Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.
Chapter 1

Chapter by Hippediva

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WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

This story has been nearly a year in the making. The original draft was written between 6/21/05 and 11/23/05. It aged (in a rum cask?) for a few months, then was tidied up and readied for your enjoyment. It is a long one and gave us many hours of enjoyment and we hope that it does the same for you. In honour of Johnny Depp's birthday, here is Chapter One. The story is complete and will be posted with occasional illustrations by over the next two weeks or so by elessil. She also did the lovely banner. The painting is by Willem van der Velde. Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtflw for her excellent beta.
Vindaloo: a hot curry with a vinegar base.

Chapter One: An Unwelcome Awakening

The adventure begins when the Commodore and the pirate find themselves in a fix.

And here is the bigger version of the banner.
An Unwelcome Awakening

Sparrows often figure in sailor’s lore. They always find their way home, so old salts say. It may or may not be true of the ordinary small brown bird in cottage gardens. Jack Sparrow, contrary to all legend and lore, was more at home on water and always slept best shipboard. The rocking motion was his lullaby and he nestled into the straw, smiling at some bright-edged dream.

One eye opened and he sneezed. He picked up a fistful of moldy hay and stared. Straw? On his Pearl? He pushed himself upright, his head spinning.

Damn it, couldn't he have one blessed night of properly piratical shore leave these days? He arched an eyebrow, taking in his surroundings; a worn deck, flat bars. Most definitely a brig and that did not make Jack's head ache any less. He peered into the darkness, rubbed the lump under his headscarf and settled back against the bulwark, scowling.

Wherever in hell he was, he'd find out soon enough.

He chewed on his thumb and tried to remember the night's activities, screwing his brow into a knot when the memories became unfocused. Navy? It could be, and wouldn't that be a foul turn of the wind?

He slouched a little further into the straw.

There was a noise, the narrow stairs creaking under the clumsy steps of two men. His eyes bored into the darkness to make out the stumbling shapes in the swaying lantern light. They carried a tall man, clearly unconscious.

One of them threw open cell door open, brandishing a knife, while the skinny one dumped the senseless man inside with a grunt of relief.

"There, company."

Jack's lip lifted, half his questions answered by the look of them. He gave no response, one birdbright eye darting around the hold as the door slammed shut and the lantern swung wildly as the skinny sailor hung and secured it. He eyed the unconscious man, his face drifting in and out of the pale light.

He sat bolt upright, his sore head forgotten. He knew that face, would recognise it in hell itself.

Scuttling closer, he poked at one shoulder. "Commodore? Norrington? Oh hell."

Jack sat back on his heels and thought for a moment. Pirates? No, he knew that any of the captains in the area of Tortuga would know better than to try and take him captive. Somehow, it always ended up a nightmare for them. Jack called them adventures. His fingers hovered over the bloodstained forehead. "Norrington? Wake up?"

The Commodore wasn't moving. Jack heaved a great sigh and quickly checked for broken bones and filled pockets. Disappointed and sulking, he shifted back to his corner, crossed his arms and frowned.

Norrington's eyelids tensed, squeezed shut. With a hiss, he hoisted himself upright. He gasped and curled forward, breathing hard as he fought nausea.

His head hung limp as he wheezed for air, but when he held still, he could make out a faint sound. Carefully, he lifted his head and blinked. Blinked again. And he had so hoped that the voice had been a nightmare. "Sparrow? What have I done to deserve everything leading back to you?"
"Could ask you the same, Commodore," The pirate's teeth flashed in the moving light. "Don't think this is any pleasure voyage, mate. Although I mus' say how glad I am that they ain't Navy. Present comp'ny excepted and all." Jack's grin was weird in the shadows, his face chiseled and dug into black hollows and spikes of sharp bone.

Norrington groaned softly. He reached to probe the back of his head, finding wetness and his vision went black for a second. Biting back another gasp, he sat up again, letting his gaze wander.

Where was he? Pirates? Why would Sparrow be here as well? And how in hell had he ended up here? He stared blankly, then closed his eyes. Groves. Yes, he had been at the man's lodgings, enjoying an evening of cards with the Dauntless' officers. It had been a fine evening, as fine as Groves' best brandy, in which he had indulged rather more than was his habit.

"I assume that this being merely a fantasy brought on by too much brandy is a vain hope?"

It was fitting, he presumed, that he would imagine his personal thorn in his side as a punishment for overindulging. However, the pain in his head, the stench of sweat and waste in the narrow hold was too real, and he had not even imbibed rum to justify the appearance of Jack Sparrow. "So what is the reason for your presence here? Or do you merely enjoy spending time in brigs, seeing how often you can be found in them?"

"You've got yourself some mighty strange fantasies, luv." Jack pushed his pain away, covering a wince with a short laugh. "I don't know where in hell I am or how long I've been here. Kipped outside ah-a favoured establishment in Tortuga, last thing I remember. Bloody hell!"

He crept to the door, clinging to the bars and staring beyond them into the hold. "And judging from the looks of them crates o' cannonballs, and the gentlemen who escorted you here, I'd say merchant, maybe a privateer. Where in hell were you?"

Norrington stared blankly ahead, searching the answer for his own sake rather than Sparrow's. He opened his mouth, but instead of speaking, he coughed violently. "After a card game at one of my officers' lodgings, I walked home, past the docks. I could hear something and tried to fight..." he croaked, searching vainly for his sword. "I do not know what happened after that."

Jack's face fell. "Pressgang. It's gotta be." For a moment, he was silent, then grinned. "Nice little recruitin' method, perfected by His Majesty's Navy." The grin did not meet his eyes.

"What a pity we have to put up with a meagre substitute of perfection," Norrington snarled. Sparrow's assumption made sense, unfortunately. Why could it not be the man's usual inane blather? But then, the pirate's stupidity seemed to fade at any threat to his precious freedom. "So we are both kept here against our will," he observed, a strange note to his voice, as if he were offering a truce. "If wot you mean by 'against our will' is that we've been tossed down here until we get well clear of land an' have no choice but to slave away until we make port, yer right." Jack retorted.

He crept a little closer and watched Norrington with bleary eyes. "Wotever they're up to, we'll find out soon enough." For a moment, his face was very still, so strange on his normally animated features. "Listen t'me, Commodore. I'm layin' bets they don't know who we are. Don't go tellin'. If they do, they'll be holdin' us fer ransom. If not, they'll cut yer throat and dump you overboard sure as hurricanes in August. Try not t'do anything stupid, eh?"

"Such as listening to you?" Norrington half-smiled, letting the words hang between them. "Although I do suppose you are the voice of experience concerning captivity." His head was a sluggish mess of
pain, but he realized that again, Sparrow was right. Was right, and with that, held Norrington's life in his filthy hands. He gulped and added quietly, "I know. I am not naive."

Jack laughed softly. "Well then that's settled. You don't tell 'em 'bout me and I won't 'bout you. We'll find out what they've got planned in good time. Meanwhile, how's yer head? Mine hurts like the devil." He settled himself on the straw. "No sense in worryin' until we know where we are, is there?

His eyes seemed to become darker, as if it were possible, huge above the arc of his cheekbones. "If they're kidnapping, they're woefully ill-informed." His sly grin caught the light. "Or someone's been slandering us in the broadsides, luv."

"My heads feels as though I had spent a decade in this cell with you." The words dripped sarcasm, but it was dulled, by pain or by Norrington's realisation that the question was an olive branch; that Sparrow was, despite everything, his only potential ally aboard this ship.

He shifted a little, then, rose on shaky legs and stepped over to the corner opposite Sparrow, sitting down on the straw to rest his head against the bulwark. He contemplated the pirate with steady eyes and a grim smile. "And I do believe that any mention of your name with mine is already slander."

Jack made a face. "Slander bein' entirely on th' side of your aristocratic self?" He dug one hand into his boot and uncapped a long leather flask. "Here. It'll help your head."

"Thank you." Norrington accepted the flask and sniffed at it. His face contorted and he winced before he steadied himself, took a careful sip, then another, finally, letting the flask hang in hand, staring at it.

The situation was miserable. No one knew where he was, no shipmate in sight to help in a helpless situation. Only Sparrow. He looked up and offered the flask. "As they should not find out our identities, I had better call you Jack. You may call me James."

Sparrow's throat moved as he gulped and nodded. When he looked back up, he was grinning mischievously. "Well, James sounds so awfully formal. Wot say you t'Jamie? More like shipmates. " His mouth twisted as he gnawed on the side of his lip. "Must be a way t' get a better look 'round."

He shimmied towards the bars of their cage, squinting. "Bugger."

"James will do." Norrington watched Sparrow gulp from the rum flask. Why had they left the pirate any possessions? His own were all gone. Had they not searched Sparrow as thoroughly? He crawled over to press his ear against the bulwark. "We are fast. Very fast. More than ten knots."

Jack crouched so close their noses almost touched. The pitch of the vessel changed and he stiffened, plopping on his backside in the dirty straw. "All sails. We're headin' to open sea." He scrabbled across the small space to the door again. "Lots of munitions. A helluva lot. Warship, it's gotta be. A bark, a snow, mebbe even a frigate."

Norrington stared ahead, brows narrowed, concentrating. Something was supposed to make sense about this. His eyes went wide, his face white. "Bloody hell!"

Jack scooted back to huddle in the shadows with him. "Wot? Wot?" Norrington was pale, his eyes scared. He swallowed hard and reflexively, treated the Commodore to his brightest smile. "Wot is it, then?"

Norrington looked up and wordlessly plucked the flask from his hands, tossing back a swallow. "We are aboard the Chimaera. She is bound towards the Indian Ocean."

"Oh. The Indies? Damn an' blast, whose colours is she flyin'?" Jack's eyes moved restlessly. "She
stocked up in Port Royal?"

"Obviously, at least on crewmen." Norrington frowned, leaning back. "She is a privateer. Letter of Marque from the Governor of Nassau.... Hamilton. She sails under Captain Hamilton. An Irishman, as far as I know."

"Irish? Oh Lord!" Jack's shoulders slumped. "They aren't much fun shipboard as a rule. All that Catholic guilt. An' they don't much like the English, do they? Come t'reck of it, they don't much like anyone, especially each other. Hope you're not Irish?" His eyes danced.

Behind their teasing, he was racing ahead, plotting a course, but he had no bearings. He needed more information and it wasn't going to walk up and lay itself in his lap.

"No, I just do not like you." Norrington shook his head and Sparrow blurred in front of his eyes.

Sparrow's eyes narrowed, and he leaned closer. "James, you're in bad shape if ya can't laugh at a joke. Lemme take a look at that. You're still bleeding." He reached up to feel the lump on Norrington's head with gentle fingers. "Damn! They clobbered you!" He dabbed at the bloodstained hair with his sleeve.

Norrington winced and every touch made his sight swim into blackness. He bit the inside of his cheek and straightened. "I merely think that there are times when laughter is appropriate, and times when it is not." He batted Sparrow's hands away. "I will live," he hissed.

"Hold still, willya!" Jack's hands were surprisingly strong and he held Norrington still by the shoulder with one, rising to his knees to probe at the wound. "You need a few stitches, mate."

If he called for help, he could get some idea of the kind of crew this Hamilton fellow recruited. It would at least give him a polestar. "I said hold still!" His thumb pressed hard near the oozing gash.

Norrington whimpered and curled forward, his hand scrabbling at the straw. "I'm fine," he managed, strained as he fought nausea. "I'll be fine."

Jack shook his head. "This needs lookin' after, mate. HEY YA SCURVY BASTARDS! GET DOWN HERE!"

"What this needs is rest and less of your shouting," Norrington muttered.

The shouting had its effect. There were steps from the hatchway, the swaying light of another lantern. "Y'need your tongue cut off, mate?"

"You wanna stiff on yer hands, ya maggot?" Jack dragged Norrington towards the bars on his knees. "He's bleedin' like a stuck pig. You gonna do aught about it?"

The skinny sailor poked the lantern into his face, making him blink. He snarled and pulled Norrington into the light. "Ya knocked the bloody brains outta him. If you want 'im alive, matey, I'd get on it right quick." His tone was brisk, coax and command mingled in it as he eyed the sailor's ragged clothes and walnut skin.

The sailor pulled back, staring at Jack for a moment before the authority in that voice made him turn. The hatch remained open, light pouring like mercury over the pitted deck, illuminating the rows of boxes and barrels, lashed together.

"I know what you're doing," Norrington hissed, unable to focus or fight.
Sparrow didn't admit anything, but soon a small blond boy climbed down into the hold, precariously balancing a tray cluttered with a basin of fresh water, an almost clean bandage, thread and needle and a small cup of brandy. "The surgeon is busy." The boy was looking at Jack shyly. "But I watched him stitch a head-wound once."

Jack grinned at him. "It's awright, lad. I can do it. Would ya hold the basin for me?" He had one eye on Norrington's white face, the other on the boy, then the sailor. "Need a razor, mate. I can't bloody stitch this wifout one!"

The man looked down at him doubtfully, then disappeared up the hatch. Jack arched an eyebrow at the boy and winked. "He'll be fine. But it don't do t'let 'em fester."

The boy seemed undecided whether to take the closest look he could get, or to run back topside and hide. He settled for staring at Jack's hands instead, always a bit too fast to truly observe them, watching the lantern-light catch in the single ring. "Are you a surgeon?"

Jack soaked Norrington's hair and carefully parted it along the gash. "Me? Nay, but I've seen me share of wounds." He glanced at the small face and swallowed a smile. "Don't get inta firefights without 'em, aye?"

The bony sailor clattered back down the hatch and glared at them. "You try a bloody thing an' I'll cut yer throat."

Jack rolled his eyes and took the razor. "Thank you. Don't you worry, Jamie. Won't even notice this."

He sliced off as much hair as he could around the split skin without soap. Norrington really did need the stitches, although Jack had been quite prepared to do a bit of sleight of hand or stab one or two through healthy tissue if necessary.

"Don't call me Jamie." Norrington's voice was raspy. "Go on," he hissed. Every touch hurt and sent him reeling, and, if it wouldn't have been too humiliating, he would have vomited into Sparrow's lap.

The boy grinned. "Looks like one of them monastery-men."

"Hand me the brandy, son. Monks, y'mean?" Jack eased Norrington down, watching his colour come and go. "Aw, ain't but a tiny bit. And his hair so thick no one'll ever notice. Jamie? Jamie luv, you ready?"

"Get on with it." The boy pressed the cup into Jack's hands and watched as he slopped brandy over the wound. Norrington hissed and his face contorted into a grimace that made the boy look away.

"So lad, where're we off to that makes you fidget so much. An' where'd you hear tell of monks? Must be a well-traveled sort o' young fella t'know such things," Jack asked, calmly stabbing the needle in and out as if he were mending a sail. He could feel Norrington shudder and tense. "There!" He cut the thread with the razor. "All done." His eyes slid sideways to the boy's. "Give 'im the rest o' the brandy, willya?"

The boy was staring in open adoration and fumbled with the tray as he hastened to hand over the cup. "Haven't been out far at all, sir! Berks does keep tellin' stories, least when ol' Deacon isn't 'round." He giggled. "But we're going to Bombay now! You know were that is?"

Norrington accepted the cup with shaky hands.

"Bombay! Now that's a great port, lad. First voyage across?" Jack took hold of Norrington's hand
before he let the cup slip and held it to his lips. "Don't be so bloody noble." He winked at the boy. "Could ya help t'hold him fer a bit?"

The boy crawled closer and shoved his shoulder against Norrington's, clumsily steadying him. "Yes, sir. Never been out further than the Lesser Antilles before!"

Jack yanked his shirt out of his breeches and sliced off four inches of the hem with the razor. He saw the boy's brow furrow and snapped it shut, laying it carefully on the tray with a bright smile. "Oh laddie, you're in for a treat! Once we catch them currents and the trades--how far out we be, anyway? It's wonderful, open horizon everywhere ya look. Nothin' like it."

His fingers were gentle as he bound the bandage around Norrington's head and secured it with the strip from his shirt. Jack was quite sure the Commodore would disapprove of using the boy for information, so he'd better keep still and drink his bloody brandy. He smiled at the child. "Yer a good lad."

The boy practically beamed. "Thank you, Sir! This morning, we sailed outta Port Royal, eastward. The Cap'n even let me take the helm for a moment. It was wonderful!" He was shuffling with the tray and looked nervously at Jack and the open hatch, then at Norrington. "Will he be all right? They said they'd throw him overboard if he couldn't work his keep. He don't seem that hurt at all."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "They did? Well, we'll just have to make sure he is, won't we? After all, to take a man aboard simply to throw him to the depths? Dreadful bad luck! Seen the worst gales come up..." He was prepared to elbow Norrington in the ribs if he had to do it. "But a Cap'n that would let ya take the helm sounds like a rum kinda man. Wouldn't want him to be courtin' ill fortune."

It was the most fiendishly accurate impression of former Able-Bodied Seaman Gibbs that James Norrington had ever heard.

Norrington barely refrained from rolling his eyes as he saw the boy's grow wide, doubt and fear warring in them. "You've really seen this, Sir? Never been-,"

The skinny sailor's head peered through the hatch again.

"Matthew! Belay that chatter and get yer arse topside where it belongs."

Matthew shrugged, put the water down on the ground and grabbed the tray. "I gotta go." He spared a last wide-eyed glance at Jack and Norrington before he scrambled topside.

Jack nodded solemnly after him and, moving like a silent shadow across the cell, pulled the open door closed, but not locked, hiding a grin.

"Tortuga, musta been two days, this mornin' Jamaica....mornin' Well, it's daylight." He glanced sharply at the Commodore. "I really hate t'be the bearer of ill-tidings but we're well past Cuba."

"Your sheer presence is an ill-tiding of its own." Norrington crawled into a corner of the cell and bunched his coat under his head. He considered Sparrow's bleak assessment. "Which means the ship will not dock until....bloody hell. We won't dock until we're well across the Atlantic."

"No!" The word was whispered, so faint it could barely be heard but the echo was deafening. Jack gulped, slumping against the bars. "We're stuck."

The green eyes looked strange and he blinked, creeping closer. The left was pale jade, shuttered and resentful; the right black as night, ringed in emerald like a Gaelic curse. "Jamie? James, stay awake." Jack looked down at him, suddenly serious.
"What is it now? I do not care if you were passed out for two days, I am tired and want to sleep, if you would kindly let me." Norrington groaned and rolled to his side, curling into the corner.

Jack followed, poking at his arm. "Ya can't. James, listen t' me. Do not sleep." He grunted in frustration and hauled Norrington upright, careful not to upset the bandage. "Sit up an' talk t'me. Ye're not gonna sleep if I have t' sing for an hour. 'O Come O Come Emmanuel, And rescue captive Israel. Who dwells in lonely exile here...' " he bawled, peeking to gauge its effect. " I'm not stoppin', luv."

"Spa- Jack, I am reasonably certain I could, in fact, sleep, if you would let me. And unless you want a head-injury yourself, I suggest you do. Oh, I forgot, you already have at least one." That all this was a demented Sparrow-plan to drive him insane seemed more likely every second.

Jack sniggered. "I don't know 'bout you, luv, but I'm not gonna let some third-rate freeboater with a streak of luck take the likes of us. Not t'be done, mate. I've got a reputation an' it don't depend on Navy braid."

"The likes of us? I must admit I never thought of you and me in a common cause." Norrington pushed himself up, then slumped. "Very well then. You would do well to have an excellent plan or a reason to keep me awake," he growled. "One that isn't linked to your enjoyment in tormenting all that does relate to Navy braid."

"A Common Cause? Isn't that more slander?" Jack mocked. Those weirdly dilated eyes worried him, a drop in the enormous bucket of worry that threatened to drench him. He didn't let himself think about the Pearl. "Well, Commodore, I dunno 'bout you, but I am not lettin' some sheeny get one up on me. But if you English just don't have t'stomach fer it..." He shook his head, jingling faintly.

"Keep me awake for a while longer and you will make closer acquaintance with an English stomach, Sparrow." Norrington head kept drooping against the bulwark, until he left it there, closing his eyes. "I will have a much better chance of escape once my sight does not blur with every second step. Of course, that is likely your constant state of being, but personally I believe I can counter it by sleeping."

"Ha! I can jus' see you playin' the tar. Bet ye've never even climbed aloft in them fine fancy britches." Jack watched him from behind a mask of arrogant nonchalance.

"No, because, unlike you, I possess more than one pair." Norrington's eyes barely opened, thin slits of green and black glaring at Sparrow.

"Oh this will be fine, won't it? They'll know yer a bleedin' officer in a heartbeat." Jack snorted a laugh. "Well, don't blame me if they name ya cabin boy. Bloody Navy." He grumbled to himself, loud enough to keep Norrington's lashes fluttering, then wrinkled his nose. "So one little game of cards and you get yerself shanghaied. Not much in the way of luck with cards or women, I'd say."

"Says the one who was picked up in the streets of Tortuga. Obviously your...company for the night did not quite enjoy your presence. Did the pigs toss you out of the sty? And do not worry. Even if they realise that I am an officer, they would never think that you have any semblance of breeding."

"Least I'm not purely decorative shipboard!" Jack snarled, withdrawing into his corner and sulking. "You do realise that yer gonna get yerself killed an' I'm not goin' with you. I swear, Norrington, I'll kick yer arse from stem t'stern if you blab."

Norrington's mouth narrowed into a thin line. "I gave you my word on it, filth. That you would doubt it shows how foreign the concept of honour is to you."

His eyes were completely open again,
still weirdly dilated, gleaming with the same fire. "And I bet you are more than decorative. After all, such a decoration would only be a testimonial to very poor taste."

"Oh, very bloody funny! Like any ship needs a second figurehead with a belayin' pin up its arse. How in hell are you gonna manage? I'll take a wager they'll cut yer throat and toss ya to the sharks." Jack slouched in his corner, trying to ignore the cold in his bones. "Why in hell did you ever go t'sea?"

"That, Mr. Sparrow, need not concern you." Norrington eased himself down into the straw again. He was hurting, he was exhausted, and he really did not need Sparrow on top of it all. "But if it helps your peace of mind, I am quite capable of climbing to the foretop. Rejoice all you will about my impending demise, but at least grant me one favour and let me sleep."

"Your funeral, mate."

"And why, pray tell, would that be? If you intend to kill me during my sleep, you can just as well do it now, or are you too much of a coward for that?"

"And why should I wanna kill you? Never even been properly introduced t'you! Now, t'be sure, I was wounded by all your accusations. And I never gave any reason why y'should have treated me so shabbily when I risked life an' limb fer the Swann chit." He sprawled and resumed picking at the straw. "I thought meself rather tender-hearted in the matter."

"You have my most profound pity, Mr. Sparrow. The world is extraordinarily cruel to you, what with your drunken carousing heartlessly interrupted by men of despicable profession...oh, I forgot, that is the main profession of Tortuga's inhabitants." Norrington had curled into the corner. He was wide awake, staring at the damp wood until it swam before his eyes. He was tired. And he was scared.

Jack glared at him. "There ya go, castin' aspersions on me again. I believe we were spendin' the respective evenings in the same manner, James. Drink an' cards. Doesn't support the accusation that I'd murder you in yer sleep."

"Then share with me what other conclusion could be drawn from your threat that my sleep would be my funeral." Norrington looked up, and it was strange how Sparrow's body blocked all the light but for what glinted in his eyes.

"Because, you fool, haven't you ever seen head-wounds? You, the great Pirate-Hunter?" Jack's eyes narrowed and he was of half a mind to pummel the Commodore to consciousness. The rest of his brain caught up with him in time. "They're funny. Seen a man get knocked on the noggin' with a yardarm, get himself up and work fer three days, then drop dead."

Norrington blinked. Now that Sparrow said it, he recalled how the Defiant's surgeon had kept him awake, way back then when the boom of a captured sloop had smashed against his head during a jibe. He had always thought it had just been a punishment for being so careless. He blinked again, then wordlessly pushed himself to recline against the bulwark.

Jack heaved a sigh of relief, had a brief moment of inner conflict and resorted to his tried and true defense; dithering. He cocked his had to one side and smiled. "So why did you go t'sea? You seem t'me a proper gentleman who'd never soil his gloves with labour and even an officer gets a few rough spots." He spoke as though they were sitting in a tavern, Norrington's office, the Leaning Tower; anywhere but where they both languished.

"If I needed to explain why I went, then you could not understand it." Norrington leaned against the
wood, the dark eye thrown into further shadow, the green one bright in the flickering lanternlight. "I went because I had to do something. And better at sea than ashore."

Jack sat up straighter. "Ahh. So you do know." He fooled with one of his absurd lovelocks, eyes darting; listening with his entire body. "Good speed. Shite."

"So," he continued, "it follows plainly you've never been in a brig before." He looked around and sniffed. "Not very effective, stuffed down here in the hold. Makes a body feel more like a parcel than a prisoner."

Norrington laughed wearily. "I may not smell like one, but I am a sailor. And as a military sailor, I have made my acquaintance with brigs, although I have little doubt that your knowledge of such lodgings runs far deeper than mine."

Jack slung on his coat of tatters and barreled ahead on a tangent. "Hmmm. Well, Spanish brigs are dead bad. Don't even wanna think about 'em. The French aren't so clean, but the food's good. Dutch brigs are the best. Always tidy." He kept praying that they weren't going so fast, that the Caribbean wasn't behind them, that the Pearl wasn't further away with every heartbeat.

"It was French. But I did not linger to sample the cooking. Yet, I will trust your opinion as an expert on brigs. I have no doubt that you have evaluated them all. I assume British brigs rank very highly on your list, seeing you frequent them so very often?"

Jack was about to respond with some clever quip about British brigs when light flooded the narrow path carved between secured cargo and the cage. The little boy, Matthew, descended a few steps, was handed down a tray and trudged to the cell.

He manoeuvered the contents through the bars, two trenchers of thin stew and two mugs of grog. Norrington gave him an encouraging smile and he was about to speak when there was another voice from topside. "Matthew!"

The boy grinned. "Wouldn't eat it too fast if I were you," he burst out before bouncing up the stairs again.

Norrington tapped the biscuit against the tray, an habitual weevil-shake. It was blessedly free of infestation, so he sopped it in the stew, for the first time glad of the lack of light. "This borders on torture."

Jack gulped and poked at the mess in the trencher with one finger, sucked it dry and groaned. "Oh Lord, save us."

Jack watched Norrington with an appraising eye. "I'd eat it all. Don't know when we're gonna get more."

"Worse than the French," Norrington muttered, choking it down. "You know what is worse? I doubt they cooked that specially for us."

Jack belched his agreement and went back to his grog. "So when were you in a French brig, Jamie?"

"Before I came to the Caribbean. More than ten years ago." Norrington seemed more companionable when eating, picking delicately at the hardtack, then settling to wolf it down, relishing the grog to soothe his parched throat. "That ship was my first prize."
Jack focused on his companion, terrified at the thought of months of such fare. "Really? How'd ya manage that?" He had to admit that while Norrington might look like he needed a lace napkin, he didn't stick out his little finger or eat like a ponce.

"We were crossing the Channel, perhaps 20 miles south of Portsmouth. Then, I was second Lieutenant aboard the Defiant, a 24-gun brig. The ship was already damaged by a storm and we were limping back to England when the Neptune set upon us." Norrington's face softened in recollection, smiling at his mug of grog.

Jack automatically drew up his knees and wrapped his arms around them. "You musta been a lad then!"

"As I said, I was second Lieutenant. I led the boarding party." Norrington's face fell a little. "Our captain was killed by a lucky shot, his first by a fallen yardarm."

He swallowed hard. "The crew... they were not used to it. The Midshipmen had barely joined up and were afraid, with nowhere to look for guidance." His eyes focused on some point in the distance, maybe a scratch on the iron bars. "They disengaged from battle. They left us... the whole boarding crew... aboard the Neptune."

"They left ya there?" Jack swallowed another gulp of grog.

Norrington nodded. He still remembered the creak with which Defiant had disengaged, the shudder as she tacked and her sails bellied in the wind again. He remembered he had been afraid, but, to his relief, could not recollect his utter dread at that moment. "I gave the order to stand down. We surrendered. That was how we ended up in the brig. Fortunately."

Jack leaned forward like a conspirator in the flickering lamplight, his face a golden mask through which two dark eyes peeked. "From the brig to a prize?" His lips curved maliciously. "Now that is a story. How'd you turn those tables?"

"The French were not particularly, shall we say... savvy. Nor did they speak much English. They did not ask my parole, and left me my uniform." Norrington laughed softly as he remembered himself, pacing in that brig, ripping his wig off in an uncontrolled fit of temper, then his cravat, sending the elegant pin flying. "I had never before realised that cravat-pins do make excellent lockpicks." For just a moment, the grin on his face was wide and pleased as a schoolboy's.

Jack's face split into a delighted smile and he clapped his hands. "Bravo! I would never have guessed it of ya, Jamie! So what happened?"

Norrington was caught up in the story, a small part of him insanely pleased that he had Jack Bloody Sparrow listening so attentively. "The Neptune had taken severe damage, and her firepower was no match for the Defiant. The crew were afraid that she would return, and so they focused on their repairs rather than guarding us." It had been a hard wait, straining on his patience when he had held the means of escape in his hands.

"At night, we escaped. Half of us secured the watch crew topside while the rest cornered the Captain in his cabin. I dare say he was quite surprised to find his own sword at his throat, and consequently, quite willing to surrender it."

"And wot a grand heroic tale it is! So it was all because o' yer cravat. I like that. Bet it was somethin' tasteful and aristocratic." Sparrow's black eyes twinkled. "I'm surprised it weren't a wig pin."

"I don't use wig pins, Sparrow. Not everyone appreciates sharp things on their scalp." Norrington
pointedly stared at the strange bit of bone.

Jack grinned at him. "So, if I'm t'understand yer story correctly, Commodore, you picked th' lock of yer cell, stormed the deck and captured th' Captain with his own sword. Very impressive. Most piratical." His hands moved like waves as he babbled. "Had no idea about th' wig pins, mate. Never felt the need t' replace me own locks." He preened over one shoulder.

"Yes, no wig could ever be as hospitable to a colony of vermin as your mop indubitably is."
Norrington drained the last swallow of his grog and put down the mug, stifling a yawn. The meal and the narration had briefly invigorated him, but now exhaustion crept back into his limbs and his head sagged.


"For God's sake, how bad can it be? I want to sleep," Norrington muttered.

His face was ashen, the wide mouth paling, and Jack grimaced. "Had a devil of a head wound once--bullet grazed me---an' twas pure Bedlam fer days. Listen, Norrington, we might be able t'make off with one o' the jollyboats, but I am not countin' on it. The opportune moment, aye?"

Norrington snored an answer.

Jack leaned down and pressed a sloppy, rummy kiss to his lips.

Norrington reached up as if to wipe his own mouth, then felt the beard tickle against his palm. His eyes shot wide. Very wide. He scrambled on his arse, cowering in the corner. "What on earth was that? A demonstration that the head wound still has lasting effects on you?"

Jack's grin seemed to float three feet above the deck with a life of its own. "Yer awake, aren't you?"
His black eyes challenged a response.

Congenitally incapable of resisting the absurd, Jack could not help enjoying Norrington's startled look. He smiled. "It's called a kiss. Surely, ye've heard of 'em before."

Norrington frowned and pressed into his corner. "I did, Jack. Which is why I am certain that they are not to be bestowed upon me by you. At least not if you want to keep your teeth."

"Now, that's dead cruel, luv. I've been told I don't kiss half-bad. But, wantin' to keep wot teeth I have, them not being all my own as you well know, you're not a bad-lookin' sort, even with a rag around yer head." He watched Norrington try to keep up with his cat's-cradle logic. The green eyes were a little more even and perhaps he should get some sleep.

Then again, it was much too much fun to tease him.

"I do believe that was a compliment, Sparrow. Either my head-injury is worse than I thought, or yours is. Either way, kindly keep your exceptional kisses to yourself."
Norrington's eyes were narrowed at Sparrow, exhaustion still written in his face, but no longer any trace of sleep. All his blissful lethargy was gone. "Better yet, if your kisses are that excellent, why don't you make your way topside and kiss the whole crew senseless so we can make our escape?"

Jack head tilted to one side, his ridiculous hair clanking over his face. "Well, I suppose I could, but I don't fancy them. Wot of that?"

"You did not even look at most of them," Norrington argued sensibly. "Besides, you do not fancy
me either. Or was that just a little revenge for my trying to hang you?"

"I fail to understand the connection between hangin' me and kissin' you." Jack retorted cheerfully. "Or maybe I just rather like the idea of kissin' you. You're very kissable."

"First, Sparrow, that is not a word. Secondly, my head injury has not served to make me so gullible as to believe that you would enjoy kissing me." Norrington tilted his head, eyebrows arching and lips widening into that disdainful smirk they must have taught him somewhere at officer classes. "Or is that the effect brigs have on you? Is that why you are always out to get yourself captured again?

Jack's lower lip thrust out along with his chin and its wagging braids. "Yer castin' aspersions on me again. So French brigs mustn't have been much fun, were they? I suppose not, all buttoned up and braided into a knot." Jack smiled, his eyes narrowed. "Doesn't anythin' make your blood jump---no, not that way, th' way it does when yer aloft and feelin' right with the world?"

"I thought you did not trust me to even make the climb aloft." Norrington's lips curled into a sneer. "But I cannot say that I find any perverse pleasure in finding myself locked up, least of all with a filthy pirate."

"That's pure evasion and you know it." Jack observed dryly.

"That is what a sane man does with undesirable things, such as bullets, or your words." Norrington's fingers tapped out a rhythm against the wooden deck, his eyes distant.

"And your words are always so very desirable, aren't they, Commodore Short Drop an' Sudden Stop?" Jack drawled.

"Not for miscreants such as you, but for law-abiding people when I announce your hanging, Captain Never Stops," Norrington snarled.

"And it was such a successful hanging. Brass band, drums, even the Governor there t'see me not hang."

"And you are complaining about what, precisely?"

Jack grinned. "Tell me, Norrington. Are all yer executions as effective as yer weddin' plans?"

Norrington's tone went from heated to icy. "If you pity the failure, I am certain I could correct the mistake by strangling you here and now."

"Without a proper audience? How depressingly banal. Besides, then you'd get to hang fer murder. Might be worth the risk t' see that."

"Sparrow, the point of doing that would be your death. I doubt the view from the bottom of the ocean would be that clear."

"Well, luv, there's one tiny flaw in yer logistics, as it were. Yer assumin' that I'll be a good lad and sit still while you get yer mitts around me throat, which, temptin' as it might be, isn't my mug of grog. So ye'll just have to settle fer dreamin' about the hanging that never was and wait fer the opportune moment, won't you?" Sparrow's tone was reasonable and infuriatingly calm. "Right now, you wouldn't scare a flea!"

"You do not seem to frighten them either. On the contrary, they have chosen you as their habitat." A shudder went through Norrington and his eyelashes fluttered. "Truth be told, I would put up with nightmares of you if it meant you finally deigned to let me sleep."
Jack shrugged. All this talk of hangings and stranglings was making the bad meal churn in his gut. "I don't give a pin paper fer yer nightmares, mate. Look at me, bloody fool." He squinted at Norrington's eyes and threw himself down onto the straw, pillowing his head on his arms. "Go t'sleep, then, and dream wotever ya bleedin' like."

He pulled out the flask, offering it with unsteady hands.

The next retort was on Norrington's lips, but he swallowed it with a sip of rum. He eased himself onto the straw, sighing in relief. He stared at the flask for another second, then handed it back. "My thanks." His voice sounded strained.

"From one corpse to another. Don't mention it." Sparrow was silent for a heartbeat or two. "Wot makes you glad to be alive, James?"

Norrington stared up at the dark rafters and shrugged. "A stiff breeze, the Dauntless cutting through the waves at well over ten knots. A midshipman who passed his Lieutenancy and thanks me. The relief on a man's face when the Navy's presence makes him feel safer. A laugh, a friend." He peered at Sparrow and laughed bitterly. "Did you think I would say hangings?"

Jack's lips lifted in a sour smile. "I was countin' on it. For me, 'tis freedom. The horizon in front of ya, the one behind. The wide ocean beckonin', callin'..." He didn't say it, couldn't. The Pearl was out there somewhere near Tortuga, calling him. If he could have gone on his knees and had her magically appear, guns blazing, her flag flying free, he would have promised almost anything.

He focused back on Norrington and held out the flask. "One fer dreams, mate? Just think of throttling me and you'll sleep like a babe."

"Would that mean that you will finally let me sleep?" Norrington's smirk almost approached a smile. He truly needed the rest; he had spoken several whole sentences to Sparrow without a trace of insult.

Jack took the flask back and drained it, pouting and snapping it shut. He padded, half-upright, to the corner where his coat was bundled and crouched for a moment, staring at Norrington with those foreign eyes. He rolled it up and tossed it across the bare two feet that separated them. "G'wan. Could use a bit o' sleep meself."

Norrington acknowledged it with another nod, arranging himself as best he could between straw, their coats and hard wood. He had barely muttered a reluctant, "Good night," before falling fast asleep.

Jack listened to his breathing ebb into faint snores before he crept to the door, pushed it open and set about exploring the hold. "One distracted brat can be just as effective as a cravat-pin, Commodore," he muttered, grabbing the lantern and poking through the stacks of roped crates and barrels like a will o' the wisp.

He spent a long while in one corner, against the bulwark where he found a full cask of good Cuban rum with a loose bung. He refilled his flask after lying under it with his mouth open, soaking his face and hair.

Anything to drown what he felt, hearing the Pearl so clearly in his heart.

He busied himself for another hour, returning to the flask at distinct quarter-hour intervals to refresh himself, then went back to the cell and pulled the door closed behind him. No ports, true, but he'd a good look at a bit of the cargo. Whatever came next was in the hands of Fortune.

Fortune, of course, would be much aided by the canister shot he shoved into the lock and the handy
little blade someone had been careless enough to leave next to a crate of brandy, mostly watered. He turned on his side, the knife secure in his boot and let the rum take him sailing.

Chapter Two
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Two
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--R.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

This story has been nearly a year in the making. The original draft was written between 6/21/05 and 11/23/05. It aged (in a rum cask?) for a few months, then was tidied up and readied for your enjoyment. It is a long one and gave us many hours of enjoyment and we hope that it does the same for you. The story is complete and will be posted with occasional illustrations by elessil over the next two weeks or so. She also did the lovely banner. The painting is by Willem van der Velde. Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtflw for her excellent beta.
Chapter Two: An Uneasy Alliance

With no way to escape, the two men are forced to help one another and realise that their situation is, indeed, grave.

Illustrations are within the text.

Chapter One

CHAPTER TWO: An Uneasy Alliance

Jack had no idea how long he slept, but Norrington slept longer. They were wakened once for another meal, poked into the cell by a compact, muscled sailor whose eyes darted over Jack in surprise. He snarled a curse and disappeared without a word.

They tried to spar but the Commodore was in no fit shape. He ate in silence and grimaced at Jack's blather, then lapsed back to sleep. Jack talked long after he was snoring and made sure his handiwork on the door was sound by refilling the flask at least three times.

Then, their cage rattled and a loud voice was shouting something that Jack, still dreaming, thought was, "Avast, ye scurvy rats, wrap th' mizzen in satin and choose yer partners."

He blinked himself awake and shouted back, "Aright. Shut yer trap!"

He groaned, crawled over to Norrington and gave him a poke. "Jamie? James?" He turned back to the face framed by the bars. "Yer the bloody eejits that knocked him senseless."

"It'll be his hide if he's senseless. Get the hell up!"

The first thing Norrington did was curse. Fervently, and with words Jack would never have believed the proper Commodore to possess. He glared at Jack, then looked out of the cell, pushing himself upright with a wince and another curse.

"Cap'n wants t' take a look at you two. C'mon. An' don't try nuthin' or I'll slit yer throats."
sailor was a hulk of a man, taller than Norrington and broad as a yard.

Jack hauled the Commodore towards the door, pulling one arm draped over his shoulders. "You couldn't slit a doxy's shift, mate. C'mon Jamie."

The door creaked open and Norrington clambered up the hatch in silence, locking away fury and the necessity of escape for the moment. He nearly stumbled over the stairs and would have fallen but for Sparrow's support. Topside, he blinked into the bright sunlight, reflected from the water stretching around them. Water. Nothing but water.

Jack poked his head into everything possible and eyed the crew topside with curiosity and relief; not one was a proper pirate. They were common sailors driven to privateering, anxious to stay out of the gallows' shadow, but not anxious enough to bear the hell of serving on a merchant vessel. Jack thanked the gods. He always thanked the gods on the outside chance that there might be more than one: he had never been convinced of the Almighty's claim to sole proprietorship of the title.

He held his tongue, plastered a cheeky grin on his face and surreptitiously gave Norrington a hand. The aristocratic face was as white as the rag across his forehead.

Norrington pushed the help away where he could and grudgingly accepted what was necessary. A wary truce with the bloody pirate did not mean he needed his pity.

Captain Diarmid Hamilton was a big man, handsome and dark. A bit of a dandy if Jack was any judge of his scarlet Italian coat and Spanish buckles. His voice was thick with the mists of Donegal. "Well now, if we don't have ourselves a pair o' English searats. You," He poked at Jack with a finger the size of a Southwark sausage. "Wha's yer name?" His eyes were bluer than a summer sky and hard as ice.

Jack grinned. "Ain't English and the name's Jack."

Hamilton walked towards him, tilting a head full of black hair that was most definitely his own. Jack cursed him silently.

He was struck to the deck with a lightning blow. "A civil tongue on my ship, bucko. An' you?" He advanced on Norrington.

"My name is James, Sir." Norrington's voice dripped with as much disdain as he could muster in his state. Jack thought he was at about three quarters of his usual level, which was more than most men's. He also couldn't help but wonder if the clear, British lilt of the Commodore's voice had always been that prominent.

Norrington was grabbed by his collar and found himself staring into those bright azure eyes. "Proud 'un, huh? Well, we'll whip that pride outta you, ya heathen. Wha' ship ya hail from, sailor?"

Jack swallowed a mouthful of blood and picked himself up off the deck, gnawing on his lip, his hands clasped together to keep them still.

Norrington's eyes narrowed dangerously, his thoughts a step ahead of his anger. Every ship he had ever served on was a Navy vessel, and it was obvious that he was no tar. He let the question linger in apparent defiance while he gathered his thoughts. "The Hermes." For all its proud name, it was a small merchant vessel, whose name, but not its crew, might mean something to Hamilton.

Hamilton grinned at him. "Tha' tub! God's death, man, ye've stepped up in the world. Wot ya do on the Hermes? James?"
"Purser, Sir." The position had the advantage of anonymity, and anything else would have been implausible. Norrington was well aware how a common tar spoke and bore himself, and it was clear that he was none.

"Purser!" Hamilton laughed. "Y'hear that, lads! A Purser!" There was general uproar on deck, subsiding to a low guffaw as Jack felt Norrington stiffen, and pressed his arm. "Well, James, yer duties are gonna be keepin' me decks swabbed an' yer mouth shut, understand? And you? Ya bejangled fool, wha' in St. Peter's name are you?"

Jack was almost pissing himself in relief. The Commodore wasn't so stuck-up-the-arse not to be able to tell a decent fib when the need arose.

He pulled away from Norrington, his eyes insolent. "Navigator." He smiled and glanced downwards. "Don't know about yer decks, but yer course could use a bit o' work."

Hamilton's hand was raised, then dropped, and he squinted. "Navigator? The likes 'o you?"

Sparrow's eyes challenged him. "Almost ran inta that nasty sandbar off Santiago, didn't ya?"

Jack was talking out of his arse and he knew it, but most never bothered to update their old charts and the sandbar seemed to have grown since trade picked up these last years. He held his breath as the blue eyes bored into his.

"Right. You, wha's yer surname, James?"

"Norbury. And I know how to handle a ship beyond swabbing decks." Norrington's lips were pressed into a tight, quivering line.

"Bet you do, laddie, but ye'll have t'prove it to me. Get workin' over there an' don't stint the pumice. You." He turned back to Jack. "Yer surname?"

Jack bobbed a bow, his hands praying. "Sbarra. Spanish, y'know. Least that' wot me mam tole me."

Hamilton's eyes registered surprise. "Spanish? Good Catholic, are ya?"

Jack's eyes were innocent as a child's. "Rosary ev'ry day."

Norrington's snort drowned in his protesting hiss as he was hauled amidships, a pumice stone thrust
into his hand. Another push hit him between the shoulders and sent him reeling to his knees.

"Y'heard wot the Cap'n said. Get it spotless."

His cheeks burned with humiliation as the sailors laughed and then left him to his task, filthy, low, and fighting the urge to throw the bloody stone at the Irishman.

Hamilton watched his pale face go crimson and laughed, lashing out at Sparrow again. This time, Jack caught his wrist. "I ain't tellin' you aught."

"Wrong side o' the law? Well, yer in good comp'ny Señor Sbarra. Get yer arse over there an' help yer friend." He waited until Jack released his hand, turned, then swung around and backhanded the pirate to the deck. For one moment, Sparrow looked very small, staring up at him. "I'd shut me mouth an' pray the angels don't desert ya, Spanish."

Jack sat up, pouting, but held his tongue and went to Norrington's side meekly, dragging the stone across the deck. "Y'awright, mate?"

"Shaddup, you!"

He made a face and returned to his task for a long while, working mindlessly while his brain spun in circles and he listened to every scrap of conversation around them. "Jamie?" he whispered.

Norrington had focused on the rhythmical scratching on the deck, on the way the stone dug into his palm, anything to keep calm. The thought that Hamilton had a Letter of Marque only fuelled his anger. The man deserved a noose, just like the rest of them, not an acknowledgement of his services. "I will manage." Anger was a perfect way to clear his head and distract from the throbbing ache and he scrubbed at the wood viciously.

"You did good." Jack's voice was very low, and he, too, worked the deck as they slowly made their way to the mainmast, then around the capstan. "Talk later."

It was long after dusk and the damned deck was scrubbed clean as a maid on her wedding night, before the skinny one, Berthot by name, aimed a kick at Norrington's backside that sent him sprawling. "Awright. Done fer now. Get up and get yer eats or ye'll go hungry."

Norrington pushed himself to his feet, shoulders and knees sore. The sun had burnt down mercilessly and his nausea had returned with it, but there had been enough humiliation for one day, he thought, swaying as he waited for Sparrow to join him on his way to the galley.

Berthot and a few of the others shooed them belowdecks, where they were each given a trencher of the same thin stew and a mug of grog. Jack picked at the stew and guzzled the grog until it dripped down into his beard.

"Here now, have some manners!" was followed by, "Can't keep it clean, don't deserve it."

Jack's hands were raised, "Now listen, mates, I ain't done nothin' but a day's work. No call fer anyone not t'be thirsty, eh?" For once, charm was not working and he wrinkled his nose. Four arms held him still as Berthot brandished a razor. "Now wait a minute! I--I----oh." Jack's eyes widened.

"I believe there is no call for that," Norrington interjected quietly, a spoonful of stew lifted to his mouth. He dropped it and put one hand on Berthot's arm. "Surely, it is but his own loss if he spills his grog?"

"Shaddup." He was pushed aside as they advanced on Jack who was alternately grinning and
looking desperately for an opportunity to escape. His eyes darted back and forth, as they held him fast and pinned him to the long table, while one of them, broad and grey, rattled a brush in a shaving mug.

Jack gulped and grimaced, trying to talk with his hands restrained. He grinned hopefully. "Y'know, there really ain't a reason fer--fuck me, wottaya lost yer...hell!"

He spat lather at them, then decided that it was unwise to fight with a razor so close to his throat. His face froze, eyes only half-focused, a shadow swirling in them when they fixed on Norrington, mute and painfully aware.

Norrington took a step forward and wrestled with the sailor, trying to get hold of the shaving mug. "Enough! He hurt none of you by spilling his own grog." The only answer was laughter, a punch across his face that sent him reeling. "Stop that at once!"

There was more laughter. "Look, now we cut 'im and 'tis all your fault for wriggling!"

There were droplets of blood on Jack's face and they only fuelled Norrington's anger. "I said stop," he bellowed, but where on the Dauntless, his orders were heeded, here the broad grey man laughed, dumped the rest of the shaving lather over his head and pushed him against the bulwark. Norrington kicked and lashed out, but another pair of hands pinned him against the hard wood.

"Awww, we're jest prettyin' him up."

Berthot finished and snapped the razor closed with a pleased grin. "There, smooth as a babe. Ye can let 'im go."

Jack rolled away from them, wiping his face with one sleeve. He exhaled deeply, looked up through his hair. "You lot done?"

He stood upright, lips twisted into a wry smile. His eyes slid back to Norrington's, one moment tar-black and scared, then sly and narrowed. "Don't think I deserved that."

Norrington stared back blankly, as if to apologise that he had been unable to stop them. The two men were still holding him fast, exchanging a glance and a grin.

The broader one jerked his head and another took his place, pinioning Norrington against the bulwark. He walked over to Jack and pushed him back towards the table. "Methinks we've only jest begun with ye, matey."

He yanked at Jack's breeches, tearing them open with a whistle. "My, yer head certainly has more hair than yer arse. Looks almost like a lass'."

Jack stiffened, then struck out wildly, snapping like a beast, until he was held still by force. He stared at Norrington, paralysed, his mouth half-open and stained with blood.

Norrington struggled and shouted and twisted, near as wild as Jack, freezing when their eyes met. He had seen that look before, had seen it often, in the eyes of women, of children; of grown men. Too often. He lashed out, he screamed, he bit, as though he were the one whose thigh the big sailor was stroking.

It only earned him more laughter and another punch. "Begad, 'e fights like that one was his mate."

For a bare second, Norrington stilled, his eyes meeting Sparrow's again. That look was still there, as if etched into a gruesome statue. "He is. And I swear I will kill you if you further touch him."
Jack remembered to shut his mouth, then bit his lip, his brow knotting. He tried to absorb what he'd just heard and reacted to it within a splinter of a blink. He pulled his arm away and yanked up his breeches with one hand. "Leave me the hell alone! An' he's got a wicked jealous streak."

They let him go and he straightened with a roll of his shoulders, bare chin tilted up. "Yer just gonna make him mad." His eyes teased, lowered beneath his lashes as he forced a smile. "Ain't fer me t'give, aye?"

Two of them scowled. "But..."

Berthot shoved them away. "Ye heard 'em. 'e's spoken for."

They let go of Norrington, his arms dropping against the bulwark with a thump. He was breathing hard, confused at himself as the hard lump in his throat slowly began to fade. Clumsily, as though he were just finding his sea-legs, he walked over and pulled Jack into his arms, awkwardly gentle.

Jack shuddered at his touch, his jaw clenched, then twisted to look back at them. "Get between us an' I don't care if yer bloody Irishman's the Pope. I'll cut yer throat."

Norrington's eyes had narrowed, and this time, no one laughed at the stony glare, nor at his possessive hold around Jack.

"Awright, awright, we got it."

Jack's mouth quirked into that swift little smile, that usually disappeared under his moustache, but now lingered. He would have thought Norrington the first in line to be doing any throat-cutting at the slander, but there were those green eyes and that noble bearing, indignant and fierce. After all, even a pirate could dream.

"Jamie? Hey, y'awright?" He looked up cautiously, aware that Norrington had not loosened his grip.

"I am." Norrington dabbed at the blood with his shirtsleeve. "But what about you?" The worry in his voice was real, as was his terror at what he had witnessed.

Jack's eyes floated, huge black pupils still wild with fright. He locked one arm around Norrington, pulling himself upright and a slow smile started deep in the black depths to creep over his lips. He figured he might as well be hanged for a sheep as a goat.

He smirked, leaned up and indulged himself in a long, slow kiss, to the approbation of the would-be attackers.

"Awww g'wan then. But listen, Sbarra. If ye ever need yer bunk filled..."

Jack tore himself away and grinned, his eyes glittering. "I'll let ya know mate. Jamie? James." The repetition was a warning.

Norrington had to admit that about one thing, at least, Jack had told the truth. He was an excellent kisser, enough for the thrill of those lips on his to almost overcome their strangeness, enough for him to not jerk away and betray their lie. His hold around Jack did not falter and he glared another warning, still watching out for any sudden move, anything that indicated danger. "Come, Jack. Let us get below.

The others watched them, more than a few obscene comments drowning in laughter as they limped off to the causeway.
Jack couldn't complain. Ever since the dock, he'd wondered how it would feel to kiss a Commodore. The reality was every bit as satisfying as he'd imagined, even better with an audience. He pushed away his terror, locked it inside the intricate Chinese boxes of his mind.

Berthot pointed them to a corner with two empty hammocks, with a wink. "At least pretend ye use both, awright?"

Jack's lips pursed. "Long as ya don't look. Jamie's shy." He tugged at Norrington's collar and melted into his arms.

Norrington did not say a word and remained immobile under another kiss, terror written into his face, a different kind of terror. He sat down on his hammock, watching Jack climb into the other one as Berthot left.

Sparrow looked so young without the beard, almost like a boy who needed protection; and yes, he admitted, beautiful. The horror in those eyes had not been at all like a hardened pirate's, rather more like the innocents he had pledged to protect. Both lips and face had been so soft as they kissed him. His finger hovered over his own lips and he dropped it.

Jack's forced grin softened. "Bastards." He reached up to feel his chin, raw from the rough shave and made a face. "Y'awright?"

Norrington was bruised, one eye a bit swollen, his cheek red as though chilled. Jack grinned, then it died away, his eyes dark as treacle. Why in hell would Norrington admit to being a bugger? No one had said the word, but everyone knew what 'mate' meant belowdecks. He laughed softly, turning away in confusion. "I'm not sure wat t'say, James. This is so sudden."

Norrington stared at him for a moment, then smiled weakly. "Think nothing of it. Are you..." He looked at his boots, then up again. "Are you all right?"

"Course I am, luv." He went for his flask, gulped down a swallow and it was impossible to ignore how his hand shook as he held it out.

Norrington took it without a comment, breathing a relieved sigh as he let the sharp liquor warm his mouth. "Thank you." He took another sip and handed it back. "Cruel bastards," he hissed.

Jack pulled off his boots and settled them under his feet. "Don't leave 'em on the floor or they won't be there in the mornin'." He sat up, his head cocked to one side. "I-... How's yer head?"
Norrington shrugged. "It will heal." He tugged at his boots and settled them in the hammock, 
shoving them aside as he stretched out his legs. "Do you need anything?" he asked warily.

Jack visibly shrunk from the question, cringing like a kicked dog. He swiped at a thin streak of blood 
from his jaw to his throat. "Nah. I'm fine. Goes wif the life." His grin was painfully false.

Norrington pushed himself half-up to stare across the divide, barely a foot wide. He looked into the 
darkness as though it held answers. "What..." He stopped, frowned and sat up completely. "Do you 
mean to call this normal?"

Jack eyes refracted a thousand painful thoughts as he watched Norrington's tired face. "One day I'll 
go from this to toothless." He threw himself back, setting the hammock swinging. "Then it won't 
matter. Y'sure yer awright, Jamie?"

Norrington withdrew, pushing back the pained curiosity, the slow realisation that belowdecks, far 
more was possible and usual than even he, a seasoned Captain, had known. He lay back again, alone 
with his thoughts even in space so cramped. "Stop using that diminuitive." His voice was harsh and 
he bit his lip.

Jack drew back, watching Norrington's eyes go cold and huddled into his blanket. He ached inside 
and instinctively wanted to run deep below to the bilges where he used to go, long, long ago. It 
could have been far worse. He knew that better than his unexpected protector. "Just don't let on and 
all will be well." The words were practical, but his voice was flat.

Jack would never admit to fear, but he felt it, smelled it, knew it. Compared to his fright and the real 
threat of exposure, prickling over a nickname like an angry hedgehog seemed unnecessarily unkind. 
"Get some rest, James. We're gonna need it."

Norrington murmured his agreement and pulled the blanket around himself, staring at the crossbeam 
above him. "I am relieved it... it didn't come to the worst." He settled on his back and closed his eyes, 
relaxing in the soft, familiar rocking. "Good night."

The hammock swayed and Jack's fingers reached across the inches that divided them, barely 
brushing Norrington's hand. "Shut up an' go t'sleep."

Chapter Three
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Three
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--PG-13.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

This story has been nearly a year in the making. The original draft was written between 6/21/05 and 11/23/05. It aged (in a rum cask?) for a few months, then was tidied up and readied for your enjoyment. It is a long one and gave us many hours of enjoyment and we hope that it does the same for you. The story is complete and will be posted with occassional illustrations by elessil over the next two weeks or so. She also did the lovely banner. The painting is by Willem van der Velde. Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smifhw for her excellent beta.
Every day, Norrington woke to stiff and sore muscles, his skin burnt by the sun, palms raw from scrubbing the deck. They had been under constant supervision and not the slightest opportunity for escape had presented itself. They were out at open sea, nothing but waves and yet more waves around them, a sight he could not help but love, despite the stark reminder of his desperate situation.

The routine aboard the Chimaera was easy to understand though hard to work. For the crew, the day was split into just two watches, day and night. It was a far cry from the naval four hour watches, one that meant twelve hours of incessant labour. Norrington worked the day watch - indubitably because scrubbing the deck at night made little sense.

He quickly settled into the routine, and his habit of rising before the sun told him when it was time to begin work. He pushed himself up, sending the hammock swinging and pulled on his boots, nudging Jack.

He'd had no idea what he'd gotten himself into with the matelot lie. Sparrow was constantly sidling up to him, pressing close or sneaking a kiss. Although he remained passive, the urge to push the filthy pirate away had quite faded. It did not seem worth the fight, and that he accepted the unwanted caresses only served to illustrate their dreadful situation.

Despite the proximity, Jack remained a mystery. Norrington had little doubt that he thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to needle a Commodore of the fleet, but there also were strange acts of kindness he did not understand.

Jack seemed to have an incessant supply of rum - Norrington would not have put it past him to have a flask that never emptied, obtained from some heathen god or other - but he was quite willing to share it, and during those first days, he seemed sincerely worried about Norrington's injury, dabbing and cooling his head with wet rags as soon as they were below.
Sparrow roused reluctantly, pulling his coat-pillow over his head and groaning. He opened his eyes, sighing as a dream of the Pearl slipped away behind them. Jack could almost have enjoyed himself but for three things: the Commodore, with his pale face gone the colour of ripe beets; the thought of being trapped alone somewhere on this tub with too many eyes that slid to his face; and most of all, the Pearl, calling to him, her voice soft and insistent.

Jack Sparrow on land was the worst loafabout in the universe. He was so indolent that even old Gibbs thought it shameful, until he got shipboard. There, he was not only skilled but indefatigable. He knew most of the crew by name already, and had settled into the hard work easily enough.

It was much harder to stay alert and keep an eye on Norrington. The poor bastard was not having so simple a time of it. Unused to the relentless physical labour and long hours in the sun, Norrington was broody and silent. Jack stuck to him like a burr, for fear he'd blunder and other fears that Sparrow knew altogether too well and refused to name even in his private ruminations.

Besides, it was absolutely no fun at all to have a whole ship to play in, all alone. Jack was not happy, and found an outlet in teasing Norrington.

He was impressed by the Chimaera and the general seamanship of the crew. Hamilton was a hard taskmaster, but strangely mercurial, leaving them to the Bo'sun's charge.

There was no time to do much snooping since he spent half his time on his knees scrubbing and the other half blacking guns. Sleep fit somewhere in between, but he could still find time belowdecks to keeps his flask filled and get close to Norrington. The matelot tale was shiny gossip those first awkward days and Jack toyed with it like a mischievous kitten.

Norrington gave the hammock a good shove when Jack did not show any inclination to get out of it. "Up, dearheart. The decks aren't sparkling yet, and if they did scrub themselves, Hamilton would miss the rhythmical sound." He stretched and pushed his rebellious hair out of his face.

His palms were chafed from the constant scrubbing, burning with the omnipresent salt water. The work was dreadful and demeaning, and he began to wonder if the Purser tale had not been that good after all. He was not treated like a sailor: the shrouds were absolutely taboo for him.

Not to mention that Hamilton, a good and proper Irishman, left out no opportunity to taunt and humiliate him. He'd soon heard that Hamilton had once been an impressed Navy tar himself, and although he had not identified Norrington as an officer, it seemed reason enough for him to take the tall Englishman to task.

Jack pouted like a six-year-old. "Oh, bugger the decks. I was havin' the most wonderful dream, Jamie. You called me dearheart, me own sweetness?" He grinned suddenly and bounded to his feet.

"Obviously you are still dreaming, sea slug." Norrington did his best to take the whole matelot tale with wry humour. He thought it more than unkind of Sparrow to turn his help against him and use it to insist, where he had to know Norrington was uncomfortable. But then, the man was a pirate. Norrington had helped unconditionally and he could not expect to set any such conditions now.

Jack followed close on his heels as he went topside and tugged him towards the galley, slinging an arm around his waist. He grinned at the crewmen around the big table, cracked jokes and behaved like a genial ass, making short work of Cookie's lumpy porridge. He choked it down and nudged James to do the same: rations were not necessarily tight, but Cookie's meals were so dreadful Jack shuddered to think what they would become when the barrels got low.

No matter. He had to keep his strength and tossed the spoon into his trencher, sitting forward and
daydreaming, his chin on his hand, the smell of coffee thick in his nose.

Norrington reminded himself that once he returned to the Dauntless, he would never again criticise his Steward. At least the man could make coffee without using bilge water for it. Still, he forced it all down. He knew how a ship on half-rations ran, and had no wish to put himself on them voluntarily.

It seemed childish to glare at the porridge, so he glared into the room, at no one in particular, until he caught Wheldon's gaze, trained clearly on Jack. He remembered the shaving mug in the man's hand, the way he'd struck him, how he'd wrenched at Jack's breeches. Norrington's chin thrust up and his glare found an aim.

Wheldon returned a nasty smirk. Norrington's eyes narrowed and he slid an arm around Jack's shoulders.

Jack's head swivelled to face him, brows knotting as he caught Wheldon's glance out of the corner of one eye. He grinned back and snuggled closer to Norrington, telling himself he was only a little chilly in the dank galley.

His lips froze into a smile as his thoughts raced. James Norrington, protecting a pirate? Now that should be funny, he argued. It wasn't funny, it was damned convenient. His eyes lowered to his mug. And damned confusing.

They hadn't had a moment to speak alone for days. The pretence was wearisome enough for Jack; how much worse must it be for Norrington? Jack shook his head to clear it and drained his mug. "Best get topside, luv."

"Yes." Sitting as close as they were, Jack could feel Norrington stiffen, wincing with every laugh and lewd comment hurled in their direction. He had heard them often enough, but they didn't seem to lose their effect. At least no one could have discerned a blush on his sunburnt face.

The fresh sea air topside was invigorating, after the confines of the galley.
The Bo'sun, Jedidiah Longthorpe was a miserable man. He was as wizened as an old apple and had the temper of a dyspeptic badger, but for some obscure reason, he had taken to Jack.

Other crewmen laughed and made jokes about how losing that beard had been the best thing for 'Spanish' Jack.

Jack put on his sweetest expression and waited to be given orders, since no one had yet assigned them regular duties. "Hey, Mr. Longthorpe?" He waited until the bandy-legged man was quite close: Jedidiah was a trifle hard of hearing. "Think you can get Jamie off th' decks. He's good aloft."

Longthorpe gave him one of those long, frozen stares that made many of the crew quake, but Jack airily brushed it aside and grinned. "Might give Shadlow a run fer his money."

The Bo'sun actually smiled for a split second; a strange pulling of the multiple folds of flesh, like a hound ready to give voice. "Shaddup, Spanish. Cap'n's orders. Can ya handle a needle with them little hands? Go mend that sail an' shut yer trap."

Norrington's brows furrowed. Jack, he reminded himself, was convinced that he had no idea how to even look at a ratline properly. But it had not sounded like a plan to rile him. Had it been, the pirate would have grinned at him expectantly during the exchange. He hadn't.

Resigned, he went to his knees, scrubbing at the wood. "Perhaps the Captain would do better to give orders by ability rather than personal animosity," he growled under his breath.

Jack sighed and perched on a barrel, watching Norrington's fingers start to leave red prints on the pumice stone. His lower lip thrust out a little as he stabbed the needle through the canvas viciously.

Then he peered up and looked around the deck swiftly. Most of the day crew were either aloft, lumbering astride the yards, or below, working the pumps. "Tell ya wot, Jamie. Can you handle a sail? Get them hands clean and you finish this. I'll do the bloody deck. Yer just gonna leave a mess and Irish won't be up here until he's drunk off last night's head."

Norrington eyed him curiously, silent for a moment, fingers flexing on the pumice stone. Was this perhaps Sparrow's way of thanking him for the help, after all? Gratitude, from a pirate? He supposed it added a twisted justification for him to accept the offer, whatever the reason behind it.

He soaked his hands in the bucket of salt water, biting his lips. "Thank you."
Jack went to work on the deck, singing to himself and scrubbing away the telltale drops of blood. "Y'know, luv, if we get a bit o' free time, I could take yer boottops and fashion guards for ya." His vile cant had grown thicker over the days as he blended in with the crew and he mumbled another verse of some lewd song, then quickly shut his mouth as Longthorpe passed them.

The old man eyed Norrington with the sail, then Jack, who grinned up at him. "Daft!" he muttered under his breath, but he walked to the quarterdeck without a word.

The Chimaera gave a lurch and Jack rolled his eyes. He didn't think much of the pilot, Jensen. The big Norwegian had the eyesight of an owl at noon and, while he could follow a chart and bearings, he could barely read. He poked his head up to glance over the rail.

The horizon stretched around the shimmering waters and Jack's gaze was full of longing. He heard sharp footfalls and bolted over the Norrington. "Hsst. G'wan, get back there."

Norrington winced, but grabbed the pumice stone without complaint and knelt again, scrubbing with salt and blood, the movement of his arms by now completely without thought. "Thank you," he whispered again, then eyed a certain pair of approaching boots from the corner of his eye.

Hamilton watched the Englishman with an unpleasant smile and Jack wanted to kick him. Instead, he stood, making that funny little bow, his hands pressed together, still holding the sail that pooled around his feet. His eyes moved restlessly under his lashes.

Hamilton leaned back against the rail. "Spanish, ya done wi' tha' yet? When ya do, go aloft and check th' gaskets on the foregallant. Make sure tha' bloody sail is secure."

He looked down at Norrington, on his knees in a puddle of water, reached out one foot and overturned the bucket. "Missed somethin', I think, Jamie." He headed towards the quarterdeck, laughing.

Norrington's hand clenched on the pumice stone, small droplets of blood pearling out as he hissed a curse under his breath. How satisfying would it be to say 'That is Commodore James Norrington to you', minutes before stringing him up? He took a deep breath and sat back on his heels, his voice angry. "I can check the gaskets. That certainly makes more sense than scrubbing the deck just for the sake of it."

"You questionin' my orders, laddie?" Hamilton's eyes narrowed as he took in the straight back, head held high, Norrington's bearing as military on his knees as it was on his feet. "You sure yer not Navy, boyo?"

Norrington straightened to his full height to glare at Hamilton eye-to-eye. With a shred of consideration, he forced himself to slump, dropping his arms to the sides. But his face was drawn tight, chin lifted defiantly. "Obviously I am scrubbing the deck, and this ship does not strike me as particularly naval, Sir."

"Shut yer gob! How bloody dare you! LONGTHORPE!" Hamilton's face had gone dark, his blue eyes more mad than Jack's dark ones.

Jack sidled closer, dragging the sail with him and coiled like a spring, ready to bolt at a second's notice. "Cap'n. Finished wif this. Y'know, I know yer a mighty testy at the-----" He grimaced and backed away, bobbing a bow. "Sorry. Sorry."

Hamilton glared at him. "Get yer arse up there or I'll have yer hide. You," he turned back to Norrington, "are gonna learn t'do as yer told an' shut yer bleedin' mouth. LONGTHORPE!"
The Bo'sun made his way forward, grumbling. "Aye, sir?"

"End o' the next watch, give this bastard a dozen t'teach him his place." His lip curled into a nasty smile. "Finish that bit and start on the quarterdeck until then."

Jack opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it. His fingers touched Norrington's under cover of his sleeve.

Norrington swallowed his retort, his only disobedience a second's silence. "Aye, Sir."

He went to his knees and continued to scrub. He was stubborn, but no fool. If he was to be flogged, he would be no coward and whine about it. He knew Captains with temper, and at this point he would effect nothing by even the sanest argument.

He stifled the urge to throw the pumice stone after Hamilton and finished his work, half-dreading and half-giddy for the end of the watch.

Jack pulled himself into the rigging, watching Norrington with worried eyes. He dared not talk: Hamilton was watching them both like a hawk from the helm, so he scrambled up to the foretop and straddled the yard, one eye on his work, one on the Commodore.

At the end of the watch, Norrington wordlessly descended from the quarterdeck, reporting to Longthorpe. He looked almost indifferent, his brows arched and his lips curled into a sneer.

A grating was already rigged and, still without a word, he pulled off his shirt and leaned against it. His back was white against his arms and neck, unscarred. A faint tremor went through him, a thrill of fear and rage. He bit down on it as his fingers clenched on the grating.

The better part of the crew had assembled around the mast, some out of curiosity, some out of pleasure, others because of duty.

Jack descended with the rest and listened to the whispers around him, his face schooled to blankness, his eyes spitting black flame. One day, my fine Irish bucko, you an' ole Jack are gonna have a reckonin', he promised himself.

At least they hadn't gone through all the formal Navy blather and made Norrington fashion the cat himself. Jack eyed it with a shudder, hanging from Longthorpe's sinewy arm. Not too terrible thick, but still, he winced.

"Can we get this over with?" Norrington drawled, his head turned sideways against the grating. "I am getting a draft here." This earned him some quickly stifled laughter and an appreciative whistle from the crew.

Longthorpe moved into position and let the first blow fall, then the second.
"Put yer arm into it, Mr. Longthorpe."

Hamilton was itching to get his hands on the cat himself, but that would not be dignified, so he watched, his fists balled in his pockets, eyes gleaming as Norrington's pale flesh reddened and the welts began to overlap, drawing tiny dots of blood.

Jack screwed his eyes shut, peeked twice and glanced around at the crew. Then he slipped through them like a shadow.

Norrington made no sound but for a gasp when the force of the first blow smashed him against the grating, straightening after each only to hiss out his breath when the next fell. His cheeks burned and he counted silently.

The crack of the twelfth blow still lingered in the air when he straightened and turned. "Will that be all?" Even his bored tone could not hide his hitching breath.

"And five more fer speakin' out o'turn." Hamilton reacted to the drawl by giving into temptation and wielded the whip himself, savagely.

Jack slid beneath the quarterdeck, right into the Captain's cabin. He glanced at the maps on the table with a haughty sniff and his fingers danced over the walls and bulwarks, checking through cupboards and hidden cubbies that sprang open at his inquisitive touch. He found a small box, and listened, hearing the final blows above him. It might not be the kindest thing, to avoid watching anyone's punishment, but Jack hated floggings. And he knew an opportune moment when he saw one, even if it was at the Commodore's expense.

He dumped the contents into his waistcoat pocket, replaced the box, and was topside before anyone had even known he was missing, just in time to see James sag heavily against the grate.

He stepped forward, coaxing James towards him with fluttering hands, his dark eyes steady. "I'll take him below.

For a breathless eon, he stared Hamilton down, then the Irishman curled his lip and returned to the quarterdeck.

Jack pulled one of James' arms around his shoulder and the crew parted for them, muttering, as they headed down the hatch.

James shuddered a little and leant heavily against Jack, then straightened and pulled away his arm.
His shirt he held balled up in one hand. He did not want bloodstains on it.

"Bloody Irish bastard," he hissed under his breath. "No self-control in the least." He could feel the testament of Hamilton's temper, burning on his back where the lash had struck in blind fury over a word.

Jack eased him into the hammock. "Hush now. Lemme go beg some water from Cookie an' get you cleaned up. Jamie, Jamie! Yer terrible. Y'really need t'keep yer mouth shut. He's got a flea in his ear over you." Jack kept his voice low and went to make puppy-eyes at the old Cook. He came back with a basin of water, a few clean rags and a mug of grog. He also made a slight detour down to the brig and refilled his flask.

James did not hush. He cursed under his breath, getting louder when Jack returned. "The bloody idiot lets his temper interfere with captaining the ship. Little wonder he has to stoop to impressing crewmen," he hissed, sipping the grog with a nod of thanks and a sigh of relief. "Caning at least did not leave scars."

Jack nodded, wetting the rag and wiping away the streaks of blood, mourning every stripe that marked 'his' commodore. "Stings a lot longer though. Damn, I'm gonna slice off his bogtrottin' prick and shove it up his nose." He rinsed the rag and cursed. "Wish I had sumpthin' t'put on these." He kept his voice light, surprised that the cruel marks made him almost cross-eyed with anger. He'd seen so many floggings.

"Poor luv. Ya held up just lovely, James. Can ya not keep quiet an' do as yer told? It'll make life a lot easier, mate."

James did not answer for a while. In truth, the purpose of his second comment had been solely to provoke Hamilton, to gauge how far the man would really let himself be carried by his temper. The result boded ill. He would never have expected a flogging in retaliation for his first words. A strike, perhaps, but not this. It had been foolish, and rage boiled in him. The humiliation was the worst of it: he, an officer, to bear flogging scars. It was unthinkable.

He looked over his shoulder, managed a smile, then winced as the rag dragged over a lash mark. "I know. Much as I would like the bastard to make acquaintance with the end of his own sword, I have no wish to be keelhauled before we can make an escape."

He paused briefly. "Thank you for your assistance." Jack seemed proficient enough, as though he had seen many such wounds already, and apparently he treated even a Commodore of the Navy to the best of his ability.

There was a rustle among the hammocks and hesitantly, little Matthew approached. He looked around, then slipped his hand into his pocket, producing a small jar, which he pressed into Jack's hand with a conspiratorial grin. "Got that from the surgeon," he added with a much shier smile.

"Yer a good lad! Here, lemme take care of it. Wot's goin' on up there? Cap'n in a temper? Jack's voice was soft, hiding his relief. Hopefully, there would not be more scarring than necessary. He doused the last rag with a liberal amount of rum from his flask so quickly the boy never saw him: he was too busy gawking at Norrington in admiration.

"Yer a good lad! Here, lemme take care of it. Wot's goin' on up there? Cap'n in a temper? Jack's voice was soft, hiding his relief. Hopefully, there would not be more scarring than necessary. He doused the last rag with a liberal amount of rum from his flask so quickly the boy never saw him: he was too busy gawking at Norrington in admiration.

Matthew nodded. ",e's behind the helm and hasn't talked a word." He shrugged. ",T'll pass soon enough." He beamed as James thanked him with grand words, then shuffled his feet. ",I must be getting back." He bolted with the restless energy only children possessed, scrambling up the hatch.

He nearly collided with Berkely, a rather stout and grizzled sailor, who lumbered towards James.
"Cap'n wants ye topside again within the hour, else ye'll earn another turn o' the lash."

Jack glared over James' shoulder, his eyes fierce. "He'll be there. An' I swear, Hamilton'll learn wot a pirate's good fer. I swear it." He stopped, surprised at himself once more and pressed his hands together, his head lowered. "Apologies, mate. I'm a bit off me feed."

Berkely leered. "I'm jest relayin' his orders. Not my fault if he's in fer a night watch. But if yer lookin' fer comp'ny, Spanish..." Then he, too, was gone.

Jack exhaled and turned back to James. "Ready, luv? This'll sting some."

Norrington shrugged expressively. "Do it."

Jack turned his head and spat expressively. His hands hovered over the raw flesh, then he swiped the rum-soaked cloth over the wounds.

James gasped softly, but otherwise did not move and waited patiently for Jack to continue, silently and sometimes less silently thinking his way through all manners of curses. "I do not think scrubbing the deck in the dark will be particularly useful," he growled.

"He's doin' it fer spite, luv." Jack's hands were surprisingly gentle, smoothing the ointment on the angry weals. "I'm not hurting ya, am I?"

He unrolled the bandage and laid it across the lacerated flesh, then sat back and used that carefully-hidden little knife to slice off yet more of his shirt. It flapped about like a girl's smock when he'd finished but he had enough material to wind around James, holding the bandages in place. He handed James his shirt and suddenly leaned forward and kissed his shoulder. "You were wonderful."

He cleared his throat. "Damned impressive."

James winced. He still was not quite used to the way Jack touched and kissed, especially when he thought it completely unnecessary.

This kiss definitely was supposed to tease him. Maybe compensation for the kindness of helping him? "Thank you for your assistance. It was...unexpected."

He pulled on his shirt and hid a grin at the sight of Jack's scowl. "It takes more than a flogging to bring me drown," he said stiffly.

"Don't I just know it! Y've got real sand." Jack turned away, hiding the sudden hurt in his eyes. "You'd do best t'lie down and get a bit of shut-eye." He threw himself into his hammock and nursed his wounded feelings with the flask, reaching across the small space to hand it to Norrington.

James sipped from the flask, tried to lie back and twitched. This would not work. Gingerly, he rolled onto his side, wincing again as the slump of the hammock pressed against his back, straining the cuts. He shuffled for ten minutes, then, with a stifled sigh, climbed out and let himself slump to the floor, stretching out on his stomach.

Jack pouted into his flask for three minutes, then crawled out and sat down, lifting Norrington's head into his lap, idly playing with his hair. He, who always had enough words at his command for a Parliamentary speech, was silent. Anger had faded to concern and he felt sad and alone. He wondered what shore the Pearl was approaching and if she missed him as much as he ached inside for her.
He parted a lock and began to braid it. His hands, those perpetual motion machines, always needing something to busy themselves with, worked deftly. He wound a few strands around the braid and slid them through to secure it. "Promise me you'll not do anythin' stupid, willya?" His voice was a whisper.

James had moved his hands to push himself out of Sparrow's lap, but truth be told, he was too exhausted to worry overmuch about the pirate's motives. The gesture seemed kind enough. And it was comfortable, better than the hard wood at least. "I won't. For now, he is in the better tactical position."

Soon, he was half-asleep, dozing for a scant hour. Jack nudged him when Berthot turned the hourglass, fixed next to one of the lanterns in their hold. He wrenched himself awake, blinked, and chuckled grimly.

Jack watched him straighten up with a little shake as he headed topside with a sigh. It was going to be a lonely night and he shoved a thrill of fear away brusquely.

The whole crew had witnessed or heard of the flogging, and secretly, most agreed that seventeen lashes for the two sentences had been a harsh judgement. They watched Norrington appear topside with pity and veiled admiration.

Norrington only reacted with a solemn nod and went straight to Longthorpe, eyeing the blood-stained pumice stone with a frown.

Longthorpe set him to polishing the brass of the capstan by lanternlight. It was an innocuous task and would not strain his back as much as the useless deck-swabbing. "When yer done, go afore an' there be a pile o' ropes. Pick 'em apart. The old eyes were sharp, then gentled a little. "I'll have someone up here t'relieve ya prompt-like."

Norrington smiled weakly. "Aye, Sir."

The crew was not bad at all. They were capable sailors. Sailors. Men like those who had served under him, not all the best, but certainly not the worst, either. He was unused to a life like this, but the one thing that really made him bristle was Hamilton's captaincy.

His thoughts were elsewhere, leagues away in Port Royal, sometimes slipping back to England, to the first ship he had served on and his first miserable days as a midshipman.

The capstan gleamed when he was done and he quickly made his way to the bow, sitting down on one of the rope coils while working on the other.

Methodically, he picked apart the thin threads, hardened by salt and weather, splitting them into those that could be spliced into new lines and those that had little future other than as baggywrinkle.

It was an easy task and required little of his attention. He'd had so little time to think since being stranded aboard this ship, always caught between hard work and sheer exhaustion, never alone. Now he was as alone as a man on a ship with a crew of nearly a hundred could be, surrounded by nothing but the ocean.

This night, what he saw were not the bodies of men, but the moonlight on the waves. Again, he realised painfully that the beautiful picture meant they were far from any civilised port, and the chance for escape on open sea was nil. He was stuck here, with a Captain who did his best to inconvenience and humiliate him, and a pirate as his only ally and pretend matelot.

Jack had been taking more and more liberties with him, groping and touching as he pleased. It was
unnerving, to say the least, this pretended intimacy, and Jack took it rather too far, but it was better than the alternative. He still remembered that first evening, and he was not blind to the looks in the hold.

It was shocking to see just how little of a secret was made of it. For God's sake, sodomy was a hanging offence, not a laughing matter for the whole crew. Yet all they did was wolf-whistle and make lewd remarks.

He began to hum softly as he worked, the regular plucking and threading calming. His back burned worse than it had directly after the flogging, but he ignored it and was relieved that at least time passed quickly, the pitch darkness of the night melding into a dim grey-blue.

Jack closed his eyes and stretched out in his hammock, where he'd been lying, hunched into a ball of pretend-slumber and holding his breath every time he heard voices. Finally, he relaxed and listened to the small sounds all around him, thinking of James, then of the Pearl and he rolled over, staring at the black space with liquid eyes.

He settled into a restless sleep, missing James' soft breathing beside him and dreamed of a cat with nine tails, spitting and hissing at mermaids with only one tail and green eyes.

The sun was already creeping over the horizon when the ship's bell rang James' relief. He stretched with a sigh, casting a glance over the blue and gold waves, glimmering in the morning light. He drew in a deep breath and leaned against the rail. The air was still cool, not yet heated by the merciless sun.

A yawn shook him and he moved towards the hatch, but found his path blocked by Hamilton.

"Captain." He was simply too tired to argue a lost cause and only wanted to go past and to his hammock.

"Well now, ya did such a fine job here, I'm thinkin' a strong man like you can easily take his day's watch as well," Hamilton drawled, his brogue thicker than a fog. "Go afore an' help Berthot wi' th' caulkin'." He grinned, watching Norrington's eyes.

They glared and spat green fire, speaking every curse he did not say aloud. His hand curled into a fist, then uncurled, mouth parting. He closed it again, took a deep breath. "Three watches after one another?"

Hamilton's grin widened like a shark's. "Gonna question my orders again, Norbury? Get movin'."

Norrington blinked and stared, pure spite in his eyes; defiance and pride warring with more sensible notions. "May I at least get breakfast first, Sir?" He had skipped supper after the flogging, and only the appeal of his hammock was greater than that of the galley.

Hamilton squinted at him. "Still got that stiff neck, doncha? Go get some grub an' be quick about it."

"Aye, Sir." Norrington hid his surprise. He had considered his question another lost cause. He quickly went below, wolfing down more of the sticky porridge.

Jack bounced up on deck for his watch, grimacing when Longthorpe pointed him to another pile of canvas. "How many bloody sails d'ya tear up on this tub?" he complained to no one in particular.

The Bo'sun shook his head and swallowed a smile. "Watch that mouth o'ynourn, lad."

Jack pouted at him and settled down with his sail. "Can't help it if I feel like a bleedin' granny. Hey, Bo'sun? Where'bouts are we? Looks awful northerly for a crossin'," Longthorpe gave him a swat
and walked to the quarterdeck, smiling.

It was past noon when Jack finished his tedious repairs. He went to find the old tar for a new task and saw James, his raw fingers covered in tar, the sun blazing down on his sweat-drenched face, stuffing oakum into the crevices between the planks. "Wot in hell? James, wot are you doin'?"

James looked up from his task, his eyes bloodshot and circled. Berthot continued and ignored them as much as he could. James smiled too wide, like an angry shark. "Caulking, Jack. That much should be obvious even to you."

"Shite!" Jack could be perversely eloquent. "Bertie, can't you give him a bit of a breather. He was up here all night." His tone was impossibly coaxing and James couldn't help thinking momentarily of Elizabeth trying to wheedle some geegaw out of her father.

Berthot shook his head. "Cap'n's orders."

"Bloody hell, that--" Jack stopped himself just in time as Hamilton strode past them, then stopped. "Why're you loafin' around my deck, Spanish?"

Jack's face quirked as he turned on his infamous charm. "Lookin' fer Bo'sun. I finished with yer little sails. Sir." He swayed towards Hamilton, his smile ingratiating. "Y'know, yer a lot further north than y'should be, beggin' yer pardon, of course."

Hamilton's face started to darken and Jack backed away, his hands pressed together. "Sorry. Sir."

"Go down t'the Great Cabin an' wait fer me." Hamilton wheeled around, his coattails swishing so close to James' face he could feel the breeze. "Very nice, Mr. Norbury. Keep it up."

Norrington's fist tightened on the oakum, black tar seeping out of the twisted hemp, but again he said nothing. Pride was only foolish when it goaded foolish actions. He repeated that sentence of his childhood tutor until he thought he would get dizzy from it. The urge to stuff the oakum into Hamilton's mouth did not fade.

Berthot, when it came down to it, was a good sailor and a kind comrade. When Norrington's hands slipped and exhaustion caused a mistake, he said nothing, only helped to press the tarred threads into the seam between the planks, manoeuvring James to kneel in the shadow of the rail.

Jack dragged his feet and looked back at James so often that Longthorpe, who had eyes in the back of his head, gave him a lick with his quirt. His heavy brows lowered. "G'wan. Don't keep the Cap'n waitin'."

Berthot looked up and offered a wink. Satisfied that James was in good hands and not about to do anything stupid, he made his way to the Great Cabin, immediately drawn to the charts on the table. He glanced them over, stifling a laugh just as Hamilton slammed the door.

"An' wha d'ya think yer doin' challengin' me course on me own deck, ya wee bastard?"

Jack mustered his sweetest smile. "Sorry. So sorry, I jus' thought, you being such a fine seaman an' all, that you'd know."

Hamilton watched him cautiously. There was something that rang a bell in those big dark eyes, still smudged with some heathen paint; something that niggled at the back of his mind. He shifted to one hip. "Spit it out, sailor."
Jack smiled, frowned and backed away a step. "Not to be castin' aspersions on yer course, but there's a lovely little current that could speed you by near a week and take ya right to Dakar."

Hamilton sneered. "An I'm supposed t'believe you, ya scrawny sidhe?" He stopped, the blue eyes appraising. "Yer a pirate, y'say."

Jack knew a trap when he saw one. "Sometimes. Mostly freeboatin' round the islands. Sir." He thanked all the gods for the ability to keep a straight face. "Runnin' cane and rum."

Hamilton laughed. "And blacks, I'm sure. Alright, boyo. Show me yer current."

Jack leaned over the chart and pointed to an area a good few leagues south of the plotted course. "If ya haul south now, ye'll lose half-a-day, no more. The current's 'bout here." He pointed. "It'll more than make up for time."

One grimy finger traced a more accurate version of Africa's coast.

Hamilton raised an eyebrow. "Somethin' wrong wi' me maps, Spanish?"

Jack grinned. "Just my professional opinion, of course, sir. Never mind me, you're givin the orders." The Sparrow idea of remaining servile did not extend so far as to not poke gently. The map was probably older than he and Norrington put together and woefully inaccurate. Much as he would love to see the Chimaera and her captain run aground or get tossed into one of those mad whirlpool currents, he had no intention of going down with her. "There be a few crosstcurrents missin'. An' a few sandbars."

The niggling suspicion made Hamilton's eyes narrow. "Show me." He shoved a pencil at Jack, who immediately marked out the proper coastline, including a few islands that had inexplicably been lost for sixty years, with a firm hand.

"Yer maps are dog's years old, mate...I mean, sir."

Quickly, Jack plotted out his proposed course change, adding the current lines. "It's no good durin' storm season, but now...y' see."

They were bent over the map together when Longthorpe knocked. Hamilton straightened, pushing his dark hair out of his face. "Yes, Bo'sun?"

"Watch change soon, Sir. Any orders?"

Jack pretended to ignore their conversation, scribbling a small ship in the shallows off the Cape.

"Spanish, you take th' helm and prove t'me yer a pilot. I'll be up directly."

Jack all but whooped in triumph and bobbed a bow. "Thank you, thank you so much, really thank you. Sir." He lingered outside the door for a moment to listen, then hurried to the quarterdeck.

Norrington had just risen and stretched the kinks out of his legs when Jack came out of the large double doors, his grin so wide that Norrington thought he could see the gold teeth gleaming from the bow. Jack strode to take the helm as though the ship was his, Hamilton right next to him.

Apparently, Jack was getting quite comfortable with their captor or captain. A true opportunist, so what was unexpected? Norrington's eyes narrowed and he stared at the quarterdeck, the figures on it easily recognisable despite the distance. Had he really expected any sort of loyalty only because of Jack's occasional acts of kindness? Foolish, far more foolish than his pride.
He remained unmoving until Berthot punched his arm. "Stop staring, Jem, it's time t'get some grub. Hope Cook's something other than that gruesome stew from yesterday."

Norrington snapped to attention and nodded. He was more tired than hungry, but his hammock would wait for a little longer, the galley would not. "Let's go then."

The last thing he saw on the quarterdeck was Jack at the helm, Hamilton's arm draped around his shoulders as he yelled orders and the Chimaera turned and began to pick up the winds, heading south.

Berthot laughed as Norrington almost jumped down the hatch. "Jack was right about yer jealous streak, wasn't he?"

Norrington answered only with a frown and dug into his stew, crumbling the ship's biscuit in his fist. "He can whore his way right into the captain's bed for all that I care." His glare was darker than the rings around his eyes. It wasn't jealousy. It was simply the distinct feeling of betrayal, and the knowledge he could not expect anything from a pirate did nothing to help.

Bertie continued to tease him gently, not letting up until he received a reluctant smile in response to his imitation of Hamilton instead of a stony glare.

Jack was beyond elated. He was in heaven. The Chimaera was not his beautiful Pearl, of course, but she was a fair ship, and his fingers quickly got the feel of her. As she cut through the waters with a lovely wake trailing, he congratulated himself on a particularly audacious piece of skullduggery. There wasn't much truly wrong with Hamilton's course, but the maps had been so bad that all it took was a little shift of latitude to make Hamilton really believe he was seeing a new navigation route.

And all Jack had to do was keep to the original course, memorised in a heartbeat, loop around a bit and he had virtual control of the ship. He had to admit that he really was the best pirate anyone had ever seen.

He grinned and hid his disappointment when Hamilton shooed him away to get his supper and an extra ration of rum. That was enough incentive to make him bolt down to the galley.

Norrington stopped mid-sentence and glared at the galley door, his gaze quickly followed by Berthot, who grinned and gave him a shove. "C'mon, get yer mate a drink." Norrington's eyes blazed once more, then he quickly tossed back the rest of his grog.

"Well, well, if it ain't our Spanish pilot! Yer gonna get some grief from Jensen, lad."

Jack laughed and dug into his trencher with an appetite. "Ain't Jensen's fault the bloody charts were made fer his granda.'" He squeezed a little closer to James and winked.

Had he listened any closer instead of preening under the attention, he would have heard how James' breath turned into a hiss, and how his hand clenched into a fist.

Berthot looked like a dog hearing a particularly high-pitched whistle. "You can read?"

Jack's lashes fluttered. "Ain't I just full of surprises?" Berkely set the rum in front of him and he pushed it towards James with one finger. "G'wan luv. 'Tis half yours, after all." His hand stole under the table to stroke James' leg and he leaned closer.

There was a rumble of laughter around the table.

"Give 'im a kiss, Jack!"
He looked sidelong at James, blinking at his angry look and refrained from the kiss. He did, however, manage to slide one hand up a thigh and squeeze.

That earned him a resounding slap, a handprint of tar on his cheek. James stared at his palm, eyes wide for a moment, then narrowing again. Jack taunting him with the stupid matelot tale was the last straw. That tale served to help the bloody pirate, and now he twisted it into further humiliation, as though to complete the victory of rising in Hamilton's favours.

James grabbed the mug and poured half its contents on the deck. "I am not thirsty," he hissed and pushed his way past the assembled crowd, down to their quarters.

Jack rolled his eyes and stared after him, one hand against his cheek. "Don't think I deserved that!"

The entire table resounded with roars of laughter. "Havin' trouble there, Jack?"

"Go on an' get 'im, boy."

That made him stiffen.

Berkely took the space on the bench that Norrington had vacated and clanked his mug against Jack's. "Yer mate is a testy one, ain't he?"

Jack was bemused. He'd managed to get a tenuous thread of control; he'd seen the charts and knew that, game or no game, those maps would never carry the Chimaera safely around the cape. He was relieved and preening and wanted to share it, not be walloped in the face. "Aye, he is. Bit too much sun on that skin of his." He rubbed his cheek. "An' don't he just have an arm."

Berkely lifted his arm and rubbed at the tar and blood with the end of his sleeve, which was almost as dirty. "Ye shouldn't let him do that. He's just jealous. Let 'im sulk alone."

Jack's whole face pouted, from the droop of his lips to the tip of his nose. "He's got a temper, that's certain." He toyed with the rum, then handed it to Berkely. When he looked back up, he made himself grin. "You kiddin'? He'll go barmy. Here, you take this. I'd better check on him."

Jack sometimes knew when he was being seductive. Sometimes he didn't and it just happened. As far as he knew, he was just being friendly and besides, it was a good angle. He liked people being enchanted with him. It felt good.

He winked and clapped Berkely on the shoulder and wandered off to find James.

Berkely looked after him with a frown, but whatever he said was drowned by the cheers and taunts from the rest of the crew. "Going down to get more, Jack?"

"Maybe he'll hit th' other cheeks this time!" Wide hands slapped against his back, followed by cheers of encouragement.

Norrington had unsuccessfully tried to curl into his hammock. He'd given up barely a minute before Jack came below, and was stretched out on the deck. His coat served as a pillow.

Jack sat down beside him, cross-legged. "James, wot was that for? I tried t'get you outta the caulkin'. I really did." For the second time that day his voice had that coaxing tone, like a child begging for sweets.

Norrington turned his head, green eyes narrowed. "By getting well acquainted with dear Captain Hamilton? How long did you have to bat your eyelashes to be allowed to take the helm? He certainly
appeared very vulnerable to your charms."

Jack’s mouth hung open. James was jealous? At least that was what his vanity told him. His eyes narrowed. "We were too far north. And the maps, oh Lord, James, you would laugh y'self silly. Must be sixty years old at the least. Anyway, what was it that Italian bugger said? Keep your friends close, yer enemies closer?" He slid a little closer on his backside. "Jamie, I've got us access to the course. Why are you so blasted angry?" His eyes were dark and wounded.

"Machiavelli," James supplied reflexively, then his voice turned harsh again. "Very convenient if it also gives you the position you wanted ever since we came aboard," he snapped. "And I can see how you cared a whit about my discomfort. After all, you have only been out to humiliate and ridicule me in front of the crew at every opportunity, or did you think I enjoy being publicly groped? You have gone too far."

It was strange, how he had almost begun to think differently of Jack, as more than a dishonest pirate, only to then be disappointed at the blatant selfishness. He had let himself be fooled by the small acts of kindness, likely given for some purpose James simply had not yet divined.

"Oh. That." Jack smiled. "Sorry. It's just such a nice..." He tried to stop his mouth before it earned him another slap. "Listen, luv. The more I can get into Hamilton's good graces, the better I can make things for us both. Yer bein' awfully stuffy."

Alas, Jack's runaway mouth was not going to be stopped. "And I'm not tryin' to humiliate you. We're supposed to be pair. And," Jack had the grace to muster a small blush. "You've got very nice legs." He shifted back, his face screwed up ridiculously, waiting for the slap.

Norrington did not move or lift his hand. His eyes said enough. "Then grope Hamilton. It will certainly raise you further in his good graces," he hissed. "And for something you are not even trying, you are doing a bloody excellent job at it." He did not believe a single word. Not even bloody Sparrow could be so ignorant as not to realise that any gentleman had to be appalled at this behaviour, openly between two men, no less.

It was not that Norrington had never touched a man in such a way, though he'd certainly not done so with the explicit intent that someone would witness it. Jack, on the other hand, seemed particularly eager for an audience.

The pirate swallowed hard, gnawing on his lip. "I don't want t'go groping Hamilton. I'd sooner pitch him overboard."

He had a terrible thought: perhaps James honestly did not realise what the state entailed. Odd, for an officer who had spent so many years chasing pirates. His eyes had gone still and distant again. "James, do you know what matelots are?" His mouth drooped, sulky and soft as he scowled.

"It's a thin veneer of respectability for sodomite pairs aboard lawless vessels." Norrington rolled to his side and pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders. He looked up at Sparrow, his brows narrowing.

"It's more than that. It's halvsies on ev'rything. It's watching one another's backs. It's safety."

His jaw clenched, his cheeks deep in shadow. "You stand on yer bloody dignity. Hope it gives you good dreams." Jack uncurled to his feet and stomped away to sneak down to the hold for another refill for solace.
When he came back, James was fast asleep. He looked so worn, his face sunburnt, his nose peeling. He’d lost flesh and there were dark circles under the long lashes.

Jack wedged himself against the bulwark and his hands hovered over the sleeping Commodore, then gently lifted his head onto his own lap, smoothing the tangles out of the chestnut hair and drinking until the flask was empty and he, too, slept.

Chapter Four
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Four
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--X.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

This story has been nearly a year in the making. The original draft was written between 6/21/05 and 11/23/05. It aged (in a rum cask?) for a few months, then was tidied up and readied for your enjoyment. It is a long one and gave us many hours of enjoyment and we hope that it does the same for you. The story is complete and will be posted with occasional illustrations by elessil over the next two weeks or so. She also did the lovely banner. The painting is by Willem van der Velde. Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smifnw for her excellent beta.
The bustling of the crew woke Norrington. Something was in his face. It was warm, covered by linen and it wriggled. Even sleep-slow, he realised it was an arse and he had little doubt as to its owner.

Jack had toppled over during the night and was nestled comfortably against James' hip, snoring softly. Norrington pushed himself up with a start, flinching in pain.

He stared. How dared the bloody pirate? With a surge of annoyance, he hauled the sleeping figure over his lap, slapping the offending buttocks several times.

A punishment for a naughty child, and as far as he was concerned, Jack acted just like one. No, worse. Even little Matthew had more restraint.

Jack yelped and kicked and yawned mid-bellow. "Hey! Wot the bloody hell d'ya think yer doin', mate!" James shoved him away, and he sat up, blinking sleepily.

Norrington glared. Again. "Do not present me with your arsecheeks if you can't handle a slap to them. " He got to his feet and smoothed his shirt, dropping the blanket back in the hammock and pulling on his boots without a further word.

"Told ya he'd go for th'other cheeks!" The rest of the crew in the hold laughed.

Jack glared up at him. "Only sat down so you wouldn't have th' bloody deck fer a pillow." He bit back the words, 'you Navy bastard' with difficulty and spun around to sit, his back to Norrington, spending several minutes pulling his fingers through his hair, like a cat grooming itself to indicate extreme displeasure at the company.

He sulked all the way through breakfast and, for once, responded to the giggles and outright laughter
that greeted him on deck with a snarl.

Longthorpe set him to handling the helm, which helped to lift his mood. The currents were fast and tricky, and by mid-afternoon, he and the Chimaera were good friends. It almost took the sting from such a rude and undeserved awakening.

His eyes drifted to where James toiled with more caulking and polishing, assiduously ignoring him. Even Hamilton caught the tension between them and had a good chuckle over his luncheon.

Norrington was all over the ship, working hard and joking around with Berthot. His mood was dark and he only forced the laughter because he was glad of the kind gestures and had no wish to reward them with ingratitude.

It seemed ironic enough that the flogging had raised his esteem amongst the crew. He earned several slaps on the back, until one made him gasp and Berkely guiltily realised that slapping a flogged man on the back was not an apt way to show appreciation.

The time passed quickly enough, and down in the galley, he got closer acquainted with crewmen he’d known only by name before, learned of their families, how they’d joined up with the crew.

It was interesting that Jeremy Shadlow, a lanky trickster who always found a reason to laugh, had been impressed as well, but he had taken it with his characteristic shrug and considered it good luck, as he had been looking for a berth anyway.

The days flew for both men, locked into the unremitting labour that any ship required. Jack’s watches were divided between the helm and aloft while James still worked the decks. They had little time to talk and James wasn’t speaking to Jack anyway.

Jack went ahead with his addled plans, cosying up to Hamilton and pilfering more rum. He knew almost every nook and crevice on the Chimaera by now and used those hidey-holes to drown his frustration when he felt out of sorts with the galley laughter.

His luck held, and he was content to do his work and drop into his hammock at night, hoping he could let himself sleep without starting at every sound. He missed the shared secret with James and the clear protection their lie afforded.

In truth, Jack’s feelings were hurt. He could not understand why James was suddenly on his high horse and, much as he laughed with the jokes—the spanking and spat provided uproarious gossip for days—he sulked. And when Jack sulked, he drank.

It was fortunate for him that he always moved and spoke like an inebriated madman, so no one noticed. Hamilton did not stint his men their grog or rum rations, but he would not tolerate drunkenness on watch. If he had ever guessed how much of Jack’s ‘act’ was no act at all, the pirate would have found himself facing the grate and one hundred lashes.

It was almost strange to see how Norrington blended into the crew. With each passing day, the skin on his face and arms darkened further to bronze instead of the glaring red that marked a body not accustomed to the sun.

The men became used to his stiff demeanour, the pride he kept up even while working the most demeaning tasks aboard by order of the Captain. Their suspicious glares faded into gentle teasing and even admiration.

In moments of unconditional honesty, he had to admit that it was envy which kept his anger at Jack alive. The pirate could slouch against the helm, scramble aloft and crow the most outrageous
comments without consequences, looking quite thoroughly content throughout it all.

It irked him to scrub a deck that was far too clean when he knew he was capable of far more.

The journey stretched and he was resigned to having to work until they reached port if he wanted to survive. It was easier now than in those first days, no longer so draining that he would collapse with exhaustion at the end of a day.

He teased and joked during supper, even laughing at some of the rudest comments, slipping in his own without a blush. He’d witnessed that as a Midshipman, but the proud officer had grown distant from it; had almost forgotten what sharing a meal with a friend and without pretences meant.

He did miss conversation with Jack. The pirate, he’d realised, despite his demeanour, had a sharp wit and was entertaining for the most part. Jack knew enough about navigation, tactics, politics, and any number of topics that, if he only wanted to, he could follow a more complicated subject easily.

Certainly, Bertie was a fine sailor, but James was more than once disappointed by his blank look when he ventured a topic that went beyond a tar’s daily life.

But every time he even considered breaking the terse silence, Jack seemed to sway particularly close to Hamilton, laughing with the bastard as though he were a friend.

Still, it was not bad to share the table with other sailors and little Matthew who continued to tease tales about long sea voyages out of him. The boy was the only one who seemed to see the sailor in the man working more often on his knees than anything else, and Norrington enjoyed that.
It made him stay in the galley for longer than it took to wolf down his supper, spending the scant hours between work and sleep in talking. This evening was no exception, and he told of his first rounding of the Cape until Matthew's curiosity yielded to an enormous yawn. The boy blushed deep-red, earning roaring laughter before he was chased away to sleep.

Not much later Norrington stretched and made for his own hammock. The next day would mean more work.

Jack picked at his meal, pushing something that pretended to be a potato around the trencher, listless and thoroughly miserable. He had kept well clear of James and sat a discreet distance from Berkeley. He was just finishing his grog when Wheldon wedged himself between them.

Jack’s teeth clenched and he forced a grin, even as his eyes flashed upwards, black and fearful. Against their depths and the painted lids, the whites fluttered like caged birds. He shoved the trencher away and got up from the bench, ostensibly to go topside for a piss.

He slipped once more to the brig and 'his' cask, wishing to God he could just sleep under the bunghole. His heart was racing and he weighed his options, eyes screwed shut. Without James' protection, he was liable to have to make a devil's bargain if he wanted to stay in one piece until Dakar.

Twitchy and jumping at every sound, he dragged himself back to his quarters and was leaning against the bulwark, glowering at nothing. He kept up his own string of stories and jokes, sang with the crew and was, by all accounts, a favourite among them already. Jack grimaced. Too much of a favourite.

But the dirty stories, whispered where the boy might be spared the gory details that made them roar with laughter had reminded him that it had been far too long since that part of his anatomy had received any proper attention. Fear and neglect had built up a powerful need for a bit of private relief. He tossed himself into his hammock, undid the buttons of his breeches and let his fingers wander to his deprived prick.

It was quiet and dark, the single lantern's candle already down to a nub and he had just found a lovely, slow rhythm, his head tipped back, eyes closed and lips parted. He made no noise save the rustling of his busy hand and the soft huff of his breath.
As Norrington pushed past, with every intention to wordlessly head for his hammock, he froze, staring. Was Jack ill? His eyes were closed, his brow gleamed with sweat, breath shallow and fast.

Norrington frowned, looked closer and then noticed the rhythmically moving hand stroking the very erect prick. He jumped back. "For God's sake! I really didn't need to see that," he hissed, quickly climbing into his hammock, turning his face away to hide the embarrassed flush.

Jack's hand stopped mid-pull, his eyes wide open to glare. "You bastard!" he hissed. He gave his prick a tug, but the spark was gone, and he was sure to make a mess of his britches by morning, being so rudely interrupted. Grumbling under his breath, he yanked them off and stuffed them under his boots. There was absolutely no earthly way he could find any relief under Norrington's disapproving eyes. He sighed.

Perhaps if he stayed awake long enough, he'd have time. The much-shortened shirt hid nothing from the deep curve of his waist down to his bare feet as he rolled over, his back to James.

There was a long moment of silence before Norrington rolled over and sat up, determined to apologise. After all, he was no prude, and Sparrow could do whatever he wanted.

The very nude body made him choke on his words. He stared for a moment, then caught himself and quickly looked at his own toes.

Needs were one thing, but did Jack really have to satisfy his desire thus, in a hold with fifteen men no less? "Can't you do that when you're alone?"

Jack rolled over and one dark eye glowered over the edge of the hammock. "And just when d'ya think anyone gets a chance t'be alone shipboard?" He was so frustrated the next words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. "Bloody officer."

