

over the edge and out of sight

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by [Nara_stories](#)

Summary

Lord John Grey, an officer in His Majesty's Navy is presented with the simple task of escorting a ship to Boston. It all seems rather boring if you ask him. That is until they are attacked by pirates.

This is for my Pirate!AU square on my Outlander Bingo 2020 card.

Endgame is John/Jamie/Claire, tags to be updated with new chapters.

This is an AU story that takes some bits from the books as a backstory for the characters but not everything and the plot doesn't follow the events of the canon.

Notes

Title from Desert Days by Blanco White

I've been wrangling the nautical lingo with the help of @mistresspandora, Black Sails and google-fu. Don't be too hard on me, please.

Chapter 1

1760, somewhere across the Atlantic Ocean

John Grey stood by the foremast of His Majesty's ship, the Sapphire watching the sunlight glimmer on the blue waves of the ocean. A few yards ahead of them sailed the Minerva a merchant ship they were escorting to Boston. She sailed with a rich cargo, this time under the usual yards of good English wool hid a sizeable amount of gold, generous donation for the rebuilding after the recent fire, cargo for sure tempting for any pirate who got a whiff about it. Grey was here steering the proud man-of-war to eliminate that temptation. It was a simple, political matter.

Grey took a deep breath of the salty air and stretched comfortably. The wind was tugging mischievously at his hair he wore securely tied at the nape of his neck. He felt the ship hum beneath his feet with controlled power and it lifted his spirits like nothing else. The Minerva sailed at roughly six knots, straining under her cargo. They raised as many sails as they dared, trying to hasten their journey. For the Sapphire, the pace was quite modest. Grey has felt her at full speed and it was an exhilarating experience. If they were not fully loaded with cannons and ammunition and the weather was favourable she was able to reach as fast as nine knots, a speed that made Grey feel quite giddy when he first experienced it out on the open sea.

He put a hand on the weathered wood of the railing, adjusting his hat with the other and scanned the deck out of years of habit to see if everything was amiss.

Nothing was. Grey didn't expect any trouble on their journey. Of course, life was never uneventful on a ship, the sea itself being a mistress with a volatile temper. However, any sensible pirate would turn around at the sight of the White Ensign and flee, fearing pursuit. They couldn't know it was unlikely in this case. Grey was under strict orders to see the Minerva safely into the port of Boston. As much as he might want to chase after petty thieves to uphold the law, it wasn't a priority on this journey.

Oh well, on their way home they were quite free to spare some attention to any pirate they would encounter. Grey grinned to himself. The next two weeks were about quietly doing their duty, but he was willing to suffer some boredom when there was the prospect of adventure on the horizon.

It was one of the things that made him choose this life much to his brother's horror. Hal would have preferred if he joined the Army like him. The Navy was for the desperate, who didn't have a choice, he said. Full of young men they pretty much had to drag to enlist. John could do better.

He smiled at the memory. He knew it came from a good place, from Hal wanting to protect him from hardship. But their father always had a soft spot for his youngest son and he was willing to grant him his wish.

Maybe he was desperate. Desperate for adventure. All he knew was that the first time he set foot on a ship he was captivated by the whole operation with its secret expressions he had no

idea what they meant at the time. Looking at the horizon the prospect of unseen lands excited him. He delighted in the freedom of being out on the open sea, with no land in sight, nothing to obstruct the gaze. The smell of the salty air refreshed him, and the rocking of the ship lulled him to sleep at night.

Grey patted the railing. Ships were truly magnificent constructions of their time.

There was also the small convenience that navy officers often stayed unmarried for a long time. It wasn't unusual for one to never marry. The unreliable nature of their occupation wasn't compatible with family life. A soldier often left home for long periods of time as well, but with a navy officer, you could never really tell if and when the winds would take them back home.

He could, of course, acquire a wife and then conveniently leave her in a house somewhere in the English countryside. But no one really frowned if he didn't, Hal having plenty of children to carry on the family lineage.

And the only one so far that could make John's heart beat faster was a beautiful ship.

He made his way casually across the deck, greeting his men who were adeptly going about their business. They were steadily on course, the weather was kind. He would have time to update the logs, write some letters, maybe even read something.

"Good morning, Captain!"

John shielded his eyes against the sun as he looked up at the young man, sitting on the rigging. Tom Byrd was grinning ear-to-ear, bare feet dangling, hanging from one of the lines like a particularly cheerful apple on the lowest branch of a tree.

"Morning, Tom." He absent-mindedly caught one of his skinny ankles and tugged playfully. "Come down, will you before you break your neck?"

"Don't keep little birds from flying, Captain," interjected one of the topmen from above, and they all laughed.

Tom was the boatswain's mate, and he was very enthusiastic about inspecting the rigging and sails each morning by climbing all over them like a little monkey. Everyone on the ship liked the boy, Grey included. He was meticulous about his tasks and showed leadership qualities quite admirable for his small size.

Grey turned and continued walking. There was the creak of ropes and a soft thump behind as Tom scrambled after him.

"Would you like me to bring you some more lamp oil now, Captain? You mentioned yesterday you were running low on it."

Grey smiled at the attentive offer.

"That's alright, Tom, I still have a few candles left. Maybe later. But," he added after seeing the brief flash of disappointment on the boy's face, "you can come and help me with my letters. If you have no other duties, of course. As you know, a ship is like a well-tuned clock. Every little piece must do its part in order for it to work properly."

Tom nodded along enthusiastically.

“I’ve already mended one of the foresails today. It was looking worse for wear last week, but I think we must have caught a seagull or something because a corner of it was neatly torn off the line now,” he explained as if this was the most exciting thing that happened to him all week.

“I’ll take a look at it later, I’m sure you did a wonderful job at fixing it,” Grey answered and Tom beamed under the praise. He was indeed very good with needle and thread which earned him a few teasing comments from the crew, but it was all done in a friendly manner. Grey would have put a stop to it otherwise.

“Well then, if you have no other task, I will dictate you a few of my letters,” he decided. Then he bent closer in a conspiratorial way, “If you write legibly enough I will let you help with the log too.”

The young Byrd had a good head for numbers, but his penmanship was quite terrible in all honesty. If he ever wanted to advance – and John was prepared to support him in that regard – he would definitely need to improve on that.

Half an hour later Tom Byrd had ink all over his fingers and smeared across the bridge of his nose and John could barely contain his laughter at imagining his brother’s face upon opening this letter.

Serves him right, he thought, as Hal himself wasn’t known for sending the most thoughtfully executed letters either. He let Tom sand and fold the letter, and drip candle wax on it before he pressed his signet ring into it.

Tom beamed at him, and John was just about to suggest starting on the next one, when there was a shout from the deck that sounded awfully lot like “Sails!”.

He furrowed his brows and walked briskly out of his cabin. When he reached the quarterdeck, he spotted his second in command, Lieutenant Newman, a competent, but usually somewhat stiff fellow, practically running towards him.

“Captain, a pirate ship has been spotted north-west,” the man exclaimed with heaving chest.

He looked more excited than frightened. Grey just felt puzzled.

“Heading towards us?” he asked as he quickly stepped to the rail and squinted, scanning the horizon.

“Yes, sir.”

Grey held out a hand to him and Lieutenant Newman pressed the telescope into it. Grey raised it to his eye.

And there it was. A sloop with the black flag, sails straining in the wind, heading straight towards them.

“I’ll be damned,” Grey muttered, then started yelling orders.

The last thing he expected was being attacked by pirates on this journey. The Minerva’s cargo was rich, but not worth the risk compared to ships without an escort. Grey wasn’t among

those officers, who regarded the enemy as inhuman monsters, beyond reason, but he thought the captain of this pirate ship might be a few barrels of rum short of a dozen.

They were coming from north-west, from the opposite side of the Minerva. Grey gave orders to turn the ship and cut them off. By the time they rounded the Minerva, the pirate ship was almost within range.

Out of sheer courtesy, Grey gave orders to fire a shot before they could reasonably hit them.

But the pirates were not deterred by the cannonball, that landed just ten yards before them with a mighty splash. The sloop turned slightly, as expected, trying to manoeuvre just out of range. It was a quick ship, with the advantage of momentum, but the Sapphire definitely outweighed it in firing power. One successful broadside volley and they would be crippled.

Well then, Grey was quite prepared to sink another pirate ship, now that the occasion presented itself. He gave prompt orders.

Men hurried on deck to comply, wooden boot heels thumping as they run. Ropes were creaking and the sails billowed out with a satisfying snap as the Sapphire caught the wind. The ship lurched into action and Grey felt the thrill in his belly at the movement.

They pursued the pirate ship heading for the Minerva. She very sensibly took flight at the sight of the pirates but had no chance at outrunning them weighed down with cargo as she was.

Grey heard the men preparing the canons below deck, the heavy scrape of metal on the wooden planks. Meanwhile, the Sapphire elegantly sprang after the other ship. They could have slipped away if they hadn't come at them. But now the Sapphire was approaching at an angle, with the wind on their side and soon they would be in range to fire the cannons.

But before they could get into position, the sloop turned sharply. Her sails went limp, losing the wind, the ship sliding sideways from sheet momentum.

"What on earth are they doing?" Grey exclaimed. He saw no reason why the pirate ship would abandon the pursuit of the Minerva and offer her side, an easy target for their cannonballs. "Lieutenant, what is this ship, do we know them?"

The lieutenant peered into the looking glass. "It's the La Dame Blanche, sir. With the Scottish criminal, Red Jamie at the helm."

Grey, of course, had heard of the ship and her captain but had no personal quarrel with them. There were, however, more urgent matters to think about. The La Dame Blanche almost stopped now, with this speed they would crash into them before they could shoot them to shreds.

Grey swore in German.

An impact like that might sink both ships.

It was a clever move he gave them that. Clever move, that is, if they wanted to board the Sapphire instead of the Minerva, which they couldn't have an earthly reason for. But Grey didn't have time to think about the pirates' motivation.

With the distance rapidly decreasing between the two ships, he had no choice, but to give orders to release the sails, and turn the ship to reduce the impact. There was no time to fire the cannons. There would be a fight on deck, there was no question about that now.

His men were well trained, and they were able to prepare for the inevitable in no time at all. Grey checked his own knife and pistols.

20 yards...

"Brace for impact!" he shouted.

10 yards...

Grey himself caught the end of a rope and twisted it around his fist, taking a solid stance. The two ships collided with a crash that knocked many men off their feet scrambling for something to hold onto. The smaller ship rocked heavier and Grey saw seawater splash over the railing taking a pirate with it. What on earth were they thinking?!

The hulls grated against each other with a terrible sound. There was yelling, as half a dozen hooks flew across the gap and latched onto the railings of the Sapphire, handy nets attached to them. And then they were boarded by pirates.

They had to climb upwards since the Sapphire was a good 10 feet taller than the other ship and Grey gave orders to cut as many ropes and shoot as many pirates they could before they could reach the deck. But their first line of defence broke after a while and pirates were jumping over the railing, using their momentum to tackle his men.

Grey always experienced time differently in a fight and he was sure he wasn't alone with this. Time seemed to slow down, and his mind had blocked out so much, but he saw other things crystal clear. If he were registering everything, as usual, he probably would have gotten overwhelmed, and if he didn't see other things with an enhanced clarity he would have probably been long dead.

He saw who was most likely the captain of the pirate ship flung himself across the railing. A tall, red-headed man with his cutlass between his clenched teeth. Grey fought at the quarterdeck, not far from his cabin. He shot a pirate clear between the eyes, then drew out his sword, since there was no time for reloading. In the back of his mind, he was assessing the whole situation constantly.

His crew was made up of well-trained, well-rested, and well-armed men. But they were caught off guard, scrambling to react, and that was never an ideal position to win a fight.

He pushed a pirate into the sea, when he spotted him again, deliberately cutting a path towards him. The man was huge, tall and broad-shouldered. His flame-red hair was flying in a wind like a flag, signalling immediate danger. Under his brown coat, his shirt was already

torn, fabric and tanned skin splattered with blood. Whether his or someone else's Grey didn't know.

He cut his way forcefully through the fight heading straight towards the back where Grey was standing. Their eyes met and something visceral gripped John in the stomach. The man was staring at him intently, no doubt deciding on him as the next target.

Before the pirate captain could reach him, John spotted Tom Byrd. The young man was gripping a beam with both hands, probably something they kept for fixing the sails. He was in the process of administering a few not precise but effective blows to the head of a pirate and then jabbing him into the stomach so that he tumbled off the quarterdeck with a shout. Grey was allowed a fleeting moment of pride, and then the realization hit him that Byrd was standing right between him and the pirate captain who was right at the bottom of the stairs now. Grey grabbed Tom's arm and pushed the boy behind him.

From this close, he could see how much he was trembling. Grey steered him into the corridor leading to his cabin, then whirled around just in time to see Red Jamie leaping up the stairs to the quarterdeck in a few feet away.

John didn't hesitate drawing his second pistol and firing at the man. The pirate captain ducked last minute, crouching like some creature from a nightmare, grinned, then launched himself at Grey.

The size difference between them was like that of the Sapphire and the La Dame Blanche. Unfortunately, this time it was not in John's favour.

John caught his first blow with his sword, steel singing as their blades slid off of each other. He knew he had to make it quick if he were to survive this. He advanced with a series of fast moves forcing the pirate into defence. Red Jamie blocked each, then answered with redoubled efforts.

John stepped to the side. The man was holding the sword with his left hand which made his moves somewhat unexpected, but it also gave John an opening. He swung his sword and the blade caught the pirate in the thigh, drawing blood. It wasn't a deep cut, but it flooded Grey with hope, at least that rush of boldness that was the closest to true hope one usually got in a fight.

The pirate touched the wound briefly, then looked up, slanted blue eyes glinting like a cat's. "Ye're a feisty wee Englishman," he said with a savage grin, then threw himself back into the fight.

This shouldn't have been a duel, John thought. Someone ought to shoot the man because he was only delaying the inevitable here. Sweat trickled down his back as he jumped back to avoid the next swing of his blade.

He wasn't quick enough by the next one, he barely raised his sword in time to catch the blow, and the sheer force behind it knocked the sword out of his grip. He instinctively pulled his dagger, but the pirate was already on him, showing him into the wooden wall of behind him. The man gripped the wrist of his hand holding the dagger with one of his large hands and forced it upward. John resisted with the last bit of his strength, muscles trembling. But he

stood no chance and soon enough his hand was pressed against the wall above his head, dagger tumbling from between his fingers.

For a split second everything seemed to slow down as they stared each other in the eye. John could register every single little detail. The bead of sweat that formed at the pirate's temple, washing away a trail in the soot of gunpowder as it rolled down. The sky, still so bright and blue behind, the shouts and grunts of the fight.

He wondered when his life would start flashing before his eyes, then he wondered why he wasn't feeling particularly afraid.

But instead of getting a blade in his stomach, the pirate hit him in the head with the hilt of his cutlass. Hard.

John collapsed on the spot, vision going black.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

It shows how far gone I am in the general pirate trope, that today I once managed to read the word "privacy" as "piracy" lol

Everything hurt. This was the first thing John registered when he came to himself. Slowly, he was able to separate the different points of agony. His head was pounding, his arm and leg muscles were aching and his right wrist felt raw from bruises. It was also tightly bound behind his back to his left wrist with a coarse rope, which didn't help matters at all.

He groaned, and slowly opened his eyes. There was a sharp intake of breath to his right. "Captain!"

He turned his head to the side, blinking to regain the sharpness of his vision. The hushed, excited voice belonged to Tom Byrd who sat next to him, hands and feet equally tied together. Upon meeting his gaze the young man's face crumpled.

"Oh, Captain, I was afraid that brute killed you with that blow!"

John himself thought it was a near thing. Both of his temples hurt, the left, where the man hit him in the head, and the right, where he presumably hit the floor as he collapsed. Judging from the sticky feeling there was some blood on his face as well. He cleared his throat.

"What happened after he knocked me out, can you tell me, Tom?"

Grey guessed they were in the hold of the pirate ship and that it was a few hours later. The light coming through the wooden planks had the golden hue of afternoon sunshine. Tom shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, I ran there, Captain, to see if you were breathing. But the pirate got me too."

Grey paled in horror just imagining the young Byrd against that broad-shouldered pirate who was almost a foot taller than both of them. But the boy had only dirt over his face and clothes, no blood.

"He insisted I show him to your cabin." Tom sounded miserable. "I'm so sorry, Captain, for letting you down like this."

John found himself smiling a wry, but true smile.

"Nonsense, Tom. He would have found it just fine without your help. And for what it's worth I'm glad he didn't cut your throat."

It was the young man's turn to pale noticeably.
"I appreciate that meself," he answered in a strained voice.

"What did he take from my cabin? The logs?" Grey asked as he idly tested the ropes. They were tied very securely. Pirates often took the logs, because they could sometimes use the information contained in them to their advantage.

"No, Captain, just the letters," Tom shrugged, then bent forward. "I don't think he's exactly sane, this pirate," the young man whispered meaningfully.

Grey hummed, thoughtful. He generally agreed with the sentiment. However, someone capable of pulling a manoeuvre like that wasn't stupid either. There must have been something among those letters that was of value to him. Something that was worth more than the entire cargo of the Minerva.

As always, Grey received an assortment of letters before departure in London. Some of them, official correspondence, was his task to deliver upon arrival to Boston. The others he had no idea about and would have been simply disposed at the post office so they could take care of delivery.

Question was, how did the pirate know they were the ones carrying the letter he was after. Even more interesting question, why were the two of them were on the La Dame Blanche and why were they not dead. At least yet.

"What happened then, Tom?" he asked. No matter how much they were taken by surprise, the crew of the Sapphire outnumbered the pirates, and this sloop couldn't possibly carry more than ten guns. There was no way they were able to sink the Sapphire. At least that though provided him with some level of comfort. Still, somehow the pirates had managed to come away with this ship intact, which in itself was a small miracle.

Tom furrowed his brows in concentration, clearly trying to recite events in the most precise manner.

"After you were knocked out, Captain, Newman surrendered. The pirates nicked a few things and they took both of us hostage so that Newman wouldn't sink them the moment they got into shooting range again. But even worst," Tom frowned, "the pirate captain, after this demonstration of his strength and with you hanging off of him like a sack o' flour, offered the men a chance to join him. And twelve of the deserting traitors did!"

Grey closed his eyes for a moment against the wave of humiliation. Tom Byrd's outrage did make him feel slightly better if he was honest to himself.

"These pirates are probably recruiting," he noted. The young man stared at him.

"Like honest sailors, Captain? What kind of disgraceful person even considers that?"

Before he could answer Tom's naive question the door creaked open. John spotted guards outside on either side. Then his gaze fell on the person stepping in, and he was surprised to

see that it was a woman.

She wore a light blouse and practical skirts, her hair tied back with a cloth so that only a few dark curls escaped around her face. She had a fair complexion but must have spent quite a bit of time already at sea because her forehead and cheekbones were tinted by the sun, which also brought out a few freckles on her skin.

She was beautiful. She was also English, as Grey realized the moment she spoke up.

“Glad to see you awake,” she gave him a small smile as she walked closer steadying a bowl of water against her hip while holding some bandages in her other hand. “I’m here to tend to your injuries.”

This wasn’t the treatment Grey was expecting, and it made him wary. Still, he considered himself a gentleman so he inclined his head politely.

“I appreciate that, ma’am.”

The woman crouched down next to him, placed the bowl on the floor and started wiping the blood off his face. John closed his eyes for a second. It had been a long time since someone touched him this gently, and it stood in stark contrast to the events of this day. Against the circumstances it made him feel slightly better.

He winced when she pressed against his left temple. She put down the cloth and pinched the skin around the wound. John hissed and reconsidered his opinion about her gentle nature.

“Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ, he banged you in the head full-force.”

“It was quite terrible, ma’am, I saw it with me own eyes,” Tom interjected helpfully with an excitement that earned him a sharp look from John.

The woman smiled at Tom then turned back to Grey with half of that smile still lingering on her lips.

“You cut him too, I saw it,” there was an interesting undertone to her voice, amusement perhaps? There was something about it Grey couldn’t quite place his finger on. “In any way, that will need stitches,” she informed him.

Grey lamented that throwaway comment while the woman prepared needle and thread. She took them out of a jar of liquid, that was most likely alcohol by the smell of it, which was one of the more bizarre things John had seen. She also proceeded to pour alcohol onto the wound which stung terribly and he would have quite preferred if he got to drink that instead of getting it into his flesh. Unfortunately, he wasn’t in the position to make that choice.

Between her strange comments and even stranger practices, Grey couldn’t quite place this woman. However, it was clear that she was a practised healer. Was this the reason why the pirates kept her on the ship? Judging by that comment she tended to the pirate captain’s injury as well.

Grey knew he cut him on his thigh and he had the sudden image of that massive man forcing this slight woman to her knees to bandage his wound and who knows what else. He felt bile rise in his throat at the thought.

The piercing pain of the needle brought him back to the present moment and he found Tom watching him sympathetically. He was glad they didn't kill the young man, but it didn't explain why they took him as well. No one, absolutely no one would think Tom Byrd would make a good pirate. Or was it so obvious on first glance that the crew liked him and with their captain and favourite officer on board the pirates wanted to ensure the remaining crew of the Sapphire wouldn't sink this ship?

Or were they planning on using them as a gruesome example? But if that was true, sending a healer to patch them up didn't make any sense at all.

He had to find out exactly what kind of mess he got himself into this time in order to fabricate a plan to get out of it. Of course, he fully intended to rescue Tom and this Englishwoman as well.

The woman neatly tied off the end of the thread. Then she proceeded to bandage Grey's head. When she was finished, she stopped, hesitating.

"I know your wrist is hurt too, and I'm sorry, but I can't untie you."

John nodded, giving her a slight smile.

"Of course, ma'am, I wouldn't have you anger these criminals on my account."

The Englishwoman's lips twitched, but Grey couldn't make out her full expression, because then she turned towards Tom and looked him over for injuries as well. Grey had that nagging feeling in the back of his mind again.

She prodded Tom with gentle fingers, and the young man protested most vehemently, while also blushing bright red. The woman stood up and ruffled his hair.

"A few bruises, nothing to worry about."

She collected her supplies and was preparing to leave when Grey realized what it was that he found unusual. This woman was not afraid. John called after her just as she reached the door.

"What is your name, if you don't mind me asking?"

She stopped and John saw her take a breath then let it out without a sound. Then, slowly she turned her head and looked him in the eye over her shoulder. Her clever eyes were the colour of gold in a stray ray of sunshine.

"Claire Fraser."

The missing piece suddenly clicked into place. Fraser. Like James Fraser the damned pirate captain. The reason why this woman wasn't afraid while on a ship full of pirates was because she was one of them. Grey felt a sharp stab of betrayal.

His feelings must have reflected on his face because the woman turned back towards the door and left without another word leaving both John and Tom bound and gaping after her in shock.

It wasn't the richest of bounties, for sure.

Two of the smaller guns with matching ammunition. Took a while to transfer those, but they were worth it.

Five barrels of gunpowder. At least the Navy knew how to keep that dry.

Three bags of flour and one single barrel rum, the only one left on the ship. Some idiot thought that would be enough drink for two weeks. The Navy was always so stringent with their rations.

And a dozen new men rested and well-trained but unfamiliar and possibly wary of their ways.

It was nowhere near the value they usually got from a hunt and it definitely wasn't in proportion compared to the risk of the operation.

Still, James Fraser counted it as a success, because he had the letter in his possession that was more value to him than any gold.

Fortunately, they had a few good months prior, so the moral of the men was high, and they could manage without income for a while. The crew knew before they embarked on this what they could expect. Fraser was honest with them. Before they set sail he told them it was a personal matter, not a hunt for money, and made it clear that anyone who didn't agree with the goal of this operation was free to stay in port without fear of retaliation until they got back.

But the majority of his men were from the Highlands as well and even if they weren't they understood the importance of kin. It was a matter of blood and loyalty and he didn't recruit men any more who thought him weak for it. He wasn't forced to, but could make his pick between men, because of his reputation. He was Red Jamie, feared pirate captain. If anyone thought him weak for his ways, they usually didn't have the balls to say so to his face.

The door of his cabin opened and he glanced up from where he was bent over the maps pretending to plan their possible route, while in reality, he was just side-eyeing the still sealed letter sitting at the edge of his desk. He couldn't find it in himself to open it yet. He knew what was in it, but reading the words would probably make his rage boil over.

Claire stepped in, with a bowl full of bloody rags in hand with a peculiar expression on her face.

"He's awake then?" Jamie asked.

Claire put down her supplies and wiped her hand on her skirt.

“Yes, awake and all stitched up. Probably already fabricating plans with that boy by the looks of them.”

Jamie smiled and stroked a hand down his short beard that was starting to grow out. When on land he shaved a lot more frequently, as much for himself as out of consideration for his wife. But usually, the longer they sailed from shore the more he let it be. He stood up, walked over and pulled Claire in by her waist.

“Let them fabricate, Sassenach. I’m having things under control.”

They shared a look that was only possible between two people who knew each other so well there was no need for words. Claire’s initial doubt melting off her face. Jamie kissed her then, revelling in that simple and familiar touch that after all these years still made his chest fill with warmth.

