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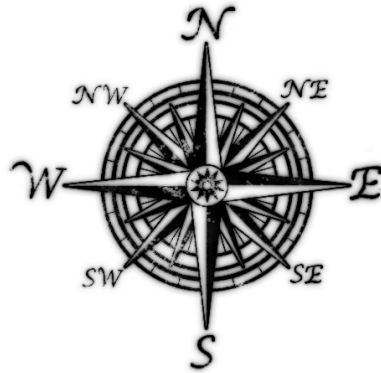
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Sacrificed: Heart Beyond the Spires



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Published by Bey Deckard
Edited by Starr Waddell

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ISBN: 9780993701740

September 19th excerpt

Author's Note

A heartfelt thanks to my fans and friends.

No really.

Thank you.

Thank you for leaving amazing reviews of my first novel. Thank you for all your suggestions, comments, re-tweeting, re-blogging, re-whathaveyous. Thank you for your wonderful support.

I couldn't have done it without you.

Other Books by Bey Deckard

Caged: Love and Treachery on the High Seas (Baal's Heart #1)

Chapter 1 – Jon

Every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home.

—Matsuo Bashō

Six Weeks Ago

“You’re going to wear a groove in the boards and make Calum throw you overboard if you don’t stop your pacing, Jon,” said Baltaros, looking down at Jon.

Jon laughed, but he felt completely frantic with worry. Tom had said that he would come give them their answer early this morning, but it was now noon, and there was no sign of him.

“It’s not like we have to leave immediately, Jon,” said the captain. “If Tom’s not ready today, maybe he’ll be ready tomorrow. He can be extremely proud, like his mother. I did him wrong, Jon... and an afternoon spent playing on bedsheets won’t make it all better. We can afford to wait a day or two.”

Jon nodded. He hoped it was the case. He’d already made two trips back to the mainland to see if he could find Tom on his own, with no avail. They could also put off the trip for this season if Tom was unwilling to join them. Jon was sure he could convince—

“Bloody fuckin’ hells, Da! What in gods have ye done to my fuckin’ boat?”

Jon started and looked over his shoulder.

The ocean-eyed, burly youth swung himself up over the edge of the raised gunwale like nothing was amiss and landed on silent feet on the deck next to Jon. After dropping his bag with a thump and ruffling Jon’s hair affectionately as he passed by him, Tom swaggered to the stairs of the quarterdeck and looked up, feet splayed and hands on his hips.

The captain, his relief and amusement obvious for a mere second, brought his stark brows down in a fierce scowl.

“*Your* boat?” the captain repeated loudly. “She’ll be yours over my dead body.” Baltaros allowed himself a small smile, and Tom grinned wide. “Whip these boys into shape, if you remember how,” said Baltaros as he lifted his head to look over the gathering crowd.

“First mate on deck!” shouted the captain.

Some of the old-timers reached out to pat Tom’s shoulder as he made his way down the deck while the newer shipmates just peered curiously at the tattooed sailor that was built like an ox. However, when Tom started bellowing, everyone jumped quickly to obey.

“All right ye lot o’ bleedin’ twats, move yer asses. Shore up that fuckin’ clutter and tighten those lines, ye bilge rat. Aye! I’ll drown ye meself if ye don’t heed, boy...”

Jon grinned, listening to the first mate yell out orders in his non-stop, rolling mainland accent that was thickly peppered with cursing and laughter.

He looked out over the calm water and took a deep breath. Jon knew there would be trying times in the coming months, both from inside the ship and from without, but at this precise moment in time, he felt he could face anything.

Jon picked up the bag that Tom had dumped unceremoniously beside him and trotted to the captain's quarters to throw it inside. With a glance up at the tall, dark man above him on the quarterdeck, Jon smiled.

There was nowhere he would rather be.



Present Day

Jon pulled the woollen cloak tighter around himself and shivered. His fingers ached from the cold; damp from saltwater spray, his gloves were scant protection from the frigid weather. He'd give his soul just to be back in Baltaros's bed, warm and far from all this fucking snow and ice. Miserable, he tried once more to undo the ropes tying the crate of supplies to the mast.

"Fucking hell!" Jon yelled into the icy wind when his numb fingers refused to close around the knot. He clenched his teeth and kicked hard at the wooden crate, his shoulders tense and hunched.

"What's wrong, love?" asked a deep voice from behind him.

Jon let out an exasperated groan and rubbed his face, leaning wearily into Tom's side as the first mate put an arm around his shoulders.

"I am so tired of this weather," he said, embarrassed by how peevish he sounded. "I can't get anything done. I'm just so fucking cold. Tom, I can't even feel my hands." Jon flexed his fingers, and tried to form a fist but failed. When he looked up, he was annoyed to see that the muscular first mate was looking at him in amusement.

"It's not funny," said Jon. "I'm serious... I've seen what frostbite can do."

Tom's green-blue eyes creased at the corners as he grinned wide at Jon.

"Here, mate, let me see. It can't be that bad," he said, reaching for Jon's gloves. Peeling them off the shivering man's hands, he frowned; Jon's fingers were bone white from cold. Tom pulled him closer, lifted up the bottom edge of his thick sweater, and shoved one of Jon's hands against the warm skin of his side.

Jon let out a low moan and quickly tucked his other hand against Tom's flank; it always amazed him how incredibly warm the big man was. During the last few weeks, as the weather got progressively colder, the crew began to resemble moving piles of fur. Not so with Tom; it was only when the deck was consistently covered in ice that the first mate grudgingly put on a pair of boots. Even now, Tom went around bareheaded in the cold, the smoke from his cheroot adding to the constant halo of steam from his warm breath.

When Jon's hands touched Tom's skin, the first mate hissed through his teeth from the shock; chuckling, he put a big, gloved hand around the back of Jon's neck.

"Listen, love. Why don't cha warm up here a spot," said Tom, his voice low and fond. "Ye won't lose yer fingers, Jon. Not on my watch, see?"

Jon nodded and leaned into the bigger man, thankful for his presence; he was glad that it was finally so effortlessly comfortable between the two of them.



Six Weeks Ago

"I'm very sorry you feel that way, Tom," said the captain with a frown. "I had assumed that we would be sharing my quarters."

Tom rubbed the side of his thumb against his stubbled jaw. With ocean-coloured eyes wide and seemingly focused on nothing, unable or unwilling to meet the captain's glare, he flared his nostrils slightly and shook his head.

"And why the fuck would ye think I'd just leap into yer fuckin' bed like a lust-wet strumpet, all big eyes and heart full of forgiveness, Da?" said Tom, his deep, gravelly voice taking on the edge of anger. "I'll be yer first mate, but I won't be sharin' yer bloody bed. Not now. Not yet."

Tom's eyes flicked to the captain's face for a moment, unmistakable pain in his gaze, before looking away again.

Jon let out a nervous sigh and ran his fingers through his dark-brown curls; his hair hung loose past his bare shoulders, and it tickled the back of his neck as he fidgeted with it. In dismay, he watched Tom bend slowly to pick up his sack of belongings, slinging it over his shoulder as he turned to leave.

Jon had assumed, like the captain, that the three of them would be sharing the large stateroom, and it was to these quarters that he had brought Tom's belongings when they had set off earlier.

The day had been incredibly busy, seeming light-hearted and hopeful to Jon. However, as the sun dipped below the horizon on this first day of their journey, when it came time to retire for the night Tom had looked almost horrified at the prospect of sharing a bed with the captain.

Stepping towards the door, Tom looked over his shoulder at Jon, his brow creased and eyes serious, before he let himself out into the salt-tinged night air, the door left swinging behind him.

At the creak of the bed, Jon turned to see that the captain had sat down on the edge of it, his eyes closed and fingers pinched over the bridge of his nose. Without looking up, Baltaros held out his hand, and Jon crossed the room to press himself into the older man's embrace.

"Stubborn as a mule," muttered Baltaros, shaking his head.

Jon looked down at the man leaning against his side and nodded; he brought his hands up to stroke the captain's shoulders and thought to himself for a moment before answering.

"I don't blame him, you know," Jon said softly. Beneath his hands, he felt the captain stiffen slightly. "You said yourself that you didn't think Tom would forgive you right away. And you were right. So... be patient."

Baltaros looked up at him, his brown eyes almost black in the sombre lighting. Jon could feel weariness and anger in the captain as the man shook his head.

"I'm disappointed too, if it makes you feel any better," Jon murmured. He leaned down and pressed his lips to Baltaros's high forehead; after a heartbeat, Jon pulled back, paused, and smiled before skimming his mouth over the older man's lips, hoping to turn the captain's mind away from Tom's unexpected rejection.