Fortunately, it was muffled in the canvas and came out as a low murmur, slurred and almost indistinguishable except to James.

It had its effect, making Norrington tense and listen for a few seconds. When no outraged whispers seemed to follow, he sat up, nearly capsizing the hammock. He glanced around the hold, about to point out that the others seemed to manage just nicely, when he saw not only one, but two hands down their owners' breeches. And that movement beneath Berthot's blanket looked decidedly suspicious, too.

He thought of all the effort he'd gone through as a Midshipman to hide any such lewd behaviour and groaned. "What a den of depravity is this? Is the concept of self control completely disregarded?"

"Don't be such a prig! Gotta get it off somehow. And you're not helpin' matters. If ya gotta talk, talk dirty or shut the hell up!" Jack's lean body was dark gold in the dim light, the offending part of him soft once more, but rose red against the black curls between his legs.

Whispers from further down the line of hammocks proved his point. Shadlow, until Jack's arrival the prettiest man aboard, had descended from his own berth one deck above and was locked in a sweaty embrace with tall Davey Jackson.

Norrington coloured dark red and rolled over to face the bulwark. "All right. Do what you must," he growled. That his own prick was stirring in his breeches, a lot less shocked and a lot more interested in the half-naked body next to him and the goings-on in the hold, did not help his mood in the least. "Good night."

Jack sighed and stared at the way the tall body, shrouded like a mummy in the blanket, made the
hammock sag. Damned stubborn full-of-himself arrogant bloody aristocratic lapdog! But the outline of that hip, the long line of the legs held his gaze.

Jack's prick had leapt to attention in the space of time it took him to consider their lie and wonder what the reality could be like. His fingers danced down again, and this time, he was not interrupted. He didn't think to consider the close hold, the smell of sweat and salt, his own fears. He did consider green eyes most carefully as his fingers slid over his prick and he gasped, spurting hard over his hand and belly.

He yawned contentedly, rolled onto his side once more and was asleep within seconds.

Never before in his life had Norrington considered praying for sleep. Lying awake, hearing every soft hitch of breath, his prick twitching at each, he did. By the time Jack gasped his completion, he was fully erect, cheeks burning with shame.

It was over now. Surely, he only needed to consider their miserable situation to...There was another rustle. He looked up just in time to see Shadlow climb into another hammock, a soft, constant groaning starting up after only a few moments.

He stifled a whimper. How was he supposed to sleep like this? In his current state, he would startle at a blink.

With a huff of breath, he rolled onto his back and slipped his own hand down. He did not dare shove the blanket aside. Better to soil it than be seen.

He was silent as his hand moved, cheeks flushed with embarrassment and excitement, eyes fluttering open and closed, as if to convince himself that the hold remained dark. His head twisted a little on his small pillow and his gaze fell on Jack, peacefully asleep.

He truly was pretty without that beard. It made him seem young somehow, and misleadingly helpless.

His lips were slightly parted and James' gaze remained fixed on them before dropping lower with a sigh. He twisted his head until he could see the lanternlight catch in the droplets on the lean belly, the sated prick nestled in the black curls.

He finished with a stifled moan, wiping his hand in the corner of the blanket, and pulled up his breeches.

He half-expected laughter to start up around him, to see Sparrow point and mock, but it remained silent, if one discounted the ongoing sounds of pleasure. He managed to ignore them and fell asleep.

Jack rolled himself out of the hammock onto the floor, his head thick and his mouth feeling like a cavern full of mud. He groaned, pulled on his breeches and glared at his boots. The hell with 'em. No one would pinch them now. He stowed them under his coat and took the opportunity of the snoring quiet to dig into his pocket.

He used Berthot's razor to shave, working up a faint lather with a sliver of soap next to the basin of dirty water, then, peering at his reflection in a shard of mirror, repainted his eyes. He settled his scarf and looked back towards James, still sleeping, his newly-browned face soft and his lip lifted. Jack was not looking forward to another day of chilly silence and trudged up to the galley for breakfast.

Berkely had watched him with interest and fell into step behind him, crowding just a hair too close. "Yer mate still sulkin' and leaving yer bunk cold?" His mouth widened into a knowing grin. "Noticed ye were feelin' rather lonely last night."
Jack smiled over his shoulder. "Ah, he'll get over it." Right, he thought. On the twelfth of never. His eyes met Berkely's green ones, but they weren't the right green eyes. He missed his beard and moustache now, painfully aware of the light in those eyes and let his own drop in a flutter of lashes and paint.

Berkely's hand dropped lower and stroked the curve of his buttocks. "Well, if ye want moren' yer hand fer comp'ny, my hammock ain't far from yours." He winked.

Jack's lips curled into one of his enigmatic half-smiles. He arched a brow and winked back, the kohl leaving a feathery fringe beneath his eyes. "Don't think Jamie'd like that much." He paused, feeling the weight of the hand against his backside and the eternal scales of his mind weighed matters. When he looked up, his glance was teasing. "But..." He left the sentence unfinished and collected his porridge. "Maybe," he whispered with all the delicacy of a French courtesan.

Berkely grinned and gave Jack another pat before he took his trencher to the table. "'Y'know where to find me, Spanish." He sat down and ate heartily, keeping the distance between himself and the object of his affection, lest Norbury start another round of fireworks.

It was only moments later that Norrington entered the galley, eyes darting around nervously. He got his own porridge and slowly approached the empty seat opposite Jack.

Jack did not look at him, but obviously not out of anger. No, the dark eyes were constantly moving, following Wheldon who came closer and eventually sat down beside him.

Jack grinned, but it faltered, those long lashes fluttering as he moved closer to Berkely. It was barely visible, more like a shifting of weight, as though he readied himself to flee.

James flinched as if struck. *It's watching one another's backs. It's safety.* He almost heard the words again and shivered. Jack really had never meant to humiliate or tease him with the matelot tale. He'd sought that safety, and James had denied him because he had been so certain that the pirate only meant him harm. So certain that all the kindness had only been a mask, a trick.

He swallowed hard and busied himself with a spoonful of porridge. "Good morning," he offered.

Jack looked up, his eyes wary. He could feel Berkely shift, his attention veiled and the dark pupils dilated a little more. He swallowed visibly. "Mornin', luv."

James opened his mouth, closed it again. He could not well mention all that here, with all the crew to listen. There was a long pause, in which he looked anywhere but at Jack, before he continued, "I am sorry about last night. My criticism was rash and unwarranted."

It was really a shame that Norrington didn't look, for he missed one of Jack's unplanned and genuine smiles. "Not a worry, Jamie. It wasn't meant t'get you riled."

Jack had been careful not to touch him over these days of coldness and silence. It was a terrible trial considering that Jack touched everyone. He was always standing too close, punctuating his words with gestures and caresses. Now, he reached across the trestle table to grasp James' wrist for a moment, his fingers tense, willing gratitude through their calloused tips.

It earned him a brief smile. For just a moment, James gripped the hand tightly in acknowledgement, before returning to his porridge. "So, how long until we see the next port, oh great pilot?" His voice had lost that habitual cold, and was lined with playful mocking.

Jack laughed. "Oh mate, we've weeks t'go. We're headed fer Dakar. We'll stock up an' head south 'round the coast. You've been 'round the Cape before, aye?"
He didn't say there was little chance of a pair of newly-pressed sailors having any opportunity to leave the ship. They might even find themselves back in the brig, if Hamilton was particularly suspicious. At least James was speaking to him again. Berkely was listening with both ears and Wheldon eased away a little. Jack grinned his relief.

"Yes, I have. Though that was nigh ten years ago, and I certainly had not expected to sail it again under such conditions." He scowled, then laughed hesitantly to soften his words. "Not that they will even let me touch anything remotely resembling a sail or a yard this time around."

"Oh, I think you'll get yer chance, luv. After all, Hamilton will need all hands for the Cape and he won't be able t'get picky. Sure as kittens, you'll get a stab at 'em." Jack leaned forward conspiratorially, "I'm really startin' to think he's a bit mad. Then again, he's Irish. They're all mad at birth."

Norrington chuckled softly. "Is this your way of telling me you are Irish?"

"I am not! Well, leastaways, not that I'd know it!"

James downed the rest of the grog and rose. "I am convinced he will decide that the brass requires particular care in the cold." He stretched and picked up his trencher to take it back to Cookie. "We should get topside."

Jack laughed and rose. "Aye, we should, before Longthorpe thumps us. C'mon." He thumped Berkely on the shoulder and spared a grin all 'round.

Out in the causeway, he waited for James to fall into step behind him, turned and leaned too close. "Been missin' you, mate." His lips hovered very close, then quirked into a smile as he bounded up to the hatch.

James gave him a good shove and laughed at the answering pout, sobering when Longthorpe coughed once. Jack was assigned the helm and James again to his menial tasks.

He was humming softly to himself as he worked, sanding and polishing the rail on the quarterdeck. The task was not all that difficult and he worked diligently, enjoying the cool breeze that tousled his hair, chuckling when he heard Jack curse at the trinkets slapping against his mouth.

There was a loud snap aloft and he flinched, staring up to see the topgallant parrel of the mizzen carried away. The yard gave an enormous creak, as if the wood moaned, and swayed to the lee, barely held aft by the braces and straining at the masthead.

Hamilton looked up and cursed. "God's Blood and damn! Alright, you lot, take the damned thing in and get the yard down. Longthorpe, tell Gentile t' take care of a spare in Dakar. Bloody hell!"

James was still staring up. The yard was straining, and with the current wind there was no telling how long the braces would hold. This was a ship, and he was part of its crew. It was in his interests that they reach Dakar as soon as possible and to end this....slavery.

He pushed himself to his feet and put himself into Hamilton's path, giving the anger no time to bloom. "I know how to save the yard, Captain."

"I'm sure ya do, Norbury. Get back t'work. Hamilton turned to bark orders at Longthorpe without giving James a second glance.

Jack's eyes lit, a wicked gleam erupting in them like twin flashes in a firefight. He nodded at James, jerking his thumb upwards.
Any disappointment in a Captain who wouldn't take the time to save a sail in the middle of a fast course was swallowed in the opportune moment for James.

James wished to sand away Hamilton's thick head until finally a brain appeared, but he settled for a glare. As his eyes caught Jack's, he looked up again. Go against a direct order? A stupid order.... an unspecific order.

He grinned, one hand already on the rail to swing himself up into the shrouds. "Take her right before the winds and steady there. With any luck, that'll keep the masthead from coming down on us."

He had one foot in the ratlines already and hollered at Bertie. "Stays!"

Bertie stared at him for a second before comprehension dawned and Bertie and Shadlow grabbed the topgallant stays, not questioning his order for a second.

It was elating, to be aloft again, a stiff breeze in his face, but James had no time to waste.

He hauled himself up as far as the topgallant yard, hesitating for a moment. He grabbed the stay hard and steadied one foot on the ratline, then swung himself out, balancing the other foot and his elbow against the mast. He slung the other arm around the shroud so that he could work the clewlines with both hands, unbending them and hauling them back against the mast.

Before the wind, the braces kept the yard mostly steady, which allowed him to fasten the clewlines abaft the trestletrees, securing the yard.

"Let fly the stays," he shouted, watching with satisfaction as the sail bellied in the wind again, as it should.

He lingered aloft for just a minute, then climbed down, sliding on the deck with a surge of elation, oblivious to Hamilton.

Jack watched, squinting into the light and near-dancing at the helm. Who in hell would have thought the Navy ponce knew how to handle himself in the rigging? He certainly behaved as though none of his high-heeled shoes had ever touched a line. Jack grinned and ducked his head as the Captain advanced towards Norrington.

"Steady as she goes, Spanish. Get us back on our course. Mr. Norbury, I don't recall givin' ya any orders."

Now James would see if it was only Jack who got away with outrageous explanations. "You told me to get back to work, Sir. My duty, as I consider it, entails doing my best by this ship and its crew."

His voice sounded almost innocent, his chin held high.

Hamilton's lips pursed and he forced a smile that looked more like the grimace of a man with a bad case of griping bowels. "However, ya did that rather neatly and saved us a load o' trouble. Yer duty, eh? You sure yer not Navy? Ya damned well talk like it." The blue eyes pierced Norrington's like daggers. "Extra ration o' rum and you can go aloft an' help settle that main course. It's been wobblin' fer a week." He stalked off the quarterdeck to his cabin.

Jack spun a little pirouette and clapped his hands.


The thought alone, to be grateful to be allowed to be aloft, was ridiculous. Nonetheless, it filled him
with pride, he could not deny that, laughing with the crew, who continued cheering.

He turned to head to the mainmast, but they pushed him back, sending him tumbling into Jack's arms, one of the helm's spokes poking into his side.

"A kiss for our hero and t'saviour of the topgallant!"

Jack grinned and pulled him close, his face tipped up for a sloppy kiss. "Jamie, yer a wonder. That was bloody brilliant." He gave the 'saviour' another kiss. "G'wan. Get up there. Y'know yer dyin' to." He laughed and urged James towards the stairs with a swat.

This time, Norrington laughed. He bounded to his feet and scrambled up the shrouds, shifting along the footropes and whistling, lost in thought.

Together, he and Shadlow quickly found and identified the problem: the yard was uneven, a long splinter of wood poked out and bored into the sail, preventing it from pulling taut. They quickly sanded it away and mended the canvas where the splinter had torn it.

Shadlow was entertaining company and they remained aloft for a good while after they had finished their task, surveying the proceedings below them and joking about what they saw.

The watch passed quickly and they made for the galley, where James collected his extra ration of rum and a steaming bowl of stew.

Jack had been watching from the helm, half-wishing to be up there with James, and followed him down to the galley with a bounce in his step. Excitement always killed his appetite for anything but rum and he forced himself to swallow the stew, which, for once, didn't taste like wood shavings even if it did look like a bowl of sick. He thought longingly of his Pearl's Creole cook and pushed the thought away. "James, that was a fine bit of work. So proud of you," he murmured. He caught Berkeley's eye and glanced down again.

He knew that look, the open invitation filled with hopeless longing. His face grew hot and he buried it in his mug.

James was still grinning like a fool. "Thank you. For everything." He had realised soon enough that had Hamilton not reacted well, Jack and Bertie would have been in trouble for following his suggestions. Bertie had done so without thinking, but Jack.... He did not think Jack had. The pirate was far too used to gauging possible sources of trouble.

Still, he had helped, risking everything he had obtained aboard that ship, especially his cosy position at the helm.

A good part of James' rum was still left and he pushed the mug towards Jack. "Halvsies of everything, remember?" He really was in high spirits, but beside the proud grin, there was a smaller, more private smile on his face.

Jack turned the mug in his hand, his answering grin secretive. For one perfectly clear moment, James remembered a statue he'd been dragged to see when he would have much preferred running about with boyhood friends; some Grecian nymph, gazing inward to her own thoughts, mysterious and enchanting. The pirate returned, and the smile faded, winking at him from the dimple just to the right of his lips.

"Sure, luv?" He wrenched himself away from James' green eyes. It was James' night and he would not risk something stupid. He was too pleased to have his initial estimation of Norrington proved wrong and too wary of his sour moods.
Norrington grinned a bit wider and nodded.

Bertie slapped Jack on the back, making him nearly spill the rum. "Drink it already. There's plenty."

He refilled James' mug of grog from his own, earning a cheer as several more half-emptied mugs were put down in front of James, some with a tousle of his hair or a gentle prod in his side. Even little Matthew brought his mug, still full to the brim and put it down on the table with one of the rare full-toothed grins.

Jack's head did a funny little tilt to the right, and he smiled with his eyes. He bolted down the rum and grinned, then threw both arms around James' neck and laughed into the hollow of his throat. "Stubborn ole Co-bastard." He released Norrington, sitting back abruptly, his eyes wary. "Knew you'd find a way, 'cos it's just like you. Sly dog. Cravat-pins an' all. Drink up."

Jack's eyes were always in motion and no matter what he felt, they noticed. They noticed Norrington's widen and sharpen; another pair, mottled green, watching rather sadly from his right; Wheldon's amber-brown scowl, and he hid his face against James' stained shirt, laughing.

He turned to the company, bursting into the rudest shanty in his large repertoire.

The entire galley joined in, even young Matthew, shouting the bawdy chorus at full voice.

James did not complain and slung an arm around his shoulder, and this close, he could hear the smooth voice join in the chorus, very low as though James was afraid anyone would hear it.

Jack giggled his way through the last verse. It was like going over the Equator, into a place where lewd songs were hymns and bawdy ballads encouraged James to pull him close and sing like a swain in a country church into his ear. He was absurdly touched and nestled comfortably as one song led to another and the impromptu celebration progressed to storytelling and the quite-unforeseen talents of Pierce and Rollings on an old pot and a bamboo flute.

The amount of empty mugs in front of James grew impressive, and at one point, he began to sing a little louder. He thought he knew a surprising amount of lewd shanties, but everyone seemed eager to teach him more, or to fetch him a new mug of grog when his threatened to empty.

It was strange to see them all smile at him, laugh with him, even cheer him; calling him a hero for so little a thing. He sputtered and laughed as Shadlow stood over him and steadily poured the grog into his mouth, Jack quickly sidling up to catch anything that would spill.

He was quite dizzy from the grog and the thrill of it. Commodore James Norrington seemed so distant from now, he was almost glad of Jack's weight to remind him of who he was, and that his former life was not only his own imagination.

They looked at each other and laughed, their faces dripping wet with grog, and James could not help but notice how red Jack's lips were, how alluring their bow. Unwillingly, his mind supplied an image from the night before: Jack's prick had been just as red, gleaming with something other than grog.

The colour on James' cheeks burned and he clanked his mug against Jack's, tossing down the contents.

Finally, Cookie had enough and stomped from his place at the head of the table to shoo them all to bed. Like rats, they scattered to the decks below, carrying away the last mug. Echoes of a final song faded as Jack helped James to his feet. He staggered and together they bumped their way down to their hammocks.
James stumbled and they fell against the bulwark, tangled together and laughing into one another's necks.

Jack's hand stole up to James' cheek and he giggled. "Ain't you supposed t'ask to walk me home proper?" He leaned against Norrington's chest, his head spinning. "Much better, ain't it? Good fellows all, and I told you they liked ya just fine." His eyes were shuttered and that secret smile was on his lips again.

"Forgive me," James drawled and looked up, his eyes slightly unfocused and his smile uncontrolled and wide. "But it sheems we have arrived at your hammock already." He pointed, staggered a little and leaned against Jack.

He was more drunk than he had been in a long, long time. The haze was pleasant and it seemed Jack was quite willing to take care of that balance problem, so everything was in order.

Not to mention that the warmth of Jack's body steadying him was rather pleasant, too, just where his hipbone pressed against that lean waist.

It did not help his balance that his mind promptly supplied images of that very waist, unclothed and covered in sweat.

"You also like me fine, Jack?" His normally crisp voice was slurred, but he was far too busy to care, shoving one of his legs between Jack's, concentrating on not sending them both stumbling again.

Jack grinned at him and pulled them both down into the hammock. It swayed madly and almost tumbled them out again, both scrabbling for balance. "We gotta get organised here," he gasped. He reached down, his hand brushing against the tent in James' breeches and he smiled, slipping his hand into the waistband and taking firm hold of him. "I like ya just fine, Jamie."

He squeezed again, then ran his fingers lightly over the hot flesh and pulled slowly. "I like you more than ever."

James groaned softly and let himself slump into the hammock, almost capsizing it. Oh yes, that was infinitely better than touching himself, and much less frustrating. He whimpered as Jack set a rhythm.

This would not do. He frowned for a moment then grinned wide as he groped the front of Jack's breeches. There, buttons, the only obstacle on his way into his 'mate's' breeches.

Apparently, they weren't supposed to open from this side, because his hand slipped unsuccessfully. Twisting himself to lie beside Jack only made the hammock sway, but did not help at all with the rebellious buttons.

He scowled until Jack's hand touched his and pulled it to his arse. Ah, there.

The backlace gave after a brief struggle, and with Jack's help, he got the breeches down far enough to touch. The eager prick was as hard as he'd seen it the day before, and Jack's answering groan as he grabbed it sent another thrill through him.

Better, definitely better, now that he wasn't the only one squirming.

Jack gasped a breath from under James' hair, air gusting over his face as he moaned. His hand was firm, warm and they pulled at each other, the hammock swaying, breath caught and shared. Awkwardly, his lips found James' and clung.

They parted as the hammock lurched, met again in a wet, sloppy twine of tongues, teeth clattering...
together. James' skin was fire-hot as he tensed, shuddering, a helpless cry swallowed between their mouths, warmth spilling over Jack's fist.

James scrambled for balance and somehow managed to keep them both in the hammock. When the swaying stilled, he peered down, saw his fist around Jack's prick and pulled at it again, palming the hard flesh frantically.

Jack gasped, his mouth slack as he jerked beneath James, thrown helplessly back in his arms. He saw stars and his bones were melting. "Jamie." Eyes wide, his whole body shuddered, a groan torn deep from his gut. He blinked.

Jack Sparrow didn't blink. He wasn't supposed to blink. He shifted with James, searching for a comfortable position until they nestled together, James' legs clasping his.

James lifted his head, looked around, eyes lingering on Jack in a slightly unfocused stare. He, too, blinked. Then he let his head fall back with a groan and began to snore.

Jack watched the timbers above them twist and spin for a moment, heaved a sigh and let his eyes close.

Chapter Five
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Entry tags: fiction

**FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Five**
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil andhippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--XXX.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

The accord evolves into something more for both pirate and commodore as their voyage continues.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtflh for her excellent beta.

This chapter includes another cast portrait.
CHAPTER FIVE:  Lying Truths

Jack cracked one eye open to darkness. The blackness stank of bilge and bodies. One body, in particular, was draped across his own and he stared into Stygian gloom blankly.

Well, that was one way to catch a reluctant Commodore. Or had he been caught? He wasn't at all sure. His real sorrow had been having all the pain of a real affaire du'coeur and none of the fun.

The arms around him were warm and that was, without doubt, fun.

Then again, whatever could have prompted Norrington to such a lapse of character? It couldn't possibly be simple ego. Jack may not have exchanged more than ten sentences with Commodore James Norrington before this unforeseen incident, but he knew the man wouldn't tumble for a just round of applause.

However, he had absolutely no objections to the warm breath against his neck.

The lulling swing of the hammock suddenly stopped, then lurched violently, capsizing and spilling them both to the deck. James cushioned Jack's fall and yelped.

Two pairs of hands held the hammock, but at least a dozen sailors laughed at them; dishevelled, breeches down around their knees. "Too busy t'even close the britches, eh?"

Berthot and Shadlow let go of the hammock, still laughing as James sat up with a groan and quickly pulled up his breeches, his face colouring.

Jack sat there, laughing like a hyena, reaching after James and tugging at his breeches. "Bugger off, you lot!" Their single lamp was lit and he turned to see James' face turn the colour of Hamilton's fancy coat. "Mornin', luv!"

He bounced to his feet, pressing a wet kiss to Norrington's cheek, stale morning breath mingled with rum and metal. "How's yer head?"

James groaned and hid his face between his hands. "It has been better," he muttered. Honestly, what did Jack think after the amount of rum he'd consumed? More importantly, why had he not drunk
enough to at least not remember anything?

He remembered all too clearly the way he had pressed against Jack, how he had clumsily fumbled with Jack's breeches and...God. How drunk had he been? How desperate?

It was one thing to befriend Jack, to help him, yes, even to feel comfortable in his company. But this...this was quite different.

He peered up to glare at Jack for a moment, then his blush deepened, and he directed his glower at the other culprits, who were still laughing at him. "What on earth was this rude awakening for?"

"We had t'get ye cuddlers up some way or other, no? Not worth a flogging even for t'best fuck!"

Jack tore his eyes from James, and grinned at them, looked back and bit his lip. Seconds later, he strutted to the basin, repainting his lids with exaggerated care. "Now why in hell should a bit of friggin' warrant a flogging? Honestly, you lot are daft."

James' cheeks went crimson and he snarled. Bad enough that he had let himself be carried away, but now the whole ship would hear of it!

Shadlow gave him a hand and then groped at his breeches. He jerked away and stumbled against the bulwark, where he hit his head and groaned, to more laughter.

Jack was at his side in an instant. "Lay off! Don't do t'make a bad head worse. Ignorant pricks."

He laughed, willing them to laugh with him, and they did, leaving James to shave and settle himself. Another bout of laughter carried them up to the galley for breakfast.

Jack tugged at James' arm and held him behind the group, pushing his flask at James' fingers. "It'll get you through the day. Just don't let anyone see ya."

James stared at the flask. He sniffed at it and his face contorted. Quickly, he pressed it back into Jack's hands with a strangled, "Thank you." He was topside in a rush.

Minutes later, when he returned to the galley, the blush was quite gone, his face ashen and pale.

Breakfast consisted of more laughter, but also, God bless Cookie, a steaming mug of black coffee and yet more porridge. It helped him to ignore the mocking and steady his stomach, but it also brought back yet more memories of the day before, the way Jack had slumped against him and wriggled in his lap. He blushed again.

Jack had been holding court at table, trading barb for barb with a golden grin that softened when James sat back down. "Better, luv?" His gaze gentled and he pushed a stiff strand of hair from Norrington's forehead.

Berthot laughed and filled James' half-emptied mug of coffee with his own. "Don't ya worry none 'bout that. We all need a visit t' the leeward rail at times."

That led to a spirited discussion of the various ways and means of becoming violently inebriated, possibly engendered by the sight of their breakfast porridge. Jack leaned close to James again. "Try t'eat, luv. It will help."

James cringed. "As if this weren't bad enough without a hangover." There was an advantage to not having to chew: he didn't have to consider the taste in his mouth for too long. He managed a grin, despite the conviction that Sparrow only helped him because he had a bad conscience. After all, there was little doubt it was all the pirate's fault.
The porridge helped to settle not only his stomach, but also his rational thoughts. He peered up from his trencher to watch Jack, his hair tumbling into his eyes. He reached up to smooth it back, freezing when his hand caught in a braid. He'd thought it just another saltwater tangle before, stiff in his unwashed hair, but this, distinctly, was a braid.

There was no doubt who had made it, but why? Was it a sign of...appreciation?

He caught himself staring at Jack curiously and shrugged. "I'll be fine."

Shadlow laughed and slipped him another half-mug of coffee.

Jack leaned close. "Y'need me, pass word through Bertie. Best get topside, lads." He rose, marrying servility to a natural air of command. He didn't so much order as wheedle compliance and swayed his way up, taking a theatrical breath of fresh air as he wandered to the quarterdeck.

Longthorpe was deep in conversation with the Captain and looked at him with chiding eyes. "You, Spanish! Yer t'trade off with Jensen at the helm. And since yer so good with maps, go and fix the ones in th' Great Cabin."

Hamilton turned to eye James. "Mr. Norbury, I trust yer ready for duty? Not too exhausted by the darin' rescue of the topgallant?"

James raised an eyebrow. His eyes gleamed above dark circles, and he certainly would not surrender before a common hangover. Bad enough that he had surrendered to his inebriation. The coffee and the fresh air did the rest and all slur was gone from his voice, daring Hamilton to doubt him. "Of course I am, Sir."

Hamilton grinned. The Englishman had a harder head than he'd imagined. "How are you wi' guns, man? We could use a bit o'practise, couldn't we, lads?"

His voice had risen and there was a cheer from the crew. They had been in open waters for weeks and the prospect of any action was a welcome diversion.

James was about to say that he'd commanded gun crews since he was twelve years old, swallowing the retort just in time. "I can handle a gun crew, if that is what you mean," he replied vaguely.

"Course it is. Go wi' Berthot and have th' Deacon set ya to a gun."

The Deacon was the gunnery mate, so called for his long-faced Puritanism. He never smiled, but was a wonder with a cannonade.

James spent the day on the gundecks, shoving cannons into the gunports, adjusting firing angles, bellowing commands. If there was any trace of a headache, he couldn't allow it, the cannonshots echoing loud in his ears and ringing long after.

They raced starboard guncrews against larboard, sweetening the contest when each man threw half of his grog ration into the bet.

He was dizzy from the haze and the powder when he returned topside, ears still ringing and his blood pounding as loud as the shots. His face was dark with soot, sweat trailing wet cascades through it.

Jack was not pleased to be stuck in the cabin with the maps while all the fun boomed without him. He sulked for a good quarter-hour, then lost himself in correcting coastlines, marking currents. He amused himself at intervals, drawing small ships and monsters in the margin and ignored his fingers'
itch for real action.

Hamilton banged open the door to stand over Jack's shoulder, watching the pen trace sure, careful lines along the western coast of India. "You know wha' yer doin', Spanish. Where'd the likes o' you learn such a thing?"

Jack looked up slowly and smiled. "Picked it up around." The quill wavered in the air, as vague as his response.

Hamilton frowned and watched a few minutes more, then went topside to handle some minor emergency.

James sat and eyed the two mugs in front of him gloomily. Of course starboard had won. It may have had to do with Shadlow's and Bertie's particular efforts, and their delight at seeing James' second mug.

He was certain that Jack would have been happy to relieve him of his burden, but there was no trace of him in the galley. Also, the mug would serve to cover the inevitable embarrassment, and maybe stop at least one or two lewd comments.

It wasn't that he minded what happened last night, James had realised in one of the quieter moments that day. He was no stranger to such fumblings among men, and although it had been many years since he had buried the memory, that did not mean he'd forgotten it.

His reputation was not the problem, either. The matelot tale had everyone believing him a sodomite, who had lain with Jack for a long time already. The sudden reality changed nothing.

To deny that it had been pleasurable was useless, too. Especially as his prick reacted rather enthusiastically to his attempts to recall the events.

That was exactly what mattered: his unforgivable slip of self-control. Desire and needs were one matter, giving in to them quite another. He had always prided himself in his strength of will, steeling himself to resist such temptation.

He had done that to set an example, to be a worthy commander or worthy of becoming one. The moment he had set foot aboard a ship, he had borne the responsibility for others.

He didn't now, and, on the Chimaera, he had to admit that being one of the crew had a thrill of its own.

To laugh and to sing; to simply sail. Not worry and weigh heavy decisions. It was a way he had never wanted, never even considered, but somehow, it was elating. Until he could escape, he was stuck on this ship, and what possible reason was there not to make the best of it?

He could find none, and, while used to self-restraint, he was no saint. What he wanted, he realised with painful clarity, included Jack. The incident would never have happened without the drink, but neither had it been rum alone. There had been a thrill to it, a warmth he could clearly remember even through the drunken haze; the feel of Jack's flesh against his, their lips pressed together. Warm, and oh-so-satisfying.

Nobody denied it him. They all approved, even Jack. The only one who balked was himself, apparently without any plausible reason.

When Jack clambered down to the galley, he was breathing fast, glad to have evaded Hamilton's scrutiny. He wrenches his thoughts from that problem to the one in front of him, sitting at the table
with a full trencher and two mugs.

Jack raised an eyebrow as he slid in beside James. "I swear you lot rattled th' ship so much, me quill jumped right outta m'fingers!" His grin had a razor edge, his eyes glittering. Fear had a funny way of making Jack Sparrow sparkle and he was nearly aglow.

James looked up and half smiled, then his face went blank, his stare cool and inquisitive. He just looked, blinked once or twice, either deeply lost in thought, or possibly deaf from the gunnery exercise.

Jack was weighing the likelihood of the different options when James suddenly reached behind his neck, pulled him down and kissed him. Not one of the quick pecks to satisfy the crew; no, James' lips were firmly on his, tongue swiping across them insistently.

Jack's lips parted, his head forced back, eyes closed. He didn't know what gods were at work or which demons infected the stew, but he was certainly not one to look at a gift kiss askance and he responded enthusiastically to a roar of laughter and snickered encouragement.

He was drowning. For just one second, tongues lashing together and clasped in arms that not only held, but possessed, he heard the Pearl very clearly. She was giggling and he melted.

Several moments passed until James released his hold and pulled away, suddenly wary.

He shoved the additional mug in front of Jack, as though he'd done nothing at all. "Won the race against the scurvy larboard slugs. Have at it!" Indignant huffs mingled into the cheers.

Jack took a breath and laughed. "Sounds lovely. Been stuck inside all bloody day. Makes me feel like a bastard stepchild." He held up the mug, his eyes fixed on Norrington's.

"The gunners."

Everyone could agree to that toast, and even James brought himself to drink to it. The effects of the hangover had quite faded, yielding to the elation of a successful pseudo-battle. "Now don't destroy my imaginings and tell me you are in fact no bastard stepchild," he teased.

He looked at Jack's shoulder for a moment, hesitating. He was not quite certain about the validity of his theory, but he had to admit that slinging his arm around Jack's waist did satisfy a distinct possessive urge. It felt...nice.

Jack tiptoed along the line between reality and green eyes, stumbled, and fell headlong. He was enchanted. This was not at all the dignified, proper Commodore who'd smirked with eyes of steel, cuffed him in a cell and shoved him away with utter distaste.

This was someone entirely new and different; bronzed, laughing, generous and warm. The arm around him was strong, the kiss delicious. It was more than enough to dazzle one slightly birdbrained pirate.

James seemed to be entranced himself, sitting there with his arm around Jack. It became less strange as time and grog passed, and he could feel the warm ribs beneath his fingers, faintly sense the heartbeat. Jack squeaked and dropped his spoon as James tickled him.

James caught it and clucked his tongue, dipping it back into the trencher with a laugh and feeding Jack.

The table erupted into laughter and good-natured jeers. Sure, there were a few comments, some
unpleasant. Wheldon's sniggering fell away from Jack like water on feathers. Somehow, Cookie's execrable stew was ambrosia and he looked up at James through his lashes, suddenly dangerous. "If ya feed me now, how much more will there be after?" His smile was an open invitation.

James sputtered. "That depends entirely on how much you can chew." He stared at the spoon, then at Jack.

Jack pushed the trencher away. "Wanna talk, luv. C'mon." He unfolded from the bench and held out one hand.

"That wot it's called these days?" Wheldon's voice was harsh amid the laughter.

"You two never get enough," Shadlow chortled.

James didn't listen, gulping as he stared at Jack's hand, outstretched, beckoning. He took it and let himself be pulled upright, steering their way through the crowd, making for their berth.

"No. This way." Jack pulled at his fingers and tore down the steps, past the orlop deck, where Gentile, the carpenter, was dozing amid his half-finished planks and plugs. The stink of dank water was almost suffocating as he pushed James against the bulwark, his lips insistent and greedy. "Can't wait no more, luv. It's drivin' me mad."

His hand fumbled with James' buttons, sliding inside, fingers curling around his prick. "C'mon, Jamie. Why stop now? Sheep as a lamb, eh?" His mouth devoured James' in a blistering kiss.

James gulped, and with a gasp, grabbed hold of Jack's wrist, pulling it away. He broke the kiss, but Jack was still so close, he could feel the thundering of his heart, the lean body pinioning him against the bulwark. "I didn't....You don't have to...." For God's sake, why did he suddenly feel like a blushing virgin?

Focus. He closed his eyes and tried to calm his breathing. Jack's wriggling did not help. "I didn't mean to... accost you like this. There is no obligation for you to do anything... just if you want... errrr." This was pathetic. And he had worried about the embarrassment of Jack's groping him!

But he was well aware that Jack relied on his protection. He had seen it every day for well over a month. He needed to make clear that...this...wasn't a condition of any sort.

Instead, he blushed.

Jack spun against him, dancing them into a corner, need making glamour needy. "Jamie. Why don't ya believe me? I want you t'fuck me so hard I can't walk." His voice was rough, spit glistening on his lips, his hands stroking, coaxing, tempting. He gripped James' chin hard while one hand stole back to let fly the slipknot of his breeches. They fell to his knees, pooling around his boots. "Can't wait anymore. I want you. Now."

James gasped. It had been so long, and God, he was so hard, and Jack…. He gulped, hands slipping down to grab Jack's buttocks. Yes. He seized Jack by the hip and hauled him around, trapping him against the bulwark, teeth sunk into the soft skin of his nape.

With a little shudder, he drew away and rested his head against the bulwark, bent over Jack's shoulder, staring into his face. "I don't want to use you," he managed to pant. "I want you... but not if you...don't." Jack's arse was so hot against his straining prick, but he could not. Would not.

"Just do it, damn you. Stick it inside and stop the damned lies!" Jack's voice dropped nearly an octave. "You know they're lies and ya know you want it. G'wan. Do it or I swear I'll run mad." It
became liquid soft, thick as honey. "I'll make it good, luv. So good. Hard as ya want, it don't matter. Just fuck me. Now."

Jack's cheek was pressed against the wood so hard he could hear the sounding of the deep outside the shell of the Chimaera. Or so he thought. He ground back against James, growling.

James' breath hitched, then he hissed it out, loud and ragged. "Oh yes, I want it, want you. So much, more than you know. Your madness is infectious but you probably do know that." His voice went on, rough and throaty, almost raving. He parted Jack's buttocks with one hand, spat into the palm of the other, smearing his saliva across the tight hole. "If you want me to stop, say it, God, please say it, or I swear I won't be able to."

He was desperate and drunk, more from Jack's scent than the rum.

Jack moaned encouragement. "If ya stop, I'll strangle you." He writhed against James, losing himself in an ocean and diving through its currents, a madman who thought himself a dolphin. "Goddamn it, James, fuck me!"

How much more did he need to say?

He said much more, hissed obscenities dripping from an eager tongue, pushing back against James, his legs trembling with the effort. "Do it. Now. If ya make me beg anymore..."

His chanting was lost in groans and curses as James pushed one finger against the tender skin, and he nearly screamed when it slipped inside. His back arched, head cresting against the wood that caught in his hair and held him captive by a halo of splinters.

"I don't want to make you beg, not now, no, I'm the one begging," James growled, licking across Jack's earlobe. He spat again, coaxing saliva from a mouth gone completely dry. He slicked himself with trembling fingers, groaning.

He held his breath as his hands slipped to Jack's buttocks again, then outwards, fingers gripping hard around the sharp hipbones, digging into soft flesh. With that grip, he pulled Jack back as he surged forward, pushing inside with one stroke.

"Oh yes. Jack," he moaned. "So tight...so tight." He stilled himself with effort, pressed up snugly, breathing hot and damp into Jack's ear.

Jack groaned, a sound torn from deep inside of him that might have been a cry or a sob. His hips worked, his tongue twisting around his own fingers, panting into the wood. Words dissolved into moaning desperation as he pumped with James, panting and impaled. "Touch me, God, don't stop and touch me." The stink of the bilges mingled with their sweat and the smell of James, gunpowder and salt.

James shifted his weight and let one hand slip down to grab Jack, jerking hard. With the other, he steadied himself against the bulwark, bracing himself so he could pound even harder, desperate to slake this fire. "So good, yes, Jack, yes."

Jack felt as though he were being split in two and bore down harder, thrusting against the calloused palm until he stilled a scream, his fist shoved into his mouth, all words strangled. He shuddered, every muscle tensed and just as suddenly, let go, coming hard against the bulwark, splattering all over James' fingers, tightening and throbbing around the invading prick like a hungry mouth sucking him dry.

James could not but yield, spilling himself with a cry. He stifled it by biting hard at the straining
muscle at the side of Jack's neck. His legs gave out and he collapsed against Jack, pressing them tightly to the wood. "Bloody hell," he whispered.

Jack sagged and squirmed to turn in James' arms, pulling him into a kiss, wet and sated and still hungry. When he raised his eyes, they were liquid. He held on tight, the wetness dripping from between his buttocks to stain the bunched cloth of his sagging breeches. His head fell forward against James' neck helplessly. "I've wanted that since the bloody dock at Port Royal, you Navy bastard!"

"Did you really?" The question was out before James could stop it, his voice still rough and lust-dark, a hint of worry warring with pride. They were still pressed together snugly, sweat slick where they were unclothed. He was reeling from the lack of air, the bilges stuffy and narrow around them. "Was it... was it worth the wait, then?"

Amid sweat and the sticky reminders of their passion, Jack still twitched. "Oh yes, luv. Well-worth any wait." The dark head dropped onto his shoulder again with a soft jingle. "Just think, it took a pressgang to make it happen. That's goddamn funny." His fingers wandered as he turned, tracing a line through the sweat streaking James' face. "You know, I lied. I was rootin' for you. But not for her. Wanted ya all for myself."

"Take what you can, give nothing back?" James raised a mocking eyebrow and laughed softly, still hoarse. "Now please don't tell me that all this was a ruse you spun for a tumble," he teased, hesitatingly bending to lick the sweat from the hollow of Jack's throat.

"Bloody fool." Jack laughed into his shoulder. "Never in a thousand years thought I'd ever see ya again." He seemed to melt into the hull, half-ship, half-man, barely human and altogether a mystery. "We should go back. My knees are puddin'." Despite his words, his fingers tightened.

"I certainly never thought so myself," James leaned down for another kiss, hesitantly, as though suddenly shy. "I never knew what this was hiding." He trailed his thumb over the smooth chin, then dropped it and withdrew to pull up his breeches. He hadn't meant just the beard. He meant the kindness, the intelligence...how Jack contradicted a lot of what he'd always thought of pirates.

Quickly, he grinned. "Do you think we were loud enough to be heard up in the crow's nest?"

Jack's lips twisted into a grimace. "More like we had Venus lookin' and Orion wondering why he's chasin' a lot of little girls." He nestled against James' collarbone comfortably. "What changed your mind? If you don't mind me askin'."

James looked down, his hand lingering in Jack's hair, then he gave a crooked smile. "You look much more civilised without that beard."

He swallowed and bit his lip. It was rather moot asking now, but he had to know. "And you? You really wanted this... me?"

"Jamie, you bloody fool." His arms tightened, then he pushed James away, his brow knotting. "The beard put you off, eh? Bastard!" He grinned and took James' hand to pull him up the stairs, pausing outside their quarters to steal another kiss.

"Even you have to admit that you look pretty without it," James grinned, then hushed.

There was a soft whistle as they pushed past Bertie's hammock. James gave it a good shove. Satisfied that this interruption was taken care of, he settled into his hammock, stretching out with a sigh. He looked up to see Jack hovering over him and raised an inquisitive eyebrow.
The long fingers rested for a moment in his hair. "Night, luv. Get some sleep." The rest hung in the
air between them.

Jack rolled over and had a hard time hauling himself out of his hammock when Bertie gave it a push
to wake him. He groaned to get both feet on the deck, ran a hand through his hair and pulled on his
breeches gingerly.

"Hey, Jamie. Wake up." He bent forward to shake James' arm, and straightened with some
difficulty, limping to the basin and waiting until Shadlow had finished.

Jeremy winked at him. "Trouble walkin', Spanish?"

"Shaddup." Jack splashed water on his face, staring at one smeared and rather bloodshot eye in the
small bit of mirror.

James pushed himself up, watching from a half-sitting position. He didn't need the teasing to blush or
to feel guilty. He'd ruthlessly taken Jack, up against the bulwark like a cheap whore in an alley. He
gulped.

He didn't know what he had imagined such a liaison to be like, but certainly not that. They were both
men, and he certainly had no right to treat Jack as a whore. He hadn't wanted to, but need and lust
had overwhelmed him. Filthy.

He slipped out of the hammock and joined Jack by the basin, shaving in silence before he looked up,
biting his lip. His voice dropped low, and he sounded almost like a nervous schoolboy, worrying the
braid in his hair between two fingers. "I...I am sorry I hurt you. I didn't mean to."

Jack looked up sharply, surprised. He automatically smiled, laying one finger against James' lips.
"Shh. Nuthin' I didn't want, luv." A coy wink. "Don't get yer knickers in a knot."

All groans and moans aside, Jack looked far from wounded. A slow, secretive smile clung to his lips
and his eyes were bright.

James smiled back, then it faltered and he shook his head. He trailed Jack's steps, like a nervous
Midshipman with an important message. "I let myself be carried away and hurt you. Such treatment
is unforgivable, I know, but I do want to apologise."

Jack winced with every move, making James wince in turn. "I didn't want to hurt you," he repeated.
"I wanted you to enjoy it. I am sorry."

The dark eyes went wide. "Ya shouldn't worry about it so much. 'Twas lovely." He planted a swift
kiss on James' lips and ducked a boot thrown at them.

"Somethin' wrong with yer eyes, Jackson? Can't aim fer a cow's ballocks." He tossed it back,
laughing and wound an arm around James. "C'mon, let's get some grub. I'm starvin'."

Funny ole Commodore, worrying over it so much! Jack couldn't imagine why, but it was rather nice
of James to ask. He tucked the thought into a corner of his mind, to mull over later, when he was
communing with his cask.

Berthot laughed. "Still hungry, Spanish? Why not 'ave it here?"

Jack made a very specific hand gesture, and tugged James to the galley.
He hoped he would get an easy watch over the maps; he was more sore than he was willing to admit.

Breakfast was quiet and they both ate with appetite. James continued to glance at Jack, not convinced at all. Yes, Jack had begged for him, he remembered with a little thrill, but that was a poor excuse; it didn't free him of his responsibility not to hurt his partner in the pursuit of pleasure.

It sounded easy and plain now, in daylight, but it hadn't been like that at all, in the dank bilges, where only the feel of flesh on flesh and the need for more had mattered.

They made their way topside, and James' head dropped when he saw Jack's limp. He moved to speak again, but instead just touched his hand lightly to Jack's arm, a look on his face as if he had been caught stealing cookies.

Jack glanced at him and grinned.

Captain Hamilton was not having a good morning, either. He had overindulged in his private stash of whisky and he gazed at Jack with bloodshot eyes. "Wha' s yer problem, Spanish? Y'ain't movin' too good."

Jack's neck immediately bent, his hands clasped together. "Fine, Cap'n, Jus' fine. D'you want me, or should I go t'Longthorpe fer orders? Meanin' no presumption, of course."

One black brow arched. "Y'ar a damned cheeky son o'Satan an' I dinna need yer lip. Or yer midnight shouting! Meanin' no presumption, Mr. Sbarra. Get t'Longthorpe, an' stay outta my way."

Jack bobbed at him and Longthorpe shook his head. "The things ye do! Worse than a scurvy monkey."

Jack's fingers spread wide. "I just asked if he wanted---"

Hamilton strode across the deck in three steps, grabbed Longthorpe's quirt and took a swing that fell short as Jack jumped backwards. "Tired of yer nonsense."

The next blow connected across the back of his neck. Jack froze.

James pushed himself between them, chin and one arm raised. It was his fault alone that Jack was limping. How dared the Irish bastard? "With respect, Sir, I believe he said nothing to warrant this reaction, but merely asked if you required him to work with the maps again."

Hamilton wheeled around, reddened eyes narrowed as he raised the short whip, when Jack clapped a hand over James' mouth and shoved him down a step, catching the blow across his shoulder. He turned back, hands raised. "Ain't nothin' sir. Nothin' at all."

Hamilton's face was deep red and Jack's fingers danced in the air around his face, his voice coaxing. "He's giddy from yesterday, as it were. Stars in his eyes from th' topgallant, y'know. Sir. Never can make any sense outta him. Wot can I do, aye?"

Hamilton glared at him, and tossed the quirt back to Longthorpe. "Mr. Norbury. Decks. You!" He pointed at Jack. "Bilges."

Jack hustled James down the steps and glanced after the red coat, putting out his tongue. "For the love o' God, Jamie! When are you gonna learn t'shut your mouth?"

James stared at him and frowned. "Why would I? He was striking you without reason, and the reason he claimed was solely my fault. Should I have stood by and done nothing?" He pushed
Jack's hair back to get a look at where the blow had landed. Fortunately, the hair had cushioned most of its force. "Irish filth," he growled angrily.

Jack's fingers pressed against his lips. "Stop it, luv. You'll only make us more trouble. Now you're stuck scrubbin' and I get t'plug holes below." He smiled, briefly. "Let it go," his voice dropped to a low whisper, "until the opportune moment." He winked and turned to head down the hatch, still limping, his black head high.

Grudgingly, James went topside, sparing one last glare over at the quarterdeck. He considered himself a very orderly man, but as far as he was concerned, the deck really required no further scrubbing, the planks wet enough that there was no danger of them shrinking apart.

Not that he had any choice. The 'opportune moment', as Jack put it, was essential. So he sank to his knees and scrubbed again, beginning to wonder if everything aboard the Chimaera was an eternal cycle of scrubbing, caulking the damage made by that scrubbing, and then scrubbing away the tar and dirt from caulking.

Jack cursed the whole way down, leaving few on the Chimaera in any doubt as to his feelings on the matter, and joined Berkely in the stinking bilges. He was ankle-deep in water and he cursed some more, trudging back up the steps to pull on his boots.

As he splashed his way to Berkely, his eyes drifted sideways to that place against the bulwark and he stopped grumbling. Berkely elbowed him hard in the ribs. "Fond mem'ries, Spanish?"

Jack turned away with a wry smile and a flutter of lashes. "Let's get to it, mate."

He sniffed and grabbed the bucket of tar. He thought of the Pearl and her lovely copper-plated keel and slopped to where the worst leaks were bubbling. Jack's estimation of Hamilton had dropped a few notches. Really, what sort of Captain doesn't make damned sure his keel is sound before setting out across the bloody Atlantic? Irish idiot! The pumps had been rattling and squawking and now it was ungodly quiet, the only sounds their boots sloshing and the lap of greasy bilgewater against the hull.

The watch dragged as they worked, plugging each hole, sometimes bothering Gentile, the carpenter, to fashion knots and slivers to make each repair fast. Berkely was silent for the most part, but Jack could feel his eyes, large and hurt, as they moved the lantern from place to place.

He wondered how James was faring and his lips twitched. James Norrington was too damned adorable for his own good. He had no idea how his lovely green eyes darkened when he was being concerned. Jack allowed himself a moment of reflection, listening to the drip and splash and wondering.

Who was James Norrington? Certainly, he was a different animal from the braided Navy terror. Not even the same species, Jack figured. He still had that lifeline and that was very good, for Jack was much less concerned about how to arrange passage back to the Caribbean than he was about getting to a port where he could begin those arrangements, hale and whole, without new scars or any unpleasantness.

James was an unexpected asset and source of fun. He was rather touched by the morning's worry and he had no regrets at all. After all, if he was going to spend the voyage as someone's mate, James was a lovely choice. He grinned to himself and went back to slapping tar on the plugs.

At least Hamilton had been smart enough to order a standstill for the plugging. Enough water slapped at their calves without more forcing its way inside by fast movement. Still, it was cold and
wet and it stank, and this time, there was no one to warm him up. Jack pouted at the next plug.

Hours passed until Berkely said a word that didn't refer to their work or the occasional grunt to get Jack to shove over. "I didn't think yer 'maybe' meant t'sneak off wif yer mate and let 'im fuck ye so hard yer screams were heard all over the ship." It was like the leaks they were plugging: when the water burst through, it did so with force.

Jack wrinkled his nose and banged another plug home, slopping the tar over it. He glanced up through his hair, his eyes apologetic. "Well, mate, y'know how those things are. I'm sorry. I mean, about the screamin', and all."

There's maybe and then there's maybe, he thought. He'd been expecting something of the sort, but he rather liked Berkley and Jack had the devil's own time saying 'no'. Like many a thief and most women, he preferred to keep all his options open and too often got himself trapped in half-truths and promises he never intended to keep.

"Listen, Berks. I am sorry. I never know wot's happenin' with him. He's a bit...strange. Can't ever tell when he's gonna go all weedy or muck things up and do something incredibly stupid. You saw 'im up there. He's a nutter." He hauled the lamp closer to the dripping seam, looking mournful and appealing, fully aware that he was behaving like an ass.

The lines in Berkely's face deepened and he, too, looked mournful, like an old and seasoned wolf eyeing a cavorting pup. "'Tis easy when ye can just climb any hammock ye want 'n' be sure of yer welcome, ey? Ever met someone who didn't want ya, Spanish?"

Jack had to consider that. He was quite sure he had met someone who hadn't wanted him once upon a time, but the memory was fuzzy with rum. He helped hold another plank in place, his fingers close to Berkely's and looking terribly small beside them.

Jack glowered, then touched one briefly, "He's terrible jealous. I dunno..." Jack took refuge in another vagary.

Berkely paused for a moment, then shook his head. "Mustn't be fun fer yer mate if ye go looking for new company after having a fight what can be fixed with jest one good shag." They caulked with more tar and nailed a new plank across the old one, securing it where the hull had bowed under the constant strain, making the seam leak.
Jack heaved a sigh. "You seen it. Dunno wot'd happen if he thought...." He shrugged evasively. "Ain't always the easiest, is James. An' neither of us is here by choice."

His eyes drifted to watch the sailor's face, strong and aquiline, set in mingled anger and hurt. He didn't mean to tease, he really didn't. It just happened, at least, that was how it appeared to Jack.

"Think he might've a reason t'be jealous? And it's obvious enough that yer in the other's britches by choice." Rejection hurt, and the man whom it didn't had yet to be born, and it certainly wasn't Berkely. "No worries there, I won't get between ye. If ye love 'im, that's yer business, but bloody well act like it."

That stung, and it showed in Jack's dark eyes. The biggest problem with lies was that they could get bloody complicated. 'Maybe' had been an unthinking answer, born of fear; for himself, for James, for this tightrope of a game. Jack never set out to hurt anyone, but inevitably, he did, a significant factor in his long history of slaps. He felt as though he'd spilled Gibbs' flask all over the Pearl's deck and that made him feel worse.

"Berks, I'm sorry." His lip quivered. "I never know with him."

He needed an answer quickly and Jack lit on something almost foreign to him; the truth. It was the first thing that popped into his head that could balance the lie of their charade, his elation at its sudden reality, and Berkely's wounded feelings. "It ain't been all that long, y'know? And I'm not one to question him when he's gettin' himself in a temper, savvy?"

Berkely chuckled bitterly. "Head over heels, eh? Figure it's obvious enough, too. Should've seen it." He sounded resigned but suddenly almost approving, slapping Jack's back before he went back to work on the next small leak. "Jest been a while," he murmured wistfully.

Jack tarred over another plug near the brackish waterline at their feet. "Bloody strange, innit? I mean, him such a toff an' all. I didn't expect it at all, not with th' likes of him. Practically a gentleman, y'know."

He straightened and arched his back with a groan. "Lord, when'd you last pump this mess outta here? Hey, Berks, mate?"

Jack wasn't sure if anything coming out of his mouth was truth or lies. It had occurred to him suddenly that he and James had been picked up far distant from one another. That they were shipmates hadn't been questioned, but he had a bad feeling that it might be if their 'previous' service was probed too hard. Diversion was always the first, best tactical manoeuvre. He brought the lantern over and watched the rats scattering with a grimace. "I'm really sorry, Berks."

"Awright, awright, I get it. I know well enough ye ain't really sorry. Yer glad t'have yer Jamie back, grinnin' like a fool whenever ya peek into that corner yonder. I may be gettin' old, but I ain't blind, Spanish." Berkely offered him the hint of an encouraging smile, then bent back to his work, disregarding Jack completely.

"Awright, awright, I get it. I know well enough ye ain't really sorry. Yer glad t'have yer Jamie back, grinnin' like a fool whenever ya peek into that corner yonder. I may be gettin' old, but I ain't blind, Spanish." Berkely offered him the hint of an encouraging smile, then bent back to his work, disregarding Jack completely.

Jack hit his thumb with the mallet and nursed it with a scowl. Aboard the Pearl, he would have indulged in one of his fits of frustration, usually involving a lot of rum and pistol shots or cannon fire, just to make noise. Then again, Jack mused, aboard the Pearl there would be no bloody Berkely and his hurt feelings, and no James with his hair getting sunstreaked the colour of honey. "Bugger!"

Berkely stared at it for a moment, lips widening into a conspiratorial grin as he took the flask and tossed back a good swallow. He sighed in contentment, eyes gone soft with just a hint of longing.
After a moment, he grinned and slapped Jack's shoulder. "Seems yer Jamie's a good one of those."

Jack's grin gleamed in the light. "Cor, you got that right! Think he damn near broke me arse, mate!" He took a nip and stowed the flask. "Let's get this done. I'm perishin' for a breath of fresh air."

The bell announced the end of the watch and everyone who was done with his work headed for the galley, including James and Jack and Berkely. Berkely gave Jack another nod and a bit of a shove, steering him towards the table where James already sat, scowling at his trencher.

"Hullo, luv. Did it snow up there? Ya look a bit frosty." Jack stared at his meal in disbelief, poking at the lump of salt pork with one finger as if expecting it to move. "Think I'm gonna go fishin' and eat it bloody raw!"

James forced a smile. "May I join you in that endeavour?" Jack's hair was damp, wet against his own shoulder as the pirate leaned against him and he pushed it aside. Again he saw the quirt mark, a red stripe that made his scowl return and deepen. But next to it, there was another mark, from insistent teeth. It looked a lot angrier than the thin red stripe.

Anger mingled with embarrassment and guilt. Those he could at least explain. But there also was an undeniable surge of possessiveness, one that made him seethe about the quirt mark and, at the same time, left him strangely proud of the bite. He settled for stroking the tips of his fingers over both.

Jack flashed him a sideways grin and winked, then went back to gnawing at the meat, praying it didn't take out any more of his teeth. He devoutly hoped that he wouldn't starve to death before he managed to get back to the Pearl.

Then again, there was Bombay, and the memory of tasty messes, hot as fire and fragrant with saffron, encouraged him to try to finish the meal. "Tell ya, luv, I'm dyin' fer a swim. Beginnin' t'feel less than fresh," he laughed, swilling down the grog to kill the taste.

Berthot stared at him. "Yer mad as a hatter, Spanish! Who wants t'swim if they ain't gotta?"

James sniffed and his scowl deepened. Much as he had gotten used to life belowdecks, the smells nauseated him, especially his own. Sweaty from relentless work in the sun, without the possibility of a proper wash, he was acutely uncomfortable with his own state of hygiene. Jack was better off than he, more used to the heat and sweating less. "I'd work three additional watches for a decent wash, but a swim sounds better than nothing."

Jack's eyes gleamed. "Think the Cap'n would throw down a line?"

Shadlow laughed. "Fer you he would, wif all yer writin' and such."

Jack got to his feet. "Well, I can't stand anymore o' this. Who's for it?"

There was a murmur among the baker's dozen at the table, laughter and disbelief. "Dare ya t'jump off the rail, Spanish. Ye'll drop like a stone."

Jack's spine straightened. "Well, c'mon. Let's go see. Ain't had a breath of air all day."

The whole group made its way topside, even those who shuddered at the thought of getting into the water of their own free will. They certainly wouldn't miss the spectacle.

Hamilton was still on the quarterdeck. "Irish guilt," Jack mouthed at James.

He swaggered up the steps, his hand trailing along the polished wood. He was becoming fond of the
Chimaera and had missed her helm. "Beggin' yer pardon, Cap'n, lads an' me, we got a small request, if it ain't too much trouble."

Hamilton looked from the impudent dark eyes to the group waiting below and ignored the throb of his still-aching head. Spanish Jack was bedraggled and stank of tar. "Wot ya want?" he growled.

Jack took in the pained expression and bleary eyes and stowed his grin. "Couple of us'd like a swim, if ye can spare a line t'haul us up."

Hamilton stared at him. "Yer mad."

"Yessir."

"Ya wanna swim?"

"Aye sir."

He shook his head and groaned. "Oh, Mother Mary's girdle, g'wan and stop blatherin' at me. Get one o' the lines an' go catch yer deaths, ya damned fools."

"Thank you, sir," James said quietly and steered the group away quickly. He barely kept himself from snapping at Hamilton. For God's sake, the man claimed to be a Captain. He bore a responsibility to the crew, and should never let alcohol interfere with that. Jack tugged at James' arm and he bit back a snarl.

Then, it melted into a grin and he peeled off his shirt, grinning wider as he pulled at Jack's arm. Jack slithered out of it, laughing, and dropped to the deck to pull off his boots and breeches.

He hauled himself up to balance on the rail, eyeing the water, then straightened, letting go of the shrouds. His arms moved like a dancer's, first out to his sides, then up, and he arced through the air, a streaking flash of gold in the lateday sun, piercing the water with hardly a splash.

James' hands stopped on his boots and he stood on one leg, watching Jack dive like a sleek fish. There was an appreciative roar from the crew. Ridding himself of boots and breeches, James climbed the rail and jumped. The water was cold, so much colder than the Caribbean, but refreshing, and James surfaced with a contented sigh.

Jack emerged, shaking his head and gasping out a laugh. He watched James through a haze of delight and seawater, the pale body in stark contrast to his brown face and arms. He swam towards James, circling him like a shark and grabbing for one foot.

James sputtered and gave Jack's shoulders a shove, then hauled him up after a few seconds of struggling. He was smiling broadly, then dunked his own head underwater, emerging just when Shadlow jumped in and splashed water all over them, all three laughing.

It was a blissful hour for Jack. They played like children in the water, the three of them racing each other back and forth along the larboard side, then around the whole ship.

Jack took the time to check as much of the Chimaera's keel as possible. He was not mad enough to try swimming under her, being out of practise, but he certainly would like to know what was happening down there.

Shadlow's teeth began to chatter and he let himself be hauled back on deck, giving the two his best grin.
Jack swam close to James to steal a kiss, his hands groping underwater. "Yer a fine swimmer, Jamie. Listen, still gotta tell ya somethin'."

James was treading water, pressing Jack against himself to relish the body warmth. "I believe we can find a place for that." He grinned. "Of course, the last time you said you wanted to talk to me, it turned out to be a sneaky trap with irresistible bait." He disentangled himself. "Race you back to the line," he taunted and took off.

Jack dove under and streaked through the water, grabbing the line beneath James and tickling him before emerging. "Beat ya," he laughed, sputtering.

"No, I reached up higher on the line, closer to the ship. Ergo, I win." James was still laughing and tugged at the line, gasping at the sudden force with which they were hauled up, then dropped onto the deck, dripping wet, giggles starting up around them.

It took James a moment to stand up, toss his soaked hair and, above all, realise the cause of the chuckles that became a crescendo of laughter. Their clothes were gone. "Most hilarious."

He was half-erect from Jack's teasing, but in the last moment realised that covering himself with his hands would only be even more embarrassing. So he stood still, his cheeks flushed bright red.

Jack pushed his hair out of his face and peered around him while Bertie crowed. "Pulled two fish up wif one line an' look wot we got."

"Aye, a pair o' wet buggers!"

Jack got to his feet and threw an arm around James' neck, posing shamelessly. "An' yer never gonna see a finer pair. If I can't find me boots later, I swear I'll take over fer Cookie!"

Another round of guffaws echoed. "Couldn't be worse, Spanish. An' seems yer paler half got a stiffy down there. Wonder how that happened?"


On the quarterdeck, Hamilton watched their antics with a half-smile and considered the idea of putting his new pair to some small job in their current state of undress. Then his head gave a vicious throb and he turned the wheel over to Jensen. By the time he looked down again, they were gone.

They made their way down the hatch under a hail of catcalls and cheers. James glared every time, and every time, it just earned him more laughter and another pat on his arse or a grab for his prick. Any lingering amusement had quite faded into anger when they arrived at their berth, wrapping their blankets around themselves.

Jack, on the other hand, pranced and sashayed, winked and behaved like a prize trollop on display, laughing and swatting away hands. He rubbed James dry briskly. "Oh, relax, luv. We'll prolly find 'em hangin' up in the shrouds or danglin' from th' bowsprit. Just a prank," he giggled. "Lord, me whole crew once stuck me down in th'bilges in a lady's shift when I were in me cups," he confided in a whisper.

James huffed, but then he laughed, relieved to at least feel vaguely clean again. "No respect at all."

"'Course, there's respect, Jem! For th'very fine 'n' pale bits yer hiding!" Shadlow shouted. James shoved him away, wrapping himself in the blanket.
"Let's go treasure-hunting, then. Any hints for a poor, freezing sailor?"

"Follow Polaris," Shadlow winked, his eyes twinkling.

Jack smirked and bolted topside, without the blanket. He didn't much care if he was naked: he was well-used to going naked on deck and if they all wanted a show, he wasn't about to forget that he was Captain Jack Sparrow, even if he was just 'Spanish Jack' at the moment.

He waited until the whole lot of them had clambered back up and made a show of poking around the capstans and piles of rope. "Polaris, eh?" He walked over to where they had dived off the rail, assessing their direction, then looked up.

His woefully-shortened shirt was flapping, tied by the sleeves to the shrouds. "You bloody bastards!" He was giggling and shook his head, then vaulted into the rigging and scrambled up like a monkey at top speed.

James was right behind him, but the blanket caught in the rough hemp and nearly fell from his waist. After that happened twice, he rolled it up with a snarl and tossed it to the deck. "I'll want that one back, or I swear I'll have one of yours!" he shouted, collecting his clothing as he scrambled up.

"Go chase the golden Spaniard's arse!"

Hamilton watched them with a smirk. "A new Golden Hind, Norbury?" he called, sipping at a cup that was more than half-full of whiskey. He'd done his penance for drunkenness and reckoned that the Holy Mother herself would opt for a hair of the dog.

That Spanish Jack was completely daft, but he was an excellent navigator and quite the cartographer. Norbury wasn't bad either, he thought, watching James scale the rigging. Good choices, both. He reminded himself to thank Jackson's presscrew with a bit of cheer.

James and Jack were in the crow's nest, and James squatted to pull on his boots. He could still hear the mocking from below, but it was distant. He looked up at Jack, then tugged at his arm.

Jack sniffed at the air, starlight just peeking over the pink orange horizon. His hair blew back from his face as he turned west, his eyes shining. He pulled on his breeches and leaned against James. "Listen," He almost got lost in the horizon of James' eyes. "I gotta tell you somethin'. He's got letters, mate." Jack watched the vermilion streaks soften as the clouds disappeared into darkness.

He'd been very busy indeed in Hamilton's cabin, taking advantage of every solitary moment there to poke through its contents.

"Letters? I know he has one from Governor Hallem. But why letters?" It was a beautiful night, chill with just enough of a breeze to tousle James' hair. He forced his attention back to Jack, knowing very well that he had truly meant more than one letter. "So he's playing on two fronts? Who else? The French, or the Spanish?"

"He's playin' 'em all, luv. One from the frogs, courtesy o' Martinique, one from the Spanish---looked like the seal of Santo Domingo, and one outta Curacao." Jack's lips were warm against his ear and nipped gently.

James shifted away. "All?" he stuttered. "This is treason." Impressment was one thing, and much as he loathed it, in honesty, he had to admit the Navy stooped to the same methods. But this... "We need to do something."

Jack watched the colour in Norrington's face rise, his eyes starting to sparkle deep emerald. "Hush,
Jamie. We can't do a thing out here in th' middle o' the ocean, luv. Keep yer trap shut and be patient." Below them, the jeering became fractious. "C'mon. Best get back down there. Oh, look." He pointed into the darkening sky. "Look there. Venus." He bowed and dropped his boots to the deck with a shouted, "Heads!" and squeezed James' shoulder. "Patience."

"I can't believe I am letting you advise me to patience," James muttered, then grinned lopsidedly and gave Jack a kiss. "All right. Let's get down there before they keelhaul my blanket."

They were down quickly, and James scanned the deck for the culprit. Shadlow. A prankster with a childish attitude, worse than Jack. Also, his shirt was damp, likely from the wet paws with which Shadlow had taken it aloft.

James glared his best commodorial glare. Shadlow laughed, then slipped behind Bertie to hide, which might have worked better behind anyone not so skinny.

James could not help laughing. "Jeremy Shadlow, you are in for a reckoning."

Jack bounced around Shadlow. "An' why, pray tell are you sendin' us up the rigging? Yer the expert here. Or did you just want a good look!"

"And who's tellin' you it wasn't yer mate that wanted a good look and paid me to do it?" He grinned crookedly. "Besides, it wasn't me at all and you can't prove a thing." He nodded eagerly, then tossed the blanket back at James. "I'm hurt. I didn't throw your blanket overboard, and you still don't trust me."

James caught the blanket and checked it for weevils, suspicious when he found nothing. "Wretch," he muttered.

Jack tugged him below. "Keep yer rudder clear. All's well. Jamie, Hamilton's just another pirate, no matter wot he like's to call himself. Stow it. We'll worry 'bout it later." His voice was a low murmur. "Now, gimme another kiss."

James looked up and smiled, gesturing for Jack to get into the hammock. He tugged the thin blanket around him and bent down to kiss his forehead. "Good night, you rascal."

"Yer bein' a terrible tease!" Jack bounced in his hammock. "I meant a real kiss." He pulled James into the hammock on top of him. "Stop worryin'. You'll do yerself an injury. We'll get to the coast soon enough. Wait and see wot happens, eh? There's no sense hangin' two sheep for a goat or fightin' the tide with a rugbeater."

Jack's eyes danced, but they were tired. Nestled in the hammock, he fought sleep and pilfered two kisses for one before his eyes fluttered closed and his face went slack.

James waited for a moment, then shifted out of the hammock, bending to brush the hair from Jack's face. "Sleep well," he whispered, then crawled into his own hammock.

Chapter Six
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Six
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--XX.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

James learns a lesson as the true purpose of the voyage becomes clear, and gets a new perspective of his 'mate'.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtflw for her excellent beta.

There is another cast portrait in this chapter.
The wind held. With Jack at the helm and James aloft, the Chimaera made her way towards Dakar. Their lie had yielded to truth, and though the reactions were the same, James saw them differently. He laughed or blushed, often teased back.

Jack found himself worrying less about James stumbling and giving away their game. He was Norbury now; a fine sailor, a good mate, and a surprising one. Jack learned quickly to hide any soreness of a morning, not because he feared Hamilton or a tough watch, but because he didn't like to see those green eyes darken with concern and guilt.

No point in souring their stolen moments, not when James would make very sure that the soreness was worth it.

It was a day like most when James sat astride the topgallant, reclined against the furled stunsails and chewing on a string of hemp. It was a rare moment of leisure, and he gave only half his attention to splicing a torn gasket. The seas were calm, the weather was fine, and although the watches had not been shortened, there was less work.

Half-dozing in the sun, he started at the sudden cry of "Sail Ho!". They had passed by other ships on occasion, but always so far away that no thought of escape was possible. He straightened and slid his legs down into the footropes to look, but was unable make out anything without a spyglass.

Jack first reaction was to raise an eyebrow. Now, what, he thought, was so important about this little boat, eh? He watched as the deck exploded into activity at the order, "Set stunsails,' and a slow smile crept across his face. He grabbed the spyglass and took a long look, the ship a faint, wavering mirage on sundrenched waters.

"Get after her!" Hamilton plucked the glass from his hands. "G'wan, move it, Spanish!"

Jack looked up at the sky, checked the compass, then wrestled the wheel a few points larboard.

James waited until three more crewmen had made their way aloft and together they unrolled the stunsails and let them fall.
The breeze caught in them and even though the Chimaera already made good speed, he felt her shudder under the additional canvas, straining into the wind.

Jack grinned as the Chimaera picked up speed, the tiny ship on the horizon growing closer, more substantial with every minute. His gaze followed the new flag being hoisted. Spanish. His eyes were glittering with anticipation and below, he could hear the guncrews; the thump of the ports opening, the roll of the cannons into their firing positions. His pulse quickened. James might not know it, but he was about to enjoy his first taste of a real pirate raid.

After a last stare at the horizon, James climbed down hastily. Jack had been right about Hamilton's playing multiple sides, and might also know what this meant. James was no fool. He knew they where about to engage in battle, but with whom and why? He could see the ship now, only a small sloop, clearly not military.

He couldn't accept the only possible conclusion that his mind supplied and rushed onto the quarterdeck, supposedly taboo for him in times of engagement. To hell with it.

He was next to Jack within seconds. "What is happening here?"

Jack winked and glanced around the quarterdeck. "I do believe we're about to take that lovely little boat yonder, mate. G'wan, luv. Get yerself outta here before his Highness sees ya. And Jamie," Jack's eyes had a wild light banked in their depths, his voice low. "Don't do anythin' stupid. Follow yer orders and try not t'be noble. I know it's hard. Hsst! He's comin'."

Hamilton stalked back to the helm, his red coat blazing amid the whirl of activity. "Spanish, how long till we catch her?"

Jack feigned utter nonchalance. "Quarter hour, maybe a bit more. She's not makin' any evasive manoeuvres.

"Good. Keep it tha' way. I want yer feet nailed t'that deck. Don't ya dare leave the wheel, understand?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "Aye, sir. Come up on her larboard side and cut her sharp 'cross the bow?"


The decks were a flurry of activity, all hands called to attention, half of them clattering down the hatches to man the guns, a small group handing the others swords and pistols. It was tight and organised, obviously a well-disciplined routine. Only James stared wide-eyed at the well-used sword in his hands.

Bertie slapped his back. "C'mon. Ye look like you've never even held one of those. Ain't all that bad. Just swing over and get it over with."

James barely took notice as if still entranced by the sword, then wrenched away and made for the quarterdeck. There had to be some way to stop this madness.

A hand gripped his arm and hauled him back. "Don't do anything that'd make yer Jack a lonely lad, boy," Berkely hissed and shook him.

James stood, frozen and clutched the sword, swallowing hard. The ship, it became more and more evident, was no warship. It was a small vessel, and though it flew Spanish colours, it doubtlessly didn't work for any crown. It was too small, too civilian.
Jack watched the sails grow larger and kept the Chimaera on a steady course. Longthorpe tossed him a cutlass and he caught it without taking his left hand from the wheel. It would not be necessary, from what he could tell. The little ship was no match for the Chimaera's size and strength, not with her starboard guns already run out and primed. Like as not, it would take little more than a few volleys. Hamilton was in full battle-mode, his orders clipped and Jack's approval ratcheted up a bit. He'd been itching for real action for so long and immediately knew that Hamilton was well aware of what he was chasing. They were smack in the shipping lanes from the East to Europe. From their prey's size, Jack reckoned an African cargo, ivory or amber. She was too small for an Indian merchantman.

They heaved to, and under screams and shouts and the thunder of cannons, the Chimaeras swung over.

James was the first aboard, charging forward as though in blind zeal, fighting those who resisted the boarding. He fought with the flat of his sword or its hilt, disarming or knocking unconscious any opponents.

He was in the hazy rush of battle, kicking and lashing out, frantic to avoid any bloodshed.

It didn't take long. The crew were helpless against the Chimaeras and surrendered. James was shaking as the fire seeped out of him and the only blood was on his shoulder, not his sword.

Jack pouted from the helm. Again, he was missing all the fun: his place was at the helm to steady the assault and cut out sharp if necessary. They hadn't needed more than one broadside, neatly taking down the mainmast. The Rosa de Malaga was a pretty sloop and he was pleased they hadn't had to cause her more damage. He leaned over the wheel with the spyglass, curious to see what cargo she carried, and grinned as the boarding crew began to load box after long box. Ivory tusks, without doubt.

He strained to look for James, indistinguishable amid the smoke, the milling of attackers, and the Rosa's crew. "Keep yerself under control, Commodore. This ain't no Navy picnic," he muttered under his breath.

His brow furrowed as sudden shrieks cut through the din, female screams, and he was of half a mind to tie off the helm, Hamilton be damned, and go fetch Norrington back before he did something stupid.

Aboard the Rosa, James winced at the screams, knowing too well what they meant. He rushed astern to find two women, girls almost, dragged over the deck by several Chimaeras, among them Wheldon and Griffin. Those two bastards were thick as thieves.

James straightened and put himself in their way. "Cease that at once," he hissed, the panic from before yielding to true battle-lust.

He got only another female scream and nasty laughter in reply. He launched himself at them, pushing and shoving, trying to free the girls when Wheldon hit him between the shoulderblades and two more men held him down, wrenching his arms behind his back.

Wheldon laughed and kicked his stomach. "Shut up, Longshanks. Not everyone here's a bugger with no sense of fun."

James struggled to his feet, freeing himself for a second, then found himself pressed up against the bulwark, Wheldon just in front of his face. James spat. "And not everyone is a rapist."
Wheldon punched him hard, still laughing. James struggled and kicked, but couldn't free himself. He knew that sense of dread. Not again. He heard the rip of fabric and another scream, and panicked. He elbowed and bit, scratching when he could, heedless of the pain as his arms were wrenched further back, his stomach and face defenceless against the blows. "Stop!" he bellowed again and again, but he could only watch helplessly as Griffin tore off one girl's shift.

There was a scuffle behind the cowering girls, a flash of red and the flat of Hamilton's sword slapped against Griffin's back. "Belay that and load th' cargo," he snarled.

The tension was almost unbearable as they stared each other down, but no one could have faced those piercing eyes without quaking, and the Irishman was not one to brook any disobedience in the middle of a raid.

He bent down and picked up a shawl from the deck, presenting it to the weeping girl with a courtly bow. "Mis apolizas, señoritas. Vuelva por favor a sus cabinas. Le significama ningun daño." His eyes raked over James, the grumbling crewmembers and his lip curled, turning back towards the captain of the Rosa.

Jack watched through the spyglass and smiled as Longthorpe emerged from the Rosa's Great Cabin with a sheaf of papers. "Thought so, you sneaky Irish whoreson. And I'll bet you sell the lot back at a profit, too. Very clever."

James leaned against the bulwark, still shaking, staring at the back of Hamilton's coat until he caught himself and straightened with a wince, blankly escorting the two girls back to the cabin.

Jack had already calculated how fast he could get the Chimaera back on course, with a few alterations to pick up some speed. He searched through the lens for James anxiously.

The hair on the back of his neck prickled and he wheeled around, fending off a very large and sharp Spanish knife in the hands of an equally large, wild-eyed Spanish sailor. He shoved hard and lifted the cutlass, wavering, eyes narrowed. "Por favor, luv. Trust me, you really don't wanna be doin' that."

The sailor spat and lunged for him, the knife stabbing between the spokes of the wheel where Jack had been standing. He whirled and lashed out with the blade. "Drop the bleedin' knife, mate. Por favor, no me....aww...your funeral." He spun away from the heavy blade, and tried to knock it out of the man's hand.

Bloody persistent idiot.

Jack was forcing him in a circle when the sailor leapt at him like a maddened animal. Jack was so surprised he took a step back, eyes wide, saw his opening and took it, dancing to the stern. He parried another lunge, then stepped aside sharply and watched as the sailor tumbled overboard, leaving the big knife wobbling in the rail.

Jack saluted gravely and pulled the blade free, examining it with a grin. "Told you."

He scrambled back to the wheel and pulled at it hard to avoid a near-collision, watching the business aboard the Rosa impatiently. "C'mon, mate. You got wot ya wanted. Now get on with it!" He stuck both cutlass and knife through his belt, under the short, flapping billows of his shirt and squinted, picking out James' tall figure. He stiffened at the stain on his sleeve.

James was still aboard the Rosa, staring blankly at the Chimaeras hauling away their loot, at the Rosas cowering fearfully on deck, watching their Captain's negotiations anxiously.
Longthorpe gave him a small shove. "Get yerself back."

He obeyed and swung back over. The crew were busy stashing away the loot and he winced at their cheers, turned and rushed up to the quarterdeck. "Bloody hell, he whispered.

Jack stared at his sleeve, scarlet from shoulder to wrist. "Jamie, yer hurt!" He peered up from under his lashes. "How bad?"

"Not too." James lifted his good hand and dropped it again as he looked over Jack's shoulder, just in time to see the draggled sailor heave himself over the Rosa's rail. "What the hell?"

"I--oh shite!" Jack jumped back the few steps to grab the wheel, stumbling to haul himself upright on the spokes. "Spanish hero. Shoulda got a medal."

In that moment, James realised that Jack Sparrow was not an act. He truly was ridiculous, even in the middle of such noise and horror. Jack grimaced over the helm. "But your arm! James, wot happened over there?"

James managed a crooked smile. "Just a little scratch, only Wheldon and Griffin seemed determined to make it worse. Bloody bastards," he hissed. "There were two girls aboard the Rosa," he added. "Without Hamilton, they'd…." He gulped.

"Ahh." The dark eyes were searching. "No time to talk. Get that looked at, luv." He pressed James' hand, apparently unconcerned about the raid but most distressed over James' wound.

His eyes crinkled and his grin became wolfish. "Our Irishman isn't gonna have the loss of good Catholic maidenheads laid at his door, mate."

And that was clearly Captain Jack Sparrow's professional opinion.

James laughed softly. "I would rather not ask you to do it better." He didn't leave, sticking close despite the blood dripping from his sleeve. He was strangely apart from the crew now, easing away from the fury of battle and shuddering at the loud cheers that celebrated their successful haul, at the sheer joy he heard in their voices when Hamilton swung back over and ordered double grog rations.

The quarterdeck seemed the best place and so he stayed there considering that, no matter what name, Jack was most pirate of them all.

Hamilton immediately made for the helm and stopped, staring at James. "Wha' re ya doin' here, Mr. Norbury? Get off th' quarterdeck. Spanish, get us back on course an' clear o'this mess." He stopped, his coat swinging around his knees and stared from the gash in the rail to the large knife in Jack's belt. "Wha' happened here?"

Jack met his eyes evenly, his smile dangerous. "Damned fool decided t'take on the enemy all by his onesies. Not his best decision, as it were. A bit of a cold shower seemed most expedient. Good haul, Cap'n. My congratulations."

Hamilton's blue eyes narrowed. "Not a drop of blood, eh Jack? Wha'd you say yer surname was again?"

James had been reluctant to leave and was immediately relieved he hadn't. What he had to say was difficult enough, and if it would help to allay Hamilton's suspicions, it might be easier on his pride.
"My apologies for the interruption, Sir. I merely want to thank you for your intervention aboard the Rosa. You have earned my respect, Sir."

Hamilton turned, eyebrows raised. His gaze danced between Jack and James. "Did I now, English? I must say, ya took a few blows to protect th' ladies." His grin was a sharper version of Jack's. "Good work. Now get that shoulder checked an' get off my quarterdeck, laddie."

His voice rose as he strode down the steps. "I want this deck spotless, ya bastards. Move it."

Jack exhaled and made a little bow to Fortune, who still seemed to like him. His eyes twinkled at James.

He held the Chimaera steady and sped them back on course, dipping into the heart of the current to take advantage of a sweet little wind that sent her flying over the water. A grand ship, a lovely girl. Not his girl, alas. He patted the wheel gently. "Yer quite the lady, Madame Phantom. An' ole Jack likes you just fine," he murmured.

Under Matthew's gawking eyes and undying admiration, the surgeon stitched James up, cleaned the blood away and bandaged the cut, declaring James' shirt beyond saving.

James laughed darkly and begged thread and needle to sew the tear, although he could do nothing about the faint pink stains that remained. It served to cheer the others who had taken minor injuries. Their mood was good, and the only 'casualty' had been James' shirt.

The watch bell sounded and Jack patted the wheel again. "Until t'morrow, milady." He headed down to the galley amid an unusual crowd choking the causeways.
On his way from sickbay to the galley, James suddenly found his path blocked by Griffin, Wheldon and one of their friends. "Get out of my way," he hissed.

"I think not, Longshanks. Thought ye'd play the noble hero, eh?" With a crash, James found himself shoved against the bulwark, his head ringing, and then Griffin's foul breath was in his face. "I don't like wanton buggers spoiling my fun."

James spat into his face, struggling violently, until Wheldon punched his shoulder, making him hiss out a strangled gasp of pain.

Jack heard the scuffling and swung over the hand rail to the deck below, grabbing a rope and pulling that lovely Spanish blade from his belt. He crept down the causeway, then lashed out with the doubled rope in hand, slamming backs and necks.

Griffin was on top of James, squeezing the breath out of him and before Wheldon or the others could gather their thoughts, Jack had Griffin's head pulled back by the hair, the blade at his throat. "Sure you want t'be doing that, mate?"

He kicked out at an interfering hand and swung the rope in a vicious backhand. "Stand down."

"Fuck off, ya Spanish molly. Get 'im!"

Jack slammed Griffin's head against the bulwark and whirled to his feet, tossing the knife and catching it with obvious practise. "C'mon then."

He beckoned Wheldon. "Wotsamatter? Shite in yer britches? You were brave enough t' go fer a coupla drabs and an unarmed man, ya gutless swine. Donatelli backed away and grabbed hold of Wheldon, as others rushed from the galley. James scrambled back on his knees and coughed violently, gasping for breath and shuddering. He reached for the bulwark and sat up, letting Bertie pull him to his feet. He coughed again and spat blood, but when he wanted to put himself between Jack and Griffin, Bertie hauled him back.

Jack spun back to Griffin, his black eyes mad, lips smiling. "Ya wanna play pirate, little man? I'll show ya how it's done." His voice was soft, laughing and chill. "C'mon then. Want the knife?" Jack tossed it from one hand to the other, taunting. "Think I can't take ya down without?"

Cookie creaked his joints faster than he had in a long while. "Spanish! Stow it. Now."
Jack wheeled on him. "Stay outta this!" he snarled, like a cat deprived of its prey.

Griffin shook his head and lumbered to his feet, circling warily in the tiny space. "You bloody foreign bastard, I'll wring yer half-breed neck." He rushed at Jack, thick hands pulling at his hair, scrabbling for his throat.

Jack laughed and danced backwards, slashing at Griffin, when Hamilton roared from the stairs, "Wha th' hell is goin' on here?"

Jack had Griffin pinned against the bulwark, the knife poised at big man's bulging neck again, his eyes seductive. "I'd really hoped fer a longer dance, luv. But if you insist."

James wrenched himself away from Bertie and rushed to Jack's side. His face looked wild: blood dripped from his nose and lips, bruises already staining his throat blue. "Stop it, Jack. He's not worth it." He held out his hand. "Not worth it," he repeated urgently, well aware that Hamilton and half the crew were watching.

Jack's eyes narrowed. "Yer a very naughty boy, Griffin." He shook the knife the way a scolding wife wielded a ladle. "Very rude of ya." James took the blade from his hands and he turned to face Hamilton. "Fine bloody thing when you can't--"

The single sensible bat in Jack's belfry flapped just in time. "--Get t'supper without a crowd in the causeway. Evidently, yer little crewmen here's got a bad case o'blue balls, Captain."

Hamilton strode forward and held out his hand for the knife.

Jack took a breath, pressed his own together and hid under his hair.

Hamilton turned to face the culprits down. "What in Jesus and Mary's name happened? Griffin, I think ye've worn me patience dry t'day. Brig. You too, Wheldon. Rest o' you wanna join them?"

The others shook their heads. "Good. Norbury, wha' happened?"

James wiped his lips with his sleeve. The linen was deep crimson once more. "I was on my way from sickbay to the galley when I found myself smashed against the bulwark. I think you know why as well as I do, sir. Jack came in and helped me."

Hamilton nodded grimly. "I want th'whole bloody crew on deck now. And you!" He turned to Jack, who was still standing with his head bowed, hands clasped together like an errant schoolboy. "I'll see you in the Great Cabin after." He wheeled up the stairs.

Jack turned to James. "Yer bleedin' again, luv." He pulled at the stained sleeve and shook his head. "You've gone an' tore 'em." He wouldn't look up from under his hair.

James laughed softly and draped his good arm around Jack. "Thank you," he murmured, the causeway suddenly eerily silent as all the crew rushed topside. "I've certainly never seen you like this."

It was the first time he had seen Jack truly violent, a wild glint in his eyes. For him? He shivered a bit and leaned on Jack as they made their way topside. "I don't know what they would have done had you not arrived. I owe you."

Jack was quivering but he laughed softly. "No, they'd probably have kissed you senseless. Hell, James, yer arm's a mess again." He ignored the first remarks. "Some men shouldn't be 'way from the ladyfolk so long. Can you hold on until His Highness finishes chidin' us? It'll need to be stitched
again. Poor luv." Jack's mind was still in a white haze and he forced himself back to the deck. "James?"

He stopped and suddenly leaned up for a bruising kiss.

It tasted of blood and James gasped into it, clinging for a moment. As they pulled apart, he wiped the red droplets from Jack's lips with his thumb. "I'll be fine. Thanks to you." He bent close for another kiss, parting reluctantly to ease his arm around Jack's shoulders, accepting rather more help than he needed to get up the stairs. "So let's hear what our good Captain has to say and hope you haven't gotten yourself into too much trouble."

Topside, Hamilton was in a fine Irish temper and spent a good ten minutes swearing the air blue before he turned to Griffin and Wheldon. "You two, a dozen each next watch and deck duty. An' yer losin' a third o' your shares fer this. I've made me terms with you all very clear. No shite, no rapin' and no drunkenness on watch. We're not bloody pirates and that's not so terrible hard t'follow. Now, get back t'work. The rest o' you lot get below and don't ya dare disturb me peace or I swear I'll string up one outta every ten o' ya. Spanish, cabin. Now."

Jack squeezed James' arm and went without a word.

James stared after him, hoping that Jack would not suffer for helping him. The thought would be too ironic. But blessedly, Jack hadn't actually done anything but fought back, with a strength and wildness that had surprised even James. He knew better than to underestimate Jack, but still, he would never have expected it of the lean and generally good-natured trickster.

He went below to have his shoulder stitched once more, earning an eyeroll from Dr. Nevill and another proud stare from Matthew, and then topside again, to wait for Jack.

Jack was still breathing hard and struggling to compose himself despite the tornado of flotsam in his head. He bit his lip and eyed the small chests on the table, his fingers itching. Potential plunder always cleared his thoughts wonderfully.

Hamilton slammed the door. "You bloodthirsty little bastard! Trust a Spanish half-breed t'pinch a good blade. I'm waitin' fer an explanation."

Jack took a breath and wheeled into action. "Came down fer supper an' heard noises below and damn me if the three of 'em weren't settin' on Jamie like a pack o' dogs. Well, I couldn't just stand there, could I? Wouldn't have been proper at all. I grabbed th' rope and just kinda saw red, Cap'n. I mean, it were James."

He swayed closer, his hands moving like a snakecharmer's. "Must gone clear outta my head. Griffin had both hands 'round his neck an' the others were hittin' him. But, all things bein' equal an' life bein' wot it is, I do think it all ended well. I mean, everyone's in good health, no serious damage to flesh or bone--" He stopped to check his success rate. It wasn't good: Hamilton's eyes were icy as he slapped the big blade against his palm.

"And that Spaniard?"

"Him?" Jack shrugged. "Swung over whilst you were in the midst of your very impressive negotiations on the Rosa. Came up behind me. Can I help it if he tripped himself overboard?"

"If he came up behind you, how did ya know, boyo?"

Hamilton watched him for a long minute, his eyes narrowed.

"I don't like fightin' aboard me ship, Spanish Jack."

"No sir."

"I don't like blood on me decks."

"T'be sure, sir."

"Ye don't miss a trick in a fight, do ya?"

"Sorry, sir"

"Get outta here. An' don't let me catch ya fightin' again or ye'll face th' grate. Understood?"

"Inescapably, sir."

Jack got himself out of the Cabin and breathed a sigh of relief. Hamilton was suspicious as all hell, and this grace wasn't any kind of assurance, but, for now, it would do.

James stood there, waiting in the shadows. His one arm hung limp, and his face was bruising in various shades of blue. At least all of his teeth were in place as he smiled shyly, reaching out with his good arm. "How did it go?"

"Coulda been worse. I think he's gettin' a mite curious." Jack looked James in the face for the first time since the fight and touched a raw spot on his cheek with gentle fingers. "Poor luv. How's the grub t'day. Don't tell me."

"I wouldn't know. I've been waiting for you since Nevill sewed me up again. Unfortunately, I doubt that Cookie spontaneously developed any sort of cooking skills." James grinned weakly and kissed the inquisitive finger.

Jack's head crested against his shoulder, his hand stroking lazy circles against tense shoulders. "Got a bit carried away, did I?"

For a moment he rested, his fingers light. "Don't answer that. Let's eat. I don't care wot it bloody tastes like although my bowels may not last much longer." He plucked at James' sleeve and they headed down to the galley.

"Do me a favour, Jack. At least try to behave inconspicuously. Yes, I do have an inkling how difficult that is for you. Just do it."

Supper was eerily quiet, the galley mostly empty. They both ate in silence, James sipping thoughtfully from his grog. A second mug stood before him. The reward of a successful raid. It was still untouched when he rose with an enormous yawn. "It has been a long day. Time for the hammock, I think."

He left Jack sitting there with a smile for an apology, and made for their berth where he tossed himself into his hammock, grimly watching the dark crossbeams sway above him.

The ship groaned and shuddered, his shoulder had begun to throb, but he ignored the pain. What he couldn't forget was that he'd taken that cut attacking the Rosa. A civilian ship, for God's sake!

They'd had women and children aboard, and none of them had been a trained soldier. The one hit had been luck, and only struck home because he'd been unwilling to fight with the deadly skill he
possessed. Had he wielded the sharp end of his sword, his opponent wouldn't have stood a chance.

James shuddered. There were softer and louder snores all around, they all slept peacefully, without a worry in the world. Men he'd eaten and laughed and worked with; pirates. Did that make him one, unwanted and unwilling?

It did, he realised. A man aboard a pirate vessel, involved in a pirate raid, no matter how bloodless, was a pirate.

He'd always thought it a big matter, a firm decision. It hadn't been that at all. It had been his own cowardly fear for his safety aboard the ship, and that he'd not killed anyone and sought to protect the women was a poor excuse. It had happened, without any true choice. It wasn't a fundamental decision, he had slipped into it, forced by circumstance.

How many men he'd hanged with as much or as little guilt as his own? He didn't think of himself as a bad man, even now. He didn't feel like a pirate, not in the way he'd always used the word.

Jack looked after James' back and heaved a small sigh, then, never one to waste a drink, dawdled over the abandoned grog. He rather expected that the raid would set the Commodore off on one of his moral tears, and figured it was better to let that dog lie for a while.

Poor Jamie was only just realising how easily one could slip from lily-white to condemned. He thought about the Spaniard and grinned. No sense being unprepared for any of life's less pleasant exigencies. As far as he was concerned, the Spaniard and he? A ducking for a lunge: they were square. And James would get over it.

He toyed with a bit of wood, picked up from the carpenter's stores, thought about the pilfered knife in his boot and decided against having it taken away from him, just in case. "Hey Cookie? Got a small blade I can borrow?"

Cookie frowned at him. "Wot fer, Spanish?"

"Bit o' whittling is all. I'm bored."

"It stays here in my galley."

"Course, luv." Jack settled on the bench sideways and started working the wood, roughly cutting it into the shape of a ship. Not any ship, but his Pearl. He edged her basic lines away and finished a third mug of grog--James' leftovers--before he yawned and handed the knife back to Cookie.

"Lemme see."

Jack handed him the piece and he grinned. "Want me t'keep it here fer ya?"

"That'd be lovely, mate. Thanks fer the loan."

"Yer a funny one, Jack. Go get some shit eye. Ye've get th' day free t'morra and nightwatch. Plenty o'time to play with this."

Jack handed it over and headed down to quarters. Almost everyone was already asleep and he slipped into his hammock, glancing at James. He seemed peaceful enough. A long night and a longer day tomorrow with little to do but whittle and try not to think about the Pearl. The day's raid had made him most dreadfully heartsick for want of her. Really, he thought, someone should write a bloody play. Pearl an' me. Like bloody Romeo and Juliet. Always getting parted by unforeseen circumstance.
He tugged off his breeches and swung into his hammock, staring at nothing.

James was lost in thoughts, his mind whirling in a circle, acutely hearing even the slightest sound. The rustle of clothing, the small creak of the hooks, even the soft hiss of Jack's breathing. He remained still for a while longer, then turned over and opened his eyes, brushing his hand against Jack's shoulder. "Is it always like this?" he whispered. "So...rushed?"

Jack rolled over to face him. "Wot do you mean, luv?" There was a soft rustling further along the line of hammocks and Jack put one finger to James' lips, standing to stick one leg into his breeches. He beckoned James down to the orlop deck.

It was dank and silent save for Gentile's snoring and Jack slid to the deck against the bulwark, under the swinging lantern. "Now, wot d'ya mean by 'rushed'?"

James chewed on his lip, and after a brief hesitation, sat down, resting his arms against his folded legs. He almost said he'd meant nothing by his words, but there was still that nagging curiosity inside him that would not rest.

It was similar when he'd first killed a man, when his then-Captain had taken him aside for a short word or two's encouragement. And Jack was the only one he could ask. "To engage in piracy. Do something you never thought you would."

Jack's smile was slow and soft. "Life's a funny thing and it tosses breakers at ya. Sometimes, there's no time to think and sometimes you do wot ya must t'survive. Think it's a lot like the sea. Never stops movin' and changin'," He smiled and reached out to fingercomb James' tangled hair. "Now, these lads. They don't think themselves pirates at all. Most that turn to it have little choice. 'Tis all fate, luv. Keep yer wits about ya and you bob like a cork. If not, you sink."

James turned to him, his face drawn with anguish, resignation creeping into his eyes. "Jack, they were helpless. Women, children. I wager that no more than five of them ever held a sword in their hands before." He shuddered. "And they all sleep. Peacefully. What if this hadn't been so bloodless? Would anyone look back even for a second?"

Jack's hand stilled in his hair. "No, Jamie, they wouldn't. Because ev'ry man is out for himself, under all the fancy talk, even judges and kings. If the Rosa ventured out without knowin' how t'defend themselves, it's their bad judgment. Worse if they knew they'd have women and kiddies aboard. You really aren't that naive."

"Not like that. Not like that at all." James shuddered and plastered himself to the bulwark, his eyes closed. "The law... it serves to protect people from just that. Do we really have to act like animals, the strong preying on the weak and nobody caring a whit to prevent it? Do wrong out of the fear of being wronged by another?"

"Aye, we do because nothin' protects the poor an' weak from those laws. They hang lads of fourteen fer stealin' a shilling when they're starvin', or ship 'em into slavery to th' Colonies. Live that fer a fortnight and anyone becomes an animal. Those laws only protect the rich an' don't do shite fer anyone who don't have two sets o'clothes and a family pew at the parish church, luv. For most, it's a kind of slavery, caught between necessity and the noose. Does the law do aught for 'em? Protect them from fat landowners with greedy hands? From being sold like cattle into 'prenticeships or worse?"

Jack's eyes were serious, any laughter in them almost hidden, and that contemptuous. "Take those women? Would most men have given tuppence if they'd been in rags, drabs with faces old at
twenty? Not bloody likely. Folks like me---us---" His hand waved. "We don't mean a thing t' the landed gentry. Any one of us is less valuable than a newborn heifer."

He smiled again, his eyes soft. "You've never been one of us. Y'really don't know how hard life can be, mate. Not really."

"I always thought I did. I don't have to know a man to help him. I want to protect as many as I can, simple as that." James sounded exhausted, not the laughing mate nor the stern Commodore. He looked so sad, his face swollen and bruised, eyes bright with a lament that was worse than any tears. Lost, somehow, as if he had suddenly realised that the task he had set for himself was worthy of Sisyphus.

"James, don't take on so. 'Tis just the way of things." Jack curled against him, an animal seeking warmth. "I'd a feelin' today was hard on you. Lemme tell you a little story and maybe it will help, maybe not. " His fingers wandered into James' hair again, smoothing tangles absently. "Once there was a lad, no one special, just a kid born on the wrong side o' the blanket. Not his fault, aye? He was left alone, very young, middle of a London rookery, if you can credit such a thing."

Jack's fingers tightened, then dropped away from James' shoulders, his eyes distant. "Damn, if that weren't a death sentence, I dunno wot is. Anyways, he manages, with a bit o' very savvy assistance, t'get off to sea on a merchant ship."

Jack stretched out along James' side, his voice low. "He's used t'bein' cold and hungry. He already knows you gotta make your own way. He learns fast and turns into a damned fine sailor."

"Nine years old and he's chartin' across the Indian Ocean. Bloody hell. Ship's taken by pirates and he's got a choice. Join up or the sword. Or worse, an' don't tell me you don't know wot I mean. So....where's the law? The merchant's too greedy t'arm his bloody vessel? I mean, there's choices and more choices, but they don't always lead to wine an' roses, aye? Wot would you have done?"

James touched his shoulder lightly and didn't answer for a while. "The same, Jack. But there are men forcing others to make that choice, and they must be fought. Or it will never stop." He half-curled himself around Jack, reclined on the hard deck, staring at the far corner. "Let me tell you another story."

Jack hissed. If he blushed, knowing he had not told the whole truth, it was hidden in James' shoulder. He'd once taunted young Turner with having pirate in his blood, but no one knew that better than Jack. He'd been born to piracy, spawned in the midst of a gale on a ship filled with stolen goods, himself and his dam included. His arms tightened.

"There is another boy. His parents are married, just barely, but they do right by each other and him. They aren't rich, but the child is always well-kempt, well-fed. It's a day like any other when there is a pirate raid in their home-port. But on that day, the husband doesn't come back. They never find him, only his fishing boat, filled ankle-deep with blood."

"The wife grieves, but she comes to seek help because she cannot find her son. Maybe he's playing with other children by the docks, he's a lively boy. At least that is what she keeps repeating in a low voice, like a prayer."

"The Navy helps. A ship is giving pursuit, and those aboard are relieved, because they don't have to witness the destruction left behind. A Lieutenant... he is young, just barely arrived, commands the reconstruction."

"And then they find him. The boy. He's huddled into a corner, slumped in his own blood. His throat
is slit. In his hands, he seems to be clutching something. The Lieutenant, he bends close to see what it is and..." James fell silent for a moment, staring into that corner, trembling. "And they cut off his fingers. His mother said he wore a copper shell, a talisman around his neck. It was gone."

"For God's sake, he was a child, Jack! Not even as old as Matthew. If they wanted that damn thing, they could have just taken it! But no. They slaughtered him like a pig, and left him lying there like one. Is it still a man who can do that, or a beast? I couldn't help the crying mother. No one could. But I will be damned to hell if I don't do everything so that no other mother has to suffer that."

"I know, luv. It isn't fair or right. None of it. Yer tiltin' at windmills." He could feel how Norrington trembled and sighed. Somehow, he always got it wrong and he'd only meant to try and ease James' distress. "You can't change it, least not all at once, James. Or by yer onesies."

"But I can try," James muttered into the darkness, then lay still. They remained like that for a while, motionless. Then James pulled away, his face like a tousled child's that had seen too much. He rose and held out a hand, attempting a lopsided smile. "Let's get back to the berth. And Jack? Thank you."

It wasn't really better, but even if the words had clawed yet more at him, they had also served to heal a little; to make him understand that there was more than one line a man could cross. That the step to pirate might be smaller than that to monster.

"Why go back, luv?" Jack peeked from under his hair. "Quieter here. Bertie snores like an elephant with quinsy."

James laughed softly, a strange sound hanging in the air between them. But he let himself be pulled down, curling up on his good side, and he didn't protest when Jack settled his head into his lap.

He shuddered a bit, seeing too much behind closed eyes, but then, he shifted closer. Eventually, the lines on his face eased and his breath evened as exhaustion overcame memory and he fell asleep.

Jack was humming softly, a song learned long ago in some forgotten port, his fingers wandering through James hair, stroking gently as though trying to wipe away hard memories and harder reality.

He smiled when James snored softly and lounged back, letting his thoughts wander with his fingers. Poor James, so shocked at such a cruel reality. Cruel? Oh yes, that Jack agreed. But James had never seen two year olds toddling in the Thames mud, amid the sickening flotsam of the city, searching for odds and ends, anything that could be sold. James was like those boys in poems and stories, filled with ideals and passion. Jack envied him the ideals and saved his passion for more personal goals.

As always, while thinking, he'd begun to play with his own hair, tugging at the lovelock. An idea sparked in his head and he pulled at the coin braided into one lock. He picked at the twine, painstakingly working it free until it came loose in his fingers. An old coin, from a place far distant, worn and softened. Some clever blacksmith had hammered a loop through it. His thoughts strayed briefly to his wild boyhood, then to the Turner lad.

Gently, he lifted the lightest, sunbleached lock of James' hair and braided it, sliding the thick loop through and finishing the braid with a twist of hair entwined with hair. Soft, soft despite salt water and sweat, bright as a sunbeam and born of a luxury unknown to the pirate who wove a memory into its strands.

Jack's hands fell still, and he, too, dozed, until he slid sideways, nuzzling James' knee.
They were granted a few hours of peace, the Chimaera rocking softly beneath them. James' sleep was blissfully dreamless, and when he woke, he knew that it was morning, and he also knew he couldn't just lie there.

He carefully disentangled himself to rise and stretch, raking two fingers through his hair. They caught in the braid and he stood, pulling it to the front.

He saw the coin, looked down at Jack, then at the coin again and smiled, tossing the braid back with the rest of his hair, smoothing his hand over it again. The weight of it was strange, but somehow comforting. Jack was still snoring, curled around the empty space James had left behind.

He folded his coat and carefully slid it beneath Jack's head, then rushed topside.

Jack slept late into the morning, a rare luxury, and Gentile, finding him on the deck, kicked him awake to stagger back to his hammock. He sank into it like a stone, rocking with the heave of the Chimaera, in dream-communion with her, with the Pearl and the deep.

When he finally opened his eyes, it was pitch black but he knew it was late. He could smell it, cutting through the bilge and sweat. Yawning, he stretched and got to his feet like a mechanical doll; lighting the lantern, swiping at face and armpits, touching up his eyes, extinguishing the flame to make his way to the galley.

He was still dozing over a cup of weak tea when the bell sounded and the day crew descended for their meal.

Suddenly, there was an arm on his shoulder and James grinned down at him. "Good afternoon, slugabed."

Jack blinked sleepily. "Makin' hay whilst the sun shines, luv! How's the arm?" He gulped down the rest of his tea.

James winked. "Dreadful. So bad that I can't be put to work, in fact. Cookie was glad of someone he could put to peeling potatoes." He'd spent an easy day in the galley, helping Cookie when he needed anything, sipping tea and trying to bury his shock under a renewed determination to escape as soon as possible. He set down two trenchers and went to get their grog. "Yet, I refuse any association with... this."

