of all, Thomas Gillette the younger.

Not only did the bugger - hah! Just the word! - avoid him whenever possible. No, he ignored him. Tom didn't even give him a glance, and this infuriated Jamie beyond words. At least he could have said something! 'I'm sorry for bringing you into such a situation,' for example. Then Jamie could have said 'ah, that's fine, I'm sorry I punched out your eye'. They would have drunk an ale or five and had been friends again.

Unfortunately, Tom didn't seem to have the slightest wish to eat humble pie, and it didn't look like he was suffering from loneliness, either. Jamie had seen him four times heading for the tavern with that bloody Robert Kyle, who he now added to his personal 'most hated' list. Once he had even seen them on the market, buying fruits. What the hell did they need fruits for?

Serving under Kyle had become torture for Jamie. If he had only found a fault in the man's work, or if he had treated Jamie unfairly! But he was the paradigm of a lieutenant, strict yet fair with his men and of a seemingly endless patience. By all accounts, Jamie should have admired him, but instead he had to resist the temptation of strangling him.

Not that Jamie would have lacked company. The young gentlemen and especially the young ladies of Port Royal's respectable society had welcomed Admiral Norrington's son with open arms. Emily, Governor Wilkins' eldest daughter, had taken immediately a shine to him. He was ever so courteous with her, but that that didn't keep him from flirting with her chambermaid, the daughter of the Governor's doctor or the wife of the apothecary.

Jamie didn't find any pleasure in it, though. Neither in his romantic pursuits nor in gambling or soirees. The young people were fair and entertaining, but there wasn't one among them whom he could have called a friend. How he missed Tom and their discussions! As much as he had often rolled his eyes over Tom's enthusiasm for the oddest things - he missed now hearing him talk with shiny eyes about an oddly shaped stone, an interesting book or a fruit. His new 'friends' were all shallow, pointless banter, and the harder Jamie tried to find joy in it, the more miserable he became.

So for tonight, he had set his mind on going to the tavern, finding a nice girl and getting drunk. Not too drunk to enjoy the company of the young lady, but drunk enough to numb his pain. Rum or ale, blonde or dark-haired, he didn't care.

Upon entering the tavern, he found to his great annoyance Tom sitting in the corner, for once in the company of a pretty girl. That should have improved Jamie's mood, yet he found this to be a very reprehensible situation. Tom hadn't seen him, and Jamie chose a table which allowed him to remain hidden while still being able to watch the goings-on. He ordered the first ale, then the second, and within the hour, Jamie was rather drunk.

From time to time, he could hear Tom's laughter, interrupted by the girl's giggle. Why the hell did that wench have to giggle? Certainly Tom's words couldn't be that funny? But then Tom could be very charming when he set his heart on it. Oh yes, Jamie had witnessed this a couple of times. A joke here, a witty word there, accompanied by a quick, intriguing smile. The girls liked that. Jamie liked it as well - not in the same way, of course, but still, when Tom smiled, even the darkest room seemed to be much brighter all of a sudden.

Empty tankards began to collect on Jamie's table. He stared at Tom and his companion with increasing irritation. Now what was that? Had Tom just touched her hand? He had! Outrageous behaviour for an officer, especially in public! Jamie scowled at the couple and ordered another ale. The innkeeper gave him a suspicious glance, but Jamie didn't notice. Now Tom even put an arm around the girl's shoulder! He would report that tomorrow, absolutely! Indecent behaviour of a lieutenant in public. There was an Article Of War regarding that, Jamie was sure. There were Articles Of War regarding everything, even the officially approved way to wipe one's arse, as his mother used to say.

Now Tom and the girl stood up. They were leaving? Where to? Jamie had to know. He waited until the door had closed behind them, then threw a couple of coins on the table and followed them. Outside it was raining cats and dogs, which was a good thing, as it made it easier for Jamie to follow the couple unnoticed. He pressed to the walls of the houses along the muddy street and hid in the shadows, but such precaution would not have been necessary; neither Tom nor the girl seemed to care for anything but each other.

Suddenly they disappeared. It took Jamie, who was three sheets to the wind a while to realise that the two must have turned into the next dark alleyway. Jamie almost ran into them when he followed suit, because they had halted and were now kissing, shielded from the rain by the large shop sign of the local shoemaker.

Jamie could feel a dark, red rage rise in his heart. He saw the girl's fingers play in Tom's hair, and Tom - was that possible? - had his hand under the girl's skirt. That was too much for Jamie to take.

"What the hell are you doin' there?" he yelled.

The couple startled, the girl immediately hiding behind Tom.

"Jamie?"

"Course it's me. Good ol' Jamie, alright! What are you doin' there with the wench?" Jamie snapped, unsteady on his feet but unshaken in his mission to end whatever indecencies were committed here.

Tom shook his head.

"Go home, Jamie. You are drunk."

The calmness in Tom's voice infuriated Jamie even more.

"Not drunk! I'm not drunk in the least! Haven't even wet the bottom o' the barrel yet! And you? Found yourself a little friend?"

"Jamie - go home. This is none of your business."

Jamie kicked an empty bottle and sent splashes of mud flying in all directions.

"Damned well my business! Have to look after you and make sure you're not in bad company!"

The girl clung to Tom's arm, staring at Jamie with big, fearful eyes.

"Maybe it would be better if I'd leave, Tom."

He patted her hand.

"Nothing to worry about, Alice. He's a good man, just drunk."

"Not drunk!" Jamie howled. "Not drunk at all!"

"Maybe you should bring him home? We can still meet tomorrow. My father won't be home till late, we could go for a walk."

Tom sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, giving Jamie a not overly friendly look.

"I fear you're right, Alice," he sighed. "Yes, I better get the drunkard home before he causes trouble. I don't think his father would like it. Are you sure you can manage on your own? I'm not feeling good about you walking around here in the middle of the night alone."

"It's only a few steps, Tommy. Don't worry about me."

She stood on tip-toes and pressed a kiss on his cheek. Tom smiled at her; she gave Jamie a quick, disgusted look and then disappeared in the darkness of the alley.

"Good! She's gone. Now we go home, and I won't tell anybody."

"How dare you, Jamie. How dare you embarrassing me so," Tom hissed.

Jamie, leaning to a wall for support, looked at Tom in surprise. He had never seen him so angry, and he wondered if he might have done something wrong.

"Don't know what you're talking about," he slurred. "Wench is gone, and that's just fine. Need no wenches around here. You and I and the navy and the sea, that's all we need. And ale."

"Maybe that's enough for you, but not for me! Mind your own business, Jamie, or you'll get yourself in serious trouble!"

"Are you trying to tell me to shut up? Is that it? Nobody's telling me to shut up; I say what I damned well want to!" Jamie snapped.

Tom's fingers closed into fists.

"Shut up? Yes, I tell you to shut up. Shut up, Jamie Norrington! Shut up and get out of my way, because I'm sick of your sight, you - big-headed, self-righteous bastard!"

Jamie lunged at Tom and tried to punch him. Tom quickly stepped out of the way, and Jamie landed face first in the mud. Unfortunately, he got a hold of Tom's foot and dragged him down as well. Within moments, the former friends were involved in an ugly fight. Jamie landed a blow on Tom's mouth, splitting his lip. Tom hit Jamie's nose which began to bleed. They were covered in mud, both trying to get the upper hand in this fight.

"Bloody bugger!" Jamie spat.

"Damned masher!" Tom growled, fisting his fingers in Jamie's hair and hitting his head repeatedly into the mud. This went on for quite a while. Then, as if coming to an agreement, both halted the fight for a moment, trying to catch their breaths before continuing their struggle.

That was the moment Thomas Gillette the younger made a very interesting discovery.

"You bastard! You bloody, lying bastard!" he gasped, emphasizing every word with a hit of his fist in the mud next to Jamie's head.

Jamie blinked and spat out mud and blood. At first he didn't know what Tom was talking about, but then he realised to his greatest embarrassment that, despite his state of heavy drunkenness, Tom's thigh was pressing against his own rather solid erection.

"Huh," he said in lack of a better comment.

"Huh indeed! That's all you have to say? You damned bastard! You cost me an eye, cut me out off your life, made me miserable, and all this just because you've been *jealous*?"

"Let me get up!"

"The hell I will! How could you do this to me! You've tortured me all those years with your in the mud with a hard-on? You bastard!"

Jamie shifted and tried to stand up, but Tom held him in an iron grip, not caring for rain or mud. He took Jamie's face between his hands and kissed him. The kiss was neither sweet nor gentle; it was rough and demanding, tasted of ale, mud and blood, but Jamie didn't consider even for a moment to fight back.

They didn't know whether to fight or hug, kiss or bite; their brains had switched off all logical thinking and they acted only on their basic instincts, neither caring for the fact that they were in a public place

nor for possible witnesses. Tom bit Jamie's lip, enjoying the pained groan. In return, Jamie found great pleasure in the moan he could excite from Tom by licking along the ridge of his ear. Tom pulled on Jamie's cravat, excited by the sight of the thin strip of pale, clean skin, which stood out from the mud-soaked uniform and the dirty face. He nibbled and bit while Jamie pulled on his hair, a painful yet strangely arousing feeling.

"Oh God, what are you doing to me, Jamie..."

Just when Jamie tried to slip his hand under Tom's waistcoat, he heard an odd, thudding noise, and Tom went limp in his arms. Next thing he knew, he felt a sharp pain on his head, and the world went dark for Jamie Norrington.

Chapter 5

Norrington woke up and knew that it would be a very bad day. Mornings were always bad, of course; sometimes it took him over an hour just to get up and stand on his own two feet. There was a dull ache in his ankles, as if they were trapped in a vice, skin stretched tight over sore flesh. By now he knew the routine: slow, careful motions to get some mobility back into his joints, supported by the iron will to force his body into submission. He knew it was his age; he had now to pay the price for decades at sea, for damp quarters and countless injuries.

It was not fair, and it was humiliating; learning how to walk like a toddler again and again.

The rain was pounding on the roof and the wind was howling; had it been up to Norrington, he'd stayed in bed, but that was out of question. He would go to his office, discuss his strategies with the captains and pretend everything was fine, just like on every other day. Everything *was* fine, after all. It wasn't the problem of the British Empire that his joints refused to cooperate, and that every movement caused him pain. It was only his problem, and he had no intention of sharing it with anybody.

"Are you awake, love?"

"I just woke up," Norrington lied. Elizabeth snuggled up to him and put her arm on his chest. He took her hand and caressed it, then pressed a kiss on the palm.

"A beastly day," she said, resting her head on his shoulder. "There should be a law against getting up in the morning when it's raining."

Norrington chuckled.

"What did you do when on watch on rainy days? Turn around and sleep for another hour?"

"On a ship things are different, of course! I never missed a watch, and I never fell asleep. Even on a pirate ship, you'd been keelhailed if you'd have fallen asleep while on watch! Jack would have..."

She broke off and bit her lip. There were very few things they never discussed, and her time with Jack Sparrow was one of them.

"It's quite alright, Elizabeth. I'm not upset. What would Jack have done?"

Elizabeth pressed his hand. It was a good thing she couldn't see his face; it was bitter with the realisation that even such a simple expression of love had to be paid for with pain.

"I guess he'd thrown me overboard. Or at least he'd pretended he'd do it. The *Pearl* - you know, the *Pearl* always came first. The only true love of his life."

Norrington turned around, careful not to show that this caused him considerable discomfort.

"I know the man was crazy when it came to his ship. He was crazy in every other aspect as well, but I'm fairly sure you were at least as important to him as the *Pearl*, Elizabeth."

She looked at him, and Norrington could see that she was searching for signs of mockery in his face. When she realised he was serious, she swallowed hard.

"I think I didn't tell you nearly often enough how much I love you, James. I do, you know? I really do. And if I sometimes think of Jack, then it's mostly because I don't know what happened to him. I don't know when he died or how."

Norrington sighed.

"I have no doubt he managed to get himself hanged somewhere. Or drowned. Stabbed, shot, eaten by a kraken, devoured by a sea snake, turned into a toad by the village witch or bored to death by Cutler Beckett."

"Your tact is admirable."

"My apologies."

"I hope he died in battle, aboard the *Pearl*. He'd have deserved that much. No matter what happened, he was a good man."

"That's debatable," Norrington muttered. "But you cared for him, so that's fine with me."

"Why are we discussing Jack now, after all these years?"

Norrington considered the question for a while.

"I still think Jack Sparrow was a pain in the neck and a scallywag, but now I've seen worse men, and some of them wore the same uniform as I do. Maybe it's the rain, maybe it's this place. I don't know."

They lay for a while in comfortable silence, listening to the rain outside.

"James, I've never asked you, but as you - well, as you've asked me, can I ask you as well?"

"Of course my dear. Ask me anything you want."

"Am I as important to you as he is?"

Norrington should have expected that question, yet it still came as a shock.

"Elizabeth, I -"

"I really want to know, James."

He wrapped a lock of her hair around his finger. It was amazing how young she still looked, especially compared to him. People probably thought she was his daughter when they went out. How embarrassing.

"Things are the way they are between us because I couldn't make a choice, aren't they? And I'll never forget that you allowed me to love you both."

She wanted to say that there was no reason to be grateful, that it was nothing, but she couldn't lie.

"Sometimes I hate him, James."

"And yet you -"

Norrington couldn't finish the sentence. Suddenly there was yelling and crying in the house. Doors were slammed, and the sound of heavy footsteps, first on the stairs, then in the corridor leading to their bedroom.

"What on earth is that?" Elizabeth asked, and sat up.

Three hard knocks on the door, then Gillette's voice.

"James! Quick, quick! We need you!"

Norrington grit his teeth and stood up. Something truly bad must have happened if Gillette came here, at this time, knowing that Elizabeth was with him.

"Come in, Thomas!" he said, ignoring Elizabeth's hissed comment that she wasn't quite decent yet.

The door flung open, and Gillette stumbled into the bedroom. Elizabeth quickly pulled the cover up to her chin, but Gillette didn't even notice she was there. He was pale, dripping wet and covered in mud.

"Thomas, what has happened?" Norrington asked, reaching for his breeches.

"It's Jamie and Tom - they have been abducted. Our boys are gone, James!"

* * *

Jamie woke up with a splitting headache and a foul taste in his mouth. He was fairly sure he was still drunk as he saw a monkey sitting on his chest, scratching its belly and looking at him with great curiosity. Jamie closed his eyes again, deciding that it was better to sober up before attempting to undertake risky and potentially harmful activities like moving or talking.

"That one's alive."

Jamie blinked, then he was doused with cold seawater, which sobered him more effectively than a nap could ever have. The monkey fled, protesting loudly against the rude treatment, while Jamie coughed and wiped the water from his face.

A second bucket of water was emptied, this time over the man lying next to him. From the resulting swearing he concluded that Tom was alive as well, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"That one's, too."

Tom sat up and looked at Jamie, who sported an ugly bruise on his cheek and a love bite on his neck.

"Alright, 'nough with the nappin', get up you scabby dogs!"

They were on a ship. How had that happened? Tom blinked at the bald, stocky and very dirty man in front of him. He was only one of many men gathered around him and Jamie, all of them quite obviously at war with personal hygiene and clad in the most outrageous garb.

"Holy Mary - what have you two been up to?"

An elderly man, clean looking in comparison with the gawking crowd gathered around Tom and Jamie, pushed and shoved the men aside.

"Well, you said we need two men, and that's what we got. Found 'em right behind a tavern, Mr. Gibbs," a tall, skinny man with a glass eye and a dirty mop of once possibly blond hair proudly replied. "They both got stuck in the mud, so we thought we give 'em a hand and help 'em out."

There was much snickering and laughing, but the one called Gibbs cut them off.

"Did you have a look at them before you brought them here, you idiots? Those are two lieutenants of the Royal Navy!"

"Now are they really?" the stocky guy asked, scratching his head. "I'll be damned. Now that you say it – well, 't was dark and rainin' and they were rollin' 'round in the mud like pigs. Difficult to tell lieutenant from man there, you know?"

"I demand to learn immediately what is going on here!"

Tom knew that tone – Jamie was not amused.

"Wouldn't mind hearin' that part either," a dozy voice behind them said.

"Look what those two gits dragged in, captain! Two lieutenants!"

Jamie and Tom looked at the captain, then at each other, and simultaneously shook their heads.

"Aye, I can see that. And why are these two gentlemen aboard my ship? This ship is off-limits for the

navy, as you well know!"

"Well, I thought-" the stocky man began, but a bored sigh and a sweeping gesture from the captain cut him off. Jamie counted twelve rings on the man's hands. Twelve. On ten fingers. Not even Admiral Finchley's wife, who Jamie's mother used to refer to as a walking Christmas tree, wore that much jewellery.

"You didn't think all yer life, Pintel, why startin' it now? Only gets you into trouble, savvy?"

"It was all Ragetti's idea!" Pintel protested, pointing at the tall one with the glass eye. "He talked me into it, captain!"

"That's not true! You're a filthy liar!" Ragetti protested, and whacked Pintel up the head.

"Ya bastard!"

"Ye git!"

The captain watched the argument with increasing annoyance and rolled his eyes.

"Would you please stop this, gentlemen? We have a problem at hand here, and I'd like to see it solved, if you don't mind."

The two shut up and stepped back.

"Aye, captain."

"Fine. So then, would you do me the honour and introduce yourself, lieutenant? Lieutenants? Lads?"

Jamie glared at the spectacular figure in front of him. Two braids in the captain's beard, many more in his matted, shaggy black hair, adorned with trinkets and beads, shells and bones. His tricorne was so old and dark from the exposure to the elements that it seemed to have become one with its owner. An old-fashioned coat, stained breeches and boots completed the picture, all of it covered in dust and stinking of rum, tar and tobacco.

"Introduce yourself first, pirate," Jamie snapped. "For that's what you and your lot here obviously are!"

The captain chuckled and mocked a bow.

"Sorry, lad, my manners. I'm Captain Jack Sparrow - I'm sure you've heard of me."

Somehow the name rang a bell, but Jamie was far too angry to think.

"Lieutenant Norrington, of HMS *Bilberry*, and I demand that you release us immediately!"

Sparrow's brown eyes widened. Jamie noticed that he had used coal to line them and shuddered.

"Norrington? Norrington? As in - *James Norrington*?"

"Indeed. Admiral James Norrington. I see with great pleasure that my father's name is still feared among your ilk."

Sparrow circled Jamie and looked him over with great curiosity.

"So you're Lizzy's boy?"

"If that should be a highly inappropriate way of asking whether my mother's name is Elizabeth, then the answer would be yes, my mother is Elizabeth Norrington."

Sparrow poked Jamie in the chest with a very dirty finger, and studied his face.

"You're not mine, are you?" he finally asked.

"Yours? What do you mean?"

"Well, mine. My boy. You're not my son, are you?"

"You must be completely insane! How can I possibly be your son if I'm the son of James and Elizabeth Norrington, as I just explained?"

Sparrow ignored the rant.

"Naw, you couldn't be my boy. You're the spitting image of your father. Poor lad. You really should only go out when it's dark."

Then a thought came to Sparrow's mind, and he pulled a face.

"That's disgusting!" he groaned. "He's touched my Lizzy? Bloody bastard! How could he? Damned Norrington!"

"Excuse me? How is it any of your business what my father and my mother - are you mad?"

Sparrow folded his arms over his chest.

"Now Jamie my lad, don't get things confused here. She's your mother, aye. Fine. But she's also my Lizzy, savvy? Still don't know why she decided to marry that - that - commodorial type of a commodore. But that's water down the river and ship down the whirlpool."

Then a thought crossed his mind, and he looked suddenly terrified. Sparrow turned to his crew, flaying his arms.

"That's Lizzy's son! Hide the rum! Lock it away! Don't let him get anywhere near the barrels!"

Tom had followed the conversation with a great amount of head-shaking, frowning and eyebrow-arching. When Sparrow turned to look at him, he wrinkled his nose.

"And who are you?" Sparrow asked. "Tell me your name is Beckett, and I'll hang myself from the yardarm. Or you."

"Beckett? No. My name is Gillette. Lieutenant Thomas Gillette, of HMS *Buckthorn*," Tom replied, trying to get rid of the monkey who seemed to be very fickle in his affections and was now clinging to his leg.

A murmur went through the crowd, then a cheer, and Ragetti opened his arms.

"Gillette! But of course! It's little Tom! Come an' give us a hug, lad!"

A dumbfounded Tom took a step back, but within seconds, he was surrounded by pirates who wanted to hug him, ruffled his hair or pinched his cheeks. Jamie tried to drag them away from his friend, but they simply ignored him.