When they’ve pulled apart, Claire stroked a thumb along his forehead gently.

“Don’t you need the needles again?”

Jamie touched his face self-consciously.

“Nay, ‘twas calm today. I also rather not introduce myself to our new crew members looking like a porcupine,” he added in jest.

Claire laughed.

“Well, it is better than throwing up on them, is it not?”

Jamie shook his head, feeling his lips tilt into an amused smile.

“I’m fine, Sassenach,” he said, then bent down and placed a kiss on her forehead. “Although, I’m really not sure which one of those two options would frighten them more.”

The man was even bigger than Grey remembered him. During their fight, he recognised the size-difference as something vague, something to be aware of. But now, seeing him in a calm state of mind he was taken aback again.

Red Jamie took up a powerful stance looking over the men gathered on the deck. His clean shirt billowed in the wind in tandem with the sails that were taking them towards a destination unknown to Grey. His tanned skin spoke of years spent out on the open sea and the rays of the setting sun lit up his hair and his short beard. Adding to his impressive appearance, there were a set of small dots tattooed along his hairline and a few just above his eyebrows. They were not as bold as some of the fierce tattoos Grey had seen in his life, small spots almost blending into his skin. But there was a pattern to them, something carrying meaning, and he wondered what it was.

He and Tom were brought out from the hold to see all the men on the ship gathered. They stood close to each other to make space for everyone speaking and joking quietly. Some were leaning against the rails, some sitting on the floor, some even climbing up to the rigging.

Grey looked over at them, faces weathered, dark eyes glinting eager at the sight of the two strangers. He felt a pang of fear in the pit of his stomach and he clenched his jaw in order not to show it. He had heard many stories of the cruelty of pirates. There were many possibilities of what they might do a navy officer and none of them were favourable outcomes.

There was a good chance the captain wanted to kill him in the most humiliating way possible, just to guarantee the loyalty of the newly recruited men. John looked over to Byrd who was pale with fear and reminded himself that the boy was still his responsibility. If he could at least make him get out of this alive, he would count it as a success.

The captain stepped forward and the murmur of men died down. Everyone looked at him with anticipation and he waited for a moment, drawing it out before he finally spoke.

Grey watched the man as he addressed his crew. He watched his body move, slow, confident steps and powerful gestures. He listened to him, deep voice persuasive and carrying. He paid attention to the words he chose when addressing the new men. He observed him in order to get a feeling for his character, to notice any weakness he might use to his advantage.

For a moment he allowed himself to acknowledge that in any other circumstance he might have appreciated the man's physique. Then he dropped that thought just as quickly and instead focused on coming up with anything that might change the direction of events if the captain decides to make a bloody example of him.

As if sensing his thoughts the pirate's gaze flickered towards Grey. John, who stopped paying attention to his words noticed his voice dropping at the end of a sentence. For a split second his blood ran cold in his veins and he was quite sure that this would be the moment when he is dragged forward and killed slowly and painfully.

And then, loud cheering broke out between the men making his ears ring. His breath rushed out in a relieved huff. Apparently, this was the end of tonight's little speech and by a small miracle, he was still alive.

Blue eyes glinted with a touch of mischief and the captain inclined his head sharply. Upon this sign, two men grabbed John by the arm and started dragging him after the pirate. He threw a gaze behind towards Tom, who looked just as startled. He saw another man grab the young man's arm leading him in the opposite direction.

Grey was brought to the cabin of the captain. The men pushed him in unceremoniously and shut the door firmly behind.

The red-haired pirate was leaning against his desk, with his back to Grey. The Englishwoman was there as well lighting an oil lamp by the small window. Grey met her gaze and her expression was probably meant to be carefully blank but carried a touch of sadness instead.

Grey straightened his back, drawing himself up to his full height. Even beat up and tied he wasn't going to give the impression of being frightened. He already let himself slip once out there and he could not afford it again.

The man turned around and gave him a slow once-over. Then he rounded the desk and sat down in the high-backed chair.

“Sit,” he gestured towards the chair on the other side of the desk. Grey shot a glance at the woman leaning against the wall, his instincts bristling against the thought of sitting while a lady was standing. Except, she wasn’t really a lady, but the wife of a known thief. Grey sat.

“I know you are thinking of us as monsters,” the man spoke up. His voice was just as deep as before, but strangely softer now that he didn’t have to raise it against the wind. “But we’re not. I hope my treatment of you has made that point. It is also my hope that we are able to speak as man to man.”

Grey scoffed.

“You have killed many of my men and convinced others of desertion,” he said, voice even. “That is still a crime, sir.”

The captain’s face hardened.

“It was an honest fight. And those men have a right to choose about their fate.”

Grey felt his anger rising in his chest, giving him courage.

“You, sir, have attacked an English warship and assaulted several officers of His Majesty’s Navy,” he spat. “Sooner or later you’re going to hang for it. Or if not for this particular set of crimes then for others you have no doubt committed in the past. It won’t change the outcome, whether or not you add to the list by nailing me to the mainmast.”

“Wheel then, I have bad news for ye, my lord,” the man said, voice mocking. It made Grey incredibly wary that he knew of his title. “As much as ye apparently want to die I’m not done with ye yet. We need to talk about something and one way or the other ye are going to help me reach my goal.”

Grey clenched his teeth.

“You are a fool if you think I’m going to help you.”

The man smiled, but without any warmth.

“Just ye being here is already helping me. Ye see the particular matter we need to talk about has something to do with ye too. And it is of great importance to me.”

He looked him in the eye, and there was an intensity of his gaze Grey hasn’t seen before.

“Because it is about my son.”

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

“Is your son also a thief and traitor to the Crown?” he asked with icy politeness.

He saw a muscle twitch in the Captain’s jaw. The woman huffed from where she was leaning against the wall.

“He is twelve, for Christ’s sake.”

Jamie tries to convince John about helping him, with various tactics. John has some strong feelings about the matter

This being an "Enemies to Lovers" story, well, this is the enemies part...

Chapter Notes

William's mother is still Geneva in this story. This chapter deals a lot with their backstory, so there are mentions of William's conception here, which wasn't entirely consensual as we know. If it upsets you, you might want to skip this chapter.

Grey leaned back examining the pirate captain’s face. His expression seemed earnest enough, but he was still apprehensive about the tale he was going to hear. He felt the floor tilt and shift beneath their feet. The wind picked up for the evening, and the water turned rougher. Nothing a ship couldn’t handle, but the movement was much more pronounced on the sloop as it would have been on the Sapphire. John suddenly longed for his hammock in his cabin, waves gently rocking him to sleep, free of bloody pirates, on his merry way to Boston.

“Your son?” he asked carefully, gaze flicking towards the woman – John could not make himself think of her by her name. She allowed him to make his own incorrect conclusions about her position on the ship. An unexpected side effect of this was that Grey realized she chose that tactic because her face was unable to lie. He just needed to read it better this time and maybe he could turn it to his advantage. He didn’t want to be too obvious about it though, so he fixed his eye on Fraser again, who nodded.

“I dinna do this for my own sake,” he said, gaze openly holding Grey’s. He picked up a sealed letter from the desk. John knew it must be one of the letters he took from the Sapphire. “This letter was sent with the intention of harming my son,” Fraser continued. “I am told ye have no son, but perhaps this will make ye understand why I had to do what I did.”

Grey eyed the Captain cautiously. He was no doubt a persuasive man. He considered the possibility that the man wasn't deranged, as he previously thought, but simply feeding him careful bits of information in order to manipulate him. It was an even more dangerous possibility.

He started idly picking at the rope still binding his wrists together. Not with the intention of untying it, there was no chance for that but to have something to do with his hands to aid him in thinking.

He could push Fraser a bit. See if provoking him made him show his true intentions. It didn't require any significant effort on his part after being knocked out, bound up and kidnapped by the man. He squared his shoulders and willed his hands to still.

"Is your son also a thief and traitor to the Crown?" he asked with icy politeness.

He saw a muscle twitch in the Captain's jaw. The woman huffed from where she was leaning against the wall.

"He is twelve, for Christ's sake." Her expression was half amusement, half annoyance. Husband and wife shared a look and when Fraser turned back towards him there was a mocking curl to his lips.

"The Crown, aye?" He stood up, rounded the desk and comfortably leaned against it on the other side. He was close to John now, towering over him in this position and he fought the urge of rising to his feet to at least somewhat level the height difference between them. But the Captain made no move to physically hurt him. He had a sort of contemplative look on his face.

"Sounds so nice, Lieutenant, doesn't it?" he asked, pursing his lips. "Has a sort of regal ring to it that disguises the fact that they are thieves and murders all the same," he finished with a look that betrayed his outward calm demeanour. A look that would have been able to cut through glass.

Grey bristled at the accusation. He took pride in his position in the Navy. While he was aware that as with any group of men there were ones with better and worse characters, he had known and taken inspiration from a number of very good men and he didn't suffer it lightly to have their name smeared like this.

"Is that is? You think me a thief and a murderer so you feel some sort of bizarre kinship with me?" he asked, indignant.

"Oh, calm down, will you?" the woman asked, now clearly more annoyed than amused. Grey narrowed his eyes at her, then stubbornly turned back to Fraser.

"Sir, were I armed, you would answer for that."

He could see the woman roll her eyes from the edge of his vision.

"Jamie, don't let him rile you up..."

The Captain smirked.

“I’ve already bested him once, Sassenach. I would gladly do it again,” he added with a glint in his dark blue eyes. He crossed one foot over the other casually and fixed Grey with his stare again. “But no, whatever ye think about our occupation, it isna important because my son doesna share it. Doesna even ken about it. He is an Earl.”

This made Grey pause. He looked at the man dumbfounded and he saw his lips curl further upwards under his red beard into an amused smile. It was such a pleasant expression on him, it startled John even more.

“Aye. And if my information is correct, ye even know him, my lord.” Before John could even think about replying to the mocking address, he added. “He is the Ninth Earl of Ellesmere.”

John gaped at him like a fish in a bucket. He knew the boy, all right. Lord Dunsany was an old family friend and he knew Isobel and Geneva since they were children. There was even a time when his brother was pushing him to ask for one of the girls’ hand in marriage.

He was able to escape that particular fate until both of the sisters were given to someone else. He didn’t even attend the weddings, being away on various commissions. But then there was the unfortunate scandal of Geneva’s pregnancy and death. Grey was still away at the time but made a visit as soon as he could after hearing about the tragedy, and even in the following years he often went back and offered assistance to the family.

“Am I to believe, that William Ransom is your son?” he asked, blinking.

He remembered the boy. William was bright, with the extreme temperament of a spoiled child. Against all his tantrums Grey found himself instantly fond of him. He had the feeling what the boy needed actually wasn’t more discipline but stimulating conversations and honest affection. Last time he visited, Grey remembered feeling a deep, unexpected pang of regret that he most likely will never be a father.

Fraser shared a look again with his wife. The man’s face remained unreadable, but on the woman’s face, there was a flash of pain, so acute it couldn’t be anything but honest. It was true then.

Fraser looked him squarely in the eye, catlike blue eyes piercing.

“Aye, he is. But no one kens about it, except Lady Isobel. At least we thought so until now.” He slid his thumb underneath the seal and broke it. “This letter was sent by Captain Richardson to the governor of Boston.”

“They sent William there to study,” his wife added. John thought it was more likely they couldn’t handle the boy anymore. “It was Lady Isobel who sent word to us. She overheard a conversation between Richardson and her husband, William’s stepfather. She sent one of the servants to spy on Richardson and figure out on which warship they were sending the letter.” The captain smirked.

“Ye were awfully slow pestering that merchant ship, ye ken that?”

John snorted before he could stop himself. Yes, he knew it and it bloody annoyed him the whole way if he was quite honest with himself. To make up for this small slip of genuine emotion he raised a brow enquiringly.

“Captain Richardson wants to hang me verra badly, ye ken,” Fraser continued all too happily. “And I believe Mr. Williams got too comfortable in Helwater to let someone else’s child take the estate from him when he comes into age.”

John’s head was spinning from all this new information.

“But they can’t take the title away from William,” he said, focusing on the technicalities for now, while quietly sorting all the pieces in his head. “Even if they somehow prove that you are his father, which would be no doubt difficult, with the mother dead and her sister on your side. William is legally the son of Ludovic Ransom and they can’t bloody do anything about it more than a decade later.”

Fraser shook his head.

“No, but they can ruin his life and reputation,” he said grimly. “It would be much easier to push him out of his inheritance and stash him away somewhere cold and remote if they could say he dinna deserve it in the first place.”

John considered everything he learned in the past few minutes. He knew that most of this must be true. He also knew that Fraser was telling him all this to impress him. So that he knew he targeted the Sapphire specifically. Maybe even to intimidate him with how much he knew about him. But it was something else entirely that made his blood rise in the end.

“Let me get this straight,” he said, looking up at the Captain, who nodded at him encouragingly with something akin to smugness on his face. The bastard.

“You have visited Helwater more than a decade ago, and committed adultery with Geneva Dunsany, siring William.” He cut a look towards the woman, making his words intentionally pointed. The woman crossed her arms and pressed her lips into a thin line.

The captain’s blue cat-eyes narrowed.

“I would appreciate, sir, if ye would choose yer words carefully. I dinna take the events lightly, I assure you.”

“You don’t take them lightly?” John echoed, absolutely furious. “Geneva died you arsehole. Leaving you son,” he emphasized, “an orphan because in case you didn’t stick around to find out, the Eighth Earl of Ellesmere died the very same day.”

“I am aware of it, sir,” Fraser gritted out through clenched teeth. “Because I was the one to kill him.”

John blanched from sheer shock, then promptly flushed from anger.

“You— you have forced Geneva into your bed, killed the Earl and then lied about it, am I getting the order right?”

One of the Scotsman’s massive hands curled into a fist so hard his knuckles popped.

“She was more than willing, I assure you,” he looked as if he was going to add something else, but cut himself off.

However, Grey didn’t back down. He couldn’t have now even if he wanted to.

“And then you left. Leaving William. And now you expect a pat on the back and for me to help you?” Fraser took a breath as if to say something, but John didn’t let him. “Do you seriously expect me to believe after this, that William’s well-being matters to you in the slightest and that it provided enough motivation for you to attack an English warship?”

Fraser's fist came down hard on the desk, a blow that would have no doubt hurt if it struck Grey. His head was bowed, face dark.

"Jamie—" the woman spoke to him, but her voice trailed off when the pirate captain didn't move.

Finally, the man looked up and there was such a ferocity in his gaze that John flinched back. "I'm not going to explain myself to ye," Fraser said. He pushed himself off the desk, took a step forward and bunched his fist into John's shirt-front, lifting him slightly off the chair. John wasn't proud of the squeaking sound he let out.

"What do ye ken about this, ye English bastard? Ye have no son. What ye call duty doesna begin to explain this." He scoffed and released John who thumped back into the chair, hard. "Ye just get told what to do and ye follow blindly. The command of an empire that cannot stand true happiness that isna formed in the way they like it."

The woman took a step forward, putting her hand on the captain's forearm and even though Fraser didn't turn she was clearly able to convey something to him without words. Fraser squared his shoulders.

"William is my son. Blood of my blood and bone of my bone. Kin. I'm going to protect him, whether ye help or no."

He turned towards his wife.

"Lead him back to the hold, Sassenach."

Jamie stood motionless in the middle of the cabin for a long minute. Then slowly unclenched his fist and rubbed his hand down his face. That bloody cheek of an Englishman!

He walked back to the desk and sat down in his chair. The half-opened letter lay abandoned in front of him, mocking him. He meant to read it out loud with Grey still in the room. That was before the wee bastard managed to piss him off. He thought... well, he foolishly thought Grey would understand, which was the sort of error in judgment he really couldn't afford right now. Supposedly, Grey knew Willie. And Isobel said the boy adored him, looked up to him and couldn't wait for his next visit. Maybe the liking wasn't mutual.

Jamie had the distinct impression that Grey was someone who cared about others. He saw the man push that young officer protectively behind himself. It was one of the reasons why he decided to take him as well.

Yes, it was convenient not to let him tell the crew exactly what he took from the cabin, to leave them guessing and wondering. Nevertheless, he also did it with the thought of showing consideration towards Grey. Proving that he did not slaughter the young man in cold blood.

But apparently for all the man cared, his kindness didn't extend to pirates. Jamie cursed himself. Why on earth did he think it did? He should have known better by now, after all the suffering he and Claire endured by the British Empire and its agents.

Grey was no different. Just another career-officer eager to capture and hang pirates, earning a name for himself. He no doubt wanted a higher position, even somewhere comfortable, so that he may marry and have a family to return to.

Jamie couldn't fault him. Sometimes at night, he would let himself get lost in the sweet dream of settling down somewhere peaceful with Claire, leaving this hard and cruel life behind. And because it was such a foolish, such an improbable fantasy, he usually let himself imagine having William there too and raising him, and Ian and Fergus and Marsali, of course, and everyone else he loved.

But it was a fantasy, nothing more.

He thought fighting a man revealed almost as much of the other's character as sharing a bed or having a game of chess. And as they've fought back there on the Sapphire and he looked Grey in the eyes he thought he saw a glint of something that made him hope. He couldn't quite put his finger on it. Intelligence, for sure. Fierceness, no doubt. But he thought he saw something else too, something that would have set the man apart from the narrow-mindedness and cruelty of his peers.

He wanted to smack his forehead into the table. It bothered him more than it should have. It didn't matter what Grey thought of him, as long as they could use him. He still craved for his understanding. It was foolish. When was the last time he wanted to be seen like that? For himself, for the man he was, not the monster they claimed him to be. And by whom? An Englishman who was handed everything Jamie had to fight tooth and nail for?

He didn't have time for sentimentality like that. He picked up the letter and unfolded it, but decided against it and dropped it back to the desk once more, disgusted. When Claire came back they could read it together.

His anger came back again, just simmering underneath the surface. Grey knew nothing about them. He probably thought they became pirates simply because of their evil nature. That they have turned against civilization and their homeland because they had no other desire, but to destruct everything.

He didn't know it was England that turned against them first.

Jamie didn't like to ponder the past. They were handed the cards, they made the best of it they could, and Jamie made peace with his decisions. If he often stopped to lament the injustice of it all he would get nowhere.

He chose Claire and their freedom and he would be defending both until his last breath. In fact, the attack on both of those was what severed that particular connection in the first place. His family never liked Claire because of her Englishness. The English didn't like Jamie for his Scottishness. Besides, Claire was always different. So bright and bold, with such amazing outlandish ideas. Most people didn't share Jamie's amazement though. Many women were jealous of both her beauty and her knowledge, and even more men were annoyed that she had no fear of them.

When she had been accused of witchcraft, Jamie wasn't surprised. He rescued her and got imprisoned for it, having already had some fall out with the law. By the time he managed to achieve his own freedom, there were many more complications, William being one of them.

Again, he bristled at Grey's assumption that he simply took Geneva out of lust he couldn't contain. But he wasn't about to admit to that bloody man that it was quite the opposite, was he?

He and Claire were able to mend what had been damaged between them, but they had no choice but flee together and try to make themselves a life at sea. And they have managed well, as always when they were together.

He wasn't about to throw that all out on the window. He drew a deep breath. Grey didn't need to understand, he just needed to cooperate. And Red Jamie could no doubt accomplish that.

John was unceremoniously pushed back to the same room he was held previously, door locking firmly behind him. It was dark in there and Tom nowhere to be found. John's stomach sank and he stumbled as the ship shifted beneath his feet. He caught himself with his bound hands, wincing as the rough rope cut into his skin. He turned and leaning his back against the wall he slid down to the floor.

His anger evaporated and he allowed himself a brief moment of despair. Well, he accomplished what he had set out to do for better or for worse. If Fraser showed his violent side now, it will be partially his fault.

He felt a natural pang of unease at the thought, but it wasn't his own skin that he worried about. Yes, ideally he would manage to find a way and come out of this mess unscathed, maybe even deliver Fraser to justice. Not to Richardson. He scoffed quietly. Matters like these shouldn't be decided on out of personal revenge. Every person, even a pirate, like Red Jamie deserved a fair trial and even an opportunity to show remorse. But he did have to answer for his actions.

What he was more worried about is whether Tom Byrd and William Ransom ended up on the list of people hurt by Jamie Fraser. He felt a strong sense of responsibility to protect both young men.

He didn't know how long he sat there, lamenting the possibilities of how the future events could turn out when he heard footsteps approaching. They were long, measured steps, boot heels clicking confidently, so he immediately knew it had to be the pirate captain. He pushed himself up, clumsy because of his bound hands, just in time to see the door open.

Fraser carried a lantern in one hand, and a knife in the other, the light catching on the naked blade.

Grey squared his shoulders and stomped down on the flicker of fear in his belly. He changed his mind then about not gutting him. Probably.

The man hung the lantern on a nail sticking out from one of the beams and approached him.

"It seems like I've made a tactical error with you, sir," he spoke up, sounding almost apologetic. "The unfortunate consequence of this is that ye know the truth about my son now.

Ye see this can be detrimental to my plans.” He idly stroked a thumb down the side of the blade, as if testing its sharpness. Grey gulped. The man raised his head and looked him in the eye, dead serious.

“If ye dinna help me I’m afraid I do need to kill ye, sir.”

Grey pressed his lips together into a thin line, face pale.

“I see,” he choked out, politely.

Fraser shook his head.

“It wouldna please me to do so. I would rather not meet my son again after many years with your blood still fresh on my hands.”

Well, that was oddly comforting, Grey thought. Fraser continued with surprising gentleness. “I’m not asking for much. We’ve only won some time by capturing Richardson’s letter. According to his words, he should already be on his way himself to Boston. There is also a possibility, that he sent a second copy of this letter on another ship.”

“And what was in this letter if I may ask?” Grey said as much out of curiosity, as an attempt of delaying the decision whether Fraser put that blade to use or not.

Fraser looked at him with concern.

“If I tell ye that, it provides even more danger to me and even more reason for me to kill ye if you dinna help me.”

Grey weighed his options.

“Convince me, Mr. Fraser,” he said at last. The man flashed him a grin and it unleashed the most conflicting knot of emotions in Grey’s chest.

Oblivious to this, Fraser began talking.

“Richardson wanted to ensure that the governor keeps William there until he arrives. His plan is twofold: he knows I have spent significant time in Helwater after William’s birth,” he said, with a pointed look. Grey cleared his throat, somewhat embarrassed. He still wasn’t sure about the man’s motivations, or even that he was telling the truth. However, if he was, then clearly there was more of a story there than he thought.

“He wants to use my fondness of the boy as a bargaining chip. And if that doesna work, he is planning to turn William against me and use him to retain me. All this to say that we need to get to Boston as quickly as possible. William is crucial in Richardson’s plan, so I’m confident that he won’t actually hurt him. However, that doesna mean he cares for his well-being.”

“And where do you see my part in all of this, if, of course, you decide not to cut my throat?” he asked with an anxious glance at the blade.

“I want ye to write a letter to William,” Fraser said. “Telling him to meet us outside the city, and instructing him to keep this a secret. I will read this before sending it,” he added before John could get any ideas.

After a moment’s hesitation, John nodded.

“All right. I am willing to do that.”

Fraser lowered the blade.

“William knows you. Probably remembers you better than me. I don’t want to take him by force.” John bit his tongue to prevent himself from making a foolish comment about Fraser not being averse to kidnapping people. The man continued.

“After we rescued Willie, I’ll drop ye off in whatever port ye desire. Alive,” he added seeing John’s expression. “Can we agree on this?”

John took a deep breath and nodded.

“Yes, I will help you rescue your son, you have my word.”

Fraser stepped closer, knife still drawn and regardless of the promise of not killing him, John couldn’t keep himself from shying back. Fraser smiled, all teeth, nothing like the amused half-smile Grey saw in his cabin. He grabbed John’s forearm with his right, big hand holding him still. He slipped the knife between his wrists, blade cool against his scraped skin and cut the ropes with one swift move.

John snatched his hands back immediately, rubbing at his wrists.

“If ye go now, ye can still join supper with the men. I’ll find you after and provide pen and paper.”

He curtly nodded to Fraser. He would go along with the man’s plan. At least until they have rescued William from Richardson’s machinations. And then he would rescue William from Jamie Fraser as well.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

We meet a few other members of the crew. Jamie's seasickness gets addressed and Claire is wearing pants. After all the excitement this is a bit of a slower chapter and lots of random shenanigans abound.

Chapter Notes

This is completely John's POV he kind of took over, I'll give Jamie more room in the next chapter.

In the ship's belly, the crew was gathered for the evening meal. John halted in the door, suddenly remembering that a naval officer entering a room full of pirates might not be welcomed. His stomach, however, grumbled loudly. Now, with the immediate danger gone it let him know that the last time he had eaten had been quite a while ago.

He looked around in the room, meeting a few curious, and a few hostile gazes, looking for a quiet corner or at least a group of men who would rather focus on their supper than on starting a fight. Then he spotted the unmistakable brown mop of hair that belonged to Tom Byrd and he let out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

He walked over to the table and Tom looked up, face suddenly alight with excitement.

"Cap—" Grey raised a hand, cutting him off before he could finish that sentiment.

