



Kestrel on the Horizon

by Angelia Sparrow & Naomi Brooks

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Torquere Press

www.torquerepress.com

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First published in www.torquerepress.com, 2008

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For Helga, for beta-reading and encouragement
For Elke, for classic pirate movies and encouragement

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Chapter 1

Nathaniel Collins, captain of the sloop *Golden Horizon*, walked the morning streets of Bridgetown, Barbados. The cries of vendors, the soft laughter of the islanders, and the noises of animals all blended into a pleasant change from shipboard life.

Passers-by saw a tall, thin man, his long reddish-brown hair tied back in a green velvet bow, dressed in a coat and breeches that—while not the height of fashion—were at least clean and neat. Observers, mostly ladies from behind their fans and under the edges of parasols, could watch him amble from shop window to booth, his sharp green-brown eyes above a sharper nose and both taking in the morning and the life of the city. An auction notice on a building caught his eye.

The Estate of one Elijah Goodman was to be sold in its entirety: house, furnishings, slaves and other livestock, beginning at eight. The sugar plantation called Breakfront was to be liquidated to pay the deceased owner's debts.

Collins checked the sun. He had time and he had money, a great deal of the latter from a Spanish ship: silver mostly, from Spain's mint in Mexico, but also some American gold, Spanish reales and even a few louis d'ors and English crowns were jumbled into the mix. His orders from the King were explicit in his Letter of Marque and Reprisal. Spaniards, French, Barbary corsairs—any ship not flying the flags of England or her former colonies—was fair game. An attack on the colonial ships could reopen hostilities that had only ended

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twenty years before. He often regretted he was born too late to see heroism against the American rebels.

Even so, there was one colonial ship he was more than willing to make an exception for. He'd seen the *Kestrel* lying at anchor in the bay. He only hoped to avoid Captain Thomas Harrison for the length of his stay.

The fragrant island air cloyed now, as he thought of the rival captain, the flowers and fruit that had been so pleasant blending into a reek that clung like the powder and cologne the other captain favored. Collins remembered the scent well; he remembered it beside him on deck, and above him in the Captain's bunk.

He'd sailed under Thomas Harrison for six years, learning all the man had to teach. The Captain had been smitten with him. Collins hadn't minded at first. Thomas was a handsome man, tall, clean featured and strong. But the second position had never sat well. He could accept a lesser share of treasure, but being always ignored, always second and always on the bottom in bed, wore badly.

Now he was his own man, with his own ship and crew. He shared all spoils fairly and took only the willing to his bed. They never left unsatisfied.

He found the auction. Goodman had been quite wealthy, but had left no heirs and a great many debts beyond the death duties. The Crown would sell it all, keep the proceeds and tax the next owner, thus doubling their share on Breakfront. The slaves were first. The field slaves went in lots of ten, their dark skin gleaming in the sun. Collins saw nothing worth having at the prices being asked.

He ignored the maid servants and cooks. Women were bad luck aboard ship, and he would no more sail with one on his sloop than he would set sail on a Friday. The various grooms and skilled laborers commanded high prices. He gave strong consideration to a carpenter, but the price of three hundred guineas made him pass. His current one was competent if not over-skilled. Last on the block was Goodman's bodyservant.

Collins had expected a doddering old man, barely capable of looking after his equally aged master. Instead, the man on the block was young, not halfway into his twenties. Like the other male slaves, he wore only pants. But even at a distance, Collins could tell they were good cotton and not the slubby stuff put on the others. He was not muscular from working in the fields. Nor was he as dark as the others. Their skins gleamed blue-black from working in the sun; his was the color of Spanish chocolate, of coffee mixed with rich cream.

"Adlai. Age twenty-three. Can read, write and cipher, intelligent and diligent. Suited to light work, butler duties, body service and clerking."

What struck Collins was the color of his eyes. The color of sea and sky and deep enough to fall into, instead of the usual brown; they stood out like spots of light in his dark face. They rested on Collins for a moment. The sadness he saw there granted him an epiphany.

He wanted the man. He wanted to make that closed mouth laugh and talk. He wanted to see those odd blue eyes sparkle. He wanted to see Adlai happy. He wanted to be the one to make Adlai happy.

Bidding had opened at two hundred guineas and was climbing steadily as he debated. A familiar voice offered four hundred. Collins saw Captain Harrison on the far side of the crowd, his trademark black velvet coat like crows' feathers among the island color. A slim exotic youth clung to his side, as flamboyant as any woman. The youth's black hair curled to his waist, and his clothing was expensive with indigo and embroidery.

Without thinking, Collins yelled, "Five hundred." It was an automatic gainsaying, nearly all the money he had upon him. Harrison sketched a mocking bow, wrapped an arm around his boy's waist and melted away into the crowd. There were no further bids and Collins stepped to the side to pay for his purchase.

Adlai looked him over, his face neutral, the sadness in his eyes even deeper up close. Collins wanted to make sure he never needed to wear that look again.

"I'm Captain Nathaniel Collins of the sloop *Golden Horizon*. Have you ever sailed?"

"No, Master Captain." Adlai's voice was soft and sweet, and his face did not change. A slow closing of his eyes was the only sign of emotion.

"My ship rides at anchor in the bay. We're re-supplying her." He removed the rope halter the auctioneer had handed him. It looked too much like a noose for his liking. "Act like a man and I will treat you as one more member of my crew."

Adlai nodded. Collins knew there was no place for Adlai to run. He knew he himself would be tempted to do so, but had no idea whether Adlai had any notions of freedom. Barbados

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was a small island, and the sloop was an even smaller ship, and there could be no escape. Adlai said, "Yes, Master Captain," then fell into step beside Collins, with the stride of a man used to matching another's gait.

Collins smiled. As they walked back to the harbor, he told Adlai of the *Golden Horizon*. He checked his purse and found he still had a few small pence left, enough for some lunch. He bought a bundle of red bananas, a couple of buns and a mango. He offered a bun to Adlai.

"When was the last time you ate?" he asked, watching the alacrity with which Adlai polished off the bun. His purchase's manners were impeccable, but it was apparent the man was hungry.

Adlai looked up from the last crumbs of the bun and took a proffered banana. "Yesterday morning, Master Captain. The sale began early today and they did not feed us."

Collins finished his banana, tossed the peel in the gutter and handed the other two to Adlai. He took out his dirk and began to slice the mango. He ate a strip off of the blade and offered some of the juicy fruit to Adlai. "We'll get better food aboard ship. I try not to stay in port long, but I visit often. I like my food fresh, not ship's biscuit and slimy water cut with rum and limes."

They reached the harbor and Collins gestured to a fast-looking sloop. "The *Golden Horizon*." He led Adlai to a rowboat where two other men sat, one small and beautiful, the other black and massive, his hair in wild dreadlocks that fell halfway down his back.

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"Matthew, Stephan," Collins nodded to each in turn. "This is Adlai. I bought him. If he serves well for six years, I'll free him. Sooner if he can buy himself with his shares."

Stephan nodded and closed his enormous hands over the oars. "And in the seventh year he shall go out free," he quoted. "We are all aboard, Captain."

Adlai listened, a stunned look on his face. Very few men, upon spending so much money for a slave, would casually speak of allowing him to purchase his freedom, let alone freeing him as if he were no more than an indentured convict. Collins knew this and didn't care. He knew that after sailing Adlai would need his freedom.

They rowed out to the ship. Collins looked back at the shore and saw a dark figure, his coat billowing like a crow's wing. Harrison raised one hand in mocking salute. Collins turned back to looking at the *Golden Horizon*. His stay had been as good as he could have expected. And any day he did not have to pass words with Harrison was a good one.

Once aboard, he took Adlai to his cabin. He looked the young man over and said, "Make yourself comfortable, but you'd be wise to stay in the cabin for now. My crew is not the best." He shot Adlai a grin. "I'm remedying that." With that, he headed back up the ladder.

* * * *

Adlai looked around. He'd never been on a ship before, and certainly not a pirate ship. The cabin was rich, but reasonably neat. A good broadcloth coat lay over an oaken chair that was bolted to the deck. There were no heaps of treasure spilling

from every corner, just a writing desk, a chart table and a fine bed. The bed was big enough for two and bolted to the deck and walls, mounted on gimbals to avoid too much pitching. There were plenty of covers, in all sorts of cloth. He folded the pair of woolen pants that had been flung over the other chair, put them with the coat and sat down.

Collins reappeared in a few minutes with a stack of clothes on his arm. "I think these will fit. Weaver is pretty handy with a needle if we need to take anything in. You can keep your good pants for when we go ashore. They're too fine for the work aboard ship."

Adlai looked the clothes over. He chose a pair of heavy canvas trousers in grey. He hesitated, and then dropped the good cotton pants he wore. He tried to ignore Collins looking at him as he pulled the canvas ones on. They fit reasonably well.

When he caught Collins' eyes on his bare chest, he asked, "Does Master Captain prefer a shirt or no?" He hesitated a moment before asking, "And are there shoes for me? I am not accustomed to bare feet and the walk was most uncomfortable." He knew many sailors went barefoot aboard ship and did not wish to ask for special treatment.

* * * *

Collins swallowed and stopped staring at the small curly tufts of black hair on the coffee skin. He had been wondering if Adlai would taste of coffee or chocolate. Glancing down, he could see there were no calluses on Adlai's feet. "All my crew wear shirts on deck. We're not some tattered band of pirates

and cutthroats. We sail under the auspices of King George III. We search, seize and destroy the enemies of Crown and Country in the names of God, St. Michael and St. George." Collins gave a small grin. "Sounds all very grand and noble, doesn't it? Letters of Marque and Reprisal always do." He dug in a drawer under the bed and brought out several pairs of shoes and a couple of boots. There was even a pair of thick woolen socks. "Here. I'm hoping one fits. Nothing worse than shoes that hurt or rub."

Adlai nodded. He put on the cleanest and smallest of the shirts; it was still a little big. He drew the socks on and found the pair of shoes that fit him best. He turned in front of the mirror, "Do I meet your approval, Master Captain?"

Collins looked him over, taking in Adlai's way of standing quietly and waiting. The sorrowful slave he had bought had almost vanished. Adlai seemed to have a purpose again and was moving back into what Collins guessed were old patterns. "Hmmm. Just one more thing." He set a tricorn hat, in relatively good condition, on Adlai's head.

Adlai reached a slow hand up to touch it, his nose crinkled and lip curled. "Do I need it, Master Captain?" he asked.

"Once we're at sea and in the sun all the time, you will." Collins could see Adlai hated it. "Don't want you getting sunstruck."

Adlai looked resigned. "I will wear it."

"You only need to when abovedecks."

"What will be my duties for you, Master Captain?" The calm voice never wavered, but there was fear in the blue eyes.

Collins sat down and unlocked his desk, hoping to soothe the fears. He knew where Adlai's mind had gone, as surely as he had seen the glance at the bed. He took out a logbook, a ledger, ink and a quill. "At the auction, they said you were literate?"

Adlai nodded. "English, French, a little Latin for church." At Collins' soft impressed sound, he added, "My master taught me. I kept the household accounts for him."

Collins decided to be honest. "I can barely read and write English. You could be a great help to me." He pushed the books at Adlai. "Your primary responsibility will be taking care of these: the log, the ledger. You will be responsible for dividing shares and making sure the King gets his."

"I will do my best, Master." Adlai leafed through the log. The writing was neat, but with many misspellings. "Your hand is clear," he said.

"Not mine. Tobias kept the log. I simply dictated." Softly, Collins tried the name for the first time. "Adlai."

"If you wish me to be." Many masters changed their slaves' names upon purchase. "It is not heathen, but from the Bible. First Chronicles, chapter twenty-seven, verse twenty-nine. 'Shitrai the Sharonite was in charge of the herds grazing in Sharon. Shaphat son of Adlai was in charge of the herds in the valleys.' It is not common."

Collins nodded. "It suits you. Better than Shitrai or Shaphat anyway."

"It is what I am used to." He didn't react when Collins touched his hair briefly.

"You have the most striking eyes." The blue of them had caught his gaze again and Collins knew he was staring. Between the eyes and the full, springy hair, he was enraptured. He reached one hand out to touch the dark curls.

Adlai looked at the floor and whispered, "My father's eyes." His grief was palpable, from the tight voice to the clenched hands.

Collins hazarded, "Mr. Elijah Goodman?" It explained the sadness he so wanted to ease. It explained a great many things about Adlai. He did not stop touching, but gentled it to a comfort and not an imposition.

"It was never made public, but we all knew. He acknowledged me privately, and was to have made me his heir, had he not died." Adlai held his head level, but his eyes were too shiny, and Collins knew it was time to change the subject.

His own father had been a Dover cooper, with too many sons. One got the house, one got apprenticed, but there had been nothing for him, the third son, not money, nor schooling, nor trade. He could only imagine how Adlai, only son of a man who could not even claim him, must feel to be sold with the estate instead of inheriting it.

"Well ... my men are all well taken care of here. We'll see about your own cut, and I'll gladly share mine with you. I can't promise you won't want for anything, but we all share the burden times when they come." He stood up. "I'm going to make a tour of the ship before it gets dark. You can look over the books."

Adlai nodded, without further words. He lit the oil-lamp against the gathering dusk and set to work, reading the log and making the day's entry. Collins smiled and left the warm lamplight to make his tour.

He returned a couple of hours later, rum in a faint cloud about him. He smiled at Adlai again and started stripping for bed. He set the hat and long coat-like vest aside, unlaced his cuffs and jabot and removed his shirt.

Adlai closed the books, stopped the ink and knelt to help him with his boots. The movement seemed automatic and drew a bigger smile from Collins. Adlai looked up, slowly. "Where will you have me sleep, Master Captain?"

"Only one bed." He gestured to it. "You're welcome to share it. Or you can find hammock or make a pallet and sleep on the floor." Adlai nodded gravely, found two blankets and made himself a bed at the foot of the bunk.

Collins merely watched over the next few days. He'd never owned a slave before, and it had been nearly a year since he'd shared his cabin with another. He found he enjoyed watching Adlai.

Once the seasickness had passed, Adlai had gotten his sea-legs with a will. He was all over the ship, from crow's-nest to bilge, observing and learning. Because of his willingness to work, the crew did not resent his questions.

Matthew Gibbs taught him to shoot the sun. Adlai's calculations were rapid and always accurate, to everyone's surprise but Collins'. On more than one afternoon, Collins saw Tobias teaching Adlai to tie knots. Simple bowlines and hitches at first, then the more complex monkey fists and

turks-heads. Adlai was slower to grasp this, requiring more time, but seemed to enjoy his lessons. Collins was uncertain he wanted Adlai associating with that precious pair. The speed with which Tobias had tumbled into Gibbs' bunk after leaving his was suspicious. Gibbs was not a man he trusted entirely.

Deering taught Adlai to mend sails and Brown showed him how to repair nets. He was clever and worked uncomplainingly. He spent hours over the log, his handwriting meticulous and the details of the day set down perfectly, from what the galley had served to any discipline that had taken place.

Collins noted that Adlai was fastidious. No matter how low water rations ran, he always found a few drops to wash his face each morning. He shaved with sea-water when he had to, but he was always neat, always shaved. He didn't tar himself a pigtail, or, like many of the island sailors, allow his hair to dread up. He claimed a comb from the stores in the hold and his hair lay in the same neat curls it had on the block. Once he had borrowed a mirror and braided it, making half a dozen short, tight braids that lay along his scalp like ropes. Collins loved the look, so Adlai maintained it.

* * * *

Adlai knew why he'd been bought. Captain Collins' predilections were no secret among the crew. Tobias, with all the venom of a scorned favorite, was partial to wild stories told just within Adlai's hearing. Tales of rapine, coercion,

torture and even belying pins came to Adlai's ears during their knot-tying lessons.

He could not reconcile the whispers with what he knew of Collins. The Captain had been unfailingly kind to him, the only exception his instance on the hated hat. Adlai hated hats, wigs and anything that went on his head. He'd had to wear the classic powdered wigs for serving at formal dinners and he'd loathed them from the time he was a child. The only beating he'd ever gotten had been at the age of eight when he'd ripped the wig off his head, thrown it to the ground and stomped it. Master Elijah had not had him whipped by the overseer, like any other slave, but had rather turned Adlai over his own knee and spanked him, like his own ill-behaved child. Hats were to keep the sun off when he had to go outdoors, and they always felt like a lowering, like being cast out to be a field hand. He had never taken to wearing them for fashion.

Collins treated him with respect and seemed to genuinely value his skills in log-keeping, accounting and other clerical work. Even the few kisses the Captain had stolen had been light, almost friendly, with little sensuality beneath them. Adlai gave no credence to Tobias' phantasms.

He worked through his days and spent his nights on a pallet near Collins' bunk. It was not the great house of Elijah Goodman, the one he should have been master of had his father not died before freeing him, but he knew it could have been worse. He could have been sold for field work and made to labor under the Barbados sun until he dropped. He could

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have been sold to one of the port brothels and turned bottom up for a dozen men a night.

The first nights were uneasy. The motion of the ship made sleep difficult and Adlai rose often to sacrifice to Neptune through the porthole of the cabin. When his body calmed, all his dreams remained bad and the underlying tension only grew. Collins hadn't requested him, but Adlai knew the day would come.

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Chapter 2

"Master Captain, is this safe?" Adlai set the hated hat upon his head and looked to the boat being lowered for the trip to the island.

"Nothing's safe, entirely. But we're more likely to walk away alive than not," Collins said. "I'm weary of sausage and biscuit. Real meat will be a nice change." They had dropped anchor well out in the Bay of Tortuga, called the Buccaneer Island, on the far side from the riotous cities and ports. Collins had explained they were just here to do some trading.

Stephan rolled up a barrel of powder from the magazine. Collins handed Adlai a heavy bag and took two for himself. "Can you manage that belt?" he asked, jerking his head at a strip of leather with eight long hunting knives on it.

Adlai set down the bag, slung the belt across his chest and picked the bag back up. It felt full of tiny pebbles. He peeked in to see pounds of small lead balls. It took him a moment to realize he was carrying shot. Climbing down to the boat with it in his hand was a challenge, but he did not slip on the rope ladder.

Deering rowed them to shore and they walked to the largest of the sideless smoking huts. As they drew closer, Adlai saw and smelled the meat that was curing in the smoke. A large, filthy man, gory to the elbows, was sitting before the hut, gutting a great sea turtle.

Adlai whispered, "You are not reassuring, Master Captain." He shifted the brace of knives and took a better grip on the

bag. He could not use any of the blades, but, if needed, he was sure he could club someone with the heavy bag.

The man looked up at their approach, then stood and wiped his bloody hands on his unspeakable trousers. "Collins, ya old dog. What trading this time?"

"Powder, shot, a brace of good knives, real Spanish steel. I need meat and information, Juan."

"Ah, the first, easy. Very fresh turtle, plenty of smoked boar and cattle. Information ... I tell you secrets if you tell me, no?"

Collins nodded for Adlai and Stephan to set their goods down. Adlai was glad to be rid of the twenty pounds of shot. He unslung the knives and set them atop the cask of gunpowder.

"You trade a slave, too?" the boucan-tender asked Collins, eying Adlai. "Your Stephan's free, I know, yes."

Collins scowled. "I don't see any slave here. Adlai is my ship's scribe. Just the shot, knives and powder. What can you give me?"

The man looked over the offerings, muttering in Spanish. "For fifty pound shot, fifty powder, eight knives, hmmm, I give you two barrels pig, one of cow and two pickled turtles."

"And you'll tell me of Captain Thomas Harrison and the *Kestrel*," Collins added, obviously wanting to be sure the deal was understood.

"Captain Harrison was here three months ago. Traded, sailed around, anchored and caroused away all his money. What else does a pirate do?" Juan shrugged and nibbled on the end of his mustache. "He gave bad powder, too, all wet."

"Aye, indeed. That would be Thomas. Never trades fairly when he can cheat."

"A pretty boy, long hair and big dark eyes, with him, and the usual crew. Said he was hunting off Hispaniola for a while."

Collins took out a couple of doubloons, gold in the afternoon sun, and held them barely out of the boucanier's reach, seeming to consider. "And that piece of information is exactly what I wanted to hear. Thank you." He pressed the doubloons on Juan.

The trader beamed and gestured to several barrels. "Those are pig." He gestured to the ones beside a more distant hut. "Those cattle. Take two and one." He vanished into the brush for a moment and returned with a pair of small casks. "Turtles."

Stephan was already selecting the tightest and heaviest of the shoddily-made barrels. Adlai joined him in his work. They rolled the barrels to the beach where Deering helped them load them into the longboat.

Collins joined them in a moment, carrying the casks of turtle, moving rapidly, but not quite running. "Shove off and quickly. Juan will do us no harm, but there are other eyes watching us this day, and some have seen I have coin as well as weapons."

Deering and Stephan got them launched and pulled hard at the oars. Adlai looked up to see several more the filthy men emerging from the jungle near the beach. They argued with Juan and Adlai watched in horror as Juan shot one out of

hand. Another one ran his long knife casually into Juan's stomach, with no more thought than sheathing it.

Most of them set to stealing his goods, the recently traded-for shot and doubloons. But one, laughing, stripped Juan and began skinning him.

"Must have spent time with the Caribs," Collins said. "I expect he'll smoke poor Juan in his own boucan, thinking it a grand joke. The Caribs have that sort of sense of humor and a taste for man." He looked thoughtful for a moment, and then told Adlai, "Remember his face. We won't be trading with him. There will be no guarantee his pig had four feet. And unlike some captains, I am fussy about that nicety."

Adlai stared. "Master Captain!" He was revolted but did not vomit over the side as he desired to do. "You speak of heathen cannibalism so plainly, as if it is nothing." He did not stop watching. The other men fell on the turtles and continued where Juan had left off. The Carib-influenced sailor had disemboweled Juan and was setting his organs carefully on a piece of sailcloth.

Collins laid a hand on his shoulder and said, leaning in until his breath stroked Adlai's ear, "It is nothing. Life is nothing, except to the man who is living it or the ones who care about him. This life changes men. Some become decent, some become savages. And worst of all, are the savages who look decent."

* * * *

The *Kestrel* anchored just off Hispaniola. Thomas Harrison sat on the forecastle, pretending to write in his log. He was watching Samir instead.

His boy was in the crow's nest, watching for sails. They needed to take a ship. The crew was restless and grumbling of mutiny. After Nathaniel's betrayal, he would not tolerate such talk. Action would be the best cure.

Samir braided his long black hair every morning and wore it coiled around his neck like the noose that awaited all of them should they be taken. Some of the crew muttered that it was bad luck, tempting fate. Others whispered that the Moroccan boy himself was bad luck, too woman-like, almost as bad as sailing on Friday or killing a stormy petrel. He knew they all whispered he was completely charmed, absolutely in the boy's thrall. Harrison liked the look, although he'd barely admit to himself why; it made Samir look like a collared pet. He'd seen paintings of Eastern kings hunting with leopards. That was how Samir made him feel, like a king with his own deadly leopard.

He fingered a scratch on his arm. His little leopard had claws. He smiled and watched the boy stretch, then returned to his log book.

Last year, they'd braved the Atlantic in the *Kestrel*, hearing there were rich pickings on the coast of Spain and Africa. They'd had a fine time, Spanish and French ships coming under their guns until the *Kestrel* could hold no more. With pockets nigh bursting, they'd tarried in Tripoli, tasting the food and the wine and the company. He'd lost several crewmen to the opium dens and still more to dancing girls

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with eyes like gazelles and knives faster than a Spaniard's lying tongue.

The wine was strong that night, and she had been a redhead. Harrison had seen few redheads in his life and almost none along the African coast, so he took the chance to learn where her freckles ended. They hadn't, and her luminous Irish skin had been a rare treat among the pretty brown girls that had been much more common. It was foolish to walk back to the ship alone, but his mind was still in bed with Speckled Molly, what part wasn't clouded with Spanish wine.

The golden-skinned youth wrapped in a waterfall of black hair, a black silk loincloth and little else had fallen into step beside him. The boy's kohled eyes drew him as did the long, shapely nose, the lithe body and the sweet voice.

"Handsome sailor is looking for company, no?" The youth had pressed too close and Harrison could smell the myrrh and sandalwood in his hair.

Ordinarily, Harrison would have said no after a visit to a whore. But the Spyglass was already extending and he was interested. It had been good wine.

He smiled at the boy. "Yes." He ran a hand over the long hair and delicate face. "Do you have a place we can go?"

The youth nodded and guided him to a very dark alleyway between warehouses near the docks. He pressed Harrison against the wall, his body slim and warm. His kiss was sweet and slow, and almost good enough to distract Harrison from the busy fingers. Almost, but not quite.

"Lying cutpurse." He seized the boy's wrist and shoved him against the opposite wall. "You would take all my money and give me nothing save a kiss."

The thief looked scared. "I give more. Anything you want. Only not go to law." When Harrison tightened his grip, the boy added, "Not break anything!"

The wine had him feeling too good to get into a fight. Harrison loosened his hold and looked the lad over. "You're smart. You're bold. I can use a boy like you on my ship."

"Samir is willing. Sailing is not jail."

Harrison nodded. "Samir. Pretty name for a pretty boy. I'm Thomas Harrison of the free ship *Kestrel*. You'll share my bunk, work hard, and learn to sail a ship. And if the law catches us, you hang right beside me." There was gold in his smile that Samir hadn't noticed. He knew it made him look wolfish and cruel.

Samir nodded and went. Harrison never let go of his wrist. They took a dory out to the ship which lay at anchor. It was almost deserted. The drowsing watchman woke enough to greet the captain.

Samir stared at the plundered finery that littered Harrison's cabin: a gimbaled bed with fine wool blankets, silken draperies, piles of coin and jewels heaped in the corners, good pewter plates and silver cutlery.

"Need a wife," Samir giggled, picking his way through the mess. A bolt of scarlet silk caught his eye.

"I don't need a wife anymore. I have a new cabin boy." He caught Samir around the waist and pulled him close. "Am I still so handsome now that you're not trying to lift my purse?"

Samir looked him over, and Harrison knew the face he was seeing: shaggy dark hair and brows, dark eyes. His nose was sharp, with a hump as if it had been broken once and his full mouth added a deceptive softness to his square jaw. His features were handsome by any measure, and Harrison knew it. He used his looks often enough. Samir molded himself to Harrison's body, nodding.

"Very handsome. I make good on my promise?"

Harrison shed the black velvet coat, hanging it on a chair. He sprawled on the bunk. "I'll be a disappointed captain if you don't. And you don't want to be on your Captain's bad side."

Samir shed the loincloth, revealing a modest and circumcised endowment. Someone had sprinkled gold dust through his oiled black curls. His movements were slow, graceful, almost as if he'd been into the opium as well. His big eyes were lined in kohl, making them look even larger.

Harrison grew quite hard at that enticing sight. "Come here, boy," he growled. He drew the slim youth to him and lowered his mouth to taste Samir's cock. Samir tasted of spices and smoke; all the mysteries of the East rolled over Harrison's tongue, fuddling his brain. The Spyglass was extended, his sails were full and there was no turning from his plotted course.

He sucked just at the head until Samir exploded over his tongue. Harrison pulled Samir down for a long, searching kiss, the salt-spice of the youth still on his mouth. "On the bunk, little one. I'm going to plunder you properly."

Then Samir was in his bunk, the lamplight gleaming on gold doubloons and golden skin equally. Harrison tasted him,

neck and shoulders and back, and then the sweet dimples above his perfect rear. He stroked the clear, smooth skin and ran one gentle finger down the cleft—a soft juicy peach—just waiting for him.

There was scented oil nearby, a sweet unguent in a plundered alabaster jar. He'd claimed it, thinking of his lost 'Thaniel, wanting it to be a special gift for their reunion. The jar had been sealed for four years. He knew he would never have Nathaniel Collins again. Somehow, it seemed fitting to use the perfect oil on this beautiful boy instead.

He got some oil on his fingers and rubbed it along the cleft. More went on his prick and more on the fingers he pressed into Samir.

The young man writhed under his touch, gasping softly as he was entered. He relaxed into Harrison's fingers, breathing with the intrusion.

"Tight. So tight. You're no whore. You tease and promise and steal, don't you, Samir?"

Samir nodded. "No virgin. But only let men when I have to."

"No choice tonight, pretty." Harrison slid in, delighted by the tightness, the heat, the feel of Samir beneath him. "You," he said, kissing Samir's neck, "are perfect. Beautiful, ruthless, greedy and a sweet tumble besides." He punctuated each word with a kiss. "You'll be a fine addition to my ship."

Samir said nothing, merely gasped as Harrison took him. The sound was sweet and pierced the comfortable fog of Harrison's night. He took the boy, never faltering or slowing. Drunk, he was. Drunk enough to last forever, he hoped. Not

drunk enough to pass out. Harrison wasn't rough or cruel, as he was sometimes with too much of the Rhenish in him. He pounded steadily but not harshly. Samir tipped his face back and Harrison kissed him, tasting the carmined lips, looking down into the kohled eyes.

Forever, he'd hoped, and forever it seemed to take, Samir tight around him, his eyes as dark as the sea outside. At length, Harrison reached completion, his arms trembling under the strain of his own weight. He had just enough presence of mind to roll off the boy before falling asleep.

Harrison woke to find Samir putting his cabin in order. The boy had found a pair of soft cotton trousers and a billowy shirt. He looked even more appetizing by the morning light, dressed but barefoot.

Harrison sat up and the wine made itself known in his head and the back of his throat. He groaned. Samir came to him with a cup of something so foul-smelling it turned his stomach.

