The Quality of Mercy

by Rachel74

Summary

Originally Written : 24/10/04. This was written before the sequels, and therefore totally (and now having seen them. I do not regret that!) ignores them. Although the Norrington of DMC on The Pearl is pretty damn hot.

Found this on my hard drive. I have posted it elsewhere.

This story assumes that the two deleted scenes (shown on the DVD) between James and Elizabeth happened. The utterly charming smile of James warms my heart. I wish they’d put them in because I think it would have made the ending far more emotionally powerful. So in my world they happened. Thanks to Fairest Cat, Fabu and warinbabylon for the wonderful betas. And thanks as always to Pam. This is my first (and only) attempt at a full length PotC fic. All idiocies and mistakes are my own.

Summary: Captain Jack Sparrow is gifted a damaged James Norrington, by an evil pirate, that was a very bad idea on the part of said evil Captain, and so begins a journey.
An Unwanted Gift

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: It is twice bless'd
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

William Shakespeare
"The Merchant of Venice", Act IV, Scene I
Page 211: William Shakespeare: The Complete Works (OUP)

Captain Jack Sparrow was content with his lot; he had his beloved back, a crew who apparently liked him, and a tasty bit of loot to keep him in the rum. He hummed tunelessly and swayed in time to the off-key notes; suddenly he became aware he was being followed. He pretended he hadn't noticed and carried on with his drunken sway until he could corner his prey. He spun round and slammed the man against the corner wall with his sword at his prisoner's throat.

"You going to tell me why yer sneakin' round after me, mate?" His voice was deceptively calm, the hard edge of his sword making itself known in the man's neck. The man, obviously a misbegotten pirate like Jack, coughed and wheezed against the tightness and then managed a strangled sentence.

"Me Cap'n has a present for ye."

"A present for ole Captain Sparrow, eh? Now why would 'e be doin' a thing like that?"

"For riddin' us of that undead bastard; he were makin' it 'ard for 'onest pirates to make a livin'."

Jack loosened his hold on the man and his captive took in a deep breath, but made no move to leave. "And who might your Cap'n be?"

"Cap'n Edward Keane."

Jack swallowed at the name, but allowed none of his sudden fear show on his face. Keane, of the Cadaver, was one of the meanest men he'd ever had the misfortune to meet, other than Barbossa, and Keane wasn't even the undead.

"Has a gift? 'Ow do I know it ain't some trick?"

The man's face crumpled, as it was obviously too hard a question for his brain to understand. Jack sighed, and then tensed as he heard another noise behind him.

"Because I say so, my dear Captain Sparrow."

He turned sharply to be faced with the cold bastard. Handsome, smartly turned out, and with good bearing, he always appeared to be more navy than pirate. Many of his ilk had chased Jack from one corner of the Caribbean to the other. It wasn't an illusion. Keane had been a naval captain before taking to the seas. He'd been kicked out for unnecessary cruelty, which considering the navy's predilection for abusing its men had always worried Jack no end, "And I can take yer word 'cos?"
"My dear man, I have you surrounded...."

Jack swirled round and he found that indeed it was true. Men appeared from the shadows. He bowed like a gentleman, and despite the whirlwind of thoughts through his head said laconically, "Well in that case, Cap'n, I accept your offer of hospitality."

"Good, good. I keep a fine table, and I am sure you will find the entertainment most... interesting."

"Thank ye. Cap'n." Jack kept his voice carefully neutral, despite the sudden chill he'd felt at the simple words. This was going to be bad, very bad, but for once he didn't think it would be him who'd suffer, although the thought didn't give him much pleasure at all.

"You are a most difficult man to track down, Captain, and I apologise for the less than polite invitation, but needs must, needs must."

The Cadaver was a fine ship, thought Jack; not as fine as his dear Pearl, but fine enough. As they boarded, Keane's eyes fell on a tiny speck of water on the deck. Jack would not have noticed it except for following the captain's eyes. The crew were lined up nervously awaiting their arrival, and Jack's escort fell into line with scarce a word, very different to the usual feel of a pirate ship. Quicker than lightning, Keane had grabbed a boy from the line. The lad was scarce older than ten, and he gasped in fear at the grip. Keane smacked him hard knocking him to the deck. His voice however was as calm and reasonable as if ordering a drink. "Unacceptable when we have an honoured guest aboard." Turning to one of the grizzled sailors, who met the gaze with a slight grin, he said in the same calm manner, "Lash the boy to the rigging, Beevor, see if that teaches him the importance of discipline. One can never have enough discipline, Captain."

Jack said nothing, unable to trust his voice, and an answer did not seem to be expected as the captain dismissed the crew and led Jack to his cabin. The cabin was all in red and gold, fine soft material and gilt edged chairs. The food was some of the finest Jack had seen, as fine as any at a Governor's banquet. There was even rum, no doubt a concession to his guest, as Jack was sure Keane's own taste ran to expensive brandy. The door to the sleeping quarters was shut, but Jack imagined it was a fine cot with silk sheets.

"Sit down, Captain; enjoy the feast. I am deeply grateful for your disposal of that uncouth individual. As you can see it has increased my plunder tenfold. I always like to reward those who aid me."

"Well ye are most kind, Cap'n, most kind."

He wondered how long he could be civil to this madman, and, to cover his discomfiture, took a large drink from the goblet in front of him and found it contained the finest rum he'd had for many a long year. He took a slice of meat and ate it carefully. Keane followed his example with a smile that chilled Jack, making it hard to swallow, but the man was pleasant enough. He complimented the Pearl and her crew, spoke of his own plunder, and then abruptly changed the subject.

"Now, Captain Sparrow, you are most probably intrigued by the gift I promised."

Jack nodded his agreement as he took another drink to ease his suddenly dry throat, and he tensed ready to fight, but Keane waved him to relax. "Sorry Cap'n Keane, but 'tis rare that gifts is freely given..."

"No offence Captain Sparrow, no offence. It is in two parts, interlinked as it were, but in two parts nonetheless."
He bent down, and handed Jack a sword, with the hilt facing up, and Jack could feel the eyes watching him. He knew this sword, knew it too well; it belonged to Commodore Norrington.

The food he had eaten turned in his stomach, but he managed not to show his sudden nausea. He doubted Norrington had given the sword up willingly...

"Tis a fine sword, Cap'n, a fine sword, that of a gentleman..."

"Indeed, Captain Sparrow. I wondered if you would recognise who was once the owner of this 'gentleman's' sword." Without waiting for an answer he abruptly stood and flung open the door. "Beevor, bring the rest of Captain Sparrow's gift."

"Aye Cap'n"

Keane took a leisurely sip of his drink. Jack copied his unconcern and sipped at his own rum, his mind frantically rushing ahead. He had a sudden horrible knowledge of just what the other part of his gift consisted of, and was desperately trying to ensure he would show no disgust at what he feared would be a badly mutilated body. Such disgust would only put him in danger. All he wanted to do was get away safely on his Pearl and forget this whole sorry affair. He would make sure that people knew of Norrington's demise, that much was owed, to both the man and Elizabeth.

The door opened and Jack struggled not to jump at the sudden sound. It took all his self-control not to react to what he saw. It was no mutilated corpse thrown carelessly at his feet, but an alive, albeit badly damaged, Commodore Norrington. The man fell with no sound and looked up quickly, fear clear on his face, before he returned his gaze to the floor, not daring to look up again. He had recognised Jack, that much was clear, and he was terrified, which touched and concerned Jack more than he would wish to admit. It had taken some seconds to recognise the bloodied mess as the proud man who was the scourge of pirates across the Caribbean and but for the sword it would have taken longer. He wore naught but a ragged pair of breeches that hung off his frame. He was bruised all over, with other signs of abuse clear on the pale skin. His head of course was bare, and the brown hair was straggled and unkempt. He had no beard, although there was stubble; his face showed the signs of a less than careful shave, no doubt from one of the pirates, enjoying another chance to humiliate him. His hands and feet were free, but they showed signs of having been manacled. There were several marks that seemed to be rat bites, and clear signs of the cat were laid on his back. His face however, aside from the nicks, was mostly undamaged, his eyes dulled with pain and possibly the beginnings of fever. The strangest thing was a loose leather strap, hanging like a necklace round his neck. It was adorned with gems, locks of hair, a ring, and other sundry items that Jack couldn't see clearly enough to identify. Jack couldn't understand why Norrington clung to it, hard enough so his bruised hands were white with the grip. Jack had taken all this in within seconds and tried not to be sick, smiled at his host.

"A fine gift, but what will I do with 'im?"

"Well Captain, whatever you wish. I would keep him myself, but I think you deserve him more. He would make a fine catamite, for I have been sure to keep him unspoiled for you... or you could simply kill him. It is of no matter to me. He is yours."

"Ahh, but will 'e bite?"

Jack hoped for a positive answer. The signs were not good, but he could merely have been biding his time until he was safe. It worried Jack that Norrington had not looked up, or even made a plea with his eyes, in fact he never made a sound or move, just lay there still and silent.

"No, Captain Sparrow, I believe I have drawn his teeth."
Jack was not sure whether this was meant in the literal sense, and the confusion must have shown as Keane laughed; it was a cold, hard sound that seemed to drop the temperature in the cabin while bringing a sweat out on Jack's brow. "Not literally, my dear boy, not literally, but he will I believe cause you no trouble."

"Then I accept your gift, cheers."

He smiled, hid the sickening anger, and promised he would kill the bastard one way or another. That Keane thought that he, Captain Jack Sparrow, would want such a gift, would wish to have a broken man, would admire the wanton cruelty Keane must have shown to break the man, were grave insults. "You are welcome, Captain." A thought occurred to Jack and he said with as much calm as he could.

"Why is he so silent; ye didn't remove his tongue did ye?"

"No, Captain, but I can if you wish. We just explained to him that silence was healthier."

"Healthier for him?" Jack's disbelief must have shown as Keane smiled, but it was no more pleasant than his laughter.

"No, that didn't seem to work, and he had the most annoying habit of spitting gags out... so we told him if he made a sound, we'd kill someone on the ships we plundered. As you can see he took some convincing." Keane indicated the leather necklace and then examined his perfectly manicured nails. "But the screams persuaded him."

Jack had to resist the urge to strangle Keane; his hands twitched as he saw Norrington flinch and hunch in on himself. No longer able to stand this he stood abruptly. "Well, Cap'n, I must be headin' off if I want to make the morning tide. Me crew will be gettin' antsy..."

Jack was rowed to his ship under the flag of truce, with his gift laid less than gently on the bottom on the boat. He appeared unconscious or at least asleep, and for that Jack was grateful, he must be in agony when awake, but just to make sure, Jack asked, "E ain't dead, is he?"

The man took this comment as Jack had hoped he would and leered with a wink, "Nay, ye can 'ave your fun; he passed out when we 'auled him in." Jack smiled his gold-toothed smile, and felt filthy from his exposure to these men.

Anamaria eyed him as he was pulled aboard, and then looked even more askance at the sword at his belt and the bundle of rags on the deck. Jack shook his head and waved cavalierly at the departing boat, before letting his anger show.

"Anamaria get us out of here, head to Port Royal, no questions. Gibbs, Jase, Fred and Kay—"

His words were interrupted by a pained groan that was quickly bitten off. Anamaria and the others started at the noise and Jack knelt quickly on the deck, his moves belying his usual sway. Norrington was muttering and holding onto the leather band at his neck,"God, please, not again, not again."

Jack looked at his men, "Get 'im to my cabin, gently now or ye'll answer to me."

The men hurried to obey, but not out of fear, out of sheer pity for the pathetic form. At Anamaria's unspoken question Jack said coldly, "Norrington." She blanched and without a word headed out to sea.

Jack eyed the form on his bed and wondered what the hell he was supposed to do now. He took a
gulp of rum and moved closer, wincing at the smell of infection and human waste. He needed to get the man clean and then he needed to take him home. How the hell had Norrington got to this place? The last he'd seen of him was his glaring face as Jack had set off for sea after Elizabeth and young Will's wedding. Somehow the lass had procured Jack an amnesty for the wedding day, and Norrington's hands had been tied. The thought made him wince as he eyed the deep marks on the Commodore's wrists. He'd heard nothing about a ship sinking and knew he would have. He was surprised he'd not heard of Norrington's capture, but then that was no doubt something Port Royal had wanted to keep quiet. Keane, of course, wouldn't have wanted the navy's attention drawn to his ship so he would have kept his prisoner a secret. Jack placed the rum on the table next to the bed and poured some relatively clean water into a relatively clean pot and wished he had more. Tenderness and care weren't exactly Jack's strengths, but there was no one else he would trust with this, and Norrington at least knew him. He ripped the lovely clean sheets he'd so nicely procured from that beautiful lass in Tortuga and soaked them in the water. He went over to the huddled body and the sudden silent tension in the shoulders, forcibly stopped before it became a tremor, did not pass him by. Norrington was awake then, thought Jack with some displeasure.

"Now Commodore, this is going to 'urt like 'ell, if ye scream it's nowt to be afeared of. Savvy? " There was no response and Jack set to his grim task. He first upended the rum over the Commodore's back. The use of the rum was a sacrifice, but one Norrington had earned. Jack expected a vocal response. He hoped for one, the man's extended muteness was as unnerving as it was unnatural. Instead all Norrington did was bite his lip so hard it bled, to stop a single noise from escaping. "Damn you, stubborn naval idiot, scream if you need to." Jack's entreaty had no effect, so he started the cleaning process keeping up a steady stream of talk.

"You have a nasty cut here, it'll need lookin' at when we get to Port Royal... sorry about the pain, love... can't help it... You can at least make some noise." Frustration finally got the better of him and he raised his voice. Norrington flinched away from the sound, which left Jack instantly contrite. "Ye goin' be okay... hush now." The gentle words stilled the Commodore. Jack's anger grew as the water became dirty with blood and mess, and he knew Edward Keane's days were numbered. The bastard was going to die. As he bathed the back of Norrington's legs he said casually, "If you let this break ye, the man's beat you. I think you a better man than that." It seemed a hollow thing to say as he was damned sure no man would have coped any better than Norrington, but Jack had hoped the words would reach that stubborn pride swallowed somewhere under the pain. There was a reaction, slight stiffening, and then a hitch of breath, with an even tighter grip on the horror round his neck. He still held on to the damned thing, which he had refused to relinquish. Jack immediately regretted his words. They hadn't helped and he hadn't meant to add to the man's suffering. "Ignore me, mate, you know I talk rubbish. It's the rum." That oddly enough brought a response, a minute noise that sounded like something less than pain.

Jack had so many questions he wanted answered but he knew it would be some time before he got to ask them. Humming softly he continued his work. He thought just once he heard a whimper, but it was gone as quickly as it had come. Gibbs entered the cabin with a brief knock bearing some fresh water, clean clothes, and some foul smelling potions. "What ye got?"

"For the bites, and it'll 'elp with the fever... 'e don't deserve this Cap'n."

"No, he don't."

Norrington made a strangled almost noise which drew their attention, and then was violently sick. At least he would have been there had there been anything in his stomach except bile. With a groan of dismay he curled up in on himself. He had managed to be sick on Jack's boots. It hurt to watch, and with the gentle tone of one who soothes a frightened horse Jack said, "I won't hurt you, or anyone else," and laid his hand briefly on the Norrington's head just as he slipped into unconsciousness.
Jack turned to Gibbs, his usual drunken manner absent. "While he's out, we get 'im clean."

Jack was still gentle not wanting to hurt Norrington, but it was easier with him unconscious. All the cuts were bathed. The worst of them covered in the salve that Gibbs had brought. "It works, Cap'n," said Gibbs at Jack's speculative look. With an elaborate shrug Jack applied it liberally. Once they were done, they were in desperate need of rum. "Nothing more we can do now," said Jack feeling suddenly helpless.

"We can get 'im home."

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It was cold, dark and wet, and he hurt. They'd left him alone for a while. The rats chattered in the cell, the deck was hard on his battered skin. He could hear voices and he raised his own to yell.

Too late, he remembered, too late. A sneering face loomed in front of him. Looking like a vision of hell. Black teeth, with a smell of death. "The captain will be pleased... which pretty one dies this time?"

"No, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Then he burned, as they died, his fault, his fault. He would make no further noise. The accusing eyes of the dead watched him as he lay there, judging him, and finding him wanting.

"Coward," his father's voice tormented him, sounding too much like the cold sneer of Keane's. Even the living found him lacking. Elizabeth shaking her head at him eyes cold, "And you wonder why I love Will." "And I wanted my daughter to have you as a husband." Not Governor Swann, he was always so good to him, he had failed them all.

Suddenly he was somewhere else, Sparrow, of all people looked at him in compassion. He turned away unable to bear it. Not for him, surely not for him.

He awoke to light, warmth, softness, and a surprising lack of pain. Was he still dreaming? Had he finally died? He'd had the strangest hallucination. It had appeared real; the horrible sensation of being dragged to the Captain's cabin had been real enough, and he was unsurprised to find the Captain had a guest. It often happened this way, but then as he looked up, he could have sworn he'd faced Jack Sparrow, but he didn't want to look again. It had then all become like a very vivid, but weird dream.

