

*WINDS OF CHANGE*

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Cover art by *David Richardson and Alexandria Corza*

To PS - for showing me that love can last.



*Portsmouth, 1801. England is at war.*

All was in readiness.

The old tin box of mathematics texts had been down in the hold for months to get it out from underfoot. The Purser had given his permission to keep it here in the locked store-room with other valuables, and it was not unreasonable for Lieutenants Marshall and Archer to be searching here, since they'd volunteered to coach one of their shipmates on His Majesty's Frigate *Calypso*. Midshipman Wilcoxon, a likeable young officer, needed to polish his skills if he hoped to pass the examination and qualify as a candidate for Lieutenant, and they wanted to help him succeed.

A candle-lantern lay on the floor, its flame snuffed from its apparently accidental fall. If anyone were to walk in, they would have a means of explaining their presence here, and even an excuse for slight disorderliness.

As long as they were not taken completely unaware. As long as they had time to pull their clothes together, to hide their true purpose.

William Marshall tensed as footsteps approached the door. He relaxed at the light scratching on the worn boards, their prearranged signal.

He pulled the door open only enough for his lover to dart through, then closed it and set a barrel where it would block its opening, a precaution to provide the moment they might need. He rested his rump on the barrel and pulled Davy down upon him, and in the dark there was only the whisper of frantic clutching, urgent kisses, loosening trouser buttons with one hand to reach in and find that hot, smooth cock that leapt at his touch. A minute of quiet, intense activity, then Davy was shivering against him, a muted whimper the only sound besides their breathing.

They were silent for a long moment after, listening for footsteps, for any sound of movement in the companionway. But they were safe, so far, hearing nothing

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but the ever-present murmur of the sea.

He could hear Davy fumble with clothing, composing himself, caught a kiss in passing as his lover knelt at Will's feet. Then those clever fingers were moving on his body, unbuttoning, seeking. The unbearable sweetness of lips and tongue were nearly enough to break the control that kept him silent, but he bit back the cry of pleasure as weeks of yearning were brought to a blinding surge of fulfillment.

He sat panting, unable to move, stroking the golden head resting in his lap. But only for a moment. His lover slid up to share a kiss; then, still without a word, they retrieved the lantern, struck a light, and located the volume which should help to unfold the arcane secrets of navigational geometry. There was time enough for a final embrace and a quick inspection to assure themselves that there was no visible evidence of their illicit encounter.

Davy paused a moment in the empty companionway. "Will—the Captain just passed word. The pleasure of our company is requested at the change of watch. All lieutenants and warrant officers. Looks as though the rumors are true."

"At least we'll know, then." There was no way, there were no words, to express the fear in both their hearts. Change was in the wind; the rumors had been circulating since before *Calypso* arrived in Portsmouth. If Captain Smith were to be transferred, as the rumors suggested, their lives were about to change drastically.

"If it's true..." David Archer bit his lip, "and if the Admiralty are in a hurry...you and I may be sailing off in different ships by this time tomorrow."

Will could not bring himself to admit it, but he knew that the past year they'd had together was more than they could have hoped for. He'd only agreed to this hurried tryst because he also knew that it might be their very last time together as shipmates and lovers. If they were to be given different assignments at the change of watch, they

might never in this life see one another again.

But he could not bear to say that aloud, so he tried on a brave smile instead. "We must trust to our luck, Davy."

David's handsome features were somber. "Will, don't forget there are two kinds of luck. Dame Fortune's not always kind. She can be a cannibal bitch who eats her own young."

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With the ship's bell ringing the change of watch on the quarterdeck above, *Calypso's* officers stood in their usual places around the briefing table in the Captain's handsomely appointed cabin. Over the years aboard *Calypso*, as officers were lost or transferred and others came aboard in their place, Will and David had gradually shifted places until they customarily sat beside one another. David Archer had always enjoyed this bit of stolen closeness, but it held a special poignancy now, with the chance of imminent loss hovering between them.

Captain Sir Paul Edward Smith, the man who had commanded them led them so ably for the past four years, stepped through the door. He took a visual roll of his officers, then bade them sit. As he looked around the table, studying his men, as if bidding them farewell, David could hear the pulse beating in his ears. Not much longer now. He shifted one foot slightly, so it just touched Will's. He would have prayed, but he had no hope in that direction.

"Gentlemen," the Captain said finally, "I know the rumors have been flying of late, and I regret to inform you that they are, for once, entirely accurate." David caught his breath as a wordless murmur of protest passed around the table.

Smith acknowledged it with a nod. "Yes. I have been granted the signal honor of command of a third-rate ship of the line, the *Valiant*, 74 guns." Was there a trace of irony in the way he said 'signal honor'? Hard to be sure, but it was a rare sailor, officer or rating, who would choose to leave a frigate—particularly one as well-kept and lucky

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as the *Calypso*. David was sure that the Captain had never sought or desired this promotion. On the other hand, a captain who was doing well might expect to move up in the size and importance of the ship under his command. A third-rate was probably the highest Sir Paul could be assigned and still retain independent action—the second-rates were generally only used for line of battle, and the handful of first-rates carried Admirals.

“I shall leave this afternoon for a meeting at the Admiralty in London,” Sir Paul continued, “and I shall not return to *Calypso* as her captain. Some of you gentlemen—” he looked round the table with a measuring glance, “will also be saying farewell to the old girl.”

Beneath the table Will’s knee pressed against David’s, as though the contact would keep them together. But Will’s face showed only the keen interest that one would expect in a junior officer hoping to continue under a fighting captain; David hoped his own expression was equally impenetrable.

“As much as possible,” Captain Smith said, “I shall follow Naval tradition and strip the ship bare of most of its best officers. Mr. Marshall, Mr. Archer—when I return from London in a week’s time, I expect you both to report to me aboard the *Valiant*.”

*Both of us. Both of us...* As he let himself breathe again, expressing his own thanks in tandem with Will, David could sense the tension leaving his lover’s body even as it drained out of his own. It would be delightful if they were to have a little time to spend on shore leave together, but even if not... They were being transferred together. They would stay together.

Thank God.

“We have had our glory days on this frigate, gentlemen,” the Captain said. “Time we go on to bigger things. As for you, Mr. Drinkwater,” Smith turned to his First Lieutenant, a sturdy, amiable gentleman whose keen intelligence and quick action had saved all their lives a



year before, "Sir, I need not fear for the well-being of our faithful *Calypso*, for I must leave you here—"

David saw the hint of hurt in Lt. Drinkwater's open, honest face. He had been promised promotion over a year ago, and by rights he should have been given a command by now. He should at least have been given the chance to transfer with his Captain to a larger, more prestigious ship. But nothing in His Majesty's Service was guaranteed, and Drinkwater was a loyal, disciplined officer; he merely nodded. "Yes, sir."

"As her Captain," Smith finished.

Drinkwater's mouth opened without a sound coming forth. Finally he managed, "But, Captain— Sir, *Calypso* is a post-ship!"

"Indeed, Sir, and you are now her Post-Captain. Allow me to be the first to offer my congratulations."

And this was, in real truth, a signal honor. As a rule, a lieutenant with sufficient service and other qualifications would first be made Commander of a smaller vessel, often a sloop-of-war. To be jumped a rank and given a fifth-rate frigate like *Calypso* as a first command was extraordinary.

"Thank you, Captain." Drinkwater shook his head dazedly. "Sir, how—?"

"You should have had your own command months ago, sir," Smith said. "As it happened, none came available in good season." He favored the new-made captain with an enigmatic smile. "As it also happened, I was in a position to call in a favor." He let it go at that, and turned to more routine business of the transfer—considerably easier, since Drinkwater was nearly as conversant with the *Calypso*'s business as was Smith himself.

As Captain Smith named the men who would be transferring with them, David realized that all of them had been involved in the pursuit and rescue of the renegade ship on which he, Will, and the Captain had been abducted the year before. There were not many, less than a dozen—

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Barrow, coxswain of the Captain's launch, was among them. So was Klingler, who had been taken off the gunnery crew and reassigned as the Captain's steward since injuring his shoulder in a boarding some months back. They would also be bringing along a few midshipmen who had come aboard *Calypso* under the Captain's care, youngsters whose parents had entrusted them to him. But the only warrant officer transferring with them was the ship's master, Mr. West; the *Valiant* had lost her own navigator in a freak accident while on her way back from the Indies. Drinkwater would be left with a sound skeleton crew, as well as the privilege of choosing his own lieutenants.

Before dismissing his officers for the last time, Captain Smith had Klingler bring in a bottle of claret, and they drank the King's health and success to Captain Drinkwater. For one brief moment amidst the joviality, Will turned and gave David a quick smile that he'd have been willing to die for. Thank God they'd had that tryst in the storeroom earlier—even with the fires temporarily damped, the excitement and delight in Will's dark eyes under his mop of gypsy-black hair made David want to tumble his lover on the floor, here and now. Which would not only be a great mistake, but the last he'd ever make. And that would be a pity, since he now had so very much to live for.

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The following week turned out to be one of those rare stretches of time when everything went as planned; even the weather was cooperative, crisp autumn sunshine instead of the usual chill drizzle. Captain Drinkwater spent the first full day aboard ship, feverishly posting letters and making preparations to take command. The next day his wife and family arrived, and he went off to visit with them ashore for another three days, leaving Will and David to attend to the necessary ship's routine.

They were perfectly happy to have *Calypso* to

themselves, although with some three hundred other souls aboard that was really only a figure of speech. But their former first lieutenant deserved some time to himself, and the chance of a little privacy. Once Drinkwater officially took command, duty required him to sleep aboard his ship. They had been at sea for six months during this tour, and there was no telling when the man would next have the chance to spend a night with his wife.

But the *Calypso*'s new captain returned at the appointed time looking rested and cheerful, carrying his four-year-old son on his shoulder. His red-headed wife beamed with pride as he read the document aloud that required him to present himself and take command of the *Calypso*, and a spontaneous cheer rose from the crew when the lengthy formality concluded.

"All quiet, gentlemen?" Drinkwater asked.

"Yes, sir," Will said. "Stores are all aboard, including the powder you ordered. The shore-leave rotation is proceeding smoothly, and the shipyard master has promised a replacement for the main topgallant yard—we may have to prod them a bit, but apart from that, everything is well in hand. Your orders, Captain?"

Drinkwater positively beamed at the address. "I'm expecting an old shipmate of mine, Keith Washburn, to arrive later this afternoon to assume duties as First Lieutenant—not that I wouldn't have been equally pleased to see you in that position—and I am appointing Mr. Wilcoxon Acting Lieutenant. Since everything seems to be under control, my parting orders to you both are to spend the next three days ashore. Word is that *Valiant* has been delayed at Plymouth for some reason, so you may as well make use of the time while you have it."

David grinned. "Thank you, Captain." There was little for them left to do aboard the *Calypso*, in any case, and their dunnage was already stowed in their sea-chests, to be delivered to the *Valiant* whenever she might appear.

As they paid their respects to Drinkwater before going

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ashore—for all they knew, he might be ordered out on the next tide—he had one last order: “Enjoy your leave, gentlemen.” But they had hardly taken a step toward the rail before he added, “And while you’re ashore, do stop at the wharf and remind them that we require that last item.”

“Aye-aye, sir.” Will hid a smile as he gave a farewell salute. *Calypso*’s new captain had an amiable disposition, and it was unlikely that he’d ever be one of the iron-rod disciplinarians every seaman dreaded, but it was clear that his wooden mistress had already seized command of his every thought. Marshall could almost regret that he and Davy had not been able to stay aboard the old girl. A bigger ship, more responsibility, more prestige...all well and good, but there was not a man in His Majesty’s Service below the rank of Admiral who would sail aboard a stodgy ship of the line if he could trade it for the freedom and adventure of a frigate. And Will suspected half the Admirals would make that choice, too. But so long as he’d be aboard that third-rate behemoth with Davy at his side, he was happy enough.

“Food first, or a room?” his lover asked as their jollyboat scraped on gravel at the Sally Port.

“A laundress,” Will said. “If Captain Smith makes an early return, I want the salt out of my underwear.” Of all the little comforts landsmen took for granted, the simplest was the privilege of handing off their much-worn clothing to a woman who would wash them in fresh water to rinse the salt out, and press and starch their dress-shirts.

Davy agreed to this plan and soon, unburdened of their laundry bags, they proceeded to the shipyard wharf and loitered there until a combination of carefully distributed coins and implacable presence had the desired effect. When Captain Drinkwater’s coveted topgallant yard was on its way to *Calypso*, their duty was discharged, and they were hungry—for food as well as for each other.

Three days of freedom. Three day...and nights. It was not as though they could afford to relax their vigilance or

discretion; sodomy was as much a capital offense in all of England as it was in the Navy, and of any town, Portsmouth could almost be considered the Navy ashore. But they could buy a little privacy, and there was nothing remarkable about two young lieutenants economizing by sharing a room in an inn less respectable than the Keppel's Head, where the Drinkwater family was lodged.

Luck was with them. The tavern was nearly empty—a lull between dinner and supper—and none of the few faces in the Anchor's taproom belonged to anyone they knew. They ordered a simple meal, sausage and mash with the house ale, and Davy proceeded to consume his sausage in a manner that had Will blushing scarlet and kicking him under the table. He wouldn't have been so unkind if he hadn't been ready to burst his breeches at the sensations his lover's performance evoked.

"For God's sake, Davy, hurry up and finish the damned thing!" he finally growled.

"But, Will, it's our first meal ashore!" Davy said, running his tongue over his lips with a look of unbelievable innocence. "You wouldn't want me to ruin my digestion, would you?"

They were sitting in a corner, out of sight of most of the other patrons, and the bored-looking codger behind the bar was paying no attention. David's back was to the room; Marshall sat across from him. Astonished at his own boldness, Will slipped one foot out of its shoe and planted his toes squarely in David's crotch, not enough pressure to hurt, but enough that he could feel his lover's excitement at the game he was playing. "You can *eat* on the ship," he said, as Davy choked on his mouthful. Will left his foot where it was for just a moment, enjoying the effect, then went back to behaving himself.

"You're absolutely right!" Davy said when he was able to compose himself. He finished the food and drained his cup. "It's amazing, Will. I never realized the barnacles in Portsmouth were so fierce—I could swear one of them

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was just trying to get a foothold on my bowsprit.”

“It’s the shipworm you must watch out for,” Marshall said. “They’ll bore right into your bottom if you aren’t careful.”

“Only if my luck’s in,” Davy said under his breath.

Marshall just shook his head. At least he had worn his cloak for protection against the sharp autumn wind; he could fold it over his arm and prevent embarrassing himself when he stood up.

After what seemed like forever, they were upstairs with the door bolted and the keyhole blocked. Since the idyllic week they’d spent traveling together after they’d first become lovers, this was only the second time they’d had such privacy.

Davy came into his arms like *Calypso* sailing into port. The feel of his body pressed full-length against Will’s own, the warmth, the scent of him, was simply overwhelming. What a wonderful thing it was to be able to hold him close like this!

“I don’t know what I’d have done if they’d separated us,” Davy said, sliding his hands up under Will’s jacket. “It isn’t just this...”

“This is good, though, you must admit.” Will pulled back far enough to start unbuttoning Davy’s waistcoat. “Never expected we’d have three whole days.”

“And nights.” Davy pulled his face down for a kiss.

“Even better.”

Their conversation trailed off as holding, kissing, and undressing occupied their attention. Before long Will was sitting on the edge of the bed with Davy in his lap. For some reason Davy was greedy for kisses, and Will had no objection to obliging him. But eventually he slid back onto the pillow and Davy followed along, widening the scope of his attention down Will’s throat, down his chest...

“Barnacles on the hull,” Davy said, and his mouth fastened onto one nipple as he pinched the other.

“If you keep on with that,” Will warned raggedly, “the

shipworm will get you.”

“Mmm?”

“As soon as I – *oh!*” Will knew that he’d intended to say something, but the barnacle had fastened onto his bowsprit and he simply couldn’t think. He tried to reach down and pull Davy up so they could be face to face, but his lover wasn’t cooperating and he just had to lie there and revel in the delightful attentions. It was sinfully voluptuous to watch as Davy licked slowly up the underside of his cock, then met his eyes and slid his mouth down around it. Will meant to hold back, but Davy, always more adventuresome in bed, simply wasn’t having that.

“You could—if you’re that hungry, you could’ve had a second sausage!” Will gasped.

“Mmmmmmmmmmmmm.”

Now that—that humming was utterly unfair, and what little control Will had left went out the window. He climaxed much too soon and much too fast, but Davy seemed to be having a great deal of fun pushing him over the edge, so he quit trying to hold back.

When he finally stopped quivering, Davy grinned up at him and said, “Feeling better?”

“Mmm. Come up here, you randy devil.”

“I’d rather stay down here and see what else comes up.”

“Insubordination, Mr. Archer?”

“Absolutely, Mr. Marshall.” But in his usual contrary way, Davy straightened from his folded-up position. He stretched out beside Will on the double bed, burrowing his face into the side of Will’s neck and caressing his chest and shoulder as though he could not touch him enough. “My God, I love you.”

The open admission touched Will’s heart, but it also embarrassed him most fiercely. “I cannot imagine why—and no, don’t tell me.” Flustered, he stopped Davy’s mouth by kissing him—always a pleasant task but especially so when that mouth had just given him such

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pleasure. As he did, he felt his lover's cock pressing insistently against his belly. "And what would you like me to do with this?" he asked, fondling it.

Davy arched against his hand, his blond head rolling back against the pillow. "If you have some slush to hand...when you feel up to the task..."

Will caught his meaning and shifted so he could reach down into his bag, which lay open beside the bed. "No slush...if the cook caught me stealing fat you know he'd ask what I wanted it for, and I'm no good at lying." He found the little jar of salve, so useful against windburn—and even more so for other purposes—and managed to get the stopper off one-handed.

"It's been too long," Davy said. "I want to feel you inside me." Although they might stretch their rule of shipboard celibacy for the occasional quick release, they never risked actual joining, however much they might long for it. That left physical evidence; Will had known a man to be hanged by a doctor's testimony.

"You may have to wait longer still. If you wanted this—" Will slid a well-oiled finger into his lover's bottom, "then why the devil did you persist in making me fire off, hmm?"

Davy went all inarticulate on him—understandably, as Will was applying both mouth and fingers to achieve that end. And his lover's excitement, the little cries and the flush that reddened his cheeks and lips, was getting Will aroused all over again. In a very short while, he would be reloaded and ready once more.

He grinned at his own mental gymnastics, kissing his way up Davy's flat stomach to lick and bite around the flat pink nipples, teasing the buds until Davy groaned and tangled his fingers in Will's hair. It always amused him to consider the euphemisms they both used for sexual congress—running out the guns, sounding the bottom, this new joke about barnacles and shipworm. Even when they were engaging in utterly shameless behavior such as this,



he never thought of his actions in their crude anatomical terms.

It wasn't that he didn't know the words—anyone who lived on a ship for even a few weeks was guaranteed a complete education in sexual epithets. The difference, he decided, lay in the feelings between them. When he knelt between his lover's thighs and raised Davy's legs, sliding into his body as Davy pulled him close and rose up to meet him, something wonderful happened, something that took this out of the realm of mere physical union and into a touching of souls.

But it was also something that overpowered thought, and for a little while there was nothing but the heat between them, and the rhythm, and the sharp musky scent that rose off Davy's body when he was aroused. That first time had taken the edge off for Will, as his clever sweetheart had no doubt intended it should. This time, it seemed that he was climbing a long hill, pushing a little closer to the peak with every thrust, Davy pulling him along as that tight hot channel squeezed around him. And then he was flying, falling, with just enough control to muffle his cry against Davy's shoulder.

He tried to roll away, but Davy held onto him. "Stay, please."

He rolled a little to one side so part of his weight was on the mattress while most of his body stayed draped across his lover, appreciating the warmth of that embracing body as his naked back cooled in the air of the unheated room. He had worried about squashing Davy the first time they'd done this, but Davy convinced him that he really did enjoy it. Will had always loved it—he had never known anything so surpassingly glorious. The pleasure, the closeness, the astonishing reality that someone so fine and loving and desirable would love *him*...his mind could not encompass it. How fortunate they were to have found one another, and how incredibly lucky they were to have been transferred together. *"I don't know what I'd have*

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done if they'd separated us." Davy's words echoed ominously in his mind. Will didn't know, either.

Unaware of his lover's active cogitation, Davy flipped the blanket over Will's back and snuggled down beneath him. "When you have a command," he murmured in Will's ear, "I must be your lieutenant. Even if we can never leave the ship at the same time. We must stay together."

"Oh, yes." Warm and wholly satiated, sliding into a doze, Will was ready to abandon his gloomy thoughts. "Always."

"It isn't that I'm a good subordinate," Davy said, with that tone in his voice that warned of a joke on the way. "It's simply that I adore serving under you."

Will bit him.

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Five days later, the bed, the room, and Portsmouth itself were far behind them. Sails trimmed and filling in the Channel breeze, the *Valiant* sailed out of Spithead Harbor, on her way to Land's End to rendezvous with the merchant convoy she was to escort. She moved easily in the water for such a big ship, though clumsy compared to *Calypso's* lively dancing. *Valiant's* bottom had been scraped when she'd returned from the Indies, though, and she answered well to the helm. She had been cleaned internally as well when she reached Plymouth, and thoroughly inspected, which accounted for her delay in reaching Portsmouth. Her crew also seemed in order, though with only a few hours' acquaintance Will could hardly say he knew any of them besides the handful of rated seamen they'd brought from *Calypso*. But all of the *Valiant's* officers had been transferred away to other ships, and that, they were to learn, was not by accident or coincidence.

And they'd also learned that their new ship's current mission was more than mere escort duty. Will and David had reported back to *Calypso* when their leave ended, only

to be told that Captain Smith expected them for dinner at the Spice Island Inn, near the Sally Port. That was well and good—they had dined there before, often in company with the Captain or other officers.

But when they arrived at the inn, the Captain's expression, usually composed and often enough good-humored, was more threatening than a tropical squall line. "Gentlemen. I've reserved a private room. If you'll come with me?"

But conversation during dinner was inconsequential and pleasant. It was not until they'd finished the pudding and begun a bottle of port that the Captain changed the tone from social to professional. The briefing he delivered explained the cause of his displeasure—and it had very little to do with being deprived of his beloved frigate.

The *Valiant* was a trouble ship. Not a mutinous vessel, which any captain would dread, but a ship so beset by problems large and small that some of the men were beginning to whisper that she was cursed.

"It's cursed carelessness, at the very least," Smith said. "Powder spilled in a passageway where no cartridge had any reason to be, splicing come undone, loose bolts in gun-carriages on the lower decks. But some of the incidents could not be dismissed so easily. Half a barrel of flour spilled into the small-arms locker and soaked with water until it turned to paste, then left to foul the weapons—that was clearly deliberate."

"But to what purpose, sir?" Archer asked. "Was Captain Venner the sort of man likely to inspire mutiny? I've heard nothing but good of him."

"I think not. The only possible fault is with his health—he has been poorly since a bout of malaria in the Indies, and his physical debility is the reason he has chosen to go ashore. His illness may have prevented strict oversight—you gentlemen know that command requires a strong constitution—but his first lieutenant was capable enough to handle that, under ordinary circumstances. No,

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what the Admiralty fears—and I fear they are correct—is that these occurrences were acts of genuine sabotage.”

Will frowned. “Captain, was the ship endangered by these acts?”

“Not to any great extent—and that is what makes them so puzzling at first glance. For the most part, the timing of the incidents presented very little danger to the ship as a whole. One member of the gun crew suffered a broken leg when the bolts fetched loose during gunnery practice, but the spilled powder was swept up by a carpenter’s mate, the flour-paste was found by the ship’s Marines when they went to get arms for target practice—these are only a few examples; there were nearly twenty incidents in all.”

“Undetected, sir?”

“Yes. Though when the facts were examined *in toto*, it seemed that many of them should have been discovered sooner, and that certain officers seemed to be less aware than they might have been.”

“Sir—is that why the commissioned officers have all been transferred?”

The Captain gave David’s question a nod of approval. “Exactly so. Now, her previous cruise was in the Indies. Her last major action, on her return trip, was the defense of a convoy of East Indiamen when it was set upon by a superior French force. In the course of the battle, *Valiant* lost two lieutenants and over a hundred crew—grape and chain across the deck.”

Both lieutenants nodded. French ships and privateers seeking to capture a prize were less likely to use the smashing force of ball shot, which could punch a hole through a foot-thick hull but inevitably destroyed valuable cargo in the process. When hunting for profit they preferred to load their guns with the smaller grapeshot and fragments of chain, terribly destructive to a ship’s rigging and deadly to the human beings on the deck. Casualties could number in the hundreds when a whole ship’s complement was joined in battle.

"After the convoy returned," Smith continued, "*Valiant* received a draft of men—about a quarter able seamen, the rest a mix of volunteers, pressed men, and convicts, one hundred fifty in all, to make up what they'd lost over the previous year. And it was after they came aboard that the incidents began. At first the problems could be written off as the inevitable inefficiency of a batch of untrained lubbers, but instead of diminishing over time as one would expect, the problems increased."

Will thought he saw where the Captain was heading. "If I understand correctly, sir—the Admiralty has tasked you to identify the saboteur?"

"Tasked *us*, Mr. Marshall. The two of you, as well. Their concern is that this problem may be related to the efforts of Irish nationalists to collaborate with the French. They suspect that the sabotage aboard this ship may be a trial run to see how thoroughly a ship-of-the-line might be disabled by deliberate sabotage."

Will bit his tongue. It was not his place to suggest that this seemed a great leap of imagination on the part of the admiralty.

The Captain smiled at his obvious restraint. "They have sources of information we do not possess, Mr. Marshall. It seems there are other indicators of trouble aimed at His Majesty's Navy. I was informed of only a few details; most of their reasoning is as mysterious to me as it is to you gentlemen. However—no matter who is doing the damage or what his motives may be, consider this: The incident with the flour-paste in the weapons locker meant hours wasted in cleaning the small arms, and in fact that provided the opportunity to educate the landsmen assigned that task. But imagine for a moment the chaos that would result if that discovery were made as the ship was clearing the decks for battle."

No answer was needed. They had excellent imaginations, and the picture was not a pretty one.

"As to why we were chosen, gentlemen—it seems the

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First Lord was most impressed with our ability to overcome obstacles in regard to last year's adventure in Portsmouth, so we have only our own ingenuity to thank. Or to blame, as the case may be."

"That is—very gratifying, sir," Will said.

"Yes, so I told His Lordship," Smith agreed. "And I am sure we are all equally pleased that our ability has brought us such a reward."

Will noticed Davy's raised eyebrow and quickly said, "Indeed, sir." Davy coughed, a sensible alternative to voicing the ironic remark he no doubt had in mind.

"I plan to make best use of our own crewmen in this matter. I am appointing Barrow *Valiant's* bosun, and have informed him of the considerable laxness of his predecessor in the matter of keeping the ship in fighting trim. I left it to him to hand-pick the ratings to be transferred—men he can trust—so we will have at least a squad of old Calypsos we can count on. We will remain in port for only so long as it takes to load additional supplies; the ship had originally been expected to remain nearby, on blockade, but that would have been too convenient for our saboteur. In order to isolate him—or possibly *them*—we have been ordered to the West Indies instead."

"*Valiant* has just come in, sir, has she not?" Will asked. "I thought I spotted her among the new arrivals."

"Indeed. She dropped anchor just as I arrived here. We sail in three days time, gentlemen, so if you will meet me aboard at eight o'clock tomorrow morning, I shall read myself in and we can commence our most interesting dual assignment. In the meantime, since we have made all the preparations possible, I suggest we enjoy the remainder of our time ashore. Would you care to join me in a game of whist? I believe I saw an old friend downstairs who would be willing to sit in as a fourth."

The next hour or so passed pleasantly enough, and the two lieutenants were able to excuse themselves gracefully when a pair of senior officers, old friends of the Captain,

appeared in the common room. The newcomers cheerfully accepted an invitation to take their places around the table so Will and David could rest up for an early start the next day.