Jack guffawed. "I'm sure it'll be worse than ever. Can't see you wavin' spoons and spits about, luv." The words fell from his lips so easily and he hid a sharp thrill of pain at the sound of their voices, easy and companionable. It had been so long ago he'd almost forgotten...

Jack forgot what he was forgetting and grinned at James, vaulting over the bench to pad around the galley. "Cooks, you got that bit of kindlin' I were workin' on?"

The cook handed it over with the knife. "Careful there, where that knot cuts through, or ye'll have a very short mainmast." His face crinkled into the smile, suggestive of a half-dried prune.

Jack punched his arm and took his treasure back to the table, sending splinters flying as he worked. "Glad Hamfist gave you a day's respite, mate. I do wish you could come topside with me tonight. Stars'll be lovely." His tiny Pearl was taking shape slowly, her stern rising over imaginary waves, her mizzen beginning to emerge from the grain of the wood.

James eyed his trencher warily, as if afraid its contents would jump to bite him, then looked up with a crooked grin. "I'm surprised he did. The second time he's surprised me in two days. Not that I shall complain." It seemed strange, to despise and respect a man at the same time. But then, had his hatred...
of Jack not given way to a grudging respect first, then to friendship?

Sipping in silence, he watched Jack work, waiting until he paused for a moment to lean closer. "That's a fine bit of work." James' voice dropped lower still, an intimate whisper, and he touched his hand lightly to the carving. "You miss her, don't you?"

Jack couldn't help but sigh. "Somethin' awful, luv. But it'll keep."

He dug at the wood a little more then put it aside and nibbled on a biscuit. "You feelin' better, James?" Jack knew better than to speak in definites so publicly.

"Well enough." Hurt, pain, misery and despair; none of that would help them escape or change anything for the better. James strove hard to remember that. "Even if my hair feels rather heavy all of a sudden." He smiled, almost grinning.

Jack tweaked the braid. "Thought you needed a bit of a present after bein' such a great hero yesterday." He'd given more than James knew in that coin, pilfered more than a dozen years earlier when Bootstrap himself had braided it into his black mane.

The watch bell sounded and he rose from the table, pressing the carving and knife into James' hands. "Give 'em to Cookie. He'd never forgive me if I lost one of his knives." His eyes were dark mysteries. "Mañana, eh luv?" He gave James a swift kiss and went topside to the fresh evening air. Venus winked at him below a crescent moon.

Jack loved being topside at night. He spent most nights on the Pearl at the wheel or lounging on deck, staring at the sky and talking to his favourite stars. It wasn't much different aboard the Chimaera this night, except for James.

He looked up into the spangled sky and winked at Orion chasing the Seven Sisters. He confided in the Little Bear, bowed to Queen Cassiopeia and watched them drop away into the milk white dawn. The odd crewman wavered in and out of his sightline as he steered her eastward. The sky slowly became white, then gold. No red morning sun to cause any worry. When the ship's bell sounded, he was still wide awake.

He turned the wheel over the Jensen, chatted a bit about the niceties of her rudder, then descended to the galley to grab a cup of Cookie's sludge.

He gulped down the coffee, thick and bitter from the salvaged grounds and hoped they would lay in a fresh supply soon. Still half-smiling at the night, he was just heading to his hammock when he ran into Berthot in the causeway. "Hey Bertie, where's James? Thought you lot would be chowin' down by now."

Berthot grinned at him. He was missing a tooth and Jack raised an eyebrow: he must have missed a barney belowdecks. "Still sleepin'. Cap'n's got him off duty fer a day or two. Such a fuss over a scratch." He winked. "Still on nighwatch?"

"Aye. I'm warnin' you about the coffee, mate." Jack shuddered. "'Tis awful." He faked a yawn and waved vaguely. "I'm fer sleep, mate."

In the endless night of their quarters, the lantern burned like a solitary beacon as most of the men grumbled and dressed in hushed quiet. Three hammocks still hung low. Jack hauled himself into his and tried to find a comfortable position. He rolled to the left, to the right, then lay flat on his back, staring at the ceiling. He almost rolled himself onto the deck.

There was no way he was going to be able to sleep for hours. Curiously, he peeked at James,
snoring softly and enjoying the luxury of extra rest.

Jack pouted and spent another restless hour until, in the dead silence of the crowded space, he sat up, reaching out to touch James' cheek.

James sniffed and stirred, throwing off his blanket and hunkering down in another dream. Jack grinned as another of his mad ideas took hold of him.

He slipped out of the hammock and carefully straddled James, his thieving fingers working on buttons until he had his object free.

Whatever dreams Norrington was enjoying were clearly of the less than angelic kind, for his prick rose with the barest touch and Jack shuffled himself back until he could balance between the long legs. For a moment, the hammock swung and he nearly sent them both tumbling to the floor, then he leaned down and sucked.

James' lips, soft with sleep, parted into a sigh, and his bruised face crinkled, then softened again as he gave a low sound, almost a purr. His body stretched and he squirmed closer, the hammock rocking unsteadily.

He sighed again and suddenly tensed, his eyes flying wide open, head shooting from the pillow. "Jack? You are going to wake everyone and I am not washed and oh bloody hell."

His only answer was another long slurp and his head fell back again. A dream, yes, it had to be.

A damned good dream. With a groan, he scrambled up, legs dangling over the side of the hammock to make room.

Jack was so used to sweat and bilge, alleys and backwater ports that a little thing like human stink was but a minor obstacle. James deserved every bit of his attention and he knew more than a few tricks that would open the most jaded eyes. He settled himself between James' legs and let his tongue do the caressing; up the shaft, swirling around the head, down to feel the veins pulse against his lips. His head bobbed, hair jangling and tickling as he pushed it over one shoulder.

James' mouth closed in a gulp, then fell open for a gasp, a long moan, helpless little sounds that only made the soft wet sucking even louder in his ears. No dream could be this...ohh...excruciating.

Only the hammock's wild swing made him notice that he was thrusting, and he bit his lip to stop it. He'd not been pleasured in this fashion in a very, very long time, and the whore who'd done it then had certainly not been capable of that trick with her tongue.

Oh no, he'd definitely have remembered that. He voiced his approval with a groan, bereft of all words by that slick, teasing, maddening and wonderfully deft tongue.

His breath hitched and, after another gasp, he spilled himself out, pulsing into Jack's throat. He thought he screamed hoarsely but, after a moment, realised he'd shoved his hand into his mouth, dimly feeling the pain of his bitten palm.

Jack gave a last lick, the tip of his tongue teasing from foreskin to the quivering head to suck every last drop, swallowed and raised his head with a grin.

Never had a human being so exactly personified the 'cat that got the cream' as much as Sparrow did at that moment, his dark eyes lazy and teasing, lips too ready to part over his anxious prick. Sheer torture.
"Mornin', luv."

James slowly pulled his hand from his mouth and blinked at stupidly. "This was quite the way to say it," he laughed finally, still breathless and panting.

Jack gave his prize a final kiss before stuffing it back in James' breeches. "Well, you turned down the extra grog last night. Thought you deserved somethin' fer all yer bravery." He bounced like a restless child, bound for the next game.

"So all you ask for this is a mug of grog?" James teased, a little more himself. "Certainly a lot cheaper than the last time I had it. Not to mention better." He looked up and blinked. Jack had to be visible, and James blushed at the thought that anyone might have watched them. With a start, he pulled Jack down atop himself into a heated kiss, flattening their bodies against the hammock. "Thank you," he purred. "I think I'll keep you."

Jack sprawled and returned the kiss. "You'll keep me? Really? Oh, sir, I am so grateful." He tickled. "Thought you'd be sellin' me off for a proper bunk and a new shirt." His golden grin flickered like foxfire. "Besides, I had a hankerin' for a French breakfast."

"You are a morally deviant rascal, quite possibly as bad as the French themselves!" James laughed, a soft sound rumbling deep in his throat. "That was incredible," he whispered, his voice wondering. He would not even have considered asking for such an act. After all, Jack was his 'mate' aboard the Chimaera, an equal, and surely, it could not have been quite as pleasant as he pretended.

Jack shovelled himself between James and the taut canvas, his head pillowed on one shoulder. "Glad to be of service, milord." He smiled into the darkness. "That's an old trick, mate. A shame it ain't more in practise for 'tis a sweet thing to give. And you shoulda seen the stars, Jamie! The moon lyin' on her back."

"I think I just saw stars barely a minute ago." James grinned and slowly shifted out from under Jack, bending low for another kiss, lingering. He crawled lower, the hammock swinging dangerously. Stopping, he put one leg out to balance himself, perched awkwardly above Jack's legs.

He used both hands to get the breeches open, nearly losing his balance by the time he had them shoved down. Jack was more than half hard already and it required only a little more teasing.

James dragged it out, stroking with his fist. His mouth, there? He gulped. Not to mention that Jack stank.

He frowned for just a moment. They had both had their swim the same day. He certainly did not smell any better, and still, Jack had sucked him with abandon. Was he going about this wrong? It had seemed so easy when Jack had done it to him.

He suppressed his protesting sensibilities and bent down for a tentative lick, unprepared for the lurch Jack gave at it. He pulled back with a start and gripped for a hold, capsizing the hammock and tumbling them both to the floor.

Jack clapped a hand over his own mouth to still his laughter. "Oh Lord, hammocks are the devil's work!" He'd almost moaned for James to stop, but it had been far too luscious to resist. Still, Jack had the distinct sense that the Pearl was laughing at him and he laughed with her. He was in good humour after a night of mooning and coffee on top of his endless diet of rum.

He sat up, leaning against James and giggling into his shoulder. "Don't try it now! I'm not exactly th' freshest bloom and it's a bit tricky to get balanced." His lips moved against the stubble on James'
James' face was crimson, and he hid his eyes from Jack's. "I'm sorry." He couldn't remember having been so embarrassed in a long, long time and he wished he could just disappear into the deck beneath. "So sorry," he repeated, scrambling to get upright.

"Don't be so silly. First time I did it, I bloody puked." Jack pulled him back down to rest against the bulwark, taking his hand and guiding it to his prick. His look burned through the stuffy darkness. "Yes. G'wan. Oh, yes, that's lovely. Such long fingers..." he groaned, stretching out his legs, one finger trailing around the shell of James' ear.

James' hand remained still and he stared at it with a quick, thankful smile. He knelt astride Jack's legs and let his hand move, slow at first, then faster and faster, the need to satisfy in return almost greater than his dreaming need for relief. He put his mouth to a use he knew, lavishly plundering Jack's lips.

"Oh yes, luv," Jack moaned into his mouth, his hips rocking with the hardened palm, sliding down until he was lying with his head wedged to the bulwark. His lean chest heaved with every gasp until his breath hitched in soft cries, his prick straining and emptying in a long jet over James' fingers. "Oh. Yes. Now that's the way to end a fine evenin'." He raised his head and grinned, leaning forward to swipe at his groin with what was left of his shirt.

"Jack? You do realise that it is morning already?" James' voice was soft as he tucked Jack back into his breeches and pressed a light kiss to his chest, then looked up. "But I do believe we both have no work to do, and you seem to be quite opposed to sleep. So, after such a fine awakening, do you have any further plans for the day? Which preferably don't get us keelhauled?"

"Ahh." Jack stretched like a cat. "Let's go topside. It's too damned stuffy down here. If we stay outta the way, at least we can breathe. C'mon." He bounded up and gave James a hand. "Don't wanna wake 'em."

Together they made a detour into the galley, where Jack wheedled Cookie into letting him take his carving, and emerged into fierce morning sunlight, pale and white-gold on the water. They found a space near the bow and Jack settled on a coil of rope to continue coaxing his little Pearl out of the soft wood.

It was a quiet day for them both. James split his time between watching Jack with his whittling and dozing in the sun. It was his first true leisure aboard the Chimaera, and he relished it. The injury was not threatening, but there was no way he could make himself useful without pulling the stitches, and sitting on the deck certainly was more comfortable than scrubbing it.

After the sun had reached its zenith, he moved into Jack's shadow, head rested half against his thigh, half against the coil of rope. They spoke very little, but the contented half-smiles remained on both their faces until it was time for supper.

Chapter Seven
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Seven
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--R.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

The cry 'Land Ho' brings some surprises on the coast of Africa.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smffhw for her excellent beta.
The days rolled into pearls of honey and starlight, hard work and sore backs momentarily eased in slumber, then cracking once more every watch. Jack got used to going below early to wake James and was touched that Bertie and the crew did not tease them both unmercifully. He took to joining Matthew in the galley and telling him stories while the others unglued the sleep from their eyes.

He was just saying "...and there was no way to stop the great beast. So Aladdin thought hard 'bout how he could get up to the jewel winkin' from that mysterious third eye in the statue's forehead...," when Wheldon passed by them with a grin.

"You jest keep flappin' that jaw, Spanish. It'll keep ya in practise once I get hold of you."

Jack's teeth clenched and he didn't dignify the comment with even a look, but Berkely and Bertie both raised their heads like hounds on the scent.

It was past his watch and Jack had descended, lured by the coffee, bad as it was. He smiled apologetically at the boy and James, and continued. "An' don't you know, he scrambled up the stone body like young Mattie here in the riggin'. And he grabs the eye."

James hid his scowl, and after a while, prodded Matthew, who had sprawled back into his lap, and when he didn't react, entranced by the story, James lifted him to sit on the bench. "Excuse me, young Master Matthew, Jack. There is a pressing matter that brooks no delay." He slipped out of the galley.

He headed topside, where Wheldon knelt on the deck, pretending to scrub. James stood directly in front of him and waited.

"Wot d'you want, Norbury? I ain't touched yer precious mate. Wot the hell is he, anyways? Looks half-heathen t'me. Like them big dark eyes, do you?"

"While it is probably quite the achievement for you to pretend to be even more stupid than you are, stop it. Don't you dare. I warn you."

Wheldon laughed and threw the pumice down. "You're warnin' me. That's a laugh. Although I see yer already lookin' fer a replacement, holdin' that boy in yer lap. Nice arrangement fer you, ain't it?"
His laugh was nasty.

James' eyes narrowed. "Yes, I am warning you." He folded his hands behind his back, clasping them in a near-crushing grip. "If you as much as look at one of them askew, I will tie you up in the seediest dockside tavern with your breeches down, and if you somehow survive that, string you up from the topgallant myself. Is that clear enough for even you to understand?"

Wheldon's eyes held his for a moment. Spanish Jack would sell himself for a shilling, of that he was sure, but everyone on board the Chimaera was fond of the boy, Matthew. He shrugged. "Wotever you like, yer lordship. Get outta my way." He swiped with the rag and James heard Hamilton's familiar stomp behind him.

"As long as you keep out of mine. Do that, or you will regret it." James' voice was ice-cold, no longer the gentle-tempered sailor who defended rather than attacked. He spun around on his heel and went below.

Jack's hands were flying around like a pair of his caged namesakes as he finished his tale for young Matthew and a few others, a tar-stained Scherazade as trapped on the Chimaera as she in her harem.

James stalked into the galley, his mouth tight and set. "Wotsamatter, Jamie? Gut gripin'?” Jack tweaked Matthew's ear and produced a monkey's fist knot out of it, to the boy's delight.

James didn't have to force his smile at the display and made a vague gesture. "Tell me this doesn't upset your bowels as well." He made back to their table and sat down, immediately plastered to the bench by Matthew. "Now, lad, you should obviously clean your ears more thoroughly."

Jack grinned as Matthew turned the small bauble of a knot over and over in his hands. "Here, Mattie, watch. It's not hard t'do. You know a hitch, aye? Well, ya do this..."

James face was still white and strained. Jack finished the knot and Matthew wandered over to sit closer to the lamp, fumbling with the twine.

"That don't look to me to be your upset-bowels face."

James' face remained stony. He couldn't very well tell Jack about the confrontation with Wheldon. It would only unduly upset him and James had no wish to recall the threats, neither Wheldon's nor his own. He tensed a bit. He'd meant every single word of that. If the bastard touched Jack, he'd pay for it. He hanged such men, always, but the personal anger was something new.

He realised he was pausing for too long and pulled a face, nodding at the trencher, then flinching. "Matthew, that tickles."

Jack grinned at Matthew over James' shoulder and nodded. "Put it back, you little barnacle. An' he shouldn't be able to feel ya at all." He bounded up to bounce on the other side of James, knocking into him briefly, then stood to show the rigging knife in his dirty palm. "Keep yer wrists up an' don't giggle." Jack handed it back to James, suppressing a few giggles of his own.

James put it back and scowled. "Jack, don't teach the boy such nonsense."

He turned and lifted Matthew back onto his lap to check his pockets, fishing out a spoon. "Matthew, Matthew," he clucked his tongue. "If you do that in Dakar or Bombay, you'll get your hand cut off." He made a swift chopping motion. "If you need something, tell us or Berkely. Promise?"

Jack fiddled with the twine and winked at the boy. "That's why they mustn't feel ya doin' it. But Jamie's right, you don't wanna get caught pickin' pockets in foreign ports." He was looking forward
to a nice, long nap in his hammock, still half-dazzled by the stars. "I'm gonna head below." He leaned forward, smiling at James.

James punched his shoulder. "If you teach the boy something, let it be useful." Turning, he shook his head and brushed Matthew's hair back. "You don't want to be caught picking pockets at all. You don't have to do it. We're all watching out for you."

"An' who says a bit of judicious 'borrowin' isn't useful?" Jack called over his shoulder, heading down the stairs and nearly colliding with the Captain.

"Spanish, good. Come wif me."

Jack rolled his eyes and followed the scarlet coattails back up to the officers' cabins in the stern.

Topside, there was a loud shout of "Land ho". He stared at Hamilton accusingly.

"Sorry 'bout this, but I don't trust you as far as I can toss ya. There's plenty o' rum and food. Y'won't be here long - two days at most." Hamilton's voice was brisk. "Better than th' brig, laddie."

Jack sulked. "Well, 'fore you lock that door, can I get me carvin'? Just t'keep busy?"

Hamilton eyed him suspiciously, then nodded. "Two minutes, bucko."

Jack tore down to the brig and 'his' cask. Under a loose board near the bulwark, he had stashed a letter, written on a scrap of paper weeks earlier, addressed to 'Pearl Gibbs', care of The Faithful Bride in Tortuga. He shoved it into his breeches, refilled his flask and spun up the stairs in a mad search for Berkely, who was just finishing his coffee and heading topside.

"Berkely, mate. Ain't got but a moment. He's bloody lockin' me up. Can you do me a favour, mate? Please?" He was breathless and turned enormous eyes at the sailor. "I can't do nothin' to pay you, not now. But I must get word to her. Please, mate."

Berkely raised an eyebrow and studied him for long seconds, perfectly still. There was so much pleading in Spanish's eyes, so desperate, so wheedling. He grabbed the letter. "Her? Sweetheart, ey? Think yer Jamie'd like that none."

Jack shook his head. "No sweetheart. Sister. She raised me. Don't like wot I am much, but still, 'twould break her heart if she never knew wot happened t'me." He stifled a grin and tried to work up a tear, thinking about his Pearl and how Gibsy would look in a frock. "Thanks, luv. Promise I'll pay ya wotever when I can. I swear it on pain o' death."

"Awright Spanish, I'll get that t'yer sister. We've all got folk t'take care of. Tortuga, ey? So the whoring runs in t'family? She as pretty as you?" Berkely winked and made a lewd gesture. "You go get up there 'n' don' let Cap'n wait, afore he has ye flogged on top of no shoreleave. Not that ye'd much need it, havin' rum and company aboard."

Jack laughed, wrapping an arm around Berkely. "She's ancient an' has three teeth. Works at the tavern. I can't thank you 'nuff, luv." He darted to grab the knife and carving from Cookie and flew back to the cabin.

Hamilton was fidgeting impatiently as Jack sidled through the door and sat on the bunk, looking mournful. "Sorry sir. Cookie'd put it 'way."

Hamilton's eyes narrowed. "There's fresh water in that bucket. Coupla sausages and biscuit. I'm sorry, Spanish. Be a good man an' ye'll get yer leave come Bombay." He closed and locked the
James had rushed topside at the cry of 'Land ho,' and frantically looked around for Jack. They would put into port within the hour, and then, finally, they would have a chance to flee.

Just where was Jack? He was not about to leave him behind. Pirate Code be damned, he was not going to leave a friend behind. Bertie passed by and James grabbed him by the sleeve and hissed, "Where the hell is Jack?"

Bertie shrugged. "No idea. Could be that Ham ain't lettin' him ashore."

James bit back a curse. That made things all the more difficult. He was certain that Jack would know what to do in such a situation. After all, the pirate had certainly faced them often enough, even if it meant leaving another behind. He gulped. No. He'd find a way, but best to keep his calm now.

He kept his head still when Hamilton appeared through the hatch, but his eyes tracked every move.

"Norbury, with me." He walked briskly and James had to run to catch up with him. He paused, fumbling with the key. "Sorry t'do it, but ye'll both be here until we finish restockin'."

James heaved a sigh, aware that anything but obedience was pointless and would only lengthen their captivity. "May I ask a question, Sir?"

"Yes, yes, wha' is it? Hurry up!"

"We will still get our shares from the raid eventually. Is it possible for someone to buy new shirts in port? This is woefully soiled," he lifted his arm slightly, the sleeve, despite all efforts, still pink, then thought of Sparrow's much-shortened one, "and Jack's! That rag won't serve any use once we make around the Cape." A weak consolation instead of the chance to escape, but better than nothing. He smiled hopefully.

Hamilton nodded. "I'll tell Bertie. There's plenty o' food, water, rum fer ya both. An' neither o' you would be needin' shore leave anyways, would ya?" He laughed and pulled the door open. "G'wan, get in there. Don't get yerselves inta trouble. An' don't bother wi' the casement. It's nailed shut."

He didn't mention that the watch crew to be left aboard would include Griffin and Wheldon. If they were stupid and escaped the cabin, they'd both get themselves beaten senseless, but that was their hard luck. He locked the door and slid the heavy oak bar across it - he'd had it specially fitted for holding important hostages. Norbury and his pilot slut would be secure.

James threw himself into a chair with a snarl. "Damn it all to hell," he hissed. He was not prone to oaths, but the time aboard the Chimaera had loosened his tongue and he was all-too-frustrated. He had hoped for this opportunity for so long, and now it was gone before they'd even had a chance to grasp it.

Jack lounged on the bunk, turning the small carving over and over in his hands. He glanced at James with a wry smile. "Smart bugger. He knew we'd bolt first chance we got. Ah well, at least we won't hafta suffer through Cookie's messes." He pointed at the three dry sausages on the table. "And there's plenty of rum. So, Jamie, I suggest we get good an' drunk." He held his tongue about the letter.

"I cannot believe it! You want to sit it out and wait until we are in open seas again? What about getting back?"

To have bided his time all these weeks, and now that his blood had roiled up at the sheer hint of a
chance, to have it taken from him was cruel. He rattled the casements, not truly yanking at them with any force, but the sound helped a bit.

Jack wondered if he should just let James get it out of his system or try to talk sense to him. "Mate, we couldn't get far in that wretched little port anyways. We'd have to brave the far edge of the Barbary and haul north to Malaga or even Marseilles. Chances'll be better in Bombay."

He was careful to keep the disappointment out of his tone. He'd fully expected to be torn from the helm before dawn and thrown into the brig. He only hoped that Berkely wouldn't play him false out of spite, bit his lip and pondered if he should have given over a bit, just for the insurance. He wrinkled his nose. "Wot th' hell did ya think he was gonna do? Escort us to the nearest westward passage?"

James turned and stared at him, eyes ablaze, but then the fire seeped out of them and he sagged a little. "I know. It would certainly be easier if he were stupid, but then, we would probably find ourselves dead or run aground already." He growled and sat on the edge of the bunk, laughing darkly. "Better than bars and straw, at least."

He didn't like it one bit and still scowled.

"Aye, it is. A bunk, and rum and time by our onesies? Could be worse." Jack threw an arm around James and felt how he quivered with suppressed rage. "Stow it, luv. Won't help none gettin' into a fantod over it. Let's just have a drink and enjoy our leisure."

He tapped the rum cask and filled two real glasses - nice bits of crystal with only a chip or two. "Well, well if we aren't gettin' the royal treatment!" He handed one to James and bolted his, refilling it. "It's a bloody bore more n' anything."

James was still seething and glared at his glass. "I don't think he has another choice. He could not expect a crew to work if they were thrown into the brig as soon as shore was in sight."

Truly, had they been in the brig, James would have fought and struggled and would already be hell-bent on an escape. The almost civil treatment seemed so much more reasonable and made him much more accepting of Jack's - unfortunately, for once sensible - arguments.

"Well, thank the bastard fer a misplaced sense of hospitality." Jack drank half the glass and settled down on the bunk, nudged against James. "I'm sorry, luv. I'd a feelin' he might do somethin' like this. He's too damned smart. Just means were gonna have t'be very savvy." He yawned. He hadn't had much sleep the day before and the nightwatch had been tense, coming towards the coast and wondering when the shoe would drop. "Think I could use some shuteye, Jamie. There's a coupla books over there." He waved towards a cupboard.

"Can't keep me eyes open." He finished the rum and the glass drooped from his hand as he curled up on his side.

James plucked the glass from his grasp and frowned at him for a long time. It was amazing how quickly Jack went from babbling to fast asleep, as if he were profoundly incapable of anything else. He now could see when the exhaustion was real, and so he left Jack to sleep, moping and staring until he felt the ship shudder and still beneath them, a loud cheer topside as the crew went ashore. It reminded him too much of the Dauntless, when his own crew made for their shoreleave.

He heaved a sigh and eyed the books, leafing through them quickly. There was nothing of particular interest, a Bible, a worn copy of Paradise Lost. James was not in the mood to be pointed towards salvation and crawled back onto the bunk.
Just as he knew that Jack would now sleep, he knew he wouldn't later, bouncing restlessly until James woke, so it was better to use the quiet for some rest. The Chimaera tilted gently in the waves of the dock and eventually rocked James to sleep as well.

James was inherently incapable of being lazy. He had slept the night and rested the past days; he could not sleep again. Only two hours later, he lay wide awake, keeping perfectly still. After another hour, he sat up, careful not to disturb Jack. When he caught himself sneaking around the cabin so as to not make any noise, he stopped in his tracks and looked back at Jack.

Just when had a criminal become a comrade and a pirate a friend? Worse, he knew that without Jack, he'd probably be long dead, his corpse tossed overboard without anyone ever hearing the tale. Jack had shown him kindness from the beginning of their captivity, and now, James slowly began to understand why. What he should have known long before had become all too clear: that 'pirate' did not exclude all positive traits. That a man could be a pirate, and still have sympathy and kindness in him.

And innocence. It was a perverse thought, but it was there, in the longing as Jack's thoughts wandered to the Pearl, in his dark eyes, in his smooth face as he slept. In the braids he'd tied into James' hair. James turned one between his fingers, smiled thoughtfully, and pulled a twin braid out of Jack's mouth, where he'd sucked it in while sleeping.

Jack was a friend. He tested the word on his tongue, if only in silence. More of a friend than he'd ever had. The camaraderie among Midshipmen had never reached this far for him, and as he rose in rank, he'd grown lonelier. Certainly, he had men he called friends, but there was always distance, something that separated them from James Norrington, the man.

With Jack, he had talked, had joked, sung and laughed. They'd been there to offer help when the other needed it. And they'd shared their bodies. Was that what matelot meant? A friend so close that he could also take care of the most intimate needs? Without embarrassment, without hesitation and without anything but reciprocation asked in turn? It was an elating thought. Free, somehow. And pure.

Jack stirred in his sleep, batting away dream-mosquitoes and muttering. He twitched like a dog chasing phantom prey, smacking his lips, then opened one eye and sat bolt upright. "Hullo Jamie."

He beamed a sleepy grin, yawned and headed immediately for the rum. "Believe I'm a bit stiff from that ticking. Never have gotten used t'beds, y'know."

For a moment, he looked around the small cabin, then yanked the chair over to the casement and started digging at one of the diamond panes with Cookie's knife. "Least we can get a bit of fresh air an' see wot th' hell is going on."

James' face looked odd. Soft and considering, as if he'd been thinking hard about something that made him smile without realising it. "Wotsamatter, James? Cabin fever?"

James' smile became more immediate, a bit wider and just a bit startled. "Bored out of my mind." He stretched and chewed listlessly on a piece of dried sausage. "But then, I should not have expected much entertainment from you after you dropped on the bunk like a sack of flour," he teased gently. "A better chance in Bombay, right?"

He rolled his eyes as Jack filled a second glass of rum in barely a minute. "Jack? There is no need to prove that you can drain the cask on your own. I believe it."
"Nonsense, luv. Sets a man up fer the day an' chases away the night before." Jack grinned, digging at the lead. "Much better in Bombay. I know it pretty well and it's one big damned place. Biggest port I've ever seen, except for Canton or Calecutt." His grin widened. "I could dance for ya."

It was well past noon and James decided that he would have at least a drop of the rum before Jack emptied it completely. "Dance. You? What, a minuet?"

Jack gulped down his drink and bounded out of the chair, twirling and prancing up and down, imitating with uncanny skill the fine Court manners James knew too well. "Or a gavotte. How about a German?"

He leaped around like a lunatic. "Or this?" His hands wavered, suddenly dipped, wrists turning and fingers curled as his arms moved seductively. He clapped out a rhythm, his bare heels pounding in counterpoint. "Or this?" His body seemed to detach at the waist, hips swivelling in an undeniably lewd fashion.

James was fighting hard to stifle any undignified giggles, then applauded. "Very well, I do realise that asking was a mistake." He waited until Jack swayed close, swiftly grabbed him by the waist and hauled him close, looking up with a slight upward twist of his lips. "Is there anything at all you can't do? Apart from thinking by common logic and taking anything seriously in the least."

Jack thought about it, one finger on his chin. "Let's see. I can't fly. Can't make a meringue. Can't speak Turkostani. And I can't resist kissin' you." He leaned forward to prove the last item. "Y'know, this might not be so bad, luv."

James' fingers found hard and solid proof of that statement, and he continued to examine it, first freeing it of any interfering cloth. "Certainly a lot more privacy, and Hamilton surely expects no less of us. And the Captain of a ship is always right, isn't he?" He laughed softly and tugged at Jack's collar, pulling him down atop himself.

Jack straddled him, pushing eager hands under the shirt to tease sensitive nipples and caress sleek sides. James had lost flesh these long weeks and replaced it with hard muscle that rippled over his bones. Jack leaned down once more.

For once, there was no rush but that of their own desire. They revelled in the privacy, the comparative softness and stability of the bunk, even the light that teased through the windows, and when they finished, they lay, sweaty and entangled, sated.

James was just catching his breath and he laughed softly into Jack's hair. "So much for the clean sheets."

"Deacon'll be shocked, poor bastard. Don't know wot he's missin'," Jack murmured contentedly, half-dozing. "Always best at noon." His lips were fixed in that kouros smile, limbs comfortably tangled with James'.

"If he is as old as he looks and has been shipboard most of that time, I doubt there is much that can shock him. Although I have little doubt that you would manage." The bunk, while comfortable, was narrow for two men, and James almost tumbled out as he rolled over to reach for his glass.

Jack nestled into the pillow and watched the muscles of James' back move and flex as he stretched out his arm. Hard work had done wonderful things, defining the strength in that long body. He thought James unbearably beautiful and his eyes closed. He was still smiling.
The cabin was pitch black, closing in from every corner. It was deathly silent, and for one petrifying moment, Jack thought he was back on the Pearl, in the middle of a mutiny a decade old. He shook the dream fragments from his head and slid out of the narrow bunk, fumbling until he found the flint and lantern.

Instinctively, he poured a glass, then another to send his dreams back to whatever hell from which they'd sprung. He filled it again. And again, stifling harsh gasps as he made for the window.

Cushioning the sound with the ragged hem of his shirt, he knocked out a few of the glass panes, pulling the chair close to the casement and breathing heavily.

James rolled over and sighed softly, a low sound as though he were tasting a particularly delicious meal, then his eyes cracked open and he sat up, suppressing a yawn. Momentarily confused by the stability of the bunk, he looked around until he became aware of his surroundings. His gaze fell on Jack. "I know I don't smell of roses at this point, but don't you think this reaction is a little exaggerated?"

Jack's eyes glittered, the light bouncing off them, fire in obsidian. "Can't breathe, mate. Bad dreams." He swilled down his fifth—or was it sixth?—rum, refilled the glass once more and promptly forgot he was holding it, guzzling from his flask.

"Should I have worn you out more, so you would not dream?" James stretched lazily and poured himself a glass, sipping slowly. "I really don't think this tastes so bad that you have to toss it back this quickly." His gentle amusement faded into a frown.

Jack scowled and started to pace. If he'd had a tail, it would have been lashing. "I woulda preferred the bloody brig. Least a body can breathe free." His balance, never suited to less than eight knots, was sloppy and he caught himself against the door. "Damn the bastard for this. Damn him!"

James' eyebrows shot up. "Only a few hours ago you insisted that this was much better than the brig. Did you decide to eradicate all nearly-sane notions from your mind?"

He rose, standing just behind Jack in the narrow cabin, reaching out, but then dropped his hands again. "I am as angry as you that we can't escape. But wasn't it you who told me that Bombay was a better chance?"

"Yes, and the more the fool I am fer thinkin' it!" Jack snapped, struggling back to the casement. "For God's sake!" He pounded out a few more of the panes, his breath harsh and short, then tipped the flask back and threw it across the cabin. "Damn an' blast and may that bogtrottin' son of a whore rot in hell." He bolted down the glass he'd abandoned and huddled in the chair.

"Jack!" James knew that he'd been in a temper himself before, but that had been nothing compared to Jack's violent outburst. "Stop it now. We're stuck here, and cursing won't do anything to change that. If anything, it will only make Hamilton decide to keep us locked in during the next shoreleave." He put his arm around Jack's shoulder. "Calm down."

Sparrow started violently at the touch, his eyes wild. He couldn't breathe. The chair tumbled backwards and he was panting furiously. Then, just as suddenly, his legs buckled beneath him and he sagged to the deck. Miraculously, he hadn't spilled a drop.

James wrenched the rum from him and filled the glass with water, urging it to his lips while holding him steady with his other arm. "Easy, Jack. Easy." What the hell was this? Cabin Fever? After not even a day? Despite all his teasing, he didn't think Jack insane... not like this.
"Oh, leave me the hell alone! And I can't drink that!" Jack swatted at the glass, shaking his head so hard the baubles clattered.

He dragged himself from James' grip, clinging to the sill and pulled his hand back. He would have smashed it through the frame had James not wrenched it behind his back. He was shaking, sucking in fresh air desperately.

James had him in a tight handlock that prevented him from lashing out, trapped between his body, the casement and one arm. The other he smoothed through Jack's hair again and again. "Easy."

Jack behaved as though he were suffocating, like a trapped, scared animal. Was it that? The fear of being locked in? "We will be out of here tomorrow. On the deck, and in the fresh sea air. Shhhh. Shhhh."

His answer was like a shock of ice water. Jack sobbed in a breath, pulled his hands free and buried his face in them. When he looked up at James, his eyes were lost in puddles of streaking paint. "Where d'ya think she is? I can't hear her no more."

James knew what Jack meant, without a doubt, without so much as a second's thought. He had seen the longing glances with which Jack had worked on his carving, the near-caress followed by a look of loss at the Chimaera's wheel. "She's back in the Caribbean. Waiting for you and anxious for her Captain to return."

Even Jack Sparrow could imbibe too much, too fast. His head was foggy and he peered at Norrington curiously, trying to think of how to get topside without alerting Barbossa and his bloody friends. "Don't know wot t'do, Bill. He's gonna slaughter the lot of us and I can't let that happen." He sobbed in another breath. "Jamie, I can always hear her. Why can't I hear her now?" His voice was rising and he choked on a bitter laugh.

"What the hell?" James paused, breathed a sigh and backhanded Jack twice across the face, hard. "Because you are drunk and you don't have the salt water roaring in your ears!"

His voice and demeanour gentled, smoothing a hand through Jack's hair, down his shoulders, hushing him, remembering how patient Jack had been with him when he'd needed to talk.

If only he could make sense of Jack's words. "You are fighting against it. You are still caught in your dream and don't want to hear her."

In an act of desperation, he pulled Jack's head to the casement, where he could hear the rush of the waves, gentle in the docks. "Do you hear that? That's the sea. And somewhere in her, there's your Pearl."

The distraught pirate crested towards the sound, shuddering. He turned back and gulped. "She's gone again. It's just insane, and really, I should know all about that. How can this be happenin' again?" His eyes focused on James'. "Wot in hell did I ever do t'deserve this? Lose her once, well, but again? Like this?" His gaze was distant and he bit his lip, his face contorting into a mask of desperate pain.

His fist slammed against the bulwark. "Damn it all!" The tide, held back by brute practicality, was crashing through all Jack's hard-learned control.

James crushed him close before he could do himself any more harm. "I know, Jack, I know. Do you think there is nothing I miss? Do you think I would not rather have the Dauntless beneath my feet? But do you know what? We don't, and it is up to us alone to change that. To get home, whether that
may be a port or a ship. You'll get her back, Jack. I promise."

Whatever else Jack had been meaning to say was lost in a long bout of outright sobs. He clung to James, muttering utter nonsense and cursing in a soggy voice.

It was more than apparent that Captain Jack Sparrow was not above a sensational crying jag if the rum and the moment were right.

James stiffened and stared in shock, hardly registering the dampness soaking his shoulder. Awkwardly, he brought an arm around Jack and steadied him, urging him towards the bed until they could lie down. He didn't know what he could do, and so he just rocked with the waves, stroking gently and singing softly as he would to a crying babe.

Jack drifted on the song, his thoughts as fractured as the light from guttering lantern. Slowly, his grip relaxed, his eyes swollen shut, and the sobs became muffled snores.

He was still curled in James' arms, uncomfortably close, but James didn't dare move for fear of waking him, all too relieved he'd finally fallen asleep. This was a side of Jack he had never seen, and he'd begun to doubt if the pirate ever felt sad at all. Despite the fear and the hard work, Jack had always seemed content, and James had wondered if, unlike himself, Jack really longed to get home at all, if he didn't feel just as at home aboard the Chimaera.

That was wrong, he knew now. The Pearl was the only place Jack wanted to be, and suddenly James was nearly ashamed of his own selfish ignorance. Jack looked so mournful, even in deep sleep, snoring loudly. Drunken sleep.

He'd seen Jack drink before, drink a lot, but always with enjoyment, not with such haste. The three sausages still lay there, untouched but for what James himself had eaten. No wonder the rum had had such a strong effect, trying to drown out a nightmare that kept bobbing to the surface.

Still musing on sausages, rum, and tears, and sparing a wistful thought for his Dauntless, he, too, fell asleep.

Chapter Eight
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Eight
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--R.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Hangovers and confusion make for consequences, as shoreleave ends and the Chimaera sails once more.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtflw for her excellent beta.
The cabin was grey in the dim light of dawn, but it was not the sun that woke James. There was a loud crash, and sleep-slow, he blinked, staring at the door shuddering under a kick.

"UP, YE SCURVY BUGGERS! YE SLIMY BILGE RATS SURE AS HELL Aren'T Going to Sleep IN!"

Jack snorted himself awake and winced; his head ached, his mouth felt full of sawdust and he distinctly remembered something very embarrassing that had to do with his stuffed nose and heavy eyes. He glared at the door.

"Bugger me sideways." He sat up, blinking swollen red eyes. "Mornin'?"

"Good morning, Jack. Was that an invitation?" James teased in a low voice, then it rose into that of a Captain trained to shout orders over a raging storm. "AND A BLOODY HORRIBLE MORNING TO YOU, MR. GRIFFIN!"

Jack gripped his head in both hands. "Shaddup! Hellacious way to wake a body." He crawled across the floor until he found the table, his eyes screwed shut against the light.

Outside the door, one of Griffin's cronies snickered. "Bet you lot've had loads o'time t'bugger each other stupid!" The laughter was cut short by Jack's flask clattering against the door.

"Least we both can rise to the occasion. Sure you ain't a eunuch?" Jack wasn't exactly shouting, but it carried as he fumbled for a glass and poured enough rum to ease his aching head. If his stomach went on him, he swore he'd fill the piss bucket and dump it in Griffin's hammock.

He gulped down a good half-glass and leaned against the table leg, staring at James through bloodshot slits mired in runny kohl.

The laughter outside faded into grumbling, and there was a last kick to the door before their waking party stomped topside.
James found a washstand, took a towel, wet it thoroughly and tossed it at Jack. "Here. I take it a
question as to how you are feeling would not be taken well?"

Jack pressed it to his forehead. "Not a subject for polite conversation, mate. Lord, my head's
hurtin'. Wot in hell did I do last night?"

Confronting Jack with the full truth might not be wise, not when it was such a matter that, even
sober, had to be too close for comfort. James hesitated. "You drank yourself senseless and got a little,
shall we say, outraged. You know, if you had wanted to trade your share of the sausages for my part
of the rum, you could have just asked." His tone was light, teasing.

"Ugh. I feel like three leagues in a Bermuda gale." Jack swiped the towel over his face, leaving
black streaks and staring at them. "Jamie, did I go off? And when the hell are they gettin' back and
please," he held up one hand. "don't talk about sausages or I'll need that bucket."

"Please don't. There is some fresh air getting in here now, but I don't think that smell would be
purged soon." James was grinning, half-mocking the hangover, half-sympathetic. "You were a little
sentimental and home-sick, but that comes with the amount you drank." His voice was matter-of-fact,
brushing the incident aside, relieved by the distraction of voices topside, of the crew getting back
aboard. "If we put out with the morning tide, I wager they will let us out a few hours hence."

"Wonderful. Can't they do it quietly?" Jack complained and tossed back the rest of the rum. "Sorry
about that, luv. I hate close cabins. They always bring out the worst in me, t'be sure." His eyes
were clearing and at last opened fully. "Well, there isn't any blood so apparently, I didn't do anythin'
too stupid. Sorry, James." He rested his head against the table leg and twirled the glass between his
fingers. "Hope the bleedin' fools remembered t'get some warm duds. If we're headin' round the
Cape, we'll need 'em."

James busied himself with his own breakfast, a good part of a sausage and ship's biscuit, soaked in
water to make it chewable. He grinned knowingly, brushing Jack's concern aside with a dismissive
wave of one hand.

"I do think they have. Hamilton might be rash and not one of the most honest, but he isn't that stupid
and unprepared to venture the Cape unequipped. And," he chewed on another bite, "Berkely's been
'round the Cape before, with another ship. I don't think he'll have forgotten the cold. Don't think
anyone does."

"Bloody Irishman'll probably keep warm with all the whisky he's got in his cabin," Jack muttered
darkly. The Chimaera gave a lurch and his head rose. "We're off, then." He could feel her shimmy
as she caught the wind astern.

"Whisky gives a worse head than rum. There is no call to be jealous," James laughed softly and knelt
down beside him. "You should know well enough that to sail 'round the Cape, it is better to remain
sober, and I, for one, hope that both the Captain and the pilot will be." He stroked two fingers along
Jack's jawline, the swollen lips. "And you should know just as well that there are other ways of
keeping warm."

Jack cracked a grin. "So I didn't manage t'make you wanna slap me? I usually do, y'know." His
eyes were still heavy and bloodshot, but he was evidently feeling much more himself as he pulled
James close for a quick kiss.

James blushed. "Actually, I hit you. Twice. But not because I was angry. I should have remembered
that you are so used to slapping that it has little effect." He went to refill the glass with water and
fetched more biscuit. "Here, you should try to get some of that down. Settles the stomach."
Jack shook his head. "Thanks, but I wouldn't have a prayer of keepin' it down. Just more rum and I promise not t'bolt it." He pushed himself to his feet and pressed one eye to the casement. "We're makin' good time already. You hit me?" He turned to face James. "Wot in blazes did I do?"

James rolled his eyes but splashed rum into the water before handing it to Jack. "You worked yourself into a temper and paced the cabin like a wild cat. And I had to stop you from demolishing the casements completely."

Jack grunted. "One of those. Musta been dreamin' again." He took the water and drank without complaint; it made the desert in his mouth recede a little. "So wot's in the books? Anything worth readin'?"

"Unless you have begun worrying about your salvation and your undying soul without telling me, no." James stretched and had a look at his shoulder. The stitches could be pulled soon. It throbbed a little from steadying Jack yesterday, but it was only a dull ache. "Must have been one hell of a nightmare," he ventured.

The dark eyes squeezed shut. "Ya got that one right, mate. It were." He lips quivered into a smile as he pushed the thought of the Pearl into the back of his mind, then stopped suddenly. "James, I didn't say anythin' really crazy, did I?"

James began shaking his head, then stopped, and his lips tensed. "There was one thing you said that I didn't understand. As though you didn't say it to me." He knelt again, face-to-face with Jack, eyes clear and searching. "You were drunk. You might be able to stomach more than most, but it happens to the best of us."

Jack's brow furrowed. "I know I were drunk. I were shite-in-the-face senseless, mate. Wot did I say?"

"Something about a Bill, and someone slaughtering the lot." James' face was set in concern. "I don't rightly remember. You were so upset, I could have misheard you." He knew what he had heard, but the memory seemed to sit so deep that he couldn't force Jack to speak of it.

Jack groaned. "Figgers. I always go a bit off when I dream 'bout that." He looked at James ruefully, the words slow, as if pulled from the depths of his reluctance. "The mutiny, luv. Still get a trifle mad. Bill, that woulda been Bootstrap. Young Turner's da." He closed his eyes and drank more of the water. "Probably was babblin' like a madman, aye?"

James bit his lip and shook his head. "You spoke of not hearing her, and I assume you meant the Pearl." He put an arm around Jack's shoulder, attempting reassurance. He'd seen how deeply Jack was shaken and was not fool enough to think it was gone now. "I promised that you would get back to her. And I still mean that."

Jack's grin was lopsided and rather sad. "'Twas a stupid thing t'do, fallin' over like that. I didn't expect pressgangs in Tortuga." He was listening with his heart, and she was there, faint, laughing and calling to him the same way she had all those years. Losing her again to drunken folly was humiliating, but her laughter was teasing, not scornful. He nestled against James. "Thanks." The word was low, boring through hurt pride and discomfort.

"That's what a friend is there for, isn't it?" It still felt strange to use the word aloud, but less so than James had thought. "We were both out of luck when we got into this mess, but we'll return home. A better chance in Bombay, remember?" He laughed softly and pulled Jack to his feet. "Would you like to sleep a little longer?"
Jack winked at him. "Friends? Us? Y’know, luv, they'll think I'm bloody contagious when we get back, if you go 'round sayin' things like that," he teased. "No more sleepin’. It'll just make me head ache more. I could use a bit more rum and maybe..." The dark eyes twinkled, one finger tracing a line down the open collar of James' filthy shirt.

James' eyebrows shot up and he grinned. "Halvsies of everything, remember? That includes madness. But-" his grin widened until it showed teeth. "We won't have that bunk for much longer. Better use it." Very pragmatic, James Norrington, a little voice in his head whispered sarcastically, but he hushed it and pushed Jack down on the bunk.

Jack laughed, groaning at the stab in his head, and shifted to make room. "You really are as barmy as me, under all that brocade. Wait a minute! That's my foot!" They tussled to find a comfortable way to wedge themselves together, which left them face to face. Never one to waste an opportune moment, Jack took advantage of it: hangover or not, he wasn't dead.

James now knew exactly where the slipknot of Jack's breeches was, and it fell open under his insistent fingers. He pulled the rough fabric down and grabbed the hard flesh he had freed, gasping into their kiss.

Jack made one of those maddening little whimpers and his fingers worked at the buttons of James' breeches. He had just managed to get into the waistband, thrusting his prick into James' hand and tongue into his mouth when the door banged open.

Hamilton laughed, long as hard, as James started and fell off the narrow bunk, leaving Jack to stare, his hand mid-air, his prick stiff. "Well now, I'd a hunch you two would make use o' the time. Norbury, cover yer bum. Ya can take wha'ere is left o' the rum and share it below."

Jack would cheerfully have traded the rum for another ten minutes of privacy but he grinned. "We were wonderin' how long you'd leave us in here, Cap'n."

James scrambled to his feet and pulled his breeches up, stifling a groan as he buttoned the tight fabric over his not-quite-faded arousal. He had to remind himself that to be caught here meant only embarrassment, not death, but his cheeks were crimson, and not with excitement. He straightened and composed himself. "I trust the restocking went as planned, Sir?"

"Aye, it did. An' which one o' you went an' busted th' window? Spanish, yer gonna fix that right quick."

Jack stuffed himself into his breeches and reached around to pull the slipknot tight. "Aye, sir. Needed a breath of air, sir." He winked at James with another cheeky grin.

James' eyes were still flickering wildly, and he settled for glaring at Jack. Eventually, his gaze met Hamilton's, and he wished he could stop thinking alternately about the humiliation and of how hard he still was. His hands were clasped behind his back, knuckles white.

"Alright, you two. Get out o' the honeymoon suite an' take the cask with ya to the galley."

Hamilton raised an eyebrow at the barely-touched sausages. "An' take them back t'Cookie, since they didn't seem t'suit yer fine tastes. Now, off with ya."

He grinned at James' blushing face and grabbed Jack by the arm as he passed. "Nice trick with tha' knot, Spanish." He gave it a tug, and Jack glared, struggling to keep his breeches up and carry the sausages as they trudged down to the galley.

Whistles, cheers, and shouts greeted them, hands groping for Jack's arse and both their breeches.
"Come t'share?"

"Making us watch ye shaggin' is nasty braggin'! Yer lucky we just had shoreleave!"

"Nice arse, Spanish! Did he shag ye so senseless that ye forgot how t'close yer britches, or are they jest worn through?"

James put the cask down, trying to keep Jack covered by standing in front of him and glared, but the blush rather diminished its efficiency.

Jack hitched his britches up from behind and waggled the sausages in the other hand suggestively. One tucked under his arm, he lunged at the startled Cookie. "Hey, Cooks, Cap'n told us to bring these back t'you. Couldn't eat 'em, we missed yer cookin' so much. Can we share 'em, aye?"

The wizened old cook beamed as though his mother had just been asked to the Court of St. James and nodded.

Jack slammed them down on the table and stuck a knife in one. "Now, you know, lads, we had to spend our time locked up doin' somethin', while you lot were all havin' such fun. We got the rest o'this cask and these. So how 'bout you tell us all about port and have a drink?"

Bertie tossed two shirts at James. "There, go'n' take care that yer mate's dressed civilly. Far too distracting, that."

James caught them and turned to close Jack's breeches. Then he pulled off the shortened rag that had served as shirt and pulled the new one over Jack's head.

At least Bertie hadn't used this opportunity for a prank, the matter of clothes for rounding the Cape was too serious. "That'll help keeping you warm." His hand was on Jack's waist, pressing lightly.

Jack looked honestly surprised, possibly for the first time in his dishonest life. He looked from Bertie to James in confusion. "Wot's this? Wot did you two do?" Jackson was bragging about something that sounded interesting to his left, but he watched James curiously.

"I can't have you run around in this short rag and catch a chill, can I?" James' hand lingered in the open collar, a soft brush that ran up to Jack's neck.

"Yeah, specially not a chill in yer arse!"

James waved a dismissive hand and grinned expectantly. "You ruined yours for me. I thought I'd take care that you get a new one."

Jack looked up at James from under his hair. The mask fell away a little in his eyes. "We can't pay for 'em. Why?" He glanced at Berthot. The new shirt, made to one size, was much too big and hung like a child's nightdress to his knees, but it was good, strong linen and well-sewn. From the look on his face, either of them might have given him a welcome but unexpected treasure chest.

James grinned and gave Jack a quick kiss. "We can. Shares from the raid, remember? Thought I'd put mine to something useful."

For once, Jack ignored an audience, his eyes locked to James, deep with a gratitude that burst through all his bravado, followed closely by a wink and a coy grin. "You're just tryin' t'cover up me charms, mate! Thank you. Both o' you. I did feel a bit of a prat runnin' round like that."

"I do not think that was the fault of the shirt," James teased. He pulled on his own, balling up the
pink rag, determined to save it for emergencies. "But yes, your charms have to be covered. Else it
would be too much like the basilisk glance, and we would run aground."

Jack blinked at him. There was a sudden lull in the conversations around them, most staring at James
with confused eyes. Jack's shifted restlessly. "Basilisks bein' strange beasties an' all." He grinned.
"So lads, tell us about yer leave? I wanna hear it all."

The mask was back up, even his eyes were guarded.

The lewd and obscene comments faded into cheers, and more quickly than ever, the group collected
around the crowded table, laughing and cheering even louder as the rum was shared out. "Had the
finest brothel ashore, 'least it seemed so after these weeks."

Shadlow gave Jackson a shove. "Think these two would care?"

Jack sat down and toyed with his mug. "Were it filled with gorgeous fillies in silk, and rooms like a
palace?" He looked at them like Matthew begging for a story.

"Eh, Spanish, don't overdo them expectations! Women and a room or a wall, 's all ye need! Floor
does it, too, but the lasses be no fond of that."

Jack leaned forward, his eyes bewitching. "Ahhh, just wait till you get t'Bombay. I swear, ya never
seen such women. Places with spangled cushions and a dozen of 'em attending yer every twitch.
You lot are in fer a treat."

Jackson shook his head derisively. "I don't believe a word o' that. How'd a bugger like you know?"

Jack's eyes slid back to James, sly and appraising, laughing, impossible to read. "Oh, there's lots o'
fish in the sea. And many a way t'try 'em out before you find one ya like, aye?"

"So ye particularly enjoy the fish what wriggle th'most?" A quick grope for James' arse and his
evasive movement proved that.

James had only half-listened to the conversation. He was blindingly aware of his slip now, although
he'd never have thought of it before. It had seemed the normal, the logical classical allusion to make,
and any officer would have understood it.

He waited until the laughter had faded a bit and Shadlow had started a new tale to lean close to Jack
and whisper, "Did I go blind from being too exposed to your charms?"

Jack shook away a perverse feeling he was being pawed. "You went an' bought on credit, mate.
That's better than a parson in some places."

"Ah, but the bloody ivory already is in the Chimaera's hold. If she sinks, Bertie will have other
worries than the price of two shirts." He had bent close, and it was really too opportune a moment to
waste. He briefly kissed Jack's neck.

Jack pulled away before James felt him shudder. He returned an off-hand kiss and wandered off to
wheedle more grog out of Cookie and deliver his carving for safekeeping. He was feeling
uncomfortably contrary and looked for distraction.

It was another spontaneous celebration, and Shadlow seemed particularly proud to tell of young
Matthew's adventures, who'd hired his first whore and ended up sitting on her lap for a song.

Jack joined in wholeheartedly, singing along and jumping on the table to raise the new shirt in an
imitation of the Bombay dancers, making a complete ass of himself, until the group began to
dwindle. He went over to Berkely with a fresh-filled mug. "Have a good time, luv."

He glanced over his shoulder to make sure James was fully distracted by Jackson's entrancing story.

"In th'right port, a girl's arms are open to anyone with the right bit of shine, aye?" Berkely winked.
"Some of us may've t'pay fer it, but that don't make it no worse. Least we get to pull up our britches
afterwards. Lest there were too much rum before."

He laughed. "Got ye a l'il somethin'. Noticed ye'd been using this, and the lass that was selling it said
it's the best kind." He pressed a small vial into Jack's palm.

Jack looked down at the kohl, his mouth half-open, then back up, his heart in his eyes. It belonged
to someone else, but that didn't make the look any less true.

"You didn't have t'do that, luv. Thank you." His laugh faltered. "Feels like Christmas 'round here.
I'll have to miss shoreleaves more often." The smile faded, and he looked tired, hunted. "Berks,
thanks. Really. You're too good, y'know that." His fingers closed around the vial.

Berkely clapped a heavy hand on his back. "Ain't nuthin' wrong with that, 's there? Ye did yer work
like any other and woulda deserved th'leave. Bit of a consolation prize."

James was sitting in the corner, where Nevill made use of his mild inebriation to pull the stitches. He
stood up and moved the arm, wincing a bit as he lifted it over his head, and grinned at Jack.

Jack had to drag his gaze back to Berkely. He smiled again, a little of last night's pain fleeting across
his face. "Thank you, mate. You're a right man."

Berkely grinned crookedly. "Oh, and yer sister will stop cryin' her eyes out 'bout ye soon if she still
be working in yon tavern. Maybe she's found a new sweetheart." He winked. "And before ye get
back t'yer Jamie, there be something I want to ask of ye."

Jack exhaled the breath he'd been holding for two days. His eyes drifted towards where James sat,
laughing and joking, a man he couldn't have imagined under the Naval braid. When his gaze
returned, it was wide and wary. "Anythin', luv. Anythin' at all."

Berkely cocked his head and rolled his eyes. A few seconds passed, then he lifted his hand to one of
Jack's braids, one with a gleaming bit of blue stone braided into it, tugging lightly. "I'd like this one.
'Minds me of someone I knew. Had black hair, too, 'n' eyes just that colour."

Jack closed his eyes, just for a moment, remembering when that particular bit of jetsam had entered
his personal diary, so many years ago, when he'd been in the seventeenth summer he saw reflected in
Berkely's eyes. The girl who had braided it in had been even younger, her laughter saying what
language could not breach.

His grin widened and he plucked the knife from Berkely's belt and sawed at the braid. It cut free,
leaving a curling tuft next to his cheek, as he laid it in Berkely's broad palm. "Musta been a very
special someone, mate."

Jack wasn't a fool. He knew that look and wished he could return it, but his dreams were too full of
infuriating green eyes that changed from fire to ice like a tide. It made him feel nervy, possessed.
"Thank you."

James watched from afar, his eyebrows knotting into a frown and one hand unconsciously lifted to
the braid in his hair, tugging at the coin.
Berkely had dropped the braid into his pocket and his crooked smile widened as he whispered, "Yer mate's looking a mite bit testy 'gain if yer asking me."

"Oh Lord, not again!" Jack laughed and glanced nervously at James, then turned back to the table, grinning and ready to join in the fun. He slid next to James, refilling his mug from the fast-diminishing cask. "Wot'd I miss now? Damn, I can't keep up with you lot!"

An arm slid behind his back and lodged firmly, very firmly, around his waist, pulling him snugly against James.

"You are merely worried about missing out on the rum." Indeed, the cask was nigh empty. Jack had put quite a dent into it, and now a good two dozen of men had been at it, apparently as bottomless as Jack himself.

Jack guzzled down the rest of his mug. "And wot, pray tell, is wrong with that?"

Bertie laughed. "Well, yer Jamie took good care that there is one less to guzzle it." He lifted his mug towards James. "I don't know what ye said t'Wheldon, but I for one am glad he stayed in Dakar." His voice was indifferent but his eyes met Berkely's over their heads for a second in grim satisfaction.

Jack looked up sharply. "Wot? He deserted? Thought he was aboard!"

He stared at James, brow furrowed. "And wot did you say, luv, t'make him run off like that?"

"Slipped the ship last night and weren't found again. We even checked under all the skirts, not that..." Bertie's voice trailed off as he saw how Jack's eyes were fixed on James and ignored the surruptitious kick Berkely gave him under the table.

James' face tensed and he nibbled at the inside of his lip, silent for a moment. "I told him to keep his slimy paws to himself, else he would have to answer to me."

Jack's lips forced themselves into a grin and he shrugged. "Without waiting for his share, too? Musta been some princess that kept him landlocked."

He bounced to his feet. "Let's go topside. I wanna breathe a little fresh air after two days locked away in that bloody cabin." He tugged at James' sleeve insistently. "C'mon, Jamie." He grinned. "I wanna see the moon."

"'Tis a wonder ye can even walk after two days in that cabin! Mustn't be much in th'britches! Or yer prayers got a special angel takin' 'em up to heaven."

He bounded up the steps to emerge into fresh night air, warmer than belowdecks where the ocean seeped her cold blood into the bones. His thoughts skipped over the water, tracing the moonlight, from the letter and Berkely to James, the new shirt, Wheldon, inexorably towards the Pearl. He grinned at Venus and blew her a kiss, but he felt dark and confused and the grin was rather strained.

James walked up beside him and leaned against the railing, letting the wind cool his face, suddenly
acutely aware of everything, despite being more than a little inebriated. His fingers were still lodged around Jack's waist, keeping him quite close. He let them slide up, stroking along his side.

"Must you make a spectacle of everything? Of faith, of seeing the stars... of giving Berkely one of your braids? What need of it does he have?"

Jack started, then laughed, twitching. His head was a jumble, the Pearl's voice in it shrill. He couldn't breathe. "Ah, that," he sighed. No sense telling James about the letter until the opportune moment. Jack was too used to playing his cards impossibly close to the vest. "Nothin' but a sailor's whim. He's been good to us and I'm afraid I were a bit of a tease." His voice was airy, but he chose his words carefully.

Above them, the half-moon spilled her bucket of light across the water and he smiled at the silver wavelets. They changed all the time, but were endless.

"You, Jack, are a tease at any given moment, so I shouldn't be surprised." James wasn't surprised. He was angry. Why, he didn't quite know. Perhaps because he had thought of the braid in his hair as a peculiar, if very personal gift. If Jack gave his trinkets away on a whim, what value could such a gift possibly hold? The thought made him scowl.

Being jealous over such a trifle was ridiculous, and he had no call to be, so he said nothing more, just pressed closer, trapping Jack against the bulwark with his body, kissing him.

Jack waited in silence, until Deacon passed them with a glare. "Y'know James, that bugger'd make a chore outta singing fer the angels."

"It is for him, probably. And the gun's fire probably is the finest greeting to the Lord as far as he is concerned. Not to mention that he certainly does not approve of us living in sin." James grinned darkly and let his hand slip lower, caressing just barely under the waistband of Jack's breeches, leaning forward to nip at Jack's ear, then the soft skin below that he knew was particularly sensitive.

Jack stiffened and turned away. Here was James, the proper Commodore almost a ghost, his prim and ordered features lost beneath a browned face and lust-filled eyes. Jack almost missed him. "Want t' thank you for the duds. Most good of you. I felt like one o' them froggie cheesemakers."

He edged closer to the rail, his breath coming up short again.

Who was James Norrington to know just where it felt so delicious to have warm breath and lips against his skin?

Jack was confused and confused sparrows are never happy birds.

James followed and renewed his hold with a playful grin, leaning against Jack and the rail with a sigh. "You're welcome. I couldn't have you run about like that when rounding the cape, could I?" His breath, once more, was hot and rum-fuelled against Jack's neck. "I did promise to keep you warm, after all."

He nipped, then let lips and hands wander, one tangled into Jack's hair, brushing the sad remainders of the braid he had given Berkely out of his face.

Jack squirmed against the grip and leaned over the rail, panting. "Stop it... don't want 'em chasin' us below. You, my dear James, are well on yer way to becomin' quite the pirate. Sure it's not in yer blood somewhere? A rogue granddad or that uncle you never speak about?" He shifted so he could see James' face, wobbling and wavering in the moonlight.

James worked one leg between Jack's and shook his head. "My uncle was a gentleman, and the one
to enable me to go to sea in the first place. And I am certain that there is no pirate in my blood, although a certain one manages to heat it quite well." He emphasised his words by thrusting against Jack's thigh, one hand pressed against the front of his breeches.

The rail pressed against his spine, he was trapped between James' insistent prick and the confines of the Chimaera. Jack broke away with a soft sound, shrinking into the prow, his eyes unreadable. "Gonna make an honest woman of me? You overwhelm me with yer ardor, luv."

James pulled back, eyes widened in confusion, then he shrugged and grinned, returning his tongue to the spot at Jack's collarbone that always made him squirm. "I hold no hopes of making you honest, but I do intend to make you mine."

Jack gulped at the word, and his voice was muffled, burrowed into the tight arc of the bow. It wasn't that he didn't like it. He did and that was what made him feel so suffocated. He felt helpless and angry about feeling helpless, and that, for Jack, was unforgivable. A parade of thoughts marched through his head; Wheldon's eyes, his own fear, James' anger, green eyes, safety, and disgust at his own inability to protect himself that made him shake. "Wot is it, James? You've got what you want."

James pulled away, still looming over Jack, his hand light on Jack's hip. "What I want?" He blinked and laughed shyly. "Why, you. You wanted me to say it?" Jack didn't smile in return and James' confusion turned into worry. "Did I hurt you again?"

Jack choked. "No, you didn't hurt me." He turned back, his eyes glittering and dangerous. "I belong to no man. I didn't spend my whole life outside of your world to cave an' simper at yer feet if you pull my hair." He was shuddery, his voice flat. "I'm not any man's cooin' bitch, not for safety, not even for my life."

He stopped and turned back to the moonlight, his breath coming hard and fast. He didn't mean what he said, yet there was a kernal of truth in it. Two days of lockup and now this, and his head was aching. He couldn't see the moon. She swam in his eyes, and any anger left melted into the silvered waves.

James warily pulled away and took a half-step back, staring at Jack. "What? I never meant or thought that." Had he taken too much for granted, a manner of right taken from a lie whose truth lay only in a convenient way to slake one's lust?

Worse, had even that been only a trade for safety, and now that Wheldon was gone, Jack no longer needed his protection? He had thought that he made it clear that he would never put such a condition. But obviously, Jack hadn't understood at all, hadn't understood that he would never do that. His voice was low and soft, without inflection but for a soft tremble. "My apologies. I had no right."

"Oh shut up, willya! You had every right and none at all." Jack forced himself to whisper and sucked in a breath. "I'm bloody drunk. Just leave me be."

He raised one hand to his face. It was wet and he couldn't understand how it could be wet. The Chimaera was making good time, but not so fast as to send the spray flying. He wanted to get uproariously drunk and sleep it off on the deck. But not this deck. He stifled a moan, the sound of a wounded animal. "Never mind me, James. Just a little crazy with the moonlight." His hand reached out, warily, ready to be snatched back at a moment's notice.

James' face hardened as he stared out at the waves. Played for a fool, and by himself most of all. "Very well then. I will get below."
He turned to walk away, then stopped again, speaking into the darkness rather than to Jack's accusing face. "Just one thing. In this, I have never considered you anything but an equal." With those words, he was truly gone, disappearing through the hatch and back to his hammock, lying awake and staring at the beams.

Jack's hand fell to his side. He turned and leaned far out over the rail, his eyes following the silver line of moonlight until it blurred into a kind of rain, and he shook himself. He moved soundlessly, down to their berth and stood for a moment, watching James in the gloom, trying to order his own thoughts. He crept down to the hold, curled up with his cask and tried to remember the last time he had cried. The mutiny? So many tears over that. Bill? More still. He fell asleep, to the last denying his running nose and eyes.

James was stiff and sore the next morning, rolling out of his hammock unwillingly. His first glance was at the hammock next to him. It was empty. All the better. It meant he did not have to keep from inadvertently touching Jack. The narrow holds made that difficult, and previously, it had not been an issue, but if Jack did not want to be touched, James certainly wouldn't.

He shaved quickly, cursing at a cut. He raised his hand and was about to toss the blade into a corner, then took a deep breath and let his arm drop, putting the razor back. He trudged up to the galley, promptly burning his tongue at the suddenly fresh coffee.

Jack drank and cursed, dozed and drank more until the nightwatch ended. He woke from sodden dreams, choking, hauled himself topside to lean out over the rail just in time. He sank back into a miserable knot. That hadn't happened in years and he wanted to punch someone, anyone.

Hamilton had him back on daywatch as they sped south and he dragged himself up, hit his head on the rail. Cookie's coffee nearly sent him running topside again. He managed to creep to his berth to fix the running kohl and spent five whole minutes, glaring at his left eye in the mirror with the razor poised over a handful of hair.

Vanity won that battle, and he trudged down to the brig to refill his flask, heading topside with all the enthusiasm of a boy starting Michaelmas term and his gut in a knot.

He stumbled up the top step and almost fell headlong over a bucket, left on the quarterdeck. His head aching, his stomach rolling, he swore savagely and kicked it to the main deck.

There was an outraged shout, and when he looked down, he could see James had nearly worn the bucket as a hat, the long hair wet and sticky on his neck, the whole sight hilarious but for the icy green eyes.

Jack clapped one hand over his mouth, sorry for James' soaked glare, but he looked so like a half-drowned cat, his eyes spitting fire, his hair dripping dirty water down his nose. Jack's shoulders started to shake and he tried to choke out an apology, but it got lost in a fit of giggles.

He leaned over the helm, laughing helplessly, and wondered if the day could possibly get any worse.

He could see how James clasped his hands behind his back to keep them from moving, and he imagined that stiff upper lip must already be bitten quite bloody.

James spun around on his heel and hauled himself into the shrouds. He climbed frantically, until he was up at the royal, taking a deep breath. So now that Jack was safe, and the Commodore no longer a necessary protection, it was time to humiliate him. For a good laugh, if nothing else, and possibly even a flogging if he could be provoked to an attack, James mused bitterly, the sharp wind ice-cold
against his wet neck, but he was glad of anything to cool his pounding blood.

Jack heaved a sigh. There would probably be more hell to pay for that little mistake. It was hard enough to keep the Chimaera on course and attempt to decipher Hamilton's brogue, which seemed unaccountably thicker. He put on his best front, a little tattered and worn from three days with little food and much drink, and far too many emotions jangling in his head and heart.

He kept one eye on James, tense and angry, even twenty feet above the deck, and forced a smile more often than necessary. The watch dragged through the afternoon until the ship's bell rang and everyone descended to the galley.

Jack stayed topside, sulking on a coil of rope and working on his little Pearl. The knot in his stomach wasn't a bit better. In fact, it was worse, and he blamed Cookie's execrable meals, and the wind for his aching gut and the salt water that turned the little carving dark and soft beneath his blade and made his vision blur.

Disgusted with James, Hamilton, oceans, ships, nightmares and damned Navy morality, he shoved both in his pocket and climbed down to the galley to search out anything edible.

James had just finished his supper and strode topside, nearly colliding with Jack. "Good. This saves me the trouble of chasing you down. What did you think you were doing this morning? I assure you, I am perfectly capable of understanding words. There is no need for a cold shower." Green eyes flared in the flickering lanternlight. "Or did you hope the bucket would knock me out?"

Jack looked up at him and groaned. Of all the things he needed, an angry James Norrington was about the last. Perversely, his lip lifted in a sneer. "Course ya would think that, wouldn't you? Well, why don't you just trot up to his Highness' cabin and complain." That was not what he meant to say at all; James' eyes were alight and beautiful, amber flames shooting from them in the swaying light. Jack felt sick and his appetite was gone again. "Sorry such a fine tar as yerself can't take a bit of a dunking!"

"Oh yes, it is an integral part of being a sailor to stalk around in the wet. It is downright hilarious to be freezing in the wind only a few leagues south of the equator. I don't know how I could expect you to be professional enough to part your personal animosity from your task. You do not know the meaning of responsibility, that much is obvious." James felt stifled and wanted to get topside for a breath of air, but Jack was blocking the narrow space of the causeway. "Get out of my way."

"Go fuck yerself!" Jack braced his legs and had to look up to stare James down, drowning in his eyes, and hating every word coming out of his own mouth. He gnawed a raw spot inside his cheek to keep his face from crumbling. 'This is the bastard who put a rope around yer neck, and then tried to own you, don't be a fool,' that little voice in his head kept nagging.

"There is no need to concern yourself. I certainly won't fuck you again. Forgive me if I lay hand on your person, but you are leaving me no choice." James shoved at Jack's shoulder, pinning him against the wooden bulwark, and pushed past him. "And next time, don't ask for something you don't want." He swallowed all disappointment and focused on his anger.

Before he could stop himself, Jack shoved back. "Next time, don't bite off more than you can chew!" Something in his gut twisted; the green eyes were cold as ice and it hurt terribly. "I shoulda known you'd revert to type. Greedy, cruel, and so damned fast to lay blame on anyone who ain't so fine. Tell me, Sir? Does yer great family still practice droit de seigneur or d'ya save that fer the cabin boys?" Jack's voice was low and venomous.

James had both hands flattened against Jack's shoulder, panting heavily. He didn't think as he lifted
one and punched Jack soundly across the jaw, wincing as he heard the gasp and he stared at his fist, then at Jack's lips, split and parted, and so beckoning, even curled into a sneer.

James' face hardened again and he pushed himself away. "Do not worry about your non-existent virtue, Mister Sbarra. You have made sure it is quite safe with me now."

Jack's eyes closed, then opened again, enormous and shining for a split second before he turned and spat a mouthful of blood against the bulwark. "I've no doubt it is. You don't want wot's given, only wot you can take. And you call me the pirate!" He bit back another rush of hurtful words and turned to push past James towards the galley blindly, then turned, his eyes narrowed. "Let's just hope your fine airs are enough t'protect young Mattie."

"Certainly better than your lies." James clasped both hands together and stormed topside.

Jack stumbled his way down to the brig hold and curled up next to his cask, sucking on his split lip and wondering why the blood tasted so salty. He banged his fist against the bulwark, cursing and spent the next few hours nursing his bruised knuckles and drinking compulsively. Half-blinded with anger and hurt, he remembered to get himself out of there, and paused at their berth, then went down to the orlop deck and curled up in a corner to sniffle and swear himself to sleep.

Old Gentile listened to him, shaking his head, then pulled a blanket over him. "Silly English buggers," was his only thought as he went back to his workshop to snore amid the wood shavings.

James stood alone at the bow, like another figurehead, no one daring to approach him, his hands clenched tight around the rail. How could he have been so wrong? He'd offered his help without any conditions, but, pirate that he was, Jack had thought he had to secure it. Always keeping an ace up his sleeve, as though a man's word wasn't enough.

He shrugged and squared his shoulders. No was a clear enough matter, and if Jack did not want any intimacy, he certainly would not press the matter.

It hurt, he realised, that Jack would think of him thus. That he would even think him capable of leaving him as prey to cruelty, abandoning his given word.

A false word given to a pirate? James had never meant to treat him like that, nor did he want it. How could Jack think that he would simply want a slave to his lust? There were brothels for that, and with whores, he'd never... he'd never... James shook his head violently and swallowed the urge to scream.

Chapter Nine
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Nine
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--PG-13.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

More than a fight threatens as the Chimaera descends towards the Cape.

This chapter includes more cast portraits.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtflw for her excellent beta.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine: Frozen Waters

The next days were sullen and silent, cold looks and frozen lips over sunlit waters. James ignored Jack and Jack ignored him back. Neither one seemed to be bothered to turn around long enough to watch the other's eyes, longing and hurt.

Hamilton put Jack back on night watches and the course grew colder, the currents more treacherous. They rarely saw each other. Jack grew used to the orlop deck. James stared at the beams above his hammock until he had the grain memorised. When they spoke at all, James was most correct and formal. That hurt worse than accusations and bickering.

Jack knew he deserved the cold shoulder. He'd done everything in his power to ensure James' protection and engage his affections, only to bolt in fright when it threatened his sense of liberty. He knew he'd been wrong and it only made him angrier and more snappish. The entire crew was aware of their continued estrangement and teased relentlessly. Jack shuddered to think of what might have been the scene had Wheldon not taken himself off in Dakar, and that made him profoundly unhappy.

He laughed at the ribbing, but not at all the way he used to laugh. It was a bark, bitter and almost dangerous, daring anyone to go too far. His fists itched for a good fight. He would have welcomed another round with James.

Berkely watched them both with saddened eyes. There was more than a quick shag between the crazy 'Spaniard', whom he suspected was no more Spanish than he was, and the proud gentleman who bore himself with remarkable military precision. They were both too damned proud and stubborn to admit it. The big sailor cursed under his breath: he and Bertie had not gone to the trouble of making damned sure Wheldon never got back to the Chimaera to watch them fall out in such a fashion.

The days that passed didn't make it easier. James had become so used to Jack leaning in or casually kissing him that, while not precisely missing the touches, he did wonder were they were, feeling as if his daily routine was lacking when he woke up next to an empty hammock.

He was not naive enough to fool himself for long. He did miss those touches, longed to reach out and touch himself. And that was the worst of it. He had been foolish enough to fall for the pirate's
game, to actually believe there was anything honest in what Jack obviously paid for his own protection.

It hurt, and that he was pathetic enough to let it hurt even more. Jack was a pirate, he had known that all along. Why had he suddenly thought to ignore it, to believe him different, a friend even?

He didn't laugh at the teasing. He only glared, looking up blankly, and something in his face made most sailors fall silent.

Bertie tried to lighten his mood by collecting extra grog for him once, but James only forced a smile and mutely shook his head. Grog would not make anything better. Lack of self-control had caused all this, more of it would not help.

The wind became cold and all the men donned their coats, making the most normal routines cumbersome and slow. Jack had resumed his shortened shirt and stubbornly refused to change, huddled at the wheel with his coat pulled 'round him like faded, insubstantial feathers, his fingers frosting to the wood as they descended towards the Cape.

The skies mimicked their moods, grey and weltering, always threatening but never breaking, until, near three weeks later, they finally opened and pelted the Chimaera with freezing rain and tiny shards of hail.

Jack was at the helm when the storm arose, damping out the dawn and sending the ship plunging amid wicked wind and churning seas.

He was exhausted when Jensen took the wheel, and hovered over his shoulder until Longthorpe chased him off the quarterdeck. He lingered out of sight, near the bow, watching their progress over the whitecaps with worried eyes, his teeth starting to chatter.

The crew scrambled aloft to take in sail and he glanced upward, searching for James wearily.

In that moment, the ship lurched and there was a scream of "Man overboard!"

His head swivelled around frantically. Young Matthew had been not ten feet away and he was gone.

Jack bolted to the larboard rail, then starboard and glimpsed one white hand over the froth. "Matthew. Got him. Throw me a line!" he shouted, shedding his coat and hauling himself up onto the rail. He took a deep breath and dove.

James was up on the mizzen, reefing the top. His head shot up as the cry carried through the wind and he immediately saw the figure bobbing in the waves, only the dark hair visible against the foaming waves. He reached for the nearest haliard and slid down.

The water hit Jack like fist to the solar plexus, knocking the breath from his lungs and stabbing like a thousand knives. He went under, and forced his arms upward, sheer will making him surface and try to still his convulsive shivering, flailing for Matthew blindly. His fingers brushed something solid and he grabbed for it, yanking hard. He found the boy's head and hauled him above the froth, his eyes stinging.

He could just make out the great hull of the ship, cutting through the choppy waves and threatening to suck them both underneath her. He vomited seawater, his shoulders cracking under the strain as he swam hard, searching wildly for a line. There was nothing but grey green around him, Matthew's curls, dark and floating above his head. He kicked madly, his lungs bursting.
He tried to push the boy higher, shaking and losing coordination. His hands were stiffening, deadly languor beginning to warm his body as it froze. There was no line, and the ship was moving too fast. He forced his arm out, fingers reaching, legs trying to kick feebly.

A ship is awash with lines. To James it seemed there were far too few, nothing, just nothing. Finally, he near stumbled over a coil of rope, grabbed it, and rushed to the stern, eyes moving in panic.

There, there Jack was, almost drawn into the Chimaera’s wake. He tossed the rope. There was no time to fasten it, he only held it tightly wound around his wrists and hoped it would suffice, bracing himself against the rail.  

The rope flew out into the wind and fell just short, then snapped back against Jack’s freezing fingers. Instinctively, they closed around it and he pulled Matthew with him, trying to suck in a breath and feed it to the unconscious boy. He forced his other hand around Matthew to grasp the line. His arms ached and burned with cold, his legs almost uselessly numb.

James reeled him in carefully. It was cold, but any wrench on the rope might cause Jack to lose his tenuous grip. Now he could feel the ropeburn from sliding down the haliard, his fingers too weak.

The rope slipped, a length of it rushing through his hands until he could grab it again. He held it, and in an agonising moment of stillness, he could feel the thump as Jack crashed against the hull. Oh God. He pulled, desperate, fingers clenched to not lose his hold again.

Jack had been barely conscious when he’d felt the line go slack and his dangling legs twitched. He screamed a hoarse whisper and wrenched around with his shoulders to protect Matthew as the hull loomed. His fingers were frozen to the rope.

Suddenly, the strain eased and James panicked, fearing to hold only a weightless rope, until he realised that Bertie had grabbed hold of the line behind him.

Trembling with relief, James pulled, slowly, carefully; relieved, when, with every haul, he still heaved the weight of a man.  

Sailors slid and spun, trying to get hold of the rope. Even Hamilton put his shoulder to it as they heaved the two aboard, sucking them out of an angry sea.
James grabbed hold of them and hauled them over the rail, all three tumbling to the deck with a gasp. Matthew. He hadn't even seen the boy. He was still staring when Nevill pulled the boy from his grasp. He dimly heard Matthew cough seconds later. Thank God.

But Jack wasn't moving. James glanced frantically between the two, until Nevill rushed below with Matthew, half the crew following. James grabbed Jack, hauled him around his shoulders and rushed to the galley.

He shuddered in relief when he saw that Cookie had a fire lit, laying Jack down in front of the stove and wrenching at his clothes, tearing at the wet material. "Jack!"

Jack heard someone calling his name and he tried to answer, but he couldn't seem to move anything at all. He could hear the Pearl, that low hum in his heart; he heard voices; he wondered about young Matthew and why the Caribbean sky was dark and red. He couldn't move and it was such trouble to try. Easier to sleep and let the tide take him wherever it wished. He drifted on clouds and they were cold. He wanted to shiver. He should have shivered, but that, too, was far too troublesome and there were flickers of heat in the cold. He wished it would make up its mind.

James pulled off his own coat and shirt, briskly rubbing Jack dry with it, then tossed it aside and pulled his coat around the shaking shoulders. Shadlow came into the galley and James snarled at him to get blankets, quickly.

He clasped his arms around Jack and rubbed his back. "Easy now. Easy. You're out of the water, and both you and Matthew will be fine."

Shadlow returned with a pile of blankets and helped James drape them around Jack.

Cookie looked on with wide eyes and produced a mug of rum which James pressed to Jack's lips, holding tight with his own palms around the shaking grasp.

Jack was quaking violently, limp in the throes of his body's shudders. His eyelids quivered, then flickered open to a reddish haze, green lights boring through it. He squinted. "But I don't like marmalade, Pearl."

Berkely lifted an eyebrow from behind James. "Now, mate, I think ye should be worried if he thinks ye're his toothless sister."
Shadlow took a closer look. "Yup, looks more like a wet rat," he teased.

James grinned weakly and draped himself fast around Jack, clutching at the shivering body, brushing the wet hair away from his face, and laughed a bit too loud. "No more sweets, or you will be the toothless one. Here, drink." He eased the mug to Jack's lips and tipped it back.

Jack was about to complain about the lack of pocket watches aboard, and why in hell was the Great Cabin festooned with flowers? He couldn't see them, but he certainly could smell them, sweet jasmine and gardenias, very tempting....when did rum grow like roses?

His eyes flew open.

"The kid," he croaked. "Where's th' kid?"

The sweetness faded to bilge and shipstink and Jack gulped at the rum. Old men, and women, too said that to smell phantom flowers presages death. He swallowed frantically.

James pulled the mug away, still trying to still the shivering and his own pounding heart. "Shhh. He's in sickbay. He'll be all right. All right, do you hear me? Thanks to you."

Jack looked up at him curiously, then tried to sit upright. "Gotta see him." He fell back against James weakly. He was no immortal; just a man, and the freezing water had done its best to conquer him. That had been the sea, Norrington was the noose. He shivered so hard he thought his bones would rattle loose.

James clutched him close and got to his feet, Jack still in his arms. He looked like a babe, wrapped in only the too large coat and the blankets. James took him to sickbay, sitting down on the hammock next to Matthew's.

The boy was just waking up. He'd been undressed and wrapped into blankets, his blond head poking out of them, all too like Jack's; pale, teeth chattering.

Jack's eyes flickered and he strained to move, but he couldn't stop shivering. He pushed his arm out of the blankets to pat the boy's shoulder. "Mattie? Hey? You awright, boy? Did no one tell you..." his voice drifted, his eyes rolling back into his head. He blinked hard and took a shaky breath. "not t'jump overboard like that?"

Matthew grinned weakly, shaky as his teeth would not still. "'m fine. And you jumped, too!" He shivered violently and clutched at Jack's hand.

James slowly reached out one raw hand to put it on top of theirs. "Hush, both of you. Curl up and stop wasting your energy with talking. Cookie promised to have hot tea ready in a few minutes."

Jack's eyes moved, his head following in strange slow motion, and it made him dizzy. "Silly bugger. Should be holdin'...holdin'...." His eyes closed, the tremors jerking him feebly under James' hands.

"Jamie? Should be holdin' him." He spat the words between chattering teeth.

He stared at green eyes, the clothes' peg jammed awkwardly into the bulwark, the clouds in his mind, detached from himself and his shaking body.

James winced and sighed. "For once, be practical, Jack." Apparently, Jack did not even want his help anymore, but whatever the complaints, he would not let him freeze. James stood, pressed the bundle of Matthew and his blankets into Jack's arms, then wedged himself behind them.
The blankets slipped from Jack's shoulders as he moved, and James quickly righted them, but not before seeing the bruises, down to the ribcage and probably even further.

He remembered how the line had slipped, the thump. With a small shudder, he touched his palm lightly to the bruise, then tugged the blanket higher.

Berkely brought them the promised tea and went topside for his watch, leaving James behind as a thoroughly ridiculous nurse, a cup of tea in one hand, a cup of rum in the other.

Sandwiched between James and the boy, Jack welcomed the body heat and a thought drifted through his head of James, and how much he missed that long, familiar body against his at night. His mouth wouldn't work properly. He wanted to say something... something about James; his name, something he was forgetting. He fought against the whispering expanse of pale fog that clouded everything.

James remained still behind the two, mixing the rum with tea and tried to feed each as much of the warm liquid as he could, clutching his own trembling fingers around the cup, his hold around Matthew and Jack tighter than necessary.

Jack pulled himself away from the pleasant fog and curled against James, clinging to Matthew. He forced his eyes half-open. "Put th' cup down 'fore you spill it, luv. Mattie sleepin'?"

"Almost," James whispered, putting the cup to the deck, uncertain what to do with both hands free and finally clasping them over Jack's chest, just above Matthew's head.

Jack smiled wanly, his eyes fogged and wistful. "James. Jamie?"

James flinched at the soft sound, suddenly acutely uncomfortable in the overcrowded hammock. He forced a smile and carefully shifted out behind Jack. "I...I should be topside."

The dark eyes softened, seemed to hold him back, then shuttered and closed. "Thank you, James."

James smiled in apology and reached out, gently ruffling Matthew's curls. "I must thank you for saving him. That was brave." His hand was still lifted, hovered for a moment, then he dropped it and his lip curled into a nervous smile, gone as quickly as it had appeared. He turned and left.

Jack wandered back to his blue-grey clouds and let them bob through his mind like so many puffs of a Chinaman's pipe. He blinked himself awake and stared at the raw beams above him. He couldn't sleep. He knew better, but it was so easy and warm to cling to Matthew and let go.

He forced himself to get up and left Matthew wound in the blankets like swaddling clothes, taking a few and huddling against the hull, his breathing heavy. What was two plus seven-hundred fifty four and four/fifths? The average speed if a ship left Port Royal to arrive in Hell, with fair winds astern? Seventeen times twelve? He sobbed in a breath and rubbed his eyes until he thought he'd screw them out of his head.

He made himself stand and prowled sickbay for something to help him stay awake, until he found a ball of twine, normally used by Nevill to tie off smaller extremities in need of amputation.

He took it back to his corner and began knotting it, fingers moving mechanically, counting in his head, sometimes aloud.

Jack fiddled away a great chasm with everything that sang and laughed, and heard the Pearl.

James returned to the galley, only freezing when he was far out of sickbay. He picked up his almost
dried shirt and slung it on, then Jack's coat, rushing topside to where the wind blew away the familiar scent.

Longthorpe shook his head at him and, without a task, James made for the quarterdeck, the place where he had stood and tossed out the rope.

Shivering, he clenched his fists around the rail, staring out. The waves were calmer now, deceptively peaceful, even if they could still devour a man within seconds.

He shuddered, staring at his palms, ripped raw from the lengths of rope that had slipped through his hands. He had nearly let go completely, and it was only luck that Jack hadn't been knocked unconscious or lost his grip when he crashed against the hull.

He never heard the footsteps behind him until Hamilton spoke. "Hey, Norbury? James. Seems t'me, laddie, yer glass is more n' half-full. That were quick thinkin'. Another minute and they'd have gone down. Dinna question it. It was a lucky day." His hand was heavy on James' shoulder for a moment before he turned away to talk to Jensen impatiently.

James stared after him, then straightened and locked away all expression on his face. With a last glance to Hamilton, he descended from the quarterdeck and pressed Longthorpe into giving him a task, working away the remainder of the day to keep his gaze from wandering astern to the Chimaera's wake.

Seven hundred.... twelve.... twenty-two. Jack's eyes fell closed. He dreamed, images distorted through the heart's lens: the Pearl, drifting towards him over the horizon, her black sails crackling with electricity, fire pouring from her guns. Closer and closer, the beloved figurehead swept towards him, fog shrouded and dim. Lightning tore through purple-black skies and her face changed, became another's: James glared at him, angry and cold and his eyes blinked wide. Twenty-three hundred eighty-seven...

When his watch ended, James descended to sickbay, carrying three trenchers.

He put away the tray and Matthew stirred, sniffing at the scent of the stew, sitting up.

He saw Jack wrenched into the corner, entangled in a fishing net, fingers gripping it tightly, his head slumping against the bulwark, eyelids fluttering.

James frowned and knelt, gauging a possible fever with the flat of his hand.

Jack dreamed on, his fingers still working; the same dream, again and again. Every time he wakened, he struggled to stay alert, but only his hands listened. And every time, he saw the Pearl's figurehead; her upraised hands wielding a sword, sometimes a noose; James' face always cold and tight-lipped. He fought against his ghostly dreamscape and shuddered himself awake.

His eyes flew open, he grabbed James' wrist and held it at arm's length until his strength was done and his muscles went limp as unstrung lines. His gaze was dull.

James winced, and he warily pulled back. The clear concern in his eyes faded to disappointment. "Easy. Sit up slowly, I have brought supper."

Jack's hands started to tremble, the twine in them shivering like a spider's web in a breeze. He was barely awake, but alert enough to see his dream-face before his nose and recoiled.

His fingers kept at their endless knotting and he had an odd look, as if blind or looking someplace else that no one else could see. "Mattie? How's he doin'?"
"Hungry, it seems." James' voice sounded detached and he shrugged, putting one of the trenchers down on the deck next to Jack. He saw the clear discomfort and swallowed a sigh, got to his feet and padded over to Matthew, sharing supper with him.

The boy didn't look good. He was snuffling, his eyes glassy and his hand shaking as he tried to sop up the stew with a piece of biscuit.

James eased him back into the hammock, checking his head as well. It was warm: the boy had taken a chill.

Jack saw Nevill fuss over the hammock, and the outline of James in harsh silhouette from his vantage point on the deck. He watched intently as Matthew fought some brew until James leaned forward and tasted it first. His face was in shadow.

Jack fell headlong into his dream, and this time it was frighteningly vivid, the face of the figurehead lit with malicious glee, the hands offering an all-too-familiar braid of black hair. He moaned, stirring, trying to stay awake and falling back into dreams.

James had just managed to get Matthew back to sleep, distracting him with odd pieces of stories and other nonsense until he succumbed to exhaustion.

He heard Jack's moan and rose, rushed over and re-settled the blanket around him, stroking his back in soothing movements. He had not set a condition to his help before, he would not now. He could not bear to see Jack suffering like this.

Jack sagged against the bulwark, then forward into James' arms like a rag doll. He held his breath, then slowly raised his head, his eyes enormous and ill-focused, something of terror radiating from behind the blank expression.

James reached up to brush the dark hair away from his face before he could stop himself, his hand lingering in the caress. "Shhh. It's all right. Let's get you back to the hammock. The deck is cold."

"Yes. Cold. It is." Jack's voice was flat. "I'm awright. Just dreamin'. You know about me dreamin'.." He leaned heavily as James lifted him and got him into the hammock, the canvas instantly cradling him.

His cold fingers still moved against the blanket and James' arm, raising the sunbleached hair into gooseflesh. "Sorry, luv."

James nodded, unable to hide his concern, bent over the hammock, hovering close. He slowly removed his hands, careful not to dislodge Jack's. The silence stretched. "You didn't take your supper. The stew is probably cold by now, but there is grog."

The long fingers twitched, then fell away. "Not hungry, but thanks. Grog'll do fine. James, how's the lad? Worried."

James kept his hand from chasing the touch, silent for a moment longer before he turned and got the grog. "He has taken a chill. Nothing too bad, I hope, and in all likelihood, he will be fine after a few days of rest. " Silence again, and he couldn't bear it. "He will be fine," he repeated. "Thanks to you."

Jack shook his head, jingling faintly. "Me? Nah. Hope he's awright. I don't need t'be here. I'm fine." He pulled himself up to face James, then plucked at the blanket. "I hate th' bloody cold."

"I used to hate the Caribbean heat when I first got there." James laughed softly and sat himself in the hammock between Matthew's and Jack's, fighting not to shuffle his feet. "We'll put 'round the Cape
soon enough. Then we shall head north again."

Jack’s smile twisted. "Blasted idiot thing, innit? Sailin' north to get warm. It just don't sound reasonable at all." His hands had stopped shaking so badly and he sipped at the grog, then bolted down half the mug, smiling at James' involuntary laugh "Can't believe it's been so long. Wanna get clear of this and I want--want..." He reeled upright, his eyes searching.

"James? You do wanna get home?"

James slipped out of the hammock to kneel next to Jack's, his voice suddenly low. "Of course. Do you think I want to be a tar on a pirate ship for the rest of my life? They need me at home."

He swallowed hard and forced his gaze up to meet Jack's. "Despite all else, I assume our accord on that account is still valid?"

Jack's face changed like sunlight in shifting winds, and he swallowed. "Course it is. All of it."

James smiled just barely and held out his hand. "Peace?"

Jack could have wished that his own hadn't shook so, eyes locked on James, afraid of that terrible, implacable distain. Or worse, the heartless glee. "Peace, luv." He held onto James fingers for a moment, his own calloused and worn.

His hand was in a tight grip for just a moment before James let go, lashes fluttering and lips widening into a smile.

He rose to his feet and smiled again, his hand hovering to smooth the blanket, but he wrenched it back at the last second. "Sleep now, lest you take ill like little Matthew."

"Me? Yer jokin', mate." Jack forced a reasonable version of his grin, hiding under his hair. So they were back to the beginning, as if nothing had happened between them but their enforced travels. He nodded and finished the grog, set his mug on the floor with quiet deliberation, and curled into the blanket, every bit as miserable as he had been for these past weeks. He watched James disappear through the door, fighting the urge to call him back.

He kept himself awake once more, knotting and twisting the twine, fetching another ball and continuing until he could not keep his eyes open one moment longer.

When James returned to sickbay the next day after his watch, again with supper, Jack was gone, the net balled in the hammock. James took it, feeling the rough texture between his fingers, the hundredfold of tiniest knots.

His hands clenched into a fist around it before he turned, smiling at little Matthew, who lay curled into his hammock, sniffling and coughing pathetically.

James sat down and helped him sit up to drink his hot tea. The trencher held a light soup for the boy that Cookie had specially prepared for him, sneaking it to James with a conspiratorial wink. "How are you, lad? Regretting your little swim yet?"

Matthew's voice was dull, weakened and lowered by the chill. "'Tis fine long as I don't get up, and surgeon won't let me do that anyway. Tells me to sleep, but there's only so much I can sleep in one day. 'N that brew is dreadful. Right about worse than Cookie's stuff!"

James hid a grin, well remembering how difficult a patient he was when confined a bed by a seeming triviality. "He is right about that. You need to rest in order to recover." He righted the blankets
around Matthew and looked over into the other hammock. "Do you know where Jack is? He should rest, too."

Matthew pouted. "Jack left this morning. Said he'd go barmy if he didn't get somethin' proper to do. And surgeon's been all round the ship. I can't keep myself busy without gettin' up." He scowled and would have stamped his foot had he not been in the hammock.

James smiled and petted his head. "I have little doubt that you will be up and running in no time. You are stubborn enough to do that." He had been ten years old when he'd gone swimming for too long in cold water and had taken a chill. His mother had been worried out of her mind, but she had just as stubbornly tucked him in and confined him to bed, nursing him and keeping him occupied by reading to him.

"Matthew, can you read?"

The boy laughed, stopping on a cough. "You're jokin'."

James sighed. "If I read something to you, do you promise to try to sleep afterwards, and not do anything foolish such as getting up?"

Matthew's eyes lit up and he nodded eagerly, wincing once. "Would you really do that?"

"Just wait a moment while I try to get a book. And stay put, or I will use that book to hit you over the head with it." James lifted one finger threateningly and made his way topside.
He spied Deacon on the quarterdeck. "My apologies for the interruption, Sir. I have a small request and hoped you would be able to help."

Deacon's wiry brows drew together. "An' wot would the likes of you be wantin', eh? Speak quick, man." Everyone knew that his formidable bark was worse than his bite.

James didn't let himself be dissuaded and put on his most polite smile. "It is about little Matthew, Sir. I know you own several books, and I hoped that I might borrow one to read it to him and keep him busy during his convalescence."

The weathered face softened. "Wouldn't be a bad thing to give that boy some religion. You neither. Y'know where they are in my cabin. An' be careful with 'em." He turned back to Jensen.

Jack watched from above, high in the rigging, swaying on one of the yards, and paused in his incessant count of gaskets and grommets. His brow furrowed and he slipped down into the shrouds, hanging from them, half-listening.

James inclined his head. "I shall. Thank you, Sir." He turned, gave Jack a tentative smile and returned below, studying Deacon's bookshelf. None of the books was likely to meet Matthew's preference.

His eyes lit on an English translation of the Holy Book. Likely, Matthew was already, at least audibly familiar with some passages, and that could prove to be an advantage.

He took the heavy, leather-bound book and triumphantly returned to sickbay. "Matthew, would you like to be able to read?"

The glassy blue eyes shot wide in the pale, round face. "Very much!" The bow coughed again and reined in his excitement, smiling shyly.

James smiled back at him and pulled up the single chair, perching the book on Matthew's chest.

The boy was reasonably familiar with Genesis and passages from the New Testament, so James began with those, explaining the letters and their shape, how they were used. It was easier when Matthew knew a sentence or a word and James could show him the corresponding letters.

It would have been even easier with paper and quill to demonstrate how a spoken word turned into writing, to even let Matthew experiment a bit himself, but paper was precious shipboard. Maybe he
could ask Hamilton later or get some in Bombay.

Bombay. Hopefully not. His face fell a bit and he returned his attention to Matthew, making do with the means he had, barely noticing how time flew by.

Jack wandered the Chimaera like a silent ghost until the watch bell sounded and he stole belowdecks to his cask. He worked the loose board free and pulled out a small roll of scrap paper, one of two pilfered quills and a half-full bottle of ink. After all, one never knew when such things would be useful, as his secret missive to Gibbs had proved. He squeaked the board back in place, refilled his flask and got lost in counting the barrels until he shook himself alert and slipped into sickbay.

"Evenin' James. Mattie, yer lookin' better." His face was a strange shade of gold, almost chalky, and his eyes were sunk deep into his head. Hamilton had had Longthorpe keep an eye on him during the watch. He'd done his work aloft without any problem, but seemed to be daydreaming and would get lost in the weave of a sail or the coils of lines.

Teacher and pupil took a moment to look up from the book, James just explaining why a word was spoken so differently than its letters indicated. Matthew was still pale, but he grinned from ear to ear and beamed with pride. "James is teaching me to read," he announced gleefully.

James looked up and laughed softly, hiding an embarrassed smile, as thought he'd done something improper. "Matthew is a most interested student. Good evening, Jack." Jack came closer and James started a little. "How are you feeling?"

Jack swung himself into the opposite hammock to face them, cross-legged. His grin was tired. "Now that is a fine thing, Matt. Nothin' better for ya. Once you can read, son, there ain't any man that can take it 'way nor tell ya wot t'think. A very fine thing." He reached into his shirt and handed the small roll of precious paper, the quill and ink to James. "Thought this might help with the lessons. No sense t'be readin' and not be able to write, aye?"

James' eyes widened and lit up, his lips stretching into a smile. "I had missed just that. Thank you." His eyes had followed Jack's movement and lingered, taking in how the new shirt hung lower than the old, covering waist and thighs. He cradled the paper like a precious treasure, about to speak again when Matthew interrupted him with an enormous yawn.

Jack smiled and plucked the book from Matthew's drooping fingers. "I think your pupil is ready for a bit o' shut-eye, luv." He turned it around and glanced at the page, laughing softly. "Is there a rule somewhere that says anyone who learns his letters shipboard must do it with King James' help?"

"I doubt Milton would be any more to your taste and, save that, Deacon's choice is limited." James laughed softly and carefully took book and writing utensils to stow them away in one of the shelves Nevill had cleared.

Matthew pouted, but remembered his promise and obediently stretched out in the hammock again, his thrust-out lower lip enormous, the plea in his eyes clearer than any words.

James hid a grin. "If you promise to sleep and behave yourself tomorrow, I will return for supper and further lessons. Is that agreeable to you, young Master Matthew?"

Matthew blushed furiously and nodded, then curled up. He was asleep the moment he'd muttered a soft, "Thank you."

Jack rose stiffly and gave the boy a quick kiss on the cheek. "Sweet dreams, luv. See ya t'morra." He headed towards the door and waited for James, leaning against the frame heavily. "He's a rum
"He is." James' voice was soft, his smile wondering. He reached out, snatched his hand away and let it drop. "You look just as tired as he is. Shall we go to the berth?"

Jack nodded and trudged to their quarters in silence. He stumbled once on the steps, caught himself and straightened, making for his hammock and sitting in it, his fingers moving restlessly, tapping out a silent rhythm.

James blinked into the darkness, sitting on his own swaying hammock, fighting not to shuffle his feet. Everything around them was silent, the hold blissfully empty. "Considering your comment, I take it the Holy Book was used to teach you to read?" he asked suddenly.

A slow grin stole over Jack's face. "Hell, yes. First thing I ever read, and it still puts me t'sleep. Well, some if it's not bad. The Song o' Solomon. An' I rather like the Psalms. But I didn't have half so nice a teacher." He pulled off the shirt, rolling it up and huddled in his blanket. "That's a kind thing, James, and young Matthew'll be all the better for it."

"I have found out that Midshipmen learn navigation better by explanation and demonstration rather than by using a cane. And he is a good lad. He deserves better than this." He started a bit at his own words, glancing around the hold quickly, the tension ebbing as he found it empty.

He stared at Jack's back. The bruises went down to his hip, further than he had expected, darker now, the edges fading to purplish yellow. He bit his lip, and reached towards his coat pocket. "I got some ointment from Nevill. Would you like me to tend to...this?" He reached out, hand barely hovering over one shoulder.

Jack's eyes flickered up to meet James'. He nodded, biting his lip. "It would be another kindness, James." He stretched out and rolled to his right side, facing the empty rows of hammocks. "Canes can sometimes be th'only way." His shoulders shook in a laugh. "Worked on me fast enough."

James poured some of the ointment into his palms, clenching them together to still their trembling, then knelt down, spreading his palms flat on Jack's back. It was warmer than he had thought, warm from injury, and the sharp smell of herbs filled the air. He gulped and looked away, staring at the hook that secured the hammock while his hands worked. "Why would I need a cane for a willing pupil? It is his choice, nothing I need to beat into him."

His hands lingered and he quickly poured more of the ointment, spreading it on his palms. He kept them flat as he worked, rubbing gently. "Who taught you, and when?"

Jack exhaled deeply, sighing with pleasure as it cooled the sore flesh. "Lord, long time ago, when I were 'bout six, I was apprenticed to a cartographer, so I had t'learn, didn't I? Damn me, if the old bugger and his journeyman didn't make sure I learned fast." He flinched a little, then relaxed. "Suppose it were th' best way with me. I wasn't a prize pupil, like young Mattie."

"Shhh…." James kept his touch light, soothing, concentrated not to let it slip too low or linger too long. He only wanted to help, nothing else, and if a stupid part of his mind became wistful, it would have to shut up. "Nonsense. I'm sure you were just like him when you were young. Hell, you are just like him still."

He continued after a short, stifled laugh. "The Captain who first taught me navigation seemed to believe a beating would help anyone to remember anything. Fortunately, the Lieutenant was a lot more capable of teaching without a cane."
Jack's eyes flew open. "Jamie! Shhh. Dangerous waters, mate." He shifted to peer over the edge of the hammock at the empty hold, and breathed a sigh of relief. He settled back down and James could feel the constant tension in his shoulders and back. "All learnin' is a fine thing. Better if it's a pleasant task, but worth it, no matter how it's got. Bet you were a rum little bugger yerself."

"Not a bugger then," James laughed softly and brushed Jack's hair aside. His neck wasn't bruised but the tension was there as well, and he smoothed his hand over it lightly. "And sea-sick like a little rat."

Jack's lips curved into a smile. "Never been m'whole life. And that's the truth. I were born shipboard. How old were ya, Jamie? And wot was it like before...?" Jack battled the urge to stare at the canvas and count the warp threads, fighting sleep on instinct now.

"I was twelve. Just barely. I thought I had never in my life seen such horrible weather. And that after growing up in England." Another soft laugh. The smell of herbs began to fade, mingling with sweat, and James realised he had bent closer. He pulled away but kept his hands steady, not wishing to startle Jack.

"Life was warmer before, cleaner. But just as much water in my ears." James shrugged, his hands stilled for a moment. "It's been my life since then. I don't regret it."