"Chip of the ol' block," Pintel said, wiping tears of joy from his eyes with a very dirty handkerchief.

"Aye," Ragetti agreed, blowing his nose in the sleeve of his shirt. "But he's got his mother's eyes."

Tom, who just barely managed to keep on his feet, stared at Ragetti with bewilderment.

"How comes you know me? And what do you know about my mother?"

Pintel and Ragetti looked at each other, so they missed Jack Sparrow's frantic waving of hands and mouthed orders to keep quiet behind Tom's back.

"'course we know you!" Pintel said, giving Tom a big grin. "How could we not? You were born on this ship, after all!"

* * *

"And why did that wretched wench not alert us earlier?"

"She wasn't supposed to go out and was afraid her father would be angry with her," Gillette replied. He stood next to Norrington who studied a map and tried to figure out the head start of their sons' abductors. It was the angry Norrington of old, the scourge of pirates and other criminals, and the assembled officers kept a safe distance.

"Compared to what I will tell her, any sermon from her father will sound like a choir of angels! So they brought them aboard a ship?"

"A longboat, so their ship must have berthed close by."

"And how comes nobody saw that ship? Just what are you getting paid for? Scratching your arse?" Elizabeth asked.

Gillette glared at Norrington's wife who, despite her husband's expressed wishes to stay at home had insisted joining them, tried to word a reply to her accusation that did not contain any expletives.

"I know that you're very worried about your son's fate, Mrs. Norrington, but please don't forget that my lad has been abducted as well!"

"I certainly won't forget that - how did Jamie get into that part of Port Royal in the first place, anyway? Did Tom talk him into joining him? I wouldn't be surprised if-"

"Elizabeth, please..." Norrington tried to calm her, but his attempts only made Elizabeth more aggressive.

"Who does he think he is to order me around? This is my son, and nobody is doing anything or going anywhere without my knowledge or my agreement!"

Gillette was very pale. Had Elizabeth been a man, he would have reached for his sword, Norrington had no doubts about that.

"With all due respect and understanding for your situation, Mrs. Norrington - aboard my ship, the only one who's giving orders is the captain, and that would be me. Have I made myself clear?"

"Captain Gillette, you forget that you're talking to my wife," Norrington said stiffly, another helpless attempt at calming the situation. Gillette clenched his jaw and bowed his head.

"My apologies, admiral. How could I forget that even for a second. Thank you for reminding me. Now please excuse me, somebody has to see to it that we have a ship to chase after those criminals."

Gillette turned his back on Norrington and Elizabeth and stormed out of the room. Elizabeth bit her lip; she already regretted her words, but right now, all she could think of was her son.

"I'm coming with you, James."

"That's completely out of question, Elizabeth. You will stay here, in case that news should arrive."

"Over my dead body. That's my son, I'll come with you!"

"Elizabeth..."

"I'll run my sword personally through the bastard who's done that to my child!"

"But you really shouldn't..."

"Or I'll shoot them!"

No mother worrying for her child would listen to reasoning, and Elizabeth was not only a worried mother, but also a woman who knew how to use two swords at the same time.

"If you insist - just remember who is giving the orders, Elizabeth."

She glared at the door that Gillette had slammed shut during his departure.

"As if I could ever forget that," she muttered, and Norrington could feel a headache coming up.

* * *

Tom looked with great suspicion at the dirty glass and the dark liquid it was filled with.

"Do you want to poison me?"

"Stop being like your father and drink," Sparrow ordered. "It's rum, best you can find. My special secret reserve. You have one as well, young master Norrington, you look like a man who needs a drink."

The two young men decided that any state was better than being sober, and downed their glasses in one go. Jack nodded appreciatively.

"You know how to drink, have to give you credit for that. Well, your father always knew, Tom the lad, but dear old James Norrington - he just couldn't hold his liquor. Can't remember how often he got sick all over the *Pearl's* deck. Those were good times."

"My father was aboard this - wreck?" Jamie asked, which gained him a glare from Jack Sparrow.

"Now you show some respect! The *Pearl* is the finest ship ever to sail these seas, or any other seas, as for that. Savvy?"

Jamie had his doubts, but he thought it would be better not to voice them at the moment.

"I was really born here?" Tom finally asked, encouraged by a second glass of rum.

Sparrow shuddered.

"Aye. Terrible thing. Worst thing I ever witnessed. How women manage to live through this, I'll never know."

"But - why?"

"Would've thought you'd know at your age! Now, if a man and a woman really like each other... I

mean, sometimes, under certain circumstances, it can happen that..."

"No. I mean, why was I born aboard the *Black Pearl*?" Tom asked, rolling his eyes.

"Ah. Aye. Your mother decided that life ashore wasn't what she wanted after all. She met up with us in Tortuga, but by the time she realised that your father had left a little surprise for her, we were already on the high seas."

"His mother was a pirate? How terrible!"

"So was yours, James my boy! Ah, my Lizzy - should have seen her in her days! She was beautiful and deadly. I'll never forget how she chased after Barbossa with those swords of her - that woman could fight! Does she still chase people with swords, by the way? Or has she taken up crocheting?"

Jamie couldn't reply. He just stared at Sparrow, trying to make some sense of the pirate's words.

"My mother? A pirate?"

"Aye! Well, I know for certain that she once attacked your father with a bottle, but I guess that was her way of expressing her love." Jack Sparrow looked a little sad. "She never hit me with a bottle, you know."

"I don't believe a word you say. My father would have never - with a pirate - never!" Tom protested.

"Now please, show some manners! Your mother was the best of us - never understood what Anamaria saw in your father. But the state Gillette was in when Norrington made off with my Lizzy, he couldn't have told a pirate from a goat, anyway. Hit him hard, poor git."

Jamie, who had followed the conversation with increased discomfort, put his hand on Tom's shoulder.

"So you've been right all along - your father's been unhappy in love with my mother."

"What?" Sparrow asked, scratching behind an ear. "What did you just say?"

"I said that Tom was right all along. He always suspected his father was unhappy in love with my mother, and..."

"Ahahahah!"

Sparrow broke out in loud laughter. He laughed and howled as if he had just heard the best joke ever, and slapped Jamie on the back.

"I love your sense of humour, lad! Gillette in love with my Lizzy? Ahahaha!"

"Everybody loves my mother!"

"Oh yes! Everybody but Lieutenant 'fetch the irons' Gillette! They're probably still talking about it in Port Royal, almost thirty years later. Say he drew his sword and threatened to kill ol' Norrington rather than see him marry my Lizzy! Mind you, wish he'd been true to his word - but what do you want: Navy. No balls. No offence meant."

Tom jumped up.

"This makes no sense! None of this does! I have no idea what you're talking about! And why do you claim all the time to be Jack Sparrow and talk of 'my Lizzy'? My father told me about a Captain Jack Sparrow, but that pirate must be an old man by now, and you don't look a day older than - well, than you look. Are you his son?"

Sparrow gave Tom a sly sidewise glance.

"Good question, mate. Can't give you an answer, though -s'ppose it's the *Pearl*, you know? Or the curse. The kraken. Might also have something to do with Tia Dalma, who knows? She never told me. Ah, women and their secrets!"

"You're insane," Jamie muttered. "Tell us what you want in exchange for our freedom."

"Your freedom? But why, you're free! Free to leave at any time!"

"We're in the middle of the ocean!"

Sparrow shrugged.

"It's not my problem that you can't swim, is it?"

"So what are you going to do with us?" Tom asked.

"Well, I'll have to think of something original and entertaining. For the time being, I'll lock you up. And just so you know, young master Norrington, it will be far, far away from my rum!"

* * *

After a good thirty minutes of kicking and hitting against the door of Jack Sparrow's night cabin, Jamie had to realise that there was no way of escaping. Tom sat on the pirate's sea chest, reading a book.

"It's amazing - Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads! How comes a pirate like him reads such a thing? How comes a pirate like him knows how to read in the first place?"

Jamie kicked one last time against the door, then he folded his arms over his chest and glared at Tom.

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Let's be realistic, Jamie: we've been abducted. We have no idea where we are and just learned that our mothers used to be pirates. The door is locked so I can't run out, jump overboard and drown myself. So I might as well sit here and read poetry."

"Poetry - a fine mess you've got us in here, Thomas Gillette! Congratulations!"

Tom arched an eyebrow.

"I beg your pardon? How is it my fault that we're in this predicament? *You* were the one who started the fight!"

"Me? Oh now it's me? Who of us had to go and hide in some dark alley to do - whatever with - whoever!"

"Now you listen - it's none of your damned business what I do. See that eye? Your fault it's ruined, and all because of a harmless kiss. Now you see me kissing a woman and it's still not right?"

"Don't you have any self-control? Do you have to chase after everything on two legs that's not a ladder?"

"Says one who couldn't keep his cock in his breeches if it was glued to them!"

"Will you shut up now?"

"Like hell I will!"

Jamie pinched the bridge of his nose.

"No. No, I will not stoop that low again. You can't provoke me into another fight just so you can - do what you did last night."

Tom looked up from the book.

"Wouldn't you just love if I did it again."

"It was disgusting!"

"Could you repeat that please, so I'll know why I'll strangle you?"

Jamie turned his head and stared at a clay figure on a small shelf, decorated with shells and feathers. An ugly thing.

"Just so you know: upon our return - if we should return - I'll ask Emily if she wants to marry me," he said, and ran a finger over the figure. As expected, it was covered with a thick layer of dust.

"What? Who?"

"Emily. The governor's daughter. We are rather close."

"You don't want Emily."

"Sure I do."

"No, you don't."

"What would you know about it!"

Tom sighed and put the book aside. He gave Jamie a pitiful smile, stood up, grasped him by the shirt and pushed him against the door. Before Jamie could protest, he kissed him, and Jamie had to admit that Tom knew damned well what he was doing. The thought of pushing him away didn't even cross his mind. Jamie felt dizzy, and a little angry with himself for giving in so easily.

He could feel Tom's hand on the buttons of his breeches, opening them one by one. He remembered their fight on the previous night, and Tom's lips on his neck; how his hands had felt on his skin and how he had tasted. Tom had finally managed to unbutton Jamie's breeches, and he broke their kiss just in time, otherwise Jamie would probably have bitten Tom's tongue off when his hand closed around Jamie's cock.

"Still want to marry Emily? Are you certain about that?" Tom asked casually, and began to stroke the flustered Jamie at a slow, teasing pace.

"Bastard," Jamie gasped. "Is that what you're doing to your beloved Lt. Kyle?"

Tom chuckled and nuzzled Jamie's ear.

"Only when he annoys me," he replied, not changing the pace of his movements despite Jamie's desperate bucking and thrusting. "Why do you ask? Do you want to know? Good grief, but think what poor Emily would say if she knew."

Jamie gritted his teeth, then he fisted his hands in Tom's hair and pulled him close, their noses almost colliding.

"To hell with Emily," he hissed. "Show me."

Chapter 6

Gillette had always been "the lieutenant" - an overzealous officer who followed James like a shadow, awaiting orders and seeing the main purpose of his existence in the fulfilment of those orders to Norrington's fullest satisfaction.

"Fullest satisfaction" - now there was a picture! Elizabeth shuddered while she made her way to the quarterdeck. She wore an old, faded midshipman's uniform, her hair was tied back in a pigtail. Her fashionable walking dresses were the perfect outfit to make the governor's toffee-nosed wife jealous, but Elizabeth was on the warpath, and whoever had abducted Jamie would be greeted by her sword, not her parasol, and fighting was easier when wearing breeches.

Judging by the expression on the faces of HMS *Aronia's* crew, many letters would be sent home with detailed descriptions of Admiral Norrington's crazy wife and her eccentric antics. That would keep the old cats at home entertained till Christmas, at least! A good thing her father was half-deaf; this would hopefully spare him from suffering a heart-attack.

But it couldn't be helped, Jamie was in danger, and she wouldn't let her son down. If it hadn't been for her constant worry about his fate, she'd actually enjoyed the adventure. Being aboard a ship again, and not as a mere passenger! How she had missed that; the sea, the challenge, the danger, the excitement. She loved James, and had never regretted her decision, but there had been many moments when she remembered her life aboard the Pearl with melancholy. First she had been fighting for Will, but then for herself, trying to escape the gilded cage she so had feared.

James hadn't locked her up, though. There had been no cage, he had never tried to fence her in. He had given her every liberty he possibly could, only one of the many reasons why she loved him. Why was Gillette drawn to him, she wondered - James' talent to bring the best out in those around him? Or friendship in combination with physical attraction? Admiration and hero-worship turned love? Or was this just another aspect of the "Band of Brothers" that she, a woman, had been excluded from?

The days of the lieutenant were over now, though. Gillette, looking rather intimidating in his uniform, talked to Lt. Kyle, who had volunteered for this mission. He hadn't hesitated a moment, and Elizabeth was quite sure that the main reason for his offer had been genuine worry about Tom. Lt. Kyle was married; he had told her about his wife and his children. Did his wife know? And if she did, how did she cope? Turning a blind eye? How many women like Mrs. Kyle and herself were there?

She remembered how Admiral Taylor's wife had lamented the deplorable custom of many husbands to get themselves a mistress. Well, there had certainly never been "another woman" in James' life, but Elizabeth almost regretted it. Had there been a red-haired woman with a voluptuous figure turning James' head, she could have picked up the gauntlet and fought back - she was a beautiful woman and she knew it. But how on earth could a woman compete with red-haired cranky captain?

When Gillette saw her approaching, he automatically straightened up. Just like James, he usually walked with a stoop; the result of years below decks which were not made for men as tall as him. His face was a mask of indifference, his brown eyes cold and unapproachable. Gillette always looked that way when she was close by, maybe he thought it would scare her off. It was ridiculous; he of all the

men should have known that it took more than a frown and a growl to keep her away.

"Mrs. Norrington - what a pleasant surprise," he said, ever the gentleman. Lt. Kyle greeted her as well, and Elizabeth gave him her most charming smile.

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

"How kind of you to ask, Captain Gillette. Actually, I wonder if it would be possible to have a word with you - in private?"

She looked at Lt. Kyle, expecting him to leave, but the lieutenant didn't move before Gillette nodded. Of course - he was the captain. He gave the orders.

"How may I be of assistance to you, Mrs. Norrington?"

"Lt. Kyle is out of hearing range, you can talk like a normal man again."

"Have you come here to discuss my rhetorical shortcomings with me?"

How she hated that ironic undertone in his voice.

"I'd die of old age before I'd finished that discussion. No, I'm here to apologise."

"Apologise?"

He was truly surprised, she could tell from the nervous way he licked his lips. What an annoying habit, how could James stand it?

"Yes. I was in the wrong for yelling at you. Whatever happened, it wasn't your fault, and I know that. And it wasn't Tom's fault, either. Unfortunately - well, unfortunately it's very often Jamie's fault when things go wrong."

"As this is very likely the only apology I'll ever get, I'll cherish it to the day I'll die."

Elizabeth glared at him.

"The only one? What on earth should I apologise for beside that? For my existence?"

Gillette shrugged.

"Ah no, that would take things too far; your existence has to be blamed on your parents. But if you give me a day or two, I could prepare a list with all due apologies in alphabetical order. That might come in handy, you wouldn't risk forgetting one should you ever apologise to your husband. If we involve Mr. Turner's sufferings as well, I'll need three days, though."

"How dare you! Just who do you think you are?"

"I'm the one who picked up the broken pieces you've left of James Norrington. 'All the King's horses, and all the King's men' - and when I finally put James together again, you came along, once again changing your mind and deciding that, after all, it was more comfortable to be the wife of an admiral than the mistress of a pirate. You have a very healthy instinct of self preservation, I have to give you credit for that!"

Elizabeth wanted to protest, but then she remembered how James had looked at her when she had left him. It was true, she had contributed to his downfall, but not much to his resurrection. That, she had to admit, had all been Gillette's doing.

She pushed a strand of hair out of her face and sighed.

"I wish I could say that you're completely wrong, but that wouldn't be the truth. I've made many mistakes in my youth, but James and I have made our peace, and it's not your place to judge our marriage. If we wouldn't love and trust each other, this marriage couldn't have survived your intrusion. Marrying me was the more comfortable and safe option for James as well, don't you agree? Thomas, do you think this is easy for me? Sharing my husband? You've earned my eternal gratitude for bringing my son home, yet there are days when I hate you so much that I could kill you, because James will never be mine alone."

"And there are days when I hate you just as much because I'm indebted to you, because I have to live on your mercy. Don't you think that would be easy for a man."

Elizabeth was at loss for an answer. She had never looked at it that way; did he really think he was a dog she'd thrown a bone to?

Gillette sighed, his anger suddenly gone.

"Elizabeth, this doesn't lead anywhere. We're both right, and we're both wrong. The only thing of importance at the moment is that we find Tom and Jamie."

"The horizon seems to be endless," Elizabeth said, more to herself than to Gillette. "They could be anywhere. And while we're arguing here about things that can't be changed, the lads are in grave danger and wait for our help."

* * *

It was not the first time that Jamie's rather careless approach to life had got him into trouble. The cases of unintended fatherhood had been the smallest problem; his father had settled them discreetly by paying the girls and their families very generously. The same had been true for Jamie's debts - he always bid on the wrong dog in the rat pit - and complaints about brawls and general impetuous behaviour. Being the son of an admiral, especially one from a family as wealthy as the Norringtons, had proven to be very helpful for a prospective rogue like him.

Norrington had lectured him countless times on morals and standards, but Jamie had learned very

early on in his life that his father's bark was far worse than his bite. Elizabeth been very upset with Jamie for getting those girls into trouble, and had often suggested to stop sweet-talking her offspring and employing a riding crop instead. Jamie had always laughed this off as a joke. Now that he had caught a glimpse of his mother's past, he wasn't so sure anymore.

Jamie took the Norrington's family motto - "*Aut vincere aut mori - Either conquer or die*" a little too literally. There had been duels, nightly horse races, and one incident of an angry husband firing his pistol at him and missing his head only by a hair's breadth. Jamie had enjoyed that adventure immensely; the danger was part of the game and made him feel more alive.

But as soon as he was on duty, he turned into an exemplary officer. His promotions had been deserved, had not just been the result of his family's connections. Even those who disliked him had to admit that he would make a fine captain one day. Jamie felt more obliged to the Articles of War than the Ten Commandments, and while nobody would have been surprised if he had been shot by a cuckold or died in a duel, the mere thought of Jamie Norrington breaking an Article of War was laughable.

Jamie didn't laugh, though. The air was hot and sticky in Jack Sparrow's night cabin, and Jamie longed for a breath of fresh air. He leaned on Tom, their bodies still joined; he felt exhausted and rather confused but also very happy. Tom worried the soft skin on his neck between his teeth, his fingers drawing lazy circles on the small of Jamie's back.

"This will leave a mark," Jamie murmured, his fingers caressing Tom's sides. "I mustn't forget the cravat, otherwise everybody would see it."

"Would you mind?"

Jamie shook his head. He didn't mind at all; oddly enough, he even enjoyed the fact that Tom had left a mark on him. How was it possible that this had happened? Rash action out of the spur of the moment, as usual? The thrill of the forbidden? Curiosity, maybe, because this had always been his weakness: the need to experience everything, pushing the limits.

"I can't resist the song of the sirens," he murmured.

Tom kissed Jamie's ear, then looked at him questioningly.

"Sirens?"

"That's what my father often says - that I can't resist the song of the sirens."

"You should resist them, Jamie. They are dangerous."

How true - illegitimate children, nightly duels and rat pits were nothing to be proud of, but also not completely unexpected from a young gentleman. But this here was a completely different kettle of fish. This was a hanging offence, and neither his father nor all his family's wealth would be able to save his neck if it should ever come out.

Jamie could feel Tom's hand in his hair now. He opened his eyes and had to smile. Despite the dead eye - and Jamie would never forgive himself for causing that injury - the dreamy expression he had so often noticed on Tom's face had returned. Dreamy and doting. Nobody had ever looked at him in such a way.

"This was not a very wise thing to do, was it, Jamie?"

"Probably not."

Jamie could feel how Tom's body tensed, and he realised that this had been the wrong answer. He leaned forward and kissed him, caressing his cheek.

"But have I ever done anything wise, Tom?"

"Probably not?"

Tom shifted and Jamie winced, hoping that whatever destiny awaited them did not involve sitting.

"Odd to think men do this for pleasure," he muttered.

"That's what women say about drinking, yet we enjoy it greatly and wouldn't give it up."