The more private game that continued in their small room at the Anchor went on until well after midnight, but it did not prevent Lieutenants Marshall and Archer from going aboard HMS *Valiant* at seven a.m. the following morning, shaved, laundered, neat in every way and prepared to do their duty. They reported to the outgoing First Lieutenant, Mr. Gillette, who informed them that Captain Venner was in a bad way and could not receive them.

As they passed the door to the Captain's quarters, the ship's surgeon stepped out, and Gillette introduced him as Dr. Curran. "Captain Smith will be here soon?" the doctor asked.

"The Captain told us he would arrive at eight bells, sir," Will said. "Eight a.m."

"I hope he is prompt," said the doctor. A medium-sized man with a round, serious face, he glanced back at the door and said, "I betray no medical confidence when I tell you gentlemen that Captain Venner must go ashore as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir, we understand he is quite ill," Davy said. "But I have never known Captain Smith to be behind-time; it's far more likely we'll see him a few minutes early."

"I hope he is. This ship's had more than her share of ill luck, and we're all looking for a change with Sir Paul at the helm."

That was encouraging, at least. Will and Davy begged the doctor's leave to go and make certain that their things had been brought aboard. They'd timed their own early arrival so as to have a chance to inspect their new quarters, which proved less roomy than their accommodations aboard the old *Calypso*, despite the fact that *Valiant* was a much larger ship. They'd known what to expect, of

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course—the arrangements were very much the same in any line-of-battle ship, where the internal structure was continually taken down and reconstructed to clear the decks for the gun crews.

The *Calypso's* internal arrangement had provided them with walls—thin ones, to be sure, but actual wooden partitions with functional doors. Here, the officers' quarters were made of heavy canvas, stretched like stalls around the outer margin of the officers' wardroom, and the doors were little more than curtains with ties to hold them shut. Of course, His Majesty did not expect that his officers would have any desire or need for privacy, and what they lost in sleeping quarters, they gained in communal living space. Not only did the wardroom have a table and chairs sufficient to accommodate the four lieutenants, warrant officers, and even a couple of guests, but there was a pleasant amount of space to move around the room, and a diffuse daylight filtering through the officer's cabins.

Davy lifted the flap to his cabin and smiled wryly. "The luxury of a 74! Trim, elegant, well-lighted—when the gunport's open—and my very own 32-pounder beneath my bed. What more could anyone ask?" He ducked inside and the door fell shut behind him. "Looks as though they've brought our dunnage aboard. Is your chest there as well?"

Will looked into his own cabin, a four-by-six cubicle identical to David's. He had a bit more room, as his partition was between David's cannon, its shadow silhouetted against the wall, and the next cannon that had a space to itself at the far end of the wardroom. His cot hung just the other side of the wall from Davy's. The officers of the *Valiant* had slightly more elegant accommodations, but as far as Will was concerned the cot was only a wooden box, even if it was considered a step up from the hammock he'd had in *Calypso*. The thing looked uncomfortable; no doubt he would become accustomed to it, but if not he



could always buy a new hammock from the purser and go back to the old cocoon. His sea-chest was tucked neatly under his cot, a convenient step up. "Yes, it is. Whoever has been assigned us as officers' servant is on his toes."

"As we must be," Davy said, his voice perfectly clear through the canvas.

Glancing at the wall between their compartments, Will saw that Davy had placed his hand flat against the fabric. Will matched it with his own. The warmth of that touch was reassuring. The wall of duty was up between them once more, like this literal obstruction—but they were still together. "Of course."

"Beginning at once—I expect the Captain will be arriving any moment, so we'd best get above."

The rest of the day went by in a whirl of new information, new impressions, new faces. It began with Captain Smith's arrival and Captain Venner's departure—the poor old gentleman was suffering from malarial chills, and had to be lifted out in a bosun's chair. Smith's reading-in was followed by a mustering of divisions in which Will and David got their first organized look at the six hundred and fifty souls who would be their shipmates for the foreseeable future.

Finding one traitor in this seafaring haystack was going to be a challenge. Besides Simon West, the Ship's Master transferring with them from *Calypso*, the officers and warrant officers were Dr. Ian Curran, whom they'd met briefly; Thomas Dowling, the Purser; and James Adams, the Captain of Marines. There was a gaggle of midshipmen in addition to the three Captain Smith had brought along—thirteen of the little devils, ranging in age from ten to eighteen years. Will had a general impression that the older lads seemed sensible enough, but getting acquainted with that lot was a task to be put aside for the moment.

The other two lieutenants who rounded out the *Valiant's* complement, Humberstone and Carter, were not

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quite what Will had expected. Nigel Humberstone was older than the former Calypsos, in his thirties at least, but his date of commission put him at the lowest rank of Fourth Lieutenant, with Will and David as First and Second, respectively. Their new Third, Ezekiel Carter, was about the same age and jokingly explained that away by saying he'd had the bad fortune to take his first two examinations under captains who asked all the wrong questions. That sort of thing did happen, but Will had to wonder whether these unlikely officers had been assigned deliberately, to give him and Davy a clear chain of command directly to Captain Smith. If so, he was grateful. Playing spy on their own ship would be complicated enough without having to explain to a senior officer just what they were up to.

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The *Valiant* lost no time in reaching the end of the British Isles, where the merchant ships from Plymouth met up with her out near Lizard Point. They also picked up Commander Edwards and his neat little 18-gun sloop-of-war, the *Terrier*, giving Sir Paul an official vessel with the speed and maneuverability impossible in a line-of-battle ship.

After meeting with Edwards and the civilian captains, Sir Paul went up into the mizzen fighting top with Lt. Humberstone. After a short time Humberstone came clambering down the ratlines alone, apparently out of breath. "Mr. Marshall," he called breathlessly, "Captain's compliments, and he would like you and Mr. Archer to join him above to observe the disposition of the merchant fleet."

"Thank you, sir." Will looked at Davy, who shrugged and followed him up.

"I suppose his last commanding officer kept his feet firmly on the quarterdeck," Davy suggested wryly. "It certainly appears that Mr. Humberstone did."

"He's in for a change, then." There were plenty of

captains who did leave the acrobatics behind them when they reached post status, and others who had simply grown old in the service and could not safely ascend the heights. But for many seamen—Will included—the excitement of going aloft was one of the great joys of naval life. It was a different world up here—a dangerous one, in bad weather, but on a fine, slightly overcast day like today, the world lay before you on a glittering blue blanket. Captain Smith was another of those daredevils; like Pellew and Aubrey, he went up even in the worst weather, and with that as an example none of his men ever hesitated to follow.

Will and Davy swung up into the fighting top where Smith stood surveying the dozen or so ships trailing out to leeward. “Good afternoon, gentlemen,” the Captain said. “You see our convoy?”

When they acknowledged the sight, he continued, “Good. Now, the reason I invited you to converse up here was for the sake of privacy. You need to be aware of a new factor in our investigation.” He glared out at the inoffensive merchant ships and lowered his voice even more. “We have an intelligence officer aboard, gentlemen. Sent to assist us in our investigations. I will relay any information you give me to him, and convey any directions.” He did not look at all pleased.

“Can you tell us who this agent is, Captain?” David asked.

“He prefers to remain incognito,” Smith said darkly. He did not need to explain that he was extremely displeased about an interloper being allowed to give him “directions” about how to conduct *his* investigation on *his* ship. Will wondered what fool in the intelligence service had neglected to inform the Captain about this beforehand.

Or maybe the omission had been deliberate. A captain had the right to decline an assignment, and while that could end an officer’s career, Will knew his own captain well enough that he thought Smith might take that risk if he thought he’d be subordinate to someone beneath his

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own rank, especially on his own command. "Sir," Will said, trying for the Captain's own level of indirect language, "If you would, please suggest to this officer that if he would reveal himself to us, we could eliminate at least one individual from suspicion."

"I shall do that, Mr. Marshall. In the meantime, have either of you observed anything that might be of use?"

David nodded. "It might be nothing, sir, or it might be most pertinent to what Mr. Marshall just said. You might tell our intelligence gentleman that our new shipmate Mr. Humberstone has given us cause for concern. He seems to spend a great deal of time encouraging gossip among the warrant officers, and we have been concerned about his discretion. Unless, of course..." His face was all innocence, apart from one raised eyebrow.

The Captain chuckled. "Gentlemen, please be aware that at his own insistence I have not named this invisible agent. However, I can tell you that of all the men aboard, Mr. Humberstone is one that you least need concern yourselves with."

David tapped his nose significantly. "Yes, sir. Thank you."

"Anything else, gentlemen?"

Will shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir, but nothing more at this time. We have instituted the inspections you ordered, and so far our saboteur—if he is still on this ship—has done nothing we've discovered."

"It would be a shame if one of the former officers were responsible," Smith said. "But I would be perfectly happy to complete this cruise without incident. And I was also given information—a rumor, nothing more, no doubt the fruit of ungentlemanly gossip—that one of the officers who was transferred had formed an improper attachment to a fellow shipmate, a situation that might put him in a position to be blackmailed. Whether or not he did the dirty work himself, many of the incidents of sabotage took place in areas for which that officer was responsible."

"So a complete change of command would leave the saboteur at a greater risk of exposure if he made any attempt on his own," David said.

"Yes. And Mr.—*our agent*—has taken it upon himself to suggest that I instruct the pair of you to behave in a similarly inappropriate manner."

Will blinked. One could not say to one's highly esteemed commanding officer, "Are you out of your bloody mind?" Since that expression was denied him, he could only stand there agape.

David's quicker wit rallied first. "Captain, do you know whether this gentleman is aware of what transpired during our—our adventure—last summer?"

"I have no idea," Smith said shortly. "All I know is that I do not expect the gentleman to remain on my ship once we have reached the West Indies."

"That's—" Will was still nearly speechless. "Captain, that is an—an impossible order! Expecting us to behave in a way that risks disgrace and death is beyond the call of duty, *particularly* after what Mr. Archer had to deal with." He glanced at Davy, hoping he'd not hurt him with the allusion, but David actually looked amused. "What if we did prance about like a pair of mollies and draw out the saboteur? If we had already compromised our own reputations, what weight would our accusations carry? Indeed, he might even turn on us and bring charges of his own!"

"To do that would be an effective distraction," David said. "And the saboteur is no fool, to have escaped detection for so long."

"I concur," Smith said. "I told our clever gent I would not order my officers to do any such thing. However, if his surmise is correct, he might also be correct about the chance of your being contacted with a view to blackmail, and since you have nothing to fear by exposure, you could confront and identify him. For the good of the Service, we must identify and arrest this man."

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“Yes, sir,” they said in unison.

“I admit the strategy might work, sir,” Will said. “Nonetheless—God forbid, but what if you and Mr.—Mister Clever Gent were to be incapacitated or even killed? This is a far different thing from risking death in battle. If this crew will gossip about one set of officers, they will gossip about another, and I am most reluctant to risk my reputation, and Mr. Archer’s, on nothing more than a stranger’s wild surmise.” Was it his guilty conscience making him protest too much? Perhaps. But this ill-conceived charade cut too close to the bone, and the risk was very real.

“I agree with everything you say, Mr. Marshall. But I also agree that our agent’s idea is valid. Therefore, if you are willing to alter your behavior slightly, only enough so that an evil mind might draw its own conclusions, I will give you written orders above my own signature, confirming that you were instructed to behave in a manner which suggests you might be violating Article XXIX, as well as the reason the order was given.”

The Captain scowled at a mass of clouds that had appeared on the horizon, and Will became aware that the wind’s force had grown stronger, and colder too. “What exactly do you wish us to do, sir?”

“I certainly do not expect either of you to do anything blatant, anything that could possibly be taken amiss if you did it on the quarterdeck in broad daylight. If you were to lose the respect of the crew, that damage would be as serious as anything the mole might do. You are known to be particular friends, so our old Calypsos will see nothing uncommon in your friendship, and they should have an influence with the foremast hands. Be subtle. Find excuses to spend time alone together, invent errands to the carpenter’s walk, what have you...” He shrugged uncomfortably. “I trust you realize I find this entire notion highly offensive, and I will not *order* you to do it.”

“Thank you, sir,” David said. “Since this is not an

order, I am willing to volunteer. Mr. Marshall?"

Reluctantly, Will nodded. "I see no good coming of it, but I have no better suggestions."

"As an added insurance," David said, "we might ask that these orders be given us in writing, above the signature of the Naval Intelligence agent, since he is the source of the notion."

Captain Smith laughed. "Even better. I'll get that order for you, gentlemen, or I'll put an end to the notion."

"And I wonder, sir—what of the officer who was transferred? Is it possible that his hypothetical paramour is still on board? If so, that other man would still be vulnerable to blackmail, would he not?"

Smith frowned. "At this point, there is only the vaguest rumor that this might have been the case at all. However, considering the number of incidents that occurred with no indication of their source, I had wondered whether there might not be more than one enemy agent aboard. In a crew of six hundred, a confederate would be essential to the saboteur remaining undetected."

"There is one other thing, sir," Will said. "If our agent objects to signing the order himself on the grounds it will reveal his identity—"

The Captain smiled—the sort of smile he wore when he had the weather-gauge on a Frenchman. "You need not worry on that account, gentlemen. I shall tell the officer that he had already aroused your suspicion by his inquisitive behavior, and that his refusal to inform you of his identity is more likely to harm than help our investigations. I'll see you on deck."

He stood and caught hold of the ratlines. "We'll see how the crew works in a storm. That squall will be on us in half an hour." He disappeared down the shrouds, and Will could hear him shouting out orders to the topmen.

They had to wait for another day to begin their subterfuge. The storm that had hurried Captain Smith

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down to the deck blew in quickly, but the *Valiant's* topmen were quicker still. By the time the wind was seeking rain-sodden sails to tear, the mains were reefed, with just enough canvas spread to keep the ship moving forward and provide control. All hands were summoned and everyone got soaked, but there was no serious damage to the ship and nothing but minor injuries among the crew. A couple of the merchant-ships in their convoy were not so fortunate, and the *Valiant* wound up sending both surgeon and carpenter to the other vessels.

Will was relieved to see that whatever else might be going on aboard this ship, her crew worked well together in a blow. They had given a creditable performance in the dumb-show firing practice, too. It only remained to see how things went when the Captain tried a run of live guns, which he was bound to do before much longer. Sir Paul Andrew Smith had a longstanding principle that he never took a ship into battle if he had not tested the crew with live ammunition—which was one of the reasons he had been so successful. He always knew what to expect from the ship he sailed on, and its weapons, and the men he commanded.

This trouble-ship, with her unknown enemy amongst the crew, would be more than a problem for the Captain to solve. Will knew that Captain Smith would take it personally, and he would not rest until he found that traitor.

~

David Archer had to commend Captain Smith for his suggestion of a trysting-place. The *Valiant* had a fine, wide carpenter's walk, with room enough for a man to swing a hammer or use any of the other tools that might be needed to make speedy repairs to the hull below the waterline. And it was private. Dark, naturally—the walk was nothing more than a passage between the ship's outer and inner hulls, and the inner hull was several more inches of oak that blocked off any light from the compartments within.



Besides, they were currently at the level of the larboard cable tiers, and since the ship was under sail and the anchors catted, there was no reason for that deck to have anything in it but miles of anchor cable.

"Listen," David said, holding his lantern low. "It echoes." They both fell silent, hearing the hiss of the water against the hull as the *Valiant* cut through the water. "This almost feels like another world."

"That's a dark-lantern?" Will asked.

"Yes, why?"

"Close the shutter for a moment, if you please."

David did—and the space they were in became pitch-black, and seemingly endless. In the darkness, he felt the warmth of Will's breath, as lips brushed against his face. David turned his head to meet Will's mouth, and they shared a quick, utterly silent kiss. David smiled as it ended. Kissing—under Captain's orders! A pity they would not have any chance to do more, but a kiss was one thing, outright stupidity quite another.

He felt Will move back a step, heard him clear his throat. "Open it again, Davy. I had just wondered if it would be like standing on deck on a moonless night."

"I'd say yes, very like—only it would be a wretchedly close and airless night. The planks look tight enough, don't you think? She might admit a little water working in a rough sea, or tacking, but I'll wager there's no more than a foot in the well, if that."

"Yes. A good tight hull, stiff and seaworthy." This sort of general inspection was perfectly reasonable, and at some point the Captain himself would probably retrace their steps. Technically, Captain Smith had only ordered David to make the inspection, but since Will was off-duty there was no reason he should not have come along. Equally, there was no reason he needed to.

"I didn't notice anyone watching us when we left the deck," David said, his voice low. "Not that we made any secret of what we were about."

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"Too soon," Will said. "Even if our mole is suspicious, he won't be fool enough to jump to conclusions on the basis of one inspection tour. Do you still have that French play your cousin sent you?"

"*L'Ecole des Maris*? Yes, why?"

"I was thinking that we might make a translation...we could say it was to improve our French, but it would also give us the excuse to spend time together in our cabin—yours by preference, it's more private with the bulkhead behind and the cannon on the other side."

"And canvas walls?"

"Sitting beside one another on your sea-chest? It's very romantic, I think. And we might even be holding hands."

Davy could not see Will's grin in the dim light, but he could hear that smile. And in fact that was the sort of thing they did do from time to time, just so they could sit close together. He and Will had read one of Shakespeare's plays over the course of many evenings, each taking several parts. "Very romantic indeed," he said. "If we solve our mystery by Christmas, I believe we might organize some of the crew into an amateur production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*."

"It's a pity we don't have any classics—we might translate from Greek, and kill two birds with one stone. We can't ask the crew to perform Molière."

"No, of course not. The play is more contemporary and I'm sure we could translate it into easier dialogue, but no crew of British tars would stoop to perform a play written by a Froggie."

"I wouldn't, myself," Will said. "You will cast yourself as Puck, I suppose?"

"How did you guess? I should have to, Will; his lines are critical, and I have no great hope of budding thespians on the foredeck. I suppose if you were casting the thing, you would prefer to see my Bottom."

Will groaned. "And watch you make an ass of

yourself? Please, Mr. Archer, I know the Captain's orders as well as you do, but I beg you not to lose yourself in the part."

~

One day followed another in the usual Navy routine, and although Marshall missed the close-knit familiarity of the *Calypso's* smaller crew, he came to see that Captain Venner and Lt. Gillette had in fact been commanding a reasonably taut ship. The *Valiant* showed no sign of neglect. The foremast jacks knew their job, the decks were cleared and scrubbed every morning, the hands in general were respectful but not servile. In a fairly short time, Will had become familiar with his duties and accustomed even to the box-sided cot. Better still, once they were far enough south to keep a few ports open for ventilation, he had the occasional treat of seeing Davy's body silhouetted against the canvas wall of his cabin as his lover undressed. They followed the Captain's orders, too—discreetly—but it was difficult to tell if anyone was paying attention.

Until one afternoon.

Davy had come off-duty at the end of the forenoon watch, and Will was not due on until the second dog-watch. They had dined with the Captain, who made it a point to share meals with various officers and midshipmen. The midshipman of the watch this time was Jack Justin, a sturdy youngster whose voice had a tendency to crack. He had been aboard *Valiant* since the age of nine—nearly five years, now—and like most growing boys, he was able to put away prodigious amounts of food.

Mr. Justin's presence prevented them from discussing the investigation directly, but Sir Paul directed the conversation in a way that allowed him to glean bits of information about the previous cruise without making an Inquisition of it. By the time they reached the pudding, the lad had mentioned several of the suspicious incidents; he put it down to the bad luck that came down on the ship with Captain Venner's illness. "But my gun crew's

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stopped that talk, sir, I told 'em it was superstitious." Blithely contradicting himself, he added, "And we've got you to change our luck, regardless."

"You did well to discourage superstition, Mr. Justin," Smith said. "Chance is a fickle thing, but I was brought along under a captain who taught me that a ha'porth of luck doubles with every pound's worth of hard work and attention to details."

"Yes, sir."

"Would you care for another slice?"

Mr. Justin happily accepted a second helping, which vanished with amazing speed. He then made his manners and departed.

"Everything going well?" the Captain asked.

Davy nodded. "Yes, sir, touch wood."

"Yes, sir," Will echoed. "We have inspected the entire ship, and she appears to be well found and in good order. No sign of the kind of carelessness that might lead to trouble."

"That's been my impression as well," Smith said. "And your translation—is that going well?"

"Yes, sir. We intend to work on it for an hour this afternoon."

"Excellent. My wife had occasion to see the play in its original language, and tells me it is most amusing, but her French is much better than mine. You must let me see your manuscript when you finish."

"Gladly, sir," Davy said, "but I'm afraid you will not find our language up to Molière's original."

"I'm sure I'll find it more intelligible," Smith said. "If I read a play or a novel, I lose track of the thread if I have to translate constantly. I prefer to read in my native tongue."

He called them back as they were leaving his cabin. "Gentlemen, I nearly forgot to tell you—the officer who is above suspicion has graciously given me leave to inform you as to *why* he is above suspicion, but he does not wish

to discuss the matter in any way whatsoever, nor have any conversation outside your normal shipboard contact.”

“That suits my own wishes exactly,” Davy said, and Will nodded his agreement.

Smith smiled. “I thought it might.” He reached into his inner pocket and drew out two small folded packets, closed with a seal used for official documents. “I saw him write these; my own signature is on them as witness, and I sealed them myself. They should remain sealed unless you require them as evidence in your own defense.”

Will felt as though a great weight had lifted from his shoulders. “Thank you, sir!”

“A reasonable precaution, I believe,” Sir Paul said. “Keep me informed, gentlemen.”

And so with the Captain’s blessing—nearly his direct order—they repaired to Davy’s cabin with the play and a copy-book. Davy’s grasp of the language was better than Will’s, so he read the phrase and when they agreed on the translation Will wrote it down in pencil, to be copied in ink, in a fair hand, when they were finished. The wardroom outside was empty at the moment, with the other two lieutenants on duty, so they had plenty of privacy and quiet.

“...put right into my chamber a box,” Davy read, “enclosing a letter, sealed like a ...chicken.”

“It doesn’t say that,” Will objected.

“Yes, it does, actually. Look. ‘Comme un poulet,’ which, my dear sir, is a chicken.”

“Perhaps the printer was drunk. I shall put an interrogation point beside it.”

“Perhaps I should write to my sister and ask her...” Davy glanced up, and their eyes met. Will had heard it, too. The door to the wardroom had creaked, very slightly, and then stopped as though someone had caught it. Over the ever-present sound of the sea, it was impossible to tell whether there was someone in the adjoining room.

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"In fact," Davy said, a little louder, "I shall write and ask her to see if she cannot find a published translation of this blasted play."

"And what good will that do our French practice?" Will asked, nodding. He did hear some slight sounds outside, in the wardroom. It could be anyone; it could be an unusually bold rat. But it was all he could do to keep from leaping up for a look when he heard the slight whisper of sound, no more than fabric brushing against itself, outside his own cabin on the other side of the cannon they sat facing.

"I'm not saying we should stop the translation," Davy rambled, "because, after all, it's only an exercise and it's at least more interesting than un, deux, trois and lundi, mardi, mercredi. But if we had a good copy in English—and no matter how quickly Amelia sent it, you know we won't see the thing until we strike soundings back home—at least if we had a proper translation we could find out why they'd fold a letter like a chicken."

"Where is that lexicon?" Will tossed his copybook into Davy's cot, and the sounds in his cabin stopped abruptly. "I must've left it in my cot. Won't be a moment."

He moved slowly enough to let the intruder escape—if there was one, and sure enough, before he could open the door of Davy's cabin, someone ran—four long steps, and the wardroom door squeaked and slammed.

Will ran, too, and yanked the door open. The passage beyond was empty. Two closed doors to his left, the purser's cabin and a small store-room for costly supplies, both locked.

"He's gone?" Davy asked over his shoulder.

"Like a phantom," Will said. "Just as well—what would we have done if we'd caught him? But I was hoping for a look." They returned to his cabin, and sure enough, the ties holding his door shut were hanging loose.

“Well, someone thinks we’re interesting,” Davy said. “Either that, or we have a shipmate who admires Molière but is terribly, terribly shy.”

“He’s gone now, at any rate,” Will said. “Before we return to our labors...” He motioned Davy into his cabin, tied the door shut, and made sure that they were in a dim corner without back-lighting. Then he pulled his lover close and released all his tension in one long, passionate kiss. It wasn’t as much as he wanted, but it helped.

“We shall have to be careful with this French language project,” Davy said when he got his breath back. “It seems to be having an effect on you.”

Will could only shrug. Something was having an effect on him, and he could not say what it was. For reasons he could not define, a fear that made no sense, he had a constant need to reassure himself that Davy was still there with him. “Let’s return to Molière, then,” he said. “Perhaps we can lure back his admirer.”

~

There was a note in David’s cot the next day, written in pencil on the sort of coarse paper the purser sold to all the foremast hands for their infrequent letters home. “*I know what you’re doing,*” it read. “*Do you want it to stay a secret?*”

“I suppose we ought to be pleased,” Will said, when David took him up to the fighting top to give him the note.

“Would you pass it to the Captain? I should avoid him, if I’m feeling guilty and furtive.”

“Yes, I’ll give it to him later. I have to report to him at the change of watch, after I review the mid’s journals and give them a lecture on an officer’s duty. Apparently the young gentlemen take turns writing the thing and then the others all copy it down, so they only ever have to do a proper log entry a few times a year.”

“Well, what of it? The navigational readings are all the same—or they ought to be—and it’s not as though there are that many ways to say ‘today we sailed one-hundred-

fifty miles’.”

“They should write their own entries so they will be accustomed to keeping a log when they’re officers,” Marshall said, sounding like a prig even to himself. “They do need the practice—their penmanship is a disgrace. It’s the principle of the thing, Mr. Archer.”

David grinned. “It’s efficiency, Mr. Marshall.”

Will smiled back, but he was worried—concerned that of the two of them, David had been the one to receive the threat. “You be careful.”

“Of course. And I think perhaps we should pointedly avoid one another for a day or two—leave off the French letters.”

“That’s *lessons!*”

“*Merci, mon cher,*” David said, and went back down the ratlines.

~

As if the grand charade were not enough, in addition to their usual duties of supervising their divisions and overseeing the midshipmen, David began to sense that he was being watched. He did not believe it was their phantom of the wardroom, however, because this watcher was nowhere near fast or agile enough to keep from tripping over his own feet. Nor was he invisible.

The nuisance was another of the *Valiant’s* midshipmen, known to his messmates as Dickie Gannon. He seemed to have developed a fixation on his Second Lieutenant, and scarcely an hour went by that the lanky, goggle-eyed little beast was not directing his unlovely orbs in David’s direction.

David aired his discontent to Will when they took a turn along the starboard carpenter’s walk. Marshall seemed to find it amusing. “Perhaps he admires your seamanship.”

“I’m afraid he’d leave out the first ‘a’ in that,” David said darkly.

“Or your stylish turn of a neck-cloth. You are an



admirable figure of a naval officer, you know.” He said it with no intent to flatter; even in the dim light of the dark-lantern, Davy’s trim, square-shouldered form was well suited to his perfectly tailored uniform. It was only a pity that the tails of his coat hung down to cover that beautifully rounded arse. “That’s all we need, isn’t it—to be saddled with a lustful mid.”

“It’s no joke, Will,” Davy stopped, and held the lantern high to peer down the dimly-lit recess of the walk. “You and I have always exercised the utmost discretion—perhaps more than necessary, but it has kept us above suspicion. Since we’ve been letting just a hint of the appearance of misbehavior show in our actions—and, I believe, in our thoughts—”

“Do you honestly think the little we’ve done could have such an effect?”

“Consider where we are right now, Will! Would we ever have risked this sort of questionable activity under normal circumstances?”

“Probably not. Not more than once or twice in a year’s time.”

“Exactly. Having this scrub tagging after me...it makes me think of my father’s hounds. The pack would be perfectly normal, then all of a sudden one bitch would be the center of attention, and their keeper would have to mew her up before she went into heat. There would be no outward sign that any human would detect, but every other dog knew exactly what was going on.”

“But, Davy, we’ve done nothing!”