Jack sighed and stretched. "That feels good. I can't imagine bein' stranded on land. Not fer good. I think I'd go mad. Not that I may not be mad already. Everyone says so." He felt detached and ready to brave any dreams. James' hands were sure but gentle, and the scent was green, tickling his sinuses. "Where'd Nevill get that? Smells of th' Orient t'me. Most amazin' medicine there. Stickin' pins in folks to cure lumbago."

Something tethered inside of Jack let go and he knew it was safe to trust James' hands and the current. He smiled again.

James grinned to himself and the darkness. "I don't know. He only pressed it into my hands and said that I should bloody well stop rummaging through his supplies and ask for what I need."

"Long while back, I shipped out on a very nice little lady called Lillia di Cremona, outta Macao. Ever heard o'typhoons, Jamie? Devil winds they call 'em. They roar outta the Pacific like cannonballs and tear down everythin' in their path. Got clobbered when the foremast cracked and I wasn't right fer weeks."

"You seem to have suffered an impressive amount of headwounds."

"M always gettin' knocked about one way or another. 'Twas so bad they had t'take me to some place. There were this Chinese feller, pins and strange-tastin' tea." His shoulder moved in a shrug and he felt limp as a bit of dulse collected on shore.

"You hit your head again this time, didn't you?" James asked softly, smoothing in the last of the ointment, before he pulled up the blanket and tucked it in around Jack. "But you can sleep now. It has been days already." His voice was soft.

Jack wanted to laugh, and wondered why it would be a bad thing if he hit his head again. It was hard as oak anyway. Laughter was too taxing and he smiled again, his breathing slowed, and he slept for the first time without dreams or disturbance since before Dakar.

James slowly backed away, careful not to upset the hammock's balance. Only with the mention of the headwound had he realised that Jack had barely slept the past days; why, he suspected not even
Jack himself knew.

It was always the act. The act of Jack Sparrow that had crumbled a bit here and there. That must have irked Jack. He was like Matthew: fighting against sleep stubbornly, tired beyond his limits, but locked in a battle of wills against his own exhaustion.

James sat awake for a long while, but Jack didn't so much as stir or snore, rocked by the swaying hammock. When his own head slumped for the third time, he stretched out, falling into uneasy rest.

Chapter Ten
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Ten
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--PG-13.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

The Chimaera rounds the Cape as the elements conspire to destroy her.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtfhw for her excellent beta.
James woke when Shadlow shook his hammock, blinking up in confusion. When Shadlow moved on, he vaulted out of his hammock and pulled the outstretched hand back. "Don't. Let him sleep."

Bertie popped his head up. "Aye. Cap'n said t'let him sleep if he did. Been acting awful peculiar has our Jack." He lugged himself to his feet and scratched, then went to the basin.

Shadlow winked at James and glanced down at Jack, sleeping so deeply he didn't snore at all. "Beat ya t'he galley fer first dibs on the coffee, Bertie."

"Y'can have all of the brew if you can stomach it." Bertie laughed and tugged at James' sleeve. "C'mon. Yer still on duty."

James smoothed the blanket's last folds and let himself be led to the galley. He hadn't expected to earn Jack more than half an hour's reprieve, but Hamilton apparently saw more than he had thought. James had a hard time not to feel grateful for that and, in the late afternoon, made for the quarterdeck to mutter his thanks in Jack's place.

Hamilton turned from the helm, his look sour. Jensen was thick as a brick and he hoped that Spanish would be fit for duty sooner rather than later. The weather had calmed but still lowered like winter on the shore of Donegal. "Norbury, wha's that ya say? An' how's Spanish doin'?"

"Sleeping, fortunately. And I wanted to thank you for letting him stay asleep." James' eyes were wondering, searching Hamilton's face for a moment, then he dropped his gaze.

The Irishman's eyes were keen. "He's a good man, I need him up here." They began to twinkle. "An' I canna have yer mate wanderin' round me ship countin' every knothole. Damned queer." He sniffed at the wind. "G'wan an' get aloft."

James stared at him for a moment longer, then snapped to attention. "Aye, Sir."

He worked hard until the end of his watch, then went to check on Jack, who was still fast asleep. He remembered his promise and made for sickbay, sharing supper with Matthew, proceeding with further lessons until the boy fell fast asleep.
Jack slept on, long into the next watch. He blinked himself awake in the dead of night, the hold plunged into darkness save for the thin ribbon of light from the outer causeway. He peeked to stare at James through his matted hair, listening to the soft sounds of his breathing. His face was relaxed; open and unguarded, all the lines smoothed away in slumber. Jack remembered the gentle hands and his eyes closed again.

He roused again with the hold whispering the soft sounds of the men waking for watch, and sat up. "Hullo!"

James was still asleep and he poked the hammock with a grin, then groaned as he got to his feet. "Goddamn, I feel like I been tossed from the nest. Mornin' Jamie."

James looked up, tousled, then blinked and grinned. "Good morning, slugabed. Don't worry, I kept Shadlow from hauling you aloft while you were asleep."

Jack grinned over his shoulder. His eyes were deeply circled and the paint had all but faded, but they didn't have that leaden, stupefied expression any more. "So kind o' you, luv, but I only fell 'sleep last evenin'."

He took the time to do his eyes and glanced at his face in the fractured bit of mirror. Much better. It took more than ice water and slam against the hull to keep Jack Sparrow down for long.

"Hamilton will be delighted. I have it from a reliable source that he missed you dreadfully." James hauled himself out of the hammock and shaved, whistling.

Jack turned, his hand in his hair. "Hamilton? Missed me? When?"

"Yesterday afternoon. You slept all day, Jack. You more than needed it."

Jack stopped and padded back to pull on his boots and his shirt. "You're gaffin' me! I did, and he didn't have me dragged topside fer a few stripes? Must be mixin' salt water with that whiskey." Jack took a step forward, smiling, leaning close. "Thanks, luv. You've been too good t'me."

He almost stole a kiss, but held himself back in time.

James held his breath, then let it out carefully. "He is smarter than he lets on. Sometimes, that is. After all, there would be no good in your falling asleep over the wheel and running us aground," he teased, then raised an eyebrow. "Coffee?"

"Sounds wonderful! Even here." Jack followed him up the close stairs to the galley and raised an eyebrow at the murmured hullos and stares. "Mornin' all. I am at yer service!" He made a mock bow and blew on his mug to cool it.

The mock cheers faded into subdued concern, but most were still wary of Jack. They had seen him hang from the rigging like a monkey, wandering around counting lines and planking, muttering to himself, and although they were used to Spanish's oddities, that had gone rather too far.

The course was hard for days, choppy seas and unkind weather tossing in their difficulties to shiphandling. The ropes were cold and stiff and they had to retie most of the rigging, giving it more play so the strain would not tear the hemp asunder.

Jack struggled with the wheel, wrenching it as the Chimaera fought her way through whitecaps and foam. His teeth chattered through his watches and he began to linger close to the galley stove to warm himself before tumbling into his hammock. He woke chilled to bones that protested more than
they had last time he'd rounded the Cape.

James quickly settled into a new routine. When his watch was over, he would continue his lessons with Matthew until exhaustion put an end to it. As Matthew grew healthier, it was often James who had to strike his colours and retire for sleep.

Sometimes, Jack would join them and pull faces at certain passages that sent Matthew laughing. Then both would set upon James and mercilessly tickle him into a giggling fit.

But Jack was not above other touches. His arm would slip around James' shoulder, play with a strand of hair, hot against his cheeks. It was unnerving; the touches not substantial enough to truly warrant complaint, but more than James thought justified after Jack's declaration on a cold deck.

He longed for those touches, missed them when they were gone. It was as if a bit of that warm closeness from before Dakar was back; cruel, as James could not accept them.

He would not again let himself be goaded into believing something that was not the case. Jack had said 'no' very clearly, and James was far too proud not to heed that. It grated at him, to always keep his reactions in check, to always consider what would be improper or what was appropriate among shipmates.

Jack amused himself carving a small plank. It was hard going--the wood was tough and his joints told him he was definitely no where near as young as he appeared. They ached with the cold, stiffened from hours at the wheel or aloft. He'd taken young Matthew's place a few times, and Hamilton figured he was too handy on the topmost yards to overly worry if he was still daft and going to splatter himself on the deck.

He cursed himself to a thousand hells and nursed his frozen bottom in the galley as much as possible. It wasn't much warmer, but it did keep him near James. And he wanted that. He watched James in the lantern's sway and let himself be enchanted all over again. He threw an arm around James' neck and nestled closer, his lips brushing one ear.

James stiffened and pulled away as far as he could, making no comment but swallowing hard on a bite of salted fish.

Jack's hand slid down his shoulder, arm, then up around his neck. He was smiling, eyes deep and mysterious over stark bones.

James shivered under the caress, leaning into it, then stiffened and pulled away, words blurring out hastily. "You said you were no cooing strumpet to yield at demand. Neither am I." He pushed himself up and fled to sickbay.

Jack opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again, cut to the quick and mourning the moment broken. He hadn't been thinking of a tumble. Well, not entirely. The light had been so beautiful, dancing in those amber streaks in the pupils of James' eyes. It was entrancing, and what right did Norrington have to stand on his dignity, and damn it all, he hadn't meant that at all.

His thoughts confused, he sulked, and slow-burning anger stoked a dangerous kind of heat in him. He had a double-watch on his back: Jensen was honestly afraid and well he should be! Rounding Good Hope in such weather was not any pilot's dream. He stomped topside and the jumbled feelings narrowed to a quiet fury. Part of him was glad of it: at least it kept him from falling asleep and freezing.

By the time the sun rose, sullen and pale through another bank of grey clouds and gusts of wind that
knocked the breath out of him, he was in a fine rage. At whom, he hadn't the slightest idea.

When Hamilton came up to the quarterdeck, a fur cloak thrown over this coat, Jack was ready to snap at any provocation. He listened with half his attention and the provocation became shocked disbelief.

"Wot th' hell did you say?"

Hamilton stared at him. "Head her in, Spanish. Closer t'shore."

"Are you out of your mind?"

Hamilton's eyes narrowed. "Wha' did you say?"

Jack was distinctly aware of two separate but equal reactions to the cold disdain in those eyes. His unfocused anger found a target and the sinking jab of survival instinct that told him such a course was suicide. "I said are you outta your bloody bogtrottin' mind? You head in and this will just get worse. You wanna get dashed on the rocks? The reefs?"

Hamilton was instantly affronted, angry that he had given the lout time to recover his wagging tongue. He'd spent a bad night, worrying about the weather himself, and had a fine Irish hangover for his trouble. "How dare ya speak t'me like tha'?"

"Oh bugger off! I'll speak t'you like the blitherin' fool you are if ya suggest somethin' so damned idiotic." Jack was shaking, his eyes fierce. "Most times, I'd humour you, but this ain't just your funeral. I will not steer any ship to shore in this kinda weather."

Hamilton looked as though he would explode. He screamed for Longthorpe, who was right beside him. "Get this bastard off my deck an' inta the brig. Remember this, Sbarra. You'll get wha's comin' t'ya once we're round the Cape. Lock 'im up and it'll be a hundred, you can depend on that."

Jackson and Griffin already had hold of Jack's arms and dragged him down the stairs to the hatch.  "Good luck, Captain Hamilton. Let's hope your Irish saints haven't been pilferin' that whisky," he called over his shoulder as he skidded across the deck.

James heard the shout from the causeway and hurried topside, but they only hauled Jack past him without a word.

He saw Hamilton, face scarlet as his coat, and his eyes narrowed, but before he could take more than one step, Bertie roughly hauled him back. "I don't know what's off, but if ye don't wanna follow below, don't as much as look at the Cap'n now."

He didn't relent, staring at the quarterdeck gloomily. "G'wan James. If ye go up there now, I swear I'll whack ye over th'head and claim it were a fallen yard."
Eventually, Bertie managed to pull James amidships, where they had to replace torn ratlines, knotting them to the shrouds. Whenever James' gaze wandered astern, Bertie punched his arm, hard.

Jack was so outraged he barely held onto his wits and kept from shrieking out his name, provenance and pedigree. Goddamn bloody idiots trying the Cape without knowing if the pilot could navigate it? He paced the cell like a tiger, cursing at the top of his lungs in five languages. Worn out and disgusted, he tried the door, and was horrified to realise they had locked him in the second cell. He was trapped. If the Chimaera foundered, he was a dead man.

He leaned against the flat bars, getting more chilled by the minute until he sagged to the deck and swilled from his flask. It was already half-empty and that prompted another tirade, an elaborately-worded rant about Hamilton, the weather, the Cape, the Irish, pressgangs, Africa and especially James bloody 'Norbury's' delicate sensibilities.

Finally, the watchbell sounded and Bertie very nearly hauled James below by his collar. After supper, he trailed James like a puppy, until he thought him safely settled in sickbay.

James smiled grimly and ruffled Matthew's hair. "I'm sorry, Matthew, your lessons today will have to wait. I will return as soon as possible."

The boy stuck out his tongue and only brightened when James encouraged him to read alone and stayed for a few moments longer, before slipping a deck lower, greeted from afar by Jack's curses.

"Goddammed bleedin' idiot. Wot's he got? Rocks in his bloody Irish head! Chupame, chingado hijo de puta. Y'hear me, fils d'une salope! Moron!"

James stifled his grin and leaned against the bars. "I doubt he does, no matter which language you use. The brig is deep in the hold, and the weather is deafening." He shook his head. "How is it that you always end up in brigs? What happened?"

Jack's anger was worrying. James had rarely seen him in such a temper.

Jack stopped mid-imprecation. "Matter? Oh, nothin' much, except that blasted fool of an Irish ass has us too close t'shore and wants t'get closer. He'll dash 'er to pieces, the damned whoreson." Jack was shivering in his corner, spitting like a captive snake.

James' eyes shot wide. "Closer still to the shore? The currents will tear her apart, and if they don't, the reefs will." He stared at the bars, then spun around on his heel, rushing topside.

Jack shrieked after him and groaned. James' face had registered more than the stark terror any sensible man would feel: it had been that awful, icy anger he vaguely remembered. "Shite."

Jensen was at the wheel, and they were headed east-nor'-east. James was on the quarterdeck in the bat an eyelash. "Sir, this is madness. Rounding the Cape this close to the shore is a death sentence to ship and crew alike. I will not stand for this."

Hamilton wheeled on him, shouting above the wind. "You, too, Norbury. Not satisfied wi' lettin' yer bloody whore talk back?"

James staggered with a violent toss and gripped the rail tightly, leaning against the wind. "He is not my whore, but he is your pilot! He's been around the Cape before. This is insane! You are putting the lives of the crew on the line for your personal vanity."

Hamilton leaned down, his tall body blocking all view of anything but his enraged blue eyes. "You won't stand fer it? On my deck? Get him down t'he brig wi' his Spanish molly." He glared at
James. "Hold yer tongue 'less ya want the hundred he's gonna get."

James pushed himself to his full height. "Do you think that frightens me? I took seventeen lashes for pride. I would gladly take a hundred for the miracle it will take to save this ship if this madness continues."

"Get him off my bloody deck! NOW!" Hamilton roared, and Longthorpe dragged James down the steps before the threatened flogging was ordered. "Shut yer trap, Norbury. Just be quiet and come along. We've 'nuff trouble up there without you bellyaching."

He pulled open the other cell and pushed James inside. "Both o' you...." he shook his head and went topside.

James kicked at the straw. "Bloody stubborn homicidal Irish idiot."

Jack watched Longthorpe disappear with a mournful look and an obscene gesture, "Jamie, Jamie, you bloody fool. I told ya not to. Now we're both stuck." He thought about being locked here, helpless while the Chimaera fought for open seas, restrained by idiots.

"If there was only the slightest hope he would listen to me, I had to do it," James snarled, rattling the bars like a stubborn child. "Should I rather have hid and cowered and watch him take everyone down with him? You didn't, either."

"Much good it's doin', isn't it?" Jack snapped. "Now we get t'wait down here until the keel cracks and we drown. Not sure I fancy that, luv." He had exhausted himself and sat back down in his corner. "Nice mess this is."

"Would it be better to be topside and tossed overboard by a breaker? Or watch helplessly as the bloody ship sinks? Better yet, be caught in a lifeboat that capsizes from a single of those waves?"

James shuddered and slumped to the deck with a hiss.

"Professionally, I'd say it would be better to cut th' bastard's throat and take th' ship," Jack drawled, then sat up, shaking his head. "Half a chance t'get outta this and I can't even get out of this bloody brig." He kicked at the bars. The Chimaera was tossing and, though the hold was quiet, the noise of the storm a mere murmur above them, both of them were clinging to the bars to keep from sliding across the heaving deck.

Jack shivered and pulled his coat closer, reaching into the pocket and thrusting the flask through the bars. "Here. Ain't much, but it'll take off the edge."

James laughed darkly and took half a swallow before handing it back. "Thank you." As time passed and his anger smouldered away, he, too, began to freeze, trapped in a cell that barely offered enough space for three steps, let alone any movement that would provide warmth.

His anger, too, cooled, and his complaints of last night suddenly seemed ridiculous. "I apologise for yesterday. I overreacted. I just..."

Jack was so tired, two watches and the cold singing a dangerous lullaby in his ears. He looked at James glumly. "Bastard prob'ly hopes we'll freeze before he's smashed his pretty boat t'pieces."

Huddling closer to the bars, his hands wrapped in the sleeves on his shirt, his lips twitched. "This is not good." He looked up again. "James?"

James sat, his legs drawn up and arms wrapped around them, his sleeves slipping back. He was shivering, rubbing his palms together frantically, and looked up. "What is it?"
Jack took a breath. "I'm...I'm sorry. I really am." His teeth chattered. "So bloody cold." When he looked back at James, his eyes were more mournful than that brief moment on the gallows under a blazing Caribbean sun. "I've made a right mess o' things, I know. And seein' how I've not really been m'self...oh...damn."

James stiffened and looked away, careful to keep his eyes in shadow, knowing how Jack could read them. "There is no need to apologise. I am capable of accepting the word 'no' when I hear it." He bit back more words and blinked. "Just do not expect me to cave in when you do feel like toying with your abandoned plaything."

Jack banged his head against the bars. "Dammit, James, I never meant that at all. I wasn't toyin' with you. Well, yes, I was, but that was only t'get you interested, because I was interested, and then there were too many people interested and...I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

"What did you mean? It is your right, and I shall not further pursue the matter with you unwilling. I would never have, had you only said a word."

"I was bloody scared." Jack whispered. "Scared to death of you. I wasn't ever unwilling. Just got kind chokey." Exactly the way he felt at the moment, huddled into his coat, his hands cramping.

He rested his head on his knees for a moment. "Didn't you know, you fool?"

James dared a glance, hurt pride, hope and confusion warring in his eyes. "Scared of me? But why? I did not mean you any harm at all."

He flinched at his own sudden relief. It was fear of exactly that, of a practical matter suddenly becoming all too personal, more than for which either had bargained. "No, I didn't." His voice was so low, nearly drowned out by his hissing, rattling breath.

"BLAST!" Jack's exploded, his shaking fingers around the bars as he banged his head against them repeatedly. "You're gonna drive me mad. I bloody love you, you...you...Navy ass!"

James stared, his mouth falling open, drawn together only by his chattering teeth. Eventually he closed it, but continued to stare, dumbfounded, at loss for words. "Oh," he finally managed.

Jack winced and looked up, as if waiting for a slap. "I know this isn't exactly the opportune moment, luv. Bein' in the brig an' all, but wot did you expect me t'do? Go down on one knee?" He sighed.

Of all the ridiculous things he could have chosen to do, and, being Jack Sparrow, he knew himself capable of more than a few insanities, this he could not have divined. Jack's whole life was a such a river of insanities, enough to confine him to Bedlam ad eternum. He was quite used to being called mad when he knew himself to be perfectly sane in his own fashion.

But this?

Even he thought he was daft, and now it was out there, hanging in the cold air for James to mock. He shrugged. "I don't happen t'have a ring handy."

James sat in silence, just looked and swallowed. Not five minutes ago, he had been determined not to let himself be played by the pirate again, not to fall for any of the tempting lies, but this just left him frozen. "I don't think I need a ring," he croaked. "They do get caught in the rigging so quickly."

"I've nothin' to offer at all. Except my neck, which, seeing how it's been claimed several times over..." Jack shut his mouth and looked up quizzically. "Wot?"
James laughed and reached through the bars to seize Jack by the neck and haul him close for a kiss. Their foreheads and chins collided with the bars, their kiss was wet and sloppy, and the Chimaera lurched. "Bloody fool," James whispered, chuckling breathlessly.

"I know." Jack's hands pulled at his coat through the bars, laughing and gasping. "You can't say y'weren't warned, mate. It'll be the death of me. Whoever heard of a perfectly dishonourable pirate fallin' in love?"

"I am certain Elizabeth could provide an adequate example from her enormous tome of highly improper tales." James rested his forehead against the bars, peering through. He grinned wide, his hand hovering between them warily.

"Jamie, do me a favour, willya?" Jack's grin was crooked, his eyes liquid. "Don't remind me when you put that rope around me neck, eh? My reputation will be in tatters."

"I do not see any ropes in the vicinity, or any ropes that I would put around the man that helped me return home." James smiled shakily and reached through the bars to wipe away the single droplet of blood at Jack's hairline. "Bloody fool," he repeated, a sound between a laugh and a sniffle.

Jack pouted, then smiled; he wanted to dance and sing at the top of his voice, then whisper and hug it to himself like a miser. "Tryin' to bang some sense into my thick skull. And let's not talk about Lizzie. I'm sure she picked up some very strange notions from them books. Like burnin' the rum. Th...rum? Oh, Lord!"

He started to laugh like a maniac, rocking back and forth, incapable of speech.

James frowned. "Jack, I know it is cold, but I am fairly certain your brain should not be the first part to freeze. Although I do admit a little fire here would be useful."

"No!" Jack gasped and giggled. "The RUM, mate. Yer door is open. I jimmied the damn thing with canister shot. There's a cask way in the back of th' hold." He threw back his head and howled. "God, if you ever needed proof! I forgot about th' damned rum!"

James laughed hysterically. "So that is the explanation of your bottomless flask." He took it and rose, and truly, the door swung open under just a push.

He refilled the flask and then went in search of anything that would serve as a lockpick. There was no point in escaping just now, but if the ship foundered, they would need to get out, and that quickly. He had just grabbed a large, hard wooden splinter when there was a crack and he scrambled back into the cell.

"Pirate!" Jack beamed. "If Hamilton can steal my undoubtedly valuable services fer months, he can't begrudge a bit of lubrication, can he? Here, gimme that, luv. I swear, me ballocks are gonna shrivel and me prick's gonna drip ice."

James leaned back and calmly opened the flask, taking a deep swallow. "Are they? That should be interesting to witness." He watched Jack's horrified expression and agitated sputtering for a few seconds before tossing the flask through the bars.

"Wretch!" Jack guzzled and smacked his lips. "Now things would be just perfect if we could commandeer her." He handed the flask back to James with a rueful grin. "Don't much like the idea of drownin' in here."

The Chimaera groaned, the sound of wood battered by endless waves echoing from the bilges. She lurched suddenly and both of them were thrown to the far bulwarks.
"Good God, wot the hell is he doin' up there?"

"Running us aground, or worse," James hissed, clutching at the bars. "Bloody hell, we have to get out of here before it's too late." He scrambled after his makeshift lockpick and forced himself to his feet, fighting against the violent tilt of the deck.

Another lurch tossed him through his cell's door and he crawled to Jack's, hoisting himself up at the bars. Frantically, he tried to cram the splinter into the lock.

"God DAMN it, the fool's tryin' to lie to. Jamie, listen!" Jack's hands gripped the bars, his face tense. "We gotta get outta here." He watched James trying to work the lock, his fingers fluttering. "Good, That's good. Gently now. Shite. I've got to get back to the helm." The vessel shuddered, complaining of her treatment loudly.

Jackson clattered down the steps and stared from James to the open cell door for a moment. He handed over the keys. "Cap'n says all hands. Get topside now. Spanish, I hope ya know wot yer doin'. Norbury, we need you aloft. The wind's bloody impossible." His face was ashen in the swinging lamplight.

Jack was up the hatch in less than a half-dozen steps.

James tossed the key to the deck and rushed topside.

The wind tore the hair from his face, hail and rain hammering and pouring down like the Flood. Just as he raced to the mainmast, the weatherside shrouds gave with a snap, loud even amidst the deafening storm. The wood groaned and shuddered.

He cursed and raced to the lee, scaling the ratlines, the wind roaring against him, anxious to pry him from his perch. He scaled high, up to the royal, his nails digging into his palms.

Wind and rain and thunder; it was an uproar of elements, and the royal slipped from his hands again and again, shrieking and bellying as they struggled to reef and tie it fast.

Jack scrambled to the quarterdeck, bracing himself and heaving at the wheel with Jensen's help. He glanced at the lashing heavens and prayed to the only deity in which he truly believed. "Pearl, my love. Help me. Help me find th' way." His hand locked on the spokes and he began to slowly wrench the Chimaera from the ocean's grip, crooning gently. "That's my good girl. Yes, easy does it. Just you trust ole Jack, luv. He won't let you down."

The rain pelted down, mingled with hail that left tiny cuts to faces and eyelids as they fought to control the flying lines. "Easy, my love." He took a breath and gave the ship her head, as a rider might with a spooked mare. The Chimaera lumbered for a breathless moment. Slowly, she shuddered upwards, a giantess rumbling to her feet in the maelstrom. "C'mon girl. Into it now. In we go, and the devil himself can drown in yer wake."

Jack's voice rose over the din. "We're heading in. Brace yerselves."

The wind roared around them, men battling in the shrouds as she pitched and tossed.

Reluctantly, she eased into her new course, a big beast bowing to the will of the men heaving at her lines, the yards snapping into position.

Suddenly, the wind died away and its thunder gave way to an ominous silence. They were in the eye of the storm.
The seas still tossed the Chimaera, and they quickly managed to reef the remaining sails, bracing the weakened mainmast lest it break under any additional strain. Everything seemed to still in the long, breathless minutes of waiting and hoping, of preparing should it come to the worst.

Those on deck were still thrown to and fro by the force of the waves, and it was a Herculean trial to bail out the water that crashed and broke over the rail. There was an eerie silence on deck, as though everyone waited for the final lurch that would capsize the Chimaera.

The air crackled, lightning flashing around them as Jack held her steady, tracking the storm and praying for a miracle. Was this what his dream had foretold? The Pearl's sails lined in flashes of white? He held to the helm, his arms aching. He couldn't let her ride too long, lest they dash themselves into the reefs as the tempest made landfall, and he kept easing her to open waters, always sou'-west, away from the treacherous currents.

The wind began to rise again as they rode out the far rim of the storm, growing wild and eerie, flashes of light dancing around the nest. It blew one great gust that nearly wrenched Jack from the wheel.

His hands were white-knuckled, eyes trained on the tiny sliver of clear grey, due west and he swore, prayed, promised as he hadn't in too long.

The skies grew lighter, so slowly, as Jack fought towards it. The Chimaera shuddered and moaned, the wreck of the mainsail whining. He could feel her heartbeat, thrumming through the depths far beneath them, and he smiled as the rain eased and became soft as a spring shower.

The wind hiccupped a tiny rumble of thunder and died away as a golden beam streaked across the soaking deck. Jack shook the hailstones from his hair and leaned forward against the wheel. "Brave lass. Yer a fine, wonderful girl. Pearl, my heart. Milady Chimaera, thank you. Thank God."

James clutched the rail, heavily panting. He'd scaled the rigging God knew how many times, the barely-healed rope burns on his palms ripped open from sliding to the deck rather than risking the climb. He was dizzy and elated.

Silence yielded to relieved laughter, to roared cheers. James merely looked up to the helm and nodded.

Jack was draped over the wheel and glanced up, grinning. Jensen rose from where he'd braced himself on the deck to help hold the wheel steady, staring at Jack as if he were possessed. Hamilton had crossed himself enough times to earn a plenary indulgence. Spanish Jack was clearly completely mad. Only a madman would have tried to race God Himself and win.

Jack winked at the gaping Norwegian. "Take her from here, mate."

Hamilton shook his head. "Ya belong with sidhe!"

Jack laughed as he hauled himself into the shrouds. "Hey, Jensen! Don't forget to turn her 'round, aye?"

Longthorpe trotted up to Hamilton, pointing. We've had the devil's luck not t'lose the mainmast. Main forestay an' the starboard rig tore, and so's the topsail. Lost the bowsprit. Damned lucky, if I might say so, Cap'n."

"Aye, the devil's own luck. Bring her around, Jensen, and get us back on course." Hamilton wondered if the Madonna would forgive a quick nip, despite all his promises not to touch a dram. His eyes followed Jack into the rigging, wide and nervous. The damned Spanish bastard had a
magic light around him, it seemed. Who in hell was Jack Sbarra?

Jack shifted along the footropes to join James, checking sails and yards for further damage. He worked his fingers raw and the whole crew was bustling long into twilight before Hamilton called for them to separate into their watches, allowing those who had fought the storm from the first to take a bit of supper and well-deserved rum rations.

Jack descended and watched him expectantly. The Irishman almost backed up a step. "G'wan below, Spanish. An' don't get too drunk. I need ya here in four hours." Jack smiled and nodded his cheerful little bow. "Dinna look at me like that! Ye'd scare th' banshees back t'hell. G'wan."

James had descended right behind Jack and stood there, dripping wet and exhausted. He stood still, as much at attention as his shivering body could muster.

Hamilton gladly looked at him instead of Spanish Jack's deep, unreadable eyes. The hair on the back of his neck was bristling. "You too, Norbury. Take that madman t' the galley and get yerself some rum. Both of ya, back here in four."

"Aye, Sir." James didn't gloat. He was too relieved that they had gotten through alive. He took Jack by the arm and they went below, shivering.

The stove was hot and all below huddled close to it as Cookie passed out rum and began to prepare a hot stew and tea - throughout the storm, it had been too dangerous to use the stove and open its hatch for even a few seconds.

Jack accepted the rum and drank it down in one gulp. He was well aware of the silence as he and James ventured near the stove; the way several of the men backed away, eyeing him as though he'd grown three heads. Good. Let the bastards learn how a real pirate works. He grinned at James. "Nice weather we're havin', ain't it, luv?"

"Bloody idiot," James repeated with another grin, palms gripping the mug tightly as though it were filled with warm liquid. He sipped from it, but when Cookie finished the tea, he took that instead and passed his rum to Jack. He noticed the eerie silence, the half-scared and superstitious glances.

He could not deny a little shiver of his own, one that had nothing to do with the cold. He had barely seen Jack at the helm, only quick glances through wind and weather, but he knew the glint that had been in his eyes, the one that had made Hamilton back away from him.

It had been a mad gamble, worthy of any of Jack Sparrow's tales, and still, somehow, they had been safe, as though all the stories were true and Jack really had a pact with Poseidon, as though he always managed to skew reality somehow.

James shook his head and punched Jack's arm. He was as solid as any of them, that he well knew. "You are a madman, Jack. Mad enough to scare even the finest sailors witless."

The ice broke into protesting shouts and outraged mutters, then uneasy laughter.

"Blame the gods and thank 'em she's such a lovely, brave lass." Jack's smile was enigmatic as he raised his mug. "The Chimaera." His voice dropped to a whisper. "And you, my Pearl." The cheer was taken up all around and the stillness eased to nervous conversation. Jack blinked and shivered. "Think I could use a bit o' rest, mate."

"If you expect that I shall let you go below with your dripping wet clothes and freeze, you are mistaken. The place here at the stove is fine for now." James shook his head, looked up shyly, then pulled Jack into his arms to keep warm.
Jack nestled against him, then looked up, that smile on his lips, as though he knew the secret that had delivered them from the storm but would never divulge it. "Everyone's wet. Can't be hoggin' all the heat, luv." He thought about pulling off his soaked coat but it was far too lovely to sit in comfort with his arm around James' waist, head drooping onto his damp shoulder. There was another bout of laughter and a small cheer.

"Glad you two made it up."

"We was bettin' on a good knuckle-duster."

"Or a shag!"


James arched an eyebrow and chuckled, brushing the wet hair from Jack's face, combing the wild tangles with his fingers. They stayed until their clothes were almost dry and Jack was fast asleep.

James carried him below under cheers, relieved laughter and loud appraisal of the benefits of being alive.

With a half smile, James pulled both their coats and boots off before lying down in a hammock, huddled together still.

Jack stirred a little and clung. The sparrow might not have found home, but he'd discovered a roost that felt like home. It was enough.

Chapter Eleven
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Eleven
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil andhippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--X.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Shipboard life continues in the wake of the storm and old grudges are rekindled.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtfhw for her excellent beta.

This chapter includes another cast portrait and an X-rated action illustration.
The day was an eerie mingling of elation and silence; elation when the crew would sit in the relative warmth of the galley and realise they were still alive, uncomfortable silence when it became clear that some of those missing would be found neither topside nor in their hammocks.

One of them was Andrew Stanton, one of Griffin's mates; the other Jeremy Shadlow. In the wild haze of the storm, nobody had seen for certain when and how it had happened, but common consent was that, certainly, nimble Jeremy had been aloft, perhaps when the shrouds had snapped; certainly, it had not been a simple wave that swept him overboard, never to return.
They told stories around the table, remembering each man, comforted those to whom they'd been close, sang songs, and Jack spent some time penning letters to their kinfolk to be mailed from Bombay. He spent the rest of his time off-duty amusing those who stayed with tall tales that defied imagination and he swore were true. He was back on day watches, happy to guide the Chimaera through the currents around the far side of the Cape.

Nights he was more often than not curled up with James, waking with an arm in his face or a leg wound around his waist. No one complained about their overloaded hammock—nearly all were doubling up to keep warm and the teasing was subdued. Everyone missed Shadlow and his insubstantial spirit seemed to hang in the galley, laughing with the stories and songs.

They missed him, but such was life shipboard, and it was bad luck to speak of it, so they did not, except once, late at night, when James lay awake and could not help but wonder what these two deaths had to prove.

The punishment for disobedience had never been exacted, and nobody spoke of it—it merely lingered that Jack had been right from the start, but it was past, and no sense in risking Hamilton's or the elements' fury once more.

The days continued as they had; the only choice they had. Even though Matthew was back on duty, James returned for daily lessons. The boy made quick progress, and the others forgot to tease him about his private tutor, watching and staring in wonder as he read sentences in a shaky wobble and traced words with an untrained hand.

A week after the storm, he had nearly knocked himself senseless when he dropped into his hammock, because stuffed under the thin pillow, there had been a plank of wood, the letters of the alphabet evenly carved into it. He'd ran into the galley to brandish his find, waving it proudly and announcing that he could read all of it. James had seen the little smile on Jack's face and had mirrored it with a knowing one of his own.

Jack spent his time between the helm and the Great Cabin, pouring over the maps and reploting a course to take advantage of the small easterly currents that would speed them across the Indian Ocean.

The Chimaera was in desperate need of repairs that would have to wait until they docked. Her
starboard rigging was woefully shabby, cobbled together with the remains of the torn lines and bit and pieces. It would hold until they made port, but Jack had no intention of leaving their course to any other hand than his own. Hamilton watched him work, asking questions now and then and saw his maps overdrawn until Jack's inked lines were dominant.

He worked hard and long and it didn't seem possible that this was the same indolent, drunken pirate of Elizabeth's tales.

James worked topside and aloft, splicing and replacing what wind and weather had destroyed. Nights saw them both tired, succumbing to exhaustion and the draining chill, fast asleep until the next day.

Sometimes they would talk in hushed tones, James relaying how he had defied his mother's will and went to sea, using his uncle's means to follow his father's career; how he had first sailed to the Caribbean and received his first command there.

He did not dare mention names, or ranks, harshly reminded that he could not allow any slip. He was by no means used to living a lie, and sometimes it was difficult to remember that something of his past, perfectly right, could mean his death if anyone aboard overheard; that James Norbury was well liked and James Norrington would be killed within moments, although they were one and the same man. But the story remained the same, a man who'd gone to sea out of a love he still held to that very day.

Jack listened to him intently, letting the stories paint pictures and snuggling close. It grew warmer as they sped up the eastern coast of Africa and he told James about his first round of the Cape when he'd been a little child, about the furry animals in Madagascar, the ones with enormous, glowing eyes, no bigger than a man's fist. The tales he whispered to James, of long-ago storms and shoreleaves were certainly different from the ones he told at table once Matthew had gone to his hammock.

Jack kept his messmates entertained with his stories, but in the quiet of the hold, he shared gentler memories with James.

One night, James was playing with the braid in his hair, tugging at it absently, very much the way Jack had a habit of chewing on the end of his lovelock. He had the other hand around Jack's shoulder, just beneath the black locks, lifting one. "Where did you get this?" His eyes were closed, as if willing the story to appear behind closed lids.

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Got that in Singapore, mate. I was roundabout fifteen and we ran into a band o' travellin' traders from the steppes. Never seen such dancin', Jamie. He was silent for a moment, remembering the taste of buttered tea and the slender shepherd who had first braided it into his mop.

James continued to twirl the braid around his finger. His hair, never quite short enough for regulations, had grown to shoulder length and Jack had rebraided both braids as they had lain there. He hadn't asked, but James had not protested, either. "Where did you get the idea? To carry around mementos in your hair?"

"Saw the fillies all 'round the far side of India do it and I thought it were pretty. And safe. Was a time I had 'bout a half-dozen golden guineas in it. Well, some painted gold, top of gold." He laughed softly. "A bloody fortune and trust me t'lose it somehow."

James stroked a hand through the salt tangles of Jack's hair, searching for a braid he knew was there and then lifted it. Small wooden dice were braided into it. "These do not strike me as monetary
reserves. Or are they pronged so that you may earn a fortune in a game of dice?"

Jack nestled with him in one hammock, one leg thrown over James’, his head pillowed on one shoulder. "Now that," he laughed, "that’s a helluva story. We were stuck fer repairs in a bloody little hole in Greece. Shabby, miserable place. I liked it. But Bill! He got himself gamblin’, and oh Lord, he were losin’ terrible. So I left him and went t’find a shop as had dice. I bored the holes through an' stuffed ‘em with paper. Course, that changed his luck considerably. We hadta cut outta there damned quick, and he said I needed t’remember not to cheat at dice. Big ole fight and we ended up wagerin’. If I won, he wore ‘em in his ears."

Jack’s face split into a grin. "I didn't and he had Ole Joe and Gargetti hold me down whilst he braided ‘em to hang in front of me face." He giggled against James' shoulder. "Damn near lost m'left eye to one of ‘em, so we moved them later."

James laughed. "They do strike me as rather precarious. I don't know how often that storm slapped the coin against my face. I cannot understand how you manage to wear this—" his fingers now traced the stingray bone, long and white and cool and sharp, "without taking your eye out. Or mine, for that matter."

Jack's eyes were dark. "Or someone else's." He left the rest unsaid. No need to worry James all over again with the tale of the bloody bone that had saved his life in a particularly nasty encounter. Bill had made sure the bone itself was bleached with lemon juice before boring a hole in it and braiding it into Jack's mop. "Saved m'life once, luv."

James half-laughed, half-frowned. "A little backdoor?" He turned the bone in his hands, stroking the smooth texture, and whistled softly. "A knife in the boot, a bit of fish in the hair... any other precarious areas of which I should know?"

Jack grinned and turned in his arms. "None ya haven't explored already. James?" His look was wide-eyed and soft, but the smile was tempting.

"So you think there is an area that warrants further exploration?" James held fast as the hammock swayed wildly and twisted to nip at Jack's shoulder while his hand dipped beneath the blanket. "Now, this here may be hard, but it does not strike me as particularly sharp or otherwise dangerous."

"Not sharp but plenty full and dangerous when goaded." Jack laughed into his ear. He was thoroughly bored of the weeks alone with his own hand.

"Very full." James stroked lightly. "And twitchy." Jack ground back against him and James bit back a moan, then pulled away and slipped out of the hammock. "All right, get up. Not here."

"Below." Jack's gold grin flashed. "We'll need some friction t'keep warm."

Together they padded barefoot down to the orlop deck, seeking a corner where roped stacks of crates made a little alcove. "C'mere, you." Jack yanked James against him in a kiss, his hands quivering over buttons. "Missed you so much."

James returned the favour, losing himself in eager kisses and desperate touches. Soon he had Jack backed up against the crate, head buried in his shoulder and grinding their hips together, breeches falling to their knees.

They didn't notice the lone figure in the corner. Bertie had sought solitude, bent over Matthew's wooden alphabet, wary of any sound.

At the hushed laughter and footsteps, he had withdrawn behind a crate and now he not help but
watch: watch how James pulled Jack's breeches off completely and lifted one leg, hooking it at his hip; hear the muffled groans they both made as James pushed forward.

There was another watcher, lost in the shadows on the other side of the crate where Griffin and Donatelli had been playing cards. Griffin was just clearing up their pilfered rum, spilled in near-fright as the scurvy Eyetie had fled back to his hammock. His lip curled at the sight of the two, but he could not stop watching the way the lantern light gleamed off Spanish Jack's amber leg, wound round Norbury's hip, the sounds they made, soft and wet.

Closer to the source of those sounds, Bertie heard them even more clearly; the wet slide of mouth on mouth, the rhythmic glide of flesh inside flesh, the breathless little laughs and whispers, muffled against sweaty skin. They were almost silent, but Bertie could not stop himself from straining to listen.

The contrast of their flesh was mesmerising, undulating with the heave of the ship; Jack's the colour of dark honey all over, James' browned arms holding him upright, his backside and legs pale as milk. Jack cried out softly, James' face hidden in the hollow of his shoulder. The black head was thrown back, eyes closed, the paint making them shadows against his face.

Griffin supposed they weren't bad, as buggers went; James with his tall pallor, and Spanish, too pretty with those girlish lips and eyes. James' head crested, his sunstreaked hair tumbling over his back as they pumped against one another. Spanish Jack's breath huffed, his dark eyes opened wide and Griffin pulled back into the shadows to watch them fix, become soft and droop under their lashes.

Bertie froze as he heard the soft hitch of breath, the helpless, broken gasps that faded into a mingled, content sigh. Then there were more wet sounds, lips moving against lips, brief laughter and the rustle of linen as they pulled up their breeches. He barely remembered to sink back behind the crate, his own breath far too loud and ragged.

James laughed softly and nipped at Jack's throat. "Very dangerous. I think I was in its line of fire."

Jack nuzzled his neck, kissing a line where the collar of his shirt defined sunbrown skin and white, then groaned as he set his leg back to the floor. "God, yer legs are so long." He laughed softly and reached behind to tighten the now-infamous slipknot of his breeches. "C'mon. Let's get back up there. I'm freezin' down here."

They chased each other up the narrow stairs, tickling and teasing, then hushed as they returned to their hold. Jack put out a leg and gave a shove, sending James stumbling into the hammock with a glare and more stifled laughter.
They shifted and struggled, still laughing, until they found a comfortable position, mashed together in the confines of the canvas and both fell into sated slumber.

Griffin remained where he was, watching the lantern light in the hold and wondered just how such a citified prig as Norbury could have taken up with wild Spanish Jack. He stayed there long enough to see them, reflected in the light and his mind, before slipping away to his own hammock.

It was a long time later that Bertie returned to his hammock, avoiding any glance into the corner. He'd seen the same often enough, never embarrassed, but this time, he felt he'd witnessed something that should better have remained between those two alone.

Jack roused with his stomach growling. It wasn't just a little rumble, loud enough to make Jackson throw a shoe at him. He sulked and gave up on sleep, dressed, and headed to the galley in search of something edible. He was near the top of the stairs when Griffin started down them, blocking his path and snarling.

"Wotsamatter, Spanish? Norbury toss you outta the hammock?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "Lay off, Griff. Y'know, for one so opposed to a bit o'buggery, yer certainly interested in knowin' wot happens between us." His dark eyes were startling, freshly painted and stark against the whites.

Griffin's smile was nasty. "Ya don't make it no secret that yer his whore."

Jack yawned, patting his mouth as elaborately as if he'd been holding a lace handkerchief.

"You bloody foreign pig!" Griffin owed Jack for that aborted knife-fight and for a night tormented by dirty dreams that featured that golden body all-too-prominently. He gave Jack a shove, got one back, and decided that pretty face needed a bit of rearranging. He punched hard and Jack went tumbling down a half-dozen steps, clawing at the handrail. His face changed and his smile widened. He bounded up the steps, fists flying.

They both fell to the deck, punching, grabbing, and clawing like a pair of maddened alleycats. Berkely stuck his head out of the galley and Matthew crept to sit on the stairs, watching with round eyes.

Jack's teeth sank into one arm as he kicked and punched viciously. Griffin yanked at a handful of hair, his big fist knocking the breath out of Jack. The only sounds were the thump of their blows and huffed curses, the murmurs on the stairs of the crowd gathering as the fight grew dirtier and more brutal.

Griffin landed another cracking punch to Jack's jaw and took one of surprising power to the side of his head. Jack grabbed his collar and slammed his head into the wall, his eye tearing and swelling up like a pig's bladder over a hot fire. His boot connected with Griffin's knee and they were at it again, until they both sagged against the bulwark, seeing stars.

Matthew slipped through the crowd and ran to find James. "Hey! Hey James! Jack's just knocked Griffin senseless! Come see!"

James nearly cut himself with the razor and ran after Matthew, shaving soap still on his face. "Where?" The fight was already over when Matthew tugged him through the crowd.

Jack scrambled to his feet and reached out with both hands to steady himself. "Whoa! Nice jab. Jus' leave me the hell alone!" He moved his jaw, checking to see if he had all his teeth, then held out a
hand. "C'mon, get up."

Griffin reeled and blinked at him, blood trickling from a cut over one eye. "Damn, fer a little bugger, you're one nasty customer."

Jack grinned and bowed. "Well, sir, if you're intent on more." He beckoned.

"Fuck yerself, Spanish."

Jack saw James, watching from the stairs, his eyes wide and horrified. He grinned and winked coyly at Griffin. "Don't hafta, luv." He bounded up the steps and laughed. "Jamie, luv, I'm starvin'. You've no idea how dangerous breakfast 'round here can be!"

Griffin was still leaning against the bulwark, spitting a mouthful of blood to the deck. "Hey Norbury, if he fucks as good as that left hook ye should hire him out."

Berkely handed Griffin a rag for his head, still amazed that slight little Spanish had managed to knock the big man breathless. "Leave 'em be, Griff."

James' eyes narrowed dangerously at Griffin, then he followed Jack's blood-trail to the galley. Matthew bounced up the stairs next to him, clapping his hands excitedly.

Jack took a moment to nurse his aching jaw and probed gingerly at his eye. "Well, that's one way of havin' a mornin' headache." He leaned against James, laughing.

James scowled and steered him to one of the benches, then went to beg a rag from Cookie. He wet it and straddled the bench next to Jack, gently swiping at the blood, then prodding at the bones. At least there was no damage to jaw or nose bones. "Shall we go to Hamilton now? He will have to lock him up."

"Wot for? I'm fine. Nothin' broken, just a few bruises. Goddamn, that's a helluva punch." He grinned, wincing as his eye squinted.

Matthew circled around them, finally lying down on the table and tugging at Jack's sleeve adoringly. "How'd you do that?"

"Do wot, barnacle? James, stop fussin'." Jack threw an arm around James' shoulder and held the rag to his eye, watching Matthew with a smile.

"Knock 'im out. I mean, he's so big." To Matthew, anyone was too big.

"Just means they can't move fast as us little ones. Ye take a few knocks but if you can get under their guard, all it takes it one good punch. Right here." Jack laid a hand on Matthew's chest, just below the breastbone. "That'll take the wind out of a gorilla." His knuckles were raw and he gave the boy a little jab, raising his fists. "Oho, I gotta fight you too!"

Matthew squeaked and slipped down from the table. James used the opportunity to grab the rag back and clean a long split on Jack's cheek. "Jack," he admonished. "It's the second time he picked a fight, and how else to stop him from doing it again? You are lucky that this won't need stitches. A captain can't tolerate such behaviour aboard, and you must report Griffin for this."

"I'll not do any such thing. It's a scratch, luv. And, honestly, it's not as though I've never been in a barney before this. Let it go. If he does it again, I'll just have t'beat his brains out." Jack took a mug of hot coffee with a grateful grin at Cookie. "No sense in all that blather, James."
Jackson and Bertie murmured their approval and Jack ran one finger down James' cheek. "No sense in it at all."

James took the finger, held it away gently and continued to clean Jack's face. He grabbed the mug of rum Cooke brought and poured a measure over the rag before Jack could protest. "No sense? You only have your thick head to thank that he broke none of your bones!"

He could hear the mutterings in the background but was determined to ignore them. Whatever sort of camaraderie they might have with Griffin, it was definitely misplaced.

It didn't occur to him that the mutterings did not concern Griffin in particular, but that they insisted on their right to have things handled as they always were.

"James? Ouch." Jack's good eye was twinkling. "Y'don't go botherin' the Cap'n with such as this. It's between Griff and me, and I say 'tis over and there's an end to it." He tried to sneak mouthfuls of lumpy porridge in between James 'fussing'.

"But it is the Captain's decision. He should be aware of such a thing," James insisted, sitting back and squinting to see if he missed anything. "Would you rather lie when he asks you about these?"

James remembered that all too well. He'd been a freshly minted Midshipman when he first saw bruises on another boy's face, bruises he claimed came from a stumble against the hatch but that had born the shape of fists, even a cut from a ring. And he remembered being a Lieutenant and asking a boy with similar marks about it, and receiving only lies and tight silence from the boy.

He remembered how his superior had then punished that boy for bearing the bruises and not daring or wanting to speak up, and how the boy had seemed almost proud to bear that punishment.

He shuddered and shook his head. "You have to tell him."

Mathew bounced up from behind again and hoisted himself into James' lap. "But why? Don't think Griffin will look for 'nother pummeling." He giggled.

"Horse shite," Jack mumbled with his mouth full. He washed the porridge down with coffee and took a second cup to drown the taste. "The great leprachaun won't ask. If he comes back fer more, I'll have to lay 'im out, won't I, barnacle?"

Matthew nodded eagerly and mimicked a sound punch, then held his own jaw and slumped back against James, who sighed. "Very well, I cannot force you. It is your decision. But at least don't tempt the boy to such nonsense. Matthew, the best way is not to pick any fights with the bigger ones at all."

Matthew pouted and giggled against his chest, then shrieked as James bent forward and gently kissed Jack's split lips. "At least he is no better off," he grumbled.

Jack kissed back and grabbed Matthew, swinging him up onto the table and pulling a few practise punches with him. "Right...no, the other right." He laughed and let Matthew pummel his shoulder. "I'm gonna need more kisses after this bruiser gets done wi'me."

"So that is why you get into fights constantly? So I can kiss you better?" James sighed and tossed down his coffee. "Matthew, there are much better ways to resolve conflict. Such as the element of surprise." He grabbed Jack from the side and pulled him against himself.

The boy shrieked and jumped down on the bench, launching himself at Jack and helping James to tickle him.
"Oww! Yield! I bloody surrender!" Jack picked himself off the bench and giggled. "Now, I'd say that's been a right mornin'." He leaned down and whispered in Matthew's ear. "A right pirate mornin'."

He yelled and chased Matthew topside and around the masts, catching him near the capstan and presenting his prize to Longthorpe. "Found this belowdecks, sir. Wot ya want me t'do with it? Feed it t'the sharks?"

Longthorpe actually laughed. Even Hamilton heard him and called down from the quarterdeck. "Belay that, sailor and set the scurvy searat t' the bow. If he's an attentive rat, he'll get some help wi' those knots he's been strugglin' on." He laughed as the boy scampered forward and looked down at Jack. "New kinda eyepaint, Spanish?"

Jack grinned and took the wheel from Jensen. "Specially made in China."

James scowled fiercely as he made topside, but Jack's grin from the helm was infectious, and Matthew had found out just how ticklish his thigh was, chasing him to the bow. There the boy innocently stated that if James wanted him to learn something useful, he could just as well teach him that damned Anchor's Bend.

James pulled his ear, "Mind your language, young man," and sat down on a coil of ropes with a sigh, shrugging off his coat. He grabbed two loose ends of rope and patiently began to explain.

Jack bounced from the helm to the nest and back again, down to the Great Cabin to check the charts, and back again to the helm. Hamilton stared at his bruises and spectacularly blackened eye with a grin. Every soul aboard knew exactly what had happened between Spanish Jack and Griffin, but no one spoke of it.

Instead, they were teased unmercifully about 'walking into walls" while their bruises faded. James was horrified to find them actually sharing a mug of grog at table one evening after supper, laughing and talking nineteen to the dozen.

He watched from afar, discussing the finer points of knotting a sheapshank with Bertie. More than once, he lost track of the conversation, glancing over again and again, certain that any minute, they would be fighting again.

Jack pushed the mug to Griffin, got up, and settled next to James. His eye was still puffy and an artistic array of colours from grape to greenish yellow. He grinned at Bertie. "Think we'll make it t'Bombay before we starve?" he whispered conspiratorially. Jack was in high spirits: the Chimaera was taking on the worst of the Indian Ocean's powerful westerly currents in winter months. He kept zig-zagging the course between them, searching out the weaker eastern flow and had them on a drunken course nor'nor'east. It would be no more than another fortnight before they made port.

"If we starve, it will be a voluntary action caused by Cookie's meals." James frowned at the remainders of whatever had been in his trencher.

"Are ye doing all that tacking jest t'make us busy aloft?" Bertie complained.

James' arm had slipped around Jack's shoulder, forgetting to tickle as he stared at Griffin who downed the rest of Jack's grog.

"Takin' advantage of the currents, luv. Silly thing, headin' east this time o'year. Makes it all the quicker if you know the currents and winds hereabouts. Besides, I don't want ya gettin' fat and sloppy on me, " he teased. Bertie nearly spit up his grog. "No need to choke, luv. I'll get us there."
Bertie hid his blush behind another cough. "Jem here woulda tell me that's insane, but I actually trust ya on that. Do think 'tis more than time for 'nother shoreleave, else everyone will go barmy like you."

James growled something about the insanity of giving rum to bilge rats and huffed.

"I prefer t'be referred to as daft. 'Daft Jack' sounds so much better n 'Barmy Jack', or 'Loony Jack'. " He nestled against James, leaning on his shoulder. "Don't get yer tailfeathers in a bunch, luv. Griff's not a bad sort, once ya get to know him. 'Sides, he's been round these parts and knows Bombay an' Calcutt like hell won't have it." He helped himself to a gulp from James' mug. The healing cut on his face and that vivid eye made him looked even more the pirate. He hadn't shaved for nearly two weeks and, contrary as everything about Sparrow, the soft fuzz on his upper lip made him look ridiculously boyish.

"If getting to know someone requires a fistfight, then I know him well enough, thank you. I know him twice as well as I ever cared to." James' eyes narrowed across the table, then he looked away.

There was little he could do about it. Foolish as he thought it, it was Jack's decision to let this matter lie. He would simply have to be vigilant should it truly come to anything more. "Or are you thankful for him giving you at least a bit of a rakish look once more?"

Jack scrubbed at his chin and made a mental note to shave in the morning, lest the lads decide to do it for him again. His lack of beard was a running joke among them and he took it with goodnatured laughter, but that did not mean he liked it. "Miss it a lot, if you must know." He shut his mouth before Bertie started teasing. "Lord, I'll be glad enough of a shoreleave. Not bein' one of you lucky bastards last time."

"Ey, but I'm certain that Jem here made you a lucky one a few times! Seein' ya didn't even get t'close yer britches after it!" Bertie suddenly fell silent, then startled giggling.

James coughed delicately. "Hamilton can hardly keep us aboard in every port."

"Yeah, right, Deacon'd complain 'bout his sheets in the next sermon!"

Jack chuckled. "It's about time he remembered wot they're for. Triton's ballocks, if I hafta listen to one more of those, I'll really run mad." He stifled a yawn against James' shoulder. "Should get some sleep."

The warmth of the galley was being shunned for the cooler regions below. "I'm off t'bed."

"Bed? Y'got a bed? No wonder Deacon's complainin' if ye commandeered his!"

James remained in the galley for a little while longer, sipping the last of his grog in comfortable silence before retiring to his hammock.

He stretched out, lulled by the gentle sway. Jack's breath in the next hammock was even, but not quite the deep huff of sleep. James knew how that one sounded, had listened to the soft snores and little hitches often enough. "What are you up to with Griffin?" he whispered into the darkness.

"Me? Up to somethin'? Jamie, I'm shocked." Jack rolled over to face the voice. "Just talkin'. Damned fine sailor." He wriggled around to get comfortable. "Why?"

"Does he know anything? Is he blackmailing you?" James persisted, reaching out across the small divide. "Why do you defend him? He's a bloody bastard."

"I'm not defendin' him and he doesn't know a thing. Relax, luv. Have you never sussed a man out in
a fistfight?" Jack swallowed a smile, trying to imagine a proper young Midshipman Norrington resorting to fisticuffs.

"Certainly not like that," James hissed. "And how Hamilton can tolerate this is beyond me."

"He's a solid seaman. Jamie, you didn't come from where the likes of Griffin, Bertie, me, all of us did. 'Tis normal as rain in spring. Ya snap and snarl, get into a tussle and then you decide. Now, Griffin, he's a good fighter. Been a long time since anyone knocked me half-senseless in a fistfight. Since we come out even, we're square. You fine folks, you do it with words, playin' around each other and usin' talk for knives. We just punch it out and see wot happens." He nestled into the folds of his coat. "Wonder where me hat got to."

"One can hardly compare a battle of wit and weapons! Days have passed and you still have that bruise. And what is done about it? Nothing. This is wrong." James had rolled to his back, staring into the darkness. This was a different world, and for the first time in weeks, he was acutely aware of it. "As for your hat, I wager it is exactly where my sword is. Which may very well be the ocean bed."

Jack frowned and pushed out his lower lip. "I really liked that hat."

He brushed James' hand in the darkness. "Please don't worry 'bout it. It really don't mean a thing. We needed to get it out. Now it's over an' that's that. Wot's the first thing you wanna do when we get to shore, luv?" He figured there was little to be gained in explanations of the niceties of street life.

James rolled over again and relented. "Get something decent to eat, and wash." His sigh was heartfelt. "And then wash you. And show Matthew how washing properly is not just one of my fantasies. Then... take a good look around the harbour. Maybe buy you a new hat."

"Aye! We'll have ourselves a good look! And some fun." James could hear the grin in his voice. "And I can't say as I'd mind a good long bath myself. And, oh Jamie, the food. You're gonna think you've gone straight t'heaven. I can't keep me eyes open, luv." Jack's fingers found his and squeezed. "Gotta sleep."

He yawned enormously and his hand relaxed, then dropped as he fell into a dream of piping-hot delicacies laced with saffron and spices.

James reached out, hand hovering over the bruises, then pulled it back, and slumped into his hammock, snoring.

Chapter Twelve
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

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Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Twelve
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--XX with a surprise.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

The Chimaera reaches Bombay and shoreleave becomes an adventure of its own.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtfhw for her excellent beta.
The next days aboard the Chimaera were bustling with activity and anticipation. Every man aboard knew their destination lay close ahead, and after the trials of the Cape, it seemed like salvation.

Grog was one way of showing anticipation, and the Chimaeras indulged in it, insisting on the ritual of draining the supplies sufficiently before sailing into port. It seemed to fuel Jack's tongue to further heights of insanity.

Matthew tugged insistently at Jack's sleeve and shoved himself between him and James, then gave his best grin. "Story?" A short harrumph from behind. "Pleeeease?"

"Well, luv. If ya stop wrigglin' like a fish, I think I can remember one. How about the very first time I were in Bombay? Weren't much older n' you, so y'see you beat me, mate!"

Matthew preened and looked back at James to make sure he was sufficiently appreciated, then settled himself comfortably; head in Jack's lap, back and behind in James'. He looked up expectantly.

Jack idly played with the boy's curls and let his mind drift backwards. "We came in durin' the summer months, just dyin' of the heat and thirst. The water supply had run low an' we were all a bit mad, I think. First thing I saw were monkeys. Everywhere, they were chatterin' and throwin' things from rooftops. An' they all seemed t'be runnin' in the same direction.

Well, 'course I followed 'em. There I am, in a strange place, lost amid a bunch o' chimps. Found m'self in one of their temples and there musta been thousands of 'em. Y'see, Mattie, there's a god in their legends, who's a monkey god—he's right good fortune an' people there love 'im, so they love the monkeys. I climbed up to one o'the roofs and doncha know one o' the little ones comes right up t'me. Think the little bugger thought I'd have somethin' good t'eat. He sits and stares. I stare right back, an' my shipmates—Fat Joe and Bill—are yellin' fer me t'get down and everytime they shout, the big monkeys are screamnin' back and throwing roof tiles at them."

"You see, lad, they recognised him as one of their kind."
"So monkeys look like Jack, or what? Never seen one." Matthew tugged at one of Jack's braids. "They have long hair?"

"No, Matthew, they only act like Jack."

Jack made a chittering sound at James and put out his tongue. "Nah. Well, some of 'em do---there's lots o' different kinds. But this kind--they look like little old men, with furry faces an' big brown eyes. Anyways, me mates' shoutin' brought the priests of the temple runnin'. They see me up on th' roof and they start yellin' and screamin' at me, an' one of 'em goes away an' comes back with the biggest damned sword I ever saw! I'm scared outta me mind, thinkin' they're gotta catch me an' cut off me head. Fat Joe and Bill, they ran like the devil an' I didn't know wot t'do. So this l'il monkey--musta been a baby--grabs a handful o' dirt that's all over the roof and throws it. I figgered that were a pretty good idea, so I did the same. Then a coupla o' the big ones start in, and next thing I know, the priests are backin' away and talkin', real nervous-like. So I reckon that maybe I can get down and make a getaway. I follow the littlest one 'cross the roof an' see a big tree with its roots all above ground---great huge thing---and it's close 'nuff so I can jump to a branch and get down.

Jack chuckled to himself.

"Let me get this straight. The monkeys engaged in piracy to save you from certain death, and then led you on a prepared escape path." James whistled, a soft little sound that meant he did not believe one word.

Matthew's eyes were very wide and shining. "An' you ran off? Just like that? Did the monkeys come with you?"

"Ahhh, no. Y'see, I didn't know where that tree'd take me, and when I finally got down, I'm lookin' round to make sure I can get away an' damn me, if one o'them priests doesn't grab my by the ear and haul me off inta the temple! I was so scared I thought I'd piss m'self but I wasn't gonna let 'em know I was. I mean, ya can't let folks think yer afraid, barnacle. It just makes 'em want t'hurt ya. So I tried t'explain, but they couldn't understand English and I didn't know wot in hell they were sayin'. They whisk me away into these twisty, turny kind of rooms an' leave me in front o' this great huge statue of a man wif a monkey head an' ten arms. Gigantic thing. I snoop around, lookin' fer a way out, but there isn't any. I can't even find the door!" Jack laughed softly. "Thought I was a real goner."

James bent close to whisper into Matthew's ear. "And that was when they all knelt down and started worshipping Jack as the king of all monkeys. The chimps carried him out of there, and he only eventually ran away because he hates bananas."

Jack clipped James across the side of the head. "Did not! An' I like bananas!"

"Bet ya do," Bertie chimed in as he walked past.

Matthew giggled and tugged at Jack's sleeve. "And then? Then?"

"I hear all sorts o' chantin' comin' from somewhere inside the place and suddenly, I see that little monkey. Now, I know he didn't get in there th' way I did, so I stayed very still and watched 'im. And there's a hole in th' wall, behind the statue. I try t'wriggle out through it, an' wotdya think happened?"

James continued. "Then he got stuck in the hole and got soundly spanked for his misdoings."

All around them, it was quiet, every single man in the galley listening intently. Jack grinned. "The
priests came back and tried t'pull me out. I can see the light ahead but I can't go nowhere. I'm screamin' blue murder, the monkeys, they're screamin' along with me an' the priests are tuggin' at me legs until I thought they'd break off. They finally get me out and I'm surrounded. Musta been fifteen of 'em all round me. I didn't know wot in hell t'do, so I acted like a monkey. I chattered and chittered and made noises like this," Jack did a pretty accurate impression of an infuriated simian. "Then I picked up more o' that dirt that was all over and started heavin' it about." His whole body began to shake with laughter.

"The priests, they all back away, like they're scared o'me or somethin', so I keep doin' it, until the oldest one opens the door--it were hidden so cleverly I never saw it---and out I go, runnin' like hells afire. Turns out, that dirt I were throwin' at 'em was monkey dung. They musta thought me mad."

"Why yes, priests quite often are fairly educated folk. They obviously made an excellent assessment of the situation."

Matthew vaulted up and slung his arms around Jack's shoulders. "So you threw shit at them and they let ya run?"

"Bastard!" Jack giggled. "Yup, that's pretty much wot happened. Wasn't until much, much later that I realised they kinda got a soft spot fer madmen an' they thought I were possessed by the monkey god." He shook his head. "Went back t'that temple years later, an' they were still tellin' stories about th' boy from a Western ship who'd been blessed by Rama. Didn't I jus' have a laugh over that!"

He hugged Matthew. "So now y'know. If ya get cornered in a foreign port, act like a monkey."

"Yes, and now we have to take him back again and make sure that monkey possession is exorcised. He might even pick up bathing again if we manage that."

He punched James arm. "I'm known t'clean up most nicely, I'll have you know!"

"Yes, like a monkey." James mimicked licking his arm clean. Matthew giggled and launched himself from Jack's arms into James', trying to imitate Jack's chittering.

The rest of the crew took it up and Cookie stared, wondering what in hell was wrong with them to be making such ungodly noise. He threatened to toss them all out of his galley hungry and every one of them raced through their last supper before making port, eager to wake early and be first to sight land.

Their berth was pitch black when James was woken violently. "James, James! You must get up! Now!" Matthew gave the hammock another push.

James stifled a yawn. "What is it, lad? The ship isn't burning, is it?"

"No, but you must get up, now! We're puttin' into harbour any minute!"

James refrained from pointing out that they would put in with the morning tide at the soonest and let Matthew tug him topside.

Jack was already at the helm. Longthorpe had wakened him much earlier and his lip lifted in one of his slyer grins as James emerged from the hatch, tousled and still shaking the dreams from his eyes.

As the sun rose, Jack smiled over the wheel. The light was warmer than in the Caribe, golden as his skin and he gentled the Chimaera, crooning to her as the deck began to bustle.
Under his hands, she glided in like a queen, lines flying as they made her fast, planks and hoists set. The cargo was already being hauled topside, Hamilton shouting orders, the smell of the dock a living thing filled with bright heat, burning spices and dark perfumes.

Eagerness was the best taskmaster as though the moment had been carefully rehearsed every day in those past months. His work done, James stole up on the quarterdeck, watching the harbour and the forest of masts draw closer. "Look at that."

"Aye, Jamie, here we are!" Jack grabbed James' arm. "Collect yer gear an' be ready in case our bloody Irish friend tries t'lock us up again."

With that, Jack tied off the helm and bolted down the hatch to sling on his coat. He slipped to the brig hold for a final refill and a quick grab at certain items he'd stashed in his cubby hole.

All their belongings had been taken upon capture, so James had only his spare shirt to pack before making topside again, masking his agitation with indifference.

Jack sidled up next to James, waiting as Hamilton strode down the line of expectant faces, calling out the names of those to stay behind and keep watch.

He paused in front of them, his face twisting into a wry smile. "Dinna get yerselves lost an' be back here tomorra at sunrise. I mean that, you two! I'll come lookin' fer yer sorry arses meself, I swear it."

Jack bobbed a bow. "Course, sir. Absolutely. Be back wi' th' sun." He swallowed a smirk and accepted the meagre pay Longthorpe thrust at him. It wasn't much, but it was all they would see until the ivory was sold.

Jack immediately plunged the coins into the depths of his coat, nearly dancing with excitement. "C'mon! Let's go." He ran to the gang, paused to straighten, then swaggered towards the dock, every inch the Jack Sparrow who'd piloted a sinking boat to Port Royal and swayed onto the quay with nary a wet sole to his boots.

James stalked down behind him, eyes fixed on the array of colour welcoming him, warm ochre against the flaring sun. Even the smell of harbour and dead fish seemed welcoming after such a long time at sea.

Matthew stormed past them with a chittering battlecry, hooking himself to Jack's knee to spin around him.

Jack scooped him up, at the same time removing several small hands from his pockets. All around there were brilliant colours; dark eyes, painted like Jack's, peering over scarlet and indigo veils. The crooked streets were crowded with beggars and peddlers shouting their wares in strange tongues; children running naked with copper-dark skins.

Matthew's head turned every which way, his blue eyes like saucers as Jack set him on his feet. "Don't go astray, Mattie. Stick close t'us, right?"

Matthew began to nod, but his head jerked again to trail a bit of turquoise in the crowd.

James' head remained nearly still, but his eyes danced, as eager to see as Matthew; wondering just as much at all that was new. It had been a long time since he had been to a port even remotely like this. He had seen African ports, Goa when he had been in the Indian Ocean, but compared to Bombay they seemed almost normal...English.

He grabbed a hand that groped for his pocket, then reached for another one that slid to his waist,
laughing when it turned out to be Jack's. "Do you intend to pilfer my pay or my virtue?"

Jack laughed. "Keepin' you on yer toes!" Matthew bounced on his, straining at Jack's hold on his collar.

"Jamie, stow him somewhere." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Won't do fer him t'get lost 'round here."

James nodded and made a grab for Matthew's waist, hoisting the boy atop his shoulders. Matthew's screech of dismay turned into one of delight and he clutched at James' hair, using the vantage point for a better outlook, squealing with excitement, and pointing at every direction within seconds.

Jack laughed and plucked another small hand out of his pocket, wheeling the tiny girl into a dancing pirouette and setting her down with a grin.

"Hey barnacle! Look! Monkeys." He tapped Matthew's bouncing knee and pointed to a group of them, chittering on a rooftop. "Well, food first or wot have ya, mates?" Bertie had joined them and they made a small oasis in the endless traffic amid the market stalls.

"Bath," James protested, but Bertie's mocking laugh and Matthew's growling stomach, almost as loud, settled the matter. "Very well then. Food." He suddenly seemed almost clean, compared to this port. "But somewhere without a smell this horrible."

Jack grinned and handed his flask 'round. "Awright then. This way." He led them down one twisting alley after another, pausing to point out a dancing bear, the gilded dome of a palace glimmering in the fierce sunlight; steering them clear of the lepers and cripples until not one of them was sure where in the maze of a city they had landed.

Different smells enticed them from either side, food stalls as simple as an old woman slapping dough into a pot buried in embers, or as elaborate as the filigreed grille behind which they clearly heard English voices.

He led them to a crossroads swimming in puddles of grease and filth, abruptly turning into a tented enclosure that muffled the sounds outside. A turbaned giant grinned them inside with all his four teeth and Jack immediately made for the back while the others wondered where they should sit.

There were no tables or chairs, only masses of cushions lying about as though after a rainbow-drenched pillow fight.

Jack babbled some incomprehensible jargon at a wizened man with a face as dark as Cookie's coffee, gesticulating towards them, bowing, then sauntered back to join them. "Wotcha waitin' fer? Sit down."

All three simply stared at Jack as though he was even madder than they had imagined. James coughed delicately as he eased Matthew down from his shoulders. "Jack? There are no chairs."

Jack grinned and threw himself down onto a blood-red cushion spangled with tiny mirrors. "Get down here!" he laughed. "They'll bring th' table."

Sure enough, two giggling boys in long robes raced to set a round table in the midst of the cushions, while another handed Jack a silver pot and a large towel. Jack sat up, cross-legged, and held out both hands to another boy struggling with what looked like a very large silver teapot. He poured a clear stream of water into the pot over Jack's dirty hands, the scent of roses rising to tickle their nostrils. Jack dried his hands and passed the basin to James.
James watched the tar and filth of months wash from his hands, the pleasant smell making him relax almost instinctively. He peered at Jack and imitated him, folding his long limbs, a tentative attempt to follow customs so foreign to himself and his upbringing.

The two boys tottered under the weight of a tray that spanned the wooden table, filled with small dishes of strange pastes and liquids; pale grain-coloured, green as glass, deep as cognac. In the centre was a pile of bread, warm from the oven and fragrant with fennel, slivers of onion crackling on top.

Jack broke off a corner and scooped up a bit of the golden paste. "That's made o' beans. The dark one's sweet. The green sauce is sharp. Dig in. Oh, and use yer right hand." He winked. "Hereabouts, the left is fer wipin' yer arse, so it's not polite to eat with."

The eager chatter and stomach grumbling yielded to curious stares. James had to remind himself not to lose his courage before food of all things, so he folded his left hand on his back, scooping up very little of the green paste with the right.

The bread, at least, looked trustworthy so it was quickly shared out. James was the first to take a tentative bite, Matthew watching him with parted lips, checking for any signs of choking or worse.

None were forthcoming and James scooped up some of the humous on a bit of bread to offer it to Matthew. The boy's eyes went wide but he bravely ate it, chewing consideringly. His eyes lit up and he went back for more. Bertie swallowed hard and followed suit.

They made short work of the bread and another tray was brought to them with a large pie, still steaming from the oven, its crust flaking and dotted with intricate designs in white powder on top.

"Careful o' that. It's gonna be hot on yer fingers." Jack broke it open and the smell of tender fowl made their mouths water. Jack sucked the powder off his fingers. "G'wan Mattie, give it a try. I know you'll like it. 'Tis pigeon pie an' ye'll never have better."

While they tasted and waited impatiently for the hot filling to cool, two men sat themselves in a far corner with a drum and an odd sort of guitar. The drummer began a steady beat, then they hear the sound of bells chiming and a girl slipped from the curtained backroom, covered from head to foot in shimmering silk the colour of the Caribbean Sea. Only her eyes were visible until the beat grew faster and she threw off the encompassing veil and began to dance.

Bertie howled, forgetting the half-cooled pie to stare and cheer. Matthew blinked, watching the glittering silk move like a waterfall. James nearly choked on a bite of pie, hiding his blush behind a cough. He stared at the floor and slid closer to Jack. "Is that part of the menu?" he whispered.

"Ain't she a peach? All part o' the service, luv." Jack grinned at him, his wicked eyes alight.

The girl wore a tiny bodice covered in coins that jingled and flashed with every shimmy, her abdomen rolling above a skirt of silk so thin the slender limbs glowed behind its gauzy folds. The belt around her waist clashed and jangled, big tassels flying with every wriggle. Jack kept one eye on her, one on James' face, near scarlet as his cushion. Her hands wove ribbons in the air, bare feet flashing as she twirled closer, her sloe eyes fixed on James and his blushes.

James never answered. He was too busy staring, being embarrassed about staring, and finding himself unable to stop staring. His mouth went dry and he swallowed hard, nearly suffocating when the girl swayed closer still, her dark eyes intent on him.

She was barely a step away when she bowed low and then upright again, the coins clanking loudly,
her slim stomach stretching directly in front of his face. Then she swayed back half a step, one finger hovering and tracing the line of his jaw, almost but not quite touching.

James desperately wished the mass of pillows would part and suck him under like a current, but nothing happened, nothing but Bertie's cheers and Jack's wicked glance deepening his own blush.

Little Matthew sucked the sugar from his fingers, digging into the pie without taking his eyes off the half-naked female undulating in front of James.

Jack reached into his pocket as she arched backwards, her black mane pooling on the carpet. He flipped a coin onto her stomach and Bertie nearly choked as she rolled her muscles to flip the coin end over end down to settle in her navel, then back up until it disappeared into her jingling bodice. She backed away, swaying seductively to the twang of the instrument and the pounding drumbeat, the veil swirling around her like a turquoise cloud.

James wrenched his attention back to the pie, eating slowly and in as mannerly a fashion as he could with his fingers, the taste of spiced fowl only dimly registering. Every time he looked up, the dancer seemed to stare directly into his eyes, and he quickly dropped his gaze again. It was one thing to appreciate a woman's charms, another entirely to do so in public. Bertie, and Jack, of course, seemed to think his embarrassment was hilarious.

She began to spin, faster and faster until she was a blur of silver and blue, landing on one knee, her back arched in an inhuman bow and they all cheered her, tossing coins at her hennaed feet.

She spun to collect them, stood and bowed, just the way Jack did, turning back once to wink over her shoulder at James before disappearing behind the curtain. Jack finished a final bite of the pie and the boys cleared away the carnage only to replace it with a tray heaped with yellow grain, shining with oil and laced with chunks of meat and vegetables.

"Good goddamn, I love th' grub here. James? Jamie, come back to us." Bertie laughed mid-chew and Matthew struggled to imitate the way Jack squeezed the tiny grains into a ball, sucking the fragrant grease from his fingers.

James startled back to full awareness and hid another blush by chewing fervently. "The food certainly is excellent. And the service is most...interesting."

Bertie gave him a shove. "Poor lasses, always going for the wrong ones. She's gonna be disappointed when she finds out her adored's a bugger!

James glared and, with grim determination, helped Mattie to finish the dish.

Jack settled back on his cushion, sipping at the sweet tea the boy poured from a great height into delicate glasses and belched enormously to the grinned approbation of the owner. "Don't think I can move!"

Once more, the empty tray was removed to be replaced by a dish of dates and a plate of small, sticky cakes. The old man brought out what looked like a chandelier, festooned with ropes.

Bertie stared at Jack. "What in hell's name?"

Jack grinned at him, unwound one of the coloured 'ropes' and nodded to the owner, taking the stem between his lips. "Pipe, luv."

Slowly, James untwisted two of the ropes, offering one to Matthew and turning the other in his hand consideringly. Bertie sucked at his stem and puffed the sweet smoke and James followed suit, pulling
the stem from the boy's mouth after the second drag and the third cough.

The pipe bubbled like a pot on the boil and Jack sucked in a lungful, holding it until he turned quite purple before exhaling, watching the smoke drift above their heads as he leaned back on his elbows, eyes at half-mast.

Soon Bertie had settled further into the soft pillows and Mattie curled up and fell fast asleep, one sticky finger still in his mouth.

They nibbled at the sweets, smoked and nibbled some more until Jack yawned and sat up with a contented sigh. "Well, lads, I dunno 'bout you lot, but I could use a bottle and a bath. Wot say you t'that?"

Bertie's agreement was reluctant, subdued by a filled belly and foggy laziness. James' eyes lit up and he wrenched his gaze away from the pipe. "Yes. I have longed for that bath since the Caribbean." He sniffed. "And you all need one as well."

Jack punched his arm. "Bastard. C'mon, let's not waste th' whole day lollin'. We'll settle up here an' move on. Wake up the barnacle. He can't spend his whole shoreleave snoozin'. There's lots more t'see." They pooled the money for their meal, a pittance in comparison to the sheer quantity of food they had consumed.

James tossed a few more coins on the pile, then lifted the half-sleeping boy. Matthew muttered softly and curled up again. "I believe dear Matthew here is on his way to proving that he can, just to contradict you."

Bertie grinned and tickled the boy, making him lash out in James' arms. "Boy's been spending too much time with ye. Picks up some of yer habits."

Matthew growled but he turned in James' arms, trying to climb his shoulders again until he was hoisted onto them.

Jack was floating through the dusty streets in a pleasant haze as he led them through more alleys and byways to a lane of walled doorways. He headed for the third one to their left and shooed them into the cool interior. The air was sweet with perfume and incense, humid as midsummer in Port Royal.

Never had a group of sailors been so silent and timid. They stood there, sandalwood teasing at their noses, and waited. No storming forward, no shouted demands, just amazed silence. James was studying a bit of intricate woodwork when two men and three boys appeared from behind a curtain, bowed and bade them follow.

Jack bobbed a bow and they were ushered into a small room, hooks all around, obviously for their clothing. He took a moment to gabble something at one of the men, who grinned and nodded when Jack slipped him a coin and called for one of the little boys, who scampered away with a gap-toothed smile.

Jack peeled off his coat and proceeded to strip entirely. "'Tis awright. Farhad's a good man. He won't let anythin' get pinched."

Bertie quickly undressed but James dawdled, his shirt pulled off and his hands at the buttons of his breeches, staring at Jack's hairless, scarred chest, gulping.

Bertie slapped his back and he nearly lost his balance. "Whatsa matter, Jem? 'fraid someone will nick yer clothes again, or are you so used t'someone unbuttoning yer britches that ye can't do it alone no more?"
Jack giggled and pulled at James' buttons, taking the opportunity to steal a kiss. "C'mon luv. Let's get you clean." His eyes danced invitingly as he opened the final one and the worn breeches tumbled to James' bootops.

James blushed furiously. "I never thought this was done with an audience." As he bent over to remove his boots, Bertie choked back a laugh and pinched James' pale arse, nearly sending him stumbling as he started, his breeches tangled around his legs. With a formidable glower, he pulled them off and straightened up.

All three of them got Matthew out of his clothes and they padded along a dim corridor to a small door. Jack knocked and it opened into a large room, curtained into many small tents, each with a wooden tub the size of a winepress filled with steaming hot water. "This first, t'get washed up proper. Then the rest." Jack winked and vaulted into their tub, sinking beneath the steam with a sigh.

James' eyes widened further and he sputtered. "Everyone into one?" It certainly was large enough, strangely like the Roman bathhouses he remembered from a childhood voyage to Italy. The thought of actually doing such a thing was startling. Uncivilised. Still, the warm, steaming water beckoned, and cleanliness was vital for civilisation. He slipped into the water, his sigh approaching a moan as it enfolded him in a weightless embrace.

Once they were all in the tub, one of the boy attendants brought them small balls of soap and they stopped lounging long enough to lather each other up, laughing and splashing, sluicing off the grime and sweat of months. Jack's nimble fingers worked the soap into James' hair, while Bertie teased and Matthew swam around them like a small shark.

With every round, Matthew dared closer and closer, until James finally made a grab for him and held him fast to work the soap into the matted blond curls. Matthew thrashed and hollered, twisting even more violently when he found out the protests gave him reason to splash wildly.

James decided not to notice the grey lather that dripped from his own hair. He settled for dunking his head underwater, then Matthew's. The boy emerged, sputtering, and they shared a grin. James launched himself at Jack and held him fast as Matthew soaped the dark braids.

Jack yelped, laughing as they pushed him under, yanking him back up for another soaping. Then all three turned on Bertie, and by the time they'd finished rinsing and exhausted themselves with laughter to the wide-eyed stares of the attendants, they were all as clean as one hot bath could possibly make them.

One of the boys stood near the curtain and handed them big towels, clearly fascinated by Matthew, who was not much older than he, yet was accounted a grown man. He led them down another dark hallway to a door and pulled it open, grinning and winking at them.

The room was enormous, like something from a fairy story, nearly filled by a giant pool that reflected the brilliant tiles. At least twenty men lounged in the shallow, scented water, drinking from delicate cups or puffing on those strange bubble-pipes.

Jack abandoned his towel and held out a hand to James, stepping down into the warm water. "C'mon, luv. Now we relax."

James let himself be led down, submerging in the warm water and a different world. "When you mentioned a bath, I certainly did not expect this," he whispered, listening to how his voice echoed, almost as if in a cave.
They found themselves a corner and James and Bertie kept sniffing at the water, the scent of roses filling the room with the steam. Matthew was fascinated, pawing at the small bubbles of foam, then started and held up a petal between two fingers, eyes wide.

Jack laughed. "Just remember t'peel 'em off yer arse when ya get out, barnacle!" He looked up and smiled as a quartet of small, slender women headed their way amid the pillars, giggling behind bangled hands, each one with a bottle of some pale liquid.

They chattered and laughed, crouching on the tiles and pouring drinks, offering them with laughing eyes that sparkled like the shimmering rings in their ears and noses. Jack bolted down the small cup and grinned, frankly appraising, then eyed James, who had turned the exact shade of a Marine's coat.

James buried his face in the cup and sniffed at it. Amidst sandalwood and roses, it did not smell at all, so he tossed it back, coughing as it burnt down his throat, obviously a sharp liquor.

The woman that had poured it gazed at him, smiled and smoothed the back of her knuckles across his bobbing adam's apple, sending him coughing again.

Jack laughed at him softly. "Easy with that stuff. 'Tis Russian and stronger than it looks." The girl refilled his cup and he held it to her lips, sharing her giggles. Bertie was already thoroughly enjoying the attentions of his girl, her green eyes startlingly pale against her amber skin.

Jack hoisted himself onto the rim of the pool and stretched his legs, his dark companion winding small hands around his chest as he grinned at James. "Better than th' usual, aye?"

James' only reply was a cut-off gasp as the third girl knelt behind him and coaxed him to sit on the rim as well, her petite fingers teasing the fuzz on his chest, caressing his nipples. "Thank you, Miss, but I believe this will not be necessary."

She only smiled, her dark gaze smouldering, and poured oil into her palms, spreading it delicately over his shoulders, easing sore muscles and teasing sensitive skin.

He shook his head and relaxed to enjoy the touch. The woman was beautiful, her fine fingers sure, and a man had to be made of stone to resist her. He was a sailor, this was his shoreleave, and this city certainly was not Port Royal or London.

The smallest of the girls, barely more than a budding child herself, sat watching Matthew with enormous eyes, smiling and nodding as he reached shyly for the towel. She handed it him, beckoning him out of the pool and helping him to dry.

After a few sputtered remonstrances, he relaxed and they seemed quite happy to grin and bob at one another. Bertie's green-eyed lass stood and held out a hand to lead him behind one of the many curtains hanging around the pool.

Jack leaned back against his girl's shoulder as she slicked her hands with scented oil, working it into his wild hair. He murmured something that made her smile and chatter to her friend, teeth flashing white against her dark skin. She stood and he rose to follow, winking at James before they, too, disappeared.

James took a deep breath. This was not all that different from a normal shoreleave, he told himself. If the brothels here were different and the intimacy more frankly displayed, that was simply because this was a port uncivilised by English standards. Sailors were sailors and it was not as if he had never taken the opportunity to find a whore and relieve his needs after a long voyage.

But to display it so openly, as though it were not something that should happen happen in secrecy,
but rather something to be celebrated! As if there were more to it than simple fleshly lust.

'His' girl ran a finger up his spine, into his hair, then under his chin and gently urged him upright. He swallowed, smiled, then let himself be drawn towards one of the curtains. She drew it aside and ushered him inside.

Jack was sprawled on his stomach on a mass of cushions, his face buried between his girl's tensing thighs, and he lifted his head with a grin at the sudden brightness. "Hullo, luv." Her small hands pulled at his shoulders and he laughed, tickling her and disappeared under his hair again.

James froze in his tracks and snatched his hand from the girl's waist. "Sorry," he squeaked, taking a step back, unable to stop staring. He turned to rush out, but the other girl blocked his way, hands slowly stroking down his sides, lingering at his hip.

With more force than he would suspected from her slender fingers, she urged him towards a free space, pushed him down on the soft cushions and then straddled him, delicately kissing and licking a path down his chest, coaxing an embarrassing, soft mewl from him.

Jack was clearly enjoying himself from the soft sounds that he made as his girl whimpered and squealed, her legs locked around his neck as she gasped out a shuddery cry until he had to pry them open.

"Darlin', that's most gratifyin' but don't strangle me," he laughed, sliding up over her, his body almost pale compared to hers. She grabbed hold of his mane and pulled him closer until his eyes closed and his back arched, her thighs tensed around his hips. He moved languidly, the muscles of his buttocks shifting beneath butter-smooth skin.

For a moment, his eyes met James' and he smiled.

James' head dropped back on the pillow with a groan. His girl, determined to counter his lack of initiative, had used the opportunity to lift herself and sink down on him, shifting back and forth in a maddeningly slow, uneven movement. The curtained space was filled with panting and soft moans, then a louder one and a contented sigh as James steadied her hips and met her movement with one of his own, rocking leisurely.

In the midst of all the moaning and shifting, Jack's lips met James' and he worried at the lower, nipping gently. He was balanced on one knee, sideways, the girl twining herself around him, still locked together at the groin. Her fingers, in turn, played over James' hair and her friend's breast. Jack swallowed James' startled moan and he grinned before shifting again to kneel face to face with the girl, his thrusts becoming more rhythmic, then slowing as they twisted together like a sculpture of gold and copper, until she clawed at his back and they tumbled into the cushions.

James was caught in a hazy dream of softness, of heady scents and headier pleasure. Atop him, his girl shuddered and threw her head back with a soft cry, her slim body curving into a bow over him. His fingers dug into her hips and he arched up with a low keen, then fell back heavily.

She moaned softly and stretched out atop him, playfully licking away the pearls of sweat, her fingers gently brushing his sticky hair from his forehead.

Jack lay on his back, arching off the cushions, his hands spanning the girl's waist as they moved together. She wound her hands in his hair as he surged upwards to meet her, moaning deep in his throat, her black tresses tumbling over his face and chest. For a long moment, they seemed to freeze together, then eased back, her head buried against his neck, his hips still moving until she squeaked and laughed softly, turning to run one hand through her friend's hair. They leaned together to kiss.
each other as Jack shifted his weight to bring them closer together, his lips searching for James' once
more.

Their kiss was wet and languid, indulgent with all the hazy slowness of this place. It took a little
while for James' breath to even and his eyes to flutter open; wide open as he watched the two women
kissing, mesmerised and shocked.

He turned his head on the pillow and smiled at Jack tentatively. "Does halving everything mean this
as well?" he asked in a whisper, then groaned as the girl rose and returned with a basin and a towel,
gently washing away sticky remainders of semen and sweat.

Jack smiled with his eyes until his lips were not otherwise occupied. "Wonderful, innit?"

His girl spoke softly to her friend and they both laughed then switched places to finish washing,
pushing the men together to watch them kiss again. Jack's head was on James' shoulder, so like their
nights crammed into the hammock, but soothed with soft limbs that curled around them and the
fluttering touches of the towel.

The girls giggled and kissed, then rose together, washing one another with small fingers. Smiling,
they wound each other in the silken garments and together they bowed and winked, disappearing
through the curtain.

Jack sighed contently and stretched out close to James. "Well, luv. How d'ya like Bombay?"

James' eyes were still wide and he blinked, staring at the curtains, the pillow, the softness. "It is
unlike anything I have ever seen, to say the least. Although I have yet to find out whether that is due
to this place, or you. How come your adventures always manage to turn the world upside down?"

"Ah, Jamie, that's the fun of it. Adventures. An' this place is most lovely. I did get meself inta
trouble here once, as you well know." He sat up and ran the damp, sweet-scented towel over the
back of his neck, then stood, a golden shadow in the dim light. "Best be seein' how young Matthew's farin'." He held out a hand and pulled James into his arms. "Nothin' like it anywhere, is there? Fills yer head with dreams."

It did. Tempting dreams of what a life dedicated to this could be; dedicated to exploring, to seeing
places like this for no other purpose than to know them. "Yes," James murmured as he shivered a
little and straightened in Jack's grasp. "But more important than dreams is to get home." Which of
them he reminded, he did not know.

"We will, Jamie. And like kings, if I've got anythin' t'say about it." Jack's eyes had that sly
expression that betrayed a plan buzzing in his agile brain. "How'd ya like t'return to Port Royal
aboard the Chimaera?" He kept his voice a bare whisper, so close to James that their bodies melded
together.

"The Chimaera? I do not think that Hamilton will take her back to Port Royal so soon." A look at
Jack's face told James that he was well aware of that, and that it was not at all what he had in mind.
"You want to commandeer her?" James hissed. "We will never convince enough of the men to
mutiny to crew a frigate!"

Mutiny. The word left a bitter taste in his mouth. It was what all captains feared and only some of
them deserved; and rarely did deserving and reality have anything to do with one another. "The
Chimaera?" he repeated.

Jack silenced him with a kiss. "Oh, I think I can recruit a few sailors round here t'make up the
difference. Hush. Don't talk of it now. Let me get me bearin's and see how the repairs go, aye? In the meantime, we have some fun. Now, let's check on the barnacle and find somethin' else to do."

He stole a look at the startled green eyes under his lashes. It was a gamble, but Jack was quite sure he could take the ship and a bit more as well. After all, he owed Hamilton a good trouncing for all his lost time and expertise. And he wasn't the best pirate on the seven seas for nothing, even in his own estimation.

It sounded so easy, and James found himself believing it. Was sharing a hammock and a fate enough for trust? Was a declaration of love, blurted out in a cell, freezing and in fear of death? A tentative friendship between two men barely getting to know each other? Was that enough to ally against a ship's captain? "Very well then," he agreed finally, tugging absently at one of Jack's braids.

They found Matthew curled into a towel, sitting in the lap of the young girl who sang to him in a strange lilting tongue. His eyes were wide, but he looked as content as Bertie, who had just emerged from his alcove with a wide grin.

One of the boys led them back to the small dressing room and they donned their clothes and anted up their shares of the charges before walking back into the street. The sun was deep gold, late afternoon casting long shadows as they prowled through the emptying market.

Jack found them an inn close to the docks and amazed them all with his extravagance in getting two rooms; one for Bertie and young Matthew, and one where he and James could enjoy a chance to truly be alone, if only for a few hours.

Jack was determined to make the most of it.

Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Thirteen
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--XX.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

A chance for real privacy gives rise to several things.

Our sincerest and heartiest thanks to smtfhw for her excellent beta.
As soon as they were inside the room, James pinned Jack up against the wall in a furious kiss, calloused hands roaming up under his shirt.

Then James paused to simply stand there, breathing hard, his nose buried in the side of Jack’s neck. It was a miracle to finally be rid of the stench of tar and sweat, replaced by the sweet scent of oil. "That bath was wonderful," he whispered, nuzzling below Jack’s ear. "This port is wonderful. Miraculous."

Jack's coat was half-off, hanging from one shoulder, his arms around James, and he laughed softly. "Just the bath?" he winked. "I love the east. Lemme get outta me coat! Impatient ole Commodore!"

James flinched and glanced around the room before he relaxed again, lips curving into a grin. "I rather thought I could do that for you." He pulled the coat's other side off, leaving it to pool on the floor.

"So," he began between kisses and touches, untucking Jack's shirt and slipping his palms beneath it, "What utterly insane plan have you come up with to get us out of here? Should we not hide further away from the docks? Hamilton will come after us if we do not report in the morning, but in a port so large, he will have little chance."

"Well, luv, "Jack was busy with James' buttons for the second time that day. "I rather think it best if we be good lads an' go back to the Chimaera and see wot's happenin' with the repairs. It'll keep him off our arses, and in the dark. As it were." His face crinkled into his most irresspressibly wicked smile. He got James' breeches down and admiringly gave him a quick stroke. "Nice t'see you've such recuperative powers."

"There seems to be something in those oils," James observed as he pulled at the slipknot of Jack's breeches and slid them down. "But," he kicked off his boots and breeches to carry Jack the few steps to the bed, kneeling astride him for more kisses, nipping at the soft flesh between his ribs, "what if he decides not to take the risk and locks us up again?"

"Jamie, luv, if he let us out first day in port an’ we follow orders and report back in the morn, he
won't be lockin' us anywhere. Besides, y'know how many of us joined up with him same as we did. I need t'get a feel fer how many might resent it as much as we do."

He lay back and returned James' kisses lazily. "And do remind me t'ell Bertie not to go anywhere but Farhad's if he's lookin' fer more tail. Only place I know of hereabouts where ya can be sure of not needin' French letters."

"Right. But if he makes us keep watch, it will be difficult to contact your shady friends." James grinned and nuzzled a path down Jack's throat, then suddenly stopped, looking serious. "I know you are well-reputed for such insane plans, but do you really believe we can take the Chimaera? You may have managed to sail a brig with just two men, but daring the Cape in an undermanned frigate is another matter entirely. Hamilton is not a bad captain. It will be difficult to convince them to…." He bit his lip. "Mutiny."

Jack stretched in his arms and laughed. "Mate, d'ya not think my 'shady friends', as you put it, won't know I'm here damn quick? Believe me, there's many a sailor here lookin' fer a way out, and they'll be glad to find a ship willin' t'take 'em on. Just trust me, luv. I'll figure out a way, even if we gotta brave the Barbary. We've got at least a week fer the repairs. Now stop worryin' and let's take care of yer ragin' stiffy there before you explode." His fingers brushed over James' buttocks and he closed his eyes, remembering the sweat running into the chestnut hair as James thrust into the dusky girl. "You were beautiful with her, Jamie. Just beautiful."

Trust. James gulped and flushed bright red, hiding it against Jack's chest to breathe warm against the dip just beneath the sternum, where the ribs met and he could faintly feel the heartbeat. He thought of Jack with the girl; both girls kissing atop them and stifled a gasp.

He peered up, blushed again, then his eyes shot wide. "You planned that!" he burst out.

Jack's laugh rumbled and set his ribs quaking beneath James' lips. "Was it so very dreadful? I didn't see you object too much." His hands tangled in James' hair. "And lovely though they were, I think I prefer havin' you all t'me onesies." His legs shifted to either side of James, one foot trailing up a pale, lean calf.

James laughed, a huff of breath disappearing beneath the collar of Jack's shirt. "I guess it was better than sharing an alcove with Bertie and his girl. I swear I could hear his grunting."

He freed himself and scooted lower, pushing the shirt up to taste Jack's navel. "So...what you were doing to that girl when I came in was just a close examination to see if you would need French letters?"

Jack burst into a gale of laughter. "That? I know there's some Latin word fer it, but damned if I can remember rightly. I just know I like a taste before a shag." He wriggled his way out of his shirt, feeling very depraved indeed, lying half-dressed beneath a naked James who seemed intent on driving him mad with an inquisitive tongue. "Sorta the same French I did with you, aye?"

His fingers curled into James' hair and tugged at his ears. "An' naughty you, knowin' all about French letters!"

"Jack? You are not talking to Matthew here. I have been a sailor for twenty years, you do recall that? Yet, I have little doubt your knowledge on them, or anything...French is far more extensive than mine. And the French truly wonder why they are considered depraved."

James settled between Jack's legs, curiously peering down at his hard prick and giving it an evaluating stroke. The smell of sweet oil was predominant, mingled with the faintest hint of
something saltier, muskier. Jack was as clean as he would ever be, and the bed beneath them did not sway or shake.

If he was ever going to do this, it would have to be now. He looked up at Jack's knowing grin, and lifted his chin. Certainly, if the pirate could do it, he was capable of it, too. With a wicked smirk, he remembered how helpless he had felt; and, hoping that he might reduce Jack to a similar level of incoherence, he bent down to trace his tongue along the hard length. Prepared for the lurch this time, he held Jack's bucking hips down with both hands, curled around his hipbones.

Jack's laugh became a strangled gulp. James' fingers were hard, calloused against his skin, holding him immobile and his own hands reached for the broad shoulders, his breath quickening to a pant. He reached up and shoved a pillow under his head, watching James with wide eyes. "You sure 'bout this, luv?" His voice was a low purr.

James peered up, frowned once, then grinned. "I do not think the bed will spill us to the floor," he murmured against the crease of Jack's thigh. A single lamp flickered on the table and cast half of his face into darkness. His tongue, too, was in shadow as he hesitantly flicked it out to lick again, contemplating. He slowly traced his way up to the tip, then, after another short hesitation, sucked it in.

Jack groaned as the wet heat surrounded him, James' lips tight and warm. He was shaking, despite himself.

He knew this well; it was no great revelation to him, but watching James, his hair tumbling to tickle his thighs, the crescent of his lashes fluttering as he suckled and tasted, was very different than the legions of lovers and whores he'd known. "God" and "James" were the only intelligible words he could manage between gasps of pure pleasure.

James wanted to retort, to tease, but could not, and hummed instead. The soft and sometimes not-so-soft vocalisations of pleasure made him redouble his efforts and he bobbed down further, pulling back in shock when he gagged, blinking. He paused, his eyes wide, then he closed them again and let his tongue tease and swirl, as he dimly remembered from the haze of his own pleasure.

Jack held himself still by sheer willpower, afraid to pump when he felt James' startled choke, groaning as the teasing tongue made him shudder, his prick beginning to throb. He hands twisted in the sheets, white-knuckled. "James?" His voice was hoarse. "Jamie, I can't hold back." He was trembling with the effort, his hips wriggling against James' grip and his disintegrating control.

It was strange to James to hear Jack coming apart so completely while he was still in full possession of his senses. Empowering, elating, but, at the same time, humbling.

The thought of Jack's release in his mouth did not seem as disgusting as before. Jack had not minded. It would be unfair of James to do so. A grin dancing in his eyes, he bobbed down and sucked hard.

Jack was incapable of speech. He panted and groaned, his mouth quivering half-open, his eyes glassy. They closed and he could feel it building, his prick twitching against James' tongue, the hot mouth sucking away any restraint, and he cried out, long and low, emptying himself in that wet cavern and trembling, tiptoe against ecstasy. His head spun in circles and heard himself dimly, still moaning.

Wet warmth in his mouth, the taste corresponding to the smell before; James was surprised by the intimacy of it all. He could keenly feel every single pulse; every bitten back gasp seemed to rumble all through Jack and quiver against his tongue. He remained like that for a while, contemplating it,
then withdrew gently before crawling up with a shy smile. "Better?"

Jack's eyes opened dazedly and he smiled, throwing both arms around James and pulling him up for a kiss, tasting himself and James at once. "That was wonderful. Thank you."

His voice had a choked sound to it, his smile shuddering on the very edge of emotions he didn't dare to name. He only knew he felt boneless, grateful and more vulnerable than he'd been in years, and yet, there was no fear in it. The green eyes chased away any kind of fear. He swallowed hard and kissed James again, his vision blurring as he hid his face against the sunbrown neck and his breath slowed.

James grinned lazily, ridiculously proud. That it was an act of depravity he once had thought beneath him did not matter, not when he saw how speechless it had left even Jack. He bent down for another kiss. "You set an excellent example."

Jack blinked at him, his eyes suspiciously liquid. "Me? Now that's an impossibility! I'm not known fer bein' any kind of example, luv."

There were many words written for what he wanted to say, but he'd feel a complete fool speaking them aloud. Instead, he kissed James, convinced that fate had enveloped them in some safe cocoon of blackest velvet and emerald stars. His hand travelled down along the hard muscles of James' abdomen, so much firmer than the first time he'd touched them. "You've changed so. I hardly remember wot ya were like before," he smiled.

"Have I changed, or just your view of me?" Certainly, James' view of Jack had, first to that of a friend, now to something he could not quite define. His own appearance had changed, his demeanour adapted to the men he was forced to spend his time with, but the man he was had become no different. He still longed for home, to return to being the Commodore who protected others from such men as Hamilton.

Jack grinned. "Rose-coloured spectacles, eh? Maybe so, but 'tis a damned sight more pleasant than swords or the noose, aye?" His fingers teased, watching the browned face flush ruddy copper, his eyes dancing again. It really was impossible for Jack to remain serious for more than a child's minute. He kissed his way along James' shoulder, inhaling sweet oil and the warm smell of the man himself.

The noose. James had hardly thought of it, had not wanted to. The thought of hanging a man he now considered a friend made him shudder, made him wonder how many of those he called friends aboard the Chimaera would deserve the fate. He thought of Bertie with a noose around his neck, of little Matthew, perhaps in five years; of a hempen rope around the neck he was just kissing. Thought of his own actions that by law dubbed him a pirate. He shuddered again, and hid his face.

Jack held him tight, divining the reason for the trembling and held his tongue. His fingers stroked through the unruly gold-kissed hair and he wondered. What must it be like for James to see so much after his ordered, careful life? How hard would it go with any man to realise just how close that rope could come to his own neck, with nothing more than a twist of fate? He shook away the thoughts and concentrated on skin. Even with his face buried in the hollow of the brown throat, James could feel him smile.

"Don't you go gettin' all serious here. We've a lovely room all to our onesies an' it'd be a damned shame t'waste it." He wriggled down a little further to nip at one pink nipple.

James gasped and flinched, shuddering with a low moan of pleasure. "Why do I believe you would consider anything but further depravities a waste of these fine accommodations?"
He stared into the distance a little while longer, then looked down and managed a longsuffering smile that turned honest before he knew it. "And you feel the need to comment on my recuperative abilities?"

Jack took hold of James' prick and encouraged a few more good shudders to chase away the bad. "Never did tell you how much," he kissed lower, his tongue dipping into James' navel, "I love the taste of you." His laugh puffed a little gust through the dark curls.

"Which is because even you likely do not enjoy the taste of a body three months unwashed?" James arched an eyebrow, and his whole forehead drew tight as warm breath teased delicately. "Of course," he amended with hooded eyes, dark and dilated, "you are free to contradict me by demonstration."

"That which we call a rose, mate!" Jack's lips closed around the tip and he sucked gently, his tongue teasing around it, pausing at a pulse point where he could feel the blood pounding; the ridge of a vein, then back up again. "Want you, Jamie." He growled, sliding half-off the bed to reach for his coat and tumbling to the floor. He laughed and crawled to where it lay crumpled, until he found a small vial of oil in an opalescent glass container, lifted neatly from one of the market stalls earlier. He tossed it with a wink.

James caught it with one hand, held the little flask up for a moment and smiled at it. "Do I even want to know where you got this?" He slicked himself and settled back on one elbow, crooking one finger that gleamed with oil and lantern light, beckoning.

Jack's head poked up from the foot of the bed and he tickled James' toes before creeping up the length of his legs to lie atop him, his hips wriggling, their pricks waging a somewhat confined duel between them. Kisses that laughed and passion with a joke; that was pure Sparrow. He enjoyed everything with complete abandon and James most of all. His black eyes were glittery as his straddled his prey.

James looked up and laughed softly, restrained. Never would he have thought of Jack as light, but compared to the girl, he was, even if his black hair was just as dark, just as long, his eyes even darker.

James lifted his arms, still pale against that golden skin, to hold Jack's hips steady, to thrust up into him, but after the barest of touches, he dropped them back to the sheets, then lifted them again to stroke lightly along one quivering thigh.