He slid on to the bench beside the young man.

"I think you should stop calling me that, Tom," he said curtly. He didn't think the people in the room would appreciate it, especially not in the bright, excited voice Byrd usually used for the greeting, that carried quite well.

Tom let out the excess breath in a huff.

"Me lord?" he said instead, tentatively.

Grey nodded.

"That will do."

Tom beamed at him as if he gave him an exceptionally kind compliment, and Grey felt a sudden tightness in his throat because until a moment ago there had been a chance that his rash actions got this bright young man killed. He only then noticed Tom's company. Sitting across the table were three people, looking at them curiously.

Right across Grey sat a man with his dark hair brushed back and tied at the nape of his neck. He had delicate features and would have easily fitted in at a gentlemen's club, if not for the silver hook in place of his left hand. Grey quickly looked away.

On the other end of the bench sat a younger man, hair plucked from the sides of his head, the rest on the top left long and put into long braids adorned with a few silver beads. Grey saw natives on the Colonies with hair like that, but this man was fair-skinned, simply tanned by the sun. He had tattoos on his face, a double line of tiny dots from the bridge of his nose across his cheeks. They were very similar to the tattoos John saw on the captain's forehead. Now that he thought about it, the cheekbones were similar too. He wondered if they were related.

Between them sat a young woman, face pleasant staring at him openly with big blue eyes. Just like the captain's wife she had a confident air about her, something John found most unusual, but not unpleasantly so. She pushed a plate of food towards John.

John only hesitated for a moment before thanking her and pulling the food towards him. God, he was hungry. It wouldn't have quite mattered what it was as long as it was edible, but the meal was far from the worst Grey had at sea. There were actual bits of meat in the stew and not just salt, but spices as well by the taste of it. There were also disconcertingly green bits of leaf or some sort of vegetable floating around, but John could look past that. Tom also had a plate of it in front of him and was chewing on the corner of a hard biscuit while eyeing their companions suspiciously.

"What happened, me lord?" he asked in a hushed voice.

John shoved another spoonful of food into his mouth, while he contemplated how much to say.

"Captain Fraser and I reached an agreement," he said carefully. It would probably do no harm if word spread that they were somehow useful to the captain. It may reduce their chances of getting beaten just for fun.

Tom, however, looked at him, jaw hanging open, giving Grey an unwanted and not so flattering view of a bite of half-chewed biscuit in his mouth. After a beat, Byrd finally closed his mouth and swallowed.

"We're not about to become pirates too, me lord, surely?"

There was a snort from the other side of the table. Tom whipped his head around and fixed the fellow with the face tattoos with one of his impressive glares. After a moment the other young man conceded and raised his hands in a mock-surrendering gesture, his face breaking into a not entirely friendly, but mischievous sort of grin, so reminiscent of some of the more undisciplined young naval officers Grey had to deal with in the past, he couldn't help, but find it somewhat charming.

"I'm sure ye would make a decent pirate. What's yer name, lad?"

Tom scrunched up his nose but held firmly onto his manners.

"Tom Byrd, at your service."

"I'm Ian Murray," the man answered, his casual manner in complete contrast to Byrd's icy

politeness. “This is my cousin Fergus and his wife, Marsali, both Frasers” he introduced the others at the table.

Grey nodded towards the other man and slightly bowed towards his wife, as much as he could manage while sitting. She apparently found this very funny, because she giggled, slapping at her husband’s arm in amusement, who grinned at her with obvious affection.

John tried not to take it personally. Apart from occasional passengers, he really did not have a lot of experience in dealing with women on ships. Definitely not female pirates.

He took another bite of stew and immediately frowned. Christ, it *was* a leaf. He chewed at the stem and swallowed it as quick as possible. Apparently not quick enough, because the man introduced as Fergus noticed and let out a pleasant laugh.

“Milady says that it keeps your teeth from falling out,” he said with a slight French accent. That could have only referred to one particular woman.

“Well, it certainly helps bulk up the rations,” he muttered but took another bite from the food.

“Are ye a real lord then?” Marsali asked playfully, leaning forward and rolling her “r”-s just like Murray or the captain. Christ, she was Scottish as well. Were they Jacobite allies perhaps?

Grey shrugged and idly rubbed at his wrists. The course rope had taken the skin off some parts, it was itchy, but burned faintly when he scratched at it.

“Yes, my father was a duke,” he answered simply. Then, to ensure no one would get any ideas about ransoming him, he continued, picking up the thread of the conversation from earlier. “It is exactly because of my family connections that Mr—” he cleared his throat and corrected himself, “Captain Fraser can use my help in a personal matter. After which he promised to deliver us into a port of our choice. Unscathed,” he added pointedly, sending what he hoped was a reassuring glance towards Tom.

“Why would you do that? Help him, I mean?” Murray asked.

Grey considered his answer carefully.

“Because the matter seems to concern a young man who is quite innocent in terms of our conflict and whom we are both fond of.”

Fergus nodded with a little smile.

“Milord was quite sure he would be able to convince you, you know?”

Grey shrugged, trying not to show any emotion on his face.

“Captain Fraser has defeated me in an honest fight and spared my life. It wouldn’t be proper for me to stab him in the back in return,” he answered. “We will get this business done together and then part ways. Should we ever meet again afterwards, we will do so in an official capacity.”

What he didn’t say, of course, was that the parting of ways might not be so peaceful after he successfully crossed Fraser’s plan in the last minute. He had no intention of letting a pirate kidnap William Ransom, whether said pirate was the boy’s father or not.

They were eating quietly for a few minutes and Grey thought he was beginning to get used to the strange company when he saw something white move towards their table. He turned and saw a huge wolf heading their way. Grey took a double-take. No, it was a dog. A very wolfish looking dog, but a dog nonetheless.

The animal trotted straight to Murray, who scratched behind his ear in a familiar gesture. However, the dog quickly seemed to take interest in the newcomers. It rounded the corner of the table and sniffed at Grey's boot. He allowed it for a second, as a way of polite introduction then ever so slowly pulled his feet under himself, preparing to distance himself from the animal just in case. The dog looked up with clever eyes, tilting its head in a considering way, then turned away with a huff and headed towards Tom.

Upon the animal's approach, the young man stilled as a caught rabbit.

"Rollo," Murray, apparently the master of the beast said in a warning tone. Rollo, however, continued to sniff at Tom interestedly. Then to the horror of all witnesses, the dog pushed its head into Tom's lap, looked up at him with huge eyes and let out a low, pleading whine.

Byrd looked down at the dog with equally big eyes, as if looking away would cost him his life. He cleared his throat.

"Ehm, do you mebbe want...?"

Tentatively he fished a piece of meat out of his stew, apparently thinking it a fair price for not getting eaten. He pinched it between his fingers and held it out for the dog, looking apprehensive. Grey held his breath, fearing that the animal would think Tom's fingers just as appetizing as the piece of meat.

Rollo, however, displayed a surprising amount of grace by taking the bite of food gently, lapping up the juice from Tom's fingers. The young man let out a dazed giggle and emboldened by this unexpected gesture of friendship he scratched the dog's head. It was the first real laugh Grey heard from Tom since the fight and he let himself relax ever so slightly. His eyes met Murray's across the table and saw him hiding a smile in his glass as well.

Grey slept like a rock that night. After supper, he met with Fraser again and composed a letter to William, then collapsed in one of the hammocks, and promptly passed out. He was surprised when Fraser gave him his dagger back. It helped him feel more secure while sleeping in a room full of unknown men and he was quite content when upon waking he observed that no one tried killing him during the night. He couldn't tell what time it was, but Tom was still curled up in a snoring little lump in the hammock next to his.

He got up and ventured up to the deck, hissing when his sleeve brushed against his wrist. The rope burned an angry red line around both of his wrists, on the right more so than on the left. The place where the rope cut into his skin looked swollen and was sensitive. He pulled his sleeve down, covering the marks. He might be able to find some drinking water to clean it if not, saltwater will do just fine. He was not going to ask the woman for help.

Unfortunately for him, he barely had time to stretch enjoying the freshly cold morning air, when he spotted Claire Fraser leaning against the port-side rail. Just when he got over this

unlucky surprise, he noticed something even more shocking: the woman was wearing trousers.

John, who usually wasn't swayed by the female figure did a double-take and felt a blush creep up on his neck. He blamed it on his mind still being clogged by the deep sleep and ignored that appreciative sound in the back of his head that shamelessly suggested that a shapely backside was an agreeable sight no matter whom it was attached to.

He snapped his gaze away and cleared his throat, drawing her attention to himself. She turned, a few curls coming loose from underneath the scarf she used to bind her hair with. They fluttered around her face while she gave him a hesitant smile.

"Want some tea?" she asked, and Grey recognized a white flag when he saw one. He pulled himself together. He was a gentleman, he could let go of this irrational grudge.

"I would very much appreciate that ma'am."

"Oh, please. Call me Claire. I'm serious," she added seeing John's expression. He reluctantly nodded.

There was a barrel next to her with a teapot and a few metal mugs on top of it. She had her hands curled around one, but now took up another and poured some tea into it. John accepted it gratefully and he too leaned against the railing, looking out towards the horizon.

It was an overcast day, with a powerful wind that filled out the sails, and woken up John better than the strong tea. The ocean glinted in shades of deep turquoise that only got on near-stormy days like this. The waves were tall, not enough to be dangerous but the La Dame Blanche was a small ship and she bobbed up and down with each wave. With the wind around his ears, Grey could imagine this was what a seagull felt while taking flight. His stomach flipped from the movement and he was filled with an unexpected amount glee. It wasn't his ship, but it was a fine one and he was alive to feel it ride the ocean.

"Jamie said this storm won't catch us," Claire said nursing her tea once more.

John squinted at the horizon. When they took them they were still a good two weeks away from Boston, but this ship was faster and they had no care for heavily loaded merchant ships. He turned and leaned his back against the railing and looked towards the dark clouds making a few calculations. Without any instruments, he used his hands to map out angles and aid him in thinking.

"I second your husband's opinion."

The movement caused his sleeve to ride up slightly and was startled when Claire caught his hand. Her fingers were cold and their grip surprisingly firm. She put the mug down on the barrel and pushed John's sleeve up with her other hand, exposing his wrist. She examined the redness with a frown.

"You should have told me before it has gotten this bad."

Grey snatched his hand back and pushed his sleeve back down, ignoring the flare of pain, strangely offended on behalf of his wrist that had just been insulted.

"It's just a scratch, it'll heal," he bristled.

"It will heal after I've cleaned it properly and bandaged it with some ointment," she said calmly. Grey still couldn't get used to hearing her speak such polite English like himself, it

being so at odds with their company.

John didn't want to be coddled by her, whether it was because of his pride, or because he didn't want to own her anything, he didn't know. Even gentlemen were allowed some pettiness from time to time, he decided.

"You don't like the reminder that I'm not here of my own free will, do you?" he snapped.

Claire pressed her lips into a thin line. Before she could answer, John spotted movement from the corner of his eye and saw the captain step onto the deck.

"If you excuse me," he clipped. "There is a matter of importance I need to discuss with the captain." Why he thought Red Jamie was safer company than his healer wife at this moment he didn't stop to examine closely.

Fraser, who heard the last part of the conversation looked at him, surprised.

"Ye do?"

John was prepared to come up with something sufficiently vague on the spot but was startled by the man's looks. He was just as handsome as yesterday, although John promptly pushed that thought to the back of his mind. However, Fraser was also significantly paler and there were dark circles under his eyes. Frankly, he looked as if he didn't get a wink of sleep last night, which would have been very unusual after a successful and no doubt exhausting fight.

"Well, gentlemen," Claire spoke up behind him, "it's a lucky thing that I have *a matter of importance* to discuss with the both of you as well. Namely, your well-being."

Fraser sent John a long-suffering look that startled him with its openness.

"I'm just fine, Claire," the captain said, the way he held onto the rail with white knuckles belying his words.

"No, Jamie," Claire replied firmly. "I've already allowed this to go on further than I should have. You're not well. With the storm approaching it will only get worse, and you will be needed."

John was surprised by the boldness of her words. Now that he looked at Fraser more closely though, he did look a touch green in the face. A particularly big wave crashed against the hull of the ship and the man screwed his eyes shut, lips pressing into a thin, pale line. It was then when it dawned on John what the symptoms resembled.

Seasickness usually passed after a couple of days and while some people suffered more from it than others, Grey never in his life heard about a seasick pirate, or any seaman suffering from this illness for that matter. He knew if he gave into the sudden burst of amusement that threatened to bubble out of him though it would get himself killed. He bit his lip. Unfortunately, the captain caught the gesture. His expression darkened, and John almost started to worry but then Fraser's eyes flicked down to his lips again and the most peculiar expression shifted across his face.

John's mind could not comprehend it fully, but his body apparently understood it just fine. His stomach flipped, and maybe this was how it felt like to be seasick. Yes, he almost convinced himself the feeling was brought on by the waves. It couldn't be what he thought it was, surely.

Whether Claire noticed the sudden shift between them or not, she used the lack of protest to her advantage. She put her hands on her hips and glared at them.

“Both of you, stubborn men are going to come with me. Now,” she declared.

Fraser caught Grey’s eyes and his lips twitched in genuine amusement, breaking whatever else had been there.

“Dinna fight it, mo charaid. Now ye’ll ken who’s running this ship, aye?” he joked.

His dark blue eyes were twinkling with amusement and John wanted to get lost in them. He warned himself not to. For all, he knew the unfamiliar words he used to address him could easily have been an insult. At the same time, he didn’t protest further.

Claire Fraser huffed and headed below deck, clearly expecting them to follow. Fraser surprised John by giving him another conspiring smile, before turning to follow his wife. John couldn’t help but notice that the captain’s trousers were quite tight as well, and if his gaze lingered on the back of those muscular thighs no one needed to know that.

Grey was startled out of his musings when they’ve reached a room usually dedicated to the ship’s doctor, although it wasn’t like any room John has seen before. There were sturdy shelves around the walls with neatly labelled bottles and vials, clearly made to last the hardships of sailing. Claire Fraser moved with practised ease in the room. Fraser too seemed familiar with the setting and took a seat on a chest by the wall.

Claire gestured John over to a chair.

“Sit down,” she said and John Grey, grown man and lieutenant in His Majesty’s navy meekly obeyed like a schoolboy. Claire Fraser went to one of the shelves and after running her fingers over the labels she pulled out a bottle, pouring its contents into a mug and handing it to her husband.

“Here, drink this.” Fraser sniffed at it and frowned.

“Ginger again? No turtle soup, Sassenach?” he teased with a smile. Claire’s expression softened.

“Well, if you get me a turtle next time, I’m sure Marsali and I can come up with a recipe for making it into a soup.”

“With a healthy dose of brandy, ye ken?”

John resisted against being pulled into their casual conversation like this, but his lips still twitched into a faint smile.

His attention was diverted again when Claire pulled out something from a drawer, a narrow wooden box. The contents of it were carefully wrapped in a dark cloth, and when she unfolded it something glinted in the light. She placed the bundle on the desk, the cloth falling away to reveal long narrow needles, that appeared to be made out of gold. John stared at it. They were very unusual, no doubt expensive and seemingly impractical.

Claire took up a clean piece of cloth and poured something on it that was some kind of strong alcohol by the smell of it. She walked back to Fraser and gently wiped down his face. John couldn’t help but stare, both because he had absolutely no idea where this was going and also

because it was strangely captivating to see her touch one of the scariest pirates of their time with unconcealed affection.

She rinsed her hands with the alcohol then took up one of the tiny needles holding it delicately between thumb and middle finger, and lifted it up to Fraser's face. She stroked the skin of his forehead with the fingers on her other hand as if smoothing out a canvas. John watched, curious as she placed the tip of the needle on one of the tattooed dots on the captain's forehead. She tapped the other end with her forefinger, piercing the skin and John winced instinctively. He could understand the use of needles when it came to sewing a wound together, but he could barely suffer them even then. Watching this was much more unnerving.

Claire gently adjusted the needle, slightly pushing it in, then reached for the next. Fraser let her, sitting motionless with the patience of a saint. Each little dot on the captain's face received a needle, and there were even a few sticking out from behind his ears and from his scalp, like golden wheat amongst the red autumn leaves. If that were not enough Claire proceeded to stick a few into the man's wrists and ankles too. In all honestly, by the end of it, Fraser looked like a very large and very grumpy porcupine.

John tried not to chuckle at the thought. Fraser, observant again, caught his eye and held his gaze, expression more exasperated than anything else.

"Aye, I cannae suffer rocky waters like this easily. Now, will ye stop laughing at me, man?"

This only caused the grin John desperately tried to reel in to break out on his face for a second. He shook his head and schooled his features.

"I apologize. I just... never saw a treatment like this. I also never thought someone, who suffers so on a ship would make a living at sea," he confessed. Meanwhile, Claire Fraser, apparently satisfied with how she made her husband into a pincushion turned her attention towards John.

Fraser fixed him with a scrutinizing look, then sighed.

"It wasna entirely my choice, ye ken?" he said. "Believe me, I would choose to settle down and work the land instead."

"Why didn't you?" John asked, surprising even himself that he merely sounded curious, but not judgemental. "Were you accused of a serious crime?"

Claire stopped where she was folding his sleeves back.

"I was," she said startling Grey. "Witchcraft," she said in a voice that was both mocking and disgusted. John looked at him with horror. He, of course, didn't believe in such nonsense as witchcraft and it always left a sour taste in his mouth seeing women – and men occasionally – being executed on this account. Although, he could see how if anyone, Claire Fraser would make superstitious masses uneasy.

"You made some enemies with your opinions, didn't you?" he asked, not without sympathy.

She shrugged, picked up the bottle from before and poured alcohol over John's wrists which stung like hell. John bit his lips as she wiped the skin down with a cloth. Fraser winced, whether it was from his words or her actions John couldn't tell.

It provided some perspective, at least. John always prided himself in being an intelligent person who was able to see many sides of an argument. While there was no arguing that they were criminals, they also maybe weren't of the worst kind.

He gestured towards the captain's face, coming back to the original topic.

"So the dots are for knowing where to put the needles?" he asked.

Claire smiled.

"Well, not for me. I know where to put them."

She took up a jar and opened it. It contained some kind of fragrant ointment and she proceeded to spread it gently across the two red lines on John's wrists.

"I met a Chinese man once and he taught me how to do this. It has been the most effective treatment for Jamie's seasickness, you see. However, there is always a possibility that he needs them and I'm not here to do it," she said, face clouding slightly.

The captain spoke up.

"Dinna fash, Sassenach, being stabbed with the wee things so many times also leaves a bit of a mark ye ken and the tattoos cover it up nicely."

John had a distinct feeling Fraser wasn't a particularly vain man and wasn't ashamed of any scar, but the words did put a smile on Claire's face and that was probably their original intent. She took up two clean strips of linen and wrapped both of John's wrists with them, finishing up her work. It was such a strange contrast to being crudely bound just last night that John couldn't suppress a shiver.

He looked at Fraser and found a peculiar expression on his face. Maybe it was the side-effect of sitting with those needles stuck into him, or maybe... He followed the captain's gaze. He would be damned if the bloody man wasn't appreciatively staring at his wife's backside, as she was putting her supplies away.

He must have made a sound because Fraser's gaze snapped towards him. John felt his cheeks burn. He made the mistake of looking at Claire, who just bent down over a chest, and... no. He quickly looked away, gaze stumbling into blue cat eyes again. Fraser's expression darkened.

John shot up from the chair and hastily rolled his sleeve down. He cleared his throat.

"I appreciate the, uh... I'll leave you to it," he stammered, then quickly stumbled out of the room, before Fraser could get any ideas of strangling him.

He hoped for the most favourable winds possible because he wasn't sure he would survive two weeks being in the company of so many bloody Frasers.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which Jamie thinks about the past, John makes a decision and later shanties are sung.

A very special thanks to @geekinthepink for beta reading this chapter!

Chapter Notes

I'm continuously updating the tags with each chapter. Please take a moment to review them. This chapter deals with Jamie's and Claire's backstory, which includes non-consensual intercourse between Jamie and Geneva (canon-compliant), Jamie exploring his sexuality outside of his relationship with Claire (not canon-compliant) and some explicit language.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

That bloody Englishman had the nerve to be ogling his wife. Jamie was more surprised than furious, and even more surprised that he wasn't more furious. He made a grumpy Scottish noise in the back of his throat and Claire laughed, shaking her head. She was pottering about in her room, organizing her herbs, preparing for any and every medical emergency as always. Jamie liked to watch her, a benevolent faerie in her natural habitat. The quiet clinking of bottles, the rustling of dry herbs and the scent of her various concoctions calmed him.

He decided to wait here until the needles had done their job. All the men had seen him with the wee things sticking out of various parts of his anatomy and knew about his predilection to 'mal de mer'. He knew that he held the trust and respect of his crew, but he couldn't help feeling somewhat ridiculous walking around like that. Not to mention the little stabbies were always in the way if he tried to do something, so whenever he didn't have duty on deck, he rather hid in here.

Claire, who was an expert in interpreting the subtleties of his non-verbal sounds, turned around and leaned against her desk. There was a playful smile on her lips.

"I wasn't the only one on the receiving end of his appreciative looks, you know?"

Jamie felt the tips of his ears burning. There was a moment where his eyes met Grey's and he noticed that the other man's gaze wasn't exactly uninterested. Something passed between them, and Jamie thought that maybe... but surely not. He had hit Grey on the head and threatened to cut his throat. That certainly snuffed out whatever spark might have been there.

“Are ye sure he wasna thinking about where to stab me, Sassenach?”

Claire sent a truly indecent smile his way.

“Well, that’s one way to put it...”

Jamie snorted, heat blooming in his belly nonetheless.

“If I dinna have these wee things in the way, I would ask ye to elaborate on that,” he said, wagging his eyebrows and blinking slowly a few times as a substitute for a wink.

The Englishman was handsome, Jamie gave him that. Bright blue eyes like when a ray of sunshine pierces through the tip of a wave. Full lips almost lazily administering politely clipped sentences, but then sometimes they stretched into a real smile lighting up his whole face. Just the memory of that twisted something in Jamie’s chest. He also flushed a very becoming pink shade when embarrassed.

If Claire was right and the appreciation went both ways, Jamie thought that was maybe flattering enough to overlook the offence of him looking at his wife. Not that he seriously thought either of them would act on any attraction with their precarious alliance. Although a quick tumble in the belly of a ship wouldn’t be uncommon between sailors of any kind. Even then, John Grey was probably above doing that with a criminal.

Jamie realized he was giving more thought to the matter than he intended and decided it was Claire’s bad influence. Youthful as she looked most people didn’t know Claire was a few years older than him, and as intimidating as he looked, no one would even think that he was the virgin on their wedding night.

He liked it that way. When he was a lad, he thought it strange that only the women were expected to keep themselves untouched before their wedding. For sure if it was such a sin, it applied to everyone. So he never let the other lads or his uncles convince him to go with them to a brothel. He just wanted to be a good man. He thought he was rewarded for it when he met Claire. He remembered it clearly to this day the first touches of her fingers on his body. Her touches seared him and lit him up like lightning lit up the sky. He was burning like wildfire and her kisses were like the first gulp of water after thirsting for days. On that night and many nights after he never wanted to touch anyone else.

He wanted to settle down with her, keep her safe, keep loving her with his heart and serving her with his body. Claire brought colours to his world he never saw before, wrapped him around her fingers and Jamie never ever wanted to escape.

People were jealous of their happiness. Especially a girl who once stole a kiss from him, in his eyes so insignificant by now. It was one of the many misfortunes that would follow. His Claire, his love, his wife was branded as a witch, by a foolish girl who didn’t even deserve to kiss the ground she walked on. Jamie wouldn’t even have cared if the accusations were true. Witch, human or other creature he was Claire’s and Claire was his.

Rescuing her and standing against the whole village by doing so ended up being the first of many crimes they have accused him. Treason was the last that sent him to prison and snapped

the irons around his wrists.

He told Claire to run. Begged her to save herself, go to France or Italy, wherever she could find safety. He had little hope that he would regain his freedom, but if he did, he swore he would find her.

It was in prison when his body first betrayed him. At least that was how he thought about it at a time. There was so much suffering, so little hope. The simplest touch of another human felt like a stolen treasure. He thought about Claire every day and every night and sometimes it felt like bliss and sometimes it felt like torture, but when in the dead of the night two men carved out a crumble of freedom for themselves he didn't think about her. When he came into the dirty rough palm of another prisoner, for a single blissful moment he didn't think about anything at all.

Eventually, the prison was closed and the prisoners scattered. Ironically it was his seasickness that saved him from being sold to the Colonies. When the governor of the prison heard about it he said he did not wish that even on his enemy and instead sent him to Helwater as a groom.

At first, it seemed like a small mercy. Then it became another curse by the hand of another foolish girl. He pitied Geneva, but he didn't want her, and the only reason why he didn't curse her name was that she was dead soon after and he had a son who cracked his heart wide open. A son, who he couldn't claim and who looked more and more like him with each passing day. Isobel saw it, and she told him to go. He did not receive his parole though, so he left the estate behind as fugitive.