David suddenly realized that his lover was truly ignorant—or perhaps *innocent* was the better term. He said gently, “Will, you do not understand how things are between men who prefer other men. In the ordinary way, no one would dare make an overt offer. Meaningful glances, the mention of certain poets...if any gentleman asks whether you know the poetry of Barnfield, I beg you, cry ignorance.”

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"I shall, with a clear conscience," Will said. "Is he suggestive?"

"He is shameless, wonderfully so—I must recite his eleventh sonnet to you in better circumstances. But had you ever given me such looks as Gannon is throwing, it would not have taken a pirate and a fortnight's imprisonment to get us into bed together. The boy is on the prowl, Will. He may well be the other side of the indiscretion that forms part of our larger conundrum."

Will was silent. "I see the problem," he said finally.

"Yes. Is he merely stupid and indiscreet, or a deliberate member of a conspiracy? If I could be sure of the latter, a word to the Captain would be sufficient. But if he's nothing more than a careless young fool, I should hate to betray him for something I'm equally guilty of."

"Indeed. Still, until he makes an advance of some sort, there's nothing you can do, and if he does you can fend him off in a way that makes it clear he'd better not try again. You would fend him off, I hope?"

There was such a note of worry in his voice that David had to laugh. "With the longest spar I can find, I assure you. I am a monogamous creature, Mr. Marshall. I've found my heart's desire, and I'm not fool enough to throw away a diamond for a road-apple."

"Davy—cover the lantern for a moment, would you?"

~

As the days passed and the convoy proceeded into southern waters, the sun grew warmer and brighter. Their investigation proceeded slowly, with nothing much happening that could be laid to anything but ill luck. A cask of wine turned to vinegar, half a dozen signal flags gone missing—the flags were a puzzle, but Humberstone himself had been signal-lieutenant during the period in question, and he had no idea what had become of them. Klingler swore the vinegar had been vinegar from the start, and he was probably correct; a second cask from the same supplier held very bad wine indeed. The flags were a

nuisance that might have been serious if they'd been sailing into battle, but that was not the case, and a new set was made up that very afternoon. Sir Paul's rigorous drilling and assemblies had apparently left their mole scrambling, if that was the worst he could do.

A second note turned up in David's cabin during the middle watch while David was on duty. Will had been sound asleep. Since the other note had appeared during the day, they'd not been expecting a midnight visitor.

*"I want the key to the arms locker. Place it under your sea chest by midnight, the day after tomorrow."*

~

"Absurd," said the Captain. "There is no reason for either of you to have that key in your possession."

"No, sir." Will had been the courier once again, delivering the idiotic demand along with his report on the midshipmen's journal-keeping. "And apart from that peculiar intrusion last week, we've had no further disturbances."

"I cannot make any change in the guards on the arms locker without alerting the mole that we know of his interest in it," Sir Paul said. "But I can speak to the Captain of Marines. We served together years ago, I trust him implicitly. He can make certain that his best men are assigned to the task."

"Sir—what do you suppose our saboteur will do when Mr. Archer cannot comply?"

"He would be a fool to do anything. He must realize that the demand is impossible."

"Yes, sir. Which makes me wonder—why make such a demand at all?"

"Either he is a fool," the Captain said, "which we know he is not—or it is a feint, to distract us from his real target. We shall see the Leeward Islands in but a few days' sail. I believe the crew would benefit from another session of live practice."

"Sir, Mr. Archer suggested leaving a note on his cot

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stating that he could not obtain the key."

"Very good. Let him do that, and we shall see what the response may be. And if you would, Mr. Marshall, send me the ship's carpenter. Those curtain affairs on the officers' cabins are excellent for the circulation of fresh air, but I want to know if we have a proper set of doors stowed in the hold. If a key is required for entry, we may reduce the number of suspects."

"Yes, sir."

~

Dinner in the gunroom with their fellow officers was a pleasant daily ritual, but David found his suspicion coloring his ability to enjoy any social occasion. Simon West, ship's master, was a man he knew from the *Calypso*, a serious, dutiful officer who wrote terrible poetry and was a demon devotee of any manner of card game. Dr. Curran he did not know, but he liked the man, and was reluctant to think ill of him, even though he realized, objectively, that a ship's surgeon had access to everyone aboard and a unique authority in being the only one who could declare a ship's captain unfit for service. The Marine's Captain Adams was vouched for by no less than Sir Paul Andrew Smith, so David was easy in his mind on that account. But he knew nothing of the purser, gunner, and carpenter—Dowling, Cox, and Michaels respectively—and while none of them seemed in the least sinister, a warrant officer would have more freedom to move about the ship without question, and *someone* had been wafting in and out of his cabin.

But if their phantom could smile and smile and be the villain, David was not about to fall down on his duty. During the course of the meal, he presented his suggestion for a Christmas entertainment, as much of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* as the crew could manage to memorize. Since they would apparently be in the tropics for Christmas, the title was not too unseasonable. Mr. West pronounced himself willing to participate and Captain Adams declared an admiration for the works of the Bard,

but the others were noncommittal at best.

Somehow the conversation evolved into a discussion of card games as opposed to games of chance, and the purser revealed his enthusiasm for cribbage. Mr. West challenged him to prove his mettle on the field of honor—or in this case, the cribbage board—and they agreed to convene in the wardroom, after pudding, to decide the matter, best two games out of three.

“Lead on, MacDuff,” Dowling said, “And curst be him who first cries—”

“Ain’t it ‘lay on, MacDuff?’” asked Captain Adams.

“I believe it is,” David said.

“No, no, it’s ‘lead on,’” the purser insisted. “As in leading into battle, don’t you see?”

“If I remember correctly,” David said, “It’s Macbeth speaking. He’s inviting MacDuff to have at him.”

Dowling frowned. “No, I am certain—Well, it’s easy enough to settle, Mr. Archer. Did you not say you have the collected plays?”

“Yes, I do, and I will be happy to prove you mistaken. I’ll be back before the pudding arrives.” David leapt up and headed off to his cabin to get the volume of Shakespeare’s tragedies, one of his most prized possessions. The wardroom was empty, naturally—those who weren’t at dinner were on duty, up on deck. David stopped dead as he saw that the ties to his cabin were hanging open. And was that a shadow, within?

He drew his pistol silently, cocked it, and with his left hand pushed back the curtain, very slowly.

And swore, softly but fervently.

There on his sea-chest sprawled the repellent midshipman, Dickie Gannon, his breeches unbuttoned and his unfortunate male apparatus in hand. It at least was standing at attention, as Gannon should have been. “Mr. Archer! I was hoping you’d come!”

“You stupid little git,” David spat, recognizing the neatest little arrangement for blackmail he could ever have

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imagined. Standing well outside the room, almost shaking with anger, he carefully uncocked the pistol and thrust it back into his belt. "Button it up, you little bastard, and get the hell out of my quarters."

"But sir—sir, I know you want—"

Blind fury boiled over. "You will not know what I *want* if you live to be a hundred, which at this moment is highly improbable, since you are displaying not only more of your disgusting person than I should ever wish to see, but a level of stupidity that I can only describe as fatal."

"Mr. Archer, I am perishing with desire!"

"Then go perish somewhere else, and be damned to you. You are too stupid to live."

The little bastard made no move toward leaving; he simply pouted. David wanted to seize him by scruff and breeches and throw him out, but he was not going to so much as set foot in that room.

"Mr. Gannon, the purser has just challenged the ship's master to a game of cribbage, and the wardroom is going to be very busy in just a few minutes. If you are not out of this cabin and this wardroom in the next thirty seconds, I am going to send the Master-at-Arms to haul you out, place you under arrest, and take you to the Captain."

"But, sir—"

"Not one word, you young fool. Out. Now. I'm giving you this one chance—it's your last. And don't ever let me catch you near my quarters again." He pointed toward the door of the wardroom and stood aside to make room for the trespasser to leave.

"Yes, sir," Gannon said sulkily, buttoning his breeches.

"Then up on deck with you—all the way up, to the crosstrees, until you're due back on duty. You might spend the time reviewing the Articles and the penalty for breaking them."

"Yes, sir."

As the crestfallen 'young gentleman' made his exit,

David felt a twinge of conscience at his own hypocrisy. Not much of a twinge, though—he might be carrying on with Will in defiance of Article XXIX, but at least he had the sense not to proposition superior officers who were in no wise interested! Shaking his head at the youngster's monumental stupidity, he quickly unlocked his sea chest, retrieved his Shakespeare, and returned to the gunroom.

By the time he got there, he had managed to compose himself and locate the relevant lines in the play. Mr. Dowling accepted his mistake with good grace, the pudding arrived and was consumed, and then the warrant officers went down to the wardroom to conduct their cribbage tournament.

David excused himself and went up on deck. First of all, he made certain that Mr. Gannon had taken himself up to the crosstrees. He had; he was high atop the mainmast and his posture suggested at least a reasonable degree of dejection.

But, still...had that been a deliberate effort to entrap him, or simply the act of an indiscreet fool? Was Gannon part of a conspiracy, or a halfwit jackrabbit who'd been told that Mr. Archer might be amenable? The boy had been mooning over him for days now. David knew he was no Adonis, but young men did form unsuitable attachments, and reason had no part of such things.

David knew that from experience. If he had not had a strong sense of caution, he might have tried something that stupid during those long, painful years he'd spent loving William Marshall from afar, before Will had any notion that love between men was a possibility, much less something he might want. But David had never been foolish enough to even hint at his desires, much less accost a senior officer. He had spent his days fighting his feelings, his nights in hopeless fantasy and Tantalus dreams. *Perishing with desire, indeed! You try lying in a hammock next to the most beautiful man in the world, night after night, certain he'd shoot you dead if you made*

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*the slightest advance! Don't you tell me about perishing with desire, you brainless little booby. Nobody ever dies of unrequited love.*

*You only wish you could.*

~

"He did *what*?"

"Gently, Will. Not so loud." David looked around, but they were far up in the fighting top and the winds had been so fair and regular that the topmen were all down on deck with the idlers. The Captain was off-watch, asleep; as First Lieutenant, Will was in command.

"We must tell the Captain," Will said decidedly. "I was wrong, you were right—but this is beyond infatuation."

"Will, for heaven's sake—"

"It seems obvious to me. This was an attempt to put you in an indefensible position, and only your quick thinking saved you. If the gunroom mess had come into that wardroom, with him *in flagrante* and you in there with him—"

"I cannot be certain of his intention!"

"What, with his wedding tackle out and ready? If his intention puzzles you, Mr. Archer, I will be happy to explain anything you may have forgotten, but—dear God, Davy, if you love me, if you have any sense of self-preservation at all, for both our sakes, *tell the Captain*. At the very least, note it in your personal journal. You can tear the page out and burn it later, if it turns out I'm being unreasonable, but for your own protection, put it in writing."

David sighed. He had never seen Will so agitated, and he knew his lover well enough to realize this was not mere jealousy. But there were some things Will would never understand. For him, awareness of desire had come literally moments before its fulfillment. He had never known that hopeless longing, had never spent years wondering what was wrong with him, why he had been



cursed with desire for a shipmate. "Is that really necessary?"

Will set his jaw. "Yes. And you had better do it, because I intend to. It would be better still if we were to go to the Captain together."

"And what if the little swab is merely stupid?"

"Then he deserves to be thrown out of the Service and sent to ply his wares ashore. Otherwise he'll get some other poor fool hanged someday, just to satisfy his own appetites." Will shrugged. "There's nothing he can be tried for at this point, you know. He's guilty of nothing more than unclean behavior, but even if we were only on convoy escort duty, we don't need a midshipman aboard who's prone to such disgraceful behavior."

David had a sinking feeling that his lover was right. He had known, in an abstract way, that they might someday be put in this position. The reality was worse than he'd feared, more difficult still because he actively disliked the importunate Gannon and could not even claim to have the good of the service at heart. "Will, everyone has desires, appetites—"

His lover cut him off, dark eyes stern and unyielding. "Don't even say it. There's a difference, Davy. You know there's a difference, a matter of self-control and self-discipline. We have it, he does not. And that difference—his weakness, if he himself is not our mole—is going to end with someone dead. I don't want it to be you."

"I suppose you're right."

"I don't mean to sound pompous, but in this case I know I am. This is a serious investigation, espionage or even treason. Mr. Gannon is a suspect. It is our duty to inform the Captain immediately."

David had the feeling that if he did not acquiesce, Will's next step would be to give him an order. And that was Will's right, and his duty, and David was unwilling to put such a strain on the bond between them. "All right," he

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said, and found himself giddy with relief at the weight lifted from his shoulders. "All right, I'll tell the Captain."

Will let out a breath, and his shoulders relaxed. "Thank you, sir," he said formally.

"No, Will, you're right. We must. But I do pity the poor little bastard."

David was able to save his pity, at least for awhile. Captain Smith considered the matter briefly and decided to discuss it with Mr. Humberstone. Their decision was to do nothing for the moment—to keep Gannon under close observation. His own behavior would prove his guilt or innocence as far as their more serious suspicions were concerned. As to his slipshod adherence toward Article XXIX...if he did appear to be working with a French agent, they now had something with which to bargain. Given the choice between being tried for treason or simply dismissed for moral turpitude, he would most probably give up his superior rather than hang. His ineptitude convinced them that if he was involved in the plot at all, it would be as a subordinate; he was not intelligent enough to have managed it on his own.

~

As though echoing David's mood, the weather turned foul the next day—not quite a hurricane, it was past the usual season, but strong, fast-moving winds driving sodden dark clouds before them. The *Valiant* and the *Terrier* were prepared as well as they could be; Sir Paul had the topmasts brought down and stowed on deck, and all hatches were battened. The merchant ships in convoy were taking precautions, too—they were regular travelers of this route, and probably knew better than the *Valiant* what to expect.

But no one could ever know exactly what to expect in weather this dirty. It was all hands on deck, six men on the wheel to hold it steady enough for the Captain's piloting, hours of fighting the wind just to walk across the deck even with safety lines strung. The sun set, but it hardly

mattered; the seawater thrown up by the constantly shifting wind made the air so wet it was hard to even see what was going on in the rigging. The night was long, and it was wet, and it was cold, bitter cold, with the wind blowing so hard against them from all directions. Much of David's time was spent simply relaying orders—even Captain Smith's powerful voice could not rise above the wind's howl. The hours stretched out immeasurably, with the only meal a cold biscuit and a warming swallow of grog—the stove could not be lit in such a treacherous sea.

Eventually the storm blew itself out, the screaming wind died away, the clouds thinned, and far above the stars returned. David saw the white curve of the late crescent moon a few degrees above the eastern horizon, and realized with surprise that it was nearly dawn.

Captain Smith issued a few orders and went below for a cup of coffee and dry clothing—he had been on deck all night—and the *Valiant* began returning to normal. The cook and his mates went below to fire up the stove, the idlers brought out their mops to dry the deck—no need to wash it, the sea had taken care of that job—and Mr. West appeared on deck with his sextant to determine precisely where they were now. Once the sun rose, they would, God willing, also find out where the rest of their convoy had gone. And in the meantime, there was much work to do. David found himself a lantern and began to organize the men in his division.

"Someone's managed to stay with us," Will said, passing behind him. "Look, just starboard of the forecastle."

David squinted into the dark and saw a spark of light in the distance. A ship for certain, relighting her lanterns just as men were doing on the *Valiant*. Within minutes the signal officer would be displaying the lights that transmitted specific messages, in this case probably a request that all ships report their position and condition. The Captain would be back up on deck soon, and he'd

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expect as much information as possible.

But it was broad daylight before they found all their ships, some of which had been blown thirty miles or more from the *Valiant*. Most of them had survived well enough or were able to make repairs, and the lively little *Terrier* earned her keep, darting about like a sheepdog with a scattered flock.

As the convoy reassembled some twenty miles from where they'd begun, Dr. Curran was called out to several of the smaller craft to treat the same injuries he'd been dealing with all night aboard the *Valiant*. Broken bones, sprains, concussion, even an amputation of a foot crushed by a falling mast. It was no surprise that this would happen—Captain Smith made it a point, whenever he possibly could, to have a ship's surgeon who was also a physician, and other ship's surgeons, often with far less training, quickly got into the habit of requesting a consultation on their more difficult cases.

Watching Curran working with their own injured crew, and seeing the way he willingly went to help the others, David mentally dismissed him as a suspect in their investigation. He knew that was premature, possibly even foolish, but he felt an instinctive trust and liking for the man. He had, so far, been unable to form much of an opinion about the other warrant officers. Purser, gunner, carpenter, cook, armorer, sailmaker, master-at-arms, schoolmaster—they all appeared to be nothing more than mariners doing their jobs. And there was no reason to assume that their saboteur was any sort of officer, was there? He could be an ordinary seaman, a resentful newcomer caught up by a press-gang, even one of the midshipmen...or possibly more than one.

With his division squared away and everything under control, David was delighted to be released from duty so he could retire to his cabin and get some much-needed sleep. But something nagged at him as he drifted off. Just after daybreak, Captain Smith had told him to go to the

midshipmen's mess and make sure the younger midships had survived the blow in good health, which they had, for the most part—the one who had not was in the sick berth with his arm in a splint—but David had not seen the three older midshipmen. When he'd come back on deck he'd seen two of them, Laird and Hatfield, supervising their gun-crews. They had no idea where Gannon might be.

He had not found Dickie Gannon anywhere. And though he had been just as pleased not to have seen him, he wondered where the boy had gotten to. But Lt. Carter was a man with a great many years experience, and he was on duty now, and when Gannon's watch came round on the duty roster, it would be Carter he had to report to. David pulled his blanket up over his still-damp head and let his weary body rest. The little beast would turn up eventually. After all, he had to be on the ship somewhere.

~

Will Marshall had the morning watch the second day after the storm, and was treated to a glorious sunrise. A day closer to the West Indies, with the sun and breeze so warm it was hard to believe they had been so very cold and wet the night before.

"Sail to windward!"

The sail appeared briefly as the sun rose above the horizon—its dazzle had hidden the other ship's approach. Almost immediately, it ducked back over the horizon. Will sent word below to the Captain, who came up, considered the wind and current, and chose not to pursue it. He ordered Commander Edwards to keep the *Terrier* well behind the rest of the convoy, however. In these waters, the stranger could be anything—British, French, Spanish, American, even a slaver. But unless it came closer, it posed no threat, even to the sluggish Dutch-built brig that had lost half its mainmast in the blow. Only a fool would take a ship as big as a 74 off her course to pursue a smaller, faster ship and leave a convoy sailing unguarded into an unknown situation, and Sir Paul was no fool.

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It seemed someone thought he might be, though. The sail showed up for a little while just before sunset, and vanished again. They were drawing close to the Leeward Islands now, where a small, quick vessel could play hide-and-seek indefinitely in these waters.

And the unknown ship was not the only one playing hide-and-seek. Davy, up at eight a.m. to take the forenoon watch, joined Will at the leeward rail of the quarterdeck. "Any sign of our lost sheep?" were his first words.

"No," Will said. "Nor does anyone I've spoken to remember seeing him since the storm hit." When Gannon had failed to report for his afternoon watch the day before, Captain Smith had ordered the ship searched. There had been no sign of the missing mid.

"Two days." Davy frowned. "What does the Captain say?"

"Precious little. Gannon could be hiding, planning to jump ship in Kingston."

"He could be dead."

"That's possible." Will regretted the words as soon as he'd said them; the look of guilt on Davy's face was a terrible thing. "Still, we're only a few more days out of port—a week at most, if the weather holds. With a bottle of water and a sack of biscuits, there are plenty of places he could hide."

"But why should he, Will? If the Captain hadn't called him immediately, he'd no reason to fear I had reported him."

Will didn't have an answer.

~

The ship that had been following them from a distance discarded its reticence the next morning. By the time the sun was high enough to see the convoy, the stranger was closing fast with the slowest ship in line, the damaged brig, which as usual had lagged far behind the rest. The intruder was well in the open now, and they could see it was a thirty six-gun frigate flying French colors. Edwards

had the *Terrier* under way to intercept, but his eighteen nine-pounders were no match for the French guns that threw more than twice that weight.

The Captain was on deck, luckily—or maybe more than luck; Marshall had been half-expecting something like this himself. As the marines beat to quarters, Smith gave orders for the *Valiant* to wear and come about to meet the enemy.

And the Frenchman did something extremely peculiar. Instead of turning tail immediately, the only reasonable course of action when facing the long guns of a seventy-four, it allowed Smith to bring the *Valiant* to just outside accurate range. Holding the *Terrier* at bay with little more than its stern-chasers, the frigate sent up a flurry of signals—signals from every mast, nothing Will recognized at all. And then, leaving the *Terrier* crippled with a mainsail yard hanging useless, the Frenchman ran before the wind, once more leaving the formidable but massively slower *Valiant* far behind.

“That’s the last we’ll see of him,” said the Captain to the four lieutenants standing with him on the quarterdeck. “Quickly, now. While those signals are still clear in your mind’s eye, write them down.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Humberstone. “Every bit of information could prove useful.”

“Particularly when we see what happens in the next few days,” Smith said. “We may not have understood that message, but I’m certain someone aboard did.”

“But there are many who would never have seen it,” Davy said, at Will’s elbow. “Dr. Curran, his surgeon’s mates, the men in the powder room—”

“And the lower-deck gun crews,” Humberstone said. “Only the men on deck could be guaranteed sight of the flags.”

“Excellent,” said the Captain, surveying the hundred or more still swarming about the deck. “At this rate, a sail around the Horn should be just long enough to do the job.”

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Marshall was grateful that he was not the only one inadequately thankful for small blessings.

~

“Will. A moment, please?”

The words were ordinary, but the tone of voice was not, nor was the stony look on Davy’s face. Marshall gathered his equipment—he had been taking longitudinal sightings for his own amusement—and followed his lover below to their quarters. “Another note?”

“Yes. And I was right here when beat-to-quarters sounded, so he had no more than fifteen minutes, the devil. Look at this.”

Another note, lying on Davy’s cot. The same cheap paper, this time with a skull and crossbones crudely drawn, and a more serious threat: *“The key to the weapons locker, or I’ll tell them where you put the body.”*

Will shivered, resting a hand on his lover’s shoulder. He needed to touch Davy, but that was all he could allow himself.

“This has gone on long enough,” David said.

“He must be mad.”

“No—only ruthless.” He put his own hand atop Will’s. “You were right, it’s a damned good thing we told the Captain. And thank you for not reminding me that you told me so.”

“Davy, I’m not worried about proving I’m right!”

Davy laughed sharply. “No, but it’s a good thing one of us was—and that I listened to you.” He folded the note in half. “Let’s go inspect the hull again. We need to talk without worrying about anyone sneaking up on us.”

“Yes.” Will wanted very much to be alone with Davy, if only for a few moments. “But I’d like to do it differently this time. You go in from the forward access, I’ll go aft—we can meet in the middle. I’ll watch and see if anyone follows you.”

“Very good. I’ll get a lantern, no need for both of us to carry one. You come forward in the dark. If someone does



follow me, you follow him and we'll catch him between us. Is your pistol charged?"

"Ever since that first note. And I should dearly love the chance to use it."

But he really could not tell whether anyone was watching Davy as they went back up on deck, observed the sky, spoke to a few of the men on duty. There were too many men on deck, men who had every right to be there—Dr. Curran had come above to extract a small splinter from the purser's thumb, the light being so much better on deck. Half a dozen of the younger midshipmen were skylarking in the rigging, the usual Marine guard was standing at attention beside the ladders to the quarterdeck, the sailmaker was supervising repair to a topgallant sail that had unaccountably been found slashed when it was put back up after the storm...their phantom could have been any of these men, or none of them.

Will counted two minutes after Davy left the deck, then went down the nearest hatch and headed aft. He made his way through the maze of levels and ladders and ducked into the access to the carpenter's walk, stepping carefully in the dark, one hand just touching the wall. He heard nothing but the sound of the sea, and as he came around the curve of the hull he saw the glimmer of Davy's dark lantern. "Ahoy, shipmate!" he called softly.

Light glinted on Davy's hair as he raised the lantern. "Any luck?"

"No. Six hundred souls...even with half them cleared, there are too many possibilities. I would swear no one followed you, but—"

"Hush!" With a single movement, Davy shuttered the lantern and held it low, behind his body. Barely breathing, they faced back the way Will had come, senses alert for the slightest sound.

There! A scrape, a footstep—and then a dim light came swinging around the curve, and Davy opened the dark-lantern again.

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"Mr. Marshall, is that you?"

"Klingler?"

The Captain's steward stepped forward hesitantly, his tanned face squinting as he raised his own lantern. "Yessir."

Of all the ratings aboard, Klingler and Barrow were thankfully above suspicion. "What the devil are you doing down here?"

"Well, sir, I noticed you hared off like you was after someone, and seein' as the Captain told me to keep my eyes open and keep an eye on the both of you—I thought you might need a hand, so here I am."

"I see." Will met Davy's glance. "Thank you for your good intentions. Mr. Archer and I are doing much the same as you—also by the Captain's orders. We're hunting the vandal who damaged our topsail and we were hoping we might be followed; we had not expected a friendly face. But since you're here, can you tell us if you've noticed anything suspicious in the past few days?"

"Among the ratings, sir, that's one thing I have *not* seen, unless you'd say two left thumbs on each hand's suspicious. This poor barky's got a couple of sawdust-for-brains grass-combers aboard who might as well have been left ashore for all the good they do."

"Always a few of those, aren't there?" Davy said. "But we'll turn them into seamen yet."

"Aye, sir," the steward said, in a tone that made it clear he was making allowances for Mr. Archer's rank and excessive optimism.

Will looked down the dim corridor the steward had just traversed. "Well, you've proved one thing, anyway," he said, keeping his voice low. "No one else followed me. If you would, Klingler, take your lantern and go on through. If you meet anyone, call out, ask him if he's seen either of us... and remember his face."

"Aye, sir. And if I don't see anyone?"

"Stay near the access, if you can do it without anyone

getting curious as to why you're there, and make a bit of noise if anyone starts down. I'd like to see whether our ship's ghost means to pay us a visit; we're going to move back toward the stern and lie in wait."

The seaman nodded, touched his forehead, and started down the corridor. Davy shut his lantern's flap again, putting them into near-total darkness. In less than a minute Klingler's light was gone, with only a reflected glow bouncing off the hull, and soon that disappeared as well.

"Set the lantern down for a moment, Davy," Will said. He heard the muffled clank as Davy did so.

"How long do you want to wait here?"

"Not long," Will said quietly. "Only long enough to hold you for a moment."

"What? Will, that's mad, we—" His whispered protest was muffled by Will's lips, but he joined in eagerly, pulling Will close.

It probably was a little mad. This was not a safe place. But there was no safe place on this damned ship, and here at least they would have a few moments' warning if anyone came creeping along; at worst, they could say they were trying to lure in the phantom.

But that was not what drove Marshall. He had been intensely furious with that damned he-whore Gannon, for making advances toward *his* lover. Ever since Davy had told him of Gannon's proposition, he had been aflame with jealousy. Even the thought that the transgressor might now be dead did not quench the fire. He desperately needed to reassure himself that Davy was his, only his, needed to taste that beautiful mouth, feel their bodies move together. Here in the darkness, with the whispering sea just outside, he leaned against his lover, pinning Davy against the inner wall of the ship.

Davy resisted for a moment, but then his hands dropped to Will's arse, kneading and squeezing as their cocks ground together through their clothing. Only for a moment—and then he whispered, "Will, we can't—it

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would show, if Klingler's waiting when we—"

"Shh." Will slid to his knees, appalled at his own recklessness even as he was working at Davy's trouser buttons. Stupid, stupid and dangerous, but Davy was shivering so beautifully as Will licked and sucked and brought his lover to a quick, silent release. He stayed there for a few seconds, resting his face against Davy's thigh, then slid up to hold him once more.

Davy's voice was shaky. "Will—shall I—"

"No. You're right, it was mad. I—I'm not sure what came over me. Just button your trousers, Davy. I'll take care of myself later." It would be madness to go any further, and in any event he certainly deserved a little frustration for putting Davy at such risk.