The captain let out a low growl and reached up to cup the back of Jon's head, deepening the kiss. When he started tugging at Baltaros's loose shirt, the captain let out a sigh.

"Yes, patience," he agreed when he pulled away from Jon. The captain's hand closed tight over Jon's forearm, his stark face going still and cold as he stared up at him.

"Don't go to him," said Baltaros slowly. "Don't seek out Tom by yourself."

Jon straightened and blinked at the captain, disconcerted by the older man's words. They were spoken as a command, the tone unmistakable.

"I mean it, Jon," warned the captain. "As long as Tom won't come to me willingly, you're not to go see him. I... won't have it."

The soft spark of passion that had begun to take hold of Jon sputtered and expired, and he pushed away Baltaros's hand when it came up to pull him in for another kiss.

"The hell I won't," he said angrily, taking a step back. "During the day, as captain you can order me around all you want... but this? Baltaros, you're being absurd." He watched Baltaros's eyes go flat, devoid of emotion.

The way that the captain could suddenly seem so completely inhuman was unsettling, and it always triggered the ghost of something primordial within Jon, buried deep in his genetic makeup: the instinct to flee from a predator.

Run.

Shaking his head to dispel the feeling of unease that had slid into his veins like ice water, Jon held up his hand.

"Listen to me. Tom is angry at *you*... not me," he said, trying to keep the resentment out of his voice. "Do you think that forbidding me to spend any time with him will make Tom any more amenable to you?"

Jon frowned when Baltaros dropped his eyes, a slow exhale rounding the man's shoulders. When the captain looked back up, the younger man was amazed by the fury in Baltaros's gaze.

Without a word, Baltaros stood, tucking his shirt back into the waistband of his black pants. He moved to open the chest at the foot of the bed and pulled out a blanket before walking towards the door. Looking back at Jon, Baltaros finally spoke.

"If I stay here, I will *hurt* you," said the older man, his words deliberate. He turned his head towards the exit. "And... I'd rather not." Jon heard Baltaros take another deep breath. "I will be above if you need me, but I do hope you won't."

With those words Baltaros stepped out, closing the door quietly behind him and leaving Jon alone in the dark of the stateroom.



Present Day

When his hands were finally warm, Jon gratefully accepted Tom's big gloves in exchange for his frozen ones. The first mate slipped on Jon's gloves and curled his hands into fists.

"I'll have these warmed up for ye in no time, ducky," said Tom, his pink lips curled into a crooked grin. The first mate then reached behind him to pull the long knife out of its sheath, and he quickly sliced through the knot Jon had been trying to loosen. When Jon exclaimed in surprise, Tom just lifted one shoulder up in a shrug.

"We have plenty of rope, ye daft boy," he said. "Now get to work haulin' this to Cook or he'll make ye eat last." Tom reached out and pulled him forward again to press his forehead to Jon's before taking off at a brisk pace down the frozen deck, whistling a jaunty tune as he went.

Jon looked around. Seeing the eyes of a few of the deckhands on him, he coloured slightly. It was never going to be easy being seen as the captain and first mate's cabin boy, regardless of what his actual role was on the ship.

When a gangly, tow-headed deckhand they had picked up during their stop at the *Jewel* sniggered, Jon scowled at him and picked up the crate.

He had to do something about the teasing; it was blatant and getting out of hand. However, it wouldn't do to let Baltaros or Tom know just how much it was bothering him. Both had a penchant for violence and an overprotectiveness of Jon that almost guaranteed excessive punishment for anyone involved.



Six Weeks Ago

Jon woke up when the sun's rays came through the stained glass at the back of the captain's quarters. As he opened his eyes slowly, he reached for Baltaros and frowned when his hand encountered nothing but the cool sheet next to him. Jon lifted his head; the stateroom was empty. The previous night's drama came back to him in a rush, and he groaned. Turning over onto his back, Jon rubbed the sleep-sand from his eyes with the heels of his hands. What was he going to do?

Tom would be furious if he knew that Baltaros had forbidden him from spending any time alone with the first mate, and the captain would be equally livid if Jon disobeyed him. The last place he wanted to be caught was between the demanding captain and his hot-tempered first mate. It was a shitty position to be in, and Jon desired nothing more than a quick resolution.

Sure, but... then what? he thought nervously.

After slipping off the soft bed, Jon paused to look at himself in the mirror above the teak dresser. Sleep had not come easily to him, and it showed in his face. He pressed at the bags under his eyes and frowned to himself; tilting his head up to the light, he scratched his chin and realized that he was also in dire need of a shave.

Above-deck a short while later, Jon was astounded to see Tom and Baltaros working companionably side by side as the morning checklist was run through. Munching on Cook's good sourdough and drinking a steaming cup of black coffee as he hung back, Jon watched the two men discuss the replacement of the starboard lines running up the mizzenmast. He could almost believe that the night's arguments had never happened. However, as he stepped up to them, it was obvious that not all had been forgiven.

Baltaros's eyes were tired and aloof when he looked down at him, and Jon noticed immediately that Tom was purposefully keeping a set distance between him and the captain. When he got closer, Jon caught the smell of stale sweat and whiskey emanating from the bigger man; evidently Tom's first night aboard had been equally restless.

Feeling achingly uncomfortable, Jon put his cup down and chose to address the air between the men rather than make eye contact.

"Cook says that someone has been nicking more than their ration of rum," he said blandly, scratching at his jaw. "He has an idea who it is—"

"Who?" asked Baltaros, his voice harsh.

Jon winced. It didn't bode well for the man accused; the captain was just looking for something to sink his anger into. Before he had a chance to reply, Baltaros held up a hand.

"Forget it. I'll go see to it myself," said the captain, turning his head towards the galley. "Tom, you stay here. Jon, go find something else to do." Jon clenched his jaw and stood his ground, ignoring the captain. Baltaros looked back, and Jon finally met his gaze. Dark eyes wide at the expression on Jon's face, the older man stayed a moment longer before taking the steps down from the quarterdeck two at a time.

Tom chuckled.

“I never thought I’d live to see the day that ye’d stare down the cap’n, love,” said the big man, his roguish face creased in a wide grin.

Jon sighed and scratched at his cheek.

“Yeah, well, obviously things change,” he replied faintly. Rubbing hard at his neck, Jon shook his head. He started when Tom’s hand cupped his chin and turned his head.

“Do ye have fleas, lad?” asked Tom with a laugh. “Will ye stop bloody scratchin’? Yer makin’ me itch.”

Wary of the captain’s return, Jon’s eyes darted to the stairs as he pulled his face out of Tom’s callused hand.

“I just need to shave,” he said, stroking his hand slowly over the hollow of his cheek. Over the course of the past year, Jon’s beard had finally filled in, and he found it a constant annoyance.

“Then... shave,” said Tom. His eyes had narrowed when Jon had pulled out of his grasp, and he crossed his arms across his broad chest. His gaze flicked towards the stairs and back to Jon.

“What’s stoppin’ ye? Hm?”

“Kat used to do it for me. Since then, it’s been either the captain or Cook,” said Jon. He cringed when Tom suddenly let out a surprised laugh.

“Aw shit, ducky. Yer a grown bloody man,” said Tom, his eyes shining with amusement. “Please tell me ye know how to shave yerself.”

His face hot, Jon touched the sparse patch on his right cheek where one of his attempts had landed him a scar, and he chuckled ruefully.

“I haven’t gotten the hang of it. I know, I know. Stupid, right?” he said, hoping he wasn’t as red-faced as he felt.

With another glance at the staircase, Tom grabbed Jon’s arm in a vice-like grip and pulled the slighter man down the steps.

Jon quickly tried to free himself, but Tom was built like an ox and just as strong; in the end, feeling like a child, he let himself be dragged belowdeck by the first mate.

Nervous as they passed the galley doors, though the captain was nowhere in sight, Jon followed Tom to a tiny storage room next to where the coal was kept.

He blinked and looked around. The room was no more than a large broom closet, but it looked like someone had been living there for some time. There was a thick mat on the floor to one side with a bright blue blanket pulled over it. Against the far wall was a rough, hand-carved shelf that held a few books. Atop a small crate sat a silver pitcher and a cup, as well as a delicate, little wooden box with an inlaid pattern on the cover. Jon frowned and looked at Tom.

“What is this?” asked Jon, confused. The room smelled faintly of the big man despite the open porthole: whiskey, tobacco smoke, and a scent that was Tom’s own.