He'd been taken out of the cabin, thrown heavily onto a boat and woken, as he was being cleaned and tended. Or had he? He wasn't sure anymore. It had felt real enough at the time, but then many things had before. He looked around through half opened eyes. From what he could see, he didn't recognise anything. A thought occurred to him: this could still be the Captain's cabin. He'd not seen the sleeping quarters, and Keane had always been making hints: a caress here, or a leer, his snake eyes assessing and noting, finding such pleasure in the infliction of pain. Norrington knew the look; he was no innocent. He wondered now, why it had taken so long to come. It would explain how clean he felt, and the appealing softness beneath. Keane would want him clean. It had been so long since he'd felt anything but hard deck, that despite his fear that this was possibly the start of something worse, he couldn't help but burrow into the softness.

He could have sworn he'd heard Sparrow and Gibbs talking. His mouth tasted vile, and while that wasn't unusual; it seemed worse than what he now thought of as normal days. It felt like...had he been sick? Elusive memory returned, he had been sick over someone's boots, and had passed out; retreated in his cowardly way from the pain that would follow... but it hadn't come. So was he dreaming? He sensed a presence, and wondered whether he should pretend to still be sleeping. It
never usually worked, so taking hold of his courage, he gripped the necklace, remembered the face
of each he had killed and stirred. There was little point avoiding the inevitable. A familiar, not
quite expected, and possibly hoped for voice came from close to his ear. "Welcome back to the
livin', Commodore."

Norrington jumped, and then eyed the room nervously. He could see behind Sparrow to the main
cabin; realizing he wasn't on the Cadaver, he swallowed. So this was real. He still half expected
Keane to be there, or Beevor, who seemed as happy to inflict pain as his Captain. He tried to talk,
but fear and dryness stopped him.

Sparrow noticed and said, "You'll be needing some water. I'd say rum, but I think it might be a bit
too rich for ye tastes." Norrington shook his head, still not sure, but Sparrow offered it again, "Go
on now, gently." The water was wonderful, clearing away the bitter taste of bile. He drank too fast,
desperate for the cooling, sweet sensation, and coughed, spilling a good deal of it on his chest. "I
told you: gently now." Chastened, Norrington looked down, the fear still lurking and fighting to
come out. He expected Sparrow to take the water away, but instead he offered it again, "Slower
this time."

Norrington sipped as ordered and finally shook his head when he felt he could take no more.
Sparrow eyed him expectantly. Norrington still felt disconnected, and wasn't sure exactly what was
expected, and simply looked, until Sparrow sighed and sat back.

"I figure you must have many a question, thought you might be asking, but I'll do the talking, eh?
I'm never one to give up the chance of telling a tale or two. That what you want, Commodore?"

"James."

He was surprised he'd spoken, fearing the worst looked down, but the roof didn't fall on him; there
was no crack of pain. In fact, Sparrow smiled: a pleasant, normal smile, with a flash of gold. Keane
had called him Commodore with an odd little sneer, or Norrington with a smile as cold as stone,
with darkness in his face. He didn't need to be reminded of that.

"Well then, Norr—James." It was obvious from the slip that the name didn't fit easily in Sparrow's
mouth,"You're a gift from that fine fellow, Captain Keane. He thought I'd want my very own
Comm—... naval officer. Where he got this idea from only his own mad brain knows, but I'm not
wanting you. No offence meant, mate, but I'll be takin' you home. I think Port Royal will have need
of ye soon, when I'm back to pillaging the populace."

James found Sparrow reassuring, his rambling soft cadence a far cry from the precise, well
modulated coldness of Keane. Not all he said had made sense, but there was something James
needed to worry about, but he couldn't place it, and despite the struggle to stay awake, his eyelids
were heavy. There was something terribly important that he needed to say, but he couldn't
remember. He was falling free, and he was floating away. Sparrow's hand was soft, and so he slept.

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Jack eyed the sleeping Commodore, and wondered what hell he had been reliving before deciding
he was probably best off not knowing. Keane's had been telling the truth when he'd claimed he
hadn't raped James, but Jack guessed from Keane's comments that the threat had not been far away.
It occurred to Jack as he watched his visitor sleep that he was still a relatively young man. He was
certainly younger than his officious manner had suggested. The good Commodore was usually
fastidiously neat, even managing to seem un-dirtied in the heat of battle, something Jack had never
quite mastered. He had enjoyed their little confrontations, enjoyed getting under the man's skin, to
see the real man under all that fancy brocade, and the iron rod that was firmly seated up his arse.
He had been looking forward to another encounter; this hadn't been what he'd imagined. Instead of the sense of triumph that many might have expected him to feel, he felt nothing but sorrow. Norrington was, for all that, a good man. He had done right by Will and Elizabeth, and even him... eventually at least. Jack felt a degree of guilt at slipping a sleeping draught into the water, but Norr —James looked like he needed a dreamless sleep, and then maybe he might realise he was safe. Jack was sure James would sleep for several hours, and went up on deck. It was well into the afternoon now, the sun bright in the sky. They were some days from Port Royal, which was a good thing, encounters with other pirates and the navy not withstanding. James would appreciate the time to adjust to his freedom, and Jack, once James was safely home, could mount a plan to kill Keane without making too many more enemies in the process.

"How is he, Cap'n?"

"Sleepin' like a babe, giving him a sleeping draught was a fine idea, Anamaria." The idea that had been at the edge of Jack's mind ever since he'd finished cleaning James up came into full focus, and with a smile that brought a suspicious look to his first mate's face said happily, "we need a bath."

"What?"

"Well these naval types like to be," Jack shuddered, "clean. So we need a bath, or something. Any suggestions?"

Gibbs had come up, "'alf a water barrel, Cap'n, and we can 'eat the water in the galley."

"Good, Gibbs, very good! Knew there were a reason I kept you on! Get at it then, you knaves!"

He knew he wasn't convincing anyone; least of all himself, but there was no harm in trying. He was Captain Jack Sparrow after all. He caught the tail end of a smirk from Fred, but nothing was said. He took the wheel from Anamaria and eyed the open sea, wondering what exactly what had possessed him in regard to the man in his cabin. He owed the man nothing, except to get him home. So where was the unwanted tenderness coming from? He was Captain Jack Sparrow, pirate, not some damn bleeding heart, but the tender feeling wouldn't fade. There was something impossibly appealing about the man. Well, he'd wanted to know who was beneath the uniform.

When dusk fell, and the Pearl was ensconced in a safe little inlet, away from prying eyes, Jack returned to the cabin. James was still sleeping, but it was far from the restful sleep Jack had hoped for. Adjusting the lamp for a better look, he realised that the fever that he had feared on first seeing the Commodore had taken hold. He was hot and restless, tossing and turning in silent misery. It was going to be a long, long night.

Delirium took hold quickly and with the heightened confusion of fever, the nightmares were seemingly endless, but James rarely made a sound, beyond muttered mumblings and entreaties. He was stuck in hell and Jack was sure they'd lose him on more than one occasion. The sheets and bandages were soaked through in sweat and at the fever's height it took three of them to stop him from hurting himself. Jack considered lashing him to the bed, but feared if he woke, James would panic and believe he was a captive again, so he was never left alone, and the Pearl stayed where she was. The crew were quiescent, as their last foray had brought them plenty of loot, but had wrought some damage on the Pearl. This interlude gave them chance to repair it. Port Royal was a tempting prospect. They were expectant of a good welcome, if they returned an officer of the navy, alive and relatively intact. If he were dead they knew things might not go so well for their necks.

Jack was woken by a groan and something approaching a snarl, and was shocked to find that in less than a blink of an eye his arms were full of angry Commodore, who was obviously fighting
something, and seemed to have zeroed in on Jack. Unwilling to hurt him, but desperate to stop him hitting out, Jack tussled the taller man to the floor, and found himself trapped under him as he collapsed with a groan. He waited for a few minutes, before nodding to himself. "Yes, he's out again." Eyeing the unconscious form, boneless on top of him, he said, "You know James we need to stop meeting like this." Raising his voice he yelled, "Gibbs!"

The two of them manhandled James back onto the bed and there were no more occurrences during the night.

Four days later, the fever finally broke. James blinked at Jack, studied him, and reached out touching his shoulder. Jack stood the scrutiny, and said with a grin, "So yer recognising me mate? Good! Yer a bit long in the leg to haul around and a bit heavy to 'ave on top of me."

James looked confused for a moment, then blushed, but was obviously reassured by the look on Jack's face. With a tiny nod, and a slow release of breath, James slipped into a healing sleep.

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James woke slowly and carefully. His head hurt and there was a rather disgusting smell, but otherwise it was an almost pleasant waking. He remembered that he was safe. Well, as safe as one could be with Jack Sparrow, which was a damned bit safer than he'd been in some time. It was night, but the moon gave some light through the cabin window. He remembered on Keane's ship when he'd expected the sailors to turn into skeletons, and in his dreams they had: bony fingers pulling at his skin, hatred glowing out of them like a living thing. He shuddered. They were simply men, and that somehow had made it worse.

He truly had not believed any naval officer, ex or otherwise, could have been so cruel. That had been his most serious misjudgment, and people had died for it. He shied away from the memory but his hand lingered on the physical reminder of his failure. He was away from them now, deservedly or not, thanks to Sparrow. It was an unpleasant feeling being grateful to Sparrow, a pirate and his nemesis. As his life was no longer what he'd expected it to be, why should anything he'd believed be correct? He had been wrong many times so the fact that Sparrow had saved him was really of no great surprise. His mind drifted away from places he wasn't quite ready to face, and he reflected on more practical matters. How many days had he been here? Tentatively he felt his face and felt some growth there, but he couldn't think what it meant. He still hurt if he moved: sharp pain in places, aches in others, so some wounds were little healed, and the bruises were still present. Certainly he had been here for no more than a week then. He realised as he shifted that the unpleasant smell wasn't pirate, but him. God, he stank. He wondered what a sorry picture he must have made and then wondered where Sparrow was. He had always been there the other times he'd woken.

A heavy thud shook the cabin slightly. A string of colourful but muffled curses followed the thud and quickly stifled laughter drew his eyes to the door. He decided that he might as well try to stand. It would be a good test as to how fit he was. The noise was intriguing and he was feeling far better. It couldn't be that hard. His legs and head unfortunately disagreed with him and the cabin spun. He landed with a sudden, painful thud on the deck.

His calm evaporated, and before he could fully assimilate what had happened, he was faced with an irate someone. He flinched from the noise, his heart thudded heavily in his ears, and nausea threatened. "I... um... sorry." He gripped the necklace at his neck. He hadn't been trying to escape he hadn't. A hand on his shoulder and he looked up meeting warm brown eyes, remembering this wasn't Keane. James felt weak with relief and was sure he must be blushing. Sparrow looked at him with a smirk that might have annoying in other circumstances, but merely made him feel like
laughing hysterically. He bit down hard on the sensation. He would not lose his composure; God, he had lost so much already.

"You know, mate, patience is a virtue I thought you navy lot would have bags of it."

Sparrow offered his hands, which James took. A lot of wavering later, because of James's greater height and difficult wobbly legs, James was standing and leaned heavily on the bed and Sparrow. He was suddenly embarrassingly aware of his nakedness. Sparrow with a grin and a flourish yanked the sheet from the bed and wrapped it round his waist nearly toppling him back to the deck. James had sudden sympathy for Sparrow's usual swaying gait, and had an unwanted memory of his own lack of balance before he'd found his sea legs. He swallowed as he regained his balance and realised Sparrow was talking to him. "Not that you'll be needing it for a bit... with the bath and all."

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"Bath?" James looked delightfully befuddled at that, which made Jack grin. It had not been easy, but the look of pleasure that crossed James's face as he surveyed the water made it worth it.

"In you go, mate." He put action to word, and eased James slowly into the water. James was a good bit taller than Jack, so it was not an easy manoeuvre, and still weak from fever James could do little to help. Jack ended up wet through, but the sigh of contentment that escaped James was fair payment.

James accepted Jack's ministrations in silence and surprised the pirate when he made no demur. Jack could tell he was only half awake. His only movement was a wince when the linen hit a bruise or cut. Jack stared at the protruding ribs and the pointed features while trying not to appear like he was. How long had he been held a prisoner? He was all bone and limbs. Jack had lit the cabin as well as he could with candles and lamps. James seemed to appreciate the light, which had been Jack's intention. He was sure James would have seen little brightness in his captivity. Jack didn't like silence; it bothered him so he started humming 'a pirate's life for me' and while it might not have been the best rendition, he didn't expect James to freeze or for his breathing to hasten in something approaching panic. Jack stopped, and started humming another random tune of his own making. James's breathing relaxed immediately. After a few moments, Jack said," You could do with your hair washing. It'll walk off ye soon. "

James glared at him, eyeing Jack's hair with some ire, and curling up his nose. Jack grinned, " Aye, but I'm Captain Jack Sparrow, pirate."

James muttered something that Jack didn't catch, but stuck his head in the water. Soon after, Jack helped James out, handed him some breeches as well as an over large loose fitting shirt in deference to James's still healing back. He hummed, deliberately looking away as James dried himself on the sheet and dressed. Jack thought that on close examination, he rather liked what was under James's uniform. He was a little disgusted at the thought, considering what James had gone through, but then he always had a weakness for pretty things, and James was certainly easy on the eyes.

The Pearl had been somewhat silent on the matter of rescuing him and Jack took it as if not approval, at least not out and out disapproval. It was really of little matter as James would be home soon. A hiss of pain caught his attention and he turned round. "Well, let's see to these cuts, no more blood on me deck, and then you need to eat!"

James looked pale at the thought of food, and he looked about to argue, but his stomach made itself known by a grumble and he glared at that instead.
Food was a light broth and water for James, and rum and chicken for Jack. James ate slowly and politely as if he hadn't been half starved and frowned at Jack as he picked his teeth with the knife he'd used to eat his chicken. "Pirate, mate!"

James harrumphed, then after a pause said. "Why?"

Jack looked at James. It was only the fourth word he had uttered since arriving on the Pearl, certainly the most coherent, and it was the question he'd expected. The answer appeared easy on the surface, and Jack went for the most obvious. "I don't like men making, per, uh... them ideas that aren't right..."

"Presumptions?"

"Aye, presumptions, about Captain Jack Sparrow. Besides it's always good to have a navy man on yer side."

"A navy man," James raised his water in a salute, his face suddenly unreadable. Whatever else he was going to say was cut off as the Pearl lurched alarmingly and tossed them both onto the deck.

"What's she doing to me ship?" Jack was up on his feet and about to see what the hell was happening when, after a brief knock, Fred, slightly breathless, entered the cabin, "Sorry Cap'n, don't understand it. We didn't hit anything, and she's righted herself."

Jack wondered what the old lass was playing at, but nodded and dismissed Fred. He turned his attention to James who had clambered inelegantly to his feet. He swayed slightly, and reminded Jack that he must be exhausted.

"I'm off to see what's up; I can't leave 'em for a minute! Ye may as well get some sleep, mate."

If Jack knew his ship, she was up to something, but he wasn't certain what it was exactly, but he was sure she'd tell him when she was ready.

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James woke slowly and stretched carefully. He was not fully recovered but certainly felt nearly human and still very tired. The dreams would not leave him be and the weariness felt bone deep as if he would never shake it, but it was an improvement. James had woken when Sparrow had returned from seeing exactly what had happened with the Pearl.

James watched as Sparrow slung a hammock up and had to admit he had been relieved when Sparrow had shook his head at James's offer to sleep in it. James had been sure Sparrow would fall onto the deck. He'd looked alarmingly unsafe swinging up into it, but had managed. As far as James could tell he'd not fallen out of it during the night. He'd offer to sleep in it himself again tonight. It seemed the only fair thing to do.

He stood and savoured the feeling of being relatively steady. It was early afternoon judging by the sun and Sparrow had been up hours ago. He wandered slowly into the main cabin where he found Sparrow muttering to himself and making weird notations that James was sure had little to do with anything approaching proper measurements. But Sparrow survived, and who was he of all people to judge? But still what the hell were those squiggles? He came up behind Sparrow who grinned at him, and waved at the map, squiggles and his ever-present compass. The squiggles as James peered at them did make a weird sense he supposed.

"We're a bit off course." Sparrow made a half a quills length between his thumb and forefinger and James tried not to smile, but it was difficult in the face of such cheerful optimism. His eyes flicked
to the compass, and then back to Jack, his eyebrow quirked.

"Now, there's no need to be rude, love. We'll 'ave you home soon enough."

James felt suddenly cold and the laughter he'd felt just seconds earlier vanished without a trace. He could see that Sparrow was puzzled by the odd reaction. He had no doubt assumed the Commodore would jump at the chance to return home now that he was making progress, but he was wrong. He would not go back. He fought to speak through his suddenly constricted throat, and managed to force out his words. "Port Royal?"

"Aye, home for you, mate."

"No." His voice wavered, but he stared defiantly back at Sparrow, gritting his teeth to stop himself from looking down. He was not going back.