"Drink, Captain. Make you feel better." The boy's smile helped, but the stench was not abating.

"It's making me sick," he growled through clenched teeth, wondering if he could find the pot before he had to clean the deck.

"Drink." Samir was adamant and pressed the pewter cup on him.

Harrison drank, deciding even if it made him spew, it was worth it to stop the collywobbles in his stomach. Amazingly, the revolting concoction stayed down. To his even greater surprise, he felt better in a few minutes.

Samir kissed him. "Better, yes?"

"Much better." Harrison pulled Samir into the bunk and kissed him deeply. "You're a man of many talents, my pet." He sat up and began hunting for his pants before changing his mind. "The crew will drift aboard over the course of the day. We sail at sunset with the tide."

"Where? One place is like another." Samir shrugged. "What difference to a boy with no money, no family and only good looks?"

"We're going home to Georgia and then Aruba and Barbados and Jamaica. I don't want to get caught by hurricanes."

Samir's eyes got big. "New World? All the way across the ocean?"

Harrison nodded and then tumbled the boy again, making sure Samir peaked during the act.

He'd never regretted bringing Samir aboard. The young man's sharp eyes had brought them several prizes once he was in the crow's nest. Harrison adored having Samir in his bed.

Harrison turned back to the log he was trying to write. He scrawled an entry of pure mundania: "Anchored at Hispaniola. Restocked, charting course." He knew what course he truly wanted to chart. One that led him straight back to Nathaniel Collins.

Nathaniel Collins. The very name made him hard with wanting, made him ache in ways he had no name for, made him want to kill, to splash in fresh-shed blood until he was as red as the heathen Indians of his native Georgia. No man had

ever moved him so. His sweet Samir, on whom he wanted to lavish the treasures of the whole ocean, never sparked the same hot and violent desires.

Now, Collins had taken a slave. A lovely boy, one he was obviously infatuated with. Harrison scowled. He hoped the pitch-black bastard cut Collins' balls off in his sleep for buying him. He hoped the boy liked girls and hated Collins for wanting him. He wanted to see the slave thrown to the waves. He wanted to know what Collins was like in bed now.

There was always another day. He would take Collins' prize. Maybe he should let Samir have the slave. His pretty boy had a streak of purely Oriental cruelty in him. He had whispered about how ugly the slave—what was his name?—was, except his eyes.

Those eyes had struck everyone on the auction block, but only Nathaniel had taken them home. Samir coveted those blue eyes like some men coveted sapphires, and Harrison knew he would pickle them in a jar of rum and keep them as a trophy.

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Chapter 3

Collins mostly ran rum between the islands and took the occasional Spanish or French ship. Life aboard ship was quiet most days. The size of the fighting crew meant that there were more than enough hands to cover all the routine work.

MacTaggart had taught Adlai to shred rotted ropes for oakum, and how to work as a caulker. Adlai didn't care as much for this as he did for other work. The tar left him feeling fouled after a stint patching the leaks between boards.

He was more interested in the fact that Collins worked as hard as any of the crew, even to swabbing the decks. One evening, he turned down the Captain's bunk and made his own pallet. Collins was looking a bit sore, having been on the bilge pumps all day. He'd gone over the side for a brief swim and had climbed back aboard, dripping. Adlai helped him out of his shirt, dried him and then rubbed at his shoulders using the effleurage movement cure, as he had been taught to do on Master Elijah after long days.

"That's good, pet." Collins relaxed under his hands.

"You work hard. Too hard for a captain," Adlai said. The warm skin of his captain felt nice.

"The crew has to see me work. The *Horizon* is mine. If I don't love her and treat her proper, why should they? I'm no spoiled lord to sit in comfort while my crew labors. That's for honest sailors." He spat the last words. "Harrison named me captain. My crew is what keeps me captain. If I look weak, if I

look lazy, they will not follow me and will elect a new captain. If I am too harsh, I can be beaten, as any of the crew."

"You? Who would set the whip to their captain?"

"Stephan would, most likely, were I a petty tyrant who bullied my men, took my ease and claimed all the best for myself without sharing it." He looked back and stroked Adlai's face. "So I work as hard as any other sailor. And I'm proud of you for doing the same. Some captains let their favorites be idle pets."

"I am no pet, Master Captain. You said I was to be one more of the crew. So I learn and I work." He pressed at a tough spot in Collins' neck.

"And you are a Barbados witch with secret magic in your hands to make me feel like a new man." This time, Collins stole a kiss of his cheek, teasing.

"It is the new thing in England and France, Master Captain. We were on Barbados, but Master Elijah said it was no reason to be backward. It is perfectly scientific." Adlai was shaking a little. An accusation of witchcraft, even in jest, still carried an ugly history of hangings. Among the slaves, they had their own ways of dealing with witches, none pleasant. Adlai changed the subject. "What is our course, Master Captain?"

"Nassau. We've had some good runs and I think it's time to spend some money before the crew gets too restless. I caught Tobias and Peg at each other over a game of cards. I think the Code may have been right in prohibiting gambling on board the ship."

Adlai knelt to get his boots and just stayed there, looking up at him.

Collins caught his breath. "You need not always sleep on the floor, pet," he said softly, tracing the neat braids that lay along Adlai's scalp.

Adlai saw the desire on Collins' face and his smile vanished. "As my master commands."

"It is not a command. It's an offer. I'll never command you to my bed, Adlai. I only take those who want to be there." Collins stroked Adlai's hair once more and watched him curl up on his pallet.

* * * *

On Nassau, Collins berthed and gave the crew shore leave. He left a rotating skeleton crew a bit larger than usual because of the *Kestrel* being docked there as well, and took Adlai ashore. After the night in the cabin, he had resolved he would have a whore—a black boy—the minute they berthed. He would never force Adlai, but at the moment he wanted him badly. So badly that any substitute would suffice. He changed his mind half a dozen times on the matter, the need relaxing but never vanishing entirely, but in the end decided against the whore.

Collins knew—just knew—he was asking for trouble taking Adlai into a tavern with him. It didn't matter. He had to do it someday and better now than later. They passed the Black Galleon. Collins knew it was Harrison's favorite. The Salt Spray was a better choice.

They took a table in a back corner. "House special, with dinner," Collins told the barmaid. The stew was a little greasy but the bread was fresh. Adlai sipped his beer and ate neatly.

"Lovely manners," came an all-too-familiar voice, mocking as Adlai caught an errant drip of stew with his napkin. Harrison leaned on the table with one arm. The slim Moroccan boy slunk along in his shadow. "Better suited to a garden party than privateering."

Collins looked at the youth. "Breaking your own iron rule, Thomas? No slaves, you always said. And here you are with a beardless slaveboy. A eunuch maybe?"

"Samir isn't a slave or a eunuch. Nor beardless. He shaves closely as his mustachios looked ridiculous." He stroked the boy's long hair. "I caught him cutting my purse in Gibraltar. I offered to take him aboard or turn him over to the authorities. He picked sailing."

Samir lifted his chin and sneered at the other two. "I am look-out and Captain's prize and old enough to be both. I am doing well for myself."

Collins shrugged. "Sounds like scut-work from every quarter. Enjoy your life of piracy, Samir." Adlai said nothing, as was fitting when free men spoke.

Samir ran long, lacquered fingernails over Adlai's cheek. "Pretty eyes. Make pretty earrings for Samir, no?"

Collins caught his wrist. "No. Get your hands off Adlai." Samir obliged with a laugh. "Don't you touch him again."

Harrison stroked Samir's hair again. "He's a little wild. Possessive, aren't you?"

"I should be. I learned from the best. Isn't that what you always told me?" Collins gave an ugly smile.

Harrison's eyes narrowed but he sat anyway, uninvited, and gestured for four drinks. "Indeed I did. So, are pickings good?"

"Not bad. Yours?"

"Adequate. Not so good I can spend five hundred on a single ornament, but not bad."

Harrison was an incurable gossip and braggart. His tongue was hinged in the middle and wagged at both ends. He told all the news he'd had and, after the fourth beer, spoke of the Spanish galleon he'd taken a month earlier.

Adlai finished his food and the beer Collins had bought. He didn't touch the one Harrison bought him. He scooted infinitesimally closer to Collins. Neither of them liked the way Samir kept looking at Adlai.

Harrison ordered another round of drinks, not noticing or caring that Adlai hadn't touched the first. He drank deeply and looked at Collins.

"Damn shame we couldn't work it out, 'Thaniel." There was a wistfulness in Harrison's tone that Collins could see startled Adlai and made Samir scowl. Collins kept his own face neutral. "I'm game for another go. A partnership if you like. Two ships are more powerful than one and safer."

"You're a colonial fool, Thomas, if you think I want anything to do with you," Collins sneered. "Keep your dreams of a fleet and leave me out of them. I'll go to Hell in my own way, not splitting the take 80-20 and letting you dictate to me."

"Stubborn English bastard. Full share of all takes to every crewman on any ship." He looked at Adlai. "Including the chained ones."

In French, Adlai said, "I am not to be bought for any such price from Master Collins."

Harrison understood and laughed. "Smart and spiteful. You're lucky he doesn't cut your throat in your sleep, since you are bunking with him." It was not a question.

Adlai did not scowl. He kept his face perfectly blank. Collins saw the wisdom of him not telling the enemy where he slept or did not sleep.

Collins seized Harrison's jabot and dragged his face up close. "Who I bunk with is no longer your concern." He slammed Harrison against the high wooden back of the booth, and let him slide back into his seat.

Harrison laughed again. "You do miss me, 'Thaniel." He stroked Samir's long hair, an old gesture, one Collins recognized as soothing himself. It didn't help enough and he turned vicious. "I wouldn't have you back. Not a lazy, dull lover like you, who lies dead as month-old mutton. Not after Samir."

"Maybe if you weren't selfish and dull yourself, you'd have found me more interesting." Collins knew he was being baited but couldn't resist returning it. "I hear Samir is quite good. In fact, I hear you spend so much time abed with your sweet ganymede, that Peter Ringrose runs the ship and takes prizes without telling you."

Collins took another drink. "The wonder of it is that the *Kestrel* can take a ship at all, with half the crew bugging the

other half all the day, and then praying to the bald bishop all night."

Collins had forgotten exactly how mean of a drunk Harrison was. At the bottom of a third mug himself, he missed the warning signs of the impending explosion in the powder magazine of Harrison's temper.

"Were it not for the barnacles and seaweed, the *Kestrel* would be sinking, her hull wooden lacework. 'Tis only the parasites holding her together as the crew exchange body lice. Is it true your helmsman lost his eye trying to fornicate with a seagull?" Collins took another drink before adding a final jeer. "I well remember the cook having to wash any supper eels twice, as they'd always been up someone's arse."

Adlai's hand shot out and froze one of Samir's motions in mid-movement. A single severed braid of his hair was in Samir's fist. Still in French, Adlai said "My master has said you do not touch his property."

Samir simply looked at him. Adlai repeated himself, in English, and rapped Samir's wrist on the table to make him drop the braid.

Samir gave a nasty laugh. "I obey my Captain, not yours, slave."

This was too much for Collins. He stood and reached across the table, trying for Samir's long braid. The beer sang in his head, making him want to fight. He wanted to pound the beautiful face until it stopped laughing, until Samir was as ugly outside as inside.

Harrison sprang to his feet and blocked Collins' punch. "That is my boy. You are no longer quartermaster to give discipline to my crew and so you do not touch him."

"Teach him to keep his hands from what is not his," Collins snarled. "Were I still in charge of discipline, he would be taking lashes for assaulting a crewman."

"You always were a harsh one. That was a prank, not an assault. He meant no harm by it."

Samir's expression left Collins doubting that statement. Adlai tugged at his sleeve, urging him to sit down.

"Please. I am not hurt, Master Captain." Adlai gritted his teeth and stroked Collins' hand. Collins smiled down at him, knowing Adlai was trying to avert the conflict, but his own face was pure loathing when he turned it back to his rival.

"So then. What would be fair payment for a lock of slave boy's hair?" Harrison asked. "The dinner tab?" He tossed down the last of his drink.

Collins smirked. A free meal and an expression of Adlai's feelings for him: it wasn't going to be a wasted evening after all. "It's yours."

Harrison caught him by the coat and drew him up close. "In earlier days, I'd have kissed that look off your face. Or slapped it away. Now, I say, if you lay hands on my Samir again, it's your blood." He drained Adlai's untouched beer. "You know, I don't think I will pay. I think you should cover it all, as payment for your insults."

"I won't pay for you." Collins gave Samir a derisive glare. "Or your Barbary gutter rat."

Harrison's sneer was ugly. "And I won't pay for the drinks for you or your colored catamite." He leaned across the table. "You can tell me, 'Thaniel. Is his ass pink, like an ape's, or black as the rest of him?"

This time Collins hauled the mocking Harrison from the booth and slammed him hard onto the table. Harrison was drunk enough to laugh. He caught the crockery mug before Collins could smash it over his face and shoved Collins off of him.

"Draw then, if you're man enough," he laughed.

Seeing the distress on the barmaid's face and the way the other patrons hugged their plates and drinks, Collins straightened his clothes and said, "Outside."

"Indeed," Harrison boomed. Heads turned and the whole tavern heard. "Let us go outside and you can defend the honor of a slave you bought to keep from the brothels. Defend the honor of your coal black whore." He followed Collins out, still loud, and snarled at Adlai as he passed, "Better one man's whore than anyone who has a tuppence?"

Adlai rose from his seat, his eyes cold. Quietly, calmly, but in a way that carried to all listening ears, he said, in his flawless French, "I am no man's whore."

Harrison spat at him. "You're right. Whores get paid."

Collins hated the laughter that greeted this, as if Harrison had made a rare joke. He stripped off his coat and pulled Adlai aside once they were out of the tavern. "If I fall, don't let him take you."

Adlai nodded. "I shall run. Stephan will care for me."

Collins nodded and stroked his hair and face. Adlai did not pull away under the touch. "My Adlai," Collins whispered.

Harrison shrugged out of his coat and handed it to Samir along with his hat. "Little one, if I win, you shall have the ugly slave's beautiful eyes, like diamonds from the head of a toad. If I fall, all in my cabin is yours. Live as you like."

Samir stretched up and kissed Harrison, despite the fact they were on a public street. "My captain will win."

Harrison's sword was a thin rapier, more cultured than Collins had expected. Collins drew his own and found his footing on the slimy cobbles of the back street. He'd watched his former captain fight many times. Harrison was fast and ruthless. Collins saluted.

Harrison sneered. "Come for me then, my 'Thaniel. Come and take my blood to wash your black whore's honor. Do you think rubbing black with red will make it white as the priests say?"

He parried Collins' first blow. The second came low and he blocked that, too. "And that's all the playing I'm in the mood for, my little ganymede." He attacked hard, but the drink slowed him, making him clumsy.

Collins parried him easily, and stepped back out of the way. He would make Harrison come for him, exhaust himself with pursuit and attack. When Harrison closed, a wicked jab of his rapier coming in low but ending high, Collins parried and stepped out of the way again.

This time, he sliced Harrison's sleeve as the bulkier man staggered past, off balance. Then he saluted again, and engaged with a will. Back and forth, up street and down alley,

they harried each other until the stone walls rang with the clash of steel.

Collins gasped as Harrison jabbed him in the shoulder. The blood ran dark against the indigo of his shirt, black in the chancy lamplight of the street. The gasp turned to a growl as he went on the attack.

His plan forgotten in his pain and anger, he lashed at Harrison, the tip of his rapier a silver blur. Collins sneered as he fought, knowing he was more sober and beginning to suspect he might be his former captain's equal in this skill.

Harrison, on the defensive, tried regaining his initiative. He could not. Collins' furious sword-work kept him moving, and he was no longer so young as he had been nor was the beer doing anything good for him. He parried without riposting, and dodged without recovering. He was tiring fast and it showed in his work.

Harrison lunged in. A lucky hit sent his sword into Collins' leg. Collins yelled and slashed wildly, laying the side of Harrison's face open and stabbing him in the sword arm. Samir and Adlai cried out simultaneously.

Collins shoved Harrison out of reach and pulled the rapier from his leg. He spat in Harrison's direction. "You're not worth killing." He took both swords and gestured for Adlai to help him back to the ship.

He heard Harrison spitting oaths behind him, and Samir's voice trying to get Harrison to calm himself and come along to the ship. Collins leaned heavily on Adlai and ignored the pair.

* * * *

Once aboard the ship, Adlai stripped his captain out of his shirt and pants and washed Collins' wounds, quiet and gentle as always. He did not flinch when Collins stroked his hair, trailing fingers over where the Moroccan boy had cut it. That was minor. He had nightmares enough from this night. The song of metal on metal would haunt his dreams for a long time, punctuated with Collins' gasp.

"I'm sorry you had to hear all that."

"Master Captain, there are those who believe because my skin is the color of an ox, that I have no more feeling than one, sensitive only to the grossest pains and pleasures."

"I know better." Collins winced when Adlai poured rum into the sword cut on his leg.

"You have always treated me as a man." Adlai bent close and pressed his cheek to the hand he had just washed clean of blood. "And I have been well pleased to be one of your crew."

Collins stroked the soft cheek, feeling the rough growth of the day's beard. Adlai did not press into him but smiled.

"A moment only." Adlai went to the dish where several pieces of cloth were soaking in more rum. He pressed one to Collins' shoulder where Harrison's rapier had taken him. He bound it tightly with a strip of cloth.

"You're good at this," Collins observed.

"Thank you, Master Captain." Adlai ventured no more. He did not wish to speak of the granny women who had taught him to heal whip cuts, how to bandage someone and what herbs would bring a quick death or one with convulsions and

pain. Instead, he concentrated on Collins' wounds. Wounds his master had taken in defense of him. The leg cut was deep, but clean, and he bandaged it as well.

Collins had appropriated the rest of the rum for drinking. Adlai did not begrudge him the pain relief. He only hoped Samir was working twice as hard and to no avail. He wanted the other captain to bleed out under his vicious little one's hands.

Finally, Collins was completely bandaged. Adlai could not resist kissing his cheek, gratitude and affection well evident. There was no desire in it.

Collins pulled Adlai close and kissed him full on the lips. Adlai opened to Collins' tongue but did not respond beyond that. He knew his captain had had much to drink. He knew Collins desired him, and felt a bit guilty for enticing him.

He smiled gently, almost indulgently, when Collins let him go. "To bed with you now, Master Captain. You have had much to drink, replacing your lost blood with rum and beer." He helped Collins out of the chair and guided the tall man to his bunk, clearly no stranger to dealing with drunkenness. Collins dropped heavily to it and Adlai knelt to remove his boots.

Collins smiled down at him and drew him up for another passionate kiss. Adlai felt himself rise, and Collins' hand slide down to meet him.

"Would you peril our very souls?" he whispered, his mind and mouth saying one thing and his body another. "Would you damn us both for mere idle pleasure?"

Collins drew him close, touching his hair, his face, as if he'd never truly seen Adlai before. "Damned a thousand times over already as a thief and a killer and a sodomite. What's one more sin on my soul?" He kissed Adlai again.

Adlai shuddered under the kiss. He did not return it. When Collins cupped his crotch, he simply looked away. Harrison's words from the tavern rang in his ears: "better one man's whore," so he did not resist. He was hard under his captain's hand, but would not thrust against him.

"Mmmm..." Collins purred, his voice thick with drink. "Not going to have to force you. Good. You'll ask for it when you're ready." He stroked Adlai through the good cotton of his pants.

"It is not for me to ask for such—" Adlai broke off, unsure if he wanted to say "vileness" or "delights." Instead, he tried to rise. "The blood will set in your shirt if I do not wash it."

"It's ruined anyway." Collins kissed him again, his hand making a slow, determined invasion of Adlai's trousers.

"It is not force when I already belong to you," Adlai said. "Whether I am willing or no." He opened to the next kiss, letting Collins enter his mouth. He hated the feel of the man's tongue, the sickly taste of rum and beer and the heat of his breath. He did not bite. It was not his place. But neither did he participate, clinging like a wanton and returning the kiss with feigned delight.

Collins was gasping when they parted. Adlai shook under his hands, not enjoying himself. Collins pulled and tilted his head to look at Adlai.

"You taste as good as I imagined. But do I face mutiny already?" he asked, running a thumb over Adlai's unresponsive mouth.

Adlai turned his face again. "I am no innocent, Master Captain. But neither am I a sodomite to enjoy such things. I will not hinder your pleasures."

"You're going to be many things once I get done with you. But it will all be willingly." Collins stroked Adlai's face and turned him back, looking into his odd blue eyes.

"No let nor hindrance, Master Captain. I know to whom I belong." Adlai's face was blank and calm.

Collins backed off a little, and Adlai was thankful he was still sober enough to do so. Collins looked at him. Adlai saw the wanting, but, lurking under that, he saw Collins' desire for him to ask. Adlai was not totally revolted, but it would take much more persuasion.

Adlai rose from the bunk, relieved to be let go, and set to work putting the cabin back in proper order. He rinsed the blood from the indigo shirt, and set it aside to mend. The grey trousers got the same treatment. He put away the bowls and bottles and cloth. He made a proper entry in the ship's log, noting the wounds and the provocation. Finally, at a loss for more work, he spread his own blankets.

Collins simply watched, stroking himself under the blanket. Adlai was well enough aware of his actions, but stayed silent, and began lowering the lamps for bed. Collins shoved the blanket away and watched him move through the cabin, turning each light in turn.

At last only the full moon, shining in the port, lit the cabin. Adlai had not looked at the bunk since Collins had begun. He sat on his own blanket for a few moments, praying silently and then lay down.

"Adlai," Collins whispered.

He sat up. "Yes, Master Captain?"

"Come here."

Adlai rose and walked to the side of the bunk. He was not surprised when Collins stroked his crotch once he was close enough. He didn't move, and to his shame he was still visibly hard.

Collins took his hands off his own cock and reached up to open Adlai's breeches. Adlai looked away as Collins wrapped one long hand around the nicely sized cock that was revealed. It stood out from the tight dark curls at his body, the head half-out from under the foreskin.

Collins smiled, despite Adlai's standing stock still and breathing hard. He stroked expertly. "You have a beautiful cock."

Adlai hissed at his master's touch. This was too good. It could only end badly, in pain, tears, hatred, beatings, sale and hellfire. "Please, Master Captain."

"Please what, pet?"

Adlai shuddered. "I am afraid."

"I'm not hurting you." Collins trailed his fingers down the shaft and brushed them over Adlai's belly.

"Not yet. I know the ways of men. They hurt." Adlai's voice was filled with unpleasant memories. Had Collins not been drinking so much, he would have understood what it was for

the master's spoiled favorite to be tossed among the rough men of the field and distillery.

Collins sat up and scooted around until he could get his mouth on Adlai. He tasted, slowly, drawing him in, inch by inch. After a moment, he pulled back. "Does that hurt?"

"No, Master Captain," Adlai said. "But when you turn me over the bench, it will."

Collins ran a slow hand up his chest to stroke his face. "And if I let you turn me over?" he asked, his voice very quiet in the dark.

"Then you will beat me to death for your amusement afterward, that I would not grow proud for having done so." Adlai knew the words were true of most men, but had begun to wonder about Collins.

"Never. I like you much better alive."

Adlai gripped the bedpost with one hand. "Do with me as you please, Master Captain."

Collins began sucking him again, deeply, his tongue busy and teasing along the shaft, under the foreskin and on the head. He stroked himself at the same time, obviously enjoying this.

Adlai never moved, his eyes shut and his breathing as regular as sleep. He wanted to hate this and could not. He wanted to loathe Collins for doing it. But he knew all Collins had done had been out of affection and this was one more way Collins was demonstrating it. Katrina, the upstairs maid, had done the same for him once, but her distaste for the act had shown through, unlike Collins' zest. Adlai gripped the bedpost tighter.

Collins took Adlai's hand and guided it to his own erection, his mouth never slowing. He demonstrated the motion he wanted. Adlai complied, his movements slow and awkward but very careful. His breathing quickened. At Collins' soft moan of pleasure, Adlai came, suddenly with a small cry.

Collins swallowed the issue, sucking just a little more, seeming reluctant to let him go so quickly. He frowned with disappointment when Adlai sagged, weak-kneed from pleasure and then clutched the bedpost with both hands. Adlai slipped down the bedpost, watching as Collins used his own hand to finish himself, before he sat on the deck beside the bunk. Collins wiped off with a rag and burrowed back under the blanket.

"Damned now," Adlai whispered. "Damned for a moment's pleasure."

Collins gave him a half-smile, white in the darkness. "In good company."

Adlai squared his shoulders and rose to sit on the edge of the bed. "Very well, Master Captain. If I am to be your catamite, I will do it well. If this life is to be all the good I shall have, then I will enjoy it."

"Join me. I'm chilled." The pain and drink bled into Collins' voice.

Adlai crawled into the bunk, still a bit stiff and nervous. He lay beside Collins, careful not touch his captain's wounds. Collins pressed close, although the night was warm. Adlai allowed himself to relax, to lie next to his master's body without guilt or worry.

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Chapter 4

Adlai woke before dawn, the body next to him an oven, a furnace in its heat. He laid one hand on Collins' sweating forehead for a moment before he rose and poured water. He wiped Collins down with a cool wet cloth and then pulled on his shirt to go topside.

He found Stephan at the wheel, taking the last watch before day. He swallowed hard and approached the big man. "Is there a leech aboard?"

Stephan nodded and gestured to a young man climbing the rigging with a hammer slung in his belt. "Brendan!"

The man looked down. "Aye?"

"Come on down. Adlai needs you for a nonce."

"Aye." Brendan came down, lighting on his feet on the deck. Adlai looked him over, from tarred pigtail to van dyke beard.

"You're the carpenter. I need the ship's surgeon. The Captain was injured in port and is feverish."

"Surgeon's dead. I'm the best we can do." He pushed Adlai toward the cabin, his Irish lilt almost ominous as he ordered. "Speak soft and fast."

"There was a duel. I cleaned his wounds with water and rum and bound them."

Brendan nodded. "Keep silent. Stephan is trustworthy. The rest of the crew is not. The Captain is a good man, but they'll mutiny at weakness."

Adlai nodded. "I do not wish to become common property." Adlai brought water and watched anxiously as Brendan looked over his work. "It was another captain, Thomas the name I heard. Very handsome, but I could not tell if he loves or hates my master."

"Aye, Thomas Harrison is the name. And he loved, once." Brendan unbound the wounds, and found the bleeding had stopped. The one in the shoulder was hot, red and streaky. Pus showed at the corners.

"Please, help him," Adlai said, his own words urgent.

"Wash this and pass it through the lamp flame until it glows," Brendan said handing over a small knife. "He's gathered an infection and we must free the poisons from the wound so they do not devour him."

Adlai did as he was told, and held Collins while Brendan lanced the wound with the hot knife. The scream made him close his eyes and turn away.

"He'll bleed a while yet. Don't bind it until it slows. Just wipe it off. Pour stronger whiskey in it. Rum has too much sugar. It sometimes feeds the animalcules that cause the disease." Brendan left to go topside.

Adlai sat beside the bunk, blotting away the fouled blood that ran freely from the wound, and bathing Collins' forehead and torso with the wet cloth. Dawn came. Stephan brought breakfast and still Collins burned like a forge.

The morning grew short, and the patch of sunlight from the porthole moved across the floor. The bleeding stopped at last, the fever broke and Collins slept. It was late afternoon when he awakened.

He smiled at Adlai, who had not moved from his chair.
"Thank you."

Adlai returned the smile, pleased to see Collins looking better. "Are you well?"

"Better." He touched his shoulder gingerly. "The whole day has been lost in a fog. Brendan worked on me?" Adlai nodded. "I remember that part. You were there." Adlai nodded again. Collins sighed. "Not the first time Thomas has nearly killed me."

Adlai rose and got a cloth for a bandage and a fresh shirt. After he wiped Collins' face, he bandaged his shoulder and helped him into the shirt.

"Tell me as we eat? You are not to get out of bed, said the man who tended you. I will fetch food." He made to leave for the galley.

"Let me drink first." Collins sounded hoarse with thirst.

"Of course." Adlai brought him water, liberally laced with rum. The drink would help dull the pain. When Collins drained it, Adlai brought another cup, this one of water and lime-juice. Collins smiled at him again and drank all of that. Adlai left him with a third, mostly of water, with just enough rum and lime to make it palatable, and went to fetch their meal.

When he returned, Adlai sat down on the edge of the bed, two plates of food in hand. He set his own on the floor and offered Collins his first. Collins raised an amused eyebrow.

"Are you going to feed me like a babe?"

"Since you cannot hold both the plate and the spoon, that was my intent." He closed his eyes for a brief moment, overwhelmed by memory. He had fed Master Elijah the same

way in the last days of his illness. "I am quite capable." He lifted the spoon of barley with turnips, carrots, pepper and beef to Collins' mouth.

"I feel absurd." Collins complained before he took the bite. "I could try, if no more."

"Let me. I do not wish the wound to re-open. It took a long time to stop bleeding." Adlai's smile was real. He fed Collins carefully, making no mess, and timing the bites perfectly. In between, he fed his captain cups of water and beer. Adlai cleared away Collins' plate and then began on his own.

"Adlai, pet, I need something you may not wish to help with. Pass up the thunder mug and you can take your leave."

"I will only need return to empty it. And after last night, I am not so shy as you believe, Master Captain."

That small task accomplished, Adlai washed and returned to his dinner. "You were to tell me of the other times Captain Harrison tried to kill you?"