Jack moved in counterpoint, his head thrown back, lips curved into smile. His hand wandered over James' chest and belly, tracing the muscles that bunched and flexed, soft little sounds torn from deep in his throat. Slowly, he unfolded his legs to stretch them out on either side of James' shoulders, bracing himself on his arms, knees crooked as they moved. His eyes opened wide at the angle's shift, his cry low and keening.

Again James was sweating, salt water collecting at his hairline and slipping down, but this time, his eyes were open, staring and wide. He bit his lip and arched from the mattress once, then again, slowly finding a rhythm. Just as slowly, his hand eased up Jack's thigh, slipping inward until he had a hold of the hardening prick.

Jack started at the touch, his whole body twitching and he breathed out a soft little sigh, his hair falling back to tickle James' knees. He rocked, picking up speed, pulling his legs back down, his hands planted on James' shoulders. His face was flushed dark red, the gold teeth winking in the lamplight. "Want you. Want you now."
James' second hand came up to steady Jack's hips and he surged up harder, gasping out a harsh cry. His palms pressed into the firm muscles, body arcing up, meeting Jack's rhythm, speeding up. His breathing hitched, a gasp caught on the next, and he froze mid-thrust for a second; then dropped back on the sheets with a stifled cry.

Jack's head whirled, all thought swallowed in sensation, the smell of James tangled with sweat, clean skin and the musk of his own body, the intensity of the throb inside of him. Most of all, he was mesmerised by James' face, tension quivering in the strong jaw, the light in his eyes flaring like twin beacons, then ebbing away as they closed. Sticky heat glued them together and ran slow rivulets to puddle on the sheet beneath James. "Much better than th' hammock, luv. Not quite so risky," he laughed.

"I still feel quite dizzy," James chuckled, pulling Jack down for a languid kiss. "It might be caused by watching you and your trinkets sway above me." He lay still for a moment, then rolled out from under Jack to find the washstand. He brandished the wet towel. "Much better than salt water. Not quite so smelly."

"Damn me, yes! Don't tickle, ya bastard!" Jack giggled as the towel flicked over his ribs. He rolled over at a push and waggled his arse as James attempted to wash it. "Here, gimme that." He took the wet towel and ran it over James' chest and groin with sure fingers. "I must admit, 'tis a real blessin' t'get clean. Never can understand why they don't stock in a bit more water. Healthier, too. They're all mad about it in China. Baths ev'ry day, if ya can believe it. I even heard tell that in th' Japans, they've got entire rooms fer 'em." He wiped the sweat from James' hairline. "Better?"

"Much better. Considering how we must have smelled, it is little wonder that Hamilton did not dare lock us up this time. The cabin would have been contaminated." James grinned and, with a sigh, buried his head in the clean linen of the bedclothes. "Don't laugh." His voice was muffled. "This is one of the things I miss the most. A basin with clean water and fresh bedclothes."

"That's why I try t'keep the Pearl's water supply half-doubled, mate. Don't cost more n' a bit of room in the hold and I don't care who calls me mad." He began to chuckle. "You shoulda been there when we all decided that Gibbs needed a good dunkin'. Took nearly half a barrel to make him smell a bit more like a man than a pig!

"I doubt the fresh water is the reason everyone calls you mad, Jack." James sighed and rolled onto his side. "My first captain would always insist everyone was washed behind the ears, and that their right hands were clean. The smell didn't matter, only that all Midshipmen had to be capable of a 'clean salute', as he put it."

Jack chortled into the pillow. "Typical Navy! Always th' appearance that counts. Ah well, long voyage like this, wot can ya do? 'Tis different when you can just pop over t'one o' them little islands and fill up the barrels in a day." He settled on one elbow, playing with James' hair. "So you did get out here at some point in yer Navy career. Y'mentioned once. Where'd ya land?"

"And if a hidden rum supply just happens to be stored upon such an island, all the better, I take it?" James, in turn, was lying completely still, contemplating some spot in the darkness, a half-smile on his face, green eyes gleaming. "Ten years ago. The last journey before I was transferred to the Dauntless." He laughed softly. "The other Lieutenants were all senior to me, so I did not get any shoreleave in Africa that time, either. I had the watch. Then, Goa... not much to see, and the Portuguese taste in women did not quite match mine, quaintly put."

"Too plump and if ya wanted 'em with moustaches, ye'd rather they had the bits t'match, aye?" Jack teased and punched his shoulder. He bounded to his feet and pulled the flask from his boot. "Here, luv. I filled it up afore we left. Rum's a bit hard t'come by unless yer Navy hereabouts." He lay back
down, watching James with a smile. He looked so different from the brocaded toff with the poker up his arse, gazing into the darkness with cat's eyes and a grin that begged for another kiss. Jack waited until he'd taken a drink to claim it.

"Was it that which led to your brush with the East India Trading Company? The lack of rum?" James' words were continuously interrupted, Jack nibbling at his lips and stopping him just when he had spoken a single syllable. "Just how did you convince them to brand you on the arm rather than the forehead?"

The gilded grin widened. "Never noticed, didja?" He pulled off the headscarf and reached over to grab the lamp from the table, holding it close to his face. There was a long, thin scar, white with age, running from under his hairline across his forehead, just shy of his right brow. "When they caught me, I'd taken a sabre slice. It were a right mess, so I kept openin' it up while coolin' me heels in their little gaol. Made the buggers feel sorry fer me, I guess. Or they figured it wouldn't be such a great punishment on top of a big scar." He giggled another kiss against James' ear and took a swig. "Lack o' rum! Now that's hell, mate!"

"Keep it to yourself, then. I would not put you through hell." Jack grinned into another rum-flavoured kiss, calloused fingertips lightly tracing the scar. "You were lucky," he murmured. "But then, are you ever not, in the long run? One could believe you are cursed yourself."

Jack considered that over another swallow. "Dunno, rightly. Sometimes, I ain't lucky at all so I guess it all squares in the end, don't it?" He made an odd gesture with his fingers, index and pinky thrust out from a fist. "Worst thing as ever happened t'me. That were losin' the Pearl. Wasn't sure I'd ever get through it." He paused over the flask, dark eyes thoughtful. "Y'know, I'd heard tell of a curse, but there's always stories about such things. I never really believed it until I saw it m'self. Guess it were lucky, cos I'da been cursed right along with 'em all, wouldn't I?" He shook his head and laughed softly.

"And you got her back." James shivered. "What was it like, to be one of them? Do you rightly remember?" He looked up, eyes wary and somehow fearful. "Sometimes, I still hope it was merely a nightmare."

Jack gnawed on his lip. "Chilly," he said after a moment. "But that coulda been the cave. 'Twas awful damp an' cold in there." He shrugged. "I were too busy tradin' blades with old Hector t'pay much mind. Musta been awful for 'em. Ten years without a drink or a good shag? A fine meal or a warm bed? Can't say as I'd like that at all. I mean, wot th' hell good is life if ya can't enjoy it? Those heathens sure knew how t'curse a body proper!"

"Do you really believe in them? Curses?" Without a doubt, James remembered his sword clanking against bones and tendons, sinking again and again into the same body without effect, had sometimes seen it again at night. But his mind was still at war with it. He was not insane, he did not have hallucinations. "Was it real?"

Jack thought about that for a moment, playing with his pet curl and frowning. "I'd hafta say yes t'that. It was as real as you and me lyin' here when I ran me cutlass through the bastard." Jack's face darkened a little. "He stood there, pulled it out and stuck it inta me gizzard. Knocked the breath outta me and I knew it shoulda hurt. It shoulda killed me dead right there. Strange, lookin' at me own hand in the moonlight."

Jack examined his fingers, remembering the white bones and the clicking, grinding sound as they flexed. "Y'know Jamie, I've seen some damned strange things in my time. Things that shouldn't be, right in front o' me face. Can I do less than trust my own eyes?" Those eyes were guileless, half-truths buried in their depths.
"I know I would rather not have trusted mine." There was enough evil without heathen curses, without death itself turning against men. James shuddered and took one of Jack's braids, turning it thoughtfully between his fingers. "Do you have one as memento for...that day?"

Jack grinned at him, his eyes sliding sideways. He reached up without glancing to lift a newer braid, one he'd done himself the first night back on the Pearl, the end bobbing with a tiny carved skull bead and a small pearl, both so dark they blended almost invisibly into his mane. "Can't ya guess. It weren't there last time I saw ya. I mean, before all this."

"So this," James turned the braid, watching the pearl reflect the lantern light, that light then swallowed by hair, "This for that day in Port Royal, and then, aboard the Pearl." He was lying on his side now, the look in his eyes distant. "Do you keep any more mementos of that venture?"

"Didn't need to, luv. Best memento of all is the one thing I wanted: my Pearl. With her decks 'neath my feet, I need nothin' more." Jack's eyes had softened. When he spoke of her, it was the way most men spoke of a sweetheart. "I supposed I'll hafta find somethin' fer this little venture, won't I?" He lay down into the curve of James' body, his hand gentle against one hip. "Tho' I don't really need one now."

"Jack Sparrow, you will not braid me into your hair." James slipped an arm around Jack's shoulder and curled closer, as though to make sure himself the body next to him was not yet a memory.

Jack huffed a laugh against his chest. "Now that would be a sight, wouldn't it?" He rested there, content for a moment, then looked up at the lines drawn between James' dark brows. "Jamie? Wot's wrong? Yer lookin' peaky on me." He automatically reached for the flask to hand it over.

James declined it with a little smile and a headshake. "Nothing. I am merely beginning to wonder that if now I miss home, in Port Royal I might miss this."

Jack smiled into the neck of the flask. "Luv, I'm countin' on it. Hell, I'm gonna spend the whole bloody voyage back dreamin' up excuses t'sneak back to Port Royal so I can surprise ya." He wondered what they might find upon returning and kept those thoughts to himself. There was always the chance that Gibbs and Ana had disappeared with the Pearl. Or, God forbid, lost her. He'd spent a decade searching for her and would do it again if need be, but that didn't mean he relished the idea.

Would James find Port Royal the same home he'd left? Jack had his doubts, but there was no sense distressing him just as escape became possible. They'd cross those bridges when the seas were turquoise and the sun beat on the decks like a summer's day.

"Will you?" James blurted out. He had never imagined taking a part of this with him, certainly not in the shape of a pirate. Dangerous, to even think it, let alone want it. Sense returned on the heels of hope. "You can't, Jack. It will be too dangerous. After all that has happened, I do not want your blood on my hands, directly or indirectly."

Jack's lip lifted in his trademark grin. "Mate, I'm Captain Jack Sparrow, remember?" Do ya think I'd jus' laugh and wave 'ta on the dock?"

It was as close as Jack would come to another ridiculous confession. He still danced around his feelings, pushing them into a corner of his mind, but they did have a most troublesome way of popping out all over, like measles.

He leaned over to kiss James. "Couldn't do that, luv. We'll jus' figger it out when we get back, but I'm not gonna sail off inta th' sunset and say, 'So long, been nice, dear.'"
James kissed back without hesitation, blinking. Had Jack, the weasely pirate, just told him he'd come back for him? Disregarding all risk and, while not sanity, the savvy he certainly possessed?

Was it possible to take this back into his life as Commodore, as the one obliged to hunt and hang Jack? It seemed hypocritical to enjoy it even now, but he did, and that was honest.

He pulled at Jack's neck until he received another kiss, then settled back into the pillows, his eyes curious. "Tell me more about matelots, Jack."

Jack raised an eyebrow and curled himself next to James. "Matelots?" He whistled softly. "The word's French--aye, those depraved fruggies again." He grinned. "'Tis very like a marriage. Yer mates in ev'rythin'. Ya share ev'rythin'. Know of one pair m'self who shared two wives and a coupla mistresses an' when one of 'em died, the other inherited ev'rythin'. Course, then it was his responsibility t'ake care of the ladies an' their dozen or so kiddies. Poor bastard!"

He tugged at his lovelock thoughtfully. "They say it started long ago, when the Frenchies settled in the Caribe. I dunno, really. But that's wot it is."

"But how can it be compared to a marriage? How can two men, in front of anyone, try to act as...as husband and wife?" James blinked again, forcing himself to seriously consider a concept all his upbringing told him to deplore. "Is it not merely an arrangement shipboard? Does it not stop the moment they set foot ashore?"

Jack nibbled at the end of his hair and tried to choose his words with care. "Well, the French got very sensible notions about marriage, luv. They think of it as business, like two companies mergin'. An' their laws, at least in the Caribbean, treat matelots the same way. 'Tisn't just about the people: 'tis the property. I guess it's because most Frenchwomen are the sharpest managers in the bloody world. I swear, James, y'ever met a French gal who couldn't stretch a sou till it breaks? Maybe the menfolk didn't trust 'em. Wotever the cause, by willin' things to his mate, a man can be sure all his kids are provided fer without jealous women playing favourites, and his property will be distributed fairly."

"And," James swallowed hard, studied his fingers briefly, then looked up again, "the carnal aspect? That is not about children, not about property. The French, depraved as they may be, believe in the Lord and His Book. How can they accept...this?" He sounded like Matthew asking why a ship floated.

"Y'mean fuckin' each other?" Jack shrugged in a most French manner. "That goes without sayin'. Part o' the deal. Very practical folks, the frogs. They don't see any point in tryin' to improve human nature."

He grinned. "Guess they figger if God wants t'change things, He'll let 'em know."

James huffed out an exasperated breath and shook his head. "Aboard the Chimaera, when I said we were mates, they... respected that. Respected it more than anything else I could have said. How can the term matelot make this sin more respectable? Why did they acknowledge it as a right, rather than something that should not happen at all?"

"Because, James, they're pirates." Jack said it simply, but the gleam in his eyes told a different story; it said quite clearly, 'we don't play by your rules.' "And who's t'say which is a worse sin; backsidin' yer mate because you cherish him, or screwin' yer fellow man? I'm no cleric. I dunno."

James' eyes were still foggy and confused and Jack sighed. He sat up, his head cocked to one side. If he owed James anything, it was at least an explanation. "James, we got our own ways of doin'
things. All of us, we're just gallows-fodder to the rest of the world. So we take care of our own. Sin
don't mean much t'most men and that's a fact. Oh, certainly, you'll find Deacons aboard any ship at
sea, even a pirate ship. But did ya know that, accordin' to th' Code, if ya lose an eye, a leg or an arm,
you get a certain amount o' coin to compensate ya? We aren't bound by the laws that keep fine folk
in order so we make our own. Matelots is one of 'em. We know it happens shipboard an' see no
reason why it shouldn't be treated fair."

James did not answer for a while, just stared into the distance, into his own memories. Of the first
two men he'd watched hang for sodomy, then and there, hung from the yardarm after enduring more
spite than a tar who'd beaten a boy senseless for a piece of bread.

It was supposed to make sense why one warranted barely a dozen lashes and the other death. Was
that the freedom of which Jack spoke? Not simply freedom from responsibility, but the choice to pick
one's own responsibility. Many were not up to the challenge, but maybe, some were.

He had seen it aboard the Chimaera, the camaraderie. How they all worried about young Matthew.
Were they pirates, in the way he'd always used the word? They were. They plundered and stole, but
at the same time, there was more to them. If nothing else, Jack and his own time aboard had forced
him to admit that. He bit his lip and did not even notice as the silence between them stretched.

Jack's eyes were soft in the lamplight. "I know wot yer thinkin'. How can we be wot we are an' still
be good men?" Jack smiled. "It don't take a giant leap t'understand, luv. We're not monsters. Not
all of us. Not even most of us. We're jus' men, survivin'."

Jack wrapped his arms around his knees and stole a look a James under his lashes. "Most men turn
pirate outta need. Needin' t'eat, needin' to provide fer a family, needin' adventure or just needin' to
survive. Some were privateers who got themselves caught up in politics, like Kidd. Some have
t'choose between dyin' or the Articles." He grinned broadly. "That's how it happened t'me."

James swallowed hard. "You? When? But," he sat up with a start, nearly throwing off the
bedclothes, "how can you possibly call it freedom then?"

Jack laughed. "I were nine, somewheres off the coast of Africa. But it really don't count with me
because pirate's in me blood from way back. An' y'know, it is freedom, Jamie. Not the kind ya
salute an' pay lip service to, but the kind that sneaks up behind ya and bashes you on the head.
When ya wake up, it hits ya: yer free. Y'don't answer to no one; not even the captain, 'cause you
can vote him out. No master workin' yer fingers t'he bone and givin' ya the lash because he's got a
bit of a head one morn. No watchin' yer kiddies starve so some fat-arsed rich man, landowner or
king, can squeeze those extra shillin's outta yer hide."

His eyes grew tar-black and bright. "No borders, no laws save those we agree on, an' no ropes fer a
poor bastard who steals more n' sixpence t'feed himself." Jack laughed at his own words.
"Sometimes, it's just fate, but it's a damned fine one."

James was silent for a while, his voice strangely and misleadingly light when he eventually spoke.
"And who pays for that freedom? Doesn't it just make other men freeze or fear for their starving
children? Doesn't it just make others miss their fathers?" In that moment, James looked so old, older
than he ever had in full regalia. He shook his head. "That isn't freedom to me."

Jack's smile became sly. "Jamie, don't be so bloody naive. D'ya really think we could do business
without the help of many a town an' their people? We offer fair barter and fair exchange. They get
their goods without the King's bleedin' taxes and we make a profit fer our risk. Y'ee, mate, in a
pirate crew, every man has a voice an' a share. Nothin' is one man's province. Oh, there'll always be
those like Barbossa, greedy fer power an' slaughter, but they don't last long because we couldn't
operate if we didn't have no one t'sell th' goods to, could we? Who d'ya think buys 'em? Damn, do you not know the black market trade as happens right in Port Royal?"

James stood up and went to the lone window of the room, leaning against it heavily. "They may not last long, but too long. Your former crew sowed fear and death for ten years. Ten years, Jack. How much blood flowed then? And for what? For greed alone." With a start, he turned around. "I may see only what I choose to see, but you pretend to be just as blind."

Jack lounged back, sipping from his flask. "Well, luv, you really can't count them as they were undead and no man can know wot t'do against that, aye? Besides, they were searchin' fer all those coins t'break the curse." He took another swallow and tugged at his lip. "Y'ever hear of a fella named John Locke? He wrote some damned interestin' things, all about government being only valid by consent of the people. Died some fifteen years back but he had some fine thoughts. Why d'ya think black markets exist, James? Because most people pay those taxes and see nothin' in return but slavery. Some day, luv, the Kings of this world won't be so damned secure on their thrones. No chair can make a man a king."

"You are making it too easy. Piracy is not the people-constituted nobility you claim it to be. Go into a port raided by pirates, and there, tell the mother of a dead son that they only wished to trade. Tell it to her raped daughter." James' eyes were wide, alight with every reason why he had sworn to hunt pirates. "For this manner of pirates to be an exception, I have had to see it far too often."

He took a sharp breath and shook his head. "Thomas Hobbes had a name for humans doing such a thing. He called them wolves, but they do not even have respect for their own pack. It is not themselves who die for their greed, and as long as they have their comfort, their freedom, they do not care. Because they cannot live by the rules, they take from everyone else."

He bit his lip with a sigh. "Freedom comes at a price, Jack. This price is too high. And that is what I have sworn to do: see that nobody is forced to pay it for another. That is what the Navy does, because else, any of us would prey on the other until there is nothing left but blood."

Jack's eyes twinkled. "Didn't Hobbes also say that life was 'nasty, brutish and short', and that believin' in anything ya can't see was the act of a fool?" He laughed softly. "We both seen some strange things no one'd believe, luv. I dunno. Maybe it's because piracy is just a reflection o' the governments that make it possible. They do the same things an' call it 'conquest' or 'exploration' and plunder whole countries 'stead o' ships."

He stretched out and gazed at James with a half-smile. "I'm not sayin' it's all noble. It's all business. That's all any of it really is: just business, an' that's a fancy system fer survivin'. There was somethin' Mr. Locke wrote I think you would like. He argued that kings got no divine rights and--oh, wot was it? 'Lest men fall into the dangerous belief that all government in the world is merely the product of force and violence.' I rather like that."

Jack swallowed more rum and thought for a moment. "Besides, I sacked Nassau an' never fired a shot. Can be done. But it's all life and men bein' men, there's always gonna be bloodshed somewhere." He shrugged. "Human nature, I suppose."

"Oh yes, and it is human nature to die, so why do pirates complain about the noose?" James' lips curled into a sneer. "Why would any citizen mind being killed by a pirate defending the noble ideas of John Locke, despite the fact that said pirate never even heard of him in the first place."

Jack chuckled and held out the flask to James. "Never said most did. My copy was still on the Pearl after all those years. Figgers. Barbossa couldn't suss philosophy outta his arse with a standin' pump." He snorted derisively. "Besides, most times a raid goes bad 'tis because some bloody arse in
"Of course! It is the fault of the Navy for defending people and property! Had they not defended the port and instead handed over all valuables, never a drop of blood or a maidenhead would have been taken. You conveniently forget that your precious Mr. Locke also proclaimed life and property as rights, not just freedom," James snarled, voice full of derision, gripping the windowsill tight.

He fell silent for a while, took the few steps towards the bed and sat down. After another minute, he stretched out, arms folded behind his head, staring up. "I concede your point that there are different manners of piracy which are not given enough regard in the face of the law." His voice was soft. "But there need to be laws. Else it is all just bloodshed."

"And the Navy's never sacked a town or taken a maidenhead, has it?" Jack eyes were dark, the shadow of a smile lingering on his lips. "Tell that to the local tribes anywhere in the new world, mate. Ahh, the hell with it. Wot say you we have an accord. You'll not spout Navy horseshit at me, and I'll not bore you with philosophical blather. Aye, luv?"

James jerkily shook his head, the following silence enough answer. "Is it so wrong to wish to fight this dreadfulness?" he asked, pulling the blanket tight around himself, suddenly far too tired.

Jack wound his arms around the tense body and stole a kiss. "Not at all, James. Just a bit like tiltin' at windmills. An' I'd much rather tilt at you."

"But the windmills are more important." James chuckled softly, just a little forced, then he arched an eyebrow. "Not to mention that attempting to satisfy you is even more like tilting at windmills."

"Can't help it. Yer too much temptation fer this pirate." Jack's arms tightened. "I'm sorry, Jamie. Didn't mean t'go off on such a tear. Don't pay any attention when I start blabberin' like that."

James looked up, his face strangely serene now, like the sea after a raging storm. "The worst is that there are some reasonable words among that blather. And I have to sift them out."

Jack did a curious thing: he ran the back of his hand down James' cheek very gently. "Kinda like a woman's burblin'. Sometimes it makes sense but it goes sideways, like a crab walkin'." His fingers rested against one cheekbone. "I know this hasn't been easy fer you, luv. We'll get home. I promised ya that and I meant it."

"Yes, mother." Whatever his thoughts, James seemed to have stowed them away for now, memorised for later, when he could think of right and wrong, of pirates and Navymen - and of freedom - as a free man once more. "I don't know why, but I trust you on that. Bloody pirate," he muttered.

"But I'm your bloody pirate an' you don't seem t'mind ole Jack too much." He stroked James' hair, soft now and clean, shot through with gold that glimmered in the light. Jack thought he could die and only see one sight more lovely, and that was his Pearl.

"When you are not smelling of bilges and dead fish, I don't. Much." He sounded playful enough, only a little subdued by thoughts that would not quite let go, tugging stubbornly at his shaky smile.

"Jamie?" Jack's eyes were soft as the night sky. "It isn't possible t'solve the problems of this world. Just gives ya a headache. And I'm glad you approve of me a little. If I've bathed," he laughed.

"You give me a headache often enough, and I doubt that solves any problems." James laughed softly and rolled over, draping an arm around him.
Jack curled into his arms more than willingly, glad to be free of the philosophical cloud. He reckoned that Locke and Hobbes could argue with Aristotle and leave him and Jamie to enjoy life. Plenty of time for that sort of talk after one was dead.

And, since neither of them was dead, they used their time to more enjoyable purposes into the wee hours of morning, leaving them but a brief period of rest before they had to return to the Chimaera.

Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Fourteen
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--PG-13.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

A plot is hatched amid more adventures in Bombay and a left turn of Fate.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtfhw for her excellent beta.
The first light of dawn teased into their room, throwing it into a strangely calm and cool grey, rays of light bouncing back from the embroidered pillows. With a grunt, James rolled over, and prodded Jack, who lay draped over a good part of bed and commodore, yet still succeeded in having both feet dangling in the air. "Up, starfish."

Jack pretended to snore into the pillow, reluctant to leave the comfort of the bed. Suddenly, he pounced atop James and tickled him. "Starfish! I prefer t'think of meself as a giant squid!" He stopped to steal a kiss. "Mornin' luv. Yer right, let's get going."

'Going' for Jack entailed a lot of laughter, a pillow-fight and swatting each other with towels as they washed. Matthew heard the fun and burst through the door to join them with Bertie still rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

While Jack was still making a show of getting into his breeches, jumping on one leg and wriggling his backside into the fabric, James attempted to groom Matthew's hair into some semblance of order. He gave up and shook his head at both of them. "Let's go."

Jack put out his tongue and they threaded their way through the market stalls, pausing to buy some of the local flat bread, still hot from the oven, and munching it on their way.

The Chimaera was already a hive of activity when Jack swatted Matthew up the gang, a local shipwright and his crew high on the mainmast, fitting and measuring and yelling to one another in their foreign babble. The watch crew from the previous day were twitching with anticipation of leave, eager to enjoy their time. Jack stopped on deck to whisper to Griffin and squawked a hello to the workmen, sashaying his way to where Longthorpe and Hamilton stood on the quarterdeck.

"Cap'n. Mr. Longthorpe. We're back. Wot ya want us t'do?"

James followed in silence and only spared Griffin a glare as he stalked past him.

Hamilton raised an eyebrow as Longthorpe answered. "You, Spanish get t' the Great Cabin. Captain wants a course charted back around the Cape. Norbury, go help the crew with th' new bowsprit."
Take Matthew with you. Berthot, get below an' help Gentile. G'wan, you lot. Get movin'."

Jack blew James a little kiss and headed down the stairs reluctantly. It was a beautiful day and he really did not relish being stuck in the cabin.

There was a commotion on the gang and a loud voice bellowed, "Get out of my way, you scum!"

Jack glanced over his shoulder and took a breath, slipping beneath the quarterdeck's stairs to peer at the fine-dressed gentleman who strode aboard, swinging his molucca cane amid the departing tars like a fly-swatter.

Well, well, more old birds come back to roost. Jack grinned. Sir John Merriweather Gainsell himself, as he lived and breathed! The very bastard who'd sold him out to the bloody East India Company five years earlier. That would bear some thought. Jack heard his heels clatter up the stairs and raced into the Great Cabin to settle himself at the table, tying his hair into his headscarf and keeping his head low over the chart.

Matthew tugged James towards the bow, squealing in excitement when he got a knife to help cut away the draggled remainders of netting and rigging before they could fit the new bowsprit into place.

It was an arduous and longsome task that occupied them until well past noon. The sun already glared down and the smell of fish had intensified to almost unbearable levels when they finally began to rig the new jib.

Jack took the opportunity of the general bustle to slip down to listen at the door of the Captain's cabin. Gainsell was talking loud enough to drown a brass band, discussing the worth of the ivory they had plundered from the Spanish ship. He grinned and hoped they'd enjoy the sherry as he went back to his chart.

Late in the afternoon, he stretched his legs, and scratched the last mark on the page, tossing the quill aside. Two good charts in record time had worked up a powerful thirst and he headed down to his cask for a refill. The brig hold was crammed with even more crates of shot than it had been before docking. Curious, he took a peek at the orlop deck, where one of the crates of ivory had been pried open, a huge tusk gleaming in the lanternlight. His smile was broad as he toasted a new plan on his way topside.

He found James leaning against the bow rail, wiping the sweat from his face. "Hello luv. Now that is just lovely!" He admired the new bowsprit and rigging.

"It is called a bowsprit, Jack."

"Aye, a most fine bowsprit, 'nd I'm sure 'tis giving yer Spanish friend some finer ideas!"

James rolled his eyes at Jackson. "He does not need further encouragement." His sleeves were rolled up, sweat gluing his shirt to his chest. "We were lucky it did not take any of the bow rail with it when it broke, so it was easy enough to replace. If one discounts helpers who cannot keep starboard from larboard."

Matthew blushed and pouted at once. "I were sitting on that damn thing the other way 'round as ye lowered it!"

Jack laughed and clapped Matthew's small shoulder. "Don't you worry none, lad. Ye'll figger it out when yer compass has got used t'Bombay. Hey Jamie, let's see jus' how sound it is." He shimmied out as far as he dared and sat astride, legs dangling over the water.
James chuckled and climbed after him. "Do you think we constructed a toothpick here?" He sat behind Jack, the ship tilting in the gentle wavelets of the dock, rocking them. "I must say, you make a fine figurehead."

"Jamie, we're havin' such good luck." Jack made that odd gesture with his fingers and knocked on the bowsprit just to be sure he didn't chase the fair fortune off, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Hamilton's sellin' the ivory and I've a mind t'get it back. Tell ya later. An' I plotted him a return course that'd take him square inta the middle o' Madagascar, just fer fun. Stashed the real one below."

Bertie laughed at them from the rail. "Wot you lovebirds on about, eh? Get back here. Cookie's got grub but Cap'n says we can go back inta town after watch."

Jack raised an eyebrow at the waves. It seemed as though most of the crew were being allowed to run riot all over the port, only the workmen and a few carefully chosen men staying with the Chimaera; a sure sign that Hamilton was up to something. He crowed, "C'mon," and whispered to James, "I'll force it down but there'll be a treat fer supper."

James laughed and gave a shove, tumbling them both down into the netting. "We can always claim our stomachs are tender from the local food if he questions our lack of appetite." They climbed out and made for the galley.

Cookie was grumbling about the stink of 'foreign food' and dished out something that looked like it had once belonged in a cow's gut. Manfully, Jack took a bite and turned a trifle green, picking his way through it with difficulty. There was, however, fresh-baked bread that was surprisingly delicious.

"Who knew he could bake?" he hissed into James' ear. The grog was stronger than usual and Jack grinned. "Seems like someone got hold of a new rum supply." Aye, indeed an' I've a good idea the Navy's out a few hogsheads, he thought with a smile.

"Are you perchance jealous of said rum?" James teased. After their delicious meal the day before, even he had difficulty forcing down what Cookie called a stew, not to mention that the smaller watch crew meant that there was more for each of them.

Once they had finished, James had remedied his conviction that there was no worse stench than that of the fish market.

Jack chattered with them like a parrot until Longthorpe chased them back to work and he spent the remainder of the watch drawing obscene caricatures of his shipmates all over a good sheet of paper, then stuffed it into his pocket for laughs later. The sun was just setting when he was shooed topside and he dragged James down the gang.

"God, I need a decent meal. Thought I'd heave it all up again. But who knew Cooks could bake so lovely!" He ribbed Bertie about Farhad's and gave him the promised warning about the pox, teased Matthew about not knowing which side of a ship was which, and was clearly in high spirits. They drifted aimlessly along the streets, then, suddenly, he was gone.

James froze, turned and scanned the crowd. No sign of dark hair under a red headscarf. "Bertie, where is Jack?" Bertie shook his head helplessly.

James bit back a curse. "Very well. Take Matthew back to the inn and wait there. I will check by the dock." At their third crossing, he had begun to memorise at least some alleys, different markets, and where he did not, a general account of the cardinal points helped. What he did not find was Jack,
and each of his glances around the area became more frantic.

He was about to retrace his steps once more when Jack fell into step beside him. "Sorry, luv. Had t'see a man 'bout a dog. Where'd Bert and Mattie go?"

"Back to the inn. You were gone all of a sudden. I was wo-wondered where you had gone."

Jack just grinned at him and whistled a scrap of a tune, throwing an arm around James' waist and heading them towards the inn.

James sighed and shook his head. "I recall you wishing to tell me something about ivory and an insanely clever plan of yours."

Jack's smile widened, his ever-watchful gaze taking in the crowd around them. "All that lovely ivory. 'Twould be a pity t'lose it to that toff Hamilton spent all mornin' jawin' with."

James cocked his head in a way far too similar to Jack's and arched one eyebrow. "You intend to steal it back? Piracy biting its own tail?"

"Why not? Plunder is plunder. I know Sir John a mite better than I'd like to and he's a nasty piece o' work, courtesy of the East India Company. He cheats 'em and his suppliers regularly. Let's jus' say I got a bit o' payback in mind." Jack's dark eyes were dancing with mischief.

James tapped his fingers lightly over Jack's wrist, the brand hidden beneath the shirt. "Do not allow this to become personal."

"Business, mate. We get the goods and the profit. I'm gonna need the money if I'm recruitin', aye? Now, let's find somethin' to wipe away the memory of that mess in the galley. Yesterday? That food were more Arab. You gotta try the local grub. It's heaven." Jack was irrepressible, singing the chorus of a very obscene shanty and dragging James from one stall to another as they neared the end of the marketplace.

James sighed. "After that stew, I am willing to try anything." They returned to the inn to find Bertie and Matthew. More correctly, Matthew found them, launching himself into Jack's arms with a giggle.

"So wot now, barnacle? Ready fer a decent meal?" He gave James respite from carrying the boy as they wandered to a new place and settled down on the cushions for a different meal.

They were all braver than the day before, brutally reminded of how their usual shipboard meals compared. The food looked and smelled just as strange, but its taste was delicious. To James it seemed another of the mysteries of this port, foreign and dangerous at first only to reveal its treasure after thorough exploration.

He was hungry but tasted every bite carefully, as if to commit it to memory, trying to compare it to a familiar meal and falling short.

Jack entertained them with explanations of the various dishes as they ate; how the yellow dish was a curry of lentils and vegetables and the spicy-hot red one was called vindaloo; how the bread was slapped on the side of a big clay oven to bake and a thousand other interesting bits of information.

He'd also managed to find a full bottle of rum to wash down the meal, and laughed as Matthew made a piglet of himself with the sticky-sweet balls of cheese in syrup that served as dessert.

Their stomachs full, he flipped a few coins to the young proprietor and James could not help but notice the glint of gold in his palm as he pocketed the rest. They walked back to the inn slowly in the darkened streets and Jack teased Bertie. "Headin' t'Farhad's again, you rake?"
"Not all of us have the fun coming t'our hammock," Bertie announced and slapped Jack's shoulders. "And there ain't no tellin' how long we're gonna take back, so I've to make th'best of time here, don't I? Try not to scandalise th'boy, awright?"

Jack snorted a response and hoisted Mattie from where he leaned against James, stupefied with an overfull belly. "C'mon, barnacle, let's get you tucked in."

Matthew blinked sleepily and it wasn't long before Jack had told him stories and sung enough songs to send him to dreamland. He tucked the covers around him and blew out the lamp, one finger to his lips. There was something in the gesture that forcibly reminded James of his mother dousing the lamps as her skirts rustled when he was a child.

Jack came back to where a lone nub of candle guttered on a low table and sprawled on the floor, handing James the bottle. "Now that was a meal." He belched, covering his mouth with a giggle.

"Shhhh." James slumped down next to him, leaning against the wall. "Have you no manners at all? Like a little babe to belch the moment it has finished eating." The rum tasted all the sweeter after the spicy meal and he tipped it back with a sigh.

"Don't ya know that a good belch after a meal is a compliment to the chef hereabouts, luv?" His dark eyes were teasing, gleaming in the half-light like an animal's.

"Typical of you to blame the local traditions," James huffed, then leaned back in lazy silence. "The boy snores," he chuckled.

"Well, I wouldn't say that, but he does make an effort!" Matthew's breathing was deep and soft, occasionally broken with a true snore. "He'll rattle a window or two one day." Jack took off his coat and bunched it under one arm as a makeshift pillow, watching the way the light glittered in James' hair and eyes and smiling absurdly.

James rolled his shoulders and stretched out. "The food was excellent, if highly unusual. My commendations. And now tell me what you truly were up to after disappearing, and where you got all that gold."

Jack leaned forward, his voice hushed. "Oh, I had a thing or two to 'sell'." He looked at James sidelong and rummaged around in his coat. When his hand emerged, James nearly spit up rum. Glittering in the light against the dark palm were diamonds, rubies, pearls; all substantial, fine-cut and each worth a fortune.

Jack thought it rather a shame that James was so serious, for his eyes were dreadfully wide and precisely the same colour as the emerald missing from the horde.

James' voice, even muffled, was harsh. "Where did you get these?"

"Found 'em in Hamilton's cabin the day he flogged you. He's been holdin' out on his crew, Jamie. And that's just wot I need to bring 'em round." He let the gems slip from one hand to the other, then laid them down on the table, watching them wink and glitter in a rainbow of colour.

James sat up and weighed a few of them in his palm. "And where did he get those?"

"Cut stones like this? He's prob'ly been stashin' 'em fer years. Too bad I knew just where t'look, aye?" Jack's face went dark, his eyes hooded. "Besides, the lot of 'em couldn't pay fer wot he did t'you." The tone was a tiny window into Jack's heart and he pushed the stones around with one finger, lifting up an enormous black pearl. "This I keep. Pick wotever ya like. The rest I'll use well, I promise ya that."
James shook his head. "I want no part of them. Use what we need to return home, and do what you will with the rest." He looked up, that stern ice that had almost, but never quite melted, back in his eyes. His voice was gentle enough. "My blood need not be repaid with something that cost that of another."

Jack's smile was rather sad as he ran one finger through the treasure trove. It wavered above an intricately carved bit of pale jade. The next moment, it was gone, palmed and deposited wherever the pearl had disappeared. He scooped up the rest and returned them to the various hidden stashes in the lining of his coat. "I coulda ripped his liver out fer that, luv. 'Twas miserable bad form an' a cruel thing." He held out his hand again, a small ruby glinting in the palm. "Ya think the barnacle'd like this?"

James smiled and closed Jack's palm around it. "I am certain he would." The boy would like the way the light played off the precious stone, not quite yet realising what it was that made men kill for such a thing.

His smile grew a little harder and more resigned as he shook his head. "The flogging was well within his right. I doubted his command. I suspected he would react like that, but I wanted to be certain. What was wrong is how he 'recruited' us and how he placed the whole crew into danger for his vanity. That is miserable bad form."

"It is indeed and pressin' is a dreadful thing. Specially in Tortuga, of all bloody places! But these, James!" Jack's eyes sparkled like black jewels themselves. "Don't ya realise how I can use 'em? Sure, we'll need the coin, but 'tis far better to show these to those of the crew as we trust and let 'em know where I found 'em. Hamilton'll be lucky if they don't bleedin' keelhaul him and all run off with us!"

He chuckled at the irony of it. "Damned arrogant bogtrotter'll find himself shipless soon enough. I sold one t'that dog I slipped off t'see, Jamie. Just one! An' lookit this." He rummaged into his coat again, the ruby disappearing to the depths as he fished out a small pouch and tossed it to James.

Norrington weighed it in his palm and frowned. How did this matter to the crew? For certain, there was always petty envy, but that was hardly enough reason to mutiny against a captain, especially when few of the sailors would have anywhere better to go.

He looked up at Jack in disbelief, then, suddenly, he understood. He blinked. "Prize money?"

"Aye, I'm sure of it. He hid 'em and cheated the crew outta their fair share. No pirate should need t'press a crew. I had my suspicions, but this proved it. They were hidden in his cabin---usual stuff, hidden drawers in cabinets an' walls. The man's no proper pirate at all! Not to mention them four letters o'marque, playing all sides, and I've no doubt sellin' the English to the Spanish an' back again. Bloody bastard." Jack's expression was comically derisive, the same face James might expect of a high-born gentleman speaking of a peer who had raised his chambermaid to mistress: offensive but admirable in its sheer audacity.

"Is this going against your pirate honour then?" James quirked a smile, then became serious. Even after this revelation, he felt hopelessly helpless. Were he truly one of the crew, he would confront Hamilton directly, but that would not win them the Chimaera and a crew to guide her home. He understood Jack's plan well enough, but it was not his. He turned to his side expectantly. "So where do you want to start?"

Jack sat cross-legged, looking more like a boy plotting mischief than a man scheming a capital criminal enterprise. "Got a handle on where sailors here go t'find work and y'know yerself how many of the crew were pressed into service. Most of 'em were merchantmen, so they've no idea how
he'd been cheatin' 'em. Bet the bugger's been doinin' it fer years. Anyways, we'll go to this tavern tommor-a fer a look-see. The Chimaera's repairs'll take another two, maybe three days. We wait until then." His grin was conspiratorial and utterly infectious. "And we have fun!"

"You mean to wait?" James' brows drew together. It was not that he did not enjoy Jack's company, to be shown the wonders of Bombay; he enjoyed it all too much. He enjoyed it so much that, when he thought too long of it, he could not fathom going back to a profession that denied him these wonders. But precisely that was their goal, and he would not allow himself to rest ere that was achieved. "Is there nothing...useful we can do while we wait?"

Jack tugged at the braid in his hair. "Wait fer the opportune moment, luv. We want the Chimaera fully stocked an' ready t'sail, aye?"

James had always considered himself a patient man, except now. He forced a grin. "I feel like being caught in the calm, knowing there is a storm ahead."

Jack laughed softly as young Matthew snorted and rolled over, sprawling like a small octopus. He rose and tucked the blankets around the boy and silently set the wooden dressing screen around the bed, then returned to sit behind James, toileying with his hair, combing his fingers through the tangles.

"Best t'wait. I'll need time to fill out the crew and sell off a few more o' them sparklies so I've somethin' to tempt 'em with. And even I like a nice bit o'shoreleave after four months, mate." He busied himself, braiding one sundrenched lock and slipping a small trifle he'd lifted from a table on his way to the fence's shop; a small disk of green stone, flecked with forest shadows they called malachite.

"You shall not spend this shoreleave working at my hair until I truly look like a paler half of you," James warned, allowing Jack to finish the braid before he turned. It seemed ridiculous to have waited for over four months and now be unable to bide a few days. But no matter how often he told himself that, he could barely sit still.

Jack finished the braid and smiled at James' restless energy. "There. That's just the colour of yer eyes when yer snappin' mad. Like the first time I saw ya." He remembered the sword at his throat, the green eyes dark with fear and fury, set in a pale face under a silly wig.

"I have never seen your eyes when you were not mad. But then, I doubt anyone has." James tossed his head, shoving the braid back with the rest of his hair. It fell forward again and he glared at it like an angry cat, stifling the urge to snarl. "My hair has not been this long in years. Do you have a ribbon to spare?"

Jack laughed and dove back into his pockets, holding up an ell of pale green grosgrain. "Thought you might be wantin' somethin' like this."

He watched James tie his hair back, biting his thumbnail and never knowing how his eyes spoke. He wanted to decorate James with all the jewels of the orient, dress him in silks and satins, and feed him delicacies fit for gods.

When James looked up again, he caught the glint in Jack's eyes, eyebrows lifting for a moment; then his eyes narrowed, going dark. They sat and stared each other down for a while, then James' grin widened to show teeth, his voice smooth and low. "Are you going to pounce me in front of the boy?"

Jack pounced. He plundered James' lips, looted his shirt, pillaged his breeches, all the while laughing and trying to keep them both quiet. He had just finished kissing away the lines of worry
when a small part of him warned, 'you are far too happy, Jack. Be careful. Be warned.' But he
couldn't listen to that voice and James' soft sounds at once.

They giggled and hushed each other, James' protests as quickly silenced as his moans. For a little
while, James almost forgot about the Chimaera and the Cape, about Hamilton, his greed and his
vanity, lost between giving and receiving pleasure.

Afterwards, James leaned heavily against the wall, his restlessness replaced by a lazy, sated smile. "It
is a miracle Matthew slept through that outcry."

Jack turned in his arms and grimaced. "I should make sure we ain't been spied on!" He folded back
the screen and bent over the boy, smoothing the fair hair and smiling. "He's a fine lad, Mattie is.
Wanna make sure--" He caught James watching him and hid under his hair, replacing the flimsy
wooden barrier and retreating to the window.

James looked at him, half tempted to laugh at the hint of a blush that suddenly crept onto Jack's face.
He grinned, pulled on his breeches and prodded the boy. Matthew grunted and curled into himself,
freeing a spot on which James sat down, crooking his finger in invitation. "He'll be fine. Let's sleep."

Jack's teeth gleamed as the candle sputtered and fizzed, then went out in a thin thread of smoke.
"You go on, luv. I don't wanna sleep just yet." He sat in the windowsill, watching the stars long
after James' breathing had slowed to soft snores; saw the few lights wink and disappear, the
mastheads clustered like a black forest against the night sky. His head dropped forward a third time
and he settled himself on the thin rug next to the bed, his coat bunched up as a pillow, and dreamed
of glittering green stones and open seas.

Jack's eyes fluttered open when he found his head buried in the much-less than fresh armpit of his
coat. He rolled away from it and banged his head on the bed frame, groaning.

James grumbled and pulled the pillow over his head, as he got to his feet, wincing. "Yer gonna kill
me, luv!" he grinned. Padding to the open window, he squinted at the sunlight pooling on the floor
and the foot of the bed.

For a moment, he leaned out to watch the street below, remembering the angle; James pounding into
him from behind, and he fingered a tender spot on either hipbone where the sill had dug into him.
He bent down to pull on his breeches and decided that he'd better find some distraction or he'd have
a devil of a time walking for the next three days. Not that he minded, but dear me, the Commodore
was certainly making up for lost buggery.

Jack reckoned it was nearly ten already, for the light was warm and golden, and he slugged down a
bit of rum by way of breakfast. He knew that would hardly suffice for a growing boy and threw on
the rest of his clothes, carrying his boots as he slipped out, closing the door quietly.

It did not take long for James to blink himself awake, easing himself away Matthew's clutch. He
rose with a start, quickly washed and dressed, then went back to the bed to gently shake Matthew
awake. "Hey, little one. The sun is up."

Jack clattered up the stairs with a basket full of bread and fruit and a few carefully-wrapped sticky sweets, poked his head into the room, and threw the door wide open. "Hullo, mates. Got us some breakfast and they'll send up tea. Mattie, ya slug, it's long past ten. Guess Bertie never made it back!" He grinned and plopped the basket down on the bed, folding himself into a corner of it, Indian-fashion.

Matthew sat up suddenly, blinking sleepily and yawning loudly. "Had the loveliest dream. No fair of you to be waking me."

Jack tousled the boy's head. "An' wot were ya dreamin' that keeps yer eyes shut on such a lovely day?"

"Good morning, Jack." James wondered if he would ever get used to the faint limp in Jack's walk on a morning. He reached out and broke a bit of bread, crumbs falling on the floor. "Are you all right?" he asked hesitantly. "I saw you slept on the floor."

Jack winked at James, smiling at the concerned eyes and faint flush. "I'm right as rain, luv. Ready t'see wot kinda trouble we can find this fine day?"

He stuffed a bit of bread into his mouth and washed it down with rum. The bottle was, of course, in one of his coat pockets, as bottomless as Jack's appetites, for he was always pulling bits and pieces from them, wondering where he'd found some interesting item. He tossed what looked like a pair of wooden sticks into the boy's lap. "Thought you'd find that amusin'."

Two curved, slender sticks, rubbed smooth as glass, connected with little strings held captive an elaborately carved wheel. He reached out one finger to push the wheel and it travelled up the sticks, around the curve and down, then started upwards once more.

Matthew was soon lost in the peculiar toy, sleep and dreams, questions and food forgotten as he sat up straighter, nudging the wheel around, until James thought he would go dizzy from it. He cracked a smile at Jack. "I see your childish mind has found the proper occupation for little Matthew."

The boy looked up, eyes very wide and lips slightly agape. With exaggerated care, he put the device aside and threw himself at Jack, clinging to his shoulders.

"Wot's all this?" Jack laughed and hugged him, swinging him out of the bed and dancing around the small room like a demented pixie. "How'd ya like t'see some real tigers, luv? There's a place where they got 'em in a garden I know."

It was a true miracle that Matthew's eyes had not yet popped out of his head. He nodded eagerly, then stopped short, nibbling at his lower lip. "Ain't they dangerous? Heard tell of 'em once and they're supposed to be some right savage beasts."

"Aye lad, terrible savage. Sometimes, if they get too hungry or th' moon's right, they'll descend on villages in the country and hunt." Jack set Matthew down and prowled after him, hunched over, his hands raised. "An' they'll look fer jus' the right size boy and pounce and drag him off to their lair fer supper." Jack deposited a squealing Matthew on the bed and put the toy aside to rummage in the basket for a banana. "Course, these ones ain't quite so savage. 'Tis a huge garden and we'll have t'sneak in, but they're the most beautiful creatures y'ever saw. Big cats, big as ponies."

"Matthew, you are not a savage cat yourself. There is no need to eat like one," James chided. Matthew was munching contentedly on the bread, frowning as James plucked it from his fingers,
showing him how to break mouth-sized bits off rather than sinking his teeth into it.

"Like ponies?" he asked between two bites. "Do they ride on'em?"

"Not likely! They got huge fangs and claws. An' y'know how cats don't like being told wot t'do? Well, they're great big cats. We'll go see 'em after we've eaten." Jack grinned at James. "Thought we could use a decent breakfast. Ah, here's yer tea." One of the serving lads was trying to balance a tray and get the door open.

Matthew, now wide awake, bounced off the bed and helped the boy carry the tray inside, setting it down on the table proudly and then imitating the strange bow Jack always made. He was tugging at Jack's sleeve while James poured the tea. "How big are they? Like this?" Matthew lifted a hand to his mid-chest.

"Near big as me when I do this." Jack rolled off the bed to prowl around Matthew on all fours, growling and snarling. He pounced on his banana, forgotten on the bed, and settled on the floor to munch it.

Matthew was giggling and pointed at Jack. "And you complain 'bout my eating manners!"

James laughed. "Well, little Matthew, what you see here is a mixture of a tiger, a monkey and an absolute madman. You, on the other hand, are a fine young man and need to learn what is proper."

Jack made a face and swiped at James with an imaginary paw. "Wonder where Bertie is? Hope he didn't get himself lost." He leaned back against the bed, stretching out his legs and fishing a persimmon out of the basket, cutting it in half with his boot knife. He offered one part to James and sliced off a piece for Matthew. "Go on. It's good."

Matthew bit into it and made a mess of the sticky, tough fruit. He licked his fingers and his eyes lit up, then he sank his teeth into it and he ripped half of the small bit off, like a tiny feral cat himself.

James chewed more thoughtfully. "I wonder if this is Cookie's fault, or if the food here really is that excellent."

Jack contemplated the orange fruit in his hand. "These kind ya can eat like apples. Others, ya gotta wait till they're so soft the insides are like jelly. 'Tis the truth, Jamie. The Orient's got some o' the best victuals I've ever tasted. Can't say as much fer the liquor, though. Rice wine is nasty and the plum wine in China ain't fit fer human lips. Seems we got th drop on distilling." He laughed, finished off the fruit, and amused Matthew by spitting the pit expertly onto the tea tray. "So, we see the tigers, an' then wot?"

"Then we see where Bertie has got to, and maybe run into a few other sailors." Matthew was far too busy licking his fingers clean and then contemplating his new toy to catch James' serious glance at the words. "Besides, you are the tour guide here, lest you have degenerated completely into a feral cat, intent on destroying all the education I strive to give the boy."

Jack laughed and gnawed on another piece of bread, lacing his tea liberally with rum. He bounced to his feet and paced about restlessly while James got Matthew washed and dressed; perching on the sill, the bed, the small stool, then back again to the sill.

James shooed them out into the streets, dust stirring whenever there was a breeze, the sun burning down from its zenith, not even the narrow alleys providing any shadow. Matthew settled himself comfortably on James' shoulders, one hand shading his eyes like any good outlook would.

Jack called his head a crow's nest and James faked a scowl.
The streets widened, houses becoming larger and set further apart until Jack suddenly turned them down a barely perceptible path that twisted amid groves of trees, until they came to a high wall. They followed beside it for a time, until it became lower, deep in the shade, and Jack stopped. He hushed them and laced his fingers together to hoist the boy onto the wall, then jumped to haul himself up, straddling it, and held out a hand to James.

Below them was a garden of exquisite beauty, fruit trees planted in miniature groves, paths of pale golden bricks winding through them. They could hear an unseen fountain at play, somewhere beyond the leafy bower, and there, lounging by a small pool, was a tiger. Indeed, not just one; there were several, striped hides dappled in the shadows, all sleeping contently.

James peered at Matthew's wide grin and remembered being a boy himself, climbing the large apple tree to peer out at the street when he was not supposed to be outside alone, desperately keeping his breeches clean to avoid any incriminating evidence. Now, he grinned like a conspirator and marvelled at the tigers' sleek elegance.

Jack plucked at Matthew's sleeve and pointed to a shadowy place, near the pool, where two cubs tumbled in a heap together, sleeping under the lazy eyes of their mother. She lifted her head to sniff the air and gazed inscrutably at the strange trio on her wall.

James bent closer to whisper into Jack's ear. "How much trouble do we court by being here?"

"Wouldn't do t'get caught." Jack grinned. "It's a harem garden an' we'd likely lose our heads."

"Oh, excellent. And simply because you do not need yours, you thought you would put ours on the line?" James teased.

Jack bit back his former adventure in this place as not fit to tell with small barnacles about, and reached out to pluck a pear from a bough close to his head.

James chuckled as Jack fed him a bite, then turned to give the fruit to Matthew, who had stared at the cubs in fascination, his eyes wide. That moment, he jumped down to get a closer look.

"Jesus!" Jack hissed and jumped down after him, grabbing Matthew and edging back to the wall, his eyes fixed on the mother tiger, who, half-tame or not, had flattened her ears and uttered a low growl. Her maw opened, fangs glistening in the dappled light, and quickly, Jack hoisted the boy up towards James, his breath coming up short as her tail lashed and she started to rise. He gulped, staring at the flicking tip of it, anywhere but directly into her golden eyes.

James frantically shoved Matthew down the other side of the wall, then leaned down and grabbed Jack's hand, bracing himself with the other. The mother tiger was prowling closer, eyes fixed on James, his breath coming up short as her tail lashed and she started to rise. He gulped, staring at the flicking tip of it, anywhere but directly into her golden eyes.

James frantically shoved Matthew down the other side of the wall, then leaned down and grabbed Jack's hand, bracing himself with the other. The mother tiger was prowling closer, eyes fixed on Jack. James yanked roughly, hauling him up as fast as he could. The tiger shifted, her lean muscles tensing as she jumped, pouncing at empty air.

Jack scrabbled to get his feet over the ledge and tumbled to the other side, taking James with him. He was up a second later. "Run!" he gasped, heaving Matthew into his arms and tearing down the path as fast as he could go. He didn't stop until they were back amid the winding alleys, leaning back against a wall to catch his breath, laughing, "Lord! Thought I was gonna be dinner."

Matthew's eyes had drawn together and he was still shivering. "I'm sorry, so sorry. I just wanted t'get a closer look."

James turned to Jack, panting. "Are you quite all right? Besides the usual." He quickly checked Jack for any injuries, then turned to Matthew, ruffling his curls until he looked up. "Matthew. You said
yourself that they were ferocious beasts. Appearances can be deceiving. What you did was very foolish, and it is more than luck that nothing happened."

Jack crouched down to face the boy whose lower lip was starting to tremble. "I'm perfectly fine, luv. Here now, none o' that. Mamma animals can get awful fierce if they see someone near their babes. You'll remember that, aye?" He pulled the flask from his pocket and handed it to the shaken lad. "It'll steady yer nerves." He brushed away a tear that dripped down the small nose with a smile. "No harm done an' we've had our first adventure t'day! Just think how you can tell 'em all that you got chased by a real live tiger." He passed the flask to James with a wink, keeping one arm around Matthew, who manfully sniffed and squared his shoulders.

Then suddenly, the boy clung again, sniffling away a last sob. James reached down and slipped an arm round his shoulder, squeezing gently. "I wonder if you are doing all that just to have Jack jumping after you," he teased. "Any other suggestions, oh captain of tour guides?"

Jack stowed the flask with a swift smile, glad to still have both legs intact. "Wanna see a temple? There's one not too far from here."

And he was off again, pulling them through the labyrinthine of streets willy-nilly, like a dervish on a crooked course. They stopped to watch a woman spinning with a small wheel, a man juggling near a dozen balls, another playing a flute for an undulating snake.

Matthew had calmed, but his enthusiasm was still subdued, his voice almost a whisper where before he would have pointed and squealed. Still, he was fascinated and James noticed it with a smile, hoisting the boy atop his shoulders again.

They were enfolded in colour, a world that seemed so complete and yet it effortlessly made way for them to submerge in it. James barely noticed the heat that had vexed him in the Caribbean, and only when a veiled girl dropped her gaze did he realise that he was staring. He swallowed and turned to Jack. "Will they allow us into the temple? I would rather not court more trouble."

"Just have to take off our boots an' keep quiet. 'Tis rather like bein' in a church, y'know, but prettier, I think." Jack led them down a broad avenue amid dozens of locals, the women swaying in their layers of bright cloth, dark eyes dropping under long lashes, gold glinting in nose-rings that obscured full lips.

They left their boots with a toothless old man who bowed and grinned as Jack bowed back and handed him a coin, beckoning them towards the tall spires covered in sculptures up to their stone pinnacles.

James did not shout or point, his eyes did not go wide, but the light in them was the same as in Matthew's. It was a miracle, to find a new world on a continent he had thought he knew from one visit, had discarded as a less-civilised English colony. To realise that there was more to learn and explore here, it tugged at the same urge that had first lured him to sea, made it flare up with a strength he had thought lost.

They ducked under a low arch like the mouth of a cave, and found themselves in a massive space, lit all round with little oil lamps that sputtered in the cool air. Women crowded around the shrine of a goddess with massive proportions and many arms, laying wreathes of flowers and lighting their clay lamps like the Wise Virgins.

Slowly, they skirted the entire place, passing bearded men with paint on their foreheads, sitting or standing as if frozen in strange postures. The air was ripe with the smell of flowers and smoke.
Jack paused before a statue of a rotund man with multiple arms and the head of an elephant, bobbing a bow and leaning forward to slip a coin onto the pedestal with a wink.

James shifted closer, eyeing the statue with wide, amazed eyes. "Who is that?" His voice was low, his head bowed. "What is that head?" James barely stifled the urge to reach out and touch, clutching at Matthew's reaching arm.

"That's Ganesha, the head god, Shiva's son. He's mighty good luck an' promises happiness and fortune to all. I'm very fond of him." Jack bowed again and led them further, trying to distract Matthew quietly from staring at a large sculpture of a many-armed god and his goddess, entwined in a frankly carnal embrace.

James coughed delicately, bowing his head and staring up through his lashes. "Two more of your favourite heathen gods?" His voice was still a low whisper as they walked onwards, shooing the boy away from the offending sculpture.

"Oh aye!" Jack grinned and bowed to them with a sly wink at James. He left another coin with a little man as wrinkled as a dried apple, before leading them back out into the sun, blinking like owls as they collected their boots and headed down the road. It was getting near mid-afternoon and young Matthew's stomach was growling. "Think it's time we got some grub and tried t'find where Bertie's gone."

"I do believe we shall find him in worship of these two most interesting deities." They found him back at the inn, snoring loudly after what had obviously been a most interesting and satisfying night. They managed to wake him and set out for another delicious dinner.

This time, James did not feast so recklessly. A filled stomach caused lethargy which did not fit his restless mood at all. Exotic though the port was, the first priority was to get home.

Jack tucked into the bright yellow curry with a passion that made the rest stare at him, since Spanish was well-known for his birdlike appetite and everyone wondered how in hell he managed to stay fit at all. Then again, not 'everyone' knew about that magically refilling flask of his. He finished with a huge, satisfied belch that made the owner beam and slip Matthew a few more pieces of sticky sweets to carry away, wrapped in a bit of bright-coloured paper.

"Now where to, mates? Heard tell of a sailor's tavern down that way. Sound good?" Jack was absently rubbing the honey-syrup from Mattie's face with one sleeve and trying to uncap the flask at the same time.

James lifted the boy into his lap and cleaned his face thoroughly, grinning at Jack with a nod. Bertie gave a small cheer. "Aye, I definitely need a drink."

They got moving and outside, James hoisted Matthew up again. "We should take the lad to the inn."

Jack shook his head so hard it set all his baubles rattling. "Bertie, you g'wan with the barnacle. Catch up in a sec." He watched them round the corner and turned to James, his eyes wide. "Are ya mad? We can't leave him there. He'll be gone fast as Bob's yer uncle, mate!"

"Do you suggest taking him to the tavern? I know many a dockside tavern, and not one of them is a place for a boy his age."

Jack resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "James, th' only reason he's left be is cos he's always with one o' us. Those blond curls an' blue eyes? Do ya not know how much he'd be worth t'some pasha once they cut off his ballocks? This ain't home, luv. Here it don't matter wot bloody colour yer hide is. If
yer young enough an' pretty, it's a danger. I'm sure young Matthew's seen the inside of many a tavern afore this. Worse thing that can happen there is he'll fall asleep under a table."

James' voice trailed off and he bit at the insides of his lip. He had no account of this port, and thus no right to object. He sighed. "Very well then."

Jack slipped an arm through James' and laughed, pulling him round the corner. "Besides, we're just lookin' fer a few drinks and laughs t'night. No harm can come to him if one of us keeps a foot on him."

They rounded the corner and Jack walked a little faster, watching a dark man busily distracting Bertie while another lurked in the shadows of a tent, his eyes fixed on Matthew, who had drifted a few feet away. Jack had his knife in his hand and tapped the man on the shoulder as he reached towards the boy. "I wouldn't be doin' that, mate."

James had Matthew atop his shoulders in a heartbeat. The boy giggled and tried to steer him like a horse, tugging at each ear to determine a direction. James followed obligingly, one hand slipped around Matthew's leg. His look at the two men was icy, and the one who'd been talking to Bertie slunk away and disappeared into the crowd.

Jack muttered a few words to Bertie, then stashed the knife in his boot so quickly it seemed to vanish into thin air. He whistled a tune and had them all singing as they reached the tavern.

It looked like any dockside hovel in any port and certainly sounded the same: loud laughter and shouts, drunken singing, the occasional screech. Jack was perfectly at home and cleared a path for them to the bar to purchase three bottles and the use of four mugs. They found it advantageous to stay close to him as he threaded his way to a corner table, for he managed to move through the chaos as if enclosed in a magical bubble, ducking fists or gesturing hands and never spilling a drop.

"There now." He threw himself on the bench where he could watch the door and handed the bottles out, filling a mug for Matthew from his own. "Drink up, lads."

Meanwhile, his eyes and ears were wide open, scanning for languages, faces; mentally ticking off those to remember, instantly forgetting any not worth the effort.

Years had passed since James had truly frequented such establishments, and to say he felt at home was an exaggeration. Yet, he had spent all his life among sailors and had learnt to distinguish serious curses from those brought about by inebriation and jest.

And he knew how to duck.

Matthew trailed ahead of him, but the boy seemed to ignore everything, turning the mug of rum in his hands and sniffing at it. Then he looked up at Jack with wide eyes,downing a large gulp which promptly sent him coughing.

James carefully watched for any choking, but Matthew only coughed more, eyes bright and wet. He remembered how embarrassed he had been when everyone had noticed his choking on his first mug of pure rum. He had downed the rest of the mug in one go and felt miserable for days. He had no wish for Matthew to repeat such an experience.

Jack pounded the boy on the back, laughing. "Take it easy, barnacle. Y'tryin' to outdrink us all?"

He winked at James and Bertie, then leaped to his feet, waving his arms around and shouted, "Ahoy, Berks!"

Berkely grinned and, after a few tactical shoves, joined them at the table. "Ahoy there, Spanish. Had
fun, eh?"
"Oh, aye we have! You enjoyin' the leisure time?"

"Shore leave. I wager y'know how 'tis. Course ya do, Spanish." He looked at James, then laughed. "Or perhaps ye don't. But I'm sure Bertie here sets a fine example."

Jack poked at Matthew. "Young Mattie's had quite an adventure today, didn't ya?"

Matthew blushed to both ears and edged closer to James. "Jack saved me from a tiger," he managed eventually, hiding his face against James' sleeve.

Finally, James had mercy. "Young Matthew here was a little too curious and wished to take a closer look at the tiger cubs, which was not to the liking of their mother."

Jack gulped down more in one swallow than any man of his slender build had a right to consume, and laughed. "Got a firsthand view of how fierce they are, didn't ya, barnacle? And we went to the temple."

Berkely raised an eyebrow at them, as if to ask why they should waste precious shore leave on such things.

Matthew's head shot up and he nodded eagerly at Berkely. "Yes, an' they've the funniest statues there! You should've seen them!"

It was James' turn to cough up his rum. "The temples are fine works of art."

Jack refilled his mug and giggled. "Must say, their idea of wot gods do on their days off is more pleasant than flyin' round with harps." He had one eye on a Dutch sailor reeling toward a back room. "Hey Berks, they got a game goin' on in there?" His eyes were wickedly appraising. "Could fancy a wager or two."

"Cards. But they've a damn good player back there. Lost a bit of coin t'him last night, don't fancy losing me whole share to Lady Luck."

James frowned into his mug. "Surely you would not wish to waste time and money on gambling?"

Jack shot him a predatory look and stretched, smiling archly. "I ain't had a good game in months. Might just have t'give their good player a go. C'mon. Let's go see." He bounded up over the table, dragging Matthew with him.

Bertie and Berkely had already picked up their rum and followed, so James had little choice. Lips drawn into a tight line and his fist clenching on his mug, he followed.

If possible, the back room was even seedier than the rest of the tavern, more silent, darker. Around a table, several players were assembled, more watchiner over their shoulders.

Jack stood towards the back of the room, watching, his eyes gleaming in the darkness, very like the tigers'. He bent down close to Matthew. "Now, listen up, mate. You stick close t'Jamie. Don't go gettin' lost and don't go outside alone fer nothin'. If ya gotta piss, get one of us t'come along. Promise?"

Matthew looked up at him, his lips edging towards a pout for a moment, then he nodded with all the gravity a little boy could possess. "Promise."
True to his word, he slunk closer to James, who put an arm around his shoulder before edging closer to Jack. "What do you want to do here? Besides being completely insane?"

"Just havin’ a bit of fun, luv." At the table, one of the players threw down his hand in disgust and got up, grumbling. In a trice, Jack was standing behind the chair. He flipped a gold piece into the air, catching it with a grin. "Wot say you t'real stakes?"

Murmurs started up all around the table and James drew his breath in with a hiss and a headshake, taking a seat in the back.

Bertie shrugged and slapped his shoulder. "Spanish's mad. You should know that best of all."

Berkely's eyes followed the glittering coin and narrowed as the big African at the table looked at Jack with a sly smile. Drunken sailors with too much money after a long voyage were his business and he nodded for Jack to take the vacated seat.

"Bone-Ace, aye?" Jack watched the shuffle and deal, grinning as he easily picked out the marks on the back of the old deck.

He dutifully lost a few hands, then promptly switched his hold on the cards so the backs were covered and his agile brain worked out the markings.

Then he started to win. He was smart enough to lose a few more, then win when the pot was big; to bet low, then high, and by the time he'd been an hour at the table, he knew every hand just from the backs of the cards. It was child's play and he amused himself with half his attention on the game, joking and laughing with the other players.

The dealer's sly smile grew nastier, just a hint of blackened teeth behind tightly drawn lips. "Yer in luck, mister," he snarled. "But what say you t'raising the stakes higher?" He tossed a pouch on the table that spilled coin, silver and a tantalising flash of gold glittering in the dim light. Most of the players tossed in their hands at the sight, the others' eyes widening with naked greed.

Jack smiled sweetly, batted his eyes and reached into his pocket, holding up a pearl the size of a cherry, its perfect white gleaming like a beacon between his dirty fingers. "Raise ya. Deal."

Bertie looked at James wide-eyed. "Where th' hell?"

James shook his head. "Long story. Ask him later." It was Jack who always insisted on the opportune moment, but James knew well enough when the moment was not opportune. Berkely's eyes, too, had gone wide, and they all stared at the table. Everyone but Jack and the dealer had backed away from the game, but they all watched, Jack's grin as genial as the dealer's was nasty and angered.

Jack barely glanced at his hand and kept asking for another card, then another and one more, finally waving his fingers and waiting for the inevitable explosion. He knew the dealer was already over 31 and turned over his hand to display the exact number. "Not yer night, is it, mate?" He grinned and swept his winnings into one pocket with an exaggerated bow. "Drinks all 'round! Mighty thirsty work, all that, isn't it?"

There were cheers all around, and the dealer's snarl was lost amidst them. He stood up with a start, his chair crashing to the floor, but not even that stopped the sudden elation. "Yer a lucky one, Mister. Hope it don't run out." With those words, he strode from the room while all the others collected around Jack. Nothing attracted more attention in a tavern than riches, drink and luck.

Jack watched him leave with one eyebrow arched into his headscarf. He leaned over to Berkely.
"We'll be seein' more of him later, I imagine." He laughed and toasted the group, singing a positively lewd Dutch shanty at the top of his lungs.

James leaned back in his chair and watched, keeping up the impression that he was constantly drinking while barely sipping from his mug at all. It was a vital skill if one wished to remain sober at balls and receptions without appearing impolite. He knew how much a man would let slip when he thought others as drunk as himself, and he waited for anything of that ilk to happen.

It did not. Jack drank, Jack sang, Jack bought rounds of drinks, but over the hours, James could not make out anything that was worth considering, and certainly nothing he could repeat in front of the boy.

By the time most were tumbling into chairs or snoring on the floor, Jack finished another outrageous story and grinned at little Matthew who was sound asleep, curled around James' leg. "Wake yer charge, luv. I think we got wot we came fer."

"Money and drink?" It took a few minutes and several shakes until the boy woke with an enormous yawn, curling into a ball once more. James had to resort to tickles to get him upright and walking.

Outside, the street was quiet, and Bertie and Berkely watched Jack warily. Something in Spanish had been different in that room; there was a glamour about him they hadn't noticed, born of mystery and money. Where had he gotten gold? And such a pearl?

The street was no place to discuss such matters so they followed quietly until Jack suddenly stopped, then swerved down an alley. "Take Matthew back to the inn. Don't stop fer no one." His voice was low, knife already in hand. "Now go. Fast. Jamie, we got comp'ny."

A snarl was James' reply as his hand went to his swordless hip. He could already smell a fight in the air and feel the tingle in his blood. "How many?"

"Three. Could be more. C'mon, let's throw 'em off a bit." Jack began to thread his way through the maze of streets, chattering a little too loudly, swaying and swaggering more than usual, his voice cutting through the quiet. They turned a corner and his eyes widened. "Bugger!"

"Sparrow? SPARROW! I shoulda known! Come back here, ya scurvy son of a whore!" the giant looming at the end of the alley boomed.

"Jesus, Jamie! RUN!" Jack tore off to the left and disappeared down another street with James hot on his heels.

They raced through streets, alleys, a mad chase, and but for the stars, James would have lost his bearings completely. Further and further they ran from the docks, deeper into the city. As they raced around another corner, Jack yanked him into a doorway with a sharp hiss.

"Shhhh." Jack rummaged in his pockets and found the pick, courtesy of another lift in the market. He wobbled it in the lock, cursing under his breath. "Dammit, c'mon, ya bastard. Turn. Damn. Turn, please!" The tumblers clicked and the door opened. They slipped inside, both panting.

There was a soft giggle behind them.

Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Fifteen
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter—R.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

James begins to realise the hard facts about his companion and the truth of his reputation.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtflhw for her excellent beta.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN: The Door in the Wall

James spun around on his heel, yanking one arm before his face, the other ready to strike.

Then, he realised two facts at once: one, a giggle was unlikely to be voiced by any of their pursuers, and two, said giggle had been that of a female. Likely that of the female standing right in front of him.

He managed a well-mannered grin. "I beg your pardon, Miss."

There was a chorus of laughter and the chime of small feet and dainty bells. Jack turned, his eyes moving from one side to the other and back again, mouth gaping.

Sometimes, Fortune had a delicious way of turning left. His grin spilled across his face like sweet oil. There were at least a half-dozen women he could see, lounging around a small fountain in various stages of undress. He turned to look at James with absolute innocence. "Think I found the right door."

A crash made them both start, the patter of bare feet on carpet and then a resounding smack.

Jack nursed his jaw and glanced at a pair of furious, dark eyes. "Ayesha."

She was pushed out of the way by a girl with hair like a fall of mahogany silk covering ample breasts. Her fist crashed into his chin.

He shook his head, seeing a star or two. "Murina."

A sudden shadow fell over them, at least from the shoulder down and Jack ducked behind James, away from the large and displeased female, already winding up for a whack. "James, save me!"

"I believe that will make for several most interesting tales," James drawled, then smiled politely at the resolute woman, only a few inches shorter than he was. "Good evening, Miss. My apologies for our intrusion, but surely, there is no need for violence?"
Jack was clinging to his shirt from behind, peering over his shoulder, the woman's glance flicking between the two of them. She pointed at James, her eyes narrowed.

"Who you? With him!" She made a grab for Jack and he jumped back towards the door.

"Sorry, Zaira. Wrong door. Forget I was here."

She pushed James aside and yanked Jack towards the fountain by the ear. "I gonna cut you into little pieces."

He yelped, his hands raised. "No need for that, luv. Or that!" He eyed her large knife with a gulp. "Let go!"

"Miss, stop that." James stepped in between them, holding the woman by the wrist to wrestle the knife from her. He had to use more of his strength than was proper against a woman to prevent her from turning Jack into a typical harem-guard. "Miss, I understand your anger completely, and I am certain he deserves everything you have planned for him. Pray tell, what exactly has he done this time?"

"Promised to marry my daughter, ran off with her cousin and brother and my money!" Zaira spoke fairly good English and glared at Jack.

"Lookee, luv. Yer here. You must admit this is a distinct--aahgh--improvement from that little shop, aye? An' I borrowed it!"

James coughed back a chuckle. "Certainly, that can be settled with other means than violence." Jack was now kneeling behind him, peering from the side of his waist only to cower again at Zaira's glare. "Jack, stop being ridiculous. Get up and face her so that this may be settled."

"Wat you doing here?" She shook one beringed finger in his face.

"Tryin' not t'get killed?" He smiled hopefully with positively his biggest, most mournful eyes.

James and Zaira both rolled theirs. The rest of the women laughed and crept closer, murmuring to one another behind small hands and veils.

Zaira glowered at Jack. "You shut up." She turned to James. "Wat happened?"

"It seems you are familiar with Jack and his way of offending people without any intention at all," he hissed urgently. "One of his gambling partners was not accustomed to losing."

Zaira's dark face crinkled into a smirk. "Still up to tricks! You cheat again?"

Jack shook his head. "No! Well, maybe a little. I didn't hafta! You know I don't cheat unless I gotta, luv."

There was a loud knock on an inner door and she grabbed James by the collar and Jack by the hair. "Shhh! Both of you. In there!" They were delivered into a dozen arms that pulled them into a room awash in purple and orange silk, and pushed down into a mountain of cushions. "Quiet!"

James' glare was far more eloquent than any spoken words could have been.

Jack burrowed into the pillows with a groan as a man's voice boomed through the rooms, then fell silent as the door shut out Zaira's angry babble.

She kicked at James' leg. "You get out of here!"
Jack bounded to his feet towards the door. "Course, luv. So sorry, luv. Shite! Guards."

James froze, inwardly cursing in words not at all fit for the company of ladies. He turned to Zaira, and with his face open and sincere like that, Jack could not help seeing the boy he must have been once. "Miss," he began, hiding a flinch at the further commotion outside, "we are in dire need of your help."

Her eyes narrowed appraisingly and she grinned, gold teeth rivalling Jack's mouthful of treasure. "We get you out." Her smile broadened. "Later."

Jack supposed there were worse ways to barter freedom than rolling around on silk with a half-dozen pretty women. Even better was watching James, although he had some difficulty keeping his hands off that pale skin and focused on softer flesh.

Two hours later, he was in a half-doze, quite worn-out and in need of a long nap when they started their blasted chattering again. He pulled a cushion over his head.

The night was unlike anything James had ever experienced, not even that one time his Midshipmen comrades had made him celebrate his promotion to Lieutenant in a manner certainly not condoned by the Admiralty. His hesitation had only provoked the girls to further insistence, teasing him further with Jack's help until he had been quite unable to resist.

At least he could be certain enough that none of them would ever whisper rumours to one of his officer colleagues.

Jack was wakened by a shake so hard his teeth rattled in his head. Zaira hauled him out of the silk cocoon. "You wear these."

He stared at the bright pink fabric in her hands, stupid with sleep. "Wot?"

She slapped him hard. "Fool! Wake up and put on."

James was already awake and staring blankly at the emerald green fabric in his hands. "Might I inquire as to the purpose of this?"

Jack was being wound in blazing fuchsia, around and around, until he staggered more than usual, to explosions of laughter on all sides. Murina pushed him onto a round stool and straddled his lap, repainting his smudged and bleary eyes. He resisted the urge to smirk.

James' eyes were wide, and soon only his face was visible, clad in dark green by many nimble fingers. He obediently sat down, but when Zaira brandished Jack's knife to give him a shave, he protested. "I do not believe this is necessary." His squeak was sufficiently eloquent.

She ignored him and lathered up his face while the lovely Ayesha giggled and wriggled against him in a terribly distracting fashion.

Jack's hair had been pulled back and tied with an enormous ribbon of shocking turquoise. He glanced at James apologetically and shrugged.

James' eyes shot daggers, or possibly hairpins. It was difficult to tell as Murina was currently busy arranging his locks and pinning them into place.

Ayesha knelt astride his legs and closed his lids with a brush of her palm. He ducked his head, trying to escape without laying hand on her. After three more attempts and nearly poking his eyes out once, Ayesha gave up.
James breathed a sigh of relief that turned into a hiss when she pushed the vials of oil and kohl into Jack's hands and pointed at James imperiously.

Jack struggled to walk across the carpet, the tightly wound skirt hobbling him, its gaudy trim catching on his boottops. "I think I know wot they got planned, luv." He gave an exasperated sigh as James' jaw set. "Please, luv. I'm too tired t'fight about it. Now hold still."

"This was more than I ever wanted to know about Jack Sparrow's miraculous escape from the East India Trading Company," James huffed, but he sat still while Jack painted his eyes. "This is ridiculous."

"Ridiculous bein' relative." Jack groaned as Ayesha wound a purple veil around him and pinned it over his mouth.

"Now you shut up!" Zaira cackled.

He sighed, then looked at James and swallowed a guffaw. Wrapped in green silk, set off with bright threads of silver and cherry-red, he looked like a very tall tree.

"Yes, namely a relative of yours," James hissed as his face was suddenly covered by a veil of a brighter green. His eyes were a shade somewhere in between, glaring and sparkling with a fire that no silk could quite copy.

Zaira held up the purse with Jack's winnings and his eyes narrowed over the veil.

"You owe me!"

Jack's lip twitched under the veil as she pulled five gold coins from it, tested one with her teeth and handed him the rest, grinning. "We square now."

Zaira knocked on the inner door and Jack took advantage of her distraction to hitch up the skirt enough to get a hand into his pocket and make damned sure that rigged lining was still stuffed with plunder. Satisfied, he looked at James with another shrug as they were delivered into the hands of an enormous African who tried, unsuccessfully to keep from laughing. Zaira babbled at him, pointing at Jack and indicating a kick with one eloquent foot.

They were hauled down the corridors until another two monstrous guards opened a very large door where the African pushed them forward, delivering the promised kick to Jack's backside and sending him careening into the street.

James let him reel, then caught him and set him upright. "You do have a talent for getting kicked out of the expensive establishments."

Jack's eyes spoke volumes and not the kind that were usually seen in proper libraries. "C'mon. Let's get goin'." He hauled the skirt out from between his legs and set off down the street to find his way back to their inn.

James kept his head bowed. Every glance burned, as if everyone saw through the costume, mocking him for sinking so low. They moved closer to the docks once more when he spied a group that looked more than familiar. Bertie and Berkely, with little Matthew between them, walking down the alley.

He elbowed Jack in the ribs, unprepared for the shove that sent him stumbling into Bertie's arms.

"Bertie! Berks, thank God! I thought we'd never find ya!" Jack spit the veil out of his mouth as
Bertie stared incredulously, pointed at James and started to laugh. Jack's hands scrabbled with the damned veil, caught in his hair. "Blast, get me outta--oh shite, shite. SHITE!" He wound it around his face again and clung to Berkely's arm as a drunken group rounded the corner, the dealer himself nearly colliding with them.

Bertie recognised the dealer, looked from Jack to him once, then grabbed James, who had just pulled away. His arm slipped around James' waist, hitching him close despite any protests. The drunken group put themselves into their way, the dealer pointing at Bertie. "Don't I know ye?"

"Who him? Nah. But who's this lil' peach then?" One of them reached for Jack. "Looks like ya got lucky, boys."

A small, skinny sailor gazed up at James adoringly. "Looks jus' like my dear Isabel," he sniffled. "I miss 'er so bad."

James smiled through gritted teeth, bowing his head. Bertie grinned. "She's a shy one. But if ye know 'er, she can be right fiery." He squeezed James' buttocks, startling him into a sound that was certainly high-pitched enough to be female.

Jack shrank closer to Berkely, trying to ignore the hand on his backside with a half-hearted giggle and to point 'away' with his eyes. Berkely's ribcage was shaking with laughter.

James managed to arrange his skirts to allow him to stomp on Bertie's foot at another squeeze.

Bertie coughed back more laughter and grinned his best smile at the group. "If ye'll excuse us, we've business t'attend to, if ye catch my meaning."

The little one winked at James archly. "Come 'round my way, pretty, an' I'll pay ya good." He promptly launched into another maudlin lament for the lost and Amazonian Isabel as they walked away, heading towards the sounds of a tavern.

Jack cowered from James' glare and meekly let Berkely steer him back to the inn. Once in their room, Jack tore the veil away and collapsed face down across the bed, still wound like a parcel in pink.

Next door, Bertie and Berkely decided that the amusement was well-worth two hours of frantic searching with a sleepy Matthew in tow. Their laughter sounded unaccountably loud.

James took a deep breath, and tore at the silk, then rushed to the washstand and rubbed at his eyes. "Is it at all possible to get this off, or is it a brand, marking one as fool forever?" He could hear the high-pitched giggle when Bertie told Matthew just who the two strange 'girls' had been.

Matthew's head popped in the door, eyes wide and he pointed at James, with a shout of laughter.

Jack pulled his head off the pillow and snorted. "Now you look like a sweep's boy!"

James smiled tightly, then rubbed some more at his eyes but only managed to thoroughly redden them, the kohl smeared around his face.

Matthew had found the discarded green silk and tangled himself into it, snuggling into the soft material with more giggles.

Dragging himself off the bed, Jack wet a towel and wiped away the worst streaks on James' face. It would take days for the rest to disappear without proper soap. "Sorry, luv. Here now, barnacle! Go tell 'em to shut their gobs!" He staggered back to the bed. "I'm fucked out."
Matthew toddled off, the green silk in tow, laughing softly. Another burst of hilarity followed from next door, then another as he obligingly relayed Jack's message.

James dropped onto the bed, limbs stretched out like a slain animal, his glare sustained by pure stubbornness. "All this for a purely unnecessary game of cards?"

"Wasn't unnecessary," Jack muttered into the pillow. "I won." He opened one eye. "Yer angry."

James rolled over and made a grab for the coverlet. "Yes, you have won yet more money and risked our life and our escape for it."

"And found us the crew we need and the means to pay 'em. Sounds like a square deal to me, mate." Jack rolled onto his back, toying with the pink silk, his lips twitching. "Wasn't all that bad neither."

"Of course, it is all about the adventure, the insanity, the tale of how Captain Jack Sparrow disappeared into the void to please an entire harem. How could I forget?" His voice was a low hiss, muffled in the linen sheets. "And I fail to see the 'crew' you found for us."

"That lot crowded 'round us durin' the game, luv, "Jack smiled. "Mostly Dutch, a few Norwegians, coupla Russians. Used to be one crew and got stuck here. Evidently, there was a problem with division o' spoils. And if I know Bertie, he's already been givin' tongue about that pearl. I figger half th' crew already know." He yawned enormously and smacked his lips. "Aren't you tired, Jamie?"

A stifled yawn was answer enough. "I fail to see how you said a single word to recruit them."

And then it hit James. It was not about what Jack had said, it was what they would say to one another, and how they would react if Jack asked them to crew a ship. And he a fool, to know pirates well enough and not to realise this from the beginning. He heaved his lids open and stared at Jack in mute fascination.

Jack's eyes slid open and he grinned. "Think it's nigh time to tell 'em who I am, luv. In th' mornin'. I can't keep me eyes open. All shagged out." There was a certain comfort in knowing that taking up with an arch-nemesis had not changed his luck. He blew the elephant-headed god a little kiss. "Course, I'm not sure how I'll explain the jewels and make 'em believe me." Jack yawned again, talking more to himself than James. "Wotever they say....I'll think of somethin'."

"You always do, do you not? Another mad escape, another insane reason that no one should believe but everyone does." James closed his eyes, but the pink seemed to shine through his lids. With a sigh, he pushed himself up on his elbows. "I cannot sleep with that monstrosity sparkling at me."

"Who's mockin'? It was all I could do not t'jump on ya." Jack kissed him, laughing softly. "Yer quite the Amazon, indeed. I'd need a ladder t'mount you," he teased.

The linen made a soft sound as James shook his head. "Is that all you do after barely escaping death? Laugh about it? We could both be dead now."

"Worryin' about it after the fact is such a comfort?" Jack yawned again. "Wotever they say....I'll think of somethin'."

"Tell me the crew you need and the means to pay them. Sounds like a square deal to me, mate." He shrugged. "It weren't a bad night, as they go. And things are gonna get a bit more excitin' and," his face become
momentarily solemn, "ridiculous. But that's to be expected, harrowing escapes and dreadful 'pressin' situations bein' wot they are." His dark eyes were dancing. "Honestly, ya can't say it wasn't fun."

"It was." James almost grinned at the ceiling. "But you never take anything seriously." He rolled onto his side, face tucked into Jack's shoulder and wrinkled his nose at the heavy, sweet scent. "Take that off," he demanded.

Jack pouted and hauled himself upright, tried to pull off his boots, and fell over backwards, off the bed entirely. "OW! I think it's stuck." He staggered to his feet, or rather, one foot, hopping around to pull at the boot.

"I am certain you could make a fine living at a king's court: as a fool." James did not move one inch from his comfortable space on the bed.

Jack shimmied and wriggled and performed a minor miracle by removing his shirt and breeches without disturbing the yards of eye-aching pink fabric.

James tossed a pillow at him. "Off," he growled.

"I'm trying!" Jack tugged at the material, twisting around like a cat with a bell on its tail. "I can't get it off!"

James rolled off the bed with a snarl. "I thought Bertie was joking about forgetting how to undress alone."

"Oh, stop growlin' and help me with this thing!" Jack was dancing around like an epileptic with an itch. "An' me coat's stuck. C'mon, luv. Give us a hand." He had somehow managed to keep his coat half-on while removing his other clothes in a typically backwards fashion.

"I begin to understand the true nature of all of Jack Sparrow's escapes. There are either women or rum supplies involved. Or both." James tugged the coat off, then snorted at the mess of pink silk below, split into over a dozen tiny ribbons, each one knotted hard. "Stop wriggling! Or is that supposed to be a dance?"

Jack did a fair imitation of a bellydancer's hiproll and craned to see over his shoulder. "Wot in blazes did she do t'me?"

He pulled at the purple veil, stuck on the stingray bone in his hair and held it in front of his face, swaying and turning to kiss James through the transparent barrier. "Where's yer sense o' humour gone? Really, luv. You get far too serious on land."

James grinned, brushed the veil aside for a kiss, then continued freeing Jack of the pink mess. "It seems that Zaira's grudge was not quite appeased." As he worked on the knots, he flinched once, then began trembling. A minute later, he was shaking with laughter. Even with a sailor's experience it was difficult to undo the tangles done by fingers smaller and nimbler than his. "Would it be too terrible for you to be stuck in this forever?"

Jack groaned and lurched forward for his left boot, handing James the knife. "I don't think that would be prudent. I mean, who's gonna sail with a pink captain?" He grinned and turned around, impeding the operation by grinding his arse against James.

"Much better when yer laughin', mate."

The silk pooled at his feet, forgotten when James pulled him into a kiss, trying to carry him, but only tumbling them both back onto the bed.
Jack melted simultaneously into the kiss and dreams, his lids forced closed. When James raised his head, he was fast asleep, already curling up into the pillows.

The Pearl's sails bellied and turned a lurid shade of pink then drifted towards him over a turquoise horizon and he grinned.

His soft snore was the best lullaby. "Thank God," James muttered, collapsing into his own dreams of sea and salt.

Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Sixteen
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS:  elessil and  hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--PG-13.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

The escape plan is complete and Captain Sparrow and Co. wheel into action.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to  smtfhw for her excellent beta.

There is another cast portrait in this chapter.
Chapter Fifteen

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: The Birds Fly

It was already past dawn on the next day when James awakened again, smacking his lips and stretching like a cat. He nearly fell head-first to the floor: someone had tied his ankles to the bed with green silk.

He rolled over, glared and took a deep breath when he noticed two things. One, Jack was in a similar predicament, tied with more of the green silk; and two, giggles. Loud giggles from the other side of the room.

"Darlin', I don't have an extra shilling," Jack muttered into the pillow, only half-awake, but pretending to be in the grip of a dream in his most theatrical fashion. It could never be said that Sparrow was incapable of laughing at himself. He did it all the time and usually others joined him.

He rose on his elbows and arched an eyebrow. "Practisin' knots on yer shipmates is right admirable, mates, but methinks Jamie's bits an' pieces are goin' take chill."

"Ain't it your task t'keep 'em warm?" Bertie and Berkely were leaning against the wall casually; little Matthew grinned at them from over the footboard.

The blankets were gone and James gave a hiss before pushing himself up into a position that, while not dignified, did not put him on display quite as much.

"Th'way I see it," Bertie began, circling the bed just out of reach, "Ye've been keepin' quite the story from us. An' seein' as how yer always runnin' off t'shag when yer not tied down..."

Berkely guffawed, standing on the other side of the bed to grin down at Jack. "We thought we might get some answers like this."

Jack looked up through the tangle of his hair. "Answers t'wot, luv? Hey, barnacle, be a good lad an' bring me my flask, willya?" He glanced down at himself. "Y'know, green really ain't my colour. Looks much better on Jamie."

"If ye want yer hands tied as well, I'll gladly oblige." Bertie slapped James' hands away from the knots, shaking with laughter. "Obviously enough ye two've been up t'some mischief. I sense a story
if there ever were one, and I wanna know it. And," he lifted Jack's coat, weighing the pouch with the card game's wager and winnings, "I wanna know where ye got these."

Matthew giggled at the bright sound of the clinking coins and bounced to deposit the flask on Jack's chest.

Jack smile was slow and sly, inching along his lips like the rum that poured down his throat. His eyes met James' with no expression except the light dancing in the depths of them. "Oh aye, that's a story, but you saw me win the coin." He took another swallow and pouted at the empty flask. "Any chance of a refill?"

"Storytelling's thirsty work, ain't it?" Berkely grinned widely while Bertie draped the pink silk around the bedposts as if to decorate it for newly-weds with bad taste. "And the pearl you found on the tavern floor? Eh, lay off that. We don't want ye drunk when yer telling that tale. 'Twill be unbelievable enough as is."

Jack leaned back against the rough headboard with a smirk. "Well, you all recall when Cap'n Hamilton was itchin' t'get at dear James here and had him flogged? I'm sure you all know there's better ways o'keepin' things civil shipboard. Never felt the need t'keep a cat aboard m'self. Much." His hands fluttered distractingly. "But, as I were sayin', James were being beaten raw an' me, bein' the protective soul I am, was fit t'skewer the Irish bastard with Cookie's spit." He toyed with the flask and scowled at it.

"Don't think Cookie's spit can turn 'is blood to pearls." Bertie tossed the pouch of coins from one hand to the other, but Berkely's forehead had creased into a frown. Realisation began to dawn, but he kept silent, trying to stifle his laughter at James' silent outrage.

Jack's dark eyes drowned them in mischief. "Bein' as the best way t'run a man through the gizzard is in his pocket, I nipped down t'his cabin right quick while you lot were watching poor Jamie take his stripes. " He tried to pull his legs up and sulked momentarily, his hands mid-air. "I've been 'round many a ship and cabin, so I know exactly where the hidey-holes are likely t'be, aye? Sure enough, I find one of 'em. An' wot d'ya think was in it?"

Between the flailing fingers and those intent eyes, they were mesmerised. The golden grin served to seal the spell. "That's not the half of it. Now wot self-respectin' pirate captain goes hidin' plunder like that where none of his crew knows?" Jack's expression was guileless. He wiggled one foot free of the silk and wrapped his right arm around his knee, the brand and tattoo beneath it plain in the morning light.

They'd seen both before, many times, but the light of Jack's grin seemed to make them glow.

Bertie choked, the pouch dropping to the floor with a chime. "Jack...Jack SPARROW?" Berkely only raised an eyebrow. Matthew's gaze shot up, and he stared at Jack like something just stepped out of a story.

"Captain Jack Sparrow," James drawled. "Would you now please untie us?"

Jack beamed, bridled and bowed with a flourish, looking remarkably pleased with himself, or, at least as pleased as any naked man tied to a bed by one ankle could possibly look. "At yer service, mates. Now, you'll all understand how distressed I was to find my own self pressed inta yer crew an' all. But most of all," he lifted one finger, "I was disgusted with any pirate who'd be cheatin' his crew of their fair share. There wasn't time to discuss the matter, me bein' at such a disadvantage, so I hid 'em. Only sold one and I believe I won back more than its value."
He sighed deeply, looking aggrieved. "I must admit I was shocked. Simply shocked." He shook his head sadly.

Bertie stood frozen as James untied first his ankles, then Jack's, swiftly dressing in his breeches.

James kept silent and let Jack talk. This was not his domain. The distribution of prize shares was not his task, and he knew too little of pirate custom to interfere.

"What proof have you? Why'd Hamilton cheat us, and who tells us you ain't doin' the same?"

Jack shrugged. "Have I tried t'cheat you?" he answered simply. He got to his feet, blithely ignoring his nudity, which made the fearsome shot scars on his chest and the twisted burns on his left arm all the more evident, of which Jack was as aware as any actor. He picked up his coat, his hand slipping through the pockets into the lining and tossed the contents onto the bed. If James noticed that there were a few less, he had the good sense not to mention it.

"That's the rest of 'em."

Bertie and Berkely were gaping while little Matthew approached and hesitantly reached out to touch the gleaming stones, rolling them around on the coverlets.

"Why would he lie?" James' voice was quiet, calm, reasonable. "If those were his, what reason would he have to claim he found them in Hamilton's cabin?"

Jack pulled up his breeches and disappeared under the billows of his shirt. "Ye can believe wot ya like, but that's the bloody truth of it. And if you know who I am, wot reason would I have t'show you if I didn't mean you well? As it were."

He went about fixing his eyes and settling his headscarf, studying their faces in the mirror as he preened. "I don't know 'bout you lads, I think you all deserve the proceeds, and prob'ly a lot more. He's been playin' you all. Just my professional opinion, of course."

They were both whispering agitatedly, pointing at the stash of jewels, the words 'Hamilton' and 'Jack Sparrow' audible several times. Eventually they pulled apart, staring at Jack. Not Spanish Jack, insane shipmate, but Jack Sparrow, legendary pirate.

It was Berkely who spoke eventually. "I been 'board the Chimaera for nigh ten years now, and I never suspected a thing."

Jack grinned at him. "Didn't say he wasn't a damned slippery eel, did I? He's good enough but I don't hold with this. 'Tis against the Articles an' wot's a privateer but a fancy name fer a pirate doin' one king or another's dirty work? Now, wot I wanna do is get home to my own fair ship? You may have heard of her? The Black Pearl?" Jack slung his coat on and the amiable, wobbly shipmate was quite lost in the glamorous shine of Captain Jack Sparrow."

"Besides, " he pouted, "I want my hat!"

Berkely crossed himself while Bertie laughed shakily, then swallowed and shook his head, as if to cast off a chill. "Are you from the Pearl too?"

James shook his head with a wistful smile. "No. I hail from another ship."

Bertie frowned for a moment, mouth opened for another question, but then pointed towards the treasure vault on the bed. "What're ye planning t'do with this?"
"Make sure it gets where it belongs, of course. " Jack's eyes were absurdly innocent. "Course, I do think the gold is mine, fair and square. I did win it. You lads wanna take them sparklies back to the rest of the crew? By the way, I can guarantee he's gettin' underpaid fer that ivory haul, too. The bugger buyin' it is an East India man and a rotten cheat. Wot were yer promised shares anyway? No one ever bothered t'tell me."

Bertie shrugged. "Ain't talked much 'bout it, but we figured th'usual. 'Bout enough t'pay for this shoreleave here 'n the next, maybe get a new shirt or a lil' something."

Berkely wordlessly tucked the jewels into his own small pouch and held it up. "Y'really mean t'give those back to th'crew?"

"Why not? They earned it. Me, I plan on gettin' back to the Pearl and, aside, from a consideration of sorts, just to recompense all me lost time an' plunder, I don't steal from me own or shoot unless I been shot at first, savvy?" He grinned at them, the heaved a little sigh.

"Of course, I could get us all back t' the Spanish Main with a hold full o' plunder and never have to fire a cannon, but...." His voice was airy, as if discussing the price of coffee or the regrettable mistakes of other men of business. "Those ain't mine and I'd hate to see them in the pockets of such a scurvy knave as Hamilton when 'tis only yer due." He picked up the purple veil and looked at them through it, gauging sidelong glances and nervous mouths.

They chattered wildly, and only James seemed to notice how Jack's grin grew sly, then feral, then once more utterly innocent when Berkely turned and cleared his throat. "Awright, Span- Sparrow. We gotta think on it and talk to th' lads. What yer talking of is bloody mutiny. But," he lifted the pouch, "if what ye say be true, then I doubt many a hand will want t'continue sailing wif Hamilton."

He stashed it away, "I'll be taking these with me as witnesses. And if ye lied, ye'd better hide well."

Jack turned his head with a lazy smile. "You do that, and tell 'em if they really want some loot, they'll think hard. I been with you lot fer more n' a quarter year and I don't aim t'spend another sixmonth gettin' home." His eyes were dangerous. "But it's your call. If you want a real share of real plunder, we can come to an accord. If not, " he shrugged expressively, "I'll just have t'find another way, won't I?"

He didn't elaborate on what that 'other way' might be, but he could read it in their eyes.

No one wanted to be on the wrong side of the Captain of the Black Pearl.

They eyed him as little Matthew had eyed the tigers: curious, intrigued, and with no little bit of fear. But there was also anger, outrage at the thought that Hamilton would have cheated them thus, and the instinctive call for compensation, no matter by whom.

The jewels were a gleaming testimony to Jack's words - why else would he allow them to carry them away? "Awright, Sparrow. Ye'll hear from us."

Bertie and Berkely strode out, like a jury passing judgement.

Matthew tugged at Jack's coat, staring up at him with wide eyes. "You're the Captain of the Black Pearl?"

"Aye, barnacle. And such a fine ship she is!" Jack grinned at him. "You'd love her like I do."

Matthew's eyes were wide and he nearly tugged Jack's coat off. "Can I see 'er when we're back in the Caribbean?"
Jack swung him around and perched him on the table, his eyes sparkling. "You will indeed. Oh, Mattie t'stand on her quarterdeck and watch those black sails billow! Like nothin' ye've ever seen, luv. Right, Jamie? James?"

"She is a most fine ship." James gave Matthew a crooked smile and ruffled his hair. A pirate ship was no place for a boy like Matthew, but where would he take him? To Port Royal? Will Turner had been fortunate all those years ago, to stand under the new Governor's own protection; he doubted Matthew would be as lucky. He straightened and his smile widened. "You will love her."

Jack stretched and lifted Matthew back to the floor. "I'm starvin'. Let's find some breakfast and then we've got work t'do."

He sauntered toward the tavern of the card game, though only the angels knew how he remembered its location. As he'd expected, the crew of Dutchmen were gathered in one corner, morosely passing a bottle.

Thrilled to be part of the unfolding adventure, Matthew bounded between them like a hyperactive pendulum, his eyes wide as Jack leaned forward over the table to talk. His face was golden in the lamplight, teeth bright as he used his bootknife to slice up gold coins and let them pass the pieces among them while he signalled for a fresh bottle.

James shifted closer, snatching Matthew by his collar to keep him near. He waited until Jack leant back, that sly little smile on his lips showing he was extraordinarily pleased with something. "So?"

The light reflected a wink of gold and the elusive, hypnotic scent of money as Jack grinned at him. "We're gonna get that ivory back. Rememer wot I said about the opportune moment, mate? It don't do t'miss 'em."

His hands reached up automatically to settle his missing hat and he pouted. "Mattie, there's gonna be a lot o'runnin' about today. Ya fit fer it? You, Jamie?"

James stared ahead for a second, then focused and nodded. "I am." He downed the rest of his mug in one go, slammed it down on the table and rose. "Matthew, I want you to stay close to me at all times. If you cannot keep up, shout. Do not run ahead. Can you do that?"

Matthew nodded with wide eyes, a gleam in them that reminded him far too much of Jack when he was about to do something forbidden that he usually called fun. "Course I can, James."

Jack rose, following one of the Dutchmen and his gigantic Russian friend to the door. "Jamie, you stick close to Van and keep order behind me. We're just a bunch o' drunken sailors out fer a stroll, savvy?" He winked at Matthew and elbowed Van Gotter in the ribs with a laugh.

Outside, the sunlight seared their eyes after the gloom of the tavern. No one looked twice at the score of men wavering through the dusty streets, calling to merchants and laughing uproariously. Jan, tall and fair, led them through alleys and crooked ways hardly wide enough for Matthew to pass and they all fell quiet as dark faces peered down from latticed rooms and the buildings became more solid, the street broader.

They cut through straggling gardens, a silent parade. Here, the houses looked more familiar to James, European-built, hugging small gardens to their rears. Jack paused to whisper to Vorst, thick and slow, and half their number followed him around a corner, the rest staying close on Jack's heels until they came to a neat gate behind a fine home. They could smell frying from the kitchen as Jack vaulted the gate and dropped down behind a clump of foliage. "Awright. We're goin' in. I'm bettin' he stored it down at th' dock, so all we need is the key. Mattie, you stay with Jamie. Ready?"

A brief glance showed their group complete and James nodded tightly. "Ready."
Jack sauntered to the back door, signalling them all to stay low and neatly picked the lock. He beckoned and swaggered inside, stilling the small, round native cook's screech with one hand, the other magically producing a shilling which kept her quiet. "Van, go round the front, get the others inside an' lock the doors. Jan, keep the the servants quiet."

Jack glanced into the corridor with a frown. "Where's his bloody office?" He had one of the kitchen knives in hand and gestured with it impatiently. "Keep it quiet!"

James jerked his head at a door, almost hidden next to the large butcher's block. "Servants' stairs. We'd better go through there."

Jack grinned at him and put one finger to his lips. Never had James supposed that ten sailors and one boisterous child could be so silent as they crept up the narrow staircase. Jack poked his head into one bedroom, saw the large double-doors at the end and the corridor and smiled like the cat that got the cream.

"Oh Johnny, my joy, come forth from thy dark despair..." His song was mocking and shattered the silence as Vorst threw the doors open.

Sir John Gainsell was on his feet, still in his dressing gown and the coffee spilled across the paper of this desk. Jack emerged from behind the giant Russian with a salute. "Mornin' luv. How nice to see you again. Did ya miss me?"

Gainsell pulled his considerable bulk up and opened his mouth, stopping when Jack sat on the desk, pushing the soiled pages away with one careless hand and holding the carving knife at his jumping Adam's apple. "Cookin' the books again! Tut tut! Yer a very naughty lad!"

Gainsell gulped, his eyes bugged out in recognition. "Sparrow! Why aren't you dead?"

Jack's head tilted to one side. "They missed. But not fer lack of you tryin', eh? Sit down." He turned to James, his face sharp as a fox's in a henhouse. "Best take Mattie with ya, luv. Find us a coupla decent blades."

Gainsell's face was purple. "You! You..."

Jack smiled sweetly. "Pirate. I know. Sit down."

James nodded sharply. "Andre, with me. They tore through the rooms, yanking swords from the wall. In the library, James smashed a vitrine with pistols, shoving one into his belt. "How many?"
"Acht," Andre hissed, hauling another blade from the wall. "Neun."

"Excellent. Up." Only a few minutes had changed things drastically: Sir Gainsell sat tied to his chair, trussed up like a goose, so red in the face that James half-feared it was blood. He tossed the other pistol at Jack. "Does he have any powder here?"

"Prob'ly somewhere stupid. Try the wine cellar. Or that fancy case over in the corner. Now, I'm really tryin' t'be a reasonable sort of man, Johnnyboy. You played me a damned dirty trick five years back but I'm of a forgivin' nature. Where's the cargo ya bought from Hamilton?"

Jack shrugged and sighed dramatically. "I'm sure you remember Ivan here. He weren't too pleased t'be left behind when you sent the Deventer off t'do yer biddin' and left the crew high an' dry."

James shook his head, bent over the desk, examined it briefly and yanked at a hidden catch. "Still the same desks they tried to trade a decade ago."

The drawer slid open easily and revealed two pouches. Spare shot and powder. He poured them together, divided it so that there was half in each pouch, then tied them closed and tossed one at Jack, tying the other at his belt.

Gainsell eyed the huge Russian and his fists. He mumbled something and Jack leaned in too close, his eyes like pistol bores. "Mind speakin' up, luv. Yer mumblin'." He nonchalantly examined the pistol and handed it to Ivan. "Load it." His eyes never left Gainsell's.