While he grieved the loss of William he set out to find Claire with equal measures of dread and hope. He went to France and spent years looking for her. While part of him wanted to keep himself for Claire as he did before, he wasn't that innocent lad any longer. At the same time, he found that he couldn't lay with a woman, because he either thought of Claire and the thoughts of not finding her again or finding her and she being disgusted with him were tormenting him. Or it was Geneva, young and sensual, taking something from him that he wasn't ready to give, and giving something in return that he couldn't have.

Paris was a peculiar city with many eccentricities. It wasn't hard to find a place that catered to men who didn't crave the soft body of a woman. He felt guilty, at first. Both because he thought he was betraying Claire as well as damning his soul. But by then so many times had he been told he was wrong when in his heart he knew he wasn't. So many times had he been punished for acting out of his best intentions. Finally, he decided that the masses were not speaking the eternal truth in this question either.

That establishment was also where he met the man. To this day he didn't know his true name. Jamie introduced himself as Malcolm and the other man was using a false name as well. They knew nothing of each other that would lead to the downfall of either and the only thing that they would be able to hold against the other would have incriminated both of them.

It started out as an evening of drinking and ended with the man spread out under Jamie. But he wasn't a whore and Jamie wasn't a man who only took and never gave. He remembered their next night together as vividly as his wedding night, lying on his front on crumpled

sheets with sweat running down his back and a hard prick up his arse. The shame that flooded him and the raging fire of lust that followed, that made every budding thought of self-hatred go up in flames and scatter like ash. It was in Paris, in a small dusty room lit by candlelight when he realized it wasn't just about whether he was faithful to Claire or not. This had been always a part of him, he just locked it away by force.

There was friendship between them with that man, but it wasn't love. They played chess, drank wine, talked and fucked. Jamie still wasn't sure if love could exist between two men. Claire said it could, and she knew things no one else had the power to know.

And then finally, on one day, against all odds he found Claire. Things didn't get easier or luckier, but they were together again and that was the only thing that mattered. They could not stay in France, because Claire acquired a reputation of being an English spy and they could not go back to England, because Jamie would be locked away again. The only freedom for them lay not on land, but on the sea. Jamie often regretted ever setting foot on a ship while he lay trembling in his hammock, being thrown around by the waves and not being able to hold down a bite. At the same time, he also knew he wouldn't have made a different decision. While he never completely got used to the movement of the sea, his stomach stopped protesting so much – only it had taken three months and not three days as all the cheerful sailors insisted – and Claire learned to use the Chinese technique to help him keep his sickness at bay.

It took a long time, a lot of tears and sleepless nights spent with talking instead of lovemaking to bridge the gap that the years of separation opened between them. Jamie felt guilt-ridden, more than anything and cursed himself for not being stronger. *Better*. Resisting the urges of flesh like he was warned so many times. Until one time Claire snapped at him and asked him if he still somehow thought women were less likely or less in need of finding refuge in physical pleasure.

Jamie was leaning towards saying yes, but then Claire explained and *demonstrated* just how much she needed it too until Jamie had no objections left and decided the church was wrong and his wife was right. After they lay tangled together, with Claire's hair like a cloud on his shoulder and her love curled around his heart like a purring cat, and she surprised him once more by declaring that he would even welcome another man in their bed if that made Jamie happy.

They both had been unfaithful, and they both still loved each other. Jamie had made his peace with the past. Neither of them was the same person as before, but they were honest with each other and their love was strong enough to hold space for change.

He knew Claire would have no objections, whatsoever if he caught the handsome Englishman, drew him into his cabin, and well... He looked up and saw Claire watching him with a knowing look on her face. He cleared his throat.

“Can ye take these out now, Sassenach?”

Just like he had predicted they avoided the storm and only run into some mild rain. Normally, the La Dame Blanche didn't sail this far north. While her mostly Highlander crew didn't mind the cold winds, hunting bounty was a lot easier in the south. There were far too many British ships in these waters. This time, they didn't have any choice in the matter, nor were they hunting for gold.

Jamie's worst fears seemed to manifest themselves when something appeared on the horizon, that was more dangerous than the rolling clouds. Sails. The sails of a British Man of War. As soon as the shout came from the lookout Jamie immediately forgot his musings about the nature and taste of John Grey. He took out his telescope, squinted in the right direction and let out a string of curses, his mind immediately starting to whirl, thinking about what strategy would be best.

It had been dangerous enough for them to engage with the Sapphire while her crew was preoccupied with that merchant ship, and could be deceived that they were trying to target the goods. Jamie decided on when and where to hit after long hours of thinking.

Engaging in a fight with an unknown naval vessel unprepared was suicidal. Well, more suicidal than Jamie was comfortable with. At the moment the La Dame Blanche was flying French colours. They looked less suspicious that way. Of course, they also had false papers to go with it. On previous occasions, he would hide in the belly of the ship and let Fergus play the role of the captain. His perfect French and easy manners sold their disguise perfectly. While Jamie himself was fluent, he wasn't an easy man to forget, so he never showed his face during any kind of inspection.

Jamie was sure they wouldn't let them pass without questions. At the very least there was a good chance they would ask them for their papers, maybe supplies or medical assistance.

This time there was also the question of what to do with John Grey. They were far enough to switch out their ensign, and if Jamie could convince Grey to play the role of the captain this time, that would make things much easier. He didn't think the Navy would be anything less than courteous with a proper Englishman like him. But would Jamie trust the man not to try sabotaging their plans?

He could also just tie him up and hide with him in the hold. Restraining the wee Englishman and keeping watch over him in close quarters wouldn't be hard, nor did it sound like a chore... However, it might erode their alliance and Jamie would rather carry out his plan with someone who didn't hold resentment towards him.

More importantly, they didn't have time to linger. Even a harmless inspection would be too much. Fergus, like a good quartermaster, was already beside him and Claire, who had a sixth sense for his moods was walking quickly towards him as well. Jamie spotted Grey too and inclined his head indicating that he should join them as well.

When all three of them gathered around him, Jamie squared his shoulders.

"They are flying the White Ensign," he said solemnly. "Yer peers," he added with a searching glance towards Grey.

The man was still in his deep blue coat, breeches dirty and torn at some places, and there were a few wisps of blond hair floating around his face that escaped from his ribbon. However, on first glance, there was no doubt about him being a naval officer. He looked cautious when hearing the news.

“Shall I prepare to take the lead, Milord?” Fergus asked. Jamie shook his head.

“Nay. Even if our papers hold on a casual inspection we dinna have time for that.” He took a deep breath. “If they want to board us, we’ll raise the black.”

Claire sucked in a breath but knew him better than to argue at this point. Jamie himself desperately hoped they would just let them pass without questions, but if it didn’t, he was going to go down with an honest fight.

Grey cleared his throat and caught his gaze. His expression was solemn and Jamie thought he saw conflict behind his eyes.

“If I may speak,” he started, but waited for Jamie’s small nod to continue. “I might know a way we can come away from this situation without casualties on either side.”

Jamie raised an eyebrow inquiringly. Grey looked between Claire and Fergus, gaze settling on Jamie once more. Something shifted on his face as he took a deep breath. He seemed to have made a decision.

“As you know, it is not uncommon for the Navy to confiscate vessels. If I theoretically found myself in port, on an urgent commission, without sufficient crew or a suitable ship I would have the authority to borrow a ship, like the La Dame Blanche – her being a legal merchant ship in this scenario, of course.”

“Aye,” Jamie said, “but they would still come aboard. Or do ye think ye could go over and convince them that yer in such a hurry, ye could barely spare a bit of time?”

The idea of letting Grey out of his sight felt foolish. He also was very much against setting foot on a man-of-war unarmed and without his men. Grey was smart enough to know this.

“I wouldn’t need to go over,” he said, a small, pleased smile appearing in the corner of his mouth. “I do not have my signal book, of course – you should have taken that from my cabin, by the way, if you were already at it – but I’m reasonably sure we could fabricate the right flags to send them a message in a code only a high-ranking naval officer would have access to. A message indicating that all is well and they should just let us pass.”

Fergus made an appreciative sound.

"Along the lines of... 'we're on the same side, everything is well in hand?' The Navy has flags for that?"

John flashed a quick smile.

“Essentially, yes.”

It was a tempting plan. Jamie sent a glance towards Claire. She liked the idea too. Could the Englishman be trusted? With a secret message, he could just as easily bring an attack down on them. He looked into Grey’s eyes again. His gaze was patient and open, accompanied by a

wry curl of his lips as if he didn't quite believe he was offering this himself.

"I'm a man of my word, Mr. Fraser," he said quietly.

After a beat, Jamie nodded. It was their best chance, and the man did give him his word.

They would soon find out how much it was worth.

"Alright then."

Grey's expression lightened and Jamie tried to tell himself it wasn't because of his display of trust, but simply because the man didn't want to be shot at more than he did, which was reasonable. Grey looked around and spotted Byrd hovering nearby. He gestured the young man over.

"Tom, fetch some needle and thread quickly." As the boy hurried away, Grey turned back towards Jamie. "I will need some scraps of fabric," he said, then looked towards the back of the ship, towards the French flag, "and please change that out."

They managed to put together a pile of fabrics in various colours. Grey sat down on the stairs and started to tear strips from them with his knife. Tom Byrd crouched beside him and arranged the colours on a square piece of canvas according to his instruction. Then he began to hastily sew them down, tearing the thread with his teeth. Jamie watched them, fingers thrumming on the railing while glancing towards the ship now and then that appeared closer and closer with each passing minute. He was surprised to see that when he was done with cutting out the pieces, Grey himself picked up needle and thread to help finish them. They were done just in time and Jamie gave the order to hoist up the flags.

Then he walked over and clapped Grey on the shoulder. The smaller man startled and turned towards him.

"Ye best go over there and stand next to the railing. Let them see ye, ken?" He didn't wait for an answer, he gestured Fergus over. "Ye too, mon fils, just look friendly as always, aye?"

Fergus flashed him a smile and went to stand by Grey's elbow. Jamie himself sat down on the floor and leaned his back against the side, hunching his shoulders to stay hidden. He gave his telescope to Grey earlier and the man was watching the ship approach through it.

His posture was confident, commanding respect without a word, just like when Jamie first lay eyes upon him on board of the Sapphire. The tricorn hat he hastily clapped on wasn't his own, but it did the job in completing his silhouette. Grey sent a glance to Fergus, then to Jamie, facade breaking for a moment.

"None of you are going to point a hidden pistol at me?"

Jamie snorted.

"Nay. Ye're a man of yer word, I've heard."

The tiny, pleased smile was back, but Jamie didn't have time to linger on it, because Grey turned back towards the water.

Sitting on the ground, Jamie looked up at the flags fluttering above on the halyard. One blue and red stripes on white background, one blue with a white cross, the third half yellow half

white. They looked worse for wear, edges frayed, and were a long way from the fine materials and bright colours they would be officially made of. Their pattern was, however clearly visible, and their state could be explained away by rough weather conditions. John told him what the signal meant. The first one was some sort of identification, the second a general confirmation of everything is well, and the third asking them to stay clear of their course.

At least, that's what Grey said they've meant and Jamie couldn't help but feel some doubt creeping into his mind. As far as he knew, they could just as easily mean "I'm kidnapped, engage immediately." He wanted to trust John Grey though, and the only alternative to his plan would be bloodshed. He tried not to dwell on the fact that if Grey betrayed them, they would lose every ounce of surprise, the only thing they could have turned to their advantage.

He wasn't able to see the other ship from this position, but Fergus helpfully commented everything he saw from the corner of his mouth.

"50 yards. 40. 30. I think someone's at the rail."

Grey peered into the telescope again.

"Yes," he added, "they should see the signs by now."

He drew himself up, looking authoritative as ever. Jamie held his breath.

A moment passed, then another. He heard no cannon shot, which was a sign at least.

"Bloody hell, they are signing back something," Grey exclaimed. He bit his lip, in concentration and Jamie tried and failed not to stare at it. "I'll have absolutely no idea what they mean without my signal book," Grey added letting out a nervous chuckle. Jamie relaxed slightly. The man wasn't an open book, but he could tell that the man wasn't pretending.

Grey looked at the flags again, concentrating.

"Well, that is not the flag for engagement, I would recognize that."

Fergus squinted over the rail as well.

"They are not steering to come closer, Milord. They are staying well clear of us," he announced.

Grey shrugged.

"Well, I'll just smile then," he said, with an edge of hysteria then saluted smartly towards the other ship.

Jamie waited a few more minutes, then carefully peeked over the rail and saw the sails of the other ship slowly receding. John raised an eyebrow looking at him, then held out his hand. Jamie looked back, assessing. It seemed like such a small gesture, an offer of help, and he acknowledged the slowly blooming trust between them by clasping the man's wrist and letting him haul him up with a surprising amount of strength.

And if he stood a bit too close, or looked down into those blue eyes a bit too long, no one dared to comment on it.

Grey gave back his telescope, smooth brass still warm from his grip. It made Jamie feel strangely flustered, and to counteract that, he clapped the man on the shoulder, and declared

very loudly.
“Well done, Johnny.”

He left the flabbergasted man there, wondering what the hell was wrong with him.

Something eased between him and the captain, and by extension the whole crew. He did help save their collective arses after all. He had to keep reminding himself that this was not his crew and that he shouldn't let his guard down, but he allowed himself to feel just a little bit at ease.

He would have to take the makeshift signal flags with him, of course, or destroy them somehow and report that part of the code had been compromised. It was something to worry about later. For now, he weighed the well-being of William Ransom against the capturing of a crew of pirates in a bloody fight and decided on the former. He might need Fraser's help on that just as much Fraser needed him. He could probably solve it on his own, but the Navy wouldn't be too sympathetic towards the fact of Willie's true parentage.

At this moment, their goals aligned, so he could justify actively keeping Fraser away from the noose.

The name stuck, of course, not that he particularly minded it. It had probably contributed to the friendliness of the crew towards himself. While some men still addressed him gruffly as Grey, Tom stuck to “me lord” and he was still John to Claire, a part of the crew took up the captain's “Johnny” and with it seemed to forget that he wasn't their actual crewmate. John smiled to himself and shook his head. Only his brother called him that nowadays. It reminded him of those times when he just joined the Navy as a skinny young man. It didn't feel bad to have at least the illusion for a few minutes that his responsibilities have been lifted from his shoulder. They weren't, of course, but he also couldn't do anything about them for at least another week.

It also was not an uncommon name and the crew seemed to take it upon themselves to teach him every dirty joke and bawdy song he might haven't known that somehow included his name.

Today's song was again about a man named Johnny, who was “carpenter by trade, but Jacobite by name”. John tried to hold back his laughter. He sent a sideways glance at Fraser who was overseeing the work.

They were using the calm weather to finally switch out the foresail where the spar got damaged in their original encounter with the Sapphire. A little sloop wasn't built to collide with a larger vessel with that much speed after all. John spared a quick thought at the Sapphire and her crew. He had no doubt Newman got the situation well in hand and they were capable of escorting the Minerva to Boston with the slightly depleted crew just fine. They would arrive well behind them if everything went according to plan. With some luck by the time Newman would report what had happened, John would be able to join them with William.

Overall, he felt optimistic.

Meanwhile, three crew members were gathered around the capstan, carefully churning the device to hoist up the new sail while Murray and a few others climbed up the rigging to guide it into the right position.

The men started to sing a more storytelling than bawdy shanty, led by Fergus, whose accent gave an interesting flavour to the song but who had a surprisingly strong and even singing voice. The chorus was echoed by everyone, not just the men actively doing what the song was about – operating the capstan –, but everyone in hearing distance. Even Claire and Marsali were idly singing away while working on the damaged canvas.

Not the Captain, however. Fraser leaned against the railing and watched the happenings with a slightly bemused expression, but didn't join in.

John looked at him.

"I appreciate the sentiment, however, I'm neither carpenter, not Jacobite," he joked. Nor did he have any intention of marrying a "lass", as the song said, he added in his mind. "I do feel like I'm obliged to join them, however," he added, earning a surprised look from those sapphire-blue cat eyes.

He grinned and started to roll up his shirt sleeves.

"I believe I got the hang of the chorus by now."

He went to the capstan with quick paces and slid into the empty space, grabbing the fourth pole. After spending weeks in the confines of a ship with nothing much to do it felt exhilarating to do some manual activity. He also didn't mind singing. The performance earned him a few smiles and friendly grins.

In no time at all the sail was in place, the song ended and John was wiping the sweat off his brow with the back of his hands.

Claire clapped her hands, smiling.

"You have a very nice singing voice, John."

Grey bowed with an exaggerated flourish.

"Thank you, ma'am... Claire," he corrected. He made the mistake of glancing towards the captain and found the man watching him.

"I'm no' one to give an opinion on the matter," Fraser said as if John had asked him. Before he could figure out the meaning of that or ask for an explanation, Ian Murray yelled down helpfully from the rigging.

"Uncle's completely tone-deaf, ye ken?"

"How do ye speak to yer captain, Ian?" Fraser looked back at the young man, expression more exasperated than angry, but even that looked frightening on his features. "Come down ye wee rascal I'll teach ye some manners!"

Ian grinned broadly but didn't move to come down. Rollo barked, perhaps in agreement, and John saw Tom cautiously smile at the scenario.

He leaned onto the railing next to Fraser and risked a teasing smile.

“Not stealing gold, suffering by the rough seas and not singing shanties. You are indeed a strange pirate, Fraser.”

The man looked at him from under his ruddy brows and huffed.

“Ye’re one to talk,” he muttered. “Ye’re the strangest Englishman I’ve ever met.”

Chapter End Notes

The last scene has been inspired by this song [Ye Banished Privateers - Capstan Shanty](#). (go check them out if you fancy some gloriously unpolished pirate songs)

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The plan was simple. Meet William outside of the city, let John convince the boy that he needed to come with them, and then get out of there as soon as possible.

Now Grey had a dead pirate at his feet, Fraser was holding a smoking gun, and nothing seemed so simple any more.

I said we wouldn't touch upon the more horrid villains in this fandom. Call me a liar, Stephen Bonnet makes an appearance here. But don't worry, he doesn't stick around...

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings for attempted rape and discussions of a past rape. Jamie and John also discuss past events which mirror canon (for Jamie this is the night with Geneva, for John it is him being raped as a young officer). Proceed at your own discretion, please.

The plan was simple. Meet William outside of the city, let John convince the boy that he needed to come with them, and then get out of there as soon as possible.

Now Grey had a dead pirate at his feet, Fraser was holding a smoking gun, and nothing seemed so simple any more.

Earlier

Grey tugged down the cuff of his borrowed coat for what felt like the hundredth time that day. The sleeves were too short and it was constricting his shoulders as well, but it was an inconspicuous brown colour instead of navy blue, and right now that was what mattered. It wouldn't have done them any good if John was recognised as an officer, not more than if Fraser were to be recognised as a criminal.

They arrived at Boston as planned, a day before the date John specified in the letter he wrote to William Ransom. They were supposed to meet the boy the next day at sunset outside of the city. Fraser's plan was to prepare a small boat, which they could use to row back to the ship and disappear with the rising tide before anyone started looking for William.

The crew of the La Dame Blanche posed as French merchantmen and had no issues getting into port. Fergus stayed on board with a skeleton crew so that the others could use the time to

look around the city and gather any useful bits of information, while Claire took a few men with her to buy some of her medical supplies.

John thought that it always felt strange to re-enter society after a long voyage at sea, but this time he found it especially disorientating. He looked around in the bustling harbour as if he stepped into an entirely different world. His legs felt unsteady and he found himself flinching at loud noises. The smell of fish and seaweed was strong in the air, almost overpowering the smell of chimney smoke and the reek of sewage coming from the city.

He adjusted his cuff one more time and willed himself to focus. In the last two weeks, he had been turning his coat from navy man to sailor to privateer and back again, until his head was spinning. He took meals with the crew of the *La Dame Blanche*, worked alongside them and went along with Jamie Fraser's instructions as a captain when needed. While he had never been one of those who thought pirates to be monsters, it was one thing to acknowledge this, and another to share close quarters with men who he considered to be the enemy of a properly functioning society. He didn't yet know what to make of the experience. They were ordinary men. Men who were trying to make a living, who were capable of running a ship and who were just as superstitious of the sea as any sailor. He wondered what these men told to themselves that justified it in their own books to plunder and steal and murder.

He reminded himself that even if he were to understand their motives, it simply could not matter. Grey had a duty to the Crown as a naval officer and he also considered it his duty not to let William Ransom be dragged away by pirates.

And so, it was his time to tread carefully and act at the right moment.

Tom Byrd who was walking beside him through the crowd had a change of clothes as well, although he seemed to be struggling with the opposite problem Grey had. The shoulders of his borrowed coat were drooping and he had to push the sleeves up constantly, otherwise, they fell over his hands. The oversized garment made him look five years younger as if he were just about to try his luck at sea for the first time.

On top of that, there was a silver earring glinting in his sore-looking left earlobe. On a boring evening last week, when there was quite a bit of rum going around, the young man let Ian Murray convince him that this was a sensible idea. Tom won the jewellery in a card game of all things, which was what sparked the idea in the first place. The only reason Grey hadn't intervened was that Claire Fraser, as the ship's doctor insisted on performing the deed herself, and seemed to be very skilled at preventing infection. John was glad that this adventure was almost over, otherwise, he would be compelled to have a serious talk with Ian Murray about how he should stop trying to make a privateer out of John's promising young officer.

When nobody was looking, John caught Tom's coat sleeve, yanked him closer and slid a small, folded piece of paper into his palm. The young man looked at him anxiously but promptly put the note away. Grey gave him a small nod.

John knew Jamie Fraser wasn't stupid. He insisted on keeping John with him, while he sent Tom and Ian to snoop around the governor's house. This allowed Fraser to keep an eye on both of their actions, while also separating them. His only miscalculation here was to

underestimate both of them. The plan suited John just fine. He was sure Tom would know what to do with the note.

He and Fraser sat into a tavern near the governor's house, ordered two beers and tried to blend in. Fraser made efforts to disguise himself as well. This mostly consisted of him stuffing his flame-red hair under a cap, which did little to diminish his natural air of command and violence. There was no way to make the man smaller after all. For this reason, Fraser took the seat closer to the door and kept his back to the rest of the tavern as well as hunched over the table, as if he were already somewhat inebriated.

Grey pretended to survey the room, while he glanced at Fraser from under his lashes. The candlelight accentuated his robust features and painted his skin in a golden light. His blue eyes were glinting like sapphires. Even now, with so many other things to think about, John was struck by his beauty.

The man got significantly more comfortable around John since their encounter with the British man-of-war. He jested with him and called him Johnny, and on multiple nights they played chess and exchanged anecdotes. Fraser has been nothing, but courteous with him, and John admitted to himself that he found the man clever and charming. And attractive, of course. There were even a few times when he wondered, whether perhaps Fraser was open to male lovers. John was good at reading subtle signs by nature and by necessity, and the way Fraser's eyes sometimes flickered across his face, or the way their hands would accidentally touch over a bottle of wine definitely gave him ideas. Under other circumstances, he would have taken these things as a subtle offer for more.

However, James Fraser wasn't only a pirate, but he also had a wife, so John pushed these thoughts away as best as he could. Maybe Fraser would have been open to it in his youth, but surely not any more. Either way, their roles were set and while he found traits he could admire in Fraser, they were not friends.

The tavern was filled with the usual mixture of loud and unwashed men. There were many sailors and merchantmen and Grey could even see a few navy officers at the bar, although he luckily hadn't recognized any of them. A group of men were playing cards in the corner, throwing coins and jewellery on the table. Loud male laughter startled Grey, coming from that direction, followed by a few sentences of companionable taunting. The words had a distinct Irish lilt to them and the voice clearly belonged to a man who was used to talking over the rumbling of waves. Fraser looked over his shoulder and cursed quietly.

John followed his gaze and saw a man with dirty blond hair and a prominent scar next to his mouth. He turned back to Fraser.

"You know him?" he asked. If it was someone who would recognize Fraser they needed to get out of there as soon as possible.

Fraser nodded but didn't seem inclined to get up.

"Aye. That's Stephen Bonnet."

John raised his eyebrows. He heard that name before, but...

"Isn't he a pirate and a smuggler? Surely he won't pose any threats to you."

Fraser shot him a sharp look.

“He is. And while he’ll be unlikely to run to the constable upon seeing me, ye’ll find that not all men in this occupation are cut from the same cloth.”

Grey still doubted that, and while a week ago he would have kept his mouth shut, now he allowed himself a wry smirk.

“Isn’t it a bit hypocritical of you to judge a man for a crime that you share?”

Something dark flickered across Fraser’s face.

“Trust me, Bonnet has done many crimes that I do not share. I dinna want any unnecessary complications in our business, so we better keep our distance from that man.”

John wondered what made Jamie think Bonnet to be a more wicked man than himself. Then he saw the Irishman in question grab one of the waitresses and pull her into his lap. She was fair-haired and slight and tried to scramble away, but the pirate held her firmly. Her eyes darted around in the room in a panicked fashion. Grey was not proud of himself that he glanced down to avoid her gaze.

“What would you say if, once returning to my position I made sure to prioritize the capturing and sentencing of one Stephen Bonnet?” he asked slowly, catching Fraser’s eye as a challenge to see if the man had any objections in general against hanging bastards for piracy. Fraser made one of his throaty Scottish noises.