They both grinned. 'We must look like idiots', Jamie thought. He had gone along with this because he needed to know what it was like - being with Tom. Now he wondered what it would be like being without him, and that was a frightening thought. While Tom nuzzled his ear and still basked in the aftermath of their love-making, Jamie was already planning ahead.

"We need to be very careful. It's not going to be easy, you're aware of this?"

Tom tilted his head and frowned.

"What? Keeping this secret? I doubt this lunatic out there would herald it on the market-square of Port Royal if he knew."

"I'm talking about being together. At least sometimes."

Tom clasped Jamie's hand, interrupting the caresses.

"Don't play with me, Jamie. I know you, and how you trifle with those who love you."

Jamie startled, surprised by Tom's reaction.

"So you don't want to be with me?"

Tom let go of Jamie's hand.

"Knowing you and your ways, you'll have forgotten all about this by latest tomorrow."

"Idiot."

Jamie kissed Tom, who first resisted, then relented. He opened his eyes; he wanted to see what Tom looked like while he kissed him. All Jamie could see was an ear, red hair with streaks of mud, a couple of freckles and Tom's closed eye, but that was enough to convince him that he wanted to enjoy that view again.

"Now if I really was such a never-do-well and scallywag as you say, how comes you love me?" Jamie asked in-between two kisses.

"I never said I do," Tom replied, lost once more in the sensation of finally having what he coveted for so long.

"But you do."

Tom never had the chance to reply, because somebody tried to open the door and interrupted any possible declarations of love.

* * *

"Door's closed, captain," Pintel said, and scratched his head.

"Sure it is, locked it myself," Jack Sparrow said with pride. "That's why I gave you the key, you idiot. Now open up and let me have a word with the two young gentlemen."

"But that's what we're sayin', captain! Door's locked! From the inside!" Ragetti explained, gesturing in helpless desperation at the solid oak door of Sparrow's night cabin.

"From the inside? Ridiculous. Makes no sense. Out of the way, let me handle that."

Jack pushed the two men aside and reached for the key, which still stuck in the keyhole. He tried to turn it to the left, but it stopped - the door was unlocked.

"Now that's odd," Jack muttered, turned the key twice to the right, which was no problem, then twice to the left again. The lock worked. The key moved. Yet the door was still closed.

He banged his fist against the door.

"Mr. Norrington! Mr. Gillette! I demand to know what you're doing in there! 'In there' being my cabin! You are prisoners! Means we lock you in, not you lock us out, savvy?"

"We'll unbolt the door in a moment," Jamie assured, hastily putting his clothes on. Tom tried to button his waistcoat up, then he realised it was Jamie's, which was too narrow across the chest, and

they swapped, cursing.

"This is against the rules! This is not the way prisoners behave!" Jack yelled, arms akimbo and hat pushed into his face. "Unbolt the door at once and come out! Immediately! Instantly! Promptly! This is not a request, you gits!"

Jack could hear muffled voices, a thud - Jamie pressing Tom against the door and kissing him, but of course Jack didn't know that - and then the door was finally unbolted and opened, revealing two very dirty, dishevelled and somewhat dopey-looking lieutenants.

"Just what are you learnin' in the navy nowadays? You don't lock your capturers out, they lock you in! It's against the rules of piracy!"

"But aren't they more like guidelines?" Jamie asked. "At least that's what my mother said."

"Your *mother*? Your mother. Of course your mother, who else! Enough with the nonsense, follow me!" Jack ordered, leading the way out of the cabin. "More like guidelines? Look who's talking. That's just like her, darned wench!" he muttered.

The monkey climbed up Tom's leg, then over his back and came to sit on his shoulder. He didn't dare to shrug the animal off, and the monkey began to comb through Tom's hair, either because he was not satisfied with the unkempt look of the young man or because he was looking for his breakfast.

Jamie gave Jack his most arrogant smirk.

"So what do you intent to do with us now? I hope you're aware that we will not give you any information, and that we know how to die like gentlemen."

"Why are you two so bent on dying? Are two harpies of wives waiting for you at home?"

"Well - no," Tom slowly replied. "But we thought-"

"Tom my lad, don't think. It's nothing your father was very good at, and your mother must have given up on it for a while as well - otherwise you wouldn't be here, now wouldn't you - and all things considered, be quiet now for a moment. I have important matters to discuss with young Master Norrington here."

Jack put an arm around Jamie's shoulder and lowered his voice. In his other hand, he held a compass, and gave it to Jamie.

"What's that supposed to be?"

"It's a compass. Don't you have compasses - compassi - compassa - whatever in the navy? How do you navigate? By following the singing of the sirens?"

"Of course I know what a compass is!" Jamie protested, insulted in his pride as a lieutenant. "But why

are you giving me that old thing?"

Jack grinned, showing a good number of gold teeth.

"Jamie my boy, it's very simple. The sea is endless, alas, my patience isn't. I barely survived the presence of your father aboard my ship, your mother made my life hell and you are the combination of their worst characteristics. I could throw you overboard, of course, but as you're Lizzy's son, you'd probably scare the sharks away. So I decided to return you to your parents; I rather have you driving them insane than us here. This very moment, there's probably half the British fleet out there looking for you and your ginger-locked friend, if James Norrington is still the man I knew him to be. To speed things up, we will be looking for them - meet them halfway, savvy?"

"Look for them? How can you do that if you don't know where they are?"

Jack pointed at the compass.

"Just look at the compass, lad, and set the course."

"But how-"

"Just look at that damned compass, that's all I ask," Jack groaned. "Can't you just do once what I ask you to do?"

Jamie shrugged. There was no point in arguing with a madman. He opened the compass and stared down at the needle, which began to turn to the right, to the left, then swirled three times and finally came to a halt. Jack looked up - the needle pointed at Tom Gillette.

"No, no. You didn't do it right. Try again. Concentrate. Concentrate on what you want most, savvy?"

"As you wish."

Again Jamie stared down at the compass. This time the needle quivered only once, then pointed in Tom's direction again.

Jack covered his eyes with his hand.

"I should've known. I'm a cursed man."

"I don't understand-" Jamie began, but Jack cut him off.

"So that's why the door was locked? I'll have to fumigate my cabin! You didn't touch my cot, did you?"

Jamie gave him a rather panicked look.

"We didn't do anything! We didn't touch anything!"

"You better not! I'll only have to get the floor holystoned then. Now look: you hold the compass and think of your mother, that's all I want. Savvy? Think of your dear old mother. Think you can do that?"

"My mother? Why should I think of my mother now?"

"You didn't think your mother would stay at home and knit while your father is out here looking for you, now did you! I bet she's having a sword with her, too! And pistols! Maybe even a musket!"

Jack let go of Jamie and arched his eyebrows.

"Try it, lad."

Jamie closed his eyes and thought of his mother, her mischievous smile, the twinkle in her eyes and the freckles on her nose - twelve, if his father could be believed. He remembered her tears when he had been brought home after Trafalgar, the loving way she used to run her hand through his father's hair.

"Yes! That's it! Brilliant!" Jack cheered. "Mister Gibbs, we have a course!"

Jamie opened his eyes and looked at Tom.

"This is insane," he said. "And you have a monkey sitting on your head."

* * *

"Any news?" Norrington asked, looking up from his table which was covered with maps and notes.

"Not yet," Gillette replied. "But we'll find them, you have my word."

"Of course we will. I just have no idea where."

Norrington gestured at the maps in front of him.

"They could be everywhere, Thomas. Where to look for them? I know these seas like the back of my hand, but there are dozens of islands where the abductors could hide. If at least we'd know why the lads were taken, and by whom! It makes no sense."

Gillette sat down opposite the admiral.

"It makes me suspicious that of all the men Tom and Jamie have been abducted. Could it be that this is some sort of retribution from an old enemy?"

"Our old enemies are, as you say, either old or dead, Thomas."

"I know. It was only an idea. Jamie and Tom are fine, I have no doubt about that."

"I wish I could share your optimism. A good thing Jamie's inherited Elizabeth's temper. He'll fight to the last."

"Yes, our lads are lucky to have such courageous mothers."

Maps forgotten, Norrington looked up and saw a small smile on Gillette's face.

"You never mentioned Tom's mother."

"You never asked for her."

"I didn't think it was my place to."

Gillette folded his hands and twiddled his thumbs.

"Tom was two years old when he came to live with me, give or take a month. It's difficult to tell at that age, isn't it? My mother said he had to be two. When I returned from shore leave, I was called to the captain's cabin and informed that somebody had left the boy for me. There was a bundle with clothes and a few lines telling me that the mother was dead and nobody there to look after him. So I brought him to my parents, and when he was old enough, I took him with me, as a midshipman. He was born to be at sea."

"He's a fine officer. His mother must have been a very gentle woman, I suppose, judging by his love for books and-"

Gillette broke out in loud laughter, which Norrington considered to be a rather undue reaction, considering the circumstances.

"Thomas, I-"

"Gentle woman? Very gentle, yes - when we first met, she threatened to run me through with her sword!"

"Your wife threatened you with a sword?"

"Not my wife. We were never married. I asked her to, but - she preferred the life at sea, so she left. Never heard of her again."

"But you *wanted* to marry her?"

Norrington was surprised how much this hurt him. It wasn't fair to be upset, he had married Elizabeth, after all. But the thought that Thomas had been willing to share his life with somebody else, even would have promised at church in front of everybody to 'forsake all others' - it was like being stabbed with a knife.

Was this the way Thomas had felt about him and Elizabeth all those years? Had this been just as painful? Then he could understand why Thomas had reached for his sword. Norrington didn't think he could have lived with the knowledge that there was another person sharing Thomas' life in such an intimate way.

"Is anything amiss?" Gillette asked upon seeing the pained expression on Norrington's face.

"No - or yes. I just realised what a selfish idiot I've been all those years. I'm sorry, Thomas. I never really considered how this must be for you."

Gillette shrugged.

"It could have been worse. She and I, we both lost our great love to Elizabeth, but while I got my wish finally granted, her dream never came true, I fear."

"Elizabeth? But... I wouldn't know of any woman... there was nobody I..."

"James - she wasn't in love with you. She was in love with Jack Sparrow."

Norrington made an odd, choked noise. His eyes became wide like saucers, and all colour drained from his face.

"You wanted to marry a woman who was in love with Sparrow?"

"You actually did marry one, James."

"But - who?"

"Sparrow's steersman. Woman."

There was a moment of silence.

"You mean - Tom's mother was a pirate?"

Gillette nodded.

"Indeed. Just like Jamie's."

"I'll be damned."

"Aren't we all?"

Norrington chewed his lip.

"I guess we are, yes. And so are our boys if we don't find them very soon."

There was a knock on the door, and Lt. Kyle stormed in, barely waiting for Norrington's command to enter.

"Sir! A ship! There's a sighting of a ship!"

Norrington jumped up, which resulted in a pained yelp. Kyle looked at him questioningly, but Gillette quickly came to stand between the lieutenant and the admiral.

"Return to your position, lieutenant. We'll be with you in a moment."

"Aye, Sir!"

Kyle turned on his heel and returned on deck, while Gillette rushed to Norrington's side. He was leaning against the table, breathing heavily.

"Bloody hell, James, what are you doing? You're not twenty anymore!"

"Thanks for reminding me. Just give me a moment, I'll be fine in no time."

Gillette looked over his shoulder to make sure nobody was watching them, then he touched Norrington's face.

"If I could carry this burden for you, I would. You know that, don't you, James?"

Norrington tried to force the pain under his control. There was a limit to what he could bear, and he was approaching it quickly.

"I know, Thomas, I know. I wouldn't let you, though. And I'm fine. All is fine. Don't worry. We have to go on deck now, if we're lucky, we found the ones we've been searching for."

Another deep breath, then Norrington walked stiffly across the cabin.

* * *

Norrington didn't say a word, he just handed the spy glass to Gillette. The captain watched the approaching ship, blinked, looked again, then passed the spy glass to Elizabeth, who snapped it up, eager to see the other ship. For a while there was silence, then she shook her head.

"That can't be. It's simply not possible."

"I'd agree with you if I hadn't seen it myself, my dear."

Norrington took the telescope from his wife.

"However, as we've all seen it, there can be no doubt that it's the Black Pearl."

"Which is supposed to be on the bottom of the ocean for at least twenty years," Gillette added. "I hate to admit it, but I have no idea what's going on here."

"Maybe that ship was built after the plans of the *Black Pearl*?" Lt. Kyle suggested. "Or it simply has an uncanny likeness?"

"I'd agree with you, Mr. Kyle, if it wasn't Jack Sparrow's flag flying there."

"But Sir - Captain Sparrow is dead."

Norrington shrugged.

"Maybe it's his son? I wouldn't be surprised. Madness runs in the family. Well, I suppose the riddle will be solved in short time. I only hope that we'll also find Lt. Norrington and Lt. Gillette. In any case, clear the deck for battle. Should really somebody have been negligent in their duties and not have sent the *Black Pearl* to Davy Jones' locker, I'll do it myself."

"But James, you can't open fire at the *Black Pearl*!" Elizabeth protested. "Jamie might be there, and Tom!"

"Elizabeth, leave the helm. This is none of your business, and whoever is commanding the *Black Pearl*, it's not Jack Sparrow. We might deal with a truly dangerous enemy here."

Elizabeth crossed her arms over her chest.

"I'll stay here. If you want me to leave, you'll have to carry me off."

Gillette didn't give Norrington a chance to reply.

"Mr. Kyle, would you be so kind and accompany Mrs. Norrington to her cabin? If she should resist, you are herewith authorised to carry her or, if that's too complicated, drag her away by her hair."

Kyle blushed profoundly, and Elizabeth gasped for breath like a beached fish.

"Sir, I don't know if..."

"But I do. Follow my orders, lieutenant."

The discussion was interrupted by a midshipman who came running, bringing important news.

"Sir, they had flags up earlier on," he reported. "Didn't make much sense, but we wrote the message down."

"What did it say?" Norrington asked.

The midshipman unfolded a paper.

"It said: HAVE TWO MONKEYS ABOARD. WILL SWAP FOR RUM. JACK. Then there was a second message shortly after: LIZZY HOW COULD YOU."

"That was all?"

"That was all, Sir. Any orders?"

"No. Thank you, Mr. Franklin, please return to your position."

Norrington, Gillette, Kyle and Elizabeth stared at each other. She was the first to break the silence, clinging to her husband's arm.

"*Jack?* James - do you think it's possible that-"

"Anything is possible when Jack Sparrow is involved. I wouldn't put it past him to return from the dead just to annoy me. If he should have hurt the lads, I'll make sure that he'll return to Davy Jones' locker within the hour, but not in one piece! Man the guns!"

Chapter 7

***"And all the King's horses
And all the King's men
Couldn't put James
Together again..."***

"Captain, what are we goin' to do now? That's one mighty big ship there, with lots of cannons."

Sparrow wrinkled his nose at Ragetti, who fiddled with a button on his coat and looked rather worried.

"It's probably James Norrington's ship. Wonder what he's tryin' to compensate there."

"Shouldn't we man our cannons as well, Captain?" Gibbs asked.

"What for? We have no powder left."

"Oh. I forgot."

It didn't take long for the *Aronia's* crew to bring her alongside the *Black Pearl*. She really was a big ship; one broadside, and the *Pearl* would be gone.

"Give me that bloody speakin' trumpet, if possible before they open fire," Sparrow ordered.

Ragetti handed the device to the captain. Sparrow cleared his throat, then he hailed the other ship.

"Commodore! How nice to see you again! Lovely day today, isn't it?"

To his great surprise, it wasn't Norrington who replied, but Gillette.

"You have ten minutes to launch a boat and release Lt. Norrington and Lt. Gillette before we open fire!"

"He sounds quite angry," Ragetti whispered, and Pintel nodded.

"Yes, very angry. Maybe we shouldn't upset him more?"

"Oh will you shut up now, you two?" Sparrow snapped. "Don't you remember that he always sounded like that? Bloody grumpy old git."

He returned his attention to Gillette.

"Mr. Gillette! Now what a pleasant surprise! 't is Captain Jack Sparrow speakin', which can't come as a big surprise, as this is the *Black Pearl* and the captain of the *Black Pearl* has always been, well, at least most of the times, Captain Jack Sparrow, which would be me. So, we have your sons, you want

them back, how about you comin' over, we have a drink and discuss the conditions for the hand over?"

There was a moment of silence. Sparrow could see some commotion on the quarterdeck of the *Aronia*; Gillette was obviously attacked by a midshipman.

"Just what are they doin' there? Gentlemen, could you please pay me some attention? I'm the main person here!"

The next message from the *Aronia* was so loud and skirled that Sparrow winced.

"You bastard! Do you hear me? Jack Sparrow, if that's really you, then you better let the boys go immediately, or I'll blow your bloody ship to the bloody moon! I'll rip your balls off! I'll gut you like a fish! I'll - I'll - do terrible things to you! Do you hear me?"

A big smile spread all over Sparrow's face.

"Lizzy! My little moray! I knew you'd come! Pack up your old geezer and his terrier and come over here! We have to celebrate this - family reunion!"

Another stream of expletives followed from the *Aronia*, and Sparrow handed the speaking trumpet over to Jamie.

"Here. Say hello to your dear sweet old mother, invite her over and tell her to leave any swords, knives, daggers, pistols and muskets aboard the *Aronia*, if possible. I wouldn't mind if she'd left your old man behind as well, but I've given up on that hope long ago."

Jamie looked puzzled. Sparrow looked over his shoulder and scratched his beard.

"Say, lad - Elizabeth - your mother - she's still very pretty, I guess?"

"Absolutely," Jamie said with great enthusiasm. "One of the most beautiful women I know."

Sparrow looked Tom over, who was trying in vain to pry the monkey from his shoulder.

"Considerin' your taste, you're not really a reliable source, I guess. Well, we'll see."

"Crazy. Completely crazy," Jamie muttered, then he passed the message on to his mother that both he and Tom were alive, in good health and more than ready to return home.

* * *

Jack Sparrow almost fell over backwards when Elizabeth attacked him. Gillette didn't put too much effort in holding her back, and so Sparrow found his face scratched by ten fingernails.

"You rat!" she screamed. "You purulent plague-spot! You miserable, rotten, damned - Jack, is it really

you? Jack, oh my God!"

He opened his arms, hugged her and grinned.

"Of course it's me, my little moray! What did you think? That old Jack's gone to Davy Jones' locker? Not for a long time, darlin'! But very glad you came to see me and pick up your monkeys."

He turned to Jamie and Tom with a sweeping gesture.

"Gentlemen! Your parents! No lengthy family reunions, please, I'm not the sentimental type, savvy?"

"Jamie! Is everything fine with you? Jamie!"

Elizabeth ran past Sparrow and took her son in her arms. Jamie was dirty and sported a bruise on his cheek, but otherwise he seemed to be unharmed. Tom hurried towards Gillette, who ignored rules and regulations for a change and hugged his son. Norrington didn't move; he watched the scene from a distance, but the relief was obvious on his face.

"Thanks God I have you back, Tom! Bless your heart, lad, you're alive!" Gillette said, ruffling Tom's hair as if he still was a little boy.

"I'm fine, father," Tom assured, then he lowered his voice. "But you better be careful - these people here are completely mad. Absolutely, completely, totally insane."

Only now, with Tom and Jamie safe and alive, Gillette took the time to have a closer look at the crew of the *Black Pearl*. He knew those faces - hadn't he spent years chasing after them? Mr. Gibbs... Pintel... Ragetti... Marty... the bloody monkey... and then there was Captain Jack Sparrow, no doubt. But how was that possible? Jack Sparrow didn't look much older than the last time he had seen him, almost thirty years ago!

"I demand to know what's going on here," Norrington said, and the noise calmed down immediately. "You can't be Captain Jack Sparrow. So who are you, what is your business, and most important thing of all, how dare you lay hand on two lieutenants of the Royal Navy?"

Sparrow rolled his eyes.

"Don't ruin the mood, Commodore. Why, of course it's me. Same hat. Same beard. See? I even still have Cutler Beckett's mark on my arm. May he rest in peace, whatever circle of hell he's been assigned to."

"Knowing Cutler Beckett, he's *running* hell by now. I admit that you look a lot like Jack Sparrow, but he'd be an old man if he still lived. Good grief, he was older than me!"

"I admit there was a time you looked better, Commodore."

"Admiral."

"Admiral then, fine, fine. Now see, with your lieutenants, that was misunderstandin', based on those two gits over there understandin' me miss. I said I need two men, they found two men in the mud and didn't realise they were lieutenants. And you must admit muddy back alleys are not where you'd expect to find lieutenants of the Royal Navy. Well, fine, you'd expect to find them there, but they shouldn't be there, savvy?"