"There are four and yesterday makes five. On the day we met, he almost threw me overboard. I was seventeen and scrawny and looked of no use save being dangled from a porthole to scrape barnacles. They thought to throw me to the sharks and save the biscuit of feeding me." He gave a quirked half-smile. "I begged. Shamelessly. And Thomas decided to keep me." His face clouded at the memory. Adlai did not press for more details.

"And the other three?" he asked.

"The first time I disagreed with him, I was nineteen. Actually, I disagreed well before that, but it was the first time

I bespoke my disagreement. He announced we had a new game to play that night and strung me up from a beam of the cabin, naked. A curious thing, Adlai, when a man is hanged, he grows large, and because I spent before I went into blackness, he let me down and kept me alive."

Adlai's eyes were huge at this tale. It sounded like the frightening tales that Tobias had tried convincing him of. He could not believe one man could do such a thing to someone he loved.

"I grew bold as I grew older. The day came when I demanded he allow me to bend him over as he had been bending me for years. He beat me for that, with the cat. I lay bloody and feverish for days and he tended me like a mother, until I could almost believe his remorse. He is ruled by Mercury and his temper is fouler than a two-week storm."

Collins pointed to some newer timbers in the bulkhead of his cabin. "And that was the last. He gave me command of the *Golden Horizon*, expecting me to sail with him. I caught the tide and sailed for the horizon. He sent a cannon volley after me." He showed a scar in his calf that Adlai had noticed. "Bastard loaded them with anything that would shoot. That was made by this." He pulled out a piece of eight that had been drilled through and hung on a cord.

"Someday, I'm going to kill him. Then I'm going to mark his body with every scar he put on me. Then I'll cut out his black and rotted heart for the sharks and leave this in its place so he can bribe Old Nick to let him sail the boiling blood seas of Hell on a rotting ship with a crew of demons instead of burning in the Lake."

Adlai just stared. His own captain looked a stranger to him, his eyes glowing with lust for revenge. The words of his father's favorite writer, Congreve, came to his mind: "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned." They were not dealing with women, but it made the passage no less true.

"Shhh, Master Captain. You must not strain yourself," he soothed, doing the only thing that made sense in such circumstances, returning to his caretaking.

* * * *

Thomas Harrison scowled at Samir, who was pouting prettily from a silken cushion he'd appropriated. "You're sleeping on the floor. You're out of the crow's nest and in the galley until I say otherwise. Was it worth it?" He ran a finger along the line of stitching that held his left cheek together.

He'd gotten roaring drunk and had Habib, the Red Sea pirate who was fast with his needle, sew him up like a ripped sail. Samir had comforted him the next morning when the rum wore off, leaving a big head and more pain. He had decided then he wouldn't be sober until he was healed.

He lifted Samir's face from where he was staring at the floor, and kissed him. "I love you, my boy, but you're too impulsive. Maybe someday we can get hold of the slave and you can play with him until he bores you. But until that day, you will behave yourself in front of Nathaniel."

"He not scare me," Samir sneered.

"He'd have hurt you if I hadn't stopped him." Harrison ran a dotting hand over Samir's hair and face. "I don't want you hurt. He is a captain. You will give him the proper respect."

"He's too good. He thinks he can be king someday. King of all the pirates in the world."

"And you're getting too big for your pretty silk britches. He wants to protect what's his. I want to protect what's mine. And that means you obey me, sweet."

Samir pouted for days, but obeyed. He slept on the floor instead of in Harrison's bunk. He cooked, scrubbed pots, peeled turnips, and hauled water until he collapsed every night on the blanket.

Before the week was out, Harrison smiled at him. "Come on back to bed, sweet." He stripped and stroked his lover quickly. "Spoiled pet. I missed you too much."

Samir looked smug. "I know." He twined his arms around Harrison's neck and kissed him slowly and sweetly.

"I spoil you until you are rotten."

Samir laughed. "I love it."

"I know. That is the reason. And you'll have the ugly slave, if there is any way I can get him for you."

"Just wanting his eyes."

Harrison unbraided Samir's long black hair and buried his face in it, smelling the salt and myrrh of him. "Vicious beauty. What would you do with them?"

"Make earrings, as I say." Samir pushed back against his captain, begging for more of the touch from the big hands.

"They'll spoil fast, especially in this heat." Harrison stroked Samir's elegant ears, envisioning the blue eyes dangling from the pierced lobes. Samir wore a single earring, in his right ear for a non-Christian burial, but both were pierced.

"Even if they only last a day, I still wear them for my own pleasure."

"I wish there was a fast painter, who could capture you wearing them. I would hang that here in the cabin and we could remember together."

Samir kissed along his neck. "Maybe I pickle them until you find one?"

Harrison smiled and drew Samir down for a long kiss. "How are you going to thank me for ending your punishment, sweet?"

Samir curled into his arms as Harrison loved him to do. "Handsome captain." He licked along Harrison's jaw and ended with a lengthy kiss: his mouth pliant, his tongue darting, as he squirmed in Harrison's lap until Harrison groaned.

"Mmm, that's my boy." Greedy for more, Harrison kissed Samir again, possessive this time, twisting his hands into Samir's hair. He liked the way Samir pressed and whimpered when he pulled. "Taste me."

Samir smiled and flicked a small pink tongue over Harrison's face. Samir licked down his neck, opened his shirt to kiss over his chest, playing in the dark hair there. He unlaced the breeches, and stroked Harrison, following his hands with his clever tongue.

"Oh, Samir." The name was a whispered prayer to Venus, a soft declaration of love.

Samir smiled up and continued licking. "Love my captain," he whispered, his breath warm in the thick curls and sensitive

skin. He sucked as if Harrison was a stick of his favorite candy, a very rare treat, much rarer than this delight.

"My good boy," Harrison whispered as he came. He pulled Samir up and kissed his face, his mouth. "You taste good, sweet. Let me see if you taste that way all over."

Samir started and Harrison smiled. He almost never did this thing, never tasted his boy. But now, he pulled Samir close, nuzzling the smooth skin of his chest and belly, licking at the thin dark line that led down from his navel.

At the first touch of his mouth, Samir shuddered and then relaxed into the slow licking that Harrison preferred. He thrust gently into Harrison's mouth and Harrison rewarded him with an increase of speed that made the sucking perfect. Harrison saw Samir's smile. His boy, with the emphasis on the possessive. Harrison sucked at Samir, letting him ride it to his own climax, and discreetly spat the issue into a cup.

"Beautiful boy." Harrison came up, holding his boy close and letting Samir feel how aroused this had left him.

"Good as hoped for?" Samir asked, his slim hands caressing Harrison's face and chest.

"Better than that, sweetness. Roll away, I will have you all night." He was gentle and demanding, taking his delight from the golden youth's body, but always with concern for Samir's pleasure. Samir squirmed and begged for more, responsive, and knowing his response would fire Harrison even hotter.

At length, they lay together, the stars gleaming through the port. Samir pillowed his head on Harrison's shoulder.

"Beautiful boy," Harrison mumbled, near sleep.

"Better than Collins?" Samir asked, slyly.

"Much." Harrison nuzzled Samir as he beamed. "You're mine and he never will be again. I'll never let you go, sweet. Love you until the stars burn cold."

Samir ran one long fingernail down his scarred cheek and kissed him before settling in to sleep.

* * * *

Adlai grew quiet in the next days. He tended Collins until the Captain was up and about. He worked. He shared Collins' bunk at night. But he was silent, and Collins caught him staring at the waves, deep in thought, far too often.

One evening, Adlai was watching the sun set over the bowsprit. Collins moved up behind him, placing his hands on the rail on either side of him. They stood until the sun slipped behind the horizon with a green flash.

"Make a wish," Collins whispered. "That's very good luck."

Adlai bit his lip and simply stood in Collins' arms. He respected Collins and liked him. But the turn they had taken still bothered him. Finally, remembering his place and his resolve, he laid his head on Collins' shoulder. He felt, more than saw, Collins' smile.

"We need money," Collins said quietly. "The rum-running's not paying enough."

Adlai shivered but controlled himself. "And how will you acquire it, Master Captain?"

"By finding an enemy ship to take." The *Golden Horizon* had concentrated on legal work for months. The lure of a great prize was too much to resist.

Relieved it was not him to be sold, Adlai asked, "Is there a way I may help?"

"Perhaps..." Collins looked him over. "Can you shoot? Use a sword?"

Adlai shook his head. "No, Master Captain. Weapons are forbidden to slaves."

Collins shook his head. "Then I'll just have to teach you. I trust you not to use it against me."

Adlai brought the same quick mind and deft hands to these lessons as he did to all the others. Collins taught him to handle a flintlock: putting the pistol into half-cock then measuring and pouring the barrel powder. Once he had some practice, Adlai was fast at patching and ramming the shot down the barrel. He could fill the pan and get the frizzen in place with no mess before cocking it completely and firing.

He learned, and practiced until he could load a brace of pistols in under a minute. Collins nodded, and started sword lessons. Adlai practiced when he had spare time. He dreaded the day he would need to fight.

It came anyway. Jansen, in the crow's nest sang out that a French ship was in sight. Collins ran up his flag, hoping to intimidate them into surrender. The captain of the *Melusine* chose heroism instead of wisdom and stood.

Of his first sea battle, Adlai would later remember little save noise, confusion and smoke. Collins had issued him a pair of pistols, powder and shot, along with a quick kiss and orders to hold his post before the door of the Captain's cabin. Each time the cannon roared, he wanted to cover his ears and

scream. He did not. He was a man, not a child to be terrified of noise.

He'd done his best, standing as chaos raged about him. He watched Tobias run a man through with a cutlass and mild-tempered Deering swearing like a screeching parrot and reloading his musket as fast as he could fire it. Stephan strode through the din and press, a giant black demon who found it easiest simply to seize one enemy head in each hand and smash them together like the rocks that martyred his namesake. Even gentle Will, the cook's assistant who was no more than fourteen, wielded a vicious-looking cleaver in defense of the galley.

A large man gave a wicked sneer and headed for Adlai, his cutlass raised. With shaking hands, Adlai raised the flintlock and fired. The man fell back, his sneer obliterated. Adlai reloaded the pistol, his hands still shaking badly enough to drop two balls and half his powder.

"You'll need those," Deering said, folding the lost shots into his hand while Adlai could do no more than stand and stare at the dead man at his feet. "We're winning." Deering vanished back into the fray.

Adlai realized he was dead now. Had they been taken before today, he might have been sold as part of the property, the proceeds going to the Crown. Now he had killed a free man. For a slave there was no greater crime. It was now the duty of every free man to bring him to justice.

The one-eyed black man was almost upon him, so lost was he in his own thoughts. He realized his danger with bare

moments to spare and fired again. The man went down, blood a scarlet fountain from his thigh, sending the deck awash.

Adlai swallowed hard. He would not be sick. He was not a sheltered white woman to swoon at the sight of blood, not even as much as this. He had overseen the deaths of endless poultry and hogs. He told himself this was not so different; a man had less blood than a cow.

He leaned against the door and reloaded the flintlock pistol, his hands steadier but his knees refusing to bear him. He simply wanted the battle to be over. The stink of blood and burnt powder and death overwhelmed him. The rioting hell of color under the burning sun made him wish for his hated hat, forgotten below in the cool dimness of Collins' cabin.

The fighting ended slowly. The crew of the *Golden Horizon* swarmed over the French ship, mopping up the last pockets of resistance. Collins found Adlai. Seeing his shaking, Collins drew him into an embrace.

"Go to the cabin. Have a drink and wash. I'll make sure you get your share."

Adlai did not cling as he longed to do, weeping like a child and refusing to let go. He simply returned the embrace and let Collins go after a moment. "Thank you, Master Captain."

"Wash up. Don't worry about water," Collins said.

Adlai nodded, his face still closed. He went below and drew the water into the basin to wash. He knew he should be above, keeping records of the loot, but at the moment, was glad to have the quiet.

* * * *

Collins oversaw the marooning of the surviving Frenchmen who would not join them, and the looting of the ship. The doctor traveling back to Marseilles was given no choice. He and his precious medicine chest were hustled aboard. About a dozen of the French opted to join rather than be marooned. Anything of value, everything of use, from spare casks of water to the cook's pots went aboard. Water, food, powder and equipment went into the ship's stores. The valuables were gathered on deck.

By nightfall, the *Melusine* was finished. She listed low in the water, taking it on rapidly.

"Scuttle her," Collins ordered. The crew lobbed flaming balls of pitch over to her. He watched as the *Melusine* sank, burning. She was the tenth ship so taken.

He helped divide the take, insisting his share be in coin, as always. They all had preferences: Stephan's liking for fine clothes, Gibbs' preference for jewels, even Tobias' taste for weaponry and silver coin.

He split the money into two bags. He carried the sacks down and thunked the smaller on the table in front of Adlai. "Your cut. It's only a half-share. Fifty double louis d'ors. I thought you'd prefer it in coin." He watched as Adlai stared.

"I don't believe I've ever seen so much coin in one place," Adlai whispered. "I dealt in greater sums for the great house, of course. But that was mostly letters of credit." He opened the bag and ran a hand through the coins.

Collins nodded. He wouldn't tell Adlai it was part of his own double-share, that despite two kills the crew refused to cut Adlai in for even a half-share. "What will you do with it?"

Adlai's brow lined with thought. "I don't know yet, Master Captain. I will hold it. I have all I need for now." He took a deep breath. "So now I have killed. For fifty louis a head."

His voice was still shaky so Collins handed him a bottle. "Better than a pound of silver pennies," he said, taking a deep drink of his own. "In London, there are men who will kill for a brass farthing. Drink. You'll feel better."

Adlai took a second drink and set the bottle aside. Collins drank liberally, but knew Adlai was not over fond of alcohol.

Adlai took out the ledger. Collins heard him breathing deeply and knew the work would help steady him as well. "Is there a record, Master Captain, of all we took?"

"Why give Mad George's tax man an excuse? We cut the King a double-share, that's enough."

"Four hundred gold louis, to be paid upon reaching port."

Collins nodded. The rum was going down fast. He stared at Adlai, hoping his man might see to going down as fast and hot and sweet as the drink. He knew it was a drunken fancy, that Adlai might never do such of his own accord.

He looked over at Adlai's shaking hand and guided it from the quill to his bottle of rum. "They're just the enemy."

Adlai took a drink. "They are men. And I am not."

"You fought like a man today."

"I stood my ground, shook with fear and shot wildly. I killed two men, either of whom I could call master as easily as I call you."

"I'm glad you did. For if you hesitated, they wouldn't think twice about sending you to your grave." Collins smiled at him. "Guilt has no place in this life. You survive, or you don't."

Adlai took a deep breath. "If I may, I would not fight again, Master."

"Fair enough. You earned today's take, though. If you do not fight, there will be no more."

Adlai ran his fingers through the lous. With a soft sigh, he looked at Collins. "And what must I do to gain a full share?"

"Greed already, pet?" Collins was smiling more broadly as the rum warmed him.

"I have a plan for it, although I am unsure I will ever acquire enough."

* * * *

Collins readied himself for bed. Adlai watched his stiff movements and the way he favored one shoulder. He winced at the groan that escaped when he joined Collins on the bunk.

"Master Captain, what ails you?"

"My shoulder. The big bosun nearly took my arm off."

"You are not bleeding." Adlai's hands were gentle and careful. "You are not broken."

"Just some of your effleurage and I'll be fine, pet. Mend me, little wizard."

Adlai worked at Collins' strained shoulder until he relaxed with a sigh. All the days of deep thinking had led Adlai to one inescapable conclusion. When Collins pressed back into his hands, back against his body, he acted. A single kiss, very lightly on the wounded shoulder, brought the taste of Collins

to him: salt and skin and sweat, but something different as well, something he wanted.

When he raised his head, Collins kissed him full on the mouth and he opened to it, enjoying it. But the beliefs and habits of a lifetime were not so quickly cast aside and he withdrew, more confused than ever.

"Master, forgive me."

Collins laughed. "Forgive nothing. You taste as good as I dreamed." He pulled Adlai close and kissed him again.

"I see, Master." Adlai stripped out of all his clothes and lay on the bunk beside Collins, offering his body silently.

Collins drew him close but did not turn brutal and demanding, ravishing him. He simply held Adlai, kissing him, stroking his hair and face.

"Are you better now, Master? I felt your shoulder go slack." He ran one hand over Collins' wounded shoulder.

"Much better, Adlai." The name was a caress out of Collins' mouth and Adlai felt himself tingle at the sound of it.

"I am ready for your uses."

"Are you?" Collins murmured against his neck. His large hand slid over Adlai's body, feeling him, teasing him. Collins encircled his flaccid cock. "You don't feel like it." He stroked with long, slow movements, trying to wake Adlai's body with great success.

Adlai pressed into Collins' hand, almost involuntarily. "Must I be hard, Master Captain? Is it not enough I am ready for you?" He'd been touched very seldom. The night in the aftermath of the duel came back to him, making him blush hot, the color concealed by his cheeks.

"I want you to enjoy it." Collins kept up the motion and Adlai shot over his hand with no warning. "That was sooner than expected." Collins kissed Adlai again, breaking it only to lick his fingers clean of the seed.

Adlai watched, a bit shocked. "Master?" he asked.

"Hmm?" Collins pressed close, hard against his thigh, but seemed more interested in finishing his cleaning.

"What would you have of me now, Master Captain?" Adlai felt bold and careless. He'd lived through battle. He lay in the arms of his captain and master. He slipped his tongue out to taste a single drop. He wasn't sure of its bland salt.

"Your hand, no more."

Adlai stroked as Collins had, less nervous than the first time he'd done this. He searched Collins' face for approval and smiled when Collins closed his eyes, panting hard.

He tried his own favorite motion, asking, "Please, am I doing well?"

"Oh yes." Collins rested his head on Adlai's shoulder, kissing at his neck and chest.

Adlai, feeling very bold, tipped his face up for another kiss and kept stroking. Collins gave a soft cry against his mouth and he felt the warm wetness in his hand. Adlai imitated his master and brought his fingers up to lick clean.

Collins smiled and fell asleep watching him. Adlai tucked himself into Collins' side, kissed him a last time and slept as well.

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Chapter 5

On a clear bright day in October, when the sun beat hot and the crew lazed in what shade they could find, a sharp whistle drew Harrison's attention from the log in which he had done no more than write the date.

"A sail!" Samir's clear voice rang over the whole ship.
"Four masts, and flying Spain's colors."

Harrison seized a spyglass and went to the rail. She was indeed a Spanish ship, within a day's sailing, wallowing full and low in the water. He'd have her. She was not for Collins. He'd seen Nathaniel shadowing him. The thought of his lover-turned-rival made him grind his teeth.

A pigeon landed on the rail. Harrison took the message. He smiled. The *Golden Horizon* was indeed following them, intending to play jackal. If he played this right, he would have everything he wanted. Making sure Matthew Gibbs had gone with Collins had been one of his wiser moves.

He fingered the scar on his cheek. His 'Thaniel needed a new lesson. And school was just taking up.

* * * *

The *Golden Horizon* tailed the *Kestrel*, staying well out of her range. Collins had spoken of owing Harrison a few bad turns, and Adlai fully agreed, having a bad night of his own to pay the rival Captain for. Stealing his prize, as Collins planned, would be perfect. In the third week, they saw the

Kestrel on the Horizon
by Naomi Brooks, Angelia Sparrow

galleon. The *Kestrel* attacked, trying to disable and rob. All day and into the night, the four pounders roared.

Adlai watched from the rail of the *Horizon*, curious yet horrified. He didn't want to fight again. But he doubted he would be spared if the *Horizon* was taken. Unlike Samir, who was readily identifiable as booty, he looked free enough to die. He smiled at the irony. The free man taken as a prize. The slave killed like any free man.

The galleon surrendered, but the *Kestrel* lay low in the water, listing to the side. The *Horizon* sailed in. The *Kestrel's* crew had vanquished the resistance, and the *Horizon* had easy pickings.

"Fire!" Collins commanded. The cannon belched fire and three new holes appeared in the *Kestrel*.

As Captain Harrison shook his fist and rained curses on them, Collins laughed. "Just something to keep you from idleness, my love," he shouted.

The crew of the *Golden Horizon* plundered the galleon at their leisure, while the *Kestrel's* crew fought to keep her afloat.

* * * *

The *Horizon* was gone before sunset and the *Kestrel* was repaired enough to be stay above the waves. Harrison ordered double rum rations and then announced, "We'll get to the nearest port and fit her out seaworthy again."

The crew rolled up the barrels of rum and he filled his own tankard before retiring to the stern rail. "I'll see you in hell,

'Thaniel. I'll send you there myself and laugh while I do," he grumbled to the rum.

Samir joined him at the rail, sliding in under his arm. "You are thinking again. Of him. And his ugly slave." He teased a little, lifting his face again. "Think of Samir instead?"

Harrison stroked Samir's face. "You're still the free one. He keeps a man in his cabin, bound, because no free one will have him." He tipped Samir's face for a kiss. As always, Samir met him sweetly. He drew his boy back down to the cabin and settled on his bunk, rum in one hand, Samir on his lap.

He unbraided Samir's hair and buried his face in it between drinks. "So beautiful. My own sweet boy."

Samir poured the last two-thirds of his double ration into Harrison's cup. Harrison kissed him, knowing his boy didn't much like any sort of drink, before drinking it.

"When you catch *Horizon*, you'll rename it, after me? My birthday present?" Samir asked, kissing his ear and neck.

"Of course," Harrison agreed. He looked a little worried at the large smile that greeted this. "You aren't thinking of asking to captain her yourself, are you?"

"Not know how." Samir was unfastening his shirt.

"Good, because I want you at my side. Always. Birthday present, eh? How old are you?"

Samir thought, and Harrison knew he was converting the Islamic calendar of his childhood into the Julian calendar.

"Twenty today," he said, only to yelp when Harrison turned him over his knee.

"Twenty, indeed," Harrison laughed and brought his big hand down in twenty playful swats, none intended to hurt.

Samir, mock-pouted and rubbed his rear before swarming into Harrison's lap, hotter and more aroused than ever. In between kisses, he asked, "Even when you catch ship, you'll not keep Collins?"

"Oh, I'll keep him," Harrison laughed. "I'll keep him in irons. I'll burn out his eyes while we torment his slave so his last sight is his black boy in pain. Nobody blows holes in my ship."

"Then Samir practices with whip."

Harrison kissed his neck, stripping away Samir's shirt as well. "If you're very, very good, I'll let you play with him all you like. With your whip or any other tool you want." He licked Samir's collarbone, the idea arousing. "What should we do with his ugly slave?"

Samir's laugh was wicked and sent chills over Harrison as he kissed the boy's neck and chest. "We let the crew have him."

"I thought you might want him," Harrison murmured against Samir's skin, his big hands all over Samir's body, tracing his ribs and playing with his nipples.

"I have him first. Before others foul him."

"You don't get to keep him."

Samir squirmed as Harrison pinched one nipple too hard. "No, he dies."

"Of course." He licked one of Samir's nipples. "If you want to do it, feel free." Samir smiled and gasped a little as Harrison sucked at him, and his fast thieving hands poured Harrison's cup full again. "Collins will watch. That should be

the last thing he sees: my beautiful boy putting an end to his ugly one."

"Captain thinks just like Samir."

Harrison licked Samir's neck. "I hope so," he said, with a light nip on Samir's shoulder. He drained his drink, not seeming to notice it had refilled itself.

Suddenly, Samir pushed him flat on his back, perching over him and draping them both in long black hair. He kissed Harrison. "I am on top, part of the present."

Harrison laughed again and pulled Samir down into a hard kiss, one that started as an invasion but left Samir hard and rubbing against him. "Not even tonight, lovely boy." He kissed the pout that was starting on Samir's face, and reached down to stroke him. He kissed and stroked Samir until he stopped pouting and was almost sobbing with the need for climax. Harrison sucked on one brown nipple and gave him the last bit of stimulation he needed. "Down you go, sweet boy. I kissed your pouts away. Now, you must kiss me."

Samir laughed again, this one much more the young man he was. He went down, blowing small bursts of laughter over Harrison's belly. Harrison stroked and played in his hair the whole time, taking a very long time. The rum made him dreamy and slow. At last, he came with a low groan. Samir swallowed and slid up his body.

Harrison held him, stroking his slim body, his perfect face, his lovely hair. Samir purred like a kitten, a sound that always made Harrison possessive.

"I have something for you," he whispered, reaching under the mattress of the bunk.

"What?" Samir's eyes widened with feigned surprise. Harrison suspected his boy had already found the gift, but he was pleased Samir at least opted to fake the wonderment.

Harrison dangled an earring before him. It was heavy and solid gold. The jewels in it were gaudy and sparkled in the moonlight. Samir widened his eyes as if in greedy surprise.

"You like it? I thought it would be pretty on you."

Samir nodded. "I love."

Harrison took out the simple gold hoop Samir currently wore in his right ear. He set the diamond and ruby chip star in its place. He kissed Samir. "My own sweet boy."

Samir hugged him tightly and then lay in his arms. Harrison, drunk from the double ration and his own pain-killing barely heard Samir's whispered words as he slid down the tunnel of sleep. "When I be a man to you, if twenty not a man? Killing the ugly slave and blinding his captain? That do it?" He kissed Harrison's unscarred cheek.

* * * *

Collins paced the little cabin like a lithe caged panther. Adlai was working on the logs and the books to have their taxes ready when they put into port. Collins loved watching the slim brown hands fly over the page, dipping ink and writing more fluidly than even Tobias had. He simply hated port taxes and was worrying they wouldn't have enough to meet it.

"I like the legal cargo. It pays nicely and we need not fret while running it," Adlai said, more to the ledger than him.

"A guaranteed payment is nice. I just wish it were more."

Adlai smiled up. "Master Nathaniel, they cannot all be Spanish galleons brimming with legendary Aztec gold. Or even silver pieces of eight from Mexico's mint."

"No. But when we get one, it is a very good day. Even if there is no more Aztec treasure at this late date. Ah, Adlai, we were born too late. The great days of pirates are long over. I would be Sir Henry Morgan, become an admiral and set myself up as governor of an island."

Adlai simply nodded. Collin knew Adlai had his dreams as well. Adlai looked back over his bookkeeping and hesitated a moment. Collins could see Adlai wanted to ask a question; he hoped Adlai knew he would not be angry with anything Adlai asked.

"Master Nathaniel, how is it that over three thousand pounds passed through your hands in the last year? Your take, not spent for resupplying."

Collins hesitated. He loved that Adlai was calling him by name now and not the impersonal "Master Captain." He supposed his bookkeeper had a right to know. "Well..."

Adlai gave him a stern look that made Collins feel about six years old with his hand reaching for a sweet his mother had told him he might not have. Then Adlai turned back to the ledger. "I can account for five hundred."

Collins nodded. "Best purchase I made, that fifteen percent. The rest on food, drink, clothing, and company."

"Expensive company," Adlai tsked.

"A few, yes." He remembered one with hair like midnight and a tongue busier than a Bishop saying Mass.

"Three thousand in a year. If we are to have our dreams, we must do better." Adlai looked up and closed the ledger.

"And I hope to be able to save you the company costs."

"Since you're willing, I don't see any need for that anymore."

Adlai smiled, the sweet, sensual one that was just for Collins in the privacy of their cabin. He rose and wrapped his arms around Collins' neck.

"So what will you do when I bring you home tomorrow? We make Barbados with the tide." Collins informed him.

"We will re-supply as we must, and I shall take you to see Breakfront. We shall see what order the current owner keeps it in. If he neglects it as badly as I have heard, it is all to our advantage."

"Of course. Anything else?"

"Anything you desire to do, my master." Adlai kissed him with that.

Inspired by the kiss, Collins offered, "Perhaps I'll find us a nice room for the night."

"It would be interesting to sleep once more in a bed that does not move. And what else might we manage in such a bed?" Adlai raised a saucy eyebrow.

"My thoughts exactly."

Adlai stood next to the bunk and stripped to his trousers. Collins beckoned him back. His steps were slow and deliberate, unafraid. When Collins looked him over, Adlai met his gaze, desire burning in Adlai's own. Collins saw that Adlai knew today would be more than kisses and touches.

"What is your pleasure, Master Nathaniel?" Adlai's voice was soft in the gloom.

Collins lifted Adlai's chin and kissed him. The memory of the few willing kisses he'd gotten fired his blood and he wanted more. He plunged into Adlai's mouth, hungry, wanting him. Adlai wrapped his arms around Collins' neck and met him with equal ferocity, welcoming his tongue and moaning under it.

When Collins pulled him closer, he could feel Adlai's arousal through the canvas of his trousers and began backing him to the bunk. Adlai followed his lead, not taking his arms from Collins' neck nor resisting. Collins punctuated the steps with small kisses when he could.

"Tonight, all of you," Collins ground out between kisses.

Adlai's soft voice betrayed no hint of fear. "Master Nathaniel, please be gentle?"

Collins pulled him in, holding him close for a brief moment. "Always. You're too dear to me to abuse."

Adlai smiled up at him and kissed him, much more assertive now. He kept smiling as his legs hit the side of the bunk. Adlai sat and pulled Collins down beside him, only to hide a startled look when Collins flipped him to his back and pinned his shoulders to the bed.

Adlai didn't tense or fight back. He lay still and his face went blank. Collins smiled and moved over him, sliding a leg between Adlai's thighs. The smile vanished at the worry on Adlai's face.

"What is it, my lovely Adlai?"

"I am puzzled, Master Nathaniel." Adlai drew him down for a kiss. "What is it you wish of me?"