“In that case, I would advise ye to thread carefully, Johnny. He is a dangerous son of a bitch.”

It rubbed John the wrong way for some reason, but he wasn’t sure if it was the idea of Fraser worrying about him long after they parted ways or the assumption that he was unable to carry out his duty and handle a criminal. Fraser might have a different opinion on that matter after tomorrow, he thought grimly.

They continued talking about unimportant things to keep up the pretence of a conversation while they were both listening to their surroundings. Bonnet’s group got increasingly louder in the corner and the man still hasn’t released the woman from his clutches. Grey started to have a vaguely bad feeling. He hoped Tom and Ian were not in trouble.

Just as he thought that Tom Byrd’s voice cut through the background noise, full of urgency.

“Captain! Captain!” Grey wasn’t sure if the young man addressed both of them, or just forgot himself in his apparent hurry. He crossed the room, Ian trailing behind him, seemingly not being able to catch up even with his long limbs. Tom skidded to a halt before John and leaned onto his knees, panting.

“There’s a problem,” he managed to get out between two laboured breaths, raising his forefinger while he struggled to get enough air into his lungs to continue. Ian arrived beside him, his face long and his eyes troubled. Fraser turned towards his nephew with an air of command Ian instantly responded to.

“Richardson,” Ian started, “he’s there, Captain. He has already arrived, and was there at the governor’s when we went by.”

Fraser said something in Gaelic that sounded crude, and Grey expressed his agreement by swearing in German. Fraser scrubbed a hand down his face.

“They got that good of a wind? Or were we that slow?”

This crossed all of their plans. *Both* of their plans.

So far they have been operating with the assumption that they still had some time. Not much, but that they had been one small step before Richardson. This changed everything.

They attracted some attention with their urgent conversation. Even Bonnet sent some wary glances toward them. The group, sensing trouble with that sixth sense petty criminals seemed to have, broke apart and Grey saw Bonnet clamping down a hand on the woman's arm and started to pull her after himself. This time her eyes met John's, the woman's wide and pleading like a frightened horse's.

Perhaps it was the bottled-up energy thrumming through his veins, that now he had no outlet for since they would have to completely re-evaluate their plans. Or he simply just couldn't let his honour erode further by standing by. He was an officer and a gentleman for God's sake, even dressed as he was in a ragged coat.

He slammed his hands down on the table, and stood up, pushing his chair back with a loud scraping noise, then purposefully launched himself towards the door not paying any attention to Fraser's confused look.

Outside, he quickly looked around. He couldn't see Bonnet anywhere, but a muffled scream alerted him to the bastard's whereabouts. There was a dark alley to the left and he promptly stepped in without hesitation. The sight in front of him made his stomach turn. Bonnet had one hand covering the mouth of the woman and was starting to ruck up her skirt with the other. She was struggling while making pitiful noises, but no amount of her kicking and trashing could make the man budge. Bonnet had his back to John and was murmuring something in a low and menacing voice, but whirled around when John spoke up.

"Let go of the lady. She is clearly not interested."

Bonnet looked him up and down, holding the woman between them. He looked surprised, but not frightened. In fact, he had a decidedly feral glint in his eyes.

"Lady? Do you hear that, darlin'?" he asked the woman in a mocking tone that raised all the hairs on Grey's arms. The woman clearly wasn't able to answer with Bonnet's grimy palm across her mouth so the man continued. "Wait out your turn, mate. I promise I'll leave you something," he said in a condescending tone.

Grey squared his jaw and held that disconcertingly sharp gaze. The back of his neck prickled uncomfortably, but he wasn't about to retreat.

"I'm sure you will find a willing companion in one of the brothels, but I think the owner of the tavern wouldn't appreciate you molesting one of his employees," Grey said, years of captaincy making it easy to summon the commanding steel of his voice. "I'm not going to ask again."

Bonnet examined him, perhaps really looked at him for the first time, and he thought it was probably more due to his speech than to what he was saying. He seemed to realize it wasn't a common sailor he was dealing with. At the same time, he licked his lips and pulled them into a sly smile.

“Now, sir, I don’t think I’ve done anything wrong here. I’m having a lovely time here with this woman, and if you want to take that away from me that’s practically stealing. I have the right to defend that have I not?”

John levelled him with a cool gaze.

“The only thing you have a right to is to leave, otherwise there will be dire consequences of your actions.”

Bonnet’s face morphed into an ugly scowl.

“It isn’t me who sticks his nose where it doesn’t belong. I show you consequence.”

He pushed the woman at Grey, who had no choice but to catch her. However, by the time he steadied her and pushed her behind himself, Bonnet was already on him and punched him in the face. John felt the metallic taste of his own blood in his mouth. He quickly pulled out his dagger. Just in time. Bonnet launched himself forward again and John saw a knife glinting. He dodged, the blade tearing through his coat sleeve.

Bonnet was taller than him and wider in the shoulders, but Grey had his fair share of fights with bigger men. He was quick and skilled in fighting in close quarters. And they didn’t have much space now in the narrow alleyway. His shoulders hit the wall and he pushed himself away, using the momentum to swing at his opponent. He felt the armpit of his coat ripping open, but at least it wasn’t constricting his movements any longer. His blade sliced the meat of Bonnet’s upper arm, coming away red. Grey pushed his advantage, kicking his legs from under him, sending Bonnet flat on the ground, the force of it pushing a surprised grunt out of him.

He put his boot on the base of the man’s throat and gripped his dagger harder.

“This is what it feels like when you are put on your back without being asked,” John spat.

Bonnet let out an ugly laugh, somewhat tampered by John’s boot on his throat.

“Are you going to show me what it’s like to be fucked without question too? I hope you’re at least going to pay me like I was going to pay that whore.”

Grey snarled.

“You are an absolute scum and I should gut you for pretending not to understand the difference. That woman—”

Suddenly, Bonnet grabbed his ankle and twisted. John lost his balance and fell. Instinctively he made the decision to let go of his dagger in order to catch himself and to avoid impaling himself on his own blade. Bonnet grabbed him by the shoulder and punched him in the stomach. Before John could recover, the other man wrapped his arm around his throat, used the hold to yank him upright and squeezed.

“I don’t know who do you think you are, but I’m thinking it doesn’t matter,” he growled into his ear. John grabbed the arm around his neck, digging his nails in, but couldn’t make it move an inch. He kicked and struggled desperately trying to hold onto his wits and not panic.

“Maybe I’m going to fuck you instead now that you scared away my fun,” Bonnet added with a laugh. Grey elbowed him in the ribs, panic squeezing his chest, but it only made the arm tighten around his throat. No. Not that.

Through swimming vision, John noticed that the woman indeed has long fled the alley. If only he could back them to the wall and maybe throw Bonnet against it with his weight. It was hard to think. At least he still had his breeches on, so maybe that was only an idle threat. Grey wheezed, desperately trying to get air into his lungs. Black spots started to dance at the edge of his vision.

Oh God. He was going to die here dressed like a poor privateer in a grimy alley in Boston, defending the honour of a woman he didn't know. What will his brother think? Will Fraser at least have the courtesy of notifying him?

A loud shot echoed in the narrow alleyway. Grey could feel the impact of the bullet hitting Bonnet behind him, his arm yanking at him one more time before it went limp around his throat, as Bonnet fell backwards. Grey opened his eyes, that he instinctively closed upon the loud noise and saw the tall figure of Jamie Fraser standing there as if conjured up by his thoughts. He was holding his gun in his left hand, still smoking, and his cap in his right hand, clenched in a fist. He was panting as if he ran, and his red curls floated around his head in the damp evening air. John deliriously thought that he looked like some sort of avenging angel.

Bonnet's body hit the floor with a thump and John staggered, catching himself on the wall and gasping for breath. His knees felt weak, so he turned, pushing his back against the wall and he slid down to the floor. When he looked up, Fraser had a very intense expression on his face, something close to fury, but there was something else too. He held out a hand to Grey and pulled him up.

"Yer completely mad, Johnny," he said, but he was squeezing John's hand a minute longer than absolutely necessary. John was grateful for both the support and for the warmth of that touch.

Jamie tossed back his whiskey, then refilled both his and Grey's cups without asking. They were back on the ship, in his cabin, waiting for Claire to arrive so that she could tend to Grey's injuries. Meanwhile, Jamie decided that whiskey was good enough medicine. He hoped it would make his own headache go away too.

He felt no remorse for killing Bonnet, the bastard had it a long time coming and Jamie doubted he would be missed, even by his own crew. It was John Grey who was the cause of his headache.

"What were ye thinking, man?" he grunted, shaking his head disbelievingly. Running away like that and searching out a fight, one that almost got him killed if Jamie hadn't intervened. He thought John Grey was a kind and sensible Englishman, but by now he also saw that the man had a fiery side too that sometimes he couldn't or wouldn't suppress.

Grey glared at him, dabbing at the cut on his lower lip with a cloth.

"I couldn't bloody well just stand by while he raped that woman."

Jamie generally would have agreed wholeheartedly, but at this moment, he was too furious. Grey could have at least told him what he was about to do. They could have worked out something together, it wasn't like Jamie agreed with Bonnet's actions and he bloody said so.

Grey either had the worst opinions of him still or was too prideful to ask for help from a pirate.

“Must ye always intervene when ye see something that’s not your business or is it only when women are involved?” he asked, not caring how true or cutting his words would be.

Grey flushed and Jamie noted how he was able to tell that it was from anger rather than embarrassment. It wasn’t half as pretty on his face.

“Do you always protect criminals, or is only when you share their crime?” he threw back.

Jamie spluttered. Instinctively, he took a step forward, and leaned over Grey, putting his hand on the armrest of his chair and crowding into his space.

“I’ve shot the man for fuck’s sake,” he gritted out. “What are you accusing me of?”

And why was he so angry with him now when he saved his life? Jamie decided that John Grey was the most infuriating little—

“You did rape Geneva Dunsany after all.”

Jamie’s blood ran froze from the accusatory words. John wasn’t backing down but stared dead cold into his eyes.

“I did not,” Jamie blurted out, pulling back. However, he saw how John would think he did. He rubbed a hand across his face. He wanted to laugh because he had never met a man who could get under his skin like John Grey could apparently.

“If there was an unwilling participant on that night it was me,” he said through gritted teeth, the tips of his ears burning. Embarrassment joined the confusing mixture of emotions swirling in his gut.

Grey gaped at him and Jamie felt a flicker of satisfaction before he realized he was now compelled to tell him the story. He sighed and turned away. He leaned onto his desk, picked up his abandoned cup and drained it. It was easier to speak while not looking at the other man.

“Geneva dinna want her wedding night to be the first time she laid with a man. The Earl was an old man, so I dinna fault her for feeling that way. However, I told her outright I wouldna do it because it wasna right. So, she threatened me.” Jamie swallowed, willing his voice not to waver. He turned around and looked John in the eye. “She threatened my family until I was obliged to say yes.”

John paled and Jamie felt his anger evaporating, being replaced by bitterness.

“Ye see, even if it wasn’t done by physical force, I understand what it is like to have yer body used in that fashion without yer agreement. Or do you think me being a man makes it different?”

He saw John’s face soften. His hand twitched as if he wanted to instinctively reach out towards him.

“No, I do not think so,” he answered, his voice honest, and completely without anger now too. Jamie saw him lick his lips. John visibly hesitated.

“*I know* it doesn’t,” he added slowly. He bowed his head, breaking eye contact, and started to scratch at a darker spot on his cup with his nail. Jamie suddenly had a terrible suspicion, that was confirmed, when John continued. “I’ve never... I’ve never told anyone this, but I know exactly what you’re talking about.”

Whatever words Jamie had on his lips disappeared at seeing the expression on John’s face. He looked pale and sad. It was Jamie’s turn to fight the urge of reaching out. He suddenly wanted to wrap the man up in his arms, tell him that it was okay, that he didn’t need to continue... But John did.

“When I was a young officer on my first voyage at sea, I had a... an unpleasant encounter with another man. I was on watch, when someone had grabbed me from behind, held a knife to my throat, and took what he wanted.” His voice was dispassionate as if now that he decided to tell him he wasn’t shy about telling the details any more.

Jamie winced, terrible sympathy swirling in his gut. John saw it and smiled without any joy. The bruises on his face didn’t help either on the grim look that accompanied that smile.

“I never went anywhere without my dagger after. The worst part was that I’ve never known who the man was. So, I had to pretend, everything was right, while it could have been the man sitting across me at the mess, or the one I was assigned to be on watch with.”

Jamie swore under his breath. That must have been terrible and his heart ached for John in retrospect.

“I’m truly sorry.”

“I am too,” John answered. “I was holding the worst assumptions of you, that you did not deserve, and for that, I apologize.” His eyes were a clear, pale blue, and Jamie felt as if they were looking straight through him, seeing every hidden corner of his soul. For a moment he wanted the man’s distaste back. It was easier to bear to be hated than to be looked at like John Grey was looking at him.

His throat felt tight so he only nodded in acknowledgement. John gave him a small smile.

“I should be thanking you for intervening. You saved my life.” Jamie saw him take a deep breath. “Know, that whatever happens Fraser, I will not be the cause of your hanging.”

Jamie returned the smile. On pure instinct, he reached out and squeezed John’s shoulder in acknowledgement. It wasn’t the fact that the man felt indebted to him that made his heart beat faster. He felt the enormity of John of all people trusting him with something he never told anyone before, let alone in his context. He also wondered when he started thinking about the man by his first name, and why he wanted so desperately to be “Jamie” in John’s head in return.

Did it happen before or after he had found John in that alley being strangled by Bonnet? At that moment the only thing going through his mind was a desperate flare of possessive “no”. He wasn’t thinking about his plans and about what John Grey might play in them. He wasn’t thinking about his status or his trustworthiness. He was simply sickened by the very idea of any harm coming to him. The only decision he could make was to aim and pull the trigger.

Now they've both bared a vulnerable part of their soul to each other. Yet Jamie did not feel afraid. He hoped John wasn't feeling afraid either because he had no intention of using this information to his advantage. If anything, he wanted to keep John Grey as safe as possible as long as he was able to.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

"I am Ian Murray," he stated calmly, "and this is Tom Byrd. We've been sent by your father."

That surely gave William a pause. The only question was whether he would laugh at them saying his father was dead, or...

The boy jumped up from his chair, nearly upsetting the inkwell.

I normally don't introduce a new character POV in chapter 7. But. This is what happens when you guys encourage me and say you want more Tom. We end up with a chapter that's half from my fav little Byrd's POV. Halfway interlude point? Maybe? I hope you enjoy it and it satisfies your cravings for something sweet ;)

Chapter Notes

I was watching this roundtable interview today and one person said something along the lines of "You always use being a perfectionist as an excuse, but when you think back on it you've never done anything perfect in your life (it's impossible). So then you realize, you're just insecure."

So I guess I'm posting this chapter in the same vein as this thought...

Buckle up babies we have lots of shenanigans ahead of us!

Tom Byrd had found himself in a bit of a sticky situation.

When they had been attacked by pirates – and it had only been two weeks ago, even though it seemed much further away by now – he didn't expect, it would come to *this*. Frankly, he only expected to die on short order, but still.

He had to reluctantly admit that the pirates were only half the problem here. In fact, Captain Fraser had been quite courteous for a kidnapper. Tom could even admire that he would go to such lengths for his son. Tom loved his own father, but the man had four other boys and their sister to worry about, he for sure wouldn't be roaming the ocean after him, no matter what mess he had gotten himself into.

The Murray fellow was quite alright too. He told the most interesting stories about how he had been kidnapped by a bunch of other pirates, sold to the Mohawk and then bought back by Fraser after which he joined his crew. Tom couldn't decide if any of this was true, but if it was, then Captain Fraser really had a tendency to gather his relatives from distant parts of the world.

It was also Ian Murray, who held him back by the arm when he wanted to run after Captain Grey. It was pure instinct at this point. He still remembered the strange mixture of envy and sympathy his peers reacted with when he announced on which ship he was going to serve. Grey was a competent captain and kind man, but he could be strangely impulsive too, recklessly getting into the most hair-raising adventures – and dragging his crew after him.

Tom would have bet on it and won that he was about to get himself into trouble. As it was, Fraser leapt to the rescue and that improved Tom's views on him significantly. Even if he and Ian were the ones – of course – trusted with the task of cleaning up the carnage – or more specifically dumping the dead body of that nasty pirate into the sea. Such was the life of a subordinate on a ship, pirate or not, he thought.

After this brief interlude of violence, and after both captains – as Tom referred to them in his thoughts – had cooled their quite stubborn heads, of course, they wanted to know all about what Tom and Ian had found out at the governor's house.

"We haven't gone in," Tom said.

"But we saw that there was a big going on," Ian jumped in, "and we've talked with one of the footmen."

"He told us all the fuss was because Captain Richardson arrived from England."

Both captains and Claire Fraser were looking at them with intense focus. Tom still couldn't make up his mind about her. She was definitely pretty, and very capable with a needle. It barely hurt when she pierced his earlobe through. She also intimidated Tom quite a bit and even some of the crew members whispered about her being a witch. Fond whispers, but that didn't help to reassure Tom at all.

"We need to act now," Captain Fraser said. "Before he realizes, we're here as well. We cannae wait for tomorrow as we planned."

"Assuming he doesn't already know," Grey pointed out tactfully. Fraser shook his head.

"Nay, he would be making an absolute ruckus if he knew." Grey's expressive eyebrows climbed up on his forehead.

"May I ask what did you do to warrant such a personal vendetta?"

That sounded like a juicy bit of gossip, Tom very much would have liked to hear himself. Unfortunately, Fraser dodged the question.

"I'll tell ye later, we dinna have time now."

Tom saw his captain's lips press into a thin line. It was interesting to watch how the two men danced around each other, like two dangerous beasts, trying to size each other up. They have

gotten significantly friendlier in the last week and Fraser did just save Grey's life. At the same time, Tom knew that he was still planning to double-cross Fraser. As a Navy officer, he couldn't well just let a pirate run away with a young Earl, his sire or no.

Tom's loyalties, of course, lay with his captain. He felt the piece of paper tucked away under his coat Grey slipped into his hand. He peaked at it earlier. It was a note to William.

It said "Do not meet with Fraser. Make up an excuse and tell the coach on the town border to stop. I'll get to you and I promise that I will get you home safely."

Tom hadn't had a chance to give the note to William, and now with Richardson's arrival, all of their plans were turned upside down. He wondered what Grey wanted him to do with the note, but had no way of discreetly asking. Tom sighed internally. What a mess.

It was decided that Tom and Ian as the most inconspicuous from the group would still need to risk sneaking into the house to find out, where William's room was, if he was in the position to leave freely and if he was inclined to do so as asked in John Grey's letter.

Tom's first issue with this plan, of course, was that Ian Murray in his opinion was anything *but* inconspicuous. He was quite in awe when Mrs. Fraser pulled Ian aside and in mere minutes transformed him into the most ordinary cove Tom had ever seen. Mrs. Fraser dabbed something on his face that covered his tattoos, then quite miraculously stuffed all of his braids under a brown wig. With all of his peculiar features hidden he actually looked hard to remember. Tom was stunned by this power of transformation.

"I could still use a fake beard," Ian grinned stroking his chin. Captain Fraser slapped him on the back.

"We have nay time for joking, lad, ye must go at once."

This was how Tom found himself crawling up on the vines covering the side of the very respectable governor's house, something he would have never imagined to do. It was not much different than climbing up the rigging though, and he reached the lowest windowsill in no time.

"What d'ye see?" Ian hissed close behind. They were at the back of the house. In front of the house was a small, but busy square and they had no chance sneaking in from there.

Tom carefully pulled himself up an inch and peered in through the window. The room looked like some sort of study. There was a desk next to the window bookshelves along the walls and an armchair next to the fireplace.

"It's empty," he whispered back.

Tom shifted so that he got a better footing, got a solid grip on the windowsill and slowly inched the window up until there was enough space for him to crawl through. Inside, he eased himself down to the desk, then to the floor as quietly as possible, then pushed the window fully open for Ian.

Murray came through a second later, quick and silent as a ghost, landing in a soundless crouch that indeed reminded Tom of a Mohawk. Not that he ever saw one, but how he imagined them, at least.

He himself felt his palms begin to sweat. If anyone found them here, they would be in big trouble. They carefully exited the room, making sure there was no one in the hallway. The floor here was covered with heavy carpet here that swallowed the sound of their footsteps. It was quite a big house and Tom had no idea how they were going to find William without getting caught.

Tom was the one to open every door first, while Ian watched his back. Their strategy was that Tom could easily pass for a new servant Richardson brought with him, while Ian would be quite suspicious the moment he opened his mouth.

The next two rooms that opened from the hallway were empty. Tom stopped before the third one, carefully putting his ear to the wood. There was no conversation on the inside, but he did hear someone moving around. His heart leapt into his throat and he gulped it down. He put his hand on the doorknob and pushed slowly, words of hurried apologies already on the tip of his tongue.

They died when he saw the boy. He was finely dressed and had dark hair, but when he turned his head at the sound of the opening door Tom was met with the intense blue of his slanted eyes.

Initially, he was worried about how they were going to recognize a boy they've never met. They simply hoped there weren't multiple twelve-year-old boys of noble upbringing running around in the house. Now, however, his worry seemed unnecessary. Those were Fraser's eyes.

Tom waved Ian inside, who stepped in and quickly shut the door behind them. The boy looked suspicious. There was a book before him, and a quill in one hand. They probably disturbed him in some kind of lesson. He put down the quill and frowned at them.

"State your purpose," he said with dignity, quite at odds with his small frame. He was shorter than Tom.

Tom had practised it in his mind what he would say if they got caught, but not what if they succeeded in finding William. So he flashed out his friendliest smile. Luckily, Ian was more prepared.

"Yer William Ransom, right?"

The boy looked indignant.

"I am the Ninth Earl of Ellesmere, and you should refer to me as a Lord!"

To Tom's astonishment, Ian rolled his eyes.

"I am Ian Murray," he stated calmly, "and this is Tom Byrd. We've been sent by your father."

That surely gave William a pause. The only question was whether he would laugh at them saying his father was dead, or...

The boy jumped up from his chair, nearly upsetting the inkwell. Tom immediately held up his hands in a placating manner.

“Please, don’t scream. Just hear us out, okay?”

William looked both miserable and alarmed.

“Is it true?” he asked. “That the feared pirate, Red Jamie is my real father?”

Tom glanced at Ian, who looked back, and then both of them nodded, simultaneously.

“Yer the spitting image of him, lad,” Ian said, completely ignoring William’s earlier reprimand about his manners. “He’s my uncle, ken? So I should know.”

William’s eyes widened, and he took a step backwards as if he were suddenly afraid of them. His hands clenched into fists by his sides. Ian noticed it too.

“Hey, that means ye’re my kin too. I’d never do ye any harm!”

William’s hands unclenched. He looked between them, his eyes full with turbulent emotions. He didn’t very much look like a lord at this moment. He looked... utterly lost, Tom realized.

“They... the governor and Captain Richardson,” he said haltingly, “they told me that if I helped them catch him, no one needed to know.”

They all fell into silence. Tom felt as if an invisible fist squeezed his heart a little. That was cruel. And also...

“It’s probably a lie,” he said honestly, then winced and quickly added. “I’m sorry.”

Ian nodded too.

“Aye. Richardson only wants to hang yer father, but the person who told him in the first place wants to push you out of yer inheritance.”

The boy went quite red in the face hearing that.

“They can’t take it away!” he said indignantly. Quite loudly too. Tom winced and put a finger to his lips.

“Please lower your voice,” he said, pleading. Ian too glanced towards the door somewhat worried.

“No,” Ian said placatingly, then he took a deep breath, “but they can publicly shame ye, and whip up a scandal so that ye have no place in society any longer and they can tuck ye away somewhere.”

William’s previously red face paled at that, probably only realizing the enormity of the situation.

“And why should my *father* care?” he spat. “He’d never cared me so far!” His bottom lip trembled, but he defiantly held his chin up.

Ian shook his head, smiling sadly.

“He’d always cared for ye, but he knew he couldn’t claim ye as his own son. That it would be better for ye if no one knew. Now though, he feels like yer in danger and he wants to help.”

William narrowed his eyes. He looked like a blue-eyed kitten, small, but ready to strike. "But he's a pirate. A criminal," he said coldly.

It was a fair point, Tom thought. Ian took it in stride, though. He slowly walked closer and lowered his voice, looking William straight in the eye.

"I'll tell ye something. Something I'm sure they dinna tell ye. Before he was Red Jamie, he'd been Alexander Malcolm. A groom in Helwater."

This was new information for Tom as well, but it obviously didn't hold as much relevance to him as it did for William. The boy's eyes went round, and his mouth dropped open.

"Mac?" he asked, reverently.

Ian smiled and nodded.

"Aye. Give him a chance, lad. Let him explain."

Tom saw William's resolves begin to crumble. He himself felt conflicted. Captain Grey's note clearly showed that he wanted to prevent William from meeting Fraser. But could this be prevented at this point? Tom tried to direct the conversation towards more practical matters.