Norrington was very tempted to punch the pirate right in his face upon seeing his smug smile, but he remembered his age, swallowed his anger and tried to keep his decorum.

"Save your breath, pirate. I could have you all hanged for your crimes."

"Commodore - Admiral - whatever - I thought we'd given up on that, aye? You have your sons back, and actually, I should have you hanged for stealin' my lady!"

"I'm not your lady," Elizabeth hissed, "and he certainly didn't steal me!"

"Now didn't he? How comes you know I've been talkin' about you then, luv? Could've talked about just anybody."

Jamie pinched the bridge of his nose.

"One moment, please. Just one. Before I lose my mind here: mother, what's this with this pirate? He has the same sea chest as you! And why do you have a sea chest in the first place?"

"Awe, Lizzy, you still have it?" Sparrow sniffled. "I'm touched! Now lad, I'll tell you how that really was with your mother. It all started when she and this old stiff there--"

"Jack, be quiet!"

"Mother, please let him talk. So?"

Sparrow scratched his head.

"Let me see, it's a bit complicated and we all lost the overview a couple of times. Well, first she wanted to marry your father. No, no, wrong, he wanted to marry her. First she said nothing, then she said yes, though she had some terrible crush on the local blacksmith, then she said no again, then there was - oh, yes, then there was I. Then it was the blacksmith again, then me again and finally she jumped overboard to run off with your father. That's it, basically. Might have forgotten a man or two, but eh, we're not getting' younger, are we? My memory, you understand?"

"You? And a blacksmith? And a pirate? And my father? And - mother! Is that true?"

Elizabeth crossed her arms over her chest and gave her son a challenging look.

"Truth is always a matter of interpretation. Does it matter? I'm married to your father and I love him.

That's all you need to know. I didn't interrogate you on Bessy and Ellen and Jane, either, though you've managed to make me the county's youngest grandmother!"

"Ah, skirt chaser he is, aye?" Sparrow asked, and wiggled his eyebrows at Jamie. "Wonder where you've got it from, lad. Not from your father, that much is sure."

Norrington had watched Sparrow all through the banter with Elizabeth. Nobody knew the pirate better than he did, maybe not even Elizabeth. He knew his voice, his mannerisms, knew every line in his face and bead in his hair. It wasn't possible, yet the man in front of him was without a doubt Captain Jack Sparrow. Norrington would have given anything to be thirty years younger; meeting his old rival in love and life in a state of ill health and weakness was a bad blow to his self-esteem.

"So it is you then, Jack Sparrow. I admit I'm surprised. I suppose that, beside capturing lieutenants of the Royal Navy and possessing the gift of eternal youth you're also the one responsible for the captured frigates and merchants?"

Sparrow shook his head.

"Ah no. You'll have to find another scapegoat for that, not-commodore."

"Now do I really - let me make a suggestion, Captain Sparrow: we will put you and your fine crew in irons and hang you upon our return. Should no more ships disappear, we'll know that you were guilty. If not, I'll be oh so very sorry."

Sparrow quickly hid behind Jamie.

"He wouldn't do that, would he?" he whispered.

"One never knows with my father," Jamie whispered back. "But it might be better not to take any risks."

"Oh. Hasn't changed much then. Well then, Admiral - would you mind if you and I had a bit of a word in private? This business shouldn't be discussed in public. It's a rather delicate business. Mysterious, dangerous..."

"It will be a cold day in hell before the Admiral will do that," Gillette barked. "For all I know, you could murder him the very second you're out of our view."

"Murder him? Now that's insulting! I'd had a hundred reasons and opportunities to send him to the Pearly Gates, why should I do it now? There's no honour in shootin' an old horse. So, Admiral - what say you? I have rum."

Norrington sighed.

"Fine, we'll talk then. Just you and I. But I hope it will be worth it."

"James, you can't do that!"

"Admiral, that's not advisable!"

"Father, I really don't think you should..."

"Oh be quiet, the whole lot of you! Do you think me too old to make my own decisions? Lead the way, Sparrow, and that rum better be strong."

Sparrow grinned, and Norrington followed him, careful not to show any weakness. Gillette's face was red with anger, and Norrington knew that he was in for a stern lecture upon his return, but Jack Sparrow was no threat to his life. He was a pirate, yes, but over the years Norrington had come to the conclusions that men of honour could be found even among pirates, and the biggest scoundrels under wigs.

* * *

Sparrow's cabin still looked the same; with exception of a large shelf with books and new chairs. One of them was hastily freed of papers and maps by the pirate, and Norrington sat down with a groan.

He watched Sparrow fishing for two tankards in a chest, then he produced a bottle.

The two tankards were filled.

"To us, because nobody else would drink to our health," Sparrow said.

Norrington muttered something, and the two men drank. He had been right, Sparrow still had the best rum, and Norrington enjoyed the heavy, spicy taste, sweet and soft like molasses. He hadn't come here to get drunk, though.

"You still insist that you aren't responsible for the capture of those ships?"

Sparrow shook his head. Norrington couldn't help but follow the colourful beads with his eyes.

"No, that wasn't me. Or us. You're not the only one sufferin' losses, Admiral. Two pirate ships have gone lost within the last three months, both captains bein' old mates of mine."

"If it wasn't you, who was it then?"

Sparrow pulled his chair a little closer to Norrington's, and looked over his shoulder, as if to make sure nobody was eavesdropping.

"I can't go into details here, Admiral, but there's a reason why I'm all fresh and juicy lookin' while you, with all due respect, resemble a dried prune. Unfortunately, my crew and I are not the only ones who, let me put it like this, profited from certain lucky circumstances."

He lowered his voice.

"Something - someone - is out there, having declared everybody an enemy, capturin' and murderin' without regard of flag or mission. Navy or pirate, merchant or fisher's slope, they don't care. So you see, it would be in my own interest to catch those bastards. Unfortunately," he added, pushing the chair back and looking very regretful, "I can't go on a hunt when I got your bloody fleet on my shirrtail day in, day out."

Norrington took another swig of rum and arched his eyebrows.

"You're expecting me to believe that hackneyed story and let you go? You can't be serious!"

"I'm very serious, Admiral! You of all the people should know! Look, I offer you the followin': until we've found the culprit and put an end to his foul deeds, we'll sail under your protection."

"Never!"

"Wait, wait, wait, now don't get all commodorial on me again! I'm suggestin' a cooperation, so to speak. We can go places none of your ships ever could, and to best that enemy, it will take imagination and a bit of magic, and with all due respect, Admiral: I wouldn't know of any institution with less magic and imagination than the Royal Navy."

"You've never been to court, have you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Forget it. Now, let's assume - and I don't say I'll agree, mark my words! - let's assume I was insane enough to enter this agreement. What guarantee would I have that you'll be true to your word? That you'll really chase for this mysterious fiend and not just use my lenience to capture other ships and cause trouble? I might be old, Jack Sparrow, but I'm no fool. You're a double crossing liar if I ever met one."

Sparrow grinned and emptied the tankard.

"That's my man, that's the spirit. Admiral, you can send me any of your men to sail on the Black Pearl. Considerin' they are able seamen, I can't use any midshipmen who poke their noses all day. And don't send me your son, either, that's a parcel of trouble."

Norrington sighed.

"I tend to agree with you on the latter. So what do you suggest? That I send you a couple of marines and Gillette?"

Sparrow jumped up and pulled a face.

"Gillette? There is no way in hell that I'll ever sail on the same ship with Mr. Fetchthemirons! You'll

surely have other men!"

Norrington put his tankard on the table and considered the matter. It was crazy, of course, like everything Jack Sparrow had ever done, suggested or caused, but he had a point. Lost in thought, he began to tap his fingers on the table, only to wince in pain.

"It's your last journey, isn't it? I can see it."

Norrington startled upon that unexpected question, and the temptation to snap at Sparrow, to give him a dressing-down was great, but wasn't he the only one without any personal interest in him? Norrington thought that it meant little to Jack Sparrow whether he lived or died; the pirate was the only person he could speak openly to.

"It probably is. Keep that for yourself, though, I don't need any commotion and people fussing."

"She doesn't know, though, does she? No, she doesn't, she wouldn't look so happy otherwise."

"Of course she doesn't know. There's no reason to upset her!" Norrington replied, quite outraged.

Sparrow shrugged.

"She's your wife. Shouldn't you be honest with her? But what do I know about that."

Deep down in his heart, Norrington knew that Sparrow was right, and he felt terribly humiliated. What had this come to, now he had to be lectured on honesty by a bloody pirate!

Sparrow took a book from the shelf, blew the dust off, leafed through it and put it back again.

"I could have done that, too, you know," he said, wiping his hand off on his coat.

"What?"

"Makin' her happy. Could have done that, mate, really. We'd argued and bickered and screamed and yelled at each other, but I'd cherished her like Ragetti his glass eye. But now she's a lady, and you have this rather ill-bred and pertly son of yours and it doesn't matter anymore. But anyway," he said, turning around and smiling brightly, "what say you about our deal?"

Norrington had always wondered who the man was who hid behind the mask of the fool, and he also wondered if he'd finally caught a glimpse of him. He looked at the tankard, at the maps and books and finally at Jack Sparrow, then he nodded.

"I agree."

* * *

They were back on the *Aronia*, yet Gillette waited in vain for Norrington to give the command to

either blow the *Black Pearl* to bits or leave for Port Royal. The admiral hadn't spoken a word, and he didn't seem to hear what those around him said, didn't react to any questions.

"James? Is everything alright? What have you and Jack discussed?" Elizabeth finally asked over dinner, scared by her husband's brooding silence. They were alone in Norrington's cabin, Jamie and Tom had been sent to the ship's doctor to have their scratches and bruises looked after, despite their protests.

"What? Oh. Jack Sparrow, yes. Elizabeth - if I'd ask you a question, would you reply truthfully? Even if it was a strange question - no, what am I saying - an inappropriate, outrageous question?"

She put fork and knife down.

"Of course I would. I've been often told that I was too blunt for a lady, as you know."

He smiled, that half-smile which never failed to charm her.

"That's true. I've always been fond of your honesty, though. Elizabeth - would you want to sail on the *Black Pearl* again?"

"What?"

"Jack Sparrow will try to find the ones responsible for the capture of our ships; he seems to be quite certain about the place where he has to look for the villains. Until he's successful, he'll be under my protection."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I know, I know, it's madness, but sometimes we have to do unusual things to succeed. But I do need somebody to keep an eye on him. Somebody I can trust. Somebody I'd trust with my life. So that's why I'm asking: would you want to sail on the *Black Pearl* again?"

Elizabeth just stared at him, her face one big question mark. Norrington began to feel very uncomfortable, only now he thought of the very likely possibility that she could take this as an attempt to get rid of her so he could be alone with Gillette.

"I don't want to send you away, I hope that's not what you're thinking! You know how much I love you," he hastened to add. "I just - thought - maybe-"

He broke off.

"I'm sorry. I should never have said anything. Forget it, please my dear, and forgive me."

Elizabeth swallowed hard.

"James - why? Why did you make that suggestion? No, I don't think you want to get rid of me, you'd

never do that. But I don't understand you, James."

He looked up, relief obvious on his face.

"Remember when you said that we both chose the way that allowed us to love and be loved without hanging from the gallows for it? It was a good choice, and I never regretted it for a moment. But I came to understand that I've been very selfish."

Norrington lowered his gaze, he couldn't look at her while saying the next words.

"You allowed me to love - both of you. You're the most generous and noble woman I know. And I'm a selfish bastard. I hope I've still made you happy enough in our marriage so you'll never regret it, but Elizabeth - I believe that he could have made you happy, too. He might be a raging lunatic, but - I guess I just want you to have the chance love - both of us. My God, I sound like an idiot."

"You - would let me go? Let me sail on the *Black Pearl*? Let me be with Jack? You would do that?"

"I would," he replied firmly. "Because it would make you happy, because I know that he'd take care of you and cherish you like Ragetti his - well, like the apple of his eye. I feel that it's my turn to be generous now."

There was silence. None of them dared to speak out of fear to use the wrong words. When he finally looked up, he could see that she was crying. Elizabeth never wailed like most women did; her tears were silent, running down her face, dripping on her coat and her breeches. They were all the more touching.

"I will sail with Jack on the *Black Pearl*, James. We'll find those bastards and I'll bring you the head of whoever it is on a plate when I return. Because return to you I will, James," she finally said, and wiped her eyes and her runny nose with the sleeve of her coat.

* * *

"It's good to be clean again, isn't it?"

Jamie, who had been lost in thought, startled when he heard Tom's voice. He nodded, then returned to watch the horizon.

"It's been here my father proposed to my mother, did you know that? I can't understand why she insisted on sailing on the *Black Pearl*. Or sailing at all. And why my father allowed it."

"Maybe because it's what she really wants?"

Jamie frowned.

"Maybe, but still, it's not really the appropriate thing for the wife of an admiral to do, now is it?"

"I suppose you told her?"

"I'm not suicidal. That aside, my father and her seemed to agree on this, so it wasn't my place to protest. Still, I'm not happy with it, and I'll never forgive my father for putting her into such danger. And then that Jack Sparrow..."

Jamie turned to face Tom, who shrugged.

"You know, he wasn't half as bad. Your mother looked so happy - don't begrudge her that." He looked around to see if nobody was within hearing range, then he gave Jamie a quick, rather dopey smile. "I've missed you. And think about it, if it wasn't for Jack Sparrow, we'd still be arguing instead of kissing."

"Actually - well, that's something we have to talk about," Jamie murmured, looking rather uncomfortable. "We have to be careful."

"Of course!"

"Things are easier here in Port Royal than back home, though. So I thought - well, I'm sure my father could arrange for us to stay here a little longer."

Tom's face lit up.

"You think he'd do that?"

"Sure he would. And the governor would agree, anyway; I don't think he'd wish to part with his daughter."

"His daughter?" Tom asked, rather puzzled.

"Sure! See, I like her, she likes me. We get married, you and I can still see each other, and everybody's happy. The perfect solution for our problem!"

Tom swallowed hard. The change from up one moment, down the next was too big, he felt as if Jamie had punched him in the stomach.

"Perfect solution? Jamie, my God - how can you say such a thing?"

"Don't look at me as if I'd just suggested murdering your grandmother! I just try to find a way to--"

"So you don't love me then; good. At least I know where we stand."

"No! I mean - yes! Yes of course I love you! But there are so many dangers; if we do this how I suggest, we could both have our careers and be respected and have families. Think about it, Tom - we could still meet whenever we felt like it!"

"No."

"No what?"

"No, I don't want this. I will not share you, Jamie. Never. Not with a wife or anybody else."

Jamie reached out and put his hand on Tom's arm.

"Please be reasonable; as much as I'd love to be with you, it's not possible. Would you rather have that they hang us? Is that what you want?"

The forlorn expression on Tom's face cut deep into Jamie's heart.

"I don't want that, of course not. But when we're apart, I don't want to think of you being with someone else. Maybe you don't mind, but I couldn't live like that."

"Ah, but I would have to live with the formidable Mr. Kyle?"

"I'd give him up for you, without thinking twice, and you know that. It's not like with you, Jamie. I don't love him."

"But what has my marriage to do with us and our love? Tom, be reasonable. Men get married. They have children. Marriage is convenient, a perfect institution by our society to keep everybody happy and well-provided."

"Good grief, Jamie - where did you get your ideas? Look at your parents, for Christ's sake, you can certainly not say they don't love each other!"

Jamie shrugged.

"Sure, they love each other, I think. Though I'd never allowed my wife to sail with a pirate! Love happens, and it's nice, but it's not really necessary. "

"I can't believe that this is the way you think. Where would that leave me in your world?"

"Bloody hell, Tom, stop being so dramatic! Nobody would suspect anything, with me being married and you - wasn't there this girl you used to write to? Sally? Elly? Whatever her name, you could get married as well and start a family."

Tom was very pale, and his hands trembled.

"I will not agree to that. I could not live being a - well, what would that make me? Your redheaded pastime when your wife's not around?"

"Well, that arrangement sure worked fine for Admiral Lord Nelson, didn't it?" Jamie snapped.

"You'd better not take a leaf out of that book! No, Jamie. It's either loving me, and me alone, or loving somebody else. You can't have both."

"You can't seriously expect me to make a choice! Are you insane, Tom? You must be aware that what we're doing is--"

"- a crime. Yes, I'm aware of it. It's a crime by any law in the book, but not in my heart. If you can't decide, throw a coin - Cross it's me, Pile it's Emily. And if you don't even have the courage for that, I'll make a decision for you."

Jamie crossed his arms over his chest.

"Is this your last word?"

Tom shook his head.

"No. My last word would be that I love you, Jamie."

"I love you too, Tom. But I'm going to marry Emily."

For the fraction of a moment, Tom wanted to reach for his sword and run it through Jamie, rather seeing him dead than leaving him. The next thought was to throw himself off the cliff, to shatter his body and his pain on the sharp rocks deep, deep below. Then he came back to his senses, and it scared him to realise how much power that Jamie had over him, and without a further word, he turned on his heel and left.

"Tom! Come back! Tom, we have to discuss this!" Jamie called after him.

"Did you have an argument?"

Jamie jumped and almost fell over when he saw Captain Gillette standing behind him.

"You - no, we didn't - it was about the canvas you ordered, and--"

"Jamie, you're the son of my best friend and an excellent officer. Sometimes I feel you're a bit of a son to me as well. This is the only reason you're still alive, any other man would have died for injuring my son the way you did."

"But I--"

Gillette grasped Jamie by the lapels of his coat and pulled him close, their noses almost touching.

"Don't think I wouldn't know what has happened between the two of you. No, there's no reason to panic, Admiral Norrington doesn't know, and I'll certainly never tell him. There is no limit to what I'd do for your father. But there's a limit to my patience with you. You're not going to hurt my boy again, and you're not going to insult your father any longer."

He pushed Jamie away, who stumbled backwards, face red with humiliation.

"I never wanted to hurt Tom," he gasped. "It just happened. I - would never hurt him. He's - dear to me."

"Odd way you have of showing it. And what about your father? You're aware he's dying, aren't you?"

"Dying?"

All energy drained from Gillette, and he reached for the wall of the ruin for support.

"Yes, Jamie. What did you think why he sent your mother to be with the only man he thought capable of looking after and protecting her? Do you think he did that because he wanted to get rid of her? How little you know."

Jamie was in shock. His lips moved, but he couldn't speak.

"This is a bad place to be for any lovers, Jamie, a very bad place. You better leave now."

The young lieutenant starred at Gillette and slowly backed away. A bad place for lovers - yes, that was true. Without another word, Jamie turned and ran away, while Gillette starred down at the rocks below, still seeing Miss Elizabeth Swann in her pretty blue dress falling into the sea.

* * *

"Are you certain we will be safe here, Robert?"

Tom looked around the small chamber, which didn't offer much more but a chair, a small table and a bed.

"Absolutely. I've been here years ago, and as you can see, things are still the same. If any actions would be taken, I'd be among the first to know. No reason for any worries, Tom; the governor has more important matters on his mind, and the admiral - well."

Lt. Kyle didn't finish the sentence out of respect for Tom's admiration for old Norrington. This was not the right moment to discuss the admiral's ailing health or young Norrington's upcoming marriage.

"Well then."

Tom took off his coat and began to untie his cravat. Kyle held him back.

"Let me do that, Tom. Unwrapping the present is half the fun, don't ruin it for me."

"Ah, so I'm a present to you then?"

Kyle grinned. His fingers deftly untied Tom's cravat, then opened his shirt. He ran his thumb along the collarbone, then nibbled on Tom's neck. It was the very same spot where Jamie had left a mark three weeks ago. It had long faded, but Tom could still see it when he looked in the mirror. He often looked. He hoped it would go away, that he could forget it had ever been there in the first place, but it couldn't have been more permanent if Jamie had marked him with a red hot iron.

He closed his eyes and put his arms around his lover, pulling him close. Lover - no, Robert Kyle wasn't his lover. A lover would love him, wouldn't he? And he, he could love him in return.

"You're more than a present - you're a gift from heaven. I'd never thought I'd enjoy this place that much. Even if you exhaust me, I admit it."

"You've been a good teacher, and you know the saying that no good deed goes unpunished."

Tom began to undress Kyle. He did so without hurry, without any visible excitement, and this seeming disinterest only added to Kyle's passion. He slipped his hands in Tom's breeches, enjoying the sensation of cool skin under his hands.

"I'll lose my mind one day over you. I've become addicted to you, do you know?"