He held his lover close until their breathing slowed, until he could convince his own excited cock to calm down at least a little. A good thing they were in undress uniform, with dark trousers that were looser than the more formal breeches

Davy kissed him one last time, then picked up the lantern. "Mr. Marshall, that was the most idiotic thing I have ever known you to do. Why, in the name of sanity?"

Will shook his head, equally flummoxed at his own recklessness. "I'm not sure. Not something I'll do again, I promise you."

"Not under these circumstances, at any rate—I hope you do not mean forever!"

"Of course not." Will was already regretting his rash behavior—and yet not regretting it at all. This uncertainty was new to him, and most distressing. He hoped that in explaining it to Davy, he might explain it to himself. "It has to do with being hung as well for a sheep as a lamb, I think. Taking such pains to give the appearance without the reality, having this unknown enemy threatening you for something we were *not* doing..." He shrugged helplessly. "Hubris, perhaps. After all, Davy, under these circumstances, even if our phantom materialized and

caught us at it—do think the Captain would believe him?”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Davy said.

~

It was long after supper—in fact, nearly midnight—when one of the younger ship’s boys came running up to David, who was just about to go off-duty.

“Captain’s compliments, Mr. Archer, if you would report to him at your earliest convenience?”

That meant immediately, of course. The Captain’s convenience was always sovereign, but except in battle Sir Paul phrased his orders with the utmost courtesy. David made certain his uniform was in good order and presented himself at the Captain’s cabin.

Will Marshall was already there, and he looked as somber as David had ever seen him.

“Mr. Archer,” the Captain said. “I need to have a few words with both of you. Over here, if you please.” He led them to a corner of the day cabin where he kept a small writing desk, well away from skylights and out of earshot of even the most determined eavesdropper, and handed a folded piece of the familiar cheap paper to David. “Klingler found this sealed in a scrap of sailcloth, addressed to me personally and confidentially. It had been left in my cupboard—directly abaft your berth.”

“Our ghost has been busy,” David said. He unfolded the note, held it near one of the hanging lanterns, and felt the color drain from his face.

*“2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Archer has been engaging in unclean practices with 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Marshall.”*

Stunned, he heard the Captain say, “I must congratulate you gentlemen on your convincing performance, and give you permission to cease and desist. You would surely do so had you been called in and given a dressing-down for illicit activities.”

David swallowed, trying to make his voice work. “Thank you, sir.” He dared not look at Will.

Sir Paul took the note back. “I believe it is actually our

phantom who should be congratulated—for his excessively active imagination. Apart from the carpenters' walk excursions, I had not noticed any unusual behavior, and even that activity was reasonable for officers acquainting themselves with a new ship. If it were not for that peculiar French display the other morning, that frenzy of signaling, I would begin to wonder if our sabotage was simply the product of a disordered mind."

"There is our missing midshipman as well, sir. "

"Indeed. When we have arrived in Kingston I intend to have the ship searched thoroughly. In this weather, a corpse would not keep indefinitely. If the unfortunate young man is indeed dead, I suspect his remains have been stowed in the bilges, and I do not want his body found until we reach port; it would disturb the crew. They're better off believing he went overboard in the gale."

"The last communication I received suggested you might be told where the body is hidden, sir."

"Oh, that nonsense. I think it an empty threat. Since you know you did not kill anyone, why should you have any reason to fear an anonymous accusation? These threats would carry weight only if you had a guilty secret—and you do not. In any event, an accusation of this gravity would require an accuser—he must needs reveal himself or find a willing catspaw. As for this rubbish—"

The Captain picked up the newest note and, to David's great relief, crumpled it up, lifted the glass on the lantern, and set fire to the thing. When it was well ablaze he dropped it onto the pewter bowl of sand that sat in a bracket on his writing desk. After the paper blackened into ash, Sir Paul stirred it until it was blended into a formless mass. "I must be sure Klingler changes the sand," he said as if to himself. "I should hate to blot a letter to my wife and leave ash-smears across it."

"Thank you, sir," David said, weak with relief.

The Captain snorted. "This reptile must know very little of me, if he believes I would bring charges against

one of my own officers on the basis of an anonymous poison pen. I wouldn't hang a dog on such 'evidence'. But as the missive itself no longer exists, I see no reason to mention it to Mr. Humberstone. The communications you have already received have convinced him that his ruse was successful."

David thanked him again. Will, quiet until now, asked, "Captain, what action do you wish us to take now? The fellow is still demanding the key to the weapons locker."

"Give it to him."

"Sir?" they both asked, in startled unison.

"On Monday, I plan to exercise the upper-deck guns in the morning watch, as soon as there's light to see. In the afternoon it will be the lower gundecks. You would of course have to remove the key when the lower deck is cleared for action, so our traitor will certainly search your cabin in the morning. On Tuesday, however, I shall have the carpenter rouse his crew and install a proper set of walls and doors in the wardroom. This is not regulation, but neither is our situation, and I do not believe my officers' quarters should be treated as a public thoroughfare. When this is done, the armorer will then cast locks with unique keys for your doors. So, Mr. Archer, when you go on duty Monday, forenoon watch, you may put this beneath your sea-chest."

He took a key from his pocket and handed it to David. "It will do our traitor little good. While the armorer is making locks for the officers' cabins he will also be making a new lock for every secure compartment on this ship, and I shall personally distribute the keys to those who have business in those areas. There will be no question of who is responsible for any given key. And now, gentlemen, would you care to join me in a light repast?"

~

The next day was Sunday, and as usual church was rigged, the awning raised over the quarterdeck, the entire crew washed and brushed, presenting themselves in their

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best attire. The *Valiant* had no chaplain, but instead of the usual reading of the Articles—was Captain Smith perhaps feeling the sting of conscience?—he read from a book of sermons often carried as a companion volume to the Book of Common Prayer.

The text of the sermon concerned the verses that began, “No man may serve two masters...”

~

Monday morning, four days out of Kingston, the *Valiant* was sailing through a scattering of minute, uninhabited islands under a fair wind and temperate weather. Mr. West and his master’s mate had been excused from practice, as he was wholly absorbed in directing their course through the passage between the islands. The *Terrier* followed to windward and a little astern, keeping their flock of merchantmen in order. Since *Valiant* was the largest ship, with the deepest draft, the rest of the convoy could follow wherever she had clear passage.

But the foremast crew paid little attention to the ship’s progress. Since the Captain had announced that the entire ship would turn out for gunnery practice, nearly everyone aboard was focused on the upcoming event. This was not just the ordinary practice that took up an hour or two every day, but an exercise in firing both sides of the ship, a considerably more demanding task. More demanding, more dangerous—and yet a favorite activity for all the men, who delighted in the noise and force of the big ship’s batteries.

Will surveyed the deck, already swabbed, scrubbed, and cleared for action. For the first time since his transfer, he began to feel a liking for the huge tub. He was pleased with the way his division was shaping up—the French intrusion earlier in the week had left the *Valiant’s* crew somewhat dissatisfied with their own performance, and his men seemed ready and eager to show their new Captain what they could do when they put their minds to it. Hammocks were rolled and stored in the netting, the gun



crews stood by their weapons with tools at the ready, and even the powder monkeys, some of them no older than six, were bright-eyed and alert.

“We’ll have three sets of three before the end of the morning watch,” Captain Smith announced. Like all captains, he aspired to the three rounds in five minutes that had become a byword—in a fight, the ship that could reload and fire the most quickly and most accurately always had an advantage. “A double ration of rum to the first crew to achieve three in five.”

The first three rounds shattered the morning’s stillness, but the steady breeze soon blew away the clouds of smoke that filled the *Valiant* amidships. After consultation among the midshipmen, it was revealed that none of the guns had reached their goal. On the bright side, however, there were no injuries—the gun teams were working in careful coordination.

The powder monkeys had already run below to fetch cartridges for the next round, but where were they? After a prolonged delay, a lad popped up and whispered to Barrow, the bosun, who looked around and spotted Marshall standing nearest the rail of the quarterdeck. “Mr. Marshall, bit of a problem in the powder room.”

Will turned to the Captain, but he was in conversation with Mr. West; the *Valiant* was about to pass the narrowest part of the strait between a tall, rocky islet and a set of reefs a little too close to their lee for comfort. For the next few minutes, Captain Smith’s attention would be elsewhere, so Will followed the bosun below.

~

David Archer counted the seconds during the first set of shots, and grinned when none of them did better than five minutes and forty-five seconds. With that failure spurring them on, he’d bet even money that somebody broke the five-minute mark on the second round. Hopefully Acting Lt. Hatfield, their oldest midshipman, would be up to the task of directing Archer’s division.

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Technically on duty, David had left the key under his sea chest, as their mole had directed. He had mustered with divisions before practice began—but then, as had been decided in conference with the Captain late Saturday night, he slipped away and concealed himself in Lt. Humberstone's cabin, directly across from his own.

He knew that the key was still in his cabin, and he was betting that the roar and thunder on deck would be the perfect distraction. Humberstone possessed a small table that was placed between his sea chest and the door. By sitting on the chest and leaning well back, David was invisible unless a man actually opened the door and looked into the cabin, and with all hands called to quarters there should be no one in the wardroom at all.

The silence above stretched out far too long. David could think of no reason why Sir Paul should have stopped the gunnery practice—it was unheard of. Even if a man had been hurt—powder burns and recoil injuries were not uncommon—the rest of the guns would have kept on at their task.

Something had gone wrong abovedecks, and if it was serious enough to stop the guns, he should be up on deck, not playing puss-in-the-corner with a traitor. But this eventuality had been planned for, too. He would simply retrieve the key and bait the trap at some other time. David stood, stretching his legs after the long inactivity.

And froze where he stood as he heard the wardroom door creak open.

~

“Sea-water, sir. Poured over all the cartridge sacks.”

This was sabotage of the first order, the sort that would be hellish in combat. It had only just been discovered because yesterday evening the powder crew had, in anticipation of this morning's exercise, filled enough sacks for the first rounds of gunnery practice for the upper deck—around a hundred narrow burlap sleeves full of ordinary-grade large-grain gunpowder, exactly the

size and shape to slide down the barrel of a long gun. But when they went into the storage chest to get a fresh supply of sacks for the second round, they'd found the box a foot deep in seawater and the burlap completely soaked. The gunner's mate had immediately closed it again and sent a boy to the carpenter to ask for as much sawdust as he could spare to sop it up.

"I've sent men down to the hold to fetch a new crate, sir." Cox, the gunner, looked worried, as well he should. The powder room was in an inner chamber because the gunpowder had to be kept safe and away from open flame, and above all it had to be kept *dry*. "I've no idea how this came to be here—but I can swear it was none of my men did it."

"I'm sure they did not." Will could only imagine what the Captain would say, but even this was not entirely unexpected. In their conference on Saturday they had considered the possibility that their saboteur was demanding the gun-locker key as a red herring, that he was actually considering a strike at some other vulnerable area. At least now they knew what it was.

"Is the powder all right?"

"Aye, sir. I set the mate checkin' the magazine as soon as we saw this. The barrels are fine—still sealed."

"Very good. As soon as you get the new sacks, get them filled fast as ever you can. Have the boys bring 'em up double-quick." There was nothing more he could do here, so he ran for the ladder. Each of the big guns had powder enough for three more shots. That was all. And a ship with seventy-four guns and no powder was little better than a moving target. Will found himself wondering just where that French frigate had disappeared to, after its sudden spate of signaling. This would be the perfect time for an enemy attack—and he had to wonder whether the enemy knew it

Captain Smith received the news with less surprise than Will had expected. He nodded approval at Will's

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orders to the powder-room, and called for silence on the deck. In a few well-chosen words, he described what had transpired, what was being done, and sent about a quarter of the gun crews below to help relay the powder back up.

"I know," the Captain said in his booming quarter-deck voice, "that you are all aware of the problems this ship has seen. I had hoped we'd left the problem behind us in Plymouth, but it seems we were not so fortunate. From now on, each and every one of you must be responsible not only for your own behavior, but for your shipmates'. Be aware of whom you are with, and pay attention if anyone is not where you expect him to be.

"It is a sad thing when loyal men in His Majesty's service must act as informers against one another, but until this viper is removed from the bosom of the ship, we are all at risk. There is one man aboard this ship who does not deserve to be here among us. Be vigilant, and use the sense God gave you. If you see something that is not as it should be, speak up."

Will studied the faces of the men in his own division. There was no alarm—in fact, several heads were nodding and he thought he caught a muttered, "About time."

"One last thing, men." The Captain stopped as two powder monkeys ran up out of the hatch with a cartridge-bucket in either hand, followed a few seconds later by another, and then by some of the younger hands, who ignored the quiet assembly on deck and ran busily about their task.

"One last thing," Sir Paul repeated. "It is my responsibility to find and arrest this saboteur, and I am now giving a measure of that responsibility to each of you. I also warn you now, and you may rest assured I am serious—there will be no leave for any member of this ship's company until we have discovered and apprehended the villain who is sabotaging His Majesty's property and endangering our lives and our mission."

As he finished speaking and looked around, meeting

the eyes of the men on deck, the *Valiant* cleared the narrow passage and sailed into the open sea beyond the longest spit of the tall, uninhabited island.

A sudden shrill whine, the sound of a cannonball's passage, tore through the crew's silence an instant before the ball itself punched a hole in the foremast staysail. The boom of the explosion, traveling more slowly than the projectile, reached their ears a moment later. Will glanced up, following the line of its trajectory, and realized that the enemy had moved cannon onto the uninhabited island. Someone was firing on them from far above the elevation that the *Valiant's* guns could reach.

And then three Frenchmen, a frigate and two corvettes, hove into sight from around the far side of the island, bearing down on *Valiant* with the weather-gauge in their favor. They were smaller than the British seventy-four, but together they carried far more guns, and they could surround the bigger ship and pound away at her.

"Beat to quarters!" the Captain roared.

~

David held his breath, hearing the door open cautiously. He slipped his shoes off, but did not move toward the door; even though the sun was on the larboard, the tropical light was still strong enough to throw his shadow against the canvas wall. Outside it, he could just hear movement, quiet steps that seemed to be traveling along the row of cabins on the far side of the wardroom, coming up just even with where he waited. The movement stopped. David waited for a count of five seconds before leaving his position.

He took two silent steps to the door, put his eye to the crack between the curtains—and all hell broke loose. A cannon crashed off to larboard, at some distance, followed almost immediately by the beat to quarters and the sound of running feet. So much for stealth. Abandoning his shoes, David pushed through the curtains and headed for his cabin, just as half a dozen hands burst through the

wardroom door to start tearing down the cabins so the guns could be run out.

A figure darted out of David's cabin, pushing against the men running in, but he was stalled at the doorway by the tide of bodies surging in. Warrant officer's coat, but David couldn't see his face. Rather than shout orders that were bound to cause confusion, David ducked around the central mast and circled around—and found himself face-to-face with Joseph Dowling, the purser.

"Of course," he said aloud, as Dowling glanced over and met his eyes with a look of hatred. Of course. The notes on purser's paper, the Shakespeare misquote to bring him down to the wardroom just in time to be caught in flagrante with Gannon—and the purser's cabin just outside the officers' wardroom, where he could duck inside and vanish instantly. Dowling was the obvious answer.

Something hit the larboard hull with a bang that shook the deck but did not burst through, and in the split second following the shock, Dowling slipped between two crewmen and through the door.

David pushed through the crowd as the *Valiant's* upper guns began answering the attack. He got into the companionway just in time to see his quarry vanish up the larboard stair. He was heading for the deck—was he planning to jump overboard and swim to whatever ship was attacking them? The man had just enough of a lead that his vanishing feet were all David saw as he chased him up the 'tween-decks ladders. A pity that he hadn't been able to smoke Dowling out without the traitor knowing it, but thank God there'd be an end to the sneaking and hiding, the uneasy awareness that someone was always watching.

He burst up out of the starboard hatch into the organized pandemonium of battle, saw two Frenchmen off to larboard and a third, a corvette, pursuing the *Terrier*, which seemed to be leading it toward the convoy—into range of the minimal but by no means useless guns of the

merchantmen. But where had Dowling got to?

Well, that didn't matter, did it? The important thing was to let Captain Smith know who their traitor was. David stepped aside as a thunder of powder monkeys passed, cartridge-cans in either hand, and headed for the quarterdeck.

"Mister Archer!"

He spun, and saw nothing but the flash of a pistol an instant before something slammed into his body and knocked him down. There was no pain—just a huge numbness, a feeling that he was not even in his body. Lying stunned, he heard a mutter of "there's one less damned sodomite," and then Dowling's voice, louder, "Sir! Captain! Here's Mr. Archer, looks like he's been shot dead!"

~

Will whirled at the shout, but saw nothing in the press of bodies until Klingler shouldered his way through the tumult and lifted Davy's shoulders while one of the ship's boys got his feet. Davy looked unconscious, his white waistcoat and breeches bloody—too much blood, but he was alive, he was still alive, they were taking him below to the surgeon, not throwing him over the side. Will hadn't a moment more to think about it, because although they were nearly out of range of the cannon on the island, there were still two French ships to be dealt with. A part of him was screaming to go below and find out what had happened to his lover. He closed that part away and turned to his duty. If the *Valiant* were sunk or captured, Davy would certainly die. He could not allow that to happen. He had to stay at his post.

Somehow, he got through the battle, though it was by sheer force of habit. Edwards, in the *Terrier*, combined forces with the merchant ships and actually managed to disable one of the corvettes. A couple of lucky shots from the *Valiant's* stern-chasers took down most of the rigging on the other, and the frigate, seriously battered and

deprived of its two consorts, turned and fled.

It was only after the battle that things got worse. An hour after the last shot was fired, exhausted and terrified, Will found himself standing on the deck of *l'Esperance*, watching the *Valiant* set off for Kingston with the convoy trailing along, while he and his prize crew set about making the captured corvette fit to sail. Even before the other ship passed out of sight, Will was assessing the damage, issuing orders, and considering what he needed to do to get this tub under way as quickly as possible.

Davy was still alive but unconscious, lying in the *Valiant's* sickbay with a pistol ball lodged in his vitals. He was bleeding slowly but persistently, and Dr. Curran said that his only chance for survival was to get the bullet out. The bullet's location made the doctor loathe to operate on a moving ship; he strongly recommended that they get his patient to solid ground.

With Kingston less than two days away, the Captain had set sail as quickly as possible. Although he had been reluctant to leave his First Lieutenant as part of the prize crew, *l'Esperance* was too big a responsibility for a midshipman, and for some reason Lt. Humberstone was not to be given this task. Will privately suspected it was because the Captain was not quite certain he would be up to it—and he also suspected the Captain was right. If Carter had not suffered a broken leg—but 'ifs' were useless; the only thing he could do was work—and hope.

*L'Esperance*. He would literally be sailing to Kingston on hope. Hope, not prayer; he could hardly be so hypocritical as to expect a god he was not sure he believed in to grant him the life of a lover whose very existence was an affront to the religion in which he'd been raised. Not that his father had been one of the hellfire-and-brimstone sort; the Reverend Mr. Marshall had been far more inclined to do unto others and judge not. Will wondered what his father would say to him about his overwhelming feelings for another man.



A foolish notion. Even if his father were still alive, that was one thing they would never have discussed. But he thought his father would have liked Davy—how could he help it? Nearly everyone liked Davy.

Except, of course, the man who shot him. Will hoped that Captain Adams would choose his most trustworthy men as guards in the sickroom—because none of those three French ships had ever been within pistol-range of the *Valiant*. Davy had been shot by someone already aboard ship—most probably their traitor, which meant he had seen the man and could identify him, and the bastard knew it.

And unless the traitor had somehow (*please, God!*) been killed in the battle, he was still on board. And no one but Davy knew who he was.

Will thrust aside the mental image of Davy's still, white face, the last he'd seen of his lover before he was called away. Davy would live. He would live. He had to live, the whole stupid charade would be useless otherwise.

And just how many stupid, senseless deaths had he seen since he joined His Majesty's service? Best not to think about that. Better to get this stupid lead-bottomed French hulk into Kingston. He pushed his worries aside once more and turned to the man acting as petty-officer of the prize-crew. "Korthals, get the jeers rigged. I want a new yard swayed up first off, we can complete some of the repairs once we're underway. Put some of the prisoners on the pump, under guard—they won't want to sink any more than we do. I'll be in the Captain's cabin, looking through the ship's papers."

Yes. He would look through the papers, see whether there might be anything that would point to a member of the *Valiant's* crew as a French agent. He did not expect to find such information—if it existed at all, it would certainly be in code—but he had to do something or he would go mad.

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Marshall brought *l'Esperance* into Kingston less than three days later. The convoy rode at anchor in her harbor, and from his perch high atop the corvette's mainmast, Will spotted the *Terrier*, with her crew at work repainting her sides where the carpenters had apparently finished repair. Beyond her lay the *Valiant*, but there was something wrong with her masts, and it wasn't damage from the battle. Whatever had they—

"Oh, no," Will whispered aloud. "*No.*"

The *Valiant's* yardarms were all a-cockbill, set at irregular angles from the masts. It threw the whole ship out of balance, but it was not sloppiness. It was deliberate, like black crepe hung over the doorway of a house where a family member had died.

It was a ship in mourning.

~

A frantic couple of hours must have convinced the men at the Kingston navy yard that the *Valiant's* first lieutenant had run mad. But Marshall held his composure sufficiently to discharge his duty. He sent his prize crew back to the *Valiant*, turned *l'Esperance* in to the Port Admiral's office, signed the forms he needed to sign, and went off to search for Captain Smith where the sympathetic clerk at the office told him to look.

He found the Captain and most of the other ship's officers in a little cemetery on the edge of town, only a short walk but exhausting in the tropical heat. He arrived just in time to stand at attention, his bicorne held over his heart, while the Marine honor-guard fired off a twenty-one-gun salute for the *Valiant's* fallen 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant.

He didn't know how long he stood there, staring at the fresh earth on Davy's grave. A moment. Forever. Time ceased to have meaning. He was numb with the overload of grief and pain and exhaustion. He had not even been able to say goodbye.

The pain closed his throat. He stumbled forward and dropped to his knees at the foot of the grave. How could

this have happened? Davy, so alive, so warm and passionate, held close in his arms just days ago. It was unthinkable that Davy could be lying cold and dead beneath this foreign soil. It was wrong. There had to have been some mistake—

Someone touched his shoulder. “Your pardon, Lieutenant.”

The Captain. Duty reminded him he should rise and reply with courtesy. Half-blind with unshed tears, he rose on legs unsteady as a newborn colt’s. The Captain, kind as a father, had an arm around him, leading him away from the barren, flower-strewn earth.

His teeth began to chatter, and he suddenly realized he was cold and shaking, even in the humid heat of the afternoon. “Let’s get you out of here, Mr. Marshall,” Smith said at his elbow. “Come along.”

He surrendered command to his Captain, grateful for the small mercy. Barrow was there, too, and some of the others, forming a sort of guard around them as they left the cemetery. The glare of the tropical sun blinded him, the smothering blanket of heat sapping what little strength he had left. A headache began to throb behind his eyes.

Somehow they passed through the bustling streets, past dark-skinned natives in blinding white attire. Smith took him to an inn a short distance from the Admiralty building, installed him in a room, then vanished. Marshall sat in the chair where he’d been placed, staring out the window, looking at the cloudless blue sky but seeing only a cool grey day in Portsmouth, and a towering ship, and a sunny smile beneath a spotless midshipman’s bicorne. “Welcome to the *Titan*, Mr. Marshall!”

The first sob racked his body like a consumptive’s final cough, and the dam broke wide open. Weeping uncontrollably, he caught the edge of the table, tumbled onto the bed, and curled into a knot of misery. *It isn’t fair, it should have been me!* Why did they all die instead of him? All those men who’d served with him, served under

him, weathered old sailors and midshipmen too young to shave, all the others who died while he kept on living. The one special 'other' who had become his reason for living. *It isn't fair. How can I go on without him? Why am I still alive?*

Thought stopped. Time stopped. He took in breath only to pump out more grief, his soul so raw he felt torn in two. Gradually his nose stuffed up, and his eyes ached, and his throat, and still there were more tears. He had not wept like this for his mother. He had not wept at all, and they had praised him for being such a strong little man. But now that he had started he did not think he would ever stop. How could a wound like this ever heal?

It would have been different if only he could have been there. If he could have at least held Davy's hand, said goodbye... He told himself that would have been easier, but he knew he was lying. He didn't know where the tears were still coming from. Wasn't there a limit to the amount of water in a human body? He was making a mess of the pillow-case.

At last sheer exhaustion pulled him under. He jerked awake to find Barrow standing beside him. "Sir?"

*You have a duty to your men, Mr. Marshall.* "Yes—" He levered himself up, coughed; Barrow handed him a glass of water. *Bless you, Barrow.* The water helped a little. "Yes, Barrow, what is it?"

"It's Lord St. John, sir." Barrow's eyes were somber, and today his seemingly ageless face looked old. "Mr.—Mr. Archer's cousin, he's askin' to see you, sir—"

"No." He had completely forgotten Davy mentioning, early in the cruise, that his cousin had a sugar plantation in Jamaica, and might actually be in residence. Will had met Lord St. John—more properly, Baron Guilford—twice before. The first time was when the Baron and his bride-to-be were rescued by the *Calypso*. He had seen them again after the birth of their daughter, when he and Davy had visited the extensive Archer-St John family after his

lover had been promoted to Lieutenant. St. John was a fine man and his wife was a sweet, lovely Frenchwoman. But St. John bore a powerfully strong resemblance to his cousin, and if Will had to look at that familiar face—

*I cannot do it. I cannot.* “Barrow...please...” He took a deep breath, forced himself to speak calmly. “Please convey my regrets to his lordship, but I am...indisposed.”

“He says it’s urgent, sir.”

“Nothing is urgent anymore, Barrow.” He said it very softly, almost to himself. *I don’t care if the place is on fire, damn you, leave me in peace!* “Unless I am ordered to leave, I intend to remain here for just a little while. Please convey my regrets to—I said that, didn’t I?”

“Aye, you did, sir.” Barrow shifted from one foot to another. “Mr. Marshall—Klingler an’ me, we just wanted to say how sorry we are about—”

“Yes.” He held up a hand, not even wanting to hear the name. “Yes. Thank you, Barrow. Now—can you please just let me alone?” He was mortified to hear the quaver in his voice, but Barrow showed no sign he’d heard it; he nodded and took his leave. Marshall felt a surge of gratitude, and immediately suppressed it. No. Barrow was a good man, that was all. Best not to feel any affection. Too dangerous. For him, and for Barrow.

*Everyone I care about dies.* And the solution to that problem was obvious. He must do his duty: treat the men fairly, and decently, and act in such a way that they would want to follow him into battle. But for their own safety, best not to feel too much. For his own safety and sanity, best not to feel at all. It hurt too much, losing what one loved. If one did not love, one would not hurt. The pain could be kept at arm’s length. Logical.

*He’s gone.*

Not just missing for a time; gone forever. No more old jokes that only they shared. No more reading Shakespeare aloud on the off-watches, no more Davy there at his back when he needed someone he could trust, no irrepressible

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good humor dragging him from the bog of his own somber moods. Davy was gone. Dead. Forever. Marshall had no great faith in a hereafter, no hope of a resurrection, whatever the Book of Common Prayer said. There might be a God, and there might be a Heaven, and if they existed, Davy was there. He deserved to be; that was where angels belonged. *But I won't be.* If he had deserved punishment for his hubris, for taking that stupid risk with Davy in the carpenter's walk, this was punishment indeed. But it should not be Davy lying in the ground. He did not deserve death.

*He is gone.*

*I will never see him again.*

The tears started in afresh. It felt as though someone had cut his heart out with a handspike, and he had inexplicably failed to die. He couldn't even finish the job himself; he had a duty to his men, to his ship, a duty to honor Davy's memory.

A soft knock at the door. *Oh, please, can't you leave me alone?* He mopped at his face with his bedraggled handkerchief. "Come in."

It was Captain Smith.

"As you were, Mr. Marshall." Without further ado, he took the hand-towel from beside the basin on the chest of drawers beside the door, poured a bit of water on it, and handed it to Marshall as if he were a little squeaker of a cabin-boy.