"I have your loyalty. Perhaps I want your adoration?" Collins nibbled his ear and tugged at his shirt.

Adlai ran a tongue-tip over his jaw, the smile back in place. "As if you did not have it."

More hesitantly, Collins asked, "And your love?"

Adlai's smile softened into something more intense. He nodded. "My love." He added, quiet and thoughtful. "In my grief, you have given me one to love and care for. Exactly the thing I needed."

"Yet there still must be something missing."

Adlai looked away, flushing darker. "Only my understanding of what you need from me right now."

"Let me show you." Collins licked along Adlai's bare chest, teasing the curly tufts of black hair that marked it.

"I understood until the fight, until you acted as if you would harm me," Adlai supplied.

"That was no fight, pet. It was play, like young puppies."

Adlai stole a kiss and slid a hand under Collins' own shirt. He unbuttoned it and the trousers and watched as Collins wiggled out without rising. His own clothing joined the pile on the floor.

Adlai ran his fingers over Collins' chest. "You are so smooth, Master Nathaniel." Collins loved the boldness, the way Adlai had grown more comfortable with nakedness.

"I always was. Like a boy." He started kissing down Adlai's chest, the smooth expanse of skin broken by curls thrilling him. Like Samir, he thought and did not say.

Adlai stroked Collins' jaw and hair. "Any pleasures I can give are yours."

"Yours first," Collins said, kissing his way down Adlai's body to take Adlai's prick in his mouth.

Adlai simply stared. "That is a servant's act. It is not meet for you to do so." But the first night, after the duel, Collins had done the same and met no protest.

Collins ignored the protests, enjoying the taste and feel of Adlai. He was nicely built, and fit sweetly in his mouth. The moans above him became small, stifled sobs.

"Please, Master Captain. It is not right," Adlai begged.

Unhappy with the change in formality, Collins drew back for a moment. "It feels right to me. And this is my ship, aye?"

"Aye." Adlai made no more protests. He simply closed his eyes and turned his face away, as if waiting for this to be over.

Seeing Adlai did not enjoy this as he should, Collins lifted his head, and nudged Adlai's hips, encouraging him to turn over. This he did, willingly enough, with an almost insouciant wiggle as he settled himself on his stomach.

Unable to stop himself, Collins lowered his mouth and began licking along the dark furrow he coveted. Sweat and skin and Adlai and a dark earthiness met him, drawing him deeper into desire. If it was fine for Adlai to be on his knees for Collins, but very wrong to be reversed, then this must be quite improper. But it would make his entry easier.

And no one could ever accuse Nathaniel Collins of caring about what was proper. He did as he pleased, and the taste and feel of Adlai pleased him greatly. Eager to finally be

within him, Collins fished for the small bottle of oil he'd tucked into the bunk earlier. He couldn't find it.

"Is this what you've missed?" The small vial lay in the pale palm of Adlai's dark hand, and his smile was almost wicked. Collins kissed him between the shoulder blades and took it.

"Thank you, my love."

Adlai flinched at the words. Seeing that, Collins was quite gentle, his long fingers stroking the oil over Adlai's opening, dipping gently into him, never forcing their way. The only noises from Adlai were small sounds of pleasure and he took the first two fingers easily. Collins scowled, jealous, wondering who had taken his man before. He added a third finger to see how Adlai would react. Adlai hissed a second and then relaxed into it, the sensual sounds resuming quickly.

"On your hands and knees, Adlai," Collins said.

Adlai knelt up, rubbing against the fingers within him, and drew Collins forward for a kiss. "Of course, Master Nathaniel."

Collins held him there, wrapping one arm around his hip and stroking his cock. Adlai pressed into his hand, still kissing him. Adlai rocked between the hands, pressing down on the fingers still within him, thrusting up into the one stroking him.

Collins slowly withdrew his fingers, and ceased stroking, just holding Adlai close, feeling the warmth of his dark skin—which seemed, like dark iron or cloth, to hold heat after the sun was gone—against his chest. Adlai almost whimpered and followed the hands as if unwilling to let them off his body.

"Easy, love, be patient just a little longer." He pressed on Adlai's back, urging him down. Adlai went.

"Forgive me, Master Nathaniel. I am too eager for you." He was indeed very hard and breathing fast.

Collins moved rapidly, using the rest of the oil on himself. He took Adlai in hand and positioned himself to enter. He paused, drawing out the moment.

Adlai pressed back onto him. Collins slowed him to something less than the stabbing thrust that his movement would have created. The entry would hurt a little, it always did. But he did not want to harm Adlai. Adlai hissed softly, making no other noise of pain. He slid back entirely, taking Collins within him. A small gasped escaped Collins at that. He settled over his man's back, his lips on Adlai's neck.

"Mmmm," purred Adlai. "Your skin upon my back is lovely." He rocked a little, less vigorously than when they had knelt together.

In wordless agreement, Collins kissed him, breathing hard. He kept his movements slow and gentle, his sighs soft near Adlai's ear.

"I do not break, Master Nathaniel."

"I know." Collins gave a single hard thrust, testing that knowledge. Adlai met it with gasp and a smile over his shoulder. Collins, too, grinned at that reaction. "A proper fucking is what you like, then?" He was deliberately rude, wondering if Adlai would be aroused or revolted by it. Collins lifted off Adlai's back and grabbed his hips, starting to pound him. Not a merciless brutality, but enough of a motion that Adlai would know he had been taken by a man.

Adlai spent himself almost immediately with a cry. He continued making sounds of pleasure and rising to meet the

thrusts, never going soft under Collins' hand. "More, if you please, Master Nathaniel," he gasped, shoving hard into his hand.

Collins withdrew and rolled Adlai onto his back. Adlai's eyes were wide at this. Collins kissed him, then pressed his legs to his chest and entered again, watching his face. The surprise on Adlai's face faded quickly to great pleasure. His shaft lay hard against his belly, between them.

Collins once more thanked his good stars and watching angels for the best purchase he'd ever made. He leaned down for another kiss, while still inside Adlai.

Adlai, in an unexpected fit of daring, thrust his own tongue into Collins' mouth and seized his ass while wrapping his legs around Collins' waist to hold him deep within. Collins moaned at that. Adlai almost sobbed with delight, and shuddered as he peaked again.

Collins himself was close from Adlai's reactions to him. He'd never expected such passion and desire from his mild, quiet man. Two more thrusts left him spent, an oath breaking from him. He felt Adlai's hands on his hair and back as he rested his head on his man's shoulder.

"Sweet Master Nathaniel," Adlai whispered, kissing his neck and ear.

Collins longed for his name from Adlai's lips, without the word Master before it. He knew it would be a long wait. He did not expect to hear it before the day Adlai was a free man. But Adlai was kissing him again and he knew there were better things to do with that full mouth than worry about a

simple word. He rolled them to their sides, not breaking the kiss.

Finally Adlai broke it, to shift and lie comfortably in his arms. Adlai smiled up, his fingers tracing over Collins' arms and shoulders.

Collins' voice was quiet as he asked, "Not your first time to be taken so?"

Adlai shook his head. "Only the first I had a lover so considerate."

"I will always try to be." Collins hated the idea of this lovely man being hurt.

"I have been put to the uses of men for many years. There are always those who take revenge upon the master through the body of his favorite. And more who mistake force for seduction. No, you are the first to care for my enjoyment, Master Nathaniel."

There was nothing to be said to that, so he played with Adlai's hair instead, drawing a soft laugh from Adlai.

"Do you like that I keep it neat, or do you think me foppish? Should I let it dread as Stephan has? It will never be soft like yours."

"I love it the way it is." But somehow, Collins wasn't looking him in the face anymore. He couldn't see the weight of knowledge on his Adlai's face. He felt Adlai swallow hard.

"Damaged goods," Adlai whispered, but so softly Collins didn't know if it was meant for him or not. The next words were. "Master Captain, you surely knew I was no virgin. Do you not recall my fear of being hurt the first night you brought me aboard?"

"I do recall. It was only a fantasy that grew as I observed you. You have innocence still."

Adlai smiled, but it was not his usual one. This one was bitter and knowing, a face Collins had never seen. "I have never been an innocent."

Collins could see the depth of Adlai's blue eyes, and imagined them seeing too much from infancy on, imagined the sharp mind making all sorts of unwanted connections. "In the ways of this ship, and the sea and me? You are, for all you've fought like a man and loved like one, too."

Adlai kissed him again, dreamy and pleased. "Then teach me of your ways. That I may delight you with experience."

Collins lingered in the kiss. "You have excelled in your first lesson."

Adlai's soft laugh was music in the night. "Be careful, Master Nathaniel, or I will not be a slave in your bed for long," he teased.

"Is that a promise?" He met Adlai's odd look with raised eyebrows and a look of sly amusement.

"I remain yours," Adlai said, contrite as if he'd overstepped himself.

Collins stroked him, reassuring him he was fine. "And if I tell you that I enjoy being in your place tonight as much as I enjoy being in mine?"

Adlai nodded, seeming to understand even though they were speaking circles around each other. "Then, because you enjoy it and because you have ordered it of me, I will give you such pleasures."

"An excellent start."

"I am ... uneasy, but if it is your will. It feels like an usurpation of your rights, Master Nathaniel."

Collins kissed him. "With time, you won't be uneasy. You will love it." He realized Adlai was aroused a third time, merely from lying close beside him and having kisses. He lowered his hand to trail a finger up the length of the shaft. "So responsive."

Adlai shuddered a bit under his touch. "I have had few such opportunities for pleasure."

Collins nodded. "I noticed. I won't let you go so long again. My bed, each night."

Adlai sounded almost resigned as he acknowledged. "I am yours, Master Captain. I will please you in any way I can with my body."

"That's right." Deprived of his earlier taste, he took the moment to exercise the authority Adlai had given him.

"You're pleasing me right now." He licked at Adlai's neck.

"If you—" Adlai hesitated.

"Hm?" Collins licked his way down Adlai's chest and swirled his tongue in Adlai's navel.

In a great rush, as if thinking he would lose his nerve from hesitating, Adlai blurted, "If you want it, I will do as you did."

"Not right now." Collins sucked him in again.

This time, Adlai gave no resistance. He lay back, hard and warm and sweet in Collins' mouth. Collins drew the pleasure out, not wanting it to stop. He felt Adlai holding back, until his tongue was growing rough and his teeth scraped and the hand that aiding them slowed with weariness. Adlai shot at last. Collins moaned, finally getting his taste. He stayed, until

Adlai was limp and lying quietly. Then, he moved to lie beside Adlai. He leaned into the dark, calloused fingers that stroked his face.

"Take me as often as it pleases you, Master Nathaniel. That was splendid."

"Have no fear. I will."

The sun was down and it hardly seemed worth the bother to light the lamps. Instead, Collins wrapped Adlai in his arms and they slept.

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Chapter 6

Spring melted into summer, the seasons barely distinguishable one from the other, save the sun burned more fiercely than it had. The last merchant ships took sail for England to avoid the hurricanes that ravaged the Caribbean during the late summer and early fall. The *Horizon* took only one more prize, another Spanish ship, heavy-laden with silver. The money was divided and, again, Adlai hoarded his half-share. Collins still had not told him it was from his own double share.

Summer came, bringing the storms. The Main became treacherous. Collins stayed near Barbados, making occasional runs, but mostly unwilling to be caught at sea in a storm. Some of the legendary freebooters had sailed through hurricanes, but Collins was neither insane nor desperate enough to try.

He noted, each time they sailed into Bridgetown harbor, Adlai would stare up one of the hills at a great house. Anger, longing, sadness, and hope all crossed his face in these moments. It was just a house, nothing out of the ordinary, but Collins had his suspicions.

One evening, when clouds were lowering, but not yet raining, Collins found Adlai on deck. He stood at the rail, staring up at the house. Collins came up behind him, placing one hand on either side as he loved to do. Adlai was caught in Collins' arms, between his body and the rail, and he pressed back into Collins. The others were all below, so Collins

indulged himself, wrapping his arms around Adlai's waist and kissing his neck.

"Your father's house?" he asked. He noticed only half the lamps along the edges of the house's great verandah were lit and they guttered low, as if starved for oil.

Adlai nodded. "That is Breakfront. A sugar plantation worth half a million pounds. We made hundreds of thousands a year: sugar, molasses, rum, even candy and jam." He smiled in memory. "Breakfront's boiled peppermints were the best in all the islands. Her jams graced the governor's table and had even been sent to England for King George's breakfast." His smile vanished. "She will be mine, and I will make her produce again!"

The last words were almost snarled. The vehemence of them shocked Collins. Adlai's face went hard and sad. "I am a fool to dream so. In my mind, I am Master Goodman of Breakfront." He rubbed his cheek against Collins' arm. "In reality, I am only Nathaniel's Adlai."

"How?" Collins asked. He kissed the side of Adlai's neck. "Tell me your dream, and I will share it if I may?" It was the first time Adlai had expressed a desire for anything beyond the barest essentials. Collins wanted him to have that house, that plantation. All he had wanted, since the day of the auction, was Adlai's happiness.

Adlai spoke quietly and quickly. "The new owner is a fool. I have studied him in our trips ashore. He does not know how to make the place produce wealth. He does not know how to get work from the men he owns. She is falling into fallow ground and disrepair. Her jams are no longer sold in the best

shops and children do not clamor for her sweets. Only the distillery still operates and that only made three barrels of rum this year instead of the dozen it should. He takes what little is produced and gambles it away, whether on cards or merchant ships that never make it across the Spanish Main." Adlai's voice never grew louder, but anger bled into every word.

"Breakfront will be up for auction in a year, maybe two, maybe less. She will sell for far less than her worth. And all her finery will be gone, pawned away. I have hoarded all my shares against that day."

Collins nodded. "I noticed. You'll be our banker soon, making loans with interest. The hardest part will be taking enough large prizes to afford it."

Adlai turned to face Collins and wrapped his arms around his Captain's neck. "I will give you my money. I need you to buy Breakfront and hold her for me until I have served my six years for you."

Collins drew Adlai close. He could say nothing for a long time. Adlai trusted him with his dreams, trusted him enough to reveal his soul-deep longing and desire, his dearest hope. Finally, his words returned. "You'll have her, love. And I'll take pleasure in watching you revive and run her."

Adlai looked up, obviously a bit startled at hearing the words spoken out of bed. Collins smiled down at him. "I do love you. I have for a while."

Adlai drew him down for a brief kiss. "Beloved Nathaniel," Adlai dared. It was the first time he had not prefaced a name with his usual "Master."

Collins stared, then seized Adlai, cupping his face and kissing him hard and deep; laughing, crying he didn't know which. Adlai truly loved him. It was more than he'd ever dared to hope. He'd fallen weeks ago, maybe even months, maybe even the first time he saw those sad blue eyes on the auction block. He'd known Adlai couldn't possibly love a man who owned him. He'd believed the words between them had been mere rote, for form's sake, and the easing of Adlai's guilt over their lovemaking.

"You'll have Breakfront, Adlai, and your freedom." Collins seldom promised anything, but when he did, he kept his word.

"And you as well? The fields run to the ocean. We have a private cove, deep enough for the *Horizon* to anchor." Adlai kissed him. "I will not have the other two if it means I lose you."

"A harbor of my own and a safe home port? My lover waiting when I come sailing in? I'd be a fool to resist that offer."

"On hot summer days, we shall lie naked on cool cotton, as the breeze from the ocean caresses us through the balcony doors." Adlai's voice was dreamy as he painted the pictures. "On rainy winter nights, we shall sit before the fire, telling old stories of the sea, drinking chocolate and playing chess. On a fine spring morning, I will wait on the pier as you leave with a load of rum. In the smoky autumn twilight, you will drop anchor and rush down the gangplank to where I wait. And we shall love the night away on a bed that does not move and most of our food will be fresh." Adlai looked back up at him,

dreams not far away. "I crave fresh bread and meat that has never seen a pickling crock."

Collins nuzzled Adlai's hair, understanding more about his lover now. "We'll get some ashore tomorrow." The words were trifles.

He held Adlai for a long time, watching the waves, staring up at the dim, half-lit lights of Breakfront. "They'll glow all the brighter when it belongs to Adlai Goodman."

A soft tremor went through Adlai. Collins knew no one had ever called him by his father's name, not an unacknowledged half-blood bastard. "Adlai Goodman," Adlai said softly, "or Adlai Collins?"

Collins nuzzled Adlai's neck, surprised by the question. "Are you asking me to wed you?" he teased. "For I doubt that would be allowed."

"When I am free, I may take the name that suits me, for I was born with none of my own." He looked at Collins. "Would it please you for me to wear yours? Would you stand husband to me in all but ceremony? We already lie together as married folk, sharing our meals, our labor and our bed. I keep the books and the cabin and you earn the money."

Collins had to laugh, hearing their relationship summed up with such domestic tidiness. "If you will stand husband to me as well. Although, I wonder if you would want a wife of your own in time."

Adlai sighed. "You do not understand, my love. I like women, but marriage would be problematic." Collins raised an eyebrow indicating Adlai should continue. "No white woman would have me and I will not take a black woman. There are

many of the mixed blood, but why would I want one when I have you?"

"A son," Collins whispered in his ear. "A son to inherit the plantation. One to teach to love his home and run the plantation. The son we cannot give each other. One you will acknowledge at his birth and not turn into a house servant."

Adlai bowed his head and Collins felt him tremble. Were he poet, he would call it a hurricane of memories washing over his man, drowning in a wave of loss and regret. It would do Adlai no good to regain his home, only to know it would pass from his hands after death. "You speak wisdom, Master Nathaniel. I will think on it. But again, I will not have her if I must lose you."

"You won't. Any wife we select will understand that I come first when I am in port. She may even take a beloved of her own if she chooses."

Adlai nodded. "I will consider it. First, our fortune, then Breakfront. Once we have secured both, then we shall look at women."

"Until that day, then." Collins kissed him, deep and sweet, pressing close and letting Adlai feel his desire. "Until then I shall not fret."

"Below, please, now, love?" Adlai was nearly begging, his own need large and obvious. "I do not wish the crew to find us making love over the rail."

Collins laughed again and pushed Adlai gently toward the cabin door. "Anything. Whatever you desire, my lover."

"Your touch. Your kisses." Adlai drew him further into the cabin and shut the door behind them. "Your love."

"You have all of them already." Collins kissed Adlai, then pulled off his shirt. He lowered his mouth to one dark nipple, half-hidden in the curly chest hair, and flicked his tongue over it until it stood up for him. "Sweet, like dark rum."

Adlai gave a soft moan under this treatment. "Beloved," Adlai whispered, untying the bow that held Collins' own hair back. He let the silken horsetail fall through his hands to trail over his back and chest.

"Tonight, you're bending me over," Collins whispered. "I told you I like that."

Adlai's eyes grew large. "It is not fit for me to do so. Not at all seemly."

"Scuttle fit and keelhaul seemly. You're going up me tonight." To punctuate the order, Collins dropped to his knees and opened Adlai's pants to suck him.

Taken by surprise at the suddenness, Adlai could do nothing but hold onto Collins and gasp as Collins' tongue worked him from base to tip and all around. Collin's felt him drawing near, heard the small moans that heralded the climax and the tell-tale tightness of Adlai's stones and thighs.

Collins pulled away, leaving Adlai wet with his spittle. He simply dropped his pants and bent over the edge of the bunk. "Show me how the master of Breakfront Plantation takes a hired sea captain," he demanded.

Adlai looked at him for a long moment, and then, slowly catching the fantasy, knelt behind him and plunged into his body. Hard and deep and fast he pounded, with no words of love or grace. Beneath him, Collins shifted and rose to meet his wild thrusts.

"Knew there was a terror in you somewhere, Adlai." It had been too long since he'd had such a lover, much too long since this pleasure. He wanted to beg for more and harder, but he knew Adlai would not accept such. Instead, he gave himself to the thrusts, trying not to think too much about Harrison. This was his beloved Adlai, not his old lover, whom he missed on occasion despite himself.

"Beloved," Adlai gasped as he climaxed, stabbing deep into Collins' body. The spasms wracked him and he slumped forward, to bury his burning face between Collins' shoulder blades. After a moment, he withdrew, looking ashamed.

"Forgive me, beloved Nathaniel. I lost control and—"

"Hush." Collins stilled him, concentrating on his own pleasure. "My own sweet Adlai," he whispered as he peaked himself. "My wonderful terror. I need you to do that much more often."

They rose together and lay on the bunk, talking far into the night of love and plantations and dreams.

* * * *

The *Kestrel* sailed north out of the Caribbean, along the coast of Florida and Georgia. Samir knew Harrison owned most of a small coastal town near St. Simon Island, and they put in there. The crew swarmed ashore, filling the hotels or going to their own small houses. Some even had wives waiting for them. Samir saw new infants in many arms as the sailors greeted their women. The *Kestrel* was careened for repairs. The town boasted no drydock, so they made do. The

summer workers scraped and patched while the crew enjoyed their time on land.

Harrison took Samir to his own house, a fine two-story affair in town. The maids aired it out and soon the smells of dinner were chasing odors of the shut-up must and disuse.

Samir snarled at the dark skin of the house servants, reminded of Adlai. They watched him warily. Master Thomas' favorites were almost always temperamental and difficult. The petite girl with skin fairer than Samir's own opened a second bedroom, changing the linens and opening windows for air. He laughed at her.

"So stupid. I sleep with my Captain. Are all dark ones so stupid?"

"Samir!" Harrison had found him just in time to hear this outburst. "Thank you, Judith, he will be staying in my room." She dropped a curtsey and vanished down the stairs.

"You may not be rude to my ladies, Samir. They are very intelligent, but not mentalists. They only know what they are told, not what we think. If you mistreat them, they will find ways to get even and I will laugh at you when they do. They are not slaves. I pay them well and they take excellent care of me." Harrison looked stern. "I looked hard for the best to hire and I do not want to find more, simply because you are a rude gutter rat."

"Scold, scold. Samir does nothing right." He tossed his long black hair and stalked into the room Judith had just prepared for him and slammed the door.

* * * *

Harrison spent the evening going over the accounts and examining the house. He praised Judith and Elizabeth lavishly for the care they had taken. He sent Judith up with some of Caroline's excellent food when Samir refused to join him at the dinner table. His temperamental boy would sulk as long as he was allowed.

Finally, after his own lonely meal, Harrison went up and knocked. "Samir, come out now."

"No."

"Little love, please come out. I've been over the house accounts. We're going shopping tomorrow. I need you to help make a list of what you want." He tried very hard not to sound as if he was pleading or wheedling.

"We're buying pretty clothes and good food?" He could hear Samir's resolve crumbling.

"Indeed. I've been invited to dinner by several of the neighbors and they would love to see my Moroccan prince."

Samir opened the door a crack. Harrison smiled at him. "Not a prince, just a gutter rat."

"You know and I know, but once we've shopped properly and you pick up some manners, they won't know. They'll see an exotic beauty and assume you're a prince. The pretty daughters will fall all over themselves for you." He smiled more as the crack widened. "Besides, you're enough of a prince for a pirate king like me."

Samir opened the door fully and flung himself into Harrison's arms. "Captain does love Samir, even for all the scolding."

Harrison kissed Samir hard. He held Samir close and stroked his hair. "I only scold because I do love you. If I didn't expect to bring you back often, I wouldn't bother telling you to be nice to the ladies. Now come help with the list."

Samir bounded down the stairs, two steps ahead, and then stopped, staring at the study. The whole of Harrison's house was masculine, with no feminine frills of doilies or flowers or lace. But this room was aggressively male, all wood and leather and tobacco smoke. Books lined the walls and the heavy furniture was dark in the lamplight. It suited Harrison. Samir sat down in a chair near the writing desk.

Harrison lit an oil lamp on his desk, carved himself a quill and settled in to write. He paused a moment to fire up a long clay pipe, getting it drawing nicely. "Ah, better. I do tire of snuff." He started writing.

Samir got up and hovered over his shoulder, looking at the lines on the paper. "Teach me to read English this summer, my Thomas?" he whispered.

"If you'd like to learn." Harrison finished his part of the list. "What would you like to buy?" he asked. "It's going to be odd to pay for things. But that's how we do it here in civilized parts."

Samir kissed him. "Handsome captain could charm the shopkeeper. But I would be jealous." He wore grey cotton pants and a colorful waistcoat over a red shirt. "Dress your prince in the height of fashion, my Thomas. And we will show the whole city how beautiful their clothing is."

"Coat, trousers, stockings, shoes, shirt, waistcoat, for both of us." He wrote these on the slip of paper that already held a marketing list for Caroline.

When they had finished, he looked at Samir. "Which room do you wish tonight, sweetness? I will not force you to share my bed."

Samir slid over his lap, as he did so often aboard ship. "Your room, my Thomas?" His large kohled eyes were hopeful.

"Of course. And we shall have a bed that does not pitch." He stood up and slung Samir over his shoulder, to a series of giggles that emanated somewhere around the small of his back. He took the steps two at a time with excruciating slowness.

Samir did not stop giggling until Harrison tossed him on the bed and kissed him silent. "Love my captain," Samir purred.

"Know your captain loves you, too," Harrison agreed, kissing him again. "My little prince. I shall be hard put not to be jealous of all the lovely girls you'll dance with this summer."

Samir looked up at him, his face puzzled. "You not dance with pretty girls, too?"

Harrison smiled. "Oh, I will indeed. But they merely humor a man old enough to be their father. You, they would set their caps for and dance with, intending to wheedle a proposal out of you."

"Not marry any of them." Samir pulled him down for a kiss. "Show me again that Samir is yours and no one else's. Besides, girls very stupid if they think Samir really a prince."

Harrison laughed and whispered again, "Enough of a prince for a pirate king," as his hands undid the colorful waistcoat and shirt. "Beautiful enough that I could eat you up. Richest of all my treasures." Harrison peeled away Samir's pants and licked along his shaft. "I'll get you oil and gold dust, and you can be beautiful for me in private as well as in public."

Samir smiled and Harrison winked back at him before taking his slim prick in to be sucked and licked. The Spanish Kiss was not something Harrison liked to do often, but when he wanted the taste of his lover, it was the best.

His tongue was heavy along the underside of Samir's cut cock, licking its way up to circle the unprotected head. Harrison bobbed there for a moment, and Samir came, crying out with surprise.

"Love my captain," Samir repeated, curling up on his side as Harrison shuffled them around to get comfortable.

A little oil and they rocked together half the night, never fiercely enough to finish Harrison. The words of love, in English, Spanish and Arabic, flowed like wine and they were drunk on their own wit when Harrison fell asleep, still hard and still within his boy.

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Chapter 7

Fall came around again. The crew of the *Horizon* had been much reduced by hurricane season. Some of them had managed to get themselves killed portside. Others had found ships that suited them better. As summer ended, each trip of the long-boat into land brought fewer back than it had taken.

On October first, Collins called all remaining crew before him. Matthew Gibbs and Tobias had stayed. Stephan and Deering were both there. Will had met a girl ashore and been married in July. Adlai counted. Fifty out of a crew of eighty. He wrote up handbills promising pay and adventure to any brave enough to sail with the *Horizon*.

"We sail on Saturday the sixteenth, fully crewed or not," Collins announced. The men nodded and began making last minute preparations.

Late on the night of the fifth, Stephan appeared with three young black men in tow. "My nephews: Aaron, Jebediah and Habakkuk, recently escaped. I told them we were treated fairly here, and not as slaves."

Collins nodded. The young men each made their mark on the Ship's Articles and he put them under Stephan's command. "Welcome aboard."

On the sixteenth, the tide was perfect. The *Horizon* caught the tide and the wind, and sailed out of Bridgetown harbor. Collins saw Adlai cast one last look up the mountain at Breakfront, and silently promised himself that his man would

spend the next hurricane season within her walls. He watched as Adlai went about his duties without a second look.

The first cargo was rum, as always. They sailed it to Florida, only to discover upon reaching Ste. Genevieve, that the *Kestrel* had arrived with a larger cargo of dark Jamaican rum. It had sold fast, but now the market was glutted. Collins sent an unpleasant notice to Harrison and sailed for another town.

They turned a very small profit on the rum. Collins continued trying to be legal and respectable, but found his profits cut, and often the *Kestrel* in port before him with the same cargo, further undermining him.

So it went, through November and December and into January of 1804. No matter what cargo Collins planned, Harrison arrived first with a larger load. They took the smaller profits until, at last, Collins abandoned the idea of legal trade and began to watch the shipping lanes for treasure ships.

The days were long and pleasant, the sea and sky an endless blue and the sun warm but not burning. The work of the ship was easily done and one of Stephan's boys, Habakkuk, played the fiddle, which made for merry evenings. They were out of Curacao and lying in wait for the fat Dutch merchants that sailed from the city.

Collins stood at the rail one evening, watching Gibbs throw himself into an enthusiastic jig to the fiddle. "What do you think of Stephan's nephews?"

Adlai watched and finally said, "They are good men, Master Nathaniel. Better quality than most of the ruffians in the crew.

They are like their uncle, calm, good natured and hard working."

"I'm almost finished getting rid of the ones who still have loyalty to their old captain. Soon, the entire crew will be mine and not his. This summer helped the cleaning. Only a very few are left." He looked pointedly at Gibbs before heading to his own cabin. Night was falling. Adlai followed him.

The January moon was full and bright, which meant the "no lights above deck" rule would be no hardship. Most of the sailors would stay as long as Habakkuk was willing to play, and many would sleep on deck instead of in the dank crew quarters.

Adlai puttered about the cabin, putting away clothing, finishing the day's log, taking care of that which was his to do. Collins watched, loving these moments. Finally, Adlai closed the log and the accounts and looked up.