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Of all the things Jack had expected James to say that hadn't been number one, in fact it hadn't been in his top one hundred. "Eh?" Not the most startling comment Jack Sparrow had ever made, but James didn't seem to care.

"I'm not going back."

"You can't stay here. I told you. I don't want you. Navy and Pirates, too many complications, mate."

James had gone white at the mention of Port Royal and had looked so unsteady; Jack had urged him to sit. A gaze almost manic in its intensity burned into Jack and shocked the pirate. He had always suspected there was more to James than there appeared, but this strength of emotion was still unexpected.

He grabbed Jack's arm before releasing it quickly when Jack looked at him, but did not look down. His voice was harsh with meaning "Then leave me somewhere, anywhere. I'm not going back."

The stubborn set of James's jaw was frustrating, and Jack felt suddenly angry, but as James glared back, and despite the circumstances Jack's anger faded and he felt a grin threatening. He had hoped for some sign that Norrington was still in there, and this boded well however inconvenient it was. Jack was sure he could persuade him.

"Mate, you're going to have explain this to me. You'll go back a hero. Welcomed with open arms. We can make up a wild tale for you. Promotion beckons ye. Lots of pretty girls beggin' to marry you. The world is at your feet."

"No."

"Well, dropping ye somewhere like you are now be like signing your death warrant. Captain Jack Sparrow won't do that. I didn't rescue you so you could go and kill yourself, mate"

James just shrugged at that, finally dropping his gaze from Jack, his voice pleading, "Don't make me go back, please."

Jack just stared at James; the plea stopped his half formed rant. He was, for once, albeit briefly, at a loss for words, but he refused to budge either. "Well, I'm not just droppin' ye off, and leaving you unless you explain to me what the problem is."
"I don't want to talk about it."

"You don't want to talk about much it seems."

James still wouldn't look up and studied his still bruised hands as if he never seen them previously. The once finely manicured nails broken and battered. Jack knew he'd pushed too fast. He knelt next to the chair and, making sure James was looking at him, said softly, "Won't think less of you, mate, I promise you that."

"What date is it?"

Jack was surprised at the seemingly unconnected question, but answered it nonetheless "August 23rd. You want the year too?"

James ignored the sarcasm and said softly, with a mixture of pain and bitterness, "Three months, five days... I think if they wanted to find me, they would have."

"I think you're making a fatal error there, mate. The Navy aren't that good, love." He was about to elaborate on his theory, but was stopped by a knock.

On his reply, Gibbs entered the cabin, "Navy off the port bow, Cap'n. Flag of truce too."

"There you go, Commodore; what did I tell you?"

He turned to leave, but was halted by a tight grip on his arm, "Please, Sparrow—Captain, don't."

Jack was half tempted to ignore the plea, but caught by James's obvious terror, he couldn't.

"Well, I'll just go talk to them, mate."

"You can't trust them, Captain, they be navy!"

"I can see that, Gibbs, but they're navy and they usually play fair, so I'm going aboard."

Jack was sure he'd be safe and, in fact, the young lieutenant who greeted him treated him with respect and the correct amount of deference. He wished his crew would have half as much, especially Anamaria.

"Captain Sparrow, we're here at the behest of Governor Swann; he has a proposition for you."

Testing the water, Jack asked with a grin: "I am sure the good Commodore had something to say about that. I was hoping to speak to the man, thank him for his kindness in letting me escape."

The lieutenant shuffled uncomfortably, and looked round making sure no one was listening, "Captain Sparrow, that's what this is about." An older, more senior, and infinitely smugger officer came up and glowered at Jack. He was obviously under orders to be polite, and nodded, the strain telling on him, much to Jack's amusement.

"I'll see to Spar—Captain Sparrow, lieutenant. Attend to your duties."

"Ye don't like me much, do you? I promise I won't bite." Jack punctuated the comment with a shark like grin and a release of breath. The officer reared back, whether it was in reaction to the teeth or Jack's breath Jack wasn't sure.

"Mr Turner will see you now."
Will! Now that made things easier. He needed a plan and quickly to get James to return home. He might have to enlist Elizabeth's help, and young Will would be the best person to ask. He was sure the good Commodore still had a soft spot for the lass, and there was nothing like some womanly persuasions when it came to making men do what they were supposed to. Elizabeth might work on Governor Swann to ensure a promotion. He was obviously fond of Norrington. Yes, James wouldn't have a chance against Captain Jack Sparrow. He'd like to cross swords with the man again when they were back on equal footing. Maybe he could snag a lift to Port Royal, his crew seemed in no danger of mutinying this time. All this was running through his head as he was shown into the cabin. With a stiff bow, the man exited, but not without a final glower at Jack's back.

Jack was gratified to see both Will and Elizabeth. With a confiding wink he said in a stage whisper: "I don't think he likes me much."

"You keep escaping; it's an affront to his honour, not to mention the matter of a ship. Good to see you, Jack!"

"You've still got a nice hat, Will."

Elizabeth surprisingly hadn't spoken, and was seemingly quite willing to let her husband do the talking.

"Thank you, Jack." There was an awkward pause, and Jack wondered what was up.

"As wonderful as it is to see ye both, me crew will be wondering if you're going to be keeping me here..."

Will cleared his throat and looked at Elizabeth who nodded and turned away to the rather grand looking cupboard and brought out a fine bottle of rum and handed it to Jack. He slurped it appreciatively. Any rum was welcome, but good rum was better and this was exceedingly good rum.

"Jack, we have a favour to ask of you. I know it's not going to be something you'd necessarily want to do, and we will understand if you refuse... but my father will, of course, recompense you for any loss of earnings..." Jack's eye had caught the flash of gold coin as the rum had come out. This was going to be easy... as long as James agreed.

"Ye know, lass, I don't remember you being so long winded. Will?"

It was amusing to see the mixture of emotions cross their faces; he was sure he knew exactly what they were going to ask. "We want you to find Commodore Norrington."

And there it was, thought Jack; he intended to drag this out as long as possible. "And why would I want to do that? He keeps trying to have my neck stretched, and I'm rather fond of the length it is now. Can't you take this nice big boat out to look for him?" He waved distractedly at the cabin around him.

"We intend to, and we have been since he went missing, but your lines of communication are more diverse than ours. The Admiralty seem to think he went missing deliberately to avoid court martial for losing the Interceptor."

"Elizabeth's father has told them he wouldn't do that... and he's given us some time, but it's been over three months."

"We half hoped maybe he'd caught up with you; that was all we meant to happen... but when he didn't come back..." Elizabeth's voice cracked on the last word.
Jack frowned and reconsidered his next words, "What do ye mean, what you meant to happen?"

Will looked at Elizabeth, and Jack was surprised to see a lot of anger in the look. Elizabeth flinched and stared at her feet.

"Elizabeth and her father decided that Commodore Norrington needed a diversion after our wedding, and sent him pirate hunting with some supposed information. The Governor set it in motion, but it was Elizabeth's idea."

"I didn't mean... I just... It was meant to lead to nothing, but he always seemed to be happy when he was chasing you... I felt responsible... " She trailed off, obviously realising how stupid it all sounded now.

"I told them it was dangerous, wanted them to wait till you came back to Port Royal; it would be a much less dangerous game, but they insisted. So Jack, please will you try for us?"

"I think... I'm afraid he might be dead... there was a ship anchored off Tortuga looking to recruit. The Cadaver?" She looked at her husband for confirmation and he nodded, she continued, "Lieutenant Groves said James, Commodore Norrington, was there asking about you. He only took a few men with him, and sent them back when there was no sign of you, when he didn't return, they went looking. But there wasn't any trace..."

Jack hid his anger that this had all been the result of a silly game, and now it might well cost James his career. This certainly explained his reluctance to return home. He might not even be certain it hadn't been deliberate. He pretended to consider, enjoying making them sweat. He would have told them that Norrington was safe, but he'd had a change of plan...

"I'll do it. With payment in advance, of course."

They offered him some food and he accepted the offer, thinking it would give him time to think. He caught up on their news. Brown had finally done the reasonable thing and drunk himself to death so Will had become the proud owner of the business and it was thriving. Jack took the rum with him. It was only fair.

On taking his leave he said somberly, "I can't promise that you'll like the news I bring." Pain and sorrow crossed Elizabeth's face but Jack felt no sympathy for her. But for a madman's twisted sense of honour, her stupid game would have cost a man his life, and it had come close to costing him his reason. Will, too, seemed to be unwilling to offer comfort, and instead turned to speak to Jack, handing over the money.

"I understand; we understand." Will eyed Jack warily with a nervous smile. Jack knew Will could sense his anger, but was wise enough to say nothing on the matter. It was good at least someone in this mess had used the brains they were born with."Good luck, Jack."

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James paced the cabin and tried to think about his options. He had figured out that even with Sparrow's bizarre plotting that they were not far from Port Royal, a day's sail at most, probably less, because the Pearl was a fast ship. The idea of returning to Port Royal terrified him, but not to go back would make him a coward. Even if everyone presumed him dead; he'd know and he couldn't live with that. He had to go back, but the thought brought him out in a cold sweat, and he covered his face in his hands.

He would return. It was his duty. He took deep even breaths and tried to relax, but he couldn't stop
shaking. He was not worthy of the uniform, but sometimes choices had to be made, however unpleasant. That stillled the shaking to a fine tremor, and he stood from the chair he'd slumped into when he'd feared his legs would not hold him.

Sparrow had left some rum out and he eyed it with intent. It seemed to work for Sparrow. Would it be better if he didn't return? He did not know, but if he was not welcome, there were other places he could settle. Rum tasted far better than he remembered rum usually tasting, and it certainly made the situation much easier to deal with. He suddenly understood the attraction. If he drank enough of this, it'd be easy to go back to Port Royal.

James found the floor inviting; it wasn't cold or wet, and didn't have rats. It made his back hurt, and the view wasn't very good, but then he was used to that. By the time he heard the cabin door open, he was reconciled to his return. He struggled to sit and waved the bottle of rum at Sparrow. He wanted to say something intelligent and express his readiness to return, but all that came out was, "Rum good. Want some?"

Sparrow gazed at him with a strange expression. James thought it looked something like affection but he wasn't sure. It certainly wasn't an angry look, which was good. Sparrow could have been angry, as James had drunk his rum. "Well thank you, James, but I have some of me own... but you don't mind if I join you?" It seemed to be a perfectly reasonable request and James nodded and took another drink from his bottle. Sparrow clinked his own bottle against James's and somehow managed to relieve James of his rum.

"Hey! That's mine." James lurched for the bottle, but Sparrow easily kept it out of reach. "That's not fair, you stole my rum."

"Well, mate, it's actually my rum."

"That's not the point... you said..."

"James, I'm a pirate..."

Considering this, James said: "If you have rum already, why do you need another bottle?"

Ha, thought James, that'd get him, but Sparrow, as usual, had an answer.

"Ye can never have enough rum."

"I have none."

"You've had enough."

There was something wrong with that comment. "But you said..."

"Since when did you listen to me?"

"Sparrow—Captain Sparrow." James was surprised at how whiny he sounded, but damn it, he wanted the rum. "You want me off your hands, and that," he pointed at the bottle, "will make it easier." See him get out of that one. Irre—something or other logic...

That odd look crossed Sparrow's face again, and he gently patted James's shoulder. "Well, problem solved. You're not goin' back. So ye don't need the rum."

"What? You can't tell me... but you." James wasn't exactly sure what emotion he was feeling. Indignation at being told what to do, puzzlement because Sparrow had been adamant, and if he
were honest no small bit of relief.

"I changed my mind." Sparrow grinned at him, and James looked, before going for the bottle again, but Sparrow shook his head, damn the man.

"I don't like you, Sparrow." James knew he sounded sulky but he couldn't help it. He wasn't even sure it was true anymore, but Sparrow was being infuriating.

"That's Captain Sparrow to you, mate, and you don't have to like me." But there was little heat to his words, and he placed the rum down, but sadly way out of reach of James. He attempted to haul him to his feet, but James's legs wouldn't hold him and he crumpled to the deck.

"Staying here, I think."

Sparrow shrugged, and sat back down, closer to James than before, and his eyes drifted to James's neck. James knew what he was looking at, and decided he might as well explain. "I heard Keane tell you something about this," he fingered the necklace. He didn't need to look, each object was burned into his brain, "but he didn't quite explain the whole story. Shall I?" Sparrow made no answer, which surprised James, but he took it for assent and touched a lock of hair, which he knew was fair, and held a tiny curl. "This is from a young girl. No older than Elizabeth when I first met her. Keane killed her while I watched because I managed to escape from the brig. Her father will be waiting for his little girl, and she will never get home."

James let his fingers caress the next object, a gold ring with tiny diamonds embedded within and an emerald gleaming in its centre. "This belonged to a young man much like Will Turner, a gift for his sweetheart. He was killed by my own sword." Each item marked him as a coward.

He started to talk about the next, a brightly polished gold button, but Sparrow held up his hand, stopping him. James was relieved; he could feel the familiar bitter taste of bile. He hated that he was so weak, that he would so easily cease the story of his shame. "No matter. I remember them all." He held his hands out in front, he could see them, although the rum had blurred their outline. "Do I have blood on my hands? Sometimes I think I see it there."

He risked raising his eyes to meet Sparrow’s gaze, and saw fierce anger cross the pirate's face. James flinched from the look, certain that a blow would surely follow. He even disgusted Jack Sparrow. It was no great surprise because he disgusted himself. The expected blow did not materialise, and James was somehow ashamed that he'd expected one. Sparrow simply shook his head and handed him the rum. James took a grateful gulp, willing it to numb the pain. "To an officer and a gentleman, eh, Sparrow?" The anger was gone from Sparrow's expression, and James wondered whether it had been there at all.

Sparrow raised his bottle with a half smile and said, "To a good man, James Norrington, to a good man."

Unexpected tightness stole James's voice, he was sure he did not deserve such an accolade, and shook his head mutely. Sparrow merely nodded. A strangely comfortable silence came between them.

James's eyes grew heavy, and he lay on the floor. It was too much effort to move much more. Gentle hands placed his head on something soft, and he knew nothing more except for the briefest of caresses on his cheek, that may have been mere imagination.

Dreams took him as they always did, noise and fear and blood, but somehow he felt disconnected, separate and sheltered from the scenes playing out in front of him. He felt safe and protected as if
in an embrace. Not the touch of a lover, nor even that of a parent, but he was sheltered by something strong and warm, and so very solid.

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Jack watched James sleep for several minutes. He knew in the morning he would have some difficulty in persuading James not to return to Port Royal. He had a stubborn sense of duty, and that streak of masochism that all naval officers seemed to have. He wondered if it was the uniform. He knew from personal experience it was itchy, uncomfortable and hot. It was easier to look for the humour than think about the horror James had experienced.

The Pearl was quiet under his feet, as if distracted. Jack wasn't sure why his ship had taken to his visitor, but somehow she had, and that confirmed for Jack that his plan was the right one.

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"Sparrow, no, you cannot keep me here. I refuse."

Jack eyed James who held body and head as if he were hurting all over. Sleeping on a deck was not conducive to healing wounds, but his roar still managed to make Jack wince.

"There is no need to shout and if you make much more noise you'll bring Anamaria in. You can't refuse me, Commodore. You belong to me..."

A flash of quickly concealed hurt and betrayal flashed across James's face and Jack winced.

"I belong to no one Sparrow, no one; I am returning to Port Royal."

Jack grinned at James; he knew it would enrage the man further. "How exactly do ye think you'll get there? The navy is long gone; you'd drown before you got more than a few strokes, and I'm not taking me ship into Port Royal," he paused and looked intently at James who glared back, but Jack could see the hurt and fear just beneath the surface, "you didn't seem so keen to return yesterday, mate... If I recall you—"

"Sparrow, I can't expect you to understand, but it is my duty to return." His anger drained, James sat heavily, giving into the pain. "I have no choice."

Jack sighed, "Stupid navy pride, mate... ye weren't exactly in any state to hear what I'd learnt from Young Will and his lovely wife last night..."

"What? Elizabeth was on that ship? Dear, God."

That had got James's attention and shut him up, which was good, as the shouting had begun to get irritating. Jack gave a brief recap of what he'd learnt and James paled to ashen as he listened. Jack feared he'd faint and was considering going for the smelling salts, but James merely bowed his head.

"All a game... it was all a game... I don't..."

"I'm sorry, mate..."

James didn't look up. "I suppose I should be grateful..."

Jack hadn't expected that to come from James's mouth. He wasn't sure what James meant.

"What?"
"At least it wasn't a plot to rid them of me. For that I can be grateful."

Jack rolled his eyes at the stupidity of the comment, surprised at the lack of worth the man placed on himself. He hadn't appeared to lack certainty on anything the last time they had met.

"James, you are an idiot. If I didn't owe the whelp and his lass..." Jack trailed off, suddenly afraid he'd revealed too much of his real feelings on the matter.

James looked at him; anger at the insult quickly replaced by gratitude; he knew what had been left unsaid. "I thank you for your concern and your care. I owe you a debt I cannot begin to repay. I will however endeavour to try. This news makes it all the more important that I return to Port Royal."