"Thank you, sir." He tidied himself as best he could, and tried to look alert.

"Mr. Marshall, I would like you to accompany me on a short visit."

*Oh, no.* He didn't want to leave this room. It was not fondness for the room, but aversion to moving, to any movement or thought not absolutely required. "May I—may I ask where we are going, sir?"

"You may. But I am not able to tell you." He frowned at Marshall, apparently assessing his state of disrepair, and

wordlessly handed Marshall his own clean handkerchief. "Now, Mr. Marshall, if you please."

"Aye, sir."

He followed like an obedient spaniel as Captain Smith led the way downstairs, out to the heartlessly sunny street, into a canopied carriage with a dark-skinned driver who took them to a lovely manor house on the outskirts of town. Mercifully, the Captain did not require conversation of him. Marshall managed to contain most of his grief, but anything further was beyond him. His eyes would not stop leaking. That was embarrassing. But he had heard that even Nelson wept when his casualties were put over the side, sewn in their hammocks with round shot at their feet. If Nelson cried for his midshipmen, it could not be so very wrong for a mere lieutenant who had lost the love of his life.

At last they pulled up at the head of a circular drive, the door was opened by a coachman, and the carriage drove away. The Captain led him up the steps of the mansion, where a liveried servant granted them entrance and ushered them into a parlor.

Marshall settled uneasily on the edge of a damask-covered chair, and waited. Dull curiosity finally prompted him to ask. "What is this place, sir?"

"It belongs to the St. John family, Mr. Marshall. Baron Guilford invited us to stay here—"

"No!" He was on his feet, heading for the door, without conscious thought.

Smith caught him by the arm and halted his flight. "Mr. Marshall! Will you please *compose yourself*, sir!"

That note of command would have had his obedience even if he were unconscious. "Yes, sir." He returned to the chair, and sat very, very still. Why the Captain would torment him like this, he did not know. Nor did he care. Not really. He probably deserved it. But the Baron would find him, at best, a dismal guest.

"Forgive me, gentlemen. We have been preoccupied."

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It was Lord Christopher St. John, Baron Guilford, in a light-colored suit of tropical-weight clothing. At close quarters, he was clearly not David; his collar-length hair was light brown, not bleached golden by sun and salt air, and he moved like a landsman. But the uncanny resemblance, especially about the eyes—

Marshall took St. John's offered hand, his own eyes focused somewhere about the middle button of the man's coat. He mumbled some polite response, and once again followed when his lordship bade them come along without explaining where.

He tried to pay attention to what his host was saying as he trotted up the front stairs. "Lieutenant Marshall, I wish we could have met again in better circumstances. Zoe is in London with the children, but she remembers you fondly."

Was a response required? St. John didn't seem to need one. "I thought you might enjoy meeting my cousin who has recently returned from Canada," he went on. "He was in a fierce battle with privateers, and has come here to recover his strength—and perhaps to stay on for a time."

Marshall nodded, looking at his shoes, at the floor—anything to keep from enduring the sight of a face so like the one he would never see again. What was wrong with this chipper, chattering idiot? What was wrong with Captain Smith? Did they feel *nothing*? Davy was dead, for God's sake. Why choose this time to haul out a pirate-fighting Canadian?

But he had no energy to sustain the anger. What difference did it make? St. John had given Davy a hero's burial; it was little enough for Will to cater to his whims. *Very well. Show me your cousin. Show me your horses, your dog, your chamberpot, anything. Only, please, do not ask me to look at your face, I cannot bear it.*

He followed St. John and Captain Smith down the elegant Turkey carpet that lined the paneled hall. They entered a sitting room, and proceeded through it to the bedroom that formed part of a guest suite. A small figure



in the blue coat of a naval surgeon blocked his view of St. John's cousin.

The figure turned, and Marshall was astonished to recognize their own ship's surgeon. "Dr. Curran?"

"At your service, sir!" The doctor seemed quite pleased with himself, Marshall noted absently. "Is your heart sound, Mr. Marshall? Are you well?"

*My heart is broken, thank you. It doesn't matter.* "I suppose so," he said automatically.

"That's a relief," said Curran's patient. "I was afraid I might have given you palpitations."

Marshall heard the voice; he didn't believe it. Dr. Curran stepped aside and Will saw a cap of blond hair over a beloved face, drawn with pain and much too pale, but undeniably alive.

*"Davy?"*

"That's 'St. John,' if you please. David St. John, late of the Canadian colonies. And I suppose you must be Mr. Marshall." And then Davy's face split wide in that familiar grin, only to dissolve in a haze of tears and grey mist.

When Marshall came to himself he found that he had been draped into a chair beside Davy's bed, and Dr. Curran was apologizing. "Mr. Archer assured me that you would be up to the strain, sir. I am very sorry—"

"It's my fault, Will; I'm a damned fool." Davy stretched out a hand to him, wincing at the movement, and Will struggled up to take it. "I couldn't resist the dramatic revival."

Marshall shook his head, half-convinced that he truly had gone mad. "Davy. My God, please don't misunderstand me, but how—why—?"

"I surprised our traitor when he came to get the key—and all hell broke loose above." Short of breath, Davy looked at the Captain. "Would you explain, sir?"

"Certainly," said Sir Paul. "Mr. Marshall, our traitor was the ship's purser, Joseph Dowling. In the confusion on deck he shot Mr. Archer and believes him to be dead."

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"He has not been arrested?"

"Unfortunately, no. After consultation with the Intelligence people and politicians here in Kingston, it was decided that since our traitor thinks himself safe, we will learn more by allowing him to continue his activities and keep a close watch on where he goes and with whom he communicates. This can only be done if he believes Mr. Archer to be permanently out of the picture."

"The Secret Service thinks I'm better off dead," Davy said. "At least for a time."

"Easy for them to say that," Lord St. John interjected.

Davy raised an eyebrow at him. "They can say anything they like. It was I who spotted the bastard for them." He rested his head against the pillow, closing his eyes.

Dr. Curran frowned and checked his pulse. "For my part, I have never seen anyone so very hard to kill. But I am glad of it."

He persuaded his patient to drink something from a small cup. In a moment Davy's color improved, and he resumed his explanation. "You know how I love the theatre, Will. The edict had its appeal. I'm sorry no one had time to get a message to you."

"But you look like—you look—terrible." No. He did not look like death. He looked like life, like resurrection. Like a miracle. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

Captain Smith spoke up at last. "Mr. Archer is still not out of danger, if I understand the doctor correctly. I was unwilling to tell you he was alive, and inflict another cruelty if he had not survived the journey here."

Davy grinned faintly. "But I did. And I plan to stay alive!"

He was so pleased with himself Marshall could not help but smile. But he sounded so weak. "How do you feel, after all that?"

"Dr. Curran tells me I must follow his every command," Davy said, not quite answering the question.

"As he was able to effect repairs, I am inclined to obey. It will be some time before I'm anything like well again."

Dr. Curran clucked. "Which reminds me, it is time for you to rest. I will do what I can to find a local physician, and make it clear to him that if he attempts to bleed my patient, he will lose a pint himself for every ounce you shed. There is still the probability of infection," he said to Marshall, "but what we have here is a very healthy young man with a strong constitution and a tremendous will to live."

"Yes," Marshall agreed, delighting in the simple sight of his friend. "But—" He turned to Captain Smith. "What of Mr. Archer's career? Surely they cannot leave him in limbo forever."

The Captain cleared his throat. "Mr. Archer will receive the highest commendation for his part in this matter," he said. "Unfortunately, we have no idea when the honour will be bestowed. So long as Dowling is unaware that we know his identity, he is a valuable link to his colleagues and perhaps even his masters. While he is aboard the *Valiant*, Mr. Archer cannot return. Once Intelligence has learned all it can, Dowling will be arrested on a charge of murder."

"Found him?" Davy asked. He didn't need to say the name.

"Yes, in the bilges. He'd been strangled."

Will's sigh of relief went unnoticed. The Captain continued, "Mr. Humberstone has an affidavit that he will send over for your signature. It will, of course, be dated before your alleged death."

Davy nodded. Will met his eyes again, saw the resignation there, and realized that he was not going to have everything back, after all. They still had reached a parting of the ways.

Davy smiled sadly. "Yes," he said. "I fear David Archer is dead, Will, for now, anyway. He's had a splendid funeral."

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Marshall smiled back, but his heart sank. They might never again sail together...not as shipmates, not in the Service.

But that also meant he would never again have to see Davy cut down by an enemy. Not so great a loss as he had faced mere hours ago. He would have given his very soul, then, for this reunion. He would miss Davy, terribly, but suddenly the separation was a burden he could bear. The knowledge that "David St. John" was safe here in Kingston, or England, or even Canada...yes, far better than a tombstone, however nobly carved. "Your family, Davy—what of them?"

"Kit has a trustworthy friend with a fast ship. Sir Percy can carry a message to my parents before official word reaches England. They will keep the secret. My father..." His mouth tightened. "His Lordship may have been happier with a dead hero." He tilted his head in wry acceptance. "I expect he will be sorely disappointed when I finally resurface."

"If so, he's a fool," Marshall said. "Who else knows?"

"Apart from a few members of Intelligence, only we five, and two others," Captain Smith said.

David's cousin nodded. "Since the war began, my friend has been using his yacht as a fast courier for the Admiralty, for covert operations. He has already left with confidential dispatches, bound for England, to share the news with the Secret Service and learn their will in the matter. I also have a servant who left the Navy under...well, under circumstances I can hardly discuss in front of His Majesty's officers. He will keep silent. The rest of the household know this gentleman only as my Canadian cousin. The fewer who know otherwise, the safer it will be for us all."

"And at this point I must take my leave," Captain Smith said. "Mr. Marshall, I have business with the Governor. I will see you back at the *Valiant* in three days' time."

"Three days, sir?"

"I want to see you aboard in decent repair, sir. You are ordered to take a few days off and recover."

"I—yes, sir. Thank you, Captain!"

After Sir Paul had departed, Will turned to his lover. "So, Davy. What are your plans?"

"At this point, I want to heal. Beyond that...I don't know." He closed his eyes again, took a deep breath, clearly with difficulty. "Fulfill my ambition to grow a beard, as quickly as I can. It will make me look more like a wild North American."

"Never," Will said. "You're far too civilized."

Davy gave his head a single shake in the negative. "I'm sure this charade will be over long before I could start a new career. Once I recover, depending on whether I'm at all fit for duty, I might see what I can do to help Kit with his business here. If sugar cane is too dull, Kit's seagoing friend is apparently doing his best to foment unrest in the French colonies... and you know I speak excellent French. I'm sure there's some way to make myself useful, even as a colonial upstart with questionable origins."

"What?"

"Kit's idea," Davy said. "Cousin David isn't in the stud-book, but you have only to look at him to realize he's obviously one of the family."

"There are some advantages to being Lord of the Manor." St. John smiled. "If I decide to accept this gentleman's proofs that he's the son of my cousin Lancelot, who went to the colonies a couple of decades ago and vanished somewhere in Virginia, what business is it of anyone else to question his identity? He worked his way to London on American ships—he is well acquainted with the sea—and served as a helmsman for a time on a private yacht sailing in government service. Quite heroically, too—he was injured when privateers tried to seize the *Daydream*."

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Marshall nodded. A well-constructed identity. And having someone outside their circle to vouch for Davy's new identity—a man of substance, and no relative at all—would make Davy that much more secure. "An excellent role, sir. I am impressed."

"Gentlemen," Curran said, "I regret interrupting you, but Mr. St. John needs his rest if he is to recover."

Davy was still smiling, but he did look worn. "Of course." Marshall took his hand once more, marveling at the touch and warmth and reality of it. "I don't know how to thank you, Doctor. Davy—"

"Oh, for pity's sake, Will." Davy frowned at him. "Do try to look mournful when you leave. If you go out grinning like that they'll think you've gone round the bend. When you go back to the *Valiant*, mope for awhile. I expect a black armband, at the very least."

"You're right, of course." But it was not easy to take the smile from his face. "May I visit again?" he asked St. John.

"As long as you have shore leave, I would be honored to have you as a guest," St. John said hospitably. "Wherever the Navy sends you, I'm sure it will take at least a bit of preparation. My footman can fetch your baggage from the inn."

He nodded, lightheaded with relief. "Thank you, my lord. For everything."

"Out, gentlemen," Curran repeated. "Mr. Marshall, I strongly suggest you have a moderate meal, no meat, and at least six hours sleep. Now, Mr. St. John—" He turned his attention to Davy, and the others filed quietly out.

Giddy with joy and fatigue, Marshall followed St. John to the guest room next door, and remembered only to remove his shoes before collapsing on the sumptuous feather bed. He was still not sure he was awake; it felt so like a dream that he finally pinched himself, hard. And welcomed the merely physical pain.

He wrapped the edge of the counterpane around him

and nestled down into the pillow. Despite all the deception, all the danger, against all odds, Davy had survived. And soon he himself would be off to war again, to live or die.

Well, death came eventually to everyone, and it was just as well that no one could say when it would arrive. But for now he allowed himself to hope that it would be later, rather than sooner. And he found himself smiling as he drifted off to sleep, at the notion of Mr. David St. John declaiming Shakespeare in a theatre on Drury Lane.

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All the luck that had forsaken Marshall's personal life was heaped in generous measure upon his naval career as the *Valiant* continued her cruise around the Caribbean. In the course of defending those ships she escorted, she took part in some highly successful actions, which meant commendations and prize money. The officers of the *Valiant* and *Terrier* earned several years' pay in the space of a few weeks.

None of it mattered anymore. Will did his duty, moving as though in a dream, making the correct replies when spoken to, receiving orders in a respectful manner, passing them along in a way appropriate to his rank and the station of the man receiving the order.

He was no longer wholly alive. He had been, for those three days he spent with Davy at his cousin's estate. But then duty called him back to sea, and something within him had ceased to live. He looked out on the world as though his eyes were two thick windows, letting through no touch, no scent, no breath of air. He functioned. That was all he could have said for himself.

Will kept himself sane by focusing his entire attention upon his duty—a duty slightly reduced when Captain Smith acquired two additional lieutenants in Kingston. One of them had an earlier service date, so Will was now only a Second Lieutenant. That was all right; it was a lesser demand, one he seemed able to fulfill. He took the

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opportunity to move his dunnage into the cabin that had been Davy's, a tiny comfort. He had long since appropriated Davy's pillow, and had nearly broken down when he found two golden hairs caught on the ticking. He carried them folded in a bit of parchment, next to his heart.

It had been his own fault. He should have stuck by his guns and refused to take part in Humberstone's charade. He should have kept his hands off Davy—not only during this cruise, but from the start. Once they were off that damned pirate's ship, he should have refrained from indulging in the physical aspect of their friendship. If he loved Davy—genuine love, not just carnal desire—perhaps he should end it.

But not immediately. Not until Davy was well and strong again, and able to see that they needed to set limits to their friendship. That would be for the best, wouldn't it? And in the meantime, he had the chance to practice being alone. He didn't remember it being so hard—the terrible emptiness. But he had to be alone in any case, so why not prepare for a lifetime of it?

One thing Will found himself unable to do was sit at table with Thomas Dowling. He had never been on good terms with the man, but now he found ways to be elsewhere when meals were served in the gunroom. Dr. Curran was most sympathetic, and made certain Will ate at least once a day. Will's odd behavior was easy enough for the old Calypsos to understand; he was mourning. Most of his shipmates had lost close friends at one time or another, and they knew that he and Davy had been closer than brothers. They understood his grief. One time he even heard Barrow whispering to a Valiant that it was "like as if Nelson was to lose Hardy".

At last something happened to break him out of the fog. They were cruising near the coast of Florida, keeping an eye out for slavers, which Captain Smith despised. Their path was crossed by a neat little sloop sailing under Portuguese colors, and the *Valiant* hailed her to stand and



show her papers. She seemed perfectly amenable, but while her ship's master was coming aboard with his documents, Will noticed that Dowling was standing near the railing in the waist, gesturing to someone on the sloop's deck.

A discreet word to Lt. Humberstone, and the sloop's papers were given a close scrutiny that they proved unable to withstand. Within a few minutes, the vessel's crew were being put aboard the *Terrier* as prisoners bound for Jamaica, and Will was given a skeleton crew and command of the *Palometa*, with orders to sail her back to Kingston as well, where a gentleman on the Governor's staff would examine her with a fine-tooth comb and a carpenter.

Humberstone suspected the *Palometa* had a secret compartment somewhere in her well-constructed hull, but he did not have the time to hunt for it—nor did he wish Dowling to observe him searching; it was their mole who was under observation, and Humberstone the chief observer.

All that was quite in the usual way of things, though a vessel so small would not normally require a lieutenant commanding the prize-crew. But after Humberstone had a short conference with Captain Smith, the Captain called for Lt. Marshall.

Half in a daze, Will absorbed what the Captain told him regarding special duty, the *Palometa's* suitability as a fast courier, and a temporary command, to be made permanent as soon as Humberstone—who was apparently no mere lieutenant, but Captain Humberstone of Naval Intelligence—was able to have the assignment confirmed.

"Of course, Mr. Marshall," the Captain said, smiling, "all this will mean that you may be forced to spend a few days in Kingston—probably no more than a week, at most—while the sloop is being examined in minute detail. But I should think that will give you the chance to visit Baron Guilford once more, and see how his Canadian

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cousin is coming along.”

Will stared at him stupidly. “Sir, the risk—?”

“The risk is aboard this ship,” Smith said, his voice low, “but I believe Mr. Humberstone and Lt. Waters have it contained well enough. It is not the risk I am thinking of, but the loss to this vessel! I had not expected you to see your own command so very soon, but I could not be prouder if you were my own son. In fact, my eldest boy is twelve now, and if I had not already badgered Ned Pellew into taking him on, I would be hinting that you might be in need of a midshipman. Congratulations on your first command, Mr. Marshall!”

His first command. Will felt frozen. “I—thank you, sir!” He forced a smile, accepted the proffered drink, thanked the Captain profusely and expressed his gratitude for all that he had been taught and the opportunities Sir Paul had provided. And then, almost before he knew what had happened, he was aboard the *Palometa*, charting a course for Jamaica.

His first command. He should have been thrilled, delighted, ecstatic. But without Davy beside him, it meant nothing but the chance to be away from the temptation to strangle Joseph Dowling. And going back to Kingston—at the very notion, the thought of ending it with Davy went out the window. He could hardly deal such a blow to someone he loved while Davy was still recovering. That could wait for another day, a day that might never come.

~

Marshall blinked in the bright bustle of Kingston port. The sunshine, the flowers blooming everywhere, the dark-skinned porter who collected his dunnage and carried it to the carriage Baron Guilford had sent to meet him—it was too much, overwhelming. The last time he had arrived here, it had been under a terrible weight of fear, and today’s arrival was hardly different.

Was Davy still alive? He had been recovering when Marshall had last seen him, but his survival had not been

assured. As they'd said goodbye, weeks ago, Davy had whispered a promise to ask his doctor when he would be fit for physical intimacy. That had been, and still was, the least of Marshall's worries. Men died from wounds less serious than those Davy had suffered. And it had been more than two months, with no word.

No. No, if Davy were dead, St. John would have found some way to let him know. He might have come down personally...

"Commander Marshall!"

Marshall's heart nearly stopped when he saw Davy—no, his cousin—approaching the carriage. It had to be St. John. Davy would not be walking about Kingston so freely; Davy would be in hiding, or disguised. But the smile on His Lordship's face was not what one would expect on a man in mourning. Dear God, why did he have to look so much like his cousin? Marshall forced his face into a pleasant expression and took St. John's outstretched hand. "Good morning, my lord—"

St. John grinned disarmingly. "My name is Kit. Do we really need to keep bowing and saluting one another?"

"No, no, of course not." He could not imagine why His Lordship insisted on treating him as a social equal, but neither could he do anything about it. "My—my apologies, sir. And as the formalities have not been completed, I'm afraid it's still 'lieutenant,' not 'commander'."

St. John smiled, ignoring the apologies but divining the source of Marshall's distress. "He's all right, Will. Quite recovered."

He had not realized how tense he had been until his body relaxed; somewhat belatedly, he remembered his manners. "Thank you, sir. And how have you been?"

"Well, thank you. I thought it best to stay here, to be certain my Canadian cousin's visit went smoothly. We have also received word that Sir Percy's trip to London was timely and successful, and my cousin's family did not endure needless sorrow."

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“Thank you. I am relieved to see you here. I’d wondered if he would be safe, with you gone back to England.”

“How was your cruise?”

“We did well, thank you. Among other actions, we took a prize away from a privateer, and took the privateer as well. And no men lost.” No more men lost. Only the one who would be lost from his life forevermore.

“Excellent! Shall we have a drink to your success, then? I had an errand in town and heard that you were in port.”

Marshall wanted only to find Davy as quickly as humanly possible, but he could not refuse the hospitality, and did his best to hide his impatience. “Yes, thank you.”

As they strolled along, St. John went on, “I thought it was best for both me and my cousin that I stay on here for a time. I am still occasionally prone to seasickness, although it now abates after a few days. But it is such a wretched state I have been postponing my voyage home. If Cousin David decides he would like to manage this enterprise for me, I shall be happy to leave it in his care. But the climate may be a bit warm for him.”

Warm? Yes, and not only the temperature. With all the Navy officers and men Davy knew, who might recognize him, Davy—no, Mr. St. John, he had to begin thinking of him as St. John—would have to be well-disguised, indeed. One wrong word in front of the wrong person, and the intricate webs of Intelligence could be disrupted. “Do you believe he could adjust?”

“I think he can adjust to nearly anything.” They turned in at a doorway that opened on a long open walkway screened by a woven shade. “But there have been changes. He was very ill for a time, and there are—well, he asked me to let him surprise you. And—I realize this is an awkward matter—” He glanced around and apparently saw no one within earshot. “I am aware of the...particular affection...between you and my cousin.”

Marshall froze; he felt as though he'd been hit with a boarding axe. Had Davy been raving, delirious? What else might he have revealed? His mind was suddenly blank with terror. "I— How—"

St. John seized his arm. "Oh, good lord, I'm sorry. That's quite a serious matter for you, isn't it? Please don't distress yourself, Will. I had guessed as much when you were last here, the affection between you was so very strong—it reminded me very much of the feelings between Zoe and myself. Having found the love of my own life, how could I begrudge you both such joy?"

The blue eyes, so like Davy's, were candid; his concern was obvious. "I—yes, it is serious, and I beg you, do not mention it in public. How did he happen to—"

"Of course I will guard your privacy. When we heard of your imminent arrival, David confirmed my surmise when he asked me if I could recommend an inn where you might safely be alone together."

Marshall hesitated, trying to frame a question, but Kit made it easy. "I believe his brush with eternity has made him very clear, very honest, even more so than before. He was concerned that I would object to such activities under my roof, and did not wish to abuse my hospitality." His smile held only affection.

"And...you do not object?" Marshall asked cautiously.

"I have friends who would laugh themselves senseless at that question, Will. No, I do not object. I think love is too rare to discard it out of hand. My own affections are firmly engaged in another direction, but my servant, Jacobs, who has been helping us in this affair, was under threat of death for something similar when he...'retired' from His Majesty's Navy. Idiocy. There is no tonic like a loved one's fond regard—I speak from experience—and I believe the hope of your return has sped his recovery. At any rate, since your situation does involve risk, I would much prefer that you both be under my roof, and my protection. Have you not both had enough peril of late?"

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"I—I don't know how to thank you," he began.

"No need. You and David kept me from fainting dead away when Captain Smith asked me if I would take Zoe as my wife. His commanding manner is quite fearsome!"

Marshall laughed. "It is that. Thank you, m—Kit."

"Good. That's settled, then. You shall have as much privacy and as much time together as I can provide. This way, if you please."

At the end of the walk lay a pleasant open garden, which they crossed, and a two-story building with a tavern on the lower floor. St. John signalled the barman, and turned to Marshall as the man made his way across the room. "I see someone here I must speak with privately, Will. Would you allow Mr. Rumley to show you upstairs? Let him know if you wish any refreshment."

Marshall nodded and asked the barman for a glass of lemonade, which he had come to enjoy. He was shown upstairs, to a small sitting room lightly furnished with a rattan settee and a chair with a footstool. A small table stood beside the chair, so he chose that, and propped his feet up. It was cooler here, with a breeze blowing in through the floor-length window; he closed his eyes. It still felt strange to be on an unmoving floor instead of the gently rolling deck of *Palometa*, but weariness bore him off to sleep.

A moment later there was someone standing beside him, holding a tray with his drink, and two empty glasses, and a bottle of wine. Something Kit had ordered, no doubt. "Thank you," he said, indicating the little table.

"Very good, sir," the potman said in an Irish lilt. He set the tray down, turned the glasses rightside-up, and proceeded to open the bottle. "Was there anythin' else you'd be wantin', sir?"

Marshall glanced up, wondering why he rated such attentive service. Dark hair, blue spectacles, a short dark beard—and then the waiter grinned, and Marshall blinked, bounding to his feet. "You—you can't—*Davy*?"

Still grinning, the waiter took off the blue spectacles, and was suddenly and recognizably David Archer, despite the alterations. "In the flesh. Slightly reduced flesh, I'm afraid, I could not eat much for a while."

That was what was different, more than the coloring. Davy's build was normally sturdy and compact, but he was thinner now, almost fragile. Even as Will's hands went out to touch him, he found himself holding back.

Davy's brows drew together at his hesitation. "What is it, the beard? I know it must be a change, I can—"

"No, it's—yes, it is a change, I—" He was horrified to find tears starting in his eyes. For nearly two months he had not allowed himself to feel so much. The mere sight of his love had undone him.

"It's only hair, Will, I can shave the damned thing off."

"No, it's—" He could not speak; he could not think. He kicked the footstool out of the way and caught Davy in his arms—carefully!—as the tears poured out of him. It made no sense, but he could not stop. "Sorry. I am—I am so very happy to see you!"

What was wrong with him? Had it been those weeks at sea, pretending to almost everyone aboard that he was in deepest mourning? He had lived the role. He *had* lost Davy, lost him from his ship and his life and his arms. It had almost been easier to consider him dead, and utterly out of reach. That was a possibility they had always lived with. And sick as Davy had been, so fearfully wounded, the hope for this reunion was always very small.

But here he was, warm and alive. However he looked, he smelled like himself, and as usual he was the eager one, reaching to bring Will's face down for a kiss.

The beard was startling.

And exciting. The touch of that sweet, moist mouth surrounded by a soft hedge of whiskers was such a strange sensation. Strange, but familiar—and the rest of Will's body began to awaken from its long suspension of feeling.

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He brought up a hand, cradling Davy's face while they became reacquainted, and was half-grateful for the beard's concealment as he realized how sharply Davy's bones defined his features beneath it.

He drew back a bit. "Are you well?"

"Well enough for this!" And further questions were postponed momentarily. Davy's hands traveled down his back, kneaded his arse, pulling him close as Will returned the attentions wholeheartedly. "God, Will, for a time I feared we'd never—"

"I know." As Davy's head lifted from his shoulder he studied the clear blue eyes. "Davy, we had better not—not here. Anyone could walk in—"

The answering grin was pure Archer glee. "Not while I've got the key."

"What?"

"And there's a latch on the door. This room is ours until Kit returns, in an hour or so. He thought we might want to...chat."

"Chat." His hands found their way down to Davy's bottom.

"Or whatever diversion might suggest itself." Davy reached up and began to undo Will's neckcloth. "What suggests itself to me would require removing some clothing."

"Davy—" He caught his friend's hands. "Are you well enough for it? What did the doctor say?"

Davy smiled and kissed him again, then nuzzled around and bit an earlobe, whispering, "He said that you should grant my every desire."

"He never did!"

"Well, no. But he did say I am fit enough for amorous activity."

"All right, then. I shall be happy to grant your every desire, if I am able."

"And I have to be on top."