He finally asked, a question that had obviously been burning for a while, the question Collins had hoped wouldn't come. "How exactly did the *Golden Horizon* come to be yours? Why are the men still loyal to Harrison, after all these years?"

"I led the attack that netted Harrison this ship, so he gave her to me." He didn't really want to talk about this, or the other circumstances surrounding their parting. He'd shown Adlai the scar already. There was no sense ripping open the unseen ones to make them bleed.

Adlai raised an eyebrow. "He gave you a ship and you left him?"

"I left as fast as I could sail away." He began stripping out of his clothing, hoping to put an end to the discussion.

Adlai only looked more confused. "I do not understand, Master Nathaniel. Should a man give me a ship of my own, I would never leave him. It would cement my loyalty."

"Loyalty's damn hard to find out here. When you name a man a captain, he is free to do as he wishes. Harrison knew this. He took the chance that I would take the ship and run."

Adlai nodded, seeming to understand more. "And he resents that you did so."

"My years of service in and out of his bed were payment enough for the ship and the crew I took. Only half were his. I weeded out the former captain's and replaced them with my own. Now I'm nearly finished weeding out Harrison's."

Adlai nodded again. "I will not be sorry to see Gibbs go. Is Tobias to leave us? I was surprised when he returned."

"They decide by their own behavior." Collins lay back on the bunk, hoping Adlai would drop the subject before he had to say something. He'd never had to reprimand his lover, and didn't want to start; not as a lover, as Captain or especially as his master.

Adlai began undressing and lowering the lamps. He held his tongue, but the look on his face was that of a man dying to say something.

"Speak. What are you thinking?"

"It is not for me to bear tales about free men." Adlai put out the lanterns on the desk.

Collins smiled a bit. "What have you heard, Adlai? Whatever impropriety is just between us."

Adlai sat on the bunk and wrapped his arms around Collins' neck, not trusting anyone enough to speak above a

whisper. "Gibbs would return to Captain Harrison. He believes he would be welcomed if he could present the *Horizon* and all aboard her. Tobias merely tells me wild tales."

Collins simply nodded. It was a small ship and eighty men kept no secrets. Gibbs's plans were not news to his ears. And he had a good idea of the sort of tales Tobias had told.

Adlai clung a bit tighter and the whisper grew lower and almost frightened. "Is it true, beloved Nathaniel, that you once decided to see how much of a belaying pin would fit within him?"

"It is true, yes."

Adlai dropped his eyes, almost shaking. "I had thought it is a mere phantasm, concocted to frighten me."

"He was more than willing at the time," Collins reassured Adlai, his hands gentle on Adlai's hair and back, "but now he would turn it around and speak as if I attacked him with one."

"Was it pleasurable? For him, for you? Should I fear the same?" The last question came softly, almost wrenched from Adlai. Collins understood exactly how fast men's affections changed and how brutal they were when they did, and that Adlai feared the same treatment.

"I hope it was pleasurable for both of us. I meant it to be. No, I wouldn't do the same to you unless you consented to it, asked for it and handed me the belaying pin yourself."

Adlai strewed kisses over his cheek and ear, his desperate relief plain. "The master I know is not the same as the one Tobias speaks of. And I wonder which is the truth."

Collins tipped Adlai around for a full kiss. "Both are truth. I'm not a good man. But not without honor."

"You have been very good to me, Master Nathaniel." Adlai rose to meet the kiss, pressing against him, letting Collins feel his arousal. Collins shoved him back on the bunk and kissed him in earnest.

"Someday..." Collins said, kissing his way over Adlai's chest, "I'll teach you why Tobias asked for the belaying pin."

"It is long and smooth and would be pleasant," Adlai supplied, his voice thoughtful. "But it is very large, Master Nathaniel, and very hard. I have seen men killed with them."

"Yes. You'd have to trust very much the man who would use it on you."

Adlai untied the bow at the nape of Collins' neck and let the fine brown hair pour through his fingers like water. "My life is yours, Master Nathaniel."

At that, Collins rose and kissed him until they were both forgetting to breathe and broke apart gasping. Adlai looked up, still panting from the kiss, his eyes large with arousal. Bold, he ran a hand over Collins' crotch, grasping a hardness to match his own.

Collins smiled down. "Now you can have me, if you wish." He rolled them over until Adlai was atop him.

His uncertainty clear in his hesitant movements, Adlai unbuttoned Collins' shirt and licked his way down the smooth, bronzed chest. Collins made plenty of small moans and words of praise to encourage him. Since mastering his fear of choking or being hurt, he had become quite good.

Collins loved the fact Adlai seemed unable to get enough of the taste. And the feel of Adlai's mouth around his shaft, the way his tongue fit beneath the foreskin to caress the head, all

made Collins mad with desire. It was pleasant to lie with Adlai's head pillowed on his hip, Adlai not trying to finish him, but simply sucking and licking, playing as if with a boiled sweet that never grew smaller.

Collins lifted his legs, a question half formed on his mouth. Adlai moved around and lowered his mouth beneath Collins' stones.

He knew Adlai did not like this so well. El Beso Negro, it was commonly called, the Black Kiss. Collins hoped Adlai did it because he enjoyed it when it was done to him. Darker things whispered that he only did it because it was what his master and lover wanted.

Collins passed Adlai a flask of oil. Adlai's fingers were light, gentle, almost as if he were making love to a woman. He slid in slowly, this act a rare one. Collins enjoyed it, but Adlai was always uneasy when asked for it, always aware of their different status and color. This uneasiness put Collins off asking too often. Adlai was easy with the motions, though, never letting the discomfort make him jerky or rough.

Collins lay beneath Adlai for a time, and then rolled them again so he could ride Adlai as if posting on a horse. He saw Adlai stifle a laugh, and felt the look of absolute concentration on his own face, as he undulated like a dancing girl. Adlai peaked quickly, and with a low groan. Collins did the same, spending across Adlai's chest. Collins bent to kiss him and then licked his belly clean.

"Beloved Nathaniel." Adlai took the next kiss from him, letting it go deep and slow. "I am privileged to be your lover."

Collins smiled. "I know now why your father kept you. You are the sweetest thing."

"Being sullen and rebellious is of no use. There has never been anywhere to run." Adlai wrapped his arms around Collins' neck and kissed his forehead and cheeks.

"Would you like to run?" The thought had never occurred to him, not since the first day.

"When you first bought me I did. I wanted nothing more than to brain you with my chains and throw myself into the harbor. The waves sang of cool greenness and freedom that day. You were taking me from all I knew. I would never own my father's house, never even see it again. My life was shattered. Now, you are helping me regain all I lost, and I will be your Adlai until a musket ball takes me from you as we take a ship."

Collins stroked his face. "I could well take the musket ball and you become someone else's Adlai. Or your own man."

Adlai's gaze was blue ice, cold and intense. "No, I will be no other's." He curled into Collin's shoulder that still bore the scar of Harrison's rapier and kissed the mark. "We will have our dream, beloved, and no other captain, nor mutinying crew neither, will take it from us."

The next morning, Collins had a long talk with Stephan. By afternoon, Aaron has been assigned to learn gunnery from Gibbs and Jebediah was studying rigging and bilge pumps with Tobias. And from then on, Collins kept his own counsel, not even telling Adlai his plans. The *Horizon* made short trips, pleasure cruises almost, carrying small supplies and luxuries between the islands and staying near the main routes.

It was a warm March morning when Tobias sang out from the crow's nest. "Fleut to the North, flying Dutch colors!" Collins seized a spyglass and looked. The great ship was almost three times his size, and she was riding low and heavy. His mouth almost watered for her. A true treasure, one to gain them their dream, and appease the crew.

"All hands, battle-stations!" Collins shouted. Around him, his crew rushed for the rail, two dozen taking up position at the eight cannon on the port side. "Run up the Red!" His flag, a red field with crossed black swords, went up in place of the Union Jack. It wasn't Teach or Rackham's colors, but it was well known enough that the Dutch ship lowered her colors and closed her twelve gun ports as soon as her crew saw it.

"Wise man," said Collins. "Heave to, I will parlay with him. Such cooperation should not go unrewarded."

As they drew close, the crew threw over grappling hooks and drew them close to the fleut. Collins came to the rail and found the Dutch captain waiting for him. The crew was tiny, less than thirty for all the great size of the fleut. The captain's wife paced the upper deck, twisting a handkerchief and looking in great distress.

"Ahoy, *Horizon*," came the call, in mildly accented English. "We would like to live through this."

"Easily done, Captain." Collins swept his hat off his head in an elegant bow. "Load us with as much as we can hold of your gold and silver and we'll not harm a hair of you. And you can keep what we cannot carry."

Collins saw the other man's face work. "You may not harm us, but my backers will draw and quarter me if I sail in empty."

"A sail!" cried out Tobias from high above. "Running with a demon-skull on the black! The *Kestrel*!"

Collins saw her, so far on the horizon she looked like a toy. He pointed it out to the Dutch captain.

"Do you see the sail, far to the west? That is the notorious American, Thomas Harrison. He leaves no survivors. He'll gut your women, rape your men, shoot you out of your own cannon and then take all of your cargo." He showed the scar on his shoulder. "He did this when I would not come to his bed one night when we met in a tavern. Captain, my *Horizon* is not so large as the two of you. After loading me, you are still alive and have a portion of your cargo."

The Dutch captain looked through the spyglass. "Is your ship a match for him?" He was plainly thinking of his own twelve guns against Collins' sixteen and dreading that Harrison would have even more.

"Oh, aye. We've beaten him before. Load me quickly and you may yet make your escape."

The twenty Dutch sailors, free and slave alike, began forming a steady pair of lines, crossing the pair of gangways set between the ships. Collins oversaw the loading, taking note of how much he could hold and still not sink. They claimed only coin and gold, not the ships' stores nor anything of the crew's.

At last, Collins chased the foreign sailors from the *Horizon*, tipped his hat to the Captain's wife, and bowed to the

Captain. "I thank you for making this easy. You still carry almost half your cargo. May your journey be safe." He cut them loose and sailed southward as fast as his crew could tack to the wind.

The fleut headed east, back on her course. She traveled faster with her load lightened. The *Kestrel* seemed to hover on the horizon and at length tacked south to follow the *Golden Horizon*.

* * * *

Adlai was below, taking inventory and tallying their new wealth when the first volley hit. The silver soup spoon that buried itself in the oaken beam before him drew him up short. He ducked behind one of the casks of coin he was counting.

Above, the guns roared. More odd projectiles came through the hull. Harrison was going for everything, all the gold, the ship and Collins besides. Adlai made his way through the reeking water of the bilge, heading to the Captain's cabin where his pistols were. He did not go armed for simple inventory work, although he reproached himself for not doing so today.

As he came to the ladder, he saw Gibbs's fair face in the light of the hatch. "Adlai, quickly. Stephan sent me to fetch you. We need all hands. It's a grand fight." He spun and fired then slashed a bit.

Adlai knew Gibbs was not to be trusted, but climbed the ladder anyway. If they needed his poor shooting and cutlass-work, he would give them. He did not see the filthy bandana coated in oil of ether—stolen from the doctor's stores—until it

Kestrel on the Horizon
by Naomi Brooks, Angelia Sparrow

covered his face, the fumes making him giddy and unable to grip the ladder. Gibbs's hands were on him and he knew nothing else.

* * * *

Under the cover of battle, Gibbs handed Adlai over to Harrison's men and continued the fight, his shots wild and his cutlass doing no damage for all its ringing. He directed the infiltrators below, and they escaped with as much of the treasure as they could before Stephan caught them at it and single-handedly relieved them of their burdens before pitching them over the sides.

The battle raged until dark, Harrison pacing and swearing and shouting orders. The *Horizon* was outnumbered, but they fought fast and hard and dirty. Many of the *Kestrel's* sailors went down, and the *Horizon's* decks ran red with spilled blood. The powder smoke grew too thick to see, but Collins fired into it anyway, using it as cover until the wind blew it away. Harrison finally called for his men to cast off.

As they slipped away, the *Kestrel's* guns roared, and the knipple shot flew, along with iron bombs and the usual cannonballs. The knipple shot wrapped its chain around the single mast, breaking it, sending it crashing to the deck. Stephan dodged it but Deering was not so fortunate. He screamed as it landed on his legs. More shot turned the jib sails to rags and the rigging and ratlines fell in great tangles of rope.

The bombs exploded on deck, their fire raging in little circles before the beleaguered sailors could put it out. Tobias

and Jebediah were in range of one that exploded. Stephan howled with anger at his nephew's death and fired a last volley from the cannon at the retreating ship. Aaron and Habakkuk pulled the bodies away from the fire and got to work putting it out before it could catch the tar of the deck.

"Something to keep you from mischief, my love," Harrison called just before they were out of earshot.

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Chapter 8

Adlai woke to a thundering headache and a stomach that roiled. He rolled to the edge of the bunk, found the china pot and vomited copiously.

"So, you are among the living once again. Welcome aboard the *Kestrel*, Adlai. I hope you're not suffering overmuch from the ether." The voice intruded before his eyes were quite open.

The first thing he saw was a black velvet coat across the back of a chair. He knew who had spoken before he saw the face. He looked up. A handsome man sat in a large chair, holding a beautiful youth on his lap.

"Master Captain Harrison," he said, his voice weaker than he would have liked. "I thank you for what surely must have been a rescue from the sea into which I must have fallen. It is the only reasonable explanation for me being here."

He remembered Gibbs quite well and could surmise the rest. He would not tell his enemies this. "I trust you will be returning this salvaged piece of flotsam to Master Captain Collins as soon as possible?"

"What he give for an ugly slave?" asked Samir, never moving out of Harrison's lap. "How much he pay for you this time?"

"Samir..." Harrison's tone was indulgent even in reprimand. "That's no way to talk to our guest."

Adlai sat up, carefully. Better to be wary than comfortable. His clothing was intact. He had no weapons. He knew the

handsome pair before him were no good, that they would hurt him for the joy of it. He knew it would amuse Harrison to no end to ransom him back and hand over a corpse instead of a living man.

He managed to stand up without vomiting again, although the deck pitched alarmingly under his feet. He sketched a small bow to Captain Harrison and fought the residual wave of nausea from the ether and his motion.

"Master Captain," the words were as neutral as the day Collins had bought him. "Collins' Adlai is at your service until my master reclaims me." If nothing else, he had some dignity left.

"Pretty words. I wonder how much you mean them. If I give you to Samir, will you obey him?" Harrison ran a hand through Samir's hair and the young man arched under it like a cat.

Adlai kept his face neutral. "To a point. I will not harm myself nor allow myself to be harmed. My master's property is not to be damaged."

"You can have him, pet. Teach him what I like. I wonder what my 'Thaniel sees in him. Think you can find it for me?"

Samir slid off Harrison's lap and slunk close to Adlai. "Pretty eyes in an ugly slave. Pretty words, too. You show Samir what your captain sees and I'll not hurt." Samir's delicate hands teased at Adlai's braids and touched his dark skin.

Adlai thought for only a moment. Every hour he kept them from hurting or killing him was another hour his Nathaniel had to find him. He began stripping.

Harrison settled into his chair to watch. Samir's eyes were greedy as they played over Adlai's body. Adlai stifled a small sigh, feeling very vulnerable in front of wicked men. He was not so afraid of Captain Harrison. A Captain was a Captain and all were masters. But the cruel little pet was different. He could be trouble.

Samir ran his hand along Adlai's jaw and then scratched his face with his long, lacquered nails. Adlai faced him, doing his best to look unafraid.

"My master will not be pleased if you damage his property. You scratch like a woman, like a kitten. You purr like one, too, when your master strokes you." Adlai could not keep the scorn from his words.

"You will only see master again one time," Samir sneered. He ran his delicate fingers over Adlai's springy hair again, reaching up to do so. He was several inches shorter than Adlai.

"So you say. I say he will come for me and you will have cause to regret all your treatment." Adlai pulled away from under Samir's hand, remembering the night Samir had cut a braid.

Samir laughed at him. "Ugly slave."

"Vicious kitten," Adlai snapped back.

Samir laughed again and meowed obligingly. Harrison laughed softly from the big chair.

"I have sanctioned trespass on my master's property, but damage will not be tolerated," Adlai repeated, making sure the words were quite clear.

"You say such big words. You like your master. Think you better than everyone." Samir scratched down Adlai's back trying to draw a reaction from him. Samir was the one who yelled when Adlai spun and caught his wrists.

"In small, crude words then, for your small crude mind: you can fuck me, but you don't get to hurt me. I will hurt you back."

Samir pulled away, and Adlai let him go, only after squeezing Samir's wrist hard enough to make the point that he could do the promised harm. He met Samir's glare with a small bitter smile and the same calm. His eyes darkened when Harrison tossed Samir a cat o'nine tails.

Adlai took one blow from the spoiled favorite, then caught his wrist. Samir was small, but wiry and agile. He twisted free of Adlai's grip, and snarled at him. Adlai, stronger after a year of hard work at sea, wrenched the cat from Samir and threw it at Harrison's feet. "I said, you do not hurt me, little kitten."

Samir flew at him, his sharp nails going for Adlai's eyes. Adlai caught his wrists.

"A man may be owned, but he remains a man." Adlai pinned Samir's wrists behind him. "Enough claws. Or do I need to fight you to the deck? Go curl up at your master's feet, little kitten, let him pet you and feed you cream."

Harrison laughed again, obviously amused at them. "You do have some spirit then. Very well. Samir, enough."

Samir glared at Adlai but went still. Adlai let go of him and he darted away to where Harrison sat. Harrison beckoned Adlai closer. Adlai went, but stayed well out of reach of both men.

Harrison leaned in and stroked his face and ran an idle hand over his shoulder. "You will stay as our guest." He grinned when Adlai pulled out of his hands. "And Samir can have anything he wants from you, or I will tie you to the mast and let the crew have you until you beg for mercy."

"Not my eyes. He will not take my eyes."

Samir leaned over Harrison's shoulder. "I take your eyes after crew is done, if you not behave."

Adlai just stared at Samir, his face controlled and steady. Samir slipped out from behind Harrison's chair and approached him again.

Adlai repeated, as if for a very slow learner, "Little one, you are a free man. I will serve you until I am given back to my rightful master. But I will not let you harm me."

He was surprised when Samir leaned in for a kiss. The man's lips were soft and sweet. Adlai allowed it, even opening to Samir, but there was no passion behind it. Samir tasted sweet, slightly spicy, and Adlai knew he'd been chewing cloves.

The man was beautiful, Adlai had to admit, but Samir's beauty went no further than his skin. Inside, he was cruel and rotten. Knowing this, Adlai did not trust the kiss nor the lithe body that pressed against his own bared skin.

"Captain want to watch us," Samir whispered, rubbing his cheek against Adlai's hair. "I not hurt this time."

Adlai shot a glance at the Captain who nodded. "Lovely. Both of you so lovely. I want to see you."

"Do not harm my master's property and perhaps he will forgive the trespass," Adlai said to him.

Samir, his hands light, almost gentle, on Adlai's shoulders and chest, gave a soft snicker. "When he locked in brig for rest of life, it not matter anyway." He teased one dark nipple erect.

Adlai did not scowl. His face was a mask. "Do what you are going to do, little vicious one."

Samir pulled him to the bed. Adlai glanced at the captain and saw he was opening his own pants, looking amused. Adlai walked to the bed with his head high and sat on it, very deliberately. He wanted it clear that this was his choice, not a rape, not force. He would not be harmed by men in such a way again if he could avoid it.

He allowed all Samir did to him. He permitted the kisses, the touches. The little one was sensual and would have been a pleasant lover, if he were not so hateful. Samir knew many ways to please a man, but even his clever tongue could not coax an erection from Adlai.

Harrison watched them, looking thoroughly entertained by his Samir taking the dark one and then trying to arouse Adlai to take him in return. He stroked himself, watching the younger men on the bed, Samir's golden skin and Adlai's dark skin very beautiful against the white sheets. But Adlai's lack of response, even to Samir's best kisses, drove Harrison to softly swearing frustration and not him alone.

"Not even trying!" Samir snarled as he spat out Adlai's half-hard cock.

"Do you need some help, sweetness?" Harrison ventured, stretching as if tired of his own hand.

"I want to taste," Samir said.

Harrison rose and sat beside them on the bed. He stroked Adlai's hair and then Samir's. "Perhaps if I took him that would help. Mayhap we can manage your taste yet." Adlai tensed under Harrison's hands. "I will not hurt you. I know you are precious to my 'Thaniel. I merely wish to see what he has."

Samir moved away as Harrison prepared and then gently drew Adlai close and entered him easily, wrapping himself around Adlai's body. Harrison moved cautiously, trying to relax Adlai so he would be calm and enjoy himself. Once seated within Adlai, he beckoned Samir closer. "Taste him now."

Adlai lay quietly, remembering how different it all was with Collins. There had been no coercion, not even the night when Collins had done what Samir was doing now. Then he had been swept up in the moment, hard and wanting. Now, he felt himself hardening, but only because of Harrison's penetration. The enemy captain had found the sweet spot inside that Nathaniel loved to stroke in order to watch him make silly faces at climax.

Harrison reached around and stroked Samir's hair as they rocked together. Samir's tongue was working harder than ever and Adlai gave a small groan. He didn't want to spend for this pair. He didn't want the cruel little one to gloat. He closed his eyes as he gave himself up to the wave of release.

Samir swallowed, and then pulled away. He looked up at his captain and saw Harrison's head was thrown back and his breath was coming in short pants. He yanked Adlai forward and shoved Harrison onto his back. Adlai gave a small gasp

as he was vacated, then rolled onto his stomach and scooted to the edge of the bed.

Harrison opened his eyes and scowled. "I was close."

"My captain," Samir said. He rubbed more oil on Harrison and knelt over him. "Mine. You're not for him." He took Harrison in and smiled down at him, ignoring Adlai. "My captain. Not his."

Harrison pulled him down for a kiss. "My beautiful boy." He gave three hard thrusts and climaxed with a yell. Samir brought Harrison's hand down to stroke his own cock, apparently wanting his pleasure again. Once recovered, Harrison smiled at him and stroked him off.

Samir raked his nails down Adlai's back. "Lazy, dark and ugly. What you good for anyway?" Adlai didn't dignify this with an answer.

Harrison caught Samir's wrist and pulled him back down for a kiss. "Beautiful little one, did you not get your taste?"

"Yessss," Samir sighed.

"Then why are you trying to hurt him again? We want to send him back in good condition."

Adlai knew the lie was for his benefit. He knew he'd never see his beloved captain again, never have his home back. He was going to die here, at the hands of the cruel beauty and Harrison would keep laughing and smiling and reassuring him that he was going home. He wanted to curl into a ball and weep and rage. He wanted Nathaniel very, very badly. He lay still, his face buried in the sheets that reeked of Harrison's cologne, and wished himself away from the men.

"Why send back? Collins give up ship for him in ransom."

Harrison kissed him silent. "Just because he is dark does not mean he is a fool, little one. I do not tell all my plans in front of his ears."

Samir just smiled and Harrison kissed him again.

"So now what do we do with him? Bind him? Set him to work in the cabin? Send him to the galley for more work?"

"Tie him up." Samir rose and found a set of irons. "Make him work here until I hate the sight of him. Then to galley."

Adlai rose and submitted to being manacled with the same air of resignation. He pulled on his trousers and began tidying the cabin. Harrison lounged in the bed, watching him, much as Collins had their first night, but with curiosity and not as much desire. Adlai would show him nothing. Not desire, not anger, not fear.

* * * *

The *Golden Horizon* rode low in the water, looking like a ghost-ship. Collins oversaw lashing the mast back to a semi-vertical, and helped re-rig it so they could sail. Stephan and the French doctor, Marc, aided the wounded and saw to the dead.

Most of the crew was injured, but only in minor ways, cuts and powder burns, easily cleaned and cared for. The count was two dead, four missing—including Adlai—and Deering would only see the night out by luck or grace. Both his legs had been amputated. Aaron had helped, holding the cauterizing irons, and seeing the man under the ether had brought up an odd memory about which he approached his uncle.

By nightfall, the *Horizon* was ready to make for Curacao port. Collins issued double rum and beer rations, and retired to his cabin with a couple bottles of his own.

Had Adlai fallen overboard? He'd sent crewmen below to search where Adlai had been inventorying, but they had not found him. Was it possible he was lying dead or wounded and dying behind some cask or crate? A knock on his door, late, roused him from his contemplation.

"Come in."

"Pardon me, Captain. I don't mean to disturb you." Aaron, the largest of Stephan's nephews stood in the door, holding his hat.

Collins took another drink. "So why do you?" he slurred.

"My uncle says I need to speak with you about what I saw during the battle. It weighs on me, it does. And seeing Deering so only brought it back."

"What did you see, Aaron?" Collins asked, wishing he'd get to the point.

"Mate Gibbs, Captain, and your Adlai. Gibbs was carrying him, as if he was asleep or..." Aaron dropped his voice so as not jinx himself, "dead. Deering looked the same, he did, when the doctor worked on him."

Collins' face darkened. He'd long suspected Gibbs. Adlai had mentioned the man's treason, and now, Adlai was gone. His beloved *Horizon* was full of half-patched holes and had a broken mast that might not hold the sails for the wind. Gibbs would pay.

Aaron had to notice the change—Collins could feel his whole face contorting—but he went on. "I saw him hand Adlai

to two of the *Kestrel* sailors and go back to fighting. Yet, Mate Gibbs's sword did not draw blood, nor did his shots hit any one of the enemy."

Collins nodded. It all made sense. "Of course. He still considers himself a crewman of *The Kestrel*." He rose.

Aaron twisted his hat in his big hands. "I am sorry to be saying these things, Captain. My brother was lost in the fighting and I want to know he did not die for nothing."

Collins rummaged in the desk before clapping Aaron on the shoulder. He handed Aaron a small purse of silver. "I thank you for doing so. If you would send your uncle in to speak with me?"

Aaron looked flabbergasted at the largesse. "Thankee, Captain. Jebediah died free. And that is all I could ask for him." He bowed out and soon Stephan came in.

The big man was still powder burnt and bloody. "How may I aid you Captain? I almost have Jebediah and Tobias ready to be buried."

Collins stayed standing, doing his best not to rock with the ocean, not to show how much he'd had to drink as he lamented his ship and his lover. His voice was clearer now. "Pick the strongest and most loyal of your men and chain Gibbs to the four-pounder." He handed a set of irons to Stephan, who took them with a grim nod.

"Yes, Captain." The mate's perfidy was common knowledge and Stephan's dark smile said he was pleased to be finally remedying it. He beckoned Aaron and Habakkuk to join him. Gibbs fought every step, but was no match for the three big

men. He sat, sullenly, his wrists bound, his ankles chained round the mount of the foremost cannon.

Collins watched the whole procedure, but did not approach until Stephan alerted him that the chains were secure. He glared at Gibbs who maintained a look of innocence.

"What's the idea, Captain, setting those black savages on me and clapping me in irons?"

"If they hadn't and I had done it myself, you'd be meeting Davy Jones right now," Collins growled.

"For what? Not as if I was hiding below decks and not fighting, like your pretty poppet."

"Is that why you handed him to the *Kestrel's* men? And in all your fighting, you took no kills."

"What are you talking about? Your reason's been blown away with the powder smoke. And you're drunk to boot." Gibbs twisted his hands in the irons, seeing if he could escape them. This looked bad, very bad indeed.

"You were seen. Those black savages, as you call them, are my loyal men." Stephan loomed large in the darkness, holding a lantern.

"Because you cannot command the loyalty of real men? For that reason do you staff us with runaway slaves and barbarians?"

Collins ignored him. "Thank me for keeping you here instead of throwing you to the sharks. You may yet survive this."

Gibbs put on his most innocent face. "I've done nothing. When you see reason and let me out of these, I will call for

elections by our articles. I will show the men what a dictator you are, worthy only of a flogging and not a captaincy."

"Call for them. I have more loyal to me now than to you or to Harrison. And should I lose, I expect Stephan would be elected."

Stephan loomed out of the darkness. "My nephew is dead because of you, traitor. Thank the captain for his mercy. As I am quartermaster, there will be no elections."

Gibbs sneered at them both and said no more. Collins left quickly, tempted to do a one-man keelhauling and knowing he'd regret it. Stephan followed him.

"I am sorry for your loss, Captain." Stephan hesitated a moment. "Will you speak over my boy? Or shall I do it in the morning?"

Collins sat down heavily and had another drink. "I will do it. His is a great loss to the ship. A strong and loyal pair of hands and a desire for freedom."

Stephan looked up at the stars, just visible through the captain's window. "Thank you. Jebediah was a good boy. He deserves a Christian burial."

Collins laughed. "I have much more sway with the devil, but I'll do my best."

Stephan pulled another bottle of rum from his coat and set it on the table. Collins poured for himself and passed over a mug. Stephan sat heavily in the chair Adlai usually occupied. He picked up the second mug and poured himself some. "I killed him, Nathaniel. I helped him and his brothers escape. I brought them here. I set his death in motion as surely as the man who loaded that bomb."

He seemed to ignore Collins' head-shaking. "You have lost your Adlai. We will regain him. Then we will make Thomas Harrison pay in blood for blood." Stephan flexed his giant fists as if imagining tearing the other captain limb from limb.

"He will know our pain before this is through," Collins swore.

Stephan nodded again, still grim-faced. He rose. "We need a mast. We need the sails repaired. It will take a great deal of time before your beloved ship is seaworthy. Then we hunt the *Kestrel*."