"Are you at liberty to leave the house? You did receive John Grey's letter, right?"

William looked at him.

"I received the letter. I do remember him too, you know? He was always very kind to me when he visited." His brows furrowed. "Who is he to you? Why is he patronizing pirates?"

"He's my captain," Tom stated quite proudly, earning a sharp look from Ian. Tom elbowed him into the ribs. Maybe it was the lack of tattoos and Mohawk hair, or simply the time spent together, but he quite lost all fear of the other. "He is," he repeated. "Got kidnapped with him by these fellows!"

Ian grabbed his arm and made a move as if to cover his mouth with his hand, but he was grinning. Tom stuck his tongue out, dodged and awkwardly scrambled away, brushing down his coat. Their playful scuffle earned them a giggle from William. His smile evaporated quickly though.

"I am not allowed to leave the house," he said. "They said it's not safe."

Ian nodded and stopped trying to wrestle with Tom. They have expected this.

"Tonight," Ian said. "After dinner, pretend to go to bed, but be ready. We'll come for you and get you out."

Tom too, nodded, seriously. He felt the note crinkling under his shirt, but he disregarded it. That decided it then. Even if he could pass the note on without Ian noticing – which he very much doubted – there was no help for it now.

He didn't doubt Grey would figure out another plan to get William away, but if he was honest with himself, he thought it was good that William got to meet his father at least once. He really had the right, after all.

Before they could even think about saying anything else though, there was a noise from the door. All three of them looked at each other, alarmed.

“That will be my teacher,” William hissed.

Ian jumped to the window, looked out then said something probably very rude in a language Tom didn’t speak. Tom ran there too and looked out. There were no vines. There *was* a tree. However, the closest branch was several feet away from the window.

Tom sent a calculating glance towards the bed. Could they hide underneath? Ian, as if reading his mind grabbed his arm, and pushed the window open. He crouched on the windowsill, then looked back at William.

“Be ready when we come,” he said urgently.

The door opened, and there was an elderly man in a powdered wig, whose eyes went round as saucers upon seeing them. Ian jumped, catching a branch and flinging himself up to it easily. He looked at Tom, gesturing urgently with his hand.

“Come on, mo charaid, just dinna look down.”

Tom, of course, instinctively looked down and felt quite sick at seeing the distance to the ground. He had been higher on the rigging before, but there were no bloody trees at least. The man shouted something, and Tom knew if he didn’t act he was going to be grabbed by the collar. William was still between them, looking quite fierce. If he heard correctly William was convincing his teacher that they were friends from town who sneaked in – a reasonable story, Tom hoped he would be able to sell, otherwise, they were all really screwed.

He pulled himself up to the windowsill, bent his knees, and then flung himself towards the branch. He managed to grab it, scraping his palms, but his aim wasn’t perfect. He slammed into the trunk of the tree with a thump and almost fell down, but Ian grabbed his wrist and hauled him up. Tom stayed still for a moment, just hanging off the branch like laundry folded over a clothesline. He saw the old man leaning out the window, shaking his fists towards them, and William behind him, worried expression on his face, but eyes alight with excitement.

Tom pulled himself together and scrambled after Ian, towards the ground, where Rollo already appeared – the dog always seemed to sense the perfect timing somehow – and the three of them started to jog towards the harbour.

“Jamie, you can’t go in there.”

“I can and I will, Sassenach.”

The two Fraser’s were staring each other down in the captain’s cabin.

“The house will be heavily guarded,” Claire argued. “Even more so if they managed to pry anything out of William.”

“And what do ye recommend, that I just sit and wait?” Fraser huffed, closely resembling a displeased bull. “Or be a coward and send someone else to get William?”

Claire spoke with careful calmness.

“While in town getting supplies, I’ve heard that the governor has an illness. I could pretend that I came because of that and get into the house without rousing suspicion.”

“I cannae let ye go alone, Sassenach. It’s one thing to get in, but ye would need to get out too, and with William.”

“I can go with her,” John interjected.

Both Frasers looked at him, startled. It seemed like they were quite used to arguing and clashing their wills against each other, without a third party interfering. Claire didn’t seem to mind the interruption though. Gleeful calculation flashed in her golden eyes.

“See? I won’t be alone.”

There was calculation in John’s mind too. If he went with Claire then maybe he could talk with the boy. It didn’t matter that John’s opinion of Jamie Fraser improved significantly over the last two weeks, William was a subject of the Crown and an Earl on top of that. John could not let a wanted criminal simply run away with him. That was not right, and John clutched his integrity with firm hands against the onslaught of emotions the Frasers brought up in him.

Jamie tilted his head, eyebrows softening even if his lips didn’t curl into a smile. He appreciated the swift counterattack but wasn’t conceding.

“He’s my son, Sassenach.”

John immediately realized that this trumped everything. For a man like Jamie Fraser, blood was more important than anything and Claire was not going to fight him on it. Damn it. Damn Jamie Fraser and his beautiful eyes. He quickly snuffed out that line of thought.

“But you and John could keep watch,” Fraser added, and John resigned himself to whatever fate awaited him...

They went well before midnight. If Tom and Ian’s visit alerted Richardson and the governor there was no point in waiting. There was however an element to the plan John hasn’t anticipated.

“Do what?” he hissed to Fraser. The man shot him an annoyed look.

“We’ll need horses to get away fast. Here,” he pulled out a pistol and handed it to Grey, “you two keep watch at the house and I’ll meet ye there with the horses.”

John tucked the pistol into his belt next to the sword he got earlier, now a comforting weight on his side. Interestingly, Claire too was likewise armed. At this point, John was not surprised that there was no way of convincing her to stay out of this. He has not seen her fight yet but didn’t doubt she could.

He was more surprised that only the three of them were the ones going on this little rescue mission. When he addressed this, Fraser shot him a flat look.

“These men, are not my soldiers, Johnny. They agreed to help me, but I’m already testing

their patience by being here. I'm not going to ask them to risk their lives for something that has no benefit to them, or I'll have a mutiny on my hand."

And so, it was only him and Claire Fraser behind the corner of the governor's house watching the entrance. There were still lights streaming out through most of the windows as it was around suppertime. John noticed that there were two guards at the door, but otherwise, everything had been calm.

The streets have not emptied out yet, groups of people were meandering from tavern to tavern, late workers were hurrying home, and so in order to blend in, and not to have an awkward silence between them John initiated a conversation.

"How did you come to be a doctor, if you don't mind me asking. It's quite... well, unusual for a woman."

Claire smiled at him at the use of the word "doctor". John noticed that she didn't like to be simply called a healer or even worse a conjure woman. She tended to go into lengthy explanations about how she performed life-saving amputations on multiple members of the crew and while she did work with herbs, that required a bone saw.

"I don't think it was ever a choice," she said. "I had a natural affinity for it and so I felt like it was my duty to help people."

John nodded. He heard that Claire often offered her service to the public when in port. "You are indeed very skilled at it," he said politely.

"You've barely seen anything," Claire brushed him off. John laughed quietly.

"With all due respect, I don't think I want to see more if not necessary."

She turned to him, golden eyes catching in the light of the street lamps.

"And you? Why did you decide to join the Navy of all things?"

John smiled wryly.

"I must confess a significant factor was to defy my elder brother," he said to Claire's amusement. "However, the freedom and the sense of adventure attracted me as well. It is a hard life, but perhaps also simpler than anything else." He trailed off, and then, he added, just because he could: "That, and I wanted to hunt pirates."

Claire laughed with a tinkling sound, and John would have been worried about attracting unwanted attention, but before any of them could say anything further on the topic, there was a muffled sound of a gunshot.

John's head snapped up, trying to determine where the sound had come from. It was the high-pitched scream that followed, that gave it away. It had come from the inside of the house.

The guards at the door turned back towards the sound too. John's first instinct was to launch himself towards the entrance, but Claire put a hand on his arm before he could move.

"We should wait for Jamie."

John shook her hand off. If William was in danger, John was *not* going to wait around for any *horse thieving pirate*. Before however, he could voice this thought in any way, the door of the house flung open, startling the guards who took a few cautionary steps backwards.

John had briefly met Ezekiel Richardson once, and he couldn't have picked him out of a crowd. He was still reasonably sure that the man standing in the doorway was him, owing to a number of facts.

The man wore the dark blue coat of the British Navy, not unlike the one John had discarded on the ship. He was also tightly clasping the arm of a very frightened-looking William Ransom with one hand. The other was holding a pistol. Luckily, not pointed at the boy. John calculated that if the shot was fired from that particular weapon then it must be empty. Would he put his life on this assumption? That depended...

He looked at William. The boy had tear stains on his face.

John huffed. *Yes*, he was reasonably sure Richardson's pistol was empty, and *no*, he was not going to wait around for Jamie *bloody* Fraser. Claire must have changed her mind on the matter too, because she grabbed the pistol in John's belt, and stepping out from behind the corner of the house, aimed at Richardson and fired.

The men ducked and John cursed. Anyone who called *him* impulsive has not met any Fraser yet. His annoyance subsided when Richardson yelped in pain, the bullet hitting him in the leg.

Richardson squinted in Claire's direction then his eyes widened.
"Arrest her in this instant!" he yelled. "And someone prepare the carriage!"

The two guards, recovered from the shock leapt towards Claire. She unsheathed her sword and looked ready to fight. John didn't doubt her abilities, but he still thought unlikely that she was able to defeat the two guards. Even if she did, there were no doubt another two that rushed out as back-up in no time, before Jamie Fraser could get here.

Where was the bloody man?

John heard a carriage rattling and bit his lip. His first instinct was not to leap to Claire's rescue.

He was still behind the corner, out of sight. He could round the house and go after Richardson and William. Moreover, if Claire Fraser would get arrested, Jamie Fraser would be preoccupied with rescuing her. This would allow John the time and freedom to pursue a course of action that would guarantee William's safety. It wasn't in his interest to save Claire Fraser from being arrested.

The first sound of clashing steel and Claire's grunt, however, twisted something in his stomach. If Jamie couldn't get to her in time, would she be hanged? It wasn't common practice to hang women for piracy, but it wasn't entirely unheard of. Richardson could certainly make sure of this sentence.

John gritted his teeth. Why did he have to *like* the woman?

“Damn it all to hell,” he muttered, unsheathed his sword and flung himself around the corner.

Together they were able to match the guards. Claire was quick and fought viscusly. For two people who never fought alongside each other, they fell into a pattern easily of covering each other’s backs, and when as John predicted more guards were sent on them, they only resumed fighting with renewed vigour.

Just as John began to feel his arms strain, he heard the sounds of hooves. He looked up and saw Jamie Fraser gallop onto the square on a black mare, holding the reins of a second horse. Claire looked up too, and almost got cut, but John thrust his sword out with good instinct to prevent the attack.

The appearance of both horses and a recognizable pirate captain caused a reasonable amount of confusion, and some of the men run back into the house. Jamie rode closer, throwing the reins to John, who caught it and flung himself up into the saddle.

Jamie threw himself onto the last two men remaining. It was obvious he didn’t need any help on that front. At the same time, the constable was probably alerted by now, so they had to get away quickly. It was pure instinct for John to bend down and offer his hand to Claire. He freed up the stirrup for her and pulled her up to sit in front of him in the saddle.

Jamie nodded and took off, and John urged their horse to follow.

When they reached the docks, Claire hopped down easily and tied the horse next to Jamie’s. John slid down from the saddle too, blood still thrumming through his veins. He ran a hand through his hair, sweaty and dishevelled from both fighting and riding. He leaned into the side of the horse for a moment, catching his breath.

And just what in the bloody hell were they going to do now?

Before he could lament on all the possible dire scenarios, Claire turned towards him. Her gaze was piercing as she stepped up to him. She was only a little bit shorter than John, quite remarkably for a woman, so she was able to look easily into his eyes. She surprised John by laying a hand on his face.

“Thank you, John,” she said with sincere warmth in her voice and before John could say anything, she softly kissed him on the mouth.

It only lasted for a second. She smelled like green things and fresh sweat, which John found a lot more pleasant than the heavy perfumes every other woman he ever got this close to wore. A respectable distance remained between their bodies, but her curls brushed against his face. When she pulled back John’s eyes immediately snapped to Jamie standing beside them.

Christ, was he going to get murdered *now*? Surely Fraser could see that he wasn’t the one initiating the kiss?

By the time these thoughts flickered across his mind however, he could see that Jamie Fraser was smiling. It was one of his genuine smiles that warmed John through from his fingertips

to his toes. Was this perhaps an acceptable practice where they came from? Or were they just both drunk from fighting?

Jamie walked closer, crowding John against the horse.

“I thank you too, for taking care of my wife.” There was sincere gratitude in his voice, but his blue eyes were twinkling playfully. He put one large hand on John’s shoulder, rooting him to the spot, then stooped and bent closer, and closer still, until his lips landed on John’s.

This kiss was similarly brief, Fraser’s lips soft against his, in contrast with his beard, but if John felt warm before, now he felt like being lit on fire. He blinked at the other man, quite dazed. Jamie’s smile broadened seeing the expression on his face. He patted his shoulder before stepping away too, the absolute *bastard*, John thought with astonished fondness.

He swallowed and licked his lips, this sending another burst of heat blossoming in his cheeks. He was confused, wound up, tired, and had so many questions. But they didn’t have time for any of that. So, he simply croaked out awkwardly, “It was my pleasure.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

A rescue mission with mixed results.

John tried his best to get those two kisses out of his mind as the three of them rushed back to the ship. They were not being pursued, but Richardson was aware that they were in the city, which only left them until the morning to plot what to do. The crew seemed to let out a collective sigh of relief upon their return. Just like Fraser said, most of them didn't particularly care about the nature of their errand in Boston, simply followed their captain out of loyalty, and they were getting restless, itching to go back to the account.

Fergus, however, instantly noticed that they were without William. "What happened, Milord?" he asked as soon as John's boots hit the deck and Fergus realized John was the last of the arriving group.

John watched as Fraser recounted their evening. He found himself staring at the man's lips as he talked. The feel of Jamie Fraser's soft, wide mouth and the rasp of his rusty beard had the potential to haunt him for the rest of his life. He imagined what it would have been like to deepen that kiss, to slide his fingers through the salt-crusted red mane and to push his tongue — He cut that thought down quickly.

He didn't have the luxury to think about this now. It was downright suicidal.

When he refocused to the present moment, Fraser was explaining to Fergus that he wanted him to take the ship out of Boston, and wait for them in a nearby, secure bay. Fergus' eyes widened slightly, but he kept the rest of his face serious. He hadn't managed the ship alone yet on open seas, without Fraser on board. Their usual trick of Fergus playing the captain was only for appearance's sake.

"And you, Milord?" Fergus asked.

"I'll stay," Fraser answered. "We'll stay," he corrected. His gaze first went to Claire, quick understanding flashing between them. Then, he looked at Grey, blue eyes burning in their intensity. There was a question in that gaze, and John found himself nodding firmly. Of course, he would stay, he promised he would help them rescue William, and he had every intention of keeping that promise.

It was another matter altogether that in his current state of mind he would have followed the flame-haired menace wherever he pleased. Claire smiled warmly at him and John suddenly remembered the feel of her hair on his face and the surprising realization that he wouldn't have minded kissing her again. He didn't usually have this urge when it came to women and

didn't want to lament on that too much, so he nodded once more and turned towards Tom Byrd, who was perching on a barrel at his side, following the conversation anxiously.

"I want you to stay on the ship," he told the young man, lowering his voice. Tom, who had Rollo laying halfway across his feet scrunched up his nose.

"Surely, you don't expect me to leave you behind, me lord?" the young man asked indignantly.

While never outright defying his orders, Tom always had a way of letting him know when he didn't agree with him and it seemed like the exposure to piracy only strengthened these tendencies. Since John was quite fond of Byrd he chose the voice of reason rather than the voice of authority.

"No one knows how things will go. I can't promise to provide you with the protection I should as your superior officer here. You should stay on the ship, and if things go wrong you can still say they kept you against your will."

Tom scoffed.

"Not a chance, me lord. I won't save my own skin while you're tangling yourself up with who knows what kind of trouble."

Before John could answer he heard a thump as Ian Murray jumped down from the rigging. The young man's gaze flickered towards them, but then he fixed his eyes on Fraser.

"I want to stay with you as well, Uncle," he said, pulling himself up to his full height.

John saw Fraser's urge to argue, but then he didn't. Perhaps he didn't want to hurt the pride of his nephew or after last night he realized three people might not be enough for this operation. Whatever he thought, he nodded.

"The rest of you," he said, raising his voice, "I want you to be out of here before sunrise."

John sighed. He looked at Murray, then at Tom, then at the dog.

"Well, if he is staying, the beast is staying too, and I think that dog will eat anyone who tries to hurt you," he said to Tom.

Rollo cocked his ears like he knew John was talking about him. John also privately thought that anyone with such aspirations might find themselves on the wrong end of Ian Murray's sword as well, but he didn't say that out loud. Tom beamed at him and scratched at the dog's head.

It was almost dawn when the five of them went back to shore and sneaked into a stable to sleep for a few hours. When John woke up, and went outside, he felt the wind pick up and he could just make out the La Dame Blanche slipping out of the harbour with the rising tide on the slowly lightening horizon.

In the morning, Claire ventured out and came back with a few freshly baked buns and some bad news. She pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket and it had a rough sketch on it, that

suspiciously resembled the face of Jamie Fraser.

“The governor is dead,” she said. “I think Richardson shot him, but Jamie is the one wanted for it.”

John remembered the shot they’ve heard the previous night. It made all too much sense.

“Damn.”

It took them most of the day to figure out where Richardson has taken William. It was Tom and Ian who snooped around in the harbour and overheard two of Richardson’s men complain about “the boy” being a nuisance on deck.

Around sunset, John and Jamie secured a small boat to row out to Richardson’s ship. They were united in their opinion that the two young men should absolutely not come in with them, but stay with Claire and do exactly as she told them. Fraser checked his pistols one last time before picking up the oars. John turned towards the water and that was when he glimpsed a familiar silhouette against the red and orange sky.

He felt Fraser’s curious gaze on him as he took the man’s telescope and peered into it. His eyes didn’t trick him, it was the Sapphire and the Minerva anchored beside her. So they made it successfully. His first emotion was simple relief, mixed with some pride on behalf of his crew. Weren’t they still his in some way?

Fraser took back the telescope and followed the direction of his gaze. John felt a pang in his chest, another, stronger emotion. Seeing the two ships, the reason why he set sails towards Boston, was an abrupt reminder of his duties and obligations. It was a reminder that no matter how fond he has grown of the Frasers – and he did -, he didn’t belong with them.

Jamie lowered the telescope and met his eyes. He didn’t acknowledge any of that, just chuckled.

“Took them long enough,” he said, offering up their usual joke about the Minerva’s speed.

John smiled back, but it felt strange, forced. If everything went well, he could be back with his crew tomorrow, selling the story of his adventure while carefully omitting a couple of details. He wondered why it didn’t feel like nearing the end of a trying ordeal, but like a journey cut short. It felt like being taken away something that was promised to him, before he could possess it, and he tried to ignore the tightness in his chest as Fraser picked up the oars once more and started rowing towards Richardson’s ship with purpose.

There was enough traffic on the water that their small boat didn’t look suspicious nearing the ship. Jamie considered swimming at first, but they were better off with having their pistols, and besides, the water was cold. He didn’t want to get William out of there only to have him catch a cold.

There weren’t many men aboard the ship, but their boat, of course, couldn’t go completely unnoticed. Jamie had his hair stuffed under a cap again as a disguise. Not for the first time, Jamie thought about just shaving his hair, it was always the first thing people remembered

about him, but he had always been too vain for that. Even if he was wanted all over the city for a crime he hadn't committed.

He was going to wring that bastard Richardson's neck with his own bare hands.

John started whistling a tune, the perfect picture of innocence. Then, after a while started singing. Jamie was pretty sure he made the song up as he went, but it featured the name William quite frequently as they idly circled the ship. Jamie thought it was a stupid idea, and he was preparing to say so when John suddenly stopped.

"What—" he started, but John shushed him.

He could hear it now, a muffled thump from the inside of the ship's hull, then a quiet whimper. They looked at each other, John somewhat smug, Jamie quite impressed himself, then started moving at the same time. There was a rope hanging down on the side of the ship, and Jamie navigated them closer so that John could reach it. John tied the boat off securely, then not waiting for Jamie, he began to climb. Even under such circumstances, there was a brief moment where Jamie appreciated the man's figure. The long thighs and the perfect curve of his buttocks in his breaches... He averted his eyes and cleared his throat.

When John reached the opening on the side of the ship, Jamie began climbing up after him. It was quiet in the hold, and the only man they came across Jamie managed to hit in the head equally quietly. It was strange how attuned they were to each other. They moved towards the spot where they suspected William was held, without having to say a word to each other.

It was a small cabin, locked from the outside. The door, however, didn't stand a chance against Jamie's shoulder and his concern for the well-being of his son, and before anyone else noticed, they were inside.

Jamie's eyes instantly went to the figure huddled on the floor even in the little light that seeped in from outside. William was sitting between a few wooden crates, hands and feet bound, and had a dirty cloth crammed into his mouth. His eyes glinted in a panicked way, and his cheeks were stained with tears. Jamie was there in a heartbeat, murmuring soothingly in Gaelic while starting to cut the ropes.

His senses were still heightened, listening for the smallest of sounds indicating danger. He could feel John hovering behind. When he glanced over his shoulder he saw the man pulling the door mostly closed, leaving a small gap to watch if anyone was coming, pistol ready in his right hand. Sudden gratitude filled Jamie's chest. John Grey was a capable man with his heart in the right place. Someone Jamie could trust with watching his back despite all their differences.

He turned back to William and carefully untied the cloth in his mouth. The boy worked his jaw, staring at him with eyes that were familiar to him from the mirror.

"Mac?"

His cracked voice broke something between Jamie's ribs and hot fury started to ooze out again aimed at Richardson. He tried to smile.

"Aye, 'tis me, Willie."

He reached out to help the boy up, but William suddenly flinched back.

“But you’re not just that, are you?” he asked, accusation clear in his eyes. Jamie dropped his hand that was hovering between them in the air.

“No,” he admitted, “but—“ this really wasn’t the right time to have this conversation. He didn’t get to say that.

“You never told me,” William cut him off, scooting further back. Jamie wasn’t used to being talked over, but his son’s voice was full of anguish. “You would have never told me!”

Jamie ran a hand down his face.

“I’m sorry, lad,” he said, hurried, but honest. “I’ll tell you everything you want to know, but we need to get you out of here.”

William’s blue eyes narrowed.

“You left!” his voice was an angry hiss and louder than Jamie would have liked in their current situation. John sent a concerned glance towards them.

“I couldn’t give you the life that you deserve!” Jamie said, exasperated. William opened his mouth, but before either of them could say anything, John stepped forward. He pushed the pistol into back into his belt and put a hand on Jamie’s shoulder.

“Please, we don’t have time for this.”

He reached his other hand out towards William.

“You remember me?” he asked. The boy nodded. “Come on then, we can’t be seen here.”

Whether it was the calm confidence in his voice or the fact that William remembered and trusted him, the young man let John pull him up to his feet. It irked Jamie, of course, it did, but right now it was more important to get off the ship.

They did, just like they came. John climbed down first, keeping the rope and the boat as steady as possible for William, who followed clumsily. Jamie was the last one, rocking the boat as he arrived. He didn’t waste time picking up the oars and he pushed them away from the ship as soon as John untied them. He rowed towards the shore as fast as he could while John scanned their surroundings, with his pistol once more in hand, William huddled between them.

All things considered, it went surprisingly well.

It was too easy.

That was the thought that rattled around in John’s head as they got off of the boat and headed towards the agreed meeting place with Claire and the two young men.

Of course, it was too easy. Nothing in John’s life was ever so easy.

“Captain!”

For a split second he couldn't place the voice, nor the address. He turned nonetheless, just like he did countless times on deck, on instinct alone that was probably steeped into his bones at this point. Then, he found himself face to face with Lieutenant Newman, who had a sort of bright expression on his face, a mixture of alarm, joy and eagerness.

He also wasn't alone. He was followed by a handful of the men from the Sapphire, all alert, and properly armed. John cleared his throat awkwardly. There was no protocol for how to address your second in command after you have been kidnapped by pirates, when he finds you unscathed, calmly walking down the street, seemingly minding your own business beside a pirate.

Oh shit.

Newman's gaze flickered over John's shoulder and the damage was done. Maybe Jamie Fraser didn't resemble the sketches plastered all over the walls in the city with his hair tucked away, but Newman did see him from up close and wouldn't be inclined to forget that face soon.

"It's that pirate!" he bellowed a second later, grabbing for his sword and the men didn't waste any time to surround them. Under other circumstances, John would have been proud. Now, he just began to sweat, gears slowly turning in his head to figure out how not to get anyone killed.

"He's the one who attacked us and now killed the governor!"

There were a few heartbeats where, instead of starting throwing punches, Jamie Fraser looked at John. He could feel the man weighing what was between them against what he was up against. These were John's men, and that meant something to Fraser now. Perhaps because John himself meant something to him now. Enough, at least, not to outright shoot any of these men.