"Ah, so your participation in the heroic rescue mission was rather self-serving then?" Tom asked, arching an eyebrow. Kyle slipped Tom's breeches over his narrow hips, then pulled him towards the bed, not willing to wait any longer to feel skin on skin.

"Partially. But then I'm also rather fond of you."

He held Tom's face between his hands.

"They've treated you well, haven't they? I was seriously worried, Tom. They didn't hurt you, did they?"

"They were better behaved than many of the officers I've served with. Now stop the talking, we didn't come here to discuss the state of the Navy."

They kissed, and Kyle noted to his great delight that Tom was in one of his brooding moods. He lightly bit his shoulder, and dug his fingers deep enough in his skin to cause a small pain, but not hard enough to leave a bruise. They were both skilled in hiding their tracks and not leaving marks.

To think that he'd thought Tom to be mild and meek! He was demanding and commanding, always keeping him at arm's length, and not once had he managed to make Tom really lose control. It had always been him, the older, the more experienced, who'd ended up begging. Most of the times, Tom would finally give in, with a small, arrogant smile, but sometimes - and Kyle had to admit that those were the best times - Tom let him beg in vain, keeping him for hours on the brink of release until Kyle was close to tears. It was all a game, they had agreed on the rules, and Kyle loved playing it.

Tonight, however, Tom had decided that he wanted to play a new game.

"Tonight you'll take me," Tom said, and from his tone, he might have said "the weather is nice" or "I'd like an apple, please". Kyle swallowed hard and starred at Tom, who looked him over, a small smile on his lips.

"Why-" he began, but Tom clasped his hand over Kyle's mouth

"We're not here for conversations. Tonight it's your turn. And you better make it good, there are some ugly things I have to forget."

He took his hand away and caressed Kyle's face, a gesture so kind and gentle that it seemed to come from another person.

Kyle tried to find a reason for this sudden change of mind in Tom's face, but he couldn't find anything but that slightly arrogant smile. He grasped Tom by the arms, spun him around and pressed him down on the bed.

"As always, your wish is my demand. Come tomorrow, you won't be able to think of anything but me anymore, and mark my words, tonight you will be the one begging."

Tom closed his eyes. Jamie had been right - love was nice, but one could live just as well without it.

* * *

Norrington had continued to fulfil his duties for as long as he could, held upright only by determination and a good portion of stubbornness, but then a fever had forced him to stay in bed. The doctor had hinted that the admiral would very likely not recover again; news that both Gillette and Jamie quite naturally found very hard to come to terms with.

Jamie spent every moment he could with his father, caring for him, helping him dress, carrying letters and messages from his sick bed to the Fort, and finally, a heartfelt apology was made and an equally deep-felt forgiveness granted. When Jamie was on duty, he and Gillette took turns looking after Norrington, or at least tried to, for most of the time, he just wanted to be left alone. Knowing that Elizabeth was in good hands and his son loving him, Norrington saw his duty towards life fulfilled.

It was on the night of a particularly hot day when Norrington ordered that the windows of his bedroom should be left open. This was against the doctor's advice, as Gillette pointed out several times, but Norrington told him to open that damned window already and leave him alone. Norrington was fighting for every breath, and of course it wasn't a good idea to allow the damp night air in, but from his bed he could see the *Buckthorn*, now under the command of the formidable Lt. Jenkins.

With a bit of luck, his torment would be over come morning; he liked the idea of the last thing to see being his ship rather than the worried faces of Thomas and Jamie. He had no doubts about leaving Jamie in the care of Gillette, but he seriously doubted that Jenkins was the right man to command

the *Buckthorn*.

"Very considerate of you to leave the window open, Commodore - Admiral," he heard a only too familiar voice say, then Jack Sparrow swung over the balustrade of the balcony. Norrington wondered if this was some sort of hallucination before death, slightly angry that he should die with the image of Jack Sparrow, of all the people, in his mind. But then he could smell the tar, the sea and the rum, plus a lot of less pleasant things, and he sighed.

"You've made my life hell for many years, Jack Sparrow. Can't you at least allow me to die in peace?"

Sparrow sauntered into the bedroom, bowed and looked at Norrington.

"Pardon my French, but you look like guano, James the man."

"How kind of you to mention it. How's Elizabeth?"

Sparrow picked up one of Norrington's medicine bottles, unstopped it and sniffed. He pulled a face and put it quickly back on the nightstand.

"Ah, Lizzy's just fine, don't worry. It's like she's never been away. The monkey still hates her, but he'll get used to her. Do they make you drink this brew? No wonder you look like you've been chewed through and digested by a sea snake. Lizzy's missin' you, by the way. And this git of a son of yours as well. Could have her back here in a week or so, if you want to."

Norrington shook his head, or at least tried to.

"No. I don't want her to see me like that. Bring her back when it's over, do me that favour."

Sparrow scratched his head, then inspected his fingernails.

"She makes me wash my hair, you know. Can't spit on the floor anymore, and she terrorises the crew. Can't help but love that woman. So you've decided it's time to go?"

"If I were a horse, I'd been shot weeks ago."

"I see. Well, apart from tellin' you that Lizzy the girl is fine, I thought I return this to you. Left it aboard the *Pearl*, remember? Bein' an honest and decent gentleman, I kept it for you. Thought we might meet again one day."

He reached into his coat and pulled out a bunch of rags. He shook them, and Norrington had to sneeze upon the cloud of dust that emerged from it. When his nose stopped itching, he took a closer look at the item, and he gasped.

"Good grief, it's Sophie!"

Sparrow looked at the dirty, ruffled wig in his hand and wrinkled his nose.

"Sophie? Don't tell me you gits *named* your wigs!"

Norrington looked flustered.

"That's none of your business. Why on earth have you kept my wig all those years?"

"Well, I thought you might like to have it back one day. Pintel washed it, and Ragetti tried to get the hair curled, but I guess he didn't that good a job, did he."

Norrington stared at the wig.

"Is this your completely moronic way of trying to apologise?"

"Naw, wouldn't put it like that," Sparrow said, and stuffed the wig under Norrington's cushion. "I'd rather say I might consider to acknowledge that it could have been, from your point of view, an act of hostility to make you scrub the deck of the *Pearl* with you wig."

If he hadn't felt so bad, Norrington would have laughed.

"You're mad. Crazy, insane, lunatic."

Sparrow shuffled his feet.

"It was a bad joke I played on you back then, especially with Lizzy seein' it and everythin'. So, well, I thought you'd like her back. The wig, I mean. Sophie."

"Please somebody shoot me, now," Norrington groaned.

The pirate pulled a chair next to Norrington's bed and lowered his voice.

"Can't shoot you, James. Think of the mess, you wouldn't want your boy havin' to clean it up, would you? But still, I could help you. To - improve your situation, savvy?"

"The only way to improve my situation would be if you'd return where you came from," Norrington scowled.

"Eh, you're only sayin' that because you don't know what I have to offer. If you're fed up with lyin' in this bed, of medicines and doctors and people bein' a pain in your arse about it, I could help."

Sparrow reached in the pocket of his coat. He searched around for a while, then he pulled out a small flask and opened it.

Norrington sniffed.

"Rum? Well, getting drunk might be a help, agreed."

"Bah, rum! 't is no rum! Sure, it is rum, but not rum-rum, savvy? Small gift from Tia Dalma which comes in handy for a man who's in your desperate situation."

"You mean it's...?" Norrington asked, but then broke off. The thought that Jack Sparrow offered to poison him was too absurd.

"Aye, it is," Sparrow replied, and wiggled his eyebrows. "Three swigs, and you'll be delivered from your misery, James."

"Go. Leave. Immediately."

The flask dangled directly in front of Norrington's nose.

"Think about it, James. You want to end your days here in this bed, watchin' Gillette emptying your chamber pot? Please! That wouldn't be the way I'd choose!"

Norrington stared at the flask. It was tempting, of course. Very tempting. He cringed in humiliation every time Jamie or Gillette had to help him with a task, which was almost worse than the pain. Though the pain was bad as well. Very bad.

"Would it - hurt?"

"Of course not!" Sparrow protested. "What d'ya think I am, a brute? No, don't answer that, it was a rhetorical question. No pain, no. You drink a bit of this wonderful brew, and you'll just fall asleep. That's it. After that - no more trouble. I hope."

Norrington thought of the rest of his life; a seemingly endless row of days filled with misery. Of course it was sinful, but - maybe it would be for the best? And Elizabeth would never see him in this state. She could keep him in good memory.

"What say you, James the man - take me up on my offer? Make up your mind, I have to return to my ship."

Was there anything left he had to say to Gillette and Jamie? Or Elizabeth? No. They knew he loved them. No need to repeat it.

Norrington nodded, and Sparrow smiled. He put the flask in Norrington's hand and closed the man's fingers around it. He did so very gently, and Norrington wondered if this was the way he treated Elizabeth as well. He hoped so. No, he was certain; she hadn't returned to him if it wasn't the case.

"Can't help you, James. You have to do this yourself, by your own free will, otherwise it wouldn't work. Anything else I can do for you?"

"No. You've done enough, I'd say."

He brought the flask to his lips, then closed his eyes and took four, five swigs. He swallowed, expecting burning or pain, but all he could feel was a mellow sensation in his throat. Sparrow took the flask from Norrington's hand and put it on the nightstand.

"That's the man," he commended.

"I can't feel a thing," Norrington muttered. "I hope you didn't lead me on, Jack."

"It's still *Captain* Jack Sparrow, and you should give it some time. Might take a while."

Norrington began to feel very tired, and a comfortable warmth spread through his body. His limbs felt heavy, and the pain began to fade.

"Is that-" he began, but then his eyes closed and he was gone.

Sparrow waited for a moment to make sure everything went the way it should. When he heard steps approaching on the corridor, he quickly left the room, climbed over the balustrade and managed to disappear just in time before Gillette knocked on the door and entered the room.

"Bloody windows," he muttered, crossed the room and closed the doors. He looked at Norrington, who seemed to be fast asleep, and sighed. Pain had drawn deep lines into Norrington's face. He'd done anything to help the man, but this was nature's course, there was not a damned thing he could do but be there for him.

Gillette was just about to leave when he noticed the flask on the nightstand.

"Now where does that come from?"

It was none of the bottles the doctor had left, and when he reached for it, he could smell the alcohol and had to smile. Just the thing he needed! He took a swig from the flask, then another one. Good rum, if it was rum at all. Who had brought it, he wondered?

Gillette put the flask back on the nightstand, then bowed over Norrington.

"James - when the moment comes... you don't have to stay here for my sake, you know? I'll manage. And I'll keep an eye on Jamie."

He pressed a kiss on Norrington's temple and caressed his cheek with the back of his hand.

"Love you, James. Always have, always will."

Then he left to see after the paperwork that was piling up on Norrington's desk. Life went on, and somebody had to make sure things were taking their normal course, after all.

Chapter 8

What are young men made of?

What are young men made of?

Sighs and leers, and crocodile tears,

And that are young men made of.

It was still dark when Lt. Kyle woke up, and while temptation to stay in bed for only a little while longer was very strong, his sense of duty won over. There was a lot of work to do; he had to see that the dreaded Mr. Jones finally delivered the canvas for the *Bilberry* that had been ordered, Captain Gillette waited for a report, and he would have to deal with a seaman who had started a fight with the *Bilberry's* purser.

And then there was Tom, of course. Kyle thought of his wife's letters in which she insisted that her husband petitioned to be deployed back home to serve on a ship protecting the Channel. She had spoken of their children and added a lock of his youngest daughter's hair. Oddly enough, it was mousey brown, while he remembered her to be blonde. His wife was right; he had been away from home for far too long, and her declarations of loneliness, eternal love and longing for her husband hadn't failed their purpose and made him feel very guilty.

Kyle had been honest right from the start about their affair not lasting forever, and Tom had never objected. Kyle certainly wasn't happy about the separation; he'd grown very fond of Tom, and not only because he had found him to be the perfect companion to share his bed. Despite occasional sarcasm and flare-ups, there was a very soft, vulnerable side to Tom; they shared many interests and had become good friends.

But even the best of friends had to part one day, and today was just the day to tell Tom that he would leave for Portsmouth soon. Tom would probably only arch an eyebrow and nod, but deep down in his heart, Kyle hoped for some sign of serious regret.

He quickly washed, dressed and headed for the Fort. Kyle knew that it was far too early, there was still at least an hour before he had to attend his duties, but he loved the early morning hours, the only ones in which Port Royal was quiet. He made a detour along the beach, admired the sight of the sea and took a deep breath of the fresh, salty air. He would miss Port Royal, and he'd miss Tom, who had often accompanied him on his walks.

Kyle nodded briefly at the tired looking marines who stood on guard. He decided to pick up the report from his office and place it on Admiral Norrington's - now Captain Gillette's - desk before heading for his meeting with Jones. That way, Gillette could study the report before their meeting, and they'd save time, discussing possible questions right away.

He didn't knock on the door, as he didn't expect anybody to be here at this time of the day. Gillette, so he knew, started each day by visiting his old friend Norrington. To Kyle's great surprise, Tom had obviously suffered from insomnia, and decided to catch up on work. He had to smile when he found him slumped over the scribe's desk, face buried in his arms, gently snoring.

Kyle approached him on tip-toes. Their ways would soon part, but that didn't mean they couldn't have some fun before he left. If Tom had allowed his hair to grow longer, it would have probably curled at the ends, but he kept it short in the Roman fashion, there were only some very small curls at the nape of his neck. Those curls had always fascinated Kyle, and as nobody else was around, he decided to indulge his little obsession.

He kissed the nape of Tom's neck, nuzzled his hair and nibbled gently on the soft skin behind his ear. He noticed that Tom used a new soap; he liked the scent. When Tom began to stir, slowly awaking from his sleep, Kyle kissed the small strip of skin between cravat and ear and chuckled.

"Tom, you shouldn't fall asleep on the desk if you could fall asleep on me instead."

Tom twitched, lifted his head and turned on his chair. Kyle just stared at him, all colour draining from his face.

"In your own interest I hope that you will have a decent, rational and especially convincing explanation for this outrageous behaviour, Lt. Kyle. Otherwise I'll save the Crown the costs for your Court Martial and take care of your execution myself!"

Kyle gulped, then he snapped to attention.

"Captain Gillette, Sir! I - Sir?"

Gillette rolled his eyes and secretly cursed his son. Just what had Tom been up to again? Rhetorical question, it was quite obvious. He really had to have word with him; this was too dangerous a game he played.

He stood up, cleared his throat and clasped his hands behind his back.

"Lt. Kyle, considering your merits as an officer and your reputation as a gentleman, I suggest that we assume you confused me with a chambermaid called Tomasina. Any other conclusion could have dire consequences, as you're certainly well aware of."

"I - Sir - you..." Kyle stammered, staring at Gillette in shock.

"Good grief, calm down, man! I won't have a good man in front of a Court Martial for a - misunderstanding."

Kyle didn't say anything, just continued to stare at Gillette with the expression of a rabbit facing a snake, and Gillette began to feel a little odd.

"Is anything amiss, Mr. Kyle? You don't look well."

"Sir - I - my apologies - but you have - please, permission to leave, please. I don't feel well at all. And you - maybe you should see the doctor as well, Captain Gillette, Sir!"

"The doctor? What for? I feel fantastic!"

It was true - actually, Gillette couldn't remember when he had last felt like this, ready to take on everything. He also felt like he'd had a glass of wine or two. A very couthie state, all things considered.

Lt. Kyle, however, seemed to have lost his wits completely, opening and closing his mouth like a fish washed ashore, so Gillette told him to leave. The lieutenant bolted out of the office; Gillette could hear him running down the corridor.

"Well, that fright will hopefully teach Romeo a lesson," Gillette muttered, then he rubbed his face. It hadn't been the first time he'd fallen asleep over papers, maps and sander pot; looking after James was exhausting on many levels, and he didn't get nearly enough sleep. Seeing how he felt so extraordinarily good that day, Gillette decided to skip his first cup of tea and head directly to James' house, hoping to find him well enough to have breakfast.

He took a few steps, then he halted. Something was not quite right with his clothes, he noticed. His breeches seemed to be a little wide, had he lost a button or two? He checked - no. Perfectly in order, as usual, yet something was wrong. Gillette put a hand between breeches and shirt, and there was quite a gap.

"Odd business," he muttered. "Must be the humidity, it's unlikely I've shrunk during the night!"

He pushed his shirt back into his breeches, brushed some sand off his sleeves and waistcoat and headed for the house of Admiral James Norrington.

* * *

Norrington woke up and blinked into the first dim light of the morning. It would be a beautiful day, there wasn't a cloud in sight, and he took in a deep breath of the fresh air, cleaned by the previous night's rain.

He had to smile. Gillette would certainly be amused by hearing of his weird dream. Jack Sparrow! What nonsense! Norrington stretched, and was surprised when the familiar pain didn't come. He wiggled his toes - nothing. He bent a knee - everything fine. Good grief, this would be a wonderful day! Awake for five minutes, and no pain yet! He turned on his back and stared at the ceiling.

"I feel good. No, I feel fantastic. That's amazing," he said to himself. He felt a bit woozy, squiffy, the same kind of comfortable lightness he usually achieved with half a bottle of nice French wine. There was a buzz in the air; one of those damned mosquitoes had made it into Norrington's bedroom.

"Bloody beast," he cursed, and slapped after the insect which had settled for breakfast on his hand. He missed the mosquito, but that was of no further interest, for Norrington starred with great fascination at his hand.

"Now that's..." he began, then he broke off, holding both hands in front of his face so he could take a

good look at them.

He inspected them for a good minute, and came to the conclusion that those couldn't be his hands. Which was odd, as they obviously were his, considering they were attached to his wrists, but still... the fingers were slender, the joints agile. He couldn't see any of the age spots that usually covered his hands.

"Just what is wrong with me this morning?"

Norrington prepared for the daily ritual of slowly getting out of bed and adjusting to the pain, but now he found that he could just stand up without problems, and looking down at his feet, he was confronted with the next puzzle. He could stand without problems, and his ankles were just that: ankles. Not swollen, malicious sources of agony. Same went for the toes, which he wiggled again.

"I'm standing here, watching my toes. If this was afterlife, it would be a bit mundane."

This was all very confusing, but Norrington blamed in on the laudanum the doctor had given him. It was widely known that it caused hallucinations, but Norrington didn't mind if he was spared pain for a few hours. He pulled the nightshirt over his head, put it over the back of the chair and went to the washing bowl. The servant hadn't been here yet to bring hot water, but that was fine with him. He just wanted to splash some water in his face and clear his head.

Norrington did so, and when he looked up, he could see his face in the mirror. He froze, hands still half covering his face and water dripping down his naked arms. For a brief moment, he thought to see Jamie in the mirror, but then he realised that he saw himself.

Or rather, the James Norrington he had been more than thirty years ago.

"What on earth..." he began, and reached out to touch the mirror. The surface was cool under his fingertips, and very real. He lifted his hands again to touch his face, watching every movement in the mirror.

Then he began to giggle.

"Good old Dr. Drake - that was some dose of laudanum!"

Norrington began to pull faces at his reflection in the mirror, and found it hilarious to see his younger self mimic his actions. A shame, really, that the effect of the drug would fade off in a while, and that the face looking at him from his mirror would return to be the one of an elderly man with bad eyesight, too much grey in his thinning hair and deep lines in his face.

He splashed some more water in his face and didn't pay much attention to the sound of footsteps in the corridor outside of his bedroom. Only when he heard Gillette knocking on the door - and he knew it was him, nobody else knocked five times - the fog in his brain began to lift enough to make him consider the question whether he should get dressed first before asking Gillette in. He shrugged; Gillette had seen him in all states of dressing and undressing, he could certainly live with the sight of

a woozy, half-naked admiral.

"Please enter!"

Gillette opened the door, and for the next moments the two men just stared at each other, two pillars of salt. Then Norrington began to giggle again.

"I'm sorry, Thomas, but this is too funny! I wish you could see how I see you at the moment! Dear old Drake must have given me too high a dose of laudanum, and now everything looks so strange. By the way, you look great."

Gillette seemed to be deprived of the power of speech. He stood there, blinking, mouth half open and looking like he had just seen a dog with two heads. Norrington shook his head. The days of Lt. Gillette were long gone by, and just like he would turn back into a cranky old admiral as soon as the drug lost its power, Gillette would look again the way he really did, greying hair and all. But until then, Norrington was determined to enjoy the sight of Gillette's freckled fresh face, framed by hair a shade of red he had always admired and once compared to a polished chestnut.

The chimera of a young Gillette finally managed to move again, and made a staggering step forwards.