Collins finished his own bottle of rum and started on Stephan's. "Thankfully we're not too far out of port."

"Two days, if the wind and the lashing hold. And all is cheaper in Curacao. I will oversee her repairs. There is still Gibbs to deal with."

"Let him rot," Collins sneered, draining off his cup and pouring more.

"At least we are spared doing it twice. I will chain him to the bilge pumps and make him work until he drops."

"Splendid idea." Collins was well on his way to becoming thoroughly drunk and barely noticed when his quartermaster left. In the morning, he had a large head, but was not sick. He mumbled through the funerals for Jebediah and Tobias, and then returned to his bed. He spent the day missing Adlai and contemplating Gibbs and Harrison and all the wreck of his life.

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Chapter 9

The *Horizon* limped into Curacao port, the lashed mast leaning precariously under the weight of the single sail. The crew slept in five hour shifts, manning the bilge pumps and bailing hard to keep themselves above water. Collins had the crew drop anchor in the shallowest water the *Horizon* could enter without running aground.

He went ashore with Stephan to find shipwrights and carpenters. Once settled, they rowed the *Horizon* into dry-dock and went ashore. Collins kept Gibbs under lock and key, putting him entirely in Stephan's hands.

"When we are seaworthy again, we maroon him," Collins said. "Until then, keep him close and never out of your sight." He parceled out what should have been Gibbs' share to Stephan. "I know I don't have to tell you to feed him. You're a good man. I'm not sure I'd be so merciful."

The repairs took weeks. A tree of proper height and thickness had to be found and felled and fitted as the new mast. The cannonball holes had to be patched. The sail had to be mended and the ropes checked over. The Dutch money that paid for the repairs began to run low for all of the crew before the end of them. Even Collins, who was using it for no more than lodging, food and drink, found his purse too light for his liking. He drank far too much. There was no night when he went to bed sober.

At last, the wrights were finished. The *Horizon* sat in the water, as beautiful as she had ever been, sporting a new

mast, all holes repaired. Collins looked her over, his eyes misting. His lady had been revived from a near-mortal wound. Now, to save his man from mortal peril and avenge them both on Harrison's gormless hide.

They put out to sea, heading into the multitude of tiny, uncharted islands at the eastern reach of the Caribbean. Once they had spotted a likely one, Collins had Gibbs freed from his shackles and brought on deck. Stephan manhandled him into a boat and set a loaf of bread, a skin of water, a pistol with powder and a single shot in with him.

"He is ready, Captain. Pronounce upon him." Stephan stood at the rail, a great statue carved of ebony, implacable and immovable.

"Matthew Gibbs, you have handed a crewman over to the enemy. You have showed cowardice in battle. And that is mutiny against your captain and crewmates by the very Articles you set your mark to when you came aboard."

"Says the traitor who cut and run the second he got his own ship," Gibbs yelled, his face twisted until it was no longer beautiful.

"I was made Captain, and that was my right," Collins said stiffly. The old argument with himself was not one he wished to have in public with a mutineer.

Gibbs stood up and looked around at all the sailors, seeking help in their faces. Collins knew he would find no help. There were none left that had sailed on the *Kestrel*. Tobias had been the last, and he was dead these many months. Collins had replaced all of the others, and the new ones were loyal to him.

"Did what I did in the name of the true captain of the ship. More loyal to him than you ever was, for all he loved you better." Gibbs straightened his shirt and put his chin high.

Collins' handsome face flushed an ugly brick color. "You speak of things you know nothing about."

Gibbs gave an ugly laugh. "Oh, I know. Wasn't I the fo'c'sle watch? Didn't I hear you in his bed more nights than not? Right loud you were, and not the sounds of no man in pain, neither. Didn't I listen to him sigh and pine on nights you was cool to him?" Collins turned his back, but Gibbs continued, the damaging truths pouring from him in a poisonous torrent that Collins could no more stop than the flow of a river. "Didn't I hear his talk in the slow watches? Of how handsome you were, how perfect? How he adored you? And when you left, I went with you, to get you back for him someday."

Stephan cut the longboat's mooring line and shoved it away from the sloop with an oar. "Your loyalty should taste very nice in about a week, Mr. Gibbs."

Gibbs glared up defiantly, his beautiful face set in harsh lines. "I done my duty by my captain, Thomas Harrison. Call it mutiny if it makes you happy." He reached for the oars and headed for the small island on the horizon. "God knows the truth and you'll freeze in hell beside Judas and Brutus, you will, Nathaniel Collins."

"He makes a point," Collins whispered.

"He has no point, Captain. He sold a crewmate to a sworn enemy and now seeks only to disquiet your mind." Stephan turned to the crew and barked, "We hunt the *Kestrel*! Our

heading is west-northwest." As the crew went for rigging and lines, he followed Collins below.

Stephan loomed in the doorway of Collin's cabin, and watched his captain open a bottle of brandy—his second bottle of the day—and pour a drink. "We'll get him back, Captain." His voice went soft, gentle for such a large man. "I do not love men, yet I have some understanding of your feeling for him. I would do much to have him back safely. I am fond of Adlai."

Collins nodded. His smile was small and wan. "Thank you."

"We will find him, Captain. I swear we will hunt the *Kestrel* if it takes a thousand years." Stephan left to take the wheel. Collins shuddered at the sound of that. Rash vows were how men became damned to sail the seas aboard ghost ships, chasing things that no longer existed, burned by St. Elmo's fire and eaten by plague as Van Der Decken's crew aboard the *Dutchman* had been when he swore they'd round the Cape of Good Hope if it took until Judgment Day.

Collins put thoughts of curses and ghost ships out of his head as he killed the bottle and laid his head on his arms. He tried not to think of what Harrison would put Adlai through or the price his former captain would demand. Horrific images intruded until he wanted to weep. He threw the brandy bottle at the wall with an oath and watched it shatter, then followed it with an empty rum flagon and more curses.

Harrison was going to pay for this outrage. If Adlai was hurt, he would pay double. Rivalry, plundering and insults had not been enough. This had gone too far. He straightened his hat and his coat and went above to relieve Stephan.

* * * *

Adlai found that cleaning up after two men, especially two such careless ones, was a far greater chore than caring for his Nathaniel. His captain was tidy and hated clutter. Samir, on the other hand, seemed to delight in making messes just to give him more work. Collins had always been discreet as well, keeping their embraces from sight of the crew. Harrison treated him as furniture and had no qualms about enjoying Samir when Adlai was working in the cabin.

Samir often cornered him, sometimes touching him in secret ways, sometimes scratching him hard enough to break the skin, always telling him of the horrors he would inflict very soon. He would do it all, once Harrison gave the word that he might. Once he decided that Adlai would be no more use to them.

Sometimes, he told Adlai how it would be once they took the *Horizon* and her crew. How they were going to tie him to the mast then, flog him bloody and let every man who wanted him have him while Collins watched. How they would blind Collins and set him to working the pumps until he died of despair and hunger. Adlai never desired to ask what his fate was to be should he survive the tortures. He suspected he was not supposed to survive.

Adlai worked. He watched. He waited. He stayed out of the way as much as he could and dreamed of his beloved Nathaniel at night. By day, he was alert, always aware he was in enemy territory, always keeping an eye on routines and plans.

There was no good way to escape a vessel in the middle of the ocean, even if Harrison did leave him mostly alone, noting his work, but not praising or chastising. Samir stayed busy and his captain kept him satisfied. Neither had touched Adlai since the first night.

This day, it was midafternoon when Harrison returned to the cabin. "Go see the quartermaster for an assignment, Adlai. Swab the decks or something. I'm tired of you underfoot." Adlai fled to the clean air above, his last sight that of Harrison drawing Samir onto his lap.

* * * *

Harrison kissed his boy and looked at the door Adlai had just shut. He whispered, "Tell me, little one. Tell me all you want to do to Captain Collins' lover. I want to send him back loving me. I want his loyalty. I want my own spy in my rival's bed."

Samir looked irritated and jealous. "He refuse to be broken. You never turn him into your creature."

Harrison nuzzled in Samir's hair, not missing the sulky tone in Samir's voice. "Every man breaks, sweet. We just need to find his weak spot." He was all too aware Samir was his own weak spot.

From the way he cuddled closer and kissed him, Samir knew it too. Harrison suspected Adlai might be the same for Collins. But where Adlai's own weakness might lie, he had no idea.

"Beautiful boy," Harrison whispered, stroking his hair. "So very sweet. Did you enjoy our guest? I certainly enjoyed watching."

Samir nodded and trailed his nails over Harrison's chest. "A little." His voice was grudging, seemingly unwilling to admit he was jealous of a slave. He busied himself undoing Harrison's shirt and buried his face in the hair of Harrison's chest.

Harrison's hands roamed over Samir, opening his clothing as well; their touch greedy, unable to get enough of the smooth golden skin beneath them. "Would you like to have him again, or shall we just work him more?"

"I'm bored of him." Samir looked sulky. This intensified into a full pout at Harrison's next words.

"I want more of him. I want him for mine." He kissed the pout off Samir's face. "You'll always be my love. I just want him as a pawn."

Samir's pout turned to a wicked smile. He nodded slowly. "You break him, Captain. Send him back your toy and not Collins'."

"That is the idea, little love. What do you want to do with him, sweet?"

"Scar him." Samir's fingers drifted to his shoulder where a single half-circle marred his skin. A souvenir from a run in with a Barbary coast pirate, it was the only mark that marred his perfect skin. Harrison knew Samir resented it and the man who had struck him hard enough to leave it. Samir ran his fingers along the scar on Harrison's face when his captain lowered his mouth to kiss his scarred shoulder.

"An interesting idea. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a scar for a scar." Harrison licked the scar on Samir's shoulder and then smiled nastily. He had his own grudges. "Perhaps I should let you have your way, all unfettered. Let you torment him and then I can become his safety, the one who limits you, who stops you from the horror." He kissed Samir's small smile. "How evil can you be, pet?"

Samir ran his long nails over Harrison's face and then began sharpening them. "You should know." He licked one lacquered talon with a sly smile.

"Show me, love. You may not permanently maim him. Otherwise, he is yours to hurt." He watched Samir toy with his nails. "Just don't use those on me, sweet."

"I use them on you. But you enjoy." Samir finished stripping off Harrison's shirt and ran his nails lightly over his captain's back, scratching just enough to be pleasant.

* * * *

The following afternoon, Samir caught Adlai alone in the cabin, folding clothing. Adlai barely looked up in acknowledgment and moved on to stacking the goblets that had been left lying around from the loot.

"Undress, ugly slave," Samir commanded.

Adlai tipped his head to the side and looked at him. "And why should I?" He took orders from Captain Harrison willingly enough, but despite having been given to Samir, he didn't plan to obey the nasty kitten quite so willingly.

Samir shook out the whip he'd been holding behind him. Adlai sighed and caught his wrist. The little one was nothing if

not predictable. Adlai was in no mood to taste a five-tailed cat across his skin.

"We have learned this lesson once and twice. Do you require a third? You do not hurt me."

"I do what I want," Samir snarled. "My captain feed you to the sharks if you not obey me."

Adlai twisted Samir's wrist until he dropped the whip. "Very well. As long as the guidelines are established." He began undressing. He waited, naked, before Samir.

Samir snarled at him as he circled. Adlai stood straight, his head high and proud. He knew the look of it on a slave galled Samir.

"Want to see you beg," Samir hissed and ran his sharp nails over Adlai's groin. "Your master think Samir a eunuch. Maybe we send you back one." Samir let Adlai feel his nails, pressing hard enough to break the skin of his stones. Samir left off scratching and grabbed the whip to lay it hard across Adlai's shoulders. When Samir drew back for the second blow, Adlai was facing him. Adlai wrenched the whip away again.

"A third lesson. This time you taste the leather." Adlai held the whip and loomed as much as his slightly greater height allowed.

"Not from you." Samir shot him an arrogant, superior look.

Adlai glared. He'd seen that look on enough faces during his life. "Care to wager, little kitten?" He snapped the whip, just lightly, across Samir's back, wanting to erase the look.

Samir yelled and clawed at his chest and Adlai slapped him hard. He took advantage of Samir's stunned look to grab his wrists. He lashed them together with the tail of the whip.

"I can fight. I am stronger and larger. If you continue, I will pin you down and give you all you plan to give me." He laid a swat on Samir's rear. "All you plan," he emphasized, hoping Samir would not see through his bluff. He was quite sure he could not take an unwilling person.

"You not dare. I'm free." Samir squirmed. He heard the threat.

Adlai's smile was very white in the gloom. "We are alone in the cabin. Who is to know? And if you tell, who will believe it?" He let Collins' most ruthless, mirthless grin spread over his face.

"My Captain believes me," Samir protested. He sounded less sure now than when he had come into the cabin.

"He will ask then what you did to me. I will show him whip welts and scratches. And I will tell him you enjoyed it. He knows you want me."

"You think he care more for your scratches or mine?" Samir sneered.

"Put no more on me and I will put none on you." Adlai idly raised his hand, flexing the fist and making sure Samir saw how strong his forearm was. "Cross me and I will see how much of my arm fits into your body."

Samir twisted his wrists, working, trying to free himself. His face wrinkled in shocked revulsion. "Disgusting."

"So says the man who does not mind beating and raping another who is at his mercy. Know that I will tell your Captain it was your idea. That you asked for three and four, and more, and you did not stop begging me for more and more,

saying he had not enough to fill you adequately and you longed for the Egyptians and corsairs of your youth."

Samir twisted out of the whip, left it on the floor and fled the cabin. Adlai knew he had reinforced the lesson that he was neither stupid nor docile. Since Samir could not bully him, he would have to take a different approach. Adlai dreaded learning what it would be.

* * * *

Samir was sitting on the rail, puzzling out his next plan when Harrison found him.

"Trouble, pet?"

Samir scowled. "Slave is disgusting pig."

"Indeed? I find him upsettingly tidy. I haven't seen my snuffbox in days." Harrison sat on the rail next to him and watched the sun set a little farther.

"On second shelf, next to pipe you cannot smoke on ship," Samir said without even thinking about it. He returned to the topic. "He threaten me, and laugh."

"He threatened you?" Harrison looked very startled at the idea of Adlai threatening anyone at all. "What did he say he'd do? And why did he say he'd do it?" He put an arm around Samir and pulled him closer.

"It not matter. He not try anything." Samir rubbed a chafed place where the whip had marked his wrists.

"It matters. Is he planning to harm you?" Harrison looked genuinely worried. "You're stronger than you look, but it seems he is as well. If he does mean you harm, you won't go to him alone. I'll watch."

Samir shook his head. "All just talking. I go back tomorrow and he not talk so high and mighty when I finish."

"Enjoy yourself, sweetness. I will watch you again soon." Harrison stole a kiss after making sure that the rest of the crew could not see them, and went back to sailing his ship.

Samir would do his work on Adlai and then Harrison would do his own. Samir smiled nastily and picked a splinter from the rail. Adlai would be returned to Collins as a spy. The whole ship had already heard word of Gibbs' marooning and Tobias' death. His captain needed someone aboard the *Horizon*, and a boy in Collins' bed would just be the final delicate touch on a perfect plan. Samir tossed the splinter into the water. Sometimes, his Thomas was almost as clever as a civilized man.

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Chapter 10

Collins put in at every port from Cuarcas to Tortuga, Barbados to Hispaniola and even as far as Cuba and La Florida, all the places the *Kestrel* was known to berth. He asked of the ship in every port, questioning everyone from port masters to tavern keepers to porters and slop boys.

It took a month to glean the first word of the ship. It was as if Harrison had gone to ground, hiding out. In Hispaniola, he learned he had missed the *Kestrel* by two weeks. In Cuba, it was a week. On Jamaica, it was two days.

At the Spotted Dog tavern in Rocky Point, he heard the first word of Adlai. Harrison had come ashore, a young man on each arm, one black, one golden. They had all dressed well, eaten at the best restaurant. Word had it Harrison spent freely, indulging every whim of his two beautiful boys.

"Right cheeky they was, Captain. Had to throw 'em out for making a spectacle. One'd kiss him then the other. I expected them to get right to it there at the table, so I put a stop, I did." The doubloon made the landlady talkative.

"You're sure the black man had blue eyes?"

"Oh aye. Don't forget a thing like that. Handsome, narrow chin, smart. Lots and lots of hair. The other was almost like a girl, but no good girl would be so shameless as he was."

Collins added a few more pieces of silver to her hand, his heart breaking. Adlai, well dressed on Harrison's arm. Adlai, eating, laughing and kissing their enemy. Faithless. The word

rang in his head. What if Harrison had freed Adlai? Freed him and won his heart and loyalty so?

It was Nassau where he found the *Kestrel* at berth. Collins bullied and hectoring the crew to near-mutiny getting there before the *Kestrel* could leave.

Stephan had finally taken him below with a bottle and pried the whole tale from him. Collins knew that Stephan worried about how much he was drinking. Collins was not a drunk, but did lean heavily upon the bottle when hurt. This time, the wound could not be reduced with bandages and sewing.

"My Adlai," Collins mumbled into his cup. "Faithless, false as water, as false as the blue water of his eyes. He laughs at Thomas' table. He kisses his captor."

Stephan poured another drink. "Nathaniel," he said. Collins started at the sound of his name. Stephan, the most formal of men, never used it. "Nathaniel, there is a reason. Your heart knows this. You know his heart. You know you hold it as surely as if it resided in that ring you wear." Stephan pointed to a large gold ring with a hinged top, an Italian prisoner's ring, one of Collins' first spoils and his lucky piece.

Collins turned it on his finger, and flipped it open to show it was empty. "What man can love one who holds him bondage? Thomas would not keep him so."

"He knew it was only for six years, Nathaniel. Six years to pay for his purchase."

"If I get him back, bugger that. He's free. I want him with me of his own will and not out of law and ownership."

As he had said too many times over too many drinks, Stephan repeated, "We will find him."

The words held no comfort now. "But will he want to return to me?" Collins whispered to the rum.

* * * *

Adlai was many things, but never stupid. He knew Harrison and Samir's game from the day Samir had beaten him in the galley and Harrison had bandaged him. He'd played it himself more than once, using his very large half-brother Franco to intimidate a recalcitrant Breakfront servant while he himself played the calm voice of sweet reason, saving them from harm.

He understood Harrison wanted revenge on his master for Collins' departure six years earlier. He understood the revenge was to take the form of his devotion. He also knew the best way to end the game was to give Harrison at least the seeming of what he wanted. As Samir's cruelty had steadily grown, he clung ever more tightly to the enemy captain.

Finally, one night, gritting his teeth and thinking of nothing but his Nathaniel, he got Harrison alone in his cabin during a bandaging and comfort session. Samir had been especially brutal, having found a tiny toy dagger that he sharpened and used on Adlai. It had not cut deeply, but he had bled all the same. He turned his face to Harrison and kissed him.

"Please, Master Captain," he whispered, "please don't let the little one have me again." He bent in close, his breath brushing Harrison's ear and neck. "I'll be good. I'll be yours."

"Will you now? Anything I want?" Harrison's voice sounded unsure, but his arms around Adlai were strong and squeezed a little more.

"Everything." Adlai considered sitting on Harrison's lap as Samir did, but decided he would feel silly. He simply leaned closer, pressing his cheek to Harrison's face. He offered himself for another kiss, which Harrison claimed forthwith. "You have been kind since I have been in your keeping."

"You can't give yourself away, you know," Harrison said. "I hold no title on you. If I did, I'd have freed you long since."

"Possession, Master Captain, is nine-tenths of the law. I am on your ship. I am in your cabin." Adlai's voice was sweet and soft, the wind in the palm trees, the waves on the shore.

"That makes you mine, then, does it? I don't keep slaves."

"Not even an indentured servant, paying for his passage?" Adlai let his breath drift over Harrison's lips again.

"We can agree to that. Mine, eh?" Harrison pulled him down for that kiss he'd been offering, making it slow and deep. Adlai steeled himself to return it, his mind fixed solely on his own captain. Harrison's hands were greedy, intruding under his clothes. He allowed them with no protest.

After that, he endured, keeping up the act, keeping his eyes and ears open. In time, he feigned adoration so that Harrison would believe he was falling in love. He played the attentive lover, the devoted servant, until Samir bristled with jealousy. It was hard, growing harder by the day. All he had left was hope.

Nathaniel will come for me today. He began the day whispering those words inside his head, whether his body lay

under the weight of Harrison's arm, or with the myrrh and sandalwood of Samir's hair entangling him. Each morning was greeted with that same unspoken promise.

Each night, as the others slept, he wished on any star he could see—like a child—that tomorrow, surely, Nathaniel would come for him.

The evening at the restaurant had been harder than he had expected, having to act in front of other people. He had known Nathaniel would hear of it, and he knew it would break his captain's heart. That was worst of all.

"Today in truth, tomorrow for certain." The hope wore thin with three months' passing, until he repeated it only out of habit, like a child mouthing prayers he did not understand.

* * * *

It was the Black Galleon, where Collins found his quarry.

Once anchored, he had wasted no time rowing ashore to check taverns and inns. In a private dining room, Harrison sat in a back booth, well hidden from prying eyes. Samir curled into one side of him, feeding him and kissing in between bites. Adlai sat in the circle of his other arm, holding his cup and whispering to him. Collins flung open the doors of the room, blood in his eyes.

"Thaniel!" Harrison had drunk deeply and was quite cheerful. "Come join us. There's plenty."

Collins saw Adlai flinch and noticed his lover would not meet his eyes. He slid into the chair and looked over the table, trying to pretend to be civilized, when all he wanted to do was gut Harrison then and there.

Samir uncoiled himself from Harrison's side, and sliced some of the fresh bread. He ladled out some stew for Collins and gave him a sly nod and a flirtatious smile. Adlai never moved and it looked as if Harrison tightened his arm a little around him.

Collins ignored the food. "You have one of my crewmen hostage on your ship. I've come to claim him."

"Are you a hostage, sweet?" Harrison asked, kissing Adlai. Collins ground his teeth but he did not miss the way Adlai's smile did not reach the cold blue eyes.

"I have been well treated, Master Captain." Adlai's answer was directed at both captains.

"What will you give me for your 'crewman'?" Harrison's twist on the word was ugly. "What is he worth? Do you even want to go back, pet?" he asked Adlai.

"It's better to have one to myself than share with another," Adlai said, sounding almost bored, as if there were no other difference between the men. Collins tried not to scowl.

"Greedy boy," Harrison kissed him again. "A true privateer. Fine. Go back to your beloved Nathaniel. Don't think I didn't hear you talk in your sleep. He's taught you to be as ungrateful as he is."

Adlai pressed close against Harrison. Collins worked to keep the pain off his face at that. He wasn't sure he felt generous enough to let Adlai explain. "I thank you for all the hospitality, Master Captain Harrison. May you have fair winds." He kissed Harrison one last time and rose to sit beside Collins.

"No, no, Samir, take him to his ship and return to ours. I'll come back when negotiations finish."

Samir took a final bite of bread, kissed Harrison almost sullenly, and stood up. He wrapped one arm around Adlai, to Collins' surprise. He wondered if it was all an act. The last time he'd seen them, it had been mutual loathing between them.

"Such a sweet pair. Once I taught Samir that Adlai was much sweeter willing than screaming, they got on like a house afire. The pair of them in the same bed would make the angels weep for pleasure."

"All to your good fortune, they've been making you weep?" Collins' mood was growing fouler by the minute. He didn't want to hear that Adlai had been willing. "Name your ransom."

"What would you give?" They both knew that the first man to name a price in any negotiation had already lost.

"Five hundred twenty-five pounds, what I paid for him the first time." Collins' voice was strained. It was most of their savings. Worse, he was no longer sure Adlai was worth it.

"Is that all?" Harrison rose to go. "Maybe I'd better catch the boys before they get far and send them both back to the *Kestrel*."

"No. Name your ransom. No more games." He had to have Adlai back. He had to know, had to understand what he'd just seen.

"Fifty louis—double, mind—and you for the night. Be grateful I don't want that leaking scow you call a ship." Harrison leaned in closer. "You'd give it for him, wouldn't you,

'Thaniel? You love him. You love him, but you keep him in chains for fear of losing him."

Collins just glared. He wasn't going to admit Harrison was right.

Harrison laughed nastily. "Oh, 'Thaniel, my boy, when will you learn? That sort can't love any more than an animal can. Neither of our boys has the higher sensibility of a real man, for all their beauty and skill."

"You don't love Samir," Collins realized. "For all your words, you don't love him, do you? You indulge him and spoil him, like a child or a pet, but that's all he is. And tonight, you want a man." He saw his words were true and having the desired effect of raising Harrison's anger.

"Pay the second half, and I'll claim the coin in the morning." Harrison's eyes were flashing with fury, their storm-grey color looking as dangerous as hurricane clouds. "I have a room upstairs."

Collins simply rose. He would not let Harrison see how furious he was in his own right. Fury over Adlai and disquiet from the gibes left him foul tempered as they climbed the stairs.

Once in private, Harrison seated himself and pulled off his high boots. Collins stood near the door and only approached when Harrison beckoned. When he was in range, Harrison pulled him down for a kiss. Collins tasted the rage and despair and loneliness of six years all poured into the kiss. He did not respond.

"'Thaniel, do you want the boy back?" Exasperation and anger rode together in the question. "If you think to cheat me

by simply offering yourself up with no pleasure, the bargain will change." Harrison drew him down again. "If you cannot enjoy me, at least perform convincingly. As you so often did in the last year you shared my bunk."

"You knew." It wasn't a question.

"I knew. And I loved you all the more for the pretense. It told me you did not wish to hurt me by outright rejection, despite your lack of pleasure." Harrison ran a slow hand over the side Collins' face. "I went to even greater exertions to please you then. Was there ever a time when you loved me?"

Collins shook his head. They were past the need to lie to each other. "Never," he said. "When you took me from a fishing boat, like a pirate in an old story, a handsome American rogue, you appealed to my boy's heart. As I became a man, you would not allow my maturing." He moved out of Harrison's touch. "That's why you adore Samir. He is small and slim and hairless, like the boy I could not remain."

Harrison's eyes narrowed. "Nobody mounts me. Not ever." His face had bent into a scowl.

"So you said often enough in later years when I asked." Collins began stripping down, businesslike and wanting it to be done. "That's the difference between us. I do not mind lying beneath my lover when I know I will have the top as well."

"I'm pleased," Harrison sneered. "For you know, you will be beneath me tonight."

Collins gave a half smile. "Thomas, you'll never change. Your pleasure focuses solely on your prick and you exclude all the rest of the sweet places."

This time, he bent in for the kiss demonstrating all the sensual places of the mouth. Thomas still kissed as if devouring a particularly juicy piece of fruit, but his desire was clear and strong. Collins would wager Samir had never tasted that. Almost against his will, he found the kiss sparked a matching desire within him.

"There's my own sweet 'Thaniel that I've missed so," Harrison whispered, kissing him again. He sighed. "What would it take to have you back, my love?"

Collins pulled away. "Equality. I am a man, your equal and your boy no longer."

"My boy is exactly what you are tonight!" Harrison snapped, shattering the illusions the kiss had created between them. "We're a pair of fools, but I'm a greater one. Let's get on with this." He stood and shed his coat and waistcoat, shirt and trousers. Collins had forgotten how hairy Harrison was, arms and legs downed with coarse hair, chest covered and the line trailing down his belly. Collins felt naked next to the intimidating man's body. His own was a different sort, clean-limbed, strong and smooth.

Collins tossed aside his trousers and sat on the bed. He could not resist a last taunt. "This is what you resort to now to get someone into your bed?"

Harrison shrugged. "With you there seems to be no other way. You always chose the most difficult path." He joined Collins on the bed, and ran a slow hand over his chest. "Smooth as I remembered."

"Well, you have me now." Collins' face was set and the earlier desire had fled.

Harrison moved closer and cupped his face. "My own sweet one, it will not be so dreadful." He kissed Collins, sensual and slow, tasting him as he pressed him back to the sheets. The kiss had Collins half-hard before it ended.

Harrison stroked him. "There, you see? It knows what you like." At Collins' soft sigh, Harrison kissed him again. "That's my boy. Relax and enjoy it." He shifted them until they lay naked, side by side. "Never thought I'd have to reassure you like a virgin after all these years."

Collins tried not to bristle too much at the "boy" reference. He succeeded in not tensing up. "I don't need reassurance." The words were sharper than he'd planned.

Harrison kissed him. "Take it anyway. It's a rare enough thing from me, as you know." His hands were surprisingly gentle. They remained greedy, heavy on his smooth skin, as if there would never be enough of it to touch. But the touches were given, Harrison obviously wanting pleasure from Collins as much as his body.

The smell, the touch, the voice, he knew all of these; they formed some of his best and worst memories. He was nineteen again, a virgin learning the pleasures of men. He was twenty-three, asking to be on top for the first time. He was twenty-seven, taking it the last time, the night before he took the *Horizon*. And he cried out as Harrison's hands brought him to a peak, as they always had.

He was relaxed when Harrison rolled him onto his side and curled in behind him. Harrison's hands were still busy on his chest and belly, and he could feel Harrison's hardness pressing into his cleft.

"Would it be easier face down?" Harrison whispered.

Collins, not yet ready to be treated like a lover, rolled onto his stomach and pillowed his head on his arms. Harrison kissed all of Collins' neck and shoulders and arms he could reach. Collins smelled the sea and tar of the ship, and the cologne and powder the other captain favored..