Those few seconds of hesitation were enough for the men to get hold of him and twist his hands behind his back. He was strong but overpowered. John could see his muscles tensing, but then he stopped struggling, blue eyes boring into John's with an intensity that could have been easily mistaken for murderous intent. John knew it wasn't that.

He grabbed William's arm and pulled the boy away from Fraser. Newman was looking at him expectantly. A second ago he was perfectly content to be in command, but now John could see he was ready to get rid of the burden.

"Should we get him to the constable?" he asked John, scanning his face. John wasn't sure what he could see there, but he lowered his voice. "Did he threaten you...?"

John didn't like the tone or the question or the implication. It wasn't the right thing to ask, but Newman offered him the only acceptable explanation on a silver platter. They didn't find him trashing, or bloody and unconscious, trying to fight the pirate tooth and nail risking his own life. They found him calmly walking beside the man. Even the fact that Newman had to prompt him to offer an explanation was incriminating enough.

John took a deep breath and forced himself to look the man into the eyes. Then, he nodded. "This is William Ransom," he said, keeping a firm hold on the arm of the young man. "He's

the Ninth Earl of Ellesmere and the son of my friend back in England. Fraser said he would kill him if I didn't help him get away."

William twitched, and John squeezed his arm to a point that was probably painful, willing him not to say anything. Newman's face hardened.

"We'll bring this man to justice."

John took the only opportunity left for him.

"Thank you. I'll bring William back to the ship, and join you shortly."

Newman probably managed to push away any niggling suspicions by now, because he only nodded. John risked a glance towards Fraser again. Jamie, he corrected himself. Then, they were pulling him away, leaving John and William standing in the middle of the road.

His mind was whirling.

This was the chance he was waiting for since the day he met the man. He could get William back to the Sapphire, then go back and incriminate Richardson. He ensured William's safety and now Fraser and Richardson could both rot next to each other for all that he cared. Right?

Except, there was this cold dread at the pit of his stomach. It was ridiculous. Jamie Fraser was a notorious criminal. Even if they erased all charges related to their current situation, the list would be still long enough to warrant his hanging three times. John promised him that he wouldn't be the cause of his execution, but that didn't include saving the bastard from the gallows. When he said that, he thought that perhaps he would simply turn a blind eye if ever encountering the La Dame Blanche again on open seas back in his official capacity.

John told himself not to get swayed by whatever stupid emotions those kisses had stirred in him, but it was of no use. He could simply not live with the knowledge that he let them hang Jamie Fraser.

He looked down at William who kept throwing anxious glances in the direction where they took Fraser. John could understand it very well. For all the things he spat into the man's face he was probably terrified by the possibility that they would take his father away before he had the chance of getting to know him better.

He sighed, and bent down slightly, grabbing William's shoulders and looking into his eyes. "Remember Byrd and Murray, the two rascals who broke into your room?" William chewed his lips nervously but nodded. "They are waiting in the inn down the street with a woman, who is Fraser's wife. Run, and tell them what happened. Also, tell them that I'm going to get your father out of there."

They locked him into a cell, and Jamie didn't put up much resistance. There was no point to do so now. Maybe out on a street he could have gotten away, but even he couldn't fight off a dozen prepared men. On top of that, they were John's men, which also meant he didn't really want to kill any of them. They weren't unnecessarily brutal with him either, even after Grey was out of sight.

After they locked him in, they left and Jamie was finally alone. He hit fist against the wall with a grunt. He had been so close. So damned close. Willie's face flashed across his mind's eye. At least he was safe. John wouldn't let Richardson or anyone else get his hands on him, Jamie was sure of that.

Maybe it was better this way. William was angry at him. Foolishly Jamie always expected that his son would receive him with the same enthusiasm he showed towards "Mac", his beloved groom. But a favourite groom who served as a father-figure wasn't the same as a real father, who posed as a groom, then left and turned to piracy. Jamie sat down on the narrow bench and sighed heavily.

He always knew he had no real place in William's life. He just hoped they would have a little time together before he had to return the boy to his real life as an earl. Time to get to know him better and make memories he could treasure just like the ones he carried in his heart from Helwater.

Then there was John.

It was all too easy to forget that they were on opposite sides of the law. That he, unlike Jamie wasn't in this willingly. Jamie thought the man was warming up to him, that there was real trust forming between them. Sometimes he even thought there was more. But now, he thought John was probably relieved that he could go back to how things were.

This is how far he got with his thoughts when he heard voices down the hallway. He recognized one of them as John's and his heart gave a confused little thump in his chest.

He heard keys rattling to the rhythm of footsteps and then there was John Grey standing outside of his cell. Jamie looked up, caught somewhat off-guard and they locked eyes for a long second. John's face was impassive, unreadable, but his facade broke when he sent an anxious glance behind himself.

"Mr. Fraser," he said on a raised voice, with a cold politeness Jamie hasn't found himself on the receiving end of so far. "I wanted to speak with you, as equals this time."

John slid a key into the lock with a smooth motion and unlocked the door. He stepped inside and lightly pulled the door closed. What he did not do was lock it back and Jamie searched his face with a sudden flare of hope. John noticed, and finally, a barely-there smile appeared on his lips. He came closer and lowered his voice.

"I told them, that you didn't kill the governor. Now the constable is rounding up the servants from the governor to question them. This should give us some time to get you out of here."

"What about William?" Jamie asked because while he was grateful for John's help that was more important to him than his own safety. If John took the boy back to the Sapphire, Jamie wasn't sure they would have the same luck as previously sneaking on board. It was also a bloody warship.

"I've sent him back to Claire," John answered calmly as if this was the only natural decision he could make and Jamie could have kissed him right then and there.

Jamie stood up, and moved carefully towards the door, then stopped when he saw John hesitating.

“What?”

“I should stay,” John said softly. “Keep them occupied.”

Jamie stepped back and grabbed his shoulder, stooping so that he could look the man straight in the eyes.

“Are you mad, Johnny?” John made a small sound at the name, but Jamie couldn’t tell if it was supposed to be indignation or nervous laughter, because the man clamped his mouth shut to stop it. “If they learn that you helped me get away, they will lock you up.”

He saw John hesitating and pushed on.

“Come with me. We’ll figure this out together.”

John took a deep breath, then finally gave him a nod. They slipped out of the cell together and were already in the back alley when Jamie realized, he kept one hand on the man’s forearm the whole way. He released his hold, and his fingers brushed against John’s wrist as he pulled away. To his surprise, John grabbed his hand and squeezed briefly.

They smiled at each other and there was a warm feeling swelling in Jamie’s chest.

That was when they heard the footsteps running towards them.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

In which the two men get captured, then rescued, alcohol is consumed and a wager is made.

Fills my square "The time they got really drunk" for the Outlander Bingo 2020.

Chapter Notes

Last chance to review the ratings and tags and interpret them properly. I'm not offering any refunds for the time you spend reading something you might not like.

Claire Fraser was used to unforeseen circumstances. It was just the nature of life in her humble experience. Yet when William Ransom entered the tavern where they had been waiting with Tom and Ian she needed a moment until she could accept that the boy arrived alone, without her husband or John Grey.

William had dirt on his face and clothes and looked extremely distressed. Even in this state, there was no mistaking those slanted blue eyes. Claire, of course, had only seen the boy once, when Richardson dragged him out of the governor's house and John's alarm clearly identified him, but she thought she would have been able to pick him out of a crowd easily because of those eyes.

Claire stood up to draw his attention to herself and it made Ian and Tom notice the boy as well. They immediately pulled him to their table and pushed a mug of ale in his hand. William seemed distrustful at first, but after some soft encouragement from Claire and enthusiastic concern from the two young men, he started talking. He haltingly explained what happened, tripping multiple times over how to address Jamie.

"Of course, the bloody man would go and get himself arrested!" Claire swore and two sets of eyes turned to her in shock at her tone. Ian was long used to her attitude but both Tom and William looked at her as if she lost her mind.

"Lord John said that he would get him back," William added carefully.

That pleasantly surprised her. For a moment she was so preoccupied with the fact that her husband was currently trying to get himself killed – again – that she didn't spare any thoughts for John Grey. She simply assumed the man was halfway across the city by now abandoning

the sinking ship he wasn't the captain of, so to speak. Apparently, she underestimated him. Or perhaps Jamie's personal interest towards him wasn't one-sided after all.

Jamie cared for the man, Claire knew that. At first, kidnapping him had been a necessary part of the plan, but there was something to John Grey neither of them took into consideration. He was devoted to his duty and untrusting of pirates and outlaws, but at the same time, he was willing to see reason and more than happy to go with the adventure. He was also undoubtedly attractive and Claire saw him clearly pique Jamie's interest.

It was still something of a novelty for her to see Jamie *look* at men. Something that wasn't there before in their previous life. Back then, Jamie didn't much look at anyone else other than her and Claire thought she should miss it more than she did. She shouldn't find it so entertaining to watch his husband stare at the handsome Naval officer with wonder and then blush under his beard when their eyes would meet.

But after all, they've been through and after staring down the debilitating possibility for years that she might never see Jamie again, she wanted him to have every bit of joy in his life he could get. Even if that meant exploring his attraction to someone that wasn't her. Especially if it meant that he could freely embrace something that filled him with guilt and shame in the past.

It was even more than that. It wasn't just someone or even just a man, it was John Grey, strong-willed and kind-hearted man who risked his own skin to rescue Jamie's son and who was currently doing the same with the father despite him being a pirate.

Claire could already see all the places John fit into their lives. It wasn't like something was missing before, yet with John there it seemed obvious that all those overlooked empty spaces that didn't really bother them before were perfect to accommodate him. She could almost feel him reaching out to slot himself into their lives before catching himself and pulling back.

Perhaps, she was ahead of herself, but that was just how her mind worked, always planning for possibilities of injury or illness. And while in terms of bodily health prevention was always important, she also learned that it wasn't worth preventing good things, just because they lead to bad ones. Or the other way around.

If she could, she would have spared herself and Jamie the separation and the suffering that lay between their previous life and this one, but if she was honest with herself, she would have gone mad settling down in a small superstitious village in the countryside. To think that she would have never gotten to know the interesting people in their crew or learn how to gut someone with a sword? She would have been bored out of his mind and perhaps actually would have started dabbling in poisons like everyone thought she did.

She hoped they would be able to leave the account behind eventually and carve out a safe haven for themselves, but this kind of stability had always been more Jamie's dream than hers. And as for Jamie, to think that if not for the necessity, they would have never found treatment for his debilitating seasickness and he would have never felt the salty air of the open sea on his face or sail across the ocean to a new land? It would have been cruel to take that all away even if Claire *were* a witch who could change the course of their life with an appropriate incantation.

So, she wasn't worried that the two men growing closer would take something away from her. What she was more worried about was the gaping and obvious emptiness John would eventually leave behind. But even if John Grey ended up breaking Jamie's heart and left a void of unborn possibilities after him, she wanted Jamie to explore freely what lay in between.

Provided, of course, that none of them idiotic men would get himself hanged in the meantime. She finished her drink and threw a few coins onto the table. Then, she snapped her fingers.

"Come on, young men. Let's get them out of trouble, because I'm not convinced, they will manage on their own."

That annoying little idiot was convinced that either Johnny was mentally derailed, or that Jamie blackmailed him with something else, he wasn't willing to share. It was entertaining for half an hour, but the man kept pestering John, even while he locked them both up in the cell this time. John endured the attention with a tight, polite smile, sitting on the dirty bench with a straight spine, but wasn't offering any explanation as to why his men found him in the back alley, freeing the very same criminal he let them arrest half an hour before.

"We can work something out, but you have to give us something," Newman practically pleaded John through the bars.

"It's quite alright. You do what you have to do," John replied calmly.

The man took another breath and opened his mouth, but Jamie had enough.
"Give the man some peace, will ye?"

Newman glared daggers at him. He walked a few steps over so that he could stop right in front of Jamie, who was casually leaning against the back wall, arms crossed in front of his chest.

"I don't know what you did, Fraser, how you corrupted a good man, but you will soon hang for this and for your many other crimes."

He pointed an accusatory finger at him through the bars and Jamie had to suppress the urge to snap his teeth at him. Wasn't there some truth in his words though? If it weren't for him, John wouldn't be in this mess. He swallowed, feeling a hollow pang at the pit of his stomach. The last thing he wanted is to endanger him. He turned his head to the side and found John watching him with the same composed expression. His eyes were crystal clear, crinkling at the edges and even now there was hidden mirth in them.

He could have chosen to save himself, and he didn't. He came back for Jamie willingly. Jamie's chest filled with warmth at the thought. He promised to himself that if they got out of here alive, he would thank him properly. He would tell him how he felt. No more careful skirting around the uncomfortable feelings.

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of yet another man in naval uniform. His face was well-known to Jamie, unremarkable as it was, except for the small mole on his chin. Captain Ezekiel Richardson. The man walked in like he owned the place and stopped next to Newman fixing his dull grey eyes on Jamie.

“Where is the boy, Fraser?”

Jamie uncrossed his arms, drawing himself up to his full height.

“Ye mean my son, whom ye kidnapped?” he asked with a sneer.

Richardson gave him a smug smile, leaning forward.

“I wouldn’t flaunt that if I were you, Fraser. Might hurt William’s reputation.”

Jamie gritted his teeth. Just his son’s name from Richardson’s mouth was like a knife twisting in his gut.

“Don’t act like it isna yer exact goal you bastard.”

Richardson rocked back to his heel.

“On the contrary,” he said lightly. “I really don’t care whether the truth about William Ransom’s parentage comes to light in England or not. I just care about bringing you to justice, Fraser.” Jamie barely refrained from rolling his eyes. “How about, if you tell me where the boy is, I won’t make your last days a living hell?”

Jamie snorted derisively. He was not afraid of suffering or of a painful death, besides while Richardson may have told the truth about not caring for William’s reputation, his ally, Williams definitely did. He needed William publicly shamed and ostracized in order to keep Helwater as his.

“Ye’re worrit that yer benefactor willna protect ye from the consequences of yer actions if ye dinna deliver yer end of the bargain?”

Richardson narrowed his eyes.

“I’m warning you, Fraser. I have no idea what you’re talking about, but if you don’t—“

“I’m talking about ye killing the governor because he dinna agree with yer methods,” Jamie cut him off.

Richardson flushed, and the other men from the Sapphire overhearing the conversation looked distinctly uncomfortable. Newman saved the situation diplomatically.

“Don’t worry, sir, I believe, William Ransom is safe on board of the Sapphire where this man cannot get his dirty hands on him again.”

Richardson didn’t seem happy with that answer, but he couldn’t argue in front of the other men, so with a last murderous glance towards Jamie, he left the room. Jamie suspected that he would be back later with fewer witnesses there, to resume the conversation.

“How much time do ye think until they figure out William is not on the Sapphire?” he asked John when they were left alone. “There is no chance they could have somehow taken him

back there?" he added on second thought.

John shook his head. The sun had set by then and the only light came from a torch outside of their cell. Jamie could barely make out John's expression, but he looked as tired as Jamie himself felt. Perhaps he was confronting the possibility for the first time what would happen if they couldn't get out of there.

"No. But they will find it out sooner rather than later, I'm afraid. Hopefully, Claire has taken William to safety by now."

It was Jamie's turn to shake his head.

"If ye think she'll leave the city while I'm in this cell, ye don't know him enough, Johnny. Despite the considerable attention ye've paid her," he added with a suggestive tone aiming to lighten John's mood. John flushed and Jamie laughed quietly.

Perhaps John still thought it would bother Jamie. It wasn't as if Claire didn't look back though. John was a very handsome man and Jamie was terrible at denying the woman he loved the things she wanted. He added to his previous promise that should they get out of there alive he would not only speak of his own feelings to John but point out to him both opportunities on the table.

There were suddenly voices from the front of the building. The sounds of struggle, muffled thumps and then... a dog growling? Jamie stood up abruptly, and John followed suit. Could it be...?

A group of people appeared on the corridor, moving towards them quickly. Jamie could have recognised the first figure anywhere even in the swaying light of the torch she carried. "Claire?" she asked in a disbelieving whisper.

It was her, but she wasn't alone. Next came Ian, who dragged a man with him. It was Richardson, Jamie realized with a flash of excitement. His hands were tied behind his back and there was a dirty cloth crammed into his mouth. His face was red and he seemed furious, but whenever he tried to stop, Tom Byrd who came after them prodded him in the arse with a pistol. Rollo was trotting next to him, occasionally nipping at Richardson's heels. There was one more figure at the end of the company, shorter than the rest of them who hurried forward heavy keys jingling in his hands.

"William?"

For a moment Jamie thought the tentative question came from him, but his throat was still closed up with emotions. No, it had come from John standing closely next to him. William smiled shyly at him and then at Jamie. Claire took the keys from him and then after a few tries quickly unlocked the door.

"Come on, we need to hurry."

Jamie knew that, but he still bent down and snatched a kiss from her.

"Thank ye, my brave Sassenach."

After they were out, Ian pushed Richardson into the cell, and Claire locked the door behind him.

“’Tis will make it easier to arrest him in the morning,” Ian said with satisfaction.

On their way out of the building, Jamie saw the two guards lying unconscious on the floor and he couldn’t help feeling a small sense of pride at their rescue company.

Once out he checked once more that everyone was there and then they hurried out of Boston under the cloak of night, towards freedom.

The bay where the crew was waiting for them was about three days travel on foot so John had plenty of time to think about what he had done. He, an officer in His Majesty’s Navy escaped with a wanted criminal. Technically, two. He was pretty sure Claire Fraser was wanted at this point as well.

It didn’t stop him feeling practically giddy with freedom. The choice he made went against all of the instincts drilled into him during his career, but acting according to his duty, in this case, would have compromised his personal integrity as a gentleman. He could not take sides with Richardson on their occupation alone after the things the man had done. He would not give William over to the man, nor could he hand over Jamie Fraser.

They didn’t stop moving through the first night, aiming for putting as much distance between them and Boston as possible. They’ve slept a few hours at dawn, Claire, John and Jamie taking turns at keeping watch. John had a hard time sleeping and woke up after an indeterminate time to see William awake too, sitting beside Jamie, the two of them speaking quietly. He didn’t want to eavesdrop, so he turned to his other side and pulled his cloak up to his ears.

The next night, after stumbling through the day delirious with sleep deprivation, they finally found an abandoned stable where they could rest. They made their beds in the attic in the soft hay. William arranged himself with his back to the wall, while Jamie and Claire lay their cloaks closely together. John lay his own down beside them without hesitation. Ian chose a spot a little further away. Rollo was picky about the company and tended to growl at anyone who got too close to him. Fraser seemed to be an exception, the dog regarded him with wary respect. Tom was another exception whom both Rollo and Ian seemed to have a soft spot for. John was not surprised when the young man beelined towards that end of the attic and finally settled down facing Ian, using Rollo as a furry pillow.

John smiled and bundled himself tighter into his cloak and when in his squirming his back touched the warm, broad back of Jamie Fraser, he didn’t pull away. He fell asleep counting the slow, long breaths of the man, he could feel the rhythm of through the two layers of wool.

The next morning they’ve continued their journey in a much better mood. The air seemed to ease between father and son and Jamie was pointing out the tracks of different animals to William. The other two young men seemed to enjoy the free space of the countryside as well, waving through the bush after Rollo who was determined to explore everything.

When they've stopped for a quick meal Tom and Ian suspiciously disappeared for half an hour and when they came back both of them were flushed in the face and they were not looking at each other.

They've reached the secret bay that evening. As they have climbed through the small hill hiding the view to the water, John thought about what if the La Dame Blanche wasn't there. There could have been a number of complications coming up in three days. What if they didn't make it to the bay, or if they suddenly had to leave because of a patrolling coast guard?

But as they reached the top of the hill, he could already see the masts and after a few steps, the whole ship came into view, anchored alone in the deepest part of the bay. The feeling of rightness that hit him in the chest took him by surprise. When he first laid eyes on this ship, she was an enemy. Now, seeing her felt like coming home.

When they've got reunited with the crew, the men threw an impromptu celebration. They've built campfires on the beach to keep them warm and to cook the fish they caught in the bay. Jamie allowed for the opening of a barrel of rum, as a reward for their patience, which definitely helped to elevate the mood. Some younger crew members even jumped in the water and Jamie saw William join his nephew and Tom Byrd in the shallows. Jamie had the sudden urge to yell at the boy, not to catch a cold and he had to consciously restrain himself.

They've talked a lot on the way here, but there was still a tentative peace between them, Jamie didn't want to disrupt. Besides, what twelve-year-old boy would be happy if his father spoiled the fun? At least William seemed to have taken a liking to Tom and Ian. He stuck close to the two young men even as they've splashed and wrestled in the water. One could have thought they were trying to drown each other, but Jamie thought it was about something else and turned away, shaking his head with an exasperated smile.

He found Claire and sat down next to her, accepting a drink from one of the crew members. It felt good to catch up with his men, exchange stories and celebrate the success of this adventure. The fire crackled merrily, the food was good, and Claire was snuggled under his arm, laughing with their company.

Something one quickly learned in this kind of life was that there was always some kind of danger ahead. One was never permanently safe and therefore it was important to take some time and celebrate what victory one was able to seize. The rum definitely helped. It was strong even watered-down and Jamie felt his muscles beginning to relax.

He could see John nearby with another group of men, who took out their beat-up and probably out of tune instruments – not that Jamie could tell, of course – and were singing songs. Jamie was distracted for a moment by the sight of John laughing at something one of the men said.

Claire noticed, and bumped her shoulder against his arm.

“Are we going to do something about that handsome Englishman of yours, Jamie?” she asked, leaning close in a conspiring whisper. She was flushed from the drinks as well, and Jamie stroked her unruly curls out of her face.

“Well, if you would like to spend some time alone with Johnny, far be it from me to prevent you, Sassenach.”

Claire squinted at him, and perhaps both of them had a bit too much to drink because it seemed like she had a hard time focusing on Jamie’s face.

“I think your company might make him happier.”

Jamie raised an eyebrow and drained his cup.

“I saw him looking at yer arse.”

“So did I, looking at yours,” Claire retorted, and Jamie suddenly laughed, finding it funny that they were arguing about who appealed more to John Grey.

“Aye, that might be, but—” he broke off, pursing his lips. He didn’t want to spoke of that John told him in confidentiality, but what the man told him before contributed greatly to why he personally thought Claire would have more chance than him. That, however, was all too complicated to voice in his current state of inebriation.

“I don’t think he wants me,” he said instead.

Claire flapped her hands in an exaggerated manner.

“Did he—,” she hiccuped and tried again. “Did he tell you he doesn’t sleep with men?”

Jamie felt hot blood rush to his face.

“Of course he dinna say it like that, but—“

Claire broke him off.

“I think he very much wants to sleep with you. I’m even willing to bet on it. Are you?”

That surprised Jamie, but it was exactly the type of madness the two of them would do after a few glasses of rum. Neither of them was one to shy back from a challenge after all. He squinted down at his wife, trying and failing to suppress his smile. This could be fun.

“All right, Sassenach. Let’s talk terms.”

Claire slipped even closer, practically sliding into his lap. Her closeness and all that talk about John stirred his blood, and he had to subtly adjust himself in his trousers. Claire noticed and gave him a teasing smile, brushing her hip against the bulge.

“If I win,” she started, “and John wants to sleep with you, then...” she furrowed her brows, thinking, then settled on something with a delighted expression. “We buy a pound of honey at our next stop for wounds.”

That was characteristic for her. Last time they bought supplies, Jamie didn’t allow it. While he had no doubt in his wife’s healing methods it seemed too much of an extravagant expense at the time. He nodded.

“And if I win, and it is you who John wants to take to his bed, you’ll allow that barrel of whiskey you’ve been squirrelling away in your apothecary for your wee potions to be split into rations for the crew.”

Claire looked outraged, but these were well-matched terms. Jamie knew there was more alcohol Claire could use for medicine and didn’t quite understand while the good whiskey would be kept from drinking.

Claire cocked her head, looked over Jamie's shoulder at John, as if to assess him, then back at Jamie. Finally, she held out a hand, which would have seemed ridiculous in their positions had Jamie less alcohol in his veins.

"Fair enough, Captain, we have a deal."

They shook hands and Jamie pulled her into a slow and messy kiss.

"How should we settle this?" he asked when they pulled apart. In all truth, he would have been content to stay there, or maybe sneak away with Claire, but he was also curious. On top of that, he did promise himself to come clean about his feelings to John and he wasn't sure when there would be a better time to go through with it, than now, that his head was pleasantly buzzing from drink.

"I think you should go up to John and ask him."

"And if he says no, do you want him for tonight?" Jamie asked.

The idea of John sleeping with Claire shouldn't have set his blood on fire as much as it did. He blamed the alcohol. Claire smiled, slow and sensual.

"Perhaps. I think whoever loses this bet should get him as a consolation prize. So, go ahead, try your luck, and don't bother coming back if he says yes."

Between singing and talking, John managed to finish one cup of watered-down rum. It tasted quite terrible, but after the three days he had, any alcohol had been welcomed. It surprised him how easily the crew accepted him back, a few of them even clapped him friendly on the back and then quickly roped him into some singing. He kept half an eye on Tom – attached at the hip to Ian Murray – and William – following them around like an excited puppy – but otherwise, he allowed himself to relax and enjoy the evening.