"Sir John, yer bein' dreadful difficult, but mark my words. I'll get that ivory, if I hafta shoot every joint in yer bloated body." For that one moment, Jack was truly frightening, his smile wolfish. "Please?" That rather ruined the effect, but Gainsell was too busy watching Ivan heft his favourite gun to notice.

"The dock. The shed. Next to the Marquess of Dorset's berth."

Jack smiled at him and patted his cheek. "Now that wasn't so hard, was it? Good man. Now where's the key?"

He took the gun from Ivan and tapped it gently against Sir John's sweaty forehead. "The key, luv? I wanna hear it from you."

He was toying with the man and thoroughly enjoying himself. Downstairs, the rest of his makeshift crew were stuffing away what portable loot was small enough to fit into pockets with a few shouts and some hushed laughter. "Sooner ya give it to me, the sooner we'll leave, luv."

"My pocket."

Jack dug into the dressing gown, relieved him of it and nodded to Ivan. "You've been so helpful, Sir John. I'll leave you to Ivan fer the moment. He's a few words he'd like to say."

Immediately, Jack dug into the desk, rifling through drawers and tossing the contents about carelessly.

He only turned around when he heard a strangled grunt to see Sir John, neatly gagged and dangling from his chandelier by the feet, his nightshirt around his ears.

James held out his hand. "The key, Jack."

Jack looked up from the desk. "Can you get it, luv? I got the small matter of Cap'n Hamilton to
"I will." James nodded sternly and pocketed the key. He stared at Ivan circling Gainsell with wild eyes, and for a second, remembered that look in Jack's. He bent closer, his voice shockingly low and intimate after the bellowed commands. "Do not let vengeance get the better of you, Jack."

Jack’s eyes slid to meet his and he nodded. "Don't worry." He grinned. "No profit in it, is there!" He hefted a pouch with a fair amount of coin, weighed it in one hand and pocketed it, then tossed a small carved cinnabar dragon to little Matthew who was staring at the proceedings with round eyes. "Go get our goods back, luv." Jack leaned close to James and whispered, "Meet ya by the moorin's behind the Dorset. Take this an' pay the bargemen. Load it up an' be ready fer us. We'll come along as soon as we can, aye?"

"Aye." The thrum of blood in his veins was familiar, the smell of powder on his hands stirring an old and dangerous thrill. It would have scared James, that battle-fever knew not whose orders it followed, but for the one thing that mattered: doing what he had to, for what he had decided. His grin was feral, and he gripped Jack at the nape and kissed him with desperate fire.

Jack watched the flicker in James' eyes and was completely taken by surprise at the kiss. Surprised or not, he responded enthusiastically: James in battle lust was just as delicious as any other sort of lust. He broke away with a laugh and tucked the pouch into James' pocket. "I'm aimin' to get our Irish friend here and let 'em both stew in their own juices. You go get us that cargo, luv."

All lust aside, Jack was careful not to use names.

"Take care of the boy," James whispered, then straightened. "Andre, Van, Jan, with me." Together, they stormed down the stairs.

Jack swayed to where Gainsell was hanging and bent double to look him in the face. "Don't look very comfy, luv. Would you like a nice lie-down?"

Behind him, Ivan cracked his knuckles and a few of the Dutchmen laughed.

"Hoist him down afore his brain bloody explodes. No need to hurt him. Much." He turned to Matthew, who was terribly torn between imitating the little dragon's fearsome scowl and watching the heft of Sir John's belly quiver. "Hey, barnacle, let's go downstairs an' see wot we find, aye?"

Matthew nodded with all the grimness he could muster. "I'll ride down on my dragon!"

Jack laughed and swatted him down the stairs to where Pietr had the few servants under guard in the kitchen. He beckoned to one small, dark boy, another shilling appearing between his fingers. "You speak English, my fine sir?"

The boy's eyes were fixed on Matthew and he nodded. "Sir."

Jack crouched down in front of him. "Know yer way t' the docks? The big ship bein' repaired there? The Chimaera?"

"Oh yessir. Saw it come in, fine English ship!" The coin disappeared again as Jack crooked a finger for him to follow into a little study, rummaged in the desk for paper and dipped the quill. "You'll get double that if ya take this to the captain of that fine ship and give him this letter. Don't tell him nuthin', just bring him right back here, savvy? He wears a red coat, very rich, and has bright blue eyes. Y'know who I mean?"
The boy's eyes widened and he grinned a gap-toothed smile. "You pirate?"

Jack raised one eyebrow. "You wanna turn pirate y'self, mate?"

The lad's head bobbed like a goose over a trough. "Aye aye! You give now?"

Jack laughed. "When ya come back with the captain in the red coat." He folded the letter and sealed it with Sir John's ring, which had somehow got into his pocket. "G'wan, then." His eyes followed the small figure and he snapped his fingers for Jurgen, "Follow him and make sure, but don't let y'self be seen. Come right back if there's gonna be trouble."

The remaining servants were quite content to eat what would have been Sir John's luncheon in the kitchen under Pietr's watchful eye. Jack bounded back up the stairs to the office.

Ivan had Gainsell upright again and tied to his desk chair with the drapery cords, a handkerchief stuffed in his mouth. The others were busily ransacking the upper rooms as Jack plopped himself in an armchair, his leg dangling over the arm. "Mattie, y'see anythin' else 'round here ya want? Ivan, there's no need t'make a goulash of him. Too fat and old anyways."

Matthew made a grab for an elaborate penknife and crawled up into Jack's lap, brandishing it. "Can I have it? Please?"

"Sure, luv. All part o' the plunder. " He leaned forward and whispered, "Don't let Jamie see it, though. He might not be so pleased."

Matthew's grin widened and he tucked the small knife into his belt, draping his shirt over it. He stared at Gainsell's red face, then flinched when the fat man glared back. "He looks angry."

"Aye, he does. Though wot cause he should have to be angry I've no idea. Y'see, barnacle, Sir John here thought to have me danglin' from a noose. Did manage t'get me branded and that after havin' engaged my valuable services transporting some goods for him 'bout five years back." Jack shook his head and wagged one finger at Gainsell. "That wasn't very nice at all. So this is just a little payback for treatin' me so shabbily."

Matthew tugged Jack's sleeve up and examined the brand closely. Before, the tattoo had always been of far more interest. "Means he got himself burnt with th'fire of his own brand? His face do look red enough."

Jack guffawed and ruffled the boy's curls. "Yer a smart lad, Mattie! He certainly did. Now let's see wot other devilment he's been up to, shall we?"

There were several extremely interesting documents in the hidden compartment of Sir John's desk that James had so cleverly shown them. Jack read through them swiftly, stacking them to one side while Vorst served up a round of the man's finest brandy.

Jack's dark eyes lingered on the fuming East India man over his snifter. "You have been busy, luv. All manner of false manifests and doctored shippin' reports. I wonder you didn't turn pirate, Sir John. Y've got the right temperament fer it."

Pietr yelled a quick warning from below and Jack looked out the window to see Hamilton striding up the path, clearly irritated at having been disturbed over a done deal. Jack's smile lit on Matthew. "Barnacle, will ya go down and let our Captain in? Pietr'll open th' door."

Matthew bounced to his feet and held out his dragon. "You watch out for it." He bolted downstairs and waited for Pietr to pull the huge double door open, chewing on his fingernails and already
craning his neck to look up.

Hamilton looked down at the boy, his brow furrowing. "Matthew? Wha' in Holy Mary's name are you doin' here?" He pushed his way inside, then stopped as Pietr's pistol cocked behind him, his hand on his sword.

"I wouldn't do that unless ya want an extra hole in yer head. Although that might be a blessin' and let out some o' those whisky fumes." Jack sauntered down the stairs as Pietr and Jurgen disarmed the startled Irishman. "Please do come up. Sir John an' me, we've been havin' a little discussion and we're anxious fer ya to join us."

"Spanish? Wha' the…"

"Captain. Jack. Sparrow."

All those little doubts and prods that Hamilton had been storing in the back of his mind for four months fell together like pieces of a Chinese puzzle. His eyes got brighter.

"So it's been Captain Sparrow pilotin' me ship across the Atlantic? Well now, laddie, that's quite interestin'."

Jack's smile was impossibly cheerful. "Innit? Upstairs, mate."

Hamilton knew better than to risk an assault when surrounded by loaded pistols. He shrugged and took the steps two at a time, glaring at the office doors. "Am I t'believe that ye've had dealings here before?"

Jack shoved a pistol in his back. "Oh, a few." He stood back and let Hamilton take in Sir John and the Dutchmen; Ivan with his wild black beard, the ransacked office. He beckoned Pietr. "Get him a glass. No need to be uncivil." He handed Matthew back his dragon with a pat. "You stick close, barnacle, and you'll see how a real pirate works."

"Jus' wha' ya think yer doin', Sparrow?" Hamilton's red coat whirled around his legs as he turned to face Jack.

"Me? I'm goin' home, luv. The home I was so rudely taken from."

"Not on my ship, yer not! I'll turn ya over t' the Navy fast as—" Ivan clamped a huge hand on his shoulder and forced him into a chair, as Jack handed him the brandy.

Jack just grinned at him. "Drink up, mate."

He waited until the brandy was nearly finished and tried to remember to hold his tongue. After all, there were still too many things that could go wrong, but he couldn't resist one last dig. "Now that you've had a bit o' refreshment, luv, I should tell ya that it's not wise to impress a pirate. Makes 'em cranky, y'know?"

Hamilton glared at him. "I don't know wha' y'think yer gonna do, Mr. Sparrow, but yer gonna regret it."

Jack refilled the fine crystal. "To be sure. Have another drink. And try t'remember, Cap'n, never trust a pirate, aye?" His eyes met Ivan's over Hamilton's shoulder and he smiled.

One blow was all it took to knock the Irishman unconscious. Clearly, Jack thought, the Russian fist is mightier than the Irish skull. He rose and bowed as Gainsell followed Hamilton into the land of
Nod and the two were carted down to the wine cellar.

Jack locked the door and the Dutchmen nailed a few boards across it. He grinned at their work and pinned the false manifests to the boards with Sir John's elegant letter-opener. "And a fond farewell, messieurs, from CAPTAIN Jack Sparrow!"

He winked at Matthew. "Shall we go find Jamie?"

"Yes, Captain Sparrow, Sir!"

"Vorst, lock up the servants in the kitchen. Make sure it'll take 'em a while to pick their way out. And you!" H turned to the little dark lad. "I believe I owe you yer fair share." He handed over two silver coins worth much more than a trifling few shillings and patted his shoulder. "Yer a good man! Now, you behave and I'm sure yer Mam could use some o' that. G'wan. Get movin'." He watched the boy scamper out the back door and grinned. "Let's move out, lads. We've a ship t'catch."

Jack's ten men split into two groups, taking different routes through the maze of streets until they met under the shadow of the dock where the Navy scow, Dorset was moored.

There was no sign of James.

The men passed around various bottles pilfered from Gainsell's cellar and sat on the sand, watching the tide rise more and more.

Jack hid his growing fears and played dragon with little Matthew. It should have been easy: get the barge, pay like a proper customer, unlock the bloody warehouse and load it up. Nothing simpler. So where the hell was James?

He swallowed his worry and tried not to swallow too much rum.

Jack chattered as long as he could, but the tide was creeping up to lap at the toes of his boots. Another hour and they would have to find different quarters. He kept poking his head out to check the docks for Navy or Indiamen, wondering how long those locks would hold Gainsell's staff. As soon as one of them got loose, there would be hell to pay. He hoped to be long gone by then, but the time dragged and he fretted. James wouldn't go to the Navy. He couldn't.

Could he?

A cold chill washed over him so hard even Matthew looked up at him. His eyes were dark as pitch, the lines between his brows cut deep, his small mouth drooping.

Finally, he turned to Vorst with a heavy sigh. "Get ready t'move. We'll have to take the ship without the bloody ivory." He swallowed hard and plastered a smile to his lips.

The waves lapped against wooden planks, licking steadily at the stone footbridge. Matthew stared at them, then took off after Jack, tugging hard at his breeches. "Jack! Jack! Look!"

Jack raised his head from settling the stolen cutlass and pistol. For just one moment, he could see nothing but the late afternoon glare of the sunlight, then a black shape glided towards them, figures moving like shadow-puppets against the sky. He blinked and squinted, one hand shading his eyes.

Oars beat against the surface, hauling the shape closer and closer: a barge, and at its bow, James, a tricorn pulled deep into his face. He raised a hand and they drew in next to the Dorset. James jumped onto the footbridge. "My apologies for the delay." He looked up, and the sun hit his face, twinkling in his eyes. "I had to intercept the Chimaera's supplies." With a lazy wave, he indicated further
barges pulling ashore.

Jack would have cut a caper, done a hornpipe, a somersault or otherwise made a complete fool of himself if he hadn't known that every one of the new Dutch crew's eyes were fixed on him. He squared his shoulders with a grin. "Looks like ya found a few of the crew as well. Hullo Bertie!" He turned to bellow orders, turned back and flew into James' arms for a swift kiss, Dutchmen be damned. "Yer wonderful."

There was no disguising the relief in his face.

"Why, yes, I required their support to persuade the merchant we were, in fact, authorised to pick up the supplies allotted to a Captain Hamilton." James brushed Jack's hair back, then settled the tricorn from his head onto Jack's. "I'll want that one back, but for now you need to look the part," he whispered, then stood straight. "Where to now, Captain?"

Jack's eyes were shining like Matthew's with his dragon, making him look absurdly young. "Let's go get our ship, then."

They poured onto the barges and helped pole to where the Chimaera bobbed and swayed. Jack signalled for quiet, then, followed by James, Ivan and Van, he vaulted to the gang and strode on deck.

It was on the tip of his tongue to make his usual 'taking over the ship' speech but he swaggered amidships and stared. The better part of the crew was assembled and Berkely stepped forward to greet them.

"Ahoy, Jack Sparrow." James had to fight down the impression of Berkely looking almost military. Berkely looked over the Dutchmen approvingly, then turned back to the assembled crewmen. "You've got something to add to that, lads?"

"Captain Sparrow," Bertie said, stepping forward to join the Chimaera's crew.

"Captain Sparrow," Cookie confirmed.

"Captain Sparrow." James' head jerked up at Griffin's voice.

"Captain Sparrow." The acknowledgements grew into cheers, until each man had said it at least once.

Berkely turned once more. "Welcome aboard, Captain Sparrow."

Jack swayed forward to pump Berkely's hand in a firm grip, trying very hard not to grin too broadly. "Thank you one an' all. I can't promise we won't have t'cut and run pretty damned quick, but I can promise you all that we hold to the Code. Each man gets his fair share. What say you to that?"

James was fairly certain that the resounding cheer answering was, "AYE!"

James felt Jack take a deep breath as he turned and bounded to the quarterdeck. "Then wot are you lot waitin' for? Load in that cargo an' make ready to sail. We're for the Spanish Main, lads!"

The deck seemed to shake under another "Aye, aye," as the crew scattered and went about their tasks.

James turned briskly. "Vorst, Jan, stow the ivory in the orlop. Ivan, Andre, Van; the supplies. Cookie will show you where. The rest of you to the mizzen, haul the yards higher. Move!"
Barely an hour later, he climbed the quarterdeck, drenched in sweat. "We are ready to weigh anchor."

Jack looked up from the line he was hauling, in his shirtsleeves, the hat tipped over one eye. "Who's not comin' with us, James?"

"Longthorpe. Deacon. Nevill. Stevens. Jackson. Baily...." The list was long, nearly two dozen names, and James could see Jack's face get longer with each of them. Almost too many, even with the Dutch to cover the losses. "Hamilton," he finished with a crooked smile.

Jack shrugged. "We'll have to do without 'em then. Awright, you dogs! Weigh anchor!" he bellowed, taking the helm and accepting the spyglass from James. He scanned the docks, but there was nothing except the usual interest at one of the big English ships making way.

"All hands!" He grinned at James. "We're goin' home, luv."

"So we are, Jack. So we are." For a moment, his hand joined Jack's on the wheel, then he put his shoulder to the capstan until the Chimaera gave a shudder, her anchor weighed.

It seemed only seconds later that her sails filled and she strained with the tide to get out of her prison. James had climbed the foretop and sat there, the coast behind them, sea stretching out in front of them. Homewards.

He smiled as he climbed down, working hard with the rest of the crew until late in the night, alternately yelling commands and climbing aloft himself, as though he no longer knew whether to be officer or tar.

Jack stayed at the helm, his eyes fixed on the horizon. "Well, now, my fine lady. We know each other, don't we? An' you know I'll treat ya right. So you trust ole Jack, aye?"

Before he turned the wheel over to Van, a pilot of some repute among his own crew, he called every man on deck. "We're gonna split into four watches 'stead of two. James here is First Mate, Berkely's Bo'sun and Bertie's Second Mate. Any o' you lot object to Vorst as Quartermaster? Good. Awright, Berks, you separate the watches. I know it ain't gonna be easy, but we need all the speed we can get outta her. The Chimaera, lads!" He raised his flask.

"The Chimaera! The Chimaera!"

James thought he could feel the ship herself shiver in delight, a low thrum running through her timbers. "The Chimaera," he shouted.

Above them, starlight twinkled and the moon herself, half-hidden behind her veil seem to blow a breezy kiss to speed them on their way.

Jack finally stumbled into the galley when the last crate was stowed and the Chimaera was in Van's capable hands for the hellwatch. Most of the day crews had already collapsed into their hammocks and even Matthew had tired of using the soup's steam as dragon breath and lay curled beneath the big trestle table, clutching his pet prize. Cookie put a mug of grog in front of Jack and was nearly asleep in it by the second draught.

A tired cheer emerged from a corner, then Ivan collapsed under the table, snoring loudly. Jack felt someone prod him and opened his eyes to James cradling a sleeping Matthew in his arms. "Come, lest you wish to share accommodations with Ivan."

Jack nodded, his eyes half-closed. It had been utterly exhilarating and exhausting; the Chimaera was
well on her way, speeding with the powerful westward currents towards Africa and he ignored his stomach's grumbling. Food could wait until breakfast. He followed James like a sleepwalker.

They met Berkely in the causeway, stumbling towards his own cabin. "C'mon, gimme the lad. He don't deserve yer noise." James smiled gratefully and handed over the sleeping boy, stowing the dragon away safely.

"An' don't keep the Cap'n up too long. He's got a ship t'run."

Jack smiled sweetly and giggled in a less-than-fearsomely piratical fashion, pushed open the door to the Great Cabin and stumbled to the Captain's quarters. He fell face down across the bed, fully clothed.

James tugged his boots loose, then the coat, folding it neatly on one of the chairs. He eyed the bed longingly, but instead went for the large cabinets and sea chests in the corner.

Jack could hear him rummage, then felt a soft, familiar weight on his head. "Judging by the smell, I believe this is yours."

Jack opened one eye, his hand reaching up, and grinned. "Ya found it!" He blinked himself awake and sat up, taking the hat off and reverently brushing off the crown. "I thought he'd chucked it f'sure."

"It seems Scarletcoat and you have the same taste in fashion. I hope he also has kept my sword. Now make some room there." James' shirt joined the clothes pile before he sat down on the bed with a yawn.

Jack slid over and pulled off his boots, letting them fall to the deck. He tried to lie down, got his pistol butt in the stomach and groaned, before standing up and stripping off every stitch of clothing, letting it all fall where it would before throwing himself down on the bed. "Now, tell me, James? How'd your part of our adventure go? Tell me th' story." His eyes twinkled under heavy lids.

"And you always claimed it was Matthew who required a tale to sleep." For the first time that day, James allowed himself to relax, stretching out, looking up into the quiet dark of the cabin. "I would hardly call it an adventure. I had barely paid for the barge when I heard a merchant complaining loudly that he needed at least three more ships if he were to fulfil all his sales.

"You should have heard him preen over his important customers, and that this order was on Sir John Merriweather Gainsell's own authority. It seems the payment for the ivory was to be part in victuals." James quirked a smile. "I am a gentleman, Jack. Thus I offered the good man my help bringing the supplies to the Chimaera, as I knew from the Captain himself that it was vital they arrived that very day."

Jack cackled a laugh, the battered tricorn falling over his face as he slid under the blanket. "A very sneaky gentleman indeed!"

"To his credit, he was suspicious, proclaiming that he had orders to only sign everything over to Captain Hamilton personally." James chuckled softly. "You should have seen Bertie. I barely heard him approach, but then he haggled as though he were born in these bazaars. The merchant barely got a word in, and in the end he insisted on adding a brace of pistols and this hat to the deal." Another chuckle. "Very well. I asked for the hat. I need something to protect my face from the sun."

Jack laughed into the pillow, one dark eye peering up at James mischievously. "Certainly not to keep y'self from bein' recognised by certain other members of our former crew, aye? And good fer Bertie!"
I kinda figured he'd be good at that. Must have him at the negotiations when we restock on the far side of Africa."

"I wager he could haggle that dragon from Mathew if he set his sights on it." James' content laughter faded and he bit his lip. "Jack?"

"Wot, luv? You've got th' makin's of a buccaneer under all that brass, Jamie!" Jack yawned and snuggled into his pillow.

"Were you worried I did not?" James chewed on his lip and turned to his side, eyes wide. "When you saw me pull alongside in the barge today... you seemed so relieved. Did you think I was incapable of doing what was necessary?"

Jack rolled over, but not before James saw the nervous working of his mouth, the shift of his eyes. "No, luv. I jus'...hoped ya had not run into trouble, that's all."

Silence fell, broken by James' swallowing hard, then the rustle of linen as he rolled on his back again. "Jack?" Another silent breath, two. "Please tell me the truth."

Jack sat up, his head bowed, peering at James through his hair. "Hard fer me to trust, Jamie. Whenever I gotta depend on someone like that...." He fell silent, gnawing on his lip.

Then he looked up and James had never, not in more than four months, seen such an expression on Jack's face. "I can't help but worry, luv."

James touched his arm, just barely, looking into his face, searching. "Why?" he whispered. "I gave you my word. I...I had hoped you knew me well enough to trust at least that."

Jack's face looked pinched in the dim lantern light, haggard and drawn. "It's not that, luv. I do trust you." He took a deep breath and reached out for the bottle on the nightstand. "I can't help it. Once burned, twice shy, eh? Makes it so hard sometimes...like I gotta have things in front o' me face or I don't believe they're real." He swallowed a bit more. "The mutiny, James. I can't help rememberin' it."

James sat up as well, a silver silhouette against the darkness behind him. He nodded slowly. "But is this not different? I am not only your First Mate, Jack. I am your mate." His voice was firm.

Jack smiled at the darkness and one finger reached out to touch James' hand. "It is. I told ya I can't help it. It just happens. I get all ---I dunno----nervy." He sighed and collected himself. After all, no sense being hung for a goat, he thought. "Y'see, I trusted someone t'handle negotiatin' with Barbossa. He called out that it was done, but when I opened the doors, well, it all went t'hell an' I ended up marooned. I know it don't make sense."

"Bill?" James' voice was infinitely soft, the single word barely a question at all. He turned his hand, offering the flat of it for Jack to touch. "You trusted him with more than the negotiations?"

His answer was a sharp intake of breath and a faint jingle as Jack nodded. For a long time, there were no sounds in the cabin but the creaking of the timbers, and their breathing. Jack pressed his hand again and curled into the pillow. "I'm a loony old sod, luv. Don't pay any attention. I'm just dead bloody tired."

James pulled him into his arms and did not speak for a while. "Betrayal hurts. I know."

Jack nodded against his chest. "Worst thing in th' world, luv. But common as dirt." He laughed softly. "Don't know why I should complain. It isn't like it doesn't happen a thousand times a day, is
James wished he could say anything to counter that, then just shook his head. "We just did it today."

"Not really. I woulda taken the bloody ship with or without the crew. An' since Hamilton impressed us, that don't square as to us bein' a part of the crew at all really." Jack grinned. He always had a loophole or two that he could wriggle through when he put his mind to it.

"I know. We never swore him any loyalty. But this was mutiny." James sighed and suppressed a shiver. "He was not that bad a Captain. He did well by the crew, better than many Na...better than most."

"Aye. And if you were still back at Fort Charles, you'da slung a rope round his neck in a trice," Jack observed dryly.

He stretched and rolled the kinks out of his shoulders. "I'm afraid four months o'forced labour makes it a bit hard for me to have much sympathy fer our dear departed former Captain, luv. Not to mention all manner o' plunder I may have lost along with me time. And lest ya get too sentimental, Jamie, let us not forget them four Letters o' Marque and all the good English cargos lost to Spain, France or God knows where. I believe yer sympathy is on shaky ground, luv."

James flinched. Jack was right, and yet it was hard to stop thinking of Hamilton as captain. James had never truly accepted his authority, but still, instinctively he refused to defy it. He had learnt that all his life, knew how vital it was that a captain's authority was never put to question. He had seen the ships and crews of bad captains, of cruel captains; had served there. They did not look like the Chimaera.

Hamilton also was a pirate, worse, a traitor, but somehow, the conclusion was not as simple as it should be. "You are right," James murmured, then fell silent.

The silence stretched and he searched the darkness for answers until Jack's touch startled him. He smiled. "Good night."

Jack curled into his arms and kissed his neck. "Night luv," he mumbled before diving into a dreamless sleep.

James lay awake a while longer, listening to Jack breathe, feeling the Chimaera's soft tilt, the caress of the wind from the casements, brushing away what he imagined had to be traces of the cabin's former owner, until he, too, slept.

It was still dark when he jerked awake, pushing himself upright. His brow was sweat-wet and he breathed hard, shivering as the sweatdrops rolled down his body.

The moonlight outlined Jack's flask and he took it, drinking deep. Another gulp helped to calm his shuddery breath, enough so that he could hear the even ones beside him. Jack had rolled over, clutching at his pillow as possessively as a sleeping man could.

James smiled and lightly touched Jack's shoulder. He let his hand lie there until it stopped trembling, then ran it up Jack's neck, brushing away the dark locks. His lips followed, mapping every inch with the barest touch.

His breath hitched and he pulled away, easing himself onto the mattress again, shivering. An arm draped around Jack, pressing him tightly to himself, he fell asleep once more.

Jack's eyes opened at the first touch, following the line of kisses and his lip lifted against the
pillowslip in a half-smile. Trust James to celebrate their first real night of freedom by dreaming about hangings. He would never quite understand the peculiarities of English gentlemen, but he more than appreciated the kisses and the warmth against him. He closed his eyes and tumbled back to dreams.

Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Seventeen
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--XX.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

The Chimaera is on the run and the pirate and the commodore's accord is complete

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtfhw for her excellent beta.

There is an X-rated illustration with this chapter
Wind and fear worked in tandem to fly the Chimaera out of retribution's reach. Straining in the wind, her sails full, James saw what a beautiful ship she was, no longer a prison but a herald of freedom. She was in fine shape and led by good hands: it would be a miracle if the East India Company's ships he had seen lumber in the harbour caught her.

Spirits were high, even on a ship on the run. He had not anticipated that, but he felt the same thrill as always on a fine ship. That death was on their trail did not matter. It was an elation fear could not conquer.

Jack was up long before dawn and endured James' teasing with a grin: he'd fallen asleep with his precious hat crammed onto his head three night's running.

Again, anyone who had ever seen him on shore would have doubted the tireless Captain was the same lazy oaf whose only concern seemed to be the level of liquid in his bottle. If he wasn't at the helm, he could be found anywhere aboard the Chimaera, and he was certainly willing to roll up his sleeves as they raced southwest across the Indian Ocean, taking full advantage of the strong currents.

Their fourth day out, James found him in the Great Cabin, ink stained and cursing as he poured over the new manifests and the ship's log.

"Jamie, got a minute? I need a proper bloody quartermaster who can write in English!"

"Of course, Captain," James' voice was less than serious, more than teasing. He sat himself opposite of Jack and went over the manifests, then nodded once, dipped a quill into the ink and began writing.

It was strange to do so again, to see his own writing in more than the few words and letters used to teach the boy. Paper had been scarce and he had spared most of for Matthew's exercises.

"Vorst is as good as they get, but I can't read half o' wot he's wrtten," Jack complained, tipping the hat over his eyes and putting his feet up on the table.
James stopped for too long, leaving an ink blotch, and hissed a curse, quickly sanding it. "His style certainly has quite the...flourish."

"Bloody Germans an' their fancy script." Jack laughed and poked his head over James' shoulder, kissing the tip of his ear. "You've such a neat hand, luv."

He threw himself back into his chair and uncorked the bottle with his teeth. "Wanna snort?"

"After supper." James shook his head, his concentration back on the manifest when he suddenly began to laugh. "Poked Fish. Did he dream of mermaids? One of my Lieutenants used to do that."

"An' wot in hell is a Frostbit Froothaggle?" Jack peered at the page in dismay and took another swallow. "Damnation. Who else aboard can write?"

"Matthew. You, possibly."

"Griffin flour. Not that I would object, but did he really grind the man?"

Jack barked a laugh then tugged at the small tuft bravely growing below his lower lip. "Speakin' of Griffin, he can write. I could have him translate. Seems he's pretty savvy with Dutch, too."

James froze, crossed out another line. "I can do it."

He sighed, put away the quill and looked up. "I do not want the man aboard in the first place, but giving him any responsibility means courting trouble."

Jack's mouth twisted. "I know ye've still got a beef with him, but Jamie, I need the bloody help if I'm not gonna be stuck in here tryin' to decipher this. An' you don't have much spare time neither. Ah well, let's muddle along an' see how it goes." He was silent for a moment, tracing a coastline in a splash of rum on the table with one finger. "The men respect 'im."

"For what, I wonder. His recklessness, or his cruelty?" James sneered, scratching at the paper with the too dry quill. Jack settled down with a sigh. "He's tough an' smart. Don't miss a trick that one." He sniffed at the air drifting up from the galley. "Good God, wot is Cookie doin' down there? Braisin' bilge?"

James sniffed. "With an odor of rotten fish. In other words, he is cooking supper." He smiled, wrote another two lines of the manifest and bit his lip. Another line, then he sanded it and put the quill away. "Jack. I do not approve and nothing you say will change that. I think he is dangerous and should rather hang from the yardarm than anything else. But if you tell me you need him, I will not gainsay that. You are the Captain."

Jack stretched and bent over him. "I don't wanna go tweakin' me First Mate's nose now, do I?" He thieved a kiss or two. "Wot say you we look around at wot else is stowed in here. The Captain's quarters are worse than the orlop. Wot a bleedin' mess!"

"Anything to avoid supper for a little while longer." James stretched and neatly rolled the manifest and the charts. "I would like to find my sword. I dread to think that he sold it, but I could not find it so far." He rifled aimlessly through one of the chests, hefting a fine pistol, inlaid with delicate ivory designs. "If that tastes as it smells, I think the pistol might be mercy."

"Don't go loadin' it. It'll be too much temptation. James, I don't think I'll survive Cookie. I can just hear the eulogy: Fought undead pirates, braved the seven seas, undone by stew." Jack pulled open another chest and began to rummage through it like a mole in a lovely patch of garden.
"At least we have a lot of ballast to throw overboard." James snapped open a compass. "If we do not find yours, this one does not point North either." He dug deeper, then suddenly went still. "Andre."

"Wot about him? Y'think Hamilton ever tried this on?" Jack held up a corset with an impressive quantity of whalebone stays.

James shook his head and rose, desperately captivated by his train of thought. "Andre said he worked as a cook while ridding himself of Cookie's efforts at the leeward rail." He sniffed again and shuddered. "Cookie is lonely. He enjoys talking. You cannot simply replace him, but you can assign Andre as his aid. It will help Andre's English, and if we are lucky, keep us from voluntarily starving to death."

Jack stopped throwing various garments around and stared at James as if he'd promised salvation. "Yer snowin' me! Andre can cook!" He grinned. "I wouldn't hurt ole Cookie fer the world, but oh God, me innards'll turn to muck if I gotta eat another four months' worth o' that. Put 'em together and pray fer a miracle. At least the flour's fresh, so there's bread. Jamie!" His shout startled the First Mate who nearly bashed his head on one of the crates.

He held up a scabbard and sword-belt. "It's yours, innit?"

"I think so." James took a close look, then looped it around his waist. "It is. Now where is that sword?"

Jack dove into the chest, tossing its contents out like a scavenging jackal. "Not here. Check that one." He pointed to a long crate against the bulwark.

James nodded and went for it like a hawk, impatiently tossing out a pile of garments. He held up a lady's nightgown and grimaced, then dug deeper, pulling out Jack's cutlass and pistol, still wound in the worn leather baldric. "The amount of rust marks this as doubtlessly yours."

Jack plopped to the deck on his arse, cradled the old weapons in his lap. "I woulda sworn he'd chucked 'em," he murmured softly, balancing the pistol in one hand and making a half-hearted stab at a crate with the cutlass.

James dove back, tossing out more garments frantically, giddy when he saw a gleam of steel. Triumphantly, he yanked his sword out of the chest, running his fingers over the familiar handle as if transfixed by this reminder of what he'd almost lost. Suddenly, he understood far better why Jack had been so eager to find his hat. Almost reverently, he slid it into its scabbard, the familiar weight comforting.

Jack grinned at him, bolted to his feet and stalked to the table for the bottle. "That calls fer a drink, mate!" Before James could wonder once more at his unending ability to swallow rum, he handed it over.

Jack edged his way through the mess on the floor, kicking at the garments. "Think he musta had six wives, like ole Henry. Or he was stockin' a high-tone bawdy house."

He lost his balance and grabbed for the bulwark, his fingers desperate for aid when they ran across a nearly-imperceptible seam. He whirled around, his fingertips gentle, until he felt a hidden hasp give at his touch. "Chinese. They're the only ones who can do that. Wot have we here?" The secret drawer slid open and he held up a roll of papers and a small promising-looking pouch.

Jack dug open the pouch first and even he was not so jaded by treasure to not whistle at the collection of gems that tumbled into his palm: four matched pearls of incredible size and lustre; two
diamonds, big as walnuts; a ruby the size of his eyeball and a square emerald that dwarfed them all. "Good Lord!"

For once, Jack Sparrow had no words at his command. He stared at them, awed: cut stones that enormous and fine were never for sale. They had royalty stamped all over them.

James weighed them in his palm. "Where did he steal those? And how did he manage to do it without his crew noticing?" He looked at the gems more closely, turning them in his hand before whistling softly. "Why does he even bother with ships like the ivory trader?"

"Don't think he stole 'em, luv. I think he was supposed to fence them, prob'ly in Spain or Italy. I'll wager ya four to six that were Gainsell's work. Like as not a bribe from one o' those little kings all over the Indies." He held the ruby up to the light where it splashed blood-deep reflections over his face. "We won't be able to get rid of such as this in Tortuga!"

James plucked the forgotten papers from his hands, unrolled them and whistled softly. "Shipping routes."

Jack peeked at them. "Jesus! All along Africa, through the Canaries, far out as New Spain. No wonder he was doin' such good business!"

The jewels tumbled back into the dark confines of the pouch and into the depths of Jack's pocket.

"Will you share these with the crew?" James' attention was still on the shipping routes, detailed and accurate charts. "English," he rolled the first paper and laid it on the desk. "Spanish." The next. "Portuguese."

Jack grinned without replying and prowled around the cabin, checking the bulwarks, the desk drawers, poking his nose into every cabinet and cupboard like an inquisitive moth. He yanked open one and pulled out a paper-wrapped package containing a gaudy Chinese shawl. "Looks like his sweetheart was a St. James doxy." He slung the scarlet silk over his hat and minced towards James. "Hey sailor! Lookin' t'get yer plumbin' wet?"

James tugged at the shawl to pull Jack close for a kiss when Matthew burst through the door like a whirlwind, running around them in circles. Finally, he stopped and looked up, his pout formidable. "I'm bored," he announced.

Jack giggled and draped the shawl around him. "That is th' first time I've ever heard a tar say such a thing! Wot's wrong, barnacle?"

"Nevill isn't there anymore. I've got nothing to do." He piled the shawl into a pillow on one side of his head and loudly snored into it.

"Well, with Nevill missin' the boat, we'll have t'keep you busy, won't we? Maybe I can make ya Chief Bilge Mate," Jack observed.

Matthew frowned. "Don't like the bilges." He wrinkled his nose, then hastily added, "Sir."

"Then you'll have t'take over fer Nevill an' be Chief Surgeon." Jack ruffled his hair and went back to rummaging.

He pulled out a red silk petticoat. "Did Hamilton keep a brace o' drabs in here? Lookit all this shite!" He tossed out a pair of satin slippers with high heels, then held up an old velvet court mask, peering through the eyeholes at the boy. "Care fer a walk in th' garden, young sir?"
Matthew looked up, suddenly serious, and, with all the weight of a nine year-old, declared, "Captain Jack, you are silly."

James snorted. "Oh yes, Matthew is indeed a wise lad." He plucked the mask from Jack's fingers.

Jack emerged from the crate with a small sword. "Am I so silly now? I think this is just yer size, barnacle."

He held it out of reach, laughing. "Still a silly ole sod, am I?"

James plucked it from Jack's fingers and winked at Matthew. "Yes, you are. Captain."

Matthew bounced from Jack to James and clutched at his breeches. James tossed the sword back to Jack with a grin.

Jack put his tongue out at James and held the little blade up. "Ya promise that I'm not silly?"

"Matthew, don't lie," James admonished, bent over the chest until he could haul out the matching leather scabbard, complete with belt.

Jack handed it to the lad with a grin. "Despite bein' an arrogant bastard and insubordinate, Jamie's the finest swordsman you can ever find. If you ask him nice, he might teach ya properly."

Matthew hugged Jack's leg, then rushed over to James and looked up at him with big eyes. "Pleaaaaaaaaasse?"

James laughed, took the little blade and stowed it in its scabbard. He scrutinised Matthew for a moment, then nodded. "I will. Under the condition that you do not play with this outside our lessons."

The boy would have accepted a condition that required him to swim with sharks and nodded eagerly, bouncing about with his newest treasure.

Jack hefted his worn old swordbelt and stood to sling it over his shoulder. His hand caressed the plain hilt and he rubbed at it with his shirtsleeve. "Missed this old thing. Seen me through many a fight. I wonder if any of the crew'll recognise this stuff? Mattie, how'd ya get aboard the Chimaera, lad?"

"And here I thought your sharp wit was better than any blade. Or is it as rusty as this one?" James teased, kneeling in front of Matthew to fasten his swordbelt properly.

The boy was blushing and chewed on his lip. "Tried t'nick something from Berk's pocket. He took me aboard then."

"Best thing as ever happened to ya!" Jack grinned over the neck of his bottle. "Whereabouts? Ya said you'd never been further than the Lesser Antilles." He laughed as Matthew grabbed the hilt of his small blade and grimaced. "Made you a proper sailor, they did. Now yer a proper pirate! We should give you a proper pirate name."

"So that he may scare his enemies with the ridicule of it?"

Matthew was trying to scowl, failing as he began nibbling on his lip again. "T'were in Nassau. Just after the Captain got his Letter there."

Jack made a face at James and crowed, "Mad Matt, scourge o' the high seas!" He bounded up again
and waded through the mess of clothing, towards the desk. "Well let's see how ya can plunder, Mad Matt."

Matthew fairly pounced on the desk, tossing the clothes to the floor, lighting on red seal wax, kneading it. He bent over a piece of paper, and his grin faded. He grabbed it and ran over to James. "I can't read that!"

James took it, then chuckled. "That is because it is Spanish, Matthew." He handed it to Jack. "A letter of gratitude."

Jack scanned it with sharp eyes. "From His Catholic Majesty no less, fer services rendered. I'll warrant that cost a few Englishmen their ears."

"Don't remind me. Combine that with the shipping routes, and he could soon rival your reputation."


To be perfectly honest, Jack didn't give two pins for England, Spain, France or Outer Mongolia. His business was loot and he wasn't overly concerned as to its origin. "Well, the charts will keep us informed of His Catholic Bleedin' Majesty's patrols. Bet he's got the same from the frogs, too." His eyes were glittering again. "Wot luck!"

"Jack. Your eyes are speaking 'plunder'. Stop it."

Jack snorted a laugh and buried his face in the bottle. "Occupational hazard, luv."

Matthew scavenged through the drawers, losing interest in the letters which James picked up. One, long and signed with a seal he recognised, held his attention. Stormclouds gathered in his face and his fingers twitched on the paper. With a snarl, he handed it over to Jack. "Read that."

Jack read it, the faint moustache on his lip twitching. "Well well, he's not the first to be running blacks to the British colonies, luv."

His expression was airy, but he swilled down more rum. Of all things, Jack hated the slave trade. It was supremely profitable and equally loathsome in his estimation. "Dirty bastard."

He could have made his fortune a hundred times over but for that one thing and, while Jack would never have elaborated to a living soul, he never forgot that Spanish conquerors had made slaves of the natives in the New World. That cut a little too close to blood relations for Jack Sparrow to forgive. "Quite the twisted web our Irish friend was weavin'."

"It is cut now, and he will not do it anymore," James hissed icily, glad that Matthew was too busy rummaging through the drawers to pay them any attention. "Or will he? What did you do with him?"

Jack's smile didn't reach his eyes; they were black as night and unaccountably cold. "Left him and Sir John in the wine cellar with their crooked accounts pinned to the door. By the time they got their arses rescued, those papers had to be in the hands of the East India Company. I think he's in fer a rather large spot o' trouble."

James whistled softly. "I am not sure he will appreciate the irony."

They were interrupted by Matthew's squeal as he held up a small wooden box, delicately carved with intricate designs and tricky catches. He brandished his find at Jack. "It's a dragon's cavern," he announced.
"So it is, barnacle! Can ya figger out how to open it?"

All the politics and talk of slaving was giving him a headache. He much preferred honest piracy where any ship was fair game and the fun was the plunder, not passing state documents around like tea cakes, or selling human beings like cargo. He stalked over to the bed and sat down, scowling into his rum and watching Matthew fiddle with the box.

James lightly touched his arm and sat down beside him. "I think we missed supper. What a terrible pity."

Matthew made a gagging noise and bounced on the bed, stretching out beside them and working at the puzzlebox with stubborn determination.

Jack answered with a half-hearted belch and gulped down more rum. "Here, Mattie, let me try it. Y' see those seams. Run yer finger over 'em. Yeah, that. Push it from the end. Try th' other one." The box lid lifted a half-inch. "Now, can ya find another slidin' bit?"

Matthew closed his eyes and examined it more closely. His head drooped forward and he yawned, then snapped awake as the second catch slid open.

They both crowed as the box popped open and Jack dumped the contents onto the blanket, pushing a few old shillings around idly. He picked up a locket and gazed at a young woman's face in an old-fashioned cap and scowled. "Sentimental old sod." He tossed it next to a curl of red-gold hair tied with a bit of thread.

"Think yer dragon has a fine home now, barnacle."

Matthew slipped the dragon out from under his shirt and reverently placed it in its new den. James rose and went back to the desk, plucking two embroidered handkerchiefs from the pile of clothes. One he gave to Matthew. "Here, give your dragon some bedding. It is enough if I have to sleep without because Jack steals it."

In the other, he scooped up Hamilton's mementos, tying it closed, face strangely blank. "There is no need to defile this. Traitor or not, Captain or not, his memories deserve respect," he said quietly, stowing it in one of the drawers.

Jack was staring at nothing, thinking of the locket and the unknown woman. If his guess was right, he'd been looking at Hamilton's mother, immortalised with tiny brushstrokes on ivory. He thought of his own, a by-product of Spanish possession in the Floridas, without so much as a tombstone and took another drink. No sense in that, Jack ole boy. Keep t' yer course an' don't get yerself distracted, he snapped to himself.

Matthew had used the mention of bedding to curl himself into theirs, half asleep within seconds. James wrenched the box from him to stow it on the nightstand. Seconds later, the boy was fast asleep. James drew the coverlet up around him and ruffled his hair. "It seems it was good we did not eat any supper. We will need the space."

Jack smiled absently, his brow still creased in thought.

He sighed and sat up to toe off his boots, pulling at the slipknot of his breeches and let them both tumble to the deck before lying back, staring at the beams above them.

James undressed in silence and slipped into bed beside him. "Slavery is a despicable practice," he said after a while. "Appalling even if it is not someone dear to oneself." Another pause, long minutes only filled by their soft breathing. "Who?"
The dark eyes slid sideways to meet his for a moment, unreadable as inky waters. Jack blinked. "Why?"

James swallowed a sigh, blinking up at the rafters, then at him, his eyes clear. "I am not blind, Jack. I see the way you look at me, at anything, since I gave you that letter. I wager I see it better than you do."

Jack lips twisted into a small grin. "Damn you fer bein' such a clever lad. If ya must know, me Mam." He tucked the blanket around Matthew and fussed with his pet curl. "She were half-savage, born in the Floridas."

James nodded the tiniest acknowledgement. "And she died there?"

Jack shook his head. "Ran off with me Da' and ended up on Wappin' Stairs until the smallpox carried her off. A better life indeed." He laughed harshly then shook his head again with a faint chime. "Enough o' that rot. Promise you'll teach the barnacle proper? I don't want him hurtin' himself with that blade."

James was silent for a few seconds longer, then nodded. "Of course. After all, I have no wish to see you teach him that featherduster waving you call fencing."

Jack sat bolt upright. "Featherduster! I never! And when, pray tell have you seen me in action?" His eyes had lost their brooding look and a grin trembled in the corner of his dimple.

Matthew stirred and clung a little closer, flinching at the sudden loud noise. "If you sway only half as much as you do walking, it must be a sight to behold," James teased, smiling in relief.

"I'll have you know I can handle a blade right well, I can!" Jack settled down to face him over the boy's curls. "So don't go impugning me sword!" He grinned. "We're on our way an' I need some shuteye. Gotta keep her at top speed 'til we're round the Cape, and the wind blows free...."

His eyes fluttered as he rested his head on one arm, fingers reaching for James' over Matthew. If they gripped tightly to banish the thought that a Thameside whore's grave was the mud that choked the estuary to open sea, James was kind enough not to mention it.

James was still until Jack's even breath joined Matthew's, then leaned over to douse the lantern, following them both into sleep.

The Chimaera cut through the Indian Ocean, sped by the wind, the currents and the fierce devotion of her crew, old and new alike. James thought he had rarely seen a ship running as well as this one. Discipline was - by Navy standards - lax, and Jack's captaincy marked it indubitably as a pirate ship, but everyone worked together and did his share without demur.

It was strange to witness the thin thread on which Jack's authority balanced and watch it grow by nothing more than knowledge and respect. Nobody was forced to follow his command, but they all did, as if glad of the opportunity to choose a Captain.

There were questions as to James' origin, how he connected with the legend of Jack Sparrow, but he always evaded them, relieved that he was forced to do so. It was difficult to fathom, standing on the quarterdeck again with his hands folded and giving orders, but it was his goal: to return home, take back the life of which he had been robbed.

Months had passed since then, and it was useless to deny he had changed. He could see that change everyday, sleeping next to him at night, Matthew curled between them more often than not. All those
nights, they simply talked, slept. There was an easiness he had never known before, that he thought he would miss as a Commodore.

That was different, too. Jack as a Captain simply did. He joked with the crew as he pleased, teased the boy until he completely forgot any respect for rank and captaincy. Jack stood at the helm and piloted, regardless of it being the task of a helmsman.

It tempted James, his gaze darting between the Chimaera's wake and the wheel, the wood just barely darker than Jack's hand on it. He pushed himself from the rail and approached, one hand on a spoke, the other resting on Jack's waist. "Let me."

Jack smiled and released the wheel to James' hands. He'd seen it coming over the past days; the way James would creep closer to the quarterdeck without realising it, the way his eyes glittered watching the wake from their cabin or standing at the stern with the wind catching in his hair.

Jack had settled into a familiar tightrope with the crew, maintaining order with his own brew of camaraderie and bravado. If ever charm had captained any ship, it did with Sparrow, and his drawled 'requests' were met with instant action as often as his bellowed roars. He was used to keeping his wits about him, and Norrington might never know how the hard-learned lessons of a decade had made him cagey and patient as a panther overlooking a watering hole. He was always alert, aware of every muttered conversation belowdecks and any ripple of doubt that might enter a crewman's head. He slept fitfully; any noise would wake him instantly and he tended to prowl the Chimaera from nest to bilges at odd hours.

He leaned against the rail, watching the light soften in James' eyes and wondered how long it would be before Norrington finally understood the mad possessiveness that burned in his own when he thought of the Black Pearl. If he squinted, he could see another Norrington, like a ghostly twin in Jamie's face, and he pondered just what Port Royal would do to welcome home its missing hero.

"She's a fine lady, is she not?"

James gave a vaguely agreeing noise, eyes fixed on her bow, her bellying sails. All he had to do was keep her steady in the currents, an easy task once accustomed with her, the wheel's spokes resting lightly in his palm, almost familiar. It was two hours later when he straightened and shook off a daydream.

Jack had been watching him the entire time, sitting on a cask and working on his little carved Pearl, smiling down at it like a madman with a secret. "Jamie, I do think you've gone and fallen in love."

James peered at him over his shoulder, arched an eyebrow, the dreamy half smile still etched into his face. "The Penelope certainly is a fine lady, but she is a ship."

"Penelope, eh? Been waitin' fer her Ulysses, tearin' out her weavin' every night?" Jack teased gently. "Her sails seem whole to me, luv. Shall we go see wot terrors await below? Andre warned me of somethin' special fer supper. I'm petrified."

James blushed. "It is certainly better than naming her after a gruesome beast part goat, snake and lion. She is, after all, a lady." In truth, he did not rightly know why he had suddenly referred to her as Penelope. It had seemed right at the moment. He shook off his confusion and grinned. "If St. Peter multiplied the fish they caught this afternoon, we will have to eat them for the rest of the journey. Rotten."

"Oh God!" Jack swore with a laugh. "That's enough t'make me turn Musselman! VAN!" he called out for the Dutchman. "Keep her with th' current. Anythin' odd, send someone to find me. There's
a coupla cross-currents that'll toss her about a bit. C'mon Jamie, let's brave the depths."

The galley was redolent with a mouth-watering smell and Jack's nostrils twitched. "Now I'm really scared!" He pushed back one of James' braids with one hand. "Hullo? Jamie? Yer woolgatherin'. Dreamin' of Penelope?"

James blinked, focused and shook his head. "Nonsense." He sniffed. "It might be a trap." He sniffed again. "Whatever it is, it is definitely not Cookie's work."

Jack went to return his carving to Cookie without thinking. he'd grown used to it, to the benefit of his handiwork for he'd likely only lose or forget about it otherwise. "Cooks, wot you got brewin' that smells so heavenly?"

Cookie grinned, his near-toothless maw stretched amid a sea of wrinkles and he turned the little ship in gnarled hands. "That's comin' on fine, Spanish—sorry, Cap'n. Ye've a nice touch. Andre here had an idea an' seein' as we had so much fish." The old face twisted into a grimace. "'Tisn't proper food but you lot must be fussy young blighters."

Jack nodded gravely. "Oh aye, we're a soft lot, ain't we. Thanks, mate. I'm bloody starvin'."

James was already seated, his trencher cooling as he absent-mindedly rested a hand on the bulwark. Bertie was already munching appreciatively next to him. When Jack sat down, James grinned and began to eat. He nearly dropped his fork. "This is edible. Which either means someone struck a pact with the devil, or half the crew will have fish poisoning in the morn."

Andre poured a thick sauce over Jack's fish and glared. "Poisoning! Und that wriggling not two hours past! Bah!"

Jack made a face and took a cautious bite, then dug in with gusto. "Mate, this is wonderful! Who sold his soul t' the devil?" He turned to laugh at one of Bertie's jokes, as much the amiable shipmate as ever, then glanced again at James. "I should be jealous, luv. Ye've stars in yer eyes."

"Jack, don't be ridiculous. She is just a ship. A fine one, but a ship." There was a sudden lurch and James swallowed more fish than he intended, coughing. "What is Van doing up there?"

Just as quickly, the Chimaera calmed, cutting easily through the waves once more. James shook his head and tugged Matthew's ear as the boy crawled under the table and emerged with a snarl and his dragon. "Did you sell your soul to the devil, hmm?"

Jack laughed and finished his meal with a belch. "Tricky currents. Like little bloody whirlpools but she's takin' 'em like Toledo steel. Oh, Jamie, Jamie, yer in deadly danger." He watched the green eyes' sparkle with a little sigh, thinking of his own dark lady, her black prow against the waves.

They loitered in the galley, eating and talking, while Jack made a perfect ass of himself, chasing Matthew under the table and providing the dragon with an appropriately fearsome adversary. After he'd been vanquished for the fourth time, he surfaced to perch next to James, his face dirtier than the boy's.

James sighed in exasperation and called for a rag. He wiped Matthew's face, then Jack's.

"That the First Mate's job, cleaning up the captain?"

"Nah, his pleasure!"

Jack stuck his tongue out at Bertie and decided that what he needed had nothing to do with dragons,
pots or pans. He fidgeted under the washing, grabbed James' arm and leaned close. "Think we got a bit o' time before the barnacle commandeers our quarters?"

"There is a lock on the door if we get away fast enough," James purred against his neck. He grabbed Matthew's dragon, held it out of reach, then passed it to Bertie. The chase was on and the boy jumped on the bench to hunt his toy, squealing in protest. James nodded. "Now."

They bolted from the galley, giggling through a mad dash for their cabin. Jack pinned him against the door with a kiss as he fumbled blindly for the handle. It creaked open and they stumbled, breathless and laughing.

Once inside, Jack darted close for another kiss. "Damnation, Jamie, I've been goin' mad." His hands were as insistent as his lips. "Fine thing, turnin' me own bunk into a nursery. I'll never live it down," he murmured, finding his way south along James' collarbone.

"Yes, it does seem to be quite up now." James urged Jack's chin up for a kiss, then batted greedy hands away from his breeches' buttons. "Shhhh, easy." He was as lit up as Jack, longing for touch, for more.

He thought of responsibility, his own responsibility to stop this, for the law he upheld. But this, too, was a responsibility. He had declared himself Jack's mate, aloud, mere days ago, and so much earlier in deed.

Almost. There was one more step before which he had balked, and they both knew that. Another step Commodore Norrington should not take, another step he decided for as a free man. He saw his own boots shuffle and looked up with a smile, infinitely soft. There was a sudden pause in their urgency, and he gripped Jack's wrist as it slid towards the slipknot of his breeches. "Not like this. Let me."

Jack backed away, his hand raised in a flutter, placating. "Wot's wrong, luv?" His sharp eyes watched James, brow knotted. So it was back to Navy protocol already? He masked his confusion and disappointment with his trademark grin. "Didn't mean to pounce you, James. I'll lay off if that's wot ya want."

James shook his head and barked a laugh. "Don't you dare." His fingers slid to Jack's shirt, teasing it free to pull it over his head and drop it on the deck, following its trail with his hands, warm and broad, then just the barest of touches as he brushed his fingertips up Jack's spine, the dip of his waist, slow and wondering.

When Jack looked up again, confusion warred with obvious desire in his eyes. His delight at the touch was more than evident, holding his own hands back clearly difficult. "I'm not sure I follow, luv."

There was something very young in Jack's face, vying with the understanding that James was on his way home to a life far removed from their adventures. It made him look unsure, at complete odds with his normal swagger, and woefully distressed.

James grinned against his lips, then nipped at them, teasing their confused pout open into another kiss. His hands were busy, one tugging loose the backlace of Jack's breeches, the other disappearing into their pocket. He cradled the small vial in his palm for a heartbeat, then pressed it into Jack's.

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Jack stared at it, then back at James, his confusion complete. He didn't know whether to leap to the obvious conclusion or push it away with both hands. So he stood there, his breeches caught on his boottops, looking stupidly from the vial to James, like Matthew torn between his dragon and a
chance at the helm.

"Wot?" he whispered, lower lip caught between his teeth.

"I'm your mate, Jack, your equal," James said firmly, "With all that entails." He took Jack's hand between his and put it to his shirt's hem.

Jack's eyes opened very wide and he let his fingers slide beneath the shirt, over well-known nooks and crannies of pale skin, holding his breath. Did James really mean what Jack thought he meant? No way to know; the green eyes were teasingly inscrutable. Jack's lips twitched into a grin and he buried his face against James' neck, the scratchy new stubble of his beard as rough as his calloused hands.

James' fingers ran gooseflesh up his spine and he shuddered with a soft laugh. "Lemme get outta me boots."

James shook his head and urged him back to sit on the bed, pulling his boots off, his breeches, then slid to kneel between his feet, hands flexing against his thighs insistently. "I think you need to relax," James laughed nervously, the gust of breath raising the thin trail of hair around his navel.

Jack groaned in agreement, his eyes rolling back into his head as James made short work of relaxing him. His fingers wound into the sunstreaked hair and he choked, "If ya don't stop, I won't be able to, luv."

He pushed James away with a huge effort, his eyes glassy and half-lidded. Was this what James wanted? Or the other? He was more than happy to oblige either way. Jack was blissfully omnivorous in matters amatory: he gave or took however the moment governed with equal enthusiasm, but he wasn't blind. He knew how hard the giving could be for some. James' eyes were gleaming and that look was familiar. The trust underneath desire was something new.

The soft laughter trailed up his chest as James rose and pushed him back on the bed, crawling over him, leaving his own breeches to pile forgotten on the deck. It was easy to desire, it would be easy to take, to make them both find the pleasure in it. He paused to nip at Jack's ear. "Perhaps, a bit of remaining tension might be best," he whispered into it, then rolled off and lay back.

Jack looked at the vial, still clutched in his hand and eased himself down beside James, lips speaking in touches rather than words.

His hair trailed across James' chest, ragged nails scratching lightly on sensitive nipples, trinkets chill amid the heat between them. "Yer sure?"

James smiled nervously, then pushed it into an insolent grin. "I am always sure, Captain Sparrow."

He was not afraid, not of Jack. He knew his touch so well now, the way his trinkets would press into his cheek, that one longer nail that could make his breath hitch all on its own. He answered as well as he knew how, his lips on Jack's, hands exploring and caressing.

The bed felt like a silken cocoon although it was certainly more spartan than Jack's cabin on the Pearl. Hamilton had maintained the illusion of a no-nonsense, hard-working captain and, although more comfortable than the rows of hammocks below, the linen sheets were well-worn and the pillows in need of restuffing. It didn't feel that way to Jack at all. Perhaps the silk was James' skin and the satin his hair.

Jack poured rum down their throats, sucked it off James chest, laughed and teased and revelled in the slow languor that fed them both. The oil slid over his skin with a glint of gold, slippery between
James' outstretched legs, gleaming droplets left along his back. Jack nipped at the nape of his neck, sliding over him and pushed forward, gently.

James' back flexed and he bit his lip, hissing. He counted his breaths and it became easier with each of them until Jack stilled atop him, as breathless as he. His face burrowed in the pillow, he was acutely aware of every shift, thinking of Jack under him like this; then Jack bent over him now, arms trembling against his own. He nodded.

Jack arched and pushed again, biting his lip to hold himself back from mindless pounding. His head was in a whirl, body so ready to simply react but he moved slowly, slipping one hand around to stroke James with sure fingers, his hips beginning to find a gentle rhythm.

"Easy, luv. You just relax and let ole Jack please you now." He shifted again on his knees and pulled James' hips up to meet his with one hand.

James gasped, his breath pushed out with each push inside. Unable to keep quite still, he shifted, his head slumping between his arms. The next thrust made him arch and he cried out, bucking into Jack's grip. He relaxed, panting for breath, then tensed again and moaned. Each thrust strung him up further, like a feather, until he pushed back to meet them. He stifled another outcry, teetering on the edge of ecstasy. He let himself fall.

Jack felt himself sucked inside James' body, the grip around him like a pulsing vice and he moaned, spilling himself in a daze of stars and sails, heat and flesh and tremors that set them both quivering. "Y'awright, luv?" he managed to pant, rolling away from their sweat to pull the blanket close.

"If the Captain is willing to overlook a slight limp in the morning," James' grin faded into a smile, then parted into a kiss.

Jack giggled in a most unfierce manner. "I think that can be arranged. Besides, I wouldn't want 'break ya." He pulled James close and hid a smile against his warm throat. The Chimaera tipped and swayed and he breathed a soft 'thank you' into one ear.

He was blissfully lethargic despite the urge to dance, thinking of James at the helm, the way the wind played with his hair, eyes matching the water. That he had committed to memory and savoured the image for a moment before he slid out from under James and opened one of the drawers of the desk. He came back to bed, a shadow of gold and midnight, two small ivory beads in one hand, a length of
scarlet ribbon in the other. "This deserves a 'here and now', luv."

He sat Indian-fashion on the bed and worked the ribbon through the ivory, then braided half of it into James' hair, the bead bouncing against his cheek. "There. I like that," he grinned, as he sliced the ribbon and knotted the second bead to it, like a small moon suspended on a streak of flame. "Now you." He turned so James could find a place amid his mad collection of baubles.

James smoothed out a strand and braided the ribbon into it. It was a small braid, hanging amidst wide ones, old ones, but he knew its place exactly. "Thank you," he whispered.

Jack grinned into the darkness and pulled them down into the pillows again. His voice teased and whispered, growing faint as the summer breeze that James sometimes felt standing on the parapet at Fort Charles; that mischievous little wind that would pluck at his wig and blow feathers at him from over the bay. The words weren't clear. He might have said "Pearl" or he might have said "James" before his lashes fluttered closed.

Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Eighteen
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: @elessil and @hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--X.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Heading towards the Cape at breakneck speed, there is still time for repairs and swords and more.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to @smtfhw for her excellent beta.
It was barely dawn when James stirred, blinking himself awake. The smell of coffee filled the air and, for a moment, he wondered if he were back in Port Royal already, his housekeeper preparing coffee in the kitchen. But no, the source was near the cabin door and balanced precariously on a tray that seemed to defy gravity, sliding around in Jack's unsteady grip.

"Mornin', luv. Thought we could use a bit o' coffee. There's fresh water in the basin and a ball o'soap." Jack was already dressed—well, mostly dressed: he had on his shirt, his boots and his beloved, battered hat.

James rose, his hair tousled. He stumbled to the basin to wash, then dressed, perfectly awake by the time he finished. "Don't tell me Cookie has learned to make coffee as well, or I will begin to truly worry about Matthew's soul."

He rescued the tray and stowed it on the table, then fished for Jack's breeches beneath the bed, stuffed in as far as possible without disturbing the storage drawers. "You are missing something in your attire, oh most awe-inspiring Captain."

"Am I?" Jack looked down at his bare knees and grinned. "Couldn't find the blasted things. How'd you sleep without our pet starfish?"

"A certain other starfish seemed intent on making up for the lack." James yawned and found his razor where Jack had misplaced it this time, quickly scratching away the day's growth before he sat down and sipped at his coffee. "Out with it. Have you thrown Cookie overboard?"

"Andre's been layin' claim to the galley and believe it or not, I think Cook's relieved. Thank God!" Jack plopped a huge chunk of sugar in his coffee and stirred it with one finger.

James shoved a spoon at Jack. "I don't know whose table manners are worse, yours or the boy's. I should teach him to use a table knife before he uses a sword." He used his to peel an orange, leaning back into his chair with a sigh.

Jack tossed back half his cup and refilled it from the pot. "This is a luxury and I, fer one, am enjoyin'
"Do you think he will be coming after us? Hamilton no longer has a ship or the means to chase us."

James finished his orange and stretched. "There should be little trouble. The repairs were all completed and she is in fine shape, although I fear the mizzen course will need replacing soon."

"Ain't Hamilton I'm worried about. It's the East India Company. Y'see, I snared Gainsell and our dear former Captain in their own trap but the Company isn't gonna be happy about losin' this cargo. And they've plenty of little boats they can send after us, quick as ya please. I'd really rather avoid that. Once we're round the Cape, they might try letters, but I doubt any bloody mail tub can outrun us if we keep sharp," Jack answered blithely, as if it were perfectly normal to have heavily-armed vessels in pursuit.

"I see," James muttered, busying himself with his coffee. "It is strange to be on this side of the chase for once." He grinned crookedly. "She is fast enough to carry us home."

Certainly, he only imagined the pleased thrum of her timbers.

Jack's eyes crinkled into a grin. "I'm no Hamilton, mate. None o' that privateer nonsense fer me."

He popped another bit of orange into his mouth. "Jamie, this is wonderful! Open water all 'round, a fast ship beneath our feet and the world's our oyster, ripe fer crackin'. But," he finished his breakfast and sucked the juice off his fingers, "speed is most important. Later on, we can have some fun. Besides, 'twill be good fer the lass to stretch her wings."

"She'll be fine and fast enough with the right course and currents to bear her," James said proudly, "And there is nothing more thrilling on a ship like her."

This time they both looked up at a distinct purr from deep within the Chimaera. Jack just grinned.

James shook his head and refilled his cup. "Why does your mention of fun worry me, Jack?"

"Wot? A bit of gunnery practise, a few games..." Jack's hand waved about airily. "Got to keep ourselves amused, luv. There's nothin' worse than months o' bein' bored off yer arse. We're well-stocked enough to spend a day or two makin' noise." Jack finished his coffee and dressed himself properly, then bounded towards the door. "Comin' topside?"

"You always make noise." James pulled his sword-belt into place and settled his tricorn on his head.

Jack stopped at least a dozen times to talk with this man or that group, checking reports and joking, a strange mingling of efficiency and sloth. By the time he was at the helm, he knew every detail from stem to stern: how Ivan and Griffin had sized each other up and neither had clearly won; how Andre had threatened Bertie with a carving knife for picking at some creation he was slaving over while fresh supplies lasted; how Berkely's night crew had recaulked the entire orlop and was of the opinion that the leak must be somewhere in the bilges and they'd have to get the pumps working to find it.

Jack set about handling these details, draped over the wheel like a scarecrow, then turned to face James. "Here. It's clear so'-so-west fer now. Don't be afraid t'cut in and ask the girl to dance."

James arched an eyebrow and grinned. He approached the wheel as he would a lady at a ball, bowing stiffly and pressing a kiss to one of the spokes, then slid behind it and took it from Jack's hands as a dancer might. The wheel was perfectly still, but the Chimaera shimmied, straining into the current.
Jack raised an eyebrow and gave her a pat. "I see she's in the hands she wants. I'll go make m'self useful below. Tell Van or Bertie to fetch me if ya need aught. I'm gonna check the pumps and see if we can spare a night to work 'em." He swept off his hat and bowed to the wheel, blew James a kiss and swayed down the steps.

James spent a fine day at the Chimaera's helm. There were some tricky cross-currents, and he constantly had to make minor course corrections, but it was an almost instinctive action, comfortable and familiar. He watched the crew go about their tasks, heard the shanties they sang as they busied themselves.

Dusk was falling when he turned the wheel over to Van and went in search of Jack, finding him up to his ankles in bilge water. Ivan was kneeling next to him and cursing at a leak he couldn't find. James straightened. "Captain, if we do stop for a night, I believe it would be a good idea to replace the mizzen course. Something is not right about it."

Jack swore impressively. "Damnation! They call this repairs! Bloody hell. Wot d'ya mean there's somethin' 'not right'? Torn? Frayin' lines? Gaskets fallin' off?" He was soaked to the skin, except for the hat which was tipped precariously over one eye and threatened to fall into the stinking water at any moment.

James reached up to settle it, then let his hand drop with an embarrassed cough as Ivan looked up. He shook his head. "Nothing visible. But there is something about the way it catches the wind that seems to be out of order." He appeared confused. It was nothing he could truly define, just a strong instinct he had learned to trust in precarious situations.

Jack stopped in the midst of hauling up a tangle of submerged lines with Ivan to stare at James for a moment, his lips barely curved into a smile. "Well, then, have Van heave to and let's take care of business. That's why we've got four watches."

In James' opinion, a captain should be on the quarterdeck rather than in the bilges, but he also knew his concerns were not warranted. The crew was content. There was an easiness he knew did not exist among a discontented crew, birthing an impressive efficiency without even the threat of punishment. "Aye, Sir."

He went topside, issuing orders to take in sail and let her drift. Bertie went to wake the rest of the crew so they could finish the necessary repairs as quickly as possible.

With the last rays of daylight, they took down the mizzen course and replaced it. By lantern light, James inspected the old one, finding a thin tear near the clew where the metal loop had worn into the canvas.

Jack hollered for the pumps and the backbreaking work lasted until the moon was high. Griffin and Ivan squabbled over who had found the leak and who was going to patch it until Jack pulled off his sodden sash and thwacked them both with it.

Satisfied that things were in fair condition, he gave all but a skeleton crew the rest of the night and extra rum with dire threats about the morning's race south, and the consequences of being unfit for duty. The speech was excellent but rather marred by the fact that Jack chose to deliver it standing on the galley table, dancing and punctuating it with snippets of a lewd song.

It was hours past midnight when they eventually retired to their cabin. James was shaking with yawns but he still undressed and trotted to the washstand to clean himself while Jack was still sipping from his flask.
Clean, he dropped on the bed with a grunt, stretching out. He sat up with a start when Jack was about to join him. "Oh no. You will not sleep in this bed reeking like a bilge rat."

He was treated to the Royal Sparrow pout as Jack groaned to his feet and promptly got himself tangled in his swordbelt and sash, his shirt half-off and one boot dangling from his foot. "Y'know, you could lend a hand, luv. Blast! OW! Buckle's caught in me bloody hair! JAMIE!"

James groaned and rolled out of bed. "Would you just hold STILL?" He managed to free Jack without significant loss of hair or trinkets or one of his own eyes as Jack swayed around wildly, gesticulating with his hair still in front of his face.

James tore his clothes off and yanked him to the basin, briskly washing him with a rag. He tossed the reeking clothes into the water, soaking them with soap, ignoring Jack's protests. "You can wear Hamilton's spare ones if those do not dry before the morning."

Jack grumbled something unintelligible, fell face down across the bed and slithered his way between the sheets. The moment James was comfortable, he was surrounded by a pirate-octopus who curled up and clung.

James shoved him away, rolled over, then grabbed him close again. "Aren't you ever tired?" He yawned and smacked his lips. "More importantly, aren't you ever serious? You are no longer simply the mad navigator, Jack. You are the Captain. The crew have to respect you, and do you really believe that floundering about in bilge water and dancing on the galley table is conducive to that?"

Jack waggled one finger in James' face until his own eyes crossed. "Don't you worry about that, Jamie. Did plenty o' good. They'll jump in the mornin', just you see." He smiled sweetly. "She's talkin', James. I think she's taken t'you."

"I do worry, Jack. I would be a bad First Mate if I did not. It is my task to support your command and make sure your orders are fulfilled." James shook his head. "What should they think of a Captain who claims that his ship talks?"

"But she does! They all do. Stop makin' it a job, luv. It's me life, not a bleedin' apprentice-prentish--prentiship. And you cannot tell me ya didn't hear her t'night. How else would you have known 'bout that course?" Jack was getting tongue-tied due to his hands being trapped between James and the sheets. It had nothing whatsoever to do with his alarming consumption of rum.

"I certainly did not hear a female voice in my head that said, "Jaaaaaamess, my mizzen course is damaged." James intoned it dramatically, sarcasm etched into his voice. He giggled. "She is a fine ship, but, and I realise this may come as news to you, sane men do not hear voices in their head."

Jack laughed drunkenly. "'Course she wouldn't talk like that. Don't be daft! But ya knew, didn't ya? An' she tole you. A sigh in yer ear, a lil' jerk at the wheel, sometimes a breeze 'gainst yer face or the faintest groan from below. They don't speak like us." He snickered. "An' she's very fond o'you. Near tore herself outta me hands fer you t'day. I should be insulted an' challenge ya."

James rolled his eyes. He could not justify how he had known about the sail, but there were a hundred explanations more sane than Jack's. He pulled up the blanket and stifled another yawn. "Wake me if you can find a white glove aboard this ship. Else, you will have to find another way to achieve satisfaction."

Jack's chortle became dark and he snuggled closer. "Can think of a few ways." He stifled a yawn and promptly fell fast asleep.
Jack was as good as his word: despite monumental bouts of snoring and pilfering the blankets twice, he was up and at the helm when the sun broke over the horizon, whistling happily and not a whit the worse for his overindulgence. The two day crews might not have been as energetic, but they were careful to disguise it from him. It was clear to all that Jack's guileless gaze missed nothing.

He smiled his thanks at Andre, who'd just brought him another cup of coffee, and slipped out of his coat. Regardless of the wind and spray, it was hot and Jack responded to warmth by shedding as much clothing as he thought he could without earning a slap.

James's coat and shirt joined his on the deck as he invaded the quarterdeck, Matthew in sharp pursuit. The quarterdeck provided the most space for swordtraining without disturbing the crew. The boy circled him and pounced, trying to get at his sword, but James held it away with a laugh. "Not yet, Matthew, not yet."

Matthew scowled fiercely but dragged himself to attention as James insisted on teaching him proper bearing and continued to babble about 'balance', and how a sword was not a toy and should only be used when necessary.

The sun was already high up in the sky by the time Matthew understood why the knowledge of supporting and non-supporting leg was so vital, and it was only then that James let him wield the small sword. He was a patient teacher but a strict one, allowing the boy any pause he might desire but no sloppiness, circling him and correcting the slightest mistakes.

The boy yawned demonstratively, peeking at Jack for help.

Jack had been watching, along with more than a few of the crew, his eyes dancing, his feet nearly following, eager to join in the fun. Unable to resist temptation for a moment longer, he turned the wheel over to Van, pulled off his shirt and swaggered towards them.

"Barnacle, yer doin' fine, but I'd listen t'James. He knows wot he's doin' right enough."

His cutlass was unsheathed in the blink of an eye. "En garde!"

Surprised by the speed of the challenge, the boy wavered, then pulled himself into the proper position with only a bit of shuffling.

Jack laughed and raised an eyebrow at James. "That's lovely. Looks like he's payin' more attention than it seems."

"He is a fine student when he is of a mind to be. And his en garde was more proper than yours, Captain," James teased, mouthing 'featherduster'. He circled Matthew, indicating with the flat of his blade where the boy's posture was less than perfect.

Jack's eyes narrowed as he circled James. "Ah, but ya never know when some bugger's gonna pull a fast one or do something incredibly stupid." He spun and lunged, their blades ringing as they clashed.

"The question is, if you know it is incredibly stupid," James lifted his sword and slid it along Jack's, effortlessly gliding into position, "why do you act in such a way?"

Jack twisted and danced to one side, then parried. "Keeps 'em on their toes." He whirled to one side, ducking a slash and slapping the flat of his blade against James' knee. "Very dirty move, that one, but very, very effective."

The crew gathered to watch as they tested each other and James began to force Jack down the steps.
He grinned and vaulted over them.

"The most important thing, Matthew, is to never let yourself be distracted by your opponent's acrobatics. The one thing that matters is where his sword is, and what he can do with it." In one fluid movement, James ducked and slid through the crowd, thrusting up to meet Jack's blade.

Jack was fast, except when he tripped over his own feet. "Y'see, Mattie, a long drink o' water like Jamie here, ya gotta aim low and stay well clear of gettin' the top of yer head slashed off." His eyes never left James as he danced backwards, then switched swordhands, using his left as he plunged in a parry that sent sparks flying.

James' eyes shot wide but he collected himself just as quickly, lunging a swift riposte.

The crew backed up to give them room, laughing and cheering for one or the other.

Jack jumped to avoid a low blow to his shins and spun dizzyingly. "Course, Jamie's much too well-bred t'slash at me proper," he taunted.

"Another rule you may never forget, is to never assume anything about your opponent." James deked an attack to the left, then spun and slashed, touching his blade cleanly to Jack's side before he spun away as quickly, sliding back to a lower guard. "My last student never quite learned that, especially when faced with an opponent up to every single trick in, and especially out of the book."

"'Course. Jamie and me, we come from diff'rent schools, don't we?" Jack deftly wove around the capstan and stepped into a bucket, pulled it off his foot, still parrying and hurled it at James. "Now that woulda been a lot faster but seein' as we don't wanna really get hurt.....shite!" He danced his way back towards the quarterdeck, bounded up two of the steps and into the rigging, hanging like a monkey by one hand.

"If I wished for Jack to get hurt, I would do this," James touched his sword to the ratline, indicating a clean slash to it and Jack's hand that would propel him overboard, "but for now, I will indulge our Captain." He dodged another lunge and spun to his side, edging closer until he could vault the rail, perfectly balanced, to touch his blade to Jack's backside.

Jack somersaulted backwards from the rigging to the deck, his blade sparking against James' and he made a sudden lunge, stopping just short of the groin. "Then again, 'tis never a bad thing to practise. Bertie, c'mere!" He tossed his cutlass to Berthot, who charged in to take his place. "Jamie, change off."

James led Bertie on for a few steps, then flipped his sword behind his back to give it to Berkely, who then advanced on Bertie. James joined Jack where he lounged against the railing, both of them breathless and sweating. "Wretch."

Jack laughed and threw an arm around his shoulder. "Love you, too, mate," he panted.

Bertie handed off to one of the Russians and he and Berkely had a fine time of it until Berks tossed the sword to the nearest Dutchman, and so it went for a good hour until Jack and James were back in possession of their weapons and everyone on deck had gone a round. Jack was beaming: this was the way a ship should be run. He saw no reason to make it a chore unless circumstance demanded it.

He leaned down to tweak Matthew's ear. "Jamie'll get you in on the game fast, barnacle. Who's fer a race aloft?"

Matthew had watched with gaping mouth and a tiny scowl. Now his grin was back and he nodded eagerly. Despite the cheers of agreement, James stared at Jack as though he had grown a second
Matthew fiercely stuck his tongue out at Bertie and scrambled up as fast as his little legs could carry him. Bertie was ahead on the first crosstree, but Matthew was first at the topgallant, his triumphant squeal easily audible on the deck. He was still beaming when he climbed down again, crowing. "Where's my prize?"

"I'll wager that performance warrants that lovely fine pocketwatch we found, doncha think, James?" Jack winked a challenge that could not be ignored. He was on the rail and into the shrouds in a heartbeat.

James was in hot pursuit, skipping the ratlines as he climbed past the crosstree and caught up. They were head to head when they reached the crow's nest and Jack reached around to haul James into it, both tumbling into a heap.

Give 'im a kiss!"

"Aww, now they'll be up there all bloody day!"

"C'mon, lads. We know why yer hidin' yer hands!"

Various other suggestions were shouted amid cheers from below as Jack grinned and threw both arms around James for the promised kiss. "Look, Jamie. Moon's up and watchin' with one eye open." He pointed to the pale orb in the eastern sky.

"This is a ship of fools, you the greatest and your first mate following shortly thereafter." James grinned into another kiss. "If Matthew gets a pocketwatch, I deserve more than just one kiss."

Jack was more than happy to oblige, then grabbed a line and swung down to the deck, bowing to the crew, then bellowing, "Why in hell are we losin' speed? Get movin', you dogs!"

He went back to the quarterdeck and tossed James his shirt, squinting at the southern horizon and spoke briefly with Van before clambering down to the Great Cabin.

All had rushed back to work at Jack's command. It was a strange balance, James thought, of respect, request and lack of reason. He shook his head and pushed the double doors open.

Jack was scowling at the chart on the table. "We're gonna have t'cut west soon. The wind's kickin' up hard." He pencilled a new line to his marked positions.

"We can sail west here," James indicated a line with his finger, hovering over the map, "let this current take us out south and then 'round. It has been a decade now, but I doubt that has changed."

"Damn, James! Why'd you never become a pilot? You've a memory like an elephant and a good eye." He fiddled with the pencil and sketched a little monster in the middle of the current. "Just as long as we don't go crashin' into Madagascar at twelve knots," he laughed.

"Unless everyone is busy fencing or racing aloft, we won't." James pilfered the pencil and sat down. "Are you never at rest, Jack? I know you are the Captain and I know the responsibility that entails, but you will not return to the Pearl any faster if you keep running on the Chimaera's deck."

"Can't help it, luv. Never can light anywhere fer long. And there's nothin' like workin' up a bit of a sweat t'keep ya fit." Jack stretched and pulled James' into an upside-down kiss. "Wot would you be
"This strikes me as a good beginning," James turned for a proper kiss, holding Jack's hands away as they began to slip under his shirt. "There is no need to plot a course five times. Draw it once, and do it proper. It's called patience, Jack."

His answer was a giggle. "But always be ready fer the opportune moment." He groped and deepened the kiss. "The advantage to bein' Captain is gettin' away with fondling the First Mate on watch."

"It is? And what if the First Mate objects?" James did not seem inclined to mutiny, at least if the soft gust of his breath and the warm lips against Jack's neck were any indication. "Do enlighten me about the captain's privileges, Captain Sparrow."

Jack's hands continued to wander. "Cap'n's privileges are plenty o' rum, choosin' likely plunder and musn't forget the booty! And it's no fun sneakin' a poke at a reluctant mate, is it? Now, this ship has a very willin' one, and that is a blessin'." His fingers thieved below the waistband of James' breeches. "A very bright blade, indeed." Jack gave the blade in question an appreciative squeeze.

"Ah, but is it wise to cross blades with an ally?" James gasped. "Especially if the door isn't locked?" He resisted, just barely, but showed no inclination to flee from a fight, squirming in his chair.

Jack swung himself around and straddled James, pulling insistently. "Never wise crossin' blades with a pirate, luv. But wisdom is not always fun." His grin was wicked. "Besides, all work and no play makes fer a fractious captain."

"I see. Of course, a good first mate will do his best to keep his captain in good humour," James panted, his head falling back, exposing his throat, of which Jack took immediate advantage, coaxing another groan from him. "Greedy," he laughed, "Greedy and impatient."

"Pirate!" Jack withdrew his hand and started working at the buttons. "Adam, Barthlomew, Charles, Dickon..." he laughed as he opened each one, sitting on the table with his legs wound around James' hips.

James rolled his eyes. "Talking to ships, then to buttons. Is there any limit to your insanity?" He tugged open the still unnamed backlace of Jack's breeches, pulling off boots and fabric, a difficult but rewarding task with Jack's legs still locked around his waist.

Jack nudged himself against James with a wriggle. "Figgered I know 'em so well by now, they deserved names." James shuddered and bucked forward against Jack. "Oooh, do that again." His fingers strained towards his breeches, still hanging from one knee.

With a grin, James fished the oil out of the pocket and then freed Jack completely of the impeding breeches. "So, tell me," he purred while his hand joined the duel, "is buggering the Captain on watch the advantage of being First Mate?"

"Most definitely, especially fer the Captain." Jack knifed his legs up around James' neck, sprawled on his back, his hands fluttering over white skin. "Oh dear God, that is damned---ahh---wonderful." His head fell back with a thud.

James rescued the chart, shoving it aside before spanning Jack's shoulders with his arms, shifting his weight and pushing. "I see," he panted, hair tumbling into Jack's face, "why the Navy does not have a First Mate aboard then."

"Don't know wot they're missin'." Jack spine arched, his ribs defined by tensed muscle as he moved
in counterpoint to James' thrusts. "First Mates are highly underrated by the Navy. Jesus, don't stop!"
he panted.

"As you wish, Captain." Sweatdrops gleamed on James' forehead, dripping down his nose to land on
Jack's, bright in the lanternlight. "I doubt such a position would be conducive to ---ohhh--- discipline
aboard."

Jack's answer was a garble as a fire lit somewhere in his lower spine and shot straight to his head and
his prick, arms straining to keep James' close. He grunted and doubled in the grip, one cheek pressed
against his own knee. "Bugger discipline."

James' first answer was a gasp, held and buried in the hollow of Jack's throat. He needed to catch his
breath after it. "I would hardly call you discipline personified," he whispered, nipping at the straining
side of Jack's neck.

Jack giggled, his legs slipping to James' waist and clinging, letting his heartbeat slow. "Discipline is
also highly overrated. This is much better than some fancy luncheon, don't ya think?"

He unwound himself, kissing along James' collarbone. "You taste like the sea, luv." 'Warm and
living' was what Jack was trying to describe, like the thick smell of their sweat and spunk. He
hopped off the table, found a spare handkerchief crammed into one of the drawers and gave himself
a quick swipe. "Poor Deacon woulda been horrified."

He stopped and stared into the open drawer, then quietly lifted his precious compass. A crooked
smile spilled across his face as he attached it to his belt with a possessive pat.

James wordlessly arched an eyebrow, then grinned mischievously. "Likely. On the desk, no less.
And that by leave of the Captain." He dressed quickly, eyeing the still unlocked double doors with a
blush. "Do you think you could have charmed him as well, given the time?"

Jack wrinkled his nose as he finished rewinding the sash and secured the belt. "Not to my taste. Too
Calvinist. And Hamilton were too Catholic. More guilt all 'round than I've a mind for. I like my
First Mate and his lovely English blade just fine," he grinned. "Wanna nip before dinner? Watch'll
end soon."

"This relieves me beyond measure." James bowed. "Should we not return to work, then?"

Jack opened the decanter and poured them each a glass. "No reason not to enjoy a quick drink."
His grin was broad. "English blades and fair winds."

James raised his. "Home."

The crystal clinked, sending little rainbows dancing across the cabin as the light caught in them.
"Awright, let's head back up there and you can head us west." He settled his headscarf, slung an
arm around James' waist and opened the doors.

Jack woke with the tip of his nose tingling. He wiggled it, scratched it and when it continued to
tingle, he knew exactly what it meant.

He pulled on his coat before going topside; they were far south of the equator and it was getting
chilly again. On the stairs, his nose began to twitch.

Not an hour later, the call came from the nest: 'Sail ho!' just as he'd expected. He grinned and
peered through the spyglass, turning the wheel a few points west. "Get Vorst! I want the guncrews
ready!" he bellowed, scratching his nose with one hand.

The crew snapped to attention and swarmed the deck from where they loitered, feeling a strange cheer after an idleness too-long enforced. James had been supervising work at the foremast and now made for the quarterdeck. "I do not believe the East India Trading Company would chase us from the west."

"We're payin' a little visit." Jack grinned at him, squinting through the lens. "Still too far t'tell. Just wanna make sure we don't have any surprises gettin' round the Cape. It's bad enough without."

Despite his words, he was quivering and his smile stretched a little too broadly.

"A little visit?" James' eyebrow met his hairline.

Jack looked like a gold-toothed shark. "Just takin' a look, mate. I'm sure she's eyein' us as well." He scratched his nose again.

"We can simply sail past and hail them. There is no need for a gun salute." James shook his head.

"You are planning a raid."

"Don't know yet. I'm just takin' a l'il peek. A bit closer....ahh yes! And such a plump little partridge she is! Portuguese merchantman, looks like 24 guns...." Jack snapped the spyglass closed. "Bertie, Berks, get ev'ryone armed and on deck. We're gonna have a bit o' fun."

"Fun? Jack, we do not need anything. We are well enough equipped with supplies and riches for the journey home. Why risk lives to steal more?" James' voice was still low, drowned out by the wind, but urgent.

Jack's eyes were black as midnight, teasingly serious. "Because that's wot we do, luv." He turned the wheel over to Van and bounded amidships, shouting orders as he clattered down to the Great Cabin, throwing on his swordbelt and stuffing two pistols in his sash.

He looked up as James closed the door. "Why?"

"Why wot, luv?" Jack glanced up from loading one of the fancy pistols, another already stuck into his sash.

"You know what." James' voice was sharp.

"Listen t'me, James. This is wot a pirate does and this is a pirate ship. If ya wanna steer clear, stay at the helm. But now's the opportune moment fer me to prove who and wot I am to the crew. A pirate captain is only as good as his last raid, no matter how much blather is written in the broadsides." His smile gentled. "Jamie, I'm not gonna go slaughterin' or sinking that pretty little ship. I want her cargo and I can get it."

He settled his hat and swordbelt. "I need yer help, luv. Think of it as a Navy prize and leave the rest to me. Please?"

James looked at him, then nodded sharply. "Aye, Captain," he whispered, turned on his heel and rushed back on deck.

"Bertie, Jan, there are swords in the Great Cabin, the long sea chest to starboard. Get them. Ivan, get the grappling hooks, down in the orlop. Move!"

Jack took a moment to stare after him, biting his lip, then glanced in the mirror and settled his
'effects'. He winked at Bertie on his way out of the Great Cabin and took the spyglass from Van.

The Chimaera was closing in fast and the Portuguese ship lumbered to manoeuvre. She was low in the water, heavily loaded and Jack had visions of sugarplums dancing in his head. "Van, take us in on her larboard side. On my orders, fire across the bow. Do we have a flag?"

Berkely shrugged and Jack rolled his eyes. "There's a red lady's petticoat in my cabin. The big cupboard. Use that."

The red fabric went up, fluttering in the wind and James swallowed hard. Certainly, the British Crown had hired Hamilton to do just that, to attack and weaken other Crowns' fleets and trade. A Naval prize. He swallowed and gripped his sword harder.

If the red ruffles detracted from the fearsome intent of a jolie rouge, the Portuguese captain was not noticing. Jack seemed to flit everywhere at once, emerging from the gundecks with a streak of soot on his face, bellowing.

He eyed the two boarding parties with a face-splitting grin and yelled, "FIRE!"

The cannon roared at his command. There was an answering blast that sent a ball plopping harmlessly short of the Chimaera's new bowsprit. Jack grabbed a line. "With me, now!"

James jerked his head and swung over, sword in hand. He could barely see through the thick smoke and the rows of men. He shoved them aside and worked at clearing a path to the quarterdeck. "Man overboard," he yelled as one of them tumbled over the rail.

A thin Portuguese blinked at him, training a shaking sword at his chest. The sword clattered overboard and James yanked him close by the collar. "Get him out," he hissed, pointing at the splashing man in the water, then vaulted the stairs.

The fat little Captain hid behind the helmsman and two men that seemed to be mercenaries well past their prime. James' boarding crew had them disarmed in seconds. He levelled his sword at the Captain's stomach.

The boarding parties and crew backed away as Jack swaggered to the quarterdeck. He tripped over a bucket, kicked it aside with a curse and pushed his hat back off his nose. "Ahem. Buenos dias, Senhor. As ya can probably tell, I'm takin' over the ship. Wot say you stand down like a good man, eh?"

James bowed and backed away, leaving the two Captains to their business.

The Portuguese captain seemed torn between a guffaw and a gulp, muttered to his helmsman and handed over a lovely chased blade. Jack studied it for a moment, then grinned. "Very reasonable of ya, I'm sure. Jamie, secure the crew. Berks, get down t' the hold and see wot's makin' this little lady weigh so heavy. Senhor Capitan, if ya'd follow me." He prodded at the captain's rotund stomach with his pistol, then gestured towards the stairs.

James' crew disarmed the Portuguese quickly, herding them on the quarterdeck. "Vorst, that swivel gun over there. Load it."

He turned to face the cowering Portuguese, their weapons gathered in a pile. "No one moves and no one gets hurt. It is as simple as that. Jan, see that those weapons are taken aboard."

The better part of the Chimaera's crew poured across the loading planks and into the Cecilia's bowels, tearing open crates and hauling the prize ones up through the hatch. Jack's crew ransacked
the officer's cabins swiftly while he and the captain came to an amicable accord. He studied the manifest and shouted out the door to Berkely. "There's a load o' Chinese silver. See that we have ev'ry bloody brick."

The men moved fast and disentangled spare sails, rolled guns across to the Chimaera, a constant parade of boxes and barrels travelling from one ship to the other.

James watched them struggle with the cargo, flinching when one of the cannons, still hot, slipped and crashed against the Chimaera's bulwark. "Watch over them. Vorst, you have command here." He grabbed a line and swung over, putting in his shoulder to get the cannons stowed when there was an explosion.

Jack had been toasting the captain with fine sherry, his pockets bulging with the loot from the usual hiding places when the Great Cabin flooded with black smoke and they emerged on deck, choking. "Vorst, get that lot below an' see wot in hell is goin' on down there. Cap'n, I do believe you've got a little problem here," he coughed, pounding the man on the back.

James rushed topside and bellowed across the divide. "Chimaeras, back aboard! We have everything!"

Vorst was gone from the quarterdeck and smoke emerged from the hatch. God, had they lit the powder magazine?

He was about to order the men to disengage when Jack emerged from the hatch, black and sooty and....laughing?

Jack made a final bow before swinging back to the Chimaera's deck---no walking across a loading plank for him, if you please. He landed in a heap on his arse, laughing so hard the tears were running down his face, streaking through soot.

James hoisted him upright. "Dare I ask?"

Jack tried several times to talk, between coughing and laughing. He finally wiped his eyes, still giggling. "I have never taken a ship because they went an' blew up their own bloody stove!" He dissolved into another fit of laughter.

"Perhaps their cook was one of Cookie's students, and a crewman decided to seize the opportunity." James managed a crooked smile. "All is well?"

"Fine, luv. VAN! Get us outta here. Don't worry 'bout them, they'll be too busy tryin' with that charred galley. I want speed! And get this deck clear. Jamie, I'm gonna need yer help cataloging all this. Wot a haul!"

He leaned against James' shoulder, wiping his face and leaving streaks of soot on his sleeve. "She was headed to Lisbon from Macao. Medicines, silks, tea, jade, silver!" The dark eyes were twinkling amid his blackened face. "Not to mention a decent supply o' rum, port and brandywine. Not bad fer one shot and an exploding stove."

"And a shirt for me to replace the one you are currently soiling?" James pulled Jack's headscarf away to kiss his clean forehead. "Congratulations, Captain." He bent close. "I believe you have smeared your kohl."

"How can ya tell? I must look like a bleedin' African. We helped 'em put out the fire." His eyes dropped at James' quizzical expression. "I'm not a savage, luv."
"You only look like one, I know." James looked out to where the Cecilia still floated on the water, then back at Jack, smiling just barely. "Get yourself cleaned up. I will take care of this."

"Awright. It's a good thing we've extra water, eh? I want a full accountin' of all this before we lose the light. Jesus, it's gettin' cold again. Bloody Cape." Jack grumbled his way to his cabin and took the time to not only clean himself but repaint his eyes. When he appeared on deck, he was met with cheers as the crew wrestled their haul belowdecks, followed by James and his quill.

They had it stowed barely an hour later, crammed in next to ivory and munitions. James lost more than half the crew to the galley and a cask of rum as he went topside. The Chimaera was well underway and back on her course when he chased Van off to join the others in the galley, taking the wheel himself, glad for company that, no matter what Jack said, did not speak or cheer.

Jack, as always, kept a sharp eye. He watched James whenever he was on deck and knew that stiff demeanour too well to try and coax him below. If Jamie was intent on brooding, there was little to be done about it and Jack wasn't going to miss a party anyway. He grimaced into his mug and figured he might as well enjoy the company of the crew since he expected little more than uneasy silence in his cabin this night.

The celebration was much more restrained than it would have been aboard the Pearl, but Jack knew they could not afford a proper pirate fete until they were back in Tortuga or Petit Goave. There was enough rum flowing to make everyone happy, but not the drunken debauches that usually followed a successful raid. The Cape lay ahead and there was no time to spare for monumental carousing.

It was dark outside when James came below, far too serious for the soused company, but he made a valiant effort, joining in the rousing shanty as he touched his mug to Jack's.

Jack nestled against him, touched that James had put aside his brooding long enough to make an appearance. He thoroughly enjoyed the last tall tale from Karl, one the of the Dutchmen who possessed a delightfully deep voice and the magic of a born storyteller. He cheered the ending, drained his mug and hauled himself to his feet. "Turnin' in, lads. As we all should. We had fair pickin's today, did we not?"

There was a final cheer and the galley began to empty when Jack stopped to touch James' shoulder. "C'mon, luv. Let's get some sleep."

He went to the cabin and walked to the casement, watching the wake of the Chimaera, the reflection of her lamps streaking gold across the water. For a long time he remained there, absently drinking from his flask.

James stretched out on the bed, the coverlet half pulled up and lying on his back, eyes closed and face empty; too empty and motionless for sleep.

Jack undressed slowly and dawdled over the lamps, finally extinguishing all but one before he slid between the sheets. "Jamie, wot ya thinkin' that's got yer brain rattlin' so loud even I can hear it?"

"You did leave them enough supplies to reach port safely, did you not?"

Jack rolled his eyes, but suppressed a groan. "I told you I'm not a savage, James."

"I know. I am sorry." James turned onto his side and managed a crooked smile, watching him curiously.

"Wot is it, luv. Yer all twitchy again." Jack pushed back one of the blonded braids fondly.
James sighed out a breath. "Twenty-four guns, Jack? That is as many as we have aboard. What if something had gone wrong? If anyone had lost his nerve? And for what? A little more plunder in the Chimaera's holds?"

Jack sighed. "But nothin' went wrong. I don't see the point of worryin' over it after the fact, luv. It's exactly the same thing we done before, and quicker without any Spanish heroes." He rolled over to lean on one elbow. "Besides, plunder is our business. That's wot it's all about. Well, there's the ship and the sea and freedom and goin' wherever we want t'go and seein' all manner of wonderful things. But it's business. Hard, cold cash, mate. Even privateers are expected to make a profit."

He reached for his flask on the nightstand and armed himself for the expected outburst.

Instead, silence followed, then the rustle of linen as James plucked the flask from his grasp. "There is not all that much difference, is there? In the Captain, maybe, but not by the letter."

Jack's brow furrowed. "How's that, luv? I mean, Navy an' pirate, well that goes without sayin', but privateer and pirate?"

James shook his head. "Where is the difference whether a privateer or a pirate takes a Portuguese for a prize? The Crown gets its share if the privateer does. Money buys safety from the noose, not the letter of the law. And the more they behave like pirates, the more cruel they are and the more men they kill, the better. More plunder, more prizes, more blood. A privateer can be every single bit a pirate, and need not even cross the law like Hamilton did." He shook his head again, violently. "The letter doesn't change anything. It's only down to the Captain."

"That's true enough. There's privateer captains as would make any decent pirate blush. And some Navy captains I'd pit against a Barbossa. Wot of it? I figger 'tis best to get the job done clean and have it off with only a little fuss. Course, it don't always go that way, but it's much better all 'round." Jack nestled into the pillow and watched James' profile, silhouetted against the fading light. The candle in the lamp sputtered a protest and died out completely.

"You will not hear me object to that. But where do we draw the line? When is something acceptable, and when is it not?" James could hear a wave break against the Chimaera's hull, a thrum going through her, almost comforting. "May those who make the rules break them?"

Jack sought refuge in the flask. "James, don't. Just don't go on like that. You'll drive yerself mad and take me with ya. Remember this: nothin' keeps a crew happy like a juicy haul. Sorta like takin' a girl to her first dance. Now, wot in hell do you think they woulda thought of me if I'd passed up such a prize without a glance?"

"I had not considered that," James admitted. "I...I am not used to the crew getting any say in that." He smiled into the darkness. "I notice you keep blaming me for any current and future levels of your madness. I shall not take that responsibility."

Jack curled into his arms and held the flask to his lips. James could feel his grin. "Not askin' you to. They'd have thought me a sorry excuse fer a pirate if I didn't take a gamble, aye? The more plunder, the more their shares. It's only natural. And with all the extra stores, what we're losin' in speed now, we'll make up fast. Do you realise we don't have to restock? We can take advantage of the Trades and cut straight across the South Atlantic. I'd say it was worth the risk, wouldn't you?" He searched in the dark for that spot on James neck, just below his ear. "No sense gettin' sloppy."

"I cannot cheer for it, Jack, but yes, the risk was worth the gain." Jack was being very sloppy, kissing a wet path along James' jawline. James might have meant plunder when he asked, "Do you ever get enough?"
"Shouldn't be so warm and smooth then!" Jack retorted, winding him in a tight grip for a proper kiss. "It's just ole Jack, luv. Same as ever." He laughed softly and made quite sure that James was not thinking about plunder, risks, morals or anything except one very insistent pirate.

Chapter Nineteen
Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Tension and temptation follow the Chimaera around the cape as she sails westward.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to @smtfhw for her excellent beta.

There is another cast portrait in this chapter.
Chapter Eighteen

CHAPTER NINETEEN: Discipline and Sacrifice

Jack felt the morning sun against the back of his neck, but the wind was cold. They were days ahead of his expected time, despite the way the Chimaera lumbered with her additional cargo. The currents and winds made up for her weight and sped them around the Cape in a rush of good fortune. There was only sullen drizzle and biting cold to bear this time; no screaming storms or idiot navigation to interfere with his mad dash back towards the Caribbean, and, if Jack had a few bad moments, worrying about how low she lay in the water, he drowned them in his flask and took advantage of the winds that raced westward.

He hunched into his coat, easing her with the current and the wind picked up from behind to blow his hair into a tangle.

"You cannot see where you are heading us, Captain," James said with a chuckle as he took the wheel from him. He had steered her 'round the Cape and was used to the sly, knowing grin that Jack always wore when giving the helm to him.

The wind caught in his hair, tied back into a tidy queue and tickling at his bare neck, making him smile. The currents were easy and he held fast with only one hand, the other resting on the smooth wood, warm in the morning sun.

"Don't need to now, do I?" Jack watched him under his lashes. "She loves you, that's fer sure, Jamie." He lounged back against the rail and slid to sit on the deck, digging in his coat pocket until he remembered that his whittling was down in the galley. "You belong to her now, y'know."

James barked a laugh. "Jack, she is a ship. I realise you hear strange voices in your head, but blaming the ship is unfair. She's far too fine a lady for that."

"I have a ship, Jack. The whole point of this is to get back to her and all she entails. Certainly, the Pen—Chimaera is a fine ship and her Captain a lucky man, but that does not mean that she can love."
James' second hand slid up the spoke at a little shimmy, holding her steady as the cross-currents pulled at her.

Jack shushed him and sucked at the pipe, puffing like Mattie's dragon with the soup. "Don't be cruel to her. I mean it. Wot say you stay with this lovely lady?" Jack gnawed a little on the pipe stem. He might have need of the Chimaera---Jamie's Penelope---should the Pearl be in the wrong hands or worse.

He sighed out a cloud of smoke. He would know if something had happened to her. Deep in his bones, of that, he was sure. Whether or not he would have to chase her for another decade was much less certain. He could only hope she was still in Gibbs' hands.

For the first time, James really looked up from the wheel. "I have a home to get back to, Jack." His voice was low, and a little bit cold; firm. "My place is Port Royal, the Dauntless, my duty as protector of those people." His gaze dropped again to the Chimaera's deck, and he could not say he was not tempted. His ship.

Truly his ship, not a loan from the Crown that could be taken from him at any time, even by means of a so-called promotion. He straightened and shook his head. "I do not have the makings of a pirate, Jack. I will not spend my life running from the same law I once protected. I have a duty and an obligation to return."

Jack smoked in silence for a few minutes. "James, y'think everything'll be the same back there? We've been gone more than half a year, another month, maybe two, before we make port. Far as anyone knows, we could be long dead."

James' brow drew tight, and he shook his head, violently. "Perhaps they think me dead, yes. That does not mean Port Royal is no longer my home."

Jack grunted an absent agreement and wondered if Gibbs had ever received that letter. He certainly could not have written Governor Swann and had not been about to let Gibbs know that Norrington was with him, lest old Navy attachments make him do something stupid like try for Port Royal. That would have been unthinkable: to put the Pearl in danger of capture. Still, he wondered, stifling his uneasy conscience, and hoped, for James sake, that his place at Fort Charles awaited. For himself, all he wanted was his Pearl, although the thought of having no James around was distinctly melancholy. The Penelope seemed to echo his thoughts with a creaking groan.

James returned his attention to their course without another word. Two months. It seemed almost short now that a clear destination was set. Home, actually within his grasp. Would it feel as if there were something missing? Jack had once said he would return for him. But even if Jack dared, James was not sure.

Jack reminded himself to confess the letter to James sometime and promptly forgot about it as that broody look crossed the green eyes. "Y'know, there's a lotta ways of sneakin' around t'see someone, Jamie." His gaze was innocent and he petted the deck with one hand. "She's gonna need a good careenin'. Best to see if I can fit her keel with copper. Really helps with the worms."

"So you are going to keep her? Commodore Jack Sparrow?" James called for Van, passed him the wheel and sat down next to Jack. "Do me a favour. Don't be twice the nuisance you were, else it will be difficult to avoid chasing after you."

"Let's just say I'll take care o'her for you." Jack grinned and tapped his ash over the side. "You look lovely standin' there." He pulled James close for a quick kiss. "I gotta get below. I'm gettin' chilblains on me bum it's still so cold!"
He clattered down the steps, turning once to watch James. On his way down to the galley, he paused, fingers stroking the handrail. "Don't you fret, luv. He's just a bloody stubborn bugger. I know he adores you." He continued to talk all the way down the steps.

James caught up with him at the hatch. "Let's see if Andre has some of that coffee left." Jack laughed and threw an arm around James' shoulder, glad of any reason to grin away the clouds.

There was an enormous crash from the galley and Jack looked up at James, his eyes wide.

"Goddamn, ya heathen son of a dog, I'll slit yer gizzard!" Griffin's voice boomed as Matthew ran right into them.

Jack's face was grim. "James, we got trouble."

Ivan leapt to knock Griffin over the upturned table, fists like hams flailing. The broad sailor grabbed hold of his beard and slammed Ivan into the waiting crewmembers who shoved him back.

Jack's voice cut through the din like an icy wind. "Wot in fuck is goin' on here!"

"Shut yer trap! I'll cut yer ballocks off!"

Ivan screamed a stream of Russian invective and charged like a maddened bull.

Berkely rushed forward to try and separate them, butting Griffin aside with one shoulder. "Damn the two o' ya! Get clear! Bertie, Vorst, get 'em apart."

It was never clear who got hold of a blade or how, but there was another crash as they fought, then a yell and Berkely went down.

Jack had his swordbelt off and slammed it across Ivan's back, elbowing Griffin out of the way. "STAND DOWN! NOW!"

James knelt above Berkely, pressing both hands hard against the bleeding wound in his shoulder. "Andre, hot water, quick. Matthew, bring bandages, needle and thread."