Jack shook his head. "This is not negotiable, mate; I will not take you back to Port Royal."

"I will escape, Captain Sparrow, make no mistake about that." The ice in James's tone did not quite cover the nervous twitch in his hand as James fought the impulse to touch the leather at his neck.

"You'd drown mate... and you're too valuable a treasure."

"For God's sake... you have the Governor's money, just return me. You've told me yourself, my presence here is too complicated. I should never have asked you... just let me go. I will make a terrible pirate, a difficult prisoner, and an unwelcome guest."

"Not unwelcome, James... But I have a proposition for ye."

"A what?"

James's tone was exasperated, but the anger had dissipated into resignation. Jack could see James knew he was outmanoeuvred and moved in for the kill.

"A working holiday as it were. Instead of looking for a missing Commodore, we go pirate hunting. Very much in your line; we both gain. You return with a ship and a pirate and your reputation intact."

"And what do you get out of this: a tame Commodore?"

"I'd not call ye tame... never that."

Jack was sure he caught the hint of a blush on James's cheeks and fought to keep the grin off his face.

James really was a lovely looking man.

"I don't know," James's indecision was obvious and he paced the cabin for several moments before shaking his head, but Jack already knew his decision. "Very well, Captain Sparrow, we have an accord."

James held out his hand and Jack took it. They shook but as Jack made to break the handshake, James grabbed his hand in both his and said: "Promise me something. If we're going to be captured by the bastard, kill me. You have to promise, or I will not take part in this crazy scheme of yours."

"Then you make me a promise, James, when we capture the black hearted bastard, you get rid of this."

He pulled a hand out James's grasp and touched the necklace. James reared back and dropped his hold on Jack's hand.
"You ask too much..."

"The blood is not on your hands, mate, and if ye believe that it will destroy you."

Jack had to get through to the stiff-necked idiot that none of this was his fault. It felt important for reasons Jack could not fathom. He knew from James's expression that he was not getting through.

"I told you all this last night, didn't I?" James's face was a mixture of easily read emotions. Embarrassment at his disclosures warred with anger, and a creeping despair that was the hardest one to face." All the fancy words and your twisted logic do not the change the facts; these deaths are on my conscience and I will not seek absolution. Not from God and certainly not from you."
Jack knew he had lost, but there was always another way; faint heart had not won him back his Pearl, but Jack knew how to bide his time. "I promise if it comes to it. I'll kill ye, and you'll do the same for me?"

James nodded once and then let out a sigh, leaning heavily on his forearms against the desk. All the fight had gone from him for now. Jack knew that on the day they faced Keane, the only person to need killing was the man himself. That was his promise.

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James was exhausted; there was too much to take in. He was not ready for any of this. He was certainly not ready to face Keane, but if he failed at least he could take comfort as he died that he had tried. Sparrow's logic was unfortunately unassailable. He needed a drink, but the pirate had locked the rum away and had no doubt hidden the key somewhere unsavoury.

The man had shown him more charity than his friends and far more than he could have really expected. But he felt so raw and exposed; Sparrow had seen him at his lowest and had not judged him. It left him confused and resentful. He ached all over, and itched, damn he itched. It made it difficult to think. He was jolted out of thoughts by a knock on the door. He was surprised to realise that Sparrow had been silent.

"Captain, we heard shouting then nothing. We wanted to check ye 'ain't killed each other."

James shook his head and willed his mind to clear. He said dryly: "Well, if we had intended to murder each other, you'd be a little late, wouldn't you?"

Fred's eyes flicked to Sparrow and then back to James. He looked so sheepish that James felt his mouth twitch. He was surprised he had the capacity to find humour in anything at the moment; he suspected Sparrow's brand of madness was catching. James watched Sparrow, who looked at Fred with a glint in his eye. "Who'd you bet on, mate?"

"You, of course, Cap'n."

"Right answer, mate. Now tell Anamaria we're headin' back to Tortuga."

"Aye, Cap'n."

Fred's eyes gleamed at the mention of Tortuga just as James's heart sank. He hated the bloody place.

He desperately wanted a shave; his face was itching like hell. He felt grimy from his night on deck and thought longingly of the bath but would not ask. He scratched his face angrily; the itching irritated him beyond reason. "Sparrow?"

"Pardon, mate?"

James shook his head, but played the game. "I beg your pardon, Captain Sparrow... do you own a razor?"

Sparrow scratched his own beard, a little perplexed. "Captain Jack would suffice, mate. I'm sure I 'ave one somewhere..."
Jack dropped to his knees with a smooth grace that somehow surprised James. He buried his head in a chest that was hidden under the heavy table. He muttered to himself for a few minutes and James sat down waiting for him to finish. An array of strange objects came out of the chest, and then Sparrow yelped. He turned round sucking his finger, holding a razor, which looked more like a dagger...

"Here ye are."

James took the proffered object nervously and wondered whether he should consider a beard, but figured it would drive him mad. His hand shook as he looked at it and remembered. He self-consciously scratched his shoulder, but drove the thought down. He wouldn't do this now, but memory was fickle and his hands shook.

"I'll be leavin' you. I can hear the sweet Anamaria swearing at something. I should go and see whom she's yellin' at. I'd like me crew intact."

James barely registered Jack's departure. He stared at the razor for several moments, before walking a little unsteadily into the sleeping cabin. Was his life going to be full of these unexpected pitfalls now? Memory bringing him up so sharply that he could barely breathe. What if it were to happen in battle? Little use he'd be to anyone in this state. He hoped that when they faced Keane, Sparrow would kill James before he endangered anyone else.

How long he sat there he wasn't sure, but eventually he was ready. To his surprised relief, he managed to shave with a degree of speed, finding the simple act surprisingly freeing. He felt more in control, and was surprised at the sense of satisfaction at his success. It had not been totally without damage, his face was sore in places, but he felt like he'd faced something and won.

A memory from when he had been a young middy on his first ship made him smile. He had been so awkward, but bound and determined to succeed at everything. He'd struggled with the low decks and the small steps. He'd constantly tripped up over his feet. He'd grown quite suddenly just before joining the crew, and wasn't used to his height or long limbs.

Noakes, one of the old timers had caught him one day as he tumbled. He'd stood James gently back on his feet, ignoring his blush and mumbled apology, and had said gently.

"Little steps will get ye there in the end, sir, and ye won't break yer 'ead getting there."

Noakes had subtly helped him through his early days, but always with respect; he'd drowned one night in a storm, swept overboard, before James could reach him. It had been a long time since James had consciously thought about the man.

There was something different about the Pearl under his feet; the ship seemed to feel different to him, and he couldn't think what it was. It somehow felt like she was waiting for something, but surely that was ridiculous; it had to be his misgivings about the plan. But he couldn't shake the feeling. He went up on deck.

Jack was eyeing the sea with some trepidation and James knew what was wrong, he could sense the heaviness in the air that always preceded a storm. Anamaria glared at James; she was obviously not enamoured of him at all. He suspected she would be quite happy to run him through.

"Tie everything down that ye can."

As the crew hurried to obey, James also helped where he could and before long everything that was moveable was secured. James leant heavily against the main mast, exhausted. He hadn't even done
that much; the crew was more than capable themselves. However, the combination of a hangover and his injuries had made even this slight physical exertion beyond him. It was frustrating but he knew it would take time, but he did not like the feeling at all.

"Thank ye, Commodore," Gibbs nodded at him and James managed a weak smile. Gibbs hurried off.

"Ye'd best be getting to me cabin. I don't want to lose you overboard, mate..."

For some reason, James was offended by his tone; he didn't need mollycoddling, and he was as good as a sailor as any of them. "Captain Sparrow, I assure you..." He trailed off and subsided. Pride was of little use at the moment. He knew in his current state he would merely be in the way. With a resigned nod he started walking slowly towards the cabin and felt about ninety years old.

"It'll get better, mate, trust me."

James realised with a strange sense of unreality he did trust Jack, and he knew that some things would never be the same again. He was too weary to look at the implications of that thought.

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James cursed as he was thrown once more onto the floor; this was getting ridiculous. He would have been safer tied to the damn mast, although that would have been humiliating in the extreme. And it forced another unwelcome memory to the surface, but this was painful. He was fairly sure a couple of cuts on his back had reopened, but he was trying not to think about it. He hated feeling so useless. He had secured as much as he could in the cabin. He had even found a waterproof in the chest as he was securing it. It was certainly stolen, and as James studied it briefly he was sure it was navy issue.

Water was leaking into the cabin, and coalescing into shallow pools. Wearily he pulled himself up, wet through and bone tired, but he would not stay here. He wrapped the waterproof round him, stumbled to the door, slamming against it to force it open against the battering wind and entered into chaos.

He was drenched to the bone before he had even taken a few steps, and the howling wind battered him so hard that he could no longer feel his body. He groped blindly for the nearest thing to grab hold of. He was trying not to panic, as memories of the last storm he had faced threatened to crowd him. He'd been bound and helpless, unable to move away from the waves; he had felt like he was drowning in the rain. He shook his head against the memories, gritted his teeth and looked for shapes in the shadowy deck.

He lost his grip on the mast as the ship rocked hard, and he was thrown into the side of the deck. His cry was stifled as a wave splashed over him. He spat the seawater out and struggled back to the centre of the deck. Someone was struggling to keep the sails secure and he leant his weight to it. The deck was swimming in water, and taking on more with each tilt. James lost count of the number of times he slipped or had to catch someone to stop them falling. He was reacting on instinct; thinking was too hard against the noise of the wind and the pain and cold of the water. He was clinging to a mast when he saw someone fall just centimetres away from him and begin to slide toward the side of the ship. James caught hold of the pants halting the slide. The man clambered to his feet nearly pulling James over. They stared at each other for a second as James realised it was Anamaria. They clung together as the ship tossed again and then the moment was gone as they dived to avoid a wave.
Jack held hard onto the wheel, his fingers white and numb from the cold. He was blinded by the water but knew he had to keep hold or everything would be lost. The Pearl was trying to help but she was struggling against elements even stronger than she was. He couldn't hear anything over the howling of the wind. He just hoped his crew would survive this. He hoped he'd survive this.

The irony of losing his beloved to natural elements so soon after saving her from unnatural ones would be too much to bear. He held on tightly as a wave of water hit him forcing him backwards. He dug his heels into the deck and managed to stay upright. He kept a firm grip on the wheel as he was hit continuously by wave after wave. He hung on as other crewmen who struggled to aid him were thrown backwards helpless against the roll of the deck. The ship rocked hard caught by a strong gust. Jack was pushed off balance as a huge wave came over the side and swamped him. He struggled to keep hold against the double blow, futilely attempting to throw his whole body forward to keep hold of the wheel. His anguished howl was lost in the wind as he finally lost both grip and balance. Then he knew nothing else.

James saw him fall and was torn with which way to go. Save Jack or go for the wheel. He knew if control was lost, they all died. He dived for the wheel at the same time as the Pearl seemed to slide him closer. He reached the wheel just as it tried to swing out of control. He fought against its pull and regained his balance. Brief seconds later just as he was sure all was lost, Anamaria hauled on the other side and together they held on. James had little time to think about anything, but he felt vaguely sick at the thought that Sparrow might be dead.

Finally after what seemed like a lifetime the storm abated, almost as quickly as it had come and James was exhausted. A voice behind him made him jump despite the weariness.

"Well, James, ye saved me ship, mate."

James stared at him speechless. Except for a bruise on his forehead Jack looked perfectly well. Although certainly even more bedraggled than usual. "You have to be the luckiest pirate I've ever seen." James said faintly.

"Gibbs and Fred caught me, lashed me to the mast, mate; the lass kept me safe. As I was saying ye saved me Pearl, I think that makes us even."

Everything started to blur, and James felt his knees buckle. He fell heavily with a groan to the deck, waves of dizziness overwhelming him. He knelt there embarrassed. Everyone must think him a fool; all of them had gone through the storm. Sparrow had been knocked unconscious, but it was he who collapsed. He half-heard Sparrow giving orders to repair the damage. Still not quite ready to stand he eyed Sparrow and noticed he looked exhausted as well. He was pale and drawn under his tan and his eyes held dark smudges not due to kohl. The fact that Captain Jack Sparrow was not immune to tiredness and strain somehow made James feel better.

They eyed each other in silence for a few seconds before Jack broke the silence. "We need to look at ye, James, mate; ye got blood on your back and we need a little chat about obeying orders. Ye don't outrank me here, mate."

He grinned and held out a hand, which James took gratefully. James ached all over and putting one foot in front of the other was something of a strain. All he wanted to do was get out of his wet clothes and sleep for a week. A sense of overwhelming relief settled over him. He'd hated having to choose to leave Sparrow and take the wheel. It had been the right decision and Sparrow was
Jack was exhausted, his head hurt, and he had bruises on bruises. He was cold, wet and desperately in need of a drink. It had been too close a call for comfort. He glanced at James who looked worse then he did and felt a stirring of admiration for the man. Elizabeth really had no idea about what she had passed on when she'd chosen Will over him. He knew it was the right choice, but he suspected if she had seen this side of James the decision would not have been as easy to make.

His cabin was a mess, but James had done a fine job of securing things and the damage could have been far worse. He could tell that the Pearl was going to be just fine. She was simply a little battered.

He righted a chair and sank gratefully into it as James did the same. He bent down to remove his waterlogged boots. He stifled a groan as pain shot through him, but managed one then the other and tipped them upside down letting the water spill out. He stood carefully and padded on bare feet to the chest hoping not all the clothes were waterlogged. Fortunately there were some clothes that remained untouched and he pulled them out. He eyed them critically, but thought for now they'd have to do. He removed his soaked scarf and tied a fresh one round his head.

He tried to stand and found he couldn't and was relieved when James offered his somewhat shaky assistance. Jack couldn't help the laugh that escaped him.

"What a fine and pretty pair we make, eh?"

"Well, you have looked better," said James with dry amusement.

"So have you, mate. Ye look like something the cat dragged in."

James's smile was slow and sweet and totally unexpected. Jack suddenly felt very warm despite his clammy clothes and chilled skin.

"Now that we have established how bedraggled we both look why don't we remedy it?"

"You first, mate. Need to see what damage you've done to your back..."

James walked slowly to the sleeping cabin and straightened items as he went. Jack followed, grabbed some of the ointment, bandages, and a bottle of rum that had remained amazingly intact. His luck held today for sure. James was laid face down on the bed, his back bare. Jack wondered at the trust. Times had changed and for that he was grateful. The bandages were soaked through with blood and Jack winced. He unbound them slowly, thankful that the damage was not as extensive as he'd feared. "Not too bad, mate, just a few new bruises to show off."

James stood the binding in silence and Jack wondered if he'd fallen asleep, but as Jack finished James rolled over and sat up. He pulled on the dry shirt he'd brought in with him and waved Jack to take his shirt off. Jack was unsurprised at James's startled gasp, quickly muffled as he saw the scars covering Jack's chest and back. Jack knew the origin of each and every one, but James didn't ask. His touch was gentle but firm and soothed Jack. It had been too long since he'd felt a tender hand that he hadn't paid for or one that made so little demand on him. It was both welcome and disturbing. Too soon, yet not soon enough it was done, and the strange atmosphere between them was broken as James sat up and rubbed his eyes.

Jack grabbed the rum and took a hefty drink before he handed it over to James who took it gratefully. Jack sighed and realised he had to see how far the storm had knocked them off course,
but he was far too tired to move and his head still hurt. But he was Captain Jack Sparrow and he had a reputation to uphold. He reluctantly stood and James followed suit. Jack waved vaguely around him.

"Have to check our course, and check the damage; you need some sleep."

"So do you."

"I'll be right back, mate. Stop worrying, love..."

James looked at Jack and sighed but obviously decided there was no point in arguing. He lay down carefully with his back facing Jack. He muttered bloody pirate and Jack grinned. "Don't be missing me too much, mate." James snorted but made no other reply and Jack left with a smile on his face.

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James was irritated at Sparrow and felt guilty that he was laid down when the rest of the crew were busy, but he was too tired and too comfortable to move. Sleep came quickly and he had no time to worry about what awaited him there.

He was drowning and no one was there to save him. Keane was holding him down and the cruel laughter of the crew rang in his ears. James started to go down for the third time and knew he was doomed. But suddenly there was someone there. He was yanked up to safety and as he lay gasping like a fish out of water. He saw a glimpse of tanned arms and a sparrow tattoo. James looked up startled into a gleaming grin and relaxed. He was warm and dry and safe.

James woke with a start, and found he had an armful of sleeping pirate. Sparrow snored softly and showed no intention of waking. It was dark outside and the sea was calm. James thought about moving but dismissed the thought. Sparrow or no Sparrow the bed was much more comfortable than the hammock. James considered the sleeping pirate and wondered at the scars he had seen and the strange something that was growing between them. The dreams were puzzling. What was about this man? He was hardly a person who should make him feel secure, but somehow in his dreams he did. Gratitude, maybe? No, that didn't explain the tenderness he'd felt. Damn the infuriating man. He was embarrassed that he really felt no burning need to push the pirate away despite the impropriety of this position. Sparrow murmured something, tensed then relaxed. James shifted his position gently, careful not to disturb Sparrow, and let sleep take him again. He'd think about it tomorrow.