Tom shrugged, his wide frame almost comically large in the tiny room.

“Where do ye think I go when Da kicks me out of his bed, lovey?” he asked, pulling down a wooden bowl from another shelf set high above the foot of the bed. Tom eyed Jon. “Ye don’t think yer the first reason I’ve been left in the cold, do ye?”

Jon’s eyes widened. He shook his head after a beat even though truthfully it hadn’t occurred to him. He felt weirdly betrayed by the information.

Tom set down the bowl next to the pitcher and poured a little of the water into it. Using the long knife at his belt, he shaved off a few flakes from the block of dark soap he held in one scarred

hand and proceeded to churn the mixture together with a short-bristled, round brush. In no time the bowl was filled with thick, milky-white, sandalwood-scented suds.

“Sit,” Tom said, pointing to the floor.

Jon looked down, furrowing his brow. His mind was a mess. Was this considered “seeking out Tom”, he wondered; and, if so, what would he say if Baltsaros found out? Sure, he had stood up to the captain earlier, but...

“Hells, Jon... do ye want me to show ye or not?” asked Tom with a scowl.

With a startled nod, Jon sank to the hard wooden floor. A moment later, Tom sat behind Jon and pulled him back against his chest, his legs bracketing the smaller man’s.

Instantly, Jon’s heart started to crash against his ribs. Tom laughed low, and Jon felt the first mate’s voice rumble against his back.

“Listen... I know he forbade ye from seein’ me, lovey. I ain’t stupid, and I’ve been with the captain long enough to know what he’s like,” said Tom softly, depositing the bowl in Jon’s lap. “But I didn’t come back aboard just to please Da.”

Tom held up a mirror in front of Jon’s face, and he could see the first mate’s green-blue eyes beside his own blue-grey ones.

I came for you too.

Jon blinked and looked down. Swallowing, he gestured weakly to Tom’s room.

“He didn’t throw out your belongings. He kept your room,” he said, his voice strangely hoarse. It was hard to breathe. Jon looked back up and saw that Tom was still staring at him in the mirror. The first mate nodded stiffly.

“Aye, lad. That he did,” said Tom, finally looking away. “That he did.”



Present Day

After hauling the crate belowdecks, Jon finally managed to wrestle it through the doors of the galley. He looked up and smiled.

Behind the thick, stained wooden countertop stood Baltsaros with a long knife in one hand. Stripped to the waist in the humid heat of the kitchen, the captain held a large fish flat against the cutting block as he looked solemnly down at it.

Jon laughed and tugged his borrowed gloves off, draping them over the set of bars Cook used to dry his towels on. After unwinding the scarf from his neck, Jon shrugged out of his thick cloak and left both in a pile in front of the hot coal stove.

“You’ll never get the scales off if you hold it that way,” he said, approaching the captain from behind. He passed his arms through Baltsaros’s and shifted the man’s hand to the left. “And you should be using a dull knife to scrape, not something so sharp... You know Cook is going to kill you for getting scales everywhere. How you’ve lived aboard a ship for so long without learning how to properly scale and debone fish is beyond me.” Jon chuckled and shook his head. “Especially you... You who can prepare quail eggs six different ways and make vegetable stew taste like it was a gift from the gods.”

Baltsaros turned his head with his stark brows high, a twist of amusement on his graceful lips. The beard he had grown over the past month was lightly streaked with grey, and Jon found it an attractive contrast to the captain’s smooth, tanned skin.

“Do you want to make supper, Jon?” asked the man with the knife, his northern accent lending sibilance to his words. “Or will you let me work in peace?” At the last, Baltaros smiled wide, his teeth sharp and white.

Jon moved his hands to the captain’s chest, stroking down the thatch of curling hair to the waist of Baltaros’s black leather pants. Pressing himself up hard against the older man, Jon slipped his fingers below the wide waistband.

“What if I said neither?” he grinned and ducked his head to bite the captain’s shoulder.



Six Weeks Ago

Jon was amazed when Tom started to show him how to shave in earnest. It hadn’t been a ploy to get him alone to seduce him, and Jon was both relieved and disappointed. Shrugging away his misgivings and swallowing his pride, he paid close attention to Tom’s hands as he slid the long blade along the curves of Jon’s jaw.

It was strangely exciting to be letting a man who once plotted against him handle a sharp knife against his skin. But, if for nothing else, Tom’s warmth felt good around him. While Tom had an easy physicality about him, Jon still felt a little odd sitting in another man’s embrace, and he was glad that the first mate made no big deal about it. Tom was simply, and very patiently, teaching Jon how to shave. That’s all it was.

And that’s all that Baltaros needs to know, he thought.

As if reading his mind, Tom wicked away the last of the shaving suds with his blade and then leaned down to bite down softly on Jon’s shoulder, his tongue coming out to taste the flesh between his teeth.

With a gasp, Jon closed his eyes. His skin broke out in prickles, and he felt lightheaded, unable to move, drowning in the sudden torrent of *want* that poured over him. The reality of the situation broke through to him a second later, and he pulled away, up onto his knees, the wooden bowl tipping and suds smearing over the planks in his rush to flee. Jon scrambled to his feet and leaned into the door, his fingers clutching the brass handle.

“I... can’t. I’m sorry, Tom.” Jon felt his heart crashing, and the rush of white noise was loud in his ears. “Just... please. Ok? Shit, I don’t even know what to say, but—” he stammered as he fumbled the door open. His breath hitched at the look of misery that flitted over Tom’s face before the first mate’s expression settled into one of exasperation. “Tom, we’ve got to do this right. Or else...” Jon frowned and shook his head. “I’m sorry.” He turned his head away from the man on the floor and staggered into the hallway.

Walking blindly for a few steps, Jon crashed into the stairs and grunted as he caught himself. He glanced up and saw Cook looking at him curiously from the galley doorway. Jon gritted his teeth into the semblance of a smile and coughed out a small, embarrassed laugh before clutching the handrail to pull himself up the steep stairs.



Present Day

As Jon kissed his way across the captain's broad shoulders, fingers working at the laces of his leather pants, he heard the sound of someone clearing his throat. Startled, Jon turned his head and saw that Cook was standing next to the crate of vegetables he had just hauled in, embarrassment plain on his craggy face.

"Should I find somewhere else to be?" asked Cook, pulling his woollen sailor's tuque off and rubbing his bald head.

"Mmmmyes, I should think so," said the captain softly, pulling away from Jon and dunking his hands in the soapy water of the basin. "I will send someone for you when the galley is free."

Turning around to face Jon as Cook left and slid the door closed behind him, Baltsaros smiled his sharp-toothed smile and pulled Jon's hands back to the waistband of his leather pants.

"Continue," said the captain and leaned back against the edge of the counter. A low, pleased growl came from deep in his chest as Jon leaned in to kiss him, his fingers deftly pulling apart Baltsaros's laces.

Chapter 2 – Baltaros

There is no way to ease the burden. The voyage leads on from harm to harm, a land of others and of silence.

—Donald Justice

Six Weeks Ago

Baltaros returned above deck once the man who had been stealing rum was thrown in the brig, the captain's mood not much improved by the task. Clenching and releasing his fists as he walked up the narrow stairs, Baltaros felt hot frustration like a fire burning deep in his belly.

Tom had *never* refused him; it was completely ludicrous. And, Jon...

Baltaros glanced up as he emerged from below and saw that neither his first mate nor Jon were on the quarterdeck where he had left them. Jealousy reared up, clawing hard at him, and he clenched his jaw. He would be damned if Tom thought he could get away with touching Jon if he couldn't bring himself to submit to the captain.

Swallowing down his ire, Baltaros made for the door to his quarters instead of mounting the steps; he needed to get a hold of himself. His anger was getting out of control.

The captain pulled open the door and stepped into the relative darkness of the large stateroom. The addition of the stained-glass windows had definitely improved the disparity of light on entering, but it still took a moment for his eyes to adjust. As he made his way to the long mahogany table in the middle of the room, Baltaros heard a noise and turned his head.

There were dark shapes moving on the bed.

Suspicion sharpened his anger, a howling tempest that churned inside him: *Tom and Jon*.

As he approached, barely able to breathe for the fury that choked him, the captain saw with relief that Jon was alone. When the young man sat up and turned to him, his eyes wide with worry, Baltaros felt his anger shudder and go still inside him. There was a deep ridge etched between Jon's dark brows, and his face was drawn.

"Please," was all that he said.