He did not know what tomorrow would bring. Until now he had a vague plan – of rescuing William and he expected to cross Jamie Fraser in the process. But this plan had been turned to its head by his own crew no less. These men around the fire seemed to know and accept the unpredictable nature of life, like the tides, forever changing. You could learn to swim with it, or you could drown. John was no fool, who would lament too much on what-ifs or keep looking back when there was so much in front of him.

He was jolted out of his tipsy lamentations by the captain himself. Jamie Fraser put a large, warm hand on his shoulder, and loomed over him.

"D'ye have a moment, Johnny?"

John nodded, and set down his mug, then stood up and followed Jamie, who turned away from the campfire and started walking. There was a steep bit of rocky hill at the far side of the beach, shaded by a group of small trees, that seemed to be the destination Jamie had in mind. He was carrying an oil lamp to light the way in the dark. John noticed, he must have had quite a bit more to drink than he did, he had a hard time walking in a straight line. After a few minutes of walking, Jamie sat the lamp down onto a rock and turned towards John.

“I need ye to settle a wager for me.”

John raised an eyebrow. He was confused about why such privacy was needed for that.

“A wager?” he echoed. “What about?”

Jamie flashed a grin at him, loose and easy from alcohol. It punched John in the gut with how handsome the man was.

“About ye.”

That explained why Jamie led him away from the group but it also surprised him. Was the crew talking about him? Were they surprised that he came back? John didn’t feel any hostility, quite the opposite, actually but—

“Ye see, I think ye want to fuck my wife.” John choked on his own spit, mid-thought. Jamie continued easily, ignoring him. “But Claire thinks ye would rather have me.”

“I’m not sure—,” John croaked, “that is, it would be entirely improper of me to—”

Jamie waved him off, movements broad and wobbly.

“Dinna worry about that, man. Yer in no trouble, whatever ye say.” He sounded sincere. That, and more than slightly inebriated. That didn’t make John feel less flustered though. Jamie ducked his head, then stepped closer. Suddenly he looked almost shy, which was a strange look on a man of his size.

“In fact,” he said slowly, “either of us would gladly have ye if that is something ye’d want.”

John’s heart jumped into his throat. Was Jamie saying what he thought he was saying? He imagined the man’s naked skin pressed against his own, or feeling his muscles underneath his palm. Suddenly, the night’s air felt much warmer. Still, he was used to being extremely cautious and he had to be sure of what was on offer here.

“And what if I would be equally attracted to both halves of your lovely couple?” he asked.

Jamie furrowed his ruddy brows in confusion.

“Damn. We dinna consider that.” He frowned. “I assume that would make it a draw.”

He sounded almost disappointed at that thought. There was no hint of jealousy or violent intent in his voice. He seemed to be only focusing on the settling this bizarre wager. John stared into slanted blue eyes, deep as the ocean.

“Do ye have no preference then?” Jamie asked, and there was still that edge in his voice, that sounded like anticipation. What answer was he hoping for? Could it be the one that would make him lose?

John licked his lips. Jamie’s gaze strayed from his eyes.

“I didn’t say that,” John replied finally.

Jamie stepped closer. There was barely any space between them now, just enough that John didn't have to uncomfortably crane his neck to look up at him.

"Then I need an answer, Johnny." Jamie reached out a hand and clumsily poked him in the chest with a forefinger. "I have a barrel of good whiskey at stake here."

He smoothed his whole palm on John's chest almost as an afterthought. Perhaps to steady himself. He must have felt his erratic heartbeat.

"Oh, do you now?" John asked, fond and amused. His blood was racing and his own tongue was loosened by the rum as well. "In that case, I'll let you know that while your wife is a beautiful and clever woman, whom I certainly wouldn't mind entertaining, my own tastes lean towards the masculine variety."

Jamie made a soft sound at the back of his throat.

"Dammit."

Then, he ducked his head and kissed John fully on the mouth.

"Mhm—"

He tasted of that awful rum, and his lips felt like a searing brand on his. John kissed back, grabbing his shirt-front and hauling him closer. Jamie went easily, long limbs loose from alcohol. Even in this state, he was a damn good kisser.

"Claire said," he started, but then leaned back for another kiss, "that it's okay."

John was not entirely sure he could have stopped even if it wasn't okay. He just confessed his desire towards Jamie, who seemed not put out by losing his wager in the slightest. That reminded him of something and he pulled back for air, breathing heavily.

"I can't believe you've lost a bet over this. What did Claire ask for?"

Jamie laughed, a warm, rumbling sound that shouldn't have aroused John as much as it did. "Honey," he said. "'Tis good for wounds, ye ken?"

John shook his head and pulled him back in.

"No, I don't." He kissed him hard. "And to be honest, I don't particularly care."

Jamie hummed into the kiss, and his large hands found John's backside. He lifted him up onto a flat bit of the stone and ground their groins together. John swore and broke their kiss to mouth along his jaw, enjoying the way his stubble felt under his lips. He found a particularly good spot at Jamie's neck and he bit down, making Jamie's hips buck.

Jamie said something in Gaelic John didn't understand but found hot nonetheless as he started fumbling with his breeches. His cock sprang free, proudly hard and slightly curling towards his belly and John already had a preference of how he wanted this to go. He unlaced his own breeches and unceremoniously pushed them down.

“Do you have something we can use?”

Jamie stared at him with hungry eyes, needing a long moment for the question to register.

“Oh, aye, here.”

There were a few moments of awkward fumbling with the lamp – the metal parts being hot and neither of them wanting to extinguish the light – but the oil itself smelled of olives and was pleasantly warm and more importantly, they’ve managed not to light themselves on fire.

John scooped some of it out with his fingers from Jamie’s palm and reached back, starting to open himself. He felt like the wick in the lamp, dripping with oil and being lit on fire by the searing gaze of those deep blue eyes. His body was barely ready, but he could not wait a moment longer. He reached out a hand in silent invitation and Jamie went without hesitation. He smeared the rest of the oil onto his prick and then he was aligning himself and pushing inside.

John threw his head back, colliding with the hard earth and bit back a moan. The stars were bright above and while the trees hid them from the sight of the others, they were not nearly far away enough for them not to hear if he screamed.

Jamie must have thought that too, because he bent down and kissed him again, silencing his moans with his own mouth. His hands curled around John’s thighs and lifted him up so that he could easily thrust into him. The rock was hard against John’s back and he deliriously thought he will have bruises the next day. With his own cock trapped between them and the punishing pace Jamie was setting there was no way he was going to last.

In retaliation, he locked his legs around Jamie’s waist and dug his teeth into Jamie’s bottom lip. Jamie hissed, but only kissed him harder.

“Ye’ve nay idea how much I’ve wanted to do this,” he panted into his mouth.

John rolled his hips.

“Oh, I have some idea.”

A few more thrusts and Jamie was swearing in Gaelic again, and the erratic movements of his hips were enough to push John over the edge too. He bit into Jamie’s shoulder to stifle his cry as he came.

They’ve panted, sweaty and dishevelled, leaning on each other until Jamie put him down, movements surprisingly gentle. He stroked a stray hair out of John’s eyes.

“Ye’re alright?”

John laughed, and kissed him again without thinking.

“Never been better.”

Jamie grinned and did up his breeches.

“Come then, let’s go back.”

John cleaned himself up as much as he could, but he still felt it was much too obvious what they've been up to. He stared at him incredulously.

"I can't look Claire in the eye like this."

"As if ye had a choice, Johnny. Come now, she doesna bite." He lifted a hand to his neck, pushed at a spot, then hissed. "Unlike ye."

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The crew re-groups after the adventures...

Chapter Notes

I hope everyone is caught up on the meaning of / vs. & ;)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Claire cradled the honeypot against her chest and gave John a smug look from under her curls. John coughed and looked away, feeling his cheeks heat up. Unfortunately, his eyes landed right away on her husband, tall and red-haired, carrying a sack of flour over his shoulder. This activity made his muscles flex underneath his shirt in a very appealing way and it didn't help to bring John's thoughts back towards socially acceptable topics at all. It just reminded him of how those strong arms held him up while Jamie fucked him thoroughly. And that the woman sitting across her in the cart was perfectly aware of this happening.

John knew that pirates were less concerned about the rules of society, but in a vague, intellectual sort of way, and when it came up in the Navy it was always tainted with disgust and judgments. He never actually expected to sleep with a pirate, let alone the pirate's wife blessing the encounter. He was used to his trysts in the Navy being absolute secrets, between himself and the other man, and the other man's wife finding out about it was the worst thing he could imagine. However, Claire Fraser wasn't like those wives, left at home on the distant shore. She wore breeches and fought with a sword, her home was the ship, and she wasn't bothered by her husband sleeping with another man.

After they got reunited with the crew they've stopped at the next harbour to stock up on supplies and rest. Jamie still hasn't said anything about where they would go from here. As the elation of escaping alive wore off and the hangover from last night kicked in John wondered what this meant for him.

He spotted William, who was running around amongst the crew members hauling supplies and helped carry smaller items, clearly feeling cheerful and very important in the process. It was good to see him happy. His face was dirty and he looked like just a street urchin, part of the crew.

John hopped down from the cart and headed towards William as much to avoid Claire's knowing gaze as to help the boy. He was currently dragging a crate after him, that was clearly

too heavy for him to lift, but he seemed determined to make it work. He was quite stubborn like that. John thought he could have gotten that from either of his parents. He grabbed the other end of the crate and William flashed a grin at him.

John had grown quite fond of the boy. He opened up in the company of the pirates and reminded John of himself when he first tasted freedom after a strict upbringing. John also remembered his visits to Helwater and the uncontrollable whirlwind of a boy who was always so happy to see him no matter how infrequently he visited. William seemed to remember it too. There was an easy familiarity in the way he talked to John that wasn't present when he talked to Jamie.

But they did talk, and John could see how happy it made Jamie. William seemed naturally curious if still a bit wary of his pirate father, and he asked a lot of questions.

"And how did you two meet?" he asked John once over supper when they were crammed in by a table next to each other. Jamie sat across them, but William directed the question towards John. John gave him an amused look.

"Your father knocked me out with the hilt of his sword," he answered frankly. Jamie snorted quietly and William let out a surprised laugh. Their slanted blue eyes crinkled the same way when they were smiling.

"Yes, quite," John shrugged between two bites. "While I take pride in being a good swordsman, I didn't stand a chance. Your reckless father pulled a suicidal move, boarded my ship and abducted me to save you," he explained with a pointed look towards Jamie, whose lips curled upward in a way John found especially seductive. He was jolted out of this musing by William.

"So you only came because he threatened you?" William asked pushing a leafy vegetable to the side of his plate. He sounded disappointed.

John turned to him fully, putting down his spoon.

"Had I known you were in trouble, I would have come on my own," he said seriously and William perked up. "And I would have deterred Jamie from his insane plans," he added.

Jamie grinned at him.

"I would've liked to see ye try."

He didn't tell William about his initial plan of double-crossing Jamie and getting William away on his own. It seemed almost cruel in hindsight, not to allow the boy to get to know his father. Even if he was a criminal.

That made John's good mood slip away. When did his life become so complicated? He was so sure of himself before. And now? He had gone against the law too. What would his crew think if they saw him now? A Navy officer should have never grown so friendly with pirates.

When he looked at the Frasers, his heart filled with stupid, longing dreams. Running away with them. Going on adventures, making a living with honest, or not so honest deeds. John

frankly wouldn't have minded stealing from the Spanish. Eventually, maybe they could settle down somewhere in the Caribbean where it was warm and they were free.

But it was only that: useless wishful thinking. He couldn't just run away with them. He had duties, even if he didn't know what punishment he had to suffer for what he did. More importantly, William had an inheritance as an Earl.

Jamie was aware of this too. After they filled the ship up with the essential supplies, but before they've departed Jamie called John into his cabin. It was the first time they were alone since that night. John tried and failed to calm down the nervous butterflies in his stomach. While Jamie had been openly friendly with him, he couldn't help wondering if that night was a one-time occurrence or if it meant more. He got his answer soon enough.

He closed the door behind him and turned. And then, Jamie was suddenly there, in his personal space, one large hand on his shoulder, the other cupping his face. He beamed down at John, dark blue eyes dancing with joy. The warmth of his touch was practically seeping into John's bones.

He lay a tentative hand on Jamie's waist. His lips pulled up into an involuntary smile. Jamie's gaze dropped to his mouth and it seemed to pull him forward like a magnet. Their lips met in a warm and wet kiss that knocked every thought out of John's head.

"You wanted to talk...?" he croaked out when they broke apart. "Or was that just..."

Jamie went pink around the ears.

"Nay, I... did want to talk with ye." He disentangled himself from John with visible reluctance and stepped back. "The men are hungry for a raid. They have helped me, and now that it's done they're restless. I cannae fault them."

He sighed and shrugged. He turned to his desk that had sheets of paper scattered on top of open books in a seemingly haphazard way. He traced a line absent-mindedly with his finger while continuing.

"We do need to secure a bounty soon. We could only stock up from the bare essentials."

"I see," John said, unease settling in the pit of his stomach. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Anything he would have said would have sounded prying or judgmental. Jamie turned and saw his expression.

"We're not doing this for fun, ye ken?" he asked gently, abandoning the papers once more. "If there was another way for us to securely make a living..."

But there was, John wanted to say. He restrained himself, just barely. It would have been his fear speaking. Suddenly, the thought of the crew going out to the sea fighting another ship and risking death and prosecution felt like a fist squeezing around his throat. There wasn't a person on this ship he would have liked to see at the end of a rope. Especially not the Frasers.

He took a deep breath and spoke out the first thing that ran through his head.

"I want to come with you."

Jamie looked as astonished as John himself felt for saying it out loud. He should have been more conflicted about where his loyalties lay. At the same time when he looked within himself, his priority was unquestionably to not see the Frasers killed.

Jamie touched his face again, his skin faintly smelling of ink and John's heart gave a painful thump. Oh no. When did that happen?

"I appreciate that Johnny, I do," Jamie said slowly. John knew even the idea was foolish but appreciated Jamie not dismissing it outright.

"But," Jamie continued, "I wanted to ask of ye a greater favour instead. I would like William to stay with ye."

"Of course," John said without hesitation. Jamie smiled at him and kissed him briefly. It was such a natural gesture, John suddenly didn't know what to do with the tide of feelings rising in his chest.

"Good," Jamie said, unaware of this. "I cannae imagine trusting another person besides ye and Claire with my son. I would prefer Claire to stay with ye too," Jamie continued pulling away, "but there isna even a point to try and convince her."

John smiled. That indeed sounded like futile effort. Jamie cupped his face into both hands now.

"Will ye take care of my while I'm away?"

John nodded but furrowed his brows. There was something in Jamie's voice, a hidden anguish that seemed to indicate that he wasn't just talking about a short period of time.

"Exactly just how long do you plan on being away?" he asked suspiciously. Jamie dropped his hands and shrugged.

"It shouldna take more than a few days. Maybe a week. I'm not expecting any resistance or real fight. Maybe a little squirmish." He sighed. "But there is always the chance of something going wrong, ye ken that."

John gripped his arm and shook his head. He flat-out refused to even think about the possibility of Jamie Fraser not coming back.

"Nonsense," he said firmly. "One of the most feared pirate captains of the Caribbean is not planning to be defeated in a simple raid. There is something else, isn't there?"

Jamie scrubbed a hand down his face. He stepped close again, circling John's waist with his arms and touching his forehead to his.

"How do ye ken me already so well?" he mumbled.

John's heart softened in his chest and he reached up to card his fingers through the red curls. The lines of Jamie's face softened. John thought it was the biggest secret of them all. That Jamie Fraser feared pirate captain was secretly the most physically affectionate man he had ever known.

He waited. Jamie sighed and pulled back slightly.

“He cannae stay with me, John,” he admitted, and John could tell from his voice how much it pained him. “I cannae force him into this life, and I would be worrit out of my mind all the time. No,” he shook his head again. “He needs to go back to England. He’s an Earl. He has the right to that title. Ye may not know this, but I was a Laird too by my own right. They took that away from me, but I cannae let them take that away from my son too. I want a better life for him.”

“And how do you imagine this going?” John asked. “He cannot go back to Helwater as long as Williams is there and is trying to kick him out of his inheritance.”

“Nay. I was wondering...” Jamie seemed to hesitate. “I was wondering if he could stay with ye?”

John hesitated.

“I have no claim to be his guardian, Jamie,” he said. Jamie Fraser, however, as he already knew was a very stubborn man.

“But what if he enlisted?” he asked. “Ye could keep him with ye, no? At least until he turned eighteen?”

John considered it. It was just like all of Jamie’s other plans: went against expectation and sometimes simple logic. Still...

“Yes, I suppose it could work,” he found himself saying. He wanted to make it work. “As long as I can present an agreeable excuse for abandoning the ship with the crew. And I can’t promise you that will go down easily. But I can promise you, that I will try,” he added, meaning it, even though his heart was cracking wide open and all those foolish dreams of staying with the Frasers shattering before his eyes. He needed to go back, he knew that. He didn’t belong with them, or only for a little while. It didn’t matter that he realized, only a few minutes ago that he had fallen completely in love with Jamie Fraser.

The night before the crew was to depart John, Jamie and Claire spent the evening together. They’ve put John, Willie and Tom up in a small house at the edge of town, but Willie and Tom both wanted to spend one more night on the ship. To John, it seemed like the Frasers were more interested in spending one more night with him, and it flattered him greatly.

They drank whiskey and exchanged stories. John hasn’t felt so at ease with anyone in a long time as he did with them and his heart was aching because he had to see them go. With luck, it would only be for a short while this time. But after they would go back to England and part for good.

Both Claire and Jamie shed a few layers of clothing during the evening since it was warm inside with the fireplace crackling in the corner. John couldn’t help staring at them. Jamie, with his strong frame, and fiery hair glinting in the low light, his voice a deep, accented rumble. And Claire, her elegant hands and soft curls, the mischief in her golden eyes and her

twinkling laugh. Both of them were so different yet equally magnificent. And together they were almost too bright to look at.

John knew he was lucky even to know a fraction of what was between them, to know even the touch of one of them. And yet, having them here, both within arm's reach, happy, flirting and relaxed, the experience felt almost painfully incomplete.

John could count on a single hand the times he slept with a woman and there wasn't even one of them where he undoubtedly wanted to. And yet, when he looked at Claire Fraser, he felt an unmistakable pull. He didn't know whether it was only that she was the other half of Jamie or on the account of her own charm, but the desire was there. The drink made him bold and even the slightest possibility of not seeing them again, of not having a second chance gave him all the courage he needed.

It was past midnight when the pauses in their conversation started to stretch longer and finally, Claire reached for her shawl.

"Perhaps it's best if we go."

John reached out then and softly laid his hand on top of hers.

"Or you could stay a bit longer," he said, as calm as he was able. Claire raised his eyebrows and slowly turned her hand over so that her palm lay warm and dry against John's. They looked at each other for a few long seconds.

"Do you want me to stay?" she asked. "Or do you want Jamie to stay?"

John had the feeling that she understood him well enough, but wanted him to say it out loud. He looked at Jamie to see his reaction. There was longing in Jamie's eyes, but also uncertainty. He looked at Claire, and John could see the desire passing between them. He could feel Jamie being torn in two directions and he wanted to tell him that there was no need to.

"I do mean the both of you. If you'd like that is," John said, his gaze flickering between the two of them.

Claire's eyes lit up and Jamie flushed, John noticed and not the other way around. Claire turned to him fully and slid her hand onto his forearm.

"What do you think Jamie?" she asked in flirtatious voice.

John turned his head to see Jamie lick his lips.

"I think ye look bonny together," Jamie said.

John smiled, his heart suddenly light and filled with anticipation. He brushed a stray curl out of Claire's eyes, cupped her face softly and leaned down slowly until his lips met hers. Her cheek was soft and round in his palm, but she kissed back hard and confident, not at all unlike a man. A zing of desire ran down John's spine. Emboldened, he let his hands wander, exploring her soft cleavage and narrow waist. Then he slid his hands down lower, finally

getting them on her backside he secretly admired before, squeezing and pulling her closer with a groan.

She nipped at his bottom lip and let out a pleased sound.

John felt a large, warm hand settle on his waist and looked up to see Jamie wrapping his other arm around Claire and trail kisses down her pale neck. It turned out, both of them fitted comfortably between his strong arms. As if sensing his gaze, Jamie raised his head, turned to him and kissed him on the mouth, parting his lips with an exploring tongue. John moaned. Suddenly his breeches felt too tight. On second thought, he was on the opinion that all three of them were wearing too many clothes.

They undressed each other clumsily, wanting to draw out and savour the moment but being too impatient and excited to do so. The bed wasn't big enough for the three of them, but Jamie seemed to have an idea about what he wanted to do.

"Sit down, John," he said, pushing him with firm hands.

"Aye, Captain," John grinned jokingly and complied. He wrapped a hand around himself, lazily stroking a few times just to take the edge off. Jamie's eyes darkened. He turned to Claire and guided her to the bed too. She was beautiful and shameless in her nakedness and John gave in to the urge to trail a fingertip along her curves.

Her body didn't arouse him the same way Jamie had, but with Jamie present, it didn't matter. Jamie stepped behind Claire, brushed her hair off her shoulder and kissed her pale skin there. He lifted his head and spoke to Claire but looked straight into John's eyes while doing so.

"What do ye think about riding him, Sassenach?"

Claire's eyes wandered over John's naked body and John suppressed the ludicrous urge to preen under her gaze. He was, after all quite a bit smaller than Jamie. But Claire didn't seem to mind. She trailed her fingertips along his inner thigh, making John's heartbeat quicken.

"Do you want me to ride you, Johnny?"

John threw his head back and let out a moan, smiling.

"I'm at your service ma'am," he said with mock-politeness.

The idea of Claire using his body for her own pleasure, his body that was strung tight with arousal mainly because of Jamie set John's blood on fire. It was a strange triple knot of desire he had no motivation to untangle.

She crawled on top of him, smooth pale skin sliding against his. She was light in his lap and unexpectedly wet between the legs. When she lowered herself onto him John did the only thing that came into his mind and bit down on her shoulder to stifle his moan. Claire let out a sound halfway between a purr and a growl and rolled her hips luxuriantly. John wrapped his arms around her waist, and thrust up experimentally, making her breath hitch. She pulled her down to kiss her again, enjoying the way her soft hair fell against his face. Her hair smelled

of herbs and John felt an absurd sense of safety while at the same time pleasure was leisurely rolling across his body. He didn't exactly forget about Jamie, but he shivered when the bed creaked and a set of wide, warm lips started kissing along his neck.

"How does that feel?" Jamie murmured into his ear. John whimpered. He couldn't answer. "If ye outlast her," Jamie continued, "ye'll get me too. What do ye think?"

At first, John's mind didn't register the words but when he did he had to sink his nails into the mattress so that he wouldn't come right there. He could feel Jamie's grin against his skin.

John took a calming breath and re-focused her attention on Claire. The last thing he wanted was for her to be unsatisfied. He didn't need an incentive. At the same time, Jamie's words provided one.

He grinned up at her, then licked a thumb and reached down, searching until he found a spot that made her gasp his name out. Then latched his lips around a nipple and coordinated his movements to the rhythm of her hips.

Claire grabbed him by the hair and pressed her closer, her nails digging into his scalp. John could have got lost in it. He nearly did. Somehow he held on while she came with a gasp, pulsing around him.

Claire let out a pleased sound as she climbed off his lap and flopped down on the bed beside him. John chuckled, and stroked a hand affectionately through her hair, still aroused but nonetheless pleased himself. He heard a grunt. He turned his head and the sight immediately inflamed his desire once more.

Jamie had one knee on the bed, his head bent low so that his red hair fell into his face and the slope of his shoulder caught the light. He braced one hand on the bedframe, the other was behind him, moving with intent. Ready himself.

John must have let out of a sound, because Jamie raised his head and grinned at him, flush high on his cheekbones.

"Ye ready, Johhny?"

John could only splutter incoherently but that seemed to be enough.

Jamie was much bigger and heavier than Claire, towering over John as he bracketed him between two muscular thighs. He sank down on him easily, from whatever oil he was using, and John still being slick from Claire. John let out a groan. There was no way he would last. He was already on edge. Jamie's savage grin said he was able to see that.

He started to move, like a force of nature and John let himself be swept away. He thrust up making Jamie curse. In retaliation Jamie attacked his neck with kisses, his stubble burning his skin.

John grabbed his hips, not caring if his touch bruised or if Jamie's teeth left a mark behind. A kiss, a gasp, a sharp roll of hips, that was all that it took before his vision went white like

when he started into a candle for too long. Jamie kept rocking in his lap, then leaned back, wrapped a hand around himself and casually finished, seed smearing across John's abdomen.

The bed still wasn't big enough for the three of them, but they crammed in underneath the covers anyways, half on top of each other. John told himself he would only close his eyes for a second, that he would kiss them both one more time before they went. But sleep took him quickly, and when he woke up, it was morning, and he was alone.

Chapter End Notes

I'm planning one, maybe two more chapters to this story.

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