But as he slipped into a doze, something pulled at him. He realised something was missing, a familiar weight. He awoke fully; all languor vanished in an instant. He pulled away from Sparrow violently, waking him. James felt at his neck. God, it was gone. Why hadn't he noticed it before? Panic took him, his heart thudded loud in his ears and he shook like he was in a fever. He tried to recall when he'd last had it, but it was all a blur. "It's gone; I've lost it." He almost fell as he tumbled off the bed; just caught himself in time and stood swaying. Sparrow was staring at him, his eyes wild. He was talking but James couldn't hear him through the buzzing in his ears and the pounding of his heart. A hard slap across his face and James remembered to breathe, gasping as his lungs filled with air. His head was thudding and he blindly accepted the bottle Sparrow handed him. Gulped it down and choked as he realised it was rum.

"Ye disturbed my beauty sleep, mate. I was havin' a lovely dream..."

James stared at him, and clutched his stinging face, disorientated. He hit me, he hit me, was all that was going through his head. "You hit me."
"Of course I hit you, mate, you weren't breathin' and I ain't going to kiss ye, well not unless ye ask me nicely..."

Sparrow grinned at James who simply stared for a moment before saying softly. "It's gone."

"And I, for one, am glad of it, mate. There's no need for it... now are we going back to sleep or do I have to drink you into submission?"

"You don't understand, Sparrow, it's gone..."

"I understand perfectly, mate... and all I'm sayin' is we can't change it. So we can either sleep or drink. The scales are pretty much level mate, but as I was sayin' me dream was really good, but if you want to drink, don't let me stop you."

With that Sparrow laid back down and James stared at him, unaccountably hurt by Sparrow's dismissal. He stared at the man's back for a few moments before he left the sleeping area, taking the bottle with him. He sat slumped in the chair. The rum tasted bitter in his mouth, but its fiery warmth was welcome.

He stared at nothing, not aware of time passing, and was startled when the cabin was bathed in a weak light. "Ye know, Commodore, mate, you think too loudly. Disturbing me dream."

"Thought you were asleep..."

"I didn't mean to make you mad, but ye knew my feelings on the cursed thing."

"Cursed?" James laughed bitterly and he took another drink out of the bottle and then slammed it hard on the table, resisting the urge to throw it at Sparrow. He would never understand.

"I know you think you're to blame for their deaths, mate. I can't persuade you otherwise. But ye said you see them all in your head; I think that's enough for anyone, aye?"

James felt his eyes burn and he struggled to fight the tears, glad that he wasn't facing Sparrow.

He blinked rapidly, took several breaths and successfully beat the threatened breakdown. He was surprised at how calm he sounded when he finally spoke, and how important it seemed to him that Sparrow understood. "You do understand."

Sparrow didn't reply directly, but said, "Come back to bed, mate. We reach Tortuga tomorrow and we both need our rest."

James made no argument, even when Sparrow lay down next to him. It was somehow comfortable to feel another person next to him, hear his breath slip into the regular rhythm of sleep.

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Jack was exhausted and it was hard to think. But even with his mind foggy with encroaching sleep he realised he was in something of a bind. His creed had always been never to do anything for anyone unless there was something in it for you, and don't care if you can avoid it. If you can't avoid it ensure you get some benefit from it. Above all don't get emotionally involved with anything but your ship. Unfortunately ever since he'd met the whelp and the lass things had changed, and now he was faced with even more complications.

He could argue that the capture and execution of Keane would aid him and it would also be fitting revenge for the insult to his character. Rescuing James had some benefits, too even if he knew he
couldn't count on a tame commodore. James had too much pride for that. Everything could be explained away, but Jack knew he was in severe danger of compromising his creed. He realised that even if there was no benefit to him at all in this plan, he would still have done it. But then worse things had happened at sea, and he knew sometimes rules were more like guidelines. Jack lost the fight to stay awake and slipped easily into sleep.

James was subdued when he woke and moved away from Jack as if burnt. Jack might have been offended but he understood the cause. James ate breakfast with little enthusiasm.

"We're a bit off course," Jack paused waiting for James to say, "again"? But the comment didn't come and Jack continued. "We'll reach Tortuga by dusk. Best time if ye ask me. We can sample the night life eh?"

James froze with a mouthful of food halfway to his mouth. "I think I'd prefer to stay on board. It might raise a few questions if you're in the company of a Commodore. I have no wish to revisit the delights of Tortuga." His tone left no doubt as to his opinion of the town.

"James, mate, you've seen yourself in the mirror. You're more pirate than commodore, and no one will ask... and we might learn something of use with that glower of yours."

James shrugged, disinclined to argue and continued eating. The silence was unnerving and an uncomfortable reminder of the first days after James's rescue. Jack hummed and hoped for some reaction. He could understand James's uneasiness over Tortuga. He knew it was where Keane had captured James, but it was also the best place for information, rum, and women, of course. They'd distract him from the rather disturbing realisation of last night. Not being slapped this time would be a decided advantage, naturally.

"I apologise," James's quiet voice broke into Jack's thoughts and he looked up into James's face. James paused obviously struggling to find the words. "And I wanted to thank you for last night."

"No problem, mate... what are friends for?"

"Friends."

James echoed the thought faintly, but made no further comment. Jack wasn't sure what had happened but something had suddenly shifted between them. There was look in James's eyes that he couldn't place. He opened his mouth to say something but closed it quickly; sometimes even he knew silence was necessary. He stood and went to check on deck.

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James was so distracted he never noticed him go. He knew now just how he was changed. He was a friend to a pirate. It had never been voiced previously. It was a disconcerting realisation that aside from the obvious gratitude he felt towards Jack, there was something more there now too. Everything came into sharp focus, all the things he hadn't wanted to face crowded in.

He could never go back to where he'd been, never. Keane had been a respected naval officer for many years. The only reason he'd been dismissed was because a midshipman he'd nearly killed had happened to be the much-loved son of a well-connected politician. That the Navy would shelter a man of such cruelty for so many years was disturbing. Discipline had to be maintained, of course, but there was a line. Was that why Gibbs had fled the navy and thrown his lot in with Jack? Gibbs was a good man for all his drunken ways, and so was Jack. Nothing would ever be the same.

James shook the thoughts away, surprised to find he was alone in the cabin. He stretched carefully,
mindful of his new bruises and went up on deck with a new sense of resolve. He would think on the implications later when they had Keane secured. His hand went of its own violation to his neck before he remembered the necklace wasn't there.

Jack grinned at him as he came up on deck. The storm had left them a freshened breeze and it whipped at James's hair as he tried to keep it out of his face.

"You need one of these, mate," Jack said cheerfully pointing to his scarf. James reluctantly acknowledged he probably did. He shook his head at Jack's glee. "Or I can just cut your hair, mate."

"No, thank you, Jack. Even fallen naval officers have enough sense not to let a pirate near them with a sharp implement."

If Jack was surprised at James's use of his first name, he made no comment. Merely looked comically offended at the apparent slur on his talents which made James's lips twitch.

"And you're not fallen, merely temporarily misplaced, mate, if Captain Jack Sparrow has anything to say about it."

James tried to form a suitable reply but found he was touched by the comment. Temporarily misplaced sounded like something he could live with.

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Jack watched as James studied himself in the mirror. He had a bemused look on his face as if he didn't quite recognise who he was looking at. James had eventually decided he didn't like the scarf on his head, so had tied his hair back into a ponytail with the scarf loosely fastened at his neck. He wore a ruffled shirt which was open at the neck and tight tan trews with knee high boots. The fading bruises that had suggested vulnerability now leant him a rakish air. Jack swallowed; he had always been attracted to pretty things, male, female, gold, silver, and gems. James was decidedly pretty.

James looked at Jack. "I look foolish."

"Now there's no need to be rude, mate. Ye look like a pirate"

James stared at Jack for a moment. "I did not say you looked foolish; you are a pirate." James fell silent as he looked once more at his reflection and then added: "I just look wrong." Jack grinned; wrong was the last word he'd have used.

"Ye look fine, mate."

"Then why are you staring at me?" James's tone was prickly and self-conscious which only made Jack grin more.

"Just you make a pretty perfect pirate, love. It's a bit unexpected."

James snorted at the compliment, but Jack didn't miss the slight reddening to his cheeks and enjoyed the reaction.

******

Tortuga was a riot of noise and light and smell. James was suddenly overwhelmed. It had been so long since he'd experienced anything like this. He felt giddy and light headed. The smell of spices
and sweat and waste made him want to sneeze and brought on unexpected nausea. The noise made
his ears ring and his head hurt. It was all too much and he started to sway. He bit his lip hard and
clenched his fists; his ragged nails digging into his palms. The pain brought him back to himself
and he steadied his nerves with an effort. No one seemed to have noticed his sudden panic and he
relaxed as he filtered out some of the noise and smell. Bloody Tortuga! He hated this place. It was
certainly an opinion none of his companions shared.

"We need rum, mates, and lots of it."

"I thought we were here for Keane..."

"Now don't you spoil the party, mate. Pleasure first, business later. Savvy?"

James sighed and resigned himself to a miserable evening amongst the great unwashed. Changed
opinions not withstanding, pirates were still pirates and he had no real desire to socialise. The fear
of discovery still lurked, but as he eyed the populace he knew he wouldn't even rate a second
glance. Or at least that was the theory. He had noticed a couple of people eyeing him, but none
seemed to recognise him.

"Very well, Captain... lead on."

"Yer catching on, mate..." Jack turned to his crew, suddenly all business. "Eyes and ears open,
savvy? And Gibbs, try not to fall asleep with the pigs again, eh?"

The tavern was as noisy and smelly as the rest of the God forsaken town and Jack, damn him, was
right at home. He found a table and watched as Jack made his weaving way to the bar. James was
amazed anew that Jack didn't fall over. Jack's unsteady gait made far more sense to James now. It
had been noticeably reduced to the point where James had hardly noticed it when they'd been on
the Pearl. The sea was Jack's natural habitat and he obviously struggled with his land legs. James
checked out the other customers and looked for any sign of Keane and his crew. But found none,
but it was dim and crowded so James wasn't surprised he couldn't see much.

Jack re-appeared bearing drinks, and sat down opposite James with a grin. "Drink!"

James looked suspiciously at the drink and sniffed it before he drank and spluttered at the taste.

"What is that?"

"Tortuga Rum, mate. Can't beat it."

James risked another drink and once the initial shock wore off, he realised it wasn't that bad.
Throughout the night his tankard was never empty for long and it wasn't long before his head was
fuzzy and he looked at Jack through a haze of alcohol. He looked good, thought James, exotic
even. He looked at his drink, surprised at the thought. What did they put in it? He was having
delusions. He'd spent days with the man and now he was noticing him? Well, a lot of those days
he'd been unconscious but still. It had to be the drink. He then thought of Jack's skin under his
touch as he had eased the bruising. The feel of his warm body when he'd woken up next to him...
the scars.

"Jack?"

"What, love?"

"How did you get the scars?"
"Some from my enemies, some from my friends, and some just because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time..."

"That isn't an answer..."

"All the one ye need, mate."

James looked up and saw the last person he wanted to see, and froze... Beevor. He glanced at Jack who despite appearing very drunk became instantly alert.

"What do we do?"

"Have another drink."

James stared at Jack dumbstruck for a moment, but then realised he was right. There was nothing he could do as Beevor was walking over with an unpleasant smile on his face. James took another shaky drink from his tankard and then met Jack's dark gaze.

"He's here then."

"Looks like it, mate."

James felt a creeping panic and forced himself into stillness because it was too late to do anything else. Beevor was there behind him. James kept his head down forcing himself to stay calm and not tremble. He knew any sign of weakness would merely draw Beevor's attention to him.

"Jus' saw ye and wanted to know 'ow the cap'n's gift worked out for ye."

"He died... think I overworked him... but he was fun while he lasted."

Beevor laughed and James's skin prickled. He barely suppressed a shudder. He remembered the same laugh all too clearly and it would probably haunt him for the rest of his life. His heart was beating so loud he was sure everyone could hear it. Beevor's stench was making him ill, not just the strength of it, but the memories it conjured up. God, the voice alone chilled him to the bone.

"He's a quiet one..."

"Lost 'is tongue."

"Quieter that way, eh?"

James didn't want to see the look on either of the men's faces and kept his head down, but he wasn't even sure he could have moved a single muscle even if his life had depended on it. He was terrified that Beevor would expect him to look up, or even yank his head up for a better view. Jack's voice was ice cold as he replied.

"Somethin' like that, mate."

There must have been something in both tone and look that unnerved Beevor as he said quickly, "Must be getting' back to me ship. The Cap'n 'ates tardiness." With a sketchy salute he left.

James felt ill, hot and cold all at the same time. He stumbled to his feet, just managing not to overturn the chair. He barely felt Jack's hand guiding him surprisingly steadily through the crowd. They just made it out before James was violently sick against the tavern wall. He retched a few times before he finally regained some control. He was humiliated by his reaction. If he acted like this with Beevor how on earth was he to face Keane?
"Don't be too 'ard on yerself, mate... it wasn't exactly planned for."

James managed a bark of bitter laughter at that, but was unable to say anything else.

"Take me back to Port Royal, Jack. I'm useless."

James heard an exasperated intake of breath, and found himself pinned lightly against the wall with a speed that unnerved him. He met Jack's frustrated gaze and let out a shaky breath. Jack released his grip but his eyes still pierced James with their sudden intensity.

"James, mate, hate to break it to you. You're only flesh and blood. Live with it? Or I can make ye a hair shirt if ye like?" He held up his hand and stopped James's protest. "If ye say I don't understand... I'll let Ana have her way with ye. Savvy?"

James managed a laugh from somewhere and replied faintly: "Savvy." Jack kept his eyes on him for a moment longer. He nodded once and after vaguely brushing James down, set off walking. James stayed against the wall for a few seconds, and then quickly caught up. Slowly James became aware they were being followed. The street was quiet, with most people either still in the taverns or the whorehouses. Those on the street would not aid them.

"Jack?"

"I know, keep walking. How many?"

"Three."

James felt for the sword at his belt, grateful that Jack had insisted he have one when he'd refused his own sword back. His sword nestled at Jack's belt. James's hands went to his own belt and he saw that there was no way out. There were three behind, but another two had materialised in front of them.

It happened too fast. Two men went for Jack who managed to stab one in the leg but was caught into a battle with the other. James was nearly pinioned by a third but elbowed him in the groin as he went for him. He blindly thrust out with his sword and he was rewarded by a satisfying grunt of pain.

A fourth man tried to slice at James's head, but James caught the blade with his own and managed to twist it away. He could hear grunts and clashes from his left but didn't dare look, so intent on his own fight.

James was surprised at the ease of it all. Reflexes honed by many years hadn't been lost and he soon gained ground against his attacker. His greater reach and sheer determination was working to his advantage. He caught a flash of silver in his attackers other hand and swerved back to avoid the vicious stab from the dagger. Anger at the tactics leant him strength, and he blocked the next blow with ease, and followed through with a torrent of slashes that drove his opponent back. Finally after what seemed like too long his break came as the other man stumbled, leaving himself open for a final attack. James lunged forward and felt a jolt of sheer vicious pleasure as the man fell with a sickly groan.

Jack seemed to be having a little more difficulty but he was still winning until he stumbled.

James started to go to his aid, but instead of falling, Jack ducked down and the man flew over his head.

He landed with a heavy thud on the cobbles.
The fifth man had fled when he realised his prey would not be as easily subdued as he'd believed. It was all over. Jack swayed alarmingly and James ran over to him.

"Jack?"

"My shoulder; he sliced my shoulder."

James could see there was some blood seeping through Jack's shirt. He gently eased the shirt from the wound, watchful for any repeat of the attack. It wasn't too deep but would be painful. He could tell by the set of Jack's jaw and the rate of his breathing that it was hurting. James took the scarf from around his neck and tied it tightly round the wound. Jack winced and then looked at James with a light in his eyes that was unexpected.

"Useless, eh?"

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Despite his wound, Jack was content. He'd managed to relieve his attacker of his purse. It had been how he'd got caught in the shoulder. Gain without pain was obviously better, but the purse had been heavy and the wound light. James was leaning pleasantly close to him and he had enough to pay for a room in a nice tavern for a change.

The hum of excitement he always felt after a successful fight was coursing through his body. He was humming with energy. He could feel the same sense of excitement in James who looked suddenly alive. He looked at James and could see very little of the Commodore in him, and even less of the nearly broken man he'd been even just hours ago. James caught his eye and grinned and Jack's breath hitched in his throat. It was always his greatest weakness: treasure of any kind. It didn't have to be silver and gold. James was still watching him and Jack saw it when James realised just what had crossed his mind. He didn't respond either way, he didn't back away, or move closer, but the glow didn't diminish Jack breathed again. Ignore it, yes; that was the sensible thing to do.

Jack got them a room using the excuse it was better to share so they could watch each other's backs. James merely raised an eyebrow and asked the woman for some fresh water and rum.