"Of course—" Will frowned. "Davy, if it's not safe for



you—”

Never missing a button on Will’s waistcoat, Davy glanced up. “It *is* safe. It is just that I am not to put too much pressure on my abdomen, for a few months yet. But I’m not going to lose this chance—”

“And I’m not going to lose *you!*”

“Will, there’s no risk of that...for heaven’s sake, I’ve run out my gun, just to be sure, while the doctor was still in the house. Everything works. It’s only that I can’t be squashed yet. More’s the pity.”

Marshall smiled at that, knowing how it excited Davy to be pinned beneath him. But it was not as though that were the only way to excite him. He tipped Davy’s face to one side, reached down to kiss and then nip the side of his neck. Davy moaned and melted against him, and they both stumbled backward against the settee, which scraped as it skidded away.

“Damned matchstick furniture,” Davy grumbled, standing again on his own feet but not letting go.

Marshall frowned at the settee, then reached over with one arm to tug the long cushion off, onto the sisal mat that carpeted the floor.

Davy laughed. “Resourceful as always.” His hands moved down to Will’s fly. “I know you will never take off that uniform until we are more secure than this...”

“I would rather not,” Will admitted, though he was prepared to if asked. Davy might have been joking about demanding his every desire, but Will would do just that if it were humanly possible.

Davy seemed to divine his unspoken thought. “And have you listening for every footstep? No, I can wait to look upon you.” He tilted his head, studying Marshall’s features. “Command suits you, Will.”

“I—Davy, I would rather not speak of it.” He stroked the shorter, dark hair, rough and coarse to the touch. “I hardly deserve it, and the price was far too high... What’s wrong with your hair? It feels different.”

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"It's the dye. Walnut and such. Kit knows far more than he should about this sort of thing. I'm lucky my beard grows in dark, or I'd've had to shave my head." He laughed at Will's horrified reaction. "Just close your eyes, Will. It's still me."

He did so, mildly excited by the uncertainty, letting his hands hang motionless. He heard Davy moving just inches away, and the soft sound of cloth hitting the floor. Then lips against his own, fingers opening his trousers, those knowing hands reaching in, touching him... He gasped aloud as his body responded.

"That's better," Davy murmured. "You don't have to just stand there, you know."

Eyes still closed, he reached up to touch, and discovered that Davy was naked from the waist down. He cradled the twin curves of his lover's behind in his palms, unable to stop the comparison between how they felt right now and what he remembered. Ran his hands up Davy's back, under his shirt, concerned by how easy it was to find his ribs but reassured by the strength of Davy's arms around him.

Then his mouth was captured again, and Davy ground against him, driving out awareness of details. He squeezed the flesh in his hands and felt only enthusiastic response as their cocks pressed close. "Oh, god..."

"You see? It's all right, Will. I'm all right. But if we don't get on the floor soon I'll have to knock you down and sit on you."

"I might just enjoy that," Will admitted, astonishing himself. "But not here."

They sank to their knees, and Davy guided him back onto the cushion, never quite letting go. He shivered a bit as his trousers were peeled down, almost to his knees, but Davy made no attempt to take them off. "What are you doing?"

Davy kissed him again. "Not as much as I'd like to." He undid Will's waistcoat, and pulled away the cloth

covering his throat, opening the shirt to let the cool breeze refresh him.

Will felt the brush of Davy's shirttails upon his bare belly as his lover moved to straddle him, then the soft hot weight of Davy's balls resting on his stiffening cock. He breathed in slowly, only just beginning to accept the reality of it all. It was no dream; in his dreams Davy looked as he always had, smooth-faced, sturdy, golden hair brushing his wide shoulders. Reality might be slightly different, but it was reality, for the little time they would have.

He opened his eyes, and found that something had shifted in his mind, allowing him to assimilate the changes. Davy's eyes were as blue as they had ever been, the smile was the same, the touch upon his body sure and loving.

He reached up to brush the beard with his fingertips; Davy closed his eyes and leaned his face into the caress. "Do you know how I've dreamed of this?"

"As I have." He brought the dear face slowly, slowly closer, noting that while Davy bent forward with care, there was no sudden tension that might suggest he was hurting.

As their lips met he started to slide Davy's shirt up, but his lover shook his head slightly. "Not yet, Will."

"Mmm?"

"I don't want you to see it. Not yet."

"Do you think it would make any difference in how I feel?" He studied Davy's face, inches from his own. "Am I so shallow?"

Davy kissed him again, the merest brush of lips. "No, never. But I... Perhaps I'm just a vain little beast. I can't explain it, Will, I hardly feel myself anymore. All the changes..."

"Nothing important." He drew Davy down against him, realizing now that what he said was true. "You're the one with all the poetry in your head, Davy..." He didn't

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remember where the words came from, but he found himself reciting, "That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet." Then winced as he remembered what play it was from, what had become of those lovers.

The line served its purpose, though. Davy chuckled against his neck. "Will, you have a gift. I have never in my life smelled like a rose."

"I don't care if you smell like bilgewater. I love you."

The admission hung like a signal flare between them. Davy had said it before, jokingly, usually followed by a teasing qualification. Marshall had never said it aloud; he hadn't needed to. Davy simply knew. Had always known.

But suddenly he was shivering against Will as though he'd been frozen by a winter's blast. Will rolled onto his side, cradling Davy against him. "Shh... it's all right, it's—*Are* you all right? Is there pain?"

"No. No. None at all." And Davy claimed his mouth again, with a fierce insistence that stopped all conversation. Pain, joy, loss, love, desire—the raw edges of emotion caught fire. No subtlety to it, no art, just the simple reality of Davy's body thrusting against his, hot and vital and alive, alive, *alive*—and it spilled over and they were clutching each other, panting, sweating, laughing aloud.

~

By the time Davy's cousin appeared at the unlocked door, Marshall was back in the chair, his feet on the footstool, one arm stretched lazily across the arm of the settee, where David St. John lay dozing. Will had shifted when he heard footsteps approach, moving so that his hand no longer rested on Davy's chest. Davy had fallen asleep after their lovemaking, and Will had had to wrestle his clothing on and hoist him onto the sofa. He'd gone so deeply asleep, and so quickly, that Will had at first put his hand there just to check his heartbeat. And left it there just to reassure himself that this was not all a dream. Such

foolishness.

“Are you refreshed?” St. John asked, smiling.

“Quite. But I’m afraid your cousin is still recuperating—or my conversation is more boring than I feared.”

He tried to keep his countenance bland, but St. John laughed aloud as he moved to the settee and touched his cousin’s shoulder lightly. “David? Time to wake up.”

Davy stirred and sat up slowly, blinking. “Fell asleep again, did I?”

“For about twenty minutes,” Marshall said. “Enough time?”

“Plenty,” he said, and yawned hugely. The other two laughed.

“I have the carriage downstairs,” Kit said. “A light dinner at home, and the afternoon is yours. To—rest.” He raised an eyebrow at them both.

“A bed sounds inviting,” Will said. “I find it strangely fatiguing to be ashore, and uninterrupted rest is a luxury even a commander can seldom afford.”

“Yes, the Marshall indolence is legendary even in the wilds of Hudson’s Bay.” Davy said mischievously.

“Indolence? You wrong me, sir!”

“Oh, my mistake. I should have said that my desire to sleep with you is known in Hudson’s Bay.”

“That’s not much better.”

“Oh, but it is. Better than anything else I could imagine.”

St. John took each of them by an elbow. “I hope you will refrain from such conversation at table, or my servants will flee. Come, gentlemen, let’s be off.”

Will had not realized how beautiful Jamaica was. From the shaded seat of St. John’s carriage, he could now appreciate the sun’s warmth, the faint fragrance of flowers that seemed to pervade the atmosphere. And St. John’s home was more cheerful than he remembered, with its deep porch and welcoming walls. Clearly, his own mood

had colored his perceptions.

The dinner provoked a deep appreciation of what could be done with the improbable combination of chicken and pineapple. Will swallowed his last bite of ambrosia. "If your cook should ever wish to run away to sea," he said, "I know a little sloop that would be delighted to give him a berth."

His Lordship frowned sternly. "Attempts to steal one's cook are considered an act of war in these parts, Captain. But the compliment will no doubt spur him on to greater efforts. Do you have any special requests?"

"I haven't the experience to know what to suggest," Marshall admitted. "Nor the gall to instruct an artist in his craft."

"Antoine is indeed an artiste," Kit agreed. "I heard some rumour of trifle for dessert."

"And his is no trifling effort," Davy chimed in.

Marshall looked from one set of blue eyes to another, and abandoned any hope of keeping up with the wordplay. "Your family's children must cut their teeth on dictionary bindings."

"My mother loves to read aloud," Davy said. "I think she went through most of Shakespeare when I was young. She even read to us before we were born. Strange, when I think of it—you'd not expect a lady to enjoy such bloodthirsty fare."

"The lighter works, perhaps?" Kit offered. "*Much Ado About Nothing*?"

"Oh, no, a new baby was always an event." Davy grinned, then suddenly sobered. "I do hope your friend Percy reached her before the official news did."

"You may be sure of it. He would not be above creating a diversion if he thought official word would outpace the *Daydream*."

The arrival of dessert interrupted their speculation, and all three gave the trifle full attention. Rich cream, jam, and tropical fruits made it unlike anything Marshall had ever

eaten before; even the cake had some faint flavor he could not identify.

Davy made slow going of it, though. He ate, but not with the hearty enthusiasm he had formerly displayed at table. Will wondered if he would even be able to manage ship's fare at this point. A futile speculation. Not a question he was ever likely to resolve.

Davy apparently felt his observation, and glanced up. "I am all right, Will. The doctor advised smaller, more frequent meals. I'll be prowling around the kitchen in a couple of hours."

Kit stole a quick look at his watch. "Come, gentlemen, 'we sit too long on trifles, and waste the time, which looks to other revels'."

"Pericles," Davy replied. He frowned for a moment, then essayed, "'My father named me Autolycus, who was likewise a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles'."

They both turned to Will, who shook his head. "I know when I am outmatched. Though I would hesitate to snap up a trifle that you gentlemen had been sitting on."

"You have us there," Davy admitted. "No further trifling, then. What other revels, Kit?"

"It hardly qualifies. You may accompany me to my foreman's house to discuss shipment of coffee beans, or you may stay here, finish the pot of that same coffee, and perhaps take a siesta?"

Will glanced up and met Davy's eyes, thought of his duty to his host, and hesitated.

David kicked his ankle under the table. "I think I'd rather stay here," he said quickly.

Kit glanced from one to the other, and shook his head. "Will, I asked only as a matter of form. The maids are already filling a tub in the bathing-room between your chambers."

Will felt himself blush. "Thank you—I—"

"Once I reach home, after a suitable greeting of offspring, Zoe and I will pack the children off to my

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mother and lock ourselves away for at least a week. I will enjoy your visit immensely if I only see you occasionally...not that your company is displeasing." With a wicked grin, he folded his napkin and left the table. "Have a lovely afternoon!"

When they were left alone, Will took another sip of the excellent Jamaican coffee. "What a thoughtful gentleman your cousin is!"

"Truly. But you know, Will, he has spoken just as kindly of how you treated him back on *Calypso*."

"He—I was terribly rude to him, Davy. He was so much like you...and I had nearly lost you to that fever."

Davy fixed him with a look. "I can't say as I remember much of that, but I believe I was ill from natural causes, and no fault of yours." He finished his own coffee, set the cup neatly on its saucer. "Let it go, Will. We're here, now, and there's a bed upstairs."

"Two beds, if I recall."

"We shall only require one."

~

They went up to Davy's suite, and Will was surprised to see that the guest parlor was now mostly a study. A desk had been brought in near the window, where it caught the afternoon light. A small table stood beside it. Both were piled high with books, maps, and monographs.

"Been doing some reading, Davy?"

"Quite a bit. Studying for my new role." Davy pulled the door shut, and slipped an arm around Will's waist. "Every book I could lay hands on that has information about North America. Geography, politics, even fiction..."

"Oh. For 'David St. John'. To make him well-rounded?"

"Yes. I've spent so much time with my nose in a book, I could tell you more than you want to know about Canada. Would you care for a lecture on weather? Beaver-trapping? Fishing in the northern waters?"

"Not especially. I'd no idea this new identity would be



such a trial.”

“Oddly enough, I’ve enjoyed it. It was something to do while I recovered, Will, and you know how I am about books. There’s been the added incentive of knowing that my life might depend on playing a convincing Canadian. Yours, too. Has that spy business been cleared up as yet?”

“I don’t think so. The bastard’s still on the loose, but the intelligence service is apparently scooping up his network—he visited several people in Kingston, and they’re being followed as well. I’ve only been told that you are not yet allowed to return to the land of the living, even if you were fit for it. But you’ve not been idle, have you? This research looks like damned hard work.”

“Easier than navigational mathematics—easier for me, at any rate. The role of a lifetime.”

“Should I call you St. John, then?”

“It would be best, at least in public. You can practice in private if you like. Of course, I kept the first name and there’s enough resemblance that any mistake on your part would seem natural enough. But we’ll not be in public much.” Davy turned him toward the inner door. “Shall we retire? If you’d rather sleep alone, the other bedroom is still available for you.”

“Of course not.” Will glanced down at the face turned up toward his, and brushed the back of his fingers over the beard. “I hear you, and you sound the same—and then I look, and must look again—but it is no longer such a surprise.”

“It will matter less, after dark.” Davy surveyed the room. “There was something else...” He went to the desk and took out a small object wrapped in a handkerchief. “Here. For you.”

As soon as he felt the bundle, Will realized what it had to be; the handkerchief unrolled and the thick plait of blond hair fell into his hand. Braided; they’d almost never bothered to do that, when they dressed one another’s hair, but of course it would hold together better this way...

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"I thought you might like to have it," Davy said diffidently. "It had to go, of course."

Will's fingers closed around it. He could not speak.

Davy frowned at his silence. "I'm sorry, Will. Of course you needn't—"

"Thank you." Will caressed the braid with his thumb before wrapping it again and stowing it in his inner breast pocket, golden treasure that it was. His other hand reached out to touch Davy's short dark hair. A new feeling. "Thank you."

"I'm not quite used to it, myself," Davy admitted. "Though—Will, it does save time. Without you to comb it out."

Kissing Davy saved Will from another incipient snivel. "Let's get to that tub, shall we? I'll see what you're like with a wet beard." He opened the door to the bathroom, and a warm floral scent enveloped them. The enormous tub was half-full, and clean white towels lay on a small bench beside it.

"We've been unshaven before." Davy said. "Even the first time."

The first time. Aboard that renegade's ship, so foolish—each of them had been secretly in love with the other, though only Davy had been fully aware of his feelings. And Marshall had been disgusted with himself for having allowed such contact with a shipmate, particularly one under his command. But after they had spent two weeks together, when Davy took and passed his officer's examination...somehow all the fears and hesitation had been sorted through and discarded. Maintaining their love under Articles of War had been difficult and always risky; opportunities to be together were rare and precious.

As this one was.

They kissed; he began to undo the soft cravat at Davy's throat. "Would you rather bathe first, alone?"

"I—" Davy's mouth tightened. "No. You may as well

see the thing. It's ugly, but—well, it will be dark soon.”

Did Davy not realize he'd seen that dreadful injury, in the days after his mock funeral? He had been unconscious or feverish much of the time, then, and dosed with laudanum for the pain, so perhaps he did not remember. “Whatever you like, Davy. It's really no matter.”

“Let's not let the water get too cold.” Davy turned away and stripped quickly, clearly bracing himself for an ordeal. Will undressed as well, placing his shirt and other clothing over his uniform coat. Captain Smith had told him to find himself an epaulet in Kingston, the symbol that would transform the uniform of a Lieutenant into that of a Commander. He had not sought that promotion; he did not deserve it. He would trade it in a heartbeat to have Davy back beside him, even in a rowboat.

Will shed the last of his clothing just as Davy pulled his shirt over his head. His unaccustomed slenderness, the vulnerable bare neck with its cap of dark hair, touched a protective chord. Before Davy could turn around, Will moved up close, gathering his lover against him. “I don't need to see, Davy. You're alive. That's enough.”

“I may have to hide from the world. I'm not hiding from you.” Taking Will's hands, Davy moved them to his lower chest, where Will felt a raised, slightly bumpy irregularity on the smooth skin. “That's the entry wound. This one— “ a longer, slightly thinner ridge— “That's from the surgery.”

He nuzzled the back of Davy's neck. “Do they hurt?”

“They itch. Damnably, sometimes. I'm told that's a good sign.” He took a step away and turned quickly, studying Will's face. “Please—tell me if you can't stand it.”

After one brief glance at the long, ragged red line, Will raised his eyes to meet his friend's. “You're breathing.” He placed his hands carefully on Davy's shoulders. “You're warm.” He let his hands slide down those shoulders, spreading over his chest, fingertips sliding

through the scattering of hair, brushing the nipples. Davy shivered.

"You're alive. And we're free of that sneaking traitor—because of you." He bent to meet Davy's lips, and touched the scar again. "Because of this. If I could trade places with you, I would. There's more courage here than in all the decorations on Nelson's chest."

Davy swallowed, and let his forehead rest against Will's shoulder, his own shoulders slumping in wordless relief.

"Anyway, it looks better now than when I helped Dr. Curran change the dressings."

"What?"

"When you were half-conscious, or feverish. I never realized you would not remember."

"I thought I was dreaming," Davy said under his breath. "Will, why—?"

"You were restless. He needed help." He'd had to sit behind Davy, restraining his hands while the doctor performed the painful necessities. He'd felt it all secondhand through Davy's cries and the tremors that shook the feverish body in his arms. He never wanted to endure such torment again. "We've both seen wounds before, after all." He rubbed the bare back soothingly, taking his own comfort in its coolness. "This was worse, because it was you. Not because it was ugly."

"No, not why did you help, why ever did you let me carry on like that?"

"It was your choice. To show me, or not."

He let out a breath. "Will, I feel a fool."

"Since you are presently feeling me, you are no doubt correct. Climb in the tub, Mr.—St. John, and I shall scrub your back."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Marshall." Davy stepped into the tub. He sighed as Will dipped the bath-sponge into the scented water and squeezed it out over his back. "Would you care to join me?"

"In a moment. You should be washed properly first." He dropped the sponge back in the water and soaped his hands.

"Or *improperly*." Davy reached behind him, finding Will's naked thigh. "You could stand closer."

"Are you suggesting I neglect my duties, sir?" He gave Davy's shoulder a light nip and slid his hands down front and back, cupping Davy's genitals in front, fingers slipping between the curved buttocks. As Davy's lips parted in a startled cry he completed the surprise attack by capturing his mouth.

Davy responded with sweet ferocity, nearly upsetting the tub as he pulled Will against him. The urgency took them again, and Will's lust-fogged mind lost track of details; somehow he stumbled into the tub and wound up lying back against its sloped side.

Davy settled atop him, leaning back on his raised knees, and ground against him. The water lapped at Will's chin. "You're going to drown me," he observed, lifting water in cupped palms to rinse the suds off his lover's chest.

"That is not what I have in mind." Davy reached between them, fingers closing around his objective. "Do you suppose there'll be any water left in the tub...?"

"We'd ruin your cousin's floor," Will said, trying to balance the exquisite sensations against practicality. He took hold of Davy's cock, smiling as his lover's hips thrust forward. The water surged with him. "You wiggle about so, we'd probably have the tub over."

"So you say." Davy leaned closer. "I will wager you a day's—damn." He frowned thoughtfully. "I will wager you...any outrageous request that I can bring you off without tipping the tub."

Will hesitated for a moment. Davy's wagers could have unpredictable results. Still, he wouldn't embarrass his cousin...would he? The blue eyes held his, laughing challenge. "Done!" he said, curiosity overriding prudence.

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He had never thought of using soapsuds as lubrication, and he had an uncomfortable suspicion that they might both be sore later, but as Davy slid slowly down, surrounding him, he forgot all that and began to raise his hips to meet the enveloping warmth.

“Hold still,” Davy said.

“What—?”

“I’ve had time to think, these past weeks.” Davy shifted a bit. “Knowing if I ever saw you again it might only be for a little while...so I have thought of a few things I would like to try.” He grinned wickedly, and Will’s cock was embraced tightly as Davy clenched around him. “What do you think of this one?”

He could only squeeze his eyes closed, fingers digging into Davy’s hips as his breath hissed between his teeth. He felt Davy’s fingers tease up his sides, his chest, pinching and rolling his nipples until his body was aflame, the pleasure shooting through him. He pumped Davy’s cock in return, knowing he was the one splashing now, but no longer concerned.

It didn’t take long. Davy cried out, and the shudders that ran through his body pushed Will with him. They both shook with the release, and Davy fell forward on him, the wet beard strange and scratchy against Will’s neck. The water rose even further, nearly enough to overflow.

But they did not tip the tub.

~

“Davy?”

“Mm?”

“That wager ... what is it you want?”

“Oh, that ... I have no idea. Wait and see.”

“Davy.”

“Oh, for—aren’t you sleepy?”

“A little. Davy, you were going to wager a day’s pay...forgive me, but—I do have prize money—if you need it—”

“Keep it, Will. You earned it.”

"I owe you everything."

"You have given me everything. Will, my funds are still protected—our prize money, some I had from my grandmother...gave it into Kit's care, to invest for me, and he is still my trustee on it. I can get whatever I need. I wrote my will awhile ago, leaving it to you."

"Whatever for?"

"My dear fool, if either of us were a woman, we'd be married long since. Who else would I leave it to? But Kit is trustee while I'm in limbo. I am well provided for. But if you should ever be in need..." He sighed. "You wouldn't tell me, would you?"

"I can always survive on half-pay if peace breaks out. And there's all that money from our adventure last year."

"You could come and stay here with me if peace breaks out. Wherever you might be, please...contact me through Kit."

"I couldn't—"

"Not charity, Will. For my own happiness. You would offer me the same. You just did, with far less to spare."

"But—"

"Too sleepy, Will. Talk later."

~

But they never did; not on that subject. They awoke sometime in the morning, made slow sweet love, and fell back asleep. By early afternoon hunger drove them into the next room, where they found a cold dinner awaiting them, along with a note that Kit had been called away on business and would be gone for a day or two. While they ate, someone visited the bedroom silently and changed the linens. The whole day went by like a marvelous dream. Food appeared as if brought by a genie from a fable, their clothes were left neatly in the study washed and pressed, though they never bothered to put them back on. There was a timeless quality to the long tropical day, sleeping and waking together, holding one another, all the things they had never had time or place or safety to attempt.

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All but one.

They slept snuggled together like spoons, naked beneath a tent of mosquito netting. Marshall woke suddenly, his heart pounding, from a dream in which Davy had been shot and taken away, and he couldn't find him. He couldn't find Davy, who was lost and wounded, dying all alone. But the dark was peaceful, and he was safe, and Davy was sprawled across him, his breath warm and even.

The night breeze was pleasant, but just a little cool; he tried to ease away enough to drag the sheet up without waking his lover, but to no avail. "Will?"

"Just pulling up the covers, Davy. Go back to sleep."

"Mmm." Davy settled against him, stretching his body like an affectionate cat, as though trying to rub against every exposed inch of flesh. "You're really here. Thought I might've dreamt it all."

"I feel the same. Keep pinching myself."

"Need help?" Davy's hands were suddenly busy, reaching back to pull Will closer. His bare behind wriggled enticingly against Will's cock.

"Good god, you're turning into a satyr!"

"Missed you," Davy said simply, tilting his head back to catch Will's mouth.

"Davy..."

"Mmm?"

"You've let me...take you." He reached around and found Davy beginning to harden once again. "But you've never... I was just wondering if you would like—"

Davy was suddenly, utterly still. "No."

Will kissed the back of his neck, caressing his shoulders, smiling at the shivers that evoked. Much to be said for short hair. "I don't know quite what to do, but it feels so good when you let me...and I'd like to know how it feels—"

"No." Davy rolled to face him, invisible in the dark but tense now, and breathing fast. "No, Will. The first time would hurt. No matter how careful I was, I would hurt



you. I cannot do that.”

It was Will’s turn to freeze. “Have I been hurting you, then? I didn’t—you didn’t seem—”

“No!” Warm hands cupped his face. “No, you’ve always been...wonderful. And I’ve had—at first, it’s—Will, I can’t. I can not.” He took Will’s hand again, as though words failed him, and moved it down to his softened cock. “I—just thinking about it, you see? I—I’m sorry.”

His distress wrung Will’s heart. “It’s all right, Davy. Truly. I only thought... It doesn’t matter.” He gathered his lover close again and began doing everything that he knew Davy enjoyed.

Kissing, licking, he worked his way down to a nipple and gave it his thorough and undivided attention until Davy was writhing and gasping helplessly. Then he moved to the other, and downward again, until he knelt between Davy’s upraised knees and swallowed him whole. Strange that Davy would allow this and not the other, but it made little difference, really. As long as he could give pleasure.... He sucked and stroked and reached around to touch just *there*— and Davy was crying aloud, hips thrusting up and up.

When he finished, Davy was very quiet for a moment. Then he murmured, “Will, the salve’s on the nightstand. Would return the favor now, but...can’t keep my eyes open.”

He sounded so sleepy and helpless that Will could only laugh. “That’s all right. You just wait until morning!” He wiped Davy off with a corner of the sheet, then wiped himself and pulled the sheet over them both. Odd. He should by rights be hard as a rock, but all he felt was a kind of tenderness. What a strange prohibition Davy had set on himself! But it didn’t matter. For the little time that remained of his leave, they were together, that was what mattered. And he was damned sleepy himself. Felt like he’d swum for miles...

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He was asleep almost before Davy's head settled on his shoulder.

~

"Kit had to go out to the sugar fields," Davy called, wheeling a small table in from the other room. Covered dishes on it suggested something interesting for breakfast. "He will be back tonight."

"I hope we are not putting him out of his own home." Will untangled himself from the sheet and sat up, swinging his legs over to perch on the edge of the bed. Their host had been conspicuously absent, inviting them to dinner only once since that first night.

Davy laughed. "In a house this size? We aren't that loud, Will!"

"Lord, I should hope not!" St. John's kindness was still astonishing; Will had never before had the experience of someone else seeing so completely to his comfort. Luxury, rather. He knew he did not deserve it, but Davy did. Davy deserved every happiness, and Will had made a deliberate effort to stop feeling overindulged and enjoy himself for Davy's sake.

"What's worrying you?" Davy lunged across the bed and caught him from behind, wrestling him down onto the mattress. "It's rolls and sausages this morning," he said with a nip at Will's ear. "Unless you'd care for seconds, before we eat?"

"I wasn't concerned with breakfast." Will threw a leg over Davy's, pinning him on one side while he cast about for a plausible topic. "It's that forfeit. The longer you delay in naming it, the worse I expect it to be. I cannot believe that in four days you were unable to produce a single outrageous request."

"Outrageous—?" Davy's eyes lit. "Oh, from the bath! I'd nearly forgotten!"

"Or have you run out of wild excess?" Will suggested hopefully. They had, after all, been as imaginative and energetic as Davy's convalescence would permit.

"Not nearly," Davy assured him. "A valiant attempt, Will, but I do have a few ideas." He ran his fingers through Will's disordered hair. "I have it. A picnic."

"A picnic?" Will echoed, leaning down to suck lightly on Davy's lower lip. "That doesn't sound outrageous."

"It is not. But what I have in mind is something more than a picnic."

"Mmm?" He stretched out and pulled Davy closer, but his lover was suddenly a bundle of energy. With a brief kiss, he slid away and threw on a dressing gown, then disappeared down the hall.

"Faster to find him than to ring," he explained upon his return. "Where are your trousers?"

"What?"

"There's a tropical paradise outside, yet we've spent nearly all your leave right here within these four walls." Davy rummaged in a trunk and thrust a bundle of clothing at Will.

He caught the clothing, and Davy, and pulled him down once more. "I have no complaints. Never in my life have I slept in a finer bed. We can spend all our time right here, if you like."

David lay still for a moment, studying him. "I wouldn't mind. But this is a beautiful island, Will. I've found a place that I would like to share with you. A place that I would like to remember with you in it. Do you understand?"