With a deep sigh, the captain climbed onto the bed and took Jon into his arms, curling around the young man's slighter frame to bury his face in the back of Jon's neck. How could he refuse this solemn, dark-haired creature who looked at him with such love?

Shifting in Baltaros's grasp after a few minutes, Jon's fingers tightened over the captain's hand, tugging it down to press it against the soft mound at the front of his pants.

Chuckling softly at the unexpected invitation, Baltaros obliged and slid his hand up and then under the thin material to cup the soft warmth beneath. At his touch, Jon's cock began to stiffen, and Baltaros pressed a smile against his nape. With a quiet, needy sound, Jon moved his hips back so that he was snug against the captain.

"I know you think I'm being absurd," Baltaros murmured, "but I'm just frustrated."

Jon let out another soft noise, and his fingers stroked down the captain's muscular arm.

As he kissed Jon's neck slowly, Baltaros closed his eyes and rubbed the ball of his thumb over the head of the younger man's cock, sighing in pleasure when he felt Jon tremble against him.

"You have to understand, my love," he said gently. "It never once occurred to me that this would happen."

At his words Jon pulled away slightly, twisting onto his back to look over at Baltaros with a frown.

"What? That Tom might have spent enough time away from you to realize that he wants to be more than just your punching bag?" asked Jon. The words, though blunt, were spoken in earnest.

Baltaros's hand, which had stopped moving, resumed stroking Jon gently, his gracefully curved cock sliding slowly within his grasp. The captain pondered for a moment and nodded, his lips pressed together in a rueful smile.

"Something like that," he answered, looking down to watch his hand moving below the sun-bleached fabric of Jon's pants. "I thought after our time at the *Jewel* things would be... normal. Though, to be fair, I don't really know what 'normal' would be. I don't yet know what's required to reach an equilibrium."

He glanced up at Jon's face and saw that he was being watched with curious eyes.

"What did you say to him?" asked Jon. His cheeks were infused with a flush, and his breathing had quickened.

Baltaros frowned.

"When? At the *Jewel*?" he asked, and Jon nodded.

"Well... I said that I was sorry, and I called him my tomcat. Then I said that I wanted him to come *home* with me," answered Baltaros with a smile. He remembered how his heart had begun to race when Tom had finally stepped into his arms, the big man's scarred back warm against his hands, his scent so familiar...

"And what did he reply?" asked Jon; closing his eyes, he licked his bottom lip before grazing it with his teeth. He had begun to move his hips in an aching ly lithe roll, matching the speed of Baltaros's hand.

Baltaros laughed loud, and Jon looked up at him, confused.

"He said, and I'm quoting word for word, 'If you ever whip me again, I'll cut your bloody cock off,'" chuckled the captain.

"Here I thought it was something heartfelt," grinned Jon.

Baltaros shook his head in amusement and leaned in to kiss him. With surprise, he noticed that Jon was freshly shaved and smelled of sandalwood soap; smiling, Baltaros moved his lips slowly over the smooth skin of Jon's jaw as he changed his grip on his cock, moving faster. Jon closed his eyes again and moaned softly. Baltaros could tell it wouldn't take long before he was panting and straining against him.

"Oh... it was heartfelt, that I know," murmured the captain. He closed his eyes, falling into the rhythm of his hand. Jon was right. Patience. Patience with Tom... and an open mind with Jon. He would work at it. But that could wait until later.

Baltaros opened his eyes and pulled his hand away from Jon's cock.

"On your knees now, my love," he said and began to work the laces loose on his own pants.



Present Day

Jon slid his hand down the front of Baltaros's leather pants, and the captain inhaled sharply at the icy touch. Chuckling, he pulled back from the kiss and frowned.

"Gods, your hands are frozen," he said, curling his own around Jon to pull him closer.

Jon grinned crookedly, his face impish as he stroked the captain's cock with one hand while tugging down the black leather with the other.

"You should have felt them before Tom warmed them," Jon said, leaning forward again to begin kissing down the side of Baltaros's neck. "But my mouth is very warm, that I can promise you."

At the mention of Tom, Baltaros felt a residual jealous twinge. His feelings about the two young men being alone together he kept buried deep, but he knew there would always be a tiny flame of resentment that flared up, no matter what. Closing his eyes as Jon slid his warm tongue over one nipple, teeth gentle yet firm on the sensitive flesh, he tried to make himself relax.

As if reading the captain's mind, Jon laughed as he sank to his knees on the galley floor.

"You're a controlling, possessive asshole, and that's never going to change, is it?" Jon said before licking a wide stripe up under Baltaros's testicles to the base of his cock, his tongue flat and velvet-rough.

Baltaros stroked Jon's long dark curls out of his face and solemnly shook his head. While watching the boys "play" together was something he rather enjoyed, the thought of them doing anything without his presence was still something he was learning to deal with.



Five Weeks Ago

Leaning over the quarterdeck railing, the captain watched Tom reach out to touch Jon's cheek and nod with a smile. Baltaros frowned but didn't move from his spot.

Patience. Understanding, he thought to himself.

However, when Jon's face immediately swivelled to glance up at Baltaros with a guilty look, something *twisted* in his gut, and he turned away.

It had been a week since they had set sail, and Tom had yet to make any attempt at reconciliation. Working closely with the big man again was immensely satisfying; but, though the two fell quickly into the easy, practiced rhythm that made them the perfect team, gone was the steady underlying current of desire that had always been there before. In its place was... nothing.

Not nothing. Aloofness.

Baltaros turned again to look below and saw that Jon had gone. Scanning the deck, the captain saw Tom standing on the port gunwale, one brawny arm curled through the ratlines. The first mate watched the captain with the coldly appraising look that the older man had come to abhor. Why did Tom think he could judge him so?

Then, as the captain was about to look away, the burly pirate dropped his eyes, raising them almost immediately with a small yet unmistakably coy grin on his face. It was gone in an instant when Tom jumped down and made his way towards the bow of the ship, but Baltaros didn't doubt what he had seen. Watching his first mate walk away, the captain wondered what it meant.

For the rest of the day, Baltaros kept an eye on Tom, curious to see if the muscular young man would again break from this strange, detached version of himself. The captain was finally rewarded with another brief, sly smile right before they parted for the evening meal.

Tom had always chosen to eat with the rest of the men rather than share the captain's table and, upon his return, he had resumed the custom. Afterwards, the first mate was almost always found sitting on the quarterdeck bench, eyes narrowed into the wind with a black cheroot between his lips as he manned the helm. It was this habit that the captain was counting on.

When Baltaros and Jon finished eating that evening, the captain excused himself and left Jon reading one of the many new books they had brought aboard. As he made his way up one of the staircases leading to the quarterdeck, a mug of dark ale in each hand, Baltaros was relieved to see that Tom was in his usual spot.

"It will start getting cooler soon," he said by way of greeting.

Tom turned his head; his brow furrowed and his blue-green eyes became suspicious slits in his sun-darkened face as he stared at Baltaros. He worked the cheroot in the corner of his mouth for a moment before letting out a short grunt with a small dip of his head. Encouraged, the captain took another few steps and held out one of the mugs. Staring at it silently for a moment, the first mate finally accepted it with another nod.

"Thanks," Tom mumbled, gaze shifting back over the water.

Baltaros sat down on the other end of the bench and leaned back on the painted boards. As the two men sat in silence, the sky slowly deepened to the true black of night above them.

Sipping his beer, Baltaros studied Tom's profile. The man had a high forehead and a shapely brow that creased so often in amusement or consternation that Baltaros could see faint lines there despite Tom's relatively young age. Though he knew Tom's nose had been broken a few times, it remained largely straight and seemed almost too aristocratic for his roguish looks. Below that were full lips that were often quirked into a smile, making Tom appear both sensual and boyish—a dangerous combination. It was a handsome face, with its scars and scratchy dark-blond stubble, and one that the captain had sorely missed.

"What else can I say?" Baltaros murmured. "What can I do to make things better for you?" When there was no reaction from Tom, the captain thought he had not heard him, and he leaned forward with the intention of repeating himself.

Tom turned his head slowly and lifted his shoulder in a small shrug, his eyes focused on nothing.

"Tom, talk to me," said Baltaros, reaching out to touch the first mate's shoulder briefly. When Tom didn't move away, the captain slid closer to him on the bench.

After taking a last drag from his cheroot, Tom flicked it overboard, and his eyes followed the orange spark as it arced through the darkness.

"When have ye ever cared about what I had to say, Baltaros?" he asked, turning his gaze back to the captain.