The wench obviously found them both appealing. Her look was certainly come hither. James nodded politely but didn't encourage her and Jack sighed heavily. If he couldn't have James he'd have liked someone but James glared at him, eyeing his shoulder meaningfully. Jack muttered at navy eunuchs, but he had to admit his shoulder hurt.

"Miss? How much would it be for a bath in the morning?"

James's polite manner gained a winning smile from the woman and she giggled, naming a price even Jack felt was reasonable. He was a little offended that the woman seemed to think James more attractive than he, but at least she hadn't slapped him.

James followed him up the stairs and made an appreciative sound as they entered the room.

Jack liked the look of the bed and wished he could count on some action in it tonight. He was surprised James hadn't complained there was only one but it was big enough that contact, however desirable wasn't necessarily inevitable. They divested themselves of their swords and other sharp objects and Jack placed one of the chairs against the door. This was Tortuga after all.

"It meets with your Commodorial approval?"

"Better than a hard deck and a rat infested brig... but not quite up to the standard I was used to."
The comment was underlined with humour and Jack threw himself onto the bed, bouncing on it and then winced at the pain. James eyed him speculatively.

"Let me look at the shoulder before you drip blood everywhere."

Jack obediently took his shirt off and let James begin to bathe the wound. He made a huge production of pain as James tended to the wound. James was exasperated, and threatened to knock him out if he didn't stop.

"Ye could always sit on me, mate."

Jack said it playfully, certain that James wouldn't act on it and so was taken by surprise when James did exactly that. He was suddenly pinioned under James's greater weight and for a brief moment he panicked, but as he looked up startled, he saw the look on James's face and relaxed. Affection, lust and mischief warred for dominance, but he could see no danger in his eyes.

"Is this what you wanted, Captain Jack?"

The huskiness of James's voice sent tremors down his backbone and he sighed. "James, ye don't have to do this ye know..."

"I know... which is exactly why I want to..."

Jack wasn't sure why he protested; he never usually turned anything down, but he didn't want this out of some strange twisted idea of gratitude. "James..."

"Do you ever stop talking?"

Jack opened his mouth to answer but James leant down and kissed him. James's hands were as busy as his mouth, nipping and fondling his nipples. Jack still high from the fight needed it so badly. He arched upwards into James who rubbed against him, his own erection obvious through the tight breeches.

Jack wanted more and considered flipping James so he was on top, but he knew James needed to control this, so he whimpered and resisted.

James moved away from him and said with his voice harsh with need. "Too many clothes."

He took off his own shirt and then returned to Jack and nipped his way down his chest until he reached the waistband of his breeches. Jack eagerly lifted his hips as James slid them down exposing his already erect cock. With barely a pause James took him in his mouth and skilfully sucked him.

"J-james where did you learn? Ahh."

His words were lost as James hummed and he felt the vibration through every part of his body. He thrust upwards and struggled not to do it too hard that he choked James. Too soon he came with a strangled moan and sank limply back, aware of the throbbing pain in his shoulder.

James cleaned him gently and went to pull his breeches back up, but Jack shuffled out of them. It was far more fun doing this naked. James eased himself off and Jack opened one eye. He looked up at James who looked back at him smugly, and then leant down to kiss him and Jack tasted his essence on James's lips.

Jack grinned up at him and nudged up against James, "You seem to have a problem there, mate."
Need a hand?"

James groaned as Jack rubbed his naked body over James's bulging groin.

"Jack."

It was more a moan than a word. Conscious of scaring James he backed away while James settled himself on his back. Jack eased James's breeches down and determinedly ignored his erection. He nibbled and sucked James's chest until he was thrusting against him, begging for his touch. He went down on James's cock and repaid him in full. James was almost silent as he came and Jack looked at him concerned. But James showed no sign of being upset. Jack lapped up James's come and then wiped him off. He then gently replaced his breeches. He moved to lie next to James, careful of his shoulder and said softly. "Well, love, that was unexpected."

James opened his eyes and looked at Jack with a slight smile on his face. "You always appeared to be under the impression that Captain Jack Sparrow is irresistible."

Jack wasn't convinced; he knew he was irresistible to most people, but not usually Commodores who had shown very little desire in the days they'd spent together on the Pearl. There'd been the odd fetching blush, but nothing that would have suggested this level of interest. He hated the thought that James might have felt he had to. James had had too few choices in the last months he didn't want to think he had added to the problem.

"Why?"

James sat up annoyed. "Because I could."

"That's no answer."

"It's all the one you need."

"Commodore bloody Norrington. Will you stop it?"

Jack was frustrated by the evasion and could see his sudden flash of temper took James aback.

But even Captain Jack Sparrow had his limits and James managed to find them more than most. He looked James squarely in the face. He didn't flinch or look away and met Jack's gaze firmly. His eyes were warm and Jack was hypnotised by the emotion in them. Where was the repressed uptight Commodore now? Thought Jack, a little amazed at the transformation. He had seen it happening but this was more than he had imagined. It seemed strong evidence that the uniform did do strange things to men.

"You gave me back me. You didn't make me do this. I chose to and I enjoyed it, and tomorrow when we've slept I will want to do it again."

The words were calmly said and they didn't seem to be words that could tilt his world but they were and all Jack managed, the wind firmly out of his sails was a startled. "Oh."

James shuffled up out of the wet patch and laid his head on the pillow, discussion closed. Jack did the same still a little stunned by events and despite everything was asleep in minutes.

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James lay awake as he listened to Jack's even breathing and smiled. He hadn't felt this free in years, if ever. He had suddenly, in a flash of illumination, realised what he felt. It wasn't about love, not
yet; it was about him, and what he wanted. For the first time in far too long he had choices and he
had wanted Jack Sparrow and Jack had wanted him. He was exotic, wild and free and everything
James wasn't. James knew he wasn't healed and he also knew he might never be totally well again.
He had seen the darkest places of himself and no one could ever fully recover from that. But he
was who he was and that was all most men could say. He would if it was in his power capture
Keane and see the bastard hanged. He was under no illusion that it would make things better but at
least there would be one less demon to face.

An unexpected, but not unwelcome sense of affection and peace swept over James as he looked at
Jack. He looked far younger asleep. With the hooded and knowing eyes hidden there was an air of
innocence about him. James smiled at the incongruity of the thought and deciding he really needed
to make Jack take a bath tomorrow and drifted off. He awoke desperate to relieve himself and
found Jack resting in close to him, his naked skin, warm against James. He untangled himself
gently and did his business, before easing himself back into bed. Jack sought his heat out again,
and James allowed it, curling his longer frame slightly round Jack's and slipped into dreams once
more.

**********

Jack woke when it was still dark; the pain in his shoulder had finally interrupted his slumber. He
awoke unwillingly and by degrees but the pain was annoyingly persistent and eventually pulled
him fully awake. James was still sleeping soundly. Jack eased out from under him regretfully,
shuffled to the edge of the bed, and as quietly as possible groped for the rum in the darkened room.
He subdued a cry of triumph as his hand found the container. He sat on the floor, uncorked the rum
and took a hefty drink. He had enjoyed the evening's entertainment and had been more than a little
surprised at James's skill. It was hard to reconcile the Commodore with this man. He knew whom
he preferred. Jack grinned around the neck of the container. Oh, he definitely had a preference.

James stirred restlessly on the bed with a muttered groan but soon settled back into sleep. Jack
needed a plan to fight and beat Keane, but it might take a lot to convince him to fight. The mad
bastard had taken a liking to him. Jack was loath to interfere with honest piracy, but he knew there
was nothing honest in Keane's methods. James stirred and his sleep muffled voice broke the
silence, "Jack... what are you doing?"

"Thinkin'"

"Well, that accounts for the noise."

"If ye hadn't melted me brain, mate, I'd be offended at that."

James snorted and then there was another shuffle and light filled the room as James lit the lamp.
Jack blinked in the sudden brightness and blinked blearily up at James who looked down at him."What are you thinking about?"

"Keane."

"Oh."

The word fell heavily between them and Jack sighed but was reassured as James sat down next to
him on the floor and indicated he wanted a drink. Jack handed him the rum and James took a large
gulp and choked. Jack thumped him a little too enthusiastically on the back as he liberated the rum
from James's now loose grasp. James glared with his eyes streaming and Jack caught his gaze and
smothered a laugh with his own cough. James looked impossibly endearing with the startled
expression, still slightly sleep fuzzy. Jack could not resist and stole a kiss, savouring the rum taste
and James's enthusiastic response. Too soon though James pulled away and looked at Jack seriously.

"We need a plan of attack..."

Jack bit back a curse and glared at James and demanded that his cock behave itself.

"Now you mention this!"

James looked down and was genuinely contrite. "I'm sorry Jack... just..." he trailed off suddenly unsure of himself and Jack easily forgave him. Some things could wait and some things couldn't. Even if his cock was a little confused on which was which, his brain wasn't.

"If we take 'em by surprise we can beat them. Keane won't be expecting an attack."

"I know your opinion of the Navy, but we are not as incompetent as you like to believe.

He was one of the best and most successful Captains. I have seen how good his crew is, and they have no mercy, Jack; none."

The catch in James's voice was obvious and his hands nearly strayed to his bare neck but he settled them back to his lap. Jack could see the small tremors in them but they were quickly controlled. To Jack it was simple; they would win.

"Then we will show none either."

James nodded in response with his jaw set with resolve. "We take them as they attack another vessel. I am sure we will not have to wait long for them to do so. They'll have spent money here so no doubt Keane will want to replenish his wares."

"Then that's our plan! Simple, eh?"

James laughed shortly and eyed Jack with mingled amusement and worry. "You make it sound so simple."

"I trust me ship, me crew, and me Commodore... so it will be simple."

James merely shook his head, but there was laughter in his eyes, the bleakness that had briefly settled there was gone, at least for now. Jack re-corked the rum. He stood up and carefully moved his shoulder. The rum had taken the edge of the pain and he felt ready to sleep again. James copied his move and they were soon settled back on the bed. With a few shuffles they settled comfortably and Jack blew the lamp out.

**********

James woke up and his nose twitched at the unpleasant bodily odour that assaulted his nostrils. He really wanted another taste of what they'd begun last night but he wasn't sure he could stand the smell. The smell of unwashed flesh sent shivers down his spine and made him feel nauseous. He wasn't sure how he would convince Jack to bathe, but after a few moments a devious thought struck him. It was decidedly sneaky and probably unworthy but he couldn't bring himself to care. He slipped quietly off the bed and picked up the remainder of the rum they'd been drinking last night as well as the second bottle Jack had procured and slipped on his shirt. He picked up Jack's discarded garments gingerly and eyed them suspiciously. But they weren't crawling with anything.

He made his way downstairs and the young woman who he met on the stairwell smiled at him. She
wasn't the same girl who had served them last night, but she knew what he wanted.

"Sir, I'll prepare the bath and have it brought up to your room."

"Thank you, miss," he paused and added: "I want to play something of a practical joke on my friend. Would you be so kind as to place the rum into the filled jugs?"

"Sir?" Her smile faltered a little but the coins he found in the purse bundled in Jack's clothes reassured her as did his smile. She also took the garments promising to have them washed and returned.

James was satisfied with himself and returned to the room to await their bath. Jack was still sleeping, but he stirred and it was obvious he was close to waking.

A knock on the door fully roused him he looked up as James ushered the men with the bath and water in. James gave them a few more coins and they left. The purse was still surprisingly heavy with coins and James wondered where Jack had got the money. He had meant to ask last night but he shrugged the question off. It wasn't that important. James surreptitiously locked the door and tucked the key under the bath as he bent down to test the water and hoped Jack hadn't seen the act.

Jack watched him with interest and a smile. "You and your bathing, James; I don't know what you see in it."

"This isn't just for me... it's for you as well."

Jack's eyes widened and he looked at the iron tub balefully. "I don't do water, less it has salt in it, mate. That's Navy. I'll just watch and drink.

Jack looked round for the rum. He stood out of bed, naked and James swallowed at the sight. He really hoped Jack wasn't going to be too reluctant as he had plans that did not involve fighting. If he was going to die he wanted to have something more than duty and regrets to take with him.

"James..."

"Yes, Jack?"

"Where's the rum gone? And my clothes! You took my clothes!"

Jack was gloriously naked, and James's breath caught as the pirate advanced on him.

"The rum isn't precisely gone, just misplaced, and your clothes will be returned."

"Misplaced? Where is it?"

James backed away; suddenly a little worried that this had not been such a bright idea. He didn't want to suffer severe injury just yet. Jack sounded really mad. He knew his obsession with cleanliness puzzled Jack, but it was important. It was probably because it was something he had lost control over during his captivity. It hadn't bothered him so much on the Pearl, but now it felt important.

"It is close by."

"James..."

They were toe to toe now and Jack's naked proximity was making it hard for James to think, but he managed a slightly cracked. "Parley, Jack, parley." Fear and arousal warred for dominance as he
looked at the irate pirate.

"What?"

Jack backed away suddenly and muttered to himself about the bloody French, bloody Navy, and glared at James, his eyes a little wild.

"I want to come to an agreement. You bathe for me, and I will return the rum and clothes... and we can carry on the activity our little discussion interrupted last night."

The wildness had faded from Jack's eyes and he was looking at James with something approaching amusement in his face.

"Your word on that?"

James nodded and breathed shakily. Jack eyed him with a degree of sympathy albeit sympathy tempered by irritation at his tactics. He knew his sudden fear had not gone unnoticed, but Jack did not seem to have taken offence. James poured the water into the tub careful not to reveal the rum in the jugs. It was soon filled to his satisfaction and he indicated it was ready. Jack took a few steps towards the bath, and then halted, before taking a step back. James watched him, a smile tugging on his face.

"It is only a bath, Jack."

"Exactly, mate."

"You didn't seem this allergic to water when you bathed me."

"That was different..."

James was getting annoyed and pinned Jack with a glare and wondered what incentive he could offer. He drew the rum out from the jug and waved it at Jack temptingly. He considered taking a sip but his stomach rebelled at the thought of rum this early in the morning. Jack's eyes lit up and he sauntered quickly to the bath, grabbing for the rum. James moved quickly out of the way and Jack splashed into the bath. He spluttered and glared but made no move to get out.

"You better be worth this, mate, or..."

James handed him the rum. He had to admit he felt a measure of guilt at his behaviour, but there was something intoxicating about the sudden sense of freedom he felt. He knew he could die when they fought Keane. If not in the battle then at Jack's hand, as he was sure he would keep his promise if things looked bad. He was no fool as to expect it to be easy and he had a sudden desire to enjoy life as he suspected his days on this earth were numbered. Even if he survived the day, the strange sense of wild freedom would soon be gone. He felt Jack watching him and looked up with a smile which Jack returned looking suspiciously innocent and beguiling.

"What?"

"Do I get me reward soon?"

And with a speed that took James's breath away, he pulled him into the bath headfirst and James came up spluttering indignantly. He should have expected that he supposed. He was soaked and these were his only clothes, but somehow it didn't seem to matter.
He disrobed and proceeded to give Jack his reward. Sometime later they lay in dozy languor on the bed.

"Ye know, James, there might be something to bathing regularly, as long as there are... compensations.

James laughed and moved to sit up aware they needed to get moving, but reluctant to leave this haven. A knock on the door made the decision for him. He dressed in still damp clothes and answered the door. The bath was removed and Jack's new clean clothes were returned. The men eyed the soaked floor with some interest and James felt a slight blush at their scrutiny, but they said nothing and departed.

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Jack had enjoyed the morning's activities despite the indignity of having to bathe, but he had been more than adequately compensated. He had been surprised at James's sudden playfulness and didn't like the almost desperate edge to him but he would not say anything, as there was really nothing to say.

They gathered their weapons and returned to the Pearl who was pleased to see them and impatient to be off. She was always happier at sea. Most of the crew looked a little worse for their night in Tortuga, but all wore smug, well-sated expressions and bore news.

"Cap'n, the Cadaver is in Tortuga, but she left today, just past dawn. There's news of a ship, and Keane seems eager to take it."

James paled for a moment before straightening his shoulders with a grim smile.

"Take 'er out, Ana, me lovely. We have a boat to catch. Men, roll out the guns. I doubt Captain Keane will be happy to see us."

Jack took the helm and set the course. He was relieved that no one argued with him, as he did not have any real argument to counter any determined resistance.

James hovered uncertainly as if he wasn't sure what he wanted to do. With a glance towards Jack he headed to help prepare the guns and Jack knew it was the best place for him. His crew knew a good sailor when they saw one, and James was most definitely a good sailor.

The Cadaver was easily spotted and when the Pearl came upon her she had a small merchant vessel cornered and her mercy. The merchant ship was only lightly armed and the Cadaver's guns had damaged her, but she still appeared seaworthy. Jack brought the Pearl in close to provide shelter and protection for the merchant ship. The Cadaver fired her cannon and if the Pearl had been less manoeuvrable it would have done some serious damage. Jack petted his ship whispering that he'd let nothing happen to her. He could tell his ship wasn't entirely convinced by his assurances, but was willing to go along with them. A lot like James in fact, thought Jack wryly before he turned his attention to the battle.