"Oh my God, James," he whispered, then he clasped his hand over his mouth, a picture of total confusion.

"I beg your pardon?"

Norrington scratched his head, and noticed that he seemed to have more hair than the day before. He would have giggled again if Gillette hadn't looked so terribly shocked.

"Dr. Drake gave me too much laudanum, I guess, and now I'm seeing things that are not there. Don't worry about it, I'm aware that nothing is real, and it will pass. It's a good thing, though - I'm not in pain at all. See?"

He held out his hands and wiggled his fingers.

"I can move my fingers! And my toes! And it doesn't hurt a bit! Isn't that fantastic? It's certainly worth having some hallucinations for that."

"James, good grief..." Gillette stammered. "You look... that's not possible!"

"Did you take laudanum as well, Thomas?"

"Of course not! You know I don't trust its effects!"

Norrington closed his eyes and tried to concentrate. He only had to focus to make the hallucination disappear. But when he opened his eyes, Gillette still looked the same, and now he had a terrible, yet also very exciting suspicion. He crossed the room, grasped the still flabbergasted Gillette by the arm

and dragged him in front of the mirror. Norrington stood behind him, arm around his waist and chin rested on his shoulder.

"Then this must be real, Thomas. Look at us!"

Gillette stared into the mirror. He could see Norrington's face, not a day older than thirty if his memory didn't betray him, mischief in his hazel eyes and the almost-smile on his lips that Gillette hadn't seen for months. And he could see himself, a young man just beginning his career as a lieutenant.

"God have mercy. I look hardly older than Tom!"

Norrington laughed, and tightened his hold on Gillette.

"This is a miracle, Thomas! Nothing more, nothing less!"

"But how-"

"Did you find a flask on the night table?"

Gillette, unable to divert his view from the mirror, slowly nodded.

"Yes. Rum it was, I think, and I-"

"-and you took a swig or two, didn't you?"

"Yes."

Again Norrington laughed, this time ending in a chuckle.

"Captain Jack Sparrow, you dog! It was him! He was here last night, Thomas, and brought me that flask. I thought-"

He broke off. The events of the last night came back to him, and while he was comfortable sharing almost everything in his life with Gillette, he'd never tell him what he'd originally thought to be in the flask.

"Jack Sparrow was here?" Gillette asked in disbelief.

Much to his regret, Norrington let go of him and went to the night table. The flask stood still there, and he picked it up.

"Here, that's it."

Norrington unstopped the flask and sniffed on it.

"The scent of eternity. Thomas, stop looking so miserable, can't you see what has happened here?"

"I thought you'd die."

"That's-"

"I couldn't sleep at night thinking what it would be like once you'd be gone."

Norrington hurried to Gillette and took his face between his hands.

"I can't believe how young you look - it's over now, Thomas. For the next thirty years, I'll be taking care of you."

He kissed the flustered Gillette, and though he'd done that so often before, he felt as if it was the first time. His tongue explored every nook and cranny of Gillette's teeth, and he only interrupted this pleasant activity to share his latest discovery.

"Good grief, Thomas. There are no teeth missing!"

"What?"

Gillette first licked his lips, then he ran his tongue slowly along his teeth.

"Bloody hell, you're right! Oh my God, James, how are we going to explain this? What will Tom and Jamie say? And - Elizabeth? The Admiralty? Everybody? I've heard of people turning grey over night, but this?"

"In a world with cursed pirates and undead monkeys, a potion which rejuvenates those who imbibe it is probably the smallest of all evils."

"I'm not so sure about that yet. And even if they believe us, just think of the consequences! Everybody will want it! There will be wars fought over it, have you thought of this? Eternal youth? People would kill each other!"

Norrington looked at the small flask and frowned.

"You're right, as usual. We have to be very careful."

Gillette, feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, staggered towards the bed and sat on its edge.

"This can't be real. It's just not possible. I'm looking like my son's older brother. What will our boys say, James?"

There were voices in the corridor. Norrington knew them, they belonged to his footman, Jamie and Tom. He arched his eyebrows and put the flask in the drawer of the night table.

"I'm afraid we'll find it out within the minute, Thomas."

* * *

Norrington paced up and down his study, thinking fervently of the best way to handle the situation. Gillette leaned against the desk, arms folded over his chest, and his eyes followed Norrington's every move. He still wasn't convinced that this was really true, and wanted to savour every second of seeing a healthy, alive and - that went without saying - very tempting James Norrington, just in case the vision might disappear.

"Father, could you please either sit down or stand still? This pacing like a caged bear is driving me insane," Jamie muttered. He cast his father confused glances, and tried hard not to look at Gillette at all. With Tom standing to his right, he felt as if he was trapped between two Toms, and currently, that was at least one too many.

Norrington didn't pay any attention to his son. He continued to wear off the carpet, looking from time to time at Gillette with admiration. Finally he halted, and gave the young lieutenants a stern look.

"This is a difficult situation, and we must all handle it with the uttermost care. We can't afford any mistakes. Jamie, I want you to tell the servants that they have to leave the house. Invent some story; you're good at that. You could tell them that we have to fumigate the place for rats, for example. I don't want anybody in that house for the next two days, understood?"

"Yes, Sir," Jamie mocked, and saluted.

"Watch your words, young man. Tom, return to the Fort. Lt. Jenkins is not there, so tell Lt. Kyle to take care of my correspondence. He's the only one with half a working brain. Jamie, you'll go and see the governor. Tell him that I'm undergoing some special health treatment - you have an imaginative mind, come up with something creative. Under no circumstances may Captain Gillette and I be disturbed for the next two days. We have to come up with a perfect and convincing story before anybody sees us, and that must be well-prepared."

"Aye, Admiral Norrington," Tom replied, and reached for his hat. Jamie shook his head.

"Father, with all due respect: there is no way you can come up with any explanation that will convince people that you and Mr. Gillette turned thirty years younger over night. It's not possible. It's against all laws of nature, and if this had happened a hundred years ago, they'd probably burned you two on the stake. I see it with my own eyes, and I still can't believe it!"

Norrington put his hand on Jamie's shoulder and smiled.

"Jamie, people want to believe in miracles. How else would you explain that they pay to see mermaids and the boy with a dog's head? The witch doctor and charlatan isn't born yet that would have starved due to lack of business. Trust me, Jamie, I will fix this. But I can't do it without your help."

Jamie had known his father all his life as a reserved man who never let his control slip. He wasn't used to seeing him so excited and determined. He couldn't help but being impressed by his charisma, and began to understand why so many men had followed Admiral James Norrington into battle, trusting his decisions with their lives.

"You can rely on me, father. I'll carry them out if I have to."

The two men grinned, accomplices now rather than father and son.

"We will see you in two days then."

Jamie nodded, and headed for the door. Tom followed him, but then he changed his mind and returned to his father.

"I just want you to know that this goes for me as well. You can rely on me. And you - look good. I just need some time to get used to this, but it doesn't change much, does it?"

Gillette shook his head.

"I hope not. Thank you, Tom. You're the best son a man could have."

They exchanged a quick smile, then Tom and Jamie left the study. Norrington followed them to the door, keeping it ajar.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to be sure everybody leaves. And I want to hear how Jamie handles this."

"Eavesdropping, James?"

"Of course. A prerogative of youth."

Jamie's strategy was simple, yet effective. He yelled that all servants had to assemble in the entrance hall, and informed them in best military terms and sound level that they had to leave the house within ten minutes, as his father had recovered from his illness and the place needed to be fumigated to keep the fever out. Anybody still here after ten minutes would be out of bed and bread.

"You've raised a future admiral," Gillette whispered, who had come to stand next to Norrington.

"That's some authoritative tone he has there. And I thought I used to be a bit of a martinet when I was a lieutenant."

"You've never been a martinet. Not even a bit. I just never had the heart to tell you."

"The men were scared of me!" Gillette protested.

"Nonsense. They admired you."

Gillette didn't know if he should be disappointed or flattered.

"Why did you never tell me?"

Norrington closed the door.

"Because you were so happy thinking that everybody trembled in fear. They did you the favour to pretend because they loved you. Such are our men, Thomas: they indulge our little fancies in return for our respect. Wait a second."

He returned to the bedroom and looked out of the window, hiding behind the curtains.

"Ah, they are leaving. Jamie knows his business, bless his heart."

He watched the servants leaving the house, hurrying and carrying bundles and baskets. One had taken the dog along, another carried four loudly protesting chicken. Briquette the cat lay in the grass, blinking and yawning, obviously not interested at all in the commotion.

Tom and Jamie were the last ones to leave the house. When they reached the gate, Tom turned around and looked up to Norrington, as if he'd known that the admiral would be standing there, watching them. There was a small smile on his face, and though Norrington knew that Tom couldn't see it, he smiled back.

"They are gone. We're alone, finally, thanks God!"

Once Norrington was sure everybody was out of hearing and seeing range, he opened the window.

"What are you doing?"

"Something I've longed to do for months!"

Norrington began to collect medicine bottles, powders, pills, cordials and salves in his arm. Then he wiggled his eyebrows at Gillette, who watched the strange behaviour with increasing irritation, and threw everything out of the window with great zest. Bottles and jars shattered on the cobblestone below, and Norrington accompanied every crash with a cheer.

"James! Good grief! Are you insane?"

"On the contrary, my dear Thomas! I've never been saner than now!"

Next followed herbal cushions, more cordials and, just because he felt like it, the chamber pot. When every reminder of his suffering had gone, he took in a deep breath of fresh air.

"I'm alive, Thomas. I'm alive. I don't need this anymore. I only need one thing."

He turned around, and Gillette almost melted under the adoring and loving gaze Norrington gave him.

"We've been given a second chance, Thomas. A second life. God knows I've made many mistakes in the last thirty years, and while not all of them were in my power to avoid, I'm responsible for a lot of what you had to suffer. I'm standing here and telling you, and God is my witness: I'll make it up to you, Thomas. Whatever I can do to make you happy, I will."

"James, I -" Gillette began, but he couldn't finish the sentence. In his head he knew exactly what he wanted to say, but the words wouldn't come. He felt helpless, overwhelmed, both by the events of the last hours and by James, who was so full of life and energy that he almost scared him.

"I suppose I sound like an idiot, don't I?" Norrington asked, smiling sheepishly at Thomas. "I can't help it; seeing you now, the way you look... this brings back all the hours that I've spent watching you, thinking by myself that I'd be the luckiest man in this world if I could have your love. I wish I'd had the strength back then to follow you when you asked me. Forgive me that I didn't. But I promise you that we won't part again."

"You used to watch me?" Gillette croaked. It was certainly the most unimportant part of Norrington's little speech, but it was something he had never considered.

"Of course I did. Our old hats were fantastic, if you pulled them deep in your face, you could look at whomever you wanted without anybody noticing. And I often looked at you when we shared a watch. Just seeing you made me happy."

Gillette had to smile and blushed; he quickly averted his eyes, a bit embarrassed about his reaction. He had no idea what to say or how to react, so he gestured vaguely at the door to the study.

"I suggest we better sit down there and discuss what we're going to do now."

"No."

"What?"

"That's not why I've sent Tom, Jamie and the servants away. I wanted to be alone with you, Thomas. Just you and I, here, with nobody to watch us, with no need to be careful. I said I'll make it up to you, and I will. If you allow me to, that is."

Gillette looked him over thoughtfully.

"James, just how much of Jack Sparrow's very special potion did you take?"

"Come here and find out."

"I'm beginning to wonder if I shouldn't have taken a swig or two more. I might not be able to keep up

with you."

Norrington caressed Gillette's face. How odd to feel the smooth skin under his fingers, not a wrinkle or line left!

"I'm very glad you didn't drink more of that potion, otherwise I might sit here with a screaming red-haired baby! I'd hated having to find a wet-nurse to look after you."

Norrington's fingers combed through Gillette's hair, deep auburn again, and leaned in for another kiss. Gillette had always been overly gentle and careful, out of fear that he might cause Norrington discomfort. There was no need for such caution anymore, and Norrington, so he learned, was obviously not the man to hold back with his passion. Strong, nimble fingers opened the buttons of his waistcoat, taking it off, throwing it carelessly to the ground. His shirt was yanked out of his breeches; Norrington pushed and tucked and finally slid it over Gillette's head, to join the waistcoat in a heap of fabric.

"That's what I used to dream off as a Captain," Norrington murmured, in-between covering Gillette's neck, collar bone and chest with tiny kisses. "You're perfect. Perfect, Thomas. All about you, the way you are, the way you look."

It was little less than a murmur, but Gillette understood every word. Taking off Norrington's shirt only took a moment, and now it was his turn to explore, touch and kiss. How different this was from their last encounters! His heart beat faster at the thought what would come; he'd never expected such abandon from Norrington. But then he remembered how the man had been as a first lieutenant, how boisterous, subduing the crew with a single glare. There was nothing frail and weak about him back then, and certainly not now!

Gillette slipped out of his shoes, and Norrington kicked them under the bed. He knelt down to take Gillette's stockings off, caressed the inside of his thighs. Gillette had to close his eyes for a moment, the sensations running through his body made him sway.

"I'll take care of you," he heard Norrington say, a feverish promise he knew his lover would keep. His lover, finally again! How he had missed it and longed for it! Now Norrington's fingers were fiddling with the buttons of his breeches, and within a moment, he found the garment dropping to the ground.

"Step out of them," Norrington ordered, then he pushed them aside. Gillette was now standing naked in front of Norrington, and for the first time, he felt conscious about it. It hadn't mattered so much in the past; both of them had had their best years behind them, but looking at Norrington now, Gillette felt oddly inadequate. He had never considered himself to be particularly handsome; he was too much of a realist to pretend otherwise and not vain enough to be bothered by this fact. But what if Norrington wouldn't find him pleasing now? It was possible, wasn't it? And good grief, there would probably a dozen people chasing after Norrington in the future, married or not, and-

"Whatever it is you're bothering your head about, stop it."

"What?"

Norrington grinned, his hands stroking Gillette's backside.

"I know that expression on your face. You're pondering something deep and meaningful. Out with it, what is it?"

"I just had a vision of young and dashing Admiral Norrington, newly returned from the almost-dead, surrounded by admirers of both genders at a garden party. Many admirers. A lot of them. Doves. With queues twice around the Fort."

Norrington pressed a kiss just above Gillette's hipbone, right on the spot where only yesterday the scar of an old wound had been. Now it was gone. Gillette could feel the edge of the bed pressing into the back of his thighs, the cool linen a stark contrast to the warmth of Norrington's caressing hands.

"Let's come to an agreement, Thomas: if you promise me not to shoot any possible admirers of mine, I will not shoot any of yours."

Gillette wanted to point out that this wasn't a fair agreement, as he would have to refrain from shooting far more people than Norrington, but his lover had obviously decided that they'd talked enough nonsense for the moment and cut off further conversations. He gave Gillette a little push, and grinned when he stumbled, fell backwards and came to lie on the bed.

"In the five years since we met again, we've shared a bed eleven times. I know, I've counted. Eleven times in five years, Thomas. And out of these eleven times, nine were rather about you avoiding pain for me than finding pleasure for yourself. Didn't I say I'd make up for it?"

"Yes, but I wasn't expecting you to make up for it in one night! I've never seen you like this, James."

Norrington ran his hands up and down Gillette's thighs. There was a determined expression on his face, and a good bit of mischief in his eyes.

"I admit I feel like I was slightly intoxicated. But it's a good feeling, Thomas. I don't know if it's Sparrow's potion or if it's you. Actually, I think it's you."

Gillette wanted to dispute this statement, but he was at loss for words upon seeing Norrington's nervous smile when he first nuzzled Gillette's groin, then slowly licked a wet trail from root to tip of his erection.

Norrington had never done this before. Nor had Gillette. This just wasn't done, period, not among gentlemen, anyway, and he wanted him to stop. Or never stop at all. Gillette couldn't take the sight of Norrington's head anymore, moving in a slow, steady rhythm, his hair tickling on tender skin. He covered his eyes with his hands, but that might not have been the best idea, as his sole focus was now on Norrington's mouth.

Just what had been in that flask? Liquid gunpowder? Gillette couldn't tell whether these new

sensations were pleasurable or painful, but he willingly gave in, gave up, surrendered to the skilled hands and mouth of his lover.

He was just about to beg for mercy when Norrington let go of him, looking a bit embarrassed and giving him a shy smile. More caresses and kisses, from hipbone to stomach; Norrington nibbled and gently bit on a nipple, only to finally kiss Gillette again. He didn't know whether to be revolted at the bitter taste in Norrington's mouth or aroused, but he didn't have much time to consider it. Their bodies were aligned perfectly, rocking against each other just the way that felt best.

"You did that," Gillette stammered. "You did that, I can't believe it, why?"

Norrington looked helpless, lost in the situation and his feelings.

"Because you liked it? And because I love you. And I'll do it again, that and more. And - oh hell...!"

Norrington's fingers dug deep into Gillette's skin, leaving bruises and angry red marks. He couldn't help it, he was falling, and the only one he could turn to for hold was his lover. Gillette bucked and threw his head back, and Norrington was sure that he had never loved Gillette more than in this fracture of a moment when his face was scrunched up in passion and complete abandonment. There was no control in their movements anymore, no plan, they just acted upon instinct and let their bodies take control, going with the flow until they were both spent.

* * *

"Will you give me that blanket now, please?"

"No. It's mine. You can't have my blanket, get your own."

"But I'm freezing!"

"It's the Caribbean. Nobody's freezin' here. If you're freezin', you'll have to cuddle up closer, darlin'."

Elizabeth cursed a blue streak, but then she finally gave in and snuggled up to Jack, who put an arm around her shoulder and couldn't help a smug grin.

"See, much better, my little moray. Small cots make for hot love."

"They make for arguments as well."

"Which lead to pleasant moments of forgivin' and makin' up. So, how are you feelin'?"

"Odd. And good. It's great to look like twenty-five and have the experience of a mature woman."

"Can't see much of a difference, to be honest."

"Is that a compliment or an insult?"

"Take it as you like."

Elizabeth ran her fingertips across Jack's chest. She knew he was ticklish, and she kept the pressure just right to make it pleasurable for him. Whenever her touch became lighter, she could feel how he tried hard not to squirm, and that was her little revenge for the last days which had been very exhausting, and not only because the *Black Pearl* had been hit by a storm.

"It might be the wrong moment to ask, but are you sure Tia Dalma's potion worked for James?"

Jack pulled a face.

"Can't we leave your husband out of my cot, please? I'm not one for threesomes, darlin'."

"I have to ask."

He sighed.

"Yes, yes, sure. Of course it worked, it always does. By now, he and this tedious Gillette are probably goin' at it like rabbits in springtime, and..."

"Jack!" she cried, and pulled on one of his braids. "He wouldn't!"

"Ouch! Course he would! You have my word, Lizzy: first thing James the man did when he realised the effect of that potion was runnin' to old Ginger and makin' him drink half the bottle. Well, hope he didn't do that, or he'd have to find a nanny, and they're rare in Port Royal."

Elizabeth stared at him, then she finally understood what Jack's plan had been.

"You bastard! You gave him Gillette so you could keep me?"

Jack huffed, all insulted pride.

"It's nothin' but fair, my little moray. You had James the man for thirty years, he had you, he had - well, probably ol' Gillette as well, and what did I have?"

"Giselle, Scarlet, Jane, Susan, Rebecca, Anne, Elly, Barbara-"

"That's not-"

"-Alice, another Anne, that female pirate I could never remember the name of, you know, the one with the blonde curls, Jenny, Sally, not to forget Tia Dalma, Rosalyn, Deirdre, the other Elizabeth, Margret, Eliza, De-"

"- and don't forget Jack the monkey while you're at it, darlin'. Bloody hell, don't you ever shut up, woman?"

"-that red-haired wench in Tortuga which-"

Jack had always known that the most effective way to keep Elizabeth from ranting was kissing her.

As a consequence, they had kissed quite a lot during the last weeks, because she was a very strong-willed woman who never held back with her opinion. When they finally parted, he pushed strands of loose hair out of her face, and she could see that he was very serious now.

"He's had you for thirty years, my little moray. I've waited that long. Don't I deserve you now? Don't you think he'd understand?"

She thought of James, but also of Gillette and the conversation she'd had with him aboard the Aronia. Thirty years were a long time.

"Yes, Jack. Yes, I think he'd understand. And now give me that damned blanket, you bastard."

* * *

Gillette sat at Norrington's desk, quill hovering over the paper in front of him. All across the room, screwed up sheets of paper littered the floor, failed attempts of a written report to the Admiralty in London.

Norrington kicked the door to his study open, carrying a tray with a pot of tea and two cups.