Baltaros frowned. Tom had been calling him "Da" for so long that it was startling to hear his name fall from the first mate's lips.

"I've always listened to you," said Baltaros slowly, confused. It was true—whenever there were decisions to be made aboard the ship, the first mate's opinions were invaluable.

Tom huffed out a small, sardonic laugh; as he looked down at the mug clasped loosely between his knees, the first mate shook his head.

“I don’t mean the bloody fucking ship, ye fucking idiot,” said Tom, looking up with a wry grin. “I mean... about...” The first mate sighed, his brow deeply lined. Tom lifted the beer to his lips and drained the contents in a few swallows. After depositing the empty mug on the deck next to his feet, he wiped his lips and turned his eyes to Baltaros again, a distraught look on his face.

Baltaros put his own cup down on the bench beside him and stared hard at Tom.

“I thought you enjoyed our arrangement,” he said, sitting back.

Tom laughed and nodded his head.

“No, no, Da. I do... It’s just... Why did ye set me aside so easily?” he asked, his eyes going quickly from sad to aloof as he looked back out over the water.

“This isn’t about me whipping you,” said the captain; it was a statement.

Tom’s lip curled in disgust, and he shook his head.

“That’s just the bloody icin’ on the fuckin’ cake,” he said, his deep voice just a low rumble in his broad chest.

Sighing, the captain reached out and curled his hand around the back of Tom’s head, the short dirty-blond hair soft against Baltaros’s palm.

At the touch, Tom closed his eyes.

“I thought I made it clear when we came for you that I’m sorry for everything that happened, Tom. Putting you aside for Jon the way I did was an unfortunate mistake, one that I would like you to forgive me for,” said Baltaros, making his voice gentle. “I was like a child with a new toy. I understand that now. It was cruel beyond cruel, and you paid dearly for my whims.”

Baltaros stroked his hand down Tom’s neck, his thumb sliding along the side of the first mate’s jaw. Tom kept his eyes closed, the muscles of his strong jaw moving fluidly under his deeply tanned skin. The captain watched Tom swallow, the crease between his eyebrows deepening.

Yes, he was terribly fond of this young man.

When Tom opened his eyes to look at the captain, Baltaros leaned forward and brought his mouth hard against the first mate’s. Tom went rigid with surprise but kissed back, a rough-edged embrace that awoke the desire in Baltaros. He pulled Tom closer to deepen the kiss; there were things that Baltaros craved that he could not inflict on Jon, and finally the drought was over.

With one hand he quickly reached down to undo the belt at Tom’s waist, and when the man tried to push him away, Baltaros pulled back and backhanded him. Tom grunted with the impact of the captain’s strike and lifted his hand to his face, his eyes unreadable in the dark of the quarterdeck. Baltaros chuckled, his lust sharpening. With a low growl the captain pulled Tom from the bench and, caught off guard, he landed hard on the wooden boards. Tom tried to sit up, but the captain hit him hard again. Baltaros dropped to his knees between Tom’s legs and continued to work loose the fastenings of his pants.

“Stop,” said Tom, his voice harsh. He shoved at Baltaros’s hands again, and the older man felt a moment of doubt.

“Don’t play, Tom,” he said, a frown on his face. He pulled open the first mate’s pants, and when he started tugging them down, the captain realized that Tom had stopped struggling. Glancing up, he saw that Tom had turned his head and closed his eyes.

“No, Da. If ye do this, ye’ll be forcin’ me,” said the big man beneath him, turning his furious ocean eyes on the captain. “I’m sayin’ no.”

The captain sat back on his heels. In disbelief he watched Tom pull his pants together and sit up slowly, breathing hard.

This was no act.

Staggering to his feet, Baltaros balled his fists and resisted the urge to lash out at his first mate. He turned and, without a backwards glance, the captain left Tom alone in the dark.

Startled, Jon looked up when Baltaros threw the door open to his quarters. He got to his feet quickly and crossed the room, his dark brows low over his storm-grey eyes when the captain leaned hard against the edge of the table.

“What happened?” asked Jon, placing a worried hand on Baltaros’s shoulder.

With eyes closed, the captain shook his head. He was at a loss.

Jon’s fingers tightened on him.

“Tom?” asked Jon, his voice low. At Baltaros’s nod, he dropped his hand.

He looked up and saw that Jon was staring at him, apprehension clear in his eyes.

“What did you do to Tom, Baltaros?” asked Jon, softly. Accusingly.

The captain sighed and straightened. It seemed that he had no choice; fate was forcing his hand.

“Go to him,” Baltaros said gently. The words stuck in his throat like bitter bile, but he made himself calmly place a steady hand on Jon’s arm. “Go to him, and see if you can’t make some sense of this. Go to him, and help me *fix this*.”

Worry and suspicion flashed across Jon’s face. Pulling away from Baltaros, he just stared at the captain for a moment before turning to leave.

Alone in his quarters, Baltaros glared down at his bruised fist wondering whether he would ever know calm again.



Present Day

The captain turned his head with an annoyed growl when he heard the galley door slide open behind him, but when he saw who it was, his lips curled into a pleased smile.

“Now, now... what’s goin’ on in here?” asked the first mate, stamping snow from his big boots and chuckling. Tom came around the counter and looked down; he put a large, scarred hand on Jon’s head and softly stroked the young man’s glossy dark hair.

Jon made a small noise, and the vibrations felt good on Baltaros’s cock.

The captain let out a soft groan, turning to watch Jon take in more of his length before he drew back to work his tongue against the underside of its head again.

Tom’s hand curled around Baltaros’s neck, and when he looked up, the big man brought him in for a long, slow kiss.

Too soon, Tom broke away, and Baltaros was dismayed to see the seriousness on the first mate’s face.

“I’m sorry, Da... but yer needed above deck,” said Tom, eyes down to watch Baltaros’s cock, shiny with spit, emerge from Jon’s open mouth.

The kneeling young man looked up, worried.

The captain frowned and rubbed his beard. Another setback?

“Snow squalls, Malik called them,” continued the first mate, ruffling Jon’s hair. Tom looked up at Baltaros, his cheeks ruddy from the cold wind. “The rest of what that bloody shipwright said was bloody fuckin’ gibberish, but the gist is he needs ye to look at the ship. I ain’t understandin’ half of what he says... so...” Tom brought up his hands in a sheepish gesture.

“Can’t this wait?” asked Baltsaros, though he could feel himself getting soft. The ship always came first.

Tom shook his head and put a hand over his nose. The tip of it had been icy against the captain’s cheek, and Baltsaros realized that, for once, the first mate was actually cold. The captain sighed.

“All right,” he said and started tucking himself back into his pants. He closed his eyes briefly, forcing himself to say words he didn’t want to say. “Why don’t you and Jon go warm? There is no reason why we all have to suffer the weather. Go on. I will join you when I can.”

Tom helped Jon up as the captain pulled his shirt on over his head. Baltsaros couldn’t help but wonder at how protective and gentle Tom was towards Jon; even for the short journey to the captain’s quarters, the first mate carefully draped the woollen cloak around the smaller man to make sure he wasn’t cold.

Frowning to himself, Baltsaros watched them leave, trying to turn his mind from bitter thoughts to the dangers of sailing a ship through icy, winter seas.

Chapter 3 – Tom

*“Not I, nor anyone else can travel that road for you.
You must travel it by yourself.
It is not far. It is within reach.
Perhaps you have been on it since you were born, and did not know.
Perhaps it is everywhere on water and land.”*

—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Present Day

Tom watched Jon pull the woollen scarf off his face and reached out to help when he saw that the end of it was caught underneath the edge of the thick cloak. Grinning, Jon shook his head, letting himself be unwound by Tom.

“I can undress myself, you know,” the dark-haired young man pointed out ruefully even though he obliged and raised his chin when Tom lifted the cloak up and off of him.

Tom let out a short grunt and nodded. Turning to hang their wet outer clothes on the nails he had set into the wall for that purpose, he felt a small twinge of embarrassment for how much he doted on Jon. It was more than a little ridiculous, but he couldn’t help himself.

He rubbed his thumb along the edge of his stubbled jaw and glanced back at Jon; when he saw that he was smiling at him, his blue-grey eyes fond, Tom grinned wide. It always amazed him that Jon had forgiven him for everything... Tom would have killed him had their positions been reversed.

Jon cocked his head to the side, his eyes growing dark suddenly as the tip of his tongue came out to touch his top lip. His hair was mussed; a few long curls had escaped the thong at his neck, and they followed the curve of Jon’s jaw as he studied Tom.

“Come here,” he said, beckoning.