The deck shook with the impact of the shots from the Cadaver. The Pearl had more guns, but Keane's cannon were larger. Jack steadied himself on the wheel with some difficulty. Smoke was beginning to fill the air, making it hard to breathe. Jack's eyes watered, his throat tightened as the air thickened. The Pearl shook, and she was pulled closer to the Cadaver.

"Move away. Move away."

The call went up the assembled crew and Jack knew where it had come from. James was no doubt
in full Commodorial mode, and few would argue with him. Jack could barely see in the thickening air and his smarted from the smoke. A crewman ran to aid Jack and together they pulled the ship to. The lookout yelled he could see space between the Pearl and the Cadaver and Jack breathed again. Jack heard the Pearl sigh beneath him. Smoke and noise filled the air and his Pearl groaned and tipped under the double blows of firing her cannon and the force of the hits.

"Get ready to board."

He yelled at the man next to him and the shout went up the line, carrying it to all decks. Jack knew this organisation was James's work. His crew were good in a battle but this ordered pattern was naval. He knew that this was the best way to beat Keane. His ship was no doubt organised in much the same meaner. You can take the man out of the navy, but not the navy out of the man.
The deck was a mass of noise and heat. Shapes made sinister in the artificial dusk loomed toward each other. The crew were faceless, clouded figures. The deck was shrouded in grey mist. James couldn't identify what were people and what was mast, as they all merged into one. The only noise he could hear was the crack and thud of cannons firing, but he yelled and shouted and the crew took his orders. It should have surprised him, but no one wanted to die, and they knew they had to fight this way.

He felt disconnected from everything, yet totally in tune with his surroundings. The acrid smoke made his eyes stream and burnt his throat. His heart thudded in his chest and his hands shook. He was high on the battle, this was why he had joined the Navy, and despite the fear, he was alive with energy.

In the short space between shots a scream pierced the air as one of the shadowy shapes fell with a sickening thud as the ship bucked again. James didn't know who it was and felt the same dull thud of guilt he always did when someone was lost. This may not be his ship, but they had listened to his orders. He wondered how Jack dealt with the loss of his men.

Jack must have given the order to board as the shout was carried up the line of shadows and James grabbed the pistols from the rack. He organised the distribution and prepared himself to board a ship he really had very little desire to return to. He tried to identify Jack in the melee of men but he couldn't.

He charged over the boarding planks and nearly stumbled at the unexpected assault of memory that assailed his senses. Dear God, this was his own personal hell. The smoke was clearing as the heavy pounding of cannon had halted to allow for boarding. Everything, he could remember everything: the mast where he'd been tied, the stench of blood and death stung his nostrils, and he saw the faces of the dead. This was foolish he couldn't do this, but he was trapped and as much as he told his body to move, paralysis froze him in place. He was going to die here. A hard shove behind him and his body unfroze. The fog cleared from his brain almost as quickly as it had come and his felt the same battle heightened senses that he always had and fury at his weakness drove his movement. What was he doing, standing here like a fool as people died around him?

A man loomed toward him his blade high and James met the attack, forcing the man backwards. He cornered the man against the mast for a brief second, and met startled eyes. He realised with a jolt that this was Beevor and he knew the man recognised him in the same instant. Fear and anger crossed his face, quickly followed by a sneer. He opened his mouth to say something, and a tide of sheer blood lust almost drowned James as he fought the man who had brought him almost to breaking. The ferocity of his attack left Beevor helpless and he was disarmed and flat on the deck. James brought up his sword to finish it and then just stared at the terrified man who wet himself with a whimper. He was pathetic, and he would hang. James bound the man to the mast using the sail rigging. James shook a little with reaction, shocked at how easy it had been and swallowed the bile that threatened to swamp him suddenly.

Some of Keane's crew were reluctant to fight and surrendered with very little persuasion and that thought James was what commanding a ship by fear alone did, made cowards of many.

James turned, and saw Jack struggling with his opponent; the wound in his shoulder had obviously slowed him down. The man had pulled a dagger on Jack, and there was nowhere for him to go. James pulled his pistol, and shouted with his voice loud over the deck.
"Jack, duck."

The shout distracted both men, but Jack reacted quicker and ducked. James shot the man and he fell with grunt. Jack bowed swiftly to James, before his eyes widened and he yelled "James, behind you."

James swirled round to meet his attacker, and saw there were two of them. James met the thrust of one of them, but was convinced he'd feel the steel of the other, but faster than James thought possible Jack was there. He caught the man's blade, kneed him in the groin and stabbed him as he doubled over. James managed a breathless 'thank you', and concentrated on his remaining opponent. The deck was soon theirs. There was no sign of Keane, but James was not surprised, a captain such as him wouldn't care enough about his crew to fight alongside them.

The pirates corralled the surviving crew. James, with Jack at his back, kicked down the door of the Captain's cabin, his pistol drawn. Keane sat at his desk seemingly unconcerned. He recognised James and smiled at him, the same cold smile that was all too familiar, and James felt a kernel of fear creep through him. Nausea threatened, but Jack's well-armed presence behind and his own weapons reassured him. He was in charge here that he had to remember. Keane was finished, but it still took a few moments before the rolling in his stomach eased to manageable levels. He was sure the sudden panic had not gone unnoticed by Keane. He knew the man preyed on human weakness, but he would not give him the satisfaction of showing it again. He managed to keep his tone calm, and unwavering, which surprised him.

"Captain Keane. I formally arrest you on the charge of piracy."

"And may ye rot in hell."

"Well, the Commodore and the pirate. It appears I misjudged you Captain Sparrow, and you too, my dear Commodore. I should have killed you when I had the chance."

Keane eyed them, calm and totally unaffected, and James felt his certainty falter, and his control on his emotions slip. The horrible feeling that he was no longer in command of this situation crept over him, and then he knew exactly what was going to happen. He saw almost at half speed Keane raise his pistol to his head. James lunged for him, and Keane pulled the trigger. Nothing happened, and Keane's rigid control broke, and he struggled, and fought and bit as James and Jack subdued him.

James looked down at the unconscious man and felt his finger tighten on the pistol, as he held it to Keane's head. It would be so easy, just to pull it, so easy. His hand shook with tension as all the madness of the past few months crowded over him. Keane would hang anyway it was over. He should just shoot him, and claim Keane killed himself. He had intended to after all. But a warm hand on his own stopped him.

"This isn't you, love. Let's see the bastard hang, eh?"

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Jack eased the pistol out of James's shaking hand and helped him to stand. James swayed alarmingly and leant heavily on Jack's arm. He was passive, pale and far too cold to the touch. Gibbs ran in, and stopped short at the scene. He helped Jack ease James into the day couch. Jack knew James was going into shock, and he had to admit he was shaky himself. The sheer hatred in James's eyes as he had held the gun on the unconscious man had almost scared Jack. He understood the murderous rage all too well, but it did not make it easy to watch on another's face.
"Gibbs, tie that rubbish up."

Gibbs hurried to obey, and Jack liberated some of Keane's brandy from his well-stocked drink cabinet. James had a bit more colour in his cheeks and the blank look in his eyes was receding.

"Drink this." At James's questioning glance, he added: "Brandy."

James took the drink and sipped it, his hands curling fiercely around the glass. A flush of colour suffused his face, and he stared at Jack. His voice was quiet with disbelief and a certain degree of wonder. "It's over. It's finally over."

Jack smiled, "Aye, it is. You are going home."

A tightness that had nothing to do with relief gripped Jack as he realised this meant he and James would go back to being on opposite sides. The glow of victory to faded into something far less satisfying, and he met James's eyes and saw the same feeling there.

James looked down and studied the glass in his hand. "Home?" There was no joy in his tone either.

"All secured, Cap'n. What shall I do wi' im?"

Gibbs's voice broke the heavy silence that had fallen over them. His face was suffused with excitement and the thrill of victory.

"Throw him in the hold."

James spoke first and Jack nodded. Gibbs hollered for some aid and he and Fred dragged Keane out of the cabin. Jack helped James off the couch and they headed back out onto the now quiet deck.

The rest of the Pearl's crew were high with victory and achievement. He saw with a sense of sadness that not everyone from his crew had survived the battle. He didn't like losing crew, especially as these men had been loyal. He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder as James obviously realised what he was thinking.

The moment passed as Ana came up to them with her hands on her hips and glared at Jack. She eyed the Cadaver with a longing that Jack found hard to ignore. He knew however that it was not his decision. He did not want to fight her, and hoped she would realise that this wasn't her ship.

"You owe me a ship, Jack."

"He may owe you one, Miss Anamaria, but I do not."

The steel in James's tone did not surprise Jack; he simply wished James hadn't chosen this moment to stand firm. He might have persuaded Ana with more time, but it was out of his hands now. Ana was more than capable of attacking James, and Jack really didn't want to have to make a choice. James met his eyes firmly. Jack saw in that look the certainty James had that Jack's decision would not fall in his favour. Jack tried desperately to think of way out of this which would not involve bloodshed because he was damned if he was going to lose either of them. Stubborn pride always meant trouble.

"Your ship, Norrington?"

Ana's voice was icy but her eyes flashed with fire. Jack saw James's hand go instinctively for the sword at his belt before he controlled the impulse and let both arms to settle at his sides. Jack was
impressed with his control, and he knew that Ana was too. The crew had stiffened in readiness for another battle, but they were also holding back. It was between James and Ana now. James's voice was calm and held no fear, merely a plea for understanding, as he met Ana's eyes.

"I believe my claim on this ship is greater than yours. My blood, and more, was lost here." James looked round the deck, and then met Ana's eyes again. Ana's face lost some of its anger, and a brief flash of something far softer crossed it. James's voice held a tiny quaver quickly subdued as he continued. "It would grieve me greatly to fight you, Ana, because I do not have any argument with you beyond this."

James's eyes swept the assembled crew, and then rested on Jack briefly. Jack swallowed against the sudden lump in his throat. He made a silent plea that this would end well.

James continued, now seemingly oblivious to all but Ana." I am also well aware my chances of success against you are minimal. I am not foolish enough to weigh Jack's older loyalty to you against whatever recent friendship he and I may have formed, but I will not give in easily. I ask that you cede to me in this, for all of us. There is enough gold, silver and gems here, to buy you a ship anyone would be proud of."

He held his hand out for Ana to take, and Jack felt the sudden lift of tension as Ana took it. She laughed, and slapped James hard on the back and said with a sharp-toothed grin. "Yer right, and besides if I leave, Jack wouldn't be able to find his arse anyway."

The crew laughed, and Jack breathed again. He was surprised that James was not insisting on all goods being returned to the crown, but he was not in the habit of looking a gift horse in the mouth. He raised his voice to reclaim the deck.

"Get back to yer work, you scurvy knaves. Remember who's Captain here."

The crew dispersed, including Ana but not without a brief nod of approval at both James and Jack. It was only Jack who witnessed James pale and shut his eyes as he leant heavily against the mast.

"Close shave, eh, James?"

"Not really. Ana is a good woman. I knew she would understand." He looked at Jack and gave a tiny smile. "Hoped, at least."

Jack grinned at him and then felt a familiar heat rush through him. He wanted James and wanted him badly. James caught the look and his breath quickened as he obviously felt answering warmth. His mouth was slightly open and his eyes darker than usual.

"Jack..."

Jack smiled and continued his advance. He was almost on James, when Jase came up behind him. He heard James's muffled curse as he sloped away to examine the plunder.

It was too many hours later when he was finally ready to return to the Pearl. Ana had asked for the chance to sail the Cadaver back to Port Royal, and Jack had agreed. She had set those of Keane's crew not locked up in the hold to work. Everything was under control, and Jack knew Ana would keep her word.

James had gone back to the Pearl not wishing to see too much of the division of plunder. Jack was grateful for the wilful blindness, and felt a sense of something he couldn't quite identify as he thought of James. He was amazed at how much the idea of having to fight James hurt. He pushed the thought to the back of his mind, and concentrated on how James felt, and what they would do
when he got back to his cabin. Jack took a breath and hurried to re-board to Pearl.

Jack entered the cabin with the items he'd decided to keep from the Cadaver. With alcohol, gems and trinkets, it had been a good haul. He was wearing some of them, and James laughed as he saw him.

"You look... shiny."

James advanced on him slowly with a predatory air. The wait had obviously not been easy for him either. Jack felt his groin tighten at the look in his eyes. James took the alcohol out of Jack's hands placing the bottles on the table. He pulled Jack closer to the sleeping quarters as he did so. With each step, James removed another item from Jack, and by the time they got to the door Jack was only wearing his breeches.

"Unfair advantage, mate," Jack gasped as James tweaked his nipple softly.

"We can remedy that."

They were naked, as they fell heavily onto the bed, hands everywhere. Jack found himself straddled by James as both panted heavily. James claimed his mouth in a possessive kiss and Jack responded hungrily. He pushed up against James, wanting more, needing more. It had been too long since he had been taken, and he realised he needed this. James's eyes widened as Jack hissed. "Take me."

"I... I." James stuttered nervously, but his erection prodded hard against Jack, telling another story.

"Just. Do. It."

"Don't want to hurt you..."

"You won't."

James took Jack's cock in his hand, and Jack bucked up with a gasp. James brought him to the edge, and then moved away. Jack swore at him, and tried to stop him moving, but James rubbed his hands over his cock, coating it in Jack's essence to mingle in with his own. Jack groaned and rolled onto his knees.

He felt James position himself behind him. His hands grip his waist. "Ready?"

"Stupid fucking question, love."

Jack was painfully hard and really wished James would just get on with it, or it'd be too late. James laughed at his impatience, and pushed in slowly. Jack grunted at the sudden pain, and he felt James start to come out.

"Jack?"

"Don't you dare, James, just been a while, mate."

"If you are sure."

"I have never been surer, mate," Jack gasped as his arousal peaked.

James shifted his grip, and eased all the way in. He then thrust, his hands tightening. The pain turned to a bolt of sheer pleasure, and Jack pushed back against him. Jack grasped his own cock and they found a punishing but satisfying rhythm.
James's thrusts became erratic, and his breath was heavy and warm as he gasped Jack's name. He came with a groan and Jack followed soon after. James's weight was heavy on his back. James eased out and lay next to him, panting.

"Dear, God, Jack... I."

"Yeah, me too."

They needed to talk about things, but Jack felt sleep beckon and he tumbled happily towards it.

**********

James woke slowly. He could feel Jack's warmth against his back and smiled as he remembered what they'd done. Jack's tight heat, his passion, had been all consuming. It had felt so totally right. The lack of morality even in the cold light of day didn't seem to matter at all. He was unhappy that he would have to leave all this behind and return to Port Royal. The urge to stay was strong, because this life, because Jack was intoxicating. The taking of the Cadaver, the sword fight, the sex, Jack, even the storm had made him feel more alive than he had in too many years. James knew however that while he could lie to Jack and even to himself for a while, he did not belong here. The navy was too much in his blood, just as piracy was in Jack's. He rose from the bed, and left Jack sleeping as he quietly dressed.

How was he going to cope back at Port Royal? It no longer felt like home. He would have to face Elizabeth, Turner, and Governor Swann. Answer questions he didn't want to answer in front of a board of inquiry, even a court martial. Relive something he was just beginning to place in the distant part of his mind. Remember the people who'd died. God, how would he do it? There were so many things to worry about, and he didn't feel ready. He wandered into the day cabin and picked up the strewn items and neatly piled them on the table.

He turned as Jack entered, still naked. He looked at James reproachfully. "You left!"

"I had some things to think about, and didn't want to disturb you."

"Ye know too much thinking is bad for you."

James sighed, and was both disappointed and relieved when Jack dressed. Jack caught the look and grinned. "Don't want to distract you from those things on your mind."

James returned the smile and shook his head. "Pirate."

"Always." Jack picked up the rum bottle and toasted the air. "To a successful endeavour."

James felt suddenly miserable and he sat heavily with a sigh. Jack came up behind him and James turned to meet his eyes. Jack offered the rum, but James shook his head. "Commodores don't drink till the sun's over the yardarm..."

"Yer not a Commodore again yet, love, so don't go all stiff on me now," he paused, and looked at James with such heat that he blushed. "Well, not in the wrong places anyway."

James took the offered drink and sipped at it before returning the bottle to Jack.

"Thought you didn't want to distract me..."

"Sorry, love, now what's on yer mind?"
"Port Royal."

Jack grimaced slightly and then said almost as if it didn't matter, but James could see it was a genuine enough offer, "Ye could always stay, mate. Me crew's got used to you. I think even Ana has warmed to ye."

"Jack..."

That was unfair thought James, his own thoughts echoed back at him.

"I just tell them I couldn't find ye. We send Keane and his lot to Davy Jones's locker. Ana gets her ship, and we can work the rest out later."

"Damn it, Jack. You said it yourself, navy and pirates, too complicated. It wouldn't work and we both know it."

Jack looked as unhappy as James felt. "Aye, I know, but ye have to admit it's a pretty dream." He took a long drink and looked at James intently.