"Come up with a believable explanation yet?" he asked, and put the tray in front of Gillette.

"Nothing that wouldn't land us in Bedlam," Gillette groaned, and raked his hair with his fingers. It stood out in spikes, and Norrington longed to smooth it. He'd do so later, he decided, after ruffling it some more.

"Maybe we should just say that Dr. Drake's cordial worked wonders?"

"Yes, and what would that do to poor Dr. Drake? They'd chase him halfway across the world! The man is seven-and-seventy years old, James! He doesn't deserve that."

Norrington sighed.

"A pity. I liked the idea."

He poured the tea in the cups, then came to stand behind Gillette, looking over his shoulder.

"Now that won't help much," Gillette growled. "I can't work when you're doing that."

"What? Looking over your shoulder? Or that..."

He put an arm across Gillette's chest, slipped his hand in his shirt and kissed his neck.

"That and that. And especially that! You're wearing me out, James. I had no idea you were so - insatiable."

Norrington laughed and bit Gillette's ear, gentle and playfully.

"That's because you didn't know me when I was a young man, Thomas."

"When you were a young man, you were a lieutenant, and I was a midshipman. All I considered was whether you'd be satisfied with my work or not, or if I'd have to expect a caning from the captain because you ratted out on me."

"I never ratted out on you. I always recommended you and sang your praise. So you never thought of me at all? No romantic dreams you might share with me?"

Gillette put the quill down and looked over his shoulder at Norrington. It was difficult to be cross with him when he was like that, cheerful and charming. He'd been cranky long enough.

"Well, maybe I had some thoughts of that kind, once or twice. But it's been so long ago, I can't remember."

Norrington let go of Gillette and pressed a kiss on his temple.

"You've never been a convincing liar. Time for a break, let's have tea."

They sat for a while in amicable silence, drinking tea, when they heard somebody opening the front door. Gillette quickly put his cup on the desk and stood up, hurrying to the door of the study.

"Who is there?" he called, and breathed a sigh of relief when Jamie and Tom replied. The two young men managed to walk down the corridor towards the study with the greatest possible distance between them, and didn't look at each other once.

"Tom! How good to see you! Jamie, your father will be happy. Come in, we were just about to have tea."

Jamie, who was close to turning on his heel and running down the stairs upon the sight of the rejuvenated Gillette, swallowed hard and forced his face into a smile.

"How lovely."

"I'm sure your father has a bottle of whiskey somewhere, Jamie."

"That's good to know."

Tom and Jamie entered the study, and Jamie shook his head.

"I'm sorry, father, but this is so unreal. I just can't get used to it how you look. How you both look."

"I thought I'd never get used to the sight of officers without pigtails and wigs, Jamie, but I managed. We can get used to the oddest things."

Tom, eager to nip any possible arguments in the bud, interrupted the two men.

"My apologies, Sir, but I have to bring you bad news."

"What has happened? Any news from the Black Pearl?"

"No, no. It's just - Dr. Drake, Sir. He died of a stroke last night. I fear this will make things even more complicated for you."

Norrington and Gillette exchanged a quick glance. Norrington thought of himself as a real bastard for feeling such a relief upon hearing of poor Dr. Drake's fate, peace to his soul, but Gillette had obviously similar thoughts and quickly reached for his quill again.

"How unfortunate," he said. "I'm very sorry to hear that. Yet you will be pleased to learn that we have found a solution for our problem."

Tom and Jamie looked up in surprise.

"You have?"

* * *

Had it been up to Jamie, his engagement to Emily Wilkins would have consisted of nothing but a brief announcement in the local paper, but of course her father had insisted on festivities with a banquet, speeches, music and the most annoying people Port Royal could offer.

He was melting in his uniform, the heavy wool a torture under the hot Caribbean sun. That would have been more tolerable than the small talk he was forced to make with the guests, though, for they grated on his nerves.

People were mindless sheep. Jamie had always had this suspicion, but now he was convinced of this theory. Nobody had doubted his father's story that Dr. Drake had given him and Captain Gillette a cordial which had rejuvenated them in such an extraordinary way. Governor Wilkins had ordered the marines to turn the house of the late Dr. Drake upside down, looking for possible remnants of the marvellous cordial, but all that had been found were three bottles of a very powerful laxative.

If he'd had those three bottles, he'd made Tom drink them all in one go. No, Jamie corrected himself, two bottles. One he'd kept for Lt. Kyle, who was all over Tom like white on rice, and there wasn't a thing he could do about it because Emily clung to him like a clam to a rock. To their left and right people chatted about the upcoming wedding, congratulating him. The men slapped his shoulder,

telling him jovially what a lucky fellow he was, and the girls and women giggled with Emily behind their fans, probably talking about him when he wasn't looking.

And then there was his father, of course. God knew Jamie was happy that he was well again; and he did not begrudge him his newly-found youth, but it was terribly confusing to have a father who looked like an older brother. Considering where that magic potion had come from, Jamie worried that his mother by now might look like a younger sister, and that was too much for him to take. James Norrington and Thomas Gillette stood in the shadow, surrounded by admirers. His father had spent a lot of time in the sun to get a tan and look older, and he had also powdered his hair, yet he still looked ridiculously young and, if the admiring glances of the ladies was anything to go by, also very attractive.

Gillette, who couldn't go out in the sun without turning the colour of a cooked lobster, didn't seem to enjoy the attention at all and tried to escape his many admirers, but as he was a widower while Norrington was married, the ladies of Port Royal's society were not willing to let a potential husband escape without a fight. Currently, the eldest of the four Misses Auberleys was talking Gillette's head off about her garden and the difficulties of planting cabbage in the Caribbean.

Emily tucked on Jamie's coat sleeve and dragged him along to a shadowy corner in a ruin.

"They would be such a nice couple, don't you think? She's always had a thing for the Navy, and it's about time she gets married. Good grief, she's almost twenty-five!"

"You make me feel ancient, dear Emily."

"Bah, sweetheart, that's a different matter. You're a man, after all! A woman who's not married by twenty-five will end up an old spinster, mark my words! But poor Captain Gillette; it is really time that he finds himself another wife who will look after him. How long is he a widower now? Twenty years, I heard? Really, it can't be good for a man to be alone for such a long time, don't you agree?"

"He seemed to have survived those twenty years well enough. That aside, Lucy Auberley has the common sense of a gnat and the attention span of a fruit fly. What would he want with her?"

Emily fanned some cool air on her heated face and rolled her eyes.

"I didn't suggest he married her to discuss literature, silly! Men do have certain needs, after all."

"Emily!"

"Oh please, Jamie. Not everybody is as prudish as you."

She moved closer to him, and he could smell her heavy perfume. A lovely scent, no doubt, but he'd preferred the mixture of tar, tobacco, salt and sweat that was so typical for Tom any time.

"I wish you weren't so old-fashioned, Jamie. We're getting married soon, so why wait? I always leave the door to the balcony outside of my bedroom open. All you'd have to do was climbing up the vines

and-

"You keep your balcony door open at night?"

She smiled and batted her lashes.

"Of course I do. Just for you, my darling."

"A very unwise thing to do, my dear," Jamie said. "You might catch a cold."

* * *

"She's quite lovely, isn't she?"

Tom, who had spent the last twenty minutes glaring daggers at Jamie and his fiancée, took another sip of punch and shrugged.

"If one likes that type, I guess she is."

Lt. Kyle chuckled.

"Jealousy doesn't become you."

Tom jumped, but Kyle put a hand on his arm and smiled.

"Your secret is safe with me, Tom. And no, you haven't done anything wrong. It was all young Master Norrington's doing; I know the green-eyed monster when I see it."

"Go ahead and mock me, I deserve it," Tom muttered. "Have I ever made a fool of myself for him; it will keep him laughing till at least Christmas!"

Kyle shrugged.

"Who hasn't been a fool for love once in a while? I know I have. And I can't blame you, Tom. He's fine looking. Not as classy as Admiral Norrington though. That's quite an amazing thing that has happened to him and your father. What a pity Dr. Drake can't share his knowledge anymore. Are you sure none of that wondrous cordial is left?"

"Quite sure. But seeing that Admiral Norrington is well again, I shan't complain."

"Of course not. As I said, a pity; I'd have loved to ask Dr. Drake if he mayhap sold said cordial to the crew of the *Black Pearl* as well."

Tom glared at him; it seemed to be impossible to keep any secrets from Lt. Kyle. A servant approached them, carrying a tray with canapés. Kyle took one and urged Tom to help himself as well. They ate in silence, and Kyle watched Tom, who couldn't take his eyes off Jamie.

"I think you should get married as well, Tom. You're old enough."

"What?" Tom almost dropped the rest of his canapé. "Have you gone insane?"

"No, why? It would be a very sensible thing to do."

"Now let me guess: next you will tell me that marriage is what every man should strive to achieve, that it's a wonderful thing and having some love to go with it would be nice, but it's not mandatory, yes?"

Kyle gave Tom a puzzled look.

"I would agree on the first part, but the rest? What nonsense! Why should you marry somebody you don't love? That would only add another cage to the one people like you and I are already living in. No, find yourself a fine woman to marry, one who'll love you and whom you can love in return. That is, of course, if you have love for a woman in you at all."

Tom looked helpless and sad, and Kyle began to feel guilty for the turn the conversation had taken.

"My apologies if I've been too forward or if I should have hurt your feelings. I'm telling you this as a friend who means you well: the world will not change for you, Tom. You will have to adapt to it. Now you have set your mind on loving that silly lad over there, but just like I, he has decided to play the game by the rules of our society, cheating at times to get what he wants. I certainly won't blame him for that. But if you want him, you have to play by the same rules, or you'll be left behind."

"I can't play that game, Robert. I don't like it, and I don't like the rules. I can't bring myself to share the one I love, I fear I'd be more unhappy if I did than if I'd stay alone. Maybe I'm one of those men who are not intended for togetherness. If that is so, I'll accept my fate. It's not too bad, is it? You're an officer as well, you know that we don't have much time for ourselves, anyway, and wouldn't it be unfair to bind a woman to me who I'd only see once a year?"

Kyle sighed.

"I really wish you were less of a romantic and more of a realist, Tom. However, this is your decision to make. I hope that we will meet again, though, and that we will still be friends."

Tom gave him a smile.

"I'll miss you."

"I hoped you'd say that. A pity we're not alone. I'd love to kiss you."

"I certainly won't let you go without a proper farewell, Robert."

"I like the sound of that. Do you know that I kissed your father, by the way?"

Now Tom really dropped the canapé.

"You did what?"

"Not on purpose, I swear! I thought it was you, and I - well. Most embarrassing moment in my life; I count myself lucky he let me go and not dragging me in front of a Court Martial. How about repaying his kindness and saving him from Miss Auberley? She seems to have set her mind on becoming your stepmother."

Tom looked about and saw his father, cornered by Miss Auberley, who was just explaining in detail which fertilisers cited the best results with roses, and her younger sister, who demanded to hear all about the adventurous life in the Navy.

"Over my dead body! Give me ten minutes, Robert, I have to rescue my father."

"Make than half an hour, Tom. Miss Auberley is almost twenty-five."

* * *

"If you weren't already my only child, I'd make you my single heir."

Gillette looked grateful at his son and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

"Womenfolk, nothing but trouble with them!"

Tom had to laugh.

"Now you got a taste of what Jamie and I have to suffer in Port Royal! You can't blame them, father. It's difficult to find a husband here, and as Admiral Norrington is married, you're probably the catch of the day."

"Catch of the day, what nonsense! I could easily be their father!"

"Yes, by age, but the ladies go by the looks, so they only see a young captain, who, if I may say so, looks rather dashing in an uniform."

Gillette rolled his eyes, and Tom tried for the umpteenth time to find the father he had known all his life in the face of the young man next to him.

"Are you happy with the way things are?"

Gillette gave his son a sidewise glance and sighed.

"I don't know, Tom. There's certainly a reason why we get older and finally die, and I'm not very comfortable with the idea that we have tricked nature. When I look into the mirror, I feel as if I see a

stranger. But don't worry, I'll get used to it. And if I look at Admiral Norrington and see how well and happy he is, I can certainly feel nothing but gratefulness towards Jack Sparrow, as hard as it might be to admit it. Would you like to accompany me on a walk? I'm rather tired of the company here."

"Of course."

The two men moved away from the cheerful crowd.

"Were you looking like this when you met my mother?"

"Your mother?"

"If you don't want to talk about her, it's fine for me," Tom hastened to assure. "But after all I learned aboard the *Black Pearl*, I became curious."

"Understandable. Your mother... when I first met her, I was first lieutenant on the *Dauntless*, serving under Admiral - then Commodore - Norrington. The *Dauntless* was a fine ship, you must know, and for a young officer it was a great honour to hold such a position. I was prepared to fight pirates, but I'd never dreamt of the danger we encountered in the end."

"The story with the undead pirates?"

"Yes. That's when I first noticed your mother. Well, she's certainly been there before, what with her being Sparrow's steersman, but it was in battle when she first caught my attention. There's nothing like a beautiful woman with a sword cutting an undead pirate in two to charm a man."

Gillette chuckled upon the memory.

"Unfortunately, I was in her way, and she tried to run her sword through me. She had quite a temper!"

"Was that when you fell in love with her?"

"Ah no. That was much later. I had left Port Royal and was waiting for news from the Admiralty regarding my future. But of course, they dragged their feet. I wasn't really the kind of officer a captain would have wanted aboard his ship."

"But you're an excellent officer! How come?"

Gillette shrugged.

"Nothing that would be of importance now, Tom. Let bygones be bygones. I met her on a market where she sold fish - she was the daughter of a local fisherman, you see - and... well, we had both just lost a loved one, and found comfort in each other's company."

Tom sighed and shook his head.

"Father, this is like pulling teeth. Did you love her? Did she love you? When was I born? What was your life like? That's what I want to know."

Gillette licked his lips. Tom was used to this little habit of his father, but now it made him look even younger, like a schoolboy caught at doing something forbidden.

"This is so difficult to explain. We learned to love each other. Love comes in many shapes, you see? I found a small house for us to live in, and decided that I wanted to marry her. She called me a fool, said I'd ruin my career, and with that she was right. I didn't care, though. I held no love for the Navy anymore, and I would have given all up for her. Then, one day, she was gone, and I never saw her again. Some years later, after her death, you were sent to me, and the rest of the story is known to you. That's all I can tell you about her, I'm afraid."

"Did she laugh very often?"

"Anamaria rarely laughed, but when she did, the sun was shining even on a rainy day. She always pretended to be grumpy and angry, but I never believed it. She had none of the skills a wife should have, couldn't cook or sew to save her life, but she knew how to use a sword and a pistol. And she was beautiful, Tom, so very beautiful! You look a lot like her; the eyes, the lips - I see her in every smile of yours. I wish you would smile more."

"It's not the time for smiles."

Gillette reached out and put his hand on his son's shoulder.

"I know what ails you, Tom. Don't look at me as if I'd just threatened to shoot you; I understand. I wished you wouldn't have to go through this, but it can't be changed. My guess is that your problem wants to marry the lovely Miss Wilkins, and that you might be tempted to agree on an arrangement that promises to give you at least part of what you really want. But Tom, standing in the background, hiding, lying, living on somebody else's mercy, that's not the way a man should live. Nothing but misery would come from this. Please, spare yourself years of agony, and make a new start. It is possible to love more than one person, if you only allow yourself doing so."

Tom had turned his head away from his father. So he knew, his secret wasn't a secret anymore, and his advise had been quite clear: to stay as far away from Jamie as possible. He looked up and saw Admiral Norrington in the distance, surrounded by people and obviously telling a funny story, because the laughter of his audience could be heard even at this distance.

"It hurts so much," he simply said, swallowing hard.

Gillette reached out and took Tom's hand, gently holding it between his own.

"I know, Tom. Believe me, I know."

"But are you - are you at least happy now?"

"I am. But it took me thirty years, Tom. That's a very long time if you're waiting."

* * *

Tom had found it easier to get used to his father looking like an older brother than to Admiral Norrington looking like Jamie. A more dignified version of Jamie, and a less irritating one. The only way for him to cope with Jamie's upcoming wedding was distracting his mind by thinking of somebody else; the moment he realised that he began to think of James Norrington in ways that were of a rather frivolous nature, he decided that enough was enough and that it was high time to make a clean cut.

So it happened that he stood in Norrington's office one rainy morning, wearing his best uniform, hat under his arm and standing bolt upright while Norrington read the letter from the Admiralty with the order that Lt. Thomas J. Gillette should return to Britain, serving as second lieutenant on HM frigate *Nova*.

After what seemed to be hours, Norrington put the letter aside, leaned back in his seat and drummed his fingers on the desk. Long, elegant fingers, Tom noticed. It was really time to leave.

"So you wish to return to Britain?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Why?"

"I have stated my reasons on page two, Sir. In paragraph three, I wrote that--"

"Yes, yes, I've read your petition to the Admiralty. I want to know the real reason, though. Before I deprive my ship of an excellent officer and send you away from your father and your friends, I have to know the reasons behind your wish, and why you made such a petition behind my back. Have you been treated unfairly? Is anything amiss? Would you rather not serve under my command anymore? Or have the recent events influenced your decision?"

Tom firmly shook his head.

"No, Sir. It has been a pleasure serving under you, and I'll certainly miss my father. My reasons are of a very private nature, yet they have nothing to do with what happened to you and my father."

"Aha."

Norrington picked the letter up again, pretending to re-read it. In truth he tried to find the right words to address the problem he suspected to be the root of Tom's wish.

"Is this a matter of the heart?"

Tom jumped and almost dropped his hat.

"Sir?"

"You understood me the first time I asked. Are you running away from some heartache?"

There came no reply save some unintelligible stammering, but Tom's flushed face and embarrassed look told Norrington all he needed to know. He leaned forward and folded his hands.

"I see. I do not want to go further into the question, as the matter is clearly none of my business. The *Nova* will leave in a week; Captain McFarlane is an old friend of mine and you'll be in good hands. He's strict, but treats officers and crew well."

"Thank you, Sir. I'm very grateful."

Tom waited for Norrington to dismiss him, but the permission wouldn't come. Instead, Norrington cleared his throat and brushed some invisible specs of dust off his desk.

"If two of my officers petition to leave their station within a month, it's my duty to ensure that the reasons for their wishes have nothing to do with my command. Lt. Kyle wants to leave Port Royal to see more of his family, a wish I fully understand and respect. You want to leave Port Royal to see less of - whoever. I can only say that I wish you the best of luck, and please, be careful, Tom. There are things which could bring even the most excellent officer in hot water, and my influence is limited. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir," Tom replied, almost breaking out in hysteric laughter. Norrington thought he was leaving because of Lt. Robert Kyle? If it hadn't been so sad, he would have laughed, but this was probably better than Norrington knowing the truth. Tom doubted that the Admiral would have been as lenient with him if he knew what Tom and his son had been up to!

"Thank you, Sir. I fully understand, and I assure you that I will not repeat my foolish mistakes of the past."

Norrington looked relieved, and Tom was touched that he seemed to be genuinely worried about his wellbeing.

"I'm glad to hear that. It's a pity, though, you will miss Jamie's wedding. He will be inconsolable about your absence."

"With such a pretty bride, the lack of one guest will barely be noticed," Tom said gallantly, and bowed. "I will send the newlyweds my congratulation and best wishes once I arrive in Southampton."

Tom didn't have the slightest intention of wishing Jamie well. He hoped his marriage would be a terrible failure and that Emily Wilkins would turn out to be a shrew. Such thoughts were not of the kind that could be shared with Admiral Norrington, but the picture of Jamie Norrington as a hen-pecked husband with a nagging wife offered Tom a small degree of comfort.

* * *

It had been Tom's wish that nobody would come to see him goodbye upon his departure. His father wasn't in Port Royal, anyway, as the *Aronia* was supposed to meet up with the *Black Pearl*. Lt. Kyle had already left for Portsmouth, and Admiral Norrington had respected Tom's wish and stayed at his office.

The *Nova* was indeed a fine ship, launched only two years ago; the officers were friendly and helpful towards him, and Captain McFarlane had welcomed Tom warmly aboard his ship. Tom's sea chest was stored in his tiny cabin, and he was glad to have a deck under his feet again. He wasn't made for service ashore, he needed the sea and the endless horizon, and he couldn't wait to leave Port Royal behind.