Instantly Tom’s heart rate accelerated, and he quickly moved forward to obey. Bringing his big hands up to Jon’s slender waist, he felt—as always—a little shy and wondered briefly if that would ever pass; he didn’t really want it to.

Jon leaned forward to brush his lips softly against Tom’s, and the first mate closed his eyes with a sigh, his breathing a little ragged. Would Jon be kind or cruel to him today? Tom tightened his hold on the smaller man, savouring the anticipation and thanking whatever gods there were for gifting him with this passionate, unpredictable creature who was able to take him apart with equal measures of pleasure and pain.



Five Weeks Ago

Pressing his fingers lightly to the bruises on his cheek, Tom winced. Baltsaros had a wicked backhanded strike that always made the world explode into bright colours when he hit him, and he did so often. Normally, it didn't bother him but... tonight...

He tongued the place where his teeth had sliced the inside of his lip and sighed as he leaned back against the bunched up pillows. Bumping his head lightly against the wooden boards, Tom closed his eyes.

Fucking Baltsaros. Actually... that was the point. Why *wasn't* he fucking Baltsaros?

He lifted the flask to his lips and grimaced when the rum burned the cut. After swallowing down the sweet, fiery liquid, he touched his cheek again. His mind was a worse mess than his face, that was for bloody fucking sure.

When he heard soft footfalls outside his door, he tensed, thinking it was the captain come to finish the job. However, he realized that there was a note of hesitation to the steps and, as far as Tom knew, Baltsaros had never had a moment's hesitation in his life.

Tom waited and smiled when the knock finally came, soft and timid; there was no one else on the ship it could be.

"Who the fuck is it?" he yelled, trying to mask the sudden excitement that had him smiling despite the pain in his face. When he saw the shadow under the door start to move away uncertainly, he swore under his breath.

Gods be fuckin' damned, Jon, he thought, shaking his head. *Grow a bloody pair.*

"Come in or get gone," he said loudly, flipping the corner of the blanket over to cover himself when the door opened a crack in response.

"Tom? It's me..." said the slight dark-haired man, peering around the wooden door. He was starkly outlined by the brighter corridor behind him; all Tom could see was the curve of Jon's shoulder and his head surrounded by a nimbus of curled wisps that caught the light. "Can I come in?"

Tom chuckled.

"What part of *come in* did ye not understand, lad?" he said, smiling. He saw Jon's shoulder lift slightly and knew that the serious young man would have a deep wrinkle between his brows. Reaching up, Tom shifted the dented cover on the lantern to make the space a little brighter as Jon stepped into the tiny room, closing the door behind him quietly.

After standing a little awkwardly next to the thin mattress where Tom was sprawled, Jon finally decided simply to sink down into a crouch. Looking worried, he licked his lips and swallowed before speaking.

"What did the captain do?" Jon asked, his eyes taking in the bruising down the right side of Tom's face. "Are you ok?"

Tom took another swig of rum and hissed in pain. He looked at the door.

"Does he know yer here, lovey?" Tom asked quietly; his heart was a quick thing knocking against his ribs, and it was making him a little lightheaded.

"He sent me," replied Jon, his storm-blue eyes wide. "Tom, what did he do? It had to have been something really shitty for him to send me to you. I automatically assumed that he beat you bloody..." He made a small noise and looked away quickly when he finally noticed that Tom was very obviously naked, covered only by the edge of the blanket.

Tom smiled; Jon was amusingly uptight. Making as if to stretch his shoulders, the first mate shifted under the coverlet a little to expose more of his inner thigh and grinned as Jon's eyes tracked

the motion only to dart away again almost immediately. However, when Tom saw the way that the young man's lips parted after a slow swallow, he let out a hitched breath; he was falling prey to his own teasing. Moving his hand over the bulge in the blanket, he then rumbled the material to camouflage his sudden, unexpected arousal. The room felt very hot.

Tom lifted the flask again, and he took a deep swallow, his mouth now numb to the sting. He cleared his throat to try to cut the tension with words.

"Uh... aye, Da came up to see me above. Said some more about bein' sorry. And then... he bloody kisses me," Tom said, frowning.

Jon turned to Tom, confusion and concern on his fine-boned face.

"That wasn't what you wanted?" he asked.

"Oh, that was fine, lad. He just never does," Tom replied, realizing immediately by the way Jon blinked in surprise that the same wasn't true for him. Swallowing against the sudden tightness in his chest, Tom went back to leaning his head against the wooden wall and stared up at the wavering shadows cast on the low ceiling. "Aye, that was fine. Nice, even. It was when he tried for more, the randy bastard." Rubbing a hand across his mouth, he scowled. "Somethin' just, don't know..." Tom gestured to his head vaguely, not able to put into words the feelings that had washed over him. "... and, I said 'no'."

At a soft sound, Tom turned his head and saw that Jon had settled down more comfortably, legs crossed in front of him as he leaned forward, listening intently to Tom. The lantern threw exactly half of the young man's features into total darkness.

"And how did he react?" asked Jon, folding his fists under his chin.

Tom grinned crookedly; the right side of his face felt tight and swollen.

"The bugger actually stopped," he said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Lying on his back on the quarterdeck planks with Baltsaros kneeling between his legs, Tom had felt almost like a spectator when he heard himself tell the captain to stop. Even though his cock had been rock hard and raring to go, he had repeated his refusal, staring in amazement when the captain simply turned and left him.

"I was under the impression that you enjoyed being forced into compromising positions," said Jon quietly, a tiny reflection of the flame in his eyes. "What changed? Why did you say no?"

Why? Tom rubbed a hand over his lips again.

Why indeed.



Present Day

Murmuring against the side of Tom's jaw, Jon's words made the breath hitch in the big man's chest.

"Since you're so goddamn thick that you had to come interrupt the captain and me, I think you *owe* me something in return, don't you think?" purred Jon. "You need a lesson in manners, Tom, and I think you'll take your punishment in the form of my cock in your ass."

Tom licked his lips and nodded, wincing slightly when Jon's sharp teeth nipped his earlobe hard. He shivered as the other man's hands slid up along his ribs, Jon's touch confident as he held Tom hard against his body.

"You're going to take your clothes off and lean over the table. Spread your legs, chest down. Do it," said Jon with a sneer, pushing him away.

Tom almost grinned, but the trick to nurturing Jon's sadistic side was not to appear too eager, something that was difficult considering how much he enjoyed Jon's inventiveness.

Tom reached between his shoulders and drew the thick sweater he wore up over his head, discarding it on the floor before quickly undoing his belt and long trousers. After kicking off the big boots he hated wearing, Tom stepped out of his pants and stood naked in front of Jon for a moment, his hand covering his cock not out of modesty but in an attempt to hide his growing excitement.

Down boy, he thought.

"What are you staring at?" asked Jon, his voice low and harsh. However, as Tom moved to obey, he caught the dark-haired man's appreciative glance and allowed himself a hidden smile as he turned his head away.

He leaned over the mahogany table, spreading his legs just as he was ordered and lowered his torso down to the cold wood. Jon hadn't specified where he wanted his hands, so Tom just clutched the sides of the table, his body taut with anticipation. The edge of the table was a hard line below his hipbones; Tom would no doubt be bruised by being driven against it... and he looked forward to it keenly.



Five Weeks Ago

Tom went to take another sip from the flask and found it empty. Swallowing, regardless, just to wet his mouth, he realized he was stalling on answering Jon. The slender young man sat staring at him patiently, a soft worry in his eyes.

"I... don't fuckin' know, love. I don't fuckin' know," Tom muttered. "Be a dove and get the bottle? The little one." He pointed to the small crate holding the pitcher of water.

Jon leaned over and reached for it, fumbling at the sides of the crate until he realized that the front of it opened on leather hinges. Inside were two bottles of rum in stoppered earthenware jugs and one small bottle of good whiskey in a narrow, green bottle; Jon held the last out to Tom.

"Will ye join me... and come a wee bit closer?" asked Tom hopefully, taking the bottle from Jon.

After a moment's hesitation, Jon crawled onto the hard mattress and sat hunched beside Tom.

"That's not what I meant, ducky..." grinned Tom, pulling his knife out from under the blanket to slide the point around the wax at the top of the bottle. "Listen, love: If Da asked ye to come see me, don't cha think he might be all right with us touchin' a tad? Can't ye see how much I'm hurtin'?" Tom chuckled and pulled the cork out with his teeth.