"I think so. As I remember you in a certain carpenter's walk." It had been foolish to take the risk in truth and not just as a part of the Captain's charade, but Will knew he would never regret their having taken that hasty joy in one another. After the *Valiant* sailed into ambush and Davy was shot, it seemed their last embrace would be forever stained with his blood. And that final encounter had been with Marshall every time he had occasion to go down the walk, the happiness of the memory overshadowed by loneliness and grief.

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Warm fingers smoothed the frown from his forehead. "Like that, I suppose. But without the wretched mess after." Davy shifted his weight just enough to make his position quite stimulating. "There is a beautiful glade, Will. I want to take you there."

"Certainly."

"And..." his blue eyes sparked with a devilish gleam, "I want *you* to take *me* there." His expression left no doubt of his meaning.

"Davy— You can't— Outdoors!" Will's voice rose to a squeak. "We couldn't possibly—what if someone were to see—?"

"No one will see us," Davy said. "And it was a fair wager..."

He felt as though Davy had just suggested they stroll through Kingston in the nude. "Yes."

"Don't worry so. You have my word, no one will see. If we leave very soon—" He pushed off and regained the floor, tossing the clothing back toward Will.

It was not his uniform, just a pair of loose slops and a plain shirt. "Davy, what is this?"

"You are off-duty, Mr. Marshall. These will be much more comfortable. A pair of straw hats and no one will recognize us. No one is likely to see us at all, much less see us doing anything...outrageous."

Marshall was quite certain no one would see them doing anything outrageous, because he knew that he would die of mortification before he could manage any such thing in the open out-of-doors. But a wager was a wager, and Davy had won—and Davy had given his word. And just how did he intend to keep it?

Curiosity got him into the clothing and down the stairs.

~

The inestimable Jacobs had arranged for a donkey cart, and Davy assumed the driver's position with an air of competence that suggested this was not his first encounter

with the beast. As they drove out from beneath the port-cochere into the blazing sunlight, Will realized how much coolness came from the trees surrounding the mansion. "Hotter than I expected," he said.

"Yes, that should help insure our privacy. The mad Canadian goes driving around when sensible people are taking their siesta."

"I think that England depends on all her citizens being slightly mad."

"Only slightly?" But they were back in the shade soon enough, under trees Will could not name, catching glimpses of the brightly-colored birds that looked like airborne flowers. Their track turned off the main road, and wound around through low hills until he could no longer see the sun or guess their position. After an hour or more he spied a small stream running alongside the road, its water catching and reflecting glints of sunlight.

"Nearly there." Davy's voice was quiet in the summery stillness. He rested a hand on Marshall's thigh. "You'll like it, Will."

"I begin to see why you were not worried about privacy," Will said. "Is there no one out here at all?"

"I saw two boys, once. And a few people when there's a holiday. But this is part of Kit's estate, and off the usual path. Besides, Will, there are many other places almost as fine, and much easier to reach."

The road took another turn, and they were in Paradise. The track they were on ended beside a shelf of rock at the water's edge, the only sign of human trespass being a small fenced enclosure. They had reached the source of the stream, a steep embankment where water cascaded down an irregular stairway of jagged rocks to form a deep clear pool surrounded by tropical greenery. Near the foot of the falls the rocks receded and the water fell nearly straight for perhaps eight or ten feet. A fine mist rose from that, and the sun above the clearing was at just the right angle to form a rainbow in the suspended droplets of water. The

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beauty of it, the color and scent and the unending whisper of the water, was beyond anything Will had ever experienced.

“My God,” he said after a moment of astonished silence.

Davy nodded; his hand rested on Will’s, fingers intertwining. “I wanted to share this with you, Will, but I didn’t expect we’d get the rainbow as well. A good omen, don’t you think?”

The only talisman Marshall needed was sitting beside him. He wanted to say he did not believe in omens, but Davy looked so pleased that he only nodded. “Do you want to have a swim?”

“Yes. It’s a bit cool, but you won’t notice for long. Would you unpack while I see to Bruno?”

He realized Bruno was the donkey when Davy climbed down and unhitched the beast, putting him in the pen where he could reach water and crop the long luxuriant grass. Unpacking was the work of a moment—lifting out the basket of food, a couple of thick Turkish towels, and a heavy quilt.

“Would you like a swim first, or something to eat?” Davy asked at his elbow. He took the quilt, old and faded, and spread it out on the rock ledge.

“Whatever you prefer.” They had wolfed down the breakfast rolls while Jacobs was arranging transportation, and he was not really hungry just yet...and he was still anticipating Davy’s “outrageous request”. But it did not seem quite so outrageous in this enchanted setting. “I think—”

His words and thoughts were rudely interrupted as Davy gave him a hard shove in the back, propelling him off the ledge. He spun in mid-fall and snagged Davy’s arm, and they splashed noisily into the pool together.

Will surfaced, sputtering, and blew the water out of his nose. It was cool, true enough, but pleasant on this sultry day, nothing like the icy water of the open sea. Laughing

like an idiot, Davy bobbed up beside him.

“Why in hell—”

“You were starting to think again, Will. I was afraid we’d never—”

Will clapped a hand on his head and dunked him, and things degenerated into a free-for-all. He had the longer reach, but Davy was unscrupulous; when Will pinned both his arms, Davy resorted to kissing, and he had to release him before they both drowned.

“I think you’re getting your strength back,” Will said, treading water. “As well as your regrettable taste in pranks. You might’ve waited until I removed my clothes!”

“They’ll dry soon enough.” Davy shed his trousers with a quick wriggle and tossed them up on the shore. His shirt quickly followed. “Do you require assistance, Mr. Marshall?”

“No!”

His prohibition was ineffective; as soon as he’d untied the drawstring that held the slops in place, Davy dove down smoothly as a dolphin and yanked them off, creating a serious distraction by pausing halfway up for a nibble. That warm mouth in the cool water took Will’s mind completely off swimming, and when Davy started blowing bubbles around his cock he went under with a startled “Damn!”

He wrestled the trousers away from his lover and pitched them clear of the water, then took off his shirt. “Davy, for heaven’s sake, I’m not a fish!”

“I thought I had a pilchard, down there...” Davy floated closer, reaching down. “There. No, it’s a little bigger than that...”

He would’ve pushed the searching fingers away, but it felt too good, and for a little while the water seemed to hold them suspended, just their faces above the surface. Davy was cool and slippery, except for the heat of their kiss, but as the embrace grew more intense they sank back into the water. It was Davy who finally broke contact and

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went up for air.

“—isn’t quite working,” he was saying when Will shook the water out of his ears. “Though it is pleasant.”

“Mm.” Will caught him again, drawing him near enough to allow their bodies to slide together. “Exceedingly pleasant. But impractical.” He glanced at the quilt on the rock ledge. He wanted Davy here and now, not back at the house. But it was so open, and however isolated, they could not be certain they would not be seen...

“Let me show you something,” Davy said. He swam back to where their clothing lay, rummaging around in his trouser pockets until he found a drawstring bag that he slung around his neck. “I promised you that no one would see...”

He swam toward the waterfall, threw a bright smile over his shoulder, and dove beneath the sparkling surface. Will waited for him to resurface, then waited a moment longer before splashing over to where Davy had disappeared. The water was clear enough to see through, but there was nothing to see but rocks and minnows. “Davy? *Davy!*”

“Here!”

He glanced up in time to see Davy framed in the falling water for an instant before he disappeared behind the glittering curtain. Will swam up cautiously, then put a hand into the torrent.

Davy caught his hand and drew him into the falls. His feet found the outcrop of a ledge as their bodies came together; with the water streaming down on them both he could barely breathe as Davy’s cool lips met his. After an intoxicating moment he pushed forward, carrying them both out of and behind the cataract.

“Look at it, Will! Have you ever seen anything so astonishing?”

He shook his head slowly, speechless with wonder. He could not have imagined anything more marvelous than



the pool outside, but this was a place of almost unearthly beauty. The sun outside shone directly through the water, creating an every-changing pattern of light on the walls of the domed cavern. The ground sloped up quickly, leaving them waist-deep in the water after only a few steps.

“How ever did you find it?”

“Kit showed me. The doctor recommended swimming for exercise, but I wasn’t allowed out alone, at first.”

“I should think not.” Will looked at him, standing there with the water lapping just above his knees. The scar was barely visible in this uncertain light, camouflaged by dancing sunlight. In any event, Davy no longer seemed the least bit self-conscious about it. He was simply waiting, naked and beautiful.

Emotion overwhelmed Will. “Davy, how—”

“What?”

He bit his lip. He could not say it, not in this magical place. *How can I ever leave you?* But his time was drawing to a close. Tomorrow, he had to go back to Kingston port, return to his ship, take up the command he had once wanted above all else.

And leave his heart behind.

Davy’s smile wavered, replaced by concern. “Will—?”

“How—” He swallowed, pulled Davy close and kissed him, letting his fingers slide down and between the smooth cheeks. The warmth of his lover’s body felt good in the coolness. “How shall we manage this? Shall I go fetch that blanket?”

“The sand is soft enough.” Davy held him fast around the waist, melding against him. His hands drifted behind Will’s thighs, gently securing him. “I want you to take me now, Will, take me hard—hard enough that I’ll never forget it.”

The heated murmur, coupled with Davy’s clever hands and the rigid cock rubbing against his own, made Will think he would burst right on the spot. “Don’t want to hurt

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you,” he muttered, testing Davy’s opening with one finger. “Water’s not enough...”

Davy pressed a vial into his hand. Oil? Where—? Oh, the little bag around his neck. Will dropped to his knees. “No, wait,” he said when Davy began to follow him down. “I want to be sure you’re ready.” He put the vial down in the sand beside him and ran his hands up Davy’s thighs as he rubbed his cheek against the rampant erection now at eye level, then gave it the barest caress with his lips. Davy gasped.

“I am ready,” he protested. “I—oh!” His fingers tangled in Will’s hair, and he became quite incoherent as Will drew him slowly down to the sand, using the oil to prepare him as he paid slow, teasing homage to Davy’s cock. The rhythm of Davy’s cries and the slow rocking as he rode Will’s fingers became almost hypnotic, the water splashing against his legs as Davy stroked his shoulders, his neck. But finally it was “Please, Will, now!” and Davy was rolling up to his hands and knees to rub that glorious behind against Will’s aching member.

He had intended to take things slowly, but he had teased just a little too long for that; as soon as he was fairly positioned Davy slammed back against him, shouting “Yes!” and setting a wild pace that Will joined wholeheartedly. He felt almost that they were no longer two, but a single soul in a single body.

He could not put the feeling into words—it was all he could do to hold on, knees grinding in the gritty sand, hands on Davy’s hips, bending low over Davy’s back to nip his shoulder. Davy cried out at that, then gasped, “Touch me!” and somehow it was as though he was reaching right through Davy’s body and holding his own cock, so closely did the sensation in that organ mirror the response in the one in his hand. Their movements grew ever more frantic until at last they paused, gasping for breath, then plummeted over the edge, the pleasure surging out like the water thundering down over the rocks outside.

He managed to catch himself on one arm so that he did not actually fall upon his lover. Davy twisted in his grasp, winding arms and legs around him, kissing his throat. Without a word, he burrowed deep into Will's embrace and relaxed. Profoundly. So much so, in fact, that after a minute or two Will realized Davy had fallen asleep, half-in and half-out of the water.

It was an absurd position, but the piercing sweetness of that trust kept him lying there, rocking a little with the rhythm of the waterfall, holding his precious burden until Davy finally murmured and stretched and sat up with a sheepish grin.

"I seem to keep falling asleep," he observed apologetically.

"Well, you waited until we were finished," Will said reasonably. He wanted to say more, to express the feeling that was overflowing within him, but once again failed to find words. He turned instead to the mundane. "Are you ready for dinner?"

The hamper held good, simple fare: bread and ham, both sliced by a thoughtful cook; a jar of pickled vegetables, and a ripe pineapple. A jug of ale and another of lemonade completed the feast. Will noticed that Davy's appetite seemed almost back to normal—or perhaps it was that he'd not had much to eat earlier.

It was fortunate that Bruno knew the way back to the St. John stable, since they both fell asleep in the cart.

~

Baron Guilford was a perfect host. Dinner was magnificent, the conversation entertaining, the after-dinner period mercifully short. Kit had been away from his lady long enough to know what this last night together meant to both of them.

A tepid, scented bath stood waiting for them. They took turns soaping and rinsing each other, then dried off and pulled down the coverlet, stretching out upon the cool linen sheets. Marshall lay on his back, Davy curled up

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beside him, head on his shoulder, as had quickly become their habit. The sun angled down, sending its last rays through the window as it slid on its rapid journey toward dark.

Will caressed Davy's shoulder, wondering if it were only his imagination that his strength and vigor seemed to have increased in these past few days. "What are your plans now, Davy? Will you be staying on here?"

"I've not decided." He smiled. "My plans may depend upon your answer. When do you think you'll return to Kingston?"

Will hesitated. "I've no idea. Probably...probably not for a very long time." He met Davy's eyes, and saw that his friend was anticipating him. "Perhaps never. My orders are to sail tomorrow for Plymouth. I have no idea where I will be after that. Or for how long."

"You knew this when you came here?"

"Yes."

"And said nothing?"

"I thought..." How could he say *'I hoped if I denied it, it would not happen?'* "I did not want to have all our time spent knowing..." His fingers dug into Davy's arm; he could not go on.

"...knowing that it might be the last time," Davy finished. He closed his eyes for a long moment, lips tight. Then he breathed a deep sigh and nodded. "I understand. Thank you. That was better." He looked up. "For me, at any rate."

"There is nothing I can ever give you to make up for what you've lost."

Davy's arms slid around him. "Yes, there is. I've lost nothing that matters. You're alive. Stay that way, and we're even."

"But your career..."

"Will, I shall miss you. Every day. But I will not miss the Navy, and the thrice-damned Articles, and the blind, regimented stupidity that is part and parcel of life in the

service. I tell you truly, since we've been lovers there's never a day I had not thought of resigning."

"Davy!"

A kiss against his ear. "Oh, I'd never have left you. But if we had been transferred to different ships, I'd have been gone like a shot. I'm old enough now that my father could not stop me leaving, and I have money enough to live. I would rather work on this plantation... I would rather be a mediocre actor— Will, I would rather muck out stables than serve under some of the captains we know, the floggers and the petty tyrants. If Captain Smith hadn't been such a paragon, I'd have been cashiered for insubordination long ago." He stopped, then, and rolled over and onto Will's chest. "Now, if I'd known you were going to get a command, I'd've just shot Dowling before he had the chance to do the same to me, and to hell with the Intelligence boys. I wouldn't object at all to serving under you." He moved his hips, reaching down to brush his lips lightly across Will's. "Or atop you...or alongside..."

"Davy!"

"Mmm?" He licked a long slow trail up the side of Will's throat, nipping here and there. The tingles ran all the way to his toes. "What is it, Will?"

"Half a point starboard, Mr Archer. Yes... Oh yes..."

~

Dawn was coming. Exotic birds rustled and called in the cool night air; a faint grey limned the branches just outside the window. Will wished he could have ordered the sun to stay where it was, to hold off the daylight. He was not ready to leave. He would never be ready to leave.

Somewhere, between the last shattering climax and sleep, he had reached a conclusion that he could not share with his lover. He knew that once he left, he must never see Davy again, nor try to communicate with him.

Because, after all, it was some defect in his own self that had brought this situation about. Davy had the

capacity for normal relations with women. It was a youthful indiscretion, an affair with an actress, that had precipitated David Archer into the Navy. And he was not happy in the service; he would be perfectly content to leave it.

If David's father had been less explosive about his son's escapade, or Davy less impetuous, he would probably have followed some less restrictive path. He would have had the opportunity to meet young women of his own station, and all the passion and devotion that he had given to a shipmate and friend would have been bestowed on a young lady of suitable age and breeding—after all, how could any girl resist such male beauty and strength of spirit? Davy should be married, he should have children by now. He should not be squandering his affection in a sterile relationship that gave him nothing but mortal risk in return.

At the very least, he deserved the chance of a normal, happy life. Marshall desperately wanted Davy to live and be happy, and there was only one way he could see to give him that chance.

Within the circle of his arms, Davy stirred and snuggled closer, his voice muffled against Marshall's shoulder. "Will?"

"Mmm?" He bent his head for a lazy kiss, trying not to acknowledge to himself that this was the last time they would ever wake together.

"Promise me something?"

"Anything, Davy. Anything I can give."

Faces nearly touching, they spoke quietly, as though loud voices would hasten the daylight. Davy's fingers smoothed the light stubble on his cheek. "Love again."

"What?"

Warm lips touched his, and the now-familiar brush of beard. He focused on the kiss, fled from thought in the reality of sensation. But Davy persisted. "If I were to die. If anything were to happen so that we had no hope of

being together. Promise me you would find someone else. Let yourself love. Let someone love you.”

His heart wrenched at how Davy’s words mirrored his own thoughts, but he knew that he’d never take that chance. Face this pain again? Impossible. He pulled Davy against him, feeling his own body rouse at the touch, sensing Davy’s response in his quickened breathing. “I don’t want anyone else.”

He covered Davy’s mouth with his own, hands sliding down to cup the perfect rounded flesh and bring their cocks tightly together. Davy groaned and his arms came around Will’s shoulders as they fed on one another. Then he pushed away, panting but stubborn. “Will, promise me this?”

“There’s no need. I shall be fine.”

“I know you, Will. You’ll walk away and close yourself off, and die of loneliness.”

“Davy, for God’s sake, it’s a fucking ship-of-war! A Captain can’t—”

“I didn’t say bugger the whole damned fleet, Will, I said love. We loved each other long before we ever did anything about it. Even if you never bed any of them—you don’t have to open your drawers to open your heart. The men can tell you care about them. They love you.”

“The more fools they.”

Davy’s body stiffened within his embrace. “So I’m a fool, then?”

*Oh, Christ.* Remorse cut deep. What but love had driven Davy to put himself through hell a year ago, risk his good name, very nearly lay down his life? “Hell, Davy, I’m sorry. Of course I didn’t mean—”

But Davy only laughed, and relaxed again. “Well, I may be.” His tone was light. “But not fool enough to waste what time we have in quarreling.” He rolled quickly so that he was lying atop Will, the warm weight pressing him deep into the featherbed and pillows, arms bracketing his head. Davy rocked against him gently, maddeningly. Will

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reached up to rub his thumbs back and forth across Davy's nipples, grinning in the dark as a shiver ran through his lover's frame.

Apparently the pleasure was not enough to distract him. "It's worth the risk, Will," he went on, his voice unsteady with arousal. "Sometimes love is all that makes life bearable. And you deserve it."

Marshall snorted; Davy leaned in and kissed him right between the eyes. "I don't know what you see when you look at yourself, but you need a clearer glass."

Davy was wrong about that, of course; Marshall could see himself only too clearly. Affection was clouding Davy's judgement. But the prospect of replacing him like a piece of broken equipment...oh, no. Not possible. He took Davy's face between his hands. "I told you, love, I don't want anyone else."

The teasing movement stopped, and Davy whispered, "I know." He gulped, suddenly, and something wet fell on Will's face. "Neither do I."

Then they were as close as a single being, arms wrapped tight, mouths sealed together, faces slicked with tears, thrusting as though urgency could somehow erase reality, but the time was slipping inexorably away. They couldn't hold each other close enough to stop it.

Will freed an arm somehow, found the little jar of salve Davy had brought to bed the night before, and fumbled the lid off. He scooped some out one-handed, got it into himself, reached between them and guided Davy in. For once, Davy was too carried away to refuse, and Will felt a brief twinge of pain as his body stretched to accommodate. But it wasn't bad, it was only fair, and he was never likely to find anyone else he could trust this much. Anyone he could want this much. Love this much.

And it was amazing, to feel Davy's heat inside him like this, to feel the frantic shuddering as he thrust and sobbed and thrust again, and suddenly the heat was spreading through him too, coalescing and exploding as



they strained against each other and then Davy collapsed bonelessly against him, breathing in great heaving gasps.

"Sorry—Will, I'm sorry, are you all right? Why ever did you—?"

Will gathered Davy close, holding him still. "I'm fine, Davy." He put a hand on Davy's rear to keep him there inside, marveling at the sensations within his body. "I wanted—I wanted to give you that. Only you. No one else, ever."

"I didn't think I could—"

"But why not? You're freer now than you have ever been. Why not throw off that chain as well?"

"Didn't want to hurt you."

"You didn't. I'm fine. And...honoured that you gave yourself to me that way." And thrilled to know that David was healed at last of all the damage Correy and Adrian had done. Healed, finally, in body and in soul. Healed, whole, and ready to move on to a new life, perhaps a new love, a real marriage.

Davy made no reply, only burrowed his face into the hollow of Will's shoulder, holding tightly. And the cowardly part of Will, the part that could not stand to let go of this love, began to create other possibilities. He stroked Davy's hair with his other hand, hating the odd coarseness the dye imparted to that golden silk. "Davy, I've been thinking—"

Davy groaned. "How can you *do* that while you're—" He rubbed his face against Will's neck. "Please don't make me think, Will. Give me a moment."

His full weight relaxed across Will; after a minute or so he began to snore softly. But Will felt inexplicably alert, as ideas began to multiply. "Davy. Davy, listen."

"Mmmm?"

"What if I were to resign my commission? We could work for your cousin, here, or perhaps for Sir Percy. We might hire a little boat, buy it eventually, become traders. Or we might sign on some larger vessel, go to Canada, or

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even America. We could work a ship on the Great Lakes. That would be safer for you. No one would know you there.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Davy slid off to one side and snuggled down, practically into his armpit. “You smell so damned good.” He nuzzled along the curve of Will’s chest, found a nipple.

“Davy, I’m—Davy, stop that! I’m serious.”

He sighed and shifted up to lean on one elbow, his hand still on Will, stroking, touching. “As I am. Will, you could never just walk away.”

“After that farce they put us through?” He had never in all his life been so furious, not only with Dowling, but with the fools who would let a murderous traitor put a bullet into the man he loved, all for their game of espionage.

“They wanted information.” Davy spoke dismissively, as though that whole debacle had not cost him his career, and nearly his life. “Think of the men who will be saved because we stopped him, Will. How many men would have been sent into ambush, like that last attack on *Valiant*, if we had done nothing?”

“The butcher’s bill was high enough—”

“Yes. But not as high as it might have been. Instead of the dead, think how many will live because of what we’ve done. And think of the men who will go on living with you as their commander. They must count for something.”

He was thinking of them. Always. And that was part of what suddenly made resignation so alluring. “It’s war, Davy. I can’t save them all.”

“Of course not. But you will not waste lives needlessly, as so many captains do. And think of Captain Smith. What would he say if you were to throw away everything you’ve worked for all these years? He’s counting on you, Will. He needs you, too. So does England. The Navy needs a few men of sense, with all the bloody idiots it’s saddled with. You can’t want the Frogs

to win. That whole country's gone mad—can you imagine the bloodbath, if Bonaparte's empire swallowed the world?"

"One commander, more or less, makes no great difference."

"Would you say that about Captain Smith, Will? Or Collingwood, or Pellew? You are not just any commander. The Navy is full of good men who are nothing special as leaders. Those are the ordinary sort of commanders. You have a talent like Captain Smith's. You can see what needs to be done, and make the men see it, too, make them believe in you. They would follow you into hell."

*Or go to hell in my place.* He shook his head and pulled Davy close again, nuzzling his ear. "Do you want me to leave, then?"

The way his breath was squeezed from him was answer enough, but Davy finally spoke. "I want to be with you. If I didn't think someone would recognize me, I'd just change my name again and apply for a servant's position, once you make post. I can do all sorts of things, Will, the Navy simply seemed the best choice at the time. It's different for you. This is what you were born to do. I don't want you to leave—but you must."

His own arms tightened until Davy let out a little 'whoof'. Will loosened his grasp but did not release him. Could not. "I don't want to lose you."

"We might have been transferred away from each other at any time, Will. I cannot see you discard your gifts only to keep us together. For you to waste your life doddling around on some little trader would be like hitching a prize hunting stallion to a plow."

"Hardly a prize." He would have said hardly a stallion, but Davy's hand was putting the lie to that, an unfair distraction in this discussion.

"The hunt is not over. And you would miss it, Will. You belong on the quarterdeck, with the ship yours to command. If you threw that away for me, you would feel

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pulled apart every time you saw a Navy sail. And I would know. Eventually, it would destroy what we have.”

“Never.”

“Yes. It would. It might not matter, to most men, but it does to you.”

“*You* matter to me.”

“Then stay alive.” There was an edge in Davy’s voice. He seemed to catch himself and went on, “Stay alive, so someday when the war is over we can be a couple of old gaffers sitting by a fire swapping yarns and playing with each other under a blanket.”

He was already doing that, his nails scraping lightly up Will’s thigh, augmenting distraction with little licks and nips along his neck. No, David would not waste time quarreling—but he was not conceding his point, either. And his diversionary tactics were masterful. Will could feel the pain of their imminent parting transmuting itself into desire. “Twenty years, do you think? How will we ever wait that long?”

“Don’t wait. Just stay clear of poxy tarts.” He rose on hands and knees, hovering over Will. There was light enough, now, to see the outline of his face, the intensity in his eyes. “And don’t forget me.”

“Never.” Will pulled him down for a kiss that became the first of many, until Davy slipped away to work his way down, leaving a wet tingling trail. Incredible that he could be so aroused again, so quickly; he could not restrain a moan as Davy’s mouth closed around him.

~

Will sat before the mirror, watching the reflection of Davy’s face as his lover brushed back his hair, pulling it into its queue. Davy was taking his time, smiling faintly, running his fingers through the strands. But at last he gathered it all back, wrapping it in its black ribbon as he had so many times on *Calypso*. Another little ritual remaining from their lives as shipmates, performed for the last time.

Davy sighed, and smoothed his hair, and their eyes met in the mirror. "I shall keep yours always," Marshall promised.

With a brave attempt at a smile, Davy wrapped his arms tightly around Marshall's shoulders. "I don't want to let you go," he said. "But I cannot keep you."

The truth of it was sharper than a blade. He disentangled himself from the embrace, took the razor lying beside the washbasin, and, almost without thinking, reached back and awkwardly sawed off his own pigtail.

"Will—"

"There," he said. He folded the razor and put the pigtail in Davy's hand, closed his fingers around it. "You can keep a bit of me, anyway."

Davy blinked rapidly, then grinned through tears. "Thank you. But your hair—it's all crooked now."

"What does it matter?"

"Mr. Marshall, you're a ship's commander. You must see a barber before you go aboard, or you'll be a laughingstock."

"Oh, very well. I suppose there is one in town." He touched the back of his neck. It felt naked, incomplete, as though he had lost a part of himself.

Well, he had, hadn't he? Perhaps the best part. The part that had once believed there could ever be justice in this world. He knew better now. There was no fairness, no justice: only Duty, a greedy, heartless, insatiable deity that demanded honor, loyalty, life, and even those one loved more than life, all to be offered up in return for even harsher demands. *I cannot. I cannot face this ever again.*

If he stayed any longer the pain would break him. "Davy, I must go. Now." He lurched to his feet and seized his love in a tight, almost brutal embrace, crushed that golden body against his own, kissed him deeply through a haze of longing, and left.

He felt his heart slam shut as the door closed behind him.

David watched Will walk down the broad white steps, shoulders bowed under the weight of his responsibilities, and for a moment his vision blurred. Will's first command! How they both had dreamt of this day, thinking they would be standing together on some quarterdeck. It would never happen, now; never in this life. Even if he did recover enough to return to the service—and that was still in doubt—he had had his fill of war.

His lover turned back once, lifting a hand in farewell, and David answered in kind. And then Commander Marshall turned away and climbed into the carriage. The coachman clucked the horse into motion and Will disappeared down the drive of crushed seashells. He did not look back again; in a moment he was out of sight.

David St. John watched a moment longer, then left the window and opened the door of the wardrobe. The little apothecary bottle was where he had hidden it. He picked it up and shook it. Still nearly full.

Dr. Curran had been very generous in the matter of laudanum, even as he warned of the possibility of addiction. David had been fearful of taking it even when necessary. But the pain had seldom been unbearable, and he had saved a little of his medicine nearly every day. Some days he hadn't needed it at all; some days were bad. He had saved the extra for those days.