"It's a pretty dream for sure, Jack."

There was a long pause and then Jack said: "Even when you're back being all commodorial, I still get to debauch ye on occasion, aye?"

The light-hearted question didn't quite cover the real insecurity in Jack's tone, and James smiled at him feeling strangely content that Jack was finding it difficult too.

"Debauching is requested and required," he paused as an unwelcome vision of one or the other of them hanged came to mind," as long as we're both careful."

Jack looked at him. "Speakin' of careful, mate. I was just thinking you look a bit too pirate like at the moment."

James looked down at himself and had to agree, but quite what Jack expected him to do about it he didn't know. Keane had taken everything, except the sword and he never intended to touch the thing again.

"What do you expect me to do about it, Jack? I have nothing except these... and they're not even mine!"

"Well, love. If you recall me list of crimes..."

"What?"

James had no idea what he was talking about until Jack beckoned him with a grin to look in the chest. James dug in the chest. Intrigued and irritated. He felt his eyes widen at what he saw. A somewhat battered and stained but serviceable captain's uniform.

"Not got your finery, but I think you might have some use for it?"

James was speechless as he stared at the uniform. He really wasn't sure what he felt. He stroked the rough material of the jacket as he tried to force some noise out, but simply couldn't. He stared at Jack, who took the jacket out of his hands and handed him the shirt.

"Put it on, mate."
Almost mechanically James dressed in what had so much defined his adult years and felt strange. Jack helped him into his jacket, and his ringed hand lingered on James's shoulder before he stood back to admire him.

"Ye make a picture perfect captain too, mate. Sorry you're missing a wig, love."

James saw Jack's wistful grin as he remembered the circumstances of him obtaining the uniform. It was typical of Jack to impersonate a Captain.

"You will have to tell me the story behind this."

"I'd best not, James... yer eyes are green enough as it is..."

Jack's tone was mischievous and his eyes lit up for a second. James really wanted to know exactly what had happened. The sudden humour left him as the reality set in. They were almost out of time for now. He felt strangely restricted and constrained. Was this him anymore? He walked over to the mirror and looked at his reflection, not quite recognising himself. He smoothed the creases out as best he could and straightened his shoulders. He would do this.

**********

James looked through the glass that Jack had given him as Port Royal came into view. He was on the Cadaver. Keane and his more loyal crew were locked in the hold. The other crewmembers had helped bring the Cadaver back to port. The Black Pearl was some distance away, but Jack, to James' unvoiced but grateful relief, had insisted on coming with him. Jack's only comment had been. "Be good to see the whelp and the lass again."

**********

James stood in front of Governor Swann and wished he were anywhere but here. His restored uniform with all its inherent brocade still stifled him. He did not need the sympathy in Swann's eyes because it was too hard to bear.

"I have spoken with Admiral Stevens and he assures me the Court Martial is a mere formality. You have rid us of a most dangerous and evil pirate. The seas will be safer for your efforts. Keane and his crew will hang on the morrow. His ship will go for repairs and a repaint. We will remove the stain of her past and integrate her into our fleet. She will be a fine addition to our ships."

James knew that for him at least the stains on her would always be visible, but he was glad that such a fine ship would end her days doing well.

"I am gratified to hear that, sir." His voice sounded stilted to his own ears and knew Swann had not been oblivious.

"James." Swann's voice was hesitant now, personal. He came round the desk and rested his hands lightly on James's shoulders. "I cannot begin to..."

James shook his head; he did not want to hear this.

"Please, Governor Swann. I hold no grudge against you, or Eliz—Mrs Turner. But I will need some time to adjust."

Swann smiled in relief and said quietly. "And you shall have all the time you need, Commodore."

**********
Jack waited for James to return from his meeting with Swann in the smithy. Will was working and seemed content with the company.

"We're so grateful for everything, Jack. I know it cannot have been easy with the history between you and the Commodore, but he is a good man."

"He ain't bad when you get under the uniform I agree."

"When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow. I don't want to outstay my welcome with your Father-in-law, mate. Ye know with the hangings he might get ideas about stretching my neck."

Will laughed as he held the finished sword up to the light. "I doubt Elizabeth would let him near you, Jack. I know he'd have a fight on his hands from me. I think even Commodore Norrington might..."

He trailed off as he heard footsteps. Jack recognised the tread as James's and looked up a little anxiously. James however looked fine, if a little pale.

"Mr Turner, Captain Sparrow, I was sure I'd find you here. I'm advised that it might be safer for us all if Captain Sparrow comes back with me." Will opened his mouth to object, to offer his and Elizabeth's house. Jack gritted his teeth at the lad's kindness but didn't dare say anything. But James had it in hand. "Do not worry, Mr Turner, he will be perfectly comfortable with me. Come along, Captain."

James nodded at Will, and Jack followed after him, with a final wink at Will.

"Nicely done, James, nicely done."

James smiled down at him once they were out of Will's view and said softly, "I didn't want to waste the night."

"We'd make a pirate out of you, James, love."

"I know, and that's what worries me. I feel far more pirate than Commodore at the moment. I itch."

James's expression was suddenly serious despite the light tone. Jack knew it would only take time. James looked natural in his uniform despite his doubts, although Jack really wished he didn't have the wig.

"It's that wig, mate."

James laughed and led him through the streets to the house he kept, rather than his quarters at the fort. Jack knew James had given his servants the afternoon off, as a reward for their loyalty to him in his absence.

It was a fine house Jack had to agree, and his fingers itched a little in an urge to procure some of the pretty things.

"Jack..."

"All right, all right." Jack frowned but soon lost interest in anything other than James.

They made love with leisurely intent, and afterwards lay together in a sweaty pile of limbs. The night wasn't easy, Jack stayed awake for a long time, not really thinking, just savouring the feel of
James against him. The nightmares that had plagued James returned with a vengeance. He was restless, but Jack's touch soothed him, and he did not waken. Finally Jack slept himself curling close to James.

They woke late, and James looked pale, but with purpose in his eyes and stance. He looked every inch the Commodore as they went to attend the hanging. Jack was not a great supporter of hanging, having been to close for comfort on at least two occasions, but he felt no qualms over this one.

*****

James watched as Keane and his men were led to the scaffold. He briefly scoured the crowd for Jack and found him. Jack saw him and raised his hand in salute. James smiled and returned the gesture. He then rested his eyes back on the man who had changed everything. He was pale and shuffled along. He was broken, and it gave James a vicious sense of pleasure. Keane did not plead or beg unlike the other men with him. James felt no pity for them. They deserved to die. These were the men who had gloriied in Keane's cruelty and taken their own share with no thought as to those they had killed. The men forced into it were on the Pearl safe, and waiting for Jack. Keane's list of crimes was endless. They included, piracy, murder and kidnapping. It went on and on. Finally it was finished, and James watched as Keane died. Justice was served and the faces of the dead that lived in his mind, seemed to look at him with satisfaction. It was time to move on the best way he could. Embrace his life, the old and the new. He knew it would not be easy, but if he did not, Edward Keane would have won, and that he would not accept.

**********

James was working through the sheaf of reports, which seemed to be growing every day. He was near the end of his first week back, and he hadn't run screaming, could now tolerate his uniform, and had even slept three nights out of five. The sympathetic looks were still obvious, but the whispering behind hands had faded to an almost bearable level. Everyone in Port Royal knew something of what had happened, and were quite happily embellishing it because he refused to enlighten any of them with the real story. There was a knock on his door, and he sighed. Not more reports surely?

"Come in."

He looked up and swallowed hard. Elizabeth Turner, nee Swann stood nervously at the door. She looked as beautiful as he remembered, but paler, and younger. He'd only seen her from a distance since he'd returned. He had been grateful for her discretion. But he knew they both had to face each other. She was as always braver than he. She was looking at him intently. Her eyes over bright, and he realised they were unshed tears; he forced himself to speak as the silence threatened to become awkward. "Elizabeth."

The uncertainty in his tone annoyed him, but she met his eyes with gratitude obvious in them. With a slightly faltering step, she came towards him. Without conscious thought, before he even realised what he was doing, he was round the desk and had taken her hands in his. He was shocked to feel how cold they were. Her voice was as unsteady as his had been.

"I just needed to see you, J—james. Will said I should give you more time, but I need you to know how sorry I am. I never meant... I understand if you cannot forgive me, hate me even. I. But don't be too hard on my father..."

James managed a small smile at that. Governor Swann was always helpless in the face of his daughter's determination.
Elizabeth wasn't looking at him anymore, and he felt her shaking. Fine tremors ran throughout her body. It concerned him. Finally she looked up, and tears streamed down her face. He hadn't seen Elizabeth cry since she was twelve years old. It would be so easy to forgive her, and to his annoyance he could hear Jack's voice in his head, telling him to let it go. Shut up, pirate, he thought in fond exasperation. He led her to the chair at his desk, and handed her a handkerchief. He crouched down in front of the chair, wincing at the discomfort as his uniform tightened. Damn thing. He gave Elizabeth time and waited till she met his eyes.

"What you did was very foolish, but I know it wasn't done with ill intent. You have a good heart. Yes, I am angry with you, but I could never hate you. I'm not even sure I haven't forgiven you already, but it is difficult at present."

She sniffed and managed the slightest of smiles. "Thank you, James."

She stood, and hesitated, James wondered what to do. In an impulsive movement as she stepped towards him, he pulled her close, and kissed her head. A sigh of relief escaped her as she hugged him fiercely. They drew apart, and looked at each other a little awkwardly. James wondered for a brief moment, just how things might have gone differently had he been less concerned with appearances when he was courting her. But he had no regrets. He knew where both their hearts lay now.

A knock on the door sounded unnaturally loud, but James was relieved at the distraction. He felt a little raw. At James's command, Will Turner entered, tense and watchful, but as he took in the scene between them he relaxed. Elizabeth ran to him, and Will slipped his arm around her. James watched their silent communication, the way they merged together seamlessly, and thought again of Jack. James felt suddenly uncomfortable. Will's steady gaze seemed to turn him inside out.

Elizabeth seemed to sense his discomfort, and said. "We should let you..."

She was interrupted by another knock, and James muttered under his breath. The Turners looked at him a little shocked at the turn of phrase. James was amused at their almost matched expressions. He didn't answer the knock immediately, and said, "Mr Turner. I will want to engage your services in a commission. I'll come to the smithy sometime today."

Will's eyes lit up, he smiled and nodded before exiting, his arm still tight round Elizabeth. James watched them go and realised that a hard knot of tension that he hadn't even been aware of had eased. He turned his attention to the clerk who had entered, and forced his mind back on business.

Epilogue

18 Months later

James was fast asleep when Jack climbed in the window. He was laid on his side facing the window, his arm stretched out as if searching for something. Shafts of moonlight lit the room and gave it a silver glow. James wore a nightshirt, which covered him far too much for Jack's liking. He looked peaceful and Jack considered not waking him. From all that he'd heard, he knew that the good Commodore had been busy. He certainly needed his sleep. But it had been two months since he'd seen James.

It was the longest time between visits they'd had. Jack had been to Port Royal in between, for business, and once to see the new addition to the Turner family, but he hadn't been able to catch James. He'd left a couple of gifts, information, and promises, but he hadn't managed to see him in the flesh as it were. Jack took a moment to admire what lovely flesh it was.
The quiet of the scene before him was broken as James shifted his position onto his back. He mumbled to himself and began to move restlessly around the bed. The dream was obviously not a pleasant one, and James looked as if he was in pain. Decision made, thought Jack.

He closed the drapes; re secured the window and ensured that the door was locked. He laid his weapons lightly on the floor and walked toward the bed. James had settled a little but was still tense. Jack knelt on the bed and eased the sheet from around James's waist. The nightshirt had bunched up as James had shifted and it was an easy task for Jack to expose what he wanted.

He bent his mouth to the task and appreciated James's low moan of pleasure. James didn't waken and Jack realised he probably thought he was having a spectacularly good dream. Completion did not take long and as he came, James murmured, "Jack", which sent a jolt of affection through the pirate. "Still on your mind, eh love?" He said softly. He was uncomfortably hard and wished James would wake up. He'd had enough of his own hand. There had of course been opportunities with willing mates, but Jack had told himself the waiting made the debauching far more pleasurable. He almost regretted it now. He cursed softly to himself and considered biting, but he knew that would merely get his head blown off by the pistol he knew was under James's pillow.

He sat undecided until a quiet murmur broke into his thoughts, "You sound like a herd of elephants even when you are trying to be quiet."

"I do not... I am Captain Jack Sparrow..."

"...the worst pirate the Caribbean has ever seen."

"You're awake!"

"Do you truly believe I could sleep through that?"

Jack grinned at the compliment to his skills. "When did you wake up?"

"When you stumbled over the sill."

"I did not..." James smirked and held his hand up to stop Jack's torrent of complaints, and Jack obeyed, as he liked the expression on his Commodore's face.

"Jack, we have, as I see it, two choices here. One, attend to that problem of yours and then work out exactly what we're going to do about getting you away from here, or two, argue until dawn breaks and then think of a way to get you away from here. I know which one I would prefer. Opportunities are not as plentiful for me as they are for you. Two months Jack!"

The frustration in James's tone amused Jack and he didn't disabuse James of the notion he was alone in refraining, but it pleased him nonetheless.

"Your logic is impeccable as ever, love."

In very little time both were naked and James eyed Jack's body hungrily, Jack grinned and pounced. A friendly tussle started, but Jack knew whatever happened neither of them would lose. This time Jack won, as he found exactly where to lick, to melt his commodore.

"Cheat."

"Pirate, love."

"Ahh—Jack!"
Jack placed his hands on James's hips, pinning him in place as he took his cock in his mouth. James tried to thrust but Jack wouldn't allow him to move. He swore softly at Jack who replied by nipping his inner thigh, and James groaned louder at the loss of contact on his cock, which was painfully hard. Jack moved away briefly and brought out a small phial of something from his hair and James was startled into rather strangled laughter.

"You never cease to amaze me, Captain Jack Sparrow."

Jack grinned at him and poured some oil onto his hands before preparing his cock. James obligingly lifted up his arse and Jack eased a now slick finger into James. He groaned and thrust back onto the finger. Jack was pleased to see how relaxed James was and knew he would need little preparation. He moved his finger round and James moaned especially when he removed it.

"Please...."

They shifted into position and Jack braced his arms allowing James to ease the strain to his legs. Jack slipped inside James easily and thrust. James moaned in pleasure and grasped himself. They set a hard and fast rhythm. Jack loved the hot warmth of James and how he moaned his name on nearly every breath, demanding it harder and faster as he pumped his cock in time with Jack's thrusts. It wasn't long before they both came. Jack fell on James with a groan and kissed his sweaty forehead. James sighed as Jack rolled off him.

"Dear God, I won't be able to walk tomorrow."

Later, much later James's hands went to a tender spot on Jack's shoulder and caressed it. "New scar," he said softly. Jack didn't want to talk about it because this was their time. He brushed James's hair from his eyes.

"Keeping it long, eh?"

James sighed and Jack knew he was irritated at the evasion but was still surprised when he found himself flipped onto his back and pinned down. James eyed him fiercely, his voice heavy with heat and intensity. All pretence was gone now as James's stare burned into him and seemed to turn him inside out.

"You know what scares me the most, Jack? That I'll read of your death in a report that crosses my desk, months after you died. Hear someone tell me you are dead and have to pretend I don't care," he paused as his voice cracked and he shut his eyes briefly. His long lashes drew Jack's gaze just as they always did. Then he looked Jack firmly in the eyes, "And my greatest fear? The horrible god forsaken certainty that one day I will have endure your hanging by my own men, and pretend that my heart hasn't just shattered."

Jack was caught by the love warring with anger in James's face and with all laughter gone from his voice replied. "I can't promise ye the first or the second love, but ye have no need to worry on account of the last."

"What?" James looked puzzled but did not loosen his grip on Jack, merely stared at him, his eyes hooded, but there was a hint of hope in them.

"You are looking at a privateer."

James sighed and shook his head, disbelief clear in his eyes. His voice held a hint of weariness that Jack did not like.

"Jack that has never been successful before. Your spelling is terrible. And your writing looks like a
"Now, Jamie-lad have some faith in ole Captain Sparrow. I wouldn't lie to you," at James's disbelieving gaze, he amended that to, "I wouldn't lie to you, often," before he continued his train of thought, "the French."

"What about them?"

"I don't like them... Eunuchs, obsessed with raisins."

The logic of this defeated James, and his grip loosened on Jack's arms. "What are you talking about, Sparrow?"

"I hold an official and totally legal Letter of Marque against the French. Pirates days are numbered, love, and this seemed to have profit in it..."

"Oh."

James's voice was faint, and the newborn hope, relief and happiness that flared in his face made Jack smile. The work he'd had to do to gain the letter was suddenly worth it. James was speechless for a moment, opened his mouth to say something, and then changed his mind. With something approaching pirate logic he simply kissed Jack into submission.

A long time later as they lay next to each other, sated and exhausted, Jack said: "So yer pleased, then?"

James simply groaned and pulled Jack close to him, "Just don't lose it, please?"

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