Jon turned his head and smiled crookedly before easing himself back against Tom's outstretched arm. However, as soon as his shoulders touched Tom's warm skin, the timidity left Jon, and he leaned against the bigger man's side with his head on Tom's wide shoulder. Tom's heart beat double a few times before settling down into a rapid rhythm; as he took a sip of the smooth whiskey, he wondered if Jon knew how nervous he actually felt. He passed the bottle to Jon, the only thing from the *Jewel* he had brought with him.

"I think you're scared," said Jon, just holding the green glass bottle in his hand for a moment.

Tom started, a little dismayed at how transparent he was. He licked the taste of whiskey from his top lip.

“Nah, I ain’t scared of much, lad,” he replied, closing his eyes.

When he had finally washed ashore after being swept overboard by the storm, Tom had spent a week just lying in a spare bed at the *Jewel*, recovering from the extreme dehydration he had suffered from. He had nearly died from exposure; fighting to stay afloat, he had held onto the barrel for dear life even though his arms had trembled and his brain had gone numb from exhaustion.

Once he was able to leave the bed on his own, the first thing Tom had done was steal a large batch of sleeping powder.

The man who found Tom collapsed on the floor realized right away what had happened and managed to empty his stomach with a tube.

Afterwards, Tom had been watched more carefully.

Fresia, whom Tom had always been friendly with, had looked at him sternly and said that she couldn’t understand why, after fighting to survive, he was trying to take the coward’s way out.

A coward.

That’s exactly how he had felt.

Returning to the ship and being forced to endure Jon’s presence from a distance for fear of driving the captain to extremes was agonizing. A bad idea. Bloody stupid. Tom never wanted to face Baltaros’s cold wrath again. Ever. He was stupid for even having Jon in his room right now, regardless of what the captain had said. He blinked—maybe it was a bloody test. Tom scrubbed his hand over the top of his head, trying to block out his worries. Jon broke through his thoughts a moment later.

“See, I thought you were angry. That’s certainly how you’ve been playing it—wounded pride and all that—but fear is the only thing that makes sense for why you’re acting this way,” mused Jon, rocking his head against Tom’s arm.

Tom opened his eyes and sighed.

“Ye think I’m actin’ the fool, love?” he asked, taking the bottle back from Jon. “I ain’t scared of him. Not the way you’re thinkin’.

Jon shrugged.

“Listen, ducky. Before the captain came along, every bastard who wanted to put his cock in me, did. No choice,” Tom swallowed some whiskey and shook his head. “Same with beatin’ me. I kept fightin’ them but just sorta got numb. When Da bought me for a few coins, I was in a real bad way. I almost fuckin’ killed the bastard the first time he laid a hand on me, but he was just fixin’ me up. I kept waitin’ for him to make me his bed boy and it just kept on not happenin’. After the shite with Abetha, well... I just crawled into his bed and sucked his cock. He got bloody rough with me...” Chuckling, Tom smiled at the memory. “And I fuckin’ loved it. He’s got this *way*... Came so hard I saw stars. Ye know, he’s the only soul I ever went to for it. The only one.”

The edges of his mind were starting to get blurry from drink, and he was tired, so very tired of thinking and talking about the fucking captain. He felt around for the cork and pushed it back into the neck of the bottle before wedging the whiskey between mattress and wall. Looping his arm around Jon, he pulled them further down on the bed to lie face-to-face.

Jon looked at him with a rueful smile.

“What do you call *this*, then?” he asked, sliding his hand around Tom’s waist.

Tom closed his eyes and let out a soft sigh.

“This... this ain’t what’s good for anyone, that’s what it is,” he said with a frown. “I’m thinkin’ it was a fuckin’ mistake to come back. I’m thinkin’ maybe ye should leave me to my bloody proble—”

Tom’s ears were filled with a rush of white noise, his pulse jumping, as Jon’s warm mouth touched his. With a groan, he opened his lips and pressed hard into the kiss.



Present Day

When he finished tying Tom’s ankles to the base of the table legs, Jon smacked the back of his thigh with a bare hand.

“Arms behind you,” said Jon, standing.

Obediently, Tom placed his arms behind him and winced as Jon tied his wrists together tightly. The room was warm from the pot-bellied stove that Malik and Baltsaros had installed as part of the Devil’s Isles modifications, but Jon’s hands felt cool against his skin as they moved to trace the tattooed lines that curled and twined over his left side. Tom let out a low groan as Jon slid his fingers lower, stroking down the furrow of his ass. Breathless with anticipation, Tom closed his eyes as Jon poured something cool on him, fingers pushing into him quickly to get him ready. The penetration was perfunctory, done without any gentleness; Tom didn’t expect any. That would come later.

Tom let out a grunt when Jon’s cock breached him, sliding deep inside him in one motion. He opened his eyes and craned his neck, glancing back at Jon when the man remained motionless. Confused, Tom watched Jon smile and lean over to pluck one of Baltsaros’s good white candles out of the heavy wrought iron holder. The motion caused him to push into Tom, and the big man exhaled slowly. He placed his head back down on the table and closed his eyes, ready for anything Jon could dish out.

“You told me once that you weren’t afraid of much. How about fire?” asked Jon.

Tom heard the unmistakable sound of a match being struck against the side of the table and felt the first twinge of real fear. His heart beat fast and hard wondering what Jon intended; when it came to finding new ways to abuse him, Jon was creative. He grunted again as the hard cock in his ass pulled back, only to plunge into him once more.

“Let’s see if I can make you beg...” said Jon, and Tom gasped when the first drops of burning hot wax hit his skin.



Five Weeks Ago

Tom rubbed his face sleepily and took another deep swallow of rum. Bleary-eyed, he reached up and pulled the cheroot out from behind his ear to tuck it into the corner of his mouth.

“Matches, bloody matches...” he muttered, patting at the pocket sewn into his rolled trousers. When he thought he had found one, he tried pulling it out, but it snagged on the material and went flying off into the dark. Tom blinked and fumbled again in the pocket. When it was obvious that there wasn’t another match, he scowled and tried to stick the slim cigar back behind his ear.

“Don’t need no fuckin’ match any—*Cock and bloody balls!*” he yelled as the cheroot dropped to the deck, rolling off into the dark to join the wayward match. With a string of low, muttered curses,

Tom squinted and saw that his dicing partner had fallen asleep against the stack of crates; the man was snoring, mouth open and stinking.

Rubbing his eyes again, Tom fought his own desire for sleep. He had to stay away from his room for fear that Jon would come find him again. With a groan, he leaned his head against the rain barrel.

Jon. Passionate and gentle. Jon with his boundless hope that the three of them would find some kind of arrangement.

“Bloody fucking naïve fucking Jon,” slurred Tom, shaking his head. The boy had been so soft in his hands, warm, willing. Tom had finally sent him on his way after regretfully breaking from the kiss. How could he explain to Jon that he was a coward? That he was terrified of being set aside again by the captain. That the reason he had been so late coming aboard that first day was because he had decided not to come at all rather than face Baltaros and Jon.



Standing on the deck of the *Sainte-Marie*, Tom clutched his bag. He had spent the night tossing and turning, almost sick with unease, before boarding the small passenger schooner bound for the midlands.

The previous afternoon spent with the captain and Jon at the *Jewel* had been almost perfect; enough so that he had fooled himself briefly into thinking that everything was back to normal.

When the first twinges of doubt had struck him as he lay next to the two men, his body cooling, he wondered how it could ever be normal when Jon was involved. His desire for the dark-haired young man was like a slow-burning fire in his veins; Baltaros would never put up with it. Jon would remain a constant threat, one that would have Tom beaten and banished again eventually.

And... he just couldn't live with being ousted from the captain's side again. There was no one else in the world that Tom respected or loved more; Baltaros was his life. He knew that it was almost blind devotion, but he didn't care. For all that the man was a blatant sadist, no one else had shown him trust or friendship like the captain had; and, in the rare moments of gentleness between them, Tom had thought maybe even love. That fool's notion had been blown to bits the moment he saw the way that Baltaros looked at Jon.

Clenching his jaw, Tom turned his eyes away from the painfully familiar mizzenmast that could be seen just past the harbour wall. *Baal's Heart*, the only true home he had ever known.

No, he would go to the midlands and find work, maybe as an apprentice blacksmith or a personal guard for a small lord... nowhere near open water. Captain Baltaros would never find him, and Tom would eventually forget and grow numb; his constant dreams of a dark-haired sylph with Jon's eyes and gentle hands would fade away.

He would become nothing.

Tom closed his eyes, trying to push away the ache that was growing inside him, making his chest tight.