Harrison found the small vial of oil and prepared, carefully. The scent of spices filled the little room, mixing with the rest. He pressed in, slowly. Collins remembered the feeling of this, and tried not to tense. The invasion was slow and careful, and it was not Adlai. He reminded himself of that.

"My 'Thaniel." Harrison kissed his neck again, and Collins moaned beneath him, almost inaudibly.

"Captain..." The word was a soft gasp.

Harrison buried his face in his shoulder, and Collins felt the dampness around his eyes. "You witch my senses, 'Thaniel. I would stay within you forever if I could."

Collins buried his face in the pillow. He didn't want to be here, didn't want to be feeling like he did, not the tension in his gut nor the ache in his balls. Most especially not the yearning for Thomas to make good on his desires. He didn't want to be wanting this, wanting the sensations, the kisses as much as he did. He shifted a bit, pressing back against Thomas, moving for his own pleasure.

"Oh love," Harrison whispered. "Yes." He laid a soft kiss on Collins' bowed neck and moved a little faster. "Oh yes, my love. My own Nathaniel. Missed you. Too long."

Collins gripped the bed tightly, thoughts of Adlai, of betrayal, of everything beginning to escape him. He wanted nothing more than to be exactly where he was.

Harrison kissed his neck, then craned forward, trying for his mouth. Collins turned, his mouth open, ready for the kiss. He sucked at the invasive tongue, welcoming his long-gone Thomas back, the kisses hot as he remembered. Harrison gasped, pressing deeper.

Collins felt the pulsations he knew were the climax, and closed his eyes. He was close, but the rational part of his mind wondered if he would get anything. He was surprised when Harrison flipped them onto their side, and reached around to stroke him.

Harrison still knew the motion that would send him through the roof. Harrison hadn't gone soft, and kept moving. "Please, love, oh my boy," he whispered, sucking on Collins' ear lobe.

Collins climaxed, a wail of "Captain" escaping him, to his great embarrassment. He still didn't know how Thomas did this every time, reducing him to need and sensation and nothing more.

Harrison kissed it from his mouth and kept moving. He wrapped his arms around Collins, holding him very close, more like a lover, not a conqueror. Harrison kept up a steady stream of pretty words in his ear, soothing him down. One large hand returned to stroke him again. "Have you a third?"

"Always." As he came back to himself, his common sense prevailed over his body's demands. He wanted to ask for a permanent truce, one that would allow them to aid each

other, and let him have this touch when he craved it. He knew better. They had always been good in bed. But out of it, nothing was in accord.

But it didn't matter now. He'd not said the words and Thomas was nibbling his earlobe and doing the push-pull motion that he loved. He twisted wildly, no other having found this combination. His breath rasped and he groaned under it as he grew large again.

Harrison gave a soft, pleased laugh near his ear. "You always did like that."

"No one else knows it ... Ahhh!" Thomas had hit the spot inside that made his spine light up.

"You should teach them." His third spending took longer, and they rocked together, wearing down the night, as it approached.

After they had both exceeded, they lay tangled together, dozing. For a time, the enmity was forgotten.

Collins rose first, and began gathering his clothing. Saying anything would break the truce that prevailed for the night.

He saw Harrison sprawled on the bed, watching him dress. The greedy possessiveness on Harrison's face whispered to Collins that no matter how many years, how many ships, he would never be anything but Harrison's 'Thaniel. As Collins turned to go, Harrison caught his wrist.

"Was it horrid? Was I a monster, a brute who ravished you against your will?"

Collins shook his head. "You never were."

Harrison drew him down and pushed Collins' long hair out of his face. It had come all undone from the bow he wore and

draped about his shoulders. "Would be easier if I was, eh? You could tell yourself it was one more unpleasant thing you'd done. Be easier if my kisses didn't turn your blood so hot." He emphasized the point with a kiss that left Collins breathing hard, almost moaning.

"It's not dawn yet. I'm not entirely spent," Collins whispered, settling back down on the edge of the bed.

"Ah, lad, I am." Harrison gave him a wry smile. "Come here then, and let me kiss you proper, as the Spaniards do. One last taste, since you are a man, what say?" He tugged at the fasteners of Collins' pants. He'd never offered this act to Collins before.

"Aye." Collins had already finished thrice, but Harrison still fired his blood enough that there was a fourth lurking in the deeps. He gave himself over to it. Harrison kissed him, full of devouring greed to wring every last moment, every small touch from Collins. He kissed mouth and throat, chest and belly, working down to where Collins stood awaiting attentions.

With a small sigh of pleasure, he took Collins in, tasting him from base to tip and back again. Collins knew it was unlikely he'd ever get this again, so he savored every lick of Harrison's mouth. The sky was tinting grey when he arched into Harrison's mouth with a cry as he peaked.

Harrison kissed him a last time and sent him out.

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Chapter 11

Collins came aboard the *Horizon* with first light. He went straight to his cabin, ignoring all, including Adlai, counted fifty double louis into a bag and gave them to Stephan.

"Take this to the *Kestrel* post-haste." He looked at the crew. "We sail with the tide. It's coming in." He went below. Adlai stood quietly in the center of the cabin. The harsh morning light did not cover the marks and bruises that had not been visible in the dim tavern the night before. He looked as if he'd been crying, but his eyes were dry and his face was as composed as usual.

Collins' heart broke again at the look of painful expectancy on his face. He did not miss the small packed bag at Adlai's feet, nor the loaded pistol on the desk. He understood at once. If he'd had any doubts that Adlai's behavior with Harrison was other than an act, he no longer did. He held out his open arms.

Adlai was in them in an instant, clinging as if Collins was a lifeline he dared not let go of. "Beloved Nathaniel. It was—" Adlai groped for words. That alone bothered Collins. Adlai was quiet but he had always known exactly how to say things. "I could not have kept up the pretense much longer," he sighed at last.

"I know." He stoked Adlai's hair, having missed the strong, compact body in his arms.

"You knew I was shamming?" Adlai's relief was plain. "I feared you would see and believe as Harrison did, as Samir did."

"You're clever. I knew you'd do what you had to do, to stay alive until I came."

Adlai held out the one thing he had left. "I never said I loved him. I gave every seeming of it."

"I'm only sorry I took so long to get to you. We nearly lost the *Horizon*."

Adlai still clung like a limpet to a rock. "I knew you'd come. Through heaven or hell, storm or wreck, I knew. It was all that kept breath in my body."

"Never again, I promise you," Collins whispered.

Adlai looked up at him. "My master, do not make promises you cannot keep." At Collins' sigh, he hastened to explain. "The sea changes, always. Fate is vague. I would rather fall into their hands a thousand times, knowing you will always come for me, than die." He buried his face in Collins' chest.

They stood like that a long time, Adlai drawing comfort from his captain's arms, Nathaniel needing to know his lover was well. At last, Adlai shifted a little, and looked up. "I have hot water, if you would like to wash."

Collins nodded. "Very much so." He watched Adlai drag out the large soak and fill it with heated water, a true luxury aboard ship where fires were kept very small and only for cooking. "Have you bathed yet?" He stepped into the soak when it was filled.

Adlai nodded. "I swam half the night after I came aboard, and then washed the salt from me."

"Join me anyway." Collins reached up from his bath and began unlacing Adlai's cuffs. Adlai smiled, then leaned in for a kiss. Once naked, Adlai joined him in the large tub. It was close quarters, and Collins treated him gently, well aware of the bruises, the whip marks, the scratches all over Adlai. In the water, Adlai clung to him again.

"Beloved, I will not break. You..." he paused to swallow against the tears that made his eyes too bright, "you sacrificed yourself up for me."

Collins had to work to hide his flush. He thought a moment trying to decide the best way to say it. Telling the whole truth was impossible. "I wasn't injured. I wasn't threatened. That's not exactly a sacrifice."

Adlai kissed along his neck. "You loathe the man and yet you shared his bed until past dawn. That is a sacrifice, and I am not worthy of such."

Collins tipped Adlai's face up and kissed him sweetly. "I'd do far worse for you." He held Adlai as his man wrapped tight arms around his neck and buried the beloved face in his shoulder. "We'll lay low for a while." He felt Adlai's silent, hot tears on his neck.

After a few minutes, Adlai regained control. "Forgive me, my Nathaniel. I have had a very bad few months and am not entirely myself."

"Adlai. My Adlai. I have no doubt of what Thomas and his little demon put you through." He touched the pair of long bruises on Adlai's side, yellow-purple and ugly around a pale white stripe. "Belaying pin." He touched the whip mark on Adlai's shoulder. "Five-tail cat."

"I am not hurt, my master. The little one was cruel, but I have been beaten by much stronger men. None hated me so, though." The long, barely healed scratches down Adlai's back gave truth to this statement. "Captain Harrison was—if not kind—at least not cruel to me." Adlai said nothing of Samir, who had inflicted the damages. He didn't need to. Collins knew already and suspected it would be a long time before Adlai could look at a belying pin without a shudder of memory. He didn't want to know what else the little monster had done.

Collins nuzzled Adlai. "This isn't over." He dunked his head and was disconcerted when Adlai was right there to wash his hair.

"Let it be. Please, Master Captain?" The formality bothered Nathaniel more than any of the marks. It almost sounded as if Adlai was pleading for their enemies. "Love me back to myself and I will be whole again. Sail us to the other side of the world and let us never speak or think of them."

"He'll give chase. Nothing will stop him."

"Why? You have given him what he requested in payment for me." Adlai looked up for another kiss.

"He's in love with me still." The admission came hard from Collins, but he was relieved when Adlai nodded.

"He is obsessed. He would have us both and the *Horizon* as well. Do what we must." As Collins washed him, he relaxed under the gentle hands. The tears were a great surprise with their resurgence. Collins pressed his face into Adlai's hair so he would not cry along with his lover. "I did not. I would not.

They had all of me, save my tears," Adlai hitched, before taking solace in Collins' hair.

"So brave."

"My screams they had. I was frightened, always. Even when Captain Harrison took me." At Collins' kiss on his neck, he sobbed once more. Then he whispered, "I am not brave. Brave would have been to fight and stand and kill them both or die myself."

"You were. Bravery is holding on no matter what they did to you."

"I held because I knew you would come for me. My own beloved Nathaniel." They clung together again, unable to let go, afraid that any relaxing of their grip would make the other evanesce like steam.

The water had gone cool. Adlai rose, dried and wrapped himself in a towel before Collins could really examine the full extent of his damage. He held the towel and Collins let Adlai wrap him up in it.. Once they were dry, he held Adlai close, kissing him..

"Please, Master Captain? Take me to your bunk?" Adlai claimed another kiss, but did not meet Collins' eyes. His voice held too much pain, and he could not seem to drop the formality. "I don't want to be theirs. And part of me still feels them all over me. I can still smell the sandalwood and myrrh of the little one, and Harrison's cologne."

Collins simply nodded and drew him toward the bed. Adlai seemed oddly skittish, and spent much time touching his smooth chest and his long hair.

"Please, your voice, Master," Adlai whispered. "Make it your voice, not his." He kissed Collins' neck, breathing deeply, almost sniffing him. After the night with Harrison, Collins knew he was smelling clean skin and soap, no cologne.

"My beautiful Adlai." Collins kissed him and pulled him into bed.

"I am yours, I know this. But may I ask you to be careful? I am ... sore."

Collins suspected Adlai was a great deal more than sore. He'd seen the bruises and had a suspicion that the little one had not used the belying pin on the outside alone. "If you would like, I will be satisfied with just holding you until you're not. Knowing you are home and safe is enough." He willed himself soft, only to find the small Collins was as insolent as he was interested.

Adlai shook his head and finally lost the formality. "I need you, Nathaniel. I need to be yours. You have cleaned me, washed away the stink of your rival. Now claim me as yours."

Unwilling to ignore such a direct invitation, Collins eased Adlai back onto the sheets. Adlai hissed as the scratches on his back hit them. Collins rolled them to their sides to ease the discomfort. He frowned at the scratches around Adlai's secret parts, some wicked and red, infection in them. "Marc will tend these at first light. I will not lose you to illness."

Adlai turned his face away. "Forgive me. I submitted and did not fight them."

"My wise Adlai. They would have killed you."

"I would not have your property damaged. I knew you would forgive trespass, but not injury."

Collins' frown became more pronounced at the sight of the cuts and scratches on Adlai's buttocks. His hand grew gentler, seeing the extent of the hurt.

"In the end, I did not fight. For the last weeks, I let Captain Harrison believe I was willing. Before that, he always bandaged me when the little one was done."

"You have no doubt that it was he ordering the abuse?" Collins kissed the long scratch on Adlai's back.

"He said nothing worth hearing in my earshot. He treated me as if he'd bought me in port. Had it not been for Samir, my stay would have been drudgery but no worse." He stroked Collins' face. "Please, Nathaniel. No more talk of them." He cast his eyes to the side. "I am ill-behaved and over familiar," he whispered.

"You are my lover. And you do nothing wrong in my eyes."

"I am yours." Adlai kissed him deeply, and Collins could see he was pleased to be home. "There are wounds that need tending within me as well as without. They do not need brandy or bandages, only you. Please, my love?"

Collins nodded. "I will be gentle." He slicked himself well, and added more oil to Adlai's body so as not to hurt. He held them side by side, forcing away memories of the previous night, feeling the rocking of the ship and the warmth of his lover. He eased in, never so slowly had he moved before. He pressed, only pressing, not forcing, but entreating entrance, until Adlai's body yielded and opened for him in welcome.

Adlai tipped his face back for a kiss. A small sigh escaped him. "I am well." His hiss of pain was quickly stilled when Collins stopped moving for a moment. He whispered, "I love

you, Nathaniel Collins, with all my heart. With all my body, I worship you."

The old marriage words and Adlai's daring startled Collins. He kissed Adlai to cover his confusion and then said the first words that came to him. "And I love you, Adlai."

Adlai covered his forearm and hand with kisses as they lay together. "I had not dared hope. I have whispered my own in the dark of night, not daring to say it. Not daring to utter your name without a Master before it."

Collins soothed himself by playing with Adlai's hair. It had become nearly habit over the long summer, and he had missed the springy feel of it. "You may say it any time you wish."

Adlai smiled for the first time since coming back aboard. He lay in Collins' arms, letting his master and the ship rock him. When he peaked, it was neither with a cry of pain, nor with feigned pleasure, but with a shout of pure joy that he was home and safe. Collins kissed the shout from him.

* * * *

Adlai was pleased to be home, but he noticed a certain anger, a tension in his Nathaniel now. He would catch his master looking at him for long periods, his pleasure fading to a scowl. Many nights he was sent topside to take a sighting on the stars, while Collins talked with Stephan.

One night, he listened at the door. When Stephan left, he returned and saw Collins putting away the charts. The small lead ships that ordinarily sailed the paper seas were all

pushed aside, but he recognized the sloop and schooner tumbled together.

He went to Collins and kissed him. "Please, Master Captain, do nothing rash on my account."

"I'm afraid I have little choice." Collins stowed the maps and pulled him closer for more kisses.

"No, my love. Not for me. Please. I am safe and home, let it be."

Collins' face was unhappy. "Oh, Adlai. If it were just you, I would let be for your sake. But it is revenge now, for the hurts to you, to my ship and to my pride. I fear the payment he exacted will only lead to more demands, like the danegeld of old. I've paid the danegeld, and now I will never be free of him unless something decisive happens."

Adlai nodded. "I am not the only one who talks in my sleep. He dreamed of you often. He resents the scar mightily. And because he thinks you desire him yet, he will hunt you, as you would hunt him had he killed me."

"He will, and he will not stop until we both serve beneath him again. We will steer far away as we can, but if he crosses our wake, there will be no mercy."

Adlai nodded, accepting this compromise for now. They went about their business, rum-running, some legitimate trading, and the occasional piracy on a French or Spanish ship.

As autumn drew on, they noticed each time they put into port there was a message from Thomas Harrison of the *Kestrel* waiting for them. Collins never left an answer, and his

face was always confused after he'd finished reading the messages.

Adlai found him one evening, looking over the latest, and mumbling. He leaned over to hear the words.

"It's a pre-charted course. He has come down to this."

"What do you have, beloved?" Adlai could make out some misspelled words.

Collins shook his head. "The *Kestrel* hunts us. Thomas wants a parlay, a negotiation to begin his fleet. He wants us to join him."

Adlai felt his face close faster than house-shutters in monsoon season. "You surely do not consider it?"

Collins shook his head but his expression was less than reassuring.

* * * *

Collins wasn't sure how he felt now. The cold fury at what Adlai had endured at the hands of the precious pair was weighed against the heat Thomas sparked in his blood. While most of the times, the flames froze, on rare occasion, he melted into desire. But a look at Adlai, who wore two scars now that he was healed, left him hating Thomas again. He looked forward to summer, when the *Horizon* was docked against the storms, and he could spend hours and days doing nothing but loving his man.

It was in early June when they came upon the Spanish ship. A lovely fat merchant vessel with few guns, she surrendered quickly to the *Horizon*. This did nothing to ease the sense of a storm about to break that Collins had been

fighting all day. The unloading took a long time, Stephan directing the sailors, Adlai overseeing the loading. Collins stood at the wheel, testing the wind. Harrison's missives had grown longer, more impassioned. The other captain declared he could no longer live without his 'Thaniel and would have him, by any means. Collins jumped when Brendan sang out from the crow's-nest.

"A sail! The *Kestrel*, running under American colors with a flag of parlay!"

"What is in your head, Thomas?" Collins muttered. Adlai was at his elbow, out of breath from taking the stairs two at a time.

"Do not go." The quiet advice matched Collins' own thoughts. "Moreover, I am not getting near that ship."

Collins checked their situation. The *Kestrel* was holding a half mile off starboard. They were grappled to the Spanish ship on the port side. They had plenty of room. He summoned Stephan to the deck.

"Get everyone back aboard. We're running."

Stephan shook his head. "Captain, the Spanish ship is but half-unloaded. There will be trouble with the crew if we leave such a prize. That much silver will keep us beyond the hurricane season."

Collins cast a worried eye on the *Kestrel*. "Speed it up, then. And ready the guns, just in case."

Stephan charged down onto deck, barking orders. The crew stepped more quickly, the heavy casks of silver seeming to flow in an endless stream. Six of the men, his nephew

Habakkuk among them, left off the cartage and saw to the starboard guns, as well as the port ones.

The *Kestrel* held position, her flags flapping idly in the light breeze. Harrison obviously saw the preparations aboard and stayed out of range.

Collins simply watched and fretted. He had never been an expert at unsnarling the tangle of Thomas' mind, and now he could figure nothing out at all. He saw Adlai dog the hatch to the hold and begin seeing to the loading of a brace of pistols.

"We are loaded," Stephan called up a few minutes later. "Do we scuttle the Spaniards or not?"

"Yes, do it." He considered a bit more and added, "I will parlay with Harrison."

On Stephan's orders, the port gunners fired on the Spanish ship. Although he usually loved the spectacle, Collins didn't watch. He was staring at the *Kestrel*. He saw the wink of the spyglass that told him Harrison was watching him.

"Fire," Stephan yelled again. And again, the *Horizon's* port guns belched fire and destruction.

Collins shrieked "NO!" as Habakkuk, manning one of the starboard guns, and tense on the edge of combat, fired as well, sending a cannonball straight at the *Kestrel*. The young man looked horrified as he realized that he'd obeyed automatically in his tightly-reined panic. For a bad moment, Collins thought he was going to charge after the cannonball, all heedless of the water beneath him, trying to stop it.

The parlay flag and the American flag ran down in a twinkling to be replaced with Harrison's own standard.

Gunports opened along the side of the schooner and the *Kestrel* closed to firing distance.

"Run for it! She's faster, but if we get in the shallows she cannot follow!" The crew rushed for the sails and lines, trying to pull the cloth around to make the wind aid them. Collins spun the wheel hard and aimed for the distant shore, well aware the unfavorable wind made escape unlikely. His only comfort was that pursuit would be just as difficult.

Harrison saw the plan and had his men tack to the wind and come around, trying to bring the *Kestrel* in between the *Horizon* and her shallow water. He herded the ship around the burning Spanish wreck and the long boats of desperate Spaniards, keeping her in deep, open water.

Stephan shoved Habakkuk off the cannon and loaded it with the chained knipple shot, trying to destroy the *Kestrel's* mast as they had taken the *Horizon's* months before. The *Horizon* lurched as he fired and the shot destroyed a chunk of the *Kestrel's* deck instead.

Adlai stood in his usual position for fighting. As Collins looked to priming his own pistols, Adlai shot him a look of almost grim anticipation. The first grappling hooks from the *Kestrel* hit their railing.

Collins saw, clear as the sails before him, his own body lying dead at Harrison's feet and Samir's wicked nails gouging out Adlai's eyes. He shook the vision away and spat over his shoulder. It hung on him anyway as he readied himself for the battle. He spotted Adlai and gave an evil smile. His lover would not be such easy prey this time. Adlai returned it, and gave a mock-salute with the barrel of his flintlock.

Harrison stood near the rail, directing the attack. "Lying little sodomite!" he bellowed at Collins. "We're going to have the silver, and you and your traitorous Tory crew will be feeding the sharks. Nobody makes a fool of Thomas Harrison twice!"

Collins was surprised to see Samir in with the first boarding party. The slim man danced through battle, his long curved sword cutting a swath through the sailors until it seemed he was encircled by a wall of bloody steel. He hadn't known the young man could fight.

Samir saw Adlai, who had not yet seen him, being busy reloading his four empty pistols, and advanced on him, the sweet smile on his face giving lie to his intent. Collins took careful aim and fired.

Samir went down in a heap on the deck, screaming and clawing at his belly where his red trousers were turning a much darker red. Adlai started at the scream, finished his loading and went back to firing. Collins came down to the main deck, sword drawn.

He looked down at Samir. "You aren't worth my blade." He slung the wounded man over his shoulder, ignoring the blood and the howls of pain that only got louder. At the edge of the fighting, he picked a large *Kestrel* sailor. A sword-point under his chin got the man's complete attention. "Take your captain's prize back to him and get the hell off my ship!"

When Samir was brought to him, Harrison flew into a rage. "You'll never see daylight again, once I have you!" he shouted at Collins. Knowing he would not, Collins fought through the fray with the desperation of a man condemned. He became

aware that the *Kestrel* sailors were growing fewer and fewer. Then, he heard Harrison order grenades and firepots, seemingly not caring that some of his own men were still aboard the *Horizon*. Seeing this, the remaining *Kestrel* sailors disengaged and began scurrying along the ropes back to their ship.

Cannonballs rocked the *Horizon*, as gun after gun blew holes below the waterline or discharged iron balls that exploded on the deck. Harrison seized and loaded a musket and aimed directly for Collins' gut, clearly a retaliation for his sweet Samir. He cursed and threw the gun aside when the gunner, the fool who had fired on them in the first place, knocked Collins aside and took the musket ball in his own leg, falling to the deck to bleed out.

Collins saw Harrison pick up his lover. "Set course for Tortuga," he snapped as he carried Samir back to their cabin.

Collins found Adlai at the wheel. He was ashen under his dark skin, but his hands were steady on the spokes. "Three men today, my master."

Collins kissed his forehead, and moved past, needing to know how bad the *Horizon* was taking on water. He hadn't even noticed he was bleeding from a dozen cuts and a gash from the near-miss of a musket ball was soaking his sleeve.

Aaron, Stephan's last nephew caught him as he headed below. "We're bad hit, Captain. Not sinking yet, but Uncle and anyone who can wield hammers are trying to keep it so. The pumps are working double time."

"Thank you, Aaron." He went below, snatching up a hammer from the pile at the head of the ladder as he went.

Harrison would never have the better of him, not if he personally had to replace every timber of his lady by his own hand.

* * * *

Only Aaron and Adlai remained above, Aaron in the shrouds, Adlai at the wheel, making for the land on the far horizon. Adlai only clutched the wheel tighter when Stephan and the little French doctor carried Collins out of the hold. He could still hear Brendan, the carpenter, below, swearing at the men in a motivational sort of way. He had to sail the ship. His Nathaniel trusted him to do so, and he would not abandon his post, no matter how worried he was.

Time dragged, the wheel pulling at his arms, the weight of the ship making itself felt all through his back. His mind was below, with his captain. He sent a prayer skyward. Elijah Goodman had been a pious man, and Adlai had absorbed the religion if not the belief in it. The doctor emerged and went below. After a very long time, Stephan came up.

"You can go down to the Captain. I'll take the wheel. We're not going to sink. The holes are patched and the men are sealing them now." He smiled. "You handled her well, Adlai."

All Adlai could do was nod. He hesitated in the door of the cabin, afraid of what he'd find. The afternoon had turned dim as evening was coming, and the cabin was dark.

"Nathaniel? Beloved, do you live?" He ventured in and lit a lamp. "Do not make me sit with your corpse this night. I have had a bad day already."

A weak laugh from the bunk reassured him. "Never fear. I'm far too wicked to die."

Adlai sank to the deck beside the bunk and kissed Collins. "Where are you wounded this time?" he sighed. It seemed his captain spent more time wounded than whole.

"Just cut up."

"You are fortunate Habakkuk took the shot for you. There will be no more music in the afternoon now."

"It is a dark day, indeed. I will miss Habakkuk. Poor fool just misunderstood and panicked under fire." He reached out for Adlai. "Don't blame him."

Adlai reached up and clung to him. "I do not. At least you live and we are afloat. Both of those were in some doubt an hour ago."

"This will not be the end." Collins scowled. "Thomas! The bastard, he wanted to take me out with a belly wound. He has a sadistic streak."

Adlai unwrapped his arms, slid to the floor and would not look at Collins. "You killed the little one the same way. That was cold-blooded murder, Master Captain."

He saw that Collins didn't miss the change of address. "It's the chance we all take in battle. He was coming for you. I wasn't going to let him hurt you again."

Adlai's face was hard. "No, firing at someone shooting at you is a chance. You hesitated and shot him in that way because of who he was."

Collins nodded. "I did. And I'd do it again. I'm only sorry we won't get to watch that beautiful little monster scream his life out in agony."

Adlai drew even further away from this vehemence. "'Twas me he violated, 'twas me he came for and even I would not have taken his life so for it. I would have shot him cleanly."

"I don't need to justify killing the enemy," Collins snarled.

Adlai's answer was soft and not meant to ease his captain's mind. "And certainly not to your own slave." Adlai said no more, but simply moved out of his reach and spread his blankets at the foot of the bed. "They need me above again, Master Captain." He left to help run the ship.

* * * *

Collins lay in the cabin, trying to think through the fog. The rum he had used to kill the pain only made his head buzz with fury. He knew he'd killed in a deliberately cruel fashion, and delivered the dying man to his lover to increase the pain. And now Adlai was angry at him for saving Adlai's life. The unfairness of it all made him angry, but he was weak from blood loss and could only pound one fist on the mattress. There would be hell to pay on every front for this day's work.

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Chapter 12

The deathwatch in the Captain's cabin cast a pall over the whole of the *Kestrel*. The men went about their work with hushed voices. They buried those killed in the raid with minimal fanfare, just a few words spoken. No one wanted to disturb the Captain. One foolhardy sailor intruded to ask the Captain for a heading. The others held their breath. They returned the Captain's dagger silently before sending the fool's body over the side.

The bleeding would not stop. Harrison had dosed Samir liberally with laudanum, but the boy kept waking in agony. He knelt helplessly beside the blood-stained bunk.

"My boy. My beautiful boy," he whispered. Samir simply whimpered. He cradled the youth's burning head in his arms and kissed his scalding face. The fever would not break.

"Samir, my lover, you aren't going to live. I can't do anything else for you." The admission cut through him.

Samir's enormous eyes were even larger with pain and the drug, and they turned to him, pleading. "Captain..." he whispered, hoarse from the laudanum.

Harrison understood. In Samir's heathen faith, suicide wasn't shameful, and asking to die when the pain was unbearable and death unavoidable was perfectly normal. He kissed Samir lingeringly, his own eyes very wet.

"How, sweetness?"

"Easiest." The word was accompanied by a gasp as the laudanum began to wear off.

Harrison wrapped his large hands around Samir's slim throat. He'd kissed it often, buried his face in it as they loved, and now—he stopped the thought. Easier just to do it. He glanced to see if this was acceptable.

"I love you," he whispered. "I love you enough to let you go."

"Love my captain," Samir returned, barely audible.

Harrison bent in for one final kiss. Samir opened to him. He closed his hands on Samir's throat and squeezed, kissing and holding Samir until he was sure life was gone from the slim body. Then he let go of Samir's throat and held the body in his arms and wept.

When he raised his face, the sky outside was dark. He cut the braid of Samir's hair and bound the thick end. At least one part of his much loved boy would stay with him. For three days and nights, Harrison stayed below. He would not send Samir to the waves if there was any chance he lived.

He found a bolt of silk among his share of the booty and wrapped Samir in it, shrouding him in luxury instead of sewing him into a coarse canvas sail. His pet would have hated the canvas. On the fourth morning, he emerged, carrying the silken bundle.

"All hands, starboard rail!" he bellowed and sent the carpenter for a plank. While he waited, he held Samir close to his chest one last time. When the plank came, he laid out the body upon it and waited. He sent the gunner to load a cannon.

His jaw set, he looked out over the waves that would soon take his boy from him. He laid one hand on Samir's head. A

whisper ran through the crew when they saw Samir's long black braid wrapped around their captain's throat like a noose.

"We knew Samir," he began and got no further as his voice cracked. He stopped and bent to kiss the shrouded forehead. "Promised I wasn't going to break down, beautiful boy, but I've lost you."