Of course there had been neither hair nor hide of Jamie, who hadn't exchanged a single word with Tom since he had learned of his departure. He spent most of his time now at the governor's house, taking Miss Emily for a walk or holding conversations with her father. There was so much to discuss about the upcoming wedding, and there were rumours that Jamie would make post-captain soon, a convenient wedding-present for both Jamie and his bride, who probably couldn't wait to see her soon-to-be husband in a captain's uniform.

Tom was rather upset with himself for being disappointed that Jamie hadn't said goodbye. A simple handshake would have done, a friendly word - but no, Jamie Norrington had decided that Tom Gillette didn't exist anymore, and if he didn't care, then Tom wouldn't allow himself to care, either. During the Middle Watch, Tom imagined Jamie dancing with Emily while he watched the horizon through the telescope. He would probably whisper sweet nothings in her ear, and her father would smile mildly, happy that his daughter had managed to marry into such an old and wealthy family.

In truth, Jamie wasn't dancing, and he wasn't flirting with Emily Wilkins, either. He stood on the pier where the *Nova* had berthed, drunk as hell, first cursing Tom, then yelling at him, and finally sinking down on his knees, begging him to come back. But it was too late, Tom was gone, and all that was left for Jamie Norrington to do was to sleep it off.

Chapter 9

***"The Queen of Hearts she made some tarts all on a summer's day;
The Knave of Hearts he stole the tarts and took them clean away.
The King of Hearts called for the tarts and beat the Knave full sore
The Knave of Hearts brought back the tarts and vowed he'd steal no more."***

"Mr. Jenkins, don't be so complicated. With only sixty survivors, it can't be that difficult to find one lieutenant."

Lt. Jenkins sighed and consulted his notes.

"Next house, Sir, if our information is correct, which it very likely isn't, considering that the name is misspelled and the age is wrong."

Jamie gave his first lieutenant a sidewise glance.

"I can't help but get the impression that you're not overly fond of your current deeds, Mr. Jenkins. Is anything amiss?"

"No, Sir, everything is just fine. Over the years I've become accustomed to locating missing lieutenants."

Jamie shrugged.

"It's always the same: the French blow up a ship a Gillette serves on, and a Norrington will come and look for him, accompanied by a capable, loyal first lieutenant. You're part of a long-held family tradition, Mr. Jenkins!"

"I feel honoured, Sir."

Considering that the *Muguet* had blown the *Nova* to pieces, it was nothing short of a miracle that so many men had survived at all. Captain McFarlane had contributed his part to that fact; it was a tragedy that he had not been among the survivors. Jamie had made light of the matter in Jenkins' company, but he was tired of this war, just like most of his countrymen, and very likely a good number of the French as well. The revolution had devoured her own children, but Jamie doubted that anybody had learned something from the experience.

"There it is, Sir."

They stood in front of a small house where, according to the information Lt. Jenkins had obtained, the injured men 'Peter Berry, David Warringham, George Wilson and Thomas Shelet (It.) in HMS *Nova*' were being nursed back to health by one 'Mrs. M. Finn, wdw. (resp.) at the Crown's expense'. Jamie had wondered why it was of any importance that said Mrs. Finn was respectable. For some uptight stiff at the Admiralty this note had probably made sense; in connection with Tom Gillette it seemed to be gratuitous.

Jenkins looked at Jamie, and when the captain nodded, he reached for the rapper in the shape of a bulldog and knocked.

"Thank you, Mr. Jenkins. I don't want to keep you from attending your duties any longer, you may return to the *Persimmon*."

"But Sir, I-"

"Alternatively, you can stay here and watch the grass grow."

"Yes, Sir."

Jenkins turned on his heel and left, sending for the umpteenth time a prayer to heaven that his promotion or transfer may come soon. Jamie shared this wish; Jenkins was a fuddy-duddy and grated on his nerves.

Jamie could hear a voice call for a 'Janet', probably the maid. It took a while for the door to open, revealing an elderly woman with a frown on her face, wearing a bonnet, a shawl wrapped tightly around her shoulders.

He bowed.

"Mrs. Finn?"

"That would be indeed my name, Sir," she replied, and her face lit up at the sight of the handsome young captain. "Are you here about the money?"

Jamie had no idea what she was talking about, but ignorance had never been a reason for him not to reply to a question.

"Captain James Norrington in HMS *Persimmon*. About your money, yes - I would prefer to discuss this business inside. There are curious neighbours everywhere, aren't there?"

This earned him a full smile, and Mrs. Finn opened the door, asking him in.

"Oh quite right, Captain Norrington! Thank you for being so understanding, but my, you are a real gentleman, I saw that on the face of it. Please, do sit down; I'll get us a nice cup of tea. Janet! Janet! Please do excuse me for a moment, that girl never listens."

She hurried in direction of what Jamie supposed to be the kitchen, not giving him a chance to turn down the friendly offer. Why did women always have to offer tea? In most situations, a glass of Whiskey would have been preferable!

Jamie waited for a good ten minutes, twiddling his thumbs. The temptation to look for Tom was great, but he couldn't wander around some woman's house, looking for the bedroom. Tom would be

in a bedroom, or wouldn't he? Good grief, what if she had locked him away in some cold, draughty chamber?

Before Jamie could come up with more horrific scenarios, Mrs. Finn, the maid Janet in tow, emerged from the depths of the kitchen. Janet, a pretty girl with pink cheeks and blue eyes, carried a tray with a teapot and a plate with scones. They were probably still warm, and Jamie took in the lovely scent, chiding himself for his foolish thoughts and worries. Mrs. Finn seemed to be friendly, if a little overbearing, and she certainly hadn't locked Tom or the other three men up in the coal cellar!

"There you are, Sir," she said, pouring Jamie a cup of tea and urging him to try the scones. They tasted as delicious as they looked.

"Thank you, Mrs. Finn," he said between two mouthfuls of scone, remembering his manners. "Delicious. Absolutely delicious. I've never had better scones. This is paradise in form of pastry."

Mrs. Finn blushed and giggled.

"Oh, you are too kind with an old woman like me! Certainly your mother's scones tasted just as well."

"You have my word as an officer of the Royal Navy that my mother's scones are not fit to hold a candle to yours, Mrs. Finn," Jamie replied truthfully, thinking with a shudder of Elizabeth Norrington's last attempt at baking. She knew how to shoot two pistols simultaneously, though, and Jamie had always considered this to be a more useful talent in the world they lived in.

"So, about the money..." Mrs. Finn began.

"Ah yes, the money. Of course. What is the current state?"

"Well, Sir, I've looked after the boy like he was my own son, I had ale brought for Mr. Berry and Mr. Warringham twice a week and sat by Mr. Gillette's bed for a week all night long when he was so ill. I've had significant expenses, but unfortunately..."

"... unfortunately, you haven't been paid yet," Jamie finished the sentence, finally understanding what the woman had been talking about, and silently cursing the Admiralty for dragging their feet once again.

"Unfortunately not, Sir, and please understand, I'm a widow and only have what dear Harold left me, and everything's so expensive nowadays! I really did my best, Sir, you must believe me!"

"Of course you did, Mrs. Finn. Nobody doubts that. How much does the Crown owe you?"

Mrs. Finn named a surprisingly low amount, and Jamie breathed a sigh of relief.

"If you would be so kind to make out a receipt for me, I will settle our country's debts immediately, Mrs. Finn. At least the ones towards you."

"Sir, I have no words to thank you!" she cried, which was a blatant lie, for she had many of them, and lavished them all to Jamie. He tried to interrupt her stream of words several times, but only when he stood up, towering more than a head above her, he finally managed to find his voice.

"Mrs. Finn, thank you for your marvellous hospitality, which I greatly appreciate, and for your wonderful company as well. However, it is very urgent that I talk to Lt. Gillette, and this may not suffer any further delays."

She quickly rose from her seat and readjusted her bonnet.

"Of course, how thoughtless of me! Janet!"

The formidable Janet entered the living room and curtsied.

"Janet, lead Captain Norrington the way to Lt. Gillette. I'll make out the receipt in the meantime, Sir."

"You are too friendly, Mrs. Finn," Jamie said gallantly. Janet gave Jamie a rather coquettish look, and he followed her up the stairs.

* * *

"I understand Lt. Gillette has been quite ill?"

"Yes, Sir, quite. We sat with the poor young gentleman for many nights, and the doctor's been here a couple of times. It was really very romantic."

Jamie pulled a face behind her back.

"Romantic? That's not a term I'd usually connect with fever and illness!"

She giggled.

"Oh, you must forgive me, Sir. It was just so lovely how he called for his sweetheart all the time. She must be quite a fine young lady, I suppose?"

"His sweetheart?"

Janet looked over her shoulder, and upon seeing Jamie's dumbfounded face, she decided that she had to elaborate.

"Yes, Sir. He called for a girl called 'Janey' when his fever ran high. My apologies if I was too forward or if I jumped to wrong conclusions. Of course it could also be his sister."

"Janey - aha, I see. No, Janey's not his sister. Indeed, one could not be less of a sister to Lt. Gillette than Janey."

Janet looked somewhat disappointed, and Jamie was glad the conversation came to an end when she halted in front of the door to 'the dear late master's bedchamber'.

"The mistress didn't think it would be suitable to have the lieutenant share his quarters with the other three, what with him being a fine young gentleman," she explained. "They're staying one floor up, with the servants."

"I see. Aboard Mrs. Finn's ship, the officers occupy the lower decks."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing, Janet. Thank you. Here, take this," Jamie said, and gave the girl a coin, "you will not have to wait for me."

"Why, thank you, Sir!"

Janet was delighted, slipped the coin in the pocket of her dress and hurried down the stairs where Mrs. Finn was already calling for her.

Jamie stared at the closed door and took a deep breath before he knocked.

"Come in."

Upon hearing that voice, his heart skipped a beat, but he braced himself and entered.

The late Mr. Finn's chamber was sparsely furnished, the centre being a large bed. It was empty, though, for Tom sat on a chair by the window, using the daylight for reading. His hair was the only dash of colour in the otherwise austere room. Jamie wrinkled his nose; he could smell camphor and other remedies, the typical stench of a sick room. He didn't want it to surround Tom.

"I'm not hungry, Janet," Tom murmured, without looking up from his book.

"Pity, that, the cook seems to know her business."

Tom startled, his head turning towards the door.

"You?"

It had seemed to be a good idea until that moment, but now Jamie felt like a real idiot. Tom had made it clear enough that he didn't want to see him again, had neither replied to any of Jamie's letters nor accepted the invitation to his wedding. Jamie had continued to write, out of stubbornness and because he believed in the saying that constant dripping would wear away the stone.

Whoever had coined that saying had obviously never dealt with a Gillette.

"Well - yes. I just happened to be in the area and-"

"You happened to be in the area? I wonder how that came. Did you hold the map upside down? The West Indies are in a different part of the world, Captain Norrington."

Jamie brushed an invisible speck of dust off his hat.

"Don't be a git. I've been sent home to assume command on the *Persimmon*, I heard what happened to the *Nova*, made a little detour and here I am."

"I didn't ask you to come."

"May I take a seat, anyway?"

"If you have to," came the exasperated reply. "But hang your hat on the doorknob first, please."

Jamie gave Tom a puzzled look.

"What for?"

"The girl Janet likes to spy through the keyhole. It's bad enough she's watching me when I wash in the morning. I don't want her to witness your early demise".

"She seems to be enamoured with you."

Jamie covered the keyhole as he had been told, then pulled a chair next to Tom and sat down.

"You look pale. I don't think you're in a fit enough state to murder me."

"I caught some splinters when the French demasted the *Nova*. Some of the wounds became infected, I ran a fever - the usual. But now I'm fine again and can't wait to leave this place. I'm waiting for news from the Admiralty, but they seem to have forgotten about me."

"I'm sure they'll find some old wreck you can serve on. Are you really feeling better?"

"Yes, I'm feeling better. And now that you've seen with your own eyes that I'm not dead yet, you may as well go back where you came from. And leave the bottles alone, they were expensive."

Jamie, who had started to re-arrange the medicine bottles on the nightstand, quickly dropped his hands.

"My apologies. Don't you want to know how things are back in Port Royal?"

"My father writes me regularly."

"I write you as well."

"I don't read your letters."

"No?" Jamie looked disappointed. "Not one of them?"

"No. They go straight into the fire, so you might as well stop writing them."

Jamie cleared his throat.

"My mother is still on the *Black Pearl* with Captain Jack Sparrow, chasing whatever it is they are chasing and loving every moment of it. She briefly returned to Port Royal for my wedding and looked stunning. Your father is the very unwilling cock of the walk, and my father spends a good part of the time chasing away young ladies who wish to marry him. Your father, that is. It's quite amusing."

"Quite."

"Your father is very happy, by the way. He's commanding my father's flagship. The Admiralty first wanted to give the command to Edison, that idiot, but father wouldn't have it."

Tom knew. His father had written page after page in praise of his new ship, obviously over the moon with his new command. Tom couldn't help but admire Admiral Norrington, he showed class in the choice of his presents: a pirate for his wife, a ship for his lover. What would Jamie have given him if he had agreed on the suggested deal - a library?

"And you've made captain, I see?"

"Yes! And my ship, the *Persimmon* - ah, you should see her, launched only two years ago, finest ship you could imagine!"

"Nice wedding present," Tom muttered. "I suppose she came with a bow?"

"Of course. Would have been an odd frigate without a bow, now wouldn't she?"

Tom decided that sarcasm wouldn't work, and so he went for the straight approach.

"Jamie, I appreciate that you came here, assuming that the reason was genuine worry for my well-being. As you see, I'm alive and not likely to end in Davy Jones' locker any time soon. Now do me the favour and leave."

"You really didn't read any of my letters?"

"No."

"That's a pity. A good thing you didn't attend the wedding, though. It was a bit of a mess."

Tom closed the book with a snap and put it on the table.

"If you're going to talk about your wedding now, I'll choke you with my bare hands, Jamie. Don't you have any respect? No compassion? Can't you imagine that-"

"There was no wedding."

"- the last thing I'd want to talk about was your - what do you mean there was no wedding?"

Jamie looked a bit sheepish and scratched his head.

"There was none. No wedding. I'm not married."

Tom stared at him, finding it difficult to process what he had just heard.

"Not married? Why not? Good grief - you didn't lead her to the altar just to leg it before you had to say 'I will', did you? That poor girl!"

Jamie looked insulted.

"Of course not! Who do you think I am? I'd never do such an infamous thing! Well, yes, maybe I would, but in that case, it wasn't necessary."

Tom looked very serious and not at all delighted, so Jamie quickly tried to explain the matter.

"My father said that a man should consider all consequences before he gets married. He told me that Emily was a beautiful girl - and she really is, as you well know - but that it wouldn't matter in the end. He asked me what we'd do once we had finished admiring each other's good looks, and if she was the woman I'd want to see waiting for me at home for the rest of my life."

"And you decided she didn't match your sofa?"

"Could you shut up for a moment and let me finish my little speech? Thank you. Well, I thought about it, and decided that I was being very foolish."

"And told her that you wished to break off the engagement?"

"No, that wouldn't have been a good idea. Her father's governor, remember? I thought it would be more convenient for all involved if she'd be the one to break off the engagement."

Tom covered his eyes with his hand.

"I don't dare to ask."

"First I thought the easiest thing would be if I could find her another man. Unfortunately, she didn't want any of the ones available, and who could blame her, considering what a bunch of milksops they are. I think the only one she maybe could have been tempted with was your father, and this was out of question. So I decided to be honest with her."

"What a novelty concept. You told her you didn't love her?"

Jamie rolled his eyes.

"You really know nothing about women, do you! First I talked about my weakness for dice, cards and bets. That didn't work, she said her father was gambling as well. Then I told her of my debts, but she was unimpressed. Good grief, can you imagine I had to confess all three illegitimate children and the incident with Betty's husband before she finally decided to break off the engagement?"

Tom stared down at the book on the table. It wasn't heavy enough to hit Jamie with it, but the temptation was there for a moment.

"And now you expect me to applaud you?"

Jamie shook his head.

"I can't imagine you approve of the way I've dealt with this. But I'm not married, and that's all that counts. Don't speak up for her, either - not being married to me is probably a blessing. A year into our marriage, I'd very likely found myself a mistress."

"Good grief."

Jamie stood up and began to pace up and down the bedchamber, making Mrs. Finn and Janet wonder why on earth those floorboards were creaking.

"You were right with everything you said, Tom. Emily, the marriage, it was nonsense. I'm not made for a marriage of that kind. I'd be unreliable, cheating and causing a wife nothing but misery. That's not only because I'm an unreliable, cheating bastard, but because I love you, and I can't imagine anybody ever taking your place. So, yes, I'm here to ask you to return with me to Port Royal. Important things are happening there, and we all need your help. Let others deal with the French, you'll be busy enough dealing with pirates. And me."

Tom's head was spinning. This was crazy, even for Jamie's standards.

"So you're telling me that it wouldn't be fair to have a woman trapped in a marriage with an unreliable, cheating bastard, but that you consider it to be perfectly fine if I had to deal with one? What are you, insane?"

"No! I mean, yes! Damned, Tom, you confuse me!"

He sat down again and raked his hair with his fingers.

"What I meant to say is that I miss you, terribly so. I don't want to share you, either, and you wouldn't have to share me. I promise that I'll be a loyal friend, and that I'll stay out of trouble. At least I'll try my best. Please come back, Tom. The way things are between us... that's not the way

they should be."

Tom looked out of the window, not saying a word. Jamie didn't dare to address him again, out of fear he might be turned down for good. After a while, Tom picked up the book, leafing absent-mindedly through the pages, then putting it back on the table.

"When will you leave for the West Indies?"

"In two days."

"What if the Admiralty wants me to serve somewhere else?"

"My father will deal with it."

"How convenient."

"You say this as if it was a bad thing."

Tom sighed.

"I'll be there."

"You will?" Jamie's face lit up. "You'll come with me?"

"Though this will ruin my reputation as a sane person: yes, I will."

"I suppose Mrs. Finn would disapprove if I had you right now and here on that bed?"

"She'd disapprove greatly, Jamie."

"Not to talk of Janet."

They stood up, feeling a little awkward, not quite certain what to do now, but then Tom pulled Jamie close by the lapels of his coat and kissed him. There could be no doubt: this was what he wanted, what he needed. Nothing else. Nobody else. Jamie's response was no less passionate, and when they finally stopped kissing and touching, they both looked rather dishevelled.

"Use my comb before you return to Mrs. Finn," Tom said. "And you might want to sit in a bucket with ice water as well."

"Very funny."

Jamie combed his hair and splashed some water from the washing bowl in his face. A look in the mirror confirmed that he looked respectable enough to face Mrs. Finn. Tom watched him, a dotting smile on his lips, and Jamie just had to kiss him again.

"This is becoming a habit. Well, I've had worse ones," Jamie said, pressing one last kiss on the brow above Tom's dead eye and caressing his cheek. He threw a glance at the book on the table.

"You know, Tom, I've read that book as well," he said. "Now don't look so surprised, it's all over Britain at the moment, and of course my father had it sent to Port Royal as well. I'm probably the only person in our country thinking so, but you know - I think I'd liked the book better if Marianne had stayed with Willoughby, though he was an unreliable idiot."

Tom tilted his head and gave Jamie his most loving smile.

"You never cease to surprise me, Jamie. But oddly enough, I agree with you."

* * *

EPILOGUE

The youth, clad in black, stood next to his master, a young man of no more than twenty years. His aquiline nose, a mop of slick black hair and dark, beady eyes gave him the appearance of a crow, a stark contrast to the elegant blond aristocrat sitting in an armchair.

"One Dutch merchantman. Cargo being spices, we should be able to sell them at a good profit," he said, looking at the notes he held. A lackey came to serve tea, but the lad ignored him.

"What about pirates?"

"Two ships sunk last week. No survivors."

"This seems to be my lucky day. Any news considering Jack Sparrow?"

"The *Black Pearl* has been sighted twice, but he managed to escape."

"How unfortunate. Not my lucky day, then."

The lad smiled.

"I have news from our middleman at the Admiralty which might cheer you up."

"Indeed? Now I'm curious."

"Captain Norrington - the younger - and Lt. Gillette are on their way back to Port Royal."

The hand holding the tea cup halted in mid air.

"Are you certain?"

"There can be no doubt. Captain Norrington is commanding the *Persimmon*. A fine ship, but no

match for ours."

"I see, I see. This is indeed good news."

A sip of tea, then a smile on elegant lips.

"There are old scores to settle with Mr. Norrington and Mr. Gillette, as you well know. And who would be better suited to pay the debts but their sons? Well done. Very well done, Mr. Mercer."

* * *

THE END

Feedback is always welcome: joyful_molly@yahoo.co.uk