Fuck it.

When the schooner's first mate cried out to push away from the dock, Tom let out a long sigh before jumping down from the ship. As he made his way along the floating dock, Tom whistled loud to hail one of the small boats that ferried those to the bigger ships just outside the harbour, apprehension like a heavy cloak around his broad shoulders.



“Well, well... lookee, Dan! What d’we ‘ave ‘ere, aye?” growled a voice nearby.

Tom pulled his eyelids apart, blinking slowly at the approaching shapes. Licking his lips, he was dismayed to see that his drunkenness had reached the level where images were overlapping. When he closed one eye, Tom saw that instead of four men swaying up the deck towards him, there were two. He scratched his jaw, trying to coax recognition out of his brain. All he could remember was that the two were part of the new batch brought aboard after the massacre on Madierus.

Tom hiccupped a laugh when the memory coalesced: *Dan*. They were both called Dan. Big Dan and Little Dan. Both were trouble.

Big Dan, who rivalled Tom in size, walked slowly up to him and kicked the sole of his bare foot. Tom grunted; he wasn’t in the mood for any foolery. When he tried to haul himself to standing, the world spun on a different axis, and he found himself down on the planks, the boards smooth and worn beneath his palms. There was raucous laughter from above, and Tom wiped at the corner of his mouth before turning his head with a scowl.

“Ye know what I ‘ear about this ‘un, Dan?” asked the bigger of the two. The smaller man kept silent, and Tom recalled that he was a mute. It made him wonder if his name was Dan after all or if the big brute had just named him such as a lark. Tom shoved himself to sitting and shook his head hard, trying to clear it enough so he could stand.

“I ‘ear that Tom ‘ere is a regular cock’ound. Aye. I ‘ear ‘e likes to take big fat todgers in ‘is little pink man-pussy,” drawled Big Dan, an ugly smile on his weatherworn face. “I ‘ear ‘e fuckin’ *loves* it. Mebbe if I fuck ‘im in that sweet little ass cunt of ‘is, ‘e’ll think twice about makin’ me swab the bloody fuckin’ deck again... What do ye think, Dan? Do ye think maybe ‘e’ll come warm our cocks at night like ‘e does the captain’s?”

The man’s hands had gone down to his belt, and Tom could see that he was unbuckling it. Anger crashed through him followed fast by a cold finger of fear when he realized he was probably too drunk to fight Big Dan off.

“Aye, ‘elp me ‘old ‘im down, Dan,” growled the big one, and the two men fell on Tom. He tried to shove them away, but Big Dan landed a blow to his temple, and he was overcome quickly as he lay there stunned. Tom was soon on his stomach on the boards, growling like a trapped animal, as his pants were yanked down past his ass.

Not again, thought Tom, breathing through clenched teeth, his chest crushed to the deck by the man sitting on his back.

There was a strangled gurgle, and Tom felt something hot and wet hit his shoulder.

“Tom is mine, lads,” said the captain in a soft voice as the man above him slumped over and collapsed like a sack of potatoes on the decking next to the first mate’s head. Tom opened his eyes and watched as Little Dan’s pupils went slack, dark bubbles of blood popping and spattering along the deep cut in his neck. Confusion was immediately replaced with astounded relief, and Tom lifted himself up on his hands and knees, swaying slightly. He heard a loud thump and turned his head, hauling his pants up with one hand. There was a splash and then a gentle long-fingered hand helped him up to his feet.

Baltsaros had saved him again. Saved him and claimed him, just as he had so long ago. Tom’s chest hurt, and his eyes burned.

Collapsing into the captain's arms, Tom buried his face in the man's shoulder. He smelled Baltaros's scent—the subtle musk of him, cologne, clean skin, ocean air. Tom clutched at him, gathering handfuls of the captain's loose white shirt at his back,

“Da, I'm sorry. I'm sorry... gods, I'm sorry...” he sighed over and over against the captain.

“Tom, you're completely inebriated. What are you apologizing for? Everything will be all right. Can you stand? Here... hold onto this for a moment please,” said Baltaros, leaning him against the big rain barrel. Tom swiped at his eyes and steadied himself as he watched the older man drag Little Dan across the deck. Leaving a wide, red streak behind him, the captain then lifted the dead man up and over the gunwale.

A graceful smile widened the captain's curved lips when he turned back to Tom, his hands bloody as he reached out to take the big man's arm.

“There's no need for apologies, my tomcat. You're *mine*... Which means you're mine to protect. Do you understand me? Gods you stink—how much have you had to drink? No wonder you get yourself into such trouble,” muttered the captain, shaking his head. “Now, are you listening to me, you stubborn thing? Jon told me you were scared, and I think I know why. Tom, there's no justification for your fears. It's really very simple: I want you by my side... I *need* you with me. How can I get that through your thick skull, boy?” He reached out and touched Tom's face, thumb sliding along his sore cheek. “*I am the one who's sorry.*”

Need. Tom looked away as his heart stumbled and his breath was torn from him. With that simple word, his doubts sank along with the dead men overboard. The captain *needed* him.

“Aye, Da. If ye'll still have me after all my foolishness,” he replied with an awkward grin.

There was no mistaking the fondness in Baltaros's dark eyes as he smiled back at his first mate. With a nod, Tom looped his arm around the captain's neck for support and let himself be led to the stateroom below the quarterdeck.

As he ducked through the doorway, Tom groaned softly. Through the haze of alcohol, he began to realize just how hard Big Dan had hit him. He felt a stickiness on his jaw and neck that wasn't drying and figured it was probably his own blood. There was a rustle in the darkened room.

“Baltaros?” came Jon's voice, confused and hoarse from sleep.

“Jon, can you please light some candles? And get my surgical kit please,” said the captain as he helped Tom to cross the room.

Tom squinted as a match was struck. Jon, standing naked next to the bed, leaned over the table to light the candles at its centre. Turning to look at Tom, his shadow-blue eyes widened.

“Tom! Oh gods, are you ok? What happened?” asked Jon, reaching out to help Baltaros lay him down on the bed. The dark-haired young man's brows were pinched together in worry for a moment, his hand gentle on Tom's chest before he went to fetch Baltaros's surgical tools.

“I'm ok, lad. Just got into a fight, aye?” Tom said as he glanced at Baltaros; the captain nodded once in understanding. “Fucker beat me when I was down on my luck at dice... Me, three sheets to the bloody fuckin' wind.” Tom grinned when Jon frowned and clucked his tongue once; there was no need to tell him what had nearly happened. As the captain said: everything was going to be all right.

“Ach, my bloody face,” he complained when Jon leaned over him to start dabbing at the wound at his brow. Tom saw the captain smile wanly as he threaded the needle with catgut. “Why does everyone hit me in the *face*? Ain't I ugly enough?”



Present Day

While it was bitterly cold outside, the two men in the stateroom glistened with sweat. Tom, his arms bound behind him and his ankles tied to the legs of the table, grunted and hissed as another stream of hot wax landed on his bare skin. Jon groaned in response; he loved the way Tom's muscles tightened over his cock with the sudden pain. He thrust himself into Tom's body a few times, his hands sliding over the tattooed skin of the bound man's side.

The candlelight made Tom's skin pure gold, and Jon thought it was beautiful.

The door banged open behind them, and Jon turned his head. The captain stepped in amidst a swirl of snowflakes and quickly shut the door against the wind.

His cheeks were red with the cold, and the collar of his greatcoat was pulled high over his ears. He yanked his gloves off, sighing happily from the heat in the room, and nodded at Jon to continue.

Jon turned back to Tom and spilled some more burning wax on him, moving within his body. With the captain's eyes on him, Jon felt his pleasure mount quickly, and soon he was pounding into Tom, a harsh growl bursting out of his chest as he pulled his cock out to rain his seed down on the bound man's back.

Breath heaving fast in his chest, Jon began untwisting the hempen ropes that were binding Tom. He looked curiously at the captain. Baltaros's face had darkened with lust at the display; he loved to watch the boys "play", as he put it. However, he made no move to join them as he usually did.

Tom straightened and flexed his wrists, his head cocked curiously at Baltaros.

"What is it, Da?" he asked, still using the ridiculous title though the two were no longer related through marriage.

Baltaros smiled wide.

"I thought you boys would like to know that we've arrived within sight of the Devil's Isles," he said.

Jon and Tom looked at each other in excitement. It had taken nearly two months to reach them; finally it was the time to see what it was they were up against.

Stay Tuned!

Sacrificed: Heart Beyond the Spires will hit e-shelves on October 15, 2014

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