The two scurried off, glad to escape the eerie silence that followed, Griffin and Ivan glancing at Berkely, then Jack, suddenly wordless.

Jack wheeled on them, his eyes like fire. "Damn you both. I swear I won't stint the rope myself if
ye've killed him." His voice was deadly soft. "Get 'em both in the brig. I'll deal with it later. Berks? Bertie, Jan, get that table right. MOVE!"

Berkely groaned as James ripped his shirt to examine the slash, then pressed it hard against the wound to stem the bleeding. "It's long, and deep where the knife entered." Matthew came running back, breathless and fearful.

Jack knelt beside James, his jaw quivering, anger still sparking from every pore. "Get him on the table. Cookie, get me rum." He took a shaky breath and stood, glaring as Vorst and Jan hustled the two combatants out of the galley. The silence was tense. "I need light here. Get some lamps." Fully half the watchers bolted to find candles and lanterns.

It took four men to get big Berkely laid on the table, blood still pouring from the wound, leaving puddles that dripped onto the deck. "Jesus Christ! James, keep a hold of that. Don't let up the pressure until I'm ready. Berks? Berkely, can ya hear me?"

His answer was a groan, then a meek, "Aye, Captain. Jest a scratch."

Jack forced himself to grin. "Y'know, if ya wanted extra rum rations, ya coulda asked, mate. Mattie, hold the mug for him." Jack turned his attention to the wound, probing around James' hand gently. "Jamie, how deep is it? Can ya tell if it hit anythin' vital?"

James shook his head. "Not the lung. Three inches where the knife entered, maybe more. It gets shallower down his chest."

"Goddamn it t'hell. Matthew, keep that steady. Berks, drink up, man."

Andre brought over a big basin of hot water and Jack worked swiftly, washing away the blood and gingerly parting the ragged edges of flesh. "Hold that lamp higher. Over a little. More light, dammit! Shite. Berks, luv. Yer gonna have a nice pirate scar, mate." He looked over at James. "Keep that clear and get as much rum in him as ya can. I've gotta clean this out. Can't see wot I'm doin'."

James cleared the blood away as Jack worked, pressing tight to stem the flow. Berkely began thrashing, until Bertie grasped his hand, coaxing him to drink rather than fight.

Jack grimaced. "Hold on, Berks. Just you hold on, mate." He splashed a full mug of rum over the wound and Berkely screamed, the sound piercing to the bilges. Thankfully, he passed out and Jack flamed the needle, then doused it in more rum.

He worked methodically, his fingers quick and careful. The gash was long, deep where it pierced dangerously close to the armpit and slicing up over Berkely's broad arm. Five times, the injured man roused and went still by the time Jack had finished stitching and blood still oozed from the wound. He glanced at Matthew whose small face was turning ghastly white. "Mattie! Someone catch him."

James made a grab for the boy when he fell, leaving red handprints on his shirt as he cradled him securely. He hissed a curse under his breath, passed Matthew to Jan, then helped Jack to yank the bandage tight.

It took another hour for them to finally staunch the bleeding and get Berkely wound in more bandages, secured with strips torn from the finest, cleanest shirt Jack could find. When he regained consciousness, they were able to settle him in his cabin. Jack had ransacked the medicine chest and applied plenty of some Chinese potion to the wound and he stank of it, sharp and green. He looked at James with tired eyes, every line in his face showing starkly but couldn't seem to make himself
Once Berkely was fast asleep, they retired to their cabin. Without a word, James pulled both their shirts off and soaked them in a basin, then fetched a rag to gently mop the blood from Jack. "What now?"

"Jesus." Jack's brow was furrowed and he took the rag to wipe a streak of red from James' face. His lower lip was caught between his teeth and he lowered his eyes. "I need a bloody drink."

James fetched him the bottle and for a little while, they passed it silence. "Seems as if Matthew will not be the new ship's surgeon."

Jack laughed softly. "Poor little bugger. Don't think he's ever seen such a wound before. He's lucky."

"Yes. So much blood." James did not mention that the crew likely was out there, waiting for their captain's reaction, expecting it. "What now, Jack?"

Jack sighed heavily. "Suppose I'll have t'do somethin' fast. I meant wot I said, James. If Berks don't make it, I'll kill 'em both m'self."

"Right. But if you tell that to the crew, they will say you are courting bad luck. You have to punish them, and you have to do it now."

"I know." Jack's face twisted painfully. "Suppose I gotta use the cat. God, I hate it. But yer right, it can't wait." He swallowed more rum and suddenly, buried his face in his hands.

James laid an arm on his shoulder and squeezed. He knew Jack did not like punishments. He was like a child, wondering why it could not be all sweets; his reaction to anyone interfering with that fun was a pout more often than not. "I will do it," James said, "but you have to be there."

Jack pulled himself up and smiled at James, only a shadow of the pout visible. "I know. Thanks, James." James was kind enough not to notice that he took another big drink before they descended to the brig together.

Jack eyed the culprits through the bars and wondered if Ivan had tried the door, suppressing a smirk. "I'm not a hard man and I don't interfere in yer bloody quarrels, but I won't have such shite on me decks, both o' you."

It was funny, he thought. The words were almost the same as Hamilton's over his knife-fight with Griffin. Maybe James was right and they should have left him in Bombay. Jack stood a little straighter. "I don't hold with such nonsense and I should just toss ya both overboard." He let that sink in, watching both faces sharply. Ivan looked like his hangover was already starting. Griffin just glared.

"I should gut ya both fer makin' this necessary. Fifty each and I don't have t'tell ya wot I'll do if the worst happens."

James could feel how Jack was quivering. "Get off yer arses." He drew his sword and nodded to James, his face a mask.

Ivan opened his mouth to speak, but James' glare silenced him. "Up."

He unlocked the cells. "Do not think I will hesitate for a moment to run you through if you attempt anything stupid."
Griffin stared at him in fury, then bent his head and dragged up the stairs after Ivan.

James had ordered a grating rigged and most of the crew had assembled around it, parting as he stepped forward and tied Ivan to it.

Jack watched from the quarterdeck and looked down at the faces, his own set and strained. "I promised you all a square deal. We keep to the Code, we share the profit. I've led you all to the kind of plunder most take years t'get in a mere two months. Have I not been good as me word? You lot put yer faith in me and I've given all ye asked and more. But I will not let anyone in this crew put his mates in jeopardy. I'm a sailor and a pirate an' the Code asks blood for blood."

He swallowed hard. "If there's anythin' I hate more than the lash, it's bein' forced to use it. Ivan, Griffin. You both let yer little quarrel put every single man aboard in danger. Far as I'm concerned, ye've been left behind. Consider this a warnin' because I won't hesitate to toss the next man who does such a thing off this ship with me own hands. Do I make m'self clear?"

No one stepped forward to their defence. The answer was a resounding, "Aye, Captain," a chorus much more grim than the usual cheerful carousing. James stepped forward and took the Bo'sun's place, swinging the cat.

He had never exacted a punishment himself and had ordered only few. A captain required respect, and the lash could not create that. But respect demanded discipline, and sometimes, the cat was the captain's last means to enforce it. His eyes wandered to Jack's, hidden under the brim of his tricorn, but watching, still for once.

After two dozen strokes, Ivan sagged against the grate, after the third, he hung from his bindings, shuddering as his blood dripped to the deck. James swallowed hard but kept his gaze and arm even as he let the last lashes fall.

Jack forced himself to watch, drawing some kind of grim strength from James or perhaps from the ship herself. Whatever angry disappointment lingered only served to stiffen his spine.

James jerked his head and Vorst stepped forward to untie Ivan, letting him sag to the deck as Griffin took his place.

Griffin, who had committed more crimes than James was willing to tolerate, who had attempted to ravish a woman, beat Jack, himself; who deserved the noose. The first blow crashed hard and Griffin screamed.

James took a deep breath and steeled himself. This punishment was for what they had done to Berkely, what both of them had done. Justice meant to punish them the same way, not to let one charge govern the punishment of another. The lash cracked again and he wielded it evenly, keeping anger and vengeance tightly locked away.

Griffin stood when Vorst untied him, stumbling against the rail and gripping it hard. Ivan was standing next to him and sneered.

"Griffin, you work the day, Ivan, the night. When you are not on watch, you will be in the brig. Each of you is responsible for the other. If one of you is not at work or in the brig when he should be, you will both answer for it. Any more fights, and you will find yourself here again. Is that clear?" James' voice was harsh, cool with Naval discipline, brooking no questios. "Now get yourself cleaned up and out of my sight."

Jack held up one hand for silence. "I don't want anymore of this sort of thing. Now, back t'work."
Van, take the wheel. I'll be below." He stalked off the quarterdeck and into the Great Cabin.

"Jan, Karl, clean that up, then get fore and move the yards up. We're low in the water." The bloody cat still in his hand, James followed Jack.

Jack doubled over the basin, retching and rushed to empty it out the casement just as James opened the door. He gulped and pressed one hand to his mouth, struggling to keep himself calm.

James brought him a wet rag and a glass of water, leaning against the casement with a sigh, hovering close.

Jack coughed, tried to choke down the water and leaned far out of the casement as his stomach refused to be quelled. He took the rag and wiped his mouth, sinking into a chair, then sat silently, his head bowed.

James stood still, watching him sadly. So this was what Captain Jack Sparrow could not do. Discipline his crew, even when there was no other resort, no loophole through which he could slip. "It was necessary," James said softly. "The crew would have lost respect if you let this happen without reaction."

Jack nodded and fished in his boot for his flask. Reinforced by near-draining it, he looked up at James miserably. "I hate floggings."

"A man who likes floggings should never be in the position to order them." James knelt before him and with one hand, brushed a strand of hair away, then lingered over the tension in his shoulders.

"I know. I shouldn't be so yellow 'bout it. Honestly, Jamie, I've never had to do this much. Pirates know the Code. They know ya don't steal from or fight yer crewmates onboard. These--" his usual gesturing was subdued. "They don't know. They expect it." Jack blushed under James' eyes. "I know I don't have much of a stomach fer it, luv."

"I am glad you do not," was all James said for a while, until he rose, kissing Jack's forehead. "I will check on Berkely."

"Let me, luv. At least let me show me face again. I feel a bit of a fool, y'know." Jack still looked pale as he gave himself another swipe with the rag and grabbed a bottle. "If he's awake, he'll need a nip, aye?" His grin was strained.

"I do not envy him his hangover," James teased, slipping an arm round his waist, squeezing. "I will go with you."

Jack clanked into the galley and wandered from corner to corner, sprinkling a liberal amount from the bottle in hand to the deck. "And I jus' know yer gonna be so much happier back in the West Indies, luv. Now, let's get all them nasty whisky fumes offa yer decks. Damned Irish swill! Shouldn't be 'llowed shipboard if ya ask me." He paused to gulp down a generous swallow of his libations and continued into the causeway.

In the two weeks since the fight, the days had grown much warmer, but Jack had his donned coat to accommodate another two bottles. He was of the opinion that the bad blood between Ivan and Griffin was all the fault of not properly exorcising the Chimaera's former captain, and, with Berkely on the mend, had set about correcting that omission, to the stares and guffaws of his crew.

"I don't much hold with spilling good rum anywheres but down me gullet, luv, but you deserve the very best. I know, me sweet. He's as obstinate as Will Turner's bleedin' donkey. A lot prettier,
"While I appreciate that you are not drinking it yourself, what, precisely, do you hope to attain by soaking the decks in rum?" James was leaning against the bulwark, arms crossed, smiling faintly.

Jack looked up from his non-stop 'conversation' and grinned, taking advantage of the pause to swill down another inch of liquid. "Just a precaution, luv. She needs a good overhaul, she does! And I'm terribly sorry, darlin'. I shoulda done this a lot earlier, but you know how 'tis. There, now, let's get in here an' take care of the crew too."

When Jack finished in the hold where their hammocks had hung on the voyage out, he left a strong fragrance of rum and a few damps spots on the deck.

James followed, shaking his head. He smiled fondly, hard pressed to remember the cold there when now it was unbearably hot in the narrow hold. "Are you speaking to the ship again?"

"Course-hic-course-hic-course I am! Who'd ya think I was talkin' to? Me shadow?" He patted the rail in the causeway with a lopsided smile. "She's such a lovely girl, isn't she, Jamie? An' I know this'll keep all them ugly whisky fumes at bay. Hic."

"Whisky caused delusions of grandeur, but rum obviously causes different delusions. Once and for all, Jack. The Chimaera is a ship. She cannot hear you, speak, or love. She is well-built, yes, a fine ship, but she has timbers and sails, not ears and mouth or heart."

James shook his head and crashed it hard against the lintel as the Chimaera lurched.

Jack giggled and leaned close to the bulwark, his fingers caressing the wood. "Shhh! No need t'beat it inta his head, is there sweetling? He's jus' bein' rational. Or is that rationale?" He looked up at James with an innocent, if faintly foggy, gaze. "Poor luv. Here. Hic. It'll help." He handed over the bottle and managed to press a sloppy kiss to James' shoulder.

James rubbed the back of his head, scowling. "Of course, if she were alive, this would indubitably prove that ships are women." The Chimaera rocked again, leaving Jack clinging to James' shirt for balance. James sniffed. "And you, my fine Captain, belong in bed to sleep off those rum fumes."

"Not done yet, luv. Gotta get th' orlop an' th-hic-bilges. Must finish it proper or I gotta start all over again. Whoa!" Jack wavered dangerously on the edge of the steps, then the Chimaera gave a little shimmy and righted him. "C'mon. Le's do it proper...jus' like you said. Do it once an' do it hic-proper."

James sighed. "Very well. Do you promise not to waft about the ship all night if I let you finish your valuable mission now?"

"Cross me heart, luv." Jack fumbled to get the second bottle open, leaving a dribbling trail of liquid behind him, making James' tiptoe to avoid slipping on little puddles of rum. He continued his bizarre 'blessing' all the way through the bilges, finally emptying the rest of the bottle in the very centre of the ship, knee-deep in water, to the extreme confusion of the rats.

James grabbed him from behind as he threatened to droop, the ends of his braids already miserably wet. He hoisted him up. "Done?"

Jack wheeled around in a grand gesture, his arms spread wide, slipped and fell backwards on his arse in the water, taking James with him. He laughed and threw an arm around James' neck, nuzzling. "Think we're done now, luv."
"Done here. Back in the cabin, you will need a wash." James maneuvered him up the stairs, the waves shaking the Chimaera so that Jack always tumbled against him. Back in their cabin, he tugged at the sodden clothes.

"Y'know, ya really should b'lieve me. She needed that! An' Berks'll be up on deck in 'nother week. Well, he will 'less I tie 'im t'the hammock." Jack swayed in James grip, smiling sweetly and plucking at his pocket for the final bottle.

"Whatever she needed, you definitely do not need that." James snatched the bottle away and locked it in the liquor cabinet, pocketing the key.

Jack managed a thunderous pout before falling over in a heap with an equally thunderous snore. Somehow, he managed to grin in his sleep and the Chimaera's shudder could only be construed as giggling, even to James.

Jack was back on deck before dawn the next morning, as always, leaving James to shake his head and wonder at the state of his liver. He'd shed his coat once more and was just peering at the endless horizon around them when something caught his eye, northeast of the Chimaera's position. He squinted and paused for a long moment, gnawing on his lip. Without a word he handed off the wheel to Van and bounced down to the galley to fetch some coffee. When he banged open the doors to the Great Cabin, James was just finishing shaving.

"Thought you'd like a bit o'service, luv."

James scraped away the last bit of soap, washed, then threw himself into the chair with a sigh. It was hot, and even this brief time had reminded his body that there were places on earth where one was not constantly drenched in sweat. "Thank you." He poured them both a cup.

"Y'know, we're just south o' the shippin' lanes to New Spain, luv." Jack peeked over his cup and quickly shoveled a bit of hardtack into his mouth. The fresh flour was long-gone but Andre had taken to sprinkling ship's biscuit with leftover sugar by way of breakfast. It always kept the Captain in a cheerful mood.

"I am well aware of our course, Jack. What of it?" James frowned at the biscuit, then bit into it, swallowing it down with coffee.

"Just saw a nice little ship bit north of us, that's all." How Jack managed to look as though he were up to his neck in devilment and completely innocent at the same time, only the angels knew. He watched James carefully for any reaction.

He heard a sharp intake of breath, saw James' cup freeze half way to his mouth, which was thinned into a line. "So?" James' voice was sharp.

"Just thought I'd mention it." Jack shrugged and grinned at him. He did not mention the British Ensign the 'little ship' flew or the fact that it was headed towards New Spain, which meant it was likely loaded with cash for trading. James' chilly demeanor stopped him in his tracks and he bolted down the coffee. "Gonna check our currents, luv. It's gettin' a bit choppy."

He bounded back to the quarterdeck and watched the ship carefully, barely a pinpoint in the spyglass and swiftly disappearing over the horizon. If he wanted her, he'd have to make a swift decision but he had a very bad feeling his decision was already rendered by a pair of startled green eyes and a wide mouth that did not laugh.
James came to stand next to him, leaning heavily against the rail, staring out at the distance. "Don't." His voice was harsh, monotone; a warning wavering with the faintest hint of plea.

Jack gave him the same look that Matthew did when caught playing with his sword belowdecks.
"Don't wot, luv? Just lookin'."

James quirked a smile, gave him a fleeting kiss, and went to find his pupil.

As James stomped down the steps, the lookout, one of the new Dutchmen, yelled "Sail Ho!"

Jack snapped the spyglass shut and rolled his eyes. "Shaddup, Fritz! She's too far off and are you tryin' to scuttle us? We've no room fer th' rats!"

He looked at where the ship had disappeared and for a moment, his right palm itched furiously and his nose gave a little twitch. He stared at the horizon until he was seeing spots and grimaced at the wheel, turning the Chimaera a bit further south and bellowed for Van.

"Keep her west-so'-west. I'm makin' a few course adjustments." His hands flew around aimlessly. "She's awful low in th' water and all." He disappeared into the Great Cabin and checked his charts, then sneaked a look at those prized and tempting shipping routes.

His smile twisted ruefully. "You'll never know how close ya came, little Englishman. How very very close." He penciled his sudden detour lightly on the chart and went topside, whistling.

James flinched at the sound, and yet dreaded its cessation, when Jack would call all hands, would call to run out the guns. He forced himself to keep his attention on little Matthew and his sword, leading him on a few steps, then chasing him until he fell over a coil of ropes, neatly demonstrating the importance of footwork.

The call never came. The noon-sun burned down, the day crept into a heated, stuffy afternoon, but the only shout was Matthew's when he tackled James to the deck. They tussled for a while, then James retreated to the Great Cabin to wash.

The chart lay unrolled on the desk and he crept closer, looking down at it with a frown. His eyes widened and he rushed to the hidden compartment to take out the shipping routes.

He stared at them, then at the map, back and forth, until a smile crept over his face. He stowed the charts away methodically.

That night, after they had retired to bed, Jack holding his arm captive as a pillow, James mentioned it. "I see you have changed our course, Captain."

"Takin' advantage of the currents, luv. She's so loaded she needs every l'il bit o' help we can give her." Jack looked up from under his lashes at James' chin.

"Of course she does. She deserves it." James bent to kiss his forehead, then nuzzled close to his ear. "Thank you."

Jack didn't answer but he was quite sure he deserved a halo. It wasn't easy to be the best pirate anyone had ever seen and pass up such pickings. He hid a sigh in James' shoulder and decided that a kiss would take the sting out of such selfless devotion.

Chapter Twenty
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

**FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Twenty**
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--R.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

The Doldrums, a swim and a long night, as the Chimaera is stilled.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtfhw for her excellent beta.

There are two more cast portraits in this chapter and we have a little challenge: we've got an action figure for whoever figures out the identities of the 'models' first *G*.
Chapter Nineteen

CHAPTER TWENTY: Still Waters

The days quickly became warmer and then hotter, and after the speed of the trade winds, the Doldrums were a hardship for everyone aboard; the merciless sun burning onto the deck and barely enough wind to stir a sail, let alone provide any reprieve.

James' face was already streaked with sweat when Matthew attempted another lunge, a combination of two quick thrusts. James easily stepped aside and grabbed the already breathless boy around the waist, spinning him through the air before setting him down again. "Enough for today, else our clothes shall not dry until tomorrow."

Matthew pouted on principle, but his lack of protest said enough. "Cor if it ain't beastly hot! And no wind! Why isn't there any wind, James?"

James tugged him aft where they could sit, shaded by the elevated quarterdeck. It was better he answered the question before Jack came up with a ridiculously insane tale that would only serve to confuse the boy. "Matthew, do you remember the trade winds? We just passed through the south-east trade wind. That was why we were so fast.

And further north, there is the north-east trade wind. As a quick-witted young man as you will have realised, their name indicates that they blow in nearly opposite directions. And here is where they meet." He paused a bit and grinned. "Sometimes, we call these the Horse Latitudes."

"But why's the wind stopped?" Matthew, sad to say, repeated one of Jack's fouler and more colourful oaths and giggled. "And why horses? I mean, that's just silly. There aren't any horses here."

"No horses! Just look at them clouds, barnacle! Horses all over!" Jack was half-dressed and dripping wet as he flopped down next to them on the deck.

"Do not mind Jack. He is affected by a little too much sun," James warned. "See, Matthew, we are crossing the Equator. And the trade winds blow in its direction. They have reached their goal, and so they stop."
He paused to glare at Jack who was draping an arm around his shoulder. "Sailors named them. They had horses aboard and when caught without wind, they had to throw the horses overboard to save drinking water. So if Jack ever speaks of sunken treasure here, it will neigh."

"And sometimes, on nights so still you can hear yer blood in yer veins, them horses come up from th' depths to wreak havoc on unwary ships, tramplin' and screamin' in fury." Jack's eyes were intent, charming the boy into hypnotised fascination as his left hand snaked around to tickle him. "Boo!"

Matthew squealed and James rolled his eyes. "See, the trade winds are a little bit like Captain Jack here, and the Doldrums are a bottle of rum. The rum is the destination, and he swirls and rushes and generally makes a lot of noise to get there. But when he reaches his destination, he falls over in a heap and begins to snore, and does not move for a long time."

"Wretch!" Jack pulled one of the braids in James' hair. "Matthew, I am not a trade wind or any other kind o' wind. Jamie, here, on the other hand, is known fer bein' a bit full o'wind himself." Jack scooted himself next to Matthew and wrestled him into gales of laughter.

Matthew squirmed until he wrenched free, scrambling behind James and peeking forward with a wide and playful grin.

"Right, Jack is not a wind. Because winds can, on occasion, be very useful."

"Such disrespect fer an ole seadog!" Jack was, as usual, restless as any wind. He couldn't sit still for two minutes together, constantly on his feet, then flopping to the deck, bouncing around, his hands always in motion. "Wish I could be a wind right now. I'd get us bloody movin' again. I hate sittin' like a bunch o'landlubbers in a church."

"I am certain your charm would convince a few horses to surface and pull the Chimaera like a carriage." James arched an expectant eyebrow and Matthew dared to leave his cover again, giggling and looking at Jack with wide eyes.

"Can you do that?"

"Only one as can do that is the Sea Witch, and she'd only do it fer a blood sacrifice. She favours lads with gold curls and too many questions." Jack tumbled around the deck with Matthew again like a pair of puppies. He shoved his hair out of his face and hefted its weight from his neck. "Anyone wanna swim?"

James sighed his relief. "Oh, yes."

Matthew nodded eagerly, then stopped short and chewed on his lip again, when James lightly touched his shoulder. "'n will the Sea Witch be down there in the water?"

James shook his head. "If she is there, she will only slap Jack, as all women do. She will not mind you."

Jack put out his tongue at James and stood up, letting his breeches drop to the deck. "Christ, let's go then. I'm too hot t'think!" He was balanced on the rail for barely a second, then arcing down towards the water.

"C'mon! It's warm as a bath," he hollered.

Matthew eyed the long fall hesitantly, although he had stared at Jack's dive, gaping. James held him a line to climb down instead, then undressed and jumped after them with a splash.
"G'wan, Mattie.  Let go!"  Jack bobbed in the water like a very odd buoy.  He dived under as the
boy released his hold and caught him beneath the surface, easing them up and sputtering a laugh.
"James, if ya grab me foot I'll---" Jack disappeared and popped up to pull James into a playful kiss.
"Matt, swim t'me."

Matthew eyed the distance and swam, pushing through the water. "Yes, very good. No, don't kick
my chest." James swam around them, circling, then, as Matthew swam away from Jack again,
dunked him under water.

Jack lazed on his back, watching the sky and made a decision. "VORST!" he yelled, "Toss me a
line. Jamie, give me as much slack as ya can. I wanna see if I can figger out that bloody leak."

James was swimming close to the ship with Matthew, showing him how to move properly in the
water rather than simply keeping his head above the surface. He lifted an eyebrow. "Do you wish to
keelhaul yourself?"

Jack splashed him. "Just takin' a look. C'mon, give it over." He took the end of the line and
wrapped it around his waist. "If I tug, haul me up." He took a breath, doubled around and dove
deep, heading under the Chimaera until he could just see the dark curve of her keel. She was too
weighted down for him to go further and he swam away from her to the surface.

"Damnation! I can usually get further down than that!" He kicked in frustration and waited long
enough for his breathing to still then tried again, losing himself in the colder waters where they sun
did not reach, carefully avoiding the barnacled wood and straining against his bursting lungs until he
saw the faint bubbling, just off-centre amidships. His pulse throbbing in his temples, he pushed
away again, finally tugging on the rope when he was sure he was clear of the ship.

James hauled him up quickly until a gasping Jack was clinging to his neck, slightly cooler from the
deep water. "Now what have we here? Look Matthew, a stranded, wriggling fish!" Bending closer,
he whispered into Jack's ear, "Bloody stubborn fool."

Matthew swam closer and clung to James' shoulders, peering at Jack. "Did y'see any horses?"

Jack shook his head breathlessly. "Only a coupla little seahorses, mate," he panted. "I found that
leak! Just off t'larboard down the middle." He spat out salt water and clung to James. "God, she's
low in the water."

"That is little wonder with all that cargo. Although we must have lost several pounds of rum casks
already." James eyed Jack poignantly, lazily treading water and holding on to the line - the Chimaera
was slow, so it was merely the gentlest tug with which she eased them through the water. He waited
until Jack's panting stilled to kiss him fleetingly. "I am getting back aboard, and if my clothes are
gone this time, we have volunteers for caulking that leak."

Jack suddenly threw both arms around his neck and kissed him, then gave him a swat and yelled for
Bertie to haul him up. "Wot about you, little horse? Ready t'find yer sealegs again?"

He played with Matthew a while longer until the boy's teeth started to chatter and held onto the line
as they flew up to the deck. James was there, ready with a blanket. "Wrap him up good." Jack
winked, then stalked to the wheel, babbling to Van as he pulled on his clothes. He was suddenly in
need of rum and a lot of it.

Matthew paraded the deck, the blanket trailing behind him, until a giggle turned into a yawn and
James shooed him to his hammock.
James set a group of four to go and caulk the leak and ordered further tasks to keep the crew busy rather than letting them fall into the stifling boredom of becalmed weather. Dusk was setting in and with it, a bit of refreshing coolness, when he returned to the quarterdeck.

Jack was lying in a heap on the deck, staring up at the darkening sky and inward to his darkening mood. It wasn't a very dark mood, just a tinge of indigo that made him slurp the contents of his flask and consider wishing on the evening star who winked at him faintly beneath the veil of sunset.

"Not that I am not flattered, but do you always have to look up to me?" James teased, a larger shadow against the sinking sun as he nudged Jack's side with his foot.

The dark eyes focused and he eyed James' crotch with a grin. "Rather nice view from here, luv." He rolled to sit up, wrapping his arms around his knees and heaved a sigh. "Hope we catch a breeze soon. I should douse the lights belowdecks. It's too still."

"Two days hence, I would say. And yes, the Chimaera whispered that to me," James teased. It was an instinct bred of sailing most of his life, and James had crossed the Equator often enough. He sat himself next to Jack, leaning against the bulwark, eyes closed. He did not mind the Doldrums, not yet, at least. They had enough supplies, and unlike Jack, he was able to thoroughly enjoy sitting still.

Jack watched him mutely, his lips drooping. James had been surprised to realise that, without his chronic grins and his beard only just beginning to fill in so he didn't appear quite so much an errant manchild, Jack's lips had a sad, downwards set to them. "Two days ain't bad," he muttered wistfully.

"Then why are you looking at me as though I had taken away your rum?" James cracked open an eye and settled Jack into the crook of his shoulder, an arm wrapped around him so he would not continue swaying in and out of his sight.

"Nuthin', just thinkin' too much. Makes me strung up. No, not that kinda strung up!" He laughed and gave James a pinch. "Y'know I love sailin' hereabouts. Right in the middle of the whole earth. Stars look wonky, winds blow sideways and everythin' feels---I dunno---fey."

"Ah yes. Thinking puts a strain on a head unused to it." It was comfortable on the deck, marginally cooler and less stuffy than belowdecks. James looked up, imagining a breeze tickling his chin. "The stars look different everywhere. Only Polaris keeps steady."

Jack's voice was soft. "Makes ya feel so small and at the same time, sorta connected to ev'rything. Like bein' in the ocean. Y'never did see them reefs off the far coast of New Holland. Lord! I never wanted t'come up fer air."

"Ah, that explains." James grinned. "It's beautiful. Endless, somehow. And it is why I wished to go to sea." He shifted, yawned, then looked over at Jack, strangely still. "Do you want to sleep on deck tonight? It is certainly more bearable than below."

Jack shifted. "Gotten used to me own kip, luv." He was feeling nervy and restless. "I'm goin' below." He rolled to his feet and scooped up his boots.

James kissed him and took the wheel, resting his hand on the wood. It was tied off, but still he thought there was a little shimmy. "I will follow in a little while."

Jack stopped in the causeway to think, then headed down to the galley in search of some refreshment. While piling a trencher with fruit and a hunk of cheese, wheedling a bit of precious, if monumentally stale, bread from Cookie, he saw Ivan and Griffin, sitting together where they should not be at the big table, both laughing and sharing a mug between them. He raised an eyebrow and
trudged back to the Great Cabin.

It was fully dark outside when James followed, padding barefoot across the deck. The sight of their cabin made him nearly drop his boots.

Jack had lit the lamps, not the usual rough lanterns whose thick glass almost obscured the light, but two ornate Chinese lamps, plundered from the Cecilia. The cabin was bathed in flame-red light as he pulled open the last casement to the Persian blue eastern sky already awash in stars.

James stood and watched for a moment, Jack leaning out of the casement, the flickering shadows of his body in the lamplight, dancing and alive. James straightened and coughed. "What's this then? I thought no light belowdecks?"

"Changed me mind. I'll prob'ly regret it." Jack had an odd look on his face, half puckish, half feaful. "There's the last of the bread an' some o' that fine cheese. No sense in goin' hungry." His lips curved into a swift smile, black eyes gleaming in the red glow.

James cocked his head and smiled back, straightened, and grinned. "Should I be afraid?"

"Not unless I bring ya one of Cookie's specials." He tipped his head with a coy look and lifted a decanter on the table that glowed like liquid rubies. "Care t'try some o' Lisbon's finest port?"

He poured them each a glass, peering at James through the thick, blood-purple fluid.

James took one and lifted it in salute, then took a sip. It was fine wine and wine had been part of a Navy prize ship often enough, he told himself. "Is there any call for celebration?"

Jack sampled the port appraisingly. "Let's just call it one o' my fancies tonight. Ole Gibbsy coulda told ya I go a bit off now and then."

"Forgive me if that does not strike me as particularly comforting," James murmured, cutting a slice of the bread without taking his eyes from Jack's. There was a strange gleam in them and he wondered at it.

Jack refilled their glasses. He'd pay for it in the morning, but the devil take the sunrise, the port and his head. He was thrilling with a familiar urgency; the need to take with both hands whatever there was in the moment. He sliced up a half-ripe pear. "Why shouldn't we enjoy it? I never have understood Puritanism."
"And that after all the work and sermons Deacon invested preaching it? Truly, a shame." James turned the glass in his fingers, the lamplight catching in the ruby liquid with a glint to match the one in Jack's eyes. "Have you ever denied yourself something you wanted? Not because you could not reach it, but because it was right?"

Jack pondered for a moment then smiled brightly. "Why?" He swayed in the ruddy pools of light that splotched the threadbare carpet, then sat down, his feet immediately on the table. Slouched, coiled like a quivering spring in the chair, he was disturbingly feline.

James chuckled and sipped from his wine. "I believe that answers my question. You truly are a child, grabbing hold of all you want without any thought of self-restraint. Or manners. At least take off the boots."

"Oh, it's manners ya want?" Jack removed the offending boots with a giggle. "Missing all those fetes and folderol, James?" He disappeared into the dark recesses of the cabin, emerging without coat, shirt or waistcoat, holding a trailing mass of Chinese silk that sparkled and gleamed the colours of translucent jade and aquamarine. He handed the robe to James and winked. "G'wan. I'm gettin' fresh water."

James stared at it, then up at Jack. The dark eyes had the same bright gleam as the silk. He gulped and undressed, slipping into the garment.

"Ah, now that looks wonderful on ya." Jack slipped out the door and clattered back in with a cauldron of hot water doused with some peculiar scent, rather like a Popish church, but darker. He tossed one of the towels at James and a moulded bar of extraordinarily fine soap. His deliberately sultry langour broke for a moment when he grinned like a boy. "Well, there's gotta be compensations, luv!"

"I see." Anything that involved water and soap was highly welcome as the salt had left behind the itch of the drying, receding sea. "Jack, you do realise we are months out of Bombay?"

"Perhaps I just wanna get comfortable and enjoy the fruits of me labours." He got busy with the soap and lingered over it, his eyes half-closed like a panther enjoying a much-needed bath.

That lasted long enough to make James' eyes darken just that little bit. Jack's lips parted in a laugh.

In one smooth movement, James slid from the chair, silencing the laughter with his lips, hands stroking down Jack's arms until their fingertips touched and he took the soap. "Perhaps," he murmured, lathering Jack's back, "you could try to speak unambiguously for once."

"That feels wonderful. How's that fer a distinct lack of ambiguity? I told ya, Jamie. I love fine things. Can't resist 'em. Must be in the blood, eh?" Jack ran the wet part of the towel between James' long legs.

"So this is why you insisted on the robe." James shifted back, lathering Jack's chest, teasing with the soapy foam until he could feel the distinct rise of his nipples. "It could also be the rum. Or the wine."

Jack soaked the rest of the towel and rinsed James off, heedless of the carpet because he was far too interested in the way the muscles rode bone under pale skin. "Well, when you weren't sailin' about commodoring, you made a fine livin'. You didn't live like some bloody hermit or dull ole Mr. Deacon."

"Point taken. On the other hand, I did not live like a heathen sultan with a matelot." James traced a finger through the soapy foam, trailing it down until it caught in Jack's navel. His robe was already
drooping from his shoulders. "A very insistent matelot, at that."

Jack backed up a step, his grin teasing. "Don't wanna ruffle such a promisin' pirate's feathers. Just think of it, James!" He pitched another fresh towel at James and dried himself vigorously. "Only two raids and yer share is a king's ransom already. Most of us wait years fer such a haul." He pulled on a red silk robe carelessly and, as he went to refill their glasses, it was strange how, but for that mad mop, he looked nearly noble. "Here y'are. Tell me, luv. Are you so used to pushin' everything in yer heart down all the time?" His smile was devilish.

The smile on James' face had faltered a little. "I am no pirate, Jack. I begin to think you do not understand that at all, but I don't want to be one. I will not put myself against the law and the people I have spent my life protecting. What I may push down in my heart I do so for a sake even dearer to me."

"Oh that!" Jack pouted. "Don't go all moral on me, luv. I meant it literally. Did ya learn it from yer Mum? Yer Da? Or is it always like that with gentlemen? I've always wanted t'know." He stretched out on the bed, toying with a box he'd left on the nightstand and smiling as if it contained a secret.

For one moment, he reminded James of Matthew, curiously asking about a world he did not understand, playing already with a different toy, but ready to complain loudly if the question was not answered. "I believe it was my first Captain. The one who first taught me the importance of duty and loyalty, of standing true to it."

"English, of course. He wasn't one o' them Nonconformists, was he?" Jack laughed. "Wot else did he teach you? Did you know how he lived ashore?" He watched from under his lashes and considered the fact that it was rather silly for him to feel such a dangerous distance between them, circling each other with words. He decided it was the Equator's fault: he must be on the north side and James on the south, or perhaps the other way 'round.

James still sat in his chair, spinning thoughtfully. "He was unmarried, I believe. We never spoke of it. What I learnt were mathematics, navigation, and how to be an officer." He put aside his empty glass, rose and climbed into the bed. "And never to turn my back on a pirate."

Jack pushed a pillow behind his back and tugged at his sleeve. "Lookit this, luv. I thought they'd be perfect fer you an' Mattie." He held up a pair of gold hoops. "And these. Smell that." He worked a tiny cork out of a vial and instantly the cabin was filled with the hot, sweet scent of jasmine.

"I think that was precisely the reason not to turn my back on a pirate, to not get any holes in me. And sweet oils on my skin, although I doubt he referred to that."

He rolled over and scowled at the hoops. "What is it with pirates and putting holes into Navymen?"

"Must be a reaction to all the ropes," Jack said dryly. "I'm surprised it ain't pierced already. Seen many a Navyman hide 'em with a bit of silk pulled through when ashore. The barnacle'll love it."

"Doubtless. He is a little like you, a magpie, attracted by all things glittering." James shifted closer and nibbled at Jack's ear. "Do you intend to turn me into a mirror of yourself? Braids, an earring?"

"No, Jamie. I want you to see yerself as beautiful as I do. There's somethin' terrible bad about too much civilisation." Jack pulled another small bottle from the box and the dark scent of the water lingered between them. "Lovely, innit? Patchouli. And this should make yer proper Christian spine melt. Myrrh oil."
"Do not speak of faith and propriety when I am lying in bed with you without a stitch of clothing on and every intention of removing yours in the course of the night," James warned. "And my opinion on sweet smelling oil stands: too much civilisation."

Jack giggled and rolled onto his side. "Damn, I never thought it possible. Y'know, James, yer very fine to have around." He leaned forward, eyes wide. "Never knew anyone quite like you. I mean, I've know plenty’ O' Navy but not like you at all."

For a moment, he was silent, almost serious. "Wot ya think, luv? Was all this worth a knock on the head?"

James was silent for a while, thinking through what he had never considered. He nodded firmly. "Yes. I have learnt and seen a lot, including a pirate utterly unlike any I have seen before."

Jack bounded up to retrieve the decanter. "Want more o’ the port? There's barrels of it. A fortune packed in straw." He read James' eyes almost word for thought. "Yes, I do appraise it all. Got to, and right quick. There is no sense gettin' yerself blown t'kindom come over trash. Of course, I'll need to get the goin' rates back in P'tit Goave. Business bein' its own kinda pleasure, aye?" He positively twinkled.

"Jack?" James rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Do not remind me of your business if you can avoid it. Yet, if you know that 'business' as you put it can be pleasure, why do you even bother to try turning me pirate? I take pride in being the Commodore. It is who I am."

Jack grinned. "And a lot more." He'd never seen such an opportune moment and took full advantage of it. When he let James up for air, he was stalking and teasing again. "I'd never had the pleasure of kissin' a commodore before our acquaintanceship, sir. You must enlighten me. Do they all taste like salt and fine port?"

"I fear I must disappoint you, oh esteemed pirate, for I have never kissed a Commodore in all my life. However, logic suggests that salt and port have the same source as rum: prior consumption." James' lips lingered in another kiss. "Why do I feel that the pleasure you have in mind has little to do with business?"

"Got it in one, mate." Jack slid beneath him, the silk slipping between their legs. He had dreams of dipping James in honey and making a business of licking it off him, but that, being a very sticky process, was better left for some delightfully deserted beach. He writhed and whispered obscenities with a laugh.

"I wonder how I ever could have thought you unpredictable." Jack answered with another writhe, that sent James gasping, their limbs twining, hair drawing traces on their sweat-slick chests.
Jack giggled when he didn't moan, let himself get dizzy and spiralled into an eastern sky. They pushed, pulled, and the excessive amount of groaning and grunting made Cooks and Andre, below in the galley, consider banging on the ceiling with the broom handle.

Later there was only the soft rustle of cloth as James pulled up a thin blanket to cover himself. It was hot and Jack slept uncovered, but James had no wish to be found naked in the case of any emergency. He yawned softly and promptly found himself with an armful of pirate.

Jack knew he'd come very close to his goal for the night when he didn't dream. Of course, he didn't know he wasn't dreaming until he woke to another morning, waiting for wind. But the blue cast of his mood was gone and he decided that, looking at James, he really hadn't needed to dream.

He was absurdly pleased with himself and the world for days. Then, a little breeze blew in to cool his overheating brain and sent the Chimaera speeding west-northwest.

Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Twenty-One
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS:  elessil and  hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--PG-13.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

The coast of Jamaica looms.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtfhw for her excellent beta.
Chapter Twenty

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: Home

It was not often that such a thing as anticipation was easily readable on James, but when they were only two days' sail out of Port Royal, it was clear, or at least Jack thought so. The flicker in the green eyes, the way they would dance to a certain point on the horizon, soften, then turn back to him or the boy, when they would turn inward, wistful and longing, like an ebbed sea waiting for the tide.

James tore himself from the helm and went below to their cabin, rummaging through sea chests, discarding piece after piece of clothing to be found in them, cursing softly under his breath.

There was a cravat, tinted with blood, which he eyed with displeasure, and a Spanish Admiral's coat would quite possibly be even worse than just a torn shirt and dirty breeches. He scowled at another scarlet coat and gave in to the urge to toss it across the room.

Jack leaned against the doorframe, watching him with an amused smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "I've a feelin' I know wot yer lookin' for, mate. Somethin' dignified, without bullet holes or bloodstains?"

"If you were to pull such attire from your tricorn, I would be much obliged." James was kneeling on the deck in a pile of clothes, neatly ordered into women's clothing and 'too gaudy for a return from captivity'. Then his hands slowed in their quest and he looked up, and rose, a shy smile on his face. "I'm coming home after more than half a year. I don't want them to see me....like this."

Jack's lashes fluttered at those last two words but he dove into the open chests with a bark of a laugh. He hefted a few crates and explored one shoved into a corner. "Let's see wot's in here. Never did go through it all." His grin caught at the light, fool's gold and forced. "Got too distracted."

He poked around, cursing when he encountered something sharp, finally pulling up a coat, the blue very dark and sober. Spanish, he imagined, and beautifully made, nearly new. "Would this do? There's britches, too."

James nodded. "Thank you." He tried it on, and but for a few creases that would straighten, it fit well. "Just one thing." He dove back into the chests, but the only cravat in sight was the bloodied
one. He sighed and tied his shirt's sleeve around his neck.

Blue and white, after a proper wash and shave, and his hair tied back into a neat queue, he almost
looked the Commodore again, but for the brown colour of his face and the braids in his sunbleached
hair.

"Now just wait a minute! You can't go back with a rag 'round yer neck and a sail needle fer a
stickpin!" All he could see of Jack was the seat of his breeches as he dug around in the chests. He
rummaged through the ladies' garments and held up a chemise of butter-soft white silk. "Aha! And
a little o' this..." One hand grabbed for a pelisse, extravagantly trimmed in fine Valenciennes lace.
"Now all we need is a needle an' some thread."

He grinned at James, then it faded, ebbing away like the sun ducking behind a cloud. Norrington—it
was undeniably Norrington—stood a bit straighter, his posture more military than it had been for
months.

Jack swallowed hard and pillaged the ladies' unmentionables.

James paused, slipped away to fetch needle and thread from sickbay. When he returned to the cabin,
Jack was sitting there, looking utterly ridiculous with fine ladies' garments all over his lap, but the
expression in his eyes did not fit. James bent and kissed his neck, squeezing his shoulder lightly.

Pirates do not look mournful or let their lips quiver like deprived children. Jack told himself
countless times to 'buck up' and 'stop 'bein' an ass' while he threaded the needle. He slashed one
seam of the chemise with his bootknife, measured about an ell, then ripped it from hem to neck. The
sound made him feel a little better and he settled down, cross-legged, under the lamp to stitch the two
pieces together. "So where ya gonna go first, luv? The Guv'nor? The Fort?"

"I believe it is not a matter of choosing. There is little doubt Governor Swann shall find me in the
Fort as soon as he hears of my return and then besiege me with more questions than could be
answered in a week's time. Of course, I have yet to... adjust the tale a little." James sat down and
watched, sparing a grin for the needlework. "Will I be wearing a square sail for a cravat?" he teased.

"Don't be daft! It needs joinin' lengthwise." Jack looked up and laughed. "Don't even ask!" His
eyes were playful again. "Knew we'd made good time the way we raced 'round the Cape." His
head was bent over the work and he shoved his hair back with an impatient hand.

James took the dark hair between his hands, smoothed it back and tied it loosely with the length of
green grosgrain that had held his own hair. "Jack Sparrow, pirate and cravat tailor. That sounds
fine."

"Only by commission durin' the fashionable season." Jack re-threaded the needle and began to seam
the silk. "Don't have a flatiron about but you must be turned out proper." He paused, momentarily
serious. "Jamie, wot are ya gonna tell 'em?"

James hesitated. He had considered the question, often enough, but without reaching a satisfying
conclusion, partially because whenever he took on what Jack called the 'broody look', he was teased
methodically until it would disappear. "As little as possible, and as close to the truth as I may."

"Yer gonna hafta think. They'll want all sorts o' details. Why not tell 'em a great fire-breathin'
dragon made off with you and ya ended up in a palace only to return by flyin' carpet." Jack's grin
was glum. "Really, luv, they're gonna pester you to death."

"What do you suggest I tell them? That I slept with - and collaborated with - Captain Jack Sparrow?
That I condoned and even participated in acts of piracy?" James' face softened and his hand dropped. "I am not used to inventing stories to veil the truth."

Jack stabbed the needle through the fabric viciously. "They'd believe the dragon more like!" he muttered, then sighed. "No, yer right. Tell 'em the truth, 'cept fer me. Just tell 'em I were some Spanish bugger. And wot d'ya plan to tell them about how you got home?"

Again James hesitated. Lying seemed as filthy and wrong as ever, but the truth itself he could not relate, not that anyone would believe it. "I think I will omit 'bugger' in the description. And I doubt anyone would believe the commandeering. It will inevitably raise the question as to why the crew would follow either of us, and that is a matter I cannot and will not explain to the Admiralty. I think it would be best if I told them I escaped in Bombay and worked my passage home on another ship."

Jack nodded, the needle between his teeth as he fumbled for another length of thread. He squinted to get it through the eye. "Prob'ly best. They'll want names and suchlike. Make up somethin' foreign they can't check." He looked up with that mournful expression again. "Have ya told the kid?"

James bit the inside of his lip and looked down, then shook his head. "Not yet. I didn't know what to tell him. I have no wish to lie to him but I cannot tell him the truth." He sighed. "They may never know who James Norbury really is."

Jack hummed an assent. "Yer gonna hafta tell young Mattie somethin', luv." He stopped and stared at the material on his lap. "Are you sure of this? Y'know a lot can happen in so many months." Jack gnawed on his lip exactly the way Matthew did when unhappy or confused. "I mean, they likely think yer dead and God knows wot they've done."

James half-smiled, a wistful little grimace as he fetched Jack's flask. "I am sure, Jack. This was my goal all these months, to return home. I won't let that be taken from me by Hamilton. Port Royal has kept its place in my heart, and likewise, they will have a place for me." He said it with such conviction, it was difficult to dispute.

Jack smiled then suddenly leaned forward and kissed James hard. "Hope so, luv." He lost the needle and found it by stabbing himself in the thigh. "Ow!" He sniffed and went back to his work.

"Do you wish to go back to watching over harems?" James knelt beside Jack's lap and pressed a soft kiss to the thus injured thigh. Then he looked up, the same conviction as before in his eyes, but softer somehow. "That I cannot mention you in any report to anyone does not mean I will forget what happened."

"I know, luv." Jack's voice was husky and he forced a grin. "Besides, I told ya I'm comin' back fer you. One fine day, I'll climb in through a window and shock yer housekeeper."

James smiled. "Of course you will. Please don't scare her away. She is a fine cook, and I have no wish to hire Cookie." He wanted to believe it, all too much, that this was not over when he returned to Port Royal, but even if Jack came once, how long would it last? Until the risk grew too high for both of them? Or worse, until that risk caught up?

Jack tapped the side of his head and shook his own. "Don't start thinkin' about it, mate. Bad luck." His mouth twitched into a smile. "You'd be amazed at how small the Caribe can be." He took his frustration out in turning his work inside-out and cutting the lace away from the hem of the heavy wrap.

"After sailing half-way 'round the world, it will seem small enough," James answered eventually. Suddenly, restlessness possessed him, and he could not sit still and watch Jack sew any longer. "I
should speak to Matthew. There is no point in delaying it any further."

Jack nodded. "I'll have this done and see about them britches."
He didn't glance up but once, after James had shut the door, but that look wanted to drag him back and tie him to the bed with silk and lace until the seas froze.

James found Matthew busy with his trencher in the galley. Andre had produced something obviously sticky and sweet into which the boy dug with appetite. James took a mug of grog and sat down next to him. "Good evening, lad."

Matthew's eyes were the colour of blueberries in high summer, dark and sheened with silver. "Hullo, James. What coat is that?" He sucked the final bit of Andre's dried fruits boiled in sugar syrup and port off his fingers.

"Jack found it for me." James sipped from his grog. Matthew's look was wide, innocent, full of trust, and stabbed like a knife. He forced a smile and waited until Matthew had finished. "Will you go topside with me for a moment?"

"Course! We're going to fence? I'm gettin' better at the lunging part." His small face broke into a grin as he bounded away to bring his trencher and spoon to Andre and bounced up the steps after James.

James beckoned the boy to the bow, leaning against the rail. "We can fence later," he promised. "But first I must tell you something."

"Are you fighting with Jack again?" Matthew's face was screwed into a teasing grin. He started to gnaw on his lip at James' serious expression.

"No, little one, and if I were, I would not discuss it with you." James' eyes danced off the bow, into the distance, then returned and focused. "You probably know we are bound for Port Royal now, Matthew. I will go ashore there."

"But Jack says we ain't stopping till Tortuga. Are we going to make port there? I've never seen it." The boy's eyes were wary and curious. Matthew was no fool: he knew when adults were trying to say something difficult. They always looked like they were dying for a chamberpot.

James shook his head and put a hand on Matthew's shoulder. "No, I will go ashore alone in a longboat. Jack cannot risk making port there."

James wished he could say yes, for the sake of those building tears and the helpless look that reminded him he had a responsibility here as well. But he would not lie, breed false hope he could not but disappoint. "That is unlikely, Matthew."

The boy stared. "Yer not comin' with us to Tortuga?" His small mouth opened, then closed. "Why?"

James' fingers on his shoulders tightened a bit. "Port Royal is my home. There are people there for whom I am responsible. They rely on me, and I will return to them."

"But---but what about Jack? An' Bertie and me and everyone?" The blue eyes were starting to shimmer. Matthew reminded himself that big lads who'd gone all the way to Bombay did not cry. "W-will you come back?"

The boy struggled for a long moment, then simply threw himself at James and held on desperately.
"Please don't go, James. Please."

James closed his arms around him and rocked him gently. He wondered when he had cried the last time, wondered what he'd done to make a little boy cry for him. "I cannot, Matthew. Perhaps one day, you will understand."

Matthew clung tight, then took a deep breath and straightened the way he'd seen James do when he had to be brave. He snuffled and swiped at his nose with one sleeve. "I-I'm sorry. I h-hope yer kin are well and...and you..." His eyes squeezed shut and he turned and ran back down the hatch.

James stared after him, itching to follow, to give comfort he knew he could not give. So he just stood there, a silent statue at the bow looking out over the waves, melancholy and proud.

Jack was awake before the sun and spent more time than he cared to admit watching James sleep. Silent as a ghost, he slipped out of bed and laid out the fine suit, a waistcoat only mildly gaudy in gold brocade, a pristine new shirt, the cravat and James' worn boots. He tried to scrub some sort of shine on them to no avail, then dug into one of the small boxes littering the desk and thrust a stickpin with a discreet emerald through the cravat. Atop it all, he laid James' tricorn

For a moment, he stood, staring down at James with clouded eyes, then pressed a swift kiss to his forehead and fled topside.

At the kiss, James woke, resisting the urge to turn, to stretch and reach. They would approach Port Royal soon, and there simply was no time for dawdling in bed, no matter how pleasant the purpose. He dressed slowly, reverently, as if the careful wearing of clean, gentlemanly clothing was something unknown to him, and, at the same time, precious. He glanced at the mirror.

Tall and straight, the blue almost Navy, like the first simple coats he had worn without gold braid. Only his hair hung untamed, sunstreaked locks with braids amidst them, hanging past his shoulders. He smoothed them back, twisted the braids beneath his strands, then tied them back. When he joined Jack on the quarterdeck, Jamaica's coastline was already visible.

"There she is, mate. Port Royal soon as we pass that outcroppin' of rock." Jack stared at the horizon. "Yer sure you wanna do this, Jamie?"

James did not speak, he only nodded. Jack knew the answer well enough and asking again did not change any of the reasons why he returned, had to return. There was anticipation, the joy of returning home, but there was no point in denying the distinct melancholy. "Home," was all he said eventually.

"Aye, luv. Home." Jack turned from the wheel with a small smile. "You look dashin'. I should get that boat ready." He looked down at the deck. "Here. You hold 'er on course. I'll be back." He stomped down the steps telling himself over and over that he was home, too. It didn't work.

James took the wheel, held it steady. There was a groan from deep in the hull, the wind hissing between the sails in a near-wail. He smoothed his hand soothingly over the wood, then started and returned it to grip the spokes.

He steered her past the rock, the same one from behind which the Pearl had sailed into sight so many months ago. But the waters were familiar, and there, in the harbour, the Dauntless loomed, quiet and proud. He smiled and was looking at her when Jack returned to the quarterdeck.

"All ready fer ya, luv. Take her in far as ya dare. I don't wanna have to outrun the gunners at the
Fort. James, listen." Jack's voice was low and his tongue tripped over itself more than once. "I'll be in Tortuga fer a while. I-I gotta see if I can get word of the Pearl." Beneath his feet, he could feel the ship fighting the slow turn into the harbour, her moans cutting him to the heart. "If ya need me, leave word at the Faithful Bride, aye?"

"Aye, Jack. And.... thank you." James looked ahead, and barked out the orders to tack. His voice dropped low. "If I read anything of her whereabouts, I will let you know." He passed the wheel to Jack, lips clinging for a moment in a kiss before he turned towards the stairs and the boat waiting for him.

Jack held onto the helm with one hand and grabbed at James' sleeve. "Tell her you love her, mate. She'll never behave if ya don't." He blinked a few times and wrestled with the wheel: Penelope was fighting him for her Odysseus.

"Most fine lady, I would appreciate it if you allowed your Captain to steer into harbour so that I may leave." James' fingers tightened for a fleeting moment. "Farewell, Jack. Until next time, and may you find your Pearl soon."

It was an earnest wish, and he seemed so sincere and proud as he walked to his boat, eyes fixed on the port they were approaching, then, as the boat was lowered, fixed on the quarterdeck again, hand raised in a salute that had nothing to do with the Navy and everything with respect.

Jack watched him row for long minutes before heading back out to open sea. He blamed his soggy vision on the wind in his face and beneath him, the ship shuddered. He leaned forward, his lips close to the spokes of the wheel. "Hush, luv. Hush. He'll be back fer you. Y'know he will. Someday. 'Till then, you trust ole Jack an' he'll take good care of ya."

Matthew watched from aloft. He was sitting huddled on one of the crosstrees, staring as James' shape grew smaller and smaller in the distance. He lifted a hand to wave, and if he cried, at least there was no one close to see it.

Jack stayed at the helm for the rest of the watch, silent except for the times he spoke to the ship. He didn't come to the galley for supper and Matthew found him in his cabin, quietly putting all the strewn contents of the seachests in order. He looked up from slowly folding James' old, stained shirt and smiled. "Hullo, barnacle."

Matthew sniffled. His eyes were rubbed dry and red, and he crept close and clung. He didn't speak for long minutes, and his voice was very tentative when he did. "I miss James."

Jack's arms tightened. "I do too, mate." He meant to go on; to say that trying to dissuade James from anything was a bad gamble, that the man's sense of duty was bloody impossible. He didn't. He just held on to Matthew for a bit and hoped that, with enough rum, he wouldn't feel quite so empty.

They ended curled in the big bed, Jack's face buried in James' pillow while Matthew snuffled. He promised himself a good long drunk once they made port in Tortuga.

Chapter Twenty-Two
Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel

Chapter by Hippediva

Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Twenty-Two
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--PG.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

James Norrington is as much of a surprise to Port Royal as Port Royal is to him.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smffhw for her excellent beta.
James could not recall ever rowing into harbour by himself in all these long years, but his attention was not on the approaching docks, instead he stared at the retreating shape of the Chimaera until she was too far away to make out even the hint of a man's shape aboard, until he had to use his memory to see Jack standing at the helm. Memories. He'd always have those.

The civilian part of the docks reeked worse than the Naval one, but, in a lonely boat, an apparent civilian would better not approach the military parts. He tied off the little boat and clambered ashore.

If the fishermen wondered at the fine-dressed gentleman, they certainly never said so. They helped him to shore, knuckling their brows and handing him his duffle respectfully as he strode towards the path that led to the Fort. He seemed familiar, but then again, all gentlemen looked the same to them.

The gravel at the fort was as he remembered, but the looks meeting him were not. Where before there had been a salute, he was now stopped by two marines, inquiring as to his business. He looked up, and Marine Mulroy went pale.

"Comm...Comm...Commodore!"

"Don't be daft. Commodore Archer is in his office, remember? He passed by half an hour ago with the order not to be disturbed."

"No-No-Not Archer. No-No-Norrington!"

"No-no-what? He's dead and ghosts are no Commodores! No Norrington."

"Yes, Norrington! And Norrington's a Commodore!"

"I knew you should keep your hands off the grog. Just 'cause it's called a spirit doesn't mean you need to go and see them."

Norrington cleared his throat, sharply. "Marines!"

They both snapped to attention, and Murtogg stared. "Comm- Commodore Norrington!"
"I thought there was n-no Commodore Norrington?"

"Well, he's here, so shut up!"

"Think we're in trouble now?"

"No-Not if you shut up!"

Norrington resisted rolling his eyes and saluted. "If you would be so kind as to announce my presence to Commodore... Archer?" He didn't know the man. He had expected to see Captain Ryves, the senior captain of his fleet, holding the position, but obviously, his replacement had already been sent.

The two marines shuffled, straightened. "Of course, Sir. Please follow us." They were whispering just a little too loudly.

"If he's the Commodore now, what's Archer?"

"The Commodore of course!"

"But a fleet cannot have two Commodores, can it?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Norrington's a Commodore, and we all know that well enough. And Archer is a Commodore. So obviously we have two Commodores.

"But who's in command? Who's the Command-Commodore?"

"Whoever it is, he should certainly cashier you."

They led him a way Norrington knew all too well, the one to his own office, barging in without waiting for a reply to their knock. "Begging your pardon, Sir, but there's Commodore Norrington to see you."

"And he's no ghost!" Murtogg chimed in helpfully.

Archer looked up from his desk, his elderly face worn and tired. He had four months of stultifying paperwork to catch up and a fleet badly demoralised by the unexplained disappearance of its commander. "Yes, yes, what is it? Sir, may I be of assistance?"

Norrington straightened and saluted, his posture as military as he could remember, wondering how to balance respect and authority. With Ryves, he would have known how to proceed, but this man was a stranger to him. "James Norrington, Sir. I was in command of this fleet prior to my abduction seven months ago."

Archer sat up abruptly, his fallen quill leaving a large blot on the page. "Norrington? Norrington! Abducted" He scratched at his head, tore off his wig and tossed it to the desk. "What-what? Sit down, sir. Please. Marines! Send down to the kitchen. I want a bottle of brandy. And send a message to the Governor at once." He eyed James curiously.

James nodded his thanks and sat down. It was strange to see his desk again, the same items ordered differently; and him sitting on the wrong side. "I realise I was likely thought dead, and I fear the reality is yet more spectacular. I have little doubt that Governor Swann will wish to witness my account as well, and I would like to wait for him, if you permit, Sir."

"Well, man, then we'll wait for him. Demme me! What happened to you? I was told you had
simply disappeared. Feared the worst, don't you know? It was a right mess hereabouts before I came, must be nigh three months gone. Brandy?" Archer was easily closer to sixty than fifty, hurriedly wrested from his country home to man a humid backwater sliding into panicked chaos. "I'll have to write to London, of course, and to the Admiralty."

He took in the young man's browned face and streaked hair. "I'd say you've been in the sun, sir."

James gave a smile, the barest hint of one, the one that Jack had named his 'commodorial smile'. "Thank you, gladly."

He waited until Archer had poured two glasses and they both sipped delicately. "Of course. I am well aware of the arising complications, and for that, I profoundly apologise although it lay not within my power to change it. And yes, I have spent most of these months in the sun, if involuntarily." He stifled the urge to shift in the chair. "May I ask who held command prior to you? Captain Ryves, I assume?"

Archer raised a bushy brow. "Yes, but the Admiralty felt him unequal to the task once the Indomitable and the Henrietta were added to the fleet. God knows why, he's a fine captain."

He was acutely embarrassed and too plain a man to hide it. "I don't really know what to say, sir, except that I am delighted you are alive and well, as I'm sure the Governor will be."

He chuckled and ran a hand through his cropped hair, straining to see the resemblance between this bronzed and hearty young man and the portrait of the lost Commodore, now removed to the Mess and decked in black ribbon. "I daresay Reverend Johnson will be distressed that his touching eulogy was for naught."

James joined him in an uneasy chuckle and sipped his drink. "My thanks, Sir. If I might say so, it is good to be alive, even at the expense of the good Reverend's speech. Perhaps he shall be able to save it for later, when all have forgotten the first time."

They were feeling each other out, like animals circling to find out who held the right to a certain position. Archer seemed a kind enough man, but it did not help the acute stab of seeing an unknown man sit at his own desk. Certainly, all this could be cleared up to mutual satisfaction.

Archer took a gulp of brandy. "So you are the great Pirate-Hunter. What in blazes happened to you? You vanished off the face of the earth near eight months ago. God knows, they looked everywhere." He had a distinctly uncomfortable feeling that the good-looking man sitting across from him was in for some surprises. Fortunate that he was still young.

"No search in the Caribbean would have yielded me up. I was brought aboard a privateer by brute force and pressed into service by a man to whom no loyalty is owed." Norrington turned the glass of brandy in his hands and sipped again, forcing himself to a slow pace. "It was not until after we reached port in Bombay that I managed to escape."

There was a lot of clatter outside the door and Governor Swann yanked it open, breathless and very red in the face. "Commodore Archer, what the devil is....oh. My. Commodore? Norrington! James!" His face broke into a genuine smile. "We all thought...we-no matter what we thought. Let me look at you, sir! My my!" He accepted a brandy after working James' arm like a pump handle.

James' smile lost its uneasiness, widening. His enthusiasm was dampened, keeping a cool detachment, but that did not mean the welcome was not appreciated. "Governor Swann. It is a pleasure to see you once again."
"James, I'll be damned! You look well. No, you look amazingly fit! Where in hell did you disappear to?"

Archer cleared his throat. "Apparently, sir, he was impressed into service. How did such a thing happen?"

James waited until the Governor ceased to fuss about him and took his seat. "As any searches will likely have revealed, I was at Lieutenant Groves' lodgings the evening before I went missing, in the company of several officers. I left earlier than most and was alone when a group of men set on me. I had half expected never to wake again, but when I did, I found myself in the brig of the Chimaera, Captain Hamilton's privateer."

"Damn the man! I'll see him on the gibbet if he ever shows his face in these parts again!" Wetherby Swann was not always a slave to political delicacy. "But what happened, James? How did you escape? We thought you were dead."

"And a likely enough assumption it was. The Chimaera was bound for the Indian Ocean. During the only shoreleave, on the coast of Africa, I was locked up with no chance to send word or escape. It took until Bombay and the assistance of a fellow sailor in very much the same situation that I could escape and find the opportunity to work my passage back to Port Royal."

"Huzzah for you both! Brave lads. And where is this sailor? I should very much like to congratulate him."

Commodore Archer shook his head glumly. He disapproved of impressment and thought briefly of how he was to explain the sudden reappearance of an officer in such circumstances. His voice was quiet and filled with admiration. "Brave indeed, sir. I'm thankful you escaped."

Norrington shook his head. "I fear he is not with me. He immediately sailed on to return to those dear to him, as I had set for Port Royal. I understand his motivations well. There was another quick smile, but it held a shadow of longing. "There is no bravery in what was but a necessity, Sir. It was my duty to return to Port Royal, and I am content I was able to do so."

"James, it was heroic! Well, well, you must come with me and we'll make you comfortable. Time enough for all this later." Swann shot a warning look at Archer and blustered more than usual. "Elizabeth will be pleased to see you hale and hearty. Commodore, with your indulgence?"

Archer nodded and rose. "Sir, I am glad of your safe return. All this can wait until you are rested from such a long and gruelling ordeal."

Norrington bowed. "My thanks, once more. It is good to be home." Much as he might wish, there was no point in pressing the issue, for he knew well it was not Archer's decision. "I look forward to resting in my own house once more."

Swann stuttered and hemmed and hawed until Archer answered for him. "Sir, I'm afraid your house was sold some months ago. Your family in England." His eyes were quiet and filled with pity. "It would be best if you go with the Governor for the moment until we can sort this out properly."

He felt chill, all of a sudden, but Norrington stoically contained himself, naught visible but a hint of shock in his eyes, the faint tremor of his lips. He set them tightly. "I see," he murmured, then straightened up. "In that case, I am most grateful for your hospitality, Governor." He swallowed and was glad of the cravat's covering.

"Nonsense, James. Always glad to have you. Come, come my carriage is waiting and what you
need is my excellent cook's attentions." Swann's eyes tralled over the mismatched clothing; a frayed cuff on the coat, the way a bit of the lace cravat dangled with a stray thread. A sad homecoming, indeed, for a brave man. He fussed his way through a quick farewell and led James out into the pitiless sunshine.

Norrington's gaze wandered for a moment, lingered on the gravel, certainly washed away by the rain and replaced while he had been gone, but it looked the same, alternately dusty and gleaming in the sunshine. The gallows, a dark silhouette against the light, sat sadly in the courtyard.

He was about to say he needed no food nor rest, but did not. Instead he followed quietly, sitting in the carriage. "Forgive my woolgathering, Governor. It seems so long now. I trust you and your daughter are well?"

"Very well, James. Very well, indeed. But you! Damn me, you must have had a hard time of it. Didn't that blaggart---what was his name?---recognise you?" There were a million questions on Swann's lips but he couldn't ask them yet: the look in Norrington's eyes was too distressing for words.

Norrington stared at him blankly, as if wrenching himself from a dream, forcing himself not to simply look at the streets rolling past. "Hamilton. I do not think he did, else I would not have lived to return. Surely, he would not have taken the risk knowingly. I never dealt with privateers where it could be avoided, and again, that has proven wise."

"James, are you quite alright? No need for a doctor? Of course, I will get my barristers working immediately. There will be a lot of to-do over this, as I'm sure you can imagine. Did you really have to work your way to Bombay? Shocking!" There was no mistaking the admiration in Swann's voice.

"There is always work to be done aboard a ship, even if that of the Captain is different from a common sailor's." Norrington concentrated and smiled tightly. "There is no need for a doctor. I bear no injuries."

Wetherby Swann felt quite inadequate to the task ahead of him. How could he tell this man, whom he admired tremendously, that as far as anyone knew, he was dead? That everything he had owned not be sold by order of his distant relations in England, had been shipped back months earlier. He tapped the silver handle of his walking stick nervously. "I'm very pleased to see you well, James."

Norrington's eyes fixed on Swann's. He had always known the Governor well, but his own acute awareness of the man's gestures was new; as though he had learned to read them, to realise why the words, welcome for sure, but certainly not vital, were repeated too often. "As am I, Governor, as am I. But pray tell me, is there something amiss? I assure you, I will find my own lodgings soon and not abuse your hospitality more than need dictates."

"James, I am very fond of you. I would be most distressed if you felt you could not accept my hospitality for a time."

He paused, fumbling with his snuff box and sneezed explosively into a fine linen handkerchief. "We had searches out all over these parts. Even had the fishermen drag the cove. James, son." He faltered, then steeled himself. "The Navy itself declared you dead. You will need to write to your family in England." Swann's hands fluttered helplessly, a strange mirror of Jack's inane gestures.

Norrington was silent. The carriage rode past a little blond boy on the street and his hand clenched into the fabric of his coat before he let go. The declaration was an act of certainty he had not expected. It normally did not happen when a soldier did not fall in battle. His voice was slightly
rough when he spoke. "Of course I shall. They shall know I am alive, as shall the Admiralty."

But for now, he was nothing, his commission, his oath of service, all revoked by the death of a living man.

Swann breached all protocol and patted his hand. "Of course they will. You know how tiresome they can be about things. Paperwork and woolgathering. You said you escaped in Bombay? How marvellous! What an adventure!"

The Governor was frankly horrified by the sudden turn of events. He had sincerely mourned Norrington, imagined him washed out to sea by an unlucky fall or fallen to some pirate assassin's dagger. Never had he considered the possibility that the man could still be living. The Navy had covered its own distress and any potential embarrassment over losing him by declaring the Commodore a dead hero after patrols and searches had yielded no answers to his disappearance. A live Norrington was going to be a sticky wicket indeed.

"As far as a necessity can ever be considered an adventure, certainly." James was no fool, irked by the change of topic. Still, he dared not insist. He had returned, so why was he not home?

Dead. After his own dedication, the thought stung. That he had been given up by those on whom he had never given up. He was torn from his thoughts by the carriage pulling to a stop, Swann's mansion as white and the gardens as green as ever.

There was clatter and chatter and generally a great fuss when the Governor ordered the guestroom readied for Norrington. Much as James had anticipated a proper bath, he did not want or need the two valets who bustled over him like a prize stallion.

He bore it quietly, as he did dinner, glad that Elizabeth stole long looks over her wine but did not press him for answers and appeared happy to see him, though strangely silent. He made his excuses as soon as he could with any courtesy, knowing that Governor Swann was not likely to attend to business as long as he considered his guest 'exhausted' and in need of pampering.

His bed was large and lonely and too still. Eventually he slept, dreaming of the swaying waves he missed lying awake.

The next morning he was awake long before dawn, pacing the room restlessly until commotion outside signalled more than just invisible servants were awake.

"Elizabeth! I don't want to hear anymore of this. Please, darling. Be a good girl and take your breakfast upstairs." Swann's voice had the whine of a chronically overwhelmed parent. He was settled at a small table on the veranda and glared at the coffeepot as her angry steps clattered on the parquet floor. He really was quite looking forward to her wedding.

James heard rather than saw Elizabeth disappear into her room, then rushed past and joined Swann on the veranda. "Good morning, Governor."

"Morning, James. Please sit down. You must be hungry. I know I am and these sweet rolls are simply too good to resist." The Governor had as bad a sweet tooth as Jack and slathered a roll with an alarming amount of jam. "I hope you slept well."

James nodded his thanks and sat down, staring at the jam on his own roll. It tasted excellent, but he could not help thinking of the orange jam Andre and Cookie had produced, and what Jack had done with it. He looked up with a start and smiled. "Excellent, thank you."

Swann's eyes were hooded as he sipped his coffee. "James, I'm afraid all this is going to be terribly
tedious. My barristers are, of course, at your disposal, but it will mean a lot of letters back and forth to London and your relatives. I believe the closest high-ranking officer here is Admiral Winthrop who is stationed in Nassau. I imagine Archer has already written to him." He coughed delicately. "I would be pleased if you would consider my home yours until something can be arranged to reinstate your funds."

James blinked and went still. He had half-expected this delay and there was naught he could do about it. He was without means, legally dead to Port Royal. He did not enjoy being dependent on help, but he was, and having it offered was better than having to ask for it. "It is I who has to thank for your hospitality. Forgive me should I have appeared ungrateful yesterday, I was not myself and I fear enforced inactivity is not my forte. Yet, I will have to exercise patience in this matter."

"I'm sure this will be resolved in one way or another. But damn, James, how terrible for you! What was it like, being impressed?" For a moment, the Governor's eyes were as mischievous as a boy's. It was easy to see where his daughter got her sense of adventure.

James sipped from his coffee, his worry not easing as Swann changed the topic once more, as though wishing to spare him the thought of those necessities he could not avoid. Still, he owed the man for his hospitality and his help, and so James stilled his own restlessness. "I believe a good part of Hamilton's crew was recruited by the same means. They certainly seemed rather... professional about it. I had received a concussion from the blow which struck me unconscious and was detained in the brig for two days ere they brought me topside and put me to work."

"I told Hamilton I was a purser, hailing from a merchant ship. I am certain he would have had me killed immediately had he suspected I was an officer of the Navy. The sailor I befriended claimed he was a Spaniard, and he certainly appeared exotic enough. A little like that pirate, Sparrow. He was very kind to me and took care of my head injury while we were held in the brig together."

"My, my!" Swann mumbled with his mouth full. "Impressing is a dreadful business. I wonder if Archer should put night patrols along the docks. A Spaniard, you say? And like Sparrow? My word, James, you're lucky he didn't cut your throat! What a dreadful thing to happen to any gentleman. You'd think such scum would know a man of breeding when they see one."

The Governor had visions of brave forbearance and English fortitude dancing in his head, interrupted by fresh coffee and another sweet roll. "And you spent all that time playing a part! Damn me, man! You should have considered the stage to pull that off. Did you actually see Bombay?"

"I fear the necessity of playing a role to remain alive is a different matter entirely than the self-display of travelling mimes, Sir. And as it was with Sparrow in that wretched business, a common goal often makes allies of enemies. In this case, it was the wish to escape and return to the Caribbean."

James wondered if a cravat had always impeded swallowing, or if he had simply tied it too tightly. "Bombay was the first port in which I could leave ship, and I spent several days ashore ere I could leave for Port Royal once more."

Swann's eyes twinkled. "I've always wanted to see the far Indies. Was it a den of terrible iniquity, filled with depravity and exotic lovelies?" His lips twitched at his own questions and he was very glad he'd sent Elizabeth to her room.

James thought of the bath, the harem, of their room; Jack's hands dancing across his skin, of sweat gleaming on golden flesh, but certainly, these were not the tales of a civilised man, cherish the memories as he might. "It is a most exotic and foreign place that would certainly warrant further exploration, but my own priority, understandably, was to escape."
"Ever the fine officer. James, you are truly a marvel. And how did you finally escape the blaggard?"

Swann was no fool and had seen the green eyes in that bronzed face go soft and distant. He imagined some dark-eyed houri must have left an impression. Certainly, Norrington did not resemble his former self: he was deeply tanned, broader in the shoulders, trimmer at the waist, altogether larger and more alive than the man in the proper wig and Navy brocade he remembered. "No romance worth recalling?"

James coughed delicately, choking on his coffee. "You are likely now thinking of sailors' reputations, but there is no memory of such a nature of which I would speak." That much was true, at least, and for a moment, he allowed himself to imagine Swann's expression if he told him of matelotage with Jack Sparrow; better yet, Jack's reaction to the Governor's shocked stare. The thought of the gallows followed on its heels and he forced the memories back where they belonged. "Bombay is a large city. Port Royal appears a small fishing port compared to it. It was little trouble to disappear where Hamilton could not find us."

Swann's face crinkled into a grin. Unwittingly, he echoed Jack's own words. "You're a dry one, James. I'm sure no lady would have need to fear for her reputation with you. Did you see any of its wonders? I've heard tell of temples and wild animals in the streets."

James could see them right in front of his eyes, the colours, the warm sun; the poverty. Children playing, children stealing, a strange and stark contrast, and still, somehow beautiful. "The wild animals are kept in gardens. A boy of the crew ventured too close to a mother tiger, and it was good fortune he escaped unharmed. The temples, the city... I lack the words to describe it. Magnificent and beautiful. I had ventured to the East Indies before, but never had I seen this."

"Hmmm." It was the Governor's turn to look dreamy. "I'd always wished to see such a place. Someday you must write a memoir and share all your daring exploits. A tiger! A live tiger in a garden. Amazing! And heathen temples." The sly look crept onto Swann's face again and he covered his embarrassment by stabbing at his omelette. "It is a great pity you hadn't longer to explore. But why did you not contact the East India Trading Company? I am certain that they, as loyal subjects of the Crown, would have aided you."

James bought himself time by chewing on the last bite of his roll, frantically thinking. "Hamilton held a Letter of Marque, issued by the Governor of Nassau. It stands to reason that he had good contacts with the East India Trading Company as well, whereas I stood alone, without proof of my identity or the truth of my claim. When the opportunity to return to Port Royal by other means presented itself, I took it, rather than risking exposure and further complication of the matter."

The Governor grunted and helped himself to more jam. "A bit wild out there, hey what? Well, the thing is done and you are safely home. That's what is important." He munched contemplatively. "I suppose I should call upon Messrs. Bleak and Crome this morning and alert them to your case. I must counsel patience, James. However much we are pleased to have you... have... are those braids?"

James bit back a curse and smiled pleasantly. "It is but a sailors' superstition with no more meaning than alleged good luck. I simply woke up with them one day." He stifled the urge to run a hand through his hair and turn the braid between two fingers as had become habit when he was exasperated by something Jack had done. "I will exercise myself in patience. It is merely the inactivity which makes me restless."

James concentrated on his breakfast and did not see the sharp look Swann shot across the table. Clearly, there was more to Norrington's story than met the eye. He smiled to himself and finished his
coffee. "Well, I am off to town. Do you care to join me, or would you prefer that I handle this. With the utmost discretion, of course. I fear your presence will be quite a shock."

James frowned. A shock? To see him returned? Should it not be a pleasant surprise, to see someone thought dead, returned whole and hale? "I would rather join you, by your leave. I see no need to cower in hiding and would rather attend to this matter than sit by idly."

Swann grimaced, then pushed his chair back. "If you insist, James. I should see that you have some proper clothing and perhaps you would care for the services of my valet. He is an excellent barber."

James fell silent. The hint was clear enough, but it seemed like betrayal to cut off the braids now. They were mementos of something he cherished, and he would not give that up because of nothing but an askance look. "That delay is unnecessary. Certainly, my hair can be tied to fit beneath a wig."

"Ah yes, of course." The Governor had a politician's vagueness when necessary and waved the servants to remove the dishes. "But we must get you properly dressed. Shoes, stockings, a good English suit of clothes. Demme, I'll send for the tailor this afternoon. I supposed they will have to do for the moment. I know there must be a few wigs about." He grinned and winked suddenly. "You can use that formal one I got last winter. I cannot bear it but it is much like your regulation wig."

James bowed his head. "Once more, my thanks. I would not know what to do without your help." He folded his fingers to stop them from worrying at his cuffs. Certainly, it was not the finest attire, but had they expected him to return from captivity clad like a Lord? "Is there nothing at all left of my possessions? Certainly, my wardrobe was of little interest to my family or any buyers."

Swann's face creased in genuine distress. "James, I'm afraid that everything not auctioned at the sale or sent back to your relatives went to the rag and bone men. I'm sorry." He raised an eyebrow. "Although the piratical look is quite becoming, you know. Most dashing."

James' eyes narrowed. "I clad myself with the means I possessed, and if any common sailor had the means to bear himself a gentleman, there would be no such thing as the piratical look."

He could hear the pity, in Swann's words, see it in his actions, the clumsy attempts to cheer him that only provoked the opposite. He took a breath and reminded himself that no matter how little he liked it, he was dependent. "My apologies. It was not the easiest time."

"James." The Governor's eyes were soft. "I'll have Peter bring the wig to you. Are you sure you want to do this?" Again, he unconsciously repeated Sparrow's very words.

James bit back a sharp retort and nodded. He needed no pity and need not be spared anything. "I cannot simply sit idly while my matters are taken care of. I cannot and will not hide. I thank you for your support, but please understand this, Wetherby."

Swann nodded and clasped his arm briefly. "Brave lad! The carriage will be ready in a quarter hour. I will meet you in the driveway."

It was an exercise in frustration to pin his hair under the wig, but eventually, James managed. Swann had that resigned sigh in his voice when James joined him at the carriage, so similar to the one he'd heard when Elizabeth did something of which her longsuffering father did not quite approve.

The ride to town was quick, and this time, James' glance out of the window was focused. Nothing had changed. The same paved streets, men going about their day's work, the stones shimmering in the sun's heat.
As they emerged from the carriage, townspeople had gathered, openly staring when, after the Governor, their former Commodore climbed out and stood straight, the wig unnaturally white above his browned face. Whispers started up and James half-wished to linger and listen, but Swann ushered him inside.

A clerk greeted the Governor and led them to an office in which a tall, bespectacled scarecrow in black loomed behind a large desk. He rose to greet Swann, assiduously ignoring James until the Governor pointedly introduced him.

James did not need to see the sneer in Mr. Crome, Esq.'s face to feel his spite. Throughout the entire conversation, the man ignored him as he saw fit, interrupted narrations of the tale he'd begun to tell, and generally treated him as though worthy of not the slightest attention. Norrington was nearly trembling with repressed rage, but the Governor had not become a Governor without acquiring a certain ability to skilfully distract and manoeuvre. They rose, bowed stiffly and the barrister promised he would take care of matters as quickly as reputation and circumstance would allow.

Outside, the same crowd still waited, augmented by some men from the other side of the street, the bolder ones near the carriage. One young man came closer yet, bending as close as Jack always did, just barely not touching him. James opened his mouth to speak when the man spun around and returned to the crowd, whispering agitatedly.

Somewhere, the sun was shining in a perfect world where palm trees tickled blue skies and seas as green as glass, and calm goodwill flowed with its golden rays. But not in Port Royal. Within that single day, the entire town was buzzing with the news that Norrington was alive and back. In the taverns, tradesmen gossiped as fiercely as their wives and daughters, laid wagers on how long he would remain and whether or not there would be a dust-up between him and the new Commodore. Sewing circles in the fine houses whispered dramatically about his tanned face, daughters anxious to see, their mothers just as anxious to spare them such a sight. Every marine and sailor and officer knew by sundown the night of his return and his former subordinates glanced among themselves and wondered what protocol could welcome home a dead man.

None of it was said to James' face, but he heard the whispers, full of disdain; he saw the glances, curious like little Matthew's but with nothing of the childlike innocence. He ignored them. He ignored the wrinkled face as the tailor measured his waist and shoulders and brought him a new set of clothes, he ignored the chatter of the servants as he sat in the back garden.

Should he disgrace himself by losing his temper and reproach them for an hour's peace, only to give fuel to further rumours? The fire glittered in his eyes but he smothered it, keeping himself in check, proving that the man those fine women gossiped about and called a savage with secret delight at his misfortune possessed more manners than they.

Elizabeth peeked through the curtains of the French doors to the garden and frowned as the kitchen chatter reached her sharp ears. She went the long way around and stood in the kitchen doorway, glowering. "A little quiet here would be most appreciated," she snapped, turning on her heel as she headed out the back door where she could come upon James without his seeing her. He was so brown and his hair so light, she hardly would have recognised him, but it suited him. Oh my, yes, it suited him admirably.

"James?"

James started, torn from his thoughts, but he showed none of his surprise as he rose and turned, gracefully bowing. "Miss Swann. Forgive my lack of attention. I was woolgathering." Engagement became her well: she had shed the last remainders of the freckled little girl and become a woman more than beautiful.
"Nonsense, James. Please sit down. May I join you or would you prefer to be alone. I'm so thrilled you are alive." Her face split into a genuine smile. She hesitated for a moment, then rushed over to hug him. It was dreadfully improper but damn decorum. He was a fine man, a good one. He had been lost and now was found. It was more than reason enough to ignore stuffy rules and silly politesse.

Where before he would have frozen, he now embraced her for a moment, before realising the impropriety of it all and gently pulling away. "Thank you." With her, at least, he knew it was spoken sincerely. Elizabeth never said something she did not mean just because propriety demanded it. "By all means, I am more than grateful for the company, lest your father sent you to convince me of taking the services of a barber."

"Father is a dear, dim old love and not half as clever as he imagines." Her dark eyes were wiser than they had been before her adventure, and calmer. "You were impressed! How awful for you! What happened? Let me have some tea brought or would you prefer a proper drink?" She didn't run as she used to, but glided across the lawn and spoke with the housekeeper inside, emerging with a bit of needlework to settle herself in the chair across from him. "Now, you must tell me all about it. I've been dying of curiosity. You are well?"

James did not know how often he had related the tale in these last days, but the gleam in her eyes was not the cruel curiosity he'd seen so often. It was more honest somehow, like that of the little girl who had demanded entertainment of a young Lieutenant on the crossing from England. "Yes, I am well, or will be as soon as this matter is satisfactorily settled. Also, I assure you that, contrary to rumour, I am still literate." His eyes twinkled, but there was a dark edge to his normally dry humour. "And decking yourself out like a pirate," she teased. "I like it. It becomes you much more than your wig. But what an adventure you've had! All the way to Bombay only to escape and come right back. So loyal!" Her nimble fingers flew over the trifle in her hands and she looked up with a sly expression. "Father said you told him a Spanish sailor helped you. That was very kind."

"Miss Swann, I must protest. The sheer lack of uniform does not imply piracy." James knew that expression, and it certainly befitted a young girl plotting mischief better than a grown woman. "Your father was right. We found ourselves in much the same situation: recruited against our will and with every wish and reason to return home."

He paused, looked at her and sighed, his voice softer. "It may sound as if all impressed sailors shared this motivation, but some do not have any better place than that ship to which they can return."

"I hope your Spanish friend was able to find his way home as well. Impressment should be forbidden. It is a vicious practise." Her lips had compressed into a thin line that broke into another smile. "I'm thrilled you are safely back and suffered no ill effects from your ordeal. But Bombay! How wonderful. It must be marvellous to see such places." Her eyes moved restlessly, the whites stark against dark irises.

"I likely should not say this, but I am convinced that you would have enjoyed Bombay. It is no place fit for a lady, yet I doubt that you would heed that." James caught himself. "No disrespect intended, of course," he added hastily.

Elizabeth laughed softly. "James, my aunts were convinced that Port Royal was no fit place for a lady. I'm sure the Indian gentlemen of Bombay would disagree with you." Her grin was infectious. "I do think you look so well, all browned. And your hands are as calloused as Will's. I like that." Her smile faded as she caught an earful of chatter from the kitchen. "I am going to use a carriage whip on them!"
James took her hand and quirked a smile. "Thankful as I am for your indignation on my behalf, I assure you that is not necessary. Leave them to talk. Anything else will only worsen it. What little truth there is in their blather I do not fear."

Suddenly, he dropped her hand as if burnt. "Although I wonder if a port like Bombay which we call uncivilised does not hold more welcome for a returning sailor." His voice was resigned, not quite bitter, and he shuddered inwardly. He would not complain, certainly not to one of the few who had genuinely bid him welcome.

"Oh, James." She was horrified by the tone of his voice. "I'm so sorry. This must be so terrible for you and silly gossip doesn't help at all. You'd think people would have more sense. It's a sad thing when every normal person you know babbles and behaves...well, behaves worse than...than Jack Sparrow in his cups!" She huffed her indignation.

James chuckled desperately and nodded. "At least he eventually passes out and ceases talking." He half smiled and his eyes fixed into distance. "Soon, this will take the same course. There is only so much a town can say about myself and my adventures, after all."

"It was terrible when you disappeared. No one knew what had happened. Poor Lieutenant Groves was frantic and they dragged the cove, searched everywhere. It was awful. I know Will would love to see you. May I ask him some evening? He worked with one of the search parties for weeks." She blushed and kept her eyes on her needle. Will would be in for quite the surprise and she got a little thrill wondering if he might just be a tiny bit jealous to see his former rival so brown and fit.

James nodded. "Gladly." He laughed. "I believe I may yet have room in my social schedule." It was strange how now they could speak more openly than during his courtship, that it would seem less stilted than any conversation with another.

He swallowed hard. "There is only one matter, Elizabeth. I am well aware that his and your own positions are not easy, the wedding drawing so close. I would not wish you to offend Port Royal's society any more. I am a persona non grata at the moment and not blind enough to be oblivious to it. I would not have you suffer from it."

"Then you can share that place of honour with me." Her eyes twinkled like her father's. "James, I am well-aware that my marriage is considered a disgraceful mesalliance and I have plenty of words for those who gossip about it. I need not repeat them. I'm not a woman who is dependent upon others' rules and guidelines. I am most fond of you and would consider myself a worthless friend if I let their nastiness sway me in any fashion." Her smile was soft but there was steel behind it. "I am and always will be your friend and the devil take anyone who cares to disagree."

Her face flushed and she giggled. "My apologies. I'm afraid my vocabulary has not improved at all."

James smiled and for a moment, it was the wide, relaxed smile of which Jack had grown so fond. "My most sincere and heartfelt thanks, Elizabeth. Still, know that if your decision should falter, I will bear you no ill will. You have an engagement and soon marriage to worry over, and I would be the worthless friend if I did not want that to be your priority."

She began to protest and he lifted his hand to silence her. "Let us talk no more of it. We have both said all we wish the other to know."

She clasped his hand with both of hers. "James Norrington, you really are quite wonderful. Now let's go inside before Estrella comes needling me about my shawl. I'm sure you would like a proper tea and I'm famished."
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Twenty-Three
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--PG-13.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Both Sparrow and Norrington have trials to bear.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtfhw for her excellent beta.

There are two more cast portraits and an action illustration in this chapter.
Jack was pouting at the sky. He was pouting at more or less everything, although sailing across such familiar waters towards Tortuga with barely a glance at the charts did give him the old thrill. The gale season was long-past and he found himself deep in conversation with the Chimaera more and more.

James had only left them three days earlier and he might have made a short trip faster if he had not inexplicably slowed and coasted his course as if waiting for something to signal him to turn back: a lightning bolt, a voice from the heavens, anything. It was mid-afternoon and the breeze was snappish. He sulked at the wheel looking much like Matthew deprived of sweets, with less patience and an infinitely fouler vocabulary.

Captain Sparrow had had more rum than was good for anybody, even him.

His fingers, grimy with three days of tar and dirt and no one to make him wash them, stroked the warm wood and he muttered, "Don't I jus' know it, luv!" when the ship wrestled with him. He couldn't think of her as the Chimaera any longer. She was Jamie's Penelope and she was the only one in whom he could confide. "I dunno why! He's such a orn'ry bugger. Ya think he'd have th' sense to stay where he's wanted."

She groaned a little, her shrouds rippling a sigh and Jack sighed with her. "Poor luv. Here. Have a drink." He poured a good half of his flask onto the deck and swallowed the rest, immediately opening the bottle stashed in his pocket. "Have some more."

The puddle at his feet widened. "I miss 'im, too. Ain't-hic-fair at all. Jus' bet those proper bastards ain't treatin' him-hic-right. Not like you an' me, hic. Luv." He stared back over his shoulder, vaguely in the direction of Jamaica, gulping more rum and sulking with every bit of determination that one deprived and lovesick pirate could muster.

When the sun sank in a blaze of orange and gold, he turned the wheel over to Van and moped around the deck like a broody bilgerat until dark.

The Penelope tossed, throwing him off-balance, and he tumbled down the hatch, clinging to his
bottle as she groaned. He petted the handrail, right before his nose, and hauled himself to his feet. There was a delicious smell coming from the galley. Cooks and Andre were concocting something wonderful, but he had no appetite, so he trudged down to the orlop, sliding amid the crates.

"Oh, it jus' ain right, luv. You want 'im. I want 'im. An' wot-hic-does th' blasted fool do? Goes back to th'bloody Navy! Can ya believe-hic-it? Jilted fer His Majesty's brocade." He fell to one side as she heaved, and pressed a kiss to the tar-stained deck. "An' t'reat you so! It's a hic-crime, that's wot it is. A rotten crime. Have 'nother drink."

Jack knew he had a lot of work ahead of him. There was all that swag to sell or barter, the ship herself needed a good overhaul and then there was the Pearl, out there somewhere without him. Life was sometimes more than just unfair. It was bloody perverse!

He sucked down more rum and curled up on his side, muttering to the Penelope with every swell and roll. "I'll take goo' care o'you, luv. You know I will. Get ya careened, mebbe even see if I can-hic-get-hic-get-hic- arrange t'plate yer keel wif copper. 'Twill feel a bit strange at first. Don't balk at me, darling. It's best wif all them nasty worms. I know, sweeting. I know. Such a damned shame but he'll come back. He's gotta come back."

He went on in this ridiculous manner for as long as the rum held out, getting more upset with every swallow until he huddled against the bulwark, too drunk to stand. He was lonely. He was randy. He didn't have James and he didn't have the Pearl, although he felt he couldn't rightly complain too much about Pearl to Penelope for fear of hurting her feelings. So he drank and muttered, soothing her troubles and his own in a vast spill of rum.

He didn't hear the creak of the stairs, it sounded so much like her complaints. But then suddenly there was a pair of arms around his shoulder nudging him gently. Above him, Berkely's face blurred into vision. "C'mon, Cap'n. Ain't no good t'sleep on th'floor. No need t'add sore muscles t'the hangover."

"Pearl's gone, Jamie's gone. Wot's a bloody difference," he mourned. His eyes were barely focused and he leaned heavily against Berkely's broad shoulder. "Y'd think I'da knowed by now. But it'sh jus' all gone t'hell. Doan know wot I done t'deserve it. Whowaaa!" He staggered a few steps, his head spinning. "Shlow down, mate. Can't seem t'feel me feet."

Berkely urged him up the stairs, slowly, nudging until finally he had Jack in the cabin. He'd seen a lot in his days, and the pity in his eyes was such that only an older man could have for a younger. The whole crew had seen James leave, and they didn't know why. It was obvious enough that the two hadn't parted in anger. They figured James had family in Port Royal. Still odd that he'd leave his mate like that. "Ain't he going t'come back? Can't see th'likes of 'im staying ashore th'rest of his life."

Jack collapsed on the bed like a ragdoll, watching the ceiling turn in circles. "He won't. He can't. But Berks, I dunno when. How could he leave 'er? Me? I shuppose he'd jus as shoon fergit. Dammit!" He rolled over to keep his head from dancing away without him. "Wot's th' bloody Navy got t'compare to thish? Nuthin'. But no, he mush needs go runnin' back to 'em. Bloody idiot!"

Jack was only a little aware of having committed a faux-pas. The usual thrill went up his spine but he was too boneless to react.

Now, there had been a great many words in that tirade that were of interest to Berkely or that he didn't quite understand. He sat down on the bed and tugged Jack's coat from his shoulders. "Navy?" he muttered, half to himself. "An' I bet he ain't no common tar either."

"Shhhh!" Jack's finger waggled towards his lips and landed on his nose. "Shupposed t'be a hic-secret. Doan tell noone. Pleash?" His eyes crossed as he stared at his own finger and he tried to sit
up, falling back into the pillows with a groan. "Tha's bloody torn it."

Berkely didn't consider himself a quick-witted man. He didn't have Jack's mind, fast as lightning and just as unpredictable, nor James', ordered and logical. But he saw and heard a lot, and he remembered. James Norbury. Navy, officer. Port Royal. The piece with Jack Sparrow fit in, but somehow crookedly, as though he hadn't turned it the right way yet to fit into the puzzle. "Bloody hell, Norrington," he whispered.

"Shhhhh!" Jack blinked and sat upright, his eyes wide, shaking his head until he saw stars. "Berks, please. He only did that t'shurive. Don't wanna make it worse. Oh hell, I really put me foot in it this time." He reached automatically for his flask.

"Lemme put that together. 'e's the bloody Pirate 'unter, but 'e's with ye, a pirate, and you only mean 'im well." Bertie grabbed the flask and downed a gulp. "The truth, Sparrow."

Jack chewed on his lip and turned an interesting shade of dark pink. Truth and he were uncomfortable mates at the best of times. "Well, ish like this. I met 'im well over a year back when I found out where Barbossa would be wif me Pearl. The Black Pearl. My beautiful Pearl." He savoured the words, drifting for a moment. "Anyways, he's not a bad sort, really. No, not a'tall. Situation wash a bit mucky. But he lets me go and I get me girl back. All's well." He hiccuped and coaxed the last drop from his upturned flask. "So I was kippin' after a lovely ev'nin at the Bride and Jackson an' hish lot musta picked me up. I find meself in th' brig and who'd they bring down but Jamie wif his head all bleedin'. Guess they went trollin' round Port Royal too. Well, we couldn't tell Hamilton, could we? He'da killed us fer sure." Jack wobbled to his feet and staggered towards the table and the twin bottles that kept wavering in front of him. He made a grab and missed.

"I ain't th'one t'tell the Cap'n how much t'drink, but I know ye've definitely had enough." Berkely grabbed Jack around the waist and they both stumbled around as Jack circled, like a bird closing in on its nest. With a great heave, the big sailor managed to shove him into the bed. He knew Jack wasn't much more than ten years younger than he, but with his eyes so wide and that sullen pout he didn't seem much older than Matthew. "But th'whole tale, bout ye being matelots all through th'voyage. Seemed real enough t'me."

"Ahhh. That. Y'see I wanted 'im. From th' first time he stuck his shword in me face, I wanted him. Dunno why. He put me in irons an' tossed me inta his little gaol. He stopped it, 'member. In th' galley. Wheldon and them. You lot asssu-asshu- decided we was mates. An' it were a right good thing fer me, weren't it? But poor Jamie! Not used t'lyin' or playactin' is our James. All proper an' buttoned-up." Jack's smile was crooked. "Bit of a lark watchin' him squirm when he figgered out wot 'mate' meant. Then, " his hands waved in the air, fingers spread wide. "I dunno. Somethin' happened."

For the first time in many a years, there was more than gentle surprise on Berkely's face. "Y'mean t'tell me that ye and the bloody pirate 'unter were mates? 'nd for real, too? Cor, 'n' I doubted the reputation of madness what precedes ye. Gimme that bottle."

"Wouldna called us mates, leashtaways afore he got drunk an' was all over me in th' hammock. Never thought he had it in him. 'S complicated. I didn't hold it 'gainst him, him tryin' th'ang me an' all." Jack couldn't repress a shudder, remembering the trap falling open and that breathless, horrid moment when even he believed it was all over until young Turner's sword had miraculously appeared beneath his feet. He heaved a sigh. "I know it's daft, but ain't y'ever had somethin' happen that don't make shense at all? I mean, logi-hic-cal sense? Happens t'me all th'time."

"Ja-Norrington were right 'bout one thing. Yer mad. Barkin' mad, Sparrow. 'N drunk."
"Doan I jus' know it. An' now lookit me! All I wanted was a night out. Got m'self 'pressed, shipped off t'Bombay and made it back. But no Pearl an' no Jamie. Can I please have 'nother drink? Can't sleep 'lone. Makes me lie 'wake a shtare at nuthin'." Jack tried his sweetest smile, which worked fine but for the dirt on his face and his foggy eyes. "Bloody shtupid. I miss 'im, dammit. Never 'spected him t'take t'me fer real."

He pouted enormously. "But he did. An' it weren't jus' bein' drunk an' wantin' a bit o'relief. You saw it. He did!"

"Aye, I've seen it." Berkely had seen so many sailors in his time, Navymen, pirates, those that walked the fine line between. "Thinkin' of it, I heard it oft enough, too." He grinned. "And now ye should sleep. We'll find yer Pearl soon enough." He didn't say anything of James, because how and why would Norrington ever return with anything but a noose for them all?

As if reading his thoughts, Jack rolled over to watch Berkely with one bleary eye. "He won't do it, y'know. He tole me so. Shouldn't believe it, but I do. Swear I'm mad an' bloody shtupid sometimes. It don't make sense t'believe him but I do. Wonder how he's farin'." Jack's face fell again. "Hope he's awright, even if he doan want me no more. An' poor Penelope pinin' fer him worsen' me."

"Penelope? So he's havin' a doxy in Tortuga? Certainly wouldn't've thought that of the fine pirate 'unter. Rumour said he ain't no man with feelings or as much as needs. Some wonder if he ever do sleep at all."

At Berkely's words, the ship lurched violently, tossing Jack half off the bed and his head into Berkely's lap, just barely missing an important part of his anatomy.

"Easy, darlin'." Jack pushed his hair out of his mouth and struggled to right himself. "The ship, Berks. He called her Penelope. An' you know him. He's not like that at all. Shoulda sheen 'im when 'Lizabef threw him over fer the whelp. So hurt. An' I know he sleeps jus' fine." He grinned. "When I let 'im."

"More than I wanna know, Sparrow, more than I wanna know. Figgers that th'mate of Jack Sparrow couldn't jest be any sailor noone's ever heard of." Berkely rolled his eyes. "Awright, I won't be tellin' anyone fer now, on one condition. Ye shut up 'n' go t'sleep and don't sneak off to get no more rum."

"Thanksh, luv. I'll shurrup. Promise. An' he's gotta come back fer 'er. She loves 'im. Don't see how he coulda left her..." Jack's eyes fluttered closed as the Penelope heaved a sigh and together, they slept, dreaming of the man who'd left them both alone.

Berkely righted the blanket again, shaking his head. A silly pirate, so madly in love or simply so mad - it was hard to tell - that he would blame his own heartbreak on a ship, for God knew what reason. Twasn't as if the ship was likely to bring Norrington back. It was a shame he'd promised not to tell that story, because it would have made a fine one. He doused the lamps and went to his own cabin.

If there was one thing James Norrington hated, it was waiting, enduring all that might happen without so much as the chance to react. That he bore it with what he considered good grace did not stop the gossip. Among all the other dreadful matters Port Royal believed about its former Commodore, they also seemed to believe him deaf, for if they intended for him to hear their words, surely they would not bother to whisper?

He heard it. Heard the bustle of words whenever he passed; heard Elizabeth's outrage when another
lady, eager to marry off her daughter to Norrington but a few months ago, voiced her delight in 'not having lost her dear child to such a savage.'

Truly, as time passed, he found that the company he preferred had vastly shrunk, to Elizabeth and her fiancé. If it made him a chaperon, he did not mind. At least if they turned and whispered, it was not to mock him, and if Elizabeth commented on the matter, she did so most vocally.

She seemed angrier than James himself, indulging in a tirade of words while he stoically resigned himself to the inevitable and pretended deafness. Surely, once his position in the Navy was formally re-instated, the situation would normalise, and those who now wielded the sharpest tongues would return to their prior boot-licking deference which James despised nearly as much.

Today, finally, he could do more than wait. Admiral Winthrop had arrived aboard the Resilience that very morning and, after attending to matters of the fleet with Commodore Archer, they were both invited by Governor Swann to a reception. That was James' chance.

He retied his cravat for the third time, checked yet again to make sure that not one strand of hair, or worse, braid, was visible beneath the wig. It was not. He had tied it so tight that it pulled at his skin, fastened with pins so that not one treacherous lock might escape. Elizabeth had teasingly suggested powder to make his skin pale, and he was angry at himself for truly considering it. He was a soldier, not a harlequin, and the sun was a matter of fact, not of shame.

Once more he smoothed his cuffs and checked his face for any stubble, then straightened. It was strange that he would feel as though he went to battle, blood thrumming in his veins, head held high. If punctuality was a virtue divine, then let them all wonder how a savage could possess it.

Elizabeth heard his door close and sped into the hallway, slipping her arm through his with a wicked smile. "You wouldn't want me to attend unescorted, would you? Apparently my fiancé is busy washing the soot from his hands. Save me?" She was resplendent in deep blue, having decided that she loathed pastels no matter how fashionable they might be in London. "James, you look wonderful. Don't fuss. The wig is fine. And please! Be careful of this blasted train. I've already tripped over it twice."

James sketched a bow. "By all means. Far be it from me to leave a lady unattended and alone to face the trials society inflicts upon us."

He fully expected that Elizabeth had asked Will to attend a little late, but to confront her would be most ungentlemanly. "Elizabeth, I am more than convinced that you will outshine anyone, and more than that. The blue suits you and considering your grace, I believe your tale of tripping is a shameless exaggeration."

The hall was well prepared, decorated with flowers and gently lit with sumptuous chandeliers. The guests were only just beginning to arrive.

She positively grinned at him. "I hate all those pinks and lavenders and the overdone furbelows make me feel like one of those dreadful dolls my aunts kept giving me as a child. I'm glad you like it." The gown was as severe in cut and ornament as possible and gave her a queenly air.

James was, as always, a magnificent escort and she thoroughly enjoyed the guests' discomfort as she greeted them on his arm. If there was one thing Elizabeth had learned this past year, it was the complete uselessness of an unattached female in society. Her engagement had given her a small degree of social freedom and she was increasingly aware of how much more marriage would lend. It might have been terribly amusing to watch the false smiles and hear the awkward words, had she not been so aware of James' mortification.
With Elizabeth by his side, the guests could not but greet James, bowing as stiffly as he did. He smiled and bowed until he thought he could no longer stop, his manners immaculate as had once been expected of him. He bent to kiss a lady's hand, but even through his gloves he could feel her stiffen, then see, all too clearly, the subtle wiping movement as she slid the arm through her companion's. James blinked once and limited himself to bows.

Elizabeth kept a smile plastered on her face. Winthrop was a pompous ass and she took a genuinely malicious delight in making airy little remarks about how wonderfully Englishmen became 'real men' in the hot Caribbean. As for Mrs. Landsford and her three tittering daughters, she could not resist a few pointed reminders about the filling nature of fresh fruit, showing her corset-aided decolletage to its best advantage and stowing the urge to scream "Old cow!".