He straightened, his face hard. "My sweet boy is going to the waves because of that blackguard Nathaniel Collins." A low murmur of agreement ran around the deck. "All of you know how he stole the second ship of our fleet, separating brothers and friends." Words like "mutiny" and "thief" came now from the crew. "All of us heard how Matthew Gibbs was marooned for loyalty to me." The loudest rumble of anger yet went through the crew.

"We hunt Collins!" Harrison shouted. "And we'll not rest until every living soul on the *Horizon* is sent to serve as deckhands for Samir aboard the ship he now sails across the boiling seas of Hell." The crew looked shocked that he would say such a thing.

Harrison's gaze was steady. "Our Samir was no Christian and we all knew it. May his demon-lord, Allah, accept him safe and grant him a fine ship. Amen."

Seeing it was all they would hear, the crew mumbled "Amen."

Harrison took one last kiss of the shrouded lips and then tipped the end of the plank. Samir's body did not move. He raised it higher and those nearest saw his fingers tighten on

the wood as if he would follow the young man and the plank into the water.

At last, the body slipped down the plank and hit the water. It bobbed briefly and then sank. Harrison held the plank tightly for a moment, his breathing ragged. Then he touched the light to the powder of the cannon, sending a charge over the water to announce Samir to the next world.

When he turned back to the crew, his eyes burned with cold fury. "We hunt! All hands to their posts." The dead-sounding snarl was more terrifying than any bellow or shout. He looked at the place in the waves where Samir had gone down. "I will kill him. His head will ride the bowsprit, I will twine his hide into a new belt." He turned and strode, his back as straight as the mast, his gaze fixed, to take the wheel.

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Over the next month, they made all of Collins' favorite ports and haunted his usual routes. Quartermaster Ringrose noticed they stayed longer in each port and the captain returned to the ship drunker each time than the time before.

As June drew on, the crew began to rumble about sailing north and putting in for the hurricane season. Harrison gave no heed. The week of St. John's Eve, there were rumblings of mutiny. They had never stayed out so late in the summer. The braver men began calling for elections. Ringrose told them to hold for a week, no more. He knew they were close to finding the *Horizon*.

* * * *

It was raining in Bridgetown when the *Horizon* dropped anchor for the summer. Miserable sheets of water soaked everyone as they put in. The fires of the tavern were a welcome beacon, and the men of the *Golden Horizon* stood before them, dripping like drowned rats, trying to dry.

Collins watched as Adlai purchased himself a single glass of wine and found a table. His man was not at his side these days, sleeping below with the crew, and doing his log work when Collins was out of the cabin. He ached to reach out, but a stubborn voice he knew for his own pride said it was Adlai who'd begun the quarrel and Adlai who must make rapprochement.

A slurred voice from a back corner made him turn. "Well, well, the Brave Nathaniel Collins, who gut-shoots a boy half his size."

Harrison stood, leaning heavily on the table. His eyes were out of focus, his hair disheveled and his normally immaculate coat was filthy. He was unshaven and very drunk.

"Half my size and twice as threatening," Collins said, not wanting to have this argument.

Harrison gave a nasty laugh. "Not so brave the night you went ass up for me to get your own boy back. Not so brave the day you gave me this." He fingered his scarred face.

Collins whirled on him, snapping, "Your rabid dog was out of control. All I did was put him out of his misery."

Harrison sneered. "I should have kept your boy. I did not." He drained his cup. "Samir was what he was and what I wanted him to be."

"Then you should know he was armed and engaging in battle. Thus, fair game to be shot."

"Aye, a chance we all take. But you could have made it a clean kill. I'd have forgiven you that, my boy. But making me send him on with my own hands was pure spite."

Collins picked up his own drink and glanced at where Adlai was sitting. He could tell his man was listening. "Believe what you like. It is done."

"Oh aye. And my beautiful boy has slept beneath the waves for weeks now. I will have you for it. Satisfaction on the point of my sword. If not, I will put it about in every port and tavern that Nathaniel Collins is a coward, with a liver as white as Easter lilies. Should you lose, you will be mine again. I will scuttle your beloved ship. I will tie your yellow boy to the mast and let the crew have him. Him dying in agony will be the last sight you see. Then, you will be wrong side up in my bunk for the rest of your short, blinded, miserable life!" Harrison staggered out and blocked Collins' way. "You will stand."

Something that was almost a smile crossed Collins' face. "It was leading to this for a very long time." Regretfully, he reached out and touched the scar on Harrison's face.

Harrison jerked away from his fingers. "Our feet are set on the path. Let us walk it, no regret and no quarter. Name the place."

"Here. We always summer here."

"In one month. On the full moon."

Adlai had drawn closer to the pair. Now he spoke, seeming to have put aside the quarrel between him and Collins. He

glared at Harrison. "I will not be yours. Not if my master falls, for I shall fall with him. Your crew will never have me."

Harrison's laugh rang loud and ugly in the room. "You say so now. But I doubt you have the courage to do it, boy. You won't live the year in either case, dead by your hand or dead from the crew, makes no difference to me."

Collins said quietly, "Let's go." Adlai was right beside him as if he'd never left.

"Here, in a month. Should you not show, I will put it about that Collins has no honor. That you are a double-minded sodomite and a murderer." Harrison's voice had grown loud enough to attract the attention of the whole inn.

Collins held his head high. There was no point denying words that were true. "I will be there."

"And you will die. You will pay for this. For everything. Of course, if you ask for quarter, it will be given. On my terms. You will pay me back, many, many nights on your knees for my mercy."

Collins smirked. "And what if I win?"

"You won't."

"Just for argument. I want your ship. You'd take mine if I lost."

"True enough. A month then." Harrison sank back into his booth, signaling for another drink.

Collins and Adlai walked out of the tavern, both lost in worry. Adlai fell at once into step as if the intervening weeks had not happened. Once aboard, he went straight to the Captain's cabin

Collins came below after checking the ship, surprised to find Adlai still there, writing in the log. He looked at his man. "Stay here tonight?"

Adlai swallowed hard and gave a short nod. "As Master Captain orders." He stripped, his face impassive, and stood at the corner of the bed.

Collins looked at Adlai a few moments. He couldn't fathom why Adlai was still so angry with him. But he didn't want it to end like this. If he was to die in a month, he wanted to love his man as often as possible before then. He held out his arms, open and welcoming. Adlai just looked at him and did not move. He didn't move either, just stood watching. At length, when Collins' arms had begun to ache, and he was feeling quite ridiculous, Adlai spoke.

"And what is Master Captain's pleasure this evening?"

The address went straight to Collins' gut. He didn't want to die as "master captain," a term Adlai used not just for him, but Harrison, too. He wanted to hear "Beloved Nathaniel" again. He said, "I'd like to make you happy again."

Adlai closed his eyes, then hung his head, shaking it slightly. "We were happy, once," he whispered. "I did not truly know what manner of man owned me."

"I never claimed to be a good man," Collins parried. "We are pirates. Legal pirates at the moment, but still the same. We kill and steal and do it with the blessings of the King."

Adlai looked up at him. "That, I knew. That, I could live with. You forget, my master, I too have killed in your service. But I did not know that you were, in your own words, a

sadistic bastard who would gut-shoot a young man simply to ensure he died in great pain before his lover."

"He was evil." The words sounded weak even as Collins said them. They could not stand against the anger and sadness coming from Adlai.

Adlai turned away. "Then so am I, for allowing all he did to me." He ignored Collins' negation and continued. "I thought you were better than they are. You have never treated me like an animal. You healed me after their abuse. But in the end, you are the same. And so, I offer myself in the same way."

Collins put his arms down and stepped in closer. "There is one thing different." Adlai looked up at him. He stroked the smooth brown cheek, and whispered, "I love you." He ran a finger along Adlai's eyebrow. "And I won't tolerate anyone who threatens to take your eyes at every turn. One who hates you, calls you ugly."

Adlai looked at the deck. "I feel broken within," he whispered. "Torn in two with the knowing that you killed him to save me, yet did so in a way I hate."

"Let me help mend you." Collins drew Adlai into his arms, having missed the warm weight of Adlai's body, his absolute trust and love.

Adlai looked up with the first thing approaching hope Collins had seen in a long time. "Try? Please?" He rested his head on Collins' shoulder.

Collins pressed him close and rubbed his cheek against Adlai's hair. "My Adlai will be harder to fix than the *Horizon's* mast. But I will try."

"I ache within. The knowing that you are no better, that only your love for me keeps you from such atrocities..." He broke off with a shudder.

"There are times I regret it," Collins admitted. "But it did get Harrison to disengage, did it not? We could all be dead now if he had not."

Adlai looked at him. "I do not regret his death. Never think that. I hated him in ways that would peril my soul as a murderer were I not already damned for that particular sin. I only regret the manner of it, and your hand on the trigger."

"Forgive your Captain?"

Adlai pressed in closer, embracing him finally. "If he will forgive his Adlai for the coldness."

"It is done." Collins clutched him tightly, never wanting to let go, not wanting Adlai out of his arms again.

Adlai shuddered again. "My beloved," he whispered, his voice trembling as badly as his body.

"I have missed you." Collins' hands were never still, roaming up and down Adlai's back, up to touch his hair, down to feel his hip. He could not believe his man was back in his arms, and had to reassure himself with endless touches.

"And I you. Irony we come together only as the calendar slides toward doom." Adlai barely grazed Collins' lips with his own.

"Someone's doom. Perhaps not mine." He went distant, dwelling on the coming duel.

Adlai's voice was low and urgent, drawing him back to the present. "Beloved, you will win. You must win."

Collins shook his head. "He is keen with a sword. Perhaps his grief and the drink will give me some advantage." It was the only hope he had left. He still bore the scar from the last duel in his shoulder and leg.

Adlai nodded. "You are not bad," he offered.

"He taught me. And not everything he knows, either."

"Then you must face him with something he does not know. Find a sword master and learn new tricks to take him by surprise." Adlai presented it as the only logical course of action.

"And spend our savings?" The suggestion had taken Collins aback. Adlai was goal-driven and tight-fisted on his way to that goal in a fashion that made the most miserly look open-handed.

Adlai buried his face in Collins' shirt. "There is no dream without you. If you are alive, there is always more money to be had."

"I will see who I can find to teach me."

Anything else he might have said was stopped by a kiss from Adlai. Wet and open and yearning, Adlai's mouth spread beneath his own, tongue begging entrance. Adlai's body shifted and he could feel the hardness against his thigh. Despite his own worries, he felt the answering stirring in his own body.

"Please, Nathaniel..."

The sound of his name, unheard since before the battle, made Collins smile. He kissed Adlai again, and then caught him playfully around the waist. He wanted to distract himself,

to forget, if only for the night, that his death was drinking in a tavern and plotting against him.

Adlai smiled, but no laughter came at his lover's playfulness. He twined himself around Collins and kissed him. "Love, heart of my heart, come to the bed instead."

He pulled Collins to it and lay down beside him. "When I returned to you, broken and wounded, you were greatly kind to me. Let me ease your mind now, beloved Nathaniel."

"There are some things I have to attend to before the duel. I'd like to do one of them now."

Adlai raised an eyebrow. "I had thought to simply love you tonight. Now you bring me more work?"

"No, no, you still may." Collins kissed him. "But only as a free man."

Adlai's eyes went very wide. He stammered, words not coming out of his mouth. Finally, he managed, "Beloved Nathaniel."

Collins kissed Adlai, sweet and yielding to his mouth. Adlai could do nothing but return it, obviously overwhelmed by emotion.

"There will be no more master captain nonsense, I hope?" Collins' eyes almost twinkled.

"I am..." Adlai began and stopped, as if unable to say the word. "This is legal?" Collins nodded. "Oh love!" Adlai clutched him close.

"Yes, it is legal. You are free. If I am to fall, you won't be passed on as property to any man." Adlai clung very tightly and Collins felt hot tears on his neck. He held Adlai just as tightly.

"We spoke of it. But I believed it to be five years away." Adlai looked up, shaking his head almost imperceptibly as if unable to quite believe, the tears on his face giving way to the smile. "So tonight, I am your lover." He lay quietly for a few minutes, seeming overwhelmed by the options that lay before him. He kissed Collins' neck and whispered, "I think I should like to taste you."

Collins smiled. "Please?"

Adlai nodded and slipped out of bed to kneel on the deck. "Sit up please."

"No, on the bed with me," Collins said. He wanted a true lover tonight.

"Would it not be easiest with me between your feet?"

Collins knew Adlai loved the position better than any other since it gave him great control. But tonight, he did not want a servant between his feet. "Easy, but not best."

Adlai climbed back into the bunk, looking eager. "Show me of the best."

"Lie down with me. But opposite. Head toward my feet." It had been many years since he'd tried this and he wanted to see if he remembered its pleasures well.

Adlai scooted around, getting into position. "Like so?"

"Exactly. Now, your mouth on me, and mine on you." He punctuated this by doing so. Adlai was clean, always, and tasted like home, and love and all the other things Collins associated with him. Adlai kissing him this way, Adlai in his mouth, he was lost in sensation.

At least until Adlai pulled away. "Nathaniel, it is a splendid idea, but quite impractical. I can neither concentrate on your pleasure nor my own."

"Doing fine with mine," Collins managed, before wrapping his mouth back around Adlai. He listened to the deep gasps then the low moan. He swallowed as Adlai poured forth into his mouth. He twisted his tongue around the shaft as he left off. "Delicious."

Adlai stretched languidly. "I shall return the favor then." He turned his face and did so.

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Chapter 13

Two days slid away, and Collins was pacing again. Adlai, to all appearances calm, had bent his quill four times making a single sentence log entry before he gave it up in frustration.

"Nathaniel." He savored the name as he had been doing for two days. No longer Master Nathaniel, just his lover's name in his mouth. "What do you require?"

"A new sword." Collins drew his and looked at it. It was at best ordinary, plain steel, no balance to speak of. "This has seen me through many battles since the day I took it from a Frenchman who no longer needed it." Adlai watched him test Harrison's captured sword, and could see it didn't fit his hand properly either. "Can't even kill him with his own blade," Collins grumbled hanging it back on the wall. He looked at Adlai. "Good Spanish steel, and balanced to me," he said. "It will not come cheaply."

Adlai nodded. "But your life is worth more than all the money. Any I have, you may use. Master Blacksmith Tanner here in Bridgetown is legendary. They say only Espinoza in Nassau is better."

"We haven't time to make Nassau. Tanner will do. I need a sword worthy enough to win my legend or to fall upon before I let him take me back."

Adlai simply nodded. He understood why his Nathaniel would die before returning. Harrison claimed he did not keep slaves, but once he thought a man was his, he never let them go.

Tanner's shop was expensive and only open two afternoons a week. Adlai heard Collins suck in his breath at the price of a simple cutlass. But he never blinked as he walked to the counter and waited. The middle-aged man left off his polishing. His arms bulged, straining the seams of the good linen shirt he wore.

"It's Elijah's Adlai, isn't it?" Tanner said.

"Adlai Goodman, master smith. I'm free."

"Good for you. Always knew you were smart enough to be free some day. What do you need?"

"My former master, now my captain, needs a sword. The best. Money is no object."

Collins sucked in his breath again. "If you're spending that freely, you must truly be worried," he muttered to Adlai.

Tanner bustled out from behind his counter. He snatched up a tape measure and started measuring Collins, without so much as a "by your leave." Adlai watched as Collins endured it: shoulder breadth, reach, his balled fist and open hand.

"How soon, Adlai?" asked Tanner. A special commission, especially a rushed one, could be very lucrative.

"We have twenty-eight days before the duel. Today would be preferred."

"Outfitted from the stock then." Tanner looked over the weapons on hand and chose several, setting them before Collins. "Try them please, Captain. See which suits you best."

Collins picked up each in turn. He tried a few passes with each. He narrowed it to a choice between two. He weighed them each again, made a few feints and parries and finally

chose. The basket-hilt circled his hand comfortably. The light blade whistled as it split the air of the shop.

"This one."

"Ah, good." Tanner looked it over. "Spanish steel, imported from Toldeo. I made her myself. She is called Hurricane. Light and strong and deadly. She moves quickly."

Adlai paid out the required money. The sword cost almost a thousand pounds. Collins looked horrified at the price and how easily Adlai parted with it. Adlai just smiled.

"Ship's bursar now, are you? Doing very well for yourself since old Elijah died." Tanner looked him over. He stared into Adlai's blue eyes, but said nothing. He busied himself wrapping the sword against the weather.

"I do try. My father left me nothing, so I have made my way." Adlai knew what Tanner was thinking. Most of the shopkeepers did the same.

"Adlai, it's a great deal of money," Collins tried to protest.

"There is always more money. You have but one life. And you are the Captain." Adlai presented the bundle to him.

"Thank you, Master Tanner."

"Thank you, gentlemen." Tanner smiled as they left. He would have much to tell in the taverns tonight. Elijah's black bastard had been a common topic of discussion and a nine-day's wonder after he was sold with the estate. Now he had returned, free and powerful enough to back-talk a ship's captain, and openly acknowledging his parentage. Things boded ill for the new owner of Breakfront, a wastrel and sot who had already gambled away half the acreage.

* * * *

Collins sat in his cabin running the oiled rag over the blade. He'd never held such a fine weapon, let alone owned one. He knew Harrison's new sword was not so fine. The other he kept as a trophy and would never use. Now if his skills matched his blade, all would be well.

Adlai finished the log entry and the ledger entry showing a thousand pounds spent for the fine steel sword "Hurricane." He looked at Collins, touching and handling the weapon.

"I count it well spent, if you are still aching over the price. If you emerge alive, it will be more than well spent."

"I've never seen one so fine. She's beautiful."

Adlai rose and came to him. "Twice what I cost, my love. I hope she serves you twice as well."

Collins kissed him. "I have never regretted that purchase. I hope I live long enough to regret this one."

Adlai laughed and kissed him once more.

* * * *

The next morning was clear and cool. He called Stephan to spar with him on the deck. They began slowly, Stephan letting his captain get the feel of the new blade. Soon, they were laying on in earnest. Collins, getting the better of it, harried his quartermaster about the deck, backing him one way and then another. Then he went on the defensive and let Stephan try getting inside his guard.

The large man was good, but his bulk slowed him, and tired him after a time. "Enough, captain," he said after a while. "I cannot penetrate your defenses."

"Excellent." He sat down and had a drink. "Who wants to try next?"

A couple more sailors took their turn, and to Adlai's great surprise, Marc, the doctor, stepped up. Very carefully, he took off his coat. He drew a small, thin sword and faced off.

He danced through Collin's defense, pricking him twice before Collins realized he'd been hit. His little blade was everywhere and Collins could not get through it.

"Show me how," Collins gasped as they broke for a rest. "I know he doesn't know how to do that."

"Heidelberg, Captain. I fought many duels as a student, and earned myself no scars." The doctor said this as simple fact, with no boasting.

Marc spent the rest of the day and the next teaching Collins several of his tricks. Each evening, Adlai worked the effleurage movement cure on Collins for the soreness. He ached from using muscles he'd never stretched before.

Collins spent the next three weeks practicing. Marc was endlessly patient, if a tad snappish, as the lessons wore on. Each of the crew was encouraged to take him on, and he disarmed most of them quite quickly.

The night before the duel, neither man could sleep. Collins paced, came to the bed where Adlai lay, endured the clinging as long as he could, and then paced again. For his part, Adlai simply held him when he stopped his restless roaming.

"You should sleep, my love."

Collins tried lying down again. He drew Adlai in, holding him instead of the other way around. "The men will support you if I lose. They won't let him kill you."

"He won't kill me."

"Assuming I live through this and lose, he will. If only to break me, because he knows I love you."

"And he cannot bear the thought that you love anyone else. If you fall, know I will not long outlive you."

Collins kissed the too-wise look off Adlai's face. "We will still never see each other, because the devil will take me as his own. I think you are bound for better climes than that."

"A murderer five times over, who lives on stolen money?" Adlai retrieved a packet from his trousers. He held it up. "As I said, Captain Thomas Harrison will not kill me. We will serve together on the ships of Hell, my love, since the Almighty set his canon against self-slaughter."

Collins stared at the poison. "No. You will get off the ship at your first opportunity. And you will live as a free man any way you wish. You have to live, for both of us, if I fall. You're smarter than both of us captains combined."

Adlai set his jaw. "I will live as a free man with you at my side. I will be master of Breakfront and you will be my beloved."

Collins smiled for the first time in days. "That's the plan."

"You will win. I have watched you." Adlai looked away. "I cannot bear the idea of you made to serve one you do not love."

"Even if I made you do so?" Collins asked the question carefully, almost afraid of the answer.

"Nathaniel, that was different."

"I should have freed you before I brought you aboard. In that, he is right."

"It would have been too much for me then. I was the favorite, educated, even loved by my master, my father. I was destroyed with his death. You took me, you gave me someone to serve, even to love, again. And you were unfailingly kind. Had you freed me that first day, I should not have known what to do with myself."

Collins kissed him. "Still the best five hundred guineas I ever spent."

Adlai kissed him back, fierce and needy. "You must win. If you do not, I will study with the finest swords around. I will hunt him. And I will kill him if I must, in order to have you back. You came for me. I will come for you." He punctuated this with another kiss. "You will be mine again and we will have two ships."

Collins laughed. "Bold words from one who mere days ago was my property. I love you bold. A man must have pride."

Adlai nodded. "It is because of you I am a man, and not simply an attack dog like Samir."

"You are going to be an amazing master of that plantation." Collins could see that dream retreating. The thousand pounds for the sword had put a huge dent in their savings. Taking the *Kestrel* would pay for the dream, though.

"I know all of its ways and how to make it produce wealth. Nathaniel." Adlai hesitated before asking. "Might we use free labor? Slave is most economical. Free will be better for our souls. Many of the workmen will leave when freed. They will return for fair wages."

Collins shook his head. "I could never see you getting rich off other people's backs. Myself, I could see, but not you."

"Had I not been sold with the goods, had Master Elijah lived to free me, I would have given it no more thought than you did." Adlai looked almost ashamed at this admission. "I would have inherited the place and my half-brothers, and owned them all with no second thought."

"So, I've changed you?" Collins was surprised. He knew Adlai had worked more magic than the effleurage on his own heart, but he didn't know how much he'd changed his lover.

"My life has changed me. You and your love of me has changed me." He burrowed into Collins' shoulder. "You will win. You must." He repeated the words like a charm against the morning.

"I will," he promised.

"You will," Adlai agreed, "and I will be Master Adlai Goodman, and you will be my own beloved Captain."

"Your own captain, who sails your own supply ship."

Adlai nodded. "I will live ashore, and you will live on ship. You will always be welcome in the great carved bed that belongs to the Master of the house." He kissed Collins' smile. "And at the long table, and before the fire on nights when the rains lash the coast."

"It will be perfect," Collins promised.

"We will make it so. Tomorrow, all our dreams hang in the balance. Rest now, my love. In a few hours, all will be decided."

* * * *

The morning of the full moon dawned clean and clear. The rains of the night before had washed the air and the city

clean. It was a muggy July morning, and the wind from the sea blew hot and heavy.

Collins walked to the appointed place, a small city park. Adlai and Stephan went with him. Adlai would not be satisfied with mere news of the duel, and Stephan was under orders to keep the *Horizon*, even if Harrison won.

Ringrose was helping Harrison out of his coat. He looked as if he hadn't slept in days; he certainly hadn't been sober in weeks. Collins was unsure the man could even hold a sword. He looked hard pressed to stay on his feet, let alone fight.

"Ready to die, 'Thaniel?" Harrison snarled, trying to walk, but taking a great lurch instead of a step.

"You are still drunk, Thomas."

"And I'll be drunker still when it's your blood pouring down my throat instead of wine." The next step was a little more confident. "I'll carve out your heart and eat it raw and beating as the French raider of legend did." His sword gleamed in the early light.

Collins drew his own sword. He stepped away from his men so as not to jeopardize them, but stayed out of Harrison's range. Making the man come to him was part of the tactic he had learned from Marc.

The first attack was clumsy and off-balance. Collins parried it easily. The second was faster and more sure. That one was not riposted so well, but it did not touch him. Collins tried an attack of his own and Harrison parried him with skill he would not have thought possible in one so drunk. The other captain smelled as if he'd been pickled in a rum bottle for a year.

Almost as if he'd washed his hair in it. Collins could not kill a man so drunk he could barely stand.

Collins went on the defensive, parrying, but not attacking. He could keep it up for hours, and would do so until Harrison called a draw or passed out. A single lucky touch got through his guard, staining his shirt red in a patch the size of his palm.

As they locked blades and Collins took a good look into Harrison's eyes, he saw the truth of the matter. The other captain was not drunk at all. He reeked of the drink that he had sweated out his pores and poured into his hair and clothes to give the seeming of drunkenness.

"Oh Thomas, you thought to take me in with such a sham? I who have seen you drunk so often? I who put you to bed more nights than not?" Collins pressed his attack in earnest now, using the French style Marc had taught him.

"Made you go easy for the first minutes. Now I know your style. Now, you die, boy." The new attack was a frenzy that assailed Collins' defenses from every side. A second touch made more red bloom at his waist.

With no qualms now, Collins thrust and sliced, trying to incapacitate if not kill. Harrison, a tight wicked half-smile on his face, parried and riposted, taking back the advantage at every turn. Adlai watched, breathing hard, and Collins fancied he could see the clever brown fingers turning the packet of poison over and over in his pocket.

Back and forth, their feet trampling the wet grass, the men dueled. Collins caught Harrison's sword arm with the tip of his sword and bore down hard, stabbing clean through.

Harrison wrenched off the sword with a scream strangled between his teeth. Blood poured from the wound, but he tried for one last stab through Collins' guard. He could no longer hold the sword and dropped to the ground.

"No quarter asked," he growled.

Collins stared at him a long time. He stole a glance at Adlai. Adlai gave him a small shake of his head. He'd learned his lesson with Samir. He would not take a life in cold blood.

"It's over, Thomas." He wiped his sword clean and sheathed it again.

Harrison scowled up at him. "Aye, you would call it over. Me bleeding my life out on the grass, you taking my lady. That'd be over, right enough."

"You'll live. And you're a pirate, you'll find another ship easily enough."

Harrison held his functional hand high and beckoned Collins closer. "For your ears and none of theirs." When Collins bent in, he whispered, "Always loved you, too long and too well. Until today, I'd have even forgiven you Samir, had you shown a morsel of remorse."

"Thomas..." Collins' face was a tangled mess of emotions

"Enough." Harrison pushed himself to his feet, with his good hand using his sword for a crutch. "You've won today. Take the *Kestrel* and go." He turned his back and made his slow way to where his quartermaster waited, bleeding at every step. Peter Ringrose caught him as he fainted.

"I'll take care of him, Captain Collins," Ringrose called. "If you don't mind, I won't be returning to the *Kestrel*."

Collins just nodded wearily and turned to where his own men waited. He felt as if he'd been beaten with clubs and keelhauled as well. His mind was disquieted. Adlai embraced him, careful of his wounds.

He held his lover close for a moment, then looked over Adlai's shoulder at Stephan. "The *Kestrel* is yours. You're her Captain now."

Stephan smiled. "I thank you. I think I shall limit my activities to the sunny side of the law instead of the shades. I have no letter of marque under my own command."

Collins leaned on Adlai, exhausted, and growing weak himself from blood-loss. "A wise captain. I chose well."

Adlai helped him back to where the *Golden Horizon* was anchored. Stephan rowed them to the ship and helped get him aboard. Adlai took him to his cabin and stripped him out of his shirt.

"Marc's here to bandage you," he said softly. "Again," he added with a mock-sigh. "This time, you will lie abed, drink much and replace your blood."

"Last I want to see of the doctor until I am at sea again."

Marc smiled and began working on the sword wounds. "I have spent as much time at your bed as your paramour since I came aboard. You will heal, Captain." He finished his bandaging and left.

"Amazing this year hasn't seen my death," Collins muttered. "Stabbed a dozen times, shot, and who knows what all."

"I am glad it has not, my love." Adlai untied his hair ribbon and swept his hair off his face.

"The next year will be better," Collins promised.

"Aye." Adlai kissed him long and sweet. "And we'll see the next storm season in from the walls of Breakfront."

"From your lips to God's listening ears." Collins was not a praying man, but this one he wanted heard.

Adlai gave a wicked smile. "There are better places for my lips to fall, beloved, and they will, when you are well again."

Stephan knocked, not wanting to interrupt. On being summoned in, he began, "Nathaniel, I would not leave you with a half crew. I ask only that Aaron and a few others join me."

Collins nodded. "We have months to recruit new sailors. We will both sail with full crews."

Stephan came and shook his hand. "You are a good man, Nathaniel Collins, for all you do not know it yet. Not every man would have been so merciful on the grass this day. I will sail with you, if it is a fleet you desire. If not, I am always at your service. Get word and I will come to your aid." He left to collect the crew and take charge of the *Kestrel*.

Collins pulled Adlai close and kissed him again. "You're would have looked wonderful captaining our second ship."

Adlai smiled at the jest. They both knew he was no captain, and that Stephan would love the *Kestrel* as Collins loved his *Horizon*. "Only if we can sail closely enough that I can spend nights in your bunk. I do not sleep well alone."

"Always."

"We must travel together for safety. I hear there are pirates in these waters." Adlai was teasing now, punctuating his words with kisses.

Collins laughed again. "How terrible." He kissed Adlai. Their dream was secured and his ship was safe. His lover was warm in his arms and nothing would part them. He took another kiss, long and deep, and then pressed his forehead to Adlai's, drowning in the blue eyes that were the color of the sea.

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