Today was worse than any of them, even though the pain was not physical. His body still held the memory of Will's touch, and there would be some of his scent left on the pillow. That would last a night or two. Then nothing, maybe nothing ever again.

The medicine would stop the pain. It always did. And he had enough to stop it forever.

He rolled the little brown bottle between his palms, like a conjuror preparing some illusion. *Exit David Archer. Exit David St. John. Exeunt omnes.*

It would be so easy. *To sleep... to dream no more.*

Lee Rowan

*'Give me this cup: let go; by heaven, I'll hav't.  
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart  
Absent thee from felicity awhile  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain...*

Then his own sense of the absurd pointed out that he would have put people he loved through a great deal of trouble only to murder himself in comfort. He could not do that to his mother and sisters, it would be a poor thanks for Kit's enormous kindness, and what would become of Will when he heard? *He would do something heroic and stupid and get himself killed.*

Besides, Will could hardly 'draw his breath in pain' to tell the story of this little escapade—not without asking to be hanged for revealing state secrets, which was hardly the point of the exercise. Shakespeare might have been a genius, but he had never had to contend with the twisted machinations of Naval Intelligence.

David smiled wryly and put the bottle back on the shelf. Easy enough, if he were to change his mind...but he knew he would not. *This love of drama may be the death of me yet. But not by my own hand.*

And at any rate, what he had told Will was true. They might meet again someday, not necessarily as old men. It was a big world, the war would not last forever, though if fate were kind, Will might be Post Captain before France finally admitted defeat. After that, this charade would no longer be necessary. Perhaps Will might find employment as captain of a merchantman, after the war, and David could be his perfectly titled First Mate. To sail in peacetime—what a lovely idea. That was something to hope for. Or perhaps Captain Marshall might visit Drury Lane now and again, spend a little shore leave with a ne'er-do-well actor.

Or...he might not. He might not ever come back, or even write.

There had been such terrible finality in Will's leaving,

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perhaps it really was the end. He had, after all, come to David's bed only through a very improbable circumstance. David had been his first and only lover of either sex. Having made the break, Will might reconsider the whole notion, and see what the female of the species had to offer. He might revert to convention and wed the first likely girl he ran across. He might lock himself away in his pain and refuse to let anyone in ever again. He might live like a monk, or he might fuck himself senseless at every opportunity without ever letting it touch his heart. And David could do nothing about that; it was Will's choice to make.

*But it is his choice. I know that he loves me. And if he lives... God, if he lives...he might come back to me.*

Was that enough? It would have to be. They were both still alive, at least for now. *That counts for something. Where there's life, there's hope.*

*And a stitch in time saves nine. I am becoming a fountain of epigrams.*

What would he do, if Will did not return? Perhaps he could become a playwright. Alter these past months enough to obscure identities, cast himself as a fair damsel, make the *Valiant* a merchant ship...write a future for them both, together. Cast their mole as a traitor diverting British supplies to France... It would be a way of speaking the truth, even if he could not speak it plain.

*I could do that, truly. There are things I can do. I must go on, even without Will. If I expect that of him, I can do no less myself. I must. Even if we never meet again.*

He was suddenly very weary. *Even if we do, it may never be the same.* All those weeks of struggling to recover, holding out the hope of this reunion, these days together, like a prize...and now the time was gone. *Dear God, where did it all go?*

So tired... He shed his dressing gown and climbed back into bed, stretching himself out over the imprint Will's body had left in the feather mattress. He pulled a



pillow against himself, but it was not enough. He dragged the sheet up over his shoulders, and let himself imagine arms around him, his lover's breath in his hair, the warmth against his back. He might awake alone for the rest of his life, but Will would be with him still in dreams.

As he drifted away he saw a ship in the far distance, white sails vanishing over the horizon as William sailed off to find his life's destiny. It was right, somehow, and he felt a strange sense of comfort, as though this life were nothing more than a very long play, and in this act he had acquitted himself honorably...and after the play they would reunite, and remember the joy and the pain, and laugh again together. It was all right. It would be all right. *Our little lives are rounded by a sleep. Goodnight, sweet prince...*

*Goodbye, my love.*

## **Epilogue**

*Portsmouth, 1802. An uneasy peace holds between England and France.*

“Thank you, gentlemen. It’s been a pleasure.” Marshall nodded to the three men with whom he’d spent the evening, as he gathered up the money he’d won at whist.

His latest partner expressed his own satisfaction as the other two gentlemen made polite noises. The three were from the same Army regiment, and had managed, temporarily, to overcome their natural rivalry with the Navy, since a beached sailor had been the only one in the tavern willing to wager a few shillings. Although the Army men were officers, two were younger sons on allowance, so their stakes were within the limits Marshall set for himself on those evenings when the solitude of his cottage became more than he could bear.

“Another night, then,” one said. “So we have a chance to even things out.”

“Of course.” He smiled, nodded, and excused himself into the cold darkness outside with a sigh of relief. Two of those gentlemen were moderately skilled players, but one was an idiot and had an irritating habit of humming as he played. His friends tolerated him, however, so Marshall was willing to do the same.

This strange life was not what he had imagined when he had taken command of the *Palometa*, with orders to act as a fast courier and transport for intelligence operatives. But he had barely received confirmation of his promotion when the rumors of a treaty between France and England, perennial rumors that never seemed to bear fruit, proved true. A treaty was signed in Amiens in March of 1802, and Will, like thousands of other seamen, was put ashore. As an officer, he was better off than most. He was paid half the salary of an active-duty commander, which was just the same as his regular pay as a lieutenant, so his income now was what he had been used to. It was more expensive to live ashore, but

he had never been spendthrift; a rented cottage on a parson's land, a few additional shillings to share evening meals prepared by the parson's wife—the arrangement worked for all of them. It was in some ways a return to his boyhood, and for now it was enough.

Will had nearly a mile to walk to the place where he habitually stayed during his monthly visit to Portsmouth. Well inland, it was one place that he and Davy had never frequented, which was the main reason he stayed there. He steered clear of those memories as much as he possibly could. He had driven into town from his rented cottage on the Downs mainly to collect his monthly half-pay, but also to remind himself that he was still among the living. Tomorrow he would attend to a few errands for the parson in exchange for the loan of the pony and cart, and then he would go back to his books and his walks.

Circumstances would improve, eventually. Everyone knew the peace would not last. Sooner or later, he would be back aboard a ship, any ship, and he would regain the chance to die in a blaze of patriotic glory.

Some small part of him pointed out that he was making a martyr of himself to no good purpose, and if he succeeded in his plan Davy would be not only grief-stricken but furious. But what, after all, did he have to live for? His father would have said he should help the less fortunate—well and good, he would do that. His prize-money, still gathering interest in the bank, would go to Davy with instructions to use it for his own benefit or pass it on to the Sick and Wounded hospital at Greenwich. He knew what Davy would do with the money. The sick and wounded would be overjoyed.

And once he was gone, Davy would have the chance for a life of his own. Every day Will fought the temptation to write to Davy, and every day he won. He did send one note just after his ship was paid off, telling David that he was well and advising him to read Shakespeare's thirteenth sonnet.

Davy had given him the collected sonnets as a birthday

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present the year before, with ribbons at certain pages. He had blushed at those, but when he read them all, there were a few that made him wonder at his own selfishness in keeping Davy to himself. The thirteenth sonnet was to Shakespeare's friend—Davy claimed it was to his lover—telling the young man to marry and have children, to preserve his beauty on the earth. The words marched unbidden through his memory:

O, that you were yourself, but, love, you are  
No longer yours than you yourself here live;  
Against this coming end you should prepare,  
And your sweet semblance to some other give.  
So should that beauty which you hold in lease  
Find no determination; then you were  
Yourself again after yourself's decease  
When your sweet issue your sweet form should bear.  
Who lets so fair a house fall to decay,  
Which husbandry in honour might uphold  
Against the stormy gusts of winter's day  
And barren rage of death's eternal cold?  
O, none but unthrifths! Dear my love, you know  
You had a father – let your son say so.

Will thought he had done quite well, letting Shakespeare speak for him, and when he was feeling his most objective, he believed that Shakespeare was right. There was too much beauty in David Archer for him to leave the earth without passing it on. It was not right for one man to keep that all to himself. Davy had told him to love again...well, that worked both ways. Davy should love again. In time, he would recover from the break. He might even be grateful to Will, once he was back in a life ashore and free of this unnatural connection. Davy was a loving man, and no matter where life took him he would find someone to love.

Will knew he himself would not. One such loss was all he could survive.

He told himself the amputation was healing over, forming a scar. Some men lost arms or legs; Will Marshall had lost his heart. He would never again gaze into blue-grey eyes sparking with wit and affection, never lose himself in a hot sweet kiss, never feel Davy's strong fingers digging into the back of his thighs—

The force of the memory made him stumble. *No. Stop. Don't look back. It's madness.*

He had not read the letters that had arrived so regularly from Jamaica, though he kept them; he could not even think of throwing them away or destroying them. Eventually they had stopped coming. One part of his mind said, "*Yes, that's best,*" while another part howled like a lost soul. When he was younger he had never understood how anyone could commit suicide. Now he knew.

But that escape was closed. To kill himself would be the ultimate selfishness, a denial of the joy that had been. He did not regret a moment of the time he'd had with Davy, did not want to leave a bitter, hurtful memory. But the past was just that. The future was existing only until he could find an honorable way to stop.

He thought that it would be a great relief to die. But he came to realize, as the weeks passed, that this deep loneliness was no more than he deserved for letting his base desires put Davy at risk. Their last time together on the *Valiant* had been proof of that. Such hypocrisy, to speak ill of that stupid midshipman Gannon's lack of self-control, and then make love to Davy on the carpenter's walk, where anyone might have come barging in. If he could do that once, he might do it again...and again, until they were caught, and Davy hanged. If the laws had been different, if the world could view their love as the beautiful thing it truly was, things might have been different. But a man had to live with what was, not the way he wanted things to be. So long as he was Davy's lover, Davy was in mortal danger.

It had nothing to do with religion. His father might

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have been a minister, but Will had long since decided that the being called God, if he existed at all, was at best coldly indifferent to suffering, and at worst a sadist. At first Will had been angry at God, or Fate, call it what you would, but as time went by he had no one left to be angry with but himself. Anger took too much effort, too much energy, and he had none left. He had nothing.

Back to the mundane. Back to his modest lodgings, a room let to trustworthy gentlemen by the widow of the master's mate from the *Titan*. Mrs. Quinn was motherly to a fault. He found her solicitude bearable for the day or so he was in town every month; sometimes he even welcomed it. Tonight he could not stand even the thought. Perhaps it had been the time he spent with those soldiers, seeing their friendship, the easy camaraderie that reminded him too much of what he'd lost. He should have bought a bottle of wine and stayed indoors.

But he had not, and it was too cold and wet to spend time walking about Portsmouth. His shoes were already damp, and he would need to let them dry slowly, so the leather would not crack. It had become a point of pride—useless, stupid pride, Davy would say—that he was living entirely on his half-pay, not touching the prize-money from his years in the Navy. Soon he must see about getting another pair of shoes. Perhaps he would use tonight's winnings; that should be more than enough, so long as he stayed away from the expensive shops that catered to fashionable gentlemen. But he did not care to stay in town long enough to visit even an ordinary shoemaker, and this pair was still good enough for every day.

*"...if you should ever be in need..."*

The late-night whisper nagged like a hungry ghost. He did *not* have to do this. He could write a letter—one line would do—and he would be on the way back to where his heart was. Or Davy would come to him—they could buy a cottage out in the country, well away from anyone who might be involved with Naval Intelligence. Even if Davy

was no longer in Jamaica, a letter to Baron Guilford would always find him.

Was Davy still in Kingston? Marshall didn't know. It didn't matter. He would not write that letter. He could not. What future would David Archer have with a sodomitical lover?

*"You wouldn't tell me, would you?"*

*No, Davy. I cannot. For your own good, I cannot.*

That part of his life was over. The door was closed. Davy was no longer even David Archer; he was now David St. John, woods-colt of a noble family, an honorable family, his natural ties of blood and honor. A better life for David, it was the life he had been born to, free of the trials and danger he'd had to endure in the Navy. Once he was able to leave off that ridiculous guise, he would have no trouble finding another lover—or a wife, if he chose to settle down and raise a family.

Surely Davy could shake off the aberration, the consequence of a womanless nautical isolation that had brought them together. He didn't need a hanger-on from his past, a fool who had nearly caused his death, interfering with his chance for a future.

Yes. That was for the best. Loneliness had been the root of it, no doubt. A lover who was also a friend had probably been good for Davy, after the abuse he'd endured from the dregs of the service, and Davy had given himself in response to Marshall's need. He knew, at least, that he had given Davy pleasure—such times they had shared!—and of course Davy would miss his lover for a time. But he had most likely already met other, more congenial friends, people from his own class. Normal people. Of course he would accept Will back even after all this time, and no word; his sweet, giving nature would make it impossible for him to refuse a friend. But Davy had given up so much, had given him so much—that Marshall could not conscience asking any more. And in some ways a clean break was all to the good.

*You are better off without me, Davy. I let you down so*

*badly...*

He had bungled matters so thoroughly on the *Valiant*. He should have stuck with Davy every minute; they should have confronted Dowling together. The man would have known he could not kill both of them—and if Humberstone's plan had been diminished, what of it? Killing the saboteur, or arresting him, would have got him off the ship and ended the danger. But he had not considered that Dowling might act against Davy, not until it was too late. He had let Davy down both as a lover and a friend. If he was alone now, it was because he deserved it—and at least he would know that he had not ruined the life of the man he loved.

He looked up and realized his gloomy maunderings had carried him all the way to Mrs. Quinn's. As he reached to knock on the door, it opened before his hand. Damn the woman, could she not wait until he was within doors? "Mrs. Quinn, I'm sorry to be so late..."

"Oh, Mr. Marshall, it's no trouble. In fact, you have a caller." She patted him on the shoulder as he walked in, as though he were some sort of wandering hound come home at last. "A gentleman fine as yourself, he's in the front room. Having a drink."

Something in her tone made Marshall suspect that the gentleman had paid handsomely for that drink, but he chided himself. The poor woman was getting by on next to nothing, and had he not just earned the price of his lodging by teaching applied mathematics to some other fine gentlemen's sons?

And then he read the card. His visitor was none other than Kit's friend, Sir Percy, one of a handful of men besides Marshall himself who knew David St. John's true origins. Marshall had met Sir Percy once, briefly, at a party in London, thrown by Davy's mother to celebrate her youngest son's elevation to Lieutenant.

Will mumbled thanks to Mrs. Quinn and hurried into the little common room. In his elegant fop-about-town attire,



sleek brown hair brushed back into a tidy queue, Sir Percy looked like a lily in a cabbage patch amid the homely surroundings.

“Mr. Marshall!” The nobleman rose, nodding graciously

“Sir Percy. Whatever brings you here on such a night? Is—” he did not want to ask if anything were amiss with David.

“Lord St. John and his cousin are well, and send their regards,” the gentleman said. He glanced toward the doorway; Marshall could imagine Mrs. Quinn just outside, with either her eye or ear to the keyhole. From his amused expression, Sir Percy had taken the lady’s measure well enough—benevolent but excessively curious. “Your landlady seems most—” he raised an eyebrow, “attentive. Can we be private here, or may I invite you to dinner?”

Marshall’s stomach gave a small cheer at the suggestion; he had forgotten all about dinner, as he often did. “Thank you, sir, but that is not necessary. We might step out for a drink, though I regret the night is unpleasant...”

“I have not yet dined,” Sir Percy said, “and I insist that you join me. My carriage was only waiting for your return.”

“Carriage, sir?”

“Indeed. It should be ready; I asked Mrs Quinn to send round for it as soon as you appeared.”

To please a guest, Mrs. Quinn would have sent round for the Devil himself; the carriage was indeed just outside the door. As soon as they were safely inside, Sir Percy settled back. “Well, Mr. Marshall, are you interested in returning to active service?”

“Of course! But with this peace, the chance seems unlikely. There are so many ahead of me on the list—”

“For regular service, I am sure. But I am speaking of *irregular* service.”

Sir Percy, Marshall knew, ran a most irregular enterprise. “The League?” he asked.

“In a manner of speaking. What I am about to tell you must go no further—and if you decide to decline my offer, I

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must ask that you forget everything I am about to say. But of course I know you can be trusted with important secrets."

"You have my word, sir," Marshall said.

"Excellent. Well, to put it briefly, which is hardly my normal style, there are certain branches of Intelligence which have made use of the League's services. Flittin' about as we do, it is inevitable that we pick up certain information that those gentleman find useful."

Marshall nodded, still not seeing how this affected him.

"I expect you know that nobody on either side believes this peace will hold. And in any event, espionage never stops in peacetime—both sides are too busy keepin' an eye on one another to see who'll cheat first. Now, since my friends and I are already engaged in this unofficial news-gathering arrangement, some of the gentlemen in Intelligence circles thought it might be convenient to have us just carry on a trifle more vigorously. And to do that we need a few more small, fast vessels, and a few more trustworthy men."

Sir Percy's brows lifted inquiringly, and Marshall's heart leapt. "Sir Percy—are you—"

"Offerin' you a job, man. You come highly recommended."

"By Mr. Ar—Mr. St. John?" Davy, bless him. Though he could not possibly accept. "It was kind of him—of all of you—to think of me, sir, and I thank you, but I should stay near Portsmouth, in case a post might open."

"That gentleman spoke well of you, yes. So did Baron Guilford. As did Sir Paul Andrew Smith, whose expertise I hope you will not dispute?"

Marshall shook his head. Captain Smith was involved?

"They all warned me you would try to talk yourself out of the idea. So let me add that the position includes the unofficial rank of Commander, to be confirmed when hostilities resume. The 'unofficial' business is strictly a formality, of course."

Unofficial. So if anything were to go wrong, this might all evaporate. But to have a ship again, and something to do

besides the everlasting walks—real work, and a deck beneath his feet? “Yes. I accept. Thank you.”

Sir Percy grinned. “Well, that was easier than I expected. You must be mellowing, Mr. Marshall.”

“I am anxious to be back at sea, sir.”

“As is Mr. Archer. You both will have your work cut out for you, to have the *Mermaid* ready to sail in a week’s time.”

Marshall’s breath caught. “Mr. Archer? Do you not mean Mr. St. John? I thought he—”

“Archer he was born, sir, and Archer he is once again. I fancy there is a grave you might want to dance upon, now that things are back to normal. A fellow named Dowling, old shipmate of yours. He was caught one day in an office at the Admiralty, in circumstances so compromising that he could not extricate himself. He was hanged as a traitor these two months past.”

“*Two months?* How kind of them to keep me informed!”

“Mr. Marshall, we’re speaking of the Intelligence Service. Some of these johnnies wouldn’t tell their own mothers that they’d been born. It was nothing personal—but if it is any consolation, a message was sent to Mr. Archer as soon as humanly possible.”

Will leaned back against the coach seat, exasperation mingled with relief. However late the news, the nightmare was finally over. Davy was free. “Thank you, Sir Percy.”

“My pleasure. Now, I had already offered Mr. Archer the position you just accepted. But he declined command; he decided he would be more comfortable serving under one particular officer of the Royal Navy.” Sir Percy’s expression was all wide-eyed innocence.

Will’s heart thumped. “We—we would be serving together? Mr. Archer and myself?” He was afraid to let himself believe he had heard correctly.

“Yes. Details to be worked out, of course. Which is why we’ll be dinin’ with the Baron and his cousin in a few minutes. The last leisurely meal you’ll have for some months to come, I’m afraid.”

## *Winds of Change*

"I hope you're right, sir."

This was a dream. It had to be a dream. He could not be on his way to take command of a ship, with Davy once again at his side. This past day had all been fantasy. Any minute now, he would wake up alone in his cold, dreary room, with nothing to look forward to but another day of solitude and regret.

But it was such a beautiful dream. And he could feel his rationalizations slipping away like sand through a glass. If what Davy truly wanted was a wife and family, would he still desire to 'serve under' his shipmate and lover? If Davy were to decide he wanted a wife, then he had only to say so, and however much it hurt, Will would set him free.

But what if he wanted the same thing Will wanted? What good would it do either of them to deny it?

He started awake when the carriage stopped beside the coach-lamp outside an inn. "Sorry," Sir Percy said with a smile. "We must pick up a friend." He tapped on the roof of the carriage with his cane; in a moment a servant opened the door and let the steps down. "Shan't be a moment!"

What could he say to Davy? An apology, first off, for ignoring his letters. And a question, a serious question—*would you not rather have a normal life?* Because no matter how much they loved one another, a life together would never be easy, would always set them a little apart from the rest of society.

"Here we are!" Sir Percy's ebullient voice floated in the carriage door, soon followed by his cheerful face. "It's a lovely night, Mr. Marshall. I believe I'll take the reins myself for the rest of our journey. But here's some company for you, so you won't be bored."

Bitter cold and sleeting—a lovely night?

The carriage tilted a bit as someone came up the steps, and all Will's considered speeches evaporated as David Archer settled into the seat opposite.

They studied each other in that moment of strangeness lovers sometimes feel when they have been long apart. In the

meager light of the lamp outside, Davy's face was very much the one that had haunted his memories, clean-shaven once again, but slightly different. Thinner, still, and touched with the look of one who had passed through suffering and been changed by it, a look Will knew from his shaving mirror. A man's face, no longer a boy's.

But it was still the face he loved, the face he thought he'd never see again. "Davy."

"Who else?" The carriage door shut, and before the vehicle had moved an inch Davy shifted into the seat beside Will and enveloped him in an embrace that turned into a prolonged kiss, warm and sweet, the answer to his unspoken prayers. They were both weeping a little by the time it finished.

"Davy, I'm so very sorry—"

"I should hope you would be!" No soppy sentimentality for David Archer. "Don't ever do that to me again, Will. That letter! Shakespeare's thirteenth, for the love of God! Did you read my response?"

"No. No, I kept your letters, but I dared not read them. I knew I'd do whatever you told me to, and I truly thought you would be happier, better off, with a family of your own."

"Mr. Marshall, if you want to know what makes me happy, you should look in a mirror." He snuggled down in the curve of Will's arm, and said, "Did you ever read Barnfield?"

"A gentleman once warned me I should deny all knowledge of that fellow," Will said.

"He was probably right. But I shall tell you one of his poems, and you may take that as an answer to Shakespeare's thirteenth. Pay attention, sir." Davy cleared his throat.

"Sighing, and sadly sitting by my love  
He asked the cause of my heart's sorrowing,  
Conjuring me by heaven's eternal King  
To tell the cause which me so much did move.

## *Winds of Change*

Compelled (quoth I), to thee will I confess,  
Love is the cause, and only love it is  
That doth deprive me of my heavenly bliss.  
Love is the pain that doth my heart oppress.  
And what is she (quoth he) whom thou dost love?  
Look in this glass (quoth I), there shalt thou see  
The perfect form of my felicity.  
When, thinking that it would strange magic prove,  
He opened it, and taking off the cover,  
He straight perceived himself to be my lover.”

“He actually wrote that?” Will asked, scandalized.

“He did. The one about cherry-lipped Adonis is even more effulgent, but I did not want to make you blush.”

“Too late for that. But you just wait, Mr. Archer. When we have finished dinner with your cousin and Sir Percy, let’s take a room—a very private room—and I shall see if I can make you blush, as well.”

“You never will,” Davy said with a laugh. “But never let that prevent you from trying.”

Will rested his chin against the top of Davy’s head and touched his face, letting his fingers rest on the exquisite sculpture of cheek and jaw. Despite the dark, he could feel that his lover’s hair was blond again, and smooth as silk. “I’m sorry I was such a fool, Davy. Thank you for coming back to me.”

Davy snuggled closer, and put his hand over Will’s heart. “What else could I have done? Sooner or later, my love, I had to come home.”

The End

## About the Author:

I have been writing since a second-grade nun explained that fiction lets you tell stories without being scolded for lying. I didn't keep much of the the dogma from those early days, but retained the concepts of "love one another" and "do unto others".

Loving someone...being loved...has got to be one of the all-time finest things. Disillusioned after my first marriage, I decided for a while that humans were more trouble than they were worth. Then a couple of extremely dear cats and a big-hearted dog taught me enough about love to eventually melt my cynicism, and romance started creeping into my writing, which for most of my life had been anything except romantic.

When I started writing love into my stories, it came into my life, and I have been, for several years, unbelievably happy in my second—and final—marriage. I think fiction lets a person try out new ideas before tackling them in real life—whether it's traveling to a distant place or taking an emotional chance—because before anything can happen in reality, it first has to happen in the imagination, where dreams are born.

When not tossing fictional people into mad passionate embraces or doing research for same with my sweetie, I like to garden, haunt garage sales, and take care of the four-legged fur family. Life ain't perfect, but it can be awfully good.

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## **Other works by Lee Rowan:**

### **Ransom**

It's 1796 and not only is love between men taboo, it is punishable by death. Lt. David Archer is an officer in His Majesty's Navy and a gentleman of Regency Society. He is also hopelessly in love with his shipmate, Lt. William Marshall. David is certain that his feelings, if expressed, would be met with revulsion. Afraid of losing the strong friendship that he has forged with William, he vows to never speak of or act on his desire, promising himself to take the secret to his grave.

Although William is young, his innate talent has allowed him to quickly rise above his humble background and gain a reputation as a promising officer. The Royal Navy is his world, and in that world there is no room for anything as frivolous as romance.

Then, in a twist of fate, the two men are abducted by a ruthless pirate who finds pleasure in toying with his captives. Thrown together in close quarters and wondering if they will survive, they're are faced with some difficult choices. William struggles with his growing feelings for David and, try as he might to dismiss them, he can't. When David makes the ultimate sacrifice to protect the man he loves, the reason for it is clear and the passion that the men have denied for so long is realized for the first time.

Before the lovers can have any sort of life together, they must first escape. After that, they face an even greater challenge—is their love strong enough to survive a clandestine life under the ever-present threat of the Navy's implacable Articles of War?



## **Trilogy No. 109: Sail Away**

**The Captain's Courtship:** For Cynthia Lancaster and Captain Paul Smith, it's love at first sight, but Cynthia has been promised to her father's protégé, the lackluster Mr. Evelyn Humboldt. A lengthy courtship is what's expected, but will Paul have enough time to claim his ladylove and get back to port to take command of the *Seahorse*? There seems to be more than one revolution brewing in the American colonies!

**See Paris and Live:** Christopher St. John hadn't planned on staying in Paris, but then he met the unforgettable Zoë Colbert. Unable to pull himself away, Christopher loses his heart to Zoë and finds himself embroiled in the turmoil of the French Revolution. Will passion save them from the ravages of war, or lead them down a path of inescapable danger?

**Castaway:** In a time when their love is forbidden and a place where privacy is impossible, the love between Lieutenants David Archer and William Marshall has remained hidden, even from each other. But when a terrible storm at sea leaves the two stranded on a desert island where their fantasies are just within reach, will they be able to deny their desires, or will their true feelings be revealed?

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## **Recommended Linden Bay Romance Read:**

### **The Not-So-Victorian Viscount by Marie Carroll**

It's 1860 and Angelica Aldrich has traveled to exotic Hong Kong, a land where the customary rules of Victorian society don't always apply. Recently orphaned, the young and impressionable American planned on living with her brother, David, and his young wife. What she hadn't planned on, was sharing the house with the infamous Viscount St. Alban.

St. Alban is David's business partner, but he's also a notorious rogue. The handsome Viscount may seem to have only a few close friends, but as Angelica discovers, he has a number of female companions that are more than willing and unseemingly wanton.

Although Angelica finds St. Alban's behavior scandalous, she's as intrigued by him as he is captivated by her. Angelica awakens something within St. Alban and as their feelings for one another grow, a bond is forged and secrets are inadvertently revealed—secrets that could put Angelica in the path of danger.

With *The Not-So-Victorian Viscount* Marie Carroll delivers whole-heartedly, taking us on a wondrous journey filled with lush settings, intriguing characters, and unsurpassed passion.