William Turner was more used to these dreadful affairs and their subterranean undercurrents of nasty social propriety. He behaved with his usual gravity and made sure to keep James in sight. He had promised his fiancee to engineer a rescue if the need should arise, but it never did. The whole company treated the former Commodore with exquisite and icy politeness that left no doubt as to their true feelings.

James wondered if that was what the tame tigers had felt like, being watched from afar with curiosity, but too dangerous to approach. He had noticed it before, this apparent danger. His former first Lieutenant, Gillette had attempted to renew their friendship, but without the protection of the power Governor Swann had, he, too, had soon become a victim of the gossipmongers. Gillette had scarce said a word, but James had known it and told him the same thing he had told Elizabeth: he did not wish his friend to stand in the line of fire for him.

Gillette, only recently made acting Captain of the Henrietta and in as precarious a situation as could be - it was a miracle that he had received a command at all after the Interceptor incident - had eventually accepted his assurances and James was glad of it. He could see Gillette now, standing across the room, in agitated discussion with Commodore Archer.

When he was not being stared at, James was ignored and tried to ignore in return. He could sense their glances all too keenly. He returned them, a smile firmly lodged on his face, his eyes chill.
The evening continued, ladies and gentlemen pouring through the rooms, stopping for polite conversation. Finally, Admiral Winthrop stood alone. They had been introduced before but Winthrop had rushed off without affording James the chance of even a single word. "Sir, I do not wish to disturb your enjoyment of the evening, yet I would be much obliged if you could tell me when I may call upon you tomorrow without interrupting your duties."

Winthrop had to look up at Norrington, a fact that made his practised stare through a gilt lorgniette silly instead of commanding. "Say what? Oh, yes, you are Norrington, are you not?" he drawled in the manner fashionable this season in London. "Yes, of course." His pale eyes continued their study of the tall, bronzed man standing stiffly before him. "I will be pleased to see you before dinnertime. Now, if you'll excuse me, I do believe there is punch."

With that, he turned his back.

James hissed a breath through his teeth and for just one moment, looked as if he had bitten into a lemon. Then his features smoothed back into their trained smile and he returned to what he had done all evening: namely not asking any ladies to dance to spare them the indignity of having to invent a sprained ankle, and not participating in any conversation.

Elizabeth glided across the floor to his side, a little flushed and breathless. "James, please rescue me. If that clod steps on my toes once more I shall be forced to call him out." She referred to the new Captain of the Indomitable, who was a fine man but an execrable dancer. "I cannot find William and I don't want to miss the gavotte. Please?" Her eyes sparkled and if she had noticed his exchange with Winthrop, she gave no sign.

"How could I ever deny a lady?" James smiled as he led her onto the dance floor. He could sense the stares and hear the brief, sudden silence of everything but the musicians. Elizabeth was smiling radiantly at him and he smiled back, but the gleam in her eyes reminded him rather too much of another pair of eyes that he missed more and more.

James had always been a fine dancer but now he led her with a grace he had not possessed before, one reserved for fencing. It was elating and his smile was a touch more honest than it had been all evening.

Young Turner watched his fiancée dance with her former betrothed and smothered a grin. He knew her well enough to divine her intentions and admired both her loyalty and her cunning. It was his
considered opinion that every one of the useless louts and their bovine females deserved every social
prick she could inflict on them. She had proved herself remarkably good at it when their engagement
was announced, and, over these months, although that gossip had faded to whispers, he knew it
would never disappear entirely.

Elizabeth treated it as a challenge and was not above spreading the odd rumour of her own in
retaliation, especially after she had become aware of the continued questions regarding her 'dubious'
honour after spending days on board a pirate ship and an entire night in the company of Captain Jack
Sparrow, whose reputation with the fair sex was well-known. Will was proud of her and touched by
her loyal defence of Norrington, who had certainly done nothing to warrant such social disfavour.
He himself was used to being eyed as a half-tame brute, a tradesman and, it was whispered, the son
of a pirate. He found himself rather enjoying the nervous glances, as though he might suddenly
provoke a duel or leap onto the table mid-meal.

He was, indeed, his father's son and he wondered about Sparrow. He, more than any of these
overdressed members of Port Royal's society, was able to hear news of such a character aside from
the usual broadsides, but there had been none for the better part of a year.

He hoped that Jack was happily with his Pearl, outwitting his adversaries, just as his beloved was
outmanoeuvring hers. It was odd how like Jack she sometimes could be, he mused.

The dance finished and James fervently wished that following his every move with wide-eyed stares
would cause sea-sickness among the fine company. He escorted Elizabeth back to young Turner
and returned her hand to his. They were happy and he found he could watch that without the guilty
jealousy that had once lingered. "Forgive my commandeering your fiancée, Mr. Turner."

William smiled. "I should thank you, Commodore. Elizabeth has been trying to teach me that for
weeks and I fear all her work is hopeless."

She stifled a laugh in her handkerchief at Will's pointed use of Norrington's title in such close earshot
of Mesdames Landsford. He was a quicker study than most. "Oh Will, you are just stubborn. I ask
you, James, is it possible that so brilliant a swordsman could possibly have two left feet?"

"Certainly it is. I know of an excellent swordsman who is barely capable of retaining his balance
simply walking." James smiled fondly. "I fear, however, Elizabeth's shoes are only marginally less
dangerous than a sword."

"Wretch!" she laughed. "And they're pinching horribly. Would that excellent swordsman happen to
have a great fondness for rum?" She turned to William. "And now you do owe me a dance. Or
would you rather a duel?"

William looked over her head in apology at James and led her back to the floor.

For the remainder of the evening, James remained close to the two. It was better to have someone to
talk to when he could hear the whispers behind him, better to have somewhere to look when he
could feel the burn of many a gaze on him. When the room began to empty, he breathed a sigh of
relief and excused himself for the night.

The next day, James paced the Governor's mansion and the gardens for hours, storming back in and
scowling at the giant clock in the parlour when the hours seemed to crawl. Finally, he left, late
enough to give Winthrop time to deal with military matters before his arrival and early enough not to
disturb him during supper. It wasn't true nervousness, he told himself, but to be prepared and think
through even such trivial matters as the time of his arrival could yield a tactical advantage.
Immaculately dressed, hair tamed beneath the wig, he arrived at the fort. The marines hesitated, but eventually all their hands snapped up in a salute: more than one of them had served under him for years.

Lieutenant Gillette strode down the hallway and James saluted. "Lieutenant, I-

Gillette winced and stopped for a second. "Sir, I pray you please excuse me, I am in a hurry." Then he strode on and James wished he had only imagined the flicker of pity in his eyes.

He sighed. The two harlequins would have to suffice. Indeed, he only had to follow the sound of arguing voices to find Marines Murtogg and Mulroy. Again, he saluted. "Where may I find Admiral Winthrop?"

James was too preoccupied to listen to their blather as they escorted him upstairs to the door of his office - Archer's now, he reminded himself.

Admiral Winthrop was seated in the one comfortable chair with a cup of tea balanced on one knee. He barely glanced at the door. Archer, however, rose and bowed, escorting James to the chair before his desk. "Thank you for coming so promptly, sir. May I have some tea brought for you?"

James nodded his thanks, lips split in a thin smile. "Gladly. That is most kind of you, Commodore. My thanks." If it irked to speak his own title to a different man, he showed no outward reaction. He stood up straight, distinctly military. "Admiral."

Winthrop turned lazy eyes on him. "Please sit down, Norrington. Commodore Archer, could you spare us your office." It was not a question and Archer's face was expressionless as he bowed and withdrew. Winthrop sipped at his tea, wrinkling his nose at it. "I must say, it was quite a shock to have you walk into Port Royal, pretty as you please after being gone for the better part of this year."

He was one of those men in the Admiralty whose only experience shipboard was seasickness on the crossing from England. Intensely disliked in London, he had been foisted on Nassau for lack of any other suitable place to dispose of him. The fact that he was a titled aristocrat with an inbred heritage of some two centuries did not lessen the fact that he was entirely useless and barely decorative. Unfortunately, he was not inane enough to be unaware of these matters and took his spite out on his Caribbean underlings.

James took his seat and eyed the Admiral, smiling pleasantly. "I apologise for the difficulties my absence has created, yet its reasons were beyond my control. I returned as soon as I possibly could, which I considered my duty. I realise that seven months is a long time, but the voyage to the Indian Ocean also is long."

"Yes, that is as it may be, but this story of yours...you say you were impressed. As regrettable as that is, you cannot provide any proof of the matter. Captain Hamilton cannot vouch for your tale. You have no witnesses. In the interests of justice and order, the Navy cannot allow its officers to simply disappear and reappear as they see fit." Winthrop's affected drawl was all the more irritating for its studied disinterest.

James' lips set into a thin line and he bit the inside of his cheek. "The only matter I saw fit, Sir, is that of my reappearance. My disappearance lay not within my power. If Captain Hamilton were to vouch for the truth of the matter, he would accuse himself of a crime, and with respect, Sir, criminals do not have the honour to do so for the sheer sake of honesty."

Winthrop stifled a yawn in a lace handkerchief and dabbed at a droplet of sweat gathering at his temple. It left a faint smudge of powder on the linen. "That may be true, but the problem is moot.
Impressment is a delicate matter and the Navy itself uses the practise at times. It would not be politic to raise such a question when recruitment is difficult enough amid all these merchantmen.

He stretched out his legs and set the cup and saucer on Archer's desk with exaggerated care. It would not be amiss to say that he was enjoying a heroic officer's discomfiture. "What I mean t'say, sir, is that the Navy itself declared you dead after four months missing. Of course, your pension and backpay can be reverted to you, but that is a personal matter you must pursue in the courts. Clearly, you are alive and something can be arranged."

James fought back the urge to grind his teeth. "As you said, Sir, clearly I am alive. The matter of my finances, while necessary, is not the reason I am here. I returned to Port Royal because I am an officer of His Majesty's Royal Navy and I take pride in that. I have every wish to return to serving England. Surely, the Navy cannot afford to lose its officers to a common criminal."

He drew in a careful breath. "Neither am I injured nor in any other way incapable of fulfilling my duty. I only wish to be given the opportunity to do so."

"Certainly, the Navy cannot afford to lose officers, but when officers go missing for no apparent reason, they surely have little need of such. And no one in London will care to take up a cause based on a rumour of impressment. I suggest you attend to your financial dilemma, sir. Your commission died when you were declared deceased and I see no reason to cause His Majesty's service undue embarrassment by dragging it before an Admiralty court."

Winthrop smiled maliciously and peered through his glass. "Of course, you can travel to London and try to explain yourself, but I doubt the results would be in any way different. Consider yourself a civilian, Mister Norrington. It would be easier on all persons involved and a very dreadful thing to put a man who went missing over such an unconfirmed scandal in charge of any command."

He returned to his tea, as if to say 'Begone'.

There were many things James could have said: repeated that it had not been his fault, that he failed to see embarrassment and scandal in the cards fate had dealt him, that he didn't think the Navy should rightly lose an officer they had once called one of their best and who had not changed. That he was not cut out for life as civilian, that he needed a purpose and that the sea had been that purpose for the greatest part of his life.

But he did not. Many things he might have lost, but not his pride. He would not beg or grovel at a misplaced aristocrat's feet. Let Winthrop see what he would in Norrington's eyes, there would be no word of it. A civilian had no need for military protocol, but it was with a moribund glee that he stood to attention and saluted. "If you will excuse me then, Sir."

The Admiral waved one soft, white hand without a word.

Outside the door, Elias Archer was grinding his teeth and wondered how in hell the Navy managed to stay afloat with idiots like Winthrop in charge. Much more of it and the pride of England would degenerate into a seagoing copy of its Army.

He silently fell into step with James down the corridor, only speaking when they were long out of earshot of his office. "Norrington, I am sorrier than you can know. But do not despair. I will write London about this matter."

James' eyes had been set firmly on the stone floor, focused on pace after pace. He looked up and forced a smile which tightened when his lip began to tremble. "My most sincere thanks, Commodore, but I have been assured that such an attempt will not be necessary. I shall not force my
services where they are not wanted." There it was again, his pride, perhaps his downfall, but if nobody else upheld it for him, only he could.

Archer swore savagely under his breath and laid one hand on Norrington's arm. "Rest assured, sir, that snivelling bit of Thameside tripe will not have the last word in this. I will spare no effort until I see you have justice, not only for your sake, sir. For the Navy's. Do not lose heart, Commodore."

He was seething, but helpless to fight Winthrop without addressing the circuitous channels of the Admiralty. The man was a blight on the service, more than deserving of a good thrashing, of that Archer was sure. For now, all he could do was offer his aid and any consolation a brave man ill-used might require. "Is there anything at all I can do, sir?"

James sighed, swallowed his pride and nodded. "Only one matter, Commodore. I understand the Dauntless is now your ship. Know that she is a fine vessel and I have no doubt she will serve you as well as she did me. Hence my request." His eyes closed briefly, then opened again. "I should very much like the possibility to be aboard her once more, even if only in port."

Archer thought he had never seen any officer so deserving of the title as he watched Norrington's stricken eyes beneath a fiercely stoic mask. "Of course, sir. Is there any among your officers that you would care to escort you?"

Archer was a good man, a seasoned captain of years who believed in justice as simple as a sword and had not needed to learn how politics could divert and pollute it. Not long ago, James had believed the same, but the past weeks had been a hard school. "Your support truly means a lot to me, Commodore. You have my most sincere thanks and I wish I could express them otherwise than with simple words. An escort will not be necessary. I'd rather... be alone for now."

"Take your time, sir. And I promise you that this will come before the Admiralty." He sighed and scratched under his wig. "God knows they take their time about things, but I will not rest until you have justice. Be patient and attend to your financial matters. And, sir? I hope that you will consider me a friend. I am proud to have met you and should you have need of me in any fashion, do not hesitate to ask me for any help a fellow officer might give."

Sympathy should not grate on him any further. Yet all James could think of was how he could have
sunk so low that he needed pity from a senior officer. There was not one word Archer said to which he could object, but they all dug deeper into a wound brutally ripped open. "Once more, my thanks. I am... I am glad to see that Port Royal is in good hands." He forced another smile. "Please excuse me now."

He barely waited for Archer's reply, tearing through the courtyard. He strode up to the parapet, not one marine daring to stop him.

It was quiet up there, only the wind hissing into his face with the unmistakable taste of salt. It seemed wrong that it should not tousle his hair and so James unpinned the wig and let the wind wreak its havoc, tearing strands from his queue and tossing them into his face. He could overlook the sea, the harbour with the Navy ships sitting proudly on the waves.

All this he had once considered his. His duty, his responsibility, but also his vocation. That which he had done all his life. And now should it be taken from him, through no fault of his own? He'd fought the impressment; done all he could to return, only to find that everything he fought for no longer waited for him. Port Royal had mourned a Commodore, they did not want one back. 'Better to have thought him dead,' he'd not heard those words but sensed them often enough, accused of shaming his own memory, the memory of a hero.

And now? Oh, he'd heard the rumours well enough, had heard them on Winthrop's lips this very morning: the Navy did not need a Commodore who simply left and returned as he pleased. The truth, obviously, had very little weight when put against a city's worth of gossip. Certainly, Jack and the others would make fine witnesses, minutes 'ere they'd be strung up for piracy. He laughed bitterly and could feel rather than see one of the marines turn and stare at him for a split second.

To speak ill of the dead was improper, to do the same to a living man the everyday lifeblood of whatever called itself polite society. The glee of misery, a fine entertainment for those who knew not what it meant to stand aboard a ship's deck and fight to ensure this very port's safety. It seemed particularly ironic that those who before had licked his heels the most were those to now speak worst of him, that they'd always known that 'something about that Norrington was strange'.
James closed his eyes, let the wind rush past his face; listened to the waves rushing and breaking against the cliff below. Wild and unpredictable, that at least had not changed. The sound was the same, slowing and speeding, as a heartbeat would.

He had not expected this. Oh, certainly he'd expected gossip and plenty of it, but that it would die down quickly, after he had been reinstated as Commodore. That he would not had never so much as occurred to him. It was his job, he was trained to fulfill it and to have it torn from him made him feel empty, as though a vital part of himself were missing. And it was. It sat down there on the Dauntless where she rocked on the waves, it fluttered in the Union Jack hoisted proudly above him, but no longer granted to him.

What had he received in turn? Spite, proscription like that of a wanted criminal. He'd returned to his home, but Port Royal no longer was a home to him. The rare pity was yet worse, reminding him all too much of what he had lost. What would they say if he answered that nothing of the impressment had been worse than this? That even the strokes of the cat had less impact than this?

Hamilton had stolen his time, his work, but Port Royal stole his duty, his dedication and trampled on it as if it were more worthless than that of a dead man. And now they also wanted to take his pride.

His hand tightened in the white curls, his eyes closed tightly. He stood like that for a while longer, listening only to his breathing, to the rush of the waves, anger searing through him. It had no aim and trickled away like grape shot spilled in the vast ocean. There was no single man he could blame. Even Winthrop stood only for a larger opinion. It did not stop his anger, his desperation and he bit down on it, stifling the urge to return to the office, remove all the items that were his and toss them into the sea where they belonged.
It was more than an hour later that he straightened, settled the wig and strode away, chin held high, meeting every single gaze. Let them see, let them talk, let Port Royal's gossipmongers know that they would not have his surrender. They had not broken him.

Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Twenty-Four
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--PG-13.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Norrington is out of his depth and praying for a miracle.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smtfhw for her excellent beta.
Chapter Twenty-Three

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR: Into the Depths

When James arrived at the Governor's mansion he strode to his room, ignoring the valet's attempt to take his coat. He pulled the wig from his head, toed off his shoes, untied the stifling cravat and laid it on a chair with coat and waistcoat before he stretched out on the bed, his eyes closed and his breath as hard as though he had just taken a long dive.

Patience. He'd always thought he possessed that virtue, but it had been far stretched by the past month, by waiting and hoping only to have that hope brutally crushed; by having to depend on another's help and being completely and utterly useless for anything other than the entertainment of gossipmongers. His commission was gone. The Navy wanted him no longer.

Strange, to think that the Navy incorporated all he'd wanted, ever since he'd first set foot aboard a ship, ever since he'd borne the disapproving protests of his mother against his decision to go to sea. He wondered if she had cried when she had read of his death. She had declared him moribund the moment he had accepted the transfer into the Caribbean to reach his captaincy years earlier than if he had stayed. Still, how was it to read of a son's death? Would she also think him better dead and a hero, than alive and a disgrace?

He shook his head harshly. Had he really sunk this low already, to pathetic self-pity? He was alive, he was healthy and a very restricted but loyal circle of friends stood by his side. Still, he could not rely solely on their help, be a parasite in the Governor's mansion until his pension was transferred back to him and then thrive from it in a small house where he would wither away from boredom. It was pure horror to think of a life without a purpose, yet that was all that stood before him.

More than twenty years in the service did not fade quickly. The twelve-year-old boy had not known where else to go, and the thirty-three year old man knew not a thing more. Enlist as a common tar and look up to his former subordinates as superiors; complete his fall from grace? Give fencing lessons and with every student think of Matthew and the children he would never have, because no lady wished for her daughter to marry a fallen star?

James opened his eyes and stared at his hands. They were the same they had always been, bearing many a new callous, but they could still hold his sword as well as they always had, could still haul on a line when necessity required it, could still lift in the Navy's proud salute. Nobody wanted that of
him anymore. Nobody wanted anything of him anymore, except to be as unobtrusive as possible and  
best disappear entirely.

He sat up with a hiss and paced the room. They had robbed all that had been his and now reached  
for all that he was. The Navy had been his home. It was no longer, but that did not mean he knew  
what else could be.

Whichever way he approached the question in the days following, he found no satisfactory answer.  
The news from the Fort had travelled fast and only served to intensify any behaviour towards him.  
Where before there had been muted spite, it now showed even more openly, without fear of  
retribution. Where there had been pity, it was displayed yet more strongly, and where James had  
brrooded, he now kept to himself as much as he could without appearing rude to his host.

One morning, the salty breeze through his window became too much to bear, and instead of simply  
staring, he went down to the docks. The far part not restricted to the military reeked of dead fish and  
sweat, but when he sat on one of the logs, he could see the Dauntless bob on the waves, a proud  
shape against the bright sunlight.

Lieutenant Groves hesitated before approaching his former commander. He was appalled by the  
recent turn of events, as was every officer who had served under James Norrington. He swallowed  
hard and remembered his orders from Commodore Archer and saluted sharply. "Sir?"

James looked up and let his hand, half-lifted in a salute, fall. He smiled and bowed his head.  
"Lieutenant."

"Sir, I have orders to escort you to the Dauntless, if you desire. And damn it to hell that I cannot do  
it under your command."

James chuckled. "Thank you, Groves. Much as I appreciate the sentiment, I doubt that Commodore  
Archer is any more delighted about your loose tongue than I was," He slid down from the log and  
straightened, staring at the fort, then the Dauntless. "I would appreciate it."

Groves fell into step with him, stealing glances with a worried frown. Norrington's face was  
pinched, tanned dark lines etched too deeply around his mouth and on his brow. "Commodore, sir?  
James? I-I am so sorry."

James closed his eyes and shook his head, but then thought better. His lips pursed into a grin and he  
nodded at the boat, chuckling. "Lieutenant, do not tell me that leaky thing has still not been  
replaced."

Groves grinned at him and hid the concern in his eyes. He knew James well enough to know that  
the man's pride was already in tatters and he would not for the world add to that burden. "You know  
how it is. A real minute or a Navy minute. You don't mind your boots getting a bit damp?"

"If I start shrieking like a lady, you will know it was the unusually cold seawater on my landlubber  
toes." He jumped into the boat and sat himself down with an expectant grin. "You cannot expect a  
civilian to row, can you?"

Theodore laughed as he manned the oars. "Wouldn't dream of allowing it, sir," he winked and  
pulled out into the harbour. The Dauntless' huge bulk loomed above them, casting a chill shadow  
over the small jollyboat. "Shall I have her raised?"

James grabbed a line, both eyebrows raised. "Up to the rail, or are you afraid of losing to a man who  
will receive his pension in a few months' time?"
"You're on!" Groves grabbed a line and they raced up the side, speed rather impeded by their laughter. The lieutenant clambered over the rail well after James and shook his head. "Whatever you've been doing, it's certainly made you limber! By God, you're faster than Jolly Pete!"

James winked and barked a laugh, then turned to the young Lieutenant rushing to greet him with a faultless salute. "Sir! It's an honour to have you aboard. You are free to go where you please, but we're having the foc'sle caulked, so you'd best mind your step there."

Groves took his place among them, escorting James only as far as the mainmast, then dropping back to let him continue alone. The others took their cue from his posture and remained at attention.

James barely spared them another glance. It was as if something drew him to the quarterdeck, up the stairs, the handrail smooth and warm from the sun. He stood perfectly still for a long while, eyes closed until he could see a different scene: himself, standing at the helm, but the wind catching in the sails, the sails billowing, speeding a ship that appeared slow and bulky into an easy grace. Eyes still closed he reached out, the spokes gliding under his hands. They, too, were warm, but not as smooth, and there they were; the four half-moons his nails had dug into the wood, when he had clutched at the wheel for dear life during a fierce squall.

There was a strange peace in standing here, in his place, even if he knew he could not stay. Even if he knew it was a one-time favour, an illusion of what he had lost. It was a ridiculous notion with all the men watching from a respectful distance, but he bent down and lightly kissed that one spoke. "Farewell, my Dauntless. You have been a fine companion through all these years. I will miss you."

He looked up and straightened, the sharp lines of his face clear and set with determination, as they had been in any battle and he strode down the stairs without a glance back. "My thanks, Lieutenant. You have kept her in fine shape. Give Commodore Archer my thanks."

Every hand on deck was raised in salute. Groves stepped forward and dismissed the men formally, before rejoining Norrington near the rail. "James, what will you do whilst Commodore Archer waits to hear from London?" His voice was low.

James looked up and shrugged. "I do not know, Theodore." Then, again, barely audible, "I do not know." There was a long silence as they climbed down, then the regular lapping of the oars against the water.

He cleared his throat. "Where are the ships in harbour bound?"

The lieutenant's eyes raked over his passenger's back sharply. "The two down to the east are heading for the colonies. There are several small boats that have mail runs and the larger vessels are Dutch, headed to the Guyanas." He grinned at the nape of James' neck. "It would depend upon where one wanted to go. The ramshackle sloop heads to Hispaniola and the smaller islands."

James nodded, turning around after a second. "I see trade is running well."

"Busier than ever. Makes the harbour seems small, doesn't it? James, will you let me know what you plan to do? I should not wish to lose your friendship." His eyes were steady. "Should you require anything at all of me, you need only ask."

"It is better you do not know, for both our sakes." The boat beached and James climbed out to tie it off. He offered his hand to Groves and clasped his tightly. "I am more grateful for your friendship than you will ever know, Theodore. And I will not forget it."

Groves grasped his hand, grinning down at the callouses. "I'm sure you have something in mind."
Do write me, James. And good luck. Sir!” He saluted.

This time, James returned it. "Fair winds to you, Theodore.” Another smile, then he turned and trotted up the gravel path. He had made a decision, and if that decision was 'not Port Royal', then so be it.

Lieutenant Groves watched his long stride until he rounded a corner and disappeared from view. He rowed back to his responsibilities and promised himself to rescue Norrington's portrait, now stuffed amid the junk cluttering the Mess lumber room. It wasn't fit that it should remain in such a place and he would not forget that honour burned brightest under clouds.

Back in his room, James tugged at the bindings of his duffle for the first time since he had returned, the rope stiff with dried salt water. There were only his old breeches and a shirt in it. Or so he thought. Beneath the shirt, wedged into one leg of the breeches, there was a heavy pouch, and as he opened it, gold coins spilled over his lap, at least three dozen, silver winking among them like slivers of the moonlight fighting against dawn.

Jack. James had told him that he needed no share of a pirate raid, but obviously Jack had seen the matter differently. It was not as much as Jack had attempted to urge on him, but enough for a comfortable life of many years if he could only explain whence it came.

A fraction of it would suffice to finance his endeavour, but what to do with the rest? Give it to Swann or Elizabeth and make them, too, believe there was more to his absence than he admitted? Inevitably, it would draw attention, and attention was something he could not afford. They wanted James Norrington to quietly disappear again, and so James Norrington would do just that.

He took dinner with the Governor, impatient and melancholic, just as he'd been when he had left England all those years ago. As they shared a brandy afterwards, he half-wished to speak, to thank Swann again and bid his farewells, but he did not. Instead he returned to his room, quietly waiting until the bustling ceased and everyone went to sleep. Then he rose, and dressed in his old clothes. The blue coat was rolled into his duffle, the suit Swann had paid for lay neatly folded on the bed. Without a glance back at his borrowed existence, he slipped out of the room, up to the Governor's study to leave a letter on his desk.

It said little, but James would not leave without a single word. He had tried to express his gratitude for the aid, had begged forgiveness for the abruptness of his departure and wished Swann and his daughter well. It was all that needed to be said, and honesty demanded it be written.

It was quiet as he snuck down the stairs, feeling like a thief when all he did was remove his unwished-for presence from Port Royal.

It took him half an hour to arrive at the docks, slipping through narrow alleys where no one would spare him a closer look. He walked along the harbour until he found the Julietta, the little sloop bound for Hispaniola carrying mail, and, James bet, as he saw how low she lay in the water, a load of smuggled goods.

There were two watches on deck and James stood still until he had their attention. "Ahoy, Julietta.”

"Ahoy there. Who is't?" Several faces leaned out in the darkness, a lantern bobbing to one side.

Another beacon wobbled down the gang and James was staring into a weathered face, dark blue eyes winking from a net of wrinkles. "Who are ya?"

James stared back coolly. "A paying passenger who needs to get to Hispanola." His voice dropped
low. "Or better yet, Tortuga."

"Wot's yer business there, mate? An' how much?" The eyes had narrowed suspiciously but greed was a powerful motivator.

"I fail to see how my business concerns you any more than yours does me." James slipped his hand into the pocket in which he had stored the silver coins and pulled out one, flipped it, then pocketed it again.

"Right enough. We sail at dawn an' ye'll have t'kip wi' the quartermaster. Two days, three mebbe if that squall promises t'rise. M'name's Walker. Cap'n. Yer's?"

James took Walker's hand and grinned. "Norbury."

"Climb aboard, Mr. Norbury. Victuals ain't included but yer welcome to a dram." Walker leaned in close and his breath reeked of rum.

"I am not thirsty." James climbed aboard and remained awake until they put out with the morning tide and Port Royal grew smaller and smaller in the distance.

The crew of the Julietta was small but watchful and James was not their only passenger. There was a young woman with a swelling belly headed to Hispaniola and a young man with a large head and spectacles who stuttered going to Santo Domingo. Both remained belowdecks for the short trip.

The weather held and they made port just as the sunlight spilled over the streets of Tortuga, illuminating excrement and garbage both sentient and otherwise.

Walker took his payment with a grin. "Careful there, mate. Heard tell there's birds flyin' about this 'ere island again."

James only arched an eyebrow, fist clenching in his coat's pocket. "Do you refer to that Sparrow? I heard tell he disappeared more than half a year past."

The wrinkled face was expressionless but Walker's blue eyes twinkled. "Never can tell. Word was he's been seen about. Coulda been someone else. Comin' in wi' one ship, leavin' on another and back again. Must be migratin' season." His grin stretched to his missing molars. "We're leavin' t'morra if ya decide t'move on. Fair winds."

"My thanks, Captain, but I have no wish to be aboard when the Navy picks you up and finds what you have stored in that hold." James grinned without mirth, and the next moment he vanished into the crowd of Tortuga, greeted by the famous (or infamous, depending who was asked) odour.

It was never difficult to find the most popular tavern in a port. At any time, one needed only to see where the steady trail of drunkards emerged, rather like following a river upstream. Indeed, this method quickly took James to the Faithful Bride, where, upon opening the door, his boots nearly collided with a man sleeping off his inebriation while his mates were still carousing vivaciously.

Sunrise in Tortuga.

The sounds and smells within were much the same by day or night. Shouts and singing, complaints about service or cards, whoops of laughter and the stink of humanity, ill-masked under sweetgrass and sawdust. There was another smell mingled with bad cooking and stale drink, indefinable but insistent: the smell of money.

It was no different from the sailors' taverns James had frequented in foreign ports, but certainly a far cry from the establishments in which Port Royal had seen its commodore. Most important were quick reflexes. On his way to the bar he ducked a flying boot, two bottles and dozens of fists. Jack wasn't
among those drinking, nor those snoring beneath tables. He had not expected it with neither the Pearl nor the Chimaera in port, but still he checked every face twice.

The keep seemed upright and capable of coherent speech, which put him ahead of the others in the tavern.

"I am looking for a room."

The keep stared over his shoulder. "Got two. Tuppence fer two hours, wif th' gel." He squinted at James and plopped a tankard down in front of him. "An' a drink."

"I'll take the drink, and one of the rooms." James took a large swallow. "For two weeks. Alone."

The keep's red eyes widened. "Two weeks? Yer mad!" They narrowed. "Wot fer? An' I want it in advance."

James' hand disappeared into one of his pockets and he pulled out one golden coin, sheltered in his palm and gleaming at the keep for a split second before he closed his hand around it and could see the gleam mirrored in greed. He leaned closer still. "A few more like this and I could likely buy the whole establishment," he sneered.

He remembered Bertie's haggling in Bombay and offered derisively, "A quarter of it for a room for two weeks, including all that I may eat and drink."

"Three-quarters."

"Half."

"Half and a tenth part."

James raised an eyebrow. "Done."

Old Crowls' beady gaze brightened and his red face puffed like a blowfish. "Come in th'back." He shoved aside a leather curtain and jerked his thumb at James.

"After you." James followed, eyes fixed on the keep's hand, his own ready to grab for his sword at the slightest indication of foul play.

Crowls pushed a scale onto the scarred table of his 'office' as the locals called it. The small space was heavy with the smell of rum emanating from the racked barrels against the walls. He tossed a small knife down beside it, filled two earthenware cups and sat down, nodding at the other chair. "Two weeks is a long time hereabouts. Y'lookin' fer a berth?"

He tossed a few weights into the scale.

James fought down every instinct in himself and sat down, weighing the whole coin before taking the knife to it. "One might say so." He forced himself to concentrate and removed weight after weight from the one scale pan, then put the half-coin on the other, adding another tiny piece until the scales were balanced, his fingertips gleaming.

Crowls watched the proceedings with one eye and slurped down his rum. "Plenty o' work t'be had. Crawfish headin' north again and birds flyin' round and round. Ye can prob'ly find sumpthin' fast. Yer name, sailor? I be Dick Crowls." He stuck out a hand a big as a ham.

James raised his eyebrows and took it. "James Norbury. And I am not looking for work on just any
ship." That was all that he would say on the matter. He emptied his mug and slammed it onto the table.

Crowls examined the gold carefully, bit on one piece, leaving teethmarks in the soft metal before pocketing it. "Understood, mate." He filled their mugs again. "I'll have Clary fix up th' best room fer ya. You be wantin' yer meals here or upstairs? Can't always promise it, if she's got custom."

James shook his head. "I will take them here. What I do want upstairs is a basin of fresh water each morning."

"As ye wish. Table t' the back just afore th' snuggery's got the best view o' the place. Just so's ya know." Crowls lumbered to his feet and pushed the curtain aside. He returned to the bar, whacking one inebriate off his stool as he passed.

As they emerged, only the most persistent drunkards were still at work. Most had passed out and snored on the dirty floor or sagged in their seats.

James went to his room. It was small but reasonably clean, the bed large and sturdy. At least his gold had bought clean sheets. It would do. He pushed the single chair in front of the door so any intruder would instantly alert him, then pulled off his coat and stretched out on the bed.

The ceiling had likely once been white, and it was still equally interesting to study. So James Norbury had returned, to all appearances a seasoned pirate looking for a berth. He wondered if he could stoop any lower from anything civilised and laughed bitterly.

Eventually, exhaustion took its toll. He had remained awake for most of the journey, knowing that money bred greed and fearing for his safety should Walker decide to see if there was more from where that one coin had come.

His sword lay beside the bed and he slept for most of the day, until the sounds on the street increased in volume. James straightened and retied his hair, pulled the coat on and buckled his sword around his waist. He left his empty duffle in the room as he walked down the narrow, creaking stairs. The tavern seemed almost civilised at this hour. In fact, all guests were still sitting, on chairs no less.

Talk was low and the murky lamplight shed its peculiar glow over the tavern. The door opened and shut, sometimes swinging wide until a newcomer slammed it shut. Clary brought James a rough meal of bread and cheese and a bowl of stew, winking at him.

"Anythin' else, luvie?" Her smiled was disconcerting with its gold and gaps. Mouth closed, she was really quite pretty, or at least, had been not so very long ago. "You over there!" she bellowed over her shoulder. "Stow it or I'll ram ya one."

"Thank you, Miss. That will be all." James kept his tone cold and aloof, but managed a polite smile, his eyes flickering every time the door opened and closed again. There was long dark hair once and he looked closer, then slumped back into his chair.

Around him, the Bride fell into its nightly routine of drunken brawls, usually quelled within minutes by Clary or Crowls. It was a safe zone, as safe as any place in a jungle could be and its owner boasted that there had been but one murder within its walls in the past fourteen years. That had been when Crowls took over for the deceased owner, who had owed him a considerable sum. Since then, anyone with sense took their conflicts into the street.

It was rather like the Corn Market in high season, bidding and trading, all manner of business conducted around him openly, but spoken in a kind of gibberish code he was just beginning to
comprehend. No one trusted anyone, therefore all were trusted at the Faithful Bride.

A slender shadow fell over his meal. "Needin' comp'ny, guv?"

James had reclined against the wall, sipping slowly from his mug. He turned to stare into dark brown eyes, mouth opening for the same refusal he’d offered at least half a dozen whores in the last few hours. Only he swallowed the ‘Miss’, because standing in front of him was a young man. Strange, how the kohl smeared around his eyes was more disturbing than around women’s, strange how it almost made him want to say yes, to run his hands across hard muscle and forget where he was and why. But he only shook his head. "No, thank you."

The boy moved away, another fight broke out and Clary bashed one of the combatants over the head with a trencher that split in two. The entire place erupted into laughter. It got later, and the talk around him darker, more dangerous, like a treacherous current stealing beneath smooth seas.

He heard murders plotted, ambushes planned, petty rivalries flare into hostility with a practised ease worthy of the worst Italian popes.

All the time, he did not so much as move from his chair, sipping only enough to keep himself busy, his eyes steadily trained on the door. Long past midnight, there was a face he knew, but couldn’t place until he heard the man’s Irish cant. Then he remembered: more than two years ago, one of the Dauntless’ crew. A deserter. A man who might recognise him, even without wig and uniform. He cursed under his breath and slipped deeper into shadow, his eyes now dancing between the door and the sailor - Collins, he thought - who was too busy with his rum and the woman on his arm to take much notice of James in his corner.

Again the late hours bled into morning and the rum eventually defeated even the most victorious pirate in the tavern. James rose and stretched, returning to his room without another word. There was a fresh basin of water and he washed diligently, his hands shaking.

Collins was not his worry. Obviously the man had been distracted, but over the years there had been more than one deserter who likely treated Tortuga as his new port of call, more than one who could recognise him and yield him up to certain death.

It was that fear that made him hesitate going downstairs the next evening, but if he had been meek, he would not have come here in the first place. He took his hat with him, shadowing his face as he sat in his corner and took his meal.

The same world bloomed around him: ‘ladies’ of unquestioned ill-repute aping manners they did not comprehend, boys and girls running underfoot at all hours, nimble of hand and blinking wide, feral eyes at the man in the corner who never moved. They left him be once Jemmy got himself caught with a hand in one pocket, facing pair of terrifyingly pale green eyes.

James wordlessly shoved his plate at the boy. He wasn't hungry anyway. Instead, he drank deep from his mug that night, had it refilled again and again with a grim determination. It didn't help. The rum swam in the mug and in front of his eyes, it burned down his throat but it couldn't quench what only fuelled him to further drink: fear, desperation, a dreadful sense of finality.

He drank until he could no longer make sense of it, until every entering figure seemed to sway like Jack and every word sounded like Winthrop's lazy drawl. Then, suddenly, in the early hours of dawn he got to his feet, the chair clattering to the floor as he wavered his way up the stairs and into his room, collapsing next to his bed in a drunken stupor.

Crowls sent Clary to check on his best paying guest in a month and grinned. That doubloon had
been the twin of more than one he'd seen cut and weighed in town for the better part of six weeks. A little bird told him which oyster Mr. James Norbury was waiting to crack.

James woke many hours later, stiff and sore, a blanket drawn around him, the tavern's brawl continuing in his head. He pushed himself up, fell back with a groan and, after a minute's struggle, stumbled to the basin, dunking his head into the cold water until he could at least pry his eyes open.

He was absolutely miserable and wondered how getting drunk had ever appeared to be a good idea. When he went below that night, his hat was pulled even further forward, shading him from the lamplight. As he downed his first and only mug that night, he remembered Jack handing him his flask that one morning, and winced.

In the next days, the whores learned to avoid the choosy customer in the corner who always shook his head at any offer, who even turned away Mary, who could normally choose her tricks as she pleased. The guests learned that no wager could coax him into a card game, that no offer could coax him aboard a ship. He was well aware that there was talk of the strange man who sat in the corner every night, waiting, turning down the allures of excessive drink, of women and men alike, as though there was any other reason why a man would come to Tortuga than to drink and fuck.

James ignored them. He waited and continued to wait. But every morning, when he eventually stretched out on the bed and stared at the ceiling until he fell into a dreamless sleep, a small part of him would wonder what he was doing here, in a place where he certainly did not belong any more than Port Royal. He was no pirate and did not want to be one, so why did he want to wait for Jack? Because he hoped that Jack could perform another miracle and make the past month disappear? He had come here without hope. He had only known that he could not stay in Port Royal any longer, and this, whatever it was, had been his only choice.

And so he would wait. It was all he could do.

Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Twenty-Five
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: @elessil and @hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--PG-13.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

As Sparrow once noted to Norrington, "You'd be surprised how small the Caribe can be."

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to @smtfhw for her excellent beta.
On the tenth day at the Faithful Bride, the door opened and admitted a swaggering figure, a row of men in its wake. James blinked and stared. He'd been wrong so often, especially in those first days, when he'd started at every laugh, when every drunken sway had made his breath stop. This time, he only sat and stared, his mug forgotten between table and his mouth.

Jack was laughing at some quip of Bertie's, and it would be dishonest to claim that he didn't time his entrance to the Bride's most crowded hour perfectly, although, Jack, being eternally dishonest, would claim it was all a complete coincidence. He was basking in celebrity, glittering and gleaming like a rare jewel. Suddenly, the dim lamplight was brighter and more golden, the laughter heartier, the curses more vile.

He waved his hellos to all and sundry, stopped smack in the middle of the place to sweep off his hat in an elaborate bow and roared for 'drinks all 'round'.

There was a sudden squeal, high-pitched as though another unfortunate guest had tried his luck with one of the whores without coin, and a small shadow tore itself from Jack's side and ran towards the lone figure in the corner. Jack's eyes seemed to follow in confused slow motion as Matthew launched himself into James' arms with another squeal.

Amid cheers and laughter, Jack plucked Matthew off James and leaned close. "Missed you somethin' awful, mate," he whispered then backed up a wary step.

Whatever James had expected to happen, it didn't. There was the weight of Matthew clinging to his leg, the warmth of Jack's arms on his, but all it stirred was memory, none of the happiness he had known in their days aboard the Chimaera. "Hello, Jack." There was a short, nervous pause. "You look well. I hear you have the Pearl back?" It was not what he had thought to say at all, but all he
could.

Jack looked at him like a man aiming a pistol. "Y'have a room?" He turned to joke with Bertie, his eyes a perfect signal to Gibbs.

"Give the Cap'n some room. Been a hard fortnight fer us all."

The drinks were passed and Jack leaned over the table, every inch the pirate of legend, save for the worried, wary gaze.

"Cat got yer tongue, luv? Let's go talk in private, aye?"

James cast another look around the tavern and rose. He'd begun to tune out the constant uproar to not run completely insane, but it was still loud, all the tavern raising their drink to Jack Sparrow, the only one to get the attention of the strange man in the corner. "Aye." He tore through the crowd with strange impatience and led Jack up to the small room that had been his home for the past ten days.

Jack's hands fluttered. "Private business, you dogs. An' no, yer not invited. My abject apologies all 'round." He bowed and laughed, one arm insistent about James' waist. Near the doorway to the stairs, he bent to Gibbs. "Keep a sharp eye an' fetch us in two hours."

Gibbs grinned at him. "Aye, Cap'n. Hey, young Mattie, c'mere and Old Crowls might fill that bottomless pit of a belly you got."

Jack pulled James up the stairs. "Which one, Jamie?"

Wordlessly, James led him through the narrow hallway, opening the door to the room at the very end and gesturing for Jack to come inside. James was a shade paler than he had been six weeks ago, dark circles beneath his eyes. There was only the single, rickety chair and the bed on which he sat down, still without a word.

Jack's eyes darkened with every step. By the time he sat himself on the dishevelled bed, they were the colour of squid ink. "James, wot's wrong? Wot happened? You look like the devil at his weddin' breakfast." He could smell fear, despair, could almost touch it. "They shut you out, didn't they?"

James only nodded. He didn't rightly know what to say, what to expect. "They declared me dead after five months," he whispered eventually. Then, more silence until he finally looked up, swallowing around his words. "May I... may I stay aboard the Pearl for a while?"

Jack's mouth fell open. "Oh God." He took a deep breath. "Of course ya can. Don't be a goose. There's always a place for you with me." He bit his lip and leaned forward, taking both James' hands between his. "Wotever you may think of me, now, before, or after, know that, luv."

James looked at him with a crooked smile. The calloused hands were warm in Jack's palms but absolutely motionless, as if folded in prayer. "Thank you."

Jack the babbler knew when to be quiet and simply held onto James' hands, watching the shadows in his eyes. "Never worry, mate. Wotever you need. You ate t'day?"

"Yes. I have an arrangement including board and lodging. Although I swear that even Cookie at his worst has produced better meals than these. They are hardly palatable when sober." James attempted another smile that came out less shaky. "I see you are introducing the boy to the local dens of depravity?"
"Mattie's quite the man now. He beat off a slaver's ship's boy o' fifteen and there's no end to his vanity these days." Jack held onto the long fingers. Ever since he'd put in with the evening tide, he'd been hearing how 'there be squab waitin' fer the bird at the Bride.' He didn't want to show how much fear was mixed into his elation; not now, when James was so obviously on his scuppers.

"Quite obviously, he has been spending too much time with you. I hope he has not picked up more of your nastier habits." The grin on James' face was a bit too wide, but a valiant attempt. "So I take it he is as well as you seem to be?"

"All's as well as can be, luv." Jack paused. The questions were screaming in his head but he didn't dare to breathe them.

James could see them well enough, had always known they would come, but he wasn't ready to answer them. No preparation could do that and his pride would not let him simply say 'I have nowhere else to go.'

"That is good to hear," he said, stretching back on the bed and closing his eyes for just a few seconds.

Jack hesitated for a moment, then lay down beside him and slowly crawled into his arms until his head rested on James' shoulder, like a child seeking comfort. "I missed you."

It was strangely comforting for James to hear that. Comforting not to hear that question spoken aloud or any of the thousand others he'd had to hear in the past weeks. He didn't answer but for a very brief press of his arm around Jack's shoulders.

Jack breathed in the scent of him, imperfectly washed, warm and familiar. He'd dreamed it often enough, his face buried in James' pillow on the Chimaera or snatched in brief moments from the folds of the shirt he'd left behind once he had returned to the Pearl.

"Just got back from deliverin' some goods a bit further north or I'da been here sooner. I'm sorry, luv."

"For what? That you did not spend all your time carousing in Tortuga?" James laughed against his neck. "I...I am glad you are here now."

Jack clung to him. "I am, too. There's been so much t'do. Oh Jamie." His words were too ridiculous to voice and he paused long enough to steady himself.

"Been runnin' around like a headless chicken, fencin' all them goods. But, luv, yer finally gonna meet me Pearl, properly. No undead pirates, I swear on pain o' death."

"No headless chickens either, I hope." Another soft laugh. "I...I missed you as well." James rolled onto his side to better see Jack, nearly wincing at the gleam he saw there at the mention of the Pearl. "So you did get her back."

Jack nodded slowly, his eyes closed. "Aye, I did." When he looked up again, he was chewing on his lip and his face had gone dusky. "I have a confession t'make, Jamie. I don't want you takin' it amiss. Can ya hear me out an' slap me later?"

James pulled away, studied Jack's face, then nodded.

His grip tightened. "I need you to understand why I didn't tell you. Or---oh hell!" He gulped and sat up, fingers straying through James' unruly hair. "I got a letter back here when we made port in Dakar. I wasn't here but a fortnight when the Pearl came glidin' inta the bay." He drew up his legs
and rested his chin on his knees, waiting for the inevitable explosion of anger and recrimination.

Instead there was silence as James only stared at him, then swallowed and looked down. "I understand why you could not mention me in a letter addressed to Tortuga," he whispered. "But not why you could not tell me." He was shaking, fists twisted into the linen sheet. Dakar. That had been long before he was declared dead. Before Port Royal had given up on him.

"I didn't want t'get yer hopes up lest it hadn't got anywhere at all. And once I knew it had gone," Jack swallowed thickly, "I forgot."

He blinked hard and cringed under James' gaze. "Well, not really forgot but it just slipped me mind. Jesus, James I'm sorry. How could I have known? It didn't say anythin' much. Just enough t'let Gibbs know wot happened t'me."

He hung his head and fidgeted with the end of his sash. "If I'd mentioned you were with me, he woulda tried t'tell someone. You know wot that woulda cost him and the whole crew, maybe even the Pearl herself."

James did understand, he knew it all too well. But in a strange, wicked way, it did not help. Know what he might, it didn't help the other knowledge that, perhaps, had there been a sign of life from him he wouldn't be where he was now. It was selfish and irrational, but to know that only made it worse. "You could have told me. I trusted you. You could have trusted me," he whispered and jumped to his feet, pacing through the room.

When he stopped, he was trembling. "I am sorry. I did not mean..."

"I know wot you meant, James. It coulda saved ev'rything for you." Jack's voice was so low he had to strain to hear it. "I'm so sorry. It were the night of the stars, when I gave Berks that braid. That's wot I gave it him for--payment fer sending that letter." He shook his head and looked up, his eyes bruised amid smears of kohl. "I-I oh. G'wan. I deserve it." His eyes closed and he tensed, waiting for a blow.

James raised his hand, stared at it, then shook his head and slumped onto the bed. He wasn't angry. He had no desire to wonder what would have been different had that letter mentioned him. His anger and his wonder had burnt themselves out in hard weeks; what was left were the cold ashes of resignation. His voice was hoarse when he spoke again. "You do not. It is not your fault."

Jack opened one eye, then the other and James found himself with an armful of pirate. "Luv, I really did miss you somethin' dreadful. Ain't been right fer weeks. I know wotever's happened must be damned bad and I know you don't wanna speak of it. But James, believe me, I never meant..." he stopped and clung like a leech. "Just know you've a place here and those who want you."

They lay still for awhile, and when they pulled apart, James was trying to smile again. "Then do not let your crew wait. They are waiting for their captain to celebrate a successful haul."

Jack could have wept at his eyes, all the sadder for being dry. "I'm not goin' anywhere without you and I'm not takin' no fer an answer either. Yer comin' with me to the Pearl." His fingertips hovered along James' jaw. "Even if you never forgive me, at least let me treat ya right once."

James nodded gratefully. "Let us leave. I have stayed here long enough." He grabbed his duffle. "Ready when you are, Captain."

Jack made himself smile and suddenly, he darted forward and kissed James hard. "Let's get outta this shitehole, then."
Jack played to the crowd downstairs but his eyes never rested on anything but James for long. When they rowed the longboat back to where the dark shape of the Pearl lay, silvered in moonlight, he handed over a line and smiled. "Up ya go, luv."

His feet were barely on the deck when he turned to James with a grin. "Welcome aboard the Black Pearl, Jamie. We're honoured t'have ya here."

He watched James take in the magnificent woodwork, the gargoyles and nymphs leering seductively from every surface, and he grinned. "She's happy t'have ya, too."

"She is beautiful, Jack. And every bit as eccentric as I have come to expect from you. Although I do believe what you are flying there is an actual flag rather than underwear."

He cast another appreciative glance around the ship. "I understand why you were so set on getting her back."

There was a sudden squawk from somewhere on the deck and James spun around. "Bwaaaaaak, fresh meat, fresh meat!"

Jack yanked off his hat and waved it frantically. "Bloody pack o'feathers! I swear I'm gonna stuff a mattress with you!"

The old man serving as a throne for the parrot shrugged an apology to the laughter of the watch crew.

"New recruit, Cap'n?"

Jamie, this is Tearlach. And Twizzle and Mick. Mr. Gibbs you know. This is Mr. Cotton. And that's Mr. Cotton's parrot." He glared and went on naming the crew until Van stepped forward.

"Gut to see you again, James."

From deep below, the Pearl uttered a soft sound that only Jack heard, a little sigh of pleasure.

He hoped that she was right.

Jack Sparrow was very good at whisking people away in such a fashion that they were too charmed to care. He was quite skilled in riding the currents and diverting attention as he needed, but there was little he could do to rouse James. The man was sleepwalking, his voice softer than ever, his eyes shuttered and empty.

Jack knew that feeling much too well to press the matter. He was, as he often crowed, no fool and if Norrington was 'dead' to the Navy, it did not take any great insight to understand the consequences. That didn't mean Jack abandoned his efforts. He kept up a running conversation with James' monosyllabic grunts. He showed off his Pearl with delight and left James time alone, appearing out of nowhere with a cheerful inanity or strange observation that usually provoked at least a reluctant laugh.

It was not that James did not appreciate the effort. He honestly did, and that was yet more reason for him to withdraw, why he would scramble aloft and sit astride a yardarm to stare until the sea's glare in the bright sunlight became too much to bear. He was short-tempered and knew all too well he was bad company.

He appreciated what Jack did, and had no wish to reward it with anger and disinterest, yet that seemed to be all could muster. So he sought solitude and turned the matter over and over in his head,
wallowing in his own despair.

Jack swayed into the Great Cabin the third day James was aboard, moping after burning his nose bright red. "Jamie, yer not doin' yerself much good," he scowled, throwing himself into a chair, his feet on the table. "Are you tryin' to prove all those rumours that I'm crazy from the sun?"

"I know they are not only rumours," James said quietly, then bent back to stare blankly at the map he had found on the desk.

"Listen, mate. Wotever happened back in Port Royal ain't gonna stop followin' you around until ya put yer sights in some other direction, as it were. You've got t'do somethin' with yerself, luv. Can't properly sail without a course." He leaned forward and poured glasses from the squat decanter on the table. "Now, y'see, I'm dreadful overworked here. It's makin' me mad. I'm not cut out fer mannin' two ships."

He paused, then sat back, the glass balanced on his chest. "The Penelope is waitin', James."

James looked up, sighed, forced a smile, and shook his head. "Jack, I appreciate what you are trying to do and I know you mean your generous offer well." He paused, the thought all too tempting. His own ship again, a place where he could not only stay but also be his own master. "But I cannot. No matter what, I will not turn against the law. I will not become a pirate captain."

It would be the last step, to truly give up all he had been, to turn into what he had fought against for the better part of his life. He wouldn't do that. Perhaps it was pride, but that was all he had left.

Jack gulped down his drink. "Figgered you'd say that. Well, would you consider helpin' me a little? She's in the midst of a refit that's takin' some time." Jack's eyes were wide and altogether too earnest. "Cross me heart, no raids or such. Just help me keep th' crews workin' together whilst I find someone t'captain her. Wot say you to that?"

James shrugged without looking up. "If you can find no one else for the interim."

It was utterly unlike him, this indifference, and finally, he did straighten and look at Jack. "I am no fool. I know you are trying to play me, and if you want, I will play along. I will watch over her until you find someone to captain the Chimaera properly piratical and do Commodore Sparrow honour. But I will not change my stance on the matter."

Jack's nose wrinkled. "Bugger!" He huffed back into his chair, lips pushed out, his dark eyes spilling worry as he bit his lip and studied the amber droplets in the bottom of his glass. "If you go on not changin', James, yer gonna go on feelin' like a beached wreck. Think on that."

He left as abruptly as he'd come and went topside to work off his frustration in the shrouds, muttering to the Pearl about obstinate, loyal, stupid Englishmen and didn't she think it was time he used a belaying pin to knock some sense into James' thick head?

Clearly, Norrington was at a place where he could not be trusted to make any decision for himself or anyone else. That was another problem Jack knew rather too well. He knew that being a captain of any ship was in one's mind and heart first. The reality came later. James wasn't fit to command a gull to shite and that was the plain truth of it.

His fingers flew, repairing a few gaskets and checking lines with exaggerated care. For the past month, Jack had been rediscovering the Pearl and spent much of his free time happily mooning over her every joint. He touched her, heard her, smelled her, saw her every shadow and corner and fell in love all over again. He knew damned well that James should feel the same about his lovely girl, now
lying on her side while two crews hammered copper to her freshly careened keel.

Of all the stubborn fool things he'd seen Norrington do in these months, this was the worst and most unfair to him, to the Penelope, and most of all, to James.

James paced the Great Cabin as if his steps could take him anywhere, then tore to the casement, leaning out and taking a deep breath, his clenched fists trembling. What the hell did Jack think? That he enjoyed being cast adrift? That, like a man on a sinking ship, he would throw overboard everything he held dear?

He craved his own ship, one that nobody could take from him by right. But not at the cost of the last part of himself he could still call his own. Not against the dedication he steadfastly upheld. He was who he was and could not simply shed and add layers as he pleased. And he wasn't the man that Jack looked for to captain the Pen-Chimaera. Only a captain could rename a ship.

He shuddered and gripped the dark wood tightly. The Pearl. She was everything to Jack; could make his eyes gleam with tears and joy. A fine thing, having a ship for a purpose, and infinitely easier than an ideal.

The Pearl gave a soft mutter beneath him and lurched, heaving him against the sill. There were times that Jack's 'dark lady' had a temper.

He hoisted himself upright with a hiss, flinching when one of the double doors creaked open. "Can you not..."

It wasn't Jack. It was Matthew, staring at him with round eyes. He took a deep breath and forced a smile. "Good evening, Mattie."

The boy watched him cautiously. "Has Jack got your knickers in a twist again?"

"He probably would like to." James grinned and bit his lower lip. "But no, this is not about him at all." He struggled to keep his voice even, then crouched down and petted the deck next to him. He was in no mood for company, but could not well turn away the boy.

Matthew slouched to sit beside him, a practised imitation of Jack's sudden collapses. "Then why're you down here? What's wrong? There's lots to do and we've been 'round to Havana and back!"

His eyes were shining.

James smiled until the sides of his lips hurt from being forced into that position. He bit back a bitter laugh. "I am tired," he said, patting Matthew's shoulder. "Matters in Port Royal did not go as I had expected, and that makes me sad."

The boy's hand was warm in his. "That's bloody awful. But you're back with us and that's good, ain't it?" His eyes were curious and concerned, yet they had the distance from adult pain that only children possess; the same look he'd had so long ago when he had told Jack that they would throw James overboard if he couldn't work his keep.

James sighed. He didn't rightly know what to tell Matthew, but he had sworn to himself that he would not lie to the boy even if he could not understand the truth, even if he would rather not revisit it. "It's not that easy. I did not want to leave. But they did not want me back."

"Why not?" The question came like a shot. "That don't make sense, James. You're a good mate, done fine things, I guess." He blushed.

James swallowed hard and his smile faltered. "Life is different there. They think I left and betrayed
them. I never did, but they would not listen and called me a liar."

Matthew gnawed on his lip before looking up at James. "Heard tell you lied to us here, too. 'Bout who you are, but that's alright. You're a gentleman, aren't you?"

"I was. I do not think anyone in Port Royal would tell you that now." James bit down hard on his lip, struggling to keep the bitterness at bay.

The boy's eyes were very round and blue, sharp intelligence working behind their transparency. "You once told me that a man's worth ain't what others think of him, but what he thinks of himself. If that's true, then what do they matter? 'Specially now." He spoke slowly, as if piecing together a part of a puzzle that did not yet make sense to him.

James couldn't look at Matthew. He was staring at some point in the distance and struggling with a question that seemed so easy.

"Sometimes, others have an influence on your life that you cannot change. I thought of myself as the man I had been, but nobody else did. They did not even give me a chance. Loyalty, Matthew, is a sword that cuts both ways, and even the most loyal can be cut if it is turned against them." His voice, too, was sharp.

"Jack is loyal," Matthew said simply. "So am I. We wouldn't turn on you."

James remembered Gillette, a friend who had grown up with him shipboard, the most loyal officer he'd ever known, remembered the cold helplessness in his eyes when he'd seen James' situation and could not help. He also remembered the cold stab as he'd ordered that friend to save his own reputation and career, remembered all too well.

"It is not that easy, Matthew. Sometimes those dearest to you are those who hurt you the most, because they are the only ones who can."

He heard himself, harsh and bitter, and recoiled, jumping to his feet. "I am sorry. I am not suitable company at the moment." Without waiting for a reply he strode to the double doors, almost running until he hauled himself up to the foretop, sitting there, alone, trembling, panting heavily.

What a pitiful sight he was! To lose his composure in front of a boy, to leave him like that, wondering which of his innocent words had caused James' outburst. Matthew wouldn't find an answer and James didn't have one either.

He waited for his breathing to steady before he returned to the Great Cabin, a studied apology on his lips, but Matthew was gone, scared away. James didn't have the strength to go looking for him. Instead he grabbed the lone bottle on the table and rushed topside again.

He peered aloft, drawn to the quiet solitude, but the weight of the bottle in his hand told him he could not rightly go there. Instead he marched - tall, upright, every fibre of his body strung to breaking - to the bow, climbing out over the bowsprit and down into the netting beneath.

There, at last, he was alone, only the spray tickling his face. The Pearl's figurehead loomed close, noble and dark and somehow comforting. He sighed out a sob and curled into himself, letting the warm burn of the rum pour down his throat.

Jack had to pull back to keep from being run down as James passed without a glance. He raised one eyebrow and was about to clamber down the hatch when Matthew emerged, blinking, into the sunlight.
"He's like a great bloody bear lookin' fer a den, ain't he?"

Matthew nodded and Jack scowled. He handed over his hat and swordbelt. "Take care o' my effects. An' toss down another bottle when I whistle, aye?"

He peered over the bow and shooed the boy to the Great Cabin, leaning back to watch the Pearl's sails flutter like stormclouds against the sky. Abruptly, he stomped down to the galley, grabbed that bottle himself and swung himself over the rail. He landed beside James, the net pressing them together, close as their awkward hammock.

Jack didn't say a thing. He uncorked the bottle and clinked it against James'.

James had already downed too much, and still wanted to be alone. He snarled angrily, stopped and rolled over, turning his back to Jack and edging away as far as he could. He was close, too close, and any word or touch would only make it worse. So he just stared out over the sea, drinking deep from his bottle, and if some of the salty drops on his face were not sea water, at least nobody would see it.

Jack let him be, content to suck at the rum and watch the sky spinning in circles if he stared too long at one spot. He was silent until the sun left the Pearl's mooring in shadow and the humid air began to cool. He laid one hand on James' shoulder.

James flinched as if struck and jerked away, then turned. His eyes were dry again, unfocused from the contents no longer in his bottle, and gleaming with anger that was eager to find a target. "Is there not one place aboard this blasted ship where I can be alone?"

"Not when yer gonna run amuck and act like an ass." Jack grinned at the spark in his eyes. He braced himself as well as a mildly inebriated man could in the netting and wondered if Jamie would take the bait or if he would have to do the honours.

James stared at him and shoved him away, then thought better and plucked the bottle from Jack's grasp. He was more than a little drunk and could feel the last bits of his control slipping away. He did not want that, and especially, he did not want anyone to witness it. "Do not worry," he snarled, "I will not damage your precious ship. Just leave me be."

Jack sighed, pulled himself up and grabbed James' collar. "Go on and bloody do it. You know you wanna. Never mind. I'll do it for you."

Jack slugged him.

James' head fell back and he punched Jack, a reaction so deeply inbred that he did not even think of it. It was relieving somehow, and Jack fought back just enough to keep James going until he was perched atop the pirate, holding him down brutally, fist pulled back for another blow.

He dropped it and hauled himself off Jack with a stifled moan, curling into himself and shaking. "Please," he whimpered. "Just leave me be. You can see where this leads."

It had been all too easy, to see Winthrop's face instead of Jack's, to think of a letter that could, perhaps, have saved him, to add blow upon blow, and James did not want that. If he did not have the strength to control himself, he was dangerous and should be avoided.

Jack rolled to hang onto him and refused to let go. "Can't do that, luv. I'm not goin' anywhere and if we have t'beat each other senseless before you stop wallowin' and decide to be a damned man instead of whinin' that fate's dealt ya a nasty hand, so be it." He was breathless and spat a mouthful of blood into the water, sucking on his split lip.
James spun around again, his eyes too bright. Let Jack think what he would, at least he would know where and how far he pushed. "If only a pirate may be a man, perhaps I'd rather be none," he snarled. "They've betrayed me. I worked and bled for them and they betrayed me. Dropped me like a hot stone because they'd rather have a fine eulogy." His eyes were too bright.

"And damn me, but I will not betray them. I swore an oath, Jack." James' voice was more agitated than Jack had ever heard it. "I swore an oath and if they do not hold true to their part, it does not mean I will break mine."

"How the devil can that surprise you, James? You know wot they are, and yer branded, as sure as if the hot iron were against yer skin. Nothin' will ever change that, luv. I told you once that it don't happen....ah, the hell with it. The hell with it all. Listen t'me, Jamie. Yer gonna do wot ya want, regardless, but I am not standin' by and watchin' you fade away like a shadow. Dammit, man, that's exactly wot they want. For you to just slink away with yer tail between yer legs."

Jack swallowed hard, and, in that moment, staring into James' anguished eyes, he began to see a way out of it all. The pinprick of an idea grew to enormous size within a heartbeat. "James, yer a sailor. You can't go off to some desk. You've got t'be shipboard. It's wot you know. Tell me, all moanin' about the disloyal and ungrateful citizens of Port Royal aside, wot in hell are you gonna DO?"

James shrugged violently and threw off Jack's arms. "I don't know. I bloody well don't know, Jack." The rum was heavy on his breath and heavier still in his words. "But I will not go against the law." His voice was slurred, his tongue heavy, but his intent clearer than all the hiding of the past days. "Don't you understand? Not at all? They took so much from me. And they will not have my belief that there is right and wrong. They just won't have it."

Jack clung to him. "We'll figger somethin' out, but James, you cannot just keep flounderin' around like a jellyfish with the shites. Tell ya wot, luv. You just stay put here on the Pearl. Give it a few days. And maybe we can speed up a redress fer yer wrongs, as it were."

James didn't answer. His strength to fight or scream or run away to bloody well be alone was quite gone. His head was spinning and he was trembling, not hearing Jack's words, only the roaring in his ears again. Pressed close, his face against Jack's shoulder, it was warm and dark; and close enough to the solitude he craved.

Jack muttered all manner of nonsense in his ear, his voice soft and low, his arms closed against the outside world. He held James close until the convulsive shuddering ceased. "C'mon, Jamie. Let's at least get on deck. Me arse is gettin' damp here."

A soft snore was his only answer. Somewhere between rum and despair and comfort, James had fallen fast asleep.

Later that night, James, still more drunk than sober, but calm, told him about Port Royal. Jack didn't
need to speak a word; he just waited until eventually James spilled the whole tale in a haze of words, torn between the sting of memory and the mask of indifference he struggled to maintain. Sometimes there was a longer pause, but he continued to talk until there was nothing left to say and, relieved, he succumbed to sleep.

Two things stuck in Jack's head as he listened. The first was that glimmer of a plan that had exploded in the midst of their fistfight. It was aided and abetted by the second; that the good Commodore Archer had to fetch Admiral Winthrop from Nassau.

Nassau, where the Governor had issued Hamilton's Letter of Marque and had provided him with chart after chart of Navy patrols.

Jack watched James sleep and wondered if all gentlemen had rocks in their heads. James was understandably distressed to find himself a pariah in his home, but was he so upset that he didn't see the strategic kernel of truth right there in front of his nose?

Apparently.

Governor Hallem and Winthrop were working together with privateers. Even Matthew could have divined that. For riches? Obviously, but to break their own laws so transparently? For what purpose? Jack slipped out of James' embrace and went topside.

It was time to pay a little visit to Nassau.

In the morning, he found himself pinned under James again and slithered free to splash in the basin, singing to himself as he touched up his eyes and tugged hopefully at the scruff of his half-grown beard. After four months, it was still woefully ragged, not even long enough to properly part and braid. He would just have to put up with more of Ana's remarks until it grew out. He twirled what he could of his moustache and growled at his own reflection, remembering her hoots of laughter. Sometimes, being the best pirate in the Caribbean was such a trial.

James stirred at another snarl, pushing himself up. "Maybe if you drench it in rum, it will grow faster." His voice was hoarse and he cleared his throat, remembering the cause of his headache and the consequences with a wince, eyeing Jack warily. "I feel I must apologise for last night."

He slipped out of the bed, stumbled and cursed. It was as if Jack's bloody ship mocked him, or they were out at sea again. He glanced out of the casement and raised an eyebrow.

Jack looked up from the mirror. "Don't worry about it, luv. Sounds like you need yer coffee." He poured a fresh cup from the silver pot and handed it over. "Black, no sugar. Think I remembered rightly." James looked much more like any man suffering with a head than one liable to throw himself from the yards into open water. "And I tried rum. An' some evil mixture ole Clambers swears by. It's just not growin'."

James sat down and sipped his coffee, breathing a relieved sigh. Obviously Jack did not intend to discuss the matter. Whatever else Jack might think, James did not particularly like indulging in his humiliation. "Maybe if I pulled at it hard enough?" he muttered.

Jack stuck out his tongue and finished his first cup of sugar-syrup coffee, poured another and spiked it with his usual 'breakfast'. "Want anythin' t'eat yet?" He bounded to the casement and watched the gulls wheeling over the Pearl's wake. "Bloody birds. Think they're tailin' us."

"I believe it is mating season and they are attracted to your flapping arms." James did look better than the day before. Certainly, there were dark rings beneath his eyes and lines of worry that had not been
there a month ago, but at least a bit of that dreadful apathy was gone from his eyes.

"You look like the very devil." Jack couldn't resist stealing a morning kiss. "And you've been landlocked fer too long. Thought a nice little voyage might blow th' cobwebs outta yer hair." He tweaked one of the braids with a grin. Jack was more than touched that they were still twined in Norrington's shaggy mop, the coin and the ivory bead clacking together faintly. "Can't say I'm surprised they all thought you'd lost yer mind," he teased.

"I have been spending too much time with you, that much is true. Although I do believe I am less affected than young Matthew. I shudder to think what other dreadful habits he has picked up from you." They had barely touched, let alone kissed, in the past days and there was a strange hesitance in James' movement as he returned the kiss. "If I am the devil, would you be one of my fiends?"

Jack refrained from bouncing atop him for fear of a hot coffee bath. He pushed his hair out of his eyes and beamed. "There's much to be said for fiends. Always thought I'd rather be a nice li'l fiend than a borin' angel." He treated himself to another kiss and flitted around the cabin.

"Now, I got new duds fer ya, too. I can't believe the condition o' that linen, mate! Did ya stuff it in a dustheap?" He tossed a fresh shirt at James. "As fer young Matthew, I swear, he's grown two inches since ya left. Can't keep him in britches. An' he could use some o' your sword-practise."

Jack decided that any further talk of James' troubles would only serve to make his eyes sad and lost again.

"No, they look like anything or anyone who has been in Tortuga for more than a passing second."

James peeled off the shirt, still damp with the sweat and sea spray of the previous day, washed quickly and pulled on the new one. "I do hope you have not taught him any more of your 'smart' piratical featherdusting manoeuvres?"

Jack swatted his bare backside. "I'll featherdust you! C'mon, we're makin' good speed and I want you t'see my girl in action." James' grin was enough to make Jack happy for days and he refrained from any reminder that 'sussin' people out' often required a good drunk and a fistfight.

James touched one finger to Jack's lip, smiled crookedly, then rushed topside without another word. Jack veered to the quarterdeck but James remained amidships, watching from a distance as Matthew climbed down from the foretop.

He weighed the words for an apology and settled for a smile, patting his sword's hilt. "Good morning, lad. Shall we see how much damage Jack did to your fencing?"

It took about a second of wariness for Matthew's eyes to light up, and considerably less time for him to dash off to get his sword.

James was leaning casually against the rail when he returned, lunging into a first surprise attack which James easily parried, clucking in disapproval. "Now, young Master Matthew, what did I teach you about sparring and En Garde? Do you wish to spend another day repeating that lesson?"

Matthew's eyes widened comically, a strange, if this time unconscious, imitation of Jack, and he scrambled to pull himself into the proper position. "Now that is better."

Soon they were chasing each other across the deck, exchanging blow for blow. The sun did the rest and quickly James' new shirt was drenched in sweat, clinging to his skin. Matthew was an excellent student but focused too much on his high guard.

He was scowling by the time James' blade touched his knee for the tenth time. By the twentieth, he
had learnt to parry every second attack there, and, with time, he got better still.

James watched his student with a smile, exercising until Matthew's head drooped as much as his sword and they withdrew into the shade, breathless and sweat-drenched.

Jack stood at the wheel, one hand wrapped possessively around a spoke and grinning like a madman. James' face was alive for the first time since Tortuga and Jack promised himself that he'd risk bringing fresh milk aboard so Matthew could have a big mug of that fine cocoa they'd lifted from a little Dutch prize they had stumbled upon on their way back from Havana, just for putting that smile on Jamie's face.

He leaned forward over the wheel. "Pearl, my heart, we've got him back and he won't be such a silly ass fer long. So, my love, speed us on and let's take a look-see at wot them buggers in Nassau have been up to."

**Chapter Twenty-Six**
Chapter Summary

Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

Current mood: artistic

Current music: birdsongs

Entry tags: fiction

FIC: Pirate Vindaloo Chapter Twenty-Six FINAL
TITLE: Pirate Vindaloo A Sparrington Novel
AUTHORS: elessil and hippediva
DISCLAIMERS: The Rodent Empire owns them. We pilfer.
PAIRING: Jack/James
RATING: from gen to XXX. This chapter--R.
WARNINGS: potential spoilerish appearances for those who are adamant

SUMMARY: Commodore Norrington and Captain Sparrow find themselves in a nasty jam and must rely on one another to escape.

A trip to Nassau is a change in the wind for James as the adventure comes to a close.

Our sincerest and hearty thanks to smthw for her excellent beta.

There are so many people we want to thank for making this possible: each other, smthw, smutcutter, the readers and, of course, the two protagonists, without whom there would have been
no story at all.

There is one final illustration with this chapter.

Chapter Twenty-Five

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX: Odyssey's End

Jack eased the Pearl into a shadowy cove just north of the main harbour. There were a few fishing boats and Mad Mickey's fast little sloop, the Marauder, bobbing in the purple-blue waters, but no sign of a Navy ensign. He had the guns run out, just in case, and went to toss on his effects, which now included a silk shirt of shockingly bright turquoise. It made him feel like a peacock and he carried himself accordingly.

James was seated in the cabin, reading a book and pretending indifference. When Jack dressed, he looked up from the pages and arched an eyebrow. "Terribly important pirate business, I take it. What will you do? Turn someone blind with the colour of your shirt, or is that thing a distraction manoeuvre?"

Jack grinned at his own reflection and settled his hat at a rakish angle. "Am I not blindingly gorgeous? Just a bit o' wrangling, then we get underway. You don't mind stayin' aboard, do you? This needs to be a one-on-one powwow, as it were."

James did mind. On principle, he minded being aboard a ship without being privy to all plans and he worried, as any sane man would, about that gleam of madness that signaled such a plan in Jack's eyes. "I would rather say gorgeously blinding, but perhaps that is the same."

Jack twirled in a pirouette, his sash flapping ragged ends around his boottops. "Must look me best. I promise I'll not be long." He swallowed a smirk and went to the desk, carefully rolling up several large and official-looking papers and stuffing them into his belt.

"Ta!" He blew a kiss and swaggered out the door.

Gibbs and a few of Jack's larger and more terrifying-looking crewmen manned the longboat and they stopped into the small shack that served as a clearing house long enough to say hello to Mad Mick
and catch up on local gossip. Then they headed up the steep hill to the Governor's mansion. Jack took a moment before breaking in to settle himself, his effects and his breath.

Hallem was in his study and was quite understandably startled to see Jack Sparrow throw open the doors and lock them behind him. "Evenin' Guv'nor. Lovely weather, ain't it?"

Hallem sputtered, rising to his feet when the flat of Jack's cutlass rested on one shoulder. "Stay where y'are, mate. We've a few things to discuss in private. And I rather think you'll prefer they remain private, so don't go yellin' fer yer little servants." Jack's smile sparkled like treasure as he tossed the papers on the desk. "You, my dear sir, have a bit of explainin' t'do."

Hallem's hands shook as he leafed through the documents: Hamilton's Letter of Marque, the patrol charts and a most indiscreet missive to the absent privateer about the division of spoils. Sparrow, of course, needed no introduction. "How in hell did you get hold of these?"

Jack lounged on the desk. "I made the acquaintance of yer Captain Hamilton. Last I saw 'im, he was sleepin' off a bit o' brandy with one of his East India fellers in Bombay. Too bad he lost his pretty ship and will be havin' a right spot of trouble."

Hallem blanched.

"Now, Guv'nor, do you mind tellin' me why ya need so much of the Crown's plunder fer 'unknown reasons'? Or need I remind you that I've a few friends in high places in Jamaica?"

Governor Hallem was not a politician for nothing and knew a corner when backed into one. "What possible interest could the Swann girl find in these?"

Jack's blade danced about the curls of his wig. "I believe her father would be more than interested. Especially since Hamilton took to impressment along the docks o' Port Royal. Bad business, impressin' a commodore of the fleet, don't ya think?" The cutlass was old and battered, but its blade was razor sharp, as Jack demonstrated, slicing through the brocade collar with barely a flick of his wrist. "I'm waitin' fer an explanation, luv."

There was a lot of hemming and hawing, many stories in which Jack got carried away, and the better part of a bottle of extremely rare old brandy before Jack got his explanation and a practical demonstration. Within three hands, he knew it was all gambling. Fortunately, Jack cheated and he did it well. Once he'd eased Hallem into a card game, he knew he'd won.

He tossed out an ace with innocent eyes. "So y'mean to tell me this Winthrop feller has been bleedin' you dry and ya haven't called in his debts? Oh, that's right. Navy Admiral an' all. Well, Guv'nor that's a damned shame. And a pity about Hamilton too. You do know he was cheatin' you somethin' fierce. However, I can promise you a fair exchange, I ain't no privateer, but there's one just waitin' who could serve yer purposes very well an' get Winthrop off yer stern, too."

Jack was never more brilliant than when he was enticing a fly into one of his webs.

Hallem was no fool. It wasn't easy to follow the twists and turns of Sparrow's talk, but the threat was clear enough. He had no wish to return in disgrace to England after losing Nassau as had his predecessor. And to the same pirate! Sparrow, however, was much more interested in doing business than plundering the port and he desperately wanted to get rid of Winthrop and his damned debts. When the gaudy rapscallion offered to buy them outright, he jumped at the chance. There was, after all, no sense being stuck in colonial backwater with an aristocratic leech without any profit. All in all, it was better to be blackmailed by a professional.
Sparrow would use those charts to his own advantage and be happy to have Nassau as a friendly drop point. The Governor would get a percentage of any plunder smuggled through the port and, if the cost included another few Letters, the Crown could worry about revoking them. Indeed, he could claim coercion, should it come to any court.

Besides, the man was a pleasant enough player.

They settled their wagers over more of the brandy and Hallem wrote the Letters of Marque most willingly. He did hesitate over the second name. "Norrington? A privateer?"

Jack's lip lifted in one of his more dangerous grins. "Won't dear ole Winthrop shite bricks in his fine chamberpot?"

The Governor could not agree more.

Jack reached into his coat and plopped a heavy pouch on the desk. "Ya said he owes you some nine hundred guineas, aye? Well, there's three hundred here and I think you'll make up the rest in profit, aye? Now write me over the debts and we're square. I'll not fergit this and I will be back with a haul in a fortnight's time. When yer fine Admiral returns from Jamaica, keep mum and ye'll get the rest and more. Savvy?"

They shook on it and Jack thanked all the gods for a hard head and a quick wit. He had the Navy patrol charts, a safe port, the Letters and Winthrop's soul in his hands. Not bad for a day's bargaining and Hallem was a welcome change from the stuffy aristocrat who had forced his hand last venture in Nassau. It was a pleasure to do business with someone who understood that gold buys damned near anything.

By the time he boarded the Pearl, it was past midnight and he was in high spirits.

James sat where he had left him, hunched over a book by lanternlight. He could hear Jack from afar; there was no mistaking the uneven, cadenced footsteps of his sway. He looked up, brows drawn. "Your grin makes me fear for this port."

"Cross me heart, Nassau is more than safe, luv. 'Twill be more welcomin' next time we're here." He shed his coat and hat, letting the swordbelt drop to the floor. "Y'know, I never thought much of politics, but it's a rum game. Lot o'money to be made."

"You do realise that you say little to appease my worry?" James rose and stretched, watching Jack curiously, the question on the tip of his tongue.

"We're headin' fer the Penelope. Wouldn't you like t'see her? I gotta check how the work is comin' along, y'know." Jack danced around his intent delicately.

"You are the Captain. Captain." James' words were indifferent, but there was a gleam in his eyes that defied it. "Where did you careen her?"

"Petit Goave. Best place in th' world fer it. There's a whole bloody shipyard and no questions asked. Now that bit o'business is done, we can get her back in the water properly." Jack slouched in his chair, peeling an orange. The sharp citrus sweetened the close air.

"Jamie, besides goin' back to the Navy, wot if you was able t'perform yer duties, as you call 'em, without wigs and brocade? Keep the Crown's interests safe an' all that?"

James blinked at him, brow drawn tight in an instinctive defensive reaction, relaxing as he mulled over the words. "Do you mean as a privateer? For that I would need a ship, a crew and a Letter of
Marque. As I have none of the three, I fear even a consideration of the possibility is moot."

Jack pulled the rolls of paper from his sash and laid one in front of James, his grin splitting his face from ear to ear. "Is it?"

James smoothed the parchment, read it and blinked. "Aint no forgery, luv. I watched Guv'nor Hallem write it himself. Not a bad bloke and our business conducted to everyone's mutual benefit." Jack tossed the rest of the papers on the desk. "Quite reasonable." He didn't mention that he'd just spent a fortune for information he might have acquired for shillings, had James' need not been so pressing and time so very short.

James was enthralled by the letter in his hand, the possibilities it bore. It was almost as if the paper billowed into a sail and the wood of the desk were that of the Penelope's wheel. As if he could hear it again, the song of the sea that had lured him away from land so long ago.

He tore himself away and looked at Jack, eyes wide and faraway for a moment, then lit with a gleam thought lost as he rose and clasped Jack's hand in his. "Thank you."

It seemed far too little, two little words for a future, but there was nothing he could have said that would suffice, and better to mean those two words than to stumble and stutter through what Jack had to know already or would never understand.

Jack's eyes were dark pools, unreadable as that future and gleaming with all its possibilities. As uncannily ridiculous as his first and only declaration in the Chimaera's brig, he simply settled himself astride James' lap and kissed him.

"And just so you don't go tryin' t'take me, I got one fer meself. Don't know as it's strictly necessary, but it never hurts, aye?" he laughed as he came up for air.

"If I am no longer allowed to take you, better stop kissing me" James whispered with a laugh that shook just a little.

He, a privateer? He had never held the practice in much esteem, but he remembered one thing he had learned: it depended on the man, not the Union Jack. And now, now he would have the chance to prove it, to stand firmly on his side of the law even without a Navy title to stand behind it.

Jack held on for another kiss, watching James' eyes light with horizons undreamed and felt the same rush of pure pleasure that was his only on the Pearl. "Oh, Jamie, wait 'til you see her! She's comin' on so lovely an' we been workin' doubletime to get her fit. This, me love, calls fer a drink!" He bolted to his feet and poured two glasses. "Fair winds and free!"

James lifted his glass. "The Pearl and the Penelope." It was strange how the same rum could sting at one moment and be so sweet in another, how the warmth didn't always burn a hole that needed to be filled with yet more of it. While they were sipping in contented silence, James snuck a glance at Jack's charts to estimate how long they would take to Petit Goave if the weather held.

Jack cracked one eye open and glared at the obscene ebony cherub gesturing at him from one of the enormous bedposts. The Pearl's Spanish origins showed in her elaborate and profuse decoration: fantastic gargoyles and fat, lascivious children poked out of odd corners or startled unwaried crewmen
at the top of stairs. Jack had often considered putting a bullet in this particularly lewd little boy's buttocks. He refrained only because the smirking bastard was part of his beloved Pearl and he could never hurt her in any way.

The sheets were wound around him like swaddling clothes, along with James' left foot, digging uncomfortably into his groin. He spat out his hair and reached out for James, only to find a mass of pillows, then struggled up to one elbow.

James was curled upside down on the bed, his head buried under half the covers, his arse completely bare and conveniently at arm's length. Jack smacked one cheek.

James shot up, crashing with his head against the same putto which had caught Jack's eye. With a groan, he straightened, rubbing the back of his head. "Do the Articles really make you share your headache in equal parts?"

Jack crawled down to James, taking pillows and blankets with him. "Damned brandy! Spent most of the afternoon swillin' it with Hallem." His chin rested on James' shoulder. "Don't wanna wake up yet."

James kissed him lazily, that small, shy, wondering smile still firmly in place, twitching as he fought to contain a chuckle. Between his own doing and the brandy, Jack's lips were dry and swollen; red and irresistible. "Then stay asleep if you cannot hold your liquor," he teased. "I will find us breakfast."

Jack threw a pillow at him as he paddled around the cabin. "Can too hold me liquor! I just can't mix 'em up too well. Grape n' grain, y'know." He propped himself against the bedpost and grinned at the headboard with its altogether gruesomely realistic Crucifixion. "From down here, he looks damned uncomfortable, doncha think?"

James, face frothed in shaving soap, swatted Jack. "Perhaps watching over your bed is not the most comfortable of tasks." He scraped away the growth of several days, grinning as he remembered Jack's squirming. "Speaking of comfort, I do believe I would have slept better had not a certain starfish fallen asleep draped over the back of my legs."

Jack looked up with a sleepy satyr's smile. "That were I was? No wonder I dreamed o' being keelhauled. All that rough hair!"

"And I thought it was because you were gasping for air like a stranded fish." James threw the pillow back on the bed.

He successfully avoided decapitation by the frightening Creole cook and returned with a tray laden with pastries, fruit, and coffee. Jack's cup was liberally doused with brandy he had found in a dusty old bottle.

Incable of remaining in one position for longer than three thoughts, Jack bounced to his feet sniffing. "Oh merciful heaven!" He tossed a chunk of sugar in his cup and lit on the edge of the table. "You evil bastard!" he choked, guzzling the coffee with the air of a complete martyr. "Ugh! Nothin' t'eat yet or it'll come back up." Typically, his body ignored anything that emerged from his lips and he reached for a banana.

James rolled his eyes and moved to a safe distance "I do believe it was you who repeatedly insisted that a hair of the dog was the best cure. Afraid to heed your own advice, Captain?" He grinned, but the rest of his face was calm, that forced stillness he took upon himself to hide whatever was going through him. But it was visible in the way his eyes flickered, how they danced to the half-rolled
chart on the desk, again and again, calculating 'how long'. He was rather like Matthew, asking every other minute if the hour's wait was over yet.

Jack grinned, refilling his cup. "Suppose that's true enough. Mid-afternoon, mebbe twilight if the wind don't pick up." He watched James for a moment and his smile was dazzling. "Ain't it wonderful?" Just as a precaution he rapped on the tabletop.

James attempted sobriety for a moment longer, then his lips split into a wide smile. "Yes, it is." Hope was yet more fickle than fortune; lack of her could douse the brightest flame, but even the smallest spark sufficed to light it to a blaze once more. "It is," he repeated, his eyes wandering to the shelf in which he had carefully stowed the Letter. When he caught himself at it, he rose and stretched. "Why Captain, I do believe we have work to do."

"Ah, yer a hard taskmaster in bed an' out!" Jack stood in front of the washstand and tugged at his beard. "So, you gonna tell yer crew? Don't think you'll lose any of 'em, but it could happen. We can recruit back in Tortuga if need be. Or see if some o' the workmen are lookin' fer a berth."

"The worse the students, the harder the teacher," James tossed Jack's clothes at him. "Of course I will. I do believe more than a few already know, but I will play with open cards. I won't start out with a lie."

"Meet you topside? Lemme take that back to th' galley. The barnacle is prob'ly pacin' my deck like a tiger fer another fencin' lesson."

"That boy will be my death if you won't," James announced, buckling his swordbelt. He bent close, very close. "Could the comment on my rough hair perhaps have been a hint of jealousy, Captain?"

"James, yer a degenerate!" Jack laughed after him, hopping to get into one boot. He avoided Pickles' threats in the galley and bounded to the quarterdeck, caressing the wheel and chattering like a magpie with Gibbs and Van. The breeze was fine and the Pearl eased her way through water as clear as glass and she a princess on its surface. Ana glared at him, still distressed by the noisy 'reunion' that had disturbed her sleep. "Ye're mad as March, Sparrow!" He grinned and winked.

Matthew sighted James immediately and pounced, sword half drawn before he saw James' raised eyebrow. He stopped in his tracks, pulled himself together and straightened into a proper position, earning a smile and a nod as James drew his sword and soon they were sparring again. Matthew squealed as James jumped over a coil of rope to chase him.

James could see Jack watching from the corner of his eye and grinned, but Jack wasn't the only one who watched with interest. The Pearl's crew knew well enough who the newcomer was, and into fearful distance and spite, curiosity soon mingled. The grand pirate hunter did not look as if he would suddenly devour the child. On the contrary, he let himself be tackled to the ground by the boy to be tickled mercilessly.

They rolled around until Matthew grabbed his sword again, taunting James into another tussle.

Deep below them, there was a distinct huffing groan. "Don't you start with me, luv!" Jack stuck out one arm, apparently unharmed except in dignity.
James grinned down at him, eyebrows twitching, and offered his arm. "You do nothing to dispel my conviction that you enjoy looking up at me."

"Bugger off!" Jack bounded to his feet. "She's bloody laughin' at me!" he grumbled, then raced over to the starboard rail to watch a pair of sharks battle over a kill. "Damn. Hoped there'd be dolphins, but sharks are better." Good omen fer a privateer, don't ya think, Gibbsy?"


"The poor men there suffer enough already. They need no addition to their misery." James peered over the bulwark and shrugged. "I would rather say these sharks are an omen for a sweaty swordsman in your cabin, because he cannot take a swim, but then, I was never good with superstitions."

"No swimmin' hereabouts unless ya wanna be sharkbait." Jack's eyes were hooded and his smile grew sly. "However, I can think of a few more----good Lord! We're passin' the marker!" He raced back to the wheel and began to coax the Pearl, veering sharply west. The inlet was on the horizon and within another hour, the deck was bustling as they heaved to and dropped anchor.

There, on the beach, busier by far than the Pearl's deck, lay the Penelope, her great keel gleaming in the amber sun. The copper was blindingly bright, a beacon to welcome James home.

James stood at the bow, staring and marveling as she lay there, careened and helpless like a beached whale. He stood very still, keeping up the mask of patience as the boats were readied to row ashore, fighting the urge to run as soon as they reached shore. The rest of the Chimaeras were there and rushed to greet him.

James bore it all with a smile threatening to split his face. Whenever he approached the Penelope, lying there like a wounded animal, someone would start talking to him and he was too polite to ignore them. After he had listened to Cookie's newest, doubtful recipe, he finally managed to steal away, stepping into the shallow water behind her keel. There, in the small space where the tide foamed around his bare ankles, he was alone. The coppered keel was warm in the sun, smooth beneath his touch.

He could see the bright colours where her new name had been painted on, stark white set off with dark green. "Now, my lady, do you like your new name?" he whispered, palms still pressed against her keel.

She shuddered a little, a playful squeak sounding from somewhere inside her empty belly.

Jack did not have to be close to know that whatever James asked, she was answering him. He lingered with the crewmen and hired workers, watching James, then turning away to listen to the report on her progress. This was Jamie's moment with his lady and one that Jack would not disturb. He glanced towards the Pearl with that same enigmatic smile on his lips that James might have recalled from the long months across to Africa. Intimacies of many sorts were, by nature, private.

James laughed at himself and his ship, yes his ship, and stroked her keel wonderringly. "I know, I know. But I can't take your helm now. I would fall off if I did. But soon I will take you out. Just a little bit of patience, or have you been in Jack's company for too long?" Certainly, he answered only his own questions and not a ship's, but what harm was there if no one was close enough to overhear?

He stayed until the sun sank and the copper cooled. "Just wait for me. I will be here soon." Still chiding himself for his affectations, he peered around the corner. Everyone was assembled around a
large fire, laughing. Excellent. He withdrew behind the Penelope's keel and slipped into the water, swimming the few paces to the Pearl. As he remembered, Van was on watch.

A brief search yielded up the golden hoop Jack had shown him that night on the Chimaera, and Van seemed near as eager as Jack to pierce his ear. The hoop was dangling from it only a few minutes later, Van content with a bottle of wine for his silence.

He swam ashore and snuck into the shelter where the Chimaera's former contents were stowed, rummaging through them for a good hour. He had studied the detailed chart in Jack's cabin and quickly found what he was looking for, a wider arm of the small stream trickling to the shore, so wide that it was near as still as a pond. It was hidden behind an outcropping of rock, a bit up the cliff and overlooking part of the harbour. He dropped and arranged his burden there, then returned to the shore.

The circle around the firepit was mirrored several times over down the beach. With near two hundred men employed on the refit, plus the crew of the Pearl, the beach was more crowded than twenty Brides at midnight and just as rowdy. Laughter, breaking bottles and cheers echoed without fear of stop or censure. This was life lived on the run and in the gallows' loop. The arrival of the new captain was as good a reason as any to break the cycle of hard work for a party.

Gibbs was just warming to his tale when James settled with a trencher full of roast goat and rice, simmering in cauldrons over the cooler parts of the fire. "An' I says to the Cap'n 'Jack, Jack you know it's dreadful bad luck t'change any ship's name. Yer courtin' disaster.' "

Many muttered "Aye!" and there was a round of head-shaking while Joshamee wet his throat. "So's I'm dreadin' the worst and we get t'work and wot d'ya think we find? After we scrape away all the old paint, there it be, hidden fer God knows how long. Her name, carved inta the very wood. Penelope. I don't know how Jack knew it, but it was plain as th' nose on me face."

Jack turned to wink at James and raised his bottle. "The Penelope."

James choked, coughing violently until the slaps on his back near sent him sprawling. He pushed himself up and stared at the looming shape, dark against the setting sun. "The Penelope," he whispered, then raised his voice, august and proud. "The Penelope."

Jack leaned close and whispered, "Told you." He turned to the company with a grin. "Ah, but 'twasn't me who knew it. 'Twas her captain here. I was just th' messenger."

There were shouts of laughter, a few wide eyes at a pair of men who clearly were touched by the Sea Witch and another round of stories and drinks, as the moon rose high and the skies lit with stars.

Jack nestled against James comfortably. "Where you been, you rogue? Y'missed a good yarn or two."

James grinned like a boy that had been up to a particularly good round of mischief and finally dug into his trencher. "Busy." His hair was dripping wet and hung free, draped over his ears. "And I do believe I have heard the best tale."

He listened and laughed at another story, then another, but there was a part of him that remained in reserve until dusk bled into midnight. He nudged Jack with his elbow, rose and held out one hand.

Jack took it and a full bottle and let himself be led. Outside of the firelight, his eyes gleamed in the darkness like a cat's. "Wot knavery are you up to?"

He blinked, suddenly struck by the memory of a shore leave long ago and another hand leading him
off into the darkness when he was still unsure of the meaning. That had been so many years ago but the thrill was every bit as fresh. "Lead on, McDuff," he laughed.

James grinned as he led Jack up the gently rising slope, following the stream's path to the small oasis, all without a word. He had spread tarpaulins on the ground, softened by silk and cushions that could not but remind of their time in Bombay. A small fire was smouldering a little further off, its flicker dancing on bottleglass.

Jack looked at James, delighted and dumbfounded. "Jamie, you bloody fox. Or should I say shark? How in hell did ya manage all this on yer onesies? You didn't swim it ashore?"

A more inviting bower could not have been invented in all the Caribbean. The night air was soft with just enough bite to make the fine blankets look delightful and the fire danced in James' eyes. "Yer a prince." Jack slid both arms around him.

"A captain," he corrected. "Captain James Norrington." His voice was a fairly good imitation of Jack's, but his smile was different, shier and all the more obvious for it. "Thanks to you," he added in a whisper. He pulled Jack close for a kiss, hands tangled in the dark hair to push it back.

Sparrows fly high and find their way home. That was the tale all sailors knew. Jack Sparrow had always flown high, or at least made people believe he did, but he'd only flown homewards once in his life. That ten-year flight had taken all his courage and determination and he could feel the Pearl, rocking in the bay. This felt like another flight home.

"Captain Norrington, indeed," he murmured. "A most wonderful captain. Certainly is a strange place t'land after a knock on the head, Captain Norrington."

James tugged at Jack's waistcoat, teasing it off. His hands stroked down the full length of Jack's torso to free the shirttails, then up again, calloused fingers against warm skin, to slide it off. "I did hope," he whispered between kisses, "that I might retain some of the privileges I had as First Mate."

"Most definitely, and more." Jack eagerly helped to get every stitch of clothing out of the way as fast as possible. His hand wandered along James' neck into his hair, then stopped. He pulled back to squint, one finger tracing the hoop. "C'mere!" He tugged them both close to the fire and watched it catch and light the metal circlet. "You, my dear James, are amazin'ly sneaky. When? Who?"

"I need to build a reputation, no?" James' hand slid up to trace the mirroring hoop in Jack's ear, then bent close for another kiss, eyebrows waggling teasingly. "Is this an interrogation? I do not think my letter allows passing information to pirates without incentive."

Jack provided plenty of incentive. He grinned and groped, his lips quite busy except when they curved into another grin. He pulled them down into the nest of pillows and James' skin tasted of salt and warmth that defied any one sense. Jack decided that if one wouldn't do, all five would have to be employed.

There was the firelight that bounced off their skin; sweat with its smell of salt and musk that trickled down to caress in a wet tickle; the taste of that smell and of warm rum in a shared kiss; soft panting that rose into moans and then stifled cries, all under the playful twinkle of the moon.

The warmth lingered as James tucked his arm around Jack and whispered into his ear. "Van. About four hours ago."

Jack's teeth glimmered in the light. "You've more tricks up yer sleeve than me Da!" He fingered the small hoop again. "They tell me she's ready t'set upright tomarra. It'll still be a few days before she
can sail but we're workin' at top speed." He looked up at the stars and they were brighter than he'd seen them in a twelvemonth. "Good t'be back. Here." He paused. "Home."

Tomorrow would be a busy day and there was no way that James would shirk what work he could do on his Penelope. After all, he had promised her. That she was a ship did not seem to matter, his word, after all, was his bond. "Home," he whispered, and it had the same conviction as when he'd said it of Port Royal all those months ago.

Jack turned in his arms and kissed the hollow of his throat. His lashes bunched against James' shoulder as he fought to keep them open. The stars tilted as the moon set and they slept, huddled together in a blanket that had seen them halfway around the world and back. Jack's hair drifted into his mouth and his legs edged over James'; James snored faintly until he rolled over; the blanket twisted around them and the stars laughed along with the wicked little wind that rustled in the trees and set the waves dancing.

The fire had burned itself out and Jack had been carefully covered. He sat up, took a swallow from the bottle dug into the sand and looked around the small campsite. No Jamie. Birds above were squawking and tittering like so many old women and he estimated it must be rather late in the morning. He grabbed his clothes and the bottle, trudged to the edge of the stream and stuck in one foot.

His eyes opened very wide and he backed away from it. The water was icy cold to his warm-weather sensibilities. Fresh or not, he refused to subject himself to that kind of torture, made an exaggerated about-face and headed for the beach. The salt shallows were much more welcoming and he splashed enough to consider himself nominally clean, dressed and set off for the worksite. Surely, James must be there, with his Penelope.

Jack found him standing in the shallow water, breeches rolled up, digging his bare feet into the sand as they all heaved to pull the ship upright. Jack could hear him bark orders, and then, once, just before she sat upright with a loud sigh and a crack, he could see James' lips move, the words that emerged too soft to overhear.

Strange, how such a small movement could transform her so utterly from a wounded animal into a proud lady. They pushed and pulled her on logs, leaving the tide to do the rest and pull the Penelope into her grasp. There, she swam proudly in the small cove, her rocking barely perceptible in the shallow waters, as though she meant to bid the Pearl a good morning.

James had undressed and was treading water beside her bow, and all that Jack could see from the shore was his huge grin. He let himself be marginally distracted as James emerged and dressed, eyes bright.

James was about to join the crew to retie the rigging when his gaze fell on Jack and he smiled. "Do you mean to make yourself useful, slugabed?"

Jack shaded his eyes and finished signing some papers for Bertie, hiding them from James' sight, so he wouldn't see the obscene cost of the work. "I can always become a new figurehead fer ya!" he grinned before shedding his coat and boots to help raise the new mainmast.

The days were a frenzy of work and they dropped like the dead at night, very much like the mad days rounding the Cape of Good Hope. Each day, the Penelope blossomed like a rare plant as her sails were hoisted, her rigging bound and her rails replaced.

With every small part of her, the eager grin on James' face widened. Jack began to wonder if his habits were truly that contagious when, the last night before the Penelope would be seaworthy,
James sat bolt upright to simply stare at her, as if afraid that the moon herself would stoop to commandeer such a pretty vessel.

Or maybe he was just head over admittedly dirtied heels in love.

Jack thought she shone like a moon herself, proud and dressed in her finest for a bridegroom who gaped at her in open adoration. He teased, he laughed and he thoroughly enjoyed the way James fell in love with her. All those months, she had been there, subdued and muffled the way the Pearl had been under the curse. Now she sang, and there wasn't a man of her crew who didn't thrill to see her. Even the weather caressed her with fine breezes that made the sun bearable and the nights soft as any in Paradise.

Beside her, the Pearl loomed like a dark orchid, flashes of her lines catching moonlight in nets of silver. Jack thought it a sight that a great painter should record, but none could do it justice, at least in his and James' eyes. There lay love and freedom, adventure, treasure, life itself heaving gently on water gone deep green in the moon's glow.

Despite his vigil, James was down with his Penelope by the break of dawn, restocking what supplies had been brought ashore. Then, finally, there was nothing left to do but to hoist anchor and unfurl the sails.

It was utterly unlike any Navy ceremony to welcome a Captain; no one stood still, no bo'sun's whistle; instead there was laughter and murmurs as they all parted to open James' path to the quarterdeck.

It was not yet time to go there. He glanced at the helm, smiling, then turned towards the crew, lifted his arm and waited for the cheers to subside.

Jack stepped from behind the wheel on the quarterdeck and leaned over the rail, resplendent and a bit red in the face, owing to the bright silk shirt being so warm under his coat. He grinned and nodded eagerly.

James remembered the first time he'd been made a Captain, nearly a decade ago, remembered the speech he'd made then, eyes bright with a fervour his crew had not shared. It had not mattered; as members of the Navy they had been obliged to follow his command. He had proved himself in action. Now, each of these men was free to choose whether to serve under James Norrington, former scourge of their ilk, or not.

There was a soft groan from the deck beneath him and he hid a grin. "Most of you know me as James Norbury, crewman and First Mate of the Chimaera. But 'ere you call me your Captain, you deserve to know the truth." He took a deep breath and raised his voice further.

"My name is James Norrington. Most of you will have known me as Commodore Norrington."

There were a few surprised gasps, but most remained silent. More than one of them had heard the truth from the crew of the Pearl.

"Yes, I lied. I lied to survive. Think for one moment how long a Commodore of the fleet would have survived aboard the Chimaera and you will know why. James Norbury was a cover that allowed me to survive, an invented name for the same man. You will likely look at me now and think me a stranger. I am not. I am the man you knew, the man you trusted.

I now ask you once more for this trust. I ask you to stay a part of this crew. I cannot promise that it will always be easy. I cannot even promise that all of you will survive. But what I can promise is to
do my best. I have fought in these waters for nearly a decade now, and the only enemy I don't know and have not defeated is the British Navy." He smiled briefly. "Since I have a Letter of Marque, we will not have to worry about them."

He blinked and stared down at the Penelope's deck for a split second. When he looked up, he seemed more confident, taller somehow. "Are you with me?"

Jack hadn't heard such a rousing speech or such cheers and huzzahs since Jerome Zalandier had spoken for an hour at his own hanging. He whooped and stomped the deck and indulged in a little jig with Bertie. "Captain Norrington!" he bellowed, bottle upraised, and it was shouted back to echo in the cove.

James grinned, stowing his relief deep inside, for it would show his prior doubts all too clearly. He raised his hand again, marvelling at the immediate silence. "I thank you for your trust and I will not let you down. However, there is one man I have to thank yet more. You all know him. That he can be annoying, insane and aggravating is beside the point, for he also is the kindest and most generous man I know, and I stand more in his debt than I will ever be able to repay. Thank you, Jack."

Jack winced dramatically. "Yer ruinin' me reputation!" Amid the laughter, his eyes never left James', jet black and, for once, honest. He mouthed a 'thank you' and beckoned James to the quarterdeck.

James sketched a bow. "Always glad to be of service." He strode up the stairs.

Jack's hands were held up, as they had been on the docks when they first met. "The Penelope waits, Jamie." He backed away from the wheel.

James took the wheel and the Penelope shimmied. He smiled and patted her wheel, pretending not to notice Jack's grin as his voice rose once again. "Enough dawdling! It is time to take her out!"

He loosened his hold on the wheel and pulled Jack close for a searing kiss, whispering another 'thank you' into his ear.

Jack held on, then winked at him. "So, Cap'n, wot are yer bearin's? I got a load t'drop near the Floridas."

"Such a coincidence. Just where I intended to go. I hear the Spanish are most active there." James' eyes twinkled. "And now get off my ship, pirate." His voice dropped lower. "At least until we are anchored for the night."

Jack swept off his hat in a bow. "Until then, ya scurvy excuse fer a captain. Race ya to the marker." He grinned and danced down the steps and into the larboard shrouds, grabbed a line and swung over to the Pearl.

For once, he remembered to let go at the opportune moment and was on his own quarterdeck, bellowing orders at the top of his lungs. Above him, the black sails grabbed at the breeze, the Pearl herself straining for action. He waved, raised his bottle and took a long swallow.

"Freedom, Jamie!" he yelled.

James waved his tricorn. He barked orders until the Penelope gently swam out of the cove, resplendent in white as her sails unfurled to full glory. "Set stunsails! I don't want one idle hand until we have shown those seaslugs what real speed is!"

His voice was lower, gentler, as he petted the wheel. "And we will show everyone in the Caribbean
what a fine lady you are. Don't you worry. We both have a reputation to regain."

The Penelope shimmied as her sails bellied in the wind.

FIN

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